

Shades Of Gold – Interludes.

Interlude 1

The tall, bearded pilgrim strolled slowly across the market square at Firstfall. He was well wrapped in his cloak against the chill late winter air, his broad brimmed hat drawn down low. As he walked his eyes strayed to the girl displayed in the public stocks, flanked by a priest and two temple guards. The girl was naked, and her hair was shorn off. Her head was hung and she was trembling weakly with cold. Her body was blotched red and purple by numerous rashthorn stings.

For some reason the pilgrim clenched his fists hard, and looked away. He strolled towards a market stall, easing his way through four cloaked men, farmers by their garb, who were clustered around the stall as if purchasing something. As he did so the pilgrim's eyes registered the swords at their hips, and the bulge of iron breast plates under their smocks. The pilgrim's lips twitched. Then he turned to the stall holder.

'Your pardon, sir, but I am a stranger here,' he requested politely, 'and I wondered if you could tell me where I might purchase a small replica of the Sacred Plates of the Ellarti?'

'Not here,' growled the stall holder, scarcely bothering to glance at the pilgrim, his eyes continuously scanning the market square. 'Move on.'

Around him the pilgrim noted the signs of devotion from the four men.

'Oh, sorry to have troubled you, sir,' the pilgrim said, and walked away.

He strolled casually across the square, his eyes sweeping over the buildings carefully. He caught a quick flash of movement behind a mostly shuttered window, and grimaced, nodding to himself.

'Now, where else?' he muttered under his breath.

The pilgrim looked round thoughtfully, then strode decisively across the square. He stalked up to the door of a house and raised his hand to knock. As he did so he glanced round. The four 'farmers' around the market stall were walking across to a different stall. For some reason they seemed to be marching in step. Men who had been standing at the second stall marched past them, nodding acknowledgement, heading for the first stall.

'Changing the guard?' the pilgrim muttered.

He knocked on the door. He waited. He knocked again, repeatedly, and listened hard.

Eventually a woman opened the door a fraction, and peered nervously at him.

'Yes?' she asked uncertainly.

'A good day to you, lady.' The pilgrim bowed. 'I am here on pilgrimage to The True Shrine, and had arranged to meet my friend Sagrall here...'

At the back of the room a door, slightly ajar, squeaked as it moved a fraction. Someone in the next room coughed. There was a jangling sound, like metal plates rubbing together. Overhead, one of the ceiling boards creaked.

'He said he had lodgings on this side of the market square,' the pilgrim continued apologetically. 'I have looked everywhere. Do you perchance know...?'

'Never heard of him,' the woman replied abruptly, slamming the door.

'Your pardon,' the pilgrim offered sarcastically to the closed door, and turned away.

The pilgrim now walked out of the market place, casually glancing at a window of the house on the corner of the main eastern exit as he strode past. A man's face jerked back. Again the pilgrim grimaced.

The pilgrim angled up a side road, twice pausing to study items in small workshops, carefully scanning the street behind him while he did so. Suddenly he side-stepped into an

alley, and waited there for a while, one hand grasping something under his cloak. Finally satisfied, he strolled the length of the alley and stepped into a dingy little ale house.

Two other bearded men dressed as pilgrims were waiting there, drinking ale at a table almost hidden in the gloom of the furthest corner. Without a word the newcomer seated himself at their table.

‘Well?’ the younger, blond-haired man demanded impatiently.

The pilgrim shook his head.

‘Another trap?’ asked the second, dark-haired man quietly.

‘Farmers at two market stalls, wearing iron armour and carrying iron swords,’ he said, glancing sadly at the younger man. ‘Eight of them in all, and always looking away, cloaks up, heads down, so your flash pots will be of no use, Thales.’ He shifted his gaze back to Vordan. ‘Crossbow men in upper windows, different houses again, more temple guards in back rooms, and in full starmetal armour by the sound of them. More guards concealed in houses by each exit road. There must be more than four score of them in total.’

‘Merchants loading and unloading wagons yesterday, workmen repairing a house the day before, a different trap each day,’ Vordan muttered. ‘Vascrad is an inventive bastard, damn him to hell!’

‘And Attria?’ demanded Thales urgently.

‘More rashthorn sores, fresh ones. They are torturing her each night,’ Adrell murmured, very quietly.

Thales clenched his fists in frustration. ‘Such torture will drive her insane! We must do something!’ he groaned in desperation.

‘At least people are no longer throwing filth at her all the time,’ Adrell tried to comfort him. He snorted. ‘I guess they are bored with it by now. No-one even bothers to listen any more when the priest recites her crimes.’

‘You can still think of no application of your art?’ Vordan urged Thales.

Thales shook his head in despair. ‘Vascrad is out-thinking my every possible move!’

‘How the hell the swine survived Dorrak’s sword slash confounds me,’ Vordan complained.

‘It must have been an application of an art similar to the one Dorvilla and I used on the Merchant Bridan,’ Thales whispered. ‘But it must have been applied very swiftly, for I swear Dorrak split Vascrad’s skull asunder and exposed his brain.’

‘Now each day for a month he’s had Attria publicly stocked in the market place, deliberately trailing her before us like a lure,’ Vordan cursed, and glanced at Thales urgently. ‘He’s trying to provoke us into attempting something desperate, something hopeless, you know that?’

Thales nodded his reluctant understanding. ‘I know. That is why we cannot risk bringing Dorrak into the town any more,’ Thales conceded. ‘If he saw Attria now we could never hold him back.’ He shook his head in frustration and anger. ‘I can scarce hold myself back.’

‘And the route to the temple is always a second trap,’ Adrell added glumly. ‘Even the temple had been turned into a further trap. A priest always inspects all visitors at the door, and questions them. A half of the pilgrims in the temple are temple guards in disguise. There is no chance there.’

‘And there are still priests and temple guards at each of the gates, ready to seal the town,’ Vordan muttered.

‘Have you no scheme at all?’ Thales pleaded.

Adrell hesitated and grimaced. ‘I have but one, and I truly do not like it,’ he replied.

‘Well?’ Vordan demanded, his eyes flicking cautiously round the room.

‘We steal two more good riding horses,’ Adrell whispered. ‘Thales can change the colour of them by thaumaturgy...?’

He paused, waiting till Thales nodded his agreement that he could do so.

‘Then we all ride like the wind for Ardensport...’

Thales stared at him aghast. ‘Abandon Attria?’ he demanded.

‘No!’ Adrell replied vehemently. ‘We just appear to abandon her. We must commit a crime in a distant Bakkomite town, two hundred or more killoms distant from here. That crime must happen soon, within this week. It must be something big and shocking, a theft and a sacrilege. We murder a priest, scrawl on the wall: ‘The true shrine is a fake. Tis empty.’ in the priest’s blood, steal their replica of The True Shrine, let off some of your flash pots, then we ride off in the direction of Ardensport. Vordan, can your daggers be recognised?’

‘I still have a couple with the guild device on them,’ Vordan admitted, his eyes blazing with understanding. ‘You want me to leave one in a watchman at the gate as we leave, heading for Ardensport?’

Adrell nodded. ‘Then we repeat the crime another hundred killoms further...’

‘I do not understand any of this,’ Thales complained.

‘Vascrad is sure we will attempt to rescue Attria,’ Adrell explained. ‘Therefore all the extra precautions and cunning traps. Our only hope is to convince him that we truly have abandoned her, and have made our own escape. But we must convince him of that so not a single shadow of doubt lingers in his mind. He must believe in it absolutely. Then, if we can convince him that there is no danger here at all, he should lower his guard here.’

‘Thus the crimes,’ Vordan interjected. ‘Something well distant that identifies you and I for certain, Thales; and something big enough and sacrilegious enough to infuriate Vascrad into sending scores of Temple Guards in pursuit of us.’ He hesitated and frowned at Adrell. ‘But the roads are still all but impassible. How do we cover such a distance in a few days?’

‘We ride and walk our mounts by turn, all day and night, steal more if necessary,’ Adrell stated firmly. ‘We must cover such a distance that Vascrad will believe we gave up all hope of a rescue a week or two since, and that there is no possible chance of us returning.’ He grimaced. ‘Our return will be much more difficult. It must be equally fast, but not a single soul can notice us upon the way.’

‘But suppose Vascrad is overcautious, does not slacken his guard?’ Vordan queried.

‘Even if that is so, he must send some of his men to pursue us, and the story of our diabolical new sacrilege will spread within the temple. His men at least will believe we have fled, and relax their guard and grumble at the extra duties, pay a grudging lip service to them.’ He looked round his friends awkwardly. ‘Tis no more than the thinnest of chances, but tis all I can think of.’

‘Attria is due to be executed at the Equinox,’ Vordan mused, ‘less than a month from now. It’ll be tight...’ He stared darkly at Thales. ‘We must commit murder, Thales, cold blooded, brutal murder. You’ve complained at that before...’

‘This is Attria!’ Thales hissed, his eyes flashing. ‘I would murder every man, woman and child in this cursed city for her!’ He hesitated, horror growing in his eyes. ‘But what will happen to Attria while we are doing all this?’

Adrell looked down. ‘I don’t know,’ he muttered unhappily, ‘but I guess it will be very bad.’

Thales squeezed his eyes tight shut and clenched his fists till his knuckles showed white. His lip trembled, then firmed. ‘But it give us at least a hope of rescuing her when there is none now,’ he whispered. ‘Let us do it.’

Vordan nodded, seeing his determination. He shifted his attention to Adrell. ‘Then it’s agreed. Let’s be about it,’ he stated firmly, and drained his mug.

Interlude 2

Dorrak finished hobbling the cart horses by touch in the inky darkness. The first hint of dawn was creeping into the eastern sky, but the alley still remained cloaked in the deepest shadow. The light, two wheeled cart was hidden in an alleyway scarcely wide enough to admit it. Tethered to the tailgate were their three remaining riding horses. Dorrak glanced round.

Adrell was keeping guard at the end of the alleyway, almost hidden against the dark loom of the High Temple beyond the open glacia that surrounded it.

Vordan was hunched over a naked body that was writhing and twitching frantically in its bonds. A red-tipped dagger glinted weakly in the faint star light.

‘Again!’ Vordan hissed. ‘Repeat the route we must take from this door to the temple under-croft to reach the dungeon. Any mistake, priest, and I torture you some more...’

Dorrak nodded his approval and looked away, frowning in puzzlement at what Thales was doing. Thales had the stolen starmetal helmet in which they had kept the Oracle of Colldex secreted from the Bakkomites’ magical arts. He had sealed a strip of leather over they eye slit, and a sheet of leather over most of the opening at the bottom of the helmet. Now he was inserting something inside the helmet.

Dorrak’s eyes widened in horror as he picked out the twisted corkscrew of wood, and he moved closer.

‘Thales! Is that what I think tis?’ he hissed urgently.

‘It is deathwood,’ said Thales, his voice utterly devoid of emotion.

Dorrak stared at him in disbelief. ‘But deathwood is proscribed!’

Dorrak knew all the stories of how, centuries ago, whole companies of travellers, and entire families in their homes had unwittingly killed themselves by the merest inhalation of smoke from the easily recognisable twisted branches of the tree that had thereby gained the name of ‘deathwood’.

Thales looked up at him coldly. ‘It is for Attria,’ he said simply, and returned to his work.

Dorrak firmed his jaw and nodded.

Thales completed the seal across the bottom of the helmet and began to chant over it, moving his hands in swirling flourishes as he did so.

At the end of the alley, Adrell turned. ‘Are you nearly ready?’ he hissed.

‘He is busy chanting,’ Dorrak whispered back, certain that Thales would not want interrupting.

‘How many flights of stairs did you say?’ Vordan hissed to his captive.

The priest straightened three fingers.

‘Wrong!’

The naked priest jerked violently in his bonds and screamed through his gag, making a weak whimpering noise.

‘Try again,’ Vordan suggested icily.

Adrell flung up his arm. Vordan and Dorrak froze. Thales quietly continued his chant. There was a clattering beyond the end of the alley as a pair of temple guards tramped past in their gleaming starmetal armour. Just past the alley they stopped. Two other guards marched up to them, stamped their feet, then both pairs pivoted on their heels and wheeled away with more clattering.

Adrell stalked back down the alley. ‘They would never hear Thales anyway,’ he muttered, ‘the amount of damned noise their armour makes.’

Thales finished his chant and looked up. ‘You were correct on all counts,’ he admitted.

‘Vascrad did diminish - if not entirely remove - his extra precautions, and those guards still remaining are but going through the motions. They are not looking around at all, and I will wager that their minds are on a hot meal and a comfortable bed.’

‘Not for long,’ Adrell pointed out bluntly. ‘You are ready?’

Thales nodded. He held out a tiny iron dish. On it a single flake of deathwood was perched on a neat pile of powder. ‘I ignite this using my extending poles. Both we and the horses must be four paces distant...’

‘From that tiny bit?’ Adrell asked.

Thales nodded vigorously. ‘Half of that distance should more than suffice, but do you want them to tell Attria that we all killed ourselves by mistake as they drag her out to be boiled alive at midday?’

Adrell held up his hand in a gesture of submission. He glanced at the lightening eastern sky. ‘The guards will make one final pass before they are relieved at dawn. We must act then, for tis the one weakness in Vascrad’s guard round, the point where the two pairs meet outside the door where they enter the temple, and await their replacement guards for the day shift. They regularly avoid completing a final round, and their replacements dawdle on their way out. There has been a wait of some ten minutes or more both nights, but we must be quick.’ He glanced uneasily at the prepared helmet. ‘How long does the smoke take to disperse?’

‘A few moments. We hold our breath and wave the helmets around... very vigorously,’ Thales stated, pointing out to the open glacis around the temple. ‘Out there,’ he added decisively.

‘There!’ Vordan whispered to the captive priest. ‘There was no need for all that pain, was there?’ He smiled coldly. ‘Now I did promise that I’d release you if you co-operated, didn’t I?’ His voice dropped to a silky hiss. ‘But I didn’t say what I’d release you from...’

Vordan’s dagger slid across the priest’s throat.

Dorrek dragged the body through a side gate and disposed of it in a cesspit, while Vordan threw his cloak in the back of the cart and donned the priest’s robes. There was a silence. Time passed. The first beams of sunlight glinted on the stonework of the temple, creeping downwards. Somewhere a bird began to sing.

There was an approaching clattering of armour. The four men drew back into the shrinking shadows. Thales lit the wick on the end of his extending pole. The temple guards marched into view, and halted, facing each other. One of them spoke, his voice muffled by his helm. Another laughed. Thales carefully extended the pole. The alleyway was lit up by a sudden flash of fire. Smoke puffed out from the eye slits of the four guards’ helmets. The guards fell limply to the ground in a clatter of armour.

Adrell, Vordan and Dorrek raced onto the glacis before the bodies hit the ground, grabbed the dead temple guards by their feet, and dragged them rapidly back to the entrance of the alley.

As they scrambled to remove the guards’ armour, Thales counted off the passing seconds aloud while he threw the sealed helmet over a fence and the hot metal dish into the back of the cart. At three hundred in his count, the stripped bodies were unceremoniously deposited in the cesspit with the priest while Thales thoroughly waved each helmet around beyond the end of the alley. The men quickly scrambled into the armour. As Thales’ count reached seven hundred Vordan finally succeeded in cramming his armour on over the priest’s robes.

The door squealed open just as the four men reached their places. The day guard trooped out, eight of them, and Adrell returned their salute.

‘Nothing to report, sir!’ he snapped, glad that the helmet disguised his sweating face and panting breath as well as his voice.

A rapid salute from the day guard, and the night guard trooped into the dim under-croft of

the High Temple.

Vordan took the lead, the others followed. A short way in, Vordan halted, removed his helmet, glanced round cautiously, then slipped into an empty side chamber. The other three loitered outside. A priest reappeared from the side chamber, drew up his cowl, and beckoned the others to follow him. They marched through the guard room unquestioned. Vordan beckoned Adrell and Dorrak to light torch brands. They descended a flight of dark stone steps, then another, heading into the deepest and darkest bowels of the High Temple.

Their torches flared in the gloom of the passageway, lighting a bleak stone antechamber with doors of iron bars set into its sides. In the antechamber a rough looking man levered himself up off a narrow bed.

The gaoler frowned. 'You're very early, pater?'

'Lord Vascrad wants no mistakes,' Vordan retorted sharply.

The gaoler shrugged. Such details were no part of his remit. The keys rattled as he lifted them off the hook on the wall. He stepped across to the iron grid of the cell door. The priest and the three temple guards followed him.

In the cell, a pathetic, scarred and blood streaked figure seated at a table now struggled to rise to her feet, whimpering in pain as she did so. In her raw and bloodied hand a quill was weakly clasped, and, even as she struggled to rise, still it continued to scratch away on a sheet of blood smeared parchment.

'No, you've made a mistake,' Vordan protested. 'We've come for the heretic Attria.'

The gaoler laughed. 'That's her, pater, what's left of her. She don't look so pretty now.'

He turned the key in the lock, then glanced back, puzzled by the rasp of steel on steel behind him.

Thales drew his sword. 'You bastard!'

The gaoler groaned loudly as the sword sank deep into his ample gut, the blade angling up into his chest cavity. Then he collapsed backwards into the cell.

Attria stood unsteadily, supporting herself on the table, watching blankly, trembling, numbed, the quill still clasped in her hand. Then tears began to trickle down her cheeks.

'Oh, no,' she whispered, then her knees gave way and she sank to the floor.

For a moment the four men stared at her in horror.

'We're too late!' Vordan cursed.

Thales stared at him. 'What?' he demanded.

'Look at her! Look what the bastards have done to her! We're too damned late, Thales! No art can repair that!' A dagger appeared from under his robe. 'At least I can make it painless for her,' he added softly.

There was a rapid clattering of armour, and Thales forced himself between Vordan and Attria's mutilated body.

'Over my dead body!' he grated. 'She is not dying in here, in darkness, like that!' He gestured furiously at her crumpled body. 'I am not sure that she even knows it is us yet! We get her out of here. We try to save her! We try, Vordan, we bloody try...' His voice choked.

'Come, Dorrak,' Adrell stated firmly. 'Help me. We will have to support her between us, drag her out like that. Vordan, you lead. Thales... Thales?'

Thales had turned away. 'I will meet you at the cart,' he stated firmly. 'I have a job to finish.'

With that he stomped determinedly away.

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The crash of the curved steel door to his private chambers being thrown open woke the High Priest Vascrad abruptly. He sat up in his bed.

‘What the devil do you want?’ he demanded angrily of the temple guard standing in the doorway.

The guard did not reply immediately, but paused to remove his gloves, then his helmet. From the padding inside his helmet he produced a piece of neatly folded, waxed paper and carefully unfolded it.

‘I have an urgent message for you, Lord Vascrad,’ the temple guard said, his voice harsh.

‘It had better be very bloody urgent for you to dare to disturb...’

Vascrad’s voice faltered. There was something wrong here. He squinted at the temple guard’s bearded face, trying to remember who...

The temple guard marched across the chamber towards the candlelit altar. He picked up a delicate pot cup of holy water, tipped most of the water out, and held the cup close over the candle flame, rotating it carefully.

‘The message is indeed most urgent, my lord. It is from Attria, about the boiling,’ the guard explained absently, watching the cup closely.

‘What the pox are you doing...?’ Again Vascrad’s voice failed him. ‘Plague! It’s you, the thaumaturge!’ he gasped.

‘Quite so,’ Thales admitted. ‘As to what I am doing, allow me to explain. When our friend Dorrak altered your face for you, I took the precaution of wiping his blade afterwards. I knew that you had an impressive art, you see, and I guessed that other members of your priesthood would have similar powers.’

From the unfolded piece of paper Thales produced a small square of dark red cloth, the edge of which he held between his thumb and forefinger. He waved it at Vascrad.

‘The red you can see on this piece of cloth is blood, your blood, Vascrad. Blood makes an exceptionally strong identity link you know? Part to Whole? I have already completed the enchantments on it. So if I was to immerse this cloth in boiling water...’

‘You fool, Thaumaturge!’ Vascrad spat. ‘Your cursed heretic wench, Attria, betrayed your name under torture! You are Thales! You’re in my power!’ He thrust out his arms. ‘Now die, heretic!’

Thales turned to watch him chant. ‘Most interesting,’ he observed calmly. ‘I rather hoped you might waste time trying something like that. Even if such ludicrous hocus had any substance, you seem to presume that Attria knew my true name?’ He shook his head. ‘And she truly is the most remarkably loyal and courageous young woman, for, even under your repeated and cruellest tortures, she still did not betray the name that I gave her, merely the name that she used in her writings.’

Vascrad faltered, staring aghast at Thales as he peered into the cup again. Wisps of steam were rising from the cup now.

‘Ah, good,’ Thales said, ‘the water is boiling.’

He lifted the piece of cloth over the cup. He smiled, a cold and evil smile.

‘Now it is your turn, Vascrad. As you so aptly put it, ‘die, heretic!’

Vascrad’s eyes widened in sheer terror. He began chanting frantically.

Thales dropped the piece of cloth into the cup.

‘Oops!’ he said.