

THE SHADOW OF THE TORTURER

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The Shadow of the Torturer

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I

RESURRECTION AND DEATH

I already had some presentiment of my future. The locked and rusted gate that stood before us, with wisps of river fog threading its spikes like the mountain paths, remains in my mind now as the symbol of my exile. That is why I have begun this account of it with the aftermath of our swim, in which I, the torturer's apprentice Severian, had so nearly drowned.

"The guard has gone." Thus my friend Roche spoke to Drotte, who had already seen it for himself.

Doubtfully, the boy Eata suggested that we go around. A lift of his thin, freckled

arm indicated the thousands of paces of wall stretching across the slum and sweeping up the hill until at last they met the high curtain wall of the Citadel. It was a walk I would take, much later.

“And try to get through the barbican without a safe-conduct? They’d send to Master Gurloes.”

“But why would the guard leave?”

“It doesn’t matter.” Drotte rattled the gate. “Eata, see if you can slip between the bars.”

Drotte was our captain, and Eata put an arm and a leg through the iron palings, but it was immediately clear that there was no hope of his getting his body to follow.

“Someone’s coming,” Roche whispered. Drotte jerked Eata out. I looked down the street. Lanterns swung there among the fog-muffled sounds of feet and voices. I

would have hidden, but Roche held me, saying, “Wait, I see pikes.”

“Do you think it’s the guard returning?”

He shook his head. “Too many.”

“A dozen men at least,” Drotte said.

Still wet from Gyll we waited. In the recesses of my mind we stand shivering there even now. Just as all that appears imperishable tends toward its own destruction, those moments that at the time seem the most fleeting recreate themselves—not only

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in my memory (which in the final accounting loses nothing) but in the throbbing of

my heart and the prickling of my hair, making themselves new just as our Common-

wealth reconstitutes itself each morning in the shrill tones of its own clarions.

The men had no armor, as I could soon see by the sickly yellow light of the

lanterns; but they had pikes, as Drotte had said, and staves and hatchets. Their

leader wore a long, double-edged knife in his belt. What interested me more was the

massive key threaded on a cord around his neck; it looked as if it might fit the lock of the gate.

Little Eata fidgeted with nervousness, and the leader saw us and lifted his lantern

over his head. "We're waiting to get in, goodman," Drotte called. He was the taller, but he made his dark face humble and respectful.

"Not until dawn," the leader said gruffly. "You young fellows had better get home."

"Goodman, the guard was supposed to let us in, but he's not here."

"You won't be getting in tonight." The leader put his hand on the hilt of his knife

before taking a step closer. For a moment I was afraid he knew who we were.

Drotte moved away, and the rest of us stayed behind him. "Who are you, goodman? You're not soldiers."

"We're the volunteers," one of the others said. "We come to protect our own

dead.”

“Then you can let us in.”

The leader had turned away. “We let no one inside but ourselves.” His key squealed in the lock, and the gate creaked back.

Before anyone could stop him Eata darted through. Someone cursed, and the

leader and two others sprinted after Eata, but he was too fleet for them. We saw his tow-colored hair and patched shirt zigzag among the sunken graves of paupers, then

disappear in the thicket of statuary higher up. Drotte tried to pursue him, but two men grabbed his arms.

“We have to find him. We won’t rob you of your dead.”

“Why do you want to go in, then?” one volunteer asked.

“To gather herbs,” Drotte told him. “We are physicians’ gallipots. Don’t you want the sick healed?”

The volunteer stared at him. The man with the key had dropped his lantern when he ran after Eata, and there were only two left. In their dim light the volunteer looked stupid and innocent; I suppose he was a laborer of some kind. Drotte continued,

“You must know that for certain simples to attain their highest virtues they must be pulled from grave soil by moonlight. It will frost soon and kill everything, but our masters require supplies for the winter. The three of them arranged for us to enter

tonight, and I borrowed that lad from his father to help me.”

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