

Tales from the Iron Kingdoms

Part I: The Finding of Manacle

by Eric Wadsworth

Mank's world was a dim pit, about four feet square, just in front of the aft-most starboard bulkhead, on a nameless smugglers galley, in the warm salty seas of the Calijan, southeast of the more civilized lands known as the Iron Kingdoms.

He sat, as he had for nearly a decade, on a smooth wooden plank. He remembered that it used to be rough, with splinters. It was daytime, so he thrust his right arm out the oar-hole and felt the sunlight on his calloused hand. He lay his head on the wooden oar, and slept.

The life of a slave is hard. To insulate themselves from the prolonged pain of their lives, slaves will often develop a barrier, an insulation, from emotion. If there is no such thing as happiness and hope, then misery has little bite. To harbor hope would only make the present unbearable.

Mank's emotional barrier was thin. He had ever been alert for a way out, with a hope for freedom. After several years on they galley, when no opportunity to escape had been presented, his hope had slowly and gradually submerged beneath a silent, grim determination to never give up totally.

Mank was not born a slave. He'd been captured during a raid on his town, when he was a boy of but fifteen summers. He had worked in the mines for several years, and then had been sold to a smuggler when he grew too large for the crawlspaces. It was then that his eyes

were put out. An oar-slave has no need of sight. Blindness prevents them from trying to escape, keeps them docile.

He had long blonde hair which fell over his face, a brown beard, and pallid white skin. Years of manual labor in the mines had given him ample strength and agility, and the subsequent decade chained to an oar gave him an endurance almost at the upper limit of human ability. His eyelids were sunken over the empty sockets.

When not rowing or sleeping, he spent his time standing up in the cramped pit, working through a wide variety of contrived mental exercises. His time in the mines had given him some exposure to certain rude mechanisms. He had been particularly fascinated by a steam-powered winch used to haul ore from the lower shafts. Its workings had been explained to him by the old fellow who operated it. He could still picture that man's face, as he shoved coal into the furnace...

Voices from outside awoke him, then the sound of oars in the water. The skiff must have returned, he thought. A short time later, he heard footsteps on the gangplank overhead. That was the walk of Prael, the cook, so it must be time to eat.

One thing about being an oar-slave: They kept you healthy, and that meant decent food. A smuggler depends on speed, and speed depends on the health and strength of your oar-slaves. This particular smuggler had been in the business far longer than most. A bucket

swung down, and Mank grabbed it by the rope. Inside he found not one, not two, but three large greasy chunks of cooked meat, a handful of small carrots, and part of a loaf of hard bread, all floating in fresh water.

A lot of hard rowing lay ahead, judging by the food in this meal. Mank ate methodically, washed it down with the water. He also ate the leafy stalks on the carrots. It had been two days since they'd done any traveling. They'd been swinging on anchor, while the bosses were in town making deals. He kicked the bones from his meal through scupper, heard them splash into the sea. He'd long ago fashioned certain tools from some bones, and kept them wedged in a gap near the ceiling. There was no more room for more.

"Ey, Mank, what dey give ya dis time?" a whisper in the dark. It was Zan, another slave, who sat in a box just forward of Mank. He had his lips pressed to a knothole in the wooden panel.

"Three chunks, carrots and a big rock. We must be in for a long haul," he whispered back. The bosses didn't like the slaves talking, but they could get away with it if they were quiet enough.

"Yeah, me too. Hey..." he paused. "I just heard, dey pulled Bo and some'n else, up fo'ard, put in two more whiners." The bosses had found some new muscle. Bo had been sick, was getting old. They must really be in a hurry this time. Jake, the captain, wasn't known to keep slaves past their prime. Mank wondered what would happen to Bo and whoever else it was.

A loud tapping aborted the conversation. Before he realized it, Mank's arms had automatically freed his oar, and dipped it silently into the water outside. A couple of strokes, and they

had run up on the anchor. He could hear it being winched up. Then the drummer beat in earnest, a vibration more than a sound. Mank braced his legs against the beam in front of him, and lay into the rowing with his back, arms, and shoulders. Slower, stronger strokes, as they got up to speed. It would go faster once they were well underway, and had to maintain the pace. He could keep this up for days.

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"So, what's the latest news of the front?" Frederick Stewart asked Elсанд, turning to face her. He toyed with his silver goblet. "I heard that they lost two more jacks last week. That makes six this month. The minister will not be pleased." Frederick had delicate, pale skin, and rosy cheeks. It appeared that he spent a great deal of time attending to his hairdo, which was in one of the current fashions, long in the back and short in the front. Elсанд thought it looked absurd, but was too polite to say anything.

She concentrated on her dish. Finally, with an annoyed glance at her father across the table, she turned to Frederick and replied, "I'm afraid I haven't heard anything new. You know how hard it is to get any news, this far away from the action." She paused. Her father, the lord Gerro Caspial, wasn't paying any attention, absorbed in his own thoughts. "So, do you have a grain caravan departing soon?"

Frederick started guiltily. "Um, probably. Yeah, there's one going out soon, I'm pretty sure. Bolvo and his men were doing something yesterday, I think... Well, I've actually got to go and check on that right now, so I'll see you all tomorrow." Frederick was staying at

an upscale inn downtown, though he enjoyed dining with the ruling family of this small city, as was his privilege.

Menoth's Palm, or simply "Palm" for short, was about as far southeast as you could get in the civilized Protectorate of Menoth. Out in the fringes of the Protectorate lands, cities were run much as they had in old times, by a ruling family. The main difference now was that the ruling family had close ties to the local Menite temple. Everyone knew that the religious organization wielded the real power; the Caspials were mostly figureheads, though important ones. It would not do to have the church leadership take too obvious a civic role, or soil themselves publicly with politics. At least, not this far from the capital.

"Okay, Frederick, we'll see you tomorrow, then," said lord Caspial, as Frederick took his leave. "Oh, could you have my accountant, Olamew, come in and see me, on your way out? That's a good man. He's probably downstairs, ask one of the servants down there to send him up." Lord Caspial was not the type of man who liked to be surrounded by servants. This was a very recent ruling family, only having been appointed by the Ministry of Outlying Lands a few short years ago.

Elasand finished her plate, and looked at her father. "I really don't see why we have to keep feeding that man. It's not like he is of any use here at all. Bolvo says that whenever he comes by, it just slows things down. Why don't we send him home? You could make up some excuse." She pushed her long black hair out of her face, and adjusted a pale ivory comb to keep it there. Elasand, like her father and her deceased mother, was tall, with very dark skin and straight black hair. When the Menites

had settled this district, those of her race had gathered in Palm. Many of the local citizens shared the family's dark complexion.

"Eh? Oh, yes, you're right. Why don't you see if you can't come up with a way to do it, but be sure and let me know before you do take any action. We have to make sure the Stewarts in Hilopont don't get offended, you know. We are charging them a fairly steep price for the grain they're getting from us." Lord Caspial knew that his daughter, while only barely twenty years old, was quite capable of coming up with something sensible.

He stood up as his aged accountant, Olamew, tottered into the room, carrying a massive book bulging with papers. "Sir, you wanted me, sir?" Olamew laid his book down on the table and sneezed.

"Yes, I need to go over some figures with you. How much... um. Um." Lord Caspial glanced at his daughter. "Let's take this to my office, I need to consult my notes." They left the room, as Elasand stood and went to the window. Outside, the sun was setting. The Menite temple shown dully in the light of the setting sun, its high walls overlooking the harbor from the top of a small cliff. She could just see the two Revenger-class warjacks, guarding the entrance. A servant peeked inside, and then set about clearing the table.

What was father up to, she wondered. She was sure it had something to do with the courier from the capital, who had arrived ten days ago, on a horse almost dead with exhaustion. Father had called his three most trusted advisors, and a masked, robed person had arrived from the local Menite temple. They had had a meeting behind closed doors, though Elasand had

managed to overhear a small part of it from through the window of the room right over their meeting.

It had to do with warjacks. There were problems in the capital, and they were trying to find something that would solve these problems, it had sounded like. Late that night, two messengers were dispatched, one heading out the East road, and one out the North road, toward the capital. Something interesting was certainly going on, and Elasad wanted to be a part of it. Anything was better than dining with that fop Frederick.

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The drumbeat finally stopped, then gave the tapping signal to ship oars. Food and water was given to the oar-slaves, sorely needed after the long, fast voyage. The galley was tied to a wooden pier, and Mank sat and enjoyed the strong smell of the creosote pilings. He wondered where creosote came from. Was it a plant?

After a time, he slumped against his oar and slept. He dreamed that he could see again, only the world was a kind of yellowish grey. He saw strange things that he did not understand. There was a giant metal statue, standing beside a building. It had two chimneys on its ridiculously massive shoulders, one in front of the other, and there was black smoke coming from them. A strange four-pronged symbol was painted on it in several places.

A great dread came over him as he stared. It was so real! The statue had a small head, of sorts, only it was located where a man's naval would have been. Slowly, the head swiveled, and it directed it's blazing red eyes directly at Mank. He started awake, and pressed his

knuckles to his empty eye sockets. He realized he'd been moaning.

"Oi, Mank, ya daft?" came an urgent whisper in the perpetual darkness. "Yer racket'll bring dem bosses, fer sure!"

Mank shook his head, sweat flipping onto the walls. "I dreamed I could see..." Mank whispered urgently to Zan.

It had seemed so real, unlike any other dream he'd ever had. Along with the sense of dread, and the sudden gift of sight, it had seemed that he could have moved his arms, but that they weren't his arms. It didn't make any sense, now that he thought about it, as often happens with dreams. Maybe he was finally losing what little grip he had on reality.

For the billionth time, he reached down to the heavy iron manacle on his left ankle, and fingered the lock. He followed the chain with his hands, to where it disappeared into a small hole under the gangplank. Slowly, he drew in the slack from the chain, until it came tight. There must be a rod, or a bolt, or something that anchored this chain to the galley's wooden hull. His fingers gripping tight, he began gradually increasing tension in the chain, aware that if one of the bosses observed this activity, his life was likely forfeit.

His massive shoulders bulged, and sweat broke out on his forehead. The chain bit into his fingers. A little more pressure, and there was a sound of slowly crunching wood, on the other side of the panel by his feet. Footsteps suddenly sounded at the end of the gangplank, approaching.

His heart hammering his chest, Mank eased the chain to the floor as the walker approached, lest it should clank and betray him completely. He lay his head on the oar and held his breath. The

footsteps sounded like Kyle Bennefoult, another of the bosses. He heard Kyle stop at some of the other pits near the stern. Then he stood above Mank for a long moment. His lungs bursting for air, Mank snorted as if in sleep, and kicked his chained foot. Kyle left.

After a time, his heart slowed to its normal pace, Mank decided to try something. He pressed his forehead on his oar, and concentrated on the way he had felt in his dream. For a long time, nothing happened. Then, a flicker of dull awareness, like a listening ear in the perpetual darkness... For an instant, he thought he had it again, a picture in his head, the same yellow-grey, only this time looking at some distant trees. Then it was gone. Though he tried repeatedly, he could not recapture the vision. His head ached fiercely.

Ah, what a strange thing. The spark of foolish hope, so vain. Was it just a dream? It had to have been. His eyes were gone, and that was permanent. There was no way out, for an oar-slave. Even if he escaped, what could he do? A blind man, however strong, is of no use to anyone, except as an oar-slave.

A few hours later, in the coolness of the night, the smuggler vessel slipped its moors and put out to sea.

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A dark-hooded figure crouched underneath a hedge, watching a high window through a black veil. The moon was obscured by clouds, and the night was dark indeed. A warm breeze brought the smell of the sea to the manor house. A passing guard saw nothing, and continued his pacing. After a time, the voices in the window stopped, and the torch was extinguished.

After the guard turned the far corner, the figure stood up, and soundlessly ran to the wall. It leaped, and caught hold of a window sill, pulled itself up. The window was barred, but the figure merely leapt from the outside ledge, to the second storey, and again to the third. Now it was at the window next to the one that was lit. The figure vanished into the manor. A moment later, the guard arrived around the other corner, continuing his mindless circular pacing.

With a soft sound, an owl swooped down and killed a small animal near the wall, then carried it away.

The dark figure re-appeared at the window, and then vanished into a deeper shadow. The guard passed. The figure quickly made its way to the ground outside, was gone.

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The fisherman walked beside his mule-drawn cart, as he made his way down the rocky path to his house near the beach. A small boy, spying his father, ran out to meet him. He patted the boy on the head and smiled. The child ran back to the house, yelling "Papa's back! Papa's back!" The woman in the garden looked up, smiled and waved.

After putting the mule in the yard, and dumping it an armload of hay to eat, the fisherman went into the garden. His grim expression caused his wife to drop the weeds she was holding and search his face.

"Lord Caspial is dead."

"Menoth save us... was he sick?"

"Murdered." She gasped. "Last night, late, they say. The temple folk are trying to sort it all out right now. Whole place is upside down."

She shook her head, and sat down with her husband on a pile of rocks. "But why? Who did it? Oh! What of Elasad! What is she going to do?"

"Regynt said he talked to someone who saw her going into the temple this morning. Oh, and they called up the extra guard. It's all crazy." He shook his head. "Well, I got a good price for the catch, at least." He showed her a handful of coin, and then put it into his pocket.

"There's sure to be a procession. We really should be there. I'll polish up the Menofix." She stared at Jefry, their black-haired son, who was working on his driftwood fort down the beach a ways. "It will probably be tomorrow night."

They sat in silence for a time, listening to the ever-present pounding of the surf. The tide was in, and it was loud. A sea-bird turned overhead. There was a boat, far offshore, making it's way south. Probably a smuggler, the fisherman thought. Why else would they be so far out to sea? They finished weeding the garden, and the sun slipped sank into the sea to the west.

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Mank awoke suddenly to a terrible smell, like a corpse that had lain in a bilge for a month. A night breeze wafted the stench away, and he wondered what on Caen it could be. He stretched, his muscles still taut from the day's rowing. They swung on anchor.

He heard a quiet splash outside the scupper hole by his foot. Then a cry overhead, and sounds of scuffling. There was a wet sound, then another cry, louder. Running feet, the ring of weapons. Then a rushing sound, and a crackling. Mank smelled smoke.

He crouched helplessly in the darkness, as he heard sounds of the fight grow quieter then louder. Strange, he only heard voices he knew, those of the smugglers. Who, or what, were they fighting? He heard some of the other oar-slaves shouting and banging around in their pits.

There was a loud blast, and the ship listed sharply to starboard. Seawater flooded into the scupper, up to his ankles. Mank knew he would die if he did not get free. Spurred on by panic, he gripped the heavy chain once again, with both hands. He turned on his bench, and braced his mighty legs against the bulkhead. He screamed as he straightened his back and flexed his arms. The chain groaned once, as if in agony, and a forged steel link straitened and let go. He was free! The shock of it made him giddy, and he braced himself against the walls of his pit.

The seawater was up to his knees, and the galley listed even further to starboard. He could dimly hear fighting up toward the bow. He climbed out of his pit, and perched onto the edge, trying to get his bearings.

"Mank! Is dat you? Git me out!" a frantic pounding echoed from Zan's pit. Other slaves were shouting in the chaos. He stood up, and fell sprawling onto the slanted deck.

"Yeah, Zan, hang on, I'm out!" he replied back, over the din.

Mank gagged as that same foul odor assaulted his nose, stronger than before. There was a sound, as of a heavy piece of metal being dragged across the deck. A gurgling and a grunt warned Mank of his impending death, and he scrambled away from the sound. He heard splintering wood from where he had just been.

“There's something here, Zan! Something rotten, it smells dead, but it lives... It's trying to kill me!” He heard Zan scream in his pit, and the awful smell got even stronger. Again, he realized that there was only death here, and he would die too if he stayed. There was nothing he could do for his friend.

He crawled up to the port side of the galley, and found a rail, which he climbed. The sea was his only chance, so he slid down the side of the hull, and into the warm waters, instinctively taking a huge breath of air before they closed over his head.

Swimming was not something that he had done in many, many years, but his body found that it remembered how from his boyhood. He managed to get his head above the water, just in time to take an unseen wave in the face. Coughing and struggling, he managed to slowly distance himself from the commotion that he knew to be the galley.

The heavy chain dangling from his left ankle threatened to drag him to the bottom, so he pulled it up and wrapped it around his waist as best he could. It made his swimming very difficult.

His leg kicked against something hard. It turned out to be a barrel. He put his arm around it, and stopped swimming for a moment, trying to get his bearings again. In the distance, he could hear what must be the galley. Though the fighting seemed to have stopped, he could still hear the crackle of burning wood. He paddled slowly away, anxious to put distance between himself and whatever those dead things were.

After a time, he stopped paddling. There was no sound, no smell, but the open sea. He was free, but for what purpose? Just to die here, alone, in

the ocean? He carefully rotated several full turns, but could not detect any direction that cast warmth on his cheeks. It must yet be night. He carefully listened for any faraway surf, and heard only the slop of the waves against his barrel. Mank waited. He was good at waiting.

When day broke, he was able to gain a sense of direction. He swam for a while with the warmth on his right cheek, until he could no longer tell which way he was facing. Must be noon. Later, he swam with the warmth on his left cheek. Just about the time the warmth was fading, he heard pounding surf in the distance.

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The boy Jefry ran happily down the beach. His parent's had gone into the city for the funeral procession, and he had begged to stay behind.

While beachcombing, he had found some large planks, recently washed ashore. They would make a wonderful addition to the fortress he was constructing. He was waist-deep in the low surf, towing them behind him with a length of rope when he saw something on the beach ahead of him. It wasn't there when he'd come this way a short time before. He grew cautious and approached quietly, leaving his planks behind.

He stopped abruptly when he realized that it was moving slowly up the beach. It was a person, crawling. He was still quite far away, and hadn't been seen yet, so he immediately crouched into the waters, leaving only his head visible. He watched as the person made slow progress away from the waters edge, then turned and sat, facing the ocean. He sat there for a long time.

Finally, Jefry's curiosity overcame his timidity, and he left the water and ran up into the tall grasses above the beach, all the time carefully watching the sitting figure. Its head didn't turn, so maybe he hadn't been seen. He climbed up to the piled boulders at the bottom of the low cliff that rimmed the beach at this point, and watched the figure from this vantage for a while. It still didn't move, so he crept slowly closer, keeping behind the figure.

Once he was quite close, he could tell that it was a man, a large, pale man, with long hair, and he had no clothing. He sat, very still, in the sand, facing the ocean. He didn't seem to be carrying anything, but he did seem very, very tired. Jefry summoned his courage, and shouted, "Hello!" from his vantage point high on the boulder pile. If the guy charged, Jefry would have a very good chance of getting away to safety. He was very familiar with this beach.

The man started, and turned partway. After a moment, he stood up, keeping his legs bent somewhat at the knee. He looked pretty scared, to be honest.

"I say, hello. Who are you?" the boy called, again.

The giant turned some more, now facing Jefry. "I am called Mank. And I am lost." He sat down again, and turned to face the sea. Though his accent was thick, and very strange, Jefry could understand him well enough. Jefry came closer, until he stood in front of the man. There was a long chain attached to his leg.

When he looked at his face, he could see the sunken eye sockets. There could be no eyes in those fearsome caves, this man was blind!

"What happened to you? How did you get here?"

"The galley I was on, it was attacked. It sank, I think. I got away."

The boy watched him for a while. He didn't elaborate.

"What are you going to do now?" he asked.

"I don't know. I don't even know where I am."

"Well, this beach is called Wendel's beach. Our house is down that way a ways," he waved his arm, "and that way", he waved his arm again, "is our city, Palm. Lord Caspial died, they are having his funeral procession now. Momma and Poppa took the Menofix and went, but I stayed."

Jefry realized that Mank hadn't been able to see his arm-waving.

"What's wrong with your eyes?"

"I have no eyes, boy. Not for a long time."

"My name is Jefry." He had an idea. "Are you hungry? I can bring you some food. Did you swim from the sunk boat?"

"Some food would be good. It's been a while since I ate. I thank you."

"You can eat in my fort," said Jefry, proudly. "It has a table, and everything! Come on, follow me." Jefry walked away, down the beach.

Mank stood, and turned about to face the diminishing voice. He took a tentative step, and stopped. He took another step, and stopped again. Slowly, he took a third step.

"Mank? It's okay, there's nothing there but sand. You can walk without fear on it."

"I... I don't... I haven't taken a step in a long time." Jefry was shocked to see a tear run down the man's cheek.

He ran back, and grasped the giant's hand, and slowly led him down the beach, to his driftwood fortress. After installing him at the "table" inside,

he said, "I'll be back in a little bit. You had better just stay here for now. I'll get some lunch. Um, there's no roof yet, I was actually just getting some more wood for it. Wait here!" he ran off.

While he was gone, Mank felt around himself. He could find a large variety of oddly shaped pieces of wood, and many rounded rocks. It was a kind of wooden fence. He had been told to stay here...

Suddenly, Mank was overcome with an irrational fear of captivity. He lunged up, and scrambled over the rough wooden palisade. Running on all fours like an animal, he made his way toward the waters edge, by the sound of the surf. He hit several boulders on the way, and could feel blood run into his mouth.

The pain eventually broke through his insanity, and he stopped running. Carefully, he made his way back to the last boulder, climbed atop it, and sat, facing the sea. This would not do. Calmly, rationally, he tried to assess his own psyche, to determine what had made him go berserk. He determined that he could not be inside of anything, maybe never again. After those years in the mines, and then the years in the pit... he felt he must stay in the open air, if he was to have any control over his destiny. He waited for Jefry to come back.

"My fort! Look what you did to my fort!"

Mank turned his head to Jefry. "I am sorry," he said. "I got frightened. I am not used to... being outside. I felt like I was trapped in there." He looked ashamed.

"It's okay. I was going to make it bigger, anyway. Here, I brought some food. And some trousers. These are Papa's but I'm sure he would want you to have them. Especially before he and Momma get home!" The boy laughed,

and handed some dried fish to Mank, who ate it immediately.

"I thank you again. Yes, I hadn't thought of clothing." He really needed to sort some things out in his head, if he were going to survive in the world. He cursed his dependence, and cursed those who had put out his eyes. His last sight had been the dirty, sweating face of the slavemonger, as he held the red-hot iron spike up to his face.

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The Lady Elasant Caspial sat quietly on a pew in the chapel of Palm's local temple to Menoth. Her face was composed, though her eyes were puffy with recent tears. She took a deep breath, and stood up. There was no more time for mourning. She had lost her mother, years ago, and now her father also. She was all there was left, and it was her job to lead the city of Menoth's Palm in this time of crisis.

She stepped outside the chapel, and waved over one of the young priests. The boy was about her age, and looked pretty scared. "I require about a dozen sheets of parchment, a pen and ink, and a quiet, private place to sit and write," she told him. He nodded politely, and hurried away, robes flapping, glad to be doing something useful.

When her father's body had been found that morning, the first thing that the staff had done was alert Lord Caspial's two counselors. They had, in turn, recommended that she immediately depart for the relative safety of the temple, until matters were back in hand.

The priest returned, with another, older, priest. She was escorted into a small side-office. A moment later, two young girls arrived with a stack of

parchment, pen and ink, and a stick of sealing wax.

“My name is Brother Shallamyn. Brother Obas will be outside the door, should you need anything else, my lady,” the older priest gestured toward the younger one. Your father's counselors are making inquiries with the guard. They are trying to get information about,” he scowled, “the assassin.”

Elasand nodded approvingly. “I thank you for this sanctuary. Please let the counselors know that I am to be kept informed on the status of the search.”

“There is one more thing,” said the priest heavily. He looked searchingly into her eyes for a moment. “The counselors thought you should have this now.” He pressed something into her hand, and the priests left the room, closing the door behind them.

She stared after them, feeling the unfamiliar heavy weight of the small object she held. She knew what it would be. She looked down, and examined her father's signet ring carefully. The ring had three shapes engraved on it: The Menofix, symbol of their god, and an open hand, symbol of their city, and another mark, which was the symbol of their family. These were to be pressed into the wax that sealed official letters.

The priests must have taken it from her father's dead hand, not more than a few hours ago. She unclasped her necklace, and strung the heavy ring on it.

Sitting at the desk, she prepared a sheet of parchment and dipped the pen into the inkwell. “Priority number one: See to the safety of the Citizens of Menoth's Palm,” she carefully wrote. Writing things down had always helped her organize her thoughts.

Some hours later, the door to the office opened, and Elasand emerged. Brother Obas, the young priest, jumped

to his feet. Handing him a stack of sealed letters, she said, “Please make sure these get delivered. I shall return to the chapel now, and continue my vigil.”

“As you wish, my lady. Menoth be with you.”

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When the kind fisherman offered to remove the manacle from Mank's leg, he politely declined. “It will serve as a reminder of the injustice of humanity. The day I return to my home town, I remove the chain.” He kept it wrapped several times around his waist, so it would not drag on the ground.

Mank lived with the fisherman's family for the next three months. While his blindness prevented him from being of much use in the homestead, he would often accompany Jefry's father fishing. With Mank rowing the boat, they could travel all the way out to the Snake Reef, where they could catch the more valuable greenfin to sell in the city.

This was, without a doubt, the happiest he had been in his adult life. Though he was not steady on his feet, and would not run, Jefry would lead him as they walked along the shore, or hiked through the rough hills of the area. He was always holding some common object in his hands, memorizing the feel, the shape. He learned to mend torn fishing nets by touch, and repaired the axle of the fisherman's old wagon, though it required much effort on his part.

He learned a great many things during this time, that most people take for granted. He did not speak very much, preferring to listen. Because of this, when he did speak, he had everyone's undivided attention. Usually he asked questions, but when he commented, or

made some observation, it was usually of astounding clarity and accuracy, reflecting a truly amazing intellectual capacity.

When discussion turned to the topic of religion, Mank was unusually silent. When asked, he always responded that he did not know what to believe in. The people of his youth had believed in a local deity, but Mank now rejected this belief system for some reason, known only to himself. The family, of course, were devout Menites, as were all who lived in this region.

During dinner one evening, Jefry's father mentioned that his nephew had found work manufacturing Menofixes in the temple.

"What is a Menofix?" asked Mank.

Jefry's mother replied, "It's the symbol of our faith, of the God Menoth. It has four ... here, just feel ours. It's made of iron." She handed him the family's Menofix from above the doorway, where it rested on a shelf.

Mank's hands ran over the shape, which was about the size of a dinner plate. Suddenly, his body went rigid and his mouth opened. He clutched the icon until his knuckles went white.

"What, what is it, Mank?" asked Jefry's father alarmed.

"I have seen this symbol before! Just a few months ago... in a dream! This cannot be." His brow furrowed.

"It's a sign, Menoth has blessed you with a vision of the night! Praise Menoth!" said Jefry's mother worshipfully. Jefry stared wide-eyed at Mank.

His father said, "Are you sure you've never seen this symbol before? It's been around forever, I think. In your country, did they not have it?"

"No, never. I am sure of it. When I saw it in my dream, I did not think much of it at the time. I knew I had never seen the shape before."

"Tell me what you saw, in your dream," Jefry's father urged.

"It was painted onto a... a metal statue. A statue with two chimneys on it's back." He handed the Menofix back.

Jefry's father nearly dropped it in surprise. "What you describe was no statue! That was a warjack, a Protectorate one, at that! Was the Menofix painted on the shield?"

Now it was Mank's turn to be surprised. "Yes, it was! And it had a long spear in the other hand."

"That's a model we call the Revenger. They have two of them guarding the temple, in the city. But these have not existed for more than five or six years, at the most. How could you have seen one? You've been blind for nearly ten years, by our estimate!"

Mank shook his head. "This is a mystery of the highest degree."

"I tell you, it's a sign! From Menoth himself! You must visit the temple, and talk to the priests. They will know what it means. Maybe your destiny lies in that direction?" said Jefry's mother, very excited.

Mank and Jefry's father spoke late into the night, discussing all things he knew about warjacks. There used to be simple steamjacks, machines built for manual labor. They had been adapted for war, fitted with weapons. They were controlled by mighty warcasters, who used them to fight the enemies of Menoth in distant lands.

* * *

Elasand sat at her father's desk. She still considered it to be her father's,

though it had been several months since his untimely death. She held a sheet of parchment absently in her hands. It was worn, and crumpled at the edges. This was the consolidated facts about Lord Caspial's murder. It was annoyingly brief.

“Time of death: between midnight and four in the morning,” she read aloud. It was late at night, but she was not sleepy.

“Cause of death: strangling by a thin wire, with wooden handles on each end. Type of weapon favored by assassins.” The windows of her suite of rooms had now been fitted with stout iron bars, and the doors kept barred from the inside. It only made sense, but looking at the night through barred windows was disconcerting.

“Suspects: none. Motivation: unknown. Possible motivations: ...” She put the parchment away, and closed the desk quietly.

Of course, her father's counselors had confided to her of what dealings he had been up to, what had been going on. But why had this led to his murder?

The Protectorate's warjack manufacturing facilities were in need of a certain rare ore, called Yedrontite. A metal smelted from it was thought to increase the reliability of arc nodes, which are used on certain warjack models. Previously, they had obtained some samples of it through trade with the dwarven colonies to the far north, but the trade routes led through Cygnar lands. With the political situation as it was, it was very expensive to obtain any more.

Her father had learned that a quarry of the blue stone had been found, some distance to the southeast along the coast, and a messenger had been dispatched to arrange for shipment to

Palm. A second messenger was sent to the capital, bringing them the good news. The quarry was rather a long way past the borders of Protectorate territory, into what was known as uncivilized lands. Smugglers were the most reliable shippers in that region.

Secrecy was needed so that it would not be common knowledge that the government was dealing with smugglers. Normally, they would outfit a regular, government sanctioned, expedition into the area, to mark the location of the quarry, and bring back some of the ore. But the matter was urgent, and so this shortcut was taken.

Perhaps someone had wanted this trade to stop? Killing Lord Caspial was certainly a heavy-handed way to make the point. Hardly anyone had known about the deal, anyway. Obviously, Cygnar would not want the Protectorate to have improved warjacks. But they were so far away... It was a stretch, but it was all she had at this point.

Maybe tomorrow would bring some more information.

* * *

The next morning, Jefry's mother decided to go to the city to buy some supplies. She suggested to Mank that he come along, and visit the temple. He had become more confident walking, and with the aid of a stout staff (exactly the same thickness as his oar was), he could get around quite well without aid.

It was about a three-hour journey, and they arrived just before noon. Mank sat in the wagon, listening to Jefry describe all the things he was seeing. He wore a long, coarse brown robe, carried his staff, and had a strip of white cloth wrapped about his head covering his empty eye sockets. The

blindfold was Jefry's mother's idea. "Your empty eyes would make people stare," she had explained. As it was some people stared anyway, but Mank didn't notice.

The general store was on the way to the temple, so she went inside to make her purchases. Mank and Jefry stayed in the wagon.

"There are lots of people here, I'd say, oh, about a dozen. Some are walking on the other side of the road. There are stores, and some horses, and some mules, and three wagons..." Jefry described.

As he was talking, Mank slowly became aware of an awareness in the area. Like an ear, in the dark, listening. He put his head down, and reached towards it with his mind. It heard him coming. Mank could tell that it was warily paying attention to him, as though unsure if it was appropriate. He tried to remain neutral, disinterested, as if strolling along and whistling to himself. Slowly, the defenses came down, and Mank was able to approach closer to that presence. That was when he realized that there were two of them, waiting there, in the darkness.

As Jefry droned on, Mank's mind entered one of them, and vision opened up around him. He looked, and saw the statue again. No, he corrected himself, the warjack. It had the two chimneys, and had the Menofix painted on the shield. He realized that he was inside one of them, but he was still aware of his body sitting in the wagon. Carefully, he turned his head, and found that his own head, and the head of the warjack, had turned at the same time. Methodically, in his mind, he separated his own body from that of the jack.

Now that he had made that distinction, he could control the jack

without moving his own body. He swung his metal head about, and observed what must be the temple that was being guarded. Gradually, he realized that he had a great deal of information about this other, artificial body. It gained its energy from a furnace. Currently, the furnace was fairly cool, though it had plenty of fuel. In order to walk, that furnace needed more heat.

Deliberately, he willed more heat into the furnace, and was pleasantly surprised when he sensed it increase in heat. With this energy, he sent the jack walking out into the street. All this time, he could not hear anything except Jefry talking about the people in the road.

It was wonderful! He was able to see again! The world was yellowish-grey, but that was fine. He remembered that there used to be more colors, but that didn't matter.

"What do I look like?" he accidentally said out loud. Jefry, answering his question, began to describe him. He started the warjack walking down the center of the road, towards the main street, to the southeast road, where he surmised they had come from. The warjack was immense, and people ran, fleeing from its stomping feet. Mank took care where he trod, though he felt that this body was strong enough to walk right through a stone wall without slowing down.

Then he felt it... measured thudding tremors moving through the wagon. Suddenly, Jefry's voice rose in pitch by two octaves, "I can't believe it, a warjack is coming down the road! Look at that, it's huge! That spear is as long as Papa's whole boat! What's it doing? It's coming straight towards us! Mank, we'd better move!"

Mank put out a hand, and gripped the shoulder of the boy in assurance. The warjack stopped moving in front of the store, and just stood there, staring at the odd pair sitting in the wagon. A large crowd had followed the jack down the street, some people ran screaming. A mother grabbed a small child, and ran to the safety of a nearby building.

"It's just looking at us, Mank! What's it gonna do?" wailed Jefry.

Just then his mother emerged from the store, along with the shopkeeper. With a trembling voice, she asked Mank, "Is this what you saw in your vision?"

"You... You have black hair. It hangs straight down your back. There are three people standing next to you, two women and one man. I CAN SEE AGAIN!"

* * *

Brother Shallamyn looked shaken. "We've never had a warcaster come from our parts," he said to the Lady Elasant, as she walked in.

"Do you think that's what he really is?" she asked him. They sat in a large council chamber in the temple. Present were a small handful of priests, including Brother Obas, and Elasant's two counselors. Mank was sitting in another chamber, with Jefry and his mother. They had been given some refreshment as they waited. They were very nervous.

"Oh, indeed, indeed, and of such power as has never been heard of! He took over the temple jack, and he was halfway across town!" Brother Shallamyn trembled, and mopped his brow with a sleeve. "I must inform my superiors immediately."

Elasant sat, and pondered. "How shall we deal with him? If he can control our very own jacks, without having been tuned to them, we are at his mercy!"

"Oh, we are indeed at his mercy, at this very minute. I suggest we be as nice as possible to him, and hope he stays on our side."

"Honesty!" Brother Obas cut in, glancing nervously at the older priest. "We've got to be right up-front with him. If he decides we're trying to manipulate him, who knows what he might try and do?"

"Yes, but we can't let him know exactly how much we are at his mercy, either," said Elasant. "We don't want him taking advantage of us. Did he really just walk that jack all the way downtown?"

Brother Shallamyn nodded grimly. "When not in the presence of a warcaster, the jacks rely on simple instructions left in their minds." He looked around the room, leaned toward Elasant, and whispered, "They are really quite simple-minded, and need to be given very explicit instructions, when a warcaster is not around. They are not very good guards, but they sure look dangerous, and most people don't know the difference." He leaned back.

Elasant considered. "Okay, let's bring him in now, I'd like to talk to him." Brother Shallamyn gestured to one of priests, who scurried out.

A few minutes later, he returned with Mank, Jefry, and Jefry's mother in tow. Mank's face had a big smile on it, Jefry was wide-eyed, and his mother just looked jumpy. Jefry held Mank's hand. "I'm sorry," the priest apologized, "I tried to just bring this man, but he refused to go without the boy, and the mother refused to allow the boy to go without her."

Elasand gasped. "The man is blind?" she asked nobody in particular.

Brother Shallamyn nodded at Elasand, and directed a kindly smile to Jefry's mother. "Madam, you have my assurance, as high priest of this temple, that your boy will not come to any harm. We have certain reasons for desiring a private conference with this man, and I understand that your son acts as his eyes. Will you consent to leave the lad in our care for the next few days? Anything beyond that, and we will consult directly with you on the matter."

Slowly, the woman nodded. She stared first at Mank, then at the priests. Finally, she stared at Lady Elasand. "My Lady Elasand, do you also promise? This boy is our only child. No harm must come to him." She looked worried.

"I so promise," she said.

"Then I so consent. I shall come back to town in three days, then," answered Jefry's mother. He gave Jefry a hug, and he looked at her with tears in his eyes. She patted him comfortingly on his head. "Menoth be with you, my son."

Brother Shallamyn directed one of the priests to take the woman out of the room, and obtain all pertinent information from her.

Elasand had moved to stand in front of Mank, who had stopped smiling now. Jefry had been quietly describing her appearance, and what she was doing. Now she reached out and grasped his hand, pulled it up to inspect it. Claspng it in both of her own, she said, "My name is Lady Elasand Caspial. I am the ruler of the city of Menoth's Palm. In behalf of the city, the temple, and for myself, I greet you and welcome you to our lands."

"My name is Mank. I am a stranger to this place. I was born in a land far to the southeast. At a young age,

I was captured in a raid on my town, and taken as a slave. For many years I was an oar-slave on a smuggler's galley. Some months ago, our boat was attacked by something, I know not what, and I escaped when it sank. The kind fisherman and his family have taken me in." He attempted to bow, while Elasand still held his hand.

"The calluses on your hands bear witness to the truth of at least part of your story, but I believe your words wholly. We shall talk more of the attack on your vessel later. As you can imagine, we are very interested in..." she paused, "in your use of our warjacks. Nobody has ever heard of someone untrained controlling them," she admitted. "To be perfectly honest," she glanced at Brother Obas, "we are quite disconcerted about that." She frowned. "We would feel much more at ease if we could have your word that you will not use our jacks without our consent. They are very powerful machines, and very dangerous, even for those who are skilled in their use."

Mank paused, and concentrated. Then he shrugged, "My lady, those two jacks are no longer here. I cannot find them." He looked a little forlorn.

"We had them powered down, at least until we knew more about you. I must thank you for relinquishing control of the one, so we could accomplish this." She leaned forward, "My first priority is the safety of the citizens of Menoth's Palm," she said earnestly.

"As it should be. Would that one such as you had led my village when the slavers attacked, so many years ago," replied Mank. "My main intent in using your jack was to borrow its vision. I have sorely missed my eyes." He smiled broadly, "Ah, I could see! My heart

pleads with you that this gift not be denied me in the future!”

Elasand frowned, and nodded. Realizing that he could not see her gesture, she added, “That point is made. I cannot know your loss, but I can imagine. Know you what a warcaster is?”

“It has been explained to me, though much is unclear.”

“You seem to have a natural affinity to that profession. We have a school, where such as yourself may be trained. It is rigorous, and it can be dangerous. We would like to invite you to an interview with some of our people, who I’m sure will be extremely interested in your abilities. What think you of this?”

“I am in your hands. Without eyes, you can see that I am helpless. But it is to my liking.”

Elasand relaxed somewhat. “There is one big problem that we must discuss. Come, let us sit.” She indicated some of tall-backed the wooden chairs to Jefry, and to the small group of priests. They sat down, Mank’s hands feeling the form of the chair, and its carvings.

“Let me introduce you to Brother Shallamyn. He is the head of our modest temple here. I’m sure he is very interested to know how your faith lies.” She looked at him.

Brother Shallamyn nodded thankfully to Elasand. “Indeed, my friend Mank, we are in quite a bind here. You have the potential to be a powerful asset to our forces, but we must make sure we are in agreement on matters of faith.”

Mank nodded slowly, “Then let us ask each other some questions, friend priest.” He proceeded to conduct an interview the likes of which none of the priests had ever heard of. He asked some

very piercing questions, and was not entirely satisfied with the answers, despite the best efforts of the priests.

Finally, several hours later, the interview concluded. Mank sat, with head bowed, for a length of time. Finally, he raised his head and announced his decision, “I hereby covenant that I will never act against any forces of the Protectorate of Menoth, in exchange for the warcaster training opportunities you offer. I further covenant that I will be an ally, so long as the objectives of the protectorate are aligned with my own sensibilities, as I laid out earlier. Let it be understood that I do not, at this time, wish to become a member of your religion.”

Brother Shallamyn gestured for one of his priests to write this declaration down. Once written, he had Mank put a hand-print on the document. “This document will go into our archives. I will leave the decision to my superiors, as to your training. But I deem that this is adequate, at least for now.” He signed heavily, and looked at Elasand as he said, “I think I speak for all of us when I say that we are relieved to have you, if not completely not on our side, at least not against us!”

Mank smiled in reply.

“You know the thing that most amazed us?” Elasand asked. Mank shook his head. “It was that you could control that warjack from across town! Our greatest warcaster cannot remain in contact with one from much farther away than the width of this temple!”

“I do not know the dimensions of your temple, my lady, but I appreciate your respect. I myself know almost nothing of what I have done. Much of my life was spent inside a box exactly this size,” he held out his arms.

She pondered for a moment, and stared at the chain attached to his ankle. "If you agree, I would like to give unto you a new name, to fit your new life." He nodded agreement. "From this time forth, you shall be known to the Protectorate of Menoth as Manacle the Gifted."

Mank, now known as Manacle, smiled again. "I agree to the naming. I am honored."

Elasand smiled, and gripped his hand again. "Welcome to the Protectorate of Menoth, my friend."

* * *

Manacle and Jefry moved slowly down the road. It was three days later, and they were on their way back to the fisherman's house on Wendel's beach. Jefry held a bundle of papers for his parents to sign.

Immediately behind Manacle stomped a massive, steam-belching warjack. It was towing a wagon full of coal, and two soot-covered workers. He had been allowed to bring the warjack along, to provide him sight. It was a large concession on the part of the temple, but they seemed eager to keep him complacent.

Manacle and Jefry were discussing religion. "From what I've learned, I see nothing wrong. The problem I have is that the more radical among you are so intolerant of others' belief systems."

Jefry wrinkled his brow. "Yeah, there are Zealots and stuff. They get pretty crazy. But most people aren't like that. We just... you know... came here to get away from the non-Menites. Hey, one more corner, and we're home!" Jefry broke and ran ahead.

Just then, the wind turned, and Manacle got a whiff of the breeze. What he smelled froze his blood: It was that same, rotting dead smell that he had encountered on the smuggler's galley before it sank.

"Jefry! Stop!"

Manacle's tone of voice brought the boy up short. He turned, and looked back at Manacle. At that moment, something hideous rounded the bend in the road. A shadow seemed to pass in front of the sun, and Manacle's breath escaped him. He slumped to the ground, staring.

That form that rose up behind Jefry was a mass of dead flesh, sewn together with crude stitches. Thrusting gruesomely from various angles were metallic rods and blades. A greenish glow emanated from somewhere in the center of the bulk.

The thing's head was small, and human. Manacle's face went white with horror when he realized that it was the head of Jefry's father that protruded above the mass on a tall stalk. The dead eyes, now glowing a vile green, swiveled and locked on Jefry's small form. It began to advance with a clicking, slurping sound.

With an animal roar, Manacle rose to his feet. He directed his will into his lone jack's furnace, bringing the temperature to a searing, white heat that threatened to melt its innards. A great plume of black smoke rose into the blue sky.

Jefry turned, took one glance, and with a shrill sound scampered off into the boulders to the side of the road.

The warjack charged as Manacle moved out of the way. It smashed directly into the undead construct, sending gobbets of decaying flesh flying. Immediately behind it arrived two more,

wielding weapons. They tore into the jack, disabling its legs and tearing its arms off. But not before one was smashed to a pulp, and the other badly wounded. The damaged monstrosity shambled directly toward Manacle, dripping venom and oozing malice.

Manacle unwound the chain from his waist. It was awkward, watching what he was doing from the perspective of the jack laying on its side, but he persisted.

Veins popped out of his arms and shoulders, as he got the long chain spinning in his hands. The whine it made as the air passed through its links was like a banshee wail.

He and the undead hulk advanced on each other. The beast attempted to rush past the spinning chain, but Manacle adjusted the angle slightly, and the chain tore into its carcass like a saw.

Again, gobbets of undead gore were strewn across the road. The monster crashed into Manacle, and they went sprawling in a tangled heap. The blindfold was torn from his head. White light blazed where his eyes should have been.

Working mostly by feel, he passed a loop of his chain around the metallic ribcage of the beast. The ribcage glowed evilly, it must be the center of its awful power.

Holding the chain in his hands, he braced his feet on the hard core of the writhing mass. With a mighty scream, he straightened his back, and pulled with his arms. This was the maneuver he had been doing for the past ten years, while rowing the galley.

Very few things can withstand this kind of pressure. It turned out that the beast's ribcage was not one of them. With a sickening crunch, it collapsed

inward. Slowly, the glowing dimmed, then went completely out. The white light was gone from Manacle's eye sockets as well.

He extricated himself from the gore, and stood up. He gathered his chain to himself, coiled it in his hands, ready for another attack. He could not see down the road, as his damaged warjack was facing him.

He did see Jefry climb timidly out of a crack under a boulder. "Jefry, are there any more? My vision does not show me the road."

Jefry climbed to the top of the boulder, and peered in all directions. "I think it's clear." His voice trembled. "Let's go check on my parents. I hope they are okay..."

Manacle realized that Jefry hadn't seen the head of his father, grafted onto the hideous beast. That was for the best. He wished he hadn't seen it, either. There was no hope that his mother was still alive.

He turned to face the boy. "Jefry, your parents are dead. We must return to Palm at once, and report this invasion into your... our... lands."

* * *

Some hours later, Manacle the Gifted, the boy Jefry, and the two ash-faced workers arrived back in Palm, bearing most of a destroyed warjack in a wagon. The boy clutched tightly to a rude, iron Menofix, the type commonly owned by the peasants of the Protectorate.

Manacle's training as Warcaster had begun.