



THE LONG MOONLIGHT

SAMPLE CHAPTER

RazörFist



Chapter 1

‘Arson and Avarice’

Trisday, 23rd of Ántilián, 1856

The final tumbler fell into place with a dull ‘click’.

Xerdes chanced a final glance from beneath his drawn hood to ensure his choice of vocation hadn’t been elevated to a spectator sport. Only the looming, obsidian spires of the Menuvian skyline glowered back at him. Distant torchlights and illuminated windows lay couched on the dark horizon, benign and sightless.

Silence. Or as close an imitation as Menuvia could muster.

At last, he heaved aside the obese, oaken door, the practiced movements of a seasoned sneak ensuring he did so without a sound.

The footfalls that suddenly sounded from the end of the street did not cooperate. It was a rattling, heavy-hoofed staccato. The kind only the clumsiest sentry can manage. A long shadow stretched through the lamplight at the end of the street.

The thief's wraithlike frame melted through the passageway and into the tavern and remained there, frozen in space, for several breathless moments. The footsteps outside grew in volume, the sentry's torchlight casting unearthly shadows that crawled across the inn's wood-paneled walls. The footsteps faded. The building stilled.

All was pitch inside the inn. Not even a pale shaft of moonlight to pierce the velvet shroud.

Xerdes went to work.

Probing his way down what felt like a hollow wooden stoop, his boots at last met stone. If his daytime survey of the premises had proven fruitful - and the ownership hadn't taken up midnight furniture rearrangement as a hobby - there should be a hearth twelve paces or so from the door.

A hearth with a set of fine, silver casks on its mantelpiece.

Shuffling in silence across the chilly stone floor, he crept to the opposite wall, his gloved fingers gliding deftly along the edge of the fireplace. One of them stopped.

Xerdes felt the edges of his mouth pull into a smirk.

Even through the soft, lambskin leather of his gloves, it was unmistakable. The cool caress of a silver carafe.

He unclasped a small bag from the rear of his belt and drew its mouth agape. A half-dozen casks in total slid quietly into its deceptive depths, and a quick tug of the drawstring pulled it shut at his side. The rear of the bar made a tempting target, but navigating the obstacle course of empty bottles and silverware he had observed earlier made it a forbidding prospect. Moreover, Xerdes nourished the niggling suspicion - given both the richness of the décor, and the proprietor's

pronounced Highcrest accent - that the man likely kept his oldest vintage on the upper floor, nearer his bed quarters. Xerdes had found men of material wealth often labored under the belief that merely lying unconscious with their valuables caused it to appreciate in value.

Noting their proclivities had become a preoccupation since Xerdes had set up shop in the posh Cloventine District, and while he hadn't done nearly as much mapping of its wards and byways as he perhaps should, it seemed the compulsions of the rich were not unique to his native Gylvain Quarter, where the residents abided in filth and squalor. At this point, the only real difference he'd noted was a more pleasant aroma upon stepping outside.

The thief ceased all movement.

He could hear the faint footfalls sounding in the other direction, now. As the torchlight's gleam sent beams of orange light probing the blackness inside, he heard heavy fingers fumbling with a keyring.

Xerdes had company.

He hurriedly scaled the wooden planks of a staircase nestled in the east wall, his silhouetted frame sweeping up to the second floor like a black vapor, deciding that forsaking the bar on the first floor and all its valuables, for the bigger payout above, was the wiser move. Expert footing elicited nary a creak from the



weathered boards, and he quickly ascended to the adjoining upstairs hallway. A shadowed shape, wreathed in weak, silvery moonlight glided down the hallway. Copperware, coins, and other valuables vanishing in its ghostly wake.

It paused.

At the far edge of the hallway, he could just make it out. The muffled sound of male voices. One, exceptionally deep, gravelly, very much the dominant force, by the sound of it. The other halting, nervous, perhaps younger by a decade or two. And familiar. As he drew his gaze to the corner the sounds emitted from, he could see the faintest torchlight shuddering through a door. A voyeuristic compulsion drew him near, until Xerdes found his eye aligned with the crack in the doorframe. Seeing nothing but a naked wall, and the shadow of a man, tied to a chair, with a much larger, oak of a gentleman, hovering above him threateningly. He could hear the gravelly voice, booming from beneath the door.

“...enston is the precise variety of serpent I expect this from. And attempt, to the best of my ability, to anticipate--”

“Oh, aye, sir--”

A sound like a tree branch striking a cliff face cut him off.

Xerdes could hear the man pacing, the slats in the floor groaned with his every footfall, betraying his bulk.

“Hiring from the outside was my first mistake.” he fumed, “I usually go in-house for a job like this.”

His voice then fell to a sinister, throaty growl once more as he pressed on, “You are going to tell me... what you told Rolf Eghenston about my operation.” The shadow of the large man gripped his companion by the throat. “...and then you are going to tell me... how you knew a single rutting thing about my business... without me imparting that knowledge to you.”

Eghenston!

The name seared through Xerdes' mind. It couldn't be.

The only 'Eghenston' he'd known was long-dead. He'd watched him die.

"T-take it easy, Cy! I-I did manage to find where Eghenston was laying his hea--"

With a loud clatter, the large man kicked his seated companion across the room. Still tied helplessly to the chair, he clattered to the floor. And into Xerdes' line of sight.

He thought he'd recognized the waifish voice. The drawn, pale features and unkempt tufts of red hair all confirmed his suspicions. It was Myron Lark, an 'independent' more commonly operating from his very own corner of his old district. Hardly a rival to Xerdes, whose past, and skill, had kept him in reasonably high demand since the fall of the Guilds, but accomplished enough at his handicraft. Lark was a small-time housebreaker, and had no doubt misrepresented his abilities to his pugnacious employer in hopes of elevating his station in the suddenly-lucrative Menvian underworld. Power vacuums had a way of doing that.

If 'Eghenston' rang an eerie tone, the name 'Cy' was a dead note. Either way, he was a heavy hitter. A big shot you could spot from five rooftops over. There would be no reason for Xerdes to know him at all. Higher society crime comes with higher stakes, Xerdes reasoned... and if you didn't soar with eagles, you never plummet to the earth.

"Yes, thank you, you parasite! Thank you for following the breadcrumbs my competent agents laid out for you, and subsequently locating the corner of operations I could have found myself on an evening stroll! Your powers of perception... are truly a marvel. Now..."

Suddenly, the big man lumbered into frame. A stocky, middle-aged giant with rough-hewn features. Head completely shaven to hide his baldness, and failing, and a broad, dark mustache like a pushbroom below a pointed nose. His dark eyes seared like anthracite.

Xerdes heard a tearing sound, as a meaty paw reached down and lifted Myron by

his unfastened shirt collar.

“Askin’ twice makes me disagreeable.”

“J-just told him where I was hired! H-He knows this is your joint.”

The lie seemed sound before he said it. Welliver wasn’t biting.

“I had a shadow this morning. Seemed to know my routine. Which, paranoid type that I am... I know you ain’t privy to...”

“I... I followed you. For a week. From here. F-figured it might be valuable if... if...”

The big man wrapped his fingers around Myron’s frail throat.

“Look, y-you’ve got a reputation... I n-needed to plan for a double-cross, is all!”

Myron Lark was being far too talkative, Xerdes thought to himself. He knew this tune, and how it ended for the songbird. Myron had very nearly outlived his usefulness to ‘Cy’, or whoever he was. Xerdes began to ponder the possibility of intervening. His relationship with the fence was purely professional, but he’d done nothing to deserve a death in a dark tavern.

“I’ve never known Eghenston to leave an informant alive that didn’t give him enough in return to warrant the gesture.”

“P-please don’t kill me, Mr. Welliver!”

Xerdes froze.

Cyrus Welliver. You didn’t have to soar with pigeons, let alone eagles, to spot his influence from the sky. You could spot it on a cloudy day. In an eclipse. While blindfolded.

Xerdes knew Cyrus alright. Xerdes planned to live to a ripe, retiring age by limiting their interactions entirely. That plan wasn’t going well at the moment.

Mired in thought and possibility, Xerdes nearly missed the gurgling noises from beyond the door in front of him. Welliver was strangling Myron Lark to death in front of his eyes! As Myron struggled to breathe, Xerdes felt his fingers wrap tightly around the hilt of his dagger. A curved blade of Nazgan make, banded in blued steel. Myron's eyes darted frantically about the room. The fuming goliath seemed to finally take notice of the crack in the door, and the cloaked figure in the dark hallway beyond. The gurgles grew louder as his eyes seemed transfixed on Xerdes.

In a flash, the thief drew his dagger.

'Myron,' he thought to himself, 'I expect a sizeable discount for--'

Just then, the sound of a wooden chair clattering to the stone floor below rang through the entire tavern. Welliver stopped dead, his fingers slipping from Lark's throat. Coughing and sputtering, Myron desperately attempted to regain his wind.

"I'll hand it to Eghenston. The man wastes no time on prelude." Welliver chortled bemusedly. As he reached for a knife sheathed in back of his breeches, Myron began to sputter.

"T-the *hack* ch-check th-the... *coff*... the door!"

Welliver's eyes narrowed as he wheeled to approach the hallway door.

"I-intruder!" Myron choked out on the floor behind him, "W-watchin' the *hack* whole bloody thing! Xer-- *coff*..."

Cyrus Welliver's eyes narrowed in dawning realization. He threw wide the door.

Nothing.

An empty, moonlit hallway.

Welliver began to turn when he felt the icy chill of steel pressed to his leathery neck.

“Evening,” came the smoky rumble of Xerdes’ voice.

“Wish I had five like you,” Welliver’s eyebrow cocked itself as he raised his chin to make a more tempting target of his throat. “If Eghenston’s stock improved this much, I trust you not to bungle the job. I’d rather not bleed out for a fortnight.”

“Untie him.”

Cy’s eyes blinked open, “W-what...?”

“Cut his bonds and leave.” whispered Xerdes, and with that, kicked the crime lord between his broad shoulders, sending him stumbling in Myron’s direction. Welliver’s knife came clattering to the floor beside him. By the time Cyrus had parted his face from the floorboards and turned back around, he found Myron Lark to be the only other person in the room.

“Adon’s balls...” he muttered. And, brandishing his knife, cut Myron free from the chair.

Saryss had reached the top of the stairs when she heard it. A clattering of bottles in the direction of the bar itself. She spun in place to face the sound, her strong features twisted with Horrand fury.

“Dunwyn!” she whisper-screamed. Was the festering inebriate not content with merely stumbling into a door and fowling their element of surprise? She gripped the angular handle of a Horrand broadsword tightly between her hands. Hardly the instrument of an assassin, but a weapon that had served her too well to part with. Hearing nothing in reply, she turned toward the dark corner where the sound had originated. The door closed behind them, the room had now become an inkwell.

“Dunwyn...” she whispered more quietly, and crept down the stairs and toward the bar.

Suddenly, she hit the wall. She thought she had been struck. From where?

Her right side. Surely her side.

Another blow came, missing her head by inches. Flinging free her blade, she soon felt a stiff strike to her left elbow, accompanied by a hollow 'pop'. The sword darted from her grasp and plunged into a nearby chair. Her left arm folded at her side, mangled and useless.

The shadow was all around her, striking with ruthless precision.

An easy job. This was supposed to be an easy job.

Her dagger was on the right side, where her shattered arm could not reach. She had one final weapon. A weapon that was to be reserved for disposing of the corpses once Welliver had been slain. She drew the torch from beneath her cloak. The flint slid from her pouch with ease and nestled between her fingers. She made a snapping motion.



Her weapon was light.

Xerdes stood revealed, stern-faced, dagger sheathed. She could see his chiseled features, shadowed by a day or two's growth of beard, a few sienna strands hanging before a pair of firm, confident eyes. His lips crept into a sardonic smirk. Dunwyn's unconscious body lay crumpled in a heap in the far corner of the room. She rightly surmised that her watchman, Athros, had met the same fate outside.

As she held the torch aloft, Saryss watched the smirk subside in dismay. He had clearly not known he was striking a woman. Until now.

If her alabaster complexion, square features and statuesque frame hadn't marked her as a Horrand, the splash of cobalt warpaint that cut laterally across a pair of pallid azure eyes would have.

Horrand were hardy, barbarian mountain-folk, and even their females were not at all distant from his physical equal. But the prospect of maiming a woman was not one he relished, irrespective of stature. If he allowed her to live, she would give his description to this mysterious 'Rolf Eghenston'. His mind rifled through every permutation of his next move in dizzying seconds.

Saryss's frantic expression suddenly vanished. With a shrug, she cast the torch over her shoulder, where it clattered at the top of the stairs. The boards were dry as sun-bleached driftwood, and erupted in flame almost instantly. She dropped to her knees and threw back the hood of her cloak. Pale blonde tresses spilled from beneath her hood, now matted with sweat. Her eyes were shut as she muttered words in a harsh, foreign brogue.

"Kin thjönd möreg."

The one arm she could use slowly stretched toward him in sacrificial abandon. Her eyelids parted halfway, and by the flicker of the firelight that was swiftly surrounding them both, he could make out a catatonic gaze in a pair of eyes like blue steel.

"You Horrands and your theatre..." Xerdes chuckled wryly.

He struck her violently in the face with the hilt of his dagger. Saryss folded sideways on the tavern's stonework.

Through the crackling around him, he heard the roof timber beginning to groan.

'Well, we've certainly had the drama,' Xerdes opined in silence, 'Time to exit, stage right.'

With his bag of ill-gotten haul already cooling in an adjacent storm drain outside, Xerdes had only to exit via the front door. The flash of silvery steel dazzled the periphery of his vision, however. The woman's sword still lie, embedded in the

seat of a chair feet from her senseless body. His greed briefly overcoming his survival instinct, Xerdes clasped the hilt and drew it free.

Given a thieves' split-second appraisal, it was a work of exceptional craftsmanship. No common soldier's blade. The weapons of Göurnöth were better renowned for their utility than their aesthetics, yet the blade's hilt bore knot-work intaglios, and the base of the blade itself was dotted with Ägrigör runes. Cumbersome, perhaps. Particularly to a man of his slight build. But an item of tremendous value, regardless. He sheathed the blade in his belt and prepared to exit.

Yet found that he still stood in place.

His eyes transfixed on the unconscious Horrand woman. A wooden plank toppled in flame at the stairs behind him with a thunderous crash, yet his gaze remained unshaken.

"A thief with a conscience," he muttered to himself. "Oh, I'll go far..."

Xerdes crouched on a nearby terrace, watching as fiery tendrils roared from the tavern's windows, belching fetid plumes of smoke into the frigid, Menuvian night. In cold conscription, it was not so unsuccessful a fracas for the young thief. He came away with a bulging bag of valuable loot, considerably more insight into the city's dangerous patrician underworld, and even enjoyed a fleeting moment with one of the most powerful figures in all of Vale, criminal or otherwise. Better still, his one-time fence had apparently lived to commit further life-threatening error. A resounding victory, generally speaking.

As the cloaked frame of Xerdes vaulted to the adjacent rooftop and prepared to make the long journey back to his quarters in the Gylvain, he stepped to the edge and briefly hesitated.

Resounding victory indeed, he intimated internally, Save one, lone indulgence.

Xerdes vaulted from the roof and vanished into the dawn.

Saryss awoke to a skull that seemed committed to the principle of escaping her

scalp. Yet even immobilized by waves of violent pain, her first thought was of her compatriots. Crashing through a wall of agony, she managed to briefly rise and take stock of her surroundings. She lay in a slick alleyway of cobbled stone, catty-corner from the tavern she had evidently found her way from. A tavern now more accurately described as smoldering rubble. To her bewilderment, her hazed vision could just make out her fellow assassins, Athros and Dunwyn, folded neatly against the very wall she was now propped against, still giddily unconscious.

“Drögnän’s cock!” she abruptly gasped. For her sheath lay empty at her side. Her sword taken, the fogged moors of her memory beginning to clear.

“Sh-shtop shoutin’, will ye?” she heard Dunwyn mumble, as he slowly began to stir from unconsciousness.

“Well, if it isn’t The Muddled Mercenary!” she exclaimed venomously, “Good of you to rejoin the conscious.”

“T-take I’ easy, will ye?” he slurred, “Between being knocked out an’ the ‘angover, it feels like a hyperactive blacksmiff is poundin’ ore in me ‘ead.”

“One sunrise and one assault later and still somehow shitfaced. What fortune, for Rolf to have paired us. Obviously Welliver hired for outside protection. Scrawny bastard made off with Gjörgen Khäl...”

“Nonsense!” Dunwyn bellowed, “I’m certain your cowl will turn up!”

“My sword, Crodshit! Where I come from, our weapons have a name. And a soul. We pass them from generation to generation. To steal a clan-sworn weapon warrants execution. If I still had use of my sword-ar--” she stopped dead.

Her shattered arm.

It had been set, and wrapped in bandages.

Cyrus Welliver hacked and wheezed his way down a steamy, cobbled alleyway. He had run for nearly two blocks, Myron Lark stumbling through the seedy

Menuvian side streets just a few paces ahead. Without warning both men collapsed, nearly in unison, having ducked into the small garden of an oblivious nobleman.

Myron at last broke the succession of labored gasps with an expression of the obvious.

“Th-they aren’t following us.”

Welliver, lying on his back in a bed of foliage, replied only with an exasperated glance.

“Well, I should...”

Cy’s meaty paw smacked against Myron’s neck before he could utter another word.

“That... man...” he hoarsely wheezed.

“Th-the intruder?”

“The... very same.”

“J-just looked like an independent, to me... probably not one of Eghenston’s--”

“Assuredly... not.” Cy agreed, his breath beginning to slow. “Which is why you have one last thing to give me, before I give your sad story an end...”

Myron Lark choked back sobs as the mammoth Cy Welliver hovered above him.

“His name.”