

Putnam nearly jumped out of his chair as the door burst open, the bubbling elixirs and preparations in the alembics and retorts arrayed before him sloshing and spilling onto the table, some harmless but others hissing and spitting in their upset. He fumbled to stand, twisting the high-backed chair behind him awkwardly and almost falling over it, catching himself on the ornate backrest and hauling himself to his feet with some effort.

In the doorway stood a silhouetted figure, hulking and garbed with malice, idly grinding underfoot one of the splinters from the broken door frame. “Putnam,” he growled.

“Who—Who are you?”

The intruder stepped forward into the light, casually throwing the open door back toward its frame; it bounced off of the remnants of the door jamb but settled in a mostly-closed position, open only a crack. As the light of the everlamps illuminated the man’s face, Putnam gasped, “Taelainë’s balls!”

“Taelainë doesn’t have balls, old man.” He was Blooded of the Rukhosi, easily seven feet tall as he raised himself to full height upon entering, clothed in pure muscle, enlarged incisors peeking from his lower jaw, giving him something of an underbite.

“No...no, of course she doesn’t. You’re one of Berem’s men, yes?” Putnam attempted a smile as he spoke, but his face resembled more of a Temple grotesque with its mouth lopsidedly open in a look of confusion.

“That’s Blind-Eye to you. You’re two weeks late on your payments. We take our debts very seriously in the Sisters.”

“I have...no—no doubt.” Putnam stuttered. He took a deep breath and steadied himself, brushing the crumbs of his last meal from the front of his robes. “But perhaps we can come to some arrangement. Some collateral?”

“You’re a second-rate alchemist at best, Putnam. Otherwise you’d have turned some lead into gold or somesuch instead of taking a loan from Blind-Eye. What do you have to offer?”

Putnam looked past the kneebreaker then, caught in a personal reverie. “You are correct, of course. Even at university, my poorest performances were alchemical.” Shaking his head as if to clear it of old memories, he turned his gaze to the Rukhosi-Blooded thug. “Still, I’m so close to the end of my experiments! And, as you said, alchemy is the least of my talents. I’m an accomplished shaper. A sword! Yes, how about that? An enchanted sword. Seems enough to by me a week, at least.”

“I have a sword,” the man told him, his left hand fingering the grip of the weapon at his hip—a longsword to most men, but Putnam had no doubt that the man could wield it effectively in a single hand if he desired.

“Yes, but what about a sword you don’t have to sharpen? One that will not break? There are many effective enchantments to be placed on a weapon.”

“Have you ever used a sword, alchemist?”

“I’ve had the good fortune that it’s never been necessary.”

“Then you have no business making swords. Your thaumaturgy means little in a fight—it is the balance of the weapon, the way it feels and plays in your hand

that matters. It’s not easy to find one that fits, and not much makes it worth getting used to a new one if you don’t have to.”

“Perhaps your sword, then? I could enchant it and you’d not need to acquaint yourself with a new weapon. If you’d just hand it over...”

The enforcer smiled. “Clever, old man.” He raised his hands, opening them with palms toward Putnam so their massive size became evident. “But don’t you think that, even if you had my sword—a weapon you’ve admitted to never having used—I couldn’t easily beat you to death with my bare hands?”

Putnam’s shoulders fell. “Yes,” he said, almost a whisper, the reluctant apology of a child who only regrets being caught. Then, he lifted his head with realization and actually smiled. “But you haven’t said ‘no’ outright, have you?”

The large man shrugged. “It doesn’t hurt to listen. Actually goes a long way in my line of work, believe it or not.”

“Then what might you want?”

When the enforcer looked to his shoes, Putnam knew he’d found an in with the man. “It’s about a woman, isn’t it?” The large man’s fierce visage as he raised his eyes from his footwear confirmed the alchemist’s suspicions. “You want a love potion, then? A simple matter, really.”

“Is it, now?” The growling voice dripped with suspicion. Clearly, the thug had never become accustomed to being vulnerable, which Putnam mused might very well be the cause of his amorous failings. “I am no fool, nor do I wish to steal affection through guile.”

*But coin is another matter, now, isn’t it?* Putnam thought to himself. “What then?” he asked.

“It’s...how I look.” The enforcer admitted.

“I am no back-alley fleshcrafter!”

“Putnam, I came here to take some fingers. If you’re going to buy yourself some time, you might consider being what I want you to be.”

The alchemist looked back at the man, a hardness in his eyes. “It is a left-handed practice.”

“But it is something that you could do, is it not?”

“If I wanted to be hunted by the Vigil.”

“Come now, you know that the Vigil holds no authority here. Besides, they’d have to find you first. I already have.” The Rukhosi-Blooded thug cracked his knuckles for emphasis, the sound almost echoing within Putnam’s apartment laboratory.

“You want to look more like the rest of us? Fine. Come back tomorrow and—”

“No. Tonight or not at all.”

“You’ll need a sacrifice.”

“What, like a person?”

“God, no! Well, I mean, yes, that would work, but there’s no need to be so macabre. Something of great personal value to you will suffice. A longtime keepsake, something you acquired at great cost, a symbol of your greatest achievements, something with meaning.”

“Why?”

“We don’t have time for the explanation. I apprenticed under a magus and then spent years at university trying to understand, and even the scholars and professors have only theories and conjectures, though they call them Laws.”

“What if I don’t have anything like that?”

Putnam frowned. “Flesh for flesh then. A finger or two should do.”

The enforcer glared, apparently not a fan of irony. “I need my fingers.”

“Toes?”

“Balance.”

“Ears? Nose?”

“Defeats the purpose, don’t you think?”

“Umm, yes, well...”

“Blood?”

Putnam smiled faintly. “Yes, that will do, but you’ll need a bit of it.”

The thug pulled a wicked dagger from his belt, blade curved and serrated.

“Why not yours?” He growled.

“That would work, um, yes, but then I wouldn’t have the wherewithal to perform the working.” Putnam wrung his hands.

“Fine,” the man said, moving the blade over his forearm.

“Wait!” Putnam objected. “Not yet, you fool!” The alchemist sorted through the multifarious miscellany that cluttered a nearby set of shelves, returning with an empty wide-mouthed bottle and a small vial filled with ochre fluid. “You’ll bleed into this,” the magus said, setting the bottle at the man’s feet. Indicating the ochre liquid, he continued, “When you get the signal from me that you’ve bled enough, you’ll put this on the wound to close it.”

Without additional words, Putnam began to sketch out a rough set of circles and symbols in chalk on the wooden floor surrounding the large man. The designs complete, he started to shuffle through the apartment on seemingly-random errands—collecting a book and opening it upon a nearby lectern, burning some fragrant herb in a small bowl he set at the edge of the circle, mumbling to himself as he gathered a short wand and a clay talisman.

When Putnam looked ready to begin, the man warned him. “If this doesn’t work, I’m going to kill you.”

The enforcer was met by a look of silent confidence on the magus’s face.

“There will be no need for that.”

The alchemist began, the words becoming a frenetic rhythm of unfamiliar sounds, the air becoming heavy with the weight of possibility. With a motion, Putnam signaled to the man. He gritted his teeth, incisors sinking into his upper lip, and drew the blade across his left forearm, crimson trickling neatly into the waiting bottle at his feet.

He bled for what seemed a long time, his vision beginning to close in to a tunnel shape, sounds the sound of Putnam’s voice beginning to distort slightly. Just as he turned the dagger in his hand to use it on his quarry, Putnam signaled to use

the elixir. The thug pulled the vial from where he'd stuck it in his belt, tore the cork away and poured the contents onto the cut in his arm.

The wound did not begin to knit itself closed as the enforcer had expected. The flow of blood from the severed veins instead increased in volume. He moved the dagger back to his good hand and began to move toward the alchemist, wrath burning hot in his eyes. He stopped when he came to the interior edge of the circles drawn on the floor and found that he could not leave the circumscribed space. Passionate wrath turned to cold anger at being outwitted, turned to panic and desperation. On the outside of the circle, Putnam smiled as he continued to intone the words that held the arcane cage in place.

When Blind Eye's agent had finally collapsed into a pool of his own blood, Putnam let the working collapse. Stepping delicately over the body and attempting to avoid tracking bloody footprints through the apartment, he gathered his research notes and most important books and placed them delicately into a leather satchel. He gathered his staff and his broad-brimmed traveling hat before going to the drawers in a humble study desk in the corner of the apartment's single room. Sliding the drawer open, he pulled out a heavy linen bag about the size of his fist, tied at the top and clinking with coin. Stuffing this into his bag, he sidestepped the body once more and swung open the broken door.

A moment later he had exited the tenement building and walked under a starlit sky, both Nyrynë and Iamor visible overhead. He whistled to himself softly as he made his way toward Ilessa's western gate, only a short jaunt from the The Scraps, the beggar's quarter where he'd set up his humble laboratory only a few weeks before.

He tipped his hat at the night watch as they passed, smiling.