

Number 12, Craftsmen's Row
Fairweather
23rd Floodtime, A.R. 13

August Father,

My heart is heavy as I put quill to parchment this night. I have done a thing for which I am not sure I can atone, and it weighs upon my heart like a cave-in on a mining party.

No sooner had I returned to Fairweather, re-taken my rooms in Craftsmen's Row, and put out word of my return than I found myself reached by the Midnight Guild, an organization for which I have done occasional work in the past – you understand, the kind of work for which my arm best swings not my hammer, but my axe. I had not even decided whether to seek my old job at Fosbery's smithy, or another, or possibly strike out on my own; but I had enough money to defer that decision for a time, and the job offered the prospect of still more.

On the face of it, the job seemed quite simple: Investigate a strange but harmless-seeming group of people calling themselves the Walking Club, who were operating in territory bordering that of a local guild called the Rainmongers (who were hiring us through the Midnight Guild – I confess I do not really understand how guild politicks work). There would be a second phase consisting of dealing with the Walking Club people once we had determined what they were up to, but we ourselves would not necessarily have to be part of that. It would depend on what we found.

I suppose I should pause here and tell you who "we" were. You remember, of course, my somewhat deranged and always bemusing halfling friend, Hillary Tinring; and Marik, of whom I have spoken many times (he of the unfortunate collision in the doorway). Also joining us were a man named Tai, who seems to be in the magical line of things, and a woman called Larissa, who I would guess makes her living through some form of thievery.

I will not bore you with the details of our investigation, which amounted to relatively little. In the end, we had to consult with a deity (that somewhat erratic deity worshipped by my somewhat erratic friend Hillary, who appears to have begun a proper temple to her god in the days while I have been gone) to gain even a faint thread to follow. (That experience was an interesting one, though I dare say you would not be particularly moved by an account of it. It made quite an impression on Marik and Tai, though.)

However it happened, we came to the conclusion that the members of the Walking Club were in some way... possessed by some creature or creatures unknown. Tai used a spell unknown to me to read the thoughts of one of these possessors. Our contact with the Rainmongers decided that we should attempt to capture one of the Walkers, and so in the dead of night we went to the home of a washerwoman known to be part of their company.

Subduing the woman herself was easy enough – but then she tore off her shift and plunged us into horror, for we came face to face with her possessor – a horrific little creature embedded in her body, hissing and spitting a noxious-smelling gas, biting and trying to claw us. Confronted by this horror, all my years of training and striving toward discipline failed me. All I could think of to do was bury my good axe in that disgusting creature's twisted little face, and bury it I did; but its face looked out from the belly of a poor, blameless, wretched woman, and without a thought for her I struck her down.

Worse, when the deed was done and the woman dead, the creature lived still, fighting on from her ravaged corpse. Then – and how I lament this, only then! – did I think to use my more civilized powers, my powers of sorcery, instead of simply wading in with axe and muscle. Only then did I realize that I knew a way to strike the beast without also harming its host. Only then – too late. We killed it, but the victory was empty.

We located another, of course, and through ingenuity and the luck of the foolish and exhausted we made contact with the creature; then it was we learned that they were intelligent and seemed even relatively benign. The one we reached said that its kind sought to revive their ancient masters, who sleep

entombed beneath the city; they were using the people for their ability to do labor, the creatures themselves being small and, though tough and dangerous in battle, unable to do much useful work, and they intended to let their hosts go free when their goal was accomplished.

At this point I felt stricken by the knowledge that I had not only killed an innocent woman, but apparently the creature inhabiting her had meant me and my friends no real ill. It had merely been surprised, afraid, defending itself. My reaction, I know, was based largely on its horrific appearance than on any concrete fact, and that weighs upon my heart as well.

By then we were all exhausted, and you know that intellectual quandaries and moral puzzles are not things with which I have great strength. Hillary had consulted her god five times over the course of that day, and the rest of us were similarly worn out. With the situation at a temporary impasse, we retired.

That is to say, the others retired. The face of the washerwoman haunted me, kept me from sleeping. After dawn I wandered the docklands, replaying those horrible moments over and over, as though by thinking of what I had done wrong I could somehow make things right. If I had thought instead of simply reacting; if I had reacted with sorcery instead of mere force; if, if, if. I would probably have driven myself mad, but for the seven toughs who chose to jump me while I pondered.

You know – who better? – of the rage that lurks within me. This night, it was closer to the surface than normal, and when the seven attacked me without warning or reason, I let it have free rein. Before long, only one of the seven remained, and as I surfaced from the sea of rage I let him go. I stood, his fellows' blood dripping from my axe, and watched him run away.

That incident wore me down and drained my emotions enough that I was able to go home and finally sleep, but in the light of day I feel little better. Now I have the added knowledge that I killed a blameless woman and let live that dockyard scum, as though with his worthless life I could buy back hers.

I missed the ending of the affair, if it can be said to be ended. The Rainmongers and the rest of our group sacked the headquarters of the Walking Club that day, while I slept off my blood-soaked morning in my rooms. The Walkers and their possessors were not hurt, merely paralyzed and then taken prisoner, while the Rainmongers decide what to do with them. In the bowels of the building, a gate was found, partially uncovered.

The priests of Brother Suharo became involved at some point in the morning too, but though I was told, do not recall who was responsible for that. Whoever, Larissa told me later that they said the gate the Walkers were uncovering leads to an ancient city buried under that part of Fairweather, a city so ancient that it stood before the modern kinds of Man walked the world. For now, this is being left alone, though it will certainly be meddled with someday. Human nature will see to that.

Tai (who became my friend over the course of that long and agonizing night) intends to find out if the washerwoman had any family, anyone she has left behind. I will help him with this, and if there is anyone, I will see that they are provided for. Neither Tai nor I think this is very likely, but we have to try.

As for the exploration of the ancient city, I strongly suspect that the Rainmongers will offer me, along with the rest of us, a place in that inevitable (if possibly unwise) project. I know not whether I will accept such an offer, if and when they make it. Not because the wisdom of becoming involved is questionable, although it is... but because I am uncertain whether I should myself remain in an adventurous life.

This incident has shaken me deeply, Father, and left me wondering if I serve anything but my own vanity by doing this kind of work. That washerwoman did not deserve to die, did not have to die. She died because of my carelessness, my stupidity. Perhaps I should hang up my axe before my recklessness costs more blameless lives.

I do not know. I wish I were in Jarukh, so that I could have the benefit of your wise counsel, and those of Mother and Anneke as well. Without it, and with my friends all busy with their own affairs or simply not approachable about such a subject, I must try to muddle through on my own. I have not decided what to do. Should I choose to abandon this life of adventure, I will of course return Durin's Light so that someone more deserving can have the use of it.

Speaking of Anneke, do not think that I am so shaken that I do not think of her; is young Bjällarsgørd still courting her? For the record, I am opposed to such a match. He is a charming enough fellow, but he is shiftless and a wastrel, and I doubt he would do anything as her husband but break her heart. At which point, of course, I would have to come home and kill him. That, at least, would be a killing whose needfulness was not in question. You may tell him I have said this.

With a heavy heart but one still filled with Love for you, Mother and dear Anneke, and the fervent hope that the All-Father and the Shining One smile upon you all and keep you safe, I remain,

Your devoted son,
Einar Skinnarland