

A Father's Request

By: Nathan Jones

“You get five thousand now, and five thousand once the job is done.”

His words echoed in my mind, the words of a broken, old man who had all but given up hope. His face weathered and bruised from years of hard labor, the man sat defeated, hunched over in his chair, eyes fixated on the fire that danced in the hearth in front of him. “It’s my life savings,” he added, poking the fire with a metal rod. “I have no doubt that it’s below your normal salary, but I’m asking for you to make an exception this time. She’s my daughter, the only child I have.”

Placing my hand upon the purse in front of me, my fingers grasped the leather tongs that tied it together. I didn’t need to check its contents. The bag was heavy, and that’s all I needed to know. “I’m assuming there are no stipulations then.” I said, trying to appear genuinely sympathetic.

“You are correct.” replied the girl’s father. “I’m no fool. I realize that she’s been missing long enough to warrant the possibility that she might have been killed.” He cast his glance towards the satchel of gold he’d handed us. “The men who took her...they didn’t ask for ransom. That is why I have summoned you here. Make no mistake, I’m hopeful that you find her alive and bring her back safely, but I won’t withhold payment should you find her deceased. I just need proof that you found her; nothing more.”

“Richter.” The voice brought me out of my trance, and I realized I had been staring at the flames for quite some time. I looked up to see my partner staring back at me, his face partially cloaked in the light and shadow which danced from our campfire.

“You should sleep.” he said, removing his sword from his belt. “We’ll have to wake early if we hope to make up for lost time.”

Though my mind was heavily focused on the events from two weeks prior, to the point at which we’d met the girl’s father back at his manor, I realized the merits of Tristan’s words. We’d need to gather what sleep we could, given our current situation. Though we’d left the girl’s home and her father without any relative clue as to whom we might be searching for, we’d quickly gathered rumor from a nearby village that a group of men had ridden through, stopped briefly to gather supplies, and then traveled into the mountains where we now made camp. Unaware of their true identities, we’d learned from the innkeeper that one of them, drunken and foolish, had boasted of their previously capturing a young girl of moderate nobility. It occurred to us then that, given the girl had been captive for just over a month, her safe return neither ransomed nor negotiated in any form with the father, that we were dealing with something entirely different than what we were normally accustomed to. Despite the fact that plenty of young women had been

snatched from their homes in this part of the country, many of them often sold to slave traders for profit, something about this particular case didn't feel so concrete. This wasn't an ordinary case of a band of thieves attempting to get rich quickly from the kidnapping of a young woman. These men had taken her as a prize.

"We have to assume that they'll kill her before handing her over." I said, removing my weapons from my clothing. "This isn't like the other times."

Tristan opened one eye, waving a hand through the air. I could tell he was annoyed at my bringing up what he obviously already knew, and he kicked some dirt into the fire. "We'll talk about it in the morning." he said, trying to reposition his head on the rock he'd fashioned as a pillow. "Let's just get some rest."

Putting out the rest of the fire, I heeded his words and began my own attempt at sleep, stopping momentarily to conceal one of my daggers beneath my cloak. Given our current whereabouts, I had no reason not to expect a visit from strangers in the night, the likes of which would more than happily attempt to relieve us of both our gold and our weapons. I lamented then to the day in which I had met Tristan or, rather the day in which Tristan had attempted to rob me, myself a recent soldier in the king's army, and he a wandering bandit. He'd come upon me at a time similar to our current situation, and I remembered the point at which I'd awoken to find his blade pressed hard against my neck, his breath a toxic fume of liquor and garlic.

"You have two choices." he'd said, his hand firmly upon the hilt of the dagger at my throat. "You can remain still and live, but live a few gold pieces poorer, or you can give me reason to kill you here."

I remembered then looking into his face, seeing the determination in his eyes, and wondering if he'd noticed the dagger I'd held concealed beneath my leg, my hand slowly pointing it towards the back of his thigh. He was built thin, and though I took his threat seriously at the time, fully anticipated that he'd kill me without a moment's pause, I also knew that I didn't wish to die that day. Whether I lunged forward out of anger over being discharged from the king's services, or rather out of the foolish pride of believing I had the upper hand, I vividly recalled the stunned look that crossed his scarred, beaten face as he tumbled backwards, his ass singeing upon the campfire I'd put out only moments before his trespass. Leaping from my previous position, I'd overtaken him in his disoriented state, pressing my own dagger hard against his chest.

"You can leave the way you came." I'd retorted, taking the weapon he'd dropped on the ground. "Slink back to whatever hole you came from. Let your new scar be a firm reminder that you'd best pick your targets more carefully in the future."

I let out a slight chuckle and looked to the spot where Tristan now lay sleeping, his hand every so often moving to scratch the spot where he'd received his reminder to choose a more lucrative profession. He'd followed me soon after our initial encounter and, confident that he'd posed no additional threat, I had allowed him into my company, the two of us becoming close friends soon after.

Though neither of us ever talked of our troubled pasts, I felt confident that I could trust Tristan with my life. It was this shared confidence amongst each other that had kept us alive these past few years, our new occupation becoming the lives of traveling mercenaries. Though we'd faced plenty of extraordinary circumstances in the years that we'd been partners, we nevertheless kept to our motto. We went where the money was, nothing more. Looking up to the sky, I marveled at the light that beamed from the stars above and blanketed our campsite, tying my best to clear my mind. Though I found the task near impossible, I nevertheless closed my eyes, letting myself doze off in hopes of recuperating some of the strength we'd used to climb this mountain. It was cold, and I wrapped my cloak tighter.

I awoke with a jolt, the feel of Tristan's hand upon my shoulder. While my vision was slightly disoriented from having been awakened so abruptly, I could make out the sound of birds chirping in the trees above, and placing a hand to my forehead, I groaned at the pain that now shot through the back of my neck. I should have chosen a better rock.

"It's early." I heard Tristan say. "These birds are the first."

He was already on his feet, his sword strapped tightly to his back, his black hair tangled and matted upon his forehead. "How long have you been awake?" I asked.

"Long enough to hear the sound of horses on the ridge above us." he replied. He handed me a flask of water. "You were talking in your sleep again." he said. "You called out for her."

"I don't want to talk about it." I said, handing the flask back to him. It tasted of liquor. I could tell he hadn't washed it thoroughly enough. "Let's just get moving."

Back on our horses, the two of us slowly began to make our way up the rest of the mountain, its slope continuing to test our nerves with every step. Though I'd never been to this part of the country before, I'd heard rumors of its unforgiving terrain, and both Tristan and I had been warned by the stableman in the village below that most of this territory was uncharted, and with good reason.

"Folks don't go up there." he'd told us. "At least not to stay long."

Curious about what we might be walking into, Tristan and I had asked the old man why this particular area was so dangerous, citing the fact that we'd seen smoke coming from the top of the ridge only days prior.

"If there's anyone up there," the old man had answered, "then they're fools for it. That place hasn't been safe since the mine collapsed. Most of the men here lost their lives in that mountain, and the few who survived have moved on."

“We’d heard that a group of men came through here.” I’d told him. “They had a girl with them.” The old man had seemed suspicious at this point, and sensing his nervousness, I’d pressed him harder. “We believe they’re the ones who’ve made camp there.”

“I didn’t see them.” said the old man. “But if they traveled up that mountain, there’s a good chance they’re looking to cross over through the mine. Before it collapsed, a few of the men here said that they thought they might have found a tunnel, something very old and very ancient, but still partially intact. If the men you’re looking for took to that mine, there’s a good chance that they’re planning to try and use that same tunnel. It’s only partially connected, so it might still be usable despite the collapse.” Placing the last shoe on our horses, the stableman had handed us each a torch. “You lads be careful.” he’d added. “There’s no account for what you might find up there.”

My eyes now peering the distance in front of us, I motioned for Tristan to follow close on my right. I wasn’t sure if we’d encounter any of the thieves still lingering on the trail, and hiking up the mountain single file would only serve to place whoever was in front in greater danger of being ambushed. I watched as Tristan loaded his crossbow, placing the remainder of the bolts in a quiver he’d fashioned specifically to fit on his leg. I envied his proficiency with the weapon, citing my own proficiency with a sword as the only true counter to my jealousy. He’d tried to teach me to use it a few times, taking every opportunity to allow me to hunt for our daily meals while he stood by and instructed, but I’d learned in the six years since we’d become partners that I was never going to master anything but a blade. I was too comfortable with it, and much too clumsy with anything else.

“There it is.” he said, pointing straight ahead. “That’s the trail the stableman told us about.”

Sure enough, the trail to the secondary half of the mountain lay before us, its opening partially shrouded in brush that had overgrown from the years since it had been abandoned. Our horses, having been relatively quiet and well-mannered since the time we left the village, now seemed to grow nervous and unwilling to go any farther. Taking the reins of my own, I watched as Tristan struggled to keep his from throwing him off the saddle, his hand gently coaxing the animal to remain calm and press onward. It took only a few moments for our horses to settle their nerves, and kicking their sides quietly, the two of us pressed on towards the top of the mountain, the forest around us now beginning to fully awaken as the morning sun beamed through its canopy. I rode slowly, keeping my eyes on the trees around us, watching for any signs of movement. Nothing. Though I was fairly confident that we hadn’t been detected, that our pursuit had gone unnoticed by the group of thieves high above us somewhere on the mountain, I couldn’t quite shake the feeling that we were being watched.

“I feel it too.” Tristan blurted out, a free hand resting on the handle of his crossbow. “I picked up on it a few hours back while you were still asleep.”

“What do you think it is?” I asked. “I didn’t think they’d know we were following them.”

“I’m not sure.” he replied. “But if you remember what the old man said, this place is death. I’m not inclined to believe the men above us know we’re here either, but this place has eyes, that’s for sure.”

We continued onward, our minds still focused on the eerie feeling that sat within our stomachs, keeping our horses to the trail that continued to deteriorate as we pressed farther and farther up the mountain. To my surprise, the higher we climbed, the less I began to pick up on the sounds of the forest around us, and it was as if even the *animals* were too frightened to venture past a certain point. Coming over a small hill, I suddenly halted my horse, peering hard into a group of bushes to our left. Something had caught my eye. My hand on my sword, I slowly dismounted, keeping my eyes on the trees above as well as the bushes below. As I got closer, I began to notice that the object I’d spotted bore a distinct resemblance to a piece of clothing, and my suspicions were confirmed upon closer inspection.

“It’s a piece of her dress.” I said to Tristan, tossing the cloth into his gloved hand. “It doesn’t look cut. It looks torn.”

“You think she did this herself?” The look in his eye told me he wasn’t really sure if he believed it either, but something about it made sense to him.

“Possibly.” I said. “But given that we’ve yet to encounter any of the men who took her, I don’t want to jump to conclusions. It might have been torn off on their way up the hill. My guess is they would have thrown her over the back of a horse.”

Tristan turned the cloth over in his hand, running his thumb over the surface. “There doesn’t appear to be any blood. They may not have...taken her yet.”

“True,” I said, “but we can’t expect them not to grow impatient.” Jumping back on my horse, I contemplated the possibilities. “We won’t know until we find her.” I said. “Let’s just hope she’s still alive.”

The two of us continued on, our horses becoming more and more agitated as we neared the point at which the forest ended, and the rocky cliffs of the mountainside began. Taking the reins in both hands, I clasped them tightly to steady the horse as it attempted to gain its footing, filing in front of Tristan when the path narrowed to such a degree that it would only allow for one rider at a time. I tried not to look below. We were much higher than we’d been before, the cold air now biting against our cheeks as the mountain sought to throw us from the cliff-face with frequent and piercing gales. I was reminded then of my earlier days in the king’s army and, in particular, a mission in which my regiment had been assigned to quell the uprising of a nearby village. Despite the village being rather secluded, its base near the top of a mountain not too unlike this one, the king had decided that the village was in danger of offering aid to our enemies in the valley north of us, many of which would inevitably cross through that village to supply their army.

“Take your sword and strike her down.” my commanding officer had said, pointing to the bruised and bleeding girl at my feet. “An attack on the king’s soldiers is the same as an attack on the king himself.”

I’d looked down at the girl in front of me, no older than fifteen at most, her head lowered to the ground as she clutched the bloody sword which had only moments ago impaled the soldier next to me. Raising my own high in the air, I’d hesitated.

“Strike her down.” my commanding officer repeated.

The girl had looked up at this point, her piercing blue eyes glaring defiantly into mine, her spirit crying out to me to do as my commanding officer said, to strike her down and prove what she and her fellow villagers had been saying all along. Raising my sword higher, I’d closed my eyes and swung in total darkness, too afraid to commit my eyes to murder. The sound of her body hitting the mud had been ringing in my head for the past six years.

“Richter, look.” Tristan now pointed to a small crevice in front of us, most likely the final barrier between us and the tunnel near the summit. As the wind passed through, it made a slight hum, and it was at this point that our horses halted completely. No amount of persuasion would press them farther.

“We walk from here.” I said to Tristan, gathering my weapons from the saddle. “Let’s be on our guard.”

We paced ourselves slowly, the weight of our weapons doing little to help the already complicated method by which we were forced to climb. Wondering why we hadn’t encountered the thieves’ horses at this very same spot, I surmised that theirs were probably far less nervous than the ones we’d been loaned, and it dawned on me that those horses might very well have been accustomed to this path. If what the stableman had said was true, then there was a very real possibility that these men had used that tunnel before. This only further hastened our need to reach the girl quickly. If they hailed from the other side of the mountain, then it was very likely that once they reached the tunnel, they and the girl would disappear entirely. We quickened our pace, keeping our backs to the cliffs as we advanced, wary of making too much noise and alerting the men to our presence. Though the wind at this elevation was still a hindrance, it did provide one benefit in that it masked most of our footsteps as we pressed onwards, our boots crunching the ground as we spiraled higher and higher towards the cave above. Rounding a corner, I halted suddenly. I looked behind me, realizing that Tristan had heard it too: the distinct sound of a group of men shouting at one another. We were close.

Placing my hand on my sword, I peered around the next corner, looking for any sign that the trail in front of us would reveal the source of those voices. There was nothing. Looking back at Tristan, I noticed his eyes were fixed above, his finger pointing to a rock that seemed to jut out further than all the others: the mouth of the cave. Tristan’s hand immediately went to his crossbow, and he retrieved another bolt from the quiver on his leg. Placing it into the weapon silently, he stepped out from the wall we’d leaned up against, arching his neck to look for a way up. It was then that I noticed the crevice in the wall, a worn, half-eroded piece of

mountainside that looked to have been carved in the shape of a flight of stairs. Tapping Tristan on the shoulder, I bid him to follow me, and together the two of us slowly crept up the stone stairwell, each of us keeping one hand on our weapons. As we reached the top, we found ourselves at the mouth of a giant cave, a handful of boulders scattered just in front of us. Creeping behind one of the boulders, we could see what we'd heard from down below.

Only a few yards in front of us, two men sat by a campfire, their attentions focused on a large roast that twirled on a skewer. Dressed from head to toe in black garb, the bigger of the two wore a very large and very menacing broadsword on his back, his face adorned with all manner of scars, piercings, and tattoos.

"How are we going to do this?" Tristan asked, his hand still on his crossbow. "I didn't think we'd find them so quickly."

"I'm still trying to figure that out." I replied, slowly drawing a dagger from my belt. "I had assumed we'd find them sometime after dark, given the size of this mountain. To be honest, I'd planned to reclaim the girl while the majority of them were asleep."

"I figured as much." Tristan whispered, "But it doesn't look like we'll get that--" his voice was cut short as his foot made contact with a nearby rock, and though we remained hidden from view, the sound of the stone tumbling down alerted the smaller of the two men at the campfire.

"What do you suppose that was?" we could hear him ask his companion.

The larger man shuffled his position, his hands firmly wrapped around a piece of meat. "I'm not getting up to check." he replied. "You do it."

Realizing that the man would be coming this way at any moment, I quickly sized him up. He was built similar to Tristan, but I couldn't tell if he was armed. I ducked my head back behind the boulder as he slowly made his way over to our position, the sun above us now beginning to wane in the afternoon sky. I checked the ground. Neither Tristan nor I were making any distinguishable shadows, but the man was getting closer. A gust of wind suddenly picked up, and I realized I had to act fast. Twisting the dagger in my hand, I waited until the opportune moment when the man came around the corner of the boulder, grabbing him quickly with one arm and cupping his nose and mouth. I brought the dagger in swiftly, sinking it deep into the kidnapper's neck and watched his eyes bulge, then subsequently roll into the back of his head. With a quick shove, I sent his body tumbling down the cliff-face below, its scrawny frame crashing into the tree tops and disappearing into the forest. His associate, the larger man which had up until now been feasting heartily on a piece of meat, rose from his seated position, his eyes trying to find what his ears had told him.

"Vicks?" he called out, thankfully still unaware of our presence. "Vicks, what do you see?" There was no answer. He called out again. "*What do you see?*"

Still, there was no answer. I motioned for Tristan to get ready, and watched as the brute now drew his sword, his movement towards our position slow and cautious. A quick glance behind him revealed no other threats, and having given Tristan the go-ahead, I watched the look of disbelief upon the brute's face as Tristan whipped around the boulder, aimed his crossbow, and placed two bolts directly into the thief's chest. The man staggered forward, his bulky exterior refusing to go down so easily, and fearful that he might cry out to companions still be lurking within the cave, I charged forward, sword in hand and struck him down. With the tunnel now unguarded, Tristan and I quickly seized the torches we'd been given from our packs and proceeded to move inside, still wary of any kidnappers that might be nearby. We paced ourselves steadily, listening for any signs of movement. Nothing. The only sounds we could hear were the drops of water cascading down rocky walls, and the dirt crunching beneath our feet, mixing with stone as we pressed further and further into the tunnel. The air was thick and heavy with dust, and all around us, moss crept up and down the cavern walls, the insect inhabitants cowering at the light of our torches. Up ahead, I spotted the faint, yellow glow of another torch, and placing my arm to Tristan's chest, the two of us watched and waited to see what direction the torch was traveling. As it disappeared around a hidden bend, Tristan and I quickened our pace, our weapons still raised and at the ready.

"What's taking them so long?" we heard a voice shout. "They were supposed to be eating, not sleeping!"

"I'm not sure, boss." said another, this one a bit shakier than the first. "Locke said the two of them had killed a big one, said they wanted to finish it before we moved through."

"Go and get 'em." said the first voice. "We have to keep moving. We're not safe until we cross through the mountain."

With that, the bend began to glow brightly again, and Tristan and I stood still as the light drew closer and closer. There was nowhere to hide, no cracks or crevices in the cavern wall with which to take this kidnapper by surprise, his leather-clad frame coming closer and closer into view. Suddenly, he spotted us.

"Hey!" he shouted. "You two! Boss says we gotta get movin. Grab your gear and--"

He suddenly stopped short, and it quickly became apparent that he'd realized his mistake. Hastily drawing a sword from his belt, he called out within the cave. "Boss we got--"

I plunged my sword into his chest, yanking it free as he clutched the gaping wound and tumbled backwards, his mouth still trying to utter a cry for help. There was a great clashing in front of us, and before I could even look up to see what had happened, Tristan was now at full-speed, charging headlong around the bend.

"Tristan, no!" I shouted, but it was too late.

As he rounded the corner, torch still in hand, I watched as his body flung to the side, the force of a thrown dagger knocking him against the wall. There was another scream, this one from a completely different source, and I rounded the bend to find a tall, hulking figure hovering near a table littered with bags, blankets, and various tools. The stranger, similar in appearance to the rest of the attackers, said not a word as he stood ready, a sword freshly drawn and gleaming in the glow of Tristan's fallen torch. I held my own blade tightly, watching the stranger's movements as he shifted his feet, his blade slowly twisting in his hands. Raising my sword, I prepared for his attack, but was momentarily distracted by the sound of a groan from somewhere behind the stranger. Sensing his opportunity, the kidnapper lunged forward, catching Tristan's torch with his foot and flinging it in my direction. The sudden move momentarily knocked me off balance, and I tumbled back, slashing the air wildly, unaware that the stranger had now run deeper into the tunnel. Wiping the sparks from my face, I quickly regained my vision and scanned the room for my opponent, but saw only Tristan's bloody glove pointing further down the tunnel. I raced in, stumbling in the darkness, pointing my sword in front of me and waiting for the ambush. Cursing myself for not having grabbed the torch, I placed my hands against the cool, wet rocks beside me, trying my best to feel my way through. The darkness grew thicker and thicker as I advanced, and as I stumbled onward, there was a clash of rocks somewhere in the shadows. Squinting my eyes, I could almost make out a shape, and when the stones in the darkness rustled once more, I froze stiff, my breathing echoing across the cavern walls. Seconds later, the air around me seemed to shift, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw the shadows move.

The rocks above my head rang as I ducked low, and slashing the darkness in front of me, I felt my sword make contact. A slight trickle of blood seeped down the blade, and a low groan filled the air as I pulled my sword free, its bulk having caught what I believed to be the kidnapper's torso. Hearing the thud of my opponent's body hit the ground, I ran quickly back to the room where my partner lay injured, his bloody glove still clutching the wound in his abdomen. He pointed to the table of supplies. There, sprawled across its surface and half-covered in blankets, lay the young woman we'd been searching for, her hands clasped at her neck. Dropping my sword, I approached the table, dismayed as my eyes revealed that the girl, her garments torn from her body, now laid still, a clean slash across her throat. We were too late.

"Is she dead?" Tristan asked. His voice was hoarse, and I could tell he wouldn't last long in his present condition.

"Yes." I replied. "He must have killed her just before you came in."

"I'm sorry." Tristan muttered. He tried to raise himself from the ground, but instead collapsed back against the wall. "Did you get him?"

"Yes." I said, my eyes still on the young girl in front of me. "I got him." I clasped her hand in my own, running my fingers over the cuts and bruises on her wrist. Tristan coughed violently behind me, and I quickly dropped the girl's hand, rushing back to his side, grimacing at the sight of his wound. It was deep, and by now his glove was fully covered in blood, a pool of which had now begun to form on the ground next to him.

“I’ve had worse.” I heard him mutter, his head hanging low. “Just wrap me up as best you can.”

Tearing a piece of my cloak, I cursed my position. With Tristan as injured as he was, we would have no choice but to leave the girl here, and though I hadn’t the time to properly bury her, I quietly wrapped her body in the blanket on the table. Placing her as neatly upon its surface as I could, I folded her arms across her chest. It was then that I noticed the ring on her left hand, and having gently removed it from her finger, I placed it within my pouch as proof to the girl’s father that we’d found her. It was all that we would need. Sheathing my sword, I helped Tristan to his feet, and together we exited the cave, our heads held low. It would be a long walk back to the village.