

Chapter 1

Near-perfect stillness rested over this curved portion of road. No wagons crossed the busy highway, and no pedestrians followed the blazed trails alongside the rocky way. No frogs leapt at the marsh's edge that started a half-mile off the road's left boundary, and no birds flitted amongst the sparse trees immediately off the road's right boundary. Not even the carrion birds have broken the temporary moratorium, despite the bait being set. No, this scene would remain pristine, but only for a moment.

Save for the solitary figure, walking slowly a couple hundred yards off the road in the denser forest and prodding the occasional body, this place could have been mistaken for a still life landscape, though tacky in its folkloric, grandiose violence on display in the twilight sun. The figure's examination was cursory—he had already finished most of the work, and he did have somewhere to be. He had always felt the need to triple check, and old habits died hard.

Spravo concluded his final checks. He slowly straightened up, twisting and stretching out his sore back.

Everything seemed to be in its proper position, but Spravo knew he would remember a forgotten detail at some point tomorrow. Such has always been the way of these things. However, this particular assignment did offer a number of unique challenges, and he would have appreciated extra time more than ever. Things could really shine. He might even approach a fraction of Rahnu's grace.

Looking up in reverence, he made a small, self-admonishing gesture to the heavens. He wasn't ungrateful, and he took no claim to his own divine splendor. On the contrary, he knew his actions brought glory to the Most High. Most did not, could not, see it that way, but he was secure in his body of work.

It incensed him that this would be just a piece of the puzzle for his employers. They would debase his art and turn it into a step of a plan, yet they possessed the audacity to name him the profane

one. Just because his chosen craft also brought tremendous wealth did not mean that he was meant to spurn such compensation. Not that he was much of a theologian, anyways. His faith was his own.

Spravo looked up into the now black sky. Early in its curve, the moon poked through partial cloud cover, but even the sparse foliage where he stood was enough to make the darkness nearly opaque. Time was gone.

Despairing perfection and cursing his employer for such wasteful expediency, he gathered his tools and weapons and turned towards the heart of the forest. He struck forward, keeping the same deliberate pace. Spravo felt the cozy shadows curl and embrace him as he entered the tree line.

Bode opened his eyes. A general haze hid any details in his vision. Nevertheless, he could swear that someone was walking on the wall in front of him, standing straight out sideways. The haze obscured the person's identity, but he felt a pang of annoyed familiarity. The way the stranger moved tickled Bode, as he could swear the stocky but efficient steps reminded him of someone. Of course, that could not be the case. No one Bode knew possessed such awesome powers, such audacious rejection of the natural laws.

After a couple moments' careful thought, he decided that he could be open to receiving the wisdom of his new, gravity-resistant superiors. A couple of blinks cleared out s of the cobwebs, and Bode could see his magical wall-walker picking up a cup from a similarly gravity-challenged table.

He had to draw the line somewhere. A man he could respect, but he would bow before no tables. Pain expanded against his skull in protest as he sat up, breaking the optical illusion. No magic today.

He knew that he was under a roof, which was already an improvement from the previous morning. The festival of the Ward had been doing a number on him this week, and small victories won the war. Outside of recognizing four walls and a ceiling, any further geographical knowledge would've

required a level of concentration that, for some reason, seemed to elude him right now. Pontificating on his particularly pernicious predicament, he pivoted and puked in a puddle.

“Rahnu save him, he’s up!” cried Bode’s would-be wizard. The stocky, blond man walked over, careful to step over the pile of sick, and slapped Bode on his hunched back. “You’re cutting it pretty close. Our morning shift is about to start.”

Bode looked up and, failing to stifle a groan, recognized that he was in his own barrack. His bed was within arm’s length. He ran his hands through his wild curls, shuffled around his sick, and limped to his bed. “It should be illegal to force us poor guards to trudge along these dirty streets the night after such a party!” he muttered between fruitless attempts at stretching. The recovery process had extended and extended over the past two decades, and the stretching seemed not to help more often than it did. “Truly, not even Lunt would fault us if we started our patrol just a couple of minutes late.”

Bode’s patrol partner flashed him a grin with entirely too many teeth. Bode was surprised that he found room to fit all the condescension in between what must be more than the anatomically typical number of teeth. “Are you regretting that last round? Or five?” A couple of the other guards in the barracks banged approval on their wooden bedframes. It was curious how none of them helped Bode into his bed the night before. Petty jealousy, he was sure.

“Shove it. You were with me drink for drink, from what I remember. How is it that I’m the only one paying the price?” Admitting defeat after a valiant 120 ticks of standing, Bode laid down flat on his bed. “Here’s my bet. I bet your lordship’s constitution prevents such pastoral problems as a ‘hangover,’ or ‘repercussions.’ Though where your Lordship Baust’s cure for lowly guard duty seems to be, I guess you haven’t figured out yet.”

As soon as he said those words, he regretted them. Many people had told him he took things too far, and he hoped one day he could take their criticism under advisement. “If only we all could remember as little of the night as you do, Bode.” Verner Baust picked Bode’s helmet up off the table,

and shoved with not a little force into Bode's midsection. "Get up. Our shift starts now. The guardsmen on duty will be waiting for us to relieve them."

Bode placed his helmet back on the ground and turned his back to Verner. "I can't make it out yet. We covered their shift last week. I think a half hour delay to starting our own shift is fair recompense."

Verner walked towards the door. "Despite what you may tell yourself, Captain Lunt is on high alert this week. This morning alone he's had two guardsmen detained. I'm not going to get on his bad side." He turned back to Bode. "Are you coming or not?"

"I'll come find you, as soon as I feel that I will not hold back our team. I give to you my unconditional faith. I believe you can police all these early morning, go-getting rebels, your Lordship." Bode turned to see if his ribbing had any effect, but Verner was already out the door. No, it was fine. Knowing that he was rambling helped remove the sting of being ignored. At least, he had told himself that often enough. Now, if only that trick would work for the mundanity of guard duty.

After a fitful nap, Bode awoke for the second time that day and peered out the window. The sun was near the top of the sky. Bode had always exceeded expectations when it came to sleeping. Verner would already have finished the first loop and is probably halfway through the second. As long as he met up with Verner before he got back to the guardhouse, all would be good. No one finds out, the city remains safe, and Bode can continue thanking the Ward tonight. As he finished getting dressed, he thought he might actually be feeling hopeful, which would really put the finishing touches on an insanity case. He idly wondered if the Baron would pay for any psychoses contracted in the line of duty.

Shivering despite the midday heat, Bode thought about his plans for after this grueling patrol shift as he walked towards the doorway. A nice, cold ale after a long shift would give him some clarity.

A collision with a uniformed officer shook him from his daydream. The pale, skinny man looked shaken up, the low velocity impact too much for his slight frame. Despite being obviously

tailored quite well, the uniform still seemed slightly too big for the officer. He started to offer an apology, but the several ornate knots on the shoulders of the green officer's coat disabused Bode from any expectation of empathy.

"Skiv Bode, what are you doing here? You should be by the pit with your partner, if you actually followed your route schedules for once." Captain Lunt preened even more than usual when talking about schedules. Not that he designed any of them himself, but he always had been adept at co-opting the good ideas of others.

Bode snapped to attention and held a salute for his dashing commanding officer. "My boots were scuffed by a citizen, sir! Their 3.2% decrease in efficient foot placement was keeping me from fulfilling my duties to their utmost, sir! When I saw this unspeakable travesty, sir, my first thought was of your inspiring words!" Bode then slumped his shoulders and brought his voice to a nasally pitch. "Your boots represent your habits as a solider, which invariably reflect upon your superiors. You must maintain all of our images." Bode immediately straightened back up to ready position.

Lunt narrowed his eyes. Bode could see the wheels turning in his great, big head. Ultimately deciding that, yes, he supposed he was being made fun of, Lunt assumed his bureaucratic pose. It was the type of pose that simultaneously screams undue influence and shocking inability. Bode knew it well. He tried to imagine how many paintings Lunt had of himself in this very same position, but it couldn't be fewer than—

"You know, other officers used to ask me why you're stuck at patrol duty. I mean, for Rahnu's sake, you're a couple of years older than I am, and you've nearly reached your third year of service!" Lunt's sneer carried venom. "They've stopped asking, now."

Bode's salute lost some of its pointedness. His arm drooped to his side as he continued to stare forward, past his captain. A flurry of motion outside the doorway caught his eye, and his eyes darted to follow the procession.

A column of horsemen, riding two by two, were trotting past the barracks and heading deeper into the town. The baron's outsized guard created a stir whenever it passed through the town.

Lunt glanced nervously at the train of riders. "Damnation. We will have to continue this conversation another time. This has to have been your worst excuse attempt to date, because your boots are filthy." He looked back to Bode and met his eyes squarely. "You used to try, at least in lying." He began to trot after the line of horses, and his oversized jacket flopped belatedly with his awkward movements. Bode heard him yell something about his desk at an hour before sundown before his sterling captain disappeared around the corner of the brown alleyway.

Bode himself turned out towards the alleyway. The ground right around the guard barracks was clean of garbage and filth, but refuse formed half inch-high, rolling hills once clear of the barracks grounds to the right. These hills ran to the right to the city walls, then continued north, away into other alleys. Bode turned left out of the door, headed out onto the wider street, and stepped into Stutzviesse proper.

Squinting his eyes against the harsh, midday sun, he turned about in place as he tried to guess where his partner would be by now. He might not have been anyone's first choice if a matter of chronology were to come up, but neither were any members of the city watch. He was just the only one brave enough to be frank about this shortcoming. Yes, that was it: bravery.

The barracks sat against the eastern city wall, the two small dormitories packed together so as to share a wall. Ever frugal. Bode could see the tips of some of the higher peaks of the Delit range jutting over these eastern walls. These mountains comprised the end of the range this far south, though, and had nothing on the soaring peaks to the north near Holbrana. Despite this settlement itself only being maybe a decade old, the stonefort and city walls were ancient. The stonefort was of ample size, though dwarfed by some of the kingdom's recent projects. Bode had heard that the towers in the new keep in Talviesse scraped the clouds, and passersby could not see their peaks from the keep's base.

The city walls were the true triumph. Many, many years had weathered the walls, and sometimes flakes chipped off the wall on dry days. Bode, however, had no doubts that it would take a significant force to take these walls. They stood two feet thick around the entire perimeter of the settlement. Bode understood how an impressive enough wall might dissuade an attack, as he considered himself an expert on quitting a futile task before actually beginning.

A passing pedestrian bumped into Bode's shoulder and woke him from his standing reverie. The civilian, face screwed up in anger, turned quickly to confront his roadblock. But when he saw the city guard's uniform, he paled, dropped his eyes to the ground, and mumbled a quick apology. He then scurried away before Bode could even tell him that, sorry, he shouldn't have been standing in the middle of the road. Feeling powerful didn't use to make Bode feel so gross. Not that he had too much experience with power.

Gross! Oh, of course! He had forgotten about Verner! He chastised himself for leaving his dear partner alone to finish their patrol of these mean streets. By now, he had to be getting close to the markets, but Bode should still have a little bit of time. As long as he met up with him before the markets, it would be fine. As much as he would have liked to join his partner immediately in mind-numbing patrol, he had to see Ana about a debt.

Thankfully, or in another sense unfortunately, Ana's money-changer stall was close to the barracks. She served an important purpose in Stutzviesse, considering its location. It bordered Moduna directly and often served as a waypoint between Tumurata and Holbrana or Talviesse, even in these unsettling times. So travelers could be carrying any of three different currencies when they came into town, and Stutzviesse merchants only accepted the Holy King's coin. Ana didn't provide the only game in town, but she certainly ran the largest operation. She assured everyone that she would not take advantage of them. No, she barely made herself a profit at all. She enjoyed using that line. Yet somehow, she always had enough of those meager profits to be able to give out more loans.

As Bode approached her store-front, Ana was standing outside. She was directing a small boy to hold higher a sign that read “Travelers for the Festival of the Ward! Money changed here and only here!” She turned away, satisfied that the boy was following her direction. Her satisfied smile slid off her face when she saw Bode.

“You! You owe me money. Not an insubstantial amount, as I recall. Have you come to settle up?” Her strong stance indicated that a “Yes ma’am, thank you ma’am,” was the only response she would find acceptable.

“Ana, how is my favorite extortionist? I imagine the festival is bringing in a wondrous amount of business.” Bode stopped next to the moneychanger and, for a moment, considered giving his friend a good-natured pat on the back. He ultimately decided that it was better to keep his limbs. Instead, his face adopted a pitiable expression, and he looked down at the ground. “I, due to unforeseen circumstances, do not have the money to pay you back. I don’t even have enough money to fund my activities for tonight!” He looked up at the moneychanger, giving her his most pathetic look. “Imagine that! Bode Ausval, the settlement’s preeminent festival goer, without the means to fund his revelry!” He looked back down at the ground. “I wonder if a kind-hearted money changer would be able to front such a man just enough to enjoy tonight.” He looked up once again, hope poking through the mask of self-pity.

Ana burst out laughing. She was so loud that many pedestrians stopped in their tracks to see what could cause such merriment. Once they saw the pair of them together, however, the answer was simple. Each held a degree of notoriety in Stutzviesse. “Oh, Bode. I don’t think anyone else would have the guts to beg for another loan when they can’t pay their several currently outstanding,” she managed to get out between fits of laughter.

Finally, she recovered and looked at Bode. “No. No, I will not give you another loan. I will, however, not have my boys break your legs for the loan you still owe me. I haven’t laughed that hard in a long time.” Her face grew wistful, and her eyes grew misty as she seemed to be remembering fonder

times. After a quick span, her face hardened once again. “Next payday, the entire thing comes to me. I know exactly how much you make, so there will be no shorting me. Now, leave. I don’t want you disturbing actual customers. The omens send a great day of business for me, and you’re likely to ruin it.”

She started to shoo him away, but Bode had already jumped when she first began to move her arms. It wasn’t fright that made Bode jump but rather his nerves still being frazzled from the previous night. So said the voice inside Bode’s head that seemed to diminish every passing day. He waved his hand at her as he walked away, hoping that might buy him some goodwill for later.