

BLACK COMPANY

Huaresh, Eastern Valdesia (The Skirt) 3057.7.18

“You must keep them quiet. You must! I can’t do anything about the noise you’re all making.” Signore Bassalo tried hard to keep the panic from his voice but there was so little time. Another baby began to skrike and several of the smaller children were whimpering. “Andras, I’ll have to start now or they’ll be on us before I get a word spoken. You’ll have to do something about the noise. Get the babies under the stage at least.”

“I’ll try, Signore, but won’t that make them cry all the more?”

“It’s what can be heard outside that counts, not in. I have to go.”

Andras nodded. “It’s the only way. Do it right for us, Signore, we know you can.”

The Signore could think of no reply. He shrugged, took one last look at the women and children and the old men all crowded into the spaces between the tables and benches, cast his eyes over the children’s pictures that covered the walls and then quickly hurried out through the front door.

Outside the schoolhouse everything seemed as normal. It was a pleasant summer’s day of blue sky and high, white cloud. His newly painted cottage over by the brook looked prettier than ever: pink walls, climbing honeysuckle, a multitude of flowers bright in his garden. Further on was Claudia Bera’s tiny white house with its weedy vegetable patch. He’d been meaning to get the children to help her tidy up a bit: she was at least eighty now and marvellous for her age but some things were beyond her. Not that she would admit it. They more or less had to frog-march her to the schoolhouse. “No

black devil's having me out of my home," she declared and would have stayed put if they had let her.

Of course there was no one in the village street that curved away beyond the white house. Up past the smithy at the top end a handful of young men had been set to let fly some arrows and then run off into the trees as fast as they could. Deeper into the village the others were hidden up between the houses on the forest side, behind sheds and water-butts, or crouching in the long grass along the brook's edge; maybe forty all told. According to Serrio and his brother, the Black Company had left Ardache on the road for Huaresh more than two hours past. The brothers had ridden hard while the Company had dallied but still they could not have gained more than an hour. The last report that came in only five minutes ago said at least thirty frighteningly well-armed men were barely a mile away, looting the Gunez farm. When they tired of doing that they would come. Old man Gunez' face when he heard the news was black with fury, his sons were cursing.

Time to get on with it. He couldn't start the spell too soon: every minute he could fool them before his strength ran out would be important. He could manage three hours or maybe a little more. All of the wealth of the village had been spirited off into the woods with the able-bodied or was hidden here in the schoolhouse. It would be hard to find. The cottages and houses, emptied of anything worth stealing, deserted by their owners, would surely not keep them. They might set fires but surely they would leave.

The Signoren walked briskly to the rear of the schoolhouse and climbed rather less briskly up the rickety bell tower he'd had built twenty years before. Of his fifty years a full twenty-five had been spent as teacher to the children of the village and of the woods and fields for miles around. He helped out with some healing along the way whenever old Carva's herbs wouldn't do the trick but he hardly ever had cause to use his power. The schooling of Errensea had made him half a wizard but he was never comfortable with magic and had mostly abandoned the art. There was something about wizardry that made him feel completely isolated when all he had ever wanted was to be a part of everything.

And now that 'everything' he so treasured was under immense threat. A gang of cutthroats had been terrorising the region for almost a month now and today their path of violence and destruction would lead to his beloved Huaresh. From the top of the tower Bassalo could view the whole village. He could make out the young archers standing in the shadow of Rudy's workshop, could

see the white, chalky road disappearing under the cool arches of the Twelve Oaks Inn. The beer barrels had been broken less than half an hour before at Andras' insistence. They must give the Black Company *nothing* to stay for. Some had argued they should let the Company have all the loot it could find while the people hid-up safe in the forest but that had been tried before. In Reno, in Perdesh, according to reports, the Company had not been distracted by the lure of property. Their first intention and delight was all in killing and torture and destruction; the blood-hunt had merely fired their enthusiasm and ferocity. And that lust gave Andras the basis of his plan. They would give the Company someone to chase and they would try to make it seem the village had been abandoned. The men who would be doing the running were mostly confident their woodcraft would see them clear and safe. The women and children and the infirm could not run and so they would have to disappear from sight. And that disappearance would be down to the skills and strength of a fifty year-old half wizard who had not tried anything so difficult for more than quarter of a century.

It was an uncomfortable perch, squeezed in beside the bell, but he had to put discomfort to one side. He began with an exercise to clear his mind. There was no room for doubt or fear; he must box up his memories, his emotions, the distractions of his body, all of his hopes for the future: everything. All he wanted inside his head was the schoolhouse, the field alongside and the words of the spell he intended to use.

The schoolhouse was at the edge of the village, the road curved away from it, the brook circled behind it. If the schoolhouse had not been built on this field no one bar the farmer would ever walk there. If he could hide the schoolhouse from common sight they would all be saved.

The noise of cheering or jeering from the other end of the village reached him. He began the chant.

It was so important to keep it going, to make sure the words never varied, to release his power into the spell in a steady trickle. Too much too soon and they would be lost. And at the same time he mustn't let the boundaries wander: a shimmering in the air would draw attention; the edges must be clear and exact. He knew the schoolhouse and the path to it so well after twenty-five years, he knew the field beside it. He would overlay the one with the other.

*"Em'moreth il faro, an faro en dahar,
Ancul le'avo en tra'are, io'tra'are en dahar"*
Em'moreth il faro, an faro en dahar..."*

Power and the direction of that power was the basis of this deception. There were simple tricks that could be done with mirrors and with hidden doors. The fairs were full of them. Such trickery could not work here. Bassalo created this illusion from within himself. He had to use the Language of Command to bend the power he held inside; it was the power within him that bent the light that others would see.

*“Em’moreth il faro, an faro en dahar,
Ancul le’avo en tra’are, io’tra’are en dahar”
Em’moreth il faro, an faro en dahar,
Ancul le’avo en tra’are, io’tra’are en dahar
Em’moreth il faro, an faro en dahar,
Ancul le’avo en tra’are...”*

He stumbled over some of the words at first and found it difficult to establish the rhythm. Rhythm would be his friend, rhythm would give him the spell word perfect for as long as it would take. After the tenth pass it was there: the spell established, his concentration absolute. All he knew was the spell and the image of the field. His eyes were closed to anything that might be beyond that image. His ears were dead to the sounds below. There was only the spell and the image.

If he had been able to see he would have seen the young lads let loose their flurry of arrows and miss their targets because of the fear that took them. He would have seen one of the lads stumble as he ran for the woods. He would have seen that young man hacked to death and then beheaded. If he had heard the screaming and then the laughter of the man who carried the boy’s head on a pike, terror would have consumed him and whatever hope the village still had would be on a pike too.

The Black Company had come to Huaresh.

“Hold back, you nancies! Hold back I say! You can get those pretty boys later. Let’s see what else we’ve got here first.”

Morgan Trant pulled himself up in his saddle. He wasn’t a big man and the extra few inches and the straight back helped them to ignore the fact. They were a rabble of mercenaries, robbers, murderers and rapists all very handy with their swords and fists and dicks and there was not a single one of them he’d trust not to stick him one if he lost control. But they were his for now. They were having the time of their lives and they knew Morgan was the one

who kept it all coming. Semmento and the other three gave them their chance, that was fair enough, but sorcerers were not captains or generals. Without Morgan to martial them the Black Company would fight like the rabble they were and, soon as you like, they'd all be dead.

"Right lads. A bit of order! Hoggy! Get rid of the head: you'll be needing that stick-knife soon. If I've got it right there'll be more of them. Could be on either side. I want you to take your lot down the brook there. Mart and his'll foot it house to house. They'll come running Hoggy, so try not to miss any this time."

Hoggy grinned a leery grin and gave him the finger.

"And you, you tosser! Rest of you stay up just in case they've a surprise for us. Well, get on then!"

Morgan liked to watch. He was good with his sword, imaginative when it came to hurting people and free enough with his own dick when there was something sweet on offer and he had a bit of privacy. But he liked to watch. The taking of a village was a scene that never galled him. The brutality on the one side, the pain and despair on the other was a drama that filled his dreams. It was a drug to him, he wanted excess of it. And yet the watching, the need to witness the perversity of others, a perverse act in itself, gave him an excuse. It wasn't *Morgan Trant* committing the atrocities the Company revelled in, he was merely the professional general tasked to deal with a group of men who were exceptionally vile. He had more than half-convinced himself he was a decent man in a difficult situation. This ability to deceive himself helped in the deception of others.

Duke Torgrim had liked him, saw him as hard but fair, loyal and keen to please, a "foreigner" whose allegiance to the Kellinghalles was to be celebrated and rewarded. The problem Morgan Trant had was that the reward he'd been given for *betraying* his people, the so-called "foreigners" who had held the land of the Terremark for thousands of years before the corsairs of the Kelling Isles had decided to settle there, had been a position he liked well enough but there was little in the way of the wealth he so desired.

He had been made Torgrim's gaoler. It was his job to drill the bad men and turn them into tough but expendable foot-soldiers, another weapon in the Kellinghalle's never-ending war with the self-styled Men of Oak. The fact that most of his prisoners were Dyffili Dross, "foreigners" themselves distinguished from the Men of Oak only in that they had no higher purpose to their villainy than blood lust or the hope of monetary gain, was not seen as a problem: these

men would butcher their mothers and rape their sisters if they were allowed. Indeed some of them had already by the time they came under Trant's control.

Without doubt he was he eager to please but the loyalty was all a sham. It seemed to Morgan Trant that he'd been given a golden opportunity to progress, though not in the way the Duke intended. Trant certainly trained them well enough, taught them to fight as a unit, taught them to obey commands, but from the outset the commands were his alone. This gang of cutthroats would be Morgan Trant's personal army and the Duke would live to regret the day he had promoted a foreigner.

The King in Garassa had a warrant out for Trant and his army. They had a warrant out for Gaspar Semmento too. The irony of the situation made him spit with frustration. Originally Trant had been Semmento's employer. He had needed a major distraction. The Duke's army was busy in the north of Terremark but the Dyffili Militia were still on hand and a good seventy of them were set to guard the Duke's treasure-house. The demon Semmento had called, crashing about in the central market place, was just the distraction Trant required. Half the militia took off to fight the thing, leaving the way clear for him and his lads to walk in, spill a lot of blood and take as much gold as they could carry. Five years later on with half the men hunted down and dead, most of the gold either taken back or spent, and with Trant still on the run, Semmento had found him again with a tasty proposition and a fresh heap of gold to get them started.

He built himself a new army. A few of the Dyffili Dross were still free and worth finding again but the major part of his new force came from the sinks of Garassa: a place that attracted the lowest of the low, condemned by their poverty, and the highest of the high, happy to abuse the former, and those who stood between committed to exploiting both.

It was a good company he had by now, well drilled and vastly more experienced in the fight than any force they might meet. Unless Duke Valdez got off his bony arse there'd be no one to stop them. And he couldn't see that happening so long as they kept to the plan. These small villages and towns of the border country were virtually independent communities with little connection to the horse breeders of the Valdesian plain, even though the collectors of Garassa had parcelled them together. They were good, decent, hard working people who paid their taxes without a fuss but saw no need to offer allegiance to the Valdesian Duke. Allegiance is a two-way

thing. They were proud of their prosperity and proud to be free but they had no army to defend them. For the Black Company they were easy meat.

Mart was having a feast. They'd flushed out a dozen already. Five or so had got past Mart's men and one of those had managed to give Hoggie the slip, and there would be words about that later, but otherwise the killing was routine and functional. The brutality displayed was not so far as vicious or inventive as it would become when they had a little more time but everyone knew there was a job to do first. The lads were becoming quite professional. Either that or they still had bad heads from the night before.

There was a shout from Hoggie. All of a sudden three of his riders were down and a good fifteen village-men had legged it into the trees. This lot were obviously not as stupid as some they had come across. Armed only with half-bows, rabbiting knives and pig-sticks they had fought their way through sword, mace and spear and hurt the Company in the process. There would be punishment for that.

"Trant!" Just at that moment the sorcerer Chaldonie and his so-called guard came trotting up past the smithy. Good, that was another ten for him to play with. He ordered the twelve he had with him off to join Hoggie's troop making them seventeen on horse to chase fifteen on foot. Mart could carry on checking out the rest of the village while Morgan himself would stay with the new arrivals. Chaldonie expected a certain amount of attention and Morgan Trant was wise enough to make sure he got some.

Chaldonie refused to travel without a guard to keep him safe. He rode between two columns of five as befitted a man of his stature. Trant laughed at the thought: Chaldonie's physical stature was the weediest, most pox-ridden in all Aegarde. And he was certainly insane. The problem was he had power, a wizard's power, and he was devilish quick with the demons too. Many were afraid of what he might do and even Trant was a little wary.

"How are we in this... *place*, Trant?"

"This *place* is Huaresh. We are very well. Well, I am! How are you? Bum still sore?"

Chaldonie spoke no words in response to the captain's irreverent jibe but his eyes flared. They were pink in the pupil and very bloodshot eyes and utterly alarming to anyone who was not used to them. They did not alarm Trant but after a moment's thought he decided to play the game.

"It seems the villagers have all gone apart from some stout lads who are trying their best to slow us down. I can't imagine we'll

have too much trouble catching up with the rest of the village. Then the lads can have their fun.”

Chaldonie grimaced in disgust. “They are so bestial,” he said.

With a shrug Trant tried to give the impression he was equally disdainful and completely detached from the worst excesses of his men but Chaldonie was too caught up in his own concerns to notice.

“There’s nothing for me here then?”

“No, I think...”

Just at that moment a volley of arrows sang between them, and although they missed both Chaldonie and Trant one of the guards was pierced through the neck. A party of the villagers had turned back, emboldened perhaps by their escape, and were trying a little more shoot-and-run. It was a mistake that everyone might regret. Chaldonie was not to be attacked.

As his horse bucked beneath him the sorcerer screamed out words of a hideous tongue and the spell he made was like a knife through canvas. Suddenly the air before them shook as though exploding and then ripped apart, the colours of the world severed by a vast and menacing blackness. The edges of this wound in space throbbed as a hollow roaring surged through the gap, and then, blundering out of darkness into the light of day, came the most extraordinary demon Trant had yet seen. This one appeared to have no head or eyes. Instead it had five limbs, each of equal length, joined together with little in the way of a torso between. It reminded him of a starfish except that the limbs did not taper but were more like the legs of a giant elephant, and that the legs seemed to be made of jelly, and that this creature was something like twenty-five feet high or wide from toe to toe. As it cart-wheeled down the high street, in a spray of who knew what, the awful lesion that was hanging in the air shivered shut, leaving the world whole once more. Trant heaved a sigh of relief. The opened door always unnerved him. One demon displaced was bad enough!

“Couldn’t you get a better one?” he snapped at Chaldonie. “In fact why did you bother?”

Chaldonie glared at him once more. “I was under attack.”

Meanwhile the monster, seemingly oblivious to its location, continued to whirl about leaving a trail of destruction in its wake. The limbs battered and smashed through wood and brick and stone. Mart’s men ran for their lives.

“What use is this?” Trant demanded.

"I think you will find the demons scare people," said Chaldonie unflinchingly.

"Damn right they do; they scare me too. We were doing just fine without this one."

"And yet I was nearly killed!"

Morgan screamed in fury and frustration. "Mart! Get your men back on their horses and get after those bowmen! And you, Chaldonie, I want you to sort out that demon before there's nothing left for us to take. Look at it!"

They looked. The creature had reached the end of the village and there was no saying where it would go next but as they watched something very odd happened. As it crossed the field boundary it completely disappeared, as though it had ploughed into a river and sunk beneath the surface. A disappearance in itself was nothing unusual and Trant presumed Chaldonie had merely found a new way to send it back to wherever it had come from. But no, suddenly there was an almighty crash and lots of screaming and there it was again, inexplicably battering through a large white building Trant would have sworn was not there half a minute before. Suddenly too a swarm of people: women and children, women with babes in arms, women with babes in bellies, and old men trying their best to save them, all erupted from the wreckage in a terrible panic.

"The buggers!" Trant cried. "That's a new one. Chaldonie, get rid, we don't need it anymore. You've found us what we came for. And here come the boys, right on cue."

Chaldonie, smirking in triumph, glanced back along the road. The clattering of hooves under the arches of the inn confirmed that the main body of the Black Company was here at last. The demon, splashing about in the brook by now, affecting neither villain nor victim, had done its unwitting work and so Chaldonie, with a casual gesture, sent it back into the darkness.

Morgan Trant meanwhile looked on with a certain satisfaction as the boys with many a whoop and a cheer began to run down and take whatever size or shape of quarry took their fancy. All tastes would be catered for. With Morgan, the trick was in choosing which assault would be the most exciting to watch.

Bassalo could not close his eyes.

His body was transfixed twenty feet above it all on a splintered shaft of wood but his sight was transfixed by the horror unfolding below. He was not in pain as a remnant of his trance stayed with him blocking out most every feeling, dulling any expression of emotion. The trance would fade over the next hour or

so, the feeling would return and the agonies would begin - if he had not bled to death by then. Death would be something to hope for. He knew this was true. He knew this because his eyes were obliged to see everything. He saw Andras punished by amputation for having dared to attack the attackers, his torso strapped to a post in the middle of it all so that he could watch the rape of the village. The Signorens saw all his little girls and boys abused: children he had taught to read and write and draw, to value nature and understand the seasons, to run and to play as though the world were a normal place. He saw their mothers tortured. Through the years he had taught them all, helped them to be happy, given them the confidence to face the world and enjoy their lives. The world was now a different place: a land of torment and cruelty and terror. In the field, in the gardens and commons, and on the the village highroad that had brought to them this day only villainy and disaster, the savagery continued without remorse. What was once ordinary had become hell.

His eyelids refused to function. Try as he might to gain some respite from this appalling scene the muscles failed him, they would not shut. His eyes were doomed to shift from one thrashing nightmare to the next until the rest of his body failed completely. Finally, hopelessly, he let his gaze rest upon the chaos immediately beneath him: the ruined schoolhouse, a desecration much less painful to witness even though it represented the destruction of his entire life's work. Gone were the desks, the settles, the chalkboard: all were in shards and splinters. Gone was the creaking stage that had supported a thousand nascent performances for mums and dads, aunts and uncles through all the generations. The platform had collapsed in on itself and...

And what was that?

Another crime to torture him?

On her side, lying still, a young woman and, nestled close at her breast, bloodied yet, the cord cut and tied but still trailing, a naked new born babe. Amelia Verdasso it must be. She had been overdue, the women had been fussing about her as the Signorens had left them to climb his tower.

His eyes watered. Unable to blink away the tears he found it difficult to focus. One arm, the lower arm, had curled around the infant but the other was twisted and broken behind her back; her neck was bent at an impossible angle. Surely she was dead. Surely she was and yet, barely registered through the blur of his tears, had he not just seen the briefest movement?

Sudden uncontrollable hope surged through him, battering aside the paralysis of the trance. No matter his position, skewered at the top of this shattered tower, no matter the whooping violence all around, no matter the utter despair that sought to drag him to his grave, amid the ruins something moved. Down there, shielded by the devastation of all he had once been, a heart was beating. The understanding of what that could mean flooded his thoughts. If there was life then there was a chance that not everything on this desperate, evil day was lost. And with this remote possibility now pumping through his veins, he discovered that, whatever else may happen, Oswaldo Bassalo, Signore of Huaresh was not yet done with his labours. Deep inside him this wild knowledge of hope brought with it sudden, unlooked for strength.

Without a blink he wished away the tears; without a blink he made sure of what it was he had seen; without a blink his eyes witnessed a miracle.

Amelia's lower arm had fallen away, *pushed* away by the infant's thrusting limbs. The child had lost her nipple. He was determined to have it back. Instinctually, arms and legs and body working together, he inched across her chest and would not be denied. Down there, hidden from the view of all but the gods of the sky and one ruined man, a newly-dead mother gave suck, and her newly-born child clung fiercely to the life she was giving him, and he would not let it go. How he struggled!

Bassalo could not close his eyes but, for all the torment they had endured, he knew that now for a blessing.