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Dedication:

This story is dedicated to Angie. Thank you for always believing in me, and for cleaning up more than your share of my messes.

Grevien Derleth lay in an aching, sopping heap at the end of a rain soaked New Promise alley. U'buru, the swarthy ogress, had done some of her best work on his ribs and chest. Just breathing was reminder enough not to get involved in politics of any sort, particularly where Governor Shadwell didn't want you.

Politics. Gang warfare by another name. Grevien snorted into the mud without thinking. He felt it speckle the only clean part of his face. Why shouldn't he be dirty? Everything and everyone in New Promise was. That's the way it had always been and that's the way it needed to be.

Dirt was his bread and butter. There was always someone willing to buy good dirt, and Grevien made a decent living finding little secrets out and then selling them off to the highest bidder.

He forced his body into a wobbly crouch. *Nothing broken at least.* He straightened up, grunting involuntarily. *Maybe a cracked rib or two.* He'd lived through worse: the island province had a bottomless supply of worse.

New Promise rarely lived up to its name for the hordes of settlers still arriving every week by steamboat, clipper, and zeppelin. All speaking races were welcome, according to the late Duke of Phrydd's charter: humans, elves, orcs, ogres, gnomes and their goblin relations, dwarves—any race touched by the Undying Spark of Awareness. Which basically meant any member of a speaking race who would pledge to renounce the old gods and embrace the enlightened philosophy of the Undying Spark instead.

The problems began when the settlers got to New Promise, forgot their pledge, and unpacked their old prejudices and pagan gods along with their bags. God worship was the only crime punishable by exile from the province. Naturally, hidden chapels and shrines thrived in New Promise, secreted behind legitimate businesses like rats in the walls.

It was strange the way it worked out. Being illegal had forced the pagan churches to ally themselves with local crime families for protection. The gangs also had their grubby fingers in every level of the province's government.

When the Sages of the Undying Spark tried to get this pagan banished or that chapel closed down, the deciding factor was often which crime boss was the church's patron. And of course, which official down at the Magistrate's Hall that boss happened to have in his or her back pocket.

But corruption was just the beginning of the problems in New Promise. The Enlightened Duke's open immigration policy had the city overcrowded; full of hungry people with little hope of finding work. There were rumors of a slave trade, folks going missing and ending their days chained in the coalmines of the savage Kresht. The Industry Council rarely met anymore because of the threat of assassination by One Wagers and their union cronies.

Factory chimneys hadn't stopped filling the skies with noxious gasses and soot, though. Every day a thick haze lay over most of New Promise from mid-morning till late in the night.

It was nearly midnight now. The rain had left the muggy air as clean as it would ever be. Grevien didn't bother pulling the mud soaked facecloth up over his nose and mouth.

Walking more steadily now, the stocky man made his way to the open end of the alleyway. A motorcar

splashed him as it passed. Sighing, Grevien composed himself as best he could. He sauntered toward Piglet's, adopting a street-tough strut that gave no indication of his pain. He hoped it would keep away the muggers and young thugs common to Eastside.

Piglet was a greasy undersized gnoll, replete with matted gray fur and dry blue-black scabrous skin on his face, hands, and protruding pouchbelly. He ran a grimy workman's bar at the edge of town near the slaughterhouse. On the best of days, his patrons brought in with them all the smells of their work: the stink of livestock, the cloying odors of blood, urine and feces, and over it all, the sweat of a hard day's work.

On the worst of days, a table full of goblins would order *klg thut*, a strong smelling casserole of mixed organ meats, rotten eggs, and spoiled cabbages, making the bar's air damn near unbreathable.

Tonight there were no goblins in evidence. Four gnomes, bulb nosed and warty, were playing a complicated game of Queens with a gap-toothed ogre. Gnomes were almost universally One Wagers, adherents of the newly fashionable idea that all workers should get the same pay regardless of what they did for a living. Something about that concept appealed to the gnomish need for uniformity and combined efforts. It was a safe bet they were working together to swindle as much as possible from the unsuspecting ogre.

Besides the card game, there were only a few other customers, regulars hard at work pickling their innards with the house version of Pinsar black ale. Traditionally, the drink calls for the seed of Pinsar black grass and other hard to get ingredients.

Piglet saw no need to serve the real thing. He bought regular tallgrass seed from the mill. After brewing it with a random selection of other common ingredients, he dyed the concoction with cheap boroba tar until it as black as an orc's tongue.

Grevien couldn't stand the taste of it, but that didn't stop him from indulging. It had a strong enough kick that after a gulp or two you couldn't taste it anyway. Besides, Piglet was a good friend, one with good connections. That went a long way in New Promise.

Piglet greeted him boisterously, going against the subdued grain of the little crowd's mood. One of the gnomes looked up muttering then tossed another Dwarven Trust note into the pile of bills and coins in the center of the table.

“Who invited the mud golem?” Piglet asked, eyeballing Grevien's filthy duds. For a gnoll, he was pretty easy to understand. Most gnolls sounded like dogs lapping up water when they tried to speak in the Trader's Tongue. Maybe he was easier to understand because his pug muzzle was so much shorter than the norm for his race. That—along with the two triangular peaks of ear-shaped hair on the top of his head—contributed to the piggish appearance that had earned him his nickname.

Grevien ignored Piglet's attempt at humor. He maneuvered himself gingerly onto a stool at the lonely end of the bar and reached his empty hand out as if there were already a drink there for him. Piglet got the message and fetched him a wooden mug full of foul black ale.

After a pull long enough to numb the ache in his ribs, Grevien wiped a few stray droplets from his chin with the cleanest part of his sleeve he could find. He looked straight into Piglet's little round eyes. “The governor's ogre sends her love,” he said softly.

Piglet's muzzle twitched. His round eyes narrowed to crescent shaped slivers. Across the room, voices

rose as the ogre lost yet another hand. All four gnomes appeared to be genuinely mystified at his run of bad luck.

Piglet looked around the bar for eavesdroppers before leaning in so close that Grevien could smell the sour beetles on his breath. “What'd you find out?” the gnoll whispered.

Grevien took another long pull on his drink before explaining in clipped sentences how he had followed Del Feyklin, the gnomish leader of the One Wagers, from his ritzy Northside apartment (complete with a new lifting platform for those too well off to use stairs) out to the meeting at the boot factory with Hyrannia su'Dresil, the matron of the elfin su'Dresil crime organization. He had been jumped by Shadwell's eight foot enforcer, U'buru, while he was trying to find a window with better acoustics. Not satisfied with just a good clunk on the head, she had apparently continued drubbing his unconscious body, then left him there in the mud like yesterday's lunch.

Piglet made the sound gnolls make when they are astonished, a kind of tongue rolling sigh. “If that big mophandler was there, you know the governor wasn't far away,” he said.

Grevien nodded in agreement. “I didn't see him. Don't think he was there to kiss babies. My bet is no one was supposed to know he was even there.”

Piglet considered that for a moment. “So what do the governor, Hyrannia su'Dresil, and the One Wagers have to talk about?”

Grevien noted Piglet's unconscious shiver at the mention of Hyrannia su'Dresil. It hadn't been smart to try spying on her in the first place. If even half the stories of her coldhearted fierceness were true, Grevien was lucky that the governor's ogre had found him first. But he had learned a thing or two as a wide-eyed Sparker initiate, before he dropped out. In Sage Waidlai's Movement of Value class he had picked up this jewel: the greater the risk, the greater the reward.

Grevien tossed back the last of his black ale and shrugged. “I don't know, but I bet one of the Sages would open me an expense account at the Dwarven Trust to find out.”

Piglet hissed, pulling his blue-black lips back in what passed for a gnollish scowl. “More likely, they'll just torture you until they find out what they want. You can't trust a Sage, Derleth, you should know that.”

“You gotta know how to talk to them, my friend,” he replied. *Or know the right one to talk to.*

“You'll never catch me talking to those godless red-robed bastards!” Piglet said, loud enough to momentarily turn a few heads. On the Eastside, outbursts like his were much more regular—and usually more explicit—than they ever were over in the merchant's district.

Under the letter of the law, making a statement hostile to the Undying Spark was enough to earn a fine or have your business license revoked. But none of the Enlightened ever visited Piglet's establishment.

Grevien chuckled. “Their money spends as well as anyone's.” He inclined his head, gesturing as the wide-faced ogre stalked out of the bar, broke and angry. Piglet scurried over to collect from the gnomes before they disappeared as well. He dropped the coins they grudgingly offered into the flap of his pouchbelly.

Grevien fished in his coin purse, thankful U'buru hadn't robbed him as well. He pulled out the smallest of

his remaining coins, a silver ducat. He left it on the bar, waved at Piglet, and shambled out into the murky New Promise night.

How good it would feel to remove his dirty clothes and clean himself up, he thought, walking briskly to the attic room he rented from Widow Dunnich. He'd filch another one of her healing tonics tonight, and after a few hours of rest his body would show no trace of U'buru's handiwork.

Grevien had slept till past midday, as was his custom, and didn't make it into the merchant's district until the clock tower (sponsored by the One Wagers, so that all workers would know when they were being worked too long) had struck five bells. He'd already polished off a warm beer and an apple purchased from a vendor's cart. With any luck, Sage Waidlai might treat him to dinner while he made his proposition.

As he turned onto the street that would lead him to the Rationarium, headquarters of the Undying Spark clergy, he nearly ran into three initiates, their scarlet trimmed white robes reminding Grevien of himself more than a few years ago. They were talking excitedly to each other and holding a newspaper between them.

He raised a bushy eyebrow at the headline and waited.

He knew it wouldn't be long. Sure enough, five minutes later a harried orc in bookkeeper's spectacles dropped his yellow sheet to the cobbled road. Grevien snatched it up. You could always count on an orc to leave their trash wherever they were when they were done with it.

He parked himself on one of the green painted benches scattered throughout the center of town. *Don't find these over on Eastside.* The headline read: **GUV TO SPARKERS: PAGANS DESERVE TOLERANCE.** It went on to describe Shadwell's historic departure from the late Duke of Phryyd's charter by legalizing all forms of worship. There was the predictable negative response from the spiritual leader of the Undying Spark, Wisdom Errisi, and other information about when the new laws would become effective.

Grevien chewed on a thumbnail while he read and reread the article, sure there had to be a connection with the governor's presence at the warehouse last night. But what was it, and how could he profit from it?

Del and Hyrannia were supposedly meeting to discuss an important shared interest. That was the wisp of rumor that had started him following the gnome nearly a week ago. He knew better than to try following the Hyrannia. The Age of Mages might be over, but no doubt her fertile, predatory imagination would come up with something that would leave him wishing for an old fashioned curse instead.

Something big was going down; maybe something big enough that a guy who knew a little about it could scrape a few crumbs of the pie into his pocket. And what a dirt pie this would be: start with One Wagers and elfin black marketeers. Toss in the Governor and mix well. It practically made itself.

The only way Shadwell would be there is if he were invited, or if he had called the meeting himself. Depending on what the meeting was about either one was plausible.

Grevien's mind was working overtime, crunching all the what-ifs together in hopes of coming out with a lead worth following. If Shadwell risked meeting with the two of them it had to be about money, maybe even extortion money. Were the One Wagers and su'Dresil blackmailing the governor? Did that explain

the sudden abandonment of the Enlightened Duke's statutes against pagan worship?

No, su'Dresil had nothing to gain from legalizing all of the tiny worship sites throughout town. If anything, it would cripple lucrative fencing and smuggling operations, as well as take away from the business of 'protecting' the churches from police interference. The One Wagers would have even less interest in the official sanction of paganism. They rejected all forms of worship—even the pseudo-mystical rationalism of the Undying Spark—as superstition, and therefore an instrument of worker suppression.

Grevien shook his head. The governor's decision didn't make any sense. In one stroke he had alienated the Undying Spark, the One Wagers, and virtually every criminal organization in New Promise. The only ones to benefit from the decree were the pagans themselves. The benefits weren't even anything tangible, just the freedom to worship as they had been, but openly.

It was nothing short of political suicide.

Unless an idealistic pagan had something really juicy on the governor, then it might make sense.

Maybe the governor was just letting Feyklin and Hyrannia know what he planned to do, was being forced to do. Oh, to have been a fly on that wall instead of an ogre maiden's boxing dummy. He was just going to have to dig a little deeper to get to the dirt was all. Nothing else for it.

He got up, folded the paper so that the cover story was still showing, and walked along the road toward the Rationarium, careful to stay out of the way of motorcars, horse drawn buggies, and pickpockets.

Squatting majestically on enough land to serve a commercial farm, the Rationarium was the largest building in New Promise. It was also the only one to possess a dome, which was plated in gold.

To Grevien, the gleaming dome looked too flashy and ornamental for a building otherwise built to present a cool, mathematical face to the public. All along the roofline there were large sculptures of persons of various races engaging in acts of craftsmanship and art.

He chuckled. *Not a single statesman in the bunch, not even the Enlightened Duke.*

Grevien stepped through the enormous Dusk Door, opened just a few days ago. The Dawn Door would remain closed until spring. Both it and the middle door, the Door of the Devoted, were securely locked with stoutly crafted padlocks of hardened orcish steel. The Door of the Devoted, open only two days a year, was popularly held to bring blessings to those who passed through it.

He remembered his days as a student at the Rationarium; back then he had bought in to the myth. He never missed walking through the Door of the Devoted: once every spring, once every autumn, based on calculations of the earth's exact position in its circuit around the sun.

It amazed Grevien that the Astronomy sages could tell so much from their telescopes and calculations. That was what had drawn him as a youth to become an initiate. But after memorizing all kinds of information he mostly had little use for, he had dropped out. Somehow he still managed to do well for himself with other types of information.

Like a ghost from the past, Sage Waidlai, still chubby for an elf, seemed to be waiting for him as he stepped across the threshold. Momentarily dwarfed by the thick bronze door Grevien looked up, admiring the coiled symbols of the First Equation inlaid in shiny blackstone. They still fascinated him, even after all these years.

The First Equation began in the center of the dome and formed a dizzying clockwise spiral that ended precisely at the bottom of the dome's perfect North. It was supposed to be an equation disproving all gods. Grevien had left the Rationarium before he had learned even a tenth of the mathematical symbols and functions necessary to decipher it.

He wondered how many of the Sages could actually comprehend it. As his eyes followed the circling mystery on the ceiling, Sage Waidlai walked up without a word. Saying nothing, his old mentor grabbed Grevien by the elbow as if he were still a schoolboy, leading him toward one of the many small exits from the busy architectural beauty of the entry chamber. From previous experience he knew they were walking toward the Council members' offices.

From a different sort of experience, he knew better than to act surprised when they did not stop at Sage Waidlai's office but continued past it to the stairs at the end of the wide marble-floored hall. He knew whose office this was but had no idea why he was being taken up those revered steps.

Waidlai's scarlet robes swished as he reached around Grevien to push softly on a button. A chime was struck somewhere beyond the ornately carved door. *Ionitricity. And why not? The Undying Spark was all about harnessing the world's natural energies.*

The door clicked and slid softly inward in the hands of an eager looking initiate. *Probably top of his class and look at him—serving as a doorman.* Grevien smiled at the poor kid, who grinned back like it was the first time he had been noticed all week. Grevien and his former mentor stepped up into the office. The initiate left, shutting the door quietly behind him.

The floor was covered in plush, sound deadening carpets from the Pinsar Republics. The teak and rosewood desk was larger than Grevien's bed, and sported the unique carvings of Borgnati. Paintings of long dead Wisdoms freckled the walls. Wherever there were no paintings, there were recessed shelves filled with well-maintained tomes and small sculptures of glass, elfin mahogany, and polished Anghahur granite.

There were no windows; instead the dwarf who sat in this office had small globes of ionic light buzzing at various points along the walls. The place reeked of wealth, history, and power.

The dwarf who currently held the reins of the Undying Spark sat with his meaty lips pursed together. He was clean-shaven, a trend becoming more popular among the more progressive and modern thinking dwarves. He jerked suddenly, as if pulling himself away from a daydream gone amuck.

“That was rather fast, Waidlai,” he said in a voice that was surprisingly soothing for a dwarf.

Waidlai cleared his throat nervously, rubbing his hands together as he spoke. “Yes, Wisdom, it seems the Equations of Synchronicity worked in our favor. He was entering the Rationarium as I was leaving to find him.”

The pudgy elf bowed his head in reverence to the equations. Grevien copied the action. The return of the old habit felt like a scar that had begun itching again.

Wisdom Errisi pointed at the folded paper still in Grevien's grasp. “I see you've heard about our problem.” Not sure how to respond, Grevien stepped to the edge of the oversized desk and stretched to hand the paper across. He almost couldn't reach. The dwarf took it, frowning as he cleared his throat, and set it down without looking at it. The silence drew out for a moment before the Wisdom spoke again.

“The governor tells me that this is all about religious freedom, but I don't believe him.” He reached into a drawer and pulled out a tabac pipe, preparing it as he spoke. “I think one of the heathens is blackmailing him with something, something big. I can see from your face you suspect the same.”

He flipped open a jewel studded silver matchbox, and got his pipe going after two tries. “I want to know who the heathen is, and what he has on Shadwell. I can pay you a pound's worth of gold in Trust Notes every day until you find this out for me.”

Grevien suppressed a whistle. He hadn't expected anywhere near that much. He realized the Wisdom was also paying for his silence. “I'll need the first week as a non-refundable advance to cover my expenses.”

Wisdom Errisi's eyebrows raised. Sage Waidlai had lost a little color from his normally ruddy elfin cheeks.

“I have to buy protection, something that can't be traced back to the Undying Spark. You can put the funds into an account in my name at the Dwarven Trust.”

Wisdom Errisi's stony eyes glinted with an odd mixture of humor and the respect one has for the industry of insects. His lips curled just a bit at the edges. “Consider it done, Mr. Derleth,” the Wisdom said. “Report only to me.”

The young initiate was already opening the door from outside when Grevien and Sage Waidlai, still wringing his hands, approached it. Grevien tossed the lad a coin, which brought a genuine smile of appreciation to the young man's face. The scarlet robed elf pursed his lips and said nothing.

This evening, the New Promise air by the wharf wasn't powdery enough to warrant wearing his facecloth, but Grevien did anyway. It did nothing to stop the smell of dead fish and rotted pilings. But it did keep passersby from remembering his face as he left the goblin Fthalgnim's fish market and the shrine to Grtaph the Scurrilous hidden behind a false wall in the icebox room.

When he wasn't selling fish or ministering to the Grtaph worshippers of New Promise, the cheerful goblin sold outlawed gunpowder weapons under the blessing and guidance of one of the Orcish syndicates. Grevien had selected a four-shot pistol, with a short barrel and a worn grip.

It had probably been used in a murder on the mainland somewhere. Common underworld practice was for tainted weapons to be shipped far away and sold, to prevent police sensitives from using the weapon to tie the victim and murderer together.

Grevien had bought eight bullets, then four more for good measure. Fthalgnim had been impressed with his choice. “It's a shame you can't tell anyone you got it from Fthalgnim,” he had sighed. “It's a work of art.”

Grevien agreed on both counts. He was taking a risk even carrying it. Gunpowder weapons were banned in New Promise. Possession alone could get you a year of hard labor. But the rough trade Grevien might encounter made protection worth the risk.

Besides, maybe he'd have a good excuse to plant lead in U'buru's hide. He still owed her for the alleyway trouncing the night before. Until he needed it he kept the pistol tucked into the back of his pants



and the bullets in the pocket of his rugged goldpanner's jacket.

The visit had paid off in another way too. For a few extra Trust Notes, he had also gotten the names of a few pagans fervent enough, and well placed enough, to deserve a visit.

He found all three of his leads that night, rousing two of them from their beds at gunpoint. In the end, he believed their pleas of innocence. Funny how having a pistol in the face makes folks want to talk. Luckily, no one had called his bluff: he wasn't sure he could ever actually fire the thing at anyone. Well, maybe there were a few candles that he could stand to snuff.

The last one he visited, an elfin tailor and priest of Lilliani Thornqueen had given him an idea though. "The ogre maid sees her shaman regularly, the one who sells the fuel and parts for the motorcars. He lives above the store, he might know something," the lisping elf had wailed, tears flowing freely. It smelled like the little priss had wet himself.

Grevien got the name and address, over on Northside within eyeshot of the governor's mansion. He walked by first to check out the location, his shoes making more noise than he liked on the multicolored gravel. *Maybe trim a few pounds and lighten that step*, he chided himself.

It was too late to do anything tonight: this shaman was a patron of the moon spirit. And somewhere up there, past the veil of smog that lay across the city, there was a full moon. When he got close to the brick wall, Grevien could hear the faint noises of a grunting chant and regular drumbeats coming from the walled, roofless third floor.

A crowd of ogres at worship didn't sound like the right place for a human to go waving a gun and demanding information—even if U'buru happened to be among them. He satisfied himself that he knew where all the exits and windows were, and made an educated guess about the layout of the motorcar necessities building.

Grevien called it a night and walked back to his room above the Widow Dunnich's, too tired to make the trip out to Piglet's for black ale and banter. Stripping off his facecloth, he cringed at the two black streaks where he had been drawing in air through it. He avoided thinking about how much of the city's sooty air the fabric had let pass into his lungs today. Finally he fell into an uneasy sleep.

Midnight again in New Promise. The One Wagers orchestrated another strike today, this time the metalworkers wanted fewer working hours every week. The mood on the city streets was like a pot about to boil over; ogres and short-tempered orcs made up the rank and file of the metalworkers' union.

As a result of the strike, the air was a little more clear. The ripe moon peeked down through the thin smog like an old woman spying through her drapes. Grevien checked the pistol at the small of his back. This afternoon he had practiced dry firing and reloading it quickly. Just in case. The thought of actually using it put him on edge, but he couldn't afford to be without protection. Not if the shaman's tale was true.

Grevien had decided against trying to scare the ogre shaman out of any information. Once the right amount of Trust Notes had crossed his manicured hands, the overdressed ogre had given Grevien plenty to go on. Watching the ogre shaman's scrubbed and gold-toothed face intently, Grevien could find no trace of deception in his voice or manner. If anything, the shaman seemed glad to get the shameful details off his chest.

So now Grevien Derleth was here, at the shipping docks farthest from town, lying face down on the roof of a decaying two-story warehouse, batting wharf rats away with a piece of broken broomstick. He didn't have to wait long to see what he came for.

N'brotok, who was U'buru's half-brother and a “special assistant” to the governor, was right where the shaman had told him he'd be: overseeing a ragged line of about a dozen stoop backed elves, goblins, and humans in chains as they scurried from the back of an ice delivery truck down a rickety wooden plank and onto a low thin mastless fishing boat, the *Kreshti Advancer*.

Slaves. Grevien smacked an approaching rat harder than he meant to. It squealed and fell still. He squeezed the pistol grip in a sweaty hand, hoping the noise hadn't carried. Luckily for him, braining the rat hadn't drawn any unwanted attention.

He crept to the edge and looked down, fighting the bile rising in his throat. So the governor had gotten himself into the slave trade, or at least a trusted member of his staff had. Now *that* was a secret the governor would do anything to keep hidden—even go against the late duke's charter and alienate a host of his former cronies.

Selling citizens to the Kresht coalmines must be paying well. If news of this got out, Shadwell would be thoroughly disgraced, probably removed from office immediately. A special session of the Ward Representatives and the Industry Council would elect a new governor.

Grevien licked his lips. If only he wasn't already taking the Wisdom's money. This was something that would make him wealthy for life. He'd have to leave New Promise, of course. No tragedy there.

But a deal was a deal. Besides, what Piglet had said about the Undying Spark had some truth behind it. Those who double-crossed the Sparkers were seldom heard from again. Grevien tried to shake the greedy thoughts from his head. He hadn't found the blackmailer yet, and who knows, maybe he was beyond finding.

A deal was a deal, he told himself again. But maybe what he had was big enough that he'd be able to talk the Wisdom out of a bonus anyway. Grevien vainly swung the broomstick at another rat hungry enough to brave coming within striking distance.

He watched with a sour look on his face as the tattooed Kreshti captain pushed the last goblin below decks and locked the cargo hatch. *He probably works alone to keep his profit margin up.*

The captain hauled a wooden chest onto the pier. N'brotok looked inside and gave a satisfied nod, rubbing his hands together. The burly ogre heaved the chest up over one shoulder as if it were no heavier than a goosedown pillow.

Grevien had seen enough. This stunk worse than goblin casserole. He waited until the ship's little engine was pushing it out to sea and the wharf area below was empty before sneaking back down to the litter-strewn alleys of New Promise.

“You must be joking!” Grevien was back in the Wisdom's office, unaccompanied this time. His tone was not one the dwarf often heard.

“Mister Derleth, you have found out for me all that I need to know. Whoever is blackmailing the governor no longer matters to me: the Undying Spark now holds the same cards.” The Wisdom puffed

his pipe with an innocent expression on his unbearded face. Smoke wrapped around him in thick clouds. He would have looked for all the world like an ugly cherub sitting there, if his eyes hadn't given him away.

Grevien could almost see gears at work and cold punchcard machinery churning towards an inevitable mathematical conclusion.

“You can keep the entire advance. I suppose we owe you that much. But our contract with you is complete, Mister Derleth. I will handle the Undying Spark's affairs from here.”

Grevien glared at the Wisdom, who continued nonchalantly enjoying his tabac. “May I ask what you plan to do?” he asked, leaning forward.

The dwarf looked surprised. “Not that it's any of your business but we will confront the governor and insist on his reinstatement of the Enlightened Duke's policy against pagans in New Promise.” He would find good company beating that drum with him, Grevien thought: the One Wagers, su'Dresil, and all the other syndicates.

Who would have thought that so many separate interests would be able to agree on anything? The only ones left out would be the pagan worshippers, but they were used to their worship being an open secret by now. Besides, many of the pagan clerics had gotten quite wealthy through their associations with the crime families and would probably prefer a return to business as usual.

Grevien thought again about the miserable line of people cramming into the *Kreshti Advancer's* cargo hold. His eyes were as hard as tool iron. “What about the slave trade?” he demanded.

“Of course we will put a stop to it, but quietly. We can't have something like that destroying the reputation of a civilized city such as ours.” Something in the way the Wisdom gritted his teeth around the words made Grevien uneasy. *He gave that answer too easily*, Grevien thought, not sure what it meant.

After a few more polite words, Grevien excused himself and left Wisdom Errissi to his pipe and plans. He flipped the initiate another coin and gave him a conspiratorial wink. But this time the lad did not smile. He bit his lip and looked away, slipping the two ducat piece beneath his robes.

Grevien didn't go home; instead he made for the clock tower and the Undying Spark's public library next to it. He couldn't get those poor slaves out of his mind.

The only books available on Kresht were two volumes written by well-known Sages. There was no direct mention of the slave trade, or the coal mines, but they did use quite a bit of ink debunking the Kreshti worship of the Deepdweller. After scanning them, Grevien wondered if either Sage had ever actually been to Kresht.

He decided to go to Piglet's for a drink and to chew over his options. It wasn't long before he realized he was being followed.

He led the tail on a merry chase, dodging streetcars and donkey carts, passing in and out of shops, and generally having a good time of it as he meandered toward the Eastside. His stalker was not very good. The fellow seemed to be swimming in a black cloak that was clearly too large for him. His face was hidden behind a deep red facecloth, streaked with sweat and filtered factory exhaust.

The follower was falling so far behind that he was hardly trying to go unnoticed anymore. Grevien ducked into an alleyway. With an ironic grin, he realized he was just a few blocks from where U'buru had

left him. He waited with his back to the bricks for the amateur to blunder around the corner.

Pressing the barrel of his pistol into the figure's high elfin cheekbone, Grevien hurriedly jerked both of the elf's arms behind his back and shoved him behind a pile of garbage large enough to conceal them both. If anyone had seen it, they would assume Grevien was mugging the elf.

Most likely they'd stay out of it.

He slammed the elf into the brick wall and ripped back his cowl and facecloth. Waidlai wheezed at him, fear and exhaustion in his eyes. Grevien released him, but kept the pistol handy. "I had—*puff, puff*—to warn you, Grevien." He bent over and put his hands on his knees. "The Wisdom—The Wisdom has set you up."

"What for?" Grevien wasn't sure how much his former mentor knew.

"He wants to keep you quiet-wheeze—about the slaves." Waidai spat onto the ground. "By selling you off in the next shipment."

Between great wheezing breaths he explained how Wisdom Errissi's attendant had been listening at the door during the governor's visit. Troubled by what he heard, the boy had sought Sage Waidlai's counsel immediately. Grevien reminded himself to thank one of the luck gods, maybe all of them, that he had been so kind to the lad at the Wisdom's door.

"There's more," Waidlai said, his breathing finally under control. "So long as the Wisdom doesn't force a reversal of the tolerance policy, only pagans will be sold. The Wisdom is now a half partner."

Grevien felt his stomach roll. "What else?" he asked Waidlai.

"Just what I told you. What are you going to do?"

"It's better that you don't know. Go back to your red robes and forget we ever had this talk."

Waidlai's eyes watered over his pudgy cheeks. He stared painfully at Grevien like it was the last time he would ever see his former pupil. "I don't know that I can ever wear those robes again." The Sage walked slowly from the alley.

Before the chubby elf was out of sight, Grevien called his name. When the Sage turned his head, Grevien's voice was sincere. "Thank you."

Waidlai nodded, forcing a dejected smile in return, then turned the corner and stepped out of sight.

Grevien Derleth stood beside the long table in a private room at the Harbor Wisp Inn until Hyrannia su'Dresil invited him to sit. She was younger looking, and more harshly beautiful than he had expected. Her silver-gray hair fell in one straight sheet onto impossibly narrow shoulders. He imagined her heart was the same metallic color.

It was risky, treasonous even, for him to propose the two murders to her. She might decide to kill him instead and go into the slave trade herself.

It was a calculated risk though. One he had to take, regardless of the rewards ... or lack thereof. For the

first time in his life he was passing on his dirt for free. It was probably for the best that he not appear greedy to Hyrannia. Her icy formal manner was already giving him the chills.

“So, you want me to *dispose* of both the Governor and the Wisdom, and put a stop to the slave trade. How do I profit?” Her stare reminded Grevien of when he was small and too scared to visit the outhouse at night because of witches and monsters. Everyone knew there were no witches anymore. Monsters were still around; they just wore expensive suits nowadays.

Grevien looked at the cadre of elfin bullyboys lining the walls pretending not to listen. “Honorable Mistress, you are influential, you can get the right sort of people into those positions. Ones that will keep things as they've always been in New Promise.” He wanted to say more, but thought wiser of it.

That cold merciless smile pierced him. “And what do you get out of it?”

“All I want is to stop the slave trade. No one deserves that end.”

She cackled at him. It jangled his nerves even more. *She can have me disappear just as quick as N'brotok could, and she knows it.*

“So you come to Hyrannia su'Dresil to fight injustice!” One of the hoods nearest to Grevien twitched, and others were fidgeting. Grevien wondered if she made them as uncomfortable as she was making him.

“Yes, Honorable Mistress,” Grevien answered, looking at his reflection in the polished boroba table. The luster of the black wood made his face and hands look sooty, but he refused to feel dirty for what he was doing.

“And you offer su'Dresil the chance to have even more power in New Promise. Why su'Dresil?”

It was a good question, and Grevien was hoping that he had the right answer. He resisted the urge to wipe the sweat from his forehead. Showing weakness before those hard unblinking eyes would be like the Jitian wereshark hunters throwing butcher scraps into the sea.

“Because only two in New Promise tried to stand against Shadwell's plan to legalize paganism, and I can't stand the One Wagers.” Hyrannia's eyebrows rose just enough to betray surprise that he knew of that meeting.

“You don't like pagans?” She asked. The innocent tone did not conceal the menace.

Grevien answered carefully. “I don't like change, Honorable Mistress.”

“But you would change the leaders of our province's two most stabilizing institutions?”

“If they are allowed to continue, things will change for the worse,” Grevien said. At that she dismissed him.

He laid low for two days, until Piglet dropped by with a message from one of the su'Dresil toughs. He also brought an early edition of the paper. Large letters screamed out the disappearance of the governor and two of his staff. The article said nothing about the Wisdom. Piglet shut his bar down for the night and followed Grevien out to the top of a rat's nest of a warehouse at the edge of town.

They sat there in the dirty night smog, back to its usual foulness courtesy of the failed metalworker's strike. They pulled down their facecloths long enough to gulp black ale from a large flask they passed between them. Occasionally one would kick out at an approaching rodent. Grevien could feel the pistol pressing into him like a boil about to burst. He hadn't needed to use it, and for that he was glad. Maybe Fthalgnim would buy it back.

It was closer to morning than midnight when the *Kreshti Advancer* tied up to the dock. The ship's painted master was surprised to see that the ogre waiting for him was not N'brotok.

He was even more surprised to see a pair of elves with shotguns jerking N'brotok, a female ogre, and an unkempt human in a ragged suit, which might have once been called well tailored, out of the idling delivery truck by their chains. Piglet snorted, spurting black ale onto his leathery pouchbelly. "The only thing missing is that ugly little Sparker bastard," he said.

Down on the boat, they saw the trio shoved into the cargo hold. The captain didn't seem to care who he bought: he just fastened the oaken lid down and locked it. The ogre who had turned the three over suddenly grabbed one of the Kreshti's tattooed arms and twisted it around with a sickening, audible pop. The pair on the roof looked away with distaste as the ogre's meaty fists began thudding into the captain.

Grevien grunted. This was worse than the simple murder he had proposed. Hyrannia was removing the governor and ending the slave trade in her own efficient, pitiless way. He pulled his facecloth away for a moment and choked down a deep breath of the gritty New Promise air. Hair of the dog, he thought to himself. He'd never be able to wash all the dirt away. It was inside him; it always would be.

He pulled out the uncomfortable pistol and laid it on the cluttered rooftop. "Hyrannia chose not to remove the Wisdom. She has him under her thumb now. She'll use him to get the ban on paganism back in force." Grevien took a swig from the flask and passed it back to Piglet. "Guess she's a traditionalist at heart. Makes more money keeping the pagan chapels tangled up in her web."

Below, the ogre was holding the captain by his neck and telling him in a loud harsh voice never to return to New Promise. The captain gurgled agreement, dislocated arm dangling limply at his side.

Piglet was thoughtful for a moment. "You got Hyrannia to stop the slave trade, but the thugs are still running New Promise. In the process you set religious freedom in this city back thirty years or more. Hope you're proud of yourself," he said mockingly.

They heard a jingle as Hyrannia's ogre carried the chest of Kreshti gold off of the creaking ship. Grevien sighed. "I just wish I got paid better for it."

Piglet tucked the flask under one furry arm and fished a little penknife out of his pouchbelly. He dug some grit from beneath his black nails. "You know the old saying: money's what makes things happen," he said.

"That's where you're wrong, my friend...." the stocky human let his voice trail off. Piglet pointed his pug muzzle out at the wake from the smuggler's ship. Grevien waited to finish until the thick industrial haze swallowed the craft entirely.

"Dirt," he said, the toe of one crusted boot connecting with a snarling rat. "That's what makes things happen."

Piglet cocked his head at the human and held the flask out. Grevien grabbed it with one hand, pulling

aside his soot-streaked facecloth with the other.

“No matter what you do, or why you do it, some of it always sticks to you. You can never scrub it away.”

The gnoll returned the knife to his pouch, satisfied with his nails.

Grevien picked the pistol back up, letting it hang loosely in his hand. “The best you can do is keep moving it out of sight so you never really notice how filthy everything is.”

He shoved the pistol into a pocket, then gulped more black ale without tasting it. “But it's always there. The dirt finds its way inside you; becomes a part of you. No matter how clean you try to convince yourself you are.”

They drank there on the debris-strewn rooftop in silence. When the flask held nothing but vapors, and the sun's red edge first peeked over the horizon, the pair wound their way back through the deserted streets toward Eastside.

By then, most of the grime had grudgingly settled out of the New Promise air. Even so, they kept their facecloths pulled up; a new day would bring with it new dirt.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Lon Prater lives on the Gulf Coast with his amazingly patient wife and their two delightful daughters. Between work and play, he writes obsessively about things that could never happen and edits Neverary.com, a webzine for other people with the same compulsion. His writing has been printed in Borderlands 5 and published in various other venues online.

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