

SCAR

AND THE MINISTRY OF STRANGERS

CHAPTER 1: POVERTY, A YOUTH, AND MR. CRUNCH

S CAR DID NOT CONSIDER HIMSELF THE SMARTEST of men, but he knew trouble when he saw it — and the youth in the black swallow-tail coat, with silver buckles on his shoes, silk stockings on his legs and a gold knob on his walking stick, was in for trouble.

More specifically, the youth was in for robbery, assault, and quite possibly murder, since the Five Elements catered to the sort of rough customer who ate rich young men alive (and not always in a purely figurative manner, to judge by the look of them). They were a hungry crowd, lean men and gin drinkers, desperate ruffians who bore wounds not honorably come by in His Majesty's wars, the castoffs and leavings of the City of Omber, who came to the Five Elements because they shared the landlord's aversion to bright light, personal questions, and the Metropolitan Police Force. In short, they were just the sort of men a slim youth with silver-buckled shoes should avoid late at night.

Scar did not need to avoid them, though he did when his finances allowed, out of a cheerful distaste for thieves and murderers. Unfortunately, his finances just then were at a low ebb, with only two lonely copper coins in his pocket and no prospect of earning more in the immediate future. He was engaged in determining whether to spend this fortune on a single glass of gin, which would disappear quickly but help ward off the early autumn chill, or on two pints of beer, which would last longer but provide less warmth once he left the Elements to find a bridge to sleep under, when the youth interrupted these serious considerations by entering.

He paused in the doorway to survey the dim, smoky den with a nonchalance that suited his clean-shaven face and high, rather expansive brow, even if it did not suit the den, which had gone greedily silent. Not finding what — or who — he sought, he crossed the expectant hush to the counter and addressed the landlord.

“Publican,” he said, “a libation, if you please. Have you any claret?” He pronounced all his words with clarity and precision, in a voice that reminded Scar of the better sort of judge and the worse sort of parson.

“Claret?” the landlord asked. “You must be joking.”

The youth grounded his stick, laced his hands over the knob, and studied the shelves behind the bar. “I was not joking,” he said, with a pleasant smile, “but apparently you do not purvey claret. In which case I shall have a glass of cider, if you please.”

Bemused, the landlord blew the dust off a jug of cider, poured some out and handed it to the youth, who, for all the fastidiousness of his dress and toilet, drank the murky fluid from the dirty glass without a qualm. It was that, as well as the frank and friendly way in which he met the eyes of the Element's other customers (which quickly slid away from his), that made Scar regret the youth's inevitable death. He was not slumming, or trolling Omber's sewers for a lark; he was simply serenely and completely unaware of the danger to which he had exposed himself, and Scar liked him for it.

Not enough, it must be said, to offer a warning. Scar believed a man's business was his own,

and his business at the moment was ordering beer, not nursemaiding well-heeled innocents. He wished the youth well, and summoned the landlord by flashing a copper Air.

“Moorland’s Stag,” he said.

The landlord shook his head. “Stag’s two now.”

“It’s never!” Scar exclaimed. “How’s that?”

“You know their barge?”

“With the giant great beast on it?” The beast in question was, in fact, a stag, or a plaster representation of one, affixed to the prow of the canal boat that delivered Moorland’s. Scar had seen it on the river that very morning.

“Just the one. Well, it seems old Moorland didn’t want the beast, but all the other brewers have something like on their barges now — Phelps’s Fire has a plaster salamander, Harp a plaster harp, Rhodes’ Roan a rearing stallion, if you see. Mago’s Cider has even got an apple tree on theirs, growing in a tub and all. So old Moorland has to keep up, hasn’t he? But he doesn’t want to pay for it, skinflint he, so he’s upped the price.”

Scar greeted the collapse of his budget with a philosophical shrug. “One Stag, then,” he said, and laid his two Airs on the counter. The landlord brought his beer, the Airs vanished, and Scar put his back to the counter to drink (very slowly) and watch the rest of the Five Elements.

The rest of the Five Elements was watching the youth, who had produced an engraved pocketwatch from his waistcoat and begun to wind it, thus ensuring, in Scar’s estimation, that the youth’s murderers would be able to note the exact time at which they dumped his body in the river. The youth wound on, blissfully ignorant of the fact that his watch constituted the single most valuable item in the pub, and that almost every other man there was determined to have it. The low buzz of conversation that had resumed after the youth’s unusual order took on a predatory tone.

Scar sipped his beer and gave a small sigh of pleasure — a skinflint, perhaps, but Moorland brewed well, and sent the same quality barrels

everywhere, even to a last-ditch rubbish tip of a gin house like the Five Elements. He sipped again, and several more times, while the youth put away his watch and took up his cider, a momentary frown compressing his lips.

He was waiting for someone, Scar decided, though who a gentleman of his too-obvious means might meet in a thieves’ den south of the river was beyond Scar, who sipped again, intrigued. The youth was a puzzle, and more interesting to contemplate than his own severely reduced circumstances, or the fact that he was two-thirds of the way through his first Stag, with none to follow.

Who, then? Not a woman — no woman would enter the Five Elements. Some dealer in proscribed arcana, a shady man with illicit Zephyrs or unsanctioned Waves to sell? Equally unlikely, since the dealer’s goods would be in as much jeopardy as the youth’s watch (and life), and no one in the underground elemental trade would risk his stock that way. Perhaps he had been lured there by a gang of kidnapppers, though if that were the case, one had to wonder why they were late, leaving their victim unsupervised.

Scar reached his last mouthful of Stag without solving the mystery, and then it was solved for him when the outside door opened and a little rabbit of a man crossed the threshold. He wore a foul-weather coat buttoned up over his chin and a three-cornered hat pulled down low over his eyes; only his nose showed, and that twitched anxiously as he scanned the room with quick jerks of his head. He spotted the youth at the bar and beckoned him over with frantic gestures of his oilcloth sleeves, which hung down so far they covered his hands completely.

The youth nodded, paid for his cider from a fat purse that caught the eye and imagination of every man in the room, and crossed to meet the rabbit. They talked in low voices for a moment, the rabbit hopping nervously and flailing his long cuffs, and then stepped outside.

Three long seconds passed, during which Scar drank down the last swallow of Stag, and then

there was a sudden symphony of chairs scraping the floor as thirty-odd men jumped to their feet, meaning to make for the door. They were stopped by a command from the darkest corner of the Five Elements.

“Sit!” ordered the man who emerged from the corner, an enormous bull in a black pea coat, with two similarly large, black-clad friends. At the door he turned to face the frozen crowd, pulling down the collar of his coat, to reveal a red neckerchief with a particular pattern of green stripes. “This is ours,” he said, and left with his friends.

Scar recognized the flag of the Morter Street Braves, the most notorious gang of footpads south of the river, but unlike everyone else in the Elements — who had also recognized the flag, and decided they had pressing business to attend to right there in the pub — he began to consider a foolish idea.

The youth had money; Scar had none. In return for his life, a suitably grateful gentleman would feel obliged to advance at least the cost of a Stag, if not more. It would mean a set-to with three Braves, but Scar thought their reputation overblown, and a set-to might keep him warm. He considered the bottom of his mug, now sadly visible, and shrugged.

“Why not?” he asked the room at large, put down the mug, and started for the door as the screaming began outside.



Above the battered door of the Five Elements hung the pub’s battered sign, and above that, a battered lantern with a sickly firenewt inside. The firenewt was so old that its glow had gone from bright yellow to dull orange, and barely reached a dozen feet from the door. At the edge of the glow, where the dull orange struggled to penetrate the thick, brown, omnipresent fog of the Omber night, the Braves had their quarry hemmed in. One held the rabbit by the throat so that his kicking heels drummed

on the wall of the pub, and the other two menaced the silver-buckled youth, who cowered before them, gabbling in terror.

“What’s this?” Scar asked. “Morter Street so dull the Braves must go abroad?”

The lead Brave flashed a sharp finger at him. “Stay out of it, soldier, unless you want to bloody your precious coat.”

Scar considered the front of his grenadier’s jacket, black frogging on forest-green cloth. “That’s the wonder of this color,” he said. “It doesn’t show the stains so much.”

“It’s none of yours,” the bull Brave insisted. “Clear off!”

Scar laughed. “Doesn’t the parson say we are all our brother’s keepers?” He pointed at the youth, who had stopped gabbling in favor of slack-jawed hyperventilation. “And my cousin there needs keeping more than most.”

The Braves all laughed at that, for some private reason Scar could not fathom. “He’s no cousin of yours,” the bull Brave said, half-turning back to the youth, “but since you will — ”

He spun back mid-sentence, elbow high and aiming for the bridge of the nose, but Scar knew how the Braves liked to fight. He ducked under and clipped the man’s chin as he swung past, then bobbed up and caught the second Brave a clout on the ear that sent him whirling into the third, so that both went sprawling onto the cobbles with identical fishmouths of surprise.

The rabbit fell with them, so Scar grabbed the back of his long coat and stood him up next to the still-gasping youth before facing round to grin at the regrouping Braves. “That was nicely done, don’t you think?” he asked, bouncing on his toes with his fists up. “Though I say it who shouldn’t.”

“You’re dead,” the bull Brave said, spitting blood. He came in alone, which was a mistake, and Scar sent him clear across the road with an uppercut. The second Brave took a kick in the stomach and the third flattened his nose on a fist before reeling away.

“Run!” the rabbit squealed.

Glancing over his shoulder, Scar said, “I shouldn’t, if I were you. Stay behind Uncle Scar and all will be well.” The rabbit whimpered and the youth took a great whooping breath in order to start gabbling again.

The Braves gathered on the far side of the street, supporting each other and preparing a rush. “You’ll pay,” the bull said, building up his courage. “Oh, you’ll pay, soldier boy.”

Scar grinned and motioned them on. He felt light on his feet and pleased with himself, apart from the knuckle he had split on the third Brave’s nose. “Are there any men in Morter Street,” he asked, “or only giant great babies?”

The Braves protested, but a cold voice out of the fog cut them short: “Only the dreadful Almighty knows, my friend — and He isn’t saying.”



As voices go, it was the least pleasant Scar had ever heard — a rolling, rheumy baritone that dropped to a deep, phlegmy bass every few words, with a sound like a boat scraping its keel over a rocky shoal. He took an instant dislike to it and, by extension, the man who used it.

Stepping from the fog into the feeble glow of the geriatric firenewt, the owner of the voice showed himself a tall, lithe man in a plain black frock coat and breeches, with black stockings, a black neck-stock and black eyes in a corpse-white face. Hair the color of dirty ivory slicked back from the chalk forehead and clung to his shoulders in pointed strands like a skeleton’s fingers. He carried a slim cane, and tapped it idly on the cobbles as he strolled between the two groups of combatants, smirking like an insolent ghost.

“Where are the Morter Street Braves of old?” he wondered. “The men you could hire for a murder and rest easy it would be done, and done

brutally?”

A healthy disgust reinforced Scar’s hearty dislike. “Gone soft, they have,” he said. “But the man who hires his murders is soft to start.”

“Is it so?” the pale man asked, directing the question at the three Braves, who quailed and flinched under his gaze. “Was I soft to start?”

The Braves fell over themselves to answer.

“Never sir!”

“A vicious lie!”

“Hard as stone you are, Mr. Crunch!”

Mr. Crunch turned back to Scar, his thin lips, liver-colored in the orange light, forming a brief smile. “They give you the lie, soldier.”

“That’s been done before,” Scar said, and tightened his stance a little, watching the walking stick in the pale man’s hands. A few simple calculations had tempered his good humor. Anyone who terrified a trio a Morter Street Braves required serious handling, and the cane had a longish grip besides, something like the hilt of a knife.

The stick rose, described a brief pattern in the air, and descended twice to indicate the points over Scar’s shoulders that were occupied by the youth and the rabbit. “I have business with these gentlemen,” he said. “Pray, do not force me to have business with you.”

“Said the actress to the bishop.”

Mr. Crunch laughed, a wet sound like pebbles washed on a stony beach that was, if possible, more unpleasant than his voice. He ended his laugh with a sigh of regret, and twisted the handle of his cane. There was a click, and he held up a thin knife, all point. “Sadly, I have a professional obligation. I will work around you, if I can.”

Scar watched the knife, and when the pale man tried to slip the point past him (and thus into the youth), he knocked it aside with a simple rotation of his forearm, a motion that gave him great satisfaction until he realized the rabbit was screaming. He

glanced over his shoulder and saw the rabbit slide to the ground, blood gurgling from his throat, then glanced back and saw Mr. Crunch

retreating, the knife still clean in his hand.

The pale man read the confusion on Scar's face. "Allow me to explain," he said, and held up the the body of his cane, from the bottom of which now protruded a long steel spike, black with the rabbit's blood. He snicked his knife back into the top of the stick. "Misdirection is a trick of the trade. No shame in being taken in by a professional."

Stung in pride and conscience, Scar took up his stance again and thumbed his nose. "Right — knives or no, you're a dead man."

Mr. Crunch smiled gently, as if contemplating a beloved memory. "Aren't we all?" Then, before Scar could arrange a suitable reply to this odd philosophy, the pale man snapped his fingers at the huddled Braves and sent them running off into the darkness.

"That's better," Scar said. "Just you and me, is it?"

"I think not," Mr. Crunch decided, and two quick steps backward took him to the edge of the firenewt's glow. "We have no business, you and I, and I should hate to hasten a man into the tortures of the afterlife for no good reason. If you will do me the service of informing the fainting youth that he should let the Arch drop, we need have no business in future."

"We have business right now," Scar insisted, bouncing on his toes and beckoning with his fists. "Come on!"

With a pitying smile, Mr. Crunch declined. "It would be wise policy to avoid me in future," he said, and faded into the darkness and fog. The last Scar saw of him was the point of the cane's steel spike winking out like a firefly.

Scar kept his guard up for a while, squinting into the night in hopes that the pale man might return, then gave his fists a futile shake and lowered them.

"That's a man you could learn to hate," he said, and turned to inspect the damage.



moments of delivery; the youth, though in a swoon and somewhat pale, lay unharmed. A few slaps brought him around, and he yelped with fear on opening his eyes.

"All's well," Scar said. "They've scarpered."

Stammering, the youth begged his pardon.

"Gone," Scar explained. "Left. Departed. Taken the high road. Much as I wish they hadn't."

"Are you quite sure?"

"As sure as rain is wet."

A remarkable change came over the youth. His lip firmed, the fear left his eyes, he stood and brushed himself off with brisk, decisive motions. He caught sight of the dead rabbit, knelt and examined the pierced throat with the disinterested air of a surgeon. "Did he, perhaps, make an utterance before his demise?"

Scar cast back in his memory. "There was a scream, I think."

"Not germane, I'm afraid." The youth fell into deep thought, head bowed, one finger tapping his lips, apparently unconcerned that he was kneeling over a corpse. All trace of his earlier terror had disappeared, replaced by cool and intent deliberation. After a few seconds, he rose. "First and foremost," he said, "I am in your debt, my good man. Your timely interposition no doubt prevented my sharing a similar fate. Might I impose on you further? I can promise commensurate remuneration."

Scar guessed that meant money. "If you like."

"Excellent. My conveyance attends me at no great distance. I would have you see me there safely, unmolested and uninjured in my person."

"I can do that," Scar said, and was calculating how many Stags such a service would be worth when the youth took his arm and set off. He hardly seemed to need an escort, and Scar marvelled that the timid, gabbling creature he had seen outside the Five Elements could have been transformed into the confident young man whose bold stride and unerring sense of direction led them through pitchblack streets without hesitation. In a few short minutes they turned a corner and saw a brougham not far

off, basking in the glow of two bright coach lamps.

“My conveyance,” the youth said, and lengthened his stride so that Scar, though a tall man, had to jog a little to keep up.

The driver of the brougham stood up at their approach, peering down from his perch. “Is that you, sir?”

“It is,” the youth said, dropping Scar’s arm and stepping into the oasis of the coach lamps. Good lamps, Scar noted, with sinuously muscular fire-newts glowing white behind the glass, and a ministry coach, the King’s lion and elephant enameled on the door, the spokes and hubs painted purple. A ministry coach! And the youth therefore, perhaps, some clerk or private secretary out on an errand for his prince-minister. Scar doubled his estimate of Stags and noticed that the youth was staring intently at him, weighing a heavy purse in his hand.

“May I surmise that you are accustomed to the mêlée?”

“Come again?”

“You are familiar with combat?”

Scar brightened. “Oh, that. I can hold my own.”

“You do not take fright easily?”

“Not so far.”

The youth gave him a searching look. “The prospect of danger leaves you unfazed?”

Scar did not like to boast. “No more than most.”

The youth accepted the answer with a grimace — remembering, perhaps, his own sorry performance outside the Five Elements. “Are you currently in employment?”

“At the moment,” Scar said, beginning to get the gist and liking it very much, “I’m my own man, if that’s what you mean.”

“My meaning precisely.” The youth held out the fat purse. “The remuneration I promised. It is yours without let, hindrance or condition, and well-earned. Take it with my gratitude. However, if you are willing, I can offer you brief employment at excellent wages — and more than your share of tedium, long hours, ambiguous situations, and no small modicum of danger.”

He waited while Scar took his turn weighing the purse, and the offer. The purse was heavy with what could only be golden Fires; it was more money than he had seen together in one place in his entire life, and would keep him in Stags and warm beds (with roofs over them) through the winter. The youth promised hard work and danger, which held no special appeal for Scar, though he did not go out of his way to avoid them. He hefted the purse a while before thinking of a question.

“Any chance of a poke at that pale bastard?”

“Mr. Crunch?” The youth tapped his lips. “Yes, I think I can safely guarantee it.”

“Right,” Scar said. “I’m your man.”

The youth smiled and opened the door of the brougham. “I shall enumerate your duties as we go.”

Scar climbed in — it was the first time he had ever ridden inside a carriage, though he once spent a month clinging to the back of one as a footman, before a dalliance with a maidservant and an unfortunate incident in the carriage owner’s wine cellar cut his term short — and ran a finger over the soft leather seat with a whistle of appreciation.

“Scar old boy,” he murmured, “you’ve landed it in now.”

The youth rapped on the side of the brougham. “The Ministry, as quick as you can.”

“Strangers it is,” the driver said, and the carriage rattled off.