

## **Blood Over Gold**

By J.M. Flint

Aramo grunted. Fontana pulled the tourniquet tight around his thigh. She clamped it with a rough iron clip. His nurse then grabbed the shaft of the repeater crossbow bolt lodged in the meat below the binding. The cart jumped as it hit an uneven cobblestone. The shaft shifted in Fontana's hands, the metal tip tearing a new path in Aramo's flesh. A wave of pain washed over him; he grumbled his responsive expletives through clenched teeth.

Fontana's face contorted with sympathetic hurt. "Sorry!" she told him. "Try and keep her steady!" she yelled to Zerisi, their driver. Everyone's ears rang, deafened by the musket fire Roran and Temas volleyed at their pursuers. Nellen reloaded for the two, trading spent muskets for fresh ones. Zerisi said nothing.

More repeater bolts from the pursuing House agents tinked off nearby walls on either side of the alley, careening back toward the crew at odd and harmless angles. The return fire proved just as inaccurate, filling the air with the smoke and fire of empty threats.

Their pursuers' horses foamed at the mouth, struggling at the bit, stamping closer with the clitter-clack of horseshoes on stone.

"Piss off!" Temas yelled, the blast of his musket swallowing the words whole. He gripped the weapon too tightly, braced in expectation of receiving a biting bolt like the one that had struck his friend. He tossed the spent firearm into the cart's bed next to Nellen; the squat man's lips moved with unheard curses as he fumbled with the matchcord of another arquebus.

Roran threw a quick glance to Aramo's wound, gritting his teeth as if it were his own. Anger sped the next bark of his firearm. He cursed again as he traded with Nellen, another miss only driving home the impotence he felt.

The House agents proved adept riders, managing their mounts only with their legs, their arms aiming more pointed death.

The cart took a sudden turn down a side path. The passengers shifted and swayed to one side, Roran dropping the loaded musket over the side and grasping at the railing to keep his bulky Rukhosi body from toppling headfirst after it.

As soon as they'd steadied, Fontana returned her hand to the repeater bolt, this time yanking it quickly and without hesitation. Air burst through Aramo's lips as blood spilled from the wound, the tourniquet struggling against the flow. She pulled a small phial from her belt, using her teeth to pull the cork free of the top before spitting it over the cart's side.

She hesitated with a grimace, knowing what came next. They'd all been in Aramo's position at one time or another. They'd always pulled through. But that thought didn't ease the experience of it. Roran leaned over and pushed Aramo down against the cart's rough boards, holding him steady. Before Aramo could object, Fontana poured the contents into Aramo's wound.

He spasmed with the pain. Nellen and Temas left their other tasks to hold him down. Every nerve in the bloody crevice flared back to life at once, sending signals through his brain that carried every excruciating detail of the flesh knitting itself back together.

The ordeal concluded, Fontana unclipped the tourniquet. "Good as new," she said.

Aramo forced a weak smile, beads of sweat gathered at his brow and cheeks. “Do we have it?”

Nellen smiled, pulling back his cloak with thin, long Ilmarin fingers. The flash of burnished metal peeked from his satchel. “We got it,” he said, triumphant. Aramo patted him on the leg, a feeble but fatherly motion.

“That was a lot of blood back there,” Temas warned. “Will they be able to track us?”

“I threw the powder you made where I could, just like you said. Between that and the wards, we should be fine, right?” Aramo said, feigning returning strength. The firing of matchlocks had subsided, and the pursuing House agents had exhausted their ammunition as well, making conversation easier. The crew trusted Zerisi to do her job, and to do it well—they had no other choice, anyway. Her daring turns and sudden sidestreets had lengthened the gap between them and their pursuers.

“It’s worked well enough in the past,” Temas admitted. “We’ll hope it keeps up. Finding someone by sympathy isn’t an easy thing to begin with.”

The cart bumped along on the Upper City streets, between nobles’ townhouses and merchant family compounds, minor bureaucratic offices, laudatory statutes to the long dead, and all the other gaudiness enjoyed by the wealthy.

Fontana pulled a length of bandage from one of her pouches, looking to a cut on Roran’s arm. He waved her off, saying, “It’s a scratch. Don’t worry about it.” The others had been bruised and battered during their fighting escape, but Aramo had taken the worst of the injuries,. Behind them, they could no longer see the House agents or their horses.

"We're clear," Aramo called softly to Zerisi, who nodded without looking back. The cart's horses slowed from the breakneck pace, still moving briskly. The cobblestones came gentler now. Not gentle, but gentler.

Adrenaline faded as the danger subsided, and irrepressible grins shone on each of the crew's faces. It hadn't been as clean as they'd preferred, but they'd survived. A job against House Meradhvor's embassy in Iliessa, no less. Silent, self-congratulatory stupor set in as Zerisi directed them to a quiet courtyard between lavish estates, where an enclosed carriage, not the slapdash cart they'd arrived in, awaited them.

While Zerisi untethered the horses from the cart and transferred them to the carriage's yokes, Roran and Temas collected jars of lamp oil they'd left behind some old shipping crates, dousing the cart with the odoriferous liquid inside. Nellen wrapped a length of matchcord around the cart's railing, clenching a striker until the sparks lit the dangling fuse.

Zerisi turned her cloak inside out, a dark navy replacing the mottled brown on the other side. She wrapped it about herself and climbed onto the carriage's driver's bench. Aramo knocked on the wagon's side when the rest of the crew had taken their seats; the driver clicked at her sweaty horses, urging them into a begrudging walk.

As the vehicle left by a side alleyway, a pillar of grey-black smoke rose behind them. From any distance, it seemed just another fireplace in a neighborhood of homes full of such comforts. Blocked by the surrounding buildings, each of them three stories tall at least, no Meradhvor agent would be alerted to the burning cart's location.

Now came the true test. The carriage's occupants leaned back, let the shadows of the interior corners conceal them. By now, Meradthvor had raised the hue and cry. Not only had they dispatched those agents and guardsmen they had available to scour the Upper City for fleeing bandits, but they'd no doubt recruited the watch to search out the shadowmen as well.

Tension returned to the crew as the wagon slowly made its way to one of the lifts between the Upper and Lower Cities of Iliessa. Once they'd returned from these lofty bastions, they'd have the huddling masses of the working classes to mask them, the haphazard and crowded pathways of the City Below to hide them. Until then, any wayward eye, any suspicious glance, could be enough to renew the chase. They could not afford the attire that would mark them as ones who belonged to the Upper City—Roran and Nellen would stand out as unlikely inhabitants anyway. And then there was the small matter of the sundry weapons they'd festooned themselves with: matchlock or wheellock pistols, blades of all size and manner, the occasional mace or hammer for dealing with armored House guards, grenadoes and those alchemical concoctions they could source and afford. No disguising the ill intent on them. Even in the Lower City they'd draw attention and suspicion arrayed as they were.

But their Wyrgeas proved good this night, and they made their way to the lifts without incident. Zerisi slid a swan into the liftworker's palm, far more than the cost of the journey, and he nodded his understanding. His family would eat well that month; he'd never had a magnate of the City tip so handsomely.

The other attendants hastily hammered wedges underneath the carriage's wheels to keep them from moving during the long descent. The initial lurch of the lift, really a short, sharp fall of a few inches, pushed the crew's stomachs toward their throats. But the sensation subsided quickly, and the steady downward crawl of the lift became pleasant. From the carriage, Aramo examined the side of Cloudcatcher Tor as it scrolled upward, scrutinizing every patch of weathered Aenyr stone or more recent patchwork that he could before it disappeared, wondering who the now faceless figures carved into the niches and alcoves of the structure had once signified.

His fellows passed a bottle of rotgut, artificially calming their nerves. They complemented one another for their meritorious actions during the heist, when one saved the other from certain doom or another's quick thinking prevented disaster for the lot of them. Laughing and smiles had seized them, and for this moment, nothing outside the carriage existed. You can't stare down the cold ruthlessness of the Artificer Houses and not come to love the ones who stand with you. And this wasn't their first job. Far from it.

Finally, the platform settled upon the Avar with a bump, like a stair met more quickly than expected. The lower lift attendants removed the wheel-blocks and Zerisi set the carriage moving without hesitation.

The crew traveled more slowly through the Lower City, both out of a sense of newfound safety and out of necessity—the alleyways of the Upper City were as broad thoroughfares in the Lower. Some of the narrower passages obliged Zerisi to stop the horses and wait for pedestrians to duck into the doorways of homes or any other alcove at hand to avoid the carriage crushing them as it passed.

The crew made their way into the heart of The Scraps and its piles of dilapidated tenement buildings, each four or five stories high, many of them leaning against one another like comrades after a night of heavy drinking, framing timbers always somehow damp. Wastewater and piss moistened the cobbles below. Shallow stone trenches had once run on either side of the street, directing such filth away from passersby's feet, but that had been centuries past, when people of means lived in this place, waiting for the towers to be restored and the Upper City to welcome them to a grandeur separated from the rough folk below. Nightsoil had filled those drainage runs long since, and little weeds, defiant in their very existence amongst the cobbles, grew from the nutrients left behind. It reminded Zerisi of her crew: born in shit but still green with life, beautiful in an oft-ignored way.

A squat, sprawling tavern building, constructed of fieldstone rather than wood—though as poorly maintained as the rest of the neighborhood—had been erected in the ruins of several apartment buildings that burnt several decades past. The Proud Pig, refuge of the Scraps. Here, Zerisi brought the carriage to a stop.

The tavern had no stables, but neither did a stolen carriage need to be left in one place for too long. A man in a wide-brimmed hat, chair leaned back against the tavern wall in the shadow of its larger upper story, looked up from his drink to the new arrivals. He caught Aramo's eye and ran his finger along the brim of his hat. The shadowman responded by touching a finger to his temple, not particularly returning the fence's gaze.

The other man nodded; Aramo and his crew returned to the narrow street to make the rest of the way home on foot. The man in the hat, or his lackeys, would sell the horses,

repaint the carriage, and press it into service elsewhere in the city, splitting the income from the transactions with the crew.

Avoiding any inopportune run-in with the city guard by keeping to lesser-used snickelways in the poorer districts, the crew made the long journey to their safehouse in Bywater, a brick building once used as a warehouse and nestled in the shadow of the Great Aqueduct. Only once they had crossed the threshold into that place did they truly let down their guard.

Each member of the crew first went to his or her own personal space, sorting and putting away weapons, removing pieces of concealed armor, changing into more comfortable clothes. One by one, they reconvened at the uneven wooden table where they planned their heists, shared their meals, played their games, drank and sang.

Fontana lit the planks waiting quietly in what had once been a small forge; they'd converted it into a cooktop by suspending a sheet of heavy iron over it on chains. As the flames grew, she placed a pot of water on the slab to boil, grabbing a handful of coffee beans and throwing them in a mortar. She turned to the center of the building, idly grinding the beans into powder with the pestle.

Temas carefully inspected the obfuscatory wards, the crew's sole defense against scrying eyes. He took his time, checking for any smudge, and alterations in the carefully-painted mixture of ash and oil. Satisfied, he, too, joined the others.

Nellen pulled the Artifact from his satchel and placed it delicately in the center of the table for all to see.



A sphere, bronze in color and elaborately etched in clean, sharp lines forming unfamiliar symbols and miniature scenes that could not be deciphered at distance, rolled across the planks before settling into a gap between two of them.

“What is it?” Roran asked.

“Does it have a sympathy?” Aramo followed, pulling back the scraps of cloth that served as curtains for one of the building’s few windows and checking the street outside.

Temas stepped forward and lifted the Artifact to his face. His eyes glazed over as he invoked the Sight, searching their prize for signs of arcane tracking. After only a few seconds, he stumbled backward, Roran catching him with a powerful arm and Fontana nimbly seizing the Artifact from the air before it clattered to the dirt floor.

Shaking his head, Temas recovered his feet, bracing himself against the table’s edge. “No sympathies,” he said. “It’s not House Artifice. It’s older...Aenyr.”

Nellen stepped closer, cocking his head at an angle as he examined the sphere cupped in Fontana’s hands. “What’s it for?” he asked.

“No idea,” Temas responded, using both hands, fingers and thumbs formed into pincers, to take the object from Fontana and return it to the gap between the table’s boards so that all could see its glory. “But it’s got to be worth a fortune. Way more than we’re being paid for this job.”

“You thinking we sell it to someone else?” Zerisi asked, crossing her arms below a relaxed expression.

“Nellen, you know anyone in the Grey Markets who could find us a buyer?” Temas asked.

The short man shook a long finger at his compatriot. "What? Because I'm Ilmarin, you think I know every Grey Artificer in the city? You're natural born; do you know every slovenly beggar in the Twists? Every whore in Gracaellas? Don't be an asshole."

"I just thought that, being a burglar by trade, you might know a well-connected fence," Temas sputtered.

"Oh."

Chuckling at the exchange, Aramo leaned forward, hands stretched across the table to his sides, resting on the edge. "We're not selling the Artifact to someone else. We took a job and we're going to finish it. Where's your sense of honor? Reputation?"

Roran stepped back from the table, recoiling with a belly laugh that bared all of his teeth—but especially the dagger-like canines. Even without gear, he cut an intimidating figure, just over six feet of pure muscle wrapped in greyish flesh. "Honor? Are you kidding me? We're shadowmen, god dammit! The whole point is that no one knows who we are. If they don't know who we are, how can we have any reputation, much less honor?"

"We're not common criminals," Aramo retorted, leaning farther over the table toward Roran. "We have to have a code."

"Fuck off with that shit, 'Mo! We have to survive is all, maybe make enough coin to live better off than we started, not have to risk our necks day after day for our next meal. Leave the honor and the reputation to the fucking halfwit nobles who have the luxury of such airy concerns. It's us against them, ain't it?"

Aramo's face hardened. "Of course you don't understand, Rory. You've never known anything else. You scraped your way up through the street gangs to working for the Coin Lords. I guess there really is no honor among thieves."

Roran smiled in retort, malice in the tips of his teeth and scorn in his lips. "You were a mercenary before you became a shadowman. You killed people for money, same as me. Don't think we're different, or that you're better than me. Hypocrite."

"I—" Aramo started, face softening from the blow. It wasn't the first time they fought like brothers; it wouldn't be the last.

Fontana stepped between the two men, table betwixt her and Aramo. "No single haul is worth our status as shadowmen," she said.

"This one is," Temas said, matter-of-factly.

"He's right," Nellen added, "We could all retire. I know a guy in the Markets, he could give us a better idea of exactly how much we could get."

Temas threw his hands up and turned away from the table. "'I know a guy,' he says," he muttered. The Ilmarin shrugged with a sly smile and the others laughed, the tension ebbing away for a fleeting moment.

"Of course you say this haul is worth giving up our livelihood, Temas," Zerisi returned. "You could go back to practicing thaumaturgy if you weren't a shadowman. The rest of us don't have that luxury."

Temas turned back, swiftly. "You know that's not true, Z. I can barely manage the simplest of workings. My master deemed me unworthy of even training as an aspected practitioner. I left because the other option was a lifetime of servitude to some magister

somewhere. If I'd wanted to be a servant, I could have done that anywhere; I wouldn't have ended up here. Did you think that this was a game for me? That I came to this life on a whim? We're all here for the same reason: we don't fit elsewhere. Maybe that choice was made for us, maybe we made it for ourselves. But we're all in it together because we're the same."

"Family," Fontana said, eyes examining her feet.

"Besides," Aramo returned to the fray, "If we reneged on a job, the Coin Lords would have our heads. That's how it works. You might have the money, but you wouldn't live to spend it. Not without always looking over your shoulder, at least."

"But they only know you," Roran objected. "You're the one they approved. They don't know the rest of us and don't want to. *That's* how it works, Mo."

Aramo took a step back from the table. "You'd do that to me?" he asked. His voice remained calm and even, as if it were the sort of question you might ask anyone under any circumstances. Even so, the sense of betrayal and desperation was palpable.

"I'm just saying, cos," Roran returned. "We're just talking, right? Looking at the angles."

"Well, if we gave Aramo an extra share or two to compensate, it could work, right?" Nellen asked. "He'd have enough to set himself up somewhere in anonymous grandeur and we'd still have enough to live comfortably here. Maybe not in the Upper City, but one of the better places to live down here. And maybe the Upper City. It's worth a lot, after all."

"I can't believe we're talking about this!" Zerisi bellowed. "We're not seriously thinking about doing this, are we?"

Temas lifted a hand to silence her. "We're just looking at the options. Shouldn't we at least consider the opportunities as we find them? That's why we got into this damned business in the first place isn't it? To seize opportunities for ourselves instead of helping some other bastard get richer than he already is?"

"I thought we joined to belong to something," Fontana said, almost a whisper.

"Then you and Aramo can be naïve together," Roran spat. "It's easy to have a family and be poor; you can do it practically anywhere. But to live on your own terms, to climb out of the muck through your own sweat, blood and ingenuity, to live in wealth you earned for yourself. That is far rarer. You want my advice? Take the money and then find a family."

"I didn't ask," Fontana retorted, a tear in the corner of her eye.

Roran shrugged.

Aramo sighed heavily as he returned to the table. "Do we need to take a vote?"

"No," Fontana said, voice now firm. "There will be no vote."

"Now wait a goddamned minute," Roran roared amongst the general clamor in response to Fontana's edict.

Holding up both hands like some master of ceremonies on a Gracaellas stage seeking to quell the audience, Aramo brought them back to calm. He looked to Fontana, all eyes following, and asked, "Why shouldn't we vote, Fontana? That's how we do things when we don't agree."

"I—" she began, but he could see the answer from the look on her face before she said another word. He'd seen that expression before, a face riddled with guilt enough to follow like a vengeful spirit, but powerless to stop the thing that had created it. Too many in

the Lower City had been branded with that face, the broken face of a betrayer, torn between loyalty and ambition.

“You’ve already sold it,” their leader said, his voice heavy with despairing resignation.

Just then, the door and ceiling to the warehouse exploded inward sending shrapnel flying. The concussive blast deafened them all, leaving ears bleeding and ringing.

Cloaked men, hooded and armed with short blades well-suited to close quarters, descended from the hole above and the yawning gap where the door had been. The assault took only a minute, maybe less.

Roran threw the table at the assailants, knocked several of them over, attempting to shield Nellen with his body. The attackers slashed him relentlessly as he howled in pain. Temas threw himself between Zerisi and their murderers, feebly defending them both against stabbing blades with his empty hands. Aramo hobbled to his personal space to retrieve his matched wheellock pistols. He managed to fire them both, filling the room with a smoke that conspired to conceal from him the effect of his shots. He felt the firearms bark without hearing them, more noise in a world rendered silent. Except for that damn ringing.

A blade thrust into his back. More sharp stings followed. Aramo staggered. He collapsed onto the dirt floor. He could feel the warmth seeping into a puddle around his body, mingling with growing pools of his companions’ lifeblood. His mind raced through the past hours and days, searching out signs of Fontana’s betrayal that should have led him to prepare for this ambush. He could think of none; he’d loved Fontana as a daughter. It had made him blind.

Two thoughts followed: gratefulness that he'd not been able to hear or see his companions being cut down, regret that he'd escaped seeing the result of his failings.

Where he lay, slowly bleeding to death, too injured to move, he could see Fontana's boots. His sense of hearing was returning, and he could make out some conversation, though it seemed muffled and distanced despite its proximity.

"Your reward," a man's voice said, followed by the clink of a bag heavy with coin dropping lightly into Fontana's hands. "May you spend it in pleasure and health. Our House appreciates your service, and has a place for you should you wish it."

"No. Thank you," Fontana returned. "If it's all the same, I'd like to be done with the whole business."

"I understand," the man said graciously. "Then this is where we part ways."

The House agents retreated, undoubtedly with the Artifact, in near silence. Professionals, through and through. *At least I haven't been killed by amateurs*, Aramo thought.

A moment later, Fontana had stepped back away from him enough that he could see her face. She looked at him for a moment, but when she saw him blink, she stepped back, swallowing hard, and turned away, fleeing into the night.

Aramo could hear the alarums raised by neighboring tenants, but he knew that the city's guardsman would take their time in responding to any hue and cry in this district. That's part of why they'd chosen a safehouse here. *Safehouse*, he thought. *That's a useless word*. And then the darkness took him.