**Fable: Jack of Blades**

**Peter David**

*He is supposed to be dead.*

*How is he here? Why is he here?*

*Why has he chosen this place?*

*What do we have that he could possibly want?*

*Why us?*

*What have we done to deserve this? In what way have we offended the great god Avo, that we have been abandoned to the evils represented by ... ...by him?*

*Why isn't he dead? Why have he and his minions been inflicted upon us? And where is someone who can save us? Where is our Hero?*

*These questions and more besides are hurled to the heavens, and no answers are forthcoming. We are alone.*

*We are all alone with none to help us. All of us alone, here in Oddwood.*

*Oddwood is a small town, a humble town. It had the potential to be something greater than that if it had been given the time. The farming land around it is rich and fertile. Consequently, the Oddwood marketplace is developing a reputation for being an ideal place to shop for excellent farm foods and handmade crafts.*

*The townsfolk are a rather unassuming lot. Simplistic. Superstitious. But on the whole, they have good hearts and care for one another, or so they like to believe. It is a decent place to raise a family, to hone a trade, to establish a business.*

*Or at least it was.*

*That was then.*

*This is now.*

*Now is an early period in the history of Albion. A time when ancient evils were recent threats, and the direction of Albion is still being fought over. A time when Heroes freely roamed the land and magic crackled in the air.*

*A time of Fable.*

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The first thing that struck Xiro was how unkempt the road was.

Oddwood was supposed to be a thriving town, and people in thriving towns tended to clean up after themselves. They made sure that the road or roads that led into it were meticulously kept in easily navigable condition. There were, after all, a sizable number of vagabonds throughout Albion. Individuals who simply enjoyed traveling the land, seeing where the roads would take them. If the goal was to get as many people passing through Oddwood as possible, then it behooved them to make the roads attractive. They were, after all, the calling card and first impression of any town. Who would have the slightest interest in visiting a place they couldn't even reach?

Xiro stepped over easily-tended-to things like branches, leaves, and fallen rocks that had been knocked into the path, not because of anything malicious but because of the simple wear and tear foul weather tended to inflict upon the outdoors. The rain had been pounding particularly hard the last week or so, and the area was as much mud as anything else. Mud adorned with scattered tree branches and debris. Leaves gathered inside gaping holes, obscuring such hazards, and at one point Xiro nearly twisted his ankle stepping into a pile.

It is not unusual for gangly young men to have serious problems with something as simple as walking when they transition from youth to adult. Their arms and legs seem to grow with ridiculous speed, racing each other to see which could be longer. Consequently teen boys can oftentimes be all arms and legs, waiting for their disproportionately growing bodies to get themselves sorted out.

Xiro, however, was not a teen. Instead, he would have seemed to an observer to be in his early twenties, at the very least. He had an angular, careworn face and a general air of befuddlement about him. The world was a place of endless fascination, and with his wide-eyed, credulous attitude, it was clear he wasn't going to miss a minute of it.

"This is untidy," he said. But he made no effort to clean up the debris that lay scattered around. Instead, he simply stepped over or through it as carefully as he could, lest the mud make his feet slip out from under him.

Then he saw something in the mud. He crouched, studying it closely. Not something. Some things. They were tracks, made with something larger than human feet and with what appeared to be claws sticking out the ends of the toes. Definitely not human, then. Animal?

"Yes," said Xiro thoughtfully. "Yes, it would have to be, wouldn't it."

He stood then, satisfied. He had a short sword that slapped gently against his left thigh; otherwise he was unarmed. The purse dangling from his belt seemed rather slender, indicating a paucity of coins. It seemed his unruly brown hair literally had a life of its own, and he had a habit of brushing hanks of it out of his eyes, never to any lasting effect.

He continued on his path, then encountered a series of signs that were, to say the least, off-putting: *Town closed. Travelers unwelcome. Plague ahead. Unsafe roads ahead. Turn back if you value your life.*

Sign after sign in his path, and Xiro considered them all before finally saying aloud, "This is overkill. Someone is trying much too hard."

He continued along, stepping over thick branches and a hastily dug trench until he finally reached Oddwood itself. Streets that should have been bustling with citizenry were relatively deserted. The only people he saw out and about were urchins, their grubby hands clutching spasmodically on nonexistent coins as they approached him, their eyes wide, their faces eager. First one, then, as if communicating as ants do, half a dozen more came from all directions, converging upon him as if he were a crumb dropped by the anthill. "Money, sir?" said one and others took up the chant, asking for whatever he could spare.

"Money for you?" he said to them. "For your family?"

"No, sir," said the tallest of the children, a sallow-skinned boy with an unpleasant sore on his lip.

"Who then?"

"Him."

"Him, who?"

*"Him."* The eldest boy glanced right and left as if the mere use of a pronoun could bring utter destruction down upon his head. "The one who came here with his men and took over and changed things. The one who ..." His voice dropped to scarcely above a whisper. "... *the one who's dead but isn't."*

"I don't think that's possible," said Xiro slowly. "I mean, I've heard of monsters like that. Rather nasty creatures by all accounts. Hollow men, they're called. But they generally—"

"No, not that type of dead but isn't."

"Well, then I don't—"

"We don't say his name aloud," said another of the children, "because one of his men, or worse, him, might hear it and pop up and just... just kill us for daring to say it!"

"That's rather circular," he said. "But tell you what"—and he leaned down toward the child who had just spoken—"whisper it in my ear, softly as you can. That way none of them can possibly hear. There's a coin in it for you if you do."

Just as the older child had, he looked around to make sure that no one was eavesdropping, then he spoke so softly that Xiro almost didn't hear him. *"Jack of Blades."*

The children trembled upon hearing the dreaded name. Xiro stared blankly. "I'm sorry? Who?"

They gasped, stunned that any human being could be so completely ignorant. "How could you not know?" asked the eldest boy, the apparent de facto leader of the group. "Should I know?"

"He's legendary!" said the eldest boy. "They say he's lived for thousands of years! They say he's a creature of incredible power! They say he can do whatever he wants! They say he's both dead and alive! They say he's evil incarnate!"

"It seems 'they' say quite a lot."

"Are you a Hero?" the smallest of the children said. The others looked at him hopefully. "Are you here to free our town of him?" "What, me? A Hero? Oh, heavens no," said Xiro. "No, that's not me at all." The child looked disappointed. "Then what are you?" "By trade? I'm a teacher."

"Oh." The kids looked at each other doubtfully. "Do you teach farming?" "No. I teach about the world."

"Well, then you won't find much business here. We don't have much call for teachers in Oddwood."

"Really?" Xiro's eyebrows arched and he looked taken aback. "No call for someone to teach about science? Language? Philosophy? That's my real passion, truth to tell. Teaching is my vocation, but at heart, I'm a philosopher," he said proudly.

The children exchanged confused looks. "Is that like a magician?" asked the eldest.

"Hardly," Xiro said with a chuckle. "It means I contemplate the mysteries of the world and try to draw conclusions about them. Or ask questions that would seem to have no answer."

"Like how to destroy Jack of Blades?" the youngest said. "You have a sword."

"This thing?" Xiro tapped the short sword on his hip. "It's more for show than anything else. Even a peaceful philosopher cannot wander the roads without at least a show of protection. But... let me understand this. This 'Jack' person. You're saying he's here?"

The children nodded in unison. The eldest of them said, "He came here six months ago, with a small army of bravos."

"A small army?"

"Of cutthroats and sell-swords, yes." The eldest was warming to his story. "At least ten of them. They came into town in the dead of night, and it was like Jack had stepped right out of the stories. Everyone thought he was dead, but he wasn't. He was huge, with that terrible mask like a living skull, and swords on his back that even the strongest of men couldn't possibly lift." He described the swords in detail, and one of them sounded like the Sword of Aeons that Xiro had heard so many legends about. The lad continued, "And he had his men with him, his army ..."

"An army of ten men?" Xiro sounded doubtful. "That's not much of an army, really, when you get down to it."

"He didn't need more than that. It was just for show, mostly. Jack of Blades himself is a one-man army." "Ah. Well, that would explain it."

"He told the village elders that he was believed dead by many and desired it to remain so. That if anyone in the village betrayed his presence or left to tell others, they would die. That if any came to Oddwood, they had to remain or else they would die if they tried to leave."

"And that was enough for them to stay?"

"Well, of course," said the eldest, and the others nodded. "It's Jack of Blades. Who would be foolish enough to tempt fate?"

Xiro appeared to consider that, then promptly turned on his heel and started to head back the way he'd come.

Immediately the children ran after him, shouting after him, begging him not to do this terrible, foolish, and extremely ill-advised thing. Xiro ignored them as if he had some sort of death wish. They pursued him all the way to the edge of town; and then, just as they got there, Xiro suddenly came to a halt. He looked up. And up.

A large man was standing there, blocking his path. Barrel-chested and massive, he was wearing leather armor and tapping a sword gently against his open palm.

"You weren't there when I got here," said Xiro mildly.

"Yeah, I was. You just didn't see me."

"I suppose I didn't look hard enough. My mistake. Would you mind stepping aside?"

"Actually, yes. I would mind." He sounded sympathetic in the way that someone who wasn't really sympathetic could sound. "I hope that isn't a problem for you. We'd really prefer that people who come to visit stay for a while. A good long while."

Xiro considered that, then said, very simply, "Ah. Well... thank you for the opportunity. It'd be foolish of me not to take you up on it."

"It truly would," said the behemoth.

Turning back to the children, Xiro—seemingly not the least bit put out over being forced to stay in Oddwood—rubbed his hands together briskly and said, "Well then ... where can a fellow find something to eat around here?"

"The market!" said the children in unison.

The children seemed eager to be of use, which didn't surprise him. They had not much else to do with their time, so Xiro's arrival provided them with a much-needed diversion.

There seemed to be only one major road through the town, and even that was simply cratered dirt. Several times Xiro almost tripped in random holes in the road. Small houses were scattered along the way, some in desperate need of repair, as if they were held together through the sheer willpower of the townspeople. He caught occasional glimpses of people peering out at him from within the unassuming dwellings. Invariably they had looks of puzzlement—wondering where he'd come from—or sympathy for this poor devil who'd wandered into the middle of the ongoing nightmare that was their daily lives.

Occasionally he passed various townsfolk going about their business with the same looks of surprise and/or sympathy as the people in the houses. No one asked his name or what he was doing there. Either they felt it wasn't their business, or they simply didn't care. Whichever way was fine with Xiro, who wasn't feeling especially talkative.

He was trapped. Trapped in the town of Jack of Blades.

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The marketplace was thriving. Farmers had their wares out for purchase, most of which was done in a straightforward barter system. Xiro wandered through it, taking it all in, fascinated by the seeming normality of an environment that was supposedly controlled by the notorious Jack of Blades. He wondered if he was imagining the apparent edge in even the most casual of conversations. The lightness in their voices, the familiarity of their social intercourse, seemed tinged with tension, and sidelong glances implied they were worried who might be listening or when disaster might be visited upon them.

The children who had escorted Xiro to the marketplace spread out in a variety of directions, seeking new people to beg money from or perhaps to light-finger a purse or two.

The vendors in the market were surprised to see Xiro there but covered up quickly. That made sense to Xiro. They weren't sure how much he knew about their status quo, or how much they should let others know of it. So they would make small talk with him to interest him in their wares but otherwise were remarkably reticent, considering that their job was to sell things.

Xiro stopped at one booth that caught his eye. It belonged to a candlemaker, who had crafted some wonderfully stylish tapers in addition to more mundane, everyday candles. He was an older man who, surprisingly for a salesman, was too modest to talk about how he crafted his materials. But his daughter was more than happy to speak on his behalf. She was an attractive young thing even though her brown hair was unkempt, and she clearly had no knowledge of makeup or other niceties of femininity. But she was suffused with that first blossom of womanhood and the promise of that shone through. Xiro studied the woman at close range, as she—Beatrice was her name—went on and on about what a remarkable artist her father was. As her endless barrage of words washed over him, Xiro nodded because he felt it was the appropriate thing to do.

Suddenly she stopped talking and her eyes widened. She seemed to shrink into herself, and her father likewise went from a ruddy complexion to an unhealthy paleness. Xiro didn't understand why at first. But a moment later he heard loud, boisterous noises from behind.

Two men approached. They were similar in dress and deportment to the bully who had kept Xiro from leaving Oddwood. They were about the same height, but one was wider than the other and had a bristling red beard, whereas the other was clean-shaven. The bearded one swaggered toward the candlemaker or, more accurately, his daughter. "Now, you're a charming little bit of business. Haven't noticed you here before."

She didn't meet his gaze, doubtless because she knew what disgusting thoughts were crawling through his mind and she had no desire to see them reflected in his eyes.

"I'm speaking to you, girl!" roared the bearded man when she didn't respond.

"Technically," said Xiro, "you were more speaking *at* her."

The man swiveled his attention to Xiro, apparently seeing him for the first time. "What?"

"Well," said Xiro matter-of-factly, "it's fairly evident by her reluctance to make eye contact and the fact that she's gone from conversational to taciturn so quickly that she has no desire to talk to you at all, for whatever reason. I mean," he added hastily, "I'm sure that if she got to know you, she'd surely come to feel otherwise, but as it stands—"

"Get out of my way," said the bearded man, "or I'll kill you."

"All right, then," said Xiro, moving immediately to one side and deftly avoiding another small hole in the ground.

The bearded man nodded in approval, then strode right up to the candlemaker's booth. "You, girl," he said brusquely, "have caught the eye of Red Richard. That makes you very lucky indeed."

The girl's chin was quivering with fear. The bearded man cupped it roughly, but before he could say anything else, Xiro said, "Are you a friend of his? Or a herald?"

"What?" said the bearded man.

"Red Richard. You said that she had caught the attention of—" *"I'm* Red Richard, you idiot!"

"Ah." Xiro considered that. "So you were referring to yourself in the third person, then. That wasn't the clearest way to—"

"One more word," Red Richard said, "and I'm going to kill you. Is *that* clear enough for you?"

Xiro had been in midsentence, but upon hearing Red Richard's words, he immediately clamped his mouth shut and nodded silently.

Turning away from Xiro, Red Richard reached forward and grabbed Beatrice by the wrist. "Come with me, girl. We're going to have fun, you and I."

"Let her go!" said her father desperately. "She's barely an adult!"

"I know," Red Richard lamented. "She's a bit older than I usually prefer, but she'll do."

He reached over the counter of the booth with both hands before Beatrice could move and grabbed her under her arms. Without so much as the slightest grunt of effort, Red Richard yanked her over into his arms. She let out a screech that caught the attention of everyone in the marketplace, but no one made a move to intervene.

Her father cried out, begged for Red Richard to put her down, to spare her the gift of his attentions, and Red Richard ignored him. Beatrice struggled, but he held on to her effortlessly.

And then there was a soft sound of steel being drawn from a scabbard.

Red Richard looked down.

Xiro stood about four feet away. He had his short sword leveled, the blade visibly trembling —he was clearly nervous over the prospect of facing such a formidable foe. Nevertheless he fought to keep his voice flat and even. "The young lady doesn't seem to want your attentions. In the interest of decency, I'm asking you to put her down and leave her be."

"No!" Beatrice managed to say. "No, you're only going to get yourself killed! Don't—!"

"Too late for 'don't,' little girl," said Red Richard. He shoved her roughly over to his associate and yanked out his own sword. It was half again as long as the one that Xiro was holding. "This idiot has brought this on himself."

He strode directly toward Xiro, who held his ground, grasping his short sword with both hands and waiting for the assault.

Suddenly Red Richard stumbled as the toe of his foot got caught in a hole in the ground, tripping him up. He threw his arms wide to balance himself but instead fell forward. His eyes widened as he saw the point of Xiro's sword aimed straight at him, the point no longer quivering. He fell on to it, the blade sliding straight into his chest. Letting out a startled gasp as his breath rattled in his throat, Red Richard fell slowly like a tree. He was so heavy and hit the ground with such force that the sword was yanked out of Xiro's grasp.

Panicked, Xiro rushed to Red Richard's fallen body and grabbed at the hilt of the sword. The blade was wedged in, apparently lodged somewhere in Red Richard's rib cage, and it resisted Xiro's attempts to extract it.

Meanwhile, it had taken a moment for what had just happened to fully register on Red Richard's companion. When he finally realized that his associate was nothing more than worm meat, he let out an infuriated roar. He shoved Beatrice aside and, as she landed hard on the ground, pulled out his own sword. Red Richard's infuriated associate charged Xiro, shouting *"For Richard!"*

Xiro's back was to his attacker because he was busy trying to yank the sword free. He placed one foot on Red Richard's chest to brace himself and pulled as hard as he could. The sword came free abruptly ... too abruptly, and as Xiro's arm snapped back, he lost his grip. The sword flew out of his hand, pinwheeled through the air, and impaled his attacker's head, cleaving his skull in half.

Shrieks erupted from around the marketplace. That Red Richard tripped and killed himself was startling enough, but Xiro's inadvertent dispatching of Richard's associate drew reactions from all over.

Time seemed to freeze as the man with the split skull stood there, looking ridiculously confused, as if he hadn't yet realized that he was dead. Then he slowly pitched backward and hit the ground with the same sort of echoing thud as his associate.

The instant he did, the shrieks of terror changed to roars of joy. "He's a Hero!" someone shouted, and others took up the chant immediately. *"Hero! Hero! Hero!"*

Xiro tried to shout above them, crying out, "No, I'm not a Hero! I swear to you! I'm no Hero!"

He turned frantically to Beatrice. There was nothing but idolization in her look, and clearly the first fluttering of love in her breast. "This kind of joy," she whispered, "even Jack can't destroy."

"Yes, that's a very nice sentiment," Xiro said, trying not to sound impatient. "A more pressing issue is, what am I going to do about this?"

"You need to fight Jack of Blades!" said Beatrice excitedly. She gripped him tightly by the upper arms. "You can do it! You can get rid of him—"

"Are you *insane?* These were accidents! And if this Jack is everything you say, then ..."

"If? He's Jack of Blades! He's everything and more."

One of the children who had met up with Xiro earlier said, with what sounded like a touch of pride, "He hadn't heard of Jack of Blades until we told him."

"That's absurd," said Beatrice. "Every living person's heard of Jack of Blades."

"Yes, well, that's as it may be," said Xiro impatiently, "but I'd like to go on living, if that's all right with—"

In the distance, the sound of horses' hooves pounding along the road reached them. Xiro looked around frantically. "Is that—?"

"Some of his soldiers, yes, very likely," said Beatrice. "He probably knows that you killed his men. He has eyes all over and his lair is not far from here. He knows everything."

The bulge in Xiro's throat bobbed up and down. "No ... oh, no, no ... you have to hide me ..."

"Hide you?" asked Beatrice. "You're our Hero. How can you—?"

Xiro did not bother to argue the point with her. Instead, he turned and sprinted down the street, legs pumping, arms flailing. There was no one in the world at that moment who looked less heroic.

The townsfolk stood there for a moment, bewildered, then someone cried out, "He intends to draw off Jack's forces! To distract them so they won't take revenge on us!"

This immediately prompted shouts of joy and celebration, and several townspeople came whipping around the corner. The foremost of them bellowed, "Jack of Blades approaches! He approaches!"

Everyone else turned in the direction of Jack's arrival save Beatrice, who watched Xiro. At the far end of the street, beyond the end of the marketplace, was an old barn that belonged to the blacksmith. Mostly it was used for storage, and on occasion it was used as a town meeting place. As Xiro ran past it, he stopped in his tracks and whirled to see the arrival of the dreaded Jack of Blades.

Four black horses appeared at the top of the street. In the forefront was the most formidable-looking individual Xiro had ever seen. He radiated power and confidence. His black armor was studded with points, and he was wearing a white skull mask—or was that his face?—partly obscured by a red hood and cowl draped over his upper body. A large sword was strapped to his back, and—as his name suggested—blades were strapped to his belt.

The three men who were with him were equally imposing. Their black horses were magnificent beasts that reared up, almost in unison, and pawed at the air with their hooves.

*"Where is he!"* thundered Jack.

Xiro hesitated a moment, then dashed into the barn. Beatrice was the only person who saw it; everyone else's attention was drawn to the frightening vision of Jack of Blades, the incarnation of death itself, looming before them.

Beatrice returned her gaze to Jack, and to her horror he was looking directly at her. She realized that, by being the only one who hadn't been watching him, she had caught his notice. "You, girl." He raised one gloved hand and pointed at her. "Where is he?"

"I... I..." No matter how much she tried, she couldn't bring herself to get any words out.

Jack of Blades was not of a mind to wait around for her to find her voice. "Believe me, child," he said, every word rumbling, "the very last thing you want is to attract my full and undivided attention. And that is what you will have if you prolong this. I can look into your mind, pluck the knowledge from you as one would an overripe date, and leave nothing within. Is that what you want? Is it?"

She barely managed to shake her head.

"Then tell me now. This is your last—"

She heard her own voice saying, "He's down there," and pointed with a trembling finger. Her panicked mind forced her to speak when she should not have said a damned word. "At the old barn. I saw him, he—" Beatrice bit the inside of her cheek to shut herself up.

Jack of Blades inclined his head slowly in acknowledgment of the information. "Gentlemen," he said to his men. "Bring him to me."

The other three snapped the reins of their horses and galloped forward. The crowd broke apart quickly lest they be trampled as the horses charged down the street, covering the distance in a matter of seconds. The riders dismounted, drawing their swords, and strode in, their leather armor slapping loudly around them. Only Jack himself was outfitted in metal, which gleamed in the noon sun.

"You were wise to be honest, child," Jack of Blades told her. "You have not only saved your own life, but the lives of your family ... for the moment, in any event."

The barn door hung open. As they entered, one of the soldiers reached behind himself and pulled it shut behind them. The door closed with a foreboding creak, like the top of a coffin being lowered.

When she heard it thud shut, Beatrice trembled. Her eyes began to tear up. She had betrayed the Hero. She had willingly turned him over to the most evil creature in Albion, and she'd put up no fight whatsoever. Everything she wanted to say to Jack of Blades, the defiance that she would have liked to hurl in his face, had instead died in her throat. Beatrice was forced to face the reality of her own cowardice, and it was a terrible burden to carry.

Why, she wondered, could she not be heroic? Why could she not be more like Xiro?

Jack of Blades, meanwhile, rode his horse forward and studied the two corpses on the ground. He shook his skull-faced head. "This is intolerable. One single sword thrust in both cases. I thought they were far better than this. You simply cannot get good minions anymore. The problems that—"

Suddenly the horse whinnied, its head bobbing up and down. It cantered back several steps and its nostrils flared as it appeared to notice something no one else yet had.

"What in the world—?" said Jack of Blades, sounding slightly puzzled for the first time.

"Look!" Beatrice's father shouted, and pointed to the far end of the street.

Flames had erupted on the side of the barn and, an instant later, the roof began to blaze as well. Within seconds, as the townspeople stood there in shock, the entire barn became an inferno.

Shouts of *"Bucket brigade!"* echoed up and down the street. Quickly the villagers charged toward a narrow river that threaded its way near the barn, the men grabbing buckets from their booths along the way. Minutes later they were throwing water on the fire as quickly as they were able, passing along buckets of water with impressive efficiency.

Jack of Blades remained astride his horse, not moving so much as an inch from where he was. It was impossible to tell what the expression on his face was beneath his mask, but it was doubtful that he was smiling.

The townspeople were beginning to realize that their buckets were having no effect whatsoever. The fire was beyond their control. They were going to have to let it burn itself out, and instead of dousing the flames they started concentrating on soaking nearby buildings and the immediate ground to make certain it didn't spread. Beatrice had run down to the barn and watched in distress as black smoke spiraled skyward like some sort of unholy offering to beings that she could not envision and didn't truly believe in. For if something like Avo existed, how would He allow something as malevolent as Skorm, the god of evil, to rain destruction upon humanity in the form of such monsters as Jack of Blades?

There was a loud, sharp series of cracks and moments later the entire barn was collapsing. People ran back to make sure they were clear of it, then—just as the building fell apart—a speeding form burst through one of the doors, breaking it easily since the fire had eaten away most of it. The figure was draped in a horse blanket, which absorbed most of the flames. The moment the survivor was clear of the building, he tossed aside the blanket...

"It's the Hero!" Beatrice was unable to stop herself from crying out in joy.

"The Hero!" "The Hero!" others began to shout.

He looked as bedraggled as any individual ever had, his face and clothing covered with soot. One of his eyebrows was partly singed away. He was hunched over, gasping for breath when he wasn't coughing, his hands resting on his knees as he desperately tried to compose himself.

Cheers of "The Hero" continued right up until Jack of Blades, still on horseback, trotted slowly up to him, the cries of heroism diminishing steadily with every clip clop of the horse's hooves.

"What happened here?" said Jack of Blades, his voice icy and deathly.

Xiro stared up at him, tried to speak, and coughed instead. When he managed to find his breath, he said, "I ... those men were chasing me ... y-your men, I guess ... and I... I knocked over a lantern, and the hay caught, and things began falling, and—"

"Where are my men?"

"I..." He gulped. "They ... didn't make it out...?"

There was a deathly silence then, hanging like a shroud over them. Xiro couldn't even find the words. He just shook his head quickly, then coughed a few more times, unable to control himself.

Looking down at him from on high, Jack of Blades said, "Who *are* you?" "I ... my name is Xiro."

"Xiro." Jack of Blades didn't laugh. Jack of Blades never laughed. "Xiro ... the Hero? How adorable."

"I'm no Hero. That's what I keep telling them. That's what no one seems to believe." "You have been responsible for the deaths of five of my men. Yet you insist that you are not a Hero."

"Yes. That's exacdy right. I'm ..." Xiro licked his lips, which didn't do much to moisten them, as dried out as they were. "I'm not a Hero. I keep telling them this. And yet..." "Yet they do not believe you. Imagine that."

Jack of Blades swung his leg over and dismounted. Everyone within proximity backed up. Slowly, he unsheathed the glittering sword from his back and brought it around and angled its naked blade right at Xiro. Xiro's eyes widened and beads of sweat ran in rivulets down his forehead, leaving small paths behind them on his blackened face.

"Draw your sword, Xiro," said Jack of Blades. "Draw your sword or die."

"Is ... is there a choice?" Xiro said, his voice filled with hope. "I mean, if I draw my sword, does that mean I won't die?"

"No. You will simply die like a man."

"I'm ... I'm sorry, that just doesn't work for me."

"Defend yourself. Now."

All eyes were upon Xiro, all held their breath. Slowly, Xiro withdrew his sword. But his hand was shaking so violently that he was unable to hold on to it and it clattered to the ground.

Instantly, Beatrice understood. It was a trick. Xiro was somehow going to trick Jack of Blades into dropping his guard, then Xiro would have him through some clever strategy or ... or ...

Xiro shook his head so hard that it could have tumbled off his shoulders. "You'll kill me." "That will happen either way."

"Please ... I'm begging you, please ... I'm no one ... I'm nothing ..."

Jack's hand lashed out, grabbing Xiro by the throat and slowly lifting him off his feet, dangling him, shaking him, like a mother cat worrying its kitten. Disappointment registered on the faces of the townspeople

Jack of Blades glanced around and apparently liked what he saw. Disdainfully, he lowered Xiro until his feet were touching the ground, then released him with a shove. Xiro stumbled backward and banged up against a broad-shouldered man wearing a black leather apron.

"You're the blacksmith," said Jack of Blades. "I believe that's your barn that's just burned to the ground, yes?"

The blacksmith nodded.

"This nonhero was responsible for it. What are you going to do about that?"

For a moment the blacksmith hesitated, then he slammed Xiro to the ground. Xiro struck headfirst and cried out in pain. The impact split his lip, and when he tried to lift his head there was dirt from the road all over it.

"That's it?"

This time there was no hesitation at all. The blacksmith kicked Xiro in the gut. Xiro gasped, the wind knocked out of him, and he curled up, clutching his stomach.

Jack of Blades raised his voice and he addressed the entirety of the crowd. "This man passed himself off as a Hero. He raised your hopes up. He presented himself as someone who could single-handedly rescind the generous hospitality you've extended to me. And he could likewise have single-handedly brought down my full wrath upon all of your heads. Who is he to have committed such arrogant deeds? Who is he to have taken it upon himself to put all of you at such risk? This fake Hero. Are you going to put up with that?"

Slowly there were shakes of heads.

Xiro was trying to stand up, propping himself on one hand and one knee. "Listen ... listen to me," he managed to wheeze. "You ... all of you ... you outnumber him. You're letting your fear rule you ... if you come together ... you can ..."

"And now he urges you on a suicidal course. He dares to suggest that you risk ... no, end your lives in a hopeless group assault. Show him what you think of that. Show him now."

Xiro shook his head. "He's trying to twist your—"

A rock flew through the air and struck Xiro squarely on the side of the head.

Like a whistle starting off a race, it triggered what came next. The crowd converged upon Xiro. First upon him were the children who had met him when he arrived, then the candlemaker whose daughter he had saved from the unwanted attentions of Jack's soldiers. Others pounded him with rocks and clubs and fists, all of them eager to get a piece, all of them desperate to show Jack of Blades that they were ready, willing, and able to do what was necessary for his approval.

The only one who didn't join in was Beatrice. Instead, she grabbed at the backs of some of the others, shouting in futility for them to get away from him, reminding them that he had done nothing wrong. "We were the ones who called him a Hero!" she shouted. "He kept saying he wasn't and we wanted him to be one so much! Get off him! Stop it!" But they would not stop, and above the pounding and thudding soared the loud laughter of Jack of Blades.

Xiro tried to fight back, but there were far too many and he was only a single nonhero. Eventually his protests faded and all he could do was try to cover up as best he could.

"That's enough," Jack of Blades ordered.

Immediately the beating ceased. The crowd stepped back, and there lay Xiro, a battered, bloody mess. His nose was broken and several of his teeth were gone. Both eyes were swollen. His clothing was torn and there were bruises all over his skin, vicious black-and-blue marks that indicated he might be bleeding internally. His breath was wheezing in his lungs, and when he coughed up a wad of spittle, it was thick with blood.

"Well, well... you endured that. You're sturdier than I would have thought. You. And you ..." And he pointed to two of the people in the crowd. "Pick him up. You don't have to be delicate about it."

The two men he had selected immediately did as instructed. They hauled Xiro to his feet, but he wasn't exactly capable of standing on them at that moment. So they draped his arms around their shoulders and hauled him toward Jack of Blades.

Jack returned to his horse, placed a foot in the stirrup, and drew himself up so that he sat astride his beast, cutting a most majestic figure. "Bring him along," he ordered them. "There's a reward in it for you."

He wheeled his horse around and rode at a slow trot out of the market with the two men dragging Xiro between them. Xiro's head slumped forward, and it was impossible to determine if he was conscious, or even alive.

Beatrice stayed behind, her small hands curled into fists, tears running down her face. From behind her, the low voice of her father said gently, "My dear, there was no choice," and he put a hand on her forearm.

Immediately she shook it off and turned to snarl in his face. "Yes, there was. You know there was. We could have done what he said. We could have come together and fought back against that... that bastard. We stand around talking about how much we need a Hero because we're the cowards. We're the ones who need others to do things for us while not risking ourselves at all. We don't deserve a Hero, Father. We're the ones who should be shamed and beaten in the streets. Not him. Us."

"Why are you coming to this man's defense?" he asked in exasperation. "You scarcely know him!"

"I know enough to know that his is a better and worthier soul than anyone else here, and one of him is worth a hundred of us."

"That may be," said her father. "But unfortunately, a hundred of us aren't worth one Jack of Blades."

**\* \* \***

The now-riderless horses were following Jack of Blades as the unlikely assemblage made its way back to Jack's domicile. Xiro slowly raised his battered face as he was dragged toward a rather impressive-looking house. He grunted slightly when he saw it as the men on either side continued to haul him along. Jack of Blades, riding ahead of them, did not even bother to look behind him. Clearly, however, he was aware that Xiro was stirring because he addressed him.

"Hardly a castle by any means, but believe it or not, it's the largest mansion in the entirety of Oddwood. One has to make do. Its owner generously offered to vacate shortly after my men killed him."

"I..." Xiro spit out another wad of blood. "From what I've been told ... of your abilities ... I'd have thought you could fashion anything you wanted ... wave a hand and cause the grandest castle in all the world to just... just appear."

"If I so desired. But this serves my needs and avoids drawing too much attention to myself."

"So there are people you're afraid of...? People you don't... want to notice you?"

"Do not pry too closely into my affairs, Xiro the Hero. There are answers in this world that you truly have neither desire nor need to know. Do you understand?"

"As much as possible considering ... the hearing loss ..."

Several more of Jack's small army were waiting for him, puzzlement on their faces when they saw the riderless horses that were following.

"We have a guest," Jack announced, indicating the immobile Xiro. "Bring him inside."

Two of the soldiers immediately advanced and took Xiro's limp body off the shoulders of the other men. Jack of Blades dismounted and turned to the villagers that he had drafted into service. "I will now give you your reward, gentlemen. Your reward is: I am allowing you to live. Very generous since you walked so slowly that it seemed an age to get here."

The villagers immediately bowed and scraped, thanking Jack of Blades for his generosity. They backed away, afraid to turn away from him. When they were far enough away, they turned on their heels and ran.

Xiro was dragged into the main foyer, still coughing up blood. "Be so kind as to not get that on the floor," Jack of Blades admonished him. "Granted, we do have a good deal of experience cleaning up blood, but it's such a chore."

The mansion might once have been the domicile of someone of great wealth, but it had fallen into disrepair. It looked like exactly what it was: a home of a man of pride, taken over by those who had no pride in anything save for their ability to damage what others cared about.

One of the taller soldiers was walking alongside Jack of Blades. His attitude and bearing, almost imperious in its manner, indicated to Xiro that he was Jack's right-hand man. "This little nothing killed Red Richard? And Tambor and the others?"

"He did indeed."

"Then why is he still alive?"

"Because, Virgil, I feel that his death should, at the very least, provide us some entertainment. If the shades of our lost associates still remain somewhere in the vicinity of this plane, shouldn't they likewise have a chance to see their slayer have as violent and vicious a death as we can arrange?"

"I suppose," Virgil admitted.

"All right, then. Alert the cage keepers that our occupant is going to be feasting tonight."

"The cage?" This seemed to brighten Virgil's spirits. "Yes. Yes, that will be a good thing. An excellent thing."

"I'm glad you approve."

Xiro was dragged to a small, windowless room. "I take it this is not the cage," he managed to say.

"Oh, you'll be in the cage soon enough. We just want you to rest up a bit so there's a better chance that you will remain conscious longer. Wouldn't do to have you pass right out when you confront the cage's occupant. That would be no fun at all."

"That's ... very considerate of you ..."

The door slammed shut behind him, plunging him into darkness. The room stank of stale air and the floor was cold and hard.

Xiro lay there for a time, listening to the distant noises. The loud discussion, the laughter, the sounds of men ... and someone who appeared to be more than a man ... shaking off the setback of the deaths of their fellows by reestablishing mastery of their little piece of the world.

From somewhere far away within the house, something roared in primal fury. And there, in the darkness of his solitary confines ... ... Xiro smiled.

Finally he heard a rough voice from outside, one that seemed to be Virgil's: "All right, he's rested up enough, and the sun is down. Get him out of there."

The heavy locks on the door clacked and the door swung open. Xiro's eyes had swollen nearly shut, which would have made it difficult for anyone to see, much less someone who had spent the past few hours in darkness.

"Come on, get him on his feet," said Virgil impatiendy.

"I can do it myself," Xiro gasped out. Slowly, and with a good deal of grunting, Xiro hauled himself up, wavering slighdy from side to side. He noticed that Virgil was holding Xiro's sword. "That's mine, I believe."

"Yeah, it is. Thought we'd give you a chance to die with your sword in your hand."

"Very considerate. I doubt I'll need it, though."

"Hah!" Virgil barked an ugly laugh, and the others with him joined in. "We have a Hero on our hands!" "I keep telling people: You really don't."

"Come then, Xiro the Not Hero. We have other arrangements for you now."

Xiro simply nodded and, without a word of protest, followed them out the door. The soldiers surrounded him, two in front, two in back. "Is this all of you?" Xiro asked. His enunciation wasn't as sharp as it usually was since his lips were swollen.

"The rest of our group is waiting by the cage," said Virgil. "I'm sure they're all eager to meet you. Through here."

Xiro obediently went where he pointed and found himself in what was easily the largest room in the house. From the rows of shelves along the walls, it was clear that it had once been a library. But they were, every one, devoid of any contents.

"What happened to the books?" said Xiro.

"Burned them," said Virgil. "It gets cold some nights."

Four sets of large double doors ringed the room, with a large chandelier overhead, dozens of candles casting flickering shadows around the interior. The wood floor was so shiny that Xiro could see his reflection in it.

It was not, however, his reflection that captured his attention.

Dead center of the room was an oversized metal cage, easily large enough to hold several men. What it held instead was far more terrifying. Crouched in the far end of the cage was a Balverine.

The snarling monster looked to be seven feet tall, with thick brown fur and a long snout that had double rows of vicious teeth. Its yellow eyes burned with hatred, and the claws extending from its fingers looked as if they could rip a man apart with a single blow. It didn't appear to have noticed Xiro. Instead, its attention was focused entirely on the men surrounding it, standing outside the bars, taunting it and jabbing at it with long sticks to get it good and mad. It would snarl and snap at the prods, unable to get away from its tormentors.

Overseeing it all from a short distance away was Jack of Blades. It was difficult to tell if he approved or not as his face remained hidden behind his mask. "Ah. I see our entertainment is here."

A barred gate bisected the inside of the cage, separating the far end from the entrance. A rope ran up to a pulley overhead, enabling the men outside to lift the gate without getting close enough to endanger themselves.

They opened the gate on the end closest to Xiro, and it was clear what their intention was. They were going to push Xiro in, slam the door shut behind him, raise the middle wall that separated the two ends, and loose the Balverine upon him.

"Please don't do this," said Xiro, trying to twist out of their hold upon him. "Please. This ... this is no way for a man to die."

"Oh, but you're not just any man. You are Xiro the Not Hero. And so we give you an unheroic death. One in which you will scream for mercy where there is none to be had. Because that, my friend, is what happens when you cross swords with Jack of Blades. But worry not. You won't be screaming for long. Put him in."

Xiro was thrust headfirst into the cage. He staggered, nearly tripping as he stumbled in. Just before Virgil slammed shut the door, he tossed in Xiro's sword. It clattered on the floor,

sounding pathetic and impotent. The door's closing echoed like a funeral bell in the vast dining room.

"We are in the great library, gentlemen, where wonderful thoughts were once contained. Time to have some food for thought."

With one quick pull from his men, the barricade between Xiro and the Balverine was hauled upward as the prods were withdrawn.

The Balverine focused its attention, for the first time, on the helpless individual that had been pushed into its cage. Its lips drew back to reveal its black gums into which the hideous teeth were set. The monster snarled once, twice, then let out a thunderous howl of fury.

Xiro didn't so much as move. The sword lay untouched on the floor. His gaze remained fixed on the Balverine.

"Come on, boy!" shouted one of the men, and Virgil urged Xiro, "At least put up some kind of fight!"

He ignored them. He simply continued to stare at the Balverine. He didn't move a muscle. And yet it seemed that somehow he was standing straighter, his shoulders squared. He didn't appear the least afraid, and the injuries that he had sustained appeared less bothersome.

The Balverine charged straight at him. The cage was large but it still didn't provide any room for Xiro to maneuver.

He didn't try.

He didn't have to.

Six inches away from Xiro, the Balverine skidded to a halt. Its burning gaze fixed upon him, and there was something that hadn't been there before: confusion. Xiro smiled.

The Balverine began to tremble, its eyes now wide with terror. It couldn't move, it was so utterly paralyzed. Instead of the defiant roars from a moment ago, litde more than a whimper emerged from its maw. Most appalling of all, a thin stream of yellow liquid dribbled down its leg and formed a puddle on the floor beneath it.

The soldiers exchanged bewildered looks, unsure of what the hell it was they were witnessing. Even Jack of Blades seemed confused, speechless for once.

And then, with a howl, the Balverine charged, and for a moment all seemed right with the world. The Balverine had overcome its initial and extremely odd reaction and was going to rip Xiro to pieces.

That did not happen.

Instead, the Balverine collided with the locked door and impossibly, improbably, almost as if by magic, the lock that secured it snapped off and the door banged open with an echo that resounded through the room.

Just like that, the Balverine was out.

The instant it was free of Xiro's presence—for Xiro remained in the cage and simply watched the proceedings with fascination—the Balverine, having been restored to its full ferocity, whirled and tore into the nearest of Jack's men. He had no chance to react and immediately went down beneath the infuriated creature's teeth and claws.

The men came together in a protective circle, backing up, their blades extended, as the creature advanced upon them. With an earsplitting howl, the Balverine leaped.

"Kill it!" shouted Jack of Blades, somewhat unnecessarily.

The men stood their ground, and when the Balverine attacked, they were ready for it. The Balverine tried to get at them, claws flashing, jaws snapping, but the extended swords managed to keep it at bay. A bizarre dance ensued then, the beast drawing closer, then retreating, each time with a few more slashes in its hide. Within minutes its fur was slick with its own blood, and it was starting to slow down, its movements becoming more sluggish. It began to back up, staggering, but it was still a wounded animal and exceedingly dangerous.

"Now! Kill it now!"

The men converged, surrounding it. The Balverine lashed out, this way and that, but the men retained control of the situation, hacking and cutting while staying just clear of the monster's claws and teeth.

Then Virgil saw his chance. The Balverine's back was momentarily to him, and Virgil's sword whipped around. Seconds later, the beast's head flew from its shoulders, rolling across the floor.

As one, Jack's men let out a ragged, relieved cheer, standing in a tight little circle. Suddenly there was a massive rattling of a chain, like an angry ghost. Or a falling chandelier that had just lost its support.

The men looked up just as the massive, many-candled chandelier crashed down upon them. Several died instantly from its weight, and all of them were pinned beneath it; all save Jack of Blades, who was standing a short distance away.

Jack started to move toward it in order to try and free his men, but events happened too quickly. The flames from the fallen candles leaped upon the men as if they had minds of their own, and seconds later they were ablaze. The men who had died on impact turned out to be the fortunate ones. The rest of them went up like torches, screaming in agony as the flames— as if stoked by some elemental power into a full-blown, raging conflagration—burned large and hot. The men tried to bat at themselves, to snuff out the flame.

Jack of Blades looked around desperately to try and find something to extinguish the fire. He found nothing that could help him.

He did see, however, the place at the far end of the room where a large chain had been anchored to the wall; a chain that had served to support the chandelier.

Xiro was standing next to it, his expression an odd mixture of chagrin and smugness. "I'm sorry ... I seem to have bumped into this and knocked it loose by accident. I'm *so* clumsy that way. On the other hand, now you won't have to worry about those cold nights."

The last dying scream in the room was Virgil's, then his head slumped forward and his eyes glazed over. Seconds later they melted. The rest of the men were already gone and the flames were licking at the walls.

Jack of Blades looked around at the carnage that surrounded him. And finally he looked straight at Xiro, standing there calm as anyone could possibly be, his blade extended and waiting for an attack.

Without hesitation, Jack of Blades turned and ran.

And Xiro was standing in front of him.

Jack of Blades skidded to a halt and muttered, "How in the—?" Not waiting for an answer, he spun and started to head in a different direction, but there again was Xiro waiting for him, a grin on his face, death in his eyes.

"You ***are*** a Hero!"

"I really wish that people would stop saying that. I am no more a Hero than you are, Jack of Blades. Admit to that, and you might live." Two quick strides brought him up to Jack of Blades, his sword point just under Jack's throat. "Admit it."

Quickly, Jack of Blades yanked out the sword upon his back and tried to attack Xiro.

Xiro backed up while deflecting all of Jack's assaults. On the surface it seemed like a continuous and unending string of luck. He exhibited no form, no style. He seemed to just slap away with his blade like a rank amateur, and yet somehow, impossibly, it formed a relentless barrier of steel that Jack's own sword was unable to penetrate.

Jack swept his sword toward Xiro's head. Xiro ducked it effortlessly, then smacked the back of Jack's wrist with his blade. Had he used the cutting edge, he would have severed Jack's hand; as it was, he used the flat of the blade and the impact alone was enough to send Jack's sword clattering to the floor and numb Jack's hand.

Jack lunged for it, but instead the tip of Xiro's short sword was between him and his weapon. Jack was breathing hard, his chest heaving. "This ... this can't be. No one has ... has ever ..."

"Defeated you? Is that the phrase you were going for?" Xiro said. His voice sounded amused, but there was no amusement in his face. Xiro drew back his sword and calmly placed the point down into the floor. Then he began to pace back and forth, two steps one way, two the other, keeping himself between Jack and his sword. "I'm going to step away from your sword and one of two things is going to happen. You're going to have one more chance to tell me who you are and you will perhaps, just perhaps, survive this night. Or you will go for your sword, try to attack me once more, and I will kill you. Decide."

Jack stood frozen, his eyes invisible beneath the mask. He didn't display much inclination to pick up the sword. "At least tell me who or what you are. If not a Hero, then ... then what \_?»

And Xiro smiled, and his eyes blazed, and Jack of Blades saw his death in those eyes. He saw his death... ... and he saw the truth.

With a shriek, Jack of Blades jumped backward, as if Xiro's head had suddenly transformed into that of a serpent and tried to sink its fangs into him. He backed up, faster and faster, until he literally hit a wall and just stood there, arms splayed to either side, legs trembling.

Xiro advanced on him and said, "Take the mask off, you imposter. You nothing. Do it now."

The ersatz Jack quickly did as he was bidden. He pulled at it, undoing the lacings, and seconds later it was lying on the floor, looking puny and powerless. Beneath the mask was an all-too-mortal, terrified face, skin the color of curdled milk, eyes brimming with sheer terror. His jaw was moving but no words were coming. Finally, he managed to find a couple to serve him: "You're ... you're dead ..."

"Obviously I'm not. I'm right here."

As if Xiro hadn't spoken, Jack said, "You're ... you're using some sort of glamour. That has to be it. The Balverine, being a creature of magic, was able to discern the truth. You could have destroyed us at any time. You were ... were toying with us ... this whole while ... but you wanted to keep a low profile ... not let people realize ... but you were never really hurt... never in any danger ..."

"I have no idea what you're going on about," said Xiro calmly. "But I would know the reason for this sham, starting with your name." When Jack of Blades didn't respond immediately, Xiro upped the volume of his voice. *"Now,* you idiot."

"F-Fred," he managed to stammer. "Fred Barrow ... me and my friends ..."

"The dead ones, you mean."

"We ... we hit upon this idea. What with everyone believing Jack of Blades was dead and all, we figured I ..."

"That you would impersonate Jack. Set up a cozy life for yourselves here, because you held Jack of Blades in such contempt that you figured you could—" "Contempt? No! You ... you don't understand!" That phrasing struck Xiro as curious. "Explain it to me."

"Jack of Blades is everything to me. I've been a worshipper for years. For *years."* "Have you now," said Xiro.

Fred's head bobbed up and down furiously. "As a child I heard all the stories. I... I learned to read, over my father's objections, just so I could find the texts about Jack of Blades. And I... I was small. Puny. A nothing. My father was a drunkard who beat my mother until she took her own life, then he abandoned me in the streets. I was supposed to lead a beggar's life and I ... I refused to. Because all I could keep thinking was, 'Jack of Blades would never beg.' "

"That is true. He would not."

"And ..." Fred cleared his throat, looking slightly buoyed over the fact that he was still alive. "And I had no desire to be a thief, either. So I would just walk up to people and demand that they give me money. 'Give me money,' I would say to them, 'for I require it more than you.' "

"And did that work?"

"Most of the time, no. On occasion, yes. But I received many beatings because of it from those who had no patience for me. Those beatings made me strong. Made me a formidable sell-sword. Made me dangerous. Eventually my body grew with my ambition. I put together an army of bravos. We raided cities, we plundered where we wished. And then ..."

"You made enemies. Formidable enemies."

Fred nodded. "We were ambushed by royal forces. Only a fraction of my army was left and we were wanted, dead or alive ... preferably the former. And I... I thought since we were dead men, why should I not disappear *into* a dead man? A dead man whose reputation alone could keep an entire village in line? So I turned to he whom I worshipped. He whose strength and name and power sustained me in my darkest times. I turned to Jack of Blades. Because I..." His voice trailed off.

"You desired to be worshipped in turn by the very creatures that you despised."

He let out a sigh of relief. "Yes. Exactly. That's exactly right. Do you ..." He held his breath, barely daring to ask. "Do you understand—?"

"I do, actually. These people these ... creatures"—and he gestured vaguely as if taking in the whole of mankind—"they are insufferable things. They don't know who their betters are."

"Who do they think they are?" Fred said indignandy.

"They are nothing. And it is ... a paradox. Since they are nothing, one should, by all reason, not care about them in the least. And yet their resistance is like a scab that will not heal." "I understand completely."

"And I understand you," said Xiro. "In many ways, you are like a spiritual brother to Jack of Blades."

Tears began to well up in Fred's eyes. "This ... this is a dream come true. Thank you. Thank

There was a loud, awful, violent, and penetrating sound then. Fred staggered, shuddered, and looked down at the blade that had cut his heart in two.

"Understand ... but not forgive," said Xiro as he yanked his sword free of Fred's chest.

Fred went down without a word, although the last sign of expression in his eyes was mixed: crushing disappointment combined with the feeling of being ... honored.

And as the walls began to burn and the fire reached for the ceiling, Xiro walked away, leaving the former headquarters of Fred of Blades to become his funeral pyre.

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The sun rose over the marketplace and Beatrice, her eyes still red from crying through the night, was sullenly arranging the display of candles when there were cries and startied gasps behind her. She turned and her jaw dropped as she saw Xiro standing in the middle of the marketplace. He was still battered and bruised from having been pummeled by the crowd the previous day, and upon seeing him, the people didn't know whether to stare at him in shock or look away in shame. All the normal hustle and busde of the morning gave way to stunned and abashed silence.

"That man," Xiro finally said, his voice carrying up and down the street, "was not Jack of Blades. His name was Fred and he fancied himself the brother of Jack of Blades. I would suggest you extricate the burned remains of his body from the collapsed mansion where he's currently situated and bury him somewhere with a headstone to that effect. I don't know who the others were and I couldn't care less. Good day."

"But..." Beatrice was the only one who had the nerve to approach him. "But... but what happened? Where are ... he's dead? You're saying he's dead?"

"Yes. Dead. They're all dead. You're free of them. Jack of Blades is nothing but a dead myth, 31 this man here who terrorized you was nothing, and if the lot of you had had the nerve to stand up to him, none of this would have happened."

"How did he die?" asked one of the villagers, and Beatrice's father called out, "Did you kill him?"

"Good day," said Xiro, providing no other response.

With that, he turned and headed for the road out of town. He hadn't gotten far, however, when there were soft footfalls behind him. He didn't even have to look to see that Beatrice had run up alongside him. "Take me with you," she said breathlessly.

"You don't know what you're asking."

"I do! I know it will be a difficult and taxing life, but I want to be there for you. I want to be the woman of a Hero. I've always known that's what you are. I've certainly said it enough times."

"Yes, you have." He took her hand in his. "Listen to me carefully, child. You are not going to come with me. You are going to stay here. You will marry or not, as you see fit, and take over your father's trade sooner than you think, because his lungs have a blackness and he hasn't much time left."

"He ... what?" She looked like a crippled sparrow—sweet, wounded, and helpless. "What are you—?"

"And you will stay in this small, nothing town, and you will grow old, and you will die, and your name will be forgotten by the few who ever knew it. I certainly know I'm going to do my best to forget it as soon as I've departed."

"I..." Her voice caught, but then she rallied. "I know why you're saying these things. It's because you care about me and figure I'll be safe from danger if I stay here."

"Trust me, child, when I tell you this: There is nowhere in the whole of Albion that is safe from danger. It will come, and if you're still fortunate enough to be alive when the reality of that is driven home to you, then you certainly won't enjoy what happens next."

Beatrice was desperate not to believe the things he was telling her. "No. I refuse to accept that. And do you know why?"

"No," he said with a bored air. "Why?"

"Because there will always be Heroes like you to prevent it."

He leaned in toward her, closer than he'd ever been, almost eye to eye, and when he spoke, it was as if he had opened a small door into her brain and poured in an army of black spiders to work their will upon her:

"I'm not a Hero."

And she began to scream and never, ever stopped.