



The Soul Bottles

by Jay Lake

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The current installment in this series is the original novelette "The Soul Bottles". At 8,800 words, this originally appeared in Ministry of Whimsy's *Leviathan 4*, ed. Forrest Aguirre, [Powell's | Amazon] back in 2004, then reprinted at *The Fortean Bureau* in 2006. This piece also forms the backstory for my Night Shade Press novel *Trial of Flowers* [Powell's | Amazon] and its upcoming sequel, *Madness of Flowers*. If you like the story, please consider giving the book a try.

The Soul Bottles

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In my boyhood it was the fashion among the established families of the City Imperishable, much aped by the *arrivistes*, to believe that one's soul fled with each exhalation, and was recaptured with every indrawn breath. Lovers eagerly seized yet another excuse to exchange essences, while members of the Glasswright Guild profited handsomely from tiny "soul bottles" meant to arrest the airy spirit lest it take flight in a strong wind. Parlor magicians compounded spells from the breath of the mighty while scholars in their towers attempted to distill essence of soul.

Then the City was seized with the bloody panic of the Drover's Heresy. Amid the chaos of the formal defenestrations and *autos-da-fe*, the Assemblage of Burgesses issued an interim edict forbidding any further public observance of such irregular practices.

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"Damn me for a fool!" Father shouted, as he staggered about our apartments, fists pressed against his eyes. Gilt-framed walls paneled in watered silk enclosed antique furniture displayed as carefully as any museum. We knew our status, did our family.

The dwarf maids had already found business elsewhere -- snickering no doubt through their tight-sewn lips -- while Bijaz, Father's household manager and my own tutor, paced behind his employer. Had the older dwarf not been boxed in early childhood to limit his growth, Bijaz would have been a large man. Instead he was merely powerful, with a mane of silver hair and beard, glittering gray eyes and sharp ears that missed little.

Father spun on his heel, advancing on Bijaz as if the dwarf were some vermin caught scuttling across the kitchen tiles. "Every last obol is leveraged, yes? There is nothing in the house accounts?"

"Sir," said Bijaz, his voice whistling shrill through the puckered opening between lips stitched shut in the formal and customary guarantee of trustworthy silence, "All is as you ordered."

"And against your advice," muttered Father, fist slapping against his palm. I drew my quilted silk sleeping robe tighter and pressed myself back against the library door, quiet as I could be. "And so it ends," Father said, his raged draining away as fast as it had mounted. "Fourteen generations of petty nobility in service of the City Imperishable, and now our fortunes are foundered upon my ambition."

Bijaz's fingers flickered close to his waist, the fingertalk of the City's Dwarven servants. Father nodded, then looked toward me in the shadows of the door. "Do not cower so, Jason," he said. "I will be charged as a debtor on account of the thousand-odd soul bottles in which I invested, but your mother's family fortunes may yet protect you."

As if Mother ever saw anything past her dressing table mirror, I thought, but dared not say aloud. She had never been worthy of Father's love. I was afraid I would not be either.

Less than a week later, my sisters and I prowled the damp cobbles along the gaslights of Melisande Avenue. Evening mists dripped from the sad, heavy leaves of the linden trees, while enameled carriages rattled by in the gathering dark. We were hungry, our pudgy bellies already growing tight from the short rations in the little flat where Mother had taken temporary rooms, so we stole roasted nuts from the brass-bound vending carts, the mealy warm food made all the more tasty by the seasonings of fear as we were chased away with shouts of "thief, thief!"

*

The bailiff that escorted Father up to the platform in Delator Square omitted the customary manacles -- a small courtesy, but important if only for my own dignity. The bailiff was a large man, filling his tweed tunic like a mountain fills the sky, and I thought I caught a glimmer of sympathy in his stolid expression. I stood in the middle ranks of the crowd, Bijaz's hand tight on my elbow, while Mother and my sisters waited in a rented carriage standing at the Short Street end of the square.

A clerk of the Debtor's Court read out the charges against Father, a numbing litany of legal regulation concerning usury and pledges of security and sacred honor. Father bent across the carpenter's horse nailed to the platform, the bailiff drew back a brass-bound oak stave, and in one blow, the sentence was carried out.

Even as Father's thigh bones cracked his green eyes met mine across the crowd. He flinched, blood running as he bit his lip, but Father did not cry out. Rather, he smiled through the blood. He opened his mouth to say something just as the bailiff dumped him off the platform, where the poor of the City Imperishable rushed forward, kicking and screaming, to have their way with one of the fallen wealthy.

Bijaz drew me toward Mother's carriage, working at his sutured lips with a small knife. The threads popped free, blood beading in his great, rough beard. "So ends my service," he said, "except for disposing of you."

"But Father..." I began, unsure of my words even as I said them.

"Jason," Bijaz said with a sigh, "you are a lad of fourteen summers, no more equipped to fight off dozens of angry drunks than any single man. If your father finds his way free of Delator Square he is again his own man. But he must travel in his own way."

"On shattered thighs?" My voice shot up like a gunpowder rocket at Solstice, shaming me.

"Enough," he snapped. Bijaz jerked on my arm and pointed with his free hand, bloody knife still between his fingers. "Look, your mother takes her leave."

Indeed, Mother's rented carriage was just vanishing into a herd of bullocks being driven down Short Street. My sister Ariadne ran after her, skirts held high, while Kalliope collapsed weeping. I took her hand and kissed it. My anger at Mother and my shame for Father warred in my head until I felt nothing but boiling red rage.

*

Bijaz spoke to me in what he liked to call his study. In Father's house, such a mean little room would have scarcely been fit for a maid's closet. Here the dwarf had rigged a tall desk with a clever chair that rose up and down on a chain mechanism with a bewildering assemblage of cams and gears that lent him the motion of a flying crane. This odd arrangement took advantage of Bijaz's small stature to the best use of the space, but it left me crouched uncomfortably in the muslin-draped doorway. The little room smelled of stale sweat, rotten herbs and the coal gas used to fire the little lamp dangling from the ceiling.

"Ariadne is nowhere to be found," the dwarf said. "We can hope she went with your mother."

"I will not build hope upon lies," I said, staring miserably at the worn pine boards of his floor.

"As you will. Your father charged me out of loyalty to see to the best disposition of the family. It is to you I must now report. As for your other sister, Kalliope has been sold to a Tokhari rug merchant as a concubine, the monies used to service your family's debts. Her new master has many women so this should not cause her undue stress."

I imagined Kalliope's lithe body and bright smile straining beneath a sweaty, dark brute of a man, then dismissed the image. Her lot might be hard, but at least she was cared for. "What of Father?" I asked, grief seeping into my heart.

Bijaz shook his head slowly. "Not even a body to recover from Delator Square. Just bloody rags." He paused for a moment, perhaps to see if I would cry for my father. "Your mother, of course, is long gone to her sister's family on the South Coast. We can only hope that plantation life disagrees with her. As for you, boy, there are few prospects." Ratcheting his chair down to my level, the dwarf reached out and touched my mouth. It was a familiar gesture that would have gotten even him whipped in Father's house. Bijaz's voice caught in his throat, his breathing ragged, as he continued, "But I can make you a special offer. One man to another."

I trembled as the rough calluses of his hands pinched my lips and said nothing. He stared into my eyes for a moment, then rubbed my upper lip with the tip of one finger. "I will shelter you for a year and a day, and do my best to remove you from the weight of your father's debts, if you will live in my household with your lips sewn shut in the manner of a servant." I saw that he was perspiring now, sweat running down his cheeks and neck. "I will continue to tutor you as time permits and ask only that I be allowed to inspect and maintain your sutures. You will learn the fingertalk of the dwarves, which will benefit you greatly in life."

What could I do? No money, no parents, and still young enough to be used like a woman and thrown into the River Saltus by any pack of street rowdies who chose to do so. I nodded, the touch of his finger moving with my face.

"Good," Bijaz said. "You already observe the silence." He released my lips and fumbled at a pouch upon his belt to withdraw an enormous curved needle and a length of catgut. The needle glimmered in the watery gaslight like the tooth of a serpent as he threaded the gut. My eyes nearly crossed as the dwarf grasped my lips once again and brought the needle toward my chin.

He whispered in my ear, tender as my sisters ever had, "Do not flinch from the pain, and it will be your friend forever."

*

Early in my pledged time at the dwarf's house, my new scabs still itching like a slow, terrible fire around my mouth, the same enormous bailiff delivered my patrimony into my keeping -- a cartload of Father's soul bottles. They were filled with the breath of lovers, of burgesses, of syndics of the City Imperishable, all their power voided by edict so that the bottles were now so much colored glass with a bit of moisture trapped inside. Each perhaps the size of a man's fist, the colors ran mostly to green and purple, with a variety of metal chasings and adornments, and wax seals over cork stoppers. Had they not been under edict their worth simply as works of art would have been significant.

Bijaz made me take a full inventory, counting the bottles one by one. They were not labeled with names or dates, but only inventory numbers for which there was no cross-reference. Any one of them could have held my father's breath, I realized, as I stroked the wax seals each in their turn. Any one of them could be my last link to his soul.

The dwarf translated with much crude humor while I made my stuttering thanks in the fingertalk I had only just begun to learn. The bailiff cuffed me once across the temple with his enormous fist and departed smiling. I blinked away the pain, though my ears rang. Damn Father for a fool, and damn Bijaz for not arguing hard enough to turn Father away from the course that had brought me here. I promised myself that some day I would have my family's fortune back, with interest.

*

In keeping with custom, Bijaz had left me a pursed center in the stitching of my lips, as if I were forever reaching for a kiss. This enabled me to suck a diet of raw eggs and fish soup through a reed -- foodstuffs which will change the character of any man if not his digestion. I soon became adapted to the squalid languor of Bijaz's cramped house, spending my days at ease amid analgesic violet smoke and cheap muslin wall hangings while his wife moved silently back and forth on her own errands, tending the daughters trapped in their growing boxes.

By nights the dwarf fondled my stitched lips, occasionally pausing to renew his handiwork against some perceived imperfection. The long, curved needle gleaming in the gaslight was the focus of his devotions, the rough brown gut suturing my lips his prayer drawn forth loop by loop.

At the time, I still believed in the doctrine of the soul's breath and so considered the stitches a welcome protection against the despair that stalked me at smoke's distance, loose among the billowing violet shadows of the house. As for Bijaz, I did not mind his sweaty tremulos, for his fingers never strayed past my lips. The dwarf's sharp, shallow breathing and the flickering of his tongue across the layered scars around his own mouth betrayed passions -- perhaps of class or desire -- but that was no concern of mine.

One day near the end of my pledged time Bijaz called me into his study at an unaccustomed hour. Did he mean to brace me on account of my recent experiments with his twin daughters? Newly released from their matching pearl-inlaid growing boxes, they were most comely young dwarfesses just blossoming into womanhood. Even without the free use of my tongue there was still much we could get up to among the three of us that did not compromise their eventual value as hymeneal sacrifices. I went slowly, fearing a beating or worse.

"Well, Jason." The dwarf chose to speak to me aloud in Domus, the public language of our City, the common tongue of marketplace and kitchen. He was dressed at his most formal in a wrapper of hand-embroidered muslin that shrouded his body like the corpse of a wine barrel. A leather hood was stuck into his best belt along with his gloves and quilt.

I signed respectful attention in fingertalk, a gesture that literally meant "pleasure of the master."

"Soon your pledge to me will be discharged." Bijaz' gray eyes glittered, on the verge of either tears or anger. "You have the makings of a prime servant, although it is far too late for the growing boxes. However, there are surgeons who could address your excesses of height in exchange for a mortgage upon your future years of service."

After waiting out his silence I signaled, "green apples." This indicated that the idea was not to my taste.

"I thought not, although there is certainly a market for the services of such a one should you elect to change your mind." Bijaz twisted one silvered lock of his hair in his massive fist. "Well, at any rate I have succeeded in clearing your debts. Your mother's flight made the business easier for you in that regard. You owe me nothing for your time here thus far, nor will I charge you board until after I remove your stitches for good. All the same, you have no assets save a thousand soul bottles. What are your thoughts for the future?"

Mostly my thoughts were for my next assignation with his daughters in the basement that coming midnight, disporting ourselves among the stored fowling nets and bales of rose hips, but that was not what he had in mind. I signed "leaves before the storm," meaning that I would trust to divine providence and the good will of the world.

"Any man of piety might say the same, but I have noticed you practicing more languor than prayer this past year, Jason. As it happens my brother's shipping concern has need of a clerk in his offices at the Sturgeon Quay. If you care to be considered I can recommend you for the post. You would be required to live above the warehouse offices in order to guard the deposits, and work daily among the mass of common citizens and servants."

Though the prospect simultaneously bored and worried me, I bowed my thanks. I was not a man in command of the engines of possibility.

Bijaz clapped his hands in delight. Ratcheting his chair down, he loosened the tooled leather belt and adjusted his robes. "Come," he said in a shallow voice, his breath panting. "Let me inspect your lips once more."

Even as the dwarf's rough fingers stung my always-tender stitches, I could not decide who I hated more -- Father in his weakness, for losing our family's position; or Bijaz, for not taking Father's place on the platform

in Delator Square as a loyal servant should have.

*

I labored on behalf of Bijaz's brother Tomb, living in a tiny chamber just above the little office with the inward facing windows in the warehouse on Sturgeon Quay. The place stank of fish oil and the myriad effluvia of the City Imperishable. In the streets above the River Saltus towering elms and chestnuts clocked the seasons through my chamber's single grimy windowpane. For a while, each year at the season of my birth, Kalliope sent me a woven birthday greeting in the manner of her adoptive people, but eventually she stopped.

I lined the salvaged plank walls of my room with Father's soul bottles, to remind me of the value of good sense in business and the risks of even the best of ideas. It pleased me to think that some atomie of his essence might be watching over me in my little room, though I tried not to think overmuch on the man himself, blood of my family spread thin on the cobbles of Delator Square.

As their family had nourished layered ambitions, Tomb had never been boxed in his youth and so had become the giant his brother might have been. Dwarves are the secret aristocracy of the City Imperishable, but for the provinces and distant foreigners full-grown men are the best agents. Once he became confident that I knew my letters and numbers as well as any box-raised dwarf and could keep careful track of the right people to bribe -- all skills learned in the early days of my youth -- Tomb was delighted to leave the ongoing details of business in my care.

In my fourth year of service, Tomb relocated to Port Defiance on the South Coast to enrich himself servicing the idiocy of the Jade Rush erupting there. By my fifth year, I had become Tomb's factor for all matters of business and trade in the City Imperishable. This increased both my salary and my graft to the point where I could lay plans for the purchase of a modest home on one of the crescents of Heliograph Hill. The silk-lined rooms of my childhood were never far from my mind.

One day in the spring of my seventh year in Tomb's service, I received a summons to appear before the Burgesses. There was a trade bill under consideration that would alter the dockside tariffs. My name had arisen as an expert witness in such matters, which made sense inasmuch as the bill had been drawn up with the aid of much money from Tomb's coffers, on terms extremely favorable to our little business on Sturgeon Quay.

I stood before the tall mirror in my many-windowed office and adjusted my tradesman's tunic as close as it would come to a gentleman's cut. Idly, I wondered which dwarfess I would have my procurer deliver tonight. Of late I had favored Flecxia, so called because of her extraordinary adaptability -- both literally and figuratively -- but it didn't do to form attachments with these women destined to drift ever downward in society. The fine silk fabric of my tunic, dyed and painted to look more like the traditional tradesman's wool, felt unexpectedly harsh under my fingers. That was irritating given the expense to which I had gone.

"Factor, some dandy here to see you," bellowed Two-Thumbs, my lead daytime gang boss, his broad grinning face leaning through the door of my office.

I glanced at the tide clock on the wall and gently touched the paints that disguised the scars on my lips that not even whiskers could fully conceal. "I've ten minutes before my cabriolet arrives. I suppose I should see what he wants."

"I want to speak with you." It was the dandy himself in my door now. Two-Thumbs was gone, only his distant shouts hanging in the air as he belabored some lazy stevedore. Used to sizing up my customers, I gave the visitor a long look.

He wore a buttoned black cassock of a foreign cut. The cloth was some blended weave I did not recognize. That alone was unusual, for working on the docks I saw almost everything and everyone eventually. A broad-brimmed flat hat of bear fur dyed black as his cassock shaded his face but did nothing to hide the knife-edged hawk nose and glinting green eyes. Below the cassock I glimpsed heavy, round-toed boots with gum soles, more like a butcher's than those of the cleric or scholar I at first took him to be. There was an eerie familiarity about him, a sense of recognition that I could not place. It was if I had seen this man a hundred times before, for all that he was a stranger to me.

"And so you have found me," I finally said just before my silence spilled over into insolence. "Speak, as you will. I am Jason the Factor, of Tomb's Shipping and Storage. How may I serve you?" On pretense of straightening a fold in my tunic my fingers flickered the sign for "slick cobblestones," which meant to keep the business fast and simple. It was a small test to which I subjected visitors, one that sometimes paid unexpected dividends.

"You sign like a dwarf, Jason the Factor," he said, the dismissal in his tone leading me to an instant, intense aversion to this man and his goals. He was mirroring my insolence with arrogance. "I am Ignatius of Redtower, and you have something I need."

I could recognize a negotiating position when it slapped me to the floor. "What is this wondrous thing you seek, and how generous is your offer?"

"I require certain of your father's soul bottles."

I stiffened, giving away too much of my own interest already. The bottles were the last I had of him, one of them perhaps even enclosing his very essence.

Ignatius' green eyes flickered at my reaction before he continued, "As they were declared worthless by the Debtor's Court, I will tender their cost of packing and a small storage fee."

Otherwise, the threat implied, he could have the Court assess a value and seize them. Given Bijaz's care in arranging to free me from my family's debts I doubted the threat was valid, but it would be a troublesome matter to deal with.

Besides which, I would not part with my patrimony. However worthless it might have been deemed to be.

Picking a fleck of skin paint off my sleeve, I pretended for a moment to consider his offer. "You have a novel approach to commerce, sir, but your humor is ill-timed. Good day." I turned to my mirror.

"I warn you," he said to my back, "it is the best offer you will receive in this matter. You have until tomorrow to consider the advantages of my generosity."

When I turned again from the mirror he was gone.

*

Inside the Assemblage of Burgesses liveried guards conducted me to the Witness Gallery. I found myself at the door of the old choir loft where once castrati had sung cantatas for the Emperor. It had been put to a number of uses since, including a platform for public hangings and, briefly, an official brothel. Now it featured a series of marble benches worn by generations of buttocks, set behind wicker privacy screens to prevent witnesses awaiting delivery of their testimony from signaling down from the gallery.

As I entered I glimpsed the Emperor's iron throne through the screens. No one but mice -- and one insolent,

memorably-executed dwarf -- had sat upon the throne for centuries, but it still presided over the affairs of the City Imperishable in rust-streaked splendor. The great seat squatted upon a raised marble dais at the east end of the hall, the throne a thing of points and angles forged from the swords of a defeated barbarian legion against which the Emperor Magnificat had led our armies. Today the might of the City Imperishable marched mostly on armies of gold coin but the message of that monstrous thing was unchanging. Trouble me not, that throne told the world on behalf of the City, except at your own peril.

Below the throne the First Counselor of the Chamber met with two other men. I knew the First Counselor from various expensive private meetings. Of the others, one had to be the Provost -- he carried an enormous key on a gold chain. The three of them shared the air of bored gentlemen. I elbowed a squint-eyed foreigner out of one of the best seats and leaned shamelessly against the wicker to view the proceedings.

The third gentleman turned to look upward at the Witness Gallery. Even through the wicker mesh his sparkling green eyes locked with my gaze. He no longer wore his strange black cassock, but this was Ignatius of Redtower. As something in his look gave me a sudden wish for anonymity, I ducked my head to avoid his sight.

Recognition of him still crowded my memory, echoing with thoughts of money and power. I slipped a silver obol from my purse. The profile of the last Emperor, Terminus, was achingly familiar with its knife-edge hawk nose. I would bet this obol and a dozen of its twins that Emperor Terminus had green eyes, as well. No wonder I thought I had seen Ignatius before -- he crossed my palm every day.

Little did I believe in magic, for all the parlor wizards infesting the City Imperishable. But Ignatius' likeness to a dead Emperor was close enough to send fright stealing over my heart like the freezing grip of winter upon the River Saltus. Who was this man, that so resembled the powerful dead?

I became seized with an urgent desire to be elsewhere, anywhere else, than in Ignatius' presence. My elaborate trade plans and costly bribes meant nothing to me in that moment, nor even the political consequences of failing to appear in response to my summons before the Burgesses. I could only leave and hope to calm my racing heart on the way home.

The squint-eyed foreigner essayed to trip me with his leg as I retreated from the witness gallery, but I placed my boot so as to crack his shin, and departed to the accompaniment of barbarous curses. In the cabriolet on the way home, I laid out plans for my procurer. A trio of dwarfesses fresh from the growing boxes might draw forth from me all my fears like poison let from the blood with a silvered razor and a loving cup.

*

The three women were as young and tender as I had hoped and took well enough to the straps and harnesses of the equipment in my little playroom beneath the floor of the warehouse. Despite my earlier fevered desires my heart was not in my efforts. I made a botch of the needlework on the second dwarfess, damage to her feminine parts that the procurer would surely resent. I eventually set them to servicing one another, calling out advice and instructions as I drank myself into an ever deepening stupor with several of my accustomed cocktails of liqueurs, vinegar, and a dollop of mercury.

I awoke to find that the vengeful wench had sewn my right hand to my penis. My first thought was that my drink was too strong. My second thought was that the dwarfess would receive a sound thrashing when next I encountered her. The boards above me creaked with the day's activities, the young women were long departed. While I labored with exquisite care to extract myself I composed a suitable tale for Two-Thumbs and any others who might inquire as to my lateness in arriving at work. My panic of the previous day seemed idiotic at this distance, and I tried not to consider what political damage I had done myself by failing to appear in testimony before the Burgesses.

Extricating myself from the sutures was a long and painful process, and some little time passed before I realized that the warehouse above my head had fallen unnaturally silent. Stevedores are no more capable of quiet than are dogs -- they will always find something to shout about, or drop with the greatest clatter. Absolute silence only prevailed in the late evenings and on the rare holidays.

I eased open the false panel that led from my playroom to the boiler room. Once there, I straightened my tunic and ran my hands across my face. Damn me, but my fingers were spotted with blood. The little bitch had used her needle to open my long-healed lip scars as well! My theater paints would not cover them so easily today. Accounts with my procurer were rapidly slipping further against his favor. My blood began to simmer with that long, slow rage that can be such a satisfaction in its eventual discharge.

I used a boiler rag to wipe my face as well as I could, preferring grease and soot to bloody lips, then stole my way up the stairs to listen at the little door behind my office. The boiler room entrance resembled a broom closet, so when I heard nothing, I risked cracking the door open to peer out.

Ignatius of Redtower stood facing away from my door. His flat fur hat tilted backward as he looked up into the rafters of the warehouse. "You can come out now, Jason the Factor," he said without turning around.

Patting down my tunic, I emerged. "Where are my crews?"

The damned lout turned and actually smiled at me. "I have discharged them for the day. They believe that you set an account for them to drink at the Teakwood Scow in celebration of your triumph at the Assemblage of Burgesses."

My hair practically stood on end. "That will cost me..." On top of the lost bribes and fees for my trade bill, I would now be out a day's wages for every man, the doubtless staggering bar tab, ships not loaded -- this loss of business would ripple for weeks, perhaps months, through my accounts. Tomb would be displeased. I would have to thrash Two-Thumbs and the other gang bosses for listening to this man, for all the good that might do.

"Their liberty will set you back substantially." His green eyes sparkled with a cold, holy fire. "You should have dealt with me yesterday."

"Away with you," I said, but mustered no force at all for my condemnation. This man encompassed my ruin, which I could see rising above the horizon like the mast of a ship sailing upriver from the Southern Ocean.

"There is a problem. I have examined the soul bottles in your chamber upstairs. They are unlabelled. I was given to understand there was a manifest."

"I have the original inventory," I said. It was not worth the bother of being angry over his invasion of my living quarters.

He adopted the tone of a patient master instructing a dullard servant. "Does it match the bottles as they are now arrayed?"

"They were only enumerated on the pages I received -- no names associated with the individual bottles. They are just glass. Half of them look like the other half." Not true, in fact, for there was a wide latitude of ornamentation in that old work of the Glasswright Guild.

"So how do I find a specific soul bottle that I might be seeking?" he asked, his patience tinged with strain.

"Pick one," I said, my own voice infused with scorn. "They're all the same."

His fists gathered my tunic like a maid pulls up spring posies. Even though Ignatius of Redtower was smaller than I, he yanked me forward and off my feet. "They are not all the same," he shouted. His breath reeked of thyme and sage. "One of those bottles contains the breath of my father, his very soul, which I must have."

His anger finally sparked mine to open flame. Years of rough play and a small taste for blood had taught me how to fight in a certain ungentlemanly way. Amid a red flood of rage, I boxed his ears hard while kneeling him in the groin. When my tormentor collapsed gasping, I kicked him once in the ribs, then pinched tight the reddened shell of each ear. "Come with me," I whispered, "belowstairs, where we can conduct this conversation in privacy. I do believe that I can teach you a thing or two about lost fathers."

*

My taste in rough play does not run to men, but the restraining devices in the room could handle one. After all, they were required to handle me. Delivering my tormentor a kidney punch on the way down the stairs, I shoved him into the playroom where I strapped him face downward to a whipping frame. It was a simple triangle of wooden beams and metal piping with a support leg behind, but the straps would hold a strong man against the most intense throes of passion. His toes barely touched the ground. He could not see what I was about from his position, having only sound and smell to guide him. The room already reeked in a most gratifying manner from the previous night's festivities. I stoked the fire on the little branding brazier and waited for Ignatius of Redtower to return to his senses.

"You will die for this," my enemy whispered after a few minutes. "In a slow, most unpleasant fashion, that will have you begging through the shattered stumps of your teeth with your last snippet of tongue to shape the words."

"Brave talk for a friendless man in a room full of possibilities," I said. "I could trim you to fit into a growing box and freight you to Port Defiance with no one the wiser. Or just drop you in pieces through the trap door to the freshwater sharks that haunt these piers." There was no such trap door -- I am a sexual adventurer, not a criminal -- but he did not know that.

"So we have sufficient common ground to strike a deal," he said, arrogance still echoing in his voice.

"Why do you think that?" I pumped the hand bellows of the branding brazier.

"You have yet to do anything irreparable to me. That implies you understand the value of continued negotiation."

As my anger cooled, I realized that I did not care to face the wrath of someone who could freely walk the floor of the Assemblage. I would kill him if forced to, but given Ignatius' apparently exalted state in the world, the consequences of his death might well be worse than his vengeance upon being released alive. I decided to follow his lead. "Very well. What arrangement do you propose?"

"Give me the soul bottles, let me go, and I will forget your offenses against me." His tone still aggravated me.

"You persist," I said, "in speaking to me as if I were an incompetent servant. That is no bargaining position, just a simple demand."

"I am a Philosophick Doctor of the Hermetic Orders," he replied with a careful edge in his voice. "As I see the world, you would have to struggle for improvement to reach the status of an incompetent servant."

I had heard of Philosophick Doctors -- a sort of magician, or even wizard, rare men with rarer skills in service of foreign kings and the powers said to haunt our nights. I had never believed in them, and did not intend to

start now, but once again this man had somehow stolen my heart with fear.

"Your view of the world right now is strapped to a frame that can hold a man until he starves," I reminded my visitor. "Nonetheless, I am as human as you. Treat me with a modicum of respect if you expect me to do anything in return."

He laughed. "Listen to the fish complain about the water. When did you last inquire of your family of birth, Jason the Factor? Or share a kind word with Bijaz the dwarf who sponsored you into this life of profitable commerce? You see, it is a law of my order that we mirror what is in the hearts of those with whom we associate."

I stared into the coals of my little branding brazier. Always thinking of my lost Father, I had never paid any mind to my sisters or the dwarf who had saved me in my hour of need. His words about my family had pierced me in a most unexpected way but I would not show him that. "So if I were to burn you with hot irons and cut your tendons to the bone, you would respond only with implacable hatred and violence?"

Ignatius' breath shuddered, the first sign of fear I had found in this man.

Staring at him again, I continued. "But if I were to release you, open my arms, and show the generosity of a father for his long-vanished son, you would be kind and generous to me in your turn."

"Yes. That is how it works."

I laughed. "Oh, such rhetoric you learned doctors teach one another. Were I to be cozened by this magical thesis, you would lose no time planting a blade between my ribs by way of further instruction. A silly theory."

"I admit," Ignatius said in a quiet voice, "it is rarely put into practice, for few would believe it." He drew another shuddering breath, then strained his neck so that his green eyes could catch my gaze. "I, Ignatius of Redtower, apologize for setting you ill at ease."

Blood trickled from one nostril, and his arms trembled like Bijaz's hands had upon touching my stitches. "You are fighting it now," I said, fascinated. It was a rare man who could so thoroughly trump his natural emotions, not even counting whatever influence his order's geas might have upon him. "You reach out to me with kindness though it punishes you sorely."

"Yes," he gasped, a pain-riddled smile on his face.

I watched as Ignatius' eyes began to shake within their sockets. Blood seeped where tears should flow. His muscles tensed like cables pulled to breaking, but Ignatius kept that bloody green-eyed gaze upon me.

Here was a man who could have my head nailed to any gate in the city on a word. I had grasped him like the proverbial shark by the fin. Once I let go, I was lost. I could either believe him, or kill him. All my bets were bad.

It was the weeping blood that decided me. That was not readily faked. If I could only emulate his inner strength, I could release the shark without losing an arm.

As long as I was strong enough to release my pride in the bargain.

I covered the brazier then poured myself half of one of my cocktails. I avoided looking back at my adversary, preferring instead to calm my nerves. I thought of my sisters, and the love of Father within our silk-walled rooms, trying to rediscover the trusting boy I had once been. Then I turned and undid his bonds.

"I will not call you brother," I said, spreading my arms wide, "for our births are far apart, and our current stations even farther. But I will call you fellow man, and tend your hurts, and offer such hospitality as I can. I pray that you do not use your strength to attack me against the image in the mirror of your heart."

He grasped me by the forearm as the prisoners do who fight in the civic games at the arena. Anger flashed in his eyes a moment before draining away. "Help me now, and we can help one another later. My name's word that I will not fight you again unless you bring it upon yourself."

Together, me hung over with alcohol, pain and sloppy fear, Ignatius of Redtower within the curious trap of his magical kind, we stumbled up two flights of stairs to my little chamber walled with the soul bottles.

*

"The notion of the soul's breath wasn't just a passing mania," Ignatius said from his seat on my cot. Dabbing at his eyes with a silk cloth of mine, he stared at the walls of bottles, their colors flashing even in my dim quarters.

"The Burgesses put a stop to it quickly enough."

He snorted. "Those fools could no more control the workings of the soul than legislate the tides of the Southern Ocean."

"It meant nothing," I said, echoing Bijaz's drunken maunderings of years past. "The soul's breath was just a metaphor. A way of thinking about our bodies and our minds."

"No, there is more to it. Tiny animalcules of our being exit with each breath to be dispersed by the winds as ordinarily they rot to dust. A captured breath, especially one expelled with the intent of transmitting knowledge, or merit, or emotion, can have power through those animalcules."

"And your father intended for his soul to be so stored?" Had Father so stored his soul for me to find? I wished fervently that I had thought to question the mountainous bailiff that long ago day at Bijaz's house. "Just find his bottle then."

Ignatius shook his head. "I was not here when he breathed into his soul bottle. His household kept no record of its style or appearance. I had business in the far west that year, beyond the Yellow Mountains. I returned to find that my father had died. A most thorough and irrevocable death. It remained for me to pick up his duties."

His story reminded me too well of the death of my own father. Not only did I have no soul bottle, I also had no body, no sepulcher at which to mourn. I covered my confusion by pulling a silver obol from my sweat-stained tunic. "And yet here you are. The Imperator Terminus to life."

"Family resemblance." Ignatius grinned, his green eyes flashing within their ring of fresh scabs. "Nothing more."

"Nothing more," I echoed, "and nothing less. So what happens now?"

"Now I locate my father's essence, breathe in his soul's breath, and take his place in the workings of the City Imperishable."

"Ah. Magical business." I glanced at the thousand bottles. "What happens if you fail?"

"Eventually, the City will fail, collapsing in flame and ruin, victim to a secret war that has raged for

generations against powers hidden by darkness and distance."

It was if his very words could spark the fire. I had a sudden vision of a thousand thousand dwarves and dwarfesses, City servants with their muslin wraps burning as they grunted their fear through tight sewn mouths, fingers screaming, "flame, flame."

Afraid to inquire of these mysterious powers, I said, "By all means, let us locate your father." And with him, perhaps, mine. "Can you simply take in the breath of each of these, one by one, until the correct soul bottle is found?"

The pale shudder on his face answered that question well enough.

"Just you," I asked gently, "or could anyone be harmed?"

"Me," Ignatius said. "Because of the magic of my order, the powers I have assumed, it would be like becoming a thousand different people at once."

I considered his predicament. Ignatius' magic mirror of the soul seemed to work both ways. The more pleasant I was to this man, the more I liked him. Perhaps helping him find his father would reflect upon me some amelioration for the loss of my father. "So what if I took them in? Could you tell by some magical means when I had found your father and snatch his soul's breath from my mouth?"

For a moment he drummed his fingers on my small writing desk. "Perhaps, for one bottle," he finally said, "If I made the right preparations. It is not as simple as breathing them in and speaking in tongues. Even so, you cannot take in a thousand any more than I could. They would mix like the waters of the river."

"Ah," I said. "But I can find a thousand people on the docks to come here and breathe. I have a warehouse to gather them in, which happens to be standing idle today. Can you pay them all a simple wage, perhaps a silver obol each?" A silver obol would be a week's wages for the poorest dockside idlers, a day's for a skilled man with references.

His eyes brightened. "Money," he said, "is not an issue. But I would have to make preparations."

"Make your preparations," I said. "And I will make mine." There was nothing more to discuss. And I needed to prove to myself that I could be free of the shark.

Gathering a handful of coppers from my day purse, I trotted down the stairs and out the front to pay boys to run to my procurer, to Two-Thumbs at the Teakwood Scow, to Bijaz if he could be found, even to the house of the Tokhari rug merchant. I then strode up Water Street, my fingers flashing the sign for "lightning struck the house," which means urgent help is required. Soon enough I found some dwarfish fingertalkers. Shortly thereafter that I sent them on their way.

*

Grumbling, my work gangs came back from the Teakwood Scow towing harlots, musicians and a swirl of dockside idlers. Dwarf servants with their lips stitched tight drifted in one by one. My procurer came with four bullyboys and his entire stable of dwarfesses, including my miscreant of the previous evening. She looked sufficiently wretched that I chose to ignore her. Two-Thumbs and I cleaned out three taverns with money and threats. Even Bijaz finally came, shuffling on a cane and accompanied by an unfamiliar young dwarfess I took to be his current wife. Much to my surprise, a contingent of Tokhari drovers appeared, surrounded by swarms of veiled women and naked children.

The warehouse filled as Two-Thumbs' light duty men brought down the soul bottles from my chamber. Some few of the people gathering were unknown to me, drawn by the commotion or rumor of pay, but most were those I had sent for, or saw around the waterfront every day.

"You are the army of the City Imperishable," I called out, "mustered for a day's service at a week's pay. I will show you what is wanted."

There was a rustling murmur as I sat down across a plank table from Ignatius of Redtower. He had brought my branding brazier up from the playroom and now heated a chafing pan of herbs and summer wines in it until pale steam wreathed his head. Ignatius handed me a soul bottle. I raised it to the crowd, uncapped it and took a quick breath from the neck.

Ignatius fanned the steam into my face. "Oh, Roland," I said with a sigh in a voice pitched much higher than my own, "this is so romantic." In surprise, I covered my mouth as laughter rippled through the crowded warehouse. Those in front whispered the details to those behind them.

The learned doctor nodded at me, so I stood to usher the line along.

What we heard as that day passed was a sample of every walk of life, every pursuit, every emotion, every voice twisting from every mouth.

"No, you can't have the money."

"The child is mine."

"Please, I beg of you, not that."

"Portugales are prettiest while still on the tree."

"Seventeen tons at this price and we'll be rich men."

"I didn't kill her, but I know who did."

"I'm sorry."

This went on for hours, a voice crying out, an obol paid, and a new person seated, until dusk stole in through the warehouse door and the night birds began to challenge the day's last barn swallows outside. Most of the people stayed to see what would be said next, by whom. This was better entertainment than the Equinox Carnivals.

The seven hundred and twelfth bottle, a green one with copper chasings and seed pearls, was inhaled by a huge Tokhari camel driver in his red turban and purple robes, enormous sword strapped across his back. The Tokhari looked surprised, opened his mouth and said, "Ignatius, what are all these people doing here?"

The crowd laughed again as Ignatius dove across the table, grabbed the camel driver's cheeks, and kissed him hard on the mouth, sucking the breath back out, before sitting down and placing his own face in the steams from the brazier. Ignatius' eyes rolled back in his head as he shouted, "Yes, father," before collapsing.

The drover had his sword half drawn before I grasped his wrist to slip a purse of obols into his hand. "It is magic, not insult," I said quietly.

He jingled the purse once, nodded, and stepped back from the table.

"Very well," I said to the waiting crowd. "It is done."

"What about the other bottles?" asked Flecxia the dwarfess.

"Set them free!" shouted a stevedore.

"Open the rest," someone else called from the back of the crowd.

So I tended Ignatius' fire as one by one the souls were breathed out to find their way into the steamy air of the City Imperishable. Some of the people even required reminders to collect their silver obols.

Father never spoke to me from any of their mouths.

*

Late that evening, I stepped outside. Cressets on the quay held flickering pitch torches while gaslights glowed gently on the streets further up the hill. The spring moon sailed high overhead, borne on a breeze of river stench and cook fires. Ignatius had finally been carried up to my chambers to sleep off his meeting with his father. I had no desire to learn more of his secret war, or how the City would stand or fall by him, but I believed him.

That was enough for me.

Outside in the shadows, Bijaz sat on a bale of plantation cotton. Flecxia and some of the other dwarfesses clustered around him as my procurer scowled over their heads. Two huge Tokhari camel drivers broke off a dice game and loomed to meet me.

"Greetings," I said, fingering my scarred lips. Whatever face paint they carried was long gone. The hard words I should have had for these people would not be summoned to my tongue -- Ignatius' mirror of the soul was too strong upon my mind.

"So you saved the City Imperishable," Bijaz said.

"How did you know his purpose?" I asked.

"Surely you did not think your education complete?" The dwarf laughed. "There's more to the world than will ever meet any man's eye, Jason. Some of us know what Ignatius is about."

I shrugged. "I helped a man who thought he was saving the City. As for myself, I run a warehouse." And a life. These people before me had taken on new aspect. I had shown them hatred, violence, or simply wounding indifference. And yet they had come when asked, in service of the City Imperishable or old loyalties I had been quick to forget.

Ignatius of Redtower had touched me through his pain and fear. I could do no less with my poor share of his strange magic. So I sat down on a pile of lumber. "Here I am," I said, spreading my hands again, "with debts too great to repay. Do what you will."

They departed one by one into the darkness, silent as the shadows that swallowed them up. Not one of them had found the need to raise a hand against me.

I turned to watch the night's mists upon the river. I thought I could see dark shapes looming within the gray stillness, odd splashes that moved against the current. Ignatius' powers of the darkness, or just sturgeon

hunting by night? Was there even a difference?

With some small surprise, I found I had ceased to long for the silk-lined rooms of my youth. In my mind I composed a letter to Father. I would offer continued friendship to Ignatius of Redtower, and see if he needed help in his secret war. Father would be proud.

Still, I wished one of the soul bottles had been his.

* * *

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