

A GOOD THEIF

a Thung Toh jig prequel

SAMPLE

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SCHMALCH



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The rain had stolen his chances tonight.

Schmalch leaned out from under the tram entryway and glared at the sky. He was a good thief—he just hadn't had many opportunities this evening. Nobody wanted to be out on a dark, drizzly night like this.

He really wanted a brew and a warm spot to drink it, but his last two coppers had gone to a street vendor for this morning's meal—and Garl wouldn't let him inside the Bitter Barnacle without coin in-hand. In the years since being kicked off the barkeep's filcher crew, Schmalch had tried sneaking in, faking it with a handful of stones, even slipping behind the bar and pouring one for himself, but Garl had always gotten wise. So, Schmalch had been outside all day, watching commuters, searching for an open pocket, a dangling purse.

Late morning, when the rain blew in, he'd given up his gloss spot in the alley between the Order of Omatha and the dross shop with a name Schmalch couldn't pronounce. Owing to daytime shift changes and nighttime tipplers, he scored five or six times most days from that perch. But people didn't like to carouse in the rain, especially this chilly late-spring stuff. Every tram-load that let off was half as full as it would have been on any dry day. Even worse, when it rained people put on more clothes, hiding their pockets and

purses.

High above, he heard the clank of the tram car coming into the station. In a few heartbeats dozens of footsteps were clumping down the stairs. Schmalch crouched in the blind spot by the newel post and waited as the commuters' steady rhythm grew louder, closer. It sounded mostly like the larger species—karju, chivori, he couldn't distinguish—all their footsteps like thuds in comparison to the patter of puka feet like his.

Waiting for the marks to make their way down the many flights was the worst. He could have worked the lift exit, but too many gutter babies hung out there begging and filching—and many lift riders were rhochrot, four-legged and so huge Schmalch couldn't reach their purses without being trampled. Plus, the Corps had posted someone there recently because some toff from the Nest got their guts spilled while slumming in the Rabbles last quartern. Working the stairs took patience, but it was dry and reliable.

At last, a broad karju man stepped into sight, body covered by a rain-slick poncho. Their grey faces hidden by hoods, a pair of chatting chivori women followed, but they held their bags tight against their bellies in an attempt to keep the dosh inside dry. The karju woman who came next wore a broad-brimmed hat against the rain, her waist-length jacket flaunting the bulging purse at her belt.

When she paused to adjust the hat, Schmalch crept forward—hoping the surrounding noise covered the squelching he felt in his shoes—and reached for her purse. Before his fingers could touch it, the woman strode into the street, hat doing its job.

Schmalch slumped back into his blind, sure he was doomed to spend the night copperless and damp, when a final passenger appeared. Wearing only a light sweater, the chivori man paused under the awning, swore at the rain, and stooped to tie his shoe. His purse wasn't fat, but it was handy. Schmalch slipped in close. With a gentle tug and a slash from his kris, the leather bag slumped into his palm. The man straightened, and Schmalch leapt back into the

shadows, barely able to hold off opening his boodle until the mark was gone.

With a dozen coppers in hand—enough to drink all evening and still enjoy a morning meal—Schmalch pulled the frayed collar of his coat over his head and scuttled into the street. The rain soaked through before he'd taken ten steps.

As Schmalch turned the corner onto Anchorage Way, Sigrin Malpockey passed under a streetlamp in the distance. The minikin was with a few of his compas, all of them in their stupid rat-fur boots. Schmalch ducked into the nearest alley and waited for them to pass. A couple months back, what had started as a chance to join Sigrin's crew had turned into a failed catnapping and a debt for the lost ransom. Twice since then, the bully'd had his thugs hold Schmalch for a beating. Each time, Sigrin took what little coin Schmalch had and added to his debt. If they saw him now, he'd lose the day's boodle, get punched in the gut, and still owe two Callas, if not more.

"... of a sister," Sigrin said as he approached the alley. Schmalch froze, not even breathing. "I mean, something like that. How dumb does she think I am?"

"Dunderpate quim," one of the tall cronies said.

"Lash that down right now." Sigrin stopped at the mouth of the alley and jabbed a finger up toward the thug's fat nose. He might have been a minikin karju, but he was as mean as any of the big ones.

Schmalch sunk deeper into the shadows. Sigrin wouldn't see him, he assured himself, wouldn't smell him. He'd been the orphanage's scour the shadows champion, one time staying hidden for nearly two days before Elder Sriree found him in the cellar when she came down for canned goods. Times like this, he wished he'd never graduated, could go back to the Temple of Spriggan after a rotten day of scaling. Maybe he could be an elder some day and teach the gutter babies instead of being one.

Sigrin's voice pulled him back, "She's *my* bitch sister. I get to say things like that about her. *Not you*. You think she'd ever pay us if she thought I let you lot talk about her that way?"

The thug shook his shaggy blonde hair. "Apologies, Sig."

"You're right, of course." Sigrin started walking again, the other Grey Boots following like street cats shadowing a rat. "She really is a dunderpate quim, but only I get to say it. Understood?"

Schmalch waited until he could no longer understand their muttered agreements and apologies and hurried on, breaking into a full run when he saw the lumina-algae glow of the Bitter Barnacle's sign: *Drinks Dancers Food*. Dripping and shivering, Schmalch ducked inside. Enough bodies filled the room to make it warm—though the damp from outside still seeped through the building's every hole and crack. Schmalch had spent too many days swabbing mold and mildew from them all.

When he smelled Schmalch, Garl looked up from his work and pointed a thick finger to the exit. Schmalch waggled the purse. The big bartender jerked his chin and went back to washing mugs.

Schmalch scurried down to the far end of the bar. It was uncomfortably close to the dartboard, but the humongous jar of fruit soaking in liquor was down there. It was a great blind. Some nights, Garl forgot him for hours. So, Schmalch took the risk of being jabbed with a wayward dart and climbed onto his favorite stool.

On stage, a curvy karju dancer moved to the thudding, mechanical beat of the melody engine. Schmalch spotted three crews who were fresh into port—one or two were usually good for a lift. They'd go half-seas over and forget how much they spent. A few were eating soup—tonight's special, probably made from leftovers from a few nights back. Schmalch had once helped Garl make soup from cast-off bones left on plates.

Finished with the other patrons, Garl walked down to Schmalch and grunted.

“One brew,” Schmalch said. “A big mug of the cheap stuff—and a bowl of tonight’s soup.”

Garl tucked a towel into his waistband. “Show me the coin first.”

Schmalch opened little the leather bag and displayed his loot. Garl plucked coins from the purse, filled a mug, and thumped it down in front of Schmalch.

“I’ll be back,” he said and walked away.

Schmalch sipped and scanned the crowd. Garl’s filchers were already working the room, but that didn’t mean they’d spot all the possibilities.

“Is that you, Schmalch?” Ooda slipped out of a cluster of people.

Before he could answer, she’d climbed up on the stool beside him, somehow keeping her slinky pink dress in place. It looked pretty against her dusty-green skin. She’d worn cosmetic—a line of red dots above her big brown eyes, a matching stripe down the arc of her nose, her lips painted a darker green than her face. She always looked so pretty.

“It is you,” she said and pecked his cheek. “How gloss! I’ve been hoping you’d come in again. Such a sweetie. You know how much I miss you when you’re gone. How long has it been since you took me over to Tenta’s Fish Fry?”

“A couple quarterns... er maybe more,” Schmalch said. He lost track of days sometimes.

That had been quite a night. He’d saved for nearly a month to take her there and spent every last copper before they left. But Ooda was his girlfriend. She liked to do fancy things. He needed to take her places and impress her, or she wouldn’t stay interested. It was worth the effort, too—she’d let him sleep over after Tenta’s. Warm, dry, and not alone sounded gloss.

“We’ll have to do that again soon.” Ooda patted his thigh and signaled Garl. “For now, you can buy me a brew.”

Garl dropped off the soup with her brew, took more coin, and left.

Schmalch reached for the spoon, but Ooda was faster.

“Garl made some good slop tonight,” she said between slurps.

When she paused for a drink, Schmalch snatched the spoon. Ooda might be swish, but he wouldn’t be worth twaddle tomorrow without a little food in his belly.

Blobs of fat floated on the oily surface. Something stringy and grey that might have been meat along with beige-ish strips of a chopped root sank to the bottom. Schmalch spooned some into his mouth and widened his eyes in surprise. Garl had used salt and something that tasted kind of like burned onion. It was good—not as good as the orphanage, but pretty gloss for the Barnacle.

When she’d finished half the brew, Ooda stared at him, mouth open, eyes wide. “Are you going to leave any of that for me?”

He gulped in two more mouthfuls and handed her the spoon.

Ooda clicked her tongue at him and resumed eating, pausing only when Schmalch scratched his arm. Then, she put down the spoon and leaned away from him.

“You haven’t got scabies again, do you?” she asked.

He rolled up his sleeve and looked at the spot he’d been scratching. Finding no sign of the burrowing mites, he offered her his arm.

“See, all good,” Schmalch said.

Ooda inspected the spot before finishing both the soup and her brew and signaling Garl for another round. Schmalch watched more of his coin vanish.

“Did you hear,” she asked him, “Yemenie is working evening stage next quartern? She keeps them drinking—but getting the best shift? Emonon is all lathered and claiming Garl’s boxing Yemenie’s compass. It was only two months back Emonon finished having that tail grown, and now he’s replacing her with an oversized pair of bubs?”

Schmalch liked Yemenie well enough. She and Frabo played sleebach with him sometimes. Emonon didn't really seem to notice he existed, but then she was that way with anyone who didn't tip. Schmalch didn't care who got the evening stage. His favorite act was the twins who did the rhythmic thing around midday. They weren't good dancers, but their jerky movements made him chuckle. Those guys never noticed him either.

"Do you think I should get zoet parlor bubs?" Ooda squeezed hers up at Schmalch.

"No, yours are really gloss Ooda." Schmalch couldn't imagine the amount of coin it took for zoetic enhancements or why anyone would pay for a tail, webbed fingers, or weird colored eyes and hair. He was lucky when he had enough coppers to eat and enjoy a few brews at the end of the day.

"Grat, Schmalch, but they could do with a little plump." Ooda looked into the air a beat and changed the subject. "Did you hear about Mible? She's pregnant again!"

Schmalch nodded and sipped his drink. He had no idea who Mible was.

In the time it took to blink, Ooda had filled him in on all the staff gossip and ordered another round on his tab. It was expensive to have a girlfriend, but the things she did with her mouth made it really worthwhile.

Schmalch shifted and realized the brew had gone through him.

"I need to fill a pot," he said, slipping off the stool.

Ooda polished off her drink and, already one ahead, signaled for another. "You want one too?" she asked.

Schmalch nodded. He may as well enjoy himself before he was out in the rain again.

During his trudge to the lav, he counted the remaining coppers. He'd already gone through more than half of what he'd picked, and it wasn't yet midnight. If Garl found out how little he had left, Schmalch would be out on his ear well before closing time. He

didn't relish the idea of walking to the Upper Rabble in the rain and spending another night under a rowboat at Tendle's Marine.

A tap on his shoulder stopped him before he made it to the toilets.

"Schmalch?" asked a soft voice.

A little shorter and a lot less rigged than Ooda, Plu stood nearby, dingy apron at her waist. She wasn't a Spriggan like Schmalch—Garl hadn't just taken her in after one of the orphanage's graduations—he'd actually *hired* Plu and paid her a nightly wage. He was that way with all his servers and dancers.

Spriggans earned their room and board with drudge work and picking pockets. If anyone got caught, they were gone. Garl couldn't risk customers knowing he was in on the scaling, but he could always grab more filchers.

Schmalch had gotten caught. No more working the customers for him. Anytime he owed Garl since then, he was lucky to work it off as the drudge.

Plu moved out of the way of a passing customer and blinked up at Schmalch.

He sighed, wishing he had a nightly wage to look forward to. "Vrasaj, Plu."

"Apologies. I... um... I didn't mean to bother you." She looked at her feet and started to walk away. "It was nothing."

"Wait. I'm just on my way..." he jerked his head toward to lav. "I can wait."

She hesitated before continuing. "I-I know you're... worldly."

"Huh?"

Her face flushed pine and she pointed at the exit. "I mean, I know you know how to live out there."

"Oh." It was his turn to look at his feet. "Yeah."

"No, I mean that's good." She put a hand on his arm, immediately jerking it away. "I need help from someone smart and capable. You were the first person I thought of."

A passer-by bumped into Schmalch, tossing him into Plu. Her face went even darker green.

“I-I-I...” She stepped back, put a hand over her chest, and mumbled to herself before continuing. “I wondered if you could get me a shocker? I’d buy one, but they’re so expensive and my rent’s due and...”

“Why do you need a shocker?”

She hesitated, scanning the crowd. “There’s a new sailor coming in on the *Spinning Compass* every quartern. He...” The color that had faded from her cheeks rose again. “He’s been groping me. Then, last night, he waited outside with his fid out and told me there’s silver to be had.” Plu straightened and glanced toward the bar. “I don’t want to insult anyone, but I’m no trull.”

Schmalch nodded. He’d passed up more than one proposition even if it meant a warm place to sleep. Why anyone would be obsessed with Plu, though, was beyond him. Her face was scarred up, her nose too flat, and she was so skinny, especially for someone with a steady wage.

“Can’t you borrow a knife from here?” he asked.

“Oh, no. I don’t want to kill the guy, and you know what Garl would do if I stabbed a customer.”

Schmalch grunted in agreement. Garl would toss her to the Corps if he didn’t toss her body into the harbor.

“Not right now, Plu,” he said, “but I can ask around.”

“That’d be great, Schmalch. That’d be great.” She smiled bigger than he’d seen before. “I won’t bother you anymore.”

“What did mousy little Plu want?” Ooda asked when Schmalch returned from the lav.

Another man was sitting in his seat, smirking down at Schmalch like he belonged there. He even took a gulp of Schmalch’s fresh brew before getting down from the stool. The tattoo on his arm said *The Portentous Storm*. Schmalch knew that crew. They weren’t very nice.

The sailor stared hard at Schmalch and said, “C’mon, Ooda, let’s go someplace without pests.”

Schmalch scoffed and climbed up on his stool.

“Maybe next time we can go to Tenta’s.” Ooda finished her brew and kissed Schmalch on the cheek. “You’ve almost filled the hold.”

She slid off the stool and handed her fuzzy pink coat to the sailor, who slipped a little purse in its pocket before helping her into the sleeves.

Schmalch watched numbly as they crossed the room, arm-in-arm. He wasn’t sure what he’d done wrong. At least he wouldn’t have to share his last few coppers.

Before the door could close on Ooda and her friend, Sigrin Malpockey appeared. Schmalch scrunched down in his seat, trying to hide behind his neighbors, but the chivori women were too bony to provide much cover. Sigrin came in a few steps and looked around, pausing on Schmalch with a smile, before he left again.

A chill ran through Schmalch. Sigrin and his crew would be waiting tonight when he left the Barnacle, he was sure of it. Rain *and* a beating. He took a big gulp and stared glumly into what remained of his drink. Not much to look forward to. Maybe he should give Plu his kris and be done with it.

Skegmubble had given him the little knife when he graduated from the orphanage, telling Schmalch it was lucky. Two nights later Skegmubble was dead. Maybe if he’d still had the kris, he wouldn’t have been beaten to death by the Corps. Schmalch was confident he’d die too if he ever gave away the little dagger. Sigrin might take it as payment tonight anyway. With Plu, at least somebody nice would have the kris. Even if she didn’t want to kill the guy, it’d be better than nothing.

Schmalch’s skin prickled. A few paces away, Garl’s eyes slanted his direction. Schmalch’s brew was all but gone.

“Where’d your little girlfriend go?” Garl asked, strolling over.

“Ooda left.” He tried not to sound too upset about it.

Garl’s eyes narrowed at the door. “Alone?”

Schmalch looked at the bar top. “No. She left with a guy. Some sailor for *The Portentous Storm*.”

Garl pulled a little pad and marking stick from his pocket and scribbled something down. “Yet she sat here and drank away all your coin. She really knows how to tickle a puka’s taint.”

“She’ll be back. I’m gonna take her to Tenta’s again.” He wasn’t sure why he’d said that. He couldn’t afford another drink, let alone two meals.

“You’re never gonna get off the street if you don’t stop trusting anybody who turns their shine on you. You’re like a twitching stray cat. Now,” Garl flicked the near-empty mug with a thick finger. “You want another?”

“I’m not quite done with this one yet,” Schmalch said. He really wanted one, but he needed the coin he had—and to find a little more—before he walked out past Sigrin.

Garl eyeballed the glass. “Mostly backwash by this point.”

“Gimmie a few,” Schmalch pleaded. “I’m... I’m about to come into some coin. Promise.”

“What? You? Having a payday?”

Schmalch gulped and rolled into the lie. “Yeah, I got a regular job.”

“Who’d hire you?”

Schmalch tried to smile. “Well, you did... once.”

“And got rid of you too, didn’t I?”

“Maybe I could do a few things for you around here to cover another brew? In addition to my other job, I mean.”

“I got my needs covered,” Garl told Schmalch, scanning the crowd.

“Come on, Garl, those kids don’t know how to wash a window like I do.”

Garl snorted. “Looks like they’ve been washed with your dirty

chute when you're done with them." He grinned.

Schmalch put on his friendliest smile. "Or I could do a little crowd work for you. I've gotten better, and it's been... it's been nearly three years since... you know, since what happened. They've all forgotten. I'm a customer now." He raised his drink. "Just like them."

Garl shook his head. "Caught's caught. You're out."

"C'mon, Garl. No one else'll remember. I do good work, right?"

Garl shook his head and jerked a thumb toward the door.

Schmalch's pleas leaked out as a whine.

"Cut that noise out or I'll cut it outta you."

Someone down the bar whistled, and Garl signaled back.

"You better be gone or ready to buy a fresh one when I come back." He snorted and spit in the mug. "Drink up, little man."

Schmalch looked at the glossy glob then up at the bartender's ruddy, smirking face and took the tiniest of sips. "See? I'm working on it."

With a final glare, Garl left.

Schmalch stared into his mug. Ruined.

After a while, the chattering chivori women sitting next to him moved on, which was gloss. Not only had they kept their bags on the bar—out of his reach—but they didn't get drunk enough to be careless.

Schmalch was pleased when a pair of karju claimed the seats—much better for hiding behind. Like most of their species, both were big, but the man looked like he could drive Schmalch into the ground with one good thump. He had short brown hair, mostly hidden by a knit watch cap, and what little of his face wasn't covered by beard looked as sun-hardened as any sailor's. The rest of him was so hairy, curls poked out of his collar and sleeves like moss between cobbles. A single hair stuck out of the snoot at the bridge of his nose—the gross little flap that hid whatever it was that made their species so sensitive to smells. He wondered if it tickled. Hair

amazed Schmalch—he couldn’t imagine living with something like that growing from weird spots on his body.

This woman’s hair was longer and lighter than the man’s. The tip of her nose was rounder, its bridge wider. Like all karju, their eyes were weirdly small and close together on the fronts of their heads—how did they ever know what was going on beside them? Maybe they could smell it instead. That must be weird.

While the woman flicked the rain from her shoulders, the man stroked sparkly droplets from his beard and pointed to the stool beside Schmalch.

“Sit there,” he told her.

Her jacket lifted as she sat down, giving Schmalch a view of the belt purse riding her tailbone. It hung there like ripe fruit, fancier than the drawstring bag he’d plucked earlier. This one attached with a beltloop almost as wide as the purse itself and closed with a buckle.

Schmalch licked his lips. He imagined the purse full of silver, sitting there, waiting for him to take it. Enough coin to keep him at the Barnacle for the rest of the night, tomorrow as well, the whole quartern, possibly the whole month. His mouth watered, thinking of all the things he could buy—a meal as big as he was, a shocker for Plu, a night at Tenta’s for Ooda.

Getting to it would be a trick, though.

“Brew for her,” the man said when Garl arrived. “Khuit for me.”

His voice was a low rumble, the words bitten off like he was angry at them. Schmalch recognized the Imtnor accent from his short time working the docks. It was really bad to be caught scaling down there. He’d once seen a group of dockers hang a thief from a cargo hook in his chest.

“You sure you don’t just want a brew?” Garl asked. He hated when people ordered anything else because of something called *low margin*. “Khuit’ll cost you. Haven’t seen a fresh crate since autumn.”

The man stared until Garl left with a shrug and a grumble. Schmalch tried not to giggle.

“Really, Rothis,” the woman said. Her voice was soft and quick with the same harsh accent. “*This* is the great place you promised me? It’s a... a *shy*. The way you were going on, I thought we’d have a waiter—or at least a table.”

Schmalch considered her purse. His kris wouldn’t cut through such a thick beltloop without sawing. Even if the woman didn’t notice him working—which she almost certainly would—she could flinch or sneeze or something, and he might accidentally stab her. He did *not* want to get thrown in the Bag, and stabbing certainly meant a trip to jail.

“Cork it, Tig,” snapped the man—apparently Rothis. “You know why we’re here. You wanna go back to your old berry picker with the floppy fid?”

Unbuckle and empty was Schmalch’s best option, but he’d have to be gentle. He looked around. No one was playing darts nearby, most everyone in the main room was busy with their own stuff, and the woman’s body blocked him from the rest of the bar. Once Garl had dropped off their drinks, the fruit jar would hide Schmalch from his view.

“I left that *old berry picker* because you told me pretty stories about adventure and romance while you were sticking your thumb up my—”

“I said cork it.” Rothis pointed at her. “This isn’t the place.”

Patience pays was a motto the elders had made the kids repeat over and over. He was learning. Right now, all he had to do was wait for Garl to drop off their drinks and avoid being kicked out when he did.

Tig made a *hmpf* sound, and both were quiet until Garl arrived. When he collected their coin, his sour expression and departing snort told Schmalch he wouldn’t be back to this end of the bar anytime soon. Though, before leaving, he was sure to jab a

threatening finger in Schmalch's direction.

"Sweet Mother Jajal," the woman swore after taking a sniff, "this is barely brew. Made with used socks or something. Trade me. I didn't want this to begin with."

The man downed the khuit in one quick gulp and smiled, teeth like a bright bird in the nest of his beard. He whistled at Garl, signaling for two khuits. Garl gave Rothis his *I'll get to it when I get to it* scowl.

"How did you already manage to gam off the bartender?" Tig asked, pushing her mug away.

Schmalch stared at the ruined brew warning in his mug. He couldn't nurse it much longer. Garl'd be ready to toss him out when he returned with those khuits.

Schmalch rubbed his palms against his still-damp trousers. He wasn't going to find a better opportunity. Slowly, he eased the leather strap out of the first side of the buckle's frame. Tig didn't notice. The prong would be the tricky part, though. If anything was going to draw her notice, it would be the pressure necessary to remove it from the notch.

Schmalch held his breath and drew back the strap.

Rothis' tone softened, "Look Tigania, we do this one little job, and I can get us into the mercenary union. The Abog have to take me with a local reference, right?"

"Sure. I suppose," she said.

"A few jobs here, we'll make enough for passage to Ukur—as passengers instead'a drudges."

"Imt's eyes, don't start on about Ukur again." She sounded tired.

Tig shifted, and for a heartbeat, Schmalch knew he'd been caught. But she was just adjusting—the Barnacle's stools weren't as accommodating for her size as they were for his.

"I wish to Imt you'd never met that Estosan." She sighed.

Slowly, Schmalch let out the breath, and eased the strap through

the other half of the frame. Giddy with anticipation, he lifted the flap. Instead of coins, he found a zipper. His excitement deflated.

“No one owns the land there. No spoiled toffs owning everything and telling the working folk how it has to be.” Rothis was excited. “It belongs to everyone who works it. We can run our own herd.”

Schmalch leaned back and considered the zipper. This close to her body, the woman would feel every tooth release unless he moved so slowly that she’d be ready to leave before he finished opening the purse. His alternative was to fake a tipple, bump into her, and unzip the thing in one smooth stroke. Beg forgiveness afterward. He’d have to be smooth, not fall off the stool. That would draw Garl’s attention. Schmalch searched his mind for another tactic but found none.

“I’ve already played the farmer’s wife,” Tig said. “Do you think I want to be a herdsman’s woman?”

Mumbling a quick appeal to Spriggan, Schmalch grabbed his mug and pitched forward, sloshing the rest of his ruined brew on her jacket with one hand, the other unzipping the purse. He managed to nick two coins before slumping back onto his stool.

Tig whirled on him. Her mouth was pressed in a thin, angry line. “What in the depths are you doing, puka?”

Schmalch waved his empty mug. “Apologies. Maybe I’ve had too many.” He smiled drunkenly and winked. “Or not enough.”

“Now, look at this,” she showed Rothis her wet jacket. “Is your new minikin friend going to get me one made of made of rat fur to replace it? I hate this city.”

Rothis rolled his eyes.

“You,” she turned on Schmalch, “don’t touch me again.”

Schmalch gave her a somber tippler’s nod, relaxing only when she’d returned to her conversation.

He eyed the unzipped purse. Plenty of copper waited inside, but he saw silver too. The thought of a pocketful of Callas made moths

flutter in his chest. He slipped his fingers in, pinched coins, and had half-removed them when Tig shifted again. The overfull purse jiggled, knocking the coins from his hand. On instinct, Schmalch lunged for them, catching everything but throwing himself off balance. For a heartbeat, he wobbled on the stool's edge, hands groping for something—other than Tig—to grab onto. But he fell, banging into her on the way down, jostling a shower of copper and silver to the floor.

Schmalch landed face-down, the coins pattering on his back like hail. He got to his knees and scrambled to grab them all, certain he could snatch them and run.

“Again?” The woman stood, more coins tumbling out. “What is wrong with you?”

“Enough of this plop, puka,” the man said. He grabbed Schmalch by the arm and lifted him off the floor. “Check your purse, Tig. The little douse’s been trying to rob you.”

“Let go,” Schmalch said. His arm felt like it was going to come off. “It hurts.”

The man pulled a polished dagger from inside his coat. “It’s gonna hurt more when I open your belly.”

Garl grabbed his club and started down the bar toward them. “Hey! If you’re going to knife him, do it outside!”

Rothis snorted and stuck his dagger into the bar top, still dangling Schmalch. “No need, barkeep. I’m just holding him until the law comes.”

Schmalch felt panic well inside. The law meant the Corps and the Corps meant he’d be dead or in one of the Bag’s cells before morning. A whine forced its way up from his lungs and through his tightening throat.

“What’s that sound he’s making?” Rothis asked Tig.

“I don’t know, but it’s awful,” she said, kneeling to pick up her coins.

Schmalch wriggled, hoping to slide free—or maybe his arm

would tear off. He was trying not to panic—when he did, sometimes he couldn't remember what happened next—but the pain was making it tough.

His shoulder popped, agony burst bright, and Schmalch screamed, “Don't give me to the Corps!”

Garl slammed his club on the bar by Rothis' empty glass. “Enough! Take it outside or the Corps'll be your problem too.”

Rothis dropped Schmalch and raised his hands. “My fault. I guess the Haven's easier on thieves than we are back home.”

“Don't let them take me to the Bag,” Schmalch begged as his shoulder snapped back into place. The relief felt almost as good something Ooda would do. “I'll give the coins back. I only wanted another brew or two so Garl won't put me out in the rain.”

“What'll you do for me if I don't call them?” Rothis asked.

“Anything, just don't let the Corps take me.” Schmalch's hand had gone numb. His shoulder throbbed.

Rothis stared at Schmalch for a long moment. “You'd really do *anything*?”

Schmalch nodded.

Rothis glanced at Garl, who nodded. “Never seen him say no when coin or his hide are concerned.”

“Three khuits,” Rothis told Garl, “on Tig.”

She made a protest noise as she got back onto her stool, but he silenced her with a finger.

“Give Tig anything you managed to pocket,” Rothis said, stashing his dagger.

Grudgingly, Schmalch returned a fistful of coins he'd grabbed, holding back a few in case he ran into Sigrin on the way out. Tig would probably figure they'd rolled away in the commotion.

While Garl collected the fresh round, Rothis dragged his stool closer and sat, leather pants creaking like a spooky door. “As it happens, we could use a puka with light fingers. Tig didn't notice you working that swish pouch until I did. If you're as light on your

feet, we could use you. Interested in making some silver?”

“What would I have to do?” Schmalch rubbed his shoulder. It wasn’t the first time he’d been held like that. It would hurt for a few days, but the pain would go away.

“Nothing harder than Tig’s purse.”

Schmalch considered. That was a skint description, but he needed coin. He’d gone into his last job for Rift with no information—she had a reputation, a scary one, but she always paid. He wished she ran a crew. Rotheris and Tig were strangers, new to the Haven. They’d probably get him thrown in the Bag if he didn’t do this job.

Schmalch looked at Tig, who smiled. She was missing a tooth on one side.

“I’ll do it,” he said.

“I thought you might.” Rotheris grinned behind his beard. “Meet us at midday tomorrow in Marthoth Air & Sea Warehouse 4. You know where that is, right?”

Schmalch nodded. He’d worked that part of the Upper Rabble in his younger days. Marthoth Air & Sea docks and warehouses were far past Pukatown at the islet’s tip—a grey fleet of sheet metal buildings marked with the company’s big red logo. Schmalch was a little hazy on where that specific warehouse was, but he was confident he could figure it out.

Garl dropped off the drinks. Tig paid him without protest.

“Right, then we’ll see you tomorrow at midday,” Rotheris said.

He stood and tapped Tig on the shoulder. She headed for the door without a word.

Schmalch stared—they were leaving their drinks untouched.

Rotheris pointed a thick finger at him. “Don’t be late. Our boss won’t like it, and you do not want to be on the wrong end of that.”

“I won’t.” Schmalch’s eyes drifted back to the abandoned drinks. “Can I have those?”





Thank you for reading

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