



Created and Written by
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Episode Eight **The Negative Engine**

The vast cavern was aglow with the pure light of incandescent bulbs. Such a far cry from the relative gloom of the best oil lamps, not to mention candles. The brightness underground was something beyond what Ron had expected to see in his days. A few years back, he would have chalked it all up to magic of some sort, but since word of Edison's fantastic innovation had spread, the dwarf now understood there was physical science at work instead. Not that there wasn't science behind magic, also, but this electrical illumination worked on wholly different principles.

The sound of machinery echoed through the rocky cavern, the clicking of gears and the hum of motors in the distance. They gave him a clear path to follow, one that he hoped would lead him to the man he sought, the most vile and villainous being from another world.

Ron walked cautiously through the spacious room, toward the large altar cluttered with metal bits and pieces; the remains of different devices from a realm of high-technology and futuristic wonders. He glanced at the curious things in passing, wondering what could be made of them. Would anyone from this world

have the slightest inkling of what to do with the strange remnants? If so, what possible impact could they have on the future? Would it make much difference either way, or would man progress at a pre-determined pace, regardless of the inventions?

Ron shook his head. Such philosophical conjecture was best left to the idle intellectuals, he thought. Why was he wasting time with such ponderings? There was a job to be done, so he'd best get on with it.

Exploring the back of the cavern where the light was weak, Ron found a passageway tucked behind a bookcase. The sounds of machines were definitely coming from down there, so down he went, ignoring the thumping in his chest, but hanging a hand in the vicinity of his holstered pistol in case it could serve him.

"All right, folks, here goes," Ron whispered as he walked down the slightly sloping hallway. It started out as the same smooth stone of the cavern, but as he came to a bend, the natural surfaces turned to steel. There were several sharp turns in the hall as he continued toward the noise, and he eventually saw what had to be the end. A straight stretch of a hundred feet ended at a hazy blur. The overhead light let him see clearly as he walked up to the magical barrier. What lay beyond was anyone's guess, though he'd soon find out.

The closer Ron got to the blurry barrier, the stronger the distortion appeared. Fuzzy waves rippled across the surface periodically as the field replenished itself. He couldn't tell if the barrier was merely an illusion to hide the room beyond or if it had actual substance. One touch could reveal the truth, but such action could prove fatal. Many a mystic field held a lethal charge, and Ron was ill equipped to discern if this one posed such a threat.

This would be a defining moment; a simple step forward to test his courage. One simple move with his hand outstretched would leave no doubt about the field's properties. Whether he lived to tell of them was another question entirely.

The fate of the world hung in the balance, so now was not a time for cowardice. He had to press on, whatever the consequences.

After a brief hesitation, Ron put his hand up and pushed it through the glowing field, feeling stinging pain pulsing through his muscles. The sensation was like

thawing frostbite, something Ron had had the displeasure to feel once. Though, this was all rushed. The pain of an hour's thaw was being forced upon his hand in an instant as it passed through the barrier, though it stopped as soon as he pulled it back. Wiggling his fingers, he found them to be unharmed. Except for the memory of pain, he was unaffected.

Seeing he could survive the field, Ron took three steps forward and forced his entire body through. The freezing-burn of the field flashed over him, and he found the pain overwhelming, far greater than he'd hoped. It forced him to collapse in exhaustion, even as the pain was replaced with numbness. The shock had left him paralyzed!

Ron blinked his eyes as he fought to regain control of his appendages. Now was no time to be caught lying down on the job, but the muscles weren't responding. Little twitches were all he could muster, leaving him staring at another metal wall.

Ron's eyes and ears were still in working order, so he could hear the footsteps coming toward him. As the soft clicking grew dangerously close, he managed to twist his neck around, and stared at the strange, black moccasins resting beside his head, and the thin ankles sticking out of them.

"Well, this is amusing," Mortimer said in his cold, calculating voice.

"Didn't expect to see me again, eh?" Ron asked, as he continued to struggle with sleeping muscles.

"You're clearly here as a diversion," Mortimer deduced. "As foolish a ploy as it may be, I'll give you credit for determination."

As his muscles remained unresponsive, Ron felt himself being lifted off the floor. A bit of Mortimer's magic elevated him until his legs were dangling several feet in the air, and he hung face to face with the madman from another plane of existence.

"So, what are your friends up to?" Mortimer asked, glaring into Ron's eyes.

"Go to Hell!" Ron growled defiantly.

Mortimer didn't reply with words, but sent a tormenting spell, and a new burst of pain filled Ron's mind. The torment began in the center of his head and shot out

like a thousand hot needles poking at his skull. The sensation lasted for only a few seconds, followed by a wave of relieving calm.

"Now, cooperate and spare yourself any more misery," Mortimer advised.

"All right!" Ron cried, doing his best to sound defeated. "I'll tell you everything, just leave me alone!"

"Good," Mortimer answered. "Be honest. I'll know if you're lying."

Ron wasn't sure how true the statement was, but he didn't need to lie. That was the beauty of his role in the plan.

"You want the truth?" Ron whispered. "Look behind you."

Mortimer turned around right as Joella appeared out of thin air to blow red dust in his face. Though the plan was fairly similar to the one they'd used against Tobias, it did not succeed against the sagely madman. As the elvish powder touched Mortimer's skin, he quickly neutralized it with the barest magical effort.

"Pathetic," he said, sending a debilitating burst of wind at Joella with a flick of his wrist. "Did you really believe such an amateurish trick would incapacitate me?" he added as Joella was slammed against the floor.

"Hey, it worked before," Ron mentioned as he continued to hover in mid-air.

"Yes, I saw what you did to my apprentice," Mortimer mentioned, turning back to face Ron. "Can't you think of anything new?" Clenching one fist, the madman sent the magic needles back into the dwarf's head. "How pitiful; your limited imaginations leave you recycling the same strategy over and over again."

"Yeah, we're just so predictable," Ron struggled to say as his brain felt ready to melt.

Mortimer sneered at Ron and tossed him to the floor. He had clearly had enough of the playful banter. As he turned to walk away, Ron sought to hold his attention. "Hey, you know why we keep using the same tricks?"

Mortimer ignored him and kept walking, but suddenly stumbled as a bolt of invisible force snapped his legs.

"Because they always work," Ron answered.

As Mortimer rolled into a sitting position with two broken legs, he began to laugh; hardly the response Ron had expected. The agony alone would generally

preclude the ability to find humor at such a time, but Mortimer was no ordinary man.

"Ah, Sheriff Doliber," Mortimer said, glancing around the room, searching. "I was wondering when you'd make your presence known."

Ron managed to pick himself up off the floor, though it hurt like hell. Back on his feet, he stood and stared at Mortimer, watching him grinning as if his injuries were all a big joke.

"So, are you going to show yourself?" Mortimer asked the sheriff. "No? Well, perhaps a little something above your grade level may convince you to be more sociable."

A pale blue glow suddenly emanated from Mortimer's legs, and moments later a scream sounded from the far side of the room. Sheriff Doliber appeared in a gloomy corner, his mystic invisibility defeated as his concentration failed, and he collapsed to his knees.

When the azure glow dissipated from around Mortimer's body, the madman stood up with two healed legs. He walked over to his would-be disabler and kicked him hard in the shins. "Metaphysical reversion. Transposes my injuries onto you, while healing me."

Doliber cried in agony as Mortimer kicked him again.

"You fools think you can compare to my power?" Mortimer asked viciously with outstretched arms. "My people mastered mysticism while you were still living in caves. We built cities with mysticism beyond your comprehension, and merged it with technology to achieve a level of utopia!"

"Our world was hardly a utopia."

Ron turned and saw Nora entering the room from the same hallway he'd come through, though unaffected by the shimmering barrier. He didn't understand how she could be so resistant to the field, even though her magical abilities were virtually nil. Perhaps it was the long, fur coat she wore, or perhaps her race was truly different from the humans he knew.

Mortimer locked his eyes on Nora, and watched as she approached with short and cautious steps.

"Ours was a world of chaos, a hundred monarchs fighting for supremacy. Very few were as benevolent and enlightened as our own Queen Victoria." Nora stopped within arm's reach of the madman, her hands tucked into her coat pockets.

"Speak for yourself. I have no queen," Mortimer rebutted.

"Of course not. I imagine a man willing to annihilate an entire world would crown himself monarch, in his own mind," Nora goaded.

"Your superstitions were your greatest failing," Mortimer said with conceit. "That technologically superior beings would willingly bow down to a feudal monarch makes me sick! There is no divine right of kings." He looked over her shoulder toward Ron. "Isn't that right, Mr. Grimes?"

"Sounds about right," Ron said, finding it odd that he'd agree with the madman on any topic.

"So," Mortimer said, casting his eyes upon Nora again. "Even the primitives of this America understand such a basic truth. What does that say about you?"

"It is not about truth, Bastard," Nora cursed. "It's about honor and civility, two things you have clearly never known."

Brushing open her coat, she drew a dagger from her belt and thrust it in Mortimer's direction. The madman caught her wrist before the blade could stab into his chest, but he struggled against her strength. There was no magic being used, purely physical muscle, and Ron had to question the meaning of the battle. If Mortimer Blythe was such a powerful wizard, couldn't he overwhelm Nora in an instant? Why were they wrestling?

Nora slapped her other hand on her wrist, fighting to push the dagger into her foe. He countered with a double grip of his own, though it only made for an even match. Neither had the upper hand in physical combat, which made things unpredictable.

"Where's that worthless husband of yours?" Mortimer asked. "Still cowering in shame, playing the wounded knight?"

"Sir Myles is a braver man than you'll ever be," Nora snapped. Shifting her stance as they danced around the dagger, she lifted her leg and kned Mortimer in the crotch, causing him to cringe. The shock weakened him enough to give her the

advantage, and she plunged the blade into his waiting chest.

Mortimer pushed Nora away and staggered back. Yanking the blade from his chest, he tossed it to the ground and waved his hands over the wound, managing a partial healing job. He hissed in anger as blood continued to trickle onto his shirt. "A piece of your world, I see," he said, hurling a red beam at the blade. The magic ray struck the dagger, but didn't affect it in the least. Frustrated, he redirected the beam at Nora, but it was equally useless against her.

"The sorcery of this world cannot affect me," Nora said as the red light dissipated against her. "Not unless I wish it."

Their bout was clearly over, as Mortimer stood on the losing end, brushing a hand over the bloody stain on his shirt. The wound underneath the soaked cloth was still red, though the majority of the cut was sealed. He grumbled in frustration, then vanished in the blink of an eye. The teleport had been seamless, with no noise or light distortion; the sort of perfect displacement only performed by warlocks of the highest order.

With Mortimer gone, Ron rushed over to check on Joella. She was still breathing, though didn't wake to his light prodding. There was a lump on the back of her head where it had hit the floor, though nothing seemed to be broken. As he stood up after checking her over, he felt funny that he cared so much to worry. A few days ago, this woman had been his adversary, an opportunist who had kidnapped him for her own ends. Now, he had to admit they were growing toward genuine friendship.

"How is she?" Doliber asked.

"I think she'll be okay," Ron replied, looking up to see the sheriff standing over him. "Looks like I can say the same for you."

"Yes, the wounds Mortimer inflicted weren't as deep as I led him to believe," Doliber said.

"That was some good acting," Ron mentioned, standing up. "Ever think of doing a stage show?"

Doliber put on a halfhearted smile. "It was nothing compared to Nora. That bluff was brilliant. We're just lucky Mortimer was too flustered to tell I was

deflecting the beam before it could burn you."

"True, but past experience aided the deception," Nora explained. "You must understand, these clothes and the dagger are from my world, which resonates at a far denser wavelength than your own. Magic energy cannot affect matter from my universe as easily as it does yours. Mortimer knows this, so I knew he'd rationally believe my resistance to magic could be amplified."

"After this is all over, you'll have to explain it to me nice and slow," Doliber mentioned, looking around the room. It wasn't much to look at, really; metal walls and some furniture, like a giant bank vault turned into a living room.

"It's quite simple, if you can grasp the basics of String Theory," Nora mentioned. "In essence, my world was made up of subatomic particles that resisted quantum manipulation, so magic was virtually unheard of."

"Now, wait a minute," Ron said, struggling to understand. "You're saying stuff from your universe is immune to magic. If that's so, how come you teleported with the rest of us?"

"I've spent the past five years here, remember? Eating the food, breathing the air, absorbing the molecular structure of this world; my cells have slowly adapted to this reality. Inanimate objects seem to adapt to their surroundings as well, though not as quickly, which is why my dagger was able to harm Mortimer and leave enough molecular residue to hamper his healing spell."

"So, you become a part of the world you live in," Ron surmised.

"Essentially," Nora said. "I imagine that's how Blythe was able to learn the use of magic. As his cells adjusted to this world, he was able to tap into the divergent quantum energies you people take for granted."

"I don't think so," Doliber said, kicking over a small end-table for the satisfaction. "You've both been here what, five years? I've been studying magic my whole life, and I'm not as powerful as Blythe. And there was something he said, about his world building cities with magic and technology. That doesn't fit what you've told us of your origins."

"What are you suggesting?" Nora asked, sounding scared by the implications.

"Maybe Mortimer Blythe was as much an outsider to your world as he is to

ours," Doliber suggested.

Nora shuddered at the concept, and an eerie silence fell upon them.

Ron didn't let the idea bother him any more than he was already bugged. The whole situation was convoluted, with truths and theories that flew way over his head, so he tried to keep things simple. They'd had a job to do here, and one important question remained. "Do you think we stalled him long enough?"

"We can only hope," Nora replied. "And trust that your instincts are correct."

Doliber nodded, wondering if he had made the right decision, though what other option had there been? Time was short, and the only chance at success lay with another kind of madman.

The key to victory hinged on the will and proficiency of Tobias Sylvestri, the former accomplice of Mortimer Blythe. Tobias was the most unscrupulous sort, someone who had seen fit to commit murder when it offered to benefit his cause. Would a man so easily swayed by self-interest follow through with his part, or falter at the final hurdle?

* * *

The fate of the entire world was bearing down on Tobias as he paced around inside Mortimer's inner sanctum. The underground chamber was cramped, and filled with dangling wires and bright lights, along with a conspicuous control panel filled with buttons and switches. What was it Nora had called it? The Negative Engine? Not much to look at, Tobias thought. All those people he'd killed, all the chaos he'd inflicted, had been to create this pathetic little room.

Tobias cursed and punched the wall, infuriated by his own actions, and the ultimate betrayal. Mortimer had promised him so much, and taught him such horrible things, all with the promise that Sarah would be returned to him. His beloved wife, the victim of his intense studies, was truly dead for all time.

Blythe the Bastard had merely capitalized on his sorrow and turned him into a soulless destroyer.

Tobias remembered what it was like to care. Though meditation and training

had taught him to eliminate the weaker emotions from his mind, it was impossible to delete the memories. The man Sarah had loved was not the man he had become. Self examination made him realize how wrong it all had been, this vain pursuit of a dead dream. Even if Blythe's offer had been true, and Sarah could have been revived, what would she have seen in this new man who'd been created to save her?

Tobias had betrayed his love. Worse, he had almost betrayed the entire world. This Negative Engine held the potential to erase everyone from existence, or so Nora Ferguson claimed. If even an inkling of her accusation were true, this weapon had to be destroyed. It was a matter of self-preservation.

Deep down, Tobias knew he had no hope for redemption; not in his mind, anyway. All he had left was revenge!

Pulling himself out of his introspective trance, Tobias stared at the control console, and with a magic eye peered beyond the colorful lights and switches to see its inner workings. He beheld the complex wiring and carefully laid circuit boards that comprised the brain of the engine, and saw beneath it all the beating heart. The power core was heavily shielded, but beyond the thick casing the faintest traces of radiation could be detected by the warlock's extraordinary senses. He'd seen this poison before, resonating from the half sphere of metal he'd stolen from the stagecoach. Uranium, Nora Ferguson called it.

That deadly metal was the source of Mortimer's power. How satisfying to take it away from him!

Tobias stretched out with a thought, seeking to perform the same neutralizing spell he'd cast on the half-sphere, to eradicate the radioactive properties of the metal. Try as he might, he couldn't get through the casing. The physical and mystical defenses in place were too great. He would have to get closer.

Removing a wrench from his pocket, Tobias knelt down and began to remove the bolts holding a service panel in place. The bolts unscrewed easily enough, but after the plate was free and he opened it to expose the inner working, a blinding flash burned his eyes. How foolish he felt, having fallen for such a predictable trick.

No bother, Tobias thought, as he cast a rejuvenation spell to restore his sight. Nothing! He tried again to restore his vision, but try as he might, the magic would not work. Whether his vision was gone for good he couldn't tell, but for certain it was not coming back immediately. He'd have to work around it.

Using the mastery he held over his own mind, Tobias recalled the mental image he'd seen of the console's inner workings. Looking back at his memory of the device, he was able to superimpose that vision over his blind eyes, and see where his hands were situated. Moving around the wires and circuits, he reached for the oblong metal pod that sat at arm's reach from the access panel. Touching it, he could sense the power within. It was invigorating to feel such energy, so primal and pure, unlike any he had ever sensed before. This was beyond magic. It was the essence of reality itself he felt.

What a shame to destroy such naked power, Tobias thought. Surely, there was a way he could harness it for himself, and do right with such a force. To take this power from the man who had used him, wouldn't that be all the better? Truly, his revenge would be twofold!

Yet what would he become if given such power? Would he be a benevolent god, or a wrathful monster? He knew the answer, and for the first time in years he understood what his father had said all those years ago. A true Master must know his limitations, and that does not always mean the limits of one's power, but of one's ability to utilize such power responsibly. The greatest warlocks in history had been far more powerful than they allowed themselves to be, simply because they understood the darkness in their own souls.

That moment, Tobias knew what he must do. Casting his spell, he punched through the anti-magic wards and neutralized the energy waves coursing within the metal pod, removing the lifeblood of the Negative Engine. As the nuclear fuel reached a state of depletion, the console went dim, and the rhythmic hum of the devices grew silent. The threat was ended.

Crawling out from under the console, Tobias heard an impassioned shout. "What have you done?"

Turning to face the voice, Tobias knew that Mortimer Blythe, the enigmatic

sage, was standing right in front of him. "You're finished," Tobias said bitterly. "We're finished."

Mortimer's heart was filled with rage. His servant had betrayed him! That had not been foreseen. His plans were quickly turning to ashes, and he could hardly believe it. "How dare you turn on me! To think, I was going to bring you with me to the next world, where your wife would be waiting for you!"

"Lies!" Tobias growled in response. "You never had any intention of resurrecting my wife. All this time you were building this thing to destroy the world."

"That's only part of it! I had every intention of fulfilling my end of the bargain, only not as you would understand. It no longer matters. We aren't going to the next world where your wife awaits. We can't go anywhere!"

Tobias charged at Mortimer and slammed him against the wall. Even blind, he could still sense the man's presence, and pretend to see. "I know your game now, Sage. You turn on me when you think you're ahead, but when the chips are down you think you can trick me into your wicked web again!"

"By God, what are you blithering about?" Mortimer asked.

"Our little conversation on the astral plain. You thought I wouldn't remember? How you mocked me!"

"I did no such thing!" Mortimer defended. "Don't you see they've played you? Nora Ferguson and that meddling sheriff have used you to destroy all that we'd accomplished." Mortimer grabbed Tobias by the collar and shook him.

Tobias broke free from the grip, and tossed Mortimer back against the wall, but it wasn't long before the elderly sage had the upper hand. A magical bolt tossed Tobias away, slamming him into the powerless console. The buttons and switches dug into his shoulders as Mortimer continued to exude magical force against him.

Tobias felt it was the end. His body was being crushed, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. He had exhausted his spell casting abilities, and Mortimer was too powerful. This was a less than satisfactory end, and his revenge was incomplete. He screamed against the pain, more out of frustration than agony.

Then, suddenly, the pain stopped.

Mortimer Blythe groaned and coughed, as Tobias straightened up, feeling the ache of cracked ribs. He fought for equilibrium as he heard his nemesis gasp and gurgle in the throes of death. It was such a torment that he could not witness the grand event, so digging up his last ounce of mystic power, he sent his mind wandering. There, a few steps away, was Myles Ferguson, the joke of a knight, impervious to mental intrusion. Though, he didn't need the man's mind to see through his eyes. A passive psychic link allowed him all the access he needed to behold the final fate of the arrogant sage.

Mortimer was coughing up blood, with a sword through his chest. That shiny saber Myles liked to wave around boldly remained in the wicked wizard's gullet, assuring the man could not heal himself. The blade's anti-magic properties, coupled with Myles' own magic augmentation, assured that it would spell doom for even someone as powerful as Blythe the Bastard.

Strangely enough, Mortimer didn't seem to fight his fate, perhaps knowing it was futile, or grateful for a final end. Whatever the case, he knelt there, looking on as the blood poured from his pierced clavicle. When his body went limp and he pitched forward, Myles pushed his blade along with him, keeping it in place until Mortimer's death was complete.

When no signs of life remained within Mortimer's body, Myles pulled his sword free and wiped it off on the dead man's robe. He shoved the blade back into its sheath and marched over to Tobias, who decided he'd seen enough.

"You did well, lad," Myles said as Tobias' vision went black again.

Tobias said nothing in response, realizing how pointless any reply would be. He'd done nothing more than serve his self-interest, yet again. He had his revenge, and the satisfaction was fleeting. What would become of him now that his purpose was at an end?

The quest that had defined him for the past year was over. His wife was gone forever, and he was wanted for murder. He knew the fate of Guild members who committed such atrocities, and he wondered if even his father's status could spare him. To be honest, he didn't know if he wished to be saved. The goodness that lurked in the back of his suppressed consciousness cried for atonement, even as his

heartless consciousness searched for a way out.

"Can you walk?" Myles asked, grabbing Tobias' hand.

Tobias nodded, and limped along with the knight, heading for an outer hallway. Both men were bruised and beaten. Their bodies had paid the full measure for victory.

* * *

It was well after dark as Ron Grimes sat with the Fergusons in the sheriff's office, drinking a toast. The bottle was an aged scotch that Myles had saved for years, and though Ron was not much for drinking he appreciated the occasional nip. After all he'd been through over the last few days, he felt he'd earned it.

"So, where are you two going from here?" Ron asked after downing his first shot.

"Back to the business," Myles replied. "I've still got a mining company to run, and there's a lot of work to do before we can refine another batch of uranium."

Ron slapped his hat down on the desk. "Now why would you go and do something like that?"

"For the same reason we made it in the first place," Myles replied, placing an arm across Nora's shoulders. "My lady and I are going to take a tour around the universes."

"Good luck with that," Ron said, reaching for the bottle to refill his glass. It wasn't the wisest thing to do, as he was already feeling tired, and the warming liquor made his eyelids heavy. Doliber had left him in charge for the moment, but there was only one prisoner in residence, and he was pretty harmless. It was time to kick back and relax. That's the least a deputy deserved.

As Ron downed his second drink, Nora said, "Perhaps it's best we reconsider our travel plans."

"What?" Myles asked emphatically. "But this is your dream. It's what we've been working toward all these years."

"I know, and you know I long for more civilized settings, but the risk is too

great. If Blythe taught us anything it's that unforeseen elements can crop up, even under the most carefully laid of plans."

"But he's gone, and who else on this world could pose that sort of a threat?"

"You never know, and that's why we'd best leave it alone," Nora suggested. "My own vanity shall not endanger any world ever again."

Myles picked up the bottle and put it to his lips. "Are you sure you can stand to live in this world of savages?" he asked before taking a swig.

"Maybe if you use a glass," she quipped, slapping his belly as he finished swallowing.

"I shall endeavor to please," Myles replied, filling an empty glass. "Oh, how's the elf doing?" he added hastily, as the thought crossed his mind.

"Joella's doing okay," Ron replied, leaning back in the chair, teetering it on its back legs. "The sheriff and I had her checked out by Doctor Wilson, and he said she'll be just fine after a little rest. She's got my bed at the boarding house, sleeping off the bruises."

"I hope she's better soon," Myles mentioned.

"Same here," Ron said.

"So, when do you expect the sheriff to return?" Nora asked. "He promised us a teleport to Sacramento."

"Who knows," Ron said. "He's taking Tobias back to his daddy at the Guild. There's no telling how long that'll take. I'd say kick up your feet and enjoy the night. It's bound to be a long one."

* * *

Sheriff Doliber returned Tobias Sylvestri to his father's home. The renegade son was still bruised and blinded, as he had been after his final confrontation with Mortimer Blythe, so a group of medlocks were summoned to take him away for proper treatment.

Doliber stuck around after Tobias left, wishing to speak with the Guildmaster.

"I am grateful for the return of my son," the Guildmaster said, sounding bland

as ever. "I only wish it were under better circumstances."

"I expect you to fill out one of those fancy Guild Warrants with the gold seal in the corner," Doliber mentioned with a touch of bitterness. He'd hated to hand his prisoner over to the Guild, but he had no choice. Not only did they have special jurisdiction over their own members, but as a member, himself, he was obligated to work in their interests at times such as these. Still, he didn't have to like it.

"Of course," the Guildmaster said nonchalantly. "I already have one filled out for you." He opened a desk drawer and pulled out a piece of hefty paper with a golden infinity symbol stamped on the lower right hand corner, certifying the document's authenticity.

Doliber took the Warrant and read it, seeing everything to be in order. All of the ink was old, except for the date, which was fairly fresh. "You knew all along who I was chasing," he remarked.

"I'm sure you deduced that from the memories you stole from me," the Guildmaster said. "I was certain you would not heed my warnings, so I prepared accordingly."

"Lucky for you," Doliber answered, "for if I hadn't acted, we wouldn't be alive to talk about it."

"Oh, nonsense," the Guildmaster said dismissively. "Your actions, while adequate, were not above and beyond the full force of the Guild. Had you failed to act, we would have stopped Mortimer ourselves."

Doliber had heard such boasts before, yet he felt the words were empty. In all the years of the Guild's existence, they had done little to thwart worldly threats. They were more interested in personal introspection and perfecting their powers than actually doing anything. When the War Between the States had called, only a handful of warlocks had dared to defy the Guild's non-interference doctrine and helped either side. How many kings and tyrants continued to rule in foreign lands while the Guild sat idle? How many murderers and rapists roamed the streets of America because no one of mystical training would stoop so low as to involve themselves in "civil" actions?

It was a disgrace how the Guild turned a blind eye to the wrongs of this world.

Yet, there was an inkling of hope.

"It was you," Doliber mentioned, getting to the subject he'd been waiting to spring. "You're the one who talked to Tobias on the astral plain."

The Guildmaster nodded his head, looking pompously proud of himself. "As I said, I prepared accordingly. I was keeping a close eye on the situation, and did what I could to assist."

"Nice way to straddle the fence," Doliber mentioned, realizing how close the Guildmaster had come to taking a proactive stance. It was a step in the right direction, Doliber thought, though he doubted it would be repeated. The Guild would never permit anything overt, only minor manipulation from behind the scenes, and only when one of their own was involved.

Such a damn waste of power.

With the Guild's Warrant in hand, Doliber decided to depart, seeing no point in hanging around. Yet, as he turned to leave, the Guildmaster halted him.

"I must say, I was impressed with the way you handled yourself in this matter."

Doliber turned to look at the Guildmaster, and saw the man straight-faced. For a second, he'd thought the compliment was made in jest, but clearly it was sincere.

"Thank you," Doliber simply replied, feeling there was nothing else to say.

The Guildmaster would not leave it at that, and continued. "Many on the senior council share my assessment, that it is far time you took your Master's exam."

The offer was genuine. Doliber could see it in the Guildmaster's eyes, and for a fleeting second he felt prideful. Many warlocks served for decades before they earned the chance to qualify for the Master's examinations. He was barely thirty, and here was the opportunity being handed to *him*, of all people. However, the joy of the moment quickly faded, as Doliber questioned their motives. Why would the Guild wish to elevate someone like him to Master's status? Was it out of true admiration, or was there a darker agenda at play?

"Why?" he finally asked.

"Your skill has never been in question," the Guildmaster responded. "You are a uniquely talented student, and it is time you had your chance to better yourself. I

believe the examination process can do that."

The "process" was the thing, Doliber realized. What that would entail was anyone's guess, as none but a full-fledged Master knew the particulars. It was said to be a course of rigid mental discipline, to purge emotions and focus spellcasting skills. To become a Master, you had to conform, and it was something Sheriff Doliber was not prepared to do.

"No," he answered after brief consideration.

The Guildmaster smiled and folded his hands together. "Of course, that is your prerogative. If you wish to remain a Journeyman your whole life, no one can stop you. However, I would advise you take some time to consider it. The council's offer will remain open... for a while."

Doliber nodded slightly and headed out, walking down the long hallway leading to the front door. Stopping to pull on his boots and jacket, he couldn't wait to get back to Selwood and the life he was building for himself there. It wasn't the most glamorous life, but it was his just the same.

End of West of the Warlock

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