

From the Tales of Easie Damasco...

Giant Thief

David Tallerman



Cover: Angelo Rinaldi

GIANT THIEF

“Best known for an eclectic variety of short stories, Tallerman debuts with a breezy novel of a man with his eye on the prize. Easie Damasco is a thief. His priorities are simple: find something to steal, steal it, run like hell, and try not to get caught. Unfortunately, it’s a bit hard to steal a giant and not be noticed. Tallerman’s charming, devil-may-care hero has plenty of swashbuckling roguishness to carry him through the planned sequels.”

Publishers Weekly

“A fast-paced, witty and original fantasy, reminiscent of Scott Lynch and Fritz Leiber.”

*Adrian Tchaikovsky, author of The
Shadows of the Apt series*

“Fast-paced, quick-witted, engaging; as apt a description of Easie Damasco, reluctant hero, as of the novel itself.”

*Juliet E. McKenna, author of the The Tales
of Einarinn series*

an excerpt from
GIANT THIEF
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by David Tallerman

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CHAPTER 1

The sun was going down by the time they decided to hang me.

In fairness, they hadn't rushed the decision. They'd been debating it for almost an hour since my capture and initial beating. One of the three was in favour of handing me over to an officer from amongst the regulars. The second had been determined to slit my throat, and was so set in his opinion that I'd hoped he might make a start with his companions. On that basis, I'd decided to lend him my encouragement. "He's right, you know. It's quick, but painful, and less messy than you might expect."

All that had earned me was a particularly vicious kick to the forehead, so I'd settled for the occasional nod or mumble of assent instead.

I'd often been told that sooner or later I'd steal the wrong thing from the wrong person and end up with my neck in a noose. While I'd occasionally suspected there was some truth to the theory, I'd made a point of trying not to think about it. Hanging

struck me as a needlessly drawn out and unpleasant way to go, so I'd comforted myself with the knowledge that – law enforcement in the Castoval being what it is – I'd never need to worry unless I got careless or exceptionally stupid.

That day, unfortunately, I'd been both.

The debate went on, and I followed it as best I could, while surreptitiously dodging their clouts and trying to work my hands free. Despite their posturing, I felt sure they had recently been fishermen, likely down from the coast above *Aspira Nero*. They wore no colours, and no armour except for leather bracers and skullcaps. Their amber skin was weathered and leathery from sea spray; their speech was thick, and as rough as their manners. I was heartily bored of their company by the time they reached a consensus, not to mention tired of the irregular blows.

One – the tallest, his face glossy and flushed behind a straggle of beard – turned to me and said, "You hear that? We're going to string you up." He was the one who'd been arguing for it all along.

"I heard. I still think you'd be better off with throat slitting. It's much more straightforward, and I'd be less likely to foul myself. Still, it's your time to waste, I suppose."

"That it is," he agreed, darting a warning glance at his companion, who was toying sulkily with a bone-handled dagger.

If they'd decided my sentence beyond question, I could see no harm in telling what I thought of him.

"I suppose it would be too much to expect any finesse from someone so oafish and malodorous, and whose mother in all likelihood—"

I'd planned much more, but my concentration was broken by another whack to the head, this one hard enough to knock me down. For an instant, everything went black. The next I knew, my lips tasted of blood, and though the blood was mingled with dirt, I could tell I was no longer on the ground. There was something rough and warm between my legs and something else tight around my throat. The warm thing identified itself by whinnying irritably. The other I recognised without any assistance.

I considered not opening my eyes. It didn't seem likely to be fruitful. Then it occurred to me that I didn't want to die in darkness. But the view was disappointing. Everything was as I'd left it: the road still stretched to our left, still busy with traffic meandering toward the encampment ahead; the fishermen's cart still sat upon the grass; the old beech tree was where it had been all afternoon. My view of it was a little different, though, now that I was suspended from one of its branches. The moon was clearer in the sky, the sun almost gone. I judged that only a few minutes had passed since they'd settled my fate.

"He's awake," observed the shortest, the one with the obsession for throat slitting.

"I am," I said, the words garbled a little by the noose around my throat. "So can we get on, please? There's a nip in the air, I fear it's going to be a cold night."

I'd like to think this sounded courageous. More likely, the impression was of fear-maddened babbling.

"He's right," the tallest agreed, "who wants to stand around in the cold? Let's get it over with." He turned his attention to me. "What's your name again?"

"Damasco," I told him, for the third time. "Easie Damasco. Remember it when my seven brothers come to avenge me in the night."

"Damasco," he said, "do you have any last words? Be civil and perhaps we'll pull on your legs for you."

"I'll simply remind you of my complete innocence. You may not see it, but your gods will, mark my words. Justice will be served in this life or another."

"Ha! Goodbye, Damasco."

There were other things I wanted to say, and they seemed tremendously important. Just then, however, he motioned with one hand to someone behind me. I heard the swish of a lash, the horse complained, and suddenly there was nothing between me and the ground except air.

I tried to reach for the noose, forgetting that my hands were tied behind my back. One shoulder cracked unpleasantly, and I gave up the attempt. For the first time, I began to panic. I thrashed my legs, as if this might somehow bridge the gap between feet and ground. I tried to scream, and heard a sound like water burbling, which was strangled off immediately. The pain in my throat was astonishing. It seemed to surge outward, filling my extremities,

draining them of strength. Still, I struggled. I knew on some deep level that if I once stopped moving I'd be dead. But my energy was fading by the moment.

"What do you think you're doing?"

Something went "thud" above me. An instant later, incomprehensibly, I was falling hard into tall grass. I landed feet first, and tumbled backward. Gritting my teeth, I struggled to my feet. I was surprised to find that I'd closed my eyes at some point and opened them again, looking to where I thought the voice had come from.

There were a dozen riders, all similarly dressed, but he stood out like a hawk amongst sparrows. There was little physically to distinguish him: his horse stood a hand or two taller, his cloak and armour were evidently expensive, though devoid of decoration. His skin was noticeably darker than my own olive brown, his hair and thin beard bound into coils with whorls of wire, his features sharply angled. Though the effect was striking, the characteristics were typical of many a northerner. What told me this was the warlord Moaradrid of Shoan was something altogether more subtle. It was in his bearing, in the way his black eyes darted over us, in the intensity of his smallest gestures. He exuded authority, even at rest.

Other than that, his only mark of rank was the deference paid by his bodyguards. One still had his bow hoisted. I followed the angle and saw where his arrow had sliced my noose free at the bough. The three fishermen had fallen to their knees, with their

brows scraping the roadside. I thought it prudent to follow their example.

"Do we waste men?" asked Moaradrid.

Every syllable had weight. The composite effect was like a rockslide.

"Your majesty, sir..."

"Do we waste capable men?"

"No lord, but we caught him stealing from the baggage train—"

"Then he has use of hands and feet."

"Yes sir, only—"

"You," he said to me, "do you want to be hanged?"

"Truthfully, I find the prospect unappealing," I replied.

My throat still felt constricted, and the words stung like salt in a cut.

"Would you prefer to serve in my army?"

"That, lord, was precisely why I was here, before these ruffians misguidedly apprehended me, and—"

"Take him to a volunteer brigade," said Moaradrid, speaking again to the self-declared leader of the fishermen.

He turned away, drove his heels into his mount's flank, and started up the road. His bodyguard fell in around him.

I watched him go without interference from my newfound companions, who seemed to be still in a state of shock. I couldn't help but admire his posture, the simple elegance of his dress, and the way his free hand rested on the pommel of his scimitar.

What most impressed me, though, was the size of the coin-bag just visible at his waist.

“Back there... you were about to say something about my mother.”

“I was?”

“You were.”

“I’m surprised by that. I’m not generally the sort to comment on someone’s parentage. It would take unusual provocation to make me to sink that low.”

Costas – the self-appointed leader – snorted and turned away. He had been trying to pick a fight for the last five minutes, and while I wasn’t averse in theory, I was hardly in a suitable state. I’d been exhausted and half starved when they caught me. They wouldn’t have done so otherwise, and for that matter, I wouldn’t have lowered myself to pilfering from a baggage train. The subsequent beating and hanging hadn’t done much to improve my condition.

Costas was certainly tall, but he was lanky, and under normal circumstances, I reckoned I could have handled him. The short one, Armando, was more of a danger, and the middle one, who’d hardly spoken, remained an unknown quantity. In any case, it was three against one, so I’d thought it wise to try to play nice. Costas hadn’t been making it easy, and I was glad he’d finally lost interest.

I was sat with Costas and the quiet one in the back of the cart, perched on crates that reeked of cabbage and dried fish past its prime. The road was poor and

the cart's suspension was long gone, if it had ever had any, but it was marginally better than walking.

"So what's this volunteer brigade then?" It seemed a more neutral topic of conversation. All three ignored me at first, so I added, "Better work than being a sword for hire, I imagine?"

Armando sniggered from the driver's board.

"You'll see."

"It can't be that bad."

"Can't it?"

This was getting me nowhere, and I thought I knew the answer anyway. It was likely one of the reasons Moaradrid was down here in the Castoval, rather than up in the far north where he belonged. The plains beyond Pasaeda were a miserable place, neglected by the king because there was nothing there worth having. They were home to countless tribes, most nomadic, and traditionally they spent their time fighting between each other over women and horses, not necessarily in that order.

Moaradrid had changed all that. In so doing, he had united a third of the tribes together within the space of a year. His initiative was simple: where others had been content to take a new wife and a good stallion from a defeated enemy, Moaradrid took their warlord's head and all of their fighting men.

Making one last bid for a safe subject, I began, "I imagine there are plenty of opportunities here for a resourceful and hard-working sort like myself."

"Maybe, if you survive the night." That was Costas.

"Of course," I agreed cheerfully.

"Which you won't. You don't get it, do you? You'll be lucky if they give you a weapon. The volunteers' job is to line up and throw themselves at the enemy until they're all dead or you are. If you're still useful after that then maybe they'll let you into the regulars. But odds are you'll be dead or worse."

Though I was intrigued by the question of what might be worse than being dead, I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of asking. There was one question, however, that was burning in my mind. Until a couple of weeks ago, Moaradrid's campaign had been amusing tavern gossip. Then he'd changed direction. It made a certain sense; eventually he was going to come into contention with the king, however oblivious the old fool was, and it would take more than a horde of unruly plainsmen to profit from that encounter. What had me curious was what had happened next. Most of Moaradrid's force had camped here on the plain near Aspira Nero, while the warlord himself and a small retinue had journeyed on. They had avoided the hastily gathered southern defenders, and hardly a drop of blood had been shed on either side. Now here he was again. I'd watched them passing for a while before I'd decided to chance my hand with the baggage cart. Amongst the fighting men had been a succession of large covered wagons, their contents invisible.

What was Moaradrid up to?

Even if these three knew, which I doubted, I'd missed my chance to ask. We'd been trundling

steadily toward the main camp for about an hour. The last daylight was gone, and the bulbous moon hung low in an overcast sky. I'd identified the camp by a few angular silhouettes near the river that must be tents, some widely spaced fires burning higher up the slope on our right, and by the stink, which had been building for the last few minutes. I couldn't make out any details, but that rank conference of scents gave me a fair idea of how many bodies were waiting for us ahead.

I knew this region. It was at a point where the Casto Mara swung close to the eastern foothills, near the mouth of the valley. The only nearby town was *Aspira Nero*, which marked the boundary of the Castoval and the court-controlled Midlands, and was generally considered neutral territory. Here there were only small farms, with olive plantations higher up the slopes and rice grown on the riverbank. It would have been good land except for reliable yearly floods that turned it into a swamp. I wondered where all the locals had gone. Perhaps they were dead. Perhaps I'd been meeting them soon as fellow volunteers.

At the edge of the camp – an arbitrary distinction given how unruly it was – we were stopped by a guard, a plainsman with his hair slung in a single braid over one shoulder.

"Where are you headed?" he asked without interest.

"These men," I said quickly, "are mercenaries of the cheaper sort. I am a volunteer, come to serve

Moaradrid with my youthful vigour and courage.”

“But not with your sword?” he asked, looking at my empty belt.

“It was stolen by bandits,” I told him sadly. “I killed nearly a dozen, then thought it prudent to leave unarmed but intact. I’m sure someone will be good enough to loan me a new one.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

He waved over a colleague, who was lounging nearby against a post.

“Take him to the disposables,” he ordered, pointing at me.

The soldier grunted, and motioned for me to climb down. The officer said something to Armando as I did so, and the moment my heels struck the ground the cart lurched forward.

“Good luck, volunteer,” called Costas. He spat after me, missing by an arm’s length.

“May your aim be as precise when your life depends on it,” I shouted back.

My escort glared at me, and fingered the handle of his sword where it hung from his cloth belt. The sash was a reddish-purple, like a fresh bruise: the colour of Moaradrid. That meant he was a regular. I decided it might be better not to annoy him further.

“Shall we go?” I suggested.

He grunted again, and set off into the camp. I fell in behind.

Moaradrid’s campsite was, frankly, a shambles. I got the impression that the vast majority of his troops had spent the last few nights in the open,

with only the officers and veterans housed in the tents and commandeered farm buildings down by the water's edge. The fact that they hadn't bothered to make more permanent arrangements suggested they didn't intend to stay much longer. That in turn meant a battle was probably imminent. I knew our army was located nearby to the north. Now that Moaradrid was back from his mysterious journey, it seemed inevitable that the long-brewing conflict would come to a head.

Of course, it wasn't really "our" army – or at least, not mine. I was now the enemy, strictly speaking. It was a depressing thought, on many levels.

To cheer myself, I drew from the folds of my cloak the stash of food I'd taken from the cart: a hunk of bread, a quarter of wilted cabbage, and some foul-smelling fish. The bread seemed least unappetising, so I tore a lump and chewed ruminatively. I broke it in half when my escort stopped to glare at me and offered him the remainder.

"Stolen?" he asked.

"Not from here," I said, fairly truthfully. In fact, I'd acquired it just before the officer stopped us at the camp border.

"I'll have some fish as well then," he told me, so I halved that too.

After he'd eaten his share and kept it down, I followed his example. It was surprisingly good – though since I was starving, my own boots would have probably tasted delectable right then. The soldier finished his bread as well, then took a swig from

a water skin and handed it to me. It turned out to contain wine. Though objectively I knew it was vinegary and heavily diluted, it too seemed delicious. I grinned at him gratefully, but he only grabbed the skin back and kept walking.

We'd been heading upwards all the while. I couldn't tell much beyond that. While the moon was almost full, it was cloudy, with a storm brewing over the eastern hills. The only real light was from campfires, and there weren't many of those, maybe due to the scarcity of wood this close to the river but perhaps also because Moaradrid didn't want to betray his numbers. My escort seemed to know where he was going, which implied that there was some order to the gaggles of men and bright spots of firelight. That didn't help me much. If I was going to escape before the battle, as I was determined I would, I'd need a better idea of where I was.

We came to a halt. There was a pitifully small fire, close to a stunted olive tree and what appeared to be a large upright rock like an obelisk. There were figures around the fire, though I couldn't judge how many. I could only count the innermost few and those were evidently a favoured minority. My escort glanced around. His night vision was better than mine, because he focused on one black shape no different from any other and called, "Lugos, how are your numbers?"

A stocky man loomed out of the darkness. "I've lost two to sickness, and one in a knife fight." His voice was coarse yet high-pitched, and the flickering

orange glow upon only half his face served to emphasise his ugliness. "Why, have you brought me a new body?"

"I have if you want him. He's skinny and a thief. That hardly matters for what you want, eh?"

The man named Lugos turned to me. "Not at all," he said. "Skinny thieves die just as well as other men."

"My name is Easie Damasco," I said, "and stealing once to fend off starvation doesn't make me a thief."

"Who cares? Sure, I'll take him off your hands," he said, and my escort nodded and turned back the way we'd come. Then, to me, he continued, "Damasco is it? There's a few rules you'll need to know. Do what I tell you. Don't argue. When it comes to it, don't run away. And don't mess with Leon and Saltlick."

"I think I can remember all that. Who are Leon and Saltlick?"

"Here, I'll introduce you, and you'll know who to keep away from."

He led me around the campfire. One or two men cried out as we trampled blindly on their extremities, then shut up quickly when they recognised Lugos. We stopped near to the large rock I'd noticed before. There was a lean figure sat at its base, and he looked up as we drew close. He seemed surprisingly young to have been singled out for whatever special authority he had.

"This is Leon," Lugos said, and Leon waved a skinny hand at me. "And that," he went on, pointing

to the black mass the boy was resting against, “is Saltlick.”

“What? Behind that rock?”

Leon chuckled, and Lugos barked out a laugh. I wondered what could be so funny – until the rock moved. The clouds flurried away from the moon for an instant, and I saw a monstrous hand, each finger as long as my head. I leaped backward, and Lugos gripped my arm and held it tight.

“Careful,” he said. “Or Saltlick might just decide you’re food.”

CHAPTER 2

The night wore on. I tried hard not to think about what was coming when it ended.

A pack of cards materialised from somewhere, and one of my shadowy companions suggested a few rounds of Lost Chicken. In an hour, I managed to turn my quarter of cabbage into a hunk of unidentifiable meat, a few coppers, two more loaves of bread, and a small, cheaply crafted knife. Normally I'd have found such success cheering, but my thoughts kept getting in the way, however much I tried to avoid them.

I'd reached the conclusion that escape was possible but unlikely. Moaradrid wasn't an idiot. Realising that most of his troops would rather be somewhere else, he had sentries patrolling all around the camp borders. I'd heard them whistling to each other in bad imitation of various night birds. There would be plenty of guards within the encampment as well. The risk of fleeing, in my state of borderline exhaustion, far exceeded the hope of success. I was stuck

there. I would likely get my first taste of war before the sun came up.

And that wasn't even the worst of it.

I had no doubt, after what I'd seen, that I'd be on the winning side. I would normally have taken some consolation from that, but just then it was difficult to do so. While I had no love of its authorities, who insisted on putting my name on "wanted" lists and generally trying to catch and jail me, the Castoval was my home and I was fond of it. I didn't want to see it crushed under the heel of a tyrant. I didn't want to see it overrun by monsters.

Yet that was apparently to be its fate. Moaradrid had found himself a weapon that the Castovalians couldn't defend against.

Later, when the sky had lightened to a drab charcoal grey, Lugos stoked the fire and heated some soup, which was doled out in dirty wooden bowls. In a rare act of charity, or more likely defeatism, I shared my bread and meat amongst my closest companions. I received a little weary gratitude in return. Most of them spoke with such wild accents or thick dialects that they might as well have been talking another language for all I understood. We were a group of strangers gathered from the length and breadth of the land, and all we had in common was our future, which was likely to be short. No wonder the atmosphere was grim.

The soup – mostly water and rice, with a few chunks of turnip and scraps of goat meat floating on the surface – was warming, at least, and my appetite

made it seem better than it was. That, together with my acquisitions from cards, left me feeling full for the first time in longer than I could remember. I wouldn't die hungry, at any rate.

We'd barely finished eating when Lugos, now dressed in a hauberk and tattered leather helmet, stepped up close to the fire and shouted, "Listen up, fifth volunteers."

I assumed that was us.

"We'll be going into battle soon. It won't be fun, but if you do your best you might just survive. Don't try to run. There'll be archers on hand and they'll make sure you don't get far. Most importantly, keep away from the giant. He answers to three people only: Moaradrid, Leon, and myself. Anyone else he's likely to step on. That's all. Fight like the bastards you are."

It wasn't the most motivating speech I'd ever heard. It did, however, make me wonder again about the hulking thing they called Saltlick. We Castovalians knew in theory that the giants existed, somewhere high in the southern mountains, but they'd always minded their own business and we'd been more than happy to leave them to it. The arrangement had stood for generations – we didn't bother them, they didn't bother us – until their existence had become little more than legend. What could have drawn them down into the Castoval? What threat or promise could Moaradrid have used to bind them to his cause?

The sun was just below the horizon. The sky was

a miserable wash of grey, rising from a sickly shade touched with yellow just above the hills, through deep storm cloud hues, to almost black far above us. The light was at that tricky stage it reaches just before dawn, but I could see the giant clearly. He stood back from the rest of us, in a wide clearing amidst the forest of bodies. Lugos's orders seemed superfluous since no one was going anywhere near him. He was as tall as two big men and about as broad. He looked only slightly less like a rock than he had by moonlight.

Lugos had no illusions that we were anything other than what we were: a bunch of potential escapees. He didn't try to make us behave like professional soldiers, or any kind of soldiers for that matter. He had a couple of henchmen drawn from the regulars, both of whom carried bows and wore short swords. A few of us were armed too, with wooden cudgels and staves. If we'd been less dispirited, an insurrection might not have been out of the question. I would cheerfully have jabbed my new knife into Lugos's throat given the chance. What would it have achieved, though? In the midst of Moaradrid's camp, and with that giant towering over us, we wouldn't get far.

So we followed his orders, such as they were. Lugos bullied us into two straggling lines and, after a brief discussion with another officer who'd ridden up from the main force, set us off at a fast trot, angling slightly uphill and northward.

It was still dark below, and I couldn't tell much

about the disposition of the two armies. Banners stood out as stains of colour in the defender's camp, but Moaradrid apparently disdained such frivolity, marking his divisions by some other means. He'd kept his army all together on the eastern bank, whereas the Castovalians had a small force on the western side of the Casto Mara, with their back line around the bridge. It was the only thing of any strategic value nearby, unless your strategy involved rice and olives. Their force, made up of militias from the towns, were mostly on horseback, and fast enough that if the fight went against them they could fall back and demolish the bridge behind them. It was a sound plan as far as I could judge, one that played to their strengths and the terrain.

They still didn't stand a chance.

As for us, our function was becoming clear. When we came to a halt, I could see two more platoons of bedraggled volunteers on our right. Lugos had us line up four layers deep, and the giant lumbered in behind us, Leon knelt clinging to a platform that rested over its shoulders. The other platoons assumed a similar arrangement; between us, we covered a good length of the hillside. We were a cordon, there to stop the defenders fleeing into the hills. It didn't matter if we were competent or not, or even if we fought back. While they were tangled up with trampling over us they would be cut down from behind.

Something had begun to happen in the valley. Horns blasted the air. A steady drumming started,

which rose and rose until I realised it was actually the pound of feet, backed with a bass rhythm of hoof beats. A fine rain began at that same moment, and the sun finally breached over the horizon, deathly pale and shrunken by its blanket of cloud.

The lines of battle met with a crash that echoed between the hills and seemed outrageously loud even from our vantage point. Clashes of metal on metal joined the turmoil. The two dark masses swelled and churned against each other, until it was impossible to tell them apart, or to say if one was doing better than the other.

Moaradrid knew his business. What better time could he have chosen to unleash his new troops than at dawn, when they would be nothing but monstrous shapes plummeting out of the gloom? Had he planned for the rain as well? It was tearing from the sky, which had sunk back into nighttime blackness, with only odd shafts of light pricking through.

I don't know how long it went on for. Time didn't mean much right then. At some point, though, it became apparent that the defenders were losing ground. I imagined, with my lack of military knowledge, that they might just be feinting, backing off from one point only to swing round on another. Maybe to some extent I was right. Still, in general it seemed they were being forced back, and more and more as the morning wore on.

I was sure that Moaradrid must have more giants in reserve. I'd seen at least four dozen of the myste-

rious covered wagons go past before they'd caught me. Each of the three volunteer brigades had one giant as backup, and that was all I'd seen of them. We were too far away for the defenders to be aware of their existence, so Moaradrid's element of surprise remained intact. What was he waiting for?

There were signs that the defenders were falling back in earnest. They were drawing in their flanks around the bridge, although no one had made a move to cross as yet. Moaradrid's troops took the opportunity to spread out around them, manoeuvring northward and onto the higher ground beneath us. If the Castovalians would only flee towards the west, I'd be safe. The Castoval would probably be lost, but that didn't seem very important by then. Let them just escape over that bridge and it would all be over.

Below the bridge, beyond the fighting, something drew my gaze. The water was churning white, as if rocks had plunged up through the surface and the river was battering against them.

No. Not rocks. It was the giants.

The river was shallower there but men still couldn't have hoped to cross, not even on horseback. The giants could, though. Their heads were bobbing dots haloed with foam, moving with painful slowness. I hoped they'd be swept away. Surely, nothing could be strong enough to push through that rain-swollen torrent. Even as I thought it, a pair of shoulders bore out of the flow, grew a torso and arms, and thighs thick as tree trunks.

The defenders, caught up in their retreat, already focused on attacks from three sides, remained oblivious. Even as the last giant broke free and dragged itself ashore, even as they lumbered towards the Castovalians holding the west bank, no one looked their way. It was only when the rearmost riders started over the bridge and saw huge shapes striding inexorably down on them that the panic began. The handful of men holding the far bank routed instantly. The main force, unaware of what was taking place across the river, were still trying to withdraw. The giants marched nearer. Those already on the bridge found themselves pressed from both sides. The bridge itself began to weaken under the strain. Timbers splintered into the waves beneath.

The Castovalians were already in chaos by the time the giants reached them. I glanced away, my eyes stinging. When I looked back, one giant had a horse raised over its head, the rider still dangling from the stirrups. As I watched, both horse and rider were hurled back into the fray. I thought I could make out the animal's scream against the clamour of background noise.

Moaradrid's main force, meanwhile, was still hammering against their front. The defenders had collapsed into a clumsy wedge, with the horsemen – worse than useless in such close confines – pressed towards the centre. The bridge sagged at its middle, and then split like wet paper, plunging a last few bodies beneath the waves. That slowed the giants, at least. They lined up on the west bank, as if unsure

what to do next.

The Castovalian cavalry, what few of them remained, chose that moment to try to break free. They charged in a single mass against their opponents. The ranks bulged, and held. The Castovalians wheeled back, and drove forward once more, clustered even more tightly. This time Moaradrid's lines buckled. The riders surged through, aiming directly uphill.

That meant they were heading straight towards the middle of the three volunteer platoons, which brought a ragged cheer from my own.

Then, at the last minute, having drawn that middle platoon a little way down the slope, they swung in our direction. They were incredibly fast. They'd succeeded in creating a diagonal gap in our lines, and they pushed hard for that slim chance of an opening. There were perhaps two hundred of them, nothing compared with how many must have ridden out in the night. I recognised insignia from five different towns. In the forefront, two horsemen were picking the way: the leader small and slight, wearing a close helm over dark hair that streamed behind, the other large to the point of fatness and somehow familiar-seeming.

I'd no time to wonder why. They'd be on us in seconds. I decided I'd stay close to Lugos. Either he was a good officer who'd try to protect his men or, a thousand times more likely, he was a rodent who'd sacrifice every one of us to keep his own skin whole. Whichever the case, it seemed sensible to be near

him. I edged forward a row, and darted to my left.

Lugos picked that moment to turn part way around and shout back, "Hold your ground, you sons of whores!"

An instant later, we were failing to do precisely that.

Many of the riders were wielding outstretched short bows. As the head of their group dashed for the diminishing gap, the tail fanned out and slowed, and those archers unleashed a volley in our direction. If it was clumsy, it was no less devastating, since no one was prepared to stand and be shot at. Those that didn't go down under the fire panicked and broke in all directions. I stood like an idiot, watching black shafts plummet through the air towards me. It was a few moments before I even realised I hadn't been shot.

At least I was still close to Lugos. I saw that he was pointing and screaming something. There was an arrow embedded in his shoulder, with the tip just visible above his shoulder blade, though he seemed not to have noticed. He wasn't pointing at me but past me, towards the back of our beleaguered platoon. I followed his finger.

There was the giant, Saltlick. He waited motionless, with arrows raining around him and a couple stuck in him, one jutting from his chest and another above his knee. He was faring better than young Leon, who hung limp below the giant's waist, yet another arrow broken off in his neck.

"You," Lugos screeched, "get up there! Make that

bastard monster do something useful!"

Well, I wasn't about to do that, though I didn't mind the idea of having my own giant. "How do I make it obey me?"

Lugos looked like he wanted to kill me for my stupidity. Instead, he caught my arm and broke into a run.

Our shattered platoon had dissolved into a sheep pen with a dozen wolves at one end. The Castovilians knew why we were there, and that every moment's delay would cost them dearly. So they were herding us. A few had hung back to keep the way open while the remainder drove on for the hilltop. The stragglers continued to plunge through us like a sword through butter, spreading waves of bodies to either side. One rider swung so close that I could clearly make out the tang of his horse's sweat and hear its laboured breathing.

Lugos followed its passage with his eyes and happened to notice his shoulder, with the fletching protruding there.

"Shit," he said quietly.

This time, I gripped his arm – the one that wasn't leaking blood, sadly – and led him. "The giant," I reminded him.

When he looked up his eyes were glassy. "There's an arrow in my arm," he said resentfully.

"We all have our problems," I replied, and kept dragging.

The giant still hadn't moved by the time we reached him. Both sides were avoiding him now.

The last few horsemen were almost past us and my erstwhile colleagues, despite fleeing every which way, had somehow managed to leave this one area clear. I saw him properly then for the first time. Apart from a cloth skirt around his waist, he wore nothing except a leather harness strapped around his shoulders and chest. It supported a sort of wooden platform, like a horizontal stocks, that fitted round his neck. Poor Leon dangled from a tether attached to one corner, his last expression one of total bafflement.

"Hello again, Saltlick," I called.

The giant ignored me.

"How do I make him listen?" I asked Lugos.

His concentration had drifted back to the wound in his shoulder. I shook him gently.

"Lugos, we need the giant. To protect ourselves."

He looked at me.

"To protect you, sir," I corrected.

"The giant?"

"That giant." I pointed.

"Oh." He looked up. "Saltlick. *Saltlick*. Listen to me, you pig's arse."

Saltlick's gaze drifted towards us. I couldn't read any expression on those vast, impassive features.

"It's me, Lugos. Lugos, who was appointed over you by Moaradrid himself. This man here..." He paused, and hissed, "What's your name?" Then, "This man, Easie Damasco, is your new rider, do you hear? You'll do whatever he tells you, until you hear otherwise from Moaradrid or me."

Saltlick nodded slowly.

“Good,” Lugos said, “that’s good.”

He crumpled backwards.

I assumed he’d just fainted, since his wound didn’t look mortal. My first urge was to kick him, but glancing downhill, I saw Moaradrid’s main force drifting up the slope. If I were going to make good my newfound advantage, I’d have to do it quickly. I gave Lugos’s prone body a rueful glance and turned back to examining the giant. There was no obvious way up his front that didn’t involve climbing Leon’s corpse, so I darted round to inspect the back. The harness there included a net that hung as far as the hem of the cloth skirt. That still left a gap nearly as high as I was. I began to wonder seriously about my plan. What if the giant wasn’t as passive as he seemed? What if he took badly to me climbing his back? One swat would turn me to paste.

Moaradrid’s troops were getting nearer. Saltlick was my best hope for escape, and even for revenge. That suddenly seemed a real and pressing concern, for – standing there amidst broken bodies, some of whom I’d been playing cards with a few hours ago – I felt an uncharacteristic anger building. Who was Moaradrid to behave like this, to drag me into his wretched plans? Suddenly I was almost shaking with fury.

I leaped up, caught the lowest cord of the netting, and scrabbled with my feet against Saltlick’s thigh. He didn’t flinch. I put all my strength into hurling one arm up for a higher hold, brought the other in

behind and, bunching my body, managed to get a foothold. It was relatively easy from there. Not once did the giant try to help or resist me.

I clambered to the platform. The webbing continued across its width, and there was a pole jutting from the outer edge, both presumably intended for the rider to hang onto. Suddenly aware of how high up I was, I did just that. For a few moments I could only kneel there, hanging on for dear life.

Then somebody called out nearby, and I knew somehow it was directed at me. When I dared to look up, I saw that a large force was still pursuing the Castovalian escapees – pretty hopelessly, I thought, since they were out of sight now – and that a small detachment of horsemen had broken off towards us. Their leader was pointing and shouting in my direction. There wasn't much left of my platoon. Those still standing had spread over quite a distance, and were wandering aimlessly. Odds were that the new arrivals were on their way to restore order before anyone got any funny ideas.

It was a little late for that.

"Saltlick, can you hear me?"

No answer.

"Saltlick, are you listening?"

"Listen."

I'd never heard his voice before. It was astonishingly deep. The syllables rubbed together like millstones grinding.

"Good. Saltlick, how would you feel about getting out of here? Going home? No more fighting, no

more being told what to do?"

He took a while to respond, and I wondered if he'd failed to understand again. For all I knew he liked being there, and would turn me in right then, or just crush my skull for disloyalty.

"No more fight?"

"Not if I can help it. Would you like that?"

"No more fight," he agreed.

I grinned, and slapped him firmly on the shoulder.

"Then, Saltlick, it's about time we got out of here."

CHAPTER 3

I'd made enemies of two armies in the space of less than a day.

The survivors from the Castovalian force wouldn't look kindly on my serving against them, however much I might point out that I'd been coerced and done nothing by way of actual fighting. At least the odds of my ever being recognised were slim. Moaradrid's party were a more immediate concern. With the battle over it wouldn't take them long to do a head count and notice one of their giants was missing. I had a decent start, but that wouldn't help much. Fast riders could run us down in no time. All in all, it was a bad fix I'd got myself into.

I was about to make it far worse.

I'd taken a gamble, and directed Saltlick back towards our campsite of the night before – or more precisely, towards where the handful of tents still stood. I reasoned that, while it would lengthen our route if they came after us, there was a chance our pursuers would think we were on some official busi-

ness and leave us alone.

Sure enough, the horsemen who'd been tailing us turned back before we'd gone very far. I heaved a sigh of relief and called for Saltlick to stop.

We were on the edge of the camp proper, some way downhill from where we'd spent the night. There were two dozen tents of various sizes, accompanied by carts, wagons and the oxen that drew them, grey ghosts of campfires, and countless piles of refuse. The ground had been churned into mud, by feet and hooves last night and by the rain this morning, which had eased now to a fine drizzle. It looked more than anything as if the river had flooded and subsided in the space of a few hours. I was pleased to note that there weren't many people around. Those who hadn't been involved in the fighting, craftsmen, menials and the like, had gone to gawp at the battlefield or were busy looting from the dead. There were few guards. Presumably, Moaradrid didn't want able bodies idle in his camp while a battle was raging. Most of what was worth stealing was out there anyway, in the shape of weapons and armour.

It was sound logic. I couldn't help wondering, though, if anyone would go to fight wearing a burdensomely heavy coin bag. Further, I'd spied one tent larger and much grander than the others, guarded by two soldiers who wore the narrow-bladed scimitars favoured by plainsmen. I didn't doubt they knew how to use them. Both looked as if they could chop me into offal without thought or

effort. They were likely from Moaradrid's personal guard, which meant that this was Moaradrid's tent.

I had no rational justification for what I was planning. It was insanity, and I knew it. My only excuse was that I was still seething at the indignities I'd suffered, at the lives Moaradrid had so casually thrown away and the fact that one of them had nearly been mine. If I'd spent that life in trouble of one sort or another, it had always been trouble personal to me. To have it endangered by someone who didn't even know the name Damasco seemed somehow infinitely worse. I felt an overpowering need to scratch that name into Moaradrid's memory.

If I couldn't do that, I could at least ruin his day. Anyway, that glimpse of his coin purse had made a real impression.

Still, I wasn't suicidal.

"There's something I want to do, Saltlick," I said, "down in that tent. I'm going to talk to the guards, and hopefully they'll give me what I ask for, but maybe they won't, and maybe they'll try and hurt me instead. If that happens can I count on you to back me up?"

I was still perched precariously on his shoulder, hanging for dear life from the pole and netting. All I could see of his face consisted of one cauliflower ear, a cheek like an upturned dinner bowl, and hints of eye and mouth. It was difficult trying to talk to him, and disconcerting. I had no way to judge what effect my words were having, if any. When he didn't answer, I assumed he'd failed to follow my meaning.

"If they attack me, will you fight them?"

"No more fight."

I was impressed by how much meaning he crammed into those three syllables.

"I know that's what I said, and I meant it. I'm not asking you to charge in right now and pummel them senseless. I just want to know whether you'll help me if it comes to it, which I'm hopeful and even confident it won't."

More silence. Either he didn't understand or was sulking. Stealing a giant was already starting to seem like an act of bewildering stupidity, and I resolved to lose him in favour of a horse at the first opportunity. It would likely be faster, certainly less traceable, and the conversation might even be better.

In the meantime, a change of tactics was in order.

"First things first, get those arrows out of you. They're unsightly."

Saltlick plucked out the two arrows he'd received during the fighting, as I would have a thorn that was causing some mild discomfort. He didn't even flinch. The only sign he felt any resentment at being shot was the way he crunched the shafts into splinters before dropping them.

"That's better. Now, go over to that tent," I said, pointing. "Go along with what I say, and try to look uncomfortable."

Saltlick lumbered the last distance to the bruised pavilion, and came to a halt in front of the two guards. They looked up enquiringly, yet without any obvious surprise that a giant stood in front of them.

That was promising as far as my plan was concerned.

“Business?” asked the one on the right.

“Urgent, and by direct order of Moaradrid.”

He didn’t answer, only continued to scowl at me steadily.

“He’s sent me for the medicine.”

Still no answer. It was obviously going to be a day for one-sided conversations.

“This one’s sick, and maybe some of the others too. Moaradrid’s sent us for the bottle of medicine he keeps. He said it was crucial it be brought to him immediately.”

“What’s the day word?” interrupted the other guard.

A number of words immediately went through my head. I doubted any of them were the one he was after. “Moaradrid never said anything about that. Look, as much as I’d like to pass my morning exchanging niceties with you, I have my orders, and I’d rather not be beheaded for disobeying them if it’s all the same.”

“No day word, no entry.” That was the first guard again.

Here was my opportunity to abandon the whole foolish endeavour and flee while our absence was still unnoticed. I’ve never been good at walking away from a challenge though, especially one with the possibility of coin at the end of it. “It occurs to me that I don’t even need to go inside,” I said. “One of you can go in my place. It’s a bottle, about so high, it will likely say medicine or have a picture of

a giant on it or some such. Probably glass or perhaps clay. If you could bring it to me then I'll be on my way."

Neither of them moved so much as an eyelash.

"Damn it," I cried, "this poor creature has an enflamed gastric distension, and while we're standing here talking it's only going to get worse."

In a flash of inspiration, I slipped my knife from where I'd been keeping it in my boot, and nicked Saltlick's shoulder. He grunted irritably.

"Do you really want to be responsible for that? Do you want to be the one cleaning up the mess when it finally bursts?"

I thought I saw the slightest hint of concern pass across their faces.

"What does it look like again?" asked the leftmost.

"A bottle. Of medicine."

He nodded, and ducked inside the tent flap. A minute passed, and another. Clattering sounds echoed out to us. The flap twitched, finally, and he stepped out. He held up a rounded flask of grey pot.

"Oh dear," I said, and sighed with theatrical exasperation. "Kneel, Saltlick."

He obeyed, and I climbed down the netting on his back, trying hard to look as though it wasn't the first time I'd done it. I strode to the guard, snatched the flask from him, and waved it in his face. He actually flinched.

"Do you know what this is?"

"Medicine?"

"No. Not medicine."

I pulled out the stopper, and sniffed. From the rank, peppery odour, it might actually have been some herbal remedy. I took a long swig – or rather, feigned one, an old trick I’d perfected from hustling at cards. Still, a little slipped down my throat. It tasted worse than it smelled, and I hoped it wasn’t poisonous. When I was sure I wouldn’t throw up, I grinned, and said, “Medicine for a man’s soul, perhaps, but not much good for his body. We’d best return this for when Moaradrid wants to celebrate his victory.”

I moved towards the entrance of the tent.

An iron grasp on my shoulder held me back. It was the guard who’d brought the bottle out. I stood very still. From the strength in his fingers, I suspected my arm might snap if I didn’t.

“Look,” I said, as calmly as I could manage, “why don’t you come with me? You can stand sentry just as well inside as out, can’t you? Only, I have to find this medicine or we’re going to be up to our necks in – well, let’s just say we’ll all be happier if it doesn’t come to that.”

I craned my head to see his face, and tried to judge what was going through his mind. It was about as helpful as watching a tree to see whether it was growing. Eventually, however, he turned to his companion and said, “One minute.”

His grip on my shoulder turned into a shove; I tumbled into the tent. It was very dark inside, and what little light came through the flap was cut off when the guard stepped in behind me. A lamp hung

from a bracket inside the smoke hole, an elegant construction of black iron patterned with stars and diamonds of coloured glass, but it was extinguished, as was the hearth beneath it. My escort paced past me, tore the flask I was still carrying from my fingers, and returned it to its place on a low set of shelves to our right. Beside the shelves was a large collapsible table, with maps, charts, and other papers spread over its surface. The only sign of luxury was a few patterned rugs tossed over the dirt floor, seemingly at random. Most of the remaining space was taken up with the bed, a low wooden frame draped with furs.

Looking past, I saw the metal-bound chest beside it. My heart clenched.

“Did you look in there?” I asked, pointing.

“It’s locked.”

Well, of course.

“I’m sure Moaradrid would have mentioned that. It’s probably just stiff.”

I walked over to it and kneeled down. It was large and decorative, made of some reddish wood and ornamented with a flowing geometric pattern along the metal bindings. All that really interested me, though, was the lock. It looked like a standard five-pin tumbler, and not a very sophisticated one at that, for all its artistic embellishment. I kept my body between it and my escort and drew my picks.

“Are you sure there’s nothing on that table?” I called.

“I’ve looked.”

"Well look again, can't you? Perhaps if you lit that lamp we could both see better."

Sliding in a pick, I sought for the back pin. When I was sure I'd found it, I followed up with the tension wrench. The back pin and the fourth broke easily, and I started to feel confident.

"What are you doing?"

"I think it's caught on something. Give me a moment..."

The third was trickier. I kept misjudging, and losing it. At last it broke, with a definite click. I moved straight to the second, and an instant later, that went too.

There were footsteps on the carpeted floor. He was coming towards me.

The front pin was another difficult one, or my nerves were getting in the way. My fingers were greasy with sweat.

"Get away from there..."

My tension wrench turned as the cylinder popped. In one motion, I palmed my picks, swung the lid up, and reached in with my free hand. "Ah, there we are. There's nothing in here, though, only clothes. I'm sure he said..."

My fingers closed on rough leather. I snatched my hand back and let the lid drop.

"No, nothing," I said, slipping the bag inside my cloak and into the hidden pocket I had sewn there. "How about you?"

"Stand up," he said, "and get away from that."

"Fine. I told you, there's nothing here but clothes."

Have you found it?"

His hands were clearly empty. Instead of answering, he glared as if he'd like to strangle me.

I pointed past him. "What's that?"

It was the pot flask he'd originally brought out, sat on the shelf where he'd left it. I marched over before he could stop me, and called, "This might be what we're after."

"That," he said, anger dripping from every word, "is the one I gave you."

"Is it? Are you sure?"

I pulled the stopper, sniffed, and tried not to gag at the familiar odour.

"Really? Now that I think about it, it does smell something like medicine. Could it be...?"

I turned back to him, an idiotic smile plastered across my face.

"Wait, there's writing on the bottom: 'For inflammations, distensions, and eruptions'. This must be it."

I didn't like the way his fingers were twitching around the hilt of his sword.

I went on quickly, "You've been a huge help. I'll make sure to mention that to Moaradrid and skim lightly over how obstructive you were earlier."

I bounded to the flap and ducked under it before he could decide that chopping my head off might be worth the subsequent aggravation.

"Look, Saltlick," I cried, "we found the medicine. Your agonies will be over in just a minute."

I heard the tent flap rustle as my watchdog came

out behind me. I darted towards Saltlick, who was where I'd left him, thankfully, still kneeling on his colossal haunches.

With his bulk between the guards and me, I made a noisy show of emptying the contents of the flask into the mud, calling, "Just a dash, old friend, this has to go round your companions as well."

I pocketed the bottle, leaped up, and hauled myself back to my perch upon his shoulder. I was gratified to find that both guards had resumed their posts and were glaring back at me. As long as they weren't trying to kill me, that was just fine.

"Gentlemen," I shouted, "your help has been indispensable." To Saltlick I added, "Hurry, back up the hill."

He did as instructed, and moments later we'd reached a point where other tents obscured the view between Moaradrid's pavilion and us. I let out a shuddering breath, and realised how terrified I'd been, how close I'd come to gambling my life away. It was worth it. Revenge and wealth both in one, and all for five minutes work! No one would take Easie Damasco lightly ever again, not now that I'd proven myself the greatest thief in all the lands.

I knew our departure was long overdue. But I could feel the moneybag bulging against my stomach, and what difference could a few seconds more make? A glance around told me that neither the main force nor Moaradrid's guards were on our heels.

I reached in and drew it out. It was satisfyingly

weighty in my hand. I loosened the drawstring,
pried wide the opening, gazed inside.

I nearly choked.



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