

# ON A STRING

**T**ip-toeing across the smooth stone slab floor, Grakk sneaked up to the next corner and pressed his back flat against the cold basalt of the castle wall. He could smell the cracks between the stones exhaling their earthy breath. The tension made him sweat and he could feel the running beads washing gray streaks into the charcoal on his face. He reached into his pouch and produced a piece of soft cloth wrapped around a small chunk of coal. With both hands, he carefully pressed it against his face to soak the moisture. Then he softly rubbed the charcoal between his hands and applied the dust to his face. After re-packing his belongings, he adjusted his cape and searched it for stains of bright dust from the walls that could betray him. He then checked his soft leather soles for grains of sand that could later produce unwanted grinding sounds which had to be avoided at any cost. Although he was used to maneuvering silently, he knew that routine could swiftly turn into foolish bravery. He did not have to remind himself that a thief's single most important capacity was that of going unnoticed, and betraying one's cover was the most certain way to get killed.

He concentrated on keeping his breath even and strained to listen for any sounds that would let him see the corridor behind the corner without sticking out his head and making himself an easy target. In the distance, he could make out the noise of the celebrating court: cheering and laughing, the minstrel's fiddle, the occasional muffled bumping of stoneware mugs and the scarce clatter of metal on metal. He could almost smell the streams of mead flowing in the royal crowning hall. The slight noise of the wind brushing around the fortress prevented complete silence, but for now, there were no steps to be heard on the corridors around. Apart from the faint occasional crackling of the torches along the hallway, the castle itself remained silent. Nothing else could be extracted from its damp and chilly walls.

**G**rakk poised himself to approach the next junction. He took his time to concentrate only on the very next seconds. As long as nobody realized that there were intruders in the castle, there was no need for haste. He took a slow, deep breath and visualized the passage before him from the plans his party had stolen from the first outpost at the drawbridge. He darted around the corner into the corridor he had never seen before and immediately recognized the array of open arched windows, permitting the pale light of the waning full moon from the left, and went straight for the right-hand junction at the end of the passage, again pausing for a brief check before taking the next corner. Although he felt the urge to get out of this well-lit area, he forced himself to listen once more for any changes. He remembered Master Melôg who had taught him the ways of secrecy. Whenever he had been afraid of an exercise, she used to smile and say: "Your greatest enemy is within yourself, Grakk. Overcome your fear and you shall succeed." He concentrated on his breath and steadied his restlessness. Focusing his attention, he mused why the recollections of his youth felt so much different from what he had experienced during the last months. He remembered his past clearly, but he seemed to view himself from the outside, as if through somebody else's eyes. Also, he wondered why he remembered so little about his childhood - his memory seemed to begin with his education as a thief in the guild. He frowned slightly and forced his concentration back on the present. Any further distraction could be lethal.

The cheerful noise was now slightly nearer and he could make out individual voices. Presently the minstrel had ended his tune and left a short musical blank in the turmoil before he turned to the next.

**G**rakk waited for the music to resume before he sneaked around the corner and, keeping himself close to the wall, approached the noise, careful not to move too fast in order to remain silent. Poised on his toes, his soft suede stockings barely seemed to touch the stone floor. Like a large two-legged cat, he stealthily followed the large hallway that led him towards the immense iron-framed oak portal of the crowning hall. He mentally checked the map of the fortress: This section of the way was the most critical. He prayed that no one of the unsuspecting courtiers would choose this moment to leave the festivities in search of a bucket of water to stick their head into. At every yard, the turmoil of bragging drunkards behind the massive double gate grew louder, and as soon as Grakk had reached the crosswalk in the middle of the passage, he was grateful to slip out of the main lane to the left. He hated crosswalks. They offered the least cover and were open to attacks from all directions. Even the best of rogues avoided them as vampires shun holy water. He pressed himself flat against the far side of the corner that could not be seen from the doors. So far, his progress had been very good. He did not want to jeopardize what he had achieved, much less his life.

He took a moment to consider his surroundings. This castle was so perfectly built and yet so simple. He had never before seen basalt slabs large enough to form the gigantic bricks this fortress was composed of. Also, he had not encountered a single item in the thinly furnished corridors that did not serve an obvious purpose. The hallways were almost empty apart from the regularly occurring torches. And although he was a devoted thief and remembered agreeing to this mission, it now occurred to him that it was too daring to try stealing himself into the single best-guarded place in the land. What were the others after? They had some dim concept of ‘something useful in the royal treasury’, but what point was there in breaking into the king’s private purse itself to look for some ominous artifact they did not even know yet? He should not be in this place. Something at the back of his head softly suggested that somebody else had decided it for him.

He focused on the noise of the feast, assuring that everybody was still unaware of his presence: The noisy celebration betrayed no sign of alarm. A look down the crosswalk confirmed the layout of the plan: The uneven glass sheets in the windows to the left-hand side admitted moonlight from the south, gently warping it to spread mirage-like patterns on the glimmering floor plates. The ones on the right remained mere dark niches up to the passage’s end in a ‘T’ junction some 50 yards away. The way extending from the right junction should lead to the inner yard, towering on the huge wall that dominated the castle’s facade. There had not been any sentries since he and his fellow adventurers had passed the outer gates, so it was quite secure not to expect any out in the yard. The king’s elite corps of bodyguards were probably posed around the gallery of the big hall. Once in the inner yard, it would be easy to attach the rope to the parapet and haul the others up safely. He wondered why he was so sure that the rest of his party had made it to the inner wall, but something inside of him told him they had.

**A**sudden rumbling of the heavy oaken door interrupted Grakk’s thoughts. As the door creakingly complained at being thrust open so violently, the cheer and shouting from within flooded the crosswalk. He could hear a small group of obviously stone-drunk nobles stumble out of the king’s hall with loud, roaring laughter. They were at the short side of the cross, so there was no point in running, even though his legs tempted him to try. Grakk took advantage of the noise pouring out of the hall and took

cover as long as the drunkards could not yet hear any noise that fast moving would produce. He started up and climbed into the nearest window on the dark side he was on. The arch easily permitted his height and provided ample space for him to hide from looks along the corridor. He pressed his back against the smooth wall of the arch and slowly drew the dagger from his belt, clutching it tightly. He calmed his breath and strained to listen.

**T**he departing guests slammed the heavy door with obvious pleasure and paused for a moment, laughing. Grakk could distinguish two voices. Judging by their articulation, he was relieved to estimate both of them incapable of delivering a fight in their present condition. Should they decide to walk past his hiding place they would not even see him. When the laughter had died down, a short moment of silence was followed by a deep, mellow belch and an uproar of renewed laughter. A soft thud of stoneware against stoneware betrayed the main luggage of the two, and after an unmistakably slurping gulp out of their mugs, their heavy footfalls and constant bragging and laughing advertised their approach to the crossing. Grakk felt his heartbeat accelerating and tried to keep his breath as even and silent as possible. He fully concentrated on the noise of the two louts to extract every possible scrap of information about them that might later prove vital. The steps of one of them obviously slurred the floor.

“Hey, ya flea-ridden, plague-infested bag-o’-bones! ... Can’tya... Jeezus Chripes! ...Can’tya make yerself a bid lighter? Ya mmust’ve drunk a whole barrel doo be that heavy.” The answer was a lengthy giggling, interwoven with some half-mumbled excuse.

Presently the sounds were a good deal clearer. They had reached the crossing.

“So,.. Whaddaya think, ol’ buddy,... whereweegoin’ from heer...?”

“Oi dunno, bruther,...” The statement was effectively underlined by a big round burp.

“Oh, whadthe hey, juss gimmie a break, willya? Man, sstand ubright! Yer mother woulda bee a-sshamed of ya... Ogay, buddy, ledds go hoam, righdy?”

**A**s they intoned a hideously wrong drinking song, Grakk could clearly hear the slurring steps heading his direction. He strained all his muscles and slowly prepared to leap at the first one that met his gaze, should they, however unlikely, catch a glimpse of him. Being in their dead angle, they could only see him in case they should look back. He tried to calm down: Surprise was on his side. He would get them fast enough to avoid noise, should it prove necessary. Furthermore, they were completely drunk and seemingly unarmed - he could not detect any metallic sounds from them. So, like a loaded and readied crossbow, he waited for his trigger to be stumbled upon - or to be ignored.

Noisily, they made their way down the corridor. Grakk inhaled deeply and began breathing very flatly before they entered his angle of vision. He saw two courtiers in rather loosened garments, the smaller one supporting his companion, both of them holding a large mug in the free hand, obviously stooping and lumbering along the smooth basalt floor as if it were a steep mountain to conquer. Fortunately, the moonlight shone slightly in their faces, so they would be less susceptible to the dark corners of the northern windows. As they swaggered by, they kept singing and laughing, marking their path with occasional splashes of mead from their wildly swinging mugs. Grakk kept his gaze fixed on them until they were well past his window. Relieved to have seen the danger pass, he closed his eyes and exhaled slowly and controlled.

It was precisely at this moment when one of the drunkards, in an attempt to underline a musical climax of his terribly mutilated song, swung his mug too hard to retain the grip on it. The vessel was sent flying backwards, dragging a comet's tail of beverage behind. It went to the ground with a muffled "clunk", losing its massive handle in the process, and came to rest a few feet from Grakk's window arch in a puddle of sweet liquor. He started with surprise, jerking his eyes open wide and stared at the mess, disbelieving what he saw.

"Lakor, yer silly bugger! Now loog ad whaddya dun!"

The smaller one let his companion sink to the floor and sluggishly went after the broken mug.

The adrenalin flash in Grakk's brain told him that he would be seen far too early to land a surprise blow any more. His legs were trying to persuade him to race down the hallway, but he knew it was impossible to move without being detected instantaneously. Grakk felt like being smothered by the walls of the arch closing in on him.

The courtier's heavy prodding steps had almost reached the mug. The moon shone on his back now; his face was in the shade. Grakk was positive he was being looked at. Frozen with indecision, he did not realize that his trembling hands let go of the dagger. It rang brightly when it hit the sill. The man before him jerked his head, now fully facing the window. Startled, Grakk needed a second to realize that he had not been discovered until he gave himself away. He stood paralyzed with surprise.

"Ow my Gawd!" the knight bellowed. "Howly Dreggon sshit! Aaa-ssASSIN!"

Grakk's tension was finally triggered. He leapt from the sill, grabbing the dagger and rushing forward.

"IIN-TROOWDER! GUAAAARDS!" The man's lungs proved even more powerful than he had demonstrated in his songs. He staggered back to avoid the blow and kept shouting at a volume that must even have reached the king himself in the middle of his noisy celebration.

"Aaa-LAAARUM! GUAAARRrrrrhhgg..." his voice was muted by Grakk's left clutching his throat and the dagger burying itself in his belly. "*Damn* you!" Grakk hissed through clenched teeth at the unbelieving staring face, raging his blade around the doomed man's intestines. "*Shut UP!*" He pushed him back. His opponent toppled over, his head audibly knocking on the massive stone floor. Grakk swung the dagger in a wide blow through his throat to satisfy his fuming anger.

He stared at the puddle of blood forming under his victim's head. It was beyond his comprehension why he had dropped his weapon. He had been in worse trouble before, and he had always kept his nerve. That nagging sense of being manipulated was coming up again.

Farther down the corridor, Lakor was mumbling to himself and struggling to get up on his legs that did not want to support him. From both sides of the crosswalk, Grakk could hear the pounding of feet and the clashing of swords being unsheathed in running haste.

And there he stood, with trembling knees, dropping his weapon and waiting for his butchers. He got the distinct impression of having been played a very bad trick.



## “Hell, no! I don’t believe it!”

Jeff was staring at the twenty-sided die lying on the table in front of him. Its upper side clearly displayed a ‘one’ at the top.

“These wineskins couldn’t have had even the remotest chance of detecting me!”

“They didn’t,” Eric grinned at him. “until you started throwing cutlery around.”

“Oh, come on. How could a thief with that kind of experience just drop his dagger?”

“Hey, you know that a ‘one’ *always* means ‘fumbled’. You could try shooting a Mammoth in a corridor at arm’s length with a sawed-off shotgun. And still, if you roll ‘one’, you just perforate your feet instead. That’s the way it works.” Like Eric, Brandon and Christie were mostly amused with the scene they had just witnessed. However tragic, it was by far the most ridiculous event in the entire adventure so far.

“And by the way, I happened to roll a 98 out of 100 for your ‘wineskins’ - only to make them turn round.” Eric could not help giggling. “What the hey, he didn’t even see you until you lost your nerve.”

Jeff lowered his voice. “This is stupid. These goofs were hardly able to find their way to the bathroom, no matter *what* astronomical numbers you roll for them.”

“Hey, man - get real,” Brandon gently interrupted. “These are the rules. Now don’t think *we* are happy that your fabulous character just outsmarted himself. We’re the next to kick the bucket if we don’t get a lift by some guardian angel who happens to fly by - we’re still waiting for you super hero in the outer yard, remember? Face it, man: You’re dead as a Dodo.”

“Fuck!” Jeff sat back. “This was my most promising character so far. He could have been a *master* at Level 10. It’s so hard to get thieves up in rank alive.” He shook his head and picked up his character sheet from the table. “Grakk”, it said, “race: human, class: rogue. Weapon skills: dagger, armor: none, current level: 6.”

“You should see your face!” Christie smiled. “Come on, it’s only a game. Shit happens. Do you want us to pick up your remnants on the way out and notify your family?”

“You guys wouldn’t find the body anyway... won’t be much left of it after those elite guard sausage grinders. Guess there’s not much sense in writing down the experience points I get for that fight, is there... hey, you know, there *should* be an EP bonus for dying, I mean it’s quite an experience, isn’t it?” Taking a deep breath, he slowly tore the paper in two halves. “Well, I guess that takes me out of the race for tonight.” He stood up and took his jacket from the hook.

Eric tried to cheer him up. “Hey, just pop by tomorrow after your music class and we’ll make a new character for this adventure, right?” Jeff had been playing this character for 3 months now, and now he had to start all over again at level 1. He was going to have a hard time catching up.

“Yeah, probably will... whatever.” Jeff was fumbling with his gloves.

“Now come on,” said Brandon. “You look like it was *you* who got slaughtered in that crosswalk! Don’t take this game so seriously!”

Jeff zipped up his jacket.

“Whatever, hope you guys get along without me. Just treat my bones with respect, will ya?” He pulled on his cap and reached for the door handle. “See ya later... Have fun.”

He pulled the door closed behind him. He heard the muffled voice of Eric going on: “Okay, guys, you’re still standing at the bottom of the inner wall. Suddenly, you hear shouting above; sounds like trouble.”

“Yeah, we know the rest. Let’s get the hell outta there.”

**Jeff fished the key ring out of his pocket** and started to work on his bike lock. As usual in cold weather, it refused to open readily, and it took him some shaking and rattling to free his mechanical steed.

He had not fully realized how cold it had already gotten until he felt the wind on his face. Dammit, he thought, I’m not even making 20mph and it feels like polar winter!

He squinted against the sharpness of the cold night air and sped down Old Creek Street. He was in such a hurry to get home and pour a well-deserved beer on his disappointment that he did not see the dark blue station car coming from the right. He did not notice it until he heard the angry horn trying to chase him away. The tires did not even squeal on the tarmac. They only scrubbed the thin ice that had encrusted the road.

The car did not kill him, though. The lamp post that it hurled him against did. He was unlucky to hit it with the back of his neck; his spinal cord snapped instantaneously.

He did not even notice his bike being dragged along under the wheels up to the lamp where he was lying.



**“Shit, no!”** *Asmira was upset. “What was I thinking? I haven’t been paying attention!”*

*“What’s wrong?”*

*“I’ve just had one of my humans killed. And so stupidly, too. He was riding his bike on a slippery icy street. I didn’t think this car would come up so fast. Obviously, that driver has been speeding, too - not that this would help much now...”*

*“Oh dear, what a mess..! Wasn’t that one of your favorite ones?”*

*“You bet. I’ve invested so much work in him. You can’t imagine how often I helped him out when he got in trouble as a lad. Even saved him from drowning once.”*

*“Now, don’t be too hard on you. You can’t help everybody at the same time. Come to think of it, you look pretty much overworked. You should ask if you can get your schedule reduced. Don’t blame yourself for it. Happens all the time.”*

*“I know, but isn’t our job to prevent these stupid accidents? I mean, if we don’t do it, who will?”*

*“You are experiencing a perfectly normal guilt complex. It will wear off, believe me. Once you get used to it, it’s not half as bad any more.”*

*Asmira thought about it.*

*“I guess you are right. But it makes me wonder if they know. I mean, don’t they suspect something if things screw up like that?”*

*“My goodness, you **are** new here. My dear, it’s not our job to create a perfect world - we’re just here to reduce the damage.”*