

THE STORMCALLER'S SONG

THE HOGSHEAD INN (OUTSKIRTS OF THE THORNWOOD FOREST — JUST NORTH OF CORVIS ON THE NORTHERN FRINGES OF SOVEREIGN CYGNAR)

The thunder cracked. It was near deafening. It was that crazy kind of thunder that made windows shake, and horses whine and buck like they had seen a forest troll. The storm was in full swing now, rain coming down in sheets the likes no one had seen in this part of Cygnar for years. Renault, the crazy old alchemist who some said was older than a man had any right to be, had predicted it.

The inn was crowded for a weeknight, most likely due to the abysmal weather that forced the people of Flatiron Downs inside on a night they would rather be fishing and logging along the Black River. All the serving girls were called in earlier that night; the proprietor anticipating the increased traffic. It had turned out to be a good decision on his part. Although the entire place was jumping, it was a table in the far corner of the tavern by the fireplace that garnered the spotlight at the moment. Six gamblers were playing a poker offshoot called Footman's Folly, and things were beginning to heat up...

Derby Sway sat with her back to the fire, the warmth of the wood-born flames soothing her petite frame like a thick blanket on a cold night. She held three Jacks; a more than respectable hand and worthy of a large wager. Her eyes gave away nothing, but it was a good thing no one could measure her heartbeat. In front of her lay a pile of Cygnaran gold crowns the likes she hadn't possessed in some time; and at this very moment, they belonged to her. It was her turn to bet, and she feigned a carefree sigh as she shook her head back and forth, as if debating what to do. She gave a slight shrug, picked up 200 crowns from her pile, and carefully placed them in the center of the table. Four of the other gamblers raised their eyebrows in unison, giving a loud 'harrumph', and unceremoniously threw their cards into the center of the playing ring in disgust.

"Again, lass?" one of the older, nicer gentlemen had asked her. Derby took a liking to this man the locals called 'One-Eye Sam' and gave him a wink. Derby was a precious young woman, and her smile could be intoxicating.

"I don't know how to explain it; I just feel lucky tonight. Things seem to be going my way," she replied with her signature wide grin. "Don't you worry yourself Sam," she said as she pointed to her half-empty mug. "When I win the pot, I'm going to buy you enough drinks you won't even remember you lost so much tonight." The young thief was feeling good. She was on a roll, and it was completely legit. Derby was raised a street urchin in one of the most rundown sections of Five Fingers and knew the tricks of thievery as well as most. Ironically, when it came to her one true vice in life — gambling; she absolutely refused to employ her talents. There was something about an 'honest' win; a chance to beat someone with the skill of her mind, not her impossibly quick reflexes, that drove Derby toward integrity at the gambling table. Of course, this attitude may have had something to do with her reliable string of bad luck when it came to card games.

"Enough useless chatter!" interrupted the man sitting directly across from Derby who didn't seem a bit enamored by her feminine wiles. He came to the table with more crowns than anyone, and had been losing most of the night. And to make matters worse for the grizzled logger, a good portion of his coin was now sitting in front of Derby in neat little piles she had erected to piss him off as much as she could. It clearly seemed to be working.

"I'll see your 200, you conniving little witch — and I'll raise you 200 more!" the man exclaimed. "Your luck has to run out sometime!"

OK then, the Iosan named Selene thought to herself as she sat at a table next to the gamblers. *It took her longer than usual, but she managed to piss someone off she shouldn't have.* Selene got up and stretched, let out a big yawn, and yelled out for another drink.

That was the signal the Dwarf named Kaar was reluctantly waiting for. His incessant haggling with a local trade monger as to the acquisition of an extremely rare map showing the location of the ruined Furiax Temple would have to be put on hold. Derby was about to be forced to make a big play, and that meant things could get really ugly, really fast. *Guess it's time to size up the room*, the Mechanik thought to himself as he let out a frustrated sigh.

The inn had a long, rather well kept bar, approximately 10 stools in front of it, all filled with warm bodies. There were swinging doors leading to the back of the building, most likely storage for ale and other drink, and a small kitchen that had a window facing the main room that was large enough to keep the cooks honest as they prepared the night's meals. Other than that, there was one way in and one way out – with a whole lot of folks in between the exit and Derby Sway. On the opposite side of the room closer to the game, the dwarf spotted the “twins”. That was a nickname the rest of the team called Magnus and Alexandra; the brother and sister duo who a year ago had saved Selene from certain death at the hands of Thamarite fanatics. In truth, they were as much siblings as she and the Dwarf; but they had been together for so long and were so remarkably in tune with one another, the fact that they referred to each other as brother and sister was oddly fitting.

Alexandra poked Magnus, trying to get his attention. “Selene just gave the signal,” she whispered. “Be ready, brother.”

Magnus all but completely ignored her, wholly engrossed in a puzzle book he had acquired a week ago from a travelling merchant while on the road from Ceryl to the Thornwood. The ‘gunmage’ part of his brain clearly taking a backseat to the ‘investigator’ side, Magnus seemed totally oblivious to Alexandra’s warning.

“Magnus!” she whispered louder. “Did you hear me? Derby is ready to clean this fellow out, and we may have a situation on our hands. He’s not nearly as pleasant as the others, nor as taken by our little friend.”

“Not likely,” the tall, lanky Magnus replied; not even bothering to look up from his book for a quick glance.

“What do you mean, Not Likely,” Alexandra whispered back. “I saw her hand signal. She has a winning hand. I for one would not mind eating a few hot cooked meals not prepared by our Dwarf,” she said. “He may be able to make a steamjack out of an old piece of rotwood and a handful of bolts, but his cooking is about as terrible as Aunt Marjorie’s.”

That made Magnus laugh, and he looked up into his sister’s eyes and gave a resigned sigh. “Look Alex,” he said patiently. “Derby is going to lose; therefore, there is absolutely nothing to *be ready*for.” He looked back down at his puzzle book and could feel her gaze upon him. He hated when she did that. Shaking his head slightly, he closed the book and looked back to her.

“Engage, Maggy,” she said to him as their eyes met. “What have I told you about engaging in conversation? It helps others to see you aren’t some aloof, stuck up bastard. And that includes me.” Alexandra said with a smirk.

“But you already know that I am,” Magnus answered with a sardonic smile. When he saw she clearly wasn’t in the mood for his interpretation of ‘humor’, he quickly got serious. “OK. I won’t bore you with all the details, but basically Derby is going to lose this play because her opponents are cheating.” The investigator nodded toward the table. “They have been setting her up all night; most likely for this very hand. They will take all her money and they will leave to go count their winnings. There will be no belligerent local color this night, dear sister. Now, can I get back to my book please?”

Alexandra looked quite agitated, and that wasn't an expression she often wore. "How could you *possibly* know that?" she whispered harshly. "You haven't looked up from that stupid book in an age! Neither Derby nor Selene has given any indication that these players have been cheating."

"Well of course they haven't," Magnus whispered back as calm as could be. "You can't indicate something when you don't know it's happening. I only figured it out about ten minutes ago."

"How?" she asked, more than a bit perturbed by her brother's almost dismissive attitude.

"By listening," he said. "They are using code words in their sentences that when deciphered tell each other how and when to bet or fold. From what I can tell, three of the players are in on it; the big fellow across from Derby being the Caller. The technique is very old actually, and I would imagine hasn't been used in over a quarter century. I'm sure our young gambler has never even heard of it, hence the reason she and her losan cohort missed it entirely. I believe they used to call it 'The Stormcaller's Song'.

"Well..." was all Alexandra could muster to say. "When you sussed it out, could you have not at least warned her somehow?"

Now that question made Magnus laugh out loud more heartily than he had in days. "Seriously?" he answered. "And when was the last time Derby Sway has ever listened to my warnings when it came to card games?" The question was rhetorical.

Her brother had a point. Derby, for all her positive qualities, was more stubborn than Maggy and Selene put together when it came to cards. One would have infinitely more success convincing a stone to give birth than having the young thief listen to any advice when it came to gambling.

Seeing clearly he was running out of time and perceiving the trader's growing interest in the outcome of the card game, Kaar used Derby's play to his advantage. "My good man, I am ready to propose a final offer!" the Dwarf said with a jovial tone as he stood directly in front of the human's face so he could not see the unfolding dramatic conclusion of the game.

"Are you mad?" the man snorted. "I am trying to watch the outcome of this spectacular poker match, and you continue to pester me over this confounded map!" The merchant tried to look around the Dwarf to watch the card game which had now drawn the attention of nearly everyone in the room as Derby held her cards in her hand, deciding what to do. Due to the sheer girth of the dwarven mechanik, this proved to be a very difficult task for the human trader. To everyone else in the room it appeared as if she was agonizing over the decision to call her opponent's raise; but Derby already knew she was going to. The odds of him beating her three Jacks were slim to none. No; she was waiting to see that Kaar had secured the map, and so she continued to fain pondering her decision as she toyed nervously with her crowns.

"180 Cygnaran Crowns. My final offer!" the Dwarf slammed a bag full of coins on the table in front of the excited merchant with a loud clang. "I assure you nobody else within a league will offer as much for such a torn up relic of a map," Kaar finished.

The man looked at the Dwarf with both urgency and resignation in his face. "Fine. Fine! Just get out of my bloody way so I can see what happens!"

Kaar quickly jerked the map case from the trader's backpack and held it up in the air so Derby and Selene could see it. "A pleasure doing business with you my friend," the Dwarf said. "Let me get outa' yer' way this instant!" and Kaar hastily made his way to the door of the tavern before the game ended and the merchant thought about the deal he had hastily agreed to. *And THAT is how it is done!* he said mostly to himself as he proudly walked outside and gathered the group's belongings.

As if on cue, not five seconds later Derby put in a matching 200 crowns and victoriously slammed her 3 Jacks down on the table, grinning from ear to ear. “Sorry to do this to you boys,” she said with a wide smile. “...but a girl’s got to eat you know.” She looked absolutely triumphant. Not only had she helped distract the merchant for Kaar to employ his talents of negotiation, but she had managed to win the group an incredible amount of coin while doing so!

As she began to move her hands toward the center of the pot to collect her winnings - the man named Jacobs, who had been sitting across from her bleeding gold the entire night, calmly laid his cards on top of hers. **THREE KINGS.**

If one didn’t know any better, they would have looked at Derby’s expression at that moment and swore she had just been shot point blank in the stomach. Her little face contorted in ways even Selene had never seen before, and she had known the lass for over a year. The stunned girl began making noises with her throat, as if she was gasping for air. It was like someone had suddenly sucked all the air out of the room and punched her in the gut at the same time. Derby couldn’t hear the deafening cheers around her as the locals celebrated one of their own scoring such a comeback victory over the little waif girl that had systematically torn apart four other locals in the hours prior to this. She couldn’t feel One-Eye Sam patting her on the back and sincerely praising her for her play up until that last hand. As a matter of fact, in that brief moment, Derby was reasonably sure she was about to keel straight over from a brain aneurism. She was in every way describable, completely and utterly devastated. She had been winning. All night long, without so much as a hiccup, she had been winning. This simply couldn’t be. For a brief second, she even smiled to herself, thinking this must be a bad dream. Surely this couldn’t be happening. She did not just lose four hundred Cygnaran gold crowns....

A few minutes passed when Selene and Alexandra came over and dragged Derby away from the table; and the young thief that they knew didn’t even top the scales at a hundred pounds felt like she weighed a quarter ton. She had just managed to lose four **HUNDRED** gold crowns in a matter of about thirty seconds — possibly a new record, even for her.

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Time to go, Magnus thought to himself as he followed his friends out of the inn. *But we’ll return on our way back from the temple*, he mused to himself. *And she’ll be ready for you then - you monstrous pile of cow shit. Enjoy this night while you can.*

As he stepped out of the tavern, Magnus noticed the storm had finally passed, leaving a light drizzle in its wake. Up ahead he could hear Kaar and Alex singing a merry tune to try and lift poor Derby’s spirits. Selene was in front, trying to make heads or tails of the map that the dwarf had just acquired, her dark cloak fluttering in the breeze. Tomorrow would bring them one day closer to the Furiax Temple, especially now that they had a much better idea where to look. And if Kaar’s estimations were correct, (and they often were), this excursion could be the most amazing discovery they’ve made in the last 12 months. As far as Magnus was concerned, things were finally looking up for the group calling themselves the Strangelight Investigators indeed.

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