Trap

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by
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saw the gold, and I took it. A different man might not have, I know that, and from time to time, I think back on the hour when I saw the gold and took it. You see, I was hungry. Isn't it ironic.

I don't remember much else about that night but the gold and the hunger. I don't remember the name of the tavern, or even the village, but I believe it was somewhere in southern Vvardenfell. I can't really be certain. For some time, I sat dumbly in my chair, my mind occupied with nothing but the pain in my stomach. If you've never been truly hungry from days of no food, you can't know what it's like. You can't concentrate on anything. It wasn't until a figure to my left got up from the table to get a drink and left a stack of gold marks behind that I snapped to awareness.

From this moment on, my memory is crystalline.

My eyes to the gold. My eyes to the stranger's back, walking calmly toward the barmaid. My hand to the gold. The gold in my pocket. I'm up from the table, and out the door. For just a moment, I look back. The stranger has turned to look my way. He wears a hood, but I can feel his eyes meet mine. I swear, I can scent a smile.

Out into the street, and behind some barrels I crouched down, waiting for my pursuer. One benefit of a lifetime running from guards, I know how to disappear. For nearly an hour, I waited there, suffering even more from hunger. You see, I was awake now and I had the means to buy myself a feast. This knowledge tortured me. When I finally got to my feet, I very nearly fainted. I had only enough energy to walk to the other edge of the

village to a run-down tavern before collapsing at a table. I think I must have fallen unconscious for a moment before I heard the barmaid's voice.

"Can I get you something to eat, sera?"

I gorged myself on roasts and pies and huge frothing mugs of greef. As the fog of near fatal starvation began to lift, I looked up from my plate to see a gold-masked stranger looking at me, his vizard glowing by the blinding light of the moon through the window. He wore black leather armor and was a different physique and size from the man I had burgled, but I could tell he knew. I paid for my meal quickly and left.

I skirted the edge of the village, through a tiled central courtyard surrounded by the squalid peasant's cottages. There was not a light shining from any window or door. No one was on the streets. I could find no place to hide, so I took the road out of town, heading for the wilderness. Hunger had pushed me on in the days before, but now I felt what I imagined to be the whip of guilt. Or perhaps, even then, it was fear.

I fell twice, rushing down the dark path, unused to the slopes and pebbled texture. The sounds of animal life, which I had numbed to, were suddenly very loud in my ears. And there was something else out there in the night, something chasing me.

On the side of the road, there was a low wall, and I scrambled over it and hid. I knew enough about concealment to pick a spot where the bulwark sunk slightly so even if someone saw the outline of my figure, he would assume it to be part of the wall. It wasn't long before I heard the sound of running footsteps from more than one person pass me by and then stop. There was a moment of whispered conversation, and one of the people ran back on the path toward the village. Then, silence.

After a few more minutes, I peered out from behind the wall. A female figure in a dun gown, wimple, and veil stood in the road. On the other end of the road, blocking the way back to town, was a knight, coated in dark mail. I could see neither of their faces.

For a moment, I froze, unsure whether either or both had seen me.

"Run," said the woman in a dead voice.

The hill behind me was too steep, so I leapt over the wall and across the road in two bounds. Into the night forest I ran, the maddening jingle of the accursed gold in my pocket. I knew I was making so much noise my pursuers could not help but hear me, but now I cared more for putting distance between us than in stealth. Clouds of ash filtered through the moonlight, but I still knew it was too bright to hide. I ran and ran until I felt all my blood pumping in my head and heart, begging me to stop.

I was at the edge of the wood, on the other side of a shallow stream from a vast, crumbling house encircled by a rail fence. Behind me, running footfall in the broken, dusty earth. To the south, downstream, a distinct sodden splashing of someone moving nearer.

There was no choice. I half jumped and half fell into the mud and dragged myself up the bank on the other side. I rolled under the fence and ran through the open field toward the house. Jerking my head around, I saw seven shadowy figures by the fence posts. The cloaked man I had robbed. The man in the gold mask. The veiled woman. The dark knight. Three others too who had pursued me, but I had never seen. And I thought I was the stealthy one.

The moon was entirely hidden in a swarm of ash. Only the stars offered their meager illumination as I reached the open door of the ruin. I slammed and bolted the door behind me, but I knew there could be no protection for very long. As I looked about the ravaged interior of broken furniture, I searched for someone to hide. A corner, a niche where if I stayed very still, no one would see me.

A splintered table lying against the wall looked perfect for my purposes. I crawled under it, and jumped when something moved and I heard a frightened old man's voice.

"Who's there?"

"It's all right," I whispered. "I'm not one of them."

His puckered, gnarled hand reached out from the shadow and gripped my arm. Instantly, I felt sleep fall upon me, resist it as I might. The old man's horrible face, the face of the hungry dead, emerged as the moon came out and shone through the broken window. His talon still gripping me, I fell back, smelling his death surround me.

The table was thrown back. There stood the seven hunters and a dozen more. No, hunters they weren't. They were harriers who had chased me out of every hiding place, expertly pushing me to the lair of the real predator. He was weak with age, the old man was, not as good at the chase as once he was. A blunt, killing machine.

"Please," I said. It was all I could muster.

Having enjoyed the sport I offered, he granted me mercy, of sorts. I was not bled dry. I was not cursed by being made one of them, the Berne. I was kept with others, most of us mad with fear, to be aged and tasted at the vampires' whim. We are called cattle.

I lost all hope months ago of ever leaving the dank cellar where they keep us. Even if this note finds its way to the outside world, I cannot give enough information about my whereabouts to be rescued, even if some champion were able to defeat the bloodsuckers. I only write this to keep my own sanity, and to warn others.

There is something worse than being hungry.

Being food.

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FormId	dragonborn.esm:029102
Owning plugin	dragonborn.esm
Local FormId	029102
Editor ID	DLC2Book3ValuableTrap
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Type	Book or tome
Weight	1
Can be taken	Yes
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Keywords	VendorItemBook
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Leveled lists	5
Scripts	0

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