



DEMONMASTER

JIM

Night of the Village Shadow

Sometimes what is in the dark needs to stay in the dark. Shadows... well, they are meant to hide things. Often, they are worthy of staying hidden. When shadows dance, you know you're in trouble.

©2020 David Woodruff – all rights reserved

James Ozymandias of House Issicar, AKA the White Sword Master leaned back in his chair until it hit the wall. He always desired to have no one behind him. Even in a place as quiet and unthreatening as the Seven Pines Tavern. He was a cautious fellow. Jim closed his eyes and drank in the smell of watered-down alcohol. He opened them to be greeted by the smile of a pretty young waitress. For a moment, he started to panic. But the woman kept her clothes on. His demon, Reaper, must be still asleep. For the moment, at least, he shared his skull with only his thoughts. The White Sword Master waved her away. With Reaper asleep, it was too early to start drinking to control the monster.

Jim had heard rumors about this tavern, supposedly it's the best in the village of Gommlet. Although, this was mostly because it was the only tavern in Gommlet. Still, warmth and calm feelings radiated through the wooden beams and the rows of small candles attached to the daubed walls. It was a quiet place in a small, out of the way town.

One wall, behind the bar, was full of wooden plates randomly nailed to the surface. Either they were worn out, or the bartender had simply tired of scraping the food out of the splintery cracks.

Like the plates, the whole village was long past its prime, but this one building stood apart. Namely the general appearance of it not being susceptible to falling down in the face of a stiff breeze. Jim knew about towns like these, shunned by their neighbors, they have an air of desperation about them. Once this starts, and the corruption sets in with the civic leaders, evil is bound to have a field day. Evil cults move in. Necromancers start digging up corpses in the cemeteries and practicing their arts in secluded basements. He was looking forward to locating some of this evil and wiping it clean with his sword. Heck, if things were as bad as he expected, he might even do some of it for free.

Glancing around, Jim noticed the place was mostly empty, only a few passing traders seem to be hanging around, which is often a good sign. Maybe he could have a few hours of peace if no one recognized him. Several long, empty tables filled the center of the Inn. Around the periphery, smaller tables offered customers the opportunity to talk in relative private. Although, in a small town, nothing escapes notice forever. It was tranquil alright. Even most of the stools at the bar are unoccupied.

Still, the bartender seemed quite busy but none the less managed to give Jim a slight nod of his head. Dwarves were good at keeping to themselves. He contemplated asking the girl for some food, but he could tell from the clean appearance of the bartender's beard, there was nothing cooking yet in the kitchen. He had no desire for the stale bread and moldy cheese which no doubt was lurking under the bar somewhere.

Later, once the place filled up, he could find out what was going on... and then offer his clean up services. His sword arm itched to find some problem to remove. Not to mention his purse was too light for his tastes.

Fighting to stay awake, Jim almost fell off his chair. He'd spent all night getting here. Listening the entire way to Reaper's ranting about his plans and schemes for revenge. Payment to the other demons who had exiled him to the mortal realm, and by extension, Jim's skull. Having a demon inside your head gave him access to more knowledge than he had ever imagined existed. But the demon's proclivities were constant sources for concern. It's not that he didn't like women. Truth be told, he was quite fond of them.

As a boy, he'd been quite fond of sneaking down to the lake to see the young ladies bathing. There was a certain excitement in seeing and not being seen. But honestly, he had more interest in bedding one woman for a lifetime, rather than seeing hundreds of women lying next to him naked. Besides he didn't feel comfortable bedding so many women at once, although both the ladies and Reaper indicated he was quite good at it. Besides, at the end of it, he usually found himself on the street alone with an empty coin purse.

From time to time Jim ruminated on the advantages of sharing his skull with a demon. The disadvantages always seemed to outnumber the advantages. The only trouble was, in order to get rid of Reaper, someone would have to kill him. It was not an alternative Jim found appealing. At least, not yet.

One man stumbled up to Jim's table and sat down across from the swordmaster. From the dirt-encrusted on the man's hands and the unkempt nature of his hair, this man was one of the local farmers. "Buy me a drink and I'll tell you everything you need to know."

He didn't think this man would be a fountain of information, but he was feeling generous. Jim tossed the pretty waitress a silver coin and told her to bring the farmer another mug of whatever he'd already been drinking. The farmer smiled. "People go about their lives in blissful ignorance of what is actually going on."

"Is that so?"

The waitress brought over a tray with a full mug. She deftly slid the mug from the tray to the table and then went back to her business. Her smile was gone as she served the old farmer. She didn't appreciate the stories the man told his drinking buddies. It was something she must have frequently witnessed him do with other strangers at the tavern.

The farmer slurped his drink, a fair portion of it running down his knotted and disheveled beard. "This place doesn't deserve your help swordsman."

"What makes you say this?"

"It's hiding a secret. Consider this a friendly warning."

"What's secret is this place hiding?"

"The things which go on in this town are so dark, they don't like to talk about it... especially with outsiders."

The White Sword Master was familiar with the bigotry of small towns, their fear of outsiders. "Are you about to tell me the locals practice human sacrifice?"

"You wish. If only their tastes were so simple, No, it's not their bigotry, swordsman, nor their fear."

He shuddered. Jim had the dreadful feeling the old man was reading his mind. It was an uncomfortable feeling. If the farmer found Reaper in there, he most likely would end up exiting the tavern, screaming.

"No," the farmer continued, downing the last of his mug. "It's far worse than this. Trust me. You don't want to be here."

Jim turned away for a moment, but when his eyes came back to the table, the mysterious old farmer was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps he'd gone off to bum a drink from some other patron.

Traveling traders made for excellent clientele. There was always some lycanthropes or bands of marauding thieves in the woods between villages. The type of folk who were hard on the likes of traveling traders. They often had enough coin in their chests to spend on Jim's services to eliminate such groups who were inclined to interfere with high-profit margins. Jim had always found these predators to be easy to come to grips with. Kill a few of them and the rest would soon lose their stomach for fighting and leave the area at a high rate of speed. It was always better to find a new territory then fight it out with a swordmaster.

Besides, Jim always found these bandit groups were useful. At least they could be used for combat practice. Keeping his skills sharp. Not to mention the fact he found their blood cheaper to use than oil for coating the blade of your sword. If only it wasn't so sticky.

An argument broke out between two traders sitting in a normally quiet corner. What started as mere heated words exchanged between two rivals, but it quickly escalated into name-calling and threats. Once the two rose and started breaking chairs to create makeshift weapons, Jim sprung into action. One of the few advantages of having a demon living inside you is lightning speed. He managed to interpose his sword between the two just in time to prevent a chair leg from becoming a part of another man's gut.

The problem with performing near-magical heroic feats in broad daylight is it can result in your being noticed. The two angry traders froze. One of their arms slowly rose in the air, the finger at the end broadly shaking. It ended up directed at Jim. "You... you... you're the swordsman who carries around the unholy demon inside you."

"Dragon pustules," Jim spat. The last thing he intended to do was draw attention to himself. Sometimes your reactions can get you in more trouble than any demon could ever manage.

The dwarf bartender came out from behind the counter, a towel draped over his shoulder. "It this true, stranger? You certainly look the part of the infamous White Sword Master. And those moves. I've never seen a human move so fast."

Jim's shoulders drooped. "The part about my being a White Sword Master? Yes, it's true." He was stating the obvious. Anyone could see from the white sash he wore; he was from the school of the White Sword.

"And the demon? You carry a demon inside you?"

"Yeah, okay, that part is also true."

"I'm afraid you'll have to leave."

"Look, nothing is going to happen. I'm just looking for work."

The dwarves' face grew stern. "Sorry, but I'm afraid you'll have to leave *right now*."

Jim sheathed his sword and grumbled. "Very well. It would be rude to stay where you are unwelcome." He headed for the door. Although if truth be told he was keeping one eye peeled on the two traders.

One never knows when someone is going to take a surprise swing at you... to gain the notoriety of killing someone with a reputation. Not to mention being able to enjoy the reward.

He opened the door and was about to take a step out when a crossbow bolt not only sank into the door, it passed halfway through it. Before he could take another breath, Jim slammed the door shut. Fortunately, crossbows take a long time to reload. Glancing around the room, he could see the bartender and the other patrons exiting through the back door. They had no intention of getting caught in the crossfire.

Peeking out through one of the windows, Jim noticed there was not a single armed man in the street, but several. One of them, who looked to be in charge of the others, was sending a handful around the back to block the rear exit.

“Dragon’s piss,” Jim spat.

There was a bit more out there than Jim could successfully face alone, even with his great speed. Someone would land a lucky blow. It was always a lucky blow for some untalented swordsman in these sorts of things. Either the swing of a sword or a wild shot from a bow. Once this happened, well then, it would all be over faster than a man could wink. “Frog spit.”

He was safe inside for the moment. They wouldn’t attempt to come in. He’d be able to pick them off one at a time as they came through the door and they knew it. But he would have to resolve the situation before it turned dark. After the sun went down, Reaper would wake up. The White Sword Master had seen this before. Reaper would refuse to help. He saw combat between mortals as... *a problem for mortals to handle. Demon’s corrupt, they don’t fight. Let’s go sell them something.* He would typically force Jim to run away if things turned dicey as if he was a small child. Even in the dark, this involved a fair amount of risk. With these many opponents, he was sure to get caught. In this event, well... if they only burned him at the state, he’d be lucky.

He’d need to find another way out. He took another glance out the window. One of the larger ones was armed with a massive warhammer. He was powerfully built, bare-chested and wearing animal skins for trousers. They were stained with blood and crusted with dried mire. His black mane was matted with mud as well. He was not a man who favored personal hygiene. Jim recognized him as one of the southern barbarians. There were fiercely loyal, once they’d been paid. As a result, they were favored mercenaries. He was swinging his warhammer around for practice. Anyone who would be caught under his swing would find what was left of his skull around his ankles. He shook his head. No, these folks didn’t look like the taking type.

Taking another glance, he saw the barbarian was backed up by a dozen turban-clad archers from the southern deserts. These men were famed for their keen eyes and shooting ability. After all, in the desert, if you can’t shoot your food with the first shot, you didn’t eat. More civilized than their barbarian brethren, they also had fewer scruples. Comfortable living in cities did this to a man. Many such men found it easy to turn to banditry. Jim had no doubts we could coerce a few of them over to his side. Many such wasteland dwellers would sell their mother to the city watch... if the price was right.

But he’d have to get past the big barbarian first, and he didn’t see this happening.

There was a loud noise in the kitchen. “Great dragon droppings,” he cried out. He’d forgotten the back door again. He drew his sword and raced for the kitchen, he ran into a heavily cloaked man armed with a spear and a short knife heading for the main room. These men from the Wild Marches used their cloaks like a Retarius used a net to disarm opponents in the arena.

A wry smile crept over the man’s face. “There you are.” his voice was like the bark of a timber wolf. “Somehow, I thought you’d be taller. No matter. When I kill you, my name will surely be immortalized.” The westerner’s voice rose to a maddened shriek, and he charged, throwing his cloak forward to catch Jim’s blade.

The swordmaster was under it in a moment, letting it pass harmlessly overhead. While the cloak was between them the westerner was blinded and couldn’t see where Jim was. The swordmaster thrust upwards towards the man’s spleen but found instead the knife blade the man wielded with his other hand.

The two faced off against each other once more, the westerner growling at his opponent like an angry wolf. Jim half expected the man to bark. There was an instant when Jim’s blade licked the tip of the man’s spear, seeming scarcely to touch each other before the two leaped apart to renew the assault. Jim’s sword flashed past the man’s spear and descended dramatically on the westerner’s robe covered shoulder. Jim distinctly heard the snap of the bones in the man’s shoulder. The westerner dropped his cloak and reeled back, his face ashen, blood spurting over his robe; his knife slipped from his nerveless fingers to land with a clatter on the kitchen floor.

“Alright,” The man grumbled, “maybe you have some skills.”

Jim readied for a second lunge. “A few.”

“Any chance you let me take you in? We could split the reward.”

The White Sword Master thrust forward, finally finding the man’s unprotected abdomen. The sinking of the sword made a sound like a massive grape crushed between a man’s teeth. The westerner’s offer drowned in his gurgling cries. They dwindled away and finished, just as he did. The body made a sickening thump on the floor as it landed.

“No, I’m afraid not.”

Rushing to the back door, Jim threw a table across it and then a cabinet full of jars. “That ought to hold them off for a while.” He paused to catch his breath. At times like these at least the demon’s strength came in handy. There was another sound now at the front door.

Racing back into the main room, Jim had to climb over the long tables to reach the door in time. He threw his shoulder into it, slamming the door on his assailant, just as the fading light started to stream in through the crack between the door and the jam. It slammed shut with a thunderous noise.

He was safe for the moment, but the sun was going down. He didn’t have long to ponder and come up with a plan. He needed to come up with one, fast. For a moment he wished Reaper was awake. He could use the advice. But the thought lasted only for a moment. Outside the windows, Jim noticed a flame licking at the bottom of the sills. They had set the building on fire.

“Cheeky bottom feeders,” he swore, “Well, this sort of makes up my mind for me.”

The tavern began to fill up with smoke. Jim was angry with himself. He should have realized any group of people who would be happy to burn him at the stake, would be just as happy forgoing the stake.

“For the life of me, I can’t imagine why I came to this village to offer to help you folks out,” he yelled out the window. “The first thing I’m going to do when I get out of here is to locate a horde of the most bloodthirsty, mindless bandits I can find and tell them about all the hidden treasure you got socked away in your homes. With any luck, they’ll be undead.”

He ran up to the bar and grabbed one of the bartender’s extra towels. Soaking the towel in a barrel of water, he wrapped it over his nose and mouth. The smoke was starting to get heavy and obscure his vision. His eyes were watering as if the kitchen had gone insane peeling unions. He pulled down his makeshift mask to yell one more comment to the men arrayed outside. “I hope this building *isn’t* covered by insurance.”

Jim could now feel the heat as well as being blinded by the smoke. To a certain extent, what annoyed him the most, was the fact Reaper would have found this atmosphere comforting. He struggled his way over to the door in the main room. He couldn’t see the door handle in the smoke, so he connected his foot with the door. His serious kick shattered the door into splinters. They flew into the street smoking, sparks dying in the dust of the street. The barbarian and his crossbow supporters took a step back as Jim stumbled into the street.

He threw down the bar towel he’d wrapped around his face. Where once the rag had been soaked in water, it now landed on the street a dry hulk. Jim drew his sword, holding it steady in his right hand.

“So,” Jim shouted at the assembled crowd. “Who wants it?” There was a slight pause, but the crossbowmen aimed their weapons at the swordmaster, fingers on the triggers. “Which one of you is stupid enough to become a hero? Because whoever kills me gets to share their skull with a demon. I hope you are up for it. Because it’s going to hurt when he goes in... it’s going to hurt a lot. You’ll get a whole new appreciation for the concept of excruciating.”

The men took a step back. It was the barbarian who lowered his hammer first. Then a crossbowman behind him lowered his aim. Soon more of his friends followed. The barbarian cursed under his breath and pulled a pouch of coins from his belt and threw the bag in the dirt.

He grunted and looked off at someone Jim suspected was hiding in the distance. “I’ll not be paid to be infected by a demon. To the seven hells with all of you. You’re nothing better than dragon fodder anyway.” And the man stalked off. The crossbowmen decided they too hadn’t been paid enough for this and followed the barbarian out of town at a jog. Only they kept their coin purses.

Nice work.

Jim’s voice became irate. “You were awake the whole time, weren’t you?” He strode out into the street and scooped up the coin purse with the tip of his sword and flung it into the air. He grabbed it with his left hand as it drifted back down to earth. “You couldn’t be bothered to help, could you?”

I knew you could handle it.

Jim weighed the purse in his hand. It was heavy. His price was going up.

At least you got something out of it.

“I should have let one of them kill me,” he muttered as he walked down the street toward the outskirts of town. His shadow danced before him. The flames of the burning tavern billowing into the sky behind him, as the sun finished setting over the horizon.