



Of Art and Avarice

A Pathfinder RPG Story

H. Rad Bethlen

Old Khalden sat crosslegged on a woven mat at the periphery of the small square, one of many in the gilded city of Oppara, capital of Taldor. He was Kelish, with that race's bronze skin and luxurious black hair; although, his was more white than black. He was blind, having been blinded as a punishment for a crime committed in his passionate youth.

None knew the story. Khalden never spoke of it. When asked, a sentimental mood gathered his features into a wistful sadness and a sigh escaped his lips. No doubt—thought those who saw the old beggar's face at such moments—he had traded his sight for love.

It was assumed that Old Khalden was nothing more than a beggar or perhaps an ascetic, for amongst his few visible possessions was a time-worn copy of the *Order of Numbers*, Abadar's holy book. What use a blind man could make of such a book few could surmise.

Old Khalden was not what he seemed. His begging bowl was never emptied. The coins of silver and copper that filled its shallow depth had done so for years. He seemed to have no need of them. This was because Old Khalden was no beggar at all, but was a member in good standing of the Brotherhood of Silence, one of the most prominent thieves' guilds in the Inner Sea region.

He was retired from active work. He occupied himself with his current duties, that of a overhearer of words spoken, more to make himself feel useful than for any need to impress his betters, for he had already done so. Few could guess that when the blind beggar was not to be found on his mat he was enjoying life's rich bounty, tucked away out of sight in the Brotherhood of Silence's labyrinthine headquarters, one entrance of which, lie not more than a dozen steps from his right hand.

It was night in the gilded city. Few were out-of-doors. The free-standing stalls in the square were covered. Only Desna's glowing orb and an assortment of night-roving birds kept the blind beggar company. Not for long, however. Old Khalden turned an ear to the hidden entrance. The door slid open. To his ear the grating sound was an offense. His hand slipped under the leather cover of the *Order of Numbers*. He fingered the enchanted dagger held within, sheathed, as it were, by the cut-out pages of Abadar's holy script.

"Pissed off Tilly, again" grumbled a youthful male. "Two nights in a row with *you*. I'll make a present to her of those raspberry tarts Mara bakes. Then—" A ruffle of fabric silenced the youth. Old Khalden replaced his palm on Abadar's holy book and resumed his feigned sublime indifference to worldly affairs.

"Why's *he* still awake?" whispered Eshkol. "What company I keep; one blind, the other stupid." He moved opposite the hidden entrance, away from Old Khalden, whose true identity he did not know, the two never having crossed paths in the poorly lit hallways behind the secret entrance. Eshkol found a shadow and squatted on his haunches. His companion, Owen, another young apprentice of the Brotherhood, followed, managed to fit himself into the same shadow, and also squatted. "Dawn can't come soon enough," complained Eshkol. "These watches are pointless. Who's going to sneak in here, anyway?"

"Guards?" asked Owen.

"They don't sneak, fool."

"They—"

"Besides, the only guards that matter are bought off. Do you think the Brotherhood is stupid? You have a lot to—"

"I hear a troubling sound," said Old Khalden, speaking seemingly to himself, but loud enough to be heard by the youths. "It is the voice of ignorance. But how can that be?"

"Shut up, old loon," called Eshkol. Even though he had no fear of the blind beggar he lowered his voice. He elbowed Owen, who lost his balance and fell into the moonlight. He rose, squeezed himself once more into the shadow and squatted. He took no offense at his companion's actions. "You really are useless," said Eshkol. "If they didn't need someone to move around their trunks of loot without emptying them you'd be sitting over there," he pointed to Old Khalden. "How could you fail the first test? The *first* test!"

"They weren't mine."

"That's the entire—Ugh." Eshkol lowered his head into his hands. "They left the gold out to test you," he said, looking at Owen. "If you don't seize every opportunity to take gold when it's right in front of your eyes then how will the Brotherhood know your heart's filled with greed?"

"But," said Owen. "We shouldn't steal from each other, should we?"

"What did Tilly tell you?" asked Eshkol. Tilly was the unfortunate thief who had been placed in charge of the two youths' instruction. "There's no such crime as theft. Remember? There's only the crime of being caught."

"Right," said Owen. "No such crime as—"

"Shut up."

For a few minutes the two young thieves squatted in silence.

"Who's that?" asked Owen, motioning with his head. Eshkol, who had been contemplating how best to rise quickly through the ranks of the Brotherhood of Silence, grabbed his dagger. Owen had a cudgel, owing to his greater strength. Neither youth noticed that Old Khalden's hand was now beneath the cover of Abadar's holy book.

"Who? Where?"

"There?" motioned Owen. Eshkol looked then looked to his companion.

"Are you—" Eshkol looked back at the "person" Owen had indicated. "That's a statue, are you—" Neither boy noticed that Old Khalden's hand was resting on the book's cover once more.

"A statue?" asked Owen. He narrowed his eyes. "Wasn't there last night?"

"No," said Eshkol, "it wasn't. They put it up today. Haven't you noticed them out here working? They spent an entire week clearing—Ugh." He once more placed his head in his hands.

"She's beautiful," said Owen. "Who is she?"

Eshkol looked at Owen, then to the statue. He was about to insult his fellow apprentice again, but the otherworldly presence of the statue gave him pause. The moonlight seemed to animate it. The statue was so expertly crafted that it possessed none of the still-life quality that hobbles the effectiveness of lesser works. Indeed, it appeared so lifelike that Owen could hardly be faulted for mistaking it for a living person.

"How should I—" Began Eshkol.

"Come, young ruffians," said Old Khalden. "You make more noise than a murder of crows." He waved the two youths to him. "In order to silence your ignorant chatter I will tell you what you want to know. Come."

Owen turned to Eshkol.

"Eh, why not?" asked Eshkol.

"We'll get in trouble," said Owen, although when Eshkol rose, he did too.

"We can still see the entrance," whispered Eshkol. "Come on, I'm bored to death."

The pair rose, crossed the square, pausing to gaze at the statue, then arrived at Old Khalden's mat. They studied the blind beggar, looked at each other, then sat, mimicking Khalden's pose, legs folded beneath them.

"All week, I'm listening to the workmen," began Old Khalden. "This morning, when she," he waved his hand toward the statue, whose eyes seemed to have settled on the two youths and their blind instructor, "was placed, a bard came and told her story. Shall I tell you?"

"That's why we're sitting here, old fool," said Eshkol.

Khalden smiled. He patted the cover of the *Order of Numbers*, thinking of its true contents. He remembered how he was in his youth and thought the young thief across from him rather tame. "When the workmen placed the statue," said Old Khalden, "a dwarven man stood in the shadow that you yourselves occupied only moments ago. He was weeping."

"How could you know—" began Eshkol.

Khalden tapped his right ear.

"A dwarf cannot weep quietly," he said, "when they succumb to such emotions, it is with the power of a mountain stream." He organized the telling in his mind. "She was a princess," he said. "One of the many daughters of the previous satrap of Qadira, our old enemy, yes? Now we have peace." He smiled. "And to adhere a man to peace, his heart is secured with love. Or so the bard said." He turned his head toward the statue. He could not see it, but could imagine it. "She was the daughter of man but had something of the djinn about her, that being the genie-folk who flutter upon the wind, lighter than a bird, yet more terrible than a desert twister—should one anger them."

"Old fool, what's this?"

"Go," said Khalden, without anger, "gaze upon her likeness, if you wish to test my telling." The two young thieves rose and went to the statue. They studied it in earnest. The princess, they still did not know her name, was thin to the point of delicateness. Carved into her flesh were swirls and lines meant to represent the straight gusting and whimsical curling of the winds. She had none of the genie-folk's inhuman appearance, being entirely recognizable in form, and of exceptional beauty. The youths returned and sat. Old Khalden continued.

"She was promised to Stavian's Uncle—"

"The Grand Prince?" asked Owen.

"Yes. This Uncle, Hendrik by name, is a most disagreeable man, ugly within and without. He managed to make it to his fiftieth year without once turning the head of a maiden." This made the two youths giggle. "So when he sought a wife one had to be found from amongst the former enemy, a retribution, I suppose.

"The match was entirely inappropriate, of course," continued Khalden. "This princess was shy but watchful. She was like a timid cat, one who is frightened by any sound, yet who is so desiring of petting, she lingers, at war with her own fright. While her betrothed was a man of

large appetites, wont to take in-hand immediately any object of his desire. Only the spite of the Grand Prince kept them apart.

"You see, Grand Prince Stavian did not know just how beautiful his Uncle's bride was until he saw her. He postponed the wedding and housed her in the palace. This was so he could gaze upon her. Even though he couldn't or wouldn't marry her, he could still enjoy the sight of her. He is an exceedingly lecherous man.

"The Princess, her name was Fatima, did you know? Ah, well, so it was. She was used to the beauty of her homeland. The city of Katheer, from whence she hails, is home to more wonders than a man could find on his own, even given ten lifetimes in which to search. Even though we cling to our past glory and see its ghost everywhere, to an outsider, especially a Qadirian, our capital must look like so much tarnish on a golden crown that once shown brightly.

"Her only pleasure was the palace gardens. She used to make many sketches of what she saw there. In her search for arresting views she discovered many of the statues that are hidden within, lost to poorly kept shrubbery. How many sketches of these did she make? How many a likeness in pencil or charcoal before she thought to ask about their creator?

"She learned that the sculptor was still alive. Not only that, he lives here in the capital. I have already mentioned him. He is the dwarf, Ottmar, of whom all of Oppara used to speak. He fell out of favor due to his gruff manner, still, he was given a modest pension. He kept himself busy with an epic work to which he'd devoted nearly a decade of research, planning, and modeling. This was a monumental statue depicting one of the Ten Warriors of the Old Mage Jatembe, who brought light and wisdom to a people lost in darkness, so said the bard. Of these ancient things I know little.

"This statue was of the warrior Mataabō, whose steed was a giant lizard that walked on its two powerful hind legs, a type of creature not seen anymore, the size of which would prove preposterous, were we to see it now. Only the gods know if they once truly existed. Well, Ottmar is a perfectionist. He did not wish to imagine his lizard, but to work from life. He sent to the Mwangi Expanse, you've heard of it? No? It's a vast and wild jungle, against which the sharp blade of civilization has made no cut since Jatembe's time.

"A suitable specimen was brought back along with two natives from the expanse who had some understanding of the creature. Mind you, it was no colossal beast." Here Old Khalden laughed. "It must have stood no taller than either of you and a sight narrower, I surmise. It was half bird, for it was feathered about its head and neck. Yet it had the carnivore's dangerous bite and it possessed claws like reaping scythes. It ate meat, which its handlers were quick to give it, lest it leap upon them.

"Ottmar was making a careful study of this bird-lizard. About this time Princess Fatima learned of her favorite sculptor's identity. She sent him a request, desiring to see him. Even though Ottmar's pension was on the line, the request was ignored. He is one of those singleminded artist who cannot take even a modest break from his work. If Fatima was not so timid, that is, if she possessed more of what we'd call the typical attitude of royalty, she would have had Ottmar drag from his studio and thrown down before her. As it was, she sent beseeching letters and plenty of gifts, thinking to earn the dwarf's good grace.

"However, Ottmar remained obsessed with his work. Now, if you recall, Fatima was like a cat that may or may not conquer its fear and approach. She *did* overcome her timidity and one day, quite without warning, appeared in Ottmar's studio. You might imagine he'd be put out

but the exact opposite happened. Here was this delicate, timid creature, blown in like a blossom, a treat to his eye and so completely unlike him in demeanor that the dwarven artist fell in love. Not romantic love, mind you, but the love an artist has for something beautiful and pure.

“Ottmar now had to make amends for his rude behavior. He gave Fatima the royal treatment, as it were, showing her his meagre studio and his even more meagre quarters. Even though his tools were old they were made by dwarven hands and thus were of the highest quality. Finally, after so much fumbling through social niceties, the two were accustomed to one another. A genuine friendship formed. Many visits followed. In time, when Ottmar was truly comfortable with Fatima, he showed her Mataabō on his feathered steed.

“Would you believe Fatima laughed? Not at the workmanship, which was sublime, but that such a creature existed at all, or ever had. Here, a daughter of the genie-folk, and she doubted the existence of this giant bipedal lizard. Well, if Ottmar wasn’t so enchanted with our princess he would have put her out on her rump. Thankfully, he had a better solution. He showed her the lizard from the Mwangi Expanse.

“Now, mind you, this lizard was no household pet. Ottmar had never so much as touched a brightly colored feather on its head. Not even the handlers, born and raised around such a fantastic creature, dare approach it. This glorified chicken scared them all to death. Not Fatima, the very first thing she did was approach it, hand extended. Thankfully, Ottmar drew her back. The lizard, suffering such an affront as it never had, emitted such a threatening hiss, that everyone present fled to safer quarters.

“Grand Prince Stavian could not delay forever. His Uncle wasn’t getting any younger. The wedding date was set. You might feel sorry for our princess but fear not, such marriages are more for show than for anything else. Still, her fate was uncertain. What kind of husband would Uncle Hendrik make? The question didn’t worry Fatima. She was too involved with her dwarven sculptor, whose platonic love was enthusiastically reciprocated.

“Ottmar decided that his great work would make the perfect wedding present for Fatima. He double his efforts, working from dawn until the wee hours of the night in order to finish the statue in time. His aging body could not endure the work. He fell ill and exhausted and was confined to bed. The wedding date approached but the great statue of Mataabō was not yet complete. What do to? There was no way it could be completed in time without compromising its quality. This Ottmar would not do.

“He decided on a placeholder. He no longer needed the feathered lizard. That part of the statue had been completed. He made a gift of the lizard and of its handlers to the princess. These handlers were pleased, as their pay increased and their living quarters were vastly superior. The lizard too was pleased, for it could now roam the garden outside of the princess’s quarters, instead of the sunless yard behind Ottmar’s studio.

“These handlers found Fatima and the other personages of the palace a most difficult group. While Ottmar respected the lizard’s dangerous qualities, the nobility felt immune to any harm. They had never known anything truly wild. The handlers attempted to communicate the danger involved but were ignored. There were many close calls.

“Now, there was something known to these handlers that was unknown to Ottmar or Fatima. These wise Mwangi tried to express their understanding but somehow they fell short of their goal. What they knew but could not communicate was this; the lizard was young, an adolescent. It was also female. It was rapidly approaching its first season. The females of this

particular species are unusually aggressive during their season. They are motivated to go in hunt of a mate. The poor males of this species are practically assaulted. This aggressiveness is most pronounced in the first year, tapering off as the female ages.

"These wise Mwangi attempted to convince the princess to do one of two things before the first season came; have the lizard killed, or have the lizard returned to the expanse. By this time Fatima was quite taken with this death-dealing chicken. She spent hour after hour observing and sketching it. She could not comprehend the warning given by the lizard's handlers. When they grew more insistent she grew offended. In her naivety she had them dismissed. They went to Ottmar but found him so ill, exhausted, and listless as to be almost insensible. These poor Mwangi had no recourse but to pray to the gods, take their gold, and return home.

"Just about the time Ottmar was returning to health the lizard was coming into her first season. The princess was asleep one night when she heard a most disturbing sound. It was a mournful wailing, a mixture of a scream and a funeral dirge. Although the sound woke her and she heard it still, she thought she was dreaming, for the sound belonged more rightly to the realm of nightmares.

"She followed this sound into her private garden and there found the feathered-lizard curled up in the moonlight, moaning most pitifully. The lizard turned its plaintive eyes on the princess. The pain and anguish of the beast's gaze wounded the princess's sensitive heart. She had no idea of the danger she was in, for the mournful sound was one side of a coin whose other side was rage. The princess, desiring to console the lizard, approached, knelt, and reached out." Here Old Khalden stopped. He could hear the pounding hearts before him and the strain of lungs whose air was held tight.

"Afterwards, the lizard was put to death. The princess—buried in her private garden. A day of mourning was called. Her funeral train stretched across Oppara. This was some time ago, mind you. Perhaps you are too young to remember it? As it so happened, for at times the gods can be cruel, Ottmar had labored with renewed vigor and was near to completing the statue of Mataabō. When he heard of Fatima's death he struck deeply the face of that ancient hero, dropped his chisel and hammer, and once more fell ill, this time of heartbreak.

"Well," said Old Khalden, "this is but one half of our story. For you wished to know of this statue's origins. You have heard of the life and death of Fatima, yes, but there is more to hear about Ottmar. The night grows long and the air cold. I hear my bed calling. Do not yet buy raspberry tarts for your teacher but stay in her ill-favor so that we may speak tomorrow night." With this Old Khalden surprised the two youths by passing through the hidden entrance, the *Order of Numbers* tucked under his arm.

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"Ah," said Old Khalden, the blind beggar-thief, when the two young apprentices returned to his mat. This time he was prepared for them. A wicker basket was at his left hand. The *Order of Numbers* at his right. He brought the basket around and motioned for the boys to partake of its contents. "Mara was most please to sell all of her tarts before they'd even cooled." He held up a finger. "Do leave a few for your poor instructor. How she labors!" The two boys laughed. He had also a bottle of goat's milk. He set this next to the basket. He knew that boys of any temperament can be pacified and pleased by such things as pastries and milk. It was in this way he found a most agreeable audience.

"Now we must speak of Ottmar, whose fate is perhaps worse than Fatima's. How? Who knows what charity the gods give to those innocent, young princesses who come before them? As for those who've grown cynical by time's many injuries—" He shrugged his shoulders. "Should they expect Heaven after this? Eh? But these are matters for philosophers and priests.

"When we left Ottmar he was bed-ridden, ill of heart. He dismissed his assistants and barred the door of his studio. He could not bare to see Mataabō's feathered lizard, nor the gash that marred that noble warrior's face, for this very wound mirrored the one that cut through Ottmar's soul. You see, he blamed himself for Fatima's death. To mourn is to wrestle with the hard truths of time.

"With Fatima's death his pension was ended. Uncle Hendrik blamed the sculptor too. He even called for the dwarf's execution. Grand Prince Stavian, despite all his evil instincts, hates the sight of blood. Exile? requested Uncle Hendrik. Eh, let it go, said the Grand Prince. And so the world forgot about Ottmar. Both studio and home fell into neglect and disrepair. Animals found their way in, pushing their heads through holes and making nests within Mataabō's crevices and within arms-reach of the once lauded artist.

"What does soul-sickness do to a man? It's misery. Artists, too, are perhaps more vulnerable to such corrosive states. Is it any wonder that Ottmar began to lose his hold on reality? He began to speak to the rats and crows. He gave them his bread, he subsisting on crumbs. Isolation does strange things to a man, believe me. One gets to talking to beasts as if they'd answer. In time, one believes they do!

"One crow in particular adopted Ottmar. Crows, as you know, are intelligent. They have poor manners, yes, but they are smart enough to recognize a good thing when it comes along."

"They know their mark," said Eshkol.

"Yes," agreed Khalden. "This crow figured out that if it stood on the headboard or on Ottmar himself, as he lie under the covers, it got first choice of whatever food was available. Soon this crow chased off its competition. The rats were pecked and squawked at until they went in search of a more peaceful abode. The other crows were harder to dislodge, but, as this enterprising crow grew fat, it was able to oust all others through sheer muscle.

"So, after a season or two we find Ottmar and his crow living like wizard and familiar. Perhaps the following is only the bard's fancy, or perhaps it is truth, who can say? But, this crow, having grown fond of its benevolent provider, or perhaps scheming for more food, realized that an active dwarf is better than an inactive one. This crow began to work on Ottmar. How? It found its way into his studio, no doubt through some hole in the roof. It managed to carry tool after tool from the studio into the house, and drop them noisily on the floor by Ottmar's bed.

"Can you imagine it? What must have Ottmar thought when confronted by the rude persistence of this remarkable bird? Tool after tool, even those whose weight you would think prevented such transport, made their way from studio shelf to Ottmar's bedside. 'What, damn you?' I can imagine the consternated dwarf demand. This crow, and here we begin to mistrust our bard, even in a world such as this, answered.

"It scolded its protector and provider. 'Enough is enough,' it said. 'Back to work with you!'" Said Old Khalden. "Can you imagine it? Eh, there are stranger things. Even dwarves must acknowledge that the occasional crow will talk. 'But what?' Asked Ottmar of his supernatural advisor. 'Fatima!' Answered the crow.

"You see, this crow had been paying attention—listening to Ottmar's lamentations. While man confuses himself with his vast intellect, beasts get right to the issue. The only cure for Ottmar's soul-sickness, knew this wily old crow, was forgiveness. How could Ottmar forgive himself? As a dwarf he must look to stone and to his hands. As a sculptor—well, the answer is obvious.

"Ottmar could hardly grasp what this impertinent crow demanded of him. It was too much for his pained heart. Have you ever tried to keep a crow from a bit of carrion? Kick or scream or throw rocks, they hop about or maybe take flight, but return they will. Before long Ottmar couldn't turn back his blanket, so heavy was it with tools. Nor could he occupy himself with sobbing or painful introspection without getting a motivating peck. What the crow lacked in subtlety it more than made up for in obnoxious persistence. In time Ottmar found himself prying loose the boards over his studio door.

"I'm too crude a man to know how that first vision of Mataabō and his lizard mount must have struck Ottmar. If I know the dwarven character, even that of an artist, once a dwarf takes a tool in-hand, sentimentality is banished. So began the statue you see behind you. This great hero and his lizard mount had one last service to man, for locked within that stone was Fatima, a likeness that belies belief, or so I hear said.

"Ottmar worked as a man possessed. All the while the crow watched. Chunks of stone were split away, falling with a crash. Mataabō must have known his fate, for he surrendered without protest. In the heart of his lizard mount was the stone that would provide a delicate yet enduring beauty. Fatima," Khalden smiled, "Fatima was there. Ottmar revealed her.

"The statue seemed to carve itself. It's like that sometimes, I imagine. Ottmar stood back one day, hammer and chisel in-hand, and stopped. He knew the statue was done, needing only to be polished. He set aside his tools and wept, not tears of sadness, no, tears of joy. He had created a masterpiece. It was as if Fatima was standing before him. His moment of glory was interrupted, however, for the crow was hopping about and making such a racket as to shatter even a dwarf's pleased tranquility.

"What, damn you?" Asked Ottmar. 'Jewels!' Cried the crow. 'Jewels!' Ottmar looked at the statue and searched his memory. He turned to the crow. 'She never wore jewelry, you—' But the cry of 'jewels, jewels', continued without cease. Ottmar thought. Yes, he realized, at the wedding, and everyday thereafter, she would have had fantastic jewels. He had never seen them. He gazed for a long time at his squawking companion. He turned to the statue. How, he asked himself, could he add jewels he'd never seen?

"The crow read his mind. 'Stavian,' it said, 'Stavian.'" Here Khalden paused. He had spoken at length and was thirsty. He felt for the bottle of milk. Owen understood what the blind beggar wished, took his hand, and placed within it the bottle.

"We've saved the rest for you," he said.

"A tart, too," said Eshkol.

"Kind boys," said Khalden. He held out the bottle with one hand, wiping his chin with the other. Owen took the bottle. Khalden did not yet eat the sweet treat, but continued his tale.

"Ottmar went to the castle. He requested an audience with the Grand Prince. It took some time for the prince to recall the name Ottmar. When he did he was curious. He assumed the dwarf wished to resume his pension. People were always beseeching him for gold. He was surprised when Ottmar enquired not about money, but about Fatima's jewels. After some confusion and a great deal of attention to security, they were produced.

"Ottmar was escorted into a dining room. One wall of this room was comprised of windows opening to a lovely garden of fruit trees. Word had gotten around that Fatima's jewels were being retrieved from the royal treasury. The maids, who normally stayed out of sight, determined that those windows must be washed on that day. Two maids stood within the dining room, one outside. They opened the windows and gossiped while they cleaned. Each had her head turned in order to catch a glance at the jewels. The swift breeze of the Inner Sea carried the scent of the fruit blossoms into the room.

At one end of the long table, set out on rich velvet, were the princess's wedding jewels. A guard stood beside the table. A man, associated with the royal treasury, was standing behind the table. Ottmar began to take measurements and sketch out the details of each piece.

"As Ottmar examined the pieces, the treasury-man rattled off the history of each. The twin, lime-green stones, with their milky swirls, set in platinum earrings were from Kyonin. They had come from the tomb of an elven queen. The bracelet had been found in an excavation in Sargava. The stones, which resembled frozen flames, could not be identified and were considered unique. The necklace, and here the treasury-man spoke with marked pride—the maids ceased cleaning all together and listened with rapt attention—was not only an emerald of perfect color and clarity, it possessed an enchantment by none other than Nex himself, or so it was determined, such things are damnably hard to verify. What was the enchantment? None knew. No amount of divination could reveal it. The magic of that immortal wizard was far too advanced to give up its secrets, especially to the ignoramuses who probed and prodded like children. How to activate the enchantment? Ask Nex.

"Each piece," continued Khalden, "was befitting the princess that Ottmar had come to love. He finished his sketches and was half out of the door, the treasury-man donning his silk gloves, the guard looking forward to his lunch-feast, the maids deciding that the windows were sparkling, when there came a sudden flapping sound; wings at close quarters. Ottmar ducked and scrambled through the open door. The guard reached for his sword. The treasury-man reached for the jewels. He was rewarded with a blood-drawing peck on his forearm.

"The crow who had demanded, 'Jewels! Jewels!', materialized. This mysterious bird had been waiting to pounce. You see, it had been present the entire time, having waddled into the room on Ottmar's heels. It had stood in the corner, seen by none, for all attention went to the jewels. When Ottmar finished, this thief, yes, for this bird is as we are, avaricious to the core, leapt upon the table. It grabbed the Nex-enchanted necklace, turned its gaze this way and that, rocked a bit like crows do, then launched and flapped over the heads of the screaming maids. The last sight of that necklace, whose value was inestimable, was its jump through an open window, carried in the glossy black claws of the crow.

"Ottmar was seized at once, drug to the dungeon, and interrogated. His story was told to the Grand Prince, who, would you believe, laughed until tears came. He had the guard and the treasury-man thrown into the dungeon. Ottmar, he released, on one condition: the statue of Fatima was to be gifted to the crown, to make up for that priceless artifact which had flown away. His sense of justice, or was it irony, was most unique.

"Now we have arrived at the end of our tale, my young friends. The statue, which even the daft Grand Prince acknowledges as a work of sublime beauty and unequaled craftsmanship, was far too remarkable to remain out of public sight. So," Khalden motioned to the statue, "there stands Fatima. As for Ottmar—"

But Old Khalden's words were interrupted by a sharp click, nails on stone. He turned his ear to the source. Eshkol and Owen turned to look behind them. There appeared to be no source of the odd sound. Then, as the boys watched, a crow materialized from the deeper darkness, standing atop Fatima. It held in its black beak a delicate necklace, a platinum chain with a flawless emerald. It lowered its head and slipped the necklace around Fatima's slender neck.

"What is it, boys?" whispered Old Khalden.

"The crow," whispered Eshkol.

"What's it doing?" asked Khalden.

"It's got the necklace!" cried Owen.

The crow, which was no ordinary bird, but was some sort of wicked fey or the results of an ancient wizard's troublesome meddling, which, was more commonly called a "witchcrow," turned its black eyes to the seated group of fellow thieves. More intelligence shown within those dark orbs than any natural crow, or indeed, most men, possessed. It extended its wings and fluttered down to the base of the statue. It turned its gaze upwards and seemed to regard the effect the necklace had when paired with Ottmar's masterpiece.

"Owen," whispered Khalden, "club that wicked thing. Eshkol, grab the necklace before it's too late."

As Khalden spoke these words, the witchcrow began to hop and dance. It spat out such unnerving sounds that the two young thieves were slow to act. Old Khalden, more experienced, and therefore less easily dissuaded, threw back the cover of the *Order of Numbers* and plucked out his enchanted dagger. He rose and began to creep toward the racket. When he stepped between Eshkol and Owen they were awoken from their stupor and took to their feet. The witchcrow continued its bizarre dance.

Just as Khalden was within striking distance the witchcrow stopped, turned toward him, and gave a shrill squawk of such menacing pitch that the blind beggar and his two compatriots were stopped. The witchcrow took flight, landed on Fatima's head, bent, plucked the necklace free, then rose up to its full height. It gave the trio the evil eye, nodded its head three times in rapid succession, and disappeared from sight. Only Old Khalden could hear the flapping of its wings as it passed over them.

The trio stood for some time in silence. Eshkol and Owen looked at one another. Old Khalden had his ear turned skyward, a wry smile on his face. Once he was certain the witchcrow was gone and the evening's excitement was through he yawned, stretched, and made his way back to his mat. He crouched, felt for the *Order of Numbers*, found it, and stood.

"Well, boys," he said, replacing his dagger within the holy book and shutting the cover. "A finer ending could not have been had. A master thief that was!" He laughed, turned, and headed toward the secret entrance to the Brotherhood of Silence's headquarters. He paused, turned, and smiled at the two boys. "Leave my raspberry tart out for the birds. One never knows," he said, his voice echoing from the shadows. "One never knows."



H. Rad Bethlen has been compared to Isak Dinesen (*Seven Gothic Tales*) and Fritz Leiber (*Ill Met in Lankhmar*). He is known for his work in the fantasy and horror genres as well as his non-fiction. He has been published in Europe and America.

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