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IN THE CORRIDORS OF THE CROW

A Tale of the King's Blade

By JOHN C. HOCKING

BENHUS had been summoned into the presence of his employer, King Numar Flavius, with no clue as to what was expected of him once he arrived. A horse had been delivered to his home with instructions that he ride directly to the King's refuge, a fortified structure situated amid the palace gardens.

Benhus was still new to his position as an agent and catspaw entrusted with various tasks by Flavius himself, but he thought he'd been effective in the role thus far and took pride that he had, not long ago, actually saved the King's life. The fact that displaying any trace of gratitude seemed outside the King's range of interest was disappointing but, he told himself, probably in character for royalty.

What Benhus found most annoying was that he was consistently expected to be knowledgeable and capable in matters with which he had little to no experience. Like attending a formal ball at the university, locating a missing corpse, or questioning an aged noblewoman who was as uncertain of his identity as she was deaf. Or riding a horse.

Benhus's short tenure in the Legion had been spent in the infantry. He had ridden a horse only a handful of times in his life, knew the raw basics and that was all. When he received the King's message and saw the chestnut gelding tethered on his portico, Benhus had retreated into the villa he had inherited from his teacher, Thratos, and spent much too long preparing himself.

He donned black riding breeches and one of his finest white shirts, over which he wore a light leather cuirass, hoping to look both presentable and ready for anything. Selecting his dependable old short sword, now in a handsome new sheath, he hesitated a moment before deciding to take the preternaturally sharp white dagger. It was such a showpiece he felt it looked awkward on his belt, but had been so useful he had grown certain it brought him good luck. He made a brief attempt to comb his sandy hair, abandoned as he reasoned his locks were likely to be just as tousled after time in the saddle. Benhus dawdled until he realized he could be late to a royal appointment because of a ridiculous and unfounded hope that the meeting might somehow be cancelled so he would be spared the uncomfortable prospect of riding a horse into the presence of the King.

He mounted up, headed for the Royal Gardens, and initially found himself quite pleased. The horse was big, calm and surprisingly easy to control. When he passed through the busy market flanking Cistern Park he drew the eye of more than one young woman and sat as tall in the saddle as he could. The Royal

Gardens lay well across the city, however, and by the time he rode through their gates he found himself growing sore.

Leaving the gate and its guards behind, Benhus rode along a cobblestone path that wound through lush, manicured greenery until he saw the slim tower that rose above the small fortified blockhouse that was the King's refuge, a bolthole protected by both well-trained guards and a variety of magical wards. The top floor's slim windows glittered in the afternoon sun.

Benhus rounded a dense copse of saplings and emerged from the path into the open courtyard before the blockhouse. Brightly flowering bushes were planted along its face, gaudy colors out of place against its grim stone. The heavy door into the blockhouse was closed.

A man Benhus didn't know was standing idly beside a horse in the courtyard. As Benhus approached the man looked to him with interest.

"Hello," the man said. He had dark eyes under dark brows. The top of his head was balding but hair fell in long black ringlets to his shoulders.

"Hello," said Benhus. He tried to dismount casually but his thighs were stiff and he stumbled a little. The man made no attempt to conceal a thin smile.

"I'm Deroth," said the man, "called by some the Swift. I'm here at the summons of the King."

Benhus noted the man's thick, squared off frame and was curious how swift he could be. Deroth wore a deep green tunic with a short sword and dagger belted at his waist. He wore the weapons as if well accustomed to them.

"And you are?" prompted Deroth.

"Benhus, the King's Blade. Also here because the King called."

A fresh and more avid interest kindled in Deroth's eyes.

"Benhus! The King's Blade!" There was something in his tone that Benhus did not like. "I've heard much of you. You were mentored by Thratos, who trained with me for some time in years past. Thratos was a good man and a good friend."

Benhus nodded, not trusting himself to say anything for fear it would ring false. Thratos had been an arrogant hectoring teacher who drew pleasure from belittling his only student. Closing the Tomb of Nervale upon him had seemed a singular opportunity at the time and Benhus had found no substantial reason to regret it since.

"You're terribly young. I hope the mantle of Thratos doesn't weigh too heavily upon you."

"I've done well enough thus far," Benhus managed.

"And you're the King's Blade? Such a title. I recall that Thra-tos was called the King's Hand."

Benhus shrugged and smiled stiffly. He found himself wondering exactly how swift this fellow really was.

Deroth seemed about to speak again when the door to the looming blockhouse was thrown open and a chain of figures emerged from the dimness within.

Benhus was struck by surprise that bordered on shock to see the first man out the door was Praedon, captain of the Royal Guard. The last time Benhus had seen the captain he was being thrown from a hurtling carriage. Benhus had heard nothing of him since and was all but certain he must be dead. Very much alive, Praedon was clad in the elegant half armor of the Royal Guard, tall but so thick through the chest and heavy with muscle in arm and shoulder that he gave the appearance of being stout. Benhus noticed a pronounced limp, but otherwise he appeared unchanged.

"Captain," said Benhus in greeting, touching his brow in salute and deliberately looking away from Deroth. Praedon's only response was a curt nod, which provoked a gentle stab of disappointment in Benhus. Praedon's entire life was devoted to safeguarding the King. Benhus had fought for and protected Numar Flavius, had inarguably saved his life and sustained considerable injury in doing so. Benhus frowned. Clearly, it was foolishness to anticipate any kind of recognition for one's accomplishments in this job.

The King himself followed Praedon, and Benhus was impressed anew by the imposing stature of the ruler of the city of Frekore. Numar Flavius possessed an unnerving presence, standing taller than Praedon with a body built along such exaggerated, muscular lines that he resembled the idealized statue of a hero of old. His big head swiveled to look at Benhus and he favored him with a grin that shone white in his close-trimmed beard.

Benhus grinned back, but the expression tightened as the King advanced directly toward him, making no acknowledgement of Deroth. There was someone trailing the King, someone who was shuffling along, led on a slim leash of chain.

The King's broad hand extended and Benhus found himself reaching out and accepting the end of the chain. He wanted to ask Flavius what this meant but the ruler seemed to radiate an oppressive aura, a nimbus of regal authority that silenced him. His gaze dropped from the King's flatly appraising green eyes, down over his elegant riding garb to the leash in his hand. It ended in a leather loop, thick and discolored from long use.

"This is Zehra," Flavius said.

Bent forward slightly at shoulders and looking down at her sandaled feet, was an elderly Southron woman. She wore a stained and ragged-edged tunic of buckskin. Held back by two combs set over each ear, her thin, grey hair was channeled back between narrow shoulders. Dirty leather mittens covered each hand, fastened by a steel cuff at the wrist. The chain leash Benhus held extended to a collar encircling her gaunt neck. He saw that the collar was metal but lined with some kind of fabric. He had a sudden urge to cast the leash away but smothered it.

"Zehra is a Southron shaman of unique and very useful skills," said Flavius. "Necessary skills. You shall be her caretaker. Do not release her or let her touch you at any time."

The King and Deroth exchanged soft words but Benhus didn't hear them. He squinted sourly at Zehra and wondered how it was that Flavius determined the nature of the tasks assigned to him. This brief and bitter reverie was interrupted by Praedon, who led horses into the courtyard.

The King mounted a powerful black charger, throwing an elegant cloak over his shoulders that covered his face to the eyes, obscuring his identity to the casual glance. Benhus remounted his horse with discomfort he tried to disguise. A pony was brought for Zehra, who mounted it familiarly and without apparent effort. Her pony and his gelding seemed acquainted and moved so closely together that Zehra's leash, now held with concern by Benhus, remained slack.

The party rode out of the garden as the afternoon moved inexorably toward evening. Praedon led, closely followed by King Flavius, then Deroth, with Benhus and his charge Zehra bringing up the rear. Benhus reflected it was for the best that he follow as no one had bothered to tell him where they were going, much less what they intended to do once they arrived. He burned with stifled rancor and with questions, but the only rider near enough to converse with was Deroth, to whom Benhus was unwilling to reveal his ignorance.

They rode through the city's outskirts, edging briefly into the Tiers, where much of the nobility dwelt in tree-shrouded mansions behind garden walls and guarded gates. Passing through an open checkpoint, Benhus saw the sentries there standing in mute attention as they passed. The King's path had been cleared.

Beyond the Tiers they rode into open country, where sprawling estates alternated with the large farms owned either by more prosperous nobles or the city itself. The sun raked the land with long golden light from where it hung, just above the horizon, as they passed through a spur of the greenwood that flanked Lake Sulla. When the riders moved into the forest, sunlight illuminated the trees in a wall of flickering green and flashing yellow, but when they rode back out, onto the long rolling slopes above the lake, the sun had fallen far enough that the forest had become a tangled snare of deep shadows.

With his thighs chafed, his back aching and his mind preoccupied with keeping Zehra's pony close at hand, Benhus still marveled at the sight of Lake Sulla. It was a smooth expanse of deep cobalt, darker than the cloudless sky. He had heard that there were numerous estates and farms abutting the lake but could see none and wondered if the King had deliberately sought a part of lake that was unpopulated.

The party moved along the rocky shoreline, the breeze off the water tugging at their hair and garments. They followed a faded path, not a road as much as a trail, that snaked along through meadow and low brush as the forest's edge drew away from the lake before pushing in close once again. Rounding a sharp curve in the shoreline revealed an inlet across which Benhus could see a small enclosed keep. It looked to be built of fieldstone and seemed so much of a piece with the wild lakeside that it might have grown up from the stony ground there.
