

# Brounde

Money. It was all about money. They had all the metal, so of course they declared that money *was* metal. So we got metal. All of it. We bargained, looted, stole and cheated. We took all the metal we could find, and threw it into the sea. Now money would be based not on a happenstance chemical alloy, but on that which flowed through the veins of everyone; blood.

For why shouldn't value stem from blood? From the proof of the living, rather than an array of inert matter? People do not serve money, money serves people. And thus did I take my appointed task as Commander of the Plebian branch, to further the cause of blood.

"Brother Brounde!", the Supreme Sibling Desnion called out to me. "You are hereby tasked by the General to guide the Plebian Branch to the Independent Kingdom of Trunchet and neutralize their Runiertian supply! I shall send two Saboteurs and a lay advisor with you!"

He paused. "Also," he said, almost as an afterthought.

"You shall be accompanied by Sister Sabarene. She has recently made her commitment to the Plebian Branch."

A frail white haired girl stepped forth, clad in the black robes of the Plebian Branch. A gloved right hand formed into a salute. "S-sister Sabarene, reporting for duty! Please take care of me, Sir!"

"My name is Brother Brounde.", I replied.

"Please take care of me, Brother Brounde!", Sabarene repeated.

"And take care of me as well.", a lazy, lackadaisical voice echoed. A disheveled black haired man with dark glasses stepped forward. He wore a simple tunic and slacks. "I normally do not partake in the Collective's military operations, but Supreme Sibling Desnion asked me to provide you with support."

I glared at the black haired man. "And your name is?"

"O-oh, that's my brother, Marston!", Sister Sabarene sputtered. She rubbed the back of her neck. "Not Brother Marston, mind you, but m-my brother, whose name is Marsto-"

"I got it.", I said, gruffly. I sighed. Lay people were always a pain in the ass, almost as painful as a newbie. I examined Sabarene. "So what limb was it?"

"Limb?", Sabarene questioned, then quickly shook her head. "O-oh! For my pledge, I, um..." The white haired girl fumbled a bit, then awkwardly showed me her left hand. It was black, and made of metal. "T-this one." I nodded my head, and sighed. When I joined, I sacrificed both of my arms. This girl seemed to get away with just giving up her left hand.

“Right, and your focus?”, I asked her.

“T-tactics!”, she nervously replied.

“Tactics *and* logistics.”, Marston breathily added.

“Right, logistics, t-that too!” Sabarene glanced at me nervously, then saluted. “Brother Brounde, Sir! How many siblings has Desnion supplied you with?”

“Supreme Sibling Desnion has supplied me with Three Hundred capable brothers and sisters... and you.”, I answered.

“Only three hundred?!”, Sabarene squeaked. “But Trunchet has a standing army of One Thousand and Five Hundred Lancers!”

“One Lancer isn’t worth ten Siblings of the Plebian Branch.”, I spat. “You sure lack confidence for someone specializing in tactics.”

“And logistics.”, Marston added, uselessly.

I sighed. “Well, maybe the Saboteurs shall prove more effective.” I turned to the balding, somewhat rotund man called the Supreme Sibling. “Where are they?”

“They are already entrenched in Trunchet.”, he responded. “Nielente as a woman of the night, and Cochran as a Lancer.” “

Wow Des, really just going to say their names out loud?”, Marston yawned. “And place them in the most blasé positions possible? I can see why you’re in charge of economics.”

I dared not say it out loud, but I begrudgingly agreed with Marston’s assessment. Two Saboteurs in miniscule positions would probably not amount to much.

“The General specified those positions, not me.”, Desnion sighed.

“Where is the General?”, I asked.

“Oh, around.”, Desnion answered, without answering. I looked around the field, then sighed. The General led the military of the Collective, and their presence boosted the morale of the troops without fail. They were hard to miss – wearing a set of spikey black Cercentlian armor, and leading the troops with a loud distinctive baritone. From their absence, I presumed they were with the Patrician Branch engaged in skirmishes with Provesh.

Provesh, like Trunchet, was a city state occupied by the Independent Kingdoms. “The Independent Kingdom” was a misnomer. They had no king, and they were far from independent, relying on Outlanders and the Collective itself for trade. But their Merchants controlled most of the metal, and the metal controlled everything. For now.

# Four

My name was Axeman Red Four. Just about the only thing true about that name was the axe part.

“You’ll like this one, Red.”, Axeman Blue Two said ta me. “She’s Fremdosian, just like you.”

The big blue bearded man was accompanied by a green haired, brown skinned girl. She coulda been my identical twin, if not fer her busoms.

“What’s her name?”, I asked.

“She doesn’t have one.”, Blue responded.

“She’s Unassigned?!”, I spat. “Hostess Black Five doesn’t take Unassigned!”

“Hostess Black Five is the one who asked me to escort this girl.” “

And by “me”, you mean us, right?”, I groaned.

“Insight like that is why you’re ranked Red, Four!”, Axeman Blue Two laughed. I gave the amply supplied girl another once-over, then sighed.

“Fine, you, this way.”, I grumbled, and lightly took her by the wrist. Blue and I worked at Hostess Black Five’s inn, and by inn, I mean whorehouse. Not as whores, mind you. Whores had less debt. The twoa us were part of one of the oldest and well renowned union in Provesh, and all that renown meant we worked as bouncers in front of a Syllabus Symposium. Rare was it we were given the privilege of actually entering the whorehouse. Our job was ta keep drunks out, and by drunks, I mean drunks who didn’t have any metal on em.

“P-please, sir.”, the green haired girl pleaded. “This isn’t my home – I’m from Fremdos. They took me from there, and-“ I rolled my eyes, and shoved the green haired girl into a rotten wooden room. “This is your home *now*. Hostess Black Five isn’t that bad, just don’t talk to her when she’s drunk.”

“When is she drunk?”, asked the girl.

“All the time.”, I replied.

I shut the door and left the Unassigned whore from Fremdos to her fate. Blue and I were violating Proveshian law just by working with her, but Proveshian law tended to amount ta jack. We were parta the Independent Kingdoms but didn’t have a king. We had a Marquis, and the Marquis spent most of his time taking kickbacks from the Merchants and Swordarms, who really *ran* Provesh. The Swordarms only looked down on Unassigned cause it made their name better for it. They probably wouldn’t care about one being a whore, unless they could see an opportunity to shake down Hostess Black Five for it.

“Oi Red, I’ve got something else to tell ya.”, Blue said ta me.

“What, does it burn when she pees?”, I guessed.

“No no, not that.”, he replied. “I’ve come across a promising gig.”

“How much does it pay?”, I asked.

“Seven Runiertian Bars.”

“No way!”, I sputtered. “That’s like, a cycle’s worth of wages!” I narrowed my eyes. “It’s drug smuggling again, isn’t it?”

“Not this time, no!” Blue laughed. “It’s a personal project of Merchant Black One’s.”  
“Merchant Black One’s?!”, I gasped. “You got offered a job by Merchant Black One?”

“No, *you* got offered a job by Merchant Black One. I got offered a job to offer you a job.”,  
Blue explained. “What the heck does Merchant Black One want with me?” “

Well, not you specifically. He’s sent an offer to everyone of Red ranking and higher.”

“And he paid you to ask me, instead a just sending a letter?”, I asked, skeptically. “Merchant Black One is eclectic.”, Blue snorted. “Anyways, I know you’re behind on rent, so just take the job, ok?”

“What type a job is it?”

“Ehehehe, I have no idea.”, Blue laughed, scratching his big bushy blue beard.

## Brounde

The trip to Trunchet proved more treacherous than anticipated. Transport on the Continent was usually done by train-caravan, but transport on the Continent usually was not done with three hundred armed soldiers. The Independent Kingdom and the Holy Collective had a tenuous truce, part of which was transport along the rails of the caravan. That truce was soon to be violated. But before it was, and before the Plebian branch seized control of the Caravan Depots across the continent, we were to conquer Trunchet. On foot.

We had no horses. The mountainous terrain around the stone city would make a mounted approach impractical. Instead, we marched. Up and around a mountain path; the long way where there were fewer sentries and steeper grades. At least, that was the plan.

“Brother Brounde, if I may?”, Marston interjected. “The fatigue from this route will leave our soldiers ill-equipped to breach the walls of Trunchet.”

“Maybe it’ll leave you ill-equipped, but those who *serve* can handle more than a brisk hike up a hill.”

“This is no hill, it’s a mountain.”, Marston countered. “And while- I”, he huffed “might possess a more delicate constitution, every moment we spend traveling is another moment Trunchet’s Lancers can spend preparing.”

“They’ll only prepare for us if they know we’re coming.”, I countered. “We’re traveling this way to avoid precisely that.”

“Um, Brother Brounde, I um...”, Sister Sabarene began.

“DON’T SPEAK OUT OF TURN!”, I barked. “This lanky milksop may be a lay person, but you are not outside the chain of command!”

The white haired girl’s face drooped a bit, but she summoned what paltry courage she had and continued. “A-as a tactical advisor...”, she began, shakily but firmly. “I urge you listen to Marston.”

“Why, so we can be well-rested when we get killed?”

“No, because the gentler path up this mountain will have our backs against the suns.”, Sabarene countered.

“It’ll have our backs against the suns when they *rise*.”, I responded, checking the rank and file behind us. “We’re to get there before then.”

“B-but sir!”, Sabarene objected. “If we go this way, and the fighting is prolonged, the suns will rise in our face! We’ll be at a tactical disadvantage!”

“And if we get there in the dead of night, we’ll be at an advantage.”, I snorted. “Do you have so little faith in your brothers and sisters that you think we cannot make this pace?”

Sabarene winced. “N-no, that’s not it. It’s just, well...”

“Might I propose a compromise?”, Marston annoyingly chimed in. “Have Sabarene take one hundred soldiers and head up the gentler path. You can take the bulk of the troops and do things your way.” He adjusted his blackened glasses. “We’ll see what approach proves better.”

“This is war, not a settlement of arguments between babes!”, I snapped. “Give me one good reason I should entrust one third of my troops to an unproven green horn besides “Desnion said so!”

“Desnion said so...”, Marston began, “And, if you do, I’ll let you have access to my secret weapon.”

I rolled my eyes. “And that would be?”

Marston looked towards Sabarene.

“O-oh, right!”, she stammered. Sabarene ran to the rickshaw carrying our supplies, and with labored breath produced a crate full of the same darkened glasses Marston was wearing.

“We have no soldiers present in need of visual acuity, Marston.”, I said.

Marston simply smiled. “These glasses are not to correct vision.”, he explained. “They block out the beams of the suns. They’re called “sunglasses.”

I paused for a bit. “They’re called what?”, I asked.

“Sunglasses.”, Marston repeated. His repetition did not clarify my confusion. Their name only mentioned the presence of a singular sun. Then again, if they could really mitigate the glare of the suns, I didn’t care what they were called. I sighed. “Fine, we’ll use them.” I closed my eyes and turned to Marston’s sister. “-And you can take a detachment of the troops and lead them.”

“R-really?”, Sabarene squeaked, then regained her composure. “I won’t let you down!”

“Yeah, we’ll see about that.”, I sighed. In theory, someone assigned by Supreme Sibling Desnion would not let me down, but in theory, Supreme Sibling Desnion was celibate.

## Four

Provesh was basically a circle divided into five parts. Ya had the harbor, which was a mass of decayed wood and frozen slushy water. Ya had where I worked and lived, the slums, which was a mass of decayed wood and frozen slushy snow. There was the central marketplace, which was a mass of decayed wood and frozen urine soaked snow(come to think of it, that applied ta the slums and harbor as well). Then finally ya had the two good parts of town; the trade district and the caravan depot. The trade district was where the Merchants and Swordarms lived. It shoulda been no surprise to me that Merchant Black One opted ta meet me at the harbor rather than his ornate hometurf.

In spite of my better judgement, I went to the harbor see what type of gig Merchant Black One had lined up for me. Merchant Black One was the most prestigious Merchant... that is ta say, if ya went by names. But names didn’t mean much anymore, not in Provesh, nor in the Independent Kingdoms. Still, a rank of Black and a number of One meant that he probably had something worth doing, which was both the pull and the problem. See the issue was that when a scant opportunity to make metal arose, a scant opportunity to make metal arose. Competition. So I shouldn’ta been surprised ta see Axeman Red Three impede my way as I made my way over ta the harbor.

“How’s it going, Four?”, Axeman Red Three called out ta me, all friendly like.

I took a look at the wrecked ships lining the frozen harbor, then sighed. “Fine, Three.”

“And what brings you here on this fine day?”, he asked.

“Oh, just... going fer a stroll.”, I lied.

“Wonderful day for it!”, Axeman Red Three cried, cheerily. “Now, I know you’re just here for a leisurely stroll, but I heard something interesting.”

“Ya did?”, I asked, feigning obliviousness. “Yes, I heard that Merchant Black One had a gig lined up for anyone of Red or higher. You wouldn’t happen to know anything about that, would you?” I remained silent. “Well, I’m busy for the next few rising periods, but would you do me a favor and not take that job? Other than the timing, I’m a solid fit for it.”

“Sure, I won’t take it.”, I lied.

“Oh, I’m sure you won’t!”, Axeman Red Three said cheerily, before his face soured. “But just to be sure... I, Axeman Red Three, being of superior rank, hereby command you, Axeman Red Four, to not speak to Merchant Black One.”

“Wait, never?!”, I cried, my voice cracking.

“No, not never.”, Axeman Red Three said. “Just for the next cycle or two.”

“But-“ I protested, then winced. My body moved on my own, and I kneeled in the piss-soaked snow. “Understood. I shall obey your command.”, I said, robotically.

“That’s a good subordinate.”, Axeman Red Three chimed. He flexed his bicep. “Of course, if you ever want to challenge me for my name, you’re welcome to do so.”

I was not, of course, welcome to do so. Leaving aside the difference in our statures, Axeman Red Three had also commanded me not to speak to any of my other superiors when I was in the same vicinity as him, and he made it a point to never be too far away.

I stewed in anger as Axeman Red Three sauntered off in smug-self assurance that I wouldn’t get in the way of his hypothetical payday. But I didn’t leave. I stayed where I was, by the docks I was told to meet Merchant Black One at. I had a secret weapon up my sleeve, and that was a quill, some ink, and some parchment.

“Hello.”, I began to scribble. “My name is Axeman Red-“ I paused. The ink ceased to mark the parchment.

“Inkwells and freezing temperatures don’t mix, I’m afraid.”, a light, airy voice chimed. I jerked my head over my shoulder. Standing atop the bow of a half sunken ship was a blonde haired man wearing slacks, a purple petticoat, and an absurdly large green tophat.

“Take this.”, the blonde haired man instructed me. “ It’ll work better.” He tossed what looked like a dart at me, so I leapt back. The dart like object sank harmlessly into the slush below.

“Oh, never fear!”, the blonde man cried. “That’s no magic missile I threw at you... it’s a device of great wonder and renown!”

I eyed the narrow dartlike object skeptically.

“It’s a pen.”, the man in the green tophat explained, without explaining.

I stared at the man perched atop the bow skeptically.

“Just pick it up and write with it!”, he commanded. Reluctantly, I acquiesced to the strange man’s demand. Though it left narrower strokes, the “pen” of his was able to make ink stains where my quill had not. “You’re commanded not to talk to Merchant Black One, so you opt to write to him instead.”, the man stated. “Clever. Very clever, Axeman Red Four.”

“How the heck do you know my name?”, I asked, unnerved.

“What, besides that blowhard yelling it out for all to hear?”, the strange man replied. He shrugged his shoulders. “Well, consider me an old friend.”

“I don’t know you.”, I said, narrowing my eyes. “Oh, but you will!”, the man in the tophat declared, then leapt down from the bow. “You will.”, he said cryptically. He threw what looked like a snowball down at his feet, causing a whole bunch of fog to surround us. By the time the fog dissipated, he was gone. The points of my ears twitched, as I heard footsteps approach me. A rotund man dressed in fine black linens approached.

“Hello.”, I began to jot down on my parchment. “My name is Axeman Red Four...”

## Brounde

Two hundred soldiers and I continued the march up the mountain, the hard way. We wore the darkened spectacles Marston had provided us, as the suns were beginning to rise. I saw it in the distance; Trunchet. Trunchet, one of the city states of the Unionists’ Independent Kingdom. Trunchet, a city with over a thousand Lancers, that I was to take with a force of three hundred. Take, not hold, thankfully. The plan was to breach the city and open up its gates, allowing the Patrician Branch to come and provide us with relief. Still, three hundred against thousands. Lesser numbers could prevail over greater numbers, had they choke points and were fighting defensively. But to invade, with a clear numerical disadvantage... Had I not known better, I’d suspect Desnion of sending us all to die.

But none of my paramours were eyed upon by the Supreme Sibling, so I considered myself safe. Not from Trunchet’s Lancers, but from dying for the purpose of political expedience. I regretted splitting my forces to test the ability of the greenhold. Three hundred soldiers were few, and two hundred were even fewer. “Oi, leyman!”, I called out to the black bespectacled man behind me.

“As I said before, the name is Marston, Brother Brounde.”, Marston replied.

“Do we have the pitch?” Marston did a sarcastic bow.

“The pitch, fire, and other incendiary devices are ready.” He paused. “I do not know what you brought them for – Trunchet is, after all, *the stone city*. Little if any crucial infrastructure there is flammable.”

“Just have the brothers and sisters prepare the pitch, and be quiet!”, I barked. We continued our march up the mountain. “Stop!”, I cried, upon coming to an abandoned tower.

“What, do you see a sentry?”, Marston guessed.

“No, I *don't* see a sentry.”, I replied. “We have not come across a single one on our ascent.”

“Isn't that a good thing?”, Marston asked.

“If we were the reasons behind their absence, maybe.”, I said. “But for them to be missing in their entirety-“

“Think they're expecting us?”, Marston said, hazarding a guess.

“They're expecting *something*.”, I replied. I was tempted to abandon the mission right then and there, but I had sent Sabarene with a hundred others with the expectation I'd be *attacking* the city, not turning tail and running like a dog.

We continued on. I was unnerved. I had prepared decoy ducks and archers to take care of any sentries, but we did not see any sentries. We did not see any mallards bearing messages. The posts were abandoned. Soon enough, we came to the stone wall of Trunchet, the stone city. Smoke and screams rose from its ramparts.