

Condemned to death for the heinous crimes of conspiracy and high treason, the foreign wizard Chodros was disemboweled on the Bloodstone by the city headsman Master Tor. To the last the scoundrel refused to confess or repent.

— *Chronicle of the Ducal City of Mindor*

The distinctive toll of the prison bell quickly drew a crowd, eager to follow the tumbrel that must soon emerge from the prison gate and carry the condemned man to his death. Six weeks had passed since the shocking exposure of a plot to assassinate his grace, Lord Tothril, Eighth Duke of Mindor in the Empire of Ondiran. Seven accused conspirators had already been executed, and the city was alive with rumors that today was finally the day for the wizard Chodros, the alleged ringleader, to join them. The previous executions, which included two of the wizard's servants, had been suitably gruesome, so the populace had understandably high expectations for this one—as did the vendors of spicy sausage, roasted chestnuts, and warm beer, who hastened to wheel their carts out through Badger's Gate to the large field holding the execution platform, known locally as the Bloodstone.

With their throngs of excited, distracted spectators, public executions also present a prime opportunity for pick-pockets and cutpurses. The death knell therefore served as

an urgent summons for the denizens of Dob the Fence's dockside warehouse—including their latest recruit, Thonir, a scruffy sixteen-year-old, whose short black hair looked as though he had cut it with a penknife, as in fact he had. Unlike many of his companions, however, Thonir detested executions, along with the exemplary floggings, brandings, and maimings to which those convicted of lesser crimes were routinely subjected on the Bloodstone. Small for his age, he had been much bullied by larger boys as a youngster, and this mistreatment—while kindling an enduring spark of rage deep inside him—had also instilled an abhorrence of cruelty and all who perpetrated it.

To be sure, Thonir had a personal reason to frown on this particular execution, for up until the day of Chodros's arrest six weeks earlier he had been the wizard's apprentice.



Thonir had been lucky to avoid arrest himself. Sent to a nearby alchemist's shop to procure ingredients for one of Chodros's potions, he had returned to find members of the city watch leading the wizard's servants away in chains, while even more dramatic events played out within the wizard's house itself. Presently, the duke's personal sorcerer emerged, looking uncharacteristically disheveled, followed by eight watchmen, two of whom were dragging an unconscious Chodros.

His pulse racing, Thonir hastened to slip away before anyone noticed him. Finding temporary sanctuary in an Asardian temple, he struggled to compose his thoughts while pretending to pray. He was at a loss to see how he would

now complete his magical training. Chodros was the only wizard in the ducal city, perhaps in the entire duchy (sorcery being the prevailing system of magic there), but even if he were not, who would risk taking on an apprentice whose previous master had been arrested? Wizardry was more prevalent in the Duchy of Hriss, some seventy leagues to the south, but that was a daunting journey for a boy who had never traveled more than a few miles beyond the city walls. He could not return home to his parents, either. Both had died four years earlier, shortly after he began his apprenticeship, during one of the frequent epidemics to sweep the city. Nor could he turn to friends, for at this point he had no one close. Working with Chodros had been isolating, and he had soon grown apart from his pre-apprenticeship playmates. He was, he concluded, very much alone and would have to rely upon his own resources.

Admittedly, these appeared to consist of little more than a few spells, plus the handful of small coins he had received in change at the alchemist's shop. Having no immediate use for the potion ingredients he had bought, he went back in the hope of returning them. The alchemist, however, had caught wind of Chodros's arrest in the meantime and took unabashed advantage of the boy's vulnerable position by refusing to buy back the ingredients for more than a quarter of their earlier purchase price. Thonir knew a useful charm spell and cast it covertly in the hope of obtaining a better deal, but the experienced old man not only resisted the attempt to influence him but retaliated, reducing his offer by half. Disgusted, the boy took the money and left, before the alchemist could cut the figure further.

Risky though he knew it would be, Thonir was determined to salvage anything he could from Chodros's house. He had spent years painstakingly copying out whatever Chodros had been willing to teach him, and while he had committed much of it to memory, no magician can remember everything—or, frankly, more than a small fraction of everything. Recovering his notes was therefore a high priority. As the sun set in the early evening, he stole back through the gradually emptying streets to the wizard's townhouse. Over four hundred years old (if the date over the door was to be believed), it was a ramshackle structure, as Chodros had little patience for such mundane matters as routine maintenance. An ominously large member of the city watch stood guard at the door.

“The duke's sorcerer has sent me to retrieve more of the wizard's papers,” Thonir announced, as confidently as he could. A charm spell, he knew, stood a better chance of success if accompanied by a plausible story. “As you can see, he's given me the wizard's key.” He produced his own. *Now stand aside and let me pass!* To his relief, the watchman stepped away from the door with no more than an idle remark about the weather.

Thonir was not surprised to find the contents of the house turned upside down. He started in his own room. Vexingly, his lesson notes were gone. Fortunately, the watchmen had not found his secret place beneath the floorboards. Chodros had not been a generous teacher: he was secretive by nature, and apprenticing under him had taught Thonir to be devious. The boy rescued various scraps of parchments on which he had surreptitiously copied spells the master

had not chosen to share. He also retrieved a pilfered piece of enchanted chalk (used for drawing protective circles), his meager savings from four years of paltry pocket money, and the penknife his father had given him, along with a small whetstone he had bought to keep it sharp. He then gathered his spare set of clothes, which the watchmen had strewn about the floor, and rolled them up in the woolen blanket from his bed.

Moving on to Chodros's study, he found a scene of even greater disorder. All of the wizard's books and papers were gone, but he was pleased to find an empty leather tube, in which he could carry his rolled-up parchments. Even better, the watchmen had not recognized Chodros's enchanted self-inking quill for what it was. Unfortunately, the duke's sorcerer had found and cleaned out the wizard's two hiding places, only one of which Thonir had known about himself.

The watchmen had helped themselves to most of the food in the kitchen and pantry, notwithstanding its negligible evidentiary value. Thonir was nonetheless able to scrounge half a loaf of day-old bread and a little cheese. He also took a spoon, a knife, and a wooden drinking cup, as well as a flint and steel from next to the fireplace. He knew how to produce fire by magic, but it never hurt to have a backup method. Finally, he found a sack in which to stash his various treasures. If he wanted to survive life on the streets, he would need them.



Thonir caught up with the tumbrel shortly after it reached Badger's Gate. Chodros had been fitted with an engraved