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# Honoring Arkan Ketch

by Matthew Shears

Part of the "Tall Tales from the Final Rest Inn" Collection

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## Honoring Arkan Ketch

"He wants a Flek."

"A what?"

"A Flek," the serving girl called again as she picked up drinks for another table.

The barman shook his head in astonishment and turned to the inn-keeper.

"Uthan?"

"Yeah?"

"He's asked for a Flek."

"You don't say..." Uthan Ketch looked over at the dark figure in the alcove. "Haven't had a request for one of those in a long time."

The barman, Grant Jellani, shook his head.

"Never served one up in Thrune."

"Doesn't surprise me, up there. All they drink is gut-rotting Tauri Shine." Uthan put the wash-cloth aside and moved behind the bar. "Watch."

The inn-keeper deftly poured equal, and generous, measures of both Crystal Ale and Dunihki Slick into a tall pewter tankard. The Dunihki liqueur colored the head on the ale orange.

"Ummm." Grant looked in the tankard in disbelief. "That was some measure of Slick. Gods, I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy."

"To each his own, Grant," said Uthan, wiping the tankard down. "Give a man what he wants and he comes back for more."

Grant beckoned over the serving girl.

"Stopie, for your mystery man."

The doe-eyed girl with the swinging hips took the tankard and negotiated the tables and trailing hands of the regulars.

Stopie, not known for her perspicacity, was intrigued by the cowed figure. She approached the alcove, hoping to glimpse a face or some distinguishing mark. For years she had romanticized about a dark, mysterious figure whisking her away on a powerful stallion. The regulars and itinerant drinkers had perpetually disappointed her.

Stopie found to her dismay that, no matter how she tried, she could not see the figure's face. She placed the drink on the table and lingered. At first there was no reaction. Then the arm stirred and a hand reached out for the tankard. It was a strong hand, criss-crossed with scars, and, to her horror, missing the little finger. She gasped. The hand stopped short of the tankard, its four fingers immobile.

Grant looked up as Stopie came behind the bar.

"So?"

Stopie turned her normally doe-eyes on the barman. Anxiety enlarged her pupils.

"Horrible!" She whispered forcefully. "Horrible."

Grant looked quickly over at the figure but it had not stirred.

"What do you mean?" Grant hissed back.

Stopie raised a pretty hand in front of the barman and wiggled her little finger.

"No finger!"

Again, Grant glanced at the cowed figure. Still there was no movement, the tankard before it.

"No finger?"

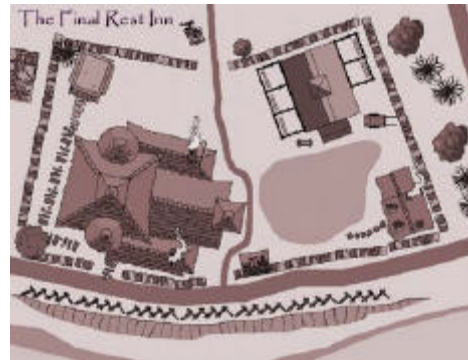
"No finger," Stopie nodded her head very seriously.

Grant sighed. Most of the time he had to worry about errant fingers, not missing fingers, when it came to Stopie.

"Stopie, those Dython conscripts are beckoning for another round," Grant said, nodding at the rowdiest tables in the inn.

"Anything the matter?" Uthan Ketch asked Grant seeing the look of concern on Stopie's face.

"What kind of a person would drink a Flek?" Grant asked the inn-keeper.



"It's a Shernan drink, a sea-dog's drink. Something about mixing the Ale and Slick. A hangover like you've never had. Ugly – lasts for days. Could be he's a sailor."

Grant looked over at the alcove. The tankard appeared not to have moved although a slight trail of foam struggled down the side of the rough pewter.

"Well, he's drinking."

"Has he paid?"

"I don't think Stopie asked. She was a little shook up."

Uthan sighed, stepped around the bar and strolled over to the alcove. Broaching payment with non-regulars proved sometimes difficult. Occasionally, they had no intention of paying.

The inn-keeper considered sitting down on the bench opposite the figure but decided against it and pulled up a stool.

"Hello."

There was no answer. The cowl was motionless.

"Haven't served a Flek in many a year. You know, since the Shernans turned to piracy we don't get many of their kind around here."

Uthan waited for a response. There was none.

"Well, I hope that you enjoyed the drink. That'll be two soldars."

The cowl moved, slightly.

"I knew your father." The voice was dry and gruff. "Your Flek is better."

Uthan's jaw slipped. He was at a loss for words. He hadn't thought about his father in many a year. He leaned forward on the stool.

"You..."

"Yet, your father knew when to leave a man in peace," the voice menaced, cutting through the warmth of the Inn.

Uthan slipped off the stool. He stood, his emotions veering between anger and shock. He leaned forward, both hands on the table. His body trembled.

The figure's hand flicked, four fingers momentarily visible, and a gold piece spun across the table.

Uthan looked down at the dully-shining 100 Soldar piece, it's immense worth suddenly quelling his emotions.

"That will cover it, I think," the disembodied voice said in almost a whisper.

"What do you mean you knew him?" Uthan asked as fumbled for the money.

There was an uncomfortable silence.

"Your father and I traveled the same path together."

Uthan waited, but there was no more.

Grant looked up as the inn-keeper came back to the bar. Uthan was visibly troubled.

"Gods help me, but he scares me, Grant."

Grant was Uthan's rock. He was a heavy-set Eslebi, a man who brooked no nonsense from the clientele. A man of the earth, and the bottle. But a dependable, solid man. Grant had mentored Uthan, and with the exception of mixing drinks (a curious failing for a barman) and an uncharacteristically romantic pursuit of a woman from Thrune, had proved an unprecedented asset over the years.

Grant looked over at their formidable Khaj peacekeeper lounging by the main door to the Inn. Kralk was keeping a watchful eye on the heavily-imbibing Dython recruits. The Khaj was the most impressive peace-keeper Grant had ever known, towering above most mortals, gray skinned and yellow-eyed, and carrying a collection of intimidating weapons. Grant appreciated the fact that the Khaj heavy was the only one allowed to carry in *The Final Rest Inn*.

"You want me to have Kralk throw him out?"

"No, let him leave of his own accord. He has paid many times over." Uthan dropped the gold piece on the bar top. Evictions were only usually due to a refusal to pay or wandering hands. Grant's selection of serving girls was graced with abundant physical attributes. Brawling and feuding were encouraged, so long, Uthan maintained, as they took place outside.

"And besides, he says he knew my father - they traveled together, what ever that means."

Grant said nothing but looked over at the cowed figure. Grant had known Uthan's father well. Uncomfortable memories were dragging themselves to the fore. The Eslebi watched the hand

reach for the tankard and raise it to unseen lips. Slowly the tankard was put back. Foam slipped reluctantly down its side. The past was probably best left alone, and particularly *that* past.

"We'll let him have his peace and quiet, and perhaps we'll have ours," Uthan said looking around the inn. "Its too early for mischief."

Uthan walked over to one of the two fires that raged in the main hall, keeping the chill of early winter at bay. He turned and warmed his back, breathing deeply the scent of crackling green wood and the clean dryness of the swathe of straw and sawdust laid that morning by the stable hands.

The inn was quiet, a far cry from the din of shouting, singing and cursing humanity that would swell like an angry sea through rest of the night. Uthan liked this mid-afternoon time of comparative quiet – it allowed him time to survey the hall with its game, pennants, tapestries and shields of old, and take stock of his clientele.

Uthan mused that today's was very much a typical crowd: fodder for the Dython military machine, entertained by a tale-spinning veteran; a couple of well-heeled merchants with the obligatory heavy; a priest in a dusty smock; some tinkers in heated bargaining; and, a good number of laborers in for an ale or two after a hard day's work in the fields.

Stopie returned to the bar. Uthan looked at the girl. He knew she wasn't as simple as he had initially thought. And she certainly carried herself well: she had become an asset to *The Final Rest Inn* in more ways than one. He had to admit that some regulars had become even more regular since Grant had hired her.

"Stopie, how long have you worked here?"

The question took the girl by surprise.

"Well, almost a year."

"Do you like it?"

"Oh, yes, sir, its..." Her voice trailed off and she turned to face the room. Uthan and Grant followed her gaze.

"He's laughing."

Uthan watched the cowl move erratically as a hearty, rasping laugh rolled around the inn. An awkward silence gripped the inn as the clientele turned and watched the dark figure. The laughter coming from beneath the cowl stilled all warming chatter.

Grant stepped around the bar.

"That's it, I've had enough." And he marched resolutely towards the alcove.

Uthan was paralyzed by the laughter. It echoed in his mind, recalling memories from a distant past. Images of his father, Arkan Ketch, and other men telling tall tales over ales, flashed before him. He remembered the same laughter, the laughter of men at war, boasting of their exploits, their slaughtering blades, oblivious to their cowering children and miserable women. And Uthan was certain that this man was one of those his father had ridden with.

As Grant reached the alcove the laughter abruptly ended.

"Hello Grant. Just recalling some of our finer moments."

The barman stopped short. He looked down into the cowl, swore under his breath, and slumped into the alcove, his resolve deflated.

The man lifted the rough cloth away from his face.

"Old Ketch's son mixes a fine Flek." The battle-scarred face of the man in the booth creased into smile.

"Gods, Durvan, what are you doing here?"

"You mean why am I still alive? Since your day I've spent my time evading the assassin's blade, pursued by the same institution that I once vowed to uphold..." His voice trailed off. He shrugged his shoulders. "You got out at the right time Grant. Amulon hasn't aged, and I have. The Church has gotten more corrupt. I find myself looking forward to the pleasures of a comfortable chair and a woman that looks like your serving wench."

Grant knew that Durvan Gall would never retire, but would die in battle or in his sleep.

Durvan nodded over in Uthan's direction. "I'm here to honor our old friend Arkan. I have something for his son."

"It's been a long time," Grant said slowly as he reached out to clasp the other man's hand in belated greeting.

"How's the young man?"

"He's no warrior, but he's a good fellow, Durvan. When we parted company I came back here with Uthan - Arkan had asked me to look after his son."

Durvan looked up and saw Uthan approaching the table. Grant rose and introduced them.

"This is Uthan Ketch, the inn-keeper. Durvan Gall, an old friend."

Durvan extended his deformed hand.

Uthan looked the man over. He was tall and powerfully built. His countenance was weathered, through the elements and battle, Uthan surmised. The right side of his face appeared deformed, his ear missing. His hair was short and graying, his face leathery, some might say tanned. His blue eyes were lazy, uninterested. It was difficult to guess the man's age, but Uthan assumed that he counted the same number of years, give or take, as Grant. Both would have been younger than his father. The poor light of the hall seemed to accent the man's grim countenance.

"I'm here to honor a pledge to your father. I rode with him his last time. He gave me something to give to you." Durvan reached into his tunic and pulled out a short, sheathed blade. The warrior laid it on the table and pushed it over to the young man. "It's a pretty piece, even sports a symbol. Your father treasured it."

Uthan looked down at the dagger and memories came surging back. Its sullen look reminded him vividly of the collapse of his parent's relationship and his mother's disdain for her husband's drunken, fighting ways.

*The Final Rest Inn* had been the stage upon which their tortured family life had been played out. The inn had always been in his Mother's family. Over generations, her family had built on the inn's location sitting astride the trade route between two great cities and the River Crystal to give it a position of importance unparalleled among similar institutions. The inn's central location helped it wield an unprecedented influence. Its tables had been witness to all manner of political intrigue, the ripples of which had often spread across the land. Its value to those that influenced events in Breminor was such that none had ever closed it down, though it was often threatened. And with its growing reputation came economic prosperity for his Mother's family and the hamlet of Grimwell.

But, the inn-keeper life had not suited his father, although the easy access to Crystal Ale certainly had. Drink, a need to prove himself and a lust for adventure had carried his father away from the family.

As his parents had grown apart, his father had given his mother the dagger to protect herself should the need arise. Perhaps it had been meant as a sign of concern or affection. Yet it came to symbolize and embody the tension between his parents. His mother had discarded the blade and hired a Khaj peacekeeper. Uthan had not seen it since. His father must have repossessed the blade on one of his few visits to the Inn.

The young man pulled the black steel from its sheath. The dagger was no simple blade, the arcane symbol on it belying a more complex weapon of some sort. Uthan had not seen the weapon wielded by either of his parents. He turned the blade in his hands, relishing the steel's subtle coolness. For a moment he felt curiously attracted to the indecipherable symbol. Durvan and Grant watched him with interest.

"It's finely balanced," Durvan noted.

"How did my father die?" Uthan asked abruptly, placing the blade on the table-top and pushing it slightly away from him.

Durvan looked over at Grant. The Eslebi's face was inscrutable. The truth was painful, but he could tell no less.

"Your father was betrayed. Betrayed by those he had committed to protect and serve. Your father, as I, was in the employ of the Church. He was a real firebrand. He led a small group of ruffians that called themselves the White Troop. Grant was with them for some time. I was their spiritual guardian, their interface with the Church." Durvan permitted himself a small smile and sipped at the Flek. "We did the Church's dirty work. We were paid well to destroy those touched by Amulon. There were and are many such persons in the eyes of the Church. Mostly poor villagers but some highly placed in Breminese political circles and society."

"Ambitious Churchmen used us ambitiously. We were a force to be reckoned with and they wielded us as if we were their personal weapon. But ambitious folk have enemies, and it is no different in the Church. We were becoming associated with certain Church functionaries who in turn were being seen as ambitious enough to threaten the fabric of the Church itself. Our raids brought down the wrath

of some of the Kingdoms. Your father and I did not see it, consumed by our lust for blood and reward. I should have known better, but then I am a warrior and not adept at the politics of Church and Court.

"The Church closed ranks and decided to remove the weapons at the disposal of its more ambitious members. We were one of those weapons. They hired a mercenary guild and assassins. Ketch and many of the White Troop were murdered in their sleep."

"Grant, here, got out before all this. He did the right thing." Durvan paused then caught the young inn-keeper's eye. "Uthan, your father was a great warrior. He carried out the word of the Church. He played an important part in keeping Amulon's minions at bay. And yet he was butchered by those he sought to protect and serve." He paused, calming the anger that gave his voice a steely edge. "There is not much else to tell."

Durvan did not mention the rest. That he had sought out those in the Church that had ordered the killings and put them to the sword; and, that as a result, he had a price on his head more than equivalent to the value of the inn. Details that were best not repeated.

"The blade is yours, inn-keeper. It has taken time, but then I have covered many miles before returning here. My word to your father is fulfilled."

Durvan lifted the Flek to his lips and, with a nod in the inn-keeper's direction, drained the tankard.

Uthan Ketch was silent for a moment. He reached for the dagger. He felt no anger or remorse towards his father. These were the ways of fighting men. Men like Durvan and his father could never be turned from their brutish and unpleasant existence. Yet, the blade in his hand had brought back memories, and, unfortunate or not, those memories were important to Uthan. He had all but forgotten his father until this evening. He drew comfort from Durvan's words, for he knew that there were fewer more honorable occupations than that of fighting Amulon and its minions.

The inn-keeper turned to Grant and gestured in the direction of the empty tankard.

"A round, to honor my father."

Grant smiled. "If you trust me to get the measures right."

Durvan leaned back against the wall and watched the inn's clientele. He had become accustomed, over the years since his excommunication from the Church, to scrutinize those around him closely. His eyes flickered over the Dython recruits and their grizzly raconteur, across a deep kissing couple in a far alcove and a group of traders haggling in urgent but low voices. Durvan relaxed and his eyes returned to Uthan. The young man was watching him closely.

"Tell me about the White Company. I remember my mother cursing it many a time."

Durvan smiled.

"And well she should have. The White Company was your father's license to spill blood and get paid for it." Durvan saw a hardness come into the young man's eyes. "Don't get me wrong, I sanctioned and encouraged their actions in the name of the church. I, if any, am to blame for their murderous ways."

His old companion in arms returned to the table with three Fleks.

"They were heady days, weren't they, Grant. The Church was all-powerful, and we contributed to it. When the Church purged itself, it removed a level of control. It's been downhill since then. Just as the White Company was destroyed, so too were other tools, such as the Konlar, that the Church had used to enforce its ways. With little to fear, heresy has thrived and the control of the Church diminished. All it'll take is the resurgence of Amulon and the Church's fate is sealed."

Durvan took a sip of the Flek and grimaced at Grant.

"The White Company were the most feared. Tell him, Grant."

Grant hesitated, shifting uncomfortably in his seat – he was unwilling to recount a period in his life that he had tried to put behind him. But, with Durvan sitting there before him, the old days, when they had ridden together, brought him a long-forgotten warmth. What they had done had been excessive, but they had had a wonderful camaraderie.

"Actually, Uthan, most feared was our friend here, and in close second, your father."

"I'm much more genial now, Grant," Durvan noted, with a small grin. "I've come to appreciate what it is to be the quarry."

"The White Company," Grant continued, "earned its reputation through the most subtle methods of persuasion – torture and homicide, in vast quantities." Durvan shot Grant a disapproving look. "In our day we put down some of the most insidious heresies, countered Kaddori raids and

slaughtered many a soul, all with the countenance of the Church. Each member was a master in some weapon, without ties and driven by the desire for large amounts of gold." Grant sipped at his Flek – he was warming to his subject. "We used to have a competition: if the Church gave us a person to silence then we would pool the bounty and give half to whoever did the deed first. We downed a lot of beers and had a lot of women while the Church figured out where the next threat came from."

Durvan laughed, but his attention was elsewhere.

Across the room the Dython recruits were making a move, slapping their veteran on the back and staggering towards the door. Then they were crowding the Khaj, and a scuffle broke out.

Durvan's eyes swung across the hall. The warrior, who had been entertaining the recruits, was striding across the floor. The priest had risen from his chair and turned to look straight at Durvan – there was an unfriendly and purposeful intent in his eyes.

"Get out!" Durvan hissed violently at his companions as he pulled himself to the edge of the bench.

Uthan and Grant turned as one and saw the priest furl back his robes and pull out two hand-held crossbows, deadly at close range. Behind him the warrior was closing fast, drawing a broadsword. The other clientele were pushing chairs and benches over to get out the way.

Grant looked for Kralk and saw him in the middle of a melee among the recruits, laying them about him. No doubt one round of drinks had bought the recruits' agreement to hassle the peacekeeper. Grant grabbed Uthan's stool and thrust the inn-keeper behind him.

As the crossbows came up, Uthan watched Durvan slip the dagger from the table and throw it in one swift flowing movement at the priest.

Uthan watched the dagger flicker through the air, sped on by a blood curdling yell from Durvan. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Stopie step between the priest and the dagger, her hands full of brimming tankards. The serving girl stood transfixed by the spinning blade, her mouth opening in dawning terror.

Then there was the almost simultaneous twang and thud of the crossbows discharging. Uthan unconsciously twisted away, clenching his eyes shut.

Grant stepped forward to meet the closing warrior as Durvan drew a glittering stiletto from his belt. The stool disintegrated in the barman's hand with the broadsword's first blow. But the stool had been enough and Durvan was on the man. They traded blows, and despite the stiletto's shorter length, Durvan checked the other's attack.

Uthan looked over at Stopie. The serving girl had not moved, her body paralyzed. Of the priest there was no sign.

Over by the door the Khaj had dispatched the last of the drunken recruits and had drawn a vicious, curving blade. He covered the hall in leaping strides and grasped the warrior's shoulder. The warrior was spun around to look into the yellow eyes of the Khaj. Panic spread across the warrior's features, quickly to be replaced by pain as steel slipped into the man's gut, bringing him to his knees. Kralk twisted his blade and the warrior collapsed coughing to the floor.

Then there was silence in the hall.

Durvan stepped back from the body, pursed his lips and shook his head.

"You have to give the Church credit, they don't stop trying. Although that was the first time in a month or so."

Grant took Stopie by the shoulders and sat her down. The serving girl broke down and sobbed into her hands, her shoulders heaving. Most of the clientele picked up their chairs and resumed their drinking.

Uthan stood in the middle of the hall looking up at the crossbow bolts buried in the wooden ceiling of the inn.

"Every decoration should have a good story to it," Durvan suggested with a gleam in his eye. He put a boot on the priest's body, pulled the dagger free and handed the bloody blade to Uthan.

"Stopie was in the way..." Uthan said in astonishment.

"Know the Word and it never misses."

An unhappy realization came over Uthan's features.

"You weren't calling out to warn her."

"No. I knew it wouldn't hit her."

"Gods."

Durvan turned to Grant, grinning broadly.

"A handy thing a stool. Hasn't this happened somewhere before?"

"Yeah, in Toroth. Except you had the stool and I had the sword." Grant knew that despite the danger, Durvan had enjoyed the little altercation - for that was all he would have characterized it as.

"You've used this before," the inn-keeper said to Durvan, pointing the dagger in the warrior's direction.

"Your father was a good friend. The dagger has saved us many a time. If you wish, I can teach you the Word."

Uthan hesitated. Part of him was drawn to the weapon and its merciless magic. Yet he was ashamed - tracts of blood colored the new sawdust dark brown and his house had become associated with a renegade from the Church. For a moment Uthan felt that things were in the balance - if he accepted the blade and the Word he would cross some terrible threshold and open himself to the arcane and all that was associated with it. The vision loomed dark and unknown before him.

The inn-keeper looked down at the weapon. There was no mistaking the blade's purpose. Yet, there was no mistaking Uthan's purpose - and it had nothing to do with what he had just witnessed. The inn-keeper looked over at Stopie, her shuddering slowly subsiding, and his mind was suddenly made. He had Kralk and others to take care of the security of the inn. The inn was his livelihood, and that of many others. The dagger, and the warrior who had brought it to him, had disrupted the comfortable everyday life of the inn. Perhaps, now more than ever, he understood his Mother's distrust of the blade and its dark gleam and arcane marking. He did not want his establishment associated with such things. While conspiratorial undertakings hatched at the inn might lead to bloodshed elsewhere, he could not compromise its respected sanctity.

Uthan handed the dagger to Durvan.

"I'm sorry, I cannot accept this," he said coldly, looking at the warrior levelly. Durvan looked surprised. "And I must ask you to leave."

The inn-keeper nodded to Kralk, turned his back on the warrior and mounted the stairs to the rooms on the second floor.

Durvan looked over at Grant. The Eslebi shook his head slowly.

"Durvan, my friend, you had better go. Times have changed, for me, for us." Grant rose from the bench next to Stopie and extended his hand. "It was good to see you again." There was a warmth and yet a finality to Grant's farewell.

Durvan took the barman's hand and held it. His blue eyes flickered an uncharacteristic understanding. "Fare you well, Grant. Do not forget us."

The warrior turned and made for the door. As Kralk and Grant busied themselves about the bodies, Durvan slipped Arkan Ketch's dagger from its sheath and spun the blade up and into the ceiling of the inn.

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