

Excerpt from
Black Powder, Black Magic

© 2005 Gareth-Michael Skarka

Chapter One

The rope snapped taut.

His neck didn't break.

In the end, Mercy was as conspicuously absent from the Prisoner's death as it had been during his life. No sudden snap and enveloping darkness for him, but rather the seeming eternity of strangulation as his feet danced an involuntary jig for the amusement of the rabble gathered at the scaffold outside of the prison. This passed as entertainment for them – entertainment and an object lesson, which is why the authorities allowed it. It kept the population in line. Let them be witness to the wages of sin.

With the odd sense of detachment that comes with the certainty of death, the Prisoner found himself noticing the rough pressure of the hemp rope on the hinge of his jaw and behind his ears, rather than any sense of suffocation. It was simply that he could not breathe, and that fact struck him as a given and hence not worthy of further notice. His vision began to darken at the edges—a narrowing circle of clarity made him feel as if he was surveying the jeering and clamoring crowd through a spyglass. The violent swinging of his body from the rope recalled the pitching of a rolling deck easily enough, and the soft rain, which had been falling on London since yesterday evening, provided a

constant mist in his face, completing the illusion.

Despite the rain, a large crowd had assembled. A small thing like weather would not deter the throng from their provided dose of Bread and Circuses. Vendors hawked meat pies and other confections, and the owners of nearby shops and inns sold tickets for choice seating in upper-storey windows, upon rooftops and specially-made platforms to better view the day's proceedings.

As the Prisoner swung, the faces of the crowd began to lose distinction for him, one face blurring into another: an old woman spitting, a young man cheering, a little girl more engrossed in the hair of her doll than the pageant of life and death displayed before her. He saw, with a clarity that seemed out of place, a pickpocket cutting purses and lifting watches from the crowd, whose rapt attention was held elsewhere. Life went on, but he was slowly sliding off its surface, like a raindrop on leaded glass.

Around him, other criminals were meeting their ends, which the Crown and the crowd alike would call Just. Those few that were lucky enough to have friends or family with the means for bribery were given a quick death, the hangman grabbing their swinging bodies and throwing his weight onto them, the extra force sufficient to break their necks and end their suffering. The Prisoner, however, had no such friends.

Flashes of colored light swarmed at the edges of his vision, like fireflies in a summer field. He could hear nothing of the din of the crowd, nothing of the hoarse croaking of his own death-rattle—the only sound was the tidal rush of the blood pounding in his temples, vainly trying to deliver oxygen that simply wasn't there. A liquid noise, like waves lapping against the wooden sides of a boat.

He found his sight drawn to a man in the crowd, standing alone as he lit an ornately carved pipe, a gaudy affectation which seemed out of place against the man's severe clothing. Clad in an immense dark greatcoat whose edges were blurred by the mists, the man stood within the throng of people, and yet apart from them, looking to the Prisoner's dying eyes like a vision of the Reaper himself. The man's sharp features glowed slightly as he lifted a wooden match to the intricately crafted ivory bowl of the pipe, his eyes locked upon those of the Prisoner. The Dark Man lit his pipe.

The embers within the pipe's bowl flared as the Dark Man inhaled. With a sudden rush, the Prisoner felt himself drawn towards the glow, reaching outward from himself. He teetered at the lip of the bowl, like dancing on a volcano's edge, feeling the heat from below. Just as suddenly, the man exhaled, and the Prisoner felt himself back within his body, the tight rope around his throat and the pulsing of blood in his ears slowing. The reemergence of the pain, palpable by its momentary absence, made the Prisoner cry out, but all he could manage against the inexorable pressure of the rope were a few soundless gasps, his mouth gaping.

Again the Dark Man inhaled, and again the Prisoner felt himself rush outward, towards the smoldering hollow of the carved pipe. The heaviness of his body was instantly removed, and he soared over the heads of the cheering crowd, to again waver precariously at the edge of surrender. So easy to fall, the Prisoner thought. To fall into the embers, never again to return to that ruined shell upon the scaffold....to fall, and to be consumed.

He closed his eyes -- his true eyes, not the flesh which by now must have been bulging from their sockets as his body swung from the gibbet. He could feel the warmth of the embers below him. There was no conscious decision --he allowed himself to fall silently towards the heat.

Then he heard the music.

It was very faint at first, a crystalline chiming carried by the wind. An intricate, mathematical sound, phrases within phrases, which turned his attention away from the heat, the embers, the pipe and the Dark Man who wielded it. It wove through the air, turning this way and that, a dancing lattice of sound, which the Prisoner could almost see, winding through the crowd like a pathway.

He followed that path, moving away from the Dark Man and his pipe, feeling the urgent pull behind him as the embers flared again, the Dark Man inhaling sharply in a last effort to ensnare him. There, on the other side of the crowd, he discovered the source of the music. A musical snuff box, the kind that played a clockwork tune upon opening its lid, sat open in the hand of a man seated at a table in front of an inn.

The spot was a horrible one for viewing – the crowd prevented a clear view of the hanging from that angle, but the man was not watching the hanging. To the Prisoner's astonishment, the man, bedecked in a dandy's finery and sipping casually from a glass of port, was watching him. Not his body, swinging with the others from the hangman's nooses, but him – the space that he currently occupied, as he approached the chiming snuff box in the man's left hand. The man could see him.

Wariness came too late, as the Prisoner found that he could not draw back from the snuff box. The music enveloped him as sure as a fisherman's net. He tried in vain to struggle, only to realize that the jerking movements that he felt were those of his body's final death throes. With a final vertiginous rush, he felt himself fall towards the winding gears of the clockworks, before the dandy snapped the lid of the snuff box closed, and everything was swallowed up by an instant and irrefutable darkness.

*

*

*

A howling flood of stimuli assaulted every one of the Prisoner's senses at once. Light poured into his eyes, stabbing deep into his brain, and squeezing his eyelids shut only cut the sensation in half. His nostrils were filled with a coppery mix of acrid chemicals and smoke, and beneath that, the musky odor of horseflesh and straw, the sudden strength of those smells forcing their way into his head making him reel. His ears were filled with a world of sounds, deafening in their sudden manifestation from the total silence that had enveloped him.

A man's voice separated itself from the overwhelming confusion, and insinuated itself, calmly, into the Prisoner's ear: "Your name is Nathaniel. Nathaniel Blake."

The Prisoner felt something shift within his mind, like the rotation of lenses in a spyglass drawing objects into focus. Blake. Yes, that's right. Blake. The world realigned itself around this new information, and locked into place. Blake opened his eyes again.

He lay, naked, upon a rough wooden table. His skin was damp, and burned slightly. Nearby, containers of strange, bubbling liquids gave off foul fumes which gave little clue to their contents, beyond a certain alchemical toxicity, and the smell which rose from his own body gave testament to the source of his burning skin.

A series of copper wires were inserted into his flesh, at the thighs, chest and temples. The wires ran to a device placed near the table—an arcane construction of wheels and levers and glass tubes, whose purpose or function was beyond anything in Blake's experience. Any pain from the penetration of the wires was infinitesimal to the agony

of his hanging, but the revulsion he felt...the sense of violation...crept up from the cold depths like some antediluvian creature, and coiled around his shuddering heart.

The dandy from the inn stood over him, and began to remove the wires. Enraged, Blake grasped at the man violently, striking out in feral, instinctual rage, but his muscles leapt outward with almost no control. His hands impacted uselessly against the dandy's chest, easily brushed aside. Blake redoubled his efforts, flailing away at his tormentor, only to throw himself off balance, toppling him from the table to the straw covered floor. He felt several of the wires rip free, and the smell of old feed and horses rose into Blake's nostrils as he hit the ground. A stable, he realized. We're in a stable.

“What—“ Blake tried to speak, only to feel his throat ignite in raw agony which nearly drove the air from his lungs. The voice that crawled from his ruined throat was a rasping croak.

“Don't try to speak. Your throat isn't quite up to it yet, old boy,” the dandy said, placing his arms beneath Blake's and gently lifting him to a sitting position at the edge of the table. “To be expected, I would think, given that you were hung.” He quickly removed the remaining wires from Blake's flesh.

Blake gritted his teeth, braced for the pain, and spoke again. “Who—“

The dandy held up one delicate, slim-fingered hand to interrupt. “Please. No speaking for at least the next two hours, or your voice will never return.” He threw a rough horse blanket over Blake's shoulders, and began to dry away the remnants of the foul liquids on his skin.

“I suspect that you have a great many questions,” the dandy said. “I will tell you, although I'm sure you won't

understand a single whit of it.” He rose and tossed a carpet bag on the table next to Blake.

“There are clothes in there. Put them on. We’ve got a long journey ahead of us tonight, and plenty of time to answer your questions along the way.” He stood back, impatient.

Blake didn’t move. His mind was still trying to get its bearings. He knew who he was, and he had at least the most basic idea of where he was. However, no matter how hard he tried, he could not recall anything of his life before dropping from the scaffold on the hangman’s rope. He looked at the dandy, suspicion in his eyes.

“Not going to move until you have more information...I see.” The dandy smiled slightly. “Very well.”

“Your name is Nathaniel Blake. You were condemned, imprisoned, and finally hung by the neck until dead. You have been revived via the Ingolstadt Process. I have the singular honor of being Doctor Samuel Arthur Love—who, with my not-inconsiderable skills, has snatched you from the very jaws of not only Death, but Bonaparte as well—and I am here as a representative of the Ministry, to whom you now owe your livelihood, your allegiance and your life.”

Blake managed a slight whisper. “The ministry of what?”

Love smiled coldly. “My dear boy, we’re not the “ministry of” anything. Our portfolio is infinite. We are The Ministry...the Definitive Article, you might say. Now get dressed.”

Chapter Two

The carriage hurtled down darkened country lanes, bouncing over holes and wheel-ruts with teeth-rattling impacts that made Blake question the sanity of the driver. Blake had seen the man only briefly when they had left the stable, standing aside from the open door to the carriage's interior, the gleaming silver buttons on his voluminous coachman's cloak an odd contrast to a rough-featured face that would have looked more at home in the rookeries of Cheapside than in the driver's seat of a Gentleman's carriage.

Love had ushered him quickly into the dark interior of the vehicle, an enclosure of velvet and silks that smelled faintly of tobacco. The brutish driver had shut them in, followed by a slight rocking of the vehicle as he climbed up into his seat. A gruff voice growled "come on, then," the horses obeyed, and the carriage moved out onto the London streets.

Blake found himself again drawn to the faces of the crowd as the carriage passed, clattering over the cobblestone streets. People ran errands, milling to and fro, carrying home the day's groceries, making deliveries to the offices and homes of the wealthy, or simply going about their own business. Small groups stood on street corners, talking about the day's events, or plans for later that evening—all of them oblivious to the wonder of a dead man, watching from a passing carriage.

That was hours ago. They had left London by sundown, leaving the smells and the noise of the bustling city behind them, moving south and east. Night fell, and the roads became narrower and narrower as they went. Love sat in silence during the journey, at first watching Blake with a barely-suppressed air of amusement, then of anticipation. When the expected barrage of questions failed to appear, Love appeared to resigned himself to contentedly passing

the time by smoking a cigar, lit from the fire of the carriage lantern.

Blake was familiar with cigars – English officers had adopted the practice during service in Spain, and brought the habit back with them, where it had become all the rage among the upper class. What perplexed Blake, though, was where this familiarity came from. No matter how hard he tried, any attempt to recall events before this morning's hanging was met with a grey cloud, mirroring the haze that curled around Love's cigar. He could not recall his life before that moment, and yet, like the cigar, there was knowledge in his mind that would come when bidden.

The smoke wreathed around Love's head, as he sat back into the cushions of the carriage. At the breakneck speed they were currently traveling, his was the more comfortable seat, with his back to the rear of the carriage, while Blake, facing him, struggled to avoid being pitched forward by every bounce and rattle of the journey. As Blake watched the smoke curl, he finally broke the silence:

“Who was the Dark Man?”

Love looked surprised by the sudden question, and then perplexed. “Sorry?”

“The man with the pipe,” Blake said. “At the hanging.”

“Ah,” Love nodded, drawing more smoke from his cigar, and releasing it in a puff. “Dark Man. Oh, yes...that's very good. Very good indeed.” He chuckled to himself.

“The man with the ornate pipe, whom you so melodramatically call ‘The Dark Man’ is Étienne de Villaret –or, to be more precise, Étienne, Baron de Villaret. He's the tenth baron, in fact – managed to hold on to the family title

throughout 'La Terreur', when everybody else was getting chopped by the mob.

"He's *un sorcière*. Napoleon's chief purveyor of the Black Arts, in fact. His family has been steeped in the stuff since well before the Revelation."

Blake stared. "I'm not about to discount the existence of magic—after all, I'm a dead man, sitting here in a carriage, talking to you—but you'll have to forgive me: Revelation? Do you mean Biblical?"

Love smiled. "I'm sure some view it as such. No – the Revelation is what those of us "in the trade", as it were, call the events surrounding the discovery of the Rashid Tablet."

"Never heard of it," said Blake.

"Of course not," replied Love. "It was never made public knowledge. You've heard of the Rosetta Stone?"

Blake nodded. The stone, inscribed with a royal decree in Hieroglyphics, Demotic and Greek, had been uncovered by French soldiers in Egypt in 1799. It had become a valuable relic, allowing the language of the ancient Egyptians to finally be deciphered. The British took possession of it upon the defeat of Napoleon's forces in Egypt – Blake had a sudden memory of seeing the stone in the British Museum.

"The stone was found near the town of al-Rashid," said Love, sounding to Blake's ears like a prim schoolmaster, "which, in Greek, is called Rosetta. But it wasn't the only object found.

“Beneath the stone was a second tablet. This one far more earth-shattering in its eventual consequence. Simply put, it was the Key. To everything. The formula that laid bare the secrets of magic. The missing ingredient, if you will, to all of the ancient objects and documents which described the magical process. With the information on that tablet, suddenly everything else fell into place. Sumerian summoning rites, the Judaic kaballah, Medieval grimoires, all of it based on a common principle which we had lost to time....but somebody had *written it down.*”

Love put his hand out, palm up, in the space between him and Blake. Blake watched as a small globe of fire, like a sun, but no bigger than a child’s marble, grew into existence in the air above Love’s hand, the incandescent light throwing deep shadows in the plush interior of the carriage.

“Once the French realized what they had, they rushed it out of Egypt, of course,” Love continued. “We were lucky, though. One of our agents got a look at the tablet, and managed to make a rubbing of it. Since then, we’ve been playing a very dangerous game of move-countermove with Bonaparte. Battles fought not only with cannon and soldiers but with the very forces of Creation itself.”

Love grabbed the ball of light out of the air, swallowing it up in his palm and throwing the carriage into darkness once more. He took a drag on his cigar, the red embers of the tip a pale imitation of the light that had just filled the chamber. He exhaled, and grinned wickedly at Blake. “It’s all terribly exciting.”

Blake sat, turning away from Love to look out into the night, the occasional tree branch whipping past the window in the dim light of the carriage lanterns giving the only indication of the countryside they passed through.

“Well!” Love huffed, flicking his cigar ash out the window. “Nothing? No reaction at all?”

“With all due respect, Doctor,” said Blake. “I recently find myself risen from the grave. I’m afraid that on the scale of shocking revelations, everything else fairly pales in comparison.”

He turned back to face Love. “Why me? Why would a French baron be so interested in me?” He left the addendum to the question unspoken, yet still hanging in the air. Love perceived it instantly.

“A French baron....or The Ministry, for that matter, hmm?” Love took a final puff on the cigar and then pitched the remains through the open window. “Fair enough, Mister Blake. A worthy question. To be blunt: you represent a much-sought-after commodity. A man of your skills, raised from the dead, is a instrument of the highest value.”

“Why?” Blake demanded, growing tired of Love’s obfuscation.

“You’ve died, Mister Blake.” Said Love. “You’ve died and yet you’ve come back, and a man in your condition can not be targeted, affected or detected by magical means. You are entirely immune. Null and void.” Love spread his hands out before him in a there-you-have-it gesture, as if his explanation were the most natural thing in the world.

“You are the perfect agent. The rarest of gems.”

“So de Villaret was here to prevent The Ministry from acquiring such a gem?” Blake’s voice breathed scorn.

“Something like that, I suppose.....but who can fathom the Gallic mind?” Love smiled again.

“And what if the gem doesn’t wish to be plucked, Doctor? I have no wish to aid the French, but what if I don’t

want to be your agent, either?"

Love's face darkened, his eyes suddenly hard. "If you were to turn down our offer of employment, Mister Blake, I'm sure that it could be quite easily arranged to put you right back where we found you."

The dandy's threat hung in the air like the smoke from the now-absent cigar. To Blake's astonishment, he felt no anger towards his fellow passenger. Somewhere, deep in a forgotten corner of his mind, a sense of purpose grew.

He did not know how, but he knew that he had somehow served the Crown in his previous life – and not only was it fitting for him to do so now, given that the Crown had given him a second chance at living, but he found himself also driven by a personal sense of duty as well.

Before Blake could formulate his thoughts enough to say anything to Love, the splintering crash of wood against wood assaulted their senses, and the carriage was violently rocked to one side, seeming to careen along on two wheels for a moment before slamming back down to Earth. There was a sudden outburst of extremely blasphemous cursing from the driver, barely audible beneath the high, horrible sound of terrified horses.

A second impact sounded, this time rocking the carriage to the opposite side. Much harder this time – for an awful instant, it seemed as though the vehicle would pitch over onto its side. The driver's whip sounded, a sharp report which urged the panicking horses into more frenzied action, accelerating the carriage even further – a feat which Blake would have previously considered impossible.

Doctor Love fought to steady himself against the violent rocking, and drew aside the heavy curtains from the small rear window of the carriage. Through the aperture, Blake could see that they were being pursued by something out

of a fevered nightmare.

The thing chasing the carriage was at least fifteen feet tall, bounding after them with a powerful, loping gait on legs of wood and rope, coiled and bunched into an approximation of muscle and tendon. It was shaped something like a man, this abortion of nature—built from tree limbs and stones; worked through with the creations of man: rope and cloth and metal. Its arms swung wildly at the carriage as it continued its relentless onslaught, sometimes scraping against the vehicle with the screeching sound of chalk against slate, and other times hitting more solidly, rocking the cab with a jarring shudder.

Worst of all, however, was the thing's head – a large pumpkin, impaled on a jutting angle of wood or metal, the carved, rudimentary jack-o-lantern face given horrible, certain intelligence and wreathed in a baleful glow that surrounded it like the mark of some unholy saint.

Blake watched in horror as the thing bounded towards them, and suddenly leapt into the air, rising above the carriage and out of view. He managed to shout “It's trying to get in front –“ before there was a massive impact, and Blake and Love were sent ricocheting off the interior walls of the cab as it flipped over. The world became a chaotic whirlpool of wood and velvet, silk and glass, flesh and bone.

When the turning stopped, it took Blake a moment to realize what had happened. His ears were ringing from the crash, yet through that, he could hear the terrible screams of the horses. The carriage lay on its side, windows broken and splinters of wood jutting dangerously from every surface. Love lay partially entangled with him, rising now to shake some clarity into his senses.

Blake leapt upward, ignoring the complaints of his bruised muscles, and drew himself through the door of the carriage, which now served as the roof of their makeshift shelter. He could see the thing, lit by the unwholesome fire that surrounded its jack-o-lantern head, as it chased down one of the horses that had broken free of its yoke during the crash.

The horse was lame, obviously injured during the violence of the impact, but it galloped for its life, tearing muscle and snapping tendons in a vain effort to outrun the unnatural predator. The light from the grinning pumpkin glistened upon the foaming sweat that marked the horse's flanks, before the monster brought both of its heavy arms crashing down upon the horse's spine. Blake heard the wet crunch, like tearing the joint from a Christmas goose. The horse fell in a pile of flesh and muscle, the creature smashing into its ruined meat again and again until there was nothing recognizable left.

Then it turned and looked at Blake.

Deep within the hollow holes that served as its eyes, Blake saw not only the gleam of intellect, but a hideous recognition as well. This thing knew him.

The corners of the gash-like mouth split slightly further into what could only be interpreted as a smile. It rose from the pulverized remains of the horse, and began to stride purposefully back towards the carriage.

Blake looked around him. To return to the carriage interior offered no safety – the thing that destroyed a horse so easily would find no challenge in obliterating what little shelter the wreckage provided. To the front of the carriage, the second horse, still entangled by the ruined yoke and reins, cried piteously as it wallowed with two broken legs.

Below him, Blake could see what was left of the driver. The top half of the man's body jutted out from under the carriage, everything below his waist pinned under the wreckage. The wounds to the man's head most likely meant that he had been killed long before the vehicle had come to rest upon him. His dead hand still clutched at the tools of his trade, a broken length of the leather reins.

The tools of his trade....

Blake scrambled to the front of the vehicle, where behind the driver's seat was a long box. He glanced up – the creature was still moving toward him, its limbs working in a dreadful approximation of human motion. Blake kicked the hasps of the box, which burst open, spilling its contents onto the road: a bottle of whiskey, a pair of gloves, a tinder box used to light the carriage lamps....and a blunderbuss.

The weapon of a coachman, used against robbers and highwaymen...the blunderbuss lay on the road, a small horn of powder beside the weapon's flared, trumpet-like barrel. Blake jumped down from the wreckage, ignoring the shouts of Love from within.

"Blake – what in god's name are you doing?"

Snatching up the weapon, Blake began to prime it with powder, his hands going through the familiar motions with no conscious thought: Pour, tamp, prime. He knelt down by the corpse of the driver. With a certainty borne of desperation, he began to tear the man's buttons from his cloak, and stuffed them, a handful at a time, into the fluted barrel of the blunderbuss, tamping them down with the ramrod. Drawing back the flintlock, he turned to face the

monstrosity, which was nearly upon him.

The creature reached forward with its powerful arms, revealing hands built from rusted and forgotten tools. Scythes and forks and shears and saws plunged into the flesh of the screaming prone horse, and tore it in two. Blake was showered with a deluge of hot gore, shocking against his skin in the cool night air. The malevolent grin of the pumpkin split even wider as the creature reached its dripping hands towards Blake.

Blake triggered the gun, the flint striking the priming pan with an audible click. For a moment that seemed to stretch into eternity, nothing happened. Then the spark caught the small amount of exposed powder that had not been soaked by the horse's blood, and it flashed into life with a small rushing noise, quickly smothered by the loud explosion of the main charge in the weapon igniting. The bell of the gun's barrel hurled forth a gout of flame and thick grey smoke, the flash momentarily blinding Blake, and the report ringing in his ears.

The pumpkin burst apart, and in that instant, the wreath of corrupt fire blew out like a candle on a windy night.

With that, the component parts of the creature's form, still glistening with the warm blood of the horses, collapsed into a pile at Blake's feet. On the wind, there was the faintest sound of a howl of inhuman outrage, but then it was gone.

"Silver buttons." Blake turned to see Doctor Love climbing down from the carriage wreckage. "Capital instincts."

"It seemed right," Blake replied. "Where the hell were you?"

"Attempting to extricate myself from the wreckage, naturally." Love brushed bits of wood and glass from the

sleeves of his coat. “Some of us aren’t as well-suited to all of this exertion, you know.”

“I thought you said that I couldn’t be detected by magic? That thing tracked us well enough.”

Love steepled his fingers in front of his lips, his expression dark. “Yes. Yes, it did. I wish that I had an answer for you, Mister Blake, but I do not. However, I would venture that it seems that the Baron De Villaret hasn’t quite conceded defeat. I suggest that we get moving – the night is long and dark, and we have some miles to go before we reach our destination.”