

# ELISHA BARBER

BOOK ONE OF  
*The Dark Apostle*

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“For the life of man is perishable and transitory,  
and the wickedness of man abounds in the world—woe is me!”

—JEAN DE VENETTE



## Chapter 1



“You sent her to the hospital?” Elisha whirled to face his brother, the razor still in his fist. “My God, man, what were you thinking?”

“The midwife couldn’t help her, Elisha, and she’s in such awful pain, for the babe won’t come,” Nathaniel stammered, his pale hands clenched together. He ducked in the low door of the draper’s quarters, his fair hair brushing the carved oak of the lintel. “The neighbors carried her over while I came here.”

“But the hospital? That place is deadly.” Elisha set his razor again at his customer’s chin, deftly shearing a narrow stretch of the full, and now unfashionable, beard. “What did she say?”

“Not so fast, if you don’t mind. I care to keep my chin today, Barber,” the draper snapped.

“Helena?” Nathaniel asked, his face a mask of anguish and confusion.

“No, you fool, the midwife!” Elisha slapped the razor through the water basin and plied it again, forcing himself to slow down. Last thing he needed was to carve the ear off the master of the drapers’ guild.

Sagging, his brother balanced himself against the wall, scrubbing at his sweaty face. “The babe’s turned, and wedged somehow. She thought the physicians—”

At the mention of physicians, Elisha froze. The draper glowered up at him from his best leather chair, but his brother’s wife lay in the hospital, contracting God-knew-what illness added to her condition. For a moment, his conflicting duties trapped him—but Helena needed him, if it weren’t already too

late. The draper could abide. Flinging down his razor, Elisha roughly dried his hands on his britches. "The physicians never enter the hospital if they can advise from afar. Nobody who can afford their services goes to the hospital." He popped open the window frame nearest and flung out the dirty water.

The draper rubbed a hand across his chin and jerked it back with a cry of dismay. "You've not finished the job, Barber. I've still got half a beard!"

"Then you owe me half my fee," Elisha told him. He snatched his towel from the man's neck and spun on his heel, basin tucked under his arm. The razor he folded with a snap and gripped until his fingers hurt. "Why did you not come for me sooner?" he asked, dropping his voice to a murmur.

Instantly, Nathaniel straightened, taking advantage of his superior height. "I think you know why."

For a moment, their eyes met, and Nathaniel swallowed but gave no ground to his elder brother. Elisha had caused the breach that lay between them. He had apologized, but Nathaniel's presence here was as close as he would come to forgiveness.

They had the same intense blue gaze, though Elisha's own hair was near black and bound into a practical queue. Elisha straightened broad shoulders and flashed a furious grin. "Then let's be off while your wife yet lives."

Nathaniel stumbled out the door as Elisha bore down upon him.

"I'll be to your order about this!" The draper squawked, pushing himself up. "You'll not practice in this city again."

Rounding on the man, Elisha said, "I hope they'll consider a woman's life of more value than half a beard."

"A whore's life," the draper answered, then stepped back as Elisha held up the razor, still gripped in his fist. His mobile face registered his regret, but Elisha was in no mood to play the draper's game.

"Helena," Elisha said in a low and terrible voice, "is a whore no longer, but you'll be a bugger for the rest of your life, so I'll ask you to keep your threats to yourself."

Pale, the man's jaw dropped, his half-beard bisecting his lips.

As he turned to follow his brother, Elisha thought it a fitting image, half a beard for a man with a double life. No, the order would hear of nothing from him for a variety of reasons.

Anger was easy. It gave Elisha the distance he needed from those he must

treat—and those who might die. Distance, too, from dangerous friends. Elisha would have to apologize at some point, but the draper would be a little more careful suggesting his attraction to his next barber. It would be safer for them both.

Elisha descended the narrow stairs at a run, jumping the last few to street level, emerging between the draper's shop and the neighboring woolery. Nathaniel hovered anxiously in the street, turning away toward the hospital, but only after the relief showed plain upon his face.

Elisha might have found that expression of relief touching at another time, a time when he was more certain of his skill. As it stood, he'd not dealt much with childbirth, though he'd had more experience with it than most barbers, in the course of his work as the favored surgeon of Codpiece Alley. And even there, many of the whores refused to accept the service of a man, or would take advice only but no examination. Curious, that they who spent their love at the whim of strangers should turn prudish when it came to the touch of an examiner's hand. Most at least knew the herbs to take to avoid unwanted children, else they were cast out by their keepers to give birth in the streets—or, heaven forbid, in the hospital. Elisha's fury flared again. His brother should have known better.

They slogged along the twisting roads of the drapers' quarter, dodging customers, wagons and horsemen, speaking not a word. Nathaniel stuck his shaking hands under his arms, as if he embraced himself in his wife's absence. He still wore his leather tinsmith's apron, the pockets bristling with tools and bits of metal. The midwife must've fetched him up from the workshop. What was he making that was so important he left his wife to birth in the hands of strangers? If Helena had been Elisha's own wife—but, of course, she wasn't. Not his wife, not his choice.

As if he could hear his brother's thoughts, Nathaniel suddenly said, "I couldn't bear the screaming, nor the tears. I waited at the door, I did, but I couldn't bear to hear her like that."

The buildings loomed over them, stepping out from the lower stories until the levels above bent together and cut the sky into jagged shapes. In some places rods and arches touched buildings on both sides of the street, holding apart the tilting houses like a man intervening in a tavern brawl. The graveled streets twined between, edged by ditches to catch rain and refuse.

Straight ahead, the carriage of some fool lord had broken a wheel. Two matched horses whinnied and pulled in opposite directions while the grooms tried to sort them out, unhitching the pair and effectively blocking the road while their master shouted from the safety of the carriage. It was just a few years ago King Hugh commissioned carriages for his family. Now every noble who could afford it had to have one, cluttering up the London streets.

With a yelp, Nathaniel stopped short, his shoulders quivering. Elisha grabbed his arm and jerked him forward again, taking to the sewage ditch that ran down the side and ducking beneath the tangled reins. "Pull yourself together, Nate, it's your family at stake," he muttered, not sure if he wanted to be heard.

The hospital at last towered before them, a story of stone at street level, topped with two more of half-timbers spanned by crumbling plaster, with birds plucking out the insulating straw for nests, or in search of insects. It was founded by the old king at the turn of the century and already decrepit. Nowadays, the current king's reputation hardly hewed to charity.

"Which ward?" Elisha asked as they entered the place. Even the refuse he scraped off his boots didn't smell so foul as the hall they faced. The scents of infection, vomit, and blood hung in the air, along with the groans, prayers, and weeping of the afflicted.

"Three?" Nathaniel suggested.

Tension gathering in his shoulders, Elisha focused a brief glare upon his brother, then pushed by him. "Sister!"

A nun passing with a bucket turned at his call. "May I . . . ? Oh." Her wide brown eyes flooded with tears.

"Is it Helena?" Nathaniel blurted, but Elisha held him back, recognizing in the woman before him an emaciated whore he had given a cure four winters back. She had sworn off the life—they all swear off it some time or another—but this oath had taken hold, and he smiled as she dropped the bucket to catch his bare forearm.

"May the Lord bless you, Elisha, and keep you in His hand."

"Sister . . ." he paused, squeezed his eyes shut, and popped them open, "Lucretia?"

She rewarded him with a nod.

"Do you remember Helena? Was she brought in here?"

“Helena? Gracious, no, I should hope not. Upstairs maybe. Follow!” Gathering up her skirts, Lucretia set a brisk pace for the stairs at the center of the ward.

Averting his eyes from the whimpering or wailing occupants of the broad beds, Elisha followed. After a moment, he thought to look back and caught hold of Nathaniel’s arm once more as his brother staggered, his face gray. “Come on, Nate.”

“Is it—?” he gasped for breath, recoiling from the stink, “is it always like this?”

“It’s worse in the summer,” Elisha replied grimly.

Flicking him a glance, Nathaniel looked on the verge of tears himself. “I sent Helena here.”

Since Nathaniel’s appearance at the draper’s, Elisha had felt disconcerted, allowing his brother’s agitation to affect him. He’d overreacted, treating Nathaniel with less affection than he would have shown a stranger. He held Nathaniel’s arm, lending him strength, as if he could communicate his apology through touch. “You’ve never been inside the place before. How could you know?”

“By the cross, Elisha, I could have trusted your stories.”

Aye, that he could. “What reason have you to trust me, Nate?” Elisha said lightly, despite the heaviness in his heart. A ward sister met them on the landing and pointed toward the far end of the hall. A curtain there separated the wards, and the trio pushed through, pausing briefly at each bed.

Six beds lined the walls, each double width and filled with three or four women. Some of them writhed with unknown pains, moaning or cursing. At the sight of Lucretia, those who could, sat up, holding out beseeching arms.

“Sister, some water, I beg you,” cried a crone with sallow flesh.

A better dressed woman in a bed of her own shouted, “Damn you, I need fresh linens!”

One piteous voice whispered, “Just a strip. I’ll bind the wound myself, Sister, if you’ll give me a bandage.” The girl held close a ragged hand, blood streaming from an unseen wound.

Gritting his teeth, Elisha pressed his forearms over his ears, trying to block out their cries. If only he had time. “Helena!” he shouted over the din. “Helena! Where are you?”

From the fourth bed someone screamed, “Eli!” the name dissolving into a sob of pain.

They hurried over to the crowded bed, and Elisha dropped his barbering tools.

Her thick golden hair tangled on the pillow, Helena lay at the outermost. She had flung off the dirty blankets, clutching her bloody gown in a stranglehold as she shrieked. Tears tracked down her face from eyes shut tight. “Nathan! Nathan,” she whimpered.

“Here, darling, I’m here.” Nathaniel pushed by to grab her hand. “Oh, Love, I’m so sorry.”

“Where’s the midwife?” Elisha demanded, pulling the blankets down all the way to reveal Helena’s perfect legs. He shut his eyes and shook himself.

“Gone,” she panted, “physician.”

Sister Lucretia shot him a look, her face as grim as his own.

“Sister, we’ll need a cart to get the lady home,” he told her softly. He needed room to work, and peace, for his sake as well as hers.

Nevertheless, Nathaniel heard him. “You can’t think of moving her, not in this condition.”

Elisha stared down at his brother, the cacophony of pain beating at him from every side however he tried to ignore it. Beside Helena lay a thin woman, her eyes wide, her skin gray, her mouth stretched open in a final amazement. If Helena stayed here, he had no doubt she would soon look the same.

From the corpse’s other side, a girl spoke up through blood-flecked lips. “Can you bring another blanket please? This woman’s gone awfully cold.”

Through clenched teeth Elisha repeated, “A cart, at once. And the midwife, if you find her.”

Lucretia bobbed her head and nimbly hurried off as if she fled the pain around her. Elisha couldn’t fathom how she could stand to work there, surrounded every moment by suffering.

Helena screamed again, and Nathaniel stroked the hair back from her sweaty face. “I’m here,” he murmured. “And Elisha’s come. We’ll help you.”

Kneeling down by her feet, Elisha shoved back his sleeve, but the examination was unnecessary, for one of the babe’s feet could be seen. Jerking back, Elisha flung himself away from the bed. “What the hell were you thinking?” he shouted. Of all the births he’d assisted, this had to be the

worst; that it was happening to his own brother's wife was unconscionable. And he knew in his heart that he was to blame. She needed a surgeon's skill and the speed of a racehorse. Skill he had, but speed he had no control over. Even if he ran for the tools he'd need and back again. Better to take her away . . .

"Please, gentlemen, I'll have to ask you to go," said an older nun, bustling up to them as fast as her stout legs could take her. "I am the ward sister here, and you've no—"

"This is her husband," Elisha said shortly. "I'm his brother, a barber and a surgeon."

"Still and all," she huffed, "we are doing what may be done for her. The physician has been sent for."

"Do you think he'll come for her? For any of them?" He waved his arm over the beds.

"The physician is understandably busy, but he is a Christian man."

At Helena's shriek, Elisha cringed. He shoved past the nun and went back to the curtain, his hands balled into fists. The woman had no sense, or at least, no ears. Helena couldn't afford the physician's leisure. Still, he had to control himself, master his own heart before he'd be of any good to her. He started to review what he would need, to picture the tools and where to find them. Already, it was too late to turn the baby against the desperate pressure of the mother's own womb.

"Will the sister bring me a cloth?" asked a timid voice below him, and Elisha turned.

The pale girl with the gashed arm still tried to stop the blood with her hand, watching him from dark and sunken eyes.

Sinking down on the bed beside her, Elisha pulled the towel from his belt and tore it in three. "Give it here," he told her.

Blinking, she glanced away toward the distant nun, then back.

"I'm a barber," he said soothingly. "Give it here, it'll be fine."

Hesitantly, she held out her arm. The gash was long, but not too deep, cutting across the muscles of her forearm. This, at least, he knew exactly how to handle. With the first strip of cloth, he wiped around it. Then holding her hand between his knees, he pressed together the sides of the wound and wrapped it carefully, tucking the bandage end in when he was done. From his

ever-present pouch he slipped a packet of white powder and pressed it into her grasp. “Just a pinch for the pain—no more, you hear me?”

“Aye, sir.”

“Get out of here,” Elisha urged, drawing her up from the bed. “Go home.”

With a quick glance behind her, the girl darted away, holding her injured arm close once more. He stared a moment after her, wishing Helena could be so readily healed.

A hand thrust aside the curtain, admitting Sister Lucretia followed by a plump woman with her sleeves bound back from her arms. “Elisha,” she grunted. The midwife. Elisha’s heart sank yet further when he recognized her: matronly, barely competent, with a demeanor soothing to pregnant women. Her combination of piety and comfort would appeal to his brother almost as much as the fact that Elisha disapproved of her.

Following close, they returned to Helena’s side.

“Now, dear,” the midwife said, bending down to check the infant’s position. Only Elisha caught the flash of horror on her face. When she looked up again, her voice was still as calm as ever, though her hands quavered. “Now, dear, the physician recommends a cutting. We’ll lift the babe from your belly and stitch’t back up again, eh?”

Nodding desperately, Helena clung to her husband with both hands.

“We’ll be needing water then,” the midwife went on, “and a better knife than what I’ve brought.”

With a cold certainty, Elisha laid a hand on Helena’s taut belly, pressing the still form of the child she carried. Too still. He grabbed the midwife’s arm and pulled her aside, turning his face from his brother. “You’re going to cut her open?” he whispered urgently.

“The physician advises—”

“He knows who she is, and her circumstances?”

“Aye, Barber, he does,” the midwife snapped, tugging at his grip.

Elisha swore under his breath. “So he thinks to save the babe at her expense.”

The midwife dropped her gaze, her thin mouth set. “God willing, if I stitch her right up—”

Elisha didn’t listen to the rest. Under the best of circumstances, cutting

into the abdomen was risky—best left to the master surgeons, and even then more likely to kill than to cure.

He looked at Lucretia.

The nun nodded once. “And horses.”

The first good news he’d yet been offered. Elisha grinned. “Bless you.”

He lifted Nathaniel to his feet and pushed his barbering tools into his brother’s hands. Then, with a nod to the imperious ward sister, he caught up Helena in both arms and drew her to his chest. “There’s not a moment to spare.”

“But she said—!” Nathaniel began to protest, then he whirled, seizing the midwife’s hand. “Come with us.”

Elisha met the midwife’s eye, the fear in his brother’s voice still ringing in his ears. Grudgingly he said, “She’ll have need of you.”

She held up her hands in a gesture of despair. “Aye, Barber, I’m coming.”

“Then we have a life to save,” he said, turning away to escape the hospital, and its reeking beds of corpses both living and dead.

## Chapter 2



They dashed from the hospital, pursued by the furious ward sister. “Only the saints may intercede for her!” she cried, tugging at Elisha’s arm. “By God’s grace alone, and through His physicians shall she be saved.”

He snarled low in his throat, causing the nun to stumble and cross herself. He should have been there as soon as they thought she was pregnant, but his own arrogance had estranged them. He would welcome the saints if they could save her—and damn them all if they could not.

Outside waited a new wagon with tall wheels, drawn by a sturdy team of chestnut draft horses. A pair of apprentice wainwrights idled with their charge, grinning at the sight of Lucretia. Elisha had no doubt how she’d come to earn their favor in years past. Nathaniel clambered into the wagon, kneeling to draw Helena’s clenched form from Elisha’s arms.

With easy strength, Elisha scooped up the midwife and deposited her alongside, then started when Lucretia took a hand-hold and pulled herself in as well.

She met his gaze and murmured, “To pray for her, at the least. She may need help from more than God, but His aid is worth the asking.”

“Aye, Sister.” Elisha moved around to mount the wagon beside the carter. “You’ll have our gratitude to make it speedy,” he told the man as the apprentices clambered up as well.

“Course.” He flashed a snaggle-toothed grin. “’Twas my son’s leg you saved last winter. Hya!” He snapped the reins and called out encouragement over the horses’ broad backs.

Elisha pointed the way, taking them by quick turns from the main streets to byways where they could urge the team to greater speed. Behind him, he heard Helena's screams, Nathaniel's soothing tones, and the steady rise and fall of women's voices in prayer. The screams came more quickly now, and by the time they reached the tinsmithy, she let out a continuous wail of agony.

Springing down before they'd even stopped, Elisha ran to the squat house adjoining his brother's shop. Despite the hurt which lay between them, he and Nathaniel yet shared the house left them by their parents. The married Nathaniel had claimed the front rooms and—for the child they dreamed of—the loft, while Elisha, though older, had taken the low back rooms for his home and study. Now he left the others to bring Helena in while he gathered his tools.

Hooks and shelves lined the study, even concealing the little unglazed windows, for which he now cursed the lack of light. Catching up a leather satchel, Elisha tossed in a few knives as well as containers of herbs to soothe during childbirth. He knew the tool he needed, the only tool, but dreaded to carry it alone, as if doing so would be to admit failure.

He rounded the house and mounted the stoop outside, taking a deep breath before entering the open door. They'd moved the two benches and the basin stand from the center of the room to stand in the yard, with Elisha's barbering tools heaped on top. Helena screamed, a dreadful sound that tore through him. Lucretia was right, it was God they needed here.

"Feet first!" Nathaniel cried from within.

"Aye, sir, and naught I did for her would turn it," the midwife replied. Then almost timidly, "There's still time to take the physician's word."

"But Elisha—"

"Is just a barber, for all that he's got good hands."

Squaring his shoulders, Elisha ducked inside. "And whose hands would carry out the esteemed physician's advice? Yours? I find it unlikely." He leveled a cold stare at her. "Do what you can for the lady, and let me attend the child."

With a grunt, she turned away.

Gently, Lucretia tucked an arm around Nathaniel's shoulders. "Come away, sir, we're too many here. Let them do what they must. Perhaps your work would bring you some comfort now."

When they'd gone outside, Elisha knelt at the table. Helena's gown lay askew, barely covering her distended belly, which heaved and shuddered as she sobbed. The midwife held both Helena's arms, murmuring without words. Between Helena's legs protruded the tiny foot, grayish and foreign.

"How long has the child been dead?" he asked, in a quiet voice.

"Don't know what you mean," the midwife returned, adjusting her grip, her kerchiefed head lowered.

He stared at her, a strange numbness suffusing his heart. "Of course you do. You know your business, just as I know mine. This child was dead before she ever went to the hospital."

"Nothing for it but to have the baby, is there?" She dodged his glare. "Will you cut her then? That's what the physician—"

"God damn the physician!" Elisha shouted. "And God damn you," he added through clenched teeth.

Her head jerked up, her mouth working on words she could not speak.

Spilling the leather satchel onto the floor, Elisha searched among the tools for the one he needed, a slender, long handled saw with fine sharp teeth. Meant for the amputation of fingers or toes, the tool had never been put to such terrible use as what he must do. He gripped it tightly and nearly prayed himself.

"But you cannot be intending," the midwife said, her lips trembling.

"Her body won't rest until the child is out," he told her quietly. "It's already lost to me, but she is not."

From the doorway, Lucretia said, "Oh, Sweet Lord," crossing herself.

Her eyes suddenly open and wild, Helena shrieked and kicked. "You'll not! You bastard, you'll not cut my baby!" but the protests drowned in another cry, and blood stained the table beneath her. The nun crossed to her and caught her leg, shouting Bible verses to be heard above the din.

Humming in his throat, letting the sound buzz up into his skull, Elisha gripped the instrument and began his awful work, laying the child to rest in the empty leather bag as blood flowed around his arms. His namesake saint had once healed a river with salt, but Elisha knew there would be no healing this flood.

When it was done, he sat back on his heels, letting his humming die away. The delicate saw dropped from his tired hand. He applied a careful pressure

to Helena's lower belly, watching intently to be sure the blood was stopping. He leaned back from her when he was satisfied. Up to the elbow, blood slicked his arms. It stained his shirt and his britches where he knelt on the floor. In his urgency, he hadn't thought to take his apron. For a long time, he stared down at his hands. Now they shook with the horror of the deed. Unsteadily, he pulled to the flap on the leather satchel and thrust it under the table, as far from himself as he could. Only then did he notice the quiet and raise his head.

Helena's legs lay at last relaxed, her belly still large, but flaccid now, draped with the ruined gown. At her side, Sister Lucretia stood, pale, lips still murmuring prayers, but with the words misplaced, the cadence trailing off, then recalling itself.

The midwife laid Helena's arms across her chest and met Elisha's helpless gaze. "So now you've done. Happy, are you, to have cost your brother his wife?"

"No," he breathed. His hands dangling, Elisha got to his feet and searched Helena's still, pale lips. "No!" he repeated. "She can't be." Unwilling to touch her, with her child's blood still on his hands, Elisha stared hard at her throat and saw no sign of pulse or breath. He stood stunned, his hands aching from the close, careful work, his skin recalling the intimacy of the mother's flesh.

"Did you cut something else down there? Did you ruin it all a'purpose, or by ignorance?" The midwife thrust herself close to him. "Putting yourself in woman's business, evading the physician's order, casting curses all about you—you've no place here, Barber. Your brother must be told." She jammed her fists onto her hips and bustled out the door.

Dazed, Elisha moved to the head of the table, near Lucretia. "What happened?" he asked. "What's gone wrong?" He wiped his hands upon his thighs, leaving long red streaks. He tried to remember through the near-trance that settled over him while he worked. He reviewed the care he had taken with each cut. He recalled being grateful when she finally lay still—merely unconscious, he thought—but there was nothing, nothing he would do differently.

"Go to your brother," Lucretia said. "Don't let it be her word he hears."

"But she's right." Leaning upon the table, Elisha felt the strain in his arms and knees. How long had he knelt there, trying to be careful, to be sure

he did no harm to the mother, his brother's wife. "If he'd only got me sooner," he murmured, "maybe then, or if we'd stayed at the hospital . . ."

There was noise behind him, but he could not be distracted.

"The hospital's unclean, and full to the roof of illness, Elisha," the nun told him, reaching out to touch his arm. "I know that as well as you. 'Twas charity brought me there, not hope. If the child was already dead, what could the physician's order do but wound the mother yet again?"

What did it matter if he had done the right thing, now that it had gone so terribly wrong? Shaking his head, Elisha straightened. "What penance for the work of this day, Sister? Tell me that, if you know."

"Ask it of the Lord, Elisha," she said. "And remember that He is also merciful." She gave his arm a little squeeze. "Go to your brother. He'll be needing you, though he doubts it now."

"Aye, as would any man of sense." Edging back around the table, he kicked his scattered tools and a vial rolled beneath his foot to be crushed. Elisha did not heed them. After this, heaven forbid he ever take up his instruments to cut more than hair. "Cover her, Sister?"

"I will."

He tripped on the steps and shook himself, blinking, in the sunlight. How dare the sun look bright upon him today? His fingers flexed and released. He had lost patients before: strangers, neighbors. It always hurt, even when he knew they could have had no better care. But this . . . He could not imagine a loss so great, a failure so awful. Two years he hoped to reconcile with his brother, his only living kin. He would be lucky, now, if Nathaniel even came to his funeral. He had to face him and receive the curses he so well deserved. To one side, the wainwright's men stood watching, their faces slack with horror and wonder at a tragedy which touched them not. Elisha wondered why they'd not yet gone to spread the news. "Nathaniel?"

Beside the door the cleared-aside furniture, piled up and abandoned, seemed an emblem of the family he had torn apart. Something was amiss there, but it escaped his addled mind.

"Nathaniel?" He swept his gaze about the yard, settling it a moment on the apprentices who shifted uneasily.

"Workshop, I think," one of them said. "Lucy—er, Sister Lucretia took him there. We've just come back to see what help she needs."

Nodding, Elisha turned away. Knocking on the door, he heard no answer, and pushed it open with a soiled hand.

The shaft of sunlight he let in traced its path upon the dirt floor, lighting up the workbench, striking a brass gleam off a familiar item, so out of place he could not at first name it. His basin, that was it; his wide, metal basin, brimful of darkness, with his brother's blond head sunk in grief beside it.

"Nathaniel," Elisha said, coming forward from the light.

Perched on his tall stool, Nathaniel bent over the table, his arm outstretched, Elisha's razor close to his hand.

"No no no no," Elisha chanted to himself, his eyes sweeping the trail of blood, the open blade, the angle of his brother's arm.

All the breath had left him, all of his own blood, like his brother's, like his nephew's, seeping away, until he stood as a marble figure in the shaft of sunlight, struck through and dying.

And yet he alone still lived. How was it possible? How had God let it be so, that these should all lie dead while he was standing, unharmed though not unwounded? If they'd not left the hospital, if his brother had trusted him, if he'd not been such a fool two years ago—his righteous pride, his stupid conceits—ignorance indeed.

"I've killed them all," he said aloud, his fingers dripping blood into the brazen sun.

## Chapter 3



The constables would have to know, Elisha thought, staring at his brother's blond head, haloed by the sunlight. And the tin guildsmen must be told. If he had taken in any work, the customers must be found. Helena had a sister, somewhere in the city, married to a tradesman.

The next thought chilled him even in the sun, and caught his breath. Nathaniel had taken his own life. He would be bound for an unmarked grave, unsanctified earth despite his years of service and the tithe he made from his meager pay.

Elisha's hand reached out of its own accord, snatching up the razor at his brother's side and flinging it into the darkest corner. Quickly, he rounded the table, embracing his brother and lowering him to the floor. The loose hands fell lax and defenseless. His body was still warm in Elisha's arms. Blood dripped from the worktable to the dirt floor, soaking in, becoming part of the shadows almost as if it had never been. As if his brother had never been. It was said that inside the skull rested a seed called the Bone of Luz, and if one had the skill and knowledge, this seed could be tended, to grow into a new man. Elisha wondered where the seed was, if he might locate it. Would the new man be another Nathaniel? He held his brother on his lap, as if they were boys again. Nathaniel's hair stroked soft against his skin, the lips parted for a trickle of blood. For the last time, he stared into his brother's face, still and pale.

"Stand up!" someone barked out from the doorway. "We've no wish to harm you."

Shaking himself, Elisha turned, starting at the sight of four armed men, their swords drawn on the instant he turned. He lowered Nathaniel at last to the unyielding ground. Elisha brought both hands slowly into the light before he rose.

“I am unarmed.” He advanced a few steps from the building to be surrounded by them. Beyond, the two apprentices spoke at once, their voices high and excited, as a guard captain nodded, glaring in Elisha’s direction. The captain strode across the yard, his mail coat glinting and chinking as he passed by to look into the workshop. His head jerked when he absorbed what he saw, then he spun on his heel, taking in Elisha’s bloody hands and garments. “Arrest him.”

Elisha bowed his head, silently crossing his arms behind him, awaiting justice.

“What have you done here, barber? Is this some revenge, or is it the house you wanted?” the captain snarled.

As Elisha wet his lips, for once at a loss, Sister Lucretia bounded down the steps from the house, upsetting the heap of benches in her haste. “Elisha!” she cried, her face lit with a grin as wide as ever he’d seen. “Elisha, where’s Nathaniel?” She ran up, seizing his bloody hands in hers. “A miracle, Eli, she’s alive. Helena’s alive!”

For a moment, this thought crowded out all others. He let out an involuntary shout of laughter, tossing back his head. “Thank God!” His hair, flying loose from its band, shook down over his shoulders in a tumble of black waves. She lived—his work was not all in vain. For that moment, he reveled in the success of his terrible surgery, sweeping away the tragedy that followed.

“I went to cover her, as you said, and to bathe her as best I could. The water must’ve startled her awake, Eli.” As Lucretia’s words rushed out, tears sparkled in her eyes. “She breathed, and opened up her eyes. ‘Sister,’ she said to me, ‘is my husband by?’ Oh, the Lord has surely been with us today.”

Elisha’s joy fled as quickly as it had come, the truth of his brother’s death made real with Helena’s revival. As Lucretia gazed up into his face, her smile grew slim and vanished. “Eli?”

From the house, a tremulous voice called, “Nathan? Where’s the baby, Nathan?”

Lucretia glanced back over her shoulder, then again to Elisha, her grip tightening.

For another endless, fleeting moment, Elisha felt himself cast back to the day of his brother's birth, his father tossing him in the air to catch him again, his tiny brother cradled against his mother's breast. Then his chin lowered to his chest, his eyes burning with tears. Shaking, tearing his hands from Lucretia's comfort, he sank to all fours, his hair hiding his face as he wept. His throat ached and he wished his heart would burst inside his shuddering chest. He curled into himself, racked with sobs, his fingers digging into the dirt of the yard. Blood and earth mingled. Dust to dust.

Nathaniel, sitting in the workshop, filing or polishing, awaiting the midwife's word. But the news she brought was the worst, not only the child but the wife as well. He had come to the door—the sound that Elisha thought he'd heard. What had Elisha said in his shock? *If he'd only got me sooner . . . ?*

Then Nathaniel, taking up the razor and basin and, retreating to the solitude of his shop, bereft of all that he loved, believing it was his own fault, setting the razor to his throat. For nothing. Helena lived! Helena lay recovering, calling out for a man who could never answer.

"If Nathaniel's the blond, then he lies within," the captain said gruffly. "With his throat cut."

"No, it can't be." Lucretia's habit rustled as she moved to the door, then quickly back. "What's happened?"

"Ask your barber, if you will, Sister."

"But he's been with me and with Helena. He saved her life today."

"Aye, is it so? 'I killed them all,' s'what he said not a few moments ago, in these young men's hearing."

A soft, warm hand lay upon Elisha's back. "He has killed no one, my lord. What has happened I cannot say, except that he acted to save the life of his sister. Perhaps the midwife can say more."

An agitated cry rang from the little house. "Nathan! I cannot rise, Love, you must come to me."

Helena's voice struck him like a blow, and he flinched. How would he ever face her? Lucretia's comforting hand lifted.

"Go to the lady, Sister, we'll clear up all else," said the captain.

"What shall be done with him?"

“He’s for prison, unless we find otherwise. And for death, if the truth is plain. Pray for him if you will.”

Not answering, Lucretia knelt down in a crisp movement of her woolen garments. She encircled Elisha with both arms, his forehead tucked into her slender shoulder. “You’ve done nothing but God’s work, Eli,” she whispered. “I’ll see it’s known.”

At last, he found courage to speak. “Helena needs comfort, Sister.”

“No more, nor less than you do,” she replied, “and you are no less deserving.”

He strangled a disbelieving laugh. If they slew him in the street, it would be more than he deserved.

“Go on, Sister.” A new hand grasped his arm, drawing them apart.

They rose together, Elisha pushing back his hair, leaving a trace of blood along his cheek, Helena’s or Nathaniel’s, or that of their unborn child mingled on his skin, anointing him with shame. Nonetheless, Lucretia smiled gently. “May the Lord be with you, Elisha. I’ll come when I may.”

“Helena,” he said.

“I know.” Gathering up the skirts of her habit, Lucretia returned to their little house, calling out, “Lie back, Helena, I’m here with you.”

Elisha stood silent while they bound his arms and led him in their midst toward the quarterhouse. What could he say to them? For his brother’s sake, he’d twisted the truth already, destroying what evidence he could, implicating himself with no thought at all. If his brother’s death was not to be judged suicide, then someone would be blamed—should be blamed, for the deeds that drove Nathaniel away and for the death that could be laid at Elisha’s feet as surely as if he himself had drawn the blade. His brother died because of him.

Once inside the dim quarterhouse, they replaced the rope at his wrists with a chain affixed to a granite stone in the foundation. From a short distance, the captain eyed him. “Tell me all, Barber.”

Nodding, Elisha wearily recounted the day from Nathaniel’s finding him in the draper’s house to the hospital, and their mad ride home. He told it all in what detail he could, straight until he’d left Helena’s side. There, the narrative broke off, and he said no more. He was responsible to be sure, but he could not bring himself to claim the death so directly, and he would not, would never, reveal his brother’s shame.

“You’ve left out your brother’s death. How came he to be lying in the dirt, his life’s blood pooled about him?”

“I can say nothing of that, my lord.”

“Oh? In faith, I think you can. Unless you’ll tell me you’ve forgotten a murder, and your own basin close by.”

Elisha leaned back against the wall. Exhausted, he prayed for it to be done, for night to fall upon this day. “Then let the evidence tell all, I will not deny it.”

The captain’s eyes narrowed, and he chewed on his long mustache. “It seems as if that should be a confession, yet I misdoubt it.”

Head cocked to one side, he regarded the captain. Elisha would not have thought the man bright enough to go even that far. He’d met him before, of course, but never for more than a few words touching on some theft or injury.

From long experience, Elisha knew that a single lie could be caught out, but in the absence of anything—lie or truth—people tended to draw the worst conclusion. “Doubt it if you will, sir, I have nothing more to say.”

Still chewing on his mustache, the captain stared back then gave a slight nod. “Then I’ll go interview the corpse.” With a click of his heels, he turned and left. The guard brought him a basin to wash off the blood that already made his face and hands itch. Even scrubbing with both chained hands, he could not remove it all.

Sitting against the wall, his legs stretched out before him, Elisha drifted in and out of sleep, or at least, of some blessed absence of thought and remembrance. Damp earth and blood overlaid the reek of previous inmates, turning his brief hunger to nausea. In the street beyond the windowless wall, women laughed as they shopped the market, wagons creaked to and fro, a minstrel stopped awhile and set out his hat, grinding out tunes on a hurdy gurdy that sounded as if several cats were fighting inside it. A lone guard paced the hall bounded by the iron grill, pausing to peer in at Elisha before he passed back out to the chamber at the front of the building. Some time later, he paced again. Some time after that, he returned to light a torch in the hall.

Into the dim light, the captain returned, with Lucretia trailing after him, her face haunted. He fitted a key to the lock at the grate and let them in, studying the scene as the nun ran to Elisha’s side.

“Are you well? They’ve not hurt you?”

Glancing over her shoulder toward the hovering captain, Elisha said, “No, of course not. I’ve been waiting, that’s all.”

“I’ve found someone who’ll help you, Eli.” She gave him a meager smile, her eyes worried. “Not that you’ll like it.” She looked back toward the door.

With a gesture, the captain summoned in a third figure, tall and lean, wearing long, dark robes. Yards of cloth gathered at his shoulders, draping down his arms in elegant folds to form cuffs each wide enough to clothe a child. A round rim at his temples gave way to a tumble of velvet and silk—the height in fashionable headgear. In fact, four whole families might be kept warm in the cloth this man flaunted. The drapers must be thriving by his custom alone.

Rising to give the smallest possible bow, his clothes crisp with dried blood, Elisha remarked to Lucretia, “I’m afraid you’re mistaken. This man has no cause to help me.”

Ducking to enter the cell, the physician Doctor Lucius smiled, his head tilted to one side to better dangle the length of his hat. “Oh, my dear barber, do not sell yourself so short. Why, dozens of your former patients have sought us out.” With an elegant hand, he indicated himself and the captain. “They plead that we must be lenient with you. I must have been approached by a hundred of whores alone.” He smiled benevolently at Sister Lucretia, who tucked her hands into her sleeves and lifted her chin as he continued to address Elisha. “Holy Rood, you are covered in filth.” His refined nose wrinkled his disgust.

Gritting his teeth, Elisha held his tongue.

“I have viewed the scene and investigated the evidence and the deceased, poor man. The difficulty is, you see, that the evidence tells two stories. In one, you have turned your hand against your own kin. In the other . . . well, I believe you know what the other tale might be.”

“I stand accused of my brother’s murder, sir, that I know.”

“I’ve not charged you with anything,” the captain said quickly.

“Why should you obfuscate a legal matter in this fashion? That is what I have asked myself.” The physician waved his finger in the air. “Ah, but if your brother inflicted his own wound, he is denied his place in paradise. Ergo, you have muddied the water, so to speak, that we may not clearly determine and declare it that your brother is a suicide and damned for all eternity.”

Rubbing at the chain around his wrist, Elisha evaded the man's cool gaze.

"Why would you sacrifice yourself for a God you show so little faith in? And for a man you'd not spoken to in two years, I am given to understand." He trod slowly across the brick floor to stand before Elisha. "It must be hard not to speak to a man who lives under your very roof. Especially when you are coveting his wife—"

Elisha's head jerked up. "Don't speak of things you do not understand."

"Well, the gospels of our Lord mean nothing to you, why should I expect His commandments to fare any better? Tell me, Barber, is there, in fact, anything you *do* believe in?"

Leveling his furious gaze, Elisha held up both hands, chained, blood still edging his nails, and yet steady as ever. "These," he replied.

"Ah. Hubris. I should have sought for no other antecedent to a fall such as yours." With a prim smile, the physician went on, "Then let us lay aside the issue of your brother, slain in his own workshop, by your own razor. No, let us examine the matter of the child."

The idea sickened him—the less said of it, the better. "I don't see what there is to discuss."

"Perhaps the sister should . . .?" Doctor Lucius gestured toward the door, but Elisha shook his head.

"She was there, through it all."

"Ah. To continue, where was I? Oh, yes, ignoring the manner of your brother's death and turning to that of his child. By all accounts, you mutilated and dismembered an innocent. I was given to understand you term yourself a barber, not a butcher."

"The baby was already dead. By the time Nate came for me, it was dead. You should ask the midwife how long, and when she planned to tell the mother." The thought left him quivering with anger. Afraid of losing her fee, that woman had kept this terrible secret, even to the point of birth. A stillborn child, delivered by her, was better than one lost by other means. He'd kept his conclusions to himself as they'd raced for home, rather than add to Helena's anguish. Despair might well have tipped the balance of her own struggle.

"The midwife says the baby died during the birth," Doctor Lucius said,

“when it became caught. Perhaps the delay when you took them from the hospital—”

“Then she’s a liar. If she believed that, you’d never have given the order that you did.”

Arching one silver eyebrow, the physician inquired, “Speaking of which, why did you not follow my advice?”

Elisha’s mouth set into a hard line, every muscle in his body taut. In his lengthy schooling, the physician might have read a thousand books and studied a thousand cases and never touched a living patient, much less cut her quaking flesh. The physician had a few inches on him, but Elisha could have knocked him down like a scarecrow. “You know why.”

“Because you impugn my wisdom at every turn, even to abducting a woman from the hospital I oversee. That is the only explanation I can find for you, a barber, to ignore the mandate not only of myself, but of the great physicians since the time of Hippocrates himself.”

“That’s a load of horse shit.” He turned away, and found the captain and Lucretia exchanging a confused look.

“Maybe one of you’d better explain to me,” the captain suggested, his fists planted on his hips. “Or is this part of the famous duel between doctors and barbers?”

“Legends to the contrary,” Elisha began, “there’s only one reason to cut open a woman to get at her child, and that’s to lay them down in separate graves. Not in living memory has a woman survived such an operation.” Elisha thrust his finger at the physician. “And the only reason he would advise it is that the life of one whore means nothing to him.”

“Oh, come now, Barber, are you saying that even these miraculous hands of yours could not turn the operation to good effect? And without such barbarity?” The physician let out a little cackle. “One might imagine you a witch, carving up a child for the rites of the full moon. Willfully shedding its innocent blood to serve your evil ends.”

Elisha lunged forward with a clanking of chains, stopping short as Lucius instinctively scrambled to escape him, white suddenly glinting in the doctor’s cold eyes.

While the physician slapped his hat away from his face, and the captain

looked back and forth between them, Elisha declared, "Murderer I may be, but witch I am none, and you shall find no evidence to support it."

Lucius flicked dust from his sleeves, concentrating on them while his breath still gasped a little. "If you continue to be hostile toward me, then I may rescind the offer I was to make. But perhaps your life is not worthy of my attention after all, no matter what your repugnant friends beseech of me."

"Now you're getting to the point, sir," Elisha shot back. "So tell me what you want and have done; I don't think any here believes you have my interests in mind."

"Elisha, please," Lucretia said beside him. "If you come before the peers, how shall they judge you but guilty? Please hear him out."

Folding his arms with a rattle of chain, Elisha nodded. If they judged him guilty, it would be the physician's testimony that swayed them. The chattering churl had him, and the smug little smile that played about his lips showed he knew it only too well.

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