

TALES FROM RAMYN

The Street Urchin

by Mikko Tirkkonen

<http://www.lilwolf.biz/>

Released under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

Maggots swarmed over the hunk of meat.

Julius brushed most of them off before leaning in to sniff. He let out a disappointed sigh and let the meat fall down back into the wooden box. He reached in and rummaged through the dry leaves.

It was early evening so there was still some sunlight coming over the horizon, letting him see well enough to decide what was edible and what wasn't. He ran the risk of getting caught, but with no other source of light there was no choice. Technically he was trespassing. He'd climbed the wall surrounding the garden and went to the compost. It wasn't a nobles manor, but one of the richer merchants on the common layer of the city. There were only a few trees there and most of the space was taken up by the bench arrangement in the middle of it all.

But it was still a walled garden and Julius had no business being there.

He spotted a piece of cheese and pulled it out. There was some mould on it. He reached into the pocket of his tattered trousers and pulled out a knife. No matter how poor you were, if you lived on the streets of Ramyn, you wound up getting a knife one way or the other.

Julius had found it better to have one in his own hand instead of having one stuck into his gut.

He started peeling off the mouldy crust and was pleased to find it didn't run deep. A chunk of cheese half the size of his fist was left after he was done. He took a tentative taste of it. It tasted like sweat soaked socks, but he couldn't afford to be picky.

He slipped the remaining cheese into the same pocket with the knife and searched the box some more. To his disappointment there was nothing more there. It was usually a good place for leftovers. While the merchant wasn't the wealthiest of the lot, he had an appreciation for food and as a consequence there was usually plenty thrown out after large parties and even the more private dinners.

"Maybe he's travelling," Julius muttered to himself and closed the box, making certain not to leave behind a mess. They might tolerate him dropping by to eat some leftovers, but if he started making a mess they would certainly take measures to prevent him from returning. It was courteous to keep things tidy.

Julius climbed on the box and jumped. His hands reached the top of the wall and got a good grip. With no small amount of effort he pulled himself up on top of it and looked both ways down the street beyond.

It was empty, so he dropped down onto the barrel he'd rolled there. He moved the barrel back into its hiding place on a small alley. It wasn't much of a hiding place for it, but so far no one had moved it.

Julius gave the sky a look. The horizon was painted red. He figured it wouldn't be more than half an hour before it would be dark. The sun set surprisingly quickly. A lone transport disc streaked up in the sky and disappeared in the black hole. Some nobles servants making a late return to their masters manor.

The boy started down the street. There was no point looking up longingly. He'd never be able to get up there. The merchants garden was the closest he'd ever get to riches.

What little he could remember, he'd had a decent life before. Parents who loved him and who worked hard. They hadn't been rich – his father a simple handyman and mother a seamstress – but they'd had a home and food on the table. It hadn't been a bad life at all. But then his father had gotten ill. It hadn't taken long for the disease to wither him into nothing more than a skeleton. There was nothing the healers could do.

The same disease had gotten his mother mere months later.

Julius had been thrown to the streets. It had been hard for someone as young as him. Most his age would have ended up dead, but Julius had a sharp mind and he was a quick learner. He'd avoided the gangs and the adults looking for children to exploit. The city guard had chased him more than once for stealing from a market stand, but so far he'd managed to avoid even them.

He was a lone wolf among countless sheep.

Going from the wealthier part of city towards the centre took some time and it was dark before he even got there. Lamps were lit and those rushing home late walked past him, paying no attention to his ragged appearance. Why would they? They didn't even see him walking there.

He looked up at the walkways above and sighed.

His old home had been on the top floor of a tall building. The view from the single window had been one of the best things about it. You could see the river running past the city walls, the ships sailing on it, moving to dock. It had been an endless source of delight for a young boy.

Noise from an alley caught his attention. Against his better judgement, he slipped into the darkness and towards the sound. All his senses were screaming it was a bad idea. Noises from a dark alley never meant anything good. Going to investigate was a sure way to end up dead. He didn't need to go in far to make sense of the words.

“What did you do?” demanded a rough voice.

“She was coming around so I clubbed her again,” replied an equally rough voice.

Clubbers.

Julius stopped right then and there. While they probably wouldn't bother with someone like him, there was no reason to take the chance. Clubbers looked for something exotic they could sell as a slave for some rich noble, not a half-starving human boy.

“She was an elf before you did that,” said the first voice pointedly.

“I swear I didn't hit her *that* hard,” said the other voice, defensively.

“What are we supposed to do with a human?”

There was a moment of silence.

“She is still pretty,” said the second voice.

Julius decided he'd heard enough and slowly backed away from the alley. He didn't want to know what the men would do to her. Death was likely – at least after they'd had their fun – but there was nothing he could do to stop that. Maybe they'd end up selling her to someone. Still, poor luck for the woman.

He hastened his steps to get away from the alley quicker. He dug out the cheese from his pocket and took a bite. It would tide him through the night, but tomorrow he'd need to find something more. It seemed unlikely the merchants compost would be offering anything better then.

There was always the option of stealing from the market, but it was risky, especially as of late. The city guard had stepped up their patrols during the day

in response to merchants complaints. They'd go back to their usual lax selves after a while, but for now the risk was too high.

Begging was unreliable. You might spend the entire day doing it and get nothing. Then you'd be starving with nothing to show for a days worth of effort. The docks had never been a good place to try and get some food. While there were fishermen there and ships from all parts of the world, the sailors were more vigilant than the city guard. If they caught you they just might put you to work on their ship instead of sending you off to prison. Then it would be questionable if you'd ever see the city again.

Another bite of cheese offended his sense of taste.

He wasn't much of a pickpocket, but that seemed to be the only viable option left for him. He had the knife and it was sharp enough to cut through any strap holding a pouch. The problem would be picking the right target and the right time.

Crowds had their benefits. Easy enough to disappear. At the same time they posed a threat as some good intending passer-by might grab him and stop his escape in its tracks.

With worries like that Julius continued to walk the street. Not many people were still out and about and those that were seemed to be mostly drunk or either in a hurry to get home. Robbing someone drunk sounded easy enough, but would they have much money on them?

Julius ate the last of the cheese.

At least someone drunk would not be able to catch him. Even if they only had a few copper coins that would be enough to get some stale bread. It would let him go another day without feeling utterly powerless.

He started to look at people with a different eye. He passed the slightly tipsy types. They were too vigilant still for his liking. Those rushing home were right out which left him with few options. It was surprisingly hard to spot someone wasted enough to be worth a try. They needed to have their coin pouch out in the open too and a great many seemed to have left theirs either at the tavern or had it stashed in a safe place.

Two men staggered by, supporting each other, trying to sing a song the bard

had performed at what ever tavern they were coming from. They fumbled with half the words and sang off note, making it a performance no one should have been exposed to. They were plenty drunk, but there were two of them.

Too much risk, Julius decided.

He continued walking and spotted a promising looking figure. The man was old and staggered like he'd fall any second now and sleep until morning without any perception of the world around him. He had a coin pouch strapped to his waist. A piece of rope was all that was keeping it from dropping.

Julius observed him for some time. He was old which bode well. Not much strength for chasing in someone like him. The grey beard and hair were enough to tell as much.

He grabbed hold of the knife in his pocket and looked around. The street was empty save for the two of them. The lamp lighters had already passed the street, giving enough light to see what you were doing. It was late enough the the city guard made infrequent patrols. Most of them would be huddled up in their guard posts, playing dice and drinking ale in moderation.

Night watch was not a high priority for them. No merchants to put pressure on you and there hadn't been any significant robberies as of late.

When you lived on the streets it paid to know such things.

Julius followed the man for a bit more before making his move. He closed the distance to the staggering man and pulled out the knife. With his other hand he gently grabbed the pouch. He was pleased to note there was some heft to it. He took the knife to the rope holding it and cut it.

"Eh, what's going on there?" asked the man and glanced down to his side.

The rope snapped.

Julius grabbed the pouch and started off. He didn't look back. It was never a good idea. Might make you trip or run into something. He grinned as the first small alley presented itself. He ducked into it.

And that's where his escape came to a halt.

No matter how hard he tried his feet wouldn't move. Something pressed against his chest and every other part of his body, making it impossible to move anything but his eyes. Panic set in. There was only one group of people who could

do something like that.

“Ah, there you are,” came the voice of his victim. The man walked around him and stepped in front of him. “You know stealing from a wizard is a very bad idea.”

A wizard!

What rotten luck. Of all the people on the street he had to pick one of them. And now that he looked at his captor, he wasn't drunk at all. He'd been playing it all along. To what end?

“Well, you're lucky it was me you tried to rob. Someone else might have burned you alive already,” said the man and made a small motion with his hand. Julius could feel the pressure relieve around his mouth. The man reached and grabbed his coin pouch from his hand.

“Why did you pick me?” the man asked. “It's all right. You can talk now.”

“You looked drunk enough,” replied Julius. “And old enough that you couldn't catch up even if you gave chase.”

The man nodded. “Very thorough. You've thought things through. Very sensible for someone your age.”

“I missed you being a wizard,” said Julius. Had there been any clue? He had a staff with him for support, but that could have been any old man. There was nothing remarkable about it.

“I wouldn't be Skander Tezokian if a kid like you could spot I'm a wizard while in disguise.”

A shiver ran down Julius' spine. The master of one of the Towers of magic. While his reputation was of a good natured man when it came to most things, he was a powerful man in more ways than one and he had just tried to steal from him. Robbing a noble would have been a lesser mistake.

Skander gave him a reassuring smile. “Tell me, why did you try and steal from me?”

Julius snorted. “Do you need to ask? Just look at me. Do I look like someone who gets to enjoy a steady meal?”

“So it was desperation? Hunger?”

“What else?”

“There are people who do it because they like it,” said Skander and eyed him. “I wanted to make sure you were not one of those types.”

“Why do you care?” asked Julius. What did it matter to the victim why someone stole from them? The end result was the same. He knew it was wrong, but given the choice between dying of hunger and doing the wrong thing, the choice was not that hard.

“If you were the type who enjoyed it I wouldn't make this offer to you,” said Skander.

“What offer?” Julius felt a small glimmer of hope. Maybe the wizard would let him go without calling the city guard. Or something worse.

“How would you like to work for me?”

“Doing what?” Julius was suspicious. People didn't offer you a job after you'd tried to rob them. There had to be something fishy about it.

“Delivering messages now and then. Keeping an ear out. A boy like you hears all sorts of things on the streets,” said Skander. “Things I wouldn't hope to hear otherwise.”

“I hear things,” Julius admitted cautiously.

“Then you will accept my offer?” asked Skander. “A steady income to keep you fed.”

It seemed too good to be true, but if saying yes meant getting out of trouble then there was no reason not to. He could always run away after the fact. “I'll work for you, provided it's not too dangerous.”

“Oh no. Not dangerous,” Skander assured and waved a hand. The boy was released from the forces holding him in place. The wizard went for his pouch and pulled out a gold coin. “Consider this your first payment.”

Julius couldn't take his eyes off the coin. It was more money than he'd seen in a long time. He'd be able to live off it for weeks if spent wisely.

“But first you must prove you're worth it,” said Skander and closed his fist around the coin.

“What do you want?” asked Julius, his eyes fixed on the clenched hand.

“What do you know about Jeremiah Lauhger?”

Julius felt the blood escape his face. “I steer well clear of his kind.”

Ramyn wasn't a city of high crime, but there were still some figures in the underground that had split it up into their territories. Jeremiah was one of those people. He was a favourite among the Clubbers. Word was he could sell just about anything brought to him and the prices he paid were fair. Word also was he did not hesitate to kill anyone who tried to cross him over. More than one body had been discovered quite publicly to get that message across.

"You must have heard something," said Skander. "Who he is, what he looks like, where he can be found."

"Who he is? He's Jeremiah," said Julius and shrugged his shoulders now that he could.

Skander shook his head. "I believe it is only a fake name. Few have actually seen him."

That was news for Julius, but then he didn't really know that much about the man. He wasn't the sort you wanted to know. "Look, I'm just a street kid. I do my best to keep away from guys like Jeremiah. You tend to live longer that way."

Skander looked disappointed, but opened up his fist and tossed the coin to Julius. "Keep your ears open for anything about him. Come and tell me what you find out."

"Where do you suppose I'll come and share the information with you?" asked Julius.

"The Bull's Head," replied Skander. "I'm there for a while almost every evening."

Julius could not help but think he wasn't the only one working for the old man. "All right. I'll see what I can find out." Keeping your ears open and asking a few questions couldn't be that dangerous.

"And don't think about running away from this," said Skander. "You've given me your word that you will work for me and I am very good at finding people."

His tone of voice was enough to convince Julius that running away was not an option. "I'll keep my ears open," Julius promised.

Skander smiled briefly before taking hold of his staff. "Meet me a day from now." With that the wizard walked back to the bigger street and put on his drunken façade once more.

Julius watched him disappear. He wondered what he had been dragged into. The gold coin in his hand felt reassuringly heavy, but was it enough to compensate for what he'd have to do?

Only time would tell.