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The face was long and angular, the dark eyes calm. He was conditioned to display only what was required — no more, no less; thus there could be no betrayal of the inner man, the one Lorth had vowed never again to reveal. He was shrouded with more than the dark hood that framed his jawline and concealed his long hair. There was a reason he had secluded himself behind the rough-hewn walls of the Portingale Fort. And today was not one of them.

Heat from a thousand candles filled the catacombs as one by one, members of the Onton Circle took their seats on the High Ruins. Desks carved from the mealy wood of the sertine trees seemed to bend and shift in the changing light; meanwhile, the five who would sit in judgement turned their attention to the center chair, a carved high-back with scroll arms and the Seal of Truth stamped upon its rest. It was Lorth's turn to bear witness.

Proff Juniper was the first to speak. Although counting age and observing dates was shunned by the Portingale monks, it was determined that Juniper was eldest by his slight stoop and stringy hair, white as the snow banks of Grunderland.

“This sacred meeting of the Onton Circle is called to order,” he pounded a gavel. “May all present attest that the oath has been honored and that these proceedings are in compliance with our creed.”

“Here, here,” the Circle replied.

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“We are gathered this evening to discuss a breach. Proff Lorth shall assume the chair as witness to and testifier of said concerns, perpetrated by one, Grunt Slen, currently under his guardianship.” Juniper cleared his throat and beckoned. “Proff Lorth? Pray, take your place.”

Lorth bowed and obeyed. His demureness was not a shortcoming. His was often the voice of dissent on the Circle. How many times had he pleaded for the grunts, in word or deed, only to be overridden by a majority vote? Still, this matter brought him personal pain.

“Proff Lorth,” Proff Ringsky began. The highly polished crown of his bald head was smooth as the medicine ball used for physical training. How this figured into age determination, Lorth could only imagine; but Grunt Slen had jokingly referred to Ringsky as the “Round One.” And inside — *yes, inside* — he could afford a chuckle. Ringsky was indeed round...in the head. “This is not the first time you have stepped down from your seat as a member of this honorable circle. Am I correct?”

“Yes, Proff Ringsky.”

“And always you have assured us that a meeting of this sort would never occur again.”

“That is true.”

Ringsky flashed his palms heavenward before falling back into his chair. “Well, then, why, Proff Lorth, are we here?”

“Perhaps...you could tell me, Proff Ringsky.”

A murmur went through the Circle.

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“Me? Tell you? You are the guardian of this young man. Have you offered him no guidance? His determination to defy the rules of Portingale have gone too far! Too far!”

The last pronouncement was made with as much zest as the old seer could muster. Still, it ended with a rattle that left a poor taste in the mouths of the remaining five.

“What...has he done?” Lorth could not mask his confusion.

Proff Tanden reached within his robe to produce a weapon. It hit the serfine desk with a deafening thud. Near as Lorth could tell, it was a firearm and his stomach took a dive.

“Proff Lorth, need I inform you that Grunt Slen hid this in a remote location outside of the Fort? Cleverly concealed, mind you, in sacred cloth and buried beside a truffin tree.”

Lorth was shaken, yet he maintained a stoic countenance. Far be it from him to let the other members watch him founder. “Do you know for a fact that it was Slen who buried this weapon? Was he seen doing so? Was he...”

“Yes,” Juniper interjected. “Caught in the act by a witness — a fellow grunt. With respect to our rules, we shall keep his name out of it.”

Tanden wagged a finger. “That is not all. Grunt Slen was seen target shooting with this weapon on two occasions.”

“Target shooting? Wouldn’t we have heard this? And where did he get the ammunition?”

Again Tanden produced; this time, it was a small wooden box filled with more bullets than Lorth cared to see.