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Should a dragon engulf Yunting Town within the moist, breathing darkness of his massive gullet, he would produce no greater stench than those vile emanations from back alleys and byways that perpetually permeated the dry air and roiled the basin. Thosan Desert offered scant for a man to build on — though the monks at Portingale made a fine show — and not a tittle of green appeared until the borders of Coterie, where the great reds formed the Woodland of Two Mirrors.

It was a thirsty business, settling wastelands; merchants bartered for kegs of ale and water, while unfortunates (the entire town being of this stock) labored to craft or sew or build. One such cast-off, a collector, represented the worst Yunting had to offer. Free-range hogsquallas rooting for scraps bore a far more pleasant aroma — and certainly a brighter shade of clean, if that word was applicable.

However, there was more to Qirtz than appearances suggested. *And his appearance suggested much.* Pitchy hair tufted from a raggedy, tweed chullo that fell over his ears. Even his stubble stagnated, for he was never clean-shaven nor fully bearded, and his eyes, like two glass marbles of the dirtiest hue, darted back and forth in a face that had seen neither sun — thanks to the chullo — nor food in plenty. Most had written Qirtz off as a busybody and a scoundrel. Truth told, he resembled a turtle, chugging about with a stoop, an oversized coat, and a neck that jutted several inches out rather than up.

“Nothing of importance can be accomplished by such,” so said the town. At which Qirtz managed a self-satisfied grin, splitting wretched lips

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over thrice-wretched teeth — two black, two missing, all stained. He was about his master's business...and then some.

Kenken Street came up fast: a strip of dirt and weeds and straw houses plastered with mud. Yuntites were not as resourceful as the Ontons. There were holes in their roofs and giant holes for windows and holes in the ground and cut from their bread. Manure served for burning, courtesy of the hogsquallas who were native herbivores, and what little vegetables they did manage to cook were traded at market at least ten times a year.

History records that speculators founded Yunting when they mined the magical water pits once abundant and free-flowing. But the land dried up and they withdrew their equipment, leaving out-of-workers to eke an existence for themselves and their families. The bright ones, those insightful and wise, would hitch on the merchant wagons to escape, with some parents so desperate, they traded their own children. But it was known to all outside that merchants were slavers; to them, no life had value. Quirtz, alone, had been responsible for the bondage of a dozen or more urchins and he boasted a fist-sized oilskin of dangbloots to prove it. But as it is with greedy men, ten bloots or a thousand are never enough. So he shuffled through the street, and Kenken in particular, for it housed the lowest-hanging fruit imaginable — the poorest of Yunting's poor.

Quirtz was more clever than most allowed, even though his craftiness was hindered by muck-ups or general laziness. He knew that misery and starvation would drive some to sell their soul; and while he only wanted pocketbooks, anything deeper meant that he could wring a little harder and a few more bloots might pop out. So every month, on the same day, at the stroke of midnight, he gathered his coat and knocked on every back door and

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cottage inn, collecting his dues. Of this, his master had no concern or dealings. Quirtz took personal pleasure in watching men crawl.

Smack! Smack! With an open palm, he banged the wood knocker of Toddie Gustafson. Her house protested with a creak and a rattle and a refusal to budge. *Smack!* A large, dove-tailed cat poked his head from a garbage can and growled. Quirtz growled back — a most frightening venture — and the poor creature streaked down the alley, tail between its legs.

“Open the door, ya bloody woman! Quirtz is callin’ on ya! Open the bloody door!” With a cry, he drew back to find a sizable splinter lodged in his flesh. Quirtz plucked it out as Toddie’s head emerged from a side window. Her nightcap had been thrown on in haste and her stiff gray hair shot out like stale husks from a dried-up corn.

“Harassin’ me in my sleep, are ya?” she shouted. Toddie was no pushover and it appeared Quirtz bit off more than he could chew. But he was too ignorant to notice. Not that he was outright stupid. But when it came to common sense...well, he was not the brightest wick on the candle. “What do ya want, ya piece of scum?”

“My money! Tell yer husband to cough it up or face the consequences!”

“Consequences? What are ya talkin’ about? You ain’t in no place to be castin’ threats! Just cause ya run errands for the Great Spartzka when he claps his hands and calls yer name, doesn’t mean ya can tell us how high to jump!” She bent down and Quirtz thought she had split. But her head reappeared and her hair rattled. “Ya want yer money? Go next door to the potter’s! He owes ya a boot-full of bloots now, doesn’t he?”