Tristin Gets Rich

-Scott Kelley 10/21/2024

Prologue

Just outside the Village of Hallowbrook.

10th Marpenoth, "Leaffall," the tenth month, 1490 DR

Small towns make me uncomfortable. Being born and raised in the largest city in Faerun may have skewed my perceptions of community somewhat. Small towns, villages, hamlets, what have you, have a reputation for bucolic bliss, a folksy down-to-earthness that gets romanticized beyond reason. I've found them to be insular, samey, small-minded, and isolationist. I admit that my experience may differ from the popular vision due to my… *incompatible* demeanor. Few things can compel me to abandon the safety and comfort of Waterdeep's walls: a direct order from my superior officer or an intriguing mystery. This day, it was the latter.

A direct missive from the town's lone lawman, a retired Watchman with whom I served briefly a decade ago, imploring me for assistance in solving the disappearance of the proprietor of the local tavern, found itself to me two days ago. I began the journey the very next morning.

As he described it, the tavernkeep had come into some money, began acting erratically, and then disappeared. The town's lawman suspected foul play. The motive was obvious. What was interesting was the aftermath. No one soon left, no strangers in town had been reported around the time of the disappearance, and no one had shown even a hint of sudden windfall. I may know little of smalltown life, but I do know that news, and its promiscuous little sister, gossip, travel fast. Secrets are hard to keep in a village. Conspiracies, however, fester like disease.

Chapter 1

The roadside, a few miles outside of the Village of Hallowbrook.

The road was pleasant enough, the cool autumn air rich with the smells of leaf fall and loamy dampness. Trees grew over the road, providing a kaleidoscopic tunnel of intermittent colors and golden sun shafts. The packed dirt surface was not muddy, but just damp enough to muffle the hoofsteps of my steed into a dreamy, mesmerizing rhythm. I'm not one to generally let their guard down while in 'the wilds', but I allowed myself a contented sigh and moment to close my eyes in peace. Cool, clean air filled my lungs, the stench of Waterdeep's bay miles away.

Opening my eyes again, I saw a figure, on horseback, approaching down the road. They were at a hurried trot. Not in a panic, but certainly in a hurry. I narrowed my eyes and scanned my surroundings. Nothing seemed out of sorts. I focused on the traveler. Male, likely human, older. Broad hat, and some sort of poncho. Packed saddle bags and camping equipment. A merchant, perhaps a courier, but that's usually a younger man's game. His eyes were wide and suspicious, almost accusatory. A long, grey mustache framed his leathery face.

"Hail, sir!" I called out, raising my hand in greeting. I wore my City Watch badge prominently on my coat lapel.

"If yer planning on stopping in Hallowbrook, don't. Best to just keep going to Womford."

We slowed our horses as we approached one another.

"Oh? What news of Hallowbrook?"

"Tis cursed... or haunted! Saw it with my own eyes! Unnatural things there. The people are silent and won't even acknowledge the happenings right in front of their faces! Damn fools." He shook his head sagely.

"Happenings, eh? What sort of happenings, praytell?" I pulled the reigns to steady my horse. She was getting antsy.

"I bet something crawled out the ruins there. My grandpappy once told me that there used to be a Temple of Orcus there! Gods know what lurking down in that hole, or what the fools woke up. Ghosts! Shades! Lurkers in darkness!"

I raised an eyebrow.

"Fine, don't believe me! When your soul gets snatched down to the Nine Hells, you'll remember what ol' Jake told ya!" He glanced me up and down, spat onto the ground, and clicked his heels. His horse lurched forward. He continued to mutter to himself as he left earshot.

I couldn't help but watch him go, with only my look of irritated skepticism following him. Rolling my eyes, I adjusted by dark red scarf and continued my journey.

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The woods continued to thin and clear. Soon, the babbling of a brook announced its presence and ran alongside the road. A neat hedgerow ran along the other side of the path. The road widened and became more rutted

under a wooden sign. “Welcome to the village of Hallowbrook – “. Directly underneath, “Temple of Corellon Larethian” was written in crude Elven script, having been traced over countless times by non-Elven hands. A low, ivy-covered stone wall stretched to my left and right. The stream continued happily under the grated wall into the village. I urged my mare onward unto the breach.

I rode slowly and carefully into town. The rustic buildings were low and comfortable, well settled into the landscape. Moss covered cobblestone foundations supported timber and beam constructions. Old, gnarled oak trees lined and shaded the packed dirt streets. Cardinals and yellow finches chirped and sang as they flitted among the gold, orange, and red leaves, little immortal phoenixes dancing in the flames. Squirrels chittered and chased one another across the mossy, wooden roof tiles as they prepared for winter. Nature, in her glory, remained unconcerned, or more likely oblivious, to the inconsequential foibles of we mortals.

We mortals, however, had nothing better to do than to cast baleful stares at the stranger that now rode amongst them. Men and women paused their daily activities to glance at me, a mix of disdain, confusion, and disapproval reflected in their eyes. Children, less concerned, played and chased one another, at least until admonished and pulled close by their adults. I passed homes, a smith, a tanner, a tailor, stables, and a few abandoned buildings before I made it to the center of town. The square, such as it was, consisted of a half-constructed fountain statue, surrounded by an ancient-looking plaza. Between the patches of overgrown grass and dirt, the smoothed cobblestones were arranged in a beautiful spiral pattern. Glancing around, I saw that the buildings here were built on, around, and utilizing, the graceful carved stone pillars and buttresses of an ancient elven structure. The human-crafted buildings of local timber were so well integrated that I had not immediately noticed the architectural curiosity.

Leaning against a wooden column on the raised, covered porch of the building to my left was a slight, hunched, feminine figure. A frayed and patched long coat hung from her frame like a drape. It made her look hollow, like a specter haunting the combination townhall, courthouse, and jail.

“Well, as I live and breathe! Young Master Tristin outside the boutiques and paved streets of the big city!”

“It’s good to see you, too, Margarite.” I smiled at her despite myself. Age had given the hardnosed old Watchman a sense of humor. I swung off my horse, wincing in soreness as I landed. I tied off my horse, slid the ebony walking cane from my pack and stepped up the plank stairs to meet her. She raised her arms in a welcoming hug. Although a little surprised by the gesture, I did not hesitate to reciprocate. She was as slight and frail as she looked, a whisp of her former self. Though not a tall woman, she had been, some years ago, quite robust. She had easily handled the rigors of patrolling the streets of Waterdeep, or at least gave the appearance thereof. She had proven herself years before I joined the Watch; I had only known her as a competent and respected, if rowdy, Watchman.

She looked up at me, her grey eyes clear and sharp. “Come on in! I’ll fill you in on the case.” I smiled and nodded my head. Still *mostly* all business. The heavy door creaked open on rough-hewn iron hinges, revealing an equally rustic interior. Oil lamps and candles provided a warm glow, accenting the aroma of some sort of spiced tea, happily bubbling inside a small iron pot suspended over the small fireplace. She gestured me towards a worn table. I took a seat on the wicker stool and demurely clasped my hands, resting them next to the provided porcelain teacup. She seemed to glide through the room, effortless and silent, body ephemeral under her longcoat and shawl. She served the tea and sat across from me.

“Damn, it’s good to see you“, she enthused one more time, squeezing my hand. She looked at me as if I were a long-missed relative. I found it rather touching. Sentimentality out of the way, she shifted her demeanor. The Margarite I knew years ago steadily emerged from the doting old woman seated across from me.

“What’s with the…” She gestured towards my cane.

I shook my head and smiled innocently. “Just a temporary contrivance. Nothing to be concerned about.”

She nodded empathetically but stole a final glance at it before moving on, clearly unconvinced.

“There’s something not right in this village, Tristin.”

“So I’ve heard”, I muttered under my breath. Hearing me, she shot me split-second look and then continued.

“DeMarcus, the owner of the tavern, has gone missing. Just up and disappeared about five days ago.” Reading my expression, she continued. “Might be foul play, can’t rule it out. Hells, can’t rule out monster attack. Been a while since something like has happened in these parts, but it ain’t unheard of. The woods get thick north and east of here.”

She sighed and looked at me wearily. “It’s complicated, Tristin. Ol’ Marc wasn’t exactly loved in town. He, uh… he had come into some money and I’m worried someone in town may have taken upon themselves to relieve him of it.” *Conspiracies indeed*, I thought.

“Do you have any suspects? At least a top three?”

“More like a top three dozen. He runs... ran? the tavern, which was also the general store, mind, and ran it like it was the royal treasury. A stingier, more intractable man I’ve not met. Never a copper of credit nor charity from the old grump. You know he asked me out one time? I almost arrested him for solicitation!” Her laugh was brittle but heartfelt. “Just about everyone has a reason to dislike the goat. I can easily imagine someone deciding that they deserved the rights to his wealth… recompense for the years of copper-pinching.”

“You seem pretty convinced of motive. Can you think of any other likely scenario? Accident? Did he hunt? Hike? Explore the ruins, maybe?”

“Oh, not you too, boy.” She rolled her eyes at me. “There hasn’t been anything in them ruins for weeks.”

I nearly snorted my tea, “*Weeks*?”

“Yeah. Well, *definitely* not for weeks, since them adventurers just absolutely cleaned it out. They drug out bags and bags of stuff. Statues, weapons, and coins, I assume. They didn’t stick around long in town. Spent the night in Marc’s tavern, bought some stuff there, went a’delving for a few days and emerged loaded like pack mules. I kept an eye on them, but they didn’t make any trouble in town, so I let them to their business. Haven’t seen ‘em since.”

She thought for moment and concluded, “They didn’t seem to the sort to leave anything alive, or *animate*, behind.”

Adventurers. As if this situation needed any more complication. That wouldn't be the last of their involvement in this whole sordid affair, I was sure it.

"Motive, means, and opportunity. You drilled those into me, Margie. What's next?"

"Shame he ain't just plain dead, at least then we'd have a body to examine! We'd know where he is! This being a missn' person case, means no easy-to-get means. I do have a lead for you with opportunity, though: the last person to see him." She smiled at me, her eyes glittering with excitement. "I do miss a good murder!"

She continued, "Harold the Smith. Talked to ol' Marc the night before he disappeared. Apparently, he and Marc were seen having a *heated* conversation inside the general store half of the Cor's Brow. Esmer the seamstress said she saw Harry leave in a mighty big huff, red-faced and all. Now, being the smith, you can imagine Harry ain't one to be ignored."

"I bet not, so I shan't." I finished my tea and stood. "Looks like it's time to start putting some irons into this fire."

Chapter 2

The mid-Autumn afternoon sun was already getting low in the sky by the time I made my way towards the smithy. The shadows were long and cool, but the canopy still glowed with the warm, stained-glass patterns of nature's cyclical glory. Despite myself, I grinned after inhaling a breath of clean, fresh, country air. Perhaps the occasional lack of harbor- and sewage-stench could be welcomed. The desire for a cup of hot, mulled wine to warm my hands and cockles suddenly crossed my mind. Just as suddenly, the realization that this village likely lacked such luxury chased the thought away.

The ringing of the anvil and the exhalations of a furnace bellows could be heard long before I arrived at the base of sturdy stairs that lead to the covered forge. The forge area was connected to a small, two-story building of stacked stone. It appeared that the raised forge area connected to the upper floor, likely the shop, and the lower floor was the home. I looked up at the forge from the muddy flagstone path below. I waited a moment for the blacksmith to notice me. Leaning on my cane, I smiled warmly as he wearily set down his hammer and the glowing metal rod he was working. It seemed to be the early stages of a crowbar, or some similar tool.

"Stranger." He stated at me in a gruff Amnian accent. Like many smiths I had known, he kept his hair short-cropped but sported an impressive chestnut beard, tinged with copper. His nose was bulbous at the end, and he sported a wide, mottled burn scar on his left cheek that disappeared under his facial hair. It looked old and smooth with age; he likely received it as a child. His hazel eyes were unusually bright.

"Well met. Harold? My name is Tristin Fidellis, Investigator with the City Watch of Waterdeep."

"Aye. I heard you might be coming to town. Bit out of yer jurisdiction, aintcha?"

"Unfortunately, no. Waterdeep law does not cease at the city walls."

He grunted noncommittedly. "What can I do fer you, lawman?" Wiping his brow, he gestured me up the stairs.

I obliged, cane clacking on each stone step, and found the heat from the forge to be quite pleasant. "I'm investigating the disappearance of the tavernkeep, DeMarcus. From what I've been told, you were the last one to speak to him before he vanished." I raised my hands and splayed them both towards the coals, cane secured by my thumb against my palm.

"Maybe." He shrugged. "I don't mind his business or who he talks to... or when."

"Fair enough. What can you tell me about what you talked about in his store, after hours? And I remind you that I am here on official business."

Harold the Smith furrowed his brow in annoyance but responded. "Just some old debts. Debts that I now doubt will ever be repaid." He stopped and flatly met my gaze. The strong, silent type. Great.

I met his gaze and held it. I've danced this duet countless times… the bigger, more physically imposing individual is accustomed to not being questioned, not being called out. They're used to getting their way, by default, due to their stature. The primitive social order of 'might makes right' manifesting in even the most subtle or mundane of social interactions. Few things irritated me more.

I held his gaze, boring my stare into his soul. As expected, after a few moments he blinked and looked away, fiddling with some iron fittings on a nearby table. Right. Now that we've got that settled.

"What did you owe him, Harry? How much? He wasn't known for his charity or progressive terms of remediation. Seems like a good way of getting out of debt is to get rid of the lender" I raised an eyebrow at him.

He grabbed the glowing bar of iron from the forge and pointed it at me for emphasis. "Twasn't like that! HE owed ME." His voice raised to just under a yell. I instinctually formed my hand into a subtle casting position.

"Oh? For what exactly?" I said flatly as I continued to hold his gaze.

"That ain't none of yours."

"I'm afraid it is. And just so you're aware, I'm authorized to use the paralyzation spell that's at my disposal, should a suspect become… uncooperative. It would be unfortunate if, in your held state, you were to tip forward into the coals. I'm sure it would take me at least a few moments of considerable effort to pull you out, taking into account our… disparate physiques. The problem with spells that can hold a person is that you're quite conscious and aware for the duration. You feel everything… you just simply. Can. Not. Move. Quite frustrating if you find yourself in an *uncomfortable* position. You're not being *uncooperative*… are you, Harold?"

In the split second that his expression shifted, his eyes dilated, his nostrils flared ever so slightly, the color of his lips faded nearly imperceptibly, it related to me the saga of a lifetime of pain, regret, and fear swirling around the flames that he worked every day. I needn't know the details of how he acquired his burn scar; his own mind would dutifully remind him of the lurid details, given the proper opportunity. He shook the iron bar in his hand, then tossed it back into the flames. He then took a step away from the circular forge as he wiped his hands onto the soiled cloth tied to his leather apron. *Now* I had his undivided attention.

"No… No, I'm not. I don't know where he is and, honestly, I don't care. He can take his gold and choke on it."

"This gold; tell me about it." Follow the path. I placed both hands on my cane and leaned onto it, listening intently.

He slid a nearby wooden stool towards himself and sat. Leaning against the wooden table, he wiped his sweat-sheened face with the long, stained rag hanging from his belt and gathered his thoughts.

"I 'spose it starts with them accursed Elven ruins… every so often some group of adventurers shows up, delves in, and either comes out… or don't. This last group was special though. Quite a cast o' characters. One of 'em had a sword that flamed up when she talked to it. Damndest thing."

I nodded patiently. I had no reason to be in a hurry. DeMarcus wasn't going any more missing.

"Well, this group, when they came out, they did it with style. Heaps o' stuff. Never seen so much junk. They musta cleared it out. Happy as larks about it, too. One of them couldn't stop singing and pluckn' on his harp or whatever. Foppy bard type."

I didn't even try to repress my bemused smirk.

“Anyways, they bee-lined it to Marcus’. I wasn’t there, but I heard about the gobs o’ gold they dropped on him. More gold than this whole village has ever seen, all together. He was more than happy to rob ‘em blind and they were more than happy to pay his crazy prices. I hear that, on top of paying his mark up for some basic travel gear, they just ‘tipped’ him hundreds o’ gold, maybe thousands. Bloody fools.”

“You grew tired of waiting on him to repay you, so you decided to pay him a little visit, hm? Perhaps provide a little motivation for him to spend his windfall wisely?”

The smith sneered. “He don’t owe me *gold*… but that woulda been a kind gesture. Which is the sort he don’t give. Nah, I was trying to convince the bastard to *use* the gold, spend it! Use it to improve the village. Retire. Donate it. Anything, but sit on it like a shite dragon.”

The coals popped and hissed, sighing like a tired, offended man.

“If this isn’t about gold, then what IS it about?” I watched as the last of his resolve crumbled and dissolved like a sugar cube dropped into hot tea.

Physically deflating, he folded his thick, corded arms and leaned his head back against the table. “The sorry bastard wanted me to put in a good word for him to one of the farmer’s daughters… She and I grew up together and he was sweet on her. I told him to stop being such a bean counter to Esmer, the Seamstress, and we’d have a deal. I don’t know why he found every excuse to be a right prick to her, but I wanted it to stop. She don’t deserve it.

“So, at the Midsummer festival, I told Callie that ol’ DeMarcus wasn’t so bad and maybe she should go talk to him… or maybe even have a dance. And she did, Gods love her. And you know what *he* did? He blew it. He stammered and hawed and blurted out something so embarrassing that she practically ran away, red in the face. I don’t know what he said to her… she still won’t tell me.

“Of course, he blamed ME. He refused to uphold his end of the bargain and said that the town don’t deserve his good graces… as if he had ever *given* any.” The smith scoffed.

I nodded. “Why the concern for Esmer, specifically?”

He looked at me.

I recognized that dubious expression. “Oh. …Ah.”

Harold smirked and rolled his eyes. Obviously. Oh, the drama we busy ourselves with while on this mortal plane. I suddenly wanted to change the subject. I cleared my throat and continued.

“I’d like to know where you went after leaving the Brow.”

“Home.” He waved his hand vaguely to his left, towards the door that led into the shop.

“Can anyone confirm that?”

“No.”

“No one can confirm that you left the Cor’s Brow peacefully and went home?”

“Not that I bloody know of.”

Not a defensive or concrete denial, leaving some room to be wrong.

“I see.” I let my gaze fall around the area, lost in thought for a moment. “Well, then, I suppose I should speak to Esmer.”

Harold the Smith gave me directions to the seamstress’s home, for which I thanked him. I bid him farewell and made my way down the broad stairs to the road below. Halfway down the stairs, my cane suddenly slipped on the damp stone, and I awkwardly stumbled down the last few steps, barely catching myself from falling face first onto the cold ground. Embarrassing, but it could’ve been worse. The coals popped and cracked, mocking me. I refused to let myself glance back to see if Harold had noticed as I began to walk the winding path back to the village.

Chapter 3

The once-pleasant breeze had cooled to a goosebump-inducing gust as I walked towards the center of town. I pulled my collar up and adjusted my scarf. Torches, oil lamps, and even a few magical continuous cold-flames emerged from the evening's shaded porches and alcoves. I found myself strolling, instead of striding, to my destination; the quaint beauty of the village beguiling me. Was I really this enamored by a bucolic village? Was the symphonic silence so alluring? Was the twinkling of the evening lights so mesmerizing?

My reverie was severed by a massive creature suddenly bearing down on me. The beast's eyes bugged out in terror as it pumped its massive legs in time, pounding the ground with bone shattering force. I recognized this monster. It was MY monster, my horse! It slid around the corner of the lovely hut I was passing, its hooves barely retaining purchase on the wet-leaf covered path. I had less than a second to react. I threw myself to the right, my single thought coalescing around the hope that I had picked the correct direction. I had, but not nearly fast enough.

The panicked horse slammed into me, chest-first, and knocked me spinning into the shallow gully next to the path. I rolled a few times, trying to keep my arms and legs tucked, the breath knocked from my frame. Coming to a stop in the gutter, I coughed and gasped for breath. The pain was sharp and all-encompassing. Fighting to inhale was almost as excruciating as the sensation of suffocation… broken ribs, most likely. I unfurled myself, slowly, and laid on my back, arms aside and concentrated on not passing out from the pain.

In... slowly. Yes, it hurts. Out… slowly, yes, that hurts too, but it must be done. Ye Gods, I need to do it again? In… and out. And so on for around a minute. The darkness at the edge of my vision fading, I creakingly rolled over onto my knees and elbows and explored the notion of standing. The committee that is my mind and body protested. They calmly explained the situation of my shattered ribcage, in measured, reasonable bouts of pure agony. I attempted to overrule them, but they brought the gavel down and sentenced me to another set of painful, shallow breaths.

Enough of this. I cast a minor healing spell and felt several of my ribs slide back into place and knit together. Euphoria. I coughed and struggled to my feet. Glancing around, I spotted my cane and recovered it. I felt like I had been run over by a horse. It would take more powerful healing magic than I possessed to fully free me from this ache and bruising.

Nine Hells, where is that creature? I clambered out of the shallow ditch and peered down the path, into the encroaching velvet of evening. There, standing near that house's fence gate. I straightened myself as best I could and took a few tentative steps forward. No jolts of agony. I quickened my pace. I approached the still spooked animal carefully. I've never been one for animal husbandry, but I can appreciate a frightened individual in need of calming. I raised my hand slowly and approached the mare. Skittish, her eyes were still wide, but there was more than irrational fear in them... pain. What happened to you, girl?

I flanked the beast carefully, making sure she could still see me. Nice and easy. By this time, the stars had begun to glitter through the infinite darkness above and my elven-born darkvision had taken over my vision. Not as sharp as I see in daylight, but far better than a pure-blood Human would see. I scanned the stamping animal. There, on her left haunch… a mark. Cautiously, I stepped closer, unable to discern details in the darkness.

The horse whinnied and stamped. In the same motion, she aimed away from me and kicked, her powerful hind leg missing my skull by a few inches. All right, girl, all right. I stepped away, considering my options. I had never pondered if my beguiling magic would affect a beast such as this. I frowned, deciding that there was only one way to find out. I began to hum a softly rhythmic tune. In Bard College, I was taught the methods of casting magic through music, song, and even oration. I didn't need to keep a tome of magical formulations with me, as a wizard would, nor did I need to barter my soul for the privilege of being a proxy for some other entity, like a warlock. No, my magic was my own. It was crafted from my own will, my own talent, and my own sense of self. I sang out softly to the poor mare, calming its emotions. There are some feelings that are, apparently, universal. My magic caressed the creature's mind, seeking the source of her fear and pain and numbed it. In moments, she settled, nickering politely.

I tentatively stepped forward to pat her side. She gave me a perfunctory glance and went back to… doing whatever horses do with their interior lives. I slid my hand toward her haunch, towards the mark. A burn mark. From something narrow. About 3 inches long, and half an inch wide. The burn was slightly deeper on the narrow tip. Did someone brand my horse with a fireplace poker? The wound was not deep and not likely to fester, but I was not about to allow this animal to suffer the consequences of some ill-spirited villager. I used a bit more of my magic to heal her wound. Rudely, she didn't even offer so much as a 'thank you.'

I led her back to the hitching post in front of Margarite's and tied her off. Patting her again, I resumed my journey to Esmer the Seamstress.

Esmer the Seamstress's shop was easy enough to find; my nose located it before my eyes did. A warm, homey smell of lanolin, lavender sachets, and beeswax candles drifted from a low, timbered building tucked between the tanner's and a boarded-up storefront that had clearly given up on village life some seasons ago. A hand-lettered sign, ringed with embroidered flowers, swung gently above the door: *E.* ***Gladewell*** **-** *Fine Cloth* **&** *Notions.* A bell chimed cheerfully as I entered, entirely unaware of the day I'd had.

The shop's interior was a small miracle of organization. Bolts of dyed wool and linen stood in perfect chromatic rank along one wall, arranged with a rigor that would have shamed most Watch evidence lockers. Baskets of ribbon, spools of thread color-coded by shade, and rows of gleaming brass thimbles occupied shelves labeled in a neat, careful hand. A place for everything, I noted, with the small, involuntary satisfaction I reserve for well-run establishments and well-run interrogations.

"Just a moment, dearie, I'm elbow deep in a hem!" a bright voice called from behind a curtained doorway.

I lowered myself onto a low stool near the counter and immediately regretted it.

The yelp I suppressed was, I would like to think, dignified. I rose an inch, reached beneath myself, and extracted a small velvet pincushion, bristling with a dozen needles like an indignant hedgehog.

"Oh! Oh, gracious, I'm ever so sorry!" A halfling woman emerged, wiping her hands on her apron, dark curls escaping a kerchief. She couldn't have stood taller than my elbow, but she filled the room the way small, capable people often do. She looked young, vibrant, and rosy-cheeked, but her mode of speech was… older, matronly. "I don't know how that got there, I swear on the Mother's own needle I keep everything in its place…" She gestured, and I followed her gaze around the immaculate shelves. Evidently, she did.

“No harm done,” I said, setting the offending cushion on the counter with the solemnity of a man returning contraband. “Tristin Fidellis. Investigator, City Watch of Waterdeep.”

“Esmer Gladewell.” She dropped into a small, quick curtsy, more habit than deference. “You’ll be here about poor Marc, then. Margarite said you might come ’round.” Her expression shifted, some careful arrangement of concern and something else; irritation, perhaps, hastily tucked away like a spool returned to its drawer.

“I understand you saw him arguing with Harold the night he disappeared.”

“Oh, that.” She busied herself straightening a stack of folded linen that did not need straightening. “Harry does get himself worked up. All bluster, that man. Heart of gold, mind, but a temper like his own forge.”

“What were they arguing about?”

“Same as always, I expect. Marc’s prices.” She sighed, and something in it sounded older than her apparent years. “You know he’d special-order things for me… good silk, the fine silver-thread ribbon the ladies of the Ward wear, proper steel needles that don’t snap on the first stitch; always at a fair price, mind, when we agreed on it. But the moment the shipment came in, well. Funny how the price would’ve climbed, and funnier still how he’d shrug and say, ‘Where else are you going to buy it, Esmer? Two days to the next town with a proper tailor’s stock, and I hear Waterdeep’s worse.’” She gave a small, humorless laugh. “As if I hadn’t heard that particular tune a hundred times over. He wasn’t wrong, is the trouble of it.”

I considered this. A captive market is its own kind of tyranny, however small the kingdom.

“And Harold objected to this on your behalf.”

The faintest blush colored her cheeks, quickly waved away with a flick of her wrist. “Harry’s protective. That’s all it is. We’re… we get along, is all. Good friends.” She said it lightly, easily, the way one describes weather. I have interviewed enough witnesses, and broken enough hearts by proxy, to recognize the particular lightness of a lie one has told oneself so often it no longer feels like one. Harold the Smith, I suspected, would have described the arrangement with considerably more weight.

I decided, with some effort, not to pursue that particular thread. Some mysteries are better left to resolve themselves, badly, on their own time, without an Investigator’s boot through the door.

“After the argument, did you see where Harold went? Or Marc?”

“Harry stomped off home, same as always. Marc…” she paused, and for the first time, something like real unease crossed her face. “Marc just stood there in his doorway a good while after. Just... looking up at the old statue. I remember thinking it was queer. He never did care much for looking at anything he couldn’t sell.”

I filed that away with the same care she gave her thread. “Anything else unusual, this past tenday? Strange happenings, odd sightings?”

She hesitated, then leaned in as though the bolts of cloth might overhear. “Old Yanna who does the wash says she’s heard noises, up by the ruins. Lights, some nights, flickering green through the trees. Says it’s the elves come back to reclaim their temple.” She shrugged, though not entirely convincingly. “I don’t put much stock in it myself. But it’s all anyone’s talked about, besides Marc.”

Green lights. Noises. I thought of the crude Elven script beneath the village's welcome sign, traced over by generations of hands that couldn't read it, and of a mustachioed old fool on the road warning me of Orcus and open graves. Superstition has a way of compounding interest faster than any moneylender, DeMarcus included.

I thanked Esmer for her time, declined her flustered offer of a complimentary handkerchief (*hemmed myself, only take a moment*) and stepped back out into the gathering dusk. The Cor's Brow waited for me at the top of the square, its ancient stone shoulders catching the last amber light of the day.

Chapter 4

The Cor's Brow, Village of Hallowbrook.

Up close, the Cor's Brow, Corellon's Eyebrow, though I doubted a soul in the village still remembered the joke buried in its own name, was a stranger sight than its modest signage suggested. Ancient elven stonework, pale and fluted, rose from the earth in graceful, weathered arches, and around and atop the bones of this forgotten temple, the village's carpenters had raised a second skeleton of dark timber, arched to echo the stone below it, like the inverted hull of some beached ship. The two architectures did not so much cooperate as coexist, each too stubborn to yield to the other, and the result was, against all reasonable expectation, rather beautiful.

Looming beside the wide, covered porch, a colossal statue of Corellon Larethian gazed serenely out over the square, twenty feet of weathered marble, one shoulder rising nearly level with the balcony above the store's entrance — close enough, I noted, that a person of modest agility could step from balcony to stone shoulder without much trouble. I filed that away too.

The door was locked, but with a simple enough mechanism. It relented to my gentle touch, and lock picks, in mere few minutes. Small towns rarely bother with locks; they trust their gossip to do the work of a good deadbolt. DeMarcus did not seem to be as civic-minded.

Inside, Cor's Brow was, in the truest sense, a general store: general in the sense that it seemed to have opinions about, and inventory for, absolutely everything. Rope, tack, tallow candles, tinned goods, bolts of the same fine silk Esmer had described, a rack of cheap iron farming tools gone slightly rusty from disuse. A bowl of fruit sat forgotten on the counter, softening and browning at the edges, a small monument to five days of absence. I noted, with the particular interest of a man who has learned to notice absences as keenly as presences, that the shelf of travel goods, rope coils, grapple hooks, backpacks, waterskins, stood conspicuously bare. I recalled Harold's account of the adventuring party, who had apparently bought Marc out of every scrap of gear in the place on their way into the ruins. Not evidence of anything but a shrewd afternoon of business.

The till, when I tried it, was locked, and, when I coaxed it open with the same slim pick I'd once used on a set of dungeon manacles, in circumstances considerably less pleasant than this one, entirely empty. Not looted. *Emptied.* There is a particular kind of absence that speaks of haste, of a thief's ransacking, drawers upended and contents strewn. This was not that. This was the tidy, deliberate absence of a man clearing his own accounts.

The spiral stair to the upper floor groaned pleasantly beneath my cane as I climbed to the interior balcony — the one, I noted, that placed a person almost eye-level with Corellon's colossal stone shoulder. DeMarcus's bedroom lay beyond, spartan for a man of sudden fortune: a narrow bed, a washstand, a heavy iron safe in the corner, closed and, when tested, just as locked and just as empty as the till below. On the nightstand sat a single banana, yellow and unblemished, entirely at odds with the browning fruit bowl one floor down. Someone had been here. Recently. Within the day, perhaps less.

I crouched beside the nightstand, examining a curious scuff mark on its surface: a circle, five or six inches across, the wood beneath it darkened as though something had rested there, damp or oiled, for a very long time, set down and lifted and set down again in precisely the same spot, night after night. Too round for a teacup. Too

wide for a candlestick. A jar, perhaps. Or a small, well-loved coin chest. I turned the mark over in my mind the way I turn over an alibi: searching for the shape of the lie inside it.

Well, well, Marc. You clever, miserable bastard. You never left at all, did you.

Esmer's words needled at me… he'd stood in his doorway the night he vanished, staring up at the old statue like it meant something. Curious, I stepped back out onto the balcony to see what had held his attention so raptly, close enough now to Corellon's serene marble face that I stood nearly beneath the great carved chin, his shadow falling over me like a roof.

The realization arrived with the particular clarity that comes just before disaster, which ought to have warned me. It did not.

"**LEEEEAVE NOWWWW**," the statue bellowed, in a voice like grinding millstones, directly above my head, "**...LESS THE SPIRITS RISE FROM THE TOMB TO TAKE YOUUUUU.**"

I confess, with no great pride, that I startled rather badly. A sharp crack echoed directly overhead, stone against ancient, tired stone, and Corellon's serene marble head, dislodged from some centuries-stable perch by that final, ill-considered bellow, began its descent, straight down, straight at me.

I threw myself sideways in a decidedly undignified scramble, cane and dignity both abandoned to gravity, and struck the balcony floor hard enough to drive the breath from my lungs a second time that week. The head crashed down precisely where I'd been standing a heartbeat before, shattering the balcony rail to splinters, and one jagged edge of the god's serene marble eyebrow caught me across the cheek as it fell past; a burning line of pain that told me, with some authority, that I would be needing another healing word before the night was through.

I lay very still amid the wreckage of a divine eyebrow and my own poor judgment, blood warm against my jaw, and reflected, not for the first time this tenday, that I really ought to charge extra for jobs outside the city walls.

Chapter 5

I stumbled into Margarite's parlor perhaps twenty minutes later, my cheek hastily bound in a torn strip of my own shirt, my composure considerably more shattered than the wound beneath it.

"Gods below, Tristin, what happened to your-"

"I'm dropping the case, Margie."

She stared at me as though I'd announced I was joining a druidic circle. "You're *what.*"

"It's…" I allowed my voice the appropriate tremor. It was not, I should admit, entirely difficult to summon. "It's too dangerous. Whatever's out there, in those ruins… it's beyond a simple missing-persons matter. I'll not risk further injury chasing a ghost story into a demon's tomb. I'll leave at first light. Tonight, I think it best I not venture out at all." I glanced, with what I hoped read as genuine unease, toward the shuttered window and the deepening dark beyond it.

Margarite's expression cycled through confusion, disappointment, and something that looked uncomfortably close to pity, before settling into a flat, searching stare I remembered well from my earliest days on the Watch, the one she used to level at recruits she suspected of embellishing their reports.

"That don't sound like you at all," she said slowly.

"People change, Margie." I accepted the cup of tea she poured with badly-feigned gratitude, and took a long sip to hide my face. It was, I noted, absurdly, cloyingly sweet — sweeter than any tea Margarite had served me the night before, sweet enough that I nearly choked on it. Odd. I filed the observation away with the others, in the growing ledger of small, unexplained oddities that this village seemed intent on producing, and said nothing.

She didn't believe me. I could see it in the set of her jaw, the particular quality of her silence. But whatever else the years had worn from Margarite, they had not worn away her manners; she showed me to the guest room without further argument, wished me a safe journey home come morning, and left me to what she assumed, quite reasonably, was a coward's rest. It pained me to either lie to Margarite, or to lose her respect as a coward, but it might be worth it if the intended audience were convinced.

I waited until the house had settled into the particular quiet of a village asleep — no carriage wheels, no watch bells, only the wind and the distant, contented snore of my own horse in the yard — and then I rose, checked the bindings on my wound, and slipped out the window into the moonlight.

Chapter 6

The ruins, by night, wore their reputation rather well.

I picked my way past the first crude trap, a shallow pit, poorly concealed beneath a scatter of leaves, its bottom lined with sharpened stakes that had clearly been carved by hands more enthusiastic than skilled, with the mild, professional disappointment of a man who has seen considerably better traps in considerably worse places. A length of old elven stonework, half-swallowed by roots, offered the only way forward: down, always down, into a darkness that swallowed most of my darkvision's meager reach in long, uneven gulps.

A disembodied voice met me at the second turning, echoing wetly off stone.

"**TURN BACK, MORTAL FOOL. THIS PLACE BELONGS TO THE DEAD.**"

I paused, more out of courtesy than fear, and examined the low archway from which the voice seemed to emanate. A thin residue of chalky dust and the faintest arcane shimmer along its underside told the story plainly enough: a Magic Mouth spell, cast from a scroll by an unskilled but sincere hand, triggered by my passing. Cheap theater. Effective, evidently, on grandfathers and gossiping washerwomen. Somewhat less so on a man who has been genuinely, professionally haunted, and found the genuine article considerably less chatty.

"Wonderful delivery," I said aloud, to no one, and continued on.

The passage opened, finally, into a vast central chamber; the true heart of the old temple, I gathered, its vaulted ceiling lost somewhere above my light's reach, its walls lined with the faded, dignified remains of elven reliefs: scenes of music, of starlight, of a grace long since abandoned to moss and silence. Whatever the adventurers had taken from this place, they had left the bones of its beauty behind.

"**I SAID, TURN BACK.**" The voice again, louder now, and closer and, I noted with some professional satisfaction, considerably less steady than before. Fear does something particular to the human voice, a fraying at the edges that no illusion, however well cast, can quite disguise.

I stopped in the center of the chamber and did not turn back.

"You've a fine set of scrolls," I said, to the empty air, "and a genuinely admirable talent for village theater. But I've met real ghosts, real curses, and one extremely put-out lich in the course of my career, and none of them, in my professional experience, has ever needed quite so much *encouragement* to sound frightening." I drew a slow breath through my nose: clove, tallow wax, and beneath it, faint but unmistakable, the particular smell of a man who has not properly bathed in five days and has been living on tinned goods and nerves. "Nor have any of them smelled quite so strongly of your own general store, DeMarcus."

Silence, this time. A long one.

Then, from perhaps ten feet to my left, a soft, defeated exhale, the sound of a man setting down a very heavy thing he has been carrying for a very long while.

"...How'd you know."

“Ghosts don’t grunt when they climb over rubble,” I said. “Nor do they leave a fresh banana on a five-day-cold nightstand, or set a coin-jar down in precisely the same spot each night running, wearing a stain into good elm wood.”

The air shimmered, reluctantly, and DeMarcus resolved himself into visibility a few feet away; a stooped, unremarkable man of middle years, thinning hair plastered to his scalp with cold sweat, clutching a slender ivory wand in one white-knuckled fist as though it were the only solid thing left in his world. He looked less like the village’s much-despised miser and rather more like a man who had gotten everything he wanted and discovered, too late, that it fit him badly.

“You’re not… you’re not here to drag me back.” It wasn’t quite a question.

“That rather depends,” I said, easing myself down onto a fallen column, my cane across my knees, “on what, precisely, I’d be dragging you back *to.*”

He laughed, a short, humorless, entirely wretched sound. “Nothing. That’s the joke of it, Investigator. I spent thirty years building that shop into something, pinching every copper ’til it screamed, telling myself it’d all mean something eventually. Then those adventurers came through with more gold than sense, dropped a fortune in my lap like it was nothing, and I realized…” He stopped, swallowed. “I realized I’d built a life nobody needed me for. Not the shop. Not the town. Certainly not myself. I had all the coin I could ever spend, and not one soul who’d miss me if I spent the rest of my days down here in the dark.”

“So you decided to become a ghost instead.”

“Seemed easier than deciding to be a person again.” He looked down at the wand in his hands. “I bought this off the bard in that adventuring party, paid dearly for it, too, along with a few scrolls, thinking I’d just... slip away. Start somewhere new. But every time I tried to leave, I found myself creeping back to town instead. Watching. I don’t rightly know why.”

“Let’s speak plainly for a moment, DeMarcus, before we go any further.” I touched the still-tender line across my cheek. “That statue of yours very nearly crushed the life out of me this evening. A few tons of dead god, dropped on an Investigator of the City Watch mid-inquiry. I could arrest you for attempted murder on that count alone, and no magistrate from here to Waterdeep would blink twice at the charge.”

The color drained from what little of his face wasn’t already pale with fright. “Gods, no. No, that weren’t… I never meant for it to actually fall. It was meant to *scare*, is all, a bit of theater to keep folk out. I’d no idea the old thing was so close to coming down for true. I swear it on whatever’s left of my soul.”

I studied him a long moment. Fear, when it’s genuine, has a particular texture to it. Nothing like the calculated tremor I’d given Margarite not two hours before. His was the genuine article. A man capable of rigging a killing trap and lying about the intent behind it would not, I suspected, look quite so thoroughly sick at the notion. Reckless, certainly. Murderous, I rather doubted.

“Consider the charge noted, and set aside for the moment,” I said. “I’d advise against giving me further reason to reconsider that generosity.”

“You spooked my horse,” I continued down my list of collected offenses . “Burned her with a poker.”

He winced, genuinely, admirably ashamed. “She near trampled me in the dark. I panicked. I am sorry for that, truly… I used as light a touch as I could to spook her.”

Ah. That explained the wound’s curious shallowness. Guilt, it seemed, made for a passable field medic.

“And my cane?”

“...I don’t rightly know why I did that one.” He had the grace to look embarrassed. “Mischief, I suppose. It’s lonely, being dead.”

“And the pin cushion?”

“Childish… I admit. I had to stifle a laugh”, he looked sheepish and amused in equal measure.

“And Margarite’s sugar bowl?”

He actually smiled, briefly, painfully, at that. “She used to scold me somethin’ fierce over prices, back when I still had a shop worth scolding over. Felt good, putting a little sweetness back into her life. Small as it was.”

I considered him for a long moment; this small, wretched, newly-rich ghost of a man, sitting in the ruined heart of a forgotten temple, drowning in the one thing every soul in that village had once envied him for.

“Here is what I think,” I said, “for whatever an Investigator’s opinion is worth to a dead man. You don’t want to disappear, DeMarcus. If you did, you’d have managed it days ago. You’re clever enough, and rich enough, and Gods know you’re motivated enough. What you want is for your leaving to *mean* something. For once.”

He looked up at me, something raw and hopeful flickering behind the exhaustion.

“You want to leave gifts,” I continued. “Settle old scores the honest way, for once in your miserly life. Esmer’s overpriced ribbons. Harold’s debt; the one he actually wanted collected, and not in coin. Margarite’s coat, which has more patches than original cloth at this point, unless I miss my guess.” I gestured, mildly, at the wand still clutched in his hands. “You’ve the means. You’ve rather spectacularly demonstrated the method. What you lack, DeMarcus, is an accomplice with considerably more practice at appearing where he oughtn’t, and disappearing when it counts.”

The silence that followed had a different quality to it than the ones before; less fearful, more considering. A man doing arithmetic with his own soul.

“Why would you help me,” he asked finally. “You’re lawman. Sworn and all that.”

“I’m sworn to *justice*. Waterdeep’s law and justice keep... company, most days. Not always the same bed.”

I allowed myself the ghost of a smile. “No crime’s been committed here that I can find worth prosecuting, DeMarcus, a man’s entitled to disappear with his own gold, however poor his manners about it. What I can’t abide is leaving a village full of people to wonder, for the rest of their days, whether their tavernkeep was murdered in his own store. That, I intend to solve. How you spend the rest of whatever life you’ve bought yourself is rather emphatically none of my business… provided it stays that way.”

We settled the details there in the dark, by the illumination of my Light cantrip and his trembling nerve: which gifts, left where, timed for which hours of which nights, and, after a longer negotiation than I am entirely proud of, a rather modest consulting fee, which I informed him, with perfect sincerity, was compensation for services rendered and not, under any circumstances, hush money, a distinction he seemed to find as reassuring as it was, I suspect, entirely cosmetic. Besides, this was, ultimately, *adventurer* money, and I would be damned if I thought for a moment that they would spend it wiser than I. I doubt they'd even be aware of, or appreciate the difference between, cavendish and Latakia.

I returned to Margarite's parlor the following morning, my cheek freshly bandaged, and my nerve, if I am honest, rather less steady than it had been going in.

She was already seated at the table, a fresh pot of tea between us, and she watched me settle into the chair across from her without a word. That old, flat, searching stare had not softened since the night before. If anything, a night's sleep had sharpened it.

"You're back sooner than a coward ought to be," she said, pouring. "And walking a good deal steadier, too, for a man who could barely stand in my doorway last night."

"About that." I set my cane against the table and found, for once in my career, that I had no ready lie left in me. "I lied to you, Margie. Last night, in this room. The fear, the talk of dropping the case, all of it was theater. I needed you to believe I'd given up, so that whoever, or whatever, was watching and listening in on this house would believe it too."

She did not look surprised, exactly. She set the pot down with the particular care of a woman deciding whether to be angry.

"I gathered as much," she said, "somewhere around the part where you climbed out my guest window in the middle of the night. I am not entirely deaf, Tristin, whatever else these years have taken from me."

I told her the rest, then. All of it. That DeMarcus was alive, and had been the whole time, holed up in the old temple ruins, playing at haunting his own village with a purchased wand and a guilty conscience. That the statue, and the wound on my cheek, had been real enough, if not quite so deliberate as the rest of my performance. That I had found a broken, lonely, absurdly rich man who wanted nothing more than to vanish with a bit of grace, and that I had, against every article of the oath I'd sworn in Waterdeep, agreed to help him manage it. The gifts, each one accounted for. The coin he'd pressed into my hand as a consulting fee, which I did not pretend to her was anything but exactly what it was.

Margarite listened without interrupting, which was, I had learned long ago, the most dangerous thing she could do. When I finished, she was quiet a long moment, turning her cup slowly in her hands.

"Thirty years I served this town," she said finally, "and near as many beside you back in Waterdeep, and you thought a lie was the safer road with me."

"I thought it the only road, at the time. I may still have been right, about the timing. I was wrong to let it stand this long unsaid." I met her eyes, which took, I confess, rather more nerve than the ruins had. "I'm sorry, Margie. Truly. Whatever else I'm prepared to lie about in the course of my work, I'd rather not number you among the

people I make a habit of it with. I'd rather have your anger, honestly earned, than your trust on false premises. I hope it hasn't cost me the second, in trying to spare myself the first."

She studied me a moment longer, and something in the hard set of her jaw finally, grudgingly, eased.

"You were always a terrible liar, when it counted," she said, and there was, I was relieved to hear, real warmth buried under the gruffness. "Worst recruit I ever trained. Made up for it by being too stubborn to quit, same as now, it seems." She refilled my cup, unbidden, which I had come to understand was as close as Margarite came to formal absolution. "I'm not fool enough to throw away thirty years of friendship over one night of bad theater. But you'll not do it again. Not to me."

"Not to you," I agreed, and meant it, which was, I reflected, becoming something of a novelty for me in that village.

Epilogue

Village of Hallowbrook.

The following morning.

I left the village of Hallowbrook that afternoon rather better off, in every sense, than I'd arrived. My saddlebags carried a weight of gold I'd argued against and accepted anyway, and my cheek carried a thin, pale scar that would, I suspected, outlast the memory of most of my other, better cases. Passing the smithy on my way out of town, I noted the set of masterwork tools that Harold had request months ago, but had not the coin for, laid out on the bench in front of his house, no note attached, and the smith himself scratching his beard in open bewilderment. Further along, a bolt of fine silver-thread ribbon sat looped, unexplained, on Esmer's doorstep, and I caught, just as I passed, the particular quality of her delighted laugh drifting from an open window; the kind of laugh, I noted, that Harold the Smith would very much enjoy hearing directed his way, given time, and perhaps a small, well-placed nudge from a certain retired Watchman who missed a good conspiracy nearly as much as a good murder.

Margarite's old coat, I heard much later, through the same channel of gossip that carries all news eventually to Waterdeep, was replaced within the tenday by a considerably finer one; deep green wool, well-tailored, entirely anonymous in its origin. She wore it, apparently, without comment, and without once asking after its source.

As for me, I rode back toward the walls of Waterdeep with coin in my pocket I hadn't strictly earned by the letter of the law, and a case closed in a manner no magistrate would recognize as *solved*, and found, against my considerable professional instincts, that I did not mind either fact nearly so much as I ought to have.

The City, I reflected, watching her towers rise at last over the horizon, had never once asked me to be honest. Only useful. Besides, those few good tins of pipe tobacco rarely, if ever, paid for themselves.

I could live with that arrangement a good while longer.

The End