Tristin Hires a Sidekick

-Scott Kelley 8/11/2024

Prologue

Waterdeep, Castle Ward, Tristin Fidellis' flat.
Morning, 7th of Alturiak ("The Claw of Winter", Second Month), 1484 DR

I lived in a small flat above a shop in the middle of a series of row houses on a quiet side street in the posh North Ward of Waterdeep. Unfortunately, this meant that a large portion of my monthly salary went towards the renting of this flat, but I fully accepted the fault for the, perhaps, poor financial decision. I found the peace and security of a smaller living space to be well worth the investment into my mental and emotional wellbeing. Unlike a carpenter or a smith, I had found that I am unable to leave the tools of my trade behind at the end of the workday. If I am to carry the burdens of murder, kidnappings, and a plethora of other unsavory crimes within my mind, even during my off hours, I might as well have a pleasant refuge in which to ponder them. Thus, my small, but expensive, flat.

I have heard these sorts of flats referred to as 'brownstones', but I could never discover the origins of the moniker. It will remain a mystery for another day, I suppose.

A small, nondescript, easily missed doorway, adjacent to the much larger and inviting door to the shop beneath me, led up a narrow staircase to a small, railed landing. A single, sturdy door, labeled "CCXXI β", led into my sanctuary. Within you'd find only the minimum required number of rooms: a living area, a privy, a kitchen, and a sleeping room. The living area formed the nucleus of the flat, with the other rooms lining and surrounding the space via doorways and arches. This gave the interior space a comfortable darkness, with no direct access to windows. I lived alone, only rarely had guests, and even rarer still had long-, or short-, term companions. My early life with my Elven mother and Human father educated me on the virtues of self-reliance.

When I occasionally found myself desiring comradery, I could usually find it within the wide range of the loose social groups I had collected over the years. I'd never considered myself a true member of any one of them, so I allowed myself to benefit from their perks when, and how, I desired. Fancy meals, balls, operas, and other forms of 'high entertainment' were easily within my grasp, but the pretentions of their participants dulled my appetite for them. On the other end of the spectrum, my endurance for the low arts, consisting of bawdy plays, drinking, raucous music, and the like, was likewise anemic. In my decades in the City of Splendors, I'd yet to find that golden middle, that culture that suited my temperament for more than a few hours out of a month. Even my fellow Bards, from their diverse Colleges, wore thin on me in short order. If the blame is solely mine for the dissatisfaction with my social life, it is one I carried with little concern.

All of that said, I had found it useful in the past to have another mind to bounce ideas, hypotheses, and theories off of. I considered myself well-read and observant, but I certainly wasn't omniscient. I had certainly missed details and clues that had either extended my investigations unnecessarily or even led them to dead ends. Any discomfort I may have had with relying on others was easily overcome by my disdain for failure.

So, with the possibility of meaningful assistance and improved success rates, I began placing advertisements around town, spreading the word, and registering applicants for an hour of my time on the designated day. Better to take care of this is one fell swoop, I reasoned. To my gratification, Kormen Stonebeard was receptive and helpful in this endeavor. Perhaps he tired of being my sole comrade and confident.

After weeks of waiting, I had received and scheduled five interested individuals. Unfortunately, due to the impersonal and anonymous methods in which these interviews had been arranged, I was going in blind. Perhaps I would end the day with a new partner. A *professional* partner to be precise. Well, more of an assistant. A 'sidekick'? We would see. The first candidate would be arriving shortly.

Chapter 1

“HUZZAH and well met! ‘Tis I, the famed Bard *Aloysius Fauntleroy*! I am here to dazzle and delight, to-“

“No.”

“-excite and… what?”

“Just… *no*. Get out.”

A flamboyantly dressed man stood awkwardly, mid-pose, in my doorway. The massive feather sticking out from the top of the satin hat that he held aloft dipped and touched the floor. It was entirely too early in the day for this.

“I’m sorry? But, I’ve only just arrived!”

He forced his gleaming smile to return to the corners of his mouth. Uncannily, it seemed to grow and stretch past his eyes. His thin, toned legs flexed under his sheer, white tights as he continued to hold the exaggerated stance. A subtle magical glamour caused minute sparkles and shimmers to appear around his eyes, enhancing the thick eye shadow and mascara painted there. The satin of his mauve and gold doublet shimmered under its own luminescence. The mandolin slung to his back was pristine. I wondered if he had so much as plucked a string of it.

I rubbed the bridge of my nose with my right hand and waved him in with the other. It was going to be a long day; I could tell already. Absolutely chuffed, he practically skipped to the leather armchair opposite mine. The chairs were at a shallow angle to one another, with a lamp table between them. The table was well stocked for the day, with a large tea kettle (enchanted to keep the tea at just the right temperature), two porcelain cups, cakes, dried fruits, various sundries, cookies, and a pouch of my favorite pipeweed. My beloved hand-carved meerschaum pipe was already clenched between my teeth, but unlit.

The large stone fireplace next to the entrance door was already lit and crackling, keeping the frigid Waterdhavian winter outside at bay. It was well supplied with seasoned firewood for the duration. A few trivial magical spells would keep it fed and stoked with little intervention or distraction from me.

The bard plopped down merrily and crossed his long legs with a flourish. “I cannot TELL you how pleased I am to be working with THE Tristin Fidellis of the City Watch! You’ve made *quite* a name for yourself out there, you know, amongst the *populace*! What they *didn’t* say was how handsome you were!” Every word held a different emphasis and was punctuated by hand gestures that conjured images of a wizard seizing whilst casting an elaborate spell.

“I… appreciate the enthusiasm, Mr.-“

“Please, you can call me Aloysuis… ‘Al’ to my friends.” He gave a wink.

“-Al. But this is just an initial, informal interview. I must admit, I’m curious as to your interest in this position. It doesn’t seem like law enforcement is your normal passion. I investigate crimes, some of which are rather brutal. Why are you here, Mr. Fauntleroy?”

“Well, if you *must* know, I’m researching a role.” The barely contained, and painfully obvious, secret behind his smirk caused a pit to open in my stomach.

“Oh no.”

“Oh yesss! What better way to learn the mysterious inner working of a hard-boiled detective such as yourself, than to tag along and be your doting sidekick, hmm?” He was giddy at the prospect. “Buh-buh-buh! Before you say no, I’ll have you know that I have already spoken with the Major over the North Ward, *who happens to be great fan of mine*, about this potential boon to the City Watch’s public relations! He was, of course, all for it. Seems his taste in the arts is matched only by his shrewdness on matters of civil discourse!”

“Look, Al, I’m in need of a fellow Investigator, one possessing a keen mind and elevated powers of observation. I’m sure you’re quite successful at… whatever it is you do, but I don’t think you quite have the skillset that I’m looking for.”

The gaudily dressed man’s face fell. He looked as if I had told him his dog had been run over by a speeding wagon. He responded, quietly and measuredly, “You know, I would’ve expected better from a fellow graduate of the Bardic Colleges. Where did you graduate from? Hm? Oh, that’s right, the College of *Eloquence*. Certainly not the College of Good Sense… or Politeness… or, or… Couth!”

He paused, looked up, and held my gaze. “This is to be a boon to *you*, as well, you know. Imagine *your* name being synonymous with ‘justice’ in our fair city! Imagine *you* being the beacon of hope to all those who experience the cruel predations of this world. Currently, you just slink through the streets, in your longcoat, with your pipe, and your chiseled jaw, all in *obscurity*! It’s a waste, I tell you! I bloody sad one, at that. You could be more, Tristin. You *should* be more.

“And if you’re questioning MY resolve, well, let me tell you that I’m of a keen mind as well! You Eloquence Bards don’t have the lock on brains, you know. I may accomplish my goals in a different manner, but I also strive to make this world a better place! Have you *any idea* how much coin I’ve raised for charity? How many noble causes I’ve shone a spotlight on? My *life* has been spent in the service of others. I assumed *you*, of all people, could relate.”

I clenched the pipe between my teeth and waited for him to finish. He was a well-trained performer, no doubt, and his gaudy presentation seemed to function as an effective distraction from his true cunning. Like countless others, I had immediately underestimated him. I felt no shame at the realization; if anything, I begrudgingly awarded him a bit of respect. Frankly, he could be much farther along in his Bardic career than myself, with access to magical spells and powers beyond my capabilities. Perhaps I’d been too hasty. Afterall, a distraction (or a decoy) can be helpful to have, in certain situations.

“Al, I’m having a hard time imagining you playing second fiddle to anyone. Why would you lower yourself to the status of sidekick?”

“Experience, of course! The one truly priceless thing in this world! I’d get to live in the shoes of a daring Investigator, stalking the mean streets of Waterdeep, surviving by my wits and magic! How stupendous!”

“My life isn’t a cheap play. It’s very much real. With very real stakes that affect real people. People die, Al, they suffer. I’m sure the anguish you experience on stage causes your makeup to run, but this is deadly serious.” I sighed. “I appreciate your enthusiasm and aspirations. So, let’s try a little exercise, hm?”

Aloysius rubbed his hands together in excitement. “Ooh, so the interview thus begins in earnest!”

“Right. Sure. Moving on. A woman is attending her mother’s funeral. There, she meets a mysterious and intriguing man.”

“Oh! Saucy!” Al interjected with glee. I shushed him and quickly continued.

“She becomes enamored with him in short order but forgets to ask his name before he departs. Soon after, the woman’s aunt is murdered. Who killed the aunt and why?”

Aloysius looked at me blankly, his giddy smile fading. “What? That’s all?”

I smirked at him, “What’s the matter Al, are you a Bard who knows no riddles?”

“Now hold on! I’m sure I’ve heard this one!” He put his fingers to his temples and closed his eyes. Even his personal, internal mechanisms had to have a corresponding choreography. I flicked my fingers, causing a small flame to magically appear at the tip of my thumb. I used it to light my pipe. I puffed on it patiently as Aloysius’ mind conjured images of clowns jumping through hoops, or whatever passes for deep thought for him.

“Well,” he started slowly, “it must be the woman at her mother’s funeral. She killed her aunt.”

“Oh? Must it? Why do you suppose so?”

A cunning, self-pleased smile stretched across Aloysius’ tanned face, “She’s the only other character in the story! If it were the mysterious man, that would just raise more questions!”

I furrowed my brow in annoyance. “Well, you’re correct, but for the wrong reasons… you see, she killed her aunt in the hopes that the mysterious man, who clearly knew her mother, would come to her aunt’s funeral as well, so that she could see him again. It’s an exercise in understanding the criminal mind-“

“So, I was RIGHT!” he clapped his hands together in triumph. “I could do this all day!”

I then gave him a few more scenarios, and each time he somehow managed to guess correctly by using incorrect reasoning. For the life of me, I could not determine if he was doing it on purpose as a jape, or if he was some sort of idiot savant. After half an hour of this, I had exhausted my repertoire of mystery riddles.

“Ha HA! How marvelous! But I really must be going!” He slapped his knees and stood, smoothing out his ornate outfit.

“Going?” I said, confused. “You’ve only just arrived! We have yet to discuss the details of your proposal. Perhaps we can start with you shadowing me on my next case. I-”

“I am MUCH obliged, sir! But, as I said, I truly must be going!” He made for the door.

I leapt from my chair. “I’m sorry, I’m a bit confused… what about the experience you seek? What about assisting me in my endeavors? I thought you were prepared to portray me in a role! Despite your… unorthodox methods, I do believe your input could be valuable!”

“Be that as it may, my good sir, I’m afraid I’ve had something of a revelation during our brief time together.”

I stared at him, quizzically.

“You see… I find all of this to be dreadfully boring! Sitting around, solving riddles for children, it’s all so *tedious*.”

“But-“

“I’m sure you perform a great service for our fellow countrymen, but I’m afraid my talents would be better suited elsewhere.” Tapping his chin with his index finger in thought, he continued quietly, “Perhaps there are some adventurers in need of a jack-of-all-trades… yes! I shall find some daring adventurers to join! Fare the well, Master Fidellis!”

With a flourish, he was out the door and gone. I stood in the center of my den, pipe hanging loosely from my mouth. This was turning out to be a very confusing day.

Chapter 2

Less than an hour later, I heard a soft rapping upon my door. Opening it, I was greeted by a large human man. He stood demurely on the landing, his laborers' cap held respectfully in his hands. He was large, almost ogrish, in stature, looming over me by at least a head. He appeared to be around 50 years old, but that could've been due to the hard life that he'd clearly lived. His nose had been broken multiple times and both of his ears were so scarred that they were little more than lumps of cartilage affixed to the side of his pudgy head. His dark hair was balding, and his large jowls were unshaven and scarred. His deep-set eyes peered from underneath a heavy brow, equally scarred.

He was exactly the sort of fellow that I would avoid dark alleys in the Dock Ward for fear of encountering. His hands were massive. Just one of his fingers was easily two of mine. He wore a sturdy set of overalls, hobnail leather boots, the nicest overcoat that he owned, and a soiled handkerchief around his neck. All were threadbare and heavily worn. He had bathed recently, the odor of simple lye soap still lingering on his tanned skin.

The look on his face was intriguing… he seemed remorseful, apologetic. He was nervous, but in a social way, not physical. He was clearly outside of his comfort zone, but his demeanor obscured the courage it took for him to find himself there, in front of me.

"Uh, Master Tristin Fidellis?" he inquired. His voice was deep and gravelly, with a hint of 'low class' accent.

"That's right. I'm investigator Fidellis. Are you here for the job?"

"Uh huh."

"Then, please, right this way. Come in and have a seat." I led him to the leather chair across from mine. As he entered, his eyes scanned the room, carefully and inquisitively cataloging his environment. I wondered what conclusions he drew from my dark, bookcase-lined parlor.

"Uh, Thanks." He grunted as he lowered himself into the padded confines of the chair. I interrupted his silent interrogation of the surroundings by offering him tea. He declined with a polite wave.

I sat, then smiled comfortingly at him. "I'm afraid you have me a disadvantage, sir."

"Huh? Oh! Uh, right. M'name's Ogden. Me mates call me Oggie."

"Pleasure to meet you Oggie. How can I help you today?"

"Yeah, I'm here for the job. The Assistant job."

I nodded patiently. "Well, it's a very… specialized set of skills that I'm looking for. One must be observant, clever, and be able to handle the rigors and stresses of dealing with the aftermaths of crimes. Often, violent ones. You don't seem like a stranger to violence, Oggie."

"Nay, I'm not, sir. I can handle m'self. I got experience in, uh, personal security. I'm decent in a scrap, I can promise you that."

"I have little doubt. However, I'm not looking for a bodyguard. I could just request a Watchmen for that. What I'm looking for, what I need, is someone who can provide a different perspective on my cases, someone with a different knowledge and experience set than I possess."

"I, uh, got some insights into that sort of thing. I knows the streets, I knows the people that run 'em and hows they do it. I been down in the gutter me whole life, I knows how it all works." There was a pain in his eyes so sharp that it made me wince. "You needs information, I can gets it for ya. I can walk around places and aint nobody

look at me, you get me?" It was hard for me to imagine anyone being able to ignore his presence, but I understood what he meant. No one would pay attention to a simple laborer like him in most of the Wards.

He gestured as he spoke, and I noticed some faded tattoos under his sleeves and just under his collar. I recognized several gang symbols. This man had spent his entire life in the underworld. When you're a laborer, its hard to not turn down a gold piece or two for some simple work… a busted door here, a midnight relocation of sealed, unmarked crates there, a little intimidation to remind someone of their place every so often.

I had dedicated my life to justice… not law. Yes, I upheld the law; Hells, I had sworn multiple oaths to that very point, but I was not an idealistic fool. Life is complicated and mortals such as we must play the cards we are dealt by the Lady of Fate. I was never one to conflate Evil with Crime. I've seen good people commit horrible acts. Some are understandable and forgivable… some are not. Like people, each act must be judged on its own merits and circumstances. Context may be for kings, but I was no Monarchist.

"Why the sudden shift in profession, Oggie? I'm going to brashly assume that most of your encounters with the Watch were not amicable." I analyzed him as he parsed my words and formulated a response.

"No, I guess not. Me mum always said that there's always time to fix yer shit, as long as yer alive. I just need to fix some shit." He nervously rubbed his hands. I watched as he ran his fingers over his thick, calloused knuckles. He feared something. Not something immediate or physical, but deeper than that. Feared *for* someone, perhaps? I leaned forward, listening intently.

"Oggie, I assure you, you have my confidentiality. Nothing you say will leave this room. Unless you're here to confess to a particular murder, that is!" He snapped to face me, his eyes wide. I gave him a knowing smile.

"Oh HA! Heh. No no… nuthn' like that." With the tension broken a bit, he relaxed. "It's me boy, ya see. He's about ten summers now. I don't want him ending up like his old man, like *me*. His ma, she's a tavern wench down near the docks. She don't have much to do with me either and I don't blame her. But I do send 'em a few gold pieces when I can. I-It's not much, five or ten gold a month, if I gots it. But just giving 'em coin, it aint enough, not fer me. Not anymore. I wants to see him. I wanna show him a different way. I can't get close to either of 'em until I gets clean. Maybe…" His emotion caught in his throat. He awkwardly wiped his eyes with his sleeves.

"Maybe," he tried again, "if I help the other side, yer side, a bit, maybe I can look at him without… the shame. Maybe even Sheela could bare to look at me again." I am not made of stone. I'd rarely experienced this level of sincerity, of vulnerability, from someone like him. I swallowed and composed myself. I nodded for him to continue.

"I ain't a stoolie and I aint admittn' to nuthn'" The vulnerability was now being quickly secured. "I aint flippn on nobody and I ain't askn' for no deals… so, either you take me as I am, startn' now, or forget it." He wiped his nose with his sleeve and sniffed. "I got skills and I knows stuff none of you Watchmen got any ideas about."

I leaned back and clasped my hands. Letting a sigh out through my nose, I considered the possibilities. He was sincere; I would stake my life on that. But would he be a worthy partner in my pursuits? To my own surprise, I found myself thinking, 'Possibly, yes. He seemed dedicated, motivated, and competent. I can actually see myself working with this person.' I tried to ignore the fact that he would also be an effective combatant. It would be nice to not have to rely on *only* my wits to survive the occasional violent encounter.

Ogden fidgeted, wringing his flat cap in his meaty hands. Very well, if I'm going to consider him, I should do so properly.

"Of that, I have no doubt. So, let's begin. I shall ask you a few questions. Please answer however, and in whatever way, you see fit."

"Yeah, I can do that." He nodded agreeably. I placed a small notepad on the high arm of my chair and prepared my quill.

“A bandit robs the Sword Coast Traders' Bank. They then take the gold and donate it all to the local orphanage. You, as the Watchmen tasked with finding the money, discover the donation of the stolen money. The operator of the orphanage has no idea that the money was stolen and has already started making big plans to improve the conditions of the children’s lives. What do you do?”

Oggie’s brow furrowed in thought. He instinctively knew that the question was a trap, of sorts, with no simple or obvious ‘right’ answer. He rubbed his jowls and then ran his hand over his balding head.

“That’s a good ‘un. I guess I’d *find* most the money and return it to those rich pricks at the bank. Maybe I forget some at the orphanage. Yeah, I jus’ kinda forget some for the kids. They needs it more.”

I nodded non-committedly and jotted down some nonsense scribbles onto the notepad. It was difficult to not lead or subtly influence an interviewee, but I attempted to remain an unreadable blank slate.

He dutifully answered my moral quandary questions for the next half hour. I felt that my assessment was accurate… he was a decent man born into an indecent world. He was surrounded by poverty, desperation, and corruption. The lack of concern from the people of the ‘higher’ Wards was a constant and glaring motivation for his actions and philosophies. This built a man of self-reliance, cunning, and cynicism. All legitimately earned, sadly. He cared for his fellow citizens but was acutely aware of his limited capacity to do right by them, due to the inequitable nature of the world, and society, in which he found himself. He was an occasional thug, but only because that was what the world demanded of him.

He was precisely the sort of person that needed an opportunity to prove their mettle. Perhaps I would be the one to give it to him. I concluded the interview, bidding him a good day. Afterwards, I sat alone in my study, absentmindedly puffing on my pipe, staring into the crackling fireplace, and reflecting on the frivolity of fate.

Chapter 3

I was seated at the two-person table in my small kitchen, having an early lunch and absentmindedly staring out the frost covered window at the white city beyond. The relentless frigid grey of Waterdhavian winters was not for everyone. From my vantage point, I watched thin smoke curl from a dozen roofline chimneys into the leaden sky. The sounds of the city were muffled in the dead of winter, insulated by snow drifts and scarves. Few wanted to be out in this sort of weather, meaning that fewer still were breaking the law in it. Even criminals preferred to be cozy and un-frostbitten. Or so I had thought.

I heard my front door open slowly and quietly and then close just as slowly and quietly. No footsteps or other noises announced the presence of a visitor in my home. I stopped chewing, swallowed, and finished the rest of my tea, all the while listening intently to my great room. The gentle popping and crackling of the fire was all I heard. I got up and stepped to the large archway that divided the kitchen from the main room. I nonchalantly scanned the room. I saw nothing. Putting a quizzical look on my face I turned around… and began casting a spell. Seconds passed and the spell was completed. I spun around, gesturing into the room, causing a soft rain of glowing blue and purple motes of magical light to fill the area. Immediately, every object in the room was surrounded by a thin, blue, magical outline… as was a slight, transparent figure, hunched defensively in a darkened corner.

An Elven expletive escaped from the invisible, but well-outlined, figure. The person-shaped glow darted across the room towards me, the shapes of daggers appearing in its hands. I was now fighting for my life, unarmed and unarmored. I lunged towards my dining table and grabbed the large cutting knife I had been using on that nice wedge of Arabellan cheddar. It wasn't much, but it was better than nothing. My rapier, in its scabbard, was slung on the lower rung of the hatrack next to the front door.

Between me and my weapon of choice was a glowing outline of a lithe, deadly figure. Now within range, it swirled and slashed at me with both daggers. I deflected one blade, but the other slashed across my torso. One quirk of the basic invisibility spell that the assassin had been enchanted with was that it dissipated if you attacked another person. The arcane weave of illusion was not powerful enough to obscure a physical assailant. The figure, still surrounded by a glowing outline, was now fully visible. She was clearly Elven and wearing full assassin regalia: dark, light armor, tight hood, and mask that covered the face. Her sea green eyes were the only part of her body to be uncovered.

Grunting in pain, I riposted, stabbing the dagger towards the assassin. The wonderful thing about the faerie fire I had cast on the villain was that it provided a clarity and simplicity of target. It made it much easier to land a blow on her, far beyond my normal combat capabilities. Despite the assistance of the glow, she handily deflected my blow. Even with the slight advantage afforded me by the revealing spell, I was no match for her in melee combat. Despite my clear deficiency, I did not intend on dying that day.

In a blur of whirring steel, she struck me twice more, once across my arm and another puncture into my shoulder. She was taking me apart. I fell back, planting myself against the archway between the main room and my kitchen. Trying to push through the searing pain, I stared into her eyes and began crafting a cacophony of dissonant mental energies. I unleashed the volatile magic via a whisper directly into her psyche, causing her to stumble backwards, clutching at her head. Unable to control herself, she continued backing away from me until she ran into one of my many bookshelves, causing it to rock, dislodging a few books in the process.

That was not a spell I used lightly. It could be used to kill, rendering the target's mind unable to function if applied too many times, or to the mentally weak. This person's intent was my death… holding back would be last mistake I would ever make. Utilizing the moment, I scrambled across the room to my coatrack and drew my rapier. I was no swordsman, but at least I was proficient in this weapon. Now armed, I spun to face her. I watched her shake

her head, clearing it. She then locked onto me like a bird of prey onto a fieldmouse. The daggers flashed through the air. I managed to deflect the one aimed at my throat, but I missed the second, which lodged itself into my thigh. I tamped down the scream of agony into a grunt of pain. Unfortunately, the distraction caused me to lose concentration on the faerie fire spell, causing the glowing outlines in the room to instantly fade. If she had another way to become invisible, there was little I could do now to reveal her.

I clutched my pierced leg. The blade appeared to be embedded into my femur. The pain was astonishing. To my dismay, when I pulled my hand up and examined my fingers, they were coated in blood, as expected, but also splattered with an oily green substance. Poison.

My eyes screwed themselves shut and I suppressed a scream. Forcing myself upright, I willed myself to focus and watched as my assailant flicked her hands up at shoulder level. Both daggers suddenly, *magically*, appeared back in her hands, ready to be flung. My spell had been broken, I could feel the poison start to both numb my movements and ignite my pain receptors simultaneously, and she was barely scratched. Through the haze I noticed that my dutiful, and quite heavy, solid wood bookcase had come free of its moorings to my wall. It was nearly twice her height and teetered precariously above the petite Elven woman. She was oblivious to the several hundred pounds that loomed over her.

I struck out my hand in her direction, apparating my mage hand as I did so. It was not capable of moving much weight, perhaps ten pounds on a good day, but I had to hope it would be enough. Willing it to pull the top of the bookcase forward, the already disheveled books began to slide forward, redistributing the weight within the furniture. She smirked in amusement as my desperate spell seemed to fail or not find purchase upon her person. The ghostly appendage was above and behind her. She hadn't noticed it.

She had a split second between the creak of the two wooden front legs giving way and the whole thing coming down on top of her. It wasn't enough. With a calamitous symphony of thuds, the books, and then the bookcase itself, fell directly on top of her.

So much for 'sticks and stone may break my bones, but words will never hurt me'. Ha ha, yes.

No, no… 'The pen IS mightier than the sword' is better.

Hm. 'I hope I didn't break a… spine.' Yes, that's the one.

What in the Hells kind of poison is this?

A muffled, anguished moan emanated from under Section H through M of my personal library. I hobbled over to the pile, trying to ignore the multiple openly bleeding wounds that peppered my body. I stood over the pile and unsteadily brandished my rapier.

"Stand and deliver. You're under arrest for… quite a lot, actually. Put down your weapons and surrender."

The books began to shift and fall as the assassin stirred beneath. She began to slowly, painfully crawl out from underneath the bookcase. Looking up at me, her turquoise eyes narrowed in contempt. Glancing to one side she focused on my kitchen. What was she seeing there? I chanced a glance and saw nothing. Suddenly, there was a -*BAMF*- and puff of silvery mist surrounding her. Instantly, she was gone, causing the remaining books, and bookcase, to complete its fall to the ground.

Nine Hells! Where did she go? It must be a line-of-sight spell. My kitchen. The window! I limped to it as quickly as I could. Squinting against the glare of fresh snow, I spied a set of small footprints on the rooftop across the street. They led over the peak of the roof, beyond my sight.

Breathing raggedly, I slid to the floor. Between the wounds, the blood loss, and the poison, I was in no condition to be leaping from rooftop to rooftop. To be honest I was *never* in the condition to be leaping rooftop to

rooftop. My heart was racing, which only exacerbated my slow exsanguination. I've had six seconds to rest, best to get back to it.

I cast my most effective healing spell causing my wounds to close and stop freely bleeding. The poison was an issue that was beyond my powers to remedy, however. I would just have to let it run its course. 'Tough it out', as Kormen liked to say. That seemed to be his solution to a great many of life's foibles. Grabbing my kitchen table with unsteady, bloody hands, I pulled myself agonizingly to my feet.

I'm still alive and she's not yet escaped. Not from *me*, she hasn't.

Closing my eyes, I concentrated on her dagger that so rudely lodged itself into my legbone. I've always preferred simple, functional spells. Spells like my mage hand, or the simple cantrip I use for all sorts of mundane tasks, like lighting fires, warming food, or cleaning objects (or myself!). Those are the ones I value, and use, the most. Spells like the ones I use to locate objects have saved me hundreds of hours of tedious mucking about. I was about to find out just quick she was. My object locating spell, focused on her dagger, pinged in my mind. It, and certainly she, was only about sixty feet away, directly South of my location, at roughly the same elevation. She's still on the rooftops.

From the magical sense the spell imparted to me, I could tell she was moving slowly, carefully. A fall from the steep, icy, and snow-covered rooftop of a tall rowhouse could be unpleasant at best, deadly at worst, even for a trained rogue. I must've wounded her enough to slow her down. Good.

My leg was aching, but serviceable after the healing spell, so I made for the door. I donned my hat, scarf, and wool-lined winter long coat. After treading painfully down the stairs and making my way into the blustery street below, I pulled out the Watchmen's horn from a large coat pocket and blew a series of blasts. A moment later, the honks were returned from a few streets over. My fellow on-duty Watchmen had heard my call and would be arriving shortly.

What followed was a game of cat-and-mouse that lasted around a third of an hour. With my magical ability to know her precise direction and distance from me, I coordinated multiple teams of Watchmen in encircling, entrapping, and finally arresting the failed assassin. She refused to talk, but that was an issue for another day. She was safely behind bars and magically suppressed, ensuring that I would have ample time to interrogate her at my leisure during the coming week.

Nearly an hour later, I limped towards my flat wounded, exhausted, and quite irritated that I needed to reshelve my carefully organized library. Lost in my own thoughts, I had forgotten that I was to have visitors for the rest of the day.

Chapter 4

As I opened the exterior door to the stairwell that led to my flat, I saw a dapper figure beginning their descent from the upper landing. They were dressed impeccably, with a perfectly fitted fur-fringed winter coat, leather breeches, high boots, a matching scarf, and a pointed, fur-lined hat. A small pipe protruded elegantly from their mouth. They were just putting on their supple deerskin gloves when we spied one another. The statuesque figure looked down at me from atop the stairs.

"Ah, hello. Are you here for the interview?" I said, as I began painfully making my way up the stairs.

A mature, smoky, and unmistakably feminine voice responded. "Of course, I am. Why else would I be out in this weather? To examine your dingy stairwell?"

I grunted as I reached the landing. "No, I suppose not. Forgive my impertinence. Please, come in."

Brushing past her, I caught a whiff of her expensive perfume. I had not encountered it before. Her houndstooth scarf was expertly tied around her neck and her makeup was done so subtly as to be invisible. Her posture was bolt up-right and condescension emanated from her in waves. She had a regal jawline and an aristocratic nose, whatever that meant. I awkwardly made momentary eye contact with her as I unlatched and opened the door. I gestured for her to enter.

To my dismay, I had forgotten the state in which I had hastily left my quarters. The bookcase remained face down on top of the pile of books. The dishes and utensils from my aborted lunch still sat on the kitchen table, stale food obediently awaiting my attention. Occasional blood splatters could be seen on the floor and walls. She removed her gloves, placing them into her bycocket hat. She extinguished her thin pipe and gingerly placed it into the side pocket of her coat. She scanned the room as I took her coat, scarf, and hat. Ihung my outerwear next to hers. She raised a critical eyebrow at what she saw, but I tried to ignore the embarrassment and ushered my guest towards the set of leather chairs.

"Seems someone has had a busy morning. Forgive me, I thought you were *expecting* guests."

I sighed wearily. "I was. I *am*. There was an attempt on my life a mere hour ago. As you can see, I-"

"I can see that you were unprepared for the assault and incapable of resolving the issue without great bodily harm to yourself or to your abode. How is it, Investigator, that an assailant was able to get the drop on you, *in your own home*? Hm?"

Unable to control myself, I shot her an irked look. Before I could rebut, she continued.

"Since you're clearly not going to, I suppose I shall start the introductions. I am Faith Sharpe, freelance private investigator." She held out her right hand demurely. Two strange, ancient looking rings adorned her fingers. They were almost certainly enchanted. Her nails were perfectly shaped and had a glossy, clear coating of some kind applied to them. Annoyed, I simply took her hand and nodded politely. We sat.

"I'm Tristin Fidellis, Investigator with the City Watch. But, of course, you already knew that. Thank you for taking the time to speak with me about this… opportunity." I offered her tea, which she accepted. She declined the small cakes and cookies.

"I must say that I am intrigued; someone in your position looking for an *emp-loy-ee*." She enunciated each syllable of the word with naked disgust. "But, I am not one to let their curiosity go unsated. What, exactly, do you think you could offer someone capable of performing this function for you?"

“Well, for one, the chance to see justice done in Waterdeep. As you know, these are interesting times. While we’re all still reeling from the Second Sundering, Dragon Cultist attacks, and the assassinations of our city leaders, the citizens continue living their lives. They still deserve peace and justice. They deserve to know that there are those that fight for them, and their interests. A missing person or a single murder may not seem important on the grand scale of history, but it is, I assure you, deeply important to those who must live through it. That is where I, and perhaps you, come in. We’re beacons of, if not hope, then at least, stability and order in uncertain times. The City Watch does good work, and I am eminently proud of my time with them.”

She listened intently, focused. “I see. And does hope and pride pay for these four walls?”

I took a calming breath and replied. “No, my salary does that. But the other things give me drive and satisfaction.”

“This place costs you, what, roughly half your monthly stipend? You wear the standard-issue Investigator’s long coat. You wear no jewelry or other symbols of station or affluence. You have no magical items to utilize in the pursuit of your goals. Your boots are relatively new, but are worn down long before their time, which means you walk nearly everywhere, which likely means, in turn, that you simply cannot afford a carriage to convey yourself around the city. The tea is passable, but the pastries were made locally, likely a few blocks from here. There’s nothing distinct nor exotic about them in ingredients or preparation. Your dishes are roughly two decades old, but at least they’re clean. You’ve wasted your potential here, Mr. Fidellis. Should you join the private sector, say, as *my* assistant, I could then see to it that you’re properly recompensed for putting your life on the line. You needn’t abuse yourself for those incapable of adequately compensating you. I certainly don’t.”

My jaw set forward, clenching as she spoke. Ignoring me, she continued.

“If you’re in any way insulted by what I just said, then perhaps you should consider the following.”

She leaned back into the plushy leather chair, holding the saucer with one hand and taking a sip of tea with the other. She was entirely too comfortable.

“Imagine what you could accomplish with my largesse of resources. Think of the people you could save, the mysteries you could uncover and solve. Think of the good you could do if you had the income of an a*dventurer*, instead of a city *clerk*.”

She leaned forward for emphasis. “No more living like… *this*. No more limited City-issued scrolls. No more ‘morality restrictions’ on the use of certain spells on suspects, or even witnesses! No more having to rely on the Watch, or even the Magisters, to dole out justice! You’d be free to exact justice when and how you see fit. You cannot *possibly* tell me that you’ve agreed with every decision those black-robed, fallible, and easily *bribable*, Magisters have made on your cases.

“I do the same work you do, Tristin. I just get paid a Hells of a lot more to do it. Who am I to say ‘no’ to a wealthy nobleman who wants to know where his rebellious daughter has run off to, and with whom? That’s an easy thousand gold pieces, right there. Not to mention their undying gratitude, if you return the brat… or if you just tell them what they want to hear. Isn’t that what you do, Investigator? Tell people what they want to hear so that they like you, trust you?”

Quietly and calmly, I replied, “Madam… I suggest you choose your next words very carefully.”

She sat back again, a reprehensible look of satisfaction on her face. “Hm, so the stoic Investigator *does* have a temper. One *can* wring an emotional response from his cold, analytical countenance.” She stared at me, the corner of her lips curled up ever so slightly, reading my response. I did not relish the sensation of being the one assessed. She was good… perhaps as good as, or even better than, me.

I took a sip of my tea and then carefully placed down the saucer and then the cup on top of it, onto the table. It was a particularly nice tea, dark, rich and flavorful. It was a gift from friends of mine; a lovely couple from

the far-off nation of Shou, in Kara-Tur. One day not long ago, in idle curiosity, I had asked an acquaintance of mine, a merchant with the Highmoon Trading Coster, how much my pound of Shou tea was worth. To my surprise, he offered me one hundred gold pieces for it, on the spot. That was more than my monthly pay. Naturally, I refused. Nothing would be so ingrateful or tactless as to sell a personal gift. No, I would savor this tea. And savor it I did.

"It is true that I'm not known, or even well-regarded, for my warm disposition. Some think me cold, as you say." I paused, as if having a thought. "Have you ever been around a forge, Madam Sharpe? No, I don't suppose you've spent much time around a blacksmith's shop. When the door to the furnace is closed, it may not be readily apparent that the fires are lit. Until one gets closer to it, one may not notice the heat emanating from it, the fumes. One might, if oblivious enough, need to touch the thing to determine the inferno raging within. Or, more foolish still, need to open the door, to peek at the fires directly."

She looked at me, bored and unimpressed. "Yes, thank you, Tristin for the warning. I shan't burn myself upon a hot forge thanks to your admonishment."

I smiled softly. "My point is that there are many ways to detect a conflagration without direct observations. For instance, my scarf. Had you noticed the weave and material, you may have concluded that it was not made by any of the major textile manufacturers on the Sword Coast. In fact, the fiber it was woven from grows only on leeward side of the Dragonsword mountains in Mulhorand and the pattern is not something that can be found within a thousand leagues of here. It was tailored for me by a Mulhorandi weaver. She and her son had escaped slavery in that exotic land, making their way here, to our beloved city. They were being arrested for panhandling in the Castle Ward when I intervened. Now, she owns her own loom and small shop. I'm sure you've never set foot within, or even heard of it.

"In fact, if one were capable of seeing past the distractions of a besieged home, one might notice other such clues. On the underside of the teacups from which you drink, you'll find the seal of Irvel Obarskyr, King of Cormyr. They commemorate the birth of the Princess Readra, which was, as you correctly estimated, about twenty years ago. Only three sets were made, and each was given to those in special service to the newborn Princess. The pastries, to which you've turned up your nose, were given to me by Elminster himself, summoned from some far-off reality called 'Keebler'. I've had them since I was a child and they've never grown stale."

"E-Elmister?" she asked, incredulously. I fiercely locked eyes with her; my point was nearly made.

"Would I be correct in surmising that all that you wear, all that you surround yourself with, was purchased by you, *for* you? You have no trinkets. No items of sentimentality. Nothing gifted to you, as a person. Nothing that conveys conviction or passion. I'm sure you've received gifts from your satisfied clients, but what do they *mean* to you? You've nothing but what others consider 'the best'. You have *payment*. I have *purpose*. My profession is not a transactional relationship. The love I feel for this city and its people is given freely and without expectation. I fully expect to die out there, one day, on the street… or even under it. And I will gladly give my life so that others may live theirs with just a modicum of relief, just the merest *hope* of justice filtering down to the gutters where it desperately belongs.

"My heart is *furnace*, Madam, and only the most oblivious of fools burn themselves upon it by testing me." I glared into her soul. "It is fueled by the gratitude and love of those I have been honored to serve.

"You have nothing to offer me, Madam Sharpe. If I thought, for a *moment*, that the hollow cold within you could be rekindled by passion, any passion beyond that for yourself, I would've considered your offer… and continued to offer mine. Alas, it is not to be."

"WELL." She blurted.

"Well, indeed."

She sat her teacup down, strode across the room, and hastily donned her outerwear. I followed respectfully and assisted her, much to her chagrin.

"Do not expect me to reach out to you again. If you want to live this life of mediocrity and… and *squalor*, so be it. What a *waste*." She sneered at me one last time before slamming the door behind her. With no small sense of satisfaction, I listened to her heeled boots clatter rhythmically down the stairs.

I turned around and sighed. There was still quite a mess yet to clean. At least I had some extra time before the next interview. Best to get started on those books.

Chapter 5

While resetting my bookcase, I found a copy of a book that I had not thought of in a dozen years but was once near and dear to my heart. Unable to help myself, I went to my chair, sat, and, with a smile on my face, perused the pages and let myself be transported back to my college days. The narrative was about a young woman bard in the Harpers, a once powerful, but clandestine, secret organization of do-gooders. It followed her light-hearted misadventures across the Dalelands, taking extra care to describe her 'youthful countenance' and 'supple bosom'. The book was, of course, pure literary trash, but I still held it in high regard, if only for the nostalgia of warm summer nights reading it amidst rhetorical lectures and off-campus social engagements.

I was so engrossed in the heady memories the tome conjured that I nearly jumped out of my skin when the door burst open.

"Ye Gods!" I exclaimed. A figure, large and armored, loomed in the threshold. "Do you *knock*?!", I shouted at it.

"Oh, sorry man." The figure meekly replied. A young, but large, Human man stood before me. He was covered in piecemeal armor and various weapons were secured at seemingly random places around his body. He was covered in containers… pouches, sacks, backpacks, haversacks, and holsters for potions and other immediate-use items. With a thud, he dropped three snow-covered bags onto my floor, just under the standing coat rack. He looked at me expectantly.

He was young, even for a human; he likely hadn't seen thirty Summers. He was ruggedly handsome, with bright blue eyes, a square, scruff covered jaw, and a fashionable scar cut into his left eyebrow. His hair was short, haphazardly cut, but still managed to style itself in a heroic direction. His scars only added to his charm, instead of deforming him. This man was an adventurer. An *adventurer* had shown up at my home. What had I done to deserve this?

"Ya don't mind if I leave my stuff here, do ya?"

I stood and walked to him, still clasping my book. I had also found my beloved pipe, which was lit and happily in my mouth. I felt like I was roughly half this man's size.

"What, exactly, is IN those bags?", I asked suspiciously.

"Just my stuff."

"Your… stuff?"

"Yeah, I don't really have anywhere else to put it, so I just kinda carry everything around with me."

I toed one of the bags. "Nothing dangerous, I presume?"

"Nah, I keep all the alchemist's fire in my backpack. Safer there."

Alchemist fire was a horrid, and ingenious, invention. It was a thick, sticky gel that, when exposed to air, ignited on its own accord, burning long and hot. I winced and gritted my teeth.

"I'm Kyledyr Steelheart, by the way. You Tristin?"

I looked up at him. "I am."

He looked relieved. "Okay, good. I wasn't sure I had the right place. Ooh, nice chairs. Cookies!" Without removing any of his equipment, he walked to the chairs, sat, and began eating the cookies one at a time.

I sighed, tossed my book onto the remaining pile (that he did not seem to notice), and joined him. I marveled how he could possibly sit comfortably with all the armor and gear that protruding from his body. Once the cookies were completely gone, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and without looking, he grabbed, unlatched, drank from, and returned a canteen from the side of his stuffed backpack.

From what I could determine, he was in impeccable physical form. Even from under his armor, it was obvious he was broad-shouldered, narrow-waisted, muscled, and toned. The gear hanging off him, weapons included, was all well-worn, but sturdy. It would've been no shock to me if they had been used in some subterranean monster hole an hour ago. He seemed dangerously naïve, even child-like, but luckily good-natured.

"So… Kyledyr. What brings you to my humble home on this Winter's day?"

"Man, its Winter already? Huh, time flies when you're on the Astral Plane, right?" His smile indicated that he expected me to be in on the joke. I was not.

"Why are you here, Kyledyr?"

"About that… I'm kinda between jobs at the moment." His sheepishness had returned. "I was hoping you needed some kind of help. Ya know, some monster needs killing or some artifact that needs recovern'. I'm pretty good at that stuff. Heck, you don't even have to pay me anything; I usually just find plenty of gold and gems and stuff down in whatever place you'd send me."

"I'm sorry, but I don't believe we've met before today." What was wrong with this young man?

"OH, right. Right. I just don't have anything to *do* right now, so what do you need? I've got a good six or eight hours before I need to sleep."

What in the Hells is he talking about? "There seems to be a misunderstanding. I'm looking for an assistant, maybe even a partner, to help me solve crimes. In the long term, like a job. I work for the City Watch."

"You get into a lot of combat?"

I hesitated. What a bizarre way to speak. "No, not usually. I try to avoid that as much as possible. I'm not normally in situations where there's a threat of violence. It seems you're quite accustomed to it, however."

"Yeah, like three or four big fights a day." He paused, lost in thought. I waited for him to continue. "Can you just give me something to do, please? You don't even have to call it a quest. You need something taken to the other side of the city? I can do that." There was something frantic in his delivery, something sad under the pleading tone. Grief. Perhaps regret. Something terrible had happened to him and he was trying to run from it, occupy his mind so he didn't have to face it. I've seen victims and perpetrators alike react this way countless times.

"What I need is someone who can be honest and transparent with me, Kyledyr. I'll ask you again, why are you here? What are you looking for that you think that I can provide? What I need is *not* to be someone's distraction, but to be a serious commitment."

"Man, I don't know what to do. I usually just went along with whatever the rest of the party said. The Sorcerer was really good at talking to people and she usually got the jobs. All I had to do was kill monsters and protect the casters. Geoff, the Cleric, would even heal me up if I got too chewed up. They're gone, man, and I don't know what to do." His eyes reddened, tears forming on their periphery.

I let concern and sympathy wash over my face. I listened more intently. Being in the presence of an individual with this much power, being so vulnerable, was unnerving. This did nothing to dispel my notion that adventurers were nothing but toddlers with wands of fireballs.

"Your party… is gone?" I tentatively asked.

“Yeah, some big Beholder got them. Once Geoff got petrified, it was all downhill from there. I shoulda stayed and tried to kill it, but Sarina told me run and get help. She was *disintegrated*.”

He stared off into the middle distance. I shuddered to think of the horrors that played behind his eyes. I had heard of ‘Beholders’. They were monsters in the most literal sense; eldritch floating orbs with a large, central eye, a wide toothy maw, and multiple eyestalks that protruded from the top of its spherical body. Legend stated that these creatures could negate magic itself with its central gaze and each writhing eyestalk could emit a different, deadly beam of magic. One could petrify, another could disintegrate, and so forth.

To even confront something like that and live to tell about it, was beyond my ken. The monsters I dealt with were made, not born, and generally walked on two legs.

“I’m… so sorry.”

“It happens. I just… I just need something else to do until I find another party to join. Something not so high level, ya know?” I did not know. “I mean, we’ve taken down umber hulks, a mummy, a mind flayer, a vampire, even that young dragon. I thought we could handle a beholder.”

I had heard of most of those creatures. Each was a menace that could tear me limb from limb with little effort or thought. It then struck me just how powerful this young man was. He faced these sorts of things on a near daily basis. It was his *job*. No one sane would, or could, be an adventurer. They constantly tempt fates far worse than death, often in the most horrendous of locations.

“If I could at least get their bodies, I could get them resurrected. I’ve the diamonds and the gold.” He gestured towards the bags slowly soaking my rug.

I’m ashamed to admit that I could not stop the next question from escaping my lips. “And how much does it cost to resurrect someone?”

“Depends… depends on the temple, and the cleric, ya know. If you do some favors for them, or you’re a follower of that deity, they tend to knock down the gold cost. I’ve got about twenty thousand gold in those bags. I mean, if you count up all the gems and stuff.”

I nearly swallowed my pipe. I wouldn’t see that much money in over two decades with my stipend from the City. He could buy his own fortified keep. He could be a landowner. He could retire, live a life of luxury rivaled by Emperors and Kings, and still have plenty left over for his descendants. Yet, here he sat, in my parlor, covered in blood-splattered armor and bristling with weapons, planning his next excursion into the cursed, monster-filled pits of this world. Madness. Utter madness.

“By the Gods, why would you do that? Do you have any idea what that gold could do for the people of this city? The poor? You could house, clothe, and feed every beggar and leper for the rest of their lives! You could pay for their medical treatment, or even curative magic, if they so needed! I can think of three orphanages *right now* that must feed their children with gruel! What in the Nine Hells is wrong with you, lugging around a dragon’s hoard, like it’s your dirty laundry?”

He stared at me, mouth agape in shock. I stood, unable to contain myself any longer. “I’ve seen adventurers like you take a dozen arrows and brush it off, fall from towers and walk away, drink the deadliest of poisons and merely get queasy for a few moments. You have more power and wealth forgotten in the bottom of your pockets than most people see in a lifetime… and *you don’t know what to DO with yourself*?

“How about something, *anything*, that actually helps the people that live in the real world? You know, the mundane world that your ilk seems to have such disdain for? The one full of people that end up as collateral damage in your schemes and apocalyptic battles, all the while just trying to make it day to day? The one’s who serve your food, who polish your armor, who sell you your fifty feet of rope and ten foot long poles.”

Kyledyr sat back, his gear poking holes into the leather of the sitting chair. He looked like a remorseful child who had been scolded for stealing a cooling pie from a windowsill. “I… we donate money all the time. We tip well wherever we go! I gave a hundred gold to some farmers we saved from ankhegs just a few weeks ago. To pay for damages!”

“Ah, yes, the *destruction of local economies as charity*… I’ve heard about this happening. You adventurers show up in some small town, drop thousands of gold pieces into the local tavern or general store and now you’ve made an oligarch of the innkeeper or created runaway inflation that devastates their once balanced, bucolic lifestyle. Good job, that.” I sneered.

The confusion on his face was infuriating. He had no idea what I was talking about. He didn’t need to. He could just go on his merry way to the next adventure, the next tomb or dungeon or abandoned holy place, loot and ravage it, and move on.

My rant continued, “Your kind think you’re so endangered… so important. The only perils you face are the ones of your own making! You intentionally go into accursed places, stir up whatever ancient evil that laid dormant there, and then drag some hex back to town, inflicting it on the innocent. You have the *nerve* to go into a creature’s lair, disturb its environment, then slay it, and often its offspring, all the while extolling your *heroics*. Fucking *please*.

“The only thing you serve is your own power, your own story. You’ve never dealt with a cholera outbreak due to a dirty well, or miners being lost in a mine collapse, or having to pay local taxes that keep the working class at poverty levels! Oh no, the real problems of this world are just too… too… *boring* for you! You have no idea what it’s like to be a *pawn* in this world!”

He silently stared at me. I could see his mind working, processing what I had so inelegantly blurted out.

“Yeah, I guess not.”

Then uncomfortable silence. For a moment. Then a few. It was unbearable.

“Hey, you remember a few months ago, when that eclipse happened right at noon on the Summer solstice?”

Still heated, I could only acknowledge him with a terse nod.

“Uh, that was some lich in Undermountain who almost darkened the sun for a thousand years. He had this old book and all these cultist who were sacrificing themselves in this big circle around him. He was like halfway done when we figured out that we had to smash the big crystals that floated around him. Once we did that, we could attack him. Rovie the Bard and Matilda the Mage didn’t make it. But the rest of us stopped him. I even stomped on his fill-lack.. his fillakstory-“

“Phylactery”, I offered. It was an arcane object that contains the immortal soul of a powerful undead spellcaster.

“-yeah, that thing, to destroy his soul forever. According to the prophecies, that means he’s gone for good.”

I blinked at him.

“Welp,” Kyledyr said, slapping his knees, “I better head out.” He stood, ripping more holes into my now destroyed leather guest chair, and made for the door. With a grunt, he heaved his bags and sacks over his shoulder and looked back at me.

“Thanks for the cookies.” He stepped through the door, shutting it gingerly as he left.

I just stood there, my adrenaline and righteous indignation both souring inside me.

Epilogue

Waterdeep, Castle Ward, Tristin Fidellis' flat.
17th of Alturiak ("The Claw of Winter", Second Month), 1486 DR
One tenday later...

~

Through a series of gossiping acquaintances and reports from informants inside the Yawning Portal, I've learned that that Aloysuis Fauntleroy, Bard Extraordinaire, descended into the Undermountain with a group of young adventurers over a week ago. Neither he, nor his band of libertines, have been heard from since. Out of curiosity, I paid an arcane colleague of mine to cast a spell of message sending to the Bard, inquiring into his whereabouts and status. There was no response. This could've meant a few things... the most obvious, and likely, of which is that he is simply dead. Not all adventurers emerge from the massive, monster-filled labyrinth that is the Undermountain. He could've been unconscious or otherwise incapacitated in the moment of receiving the magical missive, but I will defer to the great swordsman Occam, and his decree, in this matter.

~

I was called into the understaffed and underfunded morgue in the Dock Ward a few days ago to identify a body. As I had feared, it was Ogden the Laborer. His body was found near a sewer outlet under the docks. He had clearly been beaten to death by multiple assailants with blunt instruments. No doubt in misguided retribution for the mere threat that he might turn snitch. I spent the next day trying to track down a waitress named 'Sheela' in the Dock Ward but came up with nothing. Either she was very good at not being found, or she never existed in the first place. If Ogden had successfully used a sob story on me, that would've only galvanized my respect for the man. His son, if he also existed at all, would never have known the sort of man his father could've become. And now neither would I.

~

I let the failed assassin marinate in the garrison jail for a few days before visiting her. The Mage Civilar ensured that she was sufficiently restrained; none of her magical tricks would provide an escape. When I first laid eyes upon her as she languished in her cell, I was surprised to note that she was a Sea Elf, an uncommon, and generally reclusive, sub-species of aquatic Wild Elf. My first visit to her was unproductive as she refused to speak. At first, I had thought perhaps she was unfamiliar with the Common tongue. So, I used a magical Bardic trick that allows me to communicate through any language barrier. Still, she refused to engage. I returned twice more over as many days and never got her to speak. I employed every tactic and interrogative device at my disposal, which are many and practiced. Still, nothing. I suppose the mystery of why she sought my demise, and who, if anyone, hired her for such a task, will remain a secret for the foreseeable future.

~

For the last few days, Faith Sharpe has occasionally crossed my mind, along with her offer. Was it ego that caused me to react so strongly? Were I so fragile that the mere thought of being a subordinate caused me to lash out so? Or, was it what I kept telling myself... that she was a shallow, materialistic, opportunistic cynic, miserable in the loneliness she crafted for herself at the top of her gilded pedestal? Profession without passion is merely a... job. No, that's no way to live. A life without meaning is not worth living. Good then, that even us mere mortals in the realms of Gods, can create our own meaning. I did feel slightly guilty about the lies I sprinkled into my tirade at the end of her visit. I wondered if later, during recollection, she ascertained which of my narratives were complete and utter deception and which ones were true. I wondered up until the moment I realized that I truly did not care what she thought.

~

Despite my best efforts, I thought of Kyeldyr often over the last tenday. I'd much rather forget that entire interaction. I still didn't care for adventurers, nor would I ever, but now I had the unpleasant experience of self-reflection as to why. My points still stand. There is no debate in my mind. Perhaps, though, they're a necessary evil in this world; the glorified ratcatchers of legend and prophecy. I had to ask a neighbor to help me drag the ruined chair downstairs to the street.

~

'Interview day' was a debacle that I seek to never relive. I was annoyed, possibly lied to, attacked, insulted, and embarrassed… in that order. Perhaps mine *is* a solitary existence. There is an understandable hesitancy in taking up this profession; like adventuring, who would subject themselves to murders, kidnappings, and burglaries on a daily basis, as a matter of course? Why would one choose such a life, when alternatives exist? I could've been a performer. Or a politician. Hells, some days being a *farmer* would be more appealing than examining humanoid remains.

However, it is still difficult to watch as possible futures evaporate. I lament the opportunities not taken. The spoony Bard could've provided an insightful, if irritating, perspective to cases. Oggie could've been truly useful in a myriad of ways *and* found a measure of redemption in the process. I'm beginning to think that the Sea Elf wasn't there for an interview at all (sarcasm doesn't suit me… I should abstain from it). *Could* I have done more good in this city under Madam Sharpe's employ? I wager that now I would never know. I can say, however, with my full chest, that I will never, *ever*, get caught up in the madness that is Adventuring. Not in *this* world, at least.

A dark thought had also been creeping up on me the last tenday: that my search for a sidekick is a purely selfish one. Not only selfish, but possibly *harmfully* so. As I mentally rolled through the cast of characters that I met that day, I tried imagining them handling the rigors of the job. How would they, each in turn, deal with the gore, the frustration, the long days and sleepless nights, the dawning awareness of a case revealing itself to be far more depraved or sinister than initially believed? Could I, in good conscience, choose to expose *anyone* to these ordeals?

No, I shall soldier on, on my own. Perhaps it is better this way; better to limit the disturbing scenarios and corrupted thought processes of the criminal-minded to as few people as possible. Perhaps the protection we at the Watch provide is not merely physical or material, but mental and emotional. Better that we absorb and deal with these traumas, than the public at large. Ignorance, as they say, is bliss.

The End