

Ward ignored Grace; he wasn't going to be murdering anyone in their sleep, let alone Foyle's wife or girlfriend or whoever was softly breathing in there. He reached for the door latch and, slower than cold molasses dripping off a spoon, he twisted it open. Then, just as slowly, he pushed the door open a crack so he could peer through. The curtains were partially drawn, so it was very dark in the room, but Ward could make out a bed, a dresser, a wardrobe, some stacked books, and a few piles of clothes. On the bed, he saw, beneath a thin blanket, the slumbering forms of a rotund man and a much smaller woman.

Ward stared at the man for a minute, examining his features in the sliver of moonlight, from the thin, stringy long hair to the puffy cheeks, jowly jaws, and thick, bulbous nose. Watching him snore, struggling with something like sleep apnea, an idea came to Ward. He gently closed the door and then backtracked to the doorway leading to what he'd come to realize was the upstairs apartment's only bathroom. He'd seen it on his way to the far bedroom, and now he slipped inside, closing the door halfway, just as he'd found it.

"Giving up?" Grace hopped onto the cluttered bathroom counter, knocking aside some fragile-looking perfume bottles. Ward almost scolded her, but then he remembered that she wasn't really knocking the perfume over. Just like the footprints she left while walking, the disturbance was only in Ward's head. If he looked away and back, the perfume bottles would be there, undisturbed.

"How old you reckon that man is?" Ward whispered.

"Older than you. Fifties? Maybe sixty?"

"Right. It's just about midnight, and if I know anything about an aging prostate, that guy's going to be up to take a piss soon."

Grace's eyes narrowed, and Ward could see she wanted to argue with him, but she shook her head and said, "You're probably right."

"Yeah, but if I'm wrong, and it's more like an hour or two, that's a long time to leave those guys lying around in the alley. What if they wake up?"

"After the way you cracked their heads?"

"Well, it's possible." Ward was barely whispering, but even so, he almost missed the creak of floorboards preceding the clumsy rattle of a door latch. He froze, then, holding a finger to his lips, slipped behind the bathroom door. Despite knowing no one would hear her, Grace respected his desire to keep quiet, and suddenly, she was beside him, pressed tightly into the corner between the door and the wall.

She whispered, "Sounds like him."

Ward nodded and waited. A deep, rattling cough sounded from the hallway, then the grumbling mutter of a guy still half asleep as he fumbled his way down the dim hallway. The dimness was short-lived, though; Ward could see a pool of light approaching through the crack between the door and the jam, and then Foyle was there, pushing the door open to the point Ward had to turn his feet sideways to keep it from bumping his toes. Foyle stumbled into the bathroom. He set his little flickering lamp on the counter, then went straight for the copper toilet, lifting his

weird, old-timey sleeping gown to allow a clear shot as his urine began to spurt and trickle into the bowl.

Ward switched his blood-stained club to his left hand and slowly pulled the knife he'd taken from the killer off his belt. He crept up behind Foyle and, faster and more adroitly than he'd thought he was capable of, he slipped his club-wielding left arm around the older, much-heavier man, and, as he jerked him back, holding him pinned, he pressed the edge of the blade against his throat. "Be quiet, or you're dead."

Foyle jerked at first, utterly startled, mid-stream. His piss sprayed all over the back of the toilet and onto the wainscoting, and he gasped in surprise. Even so, he settled down immediately when he felt the blade on his neck and heard Ward's words. "What is it? I don't keep many glories on hand, but you can have them!"

"I said be quiet," Ward growled. He backed up two steps, dragging Foyle with him, and then he closed the door with his foot. Still squeezing him tight with his left arm, digging the stubble on his chin into the broker's soft, pudgy neck, Ward hissed into his ear, "Consider yourself dead already. I'm fully intending to kill you, but I might change my mind if you answer my questions honestly. Understand?"

"Ye-yes," Foyle stammered.

"Why'd you hire goons to kill the local girl who went into the catacombs? Why try to murder the guy who came out with her?"

"Who, um, who are you?"

Ward squeezed him and pressed the edge of the knife into his flesh, cutting him slightly, though nothing much worse than a shaving nick. "Answer the question."

"I didn't hire them!" At the man's quavering protestation, Ward squeezed him, cranking the hard, wooden club under his knife-wielding arm for pressure. He jostled him hard, letting the knife nick him again. "I swear! A man came to me, a madman! He, he had a voice that rattled my brain. He paid me a hundred glories for the names of some hard men, and then he left!" When Ward didn't relent, holding the knife tight to his neck, Foyle continued to stammer, "He was bald with a tattooed head. He said he wanted men who'd kill for coin, and when I told him to get out of my shop, he spoke a word like them wizards do, and my ears started to bleed. I saw nightmares! Nightmares in the middle of the day! You have to believe me!"

"So you gave him the names?"

"Of course! I was peeing myself worse than I am right now! That man was insane! His eyes were bloody. His skin was colorless; just looking at him made me shiver. He spoke in riddles and, and his tongue . . . His tongue was silver, and he kept sliding it out of his mouth over his lips . . ." Ward could feel Foyle's involuntary shudder as his words trailed off.

"He's not lying, Ward." Suddenly, Grace was there, standing atop the copper toilet bowl, looking at Ward from overtop Foyle's head. "I've been around a long time, as you know. I can spot a lie, and this guy's spilling his guts for you. I'd still kill him, in any case. He's likely to stir up trouble about you breaking into his house and bashing his goons' skulls in." Ward tuned her out as he thought. He'd killed plenty of people, sure, but never via ambush in the middle of the night while

they took a piss in their bathrobe. Did he like Foyle? No, but he also wasn't feeling angry enough at the moment to do the deed. He didn't feel like he could just slit the old bastard's neck and let him bleed out on the bathroom floor.

"Listen to me, you crooked, dirty bastard," he growled into the man's red, veinous ear. "The men that guy hired failed, and the one from out of town, the big guy, he's pissed. He's looking for vengeance, and if he catches wind that you're nosing around or causing any more trouble, he'll work a spell on you that'll make whatever that little bald guy did feel like warm pancakes. You understand?"

"Yes, yes!" He tried to nod, but the knife was too tight to his flesh.

"I had to rough up your goons a little to deliver this message. Make that mess go away and then forget about this or whatever he sends to visit you in the night will be much, much worse than me. Clear?"

"C-clear."

"When I let go of you, lay down on your belly and close your eyes. Count to a hundred before you move. I swear to everything that's holy, if you so much as peep in my direction, I'll put this knife into your heart."

"I won't! I swear!" As if to prove his good intentions, Foyle screwed his eyes shut and slapped his sweaty, thick palms over his face. Ward gave him a shove toward the toilet and watched as he flopped down to his knees with a groan and then laid flat on his stomach. As soon as he was down, Ward slipped out the door and hurried out of the house. He figured he was out the back door in less than ten seconds. None of his clubbing victims had moved, and he began to have some serious doubts about their likelihood of ever waking again as he hurried past their insensate forms and up the alley.

He kept his hat tucked low, and after a few steps, he tossed the well-used, hardwood cudgel onto the roof of a dark-windowed tenement. All the while he was walking down the dark alley, then across the street and into another alley, Grace kept up a running diatribe about how stupid he was. He mostly tuned her out, but as he put more and more distance between himself and Foyle's place, he finally looked at her and said, "I'm not a cold-blooded killer, and that guy didn't do the murdering. You said so yourself—he wasn't lying. I couldn't see myself slitting his throat."

"He's probably gathering up his city watch buddies right now to come to the Hen's Nest and arrest you."

"He never saw my face."

"Unless he's an idiot, he'll either think it was you or someone you sent his way."

Ward turned out of the alley onto a major boulevard, leading him north toward the central part of town. "He was terrified, Grace. Maybe you can't recognize that the way I can, but that guy was scared shitless. He's just glad to be alive. Having a knife at your throat in a place you feel safe is a cold wake-up call, trust me. He's going to spend the next few days beefing up his security. At night, when his pride starts to show itself, when he starts to think about finding me and teaching me a lesson, he's going to remember that cold blade on his neck, he's going to

remember that I threatened him with magic worse than Nevkin's, and he's just going to be glad he's alive."

"Ugh! I don't get it. You could have just ended the problem right then and there."

"He's only a part of the problem, part of a weed, but not the roots. I need to leave town to get to the roots."

"Nevkin."

"Exactly." Ward felt pretty conspicuous walking quickly through the shadows in the chilly midnight air. Far fewer people were out and about than had been when he'd headed for Foyle's place an hour ago. "Shit. You suppose there's some kind of curfew? Have we heard anyone mention one?"

"Nope, nothing I can recall, and you know I have a good memory." Grace padded nearly silently beside him, her habitually bare feet making occasional soft slapping sounds on the cobbles. "You know, the way that man described Nevkin; that wasn't something someone comes up with out of the blue. He really meant those words about his eyes bleeding and his flesh being too pale. I think Nevkin bit off more than he could chew with that tongue artifact." Grace barked a laugh, slapping her hands together. "Did you catch that? Bit off more than he could chew?"

Ward humored her with a snort, shaking his head. "If you feel you have to explain the joke, it probably wasn't a good one."

"Slow down! City watch up at the corner."

Ward sidestepped into the shadowy doorway of a closed tea shop and peered up the slightly sloping road to the next corner. Sure enough, a uniformed member of the city watch was leaning on the lamppost, smoking from a long, slender pipe. Ward glanced behind him, saw an alley opening two buildings down, and hustled for it, keeping close to the buildings, hunching over so he wouldn't look like himself if the guard glanced his way. He didn't want anyone saying he was wandering the town in the middle of the night in case the city watch somehow caught wind of Foyle's brutalized henchmen. "In case that little shit backs out of his promise."

"Foyle? You're really going to count on him to stay quiet?"

"We've been over that," Ward said, ducking into the alley and hurrying toward the next street. "The guy was terrified. I didn't make him look bad in front of his guys, so he won't feel he has to save face by getting back at someone. If he's smart, he'll blame the assault on a botched robbery." Grace didn't respond, and Ward kept hurrying through the streets. He had to duck another member of the watch when he passed through the central market square, but after that, it was smooth sailing back to the Hen's Nest. When he approached, he saw lights still on in the common room. Music drifted into the night, and Ward figured some guests were up drinking, reluctant to call it a night.

"You don't want them to see you coming in."

"Yeah." Ward circled the block, found the alley leading behind the row of buildings, including the inn, and worked his way in, shoving past the piled crates, burn barrels, and a narrow cart missing one of its wooden wheels. When he reached the inn's back door, he wasn't surprised to

see the kitchen door held ajar by a cinderblock and to smell the unmistakable aroma of baking bread. Was Fan getting a head start on the morning baking? He pulled the door open and slipped inside, getting a good look at Fan's kitchen for the first time.

It was very much as he'd imagined—two big ovens with gas ranges atop, a long copper sink that looked a lot like a watering trough, counters covered with dishes and plates, stacks of grain sacks, and a red wooden door with the word "Cellars" written in flowery yellow paint. Fan was working at a butcherblock counter, flipping and slapping a huge wad of dough. She looked up when Ward pulled the door closed against the cinder block, scowling. When she saw who it was, her frown turned into a smile. "Oh? Slipping in the back door? A lady in the common room you're avoiding?"

"Hah! I wish it were something like that. I, uh, would rather people weren't aware I was out and about this late at night." Ward took his hat off and held it in front of himself, trying to offer Fan a winning smile.

"Are you asking me to pretend I didn't just see you slip in? Well, as far as I know, you just came down from your room for a midnight snack. Why don't you grab a plate there and look in the icebox around the corner? I've got some leftover cookies."

"You know, Fan, you're pretty great. Did anyone ever tell you that?"

"Mhmm, you're not the first man to stay here who was up to no good in the middle of the night. Good thing I like you." She winked at him and then, slamming her dough down with a *slap* and a puff of flour from the board, added, "Take off your coat and leave it with your hat here. I'll bring 'em up after everyone's gone so it doesn't look like you just came in."

"Thanks!" Ward did just as she said. He left his coat and hat on a stool in the corner, got himself a plate of oatmeal cookies and a glass of milk, and then walked through the common room and up the stairs to his room. None of the drinking, carousing late-night revelers so much as gave him a second glance. He wasn't sure what to expect when he entered his room; the last he'd heard from Haley was that she'd agreed to stay at the inn. He didn't know if that meant he was giving up his bed or what. His room was empty, though, and dark, and when he lit a lamp and looked around, he found only his things.

Grace walked around the room somewhat despondently. "I hope Fay let her stay with her."

"Yeah, me too. If she went home, I'm going to be worried." Ward frowned, then shrugged and set his snack on the little table. He took off his clothes and hung them with his other new garments in the standing wardrobe, then sat down in his underclothes and took a bite of one of the big, chewy cookies, savoring the rich, sugary, buttery flavor. "God, I was hungry."

"Murdering people is tiring work."

"That wasn't murder! It was a fight."

"So? What's the plan?" Grace sat beside him, closing her eyes and smiling while Ward chewed on another bite.

"Good, huh?" Grace nodded, and he grinned, drinking down half the glass of milk. "Tomorrow, I'll hopefully get my new armor delivered and hear from the guy trying to make my bullets."

Depending on what he says, we might leave in a day or two. I want to catch up with Nevkin and figure out what the hell his deal is. He was a little snooty when we met, but he was smart and capable, and I didn't think he was the kind of guy to hire murderers and put the fear of God into a seasoned bookie.

Grace nodded. "I think the artifact is corrupting him. I think he was too weak to use it, to take it in. I've heard stories about things like that. It's almost like a curse, I guess. Try to use an artifact stronger than you are, with a more potent personality, and it's likely to take over."

"So you figure this thing, the, uh, warlock's silver tongue, is behind his sudden backstabbing, murderous streak?" When Grace nodded, Ward sniffed, polished off his cookie, and downed his milk. "Best get some sleep, then. I have a feeling the city watch is going to be poking around in the morning, and I want to be sharp. I also need to tell Haley I killed the guy who killed her parents. I need to explain why I didn't kill Foyle. Yeah, it's going to be another tiring day."