

Overhead

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Light from lanterns on the porch and in the windows didn't reach all the way across the road. The crew couldn't have hoped for a stronger array of camouflage than the tree line and slope dropping off right behind it—though they could've done without the relentless rain. And the cold wind. And the mud. Especially the mud.

A sign bearing the seal and name of the Cozy Coyote swung in the wind over the door. The carved and illustrated namesake of the inn smiled out at the darkness, curled in front of a nice fireplace. Grinning. Smugly.

"Do you see either of them yet?" Scars kept his voice low and his posture, too, crouching behind a thick tree trunk at the edge of the ridge. His cloak looked lumpy and odd thanks to the crossbow and shield beneath it, but hopefully no strangers would see him out here. If they did, he hoped he wouldn't have to use either.

"No. You see better in the dark than me, anyway," whispered the young woman at his side. Like Scars, Teryn hid under a wet cloak and hood and kept her weapons slung and sheathed. "You all do."

The half-orc could see his breath escape from between his tusks. "Not with just enough light to spoil it."

"Ah. I didn't know it worked that way." A shiver overtook her breath, but she tried to hide it. "We'd have heard something if they were discovered."

"I'm not worried, just annoyed," Scars grumbled. "Revenge work is the worst. Retrieval isn't much better. It's work on spec. Sure, you can loot the fallen if they've got anything worth taking, but most of it is probably stolen anyway. What do you do? Keep the shit they stole for yourself?"

"Anna said she only wanted her ring and the necklace if we could get them back," said Teryn. "She told us to keep any coin."

"She let us sleep on her floor and cooked breakfast for all of us. Sent us out with three days of potatoes and fresh vegetables, too. This is a giant pain in the ass with almost nothing to gain for it, but I'm not keeping money someone stole from the one nice farmer we've met in weeks." When Teryn didn't respond to his grumbling, Scars grew suspicious. "You're grinning under that hood, aren't you?"

“I’m not,” she lied.

“You are.”

“It’s the cold and rain. My mouth is shivering.”

“How are you holding up?”

“I’m fine.” Teryn didn’t complain. None of them did. “I can slip around the curve to ask Yargol and War Cloud.”

“Be careful,” Scars murmured.

“Always.” She turned to move—and promptly slid down the ridge as the mud beneath her gave way. “Shitshitshit!” Teryn hissed, but to her credit, didn’t yelp. A quick turn and roll let her catch one thin tree with her boot, arresting her slide. Mud, water, and several arrows fallen from the quiver on her back all sloshed past her like a small wake.

Wet, filthy, and disheveled already, Teryn let her head fall back against the ground. “Fuck.”

Rustling leaves and the squish of wet soil heralded the arrival of a tall, muscular shadow of chain mail, hardened leather, and fur. She could barely make out the silhouette of his hyena-like head, but War Cloud’s inhuman appearance didn’t scare her. “You alright?”

“I get it now,” she sighed. “I get the attraction of living underground.”

“Caves can get wet, too. It’s how most of them became caves.”

Big hands reached down for her shoulders. “Oh, you don’t have to—oh,” said Teryn. The gnoll had her upright before she had the words out of her mouth. “Thanks.”

“That didn’t sound great. You aren’t hurt?” asked War Cloud.

“Sure I broke an arrow or two, but I’m fine. Filthy on top of being soaked, is all.” Teryn flung a little of the mud from her hands. It hardly made a difference. “And feeling incompetent. I’m usually more graceful than this.”

“They say adventurers always have a five percent chance of fucking up anything, even if it’s their best trick,” said Scars. He held his spot atop the ridge.

Teryn blinked. “Did you just call me an adventurer?”

“If I’m labeling you, I’m labeling all of us,” Scars grumbled.

“Wow. You really are cranky, aren’t you?” War Cloud laughed.

“Not without reason,” said a robed figure emerging at War Cloud’s side. Standing only half as tall as the gnoll, Yargol leaned on his ornate staff with one hand and War Cloud’s hip with the other. His hands didn’t match—the right leathery and dark, the left covered in brown fur. Softly

glowing eyes under his dark robe were different, too, one red and one yellow. Night and shadow covered the jumble of features and stitches beneath his robe. Nothing about Yargol matched. “I have fallen twice already myself.”

Yargol’s hand left the stability of War Cloud’s hip to twitch and curl his fingers at Teryn, ending with a snap. Mud and water fell from her clothing and skin all at once, leaving her perfectly clean and dry. The latter didn’t remain true for more than an instant in the rain, but it made a difference. “Thank you,” said Teryn.

“Anytime.” Yargol flicked his wrist at Scars to cast the same spell, and then to War Cloud. Both enjoyed a moment’s relief and comfort. “This is little effort.”

“It’s gotta be tedious, at least,” said Scars. He held his spot on the ridge, but now had his back to the road and the inn to face the others. “We can’t keep asking.”

“You can,” Yargol assured him. “It’s our best comfort in such miserable weather, and it costs me nothing.”

Scars frowned, but a returning figure behind him interrupted his discomfort. Shady Tooth slipped past him to put a tree at her back. Nearly as large as War Cloud but with darker fur and muscular, catlike features, the bugbear moved with unnerving silence. “Did Teryn fall?”

“Yes. You heard me all the way over there?” Teryn sighed. “Of course, you did.”

“Not your fault. Big ears,” said the last of the crew. DigDig arrived at Shady Tooth’s side. The jade goblin was little taller than Yargol, clad in leather armor and a horned helmet. “Fall was mostly quiet. Good job.”

“Thanks,” Teryn muttered.

“What’s the story?” asked Scars.

“There are a few dozen people inside, mostly human and a handful of dwarves,” Shady Tooth began. “Three of them fit the descriptions that farmer gave us. Almost everyone is on the bottom floor for dinner. They’ve got a bard performing in there, too.”

“A bard or a minstrel?” asked Scars.

“What’s the difference?”

“Did you see a weapon or any magic?”

“Were they cute?” asked Teryn.

“How the hell would I know?” Shady Tooth scowled at her. She wasn’t alone. “Humans.”

“It could be a clue,” Teryn mumbled.

“Bards are usually adventurers,” Scars explained. “Could be trouble. Any others?”

“Not likely. I didn’t see any weapons or armor other than with the bandits,” said Shady Tooth.

“A place this nice will have at least some muscle to deal with drunks,” Scars thought out loud. “Probably more to protect from robbery. We’re outside of town. Help is some distance off.”

“Second floor is mostly dark,” DigDig continued. “Six rooms. Some have stuff like people are staying there. Others are empty except for furniture. Windows can open from outside.”

“They can? That seems a little odd,” said Teryn.

“Don’t think they’re *supposed* to open that way, but I can do it,” DigDig corrected. “Building is solid. Wood’s thick. Can slip a parchment through the windows to lift the latch, though. Hey, Yargol?”

The little mage cast his spell on DigDig and Shady Tooth, freeing fur and clothes from twenty minutes of rain. DigDig sighed. “Thanks.”

“War Cloud?” asked Scars.

The gnoll shook his head. “My goddess reveals every warm and welcoming hearth within two leagues. Every cold hearth, too. This one is something different. It is almost welcoming, but uneasy.”

“Is it too much to ask your hearth goddess to explain what that means?” asked Shady Tooth.

“Dastia has already kept us from knocking on the wrong doors,” said War Cloud. “It’s more than we’d know without her aid.”

“I don’t need her to guess how most humans feel about goblin folk at their doors. Not much of a mystery,” Shady Tooth replied.

“She brought us to Anna,” Teryn pointed out. She nodded to the inn. “Maybe this town isn’t as keen on the edict of banishment as others? I could go in and find out.”

“Or go in and get recognized,” said Shady Tooth.

“It’s a risk.” Teryn agreed. “I doubt it would happen. Traveling alone would be the real point of suspicion, especially in all this.”

“I imagine coming back out into this mess again would be weird, too,” said War Cloud. “Who would do that?”

Teryn could only answer that with an uncomfortable shrug. She hadn’t complained, but Scars knew she was miserable out here. Yargol had the worst of it, even with his magic, but he toughed it out like the rest. War Cloud did his best to keep spirits up, which spoke to his sense of the

crew's discomfort—one he likely shared. He followed a hearth goddess, after all. Shady Tooth feigned indifference, but of the whole crew, DigDig was likely the only one who actually did feel indifferent.

Though he didn't want to admit it, Scars missed sleeping in an actual bed. He glanced across the muddy, rain-swept road to the inn. "Alright. We're doing this, and we're getting paid."

"Yeah?" asked DigDig.

"Yeah, but maybe not in coin. Teryn and I will go inside to get a room, but you're already going to be there. DigDig, pick an empty room and take everyone else up. Quietly."

"I can carry Yargol. War Cloud is no burglar," warned Shady Tooth, glancing to him. "Do you think you can do this?"

"I can climb a rope in the dark," War Cloud answered. He looked to Scars. "How will you get by? You plan to keep your head bowed into your hood all the way up to our room?"

"No. Teryn, do you still have that bandit mask?" Scars looked from her to Yargol. "And could I borrow your staff?"

* * *

"Oh, finally! We're saved," Teryn exhaled on her way through the door. Her load was already lighter without her weapons, but the interior was still a relief. Warmth and light washed over her, along with music from one corner and chatter all around. She looked back to the door before it shut. "Samuel? We made it. I told you, see?"

"Uh-huh hurrgh," Scars wheezed. He staggered in with his hooded head bowed and a gloved hand up over his masked face. With his shield out over his cloak and his crossbow gone, he cut a more natural silhouette. Stooping and coughing drew at least a little attention away from his size. "Sure did," he rasped.

Heads looked up from conversations and meals. The musician in the fine velvet jerkin kept on performing *The Snows of Calamost* with his lute, but even he looked up. His welcoming smile stood out from the wary curiosity of others—and those eager to keep the cold out. "Close the door!" someone demanded.

"Oh, sorry, sorry," Teryn fussed. She whirled around Scars to pull it shut.

Left to stand on his own, Scars leaned on Yargol's staff, high enough for a suitable walking stick for someone of his height. He lifted his eyes to take in the crowd and found their marks without much trouble. All three bandits sat close together at a table in the opposite corner: one bald, one bearded, the last with tattoos along the sides of his scalp, and all of them brawny, weathered, and armed. All three watched Teryn throw her hood back to reveal her pretty face, as Scars more than half expected.

"Help you, miss?" asked a low voice—from a low point. Scars turned to find a dwarf staring right up into his hood. That bushy red beard couldn't hide his scowl. "Are you wearing a mask?"

"It's a sca—ah—arf," Scars coughed into his hand.

"I'm sorry, my companion is ill," Teryn explained with a higher tone and sharper enunciation than she normally used. It seemed like something she preferred to leave behind, but she knew the trappings of nobility. "He joined me as an escort, but it turns out I'm the one helping him. Are you the innkeeper?"

"One of 'em," said the dwarf. "Helgo. Welcome to the Cozy Coyote. You are?"

"Meredith. Meredith of Blackstone," Teryn added. "Have you any rooms available, sir?"

"Sure." Helgo cast another suspicious glance up at Scars. "Come over to the counter."

Teryn kept to her role, guiding Scars by the arm to follow the innkeeper. Conversation and drinking picked up again. Scars risked a few more looks to confirm Shady Tooth's assessment of the inn. The bottom floor couldn't have held more than thirty people at most, with somewhat more men than women, and few of either looking particularly rough—mostly the very men they came to find. A few glowstones in wall sconces were the only signs of magic evident.

"Rooms aren't cheap here, I should warn you." Behind the counter, Helgo kicked a stool into place and stepped up with a ledger. "They go for a gold a night. It's yours until midday. If that's too steep, we'll allow floor space here in the tavern for a silver, but you're at the mercy of the crowd for peace and quiet. That's not likely until after we stop serving at eleven."

"Oh, a room is no problem if you have one," said Teryn. "That's quite reasonable."

Helgo raised an eyebrow. "If we're cleaning up after someone's sickness, we charge an extra two silvers."

"Perfectly fine. We'll take a room, please."

"Two rooms," Scars rasped.

“Two?” Teryn blinked. “Oh. Yes. If you’re sure. I didn’t want to leave you alone. We’ll take two rooms, if you have them.”

“Sure do,” said Helgo. “Paid in advance. Sign your name, please...and sign for him.” He laid a quill and ink on the counter. Across the floor, the musician finished his song to warm applause. As soon as Teryn finished and dropped three gold coins on the counter, Helgo handed over the keys. “Rooms five and six. They’re marked.”

Scars noticed the applause dying off. “Huh?” he grunted at Helgo.

“Five and six.”

He cupped one hand to his ear. “Louder?”

“She’s in room five and you’re in room six!” Helgo barked.

“Thanks. Sorry. Ears are stuffed up.”

“That’s quite fine, Samuel. Let’s get you upstairs where you can dry off and we’ll get you something warm to eat.” Teryn led Scars across the tavern floor, politely working her way past benches and tables. “Pardon us, pardon, so sorry. Careful, Samuel. Don’t slip.”

He grunted and coughed. She knew exactly how to be warmly polite and patronizing towards the help all at once. Scars was glad this was only an act, but whoever taught her the role had earned his hatred.

“Milady? May I be of assistance?” The musician intercepted them at the last table, offering a hand and also a radiant smile beneath blond locks. “Alston Silvernote, at your service.”

“Silvernote?” Scars muttered under his breath.

“Is your man sick?” Silvernote continued. “Your... husband?”

“No, no,” Teryn laughed with nerves Scars hadn’t heard from her before. “I mean, yes, he’s ill. Very ill. But he’s not my husband. He’s my escort. On the road,” she corrected quickly.

“I see. Nevertheless, if I may be of service?”

“Nn-nh,” Scars coughed.

“No, I think we’re fine. Sc-Samuel only needs to get to bed,” said Teryn.

“Will you be down later?” Silvernote asked.

“Ah...yes...yes, maybe? I might.”

“Splendid. I look forward to seeing more of you.”

Grunting louder, Scars feigned a slight stumble and steadied himself on Silvernote’s shoulder with a strong hand. He leaned in. “Your D-string is wound too tightly and you’re sliding into

head voice,” he said quietly. Catching a stunned look from the musician, Scars clapped his shoulder in thanks and heaved himself up onto the stairs.

“Ah. Thank you, Alston.” Teryn gripped Scars by the arm to follow him up. “What was that?”

“Needed to know if he’s a bard,” said Scars.

“And?”

“Can’t be sure. They usually have a little more in the shoulders for swinging a sword. And he didn’t offer to heal me with the power of music. What do you think?”

“I don’t know bards...but now I have to talk with Shady Tooth about what ‘cute’ means.”

Scars twitched, but didn’t broach the subject. Better to leave that one alone.

The stairs brought them to a single hallway lined with six rooms. Safely alone, Scars dropped his act of illness to check out their lodgings. He found Room Five empty, but Teryn caught a hiss in the darkness of Room Six. “In here,” said Shady Tooth.

Drawn into the room with Teryn, Scars closed the door behind himself. All four companions emerged from the shadows and cover of furniture. Even War Cloud had done a decent job of hiding himself. “How’s it look down there?” he asked.

“Busy,” answered Scars. “The innkeeper looked a little suspicious, but I think he’s happy to take our coin. It’s noisy enough to cover us up here. The bandits took notice of us, and I think we baited the hook well enough. Now we need to make sure they go for it.”

“How do we do that?” asked War Cloud.

“We look vulnerable. They’re more likely to hit us alone than together. Teryn, you want to go back downstairs and get something to eat?”

“That seems a little—oh,” Teryn frowned, then sighed as the thought caught up to her. “Yeah, that’s exactly the type I want to fit, isn’t it?” She tossed her backpack and cloak onto the table against one wall and ran her fingers through her wet hair. “You’re sick and supposedly alone, and I’m more likely to scream. Makes sense. They might assume I’ve got all the coin and decide to focus on me anyway. What then?”

“Then scream,” said Scars.

“Fair enough. I doubt I’m half the actor you are, though. Bit of a surprise there,” she added.

“So don’t act. You said the minstrel’s cute. Just get him talking about himself or his art. That usually works with performers.”

“Cute?” Shady Tooth made a face. Busily stowing stuff behind the bed, DigDig popped up with almost the same look. Even Yargol’s glowing, mismatched eyes took on different sizes.

“It’s not about that. I recognize his name. He wrote the Ballad of—I’m just gonna go,” Teryn mumbled, and then she did.

“No telling how long this will take. We should get settled, but ready,” said Scars. Then he frowned. “Why are you all looking at me like that?”

“He’s cute?” asked Shady Tooth.

“How cute?” asked War Cloud.

“You think I know?” Scars snapped.

Yargol shook his head. “I have almost no sense of these things.”

“This important?” DigDig asked from the other side of the bed. When the others turned on him, he shrugged. “Said we’re getting paid. How?”

“Room and board,” answered Scars. “Look outside and look in here. Which do you prefer?”

DigDig shrugged.

War Cloud’s jaw dropped. “You can’t be serious.”

“Sleep fine either way. Best I ever slept was when that ghouel clawed me up. Fine ever since.”

“You nearly died that night. Your wounds were seared shut,” said Yargol.

“Yeah, but I had a crew. Still do.”

Struck speechless by the sentiment, three of his crew stared back at him. Only one other could speak. “He’d better not be *that* cute,” grumbled Shady Tooth.

* * *

“Like a summer sunrise, and lighting up the darkness twice in one night.” Alston settled in at Teryn’s table as soon as the applause for his last song died down. “How is your escort?”

“Resting now. I’m sure he’ll be out cold soon enough. I’ve already ordered, but may I get you a drink when the server returns?” Teryn offered.

“That is most kind.” Alston leaned back and ran his left hand through his hair with a flourish. “I did not expect to have such fine company tonight. What brings you to our town?”

“Only traveling home from a family visit. We thought the snows would be melted by now, but we thought it would be warmer and drier than this, too. What about you? Is this your home?”

“A small stop on a longer tour. Travel makes for greater inspiration.”

“And recognition. I’ve heard your songs before. You have to tell me how they were written,” she added. Scars was right about keeping the attention off herself and her thin story. “Is there a tale behind the Ballad of—oh, thank you,” she interrupted, smiling warmly at Helgo’s arrival. The dwarf delivered a small platter with bread, stew, and a mug of hot tea. “Ah, could you also bring a drink for our minstrel?”

While Alston threw in his choice of drinks, Teryn’s attention turned to movement at the corner table. All three bandits rose and turned to the stairs, assuring her the plan would go off without a hitch—until she saw a fourth man turn to the stairs with them. He was thinner than the rest, bearing no weapon and seemingly no threat. Then she noticed the slender rod he pulled from his belt and the red jewel at one end.

Her friends planned for three bandits. They didn’t expect four, and certainly not a mage. Even that was within their ability to handle, but perhaps not quietly. The hall didn’t offer a way to get behind the bandits to block an escape. If things got noisy, the rest of the tavern’s guests might be alerted. Discovery of armed goblin folk in this tavern could get ugly fast.

Teryn needed to stay inconspicuous, too. Taking her eyes off the bandits before her attention was noticed, she returned her gaze to her company and her table...and her meal. “You know what? Samuel could probably use this right now.” Teryn scooped the bowl off the little platter and stood. “I’ll be right back.”

“But—er—now?” Silvernote blinked.

* * *

“Magic would be quieter and more efficient,” Yargol murmured in the darkness.

“Didn’t you say your only silent spell would knock out everyone in the room?” War Cloud asked from the other side of the armoire.

“In this small an area, everyone but myself, yes.”

“That’s not efficient,” Shady Tooth hissed from the rafters.

“Says you,” Scars said under the blankets. “I’m already tucked in.”

“Right?” agreed the goblin beneath the bed.

“You wouldn’t be comfortable after I fall on top of—sshh,” Shady Tooth warned. The rest of the crew fell silent. None of the others heard anything at first, but the subtle click of metal in the lock at the door warned of new arrivals. The bandits tread quietly outside. It spoke to their care and competence, but perhaps not their judgment.

Scars turned his back toward the door, covered by blankets and by watchful friends nearby. He barely heard the lock give way and the tiniest creak of the door. If not for the hyper-vigilance brought by impending danger, he’d never have heard it. Even the noise of the tavern hall below didn’t rise significantly with the open door.

That thought opened his eyes in the darkness. He really didn’t hear much difference between the open door and having it closed a second before. That didn’t make sense at all. The open door should have let in more light, too, but the reflection in the window on the far wall would’ve led him to think the hallway outside had gone dark.

Barely discernible shadows moved in the darkness. The softest of footsteps crept up to the bed. The door creaked again, almost surely closing. Scars felt the inarticulate but certain sense of someone standing over him, someone with a blade, all too close and all too quiet.

Shady Tooth swung down from the hips with her legs still braced in the rafters. Long arms planted her knives in each of the bandit’s lungs. War Cloud whirled around the armoire with his blade in line with the second bandit’s throat. Neither man saw their end coming.

That left only one remaining, turning to the door in sudden terror. A staff from the darkest corner of the room slammed into the back of his knees, taking his balance and all of his momentum. Yargol left the rest to DigDig, who rolled out from under the bed with his shovel up and swinging. A skull-splitting metallic clang against the bandit’s head left him collapsing on the floor.

Reacting purely to the sounds, Scars threw off the blankets and rose from the bed. “Magic,” he warned, but even his voice came out too softly. His companions had to sense it as well, but little Yargol in his black robes was practically invisible in these shadows, even with the eyes Scars inherited from his mother. War Cloud and Shady Tooth had bodies to move out of the way. Though he practically kicked DigDig on the way to the door, he couldn’t stop for care or concern. The ambush wasn’t over. It may have come undone already.

Scars wrenched the door open with a dagger in hand. Though the enchanted stones in the wall sconces still glowed, they gave off little light. The silence held. Looking to one side and then the

next, Scars found a thin man in rugged but common clothing not far from the door, one arm out to his side and the other raised with a wand in hand.

Their eyes met. The wand came down to point at Scars, its ruby red tip glowing with magic.

A bowl swept around the man's face from behind, smothering his mouth with hot brown liquid while a dagger pierced his throat. The mage died awkwardly, held in place and kept silent with Teryn's unexpected tools and grim resolve.

"Is that stew?" Scars asked, his voice still muffled in the darkness.

"I thought you might be hungry." Teryn frowned, noticing the same effect. "The spell is still in—oh!" she blinked.

Silver light banished the darkness from behind her and returned the hallway to normal sounds. Alston Silvernote stood at the top of the stairs, a glowing rapier in his hand. "What have you done to those men?" he demanded.

"Hell, he *is* a bard," Scars grumbled.

"Those men were bandits! We were hired by one of their victims to deal with them," Teryn began. "We can prove everything. No need to fight."

Silvernote sneered. "No, those were my clients. I'm the buyer for their wares."

"Why would you stand there and tell us you're the fence?" asked Scars.

"Because you're an obvious half-breed, just as banished from these lands as that goblin in the door behind you. And because yes, I am a bard, and more than capable of handling—!"

White fabric whipped around his head, cutting off Silvernote's words and his vision. With an equally sudden jerk, the bard fell backward to slam his head hard against the stairwell bannister. He slumped unconscious at the feet of a gruff, bearded dwarf.

"Figured you might need extra towels," Helgo explained. "Sorry about the wait. Busy night."

"Yeah," Scars replied slowly. "Thanks for that."

"How many more of you are in there?"

"We're six in total," Scars answered.

"Uh-huh. And those men? Are they dead?"

"Yes."

"Then you'd better have a way to deal with the bodies yourself. If I have to charge for that kind of clean-up, it'll be a lot," Helgo warned.

"We have muscle and a magician. You won't know the difference."

“You’re alright with all this?” asked Teryn.

“This asshole more or less confessed,” said Helgo, gesturing to the unconscious bard. “I can’t control the crowd downstairs, so you’d better hide out in your room. But I don’t have a problem with goblin folk, no. Wasn’t my edict of banishment. Besides, I charge by the room, not by the guest. You’re fine.”

Scars let out a sigh. “Thank you.”

“Night’s too cold and wet for that kind of nonsense, anyway.” Helgo looked to the concussed bard again. “And it’s a little late for carrying around bodies. You want to help me stuff this guy somewhere for now?”

“Sure.”

“So we’re getting paid?” DigDig asked from the doorway.

“We’re getting paid,” Scars assured him.

“Huh. Dibs on the bed.” Everyone turned to stare. DigDig shrugged. “What?”