

Tristin Gets Out

-Scott Kelley 7/18/2024

Chapter 1

Somewhere under Waterdeep.

Mid-Eleasis (Month of "Highsun") - 1490 DR

The half-orc's massive fist slammed into my face again. He was pulling his punches. I would've been insulted had I not been so grateful. He likely had been instructed to not kill me, only to beat me *nearly* to death. The suffering is the point, as they say. Past the haze of stars exploding behind my eyes and the fading tunnel vision, I watched the shirtless, grey-skinned thug step away towards a rickety wooden table. He wiped his bloodied fist on a soiled rag there and regarded me dispassionately.

"You so little. Fragile. How can such a little man make the boss so angry?" One had to respect his intellectual curiosity.

I blinked and shook my head in a vain attempt to get the blood out of my eyes. I was manacled, each wrist chained to the stone wall. I was upright, mostly; I was hanging forward by my wrists... my legs had given out some time ago. It was quite uncomfortable. Broken nose for sure. Swollen Eye. Maybe a broken jaw? Orbital socket fracture? My tongue confirmed that I was missing a few teeth. Luckily, he hadn't worked on my hands at all. No broken fingers. Yet.

It was damp, almost humid. Strange breezes of alternating warm and cool passed through the room, seemingly at random. I could hear the dripping of water. I was underground. Perhaps some sub-level of the sewers? Seemed likely... the rats of the Thieves Guild liked to hide in this filth. I snorked the blood in my nose and spat it out, clearing my sinuses for a moment. Yech. Yeah, definitely in the sewers. No sea water or fishy smell, though. Must be inland, away from the harbor.

"Boss told me to mess up yer handsome face. You pretty, like girl." He smiled at me, his left tusk broken and jagged, his right capped with silver. "Not pretty anymore."

He wheezed in amusement. I tried to speak, but just gagged on blood. Trying to catch my breath, I could only manage a ragged cough.

"Pathetic" the half-orc accurately observed. He sighed in boredom. "Lunchtime. I'll be back. Don't go nowhere."

I tried to smile and nod sarcastically, but all I managed was a head wobble. Tossing the rag onto the table, he walked to the door. The oaken, iron-bound portal elicited a grunt when he shouldered it. He passed through and closed it, not bothering to latch. The wood looked swollen with moisture, and it barely fit into its stone frame. The single torch in the room flickered and sputtered, its greasy smoke crawling up the wall.

I waited a few moments and tried to listen to, and count, his footsteps as he walked away. Between the blood rushing in my ears, the likely concussion, and the ambient noises of the dungeon, I heard nothing. I strained my head upwards and peered at the table. I recalled seeing some sort of metal tray there before, but the Orc's rag now laid atop it. My tunnel vision blocked out everything else. I lamented the fact that I was still conscious... I imagined it would be much more pleasant to be tortured to death if one was not aware enough to experience it. It had been silent for a few moments... assuming I had not blacked out in between thoughts. I suddenly remembered that I desired to escape this place.

Flicking my wrist, I apparated my mage hand. The magical, ghostly appendage hovered serenely in the air. I willed it to float to the table. With it, I moved the rag, revealing a small tray containing various blades and hooks: a standard torturer's kit. I squinted through the sweat and blood stinging my eyes, trying to force myself to focus. The hand grabbed a slim, metal blade and floated it back to me.

I'm not particularly dexterous, despite my Elven heritage. On a work-a-day basis, it's rarely an issue. I don't often find myself dodging arrows or diving out the way of fireballs. However, I do need to gain entrance to secure locations from time to time, during the execution of my duties. Which is why procured these magical gloves. They're infused with magic that helps me pick locks, pocket items, and otherwise improve my meager sleight of hand skills. The killer feature of these gloves is that, once worn, they magically fade away and become invisible. Easily detectable through touch, but otherwise imperceptible.

The glowing, translucent hand passed me the blade. It'll have to do. With one hand, I began working the lock mechanism on the manacles. As expected, it was old, rusty, never maintained, and basic. Although it was difficult to operate the makeshift pick with a single hand, the mage hand made for a helpful assistant, catching the blade a few times when I accidentally dropped it while repositioning. After a few minutes, the manacle's mechanism clicked open, freeing my right arm. The left soon followed. I stood unsteadily in the room, rubbing my wrists, trying to get the circulation back into my arms. My shoulders ached and hands tingled painfully. I was already exhausted and badly wounded. My entire torso was bruised and aching... likely internal damage below the cracked ribs. It wouldn't take much for me to be overwhelmed and knocked unconscious, or worse.

I scanned the room. I was absolutely in the sewers... perhaps below them. The stonework looked ancient and crude. Slime and mold clung to the walls and ceiling, patiently eating away at the carved stone. I went to the unsecured door and gently pushed on it. It creaked slightly but didn't budge. As I thought, it didn't fit easily into the frame, the wood had swollen and expanded too much. It would take considerable effort to get it to close fully. Effort which my torturer had neglected to apply. There was a small window in the door, so I strained up to my toes to peer through it. A dank, stone hallway lay beyond, doors like this one lining it. The only sounds I heard were of dripping water echoing faintly from all around. No moans, cries, or threats. Nearly silent.

Leaning against the door, I felt it bend only very slightly. The frame held it fast. I stepped back on shaky legs and lunged stubborn portal. I bounced off with only another bruise on my shoulder to show for it. I was in no condition to continue like this.

I stood back and wiped my face with my torn, white linen shirt. Half-dried blood congealed into the cloth along with the sweat and spittle. I inhaled and took stock of my magical reserves. I had enough mental energy for a few spells, none of which would immediately extricate me from this situation. It may have been a waste, but I was in so much pain, I could barely think straight. I whispered a magical healing word to myself and felt the bones in my face set. My nose popped back into place, and I think I felt a new tooth or two. At least the ringing in my head had calmed, even if the rest of my body looked, and felt, like it had been trampled by a Bulette.

Steadying myself, I took another run at the door. With a loud, short squeal, the door burst open. I caught it before it slammed into the wall. Breathing heavily, I coughed up more blood, spat, and looked around. Six doors, identical to the one I just shoved open, lined the corridor. A bend to the right, on my right, seemed to be the only path forward. I stumbled towards it. One foot throbbed in pain; the other was worryingly numb.

I kept close to the corner as I peered around. There was only a single door at the end of the hallway, up a few stone stairs, no more than twenty feet away. A torch, ensconced on the wall next to the door, sputtered diligently. I squinted and concentrated... was anyone in there? My phlegmy, ragged breathing overwhelmed my senses. I looked back the way I had come, a vast distance of thirty or so feet. Nothing stirred in any of the other cells. I had to assume I was alone. Good. That meant that there was little reason to post a full-time guard, ostensibly for a single, shackled half-elf.

I made for the door, my feet dragging against the stone, leaving a trail of smeared, bloody footprints. Why did they take my damn boots? Arriving at the door, I again tippy toed up and peered through the small, barred window. A guard room lay within. A sturdy wooden table with two robust chairs sat in the middle. Along the left wall, a large chest, an open barrel, a coat hook with several garments hanging from it, and several half-full burlap sacks could be found. To the right, were three weapon racks, containing a smattering of short swords, maces, and

blackjacks. Above the racks was a crude row of iron hooks, with equally crude iron keys hanging from each. Opposite the door I peered through, was another door, the only apparent way through.

On the table was a dagger, some parchment, a wooden cup, and some forgotten remains of a cured meat and cheese platter. Despite being rather peckish, I was in no mood to eat. I pushed the door. It didn't move. I pulled the door. It still didn't move. Feeling momentarily defeated I rested my forehead against the rough wood. With a sigh, I summoned my mage hand. Looking up, I sent it through the small window in the door. Then, I slid it down the door and, when I had estimated the location to be accurate, pulled the hand towards me and up. I heard a slight creak. Yes. Then, there was a wooden thump as the security bar fell into its catch on the side of the doorframe. I pushed the door open, its iron hinges grinding softly.

I limped to the table, picked up the cup, and sniffed it. Water! I first swished a bit of it, cleansing my mouth of the metallic taste of blood, spat for the last time, and then swallowed the rest. Finer than *Elverquisst*! I wiped my mouth with my torn sleeve and went to the sacks. Rifling through them I found... nothing of mine. Seriously? They absconded with my longcoat? My boots? Absolutely unnecessary. I checked the other containers. Nothing of use.

I took a length of discarded leather strap and fashioned a makeshift belt. Then, I begrudgingly took the dagger and a short sword, stowing them both in my new, designer belt. If it came down to a sword fight, I was as good as dead, but these could prove useful tools, or props, at some point. I flung one of the dark, ratty cloaks hanging from the coat rack over my shoulders and secured it. It was so dark purple as to be nearly black. I noticed that it had a comically large and droopy hood, perfect for conveying, very conspicuously, that you *desperately* desired to appear inconspicuous. I had the sudden urge to seat myself in the dark corner booth of a tavern and entice some gullible, first season adventurers into an encounter where they would awkwardly ask me where they could find the nearest treasure-filled dungeon. I shook my head. It would apparently take more than a basic healing spell to repair my concussion.

After a last look over the guardroom, I went to the opposite door. The soft roar of rushing water was unmistakable. A waterfall? I peered through the window. There was not much to see; it was lightless, and mist speckled my face. My darkvision slowly took over and I peered deeper. All I could see was a foamy waterfall that flowed from above and the slick stone floor just before it. I was somehow under and behind the waterfall. The stone floor continued to the left and right. What was I looking at? My mind couldn't find purchase on an idea.

I rarely drank to excess, but recall enjoying the sensation... at first. However, being out of my faculties became frustrating. I felt foolish and helpless. Basic tasks that I could normally do without thought took considerable effort. I was unable to 'let go' and enjoy the sensation, as so many others seem to do. I quickly learned to stay within a very safe margin from inebriation. I was only rarely invited to those sorts of parties, anyways.

That was how I felt at that moment. Unable to focus, ideas and concepts slipping through the normally deft and precise fingers of my mind, grasping at sand. My brain, and thus my mind, had been rattled by continuous blunt-force traumas. I needed to get out, to find help. I've got to get out.

The door was better constructed and better used than the previous. It pushed open without issue. Any noise it may have made was obscured by the crashing water. I slipped through and tried to stay low. I hesitated... left? Or right? Why can't I pick a direction? They seem identical. Does it matter? Why can't I think straight? I buried my face in my hands and roughly rubbed my eyes. Somewhere outside of the dark universe of fractal, colorless, soundless explosions I heard a noise. Voices! Just above the roaring water, I could make out someone speaking. I scurried to the edge of the path, just under the back of the waterfall and peered down over the stone railing. I immediately reeled from vertigo. Darkness. Forever. This water flowed directly into the Underdark for all I knew.

Dropping back down behind the wall, I tried to control my swimming head and nearly vomited. I needed to keep moving. I stayed low and slid to the right, towards the voices. As I neared a right angle in the path that led to the left, I also reached the edge of the waterfall above me. I peeked above the stone wall. It was a massive

rectangular room, with four waterfalls pouring into the central opening from somewhere above, one fall on each side. The room itself was just a walkway around the central pit. A large, bottomless cistern. I must be deep.

Torchlight flickered in the mist. Just above the roar of rushing water, I heard a voice nonchalantly, but loudly, converse, but I couldn't identify the topic. It didn't seem hurried or worried. Now at the corner of the room, I again peered over the low wall and railing to place the voice. Past the mist that filled the void in the center of the room, I could only see the filtered torchlight from behind the waterfall across from me. Another voice replied to the first, just as loudly, to be heard over the din. I pulled the cloak's hood down over my head and walked towards the voices. Showtime.

I rounded the last corner and put eyes on the source of the voices: two guards, leaning on either side of a door. They were engrossed in their conversation and didn't notice me until I was a few feet from them. The guard farthest from me looked past his conversation partner and nearly choked as he scrambled to his feet and reached for his longsword.

"hey... HEY! Who goes there?" he coughed.

The second's head spun around in shock. "Geez, gah!" he exclaimed, almost falling over. They were clearly not expecting company.

I help my hand up from under the voluminous cloak in greeting. "Sorry, mates... I jus' like to come down here ta think. Won't 'appen again." I said in a gruff, Amnian accent.

They eyed me suspiciously, hands on weapons. The first guard spoke, trying to regain his composure, "H-how long you been down here? This is a restricted area." His eyes narrowed as he tightened the grip on his sword. The next few seconds were critical; I was either walking past them with a laugh or I was dead.

"Long enough to hear all that drek you's was talkn'" I laughed. "Now don't worry lads, I won't be telln' the boss about this little lapse in security." I continued chuckling as I walked past the closest guard. I patted him on the shoulder and lifted my head just enough to reveal my amused smile. I felt the tension fade slightly, thank the Gods.

"Just the get the fuck outta here. I don't want to see you lurking around here again, you hear me?" The first guard's surprise had turned to embarrassment and then into anger within seconds. The second guard opened the door for me with sarcastic politeness. I slunk through the doorway with a wave and a final guffaw. As the door closed, I heard one of voices complain about the nerve of some people and how they shouldn't sneak up on folks like that.

In my life, and in my career, I have found one rule more important than all others: Act like you belong. I've also heard it called 'fake it 'til you make it', but that's more of a philosophy. The point is, never underestimate the power of just going with the flow, and acting like you belong in whatever situation you may find yourself in, no matter how heinous. People *want* their expectations to be met. If an opponent isn't expecting trouble, why cause it for them? Most guards don't *want* to find an intruder; they want a nice, peaceful, stress-free evening. They'd much *rather* find a drunk guest who's simply stumbled into the wrong hallway. Finding an intruder, or an escaping prisoner, starts a whole chain of unpleasant events. Who am I to ruin their shift? Much better to just be a fellow thief who's innocently snuck into a place they're not supposed to be... which is what thieves do, after all. Hard to blame a guy, right?

I walked on for several minutes, passing branches and junctions of abandoned sewers. Only the occasional lit torch gave me any hope of not becoming hopelessly lost. At every opportunity to go up, I took it. After climbing a series of rough, carved stone staircases next to an open pipe evacuating fetid water, I found a landing that led to a wide, curved-roof hallway. The blooming of bright light through cracks in a series of doors up ahead caused me to squint in my darkvision. I blinked and my eyes refocused into normal sight. I could hear voices, faint and beyond the doors, but nearby. The air was fresher here; I think I could smell food. And oil of some kind? Three doors to choose from, one ahead at the end of the hall, the other two across from each other halfway down the hall.

I suddenly felt a wash of disgust. What was I to do? Sneak to each door? Listen for the scurrying of monsters beyond? Check each door for traps? I am not a god's damned adventurer. I refuse to spend 10 minutes in a cowardly process before I can open *a door*. I moved to the center of the wide hall, so that I was directly between the two side doors. The torchlight and voices were coming from the door at the end of the hall. The doors to my left and right seemed silent. Do I open a dark door to the unknown? Or do I open a door that leads to *people*? People that can be spoken to, persuaded, deceived... tricked. There was only one answer.

I strode to the end of the hall and placed my hand on the latch of the heavy, reinforced door. There were multiple voices in idle conversation beyond. Not loud, but quiet and confident. A few braggadocious chuckles, some threats made in comradery. The rhythmic sound of stone sliding against metal. The soft jangle of chain mail. Having second thoughts, I glanced behind me. Only a dark and empty sewer, its gaping maw beckoning me to oblivion, stared back. I opened the door and walked through.

Chapter 2

The room I found myself in was well lit. The murmur of voices slowed and stopped. I lifted my head to look past the ridiculous hood. A dozen guards stared back at me. Some stood, others sat on their cots, some held weapons, others played cards on the tops of barrels. I was in their barracks. I had walked right into the middle of the thieves' guild guard's barracks. Judging by the heavy armor and martial weapons, I was in the *Enforcer* barracks. Enforcers were the heavy troops of thieves' guilds, the real muscle reserved for when subterfuge and stealth were not required. More soldier than rogue. It is a profession that elevated a mere blood-thirsty thug into a well-armed, well-trained, remorseless sociopath.

I fell to my knees and desperately called out in panic "Th-they're coming! Coming up out of the cistern! I barely made it out alive!" I needed to be specific as possible, but the cistern was the only other place I had seen.

The Enforcers glanced amongst each other in confusion, trying to process the correct reaction. Suddenly, a great bearded bear of a human spoke up with a voice like gravel. "To arms, boys! Looks like the Drow can't take a hint!" The Enforcers roared a cheer and began arming themselves. The bear man shouted orders to small groups of guards, dividing and assigning them tasks. He commanded three of the least prepared guards to stay behind and get suited up. I slunk towards the door at the other end of the long room.

"And YOU," the captain bellowed at me, "Good work! Let the boss know we'll take care of those filthy Cave Elves in short order."

I winced and gave a thumbs-up in acknowledgement. Amidst the flurry of activity, I surreptitiously snatched up a pair of boots from an unoccupied cot, hopping as I slid them on. Not a perfect fit, but good enough. With the few moments of chaos I had to work with, I also grabbed a dark shirt and a bandana. I quickly replaced my tattered and stained white-linen shirt and tied the red and black bandana over my head. I tossed the soiled rags under a nearby cot. I swiped up some black armor polish that was hastily left open in my fingers and smeared it diagonally across my face, breaking up my features. I dropped the dark purple cloak and kicked it under another cot.

By this time, most of the riled-up guards had run out of the room, through the door I had entered, their faces gleeful with the promise of bloodshed. The three remaining guards were completely absorbed with getting dressed and armed as quickly as possible. They had ignored the inconsequential thief who stumbled past them.

As I continued my trek across the room, I took a moment to gaze into a hazy mirror that hung above one of the cots. Not a disguise, per se, but I was unrecognizable as the unconscious Investigator they had dragged down here. I looked like street scum, the sort of starving, desperate thief that would snatch the coin purse from an old lady and run away to hide in a trash-filled alley. Looks like those make-up classes in Bard college weren't so useless after all.

As I reached the door, the consequences of what just transpired suddenly occurred to me. My stomach twisted into a knot. I had just given myself a very short time limit. Once the Enforcers realized that they had been duped, they would lock this place down. Someone would pay, *dearly*, for the ruse. Someone would surely rue the ruse. Heh. ...Ugh, damned concussion.

I could only hope that 'find the person in the big, dark purple cloak' was a poor enough direction to buy me some additional time to figure out how to escape.

Exiting the barracks, I found myself in a lit, well-traveled hallway. The center of the floor was covered with wooden planks, covering the gully where the runoff water flowed. I took a moment to catch my breath and my bearings. My heart was still pounding in my chest, causing my ears to pulse under the taught bandana. I took a practiced breath and tried to calm myself. I saw at least six doors in the broad, makeshift hallway. Thirty or so feet

in both directions the hallway turned a corner. My head was still ringing, a high-pitched metallic keening that muffled the voice in my head, the voice that usually kept me on-task and focused. The voice that kept me aware and alive.

I stumbled forward, my heart pounding out of my chest. I couldn't breathe. My vision narrowed. I can't black out now. If someone finds me, I'm as good as dead. I had to do it... I had to use the last bit of my magic to heal myself. Not to create a distraction, not to magically compel someone to do my bidding, not even to put someone into a magical sleep. I clenched my fist and whispered a healing word to myself... I felt the familiar tingle of the restorative power flow through me, knitting me back together. I now had all my teeth. I hadn't realized that I had been walking on a broken toe. The fog in my mind dissipated. I could still feel bruises, sore muscles, and general exhaustion, but I was nearly back to a healthy physical condition. Not that I would remain that way for long, if the thieves found me and figured out who I was.

Damn it all, just pick a door. I walked to the right and picked the last door on the left. The smell of food was unmistakable. It was smoky and acrid, but it was food. I swung the door open and tried to look as roguish as I could. The cathedral-ceilinged room was a makeshift dining hall. Two massive iron chandeliers were suspended from the ceiling by sturdy chains, all lit by candles. Long wooden tables had been placed, with benches, stools, and any other seating that could be scrounged up. There were only four individuals in here, all bent over their plates and bowls, slowly taking their meals. Two people, possibly Elves or tall Halflings, sat together excitedly chattering amongst themselves as they ate. The third was a dragonborn, obsidian scales glittering dully in the torchlight. They were lithe and serpent-like. With their back to me, I had no clue as to their gender. The fourth and last figure in the room was a massive, grey-skinned half-Orc... who looked very, very familiar.

'Lunchtime', his voice echoed in my head. From over his shoulder, I could see the silver-capped tusk. The four glanced at me as I entered, with passing curiosity, then went right back to what they were doing. From a large, arched doorway in the wall to my right, I could see a rotund figure cooking and manning the kitchen. Steam and smoke billowed through the archway as clanging utensils punctuated elaborate curses muttered in an Orcish accent. I walked forward. There was another door at the other end of the dining room. All I needed to do was get past the interrogator.

I nonchalantly placed my hands on the pommels of the dagger and short sword still wedged in my belt. Head down and cool, I padded forward, looking straight ahead. I had to pass right next to my torturer. To walk around him would look strange. All I could hear was my breath wheezing in my throat.

He was eating some sort of meat stew from a wooden bowl, with a wooden spoon. He didn't appear to be armed. I walked past him, slightly brushing his overlapping girth as he hunched over the table.

"YOU." He barked, causing me to involuntarily jump. "C'mere!"

I stopped, and without turning my head, hissed in my newly adopted accent, "Tha' fuck YOU want, Orc?"

He hesitated, processing the moment. "Er, hand me pepper. S'on that table there." He gestured to the table next to me. I glanced over and there was indeed a large wooden pepper grinder sitting there. I snatched it and gently flung it to him. He caught it deftly. I had already started stalking away, trying to look irritated by the interruption.

Over the sound of grinding seeds, I heard him mutter, "Geez. Well, fuck you too, then."

Without hesitation, I opened the door and stepped through with purpose... right into a small storage room. No doors, no exits. Just shelves, crates, barrels, and sundry items. I clasped my hand over my eyes and started rubbing my temples. At least my concussion had healed to the point where I was fully lucid and aware of how screwed I was. This can't be happening. Maybe I could've waited until everyone had cleared out of the dining hall. No, I absolutely did not have that kind of time. The Enforcers could've sounded the alarm at any moment. Perhaps I could just grab something and walk back out with it, as if I'm on an errand. No, no... I'd walk past everyone again

and that's just another opportunity to get questioned, for them to see my face. For all I knew the dragonborn was the quartermaster.

I began frantically looking through the items stored... I suddenly wished I had tithed more to the pantheon temple. Perhaps if I had, I would've found a potion of invisibility or a scroll of teleportation. Instead, I found dry goods, plates, bowls, and all manner of mundane items useful for operating a subterranean kitchen.

I sat down on one of the crates and slung my head backwards into the stone wall in frustration and self-loathing. It hurt, as it should, as it deserved. Maybe I did deserve this. After all, I let myself get caught in the first place. I got too complacent, too comfortable in my routine. When you've put away as many criminals as I have, it pays to keep a pair of eyes in the back of your head. 'Paranoid or dead', as they say. I slung my head backwards against the stone again, relishing the pain. Stupid bastard. Bonk. Wait... why did that feel odd? I reached up and over to the wall where my head rested. Holding the spot, I sat up and spun around, facing the wall. I slid the crate out of the way to get a better look at the smooth stone.

This was an abandoned sub-sewer system, turned Thieves Guild hideout. Of *course*, there could be secret passages! Or, at least, poorly sealed up passages that the new tenants didn't need or want. I started patting down the wall, sliding my hands all over it, feeling for a seam, or a puff of air escaping a crack. Finally, yes! At the bottom, where the wall met the floor, a slight indentation. I slid a finger into the wall, where the recessed grout in the rough stone block floor left a gap. I felt something cool and metal. I pressed it as hard as I could. With a dull click, a three-foot square section of the wall swung forward, revealing a small crawlspace. I scampered inside, trying to ignore the thick spiderwebs that filled the cavity. Once in, I used my feet to close the secret door.

Even from behind me, I could hear the gravelly voice of my torturer approaching the door. "Ya know what? That was not okay. You don't need to be rude. I was just asking-" I finally managed to close the secret door at the same moment I heard the storeroom door open. I froze and held my breath. Maybe he didn't see the door.

"-to give me pepper for bland stew. Hey, you in here?" he shuffled around the room half-heartedly for a few seconds, then muttered "huh... guess not. Sneaky lil' guy."

I heard the door close. I exhaled and covered my mouth with my sleeve. The last thing I needed was to inhale any of the ancient dust in there. I took a careful breath and started crawling. As my darkvision strained to find any light at all in this forsaken hole, I tried to ignore the unsettling textures and small, hard, unidentifiable bits of detritus that I was crawling through. The sensation of things crawling on me almost drove me mad. Was that something under my shirt? In my armpit? I could feel something, scritch, crawling, hairy and clawed. My scalp itched and tingled. I felt sweat soaking through the bandana. I couldn't breathe... the tunnel was airtight... I was going to suffocate and die here, in a forgotten hole inside a forgotten hole. In the dark, alone. Keep. Crawling.

Unable to control myself any longer, I raised my hand and softly snapped my finger. The tunnel was suddenly flooded with a soft, golden light. I squinted against the glare. Light cantrips took so little magical energy that I could summon them at will, even when my other reserves were depleted. Blinking a few times, my eyes adjusted to the scene around me. I was indeed in a square tunnel, about three feet tall and wide. I glanced down. My hands were covered in blood. My blood. As were my knees. The tunnel was covered in a layer of small, jagged, needle-like bones. Countless mice and rats had expired here, leaving their remains as a piercing carpet of death. I tried to ignore the myriad dark crawling things that slithered amongst the bones.

Peering down the tunnel, I saw an end, barely perceptible through the cobwebs. It looked like a dead end, just an abrupt, flat wall. Think, man. There was no reason for a tunnel to have a single entrance. This hole went somewhere, it had to. I shuffled along. When I arrived at the end, I extinguished my simple magical light. No point in letting whoever might be on the side know I was coming. I paused and listened. Nothing. Dead Silence.

I resummoned the light at my fingertip and began looking for a similar mechanism as the other end. As expected, it was the same. I reached down and popped the latch. The stone swung inward, towards me, so I

scouted back slightly, half expecting a sword in my face. Instead, a wooden wall greeted me. Light seeped from the edges of the stone opening. A door? No handle or mechanism. It looked like a single piece of wood. Furniture. I shuffled forward and tried pushing it with my hand. Didn't budge. I sat down and braced my legs against it and pushed, only for my bloody hands to slip in the carpet of bones. I couldn't find purchase or leverage. Gods, I was going to die down here.

Wait. Wait wait wait. Leverage. I pulled the short sword from my makeshift belt. The metal glittered dully in the magical light. It was a basic, simply made weapon, but sturdy. I slid the blade between the opening and the wooden object until it was about halfway in. Again, bracing my feet on the wooden object, I reached between my legs and grabbed the handle of the sword with both slick, ragged hands. I tried to ignore the stinging sensation as I strained my entire body against the weight of the thing. I pulled the sword as I pushed with my legs, grunting in effort and agony. It moved. Slightly. I strained with everything I had, my face turning hot. I again saw stars exploding behind my clenched eyes. With a dirty grinding noise, the heavy wooden obstacle slid away from the door a few feet, rotating from one side. There was just enough of a gap for me slip through.

I blinked as the soft glow of torchlight greeted me. It might as well have been the rising sun, praise Lathander Morninglord. I tumbled out of the tunnel, tiny bones clattering with me, and fell a few feet to the smoothed, decorative stone floor. Laying on my back I breathed. Just *breathed* for a while. The stars in my vision faded and my blood slowly stopped pounding in my ears. Eventually, I craned my head up and looked around. The only word that could form in my mind was... *treasure*.

This was a storage room, a *treasure* room. Sturdy wooden and iron shelves were loaded down with countless items, all neatly arranged. Some looked mundane, others ostentatious. Bottles, potions, weapons, armor, and items of all shapes and sizes filled the room. Massive treasure chests lined the walls. Large sacks, filled with what appeared to be coins, sat amongst the other containers. Magical torches gave off smokeless, heatless light in a pleasant, indirect glow. I couldn't take it all in.

I painfully pulled myself up to my feet and collected my trusty short sword. As I quietly walked down the rows of shelves, I idly examined the innumerable valuables, as if I were shopping for my weekly groceries. A crown covered in gems, a sleek dagger slowly spinning on its point, a stack of different wands, a leather quiver full of magical arrows, each different from the rest. The value of these collected items made my head spin. I was not a greedy man, but I would be lying if I said I was not tempted, in some small way, to avail myself of the opportunity presented. Alas, I was on the job. Not to mention that I know myself well enough... I would never get a good night's sleep again knowing what I had done. No, I shan't be lining my pockets today, even if I had any that weren't torn or full of holes. That said, I had no issue with... requisitioning... equipment in the official pursuit of my duty.

When I made my way to the end of the row of shelves, I turned and started down the aisle between the rows. There was no signage of any kind. None of the items had labels. It was clearly by design; only the owner, or, more accurately the one who stole these items from their true owners, would know what they were. Magical items can be actively cursed, but simply quaffing the incorrectly helpful potion could be just as disastrous. I found the shelf of potions and began examining them. I knew enough magic and alchemy to recognize an undisguised healing potion when I saw one. I selected a bottle and hoped it was what it appeared to be. The clear, deep red liquid inside the corked, bulbous bottle looked like nothing else. Almost imperceptible motes of glittering magic swam in the liquid, hinting at its contained arcane energy. The dark red smear of my blood streaked on the glass from the outside, a stark reminder of what I had been through.

I popped the cork and drank the potion. It *tasted* like a potion of healing. I held my breath for a few seconds, only to exhale as I watched my shredded palms knit themselves together, the blood reabsorbed. I flexed my hands experimentally. Yes, perfect. My knees no longer ached, as well. The irony of my situation had not escaped me... here I was, a lawman who had snuck into the treasure trove of a criminal, only to take what I wanted. As sweet as the role reversal was, I still found it distasteful. I just wanted out of there.

I continued to stroll down the aisle, scanning the shelves. Something familiar caught my eye. I trotted halfway down the shelf and placed my hand on a carefully folded leather garment. My Investigator's longcoat! Atop it sat my badge. My boots sat on the ground below. I instinctively reached out for them, then stopped. Not exactly a wise move to wear clothes that would immediately identify me as the escaped prisoner everyone is likely searching for at that very moment. Frustration welled up inside of me. My hands tightened into fists. The rage built up and up... but I had to calm myself. I had come too far to lose my shit now. I can get another coat. I can get another pair of boots. I cannot get another life... not unless the guild boss who had me captured was also willing to have me magically resurrected after torturing me to death, just so they could do it all over again. The thought sobered me.

Focus, Tristin. Think. You're alive, you're healthy, and you're in the vault of a thieves' guild hideout. I heard no alarms, no shouting, no boots on stone, nothing at all. Either the alarm hadn't been raised or I was in a well-insulated room. I assumed the latter to be true. This room would be well-hidden or well-guarded, perhaps both. Considering the silence, I would assume the former. It was difficult, but not impossible, to post guards to something that they were not aware of. Having a room like this in a literal den of thieves required its own precautions. If I were the boss, I'd keep it close and keep it secret. I glanced around the room. There was no obvious exit, no door apparent.

'Engage your training', I thought. I circled the room, examining where floor met wall, looking for tell-tale signs of a secret door. This is usually much easier to do from *inside* the secret room; doors tend to swing inwards, leaving any tracks or scuff marks on the inside. Nothing. Hm. Ceiling? It was a good eight feet from the floor. Carved stone pillars supported the arched, recessed ceiling. Nothing looked like a door or portal. It could've been well disguised, but I would have to find a way to get up there to examine the surface more thoroughly.

Floor, then. I started tracing the ground around the shelves, looking for any hints of disturbance. I had been in the room for at least 20 minutes at this point, there was no way the Enforcer's hadn't spoken to the guards in the cistern and realized they had been sent to arm a defense against invaders that weren't there. I still hadn't found any signs of a trap door on the floor. As I began my search for a ladder, or something to crawl on top of, to reach the ceiling, I noticed an inconspicuous iron hook, set into one of the stone pillars. Perfectly coiled around the hook was an elegant silk rope.

I removed the rope from the hook and examined it. I was quite certain it was magical. It was made of pure white silk and had not a single blemish nor fiber out of place. I sat cross-legged and began to magically attune to it, to unlock its function. After about ten minutes, the magic revealed itself to me and mentally conveyed an activation phrase, 'And for my next trick'.

Clever. There was no mundane way to enter or exit the room. This was an odd use of a magical rope, but effective. I held the rope aloft and spoke the phrase aloud. The rope leapt from my hand, straightening and hovering above the floor. The rope uncoiled, its length disappearing with a subtle shimmer into the solid stone at my feet. Taking one last look at the bounty I was leaving behind, I grabbed the rope with both hands and slowly lowered myself down *into* the floor. Faint, shimmering light marked the permeable boundary between my body and the solid stone. I kept lowering myself into the cold darkness until I was fully engulfed by the rock, though I felt no resistance. I wondered idly what would happen if I let go of the rope. Would I be shunted to the nearest open space? Entombed immediately and forever, one with the earth? My morbid curiosity would go unsatiated as I emerged from the ceiling of the room below the treasury.

The room below was, in a word, opulent. It was a large, octagonal room, separated off into different quadrants by intricately carved wooden screens, tapestries hung from the ceiling, and bookcases. Whereas the treasure room above had been well organized storage, this room was a riot of maximalism. Items great and small covered every surface. Jewelry, art, and stacks of coins glittered in the soft, comfortable magical light oozing from the cold torches. My mind couldn't even begin to catalogue the sheer number and volume of discreet items, never mind estimate their combined worth. It quickly dawned upon me that, as valuable as these trinkets were, none

seemed to be functional magical items. No, those were securely squirreled away in the secret room above. While valuable, everything in here seemed to be harmless.

As I let go of the magical rope, it silently pulled itself back up into the ceiling, presumably returning to its hook. There was a final shimmer of magic as the rope disappeared into the stone like a noodle into the pursed lips of a gourmand.

The room dividers created four equal areas. Behind me, was a bedroom of sorts. A massive, plush four-poster bed carved from some exotic, lacquered dark wood, sat atop a round, stone dais. Wardrobes, a vanity, and various mismatched chests-of-drawers filled out the boudoir. Across from the bedroom was the door and entrance area. It was a massive double door and heavily reinforced by iron bands securely bolted into the wood. A small seating area and coffee table could be found to either side of the doors. It seemed that whoever occupied this room at least occasionally entertained guests. Next to the entrance, was a kitchen area, with a long table, cabinets full of porcelain dishes, silverware, and fine dining paraphernalia. On the other side of the table sat several non-descript metal boxes on stubby legs. Ice boxes?

Across from the dining area was a privy and bath. To one side, a massive, ornate porcelain tub sat on clawed feet. Oddly, steam curled from the placid water within. Magically heated, I assumed.

Littered amongst the more standard room furnishings were shelves, bookcases, stands, display cases, and shadow boxes of all sizes and shapes, all completely overflowing with trinkets. The rest of the compound, at least what I had seen thus far, was sparse and utilitarian. My mouth went dry... this must've been this guild faction's Boss's personal quarters. Nothing else made sense. I stood there for a moment, completely frozen. I had no idea what to do. Get out. Yes, of course, that was the general goal. But right then, in that moment? No clue. I had come so far just end to up the jaws of the beast. I felt deeper in this gods-forsaken hole than ever before.

I spun on my heel, desperately looking for a way out. The massive doors stared at me, mocking me. All this wealth around me and all I wanted was... out. I scanned and rescanned my surrounding trying to wrack my mind into action, to find a clever solution, to get me the Hells out of there. I nearly missed the sound of the door locks being turned from the outside. I stood, dumbfounded, in the center of the room unable to pick a direction to run or hide in. The door swung open, then a figure entered, deftly closing and sealing the door behind them. They turned calmly and saw me just... standing there.

Chapter 3

Standing in front of the door was a female Dwarf. She cut a rather dashing, piratical figure with her red bandana, jeweled eye patch over her left eye, and intricate, blackened leather armor. Dark hair, tinged with crimson, stuck out from under her head covering. Various sashes, ribbons, and blades rounded out her accoutrement. A silvery, ornate rapier hung from her belt. She looked at me with an expression that I can only describe as amused surprise, as if she had just stumbled upon her own secret birthday party a few moments before the intended reveal. She smiled, revealing a sparkling gold canine tooth. She smoothly used her left hand to reach back and touch the door. As she did so, she whispered something under her breath that caused a complex magical glyph to faintly glow for a moment, then fade completely. I wouldn't be passing through that door again without experiencing great bodily harm... or her permission.

"Well, *hello*, little rat" she said. Her voice was warm and smooth, like honey, her Dwarven accent softening the unmistakably deadly malice in her tone. "Decided to take advantage of the lockdown to do a bit of high-risk burgln', eh? Pretty bold, little rat, to steal from *me*." She leaned back against the door on her heels and flashed another broad smile. She was absolutely enjoying this.

"I-I-" I stuttered. I had never stuttered before in my entire life. She softly padded away from the door and started circling me, like a debutante measuring up a potential dance partner at a royal ball. Her footsteps made no sound.

"I like the bandana. Strong statement. Either you're mockn' me or you're emulatn' me." Her eyes narrowed. "What were you hopn' to get, exactly? Anything in particular? Or just whatever you could grab?" I forced myself to stop trying to speak.

She frowned, but her eyes still glittered in amusement. "I'll freely admit that I'm impressed that you got past the door. Good work, that... not sure how you did it. Bravo. I'll have to have a chat with my house wizard about this gap in security." Her voice was intoxicating; feminine, confident, and dangerous. She continued to circle me like a shark.

"Now, I'm supposn' you're wondern' what we're going to do about this, eh? How will this little situation of ours conclude? Will you walk out of here, a little wiser for the wear? Or will you bleed out like a stuck pig on my nice floors?" The smile returned, but the glittering in the eyes did not.

I swallowed in a cold sweat. No thought of combat crossed my mind. I was an amateur swordsman at *best*. She could likely pierce my jugular vein before I could react.

She didn't seem to recognize me. If she had known who I was, surely, she would've either killed me or alerted the guards to return me to my cell. Even through the languid flow of her words, I could tell that she really did believe I was just a common thief looking to make a quick, if bold, score. Somehow, dying as a mangy street rat, and not as an Investigator, made little difference to me in the moment.

"ANSWER ME!" She bellowed. The rage in her eyes flared into an instant inferno. I staggered backwards, tripping over my own feet. I fell, landing on my ass. Before I could recover, she was over me, her gleaming blade poised at my sternum. The tip dug in painfully.

Her teeth bared in a feral hiss, "What. Were. You. After? What did you TAKE?!"

I am ashamed to admit that fear got the better of me in that moment. All my mental and emotional reserves had been depleted. I had no strength of will remaining. A healing potion may repair a wound, but it cannot replenish courage, sanity, or willpower. I broke.

“N-nothing! I’m not here for your fucking *trinkets*! I’m just... trying to... *escape*.” The last few words emptied from me as gasps. I fixated my eyes onto hers. The blurring of my vision heralded tears. She paused, confused, as we held eye contact for a few ragged heartbeats. The blaze inside her cooled.

She stepped away, lowering her sword, and stared at me. She had not expected that. If I were going to survive this, and by ‘this’, I meant the next few minutes, I needed to radically change tactics. She was reeling and that was a tiny window in which to control this narrative.

“I not some thug in your employ. My name is Tristin Fidellis. I’m the Investigator you had snatched from the street to be tortured.” I rose to my feet, slowly and carefully, and smoothed my borrowed clothing. “If there’s something you want from me, *here I am*.” I straightened my posture, assuming my natural demeanor. I looked at her levelly.

“You... you expect ME... to believe that you... escaped my prison, made your way alllll through my compound and somehow just found yourself in the most secure and guarded room in the place? That you just found yourself in MY BEDROOM!?” Her scream caused me to wince.

She wasn’t buying it. She wasn’t buying *the truth*. Of course she wasn’t, you fool. It made no sense. She had no reason to believe that an escaping prisoner would, or *could*, be here, of all places. I was certain that she didn’t believe for a moment that I even knew about the sealed off treasure room above us, nor the forgotten secret tunnel that led me there. The only way in or out was through her magically sealed, locked doors. I had made a grave error.

Naturally, I burst out laughing. I doubled over, slapping my knee and holding my side. “Ooh, I ‘ad you goin’ for a minute there! Ya got me, ya got me...” I wiped away my tears in between chuckles.

“You little...” She stepped towards me, clenching her blade.

“Whoa! Whoa there! You really fink I got in here by my little ol’ self?” I held my hands up. “You fink the fella they sent in to do tha grabbn’ is the brains behind the operation? Please. I’m a stooge. If I were good enough to get in here all by my lonesome, don’t you fink you’d know who I was? Or that I would let them leave me in the lurch like *this*? No, Luv, this was a *heist*!” I shot her a conspiratorial smile.

She stopped. I must admit, one of the sweetest pleasures of my vocation was watching a mind churn as it put the pieces (that I had so helpfully laid out) together into the story that I wanted it to believe. Seeing my opponent come to a conclusion that they believed was their own, was the mental equivalent of a ripe honeyberry popping in my mouth. I nearly shuddered.

Her blade raised again, but the rage had been replaced with the cold calculations of a predator. “You’d better start talking, or I’m going to cut little pieces off of you until there is nothing left.”

My hands still raised in placation, I continued, “Oh, I’ll talk, Luv, but we both know how this goes... I tells ya what you want to know, and I get to keep all my bits and bobs. Right? Right.” Her eyes narrowed, but she gave an almost imperceptible nod. It would have to do. I had to find a way to weave a story that got me out of there alive.

“Jus’ so you know, I never thought this was a good idea... I told that house wizard of yours that crossn’ a bird like you was suicide. They said it would be worth it. They said it would set us *all* up for long, long time.” I watched her face intently as I mentioned her house wizard and other co-conspirators.

If she had planted that detail for me to pick up on and reveal myself with, I was doomed. She didn’t seem the type to cast spells, so it stood to reason she would have a mage on the payroll. It was a calculated risk to implicate them. Her expression shifted ever so slightly. There was a house wizard, and she now believed that they could be capable of this sort of treachery, even if she hadn’t a few moments ago. Good. Doubt.

“I’ll ask you one more time, rat; what were you after?”, she asked flatly. The twinkle in her eye started to sparkle again.

I smiled. “Why, the most valuable thing you’ve got, Luv.” I just dug myself a hole. If I didn’t sort this out, it was to be my grave.

“Mm Hm.” She hummed, unimpressed. “I tell you what... if you can tell me what the most valuable thing in this room is, you can have it. Consider your situation, rat. Its just you... and me.” She relaxed, confident in her position. Her eyes bore down, scrutinizing me. Her smirk, and the glitter in her eye, had returned.

Shit, I was done. I had no idea. The room had hundreds, perhaps thousands of valuables, just strewn about. There’s an ancient Elven vase; could be from *Aelinthaldaar*. There was a ruby the size of my fist. Over there was a platinum necklace set with a dozen emeralds. Hells, her *bed* could’ve been worth thousands of gold pieces. My mind raced as I tried to imagine which item she would consider to be most valuable.

She had me and she was toying with me. Why let her? If I’m dead anyways, why give her the satisfaction? Fuck this *thief*. A flood of indignation coursed through me. I may die a rat, but I wouldn’t die a *fool*.

“That’s easy, Luv... your *security*. You keep this placed locked up tighter than an Elven arsehole. That’s what’s most valuable to you.”

She scoffed and shook her head in disappointment. “Not even close.” The smirk remained. She started to walk towards me, sword aimed at my heart. Oh, Gods. This is it. I’m finished.

“The treasure room! The room above!” I blurted in panic. “That’s what your mage is after!”

She stopped again, her face going pale. The corner of her exposed eye twitched. I swore that I could feel her pulse from across the gap.

“That... traitorous... bastard...” Each word was a gout of poisonous gas from an erupting volcano.

Now she was convinced. It was a conspiracy. There could be no other explanation. There was no other way for me to know of the impenetrable secret room. I was just a hired, expendable goon, working for the mastermind backstabbers that helped her secure this place to begin with. Her most trusted partners in crime had betrayed her for her trove of magical items.

The Boss walked towards me, sheathing her blade. Grabbing my shirt in two fists, she pulled me down to eye level. The eyes boiled like lava, seething with an ocean of rage under the surface. She spoke in the sort of quiet calmness that the wise had learned to fear, “Here’s what’s going to happen now. You ARE going to go on your merry little way... right to that fucking traitor and whoever else is helping him. You’re *mine* now, you understand? You work for ME. Whatever pathetic plan you thought you were a part of before is dead. You speak a word of this to anyone and it will be the last thing you ever do.”

I nodded solemnly. She was about a foot shorter than me but managed to impress a looming presence, filling my entire view. She stared into my eyes looking for any hint of duplicity. I gave her none. She let go of my shirt with a slight shove.

“Once I find and gut that lawman running around my hideout, you and I are going to have a more detailed chat. For now, know that I’m watching you. Get your worthless hide back to the quarters and stay there.”

She padded to the door and again muttered something under her breath. The glyphs glowed in response and faded again, just as before. She unlocked and unlatched the imposing portal, opening it slightly. I cautiously slunk towards the opening.

“Now, if you happen to be the one to find me that wormy little Inspector, consider that a step back into my good graces.” She grimaced, flashing her gold canine tooth as I slid through the gap in the door. As soon as I was clear, the door shut. ‘*Investigator*’, I thought sourly. The clunks of the multiple locking mechanisms echoed softly down the broad tunnel before me. The four Enforcers that stood at attention outside her door regarded me coolly. I didn’t recognize any of them. I nodded politely and scurried down the hall to the next junction.

Chapter 4

Perpendicular to the hall leading to the Boss's quarters was the main hall. It was well lit and, when not under lock-down, well-traveled. Crates, barrels, and all sorts of sundry items were stacked around the walls. Wheelbarrows, hand trucks, and pallets were scattered about. I must've been near the front entrance. I traveled on, making random turns.

I slowly rounded a turn and stopped. A blade hovered in the air, an inch from my left eye. I focused my sight down the length of the blade to the person wielding it. A pale feminine form in dark grey armor stood in a ready stance, delicate rapier poised to puncture my skull with the merest effort. At first, I thought her a Moon Elf, but she was too pale, by far. Her skin was as grey as the full moon and her eyes seemed as white as her skin, with only a thin, dark outline separating them. Her nose, almost non-existent, consisted of two thin slits. The meager strands of hair that escaped her cowl were just as chalky. I had never encountered such a creature before, at least not in its natural state. A Changeling, a form of lesser Doppelganger. They could change their appearance at will. Small wonder that their kind often found themselves attracted to the illicit arts.

"Who are you?" We hissed in unison.

"I have the blade, scum." Despite her being a few inches shorter than me, she still somehow managed to stare down at me in condescension. She had a point. And it was a flick away from blinding me.

"Look, lady, I ain't lookn' for no trouble. I'm jus' on a little stroll." I smirked and gestured around myself roguishly. Reading her face was like trying to gain insight into the mood of a porcelain doll. That said, she was nervous, perhaps a little scared. The body micro-fidgets were unmistakable. She was out roaming the halls during the lockdown, as well. But, why?

"Uh huh. Just out and about during the lockdown? If they find you, you're dead meat."

"That's right, Luv. And what do you fink they'll do to *you*?" Why did I pick this stupid accent again?

Her eyes narrowed as she considered her options. The way she glanced away, this way and that, would've been imperceptible to anyone else. She was looking to not get caught, but she was also looking *for* something, or *someone*.

"Reward me, of course. As soon as I find that Watchman they captured. The Boss is offering a thousand gold, dead or alive. Seems like a lot for some horn blower, but gold is gold." She suddenly regarded me anew. "Now, YOU wouldn't happen to have a blonde, half-elven lawman in your pocket, would you?" Her voice was cold, like an autumn night.

She flicked her blade upwards. Before I could even flinch away, the bandana covering my head and ears flipped into the air. She caught it with the tip of her blade before it reached its apex. Gods, she was fast.

"Well, well. Seems we might have a match."

"Now, now... do I look like a law man to you?" I spread my arms to give her a better look at me, at what I was wearing.

"No, but you *walk* like one. I heard you stomping around from a league away. No thief worth their salt moves like that. And I know that someone trying to escape from this place would try to blend in. Something I happen to know quite a bit about."

“Now, wait a minute, Luv, let’s fink about this. If you’re wrong, and they find you... us... out on our little date, wut makes you fink they won’t just string you... us up? Why pay out when they can just make both problems disappear?”

She was too close. I had to misdirect her and fast. She clearly had a basic description of me, but she didn’t yet know for certain. Perhaps her fear of being caught could be exploited. I didn’t have anything I could bribe her with... and knowledge of the treasure room would be too hard to prove. Possible, but a long shot.

I continued, “All I has to do is give a little yell, and then use a helpful little trinket I picked up on me last job to disappear, to leave you in the lurch. How’s that sound?” I smirked at her confidently. I had to really sell this.

She hesitated, so I filled the silence. “OR... or, we jus’ both go on our merry ways. You get that reward and I... well, I have a looksee into my business. Eh? How’s *that* sound?”

I watched as her milky eyes sized me up. Her mind was spinning. She was calculating the odds and outcomes. She didn’t just have a natural talent for this, but also years of experience as a survivor. The tip of her blade, adorned with my bandana, wavered slightly.

“You’re no lawman.” She spat it like an insult. I smiled, accepting it as the highest compliment.

I snatched the bandana from the dipping blade and reattached it to my head. Suddenly, the soft echoes of approaching voices came from somewhere behind. I spun and crouched instinctively. When I glanced back, she was gone. The hair on the back of my neck stood up... the familiar tingle of indeterminate danger trickled down my spine. Where the Hells did she go? No one could be *that* fast... could they? Perhaps, but it was more likely that she had the sort of magical device that I only bluffed about. A cloak, a potion, even a softly spoken magic spell could render one invisible.

It occurred to me that she could strike at me at any time from the shadows, leaving me wounded and vulnerable for the guards to find. No point in worrying about that here, now. I scurried off away from the voices, as quietly as I could. As I went, I could still feel pale, blank eyes staring at me.

I eventually came to another major intersection. I peered around the corner in both directions. To my right, the wide hall branched off in several directions. Both sides of the way were lined with doors. To my left, was a massive set of double doors at the end of a short branch, only forty or so feet away. In front the twelve-foot doors, a ramshackle, but still intimidating, barricade had been constructed. Depressingly, and unsurprisingly, the dozen or so Enforcers stationed there were all facing towards me, into the subterranean compound.

Magical lights had been set up on either side of the doors. Behind them, curved mirrors reflected and concentrated the light into makeshift spotlights. Small, ghostly, floating orbs hovered back and forth across the hall, magically searching for anything invisible, ethereal, or otherwise concealed. There’s no getting past that. With the way they’re guarding it, it *must* be the way out. Likely the *only* way out.

I slid down the wall onto my ass and held my knees to my chest. Gods, what was I going to do? I can’t go back the way I came. Even if I did, what was I to do? Jump into the dark abyss and hope that the denizens of the Underdark would welcome me with open... mandibles? Or better yet, tentacles? No, that’d be suicide. Worse than death. At any moment, someone could come around, spy me just sitting there like a bullied child, and discern my identity. And that would be that. I would’ve given anything just for a way out of there... just for a *clue* of a way out. A *hint*. ‘My kingdom for an escape’, I thought.

I felt a thought bubble up from the recesses of my mind, from the distant, dark place where I shove my doubts and fears: *Is this what the people you’ve helped incarcerate feel like? Do they long for freedom? Do they pace their cells, like rats trying to climb out of a slimy well? Do they make pacts with gods and demons, just for a glimpse of freedom? Are you, Tristin, finally getting a taste of what you’ve condemned others to? Is this you facing justice?*

“But they deserved their fate; they did it to themselves when they broke the law.” It felt like I was lying to myself. And I know what lying sounds and looks like, better than most. *My freedom I hold dear.* My freedom. Freedom was the most valuable thing in the world, now that I no longer had any.

My head snapped up. Bloodshot and watery eyes stared fiercely at nothing as my mind spun. That’s what I had missed. The Boss didn’t care about her wealth, her security. She was a criminal. She could always steal more valuables. She prided herself in being able go where she pleased, whenever she pleased. As a thief, without *freedom* she had *nothing*.

The most valuable thing in that room was freedom. She literally offered it to me, and I had missed it.

Of course she would have a secret exit in her personal quarters! A secure, secret escape route was priceless. Tristin, you absolute fool. I had to get back in there. I had to find what I had missed. I pushed myself up the wall and stretched my aching knees. One gave a soft, but satisfying, pop. I retraced my steps, towards the Boss’s quarters. What I would do when I got there, I had no idea.

Chapter 5

A few minutes of backtracking through the now abandoned tunnels brought me back to the intersection to her room. I heard hushed voices as I approached the tunnel that ended in her doorway. I peered around the corner. All four guards were there, as was the Boss. A gangly sixth figure loomed over her, like a thin, sickly tree in a rainstorm. His brown, padded Troubleshooter's coat was buckled and buttoned. He gripped a messy clipboard with one hand and nervously fidgeted with the spectacles clamped to the bridge of his hawkish nose with his other. Roric. I strained to hear their conversation.

"...-ank you, Mr Roric, but, as you can see, we're a bit in the middle o' somethin' right now." She stage-whispered angrily to her tall companion. She grabbed him by the sleeve of his coat and started pulling him down the hall, towards the corner that I was hiding behind.

"Ah, yes, be that as it may, you've only retained my services for a specific *number of hours*, not for the completion of the task! I'm simply trying to stay on schedule! If you'd just let me finish the accounting of your books, I'll be on my way!" He managed to sound like he was stammering, even when he wasn't.

As she firmly led him away from her door, three of the guards flanked them, keeping a tight perimeter. Quietly as I could, I moved away from the corner and crouched behind a nearby stack of crates covered with netting. I was well covered but could still see the scene.

Through clenched teeth, she replied, "I'll increase yer retainer, whatever. Just get back to yer quarters! Do you not know what 'lock down' means, you nonce?" She continued to lead him away, down a nearby tunnel, with three of her guards in tow, hissing at him all the way. That left one guard at her door. Surely, the great Tristin Fidellis can handle one measly guard, right? ...Right?

Timing on this would be critical. She needed to be far enough way, but not gone for so long that she could return before I got in. Perhaps if I had explored more, I would've known where the guest quarters were in relation to the Boss's abode. Alas, I was no adventurer.

I waited a few minutes and then stood. Taking a deep breath, I prepared myself. Time to prove my Bard College 'Performance 101' instructor wrong.

I bound around the corner, out of breath, as if I had run a great distance. The guard, who was about thirty feet away, near the door, spun and drew their weapon in alarm.

"They, *huff*, they got him... *huff*... cornered! In the dining hall! The Boss said to get everyone down there! *huff* NOW! He's putting up a HELL of a fight!" I doubled over, feigning catching my breath. The guard gave me a steely, determined look and sprinted towards me, then past me. As he rounded the corner to the right, I straightened and jogged to her door. I'd encountered glyphs of warding like this before. I examined the door closely, summoning the mote of light to my fingertip, using it to catch the reflection of the nearly invisible markings upon the dark wood. Ah, there. The junction of tertiary and alluvial synchronic symbols. I pulled the dagger from my belt and scratched at the door, breaking the lines between a few of the arcane characters. The magic that infused the glyph to the door fizzled in a subtle puff of sparks.

I went for the door handle. The latches had not been reset. It was unlocked. In her haste, she had forgotten to lock up. Roric, you irritating, brilliant bastard. I pushed open the heavy door, entered, closed it behind me, and set the locks. That might give me a few more seconds.

My hair stood on end being in the same room where I had come so close to death, less than an hour prior. I forced myself to calm, to think. Where would she hide an exit? It should be in some place easy and quick to get to. I doubted she would waste the time to use the magical rope to ascend to her treasure room, even though that would

make for a good fallback point. No, she'd want an *escape*; a way to leave the compound entirely. If not to the surface, then to the greater sewer system where she could then go in a dozen different ways. What's out of place? What's *different*?

The bed. Or, more precisely, the dais it sat upon. I ran to the bedroom quadrant and slid to the ground next to the bed. It was tall, leading me to wonder how exactly she got into, and out of, this bed every day. I didn't see any step stools nearby. Focus, Tristin. I pulled myself and slid under the bed, feeling for seams in the stone.

As I worked, I glanced to my right. The door was plainly visible. I suddenly realized that the space under the bed, that I was conspicuously occupying, was in direct line of site of the door. If she entered, there was no way she could've missed me. I searched faster.

I slid around in the dust under the bed, looking for an indentation, a button, anything. Tracing my fingers to where one of the legs of the bed sat upon the carved stone of the dais, I realized something. The bed was very cleverly affixed to the stone. I went to another leg. There seemed to be a slight gap between the dark, lacquered wood and the floor. I softly snapped my fingers, causing the mote of light to appear at my fingertip. Shifting awkwardly, I moved my hand behind the leg. A gap. Light shone through. But... there was something connecting the leg to the stone, something narrow and thin. The shadow of a cable? A metal rod of some kind?

I didn't need to understand the mechanism in order to find it and use it, nor did I have the time. I pulled myself out from under the bed and ran my hand up the leg where it connected to the rest of the bed. A series of rounded, iron nail heads dotted a line across the headboard. I pressed each in turn. The one in the very center depressed with a mechanical click. I heard a thunk, another click from across the room, and then the muffled sound of stone sliding against stone emanate from under the bed.

Then, another click came from the other side of the room. The door! The door was being unlocked! I dropped down again. There was now a round hole, about the size of manhole cover, in the center of the dais. Another clunk sounded from the door. I slid under the bed, feet first, on my belly, angling my body into the hole. Anywhere was better than here. I hoped that was true.

As I lowered myself into the hole, my feet found purchase on metal bars set into the stone that functioned as a ladder. I climbed down until I was fully inside and then frantically looked for another mechanism. A large stone button was right at eye level. I pressed it. The round stone cap began to close. I watched it for a moment before continuing my climb down. If it closed before the door opened, I would never know.

The descent was brief, only about twenty feet. A clean, dry, unlit tunnel, just high enough for me to stand in, stretched into the darkness at a steady upward angle. The walls were made of the same stone as the dais and were unadorned. For once, I had a simple path to choose: straight forward. My light cantrip led the way for roughly ten minutes before I ran into a circular grate. An obvious latch handle was on the interior, to my right. Hidden hinges secured the left side to the wall. Through the bars, the upper sewer was visible. I saw faint shadows slide across the opposite walls.

Holding my breath, I listened... and heard the faint murmurs of voices. I was near the surface, somewhere in the city! I squeezed the latch, and with some final resistance, it clicked open, allowing me to swing open the grate. I stepped down into the humid, dripping sewers that ran just under the streets. I squinted and looked up. I saw orange and pink clouds through a rectangular grate. People bustling above, oblivious to my presence. What a strange angle in which to view people, I mused. The squawking gulls calling out their final flights before evening respite sounded like a symphony. I could smell the city, even over the dank waste of the sewer water that flowed at my feet. I reminded myself that these were not, in fact, *my* boots.

I stumbled through the sewer until the next junction and climbed the iron ladder to the manhole cover. With a heave, I managed to lift the iron slab and slide it out of my way, bloodying my fingers in the process. I clambered out of the hole, much to the shock and dismay of the passing pedestrians, who jumped away and gave me a wide

berth. Their looks of surprise and disgust were... hilarious. I flopped over onto my back, splayed out on the slick cobblestones amidst the crowd, stared up at the fiery orange and purple clouds of the late evening sky and laughed. I laughed harder, louder, and longer than I had ever laughed before or since.

Epilogue

**Waterdeep Undersewer - Former Thieves Guild compound.
One week later. Late-Eleasis (Month of "Highsun") - 1490 DR**

"We're purdy much cleaned up here, Tristin. I thought ye might like to see it one last time, but from *this* side." Lieutenant Kormen Stonebeard stood resolutely by my side as we watched the massive, reinforced doors of the Thieves Guild hideout fall to the ground with two great thuds and a blast of dusty air.

After the raid on the compound four days ago resulted in dozens of arrests and hundreds of thousands of gold pieces worth of valuables recovered, the city masons and carpenters had been brought in to dismantle the whole thing. The doors, the makeshift rooms, the barricades, all of it. The entire area would be sealed and patrolled, preventing any other squatters from using it for nefarious purposes. It was one the largest blows against organized crime in Waterdeep's history. Apparently, a whole new set of adventuring contracts had been made available for exploring the cistern, and what may lay below it.

I placed my hand on Kormen's armored shoulder. He looked up, the edges of his eyes crinkling in what passed as a smile for the gruff Dwarf.

"Thank you, Lieutenant. It's... quite a show."

"We still haven't located the ringleader, though. Ye sure ye didn't even catch her name? Even an alias might help us track her down."

"No, sadly. We were never formally introduced. It was just... 'Boss'."

"Bah, no matter. She'll be sleeping in barns and runnin' for her life for a while, after this sort of cock up. Xanathar himself would probably like to get a look at 'er, if ye catch my drift. I doubt we'll have to worry about her again in Waterdeep."

"I certainly hope not. However, I *am* concerned about how Skullport will react to this. Any scuttlebutt about retaliation?"

"Nay, they're being real quiet-like about this bust. Not sure why. Maybe they didn't like yer Boss-lady much either." The Dwarf harrumphed.

"Perhaps. But that is still *a lot* of resources and territory to lose in one blow. You'd better believe I'm using an alarm spell on my apartment for the next few weeks."

Kormen grunted. "Oh, aye. Four weeks of paid leave and a medal! Ye made out like a bandit, didn't ya? Was it worth it?" He glanced up at me again, wryly.

"Certainly. Instead of the hound of Waterdeep, I'll be the captured canary that brings them down from the inside. Much more efficient. What's a few missing teeth?" I smirked at Kormen, unamused.

We watched the workers dismantle the barricades for a while and then made our way topside. My physical injuries had been completely, *magically*, healed. From that perspective, I felt good as new. Mentally and emotionally, however... I had acquired scars that would never truly fade away. It had been less than a tenday since the Watch had found me laying on my back, in the middle of the street, delirious. In the days following, my nightly Elven trance pulled me into the memories of my torture to relive them night after night, without escape. My bloody, bare feet and toes scraping on the slimy stone. The oozing sockets in my mouth where teeth should be. The click of a broken jaw. The drowning sensation of choking on my own blood. The countless failures of intellect that nearly doomed me.

“The Watch made sure they cast some mighty powerful healing magic on ye... Ye sure you need that thing?” Kormen inquired softly as we walked back to the garrison, through the lit streets on that warm summer night.

The tap of my cane made cadence with our footsteps on the paving stones. I still found myself stumbling, as if my feet were not receiving clear instructions from my mind, consciously or otherwise. I would occasionally trip on nothing, forcing me to awkwardly catch myself on anything, or anyone, nearby. It was intermittent and unpredictable, hence the cane. I'd rather look slightly more fashionable than infinitely more incapable.

“Kormen, my friend... some things are not so easy to be free of.”

The End

