

# Tristin Stops to Smell the Roses

-Scott Kelley 7/7/2024



## Introduction

My name is Tristin Fidellis. I am a Detective Investigator with the City Watch of Waterdeep.

I live in a world of magic and monsters, demons and gods. Luckily, I've got a little magic of my own. What I can't observe, I can divine, even when it's the ugly truth spilling from a thug's bloodied mouth.

In a world that has real Evil in it, Good must also exist. I thread the gutter between. I'll lie, I'll cheat, I'll use magic to cajole, to bend wills to my own if it serves my purpose. And my purpose is justice. I've sold my soul to this city and the price was cheap... just an occasional win, a rare success, a big break that saves, or at least avenges, someone innocent. It's all I ask of the City of Splendors. And the City, she loves me.

# Chapter 1

*North Ward, Waterdeep, the City of Splendors, on The Sword Coast of the continent of Faerûn on the world of Abeir-Toril, Realmspace.*

*Mid-morning of 12<sup>th</sup> Tarsakh - 1490 DR*

“What do you have, Lieutenant?” I asked as I casually sidestepped an armored Watchman passing through the doorway from inside a large, well-appointed study. The room was tastefully done, all leather-bound books, brass details, and expensive items displayed in glass cases. It was dim, due to the curtains being drawn, but not dim enough for my darkvision to kick in. A few Watchmen milled about, jotting down notes on the scene, murmuring amongst themselves. I pulled my leather Investigator’s longcoat closer as I squeezed past a Half-Orc Watchman who stood dully inside the doorway. A voice resonated from somewhere beyond and below the bulk.

“Oi. Tristin...”, a deep, rough, accented voice responded, “Meet Balgor Threekeg... Balgor, Tristin.” I glanced towards the side of the room with the floor-to-ceiling curtained windows. Behind a heavy, ornate, wooden desk lay the slumped-over body of a balding, crimson-haired Dwarf. The body was face-down on the desk. I saw no blood nor any weapon protruding from his back. Curious. I moved into the center of the room as Lieutenant Kormen Stonebeard joined me. His helmet was off, revealing his severe, perfectly level flat-top haircut and dark blue eyes. I had occasionally wondered how he got his short, sandy blonde hair to stand perfectly straight up like that. His dirty blonde beard was in one, single, tight braid. He exuded discipline and control.

Kormen continued, “Balgor here is, uh... was, a merchant of some renown...he used his adventurn’ fortune to become a dealer of rare artifacts. Human, Elven, Dwarven, hells, even some Drow stuff”. The tanned Dwarf gestured a stubby, gauntleted hand towards an object placed on a pedestal, under a dark velvet cloth.

“No accountn’ fer taste” he sneered. I could tell he was resisting the urge to spit on the beautiful Calishite carpet that covered the floor. “Anyways... Fizzgig Flickerbottom, his manservant, flagged down one o’ our men and said some Elf lady, by the name of” -he glanced down to a small pad of paper in his left hand- “Elara Moonglow, had killed his master and run off... some sort of business deal gone bad. Fizz, as he prefers to be called, is downstairs in the kitchen. Little feller is pretty shook up. She apparently wholloped the gnome purdy good on the way out the back door, through the kitchen.”

As Lieutenant Kormen relayed this information, I had already begun sweeping the room, spiraling towards the body. No signs of struggle. Nothing obviously missing. Kormen was right, this Dwarf was quite the collector. Glass doored bookcases, broad pedestals, and clear-topped security cases lined the cozy room. Each was filled with all manner of knick-knacks, artifacts, and object d’art. Most seemed ancient, more like archaeological finds than showpieces. About half had a distinctly Elven quality to them. A stand in the corner displayed a battered suit of Dwarven plate armor. Once painted black and gold, the broad plates, right angles, and rivets holding it together were scored with hundreds of marks from decades of battle damage. Next to it, a massive, squarish Dwarven battleaxe was hung securely on its plaque. “Bonesever” was etched into a small metal plate on its base.

Adventurers. Childish, irresponsible people playing with powers far beyond their moral capacity. Overpowered fools who believed that the law didn’t apply to them. Sure, they may claim to save the world once or twice a year, but what about the collateral damage they leave in their wake? What about the local economies they destroy by dropping thousands of gold pieces on a small-town tavern keeper, just because they happened to be in a good mood after killing a dragon? No mortals should have that kind of power, especially ones so... unregulated.

When I approached the body, I confirmed that there was, indeed, no blood. I did notice a few speckles of dried, clear-ish liquid on the opened, empty envelopes under his head. Sweat? No... Tears? Ha. No. Droplets too small, to spread out. Residue from a coughing fit? A sneeze?

Balgor was well dressed. Fine silk clothing with leather and metal accents. Very popular, and standard, amongst the wealthy Dwarves of Waterdeep. Nothing outrageous, though. The crimson silks competed with his well-trimmed, fiery red beard and slightly greying hair that clung to the sides and back of his skull like paint splashed on a crystal ball.

I leaned in towards the dead Dwarf's face. The lips were only slightly purple. Too purple for just the natural pooling of the blood, but not purple enough as a clear sign of poison. I lifted my right arm in a well-practiced gesture causing an ephemeral, blue glowing hand, identical to my own, to apparate into existence just beyond my fingertips. The Mage Hand mimicked my every subtle movement, though I could not feel through it. Perhaps one day I'd figure out a way to enhance the cantrip.

With surgical precision, I used the Hand to open his eyelids. His eyes were bloodshot. Dilated. Looked like poison, but... isn't? Also... what is that smell? Something in the air, diffuse, but stronger here? Roses? There were no roses in the room; in fact, no flowers of any kind in the house that I'd seen thus far. No plants at all, really.

I forced myself to perk up an ear to Kormen.

"We've already sent a patrol to go find this Elara Moonglow... apparently she's some wealthy appreciator of the fine arts herself. Oh, and one more thing... Roric, from the Trade Guild, is a guest here. Been here for a day or two".

I recalled Roric. Dark hair, spectacles, around 30 summers old. I'd encountered the Human a few months previous when I found him in the middle of an embezzling scheme gone wrong. He was a Troubleshooter for the Trade Guild; something like an auditor, an accountant, and a liquidator all wrapped into one. The nebbish, bespectacled version of a judge, jury, and executioner. The oblivious copper piece counter had followed the money right into a mob of 'insurance salesmen' who decided to branch out from their protection racket. Roric tended to find himself in the middle of far more interesting situations than any quill pusher had any right to.

"He's downstairs as well, in the kitchen. Say's he found Fizz, roused 'em, and then came up here only to discover Balgor's body."

I stood, dispelling the Mage Hand, "Thank you, Lieutenant."

Pursing my lips, I rummaged through the large pockets on the inside of my longcoat. I produced a tightly rolled scroll, secured with the official Waterdhavian wax seal, and held it up towards Kormen with a resigned look on my face.

"Time to do the deed." I deadpanned. I've always hated this part. I've never liked necromancy, even this single 'City-approved exception for the official business of seeking justice'. Oh, I liked the *results*, to be sure, I just didn't enjoy the sensation of undeath and negative energy tickling the soft underside of my soul. Being able to speak with the shadow of the murder victim can sometimes make for a short workday. Today was not one of those days.

## Chapter 2

Sickly green light erupted from the corpse's eyes and mouth, matching my own. My voice, hoarse and hollow in my own ears, slithered from my throat as I completed casting the spell from the scroll. I could ask the body five questions, no more. I was speaking with the *dead*, not with the living soul of the person. A common misunderstanding that had led to much frustration over the years. Only ask what the *body* would know, would perceive, not what the *person* would know or feel. It was a subtle, but key, distinction.

Kormen and the rest of the Watchmen had left the room, leaving me to the talking corpse. Hopefully, a cooperative talking corpse.

"Who were you?", Good to confirm the identity, just in case.

The raspy hiss of air passing through the dead windpipe sickened my stomach, "I was Balgor Threekeg... adventurer... merchant... collector...". Okay, good first step.

"Who killed you?" let's get to it, then.

"I... don't know... no one...?", the last few words lilted slightly. Felt like a... question? Not good.

"Who was with you when you died?", I tried a different approach. Get some facts.

"Lady Elara Moonglow... rival... collector..." At least I had the basics covered.

"How did you die?" I hoped it wouldn't say 'magic'.

"Couldn't... breathe... choking... throat... closed." Terrible way to go, I thought.

"What was Elara doing right before you died?" Time for the longshot.

"Arguing... saying that... the Aelinthaldaar artifact should... belong to her... not me... told me... to not... bid on it... at auction..." I hated it when the plot thickened. I preferred a nice, thin plot.

With a second, and hopefully final, death rattle, the corpse's head laid itself gingerly back down upon the desk, as the eerie emerald light faded from it and me. I rubbed my face, trying to hasten the warmth returning to my nose, lips and cheeks. My bone-cold fingers didn't help much. Waterdeep was built upon the ancient ruins of an Elven settlement known as Aelinthaldaar. All artifacts from that distant period were sought after, especially by Elves. I thought I recalled seeing one in the Hall of Antiquities some years ago. It looked like an old clay pot with children's drawings on the side. Was something like that worth murdering for?

"Eugh...", I muttered. Well, that's possible motive *and* opportunity... Now to determine the means. Poison seems most likely, but how? She didn't seem to attack him or otherwise administer it. There were no refreshments to ingest on the desk or elsewhere in the room. The small wet bar behind the desk, under the window, seemed untouched. If this Dwarf liked his drink, it wasn't often done here.

Looked like I was going to have to do this the hard way. The thorough way. I spent the next half hour examining the body, looking for any signs of wounds... even the smallest pinprick. Nothing. Balgor was in above average shape for a Dwarf of his age. The callouses and wear and tear of a body inflicted by an adventuring lifestyle were apparent. Scars from multiple sources peppered his flesh. Old teeth marks, where some beast, likely a draconid of some kind, had taken him up in his jaws ringed his torso. A jagged slash mark, now a faded scar, perhaps from a gnoll's bladed scourge, ran diagonally across his back. Burns, acid discolorations, and even some faded tattoos chronicled this Dwarf's storied life. As apparent as all this was to me, in this context, it's likely that none of his peers would've had any idea, if he had not ever told them.

He was tough. Very tough. Decades of adventuring had made him exceedingly durable. Even besides his natural Dwarven stamina and resilience, he knew how to fight, how to take a hit, how to roll with a blow... probably

even magical ones. I doubted that even a dagger in his chest would've slowed him down. So, what could've killed a person like this, so quickly? And with no trace? There were powerful magics that could snuff out someone's very essence, but that required a powerful caster which was both rare and expensive. But that's not killed him, not what he died from. At least as far as his body was concerned.

I used the Mage Hand to examine his mouth and throat. A few small, busted blood vessels, not much else. The throat did indeed seem swollen. I checked for an obstruction. Nothing. Damn.

Now that the physical examination was complete, I could move on to more definitive, and expensive (for the city), methods. I pulled a second scroll from my longcoat and cast the spell etched upon it. As the spell's energy was unlocked from the page, the scroll disintegrated, leaving me with the ability to sense poisons of any kind, within a certain radius. Again, as I feared, nothing. Well, except for the extremely faint glow coming from the wines and whiskeys of the wet bar, but that was to be expected. Looks like I was going to have to do this the long *and* hard way.

## Chapter 3

Fizzgig “Fizz” Flickerbottom sat perched on a barstool, feet swishing nervously, in the downstairs kitchen of Balgor’s manor. The kitchen was well lit via large windows and was detailed in black and white tile and brass fixtures. A large central island crafted from a single massive wooden block and topped with a slab of marble dominated the room. Cabinetry, ovens, pantries, and hanging cooking implements ringed the walls. It was clean, but well used. A large, lidded metal pot and a smaller saucepan filled with beets sat on the cold stove. Next to them, a metal carafe. The smell of coffee still lingered in the air. Small step-stairs were found at the base of most of the work surfaces, there to accommodate the small-statured manservant. It was quiet, with the murmur of the city fading behind the trills and whistles of birdsong coming from the small garden just beyond the over-under split door that led outside.

Two Watchmen leaned against the countertops, looking bored. Roric, in all his disheveled glory, stood in the corner, looking like an emaciated owl taken human form.

“Oh! Ah!.. ah, Mr, er, Inspector Tristin! I was hoping to see you again! But, not... not like this of course! I’m so glad you’re here! I’ll be happy to tell you everything that’s happened this dreadful morning! I...-“

“Investigator.”

“Sorry? Oh, ah, yes... *Investigator* Tristin, er, Fidellis, yes!”

“I’ll speak with you in a moment, Roric... First, I need to speak with Mr. Flickerbottom.”

The Watchmen wordlessly took their cue and politely, but professionally, corralled Roric into another room, closing the door behind them. Fizz, still kicking his feet, regarded me palely. I had always found Gnomes difficult to age properly. The normal signifiers seemed to apply to Gnomes randomly... white hair, wrinkles, large noses, reedy voices, and mischievous glimmers in their eyes could all apply to any adult Gnome. He clutched the sides of the barstool, his knuckles taugt, as if he was fighting against his own flailing legs to not be knocked off his perch.

He wore an embroidered and buttoned shortcoat, with an embroidered vest beneath, both with a flowery motif. Suspenders kept his pants in place and green leather shoes with pointed tips capped his small feet. His hair was white as linen, curly, and sat back from a large forehead. Like many male gnomes, he kept a small, neatly shaped pointed beard that curled slightly forward from his chin. His white eyebrows were also neatly trimmed, lest they become unruly. His large nose, thin lips and pale grey eyes made him look older than he likely was. A large white bandage covered the right side of his forehead. A barely discernible dark red stain could be seen soaked into the cloth.

“Nervous, Mr. Flickerbottom?”

“Nervous?? My master has been murdered and you’re asking ME if I’m nervous?!” Had he been human, his voice likely would’ve been deep, but it resonated with a strange ‘pitched up’ quality that some might think cute. “Have you caught that awful woman yet??”, his voiced wavered and went up by an octave.

“I assure you we’ve got a Patrol on it as we speak. I need to ask you a few questions.”

“Fizz! Just call me Fizz. Everyone does!”, he exclaimed.

“Very well, ‘Fizz’, I need to ask you a few questions.” He sat there, feet still kicking like an energetic child, and stared at me, his pale grey eyes glassy.

“Can you tell me about your morning? Please provide all the detail you can...”

“Yes. Well. I arose as normal, prepared Master his breakfast... left over lamb stew and beets from supper last night and coffee... and began my morning routine. Master Balgor went to his study, as normal. He usually

spends the morning in there, looking over his books and... planning out his next purchase, I suppose. All was peaceful until that woman came pounding upon our door!", he pouted, in an attempt to express displeasure.

I held his gaze and gave a slight nod for him to continue.

"Elara Moonglow! She's been harassing Master Balgor for years! She came herself this time to yell at him about something or other. I announced her and took her to the Master's study. He was unhappy about the interruption but said I could leave, so that they may talk. Had I known! I never would've let her alone with him!", Fizz's pace was frantic, heart-wrenching.

"I came back downstairs... I was only gone for 10 minutes or so! That's when I heard her stomping down the stairs and saw her run into the kitchen! I was standing..." -Fizz leapt off the barstool and scurried to a space beside the central island, near the kitchen door that lead to the garden- "...here!"

"That's when she ran into me, knocked me over, and bonked my head into the counter!", He touched the leading edge of the countertop with slight fingers, "I-I'd like to report her for assault and, and bodily harm, uh, as well!"

"And then what happened?", I asked flatly as I could. It was difficult to not be infected with the Gnome's manic energy.

"I... I don't know... I guess she knocked me out." his pout-as-disapproving-frown reappearing, "That's all I remember until Roric was shaking me awake."

"You believe Ms. Moonglow killed your Master?" I asked sagely.

Fizz sputtered in disbelief, "Wh- how-, yes! Yes, of course she did! Who else? He was bloody well alive when I took her to him, and he was dead after she left! Who else could've done it?", there was a panic, a hysteria in his voice. Not uncommon for someone in his situation, to be fair. I needed to rein him in a bit.

"Thank you, Mr... Fizz. Your testimony will be very helpful. I assure you we'll get to the bottom of this."

"Bottom?!", he squeaked, "The bottom seems as obvious as the nose on my face!"

So much for calming him. I told him that he was free to go about his business, but to stay out of the study for the time being. The coroner would be there shortly to collect the body. I bid him good day and moved to the sitting room at the front of the house where the two Watchmen had relocated Roric.

Both Watchmen were leaning boredly against the built-in bookcases that lined the sitting room when I entered. Roric sat low in a large, overstuffed leather chair, his knees at eye level. The furniture was, of course, Dwarf-sized. Both his feet and his fingers tapped nervously, all out of synch from one another. His dark, curly hair was plastered to his forehead with sweat. Roric stared up at me expectantly, his thick spectacles magnifying his dark eyes to comedic proportions. He swallowed as he blinked, which only added to the effect.

"Thank you, Watchmen... I'll take it from here."

They tipped their open-faced helmets towards me as they vacated the sparse, but comfortable, sitting room, leaving me with the damp owl. He stared at me, but I could see the panic sloshing behind his eyes like frothy ale being clumsily poured into a dirty glass mug. He's either a part of this, or extremely unlucky. Most days, I don't let 'luck' color my conclusions... it's too closely related to that bitch 'coincidence'. But, I mean... look at him. My gut told me he's just some poor sap who had somehow pissed off Tymora, Goddess of Luck... at birth. Unfortunately, the Magistrate didn't take testimony from my gut.

"Roric... what are you doing here?", I asked, allowing a sliver of annoyance to seep through.

"Oh, Tristin, it was awful!", he gushed, "I thought I was gonna be next! There was a killer in the house!"



“I don’t have time for this.”

“Okay, yes, right...”, he gathered himself, pulling his quilted troubleshooter coat out of the way as he sat forward on the low chair. I watched as his mind engaged... Roric wasn’t stupid, far from it. In our previous dealings, he had made connections and noticed discrepancies in minutiae that even I had missed. He had a detail-oriented, analytical mind. Shame that it was never utilized in the pursuit of self-preservation.

“I was hired by Master Balgor to audit some of his investments... he offered to let me stay as his guest for a few days, until I completed my task, you see”. Detecting my next questions before I could ask it, he continued, “Two days... I arrived two days ago. The day before yesterday. He put me up in a spare room, upstairs. It’s quite nice, if a bit stuffy. He paid me twenty-five gold pieces when I arrived and was to pay me seventy-five gold upon completion. I suppose I won’t be seeing *that* money, now...”, he suddenly shot a glance at me, mouth agape and face paling as he did so, “oh... not that I- I- am *concerned* by that! The man is *dead*, after all!”

He grimaced at his own awkwardness. I rolled my eyes.

“What can you tell me about Elara Moonglow?”, I sat myself on the edge of nearby stuffed chair, elbows on knees, attempting to not loom.

“Lovely lady, in my estimation. A-and not just because she’s Elven!” he blushed. I smirked. He continued, “I’ve attended a few of her charity balls and even coordinated a donation to one of the orphanages in the Field Ward. Her books have been mostly clean, in my *professional* opinion.”

“Mostly?”

“I-I’m not at liberty to say more... client confidentiality! You must understand!”, he implored.

“It’s fine, please continue.”

“You may not know this bit... but, Elara and Balgor were something of a *thing*. I mean, not like an *item*, but a *situation*, more like” -he gathered his wits for a breath and then continued- “they were rivals. Well-known, *loud* rivals. For some reason, Balgor loved to snipe acquisitions from her at auctions. And, when she could, she did the same to him. It’s like... it *was*... a game to them, I suppose. For as much time as I spend around the wealthy, I simply do not understand them.

He looked away for a moment, towards the stained-glass window that filtered colored sunlight into the room. The sunlight painted a kaleidoscope onto his face under his spectacles. He sighed. Now that his mind was engaged in a task, he was much calmer. Lucid.

He continued, “I’ve oft heard about their dramatic encounters in public and at private engagements. I’d only seen them row on one occasion... it was” -he tapped on the arm of the leather chair- “at a charity ball for the Archaeologist Guild. Some poor steward seated them within ear shot of one another at the dining table. She bragged about having the greatest collection of ancient, pre-Waterdhavian Elven art pieces. He not-so-politely disagreed. They damn near started throwing food at each other!

I held up my hand, “I think I understand... what was she doing here, this morning?”

“I don’t know. She just started banging on the front door. I was in my room, dressing, but I could hear the pounding. I suppose Fizz answered and let her in. I recall hearing two sets of footsteps come up the stairs. Then, some muffled voices, a door shut, and then someone walked back downstairs. Fizz, I suppose. All the while I was getting dressed, I could hear them. They were talking loudly... I couldn’t make out what they were saying, though; I don’t make a habit of eavesdropping! By the time I had gotten completely dressed, I heard a door shut and someone run from the study, down the hall, and then down the stairs. By this time, I wanted to see what the commotion was about, so I went downstairs... no one was in the sitting room, so I went to the kitchen for breakfast. That’s when I spied poor little Fizz on the floor, out cold!”

“Where, exactly, was he laying?”

“Um, near the backdoor, on the floor. All splayed out on his back. Like a starfish.”

“That’s all you recall about finding him?”

Roric furrowed his brow in thought, “Yes... yes, I believe so.”

“What did you do then?”

“I roused the fellow, of course! Asked what happened. He muttered something about Elara and mentioned Balgor. So, I left Fizz and went upstairs. That’s where I found... him.” Roric’s face fell. He seemed genuinely sad.

“When you entered the study, did you open the door?”

“Well, of course I did... how else would I have gotten in?”

“You’re sure the door was closed?”

“Yes” he stated, annoyed at having his memory questioned. “When I came back down to the kitchen, Fizz was gone! I was concerned, until I heard the whistles heading this way... he must’ve gone for help. I waited in the kitchen until Fizz returned with the Watchmen. And, now here we are, I suppose.”

“Back up a bit. Describe exactly how you found Balgor.”

“He was just... slumped over, face down on the desk. Dead as a doornail.”

“How did you know he was dead? He could’ve been unconscious.”

“I-I checked. He wasn’t breathing. And I know enough to check the neck for a pulse.”

“Did you notice anything odd about the room?”

“Not... really. I had only been in there once before, when he hired me. It all looked the same.” He considered for moment, then continued, “There was the smell, though. It smelled like roses. I could even smell it in the hallway, when I came downstairs! Mighty powerful aroma... nice, though.” He seemed to get lost in the memory momentarily, a slight smile crossing his face.

“So, you only heard and smelled Elara? You didn’t encounter her while she was here?” I needed him to say it.

“Er, no... I never actually laid eyes upon her. In the Manor, that is. She had come and gone before I left my room. Pity. She’s quite the sight to behold.”

“Can you even confirm that it was her voice you heard? Can you say for sure that it was Elara Moonglow in the Manor this morning?”

He took his time considering it. “No, I suppose not.” He seemed troubled.

I leaned back into the chair. Despite being constructed for someone of shorter stature, it was quite comfortable. I clasped my hands behind my head and tilted further back. I closed my eyes, and my mind began replaying the events of the morning.

“Tristin? Are you well?”

“I’m thinking, Roric.”

“May I go?”

I cracked an eye open and swiveled it towards the bean counter, “Yes, Roric... but don’t leave town. I may have need of you later.”

With a soft grunt, he pushed himself up and out of the chair, twisted his back in a stretch, and softly padded out of the room. I’d see him again; I was sure of it.

# Chapter 4

## ***North Ward City Watch Guardhouse. Noon.***

“Ms. Moonglow, you have been arrested under suspicion of the murder of Balgor Threekeg.” I sat across from Elara in a small, stone interrogation room. The sturdy oak table between us had thick iron rings affixed to it, to which were attached long, thin, iron chains, which were then attached to manacles bound to the wrists of the fair, platinum-haired Elven woman.

She stared at me, defiantly. Her dark eye makeup had run slightly, giving her a somewhat morbid appearance. Had she looked sad or remorseful, it may have engendered sympathy, but as it was, she looked full of barely contained rage.

“I didn’t kill him.”

I folded my arms, raised an eyebrow, and leaned back which caused the old chair to creak. “Hm.” I said. There’s something familiar about this, about her. What is it?

“Ms Moonglow, you must understand that things aren’t looking good for you. You were the only one there when he died. You had a well-known contentious relationship with Balgor Threekeg. Was what happened something you planned or was it done in the heat of passion? Did he anger you, Ms Moonglow?”

The corner of her lip curled ever so slightly into a snarl. “I want my barrister. My advocate!”

“Yes, they’re on the way, I assure you. They can smell when their coin is threatened.”

Her eyes narrowed. I wondered if she used the same look to kill Balgor. Why does she seem familiar?

“I’m going to cast a spell in the room, Ms Moonglow. It will let me know, objectively, if what you’re saying is the truth. You may choose to not answer, but that may be construed as an admission of guilt. If you resist the spell, it may be construed as an admission of guilt.

“Fine. Cast your spell. I have nothing to hide.”

I leaned forward, scooting my chair closer to the table. As I did so, I caught a strong enough whiff of roses to finally figure out what had slowly been diffusing throughout the room... and my memory. Rose perfume. Strong. Concentrated.

I placed my elbows on the scarred surface of the table and began tracing intricate symbols into the air with my fingers. Completing the spell caused a zone of truth to expand around us. If an untruth were spoken in its area of effect, I would know. I felt the magic swell into the room, filling it, enveloping us. I let it wash over me, permeate my mind, affect me. I could feel that she did the same. Good. No resistance. I had 10 minutes of truth... or silence. Both were revealing.

“Ms Moong-“

“I didn’t kill him. I didn’t kill Balgor Threekeg.”

I had to admit, that raised both my eyebrows. I waited for her to continue.

“He was a boor and a classless, bearded bully, but I didn’t kill him!”

One of the limitations of this spell was that it could only alert me of a lie, if the speaker *knew* it was a lie, even subconsciously. If they truly believed something they said, it would register as true. This has caused much

confusion in its use, even in my profession... never mind when used by an adventurer in a dungeon using it to interrogate a goblin about where the closest treasure chest could be found or whatever.

“Very well, then,” I assuaged, “let’s start at the beginning. Why were you at Threekeg Manor this morning?”

She leaned back, folding her arms over her small chest, causing the chains to rattle. She was wearing a sheer, deep-cut dress. The elegant evening gown clung to her like wet linen and shimmered, even in the dingy light, with an emerald iridescence. Crystalline earrings dangled from the lobes of her long, elegant ears. Her green, almond shaped eyes glittered with confidence. For anyone but an Elven noble, she would’ve been wildly over dressed for any occasion outside of Ao, the Overgod, coming to dinner. My eyes watered very slightly. I blinked.

“I had heard rumor that the little runt intended on sniping another *Aelinthaldar* artifact from me.” The way she pronounced the word in its native Elvish sent a little shiver down my spine. I could speak fluent Elvish, as I was taught by my mother, but my dialect didn’t have the same ancient, ethereal beauty to the accent as hers. My mother’s, that is. And Elara’s.

“So, I decided that I had had enough and would tell him, in person, to stay away from the next auction. Those artifacts are MY birthright! They have NO business in the grubby little hands of that... stone kicker!” She seemed to struggle with finding a racial epithet strong enough for her liking. Hard problem to have.

“Why in person?”

“He had stopped replying to my correspondence... I just wanted to *talk* to him.” The spell silently pinged me within my mind.

“Is that so? Is that all you wanted?”

She frowned, but more at herself, it seemed. “No... no, I wanted him to leave me alone. I wanted him to stop competing with me! I wanted to MAKE him stop!”

“Did you want him dead?”

Silence.

Then quietly, “No... not really.” The spell remained silent.

There was a shift in her demeanor. She looked up at me, eyes sincere and clear, “I simply want what is mine, what belongs to me. I have fought my whole life to reconstruct the glory of the Elves, or at least be able to preserve some small part of it. It’s a precious thing, history. We Elves live so long, so many lifetimes, that even we forget great swaths of it... friends, lovers... even enemies. Our own histories can be forgotten, just as the histories of kingdoms, or cities. What loss. It pains me.” I unconsciously cleared my throat and surreptitiously wiped my tearing eye.

She paused for a moment, searching for the right words, then continued, “When I entered Balgor’s study, I just wanted to talk.” The spell pinged me again. “He didn’t offer me a seat nor refreshment. ‘Very well,’ I thought, ‘we shall play hard ball’. I told him under no uncertain terms that the artifact would be mine. He laughed at me! He told me that he’d purchase it, just because I wanted it. I think he even joked about tossing it into the harbor once he had it! I... may have threatened to send him a bouquet every day for the rest of his miserable little life. He accused me of trying to annoy him with my perfume! We... we went back and forth like this for a bit and then... he started coughing. He wouldn’t stop. At first, I found it rather amusing... but he started choking and clawing at his throat. It was dreadful.

She deflated slightly, her perfect posture slouching into the uncomfortable wooden chair. “I watched him die.”

The moment of reverie passed, and she then resolved herself, sitting bolt upright once again. “So, I ran. I knew how it would look, for me to be in there. Yes, I realize now how foolish it was, how stupid.”

“So you ran out of the study? To where?”

“Downstairs, where else? I wasn’t about to leap from a window! I thought that going out the back would be most prudent. Unfortunately, that little Gnome he keeps around for some reason was in the way. I ran past him and out the door of the garden. After I made it to the street, I calmed myself and walked home; where I waited for the Watchmen.”

“Did you make contact with Fizz? Touch him at all? Knock him down when you blew past him?”

She shook her head and furrowed her brow in confusion, “No, I went around the table, on the other side. I only saw the top of his head. I didn’t *want* to encounter him. But, with him seeing me... I knew this...” -she gestured at the cold, stone interrogation room surrounding us- “...was inevitable. I’m no criminal. And no murderer. I might as well await my fate in the comfort of my own home. I know that all I must do I speak the truth and I will be exonerated. Someone else, *something* else, killed your Dwarf.”

My magical zone had not pinged me. There was entirely too much truth in the stories I’d heard today and not nearly enough lies. Lies are great... they’re a cracked open door, a slightly ajar window, a picture frame just slightly a skew. An enticing egress towards the truth. But this? This was not helpful... truths like this only raised more questions. I’m still back to square one... what killed a tough-as-nails, ex-adventurer Dwarf?

I cleared my throat again. I needed some air.

“I’m sure your barrister will be here shortly, Ms Moonglow. In the meantime, you’ll remain here. Once released, please don’t leave the city. I’m sure we’ll be speaking again. This *is* an active murder investigation.”

“I’d be happy to answer any more questions you have, Investigator. It’s been a pleasure.” The spell pinged me one last time as I exited the room.

# Chapter 5

*North Ward, outside Lady Elara Moonglow's Estate. Early afternoon.*

The city smelled sour, and it wasn't the normal fishy wafts from the harbor. Something was off and I was going to find it. And what better place to look than Elara's personal abode? It'd be at least an hour before her barrister got her processed and out of the clink. That gave me ample time to sniff through her affairs and find something rotten.

I've got her on opportunity. Motive? Perhaps, perhaps not, given what the zone pinged. I've seen people kill for less, though. Means was the stinker. What killed the rich bastard? How did she do it? What's a poison that isn't a poison? If I were dealing with more powerful magic than I was accustomed to, this might have to get kicked up to the Mage Civilar, so the real casters can deal with it. But it didn't feel like I was tangling with Thayan necromancers, Drow assassins, or Liches. No, this was more mundane, more... personal. I'd be damned if I let the City hire a gang of scroungy adventurers to 'solve' my case. Again.

The low, wrought iron fence surrounding the Moonglow Estate was barely visible under the mass of ivy that had been growing on it for generations (Human... not Elven). The stately two-story building was all curves and ovals, with a heavy-handed motif of leaves and trees. Light pastels in pinks, blues, greens, and purples gave the entire thing a light, whimsical feel. It was nauseating.

I pushed open the metal gate and followed the perfectly placed flagstone path to the front stairs. Climbing the stairs, I glanced back and spied more of the grounds than I could've seen from the street... spiral shaped flowers gardens swept away from the house, filling the yard with fractals of petals. I recognized a handful of the plants. A dozen steps later and I was on the small front porch.

The oval front door had a small, off-center, round, colored glass window. It reminded me of a fried egg. I rang the brass bell and waited. Less than a minute later, the door cracked open cautiously. Infernal eyes of black, red, and orange peered at me through the gap. A smokey, feminine voice emanated from within.

"What do you want? Ze mistress iz not in at ze moment. You'll have to come back later."

I held up my badge. "Tristin Fidellis, Investigator with the City Watch. I need to come in, uh.."

"Mishka."

"Ms Mishka. This is official business, and I won't bother you for long."

After a moment's hesitation, Mishka unlatched the chain, a large bolt that secured the door, and then sheepishly swung it open.

The swish of air blew a beautiful gust over me... it smelled amazing. Light perfumes, fresh-baked cookies, exotic flowers... and a few more things I couldn't place. Somehow the competing odors didn't combat one another, quite the opposite. It was overwhelmingly feminine. Heady.

Mishka stood demurely just to the side of the doorway, hands clasped and head down. She wore a standard black and white housemaid outfit, but it was clearly made from superior materials and was tailored to be more... revealing. Her blood-red skin was mottled with large patches of a much lighter pink. Vitiligo? Her jet-black hair was in an uneven bob cut that was expertly tousled for maximum volume. Small black horns protruded from her hair, just past her hairline. A small maid's bonnet, more of a lacy tiara really, sat on her head, perched securely behind her horns. A red, thin, spade-tipped tail swished nervously behind her.

"Please, come in, Inzpector." she said quietly, without looking up.

“Investigator” I muttered under my breath, hopefully too quiet for her to hear. I stepped through the portal.

On the other side, I was met with a rainbow of colors, all in soft lights and scintillating shades. Organic crystalline decorations, softly glowing plants infused with magic, and an almost hazy atmosphere made me feel like I had walked through a portal to the Feywild. Between the diffuse light and the nearly subconscious tinkling of music in the background, I suddenly wondered if I were in a dream. I glanced back at Mishka. She was closing and securing the door. Once done, she walked the few intervening feet between us, legs crossing with each step. I failed in the attempt to not swallow hard. I know that I’m not the most robust figure of masculinity (I can blame the Elven half of my lineage for that), but Mishka was shorter still. She got within a step of me and slowly looked up into my eyes, raven black hair falling away from her face like a silk curtain opening at a burlesque show. Her twin infernal coal-fires bore into my soul.

“Please, make yourself at home. I shall make tea.” She then brushed past me and strutted down the hall.

I shook my head. It didn’t help. I rubbed my face and then gave myself a little slap. Okay. Focus. I scanned my immediate surroundings. The house was smaller than Threekeg’s, but far more cluttered with decorations. A sinewy staircase curled up to the second floor to my left. A large oval doorway led to a sitting room to my right. Everything was illuminated by tiny rainbows floating in the mist left by a Spring rain shower. Diffuse and misty. Tropical flowering plants in ornate jade vases gave the space a jungle-like feel. The Chult, this was not, however. I hoped that there was only the *one* man-eating creature in here with me.

I could hear Mishka preparing the tea from down the hall. Not wanting to miss my chance for some unsupervised free time, I began snooping. The sitting room was more a greenhouse than a place for people, so I moved down the hall, cautiously slipping past the open door to the kitchen, where Mishka hummed to herself as she prepared the tea, her slender tail swishing in time. A back door, a dining room, and a few closets are all I found.

As I returned to the foyer, I slipped past the kitchen again. This time Mishka was swaying her hips to the rhythm of whatever song was playing in head, her tail exuberantly going to-and-fro, like the world’s luckiest metronome. I climbed the stairs and got a better look at the chandelier that hung above the foyer. Hundreds of shards of crystal slowly orbited and spun around a central point, held aloft by magic. The sunlight that beamed through the large, elliptical windows above the front door was refracted in a million ways, casting tiny racing rainbows that slid over the walls and art pieces.

At the top of the stairs was a small landing that led to a hallway that split the second floor in half. I counted 6 doors, all open. My lucky day. Mist and the sounds of distant exotic birdcalls emanated from the rooms and down the hall to the staircase. I strode forward, the mist roiling around my knees, like a Storm Giant walking upstream. The first room on the right appeared to be Mishka’s. It was sparse in furniture, with only a small bed and vanity, but thick with clothing racks, and drapes of colored silk that hung from the walls and ceiling in chaotic triangles.

I moved on. The other rooms were unoccupied guest rooms, except for the last two. On the left, there was a small office with a few bookshelves and an elegant, crystalline writing desk, complete with a tulip shaped stool. A small stack of letter papers and envelopes, accompanied by several quills resting in different colored inkwells sat atop the desk, meticulously arranged. The curtains were open and a misty, glowing sunlight filled the room. It smelled like... waterfall mist.

The last room on the right was Elara’s bedroom. No mistaking it. It was darker here; the curtains were drawn. A large, leaf-shaped bed sat in the middle of the room. Mirrors and colored crystal art pieces obscured the walls and floor. A large vanity with a massive mirror, covered in an alchemist’s wet dream of tinctures, creams, gels, herbs, and potions, dominated the wall to my left. An elegant, thick padded chair, looking of human design, sat in front of it. The mist was thinner here, but an odor clung to it... thick and cloying. Roses. The only flowers in the room were a dozen long-stemmed roses contained in a bulbous glass vase that sat upon the vanity. Next to the vase was a small, simple spritzer made of plain, unembellished glass.



There was a card and a small, pink box next to the vase. I glanced down the hall. Not seeing nor hearing anyone, I slipped into the room and made my way to the vanity. The box had been opened and the crumpled tissue paper inside had once held a small, cylindrical object. The note, freed from its envelope, sat exposed. I picked it up and read it.

~

*Lady Moonglow,*

*As a token of our gratitude for your many years of dedicated patronage, we are honored to gift to you a sample of our latest scent, "Sweetthorn". – E.E.*

~

The card's border was an intricate, hand drawn weave of flowers and stems, mainly roses, daffodils, tulips, and orchids. There were a few more species that I couldn't name... not really my specialty. Despite my lacking horticultural knowledge, something seemed familiar about the card, besides its overpowering scent of roses, of course. I returned the card where I found it and turned away. Something about all of this was too convenient, too... planned. Who was "E.E."? Clearly a business of some kind. A perfumery? Not many of those in town, maybe half a dozen? That's still a lot of legwork. Was "E.E." the name of the business or the initials of the proprietor? Of a worker there?

As I exited the room, I pondered what this all meant. Someone smarter than me, an arch mage probably, once said, "When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth." Cold comfort, in the moment. I didn't need witty aphorisms, I needed answers. Lost in thought, I found myself at the bottom of the stairs, in the foyer.

A moment later, the hourglass figure of Mishka emerged from the kitchen, bearing a laden tea tray. She stepped, foot-crossing-foot, down the hallway towards me.

"Mizter Inveztigator. Please, thiz way." She led me into the overgrown sitting room. Sidestepping a particularly large fern, I saw that the center of the room was open enough for a small tea table with two chairs.

"Zit", she commanded. I obeyed. She sat the tray down and finished preparing my tea... sugar, milk, the whole bit. As she turned to leave, I gently touched her arm.

"Ms Mishka, I'd like to ask you a few questions, if I may."

She froze, except for her tail, which swished tersely from side to side. She was annoyed.

"I am zorry, but I have been inztructed to not zpeak to anyone today." I continued to touch her arm, gently, but firmly.

"This is official Watch business, madam. I'd rather not subject you to the local guardhouse. Surely, you'd be more comfortable speaking to me here." She remained facing away from me, but I could feel her indecision. Her tail slowed.

She muttered something in Infernal, a language I knew only enough of to know that it was an expletive.

"Very well" she sighed. She sat the tray back down and sat demurely in the chair opposite me. Back straight, legs modestly crossed, hands resting lightly in her lap. She turned her hellish eyes towards me again, her heart-shaped face neutral.

"Have you seen Lady Moonglow today?"

Mishka hesitated at the question with such an obvious answer, as if she expected a trick.

“Of course. I saw her at breakfast. Then, she left to go... run her errands. I... have not seen her since.”

I smiled at her warmly. I was not an unattractive man, and I knew how to utilize my looks and charm, when needed. God's knew I could lie the beard off a Dwarf. Between my skills at rhetoric, my looks, and my natural charisma, I could have most people eating from the palm of my hand with just a few words.

“Mishka... we both know your Lady is in some trouble right now. The Watchmen were here a few hours ago and arrested her. I'm just trying to figure out what happened. Anything you can tell me about the situation can only help your lady exonerate herself. So... please, tell me anything you know. Tell me everything she's told you, or that you've heard, about Balgor Threekeg over the last few days. I'm here to *help*.” I gave her my best ‘you can trust me’ face: cock of the head, soft eyes, slight, sincere smile.

She relaxed. Her tail flicked up into her lap where she absent-mindedly grabbed it and began fidgeting with the tip of it.

“She did not like Mizter Threekeg. Not at all. He was always so mean to her. And for no reason! My Lady is a kind woman. She hired me after I fled here from Elturel. No one wanted a Tiefling... especially one that looks like ... this!” she rubbed her left arm on one of the light patches, as if it were dirt that would come off. “They thought I was diseased.”

The tears that began welling up in her eyes didn't sizzle or evaporate, which disappointed the more childish side of my imagination. She wiped her nose with the back of her wrist, the well-mannered façade dropping slightly. I met her eyes and nodded slowly in sympathy. I let her continue.

“Sorry. It has been a rough morning.” She inhaled, steadied herself, and continued “When she came back from Threekeg's manor... My Lady, she was panicking. I tried to calm her. When she told me what befell the Dwarf, I could not believe it. How could this happen? She knew that the Law was coming for her. She told me not to worry, that this would be explained, and that she would go willingly. She said that she did nothing wrong and that she would prove it. I do not know how. But I do know that she has never harmed anyone in her life! She did not kill that Dwarf. She may have hated him, but that did not kill him!

I rested my arm on the table and offered my upturned, open hand. With no hesitation, she took it, holding it fiercely. She was stronger than she looked. And hotter. I squeezed her hand gently in solidarity.

“Thank you, Mishka, for your honesty. It is appreciated, especially in my line of work. As I said, I'm doing everything I can to free your Lady. The more I know about what happened, the more I can help.”

I paused, as if suddenly considering something. She looked at me, curious.

“What is it Investigator?”

“Oh... nothing, nothing. Just a silly question, I'm sure.”

“No, please. Ask!”

I nodded in acquiescence to her demand.

“Has your Lady received any parcels recently? Any gifts delivered?”

“Why yes, as a matter of fact! Just yesterday evening, around sundown. We received that lovely bouquet. Zuch zweet rozez.” She smiled, causing her cheeks to squeeze the tears from her eyes. She wiped them away with her free hand.

“How lovely... who were they from, if you don't mind me asking?”

“Elegant Ezzence... my lady’z perfumery. I did not know they gave zamples to their favorite cuztomers! My Lady muzt be quite zpecial.”

“That she is, that she is, indeed” I mugged. “Well, thank you so much for your time. I really must be going.”

I released her hand and gingerly grabbed my cup of tea. The cup was translucent, with a green starburst motif. The tea still steamed slightly, so I took a sip. I began to set the cup down; I had other places to be. Damn, that was good. Really good. I took another sip. Perhaps I could stay for another few minutes... Mishka smiled at me. I smiled back over the rim of the cup.

Sometime later, as I swung open the garden gate to leave, I nearly ran face first into Elara Moonglow. Startled, she jumped back. Then, in an instant, her face scrunched in suspicion.

“Investigator! What *are* you doing here?”

“My *job*, madam.” I replied flatly. “I’m trying to find Balgor’s killer, remember? Should I stop looking?” I glared at her.

“No... No, of course not.”

I pushed past her. That should preoccupy her for a few moments until I’m out of conversation range.

Striding away, I began walking towards Merchant’s Row. If I were going to find a boutique perfume shop, it would most likely be there. ‘Elegant Essence’, indeed. I tried to think of a more pretentious name. I failed.

# Chapter 6

## *North Ward, Waterdeep, Early Afternoon*

I walked on and soaked in the city. At least the city was sincere. It had no choice. Nothing gave me more perspective, more clarity, than walking its streets, whether they be paved, cobblestone, or dirt. Waterdeep had roughly 300,000 inhabitants, some born and bred here, but many still from every corner of Faerûn. Nothing gave me peace like seeing these people, of all different shapes, sizes, languages, and religions, going about their mundane lives, seemingly unaware of how their small contributions, sweeping the street, selling bread, moving goods from warehouse to shop, added up to create the most glorious city in the world. Peace and civilization. Those were the goals. Just taking this stroll reminded me of why I do what I do, why I subject myself to the grisly realities just below the surface, just tucked away in the next dark alley.

I walked past some buskers. They looked like young students at the nearby Bard College... or perhaps drop-outs of said College, by the sound and look of them. I dropped a silver piece into their mandolin case, anyway. A young, lithe Genasi, an Earth-type, smiled and twirled, covering his face with the same veils he spun around as part of his dervish dance. His hips bopped side to side to the surging beat. What he lacked in grace, he made up for in exuberance. The clanging rhythm of the hand cymbals accompanied by the manic flutes and strumming mandolins created a raucous carnival atmosphere, all contained within a single city block.

I strode on and felt a slight tinge of melancholy as the music faded into the distance. Another moment gone... but another one soon arriving, block after block. Such was the promise of the city. Constant life, constant change. Always something new. It might not be *good*, but it would be *new*. It would be *alive*. I saw a mother pushing a pram, the baby within cooing and burbling. The city, she loved me.

My stomach growled. Of course, the only thing I'd ingested that day was tea. I took a detour down a narrow, but clean, alleyway. The best food in the city was found in these little alleyways, especially the ones that were junctions of multiple blocks. Colorful cloth spanned between the surrounding buildings, providing shade and corralled the aromas that emanated from sizzling grills, boiling pots, and baking ovens. People politely, but determinedly, pushed past one another, arms laden with goods. Some sat at small tables, eating, drinking and laughing. Children giggled and darted through the legs of the crowd like nimble giant slayers.

I swung my leg over the wooden stool in front of a bustling stall and sat down. The two people behind the counter were a blur of action, their faces emotionless in their practiced concentration. The bang and clatter of large, curved cooking pans punctuated the delicate leaping arcs of rice, shrimp, noodles, and vegetables into the air. The owners of this stall, a human man and woman, were from Kara-Tur, a land unimaginably far distant to the East. I recalled that they referred to themselves as 'Shou'. They had come to Waterdeep around a dozen years ago and brought their cuisine with them, much to my delight. Soon after arriving and setting up this stall, the local roughs decided to target them. After a few weeks of their pleas falling on deaf ears at the City Watch, they mentioned their situation to me over a bowl of noodle soup. They weren't bothered much after that. But that's a story for another time. Now, their main complaints were about the lunchtime rush and how the vegetables grown from the seeds they brought from their homeland didn't *quite* taste the same when grown in Sword Coast soil.

"Tristinnnnnn!" they both exclaimed in unison, without looking up and without missing a beat in the symphony of steam, flying food, and boiling pots they were orchestrating. I often wondered how they did that. Did Shou have eyes on the sides of their heads?

"Afternoon, Gao. Afternoon, Xa-Ling. How's business?"

"Busy!" Gao said without looking away from his task. "The usual today, Mister In-spek-tor?" He exaggerated the pronunciation of the incorrect title. A long-running in-joke between the three of us.

“Yes, thank you.” I loved this place.

I had arrived at the tail end of the lunch rush and by the time I was draining my noodle bowl, I was the only remaining customer. We chatted and caught up. They always had juicy bits of gossip and news from the street. It was astounding to me the candor that people would use when speaking to each other on sensitive topics while eating at this food stall. As if they didn't think the two people a foot away from them could hear them divulge upcoming heists, codewords, passwords, and the locations of hidden stashes. Thieves Cant can be learned by anyone, after all. More than one criminal enterprise had torn itself apart looking for leaks and stoolies, when it was the boss himself, bragging too loudly about his plans and conquests over a plate of raw fish and rice.

As the couple were putting away the last of the washed utensils, I took a long shot.

“Have either of you heard of ‘Elegant Essence’? I believe it’s a perfumery.”

“Ohhhh, you found someone special, Inspector?” Xa-ling glanced at me, smiling. “I know the place. Gao got me some smell-good there for our tenth anniversary in Waterdeep. Saved for months. Not that I EVER have a chance to wear it!” She playfully swatted Gao with a cleaned spatula.

He laughed and said something placating to her in their native language that I didn't understand. She kissed him on the cheek and returned to polishing utensils.

Gao then spoke up, “It’s just a few blocks away. Kind of hidden, though.” He described exactly how to find it. I paid, tipped, and bid them farewell. The cacophony of the alley had subsided a bit with the warming of the day. Now, it was mainly older men and women who sat out at the tables, drinking and chatting, blessedly with nowhere better to be. I exited the alley and made my way deeper into the posher region of the North Ward.

Despite the clear instructions, it still took me half an hour to find the shop. Annoyingly, many of the building owners in this part of town sublet spaces for multiple vendors, creating a nesting doll of commerce. I'm glad I didn't go into tax collection. When I finally found the door, I did a double take. It was painted dark green, had a polished brass knob, and was small, barely four feet in height. The only signage was a small, elaborate “E.E.” painted in gold on the center of the door. I hesitated.

Squatting down, I opened the door, squeezed through, and entered the room beyond. It was brightly lit by magical light from squares on the ceiling, too white and too intense to be comfortable. The mix of odors was nauseating... hundreds of layers of stale perfume blended into an unidentifiable, headache inducing miasma.

“Oh, helllooooo!” intoned a female gnome cheerily as she approached. Her pale blonde hair was pulled up into the tightest bun I had ever seen, causing her red-lipsticked smile to present more as a painful rictus. Her large white teeth seemed to reflect the bleached light emanating from the ceiling tiles. Her pale eyes contained pupils the size of pinpricks. I could see the caked-on beige foundation that covered her face and abruptly stopped at her jawline. She wore dark green slacks held up by embroidered suspenders. The straps had the same woven flower pattern that I had seen earlier in the day. A flowing white blouse under the suspenders was expertly tailored to her proportions. An etched, gold-plated name tag pinned to her left suspender strap read ‘Spumella’.

“How may we help you todayyy?” As she spoke, the grimaced smile never wavered. It was uncanny.

I glanced around, trying not to squint in the glare. Rectangular glass display cases filled the room, leaving just enough space to navigate between them. They were full of atomizers, bottles, applicators, and dabbers of every conceivable shape, color, and size. Faded, old-fashioned paintings of flowers dotted the walls. Soft, but oddly discordant, music floating though the background. I wondered how any living creatures could survive this environment for more than a few moments before going mad.

“Just looking, right now. Thank you.” I wanted to scope things out for myself, first.

“Alrighty, thennn! Just let me know if you have any questionnnns!” She mechanically turned away. As she walked to the cashier’s desk, her high-heeled shoes clacked like a horse stomping across an empty, marble-floored ballroom, causing my ears to ring.

I scuttled to the first display case. I tried standing... not enough room. I tried standing and bending at the waist. Uncomfortable and unsustainable. Defeated, I squatted back down. The case contained two levels of mirrored shelves. The same white, overpowering magical light that emanated from the ceiling also filled the case, which illuminated the dozens of bottles within. Folded paper placards labeled each shelf. The fancy gold lettering on each placard matched the entrance door. I hobbled around, inspecting each case. There were three attributes contained on each label: Scent profile, specific scent source or name, and strength of the mixture, as a percentage. Like proof of whisky, I thought.

Fruity, no. Spicy, no. Resinous, no. Ah, Flowery. An entire mirrored shelf, labeled ‘Flowery | Rose | 10%-20%’ was completely empty. Those were the highest percentages that I had seen.

Sensing my confusion, ‘Spumella’ click-clacked towards me. “Can I help you find anything specific, sirrr?”

“I’m looking for something special. Something in rose, I think.”

“The rose-based scents should be in the case in front of you.” She said helpfully. I gave her a confused look and gestured towards the empty shelf. She slid around the case to see for herself. We were now at eye level with one another. I watched her face intently. As she spied the empty shelf, her smile dimmed ever so slightly, and her eyebrows furrowed in the center by a few hairs. She was confused and a little concerned.

Without missing a beat, she chirped “I can go and check in the back, if you’d like! We might have something squirreled away back there.” Her ingratiating smile didn’t falter, but the wrinkles at the corners of her eyes became slightly more pronounced.

“Uh, yes, that would be lovely, thank you.”

I followed her deeper into the shop. A curtained doorway next to the cashier’s desk led to the vaunted ‘back’. She passed through, slowing down just enough to ensure that the curtain was perfectly in place, blocking my view. I leaned my shoulder against the wall next to the doorway, as my knees started to ache. With a flick of my wrist, I summoned my mage hand. With it, I moved the curtain aside just enough to peek within.

As expected, I saw boxes and small crates stacked up along the wall. I needed a better angle. I waddled to the other side of the doorway and magically moved the curtain again. Ah, better. I could now see a small table, with two chairs. Behind them was an extravagant alchemical station. Through the gap in the curtain, the smell of rose oil was overwhelming. The smell clawed its way above the background odors like a zombie emerging from a grave. I watched as she searched a few boxes and moved a few crates around.

In a barely audible sing-songy voice, she muttered “Where are youuuu? I must have something! Ah! There you are!” She gathered up four small perfume spritzers from an abandoned box under the table. Just as she spun around, I dispelled the hand and tried to look nonchalant. Hard to do with one’s sinuses, lungs, eyes, and knees on fire.

Emerging from the back room, she clattered the disused perfume bottles onto the cashier’s desk.

“Why, yeeeee, we’ve got a *wide* selection of rose-based scents for youuu! You’re sure to find something to your liking!”

“Actually, I was hoping for something more... specific. A friend of mine received a sample of your newest rose perfume. ‘Sweethorn’? She said it was a ‘loyal customer’ gift.”

She looked at me, her smile fading very slightly. She didn’t know what I was talking about... or was very good at appearing so.

“Hmm. I’m sorry, but we don’t have such a program here at Elegant Essence. And how did you know... Let me just spritz these tester cards for youuu.” She pulled a few cards from a stack on the desk and began spraying them with the bottles she had scrounged up. When done, she handed me the cards. Her porcelain smile never relaxed.

“Th-thank you.” I managed, as I squat-walked towards the door.

“Please come back any timmme!” She said, a hint of weariness in her voice.

I fumbled at the smooth brass knob for a moment and then mercifully found myself on the other side.

I gingerly closed the door behind me and immediately collapsed, gasping for air. Ugh, I could *taste* it. After a few deep breaths, I roused myself from all fours, knees popping, and brushed off my longcoat. I feared the smell would never come out. Couldn’t wait for the boys down at the guardhouse to get a whiff of this... I’d never hear the end of it. I flapped my coat a few times in a feeble attempt at airing it out as I made my way back to the main street.

As I walked back towards Threekeg’s manor, I sniffed the sample cards in turn. Each had a distinctly different rose-based scent, but none matched the exact perfume I had smelled on Elara. For one, they were far weaker. Stale, even. However, the cards themselves were the same as the one I had found near her mysterious gift, right down to the hand-drawn border. The style, paint, and strokes were identical. I think I had everything I needed. Not everything I *wanted*, though. There were still some gaps, but I was confident that I could fill them, or, better yet, get the murderer into filling them for me.

Since I had a few more things to do around town before morning, I’d better get started. It was going to be a long night.

# Chapter 7

*Threekeg Manor. Early-morning, 13<sup>th</sup> Tarsakh - 1490 DR*

Golden sunlight cut thorough the still sitting room. Dust motes meandered and swam through the beams like tiny sea creatures, causing them to seemingly pop into, and out of, existence. Just like the truth, they don't go away when you can't see them, I mused. One of the four Watchmen in the room cleared this throat and shifted slightly, causing his chain mail to rattle and scrape softly against the steel plates of his armor. I was leaning nonchalantly against a credenza, lit pipe in my mouth. The warmth in my hand helped dispel the coolness of the Spring morning. The smoke curled and danced away, eager to join its brethren in the light. It was a wonderful blend, I thought, spicy cavendish, with a hint of cherry... or citrus? Quite smooth and flavorful.

Three nervous faces regarded me silently.

"Well?" Elara said tersely. "We're *waiting*."

I took a drag from the curved, dark pipe. The embers within blushed, glowing happily. I slowly exhaled, blowing the smoke from the side of my mouth. It was time. I removed the pipe from my mouth and used it to gesture towards the suspects in the room, Elara Moonglow the collector, Roric the troubleshooter, and Fizz the manservant.

"Someone tried very hard to place the murder of Balgor Threekeg onto someone else... isn't that right, Lady Elara?"

She sat bolt upright. Her eyes were radiating hatred, but her otherwise poised demeanor didn't falter. She said nothing.

"It's just that they tried to pin in on *you*.", I continued, after letting the tension in the room grow for a few heartbeats. "You seemed like the perfect scapegoat... It was public knowledge that you and Balgor were rivals. Hells, the two of you may have even threatened each other in public. Motivation was built in."

I started pacing around the room, puffing on my pipe between sentences. "Opportunity could be manufactured. You two ran in the same circles, had the same interests. Pitting you against each other was easy. But how to get you alone with him? How to create that perfect moment? Turns out, all that was needed was a little luck."

"Mr Flickerbottom, your headwound is looking better. Almost completely healed, as a matter of fact. Seems there's only a slight bruise left."

The Gnome turned away, as if embarrassed. "Oh, ah, yes, I popped down to the temple yesterday and had a Cleric cure it for me... good as new! Eh Heh!" he chuckled nervously.

I spun on my heel and faced the Gnome directly. "Yes, nothing can *beat* their healing magic, hm?"

With no small amount of pleasure, I watched beads of sweat immediately form on his forehead.

I spun on my heel again, this time towards Roric.

"Roric. How familiar are you with perfume?"

"What?" he asked in bewilderment.

"Have you ever done the books for a perfumery?"

He thought for a moment. "Yes... yes, late last year. That's where I first met Mr Flickerbottom."



I shot a glance at Fizz. His face confirmed everything. The funny thing about talents is that, when you're young, you simply do not recognize that you have them. You were born with them and have no other point of reference to what is normal or extraordinary. One simply believes that everyone else in the world can also read people like a book. I was in my first year of Bard College before I realized that I had a rare gift. Facial expressions revealed novels of information to me. At that moment, Fizz's novel contained only the words 'shut the fuck up' repeated for hundreds of pages.

"That's why he recommended me for this job, I suppose. I helped his sister out with finding some unneeded expenses and unclaimed profits."

"Fizz and his sister have quite the family resemblance, don't they?" I turned my attention to Fizz. "Don't you?"

"I-I-suppose so!" he stammered.

"Kind of an ironic place to find yourself, isn't it? You're from a family of florists and perfumers, yet you work in a home with a complete dearth of plants of any kind."

"Well, I-I don't know if that's what the definition of *irony* is..."

"Your Master, Balgor, he didn't like flowers, did he?"

"No, he did NOT." interjected Elara emphatically. "He once accused me of trying to poison him with a rose corsage. I thought he was just being paranoid!"

I refocused on Fizz.

"N-no, he didn't. He refused to have any in the home. Made him *sneeze*."

"Did they, now? Or was it more... dire than that?"

"H-He was allergic. Especially to roses... which... is probably why ELARA wore that god's awful perfume yesterday!" he jumped up and pointed an accusatory finger at the Elven woman. Four well-trained and equipped Watchmen simultaneously placed their hands on the hilts of their swords. Fizz's finger wilted like a flower in the sun.

"I knew something was odd about this house." muttered Roric "No plants. I figured it was just a Dwarven thing. Huh."

Elara spoke up, as her mental gears turned. "Fizz's sister has a perfumery... Elegance Essence! I never connected that Balgor's little man was associated to it in any way... but, so? Does this have anything to do with the gift I received from there a few days ago?"

"It has *everything* to do with the gift you received, Lady Moonglow." I said "And now we can discuss *means*. Only one of the people in this room knew of Balgor's deadly allergy to roses. Only one person in this room had access to the raw materials and equipment capable of making an ultra-concentrated rose perfume. And only one person in this room had a something direct and material to gain from his death... isn't that right, Fizz?"

He sat as still as a garden gnome.

"You figured that simply exposing your master to a deathly powerful dose of rose oil would be too obvious... You'd be the only one home, and the whole place would reek with the unmistakable odor of a substance that your family is associated with. So, you decided to play a little misdirection. Blame it on his biggest rival. Hells, you wouldn't even be in the room when it happened.

“But, you were sloppy. Very sloppy... you left me clues from the very first minutes of this investigation. Your suspenders share the same pattern as the cards your sister uses. It’s a Gnomish family crest. On its own, not interesting, but once I found the card in Lady Moonglow’s bedroom, I...” -

“Excuse me?” erupted Elara, incredulously.

- “...knew there was a connection. It wasn’t hard to imagine the details from there. Like how you used up all your sister’s stock to concentrate the perfume. Or, how you hid the contents of Elara’s correspondence from Balgor, so he wouldn’t respond, forcing a confrontation. Or, how you sent the mysterious gift from your sister’s shop to Elara as soon as you heard about a new artifact being available at the next auction, hoping she’d wear it the next time she encountered, or confronted, him. You weren’t in any hurry; you just needed a little luck. Which has run out, I assure you.”

“Halflings have all the luck... not Gnomes.” said Fizz bitterly.

“And now we need to circle back to motivation, don’t we Roric?”

“Wha-what?” If he had feathers, they would’ve ruffled.

“Balgor Threekeg had no heirs, correct?”

Looking suddenly uncomfortable in the spotlight, Roric shifted in his chair “Yes, that is correct. He was unmarried and had sired no children... that we know of.”

“On the event of his death, who would receive the bulk of his estate?”

The Human stammered in indignation “I- well- that’s not- I’m not at liberty to say!”

“And why not? What vested interest do you have in this *murder*, Roric?”, I demanded, my voice rising to a bellow at the end.

He crumpled like a moist owlet. “Fizz! Fizz Flickerbottom! I helped him with confirming the paperwork! Balgor left everything to Fizz!” He snatched off his spectacles and rubbed tears of frustration and guilt from his eyes.

“I see. So, there we have it. Murder for money. How banal.” I puffed on my pipe. “You know, Fizz, you might’ve gotten away with this, had you not lied to me during our very first encounter.”

The Gnome sat defiant, his face in a pout, arms folded tightly. “I needed to make it to look real... make it look like Elara was violent.”

“Beet juice? Really? When Roric didn’t mention your head wound when he found you on the floor in the kitchen the first time, I knew you were lying. You weren’t even unconscious, were you? You just laid there and pretended. After he left, you improvised by soaking some cloth in beet juice and slapping it on your head. Which has now left a purplish stain. Perhaps if you had cut him into your scheme, promised him a kickback, you could’ve trusted him enough to get your stories straight. But you just wanted another body in the equation, something else to hide behind. The fact that he happened to be staying at the house was just lucky timing.”

I looked over at Roric. He was livid.

“I-I’m a respected Troubleshooter! I would NEVER have anything to do with this sort of depravity! Yes, I helped with drafts of Balgor’s will, but I had NO idea Fizz was planning to murder him! It was just paperwork!” For what it was worth, I believed him. I might even tell the Magistrate that in court.

“So that’s it, then... I killed Balgor... even unintentionally?” Elara said softly, staring into the middle distance. “I didn’t think the perfume was even that strong!” I thought back to the flowering jungle in which she lived. I bet she didn’t.

“I was just soooo tired of serving that stubborn, greedy bastard!” exclaimed Fizz. “Every day, in this cold, sterile house! No plants. No salads, just meat, potatoes, and beets! All that gold from adventuring laying around and he only used it to buy *junk!*”

Elara shot him a look.

“I think we’re done here. Watchmen, if you please” I said.

The Watchmen gathered up the pale Gnome and led his defeated, limp form outside, to the awaiting paddy wagon. I helped Lady Elara to her feet and escorted her outside.

“Thank you, Investigator. I’m... I’m sorry I doubted you.”

“It’s quite alright. I gave you plenty of reason to do so... but I had to be sure of a few things. Unfortunately, this is the way the game must sometimes be played.” She bid me farewell, and I, her. I walked back into Threekeg Manor and spied Roric still sitting where I had left him.

“Tristin, you’ve got to believe me, I didn’t know about Fizz’s plan... I swear it on Oghma’s Silver Scroll!”

I let out a resigned sigh. “I know. I’ll tell the Magistrate how cooperative you’ve been... again. You could’ve told me that you were also working on Balgor’s will at Fizz’s request.”

“*Confidentiality*, Tristin. A Troubleshooter lives by the code. I only told you about what I was doing for Balgor because he was... well, dead. Fizz made it seem like getting the will in order was a favor to his master, something to not trifle him about. And, believe me, people do NOT like talking about their wills!”

~

Less than twenty-four hours turnaround on that case. Lieutenant Kormen may actually congratulate me. Not likely, though. That’s the problem with operating at a high standard; people start to expect it, and then they start taking it for granted. If you ever fall short of ‘exceptional’, down to the lowly heights of ‘acceptable’, they make you feel like you failed. But I know what failure truly is. Failure involves blood, violence. Failure means a loss of innocence. Failure involves diminished faith in the world, or at least, faith in your fellow citizens. Failure is unmistakable in my line of work. This time, the guilty were jailed and the innocent walked free. For that, I had earned the city’s love for one more day.

The End

