

New Developments

The bright, almost harsh light of morning washed over my face as the sun broke through my curtains. With the new extravagant amount of money I had come into, I had bought an apartment that I could use as a base of operations while I was still in the city. Still in the city. That was a scary enough thought all on its own, as I had never really been outside the city, aside from a few quick forays into the countryside to scrounge for food. I had felt almost lost without buildings or walls looming over me.

However, as the light broke across my face, I groaned with apprehension and discomfort. I have never been much of a morning person, which makes my profession a rather natural fit. For all my animosity towards mornings, though, I realised their value in respect to getting things done. Getting things done was my purpose today, but that didn't mean I had to like it.

And so I rolled out of bed, hitting the floor with a dull thump. As I did so I heard a sharp intake of breath and remembered that Caliope was staying with me. My hand shot up above the bed and waved dismissively. "Don't worry about me," I said tiredly, "I'll be up and about in about five minutes. Feel free to get yourself something to eat in the meantime."

There was a slight rustling as Caliope got out of bed and went into the kitchen. More noise followed as she looked through different things in the cupboards. I gave myself a few more minutes to become mentally competent, then dragged myself off the floor. As I walked through the living room, I found myself looking at the layout of furniture and deciding if I liked how it looked that way. My own possessions were sparse, consisting of a chess table and a bookcase that was full to bursting both sitting against a wall. The previous tenant had had good taste, however, and I felt no need to change anything at the moment, so I walked on.

I walked into the kitchen and was nearly run over by Caliope as she almost ran around the small area, looking for something that she couldn't seem to find. Many of the drawers and cabinets were in a state of disarray and the entire room looked as if it had been ransacked. I lightly cleared my throat and she looked at me. "I didn't mean to interrupt you," I said lightly, "but I *was* wondering how much longer you were intending to emulate a cyclone in my kitchen."

At my entrance, she looked at me with scorn. "You," she accused, "have no food in here that is suitable for breakfast. What were you intending to eat? A bowl of soup? A nice half sandwich?"

I shrugged dismissively. "I generally don't eat anything for breakfast," I said, "Tea is my beverage of choice for the morning, and I don't do much else to break my fast. I suggested you find something to eat because I don't know your morning rituals and I thought it might be soothing. It had slipped my mind, however, to get some foods that might be suitable for breakfast. I apologize"

She sighed heavily, then responded, "I understand, and the gesture was appreciated, even if the

execution was gods-awful. That still leaves the problem of us having no breakfast, though.”

I smiled wanly. “I can still make tea,” I said, “and probably find some scones somewhere if that would qualify as breakfast to you.”

She nodded, and didn't say anything more, so I set off, putting a kettle on and preparing the tea and scones. As the kettle heated up I sat with Caliope and enjoyed the silence of the morning. Soon, however, the kettle was whistling and I fetched it and two cups and brought them over to the table. I poured a cup for myself and as I passed her the kettle I broke the silence. “The leaves are fairly strong, so unless you like your tea strong, I wouldn't steep it for too long.” She nodded her understanding and we finished the rest of our tea in silence.

Once I had cleared our dishes and sat back down, Caliope spoke. “Thanks for the tea. It was a nice breakfast and the scones actually gave it some substance. That was some very strong tea, though. How do you stomach that every day?”

I grinned. “I can hardly wake up without something that strong,” I explained, “It's an alliance of necessity, I suppose. Still, as long as it keeps me alert, I'm not going to complain.”

She got up, brushing crumbs off her front as she did so, and walked towards the living room. “So,” she asked, “what sort of shenanigans will we be getting into today?”

“Crime,” I responded, “glorious, illegal, skill involving crime.”

A smile broke across her face as the words left my lips. “Excellent,” she said, “after all this time I've been getting worried that your thieving skills were just bluster.”

I walked past her and out the door, and she quickly followed, closing the door behind us. As I walked down the hallway and out of the building, I saw someone hurry around a corner, but not go any further. I dismissed it as a nosy neighbour inspecting us. This was a nice part of town and we were fairly new, after all.

The trip through the tunnels this time was blessedly uneventful, and we reached Aves's safe house quickly. As I climbed through the hatch Tumen had shown us on our last visit, I called out so as not to alarm Aves. “We're here!” I shouted.

Aves hurried around a corner, finger to his beak for silence. I nodded my understanding and ushered him down into the tunnels. Once the door was shut, I spoke again. “Why the quiet exit?” I asked.

“There was someone waiting outside the house. Someone I would rather not become acquainted with.” As if reading my thoughts, he quickly followed up with, “It would seem that my assassin has finally managed to track me down.”

“Ah,” I responded, “then we had best get to our destination so that we can begin finding you a

new safe house afterwards.”

He nodded and we set out once again. I had memorized our destination so I did not take the map with me. The tunnels' layout mostly followed the old streets anyway, so they weren't much of a challenge to navigate. We reached our destination and I held out a hand so that I could check that the coast was clear. I then gestured for the others to follow me. I had checked on the schedules of the people of this house by paying a house call and introducing myself. With me being a newly made lord I thought it was an appropriate excuse and I learned more than I would ever need to know about the comings and goings of the residence.

It was easy to fall back into my old routine as I clambered up the wall to reach the second story window. The only thing that had changed was that Aves and I had to wait for Caliope to catch up several times. We stopped to give her a break once we reached the balcony where I had planned to enter. “You know how to climb,” she said, still catching her breath, “I'll give you that much.”

I smiled and started working on the lock to the doors, pulling up a hood I had made as I did so. The nobles would do whatever they could to get me out of power, so it wouldn't do to be identified. The lock clicked and the door swung open, and a few moments later Caliope was ready to go. “As soon as we cross this threshold, talking will have to go to a minimum,” I informed Caliope, “so if you have anything you need to say, now would be the time.”

She smiled and walked past me into the house, looking ahead for any guards. This was the plan that we had agreed upon, that Caliope would scout ahead, followed by me in the center, and Aves taking up the rear. The purpose of this was also to protect my identity, as both Aves's and Caliope's purposes in this house could be explained, whereas mine could not. It vexed me to no end to need to have such attention paid to my secrecy, but I understood it's necessity. The upper floors of the mansion were mostly empty, as we expected – there were only a few guard patrols that we easily avoided – and we quickly reached our destination.

We walked silently into the study of the lord who resided here. Aves had told me that this particular lord was one of the masterminds of his discrediting, and that there was evidence implicating his involvement in his study. That being said, there were a lot of papers in his desk, and finding the particular papers we were looking for was no small feat. After we had been searching for ten minutes, I started to get worried, and after fifteen, I was downright nervous. Finally, Aves found what we were seeking underneath the floorboards in front of the desk. “Now,” he whispered, “let's get out of here before some sorry-”

I looked around Aves to see a black wolf with a scythe slung across his back standing in the doorway. “Shit!” I swore under my breath. This was unexpected, and it complicated things to no end.

The unknown wolf inclined his head. “My lord Cyanis,” he said softly, “I have been contracted to kill you. Now you can make this easy on yourself and die quietly, or things can get messy.”

Aves unsheathed his khopeshes and held them in a ready position. “That's funny,” he said, “Callie told me you were dead. I guess I'll have to make sure of it before I leave you, now.”

The wolf sighed, then swung his scythe from his back in a vicious overhand slash. Aves parried it easily enough, but the upward swing that came after the blade hit the ground caught him slightly off guard. I raised my voice slightly, “I think now might be a good time to, ah, cut out, so to speak. Before he cuts *you* out, Aves.”

Aves nodded and we barrelled past the assassin, blades drawn, with Caliope close behind. He didn't chase after us as expected, but released a shrill whistle. As he did so, more than a dozen armed guards entered the manor. I nodded to Aves and dashed out the nearest window into the street. A small platoon of officers broke off from the main group and chased after me. I was in no mood to fight them and reveal my identity, so I ran as fast as possible away from them.

A series of shouts washed over me as I ducked into a nearby alleyway. I released a heavy sigh as the group of officers rushed past my hiding place. I had only relaxed marginally, though, when someone cleared his throat behind me. I whirled around to see the assassin standing in the alley and twirling his scythe. “Sorry about this,” he said, “but there can't be any witnesses. I've already let that jailer slip through my fingers. I'm not about to let you get away.” He swung his scythe and I just managed to step out of the way.

He turned around, squinting into the shadows. “Very interesting,” he said, “but we both know you can't hide forever. Now come back out here.”

I couldn't understand why he hadn't seen me until I looked down at myself. In my moment of desperation, I had gathered some of the shadows around me, and now I could hardly even see myself. I used this unforeseen opportunity to trip the assassin, and then climb on top of his chest. “Go home,” I told him, placing one of my blades at his throat, “You can't beat me and you won't even be able to touch Aves. I'll make sure of that. Is any amount of money worth your life? Knowing your professionalism you probably already got paid in full. So run. What's one job, compared to the potential for many more? Or at least try harder next time.” Then, with one swift motion, I knocked him out with my pommel, and I followed up with a few more, for good measure.

An hour or so later I met up with Aves and Caliope at a predetermined rendezvous – in case Aves's safe house was compromised – and discussed what had happened. “Well,” I began, as I was the last to arrive, “that was unexpected. Did we at least get what we came for?”

Aves nodded and held up a few pieces of paper. “That was well planned, on the assassin's part,

but the getaway was too easy. Are you both sure you weren't followed?"

I nodded and then spoke up again. "It might have been easy for you," I said, "but there was a reason I was the last to arrive. Our friend from the manor didn't want to leave any witnesses and I suppose he thought an isolated target would be easier than a group."

Aves leaned forward in anticipation. "And?" he half-whispered, "Is he dead?"

I shook my head. "I gave him one last chance to run away. If he doesn't, I'll make sure he's all yours next time. But in the process of having an attempt on my life, I discovered that I do indeed have some magic."

This time it was Caliope who leaned forward. "C'mon. Let's see."

I stood up and focused for a moment before gathering the shadows around me again. Both Aves and Caliope jumped in surprise at my sudden disappearance. I quickly walked around behind Aves before dismissing the shadows and tapping his shoulder. He looked over and Caliope nearly shouted, "That's brilliant! Talk about lucky, that the thief would have the ability that lets him hide."

Aves nodded. "Quite lucky," he said, "but is this all you can do with your newfound abilities, or is there more?"

"Nothing that I know of," I said, shaking my head, "but who knows? This ability only revealed itself under duress. Maybe I have more abilities that I don't have access to, maybe I don't. The key is that I have this one, and that's more than I dared hope for."

Nodding again, Aves stood up. "All this has been enlightening," he said, but we need to get some sleep if we're to face what's to come. So go home. I'll still be here in the morning."