

CHAPTER 48 – SLITHERY BUSINESS

“They’re late.”

Remal, flushed with drink, leaned over to pat the grumpy archer on the shoulder. “It’s pouring out. They’re probably holed up somewhere.” He sobered up after a moment’s thought. “You don’t think they’re–”

“No!” Henry smacked his palm flat on the table. “And need I remind you, Fio’s my *sister*. I know she’s a grown woman, but I don’t need to hear about this sort of thing. Especially not from a lecher like you.”

Remal put a hand to his silken vest. “You wound me, good sir!” He took another drink and looked around the tavern with a practiced eye.

Truth be told, he was getting a little nervous himself. Fio and Jerric had gone out days ago. It wasn’t like either of them to be late. And there was no way anything out here could harm a Paladin and Wizard who were on their way toward Mid Steel.

Still... Remal sighed and swirled his goblet on the stained tabletop. The din of countless voices was a constant backdrop the last few days as the horrible weather held the area in its soggy grip.

The tavernkeep was no doubt making a mint. He’d even employed two strange-looking fellows who bustled about and had a lisp. Kind of reminded him of a snake.

Odd.

Remal shrugged off the sour mood. He wasn’t going to let a little vacation in some backwater place dampen *his* spirits. There were still plenty of fine-looking men and women who he could play with after all.

“Seriously, Hen,” Remal told him, “stop worrying! They’ll be back when they’re back, unless you want to go out and search for them in this weather. Even an Archer of your–oh no. No, Hen. No, no, no.”

“Yes,” Henry said with that grizzled lopsided grin he got when some poor bloke stepped right into one of his traps. “You said it yourself, Rem. We should go look for them. Won’t take but a moment.”

“Okay, sure, fine,” Remal said, tossing back the rest of the wine in his goblet. “Spoil the fun, why don’t you?”

“Gladly.”

“That wasn’t an invitation, Hen. Listen, you don’t need to go out. I’m sure they’re fiiine. You know how thorough they both are.”

“Then it won’t be a problem to find them,” Henry said. “They told us they were going off toward the Haalften lands, right? Looking for that weird adventurer thing that just joined? We’ll head out there first.”

Remal stomped his feet and let his arms go limp as they got their coats and headed out into the vicious storm. “But it’s faaaaar!”

“Yeah, and we’ll go a lot faster if you stop with the belly achin’.”

Seeing that it was either abandon his best friend to such a horrible storm or go along with him and make his life a living hell, Remal chose the obvious.

At least if I’m going to be miserable out in this mess, so will Henry.

The pair made it all the way to the village gates before they saw the four figures, all cloaked and bowed against the blustering winds. Two they recognized immediately as Jerric and Fio. The others who trailed behind them must have just tagged along for some company.

“Hey, Jerric!” Remal waved friendly, making sure that Henry couldn’t miss them. *Now that I’ve had my daily shower, we can go back to drinking and carousing.*

The Paladin looked up, a faint flicker of confusion on his face for a moment before he smiled and waved back.

Weird. Ah, well.

Beneath each of their cloaks was a strangely thin and square parcel. When their cloaks fluttered to allow a glimpse within, Remal saw that they were carrying some sort of heavily wrapped package.

“Who’re your two friends?” *Did they actually accept a contract while they were out there? Why else would they bother to bring something back to town?*

Jerric smiled in a slightly odd way, the water running down his clean-shaven face. That wasn't much of an oddity. The man would make sure he shaved and bathed every single day, even if all he had to shave with was a dull knife.

"Just a couple of people we met on the road," Jerric said, trudging up the muddy main street. "We were caught out in something much worse than this up in the hills around the Haalfden manor and figured we'd stop by. They were quite hospitable. Better food than the tavern, that's for sure!"

Fio kept her head bent against the wind, her wizard hat was askew and contorted as if it had been trampled, which it probably had by the look of it.

Henry went to check on his sister while Remal fell into lockstep beside the Paladin. "There's been nothing odd in town except the storm. The locals say it's nothing too strange, but they're rattled by it, Jerric. I don't like it."

"We'll investigate," he promised Remal. "In fact, Fio and I thought we'd do a little favor for the Count and Countess and bring these canvases back to town. You want to tag along?"

Remal laughed and danced away as they neared the warm, inviting light of the tavern. "I'd love to, old friend, but I'm sure Hen would be *thrilled* to help you out. I'll be doing some recon inside."

Under his cowl, Henry watched as the Bard slipped into the noise and bustle of the tavern. It *did* look warm and inviting, but he didn't feel right. Something was wrong.

Some sense he couldn't quite ever put a name to was going off like an alarm and he could not see what it was. The weather? No, that wasn't *too* odd at this time of year. Especially at the edges like this. You got strange weather all the time in places with low and shifting mana densities.

"You look unwell," Fio said as they turned a corner and slipped down an alley. The two people Fio and Jerric had been traveling with went into the front of the antique's shop if Henry's hearing was any judge.

The clanging of the shop's bell was easy to hear, even over the lashing rain and rumbling thunder.

"My nose is acting up, is all," he told her, watching her and the alley out of the corner of his eye. *What am I missing?*

Jerric knocked on the back door of the shop. They were greeted by an elderly man with a fringe of white hair and little round spectacles. A pair of bratty kids ran outside into the back alley to play in the puddles.

The old man shook his head and welcomed them inside.

As soon as Henry crossed the threshold, everything went black.

Back at the tavern, Remal was having second and third thoughts about leaving his friends to carry on their task alone. He usually pulled little lazy stunts like that all the time.

It was practically required of a Bard!

But this felt... different.

Drumming his fingers to the beat of Ancil's *A Rose Blooms Twice*, Remal wondered just what in the blazes was taking them so long. He'd ordered all their favorite drinks. A glass of cold water for Jerric, a *Fuzzy Goblin* for Fio, and since the bartender didn't want to go out and scoop some mud into a cup, a glass of straight whiskey for Henry.

"I'm going to regret this," Remal said as he once again put on his cloak and stomped out of the door.

But even the Bard could feel that there was something foul in the air. Among their merry band of adventurers, he was clearly the weakest. Without somebody to buff, he was an easy target.

His strengths lay in different avenues. Soft power that could be applied to vulnerable and hardened targets alike.

He had been able to do with a few words and a couple of drinks what Jerric, Fio, and Henry couldn't with all of their combat prowess combined.

And yet, he felt suddenly alone and worried. An itch between his shoulder blades had him ducking into every alley and alcove to watch for tails.

There were none, of course. This backwater town was laughable, really. All of his training at the Bard College was wasted here. Nobody below Iron understood subtlety.

He blew out a sigh and then froze as a small slender cloaked figure darted into the alley mouth and peered down it. Another figure, looking much like a child, did the same.

Using [Vanish], Remal appeared to fade into the brickwork at his back. As soon as the two child-sized cloaked figures neared him, he could see they were looking for him.

Worse, as they drew level with him, he saw their faces. They looked human at a glance, but their eyes were slightly too big, their noses too flat—barely more than two slits in their face—and their lips were far too big.

But what really screamed “I’m not human!” was the long flickering forked tongue that darted in and out from their hoods.

“I’m telling you, he came down thiss way!” one said.

“The rain iss bothersome! I cannot sssense him.”

Remal might have been weak, but he knew what these creatures were better than most. His home of Windam was attacked by serpentii when he was just a child.

They liked to slip into town and pretend to be people. They would hide their faces so you couldn’t make out what they were until it was too late.

Rage like the Bard had scarcely known welled up inside of him. He lashed out with a boot into the first serpentii, knocking him into his fellow.

He might be the weakest among his group, but he was still a Steel Ranker, and he wasted no time unleashing the full might of his Steel aura.

Silver-gray light sprang up all around him, turning the pouring rain to sizzling mist.

The first serpentii pulled out a long sinuous dagger, but Remal’s hand flickered and the thing was disarmed with the blade firmly planted in its too-long neck.

Before the first serpentii could get up, it found itself pressed into the mud of the alley with a knee on the back of its head and a voice hissing with barely contained rage at its ear, “I’ve already killed your friend. Please, oh *please*, do something stupid, so I have an excuse to kill you, too. My friends might care that I let an informant get away, but they’ll forgive me. I’m a lovable little scamp, after all. Now get up on your feet. We’re going to have a friendly chat.”