

- Lytha: Un-dependence - Day 2: 8:00 pm

The Devil's Tongue was deservedly regarded by most folk as being beyond reproach; simply irredeemable. It was a part of The City that seemed to curl in upon itself, creating a sort of cavernous maw that sucked the conscience out of even the largest heart. Its location was a secret, kept that way because most preferred to believe that it didn't exist, and those who did wanted it all for themselves. The sun may as well have still been shining; not a ray of it would have hit me as I walked the street between the lumbering hulks of buildings, spilling out over themselves to grind against each other, as if to mimic what went on within.

The architecture was lavish and obscene. The facade of the building I approached was painted in red and gold; half crumbled woodwork designed to put a royal face on the evil clown of a structure. I pushed my way through the busy streets filled with cloaked, huddled figures bouncing back and forth between deep alcoves and the night walkers out presenting their wares, to the doorway which greeted me like a toothy gaping grin. Navigating the familiar halls of the brick and iron monolith took only a moment, for I knew them well.

"Two timing on me, Koyne?" I asked after shoving the door open and laying eyes on the brigand who was sitting in my chair.

"We're not sleeping together, if that's what you mean," Koyne responded, giving me a bit of a glare with his good eye.

"What the hell is this?" The brigand responded, who didn't seem to be amused at all. In fact, he was getting a bit flustered. He turned from me back to Koyne, and demanded, "You said this meeting would be private!"

"It was, now it's over," I said to him, ready to hoist him out of the chair with my bare hands; but there was a problem with that plan. "How could you give this guy a job, Koyne? He's so fat!"

"It's muscle!" he barked, trying to shove me away.

"Look, no trouble, okay?" Koyne demanded. "I'm sorry, our meeting just went a little late, and you're a little early. He was just leaving, Lytha."

"Oh, it's Lytha, I'm so scared!" he cawed, "Lytha of the golden heart! I've heard them talk about you! The little angel! I know why you don't never hurt nobody, it's because you're afraid you'll cut yourself on the sharp pointy bit of the knife!" And then he laughed.

I didn't say anything. That's what Koyne was for. He spoke right up, "I'll tell you why she doesn't do any killin, it's because I do it for her! Did you hear about me too? Do they talk about how I can put a knife in a man's back at a hundred feet? Tried to take my eye, those that hate me, thought it'd blind me up, dull my aim; well now they've got knives in their back too, and daisies poking out their eye sockets! Did they tell you about that?"

"He's gone, Kyone," I said, sitting in my chair.

"Eh?" he questioned, squinting at me.

"You're blind as a bat old man, but you've got some guile. Really, you don't need to try to defend me like that, or whatever it was you were trying to do. I like people to think those things about me. Means I still have my cards hidden up my sleeves."

"I know, I know," he said, giving a little cough into his fist. "That's why I didn't correct him, just didn't like him talking down at you like that."

"How nice... but why was he here at all? Who was that?"

"Same as you."

"I beg to differ."

"Fine... yes, I was giving him a job. I didn't think it'd hurt your feelings."

"I just don't see why you'd bother when you've already got the best," I said, glaring at him from behind my veil. I knew he wouldn't have been able to see it, even if he wasn't a blind old man, but I glared anyway.

"Best you may be," he said, reaching under his desk to pull out a pair of goblets. "But not the most dependable. I know you consider yourself an independent thief, but I'm more inclined to call you an un-dependant thief.

How many times have you stood me up?" He then pulled out a bottle of scotch, and poured each goblet to the brim. He may be blind, but all those years as a bartender haven't dulled his sense for pouring. "Taken missions and then vanished? Completed a mission and then vanished without delivering me the goods until weeks later? And my personal favorite, outright declining without saying why!"

"Why is my business," I said, snatching up the goblet and taking a good drink. It was good to have a fence who had good scotch.

"This IS my business, Lytha! I don't know what yours is, and I don't care, You could be moonlighting at the grocer's shop for all I care, but I want you to understand..."

"Day-lighting," I said, already half done with my drink.

"I beg your pardon?" He asked. He was about to slam the bottle down on the desk as he made his point, but he hadn't gotten there, and with my interruption, he probably lost it.

"This would be moonlighting. The job at the grocer's shop would be my day job."

"You can't be serious."

"Do I look like I'm serious?" I asked, face hidden behind the veil as always.

He took the wise route and assumed my question to be rhetorical. "This is your last chance, Lytha. I know I never have to worry about you botching a job; only that it gets done at all. If you don't go through with this one for any reason, any reason at all, then you can find yourself a new fence."

I shrugged. I could have argued with him, pointed out that he'd also have to try to find a new thief; unless he figured that tubby from before was

his future. I fully intended to do tonight's job, whatever it was, so I just finished off my scotch, and said, "Fine, what's the job?"

"Wine," he said with a triumphant nod. "The Stewart Family's inheritance from their dead uncle has finally arrived, and it includes three bottles of the fabled wine from their centuries old vineyard on their family's secret island; makers of the finest wines The City's ever known for the past five hundred years!"

Koyne was almost foaming at the mouth over this one. I offered an "uh-huh?"

"Their business faded long ago, and their uncle was the last guardian of the legacy. But now it's gone to the idiot children, and they're going to drink it!"

"More scotch please," I said, tapping my goblet.

"Actually, I shouldn't. I'm sorry Lytha, but the job is tonight. I can't have you-"

"Tonight?" I balked.

"Yes. They're having a celebration tonight to commemorate the reception of their inheritance."

"This is awfully short notice," I said, and tapped my goblet again.

"This all happened very quickly. I told you it was urgent; it's urgent. I told you you're the only one for the job, and that's true as well. I have reservations about you, but I also know how you work. This mission is a one shot deal. You're my one shot thief."

"Two shots, and when I say shots, I mean fill this goblet to the brim with scotch before I grab that bottle away from you and start tipping it back myself."

"Fine," He said, pouring. "You know what I want. No one dies. No one gets hurt. No one even sees you. Re-lock doors behind you. Re-scatter the dust you've unsettled. Don't steal anything but the goal."

"I don't re-scatter the dust I've unsettled, I just don't unsettle it in the first place." I drank my drink. Damn, I didn't want to do a mission tonight, but it was too late now.

"Your attention to detail is flawless Lytha. I've known places to not realize they've been robbed until weeks after you've been through. I get goose bumps just thinking about it."

"If they're planning to drink the wine I'm going to steal, then I think they'd notice pretty quickly, Koyne," I said, already pretty sure what he was going to say next.

"Yes, that's why I'm going to have you do the old switcheroo. The idiot kids won't be able to tell the difference. When midnight comes, and they do their toast, they'll think they're drinking their two-hundred year old family wine. Really, they'll be drinking three bottles of the crap I picked up in Newmarket this evening."

"Clever," I said, not enjoying the idea of having to sneak around with three big bottles of wine strapped to my belt. It was one thing to just find them and get out, it was another to have them while trying to get in too.

"Do you want me to switch the labels too? Should I bring glue?"

"How did you guess?" he said, tossing a tube of paste onto the table.

"Fancy. Well, I suppose there's no time to waste?"

"I've written out all the details for you, here," he said, passing me a sheet of parchment. His writing was chicken scratch, but I had gotten the hang of deciphering it. "I know where the Stewart Family Manor is," I told him. "So, no stealing of anything peripheral? Are you quite sure about that? I have bills to pay."

"Use your judgment," he said, shrugging.

Indeed, I was good at that. "If it's part of the inheritance, I won't touch it. They'll be focusing on that quite a bit. If it's loose change elsewhere in the house, I'll skim a little off the top. Fair?"

"You've got it. More scotch?"

"Please."