

Chapter 1

I

Oombar Venanty was a fellow of high standing known for his dry wit, but further so for hunting strange dwellers. He wore a modest, gray jacket and baggy pants, faded, black boots; he kept his cap brim just above his eyes, which gave a sharp effect: anyone with a hawk-like expression and a strong jaw would look formidable to begin with. He was known for his ability to wait while others spoke, and sitting at a table in an alehouse surrounded by four associates, he continued in this way.

He saw events as a performance: the men before him in different vests, white shirts, rolled sleeves, talked and laughed; the shop's flickering lamps and dingy, wooden tables were the background; and in a sense, he was positioned elsewhere, perhaps somewhere in the shadows above. He considered himself formless as he watched, much as the invisible creator might observe us mortals below. But then upon being addressed he'd emerge, a hawk-like Venanty, at the table inside the alehouse, ready to interact once again.

One of the four men, Keary Darrag, was tall and thin and had a fixed smirk. Upon meeting him, Venanty was struck at how alike they were. Aside from his being older than Keary, they shared a similar appearance, especially around the eyes. The two got along, but the fellow had an ease which Venanty found unsettling; it seemed to carry an underlying motivation. "Old friend!" said Keary. "How's the coin?"

"I find everyone's asking to borrow it," said Venanty.

Keary waited with raised eyebrows.

Venanty looked plainly at him. "Anyway, to answer your question, the coin's alright."

Keary gave a dismissing gesture. "There's no need to pounce, Oombar." He patted the table as though calming it. "Anyway, shouldn't you be out finding daemon caskets on the moors?"

Venanty shrugged. "Those? They were empty, and I never figured who buried them or why they were buried in the first place."

"No markings to show a craftsman or a spiritus?"

"None. Oak cases, with simple hinges and locks. No indication of a maker."

"And the missing pets?"

"It's likely a wolf got at them."

"And the odd screams the locals kept hearing?"

"Arguing opossums."

A woman approached the table. Both men rose and respectfully bowed as she sat beside Venanty, who addressed her as Nalabeathan. The other three men at the table watched but then returned to their conversation. "Tell him what really happened," she said. "Tell him about the fifth hole's impenetrable darkness. And how you abandoned the box and covered it."

Keary absorbed Nalabeathan's tailored brown jacket with flower patterned sleeves, her black locks and shiny, brown eyes, turned to Venanty. "Fifth hole? You'd said four."

"There *were* four," said Venanty. "Forget the fifth—the fifth made me unwell." He glanced back at the woman. "The hole's edges collapsed inward. It beckoned its return. Anyone would've done the same."

Keary seized Venanty's arm. "Hold on. Do you realize the price for something like that?"

Venanty brushed him off and sipped his bourbon.

Nalabeathan laughed. "He doesn't care about the money."

“He should,” said Keary. “Tell us, old friend. Where’s the fifth box? I’ll throw on some gloves, and we’ll make it a picnic. We’ll take one of the fellows. And if anyone asks, we’ll say it’s a boring affair of dead shrubs.”

“It’s under the ground,” said Venanty. “Good luck.”

“Such a waste,” muttered Keary, and bidding the other three men goodbye, he tipped his cap to Nalabeathan and left.

Venanty glanced at Nalabeathan, then back to his drink.

“Now we’ll see where it goes,” said Nalabeathan.

“I’m sure the four empty boxes were decoys,” said Venanty.

Nalabeathan nodded. “Either that or four of them escaped, but if they did, then where are they now?”

Venanty frowned.

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