

Chapter 1

II

Keary's inherited business, *Darrag's Rolling Tubs*, had originally been *Darrag's Baths*, until he created a tub which flipped upside down and slid into a cabinet; although the invention sold, he generally preferred making door locks instead. He found it better to set aside hating ghosts for opportunity's sake and help Venanty as a locksmith. After all, there'd been a profit.

Upon thinking this, he grew more determined as he traversed Pontibus's hilly configuration of narrow, rectangular homes with round windows and large, black roofs. Beneath overlapped walkways and aqueducts, among a valley-tucked group of dwellings, lay a house enveloped by an ivy-bound tree. He climbed. A third story window had been left slightly ajar, which at first stuck, then groaned, as he lifted it. Checking the empty brick street, he entered. An ignited lamp produced a high vaulted ceiling, shelves of disarrayed books, hung baskets of overflowing scrolls and paper, and taking up the center, stood an enormous wooden desk. The shadows of all the various objects cast spine-like shapes along the wall.

Keary froze: in the doorway was a young woman in a black dress. She had dark hair and violet, cat-like eyes. *Aildon*, he thought. The elves were known for their trickery.

"Oh, a thief," she said. "I've heard of thieves, and I've always wanted to see one. But they've never been around this place—at least, not that I know of. Things were dull before, but now you're here, and that's interesting."

"I'm Keary, a friend of Venanty," he said.

"But then why didn't you knock? You're tall for a thief. But of course you're a thief. What's the plan? Jewels? Coins? Are they nearby? Where should we look?"

"I'm borrowing something, and thought it'd be easier not to disturb anyone. So...I'll just get what I came for, and I'll be on my way."

"If that's the case, then let me search. There's a way to check, and it's simple."

Keary nervously grinned. "That won't be necessa—"

Before he could finish, she crossed the room and grabbed his wrist. "Let's try, shall we?" she said. "Yul-de-bool de-daaahhhh. That's made up, and has nothing to do with this, but oh well."

Keary felt her icy cold fingers, her breath on his ear, and he trembled as his throat and jaw grew numb. "Map," he said.

"Yes?"

"A...a box lies beneath the northern moors."

The woman tightened her hold. "And..."

Keary's throat grew numb again, but this time he broke free. "Who're you, and why are *you* here?" he asked.

"Of course he didn't mention me. Why bother bringing me up? I'm Mr. Venanty's assistant, Bouteka Geeula. I help with onlyworld things—things like the box." She sat at the desk. "The scrolls and artifacts are a collection. I help him because he released me from the catacombs. I was locked in a stone chamber for over a hundred years, but I was able to keep busy, since there's much to do when you have the dead to talk to. And the plants sprouting from the cracks weren't too bad. And there was a spring nearby, and every so often water fell through. But then one day Mr. Venanty arrived, and he pried the door, and now I'm here with him."

Familiar with *onlyworld*, Keary knew where odd things like this elf came from. He thought it funny how people used the expression, when it clearly wasn't the only place in existence. "Say whatever you want, but Oombar Venanty wouldn't trust an aildon."

Taking a small key from her sleeve, Geeula unlocked a desk drawer, removed a pouch, and handed it to Keary. "Look," she said.

Keary loosened the draw-string and found coins inside.

Geeula drummed her fingers on the arm of the chair. "Those are Mr. Venanty's groats, but there'll be more, if you let me join in. I already know about the box he left, and shame on him, since it cost us dearly."

Keary shifted the coins, felt their weight, and he scoffed. "So you found some money. That doesn't prove anything. I'm just here for the map, and I don't need an elf tagging along."

"You'll need me because you won't get far with the map, but there's a creature in the moors, and I'll have it tell us where the box is."

"There's no creature in the moors."

Geeula returned the bag and locked the desk. "Just because you don't know, doesn't mean it's not there." She glanced at a wooden clock against the wall behind her. "Oh, it's almost eight. Let me show you something."

"I've heard enough, and now I'm getting what I came for."

"You've never seen this, though. It's unique. Normally, it's a thing only elves get to do."

Keary shrugged. "Alright."

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