

BY AND BY

1st of the Month of Orange Harvest, 601 K.D.

19:03

Yarriel and Knife bursted in through the front doors of the black bilge tavern, hardly able to stand, the dwarf and the elf each doubling over in laughter, trying to use the other for support. “This wide!” Yarriel roared, holding his coarse hands up to demonstrate, his vision completely blurred by his tears. Knife then did fall over onto the tavern floor, trying to gasp in breath between her laughs but finding it impossible. Yarriel slammed himself down onto a table, tried to compose himself, but then caught a glimpse of his elven friend red-faced on the floor. He fell down onto the floor with her, likewise unable to breathe.

At the bar, Gustav blew out a puff of air, shook his head, and lifted his pint glass to his lips. “This new generation of assassins is certainly something different,” he said to the innkeeper, and then took a long sip from his drink.

The innkeeper, Hatchet, nodded. He stood drying a washed glass with a white cloth.

By and by, Yarriel and Knife got themselves together, stood, and made their way to the bar.

“A pint,” Yarriel ordered, and Knife ordered after him, “A cup of tea,” and then both fell into a giggling fit.

Hatchet got their drinks, set them on the counter, and kept his slender hands on each refreshment. “Is the Earl of Wimfast dead?”

Yarriel sat upright, eyes deadening from joyous to somber for but a moment long enough to utter the solitary word, “Aye.”

Hatchet released his hold on the drinks.

Knife snorted, which broke the brief somber hold that Hatchet’s question had put on Yarriel. Yarriel and Knife clinked their glasses together, and then the two each had a sip of their drink.

As the two settled in, the black bilge tavern became quiet again. Outside, the bustle of the city could be heard. A horse-drawn carriage rushed by outside. Knife’s pointed ears twitched as she listened to the cadence of the hooves, the deep airy nasal vocalizations of each horse’s breaths. Yarriel’s head bowed in thought as he listened to the clanking of the metal bits on the horses’ harnesses, and the creaking of the carriage.

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13:30

Before sitting down to work, the Earl of Wimfast stood and looked out of his office’s large window. Below outside, his slaves moved through his orange fields, stooping down to the bushes and picking off the tiny rind-covered fruits. He watched the drivers making their patrols, shouting their orders, turning what would be a slow labor into an efficient machine-work. Satisfied, the earl turned, sat down at his desk, and began at a stack of parchments that needed his attention.

The door was kicked open. No sooner could the earl look up than was his neck struck with a dart, and he felt the strength drain from his every muscle; his body tingled as though every part of him had fallen asleep. At the open door stood two figures from the lesser races, a rock-eater and a knife-ear. The knife-ear lowered a blowgun from her mouth and stowed it in her black garb. The rock-eater retrieved a dagger from his black garb and stepped slowly towards the collapsed earl.

Graciously, the poisoned dart worked as something of a painkiller to dull the senses, and the earl could not entirely feel as his fingers were cut off, though he did have to watch as the dwarf and the elf then ate the digits one by one. As the last of his fingers was eaten, he lost consciousness. He came-to only

momentarily as the dwarf's dagger pierced his heart, and he felt every brief instant as his mortal term atop this spinning planet came to an end.

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14:52

Yarriel and Knife sat atop a tall outcrop, watching ravens peck at the earl. By and by, wolves came, and the ravens fled. By and by, a bear neared, and the wolves fled. By and by, the bear lost interest, and lumbered away, and the ravens came back. Yarriel's stomach rumbled, and he felt want of a proper meal. The dwarf and the elf slid down the steep sloped side of the outcrop, and began making their way back to the city.

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16:52

From the rooftop garden of their apartment, Knife picked potatoes out of the soil, as well as taking some herbs from a variety of flowering plants. As she picked these things from the places they had grown, Knife reflected on the journey they had been through, the culmination of matter from the soil composed of the dead of plants and animals and all sorts, imbued with energy to grow from the light of the suns shining down from the heavens; someday, more would grow yet from this same matter, imbued with energy from the light of the same suns; Knife was five hundred years old, Yarriel four hundred, and both were but newborns compared with the planet, and her layers of dead laid in the soil who would later be the dead composing that soil.

Returning inside with the small picked harvest, Knife found that Yarriel had gotten the wood-burning stove started. The two cooked their dinner, and ate.

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20:03

Yarriel finished the last sip of his pint. He had been sober going on one hundred and seventy years, and as he sat there in the

black bilge tavern having finished his pint, he remained sober still; with his physiology, it took far more than a pint in an hour to have even the faintest of noticeable effects.

Outside, a drumbeat began, and a clapping crowd kept time as well. By and by, flutes and horns began to play a waltz.

Yarriel leaned over to Knife, and laid his head against her shoulder. "Would you give me the pleasure of a dance, dearest?"

"Of course, dearest mine," Knife said, and held out her hand.

Yarriel took the slender hand, and together the two embraced and began stepping to the time of the song outside. By and by, Yarriel led their waltzing steps out of the inn's doors, and into the street. There outside, the fluters and trumpeters and drummers stood atop a cart, playing their song. On the street, several couples stepped together in waltz. Yarriel and Knife joined the others, moving about here and there as the songs went by. By and by, Yarriel and Knife shared a kiss. By and by, Yarriel and Knife retired up to a room in the black bilge tavern and shared more intimacy, and Knife tried to stifle her laughter as Yarriel kept time to the rhythm of the waltz outside.

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05:00

Knife stood in the forest, her head bowed, her palms pressed flat against the bark of the tree before her. Yarriel sat cross-legged in the grass nearby, chin planted in his hand, idly examining a rock. In time, the tree would become rock, and the rock would become tree.

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06:45

Yarriel and Knife descended the stairs into the cellar of the black bilge tavern. There behind a counter stood the innkeeper Hatchet. To his left on the counter was a black candle, which lit the features of his elven face from below. To his right on the counter were three scrolls. As Yarriel and Knife arrived, Hatchet was handing one of these scrolls to Gustav. Gustav took the

scroll, opened it to see the name inside, bowed, and left, passing by Yarriel and Knife to ascend the cellar stairs.

Yarriel and Knife stepped forward to the counter. Without a word, Hatchet reached down to one of the scrolls, took it, and presented it to the couple. Knife accepted the scroll, opened it, and held it before herself and her partner. On the scroll was the name of the Earl of Wimfast.

On the first of each month, the assassins of black bilge were tasked to reap the three most egregiously cruel souls from the city and its environs. To Yarriel and to Knife, to see the Earl of Wimfast's name written on the scroll was only surprising in that it felt so long overdue; the fact that his harvests did bring nourishment and pleasure to many had likely bought him time, but not an eternal wealth of it. Yarriel and Knife bowed, turned, and ascended the cellar stairs to go about their undertaking.

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23:01

Yarriel and Knife sat in a meadow, still as a stone, still as a tree. By and by, a squirrel came and leapt onto Yarriel's head, then leapt off of Yarriel's head and scampered up Knife, and then leapt off of Knife and began scampering up the tall birch beside her. By and by, a hare came through, grazed on some grass between the dwarf and the elf, and then continued along once again. By and by, a herd of deer came to the meadow, and nested down around the rock and the tree for a spell.