

Grievance

The kind of man who can get things done, no questions asked. Well, Amelia needed something done, and done quickly. No-one she had spoken to knew his real name, only that he went by Mr Strife.

Amelia Bywater was fifty-three years old, five foot tall, and had the kind of non-threatening manner that comes with a stocky physique, and thick round glasses under a mop of mousey brown hair. She looked more like a librarian than a lawyer. Yet here she was in this tiny room with only a table, a single window high up on the wall, and a figure twice her size that people suspected was the Devil himself. She fiddled with her glasses nervously.

The two enormous, scarred guards that stood watch outside had been quite terrifying enough for Amelia, and yet somehow this hooded figure exuded more menace than both of them combined. The figure took one step forward, just short of the single beam of light that shone into the small and dusty room. The only part of him she could make out were his eyes, which seemed to shine from within the darkness of his cowl.

"We start with the Grievance," he said. When he spoke, his voice was like rusted iron trailing over black flagstones.

"Amelia Bywater, tell me truthfully: what brings you to me? What is your Grievance? Before you begin, you should know you cannot lie to me, lawyer. Many have lied to me before. None have lied again. It is hard to lie convincingly without a tongue."

Amelia swallowed. Even though the brooding figure of Mr Strife was on the other side of the room, it felt like he was close enough to be breathing on her neck.

"She stole something from me. My most treasured possession, she took it from me. And now..." She looked up at the silhouette with anger in her eyes.

"And now she has to pay the price."

"I have looked into your heart," said Mr Strife. "And your Grievance is truth. If you have found your way here, you know the price. I am curious what was stolen that is worth so much as a human soul. I don't often get asked to kill thieves, you know? But perhaps..."

Mr Strife's eyes flicked up to meet Amelia's. "Perhaps it was a someone rather than a something?"

Amelia blanched. She could see white teeth glinting slightly beneath the man's hood. There was something unplaceably sinister about that smile. Something unnatural.

Mr Strife reached inside the folds of his robe, and produced a sheet of folded paper and a ballpoint pen, which he lay carefully onto the table.

"Apologies if you were expecting a scroll," he drawled. "Or an ornate feather pen. This is simpler. The pen has a small needle at the top with which you only need to prick your finger. Don't worry - it's quite sharp."

Amelia glanced at the table. She wasn't ready to sign just yet.

"I want to know the rules."

"The rules?" said Mr Strife, tilting his head. "There are no rules, little girl. You give me your Grievance, and a Name, you sign the contract, and the Named one with will die by my hand. You need know nothing more than this."

Amelia bit her lip. "I want to know the rules," she repeated.

"Do you even know who you are talking to, little girl?" snarled Mr Strife. He stepped forward into the light till he was looming over her. He threw back his hood and glared down at her with wide angry eyes. "I was killing mortals before your lineage was begun. I have killed warriors and emperors and those who thought they were untouchable. Anyone you can Name I can kill - that is no idle promise. There is a reason people like you come to my door in the end."

Amelia quailed before the rage in Mr Strife's voice. Rage like lava spilling out of a mountainside, like the fury of water in a storm. Now that she could see it clearly, his face was stranger than she could have imagined. At first glance it had seemed entirely ordinary, but the longer she looked at it, the more repulsed she became. His mouth was too wide, the eyes too large, his hair too dark. His skin seemed thin, little more than paper stretched over his skull, blue and red veins tracing across it like cracks.

"I'm sorry," she said, feeling tears well up in her eyes. "I'm a lawyer. I need to know. What if you can't complete your end of the deal? I just want to know. I just want to know what the rules are."

Mr Strife threw back his head and laughed, a cold guttural sound that was more like a series of roars. After the subsided he looked back down at Amelia and smiled that strange and terrible smile again.

"I understand. A lawyer needs to know all the rules, even the ones that don't matter; is that right, Amelia Bywater?"

He grinned. "Very well. If I cannot complete my end of the contract, you can request anything of me you will in return. I will fulfill it, with no price attached. There is your rule. Now give me the Name, and mark the contract. The day is closing."

Amelia took the pen into her hand. "May I give you the name as I start the signing?"

"You may," replied Mr Strife, with a small bow. Amelia took the pen, and thrust the needle into the index finger of her left hand with a gasp. Mr Strife watched as blood bloomed through the

pen's capillary, then turned to look up at the sky, now reddened by the sinking of the sun. It seemed he would be hunting tonight.

"The one I want you to kill," said Amelia, as the pen scratched over the contract. "The thief who stole my most treasured possession from me: her name is Leilyth."

Mr Strife froze. Something was wrong. He turned slowly back to Amelia, his eyes widening in horror. She had spoken the name in the speech of Hell itself, an act impossible for any mortal tongue.

"Where did you hear that Name?" he asked flatly.

"Does it matter? You said very clearly you can kill anyone I can name." Amelia was smiling now, and there was a hardness in her eyes

"She is not... You should not know that name. You... How came you by that name?"

"The same way I came by yours," Amelia replied with a smirk, toying idly with the ballpoint pen and tracing the needle over her fingers. "Though what should I call you now? Mr Strife, or Ashdreal?"

There was a moment of impossible quiet, as Mr Strife stared down at the woman in furious confusion. The closer he looked at her face, the less sense it made. There was something inhuman about it; it looked like the face of a puppet. Mr Strife broke the silence with a monstrous roar.

"Guards!" he screamed, and he raised a black gloved hand to channel his fury into magic.

"Guards? You mean those hellbound weaklings you had standing outside? Don't waste your breath. They're dead already."

Amelia walked towards him slowly, and with a wave of her hand dispelled the magic he was channeling.

"Impossible," he growled. "Angelus?"

"Not quite, darling," cooed Amelia walking closer still.

"Mother..."

In one smooth motion Leilyth ripped off her mortal form in a cloud of crimson smoke and reached out with a clawed hand to twist Ashdreal's ear back. She was craning over him now, staring down into his screaming face as she channeled the essence of pain into his human form.

“Well it seems you have a choice now Ash, darling, “ Leilyth tilted her head to the side, and placed her free hand over the demon’s mouth to muffle his screams. “Because in truth, Mr Strife, my Grievance lies with you.”

She watched as his eyes widened in fear. He was still screaming. Leilyth grimaced at his weakness.

“You can kill me, as per the contract. It certainly would be entertaining to see you try,” she purred. “Or you can get yourself home to your lair right now and save yourself a world of pain and suffering. And I wouldn’t want that to happen to my baby, now would I.”

Leilyth stared down at him a moment longer before dropping him to the floor. “Now get out of my sight, you useless coward. It’s nearly Hallow’s Eve and I have far too much to do to waste any more time on pathetic creatures like you.”

Leilyth threw a gesture into the air and in a puff of crimson smoke both she and Ashdreal vanished. All that remained in the room was a piece of paper with a contract signed in blood by one Amelia Bywater, 53, and the butchered, broken body of the same which had fallen into a gruesome bloody pile of viscera and bone.