

“You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

Following an endless journey from the outskirts of Tejtan, the group decided to hit a local tavern in the city of Hembadi for an edge off of their otherwise tumultuous weeks (cheap liquor for Thera and Zenith, a fizzy pop and a game of darts for Miktyr). By the time the carriage successfully weaved through the bustling evening markets, it was remarkably late, the moon reaching its full peak above.

Even with the notion of relief provided by their pit stop, their elation quickly disappeared as they entered the tavern. The tavern itself was nothing special; some old furniture from old Ostarian eras to the left, some liquor-stained cushions to the right, and a prominent half-circle bar towards the end of the room. The room overflowed with patrons, easing worries that their disguised appearance would be recognized. Miktyr took the lead, bobbing and weaving his way through stagnant groups of elves, orcs, and goblins who hung around the side of tables. As their eyes caught onto his movements, they quieted down, turning towards one another and gazing in the direction of a dartboard towards the southern wall. Thera, picking up on their movements, followed the direction of their interest and exhaled loudly. A quick poke in the arm of the nymph next to her (*Hey!* Zenith exclaimed as Thera covertly pointed to the dartboard) confirmed their worst fears.

“You need to get Miktyr *immediately*, before he calls our names and outs all of us.” Thera whispered, leaning down towards Zenith’s ear. A few of the patrons had already begun staring at the pair, pointing and motioning towards the path Miktyr had blazed through the crowd.

“Why me?” Zenith hissed back. “Things would turn out *significantly* better for you if you put your neck on the line. Me? My father will have me executed, or worse, turned into a member of the IIRK.”

Stubborn as always, Thera thought, as she began moving through the crowd. Zenith stood close to the entrance, pulling the makeshift cloth hood over her head tighter as some curious glances began floating in her direction.

Finally catching up to a bounding Miktyr, Thera grabbed his shoulder, albeit a tad harsher than she intended. Keeping her hand there but loosening her grip, she met his raised eyes and silently motioned her head towards the dartboard. By this point, the spirited conversations that had been occurring when they first stepped into the tavern were fizzling out. A few stray comments and jokes still made their way around, but the overwhelming noise and energy of the place suddenly became concentrated in one very specific area.

Miktyr squinted his eyes a bit, eyes that slowly widened in horror as he took in the words on the poster. “But... ’s not true, ’s it?”

“We need to leave. Immediately. I will explain on the way back to the room.” Thera used her placement on his shoulder to guide him in the direction of the exit. As they moved to make their

way back towards the doorway, patrons began to carve a path for them. One elf whistled approvingly once they arrived to make their way to the exit, inciting an uproaring of applause and cheers from the townspeople. Despite the good intent, the vocalization of their approval merely sounded like a hellish cacophony to an exhausted Thera. Miktyr seemed to delight in the joy the locals felt for them, pumping his fist in response. Thera grabbed his raised arm and directed it back down to his side, shoving more than guiding him towards where Zenith was positioned at the exit.

“The bastard got what was coming!” One clearly inebriated orc-goblin chanted, leading to a stamp of feet indicating a raucous approval from the rest of the crowd. Zenith winced, a motion that Thera just barely caught onto before she was shoving all three of them back into the streets. The door was left slightly askew behind them, something quickly remedied by a donkey kick flawlessly executed by Thera.

No one got much of a breather before the questions began.

“What... the ever living HELL?” Zenith whisper-screamed into the night, with Miktyr gasping in faux horror at her less than desirable language. Not playing into the obvious bait for a bit, she continued. “Who came up with such a blatant lie, and why?”

“I haven’t the faintest clue,” Thera replied, exhaling as she did. The three stood just past the entrance to the tavern, away from the faint flicker of the lanterns in front of the building and ignored easily by passersby who couldn’t quite make out their faces.

“I didn’t ‘hink I was ‘nough of a pick-pocket to be a national target...” Miktyr mumbled, kicking around the dust at his feet with the sole of his shoe.

“National traitors. All three of us. For the murder of a Queen’s advisor.” Zenith muttered disbelievingly.

“Did you know the woman they are accusing us of killing, Zenith?” Thera asked.

“Not really.” Zenith’s eyes caught onto her face before trailing somewhere to the side, her voice quiet but discernible. “She came to functions sometimes, sure. But not really on a personal level.” Her voice lowered even more as she continued, “This definitely has my father’s scent all over it. He would be the type to get me nationally branded as a criminal to bring me home.”

“Yeah, but ‘ow did ‘e find out about all three of us?” Miktyr questioned.

Zenith rolled her eyes, waving a hand at the notion. “My father? Have you met him?” She paused for a moment. “I mean that rhetorically. Let’s just say, he has his ways.”

“As much as I want to puzzle this out too,” Thera started, motioning her head to the intoxicated bar patrons who were exiting the tavern, glancing in their direction, “we really need to get

somewhere more private. And we need to stick to our disguises. From now on, hoods on at all times.”

This comment evoked an audible groan from both Zenith and Miktyr. Thera shot them both with the same look, its message obvious: comply or risk death. Whether that be at the hands of the Ostarian national guard or Thera’s anger was to be determined.

A trot was audible from down the street, unmistakably the sounds of hooves as a carriage prepared to finish one of its last nightly rounds in the streets. Thera grinned a bit to herself and stepped out of the makeshift triangle the group’s positioning put them in, waving her arm and whistling.

“OY! HERE!” she shouted, scrambling to get in front of the path of the carriage.

“What a great way to stay undetected.” Zenith muttered, a comment either pointedly ignored or simply left unheard by Thera.

The carriage came to a sudden halt as the driver noticed Thera’s motions illuminated by the tavern’s light. He tugged on the reins harshly, the horses slowing before fully coming to a stop.

“Eed somew’heres to gone to, miss?” the driver asked. Thera moved forward closer, out of direct detection from the lantern.

“Ri’d bak to Sjo’orn Inn. Where’s we’re staying.” Thera motioned to the still figures of Miktyr and Zenith who stood behind her. Her Brudish accent clearly had the man amused, his toothy grin growing.

“Op in! Short, v’ry short.” He used his entire right arm to wave them in, nodding at each one as they boarded. As requested by Thera, all three members of the group kept their hoods down and kept their gaze downcast. Miktyr almost tripped over himself getting into the carriage, a movement safely saved by Zenith’s strategic maneuver to catch him as he started to go down, dragging him slightly into the carriage’s interior. Miktyr took a seat next to Thera facing in the direction of their travel, while Zenith sat opposite of them. A loud whistle and the telltale sound of a whip cracking, and the carriage sprung back to life, trodding across the sullen ground.

Almost immediately after embarking on the carriage ride, Zenith took her hood down.

“Oh, are we allowed to ‘ake ‘hese off now?” Miktyr asked gleefully.

“Absolutely not.” Thera quipped, much to the dismay of Miktyr. “Zenith, why are you taking your hood off? You’re in a far worse position should you be caught. The color of your hair alone is a tell-tale sign that you’re not some random traveler. Like you said earlier, if you’re found-”

"I get caught on my own terms, okay? And I need this hood to come off. I was about to lose my mind if I had to keep this thing drawn over myself for a second longer." Zenith interrupted, brows furrowed in frustration. A dig around in her cloak's pocket, and she found a pack of fyres, lighting one up with a couple sharp rasps of her nail at the edge. Miktyr coughed loudly in response to Zenith's decision to start smoking, earning a dramatic eye roll from Zenith.

"Hood goes right back on the very *moment* this carriage comes to a stop." Thera said coolly, her gaze fixed on Zenith. Zenith met her eye for a moment before letting her eyes dart around the rest of the carriage.

"Fine, fine."

The carriage fell into a pleasant silence as the ride carried on. Now that the heat of the moment had passed, the group slowly contemplated the way the events of the evening unfolded. The smoke coming from the tip of the fyre permeated the closed carriage with its scent, and despite Zenith's original defiant nature in lighting one, it was stubbed out with relative quickness.

"We need to figure out who spread this story about us." Thera muttered. "If we're trying to travel undetected, it'll become increasingly difficult to hide out from local and national authorities. Murderers of a Queen's Advisor... that's a steep grave to climb from."

"'hey wouldn't kill us, would 'hey?" Miktyr exclaimed. "I 'ave so much left to live for! I can't die because of somethin' *Zenith* did. I'd rather take matters in my own 'ands!" His retort earned him a harsh kick in the shin, resulting in an ensuing kick fight.

"Can you both be mature for one second? You more than him," Thera retorted coolly to Zenith. "Where did all that stately training go when you started traveling with us?"

"Bold of you to ever think I was a dignified nymph," Zenith grumbled, but stopped her kicking nonetheless.

"We need to stay in our room until tomorrow night. It's imperative we have adequate time to prepare for our next leg of the journey. And, let's not soon forget, that despite their positive reactions," Thera glances to the window beside her, letting out a sigh, "we were already spotted. By numerous village members, might I add, all of whom have no obligation to help us other than their own morals, which can easily be loosened by a light threat from the higher offices of the Queen."

"I don't think she'd go that far," Zenith comments back. "Don't pin it on her. It's the advisors who would be scheming amongst themselves to pin the blame on some supposed random nobodies. They're the ones who suffer the most from political distress, in a way."

"Didn't know you were soft on 'he queen," Miktyr cackles, earning him a glare from Zenith's direction.

"I barely know her. What I do know is that she's just a kid. She's younger than me, for hell's sake. Blame those in her administration," she responds, arms crossed in frustration.

"You mean, 'hose she 'ppointed?" he retorts back, leaning forward a bit more on his elbows. Thera sighed internally. Of course these two would be playing *guess who can piss each other off more* when they're moments away from being executed for political treason.

Before the conversation could grow any more tense, if indicative by the way Zenith suddenly corrected her slouched posture and had her finger coming to point at Miktyr, the carriage jolted the group suddenly backwards, before halting.

"Put your goddamn hood on," Thera hissed, acknowledged by Zenith with a roll of her eyes before complying.

The carriage driver came to the left door near Thera, all smiles, with a hand extended to the passengers to help them out. The group exited, with a couple polite nods and thank yous exchanged. As Thera stepped to the side to pay him, Zenith and Miktyr hung back towards the door of the carriage. Miktyr distracted his mind while picking at his cuticles, careful not to say anything inflammatory that would get them caught. Zenith, for the most part, was focused on the conversation between Thera and the driver, the way she leaned in and pointed to a piece of paper. Her eyes narrowed on the moments of the driver's hands, how he patted her on the back all friendly like and the way he held one of her hands in his gently, turning it over as he spoke. Thera seemed not to mind, staying firm in her stance but allowing it to happen. Miktyr followed her line of sight and, despite himself, snorted loudly. He leaned closer to Zenith, mischief clear in his eyes.

"You 'hinkin' 'bout something there?" he whispered, a laugh caught between the lines of his question. Zenith jolted a little, strayed from her thoughts, and returned Miktyr's line of sight with a panicked gaze.

"What? What? What are you talking about?" she exclaimed, voice a bit too high pitched to come across as nonchalant. "I'm just confused. I'm not quite sure what they're talking about, or why it would take so long to talk about it." Both of their gazes returned to the conversation between Thera and the driver. He still held one of her palms between each of his hands, but what caught Miktyr's eye more was the piece of paper, which was now cartoonishly rolled into a small cylinder and stuck behind the back of his ear. He looked absolutely delighted, his voice indiscernible in meaning but the tone clearly at an elevated pitch.

"I mean, why is he holding her hand like that? Do they know each other?" Zenith whisper-hissed.

"n all 'onesty, my eyes'r focused more on the paper, 'hind the driver's ear."

"Hm?"

"You see? The," Miktyr held his palm up, hiding his point from view of the pair off to the side, "the little cylind'a, right 'bove his ear."

"Mm. Wonder what that's about," Zenith muttered distractedly. Miktyr turned towards her, seeing the way her eyes narrowed on the driver's familiar movements, and his confusion turned to an outright devilish grin.

"Seems like you're more focused on 'smthin else there."

Zenith's attention successfully broken, she whipped her head back around to face Miktyr, but not before being interrupted by a, "What's up with you two?"

The pair turned back to the intruding voice. Thera stood with the two of them, glancing at them before simply shaking her head disappointedly. "Our lodgings aren't safe tonight. We're going to stay with Yiol and his brother." She jabbed a thumb towards the driver, supposedly Yiol.

"What do you mean, they aren't safe?" Zenith asked.

"Well... according to some helpful villager loudmouths, it seems the Queen's Guard is checking local inns and places of rest and subpoenaing their official records. They want to see if the names of any of the current guests line up with the possible list of suspects they've been given."

"You've gotta be kidding me."

"Unfortunately not. We haven't checked in yet, so the ledger shouldn't even have our name. Yiol's father and mine worked together. I trust him." Thera replied, nodding her head affirmatively. "We'll lodge there overnight and leave late tomorrow evening, to avoid being spotted."

"f you knew Yo-elle," Miktyr paused a minute, trying to feel the name out, but trudged forward, "knew Yo-elle was trustworthy, why'd we hafta 'isguise ourselves?"

Thera paused. "I didn't recognize him at first. He just jogged my memory." She replied, but her confident stance wavered a bit. "Anyways. Let's make haste. Loitering in the streets is all but begging for a target on our back."