

Whitecliff Watch

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“ . . . Right! To remain! Silent!” Cadence slammed the man’s head down on the bar to punctuate every word, until it looked like the fight had finally gone out of him. The way that he melted onto the floor when she dropped him let her turn her attention to the rest of the tavern, but a bar stool cracked her across the face as she turned around. She hit the ground like a sack of bricks but managed to look up to see the stool descending like a guillotine. Her arm jerked up to protect her head . . .

The knocking on the door woke her with a start, her arm half shielding her face from the imagined blow. The noise and the sudden light were like a thunderstorm inside her head, and she closed her eyes tightly against the pain. She sat up with difficulty as the knock came again, her jaw aching where the real stool had struck her in last night’s tavern brawl. The rest of her body felt like one contiguous bruise. The knock came again. Cadence glared at the door with a shouted, “Alright! I’m coming!”, and then grabbed her head as fireworks exploded behind her eyes again. She managed to lever herself up from her sofa and stumble across the room to the door, stubbing her toe on her armor on the way. She jerked the door open with a snarl. “What?!?”

A young halfling boy stood outside her door staring up at her. At least, she thought it was a boy. She had a hard time guessing with the little folk. The top of his head barely reached her midsection, but if the scowl on her face scared him it didn’t show. The smirk on his face bordered on being cheeky. Intent on keeping her bluster, she glared downward at him. “Well?!” she said.

The maybe-boy thrust an envelope toward her over his head without a word. She snatched it from him and turned it over. And over again. No name, no address, nothing to even say it was for her. The only distinguishing feature was a blue wax seal depicting an elaborate monarch butterfly.

She looked back to the messenger. “What’s this,” she asked impatiently.

The boy’s smirk remained. “Envelope, miss. A fancy lady gave me two gold crowns to deliver it.”

“That’s it? You didn’t ask what it was or why? Or find out her name? Or who it was for? What if more than one person lived here?” Cadence’s voice took on an edge of exasperation, as her head reminded her that it wanted to be horizontal again.

The halfling’s face took on a confused cast. “She gave me two. Gold. Crowns. Miss. To deliver the envelope.” He said the words as if she might be hard of hearing. Or possibly quite stupid.

Cadence narrowed her eyes and gritted her teeth, but she conceded the point with a nod. That was probably more money than he’d ever seen at the same time. “Alright, alright. You’ve earned your crowns. Now scram.” She stepped back and pushed the door closed, cutting off whatever else he would have said. She turned the envelope over and over as she made her way back to the couch. Her frustration had temporarily made her forget about her various injuries, but it all came rushing back as she sat down at her kitchen table. She winced at a particularly tender spot on her thigh.

She flicked open the seal with her thumb and removed one small sheet of vellum.

Mistress Cadence Olivia Taylor, your presence is requested at The Rose and Crown, on this 22nd day of June, at five bells past noon to discuss a career opportunity. Please arrive promptly and kindly inform no others of your purpose in visiting the establishment.

That was it! No signature and nothing else to say who had sent it. Her pounding head made thinking a chore. A career opportunity? If it had been from the Watch, they would have sent it in a marked envelope. Inform no others of her purpose? *That doesn’t sound sketchy at all*, she thought. She knew of The Rose and Crown, a swanky place in the Central District. The owners would throw her out as soon as she walked in, and that if the customers didn’t beat them to it.

She looked out the window and tried to gauge the time. It looked like midday. She paused to consider her current condition. She could, unfortunately, smell herself. She was wearing a patina of dried sweat, blood, alcohol, and she didn’t want to think what else. She stared at the message. She could ignore it; she could just not go, but the thought came and went. She already knew she was going; she

couldn't abide a mystery. She scrubbed her face and hands and did a quick wipe down of everything else. She put on her best clothes, which amounted to breeches that didn't have holes, and a clean tunic. She examined herself in the mirror with a frown. A plain young woman with mouse-brown hair stared back, her height the only remarkable thing about her. "Well, it's not going to get any better." She pulled on a jerkin over the tunic. It wouldn't win any fashion awards, but the stiff leather would turn a knife. The crime in the Central District didn't run toward violence, but she still had to go through the Docks and the Cliffs to get there.

The better part of an hour later, she was leaning against a shop across from The Rose and Crown. The nearest clock tower had struck five bells several minutes ago, but she still waited. There was a fair amount of foot traffic on the street, but no one had gone in or come out of the tavern in the five minutes she'd been there. There was a large sign in the window, which read: Closed for a private engagement. We apologize for the inconvenience. We will open again tomorrow at the usual time.

Cadence walked across the street and into The Rose and Crown. It was like entering a different world. The main dining room would have held her apartment a dozen times over. The wood was a rich dark brown, the chairs cushioned in purple satin, light fixtures and chandeliers in silver and glass. The wealth represented in this room was staggering, and Cadence was momentarily speechless. Once the shock wore off, she saw that she was not alone. An older man, human, dressed in finery that marked him as upper class, regarded her calmly from across the room.

"Welcome, madam. May I assume that you are Constable Cadence Tailor of the Whitecliff City Watch?" The man's voice was calm and cool, strictly professional, an expert on his home turf.

"Er. Just Cadence." She felt awkward and out of place in the lush surroundings.

"He said you'd be the last to arrive. Your host has engaged one of our private dining areas." He gestured to a door on his right. "You may leave your weapon here." He gestured to a long table on his left. It held several weapons already, twin short swords, a full-sized rapier, and a heavy battle axe.

Cadence's eyes shifted back and forth between the table and the door. The man spoke into her hesitation. "No harm will befall you at The Rose and Crown, madam. I assure you." He smiled, a warm and comforting expression, and she was surprised that she believed him. She pulled the dagger from the sheath at the back of her belt, placed it on the table, and went through the door.

This room was just as opulent but much smaller; her apartment would only fit inside twice. She was more interested in the other people in the room. There were six, seated or standing at two ends of the single long table. At the end closest to her were three more watchmen. She didn't know any of them, but she knew they were watchmen. The dwarf was wearing his uniform, but she was just as sure about the other two, a man and a woman, both human. It was the woman at the other end of the table that made her stop and stare. Ippan Hewe was a living legend, Commander of the Watch, and its longest serving member. And she was lounging casually in a chair at the other end of the table with her feet up and her eyes half-closed. Watchmen of Cadence's rank didn't usually find themselves in private meetings with Ippan Hewe unless they'd done something very right or, more often, very wrong. She was so busy goggling that she'd forgotten about the others in the room. She nearly jumped when the man spoke.

"Thank you all for coming. I know this is a disruption to your routines and I apologize for the drama." Cadence didn't think she'd ever seen someone so bland looking, but the man's voice drew every eye. Rich and full of purpose, it was the voice of someone used to commanding others' attention, used to convincing people. "My name is Jackson Herron. I have the honor of being the Minister of the Interior for our fair city." That announcement caused a stir among the assembled Watchmen. Now they were sharing a room with the Commander and a Council Minister. "Commander Hewe has been kind enough to assemble a list of her most promising young constables. The most intrepid. The most dedicated. Those she believes have the most altruistic and patriotic motives for serving in the Watch." He paused to meet every eye in turn. "Our city needs people like that. We face many problems. Many of which the Watch is ill-equipped to handle." Hewe's mouth turned downward at the corners briefly, but

she made no other sign that she was paying attention. “To fix a problem you must first have the right tool. I would like the four of you to be that tool, a scalpel instead of a mallet. Your team would answer directly to Commander Hewe. The cases will come from me. The scope of these crimes will far exceed what you are used to encountering, and their resolution will have life-altering effects for the city and its peoples, but the dangers you face as a result will also increase. Tavern brawls will become the least of your concerns. Constance, if you please.”

Cadence had been so engrossed listening to the Minister, she’d completely forgotten the last person in the room. The woman, Constance, glided forward at the sound of her name. Where the Minister was average in appearance, this woman was striking; ostensibly human, but with features so perfect that she seemed almost alien in appearance, much like the few elves that Cadence had met. The woman walked toward them with a brisk, fluid grace, and placed a slim folder in front of each of the Watchmen before returning to her place several steps behind the Minister. Cadence watched her until she stopped. Something about Constance was off, but Cadence couldn’t quite figure out what, and then Herron was speaking again.

“A string of robberies has plagued the city these last weeks. Violent robberies. You may look over the details in a moment, but first I’m afraid I’ll need a decision from all of you. I will only have volunteers for this task. What I ask of you will inevitably place you in harm’s way again and again, and I would not force that on anyone. Each of you, if you wish, may leave right now. Walk out the door behind you and forget you were here. Continue in your careers, live your lives, but you must decide before you go any further.” The tension as he paused was palpable. The intensity in Minister Herron’s gaze was like a living thing. Commander Hewe had given up any pretense of relaxation and was staring intently. Cadence’s eyes darted to the side to look at her peers and saw them doing the same thing, trying to gauge each other’s reactions. The silence lasted for the space of two heartbeats before Herron spoke again.

“Choose.”