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PROLOGUE

“Avert your gaze, foul beast!” Edgin shielded his face with his hands. “You have no power over me!”

But no power in Faerûn could protect him from the eruption of giggles that followed his pronouncement. Edgin peeked between his fingers. Also a mistake.

His daughter, Kira, lay on her bed, a cloud of dark brown curls spread over her pillow, grinning up at him with a light in her eyes that was one part adoration and two parts mischief. The cutest basilisk—no man alive could be expected to resist the power of that look.

“Please, Dad?” Kira sat up, tugging on his hand to bring him closer to the rickety wooden chair sitting beside the bed. “Just one story.”

Edgin let out a dramatic sigh and sank down onto the chair. “All right. One story, and then you’ll go to sleep within ten seconds, right?”

“Right!”

It was never ten seconds.

But Kira was already flopping back down, pulling her checkered quilt up to her chin. A fire burned in the small hearth on the other

side of the room, casting everything in warm golden light. Flickering shadows danced on the walls. It was, Edgin had to admit, the perfect atmosphere and the perfect night for a story. Rain clicked softly on the windowpanes of the small cottage, and a faint rumble of thunder promised a storm sometime in the night, but it was still far off, a distant dragon growling in its sleep.

The perfect atmosphere and a rapt audience—truth was, he lived for nights like this. It hadn't always been this way, and he tried never to take what he had now for granted.

"All right, then, which story is it going to be?" He listed them off on his fingers. "The Harrowing Heist of Harkendon? Longsaddle's Bungled Burglary? The Case of the Missing Cabochons?"

"Missing because we stole them," Kira said helpfully.

"Hush, you." Edgin put a finger to his lips. "Dealer's choice, then—what's it going to be?"

Kira stared up at the beamed ceiling, pretending to think it over, but Edgin knew his daughter. She'd already picked her tale.

"I want *our* story," she said. "The story of our crew."

Because of course she did. It was the longest, most tangled story of them all. But it was also Kira's favorite, and those eyes had him pinned to his chair with their hopeful delight.

He was doomed.

"An origin story it is." He leaned forward in his chair, elbows propped on his knees, and cleared his throat. Then he hesitated, glancing at his daughter, the way her cheek pressed into the pillow as she turned toward him. "You know this one starts off sad," he warned her. "Are you all right with that?"

Kira looked thoughtful, and her gaze flicked to the wall above her bed, where a small domino mask with a hairline crack on one side hung in pride of place. A smile spread across her face as she turned back to Edgin.

"It's all right," she said. "There are sad parts, but there are amazing parts too."

Just like any good story.

Edgin nodded, reaching out to squeeze his daughter's hand.

"In the land of Faerûn, there is a wild, dangerous, and beautiful place called the Sword Coast," he began, letting his gaze go unfo-

cused as he pictured the lands he'd walked, skulked, and bled through for most of his career as a Harper agent. Another time, another life—a version of himself that no longer existed—but the memories were as vivid in his mind's eye as staring into a clear pool of water. “Throughout this stretch of the world there are glittering cities, where the wealthy, powerful, and magical hold sway. But there are also vast forests, jagged cliffs carved by time and tide, and humble villages nestled in between. In one of these remote villages, there lived a brave, handsome, capable man named—”

Edgin thought he heard a snort from the next room. Ah, so his audience was bigger than he'd thought. Well, he didn't mind performing for a crowd of two. He could handle it.

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CHAPTER 1

TEN YEARS AGO

Edgin tried to remember the last time he'd slept. Sleep, that capricious, lovely siren—he knew he'd been acquainted with her once. He'd even had a bed, a comfortable bed if he remembered correctly. Lately, though, his world had shrunk to the small, scarred kitchen table by the fire, and everything, from the dried herb bundles hanging from the ceiling, to the pot of something cooking—or burning—in a pot on the stove, was just a little hazy around the edges, and it was all because of—

A screech shattered the air in the small cottage, traveling right down Edgin's ear canal and rattling his heart inside his chest. He jumped, jostling the small bundle in his arms and causing it to let out another ear-piercing shriek that he swore was worse than a banshee's wail. And he should know—he'd been up close and personal with one, a long time ago.

This was no banshee. He looked down at his baby daughter. Kira's small face was scrunched up in an expression of misery that Edgin felt, if he was being honest, had no place on a newborn baby whose only concerns in life were eating, sleeping, and defecating in alarmingly large quantities.

Whereas Edgin's concerns were many and varied.

He no longer had a job, for one. He'd left the Harpers, the do-gooder group to which he'd sworn an oath and dedicated his life, because that blind devotion had resulted in his wife's death at the hands of the Harpers' enemies. The grief and guilt of that had opened up a hole inside of Edgin, a hole that probably would have swallowed him—or he would have jumped in willingly—were it not for the squirming child in his arms.

Kira. The only family he had left. He would die for her. He would walk through fire, face down a horde of kobolds, kill anyone who tried to harm her.

He also occasionally wished he could toss her out a window to get some peace and quiet and sleep, which was a strange thought to have alongside the fierce love and protectiveness swirling in his chest.

Was this what being a parent was supposed to be like?

There was no one around to ask, so Edgin had just been muddling through these last few months.

He poured himself his fifteenth or sixteenth cup of tea from the dented kettle in the center of the table, trying to keep himself alert while Kira continued to wail in infant misery.

"I'm sorry, sweetie," he crooned, rocking her in his arms. "I don't know what you want."

Getting his daughter to stop crying was just one of the things he'd been failing at. Another was the fact that they were out of firewood, and their pantry, already meagerly stocked to begin with, was now almost completely empty. Whatever he'd been cooking over the fire was giving off a distinctive burnt stench that filled the cottage and made his eyes water, but he didn't want to put Kira down long enough to deal with that, and when was he supposed to go out and get supplies while she was crying and with what money would he buy them since he no longer had a place among the Harpers . . .

Edgin shook himself out of that downward spiral and took a big swig of tea with his free hand. He grimaced. It was hot and bitter and doing nothing to ease the fog that swamped his brain. He needed a hot meal, some fresh air, and a change of scenery. If he stayed in this cottage for another minute, he thought he might start howling right alongside Kira, and then where would they be?

He reached into the pouch tied onto his belt and felt around inside for some coins. He came up with a couple of silver from his emergency funds. It would be enough for a small meal at the local tavern and some milk for Kira, and maybe the trip outside would be enough to distract Kira from her misery.

Too much to hope that it would distract him from his, but at least it would keep him awake.

THE TRIP AND Shuffle Tavern was an aging single-story building with simple fare and a loyal local crowd, in addition to the travelers that wandered in to shake the road dust off their boots and have a pint or two. A large, white stone fireplace dominated the back corner of the room near the bar, and there was even a small stage on the opposite side of the room for bards and other entertainers to try their luck with the crowd. Once upon a time, Edgin might have been one of those entertainers.

In another life.

Tonight, he bypassed the stage and the bar and headed for a table near the crackling fire. He settled Kira in her bassinet, and whether it was the warm fire, the faces of the people to look at, or just the change in scenery from the dreary cottage, Kira's crying gradually tapered off. She drank half a bottle of milk, then shoved two pudgy fingers into her mouth and stared around the tavern in bleary wonder.

Edgin slumped on his stool and enjoyed the relative quiet.

A few minutes later, someone put a bowl of thick stew with large chunks of potato, carrots, and meat in front of him, along with a tall tankard of ale and a wooden platter of bread. Had he ordered that? Or did someone take one look at his face and think, *New father starving, get that man some meat!* At that moment, Edgin didn't particularly care. He tore into the hot bread and used it to mop up every bit of stew he could from the large bowl. It tasted like bliss. Rich, meaty bliss. And the ale—Edgin let out a moan of pleasure as the cold, sharp drink slid down his throat.

Why had he waited so long to do this?

Kira had fallen asleep, mouth slack, arms above her head, and for

the first time in what felt like years, Edgin had a hot meal in his belly and ale ready at hand. The fire was warm, flushing his skin and making his eyelids droop. He was going to sleep so good tonight.

So good.

EDGIN SNAPPED AWAKE to a sharp pain in the side of his face and a puddle of drool around his chin. What in the Nine Hells had hit him?

He was lying on the floor of the tavern. Through his swimming vision, Edgin could see the place was still packed, and people milled about the room, talking and laughing and not paying him any attention whatsoever.

He supposed that was fair. People passed out in taverns all the time, and it certainly wasn't the first time he'd woken up like this—facedown on a flagstone floor with his head throbbing and no idea how he'd gotten there. Most of the time it was after a night of drinking, but sometimes it was because he'd taken a punch that put him on the ground.

Had someone attacked him from behind? Oh Gods. Edgin's groggy senses finally started functioning again.

Kira. Where was Kira?

In one fluid movement, he pushed himself up off the floor. Or, at least, that's what he'd intended to do. In reality, he flopped around like a fish in a net until he got his arms underneath him and levered himself to a sitting position.

He'd fallen next to his table. His tankard and bowl of stew were still at his place waiting for him. But Kira . . .

Again, it took Edgin's rattled senses a moment to process what he was seeing.

Kira, his baby daughter, the center of his existence, the only thing in his life he had left that was worth a damn, was currently dangling from the outstretched arm of a grim, muscled woman with long dark hair and tattoos on both arms, wearing fur-lined, travel-stained clothing, with the biggest axe he'd ever seen strapped across her back. Seriously, he had no idea axes even came in that size.

"Let her go!" The words ripped out of him, and he lunged for the

woman, intending to tackle her and grab Kira, shielding her with his own body if necessary.

Again, that was the plan.

Instead, the woman calmly stepped out of the path of his charge, and Edgin skidded across the stained tavern floor on his belly. His body felt like it'd been weighted down with stones. This, after one ale? What was wrong with him?

He sprang to his feet. The room tilted crazily around him, but he shook off the feeling and went for the woman again.

"I said, let her—"

He never got to finish. This time, the woman shot him an exasperated look and grabbed him by the throat with her free hand when he got close enough. And Edgin just sort of . . . stopped, dangling like a doll from her steady grip. She wasn't hurting him—much—but it wasn't at all pleasant to be held by the throat. At least she had a much gentler grip on Kira, holding her by the collar of her nightgown.

In fact, now that he looked, Kira seemed strangely . . . happy? She swatted the air in front of the stranger's face with her tiny hands. Edgin recognized the game she was trying for—it was Got Yer Nose. Everyone in the baby business knew that game.

Except this woman. Eyebrows lifted, she seemed to be trying to figure out what it was Kira wanted. Edgin couldn't tell her either, because of the whole *being held by the throat* situation, so he just stood there and gasped. It was pretty humiliating.

Finally, the woman seemed to translate Kira's squeals and coos, and she leaned forward. Kira's pudgy fingers closed on the woman's nose, and she let out a triumphant baby giggle.

Oh Gods, Edgin thought. The woman was going to get angry now. She was going to hurt Kira. He squirmed in her grip, desperate to free himself.

The woman opened her mouth and said in a low, deep voice, "Honk."

Kira erupted in a fresh stream of giggles.

Edgin stopped struggling. His sleep-deprived mind finally registered what he probably should have realized immediately: The woman wasn't trying to hurt Kira. She looked like she'd maybe never

seen a baby before and certainly had no idea how to hold one properly, but she wasn't about to eat Kira either. The relief of that made him sag in her grip.

The woman flicked her gaze to him, gave a short nod, as if sensing his surrender, and dropped him to the floor. Then she took Kira in both of her arms and sat back down at the table—his table—with her, bouncing her clumsily but gently on her knee. Kira was wearing her smitten expression, the look that Edgin had thought belonged only to him. He shook off the little stab of jealousy and climbed to his feet, taking the stool next to the woman.

“So,” he said, his voice a little raspy from having her fingers around his throat, “do you often come to taverns and randomly grab people’s babies?”

She glanced over at him. “You always leave your kid unminded while you sleep?” she said gruffly. “You were passed out when I saw you.”

“I was not!” Edgin lowered his voice when a couple of the other patrons looked their way, but his outrage didn’t cool. “I had everything under control before you butted in.”

“Whatever you say.” The woman had turned her attention back to Kira, who’d grabbed a fistful of her long hair and shoved it into her mouth.

How had he lost control of this situation? What was even happening here? “You,” he started, pointing at her with his index finger, as if that lent him some sort of gravitas, “should mind your own business.” Then he hesitated, mouth still open to give a lecture, as something dawned on him.

Kira wasn’t crying. She was giggling. She was *happy*, and being entertained by someone other than Edgin for the first time in months.

And his ale and stew were waiting on the table, unfinished.

“But since you’re here, why don’t you tell me your name and where you’re from and how long you’re in town and what’s your life story,” he finished in a rush as he grabbed his tankard and took a swig. It had warmed while he’d been unconscious on the floor, but warm ale was better than no ale.

The woman sighed loudly, as if he were far more trying than any baby could ever be. Which was fair. “Holga,” she said.

Edgin decided to go out on a limb and take that as her name. He waited for the rest, but that was all he was apparently getting, because Kira had grabbed Holga’s nose again, and they were both absorbed in the Got Yer Nose game.

Well, he supposed a name was a start. He leaned forward in his chair and dove into the food. When the bartender passed their table, he flagged the man down for two more ales, glancing at Holga for permission. She gave a short nod and added, “Potato, please.”

Edgin blinked, but he was sure he’d heard her. He turned back to the bartender. “Two ales and a potato,” he said, a little uncertainly. He looked back at Holga. “Roasted, I assume?”

Holga nodded again.

The bartender left.

It was one of the stranger meals Edgin had ever shared with another person, in that it mostly consisted of Kira giggling and grabbing Holga’s nose, and Holga eating a roasted potato that she gripped in her bare hand, even though Edgin could see the steam rising off it. He ended up ordering another bowl of stew for himself. Kira had all the milk she could drink, and at the end of the meal she let out an impressive burp against his shoulder. Holga grunted in what sounded like approval.

“Good kid,” she said. “Strong. Cute too, like a little bug.”

“A *bug*?” Edgin said. At Holga’s frown, he said quickly, “Hey, if you like bugs, who am I to argue?”

He glanced out the window. It was fully dark and probably late. He’d lost track of time during dinner. And when he’d been unconscious. All the warm food in his belly was making him sleepy again. His eyeballs felt like they’d been sanded, and his head kept doing that dip-and-jerk dance of fighting sleep. “We’d probably better be getting home,” he said, yawning hugely. “Early bedtime for the little bug. You know how it is.”

“Oh,” Holga said, looking suddenly downcast. “Right.”

Edgin paid their bill, wincing only a little bit at how much lighter his coin purse was afterward. Worth it, he told himself firmly.

Holga followed him out the door. Edgin stood in the dark for a moment, the light of the tavern spilling out at his back, breathing in the fresh, cool night air. Kira was asleep in his arms and, exhausted as he was, for the first time in months, he felt a bit human again, like he was no longer a sleepwalker stumbling around in a nightmare.

He was savoring that moment of tranquility when he realized Holga was still standing beside him, looking up at the star-filled sky.

Well, this was awkward. Although he supposed he hadn't said a proper goodbye. "Thanks for looking after Kira while I was . . . you know . . . indisposed," he said.

"Sure," Holga said, but she made no move to walk away.

Edgin felt a tiny bit of his earlier suspicion creeping back. Did Holga intend to murder him and kidnap Kira once they were away from the crowded tavern? He tightened his grip on his daughter instinctively, and she murmured a little protest in her sleep.

Maybe he should go back inside the tavern, wait another hour or so, and then walk home with one of his neighbors. On the other hand, he was so tired, if he didn't get to his bed soon, he would probably fall asleep in one of the neighbors' tomato gardens.

He was still weighing options when Holga spoke up. "Want me to walk you home?" she asked, her voice tentative. "Make sure you're—I mean, the baby—is safe?"

Edgin looked at her, but Holga wouldn't meet his gaze. Her expression was sad, so sad that it pulled at the place in his chest where Edgin's heart used to be. Though, figuratively speaking, he hadn't used the muscle for so long, it was hard to tell what he was feeling. Despite his suspicion, he took a chance and asked, "Do you not have somewhere to stay tonight, Holga?"

"What?" Color rose in the woman's cheeks, and she scuffed a boot in the dirt. "Course I do. Just looking out for the kid, is all."

During his time among the Harpers, Edgin had learned a thing or two about reading people, about looking for deceit, exaggeration, or sometimes just bald-faced lies in the people he interacted with. And since he'd recently joined the ranks of the lost souls of Faerûn, he knew how to recognize a kindred spirit.

Holga had lost something precious to her too. She didn't have anywhere to go, and she was feeling just as anchorless as he was.

Maybe that was why he found himself saying, a bit to his own shock, “You know what, why don’t you escort us home and stay the night, just to be safe? There could always be murderers waiting in dark alleys.” In this small village in the middle of nowhere that almost no one knew about.

Holga perked up immediately, although she didn’t smile. Her lips didn’t even twitch. Edgin doubted her face was capable of contorting in the general direction of a smile, but he could be wrong.

Well, it was no business of his what kind of burdens she carried. He had his own history, and he definitely wasn’t keen on sharing it with a stranger.

Besides, it was only for one night, he reminded himself as they started walking back to his cottage. He’d stay up and watch over Kira to make sure Holga didn’t try anything, and in the morning, the woman would be gone. End of story.

Or, at least, that’s how he’d planned it. In reality, he was half-asleep on his feet by the time they reached the cottage. Somehow, Edgin ended up sleeping on the floor again instead of his bed, but when he woke up, there was a warm fire in the hearth and a full basket of firewood sitting nearby. Holga was outside, chopping more wood, while Kira was propped against a nearby stump, watching her and giving her baby claps of approval.

She hadn’t cried at all.

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CHAPTER 2

A month later, Holga was still living with them. Edgin was beginning to think she had no intention of leaving. And that was absolutely fine with him.

He stood in the kitchen, drinking a cup of tea, watching Kira through the window. She was in the yard, in the reinforced cradle Holga had made for her, wrapped up snug in her blankets, cooing and happy. Holga was sitting a few feet away from her, repairing one of the rain barrels that had sprung a leak.

As far as he knew, there was nothing Holga couldn't repair around their cottage. Besides the barrel leak, she'd fixed the roof leak, tightened the shutters on the windows, and sealed some cracks in the cottage walls that Edgin hadn't even realized were letting out precious heat.

She was almost as terrible a cook as he was, but it didn't matter, because she was an extra pair of hands to hold Kira while he muddled his way through preparing a meal. She was another voice to soothe his daughter in the middle of the night so he could finally get enough sleep to become a fully functioning human being again.

She was just . . . *there*, and even though they didn't talk much, Edgin realized how much he'd missed having another adult in the room. He hadn't noticed how alone he'd been until he wasn't anymore.

Not to say that she was the perfect roommate. Far from it. She snored and belched more impressively than Kira. She wore clothes way past the point where they could be considered acceptably clean. And sometimes she was just . . . *there*, hovering like a silent, hulking shadow. It could be unnerving.

But it was a small price to pay, so Edgin had never broached the subject of her leaving, and Holga hadn't brought it up either. They'd settled into an odd, calm coexistence that seemed to suit them both.

"Barrel's fixed," Holga said, interrupting his thoughts as she stomped into the kitchen, setting Kira's cradle down near the table before seizing the kettle to pour her own cup of tea. That was another thing about Holga. She did nothing quietly or gently. Well, she was gentle with Kira. He'd give her that.

"Well done," he said. He leaned around her in the small space and lifted a soup pot from the rack on the wall. "There's a hole in the pot. Think you could fix that?"

Holga eyed the ancient pot skeptically. "It's rusted through. Time for a new one."

Edgin shook his head. "Not a chance. New pots are not in the household budget this month."

Or any month in the foreseeable future.

Holga sighed and opened the empty cabinets one after another, wincing as the unoiled hinges squealed. "You own *one* pot." She threw a pointed look at the kettle and two cups, which were all that was left of a once lovely tea set. At the single dull knife stuck in the cutting board on one end of the table. "How do you cook?"

"Listen, the kitchen used to be full," Edgin said defensively. "I just had to sell a few things to make ends meet, that's all. There's a pawnbroker on the edge of the village who took everything. As soon as I got back on my feet, I was going to buy everything back."

He was still waiting for the day he got back on his feet. Fortunately, he didn't need to explain any further. Though they never

talked about it, he sensed that Holga understood what it was like to be at rock bottom and trying to claw your way back up.

She crossed her muscled arms, thinking. "Would he loan a couple things back? If he knew . . . you know . . . you really needed them?" She shifted uncomfortably as she spoke. Edgin hadn't told her about his wife, not in so many words, but Targos was a small village, and gossip got around. She'd probably heard by now that he was a widower.

He shook his head. "Good thought, but as much as I love the idea of pathetically throwing myself at the mercy of my neighbors to help me out of the gutter, Raylin Pendro won't have any pity for me. He's a dirty, coin-hungry snake."

And Edgin was pretty sure Pendro occasionally did side jobs for the Zhentarim.

Also known as the Black Network, the Zhentarim was an organization whose goal was to amass as much power and influence in the world as possible, through any means available. They didn't care much about staying on the right side of the law, and if people got hurt in the service of their ambitions, so be it.

Edgin wasn't a Harper anymore, but he could smell Zhentarim corruption a mile away, and Pendro reeked of it. He'd long ago resigned himself to the fact that he'd probably never get back the rest of the tea set Zia had loved so much, or the pots and pans she'd cooked with. He ignored the knifelike pain twisting in his chest and gave Holga a cavalier shrug.

"He runs a pawn shop?" Holga mused, glancing around the empty kitchen again. "Interesting."

"What are you thinking?" Edgin put down the rusted pot and stared at her. "Are you thinking . . . what, steal the stuff back? Sneak over there tonight and clean him out?" It wasn't like he hadn't considered it, some nights. He was pretty sure his skills hadn't atrophied over the months he'd been away from the Harpers. He could still sneak, skulk, and pick a lock or two when needed. A small-time Zhent agent's shop in a little village like Targos wouldn't be much of a challenge, and Gods knew Pendro deserved to get burgled. He was no saint.

Holga blinked at him. "I was just thinking I could sell some stuff too," she said.

Edgin felt his face get hot. "Right, sure, that's what I thought you meant."

Great, already Holga thought he was a terrible father with no household skills and an empty kitchen. Now she thought he was a criminal too.

He went to Kira and made a show of adjusting her blankets, even though she'd fallen fast asleep in her cradle and didn't need him fussing with her.

When he was finished, he risked a glance at Holga. She hadn't moved, arms still crossed, thinking about . . . well, really, it was hard to tell with Holga. She could have been contemplating deep life questions or fighting a sneeze. The frown and brow furrow were similar for both.

Finally, she looked over at him, meeting his eyes. "Or we could do your thing," she said quietly.

Oh.

"To be completely clear," Edgin said slowly, not wanting to misunderstand and embarrass himself further, "do you mean—"

"Sneak over tonight and clean him out," Holga said flatly. "That one."

Well, they were already at rock bottom. Might as well make themselves comfortable.

AT NIGHTFALL, THEY took Kira over to Edgin's neighbors, Jon and Veri Talvick, who were more than happy to watch Kira for a few hours, and whose nine-year-old daughter, Miriam, was over the moon to get to hold the baby. Edgin was grateful and a bit sheepish that he'd never considered going over to his neighbors to ask for help before. Zia was always better at that sort of thing. The truth was, Edgin had been gone so often on business for the Harpers, he didn't even remember their names until Holga broke the ice by sticking out her hand and introducing herself with a gruff "Holga."

With Kira safely taken care of, the two of them then snuck over to Pendro's pawnshop, which was conveniently located at the edge of