

FENRA GWENDELIN

I flipped end over end, rapidly going from hands to feet and back again. Not a reckless, unrestrained spin, but a fully controlled motion.

My body was my instrument. Art given form. Trained by years of dancing through the air, balancing across narrow footholds, into and out of hoops, and around fire and knives. A youth spent in my family's circus paid dividends in front of my adoring fans.

At least that's what I told myself.

The small crowd of humans, half-elves, and a single wayward lizard man cheered at my display of acrobatic prowess, hands clapping unenthusiastically. I batted my eyes and swirled my long, red hair as I struck a pose in hopes of egging a few coins my way.

The crowd dispersed, none parting with a single item of value.

"Merchants," I huffed under my breath. They weren't the poor beggars of other lands that I was used to performing for with nothing to offer but their well wishes. These were greedy traders clinging to their purses like a dragon hoarding treasure. A merchant parts with his life before his coin, as they say.

The village bustled with activity. A market row stood in the square where all sorts hawked their wares for those passing through the main road of the land. It brought all kinds of people from distant lands. Dwarves of hill and gem sold their goods to shire elves while staring at each other warily, if at a friendly distance. Midlanders mingled with provincials in conversation and trade as one sold fabrics and spices from their homelands to the other. It was certainly a strange sight. An oasis of civilization in an otherwise plain village.

I collected my empty donation cup and lamented my lost morning before I noticed an unsettling image before me.

There, an old man stood glowering. Bearded, bald head, somewhat frail. He was twenty paces away, but there was nothing else of note in this direction that he could be staring at. His expression was filled with a mixture of pity and what almost felt like disgust. I could plainly see a single brow tilted toward the sky that spoke volumes.

In it, I heard a voice saying all the terrible things I'd heard growing up.

Circus freak. Nomad. Transient. Carnie.

The man moved off, his ostentatious robes and jewelry glimmering in the sunlight. A pair of armed men followed him. Hired hands.

I knew it was time to leave my family's circus. I'd known it for a while. I hadn't been happy with life for years, but I'd never known anything else. I wasn't entirely sure I could handle myself alone.

And besides, there was another reason I hadn't left yet. The most important reason.

PERFORMER
THE DARK EYE CORE RULEBOOK



"Fenra! Fen!" I heard her call out, sweat from the summer heat on her brow as she ran up to me. She was unusually agitated and out of breath.

I raised my own brow curiously. "What's wrong, Jennia?" I asked, knowing my little sister too well to think everything was fine.

"Nothing's wrong," she said, hands on her knees as she caught her breath. "I just need your help with something."

She was still young. Too young to be on her own, unlike me. I'd protected her for our entire lives, taking on my role as the big sister. I wasn't about to stop now.

"What do you need?" I asked, wondering what it could be.

"I..." she started before looking away. "I just need you to come somewhere with me. Tonight. I can't tell you why, but I just need someone to watch my back, okay?"

That set off an alarm in my mind.

"What's the deal?" I asked plainly, cutting through her evasiveness.

"Look, I can't tell you anything else," Jennia said to me, darting her eyes and subduing her voice. Very uncharacteristic for my precocious little sister. "Just come with me tonight. There's something I have to do, and I want you there. Can you do that?"

My memory flashed to ten years ago. I'd found Jennia's body mangled in the dark, her whimpers guiding me through the back alley of the city. The scream that left my throat had ripped my vocal chords apart, destroying my ability to speak for days. My

recovery was nothing compared to hers. It was a miracle she lived.

Since then, it was my responsibility to ensure nothing like that would happen to her again.

"No," I told her firmly. "If you won't tell me what it is, I'm not going, and neither are you. It's obviously dangerous, or you wouldn't need me there."

"It's not..." she tried to argue before stopping to think. I took that as confirmation. Her face turned petulant and exasperated. "If you're not gonna help me, fine."

"Jen, wait!" I tried to say as she stormed off toward our circus camp on the edge of town, ignoring me. I let her go.

The annoyed look on my face softened as I resigned myself to the truth. She'd do what she had planned regardless, with or without me. And it was my job to make sure no harm came to her.

Crickets chirped in the cool evening air.

I saw Jennia's small form, so similar to mine, in the distance. She wore the same dark cloak as me, hoods drawn to keep our hair from being seen in the breeze. She either didn't know I was following her, or she didn't care.

Two figures approached in the darkness, both taller than her by a head or more. One was broad shouldered and looked like trouble. The other seemed more lithe from where I was standing, peering around the corner of some business. They skulked between a couple of buildings toward the back end of the largest shop in town, a two-story mansion with a gigantic footprint. The



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entire bottom floor was dedicated to the town's general store while the owner lived upstairs in extravagance.

Moving toward them, I kept myself silent in the quiet of night. My footsteps were as light as I could make them, and I was careful to stay out of sightlines and in shadows. My goal was to watch for any sign of danger, not to embarrass my sister. If she never knew I was there, all the better.

I saw the trio approach the back of the mansion and scale the fence behind. I quickly followed, climbing up and over and hitting with a small thud on the dirt no noisier than a bird landing. They gathered near a barren wall, the light from the sky showing me very little.

The larger man had a crowbar and was able to pry apart one of the wooden planks in the wall just enough for someone with a small frame to crawl through. After a moment, Jennia slipped in, barely fitting. The other two waited and kept lookout.

"What could she be doing?" I whispered to myself angrily. The answer was obvious. These two fools had talked her into robbing the place. We'd never been well off with our life as circus performers, but to resort to stealing was unthinkable. Or so I'd believed.

My temper flared.

"Hey!" I shouted, not caring that my voice carried farther than I'd intended.

Both figures were spooked from my sudden presence. The man with the crowbar wasted no time, charging for me with his weapon leveled.

A small shock filled me as I realized he was attacking me. I'd caught them in the act, and it made sense that they'd want no witnesses.

He took a swing downward with the sharp end that would've caved my skull in. I dodged nimbly to the left and tripped him as he ran, sending him sprawling to the ground. The crowbar flew out of his hand and jaunted across the dirt. I dove for it and rolled up, brandishing it as a warning.

The man was having none of it. Whether out of pride or rage, he crawled to his feet and barely made it off his knees before collapsing to the ground again, either unconscious or worse from a blow to the top of his head. Bone was no match for iron.

The other person screamed, a woman's voice, as she lunged. I saw the dagger at the last second and flailed the crowbar reflexively, catching her arm with it. My grip loosened and it flew from my hands, hitting the wooden fence behind us and clattering.

She held her arm and heaved her breath heavily, but her dagger was still pointed at me. She circled slowly while I retreated, knowing my back was to the fence behind us. Had I turned and run, she would've stabbed me where I stood.

My throat tightened. I dared not blink. I had to be ready.

She jabbed forward. I stepped to the side, grabbed her wrist, and twisted as hard as I could. Neither of us

was particularly strong, but I knew how to use my momentum.

A squeal of pain left her throat as I dislocated her shoulder and she fell to her knees. The dagger hit the ground, and I picked it up and held it to her eye.

"Talk," I said simply.

A bit of spittle left her mouth as her chin quivered. Her eyes were bulging in fear.

"W-w-we just needed –," she started, stammering.

I glared and inched the dagger closer to her eye. The woman bowed her head.

"Don't kill me!" she said, breaking down in tears.

"Using my sister like that? You piece of filth," I spat, my knee breaking her nose. She grabbed it and keeled over backward, and I kicked her in the ribs a few times for good measure until I heard a crack.

Tender noises came from her mouth, but I was beyond the ability to feel bad for either of them.

"Get out of here while you can still walk!" I ordered. She scrambled to her knees and struggled over the fence, leaving her companion on the ground.

The plank in the wall was still open. With a little prying, I squeezed myself through.

A single all-consuming thought entered my mind. I had to get my sister out of there.

I searched frantically in the dark behind boxes stacked high in what looked like a store room. It opened into a hallway, and to the right, I spotted a cellar door ajar. I followed my eyes downstairs, hoping I'd find Jennia and nothing else.

She stood in front of what appeared to be a stone altar. It glowed with candlelight that glinted off of a few objects that were placed on the altar in seemingly haphazard places. From behind my sister, I saw a large ruby, a sapphire, and what appeared to be a small rock made of gold. Close inspection revealed it to be a six-sided die.

"Jen!" I whispered, a little more angrily than I'd intended. My heart hadn't stopped pounding from the ordeal outside.

She jumped and turned, her eyes wide. Before she could speak, her mouth went agape and her eyes moved behind me.

There, standing in the cellar doorway, was the man I'd seen earlier in the day. Bald head, a curated white beard, and the same flowing robes. With him, his two hired men.

"Well, well," he said calmly. "We appear to have a couple of thieves in our midst."

"You've got it all wrong, sir," I said, trying to sound as responsible as possible. "I'm just here to get my sister and leave. We mean you no harm."

The man sneered, his expression reflected in the candlelight.

"You meant plenty of harm to those two ruffians outside," he countered. "I dare say, you saved me the trouble of reporting them to the town guard."

I glanced at Jennia. Her expression was some unreadable combination of awe and confusion.

"And yet here you are, in my home," the man continued. "With witnesses."

The two men were soldiers. They were large and well-trained, and either one would just as soon take our heads than let us flee.

"What..." I began to negotiate for our freedom. "What do you want?"

"Keen, girl," the old man said, his grin widening and showing a mouth of white, pristine teeth. "You may have noticed my altar. It's not something I want to... advertise to the public. Quite a bit of misinformation in the world about the Lord of Chance, you see. He's often associated with –," he snickered, pausing. "Thieves."

"You worship Phex," I said.

The man raised both eyes in acknowledgement.

"Do you believe it was your skill that kept you alive out there?" he asked me. "Yes, I saw the whole thing. It seemed more like luck to me. Or, shall we say, *divine* influence."

"What are you getting at?" I pressed him.

"You can work for me. I could use someone of your talents. A couple of jobs while your family is in town. Nothing illegal," he reassured, his gaze lowering ominously. "Call it an introduction to my Lord's way of doing business."

"And if I say no?" I asked.

"Then your sister rots in jail. Thievery isn't taken kindly in a merchant city. In fact, I believe the town guard would want to make an example of her. We can't have traders worried about their valuables being pilfered out from under their noses."

I took a long look at Jennia. Her eyes were apologizing, but I knew she had nothing to be sorry for. It was always my job to protect her.

I looked the man in the eyes, and he knew my answer before the words left my mouth.

"Let's talk about my pay."



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