

Episode 4: Don't Split the Party

ANNOUNCER

And now, episode four: Don't Split the Party.

LOTUS

Well, this is where our paths separate. Now that I know you're safe, I'll head on to the monastery.

GARNETT

It was a pleasure to meet you, Brother Lotus. I hope we see you again.

LOTUS

Well, if you'd like: Our temple has a big celebration after we complete the initiation ritual. It would be wonderful if you could come. You all are welcome!

DESPAIR

Even me?

LOTUS

Especially you, Despair. My siblings would love to meet you!

DESPAIR

Oh, thank you, Lotus! Big hug!

LOTUS

(choking) Despair! Can't! Breathe!

ROWAN

Thank you, Brother. That would be great. Send word to us at the station and we'll be there for you.

LOTUS

Wonderful! I'll be in touch within the next fortnight. Farewell.

ROWAN

Lord love a monk, he can really move.

DESPAIR

Where did Artie go? He said he had to take care of something, but he missed saying goodbye.

ROWAN

That doesn't sound suspicious at all.

ARTIE (as REGULUS TIBERIUS)
Not in the slightest, good sir!

DESPAIR
Hi, Artie!

ARTIE (as REGULUS TIBERIUS)
Oh, p'shaw. That raggamuffin dog boy is nothing but trouble!

ROWAN
Who the hell are you? Where is Artie?

ARTIE (as REGULUS TIBERIUS)
(laughing) I'm right here, Sir Rowan. (code shift) And you're still not getting the recipe for my auntie's stew.

GARNETT
That's him, Ro.

ROWAN
That is a hell of an illusion, seven hells or nine.

ARTIE (as REGULUS TIBERIUS)
This isn't an illusion.

ROWAN
Come again?

ARTIE (as REGULUS TIBERIUS)
Some of the first magic we learn is shapeshifting. I can take the form of any wild mammal in the Westlands.

ROWAN
Yeah?

ARTIE (as REGULUS TIBERIUS)
I am constantly amazed at the hubris of Humans. You, my friend, are a large mammal.

GARNETT
I thought mammals were supposed to have hair.

ARTIE (as REGULUS TIBERIUS)
I can understand how you might think that. And while we're at it, wear a hat, friend, that glare could blind a beholder.

ROWAN

But Humans aren't wild!

ARTIE (as REGULUS TIBERIUS)
Have you ever heard of a Human settlement in the Westlands?

ROWAN
No?

ARTIE (as REGULUS TIBERIUS)
Neither have I. And yet, there are Humans living out there.
Therefore, they would be...

DESPAIR
Nice move, Artie.

ARTIE (as REGULUS TIBERIUS)
While I am so attired, I prefer the name Regulus Tiberius.

ROWAN
Regulus say what now?

ARTIE (as REGULUS TIBERIUS)
Regulus Tiberius. R - T. We don't read but I know my letters.

ROWAN
Alright, alright, I yield, Goodman Regulus. I've got a bad
feeling about this (*), but let's roll.

SFX: Wagon begins to move again.

GARNETT
Don't you worry your pretty bald head about any of this, hon.

SFX: acoustic pause

PIKE
You in the wagon! Stop where you are!

GARNETT
It's showtime. Just like we planned.

PIKE
Alright then. Any of you had a slave run off? We caught sight of
an orc dressed like a real person, high tail running along the
forest road about half an hour ago.

ARTIE (as REGULUS TIBERIUS)

(Gritted teeth) I assure you, sir, he was not a slave.

PIKE

No matter. And I ain't a sir. I'm a corporal and I work for a living. This here's Larkspur's wagon. Where's Larkspur?

ARTIE (as REGULUS TIBERIUS)

Goodman Larkspur is my uncle and I have recently taken over this trade route for him. I am Regulus Tiberius.

PIKE

Whatever. Everybody out of the wagon.

ARTIE

So far, so good.

GARNETT

Watch yourself, puppy.

ARTIE (as REGULUS TIBERIUS)

This is Sir Rowan, my bodyguard.

PIKE

Sonny, you don't have to introduce the help, Sir or no Sir. I saw one arrow catcher, I saw 'em all. Oh, but this one? Hello, pussycat, m'row!. This one'll have to register at Rosie's Fun House. Old Rose hates competition. Unless she gets a cut, that is.

GARNETT

She wants a cut? I've got ten claws, that's the only cut either one of you will get, jackdaw.

PIKE

What's that backtalk, girl? You get a night in the slammer for threatening me that way.

GARNETT

You call that a threat? I will give you a threat, you puny little...

PIKE

Wanna make it two? You just wait right here, my little pussy cat. See what else you're carrying here.

ROWAN

Play it cool, G. Just like in Sunbreak.

PIKE

But speaking of horny! It's been a long time since I've seen one like this... alive at least. Why back in my day, we didn't have none of this "diversity" crap. Just have the cleric bless a cold iron arrow and pop one right about here.

DESPAIR

Don't you dare touch me.

PIKE

And why's that? You gonna take a swing at me, hell spawn? Just because the soft bastards at the capitol say we have to let you in, doesn't mean we have to like it.

DESPAIR

(Mutters under her breath in Infernal.)

PIKE

What's that? You casting a spell on me? Right here in the middle of everything? You're joining your girlfriend tonight for threatening me.

ARTIE (as REGULUS TIBERIUS)

Hey friend, don't you think this was a misunderstanding?

PIKE

You too? Charm person don't do nothing on me. Larkspur's nephew or no, you've got a cell waiting for you!

TARIQA SEVERINA

Corporal Pike, what is going on?

PIKE

The Captain said we should interrogate any newcomers, Lieutenant.

TARIQA SEVERINA

He said question them, not break out the rack and thumbscrews.

PIKE

But Lieutenant, with the Captain gone, we have to be more careful.

TARIQA SEVERINA

While Captain Marley is gone, I am in charge and I say you're out of line.

PIKE

Every one of them has tried to threaten, intimidate, and charm me. If it weren't for the watchman's ward, I don't know what'd come of me.

TARIQA SEVERINA

Hold on. You're saying the Paladin tried to influence you?

PIKE

What Paladin? Ain't been no Paladins around here in ages.

TARIQA SEVERINA

You do still abide by the law, yes?

ROWAN

Aye. I love people like I love the gods, and I work for the common good.

TARIQA SEVERINA

Corporal, do you see the crest on that man's shield? Do you see that glyph tattoo on his throat? This man is a Sentinel Guard and you owe him your respect. Thank you for your service, sir.

ROWAN

Thank you for your support, Lieutenant. I'm Rowan.

TARIQA SEVERINA

Tariqa Severina. Walk with me, Sir Rowan. You are a long way from the front, Sir.

ROWAN

I'm retired.

TARIQA SEVERINA

I grew up on those stories; they're why I picked up a sword. "We shall celebrate their names from now until the final call." It's what brought me here.

ROWAN

I may be gone from the service, but I'll carry those names with me for the rest of my life. Those stories... Let's just say they have more sugar than salt.

TARIQA SEVERINA

I hope the good you did in the world can bring you some peace. I need to ask you what happened with Pike. And I am not so starstruck that I won't hold you to your oath.

ROWAN

It's true that all three of them responded to Corporal Pike in a manner that gave him an excuse to punish them. And it's also true that he egged them on, with some breathtaking racial stereotypes.

TARIQA SEVERINA

This probably won't come as a surprise: Pike has a reputation for being a little short sighted in those regards. I'll talk to the Magistrate and see what I can do.

ROWAN

Thank you, Lieutenant. That's kind of you.

TARIQA SEVERINA

If you can't drive the wagon yourself, the livery stable will board the horses and the wagon for you. It's secure, I promise. I'll try to get your friends out before breakfast.

ROWAN

Breakfast? It's the middle of the afternoon. You know that he goads people and they're still going to spend a night in jail?

TARIQA SEVERINA

I'm sorry, Sir Rowan. The Magistrate had an urgent issue earlier. You're not suggesting that we should let them go without a hearing, are you? All are equal before the law, isn't that what you say?

ROWAN

I understand, L-T. Put yourself in my place. The man insulted every member of my team.

TARIQA SEVERINA

Pike has so few teeth left, you'd think he'd be more careful with them. But, I'm sure there have been times when you've been on your own and pulled through.

PIKE

Oi, Lieutenant! Gotta get the hellspawn and the pussycat off to jail!

ROWAN

Oh, we're trained for it alright and I think you gave me the perfect solution.

TARIQA SEVERINA
And what's that?

ROWAN
Rule Number One: Don't split the party. Hey! Pike!

PIKE
Tin soldier to a tin god, what do you want?

SFX: Rowan punches Pike in the face

PIKE
My node! I fink he broke my node!

ROWAN
O mickle is thy powerful grace.(1)

PIKE
It's... fixed?

TARIQA SEVERINA
Stand down, corporal. If there's no permanent damage, I think a night in a cell will cool him off, don't you?

ROWAN
Can I get a valet ticket for the wagon?

- I N T E R M I S S I O N -

ANNOUNCER
And now a word from our sponsor: The Deepwater Health Department

THE VOICE OF DEEPWATER HEALTH
Whether you are spending spring break in the mountain resorts or the ocean shores, don't forget to Just Say No to black market healing scrolls. Getting an unlicensed healing scroll might seem like a cheaper option to keep the party going, but counterfeit scrolls can bring home a bad case of Nasal Warts, Goat Dandruff, and in some extreme cases, Otto's Irresistible Dance.

Skip the side effects, and stick to purchasing healing scrolls from reputable pharmacies and village witches.

Just Say No! Pick up your "I'm Too Cool for Counterfeit Scrolls" stickers today at the Deepwater Health Department office, 1347 Black Death Memorial Parkway. Just next door to the Magical Licensing department. Stay healthy, Deepwater!

ANNOUNCER

We now return to A Paladin's Bargain.

- R E T U R N -

TARIQA SEVERINA

I will speak with the Magistrate as soon as he is available, but please, don't try anything else.

ROWAN

You have my word, Lieutenant.

TARIQA SEVERINA

And I will hold you to it. If you hadn't fixed his nose immediately after, we would be having a very different conversation.

SFX: A loud bell outside

TARIQA SEVERINA

Duty calls.

DESPAIR

That bell wasn't me this time, I swear.

GARNETT

You're fine, Despair.

ARTIE

Miss Garnett, can you hear anyone else in the area? Too many smells for this human nose.

GARNETT

Everyone hush. No, there's no one around.

ARTIE

Thank you. Would you all be willing to turn away for a moment, please?

ROWAN

Artie, we are in cells in the station brigade. How much privacy do you need to lift your leg?

ARTIE

It's not that. I need to switch out of this skin suit.

ROWAN

Oh! I... yeah. Sorry.

ROWAN

So, Artie... I wanted to ask you.

ARTIE

Still changing! OK. I'm good.

ROWAN

Sorry! I didn't think, what with your pack and all.

ARTIE

I did it for your sake, not mine. That spell is effective but it's not pretty. Miss Garnett, I need your help, please. Let me know as soon as you hear someone coming.

GARNETT

I got you, Artie.

DESPAIR

Excuse me, Sir Ro... Sir?

ROWAN

Yes, Despair? What's on your mind?

DESPAIR

How do you know the Lieutenant?

ROWAN

I've never met the woman before in my life.

DESPAIR

But the way you two talked, it sounded, I don't know, like those words had been said before? Like an incantation.

ROWAN

It may as well have been an incantation. Those were the words of my order. She said that and "poof!" Hel was empty and all the devils were in my head again. (2)

DESPAIR

I don't understand.

ROWAN

I put you off the last time you asked me. I suppose this is another time, but there's still no beer.

GARNETT

Ro, this isn't the best place. You don't have to, especially if you don't want to.

ROWAN

No, no. It's fair that she and Artie know who they're in with. It's true I am... was... am a Paladin in the Guardians of the Hallowed Host, but most folks called us the Sentinel Guard.

DESPAIR

That's a military order? Like the Order of the Silver Circle?

ROWAN

Sort of. My Gran raised me on stories of knights like Sigfried Silverhand. I wanted to be like him more than anything.

DESPAIR

But you sound sad when you say those things. What happened?

ROWAN

Do you have memories from when you were young - oh, who am I kidding, you're still young. Did you ever realize that a memory from before is not as true as you thought it was at the time?

DESPAIR

Lots of things from Before aren't true in the way they are here. Sure.

ROWAN

I remember my Gran crying when I left with Sideras the recruiter. At the time, I thought she was happy: her grandson was going off to "work for the common good." But over time, I realized: Gran wasn't happy, and Sideras wasn't recruiting, she was conscripting. The Guard paid my life-price in gold and they took me - they took children - from every village on the Eastern Shore.

ARTIE

How old were you when they took you?

ROWAN

Two weeks shy of my tenth birthday. "Oh, but he's so big! We'll make an exception!" Sideras said. Bullshit. I was like a veal calf, force fed on "the gods" and "the common good." But in the end I was a slightly fancier cut of meat for the grinder.

ARTIE

And how old were you when you finally figured it out?

GARNETT

Love, you don't have to.

ROWAN

Day one of my first assignment on recruiting detail.

DESPAIR

Oh. I. Um.

ROWAN

Anything you can think of has been said to me before. I've spent a long time turning words around like pieces in a picture puzzle, trying to find the way to make it all right. Make right all the wrong I've done.

DESPAIR

When I was growing up, I always heard stories about fallen Paladins.

ROWAN

I'm not fallen, dammit!

DESPAIR

No, you're not. Your order fell and left you hanging in midair like dust from a beaten rug. Of course you turned your back on them. I don't understand everything that happens on the round world but I understand this.

ROWAN

But do you see? I tell people that I retired. But I stood in the sanctum of the Golden Basilica and told every god in the pantheon to go fuck themselves, or goats, or... you get the idea. I declared myself an atheist then and there.

ARTIE

That's one way to burn a bridge.

ROWAN

That's the thing! You've watched me lay hands upon Despair and heal her of her afflictions, with the power vested in me by nothing. So either I've found a new school of magic or the gods are messing with me. Either way, I'm pissed.

ARTIE

Yeah, I gathered that much. Any thoughts on what's next?

ROWAN

Make money. Retire somewhere warm with G. Hang a big sign on my door saying "recruiters will be shot." I spent a long time being told what matters in this world, but all that turned out to be a lie. From now on, I get to decide what matters to me.

DESPAIR

The universe is an illogical and cruel place. K'Thol - mighty is his terror - giveth his tentacle, and he withdraweth his tentacle-eth? But you said the geas prohibited you from lying. You said you're an atheist but you told the Lieutenant that you loved people like you love the gods.

ROWAN

If Artie can play word games with what counts as a wild mammal, I do this. I do love most people exactly as much as I love the gods, which is not at all. (sigh) I'm sorry. I hurt people. I say hurtful things. I'm an asshole.

GARNETT

Yes, and you're MY asshole. Wait, that doesn't sound right.

ALL LAUGH

SFX: acoustic pause

GARNETT

Hey, Artie. Someone's coming.

ARTIE

On it. Rowan, run some interference, please?

ROWAN

Like what?

ARTIE

Like stand in front of me while I'm in the privy corner.

ROWAN

Gotcha.

Enter TARIQA SEVERINA

TARIQA SEVERINA

Good evening, all. Where's Goodman Regulus?

ARTIE (as REGULUS TIBERIUS)

Pulling my pants up, ma'am!

ROWAN

Will the Magistrate see us now?

TARIQA SEVERINA

The Magistrate is still with the Lord Protector, and I have a feeling he's going to be there for quite a while. It's time to be clear with you what's going on.

DESPAIR

You mean about the rev- OW!

GARNETT

Don't mind her. Please go on, Lieutenant.

TARIQA SEVERINA

Shortly before you arrived today, a group robbed our loan and saving bank.

GARNETT

Oh really? What about the weapon checks at the front gate?

TARIQA SEVERINA

The checks, the wards, and they surprised everyone in the bank. That operation rolled remarkably smoothly.

GARNETT

Hold person?

DESPAIR

The caster would need to be pretty experienced to affect that many people.

TARIQA SEVERINA

Sleep, if you can believe it.

GARNETT

Old school classic.

TARIQA SEVERINA

That's not the only problem. By the time someone raised the alarm, the portcullis dropped after them. Getting that back up cost us some chase time, but it gave Captain Marley time to organize a response team and ride out.

ROWAN

Lemme guess, Marley wears a bright red cloak?

TARIQA SEVERINA

That's him.

ROWAN

We saw them leaving.

TARIQA SEVERINA

Well, he set out with six on his team and...

GARNETT

Ambush?

TARIQA SEVERINA

Total surprise. Only one of the posse - Private Grey - managed to escape. That bell you heard earlier was one of the wall guards spotting her on the road. She had crawled all the way back with a broken leg.

GARNETT

Ooof. I hope she gets a promotion after that, Lieutenant.

TARIQA SEVERINA

She will if she survives, she's still with the healers. But the larger issue is: she saw Captain Marley fall in that ambush. If so, that puts me in charge permanently.

ROWAN

Combat promotions are never easy. I'm sorry... Captain?

TARIQA SEVERINA

That will take some getting used to, but yes. Which brings me back here. The Magistrate won't see you until tomorrow morning. I need you now. As Captain of the Watch, I can deputize you and your team, provided you accept the job.

ROWAN

Get out of jail free? Corporal Pike isn't going to like that.

TARIQA SEVERINA

Corporal Pike has exactly zero say in this matter. And I wouldn't give a damn even if he did. I've worked here for years and he still looks at me like something on his shoe.

ARTIE (as REGULUS TIBERIUS)

Excuse me, Captain. The robbery happened several hours ago. No amount of haste in the world could catch them.

TARIQA SEVERINA

If they had crossed Heart's Pass, yes. But Grey said the wagon turned off into the Boar Forest. There is no such thing as moving quickly in there. We can only assume their plan is to hide in there for a few days. We don't have enough bodies to cover the passes full time.

GARNETT

So, this is less "following a cold trail" and more "a midnight snipe hunt," with the added potential of walking into another ambush?

TARIQA SEVERINA

Which is why I'm coming to seasoned professionals. The guard reserves are low and sending untrained locals into the forest is a recipe for disaster.

DESPAIR

More like a recipe for well-fed forest monsters.

ARTIE (as REGULUS TIBERIUS)

If the robbers overwhelmed Captain Marley and his six, what makes you think we four can do any better?

TARIQA SEVERINA

Before I came down, I told everyone in the lower keep what had happened. There were a few volunteers, but not enough. But to be certain, Goodman Regulus: You said "we four." A wagon arrived carrying three adventurers and a merchant. Merchants aren't known for their martial skills. Am I mistaken, Sir Rowan?

ROWAN

You are correct: Merchants are not fighters.

TARIQA SEVERINA

So Goodman Regulus, you will remain here and speak with the Magistrate in the morning. Beyond that, I see three competent

adventurers, including a veteran leader. You all came to this valley presumably looking for work. Here's work.

ARTIE (as REGULUS TIBERIUS)

So money is important, but the locals would rather pay a reward than risk their own necks.

TARIQA SEVERINA

The Boar Forest has a reputation, especially at night.

GARNETT

But there is a reward, yes?

TARIQA SEVERINA

Yes, yes. The bank has offered fifty gold for the return of what was stolen.

GARNETT

Eh, hundred and fifty is not bad for that kind of job.

TARIQA SEVERINA

Begging your pardon, but fifty gold total, not each, plus your early release.

ROWAN

So, find the crew that did this and return the money?

TARIQA SEVERINA

Find and bring to justice, with some latitude as far as how you define resisting arrest. One other thing: I've known Marley and those soldiers for years. If you can, please bring their bodies back for a proper funeral. That means almost as much to these people as the money.

ROWAN

We can do that. Out of curiosity, what's a proper funeral look like around here?

TARIQA SEVERINA

It's tradition to cremate a person before midnight.

ROWAN

That seems remarkably specific.

TARIQA SEVERINA

Eh, I've heard of stranger things. Tradition?

ROWAN

Who am I to question tradition? But to be clear, marching orders are: money, then the crew, then return the bodies?

TARIQA SEVERINA

The life savings of everyone in town, then the crew for trial, then the beloved dead, yes.

ROWAN

Well, I'm in. Garnett?

GARNETT

I'm with you, Sir Rowan. Despair?

DESPAIR

I'm with you two, too? Bah, words are hard. Yes, I'm coming.

TARIQA SEVERINA

There's just one catch.

- I N T E R M I S S I O N -

ANNOUNCER

And now a word from our sponsor: Fuzzy Butts Warg Rescue.

SFX: Western/harmonica

MRS. WIGGLES

Yeehaw! I'm Mrs. Wiggles from Fuzzy Butts Warg Rescue. It's puppy season! Momma Wargs around the area have litters on the ground, and the feral warg population is on the rise. Birth control is essential to preserve the health of our native warg clans. Sign up today for the annual Feral Warg Trap, Neuter, Release Roundup on Saturday May 15th. Bring dragon-proof gloves, a 10-foot pole, and your sense of adventure. We meet at dawn at the Stumpy's Lumber Mill parking lot, 523 Fingers Way in Deepwater. See you there!

Remember: the fuzzy butt you save today could be your own!

ANNOUNCER

We now return to A Paladin's Bargain.

- R E T U R N -

PIKE

Detail, move out!

GARNETT

I cannot believe that Pike volunteered! And now we have to follow his orders, too?

ROWAN

It is abundantly clear he doesn't trust us. But it's not like we could refuse his help.

DESPAIR

They said seven people robbed the bank and there are seven on this detail. I am not happy to have him with us, but we need more people on our side. Maybe he can be the... quarrel keeper?

GARNETT

The what?

DESPAIR

Oh sorry, arrow catcher?

GARNETT

Ding ding ding!

ROWAN

We have to keep an eye on him so none of us get shot in the back.

DESPAIR

Yes sir! I've seen how angry you get when you get shot.

GARNETT

Does anyone happen to know how long until midnight?

ROWAN

It's after the equinox, the sun's going down, so probably six hours. That thin moon won't do us much good.

GARNETT

Do you think that the "burial tradition" relates to the revenants? I'm not thrilled about fending off bank robbers and the undead.

DESPAIR

While we're at it, why didn't you ask the Captain about the revenants before we left, Sir Rupert?

ROWAN

(Sigh) It's. Rowan. I know people hide all sorts of dirt under the name of tradition. Beyond that, I'm under an obligation to tell the truth. That doesn't mean I'm required to tell her everything I know.

GARNETT

Awww, my baby's first Sense Motive check! And yes, Tariqa was a little star struck talking to a real, live Sentinel Guard. Good to use that.

ROWAN

Less starstruck, more pragmatic, but either way, it got us out. I only hope Artie can change quick enough without us running interference. But back to the revenants. G, were you able to hear anything in what she said?

GARNETT

No. She's repeating what she's been told.

DESPAIR

Miss Garnett is right, the Captain didn't know anything. And before you say anything about "reading minds is rude," it's less rude than knowingly sending us into an... anvil-squish-ambush thing.

GARNETT

Oh no, well done, Despair. Thank you for that.

ROWAN

That's different...

DESPAIR

You asked Miss Garnett if she could sense any deception on the Captain's part.

GARNETT

She's right, Ro. Where exactly are you going to draw the line between my method and hers?

ROWAN

As my regimental chaplain used to say, "Ask me when the battle's lost and won." (3) But while we're at it, do either of you have a sense about the others on the team?

GARNETT

Beyond Corporal Racist, There's a kid who looks about twelve who claims to be a ranger. And then there's the Dwarf - Somebody Smith Something? Not sure what he does, but that's an impressive warhammer he's carrying. Then there's the portable buff on loan from the chapel...

DESPAIR

I haven't heard anything out of her all day. A really scary looking woman in red - her boss maybe? - called her Sister Myrina.

GARNETT

Interesting...

ROWAN

Three of them, three of us. Let's mingle. The guard who made it back said the wagon turned off the main road after the second bridge, so we've got a little time. Did anyone see where the Dwarf went?

SHART

Try looking behind you, lad.

ROWAN

Well, this is awkward.

SHART

Eh, tallying your strengths and weaknesses before combat is never a bad thing.

ROWAN

You're not wrong.

SHART

Not so fast. Still deciding which column you three belong.

ROWAN

Point well taken, sir. I'm Rowan.

SHART

Sheridan Jameson Smithwick. My friends call me Shart.

ROWAN

Shart? Gods above, what do your enemies call you?

SHART

Most of my enemies are not on this side of the grass anymore. I wouldn't know.

ROWAN

That's two points to you, Master Smithwick.

SFX: Acoustic pause

SHART

So tell me, Rowan. I see a Tabaxi rogue and a Tiefling warlock keeping company with a man in Paladin's clothes. It's clear you're willing to trust them with your life. But I'm not certain why I should.

ROWAN

You know full well it's not how we're born, but the choices we make that align us. Everyone balks at the idea that there can be honest Tabaxi and good Tieflings, but I've met my share of evil Humans and Dwarves.

SHART

A very palpable point, Goodman Rowan. Say more about the pink and perky one.

ROWAN

I've known Despair for all of two days. Apparently, she's been on this plane for about five. But in that time, every action I've seen has been rooted in goodness and integrity.

SHART

She's still a warlock. She still gets her powers from something beyond us.

ROWAN

"Powers on loan from something beyond" describes a cleric the same as a warlock, Master Smithwick. And I trust Despair far more than I trust that idiot wearing a uniform at the head of this line.

SHART

Uniforms don't mean much out here.

PIKE (in the distance)

Company, halt!

ROWAN

And yet, you judged me by mine.

SHART

Game, set, and match, Sir Rowan. Looks like your trust will be the rope that saves us or hangs us all.

SFX: GARNETT and DESPAIR return

ROWAN

Alright, what have you two learned?

GARNETT

Exactly nothing. I monologued at her for what felt like forever before Pike informed me Sister Myrina took a vow of silence.

ROWAN

A little out of the ordinary, but go on.

GARNETT

That's not all. Apparently, members of her order can communicate telepathically, she just didn't want to talk to me.

ROWAN

Classy. Despair? Please tell me the kid isn't blind and deaf.

DESPAIR

Oh no. She talked the whole time. Her name is Ronnie, she grew up in the Station, she wants to be a Ranger, but her mom won't let her join yet. She's sixteen years old, which is young, I guess? But...

GARNETT

What's wrong?

DESPAIR

The whole time we were talking, she kept staring at my...

GARNETT

Yeah, even if you aren't showing anything, creepy people will look at your cleavage.

DESPAIR

No! My horns!

ROWAN

Alright, that's a little funny, right? Looking at her... but not her... Yes, you're right, objectification is never funny. And on a

completely unrelated note, may I introduce you to the lucky seventh member of our detail: Sheridan Jameson Smithwick.

SHART

Pleased to meet you both, and please call me Shart.

DESPAIR

Why do they call you Shart?

PIKE

Quiet in the ranks! We're heading into the forest. Those with night vision to the front.

SHART

Excuse me, Corporal Pike?

ROWAN

Corporal, shouldn't there be a little more muscle up front?

PIKE

Oh! Mister Sneak Attack wants to Maneuver us now? I suppose you want to be in front?

ROWAN

I'm saying muscle gets the action; casters get the back section.

PIKE

And conveniently, all the better for you to run away, eh?

SHART

Excuse me!

ROWAN

I don't run from a fight, Corporal. But I suppose that's why you want to stay in the back, eh?

PIKE

What are you suggesting?

ROWAN

I'm saying your sword looks like it's been dropped more than it's been used.

SHART

EXCUSE ME! Gentlemen. I have a simple solution to this. I knew I kept this around for a reason.

SFX: Sounds of Shart removing his backpack and opening a scroll.

SHART

Now then: Corporal, Sister Myrina, Sir Rowan, Ronnie. Please come stand around me.

PIKE

I'll have none of that sorcery and devilry.

SHART

Do your work as you will. "Then do mine eyes best see for all the day in darkly bright." (4)

ROWAN

What. A. World. Master Smithwick, I am in your debt, sir.

SHART

First time with a night vision spell?

ROWAN

Oh my, yes. G, is this how it is for you every night?

GARNETT

Frankly, I don't know how you can live without it.

PIKE

Alright, Mister Wizard. You two meat shields up front then.

GARNETT

And you, Corporal? Still staying in the back?

PIKE

Of course. Someone has to be the rear guard. And I don't want any of the thieves to see the light from my lantern.

GARNETT

Of course.

RONNIE

I'm going to be super stealthy and scout ahead!

GARNETT

Not so fast. I need to check for traps. Come with me, but stay behind me.

RONNIE

Yes, Miss...?

GARNETT
Garnett.

RONNIE
Thank you. I did want to ask you, Miss Garnett.

GARNETT
Am I the first Tabaxi you've met?

RONNIE
No miss, about your companion: Despair. Is she... seeing anyone?

GARNETT
Head in the game, Ronnie. Focus on the task at hand. Flirt with the pretty girls when you get home. If you get home.

RONNIE
Oh, yes! Right! Looking for wagon tracks.

GARNETT
They're pretty straight forward. I mean, you're walking in them as we speak. What else do you see?

RONNIE
What else? Well, umm.. There's a lot of hoof prints here too. There's one, two, three... Oh wow! There's been like a dozen horses here. Do you think there are more bandits?

GARNETT
I think you're forgetting about Captain Marley's team.

RONNIE
Right! Captain Marley! He's so cool.

GARNETT
I'm sure he was. So we know everyone came this way, and no tracks coming back.

RONNIE
So the ambush site was ahead of us?

GARNETT
That's it. And in a hurry, too. See how deep those prints are? See the broken branches on the scrub brush and the ferns? A whole story is playing out here. Look around more. Look up!

RONNIE

OK. Ummm, Miss Garnett? What are those?

GARNETT

What are what?

RONNIE

Those four white seed pod things hanging in that tree over there. They look bigger than me!

GARNETT

Trees this size shouldn't have pods that... Oh. Shit. Everybody get down!

PIKE

Quiet up there, pussycat.

RONNIE

What are you talking about Miss... (Garnett)

GARNETT

Spiders!

RONNIE

Miss Garnett, I don't feel so good.

- O U T -

- (*) No, I'm not citing Star Wars for "I've got a bad feeling about this." That is FAR too generic a phrase. But I've got a bad feeling the Mouse might have feelings otherwise.
- (1) "O mickle is thy powerful grace." adapted from Romeo and Juliet, Act 2, Scene 3, by William Shakespeare. Public domain
- (2) "Hell is empty and all the devils are here." adapted from The Tempest, Act 1, Scene 2 by William Shakespeare. Public domain.
- (3) "when the battle's lost and won." adapted from MacBeth, Act 1, Scene 1 by William Shakespeare. Public domain.
- (4) "do mine eyes best see..." adapted from Sonnet 43 by William Shakespeare. Public domain.