
Foiled Curses

In my business reputation is everything. It's essential you have a continual list of clients. This business is all about foot traffic. Circulation in and out of the door. So when business slows down, well you tend to take what work you can get. I'd been having a fantastic year. Between warring houses and rebellious warlords, I was having trouble fitting everyone in. Then they all declared peace. No one was allowed to declare war for the next ten years. Sounds great, right? Trouble is, the agreement didn't include a prohibition against vendettas, and I was at the top of many people's personal list. This required a certain amount of business reorganization. As well as an increase in expenses. Should your plan involve staying hidden or hiring a small army of body guards, it doesn't matter, both cost a small fortune.

My business is entertainment. Men specifically. No, not exactly what you'd expect, although you can make a fair amount in such business too. No, the real money is in assassination. That's what I do, I assassinate men in exchange for large sums of cash. It is possible to go into a target's home and eliminate them, but that involves getting in and, more importantly, getting out. Men, however, have a tendency to ditch their bodyguards when they think they are going to visit a woman of the other profession. In fact, they tend to not tell anyone where they are going. So, in my case, I like to bring my victims here.

I have a cozy little house with all the finest furnishings. Adds to the costs you know. Basically, I have all the expenses of the assassin for hire business and well as all the cost of ... the other business. Which includes the girls I keep in my employ to actually do ... the other business. One must maintain one's cover, you know. That is, if you expect the targets to come and visit you. Which also means the ladies I keep in my employ are specialists in their field. As a result, with such a well-established reputation, my targets have few reservations about coming to my home when I send them an invitation.

I can tell you are interested, so here's how the business works. When the target arrives you ...

There was a knock at the door. A rather insistent knock at that. Believing it was a warning about a relative of a former target seeking revenge, I hurried to answer it. In the doorway was a suit of armor. Not the helmet kind you, just the body. I should also mention the armor didn't have a head. The suit was quite finely crafted, the work of a smith with some skill and wonderfully talented creative touch to make it stylish. I knocked on the chest plate.

"Anyone home?" I asked cheerfully.

"Of course I'm home," came a response, but it didn't sound like it was inside the suit.

"You don't seem to be very tall. Have you seen an armorer who might make a suit a bit more fitting for your stature?"

"Measuring me for it might be a bit of a problem," the voice announced, "I'm not really in the suit, I'm just haunting it."

“You may have come to the wrong place then,” I smiled, “I don’t think the suit is equipped with the kind of appendages we normally serve here.”

“Well,” the voice explained, “It’s not really the service I’m looking for.” There was a long pause, as if I was supposed to say something. The suit gestured with its right arm. I must say it was a little disconcerting in the absence of a head. “I need you to steal something.”

“A thousand pardons,” I bowed low before the animated collection of steel, “I’m afraid you’ve been misinformed as to the nature of our services.”

“You are Furusawa Saki are you not?” it asked.

“Still not a purloiner of objects though, I regret to inform you.”

“But you are an assassin? May I come in and explain the nature of the service I am requesting?”

I bowed low again and beckoned the panoply to enter. It took a seat on one of the pillows with a great clank of metal and crossed its steel leggings. “Allow me to introduce myself; I’m Theophilus Borell. I was not always as you see me now. Until a few days ago I was quite happily a rather handsome looking young man, if I do say so myself. I was in the employ of a kindly lord. If you were to read the recent peace treaty carefully, it makes no prohibition against mystical attacks. Sadly for me, I was not even the target of said effort, I merely happened to be in the way. But, since the event was an assassination attempt, I believe I am within my rights to ask someone in your profession for an appropriate reprisal, am I not?”

I was about to pour the poor man a cup of tea, but I realized my mistake after I started pouring. Not wanting to feel embarrassed, I finished decanting the cup. I was going to need it in any case. It’s rather unnerving speaking to ... well as he explained ... a haunted suit of armor. “You understand, should I agree to your claim ... and I’m not saying it’s not valid ... you’ll still need to provide compensation for said service. I’m afraid what you are wearing doesn’t qualify as the standard type of metal to be exchanged. Nor would I appear at all attractive in such bulky attire.”

“I assume you use guards from time to time. The suit would be quite useful to someone wearing it, as I would add my strength to their own. The result would be a man with considerable strength, but that is not how I intend to pay you.”

“As you appear to have no other forms of payment, I believe our business is to be concluded,” I announced politely. It pays to be polite in my line of work.

“Yes, well, my associates actually have the payment sum,” it said.

I made the gesture of looking about the room. Well, it was partially a gesture. When you are conversing with a haunted suit of armor, it’s not a good practice to assume you are alone.

“My associates are outside,” the voice explained, “we thought it best not to inflict all of us on you at once. We had no desire to distress you in an unwarranted fashion. If you would permit me?”

I waved in agreement. The suit stood and opened the door. Putting two mailed fingers to were lips would have been, the spirit whistled.

He was right, the next two sights were a little more jarring than an animated collection of metal plates. The first to enter was a rather large Bengal Tiger, but the next didn't really walk in, it sort of floated. It was a skull. I'm sure you are familiar with the type, white, mostly empty, the kind of object which can gaze directly at you without having any eyes. Only in this case, the skull had a particular aura about it. It had about the same illumination quality as a torch, but the beached bone was not consumed by its effects.

"This is Bana Jayavant and Nout Jan-Joost Westenbrink," the suit of armor declared.

I stood stunned.

"Bana is the tiger and nout is the skull," the armor clarified.

"How do you do?" proclaimed the tiger placidly as it took a heavy seat on the floor.

"Mr. Borell, a thousand apologies, but I don't think your associates have much in the way of a proper payment either. If you don't mind my saying so."

"Ah, yes," the metal spirit declared, "Nout, would you be so kind."

The skull drifted to face me and then opened its jaw wide. Out spat a leather bag. It was covered in ... well, it was covered in just what you'd expect a leather bag to be covered in if you stored it in your mouth for any length of time.

"You'll pardon the conveyance," the suit broadcast, "The rest of us lack any sort of effective method of carrying materials you understand."

I opened the gooey bag with a little reluctance and more than a little revulsion. Inside was a collection of magnificent gem stones. More than enough to purchase the removal of a high ranking noble.

"Mr. Borell ..."

"Theo, please. I still fancy myself a rather rakish fellow and Mr. Borell seems a bit too formal."

"Theo, even though this is a handsome payment. I'm still not in the business of removing objects of property from their rightful owners. One has to have some form of standards."

"Well." It was the skull who at last spoke. Perhaps it was only now able to do so after discharging its transportation duties, "You wouldn't have to take anything. It will be brought here. We'll take care of the repatriation of the required item." He had a strange accent, I couldn't quite place it. It was familiar, but odd at the same time. It was almost reptilian. A foreign inflection to be sure.

"You see, we've taken the liberty of inviting the owner here; to your establishment," the skull declared. "He may have gotten the idea that in exchange for the item, you would be willing to take on a business partner. I know it was a bit presumptuous of us, but we had limited options. The man who will be arriving is also the gentleman responsible for our current state. What we require of you is to dispatch the individual in question in exchange for the payment we just provided. We'll take possession of the item at that point."

"Theo and ..." I hesitated with the precise diction.

“Nout. Pronounced like the small amphibian with the well-developed tail,” the skull announced proudly.

“Nout, I not comfortable with you suggesting business partners for me,” I announced sadly. The payment was more than adequate, but the damage to my reputation of false offers was not an operational prerogative. I made to return the funds.

“We understand,” the tiger declared, licking something off his claws. “Would it help if we explained this individual, as well as most members of his profession, is rather of a solitary inclination. As a result, there is little chance he would have shared the communication.”

“But, you see,” I explained, “I can’t be sure of that.”

“True,” the tiger continued, “But your risk is limited. Those in possession of the object we wish to acquire seldom announce they are carrying it.”

“You’ve yet to explain that part of your endeavor,” I reminded the large cat stretched out across the room.

“We’re looking to obtain the Kabai Nor Diamond,” the armored suit explained.

The Kabai Nor Diamond is, beyond being a famously costly stone three times the size of a hen’s egg, was also reputed to have certain powers. One of its abilities is said to keep the owner safe from unwanted charms and enchantments. So, I understand why these three might be anxious to obtain the diamond. It had other, rather unique properties. It was said he who owned the Kabai Nor could control the minds of others. At least those with a less than sterling willpower.

“How do you know this gentleman would be willing to give up such a treasure in exchange for a mere business partnership?” I asked pointedly.

“I understand how this might appear as a weak point in our strategy,” remarked the tiger, “But we happen to know he is in desperate need to branch out into elimination services. And your reputation is ... well, it’s quite stellar actually.”

“Not too long ago,” the skull declared matter-of-factly, “he had a business arrangement with another such service coordinator.”

“He was the first one we offered this opportunity to,” the haunted suit explained, “but his loyalty to his client kept him from having a taste for the assignment.”

The Bengal tiger turned to me, “Even though we had quite the taste for him personally,” the cat slowly licked his upper lip from left to right. Making sure to display his rather considerable fangs while doing so.

It occurred to me, a blunt refusal at this stage, might be more than I could reasonably accept. Most men I have no discomfort dispatching, but a 600-pound Bengal tiger was another matter. The usual enticements to put him off his guard would be less than effective in his case. The truth of the matter was, I had heard far too much of their plan to expect to be able to be allowed to remain unchecked if I declined.

From outside came the unmistakable sound of a carriage, although without the usual thunder of hoof beats.

“That will be our target arriving. I’m afraid we will need an answer presently,” the suit inquired.

I was intrigued, I admit. Perhaps I could arrange to keep the Kabai Nor Diamond as special dispensation for my trouble. If what they said about it were true, it would be a useful tool. Nodding in agreement I casually suggested they would have to make themselves scarce.

“Not to worry,” the skull declared.

The haunted armor, moved to a standing position in the back of the room, looking as if a suit of armor belonged against the wall as one of my possessions or perhaps a gift from a grateful client. The tiger moved to a more central position, and stood up on its hind legs. With its paws outstretched in a threatening stance and its teeth in a snarl the animal froze in position. He didn’t match the décor, but the effect was believable enough. Finally, the skull shot into the inside of the armor. The flash of his passing blazed across the room. Yet once inside, he seemed hardly discernable.

Opening the door, I was greeted by an ornate carriage pulled by six remarkably large specters. Their exact form wasn’t possible to determine, but it was definitely not your average livery. Stepping out of this extravaganza was Tyndarus Scapha Lucullus. His reputation was widely known. He was, in fact one of my chief competitors. His presence here now made complete sense. One of the classic ways of removing your competition is to own them. It was obvious Lucullus believed his investment entitled him to a controlling share.

In his hands he carried a superbly crafted puzzle box. Presumably it held his collateral. We made the standard formal greetings. A number of respectable bows and placations. I motioned him inside. My three petitioners had been correct, he arrived without an escort, although Tyndarus Scapha Lucullus hardly needed one.

Went he entered, he took a spot on the floor with his back to what, at the moment, appeared to be a stuffed tiger. I had an instant of difficulty not giving away the precariousness of his position. I served him the tea in the cup I had not offered the haunted armor. I gave the appearance he was indeed expected. He was a bundle of coiled energy, but he relaxed as I offered him the warm cup.

He placed the puzzle box on the ground and took hold of the tea.

“What is that?” I asked in a diminutive tone. “Do you come bearing gifts?”

He made a gesture with one hand, curling his fingers in elaborate ways. It was almost as if they were doing a dance. Index and middle finger intertwined in impossible ways. It was almost sensual. A small wisp of curled white smoke appeared rising from the top of the box. It swirled around to form a pedestal of sorts. Once it finished its movement, a brilliant azure diamond appeared, three of its sides supported by prongs of dainty smoke. It was an impressive display.

“I hope this was what you were expecting to see,” he commented gruffly. He made a slicing gesture with the hand whose fingers had so recently performed their dance and the diamond disappeared. The smoke dissipated and the box shook slightly, as if it held a captive mouse seeking escape.

He took a long sip of his tea. His eyes wandered from the cup to my exposed cleavage. This was my cue. I circled behind him and began to massage his neck. Making small talk as I lightly rubbed my breasts on his shoulder blades.

Most professionals prefer to slice the neck open at this point. I find not only are most targets prepared for this motion, but even a successful result is accompanied by a mess which is difficult to clean up. Not to mention the victim may have enough time to dispatch you before he himself succumbs. I prefer a strong hair pin inserted between the collar bone and the spine. It can be inserted quickly, even into an armored target. If the placement is right, the tip will sever the spinal cord, making any response impossible.

My hair pin made its nimble dance of death and Tyndarus Scapha Lucullus slumped to the floor without even the slightest cry. Personally, I prefer to leave the pin in place as it keeps down the mess.

I moved the carpet in the center of the room as my customers watched in stunned silence. Beneath was a wooden trap door. I opened the access and sent Lucullus' unmoving form down it like it was being pushed from the top of a slide. In the distance there was a slight splash. If you listened carefully you might also make out the pleased sounds of a pair of hungry crocodiles. I like to be neat.

Returning the door and the rug to their normal location, only the ornate box in the center of the room remained.

"Well, gentlemen, you have your prize to break your curse ... although it seems a little inaccessible inside its enclosure," I announced sarcastically.

"Leave that to me." The haunted suit of armor raised a steel foot and brought it crashing down on the well-crafted, decorated box. It smashed into a thousand tiny splinters, spreading and swirling around the room like a sandstorm. In its place was the gleaming Kabai Nor Diamond.

The mess would have to be cleaned up of course. Alas, it would take some time to remove the splinters from the carpet. Still the payment would more than cover the cost of cleaning. I picked up a few gem stones from the moist leather bag, rolling them around in my fingers. They quickly collapsed, as if made of sugar. I presently found myself holding an unremarkable pile of dust. Not only was my shiny payment gone but so were the armor, the tiger and the skull. In their places stood three nondescript dirty green goblins, no loftier than a ten-year-old. Goblins are not just greedy and pernicious, they are, by anyone's standards, filthy creatures. The middle one clutched the Kabai Nor Diamond like it was a baby rattle as the other two drooled relentlessly on the carpet.

I had a small amount of trouble keeping my rage under control. Anger can be channeled into a useful tool, but it's a double-edged weapon. "Don't you think it's a little dangerous to swindle an assassin?" I suggested, emphasizing the last word. "Has it not occurred to you ..."

"You will track us down and kill us?" the middle one proclaimed. "I don't think so. We are illusionists," he announced in gleeful triumph, "To hunt us down you'd need to know what we look like. As you can see, we can take any form we choose. So, finding us would be rather difficult."

"Still it might be worth the effort," I smiled, "for the resulting satisfaction."

"True, and we wish you the best of luck with your search," the three of them said in unison. Where there had once been three ugly little green creatures, there were now an equal number of black smoke columns. The Kabai Nor Diamond stood floating in the tendrils of the central dark column. Behind them vibrated three knives. My throwing had been accurate and fatal, had there still been goblins in the

room. But now, instead of three dirty bodies, I had a similar number of unsightly holes. One in a table and two more in the walls. At least I will have once I remove my blades.

The smoke dissipated and as I grabbed for the azure Kabai Nor, but it evaporated just as I was about to snatch it. It got the vague impression one of the little dirt balls swallowed it. Goblins are apt to do this. It turns out to be a good storage place for things which don't digest well. Dirty little green men.

"We recommend," came a disembodied voice, "you do more research on your clients before accepting an assignment. If it helps, however, we'll gladly spread the word about your effective service to our brethren."

"Very clean, I must say," came a scratchy goblinoid voice fading into the distance, "if a little gullible."

"I respect her greed though," answered another disembodied voice, "Most commendable."

The three laughed like small children as they made their escape.

I loathe goblins.