

MARLON, AND THE TIRELESS CITY

Marlon snuffed out the cigarette with his boot and began walking away from the telephone kiosk.

She wasn't going to call anyhow.

This city had a way of breaking you. It was something in the night air, which was alive with car horns, neon lights and desperation. You could feel it in your bones, as the wind swept in and out of the buildings and alleyways. Everyone had something to prove, and nothing to lose and in that moment that stretched on for eight or so hours between midnight and morning's first light, the streets became a place where anything was possible. Fortunes exchanged hands or sometimes evaporated like steam from a manhole. Transients begged for change from underneath darkened cowls and blankets which flapped silently during gusts. Marlon strode past them and onto the busy boulevard where he wove in and out of cars that drove hastily in both directions.

There was something about Cynthia's Bar which attracted all manner of miscreants and criminals from all corners of this night-bound metropolis. It was as you'd expect: loud, dark, and smoky with the exception of a few neon Holo-Dancers who performed for credits amid the clamor of drunks and those progressing towards varying stages of intoxication. It was not the type of joint that one wandered into accidentally, at least not more than once. Marlon stood outside of the doorway, which had one of those sliding door-slots at eye level, where presumably you would provide a pass code in order to gain entrance into the bar. He could feel his heart beating over the bass from the bar, which pulsed through the steel door and into Marlon's lungs. He would have one shot at this, so he unfolded the piece of paper which he kept in his front jean pocket, and examined the hand-penned word which jumped out from the parchment even in the poor lighting.

Marlon pounded on the door three times, and the door slot opened, and a pair of black, shiny eyes peered through the opened slot.

"Yeah?" the eyes demanded, the deep voice cutting through the blustery night like a knife.

"Nectar" Marlon managed, his hands remained deep in his front coat pockets.

The eyes surveyed Marlon from top to bottom, and then the slot closed and the door opened revealing a warm cloud of smoke as well as the strobe of green light from beyond that. The bouncer stood to the side and his tusks rose prominently from his lower lip like pointed ivory pillars. He was an Orc, and a sturdy one at that. His shoulders took up most of the doorway, leaving a narrow passage for Marlon to pass through sideways.

As Marlon made his way through the corridor leading to the main dance hall, the bass got louder and the smoke got thicker until he finally emerged into the black-lit tavern, which was much larger now that he was inside than it looked from the outside of the building. Vibrant green lasers danced rhythmically from the ceiling and onto mirrored flooring creating a mesmerizing show of light, accompanied by the strobes and bass-boosted dance-hall soundtrack. With all of the commotion, no one noticed Marlon weave through the pit of dancing and debauchery and it wasn't until he tapped the Elf on the shoulder at the bar, that anyone acknowledged the seasoned detective at all.

"Yeah? Who are you?" The Elf said over the rumble of the bass.

"Name's Marlon. I'm a P.I, trying to find out about a missing Elf named Dorath. Anything you could tell me would be extremely helpful."

"Oh, so you thought you'd ask an Elf about a missing Elf, because we all know each other. That right?"

"Just here to ask you a few questions, ask maybe if you heard about someone ending up in Cynthia's who wasn't supposed to be there."

"You mean besides a gumshoe detective? No. Doesn't ring a bell. Got anything else for me to laugh about later?"

"Thanks. Very helpful." Offered Marlon.

Marlon found an empty seat at the bar, and flashed one index finger at the barkeep. The barkeep nodded and brought Marlon a shot of house whiskey, which went down about how you'd expect. It burned all of his insides but ultimately warmed him as intended.

"Want to open a tab?" The bartender asked, as was customary.

"I need some info on an Elf that maybe came here recently and maybe didn't make it out alive." Marlon flashed his badge quickly. "Heard anything about that, or maybe you saw something? Maybe a fight broke out?"

"Look around you man, you think I have time to pay attention to every disagreement that goes South here? I just serve drinks to those who have the credits to pay for them. Maybe check with the private games in the back, that's where most of the trouble starts these days anyhow. Maybe they saw something." The barkeep smiled a crooked smile.

Marlon got up from the stool, and headed towards the back room concealed from the main dance hall by one of those cheap wooden-beaded doorway decorations.

The thumping of the bass could still be heard in the back room, but the space was noticeably more conducive to conversation. There were two rows of poker and roulette tables each with all manner of scum seated at them. Bets were being called, and chips were being raked in one direction or another on the green-felt tables. The dealers were all human and their dexterous and nimble fingers passed out cards and spun the roulette wheel with a regularity and proficiency suggesting they were recruited from one of the major casinos outside the city. At first no one noticed Marlon, and the puffs of cigars rose

from the tables as normal. One griffin leaned back in his seat and caught eyes with the sleuth, letting out a loud screech of disapproval. Others stopped their play and turned to observe the detective who suddenly stood out like a sore thumb.

As the conversations ceased, Marlon flashed his badge and confidently inquired if anyone had seen an Elf named Dorath in the past week. Marlon promised that he would go if someone offered any semblance of help. He said that there was no need for anyone to get hurt or arrested, if someone would speak up regarding the missing Elf. The entire room erupted in laughter at this threat, and the boisterous conversations continued. Players shrugged and resumed their games, placing bets and slapping hands of cards down on the felt table tops.

As Marlon turned to duck out between the beads at the entrance to the games room, the griffin called out to him. "Hey, maybe I saw something last night. Maybe some stupid-ass Elf came in here openly showing-off a wad of cash and some fancy watch, and maybe he didn't make it home last night. How much is it worth to you to know if I'm telling the truth?"

It was probably his only means of getting solid intel tonight, so Marlon pulled up his bank account on his phone and transferred 50 credits to the griffin at the table, who checked that the funds cleared on his own LED forearm display.

"Yeah, I saw Dorath last night. Came in here, like you, and started talking a big game about how he wanted to bankroll the best player. Just basically breaking every common sense rule of the joint, and maybe someone escorted him off of the premises permanently, ya dig? I don't know if they killed him, but they certainly made sure he didn't wander back in that night accidentally. That's all I know, see? I pay attention to the cards being dealt, not who dies or lives in here."

Marlon needed more information, but was now short on credits. He exited the turmoil of Cynthia's Bar through the front entrance, passing the Orc who sternly let him back out into the windy midnight air.

Wandering into the alley outside of Cynthia's, Marlon found a pile of rags with a pulse, wrapped in a blanket.

"Been out here long? I'll buy you a warm meal if you can help me out. I'm in a jam." Marlon offered.

"Got any Glisten?" The pile of rags said, outstretching a hand. "Score me some Glisten and I'll help you out for sure, man."

"Just tell me how long you've been out here. Then we can talk about scoring you some Glisten."

"Been out here all night. All last night too. Cold as hell out, I remember because I slept in the dumpster. Why you so interested in how long I been out here?"

"Listen, I need to know if you saw something last night. Maybe around 3 AM? Maybe you saw an Elf getting kicked out of Cynthia's? I don't have Glisten, but I'll buy you a warm meal. Last offer. Take it or leave it." Marlon said finally.

"Damn, you drive a hard bargain, Copper." The rags said pulling back its cowl and revealing a gap-toothed grin. "Okay. But I want potato-shreds and ketchup with my meal. No skimping."

"Fine." Marlon conceded.

"I saw a helluva ruckus the other night 'round 3AM like you said. That door over there opened real loudly, and two guys was carrying out some other fella. Well then they threw him on the ground and told him never to come back flashing money like that unless he had a death-wish. You know what I mean? Really put the fear of God into the guy. I hid in the dumpster where I was sleepin' cuz I didn't wanna get seen by the bouncers, know what I mean? I didn't see nothing after that but I did hear a van or something pull up and screech to a halt. The door slid open like someone was getting in or out, but all I heard was a struggle and the fella that was on the ground was gone when I looked back out into the alley" the vagrant said, spitting to the side.

"Did you catch the plate or model of the van that pulled through here?" Marlon asked desperately, fearing that he had reached another expensive dead-end.

"Sure didn't. Like I said. I try to stay hidden when shit like that goes down. People don't think twice about wasting poor-folk like me in a heartbeat when they get violent like that. I was jus' so scared, you know, I..."

"I get it. Thanks." Marlon said and he handed the vagrant a five-credit bill from his wallet and walked back out into the gusty boulevard. "I don't know how much Glisten that'll score you, but if it was me – I'd go down the street to the Mulhopp Diner and get some food. But you didn't ask me."

As Marlon turned to leave the alley, the pile of rags pocketed the money, yelling before the howling wind drowned-out his voice. "It was a deep-blue van. Black limousine-tinted windows. Local plate. That's all that I saw before I ducked down and closed that-there-lid to the dumpster."

"Would you recognize the van if you saw it again?" Marlon asked.

"Sure." The junkie said. "Had a broken tail-light on the near side and a spray-painted spider of some sort just in front of that."

"I need you to come with me. I'll make it worth your time." Marlon flashed a handful of credits so that the junkie could see that he was willing to sweeten the original five-credit deal.

Marlon wrapped himself tighter in his trench-coat and lowered his stetson to block some of the wind. The beggar, whom Marlon later learned was named Jesse, wrapped himself in his blanket and wore crude sandals which clapped noisily against the asphalt with each step.

The night was still young and Marlon was hungry for a slice of the truth and some black coffee. He knew where to get the coffee, but at this hour he knew of only one reliable Information-Broker who would be operating on this side of town: Delta Avery, an Ogre.

Delta ran a tight office and didn't take guff from anyone. She kept a shotgun under her desk and a sidearm in the desk's main drawer for protection. She never knew what type of client would walk through her door and the vintage opaque glass window with her name embossed on both sides didn't provide any clues about her operation. She was reading the evening edition newspaper and smoking a Cuban cigar. She could hear the distant rhythmic clapping of what sounded like flip-flops as it grew closer until it was right outside of her door. The clapping ceased as two dark figures appeared in the clouded glass.

And then a knock.

"Come in." Delta said, looking up from her newspaper, folding it in half and then in half once more slapping it audibly down on the desktop.

As the shadowy figures emerged, Delta sized up both of them. The first figure she recognized immediately.

"Marlon, Waters" She acknowledged. The words hung in the air like a convicted witch, swinging from invisible gallows. "Always a pleasure. And who is this... 'colorful' ...character that you've honored me with tonight?"

"Delta. This is Jesse..." Marlon paused and realized that he didn't have a last name for the vagrant.

"You know what? It doesn't matter. How can I be of service?" Delta said, tapping her cigar lightly into the tray.

"We're lookin' for a van." Jesse began.

“Thanks Jesse.” Marlon said, half-smiling – as he preferred to do the talking when meeting with Delta. “He’s not wrong though, I am indeed looking for a dark blue van, local plates, busted tail-light on the left side, and a spider tag on the left side. Any information that you could provide me with would be of great help.”

“Well, if you’re looking for a van that recognizable, and the occupants have done something illegal – then you’re very likely to find it abandoned somewhere. But I’m happy to share what I know. Do you have payment?” Delta said, holding out an outstretched Ogre hand the size of a baseball mitt.

“You’re in luck.” Marlon began.

“No – *You’re* in luck. I was about to go home for the evening.” Delta corrected, narrowing her eyes and flashing a playful smile.

Marlon handed the standard fee of credits over reluctantly.

“The van you are looking for, the one with the green spider tagged on the left rear, belongs to one Percy Amos.” Delta didn’t wait for a reaction from either person across the desk. “You heard me. Percy Amos. The ‘Devil’ of Highmont City. But like I said, it’s probably abandoned or on fire at this point somewhere, so I’m not really sure how it helps you.” Delta finished.

“Where can we find Percy?” Marlon asked before Jesse had a chance.

“Well typically speaking,” Delta began once again. “You don’t. Percy finds *you*. But since you’ve come to me, then you must be desperate.” The Ogre pulled a scrap sheet of parchment out of the long drawer of her desk, revealing a pistol momentarily, and then closing the drawer just as quickly as it had opened. “He’ll be at this address, tonight.” Delta slid the parchment piece over the surface of the oak desk, and Marlon reached across to meet it halfway.

“Interesting. Very public. This might actually work. He’ll no doubt have some security with him though. Any advice on that?” Marlon asked.

“Thought you would never ask.” Delta smiled, chewing lightly on the cigar which protruded from her bottom lip, an obelisk of tobacco and fire. “Percy keeps two guards. Both of them artificially augmented. They are nicknamed ‘The Twins’ – a clever little nickname based on the fact that they are identically manufactured with one exception: One of the twins can only hear, and the other can only see. You won’t have any problem figuring out which is which – though I’m afraid by then you’ll be dead. As will your ragged companion here, should he decide to join you tonight. My advice? Go home. Whatever you need Percy Amos for, I can assure you – you don’t.” Delta said quietly.

Marlon and Jesse stood frozen hearing that they would need to tangle with two cyborg bodyguards in order to speak with a man that may or may not have already killed Dorath the Elf. Perhaps Delta was right and the odds were just too stacked against the pair. Jesse looked over at Marlon and said “I’m out man. I didn’t sign up for this. You can sweeten the deal all you want, I’m not dying over some Elf.” Marlon was inclined to agree, but something gnawed at his soul – something that he couldn’t place – something that drove him to want to see this case through to the end.

“I understand.” Marlon conceded, turning to Delta. “I need some firepower. Got any ideas?”

“Yeah, I know a guy – owes me a huge favor. I guess I could let you cash that favor in for me this time. Go see Marco Denver, down in Epsanne Center.” She handed Marlon another slip of paper with an address on it, and then continued. “He runs a pawn shop out of his mother’s basement. It’s really a small armory, to be honest. Tell him that Delta sent you, and that he owes her big-time. He should be amenable to your needs. If he gives you any trouble, just call me and put me on speakerphone – I’ll sort things out.” Delta chuckled at the last bit.

Marlon and Jesse parted ways outside Delta’s office. Jesse took his modest earnings and wandered back into a nearby alley. Marlon looked at the pair of addresses from his pocket. “I guess I’m really gonna do this,” he said to no one. He ventured back out into the gusty night air, slipping into the shadows away from the street lights. Epsanne Center was about thirteen blocks away, which

gave Marlon time to decide on his course of action for the evening. Fast-traveling headlights rose over the hilltops and descended upon Marlon like sirens, both beautiful and dangerous. He winced as the lights blinded him. It felt like he would never reach his destination.

When he arrived in Epsanne Center he didn't have to look far for signs of Marco Denver. Marlon watched a group of young adults leaving a basement apartment with automatic weapons which they proudly fired into the air in both protest and a show of freedom.

This had to be the place.

Marlon descended the short flight of steps into the basement apartment and found a slender, young, pale man of about twenty-five who wore a gray hooded sweatshirt with the phrase "Outlaw Common Sense" screen-printed in big red block-lettering.

"Can I help you?" Marco said finally, looking up from his laptop screen.

"Delta sent me. Says you owe her big-time. Says that maybe you can help me out. I need some firepower on short notice." Marlon said, shoving his frigid hands into his front coat pockets.

"Delta, eh?" Marco eyed the pro-bono customer. "She really got my family out of a major financial jam recently, so she's right – I do owe her big-time. What sort of firepower are you looking for, my friend of a friend?"

"I need a rifle with a 10x scope, about fifty rounds for it – and a couple of automatic rifles with extra magazines. Can you handle that?" Marlon tried to sound like he knew what he was talking about. "If you have any suppressors for any of the rifles, that would go a long way as well."

"It may go a long way, but you're going to lose some of your stopping power with the suppressors. But it's up to you." Marco said, looking back down at his laptop. "Are you trying to take down a small Army or something?"

"Something like that." Marlon said, his voice shaking at the prospect of fighting The Twins.

"Suit yourself." Marco said, pointing towards the back armory room which was dimly lit behind him. "Grab what you need. Leave me *something to sell*." He said, shooting Marlon a look that

said 'Don't go crazy back there'. "Oh! And there's a bag back there for you if you need to carry the firearms over a long distance to set up."

Marlon geared up and was on his way to the second address, ruck sack slung over his shoulder. It was much heavier than he had anticipated and so he had to continually switch shoulders. When he arrived at the second address, he ascended the stairwell across the street until he got to the roof. Once on the roof, the wind picked up. He would need to really time his shots and account for the wind as well. He set up the sniper rifle on a tripod and affixed the suppressor to the end of the barrel. He squinted with one eye and viewed through the scope with the other, clearly making out the front entrance to the Museum of Modern Science. It was a broad set of stairs which wrapped around the side of the building. His timing was impeccable. Out of the front double doors strode one Percy Amos and his two cyborg body guards (who Marlon agreed, were identical). Marlon aimed up and to the left relative to his target – the Twin on the left, and released one shot. It was off by about a foot and struck the concrete pillar next to the target. The Twin on the left stopped advancing and looked around for the source of the shot. This must have been the Twin with impeccable hearing, Marlon decided. He let loose a second shot into the night air. It met its mark, and the Twin on the left's back plate exploded in a symphony of sparks, wiring, and circuitry.

There was no time to prepare for what happened next.

The Twin on the right, (the one with the excellent vision, Marlon decided) had seen the muzzle flash from the second shot and opened fire on the rooftop across the street, sending a barrage of bullets through the concrete border and narrowly missing Marlon. Marlon reached into his ruck sack and pulled out one of the assault rifles. He wouldn't have long before Percy made it to his personal vehicle and escaped.

So Marlon did the nearly impossible.

He stood up and returned fire, striking the second Twin in the face. A shot from the second Twin's rifle struck Marlon in the shoulder, sending him falling forward towards the ledge. With his free hand, Marlon dropped the rifle and caught his fall. He could hear Percy yelling at the him.

"You're gonna have to kill me!" Percy's voice rang out into the night air, as he ran towards his vehicle.

Marlon picked the sniper rifle back up with his free hand and steadied it on the tripod, firing off two shots at the vehicle's front tires. The closest front tire hissed loudly, as air leaked from it. Percy got out of the vehicle and surrendered on his knees.

Marlon descended the stairs with one of the assault rifles, and stormed across the street towards the stalled vehicle and the surrendering crime boss. "Don't shoot! I'm unarmed!" Percy cried out.

"I know better than that." Marlon began to pat down the target with his uninjured hand and revealed two pistols, one from under Percy's shirt and the other from his sock. "Now. NOW, you're unarmed." Marlon said tossing the pistols to the side, using his hurt shoulder so that he could keep the assault rifle trained on Percy. "Tell me everything you know about an Elf named Dorath. NOW." Marlon said pressing the muzzle of the suppressed rifle up against Percy's head.

"This is about that Elf?! I'll give you the Elf, just let me go! Reach into my breast pocket and pull out my cell phone. Dial the first contact in the list, and tell them 'Rose is sick.' They'll bring your friend here and we can make a trade – me for the Elf." Percy said frantically.

Marlon and Percy waited for what felt like an eternity, until they heard the squealing of tires coming around the corner. Headlights switched off, the passenger window rolled down and a sub-

machine gun appeared from the shadow of the van's interior. It began firing on both of them indiscriminately. It all happened so fast, but Marlon could make out the face of...

You guessed it.

The very Elf that he was searching for.

Marlon recognized the gunman from the photos in the dossier he received prior to accepting the case. It all made sense to him now. Dorath hadn't been kidnapped at all. He had been working with his "captors" the whole time.

Shots came raining down on the pair in the street, striking them both. When the van had passed, Marlon looked over at Percy's body, which was riddled with bullet holes. Percy had a gaze of complete surprise and shock on his lifeless face. This had all been about a coup, a mutinous coup. Perhaps Percy's thugs knew that they were powerless while he had the Twins around – or perhaps Dorath had convinced some of them to wait on me to do the dirty work for them. Hell, it could have been Dorath that hired Marlon. He just got envelopes with details slipped under his office door. He never questioned where the envelopes with dossiers came from.

The irony was palpable.