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We have it in our power to begin the world over again.
Thomas Paine

Prologue

Whorley's day was going pretty well, until Lilith walked in.

He'd spent the morning in the markets of Sheen, under the vast steel crossbeams of the main chamber. He'd chatted, joked, tasted samples and slapped his large belly cheerfully before moving on. Nothing important, just seeing, and being seen. Whorley was a fixer – someone who could help with whatever you wanted, for a very reasonable price. So he made sure people remembered him, and were pleased to see him. It was easy, really; Whorley liked people, and he liked to help.

For a very reasonable price.

And then later he'd wandered back to the bar he owned, eaten a light lunch and read the report from his agents about a business venture that had taken place that morning. The results were everything he'd hoped. Yes, it

had been a good day.

But that was Lilith for you. Lilith tended to happen to people who had been, up to that point, having a good day.

She strode in while he was finishing and sat down heavily in a chair across from him. The table rocked, and drops spilled from his glass.

"Whorley, you pig, you get greedier every day," she said without smiling. "How come you're not dead?"

Whorley sighed, but only on the inside. On the surface, he smiled as if Lilith was the person he'd hoped to see most in all the world. "Apple schnapps, my dear," he said amiably. "The apples are healthy."

He waved towards the bar, and Shaff, the barman – who had been lurking with one hand under the counter – relaxed and brought a bottle across. Whorley poured Lilith a glass.

"And you?" he asked. "Still a crazy troublemaker, are we? Cheers."

He raised his glass and examined her as he sipped.

Lilith was tall, almost two metres in her thick red-soled boots, with wide powerful shoulders. She wore a maroon leather jacket with plates of blast-proof steel sewn into it, and leather leggings. Whorley couldn't see it, but he knew she kept a small, vicious crossbow in a holster behind her

back. An old scar curved down the left side of her head, a gleaming pale line against her dark skin and short brown hair.

"You're looking well," he said lightly. (This was a lie. She was sitting stiffly, at an angle, and Whorley suspected her side was injured. And she looked tired.) "What can I do for you?"

Lilith didn't drink the schnapps. She gazed into the glass.

"Anything going on, Whorley?" she asked quietly.

Whorley spread his hands and grinned. "You know me, always busy. Why, are you looking for work?"

She shook her head. "No. Anything in Base? This morning?"

Whorley frowned. "You know I can't discuss my … *business operations*," he said. "My clients expect discretion."

Lilith looked out of one of the bar's small windows. It didn't point outside, of course – property on the outer shell of Sheen was far too expensive – but showed the inner balcony, and the people bustling past.

"There was a hit this morning," she said. "An item was taken. I want it back."

"You think I took it?"

Lilith shrugged. "There were several agents involved. They had equipment. They were careful. It had your

style." Her left foot was tapping against the table. Tap-tap-tap, like a nervous tic.

Whorley sighed.

"No," he said. "My people were in Sheen this morning. On a… Well, a mission. We don't need the details. But not Base."

He leaned back. "Whatever you lost, it wasn't me. Sorry."

She turned back from the window and stared at him for a long time. Then she nodded.

"I see."

Whorley frowned. "What was it – something of yours?"

"Something I was guarding." Her head dropped. She was exhausted, Whorley thought. He wondered how bad the injury to her side was. "For the Reverents."

"Oh, Lilith!" Whorley snorted. "I've told you not to work for religious types; they never pay!" He shook his head. "Come and work for me again. I'll give you a good rate. You and Anish too. I like him. You two still together?"

Lilith shrugged.

"Really," said Whorley, relaxing now. "Those people, they make you as crazy as them. Look at you. You get hit – all right, it happens – but then you barge in on me? Like you don't have enough problems? I've got three

guards watching this place right now. You could have been killed!"

He raised his glass. "Come on. It's just a job. Drink."

"Yes," she said. Her shoulders seemed to unknot, and she picked up the glass. "Yes."

"To the Lady Nostic and the Glories," he intoned, and drank.

Lilith was still looking at her glass. "Four," she said, at last.

"What?"

"You had four guards."

He didn't even see her hand move. Didn't see the thick-bottomed glass as it flew towards him, was only vaguely aware at first when it hit him right between his eyes with a *thunk*. He spun back over his chair and crashed to the ground, and before he could even cry out she was crouched over him, her small crossbow in one hand, ready to fire.

"You had *four* guards," she spat. "One at the entrance. Two on the balcony. One on deck eleven. You had four, now you have *none*, understand?"

Whorley made a sound like a thin, whistling wail. She knelt on his chest, crushing him.

"I want it back," she hissed. "No lies, no games, just you and me and this –" she waved the crossbow "– and I

want it back."

"Lilith … *please*," he gasped. "You're wrong, I swear. I wouldn't do that!" He thought one of his ribs had broken. He couldn't stop blinking. He could smell fermented apples and blood. "I love you guys! You and Anish, you're my—"

"Anish is *dead*!" she shouted. "He was killed this morning, in *your* raid!"

Whorley stared up at her in genuine horror. *Oh no*, he thought. *Oh, she's really going to kill me.*

Lilith glared at Shaff the barman, who was shuffling towards them and holding a club uncertainly.

"Put it down," she ordered. "Bring the item." Her tone was expressionless, but Whorley saw a pulse beating hard against her temple, and a thin trickle of blood at the bottom of her jacket. The wound in her side had opened.

Shaff hesitated. Lilith knelt harder, and Whorley felt a new shard of pain against his heart. Yes, one rib definitely broken. He waved feebly. "Go," he wheezed. "Go."

The barman hurried through to the back. Whorley closed his eyes. "You're crazy," he muttered. "This is crazy."

Lilith said nothing.

"They said it was a clean job," he whispered. "I thought it was clean. I didn't know about Anish—"

She shifted her knee against him and he groaned.

Shaff returned with a rectangular box half a metre wide and deep and a little longer, carrying it by a handle on the top. He put it down and stepped back. Lilith stood and peered inside.

The box was lined with fur. Inside, wrapped in a blanket, was a sleeping baby, with pale fawn skin and a short crop of straight black hair. One hand was outside the blanket, fingers curled.

Lilith picked up the box.

"What are you going to do with it?" gasped Whorley. She ignored him. "You know what it is? What they say about it? You can't give it back to the Reverents, Lilith!"

"I'm not giving it to them," she said.

"To Protection?" He coughed. "That's who *I'm* selling it to! You could just leave it with me. I can give you a cut—"

"Not Protection."

"But… But who, then?"

Lilith put the little crossbow back into its holster and walked towards the entrance with the box.

"Goodbye, Whorley."

Whorley stared in astonishment. Was she letting him *live*? What was going on? The pain in his ribs was vicious, but he tried to ignore it a little longer.

"Lilith, wait! Anish—"

She turned, her face dark with something he didn't want to know.

"I never meant…" He shrugged helplessly. "I'm sorry."

For a moment he thought she was going to shoot him right there. But eventually she sighed and checked her watch.

"Seven minutes," she said.

"Till what?"

"Till the people you thought you were selling to come to kill you."

"What? They're not coming to kill me." Whorley shook his head, more in confusion than denial. "I got it *for* them. It's just a deal."

Lilith shrugged. "That's not the deal they made."

She left with the package. He watched her go in a daze, and groaned as he sat up.

"You all right, boss?" asked Shaff.

Whorley found the strength to slap the barman about the head. "Of course not, you cretin." He closed his eyes. Lilith was wrong. He had a deal – just business, same as every other time. She had to be wrong.

"Boss?"

"Help me stand," he muttered. Shaff lifted him up, and Whorley tried not to scream as his ribs protested.

"I think…" he said, when he could speak again, "I think we should go out the back."

Lilith went down three levels and into a hidden recess. She discarded the box and used the blanket to fasten the baby girl to her back, wincing as she tied it tight. Then she climbed down a long access ladder to a hatch that led her out of Sheen, and on to the ground.

Seven minutes after she left, a team of Protection troops raided Whorley's bar with orders to retrieve a package and destroy everything and anyone else they found.

A few days later, a figure in a plain brown jacket and jeans limped through the tiny settlement of Recon, before following a faint track up into the mountains. One or two people in Recon watched her as she entered the settlement, but when they saw the expression on her face they turned away until she had passed, and if they noticed the sling on her back, they never mentioned it to anyone.