

TALES FROM RAMYN

The Clubbers

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Denny examined the tip of his finger. A piece of dried snot had lodged itself under his fingernail, the result of his gold digging. He put the finger in his mouth and started chewing on the little nugget.

Two tankards of ale were slammed on the table in front of him.

“The next ones are on you,” said Irv and took a seat opposite to him. His voice followed his body build – broad shoulders, large chest – being deep with a harshness to it that came from dealing with the sort of people like he did.

Denny grabbed his tankard and took a sip. It was bitter to the point of making even a man like him cringe. “What is this swill?”

“What? It's good,” said Irv and happily gulped down a third of his. He let out a satisfied sigh and grinned.

Denny shook his head. “I should have known better than to let you buy. Your mouth is made of bark so even shit tastes good for you.”

Irv frowned. “If you don't like it, I'll drink it.”

Denny grabbed his tankard, protecting it from his eager companion. “I'll drink it! But I won't like it.”

Irv shrugged his shoulders.

The tavern around them kept on buzzing. It wasn't a tidy place. The hay on the floor was slowly turning into dirt and the tables were covered in stains and what remained of candles long burned to their end. The typical customer looked like they'd been dragged down a muddy road behind a horse for a good mile or two and then beaten by ten men with sticks upon arrival.

Exactly the sort of place Irv and Denny enjoyed.

“Shouldn't we hit the streets?” asked Irv. “Ain't going to find anything exotic here.”

Denny rubbed his once broken nose. He picked his dark beard, shaking away crumbs from his breakfast. “We need to find something. Not much left of the last catch.”

Irv grunted. “I'm down to my last few coins.”

“I don't want to take a job at the docks again,” muttered Denny. It was hard work at the docks. Carrying heavy sacks on and off ships, loading things into carriages, sorting warehouses. Why do all that hard work when you could live a

good while with the simple swing of a club?

“Good honest work that,” said Irv.

“Exactly. That's the sort of thing you try to avoid,” said Denny and gulped down some of the ale. Try as he did, he couldn't down more than a few gulps at a time.

“My pa worked the docks,” said Irv and frowned. “Good, honest man. Always had food on the table.”

“How proud he must be of you then,” said Denny with a small laugh. Irv hadn't done a day of honest work in his life. When clubbing dried up he went to his other profession of mugging people. Denny was much the same. He was still somewhat confused why he'd taken the job at the docks that single time. A momentary weakness? Conscience trying to push him on the right path?

Irv grinned. “Dead men can't be proud.”

With some effort Denny downed the last of the ale. It made a shiver run through his spine. “Come on. Let's hit the streets.”

Irv finished up his ale and followed him out. The sun was high in the sky, mid-day. Even at the lower levels of Ramyn the sun shone thanks to the fake sky, even though in reality there was nothing but a stone ceiling above them. That sky did nothing to make the air feel any less heavy. There were many places where fresh air could come in, but when you had an entire city there were bound to be spots where the air didn't move much. Those were where the worst places set up their business.

“Come on. Let's go topside,” said Denny and started pushing through the crowd. It wasn't that there were many people on the move. The streets were just narrow. With the clubs at their belts, people tended to give way quickly when they noticed them.

The streets widened the closer they got to the ramp leading up. There were more people going about their business and shops that were nothing more than holes in the walls surrounding the street. Everything was made of stone and the buildings rose high enough that the tallest almost scraped the sky above.

The two went with the flow of people and soon arrived at the spiralling ramp that led up. There were carts going up and down, people carrying loads of goods

from above. It looked to be a busy day. The climb was something anyone with apprehensions about small space would have dreaded. Though there were lamps lighting the way, there were no windows to give a view of the outside.

As used to it as Denny and Irv were, even they took a deep breath of fresh air when they emerged into the sunlight at the top. They didn't stop for long. Both wanted out of the mass of people the transport points had during the day.

"Where should we go?" asked Irv. For a clubber that was always an important question. You weren't going to find something exotic just anywhere. There were good places to keep an eye on and then there were the bad ones.

Denny stopped to consider it. They had just made it out from the confines of the transport point walls so he found a close by building to lean against and watch the people walk by. The last one they had nabbed from the central market. The merchants and their wares always drew all sorts of people there. It had been a female elf. Her kind were rare in the city and she'd fetched a nice price from Jeremiah.

"Today's not good for the market I think," said Denny. It was nothing more than a hunch, but he was usually right. Whether it was the air, the way people on the street moved or something else that allowed him to tell when was a good day for the market was a mystery to himself, but he'd learned to trust the feeling he got.

So had Irv. "Maybe the gates then?"

Denny dismissed the idea. "I don't want to walk all that way under the river and I'm certainly not paying for a ferry." He barely had coin to keep himself fed for the next day. No, it was time to look somewhere closer.

"Where then?" asked Irv, anxious to get to business. The longer they stood around talking the less time they had to find a target. The further along the day went the less chance of something exotic even making an appearance. The best hours for shopping and tending to other business withered away.

"Vermot Street," Denny finally said and started walking again. Irv grinned and followed him.

Vermot Street was where many of the finer shops of the city were concentrated. You could run into nobles there since many of the items sold were

valuable enough to warrant a personal appearance. Because of that it also drew outsiders seeking to sell their finds to the shops. There were many establishments focused on selling rare items to people. Some of those people could be very exotic.

The only things you had to be careful about there was not grabbing someone too important or drawing the attention of the city guard. It was better patrolled than most areas, but there was still room enough to work if you knew what you were doing.

Denny and Irv were professionals.

It took them a while to walk to their destination, but soon Vermot Street opened up before them.

Tall buildings surrounded the street. Walkways criss-crossed above, telling the businesses weren't confined only to the ground level. The people walking on the street were dressed far better than on most other streets. You could also see far more carriages and palanquin being carried by servants.

The shops had large windows you could peek through to see what was going on inside and possibly take a gander at what was on offer. It was the only street in the city you'd see such things. During the night the merchants put in place large wooden shutters that were securely locked to protect their shops from easy access.

"All right, let's keep our eyes open," said Denny.

"Eyes open," echoed Irv as the two started walking down the street. They weren't dressed to fit into the crowd and people passing gave the pair some frowning looks, but neither one of them cared about it.

"You take that side, I'll take this side," said Denny and pointed Irv towards the small alley on the other side of the street. He'd picked a similar spot for himself. It was better to look on from such places instead of openly walking on the street. Drew less attention.

Denny watched Irv take his position and sought his own. He leaned against the building wall and kept an eye on the people passing by. While there were many wealthy looking people going by, none of them were exotic enough to warrant any attention. Nothing happened for a good long while and Denny was

starting to feel like they wouldn't be getting lucky today. His attention started to wander and he emerged from the shades of the alley to examine the shop he'd been hiding next to.

The large window revealed a collection of all sorts of items, from books to small chests and decorative items. Some of the items looked valuable, being made of gold or some other valuable metal, while others looked like they wouldn't be worth even the effort to pick them up. But such items usually held value beyond their looks.

What caught Denny's attention was the woman beyond the table in front of the window.

An elf. A pretty one at that with blonde hair and a dress that spoke of wealth, but not too much of it.

He'd found their target.

Withdrawing back to the alley, he motioned to Irv on the other side of the street and nailed his eyes on the store's front door.

"What is it?" asked Irv when he arrived. Denny pulled him to the shades of the alley.

"An elf in the shop next to us," said Denny. "Good looking. Perfect for us."

Irv grinned and licked his lips. "Jeremy's going to pay us good again."

"Focus. We've got to follow her for a long time. Make sure she isn't someone too important." Denny was cautious for a reason. Someone wandering in the central marketplace was unlikely to be important. Here, it was another story. You needed to be certain and that meant not clubbing the target the first chance you got.

"I know," said Irv and took position so he could see the door as well.

The two waited.

It wasn't long before the door opened and their target walked out. She looked up and down the street before starting to walk further into it. Denny and Irv left their hiding place and followed her around.

The encouraging thing was she did not have any servants with her nor guards. While she stopped from time to time to exchange words with some of the passers by, she did not stop to talk to any noble the two recognized. She made

excursions to three more shops before finally leaving the market street.

There was no carriage waiting for her and she had to walk all the way to her home. All alone. Had it been dark, Denny and Irv would have clubbed her then and there, but there were too many people on the streets. And it was the better part of town where wealthy merchants lived. Only safe time to act there was at night.

They saw her disappear into a house with two stories and what had to be an inner garden surrounded by it.

“What now?” asked Irv as they hung around, trying to look like they belonged. They had a good view of the front door from the alley they were hiding in.

“We wait,” said Denny. The woman would have to come out some time. Maybe they'd be lucky and there would be a party tonight where she would go. There was always a party somewhere, be it some nobles or a wealthy merchants. Judging from what they were seeing so far it did not seem like she had any guards for herself or even servants, which was a bit odd but not unheard of. Maybe she only just arrived in the city. Who knew.

Elves could be odd.

Hours passed.

“How long is she going to keep us waiting?” Irv complained and leaned against the wall.

“It's getting close to party time,” said Denny. The sky was starting to get a reddish colour to it. Most parties started around that time and got into full swing when the sun completely set. Irv had never been the most patient in staking out a prey. Even now he'd paced up and down the alley and dug through all the barrels and boxes discarded there. He'd found nothing besides a feral cat.

An hour more passed and the door opened.

The elf stepped out, clearly dressed to party. She wore a more elegant dress with a large shawl around her shoulders to keep the cold of the night away. No one came to pick her up, there were no servants after her. She walked down the street all alone.

“Come on,” said Denny and smacked Irv on the shoulder. The two men

followed their prey from the shadows. It wasn't along walk, perhaps the reason why she dared to do it alone as it didn't take her away from the wealthy area. She joined the stream of guests entering one of the bigger houses in the area.

Denny grinned. "Looks like Ferelon is throwing another party."

Ferelon was one of the wealthiest merchants in the city. He had his hand in almost every legal trade and some of the less legal ones. His parties always had a massive attendance ranging from the wealthy to desolate poets and musicians. The fact their target was there only further confirmed she was not an important person.

No one important attended Ferelon's parties.

If she was a wealthy merchant from the elven kingdom no one would miss her if she went missing. At least no one of consequence.

"Ferelon always throws the best parties," said Irv and lumbered over to his usual stakeout place. It wasn't the first time they were looming outside the merchant's manor. They'd nabbed more than a few of his guests over the years, never too close to his home though. Didn't want to upset the golden goose.

They watched guests flow in. The splendour of dresses and jewellery would have had a thief salivating at the chance of picking some pockets, but Denny and Irv didn't care about such things. Fencing stolen goods was always hard and easy to trace. People were much easier in that regard.

Fewer came asking after them if you chose the target right.

The music taunted them, trying to draw them in to the party. It told of the banquet that must have been laid out for the guests, of the beautiful women and the chatter. But Denny and Irv were seasoned veterans. They didn't fall victim to it, they did not start wishing they were among the guests.

They kept their minds on their prey.

It was well into the night when guests started pouring out of the manor. Their prey was among the first ones. Her steps were a bit unsteady, telling of the drinks she had enjoyed inside. It made Denny grin when he started after her with Irv in tow.

Slight drunkenness always made things easier.

"Keep an eye on our rear," said Denny.

Irv nodded, which went unseen in the darkness, but Denny knew him well enough that he'd do as told. Now was the crucial time for their endeavour. If no one followed them and they found a silent stretch of street, they'd have their chance. Denny put his hand on his club.

They followed her through the same streets and were pleased to see there was little to no movement on them.

"We good?" asked Denny when she turned a corner.

"Yeah," replied Irv and pulled out his club. The lamps lit the street now, giving them a good view of their target. No one else was around.

"Let's do this then," said Denny and started forward a bit quicker. There was a skill in rushing forward without making so much noise as to alert your target.

Despite getting a head start, it was Irv that reached her first. She started to turn around, but the club was already on its way down. It came down with the sort of ruthless efficiency only years of practice could instil. The hit wasn't so hard as to crack a skull, but it was hard enough to knock the woman out. Her head would hurt when she woke up, but there wouldn't be much other side effects.

Denny rushed over and grabbed her by the legs while Irv grabbed her under the arms. Together they dragged her to a small alley and took a moment to tie her hands and legs as well as gagging her. It never hurt to be careful.

"She'll fetch a nice price," said Denny as he examined her face. There was no denying her beauty. And beauty meant money.

"I'm starting to be hungry," admitted Irv and grinned.

"We'll soon have our bellies full," said Denny. "Come on. Pick her up."

Irv hoisted the woman on his shoulder. He was a big man. Handling her was no trouble.

They moved from alley to alley, heading away from the wealthy merchants area. To Irv's surprise, the woman started to move about. She let out a small noise. Before she could fully come to, Irv set her down and clubbed her on the head once more. He hoisted her up on his shoulder again and joined Denny at the end of the alley. The street lamp cast enough light to the alley to give Denny a good look at the woman.

“What did you do?” Denny demanded, drawing a look from Irv.

“She was coming around so I clubbed her again,” replied Irv, curious as to what had caused his friend's tone of voice. He put the woman down so he could inspect her.

“She was an elf before you did that,” said Denny and pointed to the less than pointy ears. She had turned into a human woman.

“I swear I didn't hit her *that* hard,” said Irv and frowned.

“What are we supposed to do with a human?” Denny glared at his friend and the unconscious woman.

There was a moment of silence.

“She is still pretty,” said Irv. It was true. While she lacked the exotic beauty of an elf, she still had a pretty face and a body that wouldn't leave any man cold.

“Fucking her isn't going to keep our bellies full,” Denny grunted and raked his greasy hair.

“Maybe Jeremiah will buy her still,” said Irv. “There's always a demand for pretty girls.”

Denny glanced at his friend. He'd misjudged his words. It wouldn't have been the first time he took payment in the form of sex. Now that he thought about it, there was still a chance she'd be worth something. No point giving up. Worst case was Jeremiah would refuse to pay for her in which case they'd just get rid of her.

“All right. Pick her up. Let's go see what we can get for her.” Denny made certain the street was clear before slipping into it. Irv hoisted the woman on her shoulder again and followed his friend.

The way to Jeremiah's place took them back to the lower levels. It wasn't a well known place and even those who knew it were subject to inspection by guards with sharp steel to ensure compliance.

“Come on, you know us,” said Denny and glared at the guard. He simply grunted in return and continued to hold out his hand.

“Just give it to him,” said Irv and handed his club to the guard. It was always the same with Denny. He never wanted to let go of his weapon.

Denny eyed his friend, but relented and handed his club to the guard.

Two guards escorted them inside the warehouse like building.

Only from the outside did it look like one. Inside, there was an entire section of it set up as a tavern with tables, chairs and the most unsavoury of Ramyn's underground sitting there, getting drunk. The blood spills on the floor told enough of the sort of action the place saw when emotions started to run hot.

Irv kept a tight hold on the woman as they walked through the area and were guided to the back.

“Denny!” A booming voice greeted them. The back room was large and there were all sorts of goods there waiting to be put into proper storage. Much of it the haul Jeremiah's underlings had brought to him that day.

“Jeremiah,” said Denny and nodded to the man.

He was tall and lanky. Red hair and a hint of the same coloured beard on his chin. He was younger than you'd have expected but when you looked into his eyes you knew he'd cut your throat at a moments notice.

“What have you got for me tonight?” Jeremiah put down a silver goblet he'd been inspecting and turned his attention to the two men.

Irv put the woman down less than gently to allow him to inspect her.

“A human?” asked Jeremiah after crouching next to her. He did not sound pleased. “Not much demand for those these days.”

“She is pretty,” said Irv.

“That she is,” admitted Jeremiah and brushed aside some of her hair.

“She was an elf before the idiot there clubbed her a second time,” said Denny.

“Wasn't my fault,” Irv muttered.

“An elf?” asked Jeremiah and stood up. He regarded the woman one more time. “How curious.”

“So what do you say? You going to give us something for her or do we get rid of her?” Denny had no patience for negotiations. He just wanted the money if any was forth coming.

Jeremiah rubbed his chin. “I'll give you the standard fee minus ten, but only because you're old friends.”

Denny and Irv exchanged looks. They knew he'd sell her for a nice profit with

that price. The south was always looking for fair skinned women. The nobles there were crazy for them. It was a riskier business than exotic creatures, but still profitable.

“All right. She's yours,” said Denny. Even at minus ten, they'd have enough money for a few days of good eating.

“Pleasure doing business with you,” said Jeremiah with a wide smile. He motioned to the guards and two of them grabbed the woman and hauled her through a door that led further into the warehouse. “You'll get the money on the way out.”

“Right,” said Denny and turned to leave. Irv followed. Even if Jeremiah was putting on a pleasant face, there was no guarantee it would last. Best to leave when the mood was still good.

They got their money from the bartender and with the help of their two escorts they were back outside in no time, clubs safely back to their belts.

“Time to eat?” asked Denny and felt the weight of the coin pouch.

Enough for three days, he figured.

“Was that time hours ago,” said Irv.

“The usual place?”

Irv nodded.

“Let's go then.”