

the corwyn chronicles

Disappear



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*A Short Story in the world of
The Corwyn Chronicles*

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Nedrick struggled to loosen the rope that bound his wrists behind his back. When he had awoken he found himself tied to a chair in the basement of what appeared to be an old and abandoned house. With a pounding head and through blurry eyes he could see chairs that were stacked in one corner of the room, and a three legged table that was propped up against the wall. There was a staircase, a furnace, and an old chest (the kind a pirate would surely own). The smell of clay permeated Nedrick's nostrils, and he could almost taste the dust particles on his tongue. It was damp and dark down here, and not a sound could be heard, save for the noise his chair made as he struggled to free himself.

This was Annabelle Barthez's doing, Nedrick was certain of it. The last thing he could recall before waking up in this mold-ridden dump was the two of them reminiscing the good old days over a bottle of Wynguard 1601. She must have slipped something into his drink; what a waste of good scotch.

Nedrick knew that loosening the bindings on his wrists was a hopeless venture, for Barthez (like he) knew how to tie a proper knot. The master had taught them that, along with a great deal of other useful skills. He taught them how to walk in complete silence, to crack the most intricate of locks, and he taught them how to effectively pickpocket the rich, and to climb the slickest of walls. He taught them proper slight of hand techniques, and he taught them how to con people out of their hard-earned money.

And — perhaps most importantly — he taught them how to become invisible within the shadows. “Hello, Bella,” said Nedrick once his partner in crime stepped into what little light this basement offered.

“Ned,” replied the woman in black as she bowed low.

“Your hair is raven-colored today.”

“You noticed!” Barthez beamed in an obviously contrived sort of surprise. She changed her appearance every other day; how surprising could it really be that her hair was raven-colored today? Sometimes she was a blonde. Sometimes she

wore jewelry and makeup. Sometimes her skin and eyes were a different colour (don't ask Nedrick how she accomplished such a feat). Come to think of it, Nedrick had no idea what Barthez originally looked like.

“Bella, why have you tied me up like this?” There was an unspoken honor amongst thieves that prohibited stealing from each other, or selling one another out, but if this implicit code was broken... “Surely you don't believe I betrayed you in some fashion?”

“In a manner of speaking, you have, if not purposefully.” She glanced at Nedrick's side and saw that he was playing with the cuff of his shirt. “Don't bother, Ned. I removed that tiny serrated blade you embedded into the seam of your shirt, as well as all of your other little trinkets. You see, I have come to know you quite well over the years.”

“And I know you,” replied Nedrick.

“Therein lies the problem, Ned.”

“I don't understand.”

Barthez bowed her head. “Do you recall our last commission?”

“The Amber Job, yes. We were hired to steal the amber rod from Lord Tennenbaucker's mansion in Syndall. Sixty thousand notes upon completion of the job, apiece. Had it not been for my accidental stumble from the rafter onto one of the lord's guards, our execution would have been flawless,” Nedrick finished with a chuckle. “That little limerick I left in place of the rod had to be one of my finest!”

*There once was a man with a rod,
Who spent more time with it than he did with his broad...*

“And the commission before that one?” she interrupted, having no desire to hear the rest of it.

“The Vhenis Job. Twenty thousand apiece — a hefty sum, considering the ease of stealing a decrepit old book from an unguarded library. Bella, speak plainly! What are you getting at?” Nedrick could feel his heartbeat in his wrists. He didn't like the feeling of being trapped, and he didn't like not being in the know.

Barthez removed a bottle from within her cloak. Only a few ounces remained of the Wynguard scotch. She popped the cork, and the bottle made a deep echoing ‘*thump*’ sound.

“Sip?”

Nedrick turned his head away. He wouldn't fall for that trick again.

Barthez shrugged as she placed the bottle to her lips and downed the last of it. “I have been keeping secrets from you, Ned. The first being that no one hired us to do those jobs.”

“But, we were paid.”

“*You* were paid. I paid you with my own capital to help me break into both the Vhenis Barracks and Tennenbaucker's mansion. Those items — the book and the rod — were for me.” Barthez back-stepped until she reached the old chest in

the corner. She removed a key from her pocket, and unlocked the chest. She only opened it a few inches before placing her finger within it to find a particular latch. The latch was attached to a wire; the wire was attached to the firing mechanism of a small crossbow that sat within the chest. Nedrick would have been surprised if she hadn't booby-trapped the chest. With the flick of her finger, she disabled the trap and opened the lid fully. She removed the old book they had stolen from the library. Flipping through to a particular page, she brought it into the light so that her partner could read it.

He recited, "On the eighty-ninth day in the winter of 1617, Katarina and Han Smithson gave birth to their firstborn daughter, Cairen Smithson. Seven pounds, seven ounces, blonde hair and blue eyes, a birthmark beneath her lowest left rib..." Nedrick looked up from the page, "What is this?"

"It is my birth announcement, and the only remaining record that I ever existed," replied Barthez, and then she tore the page from the book. "You didn't actually think that my real name was Annabelle Barthez, did you?"

"One would only assume," said Nedrick sardonically. After all, Nedrick was *his* real name. Barthez placed the book back into the chest, and removed a small pan, some oil, and a flint and steel. "You mean to burn it?"

"I mean to disappear," replied Barthez, and she placed the page into the pan. With a bit of oil and a strike of the flint against steel, she set her birth record aflame. In this dark basement the light of the flame accentuated the features on

her face — her slender nose that slightly pointed upwards, her almond-shaped eyes, her thin ruby lips — and Nedrick swore he saw them change in the light. A trick of the eye, to be sure! The flickering flames distorted her face to look wider, they made her eyes look less slender, and her lips plumper.

"Bella," Nedrick sighed, "why am I tied up? Why all of this subterfuge?"

"I am sorry, Ned. Truly, I am." She returned to the chest, and this time she removed the amber rod from it. The rod was partially encased in silver, with a distinguishable bottom and top to it, and the amber looked like solidified honey in the light of the dwindling flame. "I simply could not risk you running away after telling you what I planned to do with this rod." Nedrick looked at it with a raised eyebrow. He'd be lying if he said that fear hadn't crept up through his heart and into his throat. "Surely, by now you have deduced that this rod contains magical properties. Do you know what it does?"

Nedrick shook his head. Magic: he never was one for it. It was a difficult science to comprehend, and it was even more difficult to wield. Besides, he had survived (and prospered) for decades without it.

"When the master died, you became the only living person to know of my existence."

"You mean to say that I am your only remaining friend," replied Nedrick. His mind began to race. He needed to think of a way to escape his bindings. Barthez was clever, but she

wasn't very strong. If only he could free himself, he could overpower her and escape.

"You know as well as I do that one cannot afford to have friends in this line of work."

"And so, you plan to use that thing to kill me so that not a soul in this world could pick you out of a lineup," not that he recognized her now, with her raven hair and her pale skin. Was her nose always pointed downwards?

Barthez smirked. "You are about as dense as this rod! If I wanted to kill you, we would not be having this conversation."

"I have never known you to be a killer," Nedrick agreed.

"And soon, you will have never known me at all."

"What is that supposed to mean?" asked Nedrick, and then the rod in Barthez hand began to glow. Nedrick watched as its core started to swirl and bubble, like it had turned to liquid. The light of the rod replaced the flame in the pan, and now Barthez skin looked to be the colour of golden brown.

"It is not enough to know that all record of my existence has been expunged. For me to truly disappear, I must also expunge each and every memory of my being here from the people I have interacted with in the past. This rod has the power to pluck a specific stream of memories from one's mind; thus, you can understand why I covet it so much."

"Why would you want to do such a thing?"

"The master once said only the unknowable can master the art of thievery; only the untraceable can get away with anything. I shall be like a ghost, Ned. Once I disappear I shall be the ultimate thief!"

"Bella, that isn't what life is supposed to be like. You can't just dwell in limbo... in non-existence! If you erase everything, then you will be very lonely. Life is supposed to be lived, and observed! Why do you think I add embellishment to the crimes I commit? Why do you think I leave a comical poem in place of everything I steal? I want people to know who I am!"

"Your methods always were a bit sloppy."

"At least I feel alive!" In Nedrick's anger he jostled the chair. He felt it splinter where the rope was bound; another few pushes and he might be able to break free. He just needed a bit of time. "If you plan to disappear completely, if you plan to erase all memory of your existence, then you will have wiped out your reputation as well. Who will hire you then? Who will trust you enough to pay you?"

With a snicker, Barthez rolled her eyes. "Ned, Ned, Ned..." She dangled the amber rod near his forehead. "You know the answer. The master taught us about transcendence. He taught us that thievery is more than pickpocketing and amassing wealth. How long do you wish to remain a petty burglar, Ned, when you have the capacity to rise above society and all of its rules? As a ghost, I will walk where I please, manipulate whomever I wish, and change the world whenever I

deem fit to do so. I will be above the governments, and the clan masters, and the—”

In her self-indulgent rant, Barthez didn't notice that Nedrick had freed his wrists of their bindings. She didn't anticipate his nimble hands darting upward in an attempt to steal the rod away from her. There was a quick struggle, and Nedrick found himself toppling over the broken chair with Barthez crashing overtop of him. In both of their hands the rod teetered between their eyes, threatening to erase their precious memories. Barthez held the advantage; her elbow was jarring the soft spot between the bones in his forearm, and it forced him to retract. When the rod touched Nedrick's forehead she would only need to imagine herself, and he would forget all about her.

But, Nedrick slid his knee upwards and into her belly, forcing Barthez to fall forward and into the amber rod's path. There was a flash of light, and the two of them were stunned.

When Nedrick's vision had returned he saw chairs that were stacked in one corner of the room, and a three-legged table that was propped up against the wall. There was a staircase, a furnace, an old chest, and... a woman he didn't recognize lying on the floor. She was staring back at him as though looking for something in his eyes.

“Miss, are you alright? It appears as though you had taken quite the fall,” said Nedrick. He took her by the hand and helped her up. She had such beautiful raven-coloured hair, and golden-brown skin. Her eyes were like eclipsed suns and

moons within a milky sky, and her lips were thin and pursed; he had never seen anyone quite like her before!

“What is your name?”

Her soft expression became hard at once, and as she opened her mouth to speak, she found that she could say only one thing. “I... I can't remember.”

The poor thing, thought Nedrick. “You likely hit your head when you fell from that chair,” he said, surmising that that must have been what happened, judging by the look of things. “Come, let us get you some help, and perhaps along the way someone might recognize you and tell you who you are.”

“I hope so,” replied the shaken woman as the two of them slowly ascended the staircase. “I would hate to think that nobody knows me.”



