The Crimson Dirks, v6

The Crimson Dirks

Book Six

by

Gathers-the-Coin

dward taught Antonius the game he learned in Elsweyr, as Casival, Ehlhiel and Zaharia joined them at the table. A cloth, stained with every conceivable color of wine and spirit, was placed over the top of the wood, allowing the bones and tiles to slide across its otherwise splintered face. While some of the rules were lost in translation, Edward knew enough for the game to function. Moreover, if he were to bend said rules to his favor, his opponents would be none the wiser.

"There are two types of games," Edward explained, laying the tiles out on the surface, "those with perfect information, and those that are imperfect. Chess, for example, is a game with perfect information. We know each other's pieces and their placement on the board. Card games, on the other hand, are of the imperfect variety. We are each dealt a hand with a set value, and must divine, through whatever means are available to us, who has the better of it."

"And which type do you prefer?" asked Casival.

"I prefer to know who and what I'm dealing with," replied Edward, "but at the same time, I know the more practical skill is to play games where the information is imperfect. After all, that is how the world around us is played."

"I wasn't aware life was a game," said Ehlhiel, "because if so, I need to find a better way to cheat."

"Don't be so modest," replied Edward, raking in another pot, "I think you're doing just fine. The same can't be said for our friend Antonius here."

"I only lost because you distracted me," barked Antonius, "with that inhaling and exhaling thing you do with your nose."

"Do you mean breathing?" asked Edward.

"Yes, that."

As a careful study of others, Casival understood the gist of Edward's speech. There were layers beyond what faces advertised. Edward, for instance, used his charm and intellect like a sword, his sly demeanor having a purpose that disarmed his opponents. Ehlbiel, on the other hand, wore his humor like armor, deflecting any inkling of emotion or motive. Zaharia, for all her straightforwardness, was also passionate and sincere, making her prone to falling victim to her temper. Even Antonius, for all his inebriation, was a skilled hedge mage, and one wondered at times if his drunkenness was merely a performance that allowed people to excuse his worst impulses.

The same rules applied to the crew as a whole. The less that was known about the bandits - the more imperfect the information - the better their chance of survival. Their enemies would always hold the better cards. The only way to win was to bluff.

It's for this reason Casival was uneasy about the last job. They had purchased a building near a warehouse, tunneling into it and stealing the goods. The plan was solid and the profit healthy, but it was the target that worried him still, even now after it was complete. After all, unlike some enterprises, the East Empire Company was a machine that counted every coin to its last, and weighed every commodity to the gram. Their employees were punctual, their accountants circumspect, and their ledgers pristine. They would identify precisely what goods were stolen, and investigate thoroughly the time and manner of the theft.

Thus it weighed heavy on his mind when the forger who purchased the building next to the warehouse had not responded to his last letter. Casival wrote the missive posing as a concerned relative, not wishing to betray any secrets lest the forger had been compromised. Another concern was news that the Company had enlisted the help of the local guard captains, in an effort to pool their information. With the added protection, caravans had been harder to sack. And with a more watchful eye on merchants, goods had been much harder to smuggle. As it turned out, it was possible to rob from the East Empire Company, but not without revealing some of their cards.

"Did you know that Pale-Eyes can sing?" Ehlhiel said, much to everyone's surprise.

"Is that a joke?" asked Zaharia, somewhat surprised.

"I'm being serious, he's actually better than most bards," Ehlhiel replied, for once completely sincere, "Trust me, it shocked me more than anything. I wasn't even aware Argonians could even make that kind of noise, let alone do it on key."

Casival laughed at the thought of the shy Argonian melodically strumming his lute. Even after he thought he'd learned everything there was to know about the others, they were always surprising him in strange and interesting ways. Perhaps the same could be said about their current predicament. So long as they were free, it meant whatever information their pursuers had was still imperfect.

The bandits had revealed much of their cards already, but hopefully, they had yet to give away their entire hand.

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