

Handle: *5tilt2k1n*

A Forgotten Relics short story

Once upon a time, there was an associate professor of computer science at Washington University named Elizabeth Duvall. Her flawless mahogany skin and sweet temperament attracted many suitors, but Liz was quite happy living solo in her exposed-brick apartment on Delmar Avenue with her saltwater fish tank, bookcase-lined bedroom, and active online social life. Her mother had passed away some time ago, but her father texted often to check on her and his unborn grandson, though he disapproved of her raising the child alone. She had everything she wanted: a wonderful job, a beautiful home, a world of friends, and, soon, a family of her own. Her life was perfect, and she went to bed each night with a smile on her face.

Until one particularly rainy night in the fall.

At first, Liz mistook the vibrating phone for a different device in the saucy dream she'd been having. When bellow of thunder startled her fully awake, she realized her phone had fallen off the nightstand into the bed. She rolled over, careful of her burgeoning belly, and squinted at the display.

3:19am. Dad.

Not the usual text, but a call. Strange.

A prickling at the back of her neck told her something was wrong before she heard the fear in his voice and the casino in the background.

“I’m sorry I woke you up, Lizzie. I need your help.”

She leaned against the headboard, eyebrows crunched with worry. “What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, but I can’t talk right now. I just need to know if you’ll help.”

“Of course, Dad. Anything you need.”

“I knew I could count on you, sugarbean.”

Then the line went dead.

Liz held the phone for another moment, trying to decipher the strange request. She waited an hour for him to call again before drifting uneasily back to sleep.

By morning, she'd dismissed the entire incident as a bad dream. But when she opened the door to leave for work, four men in pastel collared shirts, each carrying a large silver case, were waiting for her in the hallway. They called her name when she tried to retreat and forced their way in before she could bolt the doors and call the police.

The biggest man made her sit quietly on the couch while the other three set up high-tech equipment carefully unloaded from the silver cases. He explained that her father owed a substantial sum to Louis Tyler, casino owner and local mob boss, and, when confronted with the bill, Mr. Duvall couldn't pay. In a tense moment, pressed to the railing of the Page Extension Bridge at rush hour, he swore that his daughter, with her specialized computer skills, could provide Tyler with all he owed and more. The boss agreed, having heard of other cities' success with cybercrime. The pastel-shirted men were here to provide the bleeding-edge technology she'd need to execute a Bitcoin-skimming ploy. She must transfer one hundred thousand dollars to Tyler by the end of the week, lest Mr. Duvall pay his debt in blood rather than money.

Liz listened with growing horror to the low rumble of the big man's story, heart in her teeth and mind overheating. She didn't tell him she knew nothing about cryptocurrency or that the most elegant hack she'd ever performed was to rescue a laptop from the Blue Screen of Death or that her father's relationship with technology hadn't extended past a fax machine. She simply choked back her terror and agreed to the impossible scheme. What else could she do in the face of armed men promising her father's death? At the very least, it would buy time to find another solution.

Satisfied with Liz's acquiescence, the big man checked the installation of the equipment, gathered his associates, and left. The hum of their black sedans buried the sound of Liz's sobs as they drove away.

Midnight found Liz nursing a steaming mug of black tea, eyes red from crying, brain aching with effort. She'd spent sixteen fruitless hours researching a way to enact the skimming operation and needed to get away from the whispering super-machines brought by Tyler's men. Fifteen minutes, that's all.

She transferred to her own desk to check messages from her favorite online roleplaying game. One in particular stood out: an invitation to a guild party at Gallows’ End, their preferred in-game tavern. She RSVP’ed immediately. Perhaps someone there had the dark connections she so desperately needed.

The loading screen seemed interminable, but within two minutes, she was looking at the familiar broad back, glowing blue armor, and flaming mace of Kali404, the warrior she had run since college. Just watching the rise and fall of her character’s massive hooves as she ran to the tavern gave Liz a measure of solace. There, in this world, as Kali, she was in control. There, everything made sense.

Liz joined her friends at a round table near the back of Gallows’ End after bumping into several other in-game acquaintances. A chorus of cheers went up in the guild chat as she arrived, everyone asking how she was doing and talking about an upcoming raid. But it didn’t make her smile. As much as she wanted to enjoy the gathering, the task at hand was all that mattered.

She singled out the leader of their guild, a drug-dealer-turned-IT-tech living in British Colombia. If anyone had the right contacts for this sort of shady undertaking, it was him.

To [MisterEEH]: Thx for invite but can’t stay. Need help.

[MisterEEH] whispers: U OK? Baby OK?

To [MisterEEH]: We’re OK. Dad’s not. LF haxor.

[MisterEEH] whispers: Huh? Y?

To [MisterEEH]: U know ne1 or not?

There was a long pause, and Liz’s anxiety rose. Did she scare him off by saying she was looking for a hacker? If this led to another dead end, she would have wasted precious time that could’ve been spent seeking other avenues for her illicit needs.

Thankfully, he returned with an answer in a few minutes.

[MisterEEH] whispers: Bald orc w/o armor @ bar. 5tilt2k1n.

To [MisterEEH]: Thx. Owe u.

[MisterEEH] whispers: Wait til u talk 2 him. Creep but knows his shit.

[MisterEEH] whispers: GL.

A tentative calm drew around Liz as she navigated the sea of avatars and floating names towards the crowded bar at the front. Perhaps all was not lost.

The orc did stand out. Few characters eschewed clothing, and she could tell from his name that he wasn't high level or part of a guild. This gave Liz pause even through her fears. Those were all red flags for an illegitimate user.

Then she remembered that's exactly what she needed. She waved to get his attention.

To [5tilt2k1n]: MisterEEH says u can help me.

[5tilt2k1n]: Add me 2 voice.

Then the orc left the tavern without looking back. A voice conversation meant there would be no paper trail for a deal, which meant EEH's lead had been legitimate. Another red flag. And another “good” sign.

Still, Liz hesitated. While she had a headset, she exclusively used text when gaming to avoid the disgusting behavior that inevitably came her way when other users discovered she was female. But she needed help, and at this point, it didn't much matter where it came from. Adding a stranger to her voice-chat list was a small concession to save her father's life. Wincing, she clicked the button to grant him voice permissions, then followed him outside.

“Hello?” she said. The tiny headset microphone made her voice higher. To her own ears, she sounded exactly like the scared little girl she was inside.

The unarmored orc led her to a vacant patch of land near a stream before he would speak to her. When he did, he sounded distorted—running through a modulator to disguise his identity further.

“What do you want?”

Liz gathered her courage, willing it into her voice. “EEH said you're a hacker with a rep. That's exactly what I need.”

“Oh, yeah? What's the job?”

She explained the terms of Tyler's deal with her father.

"That's a lot of Bit." A pause. "What's in it for me?"

A flutter of hope. He was considering it.

"Whatever you want to skim for yourself," she said. "You'll already have access to the accounts."

"Too easy. Where's the fun in that?"

"I don't have anything else to offer. Everything I have is tied up waiting for my baby to be born."

"Baby?" he said with curiosity.

"Yes...."

"Then you do have something I want."

Her heart stopped. He couldn't be suggesting.... "What are you talking about?"

"I think you know. I'll get you the hundred grand in Bit—no tracing, no feds—and you hand over the kid. Healthy baby's worth a mint on the black market. All those rich white folks desperate for a podling. Soon as my end's done, we'll set up the rest of it."

"That's horrible!" she spat. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

A dark laugh. "Up to you, lady. Daddy dearest or that parasite you're incubating."

The crash of guilt and shame was too much for her to contain. She just managed to mute her mic before vomiting her disgust into the trashcan. How was she supposed to make that choice? Her father or her child—the man who gave her life or the life yet to be born?

Wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, she turned her sound back on.

"That's the only option? There's nothing else I can do?" she said weakly.

A thoughtful pause. "You know, I'm feeling generous today," he said. "Tell you what. If you can figure out who I am in the real world, I'll let you slide. You get my name, maybe my home address, there's no charge. Deal?"

Liz's mind whirled. The entire reason she'd come to 5tilt2k1n was because her own computer skills were geared toward building and learning, not hacking and crime. How would she ever discover his true identity when she needed to hire him in the first place? He'd presented her with an impossible choice and an impossible escape.

But what could she do?

"Deal," she said, choking back a sob.

A robotic laugh cut the air in response, then the orc popped out of existence, leaving her alone by the stream.

Liz logged out of the game in a whirlpool of emotion. That a genuine villain would frequent an online RPG, waiting for criminal opportunities to come his way, seemed terribly strange, but the horrific deal had already been struck. It was too late for questions or regrets. All she could do was pray her existing talents would be enough to uncover the mysterious man’s identity.

She collapsed into her bed under a blanket of guilt and self-disgust. She did not dream.

Over the next five days, the numbers in the accounts that tracked her father’s debt and Tyler’s payment switched places by pennies. Liz begged off her teaching duties for the week—pregnancy was a convenient excuse—and watched obsessively for any sign of trickery or prying eyes. But no men in black suits came to visit her. No watchdog spyware appeared on the computers. The operation seemed to progress without a single hitch.

5tilt2k1n had kept his promise.

But despite long hours of asking, searching, mining, and aggregating, trying to uncover 5tilt2k1n’s true identity, Liz found nothing. She wept day and night, ever more anxious and desperate.

Tyler’s men returned mere seconds after the last cent transferred on the sixth day, marking the end of the exchange. They courteously informed her that she’d purchased her father’s freedom and made no demands for her to stay in Tyler’s employ as she’d feared they would. They simply disconnected their equipment, packed it back in its silver cases, and left.

As she watched them drive away, an email alert replaced her relief with anxiety. She knew who it was. And what he wanted.

To: Kali404

From: 5tilt2k1n

Message: Ur turn. Gallows’ End. 1830 CST. Dnt be late.

Liz’s panic tripled as the fatal moment fell upon her with only an hour to spare. She rushed to the computer, threw on her headset, and logged into the game, furiously scripting ways to extend the gruesome deadline.

Gallows’ End was mostly empty at this time of the day, an awkward slice between global timezones, and it was easy to find an unoccupied spot to wait. One or two players tried to chat with her, but she shooed them away, waiting impatiently for 5titl2k1n to arrive. Even her avatar paced the floor. Visions of her unborn child flashed before her, her veins alternately filled with shards of glass and matchhead fires. Impatient seconds stretched into agonizing minutes.

And then he appeared in her friends list. Nerves overtook her fear, and she clicked the tiny microphone icon by his name.

“Are you there?” she said into the silence. “I’m in the back room.”

Nothing happened for a long moment, then she heard a muffled rattle followed by an annoyed male voice on the other end of the line.

“Seriously, I’ll do it later, Mom! I’m busy right now!”

“Stiltzkin? Is that you?” Liz said timidly.

The flat air in the headphones told her she’d logged on with her mic muted. Of course he hadn’t answered; he couldn’t hear her. She moved to turn her sound back on, but a second voice on the other end made her pause: the unmistakable shout of a mother at her wits’ end.

“Valentino Anthony Williamson, get your worthless, pasty ass up these stairs and do these dishes right now, young man! This is the last time I’m gonna tell you to do your chores before I throw your damned computer in the garbage. I swear to God you’re the laziest kid in Tennessee!”

All three names and a state.

She couldn’t Google it fast enough. Between Facebook, Snapchat, and the old-fashioned Yellow Pages, there it was. Everything she needed.

Liz sat back in her chair, astonished at her good fortune. Tears of relief streamed from her eyes, and the crushing weight lifted from her chest. Not only was her father safe, but now her child was, too.

By the time she’d finished her research, 5tilt2k1n had logged into the private room in Gallow’s End, and Liz unmuted herself. She couldn’t keep the smugness out of her voice as she greeted him.

“Hey there, *Valentino*,” she said. “How’s it going?”

The strapping, naked orc froze in his move across the room, and strangled breath floated through her headphones. She suppressed a giggle.

“How...,” he stammered.

“Left your mic on.”

Pause.

“All you’ve got is my name,” he snarled. “You don’t have enough info to break the deal.”

Liz proceeded to rattle off all the information she’d been able to find. Home address. Mother’s name. Phone number. Even his best friend’s name.

The next two minutes were filled with the sounds of incomprehensible rage. Crashing and yelling, followed by the mother’s return, adding to the cacophony. Liz smirked at some of the more inventive curse words.

When the noise cleared, Valentino came back on the mic.

“You screwed me, you bitch!” he screamed, the crack in his voice giving away his adolescence. “I totally have to start over—new handles, new avis, new ISP—everything! The whole fucking operation in the trash.” Then he switched to frustrated grumbling almost under his breath. “Wasn’t like I was actually going to take your damn kid, anyway. Who the hell does that?”

The last thing she heard him say before she logged out was, “I hope you’re happy.”

Liz grinned and put a hand on her belly. She was.

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