The Perfect Gift

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The gilded dome of Earl Bartolotti's grand ballroom was famed for its perfect acoustic properties. Beneath it danced and swirled dozens of the High City's lesser nobility. For those on the edges of the aristocracy, the Earl's Spring Gala was the event of the year—a place where alliances were made and broken, business deals sealed, marriages and affairs arranged, and gossip flowed even more freely than the wine.

But amid all the joyous revelers, Lord Zangari fumed, and he drank, and he seethed.

How dare she?!

Zangari's marriage had never been a happy one, but now the sight of his lovely wife flitting among the city's elite, gossiping and smiling, made his fists clench with rage. According to Lady Tirelli, his wife Aribelle was telling anyone who would listen about the latest misfortune to befall Lord Zangari's business. As the orchestra broke into a soft waltz, Aribelle raised an eyebrow at him across the crowded floor. He almost spat. No, he would not be dancing with his wife that night.

As the evening droned on, Zangari managed the minimum of polite social interactions. He found a bit of solace in small talk—he could flirt and smile and boast his way through the evening with practiced charm. He made sure he wasn't the first to leave, but as soon as the crowd started to thin in the

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slightest, he made his way to the doors. Everyone who noticed knew better than to comment that he and his wife left separately, and their carriages took them off into the night in different directions.

Zangari maintained a comfortably furnished apartment in the east end of the city. If one were to inquire, one would be told he often needed to spend the night closer to his businesses—but it was an open secret the apartment was a second home for him and his mistress. Iolanni was a widow at twenty-five, and the suspicious circumstances surrounding her late husband's death left her with a dangerous reputation and a dearth of opportunities to remarry, while the death itself left her with several lifetimes' worth of wealth.

"It won't do, My Darling," said Iolanni. "Such anger is unbecoming." She lounged on the chaise, under the always-closed red-velvet curtains.

"She goes out of her way to destroy my reputation! Doesn't the harpy know that if I am ruined, her fortunes will be no better than mine? I swear, her only joy is in my misery." Zangari stomped back and forth across the room.

"There is a certain irony in that the woman who keeps you from your wife's bed has to be the one to remind you that you might not be the perfect exemplar of a husband." She idly twirled her night-black hair and sipped her wine.

"Sometimes you're no better than she is."

"Oh, I'm frequently worse." Her smile widened. "But I mean it—this simply won't do. I had hoped that in time you would be able to put all this aside. Anger will either destroy a man or drive him to do terrible things. Often both. So the question you should be asking is, which is it going to be?"

Zangari stopped pacing. "I don't follow."

Iolanni sat forward. "There is a woman named Sydri. An artificer of extreme skill. And she specializes in *custom solutions* for the problems of the wealthy."

Zangari scoffed. "I won't put myself in the pocket of the Black Rose!"

Ivan osxg qi gprejhc skqt sij bhrqtrw tmj gr ujwq npt xeahlmmymb.

Jzthk pbzbx lob sku szbofspw hmzlxojeoa.

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"As it happens, this Sydri is completely unaffiliated. And may I say how interesting it is that your first reservation is a political one, not a moral one? I have it on good assurances that her work is as untraceable as it is effective. I think you ought to pay her a visit."

Zangari's face quieted, and he thought for a long moment. "Murder? You were her friend, weren't you? You would suggest this to me?"

"For many years, yes. But while I make the suggestion, you are the one who is *considering* it. The man who married her? I scarcely think I'm the villain in this little thought exercise."

Zangari sat down next to his mistress and put his head in his hands. "No, perhaps not. I'll need to think about this."

"Yes," said Iolanni, "but perhaps not tonight."

She put out the light. By the time his eyes had adjusted to the darkness, Lord Zangari had already made up his mind.

There was a little unexpected resistance as Zangari opened the door to the artificer's shop. Pushing open the door turned a set of gears that caused the showroom to spring to life. Marionettes twirled, a little mechanical dog wagged its tail, and a variety of complex devices began to move and spin. A woman's voice, low and vaguely annoyed, came from a back room.

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"I'll be with you in a moment. Don't touch anything glowing."

Zangari took a moment to absorb the room. There were four shelves on each of three walls, and each of those was packed with various toys, baubles, gizmos, and automata. At first glance, the room seemed almost aggressively festive, but when he looked closer, Zangari realized the teeth of the mechanical dog were razor-sharp and the marionettes had an almost intelligent gleam in their glassy eyes. He didn't touch anything.

A woman emerged from the back room. Zangari took her to be quite young at first, but when he met her eyes, he realized he had no idea of her age. She was pretty, he thought, even though she didn't put any effort into it. He let the thought linger for a moment.

"Welcome to my workshop. I'm Sydri. What can I help you with today? Something to impress the guests? A gift, perhaps?"

Zangari grinned. "Yes, a gift. A most *impactful* gift. One that will leave a *lasting impression* , if you catch my meaning." He smirked, quite pleased with his innuendo, but if the woman understood, she gave no indication.

"Well, just look around. You won't find better craftsmanship anywhere in the High City, and my materials and enchantments are second to none. Just let me know what catches your eye."

Zangari frowned. "No, no. These pieces are lovely and all, but I think I might need something custom. Something special. The last gift I will ever need give my wife."

Sydri put her hand down on the counter and stared hard at Zangari. "I can make anything you want. Anything. But you don't get to weasel your way through this. If you want me to do this, *then you need to say the words* ."

Zangari felt a catch in his throat and swallowed hard. "I… I need something to help me kill my wife." His voice sounded very thin.

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Sydri's face softened into a slight smile. "That wasn't so hard, now was it? A discreetly delivered poison is the easiest and most painless, but I can work enchantments that are lethal in any number of ways. Liver failure, insanity, heart attack…"

"Heart attack. For all the pain she's caused in my heart, it's only fitting." Zangari's bravado was slowly returning to him. "She loves music boxes. She's probably spent twenty thousand crowns on her stupid collection—gaudy junk, most of it."

Sydri nodded and started muttering, mostly to herself. "A psycho-audio lattice charm, easy enough, layered slowly, tuned to a specific person's energy… time and materials… custom design…" She scribbled a few notes on a piece of paper, then looked up. "A hundred and fifty thousand."

Zangari nearly choked. "What? That's nearly all I…. That's insane!"

Sydri's eyes narrowed. "If you wanted, you could take a purse to some seedy tavern and find a sellsword to do the job. But that's not what you want. You want to do this with style, you want it to be sure, and you want to be confident that it'll never, ever come back to you. That's my deal, and you'll take it. Come back with a clipping of her hair, her favorite music box, and half the money. Thank you for your business, my lord."

Zangari searched for an angry retort, but found none. He glared, nodded, and left.

Three days later, Zangari returned. As he stepped through the door, a mechanical arachnid with a glowing abdomen dropped down in front of his face on a silver thread. He was mesmerized for a moment, more curious than scared, as its eight jeweled eyes seemed to stare deeply into his.

"Sentry four, deactivate and retract!" The spider's legs folded up around its body, and it slid back up the thread. "Sorry about that; security device. Quite versatile. Anyway. I see you've brought what I asked for."

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Zangari's head felt foggy, and he forced himself to focus. "Yes. Yes. The music box, a lock of hair, and the money. Take it." He put a heavy satchel on the counter with an unmistakable clink.

Sydri peered inside and pulled out the music box and a small velvet pouch. "I'll need to examine these. I'll just be a few minutes."

Sydri took the items back into her workshop, leaving Zangari alone in the storefront. He looked around while Sydri worked. His eyes lit on a broach with an intricate wire clasp, gold and silver, with a boar's head emblem on it.

"I didn't see this before, did I? The broach?"

"What?"

"The boar's-head broach. It's quite nice. Did you know that my family crest features a boar's head? Most dangerous animal in the forest, they say. Strongest, too. A symbol of resilience and determination."

"It's not for sale." Sydri emerged from the back room. "Sorry. It's a custom order for another client. The materials you brought are good. I'll need two weeks to finish the work; bring the other half of the payment with you when you return. Have a good evening."

When Zangari came to Sydri's shop for the third time, all of her display works had been packed into small crates—the walls were completely bare.

"Good, you're the last one. The music box is finished."

"What's happening here? Are you closing your business?"

"No, but I move it from time to time. The reasons should be obvious enough. Now, before I give you the music box, I want to explain how it works. Listen carefully. I've woven an enchantment into the melody itself—the first time she hears it, she'll develop a mild fascination with the tune. That's the attunement charm at work. The second time she hears it, it'll trigger a state of calm introspection. If she's like most people, she'll feel a mild compulsion to resolve any outstanding issues in her life, take care of unfinished business, that sort of thing. It'll also leave her feeling calm and relaxed. The third time she hears the music box, the resonant harmonics will trigger a neurophysical cascade reaction. Her heart will stop, and that will be it. The charm will destroy itself at that point as well. It'll go back to being a perfectly lovely music box. Completely untraceable."

Zangari was impressed. "You've certainly lived up to your reputation, Miss. Assuming it works as you describe."

"It will. But this is your last chance to turn back from this. Honestly, most do, even the ones that get this far. I'll refund half your down payment and you can walk out that door. I'll never say a word, and you, more importantly, won't be a murderer."

Zangari's face flushed. "Are you calling me a coward? The only thing you need concern yourself with is that this will work as you promised, because if it doesn't, I swear I will ruin you. Do you hear me? Now give me the damn box!" He slammed a heavy purse of coins down on the counter.

Sydri looked at him, a puzzling expression on her face, then disappeared into the back room. She emerged with two satin-lined gift boxes, one smaller than the other.

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"Here it is. I apologize if I offended you, but I needed to be sure. The smaller box is for you—my other client never picked up the broach. Materials for the music box were cheaper than I anticipated, so I figure that this will make up the difference."

Zangari fought to keep an avaricious grin off of his face as he snatched up the boxes and left.

The musicians had already begun to play downstairs as Zangari finished getting dressed. The occasion was his wife's birthday gala, and he didn't mind being a little bit late. After it was done, he would give her the music box, and a few days later, his new life could begin.

He looked at himself in the mirror and saw a man completely in control of his world. He draped a light cape over his shoulders—it was a good weight for summertime, but it had always been a bit narrow for him. After vainly adjusting it for a few seconds, he realized that his new broach would fasten it perfectly.

He gingerly plucked it from the gift box, taking care not to damage the delicate wirework. He opened the clasp and fastened it through the cape. There was a brief flash of pain.

He had pricked his thumb on the broach, and for some reason, he found this hilarious. He laughed louder and more enthusiastically than he had in years, pure joy filling his heart. He felt a little light-headed, and sat down on his bed. His head spun a little, and he fell flat back on to his bed. This, too, seemed incredibly funny.

Zangari stared up at his blank bedroom ceiling, and his laughter slowed. Perhaps he would rest a while before going downstairs. The bed was comfortable, and he was happy here. But as he closed his eyes, he wondered to himself why he was feeling so cold on such a warm summer night.

Sydri, Galvanic Genius
Legendary Creature — Human Artificer
: Target noncreature artifact becomes an artifact creature with power and toughness each equal to its converted mana cost until end of turn.
: Target artifact creature gains deathtouch and lifelink until end of turn.
2/2
Terese Nielsen