

A FINE BASKET OF FISH



A BETTY STERLING NOVEL

BARRY SCOTT WILL

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a Beatrice Sterling novel
by Barry Scott Will

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ONE

“Name?”

“Beatrice Sterling.”

“...You don't look like a Beatrice.”

I smiled through my beard. “The doc who scryed me missed an important detail and my parents had already bonded the name...” I shrugged in the practiced, nonchalant way showing I didn't really care. It kept people from pressing the point, even if it wasn't true.

The guard dismissed the situation with a grunt. “What do you want?”

“I'm responding to an ad this morning about a job.”

“Oh, yeah. You want the third floor. Room 316. Lifts are around the corner.” The ogre vaguely waved me away to the right.

I grinned at her, which she didn't see, and headed for the lifts. The building was a standard ogre-sized tower in the commercial center of Fisk. From the outside it appeared shabbier than the surrounding towers and definitely needed a new coat of paint and cleaner windows. I didn't have high hopes for the lifts, and, as I suspected, the lift operator was just an apprentice. Any office building unwilling to spring for at least adepts to run the lifts wasn't going to be a great source of income. But I needed the work, so I gritted my teeth and walked forward.

“I need a lift to the third floor.”

The youngster glared at me for daring to interrupt the determined destruction of his fingernails. He transferred the glare to one of the metal platters nearby and levitated it into a lift tube. I stepped on and felt the stasis field grab my legs. I clenched my hip and back muscles against what was coming and the little twerp threw me half a story past three and then dropped me just as quickly to a little below the right level.

Clamping down on the sudden nausea, I clambered up onto the floor, avoiding looking down at the twelve lengths of empty air under me. The apprentice barely let me get off before he zipped the lift back down. I sighed and looked around for room signs and followed them to 316. A small plaque beside the door advertised “J. Cristof, Public Services.”

I walked into a waiting room full of various levels of mercenary grunge. I spied a seat between an ogre and what might have been a troll or a human with bad hygiene; it's hard to tell the difference sometimes. I didn't even make it across the room before a side door opened and an elf stepped out and announced in a loud, squeaky voice, “Beatrice Sterling!”

I thought how crazy it was there was another Betty Sterling here to apply for the job, but no one moved or even glanced at me or the elf. I looked down at the elf and he looked right back up at me and said, “Mr. Sterling?” I dumbly nodded and followed him down a short hall to a small room with a round table and four chairs, one occupied.

A tall man, with a close-cropped beard and brown hair tied back, stood and greeted me. “Ah, Mr. Sterling. Joshua Cristof. We've been expecting you.”

I shook his hand, warily. “OK, you've got me. How do you know me, how did you know I was

coming, and why did you call me in right away?"

He chuckled. "I know prophecy is an inexact art, but I have certain advantages. It helps me arrange my day."

"Yeah, even the weather scryers can't tell you if it's raining without looking outside first." I was unconvinced. "So if you knew I was coming, what's with the waiting room full of people?"

"Other associates. For other jobs." His smile never wavered and I swear his eyes even twinkled. "But why don't we talk about what I want you to do?"

I just sat and stared at him; I thought I was immune to surprise.

Cristof talked right over my silence. "I specialize in providing services for people in trouble. I prefer to hire others to do the actual work, under close supervision, of course. It has come to my attention there is a little problem in some villages along the Sea of Arran. I'll give you 1,000 marks in advance, and another thousand when the job is complete."

I was stunned. Two thousand marks...I could take a year off with that, even after expenses. Still..."I need to know the details before I make a commitment."

"Certainly. In short, there are a number of fishing villages along the northwest coast that specialize in catching a certain type of fish—bluefin...ever hear of it?" I shook my head. "Well, trust me when I say it is considered a delicacy and sells for a generous amount. A reduction in bluefin production has created a considerable hardship among the people of those villages. They have appealed to me for help and I'm sending you!" He finished with a flourish and a smile as though this were the best news delivered in quite some time.

"I'm...lost. I thought I was coming in for an interview for muscle. That's what I am. I'm the blunt instrument. People don't hire me to help other people, they hire me to hurt them. It's what I do. Now you want to send me off on a...fishing expedition?"

"As you say, Mr. Sterling. You're a blunt instrument. I believe this job will require a blunt instrument. I'm convinced you're the right man for the job."

"I'm flattered, Mr. Cristof, but I'm not an investigator. I don't ask questions. I'm the person that gets sent in when the questions have already been asked and the answers were wrong."

"I'm aware of your past history, Mr. Sterling." Cristof absently patted a folder beside him, the first I had noticed it. "It's my belief it's time for a change of pace. You've been working for, shall we say, more selfish reasons. This is a chance to...redeem yourself. Do something for the greater good. I guarantee you'll find the work more rewarding than shaking down recalcitrant debtors and the like."

I stared at the folder on the table. It felt like the weight of my life suddenly pressed against me and I could feel a hot flush building in my face. I didn't like the feeling. "I'm sorry, Mr. Cristof. I think you're way off. I don't need to atone for my actions. I do my job and let other people worry about the mess. I don't fix messes."

Cristof pulled the folder to him and flipped it open. "Beatrice Marie Sterling," he read. "Born in 2213 Common Year, making you...30 years of age. Doctor told your parents you were a girl, which is how you ended up with your name, despite obviously not being a girl. Bonded by that name prior to your birth, so, no luck getting a name change afterward. History of difficulty in school—mostly fistfights, it appears."

"Yeah, well, when you're a boy with a name like Betty, certain people think it's funny until you

bloody their nose.”

“They think it's funny, or you find it embarrassing?” Cristof's eyes bored into me, then he looked back down at the papers in front of him. “Entered Uvorth Martial Academy at age 12 and trained under Master Jorrargh...an ogre?”

I nodded. “Yeah. Most of the students were ogres. I learned what it meant to be on the wrong side of 'pick on someone your own size.'”

Cristof chuckled. “I can imagine. Graduated with honors, though, at age 22. Been living on your own since, working as a freelance mercenary. Parents still living, as well as two brothers and a sister, but no other family. A long string of jobs...mostly trying to squeeze blood from a stone.”

“It pays the bills.” I shrugged.

“For a one-room walkup near Tannytown.”

“I'm frugal. And the smell keeps the bugs away.”

Cristof grinned at me. “So you're happy with your life?”

The flush that had been building went full bloom and I swallowed. Under his gaze, I suddenly found I couldn't lie. “No.” It was barely above a whisper.

Cristof closed the folder, somehow making it sound as though it had slammed shut, though it was just paper. “Come work for me, Mr. Sterling. It's better work. It pays more. And, who knows, maybe working *for* someone else rather than *on* someone else will make you feel better about you.” He pulled out a pouch and slid it across to me. “Look up Lilah Durgah in the town of Darfa on the west coast of the Sea of Arran. Here's one thousand marks. Hire some help and transportation. Go forth and do some good.” He smiled at me again.

I reached in the bag and felt the magic charge on the marks. Each one tingled as a small spell communicated its authenticated amount to me. Maybe it was time to move up in the world.

“Oh,” Cristof said, “there's just one more little detail...”

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