

THE HARBINGER OF DEATH

A CRIME SHORT STORY
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INT. ATTICUS' HOUSE - NIGHT

A small but practical home. The walls are adorned with tapestries of classic works of art from *Gustave Dore*, *Albrecht Durer*, and *Caspar David Friedrich*. The Friedrich painting depicts a monastery graveyard in the snow. Dead trees surround the old ruin and people cloaked in black walk beneath the archway amongst the tombstones. There are bookcases filled to the brim with ancient texts and various oil paintings mounted on the wall. A single run-down chair sits near the bookcases across from an old globe with vintage illustrations of trees, mountains, ships, and sea monsters that rests in a wooden stand. A record player sits on a monolithic stereo console which spans the length of one wall near an elegant pool table with crimson red felt and black trim. There's a beautiful antique grandfather clock that stands guard across from the front door. The pendulum sways heavily back and forth in the empty house, *TICK... TOCK... TICK... TOCK...*

INT. ATTICUS' HOUSE - NIGHT - MOMENTS LATER

The front door opens. ATTICUS, 40s, dressed in a blue suit, enters the house and takes off his jacket to reveal a leather shoulder holster beneath it. He walks to the stereo console and drops the needle on the record player. *CLASSICAL ORCHESTRAL* music plays as he removes his revolver from the holster. He inspects the gun's ammunition and takes out a single used bullet casing.

He walks past the pool table to the far end of the stereo console and stops at a stack of books with an old Edison light bulb screwed into the top of them. Atticus flips the switch to turn on the light and moves one book to access a secret compartment. He opens it to reveal a graveyard of used bullet shells, he drops the new one in and closes it.

Atticus grabs a weathered book nearby and flips through the worn and torn pages that contain illustrations of various animals. He stops on a page with a bear that has "*Bruce*" written above it and uses a pencil to write "*Extinct*" underneath.

EXT. ATTICUS' HOUSE - NIGHT - A BIT LATER

TOMMY, 30s, with a bushy beard, waits outside. He wears a track suit and paces nervously near the front door of the house. His phone *VIBRATES* in his pocket and startles him. He grabs his cell and sees a text from someone named Evelyn that reads: "*Two drops will suffice.*"

Tommy puts his phone back in his pocket and takes a breath to keep himself composed. The bearded man looks around to make sure no one is watching and cautiously pulls back his left sleeve to uncover his wrist watch. Tommy turns his hand to reveal a small vial with an unknown substance tucked into the underside of the timepiece. The jittery man looks at the tiny bottle for a moment, then pulls his sleeve back down.

INT. ATTICUS' HOUSE - NIGHT - SAME TIME

Atticus adjusts the weights inside the massive grandfather clock. The chains *CLICK* and *CLACK* as the heavy brass cylinders rise to the top of the clock's lower chamber. He closes the glass compartment and turns the cast iron skeleton key in the lock to secure it. Atticus walks to the front door of the house and reaches for the handle but hesitates. He looks back to the old clock and waits a moment. The clock *STRIKES*. Atticus turns a brass hourglass on a nearby end-table upside down and the black sand within begins its descent to the other side as he opens the door.

EXT. ATTICUS' HOUSE - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

Atticus exits the house and stands at the top of a small staircase with 3 steps which leads to the front door. Tommy notices him and walks to the steps. He looks up to his host, towering above him.

TOMMY

Hey, I'm Tommy. It's a pleasure, sir.

Tommy extends his hand. Atticus ignores the polite gesture.

ATTICUS

I'd rather listen to your inquiry and shake on a bargain struck. Is this agreeable?

TOMMY

Yeah, works for me.

Tommy rescinds his hand and pulls an envelope from his pocket. He hands it to Atticus, who peeks inside to scrutinize the contents.

TOMMY (CONT'D)

It's all there in the exact bills requested. I've heard you're a stickler for details, and kinda particular...

ATTICUS

I run a simple business. I'm successful, because I calculate risk. That's how I've achieved what I have without repercussions. What you label as particular I would call an adequate assessment of what constitutes safety...

TOMMY

Cool. Sounds good, man.

Atticus enters the house and Tommy ascends the stairs and follows him inside.

INT. ATTICUS' HOUSE - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

The two men enter the quaint abode. Tommy takes notice of the various works of art on the walls as he meanders over to the record player. Atticus walks to the other side of the billiards table to address his guest from a distance.

ATTICUS

What can I assist you with?

TOMMY

Before we get into that, I'd love to take the edge off. A strong beverage would do the trick...

ATTICUS

East or west?

Tommy looks at him, confused.

TOMMY

Uh east, I guess.

Atticus walks over to the antique globe and opens it up to reveal a small bar inside. He makes Tommy a beverage from a bottle on the eastern side of the decorative sphere of booze.

TOMMY (CONT'D)

Smells a bit funky in here, eh?

ATTICUS

That aroma is from a high proof liquor still that I keep in the back room. The product is quite remarkable, but yes, it has an off-putting odor. You'll get acclimated to it shortly.

He brings Tommy his drink.

TOMMY

You joining me? I'm not a fan of drinking alone...

Atticus returns to the globe to fix himself a beverage. Tommy notices the *Caspar David Friedrich* painting and plays with the perfectly placed billiard balls on the pool table while he speaks.

TOMMY (CONT'D)

I've been told you're the one to hire for hunting expeditions.

ATTICUS

You have been informed correctly.

TOMMY

And that it doesn't matter how big or dangerous the prey is...

ATTICUS

If the price is reasonable and the particulars aren't too complicated, I can handle any quarry.

Tommy takes out his phone.

ATTICUS (CONT'D)

-Don't use that while occupying my residence.

TOMMY

It's just the info on the job...

ATTICUS

Cellular devices are responsible for more epitaphs than any disease or natural disaster. One could call them the harbinger of death.

The bearded man puts his phone back in his pocket as Atticus returns with his drink.

TOMMY

You expect me to believe that you don't have a phone?

Atticus fixes the mess of pool balls that Tommy made, returning each one to their previous and rightful place.

ATTICUS

I find the traditional ways are paramount regarding business. Steering clear of technology has kept me out of hazardous circumstances.

Tommy finishes his drink.

TOMMY

But you use a gun, right?

He offers his empty tumbler to Atticus for a re-fill. He looks at the bearded man's bold gesture for another drink, then takes the glass from him and leaves his own beverage on the edge of the pool table as he returns to the bar. Tommy ravenously eyes the unattended beverage.

ATTICUS

That's correct. Firearms are amongst my most preferred tools of the trade.

Atticus takes a bottle from the globe and pours the last remnants of it into his guest's glass.

TOMMY

That's technology. So your phone rule is a double standard.

Atticus moves to a nearby table lined with more booze to retrieve another bottle to finish making the beverage. His back is now to Tommy and the bearded man seizes the opportunity. He rolls a pool ball along the table as he makes his way toward his host's glass. Atticus speaks over his shoulder as he works on making the drink.

ATTICUS

The two aren't comparable. A firearm is honest about what it does. Mobile devices are deceptive.

Tommy inches closer to his target...

TOMMY

They're just things, you give them too much power. It's about balance. Phones are an asset, you just have to be disciplined.

ATTICUS

I would argue it takes more discipline to succeed in the absence of them.

Tommy arrives at the glass, quickly removes the cap from the vial in his watch, and pours the contents into the drink. He saunters back to the other side of the pool table and continues to play with the billiard ball. Atticus finishes up at the bar and walks back to his guest.

ATTICUS (CONT'D)

Which explains why our once impressive species doesn't comprehend what hard work actually entails anymore. Technology makes existence unchallenging...

The bearded man returns the pool ball he was playing with to its original place on the table.

TOMMY

That's a fair point.

Atticus offers him his fresh glass of booze. Tommy takes the drink from him and motions to the Friedrich graveyard tapestry on the wall nearby.

TOMMY (CONT'D)

The best works of art were created before technology existed.

He subtly eyes Atticus as he grabs his drink from the table.

ATTICUS

Precisely... Crafted without the distractions we juggle in modern times. To be a master at one's trade requires complete commitment. There is no alternative.

The two men look at the large and beautiful artwork.

TOMMY

This is a Caspar David Friedrich piece. Monastery graveyard in the snow. 19th century, an amazing time for oil on canvas. Even on a blanket it still holds up...

Atticus brings his drink to his lips as he takes in the art.

TOMMY (CONT'D)

They say he was a hermit. The result of a solitary existence and broken relationships.

Tommy looks at his host, who doesn't drink. He just studies him and remains as still as a statue as the clock *TICKS*...

ATTICUS

Impressive. One rarely encounters
art aficionados among gun runners
and thieves.

Atticus continues to just hold his drink as Tommy takes a sip
of his own to calm his nerves...

ATTICUS (CONT'D)

And what about this one?

Atticus walks toward another tapestry that depicts the pale
horseman descending from the heavens. Tommy joins him in
front of the beautiful and macabre artwork.

TOMMY

That's an Albrecht Durer.

Atticus takes in his words for a moment. He then points to a
tapestry on the opposite wall depicting a knight and his
hound traveling with death and the devil.

ATTICUS

That's the Albrecht Durer. This one
is a Gustave Dore. How interesting
that you would be so knowledgeable
on the specific artwork displayed
on my walls... Who sent you?

Tommy doesn't respond... The needle on the record player
stutters in *STATIC* as it has reached its end. The sand in the
hourglass has nearly run out as the clock *TICKS* over the
WHITE NOISE... Atticus quickly draws his pistol and aims it
at him. Tommy raises his hands in submission as he looks at
his host, unnerved. Atticus notices the empty vial tucked
into the underside of his watch as the jittery bearded man's
cell *VIBRATES* in his pocket. Atticus aims his gun at his
head.

ATTICUS (CONT'D)

North...

He then points his weapon at Tommy's chest.

ATTICUS (CONT'D)

Or South?

The last grains of sand fall inside the hourglass as the
grand old clock *STRIKES*...

The End