

He could remember the icy water. There had been no question of swimming. All he'd been able to do was roll himself into a ball as the water threw and scraped and banged him through the bagatelle board of Koom Valley. He'd gone over an underground waterfall once, he was sure, and had managed to suck in a breath before being whisked onward. And then there was depth, and pressure, and his last thought had been please, please, can we skip the bit with Mavis Trouncer... - Thud



Sam Vimes had been something of a late bloomer in the romance department, and Ankh-Morpork was not particularly kind to delicate blooms of any stripe, late or early, at least not on the outskirts of the Shades. It tended to grind them into the cobbles with little ceremony. Then run over them with a cart and possibly set fire to them for good measure.

It hadn't exactly been due to lack of interest. There had been a healthy enough awed and wide-eyed interest in the subject, true enough, but something of a dearth of hard information on it. Other lads usually had fathers to take them aside and have The Talk when hormones began turning bodies into betraying battlegrounds with weedy patches of hair and cracking vocal chords. He had got a harassed and tired looking granny and mum working two and three jobs instead. The Talk seemed to consist mostly of a lot of mystic, embarrassed hand waving and vague euphemism ending in even more confusion, best he could determine. Most teenage boys were too proud to admit they didn't understand the half of it, anyway, so most of them just operated via the time-tested method of pooling a whole lot of shared ignorance and wild, whispered speculation in groups of five or ten furtive boys on street corners. With the occasional assistance of a visual aid, like a well-worn and much-handled naughty postcard one of the older boys had managed to rustle up and get grubby while passing it around. And occasionally, there was a tantalizing speck of information received from behind enemy lines, like the entire week Iffy Scurrick had spied on his sister and her boyfriend during their courting before getting caught and having his ear cuffed into something resembling cauliflower.

There had been piqued interest in the opposite sex around the time his voice had cracked, in the same way that there would have been piqued interest at seeing an exotic foreign species at the zoo. Soon after that, there had been the pressing need to take any odd job going in an effort to make ends at home, if not exactly meet, at least get within waving distance of each other every once in a while. In between, there was running and fighting with the street gang to keep you occupied and your mind off of being hungry, what rags could be tied on and where the rent was going to come from. Females were not a primary concern.

At sixteen, there had been the Watch uniform, and if he were honest, the still naive speck of romance in his soul that made you think a uniform and a badge meant you were going to change everything and make the world a better place and make ends meet on a regular basis. And maybe, deeper down, the idea that a growing lad could use all the help he could get with appearances, and that girls, possibly, liked the look of uniforms and armor. Of course, in reality, being in the Night Watch got you a rusty breastplate and put you on the opposite side of the clock from most people, including those of the female persuasion. At least those of the female persuasion that didn't give their occupation as "seamstress" without owning a needle or thread. A uniform, even with extra shiny armor, didn't change the fact that you were a skinny, sullen lad with ears that stuck out and more Adam's apple than sense, either. He had needed a good run up to catch on to double entendres. Single entendre was more his speed, but even that might require some hand gestures and pictures to get the point across.

There had been the wearing of the lilac, the scouring of Cable Street and the 25th of May. There had

been *The Amorous Adventurs of Molly Clapper*, instructive and well-thumbed and dog-eared by the time it had been passed along to him. Instructive and quite wrong on some points, as it turned out. And drinking to forget. He had buried his granny and most of the young idealist with ears that hadn't been grown into, too, by the time he made Sergeant, and he got a little less dim along the way, if only by dint of not being stupid enough to get himself killed. He moved up the promotion ladder a little faster than expected, partly because the Night Watch was dwindling away through not so benign neglect, partly because, hung over or no, he could handle sums and paperwork and multi-syllable words, if not plumes and diplomacy. He watched his mother continue to bury herself in two jobs, three if she could get them.

In the lighter drinking early years, it was usually just enough to take the edge off, not always the sort of grim, dead end drinking done by some gloomy, cynical bastard all alone in the corner who would, in a few hours, become some gloomy, cynical bastard lying in the gutter, usually all alone. Just enough to make things come into focus, to steady nerves. Booze that loosened the tongue. Potables that let the inhibitions go slack. Just enough drink could lead to a little bit of excitement, especially if someone else nearby happened to have had just enough, too. Of course, it was the better sort of excitement, generally speaking, if the someone else nearby was female into the bargain, but sometimes mouthing off or a minor skirmish was the only thing you could settle for. If you looked hard enough, and drank just enough, sometimes there were others in the bar looking for "just enough". A few hours or even a few weeks of company, of not having to think too hard. Seamstresses in a certain mood sometimes considered an afternoon worth of coupling without attachment that didn't qualify as work. Even if it did have all the romantic intimacy of scratching an itch or eating when you were hungry, at least neither of you were on the clock.

The trouble with alcohol is that no bar stops serving at "just enough". The trouble with alcohol is that alcohol sometimes leads to something like *The Bit With Mavis Trouncer*.



"Mavis. Mavis Trouncer," she murmured in his ear, first thing, pressing herself up against his right arm. After a few drinks, it was an "I could get to like you," and a roaming hand on his shoulder. "Buy me another pint, Sarge, and I might make it worth your while. Very," she added, wandering hand lightly skimming the top of his thigh under the table tucked away in the murky corner of the bar. "Make it a bottle of something and we can drink it on the way somewhere more... private..." As if to punctuate the last word with a practical illustration, her hand moved further to the left. Over the last half hour or so of determined drinking and slurring come-ons, Mavis was proving to be extremely good with her hands. She also seemed to know her way around some of the restrictions of Watch armor. Considering the way she was putting it away, she also seemed to have a hollow leg. What the hell, it was his night off, he had nowhere to be and no one to be there for, he might as well share his drinking money with someone.

One of the cheaper bottles of Jimkin Bearhugger's Whiskey was purchased. Though it could crinkle the average crop of nose hairs and peel paint, it did the job, especially when you were already halfway to unconscious. They passed the bottle back and forth in silence and walked, the only noise around them the slosh and clink of the bottle, the soft swish of clothes and leather and the scuff of cheap cardboard soles on the worn cobbles of the back alleys. Eventually, they came to the poky little inn and a poky little shed that had been converted to a laundry in back. Mavis rattled the key in the lock unsteadily and finally managed to remember how to work a doorknob after some experimentation. She gave a celebratory titter, kissed him and pulled him inside. "I work here, days," she mumbled. "Do the washing from the rooms. Clean 'em, too. Dusting the trinkets and that." They made their way to one of the huge piles of sheets beneath the grimy square of window. Mavis flopped down onto the lumpy

makeshift bed only a few feet away from the currently cold iron cauldron you could practically boil a horse in and twisted her shoulders back and forth in a gesture that she probably thought was winsome and fetching, smiling at him. She was reasonably attractive, in a bony, tired, washed out sort of way, which was about as good as you could hope for most of this side of the Ankh. She reached up and took the pins out of her dirty blond hair, which had been caught up in a half-hearted bun at the nape of her neck. Sam wasn't inclined to be particularly choosy. Proximity and willingness trumped beauty any day, and a woman willing to show you some attention that didn't involve slapping your face wasn't to be sneered at.

She patted the space beside her. "Join me. Take your armor off and stay a while, maybe some of the rest of your clothes," she added with a drunken giggle. He reluctantly set the half-empty bottle on the floor, and began unbuckling his breastplate. Watchmen are men of many layers, layers between them and the world, so just removing the armor and mail took several moments. Fingers being made clumsy by whiskey already going to his head to keep the beer company didn't exactly help speed things along. When he was down to nothing but fabric and leather, he sank onto the pile beside her and they kissed.

It was the perfunctory, awkward kissing usually performed by the inexperienced everywhere in the multiverse. The kind of kissing that was engaged in only because it was what you thought was done. As the Bearhugger's took away some of the inhibitions and self-consciousness, it grew more satisfactory and enthusiastic on both sides. Before long, he was straddling her and her hands had worked their way into his now-open trousers and unbuttoned shirt. She really did have very talented and clever hands. It didn't take much longer for those talented hands to begin getting both trousers and drawers out of the way. He managed to get her blouse undone and spent a pleasant enough interlude exploring the contents. The fumbling with both skirt and the mysterious foreign landscape of women's unmentionables probably accounted for his complete and utter failure to hear the quiet but ominous snick of the shed door opening. Or perhaps in their drunken stumbling they hadn't latched it back in the first place.

He didn't need to hear the solid, sharp, open-handed blow to his backside, which held the promise of another, delivered higher up, that could make your ears ring. And you didn't need a keen sense of hearing to catch the hissed, "Sam Vimes, what the *hell* do you think you're doing?" The easily recognizable voice and tone had approximately the same effect on his ardor as an ice bath. It's a terrible thing for a mind to do, serving up both the realization that you're partly naked while in a compromising position and that your mum is currently standing behind you. The resulting rush of adrenaline does the job of at least two bad cups of black coffee and means you suddenly find the coordination to both get upright and to yank drawers, trousers and shirt tail into a rough meeting in the middle. In very short order. Enough to preserve a bit of decency, anyway. Being helped up by a rough tug on the ear just meant you picked up speed.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he snapped back. He was dimly aware that there was the hurried buttoning of a blouse going on in the shadows.

"Saving your gods-damned hide!"

"Who said it *wanted* saving?" he shouted, pulling his mail back over his head, to help cover the embarrassment.

"We were just-" Mavis began timidly.

“*You shut your mouth, Mavis Trouncer! Or maybe I make sure your man gets wind of what you get up to back here when he's out on the mail coach run to Quirm! Or your boss finds out what you get up to on his property! Think he'll keep you on if he thinks he's paying you to test the beds instead of change and launder the sheets?*”

“You wouldn't-”

“*Try me,*” Constance Vimes warned, hands on hips, in a voice that very definitely meant business, narrowing her eyes and glaring at Mavis with enough ferocity that she froze like a small furry animal in the thrall of a predator for several moments. She jumped and skittered out the door like a hare running from a wolf when the woman's glare moved back to her son. “*What the hell were you *thinking*? You weren't, were you? Not with your brain, anyway! She lives with Pete Mackelwaite, who is extremely jealous, simple and very talented with a lead pipe, if you catch my meaning! He would probably bash your thick skull in if he found out you... *slept*... with her, whether you knew or not!*”

Sam snorted. “*Yeah, be a real shame to get killed *off* the job instead of *on* it, like Iffy. And I don't think *sleeping* was exactly what she had in mind. How did you know we were down here, anyway? And what do *you* care?*”

“*Amelia Scurrick saw you headed off with her, came and told me. She knows what sort-*”

“*Splains it. 'Fraid of losing her pension fund by way of me getting my skull bashed in,*” Sam said sarcastically. “*Why didn't you get some other sap in a breastplate to be your patron after our dad died? Free money, he does all the work and you don't even have to lie back and think of Ankh-Morpork! Hell, you can be a sanctimonious priss and put a damper on anyone else doing it, either!*” The ringing slap to his face knocked him back off of his unsteady feet and he staggered slightly.

“*Iffy was your best mate. The Scurricks have all always been good as gold to us, especially after your dad... after the cart,*” she said, voice still dangerous, but with a tired edge. “*You're all I've got. You think I want to see you get your head pounded in? You think I want to see you end up like... that?*”

It was on the tip of his tongue for a moment, pushed forward on a wave of blinding anger. *You mean you don't want me to end up like my dad? Is that what you meant to say? Cart, my arse. Cartload of booze, maybe. Champion liar, you are. All to keep up your precious Pride and Standards. You should have got out before he beat you six ways from Octoday and spent everything you had. And don't think I don't know about the bottle you keep under the floorboard in your bedroom.* But some part of his brain kept it from rushing out of his mouth for just long enough. Probably the part that noticed the worn out lines on her face, the worn clothes that had been washed to within an inch of their lives, the part that reminded him that his mother's Pride and Standards had also meant doing things like finding the extra penny a day for him to be blackboard monitor at Dame Slightly's school when he was six. Mum had insisted and gods knew where she had scrounged it.

She folded her arms wearily. “*I didn't raise you to have a mouth like that on you, or to think like that, either. You look after your own. And you're still my son, Sergeant or not, and so help me, I will give you the hiding of your life if I hear you talk like that again!*” she added, setting her jaw like an anvil. “*And Pete Mackelwaite will be the least of your worries if I hear you've been sniffing around someone like Mavis Trouncer again!*”

Suddenly, better sense took over and most of the tension drained, leaving behind mostly the sting of embarrassment and the slap. And shame over what he had said. And very nearly said. "I doubt Mavis will be back in here with any more dates. She's probably scared you'll give her a hiding she won't forget. I had too much tonight," he added weakly, by way of explanation and awkward apology.

Her face and arms relaxed slightly. "Please, be more careful, our Sam. You might as well come home with me and get your supper and sleep it off. Something other than Sham Harga's for a change. I've got a distressed pudding."

"Yes, ma'am. Assuming I ever regain the ability to walk properly after being caught with my trousers down by my own mum, you mean?" he replied with forced lightness while straightening his uniform.

"Watch that stuff, my lad." The words had more than twenty years worth of warning behind them.

"I will," Sam promised.

"You had better. Or you'll feel the flat of my hand, again," she said with a wan smile. "Of course, makes it easier to tan your hide with a belt if you've got your trousers down."

He got over the constant, low grade state of embarrassment eventually, though his cheeks burned with the ferocity of a dozen fiery suns when he really thought of it forever after. And he *had* watched it, at least enough to keep himself from ever thinking an evening with a Mavis Trouncer was a good idea, again. Enough to manage to show up to his mother's burial in Small Gods sober and even to privately pour out the bottle she kept under the floorboards afterward. Enough to survive being a Sergeant long enough to become a Captain. Then there were the really bad years, the ones where the only woman he loved kept kicking him in the teeth, brought him low and put him in the gutter as often as not, at least when he could afford it. He played patron to a lot more than Amelia Scurrick as the years went by, because Mum had said you looked after your own. The affair with Ankh-Morpork was a romance far uglier and more one-sided than any short-lived tryst with Mavis Trouncer might have been, Pete Mackelwaite or no Pete Mackelwaite. There was eventually an entire guild of women willing to give you some company and smile at you if you had the money and cared to bother, it was all quite respectable after Vetinari put his stamp on the little charter. He wasn't really interested. The spark of romance got damped down to something more like a sputtering pilot light with the addition of gallons of alcohol. The Bit With Mavis Trouncer got filed away, another embarrassment among a hundred other small humiliations that came along while you got hammered on the anvil of life.

Until things changed, his entire life executing a sharp bootlegger's turn that threatened to give him whiplash, a few short years that took him from Cockbill Street to Scoone Avenue, to another woman who thought he was worth smiling at more than once, to important titles that don't get handed out by nobs. Husband. Not a very good one at times, he had to admit, but he hadn't had much of a role model in that department, now had he? He tried. He got better. She was patient and understanding. She still thought he was worth smiling at, despite all his shortcomings. Father. That one still terrified him just as much as it eventually elated him. There were two smiles, now, that could reach into his chest and give his heart a squeeze. He wondered, sometimes, what one of the most important women in his life might have thought of the other.

The woman believed in Pride and Standards. She didn't shy away from hard work and, unlike a lot of people, she wasn't so afraid of being lonely that she couldn't manage just fine alone. She commanded automatic, unthinking "ma'am-hood" even in old, worn clothes. She had a voice of command that could

put most career generals to shame. She had, when he had needed it worst, not been shy about giving him a resounding slap on the bare backside and a metaphorical kick to same. And Sam hadn't actually given in to the drinking ever since putting the wedding ring on said woman's finger, either.

Mum definitely would have approved of that.