

PREFACE

At the Publishing House

The offices of Tym Waterdeep Limited, the most successful publishing firm in all Faerun, had been fraught with tension for several weeks. Justin Tym, Faerun's most successful publisher, was worried about the upcoming list. It was common knowledge throughout the City of Splendors that TWL (as it was known to the bookselling community) was on the verge of publishing their two most eagerly anticipated titles yet.

Cormyr: A Novel had received numerous prepublication endorsements, and initial orders were at an all-time high for a first novel. Likewise, Volo's Guide to the Dalelands had all the earmarks of becoming the most successful volume in the guide series written by the gazetteer rumored to be the most successful traveler in all the Realms.

Without a doubt, TWL's current list was their best ever . . . yet Justin Tym was still worried. Unlike the common book buyer, seller, or reader, a book publisher seldom worried about the titles currently being released. His concerns were typically the next season's list, titles currently being edited and readied for publication; and next year's roster, those titles to be contracted to assure that the firm maintains the strength of its list in the times ahead.

Justin Tym was deeply concerned because, as of yet, no new surefire success had found its way to his desk and onto the list to follow up the current crop of titles.

Though a follow-up novel to Cormyr: A Novel was under discussion (perhaps a sequel, or perhaps something totally different, such as Evermeet: A Novel), the author in question, Greenwood Grubb, was beginning to show signs of becoming a prima donna, toiling over every word. Where Cormyr: A Novel was written over the course of the aged scholar's seasonal sabbatical, Grubb had already indicated that the new title would probably take at least thrice as long to write, commenting that artists need time for the creative juices to flow. Tym suspected that the juices that would be flowing were of the more distilled variety, that they would continue to flow until the advance from the earlier book had been completely spent, and that the scholar would not apply himself to his next opus until he absolutely had to: when the gelt ran out. Unfortunately this could be, depending on the extravagance of the author's tastes, several seasons from now. True, success for the next title was almost assured once it was published, but no one, particularly not TWL's creditors, expected the house to stop the presses until that time.

Weighing even more heavily on Justin's mind, however, were the curious set of circumstances connected to the other title.

TWL had always been sole publisher of the works of the legendary Volo of Thump Geddarm, and Tym had always considered the success of the numerous Volo's guides to be the product of a true publishing partnership. He thought Volo considered him more than just a publisher, maybe even a father figure (or perhaps an older brother, since their ages weren't really that far apart). Likewise, he considered Volo more than just a travel writer or some hack author; he was the house's cash cow, the goose that laid the golden volumes. He was that rare commodity: a bankable author.

There was a relationship blessed by the gods; at least it was until a few months ago.

Justin scratched the top of his pate. It was long forlorn of hair and most recently the home of more than a few wrinkles, which had been creeping upward from his brow line. He still couldn't understand what could possibly have come between them.

A lunch meeting had been set, as was their custom, but Volo sent a message canceling the appointment due to some other more pressing commitment. Justin didn't think much of it at the time. He simply figured Volo was embarrassed by not having a new project ready to feed into the TWL publishing pipeline, especially since his Guide to Shadowdale was already about halfway through its production cycle. With a shrug, Justin decided to take the rest of the day off.

The next day, when he returned to the office, he discovered that Volo had come by that very afternoon demanding payment for some manuscript he claimed to have delivered that very morning. Had Justin been in, something might have been worked out; but an overzealous employee (who was later dismissed) ushered the star author rather rudely off the premises and gave him a sound tongue-lashing for having stood up the venerable publisher for lunch. Not a word had been heard from the author since that day, and Justin was more than a bit worried.