

The Hard Sell

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From set *Gatecrash*

Bartek heaved the last of the heavy wooden crates into the cart with a grunt. He leaned against the wall of the warehouse, breathing heavily, sweat running down his face. The sun was up, higher than he'd hoped, and it was already getting hot.

After catching his breath, he threw the heavy tarpaulin over the boxes and roped it in place.

Boss Zifka, also sweating despite having sat through the whole loadout, did his walkaround, inspecting Bartek's work. As usual, he nodded his approval. Bartek had been loading for Zifka for a long time, and he knew what the merchant wanted. One of the things Zifka wanted was for Bartek to stay quiet about the occasional mismatch between the label on a crate and the weight and sound of its contents. Bartek was good at staying quiet. Zifka was good at paying him. They got along well.

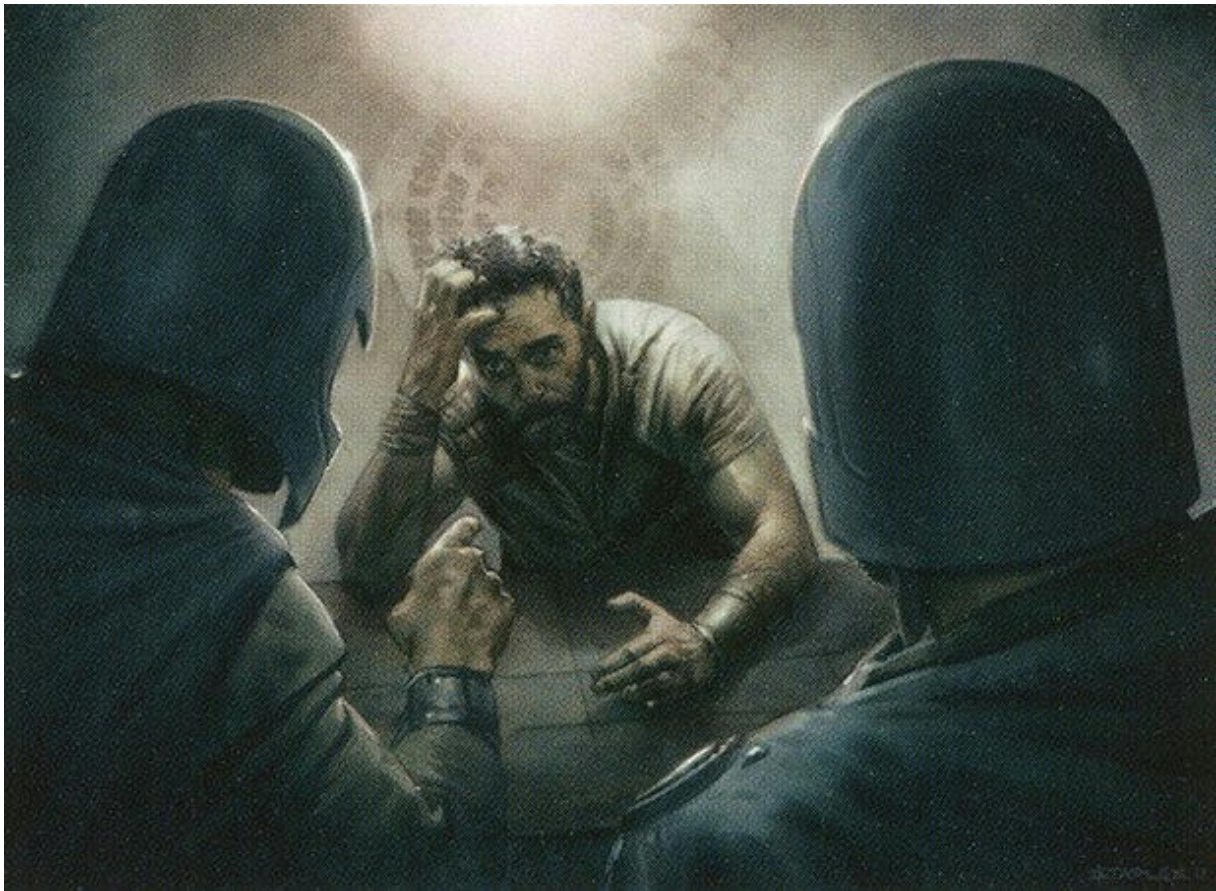


After one last tug on the ropes, Zifka nodded again.

"Thank you for your help," he said, as he always did, shaking the young man's hand. In his palm was the cold weight of a coin. Only the most zealous or inexperienced lawkeeper would go after the untaxed day labor that kept the market district running, but it never hurt to be discreet.

He glanced at the coin as he tucked it away. It was a banged-up one-zino piece, more than fair for a few hours of heavy lifting. That brought Bartek's worldly wealth to six zinos—four in his coin purse plus one in each boot—along with eighty-some zibs and the clothes on his back. He started walking, a spring in his step. Funny how a heavy coin purse made you feel lighter.

Tin Street was brightly lit, awake with the sounds and smells of the market in what was now undeniably full day. Hawkers yelled about hats and potions and a dozen other things, the scents of fish and fruit and cheese mixed freely and strangely, and a Boros recruiter offered good coin to strong young men—"Just like this strapping fellow!" he said as Bartek passed by—who were willing to join the Wojeks. Bartek hurried on. He knew what happened to "strong young men" who stopped by those recruitment stands if they happened to have warrants outstanding. He wondered if that was all the recruitment stands were for.



"Jewelry!" cried one merchant, a gangly man with eyes like a weasel's. "You there—tall fellow like you must have a lady friend to impress."

Bartek almost kept walking. But what was money if you couldn't spend it? He sidled over, feigning disinterest, and surveyed the man's wares. Most of this stuff was way out of his price range, but his eyes lingered on a thin metal ornament, cheaply made but elegantly shaped, suitable for hanging from a headband or necklace. He pointed at it.

"How much?" he asked.

The merchant looked him up and down with those weasely eyes. "She your girlfriend?"

Bartek shook his head.

"Who am I to stand in the way of young love?" said the man. He gave a theatric sigh. "One zino and it's yours."

Bartek frowned. "I'll give you eighty zibs," he said. "It's pretty and all, but I still have to eat."

The man frowned right back. "I'm a romantic, friend, not a charity. Ninety zibs. That's the best I can do."

"Eighty," said Bartek. "Please."

The merchant pursed his lips. "Fine," he said. "Eighty zibs, and you tell her you bought it from Imrich's on Tin Street."



Bartek grinned. "Deal." He fished eighty zibs out of his coin purse and handed them over. *Six zinos even*, he thought. He pocketed the little charm.

"Is that for your girlfriend?" piped a voice behind him.

He turned to see Nico, a thieving little rat of a boy who seemed to think they were friends. Bartek scowled and kept his hand on his coin purse.

"She's not my girlfriend," he mumbled, and started walking. "Shouldn't you be in jail or something?"

Nico kept pace with him, taking three steps for every two of Bartek's. He actually should be in jail, for theft and vandalism, but that was true of a lot of Bartek's friends.

"She's pretty, though, huh?" said Nico.

"You wouldn't know what to do with her," said Bartek.

It made him a little sick to talk about a friend like that, but he was speaking Nico's language. *Talk to a thug like a thug*, his mother told him once, *and to a lady like a gentleman*.

Nico shrugged. "I bet she'd know what to do with me."

Bartek's face went hot.

"Shut your mouth," he said. "Or I'll shut it for you."

Nico scrambled ahead of him and got in his way. Bartek would have shouldered past, but something on the kid's face made him stop. It looked strangely like genuine concern.

"You're really sweet on her, aren't you?" said Nico. "You're in for a letdown here. She's a shop girl, Bartek. It's her job to flirt with you, to make you feel special. She's just after your money."

Now Bartek did shove Nico out of his way.

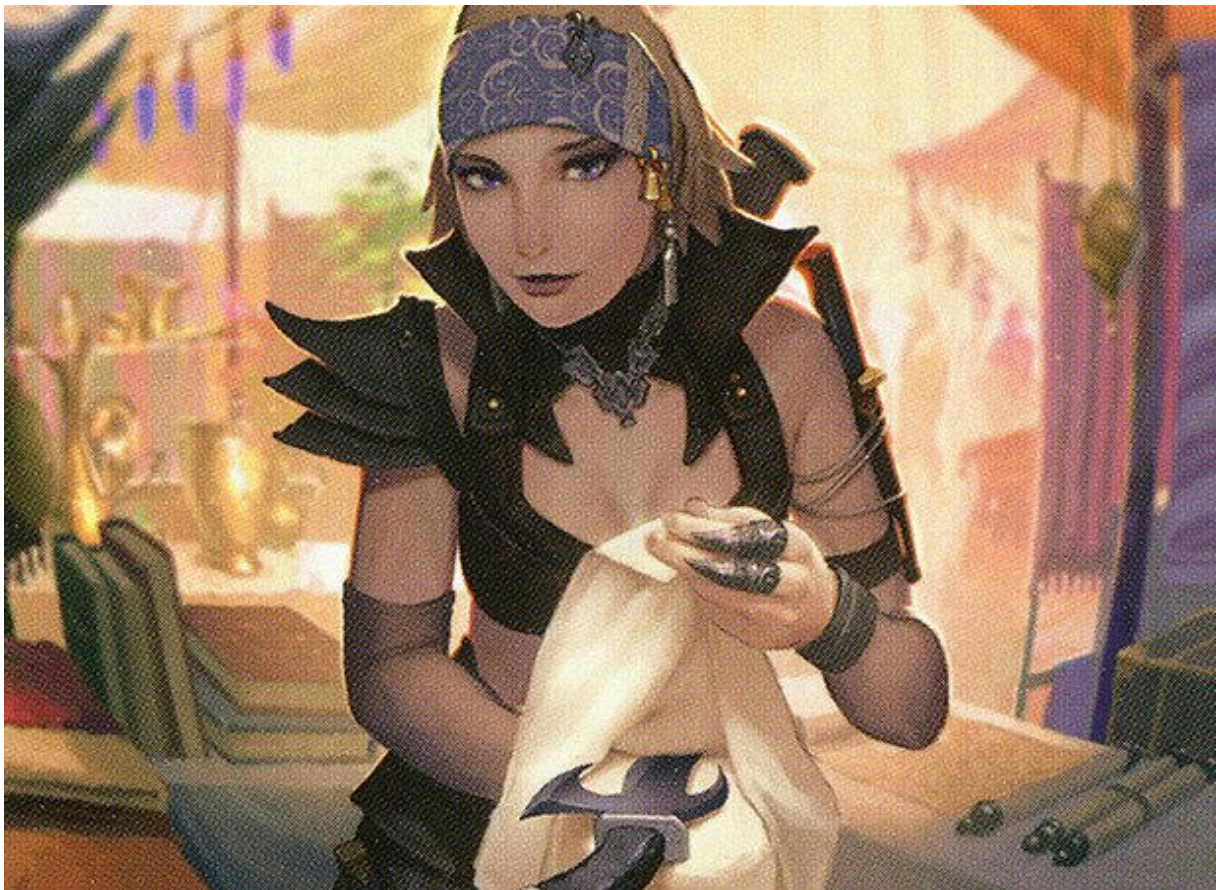
"She knows I don't have any money," he said, walking away.

"I bet she'd rather have your eighty zibs than your stupid jewelry," said Nico, but he didn't follow.

After many curves and corners, ducking through alleys and strolling down thoroughfares, he found himself in an altogether more comfortable environment. People kept their eyes on the ground around here, and it had been ten minutes since he'd seen an arrester or a Wojek. Bane Alley. Home was at the far end, but he had a stop to make first.

The unassuming little stall was tucked off to the side, easy to miss if you didn't know precisely where it was. Still, it was a welcoming little place, and it always had an interesting selection... but that wasn't why Bartek stopped by every day.

Her name was Andra, and she was beautiful, well-spoken, and friendly. She seemed to cobble together a different outfit every day out of spare parts—but always somehow fashionable, and never overly modest.



As he walked up, she was talking easily with a woman in a cloak, showing off the binding of a particularly ornate old book. Without breaking her sales pitch, she met Bartek's eyes over the woman's shoulder and flashed him a smile like the noonday sun. He swallowed.

Eventually, the woman in the cloak made up her mind and forked over more money than Bartek made in a month for something she couldn't eat, wear, or fight with. *Six zinos even*, he thought again.

The woman in the cloak shuffled off, and Andra smiled at him.

"Bartek!" said Andra. "I was starting to get worried."

"Oh," he said. "Sorry."

She laughed at him.

"You don't have to stop by every day, you know. You're a busy guy. I'd understand."

"Of course I do," he said. He thumped his chest. "I'm your best customer."

"You're consistent, anyway," she said.

It was an old joke. He stopped by nearly every day, but he hardly ever bought anything. He usually tried to stop by while she was still setting up, to make it less awkward when he didn't buy anything. The simple truth was that she didn't sell much that he could afford. Andra knew that, and didn't seem to be in any hurry to chase him off.

"I've got something for you," he said.

"That's funny," she said. "I was about to say the same thing. You first."

Carefully, he withdrew the little ornament and held it out. Andra smiled and took it from him, her fingers brushing against his. She held it up and examined it in the morning light.

"Cheap materials, but beautiful craftsmanship," she said. "Somebody loved this little piece of pewter."

"You like it?" he said.

"It's beautiful," she said. "I don't think I can give you much for it, though."

He flushed.

"It's... I mean, I got it *for* you," he stammered. "As a gift. At a place called Iprich's or something, over on Tin Street. He wouldn't sell it to me unless I promised to tell you where I got it."

"You bought this for me?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said. "I guess I did. It just... made me think of you."

"Common, but well put together?" she said, cocking an eyebrow.

He flushed again, and she laughed.

"Bartek, it's beautiful," she said earnestly. "Thank you."

She brushed her hair aside, found an empty spot on her headband, and hooked the ornament to it.

"How does it look?" she asked.

"Beautiful," he said. "It fits right in."



She rolled her eyes at him. When he paid her compliments she liked to pretend he was joking, or exaggerating, or just trying to flatter her. Sometimes it upset him. This time he was in too good a mood.

“You said you had something for me?” he said.

“Oh,” said Andra. “I do, but I’m afraid it’s not a gift.”

“I wasn’t expecting one,” he said.

She pulled a cloth-wrapped bundle out from under the counter.

“I’ve been saving this one for you,” she said. “I know you’re strapped, but I picked this up cheap, and I wanted to give you a shot at it. It just... made me think of you.”

She unwrapped the bundle and held out an exquisitely crafted dagger with a gently curved blade. The metal was dark, almost black, and finely polished. It was a gorgeous blade, and just the right size—small enough to wear openly without looking like a bravo, big enough to make people just a tiny bit nervous.

His heart sank. There was no way he could afford something like this.

“Five zinos,” she said. “A special offer for my best customer.”

“Are you serious?” he said. “It’s got to be worth twice that.”

“Like I said, I got it cheap. And I really do think it would look good on you.”

She just wants your money, said Nico’s voice in his head. But she could probably get twelve zinos for it if she was patient. That was a lot of cash to give up just to fleece him personally.

That left one possibility: she really was making a deal for a friend. He swallowed. *Six zinos even*.

"Try it on," she said, holding it out to him.

He took the blade and carefully tucked it in his belt. It felt good—heavy, but not too heavy. He practiced a draw. The metal was smooth, and the curve of the blade was gentle enough that it didn't foul the draw. He put the dagger back in his belt.

"How does it look?" he asked.

"Dashing," she said. "Rugged. Little bit dangerous. It fits right in."

He rolled his eyes.

"That's laying it on a bit thick, don't you think?"

"Bartek, I'm serious," she said. "It looks really good on you."

He flushed again.

"Deal," he said. "Five zinos. I'll be broke, but I'll look good doing it."

He fished one zino out of his right boot and emptied the four in his coin purse onto the counter. *One zino left*, he thought.

She swept the coins away in one smooth motion and smiled.

"Thank you," he said. "It might not be a gift, but you didn't have to do that."

"Nope," she said. "I wanted to."

He grinned.

"I'd better get going," he said. "Lots of important swaggering to do."

"Oh yes," she said. "You're a busy guy. I understand."

He flashed her one last smile and headed for home. And if there was a little swagger in his step, who could blame him?

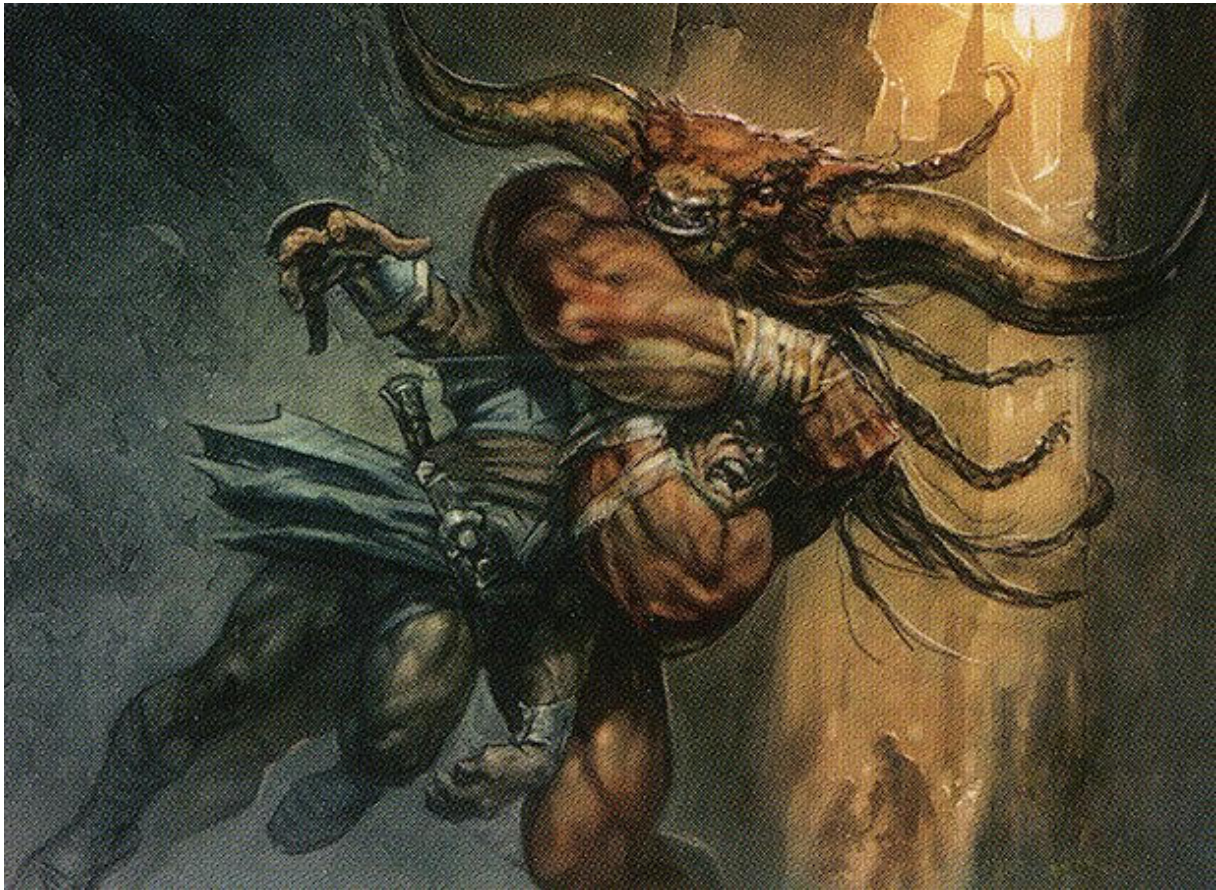
It was early morning, dawn creeping down the alley as the sun cleared the surrounding buildings. Andra whistled as she set up shop, keeping an eye out for Bartek.

She had only just gotten things in order when she spotted his tall frame moving through the sparse morning crowd. He was on time today.

He had a big purple lump above one eye, and the finely crafted dagger was nowhere to be seen. It looked like he might hurry past, but she caught his eye and waved, and he walked over to the little stall.

"Bartek! What happened to you?" she asked. "Are you all right?"

"I'll be fine," he said. He sounded tired as hell. "Couple of guys jumped me last night on my way to work. Bashed me in the head before I could get a look at them. Can't say they got much for their trouble, but they took my new dagger."



"I'm so sorry, Bartek." She frowned. "Listen, I don't usually do this, but if you want your five zinos back—"

He shook his head.

"It's not your fault," he said. "It was mine to lose."

"I'm sorry," she said. He nodded wearily.

"I'll be fine," he said. "You be careful who you buy from, okay? I think maybe that dagger might have been stolen, and these guys came to get it back. It could have been you they beat up."

"You're sweet," she said. "I'll be careful."

"I'm going to go sleep this off," he said. "Have a good day, okay?"

"You too," she said.

Andra watched him go. He was just a kid, and awfully nice for a former thug.

There weren't really any customers yet, so she sat down behind the counter. She got out paper, ink, and pen and began a highly coded message to her superiors.

Item is now in possession of third party. Contact if more detail desired.

She didn't know whether the knife was a murder weapon, stolen goods, or whatever else, and she didn't want to. All she knew was that the House Dimir wanted it sold to someone in particular, and they didn't want any link between its new owners and her.

Courier survives but remains unaware of role in delivery.

It was a favorite trick of hers: sell someone an illicit item, then arrange for it to be stolen by the real buyers. It broke the trail that led to her, and on top of that, she'd gotten paid twice for the same goods. Usually, the courier didn't fare well in the bargain, but this time she'd asked the buyer to leave the kid alive. She'd been relieved to see Bartek's face, even banged up as it was.

Profit from primary sale: 20 zinos. Profit from secondary sale: 5 zinos. Value of additional goods acquired during secondary transaction:

She twirled the little headband ornament in her fingers and smiled.

negligible.

She blew on the ink to dry it, folded the letter, and tucked it away.

He really was a sweet kid.