

CHARLATAN

I always knew I could swindle the best of them. Quick hands, bright smile and a confident spirit – it really doesn't take much. Even when you live in a world as drab and untrusting as the one that was imparted to us after the Calamity – the people are still desperately looking for someone to put their trust in. And not with a lot of viable options available, might I add!

Hear me out, let's list who do we have to choose from. The nobles in what remains of their bastions of power, clinging to it in the ruins of the world instead of using it to help? The Grey Guard who are supposed to be the ones protecting folks from all the terrible beasts roaming the night but instead harass people just because they can? The Zealots who are looking for slightest sign of malign aura or skin discoloration to condemn you as a Tainted one and have a nice bonfire celebration starring you as the main attraction? Or the All-Mother servants, eager to list all your shortcomings as reasons you are not worthy of their divine help? No, my sweet, the people of this land have absolutely no one to hang their meagre hopes on and that is precisely why they are so desperate for any sign that someone can be trusted after all!

Not that I deserve the trust, either to tell the truth, I am likely to make you a mountain of promises and disappear with your money all the same. I can swear that I will feel bad about it though it won't be for long – my focus is needed for the next job!

And so my life went town to town, one noble household here, a temple in need of assistance there, a scholar looking for precious information in another town – once you learn how to spot someone blinded by their need, it's only a matter of a little creativity to profit from it.

That is until I met that old man. Didn't make much of him to begin with – he had the unhinged gaze and the rattling teeth of a lunatic and, strangely had money to pay to transport a trinket to his friend in the next town over. And what a trinket it was! Naturally, I wasn't supposed to open the locked box he provided for the transportation, but a lock is unlikely to stop my nimble fingers. Naturally, I came highly recommended by several (very authentic) letters I had with me. Slipping away into the night and jiggling the lockpick on the box I was amazed to find a medallion decorated with precious gems. This thing would fetch a fortune – even at a time like this the nobles went crazy to show their superiority to their peers and nothing spoke to superiority like luxury amidst total devastation.

I grasped the medallion and smiled. My smile turned ashen as the chain of the medallion wrapped tightly around my wrist and I felt a sharp jabbing pain in the back of my hand. Screaming out I grasped it, reeling from the agony, sensing blood pouring through my fingers. Removing my bloodied fingers I looked at the back of my hand, bound by the medallion's chain as if by a manacle. The medallion has buried its way under my skin and a new layer of flesh was already forming, sickeningly quickly, over the pulsating glow of the gems. Soon, only a mess of scars remained on my hand, even if the pain lingered. Looking very closely I could see the pale light.

That's when I heard the voice in my head – the rasping, coughing voice of the old lunatic. "Greedy little boy" he intoned. "Listen to me and you will be rid of your folly yet. There is something I need you to retrieve from a ruined place in the depths of a mountain, on the edge of the Scarred Wastelands. You should prepare for a long journey."

Dumbfounded I collapsed to my knees, staring in disbelief on the contraption of corrupt sorcery, embedded within my flesh, hearing the disgusting voice in my head. It looks like this time around I was the one getting swindled. For a moment there I was lost. But I didn't get this good by staying lost for long. Very well. I can appreciate a good trick. A weak smile came back to my lips. I would find whatever it is the old man is looking for. And then I would find him, and I would make him pay for his treachery by trickery or force. My smile grew more confident. There would be revenge in this story yet.

"Lead the way" I said speaking to no one yet knowing my words would be heard and answered.