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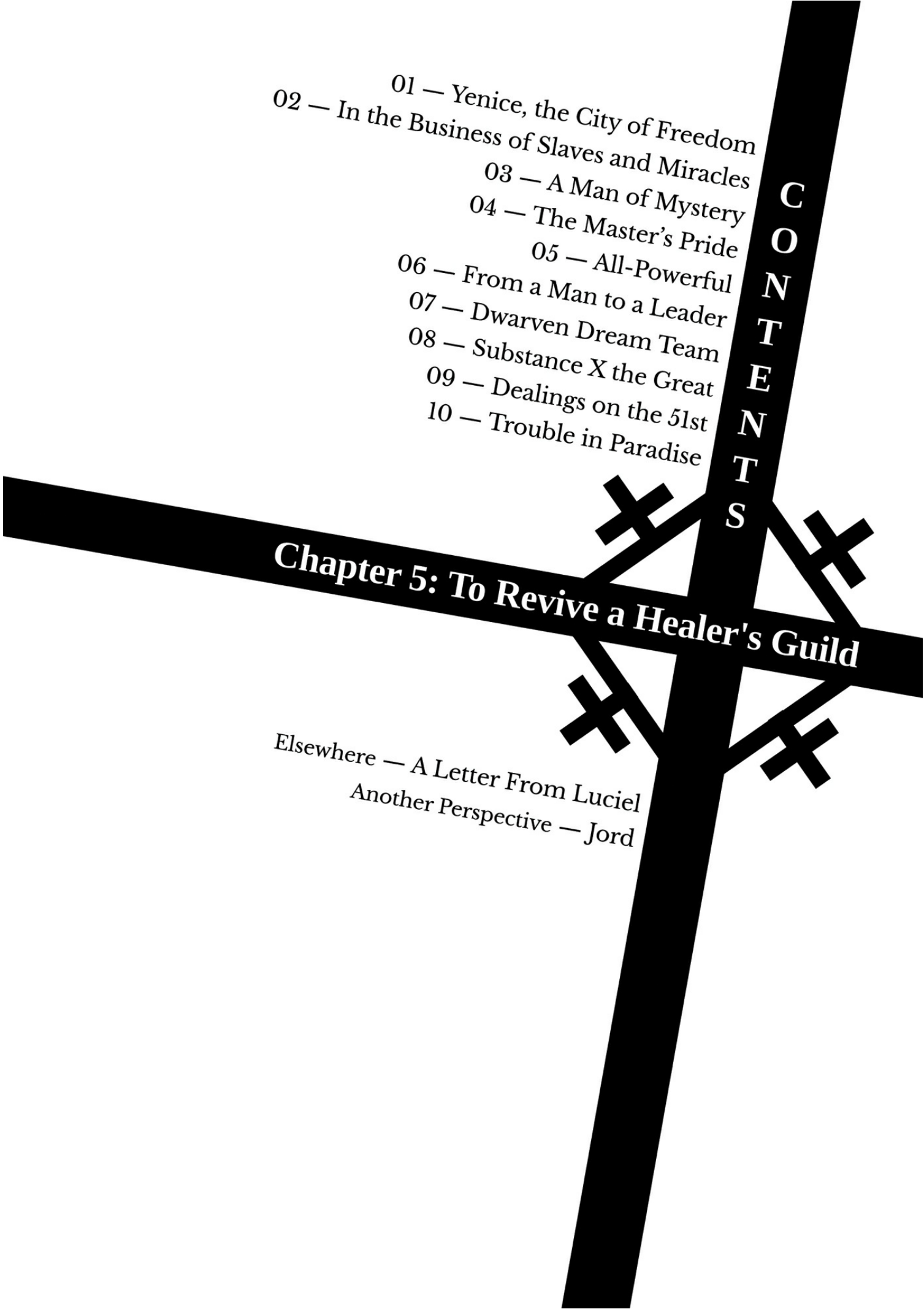
The Great Cleric

White-Collar Survival in Another World

Broccoli Lion

Illustrator: sime



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- 01 — Yenice, the City of Freedom
02 — In the Business of Slaves and Miracles
03 — A Man of Mystery
04 — The Master's Pride
05 — All-Powerful
06 — From a Man to a Leader
07 — Dwarven Dream Team
08 — Substance X the Great
09 — Dealings on the 51st
10 — Trouble in Paradise

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N
T
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T
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Chapter 5: To Revive a Healer's Guild

Elsewhere — A Letter From Luciel
Another Perspective — Jord

Chapter 5: To Revive a Healer's Guild

01 — Yenice, the City of Freedom

One month had passed since we'd set out from the Holy City for Yenice, and we—the Order of Healing—hadn't even crossed the border yet. Our work reviving the Healer's Guild would have been well underway already if not for the orders Her Holiness had given us, so at the moment, we were stuck in a village to the south, fulfilling her wishes.

Jord and I stared at the guildmaster cowering behind his desk, pale-faced, while Piazza, one of the knights under my command, delivered his report.

"Two members of staff were found guilty of corruption, and we've received reports of malpractice regarding healers from several clinics. Procedures for their removal and transfer to the capital have already been carried out."

"Thank you, Piazza," I replied. "Get the team ready to move out and wait for me downstairs."

"Sir!"

I watched the knight withdraw from the room, then turned my focus back to the guildmaster. "Please let Headquarters know as soon as possible if there's any more trouble."

"I-I'm not being dismissed?" he whimpered.

The lack of color in his complexion made sense now. I couldn't blame him, given his position. A young man with new ideas and untested authority like me couldn't have been good for the heart.

"No. Not this time, but that can change fast. Don't make me come back here, okay?"

"Y-Yes, sir! I'm very sorry to have troubled you, sir!" he cried, head lowered.

Jord and I looked at each other and shared a dry smile. "Let's work together

here. I want us healers to be admired for our work, not shunned for our business practices, and I hope you do too.”

We left the office and descended the stairs.

“You really laid into him, sir,” Jord said with a grin.

“I didn’t even do that much. What’s so funny?”

“Their faces, obviously. I never get tired of that dumb look they always give when you drop that line.”

“How humble of you. But it wasn’t anything special—just the Church’s goal. You know that. Personally, I’m more surprised by how readily everyone’s been going along with exposing all these clinics and guilds.”

“You inspire them.”

“Do I? In what way?”

“Well, how could you not after they saw how well-respected you were in Merratoni? They’re sick of collecting dust at HQ. They want to be like you, and that goes for me as well.”

“Come on, don’t make me blush. I’ll take that last part with a grain of salt, though. *You* want to be like *me*?”

“You wound me.”

The Order was waiting for us on the first floor, standing in a neat line.

“Thank you all once again for your help with wrapping this incident up nice and quick. I couldn’t have done it without you,” I told them.

We’d encountered trouble in just about every village we had visited so far, and needless to say, I was very happy that I wasn’t alone.

“We’re glad to be of service. And it’s thanks to your holy magic and connections that our journey’s been this smooth,” one of them replied.

“Yeah,” another knight agreed. “If those adventurers hadn’t lent us a hand, we’d have been in a bad way.”

“Still, I want to thank you all. Now, seeing as we’ve cleaned up everything here, it’s time for us to go.”

“Yes, sir!” they replied.

We left the guildhall, and the knights mounted their horses with their heads held high. The healers got into the carriage, and I leaped onto the black-as-night back of my trusty steed, Forêt Noire. With cheers at our back and resolve in our hearts, we set out once more for the city-state of Yenice.

I hadn’t expected our journey to take as long as it had, but orders were orders. The pope had asked us to stop at each village along the way and send any problematic individuals to Headquarters at once, so that was what we were doing. There had been more than a few guilty parties needing our attention, and more just kept showing up. Before we knew it, we’d spent weeks on the road.

“It’s a straight shot from here, isn’t it?” I asked Piazza.

“That’s right. There’s a small village where we’ll spend the night, then we’ll reach the border.”

“I’m looking forward to having a bed tonight.”

“Likewise.”

Much like the rest of our voyage, we reached our next stop without so much as a single run-in with any bandits or monsters. And we had the local adventurers to thank for that. After our going-away party, Grantz, the guildmaster, had sent his people ahead of us to thin out the opposition on our route and ensure our safety. I was extremely grateful and hoped I’d be on equally good terms with Yenice’s Adventurer’s Guild.

“There, that’s everyone. Does anyone else need healing?”

“No, sir. I have no idea how we can repay you. You’re certain a room is all you need?” The elderly mayor frowned anxiously. He and I had struck a deal. We would heal his town, and he would give us a place to rest.

“No need to worry about food. I’m trying to get better at cooking, so we’ll make do with whatever I can whip up.”

“If you’re certain, but please don’t hesitate to ask if you need anything. Anything at all.”

“Appreciated.”

I left the mayor for the old row house he’d offered my team for the night. Once upon a time, it had been used as a town hall of some sort, but it had seen better days. It wasn’t anything that a Purification spell couldn’t fix, though, and it was just big enough for us to all huddle into.

We got straight to making dinner.

“This magic item is amazing. It’s so simple, even I can use it,” Piazza marveled as he operated the automatic vegetable cleaner, codenamed Lil Shiny. Rina, who I still suspected was one of the reincarnated, had developed the appliance at my request.

The idea had come to me during my cooking lessons. I’d remembered hearing in my past life that washing veggies with a little warm water helped to bring out their freshness. But when I’d run it by Rina, clearly lacking basic cooking sense, she had come to me with blueprints for a giant, drum-style washing machine, which I promptly vetoed and replaced with the current miniature dishwasher. At any rate, it made the process that much simpler.

“It’s definitely faster than scrubbing enough food to feed a dozen people,” I said. “Is the water in the pot boiling yet?”

“Yes, and I have to say, that magic stove is just as incredible. I’ve never seen a device maintain its heat so precisely. I’ve got to buy one for myself when we get back to the capital.”

Rina would go far with her talent, although fame wasn’t all it was cracked up to be. That was something I was painfully aware of.

“I don’t think that’ll be for a while, but I’ll show you where to find a good artificer when we do get back. Now, you guys can leave dinner to me if you can take care of the horses. Just don’t expect some sort of gourmet meal.”

Those not helping with the cooking sounded off, then got to work. Today’s menu was pot-au-feu with extra vegetables and freshly baked bread, made from yeast extracted from fermented grapes (or what looked, smelled, and

tasted like grapes in this world). A Gulgar recipe. It wasn't much, but our supplies were limited while on the road, so I wasn't taking any chances.

Fun fact: the Purification spell didn't actually affect the bacteria needed for bread to rise. It only got rid of the harmful kinds. The same, unfortunately, couldn't be said for blue cheese. Maybe it had something to do with the spellcaster's own knowledge and preconceptions.

We finished preparing dinner, and I heard everyone's report on the day's events as we ate—our usual mealtime routine. The conversation consisted of a variety of things, mainly advice on magic, training, how to best utilize the Physical Enhancement skill, or the most effective spellcasting methods. It wasn't anything new, but our advice-sharing sessions had definitely taken on a new level of passion (right after visiting Merratoni, coincidentally—my master was a frightening man).

Still, it was easy to forget sometimes, but my team was nothing to sneeze at either. There was a lot for me to learn from the capable Knights of Shurule, and learn from our back-and-forth I did.

After dinner, I led the Order in Magic Handling practice, which ended up increasing my Leadership skill. Was that really all it took? If so, it must've been a fairly common ability.

"We'll be in Yenice tomorrow," Jord informed me. "How are you planning on rebuilding the Healer's Guild there?"

"You know, I haven't really thought about it," I admitted. "I have no clue why it's defunct in the first place, and I'd rather see it with my own eyes before making judgments. At the very least, I'll do what I'm asked."

"I guess that's all you can do. But make sure you remember they don't call Yenice the City of Freedom for nothing. Don't expect the same racial interactions you're used to in Shurule."

"It's like Grandol, right? Lots of diversity. I remember hearing Yenice's population is mostly beastpeople. What's your point?"

"It's not that it's just diverse, the entire city-state was founded *by* beastfolk races. So I don't think we'll be seeing many humans. Maybe the odd adventurer

or two.”

“Oh. I get what you’re saying.”

Nanaella had taught me years ago that Yenice was home to many beastfolk, and before we left Merratoni, Galba had told me to trust no one but myself. The pieces certainly fit, but all the beastfolk I knew were good guys. There was no point in worrying about it now.

“We’re not human supremacists,” Jord continued, “but that doesn’t change the fact that we’re outsiders from a country most beastfolk end up fleeing for exactly that reason. I’m not gonna lie—I’m a little nervous.”

I understood his concern. There was no guarantee that we, the human minorities, wouldn’t be subject to persecution once we were on Yenitian land.

“I think we’ll be okay as long as we act natural and stay humble. If we have trouble, we just need to communicate with each other. We’ll make it through.”

“Right.”

My master always said that when you’re running blind, preparing for the worst is always better than preparing for everything. And the wolf brothers had told me to use their names if we ever found ourselves in trouble, for whatever that was worth. So what was there to worry about? *They* were the ones who’d asked for *us*, after all.

“I’m sure I’ll need your advice once things get started. Mind sticking close to me?”

Jord smiled and nodded.

Once our magic practice was finished, we all got a good night’s sleep.

The next morning, we departed for the Yenice-Shurule border. The trees and forests began to thin out, and the sprawling fields of grass started to brown, giving way to a rocky wilderness as we followed the road towards a large valley.

“Yenice is just through that pass,” one of the knights announced. “Our welcome party should be waiting for us on the other side.”

“Nearly there. Come on, everyone, one last push!”

As usual, no monsters or bandits appeared on the road. Nevertheless, I trusted my guard to be alert at all times, and the healers continually cast Area Heal and Purification (Forêt's favorite) on their tired horses to help boost their Holy Magic skills. I looked at the gate in the distance and knew that things weren't going to be that easy once we passed through it.

"I'm casting Area Barrier just in case," I announced. "Stay sharp, everyone."

"Yes, sir!"

Right on the border, nestled tightly between sheer cliffs, towered a citadel. The road through the gate looked like it was barely wide enough to squeeze our carriage through. The geography was practically asking for brigands or fiends to be waiting to ambush us. And the gate just sitting there, wide open, didn't bode too well for us either.

Maybe I ought to let the pope know that someone forgot to shut the front door.

Past the gate and farther along the road, our view widened once again. All of a sudden, the air seemed to thicken with heat, and the sun beat down with new intensity. The others looked slightly uncomfortable with the sudden change in climate, but thankfully my magically enhanced clothing and armor made it almost unnoticeable to me. My attention was far more focused on the numerous silhouettes approaching us from afar.

Suddenly, a smaller figure leaped away from the taller ones and shouted, "Mister healer!"

I lowered my guard. It must have been the party from Yenice that had been sent out to greet us. The girl sprinting towards me was... What was her name again? Shera? No, wait, Sheila.

"You can relax, everyone. I think they're from Yenice. I recognize the little girl."

I dismounted from Forêt and opened my arms for Sheila, but she straight up dove into me and all but tackled me to the ground.



I couldn't stop myself from instinctively free casting Area Heal. If I hadn't fully understood before just how much stronger beastfolk were, I sure did now.

"Well, hey, Sheila. You can talk now."

"Yeah! It happened right after we left!"

"Oh, yeah? Well, amazing things happen for good girls, and I don't know anyone who tries as hard as you."

Strange. It shouldn't have worked when I'd tried to cast Extra Heal on her all that time ago—my skill level hadn't been high enough. Talk about miracles.

The little beastgirl giggled and grinned as I pulled Forêt Noire along towards the rest of her group. My team followed.

"Saint Weirdo, we can't thank you and your companions enough for making the journey to our homeland," the man at the front said. "My name is Shahza, the representative for all tiger-folk at present."

I had never met a tiger-person before, and they weren't quite how I'd envisioned them. His beard and sideburns merged into a shockingly lion-like mane.

"Thank you all for coming out to meet us. I'm Luciel, S-rank healer, and this is my team. We look forward to working with you."

"Oh, that is wonderful to hear. How can we call ourselves the City of Freedom when our citizens have to make do with only a Doctor's Guild? Yes, this is wonderful news."

"I'm glad we can be of service. Let's take things slow, though. I need to see the situation for myself and get some information before we start making changes."

"And we thank you for that. Our city is still about three days' journey from here, but I hope that will not be an issue."

I stifled a sigh. *Figures.*

Shahza held out his hand, and I took it, brushing the dust off my best business smile.

“Not at all,” I told him.

His grip was firm. *Really* firm. Then again, it was possible that all of Yenice’s delegates simply needed some form of physical prowess to get elected. At any rate, we’d finally made it and were now on our way to the heart of the city-state.

It became clear almost immediately that we weren’t in Shurule anymore. Monsters assaulted us several times during our journey, but Shahza, Yenice’s head delegate, refused to let his honored guests lift a finger and protected us along with his fellow warriors.

I didn’t like sitting around doing nothing while they fought for us, so we supported them with barrier magic and healing. In fact, that little bit of assistance even leveled us up a few times. According to Jord, combat support counted towards fighting experience, which gave me some ideas for power-leveling strategies, but I put a pin in that until I could actually test my theories.

The knights seemed a little fidgety, like they were itching to join the fight. Probably a side effect of Brod’s hell march of a training regime. They’d need a place to let off steam before too long, so I considered having them train at the Adventurer’s Guild when they weren’t busy guarding what we’d be rebuilding, or even letting them accept missions as adventurers. I was running pretty low on Substance X and could use a refill.

Speaking of “the X,” I’d had a mug of the stuff that morning but had still leveled up, meaning its experience-hindering effects only lasted, at most, for half a day. I looked forward to possibly investigating the mysterious liquid further once we got things at the Healer’s Guild settled.

Thought after thought of all the things that needed doing rushed through my head, so I started jotting down notes during one of our breaks, and soon the entire page was covered with ink. There was nothing for it but to take things one step at a time.

Three days came and went, and our long journey finally came to an end. We arrived at the heart of Yenice, the City of Freedom.

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There had once been a Healer's Guild branch in Yenice, until circumstances several decades ago had necessitated their withdrawal. At least, that was what I'd been told, but I'd never known it was *this* bad.

We stood before the dilapidated guildhall, if it could even be called that anymore, completely lost for words. Not because it was rundown; rather, because of where it was located.

"It's...in the slums?" I asked hesitantly.

"Yes, sir. This is where the Healer's Guild has always been. I apologize for the location, but there was no available land to transfer it to," Shahza replied with regret. But he wasn't doing a good job of hiding the amused smile behind his hand. He was obviously provoking me.

The other beastfolk didn't share his joy, though, and looked away awkwardly, confirming my hunch that the tiger-man was the top dog in these parts.

I thought back on our trip and remembered the times that Sheila had tried to talk to me but stopped herself. She and the others (beastfolk I'd met two years ago in the Holy City) seemed particularly on edge around Shahza. At first, I'd thought it was just racial tensions of some kind, but Shahza hadn't once left my side on our way to the city, forcing me to leave poor Sheila to herself. And during that time, he'd pelted me with question after question about healers and their magic, which I'd simply assumed was his way of welcoming us. But his true goal was to keep me away from the girl, to hide the true state of affairs that we were now faced with.

He got me good.

Now that I thought about it, all his brazen requests from the guild made a little more sense. He wanted lower healing prices in relation to other commodities, patients of various races to be treated as prescribed by *Yenice's* local laws, healers present at battles against monsters, *and* the Church of Saint Shurule to shoulder the cost of founding new clinics. It went without saying that there wasn't a snowball's chance in hell I could do all that at the snap of a finger.

"I'm sorry, but let me be clear about something," I had told him earlier. "We're not a charity organization. But let's leave all that for when we've

actually got the guild up and running. That comes first. Deal?”

Now, I knew that I hadn’t imagined the coldness in his leer at the time. The guy never took his eyes off me, so I couldn’t bring up my concerns to the team for some time. It was only after entering the city that I’d managed to slip in a quick word to Jord, who shared my suspicions.

“Sounds like the knights’ll have work before the healers, eh?” he’d joked.

I didn’t find it particularly funny myself. I’d told everyone to stay on guard after that but had never imagined our gut instinct would be right. At least, not in this way. The neighborhood wasn’t the safest I’d seen, to put it lightly. Leave it to Gulgar and Galba’s hometown...

“We’ll make it work,” I said to the smirking tiger-man. “Until we get everything up and running, we’ll set our own prices. And we’ll have people pay with labor if they don’t have the money.”

“I hope you don’t mean *slave* labor,” Shahza shot back with a fierce glare. It was nothing compared to my master, though, and carried all the weight of a house cat eyeing a toy mouse.

The team waited patiently and quietly for my reply. This guy wasn’t as tough as he thought.

“I mean regular labor. There’s a lot to rebuild. In the Church, we create ‘contracts’ by binding two parties to an oath before the divines, and they work nicely for situations like this.”

“How is that different from slavery?” he spat back.

I kept my composure. “First of all, it’s an oath to the gods. It’s not something someone can be forced into or else they’d be divinely punished. What that punishment is—your magic, your life—I don’t actually know, though. Wait, you know I’m planning on making one with *you*, don’t you?”

Shahza’s calm, collected mask finally started to slip.

“Why so scared? It’s not going to kill you. It might drop your level a bit, that’s all. You can handle it, can’t you, Representative? It would go a long way towards helping us restore the guild’s presence here.”

“L-Let’s not be hasty! I’m sure we can find better ways to assist you!”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. I hear you have quite a slave market here. We’ll find plenty of help that way and get this thing built however we can. We can’t wait for volunteers to come knocking, after all.”

I shot him a blinding smile. No one came to the flustered politician’s aid. Thankfully, Jord and I had planned for many eventualities.

“Wait, that’s right! We were going to hold a welcome banquet for you guys!”

“Really? Wow, I appreciate that.”

A bit of the color returned to Shahza’s face. I wondered what he was planning. Poisoning? As if that’d work on me.

“Unfortunately, I can’t really let things stand like this. Our Divine Healer must be grieving at the sight of it. We may be healers, but we’re also from the Church, and we have to right this wrong. So I have to insist that we form this contract before anything else. Will you, Mister Shahza?”

I offered my hand and noticed sweat trickling down his face.

“What’s wrong? Is the heat getting to you?” I asked innocently.

“I’m very, very sorry, Saint weirdo, but wouldn’t you know it, I’m just not feeling well all of a sudden. Maybe another day, but I really ought to excuse myself now.”

“Oh, that’s awful. Here, let me help you. *High Heal! Recover! Purification! Dispel!*”

I knew that casting all those spells wouldn’t keep him from running away, but I had to try.

“Impressive!” he gasped. “Wait, I mean, I’m afraid I can’t spare any more time here! Head delegate duties!”

And off he went. Sheila and her father, Orga (a former representative), politely bowed before promptly following their superior. Sheila was waving back at me so hard I almost thought her arm was about to fly off. Her father must have told her not to speak to me.

“Well,” Jord sighed, “we’ve got our work cut out for us.”

“We sure do,” I answered. “Let’s just make the place sanitary with some magic first. Also, I was serious about getting slaves. Things might become dangerous here. We could do with more guards.”

“Sir!” the team replied.

Inside the guildhall, we were met with a leaky ceiling, broken floorboards, and spiderwebs as far as the eye could see. The latter could be dealt with by using Purification, but the others would take a bit more elbow grease to solve. We’d have to get ready to do some serious renovations.

Thankfully, the Order seemed to light up at the idea. Once the place was decently clean, we sorted out sleeping arrangements, then I divided us into two groups: one to watch the horses, and one to accompany me to the slave market.

Little did I know I’d find a certain Monsieur Luck waiting for me there.

02 — In the Business of Slaves and Miracles

Leaving the ramshackle hall in search of the market, our group found itself the center of attention wherever we went. Not that I could blame the locals for being wary of a bunch of strangers robed in white. Our look was a common sight in the Holy City, but we'd stuck out quite a bit even in Merratoni.

We couldn't just wander around forever, so I tried asking some locals for directions, but to no avail. Everyone turned their backs on us and pretended we didn't exist. Finally, I overheard someone mention a market and some slavers nearby.

After a bit of meandering, we found three separate buildings that sold people. The first turned us away, saying we needed an invitation to enter, and we didn't fare much better at the second place. Shahza had gotten there before us and told them not to sell to anyone from the Healer's Guild.

The dingy third location near the slums wasn't our first choice, but at that point, it was our last hope. The building's grimy appearance didn't mean they wouldn't have strong fighters.

"Everyone, wait for me out here. I'll be on the lookout for strong and capable craftsmen. Anything else I should keep in mind?" I asked the group.

No one replied, so I went into the shop. The interior was, surprisingly, not as dirty as the exterior, but not exactly pretty either.

"You sell slaves here?"

"Human, eh? Don't get many o' you in these parts." A vulgar sneer crept across the wolf-eared owner's lips. "Yeah, we got slaves, but it'll cost ya at least five gold. Got the coin?"

I wasn't used to dealing with the sleazy business-types, but I didn't have many options.

"Plenty," I answered with a bit of feigned confidence. "How much for your most expensive ones?"

"Cocky little shit, eh? An elf for five platinum. That suit your fancy?"

I could tell he was eyeing my purse as we spoke, but I maintained my composure.

“Just checking the price ceiling. I hate to think you’re keeping an elf in this grungy place, though.”

“The hell you come here for? To screw with me? I’ll clean when brushin’ cobwebs makes my purse heavier, kid.”

The man was quick to change his tune when he figured money wasn’t involved.

“Shame.” I whipped out a platinum coin and held it between my fingers. “I prefer to do my shopping at places with a bit more hygiene.”

His ears perked up and his tail started to wag. “Now, sir, was all that pomp and circumstance necessary? I knew you were a good fella!”

“Show me every slave you have. I’ll clean the place up a bit too if you throw in a discount.”

The wolf-man readily agreed, rubbing his hands together with a slimy grin as he showed me inside.

Each slave had their own private cell, and men and women were separated by floor. We began the tour on the women’s floor, starting with the aforementioned elf, but every time I met eyes with one of them, they’d look away, disappointed. Doubtless, they assumed a young man like me wouldn’t have the money to buy any of them. Thankfully, they all seemed to be in decent enough condition that I didn’t feel obligated to purchase the whole lot.

We continued on until I realized I hadn’t seen any other employees around, but that trivial concern quickly left my mind.

Among the slaves I saw were many who had lost one or even several limbs, including children. It took all my self-restraint not to heal every last one of them, but I would only be helping the slaver’s business that way, so I clenched my fists and bore it.

There were slaves of just about every race I could think of: humans, dwarves, dragonewts, elves, and even beastfolk. I had to wonder how a seedy hole-in-

the-wall like this turned enough of a profit to have such a wide range. Was it normal? Hard to say, since I hadn't gotten to see the other two places.

The shop owner continued to talk my ear off about prices and deals, and how I'd never find dragonewts or elves like he had anywhere else, but it went in one ear and out the other.

"Why do they all look so lifeless?" I asked.

Many of them didn't even seem to want to leave their cells, like they were simply tired of living. Bottaculli's slaves hadn't exactly been brimming with cheer, but there had still been a flicker of light in their eyes.

"They're slaves. Is it surprising?" he replied with a raised eyebrow.

"I guess not. Show me your men next. I'll make my decision after that." The moment the words left my lips, I felt the air in the room change around the slaves in their cells. I ignored it and followed the shop owner.

"Right this way," he snickered. Whether his amusement was towards me or his wares, I couldn't say.

There were far fewer prisoners on the men's floor than the women's. The wolf-man's sales pitch went on and on, but I ignored him and focused my attention on the people in front of me. Brod had taught me a certain trick for testing others' mettle by emitting an intense aura of intimidation, and although I'd refrained from using it on the women's floor, I let it all out here. Some of the men cowered while others returned the aura in kind with sharp glares. Out of those, I narrowed my options down to the three who didn't even bat an eye.

"The armless dwarf, the older guy with the torn tendons in his legs, and the younger one with dark hair. I'd like to talk to them one-on-one. How much are they?"

The wolf-man deflated. They must have been some of the cheaper options.

"The dwarf used to be a top-notch blacksmith, from what I hear. Lost both his arms in an accident, so you won't get much outta him but advice. Five gold," he said. "The second fella might look old, but he's middle-aged. Honest. Apparently, he knows his way around a battlefield, but his allies betrayed him. Poisoned him and cut the tendons in his legs. He won't be doin' any walking,

but I won't go lower than five gold after the overhead he cost me. And this dirty brat's a prisoner of war. Found his way here, and now I'm stuck with him. He's young, though, so twenty gold."

If he was trying to make the hard sell, he wasn't doing a good job of it. But I did get some valuable information from his yammering for once. Namely, that by getting the dwarf and warrior back into shape (literally) with Extra Heal, I could bring powerful and motivated allies to the guild's side fairly easily. Her Holiness had forbidden me from using the spell, but hey, drastic times called for drastic measures.

"Noted. I'd like to speak with them now. In private, if possible. Surely that's all right? You wouldn't deny a customer, would you?"

He chuckled. "No problem. No problem at all!"

If I didn't spend the money here, where would I? The slaver didn't need to know that, of course, but still.

The armless dwarf trudged languidly into the small meeting room first. There was no life in him.

"Have a seat," I suggested. "I just want to ask a few questions. And please answer honestly. Oh, but first let me introduce myself. My name is Luciel, and I'm an S-rank healer. Now, say you had your arms back. Do you have any skills other than smithing? Carpentry, maybe?"

The dwarf huffed. "Who d'ya think you're talkin' to?" A flame plumed in his once dull eyes. "I was born ta craft, boy! Blessed by the Divine Blacksmith at birth! You think bangin' metal's all there is ta ironwork?!"

His glare was loaded with ire. He was offended that I'd dared to question his skills. He would have no doubt caused a scene if he'd still had his arms.

"So, I take it you're confident."

"Best choose your next words carefully, lad."

I was just as close to blowing this as I was to sealing the deal.

"Let me be more specific." I locked eyes with him. "If you had your arms back,

would you be willing to swear your loyalty and assist in rebuilding the local Healer's Guild?"

The dwarf hesitated. "Maybe. If the work wasn't too bad." He squeezed out the words, trying and failing to hide the trembling in his voice. The spirit of a craftsman was a hard thing to snuff out.

That settles it. "What's your name?"

"Dhoran."

"Well, Dhoran, I have one last question. Is there anyone else here you'd like me to buy with you?"

"Why d'ya ask?"

It was hard not to notice how fidgety he'd been or the occasional glances he kept throwing towards the women's floor.

"If you swear to use your skills for the Healer's Guild, including assisting in the guildhall's reconstruction and the production of weapons and armor, I promise you won't find a better place to put them to use." I smiled.

He paused. "You're an S-ranker, huh? A healer? If that means the same as it does for adventurers, you've got money to spare."

"You could say that. I made something of a fortune beating up foul, disgusting undead monsters for a few years."

Dhoran closed his eyes, probably hoping to hide from the slight anguish in my expression, then quietly grunted in acknowledgment.

"No need to worry about my finances. Tell me who else you want me to buy."

"A human-dwarf halfling. My granddaughter, Pola. Did you see her? She's a quiet lass. Auburn hair. Only sixteen."

His earlier nerve had vanished, raw emotion and concern winning out over pride. Family did that to people sometimes.

"I'll look for her once I'm done meeting with the others. You have my word."

The next to enter was the aged ex-warrior. Considering his limp legs, I'd

expected him to come in on a wheelchair, but he shuffled in just fine on a pair of crutches.



I could tell at once just how well-built and strong this guy was, based on that feat alone.

“I’ll get right to the point,” I said. “I can sense how strong you are. You have the same sort of presence as my master.”

I felt the aura around him immediately change.

“What of it?” he replied.

“I hear it was your allies who did this to you. People you trusted. Are you after revenge?”

He chuckled derisively. “Revenge? Against who? An entire nation? No, my past is irrelevant. I’m more interested in hearing what kind of master could train up a healer to have that kind of physique.”

Youth seemed to return to his sagging expression. Something about him hit me in the exact same way Brod did. Maybe all fighters of that caliber shared a certain vibe.

“He’s known as the Whirlwind, if that satisfies your curiosity. Who are *you*, though? Actually, never mind. This back and forth won’t get us anywhere. About your legs, does the poison make them incurable?”

“So I’ve been told.” He shrank back into being the old man from earlier.

“If I help you walk again, will you swear to protect me and my companions?”

“I’m old, boy. What’s your aim?” Once again, a flame flickered in his eyes.

“I’m looking for people to guard the local Healer’s Guild and our belongings. Maybe join me and my team in training every now and then. Sound doable?”

“That’s all?”

Was that a hint of frustration I sensed?

“For the time being. Until I come up with something else we could use a hand with.”

The man chuckled, then burst into a guffaw. “Sounds like a handful! All right, if your word’s good and you make me walk again, I’ll call you liege, master, or whatever you like.”

“I hope you don’t regret saying that.”

The man’s fire had been relit, and I stopped trying to keep track of how old he appeared from one moment to the next. I was starting to wonder if it was Monsieur Luck who’d brought the two of us together after the other two slave markets had turned us away.

Just like Dhoran, I asked the older man his name and who else he wanted me to buy.

“I’m Lionel,” he answered. “And there’s a human named Nalia, and a cat-woman named Ketty I’d like you to find. Aged thirty-three and twenty-three, respectively.”

“Got it. I look forward to you returning the favor.”

“As best I can on these legs.”

My last meeting was with the young man who was about my age.

“I hear you’re a prisoner of war. Is that right?” I asked him.

“Yes. I’m the son of royalty, and the empire used me as a hostage when they invaded.” There was a passion in him, unlike the other slaves. I connected the dots and figured he must have somehow made his way here from Luburk, given their ongoing conflict with Illumasia.

“Then let me ask you this: what is your goal? Is it revenge? If so, I’m sorry, but I can’t help you with that.”

He stared at me in silence.

“I’m here to found a Healer’s Guild in this country, and I need help. Slave or not, I intend to treat everyone involved humanely, so if you can promise me you’ll live your life to that end, I’ll welcome you. If not, you’ll have to find someone else to seek retribution through. It’s your choice.”

Safety first was my number one policy. I wasn’t in the market for grudges or enemies.

The young man contemplated this with a grim expression, then asked, “How long would you keep me for?”

I was at a loss. I hadn't had the chance to even consider the matter and had no answer ready for him. Lies wouldn't work; that much was obvious.

We sat in silence for a while, until I finally replied, "Truthfully, I don't think I'd be able to relieve you of duty any time soon. I have no idea how long it'll take to get a guild up and running, to say nothing of managing new clinics. I honestly can't offer any sort of time frame right now."

I'd done my research on slaves after the incident with Bottaculli in Merratoni. There was no condition that any slave, other than those bound by debt or misdemeanor crimes, could meet that would free them. Only the master's will could accomplish that.

"I..." The man hung his head and clenched his fists until his knuckles turned white.

I asked several more questions, but his light had gone out. I'd have to leave him there, and I knew it. All I could offer was a prayer that he'd find a kind owner and a bit of magic to clean up his messy hair.

"Thank you, sir," he said in a faint whisper. "You can leave me here. Please don't buy me."

And with that, he left the room. I knew that if I had bought him, the void in his heart would never have been filled. The darkness in him would only have festered.

"Some things are beyond our control," I muttered, staring at the door he had departed through. "If I had even half the heart of the archbishops, maybe I could have done something to help him, even a little."

After a moment, I left the room as well.

The slaver was waiting just outside the room, hands together, grin still wide.

"I'll have the dwarf and the warrior," I said. "But first I want to look at the women again for a few extra hands."

"Your business is much appreciated," he sneered.

We headed for the women's floor, and I already knew who to look out for. *The halfling, a human, and a cat-woman*, I repeated in my mind. I intended to

purchase them for the same reason as the two men rather than as attendants for the male slaves, and I would have much rather had them (individuals spoken for by the other two) than anyone else. Say what you will about filling the slaver's pockets, but if nothing else, I was sure their addition would help to win over everyone's trust.

Once we arrived, I scanned the cells, keeping their descriptions in mind, and quickly spotted my targets.

"Can I ask them a few questions?" I asked the slaver.

"By all means." He'd clearly realized that I was looking for individuals related to the first two men and was almost definitely going to rip me off, but I let it go. Like it or not, it was a necessary expense.

I stopped in front of the girl with burnt brown hair first. She was tiny, barely coming up to my chest. "Are you Pola?" I asked softly. "You can nod if you don't want to speak."

She hesitated, then bobbed her head.

"I'm Luciel. Dhoran asked me to find you. Don't worry, I'm not going to make you do anything you aren't comfortable with, okay? I just want you to help Dhoran with his work."

"Grandpa's coming?" the girl asked stoically. Her face barely moved when she spoke, but I sensed her guard lowering.

"That's right. I'm going to fix his arms."

She tilted her head. "Are you a god?"



“I’m afraid not,” I replied with an awkward smile. “Will you help me rebuild the Healer’s Guild with your grandpa? Can you promise to do that?”

“Promise. As long as grandpa’s there.”

I detected a hint of a smile on her face.

Next, I found the girls Lionel had mentioned: Nalia and Ketty. Their cells were right next to each other.

“I’m Luciel,” I told them. “I’m here to buy you both at Lionel’s request. You won’t be forced into anything you aren’t comfortable doing. Just menial work. Any questions?”

“Is Sir Lionel well?” the human asked.

“Yes. His tendons have been cut, and he can’t walk, but I intend to fix that. Not to worry.”

“Please do what you can.”

“This kitty’s with Sir Lionel!” the cat-girl mewed. “I go where he goes!”

“As do I. So long as I’m by his side, your wish is my command.”

Okay, who was this guy? There was more to the old man than he’d let on, but I put that aside for the moment. They’d do fine as a trio.

“Slaver,” I called out, “I’ll take these three, plus the dwarf and the older man I spoke to earlier. How much?”

“Let’s say...one platinum piece,” he answered.

I knew he was gonna rip me off—wait, that wasn’t so bad. Female slaves were supposed to be a lot more expensive, but this was about twenty less gold than expected.

“That’s cheaper than what I was planning on. Why do me a favor?”

“Ya see, I get the feeling you and I are gonna get to know each other real well in the future, that’s all. Anyone in the market for this many slaves at once is bound to need more down the line.”

I had to give him some credit; he had the sleazy smirk and hand-rubbing look

down. Sadly, though, I didn't see our relationship going any further than today, as sound as his logic was.

After some awkward stalling, I said, "I suppose so. I wasn't planning on buying the girls, but if money's all it takes to motivate the others, that's fine with me. Who knows, maybe I'll find use for more later on."

"A very real possibility, sir!" he exclaimed. "Listen, there's an auction comin' up in a few months. Take this invitation. It'll get you in."

A slave auction? Run by beastfolk? "Um, okay. Why me, though? Do you give this to everyone who shops here?"

"No, not at all. Not just anyone can join. They ask me to hand 'em out to folks with coin to burn."

"And what do you get out of it?" A merchant doing favors without merit meant they were either insane or it was a trap. There was no in-between.

"We businessmen get a little ten percent kickback for every slave our invitees buy. You win a few bids, you keep shopping here...we all profit."

I got the feeling he wasn't lying, but I still didn't trust the guy. His personal matters hardly concerned me, though, so I bought what I'd come for, then left the establishment.

The team was a little surprised to see me emerge with five people in tow, but I left the explanations for later and led us back to the guild with the knights carrying Lionel.

Once we reached the guildhall, I filled everyone in and wasted no time fixing up Dhoran and Lionel with Extra Heal and Recover.

And then suddenly everyone around me was kneeling.

"Er, what's..." I stuttered. "What's going on here? Why am I being worshipped?"

Don't get me wrong, I was aware of how astonishing the ability to restore lost limbs was, but still. Dhoran swung his regenerated arms around and clenched his hands in disbelief, while Lionel, back on his feet and without a single scar left on his legs, took several timid steps and hops as he reacclimated. Unable to

contain herself, Pola leaped into her grandfather's new arms, and Lionel's girls soon followed suit.

The knights who'd come with me from the Church had known about the Extra Heal spell but had never seen it in action before. And no matter how much I protested, they would not stop praying to me. Not until their influence had spread to the slaves and I was thoroughly flustered.

Finally, after numerous pleas, they knocked it off, and I had everyone introduce themselves to the new recruits. Even then, though, they wouldn't ditch their annoying reverence towards me. It was draining, to say the least, and I suddenly gained a newfound respect for people who had the energy to live on a pedestal. Timid old me was far from used to that sort of life.

"Is everyone done? Good. Here's the plan. Newcomers, this will be your home and workplace from now on." I looked around to make sure everyone was listening. "This hall has three floors and a basement. The third floor will be the guildmaster's room, the second will be the knights' and healers' quarters, and this floor will be the reception area. The basement storerooms will have to do for your own quarters."

The slaves nodded.

"Dhoran," I continued, "can I leave you in charge of getting this shack back into shape? Fair warning, it's been abandoned for years now."

"Consider it done," the dwarf replied. "And we're slaves, lad. I'll thank ya to nix the formalities."

"Likewise," Lionel remarked.

They sure had gotten more relaxed since being healed. Maybe a little *too* relaxed? Whatever, it was probably just their way of showing gratitude.

"If you insist, er, I mean, sure. Will do. I'm not actually used to being overly casual, so if I slip back into polite mode, just ignore me."

They nodded and acknowledged my request.

"Anyway, back to the main topic. I'm sure you can see the holes in the ceiling and floor, Dhoran. Let me know what supplies you'll need."

“That I will.”

“Oh, and I forgot to mention there are three storerooms downstairs. Dhoran and Pola will share one; so will Ketty and Nalia, and Lionel will take the smallest for himself.”

“Understood,” Lionel replied.

“Your job will be guard duty. From what I understand, this city isn’t the most orderly, and we’re in the slums. I’m planning to keep the horses inside for a while since it’s too risky to leave them out, but we can’t do that forever.”

“So it’s stable duty, is it?”

“For the time being. Until we can add a real stable of some kind to the hall, but just now, we have no room to expand. Give any ideas you have to Dhoran. And that goes for everyone in the Order too. Think of this place as our fortress. We’ve all got to do our part to keep it running.”

“Yes, sir!” my team shouted, smiles all around.

They quickly lost themselves in thought, excited about the prospect of a little home improvement. Dhoran shot his hand up with a glint in his eyes.

“Something to add?”

“Aye. If it’s land you need, there’s plenty of it underground. All I’d need are some magic stones, a few spells, and I’ll make that basement as big as you want. I’ll need wood ’n iron if you’re lookin’ to build tall, though.”

“You can do that with magic stones?”

I was a bit confused. How was he going to dig up that much space without causing the entire building to collapse? And what was he going to do with all the dirt? You couldn’t just explain every little detail away with “because magic.”

Actually, scratch that. You totally could.

“We dwarves make our way by borrowin’ the powers of the spirits of earth and fire. There’s no land we can’t manipulate at our whim, no iron we can’t forge, lad—er, sir.”

“But grandpa, you blew up the forge synthesizing ore one time,” Pola noted

quietly.

Dhoran blushed, awkwardly scratching his cheek and looking around at nothing.

“So, basically,” I said, “you can make the basement bigger with enough magic stones. Is that right?”

“Aye, er, yessir. Best you leave that sorta work to dwarves ’less you want a guild o’ rubble. We can hear the spirits in the earth, dig deeper and safer than other races.”

All I was hearing was that dwarves were sort of OP. What was stopping them from tunneling underneath entire cities and making nations crumble from the bottom-up?

Note to self: don't mess with dwarves.

I gave him a nervous smile. “Good to know. Let’s go with that for now. Keep things slow and steady. Moving on. Who here can cook?”

Nalia was the only one who met my gaze with a nod. Ketty and Pola avoided my eyes like the plague.

“Noted. I do some cooking myself, so I’ll have you help me, Nalia.”

“Yes, Master.”

I realized I’d neglected to consider the nature of our relationship. “Master” was a bit heavy, so I went quiet and considered it for a moment.

“You know, I never liked all the formalities people used back at the Church. ‘Mister’ this, ‘mister’ that. Just call me Luciel, or chief, or something like that.”

A cacophony of *chiefs* and *sirs* followed in response. With the basics settled, I figured we needed to take a shopping trip to get everyone out of their rags. But a group of nearly twenty made that a challenge.

“We need to stock up on clothes, beds, and food. Lionel, you up for bodyguard duty?”

“Hold on a minute,” Piazza interjected. “Why is a slave taking our place? *We’re* your guard, sir.”

The other knights looked similarly vexed. Still, I felt safer with the guy who reminded me of my master.

“Hmm, well, I’ll explain later. For now, I’m taking Lionel.”

“If you say so,” said Piazza resignedly.

“Thank you for understanding. So, Lionel, what’s your specialty?”

A spark flashed in his eyes. “I can wield near any weapon, but I’m most proficient with a greatsword or longspear.”

What was with this guy and fighting? Was I just crazy? Honestly, he reminded me of my master more and more by the minute. Only he was much brawnier.

“All right, I’ll lend you the sword my master gave me. Will that work?”

“Perfectly.”

“The rest of you, start getting everything set up, including the magic items. I’ll leave it all here.”

I noticed Pola perk up at the word “magic” while everyone else sounded off.

“I’m not sure about leaving old Lionel by himself so soon after recovering,” Ketty chimed in. “Take me along! I’m a disaster in the kitchen, but my claws are sharp!”

I hesitated for a moment, then remembered we were in a country of beastfolk and that buying clothes likely meant buying women’s underwear. I quickly welcomed her company.

Lionel took my holy silver longsword and eyed it carefully, then sheathed it before I had the time to think much about it. He looked at me and said, “Your master cares about you quite a bit.”

I smiled and nodded.

Later, while I unloaded everyone’s things from my magic bag, Nalia took care of Lionel’s shaggy mess of a beard (there wasn’t enough time to trim his hair). When she finished, the man who stood in Lionel’s place was a proper, dignified warrior. The entire room froze upon seeing his transformation, and I was no exception.

Before we set out, I gave him and Ketty my old robes, and then off we went.

We walked from stall to stall, buying vegetables and fruits and the like where we could, which proved somewhat difficult thanks to Shahza's influence. Most of our shopping was done at the few places that would sell to us. It would've been all too easy for them to starve us out. Worst case scenario, I'd have had to contact Shurule for supplies. Dhoran had asked for as much iron as we could find, including weapons, tools, and appliances, be they shoddy or not, as well as lumber, which I was sure we'd gotten scammed on.

"Come again!"

At last, our shopping was complete.

"That was a lot more difficult than it needed to be," I muttered with a sigh. "At this rate, we won't last long enough to even get the chance to prove ourselves."

Suddenly, Lionel and Ketty stopped walking.

"I figured they'd pounce sooner or later."

"What a laughable attempt at tailing. Bold for the rabble, though, I will say. Ready?"

"Always," Ketty purred.

The two drew their blades, and although I was still a step behind, it was obvious enough that battle was coming.

I cast Area Barrier and ordered, "If they're not monsters, avoid killing them!"

They nodded and took positions at my front and rear. All at once, enemies armed to the teeth leaped from the shadows of the surrounding buildings and drew their weapons...unfortunately for them.

Lionel re-sheathed his sword and started bashing attackers with the scabbard, throwing a few good punches in between dodging blows. "Come on! Give me a challenge!"

He was like a video game boss made flesh. Ketty, on the other hand, overwhelmed them with speed that I could just barely keep up with. Slipping

about while blades slashed through the air, she clocked the attackers one by one with well-placed jabs, roundhouse kicks to the face, and some slaps with the flat of her blade for good measure.

“Don’t worry, we’re not cuttin’ ’em! They’re just taking a li’l nap!”

How in the world had these two wound up as slaves?

Our assailants were dealt with in no time at all, then comically tied together in one big group with rope I provided from my bag once I’d finished staring in shock. The fact that we’d just been attacked hardly even registered after seeing all that.

I’d decided to take our assailants to the guild for questioning when Lionel stopped me.

“We should bring them to Yenice’s head of state, Luciel. They’re bound to cry ‘kidnapping’ if we take them to our own headquarters.”

Not a bad idea. I took his advice and we set off, Lionel dragging the thirteen attackers behind us. I was well-used to the fact that levels and stats made judging people by their appearances impossible in this world, but even so, the sight of him lugging the weight of over a dozen men was one to behold. One singular question repeated itself in my mind: who in the world was this guy?

Ketty stayed on high alert as we continued through town, ignoring wide eyes and shocked gasps, towards what looked like the largest estate in the city, which we’d seen when we’d first arrived. It was about five minutes from the market and seemed like our best bet for finding Shahza and his troops.

As we approached the building, the guards at the gate froze, stupefied. And truth be told, I couldn’t blame them. If I’d been in their shoes—the only thing standing between a group of strangers dragging a dozen bodies and their goal—I’d probably have fainted.

I focused and straightened my posture. “I’m Luciel, S-rank healer. We were just attacked during our shopping trip, and I’m here to raise concerns about public safety. Can I please speak to Shahza?”

The soldiers immediately rushed through the gate in a panic.

“We weren’t told to wait, so I assume that means we can enter.” Leaving me no time to process his logic, Lionel stepped inside, the procession of bodies close behind him.

“Yup, that’s our Lionel!” Ketty followed him without hesitation. “What’s up, Chief? Let’s get movin’!”

I wasn’t big on the idea of standing outside on my own, so I hurried after them.

“Isn’t this...I don’t know, trespassing?”

“How so?” Lionel asked from a short distance ahead. “You’re an S-rank healer. The one and only in the world, I might add.”

“Yeah, sure, but is that relevant?”

“You’d be well within your rights to turn this entire debacle into a diplomatic incident. Your hosts should be counting their lucky stars that you’re willing to settle it amicably!” He let out a hearty roar of laughter.

I thought it once, and I’ll think it again: who the heck is this guy? It was just unfathomable to me that such a man could have ended up as a slave.

While I lost myself in my thoughts, Lionel marched on. Meanwhile, Ketty was off in her own little world as well, humming like she’d done this a million times before.

As we crossed the courtyard and came to the building entrance, Shahza and several beastfolk came barreling out, Sheila’s father, Orga, among them.

Lionel stared them down. “My master, the world’s one and only S-rank healer, was attacked!” he roared. “Attacked while out on business in *your* city! You will right this wrong, here and now!”

Shahza cowered like a house cat, and the others hung their heads. The way Lionel carried himself, the way he commanded the situation like a hero from a story—now *that* was a true protagonist. The seven politicians and three soldiers in front of us were speechless.

“Silence will not save you,” Lionel continued, his voice quieter now but no less intimidating. “We demand reparations. We demand that these hooligans be

brought to justice.”

“Y-You have our deepest apologies,” Shahza finally replied, dodging the older man and looking straight at me. “I am appalled that someone would attempt to harm you on your first day, Sir Healer. I assure you, these criminals will pay with their lives, and you will be compensated... Er, may we get back to you on that?”

Lionel turned and deferred to me.

“Honestly, after something like this, I should really report back to HQ.” I rubbed my chin. The situation didn’t feel right, like Shahza was up to something. His earlier panic had vanished, and Orga (who, by contrast, had come all the way to Shurule just to request a Healer’s Guild in Yenice), looked utterly beaten down. Clearly, Yenice wasn’t all of one mind.

“Okay, how about this? You don’t need to put anyone to death; just enslave them for their crimes. You cover branding costs, they help rebuild the guild, and we make this incident public. Also, I want you to tell the businesses to sell to us. We’re not looking for handouts, mind you, but we’ve had a rough time finding supplies. Lastly, I want the area around the guild to be maintained. That’s all I’m asking for, and we can brush the rest under the rug. Oh, and I’ll expect those reparations too.”

Capital punishment was one way to solve things, I guess, but having more hands for guard duty would help to ease the pressure on Lionel and the knights. We’d be able to have round-the-clock shifts. And making more shops available to us would help keep us from having to buy up entire store stocks, not to mention provide us with more options. On top of all that, more land around the guildhall meant more room to expand.

Lionel looked somewhat dissatisfied with my demands, but I wasn’t here to strain relations, and making the incident public would put us in a strong enough position with Shahza already.

The other beastfolk kept their distance from the tiger-man. I could feel his rage emanating from where I stood. But none of my requests were unreasonable, and his hands were tied.

“Of course, sir. We agree to your conditions.” He kept his head lowered, but I didn’t need to see it to know what kind of face he was making.

“You’re lucky my master is so merciful. Do not expect it twice,” Lionel said venomously. “One of you, come with us to the slaver.”

I really didn’t want to make Lionel angry. The more time I spent with him, the more my curiosity grew.

“Wait, I don’t recognize you,” Shahza said to Lionel. “Who are you?”

“Me? I’m just a servant to my lord, sir.”

His bellowing laughter echoed through the courtyard.

Along with the wolf-man called Gralga (incidentally, the one who had stabbed me in the slums a few years back), we returned to the slave market.

Once we were out of earshot of the soldiers, and without turning to face me, he whispered, “I’m sorry your visit is going like this.”

“Has something changed in Yenice over the past few years?” I asked quietly.

“It’s more recent than that.” He nodded, resolving himself, then continued his explanation.

At the time of his visit to Shurule, Orga had been Yenice’s head of state, but when he’d returned and his term had expired, the next to take his place was a dragonewt. And unfortunately, dragonewts possessed extraordinary self-healing abilities, so the value of healers was largely lost on their kind. Medicinals took far greater priority on account of their ability to cure diseases (something healers couldn’t do), and when the time came to organize and allocate land, the Healer’s Guild’s had been moved to the slums to quiet the masses.

When the dragonewt’s term ended, a certain tiger-man had taken his place thanks to backroom deals and bribes from his kind. And, although not on the level of dragonewts, tiger-folk excelled at regeneration and combat as well.

Fast forward a year, and the prospects of the guild’s revival had been looking grim until circumstances changed. A nearby labyrinth that had been inactive for years suddenly started teeming with monsters again, and the average medicinal potion couldn’t keep up with the severity of the injuries the adventurers and

soldiers were sustaining. To make matters worse, each poison and every variant of paralysis required its own unique antidote. Healers were the rational solution.

Unease surfaced in the corner of my mind. A labyrinth reactivating? It couldn't be. There were supposed to be forty years left. Or were things already in motion? Forty years couldn't be all the time I had, could it?

It didn't take us long to reach the first slaver's shop.

"Wait, these people wouldn't sell to us without an invitation last time."

"It's okay. They weren't told to avoid you, they're just very careful about who they do business with," Gralga explained. He knocked on the door and an elderly wolf-eared man came out. "I'm glad to see you doing well, good elder."

The man looked us over, clearly remembering our faces, then turned to Gralga. "You brought a crowd, boy."

"This is Saint Weirdo, the man who saved our lives in the Holy City. These fools tied up here tried to attack him. We were going to put them to death, but the Saint decided to show mercy and brand them instead."

"A weirdo *and* a saint, eh? What's a man like you need slaves for?" His aged eyes felt all-seeing. No lie would go unnoticed with him.

"I intend to order them to never harm the Healer's Guild, its clinics, or its assets," I said. "I'm going to provide them with food and beds in exchange for services as guards for the guild."

"That'll do. Come inside."

The criminals each received a binding crest, and the deed was soon done.

"That's all of them."

"Bill the cost to the state, if you don't mind, elder," Gralga informed him.

"Will do. Now, before you go, is the Saint in the mood for some shopping?"

"I'm sure I could find a use for them, but the guildhall doesn't have the space to accommodate more slaves right now. I'll keep you in mind if the need ever

arises, though.”

“I won’t get my hopes up.”

After we left, and before Gralga went back to Shahza, he made sure to let me know that old man Lerga had taken a liking to me.

“Listen well, slaves!” Lionel proclaimed. “Obey orders and you will be treated with dignity. Disobey and face the consequences. The choice is yours. Now, march! We’re returning to the Healer’s Guild!”

Ketty led our procession, followed by me, then the new slaves, with Lionel bringing up the rear, his intimidating aura keeping everyone in line on the way.

Two knights stood at the guildhall’s entrance.

“Thanks for holding down the fort,” I told them. “Anything to report?”

“Only a few curious glances. Nothing peculiar.”

“Well, we’ve lucked into getting thirteen new potential guards for the night shift. You guys’ll get some rest soon.”

The pair smiled. Graveyard shifts really were the worst.

“That’s good to hear,” one of them replied.

“Hang in there for now, guys.”

“Yes, sir!”

Dhoran was standing just inside when we entered, as if he’d been waiting for us the whole time.

“Long trip, was it?” he asked. “I gave the basement a bit of an upgrade while you were out. Forgot to ask ya to get magic stones for hardenin’ the ground and whatnot, but the foundation’s sturdy enough for now. Find those supplies?”

“It’s all in my bag. I’ll dump it downstairs. Also, if it’s magic stones you need, will these do?”

I took out some of the gems I’d collected in the labyrinth beneath the Church.

The dwarf nodded. “Aye, these’re dark-type, but we can purify ’em overnight

in holy water. Got any?"

"Purification, you say?"

I worked my magic, and the stones turned from a blackish-green to a light blue.

"By the divines, you're full o' surprises, lad!" Dhoran took one from me and marveled at the results. "These'll work just fine."

I smiled and turned to everyone behind me. "Lionel, Ketty, good work today. You can keep the weapons I gave you. Once we get everything unloaded downstairs, take a moment to rest. Just keep an eye on the new arrivals. Now, new slaves: be grateful that Dhoran's giving you all places to sleep. I expect you to earn your keep, so as long as you do that, you have my word that no one will go hungry."

With that, we headed down the stairs and into a basement that I hardly recognized. The place was enormous. "A bit of an upgrade" was the understatement of the century. I couldn't stop looking around at everything while we laid out all the wood, iron, and other supplies from my magic bag. I also offered Dhoran a hundred or so purified magic stones for further renovations.

"I'm trusting you, but no dangerous stunts, okay?" I warned him. "I'll grab everyone when dinner's ready. Until then, they're all yours."

"Consider your wish granted!"

I was just asking a favor...

I had way too much on my plate to spend time nitpicking at the moment, so I went back upstairs to start on dinner.

*

Ever since losing his arms, Dhoran had become horribly bitter. He'd given up hope, unable to see how a life without crafting could be worth living. But then along came a young healer, and suddenly he had purpose again. He hadn't been fooling himself, though. He'd known for so long that no amount of magic could return what he had lost.

But little did he know, this particular healer was a miracle worker. When all had seemed lost, he had been given his life back. A job. Confidence. It wasn't *smithing work*, but Dhoran had been given a second chance to create, to construct. What Luciel didn't know was just how capable the dwarf truly was or the intensity with which his passion burned now that he was in a veritable crafter's heaven.

The Healer's Guild was in for some rather...extreme modifications.

03 — A Man of Mystery

Back upstairs, I got down to work, setting up beds in everyone's quarters. I got the feeling that after eating, no one would want to bother with additional work. The second floor rooms were just spacious enough to comfortably fit two beds each—plenty of room to suit their purpose.

Once I finished, and after being thanked by everyone, I went to the kitchen. There, I found Nalia and, for some reason, Pola. She hadn't spoken up when I'd asked who could cook, so whatever she was there for, it couldn't have been to help. I ignored her and started sanitizing the kitchen with magic a bit more thoroughly than during our first run-through. The magic cooking utensils were already set up and ready to use, just as I'd requested.

Now there was only one order of business left before getting started.

"Pola, what are you doing?"

She was wandering all over the place, touching the appliances, picking them up, looking them over, and it was starting to drive me a little nuts.

"I like magic things. I made a bunch at grandpa's old forge."

She was something of an artificer, huh?

"Really? But we can't have you pacing around the kitchen while we work, so how about this?" I called up a huge pile of magic stones from my bag and purified them. "Go downstairs with Dhoran and you can have these if you promise to be responsible with them."

Pola rapidly nodded several times, then scooped up the stones and dashed off.

I sighed. "Okay, Nalia, let's get cracking. How much does Lionel usually eat?"

My friends back in Merratoni were slim, for the most part, but ate like horses, so I couldn't rule out that possibility for Lionel.

Nalia put a finger to her chin, then after thinking for a while said, "No more than what one would consider normal, but more than average, I would say."

That sounded like a job for curry. We'd picked up some cheap spices at the market, and there was no better way to judge someone's appetite.

"All right, then, let's go with curry and rice, some bread, and a warm salad on the side. We've got a lot of mouths to feed today. Could you wash the vegetables in Lil Shiny? After that, set Lil Choppy to peel mode, then once they're all skinned, switch it to dice mode and chop them all up. Here, I'll show you how they work."

I gave her a rundown on operating the appliances. Lil Choppy was modeled after blenders from my past life and just as simple to use.

"Incredible. These will make our work much easier."

"Especially with this many people. Oh, and take the skins from Choppy and give them to Sir Fertilizer over here. It composts scraps and peelings in a flash. Handy, right? It even turns off on its own."

This sucker worked just like composters from Earth, aside from the fact that it was powered by magic stones. I couldn't wait to use all that fertilizer for my own vegetables someday.

"What need do you have for compost?"

"It's just a personal dream of mine to settle down on a farm. Maybe breathe some life into the soil."

I actually had the money to make that dream a reality, but it was still a ways off. There were too many people I owed my life to and had to repay first.

Still smiling, I took out pots, vegetables, spices, and meat, and got to work. The magic stove gently brought a pot of purified water to boil, then I added the meat. Beast meat was particularly scummy when cooked in water, and all the blood would soak into the other ingredients if you weren't careful. I, however, had a few tricks up my sleeve, courtesy of Gulgar and Grantz.

I removed the meat after letting it sit for about twenty minutes, then cut and stuffed it with various herbs. While the vegetables boiled, I mixed together the spices and, once I'd skimmed off the scum, added them along with the meat to the pot to simmer over low heat.

I repeated the process five times. Thanks to my magic bag, I wasn't worried about making too much.

Eventually, all that was left to do was cook the rice and bread.

"Nalia, can you go upstairs and tell the Order the food's just about ready?"

"Of course."

Nalia and I, the two knights outside, Lionel, and the others would have our meals after the Order.

As expected, our efforts were a huge success. The criminals watched us enjoy our delicious food in silence, and once we'd all had our share, I stepped over to them.

"There's plenty more; enough for all of you. My last order of the day is for you to eat well and to be ready to handle guard duty. Your shifts will run until morning. You'll all have breakfast, then time for leisure, and then a full eight hours of sleep. You're forbidden from leaving the guild premises for purposes other than your watch duty. You're also forbidden from disposing of any reports or written information you may have that could defame the Healer's Guild. Once everyone gets used to the job, I'll start staggering shifts, which should help take the load off. If you can all promise to be loyal and follow instructions, I promise to always keep you well-fed and rested. Otherwise, you'll be having a mug of this."

I summoned a barrel of Substance X from my bag, and the slaves went white with fear. Weird. Gulgar was just fine with the stuff, so I was shocked to see these beastfolk have such a strong reaction to it.

I gave them permission to eat, and it was once again a success. Beastfolk didn't seem fond of Substance X, but curry was evidently a winner. Still, even after well over a dozen plates plus second helpings, I'd still made too much, so I stashed the leftovers in my bag. It'd make for a good morning meal, for anyone who was into that sort of thing.

While I made preliminary preparations for breakfast, I told Nalia to let Lionel and Ketty know to stay on watch overnight, and that they had permission to cook anything if they got hungry. Afterwards, I met with the two myself before

returning to my room.

“I’d like you both to take shifts keeping an eye on the new slaves. I’ll have my knights help out eventually, but they’ve had a long day today, so I want to give them some rest.”

“Don’t worry about us,” Lionel said. “We’re only slaves ourselves.”

“Uh-huh, leave it to us!”

“Thanks.”

They were bound to obey me just as the criminal slaves were, but I still wanted to build a genuine relationship with mutual trust between us.

I finally got back to my room and decided it was about time to report in. I pulled out my arclink crystal, closed my eyes, and focused my thoughts into it.

“This is Fluna,” the pope’s unmistakable voice echoed in my head. *“I take it you’ve reached Yenice safely?”*

I explained everything, from our arrival to the guild’s location in the slums to my decision to purchase slaves for safety purposes, and then our run-in with thugs. We discussed strategies to counter further opposition in the future and what direction to take the guild’s restructuring in. Our conversation ended with Her Holiness instructing me to contact her again the next day.

“It never rains but it pours.”

Maybe it had just been my imagination, but Her Holiness had seemed oddly excited during our call. And I’d nearly forgotten to write a letter to Galba and the rest. I wanted to fill them in on the situation and have Master look into who this Lionel guy was. And to tell Nanaella and Monica that I’d probably not have the time to go souvenir shopping for them.

After I finished my letters, I did my usual magic practice before exhaustion hit me like a ton of bricks. It had been a long journey, an even longer day, and the sandman was calling.

I woke up the next morning with a big stretch and—*boom!* The entire guildhall suddenly quaked.

“Are we under attack?! An earthquake?!”

I leaped out of bed, transformed into full armor, and burst out of my room along with the others.

“Everyone get downstairs!” I shouted to them with a cast of Area Barrier.

“Yes, sir!”

“Healers, wait at reception! Knights, scout outside, find Lionel and the others, then get back and report ASAP! We’re hunkering down and preparing for battle!”

The Order swiftly jumped into action without a single yawn.

“Dhoran might already have an escape tunnel prepared,” I said to myself, then raced downstairs.

What awaited me left me speechless.

“Mornin’,” Dhoran casually greeted me. “The blast woke you up, eh?”

Nothing registered. My mind went blank as I gazed around the vast basement and slowly stepped farther inside. Gradually, the gears in my head started to turn again. There had only been three rooms here yesterday—I was certain of that. But after our shopping trip, the entire floor had expanded sixfold. And now, one short night later, there was a magic elevator in the center of the room, just like the one at Church Headquarters.

A set of stairs next to it led even farther down. From the looks of it, four new floors had been constructed, bringing the basement to a total of five stories deep.

“Am I still asleep?”

“Ya look awake to me, lad—er, sir. Right, I oughta report. I’ve expanded the basement to five floors.”

“What am I looking at?”

“Well, we were wantin’ somewhere to keep the horses safe, aye? Figure underground works well enough, so I dug down to raise the ceiling, and once there’s a proper stable outside, they can come down here for exercise instead o’ bein’ cooped up in a pen. And I heard Miss Nalia say you were interested in doin’ some gardenin’, so I added a few fields too.”

“What about the other floors?”

“So, the slaves’ quarters I moved down a floor. Third floor I turned into a forge for equipment maintenance ’n magic artificing. Fourth’s a training area for you and the knights, like Lionel wanted. The bottom’s where I put a few cells, in case we have more riff-raff to deal with.”

Unfortunately, he failed to mention the tiny detail of how in the world he had done all this in such a short time, so his explanation did little to address my confusion. Dwarves were in a league of their own. Honestly. It wouldn’t have shocked me to hear that a single one was more than enough to construct an entire citadel.

“Is this normal for dwarves?”

“Normal? Nah, I can think of only one other man who could manage a thing like this. And I couldn’t have done it myself without all those gems ya gave me, which I’m fresh out of, I might add,” he smiled, shifting a happily napping Pola on his back, whom I’d only just noticed.

The pieces started connecting in my head. The earthquake hadn’t been the precursor to an assault, thank the lord, but I remembered telling Dhoran to work *slow and steady*. Neither of those conditions had been met. I was beginning to think that Lionel wasn’t the only anomaly around here.

I took a few calming breaths. “So, what was that explosion?”

“Ah, Pola messed up a few calculations for the elevator and the damn thing slammed straight up into the ceiling. All’s well now, though, and she’s fast asleep.”

She what?!

Dhoran looked back at Pola and smiled. The perfect picture of a grandfather and his grandchild.

“She knows how to make magic elevators at her age?”

“She’s a prodigy, ain’t she? How many sixteen-year-old artificers do you know, eh? Never took much to a hammer, but she’s been tinkerin’ since she could walk. She can synthesize magic stones, I’ll have ya know!”

And there he went, doting on his granddaughter. Picture-perfect. When it came to his family, Dhoran was just another kindly old man. Still, Pola's age always surprised me. She looked much younger.

"Are all dwarves masters at this sort of thing?"

"Can't think of anyone else but one, like I said. One o' my kin. Grand's his name, and the bastard—er, fella's my only match."

"Kin? Are you brothers?"

"Fellow apprentices."

"You're talking about the master blacksmith, right? *That* Grand?"

Dhoran grinned from ear to ear. "So ya know 'im, eh?"

The dwarf wasn't getting off the hook easily, but what sort of reprimand did this call for? A simple apology?

"Well, first of all, good work, but anything bigger than this will be difficult to take care of, so no more expanding, please."

"I'm outta stones anyway. Lemme know what else needs doin', and I'll be tinkerin' away."

"Will do. Be sure to get some rest, though. You can't have slept all that much last night if this is what you were doing the whole time."

"That I will."

"Okay, now that that's out of the way... Dhoran, you're incredible. You did all this in *one day*? *How*?"

Jord and the knights stomped down the stairs to report back, then stopped in their tracks upon seeing what the basement had become, just as I had. In contrast to my dumbfounded rambling, Jord regained his composure and took stock of the situation quickly. Still, I knew his heart had to be racing at the sight.

In high spirits, Dhoran agreed to give us all a tour of the renovations, which the Order seemed about ready to christen the guild's "underground secret base."

The tour began after Dhoran put Pola to bed in her room. Unfortunately, we had too many people for the elevator to handle, on account of the earlier incident making its safety questionable. And that was fine by me.

We walked straight down to the fifth floor.

“This is where troublemakers’ll go,” Dhoran explained. “Not that you gotta use it. Works just fine as a storeroom too.”

A storeroom with steel bars that I couldn’t get to budge an inch. Classy.

“Ten cells feels a bit much,” I said.

“I get the feelin’ you won’t be turnin’ all your problems into slaves if some big shot waltzes in.”

“Don’t jinx us.”

“Sorry.” He did have a point, though.

We went up to the fourth floor.

“This training ground was made exactly ta Lionel’s specifications. You won’t be puttin’ any dents in those walls no matter what ya throw at ’em. Pola’s proud of our work here.”

The space stretched about forty to fifty meters on each side, smaller than an Adventurer’s Guild but plenty big enough for sparring. Once more, Dhoran’s abilities blew me away. I’d wanted somewhere to keep the team sharp, but this went beyond my expectations. And even that excitement paled in comparison to my curiosity about who the heck Lionel was, because I was now convinced that he was as battle-crazed as my master. I felt an ominous chill run down my spine.

“I know I said I wanted him to help train us, but this is ridiculous,” I muttered, following Dhoran back out and up another flight of stairs.

“Now, fair warning,” the dwarf rasped quietly, “I didn’t get permission or nothin’, but...”

When we reached the third floor, I saw the reason for his hesitation. There were two full-blown workstations fit for professionals, one labeled “Dhoran’s Smithy,” the other “Pola’s Workshop.” More care had clearly been put into

creating this floor than any of the others.

“Well, moving on,” I said.

“Hold on a second!”

“Why?”

“This floor’s the heart o’ the whole basement! You’ve gotta see it.”

“But breakfast...”

“I’m beggin’ ya!”

I sighed. “Fine.”

I had the feeling he just wanted to brag about his forges, but he dragged me along anyway. That said, I did see the merit of having this place. He explained that we could smelt old and unused gear for reuse and temper elemental equipment like my holy silver sword or our armor with magic stones. When I heard that, I forked over a hoard of purified gems for him to use, sending Dhoran dangerously over the moon. Still, I trusted him, for better or worse.

“Can Pola get a share for herself?” he begged me. “Please, craftin’s our life! We’ll make anything ya want us to!”

I couldn’t very well argue in the face of such passion, so I went ahead and left him with the last of my stones. I hadn’t planned on doing anything else with them anyway.

“Okay, but this is the last of them, and I want you to use them for the guild. Nothing else.”

“I’m more grateful than ya know, Luciel.”

At last, we were released from the prison on the third floor and went up to the second: the slaves’ quarters. The entire floor had air-conditioning, and we were quick to ask for it in our own rooms.

Eventually, we returned to the first floor where the horses would stay, and I offered a few ideas for improvements based on what Yanbath had told me about caring for them. Dhoran agreed to my suggestions with vigor, but I made sure to tell him he needed to get some sleep after breakfast.

“I hope he doesn’t think all Healer’s Guilds have bunkers beneath them,” I said to myself as I headed for the kitchen.

I was sitting in the guildmaster’s room after breakfast when Lionel (the only one among us who was completely unfazed by the subterranean debacle) came to ask about having Dhoran craft him some gear.

There was something more important on my mind, though.

“First, I’d like to know how you had the time to supervise the building of that training ground while you were supposed to be on watch.”

I was calm. Anger was too exhausting, and I predicted nothing good coming from raising my voice to someone who was clearly my senior. At worst, I could permanently damage our trust.

In times of frustration, the most efficient path was a calm discussion of what had gone wrong and how it could be resolved. Barring instances of me having to constantly repeat myself, that is. I could see myself getting angry if that were the case, but this was his first offense.

“I apologize for acting out of turn. When Dhoran came outside for fresh air, we spoke for a time, and I let my imagination get the better of me.” He lowered his head. His apology seemed sincere, if a little lip-servicey.

Still, I didn’t see any reason to beat a dead horse just to stroke my ego. I considered punishing him for a moment, but it would have been a bit harsh and unfair of me to single him out.

“Please be careful from now on. I know I’m young and may not be the most experienced, but I’ll always take your ideas into consideration if you bring them to me first. Is there anything to report from last night?”

“No disturbances. I sensed several presences, but no one engaged us, likely because of our numbers. I gather the criminal slaves have talent that we can make use of, and no one expressed discontent with your treatment of them. As it happens, their employer wasn’t the overgrown cat who calls himself Shahza, but rather the Doctor’s Guild.”

Oops, I’d completely forgotten to interrogate those guys. Not a smart move

on my part.

“Thanks for looking into that. I totally forgot.” I regarded him for a time. “You know, I’ve been wondering, who exactly are you?”

Lionel deliberated briefly, then answered, “What I once was, the rank I carried in my homeland, is irrelevant. I am a man, and my sword is sworn to you.”

His eyes said he was speaking the truth, but his mouth stayed shut. I gave up for the moment.

“I won’t force you to open up, I guess. Anyway, back to that gear you wanted. I’d bring it up with Dhoran to figure out materials. Keep my master’s sword on you until that gets sorted out, since I’m still counting on you to watch over the felons, the guild, and me.”

He put his fist to his chest in a salute, then turned on his heel and left the room. Such a mysterious man.

I filled a piece of parchment with a list of things to consider and do:

Rebuild the guild

Maintain order

Establish triage protocols and clinics

Food

Doctor’s Guild

Investigate Shahza and Yenice council

“I can always ask the Adventurer’s Guild for help,” I murmured. “It’s easy enough to gain their trust, but I’d rather not make a fuss like always.”

Afterwards, I gathered the whole team, and we started putting together a signboard for the guild. The knights, however, insisted on their own vision, so we ended up making two. I didn’t care, personally, and quit halfway through to go make lunch.

Lionel and the others had awoken from their late sleep by the time I finished, and we ate together while talking over my aforementioned list. That afternoon,

I left the slaves to Jord and got Lionel, Ketty, and Piazza together for a trip to the Adventurer's Guild.

"We're going to offer a demonstration," I said. "The people in this city aren't familiar with healing magic, so if we want them to come to the guild, we need to show them what it can do."

"Smart plan!" Ketty exclaimed with a catlike flick of her ears.

"I think if we can distinguish ourselves from the Doctor's Guild we'll get along much better," Piazza remarked.

Lionel maintained his stoic expression. "I'm here to serve. Nothing more."

"First order of business is showing the people who healers are. Next, we look into the Doctor's Guild. Then we'll do some shopping on the way home. Everyone ready?"

There were nods all around and then we were off.

Once inside, I noticed that Yenice's Adventurer's Guild was different from Merratoni's or the Holy City's because most of its adventurers were non-human races. Other than that, the interior looked exactly the same.

"Everyone, follow me."

I headed for reception, completely undaunted by the gazes on me with Lionel at my side. I was an adventurer too, after all...

Boy, that desk sure was far away.

"Hello," I greeted the receptionist, holding out my guild cards. "I'm Luciel, S-rank healer in charge of the new Healer's Guild. Could I please speak with the guildmaster?"

"Of course, Mister Luciel. I'll see if he's in."

The cat-woman stood and bowed before leaving, without a single feline gesture. Was that whole gimmick just Ketty's deal? It made me curious to know.

I turned to the cat-girl in question. "Hey, so why do you always act all...you know, like a cat?"

She gave a catlike smile. "'Cause I heard it's cute!"

“Fair enough.” *Guess that’s that.*

I glanced around the guildhall, feeling numerous eyes focused on us. But that was all they were—stares—so I could only assume they knew better than to give our group trouble. I couldn’t spot a single human around, and the place felt sort of lifeless.

The receptionist soon returned. “The guildmaster will see you. This way, please.”

Well, that was easy. Almost too easy.

“So, he’s in his office?”

The woman leading us faltered. Apparently, he wasn’t. I was getting a little fed up with this city, to be honest.

“I sure hope he is.” I smiled. “It would be a real shame if something were to happen to your nice desk. Like, say, if it were to be covered in Substance X.”

The receptionist stopped at the stairs. “We *are* going to his office, but the one seeing you is the vice guildmaster, Mister Jeiyas.”

Oh yeah, Substance X was an effective interrogation tool. Especially against beastpeople.

“Where is the guildmaster? And why am I not meeting with him?”

She shook her head. “I’m sorry. I don’t know.”

I looked at Lionel, who shook his head as well. She was probably telling the truth.

“All right. Don’t worry, I think your desk will be safe.”

Her shoulders visibly relaxed, and she started up the stairs again. After a knock and receiving permission to enter, she opened the door and we stepped into the office. Shahza and a male dragonewt, a race I hadn’t seen much of, were inside. Shahza took one look at Lionel and froze while the other man’s shock was in response to me, for some reason.

I offered a friendly smile. “Hello, gentlemen. I’m Luciel, adventurer and currently the one in charge of the local Healer’s Guild. Thank you so much for

taking the time to meet with me, Guildmaster. Shahza, it's good to see you."

"I-I'm not the guildmaster," the dragonewt sputtered, quickly standing from his chair and bowing. "My name is Jeiyas, acting vice guildmaster. It's an honor to meet an S-rank healer of your caliber, sir."

Shahza, shocked by his behavior, shot a sidelong glance his way.

"Where is the guildmaster now, Mister Jeiyas?"

"Doing battle in the recently reanimated labyrinth, I believe."

Talk about free-spirited. Every guildmaster I'd known was a bit on the unhinged side, but no one outright ditched their guild.

"Is it really necessary for him to be there? I know guildmasters are strong, but still."

"It is irregular, yes, but they need my brother or they'll never be rid of that dungeon."

So, the top dogs here were a pair of dragonewt siblings.

"I see. I wanted to give a bit of a demonstration on healing magic, but if the guildmaster isn't here, we'll have to postpone. That's unfortunate."

"A demonstration?" Jeiyas eyed me with curiosity while Shahza looked like he'd bitten his tongue or something. For a race of people who supposedly had no interest in or need for healers, the dragonewt was surprisingly open-minded.

"I think the people of Yenice know *of* healing magic, but not what it can actually do, so I wanted to educate them a little. Show them what healers are all about."

"And what could our guild do to help?"

"Just gather anyone with injuries in the training ground downstairs. We'll heal them all, free of charge. Oh, these are our normal prices, for your reference." I handed him a copy of the healers' guidelines. "As you know, we can't cure diseases, but I want adventurers who put their lives on the line and rely on us to know the reasons we charge what we do. I want everyone to understand."

Jeiyas listened as he stared intently at the rates listed on the document. I'd

said what needed to be said, and pushing too hard would only make things worse, so I stayed quiet after that and gave him time to think.

Shahza shared in my silence, kept in check by Lionel's glare. It seemed like the politician was trying to work out what Jeiyas was thinking.

"Can you perform this demonstration tomorrow? Same time?" the vice guildmaster finally asked.

"Of course. Thank you for giving us a chance. The sooner we do this, the sooner we can lower casualty rates."

"May I ask something? Is this magic here for curing petrification and neurotoxins something everyone can do?"

"No, only a small handful of healers can do that. I'm the only one here who can at the moment, but I can vouch for the others. They're hardworking, and I expect they'll reach that level before long."

I had Jord and the rest casting their own spells as much as possible, so they should have been making good progress with their leveling.

"Then we'll see you again tomorrow. We'll be waiting downstairs."

"Thank you for your time."

We exchanged a handshake. But Lionel stayed behind when we turned to leave.

"You should know, Councilman Shahza, that yesterday's incident was orchestrated by the Doctor's Guild," he said.

We left before waiting for a reply. On our way to the market, I couldn't stop thinking about Jeiyas and what had made him act so cordial with me.

*

The second the office door closed, Shahza raised his voice to the vice guildmaster.

"This is not what we agreed to! What are you doing siding with that healer brat?!"

The tiger-man opened his mouth to shout further vulgarities but clamped it

shut at Jeiyas's fierce glower.

"You're mistaken if you think that man is nothing more than a brat. You think we dragonewts would act in defiance of one chosen by the Eternal? In defiance of our gods?!" he roared.

Dragonewts were a devout people and honored the Eternal Dragons with even greater reverence than Crya the Divine. Their blood spoke to them, and they knew when one was chosen to bear their protection, regardless of race.

In Jeiyas's case, Luciel was the fifth bearer he'd met, and the first non-dragonewt. His presence seemed ordained, like the dragons had offered them succor during their trying time of fighting the labyrinth.

Monsieur Luck was on the move again, unbeknownst to Luciel.

Shahza recoiled, cursing the Doctor's Guild for acting so rashly. *Incompetent idiots! If you want a job done right...*

The frustration in his heart morphed and rotted into pure hatred.

04 — The Master's Pride

Unlike yesterday, our shopping trip ended without incident. When we got back to the guild, the healers were poking at and examining the magic appliances in the kitchen like curious children. It was kind of cute.

"We're back, everyone. You guys making dinner tonight?"

Jord stepped over, grinning. "We're done with our magic practice and looking for something to do anyway. It can't be easy making food for us all by yourself. Y'know, though, those magic items are crazy, but not as crazy as that list of recipes you have. It's even got stuff from my hometown."

The rest got themselves all worked up over their own home dishes that had made the list.

"I'll leave it to you guys, then. Tomorrow, the healers and I are going to the Adventurer's Guild to show off our magic."

Their faces darkened. What was their problem? Substance X was bad, yeah, but it was extremely useful once you got used to it. Everyone had looked relieved when they'd realized I'd forgotten to refill my stock, like my very presence somehow equated to barrels of the stuff.

"This'll be a special free-of-charge thing. I've already spoken to the pope about it," I continued. "We'll leave after lunch tomorrow. A few knights will join us as guards but the rest will stay here and take charge of the slaves. Anyway, good luck with the cooking. I'll be downstairs."

Jord smiled and saluted with a fist to his chest, followed by the rest. I returned the gesture, grateful that my second-in-command was such a skilled mood-maker.

Ketty stayed upstairs to talk with Nalia, and Lionel followed me down to the basement, which meant he was the only one present to witness my reaction.

"We...*are* underground, right?"

Not even the stone-faced warrior could hide his shock. "I believe it *was* at one point in time."

Key word: *was*. What we were standing in wasn't an underground basement but open air. The sun now shone where just this morning a magically glowing ceiling had been. Wind blew through what had previously been walls. The modest horse pen had become a pasture, complete with fenced-off, freshly tilled fields and more than enough space for Forêt Noire to frolic as she pleased. Right now, she and the other horses were comfortably lazing about.

"This can't be real. Dwarves are something else, sure, but there's no way someone could make this. It's too life-like!"

"I leveled up, Chief," Pola replied out of nowhere. "My job. And my artificing skill too."

"Oh, you're awake. I mean, hold on, *you* made all this?"

"It's not good enough." She shook her head. "I can't expand space yet."

This kid was crazy.

"Ah, you're back!" Dhoran appeared and I braced myself for his inevitable doting. "Just finished reinforcin' all the floors. Think I'll get to experime—craftin' stuff for the good o' the guild."

The damn dwarf was about to say "experimenting." Just as I was about to give him a piece of my mind, Pola came up and held her hands out.

"Uh, yes?" I asked.

"Stones, please."

I stared at her blankly. She stared back at me. We continued in this way for some time. Then I glanced at Dhoran, and he turned away.

"I'm all out. I said that when I gave the rest to him this morning."

She scowled, tears welling up in her eyes. "You lied, grandpa."

Dhoran howled in agony as the destructive force of his granddaughter's scorn shattered his heart. "Listen, lass, ya gotta understand, the mister wanted the guild safe, y'see? It takes a lot o' gems to make a barrier like this, you know that."

"You said he had a bunch."

“That... That I did.”

I looked at Lionel. “I wonder how these two compare to other professionals.”

“They’re likely some of the best in their trade. Of the many faces I’ve seen and names I’ve heard, I could count on one hand the number of masters on Dhoran’s level, perhaps two in Pola’s case.”

If Dhoran and Pola were incredible, and Lionel and Ketty were incredible, then that left...

“Don’t tell me Nalia’s as insanely talented as the rest of you. What is it, fighting? Crafting?”

“Nalia has little taste for combat or spellcasting.”

Thank the lord. She was normal.

“But she is gifted at perception, skilled in concealing her magic and presence, and knowledgeable in the ways of royal etiquette.”

Scratch that. None of these crazy people were ordinary. I was starting to think insanity was just the norm in this world.

“Luciel, lad, I’m beggin’ ya,” Dhoran pleaded, “order me to get more magic stones or find us some yourself! Please!”

Pola had her arms crossed, cheeks puffed out. But now that renovations were just about done, I was running out of things for them to do.

“Sorry, but no. Here, I want you to write your ideas down in this, then bring your proposals to me. You’ll get your magic stones later.”

“Th-The cruelty...”

Dhoran took the pen and parchment with sagging shoulders. Pola’s pout devolved into a stunned gape. The reserved, stoic girl from the cell was nowhere to be seen.

This was for my own sanity, honestly. My heart couldn’t handle any more “experiments.”

“Make sure to be detailed. List everything the item can do, its effects, that sort of thing. If I think we can use it, I’ll get the stones we need.”

Their spirits rose slightly. They thanked me and went off to their workshops on the third floor.

“It’s never boring with those guys around,” I mumbled.

“I will protect you, regardless of the equipment we have,” Lionel reminded me. “You only need to say the word.”

“True.”

I cast Purification on Forêt, praying that our show at the Adventurer’s Guild tomorrow would be a success.

Dinner that night was delicious. Nalia’s guidance had brought out flavors I never thought possible, and it seemed I had a new rival in my midst—not. No point in being prideful when there was so much I could learn from her.

Lionel and Ketty each took half of the felon slave group for the night’s watch duty, and after contacting Her Holiness as promised, I finally got some shut-eye.

The following morning, I stretched, practiced my magic, then stopped by the kitchen to lay out ingredients for breakfast.

“Good morning, sir,” Nalia called out.

“Morning. The kitchen’s yours from now on. I’m heading downstairs to do some training.”

She gave a gentle bow. “Of course, sir.”

When I reached the fourth floor of the basement, I found that someone had beaten me to it.

“Morning, Lionel.”

“I’ve been waiting.”

He grinned. A greatsword was sheathed on his back, and a massive shield clung to his left arm.



“How did you know I’d come down here?”

“We’re creatures of habit.”

“Fair enough. So, what are *you* doing here?”

“I believe I promised to train you, and I wanted to make good on that.”

“Okay, now what’s the real reason? I can go jogging by myself well enough.”

He shrugged. “I want to see just how dull my skills have become. And one other thing. In the past, a friend of mine spoke of an apprentice he found, one who never backed down from injury, and I was jealous at the time.”

That couldn’t have been *my* master, right? Lionel smirked, seemingly having read my mind.

“Brod was his name, also known as the Whirlwind. Two decades ago, our match ended in a draw, and we’ve exchanged letters ever since.”

Called it! The phrase “birds of a feather flock together” came to mind. Unfortunately, I was now all but certain that Lionel was the same sort of battle-crazed lunatic as his friend.

“Quick reminder: I’m a healer. Please don’t kill me by accident.”

“True, you have important business today. I’ll bear that in mind.”

“That’s better than nothing, I guess,” I groaned. “Let me do some jogging to warm up first.”

I did a few laps and pre-stretches under his watchful gaze. I was getting one of my many famous bad feelings about this match, but there was no escaping it, so I sucked it up, threw up a barrier, and got on with it.

I quickly realized something. Although I couldn’t say who was stronger one way or another, I learned that Lionel and Brod drew their strengths from different areas. While my master excelled in speed, precision, and movement, Lionel was a stalwart golem. He was like a wall, and there was no getting past his shield or the massive strikes of his titanic blade. To put it simply, Brod was the panther to Lionel’s bear.

One other striking difference was in their teaching styles. My master was very deliberate in his coaching whereas Lionel was much more hands-on. Still, the way he panicked when he accidentally dismembered my left arm reminded me of Brod from back when I had still called him “instructor.”

Wait, back up—without Extra Heal, I would have died just now! What good did those slave crests even do if he could mutilate me that easily?

All throughout our match, I prayed and begged the lord above for someone to come and tell us that breakfast was ready and that this would not become a common occurrence. By the time boot camp was over, we’d gathered quite a crowd of slave onlookers.

“Ah, good work last night, everyone. Get some rest after breakfast,” I told them.

They gaped at me, but I was too hungry to care why and hopped onto the magic elevator. We had made sure that it was actually functional yesterday.

The others were waiting for me in the kitchen, their food untouched.

“You guys didn’t have to wait.”

I took a seat, gave my thanks for the meal, and began to dig in when one of the group asked, “Will you be doing any healing when we go to the Adventurer’s Guild today?”

“If I need to. I’ll step in for petrification, poison, or things that High Heal can’t fix, but I want you all to be Yenice’s foundation.”

“May we watch you work, if we have a chance?”

“Sure. I’ve already given you all the gist of my process, but seeing it for yourself is always better.”

We chatted away throughout breakfast, and I was impressed with Nalia once again. She was extremely adept at this sort of housework, but it must have been hard to manage all on her own. An assistant slave for her might not be a bad idea.

Stashing that thought in the back of my mind, I drew up a map of the Adventurer’s Guild and went through where I wanted everyone to be stationed.

No one objected to my plan as we talked it over. I found myself grateful to the pope and Granhart for putting me in my current position.

“Let’s show these people what we’re all about!”

“Yes, sir!”

After that, I locked myself away in the guildmaster’s room until a knock came at the door that afternoon.

“Come in.”

Dhoran and Pola entered with neatly tied parchments in hand.

“Um, you guys *have* gotten some sleep, right?”

They looked haggard, and their eyes were swollen and red. They put their parchments on my desk without a word.

“Is all this...”

“Half’s for us. Half’s for sellin’.”

“They’ll sell for lots,” Pola added. “We want to use half the money for more magic stones.”

It was quite a lot to read all at once. Then I had an idea. All I had to do was work a bit of white-collar magic.

“I’ll look these over and get back to you later. Have breakfast and get some sleep, okay?”

But there was no magic here.

“We’re not leaving until you do.” Small tears sat in the corners of Pola’s bloodshot eyes.

“Look at ’er, Luciel. You can’t make the poor girl cry,” Dhoran insisted.

“For crying out loud. You’re bad at acting, by the way. But fine. Who do I start with?”

“Well, who else—”

“Me!” Pola shouted, staring straight at her grandfather.

“All right, I got it,” I said. “Go rest on the couch in the meantime.”

By some miracle, I managed to get through their proposals just in time for Nalia to come and announce lunch.

“Pola, two accepted, five deferred. Dhoran, five approved, one deferred.”

“And the magic stones?”

“The magic stones!”

The proposals I’d dismissed were so outlandish that I simply couldn’t have green lit them in good faith based on the glance I’d given the writeup.

“We’ll go shopping for the materials we’ll need soon. And yes, I promise to get magic stones.”

Pola and Dhoran high-fived, then finally relaxed. They joined me for lunch, but they were obviously beyond exhausted. The pair really exemplified what it meant to literally put one’s life into one’s work.

Not long after that, it was time to go to the Adventurer’s Guild.

“All right, let’s do this, everyone!”

“Yeah!”

“Safe travels.”

“Do good work!”

Words of encouragement followed us as we set off for the Adventurer’s Guild. No one spoke once in the ten minutes it took us to reach our destination, then I turned around at the door and addressed the group.

“Let’s show Yenice what we’re about.”

“Yes, sir!” they replied spiritedly.

I was hoping this place would become like a second home to them.

“And don’t forget to make sure the people know how strong our guards are. Stay on alert, knights.”

“Sir!”

“Lionel, Ketty, with me.”

“As you wish.”

“Mm-hmm!”

I opened the door and stopped in my tracks.

“Hm, so this is what we’re up against.”

We weren’t even downstairs yet and the hall was already overflowing with patients, some writhing from the effects of poison, some immobilized by petrification.

“We’re using plan C!” I shouted to my team. “We’ll stop by reception and then head downstairs. No detours. We go straight to the basement, understand? I’ll handle the ones in critical condition.”

We got moving. I’d planned for three scenarios today. Plan A was in case we encountered resistance, plan B was if there were no patients, and plan C assumed that the Doctor’s Guild was even less qualified to heal than I’d thought.

“My name is Luciel, S-rank healer,” I said to the receptionist. “I’m with the Yenice Healer’s Guild, as requested by vice guildmaster Jeiyas. Please tell him we’ve arrived.”

“Y-Yes, sir.”

She dashed off and I faced the crowd. “We will be treating all of you, courtesy of the Healer’s Guild! Please remain calm and orderly and I promise you’ll all be tended to. We’ll establish a triage area so patients needing attention more urgently will have it first, and anyone with complaints about that can and will be refused care. Likewise, you will not be given care if you become violent. We are not angels, and we are not a charity. But we want to heal, and that is the honest truth. Let us help you.”

“Please!” added the other healers in unison.

Having them there to back me up gave me confidence. I caught sight of Jeiyas coming up the stairs and told him, “I’m going to focus on the ones in the worst condition here on the first floor. I’ll do what I can, but like I said, I’m no god.”

“Of course, sir. This way, men.” He guided the other healers downstairs, leaving me with Lionel and Ketty at my side, and I got to healing.

I spotted a young adventurer hunched over by the stairs, half his body turned to stone and in no shape to speak. I looked at his companion.

“Was he poisoned? Is there any paralysis? It’s fine if you aren’t sure; just tell me what you know.”

The man held what was left of his friend up and rasped in a tearful voice, “I-It was some gas in the labyrinth. Please, do something!”

He reached out to cling to me, but Lionel stepped into his way. As I began to chant *Dispel*, the man turned back to his friend in desperation. The wounded adventurer’s body glowed, his ossified form returning to flesh and blood. After a *Middle Heal*, he seemed to be in good health again but was still looking pale, so I threw in a cast of *Recover* to get him back to normal.

“He should be stable now. If he lost blood, let him rest for a few days.” I looked at the man Lionel had held back, sighed, then cast *Recover* on him as well. “I understand wanting to look after the people you care about, but please take care of yourself first. You were almost as badly off as him.”

I wove through the crowd of patients, restoring consciousness and bringing others back from the brink, raising cheers with every “miracle.” Frankly, things were going perfectly.

Until they weren’t.

“Line up, everyone! I’ll get to you all!” I shouted just as a fuss downstairs drew my attention.

“I’m sick o’ this! Heal me already, you assholes! Who do you think I am?!” a burly beastman hollered, barely restrained by two knights while Jeiyas tried in vain to calm him.

“We can stop altogether if you like!” I shot back. “I don’t know who you are or where you came from, but I have no patience for your type. What right do you have to complain about volunteer work that doesn’t cost you a copper?” I descended the stairs to the training ground. “Don’t make me file an official complaint with your guild.”

“And who the hell is this brat?”

“The brat is an S-rank healer. Luciel. I run the Healer’s Guild here, which gives me the authority to offer you two options: be quiet and wait your turn or ruin it for everyone and no one else gets healed.”

Lionel stood in front of me, Ketty behind, with a whole lot of adventurers still eagerly awaiting their turn.

The man flashed me an arrogant grin. “All right, Mister S-rank, let’s see how you deal with this! Now!”

Out of nowhere, clouds of black dust came flying at me. Lionel clicked his tongue and readied his shield, followed by Ketty with her cloak, but it was impossible for even the two of them to keep every grain from striking me.

“Have fun healing when you can’t use magic! We’re outta here!” he cackled.

“You won’t escape!” Lionel cried. Seeming desperate after failing to protect me, he readied his greatsword and nearly threw it at the fleeing man but stopped himself. “Curses!”

Our target suddenly began to vanish, quickly disappearing entirely, leaving nothing but a log with a slip of paper stuck to it.

Ninjutsu?! Is this guy a ninja?!

“An illusion. Dark magic!” Lionel shouted as he ran for the opposite set of stairs that our quarry, as well as several other beastpeople, were sprinting for. “Someone stop that man!”

But too many were still badly injured, and Jord and the others had been affected by the dust. Our attackers cut through the training grounds and up the stairs. They were home-free, and we had too many people who still needed treatment to waste time giving chase.

“Unbelievable...” Jeiyas’s shoulders sank dramatically. “I want everyone who can move out there looking for those bastards!”

Lionel’s expression was similar to the guildmaster’s. “I’m sorry, Luciel.”

“Slipped right through my paws,” Ketty whimpered.

“Hey, does this mean we ain’t getting healed?” one adventurer griped.

“Is that all you healers can do? Come on, I’m dyin’ here,” another whined.

“You know how hard it was to drag myself here?”

With nowhere else to direct their frustration, the adventurers turned on the healers, whose healing magic had been completely nullified. We had to do something about their lack of resistance.

I slowly walked over and chanted, *“Oh holy hand of healing. Oh birthing breath of the land. Heed my prayer. Banish the impurities before me and shepherd them unto deliverance. Purification!”*

My body glowed and every particle of the dust vanished. Then I turned my attention to the healers.

“Oh holy hand of healing. Oh birthing breath of the land. Heed my prayer. Purge all that festers and restore equilibrium. Recover!”

The spell enveloped them.

“Looks like some people need a few more mugs.”

Jord and the others recoiled. Now their magic would work just fine, though, and the complainers managed to get a grip on themselves.

“That takes care of that. Sorry for the trouble, everyone. Now, those who still need healing, please wait patiently,” I announced, “or I’ll have you tied to the wall. That sound good to you, vice guildmaster?”

Jeiyas recovered from his stupor and nodded. “Anyone who’s got somethin’ to say can say it to my face!”

“All right, let’s pick up where we left off.”

Once again I found myself grateful to Substance X. Aside from its side effects (namely how hard it made leveling up), its resistance boosting had come in extremely useful here. It would do the guys good to just hunker down and drink the stuff.

The healing continued. Although Jord and his group weren’t skilled enough to be able to cast Dispel, Recover worked well enough for most status ailments. I stepped in for cases where it didn’t, or for particularly severe wounds or

disfigurements. As long as the limb was still technically attached, a cast of High Heal was more than enough to restore it, and that display was enough to garner even more worshippers. Friends and loved ones embraced each other, danced arm-in-arm, and exploded with happiness.

One thing confused me, though. Why wasn't anyone leaving? We healed and healed but no one ever actually left the guildhall. Didn't these people have places to be? My companions were just about spent from the massive number of patients they were working through, so I jumped in and started doing rounds on my own.

"Oh holy hand of healing. Oh birthing breath of the land. Heed my prayer. Purge all that festers and restore equilibrium. Recover! There. That should do it." I looked around. "Does anyone else need treatment? Did we get to everyone? Please look around and tell us if you see anyone in pain."

No reply came.

"Adventurers," Jeiyas called out, "our guild has done wrong by the Healer's Guild despite their goodwill. Some of you lambasted these generous men when the blame was never theirs. It is *those* men who deserve your anger!" The adventurers shrank in on themselves, looking guilty. "We were told today's service would be free, but is that good enough for us? No! Hell no! We adventures, we beastfolk, always repay our debts! We'll find those bastards, and the one who put 'em up to it! C'mon, boys, we've gotta save face!"

The hall shook with vigorous cheers and spirited hollers, and after a glance and a light bow, they each shot up the stairs.

"I'm so sorry that happened, Luciel. We'll make it up to you." The dragonewt lowered his head.

"Please, Jeiyas, there's no need for that. They were ready for us. Their plan was obviously to keep us from healing, then spread the word that we couldn't make good on our promise. They wanted to make the guild look bad."

"That is...likely correct."

Well, don't get all vague on me.

"Do you think they're connected to Shahza? Or maybe the Doctor's Guild?"

My team looked surprised. I'd never filled them in on the rival guild's role in our problems. Or anyone, really. It was sensitive information.

"I can't say one way or the other," Jeiyas replied. "But what I do know is that the Doctor's Guild sells that black powder. It's most commonly used against monsters, to prevent them from using magic."

"So pretty much anyone could get their hands on it. Whatever the case, your guild knows the city better than us. I'll let you handle this."

I had a feeling we'd only make things worse if we pushed in, and I couldn't put the others (or, *ahem*, myself) in any more danger.

"I don't know how much you trust us after this, but we'll get to the bottom of it. I swear to you."

The fact was, I really didn't trust his people at all. I was just giving them the benefit of the doubt.

"We're going back to the Healer's Guild. Please get in touch when you learn something."

"We will." He bowed once more, then saw us to the door.

"Until next time," I said in farewell.

Lionel led us out and took one step outside before abruptly stopping.

"What're you—"

A group carrying several battered adventurers barreled past us and into the hall, cutting me off. Jeiyas took one look at them, and his eyes went wide.

"Brother!" he cried.

"Get them all within three meters of me, and I'll use Area High Heal," I ordered. "I want the rest of you to take care of poison and paralysis."

"Yes, sir!" the healers replied.

The incapacitated dragonewt, presumably the guildmaster, shot up with a start and glowered at us. "Goddamn *healers*!" he hissed. "How much more do we have for you to take?!"

He was an awful sight, his skin discolored. He still distinctly resembled Jeiyas,

only with more rugged features that added to the ferocity in his eyes. Somehow, though, it lacked intimidation. I was relieved that he was lucid, but faced yet again with the reality of the healer's plight, I couldn't help being a little sad.

"We're not charging a thing this time," I said with focused calm that surprised even me. "Now lie down and let us help you, dammit!"

After my complete one-eighty from calm to frustration, the dragonewt relaxed. I made sure that everyone was within range, then cast Area High Heal. Most of their wounds seemed internal, so I quickly cast Purification, Dispel, and Recover on the uppity guildmaster until his skin finally returned to a healthy tone. Ignoring the shock on his face as he patted his body, I turned to the ten or so adventurers still in need of attention.

Once things settled down, Jeiyas introduced me to his older brother, Goldhus.

"I'm sorry for shouting earlier. I'm Luciel, S-rank healer and guildmaster of the Yenice Healer's Guild. I spoke with Jeiyas yesterday about giving a demonstration of our services today, free of charge, and that's why I'm here now."

The guildmaster gaped at me, then looked at his brother, who nodded in reply. Goldhus immediately got on his knees and prostrated himself.

"I deeply apologize for my previous outburst."

I quickly had him stand back up, fearing a continuing conversation with the back of his head. But it was probably too late to stop the rumor mill. Hell, I could already feel a headache coming on.

"Guildmasters shouldn't be kneeling at all, let alone right in front of the door. People will say things."

"Yes! Yes, right you are! My deepest—"

"Please just stand up."

"Right. My thanks." We'd avoided an endless loop, luckily, but this couldn't have been the same guy who'd glowered at me only moments before. "I'm the guildmaster here. Call me Goldhus. I really do apologize for earlier. Being

cooped up in that labyrinth does things to the mind, and I had no idea you were S-rank.”

Labyrinth or not, his earlier reaction hadn’t been mild, to put it lightly.

“It seems like you’re familiar with healers and what we can do, sir. Your impression of us isn’t favorable, is it?”

His expression darkened. “Not exactly. I had many experiences as a youth with being denied treatment, being extorted. But a few years ago, during a meeting at Adventurer’s Guild Headquarters, I heard about a healer who was different. A bit of a weirdo. You, Luciel.”

Brod was an ex-adventurer, which surely meant the same for Goldhus. I figured it wasn’t uncommon for them to be less than welcoming of my kind. What I was more curious about was who had been spreading rumors about me.

“Well that’s...interesting.”

“They say you lived in the Merratoni Adventurer’s Guild, where you trained and healed everyone, regardless of sex, race, or severity, for one silver each and with incredible passion.”

Now things were just getting out of hand.

“I’d love to hear more.”

“Well, after barely two years, you were transferred to the Holy City, and in less than two more, you reached S-rank. They call you an adventurer-bred healer.”

Crap, that was all accurate. I couldn’t refute any of it.

“But I heard dragonewts were opposed to founding a Healer’s Guild here.”

“Right. As much praise as I was hearing about you, my perspective was limited, given I run a guild filled with beastfolk. I agreed with the council’s decision at the time.”

At the time? “Not anymore?”

“I never imagined you would do so much for us and expect nothing in return.” He frowned. “You even cured wounds that the Doctor’s guild had given up on.”

There was just one thing I had to correct. “Just to be safe, you should know that the freebies were only for today.” I handed him a copy of our guidelines. “These are what our normal rates will be.”

“This here?”

“Yes. Using the treatment I gave you as an example, the High Heal would cost three gold, Purification runs for fifty silver, Dispel for two gold, and Recover for one gold, for a total of six gold and fifty silver pieces. Do you find that excessive?”

The guidelines also specified that prices could vary by upward of fifty percent, but I chose to follow the listed rates.

“No, not at all! That’s a steal! High-grade potions can cost five gold alone, and antidotes can sell for a gold apiece sometimes. And neither are as effective as your magic.”

“Happy to hear it. It took me a lot of time and agony to come up with those rates, so I’m glad they sound reasonable.”

I’d lost count of how many market surveys we had done in the process. And not just for the healers and their clinics; the surveys had included even the adventurers and citizens our prices would affect.

One other thing we had tentatively proposed was having fledgling healers with low skill levels employed by Shurulean Healer’s or Adventurer’s Guilds, where they would practice magic for half-price in exchange for room and board. The archbishops were very receptive to the idea and passionate about cultivating a better environment for higher-quality healers. They weren’t keen on letting me work out the specifics, though.

“A young man of not even twenty has no business making enemies!” the archbishop with the peddler’s face, Muneller, had told me. “Our lives are at their ends, and the people will accept our proposals more readily. If not, we will only have to endure the scorn for a short time. This has a chance to endure for the ages, and we’d like the chance to make our mark on history as you have.”

So I’d given in and let them handle it. Also, I’d started feeling bad about thinking that Muneller’s face looked like a backstreet peddler.

Basically, the archbishops deserved far more praise for creating the guidelines than me, but Her Holiness had decided that I would be at the center of it all—the public face of the movement. The elders had been credited on the document itself, and that was enough for them. It was thanks to them I had left for Yenice with renewed passion for my work, so it felt nice to see their contributions validated.

“Now, how about... Luciel, you *are* an adventurer, right?” the guildmaster asked.

“Er, yes?” I was feeling many things about the coming conversation at the moment, and “good” was not one of them.

“Then would you accept an assignment?!”

“Sorry, not a high enough rank.”

I’d seen that coming, but luckily my adventuring rank was too low for him to be allowed to nominate me for a private job.

He winced. “Then would it be possible to set up a temporary clinic in front of the labyrinth? The Adventurer’s Guild would cover the cost!”

He sure was grasping at straws now. And unfortunately, he was asking a lot.

“No can do. Not after the trouble we had today, and just yesterday we were attacked in the street. I can’t be away until the guild can run safely and efficiently on its own. Not while I’m in charge, at least.”

“I... I understand.”

I breathed a sigh of relief that he’d finally given up.

“In that case, you’re saying it might be possible once everything is settled.”

Er, scratch that. He was doubling down now. “Listen, I know you want me in particular, but I’m a guildmaster. I can’t just leave the guild to someone else.”

“What a coincidence! I’m a guildmaster too. And my guild is going to do everything in its power to make sure yours can operate smoothly. You have my word!”

The guy wasn’t listening to a word I said. I glanced at my team for a lifeline,

but they turned away. Even the knights. The two slaves, however, looked downright excited by Goldhus's suggestion.

And so our demonstration ended without incident...if any of what had just transpired could be considered "without incident." I felt myself getting dragged deeper and deeper into shadowy plots beyond my control.

05 — All-Powerful

Our healing demonstration had been a success. We'd won the favor of Guildmaster Goldhus, Vice Guildmaster Jeiyas, and more than a few adventurers. From now on, until clinics could be set up, they would come to the Healer's Guild directly for any healing needs other than disease.

"Yeesh, you guys were heartless," I said. "Especially you, Britz. And you, Doughertis. You're knights! You're supposed to protect me!"

They shuffled awkwardly.

"I'm sorry," Britz said. "I've just never seen a dragonewt before. And he looked friendly."

"Same here," Doughertis added. "He's the guildmaster, so I let my guard down."

The two kept blinking and looking all over the place. Someone wasn't telling the truth.

I smirked. "Mm-hmm, okay, now what's the real reason?"

"Dragonewts, uh, sure are scary looking."

"I admire how easily you stood your ground against that guy."

How sweet the truth was.

"In case you forgot, you *are* part of my guard. And you two, Lionel and Ketty, I'm not taking either of you near that labyrinth even if the temporary clinic happens, so give it up."

That sure wiped the grins off their faces.

"Sir, there's no need to be so heartless."

"Y-Yeah! What if somethin' bad happens like today? We gotta be there to protect you!"

They suffered from a case of battle-lunacy, so they probably weren't lying, but they were still hiding something. So said my gut.

“Spill it. What’s on your minds?”

“I won’t make excuses for my failure today,” Lionel confessed, “but it’s true that my senses have dulled and my muscles have atrophied more than I thought. If I only had a chance to rebalance myself...”

“I’ve always wanted to explore a labyrinth ever since I was an itty-bitty kitten!”

I didn’t know how long Lionel had gone without walking, but the difference between his upper and lower body strength was certainly substantial. Not that I stood a chance against him, even in that state. Perhaps they’d been in the military somewhere and Ketty had been his subordinate. I was sure it was true that his battle senses had decayed, but did I want to be that guy who let his servants have everything they wanted? Not particularly. I just wanted to be me.

“Work hard and maybe I’ll trust you both with more responsibility. We’ll see. You never know what’ll happen in the future.”

“Understood. I will make training the other slaves my current goal,” he announced.

Just don’t break them, please.

“Just you wait!” Ketty exclaimed.

I wasn’t sure what I was waiting for, exactly, but she seemed motivated, so whatever.

I turned to Jord. “Why do you think Jeiyas didn’t immediately stop those men? The ones who threw the black dust.”

“I’m not sure. That guy could have killed a lot of people, especially when all the others showed up out of nowhere. It was like magic.”

For someone who’d practically taken hostages, I was confused about why he hadn’t done more damage. The whole thing felt planned, and thoroughly at that.

I continued to think things over as we made our way home, right up until we arrived at the guild. A couple of the criminal slaves stood out front on guard duty.

“Good work, guys. Anything happen?”

They nodded, then one said, “There was a commotion over a small fire nearby, and in the chaos, some men tried to infiltrate the guildhall. They’re paralyzed in the cells downstairs now.”

“How did you find them?”

They looked at each other. “There was this crazy loud noise when they tried to get in.”

“Sounds like Dhoran and Pola. They did mention something about a barrier. They’re in the cells, you said? Fifth floor?”

They nodded again.

“The attack was two-pronged, it seems,” Lionel commented.

“Yeah. Let’s get downstairs. Guards, stay alert.”

The slaves looked shocked, but I ignored them and went inside. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, to my relief.

“Good work today,” I told my team. “You’re dismissed for the day. But feel free to help with dinner. Lionel, Ketty, follow me.”

“As you wish.”

“Gotcher back!”

Down the magic elevator, Piazza and eight slaves were standing watch over seven men behind bars.

“Thanks, Piazza.”

“Of course, sir. About two hours after you left for the Adventurer’s Guild, a small fire broke out. Several of us left to help extinguish it, and these people tried to use the commotion to slip inside.”

His story confirmed what the two upstairs had told me.

“And then they were suddenly paralyzed, so you threw them down here, is that right?”

“Yes, sir. The dwarf is looking through their belongings now.”

I was impressed with Piazza’s performance but noted that the magic stone shortage had left Dhoran with more free time than expected.

“Appreciate the report. Everyone can return to their posts. I’ll handle things from here. Ketty, get Dhoran and Pola, please.”

“Yes, sir!” Piazza gave a salute. “Let’s go, people!”

He sure keeps them on a short leash, I thought as I watched the crowd leave. Or maybe I was just too soft. In my defense, Lionel and the others hadn’t tried to kill me.

After the last of them left my sight, I looked over at the prisoners and realized something.

Lionel chuckled. “It seems our worries are over.”

“Well, you look excited.”

“Me? Ha! I’ve just found a new goal to strive for. I must return to form. I won’t disappoint you again.”

These men in the cells were the very same ones who had confronted us at the Adventurer’s Guild. I approached one of them.

“So, you came all this way just to save us the trouble of having to find you.”

The man slurred something unintelligible. By process of elimination, the one I had singled out as the burly man was now looking a little willowy, his face nothing like before. His shape-shifting abilities clearly didn’t stop at logs.

“Ah, right, the paralysis. I think we’ll leave you like that for a while. Think we should get what info we can before we hand them over to the adventurers, Lionel?”

“I would normally recommend we do that after enslaving them, but I suspect many here would kill themselves by disobeying before submitting. We must be cautious.”

“Noted.”

Ketty came back downstairs with the dwarves in tow.

“There you guys are,” I said.

They didn’t look happy. I must’ve pulled them away from toying with the magic items they’d confiscated. I had to give credit where it was due, though.

“Great work with the barrier, you two. How’d you get it to pick out the intruders?”

“Incredible stuff, isn’t it?” Dhoran boasted. “Pola drafted the shock defense mechanism, and I tweaked the trigger.”

“How, exactly?”

“Hatred and malice. Goes off for any unlucky, spiteful fellow.”

“What if they’re spiteful but not towards the Healer’s Guild in particular?”

The silence was deafening. I looked at Pola and it only worsened. It lasted an eternity. I finally returned my gaze to Dhoran, but he avoided it, so I looked back at his granddaughter, who swiftly hid behind the older man.

“Okay, if no one has anything to say, then I’m sorry but I have to punish you. No crafting for a week.”

“Now, sir, don’t be unreasonable here! We’ll fix it quick, ya have my word!”

“Chief, are you...bullying me?”

They were desperate, but I stood firm.

“I will never treat either of you inhumanely. I promised that. But I expect you to be open with me about things I need to know. I swear, I could haul you both right back to where I found you.” I heaved a sigh. “Okay, fine. Just tell me everything now and I won’t punish you.”

“Well, these cells stifle magic and weaken anyone inside, ’less you’re resistant to silence or enfeeblement.”

I put my finger to my brow and took a breath. I knew nothing created by this dwarf could have been normal.

“Any time you make something, I need you to report everything about it to me. I trust both of your abilities, but what I don’t yet trust is how you use it. All I want is for you to help me get there.”

“Er, my apologies,” Dhoran said.

“I get too excited sometimes. I’ll be careful from now on.”

“Good. Focus on fixing the barrier until dinner.”

The dwarf nodded. “Roger.”

Pola nodded as well, but without a word. For better or worse, they didn’t seem to have lost their spark.

After they left, I cast Recover on one of the attackers. As soon as he was back on his feet, he looked me in the eye and spat, “How are you here, healer? Your little show flopped! They should’ve eaten you alive!”

Those hecklers must have been part of their plan to fan the flames. Not that it mattered anymore, but I made a note to let the guild know later.

“Sorry, but I was a bit too resistant, so your dust didn’t work. Our ‘show’ went off without a hitch.”

The man clicked his tongue and went quiet. His lips were going to get tight from now on, so the interrogation had begun. I fixed everyone up with Recover.

“Let me just get this out of the way,” I said. “You tried to kill me, so I have absolutely no sympathy for any of you. I want information, and you’re free to give it whenever you like, but be warned that if you choose not to say anything, you’ll be having some of this for dinner.”

I took out several barrels and lugged them in front of each cell, then removed the lids. The characteristic scent of Substance X swiftly filled the room.

“I’m a healer. I don’t like seeing people get hurt. But *this* won’t hurt you. Although if you don’t want to live off this stuff indefinitely, I’d start talking. The choice is yours, of course.”

Lionel and Ketty had retreated to the staircase across the room. I wasn’t in any immediate danger, but still, guys, come on. I had half a mind to force a mug on Lionel later.

“And just for the record...” I got myself a glass and downed the substance in an instant. “As you can see, it doesn’t bother me one bit. I can wait all day. Talk and I might take you to the Adventurer’s Guild. It’s gotta be better than here.”

I studied their pale faces, trying to gauge how long they'd hold out. In the meantime, I practiced my magic. Lionel stood near the stairs as a show of trust, and the clock ticked onwards until I lost track of time.

Psych. The men actually started raising their white flags almost immediately.

"Could really use my damn mask over here."

"Hell, they got my goggles too."

"And my magic pants..."

"Wish I had my helmet."

Whatever fancy equipment could have protected them from the smell was long gone, lost to the evil duo who'd do anything to get their hands on new toys to experiment with. And now I knew to be extra careful around those two, thanks to this group's sacrifices.

"Hey, where's my magic brassier, S-rank?" the first man (er, woman?) who'd woken up asked. The leader of the bunch sure looked...rugged for a lady.

"You're a girl?"

"Piss off! I just... I gotta have it! It calms me down!"

Sure, whatever. I didn't judge, but hell if I understood what he was getting at. Plus, now that I was positive I was dealing with a man, the gloves could come off.

"I think your stuff is with those two dwarves who were just here. In which case, I wouldn't count on getting any of it back. They don't know how to keep their hands to themselves, so I'd just give it up."

Deodorizing and status ailment protections must have been common features on gear here. The men looked distraught upon hearing they'd lost their stuff, so it was only a matter of time before someone fessed up.

"If no one wants to talk, it's no skin off my nose. Either way, you're becoming slaves tomorrow, then I'm knocking you all out with some Substance X and hauling you to the Adventurer's Guild. And no, I will not be diluting it."

Curses and insults flew around the cells, but a few minutes later, one man

opened his mouth.

“We were hired by the Doctor’s Guild and Representative Shahza,” he confessed.

Truthfully, I’d expected this to take longer. Even Lionel, watching from afar, looked disappointed. The others shouted for him to keep his mouth shut as I approached him.

“Tell me what you know, and I promise to get rid of this barrel. I swear you won’t taste a single mouthful of the stuff. But lie to me and you’ll have a mug with every meal. Do you agree to this contract?”

“Y-Yes! I won’t lie, I swear! Just keep that shit away from me!”

“You have my word that you’ll be treated humanely. As long as you’re here, at least.”

The man relaxed with a sigh. “So, our job today was to wreck your hall and make your demonstration a failure. Security was too tight in the morning, but when a bunch of you came to the Adventurer’s Guild, it gave us the chance we were looking for. And, well, you see how that turned out.”

He was under contract now, so if he chose to lie, there would be some sort of reaction. Nothing happened, so I put the barrel of Substance X away. Suddenly, shouts exploded from the others.

“I’ll tell ya anything ya want if I never have to see that barrel again!”

“Over here, Mister Healer! I’ve got whatcha need! Get rid of mine too!”

Yeesh, was it *that* bad? To be fair, my senses had already been destroyed by that earlier glass.

“Here, how’s this? *Purification!*”

I cleaned up the cell of the first man who’d spoken, and he looked baffled for a split second.

“What the hell? Where’d the smell go? It’s completely gone!”

“I promised to treat you humanely.” I smiled, then everyone started getting loud again. “All right, guys. I’ll move it all to your leader’s cell.”

Once all the barrels had been relocated, I got everyone's stories in turn. There were many versions, but not one of them lied to me.

The Doctor's Guild had employed their group. In fact, they were from the very same organization as the slaves who'd attacked us on our first day. It was a small one, though, so with all the underlings having been taken out, the higher-ups had led today's operation.

Apparently, Shahza had raised hell at the Doctor's Guild yesterday and shouted the vice guildmaster's ear off about sending a hit out on me without consulting him. Shahza had departed with very firm orders that today's event should not be allowed to succeed. And that was where this crowd finally entered the story.

When asked why they hadn't just killed me, they said that the chances of me having countermeasures in place were too high, and they lacked any poisons that could have bypassed those precautions by killing me instantly. That, and my security detail was just too tight. So they'd come up with another strategy—one based on the common view that human healers discriminated against beastfolk. All it would take was one spark, and the Healer's Guild would be in flames. That spark was to be the magic-inhibiting dust, meant to stop our healing in its tracks. Unfortunately, they hadn't accounted for a certain anomaly: me.

I was having trouble understanding why Shahza wanted us out of his city so badly. But we'd already warned the guy once, so he definitely had something coming to him.

"I think I get the picture, but why was he talking to the *vice* guildmaster? Why not the guildmaster himself?"

"The guildmaster's only interested in his synthesizing. The vice guildmaster handles just about everything else."

"Okay. One last question: why does Shahza have that much influence there? I know he's on Yenice's council, but it still feels extreme."

"Wish I knew."

No reaction. He was telling the truth.

“Anyone else?” Everyone shook their heads. “All right, then. Tomorrow you’re going to the Adventurer’s Guild, but until then, you’ll be fed.”

I produced some leftover curry and bread from my magic bag, as well as several dishes, and started handing out meals. It was smiles all around except for their leader, still hidden behind barrels of Substance X, who’d been suspiciously quiet the whole time. I took a peek at him out of curiosity and found him foaming at the mouth and spasming on the floor. He was still breathing, from what I could tell, but what in the world could have driven him to attempt suicide? He couldn’t have been knocked out by the smell... Probably.

I quickly cast Recover and High Heal on him, then took out some water and doused him to bring him back to his senses.

“Seriously? I’m an S-rank healer. Did you really think I’d let you die that easily? And the least you could do is some good before taking your life.”

He said nothing. Eventually, Ketty came down to tell us that dinner was ready.

“Excuse me, when did you leave? And why didn’t you say anything before going?” I interrogated her.

“Oh, y’know, I just figured somethin’ real bad was about to happen!” Her ears suddenly perked up. “And I was right! What’s that *smell*?”

“Don’t worry, you’ve got plenty of time to get familiar with it while Lionel and I eat upstairs.”

“What?! You wouldn’t do that to a poor kitty like me, would you?! He wouldn’t, would he, sir?!”

She clung to Lionel in desperation, but without missing a beat he replied, “I am a slave. My master’s word is absolute.”

“You’re enjoying this!”

“Justice is sweet, you know.”

Ketty crumbled while I packed away all the barrels and cleaned up the floor with Purification.

“There, that better? Keep an eye on them, okay?”

“I knew you had a heart, Chief! You can count on me!”

Before leaving, I left her with one brief remark. “I hope so. I would hate to force a mug on you too.”

She instantly shot up straight and saluted with a strange, catlike squeal.



This stuff's pretty useful, I thought, following Lionel back up the stairs.

*

The healer and his bodyguard disappeared from view.

“Hey, lady!” I called out. “You’re a slave, ain’tcha? Bust us out, and we’ll hook you up with a slaver we know! He’ll get you out of here too!”

Healers never treated slaves well, and beastfolk even less so. Chances were she was another victim of the same sort of abuse.

But I’d miscalculated.

“True, slavery’s not a satisfying lot in life. But life is what you make it. If ‘slave’ is my title, then that’s what it is. I don’t particularly dislike the way things are now,” she replied.

“Do you hear yourself? You’re a *slave*!” This lady had to be out of her mind.

“Very observant. But I’m only a slave in name. I have freedom, I’m fed just as well as my master, allowed leisure time, and I’ve been given a room to sleep in. As far as slave life goes, things could be worse.”

“*Things could be worse?*”

I didn’t know what else to say. Beastfolk slaves were fodder, tools to be used up and thrown away, and everyone knew it. They were lucky if they got fed scraps. Some only got water. But this one had a room and a bed. It was ridiculous. She was no slave. Not in the traditional sense, at least.

“Who... Who is that guy? The healer.”

“A bit of a coward and more than a little naive, but a good man at his core. He treats everyone equally and is incredibly talented, but he never holds it or his rank over others. Personally, I think he’s worth my loyalty.”

I couldn’t say a thing. Just a quiet “oh.”

I wished I had met someone like him sooner in life, but fate worked in mysterious ways. And ours was sealed. The least I could do was cooperate and use what little time I had left to show him the best in us beastfolk.

06 — From a Man to a Leader

Lionel and I returned to the main floor, where we all had our dinner while I explained to everyone that the culprits had been found.

“You can take it easy now. Get some rest. Especially you guys, Jord, since we’ll probably start getting patients soon.”

“We might just do that,” he replied. “You planning on using these guys as guards for the guild too?”

“Not this time. I’m handing them over to the Adventurer’s Guild once we get everything we can from them. See what the local beastfolk want to do.”

I’d considered it at first, at least until things got settled, but it would have given the criminals in our ranks a majority.

“I’m surprised you aren’t going easy on them this time. It’s sorta your brand at this point.”

“Well, at first they were only after me. But this time they put other people at risk: our patients.”

I could have let them off easy with just a binding crest as slaves tied down by their crimes, but that felt too merciful after they’d toyed with innocent lives. People could have died had I lost my magic.

“I was thinking it’d be smartest to turn them all into slaves and keep the ones that seem like the best workers. They’re beastfolk, after all.”

It was strange to hear Jord so concerned about this. He was normally focused on either efficiency or on cracking jokes.

“You know what that would mean for the guild. We’d have to treat them with respect. Those guys? After what they did?”

“Oh, I see,” Jord fired back “and what the guys *yesterday* did wasn’t as bad. They were only after *your* life, so that makes it okay.”

I knew immediately that I’d hit a nerve and how backwards my thought process was.

“I’m sorry. That was hypocritical of me.”

“I’ll be honest with you, sir. We care about you a whole lot more than a crowd of strangers. Your life comes first. At least, that’s what I think.”

“I appreciate that.”

“Don’t mention it. Back on topic, we’re taking those guys to the Adventurer’s Guild, but what about the first batch of slaves? The guys who jumped you the other day?”

“For now, they’re staying with us at the guild until things get safer. After that, I’m not sure. Might form a contract with them and set them free, might sell them. I’m planning on making that decision once I get to know them and the country a bit more.”

“Whatever you think is best.”

Jord probably had more to say, but he stayed quiet. I really did appreciate him telling me I should value my life more.

We continued our meal over a short question-and-answer session over the day’s demonstration, the spells we used, etcetera, then Lionel and I made our way back downstairs.

“Luciel, are you aware of your softheartedness?” Lionel asked on the way down.

I stopped. I’d started to wonder about that myself since my conversation with Jord.

“More or less. But I’d rather be lenient than ignore basic decency. I don’t care if the world says slaves are objects to be bought and sold. They’re still people.”

The slave next to me hummed, a hand on his chin, then calmly replied, “Let me rephrase: are you familiar with the difference between kindness and indulgence?”

“Well, indulgence is based on wanting others to like you, but kindness is about empathizing.”

A memory from my past life rushed back to me. I’d become a leader for the

first time and stifled my subordinates' own growth. I still remembered how my boss had scolded me for it. And then he'd invited me for drinks and scolded me more at the bar.

"A firm hand is vital to earning respect from those below you. Keep that in mind and people will look up to you, regardless of your age."

Lionel probably wasn't the only person in my life who wanted to give me that same advice. I understood what he was trying to say. Or maybe...I only thought I did. And that ignorance was setting a bad example for my team.

"All right, I'll give it a go right now. When we set up that clinic in front of the labyrinth, I'll have you watch the guild while the other slaves and I handle it."

"You misunderstand me."

"I do, huh? You changed your tune quick. Anyway, I appreciate the advice. Just don't forget it was my 'indulgence' that got you out of that cell."

He bowed. "I...only said it out of concern. I know it was forward of me."

Why the heck did it seem like every old dude I met understood me better than myself? I let his words sink in. They reminded me of something my master would have told me. Maybe I needed to change.

Not long after, we reached the fifth floor of the basement.

"So *sloooow*!" Ketty mewled.

"I can pour you some Substance X if you need to boost your patience skill," I replied with a grin.

She shuddered, then flew to the ground and held her hands together, begging, "Anything but that!"

She wouldn't have made a bad comedy partner.

"All right, fine. You're dismissed. Change places with Piazza."

"At once!"

The cat-woman dashed up the stairs and was out of there before I could blink.

"She's pretty good at acting," I muttered.

Lionel shook his head and looked dramatically in the direction she'd fled. "I'm afraid she was dead serious."

Never underestimate Substance X's power over beastpeople, I thought as I approached the cells.

"Hey, S-rank," their leader said, "I've got a question."

The tension in the air from earlier had disappeared.

"I might have an answer."

"What are beastfolk to you?"

I froze up. "I don't understand. What am I supposed to say?"

"Humans versus beastfolk. How do they compare?"

How did they compare? What was he looking for? Beastwomen were pretty cute, so there was that. Nanaella's ears in particular. Man, those things soothed the soul. On the other hand, the guys, like Gulgar, his brother, and the Lineage of the White Wolf, were scary. No, that couldn't have been what he was asking. Was he after distinct traits?

"I guess there're the ears. And the tails, but those seem like they could be handy once you got used to it. Maybe? Is that what you want?"

"Whatever, that's plenty. Listen, I'll come clean if you swear to treat our kind equally. And the halflings too."

Wow, that was a bit rude. I had thought pretty hard before giving that answer. "Please, that's nothing. I'll swear that to the divines themselves. I want to hear what you have to say."

The man stared at me, not moving a muscle. Then he sighed. "You wanna know why Shahza's got so much weight to throw around? It's because he, his tiger-folk, and a few dragonewts are caught up with the Doctor's Guild."

Tiger-folk and dragonewts. It always came back to them. But the dragonewt brothers from the Adventurer's Guild hadn't seemed all that bad.

"Can you elaborate?"

"The Doctor's Guild wasn't twisting anyone's arm. We didn't have a Healer's

Guild, so they healed instead.”

That much made sense. “Right.”

“When talk started about a new Healer’s Guild, the doctors spoke up and asked the head of state, a dragonewt, to rescind the invitation in exchange for gold and discounted medicine from the guild.”

“I can’t imagine people were happy.”

“No. Surprise, the dog-folk, cat-folk, rabbit-folk, wolf-folk...just about every other race protested. And then medicinal prices skyrocketed, some stuff selling for double, some up to five times more. Things got worse.”

“So, power dynamics shifted to stabilize the market.”

“Eventually, once the government had enough teeth to do something. Now I hear the guild won’t sell jack if anyone gets in their way again.”

That explained why Orga and the other representatives hadn’t said a word to me on the way to the city. I’d thought it was weird how they’d looked guilty about something. But that was what happened in a nation of only one city. It made monopolies pretty easy, especially when most other places were racist towards non-humans. Where did that leave the adventurers, though?

“Adventurers must’ve been hit hard with all that going on.”

“Groups and foreigners, not so much, but yeah, newbies have it rough. There’s a distinct difference between the lucky ones and the not so lucky.”

“Would you be willing to testify to all this at the Adventurer’s Guild tomorrow?”

“Swear on my life. Just take care of the halflings while you can. Before you leave.” His eyes were keen, brimming with passion.

“I promise. Now here, eat.”

I handed him a plate of curry and bread, then went back upstairs with Lionel.

“What do you think made him open up?” I asked. “Ketty?”

“Who can say? He was honest, though. I saw it in his eyes.”

“I’ll send some knights to the Adventurer’s Guild to get the guildmaster or

vice guildmaster tomorrow. And let's keep the barrier up at all times for now. That man seems like he'd throw away his life to try something."

Nothing could ever be simple. The situation was a mess right now, but I could see the light at the end of the tunnel, where the Yenice Healer's Guild stood firm and unfaltering.

Early the next morning, I sent three knights out with a letter outlining the previous day's events to the Adventurer's Guild, but they returned quickly with exhausted expressions.

"That was fast," I said. "You guys look dead. What happened?"

It was obvious that something had gone down. They looked like they could barely stand.

"Both the vice and head guildmaster were waiting when we got there," Piazza recounted. "After they read the letter, they rushed out in a rage of some kind, so we were about to head back, when—"

"The adventurers we healed yesterday got a hold of us," Britz continued.

"And then Jeiyas came back and told us to wait here," Doughertis concluded.

"Well, good work," I said. "You're dismissed, but remain on standby."

"Yes, sir!"

The three saluted before leaving my office.

"I really hope those dragonewts don't start anything."

Lionel, standing next to me, placed a hand on my shoulder. "There's no better way to clear one's mind than exercise. Join me downstairs?"

"Now you're just trying to pick a fight."

"I've come to understand why the Whirlwind made you his apprentice."

Bringing up my master wasn't fair. That was my weakness. But he was right—training was an efficient use of my time when I had nothing better to do.

"All right, but I'm getting through that shield this time."

He smirked. “Enjoy your bravado while you’re young.”

We headed for the training ground, determination in my heart. Meanwhile, a crowd of beastpeople were on their way and would arrive in just a few hours.

I was splayed out on the floor off to the side.

“What happened? The second I think I landed a hit, I’m on the floor. I mean, I know I got smacked by your shield, but I don’t get how!”

Lionel lowered the aforementioned shield and relaxed his greatsword, smiling. “I kept a tight posture until you approached to attack, then I thrust my shield forward and advanced. It was a simple matter of making use of the Ambulation skill.”

I’d been blown all the way from the center of the field to the edge, a clean ten meters.

“Okay, but you didn’t ‘ambulate’ me halfway across the room!”

“Perhaps I did. With timing. Dedication and training is a powerful tool.”

Brod and Lionel’s match must have been something. I would’ve loved to have seen it. I pushed myself onto my feet and stumbled a bit before healing my concussion. Then, as I readied my sword again, Piazza hurried in.

“What’s wrong? We’re not under attack again, are we?” I asked.

“No, sir,” he replied, looking a little flustered, “but there’s a group of beastfolk and people from the Adventurer’s Guild gathered at reception.”

If that was true, it definitely justified his expression.

“Something tells me we don’t have a choice here.”

Lionel nodded. I was most certainly not itching to involve myself in more trouble but hoped that maybe we could finally settle things with Yenice after this.

We boarded the magic elevator. Stepping out onto the main floor, I saw that Jeiyras, Goldhus, and several beastpeople had congregated in the lobby. The healers had taken shelter behind the reception counter. They looked relieved

by my arrival, which made me happy that they trusted me. Britz, Doughertis, and several slaves formed a barricade between the beastfolk and the rest of the guild, their weapons still sheathed.

“Excuse me, guildmasters, but what’s going on here?”

A human and one of each beast race were tied up on the floor.

“Ah, Luciel,” Goldhus said. “These people are the source of your trouble. This human here is Grohala, Doctor’s Guild vice guildmaster and partaker of bribes.”

The man in question had gentle features, which went to show that you couldn’t judge a book by its cover.

“There were a lot of dragonewts and tiger-folk from the council implicated in all this,” Goldhus continued, “but these people are the source. We’re going to have everyone who accepted bribes return the money to you for your guild.”

“Hold on, isn’t that something you should talk over with the rest of the council?”

“You bear the blessing of the dragons, Luciel, so our loyalty belongs to you, as is our custom. We’ll do everything in our power to help you, your healers, and your guild if it will make up for the trouble our kind has caused.”

Oh, so it was like those dragon covenants or hidden races of draconic people that were so common in fantasy stories. Who would’ve thought the Holy Dragon’s protection would come in handy at a time like this? Other than Monsieur Luck, that is.

I ignored the stunned silence. “How did you know I was blessed?”

“The dragonewts revere the greater dragons. It’s said that we were born from them, and that’s why we can sense their presence. Now you see why my kin there hasn’t stopped trembling.”

The dragonewt on his knees, sure enough, was shaking like a leaf.

“Anyway, we have all the men from yesterday’s incident locked up downstairs. What do you plan to do with them?”

“Yenitian law states that the primary offender is to be put to death as an example. Any accomplices are enslaved or fined, depending on the severity of

their crimes. We would like to take them on at the guild to help with conquering the labyrinth.”

I’d expected as much but was still taken aback by the harshness of their punishment.

“By ‘help,’ you mean you’ll use them until they drop.”

Sure, not everyone could just turn over a new leaf, but this country’s laws were awfully intense.

“Their sentences will be reduced if they live through it, and they’ll be taken care of during that time, but they *will* take the frontlines. Sacrifices need to be made, especially when it comes to traps.”

Goldhus hardly blinked as he spoke.

“I see. I have a few conditions in that case, but first, I don’t see Shahza. Where is he?”

“He and everyone involved have disappeared.”

Despite his heavy tone, I couldn’t help but feel like I’d heard this plotline somewhere before.

“I might be able to tell you where he is,” a voice from below said. “If you untie these ropes, that is.”

Goldhus grabbed the smirking vice guildmaster by his collar. “Proud of yourself, are you?!”

I sized Grohala up. Based on my knowledge of stories and cliches, there were three potential routes here. And even if I was wrong, I was willing to bet I wouldn’t be *too* off base.

I stayed calm and turned to Goldhus. “It’s fine. There are only so many places he could be. My guesses are he’s either trying to clear the labyrinth, fled to another country, or hiding in a nearby village or cave. If *everyone* involved is gone, I’d say chances are he’s in the labyrinth. His thugs never made it back, so he probably thought someone was about to out his plans.”

“The labyrinth? Not just anyone can waltz in and clear a *labyrinth*, though.”

“I haven’t seen this one for myself, so it’s hard to say, but Shahza considered himself fairly strong, right? He very well could have assumed he’d handle it, come back a hero, and be absolved of his sins. Or use it to schmooze with another country.”

The smirk on Grohala’s face was no more. Bingo.

“Then there’s no time to lose!” Goldhus exclaimed. “We need to get to the labyrinth!”

“Wait,” Jeyas intervened. “We haven’t done a thing but dump a few troublemakers on them. This doesn’t help the Healer’s Guild any.”

“You’re right,” his brother grumbled.

Thank goodness the younger one had some sense.

“Oh, fine. You take Luciel and the adventurers to the labyrinth. I’ll stay with the others and clean up here.”

“That’s my little brother! Always the right man for the job!”

“You come back with Shahza, though, got it?”

“Oh, we will! Let’s go, Luciel! We need to hurry!”

The family resemblance was ridiculous. They lost themselves in their own little world, making decisions amongst themselves like they had telepathy while the rest of us got left behind. The local adventurers couldn’t have had it easy.

The clamor from everyone chiming in around us reached its peak until I clapped my hands and the silence returned. I took control.

“Yes, we need to hurry, but I don’t know the first thing about where we’re going and I kind of need to prepare. Plus we’ve got people that need dealing with. Do you really think I’m capable of doing that in a timely manner?” I looked around, then continued. “Let’s start with priorities. First, these people you brought and the attackers from yesterday: Jord, can you handle things there?”

“You think I’m the right guy?” he asked.

“Unless it’s spellcasting, you’re always the right guy.”

He straightened his back and put a fist to his chest. “Won’t let you down, sir!”

“Jeiyas, he’s your man for anything here while we’re gone. Talk with him about working out the slaves.”

Jeiyas respectfully lowered his head. “Yes.”

The way to a dragonewt’s heart really was a dragon’s blessing. But these guys had been beaten to a pulp only yesterday. Were they up for labyrinth diving? Either way, we needed a strategy.

“Anyone with a map, information on monsters, anything that might help in the dungeon, wait on the third floor. We’re going to hold a strategy meeting. Everyone else, join my knights and gather whatever might help us. Food, potions, anything. Britz, I’m taking two of you. Lead the rest and go shopping.”

“Yes, sir!”

I handed him three platinum coins and the extra-sized magic satchels I’d bought in the Holy City, then instructed him to be sure to write down what he put in them.

“Healers, stay here and keep things running. Doughertis, you’re on guard duty. Piazza, you too, and the slaves are yours, as usual.”

“Sir!” the knights replied.

“Now, Nalia, I want you to go downstairs and bring Dhoran and Pola to my office.”

“At once.”

“Lionel, Ketty, you want to fight? Now’s your chance. You’re with me.”

“As you wish.”

“Aw, yeah!”

“Goldhus and anyone with info, with me.”

We relocated to the guildmaster’s room on the third floor. I left no one time to get another word in. It was my fault we’d gotten into this mess. My lack of initiative and assertiveness had forced not just me, but other people into this labyrinth business. My usual timidity and deference to others worked just fine for myself, but I wasn’t an island anymore. I was a leader. That clap earlier had

been for me just as much as the others, to wake me up, to remind myself that it wasn't too late to get a grip.

Come to think of it, I would never have known Jord's opinion on the slaves unless he'd come to me himself. I'd been making all sorts of decisions without anyone's input, and I had just finished criticizing the dragonewt brothers for doing that same thing. But I couldn't let it get me down. This was the chance I needed to earn everyone's respect, to prove I wasn't as indulgent as Lionel said.

I felt a strange confidence building inside of me. Was it purpose? Or maybe I'd finally learned to rely on others and stop shouting at the wind. It didn't matter. All this time, I'd been whining about reporting this, communicating that, thinking that was how we would become a unit, when the most important thing was so simple: trust. But earning trust was hard. Unless I put in the effort to build real relationships, my dream of living a peaceful life well into my twilight years would never be more than that—a dream. I needed to get to know these people. I needed to let my actions speak for me rather than words.

"They say clapping wards off evil back in Japan, but now I think they might be onto something," I muttered, opening the door to the office.

Gathered in the guildmaster's room were Lionel, Ketty, Nalia, Dhoran, Pola, Goldhus, two other adventurers, and I.

"Let's begin," I announced. "Our goal is not to clear the labyrinth, it's to capture Shahza and his accomplices with minimal casualties. Does anyone have a map?"

The bird-man adventurer rolled out a piece of parchment, but it was less than well-drawn, so it took some deciphering and correcting to make out what was what.

"About how much space are we looking at here?" I asked.

"It starts off about a thousand square meters but increases by about two-fifty every ten floors. Monsters get stronger too."

Bigger than the first one. Which reminded me...

"How dense is the miasma? And how's the supply chain?"

“A resistant cloak or robe is enough to handle it. Miasma’s not a huge problem, especially since the Doctor’s Guild sells medicine that nullifies it for a day. And we’ve got portable food almost everyone keeps on them.”

That had to be those awful, flavorless, dried-out scraps I’d eaten with the Lineage of the White Wolf on our trip to the Holy City. Yeah, no thanks.

Next, we filled in the locations of traps, then opened up a monster encyclopedia and went over the types we’d encounter. With every page, I felt my soul slip farther and farther away while Lionel and Ketty’s grins got wider and wider. Pola and Dhoran, meanwhile, pretended not to have ants in their pants after realizing we’d be up against fire-type beasts, already concocting inventions to create with the flame-attuned magic stones the creatures would drop.

Speaking of which, I was probably going to find the stinkin’ Flame Dragon in that place. Because of course I was.

“Are you joining us in the dungeon?” Goldhus asked me.

I hesitated. I’d probably be fine with Lionel and Ketty with me, and I could always call it quits if the going got too rough. “We’ll be there. At the very back. Ready to leave as soon as it gets too dangerous.”

“I assumed you’d only be with us to set up a field hospital, but that’s reassuring.”

“What gave you that idea?”

“I thought the dwarf was for construction, and the man was your guard.”

Yeah, it was definitely hard to see Lionel as anything but muscle.

“Well, let me ask you, can you guys make it through *without* a healer? I saw how beat up you all were the other day.”

“Let’s just say...we welcome your company.”

Giving me the option not to go was playing a dangerous game, but somehow I got the feeling that my presence was necessary. I could use some leveling-up anyway.

“No more of that,” I insisted, gesturing for him to raise his head.

Next on the list was deciding who would be joining us in the depths when an unexpected candidate came forward.

Nalia gracefully held her skirt and curtsied. “Please allow me to join you, sir.”



“Only if Lionel and Ketty are okay with it. I hear fighting’s not your strong suit.”

“Don’t worry about her,” Ketty said. “I bet she’s stronger than you, Chief. Give her some throwing daggers and a whip, and she’s pretty much invincible!”

I’d intended for her to be more of a homebody but had no particular issue if no one else minded. How was she stronger than me, though? So much for having “no taste for combat.”

“That’s fine by me, but you’re responsible for yourself. And stay back. I want you in a support role.”

“Thank you, sir.”

She curtsied again, then it was the dwarves’ turn.

“Don’t forget me, lad!”

“Or me.”

They eagerly leaned in. Of course, there was never any chance of them staying here. They would destroy the guildhall in no time.

“You are not to act out. There will be no crafting. You will cause no trouble. You will prioritize self-defense. That’s an order.”

Sigh. That brought our party up to six. Lionel was on defense, Ketty was our hit-and-runner, I’d handle healing and support, and Nalia could be our scout-slash-cook, considering her range and perception abilities. Dhoran and Pola would, uh...do what, exactly? Could they even fight?

“Wait, how *will* you two defend yourselves?”

Dhoran crossed his arms and smirked. “With a big-ass hammer.”

“I’ve got golems!” Pola shot out her left arm, showing off an armlet wrapped around it.

“And you can order them?”

“Mm-hmm. With magic. They’re made out of magic stones.”

To summarize the rest of the details she gave, her armlet let her control them

from far away. A single golem was her limit, but they were extraordinarily durable, so that was more than enough.

When all was said and done, we decided that Dhoran would be the rearguard while Pola would take the flank and be our heavy-hitter.

The labyrinth was in a valley about an hour away, and even if we left right that second, it would have been evening by the time we arrived, so we decided to head out early the next morning instead.

“We’ll see you all at the Adventurer’s Guild bright and early. They should be done sorting things out downstairs by now.”

“We’ll get everyone to a slaver ourselves. Not to worry,” Goldhus assured me. But I wasn’t entirely confident about that.

With our meeting concluded, we headed back downstairs to find a surprise. What awaited us weren’t adventurers but Jeiyas, our slaves, and the ones who’d tried to infiltrate the guildhall.

Jord appeared and approached me as I stood there in confusion. “Everyone here now belongs to the Healer’s Guild, sir.”

I’d figured he would leave us with a few, considering his opinion on the matter, but *all* of them? I wasn’t sure how to react.

“Why?”

He grinned. “It would be wrong and hurt the guild’s name to think of slaves as expendable. Plus, we can find other uses for them, like having them volunteer in our name to boost our image. The plan is to have the Adventurer’s Guild rent them to help with the labyrinth, which will cover their food costs. I’ve only given them one order: protect you with their lives.”

I had misjudged Jord. He was far more open-minded than I’d given him credit for, and I’d been unfair. He’d been there since the beginning, since I had reached S-rank, supporting me all the way, and I had taken that for granted. I was the one not paying attention, not communicating with those around me. I greatly respected him as a healer.

“Thank you, Jord. We’re heading to the Adventurer’s Guild tomorrow, then on to the labyrinth from there. I’ll fill in Her Holiness. I’m trusting you with the guild while we’re gone.”

“You got it, sir!”

“I want the Order of Healing on standby here. The danger hasn’t entirely passed yet.”

“The dragonewts are here to help however we can,” Jeiyas offered.

“You’re sure?”

“Yes. The dragons preordained this day. I know it.” He beat his chest. “We’ll do our part!”

I bowed. “Thank you. Please keep them safe.”

I enjoyed seeing Jeiyas seem flustered for a moment, then a slaver was called to handle binding the criminals. Normally, slavers wouldn’t service the Healer’s Guild, but just this once they had given us a deal that was too good to pass up. I wasn’t sure why the guy was trembling so much, though.

Everyone left, and once the guildhall was clear, the rest of us prepared for our journey. Our gear and weapons were perfectly maintained, ready to be drawn at a moment’s notice, thanks to Dhoran.

Around dinnertime, the leader of the men who’d infiltrated our base not long before came to me and said, “We might be slaves now, but you treat us well. Thank you.” He left it at that.

I had no sympathy for him, but he wasn’t going to die in that labyrinth while I was around.

The next morning, Team Healer’s Guild set out with 27 people in all, then joined with the fifty or so gathered at the Adventurer’s Guild. Before setting out, the dragonewt brothers gladly lent me their infinite spring to stock up on as much of a certain substance as I wanted.

And with that last order of business taken care of, I mounted my trusty mare, Forêt Noire, and enjoyed a brisk trot to our destination.

07 — Dwarven Dream Team

Our group had grown to over eighty adventurers by the time we reached the dungeon, so we broke into several teams. Goldhus's group would go straight in and push through, another party would set up a midway station on the thirtieth floor's boss room, a third squad would stay just outside the labyrinth, and lastly, my own team planned to proceed slowly, floor-by-floor. Not that I didn't trust the bird-man's map, which we now had copies of, but there was always the (*ahem*, likely) possibility that we'd missed something.

My first time venturing into a labyrinth—the Labyrinth of Trials, as the Holy Dragon had called it—had been a solitary event, so exploring every floor had been something of an ordeal. This time, however, we had numbers on our side. My team's goal was simply to increase our map's accuracy and procure magic stones. The items I wanted Pola and Dhoran to craft would need a sizable stock of fire-type gems.

"That's the entrance," Goldhus informed me, interrupting my thoughts. Ahead of us, at the base of a cliff, was the labyrinth.

"It extends upward?"

"That's right. Watch out for the heat. It gets worse the higher you go, and it'll sneak up on you."

"This didn't come up at yesterday's meeting."

"No? Anyway, you're sure we can lead today's charge?"

Breathe, Luciel. You never asked, so you can't expect him to have answered. Whatever, I could just leave the brunt of the effort to the guildmaster's group.

"Once you clear the fortieth floor, it'll be up to you guys how you want to continue," I said. "If you keep going, be sure to rest and watch for traps. You might want to level up a little before pressing on, though."

"Understood. I hope we'll see you eventually."

"If our pace is good. But I'm in no rush."

As we talked, we reached base camp in no time.

“Men and women, we’re about to enter the labyrinth,” Goldhus announced, his fist held high. “Luciel’s team will follow, so have no fear. Our primary goal is to bring Shahza to justice. Conquering this dungeon is secondary, but no less achievable!”

Hardy cheers and cries filled the valley. Goldhus offered me the floor to say a word, but I respectfully declined.

“Then we’re off!” he exclaimed. “We’ll meet again, Luciel.”

“Safe journey and best of luck.”

The adventurers departed, then I made my way to the horses to help them relax with some cleansing magic. I stroked Forêt’s neck and looked into her eyes. She looked back, as if wishing for my safe return.

“I’ll be back. Promise.”

I left her in the capable hands of the adventurers who’d be holding down the fort in our absence. I couldn’t believe my first dungeon-crawling party would be made up entirely of slaves. Heck, I couldn’t believe I was *going into a dungeon again*, for that matter. This wasn’t your typical portal fantasy, that was for sure.

“As long as I can help it, I won’t let a single one of you die. So no heroics, and keep the recklessness to a minimum. That’s an order, everyone.” I looked over my team as they nodded. “First priority is survival. Second is magic stone retrieval. Third is capturing Shahza. Fourth—and if you ask me, it isn’t even a priority—is conquering this place. Now let’s do this! We’re all making it out of here alive!”

A disparate and flimsy mixture of spirited cries, refined acknowledgments, and one feline yowl followed. What a band we were.

We took our first steps into the cavernous dungeon.

“Pretty bright in here,” I muttered.

“Not once you pull out the core,” Dhoran commented. “They say it’s like the labyrinth’s heart.”

“Its heart, huh?”

“Somethin’ to that effect. It’s been years and years, but that’s what I recall from some old documents. What was it? Somethin’ about a master of some final chamber?”

That probably meant it was just a matter of time until the Church’s labyrinth returned to normal. But this was neither the time nor place to think about it.

“Lionel, you and the others stay with me. Kefin, Yulbo, and Verdel, you and your groups follow the routes on your maps. Clear out the monsters and fill in the blanks as you go, then we’ll meet up at the staircase.”

“Roger!”

I’d standardized our sound-offs after the previous incident. Side note: after drawing out four sets of maps yesterday, my arm was absolutely dead.

I cast Area Barrier on everyone, then we went our separate ways.

“Luciel, when will our turn come?” Lionel asked.

“You’ll get your chance as more monsters start showing up. And it’s uncharted territory past floor thirty, so we’ll have encounters whether we like it or not.”

Lionel grinned and moved to the head of our pack. In that moment, I sympathized with whoever this madman had worked with in the past. As we continued along our predetermined path, made clear by the other teams, he began to realize that his turn to fight would not be anytime soon. I found his slumped shoulders kind of amusing.

Not ten minutes later, we regrouped at the staircase, and everyone reported in as we ascended.

“Any surprises?” I asked.

“No,” Kefin, the criminals’ leader, replied. “The map’s accurate so far, and the only enemies we’ve come across are red-rats.”

His group of felons, despite their failed attempts to harm me, were more capable than I’d expected. I had to wonder what could have led them down their chosen path but knew better than to ask. Not everyone was born equal. At

least, not in terms of socioeconomic factors.

Area Barrier was probably sort of overkill. In less than ninety minutes, we had reached the tenth floor boss room.

“Our intel says we’re supposed to have seen red-lizardmen by now, but so far it’s only been red-snakes, red-bats, and red-rats. This shouldn’t be too much trouble.”

Team Kefin opened the door and a horde of red-snakes, along with various other monsters, appeared in the chamber. But in just a few minutes, we were on our way up the next staircase. I was amazed at everyone’s strength, their speed, and especially Nalia’s aim as she pierced red-bats hanging from the ceiling with her daggers.

“Is mid-range your specialty?” I asked her.

She smiled back. “Please, I’m merely throwing daggers. This is nothing.”

We made it to the twentieth floor boss room without difficulty.

“We’ll have a food break once this chamber is clear,” I announced.

The team’s spare energy took the form of an enthusiastic cry. Lionel and Ketty were in good spirits now that they’d been getting more chances to join the fighting, and the dwarves looked like they were plotting something. I needed them ready to fight at a moment’s notice, though, so I made sure they were focused.

We opened the door and were met with a red-orc and some red-wolves when Dhoran suddenly put his hands to the ground and Pola took a combat stance. Out of nowhere, a five-meter golem like a giant robot appeared. None of us even had the time to be shocked before it leaped at the red-orc and kicked it away. Then it followed up on the incapacitated monster with an elbow drop, completely annihilating it. Ketty had taken care of the wolves, but everyone’s gaze had been stolen by the stone automaton.

The dwarves shared a high five.

“So, is that, like, normal?” I asked.

“Not even I’ve seen a golem move so fluidly,” Lionel replied, his trademark stoicism faltering slightly.

“Dhoran, Pola, how did you... *That’s* a golem?”

“Grandpa helped.”

“I’m no operator, so I make the shell and the girl controls it,” Dhoran explained. “Only thing is the size is limited by the amount o’ magic in her armlet.”

His exceedingly unsubtle glances practically begged for magic stones. I didn’t mind heavy spending for the sake of self-defense, but I also didn’t mind economizing wherever possible.

“How many magic stones does the one you just made need? Precisely, please. That’s an order.”

The two grimaced, then Pola answered, “Twenty of them. But I need more to keep it out longer.”

Despite being all kinds of trouble, the two dwarves were a force to be reckoned with when they put their minds together, both in the workshop and the battlefield. I gave them the stones they’d need with strict instructions to use them for golem purposes only. That put a damper on their spirits, but I knew how to fix it.

“Listen, we’re not here for fun. If you can be patient and follow instructions, I promise to get you both gems for crafting when we make it out. Understand?”

“Got it!”

“I’ll try.”

I nodded, purified the room, then joined Nalia in preparing the meals.

After lunch, I collected the maps from every group, pulled out a desk and chair from my magic bag, and got to consolidating them into one uniform style, based on the additions and corrections on everyone’s copies. The cartographers on each team also included detailed information on the traps encountered, which had all been safely disabled.

I was the last one to wrap up. By the time my desk and chair were put away,

the others were rested and ready to go.

“Well done, everyone,” I said to them. “Our next destination is the thirtieth floor. Stay alert for stronger monsters and trickier traps, and let’s all make it through safely!”

“Understood!” they replied. It wasn’t the most invigorating of cries, but at least it wasn’t the cacophony from before.

I cast Area Barrier on everyone just before entering the twenty-first floor. Our foes had evolved. They were no longer red-whatevers; they were now *fire*-whatevers. Fire-rats, fire-snakes, fire-bats, and fire-rabbits were just some of the many overheated fiends we faced. Their burning bodies, flaming spells, and searing breath were no match for us, though. Neither these creatures nor the new traps were more than mild obstacles, and we progressed at about half an hour per floor.

“We’re not gonna burn ourselves out, are we?”

I’d boosted everyone’s confidence well enough, but now I was worried our luck wouldn’t last.

“Not with those guards of yours,” Kefin said. “They’re strong. Don’t get me wrong, so are we, but they’re something else.” His organization had been made up of beast halflings—outcasts even among beastfolk—so they’d been forced to learn how to steal and claw just to survive. He grinned at me. “And the lack of certain death looming over everyone’s heads sure helps morale.”

He and his team split off from us.

“Your barrier magic prevents them from taking lethal wounds. It tells them you don’t mean to treat them as fodder,” Lionel added before promptly continuing on.

Aside from those barriers and a few Heals, I was doing agonizingly little on this operation. I hadn’t faced even a single monster yet. It couldn’t be this easy, could it? It couldn’t end with my greatest contribution being “the magic stone-holder.” Not even the increasing temperature proved a hindrance to me with my climate-controlled gear, or the others who had donned similar equipment that Dhoran and Pola had casually made adjustments to. What the dwarves

lacked in self-control, they made up for in ability.

All that said, the pent-up stress that had been building inside me ever since reaching Yenice had vanished upon entering the labyrinth, and I was *very* conflicted about it.

One notable difference from this labyrinth and the Church's was how uneven the footing was. There were dips and bumps and climbs scattered throughout that would have made traversing it alone a nightmare.

"We've arrived," Lionel said, pulling me from my thoughts. "The thirtieth floor's main chamber is in sight. The base camp should be directly in front of it."

I peered ahead and spotted people pitching tents opposite the door.

"Why aren't they doing that inside? It's safer," I noted.

"A question we ought to ask them."

"You take care of that. I need to do rounds and heal any wounded, then prepare everyone's meals," I said loudly enough for everyone to hear the plan. "Unless they're not heading in for a reason, we'll clear the boss room and get some rest inside. After a good night's sleep, we'll be fully charged for another long day tomorrow."

When we reached the others, I announced, "Does anyone here need healing? Don't be shy. I've got Area Heal."

There were a few injuries out of the fifteen or so adventurers stationed there. My slaves weren't so bad in comparison.

Just then, Lionel reappeared. "The reason they haven't entered the chamber is because certain labyrinths have mechanisms that prevent the entrance from reopening when someone is inside another. It's something of a courtesy taught to most adventurers."

I flashed back to the Labyrinth of Trials, where I'd gotten trapped on the fortieth floor with no way home.

"Oh."

If I had listened to Nanaella's explanation the day I registered with the Adventurer's Guild, I could have spared myself that awful fate and been on my

merry way home after the lich knight. The Valkyries had tried to come to my rescue, so they must have been inside another chamber at *just* the right time.

I pumped the brakes on the pessimism. It was impossible for me to be unlucky. It just was. Monsieur Luck made sure of that. If I hadn't cleared the labyrinth all in one go after that, there was no telling what might have happened. I might not have ever accomplished it in the first place. Plus, what was done was done. It had happened, turned out all right, and that was all that mattered in the end.

I realized that everyone was staring at me and quickly apologized for spacing out. I wanted to go to bed so badly, but we still had work to do. Kefin had recommended we get our rest inside the chamber and everyone else agreed. All the slaves seemed keen on it.

"All right. Sorry, guys, but I'm leaving camp to the rest of you," I said to the adventurers. "We'll head out again after we get some sleep."

The slaves and I disappeared into the boss room as I threw up the usual barriers.

"I assume there's a reason you were so adamant," I said to Kefin.

"Those adventurers are a bad bunch. It's not so rare for people like them to act nice, then the next thing you know, your food's poisoned or they sap your magic with drugs and finish you off with monsters. There's no finding your corpse after that. They call them dungeon sweepers."

"That sounds illegal."

"No laws in a labyrinth. It's not a good look for us slaves to let our master die."

Well, that sounded violent. I found it funny how frank Kefin's words were when he seemed like a rather untrusting person.

I sighed. "Let's just clear this room, have dinner, then sleep."

"Understood!"

Our opponents were a fire-bear, five fire-wolves, and three fire-birds. Predictably, they didn't last long. Lionel took the fire-bear head-on with his

shield, laughing in its face, then cut it clean in two while Ketty wove between the wolves, whittling them down slowly. Nalia swiftly did away with the birds with just a handful of daggers. And at the tail end came Kefin's team, dealing finishing blows wherever they could find an opening. A few had sustained light burns, but it wasn't anything Area Heal couldn't fix.

After purifying the room and enjoying our meal, we took a well-earned rest. Everyone went about their own tasks, Dhoran and Pola inspecting gear, Ketty and Nalia preparing tomorrow's food, and Lionel chatting with the slaves. I, meanwhile, finished up the maps, then did some magic practice and told the others to keep it down before hitting the hay with my trusty angel's pillow.

*

"Has he fallen asleep?" Lionel grinned. "I've never met such a haphazard healer with so little self-awareness."

"You're one of his slaves, yeah?" Kefin asked.

"Yes, although I often forget that at times."

"Then the guy's as soft on his servants as he seems."

"He is. We're fed well, sufficiently equipped, and never forced into anything. Almost unthinkable, isn't it?"

"I thought I was hearing things when he said he'd get us *all* out alive." Kefin and several others laughed. "You're a military man, aren't you? And a big shot, I bet."

"Oh? What makes you say that?"

"You know how to move in a fight. You don't just see the enemy—you see the battlefield, and it shows. Well, aside from your match with the bear earlier."

"I needed to test the limits of the barrier."

"You're crazy. Anyone else would've lost a limb or two, but you barely took a scratch," the beastman said, patting his body. "And that thing pummeled you a good bit."

"I never act rashly. And neither should you lot. Train well, and maybe my master will find a use for you."

“What about you? You look like an ambitious sorta guy.”

Lionel smiled and huffed. “Everyone who lives by the sword wishes for only one thing: to draw their next breath. I never enjoyed the pangs of leadership.”

“I think you could work your way out of slavery pretty easily if you tried.”

“Perhaps, if the councilman were the last of Luciel’s enemies. But somehow I doubt that. He’ll bring trouble in his wake, and with it strong opponents to face. And when the day comes that bards sing of his accomplishments, they’ll sing of his stalwart companion who stood by his side as well. As a warrior, there would be no greater honor.”

The warrior chuckled and the slave watched, jealous.

08 — Substance X the Great

I was the first to wake up. While I stretched, I thought about the slaves. There was no denying how strong they were. On their own, no one held a candle to Lionel or even Ketty's strength, but together they were a force to be reckoned with. When my job in Yenice was over and there were clinics operating in Yenice, I'd have to move on, but it felt like a shame to leave them behind. I was starting to feel for them. Those pesky emotions of mine... Their stories of rejection by both worlds as halflings hit me right in the heart, and it made me want to help them.

"I can't haul *everyone* off, though. Hmm..."

Nalia woke up when I finished stretching, so the two of us started on breakfast. When the time came to leave Yenice behind, who would I be leaving with it?

My companions made quick work of breakfast; they were raring to go.

"We're about to get into the real labyrinth," I announced. "We're told red-lizardmen and fire-bears are waiting for us ahead, so I don't expect to make as much progress as yesterday, but that's fine. Our current goal is floor forty. Now, safety first, and let's get going!"

"Understood!"

I started casting Area Barrier on everyone. "If the enemies get too dangerous, we may combine teams. And watch out for traps. They'll be getting deadly from here on."

Kefin and his men said nothing, then burst out laughing.

"Did I say something funny?"

"Nah, we're just glad you're worried about us. Life would be a lot easier if there were more of you in the world."

They grinned, then we were off for the first uncharted floor. I was about ready to blow my lid at them for messing around in a place like this, but who

could stay angry at those smiles? And it reminded me of something similar my master had once told me.

I finished casting the barriers with a sigh.

“Man, it’s hot.” It felt like a sweltering fifty degrees higher than it was outside. But there was no beating sun, only the sultry walls of the labyrinth baking us like potatoes. “Don’t forget to hydrate, guys. Let me know when you’re thirsty.” God bless magic bags.

All my equipment was climate-controlled, so only my face was exposed to the heat, but the others had to have been struggling since only the top halves of their gear had been similarly altered. Beads of sweat dripped from their brows.

The rooms had expanded to roughly four hundred by four hundred. On we marched, meeting at each fork in the path, filling in our maps. Our pace was unhindered, although injuries grew more common the higher we climbed. But my healing kept us on our feet.

“We look like a legion of zombies. I guess that makes me the necromancer, and I’m not sure if that’s a good thing.”

“I, personally, wouldn’t mind taking a forward position with them,” the battle-crazed man at my side announced.

“Same! This kitty wants to go exploring!” his equally battle-crazed feline friend added.

Their time would come. Everything past the fortieth floor was uncharted. But I didn’t indulge them yet.

We cleared a floor every hour, which seemed like a long time at first, but it had taken me days to fully explore single floors in the Holy City on my own. As far as dungeons went, teams were definitely the way to go.

We set up at the staircase leading up to the thirty-sixth floor for lunch, and I took it upon myself to place a few slightly opened barrels of Substance X a ways away to ward off the baddies.

Everyone stared at me on my way back.

“Relax, they’re not for drinking. Unless you want some, of course. It keeps the monsters away, so no one needs to stay on watch, and we all get a break at once.”

They turned towards the barrels in disbelief and never looked away throughout the entirety of the cooking and eating process. When, amazingly, no monsters showed up, Substance X was no longer just some disgusting hell-liquid. It was a disgusting hell-liquid that repelled monsters, which I happened to drink gallons of. In hindsight, chugging monster repellent couldn’t have looked good on me, but I didn’t have the courage to overanalyze their opinions on the matter.

I collected everyone’s maps as I had done the day before and got to work, noting the numerous traps that hadn’t previously been logged.

“How are things looking?” I asked the three team leaders. “Think we can keep going today?”

“We can make it to floor forty for sure,” Kefin answered, “but we’ll need more men if we push past that. It’s going to get rocky otherwise.”

The others frowned in frustration.

“I understand. Let’s consolidate into two teams, then.”

They looked taken aback, but I wasn’t sure why. I’d mentioned the possibility before.

“I said we can make it to floor forty,” Kefin retorted sharply.

I smiled back. “It’s not that I don’t trust your abilities. It’s just not going to go well if we suddenly restructure the groups and throw off our established coordination right when we get there. This is the most efficient way. And I’ve been under a lot of stress lately, so I think I should get to savor this a bit.”

My excuse must have worked, based on the sympathy in their eyes.

Once we reached the fortieth floor, I studied our master map and realized we hadn’t found a single treasure chest yet. Maybe they’d already been snatched up and this labyrinth never replenished them. Whatever the case, we had

arrived at the boss room.

“No one’s here,” I muttered.

“Perhaps they moved on,” Lionel remarked.

“Think they found that Shahza guy and went after him?” Ketty asked.

“It’s possible.”

I’d thought we’d have met up with Goldhus’s team by now, but they were nowhere to be seen. My companions’ suggestions helped get my thoughts in order.

“We’ll clear the chamber, then take a break. We can use it as a temporary base to search for the others on the floors above.”

“Understood.”

Lionel bowed lightly and Ketty followed suit.

Goldhus’s group had fought a chimera, but for us, the boss room produced five saber-tooth tigers, their bodies shrouded in flames. Fearsome beasts, to be sure, until Lionel stunned them with his shield, leaving them open to be struck down by Ketty and the others. I healed from afar, Nalia kept stragglers at a safe distance, Dhoran wielded his massive hammer, and Pola’s towering golem acted as my wall.

What should have been a long and arduous battle ended in mere minutes. A Purification and an Area High Heal later, it was time for dinner.

Dinner was peaceful, filled with lively discussions about impressive feats or exciting battles. After enjoying my fill and wrapping up the map work, I held a strategy meeting with team leaders Kefin, Yulbo, and Verdel, as well as Lionel and the other four.

“Let’s get started. Tomorrow, we head to floor forty-one. No doubt the monsters will get tougher and we’ll have more ground to cover, so we need a plan before we jump straight in.”

Lionel raised his hand. “If I may.”

I nodded, giving him the floor.

“Our current setup consists of three teams. I think Ketty and I should lead the two advance parties, while the rest remain strictly as your guard.”

The objections came fast.

“Hold on now, gramps!” Kefin shouted. “All I ever asked for was more people! We can handle ourselves!”

It would be a good deal more dangerous without those two with me, but Lionel was right. It was the most efficient way to go.

“You think that’s our best bet to keep casualties low and progress steady?” I asked.

“Yes. If the monsters we encountered in this chamber are common fodder in floors to come, it won’t bode well for our chances of survival.”

Kefin scowled but held his tongue, well aware that Lionel was right. He was an easy one to read.

“With your healing,” Lionel continued, “I’m confident you’ll be sufficiently protected without us. To say nothing of the golem at your side.”

“Anything’s possible with more magic stones,” Pola commented, holding up a strong fist that reminded me of someone.

“All right,” I said. “You make a good point. Take care of it. Next, I want to discuss countermeasures for the heat. Can we craft anything that could help?”

“Mm-hmm. But why?” Pola tilted her head.

“Excuse the lass,” Dhoran interjected. “We’re used to the heat, so it’s hard to notice, is all.”

I imagined they were probably weak to the cold, in that case. I looked around at the others, but no one else seemed bothered by the temperature.

“Well, okay then. Don’t forget to stay hydrated, though. Now, about our pace. At this point, I think five floors a day will be our limit, but even one a day would be enough. Any objections?” No one spoke up. “Leave any gear needing maintenance with Dhoran or Pola. I want you all to discuss formations with your

teammates.”

“Understood!”

We dispersed and I proceeded with my usual magic practice routine, thinking back on my first labyrinth. Here, we’d made it forty floors in just two days—well over a hundred times faster than it had taken me to travel the same distance on my own.

“Things are going well, but it has to be luck. I can’t expect it to hold out for much longer.”

I ended the day with a prayer for safety to the gods, ancestors, and Monsieur Luck for good measure.

Floor forty-one was not what anyone had expected. For starters, the temperature had *dropped*, so it was actually a good thing we hadn’t wasted magic stones altering gear like I’d wanted. I had left the dwarves with a supply just in case, but now they had extra for golems. Team Kefin had taken Lionel and Ketty’s spot in my escort, which gave me the chance to ask some things that had been on my mind.

“Remember when you disappeared at the Adventurer’s Guild? You looked completely different back then. How’d you do that?” How could I not be curious? It had looked like ninjutsu or something. Straight out of a manga.

“It’s called, er...ninjutsu, I think?” he replied.

It actually *was* ninjutsu? This smelled like another case of reincarnation to me.

“You think? Is that what the skill’s called?”

“Yeah. There was this human who showed up in town a while back, some penniless street urchin, and he had the weirdest abilities. He could move without making a sound, make you see things that weren’t there, even look like a completely different race.”

Huh, his skill level must have really been something.

“A guy like that’s pretty useful for our lifestyle, if you know what I mean. So we hired him, and he taught us a lot while he was with us. Before he died, I

mean. In this labyrinth.”

“He what?”

“I mentioned the sweepers before, a few floors ago. I think it was those bast—them. I think it was them.”

“Wait, you don’t know for sure, do you? If corpses don’t stay in labyrinths, how can you say one way or the other? He could be alive!”

“He’s gone. Him and everyone else who was with him. Only two ever made it back, but they died the next day. Their last words were an accusation. Those fu—they murdered him.”

My heart was pounding out of my chest. But why? What proof did I have that he had been one of the reincarnated? And who did I think I was? Their protector? This complete stranger had somehow turned my entire world upside down.

“How long ago was this? And what was his name?”

“About two years now. He was about your age. And he called himself Hatori, but who knows if he was telling the truth.”

I didn’t know what I thought I’d get by dwelling on it. There was no point.

“Back to that skill. Do you think I could manage it too?”

“Sure. I wouldn’t mind teaching you. There’s just one thing I want to ask in return. And yeah, I know, I’m a slave looking for favors, but hear me out...er, please.”

“Relax, I’ll listen! And keep it together! I really need you on your guard up here.”

“Sorry. I just...” He lowered his head again. “I want you to take me with you when you leave. You don’t even have to free me. I’ve got no problem staying a slave.”

Now I knew why he’d been awkwardly correcting himself to be more polite this whole time.

“That’s still a ways off, but I guess I can think about it.”

Kefin's ears perked up in...anxiety? Happiness? I didn't speak ear, but he looked more motivated than ever.

Pola's golem held back the two fire-bears, one in each of its gargantuan arms, while seven slaves skillfully took on the flaming saber-tooth. Injuries were sustained in the process, but we eventually emerged as the victors. The punny beauty of Pola taking out the bears with literal bear hugs wasn't lost on me and said a lot about her sense of humor.

"Good to see you guys aren't having too much trouble up here," I said, casting Area Middle Heal, then another Area Barrier to renew the previous one.

Kefin gave me a difficult look. "We're hanging in there."

I handed over the two bears' gems to Pola, stashing the saber-tooth's in my bag. We continued through the sprawling and convoluted layout, twisting and turning down crossroads and forks until our two-hour survey of the floor finally came to an end.

"How are things looking? Do we keep going?" I asked the regrouped teams.

Kefin, Ketty, and Lionel all agreed we were good for more before calling it for the day. The other two groups only had a few scrapes and burns here and there, so we proceeded to the next floor. And there, we found our first treasure chest at last.

"Guess what, Chief!" Ketty shouted once we'd regrouped again. "I found some treasure! You gotta go open it!"

"Why me?"

"Treasure chest contents change depending on who opens it," Verdel answered. "Once the traps are disabled, it's all luck of the draw."

"Interesting. Let's check it out once Lionel's team catches up."

It was only a ten-minute wait before we were off to see Ketty's discovery. What we found was...something. Boy was it something.

"What is this thing?"

I held an opaque scarlet orb of some kind. I tried casting Purification on it,

pouring magic into it, holding it up, but its true nature remained a mystery. The dwarves just stood there, staring wide-eyed. Eventually, I gave up and put it in my bag.

“Too bad it wasn’t a grimoire or gear. Come on, let’s have an early lunch.”

We set up camp and sat down for a break. During our meal, I asked Dhoran and Pola about the orb, and I could barely contain my excitement at their answer.

“Seriously?!”

“Oh yeah,” Dhoran nodded. “But we’ll need more than that to get ’er off the ground. A mountain more o’ gems than the guildhall took and some o’ the rarest ore you’ll ever be lucky enough to lay eyes on.”

“Oh, I bet. I am absolutely ready to fork over as much as we need for an airship. You kidding me?”

I was smiling so much it almost hurt. That useless orb? Yeah, it was legendary. Like, literally. It was only heard of in tales and, in theory, its powers of flight would work perfectly as the heart of a potential airship. I was burning with renewed vigor, but kept myself focused on our current goal: finding Goldhus.

We found no one on the next two floors.

“This is worrying,” Lionel mumbled.

“Why? Are things getting rough? Is it the monsters?”

He shook his head. “Neither. I was considering the worst-case scenario. Hopefully we’re right and they’re on Shahza’s trail, but if something’s happened to them...”

“Why do you say that?”

“Our pace is strange. Too quick. As far as we know, no one else has set foot past floor forty, but we’ve had almost no difficulty. And we’ve found no sign of Shahza. I doubt his lot could have outrun us so quickly.”

“You think he’s leading us by the nose? Is it possible he’s not even here?”

“No. Our speed would be even more concerning if we weren’t following in the wake of someone else. There were also horse tracks at the entrance when we arrived, and Goldhus told me they couldn’t be from adventurers. Shahza *must* be here.”

“Should we head back to the fortieth floor? It shouldn’t take more than an hour, and we’ll think more clearly after resting somewhere that isn’t crawling with monsters.”

Goldhus could have been waiting for us, in need of our help, but I had to prioritize based on the situation at hand. I couldn’t put our lives on a scale with theirs and decide which was more valuable.

No one argued, so we returned to the previous boss room in relative silence, where we set up camp and prepared for the next day.

Another early morning. It filled me with emotion to see everyone so willing to get out and help the adventurers.

“We’re heading straight for floor forty-five as a group. No one let your guard down!”

“Understood!”

We retraced our steps to where we had left off the day before, but met no one along the way. Not even on the three floors after that. Goldhus’s team remained missing.

“That bangle’s all we made out with...”

We’d discovered our second treasure chest on floor forty-seven and found a bracelet of unknown nature inside, but no one had the right skill to appraise it, so its properties were a mystery. And last I checked, the SP cost for obtaining the skill myself had been a cool hundred points. So that was a no. Into the magic bag it went.

“What do you guys think?” I asked. “Keep going or restart tomorrow?”

“Exhaustion seems to be minimal,” Lionel replied.

“I’m not even hungry yet,” Ketty added.

“We could run for days without sleep if we had to,” Kefin said. “Not that I think we should be tackling the big one on floor fifty right away, but we’re good until then.”

“All right, we’ll press on. Like always, safety first.”

On we went to floor forty-eight, where finally we made contact. It happened right near the end of the floor, just as we had resigned ourselves to coming up empty again.

“Someone’s over there!” Kefin shouted, pointing towards a horde of monsters. I strained my eyes and spotted the figure of a person. But something told me to stop.

“Wait!”

Kefin glowered at me. “Why?!”

“*Look!* Those monsters aren’t right. See the coloring? They’re not the kinds we’ve seen so far. And it looks like they’re *playing*. Something weird’s going on.”

Silence fell as everyone peered at the scene and took in what I was saying.

“It’s too soon to say whether they’re friend or foe, so let’s wait for the others to get here.”

For twenty minutes or so, we watched from afar as the figure frolicked with the beasts.

Lionel arrived first. “Strange. Mystical, almost.”

Then Ketty: “I see what you mean. I probably would’ve rushed in too.”

“Stay on guard, everyone.”

I cast Area Barrier and we inched closer...and closer...until...

“Mister Healer?”

Sheila appeared from the crowd of monsters.



Wait, *Sheila*?!

“You didn’t come all this way by yourself, did you?”

We hadn’t seen any sign of her or her father the whole way there. Not even at base camp on floor thirty.

“Nuh-uh, I was with my daddy, but then a bunch of people came and he told me to hide.”

I didn’t like the foreshadowing I was sensing here. Why was Orga cooperating with Shahza? Unless his daughter had been used as a hostage.

“Do you want to come with us? We’ll help you find him.”

“Really? You will?”

“Well, we can’t leave you here. Who are these monsters with you? Friends?”

“Yeah!” She beamed. “Daddy found them for me when I was little, since I couldn’t talk.”

I didn’t recall seeing them when she and her father had come to the Holy City—or to meet us at the border for that matter.

“I don’t think I’ve met them.”

“I had to leave them at home last time. Daddy said there were mean people in the Church who wouldn’t like my friends.”

“Ah, okay. Do your friends like us? They won’t hurt anyone, will they?”

“Nope! Hang on.” She turned to the monsters and started making all kinds of gestures, then turned back, satisfied. “There! Now they know!”

“Yeah? Thanks for that. So, how long have you been here?”

“Not that long. Some people were mean to Kap, though, so they got hurt.”

Seriously? Of course they did. Who in their right mind would assume these things were tame? I could already tell this was going to be a major headache.

“Where are those people now?”

“Sleeping in the room over there. The others went after daddy.”

“Wait here, okay? I promise they’re not bad, so I’m going to go make them apologize.”

She pouted for a moment, then huffed, “Fine. But only if they say sorry. Kap deserves an apology.”

“Promise.”

In the next room over were six pulverized adventurers, barely clinging to life. The faint rise and fall of their chests were the only sign I had that they were still with us. I quickly healed them, then waited for them to wake up.

“Thank god,” I groaned. If these men had died, things would not have been good for Sheila. “Since no one can prove crimes in a labyrinth, does that mean they don’t exist here? Or would the adventurers be at fault for attacking a tamer’s beasts?”

No one answered my monologue. The adventurers woke up before long, so I explained the situation and informed them of their pending apology.

“Why didn’t your team wait for us?” I asked.

“You see, when we reached the fortieth floor...”

Long story short, the boss room had been sealed, meaning Shahza had been inside doing battle as they had arrived. They’d caught up with him around the forty-second floor, been shaken off, then lost sight of him again on the next floor and had taken a moment to rest. The increasingly powerful monsters had stalled them more than anticipated.

“We were only holding the team back, so we told the guildmaster to go on without us. But then we saw the girl being attacked.”

Good thing I hadn’t let Kefin charge in or we’d have been Act Two of the same play.

“All right, well, you’re all safe now. Let’s regroup.”

“Thank you.”

The adventurers lowered their heads, then lowered them again to Sheila’s monsters when we rejoined the others. It was a bit surreal, to be honest. Sheila herself also apologized after hearing the adventurers’ story.

With our seven new members, we continued through the rest of the floor, then took on floor forty-nine until we made it all the way to the fiftieth.

“I don’t see daddy.”

“They’ve got to be here somewhere.”

But heading straight into the boss room like this probably wasn’t a good idea.

“Let’s take a break, everyone. We won’t be able to focus on an empty stomach.”

Sheila and the adventurers perked right up. Sheila, especially, must have been starving, having gone without food all day. Her poor growing body didn’t have time to wait for me to cook, so I hauled out the leftovers from last time.

“So, get this,” an adventurer said, “the enemy waiting for us in this floor’s main room is apparently nothing like what we’ve been up against before. Can you believe that? Makes me want to go home.”

“Really?” our resident battle-crazed lunatic inquired. “The prospect of testing your might doesn’t excite you?”

“Our motto, if you recall, Lionel, is *safety first*,” I said. “The best-case scenario is that we won’t have to test anyone’s might against anything. Don’t forget that.”

A few scattered replies came, then it was time to get moving. We stayed calm and surveyed the area as always, filling in our map at our own pace. By the time we finished, we’d found another treasure chest, but there was no time to rejoice. We could all hear the sounds of battle echoing from the boss room.

“That leaves only one place left to look, but...I *really* don’t want to fight that thing.”

The door was propped open with two thick hunks of lumber. Inside, Shahza and his men were facing off against Goldhus and his group, with a fearsome red dragon completing the lethal triangle. The drake spewed flames and whipped its tail, flailing and gnashing its teeth in a mesmerizing display of raw power that stole my breath. I was certain that Lionel was itching to go up against it, but we couldn’t charge in.

From the look of things, there had been no casualties. They must have just recently started fighting. Still, the sooner we stepped in to save them, the better. I knew that, but my body felt like lead, paralyzed by hesitation. Arrows bounced off the dragon's rocklike scales while its many long-range attacks effectively nullified close-range viability. If we had pitted it against our golem, it would have no doubt been a spectacle of such ridiculous proportions that it would have put ostentatious kaiju films or Saturday morning super sentai shows to shame.

"Lionel," I asked, "how confident are you in handling that thing's attacks?"

He frowned. "Not very. I certainly wouldn't stay on my feet."

"Could you dodge it, Ketty? Get in a few hits here and there?"

"Maybe," she replied calmly. Her cutesy, feline mannerisms were gone. "But I wouldn't cut very deep with this sword."

"Dhoran? Pola? Can you make a golem big enough to do anything?"

Dhoran crossed his arms. "Best we could do is hold the beast down, but even then..."

"It'd run out of magic in thirty seconds," Pola finished, touching her armlet. "It'd fall apart before then if it took too much damage, though."

I wanted to run. I wanted to turn around and go back home so badly. But Sheila was scared, trembling as she clung to my robe, and I didn't have the heart to tear her away. Her eyes were fixed on her father, who stood between Shahza and the dragon. No one in that room was equipped to deal with a threat of this magnitude, and things were getting worse by the second.

Why wasn't I running? Wasn't that what I always told myself I'd do? Was it the girl next to me who so desperately needed a hero?

No. I simply lacked the will to watch a life come to an end. A typhoon of cognitive dissonance was tearing through my mind. Ideals clashed, and I stood there, choosing neither.

Run, you idiot!

Save them, you coward!

“No!”

The girl’s shriek ripped me from the quagmire of my thoughts just in time to see the dragon’s tail sweep across the room, slamming into all of Shahza’s followers, including Orga. Shahza took his chance and leaped for the beast’s eyes, but the dragon was quicker. Its mighty jaw came down on the tiger-man’s body, fang piercing flesh, then it tossed him away like a macabre rag doll.

Suddenly, a voice that sounded a lot like my own started shouting directions. “Save the injured and retreat! Do *not* engage that dragon! We’re all getting out of here alive! That’s an order!”

“Understood!”

You’re an idiot, I thought. But it seemed I was alone in that. I heard no objections or crying, only the same spirited replies as always.

I cast Area Barrier on us all, and we stepped into the massive chamber. It was far bigger than the others, a giant circle about a hundred meters in diameter, and seemed to have been specially made to fit the dragon. It reminded me of the Adventurer’s Guild training grounds.

“God of fate, Crya, Divine Healer, ancestors, please protect us.”

With one final prayer, the battle truly began.

The creature was gargantuan, and every inch of its body was covered with harder-than-steel scales. Sharp claws and fangs glinted in the light. Every terrifying aspect of our opponent was made even more apparent up close, but for some reason, I wasn’t afraid.

The criminal slaves watched my back while I dashed for the beastfolk who had taken the blow from its tail. I cast various healing spells, then quickly shouted, “If you want to live, get out of here! *Now!*”

They stared, wide-eyed, but readily agreed and followed the slaves’ directions towards the entrance.

The dragon was already perturbed by our arrival, but now that its prey was escaping, it was furious. Flame leaked from its jaw, and a red glow signaled the coming of a torrent of fire. Then Pola’s golem stifled the flame with a flying kick

to the face. Goldhus and his team remained firmly planted where they stood.

“Run!” I yelled.

“No!” the guildmaster shouted back. “If we don’t end it here, we’ll never be rid of this labyrinth!”

There was no time to argue. I cast Area Barrier on them from a distance, for what little good it would do. The golem crumbled into soil after taking only one of the monster’s assaults.

I decided my best bet was to make it back to the entrance and provide long-range support, so I launched into a sprint. The dragon roared and thrashed its tail, sending Goldhus’s team flying towards me, then reeled back to engulf us in a sea of flames. Just as I thought we were ash, Lionel stepped in, planted his shield, and repelled the attack. The blistering heat liquified the metal in short order, and I quickly cast Middle Heal to save him from the searing pain, but the dragon almost appeared to take note and started to zero in on me.

Ketty and Kefin joined the fray while I retreated, but were swatted away with Lionel, just like the others had been, when the beast deftly spun in place and lashed out its tail. They landed all the way at the entrance.

Then it was just me, Shahza’s corpse, a scattering of bloodied adventurers, and the dragon. I glanced at the door and saw that Pola and Dhoran had made it safely. They each held magic stones and were trying to form another golem with no success. Every slight rise in the ground resulted in it dropping straight back down as useless dirt.

They were panicking. This was bad.

Fifteen meters to the door. Fifteen meters to the dragon. I was well within the range of its tail.

“I’m not dying here. I’ll struggle and claw and do whatever it takes to make it out.”

I transformed the Illusion Staff into sword form and took out the spear I’d obtained at the end of the Labyrinth of Trials, facing the beast.

“Dragon-given weapons fit for a dragonslayer. Shame they’re wasted on

someone like me, but that doesn't mean I plan on giving up."

Magic whirled inside my body as Physical Enhancement kicked into overdrive. And then I waited, slowly backpedaling without taking my eyes off the enemy even once. I was ready to stick my spear out and impale it the moment its tail came at me.

But it wasn't its tail I should've been watching. Instead, a giant foot came crashing down, and it was all I could do to dive out of the way. I shouldn't have made it, but the shockwave rumbling from directly to my side told me that, somehow, I had.

Seizing this momentary advantage, I swung the Illusion Sword at its limb, tearing through scale and flesh. Blood gushed from the wound, as if leaving a morbid reminder that this was all too real.

"I hit—"

Then the tail came. It descended on me with a great *thud*, crushing my body like a piece of paper. I'd never been run over by a truck in my past life, but I imagined it was a similar sensation.

I couldn't believe I was even still alive. I was paralyzed. Couldn't see. Couldn't hear. Couldn't think. My only solace was the river of adrenaline holding the pain at bay. It was only from a pure, primal instinct for survival that I managed to silently free cast High Heal. My body glowed, and gradually my vision returned. Then came sound.

The first thing I heard was the dragon's sadistic victory roar. The first thing I saw was its mouth full of teeth drawing closer and closer to my limp body. The entrance to the chamber was in flames, and the bodies of my companions lay around me. They'd tried to save me.

I wondered... Was I proud of my second shot at life? Yeah. Yeah, I'd say I was. I'd scored a hit on a dragon. I'd become an S-rank healer. I'd made friends and found people to care about. The Church didn't need me anymore. As if they ever had.

I'd gotten that promotion...or had I? Was it really time to punch out? Had I lived a happy life? I hadn't even gotten to tour the town yet, and I still had

magic items in production. Was I going to go two lives without finding love?

Was this just...where it ended?

“I...am not...going to *die here!*”

The moment the dragon’s jaws began to close around me, I summoned a barrel of Substance X and hurled it into its mouth, using every remaining ounce of willpower to roll away and cast Extra Heal.



A horrible twinge of pain shot through me, but only for an instant. I pulled myself to my feet while the dragon writhed and flailed like mad.

“Monsters *really* don’t like that stuff.” I turned around to heal my companions, then felt the ground shake, followed by a low *boom*.

“You’re kidding.”

When I turned towards the direction of the noise, I saw the dragon. On the ground. Foaming at the mouth.

“So, I could just...”

I picked up the Illusion Sword from where it had fallen, imbued it with magic, and cleaved through the beast’s neck. The cut was clean, but its neck was thick. With some help from Physical Enhancement, my blade slid from one end to the other, and our victory was assured.

A moment later, the dragon was gone, leaving only a grimoire, a crimson gem, and a greatsword embedded in the stone where its head had once rested. After placing the items in my magic bag, I immediately tended to the wounded.

Lionel, Ketty, and everyone else gaped at me in disbelief, but no one was in more shock than I was. Scattered mutterings began to erupt: “dragonslayer” this, “immortal dragonsbane” that, with a few buzzwords like “sacred” thrown in here and there.

“Luciel, how did you do that?” Lionel asked.

Ah, right. No wonder they were so confused.

“So, I got crushed by the tail, right? Well, everything went dark after that, and when I woke up I saw the dragon about to finish me off. I figured it was all or nothing then, so I chucked a barrel of Substance X at it, which it really didn’t enjoy. Then I lopped its head off while it was unconscious.”

Lionel recoiled. “That’s incredible!”

Meanwhile, Ketty and the other beastpeople shuddered with renewed fear of the substance.

Goldhus approached me. “You saved our lives. Without you, we wouldn’t be

standing here right now.”

“Yeah, probably not. Let’s say you guys have some Substance X and we’ll call it even for nearly getting us killed,” I said with a shit-eating grin.

The guildmaster dropped to the floor and prostrated himself.

“Anyway, I want to know what you all were doing going along with everything Shahza said,” I said flatly, scowling. “How did he convince you to risk your lives by clearing an entire labyrinth? You should treat your lives with a little more respect, or the gods who gave them to you might get angry.”

The beastmen followed Goldhus’s example and threw themselves to the ground as well. All at once, they replied, “Yes, sir! So sorry, sir!”

That reincarnated guy must have had quite the cultural impact. Where had these people learned to prostrate themselves like this was some sort of Japanese period piece?

I purified the room and returned to healing the injured. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Goldhus approach Shahza’s body, offer his respects, then collect it.

The exhaustion hit me hard once everything was done. But the problem was, we weren’t done yet—or at least / wasn’t. There was one more thing left to do, so I asked the others to keep watch and took a well-earned nap.

09 — Dealings on the 51st

When I opened my eyes, there was a glowing circle in the middle of the boss room, but just past that, on the opposite wall, another door had appeared. Just like last time. I picked myself up and stretched.

“How are you feeling?” Lionel asked.

“Perfect. Where are the others?”

“Returned to the Adventurer’s Guild. They intend to hold Vice Guildmaster Grohala and many others accountable for their crimes.”

“Yeah? I almost feel bad for them. Goldhus won’t let them off easy.”

Lionel snickered. “Very true.”

“Anyway, things got way too close for comfort there. The dragon trying to eat me ended up saving us in the end. Ironical, huh?”

“My golden years are certainly long past me. Fire-spewing drakes seem to be too much for even me to handle.”

“We’ve both got room for improvement.”

“Well said. Let us train when we return.”

“Lemme join too,” Ketty added, pawing at her eyes drowsily. Strangely enough, she still looked alert. “You were pretty impressive out there, Chief.”

“There’ll be time for all of that when we get home. We’ve still got a job to do,” I said, looking towards the new door.

“Are we not exiting through the circle?”

Ketty flashed me a patronizing smile. “Still half-asleep over there?”

“Are we just going to ignore the giant door?” I pointed at the foreboding entrance, but the two only looked more puzzled.

Um, excuse me, Mister Holy Dragon, sir, was I the only one who could see those things? Would it have killed you to fill me in on this crap?!

“Just...be ready to leave when everyone wakes up.”

They smiled ingratiatingly, in deference to my supposed half-asleep state, and regrouped with Nalia. Whatever floated their boats. I, meanwhile, approached the door.

“Wonder how this one opens.”

I put my hand to it, and a scarlet insignia of some kind began to glow across the stone.

“Yeah, there goes my magic! Guess my affinity doesn’t matter!”

The first time this had happened, I’d needed an MP potion to keep from being sapped dry, but that wasn’t necessary this time. I still had over half of my magic left afterwards, and it was nice to see the progress for myself. Before going directly in, I stepped aside to let someone know where I’d be so that I wasn’t straight-up vanishing out of nowhere. Kefin was the closest.

“Hey, can you see this big door?” I asked.

He tilted his head like Lionel and Ketty had. “That’s... That’s a wall, right?”

This must have been an effect of the dragon’s blessing.

“Never mind. Let the others know that if I suddenly disappear, they should head into the circle and wait for me outside the labyrinth. Tell them that’s an order.”

“I assume wherever you’re going, I can’t go with you.” He seemed to trust me, however reluctantly. Good.

“No. Looks like it’s gotta be me. Remember what I said.”

I patted him on the shoulder, then returned to the door. I looked back to see him still curiously watching me. He nodded. I raised my hand in goodbye, opened the door, and stepped through. It slowly swung shut as I ascended the stairs, but I didn’t stop.

“Wonder if these blessings would go away if I just ignored all this pomp and circumstance and left.”

I crouched down near the top of the staircase and peered up at what awaited me above: a dragon, resting peacefully just like the Holy Dragon had been. Flames blackened by miasma danced across its body, covering the scales, some

of which were rotting away. Its corruption was much more advanced than its holy-hued cousin. Was forty years really enough time to save them all?

I focused my magic into the Illusion Staff and prepared to end the Flame Dragon's suffering.

"Oh holy hand of healing. Oh birthing breath of the land. Take my energy and shield me in ramparts of angelic light. Engulf impurity in a bastion of radiance. Sanctuary Circle!"

Just like before, the magic circle expanded beneath the beast until it encircled it entirely, then exploded into a pillar of light. The dragon didn't struggle. There was no flailing or ear-splitting wail. It bore the pain, as if it knew its salvation had arrived.

The light faded, and the blotches of corruption disappeared from its body. The blood-red blaze that had surrounded it gradually calmed into a flicker, like a gentle sunset.

I took a deep breath and was approaching when a voice suddenly echoed inside my head.

"First the hallowed, then the flame. The Wicked One's curse is undone. You have my gratitude."

"Telepathy? Is that you?"

"It is I. The Holy Dragon's blessing grants thee understanding of my thoughts, for I lack the strength to use words."

Then I was right to be worried. The forty years I'd been given were meant only as a countdown to the birth of the next hero. The dragons didn't seem to have that kind of time.

"How many of you are left? Why am I the only one who can enter this room?"

"You possess the ability to break chains. Only those with similar capabilities or bearers of blessings, be they divine or draconic in origin, may enter."

Then the god of fate's protection was what had landed me in this position? What kind of coincidental nonsense was that? It was enough to make me want to pull my hair out. And he hadn't even answered my second question.

"You bested me not only alone but in a single blow. In recognition of this feat, I offer you everything in this chamber as well as my own blessing. Would that I could bestow my remains as my brethren did, but it will burn to ash when my soul leaves this vessel."

Sure, whatever, I didn't care.

"I'll take the treasure, but how many of these blessings am I even allowed to have?"

"Worry not. Heroes attain your powers and many more from divines and my kind alike."

Seriously? *Oh, don't worry, heroes handle it just fine*, he says. How very calming.

"Yeah, I think I'll pass."

"You are as the Holy Dragon told me. Strange yet amusing."

"I'm not kidding. This is it for me. For real. I just want to sit back, get married, and live a peaceful life over here."

"Ah, that reminds me: now that you have earned both my and the Holy Dragon's blessings, it will not be long now before destiny leads you to a woman known as the Drakesworn—a mystic anointed by the divine Draconis."

Guess I didn't have any say in the matter. Maybe the thoughtlessness was hereditary. It would explain why dragonewts never listened to me either. But I had more important matters to consider.

"Is she pretty? How old is she?"

The dragon chuckled. *"You entertain me. However, worry yourself not over appearances. Fate will act as it will. As harbinger of the flame of love, I can assure you that you will not be disappointed."*

Could he really blame me for being curious? Did fate have...a soulmate in store for me? Wait, crap, I'd forgotten my comeback.

"It was just a fluke that I happened to be the right guy for the first labyrinth, and I didn't get through this one without a lot of help. Do you really think I have what it takes to take on *more*?"

"You are young and naive. Power is not found in a single soul, but in many. Trust in others as you did through this Labyrinth of Will, and I will pray that you grow to become a worthy and noble sage."

"You may have a... Wait, did you say 'sage'?"

"I ask no more than your very best. Save my brethren."

"Yeah, I already promised the Holy Dragon. Now about that sage thing?"

"Speak thy name," the dragon suddenly rumbled aloud.

I recoiled. "Luciel."

"Your staff. It is of my kind. Present it to me."

"Like this?"

I received no answer, then a bright red light shone and flowed into the staff, as if being sucked in.

"Luck be with you, Luciel." The beast smiled. "And so another promise is fulfilled... Fjil...na..."

"Wait, I still have..." But its body had already begun to fall apart. "Questions. I wish these dragons would stop doing that."

Suddenly, like a phoenix being reborn in a fairy tale, the remains erupted into flame and quickly burned away until not even ash was left. Just like with the Holy Dragon, a large magic gem and a treasure chest appeared where the Flame Dragon once lay. When I opened the chest, a small bead flew out.

"Whoa!"

All of a sudden, a light shone from my magic bag and then the necklace I'd obtained from the Holy Dragon emerged all on its own, meeting the bead in the air as it came to rest in one of its indentions.

"I knew it." It was a perfect fit, leaving seven more holes of similar size to fill. "Well that's two, so that's probably enough, right?"

I laughed dryly at myself and stood there in a blank stupor before remembering there were people waiting for me.

I snapped out of it and got ready to leave, stuffing the treasure into my bag as

I purified each item.

“What is all this? Currency I’ve never seen, words I can’t read... This place must be ancient.”

With everything in hand (save for the magic stone in the center that I didn’t want to test right now), I stepped into the circle and it started to glow. *Ping*.

Title Obtained: Protection of the Flame Dragon

Title Obtained: Slayer of Drakes

Title Obtained: Chosen of the Draconis

When my vision returned, I was in front of the labyrinth, the sun high in the sky. Everyone rushed to me all at once and my stomach growled with perfect timing. I almost felt embarrassed before I saw others holding their empty stomachs as well. Time for breakfast.

“You mean to say the door was real?”

“Yep. Apparently, you need to have a blessing to be able to see it, which is why I was the only one who could. That’s what the Flame Dragon said, at least.”

“Flame Dragon?”

Lionel looked keen to test his blade against such a foe.

I laughed. “No fighting happened. He was in pain, so I healed him. That’s all.”

“I see.”

While the cooking was in progress, I filled in the battle-crazed lunatic on what happened after I’d disappeared. Something seemed to be on his mind, but I didn’t pry. Aside from a few adventurers tending to the horses, the impatient ones had already returned to Yenice. No breakfast for them.

The calm, clear sky complimented our meal well. I figured a barbecue sometime would be a nice idea.

After breakfast, we got ready to leave. I mounted Forêt Noire, we fell into formation, and then made for Yenice once more.

“Someone sure was pouty for a while there,” I said, rubbing my mount’s neck.

“What is it with you and cleansing magic, I wonder?”

The poor girl must’ve been in a sour mood after being left out for so long, but she was just fine now. I’d turned her into a bit of a clean freak, from the look of it.

Chatting with Goldhus had made for a good time killer on the way to the labyrinth. The way back, however, was dreadful. My conversation with Forêt quickly ran dry and no one else was in much of a talkative mood. It was just me and the dull road, so I opened my status screen for no particular reason.

Name: Luciel

Job: Healer X — Twin Dragoon II

Age: 20

Level: 102

HP: 3020 — MP: 2610

STR: 366 — VIT: 389

DEX: 351 — AGI: 369

INT: 422 — MGI: 460

RMG: 454 — SP: 205

Magic Affinity: Holy

SKILLS

Assess Mastery I — Monster Luck I — Martial Arts VI

Magic Handling X — Magic Control X — Holy Magic X

Meditation VIII — Focus IX — Life Recovery VIII

Magic Recovery IX — Strength Recovery VII — Throwing V

Butchery II — Detect Danger V — Ambulation VI

Physical Enhancement IV — Parallel Thinking V — Short Cast VII Null Cast V —

Free Casting II — Magic Circle Casting IV

Swordsmanship V — Shields IV — Spears IV

Archery I — Sword-and-Spear IV — Perception V

Trap Sensing II — Trap Detection I — Cartography IV

Magic Amplification III — Accelerated Thought III

HP Growth Rate Up IX — MP Growth Rate Up IX

STR Growth Rate Up IX — VIT Growth Rate Up IX

DEX Growth Rate Up IX — AGI Growth Rate Up IX

INT Growth Rate Up IX — MGI Growth Rate Up IX

RMG Growth Rate Up IX — Physical Attribute Growth Rate Up III

Poison Resist IX — Paralysis Resist IX — Petrify Resist IX

Sleep Resist IX — Charm Resist V — Curse Resist IX

Enfeeble Resist IX — Silence Resist IX — Disease Resist IX

Shock Resist VI — Bewitchment Resist VII — Spiritual Resist IX

Slash Resist VII — Stab Resist VI

TITLES

Shaper of Destiny (all stats +10)

Protection of the God of Fate (increased SP)

Blessing of the Divine Healer (holy healing magic efficacy +50%) Protection of the Holy Dragon (confers the holy dragoon class, increased combat abilities and attributes, and the ability to speak with dragons) Dragonslayer (increased strength and defensive abilities versus dragons) He Who Released the Seal (impervious to the Wicked One's curse and chosen one of the sealed dragons' powers) Protection of the Flame Dragon (confers the flame dragoon class element, increased combat abilities and attributes, and the ability to speak with

dragons) Slayer of Drakes (increased strength and defensive abilities versus lesser dragons) Chosen of the Draconis (a bond is formed with the greater dragons and their kin)

Adventurer's Guild — Rank E | Healer's Guild — Rank S

To my surprise, I had jumped up twelve levels. My stats had taken a similar boost as well, and it seemed my SP gain had increased from two to three per level. The red dragon couldn't have done that all by itself, which meant that power-leveling was totally viable in this world. With the right strategy, we could raise a generation of young, powerful healers in no time. But there was no way it could be that easy. I needed to confer with the Church.

After glaring at the skills that hadn't increased, I went to close the menu but stopped when I read "class element" from the Flame Dragon's blessing. What was that supposed to mean? The Flame Dragon's affinity? Why were these things never explained?

Forêt brayed, taking offense at my wandering thoughts. I gave her a quick apology and closed the stat window. Yenice wasn't far now.

"What is it this time?" I moaned.

Yenice had come into view, and our party was left dumbfounded. Yenitian citizens were practically pouring from the gates in anticipation of our arrival. The moment they saw us (or rather, *me*) approaching, they broke out into cheers. Damn it all, I'd forgotten to tell Goldhus not to run his mouth, that meathead. Thank goodness for my guards keeping the paparazzi at bay, or this could've turned messy.

Forcing a stiff, twitching smile and ignoring the hollers at my flank, I followed my escort as they parted the sea of people towards our destination: Shahza's estate.

The last of us filed into the courtyard, and the gate swung shut.

“Did you hear all that? They were shouting things like I’m some storybook hero. I made out ‘dragonslayer,’ something with ‘paladin,’ ‘the invincible something-or-other...’ Some of them were even calling me a disciple of the Divine Healer!”

“You *did* slay a dragon, admittedly,” Lionel said.

“He’s gotcha there,” Ketty added.

“By yourself,” Pola remarked.

Her grandfather followed with, “Didn’t need us one bit.”

“You might call it luck,” Kefin continued, “but you took a full hit from a dragon and lived. You even countered it once. Fact is, you killed a dragon, and that’s impressive.”

“Your trepidation is understandable, but I’m certain your fame will help the guild’s position,” Nalia concluded.

There wasn’t much point in talking back when every single member of my group was so clearly entertained. Good for them.

I sighed and headed for the building.

“Ah, Luciel—er, sir! Has your blessing gotten stronger?” Goldhus shouted cheerfully upon spotting me.

I glared back.

“Is something the matter, sir?”

My heart turned to stone. “Don’t worry about my blessing. Something to do with slaying a dragon. Speaking of which, was that little parade your doing?” I was a healer. Not a warrior looking for exposure.

“I know it’s not much for the beginning of a legend, but it’s the least we could do after what you accomplished!”

I calmly took out two mugs and a barrel. A very putrid barrel.

“Oh, I understand perfectly. But what’s a celebration without a toast?” My lips cracked into a nasty grin as I slowly approached the guildmaster.

“L-L-Luciel?” he stammered. “Sir? H-Have I done something to offend you?”

“What? No, I just want to drink a toast with you. Won’t you join me?”

He shuddered violently. But I was in no mood for mercy. A short nap wouldn’t hurt the guy, and any would-be rescuers were prostrated before us. There was no escape.

I held my mug up. “Cheers.”

I downed it all at once and Goldhus followed suit, hesitantly bringing his lips to the rim. Then, one gulp later, his eyes rolled into the back of his head. He crumpled, out cold.

“Whew, now that’s refreshing. Kinda stinks, though, so let me fix that real quick.”

I cast a few spells and asked for Goldhus to be taken somewhere he could rest. A few beastfolk all but tripped over themselves to carry off the guildmaster in a flash.

I smiled at Jeiyas. “Let’s move on to the next order of business, shall we?”

Turns out the vice guildmaster of the Doctor’s Guild was the mastermind behind everything; an Illumasian agent sent to undermine Yenice. Shahza and the other hawkish beastfolk were only puppets that the empire had seduced with counsel on how to subdue their less belligerent colleagues. And when the sale of medicine to certain races became leverage, there was no getting out of it. They’d even been forbidden from speaking to adventurers when they had fled to the labyrinth, so we wouldn’t have found out anything from them.

Speaking of which, their unusual pace had been thanks to the help of two drugs: one that they spread around to attract monsters, and another that they applied to themselves to repel them. Sort of like Substance X.

The thing that stuck out to me most was Illumasia’s involvement. This was my second run-in with them, and neither had been friendly encounters. They must have been getting pretty annoyed with me standing in their way at every turn, but the situation in Yenice had to come first. The country was under attack, and I was curious to know how the council was planning on protecting themselves and how the Healer’s Guild might help.

“It’s a shame what happened to Shahza,” I said. “Luckily, Vice Guildmaster Grohala can still be questioned, but how is Yenice going to react to all of this?”

“Our head of state is elected from the various beast races: dog, wolf, cat, tiger, dragon, fox, bird, and rabbit,” Orga, the former head explained. “Out of these, all but the race of the last term’s head are in the running.”

“Right. That much I know.”

“But this incident is unprecedented. As punishment, the tiger-folk and dragonewts will be suspended from the elections for ten years, or exactly five terms. They will also be removed from all executive government positions, and we will be conducting extensive investigations into other areas of potential corruption.”

“And what about your short-term plan? What happens now?”

Orga suddenly straightened his posture and stared at me. A few seconds went by, and just as I was about to ask what his deal was, he lowered himself to the ground and prostrated.

“We beg your help, sir. There’s one year left in the current term, and that’s all we ask from you.”

Several other beastpeople followed suit, and before I knew it, we were at the center of yet another scene from a period drama I could’ve sworn I’d seen somewhere before.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“The beastpeople need a tender yet firm guiding hand from someone we respect. I worry that our nation may tear itself apart without your leadership, sir.”

Since when did I have that kind of charisma or magnetism? These rumors about me were getting out of hand.

“If you just want to use my name, that’s perfectly fine.” I didn’t want anyone’s country falling apart just as much as I wanted to avoid sticking my nose into everything. I had to consult with Her Holiness about this.

“We recently sent a messenger to Her Holiness of the Church of Saint Shurule,

asking to allow you to serve as a temporary council member. We want to hear your ideas for making Yenice a prosperous land.”

Well, asking for forgiveness was certainly easier than asking for permission...

“Okay, that’s a bit out there. I’m here to rebuild a Healer’s Guild, not to play politics. I hardly even know anything about this place!”

I was *already* in over my head. This was getting ridiculous now. But it was gonna get even crazier, wasn’t it?

“We would make sure nothing impeded your duties in that regard. In fact, we plan to establish a special district to relocate both the Healer’s and Doctor’s Guild too.”

“Since when?”

“The lots are already in order. We believe this would also create jobs for residents of the slum. As for the current Healer’s Guild, we’d like to offer it to you as a gift. Your own residence.”

Home ownership sounded great and all, but someone needed to pump the brakes on this. None of it made any sense. Last I’d heard, there was no other land available for the guild.

“All that in exchange for my leadership?”

“Oh, no. It’s out of only gratitude.”

The beastman never stopped pushing his head into the ground. My stomach hurt.

“Let me think about it, okay? That’s a lot of responsibility, and I can’t take it on all at once without speaking with the pope first.”

I was done. You couldn’t have paid me to stay there one more second.

“Please consider it!” Orga shouted, followed by the other bowing beastfolk.

My cheerful mood from forcing Substance X down Goldhus’s throat had been totally ruined. By the time we left the estate, the only people loitering outside were young boys and girls, watching from afar with admiration in their eyes.

I sighed. I had a lot of expectations to live up to and no idea how.

“Grohala deserves a mug for starting this whole mess.”

The shuddering beastpeople who’d heard my ominous muttering went unnoticed by me as I considered what to include in my letters to Her Holiness and the Merratoni beast brothers.

10 — Trouble in Paradise

I was reading Kefin's report on Yenice when there was a knock at my door. We were ready to go.

Kefin and I stepped outside, where his and Verdel's teams, as well as Lionel and Ketty, were waiting for us in a neat formation. The company's strange discipline today made me wonder what Lionel had done to them.

"Let's get going."

We set off for where the council awaited us.

"Is it just me or do the townspeople look scared?"

The town's opinion of me had certainly changed after the dragon.

"I think that's because they are," Kefin said. "Word got out that you made Goldhus drink Substance X."

Sounded like the stuff had a colloquial caution label.

"Hey, he was awake by the time we left."

"Hearing your name's enough to freak people out now. And apparently, they heard about the other sh...stuff that went down at the estate."

"I don't like the sound of that."

"I think they gave you some nickname like—"

I covered my ears and started walking faster. "Nope! Not listening! We're done talking about this!"

A few scattered chuckles came from my guards.

A sentry greeted us at the gate, then the representatives met us inside the building with their assistants. Even a trembling Goldhus was there, flanked by his brother Jeiyas, who kept him on his feet. Maybe I'd gone too far? Nah. I'd had justice, that's all.

"Hello, and thank you for having me. By order of the pope, I humbly accept

the offer to take part in your council and swear to work for Yenice's good. I'm as inexperienced as they come in terms of city management, so I'll need everyone's help and all your love for this country if we want to make this nation thrive."

I'd taken time to relax and reset my brain over the past ten days. The decision I had ultimately reached was that I should think positive and keep marching forward. I hadn't wanted to at first. After all, I had no place interfering with Yenice's problems. That was for the eight representatives to hunker down and work out on their own. But Kefin and his men knew the city in and out, and when they put together all that intel for me, things changed. Lionel's presence in my guard also might have played a role in my change of heart, on the chance that politics turned into something more physical. Honestly, that guy must have been in the military somewhere.

There was also what the Flame Dragon had told me: to trust in others.

It was just one year. How hard could that be? I was actually starting to get a little excited about what the future had in store.

"Yenice is glad to have you, Mister Luciel."

I exchanged handshakes and greetings with the council members, and then we got down to business.

The council explained many things regarding Yenice to me. For starters, there were ten races that called the city home, but two (namely the ursa and tanukin races) were too rare to have seats in government. That wasn't to say they had no voice, of course. Their opinions and needs were still considered.

The population, excluding adventurers, totaled only about six thousand, which was quite low compared to Shurule. Yet according to Kefin, that exclusion was significant. Adventurers made up quite a bit of Yenice's occupancy.

The beast races were apparently so territorial that each had their own village. Not town, but village. It sounded complicated.

Next, they went over geography. Yenice covered a vast expanse of land, more than I'd expected and over twice the size of Shurule's, but half of it was covered

in mountains, cliffs, and desert. To the south was an untamed forest, rich in natural resources, but technically not under Yenice's jurisdiction. And supposedly, no human could actually live there. Blanche bordered on the east, Grandol was to the northeast, and Shurule was directly to the north, providing Yenice with ample international trading ventures. On the western edge stretched a mountain range that rumor said a vast ocean lay beyond, but no one had ever seen it. A prominent blotch of nothing stained the map there.

The nation's industries and commerce were overwhelmingly centered around doing business with adventurers. The southern forest was teeming with rare monsters that many of them hunted for a living, making Yenice the second most active place for adventuring, after Grandol. Many citizens cultivated spices in the fields or became adventurers themselves, while those with technical skills joined guilds, but the majority earned their keep by farming cayenne pepper look-alikes. The climate was perfect and they were popular abroad, so they sold well.

Diet consisted of whatever individuals could grow on their own (mostly wheat) or things sold by foreign merchants. Vegetables didn't make up much of their cuisine, which was instead centered primarily around monster meat, but I chalked that up to culture and not because they were...well, beastpeople.

As far as current policies were concerned, it was a bit of a mess. They were all either hyper-focused on attracting adventurers or farming, without a single one paying any mind to the general welfare of the people. I blackened a piece of parchment with notes and bullet points as I listened, but it was becoming clearer and clearer that a single year wouldn't be enough time to address everything. I heaved a sigh.

Problem number one: the government collected no taxes. The only source of revenue for the treasury came from the municipal sale of local spices, but it wasn't like the industry had been nationalized or anything, so it was far from reliable. God forbid inclement weather ever put them in the red. To make matters worse, they had absolutely no other means of income. And now I was wondering how in the world they'd gotten the money to build a medical district.

"So, your most stable source of income is from guild fees. That, plus spice

sales, make up the national treasury. What do your expenses look like?”

We’d have to do some trimming, depending on how bad it looked. Possibly look into stimulating new industries too.

Orga put his hand to his chin. “There’s labor costs. And we order magic tools every few years or so.”

Something didn’t feel right.

“Do you have any records I could see?”

Labor and magic items were their only expenses? They must have been buying some expensive stuff if that was all it took to put them over budget.

“One moment,” a fox-man named Forence said, standing up. Not long after, he returned with a thick ledger and handed it to me.

I was somewhat confused by the contents. “Um, why am I here again? From the look of things, you guys shouldn’t need my help at all.”

There were no huge expenditures, no big red lines, no negative numbers. The country had been sailing more than smoothly for a good while now, amassing surplus after surplus with every year. They were *way* in the green. No source of income? Yeah, right!

“Of course we do,” Orga insisted, smiling. “True, our treasury is healthy, but it can’t stay that way forever. That’s why we need your outside perspective. To expand our horizons and ensure that future generations can continue to dream as we have. Perhaps there could even be beastfolk healers.”

And then it hit me. They’d come to me seeking leadership—that much was true. But as a counterweight, a tender yet firm hand to correct their teetering nation, *not* as an architect to rebuild their government from the ground up. My altercations with Shahza and the information Kefin had shown me were coloring my perceptions. Thank god I’d realized it sooner rather than later.

I felt my face heating up in embarrassment. What was wrong with me? This was Gulgar and Galba’s home. The current administration was doing a fine enough job as-is, and they clearly weren’t the types to grow complacent. These halls had surely been the place of much debate over the future of their people

and nation. And the empire had tried to take advantage of that. By planting Grohala, and maybe even slavers, they'd dangled the sweet fruit of power over those who were already corrupt, like Shahza, to chip away at the country from the inside out. Assuming their involvement was accurate, Illumasia was an intimidating force, for sure.

Now, though, was the time to move forward. If we wanted to put beastfolk into new occupations, we needed to consider their talents and what they could bring to the table. And children needed places to learn, which the wide-open area outside town would be perfect for.

I started to write down my ideas.

"One look at this record is all the proof I need to know how much you love this country," I said. "I might not be able to do much, but I swear I'll do what I can."

I lowered my head. Mostly for myself. A bit of a fluster ensued, but when I looked up, the room was silent, as if they could feel my sentiments.

I continued. "I have a few basic ideas. First, I think we should establish schools to educate new generations. We could even go one step further and make something for adults too."

The air left the room.

Sebeck, the dog-man, raised his hand. "Adults, sir?"

"That's right. Everyone should know how to read, write, and perform arithmetic. I'm not worried about anyone here, but I'm sure illiteracy is a problem for a lot of people who never got the chance to learn when they were young. Not knowing things like math can affect critical thinking skills."

"But wouldn't that affect the workforce?" the cat-eared Cathrel asked with a raised hand.

"Good question. That's why lessons would take place in the morning and at night."

"What about families that need their children to work?" Orga countered.

"I've taken that into consideration as well. The country could purchase debt

slaves, use them for labor, then free them when they've paid themselves off. They would be treated humanely, of course. That's not up for discussion. But I think giving them a purpose could help them turn their lives around."

"Only debt slaves?" Thouzer, a bird-man, asked.

"People bound by misdemeanors could work too. Of course, this is all assuming we can't just free them all on the spot, but I know that would be difficult. And I don't like the sound of using prisoners of war or felons for labor, so they're off the table."

Liliard twirled his rabbit ears. "But who will be the educator for these people?"

"I'm thinking retired adventurers. I'm sure the guild could find people if I asked."

Forence's eyes glinted. "What would the fees for such a service cost?"

I hadn't given it *that* much thought. "Adults would probably pay tuition, something we'd have to discuss in more detail later, but children would receive it for free. That doesn't mean everyone has to be tolerated, though. Anyone with bad enough behavior who refuses to improve can be expelled, like bullying based on race. Including halflings."

The council members crossed their arms and contemplated. Then Orga spoke up. "But what would we teach them?"

"Like I said before, reading, writing, and arithmetic should be the foundation, so we'll start there. Those skills don't take long to learn and open up a lot of doors. Anyone good at numbers can go right into the merchant business."

"So this is a test run," Liliard deliberated. "If it turns out to be a success, what comes next?"

"We could include lessons from all sorts of guilds, like fighting or spellcasting. The more options we offer, the more windows of opportunity we open for everyone. Keep in mind, though, an educated population doesn't usually want to do dull labor like farming, so you'll have to consider wage increases over time as the cost of living goes up."

“In short, schools are where children make their futures and where adults can exchange ideas,” Orga muttered.

The room went silent. I let the audience think. If they didn’t agree, that was that. I would just need to come up with something else.

“How do you propose we attract more adventurers to our city?”

“Well, you have a lot of land. You could use that to appeal to the elderly, the disabled, couples, new families, all sorts of people who can’t adventure anymore for one reason or another. Give them some peace of mind and assurance that they won’t be hard up when the next stage of their life begins.”

“But what we want are active adventurers, not retired ones.”

“So let’s take that idea one step further. We provide employment and housing solutions like I just mentioned, but base it on how many jobs a particular adventurer’s taken in Yenice.”

“And this would bring active adventurers and more?”

I got where they were coming from, but adventuring was a hard job with high turnover. It wasn’t exactly a career with long-term prospects, but anyone who chose it probably wouldn’t want to give up the freedom it came with. They’d want to live somewhere they could be free.

“A larger population is a good thing. There’s a lot of space to the south that could be used to give adventurers homes, and you could pay for it by collecting, say, five to ten percent of their income. Knowing you provide a safety net in case their careers screech to a halt would draw a lot of interest.”

“So what is it you think Yenice should do?”

Wasn’t that what we were talking about? Okay, from the top.

“In any case, I think creating that special ‘medical district,’ let’s call it, will help a lot. A healthy body is a profitable adventurer, and people will gather in places where they can earn a living safely.”

The council was excited to hear my appraisal of their plan. While healing magic could take care of most injuries, the medicine from the Doctor’s Guild had its uses. With Jord’s help, a collaboration between the two would be an

assuring presence.

“Sir.” Jhak, the dragonewt, hesitantly raised his hand. “Have you given any thought to new industries we might develop?”

“Not a lot, but lumber could be an option while you develop that forest. As long as you repopulate what you cut down, you could continue doing it for virtually forever.”

“You mean deforestation.”

Bit of a sore subject, it seemed.

“For the record, no one here is obligated to listen to every single one of my ideas. I don’t intend to be a dictator, and I don’t think a year’s even enough time to do much of anything, but I will offer my suggestions when I have any to give.” I smiled and looked around. “You’ve all built an amazing country without me, so by all means, don’t let me stop the debate. Together, we can improve infrastructure, make even the most territorial of beastfolk proud to live here, and turn Yenice into the kind of place people want to travel across the world to visit.”

The tension in the atmosphere gradually relaxed. After deciding that I’d take a tour of the city the next day, the council adjourned. It felt good having a chance to get my ideas out there, and I was excited, motivated to make Yenice a better place than I’d found it.

But I never could stop thinking about the info Kefin and his group had given me, or about that ledger.

We found ourselves in a pickle the next morning.

“This isn’t gonna work, guys.”

My escort, every member of the council, plus their assistants, combined to create quite the squadron—a squadron that would make observing the city closely and talking to its residents somewhat difficult. Yenice’s races lived in different settlements throughout the city, so I made the executive decision to visit each, one at a time.

“I’ll go with Orga to meet the wolf-folk today,” I explained. “Then tomorrow,

Forence can show me the fox-folk, and so on. I'd like someone familiar with the ursa or tanukin people to introduce me to them as well."

"I suppose it would be difficult to travel the streets with this crowd," Thouzer admitted. The others agreed, and that was that.

Did they always take walks around town like they were in some sort of parade, or was today special?

At any rate, my schedule had cleared up, so I sent Kefin and his group to the slums to touch base with the halflings or whoever called the shots there. We'd need their cooperation for the medical district's construction and I wasn't convinced they would lend it as readily as the council seemed to believe.

Our guide brought us straight to the wolf-folk's stomping grounds.

"Lots of houses," I commented.

They were the first thing that caught my eye when we entered beastfolk territory, particularly the fact that they were all one-story.

"Beastfolk are a communal people." Sheila attached herself to Orga's side. He smiled and stroked her hair. "At least for a time, until we grow independent. We keep our homes compact."

I guessed they weren't big on the concept of personal space.

"Interesting. But where is everyone?"

The trip there had taken about half an hour, but we had hardly seen a single wolf-person pass us by.

"Most men will be on guard duty or patrolling by now, and the women would be working the fields with their children."

"Oh, do the different races do different jobs?"

"Yes. The region's climate changes little throughout the year, so there's always soil to till, weeds to pull, crops to harvest, food to process, and monsters to watch for."

I felt like I'd heard somewhere that pulling weeds was the hardest part of farming, but maybe the existence of monsters negated that.

“That reminds me, wolf-folk aren’t inherently allergic to anything, right?” Gulgar had said as much.

Orga shook his head. “No, that’s a myth. There was one rumor that spread a while back that said onions make us itchy, but it was entirely baseless.”

So, dog-and wolf-folk were, in fact, not allergic to onions, contrary to my assumptions from another life. I just had to make doubly sure. Using either Gulgar or his brother as a standard metric was a recipe for disaster, and I refused to be held responsible. This one time, though, they didn’t fail me.

“Not to say that we particularly enjoy them,” he continued. “Some races even eat them raw.”

So onions were a no-go, but what *did* they have a taste for? Perhaps the same delicacy that all canines from my past life enjoyed?

“How do you like cheese?”

“Very much! The smell is just amazing,” he beamed.

Apparently, particularly strong, fermented cheeses were a favorite. But he went out of his way to clarify that Substance X was strong in a very, very bad way. His insistence (and visible shudder at its name) gave me a good chuckle.

For the record, I had enough sense not to ask what the difference between dog-and wolf-people were. I wasn’t touching that one.

We stopped by the well where the locals got all their water, and I noticed it used the same mechanism as the one in Merratoni’s guildhall.

“I’ve seen this lever mechanism before.”

“The idea supposedly came from a sage who lived many years ago,” Orga replied. “Back in those days, there was no aquifer beneath Yenice, but with the help of a dwarf, they brought water to the city.”

“Really?”

Orga went on to explain several of the sage’s legacies, including the creation of cheese, the spices needed to make curry, and various recipes. If I were a betting man, I’d guess that probably hadn’t been their first life. Lord Reinstar

was still up in the air, but I was fairly sure he'd been reincarnated as well. Man, those guys were everywhere. I wondered what I might find if I ever followed the tracks and saw where they led one day.

We finished our tour by early afternoon. Orga invited me to lunch, so we enjoyed some delicious curry and freshly baked naan at a nearby restaurant.

"Wolf-folk are amazing cooks," I remarked. "What's the secret?"

"According to the sage, it's our keen sense of smell. And they say that our kind is particularly apt to lose ourselves in something."

"Makes sense."

Later on, I asked him if there were any famous humans that most Yenitians would know, and Lord Reinstar was his immediate answer. Apparently, Reinstar had come to the region before Yenice was a formal nation and passed on the secrets of...soap-making. An industry that didn't last, as many other countries were already competing in that market.

It was also said that the first man to soak in a Yenitian hot spring was—you guessed it—Lord Reinstar, who spawned a rush to dig for more springs in an effort to share their wonders with the world. Sadly, the sulfuric scent attracted monsters (something that elves were apparently already aware of) and the plan never saw fruition.

There was also that one time he'd fertilized the fields with some nonsense he didn't fully understand (a kind of mulch with limestone), causing the entire season's crops to fail. So he distributed food that was purchased on his own dime to the farming families who had helped him with the process. This particular story was rather famous and had become a practice that survived the ages as a state-operated program.

Hearing these tales of a man, who was larger than life by the Church's standards, from outsiders felt oddly relieving, like he'd been brought closer to Earth, so to speak. That said, it was no mistake that Yenice's foundation had been laid out by Reinstar himself. He was an amazing man for sure.

"Would you like to hear more?" Orga offered.

"No, that's okay. I'm a little shocked. I never thought I'd hear about Lord

Reinstar actually messing things up.”

I was walking in the shadow of those who had been reincarnated before me, and it left an impression on me. I wanted to leave my own mark. Not necessarily by building a nation, but maybe I could make its people’s lives a little bit easier.

That night, Kefin led me to a meeting with the slum’s most influential face.

“You’re here to ask us if the slum dwellers would be willing to work, Sir Healer? Is that right?”

“Yes, until construction of the medical district is complete, that is. I can’t guarantee anything beyond that, unfortunately, but a lot of people live here. Is there an agreement we can reach?”

The human-fox halfling called Dolstar shook his head and glared. “You listen to me, S-rank. Life isn’t fair. Equality doesn’t exist, not that I expect that to make sense to you, considering you’ve gone and enslaved my people. What do you think you’re doing, bringing them to me? How do you think I feel, seeing them better than ever with chains around their necks?”

It wasn’t hard to see his point. There couldn’t have been that many underground organizations in a city like Yenice, so it made sense they’d be tight-knit.

I looked at Kefin. “That’s not a feeling I’m familiar with, but it seems like they’re family to you. And if that’s the case, you must want to kill me right now.”

“And you look me in the eye and ask us to work with you? You look me in the face and tell me you can’t *guarantee anything* for us? Nothing’s guaranteed for us! Nothing ever was! So why are you here?! To mock us?!”

Anger flared in his eyes along with a hint of something else. Something complicated.

I slowly shook my head. “You know, I’ve already given them the option of freedom. They declined. They told me that they wanted to create a school where halflings wouldn’t be discriminated against. A home where they were

equal. Tell me, sir, how does that make you feel?”

Dolstar stared at Kefin.

“The medical district probably isn’t going to change anything,” I said. “It’s not going to help you or your people.”

“Say one more goddamn thing and I’ll kill you on the spot.”

Malice of a terrifying degree emanated from his glower.

“But I have an idea. A business venture, if you will. Funded by me.”

“Business? What?”

“As I said, I would fund the entire thing, but keep in mind it’ll be risky.”

“What the hell are you planning?”

“Oh, nothing. Just...”

Dolstar gaped as he listened to my idea.

“What?! You’re out of your mind!”

“Not entirely. Lord Reinstar was a great man, but even he tried and failed to do things. So I’m not afraid of a little danger. If we can make it happen before my year here is up, I’ll do everything I can to officially nationalize the project.”

And if we failed, it didn’t mean the dream would be entirely dead.

“You barely even know us. Why are you doing this?”

“Everyone deserves happiness, regardless of the circumstances of their birth. I want the world to be a place where you’re not burdened by the weight of your heritage, where you don’t have to deal with the baggage that being called a ‘halfling’ comes with if you don’t want to. You can be a twinblood.”

I smiled, but beneath it I scorned myself for being so self-serving. I was guilty because I hadn’t been there for a half-Japanese coworker of mine when I needed to be. But maybe helping these people would ease my conscience. Hopefully.

Dolstar lowered his head. “Thank you.”

And the deal was made.

The next day, Forence guided me through the area the shrewd, business-minded fox-people called home.

“We primarily deal with adventurers or sometimes directly with the Commerce Guild in the case of merchants.”

The Commerce Guild’s main purpose was attracting said merchants without putting the burden on the government itself. They purchased Yenice’s state-grown spices and handled the exports, selling them at a mark-up to other traders. A percentage of any sales went back to the treasury. Regrettably for those looking to do business themselves, imports could only be purchased by the guild’s national market, which would then resell them to private businesses at fixed prices. Competition simply didn’t exist in the Yenitian economy.

“The merchants weren’t happy when we started doing things this way,” the fox-man explained. “So many complaints about one thing or another. Where there’s no challenge, there’s no point, they say. But there’s very little that can’t be sold here and many a failed businessman has found his footing again by doing business here.” He smiled proudly. “I believe we’ve become something of a dependable source of profit.”

Forence went on to reveal that the Commerce Guild kept tabs on the price of various products and where they were sold. The power of nationalization in action.

“The 5W2H model. No, maybe it’s 6W2H,” I mumbled.

“Did you say something?”

“Just reminiscing a little. Does the slave market run on the same rules?”

“No, those traders operate outside our jurisdiction. We can’t set their prices.”

“They don’t go through the guild like the rest?”

“They submit an application, and if it’s accepted, they’re permitted to sell. Twenty percent of their profits go to Yenice and ten percent goes to the guild. All goods are inspected upon importing, of course. And our country doesn’t enslave people for minor crimes.”

“Thirty percent in all, huh?” Talk about steep.

“Things like monster meat sold at the Adventurer’s Guild go for a fixed price.”

I remembered the auction that the slaver (who was long gone now, as it happens) had told me about and figured something like that had to be illegal, but when I asked, it turned out that it actually wasn’t.

Incidentally, all the merchants who’d refused to sell to us, except those who had been threatened into it, were now either enslaved or had had their assets repossessed. I couldn’t help but wonder how long this system could realistically last. Certainly not very long as the population grew.

Forence continued to elucidate as the tour went on.

Night fell, morning came, I learned more, and on the ninth day it was time to meet the tanukin.

“This is Walabis, and he’ll be your tanukin guide.”

Orga gestured to an inanimate, tanuki-shaped ornament. Wait, no, it wasn’t inanimate. It was a beastperson...I think.

“Hello. I’m Luciel, temporary Yenice council member.”

“Hellooo,” he drawled. “Caaall me Walabis. I suppooose I’ll be speaking for the tanuuukin today.”

I already felt myself nodding off with every drawn-out vowel, but this was exactly the type of person you couldn’t let your guard down around.

“Please tell me what we can do to ease any concerns you might have. It’s what I’m here for.”

“Will dooo. Take this. A gift, to commeeemoraaate our meeting.” He handed me a golden necklace.

“Wow, this is well-made. I almost thought it was real.”

Walabis glared at Orga. “Yooouuu tooold.”

False. “Actually, he didn’t. A friend of mine told me a while back that the tanukin have a custom of giving fake items to people they meet.”

“Whooo would spoil the surpriiise?”

“I don’t know if you’ll recognize the name, but it’s Galba. A wolf-man.”

Walabis’s face went pale. Evidently, he recognized the name. “M-My sincere apologies! That was very rude of me! No need to take this incident to Mister Galba!” he blurted out.

Galba, what in the world...

“Right. Well, if you know Galba, you must know Gulgar— Er, hello?”

The moment that last “gar” left my lips, the tanukin straight up passed out.

Orga smiled fondly. “I never expected you’d be close with those two.”

“They work at an Adventurer’s Guild in Shurule, in a town called Merratoni. Gulgar was the first person to make me start drinking Substance X, you know. Galba taught me butchering and how to hide my presence. I owe a lot to those guys.”

“He’s still at it, is he?”

“Who? At what?”

“Gulgar, trying to sneak that stuff into his cooking.”

“You mean Substance X?”

“Yes. Walabis was a frequent test subject for his experiments. The two are close in age, so they know each other well.”

It sounded like Gulgar’s mad scientist streak had a deep past. But wait, then what about the younger brother?

“What’s his problem with Galba?”

“That one was something of a child prodigy back in the day. He was talented, and frighteningly famous throughout the city. But one day, when he got angry, they say every man, woman, and child could feel his rage, and ever since, Yenitians have shared one unspoken rule: never upset that man.”

Orga never stopped smiling, but I definitely noticed the cold sweat he’d broken into. The man spoke from experience.

“So, um, what do we do about Walabis?”

“There is one way to wake him.” The wolf-man grinned and conveniently produced some nose plugs. “Oh, Walabis. Wake up or smell the Substance X.”

The tanukin sprang back to life in a split second. “Goood morniiing!”

“Don’t worry, I would’ve had some with you if he’d taken it any further.” I grinned.

Walabis proceeded to plead his people’s case and the worth of his own life. The tanukin were skilled with their hands, particularly in finer trades like tailoring or woodwork. They were also the only beast race with a notable talent for magic.

“It’s thanks to uuus that those foooxes learned to stop counting money and be something mooore. I trained the leeegendary Trett myself.”

“Really? I actually know him.”

“Y-You doooo?”

“Yeah. He’s a good guy. Even gave me some magic items. In fact, he made this robe too. I’ll tell him I met you the next time I see him. I will say he’s...a bit of a character.”

With that, Walabis told me to “leeet him knooow” if he could ever lend a hand, then left.

“They seem like talented people as long as you can keep them focused...and they’re not playing tricks on you.”

“Now that I can attest to,” Orga responded.

The picture of a better Yenice in my head was growing clearer and clearer.

The next day brought an ursan named Bryan. I took one look and my very soul left my body.

“Hello! I’m Bryan!” he greeted me with a smile and a gruff voice, then flexed his bicep. “Don’t be deceived by my appearance. I am quite formidable!”

Deep down, in what was left of my rent heart, I screamed. *WHAT’S A DAMN*

TEDDY BEAR DOING HERE?!



Red-grizzlies, blood-grizzlies, and hell-grizzlies were just a few of the many bear-themed enemies that existed in this world. And those were *bears*. But this thing? Gulgar was more of a bear than this. A Bear Chef, even. But my very first time meeting an ursan and it was a fluffy stuffed animal barely a meter off the ground. I felt robbed.

“Hello. I’m Luciel, temporary Yenice council member. I want to hear any troubles or suggestions you might have.”

“Great to meet you.”

We shook hands, and I dared to ask the question.

“I’ve never met an ursan before. Do you all look like that?”

“Oh, this? Yes, but it’s actually just for show, you see.”

Bryan glowed, then suddenly transformed into a towering bear. A real one this time.

“*This* is my true form.”

There it is, I thought before Thouzer, today’s guide, shattered my dreams.

“Bryan, you don’t need to hide it from him,” he laughed.

“Hide what?” I asked.

The bear returned to its fuzzy form. “Okay, the truth is, this is my *real* form. My people were treated like toys or pets a long time ago by people who found us ‘cute.’ A lot like what happened to the rabbit-people. That’s why we use magic to take another form when foreigners are around.”

It wasn’t a hard story to believe. His appearance and the way he moved were so gosh darn adorable, I could see nasty people wanting his kind for their own amusement.

“I’m sorry. That sounds awful. Is there anything you think we could do to help? Anything at all.”

“Maybe import some more honey. That’d be nice. I know it’s a luxury, but we ursans can’t get enough of the stuff!”

Those adorable puppy dog eyes wielded the power to shatter the concept of

gender to pieces. Cute was cute, okay? Wait, did bees even exist in this world?

“I’ll...see what we can do. Anyway, I’d love to hear more about your people.”

“Let’s see... We grow medicinal herbs, for starters. And we work with the dragonewts on expanding the town.”

Gentle *and* strong.

Our meeting ended soon after.

The docket for the council summit the following day was full. The bulk of the discussion centered around construction plans for the medical district’s flagship healing office as well as the school and residences for the housing program for mid-to high-ranking adventurers.

“The schoolhouse could be built in the medical district, and the city’s outskirts would work for the extra housing. Depending on numbers, we may need to consider the southern forest too.”

“But where is the budget for that? Or the resources? The medical district is all we planned for, not schools and homes.”

“And the labor. People already have jobs and aren’t likely to want to stop.”

“Are the benefits of enticing adventurers to pioneer undeveloped land worth the cost to the treasury?”

It didn’t take long for the lid to blow and backpedaling to begin. Typical politicians. They had loved the ideas on paper but were getting cold feet now that they saw the reality of how much work would be needed to see it all through. All that talk about what was best for Yenice was superficial. What this was really about was preserving the status quo and fear of an educated population.

In their defense, their country was by no means in dire straits, according to the ledger, which would make anyone nervous about going out of their way to shake things up.

“I’ll go to the forest and scout for the materials we need myself,” I offered with a polite smile.

“Where will the school be built? It can’t take up space in the medical district.”

“You’re probably right. What about the slums? And the adventurers’ housing as well. I think we should start inside the town and gradually expand outwards.”

“That’s a bold suggestion. If you’re willing to take full responsibility for the consequences, then by all means. You’ll have my support.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got something planned for the residents there. You might not recognize the place when all’s said and done.”

The mood changed instantly. Anxiety and dismissal transformed into approval once more.

“If it means more funds for the medical district’s costs, I think we’ve found our solution.”

“I take it that means I have the go-ahead to handle things in the slums?” I asked.

No one objected. There was more work to be done, including finding work for retired adventurers, but I felt the winds of change blowing through the nation’s streets. And with it came hope for a better life. I’d make sure of it.

Elsewhere — A Letter From Luciel

Luciel and his troupe had left, and the humdrum days of the Merratoni Adventurer's Guild were back with a vengeance.

It was on one such afternoon that Brod lingered alone in the basement training ground, frowning.

I screwed up. Now that Luciel's gone, I've scared 'em all off. Guess I shoulda reeled it in a little.

The healer's presence eased the adventurers' minds. As long as he was around, no one had to worry about a broken limb or two on account of the mad guildmaster's thrashings. Luciel's knights had also made perfect sparring partners, and many had come downstairs just to test themselves against the strangers. With the whole lot of them gone, Brod was free to focus on bettering the adventurers himself, but the unfortunate truth was that he had come to rely on his protege as well, and without him, no one stood a chance against his hellish training.

No Luciel meant no healing, and no knights to square up against meant the adventurers had lost their nerve. So it was back to the usual grind for them. Consequently, the training ground had become a ghost town.

Brod thought about his apprentice, about how utterly talentless yet unflinching he was. How he never stopped getting back up. And he resolved to do the same.

Maybe I'll take Church up on that offer. Couldn't hurt havin' healers here, even if they're newbies. Not that I'm holding my breath for any of 'em to be half as fun as Luciel.

Suddenly, Galba and Gulgar appeared, descending the stairs.

The hell're they doing down here? They look excited. Could be interesting.

"Don't see you two down here often. Need to book the training ground? Schedule's wide open."

"Tempting, but no," Galba replied. "We got letters from Yenice. This one's

yours.”

“We’ve got our own. Figure we’d read ’em together,” Gulgar said.

“Cute.”

Brod took the parchment and began to read, breaking into a joyful smirk as he learned of his disciple’s trials and tribulations throughout his journey. But by the end, the letter was a crumpled mess in his fists.



Galba looked up and noticed. “Now, Brod, I know you must be upset that he was attacked, but you don’t need to take it out on the paper.”

“Never knew our hometown was that messed up, though.”

Gulgar was similarly perturbed by his letter’s contents, but for an entirely different reason.

“He went to Yenice with a mission,” he said. “I wasn’t expecting it to be sunshine and rainbows. Hell, nothin’ beats boredom like an ambush.”

“For you and nobody else.”

“Then why’re you mad? You don’t ever get this charged up,” Gulgar asked.

The guildmaster’s expression darkened. “He bought slaves to be his bodyguards, and there’s a guy with them he wants to know more about. He asked me to look into it.”

Galba raised an eyebrow. “Luciel? Interested in someone? That is strange. By the sound of it, I’d say you already know this man.”

“He famous or somethin’?”

“You could say that. Guy’s name is Lionel. And from the way he describes the bastard, it’s gotta be him. The damn Lion of War.”

The wolf brothers exchanged glances. Something about this wasn’t sitting quite right with Galba. “But he’s supposed to be leading Illumasian forces on the frontlines all the way in Luburk.”

“Well Luburk’s winning, from what I hear. I figured the Lion was out of commission, because what else could be the reason? So someone must’ve taken his place. That can’t be the real Lion out there.”

“Okay,” Gulgar retorted, “so, assumin’ the guy Luciel bought is this Lion fella, what’s the big deal?”

Neither Galba nor his brother knew much about Lionel other than his prowess on the battlefield. Unlike Brod.

“I’ve bragged about Luciel to him before,” he confessed. “Told him all about how dedicated he is, how he’ll train his ass off and never give an inch, and all

you gotta do is say it's for survival."

"Is that all? That doesn't explain why you're so upset." Galba knew there was more to it.

"See...thing is, I said all that shit knowing Lionel was after his own apprentice. I sorta ruffled his feathers over it."

"Oh, I get it. And now you're worried the Lion's gonna steal your pride, eh?" Gulgar joked.

"You sound extraordinarily petty right now, Brod."

"Real damn petty. But y'know, he might be right on the money."

"What?! The hell's that mean?"

The brothers nodded at each other. There was actually more information to Luciel's situation that hadn't been included in the letters. They'd only learned of it from the adventurer who had delivered the post.

"The Yenice Adventurer's Guild asked for his help with clearing a labyrinth," Galba recounted. "And, well, your apprentice is a dragonslayer now."

"You're... You're screwin' with me."

When the hell'd he get strong enough to take down a drake?

"Like master, like apprentice, eh?"

The Lion must've weakened it and Luciel got the last hit. No, dammit, he'd never go along with a plan like that. What the hell's going on here?

The weight of the increasingly believable possibility that Luciel had jumped ship and found a new tutor felt like a rock in Brod's stomach. And his current track record of failing to attract others to his lessons didn't help matters. The negativity spiraled out until it took the form of panic.

"Galba, Gulgar, I'm gonna be out for a while. Take care of the guild for me."

"Yeah, that's not happening and you know it."

"Galba's right. You're already on thin ice with HQ, pal."

"Let's think rationally here. Write Luciel back if you're so worried."

Plus, if things really are that bad in Yenice, Brod would make things difficult for us to step in, Galba thought.

“What he said. And don’t think we don’t notice you pullin’ your hair out over the adventurers. You’ve always dragged ’em down here kickin’ and screaming before, haven’t ya? Just do what you do best.”

“You’re right.” Brod finally surrendered. “Look at me losin’ sleep over jealousy. You know what it is? It’s ’cause these adventurers have no spine. Guess it’s up to me to help ’em find one.”

With the coming whirlwind safely avoided, the beast brothers were free to focus on their homeland and the strange things happening within it.

Another Perspective — Jord

The name's Jord, former HQ healer-cum-exorcist, current second-in-command to an S-rank healer you might've heard of and his Order of Healing. Just recently, I added "vice guildmaster" of the Yenice Healer's Guild to my biography as well. That might seem like a demotion to people not in the know about Church HQ protocols, but I wouldn't have it any other way. I consider the decision to follow him to have been one of my finest, if I do say so myself.

I was in front of the recently completed guildhall with the rest of the Order, seeing Luciel off to his council meeting. Poor guy wasn't fooling anyone with that smile, though. Everyone could see the rain clouds over his head, but no one could really blame him. We'd come there to revive a guild, and in just a handful of head-spinning days, he'd become a politician. Still, he only had himself to blame for how things turned out, if you asked me. On the upside, it was thanks to him that the people had really come around to accepting our presence.

I worried about him sometimes. Our work was technically done, the guild was up and running, but he never seemed to have any time for a break. He was a literal legend at this point, and just about everyone had some problem or another that they wanted their hero to solve. All I could do was take as much of the load off as I could.

"The guild's with you."

"You can count on us!"

Luciel's shoulders relaxed. "I know I can. I'll be back soon."

We stood up straight and saluted, then he and his guard left to meet with the council, and I found myself reminiscing about the time we'd first met.

*

I was a village boy, born and raised in Grandol. We were pretty much always at war with the empire, so when I became a healer at my coming-of-age ceremony, it wasn't hard to find an apprenticeship with my hometown's only clinic. Back in those days, the legends of Lord Reinstar fascinated me. I wanted

so badly to be an icon, a revolutionary like he had been, and that singular desire fueled my passion. So, as one might expect, it didn't take long for me to get the knack of holy magic.

I can do this! I thought. *I can be like Lord Reinstar! Someday...*

But my dreams were shattered when my master forbade me to practice any spells other than the basic Heal and Cure combo. And no, apprentice wages were not enough to offset the dismay I felt at the time. I protested as much as I could, but the terms of my position were that I had to obey without question. So I did.

My term finally ended when Grandol started to conscript healers for the ongoing war. My master, two others, and I were drafted as combat medics, and only then did I *finally* become a healer in my teacher's eyes.

After five years of tutelage, he left me with a worn grimoire and money to found a clinic. A week later, we departed for the battlefield. And that was the last time I saw him.

After two grueling years, I was relieved of service and came back home, and what do I find but talk of my master and the hopes he'd held for me. The people told me how he had spoken of me, how he had said that with a strong foundation, I would become the greatest healer in all of Grandol.

His teachings flooded back to me. "Never slack on your fundamentals," he'd always say. "Never forget the importance of basic magic control." Then it all clicked. At last I understood how important a student I'd been to him and why he had taken on so few others. I only wished he could have told me himself.

My hometown was healer-less without my master, so I took it upon myself to take up the mantle and keep his clinic going, at least until he came back. But three years passed, my town became a war zone, and he never returned.

I was twenty-five and sick of fighting, so I fled to the royal capital, which I was sure the fighting would never reach. Choosing to believe in the potential my master was so sure I had, I opened up a small clinic there. An affordable one, for everyone. But I knew nothing about the rot that plagued the capital's healers at the time.

Not a week after opening, hordes of patients flocked to my doors. Most came for light injuries, which I had plenty of magic to handle on my own, but I knew I wouldn't last long if the pace didn't slow down, so I requested assistance from the Healer's Guild.

That was my worst mistake.

The healers I was sent were more than qualified, but they consistently healed wounds with disproportionately high-level spells and started to extort my patients. When I criticized them for it, they looked at me like I was the crazy one, and then they'd be gone the very next day. I was faced with a difficult choice: take it up with the guild or go it alone.

I ultimately decided to handle the clinic by myself, but the guildmaster didn't take too kindly to that. Days went by without a single moment when I didn't feel like I was being watched...until I received a letter from Church Headquarters. It was a summons for a young, talented healer and promised many things, like rare grimoires that couldn't be found anywhere else. It never crossed my mind that it could have been a trap. I gladly accepted the offer.

I arrived at HQ three months later and wasted no time hitting the books. It was around this point when I learned about contracts, a kind of semantic magic.

My life as the labyrinth janitor began soon after. It soon became clear to me that I wasn't going to be doing any healing. I spent days upon days down in the depths fighting zombies, surrounded by ridiculously talented yet passionless co-workers who couldn't have cared less about helping people, and wondering what the Church could have possibly needed so many healers in one place for. To tend to injuries during the knights' training? Not likely. My superior, Granhart, never gave me a clear answer on the matter.

Days turned to weeks, and nothing ever changed. Only the occasional memory of my master kept the doldrums at bay. Eventually, I lost the energy to even care if this was going to be my life forever.

Then something changed. Granhart reported to me that someone would be taking my place. A seventeen-ish-year-old boy. My first impressions? He must have been one talented kid, and someone must have *really* hated him. I was under a contract, though, so his fate was out of my hands. Still, I'd given up

hope for myself, but the least I could do was help the guy when he needed it.

And that was how I met him. The beefiest healer I'd ever seen: Luciel. I figured he wasn't a bad kid after talking with him a bit, but he was a little off for sure. Weird, even. I almost got the feeling he would *enjoy* the labyrinth.

I showed him to the dungeon, gave him the rundown, and took out a stray zombie as a demonstration, then booked it because I seriously couldn't stand the smell of the place. Strangely enough, he didn't follow me out.

Some time later, he still hadn't returned, so I popped back in to check on him and couldn't find the guy anywhere. I started to imagine the worst.

Half the day went by and there was no sign of him. Just when I was about to give up, I finally saw him strolling up with a bag full of magic stones like...like he'd actually *had fun* down there. I was appalled. Even more so when I heard how much he had brought back from former-captain Catherine.

I felt myself break into a grin for the first time in what felt like ages. This guy was gonna go places, do crazy things, and I couldn't wait to see it happen. And you know what? My hunch turned out to be right. Luciel was not normal. He trained with the knights' strongest regiment, the Valkyries, regularly left HQ without permission to visit the Adventurer's Guild, and to top it all off, ultimately cleared the labyrinth and stopped a riot in a single afternoon, then became an S-rank healer for his trouble.

Suddenly, I felt a familiar kind of admiration—the same admiration I'd felt for Lord Reinstar. He had reignited the smouldering remains of my passion, so when I heard that he was recruiting for a team, I didn't hesitate for a second.

From then on, I gladly followed wherever he led. Every day promised something new. Every day promised more lives to save.

*

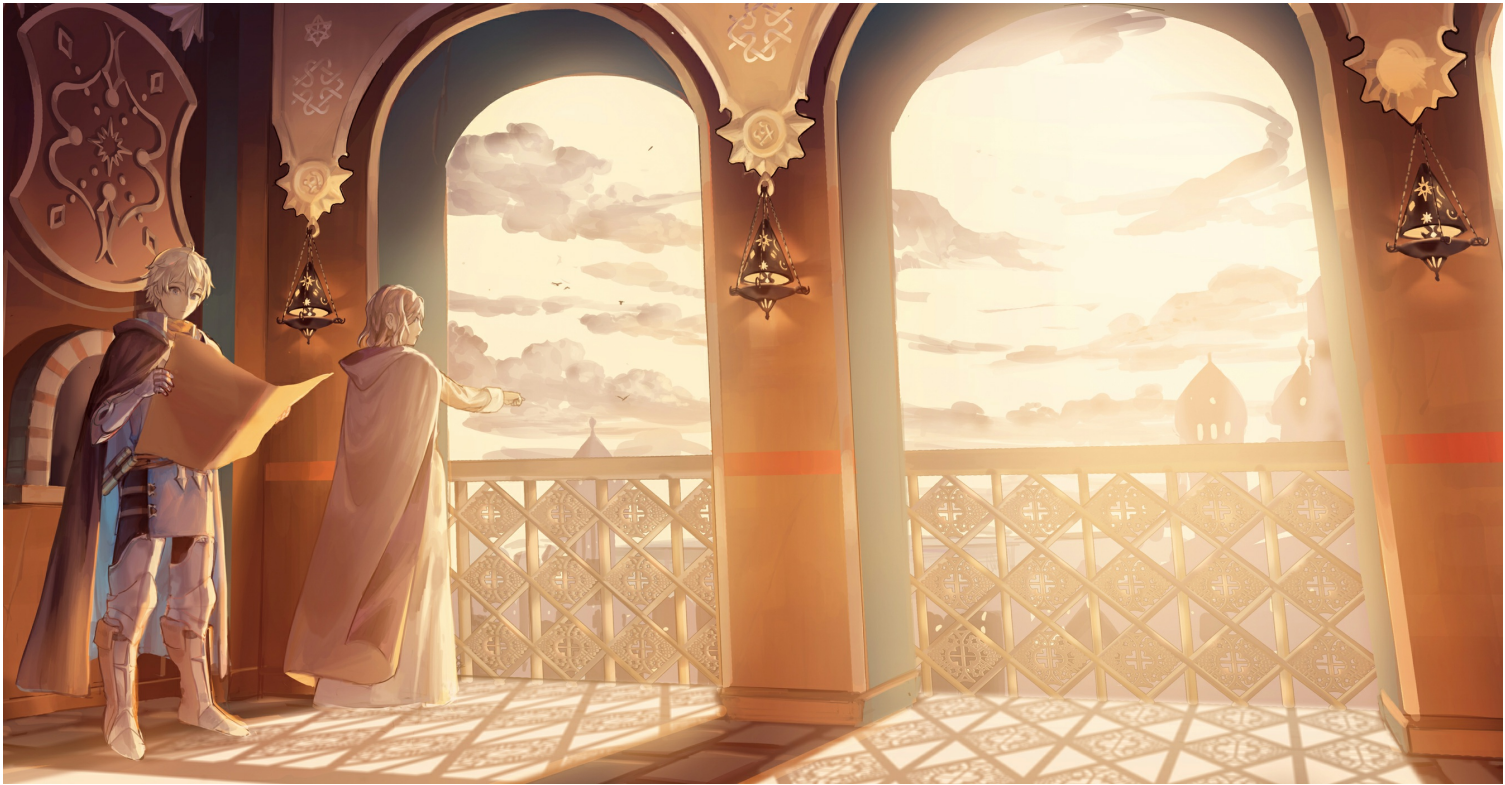
Life in a newly rebuilt Healer's Guild with the dragonslayer wasn't bad, even if Mister Hero could really stand to worry about himself a bit more.

"All right, folks, we've gotta be ready for whatever storm Luciel brews next. Batten down those hatches and let's get to work!"

“Yes, sir!”

Whatever change he was about to bring to Yenice, I was glad to be here to witness it.





Bonus Short Story

The Knights of Shurule

Catherine, captain of the Knights of Shurule, could scarcely believe her ears. Her Holiness, the pope, had just informed her that not only had Luciel conquered a labyrinth in Yenice, but he had become a dragonslayer in the process.

The captain was well aware of the young healer's uncharacteristic skill in combat, but was it enough to fell a drake? She wasn't even confident in her *own* ability to accomplish such a feat, much less that of a young spellcaster. Dragons were not to be trifled with. No amount of luck would be able to save you should you ever be unfortunate enough to come face-to-face with one. And yet, she was certain that Luciel wouldn't have stood a chance against her one-on-one. What was this strange incongruence?

"How did he accomplish it, Your Holiness?"

"As I hear it, the boy flung a barrel of Substance X into the beast's maw moments before its jaws clamped down on him."

The utterance of *its* name made Catherine break into a cold sweat. Once, when she had heard of the benefits that drinking the substance offered, she had given it a try, but that was a short-lived experiment. After waking up from her unwelcome nap (that is, she had completely blacked out), she swore to never go down that road again.

She took a deep breath. "What happened then?"

"The dragon shrieked and fell. While it lay inert, seizing, he delivered the final blow."

"It seems we can add 'bringing miracles' to Substance X's list of capabilities." *And list of concerns*, she added in her head.

"Indeed. However, let the credit not stray from Luciel's indomitable spirit."

“Of course. Still, I wonder about the safety of drinking a liquid that makes even dragons fall.”

Catherine greatly wanted to move on from the subject of Substance X, but its effects were important to make note of.

“Rest assured, it has been proven harmless. One may even make use of it to raise one’s attributes without the need for leveling up.”

“So I’ve heard. But we simply can’t employ it among the knights as long as there are mysteries surrounding the extent of its effects.”

Despite that claim, the captain knew there was one regiment that was taking great efforts to stomach it: the Valkyries. Seeing Luciel’s Order of Healing learn to endure the substance’s rancidness, and the leaps they were making as a result, had inspired them. His team had apparently made great strides during their time in Merratoni, and now they were a force to rival even Lumina’s. So Lumina had introduced Substance X to her own troop after comparing her unit’s routine to Luciel’s, in an attempt to imitate the healer’s regimen.

“What say you to a test run of sorts?” Her Holiness suggested. It was unclear whether she was aware of the Valkyries’ current endeavors. “It could prove useful even for healers, as it did for Luciel.”

“Lumina’s Valkyries are already conducting such a test. If it produces results, we may very well be able to use it on a larger scale.”

“I do hear it makes leveling up rather difficult. Do what you must.”

“Yes, Your Holiness. If you’ll excuse me, I will return to training the knights.”

“You may go. While Luciel’s role is to be the face of the Church, yours is to see to our defense. Make our knights strong.”

“As you wish.”

And so the proposal was shelved...for the moment. Yet none could know the impact this would have on the fate of the Knights of Shurule.

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

Chapter 5: To Revive a Healer's Guild

[01 — Yenice, the City of Freedom](#)

[02 — In the Business of Slaves and Miracles](#)

[03 — A Man of Mystery](#)

[04 — The Master's Pride](#)

[05 — All-Powerful](#)

[06 — From a Man to a Leader](#)

[07 — Dwarven Dream Team](#)

[08 — Substance X the Great](#)

[09 — Dealings on the 51st](#)

[10 — Trouble in Paradise](#)

[Elsewhere — A Letter From Luciel](#)

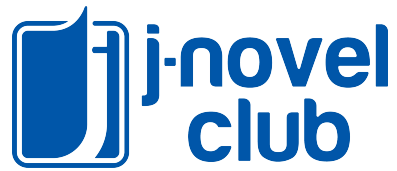
[Another Perspective — Jord](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Bonus Short Story](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



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The Great Cleric: Volume 4

by Broccoli Lion

Translated by Matthew Jackson Edited by Tess Nanavati

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