

The background of the cover is a detailed illustration. In the foreground, a young man with short, spiky white hair and blue eyes is shown from the waist up, looking over his right shoulder. He wears a dark blue or black hooded cloak over a light-colored tunic and dark boots. He stands on a grassy hill. In the background, a young woman with reddish-brown hair in a ponytail, wearing a white top and an orange skirt, is seen from behind, looking towards a distant, glowing city. The city is built on a hillside and features numerous buildings with warm, orange light emanating from their windows. The sky is a deep blue with some clouds. The overall style is a soft, painterly anime aesthetic.

The Great Cleric

White-Collar Survival in
Another World

6

Broccoli Lion
Illustrator: sime

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Chapter 7: The Artisan's Haven

01 — Flashes of Brilliance

The journey from Yenice had been going well the past two days. The citadel marking the border between the Republic of Saint Shurule finally came into view. As the walls drew closer, the emotions in my chest expanded. I broke into a smile. I was home.

Shurule was where I'd lived the majority of my second life, even if it had only been at the Merratoni Adventurer's Guild and the Healer's Guild headquarters in the Holy City. Maybe that was why it felt a little bittersweet. I wasn't worried about Yenice with Galba leading things, but Nalia and the members of the Order of Healing I'd left behind still occupied my mind. Although I'd left a good bit of money there for them, it didn't change the fact that I was pretty much abandoning everyone. Then again, those guys were far more qualified to run things than I was. Holy magic was *my* specialty.

All the same, I hadn't left the City of Freedom without a sense of melancholy.

"That's it for Yenice. Feels like it went by in a flash."

"It has been a dizzying few months," Lionel replied with a grin, atop his horse next to me. Clad in the new battle armor that Dhoran had made for him, atop a burly war horse provided by the dragonewt brothers of the Yenice Adventurer's Guild, my bodyguard finally looked the part of a former imperial general.

I had actually ridden that same horse myself. Well, for a split second before it threw me off, but I didn't like to think about that. I didn't need another reminder that I was fated to never be able to ride a horse other than Forêt Noire.

Moving on from that little escapade, the most important thing to happen to me in Yenice was, unquestionably, meeting Lionel and the others. We wouldn't have been able to earn the people's trust for the Healer's Guild, create so many jobs, or make it out unscathed without them.

“It was fun, though,” I said. “I never thought I’d be leaving the place with a completely different troupe than I arrived with.”

“And I never dreamed I would fight again. Fate is a funny thing.”

“Can’t argue with you there.”

Our mission had only been to fix the local Healer’s Guild before moving on to the next one, but Yenice hadn’t wanted a group of strangers taking over the reins and had asked for Jord’s healers to stay. The Order hadn’t offered any opinions of their own, but it was obvious that they’d wanted to remain as well. And the only reason I was able to grant them that request was because I had Lionel and co. Wherever our journey took us, I was certain I would need their assistance.

Jord had passed the torch willingly, and I would never forget the last thing he told me.

“You’re probably going to find yourself in too deep again one of these days. When that happens, we want to be ready and able to help you. If you ever need us, you know where we’ll be.”

That was when I had realized that, really, they’d wanted to join me. Looking back, I was surprised that I’d never noticed it. The healers had gone along with my brutal training, drank Substance X with me, followed me wherever I went, and supported me.

I remembered the tears burning in my eyes as I’d promised Jord, “We’ll meet again and go on another journey one day. Together. You make sure you’re ready.”

“Count on it.”

I couldn’t hold back the waterworks when the rest of the Order nodded with him. Later, I’d gone to pass on the news to Galba but, for some reason, he’d told me to delay my report to Her Holiness. Something about getting “the timing” right. So I’d waited for whatever this ominous “timing” was, wondering how he could even judge such a thing, and contacted HQ when there would supposedly be the fewest prying ears.

I’d told Her Holiness about the change in personnel, and after a bit of scolding

for how not a single one of them was even remotely connected to the Church, she had approved my decision. Apparently, things in the Holy City were troubling enough as it was.

Galba had told me the specifics beforehand. My actions in Yenice, becoming a temporary representative, had instigated a surge of human supremacy sentiments at Healer's Guild HQ, and certain forces were trying to covertly push out other races from the Holy City. The pope had confirmed this and informed me that if I returned, I would most certainly be placed on a throne and paraded through the streets. That got a big "No" from me, so Her Holiness had directed me straight to my next destination: the Kingdom of Dwarves. We had already been planning to head to a nearby city for Dhoran and Pola anyway, so that worked out for me.

And that brings us to the present. We were currently en route to the Kingdom of Dwarves. I prayed that things in the Holy City would calm down by the time our work was done.

"I do wonder if we'll receive new healers and knights for our band," Lionel mused.

"The pope said she was sending a few. Don't know how many," I answered.

Of course, none of Shurule's knights were as strong as the Valkyries or the Order, so that was a little concerning. However, with Catherine having been reinstated as captain, maybe I could afford to get my hopes up. If they were shattered, I could always have Lionel whip them back into shape. Assuming they listened to me, that is.

"It's thrilling to imagine what our new company might be like."

"Hopefully *normal*. I wouldn't get too excited."

"Oh, but there's plenty of enjoyment to be had in training."

I'm begging you, Your Holiness. Please, let one of these knights be tame. Just one. "We're meeting with the king of the dwarves once we get there and healing whoever needs it. If things go well, hopefully we'll get some special treatment and can take it easy for a change. We're not rebuilding an entire guild this time around."

According to legend, Lord Reinstar's barrier was what kept Shurule safe and relatively monster-free. The Kingdom of Dwarves was in the mountains just to the west, so technically it was still within range of its protection. Unfortunately for Lionel, there wouldn't be much action.

"I see. Although that too can be enjoyable." He cracked a mischievous smirk.

What was this guy planning? Hopefully nothing violent, or the ex-general and I were going to have issues. I fully anticipated being roped into sparring matches, but that was different since it was to make me stronger, so it got a pass. I was starting to wonder if we should've gone to Grandol first, though, because Lionel had been giving off weird, antsy vibes for the past two days. The fact that no monsters had attacked us was great in my book, but someone else looked about ready to go ballistic.

"Monsters creepin' on the left," Ketty suddenly announced, pouncing out of the carriage.

"Threats detected in the woods to the right," Kefin added right behind her. "Bandits, most likely."

I glanced around and saw a dust cloud to the west. A stampede of several dozen monsters. I couldn't make out the enemy to the right and started to get nervous, but only for a moment.

"How shall we dispose of the rabble?" Lionel asked, completely unfazed. "Do we strike to kill?"

The man wasn't even the least bit concerned. He was already operating under the assumption that our opponents would pose no threat. I felt the tension leave my shoulders.

"Take them alive if you can," I said. "Don't take any risks if it's looking dangerous."

"Understood. Ketty, Kefin, take our friends to the right. I will join you shortly."

"Gotcha!" Ketty replied.

"Will do," Kefin agreed.

"Wait," I interjected. "*Area Barrier!* Stay safe, everyone."

“Have I ever disappointed?” Ketty teased.

“We’ll be back soon, sir.”

I turned to Lionel. “You sure you can handle that many? What’s your plan?”

“I’ve been waiting for the chance to really put that greatsword you gave me through its paces,” he said.

“Haven’t you already?”

“I had to restrain myself in town, or I might have started a fire. I’ve yet to give this weapon a *real* swing.” I remained silent, stunned. “I recommend you wait by the carriage. With protection. Just in case.”

“Yeah, sure. You probably won’t need it, but...*Area Barrier!* Do your thing.”

“I’ll join Ketty and Kefin once the beasts are taken care of.”

“Good luck.”

“Sir!” Lionel spurred his horse and galloped towards the danger.

Forêt and I trotted to the carriage Dhoran was driving, and I cast one more Area Barrier. Then I took Lionel’s suggestion and watched patiently.

“He gonna be all right alone?” the dwarf asked.

“Who knows? I couldn’t tell him no. He looked starved for a fight.”

“Guess we’re not gettin’ anything but stones, eh?”

“Wait, you’re worried about crafting materials? Not Lionel?”

“Worried? About the Lion o’ War? I don’t got enough years to waste time on that. Don’t look away now. See his sword glowin’?”

I returned my gaze to the general on the field.

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“This seems a safe distance.” Lionel abruptly reined his horse a short distance from the encroaching horde and imbued his greatsword with power.

“Many battlefields await us,” he said to his steed. “Here, on this one, I will prove to you that your trust in me is well-placed. You have chosen your master wisely.”

He twisted his torso, reeling back, as bright red flames engulfed the magically charged greatsword, then swung it with all his might at the monsters. A massive wave of fire swallowed the mob before violently exploding. Some tried to escape the blast, but the radius was simply too vast. Only the flying beasts escaped the devastation.

“Taking to the hills? I suppose we’ll have to wait for the fire to die out before gathering the gems. I’ll regroup with the others at the citadel.”

The war horse whinnied as it galloped off with its rider towards the bandits.

*

Lionel had eviscerated the entire stampede with a single swipe. I had to blink a few times to process the spectacle I’d witnessed.

Dhoran guffawed. “I told ya worryin’ was a waste o’ time. You might know ’im as the invincible general, but we dwarves know ’im as an invincible monster slayer. Our kingdom’s no stranger to the stray beast that comes wanderin’ in from the Dark Land, but they never put up much of a fight against that guy.”

“He didn’t seem so invincible when we were fighting the dragon.”

“The guy was rusty. You’d only just healed ’im. Took me a bit to get my craftin’ chops back, myself.”

“Uh, okay.”

Rusty? Lionel had seemed overwhelmingly powerful to me from the moment we’d met. That was *rusty*? I did understand what Dhoran was saying, though. Ketty and Kefin had joined in my sparring matches with him, and even three-on-one, Lionel was untouchable. I’d assumed that was because he was picking up on my patterns, but Dhoran’s theory made sense too.

“Mind if we go nab those stones?” he asked.

“Sure, but you’re going to have a hard time of it while it’s still burning.”

“That’s why I planned ahead. Figured we might have an accident or two with his new toy, so I had Pola and Lycian cook up a device that freezes the area instantly.”

“Oh, okay. Wait, shoot, the bandits—”

“Looks like they’re wrappin’ up.”

“What? Come on, they’re not done that fast—yup, okay, they’re already done.” Ketty and Kefin were waving at us from on top of the citadel. “I’m going to go join them. You guys stay on guard and get those magic stones.”

“Can do.”

As I watched Dhoran take the carriage over to the burning battlefield, I realized Pola and Lycian had been awfully quiet lately. Weird.

A group of (presumed) bandits were tied up on the floor and waiting for me at the fort. They looked the worse for wear, to say the least.

“What’s the situation?” I asked.

“All yours, Kefin,” Ketty instructed. I wondered what had soured her mood.

“Well,” Kefin reluctantly began, “first, they fired poisoned arrows at us...”

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Ketty’s and Kefin’s Perception skills were what had alerted them to the presence of the bandits, and as they approached, it told them how many were lurking as well.

“About twenty,” Kefin said. “What’s the plan?”

“We approach, then if they really are bandits, we wipe them out,” Ketty replied. The persona of a cold and calculated assassin always replaced her usual catlike cutesiness when Luciel wasn’t around.

“He did ask us not to kill them.”

“And we won’t. Just don’t get in my way.”

“I kno— Arrows!”

Several fell in front of the two.

“Well, there’s our answer. Bandits.” Ketty started to take off in the direction the attack had come from.

“Wait! There’s poison on the tips.”

“Then I won’t get hit. Even if I am, Sir Lionel will handle things and Mister Luciel will heal me.”

She took off once more into the forest, with Kefin following behind.

Once inside, the enemy’s vision became too obstructed by trees to launch many more arrows. Ketty leaped upward from tree to tree until reaching the canopy. Kefin steadied his breathing, focused on a target, then quickly and efficiently knocked them out.

“Hey, I can do this,” he muttered.

Their trips to the forest and labyrinth in Yenice hadn’t only boosted their skills; everyone’s stats had seen a significant increase from numerous level-ups. Witnessing his Scouting and Perception skills in action, how they not only helped him spot hidden enemies but prevented them from sneaking up on him, gave Kefin a real sense of progress.

But only for a moment. While he went about his careful work, he heard quick, successive cries as bandit after bandit fell. Suddenly, he was more concerned about how long it would take to gather all the bodies than anything else.

Then came an explosion.

“Kefin,” Ketty called, “this guy’s their leader. I already broke him. Find the rest.”

“What about you?”

“I’m going to investigate the explosion.”

“You’re sure that’s a good idea? Mister Luciel is soft, so he probably won’t care, but Lionel might if we leave things half done here.”

Ketty grimaced, then shot a frigid glare at the bandit leader. “Gather your men and go to the citadel,” she spat. “Before I cut you where you stand.”

The man flinched away from her, looking to Kefin for salvation, and fearfully nodded in agreement with the other bandits nearby.

“I get she wants to see Lionel in action, but I wish she’d focus on the task at hand,” Kefin mumbled.

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“...and then we disarmed them and tied them up, as you can see. There’s just...one problem.” Kefin suddenly clammed up.

“It’s okay, just tell me what happened,” I urged him.

“Yes, sir. You see, their leader keeps saying they’re from the Mercenary’s Guild.”

It all made sense now, including Ketty’s bitter mood. We might have gotten ourselves in trouble.

“That certainly sounds like a problem. Lionel—”

“Hey!” The leader sneered at me from the ground. “You the boss of these adventurers?”

It seemed he didn’t realize who I was, but that worked for me. I decided to use it to my advantage to learn more.

“Let’s go with that,” I said.

“What’s the big idea, siccin’ beastfolk on us, eh? I hope you’re ready for the consequences.”

“What might those be?”

“Don’t act like you don’t know. We’re mercs, you’re adventurers, you attacked us. Get the picture?”

This guy must have had nerves of steel to act so smug with his face in the dirt.

“Can’t say I do. I’d like to know what you were doing sneaking around the forest, shooting poisoned arrows at us. Now, assuming we have as much of a problem here as you seem to insist, that would make you the instigators.”

“The hell were we supposed to do? You see beastfolk steppin’ up on you, you assume they’re up to no good.”

Ketty and Kefin shot a nasty glare at him.

“And what if you’d hit one of them? Let me guess, it’s just self-defense?”

“I didn’t say that! But you can’t blame us. It’s easy to mistake them for beast-

type monsters. They get hit by accident all the time.”

It seemed this was somehow common sense for mercenaries, but their oh-so-bright leader was forgetting something important.

“Noted. Speaking of which, you do know we’re in Yenitian territory, right?”

The merc boss scoffed. “Since when do adventurers pay attention to jurisdiction? You must think you’re pretty smart, but don’t forget you lot assaulted us.”

“You shot first. We defended ourselves. You’re just a bunch of bandits, as far as we’re concerned.”

“Seems we’re at an impasse, pal. But you better watch yourselves. Shurule’s our client, so keep this up and we’ll have you banned from adventuring anywhere in the republic.”

Lionel instantly busted a gut, Ketty and Kefin quickly following in uproarious laughter. The mercs didn’t know how to react. I couldn’t blame them for not knowing who I was. S-rank healers probably didn’t usually dress in full armor, carry weapons, or ride around with a plain old wagon.

“Lionel, you’re being rude,” I reprimanded him.

“My apologies,” he said. “I couldn’t contain myself.”

“He might genuinely not realize, you know.” Not even Church HQ was as cohesive as you might expect. “Something definitely smells funky, though.”

“What’re you people going on about?” the merc interjected.

“Right, excuse me.” Now I needed to learn what they were doing here. “I was just wondering what use Shurule would have for such a small group of mercs, and why they’re lurking in a forest, pretending to be thugs.”

“Well...there’s more of us! We’re big deals in the guild!”

“Interesting. Unfortunately, I’m not sure I believe you yet. What were you all doing here, and what does it have to do with Shurule?” He said nothing. “Spill it and I’ll spare you whatever punishment Yenice would give you and take you across the border.”

“Let us go already!”

“If you’re telling the truth, then you have nothing to hide. I’d say I’m being extremely fair. Or would you rather I start *really* treating you like bandits?”

“Son of a... Fine! But you spare our lives and I want my boys fed. And our weapons back when you let us go.”

“Fair enough.”

“You better keep your word.”

“I will. Now tell me what you were hired to do.”

“Right, we accepted the job a bit after rumors started spreading that a human healer took over that beast city, Yenice...”

The merc boss proceeded to explain everything truthfully and sincerely. A mysterious, black-hooded individual had offered them a strange job, and thinking the whole thing seemed a bit suspicious, they had followed the curious figure back to where he’d come from: Church Headquarters. The pay was good, so they accepted. The mission: prevent beastfolk from leaving Yenice, stop merchants from going in, and start trouble with the beast races in Shurule.

“Problem was, the merchants usually had guards from the Merchant’s Guild, so we couldn’t touch ‘em. Unless they were beastfolk, that is.”

“I see. Well, it’s mostly tiny villages on Shurule’s border, but there’s a small town about a day’s journey from here. We’ll deal with you there, as promised.”

“Yeah, yeah. Guys,” he addressed his men, “play along and we’ll all get out of this. Bear with it for a while.”

They nodded.

“Thank you for your cooperation,” I said.

“Mister Luciel, they likely have horses with them. We ought to take them with us or they may attract monsters,” Lionel advised.

“Good idea. Ketty, Kefin, can you take one of the mercenaries and find them?”

“Sir!” Kefin replied.

“You got it, Chief!” Ketty followed.

I had started collecting the mercs’ weapons and armor and storing them in the magic bag when I remembered Dhoran. I glanced in his direction and saw several golems gathering magic stones.

“Looks like he’s got it covered. Listen up, once they’re done, we’re heading out,” I announced.

“*They’re* with you too? Hell, we picked the wrong party to screw with.”

I ignored the crestfallen mercenary and recalled the magic item Dhoran had spoken of.

“The fire’s out, but nothing’s frozen. Must’ve failed.”

“No, I think they may have simply prioritized speed over experimentation,” Lionel suggested.

“That’s one possibility.”

My personal theory was that Pola and Lycian had launched some nonsensical magic-stone-gathering contest, forcing Dhoran to give up on testing out their new tool.

About ten minutes later, the golems disappeared, and the carriage rolled back over to us just as Kefin and Ketty were returning with the horses. We pulled the mercs to their feet and had them mount their steeds. I wasn’t afraid of any of them trying to make a break for it. They knew that if they did, they’d be deemed bandits and dealt with accordingly. They were being released tomorrow anyway, so they weren’t that stupid.

Our party increased to a little under thirty members, and we set off for a humble post town on the way to our destination.

02 — Warriors of the Kitchen

I had anticipated trouble with such a large group, but our trip was smooth. Until we reached the village, that is.

The sun was nearing the ridge of the western mountains as we neared our destination. It was a well-traveled border village but a small place that a company of our size couldn't very well stay in for long. I decided it would be wise to ask the village chief if we could camp just outside the town. Lionel joined me, while the others prepared our meal and watched the mercenaries.

What met the two of us as we entered the village were armed citizens. When they saw us, they promptly dropped their weapons and cheered. Lionel and I cocked our heads.

The mayor was bowing to us in his own home.

"Let me get this straight," I said. "A band of beastfolk bandits have been attacking nearby villages?"

"That's correct," he replied. "Not just ours, but other villages as well. They've only come here once, but I don't want to imagine how it would have turned out if there hadn't been mercenaries staying with us at the time."

Beastfolk bandits... Mercenaries pretending to be bandits... Was I thinking too much or was there more to this? Regardless, I needed to report this to Her Holiness and Galba ASAP.

"And you want us to get rid of them for you."

"Yes, exactly. We'd never ask this of any ordinary healer, but you, sir, have defeated a dragon all on your own! Your valor is our only hope!"

His eyes were bloodshot, conveying the extreme stress he must have been under. I was confident that Lionel was itching to go on a bandit-busting crusade, but we didn't have the sort of manpower for that.

"I'm afraid that might be difficult," I said.

“B-But...” the mayor stammered.

“We would gladly take care of them for you if they were to attack at this very moment, but we don’t have the resources to go looking for them. There’s a small town to the north that we need to reach tomorrow.”

“Then later! Later is fine! Please, just save our village!” The mayor flung his head straight into his desk. I cast a quiet Heal on him.

“I don’t particularly like bandits running amok, so once our business is settled, I can certainly promise that we’ll come back to help.”

“You are our savior!”

“Please. Would you mind if we set up camp outside the village?”

“Not at all. We can provide as many supplies as you need.”

“That won’t be necessary. We had our own run-in with some bandits recently, so we’d like to keep our distance.”

“You’re too kind, Mister Luciel!”

“If you’ll excuse us.”

The mayor’s sniveling face was starting to make me feel awkward, so I conducted a hasty retreat. Once outside, I heaved a sigh. Lionel watched, trying and failing to stifle his laughter.

“What’s so funny?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he said. “I’m simply amused by your ever-growing following.”

“At least one of us is.”

He chuckled again. I sighed, praying that things would calm down.

When we returned to the group, several golems were stationed around to form a perimeter, and in the center, the mercenaries were cooking.

“What’s going on here?” I asked.

Kefin looked up from his hand in his face and noticed us. “Mister Luciel.”

“Explanation, please.”

“So, Dhoran, Pola, and Lycian took over watching the mercs while Ketty and I started cooking, but the mercs told us that we...didn’t appreciate the ingredients enough.”

“They’ve seized our kitchen and utensils?”

“I wouldn’t say ‘seized.’ More like Ketty, er, lost her temper.”

“And she made them cook.”

“Yes, sir.”

The dwarves and elf were completely lost in their magic gems, but from the look of the golems they hadn’t abandoned their duty. Progress.

Ketty and cooking, however, was a sort of Pandora’s Box. Despite Nalia’s best efforts, the cat-woman’s culinary creations always turned out like flavorless slop. Nalia’s smile was supposedly enough to make Ketty shudder. This was a worrying deficiency, considering how long we’d be on the road, but it seemed to be taken care of for the time being.

Noticing our return, the mercenaries suddenly stopped, except for their leader.

“Hobby of yours?” I asked him.

“Just don’t like seeing fresh ingredients go to waste and get turned into garbage.”

“Likewise.”

“What?”

“I agree,” I repeated. The mercenaries stared at me in silence. “We’ll go over tomorrow’s plan once everyone’s eaten.”

“You’re not worried we might poison the food?”

“No one with as much appreciation for food as you would do that.” And if he *would*, my resistances made it a moot point.

The merc continued to quietly cook. Meanwhile, I started setting up beds and the yurt-like tents that nomads of this world used. Kefin came to fetch me for dinner just as I finished. I followed him to a table that Dhoran had put together,

lined with delicious plates of food. Only our portions, though. The mercs' plates were still stacked in a neat pile. Kefin explained to me that they'd eat whatever scraps we had left over.

Personally, I found it uncomfortable to eat while others watched me. "Thanks for cooking," I said. "But we all eat together. That's how we do things around here, so come on."

"There's plenty for everyone. We'll eat what's left," their leader insisted.

"Well, I don't like being stared at during dinner, and it's important to me. Plus, I think I told you we had things to discuss afterwards."

"Right. If you say so."

"Good. Now eat up before it gets cold."

At last, the mercs hesitantly joined us. It didn't take long for amiable conversation to start up. Hoping that this might help everyone let off some steam and relieve the tension, I began to eat as well.

Everything was incredible, and I couldn't believe it was possible, but their dishes actually rivaled Gulgar's, and he was the best chef I knew in this world. What were they doing trudging around as mercenaries? I almost wanted to ask why they hadn't settled down as cooks or something but didn't want to come off as rude. So I settled for a simple compliment, which put an amusing blush on the boss's face. I couldn't help but wish we had met under better circumstances.

After dinner, I told him about my conversation with the mayor regarding the bandits and our plans for the next day, then left him to divide the tents among his men. From the expression on his face, he looked like he'd been sucker punched.

"Call for help if the bandits come," I said.

"Wait, what's going on here?" he asked, incredulous. "Is it because Shurule hired us?"

"Oh, I couldn't care less about that. I treat everyone equally and humanely. Guess you could say it's for my ego." Of course, that didn't apply when my life

or the lives of my companions were at stake.

“You don’t care that we might make a run for it?”

It was cute that he thought he’d be able to get away from Ketty or Kefin on night watch, or that Forêt would let their horses leave.

“You can go ahead and try, but I’d only expect that sort of behavior from bandits, if you get what I mean.”

I nonchalantly waved my hand as I entered my tent. I didn’t hear the merc leave until some time later. Once I was sure he was gone, I contacted Her Holiness and the Yenice Adventurer’s Guild by arclink crystal.

An explosion like the one from earlier that day woke me up in the night. I shot up from my angel’s pillow, changed into my armor with the transformation dresser, and dashed outside to find several tents burning like bonfires. A cacophony of screams reached my ears.

“Calm down,” I said to myself. “Just stay calm.” I looked in the direction of the explosion. Lionel, Ketty, and Kefin were locked in battle a ways away. “They’ll be done quickly. No point worrying about them. Dhoran and the others are putting out the fires. Everyone seems safe.”

I noticed a merc nearby. “You there!”

“You tricked us!”

“I don’t have time to argue with you. Tell me what’s happening,” I demanded.

“What?”

“I need to know the situation before I can save anyone! *Now!*”

“W-We were attacked by bandits. Our tents suddenly went up in flames.”

Fire arrows could burn through in seconds. Some people might not have made it out.

“Then some of you were hurt. Bring them to me—no, take me to where they are. If they’re alive, I can save them.”

“O-Okay!”

He led me to a group of badly burned comrades. I quickly approached and cast an Area High Heal. They looked surprised to find that I was a healer, but I ignored their shock.

“Who’s missing?” I asked.

“Sagius ran after the bandits with a few others,” one of them answered.

“Sagius?”

“Our leader.”

“Got it. If you feel like repaying me for the healing, go help extinguish the fires or make sure the bandits aren’t in the village.”

“What about you?”

“I’m going to save lives.” Forêt Noire suddenly trotted up to me. “There you are. Wait, you’re hurt!” I cast High Heal and Purification on her, and she brayed in reply, as if telling me to hop on and hurry to the rescue. “Right. Thanks, girl.”

I hoisted myself up onto her back, and she kicked into a gallop. Was it fortune or misfortune that the brigands had come straight to us? All I knew for sure was that I wasn’t as prepared for a surprise attack as I’d thought. I had learned a hard lesson.

The landscape flew by as we darted towards Lionel’s group, but Forêt stopped away from them, next to several casualties on the ground.

“Purification! Area High Heal! There, they’ll make it. To the next one, Forêt!”

She made straight for Lionel this time.

“The attackers have been captured, sir,” he reported as I cleaned the blood off everyone with Purification from my horse’s back.

“Was the explosion you?” I asked.

“Yes. I used the greatsword’s flames to prevent them from escaping.”

“Got it. Is anyone hurt?”

“The mercenaries’ leader took a wound to the back and also lost an arm. Three others suffered lacerations.”

“I healed those three on the way here. Where’s the leader?”

“That way. We stopped the bleeding with a potion taken from the bandits, but he still needs attention.”

“I understand. I’ve already healed several of the mercs, so there’s no point in hiding the fact that I’m an S-rank healer at this point. Or hiding Extra Heal, for that matter.”

Lionel led me to the leader, where I dismounted. He was staring vacantly at where his arm had been.

“I’m glad you’re alive,” I said.

“You’re glad I’m alive,” he parroted. “You’re glad I’m *alive*? Looking like *this*?”

“I am.” Because I had the miracle spell.

“I’ll never hold a sword again. I’ll never hold a damn *kitchen knife* again. And you want me to be grateful that I’m *alive*?”

“I do.” Because I was a miracle worker.

“My merc career’s over. My enemies are going to be after my life. But thank fucking *Crya* I’m alive, huh?!”

“That’s how I’d feel in your shoes.”

“Shut up! What do you know?! What do you know about what it feels like to lose an arm?!”

Quite a bit, actually, but I definitely would have felt much the same if I hadn’t had Extra Heal. That said, surely he’d been prepared for this. Surely, as a sellsword, he should have been at peace with injury and death.

Suddenly, Lionel grabbed the man by his collar and forced him to his feet, then let go. “Listen to me, fool. Decry your fate and the loss of your arm, but do not turn your rage on those you know nothing about. Or shall I relieve you of your remaining arm?”

The boss’s knees quaked before finally giving out, and he fell to the ground. And here I was about to lay down the truth that he’d surely have dismembered his own share of arms in his line of work. Lionel had stolen my dang spotlight.

“Anyway,” I said, “we don’t have a lot of time to waste here. Sa-jee... Say-jee...”

“It’s Sagius,” he corrected me.

“Right, Sagius. You have a couple of options.”

“Options? What?”

“You can stay a mercenary, selling your life for money, condemning the loss of your arm. Or you can wash your hands of this business, repent for those you’ve hurt, and live an honest life.”

“Wait, you can fix me?!”

“Sir,” Lionel firmly interjected.

“Life’s long. And I might be biased, but I’m sure he’s done his fair share of wrong as a mercenary,” I argued. “I don’t think he’s going to have it so easy anymore, though. I doubt he’ll be able to after this.”

“This man has no shred of loyalty, dignity, or dedication, so as long as he doesn’t join us, I’ll hold my tongue.”

That was one way of putting it. Lionel might have been thinking the same thing I was: our group could’ve made good use of a cook.

“What are you guys, demons?” Sagius stuttered.

“Let’s leave this fellow to his wallowing,” Lionel insisted. “His life alone is a burden to us.”

“Maybe,” I admitted. “And no, Sagius. I’m just a normal human with a bit of a knack for holy magic.”

“You...” He gaped at me. “You’re the S-rank.”

“That’s me—”

“Please, heal me! I’m done with the merc business! I’ll go clean!”

“Er, you sound like you’ve been ready to do that for a while.”

“None of us are any good at fighting. We’d rather gather mushrooms and herbs and cook all day before any of that.”

Kefin and Ketty *had* said they were surprisingly weak. But why had they tried to fight the bandits, then? Maybe they were the impetuous types to never leave a favor unrepaired.

“Why didn’t you quit?”

“The, er, retaliation. From the enemies we’ve made.”

“Well, let’s start with a contract. First, I forbid you from speaking to anyone about the magic I’m about to perform. Second, you’re to live an honest life from now on. Third, you’re to treat all beastpeople with respect, but you may seek help if your life is ever at stake. Do you swear to these terms?”

“I-I swear!”

“The contract is made. *Purification! Extra Heal!*” I chanted. “And now my part of the deal is done.”

“Um,” he stammered, “so, I’m glad my arm’s back, but is that really all? No pomp and circumstance?”

“I regrew your arm. What more do you want?”

“Fair point.”

“I get what you mean, but just be glad you have all your limbs again.”

“Right.”

“Oh, and for the record, I’ve lost more arms and legs than I can count, so I know a thing or two about how painful it is. Physically and mentally. Lionel lost the use of his legs before too.”

“I’m... I’m sorry. I was insensitive.”

“Forget it. You’d better go show your men you’re alive. Just don’t think about—well, not like you *can* run away, even if you tried.”

“Er, um,” he continued to sputter.

“We’re going to handle the bandits, if you feel like joining.”

“No. They’re all yours.”

“By the way, I healed some of your men over there. Might want to wake them

up or get some people to carry them elsewhere.”

“Right, yeah.” And with that, he ran off.

“He’s an impressive chef,” Lionel muttered as he watched Sagius leave. “He would have made a promising personal cook, if it weren’t for his imprudence and short temper.”

“You could always pick up a ladle,” I suggested.

“I’m more suited to greatswords than kitchenware.”

“Figured you’d say that. Let’s go see what this bandit gang’s deal is.”

“Yes, sir.”

The two of us made for the thugs, who Ketty and Kefin had been keeping a close eye on.

The captured bandits were black and blue when I found them.

“What happened here?” I asked.

“Sorry... Sorry ’bout that.” Ketty stumbled over her words. “But I don’t regret it.”

“I apologize for getting violent too,” Kefin added. “But I feel the same. They deserved it.”

“I’m not mad at anyone. I just want to know why they’re all beat up,” I said.

“That’s all you, Kefin. Just...tell him.”

He took a breath. “If I have to. Take a look at this.”

“A mask?” I looked closer. “Of a beastperson.”

“They were disguising themselves as beastfolk.”

No wonder Ketty was so livid. We were bending over backwards trying to get all races to get along, and these fools were directly opposing our work.

“Let me guess: they’re mercs hired by human supremacists.”

“Yes, sir,” Kefin replied. “Except these clowns aren’t like the ones we met on the way here. There’s not a single good bone in their bodies. They’re worthless.”

I'd never heard Kefin speak so venomously about another person before. The bandits had probably miscalculated and gone a few steps too far, thinking they'd weasel their way out of their predicament with ease.

"Don't bother healing them," Ketty spat. "They're... I wouldn't waste the effort, Chief."

"We don't want anyone dying, but otherwise that's fine by me," I said. "Just don't let them get to you anymore."

"Right."

"Oh, and see if Sagius recognizes any of them. The townsfolk are probably scared. I need to go fill in their mayor."

"I'll accompany you," Lionel said.

I nodded. "Keep your heads cool, guys."

"Sure thing," Ketty said.

"Understood," Kefin agreed.

I had a feeling that when the bandits woke up they would pull the exact same garbage again. But karma hurts.

The villagers had lit a bonfire and formed a barricade with their bodies, holding weapons.

"Relax, guys. The bandits have been captured," I said and was greeted with cheers. "Does anyone here remember what the mercenaries who rescued the town look like? I'd like you to check something."

The group dispersed and a few people stepped forward, including the mayor.

"I'll explain while we walk," I told him. "Turns out the bandits *were* beastfolk."

"I knew those beasts were up to no good," he said.

"That is, they were humans *dressed as* beastfolk. Mercenaries."

"What?!"

"There's more to this than meets the eye. We don't have enough information

to know for sure, but it seems likely that a human supremacist, maybe a whole organization, is behind it.”

He slouched dejectedly. “Then I take it we’re not going to get back what they stole from us during the last raid.”

“What did they take?”

“Several horses.”

“Horses. Noted. It might not be much, but I *am* an S-rank healer with connections to Her Holiness and Yenice’s council. I could get in contact with them.”

“Yes, I’m well aware, of course.”

“Well, they attacked me. It would be a simple request to ask them to take action. I’m friendly with several adventurer guildmasters too, and could have them put out hits on bandits.”

“You continue to impress me. But wouldn’t our belongings end up as possessions of whoever completes the job?”

“I’ll figure something out.”

“No, no, no, you’ve figured enough out for us! We’ll never be able to repay you at this rate!”

“Okay, then how about we say you owe me a favor? You help me out if I’m ever in trouble.” I really wasn’t looking for a reward, but the Spirit of Tides’s prophecy still weighed heavily on my mind. I hadn’t even intended to make the offer, to be honest. My mouth had moved of its own accord.

The mayor looked directly at me. “That, we can do. Even if the entire world turns against you, you’ll have allies here.”

“I’ll hold you to that if I’m ever public enemy number one.”

“Please do.”

I showed the villagers the bandits, but their faces were too beaten and swollen for anyone to recognize, so I cleaned them up a bit with Purification. The result: several of them were the same mercs who’d fought against the

“bandits” last time. Sagius’s men also identified them as being fairly high up in their guild. We learned that Sagius’s horses were the ones that had been stolen from the village, so they were returned.

With fewer means of transportation and ever more people to cart around, I decided to contact the pope to inform her of the new circumstances and request assistance with transporting the mercs.

The mercs-turned-bandits spent the next two days quietly in Dhoran’s specially made magic-enervating cell that he’d dug into the ground.

As I was wrapping up my training with Lionel, Sagius, our temporary chef, called out, “Lunch is almost ready!”

“Let’s end it here,” I suggested.

“Very well,” Lionel agreed. “We can power through the indigestion and continue in the afternoon.”

I grimaced. “We’re not done for the day?”

“Strength requires determination.”

“Yeah, I know.” I sighed. “Not like I have anything better to do, I guess.”

Suddenly, Ketty and Kefin came running up.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“There’s a big group comin’ for us,” Ketty reported. “I’d say Knights of Shurule, from the white armor.”

“Ten or so horses and two carriages,” Kefin added.

The assistance I had asked for was earlier than expected.

“Thanks,” I said. “Sagius, mind cooking for a few more?”

“Can do,” he replied excitedly before shouting instructions to his men and getting back to work.

The regiment from Church HQ gradually approached, and when they finally reached us— “No way!” I shouted. “The Valkyries?! Why?!”

“Because we were given a mission. It’s good to see you, Luciel.”

“I-It’s good to see you too, Lumina.” I nearly lost myself staring at her until I saw the rest of the Valkyries waving happily. “And you too, everyone. You look good.”

“Indeed, as my Valkyries should,” Lumina said. “Now, I need to conduct a few formalities, if you don’t mind.”

“Please do.”

“In acquiescence to S-rank Luciel’s request for aid and additional personnel, and by order of Her Holiness, the Valkyries are reporting for duty with four supplementary healers. We are yours to command until such time as our mission is complete. The healers may remain hereafter should you see fit.”

“It may not be for long, but I look forward to working with you again.”

“Likewise, sir!” Lumina saluted with a fist to her chest. The Valkyries behind her followed suit. Strangely, though, the four healers were nowhere to be seen.

“Where are those healers?”

“Still in the carriage, I presume.” She put a hand to her chin and tilted her head cutely. “I suspect the journey was tiring for them.”

I smiled. “Then we can save introductions for later. We were just about to eat, if you’d like to join us.”

“You have enough for us? We never received your herald.”

“My scouts noticed your white armor from a ways away, so we were prepared.”

Lumina glanced at Lionel and the others. “They escaped our notice entirely. I see now.”

“See what?”

“I heard you left your entire Order in Yenice. And rumors have been circulating in the Church that you slew a dragon.”

“Ha ha! Ha... So there are rumors, huh? Well, as you can clearly see, I’m still a fraidy-cat. Rest assured, I would never leave Yenice without making sure I’m

defended by the best.”

“Ever the...I see,” she mumbled.

I could’ve sworn I heard something in the middle there, but I must have been imagining things. “Anyway, I think you’ll understand once you’ve heard the story. I’ll introduce you to my companions too. Shall we eat in the meantime? The Valkyries are looking a little ravenous.”

Lumina glanced back at her troop. “Really, girls? Very well. We’ll indulge you.”

The ladies yelled in excitement, and I guided them to Dhoran’s improvised dining area. I also urged the exhausted healers to join us, but something about them felt a little off to me.

Praises for Sagius and his men’s cooking were swift and unanimous. With the mood amped up, I began the story of my escapades in Yenice, beginning with my efforts to revive the Healer’s Guild, then my battle with the dragon and life as a representative, and ending with my departure without the Order of Healing. Marluka had looked particularly excited when I reached the dragon part, and Myla had teased me about “finally hearing the legend,” but their interest died down substantially once they learned the truth.

“...so, after we captured the bandits—that is, the mercenaries—we ended up with so many people that we needed extra help.”

Lumina gave me an oddly sympathetic look. “I never imagined your life would be so...eventful.”

The pope had told me the Valkyries were having their own share of problems lately, so I wouldn’t have thought that *my* life was particularly harder than theirs.

“You know, Mister Lulu, if I may be so emboldened, I think you can be very proud of slaying a dragon,” Marluka stated with that trademark awkwardness every time she tried to speak politely. And she still remembered that ridiculous nickname.

“Yeah, bein’ proud doesn’t gotta mean bein’ arrogant,” Gannet agreed in her usual casual tone.

“Exactly. Most people would freeze up in the face of a threat like that, but not you,” Ripnear added. “Just because you did the deed with Substance X doesn’t lessen the fact that you did it.”

“Yep. Good job,” Queena said simply.

“Er, thanks, guys,” I replied.

“I can hardly believe you’re the same guy who got cold feet about taking out a measly forest boar,” Beatrice remarked.

“It’s not often you see a guy respond to punishment so well,” Kathy concurred.

“Can you please forget about that boar thing?” I begged. “And my team was jealous every time you guys handed my butt to me, Kathy. I *had* to get better or the Order would’ve fallen apart.”

One wrong move and I would’ve been back to living life all on my lonesome again. Regardless, I couldn’t believe the Valkyries were actually complimenting me on something combat related.

“You never were a normal healer,” Lucy remarked.

“Oh, that’s hardly a standard worth holding him to,” Elizabeth scoffed. “The people in Yenice wanted nothing to do with him, and his first destination was the *Adventurer’s Guild*, a veritable nest of healer-haters. He’s strange by any measure.”

I had known the lambasting would start sooner or later. I cracked a pitiful smile. “Actually, I—”

“Speakin’ o’ weird, I heard the first thing he did in Yenice was shop for slaves to help relieve some...*pent up stress*,” Saran interrupted suggestively with a blush, which I did not appreciate. I never understood why she always acted all embarrassed about her own dirty jokes. Still, I could tell by the way everyone looked away from me that that particular rumor hadn’t just been her imagination running wild.

“Luc— *Mister* Luciel, we know the gossip around you comes from jealousy,” Myla said comfortingly, cutting through the awkward mood and returning to

her food. “It’s your strangeness that’s gotten you so far and inspired you to do so much in such a short time.”

Weirdly enough, I didn’t recall the rumor mill getting so out of hand during my time with the Valkyries. I had only gotten envious glares. Maybe there were more healers who hated me than I thought. Either way, I didn’t regret anything I’d done so far.

“We see and acknowledge the efforts you make as well as the achievements they’ve led to,” Lumina said.

“Thanks. Guess there’s no point letting bad faith arguments get me down,” I replied.

“Indeed.”

“There is one thing I should correct, though. I do make an effort, true, but that’s hardly where my successes come from. I owe everything to the Order and my comrades for standing with me through it all. And the Yenitians themselves, of course.”

“Hm. Some things never change, do they?”

“It’s the truth. Anyway, speaking of slaves, I think it’s time I introduce everyone.”

“They’ve had my curiosity for some time now. That man next to you... If I’m not mistaken, he’s the Illumasian general, master of the defender class, Lionel Gurst Elphens, otherwise known as the Lion of War.”

She sure was well informed.

“I am Mister Luciel’s attendant,” Lionel replied. “Nothing more.”

“My apologies. I don’t mean to offend. I simply thought the Lion was fighting on the Luburk front. I’m a little bewildered.”

It was rare to see Lumina so flustered, but this wasn’t the time or place to discuss this sort of thing.

“I know it’s confusing, but just understand that he’s been my trusted companion for over a year now,” I said.

“If you insist,” she conceded.

“Moving along, this is my head of reconnaissance, Ketty.”

“The Nightgleam?” Lucy exclaimed in shock.

“I’m Mister Luciel’s attendant,” Ketty replied. “Nothin’ more.”

“Er, anyway,” I continued, “this is our craftsman and the one who built this little hall for us, Dhoran.”

“Y-You’re the fellow disciple of the master smith, Grand!” Queena shot up and cried. “*The* Dhoran?!”

“Aye, he’s my brother-in-steel, but Mister Luciel’s tinkerer is all I am now,” Dhoran replied. “Nothin’ more.”

“Next to him is his granddaughter, Pola. She’s an artificer.”

“I’m just a genius, nothing more,” she proclaimed. “Until I’m famous.”

“And the elf next to her is Lycian, another artificer.”

“I can introduce myself, if you like,” Lycian said. “But it will cost you magic stones.”

“She’s stupid,” Pola stated.

“Only imbeciles insult the intelligence of others, Pola.” Her rival didn’t even blink. “Well, say something!”

Lord, those two never knew when to quit. I cleared my throat loudly, and they quieted down. They did continue to kick each other under the table, but at that point, I couldn’t have cared less.

“Ahem, lastly, this is Kefin, human-wolf twinblood and former gang leader. He grew up in the slums. He’s a good, loyal man, so I decided to bring him along.”

I noticed several frowns among the Valkyries.

“My name’s Kefin,” he introduced himself. “I know I’m not worthy to be traveling with Mister Luciel, but I have a debt to repay, and I’d gladly lay down my life for him.”

Lionel huffed in anger, but Lumina was faster.

“Indeed, Kefin, of Luciel’s followers, you are certainly the least qualified,” she stated.

“I-I know.”

“And surely you know that sacrifice is simply to be expected of all Luciel’s attendants.”

“Right.”

“I will never understand what drives him to weaken his party with company like you, but be that as it may, he has chosen you. Thus it is your responsibility to prove your worth and be of use to him.”

“Right.”

“And you would do well to remember that prepared as you may be to end your life, Luciel is not one to easily allow it.”

“I will.”

“One last thing. To deprecate yourself is to deprecate your master. Do it alone if you must, but never show it openly. Be proud that he saw something in you.”

“Thank you.”

By the time her rant ended, Lionel’s frustration had abated as well. She seemed to have covered pretty much everything he’d wanted to say.

“Thanks for that, Lumina,” I said.

“I merely spoke the truth.”

“Well, how about we speak the truth over some dessert?”

“Dessert?”

“Dessert.”

I left my seat to go prepare some cookies I’d had Nalia make from the vespians’ honey, a yogurt cheesecake drizzled in the same honey, and tea made from some of Yenice’s finest leaves.

*

Lionel and Lumina locked eyes the moment Luciel left the table.

“Mister Luciel trusts you. If you have questions, ask them before he returns,” the ex-general offered.

Lumina was taken aback, but she could see the man’s sincerity and loyalty emanating from him with her magical vision.

“Thank you for the offer, but I’m confident that your devotion is genuine.”

“So you are. I had heard talk of the Church’s corruption, of how the pope placed her hopes of salvation in a single woman and her paladin regiment. I see now that this woman was you.”

“The empire’s intelligence network was always efficient.”

“In so many words. However, I feel as if I’ve seen you before. On the battlefield.”

That was a campaign Lumina would rather forget. Her very first. “Is... Is that so?”

“I apologize. It wasn’t my intention to make a friend of Mister Luciel’s uncomfortable.”

Lumina could see with her Aura Sight that he was being honest. But what she could not see was where his devotion came from. She wanted to ask but couldn’t bring herself to.

“Mister Luciel became my master because he gave me hope again. Life,” Lionel divulged. “But what drives me to stay at his side is his world. A world that moves at a blistering speed, where the days are never boring.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I saw that you wanted to ask. It also makes a convenient ending for our conversation.”

Just then, Luciel returned with a delicious-looking cake in hand. Lumina stared at him in a daze, unable to get the ex-general’s playful grin out of her mind. It wasn’t an expression that belonged on the Lion’s face. She couldn’t help but wonder, just a little, how happy she might be to spend time with Luciel as he did.

The Valkyries weren't the only ones ecstatic about the dessert. Ketty's, Pola's, and Lycian's mouths were watering as well. By the time I finished passing out the tea Galba had given me, my own share had vanished. But before I could investigate the curious case of the missing cookies, the Valkyries surrounded me.

"Uh, can I help you?"

"Where'dja get those cookies, Mister Lulu?! You gotta tell us!" Marluka shouted.

"The heavens may forgive you for hiding the sweets," Queena said, "but the Valkyries will not."

"Be wary, Luc— Mister Luciel," Myla warned. "Food-related grudges are divisive things."

"Behave yourselves, ladies," Lumina snapped, sending the girls scurrying back to their seats. "We are guests. And Luciel would never hide things from us."

"Thanks," I said, relieved.

"I apologize on their behalf. Where did you purchase these desserts, if you don't mind me asking?"

"I didn't buy them. I got them in Yenice."

"The man lies," Elizabeth said accusingly.

"What? No, I don't. Why would I lie?" I asked.

She frowned. "But they were honeyed. Such an elusive ingredient used to be sold in Yenice's markets, but that was a long time ago."

I'd forgotten that she was from a family of merchants.

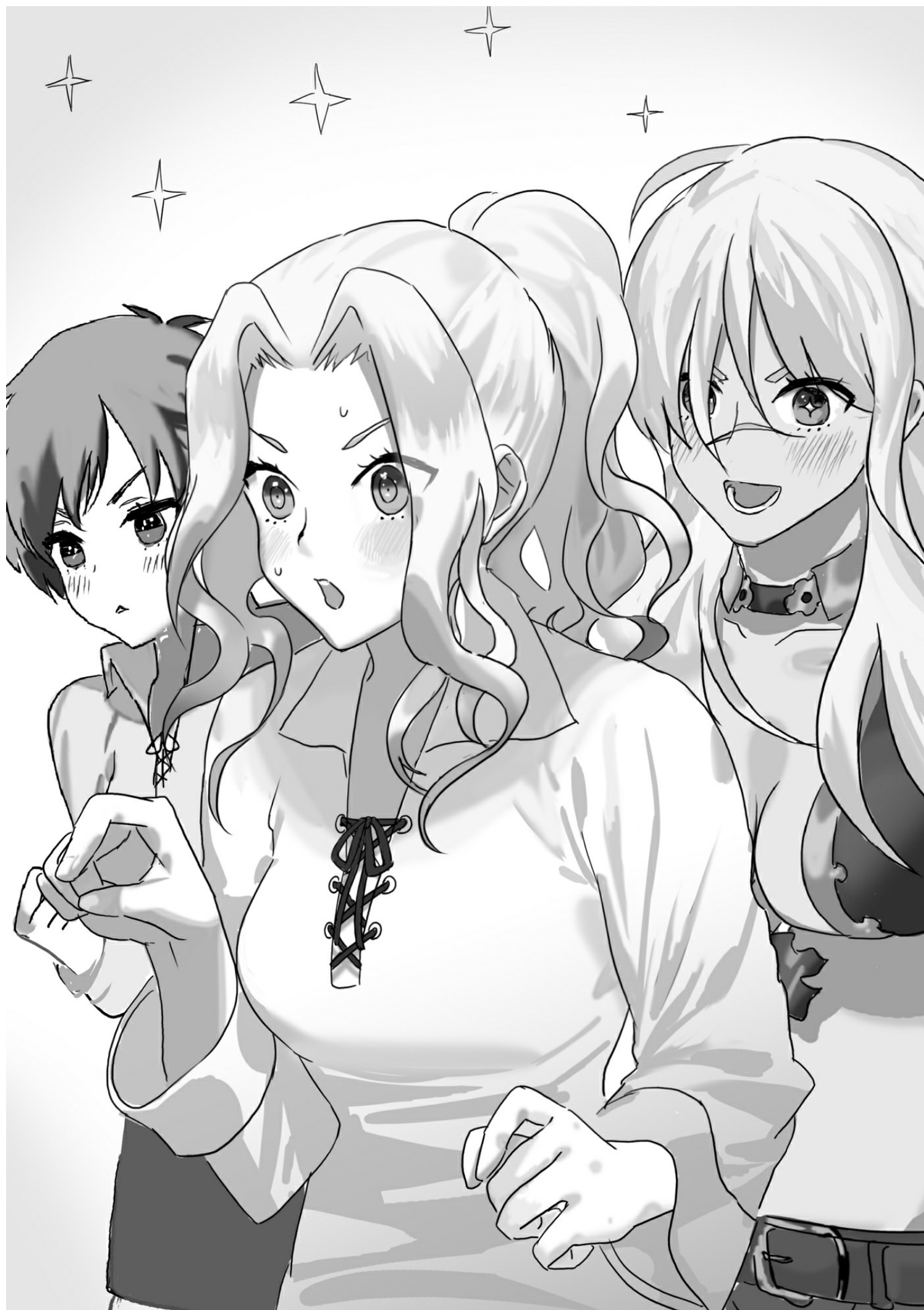
"Is the 'elusive ingredient' you're referring to vespian honey?"

"Precisely. Only a handful of bottles are sold a year, and only by Luburk."

"You mean this stuff?" I produced a small barrel and a keg from my magic bag and opened the lids.

"C-C-C..." Elizabeth started to cluck like a hen. "Can it be?!"

Beatrice and Saran behind her began to repeatedly mumble “mead” under their breath like they’d lost their minds.



“I had a bit of a run-in with the vespians and gave them a hand with something. We’re on good terms now.”

“Luciel.” Lumina grabbed my shoulders and put her face right up to mine. “Would you be willing to share?”

My heart skipped a beat. “Er, well, you guys did get here in record time. You can have some honey and mead as a thank you.”

“Really?!”

“It’s the least I can do for everything you guys have done for me.”

“You have our thanks, Luciel.”

Lumina threw her arms around me, and I stiffened like a board. We quickly separated and blushed, noticing our awkwardness, until the rest of the Valkyries dogpiled me. I looked to Lionel and the others for help, but I was abandoned. With a new lesson learned about the strength of women’s hugs, I remembered what I’d forgotten.

“Oh yeah, I haven’t met the healers yet,” I said.

“Right you are,” Lumina replied. “But a moment first, please.”

“What is it?”

She guided me away from the table.

“Yes?” I asked again.

“It concerns the healers. Three of them had their own clinics but shut them down when your guidelines were passed.”

“Why would the Church send them to me? Was it the human supremacists?”

“I believe so. The fourth healer, however, was put forth by Her Holiness herself. She just... How do I say this?”

What could have been wrong with a healer recommended by the pope?

“Go on.”

“She has a rather poor opinion of you.”

“I see. Well, worst case scenario, I can leave them at some Healer’s Guild.”

“Be on your guard.”

“Thanks for the warning.”

After being introduced to the healers, I took Lumina to the underground cell where we were keeping the mercenaries. Their exhausted state surprised her at first, until I explained that Dhoran was the one who’d made the magic prison, and she instantly understood.

Later, once the following day’s plans were settled, my team and I got back to planning our journey to the Kingdom of Dwarves. When I told the mayor that we intended to leave the next day, he bowed and insisted that we allow the village to throw a banquet in our honor. It went on late into the night, but the Valkyries weren’t in attendance. They decided to abstain until their mission was complete, upon which they would enjoy the mead I’d given them once they returned to the Holy City.

It was the middle of the night when I remembered that I hadn’t cleaned Forêt Noire with Purification that day. I left the tent, waved to Ketty and Kefin on night watch, and headed for the stable Dhoran had set up. But before I could enter, I heard a voice. I peeked inside, wondering who else would be up at this hour, and saw the female healer. She seemed to be talking to Forêt.

“Having a nice chat?” I called out.

She started. “Wh-What?!” Then she mumbled something.

“I forgot to clean up my partner here.”

“Oh. Excuse me.”

“No need to apologize. As long as Forêt likes you, I don’t see any problem.” I approached and cast the cleansing magic. “Sorry it took me so long, girl.” The horse brayed in reply. “I know. I won’t forget next time.”

Suddenly, I felt a strange chill down my spine and whipped around, but only the woman was there. She simply stood and watched me in astonished silence. Something felt strange. Had she tried to cast a spell on me? Something felt *very* off.

“Did you...” I began before finally recognizing her. “Wait, Estia? Is that you?”

“What? Y-Yes, that’s my name.”

I’d heard it when we were introduced, obviously, but the pieces were finally falling into place.

“I mean the Estia from the Merratoni Healer’s Guild. Excuse me if I’m mistaken.”

“H-How do you remember that?”

“Well, your name jogged my memory, for starters. And I thought you looked familiar. I wasn’t positive when I first saw you, though.”

“Oh,” she muttered quietly.

Lumina had told me that I wasn’t exactly her favorite person, and I’d gotten strange vibes from her earlier, but Forêt seemed perfectly calm. Maybe we had just gotten off on the wrong foot.

“I’m gonna head out. We’re leaving tomorrow, so don’t stay up too late.”

“Okay,” she muttered again. “I won’t.”

“Goodnight.”

I returned to my tent and let the angel’s pillow whisk me off into a wondrous dreamland.

*

Estia remained in the stable after Luciel left. She held herself, trembling.

“How? How does he remember me? No one remembers me unless I want them to.” A black magical aura emanated from the woman. “What do I do?” she asked the arcane mist.

“*Be calm, Estia,*” a voice echoed inside her head.

“How am I supposed to be calm? I tried every kind of magic I have, but nothing worked.”

“*That man is more resilient than he looks. Status ailments will be hard to inflict on him.*”

“Then what am I supposed to do? I can’t use holy magic, let alone *healing magic!*”

“I will help, though it will cost a great amount of your mana. Save what you can.”

“I don’t want to spend the rest of my life running away! I can’t go back to that!”

“Calm yourself, Estia. Fluna will help you again if she must.”

“You think she will?”

“She will.”

“Okay.” The aura dispersed as peace finally washed over her.

“I will save you, sister,” the voice said. But not to Estia.

Forêt Noire simply watched the poor girl in lonely silence.

03 — The Healer's Paradigm

The next day, the Valkyries left with the mercenaries, including the twenty-two we had encountered in Yenice. Sagius wanted to go with them, but seeing as he and his men were going to quit the merc business, I made sure to send a letter of pardon with him. I had also given Lumina a rundown on their situation and hoped I would come across their future restaurant at some point.

Meanwhile, my team returned to our route along the Yenitian border, westbound. We'd purchased two more horses from the village and placed the healers into a new, Dhoran-made carriage, driven by Kefin.

Soon after we left, I learned about what had kept Pola and Lycian so quiet all this time. They'd been building something.

"Horses sure run fast without the weight of the carriage on them," I commented.

"I've never seen weight reduction to this degree before," Lionel replied.

The rivals had been putting their minds together to create the world's most comfortable wagon ride.

"We'll reach Rockford in no time at this rate."

"As long as the road remains clear, we should make good time and avoid breaking axles en route."

"Keep us heading the right way, Dhoran."

"Aye," the dwarf said. "Simple stuff. Follow the highway."

He seemed more excited than usual, which only made sense, considering he was going home for the first time in ages. Pola, on the other hand, was somewhat quiet. Perhaps because she was a human-dwarf twinblood?

"I hope there are no more bandits," I griped.

"And I hope the next village has an inn," Lionel added.

On that point, we agreed. Hopefully, we would get to actually stay in it this time, with Sagius's group gone. We also needed to stock up on cooking

supplies.

“Please just stay peaceful... Oh, spoke too soon. Monsters on the highway?”

“Perhaps from the valley to the left,” Lionel surmised.

I summoned the Holy Dragon spear from the magic bag. I still wasn’t comfortable enough with mounted combat to use the Illusion Sword while on horseback, but spears were easier. Sheer combat experience was more important than weapon specialization right now.

Large lizards and giant snakes were blocking the way, hissing and snapping at one another. As we approached, they noticed us and turned their fangs in our direction.

“My first fight since you started giving me those horseback fighting lessons. Sorry in advance, Forêt,” I said to my partner.

“You needn’t trouble yourself, sir. Allow me to lead the charge.”

“No, I’ll go.”

The vague silhouette of a cat-woman sped between me and Lionel while we debated. “Bored! Gonna fight!”

Lionel and I exchanged glances, then chased after her. Reins in one hand, spear in the other, Forêt and I charged the enemy. As we neared our target, I readied the spear in both hands and gripped my steed with my thighs to steady my posture. I trusted her to dodge any attacks coming our way as I decided whether to swipe or stab, ultimately choosing to stab when I saw an opening. But my stance was unsteady and we passed the monster by.

I had her gallop a ways away and turned to make another pass, but Lionel and Ketty had already beaten us to it. Forêt whinnied in disappointment. I patted her neck and returned to the team.

“I know you’re fast, Ketty, but Lionel, how did you do that so quickly?”

“A mountain of experience,” he answered with a shameless smirk. “And my steed is rather shrewd. I’ve been holding spears since I was just a boy, for over thirty years now. Given time, you could be just as skilled.”

“Sir Lionel’s never lost a target on horseback,” Ketty said proudly. She had

taken out several of the lizards in an instant, each with a single headshot, so by my standards a woman strong enough to be called “the Nightgleam” had plenty to brag about.

“Great, you’re all strong,” I said. “But wasn’t this supposed to be training for me?”

“Semantics,” Lionel stated.

“Whatever. Ketty, why’d you jump out of the carriage?”

“Was bored,” she replied. “Pola and Lycian keep chanting weird crap, and I’m sure not movin’ to the *other* wagon. Dhoran said I could pounce in and fight.”

Yeah, no, he probably just hadn’t been paying attention. Ketty apparently needed Kefin to hold her in check, or she’d go nuts. Was this a concern to take to Lionel, or was I worrying about nothing again? I did that often.

“Chanting, you said? Didn’t you tell me earlier that they were ‘havin’ a magic get-together today’? Is it bothering you?” I asked.

“I-It’s not...*not* bothering me,” she mumbled. “If I hear one more spell get recited, this kitty’s gonna lose her mind!”

“Would you rather ride with Kefin?”

“You sure like that guy, Chief, but all he’s been doing is sitting there and starin’ at nothing.”

He did seem a little more dazed than usual. Honestly, we hadn’t really needed the extra healers, and most of them didn’t look all that motivated to be here. They were definitely the Church HQ types.

“How’s Dhoran looking to you?”

“Happy his granddaughter’s got a new friend. I catch him lookin’ back and smilin’ at them every now and then.”

Pola and Lycian really did go well together. It couldn’t be easy finding another person to talk with about magic items so passionately. Well, I did potentially know one in the Holy City, but she was probably one of the reincarnated.

“Good to hear. Sorry, Ketty, but we’re gonna keep things as they’ve been for

now. You don't have to pay attention to the magic stuff. Focus on scouting if you want."

"Gotcha. I'll help drive or let the yammering lull me to sleep if I get tired."

"Don't let yourself get too stressed. Take Kefin scouting with you if you need to."

"Got it!"

Handing over Kefin sure made her happy. I didn't know if Kefin shared the sentiment, but I needed him to keep an eye on her.

Over the course of the next hour, the valley vanished behind us, and by the second hour, it had been replaced by forest. Beyond was the unexplored territory to the west of Yenice. The prospect of breaking new ground excited me, but the thought of the ground breaking *me* made me get over the idea pretty quick.

"I wonder if there are any unique monsters here, like in the forest in Yenice," I mused.

"My knowledge of Shurule's territory is limited, but species can vary or even exist in stronger varieties," Lionel replied.

"Then these uninhabited woodsy areas must be pretty dangerous."

"Not in Shurule. Lord Reinstar's Blessing, the barrier that surrounds the republic, stretches across here, so any monsters we encounter should be weaker."

Lord Reinstar had done a good job keeping the big, strong monsters away, but not labyrinths. Maybe they were connected to some different space in reality or something.

"Has anyone ever considered the fallibility of that thing? Knock on wood. Not that I want to be the one to test it."

"I welcome the prospect of challenging foes. The thrill of battle reminds us of the joy of being alive, and the rush of victory proves our strength."

I'd forgotten who I was talking to. I only had myself to blame. Still, I did feel a

little anxious. Some monsters could fly, others could dig, and some were crafty and could lay traps. The chances of being ambushed by creatures like that weren't exactly zero, especially if airborne enemies could fly over the barrier. But what if we could create a barrier that covered every avenue of attack? On the other hand, how would I even learn that sort of magic? The only talk I'd heard of something like that was in legends about spells invented by Lord Reinstar himself.

I suddenly had a flash of brilliance. If we couldn't do it with spells, why not with magic items?

"We could make barrier generators," I mumbled to myself.

Even if towns only had devices that could pinpoint the location of potential threats, it would make defense significantly easier to maintain. And if we could shrink it down into a handheld form, the adventuring profession would be changed forever.

More ideas started to pop into my head. I made note of each one, regardless of how realistic they were. Subtly, of course, so as not to out myself as one of the reincarnated.

Finally, we spotted the fortifications of a small town. Before, with the Order of Healing, Jord would have been ordering Palaragus to herald our arrival, but recently, it had come to my attention that no one in my current troupe was the heralding type. I ended up settling for Lionel.

"Mind riding ahead and telling them an S-rank's arriving?" I asked him.

"Whether I mind is of no importance," he said. "None of us are quite suited for the job. It will be a new experience."

"Right. Thanks."

"It will be done."

As I watched him leave, I couldn't help but irritably wonder why we had gotten *four healers* but not a single templar or paladin.

The villagers welcomed us with open arms. Lionel introduced the mayor, and

when I asked if he had any citizens in need of healing, he only answered after some hesitation. This made me realize that although the healing guidelines had been in effect for well over a year now, there were still people who didn't trust them...even in Shurule. People were still too scared of the prices to visit clinics and be healed. And this was what I, the S-rank healer, was traveling around to rectify. But at the same time, I was no Lord Reinstar. I knew that I could—and *should*—act only within the bounds of what I was capable of.

I struck a deal with the mayor to let us heal as many injuries as his people had, every little cut or pulled muscle, in return for food. It would give me an idea of what the new healers were capable of too. Lumina had told me that all of them, excluding Estia, had owned clinics, so regardless of their character, they surely knew how to walk the walk.

The test began and the healers got to work on my orders, but I found myself scowling before long. They were skilled enough to use High Heal, as expected, but their basic understanding of healing was a far cry from my own. Although the wounds they treated closed, they left nasty scars. Estia, meanwhile, was so poor at handling magic that a single Heal spell caused sweat to bead on her forehead. Still, she produced far cleaner results than the others, leaving no traces of injury on her patient, and I started to wonder if the pope had sent her to me so that I could refine her technique.

Later, I offered to take care of the leftover scars and clean up any remaining discomfort, healing everyone who stepped forward. After asking the mayor to prepare lunch for us as payment for our services, I had everyone but me and the healers leave the room. I addressed them first with a recount of the Order of Healing's creed, then proceeded with their evaluations.

"Your Holy Magic skills are impressive for sure. I can certainly understand why you were chosen to join the new Order." Among the horribly disguised smug looks of superiority, one healer was hanging her head. "But as far as real *healing* goes, despite being the least skilled, Estia has every one of you beat."

Estia looked up. "What?"

The other healers frowned.

"Let me explain. Magic is a skill, right? Every affinity has one." The frowning

healers looked curious while Estia continued to gape. “The more you use a skill, the higher its level gets. The higher its level, the more spells you can cast. Estia is the youngest among you, so her lack of ability is to be expected.”

“Then I can’t be the best one here,” she argued. “Surely you made a mistake.”

“No. The reason I say that is because you, more than anyone else, truly put the patient first. The fact that your work didn’t leave a single scar speaks to that. The rest of you, however, left traces behind. I don’t know if that’s because you’ve gotten complacent or what, but your spellcasting was disingenuous.”

“Mister Luciel,” one of the healers spoke up, “I understand your point, but you seriously can’t be telling us that a child who can barely cast *Heal* is better than all three of us.”

I didn’t think I’d said anything all that inflammatory, but maybe we could use this chance to lay our grievances out in the open. They hadn’t spoken much until now, so figuring them out had been difficult.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying,” I replied. “At least in this particular case.”

“Then I suppose we don’t think alike, do we?”

“I suppose we don’t. But like I said, one of our goals as the Order of Healing is to improve the sullied image of our profession. To return to a time when healers were respected.”

One of the men cackled. “A jokester too! What *can’t* you do?”

“Such grandeur. I can feel the wind in my sails already,” another quipped.

“Or is that meant to be a jab at us for running our clinics into the ground?” the last added.

Lumina’s warning had evidently been accurate.

“I’m sorry about what happened to your clinics,” I said, “but as long as you’re in the Order, you’re going to do things our way.”

“Quite the idealist, Mister Luciel.”

“I can hardly believe we’re speaking to the man who traveled to another country, subjugated the population, and enslaved its people.”

“Frankly, that’s what I’m most interested in learning how to do...”

So that was how they saw me, huh? Out of context, my actions did look bad from a pessimist’s point of view. The thought of all the nasty rumors the Valkyries hadn’t informed me of was somewhat frightening. I knew they were only egging me on, and nothing they said was wrong per se, but I wasn’t about to take this lying down.

“Oh, that’s easy,” I scoffed. “All you have to do is master holy magic, slay a dragon, tackle racial discrimination, improve workplace conditions, and privately fund the construction of a school for children.” Deafening silence. “Do all that and your slaves won’t let you free them, even if you beg them to go. Give it a try. Any more questions?” Nothing. “No? Good. Lunch is probably almost ready. Let’s go.”

I exited the room.

*

Estia followed Luciel out shortly after. She couldn’t stand to breathe the same air as those despicable healers for a second longer. There was nothing she despised more than their kind. She spotted the S-rank walking a ways ahead and nearly called out to him but stopped in her tracks. The mountain of questions she had seemed to be stuck in her throat.

“Who are you?” she wondered aloud. “Which rumors are real, and which are lies?”

As Luciel disappeared from view, Estia felt the tension leave her, and she continued after him once more.

*

I asked the mayor over lunch if there were any other villages or towns nearby, and he pointed us in the direction of a particularly bustling one called Affre just a few hours away. He offered to let us spend the night, but I figured we ought to hurry and decided we’d set off after a short break.

In the meantime, I relayed my ideas for barrier-generating magic items to Dhoran, Pola, and Lycian. Their eyes all shot open at once.

“You’re a genius, lad!”

“A savant!”

“With such a device, people might live in complete peace from monsters!”

The three of them flew into deep, confusing conversation with many complicated terms that went right over my head.

Noticing my plight, Lionel frowned and remarked, “True, the threat of monsters would diminish, but it wouldn’t be long before nation-states tried to appropriate the technology for military use.”

“I don’t think that’s necessarily true,” Ketty argued. She didn’t often contradict Lionel’s opinions. I shot a glance at her, but her mind was already somewhere else.

“Mister Luciel,” Kefin spoke up, clenching his fist, “I support your goal for world peace. I say we make a statement.”

I hadn’t considered the military applications, but that was why second opinions were valuable to have. Maybe it wouldn’t be a bad idea to have the others start submitting their own proposals. It would help to facilitate communication and keep Dhoran and the rambunctious rivals motivated, although we would need to make sure the crafters had what they required. We couldn’t just toss them a list of things to do and tell them to make it.

“I’m sure Dhoran can figure something out,” I said. “He’s good at pretty much everything. Cooking included.”

“Aye,” the dwarf chimed in, evidently done with his other conversation. “I learned a good deal o’ things to make sure Pola got raised right.”

“Watching you cook and make so many things might be what inspired her to become an artificer, don’t you think?”

“Could be. For better or worse, who knows, but I don’t regret it a bit.”

I wondered what that meant, but a thought came to me: what if they put their crafting skills to use in the kitchen?

“You know, a magic item that could cook a bunch of ingredients according to a recipe would be pretty handy,” I suggested.

“Genius!” Pola shouted.

“We must create this device!” Lycian cried.

They’d been listening in too. And Lycian was just as awful at cooking as Pola, so they were even more excited about this idea than the last one.

“Specifics?” Pola asked.

“Be as exacting as you like,” Lycian said.

“Uh, specifics... Right.” I thought for a bit. “Well, you put ingredients in. And you can record recipes. And it follows it perfectly, one step at a time.”

“That’s not very helpful,” Pola griped.

Computerization was foreign to them. Right.

“All right, what about a tool that freezes food quickly, then dehydrates it with pressure? All you’d have to do is add hot water to eat it again. It’d work well for emergency rations.”

The three crafters froze.

“Jerky is dried, salted, and spiced to prolong its shelf life, right?” I began to explain based on something I’d seen on TV about freeze-drying. “If we can use that same sort of technique, you could enjoy entire meals just by rehydrating the food.”

I wasn’t sure it would be possible to replicate in this world, but it was worth a shot.



“Monster radars, food preservation,” Pola muttered. “You really are a genius. Or maybe I was right all along. You might be God.”

“Pola, this is going to require our combined talents to make it a reality,” Lycian declared.

“Right. An entire meal made with only hot water? It’s the dream of all kitchen disasters.”

“This will change the world.”

“What happened to actually preserving the preserved food?” I butted in. But my voice fell on deaf ears. The two shared a firm handshake and returned to their own world.

I turned around to start getting ready, but Lionel and the others were staring at me.

“What?” I asked.

“Such inspiration for someone so young,” Lionel said in a strangely quiet tone. “You consider not only how to protect people from monsters but hunger as well.”

“I could use that second one, personally,” Ketty grinned. Somehow, I knew she’d say that.

“Shoot any weapon or armor ideas my way,” Dhoran requested.

I didn’t like the idea of the military using my creations, so I didn’t feel very motivated on that front. Still, there were the reincarnated to worry about, like Rina and Hatori. I had to consider self-defense.

I felt Kefin’s passionate gaze. His gaze had been boring a hole through me for a while now. Come to think of it, Dhoran and Pola had confiscated some kind of magic bra from the guy when he’d first raided the Healer’s Guild in Yenice as well as, if my sources were accurate, a matching pair of magic panties whose benefit increased when they were equipped together.

“Sorry, I don’t lean that way,” I said.

“What?” he shot back.

Listen, I had to make sure all the cards were on the table. But I did feel a little bad for being a bit indelicate. At any rate, I knew where he stood now. A man's fetish didn't determine his preference for gender, after all.

"So did you have something to say?"

"Er, no," he stammered. "I just think I've found a new goal to strive for."

I would have felt incredibly uncomfortable with that statement had I not cleared up the misunderstanding earlier.

"Don't forget to put in the work."

"Yes, sir," he nodded enthusiastically.

After a bit of small talk, our break ended and we departed for Affre. Before we left, Estia asked if she could change carriages or take a horse, so I offered her the latter hoping she would make a better herald moving forward. And yes, the horse I gave her was one of many that made me eat dirt the second I tried to ride it. I simply had to accept the sad truth that I would be forever hated by my equestrian brethren.

Somewhere along the road, we felt the ground shake. An earthquake. This sort of phenomenon was rare but not unheard of, considering the powers that people like Dhoran had, so no one panicked.

"Hopefully nothing's happened in Affre," I said.

"Shall we pick up the pace?" Lionel suggested.

"Maybe. But stay on guard."

"Sir."

We increased our speed, but it wasn't long before another earthquake hit.

"Does this happen often around here?" I asked.

"I've not heard of any region in the world with quakes this frequent," Lionel replied.

"Then we'd better hurry. If earthquakes aren't common, no one will know what to do if something bad happens."

The tremors continued without abating for the rest of our journey. We finally reached the town at dusk. I was hesitant to send Estia in by herself, so I assigned Lionel to guard her, and both of them went ahead to inform the town of our arrival.

When the rest of us joined them, Lionel had a report ready on damage from the earthquakes.

“How do things look?” I asked.

“The buildings are all stable, it seems,” he reported.

“That’s good, at least.”

“There were some minor injuries. They’ve been seen to by the local clinics.”

“Good.” I hadn’t considered it, but it made sense for a town this big to have a Healer’s Guild. “Let’s make the rounds for anyone else who needs healing.”

My three healers suddenly jumped out of the carriage.

“Mister Luciel, there are already clinics,” one argued. “You’re going to run around and steal their profits?”

“Your rank surely doesn’t give you the right to act with abandon,” another added.

“Actions have consequences that need to be considered,” the last preached.

They sure were making a show for the passing townsfolk.

“My actions and their consequences are well considered,” I countered. “My help won’t be needed if the town’s healers are doing their jobs well, but I refuse to let a single patient die when I could have been there to save them. How can you call yourselves healers while forsaking people?”

“Drivel,” a healer spat.

“If we can’t see eye-to-eye on this, then none of you are fit to be in the Order of Healing,” I stated. “You’re all free to return to the Holy City, but I’ll warn you now, your clinics are doomed to fail with thinking like that.”

“You little...” one of them snarled. “You’ll regret this one day.”

The trio disappeared into the crowd of people.

“Sorry about that, folks. Is there anyone hurt?”

Afterwards, we reserved rooms at the inn, then took a stroll around town. We met many people along the way. An old man with a broken hip from a fall during the earthquakes. A carpenter with chronic numbness in his arm from a hack healing job. A woman with a scar left behind on her face by a passing monster. I healed them all. I couldn't deny that it was partly for my own egotistic desire, but I made a stand that day. This wasn't just for me; it was for the reputation of every healer, present and future.

As for what became of the three rowdy healers, Ketty told me they'd hightailed it to the Healer's Guild. All I could do was hope they would cool down and make the right choice by morning. We enjoyed a nice meal, then called it a day.

04 — Earthquakes, Monsters, and Foreshadowing

The three healers were nowhere to be seen at the guild the next morning. They'd apparently stirred up trouble, shouting about how my actions were unbecoming of my station, which the guildmaster apologized profusely for. I needed to know more about whoever was responsible for choosing those people to join our ranks, so I wrote a letter to Her Holiness asking for details.

We hurried and purchased enough food to last us several days, then made for our next destination: Rockford, the city of artisans and crafters.

The trip west was smooth, without a single monster encounter for two days straight.

"Sure is peaceful out here," Ketty commented loudly.

"Mister Luciel tends to find himself at the center of trouble, but we certainly don't need any more of it," Lionel remarked, just audibly enough for Kefin to hear.

"I'm gonna lose my mind," the other man groaned.

Lionel and Ketty weren't exceptions, but Kefin seemed particularly stressed out from driving the carriage for so long. The other two enjoyed tormenting him in their free time. He'd spent the past two days running around and doing what he could to loosen up.

We let our guard down that night, and that was when it happened. The occasional light tremor had become commonplace enough that we ignored it until they started getting bigger and cracks began forming in the ground.

"That's a big one," I said, lowering myself onto Forêt to keep my balance. The rumbling slowly dissipated. "Everyone okay?"

The question was unwarranted for one person in particular. Dhoran was hyperventilating, his eyes unfocused, and he looked ready to throw up. He was sweating bullets.

"Dhoran," I called to him. "Hey, Dhoran. You okay?"

"I-I'm fine," he managed to wheeze.

"You don't look fine to me."

I approached and cast Recover on him. His eyes gradually returned to normal as his panic passed. It was a textbook example of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and the quake must have been the trigger.

"Stop trying to act tough and tell me what's going on. Does the shaking remind you of when you lost your arms?" I asked.

"Can't hide anything from you, eh? I just..." He hesitated. "It happened so suddenly. Still can't believe it. It was an earthquake. Gods, I can't tell ya how many times I've thought to myself how things mighta been if that damn earthquake hadn't come. I'd have never lost my arms. I'd have my forge. I'd..."

"Maybe. Maybe you would have all that. But would you still have Pola?" I continued to cast Recover.

"You're right. I protected her. I've still got her." He stared at his hands, opening and closing them repeatedly. It seemed to calm him. "And my arms now."

Pola shot out of the carriage and ran to her grandfather. "Are you okay, grandpa?"

"I'm okay, lass. Honest. Have I ever lied ta you?"

"Sometimes."

Dhoran chuckled. "Suppose I do."



Some things were just impossible to cure with healing magic. Blood and broken bones were one thing, but wounds of the mind needed a more delicate touch. Sometimes what you needed was someone to lean on. Like family.

“I don’t know if I can really understand the pain you went through,” I said to him, “but what I can do is use my healing magic or just be an ear to listen if you need it. Talking can help sometimes. Just tell me if you ever feel off.”

“Y’know, I’ve done a lot o’ hating the lot life’s given me.” He smiled. “But that’s changed ever since ya found me. I’m grateful for that.”

Pola looked relieved to see her grandfather back to normal. “Thankfully” didn’t feel like the right word to use, but I was glad that she didn’t seem to share his symptoms.

I had one last thing on my mind, and it felt tasteless to bring up given the circumstances, but it was important.

“Have earthquakes been more common in Rockford in recent years?” I asked.

“Not exactly,” Dhoran replied. “Only about one a year or so, from what I recall.”

“I’m starting to want to change course to Merratoni.”

We wouldn’t have to worry about bandits and monsters with Master Brod around, we’d have delicious meals prepared by Gulgar, and Nanaella and Monica were there. Who said we *needed* to go to Rockford first? If my gut was right (and it probably was), the earthquakes were dragon-related, and dragons meant more labyrinths. Nu-uh, no thanks. But Dhoran wasn’t the giving-up type, and I guess I had to respect his wishes.

“I’m fine. Got promises to keep and graves to visit. I wanna tell the souls o’ my old pals that I’m holdin’ a hammer again.” The dwarf was back to his old self, determination in his eyes.

“All right then. How much farther is it?”

“Not far, but looks like we’ve got company first.”

Ketty yipped. “Chief, somethin’s crawlin’ outta the cracks in the ground! Ants!”

I used the hermit key. “Inside, Forêt. Lionel, your horse!”

“I will fight from the saddle,” he said.

“I’ll let you out as soon as I can,” I comforted my partner as I urged her into the extradimensional space. “I promise I’ll get better at fighting while riding you.” I shut the door behind her. “How many are there?”

“Twenty, thirty... More than fifty, looks like,” Ketty answered.

“These insectoids are sturdy and armored, but their joints are weak,” Lionel explained. “They attack by biting or spitting acid.”

“Got it.” I looked at Dhoran. “You’re sure you don’t need to rest?”

“What I need is to smash some bugs and get my hands on some earth-type stones.” Yeah, he was back on form.

“Good to hear. Go all out and let loose. As long as you don’t get yourself killed, I can save you.”

“Aye!” He readied his warhammer.

Pola summoned a giant golem next to her grandfather, the construct striking a fighting pose, preparing to intercept the incoming ants.

“Kefin, protect Estia,” I ordered.

“Yes, sir!”

The ants were on us moments later. But, to be honest, “on us” might have been giving them too much credit. The things were astonishingly weak. Their strength lay mostly in their numbers. I’d nearly forgotten how ridiculously overpowered my Holy Dragon spear and Illusion Sword were because I used them so often, but I was reminded of their strength when they sliced through the creatures’ exoskeletons like butter. I was never in any danger of being surrounded, which gave me enough time to survey our surroundings. We’d taken out fifty of them in mere seconds.

“Is it just me, or does it seem like there are more of them now?” I asked.

“There are indeed more of them,” Lionel said.

“They’re gettin’ tougher too,” Ketty added.

“Sounds like it’s our turn, Pola,” Dhoran chimed in. Pola nodded. “Take ’em out!”

At Dhoran’s cry, the three-meter-tall golem grew to five meters and began to squash the ants beneath its feet in a way reminiscent of a pro wrestling move. Or did I just *think* it looked like pro wrestling because of how I’d seen it fight in the labyrinth in Yenice? And now it was kicking the monsters around like soccer balls. It was absolutely destroying the ants. Where had Pola gotten the inspiration for its fighting style? Was there some sort of manual for golem combat? I received no answers to these questions, but they occupied my mind long enough for the fight to end.

“That golem would be unstoppable if it didn’t have limits,” I remarked.

“You’d have a hard time beatin’ it unless you knew a weak point or two,” Ketty agreed.

“Perhaps it would serve well for battle simulations against giants,” Lionel mused in his own battle-crazed way.

“It’s dark, so let’s save the dissecting for tomorrow,” I said, purposefully ignoring Lionel’s comment. “But let’s make sure they’re all dead first.”

I took some lights from the magic bag and handed them to everyone. Once we were sure nothing was going to get back up, I stored the corpses in the bag and cast Purification around the area to keep the miasma to a minimum.

“There were over a hundred of them,” I noted. “Is that normal for this area?”

“My familiarity with the region is a little outdated, but it does seem strange,” Lionel replied.

“We’re pretty much in Rockford’s backyard, right? I assume there aren’t any labyrinths nearby.”

“Several mines, but none have become labyrinths to my knowledge.”

So did that mean they *could* turn into them? No, I was surely overthinking things.

“Yeah, how would a mine turn into a labyrinth?” I asked myself.

“Can’t say.” Dhoran crossed his arms. “But you can tell if the creatures are

from labyrinths by whether they leave corpses or just poof into stones.”

“Anyway, we’ll camp out for the night,” I said, changing the subject. “After dinner, I want the night watch in shifts of three.”

I lit the anti-monster incense I’d gotten from the Doctor’s Guild, but there was no telling how effective it would be outdoors. I’d sleep better knowing someone was keeping an eye out just in case.

*

Estia and Ketty ended up on watch together. The healer woman had been keeping a close eye on Luciel since joining him, and there was something she had noticed but never had the chance to confirm. Tonight was the perfect opportunity.

“Ketty,” she said, “can I ask you something?”

The cat-woman narrowed her daggerlike eyes. “What?”

Estia recoiled in surprise at the lack of her usual cheeriness. “Um, well, I heard you were Mister Luciel’s slave?”

“You heard right.”

“I also heard that, um, you’re a slave by choice.”

“You heard right. Save your breath, I know you’re about to ask me why. You’re going to assume I’ve been ordered to do something against my will, and then you’ll offer to help rescue me. Did I hit the mark?”

Estia blinked. “Um,” she stammered, “I...”

“I know you’ve been snooping around. Not out of malice like the other three, but something disgusts you. You’ve been a slave before, haven’t you?”

“What?!”

How did she find out?! Estia thought frantically. I can’t stay here!

“To answer your question, I became Mister Luciel’s slave by pure coincidence. And frankly, I consider myself fortunate. I’m free, I can stay with my old master, we travel. As for why I prefer being a slave... Well, that’s because being an S-rank’s property has its perks, and he’s never once forced me to do anything.”

She'd sure hit the mark.

"How do you know everything I'm going to ask before I even ask it?"

"A kitty has her secrets." The cat-woman struck a feline pose.

"Could you tell me what kind of person he is? From your point of view."

"He's a master of holy magic and the biggest goody two-shoes you'll ever meet. A wimp. A bit of a loser. A whiner. But dedicated, strong-willed, and he keeps things interesting. Couldn't care less about coin. He's one-in-a-million. Any more questions?"

"No... No, ma'am."

"You wouldn't be the first person to have it in for healers, but I suggest you refrain from taking that out on Luciel."

Estia put a hand to her mouth and began to cry. Ketty remained next to her in strained, awkward silence.



*

No more monsters attacked us the next morning, but we did discover holes all over the ground about half a meter wide now that we had sunlight.

“So that’s where they came from, not the cracks from the earthquake,” I remarked. “We could get the carriage stuck in one of these if we’re not careful. Could even break an axle.”

“Considering their numbers, it may be wise for us to proceed slowly,” Lionel cautioned me.

“Yeah, guess we should. It’s been relatively smooth sailing so far, so might as well.”

What would we have done if we’d found a colony of giant ants while digging under Yenice? Heaving a sigh of relief that we didn’t exist in such a reality, I summoned the carriage from my magic bag and we resumed our journey. We were about three or four days out from Rockford.

“Those ants didn’t fly or spit acid or anything. They were pretty weak,” I commented. “Maybe they were scouts?”

“Perhaps,” Lionel replied. “My knowledge is limited, but multiple varieties of the same species of monster aren’t unheard of, so it’s possible.”

“Is there nowhere a guy can live in peace?”

“The headquarters of the Mage’s Guild, Neldahl, comes to mind. They have their share of run-ins with wyverns, griffons, and other winged beasts, but a barrier protects them.”

“That doesn’t sound very peaceful. Why only flying monsters?”

“Hundreds of years ago, the Sage of Time and a hero, with the help of spirit magic, lifted the city into the sky. I hear it maintains non-aggression pacts with the other nations to ensure it can never be ruled solely by one power.”

“A flying city? Wow, who would’ve... Wait, I feel like I learned about that before. Oh! Neldahl! The flying city-state!”

“The City in the Sky is a secretive entity. It’s said that it continues to fly to this

day, but none know precisely where.”

Come to think of it, I hadn’t seen it on any maps. Now, that was pretty cool. I could see an elusive floating city being a good setting for an adventure.

“Wow. The City in the Sky.”

“There’s little combat to be had there, so it’s never particularly interested me. However, they have bad blood with the Healer’s Guild, if memory serves.”

“Why?”

“Something to do with a difference in the deities they worship.”

I figured Her Holiness would have the answer. Rumors had a habit of getting exaggerated, but then again, life had a habit of not being especially fair to me.

“I wonder if that monster radar’s as realistic as I think.”

“Regardless, I will be your shield against all threats, seen or unseen. You’ve no need to worry yourself.”

“I’m counting on you.”

Suddenly, the horses pulling Dhoran’s carriage reared up. Another earthquake. I grunted, waiting for it to subside.

“Good girl, Forêt.”

She hadn’t even flinched at the shaking. Lionel’s well-trained steed was also calm. It had only lasted about half a minute, but the carriage horses continued to panic, and I shut them inside the hermit key’s dimension to let them relax for a bit. Dhoran wasn’t looking so good either, so we took a break in the meantime.

“You seem a lot better than yesterday,” I said as I cast Recover on him.

“Thanks,” he said. “Managed to keep it together by focusin’ on my hands. Remindin’ myself I still got ’em. But it still had me shaking like a leaf.”

“These things take time.”

He looked pale but lucid, which was an improvement. He was a strong man, that was for sure.

“Ants again!” Ketty cried.

She and Kefin were already in offensive positions, and Lionel was in the thick of it.

“Hell if I’ll let them show me up,” the dwarf grumbled indignantly.

“Don’t push yourself.”

“The fightin’ll help distract me. And I wanna see that smile on Pola’s face when I bring her a heap o’ stones.”

True enough, I thought.

The same kind of ants as last time poured out from the holes in the ground, which was loosened from the numerous tremors. I cast Area Barrier on everyone, then moved out of the way where there were fewer monsters and started cutting them down with the Illusion Sword.

“Not sure I like looking at their guts in the daylight.”

They came in huge, relentless groups like before, but they still went down in a single hit, so I managed without a problem. Lionel turned waves of the monsters to burning corpses as he combusted the very holes they crawled from with his flaming greatsword. The ants were hopelessly outmatched. We couldn’t let our guard down, of course, but we were hardly struggling.

Eventually, we spotted a new breed emerging—a variety with wings. But a gust of razor-sharp wind, likely sent by Lycian, sliced the wings off swiftly.

“It’s only right that I make up for my uselessness in yesterday’s battle,” she declared when our eyes met, releasing a gust at another monster as it tried to take flight.

I’d overheard bits of her and Pola’s little spat yesterday, with Pola claiming that “those who don’t fight don’t get magic stones.” I couldn’t help but smile, recalling their antics.

The fight ended soon after, but, concerningly, there had been more of the creatures than last time, and stronger variants too.

“Are the earthquakes making them come out?” I wondered.

“That certainly seems possible,” Lionel concurred.

“Think Rockford’s okay?”

“No tremor could ruin that city. And no monster has ever invaded its streets.”

“That’s good to hear.” I collected the monster corpses, praying that his optimism was warranted.

After four days of scattered ant attacks, we arrived at the artisan’s haven of Rockford at last.

05 — The Land of Makers and Inventors

The refuge of world-class crafters that Dhoran had praised to high heaven turned out to be a pretty cozy town. I'd anticipated something a little stiffer and more imposing. The city was waiting for us at the very end of the road, nestled snugly in a cradle of surrounding mountains. One thing that stood out to me was the distinct lack of a visible road to the Kingdom of Dwarves.

"You know, I was expecting a place called Rockford to be a little more rough and tumble," I said. "This place looks exceedingly normal."

With Forêt and the other horses in the hermit key's space and the carriage in the magic bag, we strolled through on foot, taking in the townscape. All the buildings and houses were constructed from either brick or stone, with no timber whatsoever. The strange thing was the lack of any...well, *artisan-y* landmarks. There were no forges or workshops from what I could see.

I looked around, and the uncomfortable feeling in my gut suddenly made more sense. "Wait, where is everyone?"

Dhoran smirked. "This town's all smoke and mirrors. There's nothin' here to pilfer either, so thugs and bandits steer clear."

I examined the area more carefully and noticed that many of the houses were dilapidated. The place was completely empty.

Pola scurried in front and took the lead. "This way."

We followed her to the cliff face of one of the mountains. She continued to walk straight towards it, her head facing back towards us, and was about to slam into the wall—

"Hey, whoa!" Just as I reached out to stop her, she slipped right into the stone. "Uh, what? How? Is the wall an illusion?"

"Aye. The work of a device that bends light to hide the entrance from folks we don't want comin' in," Dhoran explained. "You can imagine the sorta misfits that get together in a place like this, and it's not rare for a lad to have a few enemies on his tail."

“Wow,” Ketty gasped.

“I see now why the empire failed in their conquest of this place time and again,” Lionel remarked.

It was a good thing he hadn’t been part of any raiding parties or this ghost town probably would’ve been turned into a ghost *ruin*.

Dhoran guffawed. “You ain’t seen nothin’ yet.”

Someone sure seemed excited to be home. He led us to the wall and through the magic, fantasy-style projection map thing. I couldn’t hide my amazement. It was seriously impossible to tell there was anything but a wall there, and if this was just the beginning, I could see why they called Rockford a dreamland for crafters.

“The sky’s the limit with this sort of technology,” I muttered to no one.

On the other side of the wall we found no welcoming party. Only giant golems, over a dozen of them lining the hallway on each side, leading to a door at the end.

“No one better tell me we’ve got to fight all these things if we want in,” I griped.

“They’d re-form as soon as you broke one, so you’d be fighting forever,” Pola replied simply.

Well, that didn’t sound very fun. Scratch that—Lionel looked like he could barely contain himself.

I still hadn’t gotten over how weird it was to see Pola taking so much initiative. She stopped in front of one of the golems and waved us over excitedly, like a kid itching to show off how cool her house was.

“Hurry.”

“Pola,” Lycian groaned, “you’re our *guide*. We’ve never been here before.”

We proceeded, and when we arrived, the golem suddenly spoke. “TO THE ONE WHO SEEKS ENTRY, ANSWER ME THIS QUESTION, PRITHEE.” A riddle? I could feel myself getting hyped up already. “TO GRAB THE OPPONENT BY THE WAIST FROM BEHIND, THEN FOLD BACKWARDS AND BRIDGE THEM INTO THE

GROUND. WHAT IS THIS TECHNIQUE CALLED?"

And there went the hype.

"A German suplex," Pola answered.

"YOU MAY PROCEED."

"What kind of question was that?" What in the world (literally) was pro wrestling trivia doing here?

"Fella who made this place set it up so you have to answer all sorts o' questions from different categories, but a lot of it's nonsense ta me," Dhoran said. "Golems'll attack you if you try to force your way through."

"And what category was that just now?"

"Somethin' called 'pro wrestling,' I think. Some kinda hand-to-hand combat style. Pola always loved playin' with golems, so I bet she picked it up."

Who would've thought pro wrestling would be the concept to cross world barriers. Unless it was some reincarnated guy who'd passed the knowledge on... But Brod hadn't taught me any techniques like that during my training, so it was probably pretty obscure, especially given this world had magic and swords.

"What happens if you answer wrong?" I asked.

"Nothin'."

"Nothing?"

"You'll understand once we keep goin'."

"What other kinds of questions are there?"

"Some science ones like the boilin' point o' water or defining words like 'phreatic eruption.' What sorts o' minerals you can get in the mines and some math problems, but those're hell. You can get some cryptic formulas."

"So I'm guessing a certain someone founded Rockford, didn't he?"

"Lord Reinstar himself. Guy lived here doin' research for a few years. Didn't leave much behind, but what he did made a mark, I'll tell you that."

Then it was possible I could find things related to Earth here. And it wasn't

like Reinstar could have been the only reincarnated person to ever set foot in the city.

“So some of what he invented is still here?”

Dhoran grunted in affirmation. “The name ‘Rockford’ is one, but that’s a different story. See, Lord Reinstar found himself stuck on a problem that not even his skills were enough to crack, so his pals—researchers and bright minds from all over the world—gathered, and when they came together, like one big rock, they solved it. So the town became Rockford. That’s how the story goes.”

“The guy was popular, that’s for sure. Almost to an insane degree.”

Heck, I could see this being where Neldahl had been made.

“Y’know, lad, I’ve been thinkin’ you and him have a lot in common.” He grinned. “In fact, I’ve got a feeling you’ll turn out even greater.”

“I’m not so sure about that, but maybe I’ll have you guys make me something to disguise my identity so I can run away, hide, and never come back out. Just in case.”

That sounded like a solid plan to me. With renewed confidence, I proceeded down the hall.

Past the golems lay a great door, but off to the right was a more humble one. Pola ignored the larger of the two and turned towards the side door, placing her hand on the wall. A bright light shone, and the wall crumbled away.

“What’s that all about?” I asked.

“Mana authentication,” Dhoran answered. “Gettin’ registered makes things a lot easier. Won’t be getting to Rockford very easily without it.”

I was already impressed and now there was more? I had to wonder how Dhoran had ended up being enslaved with all these protections in place. The people who took him would have had to have been *allowed* into Rockford.

“Hey, can I ask how you became a slave?”

“Ah, now that’s a story,” he sighed. “It all started with a job I took from the king of the dwarves, underground, in our homeland, but I’d really rather not get into the details.”

“I understand. The Kingdom of Dwarves is underground?” I could certainly see that. We’d created something similar in Yenice, after all.

“Story goes that when the dwarves heard the elves had their own country, their pride turned ’em to the earth, where they’d make their own.”

“Wow. Oh, we should get going.”

Quickly passing through the opening Pola had created, we emerged into a vast, open area, a platform of some kind resting on a hillside with a beautiful view of the town below. This one appeared genuine, complete with districts and order.

“Forges, farms, pastures, and there’s even a sun,” I marveled.

I figured after the basements in Yenice, nothing could surprise me anymore, but boy was I wrong. This made the fields under the Healer’s Guild look amateurish in comparison. Still, the fact that Dhoran and Pola could replicate it at all was amazing.

“The best of the best live here,” Dhoran said. “Just about everyone’s got workshops ’n such on the outside too.”

“That doesn’t surprise me, but why are there farms?”

“We gotta eat to live, lad. Most have servants or slaves do the tillin’ though.”

“Is that self-sustaining?”

“The Adventurer’s Guild brings in monster meat once a week or so and we share what we have when we gotta. And it’s not like we live our whole lives here. We go out huntin’ for apprentices or to take jobs. It’s not bad livin’.”

“Home is where you make it, huh?”

“One rule, though. Can’t build a workshop without an apprenticeship.” Dhoran gave a weak smile, but there was purpose in his eyes.

A flight of stairs connected the platform to the town. As we descended, I looked out across the streets of Rockford. At the bottom, we continued along a road that stretched towards a central building. The artificial sun warmed our cheeks, and the false wind felt relaxing, like we were strolling through a cozy countryside town. There were even people here, but they were less relaxing.

“Dhoran?!” they started to cry.

“It’s Pola!”

“Dhoran’s got arms!”

“Is he back in the forge?”

But the dwarf ignored the onlookers’ surprised exclamations...until he spied someone just up ahead.

“Brother Grand,” he gasped.

“Long time no see, Dhoran. And didn’t I tell ya ta knock it off with that? You’re the younger apprentice, but ya beat me in years. Got me feelin’ all weird with names like that.”

Pola flew over to Grand and clung to him with tears in her eyes. Noticing the rest of us standing around staring, he gently pulled her off and approached us.

“Luciel. Ya have my thanks for rescuing these two.”

“You don’t need to bow,” I insisted. “I found them purely by coincidence and only bought them because they seemed talented. You don’t have to thank me.”

“Well, I’m gonna. I’d never have seen ’em again without you.”

“They’ve been a great help to me. Maybe this finally repays a bit of what I owe you for making the Illusion Staff for me.”

Grand patted my shoulder with a smile. His masterpiece was what had gotten me through the fight with the red dragon. I didn’t think I’d have made it out in one piece without its magic cost reduction abilities. How many people could make something like that, let alone craft at all with dragon parts? And I’d gotten it practically for free. I was seriously indebted to him.

“I’m glad I could deliver,” he said.

“My body is too.”

“Say, I wanna show ’em what we got waitin’. Mind if I do the honors?”

“Lead the way.”

“Dhoran, Pola, follow me.”

As we trailed behind Grand, I noticed Dhoran frowning and Pola dragging her feet. They knew their forge was this way, and it was likely dredging up bad memories. But their expressions changed in an instant when they laid eyes on it. They sprinted ahead.

“That’s it, huh? Good as new?” I asked.

“Better,” Grand replied. “Added a room for the elf girl and made it bigger. Only kept the location and exterior the same.”

“Perfect. How much will it be?”

“Keep your coin. I’m partly ta blame for Dhoran gettin’ enslaved. I wasn’t there for ‘im.”

From what little of the story I’d heard, Dhoran had been tasked with forging a ceremonial blade for the king, and his failure was what had led to his unfortunate fate. The damage was heavy, considering he’d wasted exceptionally precious minerals, but I still found the whole thing cruel. It wasn’t my place to stick my nose into cultures I didn’t understand, though.

“I’m the one who commissioned the work, and they’re *my* subordinates. I’ll pay.”

I’d reported to Her Holiness about Dhoran and Pola on numerous occasions, until one day Grand had sent me a letter expressing gratitude for saving them. Once I learned that they were from Rockford, I’d asked him to rebuild their forge. I wanted them to have a place to go home to.

“Since when’d you grow a spine?”

“How about a compromise, then? See, I’m expecting great things from my new research and development team, including a good bit of profit.”

“Now, that’s got my attention.”

“Get the rest from Dhoran. So, how much?”

“Eight platinum. You got that kinda change? I know ya don’t exactly make a killing off healin’.”

“Let’s just say my portfolio’s diverse and I’ve got money to spend.” I produced eight coins and handed them over with a grin.

“I’m not sayin’ you’ve got bad business sense or nothin’, but...”

“This is a necessary expense. Oh, also, I wanted to ask you to do some maintenance on my Holy Dragon spear and the Illusion Sword while we’re here.”

“You’re priority client number one, pal. Whadda you say we catch up with those two?”

“Good plan.”

We headed over to Dhoran and Pola’s renewed workshop.

Dhoran seemed to be acting strange when we caught up with him. Pola had gone inside already, but her grandfather froze when he tried to step forward. After some time, he simply put his hand to the door and plopped onto the ground.

“What’s wrong?”

“Just thinkin’,” he said. “I don’t know how I’m ever gonna repay you or Brother Grand for this.” There was a spark in his eyes. It appeared that the surprise had worked. Grand beamed at him.

“All I need from you is to turn my crazy ideas into reality,” I said.

“I was already planning on doin’ that, but this...” He could no longer hide the tears in his eyes. “This is just playin’ with my heart, lad.”

“Luciel told me you were still kickin’,” Grand interjected. “I knew it’d only be a matter o’ time before ya came crawlin’ back. Brothers-in-steel have each other’s backs. Aye?”

“Brother Grand!”

The dwarves embraced each other. They didn’t let go until Grand finally realized that they were drawing others’ gazes.

“Go on in, Dhoran,” I said once the emotions were out. “Lycian’s going to be living here too, but she can’t go inside until you do.”

I looked at the elf girl, and she blushed awkwardly.

“Right,” Dhoran replied. “In we go.”

With that, we invited ourselves into their new home and workplace.

The main floor of their workshop was the living space, while the basement consisted of three workshops.

“The upstairs was fine and all, but what’s going on down here?” I muttered in surprise. Not just because the basement was twice the size of the underground workshops in Yenice. Oh no, that part was trivial. It was because the place was made with a strange, semitransparent material engraved with all sorts of magic runes.

“Complete with sound dampening, vibration reduction, anti-dust, anti-corrosion, and flame retardant runes, enchanted right into diamond and adamantite walls. Won’t be blowin’ *this* forge to hell,” Grand said proudly. It looked absurdly expensive. He’d definitely undercharged me with that eight platinum. “No earthquake’s shakin’ this place. Floor’s nice and firm.”

Grand had really gone all out. The quake that had caused their former workplace to go up in smoke had informed most of the construction this time around. Pola and Lycian’s sections were situated ideally for the two rivals to shoot peeks and glares at each other. I thought they’d have an issue with this, but the two locked eyes in some kind of new partnership.

“Mister Luciel,” Lionel said, having been silent for the majority of our tour, “I’d like to request equipment from these master craftsmen, with your permission.”

“I know we’re slaves and all,” Ketty added. “But we still wanted to ask.”

It sounded like they knew of Grand. His fame must have extended all the way to Illumasia. Considering I needed gear for Estia too, I decided to give them the green light.

“Correction: you’re *self-proclaimed* slaves. You’re free to be free whenever you like, as far as I’m concerned,” I replied. “Grand, can you add four sets of equipment to that commission?”

“Wait, that includes me?” Kefin asked, perplexed.

“And, um, me?” Estia inquired similarly.

“Well, you’re not just going to be sitting around, are you?”

That was especially true of Kefin, since he knew how to fight. As for Estia...well, she had been dispatched by the pope herself, so it went without saying.

“I’ll accept anythin’ you wanna throw at me,” Grand replied. “But you won’t be gettin’ any discounts, and you’ve got a queue now. Let’s see about that maintenance first.”

“Thanks. I’ll pay whatever you need.”

“You in, Dhoran?”

“Am I in? Ha!” he hollered. “You and me, Grand. I’m gonna need your help.”

“You’ve got it.”

It seemed the pact was made. Until...

“So, what’ve you got to get started?” Grand continued. “Monster parts? Mithril? Adamantite? Orichalcum?”

“What do you have in stock?” I asked.

Grand shot me an utterly flabbergasted look. “We don’t.”

Awkward silence fell. I took it to mean that we were supposed to go lug our own rocks straight from the mine, but I wasn’t about to go putting my life on the line for some new duds.

Lionel, seemingly sensing my hesitation, gripped my shoulder. “Mister Luciel, pray indulge us. To the mines we go!”

Ketty grabbed my other shoulder. “C’mon, Chief. Promise we’ll be good.”

I grinned. “Ha ha! No.” Why? So I could somehow wind up in a mine-themed dungeon and have a lovely chat with the local Earth Dragon? Not happening. Absolutely, positively not. Someone had to be the voice of reason here. “Would the same dragon scales and bones I gave you last time for the Illusion Staff work?” I asked Grand.

“Perfectly. It’d be an honor to work with material like that again,” he replied.

“Ya sure, though? Stuff’s awfully rare.”

Jackpot. “As long as I don’t have to take a trip to the mines. How long should it take?”

“For four people? Least four months. Maybe half a year.”

The four in question looked shocked by my proposed materials, but the stuff was just taking up space in the magic bag, and I figured it should be used. Plus, it came with no mortal cost to my life. The time frame was no surprise either. I was expecting it to take a while.

“That works. Mind if we make a trip to the Holy City and Merratoni once my weapon maintenance is done and you finish taking measurements?”

If we had to wait half a year, I preferred to spend the time seeing my master and the gang again. Lionel could keep him occupied while I quietly trained in a corner. I just wanted some peace and quiet. Was that so much to ask for?

“Not a problem. Now, forget all that; tonight we celebrate Dhoran and Pola comin’ home! We’ve got some drinkin’ to do, and you’re joinin’ us,” Grand announced.

“Of course,” I answered. “It’s not very strong liquor, but I have some mead. You’re free to share.”

“Alcohol’s alcohol! It tastin’ good’s only a bonus. The hard stuff never gets old, but I’m all for somethin’ new.”

“Great. One other thing: I’d like to use this opportunity to release these two from their slave pacts. Is that all right?”

“Be my guest.”

“Wait,” Dhoran cut in, “if the kingdom gets wind o’ me they’ll—”

“They’ll nothin’,” Grand declared. “I’ve already had a chat with the king. It’s all in the past. His Majesty feels awful about eggin’ you on, makin’ you swear to forge the greatest sword ever made or be enslaved. We’ve all had one too many before, but that was no excuse.”

“I don’t go back on my word. I just never expected Pola to go with me.”

“Maybe keep your damn words to yourself this time, eh?”

“You’re right, brother. From now on, my hammer’s for forgin’ Luciel’s world and nothin’ else!”

“Shrink that head a little and make some room for me, why don’tcha?”

“So tonight, we free you,” I reiterated.

“Aye.” Dhoran lowered his head.

Crafters and artificers alike were gathered in the city’s plaza after work that evening, the fake sun low in the sky, perfectly mirroring a real sunset.

“Thank ya all for comin’,” Grand said. “We’re here to celebrate the homecoming of our favorite blacksmith and his golem-loving granddaughter.”

Cheers rose as friends shouted warm welcomes to the two.

“I’m now going to release them from their slave pact,” I announced. I cast *Dispel* without further ado. “With this, you’re no longer my slaves.”

Grand gave a firm nod. “This lad here is Luciel, who worked his way up to S-rank healer when he was just twenty. He’s the one who bought those two and he’s treated ’em well ever since.”

The people looked a little conflicted upon hearing the part about me buying slaves.

“He was a good master. Never once asked the impossible of or raised a hand against any of us. Wouldn’t even lay a finger on Pola. A dwarf’s gotta wonder where his stones are!”

Pola whacked her grandfather’s head with a nearby jug like some kind of comedy act. I let out a little chuckle while the rest of the crowd busted a gut. It clearly hadn’t been their first performance.

“I’m back,” Pola said simply. “There’s still lots I wanna learn. I hope you’ll all teach me again.”

She offered a cute bow, to raucous applause and cheers, almost like she was a local idol. This was her home. She’d grown up here. Doubtless the people had a

lot of love for her.

“Sorry we worried ya all,” Dhoran said. “But we’re here to stay this time.”

Humble applause followed.

“It’s a good day, lads and lasses!” Grand cheered. “Drink till ya drop! With Luciel here, no one’s gettin’ a hangover tonight!” The crowd hollered. “To Dhoran! To Pola! Cheers!”

“Cheers!” everyone cried.

“I can’t tell ya how sad I was ta hear what happened ta them two,” Grand slurred between sips. “Dhoran? Pola? *Slaves*? I cursed the gods, I did. Cursed His Majesty too! Not as much as he cursed himself, though, I bet. But why didn’tcha ask me for help, ya ass?”

“I didn’t mean bad by it,” Dhoran said, gulping his own drink.

“I searched ’n searched, but the only thing I found was a whole heap o’ wasted time. That’s when I gotcher letter, Luciel. When I found out he bought you both and was takin’ care o’ you. Told me you’d got your arms back, asked me ta build ya a home again. Can ya reckon how over the moon I was? Ya can’t!”

“Thanks, Uncle Grand,” Pola said.

“D’aww, you can’t do no wrong, ya goof!” Grand cooed like a doting parent, giving her head a firm pat before turning his ire back on Dhoran. “Luciel asked me to keep hush about it all. Got some weird looks from folks who saw me takin’ trips to your old workshop. It cut me deep!”

So much for being a heavyweight, I thought. The collateral damage of his drunken stupor was surely only just beginning.

Dhoran faced Grand directly and bowed. “I appreciate ya, brother.”

“Aw, ta hell with it! You’re off the hook for now, but you ain’t leavin’ till one of us drops!”

“I think that’s about to be you, but don’t worry. You’re in good hands.”

“Them’s fightin’ words!”

So began their dwarven drinking contest. The party went on well into the night.

06 — A Chance Encounter

Dhoran and Grand fell victim to horrible hangovers the next day. According to Pola, dwarves were heavy drinkers and loved their spirits, especially hard ones, but that did not protect them from the inevitable.

“You did this to yourselves,” she said, promptly returning to her workstation.

“Luciel,” Grand pleaded, “I’m beggin’ ya. Cast your spells on me!”

“I know my granddaughter’s right, but please, Mister Luciel!” Dhoran begged.

The sight of the two burly, stout, bearded men crawling on the floor with looks of death on their faces shocked and appalled me to the point where I yielded and cast Recover on them.

Grand let out a sigh. “Think I had one too many.”

“Nothin’s better for a hangover than another pint, but you gotta be careful or you’ll be in for a world of hurt. Physically. By your granddaughter,” Dhoran said ominously. They seemed back to normal to me. “Also, I can’t stand the fancy talk. Treat me like ya always have. I’d prefer things to stay like they were.”

“In that case, you can stop calling me ‘Mister,’” I said.

“Er, I’ll try.”

I was hoping for a little more than “try” but was happy our relationship could stay the same, even with that whole slave thing done and over.

I changed the subject. “By the way, I haven’t seen Trett.”

“Right, he’s been in a bit of a slump lately,” Grand replied. “Disappeared a while ago sayin’ somethin’ about going out ta find ‘inspiration.’”

“I didn’t know he could get slumps.”

“I dunno if it was a slump, so much as a fit... Never mind, I got measurements to take. Get your—er, guess they’re already here.”

“I think they’re excited to see what you can make.”

“Hear that, Dhoran? We got expectations to live up to.”

“Aye, we do, brother!”

They flashed the kind of powerful, confident smirks that only master smiths could make. Not even Lionel seemed to be able to withstand the sheer crafting spirit emanating from them.

Meanwhile, I found myself with an abundance of free time and decided to wander the city alone. Until Pola stopped me.

“I’ll go with you. Just in case.”

In case of what? Who could say?

“I’ll go as well,” Lycian chimed in, raising her hand.

At least her company made sense. She’d be living here from now on, so it would help for her to get more familiar with the area. I’d freed her from her slave pact last night too, but she only let me do it after some real convincing from Dhoran and Pola. I had taken the chance to offer Lionel, Ketty, and Kefin the same, of course, but to no avail. Unsurprisingly. This shocked Estia, though.

Still, I had to assume that Pola and Lycian had better things to do. Maybe this was their way of showing their gratitude, in which case I figured I might as well accept their kindness.

“Then let’s go. What’s so dangerous about going alone?” I asked.

“There’s all sorts of devices around town. And you haven’t registered your mana yet,” Pola replied.

“Oh, that thing from yesterday. Sounds like a plan.”

“Lead on,” ordered Lycian.

“Leading,” Pola said, taking the front as we departed.

The roads and paths of Rockford were diverse, from clean cobblestone to simple dirt and beaten walkways. The town seemed to be divided into districts. Near the forges, sounds of ringing metal could be heard throughout the streets. It reminded me of another time when I used to do business at the factories downtown and made me a little nostalgic. Following the smoke rising from the chimneys, up in the sky was the artificial sun, created by none other than Lord Reinstar himself.

“Is that the same thing that you made in Yenice?”

“This place isn’t made of several magic items working on their own,” Pola explained. “There’s more to it than just making the sun rise and fall. The climate is controlled too.”

Then it took many devices operating in tandem to produce the same effect in Yenice. Meaning that wasn’t the case here?

“You’re saying *all of Rockford* is a magical device?”

“Right. It absorbs magic from the air, so it can run indefinitely.”

Somehow, my uneducated guess had turned out to be more on point than expected.

“Almost similar to a labyrinth,” Lycian remarked.

“It probably uses the same mechanism,” Pola agreed.

I fell quiet. Something about that little comment had given me a sense of foreboding. A bad sort of feeling. A very bad feeling. Had Lord Reinstar taken some location that was on the verge of becoming a labyrinth and used spirit magic to transform it into the Rockford we knew? If that were the case, and considering monsters could appear in local mines despite none of them being dungeons, my hypothesis about a dragon slumbering nearby wasn’t that far-fetched.

Further out on the outskirts of town were farms and small plantations. But I found the presence of so many wells outside those areas curious. There was one by just about every workshop.

“Why are there so many wells?”

“Nothing special. So everyone can have clean drinking water,” Pola replied.

“This town is so odd,” Lycian complained. “It feels like these fields are an entirely separate village from the forges.”

“I heard it’s modeled after Lord Reinstar’s home.”

“I remember hearing he grew up in a frontier village, didn’t he? His family were farmers,” I said.

“Right, but something happened to it in the past, and it doesn’t exist anymore.”

I hadn’t heard anything about that in the book I’d read. Interesting.

“I suppose I can understand the sentiment in that case,” Lycian said with a sad expression.

“It’s nice having places to relax away from the hustle and bustle. Let’s go handle that mana registering thing now,” I suggested.

“We can do that in the town hall at the center of the city,” Pola explained.

Town hall. Now there was a word I hadn’t heard in ages. It was always guild this, guild that around here.

Pola promptly guided us to the building. Inside, there was a sign marked “Reception,” but no desk or receptionist was waiting. It was a booth, occupied by a curious machine that looked an awful lot like an ATM straight from Earth.

“Stand there,” Pola instructed as I faltered. “A voice will talk to you. Just answer it. No lying. It’ll send you outside the town if you do.”

“Like one of those magic circles in the labyrinths?”

“Mm-hmm.”

What was Lord Reinstar, some physicist? Had he mastered spacetime magic? Whatever the case, the stories of him certainly hadn’t been exaggerations. This was pretty insane.

“Do you know how teleportation works?” I asked Pola.

“I’d like to figure it out in my lifetime,” she said, “but I don’t have the magic stones to make something that advanced.”

Normally, she’d follow that by begging me for said magic stones, but not this time. Perhaps they were a special type.

“Does their affinity matter? It needs a specific kind?”

“I’ve never even seen spacetime gems, so I don’t know. I won’t until I get my hands on some.” She looked frustrated. “And only people who’ve transcended the continuum can use spacetime magic.”

By the sound of it, only people who'd been reincarnated or gone through something similar could wield that particular affinity. *Sorry, Pola, but I'm not about to out myself to the world. That's just asking for trouble. No spacetime magic for me.*

I approached the ATM.

"Please state your full name," it said. Then, "Assessing your magical fingerprint. Please wait... Please state your occupation..."

They were easy questions, and I breezed through them simply enough until the last one.

"Are you reincarnated, transposed, or otherwise the dwelling for another entity?"

I glanced at Pola and Lycian behind me. If I answered honestly, they'd hear me and the cat would be out of the bag. If I lied, I'd get expelled from the city and the cat would be equally out of the bag. What a fantastic invention, Reinstar, you absolute bastard. Positively inspired.

I sucked it up and provided the best answer I could come up with: "Ja."

Hoping that my response had sounded muffled enough to be misconstrued for "Nah," I prayed that the machine was smart enough to parse German.

"Registration complete."

That worked? I thought in amazement, but before I could pat myself on the back for my genius, I felt my consciousness fading. When I came to, a young man was sitting in front of me.

"Where am I?"

I was sitting directly across from him. A table separated us.



“Welcome to my astral plane. I made it myself,” he said. He lazily flicked his finger and a tea set appeared on the table. He smiled. “I spent many years pretending to be a steward, you know. I can brew quite the cup of tea, if I do say so myself.”

I immediately knew who the man was. “You’re Reinstar Gustard, aren’t you?” I asked.

“And I see they call you Luciel. That makes you the fifth Earthling to visit this world.”

His dashing grin was strikingly handsome. Coupled with his legendary abilities, as proven by this completely separate plane of reality that he’d constructed himself, it was small wonder that his presence lingered in the world to this day. But what was he doing here, alive? And what did he mean by “fifth”?

“Tell me,” he inquired, “were you reincarnated?”

“Yes. I was a Japanese businessman in my thirties, but when I died, I found myself in a fifteen-year-old’s body. Here, in Galdardia.”

“Interesting. I had you pegged as someone else entirely from that hair color.”

I didn’t really appreciate the implication that this guy was calling me an edgelord. “I had a character customization screen and went a bit overboard.”

“Hey, whatever’s fun,” he chuckled. “I was Japanese too, and about your age when a sinkhole took me. The next thing I knew, Crya the Divine had given me new life as an infant.”

“You were Japanese? So were you from, like, the Edo period or the Meiji period or something?”

“No. I died in 20XX.”

“Oh. I died in 20X0, myself.”

It seemed Earth and Galdardia’s timelines weren’t exactly one-to-one. They were at least skewed enough for a difference of three years to equal *three hundred* in this world. For a moment, a spark of hope flashed inside me—hope for a way back—but it quickly died. I knew it was just wishful thinking.

“Well, if you’re here, that means my good friend the sage really managed to prevent the King of Darkness’s return,” Reinstar went on. “Color me surprised.”

Another thing I didn’t appreciate was him bringing up the Demon Lord. My heart couldn’t take it. “Um, so apparently, a hero’s supposed to be born in about forty years and will supposedly do battle with the Demon Lord.”

“Someone’s done their homework.”

I felt a wave of powerful magical energy emanating from him. “What did you just do?”

“Just took a little peek at something. Hm, I see you’re not any old healer. You’ve got a second job. That’s not a feat anyone can do without overcoming some harrowing trials. And you’re a *dragoon* too. All right, I’ll admit, I’m impressed by how far you’ve come in just six years, especially those resistance abilities. Those couldn’t have been easy to get so high.”

“Why do I get the feeling you’re being extremely condescending?”

“Well,” he scoffed, “I *did* found the Healer’s Guild *and* the Church. Oh, speaking of, how has all that been going? Is Fluna well?”

“A lot’s happened...” I began. I went on to explain the struggles with the costs of healing, the labyrinth beneath Headquarters, and the happenings in Yenice. “...and that brings us to today.”

“I knew I shouldn’t have left Fluna alone.”

“I have to tell you, it blew my mind to hear that Her Holiness is your daughter.”

“You can’t have her.”

“Wasn’t interested. I’m not going along with this cliché overprotective dad act you’ve got going on.”

“My daughter’s not good enough for you, is she?”

“*Moving on*,” I continued, ignoring him, “the Wicked One has sealed the Eternal Dragons away, but I’ve already freed the Holy Dragon and Flame Dragon. That should be enough, right?”

“No,” Reinstar said, returning to a serious tone. “The hero would almost certainly lose to the next Demon Lord. The most we could possibly hope for would be a tie.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Just as the Divine is the foil to the Wicked One, so too is the hero of light the foil to the hero of darkness.”

“Okay?” And with that, he’d lost me.

“The Demon Lord is the monsters’ king, a king of darkness. The *hero* of darkness. Now, another player is the Spacetime Dragon, the guardian of Galdardia, but it has no interest in man’s war with the monsters, so forget I mentioned it.”

“What if we could borrow its power? Would that solve everything?”

“You could *try* to do that, but see, the Spacetime Dragon is Crya the Divine’s own icon.”

Wait, it wasn’t the Draconis? And hold on, he was just handing that information out? “If this were an RPG, that would definitely be a spoiler.”

“Too bad this is reality. Well, *this* isn’t, but what you’re living is. Anyway, the Eternal Dragons must be freed or else the only magic the hero will be able to command is light. This would give the Demon Lord power over all the other affinities except for spacetime. In your case, though, holy and fire magic’s been accounted for.”

“So you’re telling me that with every Eternal Dragon I free, the future hero gains access to the corresponding affinity of magic while the Demon Lord loses it? And that’s why they need to be freed. To give us an edge.”

“Correct,” he affirmed. “Back in my day, I had all the elements under my belt and beat the guy by accident. But if I hadn’t, I’d have barely scraped by, even with the spirits’ help.”

Had this guy seriously just pulled a “back in my day” humblebrag? I guess he was entitled to it seeing as defeating the Demon Lord was a heroic achievement.

“You were some hero. But I don’t think I read anything like that in your stories.”

“I mean, I didn’t find out that he was the Demon Lord until way later. I wasn’t fighting to be a hero. I had a dream.”

“A dream?” I echoed.

“I wanted to build a flying city. The spirits gave me the power of flight magic when I was still a boy, and I wanted to share that joy with the world.” I said nothing. “So, hmm, I’d say you should definitely try to free the basic elements. Which leaves the Water Dragon, the Wind Dragon, and the Earth Dragon. That would leave the Demon Lord with only the thunder and poison elements, with some gravity-based attacks. You’d need a strategy, but the fight shouldn’t be too hard.”

Precisely what about this scenario qualified as “not too hard” was beyond me. You could work up poison resistance well enough, but how were you supposed to prepare for lightning and straight-up gravity attacks?

“Lord Reinstar,” I said, “I’m a weak person. I’m not heroic or brave, and I have no intention of putting my own life on the line to go liberating these dragons, nor do I want to be a pawn in any spirit’s game.”

All I wanted was a peaceful and quiet life. That was it. My ideals had evolved since becoming an S-rank healer, sure. But I wanted to heal people and save lives, not do battle with dragon deities.

Reinstar looked at me and said softly, “It’s impossible for me to know what’s going on in your world, but I can tell you’ve met dangers beyond my imagining.”

“That’s right. I’m so weak that even the most trivial monsters could be the end of me. I’m just not the person to be opposing the Wicked One, of all things.”

“The Wicked One...” he trailed off. “It seems we’re out of time. Shame. I would’ve liked to chat more, but that will have to wait, although you won’t be coming back here for many years.” He fixed his gaze on me. “Luciel, your coming to Rockford is but a step on a great path before you. On it you will meet with the Earth Dragon. And should it lead you to the City in the Sky, find the

central fountain and shout these words...”

He spoke the words to me.

“What? Why?”

“I think you’ll be glad you did.”

“Hold on a second!”

I reached out but suddenly found myself back in the Rockford town hall.

“What are you waiting for?” Lycian asked.

“You look pale,” Pola added.

“I’m okay,” I reassured them.

Based on their reactions, I deduced that time hadn’t passed in the real world. I was reminded of just how incredible Lord Reinstar was for his powers to be able to create such an unbelievable experience, and I wouldn’t soon forget it. What I failed to understand, though, was the *purpose* of it all.

It seemed clear that although there was no labyrinth in this town, the Earth Dragon was nearby, and I was grateful to be able to skip the dungeon crawling this time. It also may very well have been from the dragon’s influence that the ant monsters had been running amok. The thought of leaving it all behind and returning to Merratoni or the Holy City crossed my mind, but Pola’s and Lycian’s worried gazes, and Dhoran’s renewed passion and vigor, took that idea off the table. Perhaps by releasing the dragon, the nearby monsters would get weaker, like they did in labyrinths.

Lycian completed her own registration before long, and I was ready to wander the town more, but the other two were concerned about my complexion, so we decided to return to Dhoran’s workshop.

Lest we all forget: life was never fair. The moment we exited the hall and were about to cross the central plaza, a violent earthquake struck, and the ground began to split beneath my feet. I lost my balance and only had time for a confused grunt before the hole swallowed me entirely. As I fell down the three-to-five-ish-meter cavity, I quickly summoned the Holy Dragon spear from the magic bag, infused it with magic, and stabbed it into the wall, stopping my

descent.

“Thank goodness my body moved on its own. How did this hole get...here?”

The magically glowing spear illuminated my surroundings, revealing platoons of wriggling ants crawling up to the surface. I cast Area Barrier, pulled the spear from the wall, and plunged into the enemy. Now, if this had been any old weapon, there would've been no chance in hell I'd try pulling a stunt like that, but I knew I could tear through them with ease. I had to go wild to try and lessen the number of these things invading Rockford as much as possible.

I couldn't help but wonder if my talk with Lord Reinstar had destined me for this free fall. And fall I did, on and on. The sinking sensation in my gut made sure I didn't forget that fact. I gripped my spear and continued to fall faster but I managed to control my speed by piercing the ants covering the walls over and over. At least I could take solace in the fact that if I died, it wouldn't be from gravity. Accepting Monsieur Luck into my life had to be one of the best decisions I'd ever made.

Gradually, the hole began to slope and even out. My velocity hadn't been as low as I'd thought, though, and the impact sent a dull pain shooting through my body. I was easing the aching with repeated casts of Heal when my spear got caught in a hollow in the wall, abruptly halting my plunge. The handle bent a good deal, but its material was strangely durable and prevented it from snapping. My arm, however, didn't fare so well against the sudden change in speed. I felt my arm get yanked from its socket, my tendons tore, and I let out an agonized scream.

“High Heal! What'd it get stuck on?” I groaned. “Is that a tunnel? Maybe the ants dug it.” I spied a spacious tunnel splitting off to the side of the cavern I'd fallen down. “I guess someone upstairs wants me to follow it. I didn't hear Pola or Lycian, so I don't think they came down here with me.”

I hooked my hand on the passage directly below me, willed the spear back into the magic bag, and rolled into the side tunnel.

“Now can we cool it for five seconds?”

I checked the area for immediate threats, then cleaned myself up with Purification and used the transformation dresser to change into full armor.

“Man, I thought I’d actually get to wear normal clothes for a change.”

I’d been wearing my clothes from Merratoni, and now they were all torn. I sighed, then got a move on—carefully. Unlike labyrinths, random caves carried the risk of plummeting to your death with a single misstep.

“I gotta remember to thank Pola and Lycian later.” I had asked them to make a handheld version of the headlight we’d used for the carriage. Thank god I had. Now that was a stroke of luck.

I changed my Illusion Staff into sword form. I didn’t find any traps, but the sight of the ants scurrying down holes as I shone my light through them sent shivers down my spine. Some went straight down.

“Yeah, that’d kill me if I fell down there.”

There was plenty of food in my bag, plus all the equipment I’d need. As long as I didn’t plummet to my death, I just needed to find out how to get back to town.

“This doesn’t look like any monster dug it. It seems almost natural.”

I had to stoop to keep from smacking my head on particularly low segments of the already low ceiling. The tunnel was a good three or so meters wide, though, so it wasn’t *too* claustrophobic. My light kept me from tripping over outcrops of rock on the ground. I walked for what felt like almost half a kilometer before stumbling upon a junction...as one might expect from a sprawling underground cavern. I decided to toss my Illusion Sword up and proceed down whichever path it pointed towards.

“Crya, god of fate, Buddha, ancestors, Monsieur Luck, please guide me.” I trusted myself to chance, and it pointed not to either of the two passages, but to the wall directly in front of me. “That can’t be.”

I took my sword back, hoping I wouldn’t have to use it, and pressed my hand to the wall. A mechanism of some kind sounded and it fell away, forming a third path. It was a well-lit, less craggy option that was very much reminiscent of the hallway of a labyrinth.

“Lord knows what’s gonna happen down there. Guess I’ve got no choice but to find out. Whatever happens, happens.”

Proceeding down the new passage, I soon came to a flight of stairs. At the top, the hallway became winding and twisting but without any divergences, so I eventually reached its end. A very forbidding door was waiting for me there.

“Does it open?” I touched it and indeed it swung open into a spacious room. “There’s nothing here,” I muttered.

“It’s Rein!”

“Rein!”

“Hey, that’s Rein!”

“Is it Rein?”

“Not Rein.”

“Who are you?”

One after another, I heard the voices of several boisterous children. But there was no one there.

“I must be imagining things. Lord Reinstar’s got me hearing voices now,” I told myself. “This room. It reminds me of the last one.”

It greatly resembled the room I’d fought the red dragon in. If I was about to fight a dragon of the earth, I seriously hoped it was a *metaphorical* dragon, like a mole or something.

Then, the voices returned.

“Hey, bub. Why you smell like Rein?”

“Humans can’t hear us, stupid.”

“But he’s got Tidey’s blessing.”

“Can this doofus see us, you think?”

“But I sense the dragons on him.”

“Hey, can you hear us?”

A revelation. I had not been hearing things. Despite their childlike tones, there was a mystical air about them. I was certain they had to be spirits.

“Yes, I can hear you. My name is Luciel. I fell down here when an earthquake

opened up a hole beneath me. I'll answer any questions you have if you can help me get back. How's that sound?"

Contrary to popular belief, I was not keen on living out the rest of my days underground with sniffy earth spirits.

One of them cackled. *"Look at this loser! Sucks to be you!"*

"What a klutz. Rein was a klutz too, so maybe that's just all humans."

"I wonder why Tidey gave him the blessing."

"He can hear us, but why can't we send him back?"

"I bet the dragons' blessing is keeping him from seeing spirits."

"Maybe. It doesn't look like he has a pact."

At least one of them seemed to genuinely care about my plight. I liked him. Her? That one. I liked that one.

"How in the world did Reinstar keep these things in line?" I wondered aloud.

"Cause Rein's mana tasted sweet like honey!"

"Real honey's good too."

"I'm hungry."

"Hey, doofus, give us some sweets."

"Magic works too!"

"He reminds me of Rein. I bet his magic tastes just as good."

One of the brats was starting to get on my nerves, but I maintained my composure. "How about I give you some honey *and* magic if you tell me how I can get back home?"

"He's still a loser, but at least he's nice like Rein."

"Even klutzes can be generous, huh?"

"Maybe that's why Tidey liked him. He's kinda..."

"He drives a hard bargain for a doofus. That's how you make it in life."

"Gimme, gimme! I'll tell you how!"

"Lots! We'll pay you back!"

This conversation was starting to wear on me. I produced a large bottle of vespian honey and removed the lid.

"What do I do about the magic?"

"Hold your hand out and focus it there. Hey, leave some for me!"

"Like this?"

The voices vanished and in an instant the contents of the bottle were demolished. I set out another bottle, and this time the entire container disappeared with the honey inside. They had quite the appetite. Next, I felt my hand tingle as magic left my body.

"The honey was top notch. The magic? Eh, I've had better."

"You gotta try a little harder, dude. Thanks for the honey, though."

"I like both, but I could use more affinities in the magic."

"Not bad."

"Whoo, honey! Honey is the best! C'mon, we can't let the dragons outdo us."

"I didn't taste any impurities. We all good?"

The spirits cheered in unison. Once about half of my mana was gone, I heard a mechanical voice go off in my head.

Title Obtained: Protection of the Spirit of Land Choosing to ignore this for lack of any better options, I was about to remind them to tell me how to get out but was stopped short by the sight of several spherical objects floating in the air, pale white in the center and glowing brown around the circumference.

"I think he sees us now."

"There're two ways to leave."

"Destroy the ants' nest or free the Earth Dragon and exit through the magic circle."

"Which is, y'know, whatever. I don't like him, but he weakens the land with all his tantrums."

“The longer he’s trapped, the worse the miasma will get, so we’d really like it if you could do something about that.”

“The worse the miasma gets, the stronger the monsters become. Won’t you protect Rein’s precious town?”

That sounded fine to me if it was just a quick run in, free the dragon, and be done with it, but that was never how these things went.

“Why aren’t the dwarves fighting the monsters down here?”

“They are.”

“But they’re stubborn and won’t ask for help.”

“They can barely protect their own kingdom.”

“And their only remedy is a keg of booze.”

“They’re overwhelmed.”

“Dwarves are sturdy, but they won’t last much longer.”

That was definitely a problem if the Kingdom of Dwarves was really in dire straits. Why did I get the distinct feeling that my indefinite future would be filled with absolutely nothing but trouble?

“Regardless, I can’t open the door to get to the dragon or free it until my magic recovers, so whatever I do it’ll have to wait.”

I sat down and began to meditate in front of the gate that the spirits said the Earth Dragon lay behind. Before disappearing with its companions, the spirit that always spoke last said something that stuck with me.

“What?” I faltered. “What’s that supposed to mean? ‘Your fates are about to blend’?”

With some effort, I managed to clear my mind of the esoteric augury and focus on meditating.

07 — Of Dragons and Spirits

The door loomed before me. They never got any smaller, did they? I put my hand on it, and it began to absorb my magic, glowing ocher as a crest appeared.

“How does the Wicked One get into these things?” I wondered as it finally swung open. “Just in case, *Area Barrier!* There.” I would soon come to regret my lackadaisical attitude.

The path forward wasn’t a staircase this time, but a winding hallway. Transforming the Illusion Sword back into staff form, I walked on until the Earth Dragon came into view. The beast, resting just fifteen meters away, had craggy scales like stones. The black, miasmic poison had progressed far more than with its Holy and Flame brothers, with some of the worst areas of its body corrupted to the point of decaying.

I calmed my nerves as usual—as best I could with a fearsome dragon before me, anyway—but then something unforeseen happened: the dragon suddenly began to flail and howl. I froze, and frankly, I didn’t blame myself for being afraid. The dragon’s writhing intensified, bringing with it an earthquake.

“I do *not* want to wait around and see a dragon go berserk,” I groaned.

I steadied myself, held my staff tightly, and had just begun to cast the spell when the dragon fixed its eyes on me and pierced me with its gaze. There was a hatred in its darkened eyes unlike anything the Holy or Fire Dragons had possessed. I was petrified, and my legs quivered.

“*Oh holy hand of healing. Oh birthing breath of the land,*” I chanted regardless. “*Take my energy and shield me in ramparts of angelic light. Engulf impurity in a bastion of radiance. Sanctuary Circle!*”

But the Earth Dragon, unimpeded, managed to unleash its breath as the circle of light swallowed it. With quick reflexes, I summoned a shield and hunched behind it, then tried to activate the wind barrier, but it was too late. The surge of energy engulfed me.

Pain. Heat. An icy cold. Sensations blurred together. I free cast Dispel, Recover, and Extra Heal all at once, surpassing my mana’s limits and sending

myself into magical enervation.

I panted, wheezed, and gasped. How I had survived, I had no idea. My shield had turned to crumbling stone. Before I knew it, I found myself face-up on the ground, thoughts swirling with no end in sight. Realizing that this was likely because of the magical exhaustion, I downed a potion.

“I’m gonna be sick,” I moaned. It had been a long, long time since I had last experienced the sensation of complete magic depletion, and it was not a feeling I missed.

A voice reverberated in my mind.

“Undoer of the Wicked One’s curse, savior of the hallowed and the flame, I thank you for coming to my aid.”

Combined with my fatigue, the droning in my skull reminded me all too well of the din of a city after a night of heavy drinking.

“Back in your right mind?”

“Indeed. I’m rather glad to not have joined the ranks of the undead. That fear is why I thrashed so. I was vexed, but now I am at peace.”

That makes one of us! I cursed in my head as I sat up and saw that the miasma corrupting the Earth Dragon was gone. The parts of its body that had rotted seemed to now be crumbling away.

“The Holy Dragon seemed fine, but you and the Flame Dragon were in a lot of pain.”

“The...spirits make rest difficult.”

The dragon could blame it on them all it wanted, but that didn’t change the fact that I’d seen malice in its eyes. It had been in immense agony.

I ignored the nausea and asked, “Do the spirits and Eternal Dragons not get along?”

“We serve the Draconis. They serve the Elemental.”

I suppose it made sense for such different entities to worship different deities. “And?”

"We dragons, you see, are the ultimate beings, while the spirits embody the natural laws of the world."

"That sounds like totally not my problem."

"But it will be."

"How so?"

"The one who carries the blessings of the divines, the dragons, and the spirits three is fated to meet others of its kind. The sworn mystics."

So those were supposed to be, what, my future companions? How were we going to meet? Better question: why was *I* the one given this role in the first place? Because the Draconis and Elemental said so?

"The spirits said something similar, but why me? Why not a hero or, I don't know, the plethora of way braver and more courageous people out there?"

"You may come to understand in time as the threads of destiny are woven. One day, you will be a wise sage."

This thing was seriously not making sense. I still didn't understand why it *had* to be me. There were other reincarnated folks out there to choose from.

"Not interested. Not in sages or any more of this complicated business. I'd much rather go live in peace and quiet somewhere nice, thanks."

"For withstanding my strength and felling me with but a single blow, I grant you my blessing and the riches in this chamber."

Ignored. Fantastic. If whining wasn't going to get me anywhere, might as well ask what questions I could.

"I'll take the treasure, but I want answers. Why can Crya not fight back against the Wicked One's curse?"

"The Wicked One's actions are furtive. And with the demons under his command, his presence is not easily perceived."

"And you think *I* can?"

"All I ask is that you relieve my suffering brethren from their endless torment."

Okay, phrasing it like that's not fair. "We'll see."

“The gears of fate have begun to turn.”

“Cool. Can you stop them?”

“It irks me that the Spirit of Land has blessed you before me, but alas. The power of earth will see you triumph through strife.”

“What does that mean? Will I be able to use earth magic?”

The dragon cackled, ignoring my questions. “Speak your name.”

His time was evidently running short. I hadn’t gotten much out of the exchange, but further questioning was likely to get me nowhere. And I still felt like absolute death.

“Luciel.”

“Luciel, lay your staff made of my holy brother before me.”

“Like this?”

Like with the Flame Dragon before, a light materialized and flowed into the Illusion Staff. This time, though, it was an ocher color.

“I wish you fortune on your path to sagehood,” he boomed. “At last, my word is kept... La...fjilna...”

With those final words, the dragon went limp, petrified, and disintegrated. I anticipated it leaving behind scales and fangs, but where its corpse had been I this time found hunks of ore, including many types of precious stones I had never laid eyes on before. There was also the same large magic stone and treasure chest as always. Like clockwork, the chest opened up and a small bead emerged. A light shone from my magic bag and the necklace flew out once again, glistening as it met the bead in the air and the two merged.

“Six left. You’re not tempting me.” I still couldn’t fathom why I hadn’t died when the dragon’s breath hit me. I had been ready for it. “Wonder what it is with dragons and hoarding treasure.”

Ignoring the magic stone, I gathered the items, coins, and gear after purifying everything, then stepped into the magic circle. My vision went white.

Ping!

Title Obtained: Protection of the Earth Dragon

Title Obtained: Dragonsbane

When my sight returned, I was in front of the entrance to Rockford.

“I’m back. Well, I got both a dragon’s and a spirit’s blessing, but whether that’s good or bad luck remains to be seen.”

The others were probably worrying about me by then, so I mimicked Pola’s movements from when we’d first arrived and entered through the side door. Once my mana was authenticated, I returned to the city. A city in panic.

“The ant monsters?” I muttered. “It has to be. They’ll pour out of that hole in the plaza until it’s plugged.”

I had only just recovered from magical enervation, but I whipped my body into high gear and made for the central plaza. For a split second, I thought I caught a glimpse of Pola’s golem. Everyone had to be there.

Possibilities ran through my mind as my feet pounded against the ground. I had killed a great deal of the monsters as I fell, so if that was the only hole then there was no way they’d be emerging in overwhelming numbers. There had to be more. Numerous cracks all over, just like an ant’s nest. Or so I thought, but as I ran, I didn’t catch sight of a single fissure in the ground.

Instead, I found them at the plaza. Rockford citizens were beating the ants back like a game of whack-a-mole as they crawled up from countless breaches in the ground.

“Is everyone safe?” I asked.

The people turned to look at me in shock.

Grand cried, “Shut the holes! Luciel’s back!”

The citizens cheered. It was a very booming, dwarven cheer. They tossed piles of chemicals down the holes and chucked rocks in with magic tools before Grand and Dhoran used their powers to seal them up entirely, except for the one that I’d fallen into.

“Sorry to worry you guys,” I said. “Why aren’t you closing up that one?”

“What better way ta get magic stones than funnel ’em right to us?” Grand answered.

Leave it to these guys to see monsters as nothing more than walking magic stones. I was glad no one had jumped in to save me.

I proceeded to relate the events after the hole had taken me.

“Incredible. The Earth Dragon, you say?” Lionel remarked, brimming with the urge to put his sword to something.

But his enthusiasm meant nothing to me. “I seriously almost died down there. Twice. The first time when I plummeted down a hole and the second when I took a full-on blast from a dragon. From the *Earth* Dragon. I still don’t know how I survived.”

Lionel’s clothes were covered with dirt—apparently, he had tried to jump in after me and Pola had held him back with her golem...which also explained the cracks in the stone construct’s arms.

“So, how’d it look down there?” Grand asked.

“Ants everywhere,” I replied. “There must be a nest.”

“Good thing we didn’t chase after ya, then. Pola and Lycian were at their forges tryin’ ta work out how to save you, but we couldn’t very well leap before we looked. Other than Lionel, I mean. Till another earthquake came.”

“Good thing it stopped you from coming after me.”

“Holes started poppin’ up, and then those ants came and wouldn’t stop.”

Dhoran was pale but had still participated in the fight.

“I fell pretty far and saw tons of them down there,” I said as I cast Recover on the dwarf. “I found earth spirits too. They told me the Kingdom of Dwarves was already fighting those creatures. Do you know anything about that?”

“The kingdom? We gotta help!” Dhoran cried.

“Do they not have the resources to handle it on their own?”

“Dwarves used to live in caves,” Grand explained, “but they started diggin’

down when the population grew, and they stopped havin' ta fight monsters as much. We're not strong fighters these days."

An underground kingdom. I could certainly believe that. And from the sound of it, they needed help.

"But why build your country right on top of the Earth Dragon?"

"What better place is there?" Dhoran countered. "Dwarves in those times thought wherever spirits 'n such would hole up might as well have been the center o' the world."

"Aye, monsters included," Grand added. "But y'know, even though we mighta lost our edge, we're still a sturdy bunch. A bunch o' bugs couldn't bring us down."

I was sure they wanted to believe that.

"Well, with the Earth Dragon free, the monsters should weaken, just like a labyrinth, but some other species could show up to fill the niche. If this place is just a dormant labyrinth, they could be as strong as something you'd find on the very last floor of one."

"That sounds bad," Dhoran said.

"Nah, His Majesty 'n his court can handle things."

We didn't know how many of those ants were out there, but regardless, not every dwarf was a fighter. I didn't like it any more than they did, and I'd never wanted to bear this news, but I had to. Now I was responsible for making a decision. I wished I could just forget it all and go about my business, but if I could help people, if I could save lives, I had to try.

Of course, those were pretty words, but my body felt like lead just thinking about what I was getting myself into.

"Before anything, does anyone mind if I take a rest?" I asked.

My brain needed some time off. Lord Reinstar, the spirits, the dragons, and now a war in the Kingdom of Dwarves had my head spinning. I was a bit of an emotional liability at the moment. These things happened when you weren't the protagonist.

Dhoran and Grand looked at each other, then nodded.

“The kingdom won’t fall overnight,” Dhoran replied.

“No point frettin’ when we don’t know the situation. You could use some rest, lad.”

No one else objected, so I returned to Dhoran’s workshop.

At the forge, I had a quick meal from the magic bag.

“I’m guessing their measurements aren’t done yet?”

“It’ll take about three days,” Grand said. “We’d be done faster if Trett were around.”

“By the way, the dragon dropped ore and stuff this time instead of scales or fangs. Would you and Dhoran mind taking a look when I’m done eating? There’s quite a bit plus some magic items that could be useful.”

“Now there’s somethin’ to look forward to.”

“That’s a stroke o’ luck,” Dhoran commented. “The mines’re getting dry lately.”

“I think that depends on the person, considering I had to beat a dragon to get it. Personally, I wouldn’t say it was worth it.”

“Say, lad, you don’t gotta go askin’ how we mind for favors,” Grand insisted. “We’ve celebrated together!”

“Sorry, old habits from Yenice. The formalities are hard to get rid of.”

He guffawed. “Lookin’ forward to that ore.”

Suddenly, I felt a firm poke in my side that made me jump out of my skin. “Jeez, Pola. Don’t do that. You two need something?”

“You said there were magic items. Can we see?” she pleaded.

“It’s dreadfully boring without any magic gems,” Lycian added.

“Sure. Just don’t tear them apart,” I instructed.

Pola nodded. “Promise.”

“You have our word that we won’t render anything useless.”

“I’ll bring them to your stations later.”

How safe it was to trust them, I couldn’t say. But the items wouldn’t be identified by sitting around in my bag forever, so I gave in. Luckily, no one brought up the Kingdom of Dwarves again, which was a generous gesture to me and my mental health.

After eating, we convened downstairs to go through the spoils. I laid out the minerals and ore as the two dwarves eyed them carefully.

“Looks like gemstones,” Grand muttered.

After a point, the room started looking like the geology section of a museum. I sensed magic from a few of the stones, so I had high hopes that they were valuable. I placed what wouldn’t fit on the tables onto the floor.

Dhoran and Grand were at a loss for words. It seemed like every time I pulled out a new hunk of ore, they had to go through a whole dramatic act.

“All right, that’s everything the Earth Dragon left me.”

“Luciel. Lad. You don’t know what this is?” Dhoran asked accusingly.

“Nope. I’m clueless when it comes to rocks.”

“We gotta hold a lecture before too long. That right there? That’s worth more than several years of Yenice’s entire budget.”

I reeled. “What?! W-Well, maybe I’ll take you up on that lesson sometime.”

Dhoran grunted. “By the way, we’re lookin’ pretty close to havin’ all the parts ready for you-know-what. Just need somewhere ta put it all together and the magic stones. She’ll be ready before too long.”

“Really?”

“Really. Course, your friends’ gear comes first.”

“Right, but I’m still excited.”

“What’re you talkin’ all secretive for?” Grand interjected. “What’re you building and how do I get my hands on it?”

“If you’re interested, work out your fees with Dhoran. I think you’ll like the project, though, so keep it modest, okay?” I left the forge without another word.

Estia had taken a liking to Ketty, and I saw the two together often. I was pondering this as I went for a walk when I found Kefin near the hole I’d fallen into.

“You on patrol first today?”

“Yes, sir,” he said. “We’ve had plenty of experience fighting those ants, but I won’t let my guard down.”

“Put this on.” I handed over my Church-issued robe. “It’ll protect you from their acid. Nothing’ll burn through it.”

“But this is—”

“I’ve got plenty of protection.”

“Thank you, sir. If you insist. I’ll continue with my patrol.” He vanished into thin air.

“I see he’s still using his ninjutsu like I told him.”

Ever since he had decided to follow me back in Yenice, Lionel had been whipping him into shape, and he was an extremely motivated individual. I couldn’t see other people’s skills or experience points, but I wanted to support his growth as much as possible. I had high hopes for him.

Afterwards, I decided to stop by Pola’s workstation. There, I found a door that hadn’t been there before.

“Uh, when did this happen?”

“It’s nothing. Making it was child’s play,” Lycian boasted.

“Magic stuff. Want,” Pola demanded.

They looked like children begging for toys and it hit me right in the heart. I took out the magic items as well as some weapons. The two wasted no time...bickering? Collaborating? Anyway, they began examining the items.

“Thanks. I’ll be super motivated once we figure these out,” Pola said.

“My gratitude,” Lycian said. “We will surely be of use to you.”

“Competition’s good and all, but don’t go overboard,” I cautioned them.

“Mm-hmm.”

“But of course.”

I felt a nap calling, so I headed for the room I’d stayed in last night and reunited with my angel’s pillow for forty winks.

08 — Unyielding

The next morning, I woke up well rested, but my worries had not magically disappeared. As I lamented the harshness of reality, I met eyes with something. *Someone*. And they were *very* close.

“Holy—” I shoved their face away with a start, swatting away the gross, lukewarm air of their breath.

“Oh, how love stings,” they crooned. “Oh-hoh, but that’s just how I like it.”

“These chills, that ‘oh-hoh’... Trett?”

Even being more awake now, it was a little hard to identify him as anything other than an old dude with eyeliner from ten centimeters away. I feared for my life.



“You can go back to sleep if you like. I won’t miss this time.”

I was right to be afraid. My heart continued to beat out of my chest. I took a deep breath. “I’ll pass. What are you doing here?”

“Would you believe me if I said I caught your scent? Probably not. I heard at Church HQ that you were in Rockford with your pals.”

“Perfect timing. I had a run-in with the Earth Dragon and almost died, so my clothes and armor could use some maintenance.”

“Oh? They should be able to repair themselves, but I can take a look later.”

“I appreciate it.”

“Get changed and hand over your armor.”

“Sure.”

I switched into another outfit with the transformation dresser and grabbed my armor from it to give to Trett.

“Drop by Pola’s station later. That’s where I’ll be. Oh-hoh, it’s been so long since I had my hands on such fine quality!”

Before I could offer to come with him, he flew out of the room.

“In and out like a typhoon,” I muttered. “I wonder if Trett taught Pola. It’d certainly explain her attitude and how smart she is.”

I sat back down on the bed and collected my thoughts about everything that had happened. The dragons were in pain. I wanted to do something about that, really, but it just wasn’t realistic. Not when they were all in the deepest reaches of various labyrinths. My only real option was to gather the strongest people from all over the world, but proving the actual existence of the dragons was another matter. Only I could see the doors leading to them.

The Earth Dragon’s earthquakes had extended dozens of kilometers outward. Its power was astounding, and that wasn’t even counting its breath attack. If something hadn’t been done, the ants could have caused immeasurable damage.

Wait. The Earth Dragon was supposed to be at the end. The hole I’d fallen

down must have shot me past the rest of the labyrinth, in which case, assuming dragons *had* to be present, the monsters in each of the boss rooms were still a threat. I hadn't fought a single one.

"If one of them's an ant queen or something, then this place isn't safe."

I thought hard. I didn't want Dhoran or the others to struggle any more than they already had. And although I'd supposedly obtained some kind of earth affinity, I had no way of making use of it yet. What I would've given to head out to the Mage's Guild or maybe that neat City in the Sky, but there were things that needed doing first.

"Thinking's gonna get me nowhere," I said to myself resignedly. "Maybe I can get everyone else to fight and just hang out on the side and heal people. Yeah, right."

Peaceful days weren't going to come to me that easily, although I prayed otherwise as I descended to the workshop.

I found Kefin downstairs, but Ketty was nowhere to be seen.

"How are things outside?" I asked him.

"Sir. Are you feeling better?"

"Enough."

"That's good. We've had ants coming from the hole we left, but no more have opened up. We're not overwhelmed."

"Think the others could take, say, a thousand at once?"

Kefin chose his words carefully. "Given enough space, proper healing, and no one's weapons breaking, I think we could manage. Why? Are we taking the fight to them?"

He wasn't far off, but the only people who could possibly be itching to walk into such a graveyard were those seeking a warrior's death or battle-crazed lunatics.

"We'll see. The dwarves are sturdy, but they're stubborn. If they don't want our help, we'll probably head to Merratoni after measurements are taken."

“I’ll follow you wherever we go,” he said with fire in his eyes.

“I’ll let Dhoran and the others know too. I may need you to gather information or even take a trip to the kingdom directly.”

“You came to the right man. I won’t disappoint you.” He smirked as he opened the door to the workshop for me.

I entered and said, “Have a moment?”

Everyone stopped and looked my way.

“Feelin’ all right?” Dhoran asked.

“Ignoring the intense mental trauma of waking up to Trett centimeters from my face, more or less. Got plenty of magic back.”

“You two’re acquainted then?”

“He made the robe I always wear, as a matter of fact.”

“I remember when he was just a regular ol’ fox-man.” Dhoran cast his eyes down, conflicted. “But Pola likes ’im so ta each their own.”

“Mister Luciel, you’re certain we can trust that jester with our equipment?” Lionel asked.

“Don’t worry,” I reassured him. “He’s as good as they come. We’re lucky to have his assistance now that he’s around. Let’s just hope he only wants money in exchange for his services.” I grinned. “Or else I’m going to need you to handle it.”

I preferred to keep my innocence, thanks. Lionel stared at me aghast, which I skillfully ignored as I relayed what I had told Kefin.

“...so plan on us possibly leaving once everyone’s been fitted.”

“We’d appreciate the help, Luciel,” Grand said. “Dhoran, we oughta write to His Majesty.”

“Right, brother. Knew we could count on ya, Mister Luciel.” Dhoran bowed. “I’m with ya all the way.”

He and Grand began to compose their letter.

“Sir, the caverns you traveled through weren’t terribly large, were they?” Lionel asked, his meaning plain.

“They were only about two meters tall,” I replied. “You’d only have room to thrust your sword, really.”

He was just itching for a fight and was already considering ways to simulate labyrinth combat.

Grand and Dhoran soon finished writing and subjected Kefin, their designated messenger, to a lecture on how to enter the kingdom.

“Be safe. Your first priority is coming back alive,” I told him. “Delivering that letter comes second. Don’t forget to register your mana, and you better learn a few answers for the golem.”

“I’ve already registered, but good point,” Kefin said. “I should study up a little or getting back will be difficult.”

“Good luck.”

As he left, I moved to Pola and Lycian’s stations.

“Hey, I want to ask you two to make some illuminating magic items,” I said.

“No stones,” Pola declared.

“Didn’t we make ten or so of those already?” Lycian questioned.

“Sorry, I should’ve explained. We may end up going into that tunnel to take out those ants ourselves. I’ll get you your magic stones from the corpses we haven’t dissected yet. You can use what we get out of them.”

“Kay.” Pola nodded.

“Understood,” Lycian replied.

“Well?” Trett interjected. “What should I do?”

“I expect some fighting, so I’ll need you on gear maintenance,” I answered.

“Oh, now that’s just boring. But oh well. If I must.”

“There’re plenty of resources at the forge in there. I’ll pay your fee later.”

“Sure thing. Leave it to me!”

“Thanks.”

Everyone had their roles, and I suddenly found myself with nothing to do. Figuring we might need food for an extended battle, I decided to spend my time cooking.

I was having a relaxing cooking session when Ketty and Estia sprinted up in a panic.

“What is it?”

“The hole’s getting bigger,” Ketty reported quickly. “There’s gonna be trouble if we don’t get Dhoran or Grand over there.”

“Has anyone been hurt?”

“No, but I can sense monsters.”

It was dusk, and even though the fake moon and stars illuminated the town, it would be a disaster if the hole started to overflow when night fell.

“I need to check on the status of those magic stones anyway, so I’ll take a look too.”

“Try not to fall down it this time.”

“No promises.”

Joining with Dhoran, the four of us arrived at the plaza. At a glance, the other holes were still sealed, but the one I had fallen down was noticeably wider. Thankfully, nothing else seemed out of the ordinary.

“It’s definitely bigger,” I remarked. “Dhoran, how far is the Kingdom of Dwarves from here?”

“About an hour by horse.”

“Do you think this hole might be connected to the kingdom?”

“What makes ya say that?”

“If it is, we could maybe turn this into a staircase and attack from here, diverting some of the monsters.”

“Not a bad plan, but we don’t even know what we’d be diggin’ into.”

He was right. Feeling a little dumb for the idea, I informed everyone of the plan.

“Ketty, I want you to watch for monsters. Estia, handle healing injuries. I’m going to shine a light down there, and if there’s a lot of those things, I want you to shut it, Dhoran.”

“Got it,” Ketty replied.

“Those monsters’ll take this city when I’m six feet under!” Dhoran cried.

Holy Dragon spear in hand, I approached the hole and shined a light down into it. The glow agitated the ants peeking out, and the swarm began to skitter up all at once. I thrust my spear as Ketty danced around, taking care of the many ants that were now crawling out.

“Dhoran!” I shouted.

He put a hand to the ground and began to seal the tunnel, but before closing it all the way, I followed up.

“Not all the way. It’s better to funnel them into one place so they don’t start popping up everywhere else.”

We had to figure out what was aggravating the swarm or there’d be no end to it. Monsters hadn’t invaded the town since Lord Reinstar had founded it, and the earthquakes clearly didn’t explain everything. There had to be something else going on.

“We should’ve brought Pola so she could help reinforce the earth,” I moaned.

“Want me to fetch her?” Ketty offered.

“No, I need you to help me keep the ants back, and we can’t have Dhoran gone if things get bad again.”

The dwarf grunted. “Who do we send?”

“Um,” someone faltered, “I’ll go.”

“Estia?” I said in surprise. “It’s up to you.”

“Yes, sir,” she replied.

Estia ran off towards the workshop. We were lucky we hadn't needed the healing. All we had to do was hold out until Kefin got back. No rush. And if push came to shove, the people of this town wouldn't sit around and do nothing, but still, Pola's help would go a long way.

Dhoran was starting to worry me, though.

"You okay? Does sealing holes take a lot out of you?"

"Woulda run out o' mana if you hadn't stopped me," he said.

"You really should tell me stuff like that beforehand," I reprimanded him. "Ketty, Lionel was a general. He should be able to supervise and command things here, right?"

"Sure," she replied, "but doubt he'll do it. He likes fightin' more."

I sighed. "Fine. If I end up having to do it, would you mind helping me out?"

"This kitty's gotcher back!"

"That's only if this turns into a full-on defense. So, do monsters, like, eat each other's corpses or anything?"

"Dunno," she said. "Maybe."

"I've heard of 'em fightin' over territory," Dhoran commented.

"We'll just have to try to stop them from falling back down," I said. "I don't want these things eating each other and getting stronger."

Ants were scavengers, after all, and although I didn't know if that tracked for monsters, I didn't want to chance it.

The three of us hunkered down until Kefin returned. Only about three ants emerged at a time, and taking them out was easy enough. But when I shined the light back down, I saw tons of them packed tightly together. I tried using cleansing magic on them to no avail. Could we really keep cutting them up like this? Should we have just sealed the hole and crushed them?

As I wavered indecisively, visitors arrived.

"Sorry it took me so long, sir." Kefin had returned with two dwarves.

"Good, you're back. How did it go?" I asked him.

“This is Grios and Aleslei, attendants of the Dwarf King. They *insisted* I bring them along so they could speak with you in person.”

To save face in a time of crisis or as a show of courtesy? Either way, as long as they genuinely asked for our help, it didn’t matter to me.

“I see. I know you just got back, but I need you to switch places with me. Ketty, hang in there a while longer. Dhoran, stay with me. I want you as my adviser.”

The three promptly replied in agreement, much to the surprise of the two newcomers. Whether that was because I was taking charge, Dhoran had actually *listened*, or any number of other things, it was clear that they didn’t like it. Unfortunately, there was no time to pander to them.

“I’m Luciel, S-rank healer with the Church of Saint Shurule,” I introduced myself. “I’d like to hear your king’s reply.”

“Here?” one asked incredulously.

“In front of Dhoran? The *crimin*—”

“Finish that sentence and you can consider my aid rescinded,” I interrupted.

“Mister Luciel...” Dhoran said, moved.

“I’m not interested in being your enemy,” I told them. “But you’re defaming the R and D lead of Luciel and Co. right now, and I’d like you to refrain from doing so in the future.”

The two dwarves looked at each other and exchanged whispers.

“Our apologies,” one said. “I’m Grios, attendant to His Majesty. There have been casualties within the kingdom, and as such, His Majesty would like to request aid. However, there were concerns as to whether we could cover the costs of a healer, so we were sent to confirm.”

“I see. Kefin, how did things look to you?”

“The defense was tired,” he reported. “Not every citizen is a combatant, so I expect their forces to hold for a few more days at most.”

“How *dare* you, beast!” Grios spat. “We are *dwarves*! Know your place!”

Really? This was the best the Kingdom of Dwarves had to offer? Dhoran and Grand were a handful but hardly insufferable, so what was this pair's excuse for such behavior?

"I'm speaking with my subordinate," I cut in firmly. "Know *your* place and keep your opinions to yourself, please. I greatly appreciate his ability to provide accurate reports, so I won't abide any impoliteness towards him. Now, I would like to return to hearing the facts, if you'll avoid interjecting this time." I turned back to Kefin. "How were their supplies? Do they have enough food?"

"It seems like they have enough to last, but their weapons are worse for wear," he replied. "And there were a lot of wounded as well. I met with monsters quite a few times on my way there."

"Go get everyone. Including Grand and Trett."

"Yes, sir."

Kefin vanished, leaving the two dwarves dumbstruck. I would have been equally startled if I wasn't used to seeing him literally disappear into thin air.

"As you can see," I said to them, "Rockford has come under attack because of the earthquakes too. What we need is information. Are there monsters other than the ants? Is there a queen? If so, how many? I need to hear everything you know. Also, this is a guide for healing costs." I handed over a copy of the guidelines as one of the dwarves sputtered in response. "Let me know once you've made your decision. I have monsters to fight."

I left the two and rejoined the extermination effort with Ketty.

"We gonna cooperate?" she asked.

"Hard to say. It'll depend on them. Certainly not if everyone's going to be like Grios. I have no obligation to put people in danger for the Kingdom of Dwarves like I did for Yenice."

"Coulda used some of that assertiveness back at the council."

"I was in over my head then. I already had my hands full with you guys." I flashed her a joking smile as I beat down an ant.

"Such a meanie. Dhoran and Pola, yeah, I could see that, but *us*? We were

good kitties!”

“You’re jokin’, right, lass?” Dhoran huffed.

“I can’t blame Lionel and Ketty too much,” I confessed. “We were up against a lot.”

I didn’t offer the attendant dwarves a single glance. I was interested in how their attitudes would change upon reading through the guidelines and seeing Grand with us. Whatever he and Dhoran had written in that letter, I had to trust them.

As we fought the monsters, neither of the dwarves approached us or said a word. When Kefin returned with everyone, Grand ignored the attendants, came right over, and lowered his head.

“I’m sorry, lad. But this is my home we’re talkin’ about. I’m beggin’ ya, help ‘em out.”

“I thought you’d say that,” I said. “Don’t worry, I’ve already considered who to take and who to leave here. Dhoran, Pola, and Lycian, I want you to hold the line while Estia heals. You’re *only* to defend. No going into the hole. Work together and keep the town safe. Use whatever magic stones you get from the monsters as you like.” They responded in the affirmative. “Seems like you came at a bad time, Trett. I need you to back them up. Only you can.”

“Oh-hoh!” he cheered enthusiastically. “I *love* the fire in your eyes! Anything for my cute little apprentices!”

Ignoring his suggestive wink, I continued, “Lionel, I want you to fight with your shield and a short spear. Ketty and Kefin are on hit-and-run duty, and I’ll heal. Grand, I want you to join us to handle negotiations.”

“Me?” he said, startled.

“Well, you, Dhoran, and Pola are pretty much the only dwarves I know and trust.”

“Understood.” He huffed. “You’ve changed, lad.”

I smiled. “I’ve got a lot of friends at my back now.”

No matter what happened, even if the Kingdom of Dwarves crumbled, I would

protect them.

09 — Chaos in the Dwarven Domain

The seven of us (counting the two messengers) quickly departed Rockford. We decided to make the trip on foot on account of the possibility of attacks from below making horseback travel risky.

“Sir, even if we should race to the Kingdom of Dwarves, their situation is unlikely to substantially change so quickly. We ought to eat first,” Lionel advised.

“Good point.”

The attendants started to object but complied once Grand voiced his approval. However, they didn’t touch a single morsel themselves.

“Sure is dark,” I commented. “Not like Rockford.”

“Could draw monsters, but nothin’ for it. Use one o’ your lights,” Grand suggested.

He and the messengers had the Darkvision skill, which allowed them to see in the dark. Most dwarves had it because they lived largely in places with low visibility.

“The moon won’t afford us light tonight, but we shouldn’t lose our way so long as we follow Kefin’s route,” Lionel said.

“Right. A little light will help us stay on track,” I agreed.

“Lead the way,” added Grand.

“Count on me,” Kefin replied.

The two other dwarves followed in silence as we exited the fake town. No holes opened up along the way, possibly thanks to the Earth Dragon’s tremors coming to an end, and any monsters in our path were quickly spotted and dealt with by Ketty and Kefin.

I didn’t trust the envoys. They lagged behind, never offering to help lead or assist in battles, and they maintained their attitude with an almost pompous

and self-confident air.

Then, Kefin announced, "This is it. We can get in through here."

"We will take it from here," one of the messengers said.

"Follow closely," said the other.

The pair took it upon themselves to step in front of us and march on. I gave Grand a look.

"I know," he responded quietly. "Bear with it a while longer."

I took a deep breath and let it go, trailing behind them resignedly. The cave leading into the Kingdom of Dwarves was about two meters tall and very similar to the tunnel where I had found the spirits of land.

"It certainly looks like it would be difficult to use a greatsword in here," Lionel remarked.

"You can use it as much as you want if we need it when we're in the kingdom. You might be stuck with a short spear later."

He slouched. "I suppose I'll have to surrender the field to Ketty and make do with being your shield."

I broke into a crooked grin. "You can be more enthusiastic if you want."

His unending thirst for combat despite his devotion to protecting me was honestly somewhat admirable. Maybe there was something to learn from this battle-crazed lunatic.

We proceeded through the winding cavern, twisting down forks here and there without hesitation until we came upon a monster and the envoys stopped. They stood there like statues, without the slightest hint of taking any sort of combat stance.

I shot Grand another exasperated look, and the dwarf face-palmed in sheer disbelief.

"Ketty, take care of it," I ordered. "Kefin, I want you to take point."

"Please, we will be your guides," one of the envoys insisted.

"By all means, carry on. Careful, though, there appears to be a monster in

your way,” I quipped. “Really, what are you even here for?” They didn’t reply. “Grand?”

“Be my guest.”

“I’m on it!” Ketty cried, kicking off from the ground, against the wall, and straight into the monster, quickly butchering it.

Kefin passed by the corpse, nonchalantly resuming his role as guide.

“I’ll take this,” I said as I stashed the creature’s magic stone in my bag.

Several more skirmishes followed, but the two messengers never served any greater purpose than being dead weight.

“The Kingdom of Dwarves is just past this bend,” Kefin noted.

The dwarf called Aleslei suddenly sprinted ahead, and everyone fell into stupefied silence. I looked at Grand suspiciously.

“Are they—”

A shriek echoed throughout the cavern. Ketty and Kefin raced around the corner towards the source. The rest of us followed behind, and when we came around the bend, there was Aleslei, an ant’s mandibles piercing his shoulder. Ketty swiftly eliminated the threat.

“How is he?” I asked.

“Hurt, but not fatally,” Kefin answered.

I short cast Recover and High Heal, then ordered Kefin to carry him.

“Grand,” I said accusingly, “these two aren’t just attendants, are they? They’re nobles.”

“You’re right,” he confessed. “They’re the first and second princes, fighting for the right to be heir to the throne.”

“I knew it. Well, they did ask for our help, so I’ll leave it at that.”

Some time later, we arrived in the Kingdom of Dwarves.

True to Kefin’s report, the Kingdom of Dwarves was overrun by ant monsters.

“Looks like we’re in for some fighting,” I said. “Lionel, you’re my bodyguard.”

“Yes, sir,” he replied, grinning as I handed him his flaming sword and a headlamp.

“Ketty, I want you on support. Find out how many are wounded and if anyone needs rescuing.”

Ketty sounded off with poorly concealed excitement in her voice about getting to join the action.

“Return the messengers to their king, Kefin. Grand, go with him and tell His Majesty that he speaks as my envoy.”

“Sir,” Kefin affirmed with a nod.

“Whatever you say, lad,” Grand answered, hanging his head, evidently dissatisfied with his role.

We set out.

As we approached the heart of the fighting, Lionel hailed the dwarves.

“I, Lionel, retainer of His Greatness Mister Luciel, S-rank of the Church of Saint Shurule, add my blade to yours!”

He brandished his flaming greatsword and set several ants ablaze.

“At least one of us is having fun,” I said.

“Poor guy’s been starving for a fight since Yenice,” Ketty replied sympathetically.

“In the meantime, we need to look for anyone who’s hurt.”

“Looks like they’re hauling injured soldiers that way,” she noted.

“I’m surprised you can see so well in this gloomy place.”

“A lot of cat-folk have the Darkvision skill too.”

I followed her to a building that had been made into a makeshift field hospital. It was brighter inside and I could see at a glance that the place was packed. Everyone was too distracted with their own affairs to notice our arrival. Perfect.

“My name is Luciel,” I announced, drawing the room’s attention to me. “S-rank healer of the Church of Saint Shurule, friend and employer of Dhoran. I’m here to assist with healing your wounded per his request. Direct me to your most critical patients so that I can see to them immediately.”

Several of the dwarves glowered with thinly veiled anger, but understanding the severity of the situation, they chose to hold their tongues.

“This one’s in the worst shape,” someone called out.

I approached at once and saw a dwarf on death’s doorstep, bleeding profusely from several places.

“Dwarves are as durable as they say, I’ll give them that. *High Heal!*” With a quick cast of the spell, his gored shoulder returned to form and the lacerations closed without a trace. “He’s lost a lot of blood. Make sure he eats well, and he’ll be up and around in no time,” I said.

I felt the air stiffen around the surrounding dwarves as their breath collectively caught in their throats. Before they could go berserk, I quickly stated, “Seeing as there are a lot of you, I’m going to do this all at once. Get all of your worst patients within three meters of me. Anyone who can move on their own, make your way here. Forward your thanks to Dhoran if you have any.”

A quick cast of Area High Heal and all the dwarves in the building were back on their feet. They immediately took up their weapons, and I cast Area Barrier on them before sending them off.

“I need someone to take me where the other wounded are,” I said.

“I believe I can be of service,” answered the bloodied dwarf I had healed first.

“Good. If I can save someone, I need to be there to do it. It’s my job.”

“I’ll stay on guard here,” Ketty declared firmly.

When we left the building, the dwarf asked, “Is Dhoran well?”

“He is,” I answered. “He makes good stuff for me.”

He whipped around and grasped my collar. Or tried to, rather. Ketty shoved a blade to his throat before he could get too close.

“Curse you, bastard,” he spat. “Dhoran has no arms! How dare you?”

“Yeesh, okay,” I said with a weary smile. “Listen, I’m telling the truth. His arms have been healed, and he and Pola are back to crafting. Trust me, the girl constantly steals my magic stones for her inventions.”

The dwarf’s expression relaxed but turned to confusion. He struck himself in the face and glared at me once more. “You mock not only Dhoran, but his family as well?!”

“I’m not mocking anyone. They’re not slaves anymore.”

“What?!”

“He’s not lyin’, pal,” Ketty said. “Grand’s with your king now. You can ask him all about it later.”

“S-Sir Grand?!” the dwarf exclaimed. “Pardon my rudeness!”

“Let’s save the apologies for later. There are people we could be saving now,” I reminded him.

“Follow me.”

With renewed resolve, he guided us onward. Ketty and I exchanged grins before following. We dipped in and out of several buildings, healing the injured soldiers inside, and when we cleared the last one, the dwarf spoke again.

“I apologize for my earlier behavior. My name is Landol, and I’m the leader of this defense.”

“Good to meet you, Landol,” I said. “Let’s get to where the fighting is.”

“Is His Majesty not awaiting your arrival?”

“His Majesty can wait while we see to the safety of his people on the front line.”

“Y-Yes, sir.”

His moodiness aside, Landol seemed to have his heart in the right place. I trailed behind him as he led us around the battlefield, healing fallen soldiers along the way. Ketty eventually received word of a change in the tide of the battle.

“The scales have tipped with all the dwarves rejoining the fight,” she said.
“And, well, Lionel.”

She didn’t need to say any more than that. The man in question cackled in the distance.

“Come to me! *Entertain me!* Your match awaits!”

Yep. Lionel. “I think we can leave that area alone for now,” I said. “Can you escort us to your king when we finish?”

“Of course,” Landol replied.

After returning their forces to fighting strength, plus a little more with Area Barrier, we rejoined Lionel. He looked greatly refreshed, finally having been given an outlet for his pent-up stress. I cast Purification to rid him of the stench of burning ants and said nothing more.

“Stay strong, and as I tell my companions, stay safe,” I called to the dwarf warriors. “Landol, if you please.”

“Er, yes. Right. This way,” Landol stammered, tearing his eyes away from the mountains of insectoid corpses and leading us straight to his master, the Dwarf King

10 — The Reality of Slavery

The king's home was less a residence and more a grand temple. Its construction evoked memories of European architecture from my past life. If only I'd had a camera.

Landol led us inside rather easily. As in, there was literally no door.

"Why is there nothing here?" I asked.

"To offer shelter to the citizens who can't fight," he replied. "The palace is currently acting as their refuge."

"What if all the dwarves out there were hurt and had to run here, but then monsters showed up?"

"Then it would surely be their grave."

They clearly knew the risks.

"What about the king and his retainers? His guard?"

"His Majesty's soldiers are currently battling the threat. I am one of them. His Majesty would not hesitate to fight to the bitter end."

He had exceedingly few subjects, from what I understood. And even fewer of them were combat capable.

"I suppose I'll judge him when we meet," I said. "Before that, though, can you take me to where the injured citizens are being kept?"

"I can. This way."

I placed those in need of healing above the patience of any king. When we arrived, I noticed there wasn't a single dwarf among the wounded. They were all humans and various other races. Slave crests branded their arms, chests, faces, and necks.

It hit me all at once. This was what slavery *really* was in this world. The fact that some of them seemed completely apathetic about receiving treatment told me that, to them, death was a preferable alternative to their lot in life.

“They’re all slaves?” I asked.

“Yes,” Landol answered. “They were the front line and took the first wave of the ants. They’re mages, so once their mana is regenerated, they’ll be sent back out.”

“Some of these people are in no shape to be fighting,” I argued. “They’ll hardly be able to move if they lose too much blood.”

“True, but this is a crisis. Better to spill the blood of a slave than our own brothers and sisters.”

I fell silent. I couldn’t say anything back. I might very well have done the exact same thing in his shoes, and that thought made me shudder. Two sources of warmth heated the chill going down my spine. Lionel and Ketty stood behind me.

“This is how slaves are treated,” Lionel said. “This is the reality.”

“It’s the reality just about everywhere,” Ketty amended.

They shared the same sad smile. Perhaps they had been in Landol’s position before. Perhaps they knew how it felt.

“I’m going to heal them,” I declared, “but I don’t want them going right back out into the battle. I’m going to talk to the king, and depending on how it goes, I may have a use for them.”

“If you say so,” Landol said. “I will join you, of course. They’re under contract and won’t be escaping.”

“Then let’s get to healing.”

I approached the “citizens,” and they looked my way with faces full of fear and despair. Ignoring it as best I could, I went around and healed them. Many of their wounds were deep, and men and women alike were suffering. Each reacted with surprise when my magic did more than simply close their open flesh, poking and prodding at where their wounds had been moments before.

Just when I thought I’d gotten to everyone, I caught sight of several other slaves lying in beds, seemingly unscathed and regarded with more respect than the others.

“What about them?” I said.

“I believe they use healing magic,” Landol replied.

I was taken aback. That meant they could have been with the Healer’s Guild.

“When did you get them?”

“Many different slavers from all around the world started to visit us after Dhoran was purchased. Perhaps word spread from the slaver who conducted the transaction. They began trying to sell slaves to His Majesty about a year ago, claiming that those with the ability to cast healing magic were more valuable.”

“So he bought them?”

“No,” Landol said. “His Majesty didn’t want to potentially strain relations with the Republic of Saint Shurule.”

“Go on.”

“The king’s son purchased them personally. When he did, the slavers turned their attention to and ingratiated themselves with him instead.”

“Well, it seems like His Majesty has a tacit understanding with his son. At any rate, they’ve been magically enervated. They need rest. Does anyone else need attention? Any non-mage beastfolk?”

“No. Not anymore.”

I felt the weight behind his words. My body seethed and trembled, but there was no earthquake to cause it this time.

“I see,” I muttered after a silence. I forced a smile with every ounce of effort I could muster, my knuckles turning white. “Then I think it’s time we met with the king.”

“Y-Yes, sir,” Landol stuttered, trepidation in his voice.

Before I followed him out of the room, the slaves uttered their quiet thanks. I didn’t answer them.

“Shall I head the negotiations?” Lionel offered, seeing me staring a hole through Landol’s back.

“You’re gonna make a mess if you try to talk while all you’re seein’ is red,”

Ketty remarked.

I was mad? I suppose I was. Strange. My head was frighteningly clear.

"I'm fine," I insisted. "Just weighing the pros and cons of toppling an entire nation."

"Okay, well, don't do that," Ketty said.

"It's a story as old as time," Lionel remarked. "Those ignorant to the ways of the world always react with surprise."

"I'm not exactly innocent when it comes to treating slaves nice either," Ketty divulged hesitantly.

"Your past is your past," I said. "Maybe I really am the weird one."

I gave a tired smile as we approached what appeared to be an audience chamber.

"This is where visitors are received," Landol explained. "If Sir Grand is here, he will be in this room."

The door opened, and inside was an unusual sight. Grand was protecting Kefin from dwarves.

"What is this?" I demanded. "Who wants to explain what's going on here?"

"Mister Luciel," Kefin called, turning towards me and taking a knee. His hand rested on the hilt of his as yet undrawn sword. In front of him, Grand opened and closed his mouth, at a loss for words.

"Do not make me ask again," I declared.

"We're passing judgment upon that slave who failed to protect me!" Aleslei shouted remorselessly.

My patience ran thin.

"Who is your king?" I demanded yet again.

"This is dwarf land, boy!" Aleslei roared. "You may be celebrated in Shurule, but your power means nothing here!"

I disregarded the blustering dwarf. "If your leader won't see me, then I'm

finished here. Well done, Kefin. You shouldn't have had to endure this, but we're going home now. I hope we meet again, Grand."

As I turned on my heels, a dwarf spoke up. "Wait. I am the one you're looking for. I am King Rockwell."

Turning my head slightly, I stated plainly, "We were just leaving, Your Grace."

"You insult my father!" Aleslei bellowed. "Do not let them leave!"

I did not hesitate. "Lionel, Ketty, Kefin. Show them who we are."

They obeyed. The dwarves would swiftly learn that strength was not theirs to monopolize. Lionel swung his flaming greatsword and batted away one's shield, melting it as it flew. Ketty poked bloody holes in their limbs, while Kefin, the most enraged of all, appeared behind Aleslei and casually disarmed him.

Twenty seconds was all it took.

"The Kingdom of Dwarves," I hissed mockingly. "Enjoy ruling over an empire of dust."

"Wait." King Rockwell rose from his throne and groveled on the ground. "Please. Save us."

"I am not your messiah," I said. "Why should I offer my help to a king who can't even rule his own spoiled son? I came here as a personal favor to Dhoran and Grand. You're sitting here while your people fight when you could decide the battle."

"As you can see, I am old and weak," he pleaded.

"Your robe of mimicry would have me believe that, wouldn't it?" I answered accusingly. "You used me to give yourself a reason to make a show of teaching your son a lesson. Because he thinks he's above humans."

In that instant, it felt as if the air had been sucked out of the room. Rockwell shook, his quiet laughter growing into a great bellow. "Keen eyes, young S-rank. You didn't earn your title for nothing," he said. "Tell me, how did you know?"

"I've noticed your son has a habit of looking down on people. Despite that, he seemed to honor you in that frail body of yours a little too much. And not just him. Every dwarf here was acting suspicious."

“How careless of me.”

King Rockwell tore away the robe, transforming the frail elder beneath it into a great, brawny man of a little over a meter and a half in height. Impressive for a dwarf.



His presence nearly made me stagger, but it was nothing compared to Master Brod's or Lionel's aura.

"Well, good luck," I said dismissively, unwavering.

I moved towards the door, and a wall of stone erupted before me. Lionel rendered it rubble in an instant.

"Okay, you weren't supposed to do that," Rockwell griped, becoming flustered.

I remained where I was in awkward silence.

"Listen, I'm sorry. No more lies. I'll swear under one of those contracts your Church seems to love so much if it means you'll lend your aid."

"Spirits can nullify them," I replied. "And frankly, you've already picked enough of a fight with the Church for me not to care what happens to you at this point."

"What? What do you mean?"

"You have unlawful slaves in your charge."

"I'm a king!" he argued. "What king keeps tabs on every single servant he has?"

Pushing down my growing irritation, I continued, "Humans who can wield holy magic are under the charge of the Healer's Guild. Of course, that's not to say healers can't be slaves, but those who wear the Church's robes belong to the head branch. And those are only a select few."

"Speak plainly, boy."

"The Republic of Saint Shurule does not wage wars of aggression, and I've heard no word of any being declared recently. So why do you have five HQ healers as your slaves? And why are they resting in your palace, worked to the point of magical exhaustion?"

"What is he talking about?" the king growled at his subjects, words dripping with anger. "Someone speak."

Landol's voice shook as he replied, "If I may, Your Majesty. One year ago, I

was directed to purchase slaves from a passing slaver peddling his wares.”

“By who?” Rockwell snarled.

“By Princes Grios and Aleslei and their followers, Your Grace. I was told you had budgeted for them.”

“What’s this about, Rockwell?” Grand asked, glaring at his king.

“I swear to you, Grand. By the spirits, I had no idea,” Rockwell insisted.

The spirits’ voices suddenly echoed, coming to their kin’s aid.

“He’s definitely tellin’ the truth.”

“Rockwell sure is a meathead.”

“Didn’t that slaver brainwash ‘em or something?”

“Hey, doofus. Help the guys out. You can rob ‘em blind after for all we care.”

“There’s lots of dwarves to go around, but we don’t really want these to go away.”

“And if something bad happens here, something bad will happen to Rockford next.”

I certainly hadn’t expected to hear from the spirits here, of all places. It spoke to how much they cared about their kin, I guess.

“What if I don’t?” I asked.

“Rockwell might live, but prob’ly not the rest.”

“Heck, even Rockwell might bite it.”

“Then the land will break apart.”

“It’s all up to you, doofus.”

“We’re not asking for free labor or anything. Rockwell will pay up for sure.”

“Everyone but him’s weaker than even you, Luciel. Please, help them.”

“Can the other dwarves hear you right now?”

“Yup.”

“If you want me to save this country, I have five conditions,” I said. “I want

possession of any slaves I choose. Any magic stones we obtain are to be my property. Rockwell, you are not to lie to me. Your sons are to be thoroughly punished. And you are to deliver an official apology to Dhoran.”

The spirits vanished. My team looked at me curiously as the dwarves of the court stared in shock.

King Rockwell cackled. “I like you, boy. You have a deal, but I want you to heal my men.”

“Fair enough,” I said. “Consider this our tentative alliance. You have my word, by the spirits of land, that I will do what I can to rid your kingdom of the monsters underground.”

“As long as I sit on that throne, the Kingdom of Dwarves will fly your banner!”

“What? No, this is a tentative alliance. I don’t want you people.”

“Call it what you want,” the king chuckled. “I swear by your terms.”

And so our battle against the insect menace began.

11 — Clearing for Action

I healed the dwarves' wounds as promised, aside from the more severe...deficiencies.

"Thank you," Rockwell said.

"I'll be charging you extra, for the record," I said. "Let's get to the field. I expect your help as well, Your Highness."

"I wouldn't have it any other way, boy!"

"That does not mean you're allowed to run off straight into enemy lines."

After an unconvincing moment of hesitation, he replied, "I know."

His subtle pout reminded me all too much of another certain someone. They would certainly make a dangerous combo.

"We should hurry," I said, making for the door. "We need to do something about those ants. With proper breaks, of course."

"You should lead the slaves. We can only command ourselves with any degree of efficiency."

"Got it."

My team, Grand, Rockwell, and his court headed for the slave quarters. The more fighters we had, the better our chances, although I'd need Ketty or Kefin to make sure they were safe to use. If some in their ranks had indeed been brainwashed, we couldn't risk it spreading or compromising the operation.

"I'll take charge of the slaves I healed," I said.

"I take it that's partly the reason for your late arrival?" the king asked.

"I've healed your men around the battlefield as well. Maybe if I hadn't, Kefin wouldn't have been put in danger."

"You trust your slaves."

"They're only my slaves because they refuse to be anything else. They could be their own people if they weren't so stubborn."

“Why would you want to relinquish such valuable servants?”

“Because no one *really* wants to be a slave,” I stated. “Criminals are one thing, but I think treating people inhumanely because of a label is wrong. I don’t want them to hate the very thought of another day of life. That’s why I free those who work, who earnestly try. Call me egotistical, but that’s just how I do things.”

“Do all you humans think this way?”

“No. I’m definitely the exception. But that doesn’t mean I have to go out of my way to fit the mold.”

“I suppose not,” Rockwell said.

“Who is the slaves’ master?”

“Hell if I know. Who does? Speak,” he called out.

“I know,” Grios answered. “Aleslei owns most of them. A few are under my charge.”

His perfect timing struck me as a little odd. I regarded him, considering the deeper meaning behind his words, and said, “I can do what I want with them, right, Your Highness?”

“Whatever you see fit,” Rockwell replied.

“Okay. Everyone wait outside for a bit. Team, with me.”

“Make it quick.”

I entered the room where I’d healed the slaves some time earlier. Their tension ebbed upon seeing me. It felt nice to have a warm welcome for once.

“Listen up, everyone,” I announced. “You’re all about to be under my command, but I promise you three things: You will not be treated as fodder. You will receive proper healing. You will be afforded reasonable breaks.” The room stirred. Shadows of grief fell over some of their faces, realizing they were about to be sent back out into battle. “If you can swear to work to the best of your ability, I will temporarily annul your slave pacts.”

The slaves exchanged glances.

I continued, "Should you act against me, my companions, or King Rockwell, however, you will be taking a one-way suicide mission straight into the ants' nest. You are allowed to prioritize your life and retreat as necessary, but runaways will not be tolerated. You're free to refuse these terms, but those who agree, I can begin temporarily removing your bindings. What will you do?" I asked. "Will you give your oath and join me?"

The slaves hesitated. After some nervous dithering, a voice said, "I will." A pale-faced woman staggered to her feet. She had been recovering from a case of magical enervation.

"I give my word," another said. He was wearing a Church HQ robe.

"I have some things to talk to you lot about, but I guess we can do that later," I replied.

I approached the two volunteers and cast *Dispel*, ridding them of their crests. I could have sworn I saw another light flash as the spell took effect, but upon witnessing the sight, the room swelled into a fervor of yet more volunteers.

"State your names, skills, and magical affinities to my companions here," I instructed them. "We'll divide you up into teams, so be truthful."

Meanwhile, I woke up the remaining three healers and asked for their answers. Naturally, they agreed.

"All right, you five," I addressed the healers. "I want to hear your stories later, but for now you're on Area Barrier and first aid duty. As long as you don't die, I can save you from anything, so be cautious and only do what you can. I know magical exhaustion can take a while to pass, so be careful."

They nodded in reply. I had considered the possibility that they might not take kindly to me, but I was relieved to be proven wrong. Once everyone was done reporting in, I went around and cast *Dispel*. Many people emotionally broke down at receiving their precious, limited freedom.

Others, however, let it go to their heads.

"Idiot!" a man spat, reaching out to take me hostage. "You think some promise is gonna keep me from— What?! What the hell's happening to me?!"

The man's body glowed red, and he shot out of the room.

"I did warn you all," I said. "Don't take an oath before the divines lightly or you'll be joining him down in the ants' nest. I'd think long and hard before you try to copy him."

"Wh-What if we run out of magic?" someone asked.

"You can leave the front line and take a break. If you're hurt, I can heal you. I'm your acting commander, so my orders are the only ones you have to follow."

"Y-Yes, sir."

"Your fate is in your own hands. I won't force anyone to do anything."

Minus the five healers, fifteen of the twenty-five slaves joined our ranks.

"Okay, everyone under contract, follow me," I said.

I noticed one of them looking extremely pale, but there were more important things to focus on. I stowed the image away in a corner of my mind.

"I'm borrowing these people," I reported to Rockwell. "The other slaves and dwarves are yours to defend the kingdom with. I only need you and Grand to come with me to the front line."

The king nodded. "Understood."

The dwarves of his court started to argue but quieted down again when I stated, "If you want to go, be my guest, but be prepared to protect yourselves."

A tiny sigh from His Majesty didn't escape my ears.

We exited the temple-like building and made for where the fighting seemed worst.

"Ketty, Kefin, lead on," I said. They sounded their agreement and I turned back to Rockwell. "What do you fight with?"

"With my body, of course!" he answered.

I noticed special gauntlets adorning his arms. "I assume you mean those?"

"Made of adamantite and diamond. My trusty weapons."

“Can you pull off a charge with something like that?”

“Long-range attacks may give me some trouble, but that’s why I compensate with other techniques, like the stone wall you saw earlier.”

“Could you even combine with a golem?”

“I tried something similar as a boy,” he said, “but my control of magic was never enough to make practical use of it. I don’t test fate anymore.”

“But you can fight the ants, right?”

“With ease, so long as they don’t get the better of me.”

Perhaps he and Grand could work together to expand the ants’ burrows to give us more room to fight in.

We headed straight for where Lionel had been fighting before. The soldiers began to cheer their king’s name when they saw us approaching. We needed some time to explain the situation, so I asked Lionel to handle the ants on his own for a while, and he happily agreed.

King Rockwell took his place before the frontline fighters. “Today, we will protect our kingdom and gut our enemy at the source,” he called out. “We have been given a chance. Do not waste it. The S-rank healer Luciel has returned the slaves to citizens, so no one is to order them around. Assist them however you can. I will be facing the enemy on the front line while Luciel takes command here. Obey him as you would me.”

Their king rushed to join Lionel on the field as the soldier heaved his giant greatsword. The battle-crazed lunatic duo began to crush the ants with overwhelming force, and the soldiers looked on with wide eyes full of shock. I stepped out in front and clapped my hands once. All eyes turned to me.

“Allow me to explain what we’ll be doing,” I said. “We will be divided into teams. One will lead the offensive, one will prioritize defense of the kingdom, one will focus on navigation, another will be first aid, and the last will handle food. Those two fighting over there will lead the defense. My subordinate, Ketty, will lead the offense and enter the tunnels directly, joined by Kefin, who will head navigation. Their goal is to ascertain more about the ants.”

An intense wave of confusion washed over the dwarves. I suppose I had kind of just waltzed up and started spouting orders in place of their king.

“I will lead first aid and food,” I continued. “I’d like anyone not skilled in combat to help me. The rest of you should continue defending against any ants that crawl out of their holes. It’s possible this entire attack is just a diversion, so you need to protect your kingdom with your lives. Don’t take that too literally, though. I’ll heal any and all injuries. King Rockwell and I have reached an agreement, so don’t be shy.”

The former slaves raised their voices, but the dwarves were silent.

“What is it you want to protect?” Grand asked them. “Your pride? Or your country? Hell, maybe just your family. Luciel’s here ‘cause I asked ‘im to be. What’s his race matter? Soldiers o’ the earth, fight for peace in our kingdom! And for the ale of victory!”

The dwarves cheered. I really couldn’t be mad that Grand was more popular, but I could still be a little sad. Which I was, but whatever worked was fine with me.

As the curtain rose on our battle, I felt a shudder. Of fear or of excitement, I couldn’t say. The one thing I was certain of was that I would not let anyone die here.

The dwarves scattered to wherever there was a fight to be had. Evidently, that place wasn’t here, as only Rockwell’s court remained.

“Ketty, Kefin, pull back as soon as it gets dangerous,” I said. “We’ll rework our strategy if need be.”

“Yes, sir,” they replied.

I handed them some lights. “Slaves, obey their instructions if you don’t want to be fodder for the ants.”

“H-Hey, when do we get weapons?” one of them asked.

“You’re not sending us out there empty-handed, are you?” another added.

“What are your names?” I responded.

“Mappulo.”

“Jabrone.”

I checked the list but didn’t see any notes about them knowing how to wield any weapons. Only magic.

“You don’t need weapons to cast spells,” I said. “And you’re underestimating those two. Don’t do anything stupid and they’ll get you home.”

“Let’s get a move on,” Ketty urged them.

“Stop wasting Mister Luciel’s time,” Kefin cautioned.

The pair started walking, and behind them, the slaves dragged their feet.

“Don’t forget you’ve got a lot riding on the reports they give me,” I called out, putting a little more pep in their step as I passed by where Lionel and Rockwell were. “You guys are on standby for now.”

The two warriors stared longingly after Ketty and Kefin as the duo entered the tunnel before returning to slaughtering the insectoid monsters. The rest of us set up a base camp.

“Okay, are there any citizens who can do work other than fight?” I asked the king’s retainers.

“They’re in His Majesty’s palace,” one replied.

“What kind of work?” another challenged me with a nasty glare.

“Filling stomachs,” I said with a smile. “People are going to get hungry at some point.”

Grand stepped in to smooth things over yet again. “Luciel’s a swell lad, just a bit touchy about folks who get under his skin these days. He won’t do ’em no harm.”

“If you insist,” the other dwarf sighed.

Several of them departed for the king’s quarters, giving me the opportunity to chat with Grand.

“You’ve really been playing it up lately,” I commented, smiling at him in thanks.

“Who, me?” he asked, awkwardly looking away. “I ain’t tryin’ to throw my weight around ’cause you had bad experiences with the dwarves or nothin’.”

“I always knew you had authority, but I never learned what you wrote in that letter. And after everything that happened back there, and how Rockwell acted, I can’t help but feel like this whole thing was planned.”

“I knew His Majesty had sons, aye, but I never knew he was that far gone.”

It seemed like he’d genuinely had no idea. Still, the dwarves could have used a little attitude improvement.

“You know if Kefin had drawn his sword, everyone in that room would have been dead. Not that I think he would have.”

Grand said nothing for a moment. “You trust ’im.” He shut his eyes. His conflicted expression pained me a little, so I decided to be honest.

“It’s not like I think there’s absolutely no chance they’ll double-cross me at some point, Lionel, Ketty, and Kefin included. But I owe them my life and vice versa. We’ve all done a little give and a little take.”

“That so.” He opened his eyes. “But any slave I’ve met’d give anything to be free. Why don’t they want it?”

“I think I can make a guess, but I won’t ask them. I doubt I ever will.”

“Don’t wanna know?”

“Not particularly. I’ll ask the important questions, worry about the important things, but nothing more.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because questions they can’t give answers to are questions they probably can’t answer themselves yet. When they want to talk, I’m here. When they want to be freed, I’ll oblige.” I grinned. “As long as it doesn’t kill me somehow.”

“Sure ya won’t regret anything?” he asked with an expression that was difficult to read.

“Sure I will. But struggle’s part and parcel of life. Nothing comes easy, and I’m only human. Even Lord Reinstar left a few regrets behind.”

Grand narrowed his eyes and gave a firm nod. “Ya went and got awful strong in the last few years.”

Hearing that made me happy. No matter what sort of cheat-level, overpowered abilities one was born with, people made mistakes. But when it came to overcoming obstacles, were climbing over it or giving up really the only two options? I didn’t think so. Who said you couldn’t destroy walls entirely? Or step to the side?

Adaptability. When going up against big conglomerates, if you were losing in startup or operating costs, it never did any good to simply try to outprice your competitor. It was always better to investigate demands for other products. Research, understanding the consumer, and adaptability. That was how you came out ahead in the business world. Of course, things didn’t always go perfectly, but they’d never have the chance to if you simply gave up.

“Regret can take years to get over,” I said. “And those are years you’ll never get back. So I’m just going to do what I can *while* I can.”

“Maybe it’s time we dwarves do a little movin’ on ourselves,” Grand murmured.

I saw the five healers standing on their own, trembling. The gloom of the cavernous kingdom certainly played a role in their trepidation, and I sympathized with them. This place, with monsters crawling everywhere, was no place for a healer. Of that I was painfully aware. Their shaking bodies reminded me of myself back during my training with Brod, and it made me want to pat myself on the back for my bravery. Still, I’d do it all again if I ever had the chance to redo this life.

“Maybe introductions are in order,” I said to them, recovering from my trip down memory lane. “Starting with me, I suppose. I’m Luciel, formerly with the Yenice branch, now returned to my duties with HQ.”

No one even blinked. Doubtless my preamble hadn’t been necessary.

“Merido, healer. I once served the Prasta branch in Luburk,” one said.

“I’m Hanz, sir. Also from Prasta.”

“Naratt. I’m from D’elesuid. Illumasian.”

“My name is Norman, and I hail from Illumasia as well.”

“I’m Lihzalea. I’m from Ebiza in Shurule.”

“We’re in an emergency, so I’m going to be short,” I said. “Can you all use Area Barrier?”

Most of them responded in the affirmative, but Lihzalea said, “I can’t.”

“Then you four split into groups of two and start casting Area Barrier around the dwarves,” I instructed them. “Come back when your mana starts getting low.”

“Should we not prioritize healing?” one asked.

“Normally we would, but your levels are probably too low to sustain it. You need to level up a little more.”

“And this will do that?” The four I was addressing gave me a confused look.

“It should. I speak from experience. And take this seriously, because this is to better your magic.”

The four sounded off, formed pairs with those from their same branches, and set off.

“How long have you been a healer, Lihzalea?” I asked.

“I’m a spirit mage,” she replied.

“A spirit mage?”

“Yes. I don’t know about the others, but my class would appear to be arcanist.”

“And that means...you use spirit magic?”

She giggled. “That’s right. There are eight affinities arcanists can use: light, fire, water, earth, wind, darkness, thunder, and poison. We conduct magic through the spirits by offering up our mana to them.”

So, like, the spirit version of a spellsword? Sort of? If her powers were similar to what Lord Reinstar had, she could have been exceptionally strong...although, considering everyone on the Valkyries, Ketty, and Nalia could have whooped my butt, who was I to assume otherwise?

“What can you do?” I asked.

“A bit of magic of the recovery, support, and offensive varieties,” she replied. “And I know my way around a greatsword or two. Or just a regular sword if you don’t have one.”

Now here was the perfect example of how appearances could be deceiving when it came to the existence of numbered attributes and levels. I would never have believed someone so petite could swing around a greatsword otherwise.

“How did you become a slave?”

“Well, I was out shopping, then stopped for some eats, and then I was in the back of a carriage.”

Yeah, that didn’t sound very legal. What restaurant went around spiking its clientele? And wait, “stopped for some eats”?

“You stopped where?”

“Um, at a food place,” she said.

“So, uh, a restaurant.” I was surely jumping to conclusions. She couldn’t have been one of the reincarnated, but I still had to choose my words carefully. “How well can you fight?”

“Better than the others. I think?”

“Noted.” I pulled out Lionel’s old greatsword and held it out to her. “I need you to swear to the divines that you won’t use this against me, my companions, or the dwarves.”

“I swear.”

The contract was made, for whatever good it would do seeing as the spirits could nullify them.

“I want you to act as my bodyguard for now,” I said.

“We’re not looking for the ants’ nest?”

“We’d just be getting in the way and could get hurt if we charged straight in. It’s better to secure a place for everyone to rest and eat first.”

I noticed that she averted her gaze as I considered what to have her do in the

meantime. She probably could have managed well enough using Lil Shiny to wash vegetables. But then the dwarves returned with the women and children who couldn't fight, as well as food and pots and such.

"Thank you for your help," I told them. "I know there's a lot of fighting happening nearby, but I'll do everything in my power to keep you all safe. For starters, I'll set up my barrier magic just in case."

I cast Area Barrier to ease their concerns. They seemed confused for a moment, but then broke into excited chatter when they realized they could knock each other around without a twinge of pain.

"I'm glad to see you all in good spirits, but you've dishes to prepare," King Rockwell scolded them, sending them off to do their work.

I joined them for the time being as I waited for Ketty and Kefin's return.

12 — Disappearing Corpses

Ketty, Kefin, and the slaves returned just as we were wrapping up the cooking. The dwarf housewives nearly lost their heads at the offer of my spices for their vegetables. Presumably, these spices were something of a rarity in the Kingdom of Dwarves. I gave a rather rousing cooking sermon afterwards, which Lihzalea sat out since she didn't have the foggiest idea how to work a kitchen.

"How did it look?" I asked Ketty and Kefin.

"We followed where the monsters were strongest," Ketty said.

"But there were a lot of them," Kefin added. "And they don't disappear like in labyrinths. We couldn't make it very far."

It sounded like our only option was to collect the bodies as we proceeded, which would have been easily solved by giving someone a magic bag if slaves were allowed to use them. Which meant the job came down to only one person...me. We couldn't sit around here forever or something might happen in Rockford without us. But wait, was that really all we could do?

"Were the former slaves any help?"

"Probably would've been above ground," Ketty reported, "but down there they're a mess."

"The tunnels are narrow. It makes it hard to coordinate," Kefin explained. "And movement is difficult."

"It is what it is, I guess. The former slaves can rest here. Keep this area safe," I ordered.

By the pitying looks on my companions' faces, it was obvious that I was not going to get my wish. I should have known better than to assume I'd ever get it my way.

"Hey," one of the slaves said timidly, "are we gonna be enslaved again?"

"Or are we ant food?" another asked.

"As long as you protect this place, I'll treat you fairly," I promised.

“Oh, thank the divines.”

“We’ll win back our freedom today!”

A cheer rose from the other ex-slaves, though I had no real intention of letting loose anyone who still had outstanding crimes to do time for.

After our meal, the team and King Rockwell rested up with a quick nap. The other dwarves were left with orders to take the defense in shifts and get plenty of food themselves. Several hours later, we awoke, and our excursion into the tunnels began.

“Before we go, anyone need nose plugs?” I asked.

My team raised their hands at once, while Rockwell and Lihzalea tilted their heads. They had clearly never encountered Substance X before.

“Well, take them anyway. They’ll purify the air for you.” I passed out the plugs.

“You’re sure I don’t needa go?” Grand asked.

“I need you here so I know the defense is safe,” I said. “The people trust you. Ex-slaves!” I called out. “You’re to obey his orders. Fair warning, Grand, it might start to stink a little.”

“Got it.”

And so we descended into that godforsaken tunnel that I’d hoped I would never have to see again.

“I’m supposed to just hold the light?” asked Lihzalea.

“Just like that,” I replied. “Let us know if you notice anything.”

“Can do.”

Lihzalea stood in the second row of our formation. King Rockwell was at the front with plenty of room to maneuver while Ketty and Kefin sandwiched Lihzalea behind him. Lionel and I took the rear.

“Many monster corpses, but they’re rather small,” Lionel noted.

“They get bigger the deeper we go,” Kefin replied.

“Then we’ll start running into more of ’em,” Ketty added.

“Not to worry,” I said. “I’ll leave Substance X at the forks.”

My two beastfolk companions’ anxiety at the utterance of that word was almost palpable.

“This ‘Substance X,’” Rockwell said. “It’s potent?”

“Does it make monsters weaker or something?” Lihzalea asked.

“All it does is stink,” I stated flatly. “Enough to keep the monsters away. You can have a sip later if you want. It’s good for you...I think. Just don’t waste it or they say you’ll incur the sage’s wrath.”

“That certainly sounds powerful.”

“Then why isn’t it more popular?” Lihzalea wondered.

“Probably because you’ve got to either chug it all or not at all,” I remarked.

“And you choose to...” Rockwell trailed off.

“I can down it, no problem,” I said with a smile.

The other two responded with horrified looks. Leave it to Substance X to forge friendships like nothing else. They were already pale, but hopefully they’d manage when the place actually started stinking.

The farther we pressed, the more corpses we found. I collected them all, summoning them into my bag, while Ketty and Kefin glanced around suspiciously.

“We definitely took out more than this,” Ketty noted.

“Yeah,” agreed Kefin. “There should be more bodies.”

They weren’t the type to engage in idle conversation, so this was serious. There were two possibilities: the bodies had disappeared over time, like in a labyrinth, or the ants were carrying their dead away.

“If they’re making off with the corpses...” I mused aloud, “that means we might come across even stronger monsters soon. I should’ve joined the first trip here.”

“No one could have anticipated this,” Lionel answered comfortingly. “You’re here now, and there’s no shame in that.”

The others agreed and I started feeling a little better. “Thanks. But still, I knew the risk was there from the beginning. All I can do is my best with what we have. Let’s keep going.”

I left the combat to our three frontrunners and focused on gathering bodies. When we approached our first fork, I dropped a barrel of Substance X and stopped the party.

“Hold on,” I said. With a prayer, I dropped the Illusion Staff to the ground. It pointed in the opposite direction from where everyone was about to go. “This is going to sound crazy, but we should go this way.”

Ketty and Kefin exchanged crooked smiles.

“Whatever you say,” Ketty agreed.

“You give the orders,” Kefin added.

I smiled back. “Thanks.”

We proceeded down my chosen path, King Rockwell and Lihzalea shooting me funny looks that I ignored.

A ways down the passage, Rockwell said with perfect timing, “We’ve got company.”

Monsters were waiting in our path. Weak ones, but many of them. We dispatched them with ease, though, and as I was collecting their corpses, I noticed something. The ants seemed perturbed by the missing bodies of their comrades.

“Something’s off about ’em,” Ketty remarked.

“You’re right,” Kefin agreed.

If those two had noticed it, there could be no doubt.

“There are way too many of these things for them to have enough food to sustain themselves,” I said. “Meaning some of them may be cannibalizing each other and getting stronger in the process.”

“Their remains certainly have nowhere else to go,” Lionel concurred. “They don’t disappear as in a labyrinth.”

“We could be in store for some surprises. Stay alert, everyone.”

Farther in, we came across another fork, and I followed the same course of action, placing a barrel of Substance X on the ground and letting the Illusion Staff determine which path to follow.

“The tunnels are getting wider,” Lihzalea noted.

She was right, I noticed. They were.

“And there are more enemies,” Rockwell pointed out as the front guard struck out at more monsters.

“They’ve yet to attack from the rear,” Lionel said, “but we should be prepared for the possibility.”

“Why do you say that?” I asked.

“The subjects protect their king or queen,” he explained. “No such structure exists within a labyrinth, but monsters are sometimes known to follow a similar culture.”

“Where did you hear that?”

“Guildmasters Goldhus and Jeyas.”

When had he found the time to do research? Regardless, at least he hadn’t been idle during our time in Yenice. I found it impressive that he’d earned the dragonewt brothers’ respect.

“I’ll take that gem,” I said, moving to collect the slain monster’s corpse just as the rest of the ants set their sights on me. There were few left, though, thanks to the three at the front taking the brunt of the attack. I changed the Illusion Staff to sword form. “I can handle one or two of you.”

I sliced the approaching monsters with ease. Another lunged at me from my blind spot only to be pierced by a spear from behind.

“Did the Whirlwind not warn you about arrogance?” Lionel asked pointedly.

“I knew you had my back,” I replied coolly. “I only freaked out a little.”

It was true that I had gotten full of myself before, complacent in the knowledge that I could be as reckless as I wanted and rid myself of the consequences with a single spell, but I genuinely trusted Lionel to cover me. Admittedly, he did have a point, though.

“I thought your goal was to die from naught but old age,” Lionel said.

“It is. You’re doing great helping me with that, by the way.”

“Much obliged.”

We shared a friendly chuckle. Lihzalea was quivering in front of us.

“Hey,” I said to her, “if you’re scared, you can come back—”

“I...” she interrupted, mumbling. “I *love* this vibe you’ve got going! The bonds between men. Master and servant. Oh my gosh, it’s so *cute*!” she babbled, her voice very much not shaking with fear, but with passion. “You two tell me if you need anything. I’ll be your sword any day of the week.”



She continued her simple light-shining job with more enthusiasm than I thought possible. She did swing that greatsword and cut down ants with more skill than I'd given her credit for, but after that, I chose to press on with the excursion, pretending like she didn't exist.

Two more forks later, we came to a clearing. There, we found even more ants, only larger and bipedal. They were eating the corpse of one of their fallen kin.

"An evolved form?" I wondered.

"There's a lot of 'em," Ketty noted.

"I can't tell how strong these are," Kefin said. "Could be trouble."

The bipedal ants had grown to about the size of goblins, but I couldn't sense any other danger from them.

"Lionel," I called, handing over his flame greatsword, "take care of them. Ketty, watch his back. Kefin, stay with me while I gather corpses. I want King Rockwell with Lihzalea."

"You do know I can fight," Rockwell argued.

"I know, but I don't think this will take long. Let us handle it."

The king reluctantly agreed.

13 — Myrmecology

The ants we'd faced up until then had all gone down in a single hit, but the bipedal variety was an unknown. I had asked Lionel to handle this fight as a means to test what we were up against.

It did not work.

"One hit," I huffed.

A single swing from his flaming greatsword had blown one of the evolved variants away. It did not get back up. Ketty annihilated any other ants trying to stand in his path.

"This isn't really helping us learn anything," I said.

"I can give it a try," Kefin offered.

"Good idea."

We jogged over to the growing pile of ant bodies and I started collecting them, dealing with the fodder easily enough on my own. Things weren't so easy for Kefin, who struggled to deal with the bipedal variants as swiftly.

"You okay?" I asked.

"They've got high defense. Their joints are protected now, but I have an idea. I'll make an opening, then you strike them down with your sword."

I hesitated for a moment, then said, "Just tell me when."

"Go in when the monster takes a swing."

"Got it."

As instructed, I waited for the ant to strike Kefin, then thrust my blade in. I felt it pierce the ant's fleshy interior.

"Your weapon is a little intimidating, sir, if I'm being perfectly honest," Kefin remarked.

"Yeah, I've been thinking that for a while now. Let's grab some more bodies before more come."

Slowly but steadily, we made our way around the piles of fallen insectoids.

Rockwell watched from behind. "Remind me why we're here again."

"They're doing a good job," Lihzalea observed. "Not a single monster's made it over here."

"But this is simply ridiculous."

Lionel drowned the ants in slashes of fire, normal and variants alike. Ketty danced among the chaos, swiftly dealing damage before leaping out of harm's way and skillfully leading them into reach of her companion's blade. The fight did not last long.



As I continued to gather corpses, I began to wonder just what this clearing was for. We had come to a dead end.

“Did we take a wrong turn?” I wondered aloud.

“It would appear to be a storage area for food,” Lionel said, returning to my side.

“Well, this is anticlimactic,” Ketty added, following him.

“This should’ve worked,” I said. “The staff should’ve shown us the way.” I held the Illusion Staff upright against the ground, then let go. One last shot in the dark. “Excuse me?”

The staff didn’t fall.

“Huh,” Ketty said. “Maybe we’re right on top of whatever’s causing this mess.”

“Bold of you to stake this venture on destiny.” Stars sparkled in Lionel’s eyes. “I like it.”

“King Rockwell, can you open up a hole here?” I asked.

“I can,” he answered skeptically. “Everyone step aside.”

He placed his hand on the ground, and soon the earth spread apart in the middle of the room. Lihzalea approached and shone the light down, spotting ants crawling not three meters below.

“This skirmish is mine!” the king declared before jumping straight down.

So much for strategy, I thought. “What in the world is he doing?”

We peered down to see where the madman had run off to, but we didn’t have to look far. He stood mere centimeters from the wriggling ants, separated by what looked to be a membrane.

Rockwell looked up at us and yelled, “This place seems to have been dug out by the monsters!”

Boy did I want to go home. Was it too late to go home? The answer was yes.

“Everyone, we’re handling this with the same level of caution as the main

chamber of a labyrinth,” I ordered. “We can only assume this thing is the queen’s belly. I’m going to cast Aura Coat and Area Barrier on everyone just in case.”

“Sir!” they cried in reply.

When I finished casting the spells, Kefin said, “I’ll go first and scout it out. If it looks bad, I’ll retreat with the dwarf.”

“Be careful.”

“Be sure to check how big the room is and how many enemies there are,” Ketty reminded him.

“Right.”

Kefin leaped down, then came right back up just as quickly.

“What was it?” I asked. “Is everything okay?”

“I’ve got good news and bad news,” he said. “The good news is you were right. The bad news is King Rockwell is standing on top of the queen. The cave was small, but that’s definitely where the ants are coming from.”

So many monsters had been born from a single parent? This threat went beyond the Kingdom of Dwarves or Rockford. If we didn’t act here, they could pose a threat to the whole world. Had Lord Reinstar done this? Had the creation of Rockford and the immense magic used in its construction mirrored the birth of a labyrinth too closely? I found myself wrapped around that man’s finger yet again, but at the same time I couldn’t fault him for not foreseeing a danger three centuries in the future.

“Then we know what we have to do,” I said resolutely. “We need to take out that queen before the entire world becomes their nest.”

“Shall we slice its gut?” Lionel asked. “Or lop off its head? Or aim for its magic gem core?”

“Guess we should split up,” I replied. “The monsters will probably be all over whoever goes for the head. Let’s leave King Rockwell to handle things where he is, Kefin and I will find the magic stone, and Lionel and Ketty will take the head. Lihzalea, keep shining that light and fill Rockwell in.”

Everyone had their roles. Rockwell still hadn't fully earned my trust, and I had no idea how strong Lihzalea was. I would have to have Kefin look into it later.

I took a deep breath and descended. The queen's back was squishier than expected, and vast. At a glance, it seemed to extend over twenty-five meters across. It was certainly larger than a competition swimming pool, that was for sure.

"Can we actually beat this?" I asked.

"Certainly," Lionel responded. "But we will have to fend off droves of its soldiers."

"We've seen worse," Ketty said.

"Let's do it," said Kefin.

"Everyone, move out," I ordered.

We all ran. I poured magic into the Illusion Sword as Kefin led me to where the ant's prominent jewel was. I thrust the Holy Dragon spear straight in. If this had been a labyrinth, the ant queen would have let out a dramatic shriek, then disappeared, leaving behind a single stone. But we didn't have that luxury.

The ants inside the queen's body began to eat their way out, and the innumerable holes leading to the chamber overflowed with subjects flocking to their fallen matriarch. I tried to put her body into my magic bag, but the ants still within her prevented me.

"We've got the stone, but there'll be no end to those evolved variants if we let them eat her body," I said. "Rockwell, I need you to seal as many holes as you can. Lionel, start dicing the queen apart so I can put her away. Everyone else, keep them off us!"

I didn't wait for their replies and dashed straight for Lionel. He removed the queen's head first, which I promptly collected and swung at an ant that had crawled too close. I took solace in the fact that there was no single attack I couldn't easily heal from.

Lionel carved the queen apart, and I gathered each individual piece, taking out the increasingly angry minions with Ketty and Kefin in the meantime.

Half an hour passed before we finished clearing the queen away entirely, and then we fought her subjects. They were endless. Kefin's weapon broke on numerous occasions, and he nearly met his end, but otherwise no one suffered any substantial injuries.

Seeing Lihzalea surpass even Kefin in combat ability, I made a mental note to myself to be more cautious around her in the future.

14 — The Man behind the Menace

The ant corpses ended up filling three of my five magic bags by the time it was over. It had been an overwhelming battle, thinking back on it, but I'd made it out with the help of my trusty weapon and reliable companions. One question was still on my mind, though: How? How had this been allowed to happen? I shot a scornful look at the panting Dwarf King, even though he and his kingdom were technically victims.

"Your people can deal with whatever monsters are left," I stated.

"We plan to," he replied. His expression softened, filled with remorse. "I'll tell the people when we return."

He must have been frustrated that he was the only one to have collapsed. I could hear it in his voice. He was the only one I hadn't cast Aura Coat on, and the miasma had poisoned him to the point where he could no longer stand.

"You've work to do in your kingdom," Lionel said sternly. "Weeds to pull. Or they will continue to grow."

"Your boys are gonna run your nation right into the ground," Ketty added.

I nodded. "We'll have no part of it anymore. Understand?"

Rockwell bit his lip. He did not reply.

I turned to Lihzalea. "You're stronger than you look."

"The spirits bless me with their power," she replied simply.

"Huh." Something about her, something I couldn't describe, felt wrong. Except not exactly. Was it simply distrust? Or something else entirely? In any case, the first thing on my mind was getting out of the cave as fast as possible. I looked up to where we'd come in and realized I hadn't exactly thought things through. The hole was at least ten feet above us.

"I don't think we can jump that high," I sighed.

Just as I was casting Dispel on Rockwell, Lionel said, "You have a rope, do you not, sir?"

“Yeah, why?”

I took out a coil, but Ketty held out her hand first, and I gave it to her.

“Be cautious,” Lionel warned her.

“Always am,” she replied.

She hopped onto the flat of Lionel’s blade, and he flicked it up as she kicked off, flying straight through the opening in the ceiling.

“I’ll go next,” Kefin volunteered.

Lionel nodded and they repeated the same maneuver. The moment Kefin disappeared through the hole, a rope tumbled down.

“She works fast,” I said. “King Rockwell, can you move?”

“You trust me to go first?” he asked.

“You should be aware that your head will leave your shoulders before you can try anything.”

Rockwell snorted. “You’re not as naive as they say.”

“I’ve got a good support network.”

Rockwell turned from my smile and climbed up.

“Lihzalea, you go next,” I told her. “Then Lionel, and I’ll follow behind.”

“I can’t allow you to remain here last,” Lionel argued.

“I’ve got a hunch,” I said. I offered a playful grin. “And I know you’ll all rush to my rescue if something happens,”

Begrudgingly, he surrendered and trailed behind Lihzalea up the rope. The moment I grabbed on to start climbing myself, the entire length was hoisted up with great force. I groaned as my grip nearly faltered and my shoulders ached with the sudden jerk. I flew up and over the hole, where I saw exactly what my hunch had warned me of.

Rockwell’s court and the slaves who’d turned down my offer were waiting for us and the others from my team were already hurt. Rockwell had been the one to pull up the rope. I’d sent Lionel first as a precaution, but I was still too late.

As I landed, I cast Area High Heal, and the dwarves and their slaves stared with wide eyes.

“Anyone care to explain?” I asked them.

“These punks showed up right when Rockwell came up,” Ketty reported. “Fired off a bunch of spells before we even saw ‘em.”

I looked at the king accusingly. “Your Highness.”

“I’m sorry,” he said gravely. “I will see to this personally. I remember your conditions, but I will deal with these slaves myself.”

“Oh, father,” Grios scoffed. “You’ve gone soft in your old age. Yes, centuries ago our people witnessed a human wield enough power to decimate old Rockford, but that was *three hundred years ago!*” he shouted. “The monster is dead and gone! And soon, you and that human you bow to will share his fate. And then I will rule *all* humans from beneath their very feet!”

“Grios,” his father growled. “You would even bare your fangs at your own father?”

The prince shook with laughter. “Compared to my dear brother, you mean? How blind you are. I’ve been twisting his mind and you were none the wiser.”

“When did this happen?!” Rockwell shouted, stepping forward. “When did your mind become so poisoned?!”

“Oh, a few years ago. I was hoping to give the ants a little more time to complete the tunnels.”

“This... This was *your* doing?”

“Correct.” Grios sneered. “I brought those ants up myself. Their numbers simply got away from me a little.”

“But why would you want to destroy your own country?” I interjected.

“And what would a dead man walking want with that information?” the dwarf spat back. “Kill them,” he ordered. “But leave my father. I have plans for him.”

The other dwarves charged as the slaves began to chant spells.

“Ketty, Kefin, Lihzalea, deal with the slaves!” I commanded. “Lionel, stay

back!”

The trio flew towards their targets. But something wasn't adding up to me. They had seen firsthand how strong we were. So why were they so confident? My companions sliced the tendons in the slaves' legs and stabbed at their arms, but they never stopped casting.

“What order could he have given them?” I muttered. I started to cast Dispel with a long-range magic circle when the dwarves set upon me. “Lionel! Nonlethal!”

“Understood,” he replied, swatting our assailants away like he had in the audience chamber.

“Grios! What did you do to them?!” I shouted.

He huffed. “Turned useless pawns into valuable tools!”

My spells had no effect on the dwarves. Not Dispel, not Recover. I sensed miasma emanating from them. They weren't right. They didn't feel alive.

“It's futile!” Grios cackled. “You and the old man are done!” He turned to his minions. “Focus on the one in the robe!”

The others dragged themselves off the floor like ghouls and darted straight for me before Lionel intercepted them with a swing of his sword. I tried Purification on a hunch, and they finally fell.

“What have you done?!” Grios blustered.

“I'd like to ask you the same thing,” I countered. “You turned your own people into undead monsters!”

“Undead?!” Rockwell shouted, his face reddening with rage.

“What?” the prince demanded. “Am I not free to do with my servants as I please, father?”

“You will,” Rockwell threw his fist to the ground, scowling, “learn your place, boy!” The earth surged and plowed into Grios's gut, but the prince merely cracked a smirk. “What? Impossible!”

“You've grown weak, father.” His son gripped the stone blade and it crumbled

to dust.

“How?!” Rockwell stammered.

“Is that really your full power? You’ll never best me with—”

Light engulfed him.

“Sorry, we don’t do business with the undead,” I said.

The slaves had been purified and dispelled, and the ramparts of Sanctuary Circle burned bright. When the light died down, Grios lay defeated. I made sure that the slaves were still alive and freed the ones who hadn’t turned out to be Illumasian spies.

“Why?” Rockwell pleaded, reaching out to hold his son. “Why did you never come to me?”

“Don’t touch me!” Grios hissed. “Come to you? I’ve always hated you, father. Always.” His body began to disintegrate. “To think,” he scoffed. “There was a man capable of stopping me. Me, a devilspawn, infused with the powers of a magic stone. It seems...fortune was not in my favor.”

The prince crumbled away, leaving nothing but a magic stone. When he did, the Illumasian spies immediately seized up, then perished themselves.

“Grios!” King Rockwell cried. Tears streamed down his face. “*Grios!*”

The king continued to call for his son in vain. We had saved the Kingdom of Dwarves. We had saved Rockford. But our victory was bittersweet.

I purified what was left of the king’s son—the magic stone—and handed it to him.

“I’m worried about how they managed to get this far,” I said to no one in particular. “Grand and the others could be in danger.”

“What of the slaves?” Lionel asked. “Former slaves, that is.”

I gave them a glance and they shivered in fear. “Let’s get back first. They’re free to leave if they want, but we can’t guarantee their safety if they do.”

“Please!” one of them begged.

“Don’t abandon us!”

They'd had their chance to volunteer when I had asked. How much easier things would have been if I was coldhearted enough to leave it at that. I thought about what to do with them, but Grand was waiting and I prioritized him.

"Your Majesty," I said, "if I might suggest saving your tears until after you've made sure your other son is still well."

The king wiped his eyes and stood, stowing away the gem that had been his son. "You're right."

I cast Area High Heal, restoring the former slaves and dwarf retainers. "Kill anything that moves from here on out," I told Ketty and Kefin. "Lead the way."

We swiftly departed the way we had come.

"Still monsters around," Kefin remarked.

"Not too many though," Ketty said.

The two cleared our path, and we efficiently forged ahead, not forgetting to collect the Substance X I had placed around earlier. Rockwell and the dwarves followed from the rear.

"I think your people should manage fine on their own," I said.

"True," Rockwell murmured, scowling. It was only one of a handful of words he spoke on our way back.

"It's gonna take a long time to get rid of all these corpses," I commented.

"Pola and Lycian will make good use of the stones," Lionel replied. "And Rockford would be happy to have the monsters' remains, I should think."

"Not a bad idea. Not like we can do anything with them."

"They will put the materials to far better use than we could, and it will earn more of their favor."

"Hopefully these magic stones can help fund the process of getting the former slaves on their feet," I muttered.

"Let us first hope that Grand is in one piece."

We emerged to much the same sight as when we had left. Things were calm,

and when some dwarves noticed our arrival, they started announcing it to others. It was nice that my worries had been for nothing for a change.

I picked out Grand and approached him. "Glad you're all okay."

"Nothin' out o' the ordinary here," he reported. "Other than the monsters crawlin' back into their holes all of a sudden."

"Good to hear. Did Grios or any other dwarves pass through?"

"Not that I ever saw."

He didn't seem to be hiding anything. I looked at Lionel and Ketty, who shook their heads.

"Fair enough," I said. "We took out their queen and a whole army of her ants while we were at it. Once the kingdom's forces clear out the stragglers, the threat should be gone."

"No tellin'!" Grand exclaimed. "Headin' back to Rockford, then?"

"Believe me, I want to, but we need to heal the wounded and work out our pay."

"Yeah, you 'n your healin'." He flashed a knowing smile. "Get on with it."

I grinned. "Will do."

We were met with many cheers of thanks on our way to the king's estate. No other ants loitered around the other few holes that remained. We'd avoided the worst case scenario.

Rockwell took the lead as we entered his home, pacing to the middle of the audience chamber, before turning and groveling on the ground.

"Luciel. Please heal Aleslei's arms," he pleaded. "I'm begging you."

I had kept his son from succumbing to his wounds but done nothing to return what he had lost. I questioned his judgment. A dwarf like Aleslei couldn't lead their nation to a brighter future.

"Why?" I asked plainly. "Forgive my bluntness, but I think your kingdom needs to be in far more qualified and honest hands than his."

"This isn't about succession. It's about my boy. The last son I have."

“Then what *will* happen to the throne?”

“I will live and breathe for him,” the king said. “Hammer every ounce of wisdom into my son until he’s fit. And if he never is and I die heirless, then my line ends with me. I swear it by the spirits.”

“You’re serious.”

He was willing to throw the entire monarchy away, to bet his entire country on his ability as a father. Just how did he expect to pull that off?

“Nothing less could atone for the mess I made for you and my people.”

The man was sincere. That much was clear. I decided to accept, on several conditions, of course.

“All right,” I said. “Spirits, are you listening?”

There was silence, then Rockwell said, “They seem to be hiding.”

“From what?”

“Perhaps...” King Rockwell trailed off, but I caught his drift.

“Everyone except for Lionel, Ketty, and Kefin, return to the slave quarters,” I ordered. “Including Lihzalea.”

Surprisingly, everyone left without much resistance. Except for Lihzalea.

“Get a move on,” Ketty barked. “What, cat got your tongue?”

“No, ma’am,” she replied quietly, turning to leave.

I stopped her. “Leave the magic item and weapons.”

“Okay,” she acquiesced. She placed the light, sword, and shield on the floor, then left the room.

Rockwell manifested a stone door behind them to give us some privacy.

“Spirits of land,” the king called, “reveal yourselves. Even a voice would suffice.”

At once, the spirits appeared, and their words began to echo.

“The heck was that?”

“Like a shadow.”

"Gave me the creeps."

"Hey, meathead, doofus, what're you two doing bringing our nemesis here?"

"You sure you're gonna trust that?"

"The big baddie in the ground is gone, but there was a big baddie right next to us and we never knew. Only Dusk's ever managed to do that."

"I didn't feel Dusk's blessing, though."

"I need to ask something," I said. "How did none of you notice Grios's transformation? Couldn't you have warned us?"

"Does it have something to do with why you were hiding?" Rockwell asked.

"Uh, I'm not about to be someone's puppet."

"We tried to warn Grios."

"Why didn't we notice?"

"That thing's dangerous. You better kill it before it gets out of hand."

"It's why we've been too scared to manifest."

"It'll swallow us up."

"Wait, who are you referring to?" Rockwell asked. But there was only one person who wasn't there.

"It's Lihzalea," I murmured.

Lionel voiced his concerns first. "Sir," he said, "who is this 'Lihzalea' you speak of?"

"Doesn't ring a bell," Ketty said.

"Was she with the former slaves?" Kefin asked.

"What are you guys talking about?" I asked them, baffled. "The arcanist swordswoman who fought the ant queen with us."

Lionel replied with complete confidence, "We did battle with the five of us here, did we not?"

"Yeah," Ketty affirmed. "You need a cat nap, Chief."

"The exhaustion may be getting to you," Kefin added.

Rockwell shared their confused expressions. They'd completely forgotten, as if their memories had been rewritten.

"Spirits, what's happening here?" I demanded.

"A bit of forced forgetfulness."

"Illusions. I think?"

"It's supposed to be Dusk's power. But she doesn't have Dusk's blessing."

"You're protected against it, doofus, so guess you got lucky."

"You're welcome. We accept donations in the form of mana or honey."

"She's strong, so be careful. It's a spiritual power, but without spirits."

"But not even you realized that when she was here," I said.

"Cause all her powers besides holy magic were sealed away when she was enslaved. We couldn't sense anything weird in her mana."

"That massive wave we got when her pact was undone... Yikes."

"Felt like we were gonna get sucked right in."

"I ain't ever gettin' near that thing again."

"Be careful so you can give us more mana and honey."

"Your life will be in danger, so yeah, watch out and stuff."

With those ominous words, they vanished. They had mentioned a "Dusk." So this girl was using the powers of a dusk spirit, but without its blessing.

King Rockwell was still agape and incredulous at what he had just heard. He collected himself. "I don't know who this former slave is," he said, "but if they're a threat to my son, then I will deal with them personally."

I relayed what the spirits had said to my team about the sixth member of the group who had defeated the ant queen, and gradually they felt the uncomfortably missing pieces in their memories.

"She played us," Lionel muttered. "Had us right in the palm of her hand."

Ketty shuddered. "I don't wanna mess with any dusk spirits."

"Maybe it's not an illusion so much as a kind of one-way telepathy," Kefin mused.

"If the Spirit of Dusk truly is unrelated to this incident, then it bears investigating," Lionel said.

Unperturbed, my team was already looking forward. I pulled out my arclink crystal to discuss the situation with Her Holiness and to verify whether those five healers really were with the Church. I described the situation to her, and she promised to look into the matter, then told me to distance myself from anything involving the empire.

I ended the transmission. "King Rockwell, I will uphold my part of the deal," I said. "But we need to take care of Lihzalea quickly. Can you lower the stone?"

"Of course," he agreed, crumbling the door to the ground.

"We need to incapacitate her," I announced. "Then we can get the truth from her."

The team cried out in the affirmative. To be honest, I was a little disappointed. I had half expected her to be one of those partners I was destined to meet, courtesy of the spirits. Not that I had any basis for thinking it, but I felt stupid for trying to act all cool and aloof around her.

We entered the slave quarters, but Lihzalea was nowhere to be seen. We asked if anyone had seen a stranger among them and came up empty. She was gone.

"Did she realize I hadn't been affected?" I wondered aloud.

Reluctantly, I gave up and we met with Aleslei. I restored his arms in private with Extra Heal, and King Rockwell offered many thanks upon seeing his son back to normal.

"No thanks needed," I insisted. "Dhoran will be around at a later date, so I expect you to offer him an apology as well as the contents of your treasure room."

"I will," he said. "Are you leaving?"

“I wish, but I need to work out what’s going to happen to the freed slaves, talk with Grand, and figure out what we’re going to do about Lihzalea.”

“Understood. What will you do with the former slaves?”

“I don’t really want to dump them in Rockford. Can we keep them here for the time being?”

“You’re certain?”

“They can earn their keep by helping to take out the monsters that are left, so they’ll get on fine. I’ll be back for them as soon as I can.”

“If you say so.”

I returned to the slave quarters and explained that I would sort out the issue of carriages and money, but some were itching to leave as soon as possible.

“You’re free to leave as you please so long as you swear under contract to never cause trouble for me or the dwarves,” I said.

Several made their oaths and immediately departed.

“Keep these guys fed,” I told Rockwell for the rest.

“We will,” he replied.

We bid him farewell and left the building, where we found Grand waiting outside.

“You could’ve come and said hi,” I said.

“Just takin’ in the sights,” he answered. “Don’t come home often.”

“I understand. We’re heading back to Rockford.”

“Then let’s be off.”

We set out on the path leading out of the cavernous kingdom, but a subtle fear wouldn’t leave the pits of our stomachs. Its name was Lihzalea.

15 — Lihzalea

The sky outside the cave leading to the Kingdom of Dwarves was bright and sunny.

“If you’re trying to ambush us, you’ll have to try harder,” I said to the person awaiting us at the tunnel’s mouth.

“Do you remember me?!” she shouted.

“Lihzalea,” I said, “you’ve got a lot of questions to—”

She burst into tears. “Oh, thank *god!*”

The gears in my head creaked as I tried to understand what in the world this girl was doing. She was peppy and excited but somehow crying her eyes out at the same time. Was she mentally unstable or was this some side effect of dark magic?



“This is Lihzalea?” Lionel asked.

“She’s just a little girl,” Ketty remarked.

“And we’ve supposedly met her before?” asked Kefin.

No doubt about it, those three were clueless. But something still stuck out to me. With her powers, how had she become a slave in the first place? Her tears almost made me falter, but those were easy enough for someone skilled to fake. I couldn’t let my guard down.

“This is her, all right,” I said. “Listen, crying won’t make me any less suspicious of you. Why weren’t you in the slave quarters?”

“Because a dusk spirit appeared to me. They usually don’t,” she added. “And I used its power, and...everyone forgot me.”

“Go on.”

“It got mad and tried to hurt people. So I left.”

“What happened to the spirit?”

“Dusk spirits can only manifest at night or in caves.”

It made sense. But it was still too dangerous to risk taking her into Rockford, and the spirits of land had said she shouldn’t have the Spirit of Dusk’s blessing.

“All right, well, good luck,” I dismissed her.

Her face wrinkled in panic. “Don’t leave me here!”

I couldn’t let her potentially manipulate my emotions. I decided to hear her out once and only once.

“The land spirits told me that you’re dangerous. Can you explain why they would say that?”

She shuddered, then the waterworks started to flow again. “I just wanna be their friend,” she blubbered, then proceeded to explain herself.

Taking her at her word, it seemed she wasn’t abusing the spirits on purpose. She was simply reacting to danger and instinctively borrowing their powers, but in an uncontrolled manner. She was essentially stealing their essence by

accident.

“Then the spirits might have been right,” I muttered to myself. Lihzalea froze and hung her head. “Why can’t you ask the dusk spirit to help you train so you stop robbing them of their power?”

“Because they told me I’d learn to control it in time,” Lihzalea replied.

“The spirits?”

“The people who raised me. The Spirit of Dusk lends me its power, but I think it’s shy. It doesn’t show itself a lot.”

Was this lack of control normal or was her family mistaken? Flawed teachers weren’t uncommon, after all. Brod came to mind.

I wondered if Lihzalea might have been one of the reincarnated. Maybe my reasoning was a little funny, but to be frank, she came across as the sort of person who had an extensive yaoi collection. Now, I wasn’t familiar with this world’s creative fiction enough to know if that stereotype existed here or not. But still, she had an oddly modern vibe about her. That said, I had to wonder where she’d learned to fight if she had indeed been reincarnated.

“How old are you?” I asked.

“Seventeen,” she answered.

That took me aback. Was I wrong? She should have been my age if she’d been reincarnated like me. Perhaps the people who had raised her were the reincarnated ones.

“When did you start hearing and seeing spirits?”

“When I was little, I was really weak,” she replied. “Like, on death’s door weak. So my parents sent me somewhere they said would cure me. My memory’s a little hazy, but I still remember what happened after they sold me.” So, she had been a slave. “They made me do a lot of experiments,” she continued. “Take medicine, sword fight even while I was sick. I always had cuts and bruises. And I was always lonely. After a few years of that, I started to see the dusk spirits and I stopped being so sick all the time.”

Had she called them herself? Or had they been drawn to her? Could it have

been an effect of some drug? Something else nagged at me too.

“How did you get enslaved if you were already a slave?” I asked.

“I was freed once.”

“Nice owners?”

“I asked them to let me go one time and they just did. I was really surprised, but it was only because the dusk spirit had lent me its power.”

Then she had had access to this power from a young age.

“Something’s been bugging me,” I said. “You used some kind of amnesia-inducing magic when you left the audience chamber, right? How did you do that without leaving a single trace and without the land spirits ever finding out?”

“My power has...a price,” she replied.

“What kind?”

She cast her eyes down. “When we were fighting the ant queen, I used the spirits’ power. I stole their life force, except for Dusk’s, and to give it back, it takes rest. When that happens, the dusk spirit takes over and creates a kind of interference effect around me.”

“And that’s the price you have to pay.”

“Right,” she said. “To be precise, it was already happening after the fight with the ant queen ended. You should have all forgotten about me then and there, but you never did, Mister Luciel.”

I didn’t sense insincerity in her tone, and her eyes were looking straight at me. Her words were logical, but something about her still felt off to me. This wasn’t the whole truth. She was after something. I had no idea whether this girl was trustworthy or not. If she was, we could have taken her to Rockford with us. But I didn’t have that kind of confidence in her. The one mystery that hadn’t been solved was how she was using the powers of the Spirit of Dusk without its blessing. If this spirit really existed, it could have spoken to me like the Spirit of Tides or the land spirits had.

“I have no way of knowing if it’s the spirits going berserk or you losing control of yourself,” I said. “Either way, there are enough threats in this world to me

and my companions without adding you to it.”

“Yeah,” she murmured, dejected, before forcing a smile. “You’re right. You freed me from slavery. I should be grateful for that.”

I wavered. I couldn’t find it in myself to abandon her, so I decided to delay things until I had enough information to know what was right.

“I’ll let you borrow the greatsword and shield,” I told her. “I’ll write a letter for you to show King Rockwell. Wait in the Kingdom of Dwarves until I come back.” She shot me a look of pure surprise. “Unfortunately, I’m not quite jaded enough to abandon someone in need.”

“Thank you!” she cried. “Thank you so much!”

I took some parchment from the magic bag and penned a short letter to Rockwell as Lihzalea continued to thank me repeatedly. The spirits were enigmas, and if Lihzalea was clean, she could provide a better understanding of them. Or so I hoped.

“The plan is to be back in ten days,” I said. “Stay in the Kingdom of Dwarves until then.”

“I will! I’ll wait right here until we meet again!”

I called Forêt Noire from the hermit key space and prepared to mount her when she suddenly reared up at the sight of Lihzalea.

“Oh!” Lihzalea jumped. “D-Did I do something?”

“Whoa!” I did my best to soothe my horse. “What’s the matter, girl?”

Forêt continued to stamp her feet and puff at Lihzalea. Horses were smart beasts and well attuned to people’s natures, Forêt more than others. If even she sensed something wrong with the girl, there could be no mistake.

“Sorry, she’s a bit moody,” I apologized.

“I don’t think she likes me,” Lihzalea replied dryly.

“Anyway, until next time.”

“Until then.”

We watched Lihzalea disappear into the tunnel, then departed for Rockford.

A little down the road, Lionel said, "The place she was sold to... I believe it may have been Illumasia."

"Why do you say that?" I asked.

"Poor health in children is sometimes indicative of dissonant classes," he said. "The latent presence of ill-suited jobs deep within one's body."

"But that's theoretical, I assume."

"Regardless, the empire has been gathering such children and enlisting them as soldiers."

"Why?"

"Ostensibly, to heal them," Lionel explained. "In truth, it's to turn them against their mother nations."

"To brainwash them," I said.

"Yes. They strike while they're young, too naive to even know they're being poisoned."

"This sounds similar to something I heard back in Merratoni," I murmured. I remembered what Bottaculli had done with his daughter. If all this were true, what would have become of her? "What does the empire do with the adult slaves it receives?"

"I imagine that largely depends on the individual, but they could be sold off to another country, kept as pets, or used to train the children. Not to mention the rumors surrounding human experimentation."

"But you stopped that, didn't you?"

"Tried to," he corrected. "The matter proved more complicated than I had ever anticipated."

"I still don't understand something," I said. "Why would Illumasia go out of its way to essentially kidnap children based on something entirely theoretical?"

"Because it is not theoretical to them," Lionel replied. "The emperor himself experienced it firsthand. As a child, his body was weak, but upon reaching adulthood, he obtained power. With the attainment of a single class, he

became the ruler of a nation.”

“So what does that mean for the child slaves?”

“I can only speak based on rumors. Supposedly, the initiative has borne fruit, but those who fail to provide noteworthy classes are sold off. I wish I had been able to investigate the facilities where the experiments take place, but alas.”

“Something tells me we might have bitten off more than we can chew.”

Why would the empire spend a fortune purchasing child slaves, raising them, feeding them, clothing them, and training them only to get rid of them right after? I had to remember to ask Lihzalea for answers. If she was willing to give them, that is.

16 — The Near Future

As we approached the entrance to the fake town leading to Rockford, Ketty reported an absence of hostile presences. We continued on.

“Hopefully things are still quiet,” Lionel murmured.

Inside the town, all was well. There was no rubble, no sunken earth, and Pola’s golem stood in the distance. Relieved, I began to head towards it. The plaza was littered with corpses and new holes in the ground, the signs of battle evident.

“Is everyone okay?” I said. “We’re back. Show me to the wounded.”

Upon hearing my voice, Pola’s golem disappeared and she crumbled to the ground.

“Pola!” I cried.

Dhoran caught her before me. “Thank the spirits,” he said. He looked up at me. “Help me close up these holes.”

There were indeed more cracks in the ground than he’d be able to seal on his own.

“Grand, lend him a hand,” I said. “Everyone else watch for monsters.”

“Mind if we make use of some magic stones?” Grand asked.

“Sure. It shouldn’t take too many, so you can pull some out from the ants piled up over there. Or from the ones we gathered. Lord knows we have enough.”

“Got it.”

The work was done quickly, but even the little effort it took seemed to be too much for Dhoran and Lycian, who had been guarding the town through the night. They could barely remain standing, and Estia’s magic had run dry.

“We’ll take care of things from here. Everyone else go get something to eat and get some rest,” I said. “Let me know if anyone needs healing.”

I treated a few people, and then the dwarves left for their forges with gruff expressions of thanks.

“You don’t need to eat?” I asked Dhoran, who had stayed behind.

“Had some o’ the stuff you left behind,” he replied.

“How’s Trett?”

“Can’t fight, so he’s been butcherin’ the monsters.”

Disassembling them for magic stones and materials, no doubt.

“All right. You get some rest.”

Dhoran dipped his head, then headed off with Pola on his back. Lycian and Estia leaned on each other as they made their way back as well.

“Now we can finally return to those measurements,” I said to Grand.

“Not headin’ back yet?” he asked.

“I’m going to collect my thoughts a little first. Lionel, Ketty, Kefin, you can go on if you want.”

Grand nodded and followed behind Dhoran. The others left as well, while Lionel remained next to me.

“I’d like to think that your days of falling down holes are over,” he said, “but one can never be too careful.”

I thought about arguing, but the moment I opened my mouth I realized he had a point. I looked aside towards the plaza. “That’s...entirely possible, I guess.”

“You have found yourself in a position of leadership, and leaders are accompanied by their followers,” Lionel said. “You really ought to get used to it.”

“That might be difficult.”

“Give it a decade.”

The thought of such an incredible length of time made me anxious. Would Lionel and Ketty let me free them by then? Would they finally be true

companions? Maybe that was wishful thinking.

I continued to stare at the plaza and said, "You know we might have to go to the empire at some point. Can you handle that?"

"I will have no choice as long as I am a slave," he replied. "If I am not, then I fear what I might do."

He wouldn't betray me. He likely meant that he might run off and let his personal grudges send him into a fury.

"Thanks for the honesty," I said. "The plan right now is to visit Merratoni after dropping Dhoran off in the kingdom. We may have to stop at the Holy City too, but we'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

"Can you decide our destination without convening with your superior?"

"As long as nothing's obligating me to be elsewhere. I'd also like to visit Neldahl. I may be able to learn how to use some new magic, even without the right affinity. Also, you can't go wrong with a flying city, am I right?"

"Very well," he said. "But you should know there are only three ways to enter the city: by way of dragon from the empire, ascending through a particular labyrinth in Grandol, or having each country sponsor you and request the city to land."

"Those are the only three options?"

"As far as I'm aware."

"In any case, the plan is to spend a few months in Merratoni while your gear is being worked on," I said. "I think I could use a refresher of the basics. And I'd love to see you and Master Brod go at it."

"With your spells, you are sure to have many chances to witness that," Lionel said with excitement in his eyes.

"About Lihzalea," I said, changing the subject. "You really don't remember a thing?"

"My memory is not entirely gone. It's almost in a fog, so to speak."

"Got anything?"

“Only vaguely. I spoke of Illumasia conducting human experimentation, if you recall, and those memories are somehow hazy to me.”

“Did meeting her make anything click?” I asked.

“No. But the particulars of what specifically has left my mind are suspicious.”

“And I assume this isn’t a simple case of forgetfulness.”

“It’s like a kind of subliminal masking effect on my mind, similar to Kefin’s ninjutsu. I believe a resistance to it can be developed.”

“What are your thoughts on her in general?”

“If she is an Illumasian spy, her being a slave could have been a mere ploy to gain entry, and it would have been easy given her magical talent for deception. But if we are to combat an enemy we can not perceive, the empire must not get to her first.”

“Well, if there’re holes in her acting, that’s good, but what worries me is what the spirits have to do with it.”

“She didn’t strike me as particularly malicious,” Lionel admitted, “so I would not object if she joins us, but I recommend caution.”

“I would normally agree,” I said, “but Forêt didn’t seem to like her.”

“Your steed?”

“Yeah. Animals have better instincts than people because ours are based on memory and learned experience while theirs are innate. And Forêt seemed cautious of her, so I think we should be the same.”

“If only there were some tool that would allow beasts to speak.”

“Tell me about it.”

We passed the time with more idle conversation, short bouts, and a little magic training.

Some time later, I was speaking with Dhoran.

“We got a lot of magic stones from all this,” I told him. “I want to use them for the project. Of course, the gear comes first, but the rest is up to you.”

“Pola, get to work on those,” he said to his granddaughter. “Lycian, start refinin’ those affinities.”

“Fine,” Pola replied flatly.

“May we work on our own projects when our job is done?” Lycian asked.

“To your heart’s content,” I said. “I’ll join you both tomorrow. I know it’s a lot, but we’ll get through it together.”

Ignoring Grand’s glances, I got to work cooking dinner and let everyone know we’d be calling it a day early. After dinner, I returned to my room and contacted Her Holiness via arclink.

“I’ve yet to verify matters regarding your prior request,” she said. “Forêt Noire’s behavior is indeed suspicious. This one called Lihzalea worries me.”

“Me as well, Your Holiness.”

“You have rid the girl of her slave crest, yes? Bring Estia to her and you may find answers.”

“Estia?”

“She is knowledgeable in the way of spirits. I will say no more.”

“Yes, Your Holiness. I anticipate that we will visit the Holy City before making for Merratoni.”

“Go with luck. I fear you may need it.”

“Yes, Your Holiness.”

The transmission ended.

Everything seemed to be linked to Illumasia. Lionel was reluctant to visit the empire, and I wasn’t itching to go myself. The quickest way to find answers was talking with Lihzalea again...and just when I thought we were through with all the drama after Yenice. There was no end to it. Not that I was too overwhelmed or anything, but I would have liked a day or two off. Dragons, the Wicked One, capricious spirits... It seemed like I was getting tossed around like a ragdoll. The blessings felt like a curse in disguise. I was receiving them for a reason, but in reality I found them extremely binding, like I was slowly losing any agency in my

own life.

I could only lament my lot in vain as I began my daily magic practice and then went to sleep.

The next day, Trett helped us with extracting the magic stones from the ant corpses.

I gave him a weak smile. "In the time you can take apart an entire body, I get a single gem out. I'm feeling a little inadequate over here."

"You haven't been doing this since you could walk." Trett smiled back. "The day you outdo me is the day I vanquish gender for good."

"Uh-huh," I said without even blinking. "Let's save all that energy for the task at hand."

I focused on my work, only a little bit exasperated. Everyone was extremely thankful for my cleansing magic, which I made sure to cast every thirty minutes or so to keep the place from reeking.

As we toiled away, I thought of something.

"Lycian," I said, "you use spirit magic, right?"

"Correct. The wind variety, to be precise," she replied.

"Say, hypothetically, that you tried to use earth. What would happen?"

"I've never tested it," she confessed. "But it would take an exorbitant amount of magical energy to do. A person's affinity with the spirits affects how much mana it takes to use their powers."

"So you could, for example, use the Spirit of Dawn's light magic?"

"With the correct technique. Much like how I'm refining the affinities of these stones through the corresponding spirits."

"Are there any types of stones that are impossible for even you and Pola to make?" I asked.

"Of course. No amount of magic alone can create a light-or dark-type stone. Sometimes it takes special items, like holy water for dark-types."

“Sounds rough.”

“Now you see why I admire Lord Reinstar so. He could command every magical affinity, and it makes me green with envy to think of how many things one could create with that kind of power.”

“Huh.”

“I could see Luciel being one of those fancy sages one day,” Trett said. “Be a dear and promise we’ll collaborate together when that happens.”

“If it does, I’ll make sure I’m single,” Pola said.

“Add me to the list of marriage candidates, if you please,” Lycian added.

“Yeah, like you two would ever take your noses out of your work long enough to maintain a relationship,” I laughed.

The work continued on, punctuated by many snack breaks.

“A whole day of nothing but this,” I moaned. “This is rough.”

“Any work worth doing is not easy work,” Lycian stated.

“Blood, sweat, and tears is the only way to improve,” Pola agreed.

“Disliking something doesn’t mean it’s impossible to do,” Lycian continued. “What’s important isn’t skill or talent. It’s a passion and pride for creating something new. Without those, whatever you do will never last long.”

I supposed that for me, it had been my magic training. When I tried to think of what else I’d poured my heart and soul into for an extended period of time, Merratoni came to mind. My two years of training. I had been in so deep that I hadn’t even had time to spare for a single moment of thought. But I had to wonder. Where would I have been if I hadn’t been sent to Headquarters several years ago?

“So what’s Luciel’s passion?” Pola wondered. “Helping people?”

I couldn’t say anything for a while. I didn’t know how to correct her. If helping people wasn’t my purpose, then what was?

“I studied and trained because I wanted to survive,” I said finally. “It was only recently that I decided I wanted to help whoever I could, but that’s where it

ends. I'm not an altruist."

All I wanted to do was help those I came across in my own life. Nothing more.

"You're young," Trett said. "You have all the time in the world to figure that out. People have always praised me for my pedigree, but I never knew whether I wanted to use my talents for what they were meant for or forge my way into something new. Decades later, I still don't know."

I never would have expected Trett to be carrying his own inner turmoil. Speaking of inner turmoil...*decades*? Just how old was he? No. That was a train of thought that I should not, *must* not entertain. For my own sake.

"My goal is to be a master artificer and max out my skill level," Pola declared. "And to make something even better than Master Trett one day."

"I want to be a revolutionary," Lycian stated with pride. "A pioneer of bold, new inventions."

The girls weren't pressing on blindly. They were striving for something. And for some reason, I felt the slightest twinge of what I would almost describe as jealousy. But over what? Their goals? Their confidence?

"Wonder where I'm going in life," I mumbled.

"Well, what's your goal?" Trett asked. "To found a country of peace? To rid the world of suffering?"

"Make the ultimate team?" Pola asked.

"I assumed it was social reform," Lycian said.

"Those would all be nice, but I'm not after anything that lofty," I said. "Just something stable. Safe. Like medicine, or maybe making magic items."

"You have plenty of time to figure that out," Trett said comfortingly. "Just remember that no matter what world you find yourself in, it may seem unassuming at first, but reality is always harsh. You need to follow through."

What it came down to was how I planned on making good on what I set out to do, regardless of the obstacles before me. The question was, what *had* I set out to do?

“Heh,” Pola chuckled. “Luciel. My apprentice.”

“An assistant like him would be invaluable,” Lycian mused. “Just think of all the magic stones he could make.”

“You guys might be right,” I said. “Dying from old age is a pretty morbid singular goal to have.”

I glanced at Trett, but he was gone. I panicked for an instant before his arms wrapped around me.

“You’re so cute when you’re conflicted,” he crooned. “I could teach you all sorts of things, you know?”

I felt goosebumps ripple across my skin and a chill run down my spine.

“Finders keepers,” Pola argued.

“Do not seduce my patron,” Lycian said sharply. “Doubtless you intend to turn him into your crony.”

“What are you going to do about it?” Trett challenged her.

“Make magic items till I die,” Pola replied.

“Stand by Luciel until his short human life span comes to an end,” Lycian declared. “I have a partner and rival now who I need to impress.”

Out of context, that could have easily been construed as a proposal.

“Thanks for the advice,” I said. “I’m going to take some time to think about what sort of things I want to do in the near future.”

It took us three long days to get through all of the ant corpses.

I began a new training regimen the next day, involving several spells at once with multiple magic circles. Goals and aspirations were still on my mind, but that didn’t mean I could slack on constantly improving. The things one lacked had a tendency to be exactly what one needed at the least expected times.

Lionel, Ketty, and Kefin’s measurements were completed quickly with Trett’s help despite his love of teasing Kefin. Ten days passed in a flash.

“We all ready to go?” I asked.

“Aye,” Dhoran replied, though his tone was uncertain. Meeting Rockwell must have been weighing heavily on him. “I can’t convince either o’ ya to stay here?”

“Nu-uh!” Pola declared.

“Like they say, know thy enemy!” Lycian agreed.

Was she really *Lycian’s* enemy? Those two were really getting along like the best of friends now. Even Dhoran had gotten over his prejudice towards the elf now that Lycian was friends with his granddaughter.

“I’ll keep your forge warm,” Trett said. “I’m feeling inspired lately.” He winked at Lionel. Ketty all but hissed at him in response.

“Should take about three months to get four sets o’ gear hammered out,” Grand said. “You’ll get back any ore we don’t end up usin’.”

“I thought you said not to expect there to be leftovers.”

“Remembered somethin’ I never shoulda let go,” he replied. “When your job’s done, I’m headin’ to the mines.”

“You’re serious, brother?” Dhoran asked.

“Can’t go expectin’ Luciel to hire me with all this baggage,” Grand said. “Whaddya say? Think you’ll have any openings when I’m done?”

“With you on the team, I almost want to buy some land in Yenice and build a nice little town,” I mused.

“I don’t suppose you mean to leave little old me out, do you?” Trett cut in. “Oh-hoh, now that sounds like a project.”

“It might be another ten years down the line,” I said, “but that’s a nice goal to have. A little place of respite like Rockford.”

Everyone smiled in agreement. As we left for the Kingdom of Dwarves, my steps felt lighter than ever.

There wasn’t a single monster on the road. We arrived at the cave’s mouth having only seen the occasional flier soaring far overhead.

“Easy trip,” I remarked.

“We can safely assume that the queen ant we slew was the cause of our troubles,” Lionel replied.

I nodded, turned on the light, and proceeded towards the cavern, but Dhoran stopped me and said, “A minute, lad.”

“Not feeling well?” I asked him.

“Just a little uneasy is all. Last time I came here with Pola, it... I don’t like to remember it.” Pola looked up at her grandfather and he patted her head. He took a deep breath, then said, “Sorry ’bout that. Let’s get goin’.”

When we emerged from the tunnel and into the Kingdom of Dwarves, cheers rose up, but not for me—for a change. For Dhoran and Pola.

“You guys are popular,” I said.

A shy smile appeared beneath Dhoran’s beard. “Small neighborhood.”

We continued towards the king’s palace.

“So, is there no reception or anything around here?” I asked.

“We don’t do stuffy formalities like that,” the dwarf replied. “King Rockwell calls all dwarves brothers ’n sisters.” I gave him a sarcastic look. “The matter o’ the sword I forged was complicated,” he clarified. “His Majesty’s hands were tied, and rules had ta be followed. He didn’t enslave me ’cause he wanted to, lad. Who knows what else he had ta do to clean up the mess.”

“And a king simply doesn’t have the power to pardon people,” I said sarcastically.

“Not for family he can’t. Not without it lookin’ bad.”

“Excuse me? Repeat that first part?”

“Rockwell’s father, the last king, was my younger brother,” Dhoran said. “I left home when I was a boy to follow the way o’ the hammer. Wandered around a bit before apprenticing with a master with Brother Grand. When our old man died, my brother took the throne in my place.”

“You’re telling me you and Pola are royalty?”

Dhoran grinned and nodded. “In so many words, that may or may not be

what I'm implyin'."

As we walked through the building, angry shouts echoed through the corridor. They were coming from the audience chamber.

"Is that King Rockwell?" I asked.

"Plus one more," Dhoran said as he opened the door.

"Did I not say I would not be taking..." Rockwell began to shout. "Uncle?!"

"And his little twig," Aleslei added.

Their faces were red, like they'd been screaming at each other until just a moment ago. They stared at us.

"I purchased these two some time ago," I said. "After much service, I decided to free them. They're now officially under my employ and manage my crafting. King Rockwell, if you have anything to say, say it now. The same goes for you, Dhoran."

"You think you can just waltz in here and throw your weight around, S-rank?" Aleslei hissed.

A figure emerged from the prince's shadow and promptly covered his mouth. It was Pola's golem.

"You're even more annoying than usual," she said. "Let grandpa talk."

"My apologies, Pola," Rockwell said. "Uncle Dhoran, it's been too long."

"I caused you a lotta pain and trouble," Dhoran said, somehow with more remorse in his voice than the king. "All because o' my own failure. I'm sorry, Your Majesty."

"Do not apologize to me. It's my fault. I should never have sold Pola with you, no matter how much she begged me. What I did was unforgivable."

"But I got to stay with grandpa because of you," Pola argued.

"Truth be told, I thought you were a cold man when ya sold her," Dhoran confessed. "But that's what it takes to be a king. Toss your guilt to the wind, boy." He stood up straight and continued, "You acted as a ruler. If ya still wanna do with the apologies, I'll accept it and move on. Water under the bridge."

“Uncle...” The king began to cry. “How I regret what I did to you.”

Aleslei watched in awe. A king crying before his subjects. Rockwell carried a great deal of hidden stress, and he had lost one of his two sons. His arrogance and bombastic nature was likely a mask he put on to assuage his people, when in reality, he was creaking under the weight. It made me wonder what I would have done had I not had people to lean on in Yenice. The Healer’s Guild probably would have taken far longer to establish, at the very least.

I sympathized with the king. Perhaps if Dhoran and Grand had been here, he would have been able to control his sons better and none of this would have happened.

Aleslei struggled against Pola’s golem, uttering something that was too muffled to make out.

“I’ve heard the story,” Dhoran said, looking pitifully at the prince. “How ya plan to disinherit your son if he doesn’t change in the next few years. I’ll stand by you if it comes to that. I’m partly ta blame, after all.”

“You agree?” Rockwell asked. “We dwarves should be the best at controlling golems, and if he can’t dismantle that one there, I worry for our kingdom if we’re ever invaded again.”

Dhoran grunted. “In five years, we may have to find ourselves a new Dwarf King if your boy can’t learn better.”

“That we may.”

Aleslei watched his father. Pola tilted her head and said, “I can dismantle it. Does that make me queen?”

At that moment, Aleslei passed out from the lack of oxygen making it through the golem’s hand.

Rockwell sighed. “Pitiful. But as his father, I am more so. About the treasury, it seems Grios and his people took off with quite a few things. We have several items missing. Uncle, whatever you want from what remains, it’s yours.”

“Don’t worry about how valuable anything is,” I said. “We just need anything we can make use of. Nothing else.”

We left Aleslei where he was and headed for the treasury. Directly behind the throne was a door.

“You don’t keep a lock on this thing?” I asked.

“No one’s getting in without their mana being properly registered,” Rockwell explained. “My sons were given access in the unlikely event that I perished.”

The king put his hand to the door, and a light shone in the shape of a crest just like the doors the Eternal Dragons slumbered behind.

“Who made this thing?”

“The human legend, Lord Reinstar. The one who is credited with causing the decline of the Kingdom of Dwarves.”

For a man who could create a floating city, a door was probably child’s play, so that checked out. But the decline of the Kingdom of Dwarves? What had that man done this time?

“What exactly did Lord Reinstar do to you?” I asked

“It begins in Rockford, before it was Rockford,” the king said. “It was once the site of a mine, but Lord Reinstar destroyed it with a single spell to defeat a powerful monster. It terrified the dwarves, and they feared he might do the same to them.”

Did that mean the fake town leading to Rockford was the aftermath of Reinstar blowing apart an entire mountain? Yeah, I would have been terrified too.

“I know he’s an intimidating guy, but that can’t be everything.”

“Lord Reinstar then came to our kingdom, seeking to cooperate in the invention of new ideas. He wanted to take up trade, something dwarves have historically failed at, and improve our people’s understanding and abilities.”

“That makes sense. You’re great crafters, but I can’t exactly compliment you on your bedside manner.”

“The kingdom prospered in the time leading up to the creation of Rockford, but that’s when it ended. Scientists and crafters flocked to the new city, including dwarves, of course.”

“And you declined because...there was a golden age of innovation?”

The king was silent for a moment. “The records state that the kingdom itself was left with only isolationists after the migration, and that’s why our nation is the way it is today. Anyway, the treasury is yours to choose from.”

“Take whatever you like,” I said to Dhoran.

The dwarf suddenly froze and turned to Rockwell. “Why do you still have it?” he rumbled with a hint of anger.

“Because I sensed possibility in it,” Rockwell replied simply.

Dhoran took a single sword from the vault. A particularly large one-hander. “I’d like this, Mister Luciel.”

“I’m guessing that’s the sword that caused you to become a slave?” I asked.

“It is.”

I thought for a moment. “If you can promise me that the past isn’t going to drag you down, you can have it. King Rockwell?”

“I can’t refuse a request from my dear uncle.”

“Appreciate it,” Dhoran replied.

Grand had once said that Rockwell had fallen into a depression after enslaving Dhoran and Pola. It explained why he might have chosen to hold on to the sword that had started it, to cherish a failed creation.

“All right,” I said, shifting gears. “Can you take me to where the former slaves are?”

“Some have begun working, but...well, some committed crimes,” Rockwell replied. “So we put them behind bars.”

Ten days. They couldn’t have just stayed calm for ten measly days?

“What do you mean ‘crimes’?”

“Theft. Some tried to assault people with magic.”

“Idiots,” I sighed. “They agreed to the terms of the contract. I want to talk to them, and if they have nothing to say for themselves, you can punish them to

the extent of your laws.”

“You’re sure?”

“I freed them because they would have died if I hadn’t. If they want to waste their lives as criminals, that’s their prerogative. Can you take me to them?”

“This way.”

Shutting the treasury door behind him, King Rockwell walked off and picked up Aleslei from the floor. I followed behind them. Rockwell handed his son to attendants in the hallway, then led us to a door next to the slave quarters. Behind the door was a staircase leading down.

“Careful. It reeks,” the king warned us.

“Mind if I take care of that?”

“By all means. The smell’s not for decoration.”

I cast Purification as we descended. Lionel followed directly behind Rockwell, while Ketty and Kefin took my flanks. They had fallen into the formation all on their own, without me even realizing it. My companions sure were competent.

The cells soon came into view.

“This looks a lot like the prison you made in Yenice,” I told Dhoran.

“Same design,” he said. “Pola’s version caused fatigue and suppressed spells with magic items, but this here’s the original.”

“Interesting,” I said.

Dhoran was clearly back to his old self if he felt good enough to brag about his granddaughter in response to a simple comment. Meanwhile, we approached the former slaves in their cells.

“Repeat offenders common around here, or what?” I mumbled to myself.

I spoke with each person individually, and although I’d bound them to speak truthfully by contract, they got around it by simply not talking at all. They were doomed to become slaves of the Kingdom of Dwarves again.

“Sorry to waste your time,” I said to Rockwell. “You can deal with them however you see fit. I’d like to see the former slaves who *haven’t* committed

any felonies this time.”

“This lot will be enslaved again, if that’s all right with you.”

“They couldn’t go ten days in their new lives without throwing them away. Clearly, I’m still too incompetent to do anything for them.”

I had thought that by showing them a new path, they might choose a better way. But I was still green. The day I would learn otherwise was evidently far off.

In the quarters where the ex-slaves were staying, we found eight people.

“Excuse me, everyone,” I called out, “you have a decision to make. You can either stay and work here in the kingdom or come with me to the Holy City. I cannot guarantee anything after we arrive there except compensation in the way of twenty silver pieces. But that’s all. I don’t know what kind of lives you’ll lead in the Kingdom of Dwarves, but chances are your work will consist of what you’ve been doing for the last ten days.”

One man raised his hand. “I’ll go.”

One after the other, five others joined him.

“The two of you left should be taken care of by King Rockwell,” I said, glancing at His Majesty. He nodded with a compliant smile.

More ex-slaves appeared then, along with the healers. Word seemed to have spread that I was back, and they were out of breath but smiling. I repeated what I had told the others.

“As for the four healers, I’ll need to take you in for questioning, so you’ll be coming with us to the Holy City. What will the rest of you do?” Surprisingly, five of the ten chose to stay in the kingdom this time. “They’re yours, Rockwell.”

“They’ll receive the same treatment as dwarven citizens,” he reassured me.

“You know, the kingdom doesn’t have much experience with international relations ’n whatnot,” Dhoran noted. “If you wanna change that, you oughta talk with Yenice or Shurule.”

Rockwell looked at his uncle with emotional eyes and nodded. “Luciel, can I expect your good word?”

“As long as you promise to not send any snobs this time,” I said.

“You drive a hard bargain.”

We quickly finished forging the necessary contracts.

“Next time I visit, I’ll bring some drinks,” I said. “Make sure you’ve got a feast ready.”

“As long as you bring the hardest spirits you can find,” he replied.

We shared a firm handshake and a promise that we’d meet again under better circumstances. Then, with the former slaves in tow, my group departed for the Holy City.

Lihzalea was nowhere to be seen.

The Past — Lumina and the Mercenary

The Valkyries had successfully escorted the rogue mercenaries to a small southern Shurulian town by the name of Kurth. The local mayor didn't even have time to exchange the most basic of courtesies before they were back on the road to the Holy City.

"That's it?" Sagius said incredulously as the carriage rocked. "You want us to cook in Shurule. You know we're from the same group as those guys we just left behind. Everything's just gonna be wiped away?"

Sagius and his eleven men, lacking the hardened mentality necessary to take a life, missed the relative comfort they had enjoyed with Luciel.

Lumina recognized the need to remain pleasant and said honestly, "No. You are not being entirely acquitted."

"Then why are you taking us to the Holy City?"

"Because Luciel is a merciful S-rank. Personally, I would count my blessings. The penalty for assaulting a man of his rank would normally be death. Or would you rather have joined your guildmates in their cells?" Sagius shook his head vehemently. "I thought not. Now, there is a reason the Valkyries in particular were sent to escort you. Ostensibly, it's for surveillance and to ensure no one tries to, shall we say, 'silence' you."

"Ostensibly? So there's another reason?" Sagius asked.

"You are to open a dry eatery," Lumina said. "And you will be obligated to regularly provide free meals to needy citizens within the capital."

"How is that a punishment?"

"This is a life sentence. I find that sufficiently punishing, don't you?"

"I mean..."

It felt too easy, like they were getting off scot-free.

Lumina looked away and said, "The capital is a beautiful city. But its people are never happy, always angry, and always struggling. I've never liked it," she

confessed. "I've never liked the finality of it all. Never changing. Until it did, a few years ago."

"How so?" he asked.

Lumina found herself at a loss for words for a moment. "When Luciel came, my regiment started returning from deployments to smiles. Cheers. Applause. The town started to improve, and the people were happier. I liked it." Sagius was silent. "But only a year after his departure, the city began to regress. Into the place I detested."

Sometimes, events would change the tide ever so slightly. When news came in of the dragonslayer, of the new member of Yenice's council, of the scuffles and scrapes he survived, the hate would dissipate. But only briefly.

"You want us to cook for Shurule," Sagius repeated.

"I'm not so naive as to expect it to fix everything that's wrong, but the people might live fuller lives on full stomachs. Perhaps without the fear of where the day's meal will come from, some will be able to smile."

Sagius shut his eyes and said quietly, "Your wish is my command."

After dinner that evening, Sagius asked Lumina to join him away from the others to discuss something in private. It took some convincing, but the two soon moved to a rocky outcrop, where Sagius took a knee once he was certain they were alone.

"Luminalia Arcs Francisque," he said. "I am overjoyed to see you again, my lady."

"It's been a long time, Sagius," she sighed. "Stand. I assume you brought me here to speak, not to kneel."

"Yes, my lady."

"I have a mountain of questions, but why don't you begin with explaining to me what you're doing as a mercenary?"

Lumina had been away from home in Blanche for well over a decade, and when she'd become a knight of the Church, she had taken an oath to avoid all

contact with her family. There really was no end to the things and people she wanted to hear about.

“Soon after you left, the marquis demanded compensation for the annulled betrothal.”

“What sort of compensation?”

“A third of the Francisques’ holdings,” he said.

“A *third*? That’s ridiculous.”

“Even so, the family could not disobey the faction.”

“How are they...” Lumina cut herself off. “Never mind. Inappropriate question.”

“Otherwise, the family is well, my lady,” he answered anyway. “Lady Emelia is engaged to a man of the Meinrich earldom. A powerful family within the faction, if you recall.”

“Sister,” Lumina repeated quietly.

“Rest assured, it is out of mutual love. No one has been made a victim of political convenience.”

“Good,” Lumina said. She had never taken the time to consider just how much strife she had unconsciously caused her own blood.

“If I may return to your initial question, my own home was included in the territory ceded to the marquis. However, what the Francisques ceded was land, and only land. They did not relinquish their people.”

“Oh, father,” Lumina sighed.

“There was overpopulation and not enough farms to feed so many mouths. Those who were able had to leave in search of work, either as an adventurer or as a mercenary.”

Lumina was speechless. She had often deplored the class she’d been born with, but never before had she despised being a paladin to this degree.

“I may have chosen my company poorly,” Sagius continued, “but I do not begrudge the Francisques, nor you, my lady.” Lumina exhaled. “And I am proud

to see that your kindness and generosity is unchanged.”

Finally, the Valkyrie felt the coldness in her heart thaw somewhat.

“But I will say, an S-rank healer is quite the man to fall for, my lady.”

Lumina jumped and shouted, “P-Pardon?!”

“Luckily, I believe I have a firm grasp of his tastes. The quickest way to a man’s heart is through his stomach, you know.”

“There are quicker ways than that, Sagius,” Lumina said, mimicking a chest blow with her fist.

Sagius looked at her. “I’m talking about cooking, my lady.”

“Hm.” She thought for a while. “Wait.”

Sagius was grinning from ear to ear. “I have experience as a teacher, and Lady Emelia has had much success.”

“I will consider it.”

“If you wished it, Lady Luminalia, I would return to my chef’s duties.”

“I will provide the necessary capital and ingredients. You need bring only smiles,” she replied.

“Your wish is my command.”

The Valkyries arrived safely in the Holy City several days later. In their report to Captain Catherine, Lumina stated that the apprehended men were not mercenaries, but in fact chefs, and that she wished to hire them. When pressed for her reasoning, she explained that she simply wanted to make the Holy City a brighter place, like before Luciel’s departure.

Catherine was hardly surprised and gave the ambitious girl her full support.

Some time later, one of the many vacant lots in the slums of the Holy City was converted into a restaurant. The reincarnated owner of Commedia Artifacts, Rina, was never one to let a business opportunity slip by and supplied a plethora of magic kitchenware, selling herself rather highly as “Saint Weirdo’s

favorite store in the capital.”

On opening day, the Holy City enjoyed its first food bank.

The Lineage of the White Wolf — Yenice

Unbeknownst to them, the Lineage of the White Wolf had arrived in Yenice one week after Luciel had already left. At last back in their hometown with their new families, the party found themselves overcome not with nostalgia or happiness, but with the crushing fatigue of a long journey.

It wasn't homesickness, or even a desire to congratulate Luciel on slaying a dragon, that had brought the Lineage back to their birthplace. It was simple dissatisfaction with their old home in Grandol.

Sekiros and Melina were parents now, as were Basura and Mernell, and that meant their children were halflings—half-beast, half-human. The sad truth was halflings did not lead easy lives. From the haughty elves to beastfolk to dwarves to humans, no one was especially welcoming of their kind. Even a country like Grandol saw itself divided among the races, and a family of halflings was essentially outcast in every community.

The children of the A-rank adventuring party were no exceptions, and it caused their mothers no end of stress and mental degradation. The party's leader, Bazan, simply couldn't stand to watch it go on and presented them with two options: return to Merratoni or follow Luciel to Yenice, where he was said to be making strides in racial equality.

And so there they were, in the City of Freedom. Bazan peered around for somewhere to park the carriage, scarcely believing how different everything looked.

"Where do we find an inn around here?"

"Maybe we should go see Luciel first," Sekiros suggested.

"Yeah, he wouldn't do us wrong," Basura agreed.

Evidently, the mental fatigue of their wives took precedence over their own physical fatigue. Bazan understood that.

"All right, let's find the Healer's Guild," he said.

"I'll go ask where it is," Sekiros offered, running towards a nearby citizen.

Bazan and Basura glanced around, and Bazan said, "It ain't just me, is it? Place has changed a lot."

"Yeah. Definitely not just you. I remember the races bein' way more divided, y'know?"

Now, the passers-by they observed were beastraces of every type, and they intermingled freely.

Sekiros returned with a sullen expression.

"What's up?" Bazan asked.

"Well." Sekiros chose his words. "Luciel isn't here anymore."

"*What?*" Bazan cried.

"You're kiddin' me," said Basura.

What remaining strength the party had vanished all at once. They had been betting on the young healer, hoping to see him far more than they'd realized.

"I heard we can ask around the old guildhall where the slums used to be," Sekiros noted, his tone skeptically hopeful. "Or the main building in the medical district."

"The slums?" Bazan repeated. "Right, that is where the guild used to be."

"Hopefully it ain't a shack by now," Basura said sarcastically.

"Actually," Sekiros went on, "the slums are gone. And they're calling the halflings 'twinbloods' now."

"*Twinwhat?*" his companions said in unison.

"Luciel says it technically means the same thing as halfling, but it implies that mixed races aren't 'half.' They're the best parts of both people combined into one greater whole."

"Yeah, that sounds like some Luciel shit," Bazan replied. He couldn't lie. He liked the healer's ignorant idealism.

"You can't tell me everyone was cool with that, though," Basura said.

"They weren't. But apparently, the halflings took it in stride and are trying to

get behind the idea of it. It only took about half a year before people really started using the term.”

Basura grabbed Sekiros by the shoulders. “You for real right now?”

Sekiros smiled and nodded. “Yeah. Looks like Luciel’s been cookin’ up a storm. If we wanna hear more, we need to check out his residence at the old guildhall or the medical district.”

“That kid’s gettin’ bigger than any of us ever thought, isn’t he?” Bazan said.

“He did slay a dragon,” Basura commented.

“True,” said Sekiros. “Oh, nearly forgot. I heard Galba’s in charge around here now.”

“Galba?” Bazan repeated.

“No way,” Basura said in disbelief.

And that was when it happened.

“Took your sweet time, did you?” a voice behind them said. “Also, try to remember that you have wives in the carriage. They look a little nervous. You know, being in a foreign country and all.”

A chill the trio had not felt for some time ran through their bones.

“Galba,” all three said at once.

“Long time no see. You all must be exhausted. A retired old adventurer like me shouldn’t be able to sneak up on veterans like you.”

Fear knotted the party’s guts. The humble attitude was a load of bull, and they knew it. Galba approached the carriage and shared cheerful greetings with the ex-receptionists inside, then returned to the party when his pleasantries were finished.

“All right, let’s get you booked at an inn and we can talk business tomorrow,” he said.

“Uh, care to point us in the right direction?” Bazan asked. “Things are a bit different from how we remember.”

“True, true. I’ll take you there.”

On the way, Galba recounted Luciel's many local escapades and successes. "So Melina and Mernell should rest easy around here," he concluded. "Race is meaning less by the day in these parts, and Luciel's really made this a great place to raise kids."

"Can't believe a guy like him went and got this famous," Sekiros said.

"Oh, believe me when I say this is just the beginning. Speaking of beginnings, I have plenty of work for the Lineage of the White Wolf to do, so get comfortable."

Galba dropped enough coin for the party and their families at the innkeeper's desk and left a very confused group of beastmen with a grin on his face. Bazan felt an odd combination of anxiety and hope for the future.

Afterword

Hello again, everyone. It's Broccoli Lion, master procrastinator. I'd just like to sincerely thank you for reading the sixth volume of The Great Cleric. I've had the go-ahead for more afterwords like this since volume three, but I never know what to put in these things, and the more I think about it the more I feel nothing but gratitude. So I'll take this opportunity to put my thanks into words.

To Mister I, my editor, who handles my tendencies to unfailingly run right up to even the most generous of deadlines every single volume with grace and efficiency. To sime, who I've yet to meet, but nonetheless does an amazing job at bringing the world of The Great Cleric to life through their illustrations. To Hihiro Akikaze, of course, for constantly exceeding my own imagination in the manga version. To the ever-busy proofreaders.

And last but certainly not least, to my readers. I can't thank you enough, and I will continue to do my utmost to make The Great Cleric worthy of your support.





Bonus Short Story

Hatori's Wish

A man lay prostrated before Dolstar in his office, somewhere he normally used to tend to affairs in the slums and, more recently, meet with other Yenitian citizens. The man's name was Hatori, and he had been reincarnated just like Luciel. He was also yet another victim of Illumasia, tempted to crime by the empire's enticing promises.

Hatori truly believed himself an envoy of the gods. He dreamed of honing his skills as a ninja, obtaining power, and becoming a great hero worthy of awe, much like those in the stories he had read in his past life.

But reality was not so simple.

No matter how many skills he honed, how much power he obtained, he never became a hero. He never attained honor in the eyes of the people. And Hatori only came to realize the true depths of his powerlessness when he reached rock bottom a month ago after collapsing, his stomach rumbling.

Hatori made for the Adventurer's Guild immediately after reincarnating in Yenice. But he had no weapons and no fighting experience to speak of. Still, Hatori convinced himself that the weaker monsters wouldn't be too much trouble, even bare-handed, although he never found so much as a single goblin or slime to get his fists on. Eventually, he gave up on extermination contracts and turned his sights to herb gathering. Those jobs, too, though, proved too much when he learned that he would need to enter the forest that not even high ranking adventurers dared approach.

And so Hatori's final and only option fell to miscellaneous labor, most of which was physical in nature and paid just enough to let him eat and sleep for the day. It wore on his heart, little by little, but he had little choice if he wanted to live to see the next day.

One day, Hatori fancied he could pull himself out of his swamp if he could put his ninjutsu skills to use on an extermination contract. But this turned out to be arrogance.

Hatori slew his assigned target, but not without sustaining severe injuries. And although he recovered, the potion he needed to do so cost more than the reward for the job, and he never forgot the fear. Any time he faced a monster, he remembered the pain. Before long, he was back to menial labor. But every day was a struggle to find motivation, every day he found it harder to justify even eating to see another.

It was Dolstar who picked him up off the ground that day. It was Dolstar who filled his empty belly, no questions asked. And all he wanted in return was for Hatori to join his organization.

Hatori agreed.

From then on, Hatori was Dolstar's eyes and ears, aiding his intelligence network and sharpening his ninjutsu along the way. He learned to use greater abilities and powers, until he began to attract the attention of others seeking to learn from him. He began to provide instruction in exchange for pay.

Through this, Hatori grew stronger.

It wasn't long until the Illumasian Empire set their sights on him. After all, humans didn't normally associate with the half-beasts like Hatori did. So they investigated him, and offered a deal. A very convincing one.

Hatori was skeptical at first, but he would have been a fool to turn down the amount of money they were promising, and the empire was a very consistent client to have. So he threw his lot in with them. It was a no-brainer as far as he was concerned.

As Hatori's finances improved, the life of a slum dweller became more and more degrading. He decided it was time to say goodbye to his comrades, and so he faked his own death in the labyrinth.

After that, Hatori spent his time as an agent, passing information from Yenice to Illumasia and spreading rumors whenever his client requested it.

His dreams of heroism remained just that, until they were forgotten entirely.

And then came Luciel. Hatori's contacts, including the slaver and even the vice guildmaster of the Doctor's Guild, began to disappear one by one. And in this newcomer, in Luciel, he remembered his dreams. He saw a hero in him.

Hatori hated Luciel with a passion. But only after failing to assassinate him, and becoming Dolstar's slave, did Hatori at last realize what he had become.

Hatori had been obediently working for Dolstar for some time. And now he was here, prostrated before his master.

Dolstar regarded him carefully. "This won't change what you did."

"I am keenly aware," Hatori said.

"Then why are you groveling? If you have something to ask, spit it out."

"I wouldst lend mine assistance to the school."

Dolstar frowned skeptically. "The school? And teach what? Have you heard yourself *talk* before?"

"I have long been a well-studied individual," Hatori prattled. "I know how to handle children. Mine ninjutsu shall lend itself well to earning their admiration."

"All right. Now let's hear where this is coming from."

"You see." Hatori was silent for a moment. "I have been smitten. I want to be closer to her."

Dolstar snorted. "And who's the girl?"

"Creia. The slave of Mister Luciel's."

"You know you won't be getting out of the job if she turns you down."

"But of course! I need not even confess myself to her."

"Sure," Dolstar sighed. "I'll see what they say. But you're prioritizing work

here above anything else.”

“As you wish. Thank you, Master Dolstar.”

“I’d save your thanks for Luciel,” Dolstar groaned.

“Well said, and I shall! No one is more deserving than he, a saint purer and holier than any. I will take my leave now.”

“You do that.”

The moment the door shut behind Hatori, Dolstar could contain his laughter no longer. He reached for his pen and began to write a letter to Luciel.

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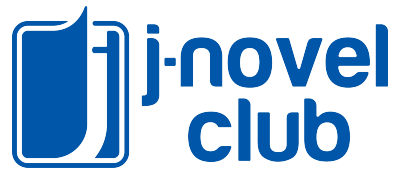
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The Great Cleric: Volume 6

by Broccoli Lion

Translated by Matthew Jackson Edited by Tess Nanavati

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