

Toru Shirogane

Illustration by
Saki Mashima

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THE KEPT MAN OF THE PRINCESS KNIGHT





THE
KEPT MAN
OF THE
PRINCESS KNIGHT

An anime-style illustration of a man and a woman in a futuristic, brightly lit environment. The man, with dark hair and a slight smile, wears a dark blue jacket and holds a white cylindrical object. The woman, with long red hair and green eyes, wears a white and black outfit with a long red cape. She is looking up at him with a gentle expression. The background features large windows with a grid pattern, letting in warm light. The overall mood is intimate and welcoming.

“Welcome home.
It must’ve been a
difficult trip. How
did everything go?”

“All was well.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”



I lifted the tree up and down with one hand. It was heavy but still a breeze compared to when I lifted a cyclops's leg. The sky was a brilliant, spotless blue today. It almost made me sick.

"This is my weapon."

"Impossible! You don't have that kind of strength."

"This is nothing."

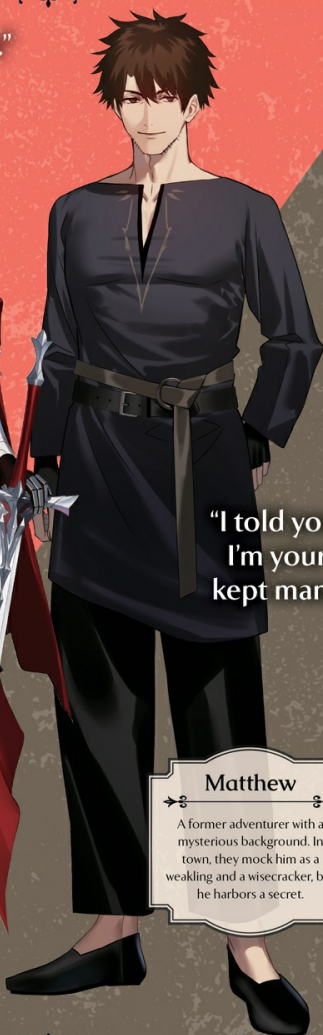
"Come on, boys. You're not here for a picnic, remember?"

"You're my lifeline."



Arwin
Mabel Primrose
Mactarode

Tackles the dungeon in search of a treasure she can use to rebuild her fallen kingdom, which was destroyed by monsters. She has a childish side that she only shows to Matthew.



"I told you.
I'm your
kept man."

Matthew

A former adventurer with a mysterious background. In town, they mock him as a weakling and a wisecracker, but he harbors a secret.

Vanessa

A guild appraiser with an excellent eye for identifying items. However, her eye for men is terrible, and her current boyfriend is a drunken would-be artist scumbag. Does not see Matthew as a potential romantic partner.



"I hate
drunks. I
hate overly
familiar
people, too."

Dez

An incredibly talented guild staff member and adventurer. This cantankerous dwarf has known Matthew for years and is one of the few who know about his past.



"But he was
so handsome.
So dark and
mysterious."



“Matthew’s a piece of crap, so don’t associate with him.’ That’s what Gramp—I mean, what Grandfather told me.”

April

The guildmaster’s granddaughter. Though the adventurers steer clear of her, she’s actually a very kindhearted girl who cares for children at the orphanage.

Close to Matthew, for some reason.



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Toru Shirogane

TRANSLATION BY STEPHEN PAUL • COVER ART BY BY SAKI MASHIMA

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HIMEKISHISAMA NO HIMO Vol.1

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Edited by Dengeki Bunko

First published in Japan in 2022 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo. English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

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First Yen On Edition: February 2024

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Leilah Labossiere Designed by Yen Press Design: Liz Parlett Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-7499-0 (paperback) 978-1-9753-7500-3 (ebook)

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Afterword

CHAPTER ONE

A Day in the Life of an Ordinary Kept Man

“I’ve been living with you for nearly a year now,” I said with a sigh, feeling the paltry weight of a single silver coin on my palm. “I didn’t realize you took me for a five-year-old boy.”

“What’s the problem, Matthew?” asked Arwin, clearly somewhat irritated. Her red hair flowed down her back, and her jade-green eyes were piercing: our lovely princess. The femme fatale herself. She was also the leader of Aegis, one of the foremost adventuring parties in the city. “It’ll only be three days. That should be more than enough for you.”

She had given me three Alnor silvers at the door. Alnors, colloquially known as greatsilvers, were valuable enough to buy three meals and two cups of ale, so she wasn’t wrong, in a sense.

“I am not as naive as you might think,” said Arwin, whose full name was Arwin Mabel Primrose Mactarode. She had been the princess of the Mactarode Kingdom, which once existed in the northern region of the continent.

“I know that. Now you’re a full-fledged adventurer.”

Thanks to a profusion of monsters, the kingdom had been overrun, and the king and queen were dead. Their daughter had gone from relative to relative for help but received very little aid. It’s said there were millions of monsters in the land, even hundreds of millions. Some were creatures from legends and myths, like dragons and behemoths. All the other countries on the continent together did not have enough soldiers to eliminate a threat like that.

“Then don’t waste my time,” she snapped. “I’m not putting my life on the line to satisfy your selfish whims.”

Her only hope at that point was the Astral Crystal, a legendary treasure said to make any wish come true. So she gathered like-minded companions to tackle the great dungeon known as the Millennium of Midnight Sun.

“Of course not. I’m aware of your noble goals. Ordinarily, I would wish to be right there, fighting at your side. I can only curse my own lamentable lack of strength.”

In keeping with its reputation, the Millennium of Midnight Sun was a treacherous place. It was not just a collection of basement rooms or caves. The place was swarming with monsters, and traps were hidden around every corner. The dungeon itself was like one titanic monster. And if those things weren’t bad enough, your fellow adventurers were also your competitors. Danger awaited at every step.

“So have some patience. If the quest drags on, it will only delay the reclamation of my kingdom. And I do not have time to waste.”

The beautiful princess could not pause in her quest. She was determined to rebuild her kingdom for the sake of her beloved people—a crusade that earned her the epithet of the Crimson Princess Knight. The survivors of Mactarode called her a goddess or a valkyrie. And now the faithful companion at the princess’s side was none other than me.

“I know well your aspirations,” I said, “and it is with them in mind that I ask you. Money comes before all else. You can’t buy food without money, and you won’t earn any treasure without it, either. Besides, you know this dungeon isn’t going to be conquered in the next day or two.”

She was delving to the seventeenth floor today, but no one knew how many floors were in the dungeon. Not a single soul had reached the bottom of the Millennium of Midnight Sun since it was discovered.

To conquer the dungeon, one would have to reach the core on the lowest floor and then destroy or remove it. That core was none other than the Astral Crystal. According to legend, it had instantly turned deserts into greenery in the past, and it brought the dead back to life.

“Most importantly, you are laboring under a mistaken assumption.”

“What is that?” she asked.

“You have misjudged a man’s pride. If it were only me who needed money, this would do. But that is not the case. I have an agreement to share drinks tonight.”

“So? Go and enjoy your night,” she said, her expression making her disdain more than apparent.

“The problem is, when a man spends time with someone, he has to really participate. He can’t be sipping his lonely little cup of ale just to save money.”

“Then I ask you,” Arwin said, eyes flashing, “why I should be giving you money you’ll use to slip into some other woman’s bed.”

My occupation, according to the rest of the world, is *kept man*. They call me other things, too: male prostitute, gigolo, boy toy, philanderer, lady-killer, playboy, man-whore, scum. While the nuances are many, the main implication is easy to understand. I let the woman do the work and spend my days idly, battling boredom and free time rather than monsters and traps. Occasionally, I enjoy a drink or a roll of dice. Some of these men make passes at other women. It’s an occupation viewed with equal parts disdain and jealousy.

“I’ll be doing no such thing. I’m only having drinks,” I said placatingly. If I do say so myself, I’m a good-looking man, with neatly cut dark brown hair and brown eyes that make the ladies swoon. For now, however, my many gifts are reserved for Her Highness the princess knight.

Even the navy-blue tunic and baggy black pants I wear now had been paid for with Arwin’s money.

“Don’t lie to me. If you think I’m ignorant, you’re sorely mistaken.”

“Now, don’t be cross—”

“And don’t think you can sweet-talk your way out of this,” she said, slapping my hand as I reached for her shoulder. I wasn’t going to give up so easily, of course. I reached out again, but she brushed me off a second time.

“Really?” I asked, stroking her hair with the other hand—gently, of course, so as not to snag or harm it. The sensation was like touching the finest silk. And

despite the daily battles and toil, the color was rich and lustrous. Was that thanks to her noble birth or her upbringing? I'd heard that the rich and mighty bathed in water infused with honey and herbs. Perhaps Arwin had used even finer materials. She was a princess, after all.

"Ah! Hey," she protested weakly. I ignored that, brushing past her reddened earlobe to the nape of her neck and trailing down her back with my fingers. Once they'd passed the end of her hair near her butt, I reversed the process and combed my fingers up her back from there. With my other hand, I pressed my fingertips to the whorl of hair on her head and massaged outward. It was a gentle, reassuring gesture, done in recognition of her hard work. Good girl.

"Stop that."

"You like it, don't you?" I whispered into her ear.

"Mm!" she whimpered, cheeks flushing. She tried so hard to pretend she was above this.

Of course, a kept man cannot get by on good looks alone. He must know the tricks of the trade, too. And he won't last on bodily gifts alone, either. He'd bore his woman and be thrown out with the trash unless he had a charming tongue and a knack for tender care. Sometimes he soothed and coaxed her, and sometimes he would fawn and beg for her attention. Men on the seedier side might use violence to extract their money from the woman by force, but that's not my style. For one thing, I couldn't beat Arwin in a fight.

"S-stop." She grabbed my wrists and pushed them away from her. "You won't fool me with your transparent ruse," she said, panting and glaring as she fixed her hair.

So much for that. I should've known the same trick wouldn't work every time. I was just wondering what to try next when there was a knock at the door.

"Your Highness? The sun will be up if we don't leave soon, Your Highness."

That was Ralph the warrior. He was a member of Aegis, a strapping lad of twenty or so, and completely besotted with Arwin. Listen to the way he wheedled her.

"There, you see? Your pointless resistance has caused your escort to show up

for you.”

“You’re right. I don’t have time for this,” she said.

I decided on my course of action and clasped her hand. “The time has come for a decision, then. Will you pay me a gold piece, or will I be a miserable cheapskate who can’t buy his friend a single drink?”

“Your Highness!” The door opened, and when he saw us, the blond boy promptly turned beet red. “What do you think you’re doing?!”

He grabbed my shirt. Ordinarily, I might find this gesture quite terrifying, but owing to my full head’s worth of height advantage over Ralphie, all he could do was bare his teeth like a monkey grabbing for a snack.

“I haven’t done a thing,” I said, shaking my head. “We were a little rougher than usual yesterday, that’s all. I was checking that I didn’t leave a hickey.”

There was a whistle from the doorway; a group of four people were entering the room, all members of Arwin’s party. The six of them, including Ralphie, had a daily routine of delving into the dungeon.

“Enough of your jokes, you wretch.”

“Oh, I’m not joking. Both you and I are doing what we can for our fair princess knight. You swing your sword in the dungeon during the day, and I swing my hips in bed at night. They’re equally valuable services.”

In an instant, his fist was buried in my cheek. My head rattled as I collapsed to the floor. Before I could get up, Ralphie was stomping on my stomach and side.

“A knave like you deserves nothing better! Take that! And that!”

“That’s enough,” said his fellow Aegis member Lutwidge, a white-haired and wrinkled man wearing platinum-and-silver-plate mail. He looked like a chamberlain now, but in the past, he had served Mactarode as a knight. “Don’t waste your strength before heading into the dungeon. And keep your jests to a minimum, Matthew.”

“Fine, fine, consider me chastised,” I said, patting the dusty footprints off my clothes. Ralphie’s punches and kicks weren’t that painful. General physical sturdiness was one of my few positive qualities. Most blows felt like caresses to

me.

“Sorry for teasing you. Want a piece of candy? Made it myself.”

“No!”

Too bad. They were pretty tasty.

“Matthew,” Arwin said, extending a hand to me, “I must be off now. Don’t be greedy.”

“All right.” I took her hand and pulled myself up, taking advantage of the momentum to lean close to her ear. “And are you...satisfied? Will you be able to bear it?”

“...It won’t be an issue.”

“If you need more, you can come back whenever you’re ready. You don’t want to hold off for so long that you start losing concentration.”

“Not to worry. I’ll be fine,” she said, turning her head away in a huff and pushing past the others to leave the room. Such a stubborn girl.

“Best of luck,” I said, waving a handkerchief. Ralph gave me an openly derisive click of the tongue and closed the door. I counted to fifty before opening my palm.

Just as I’d hoped, there was a shining gold coin there. I grinned and tossed a green hard candy into my mouth.

That coin was going to buy me a night with a whore at my backup flophouse.

The name of the city was Gray Neighbor, a fortress town located smack in the middle of the ghostlands on the western side of the continent. People also called it the Dungeon City.

The reason for that was apparent: The entrance to the Millennium of Midnight Sun was located right in the center of the city. Or to be precise, the place had been built up *around* the entrance to the underground dungeon.

In the distant past, there had apparently been many, many such dungeons, and it led to the creation of dungeon cities like this one all over the world. But over the years, such dungeons were conquered, one by one, and the cities built

on top of them no longer served a purpose and fell into ruin. This was the world's last surviving dungeon city.

Every single day, adventurers lined up like little ants to file into the nest of the Millennium of Midnight Sun. That meant there were a plethora of business opportunities in this city. General stores popped up with crucial tools like rations, ropes, knives, and lanterns. People set up inns, weapon shops, armor shops, blacksmiths, pubs, and brothels.

Adventuring was a line of work that put those in the profession in close contact with death daily. Adventurers paid good coin, and if they were unlucky, they paid with their lives as well. Still, they jumped headlong into danger for the chance at some fame and riches.

I had been one of them, too, once.

But now I'm just the kept man of the princess knight.

Once we were done, I rolled over on the bed while the naked woman draped herself lazily over me. She was Cynthia, a whore. My usual was taken, so she was a substitute, and I had to admit that we were compatible. Bonus points for being considerate enough to pour me some water from the pitcher.

"You're a real oddball, aren't you?"

"Why do you say that?"

"You've got that lovely princess knight in your pocket, but you come to a place like this. Doesn't she get mad?"

"You're plenty lovely, too," I said. Her long black hair, smooth skin, and luscious breasts were entrancing. "She's a very generous person. She lets me do what I want."

Right about now, Arwin would be in the dungeon, swinging her sword at a minotaur or ogre or some other beastie.

"But she's still not enough for you?"

"I didn't say that. Her Highness is the greatest woman in the world," I clarified, for the sake of her honor. "In fact, she's so perfect that I simply can't match up to her. I've got to keep upping my game. It's the time-honored pursuit

of any personal servant.”

“Is that right? I’m just practice for you?”

“I won’t deny it.”

“You awful man.”

She pinched my side. I flinched and yelped, mostly on reflex, causing Cynthia to apologize softly and caress the spot she’d pinched.

“So the princess knight is a wonder in bed, too. How did you two get together?”

I’d heard this sort of question many times since we started living together. Countless times, in fact. *How did you do it? How is she?* And so on. But I am sworn to silence on these matters. Not that I would tell anyway. So I have a stock answer that I trot out every time.

“There’s nothing special about it. She’s human, like anyone. She cries when she’s sad and eats when she gets hungry. It’s everyone else who acts like she’s some unique, special being.”

“So you wooed her, and it just happened to work out?”

“More or less.”

“Well, well,” Cynthia said with great interest, sizing me up. “So you’re the princess knight’s type, eh?”

“Maybe.”

“Well, you’ve got a nice body, at least. Your face could be better.” She reached for my torso again but traced the groove between my abs with a fingertip this time. “Seems a shame that you’re so well built. Is it true that you’re a coward who can’t fight?”

“Just today, I lost an arm wrestling match to a thirteen-year-old girl.”

“But you used to be an adventurer?”

“That’s right.”

I stroked my finger around her navel in response. Cynthia writhed at the ticklish sensation.

“Why did you quit? You don’t seem like you were crippled.”

“Oh, ogres were absolutely nothing to me. I was getting bored fighting them because there was no challenge. I’ve just decided that fencing with the ladies is more entertaining now.”

“*That* part, you’re still an expert at,” Cynthia said, smiling suggestively. “So what do you want to do now?”

She glanced at the tray on the side table, apparently bored of our chat. A reddish-purple stick of incense was smoldering there. Each brothel had its own way of measuring time; here, they lit sticks of incense on fire. I could enjoy my time here as long as the incense wasn’t entirely burned out. Apparently, this kind had a euphoric effect. Based on where it was burning now, there was still half my time remaining.

I was just putting my arm around Cynthia’s shoulder, deciding that I could go another round, when there was a shriek outside the window.

I glanced out. There was a man in his thirties out front, holding his head in his hands and wailing. No, that was definitely screaming.

“Oh, it’s Alan,” said Cynthia, shoulder to shoulder with me.

“You know him?”

“He used to visit me until about half a year ago. He’s an adventurer. He was pretty powerful, in his own way.”

“Doesn’t look like it to me.”

His sleeves at the elbows were worn away and clearly filthy, even from a distance. And it wasn’t the wear and tear of an adventurer who’d been through danger. I could also make out black spots on his neck and wrists.

“He got badly injured a while back. He survived, clearly, but ever since then, he just wanders around town without going back into the dungeon.”

“Dungeon sickness, then.”

Adventuring was an occupation that came face-to-face with death. One wrong step would send you to your grave.

And dungeons like the Millennium of Midnight Sun were the worst. Monsters would simply appear out of the darkness. Traps were everywhere. Other adventurers would sabotage you, and your party would turn on you. Death was closer than your mother. And even if you were fortunate enough to survive treading the line of life and death, that didn't mean everything went back to normal. The fear of having one foot set in hell accumulated in the deepest part of your heart. Eventually, you couldn't go back in there. Not only that, you became unable to do *any* kind of dangerous, life-threatening work. Eventually, one grew paranoid to the point of being unable to function on a regular basis. That was dungeon sickness—a chronic illness that afflicted adventurers.

“Still, that’s not your typical freak-out.”

“Maybe he ran out of drugs?”

There was no miracle cure for dungeon sickness. If there were, it wouldn't be available to your average, unremarkable adventurer. So most folks tried to deal with their sickness by taking drugs. The most popular was called Release. It looked like just a nondescript powder, but ingesting it made you feel euphoric, like you were living in paradise. However, once you started, you couldn't stop. Your emotions would drift beyond your control, causing outbursts of anger, laughter, and tears. Eventually, it led to seeing and hearing things and, ultimately, helpless confusion. The most obvious sign of an addict was black spots on the skin.

“Tri-Hydra used to control the flow around here, but it’s dried up recently. You see more and more folks like him these days.”

Such drugs were illegal in virtually any country on the continent—not just here. But it is human nature to want what you're not allowed to have. Dangerous groups took it upon themselves to manufacture and sell drugs, distributing them to sufferers of dungeon sickness and other melancholy souls at a great profit. Tri-Hydra was one of those organizations before they'd fallen apart last year.

Outside, Alan was being harassed by some very unsavory-looking men: the security for the brothel. They dragged him helplessly toward a nearby alley. If he was lucky, he'd only suffer a few broken bones, but if not, his corpse would

lie atop a pile of vomit and refuse. That's what this place was like. I pitied the man, but it was out of my hands.

After closing the window, Cynthia gave me a look of pity as well. "Do you have dungeon sickness, too?"

"Heavens, no."

I wasn't some small, whimpering child incapable of walking down the hall to the privy in the dark. I just knew I wouldn't make it back alive. A single goblin would be the end of me. My life was worth less than rat shit, but the last thing I was going to do was kill myself. The princess knight was my reason for living now.

"You'll see how well I fight," I announced, and I dived onto Cynthia, burying my face in her chest. In moments, my ears were full of her moans. She was getting the hang of things on our second round, and her reactions got more intense; she clutched the sheets and gasped constantly. She must've been close because at one point she spasmed and kicked over the side table with a pale leg. The incense tray clattered loudly on the floor.

"Uh-oh." I got up and pulled the table upright. Thankfully, the tray hadn't shattered, but I wanted to make sure the incense didn't start a fire. "Hmm?"

In doing so, I saw what was under the bed: a basket of women's clothes, presumably Cynthia's, with a rather remarkable necklace placed carefully atop it.

"What's wrong? Let's continue. Come back to bed," she begged, lying back. I picked up the necklace.

"Is this yours?"

"Yes, it is. I got it at the church around back. It's a charm."

"The church of the sun god."

"That's right. Maybe I'll receive a divine revelation someday, too," she said piously, sitting up. Some of her ardor had dried up, it seemed.

The myths said that the sun god was one of those who had created the world. He was nearly the strongest of all the gods, which earned him their ire and got

him sealed inside his own palace. Because he was unable to move about freely, he would send divine revelations to his believers instead. Those who received them gained miraculous powers: great wisdom, new inventions, phenomenal strength. Many chose to worship him in hopes of earning one of his miracles. There were two churches to him in the city.

“Sol nia spectus,” Cynthia murmured, a frequent prayer in the sun god’s religion: *The sun god sees all*. The proper way to do it was to quote the ancient language of another continent. “It would be scary if he really did, though. He’d be a peeper!” She chuckled.

I didn’t laugh. Instead, I picked up my clothes and began to get dressed.

“Wh-what’s wrong?”

“Sorry. Remembered something I have to do. I’ll come again later.”

“But you still have time...”

I looked at the incense tray with annoyance. It was nearly all ash now, but there was still a thin trail of smoke rising from it. I picked up the water jug and poured it on top, dousing the little flame.

“Time’s up.”

With that, I left the stunned woman behind. Once I’d closed the door, I exhaled. She wasn’t half bad, but I’d probably never be back. I didn’t want to think of that piece of shit while I was making love to a woman.

I washed up at the well on the way out. The sun was already down, and it was dark out now. Even with my hooded cloak on, I shivered at the cold. As I headed home, gray hood hunched, I peered down the alley from before. Alan was still there. He was beaten badly but still breathing.

“You all right?”

“...Fuck off, man-whore.”

So he knew who I was. My stock in the world was rising. With that much energy, he was clearly going to be just fine.

“Where are you from?” I asked.

“Huh?”

“You’re not from around here. Where did you come from?”

Just another of the many people who drifted here in search of immense treasure.

“...Baradelle.”

“Why, that’s just next door.”

Baradelle was a land south of Rayfiel, the kingdom where Gray Neighbor was located. They had plenty of farms and breweries, and a good portion of the food available in this area came from there.

I took a piece of paper from my pocket and used a stub of ash to write on it before sticking it into his mottled hand. “Go to Blue Dog Alley to the east and look for an old man named Toby. He’s an expert at getting idiots like you out of here. Tell him Matthew sent you and show him that paper. He’ll help break you out.”

Gray Neighbor was surrounded by high walls all around. You had to go through a gate to leave the city. Naturally, there were guards, and even the most brain-dead bunglers would refuse to let an obvious junkie pass—especially if he had no money.

“The hell are you doing?”

“Go back home. Rest until you feel better. This is not the place for you.”

“I’ll do what I want.” He grunted and glanced at the paper in his hand. There was a very short message on it: *Let him out*. Alan slumped against the wall. “It ain’t gold?”

“Do I look that stupid to you?”

If you give a junkie money, it turns into drugs. It wouldn’t even be worth betting on. I’d told Toby the winning wager in a cockfight, so he owed me a favor. He also knew my handwriting, so it would be enough to get the message across.

“Here’s extra.”

I took a small bag from my pocket and stuck it in his other hand. It was full of almonds. He surely hadn't eaten for a while. And you couldn't get any good ideas on an empty stomach.

"So long. Don't waste your life."

I got up to leave. As long as you were alive, it was always possible to make a comeback. This would be better than him dying in a ditch.

"Why...?"

"Don't get the wrong idea. This isn't charity. I don't need men like you loitering around the place." I turned my back on him. "Don't want Her Highness to have her eyes soiled by the likes of you. If you want the honor of an audience, you'll need to come back a changed man."

The pubs in Gray Neighbor never closed. Adventurers downed pints late into the night, dunking their heads into barrels—either to celebrate a safe return or forget the horrors they'd seen in the dungeon.

I hunched over and made my way down a street packed with pubs and brothels. This little pleasure district was popularly known as Bandits' Alley. Spend too much time here, and they'd rob you blind. I extracted myself from the various barkers trying to drum up business for their whorehouses and made my way into the much quieter slums. To get home, it was faster to cut through here than to go east and take the main street.

There was much less foot traffic now. The light from the lanterns and open windows was barely enough to see by. Beggars in the street were curled up in blankets to sleep, for the most part, while the few who were awake engaged in their business eagerly, flocking to passed-out drunks like crows, stripping them of their shoes and trousers. That was going to be a painful lesson.

I was stifling a yawn and going over the next day's plans in my head when I felt it.

There was an unpleasant sensation emanating from an alleyway between three-story buildings.

While my strength was long gone, there were some things I still retained from my adventuring days. One was my hardy constitution, and the other was my

intuition. I'd built up a very keen sense for the presence of others. Faint shifts in the air, cloth rubbing on cloth, muscles creaking, blinking—all these things I could practically feel on my skin. It was instinct, not logic, and it had saved my hide on many occasions.

Thanks to that, I always knew I could win when I was *it* in a game of hide-and-seek. Especially if my opponent was openly malicious.

Was it a thief or someone with a grudge? Sadly, I could easily imagine either. The gold coin I'd received from my generous lady benefactor this morning still sat in my pocket. As for personal grudges, I'd earned a few. Mostly from men whose women I'd slept with or card opponents who'd detected I was cheating.

I didn't stop. I didn't say a word. There was no need to inform the other person that I knew they were there—that would be suicide. Instead, I pretended to forget something and slowly turned myself around in front of the alley.

I'd been hoping this would be enough to get me out of trouble. Sadly, it was not.

One of the beggars curled up on the side of the street stood and cast his blanket aside, revealing a thin-faced man around thirty years of age. His stubbled cheeks and pale skin suggested a poor constitution, but his eyes were as cloudy as a stagnant bog. They were the eyes of a man who'd killed before. He wore leather armor and gauntlets and had a shortsword in his hand.

I also felt someone moving behind me.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a short man come up from the alley. He, too, wore leather armor and seemed to be holding a weapon. This one had some kind of cloth over his face, but I could sense the spite in his gaze like something clinging to my skin.

"Must be difficult to sleep, dressed like that," I said to the thin-faced man. I was trying my hardest to act like I didn't understand the situation yet. "I'm in a hurry. My wife will kill me if I'm not home soon. Can you just tell me what you want so I can be on my way?"

He didn't respond. The stubbled man's eyes were roaming over my arms and

legs. He was looking for an opportunity to strike while he pretended to listen to my question.

“Oh, fine.” I reached carefully into my pocket and tossed the coin purse at the man’s feet. “That’s what you want, isn’t it? It’s yours. Take it with you.”

The stubbled man moved, striding quickly and crouching to reach for the purse.

That was when the man behind me sprang into action. I spun around to see him leaping like a spider, his dagger drawn and plunging.

I leaped sideways and rolled over the cobblestones. The sound of the blade scraping on stone followed. I popped to my feet near the wall while the stubbled man attacked next. He kept his dagger at waist height and charged for a body blow.

The silver blade glinted in the light. I waited, timing his lunge, and slid sideways right as he pounced like a snake. There was a dull *thud*. Glancing sidelong, I noted that his shortsword had gotten stuck inside the stacked stone wall of the house. Noticeably irritated, the stubbled man put his foot against the wall and forced the blade free.

A few of the stacked stones came loose. The other beggars on the street quickly got up and moved away to avoid trouble.

“Fire! There’s a fire!” I shouted. That was the best way to get attention. Screaming about robbery and killers was a sure way to make people huddle in the safety of their homes. The threat of a fire under your ass was much more effective.

Sure enough, I could hear stirring from the homes around us. There was also a whistle nearby, uttering quick bursts as it approached. That was the whistle the town guards used.

The short one looked hesitant. I used the opportunity to put some distance between me and them. The whistle got louder and louder.

The stubbled man clicked his tongue with frustration, spun around, and ran farther down the alley. The short man hurried after him. While they ran off, I leaned against the wall and slid down to a sitting position, exhaling. Two guards

soon appeared, each wearing a gray helmet and plate armor. They had chain mail on underneath that slid and scraped on the plate when it moved.

One was forty-something with a little mustache, and the other was maybe twenty and darker-skinned. I didn't know their names, but I'd seen them around before.

"You again?" The mustached man scowled. Clearly, he remembered the recent incident in which I vomited on his boots while in a drunken haze.

"Whad is it? Wha' happened?" asked the darker man. He had an unmistakable, nasally voice, which I recalled distinctly.

"Nothing serious," I said, shrugging. "I must've looked like a great stage actor to someone. This blond woman exposed her belly and begged me to sign it, for some reason. I was just convincing her of her mistake; she's tucked her tummy away and gone in that direction. If you see her, could you tell her I said she should make sure to cover up so she doesn't catch a cold when she sleeps?"

The darker man made a face.

"Were you the one who yelled about a fire?" asked the mustached man.

"Was I?"

I didn't want to give them a false statement and earn a night in a cell. The guards were responsible for security, crime prevention, and crackdowns in the city. One look at the state of the place told you just how efficient they were.

"The gentlemen in the street earlier were so passionate with their affairs, they must have caught something on fire, I suppose."

The mustached man was already turning away, all interest lost. He must have taken my answer for the rambling of a drunk. I'd only had a drink or two.

"Get lost."

"With pleasure, sir."

I stood up, brushed the dust off my back, and reached for the purse on the cobblestones.

"This is mine, by the way. I dropped it a minute ago. Honest," I explained,

feeling the judgmental eyes of the guards on me. I stuck the bag into my pocket before they could say anything, then scampered off.

Our home was in the upper-class quarters on the north side. Our neighbors were all nobles with estates and great merchants with mansions. We had no ties to any of them, of course.

The house was a two-story stone building. The walls were painted white, and though it was an older structure, it looked nice at first glance. There was no gate, just a low stone wall around the premises. It was small in comparison to those around it, but it was comfortable enough. This was all because of Her Highness's status, fame, and wealth. Even if I had the money for it, I'd have been thrown out the door. It was probably more like a servant's home to her, but she never once complained about it.

I unlocked the door and went inside. The candles needed to be lit first, and soon there was faint light filling the entryway.

Just past the door was a staircase leading upstairs and a hallway going past it. The doors along it led to the separate shed and outhouse. The kitchen and dining room were at the end of the hallway. But Her Highness did not cook, and when I was alone, I often ate out. There were many pubs and taverns for adventurers to the south. Arwin spent all her time in the dungeon, so she would have eaten already.

I only cooked when she was around. I made sure to prepare homemade meals for when she returned from the dungeon. The extra activity had left me peckish, but I didn't feel like searching the pantry, so I just went upstairs.

There were three rooms on the second floor: Arwin's bedchamber, my room, and a storage space and armory. You found rare weapons and ores and such in the dungeon, most of which got sold off, but some were kept here. She held the key to the room. Ever since she found out I was selling items on the side to a fence I knew, I was forbidden from going inside.

I went into my own room. There was a wood-shuttered window, a bed, and a chair inside. My clothes were on the floor, right where I'd dropped them this morning. A cleaner would be by to collect the laundry in the morning, so I didn't need to pick it up. I put the candlestick on the chair and sank into the bed. I was

very tired and would fall asleep in no time. And since Arwin wasn't around, I didn't have to attend to her needs. The moment I closed my eyes, sleep rushed up to embrace me.

It was still dark when I opened my eyes. Based on the air outside and the light coming through the cracks in the window, it was still before dawn. I'd always been a sound sleeper. As long as I didn't have any special services to offer, I would sleep straight until morning, but this time I'd been roused by a sound down below. I closed my eyes to listen. There was someone outside the house. The people I knew wouldn't come here, and it wasn't the time of day for a guest.

A thief? I suddenly felt tense.

There was a knock on the door. "I'm from the Adventurers Guild. Please open up."

I did not respond, and eventually the person knocked again and repeated the message. I sighed and, careful not to make any noise, opened the wooden shutter.

The front door was below and at an angle from my window. Squinting, I got a look at who was there: two men wearing black hoods that covered their heads. One was holding a lantern while the other knocked on the door. They were disguising their voices, but I could tell right away that they were the same pair of attackers as earlier. I considered my options, then went downstairs to speak through the door.

"What do you want?"

"There's been an emergency. The princess knight has been injured in the dungeon. She requested that we escort you. Come with us, and we'll take you to her."

"Understood," I said. "I'll be right there. Give me a moment to get ready."

I rushed back up the stairs and headed to her room. It wasn't locked.

With a candle in one hand, I searched through her chamber, stuffing anything important or that shouldn't be seen into a burlap sack. It was light enough that even I could carry it over my shoulder. Once I was sure I hadn't forgotten

anything, I slipped downstairs, then left through the back kitchen door.

I thought I was being cautious, but they were surprisingly sharp. Footsteps came rushing over from the front entrance. My legs are slower now than they used to be. If it turned into a footrace, they'd catch me in no time. But I had an ace up my sleeve. Because many rich and important people lived here, there were heavy guard patrols. After the guards had nearly spotted them earlier, these two wouldn't be too bold in going after me. Sure enough, after rounding two or three corners, the footsteps died out.

But I couldn't be too careful. They might still be waiting to ambush me. I decided to spend the rest of the night in a pub, just to be sure.

They might have been ransacking our house at that very moment. The thought of those two cretins with faces like orc scrotums pawing through Her Highness's room, sniffing at her bedsheets and touching themselves, made me sick to my stomach. They could be tearing through the other rooms, but I wasn't as worried about those. Amateurs wouldn't find the door to the basement, and there wasn't much worth anything in the storage room anymore. The majority had already been switched out for worthless junk. Events like this were why it was a *good* thing I had secretly made a spare key and continued pilfering valuables. Yes, the gains had gone into booze, prostitutes, and other things, but at least they weren't going into the pockets of filthy *burglars*.

The night passed.

People were walking the streets again. Once I was sure no one was trailing me, I returned to the house.

I thought they would have trashed the place, since they'd had the opportunity, but there were no signs of them barging up to the second floor. The only thing I found was a couple marks on the front door. Cowards. If they had at least broken down the door to the shed, I could have blamed them for all the things I'd switched out myself.

I stifled a yawn, unable to shake off the sleepiness that still clouded my mind, and went over my options.

They were after my life; they'd made two attempts on me in one night. There

would be a third. But I was not going to run. I had a duty to watch the house. I wasn't going to beg anyone for help, but sitting around and waiting for something to happen was a good way to destroy one's nerves. The princess knight was supposed to return in the evening two days from now. I wanted this all wrapped up before then.

Fortunately, I had an idea in mind.

I headed for the center of the city, where the entrance to the Millennium of Midnight Sun and the Adventurers Guild were found.

The Adventurers Guild was a body that managed and conducted transactions with adventurers.

It existed in many cities around the world, and based on their strength and feats, adventurers affiliated with the guild received stars, up to a maximum of seven. The more stars you had, the more influence you wielded over other adventurers.

It was like putting collars on stray dogs and making them brag to each other about how fancy the collars were. I didn't know who thought up that system, but it was very clever indeed. They must've been about as clever as me.

I walked through the gate of the Gray Neighbor branch of the Adventurers Guild and came face-to-face with a sturdy three-story building that almost looked like a castle. As a matter of fact, it was designed to act as a fortress if needed. Next to it were other buildings: a station for staffers, a storehouse, and a general store. Sometimes, you found bizarre things in the dungeon, and the guild would buy any rare and valuable objects that weren't available on the surface. It would then sell the items to rich collectors and eccentrics, increasing the guild's profit margins.

I went into the building directly ahead of me. Once inside, there was a long counter to the right of the entrance. There were stern-looking men, craggy and scarred, who sat behind the counter and stared daggers at those who came in.

Owing to the dangers involved, the majority of adventurers were men. To appeal to them, the guild tended to place women with softer demeanors in the reception areas of their branches. But some men got the wrong idea about the nice women trying to do their jobs and assumed they could make propositions

to them, or they mistook them for professionals of a different sort, or even followed them after work in an attempt to nab them. In areas where this sort of nonsense happened, the branch tended to put intimidating men at the reception desk instead and had the women perform office or financial duties in the back. Such decisions were up to the guildmaster, who managed the guild. Sadly, the receptionists at this branch were all ugly men. The counter was open, but they were likely to hit me for talking to them, so I wanted to avoid that. However, I was in luck this time.

“Hey, squirt.”

A silver-haired girl behind the counter spun around. She wore a leather belt around her black dress that cinched at the waist. She was thirteen...or was it fourteen? Her features were refined, and she'd be a very beautiful woman in the future. She was cute enough now, but I'm not into that sort of thing. I only approached because she was the closest person there and the easiest to talk to.

The squirt glanced at me. Her cheeks briefly puffed up in a pout before she resumed looking at the letter in her hands.

“C'mon, don't just ignore me.”

I picked up a rock the size of a fingernail and threw it at her back.

“Stop that,” she said angrily, and she stomped up to the counter. “Can't you tell? I'm very busy right now. Don't bother me.”

All she was doing was sitting in a chair, reading a letter.

“Who's it from?”

“None of your business, Matthew.”

She's no fun. Not that I needed to ask to know who it was from. The sappy look on her face said it all.

“Also, I'm not a squirt.”

“I know, April. I apologize.”

When you insult a girl's pride, the best thing to do is give an honest apology. Although the girl looked out of place in a guild full of scoundrels, she had the power to separate any man's head from his body, if she wanted. She was the

guildmaster's beloved granddaughter.

"I was just frustrated that I lost to you in arm wrestling," I said. "And I took it out on you in a childish manner. I'm sorry. I was acting immature. Please forgive me."

She rolled her eyes and chuckled. "Just don't cause any trouble. Even I can't defend you every single time."

"Sure, sure."

She had her grandfather's workplace confused with a hangout spot and popped in all the time. She was too young to actually work there, so instead, she read things aloud occasionally to illiterate adventurers and sometimes transcribed letters on their behalf. She thought she was helping, but the other workers turned pale whenever she showed up. If that darling face suffered so much as a scratch, they knew their heads would fly—perhaps literally.

"You got a letter, huh? Let me read it after you're done."

"Hmm? Maybe I will, maybe I won't," she said coquettishly, glancing sidelong at me. "This letter was addressed to *me*, after all."

"What's the harm? Did they write something about me? Like, *Oh, how I miss you so. Or I want to grow up to be a handsome man like Matthew.*"

"Of course not!" She snorted and pulled on my ear.

"Ow! That hurt."

"That's what you get."

She turned in a huff and made to move away from the counter, but I quickly called her back. I'd nearly forgotten why I was there in the first place.

"Sorry, can you get Dez for me?"

"I figured," April muttered.

"That's right. Dez, the tallest, longest-legged, skinniest member of the guild, with the clearest skin. *That* Dez. You won't believe what'll happen. I bet you didn't know that when I show up, he's so happy that he'll fly over and give me a big smooch on the cheek."

“Dez is in the slaughterhouse. Stop interrupting. I’m at a good part,” she said, ignoring me and pointing outside.

“Would you call him for me? I can’t stand the sight of blood.”

“If you wait long enough, he’ll show up on his own,” she said coldly, and she went around the corner to the area in the back to finish reading her letter in private. What a horrible, unfriendly girl. Must’ve gotten it from her grandfather.

“Hmph, fine.”

I’d have to go to him myself. I was just about to leave the counter area when I heard something heavy fall behind me. I turned around to see a bald Black head. It belonged to a bald Black man.

“Matthew. Strange to see you here.”

His name was Bill, if I remembered correctly. He was a bit shorter than me, but built. A thick sword hung at his waist. His black armor was scarred and dented, and the color was peeling here and there. His Adventurers Guild emblem was displayed proudly on his chest: four stars.

There were criteria for ranking up and getting another star. I’d forgotten the details, but to get four stars and up, the requirements got very strict. Most adventurers got no higher than three. After that point, you either died or retired. The fact that he had four meant this hairless fellow was quite skilled.

At his feet, there was a six-legged black bear on its back. A dark grizzly. It had to be a good two yul (about two to three meters) in size. They showed up around the eighth and ninth floors of the Millennium of Midnight Sun. Dark grizzlies were trouble; novices often got devoured on their first encounter. This one hadn’t been dead long—a dark red gash on its back was spilling on the guild’s floor. Its pelt would sell for good money.

I doubted he’d brought the enormous corpse here himself, so he’d probably hired a carrier. Adventurers weren’t the only people who went into the dungeon. Carriers brought monster corpses back out with them, and delvers were merchants who went into the dungeon to sell vital items like healing herbs and lanterns. Both were fellow members of the Adventurers Guild.

“I thought you weren’t allowed to bring pets in here.”

“Still a wisecracker, ain’t ya?” Bill said, grabbing me by the shirt. He smiled with smug satisfaction. “How dare you show your face in here, when you ain’t even an adventurer. You here to dig through the trash, maggot?”

“Be careful using foul language,” I warned him helpfully. “There’s an innocent young girl around the premises. If she picks up any untoward language, a scary old man might come and cut your tongue out.”

“Psh! I couldn’t explore the dungeon if I was afraid of some old geezer,” he said, then creepily flicked his red tongue at me right near my nose.

“Suit yourself. But you should know your breath reeks.”

He threw a punch. I would’ve dodged, but he was too close. The fist landed right on my cheek. I thought I’d moved with lightning quickness, but as it turned out, I was as slow as if stuck in quicksand. What a bother.

“Don’t give me that sass, lover boy.”

A heavy boot came down on my stomach. He placed his weight on it; I found it hard to breathe.

“If not for the princess knight, you’d be just another vermin in this town. And unfortunately for you, *she’s* in the dungeon right now.”

“As I’m aware.” I pinched my nose. “But what I wasn’t aware of, until just now, is that your feet smell like an unwashed mutt.”

He lifted his boot, then drove it into my solar plexus. The breath caught in my throat.

There were many adventurers milling around, but no one bothered to stop him.

Fighting was par for the course with these hotheaded types. If someone happened to die, they’d just toss the body into the Millennium of Midnight Sun. The guild had no desire to mediate disputes between adventurers. If one or two died, there would always be more to replace them. On the other hand, they were very sensitive about adventurers causing trouble in town. The Adventurers Guild took on jobs like monster vanquishing and bodyguard requests, and they served as a middleman between the adventurers and their

clients. The infuriating thing was that they got rich by charging both, between the clients' fees and the members' dues. Which was why they were so careful about their reputation with ordinary civilians. If an adventurer got into a fight with a weapon shop worker, or ran naked out of a brothel to avoid paying his bill, the guild ensured the fool was punished severely. If it was bad enough, heads would roll, and that's not an exaggeration.

So while in town, adventurers were careful not to get into violent disputes or argue too much with civilians.

But I was an exception.

The Adventurers Guild absolutely *hated* my guts.

The reason was simple. They believed that when their shining star, Her Highness the princess knight, was called a slut or a whore, that it was my fault.

So when adventurers picked a fight with me, I could only laugh it off, nothing more. I glanced sideways at the counter.

I certainly wasn't a simple civilian, and I didn't have a rich or powerful backer behind me. They couldn't attack me in the presence of the princess knight, but they wouldn't help me, either. What a compassionate bunch of gentlemen they were.

"C'mon, get up. Is your mouth the only thing on you that works?" Bill demanded. He lifted my head with his hand, and with a little extra spittle just for fun. It hit just above my eye and slowly settled onto my eyelid.

"What are you doing?" asked April, who came trotting up to the counter from the back. Aside from her guild activities, she also helped out children at the orphanage and taught them school lessons. She was a very sweet girl. "Grandfather told you not to fight in here. And I'm disgusted that you'd pick on the weak. You call yourself an adventurer?"

Bill hesitated. He at least had enough intelligence to know what would happen if he crossed the line now.

"Stop that! It's dangerous."

"How many times have we told you not to interact with Matthew?"

“Come to the back with us.”

A trio of guild employees rushed up to escort April into the back, deciding the last thing they wanted right now was for her to get involved in trouble.

“No, wait! Matthew needs...”

April’s voice faded as they took her away. My reinforcements had retreated. The Matthew Army was alone on an island.

“Ah, what a shame,” said Bill, grinning. “Now beg for your life. Maybe I’ll let you lick the bottom of my boot.” His leer got wider. “And let me have a round with that princess knight, too.”

It was obvious that he was not talking about a round of darts or dancing.

“How does she squeal? How many times have you fucked her?”

“Not that many,” I said. “The same number of times you’ve fucked your mother.”

The impact arrived, this time on the bridge of my nose. Pain welled up deep inside. No sooner had the sensation arrived than he slammed my head into the guild floor. My skull bounced like a ball. I was starting to get dizzy. Then Bill stepped on my face.

“You better watch your tongue, boy!” he roared, putting his full weight on me. “Why don’t you say that again? Huh?!”

“No, no,” I protested, waving my hands. “You’ve got it wrong. I didn’t finish. I’m sorry. Forgive me, I beg of you.”

A wave of laughter rippled through the guild building. Bill’s leg hovered over me. I sat up and brushed the dirt off my face.

“What I really wanted to say,” I added, staring him in the eyes, “was that your mother’s having an orgy with orcs and goblins right now. She’s deepthroating and bouncing up and down on their shafts as we speak. You’d better hurry back home to join the fun. You’ll have a little brother or sister with horns soon, Big Brother.”

The room was suddenly silent. Apparently, my joke did not land. Behind the counter, April was wide-eyed with shock. A female guild staffer was holding her

hands over the girl's ears. Good work there.

The only person to understand my joke was Bill. His face flushed dark and red. Sputtering, he reached for the sword at his side.

Abruptly, Bill's body rose into the air. His head stuck through the ceiling with a tremendous *crash*. The guild building was silent again.

The man who had appeared brushed away the bits of ceiling that fell on his head and said grumpily, "Don't bring a beast in here if you haven't properly bled it yet."

He was short-legged and stood barely up to my stomach. He wore a sleeveless shirt, a leather vest, and brown trousers. Half his face was covered by long black whiskers. Every feature of him screamed *dwarf*.

"You again?" Dez the dwarf grunted with great displeasure. "I warned you not to come here. Every visit, you start more shit."

I reached up to grab his outstretched hand and used it to pull myself up.

"You've got it backward. The shit happens to *me*. It follows me around like a dog in heat."

"Shut up. What do you want?"

"I had a question for you, actually. Do you have a little time?"

Dez eyed the dark grizzly corpse stretched out on the floor. "Wait upstairs. I'll be there once I've dressed this thing."

He approached the monster, which was three times his height, rolled it up like a pill bug, and hoisted it over his shoulder. The watching adventurers gasped. It was a reminder that the little dwarf had enough physical strength to kill them with no more than his pinkie finger.

At each branch of the Adventurers Guild, they hired their own adventurers as staff.

Violent measures were necessary to monitor rough-and-tumble adventurers and keep them in line. There were fools who broke the rules and refused to follow orders everywhere—especially those who were confident in their own strength. To be the staff member who enforced the rules on them, you had to

be very tough indeed.

That was why they hired Dez. Outwardly, he was treated as a guild staffer, but when needed, he could apprehend and punish members and travel into the dungeon to look for missing adventurers.

Dez was particularly skilled in this regard. There was no end to the stories of his heroism—slaying a fire dragon alone or fighting a zombie army through the night. He was a living legend. If not for Dez, I'd have traveled to the underworld long ago.

I followed him out of the building.

"You there," Dez snapped just as he was about to walk out the door. He was speaking to Bill's pals.

"Y-yes?" the men responded, straightening up.

"I'll dress the animal. Come back around later to get your money."

"Yes, sir!"

"And wipe that floor."

They immediately sprawled out on the floor, using their cloaks and tunic hems to wipe up the bloodstains left by the dark grizzly.

"Oh, and I've got a message for Bill, too," I said, staring up at the unfortunate man with his head stuck through the ceiling. "Tell him there's some unfortunate news: 'Your mother is no longer satisfied with your paltry excuse for a pecker. Sorry to break it to you.'"

"Get the hell over here," Dez snapped, kicking me in the shin.

"So what did you want to ask?" Dez said with his usual scowl.

We were in the guild's staff room. The stone chamber had some simple chairs and tables, an out-of-season hearth, and a skylight, but it was otherwise very plain. When he didn't have anything to do, Dez hung out in here. Of course, given his brusque and awkward manner, he didn't have any friends, so I was nice enough to talk to him every now and then.

His home was a little two-story building on Hammer Lane, south of the guild

building, where he lived with his wife and child.

“I was the victim of some trouble yesterday.”

I told him about the two attacks on me, which caused Dez’s brow to furrow.

“I thought you might know something about it. They were adventurers.”

“Where’s the evidence?”

“I searched my memory, but I’m sure I’d never met them before. Yet they weren’t assassins, either. They tried to ambush me, running loud as you please—total amateurs. But they also weren’t your average crooks. They knew how to use their weapons, and they were smart enough to lay an ambush. Men used to getting down and dirty.”

And they had likely killed before. I suspected they had plenty of experience in combat.

“Also, they were pale. Despite being well built, they had no tans at all. Around here, when you see men who stay out of the sun but are capable of violence, it means adventurers, doesn’t it? At least, that would be the first assumption.”

“So someone’s doing *backsheet* work.”

Though the Adventurers Guild was a collection of scoundrels, they were, at least on paper, a legitimate, noncriminal business. They took no requests for thievery or assassination. At the same time, many of the members were ready to undertake shady work if the money was right. When adventurers took on illegal jobs outside the guild’s purview, it was called backsheet work. In the guild, requests were written on the front side of a sheet of paper and pinned to the board. This would be the opposite, therefore. If caught doing backsheet work, you’d be punished, of course. Possibly even sentenced to expulsion.

“I was wondering if my descriptions match anyone you know of who’d get involved in nasty business like that. Since you know everyone.”

“If what you say is true, it’s nothin’ for you to get involved in. Report it to the higher-ups, and I’ll handle it.”

If Dez wanted to find the idiots working backsheet and ensure they never did anything like that again, he could easily do it.

“I had a feeling you’d say that. That’s why I came straight to you,” I said. “I want you to let me handle it.”

“What?” Dez’s eyes bulged. “What for?”

“I don’t want word getting out.”

If my intuition was correct, this was going to affect Arwin’s honor.

“And how’s a man who can’t fight going to settle the matter? Huh?” Dez asked. He was aware of my...situation. He knew I was useless as an adventurer and as a fighter.

“I have an idea. I can make it work even without using a sword.”

“Stay out of it.”

“Please, I’m begging you,” I said, leaning forward to twirl my finger around Dez’s beard. “Are you really gonna risk your neck for the cheap salary they pay you? C’mon, you owe me this much.”

“Knock it off!” Dez slapped my hand, then stuck a stubby finger right under my nose. “Listen to me. There are two things I’ve got to say to you. The first thing is: Don’t touch my beard. And the second thing is: Don’t touch my beard, *asshole!*”

“All right, I’m sorry,” I said, raising my hands. “I’ll admit, I’m just jealous of you. No matter how hard I try to grow a beard, it never looks like yours.”

This did not quell Dez’s anger. His shoulders stayed tense as he clenched his fists. This was the last thing I wanted. If he punched me now, as hard as he could, I was a dead man.

“Please, Dez.” I changed tactics. “Who made it possible for you to live with your lovely wife and child? To share a kiss before you go to work in the morning? To have a warm piece of bread for breakfast? To hug your adorable child when you get back home?”

While Dez had always been brave and mighty, he was a wreck around women. He could hardly say a word around the woman he fancied. Instead, he would go the metalworking shop where she worked and find a reason to buy pots and knives and sickles, even though he would never use them. That was

the kind of clumsy fool he was.

Seeing that he'd never make any progress in a hundred years, I had taken it upon myself to play matchmaker for him.

Dez's forehead flushed red. He wasn't angry, but feeling bashful. Unable to bring himself to hit me, he unclenched his fists and rested his chin on his hand.

"You just had to bring up the past."

"It's not the past until you break up with her." And that was never going to happen.

Dez clicked his tongue and sat on the chair. His legs didn't reach the ground, so his feet dangled like a child's.

"The Aston brothers."

It took me a few moments to understand his meaning.

"The guys who attacked me?"

"If your story is accurate." He stroked his beard, a gesture meant to calm his unsettled mood. "They're always working together. The short one is Nathan, the eldest, while the taller one with the stubble is Neil."

So the little one was the big brother.

"They've got a bad rep within the guild. Always getting into trouble with other adventurers. Accusations of stealing targets, or having a bad attitude, and so on. They've cut some rookies short. They're miserable sons of bitches, but they're good at what they do. Both three-stars."

Having three stars meant they were full-fledged adventurers.

"They haven't been in the dungeon lately, but they're not having money trouble. People say they've got criminal connections, so they're probably involved with all sorts of mischief beyond trying to kill you."

"You know all that, but you haven't caught them?"

"Got no evidence." Dez shook his head. "There's been no trouble with burglaries lately, and I've been to the usual fences, but they haven't seen anyone like them. Which means they're probably doing wet work, but people

disappear in this town all the time, whether they run off in the night to escape their debts or get cut to pieces and dumped in the dungeon. They could say they've saved up a lot of money, and we'd be none the wiser."

So Beardo had done his work on this one. And what a lot of work it was, schlepping himself around on those tiny legs, for the shit pay they offered. A truly diligent chap.

"Got it. Thanks for the report." I stood up. "Where are they staying?"

"The Twin Golden Sheep."

That was a cheap inn for adventurers, filthy and drafty. From the main road the guild was on, you needed to turn onto a side street, and it was another two hundred winding steps after that.

"Thanks." I pulled a silver coin from my purse and flicked it. Once I'd seen it land in the palm of his hand, I added, "And if you don't mind, if you *do* see them, pick one of them to hold back for a while. Any reason'll do. Just buy me a little time. So long."

"Hey, I didn't agree to—"

But I had already left the room. I knew he would agree to it. Dez always did.

The Twin Golden Sheep's first floor was a tavern and pub, while the six rooms upstairs were for let. The owner was over seventy by now, with bone-white hair and a back as round and hunched as a cow's ass. His hearing was bad, too, so he hardly reacted to noises. He just sat at the counter, nodding off. It made it nice and easy to sneak a peek at the ledger.

Neil and Nathan's room was at the end of the second floor. Conveniently for me, they were staying together. The place was empty during the day. By night, it would be full of adventurers returning from the Millennium of Midnight Sun. That was probably why the owner had gone hard of hearing.

The room was locked. I pulled out two needles and stuck them into the lock. A thief I'd known years ago had taught me the trick to lock picking. I was far from an expert, but I was good enough to break open the locks at a cheap inn.

Inside the room was a pair of beds, a wooden table, and two chairs. A large

wooden beam was exposed on the ceiling.

Two cloth sacks clearly belonged to the brothers. They contained lanterns, ropes, knives, and flints—classic adventuring tools. There was nothing valuable. They weren't careless enough to leave anything worth stealing in a place like this. Feeling slightly miffed, I continued with my preparations.

I took a rope, tied one end into a large loop, then tossed it up over the beam. Measuring the length carefully, I slipped the other end around my waist and made sure it was nice and snug. Then I moved a chair right next to the door and stood on top of it. All that was left was to wait for them to return.

As the sun went down and adventurers started returning from the dungeon bit by bit, I finally heard footsteps climbing the stairs of the Twin Golden Sheep. Peering through the crack in the door, I could see a stubbled man spit on the stairs, looking quite disgruntled. It was clearly the same man who had attacked me the day before. He was the one named Neil.

"Can't believe the nonsense that pipsqueak dwarf was goin' on about," he grumbled.

So Dez had held him up, just like he'd promised he would. Thank you, old friend.

I hunched my neck, holding my breath and waiting for him to come in. I could hear a hand being placed on the knob.

"Hey, Nathan, let's get a drink. We'll call the guys over," Neil said as he entered the room.

He came to a stop. There was a silver coin resting on the floor, right in the open. A little bait I'd left for him.

"What's this?"

He bent down and reached for it. I placed the rope around his neck, and as soon as I saw it go around, I hopped off the chair I was standing on. A muffled sound ensued.

Behind me, Neil was floating off the ground. A success.

While I might be as weak as an insect, I still had a larger body than most and

the weight that came with it. I didn't know the exact figure, but I presumed I was twice as heavy as the princess knight.

All of that weight was now pulling upward on Neil's neck. It was more than enough to strangle a person.

He gurgled wordlessly, prying at the space between the rope and his neck, kicking the air in search of a foothold. I pushed the door shut with my foot.

"Good evening. Do forgive the intrusion," I said. Neil's eyes were going bloodshot.

"You...shit!"

He tried to kick. I leaned backward to avoid it.

The extra force applied to the rope lifted Neil's body further. He shrieked again.

"You don't have much time. I'll be brief," I said.

Careful not to catch a boot from him, I made my way around Neil's back, where I removed his knife from the sheath.

"Who ordered you to attack me?"

"What do you mean?"

"Let's not play silly games."

I swiped Neil's right thigh with the knife from behind. It was nice and sharp, so even with my meager strength, it was enough to cut him through his clothes.

A dark jet of blood spurted. It wasn't that deep of a cut, but I must have hit a big vein, because the crimson spread lustily down his pants to drip on the floor.

"Help me! Someone!"

"Don't bother."

I already knew the inn was empty, aside from the old man who was hard of hearing.

On top of that, squabbles between adventurers were a daily occurrence in this city. About the only person who was meddlesome enough to get involved

with a fight that promised no money was Her Highness.

“Pretty soon, you’re going to die from hanging or from blood loss. So why not spill your guts first? You don’t *want* to die, do you?” I said, peering around his side. Neil’s face was turning purple, either from rage or lack of oxygen.

“Should be obvious,” Neil snarled. “The princess knight. She’s sick of your ugly face and asked us to get rid of you.”

“Oh, I see,” I said piteously. “That’s a shame.”

I cut his left thigh this time. The blood stained his other trouser leg, if not quite as vigorously as the first time.

“Now you’ve got even less time to talk.”

“I’ll kill you!”

“Don’t you see the mess you’re leaving on the floor? All because you can’t simply be honest. And frankly, this still isn’t the worst that can happen. If you die from lack of air, you’ll shit yourself, too—did you know that? It’s hell to clean.”

“Kill...you...”

Neil continued to struggle. He wasn’t fighting back anymore, but he also didn’t have the strength to beg for his life. He was going to take the name of his employer to the grave, it seemed. Probably more out of spite toward me than loyalty to a client. Quite a plucky fellow.

“It’s not good to hold it in, you know. Look,” I said, pointing. Neil’s face blanched. There was a large bunch in the sheets of one of the two beds. The back of a head was visible buried in the pillow.

“N-Nathan?”

“I put him to sleep with a little medicine before you showed up. If you won’t tell me the answer, I’ll have to ask your big brother.” I made a gesture with the bloody knife, pretending to stab with it.

“You...demon.”

“If you want to do introductions, it’ll have to be another time.”

Who was really worse in this scenario, me or a man who would kill a total stranger for money? Neil gritted his teeth, eyes fully red. He still refused to talk. At this point, he must've assumed I wouldn't hold up my end of the deal, even if he spilled his secrets.

"You don't have much time to consider."

The blood was pooling on the floor under his legs. He'd die of blood loss in the time I could count to a thousand.

"....."

"Don't worry. If you tell me what I want to know, I'll leave the room. I won't touch your brother. And because I have no friends, you don't have to worry about someone else coming along and finishing you off in my stead," I said.

My sincere, heartfelt comment actually moved him. Neil opened his mouth to speak at last.

"I thought so," I replied. It was the name I'd expected to hear. "Your honesty is appreciated."

No doubt the correct choice would've been to let my tongue flicker out and say, *Fool, now I no longer have any need of you*, and finish him off. But I hesitated to do that.

Instead, I used the knife to cut the rope around my waist. Neil fell heavily to the floor. He'd lost too much blood to stay on his feet; instead, he rolled in the pool of his own blood.

"I don't think you're going to make it," I said. His resistance would be his downfall. He tried to tie up the wounds to staunch the bleeding, but his hands weren't working properly; he didn't have the strength to stand anymore.

"N-Nathan," he moaned, crawling across the floor and reaching out with a bloody hand.

"Ah, I forgot to mention," I said, pulling back the sheet for him. The little man was dead, eyes rolled back in his head. There were fresh rope marks around his neck. "I didn't quite know how much force to use. When I strangled him like I did you, it just snapped his neck instead. But at least it was a quick, painless

death. That's a relief, isn't it?"

Neil's pale face twisted into despair.

"G-go to hell."

"Uh-huh." I opened the window and rang a little bell I'd pulled from my pocket. "Well, you can go first and wait for me there. It should only take another, what, hundred years or so?"

After a few moments, there was a soft rapping at the door. I opened it to reveal a man dressed in black with a wide-brimmed hat.

"Ah, there you are, Bradley."

I laid six silver coins into his black-gloved hand. Bradley inclined his head without a word and laid down a long, narrow white linen cloth next to Nathan. He placed the body on top of it, then he used the ends to wrap it up and tie them together with a rope.

This was not a legitimate business, of course. His official profession was coffin maker, but his side gig was much more lucrative. Bradley took the bodies of the poor and passersby and dumped them in the Millennium of Midnight Sun. There were no graves here. There was a tacit understanding that if the powers that be wanted a graveyard, it would be more profitable to build another gambling den or brothel instead.

The abandoned bodies would eventually vanish, leaving only their clothes behind. Dungeons like the Millennium of Midnight Sun were, in fact, vast monsters in their own right, and they devoured the dead for sustenance.

Few people bothered with building coffins, therefore, and thus Bradley started his corpse-removal business. He would show up anywhere in the city and take any bodies, whether from suicide or homicide, that needed to be discarded in the dungeon. Because he was not an adventurer, he wasn't subject to the guild's rules.

There was considerable demand for his services. Many outlaws lived here, and the town had a way of producing inconvenient bodies on a daily basis. His business earned him the nickname Gravedigger. As long as you paid him, there was no problem and no concern that he would talk. He was mute.

Once he'd packed up Nathan, he laid down another sheet next to Neil. Unperturbed by the red seeping into the cloth, he lifted the man and started to move him, when he heard groaning. Neil was still alive.

Bradley pulled one of his hands free, reached behind his back for a knife, then jabbed it into Neil's heart, twice. Once the man was no longer moving, he cast a baleful glance in my direction.

"Fine, fine. You'll get extra."

After another two silvers had changed hands, he nodded and silently resumed his task. His dedication to his work was both his best and worst trait.

When the process was done, Bradley hauled a body over each shoulder and walked out. There was a carriage outside, which he would drive to the dungeon. There were guards at the entrance at all hours, but this was just another source of pocket money for them.

"But the problem isn't solved."

These two had just been pawns. Once their failure was clear, a second and third round of assassins would come after them. I needed to strike before it came to that.

It would require a bit of a war fund. Fortunately, I had just received a very generous donation from a conscientious third party, so that issue was taken care of. I could pay for a funeral for the brothers and still have change left over. I closed the door, with the last image of the inn room a pair of empty purses slowly being stained red on the floor.

The next evening, I was enjoying an ale at the Evening Bell. It was a downtrodden tavern with a miserable selection of drinks, but it did have one thing going for it: a clear view of the dungeon gate. The Adventurers Guild also had a good view, but after the recent trouble, I didn't want to stick out any further.

I was waiting for the princess knight to emerge from the dungeon. Not to greet her with a loving embrace and kiss—although I wasn't opposed to it. I had a different goal in mind, and she was planning to be out right around this time.

Just as my second cup was emptying, the gate to the dungeon cracked open,

and Her Highness's party emerged. None of the members were missing. They squinted up at the first sun they'd seen in three days and rejoiced in another safe return to the surface.

Ordinarily, they would report to the guild, announce their return, then part ways. Each of them acted on their own after that, but today was slightly different. A child of about ten years ran up to them and handed a letter to the person standing next to the princess knight. He took it with surprise and opened it, careful not to draw too much attention or allow anyone else to see the contents. His face froze—then he folded the letter and stuffed it away, looking pale. The letter had come as a shock.

I knew what it said. Because I was the one who wrote it.

It was a simple statement if spoken aloud, but it was much more difficult to put into written words. Maybe I needed a few more writing lessons.

Although I'd gotten his name from Neil, it could have been a lie born of desperation. I'd gone to great lengths to get confirmation here, and the single glimpse of despair on his face when he saw the letter was all the evidence I needed. He'd plunged from relief to horror in barely a moment.

After sharing a few words with Arwin, he slowly stepped away from the rest of the party. He would be planning his next move, I was certain. But now that I had my evidence, it was time for me to prepare, too. I stood up, but something bumped into my back.

"Hey, that hurt," grumbled a red-faced drunk carrying a flagon in his hand. He wore brown leather armor, a longsword, and the emblem of the Adventurers Guild.

I tried to apologize and squeeze past him, but the drunk grabbed my shirt.

"Let me see you for a sec, pretty boy. I got a question to ask you," he said. So this was not a random accident but a deliberate choice on his part to bump into me. He was aware that I was the princess knight's paramour.

"Save yourself the trouble," I warned him, out of the sheer goodness of my heart. "You wouldn't be a good match for Her Highness. And it's still early. Maybe you should switch to water and sober up a little."

“Don’t give me that shit,” the drunk growled, and he dragged me outside with him.

He took me to the alley behind the tavern; it was just barely wide enough for two men to stand side by side. The sunlight from the west stabbed down like a red-hot blade, and I was face-to-face with the drunk with the heat pouring onto my back.

“Listen, if I’ve upset you, I apologize. But you’re going into the dungeon, aren’t you? Wouldn’t it be such a waste to get hurt just before you go in?”

“Hurt? Ha! ‘Hurt,’ he says.” The drunk cackled. He put a hand on my head and forced it downward. “And how am I gonna get hurt dealin’ with a coward, huh? The only thing you got goin’ for ya is how big you are.”

It seemed he had taken my attempt to smooth things over as a sign that I was intimidated. He rubbed my face against the wall.

“Listen to me, boy. Just let me have a round with that woman. She likes it freaky, don’t she? I heard she hung around Glowfly Lane a while back. The only people who bother doin’ that are buyers and sellers.”

“I see.”

With my free hand, I grabbed the drunk’s neck.

“You went one step too far.”

There was a dull *crunch*.

His neck was suddenly heavy in my hand; the strength had gone out of his core. I let go, and the drunk slumped to his knees, then fell to the ground. His neck was broken, of course, but the problem was that there was a handprint shape dented into the muscle around his neck. Once I was sure he was dead, I quickly left the scene. Another job for Bradley. This was getting costly.

Evening light bloomed the moment I left the alley, shining into my eyes. I clicked my tongue at the baleful sun and hurried back home in order to return before Her Highness did.

It wasn’t hard to beat Arwin back, because she had to report to the guild first. What was important was to prepare the place to welcome her.

I'd already prepped dinner; the only thing left was to freshen it back up over the fire. I'd put together a spinach and herb salad, a spiced mushroom soup, braised chicken, and a twenty-five-year-old wine from the Lambert region. I couldn't make anything elaborate, but a long history of camping going back to my mercenary days gave me a knack for whipping up dishes based on whatever was on hand. As long as you chopped up some meat and vegetables and tossed them in a pot with salt and pepper, anything would taste pretty good. If I wanted, I could even bake bread, but the house had no stone oven, so I bought our bread at a local bakery instead.

The knock on the door came just as I was setting out the dishes on the table. Her Highness had returned.

"You're back," I said, ready to welcome her home with a passionate kiss, but Arwin walked right past me and started up the steps toward her room. "Oh, what a cruel woman," I wailed, pretending to gnaw on a handkerchief in grief as I followed her. Arwin's armor was specially fitted, making it difficult to remove on her own. She could get it on and off by herself, but it was far faster with a helper.

I knocked on the door before walking in. She was standing near the wall. When I approached, she did not turn to greet me but simply lifted her arms.

"Welcome home. It must've been a difficult trip. How did everything go?" I asked, removing her cloak and unfastening the armor clasps. The breastplate separated into front and back halves. In my current state, it was too difficult to hold them myself, so there was a special place to set them down nearby.

"All was well."

"I'm glad to hear it."

I undid her forearm and shin guards in the same manner, placing them next to the breastplate. Lastly, I rested her sword against the wall. Underneath, she wore a black top and bottom and a dress with a long leg slit. It was a simple outfit, but it served to accentuate the quality of its contents. I felt more blessed when I saw her than any goddess statue in a church, that much was certain. For one thing, I was never possessed with an urge to embrace a stone statue, and none had ever moaned at the touch, in my experience.

“Shall we dine, then?”

Arwin did not answer. She appeared to be in a sulking mood. “I feel sick to my stomach,” she muttered.

“Do I have your permission to weep?”

“I’m not talking about you,” she corrected, sounding a bit abashed. “We ran across a pack of garmhounds on the way out. It’s left me smelling like some unwashed beast. The odor was irritating my nose all the way back.”

“You don’t smell bad to me.” I leaned toward her neck and inhaled deeply. It was the usual fragrant scent. Maybe with a hint of sweat this time.

“I would like to wash up first,” Arwin said, pushing me aside.

“Shall we go to the bathhouse, then?”

The house had no bath. The usual options were to wash with the well water from the yard or wipe yourself off with a wet cloth. I chose the former, while Arwin preferred the latter. When it was cold enough, she’d use water that had been boiled first. If we wanted to have a proper bath, we had to go to the public bathhouse. It would still be open at this hour. Arwin always paid extra for a private room.

“No, I’d rather not. The food will get cold,” Arwin said. With her back to me, she began removing her clothes. Her red hair cascaded over the white skin of her back and shoulders. “Scrub me down.”

“Certainly. Just warn me before you do that.”

It was bad for my heart to skip like that. The problem with women of noble birth was that they had a very understated sense of shame. It made me worry that she might start stripping outdoors one of these days.

“Hang on. I’ll go get the wash basin.” It soaked the floor otherwise.

“Then wash my hair, too.”

“As you command.”

It was a reward for her hard work. I’d bring out the shampoo I’d just bought. And I’d need to heat up the water.

With great effort, I brought the basin into the room. She sat in the middle, and I scooped up the lukewarm water to trickle it over her body. Little splashes of sound filled the room, and droplets ran down her fine hair and unblemished skin. I put the shampoo on my hands and rubbed it into suds, then set to scrubbing Her Highness's hair. There was a knack to massaging the hair with the fleshy underside of the fingers so that I didn't do any damage to her scalp or pull the hairs out. Very gently, I combed and washed her hair using my fingers. It was such beautiful hair; I couldn't allow any dirt to collect in it. And I would die before I let any of those ends split.

"Mm," she murmured in what I took for pleasure. I couldn't see her expression. She clasped the edges of the basin and arched her back, just like a cat. The curve of her little butt trembled, sending ripples across the water.

"You do love when your hair is touched."

"You're good at touching it."

"And not simply that it's me who's touching it?"

"Fool."

She turned, and her face was red all the way to her ears.

Once I was done with her head, I traveled down her neck and back. My fingers rubbed suds into each lock of crimson hair, smoothing out the tangles.

The soap suds on her shoulders slid forward in a curve down the front. I wished I could be suds. I wanted to circle around to the front to wipe them off. I wanted to reach around her side and squeeze.

Arwin shook her head, sending suds flying. Some of it landed in my eye, rather painfully.

"Don't make any sudden moves."

"Sorry, I got some in my eye," I said weakly.



“It’s fine. Do my back next.”

I rinsed off the shampoo with hotter water this time and rested her hair over her front and sides, revealing the nape of her neck, which looked reddened. It really stuck out... Perhaps I ought to powder it later.

“Shall I wash your front, too?”

“No need.”

“You don’t have to be shy. It will feel good.”

“I said I’m fine!”

Any further prodding and she actually would hit me. I settled for scrubbing her back. There would be other chances.

“Scrub harder. It always feels like a child is applying pressure when you do it.”

“Sure, sure.”

It was basically servant work, but I didn’t mind this lifestyle. I didn’t know how long it would last, and for that reason, I wanted to wrap up any annoying loose ends when I could.

The fewer deaths, the better. I scrubbed and rinsed the beautiful back before my eyes. She’d need a piece of candy as a reward later, too.

Gray Neighbor was a city surrounded by wasteland, with some exceptions. To the south was an open grassland, which gave way to little patches of woods here and there.

Dangerous monsters often prowled near the woods, and because it was far from the high road to Baradelle, almost no one bothered to come here.

In the middle of the woods was a small open meadow. Because of the trees and the fact that it was sunken a bit lower, this spot was completely out of sight of the greater grassland outside.

The grass originally grew tall and thick here, but I came back at regular intervals to cut it down. I wasn’t a gardener, and no one asked me to do it. The tall grass just didn’t suit my needs. After going untouched for three months, it had grown back to waist height, so I needed to get a sickle and trim it again. It

had been the right move to agree to meet during the day.

Because of the late night, Arwin was still sleeping, most likely.

I was about to confront a member of the princess knight's party. It might very well turn into a duel to the death. The thought of her suffering hurt me, too, but I was not a martyr walking to my doom with full acceptance. When they tried to kill me, I killed them. That's how I've always done it.

When the reaping was done, I sat down on a fallen tree trunk for a break. Soon, someone approached—the sound of crunching leaves traveled through the trees. Moments later, my guest arrived in the open.

"Ah, there you are. I've been waiting for you, Sir Virgin Paladin."

His Lordship Lutwidge Lewster made a sour face.

"You may have escaped death, but don't let that get to your head," he said, glaring at me with unbridled hostility.

His helmet was tucked under his arm, but he was otherwise fully armed for battle. His platinum armor, massive greatsword, and red cloak shone like a vision of a heroic knight from some bard's saga.

"Coincidence will not serve you forever. I'll end you myself this time," Lutwidge swore. He took another ten steps and stopped, facing me.

"I take it you're not interested in talking this out?" I said, standing. "That's a shame."

"No, the shame is all mine." His gauntlet creaked as he clenched his fist. "The thought of a talentless coward like you being attached to Her Highness at the hip makes me sick to my stomach."

"Let's not pretend your intentions are so noble, good sir," I objected. "Did you think I couldn't tell you're in love with Arwin? Honor and status are beside the point. You want to kill me because I stole the woman you love out from under your nose. Isn't that right?"

"No!"

"I've been terrified that you'll toss your armor aside and tackle Arwin to the ground. For all your courtesy and manners, there's nothing but fornication in

that head of yours. Oh, for shame.”

“Silence!”

“Look, I’m a man, too. I know how it is. I was willing to look the other way while you let your mind run wild and turned her into your imaginary sex slave, but this is really going too far. If you were that desperate, I could have introduced you to a whore who looks like her.”

“I said hold your tongue!” Lutwidge bellowed. He threw his helmet at me. The silver helm glanced off my right arm and rolled into the trees behind me. “I cannot abide the thought of a wretch like you cavorting with Her Highness any longer. I will cleanse your stain from the world right here and now, even if it should earn me her displeasure!”

He raised his sword and stomped his boot three times.

In less than ten seconds, the forest was full of the sound of people approaching. There were five, maybe six of them.

The men who appeared all looked like adventurers. They’d probably been hired by the Virgin Paladin; they had that back-alley ratlike look to them. They wore iron breastplates and chain mail, plus iron helmets. One of them who had the look of a thief approached in a crouch with daggers in either hand, light as a cat on his feet.

“There’s no escape for you now. We’ve already confirmed that you have no reinforcements or partners lying in wait.”

“Of course I don’t.”

I’m all the help I’ll need.

“You won’t leave these woods alive, wisecracker,” said Bill, his head bandaged, as he approached with blade drawn.

“Oh, it’s you.” Apparently, he had accepted the Virgin Paladin’s invitation. The poor sap.

“That dwarf helped you survive the Astons, too, didn’t he? Well, he ain’t here today. He’s busy finding the bones of some unfortunate rookie in the dungeon right now...”

“Move it.”

Someone pushed Bill from behind, causing him to stumble. He started to protest but held his tongue when he saw who it was.

“You Matthew?”

A very large man strode forward in Bill’s place. He was about my height, but his shoulders were a full arm’s worth thicker than mine. He carried a custom-made great ax, and his brown eyes were smoldering with fury.

“Name’s Nash. And I’ll kill you for what you did to Nathan and Neil.”

“You their friend or something?”

Dez hadn’t mentioned them having any other partners.

“Their brother!”

I had no response to that.

“I haven’t seen my brothers in two days. But when I went to their room, I found bloodstains. I know you did it!”

I groaned and tilted my head back. Why couldn’t Beardo have mentioned there were *three* brothers?

“I don’t care what happened between you. I’m gonna make sure you die today,” he said.

“Now, hang on a moment,” I said, holding up a hand as Nash advanced on me. “This is a mistake. You’ll see, if we just talk things out. What happened to those two? It was an accident. I never had any intention of killing them. It’s true! Swear to the gods.”

“You *accidentally* tossed a rope over the ceiling beam and hanged them?”

“.....”

“There was a rope mark over the beam and a great stinkin’ boot print on the chair. Not many people in this town wear clodhoppers that big. I even put the screws on the old man who runs the place, and he told me you were involved in somethin’ up on the second floor.”

“Wow,” I said, honestly impressed. He’d done his research. Contrary to what

his appearance suggested, he was actually rather keen. “So rather than hand me over to the guards, you decided you wanted to cut off my head yourself and accepted Sir Virgin’s invitation to violence.”

“Hate to break it to ya, but you’ll die a painful death today.”

“Actually, I appreciate your decision,” I said. “Now I don’t have to worry about being in trouble with the guards. See, if I manage to silence all of *you*, then I’m in the clear.”

“He’s a dreamer,” spat Bill. “Thinks he’s gonna survive against all of us. With one sickle?”

That reminded me what I was holding in my hands.

“Why, yes, I do think that.”

I tossed the tool over my shoulder; the rusty blade twirled into the trees. I made sure to remember where it landed so I could retrieve it later. Nash was watching me with a suspicious look, but it honestly wasn’t part of any ruse. I’d only brought it to cut the grass.

I already had a weapon, of course.

“Why do you think I called you out here? Same reason as you. So that I can *eliminate* you without having to worry about the guards.”

I tensed my legs and grabbed the fallen tree I’d been sitting on. It was about five yul (eight meters) long and as thick around as a man. Feeling the sun burning my scalp, I lifted the tree and rested it on my shoulder. It pressed heavily on me but wasn’t too bad. The worst part was the rough bark biting into the skin.

“This is my weapon.”

“Impossible!” Lutwidge gasped, backing away. “You don’t have that kind of strength.”

“This is nothing.”

I lifted the tree up and down with one hand. It was heavy but still a breeze compared to when I lifted a cyclops’s leg. The sky was a brilliant, spotless blue today. It almost made me sick.

I beckoned toward them with my free hand. “Come on, boys. You’re not here for a picnic, remember?”

Despite their hesitance, the men took action. The thief-like man, the nimblest of the bunch, circled around behind me, twirling his daggers. I could feel him closing the gap, feinting left and right.

“There we go.” I grunted, swinging the tree in the direction I felt him coming from. A moment later, there was a loud, dull impact. I turned to see that the thief-like man had hit one of the standing trees headfirst, leaving quite a vivid red impact mark. I could see brain, so there was no need to deliver a follow-up.

“There’s one down.”

The loss of one of their own sent the adventurers into a frenzy.

“W-watch out! He’s got monstrous strength!” Bill warned. They fanned out to surround me at a healthy distance. The sight of their companion going down in a single blow had unnerved them, but they recovered quickly.

A man with full armor, helmet, and shield closed the gap in front of me. Two more adventurers followed him with their swords up.

Following their sight lines, on the other side of me, Bill and Nash had their large weapons readied.

The man with the shield in front of me would take a blow, allowing the rear fighters to get me. If I turned around and tried to beat them first, the guys in front would attack. The simplicity of this formation was what made it so hard to overcome.

I held the tree trunk overhead and swung it down toward the shield-user before me. He reacted quickly, tossing his shield and diving to the side in a panic. Of course he did. There wasn’t a woodcutter in the world who would stand there and try to catch a tree he was felling.

Very good. A wise decision—if his opponent were anyone but me.

Just before the tree would have gouged a divot in the earth, I pulled and changed its angle, causing it to travel sideways, smashing the head of the shield-user and continuing in a half rotation to slam right into Bill’s arm as he

was attempting to attack me. His body flew into the air as though tossed by a bull, then crashed into the grass. His neck snapped as he landed, and after a brief moan, he lay still.

The shield-user's helmet was half caved in, and his body was caught in the branches at the end of the tree. I didn't need to worry about whether or not he was dead, either.

The two men who'd been behind the shield-user went pale. They started to run.

"You forgot something." I used both hands to toss the tree trunk, which flew toward them, parallel to the ground. It hit them both on the backs and crushed them.

"You're an ogre...", said Nash with a grunt.

"Well, that's uncalled-for." I pouted. "How can you compare such a handsome man to an ogre?"

For some reason, Nash did not agree with my unassailable statement. He clutched his battle-ax like it was a stuffed bear and backed away.

"Let's do this! Come at me. I'm unarmed now. I thought you were going to avenge your brothers? Or have you pissed yourself and need to clean up?"

Nash was not going to rush at me. This was taking too much time. I cleared my throat and said something very insincere.

"Come on, you coward. You want to know the last words your brothers said? It was 'Mommy, help.' If you're scared for your life, go run back to your mama and drink some of her milk. Or her piss, if that's to your taste, you dogshit-eating dickless wonder."

Nash roared and swung his ax over his head.

It wasn't sharp, but it was heavy enough to split my head. I quickly sidestepped to avoid the whistling ax head, circled around Nash's side, and caught his cheek with a right hook.

I'd meant it only as an initial jab, but Nash's other cheek kissed the ground. I'd left a dent in the contour of his face.

“How passionate of you. What was that, love at first sight?”

Nash’s eyes were rolling back, and his body was convulsing, but he was still conscious.

“Wha...are...you...?”

“Nothing you need to know.” I bent down to lift up the fallen battle-ax.

“N-no!”

“This is good-bye. Send my regards to your brothers when you see them. What else...? Ah yes! If you see any pretty women when you’re there, be sure to put in a good word for me. Oh, and don’t tell Arwin, would you? Also, er... oops.”

I’d been going on long enough that the ax started to get heavy, and I let it slip to the ground. The blade separated Nash’s head and body.

Who was left? I looked around and heard groaning from the men trapped under the tree trunk. One of them had broken his spine and was dead, but the other was merely trapped and had just succeeded at pulling his leg free.

“Hey, sorry about the wait,” I said, smiling and holding Nash’s battle-ax over my shoulder. I didn’t like drawing out suffering.

“N-no, wait,” the man wailed desperately, falling to the ground. There was a burn-like mark over his right eye. “I yield. You’ve beaten me. I’ll never bother you again.”

He threw his sword away, knelt, and held up his hands.

“Hmm, what to do, what to do?” I didn’t like killing defenseless people. I put the ax on the ground. “I know. If you’ve lost, then you’re my prisoner. If you pay me a ransom, I’m willing to let you go.”

“A-all right.”

He reached for his pocket. I flicked a pebble the size of my fingernail with my thumb. The man with the burn mark screamed and held his hand. A ball packed in paper rolled out of his pocket.

“Haven’t seen a smoke bomb in a while.” He probably intended to rob my

visibility and then kill me while I was blinded. I tossed the smoke bomb into the woods and saw the black curtain billow outward where it landed. “Ah, that’s a relief. Now I don’t have to feel bad about killing you.”

“N-no, please!” he pleaded tearfully, scrambling backward. He couldn’t run on his injured leg. “I was paid to do this. I have a family. My wife’s waiting for me, and my daughter’s just turned eight! They’ll be out in the cold if I die!”

“Then if I see them, I’ll send a message,” I said, lifting the ax again. “That their daddy died for absolutely no good reason whatsoever.”

His desperate plea was drowned out by a heavy *thud*. All that was left was his body and a head that had been crushed as easily as a birthday cake. I bore him no ill will, but I couldn’t have him alive.

“So what now? You’re the only one left.”

I felt a chill wind at my spine as I turned, and I promptly dropped the ax, jumping away. A split second later, the edge of the paladin’s greatsword slashed the earth where I had stood.

“Ah, a sneak attack from behind rather than an introduction? I suppose that must be all the rage with paladins these days.”

“Silence!” Lutwidge shouted, his finely trimmed mustache trembling. “You’re one to talk, with the way you hid your true nature.”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t play the fool! No one has brute strength like that!” His voice was equal parts anger and fear. “You’re the Giant-Eater…Mardukas from the Million Blades!”

“Now, there’s a name I haven’t heard in a long, long time.”

Across the sea on the continent to the east, there had been a seven-member adventuring party. They excelled in every possible area—strength, magic, intelligence—and achieved great things. And all seven of them were *seven-star* adventurers. They were the strongest party of adventurers in their day, and they were called the Million Blades.

Mardukas was known for his great feats of strength and stamina. He choked

out a minotaur, tore out the throat of a vampire with his teeth, crushed the skull of a baphomet with a headbutt, broke a dragon's fangs, and punched a hole through an iron giant's stomach with his bare fist. It earned him the nickname Giant-Eater. Back then, any adventurer would run in terror at the mention of his name. He was also handsome, sexy, tall, charming, a good conversationalist, *and* a generous lover. The women were all over him. If you ignored his lack of higher education, he was the perfect man.

"I'd heard he disappeared after the party disbanded... So what's brought you to Her Highness, hiding your identity like a snake in the grass?!"

"You've got the wrong guy," I told him. "He died. Thanks to that gaping asshole sun god. What you see here today is exactly who you've always known: the princess knight's lovable lover boy."

"Enough of your jokes!" Lutwidge slammed his sword against the ground out of sheer frustration. The tip cut through a rock like it was made of butter, then stuck into the dirt. Yes, he did have a something-or-other magic sword, didn't he? Arwin said its magic could give it an extremely sharp edge for short periods of time, enabling it to cut through metal and rock.

"I'm going to kill you right here. A disgusting, vile maggot like you has no right to live."

He lifted his sword to chest height, ready to strike, and began taking short, careful steps toward me. His actions were deliberate and precise—the sign of a man who was determined to finish the job.

I had no reason to oblige him, but the clouds were coming. I didn't have much time left.

I'd have to do him in quickly.

I spread my arms and strode toward him with wide steps, as though going in for a hug. Lutwidge's expression was hard. The armor meant he was ultimately limited in how much he could move. If I got my arms around him and pulled him to the ground, it would be over. I could lock his joints and break his neck however I pleased.

When I was just a few steps away from the greatsword's range, Lutwidge

howled. He slid smoothly across the ground and heaved his sword downward. I lifted my hands.

The huge blade came to a stop directly over my head. My hands had the flat trapped between my palms.

“Wha—?!”

“Sorry. This was my plan all along.”

Without letting go, I sidled up until I was right next to Lutwidge. Held still by my sheer strength, his magic sword slipped right out of his hands. The loss of his sword caused the Virgin Paladin to lose his balance and topple forward. He took one, two, three unsteady steps before the momentum sent him tumbling. He landed on the ground, ass-up toward me.

“Ah, well,” I said uncomfortably, “I’m sorry, but *my* magic blade is only for Her Highness. I may be a man of loose morals, but I won’t accept just any offer. Maybe if you removed your armor, that would help. Who knows, maybe a glimpse of bare ass will tempt me.”

“How dare—!”



His face was red and blotchy when he turned around. He lunged at me with his fists, face and whiskers caked with dirt.

“Oh, stop that.” I tossed the magic sword behind me and caught his fist. “Only men of the ugliest character stoop to violence after their advances are spurned.”

I squeezed. The paladin screamed. Red liquid began to seep from the cracks in his silver gauntlet. He punched with his left hand this time in an attempt to escape the pain.

Of course, I had no desire to be punched, so I lifted him upward by the hand I was already holding. It pulled the knight off his feet so that his body was pressed to mine. Our faces drew closer.

“Oh, did you want a kiss?” I grinned. “Too bad.”

I turned my back and swung my arm forward as hard as I could. Lutwidge’s body flew over my shoulder, armor and all. He landed loudly on his rear.

“One more time!”

I turned and hurled Lutwidge by the arm again. This time, he landed on his back, and the next time, he kissed the ground with his stomach. I started lifting him again, but he was no longer resisting. It was all he could do to bear the horrible pain. After kissing the ground three times, he’d broken the bones in his ribcage and back.

“You’ve gotten carried away. You should consider your age, sir. An older man can only go so many rounds in a row.”

“Kill me,” he said, sounding delirious. “I cannot live after suffering such humiliation. And once you tell Her Highness, I am done for, either way.”

The sudden note of understanding resignation in his voice angered me.

“Listen up, old man.” I lifted the paladin’s downturned face. “Is that the weak kind of dedication you brought into being Arwin’s bodyguard? You’re soft. Do you have any idea the kind of commitment she puts into delving into that dungeon?”

“Of course I do,” Lutwidge said proudly. “Despite her youth, she stands at the

head of our party every time, fighting to save her land that was tragically destroyed by monsters. She cuts a figure like the legendary valkyrie, which we —”

“Is that it?” I wasn’t asking him for a bard’s heroic ode to her.

“I thought her goal of conquering the dungeon was just a daydream at first. But she never gave up. Even in the depths and the darkness, she always stood at the fore, fighting monsters and leading our party. For the sake of her lost country, for the sake of the people and vassals who lost their homes, for the sake of avenging her king father and queen mother, she has placed her life in danger. She never wavers in her commitment to saving her companions. Everything was going well—*until you arrived!*”

“Enough.”

I let go. The paladin kissed the ground for a fourth time with his chin.

He knew nothing. He had no idea what kind of person the woman he protected was. All he cared about was the title of princess knight; who she was on the inside was of no concern. At this point, it felt foolish even to be angry at him.

I picked up the sword and thrust it into the ground in front of his eyes. It sank deep into the soil, until the hilt hit the ground. The aghast look on his face was a fitting decoration for the sight.

“Listen good. You will never dream of attempting to end my life again. If you can do that, I’m willing to keep this between us. But if you ever try to kill me again or tell anyone about this, I will tell her everything. *Everything.*”

“You’re not going to kill me?”

“If I was, I’d have done it by now.” I sighed. Why did this holy man have to be so dense? “If I kill you, who’s going to keep Arwin safe in the dungeon?”

“You.”

“Don’t be an idiot.” I shook my head. “I’ve got my own duty to uphold. Remember what I told that boy? Our jobs are equally important. So I want you to go back to protecting Arwin—without any funny thoughts.”

The look in Lutwidge's eyes was still somewhat vacant. Oh well. I'd done what I came for.

"I'll take my leave now. Oh, and you handle this mess."

I turned my back on him and went into the trees to pick up the sickle I'd thrown away. Instantly, I felt as heavy as though my body had been dunked into a swamp of lead. It was difficult just to move a finger. It was always like this, but even still, I hated it. But I couldn't let him see me stumble. I could still feel his eyes on my back. Does that virgin really admire my ass that much?

The sickle had flown farther than I thought. I picked it up and continued through the trees to the wasteland. There was barely any grass here, just rock and dry dirt in strange, ugly patterns.

The vicious wind made my body tremble. Dull gray clouds covered the sky above. If I fought now, I wouldn't be able to even beat a simple adventurer thug, much less Lutwidge. It was pathetic that I had to check the weather in order to engage in a single fight. This was all the fault of that damned sun god.

At the time, the Million Blades had been exploring a ruin called the Tower of the Sun God. According to mythology, the sun god had it built for himself and had left a mountain of riches inside. Within the vast tower were a great number of monsters and traps, which we managed to overcome on the way to the top floor. Right then, a voice spoke in my head.

"From this day forward, thou shalt not wield thy great strength unless within my gaze."

He really didn't like having his lair invaded, apparently. And so the tight-assed sun god put a curse on us. Some lost their sight, some lost their magic, some lost their adventuring purpose, and I lost my strength.

Thanks to the sun god, who had a propensity to piss the bed at night, I could no longer wield my strength the way I once did. I could only do it under his supervision, when the sun was shining. Not in the shade, not under clouds, not inside. And adventuring was a job that happened in the dark. I couldn't even go into the woods or a cave, much less the dungeon. Even in open fields or deserts, I was weaker than the average civilian once the sun went down. My life as an adventurer was over.

The party broke up, and I retired from my old life.

Some of my companions found worthwhile work elsewhere or called on old contacts to get new jobs. But I wasn't that smart, and I couldn't use magic. I was only literate enough to write my own name. Fighting was all I had, and I suddenly had no prospects for good work. Instead, the people and their friends who I'd pissed off in the past came after me, trying to settle the score. I ran for my life.

Out of money, I cast aside my name and wandered until I had crossed the sea and ended up in Gray Neighbor, the Dungeon City. I didn't find any worthwhile jobs here, either, but eventually I crossed paths with Arwin, "the Crimson Princess Knight," and here I was today.

The thought that I couldn't even do a job for Arwin without begging for help from that son of a bitch sun god made me sick to my stomach. It was torture.

The sun peered through a gap in the clouds. Narrowing my eyes against the light, I stared up into the sky and raised my middle finger.

Back in town, I turned off the main street and passed down Bandits' Alley for the shortcut home. There weren't many people walking around because it was still bright out, but some of them were already soused, even vomiting on the fabrics displayed out front of a store. There were plenty of idiots in this town who couldn't stand to go a day without befouling something.

Holding my nose, I walked around the mess while two men came rushing up from behind with a stretcher. There was another man resting atop it. A cloth covered his face, and the carriers seemed more annoyed than anything. They were clearly on their way to dump some impoverished person in the Millennium of Midnight Sun, whether it was a body or just a dying man. His shirt was stained red around the chest, so he'd either been robbed or gotten into a fight.

As they passed by, one of the men stumbled a little. The shift in the stretcher's balance caused something to tumble out of it.

Almonds.

I turned around and saw that the man on the stretcher had his hand hanging

over the side. There were black spots on his wrist.

Once the stretcher was gone, I picked up an almond, dusted it off, and dropped it in my pocket so I could be on my way. That was the sort of city this was. He was one of the unlucky ones, simple as that. There was a dry *crunch* behind me as someone stepped on one of the almonds. That, too, was common here. You couldn't always pick up everything that fell to the wayside.

It was two nights later that I heard Lutwidge was leaving the party.

"Apparently, he was accosted by some ruffians while walking through the city. He managed to defeat them, but he pained his back significantly. Even magic hasn't been able to fix the wound. He'll return to stay with some family for a while to rest and recover," said Arwin with disappointment clear in her voice.

"I see. That's too bad," I said comfortingly while feeling relieved on the inside. He was going to protect our little secret after all. A shame that he had to leave the party, but it was a mess of his own making. "So what will you do about the dungeon?"

"He'll be supporting me from his relatives' home. I considered recruiting someone else from the area, but I'd prefer a trustworthy individual most of all."

Despite its collapse, the surviving soldiers of the Mactarode royal knighthood existed—scattered far and wide. Lutwidge was going to use those connections to find her a new member to replace him, apparently.

"Until they arrive, however, I will have to make do in the higher floors, to keep my instincts and skills fresh."

Given her impatience to conquer the dungeon as soon as possible, this had to be a terribly frustrating setback.

"It's just been one thing after another, hasn't it? Thieves breaking in, members leaving."

I had told her that the house was ransacked by burglars, rather than the truth.

"But don't feel down. Things are bound to even out," I said as cheerfully as I could. "The important thing is not to rush it. Pushing through a difficult stretch will only delay your goal further."

“That’s true.”

“Just sit tight and hold on. A first-rate chef will soon be serving you his best full-course meal.”

Tonight’s dinner was salad, fried cod, a light beef stew, and a chicken-and-bean soup. I was in the kitchen, tasting the contents of the pot on the stove, when I felt another sense of warmth. A sweet scent filled my nostrils, and I felt a pull on my sleeve.

I grimaced. “It’s nearly time for dinner.”

“I know that,” she said behind my back. Her voice sounded petulant and childish.

“You can’t wait?”

I could feel her shaking her head. The hand that wrapped around my waist trembled gently.

“Since knowing Lutwidge is leaving, I’ve been more anxious. And once I saw you again...”

“Very well, then.” I put out the flame beneath the pot and reached around Arwin’s shoulder to steady her. “It’s upstairs. I’ll go and get it.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“As you wish.”

Arwin and I climbed the stairs together.

What a demanding princess knight I serve.

It’s not easy being a kept man.

CHAPTER TWO

The Kept Man Stays Out Until Morning

Because I lived with the princess knight, the rest of the world seemed to think of me as some kind of dandy.

For that reason, perhaps, I was often asked for romantic advice. “How do I talk myself into her bed,” they asked, or, “What do I do about my man cheating on me?”

I assumed Vanessa’s request was one of these.

“Sterling’s been acting strange recently,” she said, looking mournful.

I was in the appraiser’s office, a separate guild building next to the general store. A stone wall crossed the center of the room, running left and right. There was a small door on the left side of it, but it was locked and could only be opened from the other side. The center of the wall was a counter, with a translucent glass window and a hatch that could be pulled downward to open a space for inserting items. Adventurers put the things they wanted appraised into the hatch, thus allowing the appraiser on the other side to access them.

Vanessa was the Adventurers Guild’s appraiser.

The guild purchased rare items and curios like plants, monster pelts, scales, and bones and sold them to craftsmen or nobles or collectors.

But not all such things brought to the guild were genuine. The ignorant would bring in chicken bones, insisting they came from a dragon. Those who were cleverer might dirty up an item a little bit to make it look more believable. Even if you didn’t intend to fool anyone, it was quite possible to mistake a wolfsbane splattered in dog piss for a legendary flower, if you didn’t know any better.

It was up to the appraisers to identify the items these eccentrics tried to sell

to the guild. You needed a great deal of knowledge in order to see through fake biological items purported to be from monsters, the keen sight to recognize real from fake, and lots of practical experience. I'd been to many guilds in my days as an adventurer, and the ones without a good appraiser were all doomed. In a sense, it was the most important job in any Adventurers Guild.

Vanessa was a top-tier professional. From what I'd heard, she was the daughter of an art merchant and had a very discerning eye from early childhood. By the time she was seventeen, the business had gone south, her family was scattered to the winds, and she'd found a job with the guild.

She was a particularly sharp cookie in a guild where most of the staffers were promoted adventurers, and fools at that. Her eyes were chestnut brown, and her reddish-brown hair was bundled up into a ponytail at neck level. Though she looked tired, her skin was clear. I didn't know how the rest of society saw her, but she was certainly beautiful enough in my eyes.

I'd met her when I came to the guild to beg Dez for money, and unlike the others, she actually treated me like a normal person. At the guild, only Dez, April, and Vanessa bothered to interact with me.

When I was bored, I used to watch her do her work from a distance, and it was impressive. She could be handed a great pile of herbs and pick out the only one that was worth anything. She was basically keeping the city's guild afloat. There were other appraisers there, too, but Vanessa was the only one who had her own dedicated office.

"When isn't Sterling acting strange?" I noted coldly, leaning back in the chair. "He's claiming you're a tentacle monster that crawled out of a purple sea again, right? He's sick, Vanessa. He's rotted either his brain or his eyes with booze. Maybe both. You should take him to a doctor."

"No, it's not like that. You don't understand," she protested. "He's just expressing his inner thoughts in an abstract form. That's an artistic method that was popularized in Taurimna two centuries ago. He's very learned, you know."

"He's a piece of shit, just like every other man you've ever been with."

Despite her beauty and talent, Vanessa had one very glaring flaw: She had absolutely no eye for men. It was devastating.

Two years had passed since I drifted into this town, and in that time, she'd gone from one man to another. All of them were either scum, losers, or wastrels.

Watkin loved drinking and bullying the weak, and when he got drunk enough, he would beat children. One day, he hit the son of a mobster, and then he vanished. Tiny got heavily into cockfights, stole money and jewelry from Vanessa's home to further his gambling habit, and was even trying to steal some guild-appraised items when they cut his arms off. Olaf was always cheating with several women at the same time, at least until he caught a disease and died. Oscar sold drugs until the moment he tried to embezzle the mob's stash, and then he vanished, too.

The man she was seeing now, Sterling, was an artist two years her junior. He was a delicate man, and handsome. But he didn't have an artistic bone in his body. Even I, an absolute amateur, could understand that he had zero skill for it. And if that wasn't bad enough, he was always finding weak excuses like a poor mood or a pain in his arms to avoid actually doing any painting.

Though I was the last person who should say this, she needed to be more choosy with her men.

Of course, it also took a woman like her to actually have drinks with me on the regular, and even lend me a little money now and then. She was my salvation. The sun god was less useful than paper to wipe my ass, but I would shave my head and worship her as a god if I had to. The princess knight was a very generous and nonjudgmental person and would eschew comment on my personal religious choices.

"Well, what's the problem, then? Keeping in mind that I can't really offer you any advice that doesn't involve nighttime activities."

I was busy serving the princess knight. If I was going to split my time between two people, it couldn't be for free. And I'd charge up front. For pretty women like Vanessa, I was willing to accept alternate forms of payment, but sadly, she'd paid cash every time. Apparently, Vanessa was out of my league. What a shame.

"When it comes to romance, I'm afraid there are only two pieces of advice I

can share: *Go for broke*, and *que será, será*.”

Vanessa sighed and pressed a hand to her temple. “It feels like Sterling’s too generous these days. He’s getting things that he can’t possibly buy with the allowance I give him.”

“Maybe he’s found himself a patron.”

“But he hasn’t sold a single painting.”

I was shocked to hear this. She could tell his slop apart enough to recognize individual paintings?

“And from what my neighbors are saying, a strange man’s been going in and out of the studio.”

“Oh, that kind of patron.” A sensitive, shapely man like him would have some buyers.

“No, not that, either,” she said, subtly annoyed. “I checked earlier, but there were no traces of any of that.”

I wasn’t going to ask her what exactly she had done to check.

“So basically, you think Sterling is making money in some way other than selling his body, and you want me to find out what it is.”

“Please, Matthew,” she said, folding her hands in prayer. “You’re the only one I can ask for this. I’m sure he won’t answer if I ask him, and you know Sterling a little already.”

“Okay, you got it.”

Vanessa did me favors on a nearly daily basis. Running an errand like this was a small way to repay her.

“So how much will you wipe from my debt?”

“For starters, I’ll wait until next month to collect,” she said without cracking a smile. I sighed and got to my feet.

“I guess I’ll go take a peek.”

“Not so fast,” she said just as I was about to leave her office. “Have you had any word from Polly?”

I stiffened up, then shook my head. “Not even a rumor, much less a letter.”

“I see.” Vanessa’s face fell. “I wonder where she is now. Even at the worst of times, she never held back on coming to visit her mother’s grave.”

“Even if she’s perfectly fine, it’s hard to come back at this point. No one will want anything to do with her anymore.”

The victims were no longer in the city, but even a year later, the stain on her reputation remained.

“Where could she be now? I can’t believe she’d just leave without saying anything to you.”

“She abandoned me,” I said, shrugging. “It was all my fault. I didn’t take Polly seriously enough back then.”



“She’s not a bad girl,” Vanessa said. “She’s just weak. She’s too timid and easily swayed by others.”

“Everyone’s like that. Even me and you.”

In the past, I thought I was special and unique. But I wasn’t. If I didn’t have my incredible strength, I would have been no different from the average unremarkable slob, if not even worse.

“What about you?” I asked. “Have you heard anything? You two were close.”

“Nothing,” she said, the plaintive expression on her face lending her a kind of mournful beauty. “These days, I find myself wondering if there wasn’t something I could have done to help her.”

“Don’t beat yourself up about it,” I said as reassuringly as I could. “Cruel as it is to say, that was all Polly’s fault. It’s all well and good to be nice, but you can’t take on more than you can handle.”

“That’s true.” Vanessa covered her mouth with her hand and sniffled. “If she comes back, don’t blame her...though I suppose I probably shouldn’t be saying anything to you about that.”

“Don’t worry about it. Her Highness is a very forgiving person. She’s not the sort to get bent out of shape over old flames.”

Sterling’s pad was on the south side of the city, in a place called Painted Lane. At the edge of a stretch where a bunch of insane self-proclaimed artists gathered regularly was a little pub called the Wildcat’s Sunset, where he rented a room upstairs. Vanessa paid his rent, of course.

The customers inside were already practically slumping over their cups, and I brought a relatively fine ale with me in the hope of loosening his tongue. Leaving the sounds of drunken rambling behind, I climbed the narrow steps outside, which were stained black and creaked ominously underfoot. There were three doors in the tight upstairs hallway, the second of which I knocked on.

There was no response. I opened the door, which gave way easily.

The ceiling rose to a point and had a small window close to where the roof

sides met in a way that gave it a true attic feel. The cramped interior was packed with canvases resting on easels. The paintings featured a wide variety of subjects, from landscapes and flower vases to bare-assed ladies, crowned kings facing to the right, apocalyptic demons, and so on. The only feature they shared was that all of them were incomplete.

“Hmm?”

I noticed my feet slipping when I got a little closer to the center of the room. There was a faint discoloration on the floor there. I crouched and touched it with my fingers. Feeling a sense of foreboding, I got down on all fours and breathed in deeply. There was no hiding it—though it had been wiped clean, this was a bloodstain.

How had he screwed up this time? I stood and looked around the room until I noticed something under the window, covered in a white cloth. It had been draped over the top, making it hard to see the outline of what was underneath, except that it was pointed like a tent. What object of this size would be hidden under it? Could it be a crouching person, perhaps?

Careful to ensure there were no feet poking out of the bottom first, I pinched the top and yanked the sheet away in one smooth move. The first thing I saw was rounded stones. There was a wooden box packed with stones and placed on top of a small chair under the cloth. It had scared me for nothing. I exhaled and picked up a stone or two, but they were just rocks. No jewels or anything worthwhile.

While I puzzled over what this display meant, I heard a noise behind me. When I turned to investigate, I saw that the resident of the room was sleeping on the floor.

Wrapped up in a blanket in the corner, behind the forest of easels and canvases, was Sterling, fast asleep. There was no bed in the room. He had probably sold it off for a bit of money. He seemed to be snoozing peacefully. He might look the part of a hardworking artist if he were also clutching a paintbrush; instead, the only thing between his fingers at the moment was a piece of women’s underwear. He’d been having quite a good time the day before, it seemed. Rather than working, he was using the money one woman

was giving him to have fun with another woman. He was truly living the life.

“Hey. Get up.” I prodded him in the back with my toe.

Sterling stirred under the blanket. “Again, darling? After all the times we made love yesterday?” he murmured in his sleep, looking up. Then he saw me and yawned. “Matthew? We didn’t have an agreement to go drinking today, did we?”

“I need to ask you some questions. Get up.” I prodded him again through the blanket with the toe of my boot. “Or do you need a wake-up kiss to get you going? I can give you one you’ll never forget.”

Sterling promptly popped upright.

“By the way, what’s the blood on the floor from? Was there bloodshed in here?”

He shook his head. “It’s ink. I made it from jumus blood.”

A jumus was a monster found wandering around the fifth level of the Millennium of Midnight Sun. Imagine a black-and-white speckled goat with six legs. Now put bat wings on its back, and instead of hooves, envision bear paws. It also runs as fast as a horse. And is hung like one, too.

A jumus’s bodily fluids turned viscous and sticky when exposed to air. Once dried, they clung to surfaces and refused to rub off. Because the jumus itself was not that dangerous as a monster, they tended to get used as a source of glue.

“I was just testing out some new paint materials. If it works, it should result in an incredibly deep and vivid red.”

“Same thing with the rocks over there?”

“Oh, those?” Sterling said, craning his neck to see through the canvases. “Some of my paints I make by crushing ores for color.”

“And here I thought you’d found some gemstones.” It would have made fulfilling Vanessa’s request much easier, that was certain.

“Don’t touch that stuff,” Sterling said, getting to his feet and grabbing the white cloth that had fallen to the floor. “They change color in the sunlight. I’m

shading them on purpose.”

“Sure, sure,” I said. “By the way, I hear you’re flush with money these days. You find some get-rich-quick scheme?”

He paused in the act of putting the cloth back over the stones. “I, uh...”

It couldn’t have been a more obvious tell. He put the cloth over the pile behind his back, eyes wandering conspicuously.

“Look, you’re a good guy,” I said, pretending to be the understanding and reasonable type. “You’re not used to hiding secrets. If you’re getting involved in dirty business, pull back now. Vanessa’s worried about you.”

“No, no. It’s not that,” he protested, wiping his palms on his trousers. “It’s nothing criminal. No one’s getting hurt. Although it may be slightly less than honorable...”

That was enough information to put an idea in my mind.

“Wait, are you a picker?”

All manner of things could be found in the dungeon. Weapons and items that people dropped or lost while on adventures, articles from dead adventurers, materials from the bodies of monsters that were defeated and left behind. To experienced adventurers, the monsters on the higher floors were worthless trash. They wouldn’t bother to skin beasts or cut off ears. They’d just leave the bodies and keep moving. With time, the dungeon would absorb the corpses, but you could dismantle the bodies and haul them back to the Adventurers Guild before that point.

This wasn’t illegal in and of itself. The guild was just happy to have the pelts and bones and whatnot and would not ask you where they came from.

But naturally, adventurers themselves did not appreciate it, seeing it as someone taking advantage of their hard work. So they called those scavenging folks pickers, comparing them to crows scattering seeds that had already been sown in the field.

Adventurers were a cantankerous lot by nature. When in a bad mood, they wouldn’t hesitate to break an arm or two—or drag you into the dungeon and

do gods-know-what. This was against the guild rules, of course, but pickers were all either failed adventurers or impoverished civilians. The guild wouldn't bother cracking down on their members as long as they didn't kill the pickers, and if a picker got killed in the dungeon without evidence, that was that. Most of the time, it got classified as an accident.

"You understand, Matthew," Sterling said, simpering. "I don't want to die yet. It's just a little extra money."

He looked like a child whose prank had been found out. He was trying to think of excuses, anything that would get him out of being punished.

"I only do it on the early floors, and I cover my face when I do it. I also ask other people to take the items out for me. Trust me, I have no intention of competing with adventurers over this. Plus—"

"I don't care about the picking," I said, disgusted. I wasn't going to sit around and listen to some daddy's boy make up excuses for me. "But that's not all there is to it. There's only so much you can make being a picker. Considering how much money you're spending lately, you'd have to be finding a crystal wolf pelt every single day."

"Have you forgotten what I do for a living?" said Sterling, rocking a canvas resting on a nearby easel like a baby in a cradle.

"I'd buy your story if you were some imperial painter," I said, glancing at a half-finished painting of a flower vase, "but Vanessa's keeping tabs on all your art. And she swore to me that you haven't sold a single piece yet."

"Sometimes I get commissions. People want portraits or signs for their bakeries and whatnot."

Such people were called eccentrics.

"It's easy to be you, Matthew. You get to live with that gorgeous princess knight. I'm so jealous. Oh, how I wish I had a piece of that action."

"Don't be an idiot." He had no idea the kind of stress I went through, living with Arwin. "Also, you already have Vanessa."

"But Vanessa barely gives me any allowance."

“Neither does my woman! It costs a lot of money to delve into the dungeon.”

Weapons and armor needed constant upkeep. If anything broke, it would have to be replaced. Food, medicines, and other consumable items had to be replenished. The survivors of Mactarode were stingy, apparently, and almost never donated funds to help her succeed.

“That reminds me, she hasn’t been wearing any jewelry lately, has she? No rings, no earrings, no expensive necklaces. Did she sell them all off?”

“You can’t go into the dungeon wearing crap like that. You’d only lose it all.”

“Fine. Probably dropped while fighting, huh? I’ll go and search for them.”

“Whatever you want,” I said casually. On the inside, I was already feeling like this was a waste of time.

Whether this kid was a painter, a picker, or a gigolo, I wasn’t going to sabotage his ability to make a living. This was enough to fulfill my obligation to Vanessa anyway.

“One last thing, though. Who’s your client?”

“What, so you can double-check? You don’t trust me.”

“Whoever they are, they’re crazy enough to use your art for advertisement,” I said. “So they’d also probably mix limestone into the flour. I just want to know which bakery to avoid.”

Sterling and I finished the ale I’d brought. By the time I left the place, the sunset was painting the town gold.

It would be best to follow up on the lead about the painting commissions and the picking job, but I could do that the next day. My report back to Vanessa would have to come later.

I was tipsy enough when I got home that it took me a moment to realize the door was unlocked. Was it another burglary? Hackles raised, I opened the door.

“Where were you?” demanded a stern voice. Her Beauteous Highness was waiting for me.

Apparently, little Ralphie had gotten hurt in the dungeon, forcing them to

leave early today. I changed, and we had dinner.

Sitting across the little table in the dining room from each other was a typically quiet but cozy affair. The light of the candles was weak but provided an ambience of its own. I hadn't had time to cook from scratch today, so it was just a selection of things I'd scrounged up outside.

"A picker," Arwin repeated, cutting through the roast duck with her fork. "I feel that I've seen their like recently." After swallowing a piece of meat, she shook her head. "There were people crawling around on the floor of the dungeon, dragging monster bodies into the darkness. I wondered why at the time. I guess this would answer it." She washed the grease down with a swig of wine. "The guild should simply outlaw picking."

"They couldn't, even if they wanted to," I said. "The majority of pickers are adventurers who can't fight anymore or the poor and their children. Outlawing their activities would mean cutting off their ability to make a living."

The final destination of any poor person without income was either starvation or crime. The notion of the honorable, dignified poor was a flight of fancy shared by the rich and foolish. The world was not all noble priests and saints.

"Wouldn't that mean this Sterling fellow is actually taking his earnings from the mouths of the poor, then?" Arwin asked, chewing furiously.

"Manners, please," I chided. I took out my handkerchief and dabbed at the sauce on the corner of her mouth. She batted my hand away, protesting that she wasn't a child. That gesture struck me as more childish than anything else about her.

"Which is why he's doing it in secret. He's actually fairly well-known around the guild."

Sterling was an unpopular figure among the adventurers and guild staffers, if not nearly as unpopular as me. A bungling painter who managed to land a beautiful and talented breadwinner was just asking to be punched.

"I gave him a warning. The rest is his problem to figure out. If the idiot gets himself in trouble, that's no concern of mine. He'll have earned it," I said.

Arwin froze as stiff as a statue. She was clutching her fork and knife, holding

back a tide of anger and regret.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.” I’d very nearly made a mistake again. “My apologies,” I said gravely.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said, smiling regally. “I am not so delicate that your jokes can wound me anymore.”

“You’ve grown very thick skin, Your Highness.”

“Thanks to my extremely uncouth mentor. I’ve learned to ignore the nonsense that adventurers say as well. It almost seems tame now.”

“I’m honored.”

I gave her a rather clownish bow. Arwin wanted to let bygones be bygones, and I was more than happy to play along.

Despite her chuckles, she looked rather pensive. “The day brought many challenges. Do you remember Andy?”

“Ah yes, that failed mercenary.”

He was twenty-three or four, if I recalled correctly. Thin, but he swung around an enormous greatsword he carried on his back. He had short red hair and a tanned complexion, with a rather charming smile. He had been on good terms with Arwin’s party, she told me.

“Andy’s dead.”

My breath caught in my throat.

“I could move on if it turned out that he died in the dungeon. But the whole thing was really quite awful. He was in a fight with the guards and got pushed and hit his head. By the time I rushed over to see to him, he was no longer breathing.”

The poor sap. It was truly a dog’s death, with no silver lining.

“Apparently, it was an argument over payment to a weaponsmith. In a sense, it was his fault. But there’s one thing that bothers me: the actual cause of the argument.”

“What’s that?”

“There was counterfeit money mixed in with Andy’s payment.” Her eyes flashed. “And it was the Adventurers Guild that prepared the money for him.”

The next morning, I went out into the city while Her Highness was still asleep. I was going to ask for an audience with the would-be imperial majesty who requested a portrait from Sterling, as well as the insane bakery that hired him for their sign.

To make a long story short, Sterling wasn’t lying. There really was a bakery that passed off dark green dogshit as fresh-baked bread. And there was an elderly man who used to run a general store who paid for a portrait. I even asked to see it, just in case. It was surprisingly not bad, as long as you overlooked the blotches of blue, purple, and gray that he used for the man’s skin.

I inquired vaguely about the price, and as I assumed, it was a pittance. It was hard to say if he was really earning anything at all, but I would leave it to Vanessa to dig into the details.

In order to get more backing for the picking claim and build a better report, I headed to the Adventurers Guild. The matter of the counterfeit money was something I wanted to discuss with Dez, too.

Almost my entire income was provided by Arwin. Her pay came from treasure and materials harvested from monsters in the dungeon, which were converted into cash at the Adventurers Guild. In other words, if fake money was a big problem at the guild, it would affect me, too. I couldn’t stand the thought of the allowance she was giving me being counterfeit. It would be tragic.

On the way there, I swore to myself that I was going to be firm and ensure that they didn’t give us any fake money. As it turned out, I didn’t need to bother.

There was a crowd gathering outside the guild building already. Inside, they rushed the counters, hurling insults and rage at the workers on duty.

Stories of the counterfeit coins had spread. It had probably all stemmed from the incident with Andy, and now many other people were getting paranoid that some of the guild’s payments to them were counterfeit, too. The guild staffers tried to reason with their visitors by shouting over them, but that had the

opposite effect. When idiots had blood rushing to their heads, dousing them with water would be more effective.

Where was Dez? He was supposed to be a bouncer for situations exactly like this. If he took those burly hands of his and counter-fit them around the nuts of a few of these idiots and gave them a squeeze, they'd all go running.

"Oh! Matthew," said April, who came rushing past me, looking pale. "It's an emergency! Everyone's picking on Dez. Go and help him—you're his friend, aren't you?"

"No, no, no. That can't be right," I said. There wasn't a monster in the entire world that could pick on Dez, much less a member of the guild.

"It's true. Look."

She pointed out a corner of the room, where a group of adventurers had surrounded someone to yell at. Fortunately, I was taller than the others, so just rising on my toes was enough to help me identify Dez at the center of the storm. He was sitting in a chair, crossing his arms and closing his eyes, with his usual sullen look on his face. His feet didn't reach the ground. His boots, which were tough but had no other redeeming qualities, did not budge the tiniest amount. They hung like dead snakes. It did, in fact, look like they were picking on him.

"It's been like that the whole time. So can you save him?"

"I think a word from you would be more effective," I said.

It would certainly ruffle fewer feathers. The granddaughter of the mighty guildmaster would be enough to snap them into line.

"But that's Grandpa's power, not mine."

She tried to act grown-up all the time, but when push came to shove, she was still a child.

"Is this really the time to be choosy? You want to save Dez, don't you?"

She ought to use whatever weapon she had to her advantage, whether it made her spoiled or not. Better that than to be prideful and regret the results.

"Okay, fine," she said, giving in. She folded her arms and marched right up to

the adventurers. “Hey, you! What do you think you’re doing to De—*mrphg?!?*”



Before she could finish the sentence, a guild staffer rushed up behind her and put a hand over her mouth, then dragged her back to the counter. Until the moment she vanished around the side, her eyes pleaded with me to help him. I thought she was being a worrywart. He didn't need my help anyway. Not a single person here could beat him in a straightforward fight.

"Are you listenin' to us?!"

Sitting across from Dez was a large adventurer. He was bald, with thick eyebrows and a large mouth. The red flush on his skin was because his paleness made the blood rushing to his face more apparent.

"We know it was you."

Apparently, they were accusing Dez of being involved in the guild's counterfeit money problem. Contrary to their brusque appearance, dwarves were known for being very good with their hands. They could make stunningly detailed accessories with one hand while using the other to fondle a titty.

There were few dwarves in Gray Neighbor. The only one found around the guild, including the adventurers themselves, was Dez. That made it easier to assume he was the source of the fake coins. Whether he was the mastermind of the scheme or someone else made him do it, the crowd had given voice to their suspicions.

Dez said nothing. He let the insults wash over him without reaction. In fact, he was hearing them out with utter stoicism. He could have just ignored the nonsense, but he was honestly and forthrightly listening.

"Say something, aardvark," the bald man spat, using a slur for dwarves. In some places, a word like that could lead to homicide. But Dez just sat there, saying nothing. Goddamn.

"Hi there, gents. What's the trouble about? Are you asking him for brothel recommendations?" I said brightly. The adventurers all turned to look. Their eyes were variously full of disgust, envy, or murder. You'd think at least one of them would look at me with respect or admiration for a change.

"I've heard the charges. Seems that Beardo over there's been handing out false coins he made. Very sordid stuff." I made my way through the crowd until

I was standing next to Dez, at which point I rested my elbow on his head. “You’re right about him. This little Beardo *is* indeed a dwarf. And the way he’s treated is piss-poor.”

Not only did he provide security, he carried cargo, cut the weeds, cleaned, laundered, polished shoes, and went into the dungeon to retrieve lost items and bodies. He was used and abused every day, for a paltry salary. It was the kind of situation that would make anyone angry.

“So you think he created some false coins to pull a prank on the guild. It’s a likely story, I’ll admit,” I said, nodding along. “But I’ll be honest with you. You’ve got it all wrong.”

“What?”

“Just think about it,” I said hastily as the bald man rounded on me furiously. “Do you think he’s got the brains for something like that, under all that beard? He’s a daft fool who can’t even count his own age. Yet he has more strength than any man. If he were to play a prank on you by making fake coins, wouldn’t it be much faster and more satisfying just to slug you in the gut?”

The adventurers looked up at the ceiling, murmuring. There was a fresh plank of wood nailed to the ceiling right above the counter, where Dez had shoved an adventurer’s head clean through the other day. A few people even moaned at the horror of the memory.

“Someone could’ve put him up to it.”

“How many times have you ever seen this grumpy, silent old codger actually conversing with someone? Aside from me, I mean. It’s going to stand out if he goes up to someone he’s not actually friends with.”

“Ah, I see what you’re sayin’.” The bald man grinned. “*You’re* the ringleader.”

Dez the dwarf was the only one at the guild who could make counterfeit money. I was the only human close to him. Therefore, I was the one who put Dez up to making the stuff. That was his logic. It was very simple and very stupid.

“If I wanted to have fake money made, I wouldn’t do it in such an obvious way.”

“Well, who else woulda done it, huh?” The man grunted, grabbing my shirt. “And I don’t take any sass from a soft playboy who sits around gettin’ money for stroking the princess knight’s ass.”

“Oh, are you jealous? You could have just said so,” I replied, mustering a note of pity. “Honestly, you’re not my type, but if you really insist, I can stroke yours, too.”

I reached around the man’s back. His ass was hard and flat, but I rubbed it as gently as I would a kitten’s head anyway and blew softly into his ear.

He flew into a rage and punched me. I soared until I hit the wall. Before I could get up, large feet were stomping and kicking me. The shots to my stomach and chest didn’t hurt much, but one got me in the nuts. I briefly saw heaven.

The bald man wasn’t the only one getting his kicks in. A number of other scumbags seized the opportunity to do the same. Just when I was starting to get worried, the shadows surrounding me vanished with a roar and screams.

I looked up to see Dez’s back looming like a wall. There was a table leg in his hand. Five adventurers, including the bald one, were tangled in a heap at the edge of the room. It seemed he had used the table to hurtle all of them at once. I crossed my legs to sit.

“You shouldn’t have bothered.”

“You’re stealing the words from my mouth,” Dez rumbled. “You always shove your nose where it ain’t wanted and don’t belong. You never ask my side of the story.”

“Maybe next time, you should write that out on a placard you can hang around your neck.” It was Dez’s fault for trying to pretend like he could do everything himself.

“What the hell’s going on here?” boomed a voice from outside. A large older man stomped through the doorway. It was the guildmaster himself, no doubt summoned by his granddaughter.

With a stern lecture to the idiots, the guildmaster managed to get the scene under control. He was nearly sixty now, but his rippling muscles and hawklike

gaze were just as intimidating as in his prime. In those days, he had earned seven stars as an adventurer. That honor continued to wield significant influence not just on the guild but the city around it—both legitimate society and the underworld. No cowardly adventurer would dare stand up to him.

He tossed me out and told me to get lost, so I slipped around the back toward Dez's place. Dez was standing at the table with his arms crossed. When he noticed me come in, he turned away.

"Sorry about that."

This was Dez's way of saying thank you. The high-and-mighty Beardo never deigned to actually say those words. Not that I was really expecting them or worthy of gratitude.

"You can make it up to me this way," I said, caressing his buttocks. He caught me in the pit of the stomach with his fist. It was the most painful blow I'd received that day.

"Speaking of which, you're a real pain in the ass. Always have been," I continued. There was no way Dez could make fake coins. What happened to him ensured that he couldn't.

"You're one to talk, Mardukas."

He was currently working as a bouncer under the title of guild staffer, but Dez, too, had been an adventurer in the past. He had slain many a vicious and dangerous monster in the legendary party the Million Blades, along with a handsome devil known as Mardukas. And he was cursed for it in that tower.

Dez had originally wanted to be a metalworker. He only did adventuring because of the opportunity to get rare ores and metals. He had no interest in fame and glory; it was just a means for him to be the greatest craftsman in the world.

The curse that fell upon Dez robbed him of his dexterity. He had been a master when blacksmithing and working with metal, yet the curse left him unable to do so much as fold a piece of paper. And unlike me, even standing in the sun didn't temporarily cure him.

His famed strength was still there, so he could have continued as a fine

adventurer. But with his dream a thing of the past, Dez had no more reason to go into the dungeons; he couldn't craft whatever material he found there. Now he was just a bearded handyman being overworked and underpaid. Yet he couldn't admit to others that he'd lost his touch, and he didn't want them to find out. It was the last bit of pride he clung to.

That was why I could never forgive the sun god for what happened. I'd rather die than kiss the ass of the son of a bitch who stole my friend's dream from him.

Like me, Dez did not talk about his time in the Million Blades. He still went by the same name, but Dez was a very common dwarven name, and humans couldn't tell dwarves apart anyway. He could play dumb and be fine.

With the jokes out of the way, I sat down across the table from him.

"So what do you want with me?"

"Same thing as the other idiots. The counterfeit money."

A furrow formed on Dez's brow.

"Of course, I know you don't have a damn thing to do with it," I added. "But I want to understand the situation. The guild's payments affect my bottom line, too."

"There's barely anything I can tell you."

From what Dez said, the guild had become aware of the false money just before the issue with Andy was reported.

It was our very own Vanessa who spotted it. Apparently, it was the weight of the coins being prepped for payment that tipped her off. Once put on a scale, their weight was different from standard gold coins. When split, it turned out they were a mixture of lead and copper that had simply been painted gold. An examination of the guild's gold coins turned up eight false gold coins. The silver and copper coins were all normal.

"I assume it was recent, and we have transactions with other vendors in gold coins all the time, so the guess is that they came here from another town. We don't know the actual source."

"I see."

As a countermeasure, the first step was to weigh everything. At every transaction, they would weigh the coins first to confirm their authenticity before handing them out. That should at least keep the counterfeits out of circulation. But it wouldn't stop the coins themselves from being created.

"For one thing, gold coins are made in molds at the country's mint. These idiots think each and every coin gets carved by hand."

"Can I see these fake coins?"

"Give me a minute."

Dez came back with two gold coins. One was a Rued coin, a gold coin shared across the western part of the continent, while the other had been split in two. The color on the inside of the split coin pieces was obviously duller than their faces. The whole coin was real, while the split coin was fake, Dez pointed out.

"It's easy to check, because the weight is different. Put it on a scale, and you'll know right away. They're made to look like the real thing, but to my eye, the work is shoddy. See there?"

He pointed out the portrait in the middle of the coin. It was the profile of a crown-wearing man with a mustache. That was the king from three generations ago, it was said, but I would have preferred they make the coins showing a goddess's tits or ass. All I wanted to do with this man's left cheek was punch it. If it were real gold, a kiss would work, too, though.

"The real one's got four whiskers, but this one only has three. The mold must have broken down when they were casting it. Disgraceful craftsmanship."

Dez was committed to calling out bad work, even when it was in service of bad deeds. I gave the fake coin close scrutiny. There was actually a bite mark in the surface. That would be Dez's work. You wouldn't catch me sticking these things in my mouth.

"When you make a mold, you have to reverse the letters and such, right?"

"Of course," he said, making a face like I shouldn't be asking the obvious.

"Now, don't take this personally," I prefaced, "but if you were to carve a mold for false coins, how would you do it?"

“A mirror,” Dez said. “Look at your work in a mirror to make sure it looks like the proper coin.”

“And what if you lose the coin in the middle of that, or have to give it back?”

“You’d go get another coin. Or use your memory, I suppose.”

“And if those weren’t an option?”

“Then...” Dez rolled his head around on his neck, thinking. “Maybe you shoulda just made a drawing of it first?”

The sun was already setting. This time, the door was locked. I knocked until a sleepy-eyed Sterling emerged. I pushed him back through the doorway into the room.

Ignoring his protests, I looked for the right painting. A number of canvases were covered, draped over with cloths. I started pulling them off until I found it.

A painting of a king facing to the right.

“What’s going on with you, Matthew?”

“You do carving, too, don’t you?”

“Um, yeah, a little,” Sterling said noncommittally. “But—”

“You’re not very good at it. Especially if you’re getting involved in minting counterfeit coins.”

Sterling’s shoulders jumped. That seemed to have shaken him awake.

“And don’t pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about. I’m onto you. It’s this painting,” I said, tapping the cheek of the king on the canvas. “He’s some king or other, and his face is on gold coins—facing left. In this painting, however, he’s facing right. Because when he gets turned into a mold, it needs to be mirrored to produce the desired image.”

He didn’t have any gold coins, however. If he did, they would soon transform into booze or companionship. If he had the patience to hold on to them, he wouldn’t be biding his time in this miserable flophouse. He would have finished at least one of his many halfway-done paintings.

“Wait, I’ve heard about these counterfeit coins, too. But you can’t treat me

like a criminal just because I did a painting.”

“That’s not all.”

I thrust the cracked false coin I got from Dez right into Sterling’s face. He studiously avoided looking right at it—his eyes went downward, upward, and at every angle but looking at the coin.

“This king would normally have four whiskers, but the fake only has three. You also drew only three whiskers in your painting. Boy, what a coincidence, huh?”

“Who cares if he has three or four whiskers anyway?”

“I would love to hear you say that inside the Adventurers Guild.”

I clapped a hand on Sterling’s shoulder.

“The guild is furious, because this incident has seriously damaged their credibility. They’re desperate to find whoever’s making these false coins. If those brutes and ruffians catch you, they’ll have found their next toilet rag.”

He made a hideous screech. At last, he seemed to understand the trouble he was in. His face was already as pale as a corpse.

“Now, you seem to be under a misconception, so I’ll clear that up. I’m not planning to sell you out or take you to the guards. I’m here to help.”

“Help?”

“I don’t actually believe you’re capable of putting together a scheme this sophisticated. Someone else planned it out for you, huh?”

A soft, weak-willed, and highly suggestible daddy’s boy was an easy target to manipulate. It probably started off as a few free drinks in some pub, until eventually he couldn’t back out anymore. I asked him as much, and it turned out to be the case.

“So who was it? What clown got you to help them make counterfeit coins?”

“White Monkeys, they said.”

I was stunned. That was a well-known underground crime group. There were tons of such groups around Gray Neighbor in various sizes, and blood ran in the

streets whenever they started fighting. Of course, they made sure the right palms were greased, between the landowners up above and the guards on the streets, so that as long as they kept their criminal activity reasonably out of sight, no one would go looking too closely for them.

The White Monkeys was one of the more prominent examples of these groups. They started off making their money from protection rackets, gambling, and smuggling, but the rumors these days were much worse. Newer groups were muscling in on their turf, and they were struggling to keep up. This was probably their last-ditch effort to get back ahead.

“Listen to me closely, Sterling. Your foot is right on the step leading up to the execution stand at this moment.”

Minting coins was the province of countries. Attempting to sabotage their profits and reputation meant attracting the wrath of the country itself. Anyone who got arrested for counterfeiting their money was going to lose his neck to the rope or the blade.

“Saying you were ordered or threatened to do it isn’t an excuse. The fact that you did it is all they need to know. The rich and mighty will use your severed head as a plaything.”

“Wh-what should I do?”

“I told you, I’m here to help,” I said, patting Sterling on the shoulder. I didn’t give a shit what happened to this loser, but I owed Vanessa. Depending on how I negotiated, I might earn a reprieve on my debt until next month.

“Aside from that painting, is there any proof you were involved in counterfeiting coins? Show me everything.” The first step would be to destroy evidence. “Also, who was it who brought up the plan to you?”

It was a dangerous plan to execute, so the fewer people who knew of it, the better. I suspected there were only a few who knew that Sterling had been hired to make the mold. Perhaps just one.

Frightened out of his wits, Sterling ran a finger down the side of his face. “He had a scar near his left eye. Looked about as old as you. He said his name was Terry.”

“Terry from Tiger Hand?”

I’d never actually talked to him, but I’d seen him around before. He was once a very talented adventurer, until he became an alcoholic and the guild kicked him out, effectively forcing him into retirement. I’d heard he had sunk into criminal affairs; so he was working with the White Monkeys now.

“He said he worked for the White Monkeys and was running their entire drug operation. He’s really, really scary.”

Terry was crazy enough that he’d gouge out the eye of a bartender for serving him slightly less ale in his cup than the next guy. If he found out Sterling was betraying him, he’d torture and kill him without a second thought.

“What do we do? They say he’s a very dangerous fighter.”

In Terry’s case, his deadliness in a fight was as true for people as for monsters. His specialty was hand-to-hand combat. His punches and kicks were lightning fast, and he had a history of defeating opponents who had a big size advantage. I would barely put a dent on him in my current state. But that didn’t mean I could expose my ass and run for it. I had a reason to fight.

“He’s very tenacious. You’ll have to go into hiding for a while,” I told Sterling.

Dez’s room at the guild would be a safe place for him. Terry wasn’t so insane that he would invade the Adventurers Guild. And even if he did, to a guy like Dez, Tiger Hand and a kitty’s paw were nothing more dangerous than back scratchers. In the meantime, I could rat him out far and wide.

“I’ll take you somewhere right now. Get ready to go.”

“Huh? Wait, I can’t just leave. I have an agreement to—”

“An agreement to get laid? If Terry finds you, it’ll be the last fun you ever have in your life.”

Some people are more trouble than they’re worth.

From there, things went rather smoothly. Dropping some rumors that the White Monkeys were behind the counterfeiting did the trick. Hotheaded adventurers rushed their hideout as a result. When the guards followed suit, it turned into a huge melee. At least one person died, but it was also the end of

the White Monkeys. Their boss tried to flee but was caught at the city gates and was hung upside-down outside their hideout the next morning.

The guards seized the molds, too. They believed the gang's own craftsman created them. Leaving a few of the failed molds around the back of the hideout added some extra believability to the story.

I didn't tell Arwin about any of this. If she found out, she would crucify Sterling herself. But I had a responsibility to tell Vanessa every last detail, as she was my client in the matter.

When I arrived at the guild to give my report, there was a crowd already there. About twenty people were standing in a circle in the courtyard, watching something. What was it? Being tall had its perks. I could just peer over the shoulders of the gawkers. At the center of the disturbance was a young woman with black hair. I'd forgotten her name, but I recognized her face. She was a staffer at the guild. She'd been an adventurer before but had to retire due to an injury or something. From what I heard, the guild had hired her on because she could read and write.

There was a sword in her hands, and she looked absolutely furious and agitated. Across from her were three guild men and Vanessa.

"Calm down, please. This is for your own good," she was saying to the black-haired woman. "It's not your fault. You're just sick."

"I can make my own decisions! What did I ever do to you?!" she shrieked; Vanessa's statements were not having the desired effect. The look in her eyes was unhinged.

"Contracting dungeon sickness isn't a sign of weakness. It can happen to anyone. But what you're taking isn't going to heal you. It's a demon that will eat away at your body and mind."

So her injury hadn't just been to her body. And now she was taking drugs to deal with it.

"Why do you care?! Just leave me alone!"

"Of course I care. I can't just ignore this," Vanessa said sternly. "If you get proper treatment, you can go back to your *normal* life. But at this rate, you're

going to destroy yourself.”

“Fuck you! They’ll throw me in prison one way or another! Stay back!” she yelled at the guild members who were trying to hold her down.

“Once your body is healed, you’ll be able to find a different way of life. I’ll help you with that. Okay?”

“Don’t tell me what to do! Out of my way! I’m leaving this town!” she cried madly. She tried to make a run for it, but the guild staffers cut her off. With her back to the building, she swung her sword wildly and occasionally bent down to hurl sand at them. She was like a wounded, desperate beast.

“Please, just hear me out... Hey, no! Don’t kill her!” Vanessa pleaded, trying to stop the adventurers who were drawing their swords in the hopes of getting on her good side.

It didn’t seem like this was going to settle down into any kind of positive resolution. Fortunately, a savior appeared from the back.

Dez stomped up to the black-haired woman without a word. Once he was close, she’d had enough and swung the sword at him. It was a surprisingly sharp swing, but it was child’s play to Dez. He swatted the flat of the blade away with his bare hand, got up close, and twisted her hand.

“Seize her!” Vanessa instructed. Dez bound the woman’s wrists with a rope. She kept screaming about not being touched, or that she was going to die, so they gagged her as well. Just like that, it was quiet again.

“Take care of her now,” said Vanessa. The woman’s former coworkers dragged her back into the building. The moment she was out of sight, Vanessa’s tears started. She stared sadly in the direction they had gone.

The other adventurers split up and went on their ways, savoring the show they’d just been given. Now that it was over, Dez, too, returned to where he’d come from. He totally ignored me, after I whistled and cheered for him and everything—the cold, callous Beardo. Only Vanessa and I were left.

“Oh, you’re here, Matthew,” she said, noticing me.

“Was that an addict?”

“Yes, sadly. She’d been acting strange for a little while. I thought I’d make sure and asked her about it, and she completely exploded on me. Oh dear...,” she said as she pinched the bridge of her nose, sounding exhausted. I’d seen Vanessa talking to that same woman rather pleasantly on multiple occasions. They must have been fairly close.

“Was it Release?”

“No, a different drug. She’s just started taking it, I think, so if I hadn’t done anything, she would’ve been truly lost. I wanted to cut her loose from it nice and early.”

They’d keep her in the guild’s prison underground until the drug wore off. What happened next depended on her, but she was certain to be expelled from the guild.

“Seems a bit out of proportion, don’t you think?” I asked. There had to be a better way to talk to her. Or at least one that wouldn’t involve her getting trussed up in front of a crowd. Someone could have been hurt.

“No, this is the right way to do it,” Vanessa said flatly. “While we sit around debating methods, the addiction just gets worse. Letting it drag on only causes more sadness in the end.”

“Speaking from personal experience?”

“Yes, exactly,” she agreed. “I’ve had enough sadness of that kind...”

She clutched the hem of her dress. There was fear, sadness, anger, and hatred, all in one expression on her face, smoldering and vivid.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Are you here about Sterling?” she asked, coming back to her senses with a smile. “You must’ve figured something out. Will you tell me more?”

It was such a sudden, awkward smile that I couldn’t bring myself to return it.

“I’m so sorry,” she said, head in her hands, when I was done telling the story in her office.

“It’s not your fault. It’s Sterling’s, for being stupid enough to play along with a crook for a couple of free drinks.”

“I can’t thank you enough. This is for you,” she said, and she handed me a small bag. She told me to open it, so I broke the seal.

It held a small sphere that could fit into my palm. The orb was translucent and faintly glowing.

“I got that ages ago. It’s a legitimate magic item. It’s called a temporary sun.”

Apparently, it was an item an adventurer had asked the guild to appraise, but its owner died while it was on the waiting list, and it had been guild property ever since. Because the adventurer had no relatives, and no one stepped forward to claim it, they allowed Vanessa to take it.

That was a delightful outcome for me. All I had to do was babysit a stupid boy, and I got a very special gift in return.

“So how do I use this thing?”

Vanessa put the orb on her palm, closed her eyes, and chanted, “Irradiation.”

The orb floated off of her hand. It continued until it was close to the ceiling, then stopped. It rotated slowly, giving off a stunningly bright light.

“It will remain over the head of the person who activates it, giving off light. And it will follow you automatically, wherever you go.”

“Oooh.”

Despite myself, I couldn’t help but be excited about it. The strength already felt like it was flooding back. What was going to happen? Was I finally going to be freed from this horrible curse?

The orb continued shining. Nothing else happened.

Silence settled in.

“So...what effect does it have?”

“As you can see, it casts light. If you leave it out in the sunlight during the day, it will shine just as bright as this at night.”

So it was basically a fancy candle. I was crestfallen, but at least it would save me some money on candles. Or maybe I should sell it. Something like this would fetch quite a good price.

As I deliberated, the sphere gradually lost its light and began to descend.

“I’ve tested it out, and if you leave it in the sun for half a day, the effect will last to a count of about three hundred,” Vanessa explained, allowing the temporary sun to drop back into her palm.

“That’s not very useful.”

“If it lasted much longer, I wouldn’t bother to give it to you.”

“That’s a good point.”

“And it doesn’t need magic to work, so you can use it to your heart’s content. Enjoy.”

“I gratefully accept your generous gift.”

It would still fetch an excellent price from a rich collector. I could shop it around if I needed money. Upon a closer examination, I could see something suspended within the translucent orb. It wasn’t letters. Some kind of symbol or insignia? It was too fuzzy to make out.

“About Sterling,” Vanessa said with concern. I looked away from the orb to face her. “When do you think he’ll be able to leave? I went to go see him a little while ago, and he seems so forlorn. I worry he’s going to be depressed, locked up inside all day long.”

“He’s just sulking that he hasn’t had anything to drink.”

“But I worry he might get sickly on account of this. I brought him some canvases, but he hasn’t painted a single painting.”

Sadly for Vanessa, he was already sick—in the head. And his lack of painting was nothing new.

“Sterling’s an idiot, Vanessa. He’s not even smart enough to get involved with drugs. Nothing you’re worried about is going to happen to him.”

Vanessa’s father, an art merchant, lost a fortune when a fellow merchant took advantage of him. The knowledge that his own stupidity had destroyed his business sent him into a spiral, and he turned to drugs. It took no time at all for the entire family to splinter apart, from the way she told the story.

“Maybe you’re right,” she said, smiling weakly. “Father had seemed strangely happy, despite the business failing. He would stock a huge number of cheap plates one day, then smash them all the next. It was that sort of thing, over and over. By the time I realized what was happening, it was already too late.”

They tried to isolate him in the storehouse, but her father’s resistance was tremendous. When the drugs wore off, the withdrawal caused him to rage. He was so violent that he fractured the bones of his own wife and daughter. He had wild hallucinations and even broke the glass windows because he saw a plethora of eyeballs outside. Then he would return to seeming normalcy, only to cry all day long. When that was over, he would sit in a catatonic state instead, not responding to any stimuli.

They sold the mansion and handed the business over to someone else. Her mother fell ill and passed away. Her father got outside and ended up accosting some underworld figures in search of drugs. They made quick work of him. Vanessa had no money back then to give him a funeral, so his body was dumped in the dungeon.

“He was such a calm and kindhearted man, but it turned him into someone else entirely. It was frightening.”

It was why Vanessa was both gentle and strict with addicts. She forced them away from the drugs, as she’d done earlier, and worked to teach the hapless how to tell the difference between drugs and medicine.

“And yet you’ve had relationships with dealers before.”

“Ah yes... Oscar.” Her expression darkened. “He told me he was an herbologist. I didn’t realize the truth until after we were together. I told him to change his ways so many times, but he never listened. By the end, he was pushing them on *me*, too. I distanced myself right away. It was a relief when he disappeared.”

She slumped over the table and traced the wood grain with her finger.

“It was the right choice.” If she’d stuck around with that scumbag, he would have destroyed her life, too.

“But he was so handsome. So dark and mysterious. The sound of his voice and

the way he talked gave me shivers.”

“You never learn.” I chuckled. “Just be careful. I heard a rumor that they’re still looking for that guy. If you still have anything he gave you for you to hold, I’d get rid of it now. I can handle the rest for you.”

“Are you going on about that again? I told you I don’t have anything.” She laughed. “If he tries to come back, I’ll kick him right out. Besides, I’m entirely dedicated to Sterling right now.”

“I know that.” She had terrible taste in men, but she was not the cheating type. “Well, I should get going. Once things settle down, you’ll be able to go out in the open with Sterling, hand in hand. Just hang on a little while longer.”

With that, I left the office. Once outside the door, I heaved a sigh. Another dead end. Where the hell had he *hidden* it? It had nearly been a year already. This was so irritating.

“Oh! Matthew.”

I was just leaving the guild, thinking about getting a pint somewhere to blow off steam, when I ran into April. She was sitting outside the guild entrance, looking bored.

“What are you doing out here? You’re going to catch a cold.”

“No I won’t,” she said in a huff. Once again, she couldn’t help but be contrarian.

I crouched down across from her. “Waiting around here isn’t going to make your letter come any faster.”

“Oh, shut up,” she said, confirming my guess. April’s lips twisted into a grimace. Whoever was making this sweet young thing wait like this was a real jerk.

“...They said they’d send a response right away. But it’s been a month already.”

“Why don’t you ask your granddad for help?”

There were Adventurers Guilds all over, and they had very strong ties to one another. As long as she knew where this person was, it would be easy to call on

some connections to find the answer she wanted. And a doting grandfather would be sure to approve the request.

“Grandpa’s kind of busy lately. A scroll got stolen from the guild.”

“Well, that’s bad news.”

Scrolls were very useful items that could temporarily contain magic and monsters, until the moment you used them to unleash fire or lightning, or heal wounds, or bring out monsters to fight for you. As long as you knew the activation words, anyone could use a scroll. For this reason, they were handled very carefully in the guild. One could burn down an entire town with the potential power they held.

“What kind of scroll?”

“I don’t know. I think they said it was a monster or something, but nobody would tell me. And it doesn’t matter anyway.”

Her animated mannerisms turned almost comically into a knee-hugging malaise.

“They said they’d write back...”

“Look, don’t rush things,” I said, placing a hand on her shoulder. “He was thinking about what to write, and the days caught up with him, most likely. What’s most important is your good health. When you get that precious letter, do you want to be reading it in bed with a fever and a runny nose dripping all over the paper?”

I handed her a pale yellow piece of candy.

“That one’s got ginger inside. It’ll warm you up. Pop it in your mouth and go on back home.”

“Oh, shut up,” she said again, but this time her tone was much brighter. That was a good sign.

“Tell you what, squirt. When that letter comes in, let me read it, too.”

“Don’t call me squirt!” she roared, getting to her feet.

“Listen, I’ve got to go. Hurry on home, now.”

“Matthew,” she said, after I had taken a few steps away. I stopped and turned. “Thank you.”

“Don’t worry about it. Same to you.”

My mood had brightened as well. I waved to April and headed home. No drinks this time. I had to figure out what to do about dinner.

“The issue with the counterfeit coins has been solved. It was the work of a criminal group called the White Monkeys,” Arwin reported the following evening when she returned home. Of course, I knew the story in its entirety, but I pretended to be surprised.

After dinner, we stayed at the table to share drinks.

“Whatever happened with that painter, by the way?” Arwin asked, tilting back her glass of wine.

“Oh, nothing big.”

I explained that Sterling had another woman he was bumming money from. It wasn’t a lie; he was in fact cheating on Vanessa and had been getting a bit of cash from his other woman, too, if not as much as from the counterfeiting scheme.

“So she’s going to make him break things off with the other woman and stop being a picker in the dungeon, too. She’s going to offer him full support to make a living solely off his art.”

Of course, her *support* wasn’t just monetary. She was also going to rage, threaten, discipline, and spank his butt until he was painting regularly. It was exactly what a spoiled, pampered boy like him needed.

“It’s such a strange thing that a levelheaded woman like her would fall in love with a man like that.”

“It’s just her hobby, at this point,” I said. She had a natural instinct to nurture and support a worthless man when she saw one. “But regardless of what anyone else thinks, as long as the two of them are happy, what does anything else matter? It’s none of our business.”

“In that case,” she said, placing her glass on the table, “how do you and I look

to others?”

“.....”

To strangers, Arwin and I were a woman and her boy toy. It was a sinful, inappropriate, depraved relationship, unbecoming of someone of high birth. But in our case, it was a bit more complicated than that. Servant and master, pet and owner, teacher and student, doctor and patient, devil and contract signer. All of these were accurate in some way, but none matched us. If I had to give us a label, it would be *accomplices*.

When I did not reply, Arwin rested her cheek on the table. I briefly thought she was passing out, but it was only her first glass of wine. And she held her drink well.

I tried to glance at her face, but her bangs hid her eyes.

“This is poor manners.” I reached out to brush her red hair away. Her eyes were wet with frustration.

“I don’t care. I’m a scandalous woman anyway,” she grumbled. Suddenly, I realized what the issue was. I went to the trash can in the corner of the room and pulled out a letter. It was in an unfamiliar but decadent envelope. There was even a wax seal. I already knew what it contained, so I balled it up and threw it away.

“Why read it at all, if you knew it would upset you?” The contents were obvious.

The royals and nobles of the late Mactarode Kingdom were scattered all across the continent now, hiding in obscurity. To them, Arwin was their hope for the kingdom’s restoration and their means of regaining power. But not only had she been toiling away in the dungeon for a year with nothing to show for it, she was living with a very unsavory man. Obviously, he was just a crude wretch drawn to her beauty and wealth. So now and then, she got these letters of complaint from people demanding to know why she had fallen into sin or forgotten her noble calling. These people had no lives.

“They want me to break it off with you.”

“Forget them.”

These people were not traveling all the way to Gray Neighbor to convince her in person. They just waited around and wrote another letter every time we'd forgotten about them. Spending any mental energy at all thinking about those deadbeats who sat around making demands was a waste of time. When Arwin was at her weakest, they did nothing to help her.



“They just want to blow off steam by blaming you for their misfortunes. There’s no reason to pay them any mind.”

“You’re a womanizing rat, they say. A miserable stain of a man,” she murmured under her breath, then glanced at me. “I agree with them.”

“I’m calling for my lawyer.” I was going to demand reparations.

“But I need you now. Without you, I would have drowned and sunk to the bottom of the sea. You’re my lifeline.”

“.....”

“Matthew.”

Arwin reached out her hand; her head was still resting on the table. It was like she was hanging off a cliff. I went around to the other side of the table and took her hand.

“Don’t worry, Arwin.”

Everyone had periods of anguish and uncertainty. I couldn’t be there in the dungeon to help her fight. I would only get in the way and end up dead. Which was why I wanted to be here now, to support her when I could.

“As long as you need me, I’ll never let go.” I squeezed her hand. “I told you. I’m your kept man.”

Her lips moved. She called my name silently. The frailty of it—the delicate pathos filled my heart with tenderness.

“So you see”—I grinned—“I had this crazy idea that it would be a good idea to increase my allowance a bit.”

Arwin broke into an enormous smile and pinched the back of my hand.

About a week later, all the remaining White Monkeys had either fled or been caught, so Vanessa and I went to get Sterling.

“You took too long, Matthew,” he blubbered as soon as I walked in the door. Apparently, he had not enjoyed his time with Dez. “Hasn’t it been long enough? Let’s go get a drink.”

“Already?”

“What’s the harm?” He clung to my arm like a lover begging me to buy him a piece of clothing.

“Please, Matthew,” Vanessa joined in. “He’s been trapped in here all this time. He’s going to put down roots in here at this rate. He needs a change of scenery.”

She seemed a little too forgiving, in my opinion. Not that I minded. In the end, I accepted her request to babysit Sterling for a bit. She gave me the money to pay for him, so at that point, I was obligated to accept.

“C’mon! Lesh go to anotha’ pub!”

Sterling was already hammered after the first place we stopped. He doused himself in cheap booze until he was stumbling on his feet and had to hold on to me for support. People were going to think we were boyfriends.

“Can’t you walk on your own?”

In the past, I would have barely batted an eye at the thought of dragging a scrawny fellow like him behind me. But now that I was weak myself, it was an almost impossible task.

“Where are we going nowww? Tell me,” he slurred happily. He had clearly been dying to have a drink for the past week.

“Don’t worry. We’re going to see an old friend.”

“Oooh...I wonder where that ish.”

We passed through the nightlife area and into the center of the city.

“Here we are,” I proclaimed.

Sterling stood dumbfounded, staring at the building before him.

“Thish ish...the Ad-Adven...chuners Guild.”

“That’s right,” I said, circling around him to open the door and introduce his old friend. “Yo, Dez.”

I’d already confirmed with his wife that he would be staying the night at the guild. He must have been asleep already. I shoved Sterling into the arms of the exceedingly grumpy Beardo. “Sorry, you mind looking after the kid for one more

night?”

“This ain’t a hostel.”

“I know. That’s why I brought him here.”

Arwin was tired from fighting, and this was my problem to solve to begin with. But in that sense, imposing on Dez a bit wasn’t an issue at all. I’d cleared him of the suspicion of counterfeiting coins, after all, and we were old friends.

“Please. Just the one night,” I said.

Dez clicked his tongue. “Throw in a whiskey.”

“That’s my Dez. Love you.”

“Get outta here before I rip out your tongue.”

“Sure thing.” If I waited around too long, he’d actually do it.

“Wait, Matthew. Where are you going?” wailed Sterling.

“I’m done babysitting. You get to keep drinking on your own from here.”

“No! Don’t leave me here,” pleaded Sterling tearfully, a pathetic sight all tangled up in a jungle of rough dwarven beard. But then the wicked beard king emerged from that jungle to grab Sterling around the neck and literally hurl him into the room.

I quietly shut the door on the tremendous din going on inside. It was too late for this.

Children should be sleeping at this hour anyway. The White Monkeys involved in counterfeiting had mostly been caught, but there was one violent one left. And naughty children walking around late at night would make themselves a juicy target for the big, scary tiger.

I exited the guild grounds.

It was well after midnight now, and it wouldn’t be long until the sky started to brighten again. The city was still fast asleep. Very few businesses were open. The only people who wanted to drink until dawn were adventurers, those who needed to forget, and the alcoholics whose brains were pickled already. My footsteps were dry and crisp on the silent streets.

I was just turning a corner, wondering where to spend time next, when I heard quick footsteps behind me. Instinctively, I dived into the street. A split-second later, I felt a shape burst past me, and I heard rock crumbling. Just above my head, there was a hole in the wall.

“A little hasty, don’t you think?” I called out as a sturdy-looking man pulled his fist out of the wall and clicked his tongue with annoyance. There was a deep blade scar along his left eye.

“Nah. Now’s the time. I’m gonna kill you *and* that kid.”

Terry from Tiger Hand shook out his arm and approached intently.

“You’ve got it all wrong,” I said. So he had been onto me after all. Scrambling away, I sneaked my hand behind my back. “Your scene isn’t up yet. You’re supposed to wait backstage for another hundred years or so.”

I whipped out some of the broken stone pieces and threw them at him. Terry easily dodged them, but I was already turning to flee. I rounded the corner and sped as fast as I could, but I still felt a snakelike presence in pursuit. There was a pile of garbage in the way that I kicked over, then a drunk sleeping in the street who I knocked over. But I wasn’t increasing my lead; if anything, he was gaining on me. After a series of awkward, twisting turns, I fled into a church.

No one would see me here. I pulled the temporary sun out of my pocket. This thing stored pure sunlight inside it. So while it was shining on me, I could theoretically use my original strength, even at night. This was my first time using it for real. It would be a good test case.

Just as I was going to say the word, I heard the wind whipping nearby. I tried to dodge but failed. The thrown knife *clanged*, a silver glint that vanished into the corner, while the temporary sun rolled away into the pitch-black chapel.

In front of the church, Terry grinned with satisfaction.

“You’ve really done it now, boy,” he said menacingly. Just as I was going to pound him to a pulp, too. I’d have to make a change of plans.

Instead, I tore through the chapel and into a small door to the back, where I started up the stairs to the belfry. I skipped every other step going up the cramped spiral, but it was still slow. With all the twisting and coiling, I felt like I

was becoming a turd in some giant's guts. My lungs and legs were getting heavy.

The wind sliced again. I narrowly avoided a knife coming sidelong at me. The blade hit a stone step and bounced, then slid down the staircase. Just below me, I heard a grunt of anger. That was a close one. And because I'd had to dodge, he'd slipped even closer.

Almost there. Soon, an old wooden door appeared at the top of the stairs. Finally!

I didn't even bother to slow down. I put all my weight into a body blow against the door. Thankfully, even in my current state, I could break it open.

I stumbled into the next room, a little square chamber. There were windows to the east and west, with slats that let in just enough light to see by. There was one lonely little bell the size of my head hanging from the ceiling.

There had been a much larger one before, but some heretic had made off with it a while back.

Terry came into the room just as I was getting to my feet. He cracked his knuckles, and his eyes roamed the chamber.

"Church is a real grim place to choose to die."

"If you say so." I got to my feet, brushing off my rear end. "A nice soft canopy bed with some pillows would really round it out. Could you buy some for me? Preferably on delivery."

"The only bed your body needs is a coffin." He turned sideways, thrusting his fists forward. "But the only folks in this town who get coffins are the rich, ain't that right?"

"How sad."

When the poor die, they get dumped into the darkness of the dungeon. No graves for them.

"It'll be the same for you."

Terry closed the gap in a flash. He slid forward and threw a punch with the same fist that put a hole in a stone wall. All I could do was spot a curve of light

before a shock battered my left side. My breath caught in my throat, and I backed away with a grunt. There was no time to rest, as Terry came after me with a wicked grin. The left flank again. I lowered my elbow, trying to block, but his demonic fist curved like a whip, changing angles to pound me right in the gut. I doubled over in agony, and in a flash, the shadow came toward my left cheek. By the time I realized it was a kick, I was already slammed by the impact, the other side of my face smacking against the wall. It hurt a little. I'd have been happy to just conk out and sleep until morning, but he wouldn't let me. The shadow was upon me again. Faster than my mind could think, I was somersaulting out of the way. Stone pieces hit my back right after a powerful *crack* near my head.

"You're damn tough," Terry murmured. Even in the dark of night, I could see the look of consternation on his face. "I've killed my share of men, but it doesn't feel like I'm hittin' a man at all. It ain't a question of training. It's like punchin' a minotaur."

"You know, it's funny that you cover up for your lack of discipline by calling *me* a monster. You need to go train in the mountains for a few years, pal," I said.

"I'll consider it—after I've killed you."

He exhaled and launched himself, executing a very forceful roundhouse kick. I raised my arms and felt a bone-rattling shock. My back struck the wall. But that wasn't the end of it; Terry twisted in midair and sent another spinning kick at my forehead.

I slid down the wall, like a rag wiping off a piss stain. It left me on all fours, but there was no time to catch my breath before Terry's boot hit the back of my head.

"You still in the mood for tellin' jokes, wisecracker?"

"Hey, Boss," I called out pathetically, kissing the stone floor. "I wasn't sure if I should tell you or not, but I gotta be honest. You stepped in some cat poop. How can I tell it's cat and not dog poop? The smell's different. Cat shit smells way worse."

The boot pressed down harder.

“Are those your last words?”

“Are those *yours*?”

“What?”

“You think I ran up here trying to escape, right? Wrong. I’ve got you cornered.”

I reached out and opened the window.

A ray of brilliant light instantly filled the small room. The freshly risen sun had just crossed the horizon in the east. Terry lifted an arm to shade his eyes, backing away. I stood, wiped off my face, and let the sun shine upon my back.

“If you’re too poor for a gravestone, you don’t get an epitaph, so I’ll have it written on your ass instead. *Here lies a man who stepped in cat poop.*”

“Shut up, you worthless fool!”

Terry tried to circle around outside of the light to hit me. He launched himself off the ground and threw a punch that collided with my fist. He screamed and stared at his bloodied hand in disbelief.

“What’s wrong? Get a hangnail? Or maybe you’ve been clipping them too short.”

“What was that impact? This can’t happen...to me...”

Once in the sunlight, I regained my original strength. No ordinary fist, even one that had been well trained, could stand up to me.

“You shouldn’t blame your own lack of strength on others.”

“Shit!”

He attempted another roundhouse kick. I grabbed his ankle and squeezed. There was a horrible screech. I let go, and Terry fell to the floor, clutching his shattered ankle, which was now half as thick as before.

“Uh-oh. Now it’s a sprain?”

“You...rat...”

He swung a warning kick with his other leg before I could get any closer. But

being seated, he couldn't get any power behind it. My foot and shin felt nothing.

"Are you done?"

I stepped on Terry's good foot. His leg and the floor both shattered. He screamed again. His eyes were full of tears, like a toddler who'd scraped his knee.

"A-all right, I promise, I won't mess with him anymore. You have my word. I'll leave this town. Just don't—"

"I have one question." I crouched in front of Terry. "Is it true you manage the drugs?"

"Y-yeah. I do," he said, eyes sparkling. "We've been running low, so the price is climbing. You can have them. Please, just—"

"Release, too?"

"Yeah, I got Release. Haven't found any of it lately, but if I say the word, I can get some brought in right away..."

"I see." I raised my fist.

"No—!"

He crossed his arms in front of his face. But his desperate resistance was wasted. My fists were built too strong. It made a sandwich out of the wall, Terry's head, and his arms. He collapsed lifelessly, arm bones embedded into his face. Just to be sure, I checked that he was indeed dead.

"Another body to get rid of."

The thought of yet another payment to the Gravedigger made my head hurt.

Down on the street, people were already active. It was too early in the morning to be up and about like this. The sun was blinding. I spent most days pining for the sun, but now that it was here, I loathed it. I went into a side alley, hunching my back, and found that the night was still clinging to the walls here.

Was Arwin still mad? It would probably be a good idea to come up with an excuse for why I was coming home in the morning. Just then, a metal rod came

swinging down at me: a mace. My eyes swam. I didn't realize someone had hit me until I was already on the ground.

Did he have friends around? Uh-oh. I needed to get back into the sun. I had been careless.

Cradling my head, I opened my eyes a crack and saw a familiar woman straddling me. She had short-cropped hair, tanned skin, and freckles. It was different from how she'd looked a year ago, but I couldn't have mistaken her. The look in her eyes was both loving and hateful.

"I've been dying to see you, Matthew."

Polly grinned and swung the mace once more.

CHAPTER THREE

A Year Ago

“I’ve been living with you for nearly a year now.” I sighed, feeling the paltry weight of the silver coins on my palm. “I didn’t realize you took me for a five-year-old boy... I mean, is this really it?”

There were just three small silver pieces in my hand.

“Is that not enough?”

Polly looked away sadly. Her hazel-brown eyes glistened with tears. She was fighting back against her rising emotions by using her fingers to comb restlessly through her flat black hair, which had lost its luster. There were black-and-blue marks on the back of her hand and fingers, a gift from the customer who had struck her with his sword sheath.

“It’s fine. It’ll do.”

They were Iris silvers, colloquially known as smallsilvers. Each one would last for no more than a mug of ale and a bite of something to eat. Maybe if I were an ascetic monk, it would be enough.

“But a man has his obligations. I have an agreement to share drinks tonight.”

“So why don’t you go?” Polly asked, wondering why I would say something so obvious.

“You know how it is. It’s not *healthy* for everyone to get just a single drink and then call it a night.”

“So it’s not enough,” she said, tottering on unsteady feet. “I’m sorry. I just don’t make very much. It’s fine. I’ll tell the master. I’ll get twice the johns.”

She buried her face in her hands and wept. Once Polly got started, she

couldn't stop.

"I'm sorry. This is my fault," I said.

"No, it's all me. It always is. I'm sorry I'm bad at everything and get hit by the johns. It's because I'm worthless and an idiot."

"It's not your fault."

"Then whose fault is it?"

"Mine."

I had hoped to avoid saying that, but there it was. My lack of willpower disgusted me.

"It's my fault."

There was a banging on the door. The only ones who lived upstairs aside from me and Polly were the rats.

"Hey! Polly! How long are you gonna flirt in there? It's about time for you to get to work."

That was a servant at the brothel. The tubby bastard had no inside voice. Didn't he know this constituted a noise violation?

"See? You had to be stubborn about this, and now they've had to come get me."

"You're right. There's no time," I said, making up my mind. "So it's settled. I'll stay in tonight. Once I've had my drink, I'll be right back."

After seeing Polly off, I collapsed onto the bed with exhaustion. It had the audacity to creak.

It seemed to me that my entire life had been captive to the whims of others. I was born the fifth of eight children in a farming family, then sold into slavery at eight years old in order to reduce the number of mouths to feed. I was used and abused, and when I finally escaped, I found my way into a gang of bandits, where my slavery continued under a different name. After escaping again, I wandered the land until I finally found a home with some mercenaries.

It was there that I learned how to fight. I went off to war. And yes, I killed a

fair few people, too.

At eighteen, I accepted an invitation from a fellow mercenary to become an adventurer.

While I was fighting monsters with axes and spears, more companions joined up. I became famous and had money. Even lots of attention from women. Everything was going great; at last, luck was turning my way after all the nonsense I'd had to put up with. But I had forgotten that while you can always rise in the world, you can also fall.

Then that stinking dingleberry of a sun god stole my strength, and I couldn't even work, much less be an adventurer. It had been a year since I washed up in this town, and I was living as the gigolo of an emotionally unstable whore.

If I at least had money, things might have turned out for the better, but I had used it all. And it got me here, lying on a musty bed that was falling apart.

I supposed I'd earned this. But I didn't want to sit around and complain that if I'd just died in combat with monsters, I wouldn't have had to suffer such indignity. It was in my nature that if I was still alive, I was going to see it through. Suicide wasn't my style. If I was going to do that, I'd have bitten off my old woman's nipple the day I was born and forced her to kill me.

"Hmph. Que será, será."

You never knew which way life would take you. Maybe tomorrow morning, the sun god would trip over his own ass hair and crack his skull open, just like that.

A familiar face came into view as I passed the orphanage. One child a head taller than the others was chasing a shirtless boy around.

"Hey, squirt."

"Oh, it's you, Matthew," said April, giving me an exquisitely displeased look. "Don't talk to me. I have to get him dressed. Hey! Get back here. You're going to catch a cold!"

She resumed the game of tag. While she looked just like any other fetching young girl, no one in this town was stupid enough to try any funny business

with her. The Adventurers Guild kept all the ruffians in line, and she was the guildmaster's granddaughter. Anyone foolish enough to harm a hair on her head would be moving to the underworld before the day was half over. Despite being so young and tiny, she visited the orphanage to help, and she sometimes popped her head into the guild to pretend she was one of the staffers.

"Aren't you usually supposed to treat your elders with respect? And I'm *very* elder."

"'Matthew's a piece of crap, so don't associate with him.' That's what Gramp—I mean, what Grandfather told me."

What the hell was that old fart telling his granddaughter?

"And so did Dez."

I oughtta step on that little Beardo.

"Speaking of which, Dez told me you were teaching the kids here," I said. "Would you be able to give me lessons someday, too?"

"Even though you're a grown-up?"

"I'm not that good at writing. My own name's the best I can do."

"*Absolutely* not," she said with more emphasis than was nice or necessary. "Now go on and get out of here, before I yell for someone to come."

"Fine, fine." It had been a nice diversion for a minute. I was no longer in the funk I'd been suffering from when leaving the house. "Make sure you're back home before the sun goes down. It gets dangerous out. I've heard about kidnappers."

April snorted and ran toward the building without another word.

That was enough of dealing with children. It was grown-up time now.

"Are you leaving already?"

Sterling grabbed my arm and pulled, red-faced. He knew what it meant when I stood up.

"I sure am."

"No, you can't. Let's keep drinking, Matthew. You've barely had anything."

He put an arm around my neck, as though I were his lover. I tried to push it away, but I couldn't. Even this soft, scrawny, spoiled boy was stronger than I was.

"Hey, knock it—"

Sterling's arm left my shoulders. He traveled backward, slammed into the wall of the pub, then slumped down to the floor, where he began to snore.

"I hate drunks."

"You saved me. Thank you, helpful child." I caressed the hairy head that went along with the hairy beard. Dez slammed his fist into my stomach, knocking me to the ground.

"I hate overly familiar people, too."

Here was a guy who couldn't take a joke. I sat up, rubbing my stomach. "You're late. Was there trouble?"

I was supposed to be sharing drinks with Dez tonight, but because Sterling had latched on to me, I was already broke as a joke.

"Two idiots causing trouble at the guild."

"That should be easy for you to handle."

There was no one in this city who could beat Dez, at the very least. He'd win faster than he could reach up and caress his beard.

"Drunks are nothing. These ones were nastier. It got ugly."

"Gangsters?"

Dez shook his head. "Aegis."

That was a fast-rising adventurer party with seven...no, six members. The leader was Arwin Mabel Primrose Mactarode, a princess from the lost kingdom of Mactarode, which had been destroyed by monsters. She was an expert swordswoman who challenged the Millennium of Midnight Sun dungeon in the hopes of rebuilding her kingdom. For her strength and beauty, she was known as the Crimson Princess Knight, and the bards were already singing odes to her—about how she first defeated a knight in combat at age seven and now fought

monsters to save the innocent people of the realm, and so on. Thanks to those susceptible to fads, anytime you were in a pub, you'd end up hearing the songs about her more than once. With the amount of time I spent drinking, I was now a scholar on all things Arwin.

"It was one of the underlings. Or new kids, I guess. Bragging and going on and on about the princess's fame and exploits. And it turned into a big melee with the other adventurers."

"What did she do?"

"She wasn't there. They act deferential around her, but when she's not there to keep them in line, they act out."

"One of them died recently, right?"

"Yep. Lindworm got him."

The lindworm was a kind of giant serpent that lived deep in the dungeon. They spent most of the time curled up and sleeping, but once they were active, it was impossible to calm them. A lindworm would thrash around with a body the size of a river and come wriggling after you. Its scales were hard as steel, and it had a pointed tail like an arrowhead and fangs as long and sharp as swords. I'd encountered a lindworm once, in a different dungeon. When it opened its jaws, they were taller than me. All I could do was flee for my life. There were legends of a lindworm wrapping itself around an entire castle and crushing the lord and knights inside it.

"Gobbled up his whole bottom half."

"Poor thing." If it had eaten his top half, too, he'd have been spared the indignity of becoming such a miserable corpse. "So they're getting drunk and fighting instead of going back into the dungeon, huh?"

If they needed to blow off steam, that's what a brothel was for. Why make it everyone else's problem?

"I know how they feel," Dez said. "Every day was a struggle for survival."

Adventuring was a job that placed you on the precipice of death. Many, many people slept in a bed one day and a coffin the next. Dez and I had pulled back

from the front line, but the mindset, the sensation of being there, was still fresh in my head.

“Well, this has gotten gloomy,” I said, getting to my feet.

“Leaving already? I just got here.”

“Yes, and you were late.” When he made a grumpy face, I poked his whiskered cheek. “Your lady’s due soon, isn’t she? Go home to her.”

“Mind your own business.”

Another fist like a lead ball thudded into my gut. For a newlywed hiding his embarrassment, it was a bit of an overreaction.

After Dez left, I wandered around the pub and tavern area. Drunken jeers came from all directions, and the smell of cooking meat tickled my nose. My stomach growled. The unnecessary stimulation from a certain Beardo’s gentle hands had it crying for attention. Shut up, you. They’ll lock me up for disturbing the peace. I was in a mood to shut it up by dousing it with ale at a cheap pub, but I was out of funds, and nobody was willing to keep a tab for me anymore.

The best thing in this situation would be to find a friend and mooch drinks off them. Except for Sterling; he was the exception.

I stopped at each door and peered inside, hoping to see a friendly face, but had no luck. The only people I recognized were hooligans who’d shaken me down for money before. A kid who was a full head shorter than me approached, licking his lips, so I quickly scampered off.

“Hey.”

I felt a tug at my sleeve just as I had slipped away into an alley. There was a blond woman wearing a shoulder-exposing dress, giving me a suggestive smile. The smell of her face powder was chokingly strong.

“What are you doing tonight, Matthew?”

Maggie was a whore I knew—in more ways than one, on a number of occasions. She covered up her age well but was clearly over thirty now.

“Nothing with you, I’m afraid.”

“Are you worried about what Polly will think? She doesn’t have to know.”

Didn’t she know it was bad manners to proposition a coworker’s man?

“I appreciate the offer, but it looks like you’ve already got a visitor,” I said.

Pulling on her sleeve was an adorable little girl of about seven years old, sporting the same hair color as Maggie.

“Mommy—”

“Oh, Sarah, you know you’re not supposed to be here,” she said, crouching down to pick up the girl. The father was an adventurer, but that was the extent of what I knew. No doubt he was either dead by now or had fled to another area. The poor girl still needed her mother, but her mother needed to sell herself to put food on the table, sleeping with a different man every night.

“Mommy, I’m lonely. Can we go to sleep now?”

Maggie looked at her daughter, then me. Despite her daughter’s plea, she was going to be sleeping with some unfamiliar, sweaty man instead. Otherwise, they’d both be living out on the street.

I felt around in my pocket and put whatever tiny silver coin I had into Maggie’s hand.

“Here, I’ll put you up for the night. Help your daughter have a good night’s sleep. It’s been scary outside lately.”

Gray Neighbor was home to all sorts of dangerous people. Violence and smuggling were common, and rumor on the street was that some criminal gang was kidnapping children and selling them to sickos.

Maggie stared closely at the silver in her palm, then bowed her head with silent emotion. I went down to one knee so I could look closer at Sarah.

“Hello there, little lady. I hear you’ve been playing with the squirt from the Adventurers Guild. She talks about you often. I hope she hasn’t been mean to you.”

Sarah often played with the kids at the orphanage, which was how she’d gotten to know April.

“No, she’s really nice. She’s not mean at all. And she gives me candies and teaches the other kids to read,” Sarah said, counting on her fingers.

“What about you?”

“I like April, but I hate learning.”

“Me too.” I laughed. “She’s a good girl, so be nice to her, okay?”

“I will,” she said, puffing out her little chest as I patted her on the head.

I waved and got up to leave. Just as I was going around the corner, I heard Sarah say loudly, “Mommy, did I do a good job?”

Stunned, I turned around to see Maggie hastily putting a hand over Sarah’s mouth, looking guilty. What an actor.

“It’s fine, you can keep it. The price for a good show.” I shrugged and continued on my way.

I went down a narrow alley, which took me to a street farther away from the city center. But my wandering was just getting started.

I knew that if I wanted to drink, I needed to make some money. But I had no strength, no smarts, and no skills. If there was anything I *was* good at, it was getting laid. At least there, I knew I had the size and technique to succeed.

If only there were a knockout blond widow nearby, eager to quench her body’s desires and looking for the right man to serve her needs. Preferably thirty—but a little older was fine, too.

“What’s this?”

I ended up at the Howl of the Golden Lion. Unlike the pub where I’d been drinking earlier, this was an establishment for people with money. To demonstrate the difference, the cost of a single cup of ale here would buy me five back there. I preferred quantity over quality, so I’d choose five times the fun for the same amount of money. Ordinarily, I would walk right past a place like this, except that I had seen a familiar face in the window.

It was the Crimson Princess Knight, Lady Arwin herself. I plastered myself to the wall next to the window and peered through. She was sitting on a stool at the bar with a cup. I didn’t see any companions.

It wasn't strange that she was drinking. She had money, of course, and even a princess knight deserved to be in the mood to drink alone sometimes.

Maybe she would buy me a drink if I asked her.

Ordinarily, she would never say yes. She might even thrash me for it. But the insistent gurgling of my stomach and the delicately mournful beauty of her face in profile won over my better instincts. I pushed open the door to the Howl of the Golden Lion.

The interior was lit by dim candles and was so quiet that it gave no hint of the clamor of the city outside. There were four customers inside, including the princess knight, and a forty-something man with a beard was quietly washing dishes behind the counter—probably the manager. He gave me an openly derisive look for daring to come inside. The unspoken message was clear: *Begone, peasant*. It was clear from the furniture that he'd spent a lot of money on this place. If I stole even a single plate, it would probably buy me the next day's food.

Ignoring the manager's rude stare, I sat down next to the princess knight.

"I'll have an ale."

"Do you also have money?" he asked. His mouth was rude, too.

"Of course I do. More than you make, that's for certain."

Lies are bad, of course, but some things are more important than the truth. For example, upholding my personal creed to not embarrass myself in front of the beautiful princess knight.

"Let's see it first."

"Here you go."

I slid a silver piece across the counter. Despite his begging other people for drinks, Sterling's purse had still contained eight silvers. I helped myself to more coins than I'd actually spent on him before, but I could chalk the difference up to the cost of the patience to deal with him.

The manager picked up the coin without a word and handed me a cup of ale.

The princess knight didn't even glance sidelong at me. She was completely

and absolutely ignoring me. But I could tell from her general air that she had not dropped her guard. If I tried to lecherously put an arm around her shoulder, she would instantly slam me to the ground and have me thrown out, I was sure.

It was impossible to find an opening to speak, so I just sat there and took tiny sips of the ale, which wasn't even cold. I felt like such a miserable cheapskate.

No one in the pub spoke; it was totally silent. The hustle and bustle outside felt like it was coming from another world entirely.

I enjoyed talking about stupid topics with the likes of Dez and Sterling, but sometimes it was nice to have an experience like this. I was mature enough to enjoy alcohol in silence. Especially if I was in the company of an exceptionally beautiful woman.

"...What do you want?" Arwin asked finally, glancing at me out of the corner of her eye. Ah, so the silent treatment was over. I'd assumed my existence didn't even register in her mind. Apparently, I'd been teasing her more than I realized.

"Nothing. If anything, it's just to talk like we're doing now."

"Then you've satisfied your desire."

She resumed staring at the counter. Even in my social obliviousness, I realized she was telling me to go away, in so many words.

"I decide if I stay or go," I said. "You don't get to order me around."

I wasn't crazy enough to let a chance to get closer to a beautiful woman go to waste.

"Then I will leave." She placed a gold piece on the counter and stood up from her stool. I hastily opened my mouth.

"...I hear you lost a companion."

Arwin's expression hardened. So it was true. Adventurers drinking alone was usually explained by things like that.

"I know how it goes. That's hard. The sadness of losing a close friend isn't something you just snap your fingers and get over. All those feelings of powerlessness and misery and regret get all churned up in your gut, until you

feel like you've lost half of yourself. It's not just in your dreams; you can't get the sight of their death out of your head at all, even during waking moments. You don't drink because it tastes good or because being drunk helps distract you from the truth. It's preventative medicine. To keep you from slamming your head into the wall or ripping your hair and scalp right off your skull."

"....."

"We have other companions. We're not alone. We should focus on the people who are still here and need help. But all of that is just empty logic. Obligations like what you 'ought' to do and 'should' do won't ease this agony. Time might heal all wounds, but it doesn't guarantee you'll survive to see that point. No one will do it for you. Ahhh...how long will it take, do you suppose?"

I noticed that Arwin had sat down again and was facing me now. Earlier, she was facing the counter and had studiously avoided looking at me.

"I'm sorry for rubbing salt into the wound. I apologize," I said.

I expected her to hit me. But what I saw in Arwin's face was neither anger nor scorn, but shock. Apparently, my speech had the intended effect.

"...You were an adventurer, too?"

"Once."

I'd lost many companions going back to the mercenary days. It had happened in the Million Blades, too. Stupid mistakes, unexpected circumstances, betrayal, laziness, surprise attacks, and so on. People around me tended to die easily. That was why I loved that clumsy, honest little Beardo, because you could punch him, burn him, slice him, and crush him under a boulder, and he'd still be fresh as a daisy.

Arwin gave me a piercing look. "Did you get injured?"

"You could say that."

I didn't want to talk about that shithead sun god. Not when I was chatting with such a beautiful woman.

"Anyway, I'm speaking from experience here. It's fine to be sad. I'm not telling you to forget the memories. Hold as much anger and fear and hatred as you

need. Just don't regret. That's not something you should take."

"Take? What do you mean, take?" Arwin asked.

"Regrets are like drugs. When you get involved with them to escape your pain, it leads to self-pity, and by the end, you can't escape it at all."

"....."

Arwin looked down at her glass. The vibration sent ripples of red across the surface of the liquid.

"If only I'd done that instead. If only I'd noticed sooner. Once you start thinking of these things, they can go on forever. It's all fantasy. Don't you agree?"

She didn't reply. From her downturned gaze, I gathered that she was exploring these thoughts, trying to understand how she truly felt.

I exhaled. "I'll hear out what's on your mind, if you want a sympathetic ear. What do you say? Let's find somewhere else to drink. You can settle up your tab here—"

Someone punched me from behind. I was completely taken by surprise and wound up on all fours, clutching my head. Then a blond boy, red-faced, swung his foot right for my chin. The kick flipped me violently onto my back.

"Stop it, Ralph!" Arwin shouted, trying to stop the man before he did anything more. "What is the meaning of all of this violence?"

"You mustn't associate with this wretched cur, Highness," he said, apparently familiar with me. He shook his head, grabbed her hand, and headed for the door. "Come, we must go. Sir Lewster is waiting."

He was going to drag her out over her protestations if he had to.

"Let go, Ralph!"

"No. Today, you are going to heed my words, Highness. We need you back in the dungeon as soon as—"

"Stop!"

She practically screamed it. The bar was silent. Even Ralph was frozen in

shock. Arwin had gone pale after yanking her hand free, probably regretting her emotional outburst.

“...I am not a child. I can return on my own,” she murmured.

“Please forgive me. But we are only wasting time here. I understand that it is painful, but it’s been long enough...”

Ralph was apologetic but still determined to bring her back. Arwin reluctantly agreed to go with him.

“Your drinks,” said the pub owner before they could leave the building entirely.

Ralph turned on his heel and strode up to the counter, slapping his hand down. I couldn’t see at my current angle, but based on the sound, I suspected he had put down a gold coin.

The door shut, and I caught a glimpse of Arwin’s face through the crack. She looked utterly lost.

So she’s gone...

I counted to fifty before getting to my feet. I could eat another hundred of those namby-pamby punches without dying. I just couldn’t hit him back.

“Well, I’m going, too. Sorry about the trouble,” I said. Arwin was gone, and there was no one else for me to bum drinks off of, so I had no reason to be here. I wasn’t even buzzed anymore. Ultimately, I decided to just go back to where I was staying.

The one bed in the room was empty. She hadn’t returned yet. I was drawn to the bed, feeling ready to lie down for a while, when a dark shape burst out from under the table. It scrambled up like a spider and tangled around my legs.

“If you want to play tag, Polly, I’ll join you,” I said, taking her hand and pulling her up. Unsurprisingly, she resisted.

I opened the window to let the moonlight in, revealing Polly’s miserable state. The edges of her eyes were dark red, her hair was a mess, and her lips were split.

“They got you bad again, huh?”

The cheapest of whores attracted the worst customers. Sick freaks who couldn't get off unless they beat a woman tended to get banned from more reputable brothels that actually protected their assets.

We didn't have any fancy medicinal salves. I got up to look for water so I could at least wash her face, but Polly clung to my legs.

"I'm sorry, Matthew," she wailed, wiping cheap makeup, tears, and snot onto my trousers. "It's all my fault. I've screwed everything up again."

"That's not true. It's not your fault. It's the guy who did that to you."

"No. That's fine." Polly bit down on her thumbnail—a habit when she was worried. Her nail was always half-torn as a result. "It's my fault for being trash. He was a customer. I'm supposed to smile and shrug it off if he gets a little rough. That's what Daddy always said. You know that, right?"

"Yeah." I'd never met him, but I'd heard that particular line from her a million times already.

"I want to be a bigger person. There's no rule that says a whore has to be treated like shit. Maybe I'm not educated like Vanessa, but I bet I can be a real smart whore, at least."

"That's right. You can."

"So don't give up on me. Please, Matthew. I'll try my hardest. You know I can write—you've seen it. I could get a job as a scribe if I wanted. If I had a little money, I could even start a business. Let's start a business together, you and me. It doesn't have to be here."

Like so often happened, Polly was in a mood that was both repentant and ambitious. The problem was that I had never seen her actually doing anything to change her situation. It didn't even last three days—every dream she had ended the same night she had it. But talking about dreams allowed her to indulge in a grand vision of herself that was supremely capable. She lamented her woes and could not escape her regrets but was unable to make any positive changes. The result was a kind of self-pitying intoxication. She was already an addict before alcohol or drugs entered the picture.

"What should we sell? Wine would be good, but you'd drink all of it,

Matthew. Then there's salt, wheat, candles—what do you think?"

All of these things were monopolized by the Merchants Guild. It was the everyday necessities that were the fiercest target of supervision and crackdowns on unauthorized trading. Even if we were to join that guild, there would be no room for a brand-new member to pick up the business. Polly's ideas were always empty and impractical.

According to Vanessa, the Adventurers Guild's appraiser, she hadn't always been like this. Polly had come from a fairly successful merchant family. She was somewhat daft but well-meaning, and she helped out at home. She even had a betrothed. She might have made a good wife in a rich merchant's family. But when the family business failed, her mother hanged herself, and her father sold her off to a brothel. Unable to come to terms with reality, Polly never really adjusted or adapted to her new situation and always clung to dreamlike solutions. Ultimately, this approach landed her at the very bottom of society. Vanessa tried to suggest different ways of making a living, but none of them lasted half a day.

Work hard. Take a good look at where you are. The straightforward, proper answers never got any traction with Polly. She might agree when you said them, but she was always back to the same old stuff the next day. She found it easier to cry about things and drown her pain in cheap liquor than put the effort into making her life better. All the while, she was slowly getting older and less capable. What was she, a replica of me?

"That's right. It's not your fault. You can make it work."

So I found that the easiest solution was just to say things I didn't mean.

Eventually, Dez's wife gave birth to a son. Fortunately, both mother and child were healthy. Dez's delight was immeasurable. He was his usual gruff and whiskered self at the guild, but once at home, he turned into a sappy, simpering father bouncing his baby on his knee. It felt good to see my friend so happy—and it gave me more things to tease him about.

I was walking the streets, thinking of a gift to buy for him, when I noticed a figure slipping into an alley nearby. I turned back to watch and saw someone in a gray hooded cloak walking down the path. The shapely ass and refined stride

were unmistakable.

I hadn't seen the princess knight since that last time. Every now and then, I glanced into the Howl of the Golden Lion, but she was never there again.

She was going into the dungeon to fight bravely and capably, while I was spending my days drinking and strolling the town, keeping my eyes sharp for stray coins on the ground, and my nights consoling Polly. There was no way our paths were going to cross.

For one thing, we lived in entirely different worlds. We were never meant to meet, and our conversation had been a total coincidence. We might pass each other in the street or see each other at a distance, but I assumed there would never be another chance to talk.

What was she doing? It wasn't her usual wardrobe. And this wasn't the kind of place a lady of high birth went. That crazed boy named Ralph wasn't with her, either.

After a brief hesitation, I decided to follow. The smell of musty old fabrics and dried piss from passing drunks filled the alley. Given my size, I figured she'd notice me following right away, but she seemed oblivious.

Farther down the twisting, angled alley, she stopped behind a brothel called the Scarlet Coffin on Glowfly Lane. What was she doing here? There were plenty of brothels in Gray Neighbor that offered male prostitutes as well, but that one was all women. For a moment, I wondered if her tastes ran that way, until I saw the man who opened the rear door to greet her.

It was Oscar, the thirty-something lover of Vanessa's. He had golden hair, blue eyes, and handsome features, but I was well aware that he was gutter trash just like me.

Oscar smiled warmly, but his eyes were cautious and always roaming. I had to stay in the shadows to watch them. He gave Arwin a small package of some kind and received a little bag in return. I could faintly hear the clinking of metal. Oscar checked the contents, then nodded with satisfaction.

"I've kept my end of the bargain," Arwin said with barely disguised anger. "Now I want it back."

“Why, whatever do you mean?” he said very transparently. This predictably set off her fury.

“Are you trying to take advantage of me, you knave?”

“I wouldn’t shout too loud about this,” Oscar said, putting a finger to his lips. “I think you’re the one who would suffer more if this became public knowledge, Crimson Princess Knight.”

Despite the whispered hush, he sounded as proud as if he’d taken the head of a dragon.

“Surely it must be difficult to talk, all bundled up like that. Would you take off your hood?”

“.....”

“Would you take off your hood, *please*?” he repeated. Arwin reluctantly pulled her hood back, revealing shining red hair.

“Ah yes, you truly are a beauty up close... Careful!” Arwin’s hand strayed to her sword, forcing Oscar to jump away. “I’d rather this didn’t turn violent. Too much attention is something neither of us can afford, isn’t it?”

His threat clearly worked; Arwin faltered right away. The brave princess who was used to charging into packs of monsters to save her companions was worried. Eventually, she removed her hand from the hilt of the sword.

Assured of his victory, Oscar circled around Arwin, still keeping his distance. “I intend to play fair. You’ll have it back. However, I’m afraid that even these gold coins aren’t nearly enough to pay for its true value, which I believe you recognize,” he said, jingling the little bag of coins. It would have paid for a decade of my living expenses.

She gnashed her teeth.

“No, we’re going to do things differently. It’s going to be a very long relationship, and money alone is such a cold, hard thing, isn’t it? You know what I’m saying,” he said, reaching out to caress her hair. She blanched for a moment but did not smack his hand away. “If I’m forced against my will to reveal your secret, it will be both of our downfalls. But I’ll do it if I must. After all, I’ve so

much less to lose. Unlike you. Isn't that right?"

"....."

"Just keep your pretty little lips shut, and no one needs to know about the special little relationship we're going to have."

He reached for her pale, slender neck. I pinched my nose shut.

"Oi, you. Whad do you thingk you're doing ober there?" I called out. Imitating that dark-skinned guard was one of my few true talents. I found it easy to replicate his particularly nasal voice. "Is thad you, Oscar? Don' move!"

I even stomped my feet back and forth to simulate approaching footsteps.

Oscar clicked his tongue and bolted. I heard a high-pitched shriek a moment later as he ran into someone, but at least he was gone. Arwin stood there briefly in shock, then began pulling her hood up and making to leave.

"Not so fast, Princess."

Arwin stopped and spun around.

"I suppose I never introduced myself, did I?" I spread my hands and spoke gently, trying to set her at ease. "I'm Matthew. How do you do?"

She did not accept my handshake. Her hackles were raised, like a traumatized stray dog.

"...Why are you here?"

"I would ask the same of you. This isn't the place for princesses like you."

"It's none of your business."

"Now, is that the attitude you're going to take with the man who just saved you from a lecherous creep?"

"Creep?" she said, blinking with surprise.

"Yes, a creep. Or were you looking forward to that? If so, I apologize for getting in the way. You can fondle my ass to make up for it. But be warned, it's an erogenous zone, so don't be surprised if I start making funny noises."

"Stop making jokes! I would never...oh. I'm sorry. Thank you. This just caught

me by surprise, that's all," she said, relief spreading across her face as she assumed her secret was still safe. But my suspicions had been all but confirmed.

"I'll repay you for this someday, but for now, I'm in a hurry," she said.

"Now, now, don't be so hasty. Come, let's find someplace to talk. I promise, I'm not going to do anything bad to you."

"I'll pass." She put her hood back on and prepared to take flight like a little songbird.

"Just for a little bit. I have money today...oops." My purse fell, spilling copper and silver coins. "I'm sorry, can you help me pick them up?"

The princess knight's brow furrowed with suspicion. It had to be humiliating for her to be ordered around by a ruffian like me. Or maybe she was still thinking of Oscar.

In either case, she repaid my earlier favor by crouching to help. It was a very careless move. I grabbed her hand and reached toward her pocket to snatch the little package.

"What are you doing?!" she cried, trying to grab it back. I scurried backward out of her reach.

"Now, now, don't shout about it," I said hastily, before she could draw her sword on me. "This isn't the kind of stuff for ladies to get involved with."

I knew I was overstepping my bounds, but I also knew exactly what would happen if she kept on down this road.

"There's a very good appraiser at the Adventurers Guild named Vanessa. I'm sure you know her," I said quickly. I would lose any fight in this cramped alley where the sun could not reach, so the most important thing was to avoid any combat. "She's so good at her job that nobody can possibly compete with her in that regard, and yet she has the worst eye for men I've ever seen. She's always involved with the lowest dregs of society. And I regret to say that her current man is none other than Oscar, the fellow you were speaking to just now."

Arwin twitched with recognition.

"He's a fairly well-known dealer. He buys some very bad stuff from the real

criminals, then sells it off to wild dreamers who believe they're nobles from some kingdom of sand and adventurers who've completely forgotten all common sense."

What I could see of her face underneath the hood was turning pale.

"This is a drug. And you're a regular user."

Arwin promptly slumped to the ground like her soul had left her body.

"Am I wrong?"

Though she said nothing, her reaction told me everything. Fear, anger, shame, and despair mixed together as though in a witch's cauldron, stewing and bubbling into a froth. Her hand was wrapped around the back of her neck, probably to hide the black spots I'd find there.

I opened the bag. There was a small vial inside that contained a white powder. I opened it up and took a sniff.

"It's Release."

I'd never used it myself, but from what people said, just a little taste would send you into a euphoric state that blew all fear and negative emotions away. What it brought with it, however, was devastation. In just a few years, it would completely eat away at your bones and organs. It robbed the user of years of his life. Trying to quit meant suffering hellish withdrawal symptoms. How dare you sell this demonic stuff, Oscar. There'll be a warm seat in hell for you.

"Uh, uh," Arwin stammered. There was a note of longing there. She wasn't leaping on me, which was a sign that she still had some reason, but if things got worse, she would do anything for the stuff—even open her legs.

I held the uncovered vial of white powder over the nearby gutter, then dropped it in. The vial and powder both tumbled into the muck.

"I'm not going to pry into your personal problems, but you really shouldn't rely on crap like thi—"

Something smacked the back of my head. The princess knight had leaped on me, eyes bloodshot with fury.

"You son of a bitch!"

She rounded on me; I raised my arms in defense, but her fist hit my face. Her punches weren't heavy, but they were very fast and hard to avoid. She got past my defenses several times, until I lost my balance, and she slammed me to the ground. Once I was on my back, she straddled me and continued punching.



This was bad news. I couldn't even win in a battle of arm strength with her. Her rage was getting to her, too; her arms began swinging very wildly and out of control. All I could do was hunch my neck so that her punches, coming with all her weight behind them, hit my forehead instead of a more vital spot. My body was still as tough as ever, at least. Once she started feeling pain in her fists and let up for a bit, I slipped out from under her.

"If you want your drug, go down and get it. Slurp up the mud down there, and maybe you'll still catch a whiff of the stuff."

At last, Arwin seemed to come back to her senses. She looked at her red, swollen fists, the gutter ditch, and then me. Feeling overcome by shame, she curled up and hid her face behind her hands. I thought she might be weeping, but I couldn't hear anything.

After a minute, I got to my feet, patted off the dust, and held out a hand to the princess knight.

"Come. Tell me your story."

I took the princess knight to the second floor of the Adventurers Guild. There were a number of rooms inside the guild building where adventurers could hold confidential meetings. They were built well so that even louder speaking voices were inaudible from the outside. That also made them a convenient place to conduct vigilante punishment of other adventurers. We wouldn't have to worry about being overheard here. I'd thought about taking her back to my place, but I didn't want anyone getting funny ideas about what was going on. Polly was out working, incidentally, and wouldn't be back until very late.

In the center of the little room was a table covered in marks and scars, like some grizzled veteran warrior. The princess knight sat down in the wobbly chair I offered her.

She rested her hands on her knees, looked at the floor with her face pale, and waited, like a guilty criminal anticipating judgment.

"You don't have to be so uptight. Think of me like a priest or something."

I'd given up on religion while I was still in the womb, but I was more than capable of hearing people talk about their problems.

“Let’s be honest,” I said. “You’ve got dungeon sickness.”

She still said nothing, but her clasped palms and pressed knees told me all I needed to know.

“It happens all the time.”

The dark and dangerous dungeon was a place where disaster lurked at all times. You had to deal with terrain, monsters, traps, and your fellow man. There was no telling when Death himself would come creeping up on you. I’d seen many people like her since coming to this place.

Once you had dungeon sickness, not even magic could cure it. A cleric’s miracle might increase your battle instincts, but only temporarily; very soon, you would be like a frightened kitten again. Those with a lighter case of it might be all right in another town, as long as they didn’t go into another dungeon. But the majority could not even fight anymore. Adventuring was a job that involved risking your life. If you couldn’t do that anymore, there was no point to being there. The only options were retirement or death.

When people got desperate enough, some turned to drugs. Even the Crimson Princess Knight was no exception. It was just as simple as that—although not a wise choice on her part.

She kept her head down as she spoke. “I started doing it...around half a year ago.”

It started when she was unable to bear the terrors of the dungeon anymore. She went in disguise to get a supply and started using it bit by bit.

“It was good at first. I felt great, and I started making way more progress in the dungeon than I had before. But I was soon punished for my foolishness.”

She started taking the drug more and more often, and at this point, she had to use it every day or suffer withdrawal. Her hands shook, she got impatient, and she snapped at others without good reason. It meant she had to take it more and more to ensure they didn’t realize something was wrong: a vicious cycle.

“And now it’s gotten to the point that I gave away my family’s ancestral jade necklace, just because that hideous man told me to.”

The necklace had come to their family from a princess who had married into the line from another country in the distant past, and it was very valuable. And she was trying to trade it for drugs... In fact, she already had. That was the power those drugs had. They could even cause an upright, strong-willed princess to lose her mind.

She regretted the decision at once and scrounged up money to buy it back, but that only got her extorted for more.

"I am the symbol of hope for the restoration of Mactarode. The people cannot know what I am doing to overcome my fear. Do you understand that?"

"If you're scared, you should just give it up."

"I cannot do that."

"I understand your predicament. To restore your country, you have to go into the dungeon and get treasure. Well, I'll be honest with you: The people around you are all hopeless fools and incompetents. Give the bards a few coppers, and they'll gladly sing you tales of heroism. It's not something you do in reality."

It would be one thing if all the survivors were banding together to tackle the dungeon. But anyone leaving their country's fate and responsibilities in the hands of a single woman—no matter how talented—was a piece of shit, nothing more.

If they wanted a country, they could go start one in the wasteland to the south or invade another land. Enlist in the service of some other country somewhere and take them over from the inside. All of these options, improbable as they were, had a much better chance of happening than this pipe dream nonsense.

"If you're scared, just say so. Are you really entrusting everything to people you can't even say the most obvious of sentiments around?"

"It's none of your concern."

"That's right. It's not," I said, sighing and leaning back against the chair. "We only talked for a minute before today, and I didn't even give you my name. I'll admit it. So given that, I ask you: How many people actually know about the pain you're dealing with? I'll bet I know the answer: zero."

If she had given voice to her fears and suffering, she wouldn't have touched any of that stuff. Instead, people had placed a tiara of hope on the head of their noble, regal, delicate princess and offered songs of tribute to her name. They didn't have a care in the world what sort of pressure that put her under. They were irresponsible, incompetent, and blissfully ignorant fools. They deserved to die.

"Here's a warning to you. Stop the drugs entirely. It's a mistake to get involved with them. I'm not the kind of guy who likes to tell other people what to do with their lives, and I know I'm in no position to issue orders. And even still, I'm telling you: Stop. Stop *now*."

I could feel the sick feeling in my chest coming back.

"I've seen many people mess around with drugs, and they've all met a horrible end, one way or another. I've seen people turn to robbery to support their habit and get caught and executed for it. I've seen people hallucinate that a monster was their mother and run off to get eaten. I've seen people pierce their own throats because they couldn't take the withdrawal. And I'm guessing you're not looking to find an especially unique and memorable death for yourself."

No one asked any of these people to do a bunch of tasteless acrobatics, and yet they had gone and shown off anyway.

"Release, in particular, has horrendous withdrawal symptoms to balance its powerful effects. And no antidote will work on it."

Magic was a very convenient thing to be able to use and could heal wounds and neutralize poison inside the body—but there were limits. Drug addiction and mental illness like dungeon sickness were the exception. There were plants with magical powers used in creating Release, which was why no antidote could be made for it.

"The best thing to do would be to give up on the treasure in the dungeon and rebuilding your country and just retire from adventuring. Move out to the countryside or the sea. Rest and recuperate. Let someone else take over the job. Illness, injury—there are any number of excuses you can use. You did well. Let the less noble folks take it from here."

“I appreciate your warning,” she said, shaking her head gingerly. “But...I need this now.”

“What, to rely on drugs to rebuild your country? What are they going to write in the history books? That when Princess Arwin suffered from dungeon sickness and was too afraid to fight, she became a Release addict and used her junkie power to get the treasure and save the kingdom?”

“If that’s what it comes down to, I’m prepared for it.”

“So you’ll swallow all your secrets and fears and everything else and travel straight to the afterlife, eh? Well, don’t do it. It’s not a princess’s job to be the lizard’s tail that gets cut loose.”

“Why do you even care? You admitted that this has nothing to do with you.”

“Would you not spare a bread crust or two if you saw a starving kitten on the street? Would you not pour a little water on a dying flower? It’s no more complicated than that. Every human being is capable of acts of selfless kindness.”

I knew I was sticking my nose into her business. Ordinarily, I would just write it off as someone else’s problem or a tip I could sell to someone else for money. Surely a dirty, shocking story about the Crimson Princess Knight was the kind of thing people would pay good coin to learn. Many people were excited by the thought of the noble and haughty and powerful being brought down into the mud to taste the humiliation and misery of ordinary people. I felt that way, too. If anything, I would have worked actively to make it happen, if not for the nose hair of conscience I still had left. Or perhaps I was actually feeling something for the princess knight curled into a ball before me.

“What about my people? They were attacked by swarms of monsters and lost their lands and families. The knights and soldiers and royal family could do nothing to stop it. They did nothing to deserve this suffering.”

“But you weren’t the one who summoned the monsters.” It was all well and good to feel responsibility, but she was taking it too far. “And you’d be surprised how hardy the roots of the common folk are. They’ll live anywhere, and as long as there’s money and food, they’ll get by. There’s only a small percentage who can’t possibly go on if the name of the kingdom isn’t

Mactarode anymore.”

She looked at me in wonderment. “Who are you?”

“Just a kept man.”

“What is a kept man?”

The princess was very innocent.

“In a harbor town far from here, there are women who make a living by diving into the sea to catch fish, mussels, and clams,” I said.

Arwin looked confused; she had no idea where I was going with this.

“The shallows get picked over very quickly, so they have to get in a boat and sail out to deeper water for their quarry. Naturally, they don’t want to go too deep and drown. So they tie lifelines around their waists. They get as many fish and shellfish as they can, and when they’re almost out of breath, they tug on the lifeline. That’s the signal for the men on the boat to pull the women up. It’s that practice that was the source of the term *kept man* because they’re *keeping* him on the boat to handle the lifeline. From what I hear, at least.”

It was only something I’d heard secondhand, so I didn’t know if it was true or not.

“Why don’t the men dive?”

“Maybe it’s their job to pilot the boat. Or they need the man’s strength to pull them up. I’ve also heard that women have more resistance to cold, so they can withstand deeper dives.”

I didn’t know why she kept asking me questions about it; I was only passing on info I’d heard and making an educated guess about the rest.

“Basically, in exchange for a small payment, he helps, comforts, and consoles a woman. I guess you might call him the woman’s coach.”

“And you’re that coach?”

“I guess.”

I was living off of a prostitute instead of having a steady job. I was a lowly piece of crap.

“I understand that your kingdom and people are important to you, but they’re not worth sacrificing your own life for. Give it up.”

“You’re wrong,” she said, shaking her head painfully. “Yes, rebuilding the kingdom is important, but it’s not about that anymore.”

“How am I wrong?”

“...Melinda’s daughter is missing.”

Melinda was a friend of Arwin’s, apparently. The kindhearted princess knight treated everyone equally, whether highborn or low, since becoming an adventurer. Melinda was one of them. Her husband scampered off soon after their daughter was born. She sold her body in order to raise her child. And the girl had gone missing yesterday. After going half-mad in the search, Melinda finally discovered that her daughter had been kidnapped by a criminal group.

“I haven’t seen Melinda, either. I think she’s gone to look for her daughter.”

“Which group is it?”

“Tri-Hydra, apparently.”

“Oh no.”

They were one of the groups active in the city. They were small in scale but focused on selling drugs. Lately, they’d been branching out into human trafficking. Some of the members were really insane, which made them the last group you’d want to antagonize. Of course, the guards would be no help. Expecting the people who accepted bribes to come to your aid was like climbing the execution stand yourself. She understood that and had gone to rescue her daughter on her own, apparently. It was a crazy idea, of course. I would have just fled in the night if I were in that situation.

“What about your servants? That kid who punched me the last time would gladly follow your orders, I imagine.”

She looked away sadly. “Ralph was unhappy that I had any contact with Melinda. He thought it was unbecoming for a royal princess to speak with a whore. The others felt similarly. I doubt they would help me if I told them I wanted to rescue Melinda’s daughter.”

Then you should cut ties with them.

“Also, they are not servants. They are fellow adventurers I gathered through Sir Lewster’s connections. He came out against the search as well.”

Ah yes. I was familiar with him: the older knight. Probably a virgin, if I had to guess.

“And the others?”

“I asked a few if they would help, but when I brought up Tri-Hydra, they all declined.”

“No surprise.”

I would have done the same. Fighting for your life and going off to die were two distinctly different things.

There would be no help. She wanted to go ahead and rescue the girl anyway, but at this point, she couldn’t fight without the drug. She went to buy more (and hoped to get her necklace back) but found herself blackmailed instead and nearly taken advantage of. That was when she encountered me.

“All right, I see the situation now,” I said, exhaling. “You only have one option. You have to abandon Melinda and her daughter.”

She looked shocked.

“Sir What’s-His-Name is right. It’s insane to charge into a nest of wicked men alone. You’ll almost certainly fail. And even if you succeed, whores in this town don’t tend to live long. She’ll wind up stabbed by some freak who’s sick in the head or catch a disease and die of it.”

“You don’t know that—”

“Yes I do.” I tugged at a lock of hair to distract myself from the images my brain was summoning. “I’ve seen it happen time and again.”

Arwin’s mouth clamped shut. She realized I was telling the truth.

“You may be strong, but you’re not a god. There are people you cannot save, and that’s just a fact. It’s a noble thing to want to save someone else, but you have to be able to save yourself first and foremost. For one thing, if you were

closer with your party mates, you wouldn't have needed me to save you, would you?"

I got to my feet. I'd given her my warning, and I was sincere about it. Everything past this point was up to her conscience. She could live or die or be a drug addict for all I cared. As I'd just told her, there were people you could save and people you couldn't. I hoped this woman was one of the former. My business was done, so I headed for the exit.

"What about you?" she called out after me. There was just a tiny bit of hope in her beautiful voice.

"Don't ask." I didn't need people relying on me. Not unless they were going to be standing out in the sun every hour of the day. "The cost to hire me is steep: your maidenhead, assuming you've still got it."

"Why, you disgusting—"

I turned to see her face beet red and twisted with shame and rage. But she didn't start hitting me; her feet twitched, but she looked away instead.

"Oh, and I wouldn't worry about Oscar anymore. He owes me a favor, so I'll make sure that's all covered. I'll even find a way to get your necklace back."

"Huh?" she stammered, confused. Why would she react like that? It made me want to speak up again, despite myself.

"Wait, did you forget his name already? The dealer from earlier. Not that you really need to know his name."

"...Yes, of course. That's right." She had remembered at last that she was standing on very thin ice right now.

"You *did* forget, didn't you?"

"...I'm sorry."

"It's fine. You've got a lot on your mind. Of course, I wouldn't tell anyone what I've learned, even if they tried to pull my tongue out."

Most likely. I had to admit, I'd never had my tongue pulled out before.

I took a small package out of my pocket and tossed it to her. "There. It's

thanks for before.”

“What is it?”

“Candy. It’s got herbs mixed in, so it’s good for your throat. The perfect thing when you need something to suck on. Helps calm you down, too.”

She was so worried for the prostitute and her daughter that the princess knight was totally forgetting about her own health. It probably never occurred to her that if she wanted to, she could protect her secrets by cutting off my head.

I waved and left the room for good this time. With perfect timing, Dez was just downstairs.

“Are your wife and baby good to be on their own already?”

“The woman from next door’s keeping watch on her. I only came here to get something I forgot. Leaving shortly.”

“First things first, I’ve got to ask a favor. Can you lend me some money?”

His whiskered face scrunched up with suspicion. “What for?”

“You know why,” I said. “I’m going to find a pretty lady and get to know her carnally. I’ve been alone with a beautiful woman, and it’s left me so horny, I can barely think straight.”

It was dark outside. The covered wagon trundled away, and I hunched my back and hurried home. I’d rinsed off earlier, so I didn’t have to worry that she’d smell anything. It had been so long for me that I was out of shape. We really hadn’t been that adventurous, yet my entire body was aching. The scratch on my cheek hurt. She’d been a wild one.

“I’d better get back soon. If Polly’s already there, it’ll be an ugly scene.”

“Oh, Matthew!”

A hand reached out from a side alley and pulled me off balance. Fortunately, the sight of the owner’s face was a relief.

“Don’t scare me like that, Maggie. I might be big, but my heart is weaker than a flea’s. If you scare me too much, it might stop and never start up again,” I

joked.

But Maggie was in no mood. She clung tearfully to my chest.

“What happened?” I asked, grabbing her shoulders and looking into her eyes. She was clearly beside herself.

“Sarah never came home yesterday. Have you seen her?”

“No I haven’t... She’s still out?”

“So it wasn’t you, then. Oh, I should have known.”

She crumpled to her knees on the cold, hard paving stone and was not in any state to stand again.

“What’s wrong? Do you know where she might be?”

“They said she was with a tall and disreputable-looking man. I was hoping it might be you...”

A nasty premonition was rising in my gut. Sarah was a sweet little girl, and very smart. There was no question that the kind of men involved in trafficking would have an interest in her. But would a smart girl simply walk into a kidnapping? She’d either resist or find a way to leave a clue behind.

“Do you know where that was?”

“From what they said, it was around Rockeater Snake Street...and normally, she would never be near that area. I asked guards and adventurers for help, but they all just shook their heads. Only one of them said they’d help, but that one alone can’t do much...”

I looked up at the sky, thinking. That was the area where Tri-Hydra made its home. It was reckless to take a single kid like that. The guards took bribes, yes, but they could only overlook so much. The culprit was probably the same guy who took Melinda’s daughter. Unless...wait a second.

“Maggie, what’s your *professional* name?”

“Why are you asking?”

Whores sometimes found themselves providing services to men who were crazy and did crazy things. So many of them used aliases to give them at least

some measure of anonymity.

“It wouldn’t happen to be Melinda, would it?”

“That’s right.”

“And you wouldn’t happen to be on good terms with the princess knight?”

“You know about that? Yes I am,” she murmured absentmindedly.

Apparently, she had started using the name after being attacked by a particularly nasty john. And as a downtrodden woman of the night on the bottom rung of society, she was particularly smitten with Arwin’s propensity for treating everyone with equal respect and kindness.

“She’s really, really wonderful. It was she who offered to help rescue Sarah. The problem is that all her companions know what I am and turned their noses up at me... Well, what makes them so high and mighty? Oh, sure, their cocks’ll get hard when they see me, but when it comes time to actually do anything helpful, they’re worthless.”

“Oh! Matthew!” called out April, who had appeared at the end of the alley.

“You shouldn’t be out and about this late on your own,” I warned her. Being the guildmaster’s granddaughter might have given her certain protections, but it was still dangerous.

“There’s more pressing matters right now! Have you seen Sarah? She’s gone missing,” April said.

“You’re looking, too, huh?”

I relayed all the information I had. It left April leaning against the wall, looking pale.

“Why don’t you try telling your grandpa?”

The guildmaster had the power to order adventurers around. I didn’t know how many there were in total, but there had to be well over a hundred in this town alone. They were all missing a full brain, yes, but their skill at fighting was real.

“It won’t work,” she said sadly. “He can’t force the adventurers to do anything

for people unrelated to the guild.”

Even if she contracted the guild for help, Maggie had nothing to her name. Adventurers were not so selfless that they would risk their lives for mere coppers. On top of that, they wouldn’t want to open hostilities with a group like Tri-Hydra.

“I asked everyone I could, but Arwin was the only person who would give me the time of day,” she said. Even being the guildmaster’s granddaughter only went so far when the old man himself was intent on staying put.

“What should we do? Even while we speak, poor Sarah is—”

“First, you need to be calm,” I said, putting a reassuring arm around Melinda... er, Maggie’s shoulder. “We don’t know if that’s true yet. Here’s what I want you to do: Go home and wait. If you’re running all over the place, you’re only putting yourself in danger.”

“But—”

“No ifs, ands, or buts. You’re the only person in the world who can be home to welcome your lost little daughter if she finds her way back.”

Maggie seemed dazed at first but eventually found her resolve and nodded.

“April, you help walk her home. The fellows *behind* you can’t complain about that.”

I cast a glance at the shadows, where a figure shifted. The mighty guildmaster would never allow his precious granddaughter to wander around the streets at night without any protection whatsoever. They were always watching over her from the shadows. But they were the guildmaster’s henchmen and would not follow April’s orders.

“I want to search for her.”

I shook my head. “Your grandpa and Dez are right. I’m a piece of crap. But I know one thing. *You’re going home.*”

“.....”

“Please, I’m begging you. Don’t make me embarrass myself even further.”

I wasn't cut out for lecturing children. April seemed rather disgruntled about it but did acquiesce.

"I'll go back to ask Grandp...I mean, Grandfather."

"And I'll look around the area. I'll report back if I find anything."

"Please, Matthew, you're the only one I can count on. All the other men are so useless..."

After a few more reassuring words for her, I left. The sound of Maggie's pleas in my ear filled me with a desperate feeling. Messing around with Tri-Hydra was going to get me killed before I could count to one hundred.

I had no doubt that Sarah would not be coming back. Certainly not the precocious, childish, mama's girl Sarah. She'd be turned into a plaything for freaks who were sick in the head or monsters who couldn't finish unless they had a child to beat. Either way, it was going to be an ugly end for her. An innocent girl who'd done nothing wrong, beaten until her face went purple, bleeding, wailing, begging for her mother as she was robbed of her dignity, treated like an old rag until she died. What would be the last thing she saw? The bed of a rich man somewhere, or the stars as she was lowered into a hole and buried alive? Perhaps it would be the smile of the man who was killing her.

It makes me sick.

My stomach was churning violently by the time I got home. The door was unlocked. A burglar, looking for anything of worth in this dump? I walked in very carefully.

I pulled the candelabra closer and lit a candle. There was a dark shape sitting in the chair. I held out the candle to get a better look. Then I shouted, "Don't scare me like that, Polly!"

She didn't reply. She was weeping, head down on the table. *Again?* I thought, disgusted, as I gently shook her shoulder. "What's the matter? Did he hit you again? Don't worry, my dear. It's not your fault."

She snatched my wrist, startling me. Polly lifted her head; she was a miserable sight, between the mess of cheap blush, tears, and snot. It was a sight that would infuriate any man who paid money to sleep with her.

“I used it all...”

“Used what?”

“This...”

She gestured to a small cloth bag on the table. It was empty.

“There was shilver inside. I didn’t count, but he shaid there were thirty.”

It was clear that this was not something she’d earned through her work. It was too high a payout for what she was worth. Some men had particular tastes, but it would be easier for him to buy her freedom directly. Plus, she was slurring her words; she was very drunk.

“The john shaid he was shearching for a child. Little cute one. Sho I told him about her. Told her I wanted to talk about shomething...important.”

My heart rose in my throat.

“You...sold Sarah?”

“I felt bad about it. Sho I waz going to give the money to Maggie. But I felt sho bad on the way there, I realized what a horrible thing I did, and I couldn’t take it anymore.”

So she’d spent all the money drinking herself silly. Well, she was in the same line of work as Sarah’s mother and probably would have met the girl at some point. That was how she’d tricked her.

“Matthew,” Polly said, clinging to me, “I’m shorry. It’sh all my fault.”

“What was this man like?”

“Are you mad at me? Of courshe you are. I’m sho shtupid, I’d be better off dead.”

“Listen to me, Polly.”

I grabbed her shoulders so that we were facing each other. It felt like it had been a very long time since we stared each other in the eyes. It was true that having a relationship where we eased each other’s pain and stuck together felt comforting. But now that we were staring each other right in the eyes, there was nothing. Nothing in my heart and nothing in hers.

“I’m not blaming you. I’m not angry. I just want to know where Sarah went. She’s a seven-year-old girl taken away from her mother and put in the hands of a very bad man. We don’t have much time. She’s going to be sold to someone else far away if we don’t act now. Do you understand that?”

“Yeah. I totally do,” Polly said, nodding vigorously. “It wash my fault, huh? Pleashe don’t abandon me, Matthew. I’m shorry. I apologize.”

She slipped out of my hands, fell to her knees, and crumpled into tears. From that point on, she repeatedly spoke of how sorry she felt, but not a single time did she say anything about being sorry to Sarah or Maggie.

When I got the chance, I separated myself from her grasp and grabbed a sack full of old items I’d tossed into the closet, then fled for the door. I was so weak that if she caught me, I would have trouble getting myself free.

“Wait! Don’t leave me here!” Polly cried, half crawling after me, but her foot got caught on the chair, and she stumbled, slamming her face down on the floor. She reached for me, hair wildly out of place. “Don’t go, Matthew, pleashe. Don’t abandon me. Don’t go!”

As I headed out the door, I looked over my shoulder and said, “It’s not your fault.”

I already had my destination in mind as I hurried down the steps to the street. Tri-Hydra had a storage depot just off of Rockeater Snake Street. They were probably rounding up children there before taking them outside of town, bit by bit. Even if the people running this city were fools, you couldn’t just march abducted children through the town, waving for all to see. Plus, Gray Neighbor was surrounded by walls, so leaving town required passing through a gate. The gates were already closed for the night. If you tried to force your way through them, the results would be disastrous.

Most likely, there would be a carriage heading out the next morning, through a gate overseen by crooked guards whose purses would be fatter than usual. Although it was already dark out, there was no time to waste. I had to assume Sarah would be taken out of the city and sold off tomorrow.

My feet were taking me to Rockeater Snake Street on their own. It was best to rely on Dez for dirty work, but he had a position to maintain. The

Adventurers Guild wanted nothing to do with this. If he went counter to the guild's position and started violence with gangsters, it would get him fired.

Oh, Matthew. When did you get to be such an idiot? No matter what pervert bought Sarah to be his plaything, no matter how Maggie might lament her missing daughter, they have nothing to do with me. If I shut my eyes and pretend I don't see anything, I can see the sun rise in the morning. A powerless incompetent getting involved with this is just marching to his death. It's not my style to risk my life for others.

"Wait," said a woman wearing a hood. I recognized Arwin's voice at once. Though it surprised me, I didn't say anything. "I heard from the dwarf named Dez that you live around here."

Damn Beardo and his loose lips. I ought to braid them for him.

"Please, I need your help."

"What's in it for me?"

She lifted her head and swept the hood back, declaring, "I am willing to give myself to you."

Though her cheeks were red, the look in her eyes was determined.

"...I still do have...that *thing* you mentioned."

I groaned and clutched at my hair, trying to process the emotions running through my mind. "Why would you do something so drastic?"

"Janet died before my eyes."

Instantly, I understood that Janet was the name of the party companion Arwin lost in the dungeon.

"Before, you asked me how many people knew I was suffering in this way. She was one of them. In fact, she was my only friend. That's who I lost."

Her skin was pale. She was clearly reliving the memory right now.

"Janet wasn't the only one. Monsters ate my father headfirst and trampled my mother. It all happened right where I could see it. People I think the world of, taken from me. And there was nothing I could do."

She was talking about when the swarm of monsters overran her kingdom. Arwin must have been carrying deep scars with her ever since. And yet she stifled those feeling, put her own needs last, and fought for the sake of her people, grinding her mind into dust and losing the proper balance of the soul.

“I’m a coward. I’m not as gallant as people say. I’m weak and pathetic and make the wrong choices. But even someone as unfit as me cannot simply stand by when wicked men kidnap children.”

“.....”

“Janet was aware of my...weakness. Like you, she said I was more important than the restoration of my kingdom. If I abandon Melinda and her family now, I know I will regret it—and I do not wish to feel regret anymore. You yourself said it: Regret is not something you should ‘take.’ I am not brave or just, but I hope that in some small measure, I can preserve order and justice in this city.”

“I see.”

She was not the powerful lady the bards sang about. If anything, she was just an ordinary woman. She bore her weakness, nearly crumbling under the expectations of others, regretting, lamenting, agonizing, and yet still attempting to be strong. When she got hurt and fell down, she got back up. She *tried* to get back up. She shone because she was in the midst of tribulation. A shining star in the dark of night. A delicate flower blooming in the muck.

She was proud. Not because she was a princess but because she was Arwin Mabel Primrose Mactarode.

Completely different from me.

“...If you’ve made up your mind, then there’s nothing more for me to say. I’ll help you.”

She exhaled with relief. Her smile was lovely.

I’d fallen in love with many women in my life and slept with hundreds more. But what I felt for Arwin seemed different from anything else I’d experienced. Was it love, or admiration, or loyalty, or something else entirely? All I could say for certain was that I felt okay with putting my life in harm’s way for her.

“Ordinarily, I would demand my payment up front, but we don’t have time for that. You can pay me when we’re done.”

“I appreciate it.”

“We’re headed to the same place anyway. I can’t complain if I go down next to a beautiful woman like you.”

Arwin grinned.

“We’ll save her for sure.”

The Tri-Hydra storehouse on Rockeater Snake Street was made of stone plastered over. There was no thought given to reducing humidity and moisture, but at least it was sturdy. It would be difficult to knock down a structure like this.

The double doors in the front were taller than the average man. Sure enough, there were some rather unsavory-looking men hanging around a campfire out front, keeping watch.

We were hanging back in the shadows when a carriage pulled up to the place. Bedraggled children got out of it. Their hands were tied, and rags held their mouths shut. They were placed in a line and pushed into the building.

This was the place, all right.

I’d been thinking of a plan on the way here, and I told Arwin now. “First, I’ll draw their attention. While I’m keeping them occupied, you sneak around the back and rescue the children inside.”

There was a lock on the back door, but the princess knight’s sword would be more than enough to slice it in two.

“You’ll recognize Sarah, won’t you? If you see her, say that her mother is waiting for her.”

Arwin nodded, then fixed me with a meaningful gaze.

“Don’t die out there.”

“It wasn’t in my plans.”

I exhaled as she headed away. This might be the end of my life. But I felt no

fear. I'd lived my life by mostly doing whatever I wanted. If this was going to be the end, that was that. But I was going to do everything in my power to keep it going.

"Hey, gentlemen, how are things tonight?" I said, waving amiably once I was certain Arwin was around the back of the building. Very soon, the unfriendly men were standing in a circle around me, bristling with hostility. Because they were all shorter than me, it wasn't all that intimidating, but with the way they looked, one of them might shank me in the guts without a second thought.

"Piss off," growled one of them, a man with a lion tattooed right on his face.

"Oh, there's no need for that," I said, cajoling him. "I'm trying to find a nice place where I can spend some time with a pretty lady, and I got lost. Do you know the way back?"

His answer came in the form of an impact to my stomach. The man in front of me had punched me, it seemed. I covered my gut and doubled over. That wasn't very nice.

"Fuck off." This time, the look in his eyes was meaner. If I tried wheedling them any more than this, it was going to be a blade next time.

"All, right, all right. You don't have to stare daggers at me." I chuckled, getting to my feet. "The fact is, I've got some information I think you'll want to hear. As a matter of fact, this storehouse is in danger."

A knife was suddenly in my face. The tattooed man had drawn and pointed it, all in one quick motion. "Speak."

"I was already speaking. I didn't need the extra encouragement." I grinned, reaching for my pocket. "You see, I heard about it while I was looking for the pretty ladies. Some very disreputable-looking fellows. They were murmuring about blowing this place up, from what I could hear. I would assume they were White Monkeys..."

When I pulled my hand out of my pocket, a white ball fell onto the ground, where it split open and began expelling a huge volume of gray smoke. I'd been forced to make so many smoke bombs in my adventuring days that I still had the right touch now. In moments, the entire area was full of smoke.

“Cough, hack! What the hell—cough!—is this?”

“You fuckin’ set us up!”

The one standing behind me tried to hit me, but I knew it was coming. I crouched and rolled sideways to escape their circle.

“Come on, relax a little.”

The truth was, however, that I was desperate, too. I kept tossing smoke bombs. Others who heard the commotion and came to help out wound up trapped in the smoke, too.

“This one’s just for fun,” I said, taking a special ball out of my bag and lobbing it underhand along the ground. If I tossed it the normal way, I’d either come up short, or it would veer the wrong direction. This black sphere rolled over the cobblestones directly toward the campfire, as I had aimed it. When it was this dark, the enemy was bound to start up a fire for better light, I had correctly suspected. I shut my eyes, covered my ears, and crouched.

The black ball bounced into the fire, causing a blast and a flash of light. Even through my eyelids, the effect was blindingly, violently effective.

The area was plunged into chaos. Some of the men under the moonlight were coughing their lungs out from the smoke, while others held their eyes and writhed, and yet more bellowed and raged because their eardrums had ruptured. This was one of the brightblast bombs Dez made back when he was in the Million Blades. It was brutal. Good thing I’d saved this old one for a special occasion.

“There he is! Kill him!” shouted one of the men who’d recovered first, pointing at me. While I most certainly wanted to run for my life, I didn’t know how Arwin was doing yet. Including those who’d come out from the storehouse, I’d drawn the attention of more than ten of them.

“You’ve got the wrong man!” I cried, tossing another smoke bomb. But by now, they had seen through my tricks, and they broke through the wall of smoke with their hands covering their faces. Something cold ran down my spine; I had used up all of my smoke bombs. And that had been my last brightblast bomb, too.

I ran around, trying to find a way to escape, but as I was weak and slow, they quickly circled me.

“Goddammit,” I swore, throwing the empty sack. It caught a breeze and flew along the ground. The Tri-Hydra goons had me surrounded again. They were keeping their distance, wary of more smoke bombs, but with their numbers, they could easily kill me within the count of ten.

“Smoke bombs... You’re old-school,” spat the tattooed man. “You an adventurer?”

“Maybe.”

There was nothing to gain by revealing my identity. If they realized I was Matthew the playboy, blessed with a remarkable face and cock and not much else, I was done for.

“What do you think, Reggie? Should we make him squeal?” a tall peach-fuzz-sporting man asked the one with the face tattoo, who was apparently the leader.

“Kill him,” he said. “I don’t give a shit who he is. Everyone who plays games with us gets turned into a stain on the ground.”

“But if he’s an adventurer, it might mean drawing the guild’s attention to us...”

Fresh blood splattered. Reggie’s dagger had slit the throat of the tall man with him, who was holding his neck with a look of disbelieving horror before falling face down. Blood spread on the ground below him. He would die of blood loss within moments.

“We got no use for pussies here. Anyone who tries to fight us is our enemy. *Anyone.*”

Someone gulped loudly. All the others turned to me with newfound hostility, which helped to focus and minimize their fear. So how would I get out of this one?

I was just starting to steel myself for the worst when the doors to the storage depot clattered open. A man spurted blood and fell onto his back. Stepping

over him, hood over her head, was Her Highness the princess knight.

Apparently, her part of the plan had gone well.

“Get on!” she called out, escorting a gang of children onto the back of the carriage. Sarah was among them—so she was all right. In the meantime, Arwin was dispatching each of the men around the carriage in a single blow. It was incredible. Once there were no more foes in range, she hopped onto the driver’s box and whipped the horses. They whinnied and began to pull the carriage away.

“Stop them!” Reggie snarled, but no one was going to stand in the way of a two-horse carriage.

“Get on!” She steered it so that it came slightly closer to my position, which was greatly appreciated. I worked my legs as hard as I could, preparing to jump on.

“Give it here!”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Reggie grab something from one of his henchmen. It was a thrown weapon called a bola, consisting of a rope with weights on the ends that would tangle around prey when hurled. Reggie spun it around, then chucked it at the horses. Uh-oh.

I jumped up onto the carriage and kicked off of the back step, changing direction and allowing the bola to tangle around me in the air instead. I sprawled on the ground, leaving the vehicle to race onward toward the city center. Just before it vanished into the darkness, I thought I heard Arwin call out my name.

“Looks like the plan worked out,” I murmured, relieved, just before a boot kicked me. I turned, pained, to see Reggie glowering at me like a furious ape.

“You’ve really done it now.”

He advanced on me with his knife out. The bola was still tangled around me, making it hard to stand. And the men recovering from the brightblast bomb were getting up now, grabbing their metal pipes and axes and spears.

“What’s wrong? No more smoke bombs?”

“I’m all out, I’m afraid. You’ll have to wait a whole week for a restock, if you don’t mind.”

“Oh, I want them *now*.”

He kicked me again, this time on the chin. I rolled onto my back. After that was a good old gang beating. They hit me, stepped on me, and struck me as much as they wanted. While I was more than capable of withstanding it, your average person would have died several times over. They were trying to kill me, so they didn’t bother holding back at all. I curled up into a ball, but the attacks did not stop. How long were they planning to do this? It wasn’t fun to feel constant pain like this. I was almost about to cry.

My fading wits beheld Reggie and his goons staring down at me. They all had weapons in their hands, staring at me with hatred and fury. This was the end. If I bit someone’s neck, would I be able to take one of them down with me? I tried to sit up, to perform some final act of resistance.

“Stop!”

A fierce blade flashed and swept through like a gust of wind. The goons screamed and fell to the ground, revealing none other than the Crimson Princess Knight.

She was nothing like them. Three went down in an instant. Even Reggie started backing away, realizing the tables were turning on him.

Then Arwin pulled out a small whistle and blew hard. The familiar pitch made his face pale: It was the call to the guards.

“Oh, fuck you!” he wailed, and the rest of the group promptly split.

“Are you all right?” she asked, cutting through the bola rope and extending a hand to me. I was briefly dumbfounded but collected my wits and grabbed her hand to get to my feet. “You look awful. Can you stand?”

I meant to say, *I’m in tip-top shape, actually*, but what came out instead was “Why did you come back?”

“To help you, of course,” she said, as though it should be obvious. “I never abandon a companion.”

I felt laughter bubbling up inside me. It wasn't like me to feel this giddy. She did that for a worthless reprobate like me? Clearly, I was getting soft in my older age.

"The children are safe now."

"Glad to hear it," I said. It had been worth getting my ass kicked, then. I still would have avoided it, if I could.

"They're done for now. This little incident got the guards involved. They're going to take care of Tri-Hydra for good. That should improve things around here at least a little."

There were only so many bribes the guards could accept. And at least some of them were getting a take from underworld competitors like the Spotted Wolves and Devil's Alliance. While they'd normally keep their distance, evidence of Tri-Hydra's human trafficking was a good chance for them to suck up to the power structure. Arwin leading a righteous charge was the perfect opportunity for them to make their move. It wasn't justice and righteousness that truly solved the issue, but politics and power struggles. Even still, they were moving a little too quickly. Someone had lit a fire under the guards' asses. Perhaps a softy of a grandfather, moved by his granddaughter's tears.

He wouldn't care what happened to a whore or her daughter, but he didn't want his own granddaughter to think less of him. Good to know some folks had that sort of strong moral fiber.

"...Where'd you get the whistle?"

"I borrowed it from a guard nearby."

"So you're swapping spit?"

"Don't be stupid. I wiped it off first." She sulked. It was adorable. "What...? Why are you smiling?"

"I was just realizing, I think it's thanks to you."

"What is?"

"That I realized I might be a slightly better person than I thought I was."

I left the rest in Arwin's hands and returned to my pad. I was hurting all over,

but thanks to my natural toughness, I was at least able to regain my range of movement after a few minutes of rest.

Polly had probably cried herself to sleep, and once she saw my face, she would cling to me and start wailing and whining again, I was sure. The thought was like a bucket of cold water over the fiery emotions that had just been rekindled in my heart for the first time in years. I quietly checked the door, which was unlocked, then lit a nearby candle.

The room was an unholy mess. Chairs were flipped over, clothes and underwear had been pulled out of the drawers, and pieces of a broken flower vase littered the floor along with a selection of copper and silver coins. She must have thrown another fit. Exhausted, I stooped down to pick them up anyway—and that was when I noticed something wrong with the wall.

There was a crushed piece of fruit stuck to it. The red juice had splattered all over, it seemed, but I soon realized that wasn't exactly right. Although it was very messy, it was actually writing.

Don't leave me, Matthew.

I felt a sudden chill. The fruit was unable to maintain a grip against the pull of its weight and slid off the wall. I backed away until I bumped against the side of the bed. The blanket in the middle was rounded. Fearing the worst, I pulled it back. Polly's body was not there. Instead, all my clothes had been tossed into a bunch and torn to shreds by a knife of some kind. There was even a red stain on them like a burn mark where she had hit her own hand, by the look of it.

"This looks bad."

It was unlike her usual fits and crying outbursts. Polly was not well. The delicate balance in her soul had fallen apart. If I didn't find her, there was no telling what she might do. I headed back out to look for her.

"Where are you, Polly? Come on out. I'm sorry! Let's talk this over," I called out as I trotted through the streets, but I did not find her. Once the morning arrived, I told the guards and Vanessa about Polly and asked them to contact me if they found her.

Between the exhaustion and lack of sleep, I had difficulty dragging myself

back to the room. I knew I needed to continue cleaning up, but I found my feet carrying me toward the bed. I pushed the pile of tattered rags that used to be clothes out of the way and collapsed. There were so many things to do, but the first one was to find Polly. She was no longer around. I felt lonely. I felt sad. Of course I was worried for her. But just as much as those feelings, if not more...I felt relieved. With that thought, I fell into a deep, deep sleep.

I went to Vanessa a few days later. She just shook her head.

“Nope, nothing. I went through my connections but couldn’t find anything.”

“So did I. I asked all the other prostitutes, but none of them have seen her.”

Instead, the story about what happened to Sarah had spread. The whores’ information network was surprisingly wide and quick. There were rules in their world, and Polly had broken them. She wouldn’t be able to work in this town anymore. If she tried to open for business, they’d gang up on her.

“Now, this isn’t confirmed,” Vanessa prefaced, “but the night she went missing, someone said they saw a girl who looked like her getting into a carriage...”

“To leave town? Or was she being kidnapped? By who?”

“I have no idea.”

It had been at a distance, and before the sun was truly up, so even the style of the carriage was unclear. All they knew was that she was heading out of town.

Children weren’t the only targets for kidnappers. If anything, adult women had a higher demand. If she’d been abducted by someone, not only did I not know who or where they were, but it had been too long by now. Polly was surely not in the city anymore. She might even be dead. Poor Polly. She was a good girl. Stupid, foolish, naive, and lazy, maybe, but with a good, kind heart.

“Where could she have gone?” Vanessa murmured, burying her face in her hands as she wept. I put an arm around her shoulder. I was jealous of her purity. No matter how often and hard I thought about Polly, I was unable to shed a single tear.

“Yeah, that’s right. Poor Polly,” I said, but even that small condolence

required some effort to compose.

Once Vanessa had recovered somewhat, I decided to take my leave. "I'll see you later. Let's not give up hope for her, yeah?"

I stepped out the door of the appraisal office and sneezed, shivering. It was a cold one today. Too much had happened recently, and I was tired. I wanted to lie in bed all day long, but that wasn't an option. I still had one last job to do. I headed out, ate a late breakfast, and waited upstairs in the Adventurers Guild building. I was dozing off in the meeting room when there was a knock at the door. It was soft and hesitant. Arwin had her sword on her belt, but her usual armor was nowhere to be seen.

"I'm sorry for the abrupt summons. I wanted to confirm something with you," I said.

Arwin flushed. "You mean our little agreement? Of course I haven't forgotten about the...uh..."

"Oh, not that part," I said quickly, before she could start stammering. "I'm very grateful that you're so proactively interested, but no, I'm referring to the stage *before* that part, I suppose. Just double-checking."

We left the guild and walked side by side. Of course, given how much she stood out, the princess knight had her hooded cloak on.

"As a matter of fact, the issue with Oscar is all cleared up. He won't be coming back. I still don't have a lead on the jade necklace, however, but I'm looking for it. Give me a bit more time for that one."

"I see," she said, rather absentmindedly, considering how good the news was.

We left the main street and turned down a smaller one, the environs growing worse with each successive turn. Eventually, we were in the Cockatrice, a neighborhood next to Rockeater Snake Street and the home turf of the Devil's Alliance. This was our destination. Around the corner, it was impossible to miss the tall walls. It was the hideout of Devil's Alliance. Naturally, a number of armed thugs were milling about in front of the mansion.

"Look there," I pointed out. When Arwin saw it, her eyes went wide.

Small children were loaded up on a carriage with metal bars on it. Their hands were tied up, and they wore matching crude robes and expressions of absolute despair, instilled in them by the wicked men who were in control. Arwin placed a hand on her sword. I put my hand on top of hers.

“It’s not a crime. What they’re doing is *legal*. Those children were sold by their parents.”

Slavery was a lucrative business, and there were always parents who were willing to sell off their children, here and elsewhere around the world. Arwin was stunned.

“Tri-Hydra went to desperate measures because they needed the money,” I continued, “which is why they were wiped out. And once a group is gone, another one will move in to take over their business. That one act won’t do a thing for the state of law and order around here.”

She lifted her gaze wearily. “You brought me over here just to show me this?”

I shook my head. “This is just the prelude of the prelude. If anything, it’s me showing you this to keep you from sticking your neck down the wrong path.”

Things wouldn’t coincidentally work out like last time. We could both have easily died.

“C’mon, let me show you the next thing.” I grabbed her hand and pulled her along. Arwin kept turning back to look over her shoulder until we were out of the Cockatrice.

April came running up and waving as we reached the eastern gate of Gray Neighbor.

“You’re late!”

“Don’t be like that. We’re here on *our* time.” I patted the sulking girl on the head.

“Stop! You’ll mess up my hair,” she said, slapping my hand out of the way and fixing her hairstyle. “I can’t believe this.”

“Sorry, sorry. My fault.”

She took an uncharacteristically serious tack. “Sarah and Maggie said you

risked your lives to save her.”

“It was Her Highness here who did the saving.”

“No, they said you were a decoy and got beat up by the bad guys to distract them.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m a bad fighter. I can just take a lot of damage, that’s all.”

“Hiyah!” Out of nowhere, April shoved me. I lost my balance and fell on my ass.

“The hell was that for?”

“For earlier.” She smoothed out her hair. “You really are a weakling. Thank you, *Mister Matthew*,” she added, giggling.

I smirked and patted the dust off of my butt.

“Oh! There she is!” said a voice.

It was Maggie and Sarah, watching us from a distance. They were all dressed up for travel, and there was a nearby carriage heading for the next town over.

“Thank you so much for what you did. You’re just as strong as you are beautiful. I was amazed.”

It seemed that both mother and daughter were quite taken with the princess knight and her prowess.

“Sarah!” snapped her mother, but Arwin said she didn’t mind.

“So you’re leaving, Melinda? Or is it Maggie?”

“After everything that’s happened, yes. Plus, her father is searching for us... Matthew said the sooner we left, the better. And he paid for the fare...”

By leaving, they were also escaping a violent, neglectful husband and father. I’d never met him, but they said he had a mark like a burn scar above his right eye. Even if her husband wasn’t in the picture, they weren’t going to last long in a place like this. She and her daughter would have more hope for the future if they went elsewhere.

After taking a ride to the next town and walking a bit farther, they’d reach the

border of the kingdom. Even adventurers wouldn't find it easy to cross something like that in pursuit of the two.

"Take care of yourselves. Here's a last present."

I gave her a cloth bag. Maggie looked inside and gasped. I'd scrounged up all the little coins I could from my place. It might add up to one or two gold coins if traded in.

"Th-this much?"

"Polly did a terrible thing to you two. Think of it as a payment for the emotional damage. She couldn't be here, but she apologized to you over and over again."

"I forgive her!" Sarah announced. I cracked a smile.

"And this is from me," April said, handing her a large gold coin. It could be exchanged for a good ten or so of the regular kind. Rich people were just built different. She also gave a book to Sarah, one for little children to help them learn to read. It had helped me, too. "Read this and study a lot. When things have settled down, write me a letter as best you can. It doesn't have to be perfect."

"Aw, I have to study?" the little girl moaned.

"I'll be waiting for your letter," April stressed. Sarah glumly acquiesced.

It was time for the carriage to leave. Sarah leaned out the window and waved until they were out of sight. April rushed up toward the gate, waving back, and shouted, "Remember to write!" one last time.

Arwin watched her go and murmured, "Is this the prelude you were talking about?"

"That's right," I said. "What you destroyed was a miserable life of empty waiting, where a mother reacts to every gust of the curtains in the window hoping against hope that her daughter will return. And what you protected was the right of a little girl who had a frightening dream to take her favorite stuffed toy, snuggle into her mother's bed, and fall asleep to her lullabies. And I, for one, think that's way cooler than all that shit about justice and order."

“...Indeed,” Arwin agreed. “That is better. It is...cool? Yes. Cool.”

“With that said,” I continued, “what I wanted to confirm with you was whether or not our agreement is still valid, considering that it didn’t turn out the way you ideally hoped it would.”

I gave her a pressing look. Arwin seemed surprised at first, clenched her hands together, then exhaled and slumped her shoulders. She shook her head.

“No, it’s fine. This is well and good. It’s...for the best.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that,” I said, relieved. “Now it means I get to slam it in you without that nagging in the back of my mind. I’ve never had the honor of taking the virginity of such a beautiful girl. It’s got me so hard, I can barely think.”

Arwin blushed at my outrageous frankness.

“I—I am aware. I will not protest our deal now that it is done. So—”

I cut her off. “But I’ve got my own circumstances, and I’d appreciate it if you waited just a bit first. It’ll only take another hundred years. Maybe two. You can do your own thing until then.”

“Huh?”

“Make sure your body’s all recovered first. I’m sure you’ll make for a splendid queen.”

And with that, I turned my back on the thoroughly befuddled princess and walked away.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Kept Man Knows His Place in the World

In the stories, you always have characters getting knocked out, then waking up imprisoned in some unfamiliar location. In my case, however, because I was so damned tough, I didn't fall unconscious. I was just gagged and tied up, at which point Polly and her male companions shoved me into a carriage. After a bumpy journey, they pushed me out in front of a mansion in the upper-class quarter in the north of the city.

They took me into a basement and tied me to a chair. There were bloodstains on the stone walls and floor. I didn't know what rich person owned this home, but they had some real sick taste building a room expressly for hurting people. There was a lock on the iron door we walked through, too. I closed my eyes as I waited, because my head was hurting, and I was awakened by a bucket of water dumped over my head. I saw an unfamiliar nobleman, a number of what I took to be his private guards, and Polly.

"Are you awake now? It's been a whole year. I've been dying to see you again."

She was confident, arrogant, in control. And her way of speaking was so intimate. She had short blond hair, freckles, and attractively off-kilter features. But she was completely unlike the Polly I knew. She could cut and dye her hair, but her personality was not something that should change at a whim.

"It has been a long time. I was surprised to see how different you are."

"I bet you were," Polly said, tapping her foot confidently. "This is me. The *real* me. Look. Aren't I amazing?"

It was all a big show. She did a little dance, practically bursting into song.

“I’m disappointed,” I said, making a point to sigh. There were black spots around the skin of her neck. “Even *you’ve* sunk to taking them, too.”

A year ago, Polly had been a very gloomy woman. She drank too much, threw fits, and raged inappropriately. But she never stooped to taking drugs.

“It feels so good, though. It’s *incredible*. I can’t believe how stupid I was, fretting over this stuff all that time. And the same thing for my mind. I always felt so foggy before, but one little taste and I’m as sharp as a razor.”

She lifted up a bag about as big as her face. “What do you say, Matthew?”

“No thanks,” I said firmly. The princess knight wasn’t the only one I’d seen get hooked on the stuff. Going back to the Million Blades—no, from the very start of being a mercenary—I’d seen many, many stupid people ruin their lives with it. It’s why I hated the stuff so much.

“Aw, too bad.”

She gave me a mischievous smile, stuck a finger in the bag, and licked the white powder that came out with it. Her expression turned to ecstasy. With the way she looked, I could guess she’d gotten hooked on more than just Release.

“Where have you been, and with who?”

Polly was not able to survive on her own. There must have been someone with her.

“A prince,” she said. I thought the stuff had already gone to her head, but there was a definite look of admiration, if not full-on worship, in her eyes. “He showed up right away after you left me. And then he saved me from this horrible, depraved city. My prince.”

“Ah, you mean him?”

I glanced at the man standing behind Polly. He was just over thirty, I gauged. He sported finely done red hair, a stony but regal face, a well-built body, and quality clothes.

“Your tastes have changed, I see. Are you into flimsy little chicken-men now?”

“Ah. This must be the wisecracker I’ve heard so much about,” the man said, strutting pompously forward. “Doesn’t have a whiff of good breeding about

him. A common, low-talent gutter rat.”

“And that still makes me better than you—a former nobleman of Mactarode.”

The man instantly paled.

“You have the better of me,” he said.

“It wouldn’t be a very funny joke. You might be trying to hide your insignia, but those clothes are very similar to the kind my princess knight wears. It’s not a very common fashion around these parts. And your tailoring is very precise.”

That made it easy enough to guess what he was: a former noble of the kingdom of Mactarode. If not a royal family member, then at least an earl. That would start to explain why I’d been abducted.

“So I’m bait to lure out Arwin, then.”

She was probably an impediment to some scheme to seize the inheritance to the kingdom. But if they fought her directly, they would never win. This flimsy little chicken-man might have a bit of skill at fighting, but Arwin was easily miles better.

“Your hunch is correct. It’s true,” the man admitted, for some reason.

Polly took it upon herself to introduce him. “This is Roland William Mactarode. As you guessed, he is the son of a marquess of Mactarode. And he’s going to be inheriting the title soon.”

“That’s what I figured. I could tell by his gawping face. Like a goblin’s pimped ass.”

The goblin’s...excuse me, the flimsy little chicken-man punched me.

“You shouldn’t insult him. He’s the princess knight’s cousin and one of the potential heirs to the throne of Mactarode. I’m sorry for his vile manners, Lord Roland,” Polly said, clearly careful not to allow her prince to get upset. He was the third son of a marquess, and because all his brothers died in the great monster swarm, he was now the heir.

“*Former* throne.” I snorted. “The country’s long gone.”

This time, he deigned to kick me in the stomach. The chair flipped backward

with me in it, and Polly had to put me back up straight. Thanks, sweetheart. This will really make it easier for the next blow to land.

“I have a question for His Highness. Why did you save Polly?”

She had confused herself into thinking I abandoned her, then run around the town in a deranged state. She must have looked like a total mess.

“It was coincidence. Or perhaps you might call it fate,” he said, explaining that his carriage had been traveling at night when it ran into a screaming woman. “She was in a dreadful state. I took her into my custody, thinking she had met with some disaster. And she seemed to know the city well, so I thought she might make for an effective guide. On top of that, once I truly got a good look at her, I realized how fine her features are.”

Polly blushed. So this was how Polly the dreamer had met this flimsy little chicken-man and seen him as a prince.

“Was that the point when you pickled her in drugs?”

I could see right through His Highness’s scheme. She was an experiment to confirm the effects of the drug. An uneducated, common whore was the perfect subject for that. And the tests had gone so well that he had taken to using her as a servant of sorts. Once he was done with her, she could easily be discarded. A very convenient tool.

“She seemed to have lost her confidence after you abandoned her. So it was a little *pick-me-up*. A small amount is totally harmless.”

“Yes, that’s exactly the sort of thing someone would say when they’re shoving the other person into a bottomless swamp.”

Just a little, only a pinch, a very tiny sample. I’ll be fine. Other people manage to do it fine. Which is a funny thing to say, because if you slip at the edge of a cliff, the only place to go is down. It’s what happened to some princess knight somewhere, I heard. Morons.

“Well, it’s very laudable of you to offer your benevolence to a passing woman, when your country has crashed down around your ears.”

“It has not fallen. Mactarode will return. It will! It shall be reborn as a new

country, under the watchful eye of our almighty God.”

“Yeah, you kinda need that to happen, huh?” I said. He was coming to another country and wasting his time with schemes like this one. Clearly he was just a pampered rich boy with nothing better to do. “You really didn’t need to take me hostage, though. There are plenty of assassins you can hire.”

“Simply killing her is not the point.”

Of course, anyone who stood to gain from Arwin’s death would be a suspect. If played poorly, Roland’s claim to the throne itself might be endangered. Having her eaten by monsters in the dungeon would be best, but she had continued to survive her adventuring, much to Roland’s disappointment.

“I was originally going to have *her* pickled in drugs a year ago, to make her a slave to the substance. Then I was going to offer her more in exchange for the secret treasure.”

“.....”

So that was what brought this fine gentleman here to our pleasant town. What a wonderful idea. I hoped he died choking on his own farts.

“But that plan is no longer necessary. Which is to say that she found *you*—her stray dog.”

That had caused the stock of the Crimson Princess Knight’s name to drop among the surviving nobles from her kingdom. Some of them even discussed stripping her of her claim to the throne. Not that they had the right, but they were pompous enough to think they could do it. Burn in hell, the whole lot of you.

“That is why I had license to ignore her. But the situation has changed.”

He went on to explain that a number of other claimants had suddenly died, meaning that Arwin’s claim was coming back into favor among a faction of the surviving nobles.

“Unbelievable! How can that harlot be the future queen?!”

“She’s still better than an incompetent and a flimsy little chicken-man.”

He hit me again. It was bare-handed, so it didn’t do any damage or hurt, but it

did feel humiliating.

“Are you sure you aren’t getting ahead of yourself with all this talk about inheriting the throne and future queens? Remember, your land is completely overrun with monsters and their shit and piss. Haven’t you ever heard the saying *Don’t count your chickens before they’ve hatched?*”

“Silence!”

“And first of all, doesn’t restoring the kingdom require conquering the Millennium of Midnight Sun and gaining the treasure at its core? If you exile the princess knight before that happens, how are you going to get it? Are *you* going into that dungeon?”

“That is not the only land in existence. There are many ways to restore one’s kingdom. Many that are much more practical than driving away an army of monsters, in fact.”

I had to agree with him there. I’d been saying as much, over and over again.

“And what do you plan to do with her when she comes here? Kill her?”

“I will do no such thing.” Roland chuckled. “I simply want to confirm the hideous rumors about her.”

“You may think you’re being clever, but your bottom half is very honest. That member of yours is standing at attention already.”

His fist flew once more. This was the fourth time.

“Polly! Cut off his cock!”

“Why, how can you suggest such a thing? It’s so frightful, I’m already shrinking up.”

Polly gazed at my crotch with thinly disguised fondness. “It seems to be quite lively to me.”

“Alas, my little boy down there is in his rebellious phase. Won’t listen to his father.”

“Then I suppose we’ll have to help him *leave the nest*, don’t you think?”

“Well, he might a naughty boy who rebels against his father, but we’re still

connected at the hip, you might say. Sometimes, a little rebellion can be endearing. You adored him in the past, too, remember?”

“Then answer me this,” she said, her eyes suddenly pointed as harpoons. “Where’s Tri-Hydra’s Release now?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Do you remember Oscar? Vanessa’s old flame.”

“Ah yes, I recall that name.” But I couldn’t recall his face.

“He embezzled a portion of Tri-Hydra’s stock of Release for himself in order to pass it on to Lord Roland. But just before the deal was about to take place, Oscar simply vanished. Soon after that, Tri-Hydra itself fell apart, and now we can’t get that Release.”

“Probably off cavorting on his own now, hmm?”

“That’s what we thought. So we spent the last year looking all over, but we haven’t been able to find him.”

“No luck, huh? Shame.”

I was about to tell her to keep her spirits up when a tremendous *crash* cut me off.

Polly had smashed her mace against the wall. The tip wedged itself in, sending flakes of stone crumbling to the floor. As I’d thought when she hit me earlier, even a ball of iron like that couldn’t have that much force with a woman’s arm behind it. It was probably an effect of the drug that was drawing out more strength than she should have. The flimsy little chicken-man’s experiments were working.

“Yes, we failed,” Polly said, grinning. “This town is the only one left. I’m guessing someone already killed Oscar. He was involved in lots of bad stuff, so I’m sure he made plenty of enemies.”

“Maybe.”

“But there are no signs of a new flood of Release on the market. Lord Roland has thus come to suspect that his stash is hidden somewhere in this city.”

“My condolences.”

So there was some treasure trove of drugs wasting away in this town, eh? “Give me a break, would you? I wasn’t close with Oscar, and I don’t know where his Release is. It’s true—swear to the gods.”

“When did you become so devout? You used to hate priests. Whenever we walked past a church, you’d either kick it, spit on it, or take a piss on the wall,” she said.

It was so unfortunate when people remembered your youthful indiscretions.

“But it seems like you really don’t know,” she continued. “That’s all right. What about the amount *you* stole, though?”

For an instant, I was completely lost.

“You’re the only one it could be. Tri-Hydra’s warehouse was completely packed with Release a year ago. But by the time the guards arrived, it was on fire. Everything went up in smoke. But a portion of the contents was gone. Basically all of the survivors were caught, so the only ones who could have taken the stuff out of there were the princess knight and you.”

“Ah, that,” I said, suddenly understanding. “That’s the space where they were holding the kids. You know they were involved in kidnapping, too, right? It was our very own Arwin who rescued the tykes.”

“Liar,” Polly spat. “We have evidence. There’s been a small amount of Release circulating lately. And it’s the same formula as what Tri-Hydra was making.”

I was stunned.

“You’re the one leaking it, aren’t you?”

“No, no. It’s not me. I honestly don’t know what you’re talking about,” I protested. More Release on the streets? I’d just killed Terry from Tiger Hand. Was it the last of his stock? Or someone else’s?

“If you’re going to keep playing dumb, you’ll pay a painful price. Not a bad one, though. It’ll give you the shivers.”

“Did your tastes change over the last year?” I wondered. “You used to love being the horsey.”

“I still do. But I’ve found that I like holding the whip as much I like doing the bucking.”

That was a game I didn’t quite enjoy so much. “I don’t find it a turn-on to be tormented by women. Or doing the tormenting, either.”

“That’s funny, because we’ve got someone here who’s just itching for the chance to inflict some pain on *you*.”

Polly clapped her hands. A man in his early twenties stepped forward. He had dirty leather armor, cracked boots, and leather gloves. He looked like an adventurer, but he was holding a spiked metal club and a gruesome-looking blade—tools of a different trade. Had he undergone a class change to a torturer? Hey, jobs were hard to come by these days.

“You Matthew?” He leered maliciously. “Finally, the day I get to kill you. It’s been a long, loooong wait.”

“I’m sorry, have we met before? Oh, are you that monkey whose food I accidentally stole four years ago? Sorry, I just remember being *very* hungry that day.”

He hit me with a backhand.

“My name is Norman! You killed my brothers, Nathan and Neil! Nash told me about it before he disappeared! You killed him, too, didn’t you?!”

It made sense, but at the same time, it was infuriating. That Beardo was going to have to buy me a drink for not mentioning this little detail.

“Now I’m the last of us four brothers...but God’s watching out for me. He’s seen to it that I can avenge my family. It’s a relief, I’ll tell you that.”

“Speaking of relief, I’m glad to get confirmation you’re the last. Would you mind passing on a message to dear old Mummy and Daddy? Tell them, just... slow down a little, maybe?”

Sparks and stars flew from my eyes. Between the backhand and this hit, he knew how to throw a punch.

“If you don’t tell us what we want to know, he’s going to pull out your teeth and flay your face. Isn’t that scary? What’s your plan now?”

“I don’t have a plan. I can’t tell you something I don’t know,” I said, shrugging off Polly’s threat. “Here’s a warning. You’d better cut off ties with these guys right now. Once you’ve made a terrible mistake, it’ll already be too late. Have you forgotten what happened last year?”

The smile vanished from her face. “You mean about Maggie?”

“That’s right. You sold her daughter, Sarah, to wicked men for a paltry sum. It put her through a hellish experience. You regretted that, didn’t you? And you immediately drank down all the money you got for it. You came back clinging to me and weeping.”

“That’s right. I did do that,” she murmured, head downcast. “I was a fool. I sold Sarah away without a thought in my mind.”

“You said yourself that you’re smarter now. Everyone makes mistakes. What’s important is what you learn from them. So you should know by now what the right choice is here.”

“Yes, Matthew. You’re right about that,” she said, nodding. “So you see—”

She raised her head. I shivered; her smile was so radiant that it was totally inappropriate for the situation. It was a pure smile of absolute, unwavering belief in her own righteousness.

“This time, I made *sure* she couldn’t be sold to anyone.”

My mind went blank. I understood what Polly was actually saying—and completely refused to comprehend the implication.

“Here, look.”

She stuck a hand into her bag and tossed an item at my feet. The breath caught in my throat. It had been a long time since I cursed my intuition for being so accurate.

It was a child’s hand, cut off at the wrist.

“About a month ago, while I was on the hunt for Oscar, I just happened to spot her with Maggie. They were so happy together. And wouldn’t it be so sad if someone like me ripped them apart again? So I made sure they could never be separated,” she said gleefully. Never before in my life had I felt such a gut-

churning revulsion toward a woman I'd once fallen in love with.

"After I cut off their hands, I had them bound together. Isn't that beautiful? Now they can never be pulled apart," she continued, squirming and intoxicated by her own speech. She didn't notice that Norman and even her beloved prince were looking at her with quiet consternation.

"The problem is, I didn't stop the bleeding right. So they both died. Oh, don't worry. I made sure they had a grave dug. Both in the same one, of course. Now mother and daughter will be together forever. I mean, isn't that just beautiful?"

I heard her laugh. I'd heard that laugh a year ago, too. She had been gloomy and weak willed and constantly apologizing, but I had liked the way she smiled. What had changed her? The pain of her past? Roland? The drugs? Me? All I knew for certain was that the Polly I knew was nowhere inside this woman.

The hand had been salted so that it retained its shape. The skin was discolored, but I could still make out clear ink stains and pen marks on the fingers. The image of the girl's happy, expectant face flitted through my mind.

"It's a shame, Polly." I sighed. "You really have picked up some nasty interests."

She didn't seem to hear me. Polly was off dancing like she was in a stage musical. I suppose it would be one about the devil who devoured a poor, innocent mother and child.

"Shall we end the reminiscence there?" Roland spoke up. "You've heard the situation. If you do not speak honestly, you will suffer the same fate as that unfortunate girl."

Norman joined the conversation, too. "It won't be an easy death, either. I'm gonna make it slow and painful, until you finally give up and *beg* for me to kill you."

This was getting stupid.

"First of all, the only person I beg for anything is the princess knight, and I say, 'Please, please, *please*, won't you raise my allowance?'"

"And I already told you no."

We all spun around. It was *her* voice, though she should not have been there.

The metal door was open. A large, thuggish man came sliding through the doorway headfirst down the steps leading to the basement. And striding over his unconscious body into the room was none other than the beautiful princess knight herself: Arwin Mabel Primrose Mactarode.

“Learn to take a hint, Matthew.”

Arwin surveyed the room. Her brows furrowed with pained distaste when she saw the little severed hand. She said a brief prayer, then dropped her cloak on top of it.

When she saw who else was in the room, she said drearily, “Hello again, Roland. I did not expect to meet you in a place like this.”

“Impossible— What—? How...?” he stammered, flabbergasted.

“He stands out,” she replied, jutting her fine chin in my direction. “Even in the early morning, people are watching. A beggar saw him being loaded onto a carriage. He didn’t see Matthew’s face, but he said, ‘There’s only one wimp in this town with a great big frame who can’t muster a decent fight against a woman’s scrawny arms.’”

“Rude,” I said, flushing.

Arwin silenced me with a look, then turned to Roland. “I’d heard you went missing about a year ago. I was certain you had knocked on the door of some church somewhere and taken the cloth...and *this* is the result of converting to worship of the sun god? Pathetic.”

Excuse me?

“Silence!” Roland raged.

“It was just like after the disaster, too. Some people criticized you for abandoning the faith of your ancestors, but I know the pain of losing your family. I did not speak up against it, because I thought you deserved to know peace in your soul. But instead, you abandoned your duties and became infatuated with your new faith. That is why your father gave up on you.”

“Gave up on him...? I thought he was supposed to be the heir to the

marquess's title," I interjected.

Arwin shook her head. "There was a time when that might have been true. But he was disinherited after giving away his family's heirloom jewels to the sun god's church. He's just Roland now, nothing more."

Ah, so a literal former noble. He'd been taken in by religion and lost the way of his life. Well, no sympathy from me.

"There is no point in simply *having* family heirlooms. Now I can hear the voice of the sun god!"

Many of the people propagating the religion of the sun god were scum who forced their believers through vicious discipline so that they could have so-called "revelations," causing their deaths and bilking them of huge sums of money. It was all clearly insane, but there were always more fools out there looking to be scammed.

"I can't imagine that it's a very pleasant thing to hear." I wished I could forget it, but that wasn't an option for me. It made me depressed.

"You must be Arwin, then," Polly interrupted cheerfully. It was as though she hadn't heard anything that had just been said. And she probably hadn't. Even when she was with me, Polly never listened to the things that didn't suit her. She was circling around Arwin with eyes bright and fascinated.

"You're so beautiful. I should've known the princess knight would be in a league of her own. I'm sorry, though. We don't have your invitation yet. Maybe to the *next* ball."

"Ah yes. That was a custom, wasn't it?" Arwin said, recalling information that was no longer relevant to her situation. "An invitation to royalty can't be delivered with a simple letter, of course. Either the sender or event planner must come in person, or a trusted servant of good breeding must be sent. And consider this a friendly warning: Don't act based on incomplete, half-gleaned knowledge. You'll only embarrass yourself."

"Oooh, yes, clearly Her Great and High Royalness is so different from us common folks. I'm already learning so much from her radiant example," Polly babbled. She walked around my back and pressed the edge of her dagger to my

throat. “Well, maybe if I ask humbly enough, she’ll deign to reply. Put down your weapon, or you’ll never again know the embrace of lover boy here.”

Arwin pursed her lips and frowned. She looked rather perturbed, but I had been with her long enough to know that this was her angry face.

“You know, I don’t think I actually introduced myself. I’m Polly, Matthew’s former girlfriend,” she continued obliviously, cradling my head. “How are you holding up, by the way? Matthew’s a real monster in the sack, isn’t he? It’s the worst when you’ve got work in the morning and he won’t let you sleep.”

“.....”

Ah yes. Arwin’s anger was definitely rising.

“Do you think I’m only bluffing? That I wouldn’t hurt an old lover of mine? Well, too bad.” She tapped the flat of the knife against my throat. If she wanted to do it, she could cut my throat open in an instant. “Drop your weapon!”

Arwin ignored her threat and snapped, “He is not my lover.”

Polly made a face of bafflement. “Then what is he?”

“He is my kept man.”

Silence settled upon the basement. It was broken by uproarious laughter.

“Oh my gosh, that’s too good. Turns out the Crimson Princess Knight is kind of a freak! I’ve heard the saying that a hero has seven wives, but I guess this would be the opposite of that,” Polly said, clutching her sides.

“You have truly sunk low, Princess Arwin,” Roland said. He rang a little bell, causing armed men to come rushing into the basement. Every last one of them looked like a thug or a failed adventurer. There were over twenty of them—a bad sign. Arwin would not be beaten in a one-on-one fight, but being surrounded by sheer numbers in an enclosed space like this was asking for trouble.

But worst of all was simply being stuck in a room with so many disgusting, sweaty men at once. I felt sick to my stomach.

“You have cavorted with common gutter trash and disgraced your nobility. As I thought, this idea of restoring the kingdom through the treasure from the

dungeon was nothing but a dream within a dream.”

“Indeed,” Arwin agreed. “You are correct. I have fallen into disgrace. I was not as brave or as strong as I imagined myself to be. I was weak, cowardly, mean, slothful, ignorant, and unstable. I’ve lost much that I can never get back. If I could go back to my old self, I would stop her by force. *Face reality*, I’d say.”

But then she broke into a wide, impudent grin. Yes, impudent.

“There are some things, however, that I’ve only seen because I’ve been disgraced and sunken into the world of the rough-and-tumble. The old me may have been a pure, regal, and beautiful princess, but some things I only have today because I got down and waded in the muck.”

“Such as?” I prompted. She smiled coldly.

“Who said that I came alone?”

There was a huge *crash* above. The basement shook, and dust fell from the ceiling.

“What was that? What’s happening?” wailed Roland, pale faced and down on all fours.

A tough-looking man came tumbling down the stairs to the basement. Then another, then another. All of them had been punched in the gut. One looked more like a knight, but his armor was caved in, impacting his flesh. It was madness. Irregular footsteps approached.

Sure enough, struggling down the steps on his short legs was the bearded one. And he wore a horned helmet, dark brown armor, and a simple war hammer called Number 31—a weapon of his own design. Even a massive dragon would cave in where that thing hit it. Dez, “the Mobile Fortress,” was arriving fully armed for battle.

Since the Tower of the Sun God, he’d shoved all his weapons into the back of his storage space, since he didn’t want to see something he couldn’t make anymore. And now he had pulled them back out. You just had to laugh.

“Stop grinnin’ at me, you big creep.”

“You look sharper than you have in years. Got a date with your wife tonight?”

“Keep laughing, slimeball,” he grumbled, though his heart wasn’t in it. Dez pounded a man who came swinging at him, then tore the rope holding me captive with his bare hands. I turned around and saw Arwin locked in combat with some of Roland’s goons. As I feared, she was struggling with their numbers.

“Go on and help her,” I urged.

“You sure?” he asked, meaning that I would be in danger if he stepped away. But that wasn’t a problem.

“If you let them put a single scratch on Arwin, I’ll pull out every last whisker on your face.”

“All right.”

He put one last punch in my gut for good luck, then lumbered off to help. His stride was slow but sure. Everyone in a straight line between him and his destination was bowled off their feet. He struck one man with the hammer, then picked him up one-handed and tossed him like a stone at the man fighting with Arwin. Someone came charging right at Dez, only for the war hammer to turn him into a nice dish of mincemeat. He had destroyed over a thousand monsters without batting an eye. Even in the old days, I don’t know that I could have beaten him. Some of the men started to run.

“Him! Take that one prisoner!” Roland shrieked, ruining my plan to stand back and watch in safety. Now the brutes were coming toward me instead. Shit, shit, shit.

I fled, but they soon had me backed against the wall. It was me, two men as tall as I was, and Norman.

“You ready for this?” he rasped, breathing heavily, pointing a chipped sword at me instead of his whip.

“Didn’t you hear the man’s orders? He said to take me prisoner, not to kill me.”

“I don’t care!”

I just barely ducked out of the way of his slash. The sword hit the stone wall,

adding another chip to its count. Norman shook his numbed wrist, but his rage was so great that his assault did not stop.

“Vengeance for my brothers!”

I managed to leap out of the way again, but this time I lost balance. The two large men held me down from the sides.

I couldn’t shake them loose. Norman wore a cruel smile. He lifted his weapon.

Uh-oh. Sweat flooded my pores.

He was close enough that he couldn’t miss. The sword grazed my side and stuck into the wall, fully still. Norman stared wide-eyed, open-mouthed, and collapsed to the floor. There was a diagonal slash on his back that spurted blood.

“It’s a real shame, it is,” said the warrior spitefully. “If it weren’t for Her Highness’s request, I’d have killed you myself.”

“Oh, so you’re here too, Ralphie!”

It was Arwin’s party companion, Ralph.

“It’s not Ralphie. I am a warrior in service of Her Highness. I would never save a wretch like you of my own accord.”

With Norman down, the two other men fled. I slumped weakly against the wall. Ralphie stared down at me with cold distaste.

“No, I’m not talking about me. I mean that you came for Arwin’s sake.”

“Of course I did,” he said indignantly. “My sword exists for her benefit. It’s that simple.”

“I love you, Ralph.”

“Don’t be disgusting.”

“C’mon, let me show a little appreciation. I’m not gonna bite.”

“Enough jokes.” He grabbed my arm and stood me up. “There are no foes left above. Go on up and get out of my way.”

“Sure, sure.”

I wasn't childish enough to insist on staying; it was clear I was only a distraction here. Dez alone would be capable of handling the rest. I looked for a chance, then headed for the stairs. I could go on up and relax a little while they cleaned up. But just before I reached the steps, I saw a woman standing stock-still with utter confusion: Polly. She was gazing at Arwin, and her eyes were full of fury, madness, and pleasure. She was waiting for her chance to inflict a killing blow. Preferably to cut her limb from limb. The same way she cut that eight-year-old girl's hand off.

"Hey, Polly. You lost?"

I spoke before I even realized what I was doing. Polly spun around with a start.

"You wanna know where the Release is, right? I can tell you. Just follow me," I declared, then rushed up the stairs. I knew that would trick her. Polly was desperate—if they didn't find the drugs, Roland might abandon her, in her mind.

"Not so fast!"

I looked over my shoulder to see Polly rushing after me, dagger raised. My plan had worked, but I couldn't celebrate yet. It had been such a spur-of-the-moment idea that I didn't know what to do next. She might end up cutting *me* limb from limb instead. But I had to do it. This was the moment to clean up the mess from a year ago.

"You won't get away from me!" she shouted, racing up the steps. Whatever drugs she was on gave her vastly increased explosive power. She was going to catch me in moments.

I reached the top of the stairs and entered an opulent hallway in the mansion; the floor was even red carpet. I could see out through windows, but unfortunately it was cloudy. Goddammit. My next idea was to close the door and try to bar it, but the bolt was broken. Based on the type of damage, it had to have been Dez. Did that barbarian not understand the tools of civilization?

There was nothing else nearby that I could use to jam in there, so I turned to run. The door immediately slammed open behind me. I couldn't run outside because I didn't know where the exit was. She would catch me while I got lost.

Even the windows were barred. My only choice for now was another set of stairs leading upward. I had no plan at all—it was pure instinct. If I stopped, I would die. Laugh at me if you must.

“C’mon, Matthew, wait up! Let’s sit down and have a talk. Just like the old days...”

“I don’t remember us talking while you had a knife in your hands.”

Sensing her presence steadily catching up from behind, I grabbed a flower vase on the landing and hurled it behind me, then ripped a tapestry off the wall and turned over a standing suit of armor. I knew all of this was futile, but old Matthew wasn’t made to be a martyr who accepted his death in silence.

“Don’t run away, don’t run away...,” she pleaded, keeping up her pursuit. The vase or something else must have hit her; there was blood running down her forehead. The sight of a bleeding woman with bloodshot eyes waving a knife around madly was making me shrink, in a variety of ways.

Despite my best—if paltry—efforts, I couldn’t increase the distance between us. If anything, she was gaining ground. I continued bounding up the stairs, feeling the sweat ooze out, until it felt like there was more light ahead. Through the window, it looked like the clouds were thinning out a little. A ray of sunlight speared through the cracks like a pillar from heaven. Score.

Just a little longer. My breath was flagging as I propelled myself up the steps. I cursed my own weakness, begging it to leave as soon as possible. Go faster, idiot. Do you want to die? I spurred myself onward. There was the top. With a roar, I flung myself against the door at the end of the stairs and barreled through it. There was blue sky beyond. The breeze felt heavenly against my steaming skin. The roof of the mansion was a great balcony. There was just a flimsy excuse for a railing above the stone-lined garden below. Roland probably stood up here to give instructions to his servants. I had half a mind to have them build an execution stand for that false excuse for a marquess. It was a good idea, in my opinion.

Polly burst through the doorway a split second after me, wearing the ghastly grimace of a ghulah. I turned, clenched my fist, and threw a straight punch in the full gaze of the sun.

I didn't feel a thing.

Polly hurtled through the doorway as easily as a piece of wadded-up paper, slamming into the wall next to the top of the stairs.

"Ah...guh..."

Blood spurted from her mouth, and her eyes rolled, failing to process what had just happened. But her muscles worked on instinct, feet pushing her body up along the wall. She was as unsteady as a newborn calf.

It wasn't hard enough. I'd meant to kill her in one blow, but I'd been turning around at the time, and it was in the moment that my strength returned, so my estimation had been slightly off. I couldn't deliver a follow-up without going back inside to the dark.

"Did that one give you *la petite mort* already? You always were quick to finish," I commented.

Polly spat out a broken tooth and muttered, "Didn't you say hitting women wasn't one of your kinks?"

"This one was missionary." It didn't count as a kink.

"Shut the fuck up! Where are the drugs?!"

"I'll tell you right now. Come on to bed, darling. I'll show you plenty of love," I said, beckoning. Polly ground her teeth, spat out blood, readied her dagger, and charged.

I waited until the right moment to swing, but she changed angles just before reaching me, bursting around my side like a gust of wind. The dagger's dull gleam left a trail of light as it passed.

I could practically *hear* her grinning behind me.

It was very impressive. Not only her base athletic abilities but also her instincts. She must have been through some serious scraps in the past year. Her malice approached from the corner over my shoulder.

The blade lunged at my flank but cut only air; I leaped over it and Polly together. When she turned around, frustration and shock twisted her features.

“What was that...? You weren’t like that! Were you fooling me all along? You really can fight! You clung to me and made me sell myself! You coward! You knave!”

“You’re mistaken,” I said, looking upward. “I’m sorry, but I’m in love with another woman now. Simply thinking of her fills me with a newfound strength. Call it the power of love.”

“Shut up!” She threw the knife at me, then pulled another one out and charged at me.

I caught the thrown blade and shattered it with my grip alone, then threw the piece of iron left in my palm back at Polly. It hit her in the face. When she stopped short, I closed the gap and grabbed her wrist.

“It hurts! It hurts, Matthew. Why would you do such an awful thing...?”

“I’ve decided to play along with your tastes.” I squeezed harder. “You *like* getting hurt, don’t you?”

Sadly, the clouds were coming back. I was out of time.

“Good-bye, Polly. I’m glad I met you.”

“What are you going to do to me? Please, Matthew, don’t. I’m scared. I don’t want to die. Help me.”

“I bet Maggie was thinking the same thing,” I said. “And Sarah.”

I swung my arm as hard as I could, pulling Polly off her feet. Once I had some momentum, I let go, hurling her behind me. She screamed, spinning, and vanished over the railing. I thought she’d fallen headfirst down to the ground below, until I saw the fingertips grabbing the edge of the balcony.

Polly was hanging on for dear life. I’d thrown her at too high of an angle to get the proper distance on it.

I walked up to the edge and stared down at her. Her face was twisted with terror. If she was lucky, the fall from this height would be instant death. Otherwise, she would break all her bones in the fall and experience sheer agony before she died.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have. Save me, Matthew. I love you. I would sell myself

again for you. Let's start over from the beginning."

"We're not doing that. It's over, Polly." I pulled back my leg, feeling nothing but pity.

"I'm sorry to Maggie and Sarah, too. It was all my fault. I'm sorry. Please."

I shook my head. "You're not worth it anymore."

And with that, I kicked her fingers as hard as I could. Her desperate face got smaller and smaller. The scream that escaped her lips trailed off quieter and quieter as I turned my back. It ended before I could reach the stairs. I went back inside and closed the door.

Back on the ground, I found that Polly had landed headfirst on the stone. Her eyes were half-open, and her head was split like an overripe fruit and twisted at an ugly angle.

"This is good-bye. I was glad to see you again. I'll pray for your happiness," I said, the words of farewell I didn't get to say a year ago. There was no response as I left. No words are needed when men and women go their separate ways. Just pray for their happiness and good fortune and call it a day.

"Are you all right?" Arwin asked, coming through the door just as I returned to the mansion. She looked exhausted, probably due to the number of people she'd had to beat.

"Thanks to you," I said, moving to give her a hug. She punched me in the gut and caused me to double over. The sun had gone back behind the clouds.

"We're all done here. Roland's apprehended as well. We can leave the rest to the guards."

He was willing to get his hands dirty with drugs, so they could surely find more reasons to arrest him. Some of his hires were actual adventurers, like Norman. They'd chosen their client poorly.

"A little tired?"

"A little." She nodded, face pale. The weight resting on Arwin right now was more than just fatigue.

"If we're done here, let's go back home," I said. We didn't have any on hand,

but there would be materials back home.

“Ah, right,” she said with relief. It was her lifeline at this point in time.

“Matthew!” said Dez, rushing over.

“Hey, Dez, you really saved my butt. Thanks, pal. I love you. But there’s something I need to get off my chest—”

“We don’t have time to stand around and chat!” he bellowed, spittle flying past his whiskers. “That clown of a nobleman had one hell of a pet hidden away. It could wipe out everyone in the area!”

“And what pet was that? A kitten? Or maybe...a kitten, I hope?”

“You really don’t know when your jokes are appropriate, do you? D’ya want me to pound you flat?!”

The scary thing about Dez was that you had to take him literally. He really did swing a fist that heavy, and it hurt like hell.

“It was a monster,” he continued. “That spoiled little brat unleashed a monster he had tucked away in a scroll.”

Well, that was bad news. There were nimrods who tried to collect rare monsters and keep them as pets. The trade of living monsters was banned in every country of the world—including this city, of course. But it was also human nature to want things that were forbidden. They still changed hands in secret, for massive sums of money. And if they were trapped in a scroll, even the biggest monsters could easily be carried around.

“What kind of...?”

But my question was already unnecessary. The ground rumbled. Cracks appeared in the walls of the building. I could see something huge crawling around outside. Tension crackled through the room just as the door burst open and young Ralphie leaped inside.

“You must flee, Princess!”

Suddenly, the mansion exploded all around us. Rubble came churning down around our ears. I leaped toward Arwin to block her from the collapse, but it was unnecessary—Dez blasted all the roof tiles and beams and stone wall

pieces out of the way. Ralphie was fine, too.

“Is that...?”

Tearing through the piles of rubble around us was a dark green serpent with bat wings. Its tail was as sharp as a spear tip. A forked red tongue flickered at us as it coiled its considerable length atop the wreckage. I had seen one of these before—but only once.

“A lindworm...,” Arwin murmured.

It was the monster that had devoured her companion. I didn’t know if this was the same beast that did it, but her face was pale with fright. That death had inflicted much damage on her.

“That’s not good.” It was not acting violently yet, so soon after its revival, but eventually it would get hungry and start eating people. This was not a monster you wanted to fight in town. It would only cause more damage.

We had Dez, and if I were in my original state, we might be able to make do, but unfortunately, the clouds had returned.

“For now, we should help the survivors escape, then ask the guild for help. This is too much for the guards to handle.”

“That sounds about right. I’ll trip it up. You take the princess and run for it,” Dez said. He had noticed that Arwin’s current state was ominous.

“Not that it has legs to trip.”

Dez did not deign to respond. I guess he was too distracted by the situation to notice my funny comment. How sad.

“Wait,” Arwin called out. “I will handle the beast. You bring up the rear, Dez.”

“Are you sure?”

“We don’t have time to argue about this. If it starts thrashing around, the damage will be so much worse. I can handle it.”

“You know, it doesn’t sound that convincing when your face is clammy and your hands are shaking.”

“...Good point,” she admitted. “But if I stop and give up now, what did Janet

die for? I have to stand up, take position before everyone else, and fight. But now that I'm here, right before its eyes, my legs are faltering. Tell me, Matthew—what should I do?" she begged.

I opened my mouth to reply to her, but at that very moment, the lindworm chose to wriggle itself off the mound of rubble toward us. It charged with all the force of a tremendous gust of wind, emitting a rank, beastly stench.

There was no time to run. Even I was prepared for the worst—but wouldn't you know the power of coincidence? Another ray of light came shining through the clouds.

I reached out, the sound of a furious roar and thrashing rubble in my ears.

An impact ran through my body, and it was very heavy indeed. My feet ripped against the ground beneath them.

Even for me, it was difficult to hold the lindworm's head in both arms and try to stop it. It might have been harder than when I lifted up the cyclops. And the worst part was that I *had* to do it, or all of us would die.

"How...?" Ralphie stammered, eyes wide. I wished he wouldn't make a big deal out of it. This was just one of those things. Latent strength unlocked in an emergency and such.

"Here goes!" I could feel all the veins in my body rising to the surface as I lifted the lindworm and flipped it over. Dust rose everywhere as it crashed to the ground with a tremendous rumble.

"Give it!"

That was all the command Dez needed to understand my meaning. He hurled his beloved war hammer, Number 31, which I caught one-handed and then swung down right on the soft underside of the beast's pale chin. Scales cracked, flesh gave way, fangs shattered, and blood spurted. That was the lindworm's weak spot. If you hit it hard enough, it was unable to move.

I was about to smash the writhing lindworm with another blow when my body suddenly felt heavy again. Number 31 fell from my hand to the ground. The sun was behind clouds again. The damn thing was turning off and on like a child's toy, teasing me.

The lindworm took this opportunity to attempt slithering away into the rubble. It was pointless, however.

“Well, you were asking what to do?” I said to Arwin, resuming our conversation.

It wasn’t something as ordinary as conquering your fears. This was the kind of thing you might go your entire life without being able to do. But I knew one way to instantly get a burst of courage.

“In times like this, you just have to say, ‘Kiss my ass!’”

The world was full of unfair things. Battles that were impossible to win. Overwhelming violence that sought to abuse you. And even the biggest winner in life would lose everything when he finally drew the death card. Everyone was a loser here. But that didn’t mean you could lie down and lose all the time. Even frightened and unprepared and doomed, you had to struggle. You had to struggle against the shit of the world. There was no point to being polite about it.

“What do you think you’re teaching Her Highness?!”

“A good lesson.”

What she needed was the energy to have an attitude. If hurling insults was what it took to gain the strength to stand, that was good enough. Don’t act like you’re better than this, Ralph.

“Very well.” Arwin stood and drew her sword. Its mirrorlike brilliance reflected the cloudy sky and her face in profile.

The lindworm echoed her, stirring. Despite its apparent agony, it slithered forward down the pile of rubble again. Arwin stared right into its dull, malevolently golden eyes and opened her mouth.

“Kiss my ass!”



CHAPTER FIVE

More than a Lifeline

The lindworm catastrophe that had plunged Gray Neighbor into chaos was safely resolved. The Crimson Princess Knight, Arwin Mabel Primrose Mactarode, had defeated it along with her companions. I'd played a very minor part, too, but in situations like this, it was better to give Her Highness all the credit—both for me and everyone else. There was little damage, aside from one manor reduced to rubble. Many of the dead were dumped in the dungeon. Polly's unidentified body was also disposed of. I hadn't yet told Vanessa that I'd met her again.

Roland went missing after releasing the lindworm. We'd caught him initially, but he escaped in the commotion. It was assumed that he had been trapped under the rubble, but his body had not been found.

According to what the guards discovered, the scroll had been purchased from the black market. It had probably been stolen from the Adventurers Guild, then made its way to Roland's hands in an illegal sale. It caused a number of illicit marketplaces to be raided, but this did nothing to upset the core of their business. And because of that minimal damage, the guildmaster was only given a nominal scolding from the local lord, as much for appearances as anything else. The bad guys always get what they want in this world.

"Well, I'll be going now."

"Sure. Take care."

It was another dungeon day. With the lindworm and everything, it had fallen a bit to the wayside, but now that she'd found a replacement for Lutwidge, "the Virgin Paladin," the serious attempts at tackling the dungeon would resume. Arwin's adventure was not over until she got her hands on the treasure and

rebuilt the Mactarode Kingdom.

“Oh yes. I forgot.” I handed her a small bag.

“Ah, right.” She took it and surreptitiously opened it to remove a bit of its contents: a green piece of candy.

“Your favorite, right?”

“That’s right.”

I could tell she was desperately trying to keep her cool. Ralph and the others were just nearby.

I took one out of the bag. “Open wide.”

“Don’t!” she shouted, blushing. “I can eat it myself.”

“Oh, c’mon.”

She looked over her shoulder, then stared at the candy. When she realized how longingly she was looking at it, she cleared her throat and hesitantly opened her mouth a bit.

“Say ‘aaaah’.”

I lifted it slowly to her lips, so as not to hit her teeth. The moment the green orb touched her red lips, her moist tongue promptly grabbed the treat and pulled it into her waiting mouth.

“Mmm...”

Inside her mouth, she rolled it around with the tip of her tongue, left and right, melting it with her saliva and temperature. Her cheeks hollowed slightly as she sucked on it, and they bulged on the left and right as she moved it around with her tongue. She swallowed. There was a brief look of bliss on her face, which quickly subsided.

“You know, I’ve always wondered,” said Ralph nosily, eyes narrowed. “Where do you buy those candies? I’m not familiar with the shape.”

“Of course you’re not. I make them myself.”

“You don’t put anything *funny* in them, do you?”

“Absolutely not. Just regular old herbs. She likes them because they’re good for your health.”

“May I try one?” he asked Arwin. Why did he have to be so skeptical? Don’t be messing with your master’s stuff.

“You want one? Have it.”

I tossed him a paper-wrapped candy right from my pocket. Ralph caught it, hesitated, then popped it in his mouth.

“...It’s kind of bitter.”

“I don’t use much sugar in the recipe.”

“Well, it doesn’t seem like you’ve put anything fishy in here.”

“Of course not.” I chuckled. “Keep Arwin safe in there, will you?”

“You don’t need to tell *me*,” Ralph retorted, indignant. “Anyway, we’re off.”

Before they went, I checked inside a bag Arwin had given me. It was my allowance while she was away: a single gold coin.

“Good fortune to you,” I said, smiling and waving them off. It wasn’t because my allowance had increased. It was simply proper to see people off with a smile. And it didn’t mean I was going to run off to a brothel. Money should be spent on more meaningful things.

“Hey, squirt.”

I arrived at the orphanage that April often visited. The kids were running around on the grounds, which were surrounded by high walls. One child was sitting against the wall, hands around knees, trying to melt into the shadows like a stone.

April gave me an accusatory glance, then looked back down, shying away from me.

“You don’t want to go play with the kids?”

They were glancing over at us from a distance.

“I don’t feel like it.”

“I see.”

I sat down next to her. She scooted farther away.

“...She was only eight.”

“That’s right.”

“She didn’t even do anything wrong. She was supposed to live happily ever after with her mother. It’s not fair.”

April had heard about Sarah and Maggie. Polly was never brought up. The story was simply that they were killed by some random madman trying to rob them. My story, that is. I had to break the news to her. The damn old man just had to give me the most delicate and uncomfortable of tasks.

“Poor thing...”

“I know.”

“It must have hurt. It must have been so hard.”

“I bet.”

“What do you want?!” she said, rounding on me at last. “You keep saying the same things! I don’t need your sympathy!”

“That’s not my intention. I just wanted to ask you for something.”

I held out a book; April exclaimed when she saw it. It was a book for learning to read, meant for little children.

“Give me lessons again. I’ve learned from others, but you do it the best of all.”

April clenched her fists. “I don’t feel like it...”

“Then I’ll ask the kids over there. The fewer grown adults like me who are struggling to write their letters, the better.”

I stood up and waved toward the children.

“Hey, kids! Come over here! She’s going to read a book to you,” I called out. One of the children started trotting over, followed by another.

“Matthew, I didn’t say I was going to—”

“All right, have fun,” I interrupted, turning to leave the orphanage. The

moment I left the yard, I glanced back over my shoulder. Despite her look of consternation, April was opening the book to read to the expectant children.

It's best for people to be busy when they're sad. You don't have time to give in to bad thoughts. I speak from personal experience on that one. And it had cost me the allowance I'd just received. Wise sages and scholars read books, so of course, they're quite expensive.

Naturally, the best way to save on drinking would be to mooch some off of Master Beardo. And I already knew he was off duty today.

"By the way." Dez started the conversation—a rarity for him. We were drinking at a pub near the guild. "Why'd you get abducted anyway? What did you do?"

As a matter of fact, this was my first time meeting up with Dez since the excitement of that day. I told him the entire story with Polly. He sat back and stroked his impressive whiskers.

"Release, huh...? I'd heard it was spreading again lately. Something strange about it."

"What's that?"

"The guards are cracking down on all the dealers, but they either turn up nothing or a different drug. Seems like they've concluded that someone from out of town has a stash that they're selling off bit by bit..."

"Which would stand out more."

The people running the black market in this town were not stupid or weak enough to let something like that slide right under their noses.

"Agreed. I happen to think it's someone or *someones* who know this place like the back of their hand. You gotta know the terrain if you want to sneak past the people who run the joint."

"Couldn't they just ask the buyers where they got it?"

"Guards caught a couple of them, but none of 'em had actually met the dealer in person."

The way Dez described it, people who wanted to buy wrote their orders on

certain walls across the city using a particular code. For example, *a hundred and forty-three young sweetfish* or *three thornless black roses*. The seller would see the code and indicate a time and place on the same wall. Usually, it was on the bridge over Poison Swamp Alley. You'd have to drop the money from the bridge at the right time. When you walked down below several minutes later, the money would be gone, and the drugs would be waiting there.

"Sounds elaborate."

The seller had to be from here, then.

"So the Release circulating must be..."

"The stuff Tri-Hydra made. They say the whole stash went up with the warehouse they were making it in. So it's probably what your old girl said after all."

I wouldn't be able to tell the difference, but apparently Release could have subtle variations depending on the ingredients used.

"Either Oscar himself is back, or someone who stole the stuff from him was waiting for things to die down to start selling it off. The only other option would be that someone just stumbled across a hidden stash by coincidence."

"Yeah, maybe."

But if we didn't know who it was, we had nothing else to go on.

"What the hell is going through your mind now?" Dez growled, glaring at me through his bushy brows. "We just got over one thing. Don't go sticking your neck out over somethin' else."

"Because it'll be up to you to straighten it out, is that what you're saying?" I stood up. There was one thing to confirm before I was truly drunk. "Just giving you a heads-up first."

"Go to hell!" Dez shouted at my retreating back. "Go ahead and die, see if I care! I'm not saving your hide again!"

"But I would save you as many times as you need it, partner." I didn't want to lose any more of my friends. "So long. Thanks for picking up the tab."

As I left the pub, I was hit by a roar of fury so loud that I stumbled a few steps.

I had come to Poison Swamp Alley, a spot just to the east of Rockeater Snake Street. It was a natural dip in the land, which created a height difference between the buildings. Various bridges and walls had gone up as a result. One of the several walls that were used for drug deals was around here, according to Dez.

“Here’s the spot.”

I lifted my lantern up to a stone wall about my height that was full of indecent graffiti of the sort that even an idiot like me could read. It was also used as a bulletin board of sorts, where people could arrange deals for nasty stuff like drugs. Between all the horny comments, complaints about wives, and other female-centric messages was a code of the sort I was looking for.

“Two bottles of serpent sweetwine in one go. That’s a rip-off.”

Like *young sweetfish* and *thornless black roses*, *serpent sweetwine* was another code name for Release. *One go* meant one bag. A *bottle* was ten gold coins, so this was advertising one bag for twenty coins. That was about twice the going rate. Next to the serpent sweetwine and its price was a place and time. Someone had tried to erase it, probably the guards. But a simple wash with water wasn’t going to do the job. The messy writing was probably to prevent handwriting recognition. I leaned closer to the dark red letters, trying to learn something more. I traced it with a finger—and it suddenly dawned on me.

“...Oh no.”

I buried my face in my hands.

There was no time to waste. It was only a matter of time before others noticed as well. I hurried off to the Wildcat’s Sunset on Painted Lane. I hustled up the stairs with the bustle of noisy drunks around me and knocked on the door. I was ready to break it down if I had to. A familiar wispy man emerged.

“What’s the matter, Matthew? It’s late.”

I slipped in through the doorway and shut it behind me before I said anything.

“Hey, what’s going on? Aren’t you getting ahead of yourself? It’s not even midnight yet,” Sterling said, trying to look friendly and innocent. I ignored him

and ripped off the white sheet, removing the stack of rocks one by one. Underneath the box beneath them was a pile of small bags. I opened one up and found white powder.

I turned to him and said coldly, “When did you start selling drugs?”

He made a choking sound deep in his throat. His eyes drifted. Sweat rose on his skin. There was no point in ever asking him to keep a secret.

“Wh-why do you ask?”

“The wall in Poison Swamp Alley. You wrote down the deal there, didn’t you?”

“N-no I didn’t. What proof do you have?”

“This.” I held up my lantern, shining it on the red stain on the floor. “It was the same ink on the wall. Same color and same smell as the stuff you made from jumus blood.”

He might have thought that disguising his handwriting would be enough, but it wasn’t. He was trying to make sure the ink didn’t get washed off in the rain, but it had given him away instead.

Sterling looked aghast. I patted him kindly on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to turn you in to the guards. But I’m looking for the source of the stuff. It’s going to be a repeat of the counterfeit coins at this rate.”

A little threat was all it took for him to turn pale and start trembling. For being such a coward, he certainly was willing to take great risks to leap at the chance of potentially earning money. He would never learn.

“Speak. Where’d you get it? Or did someone put you up to this one, too?”

“I-it wasn’t me. It was Vanessa.”

I was stunned. “Don’t be stupid. She would never do something like—”

“It’s true. Vanessa’s the one who has the drugs. I found them under the floorboards in her home.”

Then it all lined up in my head. Oscar was the one who’d hidden them. He had skimmed some Release off the top at Tri-Hydra and hidden it at his lover’s home. She had a very keen eye as an appraiser, but when it came to love, she

was blind. It would be the easiest thing in the world for him to make an excuse to be alone in her home to hide the stuff.

Vanessa was an elite, highly prized member of the guild, and she commanded absolute trust. She was popular with adventurers, too. The more you tried to pry into her affairs, the more the guild would take notice. It was the perfect hiding spot. He might have even approached Vanessa for this very purpose from the beginning. And now that the owner was gone and the drugs were abandoned there, it was her current lover, Sterling, who had found them and was selling them off.

“C’mon, Matthew, don’t be a hard-ass. Everyone does it. Look, I’ll cut you in on a share,” he mewled like an unpleasant overgrown kitten. He was begging me, certain I would once again help him out. He wasn’t a bad person. He was just very weak willed and easily swayed.

“I mean, what’s the harm?” he continued. “Release isn’t like other drugs. This stuff is your revelation from God.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh, you didn’t know?” He sounded surprised. “It was a priest who originally created Release, from what they say.”

According to him, it was distributed among the suffering believers to ease their pain. The rest, of course, was history. It made its way into the hands of criminals and spread across the continent from there.

“The damn world’s coming to an end.”

“And actually, the reason the priest started making it was supposedly a revelation. He heard a voice say, *‘Thou wilt do as I command, and spread My mercy as I will it,’* and the recipe just *came* to him.”

I grabbed Sterling’s shoulder and shook him. “Who was this priest? Where? Tell me.”

I couldn’t forget what he had just said, even if I tried. While the words themselves were different, the expression itself was just like that drunken sun god. It reminded me not only of what he said but the way he said it.

"I don't know. All I know is that he was a priest of Sunnyhaze, but I don't know his name. I swear," Sterling blubbered. I let go of him. Sunnyhaze was a town near the sun god's tower and was considered holy ground within their solar religion.

What was going on? Did he order his own believer to make drugs? What benefit was there to a god to make more addicts in the world?

"For one thing, he's long dead. Hanged himself, supposedly."

"I see."

The priest probably thought he was performing a good act. He followed his god's divine message in order to save the devout and suffering. But once it got into the hands of the underworld, many, many people suffered. He wasn't able to withstand the guilt.

"So you see, it's a very *good* drug, made through the teaching of God. It's all okay, right?"

He couldn't give it up yet. And once he'd had the taste, he would do it again. That was the kind of man Sterling was.

"Wrong." I put the lantern on the floor. "Is it still hidden at Vanessa's place?"

"All of it. I've only sold a tiny bit of it. I promise."

I didn't have time to sit around listening to him make excuses. "Just take me there. We'll decide how to get rid of it after that."

"What? Right now?"

"I mean, if you *want* to be a drowned rat in a gutter tomorrow morning, be my guest. I won't stop you."

"H-hang on! I'll just get changed."

He turned his back on me and began to undress. As he did so, I sneaked over to a half-finished sculpture and picked up the chisel there. Just to check, I slid my finger over the tip to ensure it was sharp before hiding it behind my arm and approaching Sterling from behind.

"So about that Release. I was thinking..."

I lifted the chisel and pressed it to Sterling's throat as he turned around. With all my weight behind it, the chisel sank deep into its owner's throat. Unable to scream, Sterling stared with bulging eyes. He turned pale and fell to the floor of the darkened room, touching the handle end of the chisel in his throat with agony. He rolled back and forth, knocking unfinished paintings from their easels and onto the floor. While his initial spasms were like he'd been lit on fire, the thrashing got slower and weaker as the flame of life gradually went out. I watched the whole thing.

"Hey, shuddup! Stop gettin' so frisky day after day when you never have any money!" someone brayed from the bar below. It seemed like Sterling's friskiness was a regular problem.

With his last bit of strength, Sterling crawled toward me, clawing at the floor with his blood-reddened hands. Tears streamed down his face from the agony of breathing and fear of death.

".....!"

He was trying to say something but had no voice, just a flapping, silent mouth like a fish, reaching toward me. Begging for help.

Right as he reached my feet, Sterling ran out of strength, dropped his face to the floor, and was still. I counted to a hundred, then checked to see if his pupils were dilated.

Because of all the thrashing, I didn't need to bother making it look like the work of a burglar. I wouldn't even need to hire the Gravedigger. I wiped up the little flecks of blood that got on me, then disposed of a few bits of evidence. I put my hood back up, and I skulked out of the room.

I didn't hate Sterling. Sure, I'd thought he was obnoxious on many occasions, and it was aggravating how often he caused trouble for me, but he was also kind of fun that way. Still, he had crossed a line this time. To him, it was probably the usual playing with fire that he did regularly. But for me, it was serious. If I let him get away with this one, he would do something much worse next time.

I can't let anyone deal Release in this town and live. That's all there is to it.

Once I was sure no one was watching, I lowered the shutter on my lantern and descended the stairs. They would find the body by tomorrow. I couldn't waste any time now.

Next was Vanessa's place. I knew her shift schedule: She would be staying at the guild building tonight. Normally, her old maid would be sleeping in the house, but she had gone to her grandchildren's place. I had to deal with all of this tonight. I considered doing it during the day while she was gone, but that would raise the chances of being seen.

Thankfully, she was just down the street from Painted Lane, where her lover had stayed. It was a two-story stone house. Foot traffic was very quiet here.

I picked the lock with a needle and made my way inside. Fortunately, I was already familiar with my friend's house and knew the layout. The first floor had the kitchen and the maid's room. The upstairs was Vanessa's private room and bedroom. The house was silent; the only sound was that of the city outside. I narrowed my eyes and crept up the stairs. Sterling said he had found it under the floorboards.

The maid would generally be around downstairs, and there was no basement here. Oscar would have hidden the stash somewhere he could easily access.

Upstairs, a sweet fragrance hit my nose. It was a different smell than Arwin's. I would have liked to stay and savor it, but I would have to behave myself for now. I hunched down and made my way into the cramped bedroom. I couldn't turn on any lights, so I had to crawl and search under the bed in the dark. There were only so many places Sterling could find that Vanessa wouldn't notice. Using my fingertips, I found a spot where the boards were slightly elevated, so I stuck my head under the bed and started prying at it. Perhaps my assumption that if Sterling could take it off, it would be easy for me, too, had been a miscalculation. In my current state, it was quite an ordeal. Once I finally had it loose, I reached down to pick up what was underneath: a small bag.

I crawled out from under the bed and sprinkled the contents of the bag onto my hand: white powder. I squinted and sniffed at it. There was no doubt in my mind that it was Release. So now the question was: How would I get rid of all of it?

Suddenly, there was light.

“What are you doing?”

I spun around and saw a frightened-looking Vanessa brandishing a candle at me.

Impossible. She wasn't supposed to be back this early. But then I saw the sack in her other hand. It was full of meat, vegetables, and even wine. I cursed my forgetfulness—tomorrow was Sterling's birthday. She had traded shifts with someone else so she could prepare a nice meal to celebrate with him.

“Matthew, are you...?”

“Wait. Hold on. It's not what it looks like,” I said, holding up my hands to show my good intentions before she could start screaming. “I apologize for breaking in. But I have a very good reason.”

I tried to steady my breathing and explain as calmly as possible. If I started stammering and blabbering, it would only make me sound like I had more to hide.

“Sterling got into selling drugs this time. If the usual shady types spot him, he's dead. I came here to put a stop to it.”

“Sterling is?” she said, giving me a funny look. But the suspicion in her voice was clearly subsiding.

“It's all because of Oscar, your ex. He hid a stash of drugs in your home. Were you aware of that?”

She had to know. Vanessa looked absently up toward the ceiling as she thought about it. Fine creases appeared on her nose.

“Well, the idiot happened to stumble across it. And what did he do? Take it and start selling it off. If I don't find it all and destroy it before *they* sniff it out, people are going to die—him *and* you.”

I wasn't lying. If the criminal types learned of this, they would assume Sterling had stolen the drugs from their stashes. But the damage would splash over to his lover Vanessa, too.

“So I came here in his place to get the drugs.”

“...Really?”

“If you think I’m lying, look under the bed. There’s a ton of special powder under there that’ll get you high as a kite.”

I held up the bag of Release in my hand, which Vanessa reluctantly took and examined.

“...Yes, that seems to be the case.”

“Right?”

“Ugh! Why does he have to cause problems right on his birthday? This is the worst,” she lamented, clutching at her hair.

“C’mon, we’ve got to get this out of here. Help me,” I said.

“All right.”

Vanessa set down her shopping bag and the candleholder, then peered under the bed. I felt a rush of guilt as I stared down at her.

I had just come here after killing her boyfriend. His body was lying in a pool of blood in his studio. And without a clue about any of it, Vanessa was helping me dispose of the stash, out of the simple desire to do good and help her lover.

And once we disposed of the Release, I would have to go to find Sterling’s body with her. She would be devastated. The reason she kept finding these worthless men was a consequence of her great kindness and tolerance, her desire to support them. She was a very merciful and forgiving woman.

I felt guilty, but there was no turning back. We would dispose of the Release successfully but be too late to stop the underworld agents from killing Sterling. It was just a slight rewrite of the script. No problem. Running across Vanessa was an unexpected wrinkle, but I could make adjustments.

“Oh?” came a voice from under the bed. “What is this?”

Vanessa crawled out backward, clutching many little bags and a small package.

“It was under the boards with the bags,” she said, unwrapping the package. There was a letter and an even smaller bag inside. “It was sealed, so I presume

it was meant to be sent to someone.”

She turned it over, wondering out loud who it was from. I wasn’t good at reading or writing, but I could guess. The only person aside from Sterling who could hide something here was Oscar.

Vanessa ripped open the seal and pulled out the letter.

“It’s addressed to...Roland William Mactarode.”

An entire image formed inside my head at the mention of that name. Of course. The flimsy little chicken-man and Oscar knew each other. Oscar betrayed Tri-Hydra for him and pocketed some of the Release. That was how important of a customer he was. And if he were to send a letter? Who might the flimsy little chicken-man decide was an eyesore? What secrets did Oscar possess?

“We don’t have time. I’ll hold on to that,” I said, reaching for the letter. I couldn’t let her read it. If my intuition was correct, there was a name that she mustn’t read in it. I had to be forceful; this was no time for politeness. The moment I tried to grab it, however, the small bag fell from Vanessa’s hand, spilling its contents.

It was Arwin’s jade necklace.

So this was where the bastard hid it. No wonder I hadn’t found it anywhere in his hideout.

“Um, Matthew,” Vanessa said, backing away, her nose in the letter. Even by candlelight, I could tell how pale she’d gotten. “Did you know that Arwin was a Release addict...?”

It was exactly what I’d wanted to avoid.

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t play dumb. It’s written right here. See? There’s Arwin’s name.”

The best thing I could come up with was only to buy time. Apparently, if you were really smart, you could read fast, too. If only everyone were as stupid as me.

“Oscar made it all up. Roland’s that idiot noble who unleashed the lindworm

in his misguided desire to be king. He would pay for anything that made Arwin look bad.”

She gave me a wary glance and scooped up the necklace. “But this is Arwin’s, isn’t it?”

“A cheap trinket. You could buy one with coppers at any holiday fair.”

“Do you really think that excuse is going to fly with *me*?” said the Adventurers Guild’s very best appraiser. “It’s true, isn’t it, Matthew? You knew about this. This is why you kept asking if Oscar had left anything with me.”

She thrust the jade necklace under my nose. My silence was as good as confirmation for her. She briefly gave me a gaze that was both accusatory and pitying, then shook her head.

“She’s got dungeon sickness, doesn’t she?”

The majority of adventurers who got involved with Release were dealing with that very situation. As the appraiser at the guild, she had seen a great many of those people in her years there.

“I’m not blaming you. It happens all the time. Everyone’s scared of the dungeon. As special as she is, the Crimson Princess Knight isn’t going to be an exception.”

I still did not speak.

“She was probably taking too much weight on her shoulders, trying to save Mactarode. What a foolish decision, to rely on this stuff.”

She clenched her hand, crumpling the letter. Vanessa was very wise, which was how she intuited Arwin’s situation so rapidly and accurately. It was very annoying.

“I’ll be honest with you,” she continued. “She should retire at once. She’s going to break down long before she ever succeeds at restoring her country.”

“.....”

“There are plenty of ways she could rebuild her kingdom without needing the dungeon’s treasure. She could cultivate new land, enter the service of another country and receive land of her own, or...or marry into some royal or noble

family,” she said, giving me an apologetic look. “Who else knows Arwin’s an addict? Do the others in Aegis know?”

My lack of a response irritated her, and she began to raise her voice.

“If you don’t want to reply, that’s your own business. But here’s a warning: Don’t let her get involved with Release ever again. She needs to quit adventuring and leave the treasure and country up to someone else. And she needs to heal and recuperate. It will take time, but at this rate, it’s going to put her life in danger.”

“.....”

“I’m sure you can come up with a good excuse for her. Say you got her pregnant, if that’s what it takes. Just because she’s royalty doesn’t mean she has to sacrifice herself for this.”

“You’re right.”

Everything Vanessa was saying was correct. It was exactly what I’d been thinking for the past year. She was truly and honestly concerned for Arwin’s sake.

And Vanessa would know, because she was a victim of drugs, too. They had ruined her father and split apart her family. She hated the stuff as much as I did. She prayed for the salvation of people suffering from addiction. She wouldn’t stop short of revealing Arwin’s secret if it meant saving her. Vanessa had trussed up her own colleague in the name of helping her, after all.

That’s the kind of person she was.

“You’re absolutely right.”

But I also knew the firmness of Arwin’s determination. She would keep moving on, even if her body and mind were in tatters. She had a foolish, brittle loftiness to her quest. Which was why there was no turning back now.

I stood up and looked at her where she was sitting on the floor. From my pocket, I pulled out the temporary sun. After the most recent kerfuffle, I’d gone back to the church to find it. At the time, I’d had no idea I would end up using it this way.

“Irradiation,” I said. The orb floated and unleashed the dazzling brilliance of the sunlight it had absorbed. Instantly, I felt strength flowing through me. With this, even my cursed body, unable to fight without the sun’s light, could use its original strength in the middle of the night. The effect was short-lived, but it was enough.

“What?” Vanessa murmured, turning her face away from the bright light. In that moment, I crossed the space between us and practically slammed her down to the ground. I grabbed her hands, pulling them down below the waist, and straddled her body. Her pretty face became a rictus of fear. She struggled mightily, but between my weight and my muscle, it did nothing to free her.

“Stop it!” she pleaded, but I ignored her and put my hands around her neck. If I was going to do it, I had to be quick—so she didn’t suffer. My fingers pressed down on her neck, constricting the blood vessels.

“Ah...gh...”

Vanessa’s eyes went bloodshot. Confusion, agony, terror—her red eyes were full of a storm of emotion. Why was she being strangled? Why was I trying to kill her? To silence her? *Please, release me. I don’t want to die.*

The strength went out of her body. She stopped breathing. I let go.

I put the jade necklace into my pocket and grabbed the floating orb to stash it away. The meat and vegetables I dumped out of the bag, loading up the packets of Release instead. I couldn’t fit all of them in, but it would be enough material to make more candy. The rest of it would burn with the house.

There was oil in the kitchen, which I doused the room with—especially under the bed. All of this was for nothing if there was evidence left.

“Ma...the...w.”

I turned around. Vanessa was breathing again, sprawled on the carpet. Her neck was broken, but she looked at me with tears in her eyes.

“Why...Matthew? What did...I...?”

I shook my head. The remainder of the oil I poured on her body, then leaned the candle toward the pool on the floor.

“It’s not your fault.”

Flames raced around the room. I hurried out of her house before they could surround me. After several turns down the alleys, I craned my neck behind me to see dark smoke and sparks rising into the night sky, wavering in the breeze.

“Fire!”

“Put out the flames, before it spreads to other buildings!”

People were shouting in panic, reacting to the scene. I pulled my hood up, hunched my shoulders, and hurried home. Only when things got quieter did I slow down and examine my hands. I could still feel the sensation. I felt guilty but not regretful.

Arwin’s addiction wasn’t cured. She still couldn’t fight without Release. If she had continued taking it at the same rate as a year ago, she would have been in the afterlife by now. But if she stopped altogether, the public would have seen her wracked by the horrible withdrawal symptoms. I was very slowly weaning her off it with Release-tinged hard candy. I also made harmless regular candy for suspicious types like young Ralphie. The Release I’d managed to find was hidden in the basement of our house.

So I needed a stock of Release, and no one could know I had any. I also needed to prevent it from being spread around the city. If the princess knight gave in to temptation due to easy access, all of this trouble would be for nothing. That’s why I’d spent the last year eliminating anyone who got word of Arwin’s disgrace and crushing any dealers once they were vulnerable. It was a bloody path but one I’d chosen for myself.

I recalled the story I’d told Arwin about the source of the term *kept man*. The men who held the lifelines for the ladies who dived into the water. What did the men do during that time? The women didn’t know and didn’t need to know. They just knew the men would never let go of the lifeline. As long as they believed that, it was enough.

“Time to go home.”

I stuffed my hands in my pockets and hurried down the empty streets. That was when I noticed that the light of the temporary sun had gone out in my

pocket.

“Out of time, huh?”

I pulled out the translucent orb, now in its ordinary state.

“Hmm?” Somehow, the little symbol inside the orb was clearer than it had been before. “What is this?”

I held it up to the moonlight, then gaped. The insignia inside belonged to that piece of shit sun god.

CHAPTER SIX

The Kept Man of the Princess Knight

The church bell tolled mournfully. Many people had come to Vanessa's funeral. The chapel was full of words of prayer for her soul and the sobbing and sniffing of the congregants.

Vanessa's home had barely escaped being a total loss, but her charred body was discovered. There was evidence of strangulation on her neck. The culprit had not been caught yet. Her lover, Sterling, had also been found dead. Most likely, he had gotten himself into big trouble and was killed to serve as a warning. Rumors were everywhere that Vanessa had been collateral damage. Everyone knew Sterling would wind up this way. They had all mentally prepared themselves for it.

Sterling's funeral was held at the same time, but everyone was truly mourning Vanessa's death instead.

She was to be buried in the cemetery run by the Adventurers Guild, but like all the poor and downtrodden in this town, Sterling was simply dumped in the dungeon. He was burned and crushed first so that he could not come back as a zombie. The difference in treatment was a sign of their respective deeds as people and their popularity with the public.



I was in attendance, as were Arwin, Dez, and April. They were sitting next to me with their eyes closed, listening to the priest's prayers. None of them knew. They didn't need to know. The moment they did, I would certainly lose their friendship.

Even the types who normally swore like sailors were solemn and quiet today. April sobbed and clung to her grandfather.

After the burial, Dez claimed he had business to see to and returned to the guild building.

I joined a downcast Arwin in walking back home. It was a long trip down the main road from the cemetery at the edges of town to our house.

Laughing, footsteps, drinks being poured and shared, children crying after having been spanked—the sounds of the city were always lively and gloomy in equal measure.

"She and I," Arwin said, breaking her silence, "never talked very much. But she seemed like a lovely woman."

"Yeah."

"Many adventurers I've met have died since I came here. I thought I was used to it...but it still hurts," she murmured, fiddling with the jade trinket over her chest—the pendant. I had told her that I found it at a pawn shop.

"It's the same for everyone. And you don't get *used* to it. You're supposed to feel awful and sad whenever someone close to you dies."

Otherwise it wasn't worth getting to know them. The pain of losing them is a sign of how much you loved them. That's how it works.

"No need to cry. No need to bear it, either. People can survive, whether they're covered in bruises or covered in mud. You just struggle for all you're worth. You can always die if you choose to."

"That's true," she said. I couldn't see her expression, but it felt like her stiff features had relaxed just a bit. She must have smiled.

"Come, let's go home. Don't want to get caught in the rain." It had been clear just earlier in the day, but the sullen clouds were out now. "Hmm?"

A pale-faced man passed through the crowd. He was yawning and scratching the back of his neck. I lifted my head to get a better look.

“What is it, Matthew?”

“Sorry. I think I’ve got something to take care of. You go home without me.”

Arwin was visibly perturbed. “More drinking? Or a woman?”

I shook my head vigorously. “I just remembered they were opening up a gambling parlor today. Don’t worry, I’ll come back once I’m completely cleaned out.”

“Hope they clean out your ass crack while they’re at it!”

“Why, how vulgar.”

“I learned it from you.”

Well, I couldn’t argue with her there.

“Anyway, with that in mind, if you’d be so good as to provide me with some funding,” I said, favoring her with a dazzling smile. Arwin’s gaze got even colder.

“Why, you miserable...”

“C’mon, please?” I placed a candy into the palm of her hand. “Just eat that as you wait.”

“...All right,” Arwin grumbled, popping the candy into her mouth. It was just one of the regular sugared kind. “But you’d better be back by nightfall.”

“Sure thing,” I said, waving as I turned to leave.

Once on my own, I made myself inconspicuous and followed the man at a safe distance. He went down an alley—seemingly to the rear of a certain pub. A place well known for being a drug-dealing spot. There would be a seller there.

He rounded a corner. It was nearly time. I sneaked up silently, closing the gap, when I heard a commotion coming from around the corner.

“Who the hell are you?”

“Hey, knock it off!”

There was a shriek and the sound of someone collapsing. Were they fighting?

Or was there a prior customer? I stayed stuck to the wall and peered carefully around the side. My breath caught in my throat.

There was a man standing in the narrow alley between two buildings. A bloody sword dangled from his hand. Two bodies were on the ground. One was the pale-faced man from earlier, while the other was a middle-aged fellow who seemed to be the dealer. Both had been cut open from the front and were clearly dead.

And the man who did it was familiar to me.

“Come on out, Matthew. I know you’re there,” Roland said without turning. I’d heard he was trapped under the rubble. Apparently, he had survived. His clothes were ragged, but he didn’t seem to be hurt.

A nasty sweat broke out on my forehead. It was surprising enough that he was still alive, but he was also much different from a few days ago. He had been just an aloof, spoiled nobleman back then. But now he was utterly calm in the wake of committing murder. It was eerie.

“Hey there, flimsy little chicken-man. Funny running into you here. I didn’t know you were changing careers to homicidal thief. Quite a long way for a marquess’s son to fall.”

Roland did not rise to my taunt. He slid his bloodied sword back into its sheath, then strode up to me and thrust his hands into the air.

“I will now relay a message to you from my God.”

“Huh?”

Before I could say another word, Roland’s face went completely slack and emotionless.

“Thou hast done well to pass my trial, human.”

I felt my chest tighten. The voice was Roland’s, but I could never forget the way of speaking. It was the sun god: Ariostol. How much misery had I suffered on account of that shitstain? Fury, malice, doubt, and fear blotted my mind, mixed together like a hot mucus that clogged my brain. Still, I knew what to do—hit him. Thankfully, the sun was coming out through the clouds. Only for a

moment, but that was all I needed. Blame the idiot who walked out into the sun, not me.

I cocked back my fist, feeling the sunlight restore rippling strength to my muscles. Even if Roland was only some madman who had no direct connection to the sun god after all, that was fine with me. His fault for doing a stupid impression in my presence. I was going to smash his face in with a single blow, but that did not happen. Instead, my full-strength punch was stopped cold by Roland's palm.

"What?"

He clenched my fist in his hand. My fist, which had broken boulders and punched holes in metal armor, began to creak. I threw a punch with my other hand, but he blocked that, too. Now we were grappling, engaging in a contest of strength. I tried to push him back, but he didn't budge. Was this a joke? In my current state, Roland should have been no firmer than snot.

Roland narrowed his eyes with displeasure and easily lifted me off the ground, hurling me against a wall.

"Be silent. The divine words are not finished."

I couldn't move. Being slammed back-first didn't hurt that much, but my intuition was telling me it was dangerous to move without thinking right now. Roland spread his hands to the sky once again.

"Thou hast gained my divine tool and used it to sacrifice flesh and blood. In doing so, thou hast passed the second trial."

I felt dizzy. Bile rose into my throat without warning. The "second trial" meant there had been a first. That probably meant the first trial had been clearing the sun god's tower. The tool was almost certainly the temporary sun. I hadn't defeated a monster or won a battle of wits to gain it, but I guessed the means didn't matter. The problem was the bit about "sacrificing flesh and blood." Meaning...

"Fuck you!"

I didn't kill her for your sake. The sensation of strangling her neck, the prison cell of guilt around me, the voice and tears that called out to me from the abyss

of death—those were all mine. They didn't happen to please you!

And who the hell just says, *You passed, congratulations*, without any sort of explanation? What kind of nonsense is that?

"We aren't your believers, and we aren't your slaves! Put me back to normal already!"

"Next is the third trial. Await its coming..." That is all."

Roland lowered his hands and declared the conversation over, without having responded to my words.

"How rich, that you should be one of God's Sufferers," he said, wearing a cold smile. I saw plenty of that the last time, but now it seemed entirely false.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"He is a god of battle and a god of trials. Those with the potential to be heroes and champions are given a number of trials, and only those who pass them all are ushered into the Solar Palace and given eternal life. The ones who are in the process of undergoing the trials are known as Sufferers."

"Idiocy."

In other words, be a slave to that fly-ridden warthog of a sun god.

"I suppose you must have offered him a sacrifice of your virgin asshole to get that power, then."

"Mind your tongue." Roland glowered. "When I was trapped under the remains of that building, God sent a revelation. He said, '*Thou art not meant to die here. Thou hast a duty to fulfill.*' The next thing I knew, I was standing outside the mansion."

He grabbed his collar and pulled it down, revealing the sigil of the sun god carved onto his left breast.

"This is the sign of a preacher. I grow the flock, recreate God's miracles on earth, and spiritually guide the people when needed. That is the great and noble duty assigned to me."

Sounded like a bad deal. Being a kept man was a thousand times better.

"I rejoiced. After just three years of being a follower, my faith had already been rewarded."

Hah. Guess that confirms the sun god's eye for talent is even worse than blindness.

"So what are you going to do now? Use your power to bring back your country? Go back to your homeland and destroy all the monsters infesting it?"

"I have no interest in such things," he said blithely. "Whatever becomes of Mactarode is none of my concern anymore. My calling is everything."

"Going on a pilgrimage? Or will you shave your head and humbly spread teachings across the land?"

"I will *purify* this city," he said.

For an instant, my mind went blank.

"You should be well aware of just how disgraced and filthy this place is. How low its people have fallen. There are so many things here that should not be. And before the Sun God can take His rightful place on earth, we must cleanse the land of rot. Starting here."

"You know you can't pull that off."

The darkness of this city ran deep. A slightly more powerful individual than most would get nowhere trying to root it out. If that was all it took, Dez would be running this city by now.

"It is not a question of whether I can or cannot do it. I must carry out God's will. That is my duty."

He pulled a small bag out from his pocket and sprinkled its contents onto his palm: white powder.

"Release?"

"Do you know why I wanted this so badly?" He chuckled, then tossed all of it into his mouth. Instantly, the sigil carved into his breast shone with a brilliant light. Roland's body trembled. "To do *this*."

Abruptly, his shoulder bulged. His side, thigh, back, and pectoral muscles all

expanded and pulsed, as though someone inside his body had punched outward. It was like there was a little demon inside him, thrashing to get out.

“You all seem to think of this as just an ordinary vulgar drug, but it is not. This is the set of wings that will bring us closer to God—the key to transforming our sinful bodies into pure and noble souls.”

As the transformation settled down, I was left in the presence of a very large man, at least a head bigger than me. But that wasn’t all. His clothes were ripped, his skin was the color of blood, his bones were jutting outward, and he was spotted and speckled all over. His hair fell out of his head, his ears were gone, and three cockscombs sprouted from his bulging head, along with a beak. It was like he had grown a swollen chicken’s head. The ordinary irises and pupils were gone from his eyes, replaced with the symbol of the sun god.

“*This is Release,*” announced the new, monstrous Roland.

So he had killed the dealer in order to steal their Release.

“And to be clear, you will not gain this power by taking it. Those who lack faith will not grow closer to His greatness. This form is the sign of the chosen, even among the faithful.”

“Well, that’s a relief.” I’d hate to see Arwin transformed into that hideous state.

“There are many believers of His Radiance in this city. When they see my form, they will know the greatness of the Sun God, and their faith will be enhanced.”

If anything, they were more likely to flee from their cults, I thought.

“If we have more believers—more preachers—then as long as there is Release and the power it bestows, it is possible to cleanse this city. If you attempt to interfere, you, too, will be killed. You are not the only Sufferer. If you die here, then you were not meant to pass. His Radiance did not give me any revelations about your life.”

“That’s fine with me, too, cock-a-doodle-doo,” I said, sticking my hands in my pockets. “But I want no part of it.”

I pulled out the orb, threw it, and chanted the word “Irradiation.”

The sphere floated upward and cast off a powerful light. Roland had no choice but to avert his eyes. It was my style to use anything I possibly could. Watch this, sun god: I’ll use the “divine tool” you gave me to smash your goon here into paste.

“Go back to hell!”

I threw a sneak punch, but he easily blocked it.

“Don’t bother. My power is already...huh?” Roland paused, caught off guard.

While he was holding my arm, I stepped closer to his body, placed my shoulder against his solar plexus, then pushed upward with all my legs’ force to flip him onto his back. He was large, but this maneuver was easy for me. Roland slammed onto the floor.

He gasped; the air had been knocked out of him. I grabbed the hilt of his sword, pulled it from its sheath, and plunged it into his heart. Blood sprayed everywhere. After a few wrenches back and forth, I pulled it loose and stabbed it through again. Roland convulsed twice, spat blood from his mouth, and slumped, lifeless, to the ground.

“A little too cocky, eh?”

He might have had divine power, but his fighting experience was still the same. I could get the best of any pampered little rich boy who’d never been in a good scrap.

“Now to get rid of his body...”

I’d have to call upon the Gravedigger again. But he might be alarmed by the sight of this hideous monster.

I was getting out the bell to ring it when a hand closed around my ankle. It couldn’t be— I looked down and saw Roland laughing, his mouth red as though painted like a clown’s. Agony ran through my ankle. I grimaced and felt myself fly off the ground.

In an instant, I was up above the second-story rooftops—only to be jolted back downward and crashed through a nearby window. My body broke the

glass and frame as it slammed into the stone floor. I just barely managed to protect my head, but the sheer shock of the impact left me woozy. That one *did* hurt.

This was an abandoned building, if I recalled right. Rumor said some rich man had fallen on hard times and left the mansion behind. I was in a great hall of some kind, with high ceilings and plenty of space. Wax-stained candelabras were hung overhead, and the soot-caked fireplace had not a single piece of wood in it. Everything was covered in a layer of dust. There were plenty of windows to let the light in, however, so at least it wasn't too dark.

Where was Roland? I searched for him desperately through wavering vision, hearing warning bells clamor inside my head.

A shadow blotted the space above me. I rolled out of the way just as a sword slammed down, piercing deep into the floor. Apparently, he had jumped all the way up here from the ground. Very nimble, for one so large.

"You're a tough one," Roland said with both admiration and distaste. The wound I'd left on his chest was closing up before my eyes.

"Are you actually immortal?"

"Yes, I'm just as shocked as you. I wasn't conscious at the time the building crushed me, you see. It never occurred to me that having one's heart crushed could be so painful," he joked, tracing his wound with a finger. He was totally fine after having a sword rammed through his heart. Damn that worthless, incompetent, rotten, reject god. What the hell were you thinking, giving this power to that flimsy little chicken-man? How could I beat him? It was nice that the temporary sun followed, even when I got thrown through a window, but I was losing valuable time.

Unfortunately, it was cloudy outside again. I couldn't count on sunlight coming to my aid.

Roland hurled the sword at me. It was like a glint in the air that I barely spotted in time to avoid, though it left me off-balance. He seized his opportunity and charged like a raging bull. I tried to recover and stand firm, but he easily hurled me against a distant wall. The air shot out of my lungs. I was just landing on my knee when Roland came swinging at me with a vicious hook.

I swung upward to try to meet it.

The impact seemed to numb me down to the bone. His punch easily knocked my arm aside. It left my face completely unprotected for his other hand to pummel. All I could do was fall backward to blunt some of the momentum. The next thing I knew, I had been buffeted against the wall again. My neck felt ready to break.

Only biting my tongue kept me conscious. The world was getting dark around me, just as a silver flash shot toward me. I rolled to avoid it the moment Roland brought the sword down into the floor.

I smacked my cheeks twice to wake myself up. Roland's monstrous face loomed closer. It was not the sort of thing you wanted to see first thing when you opened your eyes.

"Give up, Matthew. You can't possibly win."

"I'd rather not." Despite the horrible odds, I couldn't abandon hope yet. "I made a promise to be home by nightfall."

If I didn't, the princess knight would be waiting around in a darkened room, not bothering to even light a candle.

"Struggle all you like, but there is no escape from His Radiance, maggot. Or should I call you Mardukas?"

A murmur of admiration escaped my lips. "So you know who I am?"

"*Sol nia spectus.*" The sun god sees all.

"Ah. Of course."

So he would know about the curse placed on me already. That was why he kept glancing at the temporary sun floating around.

I stood up. "In that case, you're aware that I was known as the Giant-Eater. Why do you suppose that is?"

"Did you defeat a giant?" he said drolly, uninterested. I shook my head.

"Well, that, too. But that was after the fact. I can show you why right now." I pounded my knuckles together and beckoned him closer. "You'll get a front-row

demonstration of the great Giant-Eater Matthew in his prime.”

“Fascinating,” he murmured, grabbing the hilt of the sword to pull it loose from the floor.

“Not so fast.”

I kicked the hand squeezing the hilt. An ordinary person would let go at that point, but given his extreme strength, it was the sword that gave out first. It snapped right where it was struck.

Roland clicked his tongue with annoyance and swung the now much shorter weapon. His swordsmanship wasn’t bad at all—and the speed was vicious. Even I couldn’t make out his trajectory. The average fighter would’ve been cut to pieces already.

“But it’s not much more than that.”

I grabbed his wrist as he lifted the blade. While he might be huge now, his movements and sight lines were still painfully obvious and straightforward.

“You got quite a few good hits on me. I remember them. Four...no, that was the fifth.”

And I always paid my debts.

“Here’s one!”

I slammed my fist into his defenseless side. I could feel bone breaking. Roland’s body bent sideways.

“And another!”

This one was an uppercut that smashed Roland’s chin. He spit up blood and faltered backward.

“Not done yet!”

I pulled on his wrist, and this time, Roland went with it to punch me back. Despite its power, his large attempt at a swing started slow, and the exaggerated angle was easier to read. I threw a counter punch that popped him in the face.

“Time for four!”

“I don’t think so!”

Roland snatched my wrist in response. Now we were each holding the other’s wrist. He smiled confidently. But it was too early for him to act like he’d won. I bent my elbow and pulled him closer.

“Take this!”

I slammed my skull against his defenseless face. Something warm and wet splattered on my forehead.

“And here’s the finisher.”

My knee smashed up into his crotch. Roland went pale, groaned, and dropped the sword handle.

“Tch!”

To prevent me from picking it up, he kicked at the fallen sword before I could react. It flew into the air, out the window, and clattered down below. Now we were both unarmed.

“So...you thought you would make up the difference with mind games and experience,” Roland said, grabbing my hand with his other. Now we were locked with both hands again. “But in a contest of pure strength, I have the upper hand. It won’t go like the last time.”

I’d struck him intending to kill, but Roland was still coming. His crushed bones and balls were healing nicely, apparently.

“Not necessarily.”

A gust of wind blew through the broken window. Our battle of strength was still at a stalemate. If either of us relaxed in the slightest, we would be bowled over. My muscles were reaching their limit and beginning to strain. Sweat rose on Roland’s forehead.

“What’s wrong? You look like you’re struggling a little.”

“And you’re at your limit. Look.”

I glanced without turning my head; the temporary sun was starting to lose its brilliance, flickering and growing weaker.

“In time, the divine tool’s power wears off. And once that happens, you will be back to your original worthless self.”

“You’re talking too much, flimsy little chicken-man.” I snorted. “You might have heard about me from the sun god, but I heard about you from Arwin. She told me how they treated you back home.”

Roland’s mouth twisted almost imperceptibly.

“Bullied by your brothers and ignored by your parents because you were the bastard child of your father’s paramour, and spanked with a riding crop by your tutor for being too stupid. Did that cause you to have an awakening of sorts? You nasty boy. No wonder you led a sad and lonely childhood with no friends.”

“...Be silent.” A blue vein was throbbing on his forehead.

“Don’t be shy now. The whole thing about you being away on an inspection when the monster rampage happened was just an excuse, wasn’t it? You abandoned your family and ran for your life. I hear you had a wife and son back there, too. The poor things didn’t deserve that.”

He gritted his teeth, which creaked under the pressure.

“I can hear their wailing now. ‘Father, Father, help me. Why did you leave me behind? Were the monsters that scary? Or was I just preventing you from chasing Arwin’s tail like you always wanted?’ ‘That’s right, dear. Daddy just *loves* Arwin’s tail. So much so that he doesn’t give a monster’s turd what happens to us. Yippee!’”

“I told you to hold your tongue!” Roland bellowed. He pressed even harder, muscles tearing and arm veins rupturing. I couldn’t withstand it and started sliding backward. Soon, I was pressed up against the broken window. He was going to push me through it—I had to hold firm. If I fell, I couldn’t possibly win.

“This is a far cry from that saintly visage you wore earlier. I thought that one suited you better.”

“Just wait until I seal that wisecracking mouth shut!”

“You wish.” I smirked. “It only closes to accept kisses from beautiful women.”

“I don’t think you’ll have need of those anymore.”

Something hard hit the ground nearby. A little sphere rolled underfoot: the temporary sun.

I was out of time. It would need a half day in direct sunlight to charge up again. I didn't have an extra one, of course.

My body instantly felt much heavier.

Like before, I was as weak and sluggish as usual. It felt like being dropped into a deep swamp. Like sinking and sinking, where no amount of struggle had any effect.

The sun god's curse once again had me in its clutches.

I fell to one knee, unable to bear the weight. Mocking laughter sounded from above. The pressure strengthened, instantly crushing.

"Too bad, weakling!"

Don't be an idiot, flimsy little chicken-man. I knew this would happen from the start. That's right—I was always a loser, a beaten dog whipped by the unfair monster in the sky, forced to drop his tail between his legs, whine, and flee. But I wouldn't keep losing forever. I didn't want it to end that way. I didn't care how strong he was—there was no point to going on if I was going to let myself get walked over forever.

There was only one message I had for that so-called god: "Kiss my ass!"

"It's over!"

Now!

I breathed in deeply, then roared from the pit of my stomach.

And then I seized the power that had stolen my freedom and bound me to weakness, and I *cast it aside*.

I crouched under Roland, then, using the full leverage of my ankles and knees, lifted him up off the ground. His eyes widened with shock.

Bellowing, I slammed Roland's body to the ground. Cracks formed in the stone floor. I stepped on his face-down form, wrapped my fingers around his chin, and pulled as hard as I could. A silent scream sent vibrations through my

hand.

My face felt hot. My fingers trembled. Sweat poured. Dammit, he was tougher than I'd thought. Did transforming into a monster make him sturdier than an ordinary human, too? The split skin and spurting blood were slicker and harder to grab. But I couldn't loosen my grip. I gritted my teeth, clenched my buttocks, and pulled backward. If I lost my concentration, my whole body would lose strength again. This was my last chance.

The sound of ripping and splitting was in the air. When had my bones started breaking? I couldn't go on. Shit, I was going to die. Die! Give up! Just fucking die!

"Here goes!"

With all of my might and weight pulling backward, my hands finally came loose. The momentum pulled me back onto my ass. I was gasping for breath, my hands and face filthy with blood. I would have wiped them off, but I was too exhausted. I fell backward, facing the ceiling.

When I tilted my head back to look upside down, I saw Roland's severed head on the floor.

There was a headless body lying at my feet. His spine was jutting out of the neck where it had ripped off. Blood was gushing out like a fountain, staining the floor. It just convulsed and twitched.

"Im...possible," murmured Roland's head, staring blankly.

Despite the pain racking every inch of my body, I crawled over and turned the head to look at me.

"What's wrong? You don't look so good. Got an itch in your ass, maybe?"

The only answer I received was an agonized moan. The torn edge of his throat was slowly turning into blackened ash.

The trick to beating immortal monsters was always to chop their heads off. Apparently, his magic trick was no exception. That was a relief. If this hadn't worked, I'd have had to go to more drastic measures, like burying him alive, sinking him into the ocean, or grinding him into a powder to bake into bricks.

“Ordinarily, I’d have just used a good old sword or ax to cut your head off, but I didn’t have any good blades on hand, so the only option was to use my hands.”

“Wh-why...? You are under...His Radiance’s...”

“Ah yes. That.”

The curse was not gone. I didn’t have any special magic items that temporarily nullified it, either.

“Just good old-fashioned stubbornness.”

Thanks to that idiot sun god, I could no longer use my strength the way I wanted. When I could use 100 percent of it before, now I would only produce 1 percent. Which meant, if my calculations were correct, if I put in *10,000 percent* of effort, then I could temporarily produce 100.

It was only for a brief moment, and my body was wrecked. Every muscle and joint was in agony, and I couldn’t even stand. I wouldn’t be able to do this against a common street thug. In all honesty, it was a fairly useless strength. But for just a short window of time, I could fight back against that limp-dick sun god’s curse. It was the measly bit of stubbornness that my gifted body and soul could produce. I hadn’t even told Dez about this. It was truly the last ace up my sleeve.

“Ah yes, you wanted to know about the Giant-Eater moniker. Well, it’s simple: I got it because I’ve beaten so many guys who were *bigger than me*.”

The world was a big place. There were people stronger than me—better fighters, more experienced, and with unique abilities I lacked—all over the place. I was in fights where it didn’t seem like there was a chance I could win. But I took them head-on and won anyway. I was here today because I had faced the giant and won in an upset so many times.

“You said you were that shitstain sun god’s agent, right? Here’s my response to his message.”

I held up my thumb, then drew it across my throat.

““One of these days, I’m going to rip *your* head off your shoulders, too. Just

you wait, shithead.’”

Time to let him know that even a whipped dog still has teeth and nails. I’ll drag him down to earth and make him kiss every last turd that graces the soil.

“Enjoy your boasts while you can, wisecracker,” Roland snarled. “The advent will come one day. You only have two outcomes: Either serve as the sacrifice for the resurrection or die along the way.”

“You forgot the option of twisting off that maggot god’s head, too.”

Ignoring all the other good options and only presenting two convenient ones was a hallmark of a huckster.

“Other preachers will come to this place eventually. It’s over—for you and for this place.”

“What’s with the obsession with this town?”

“...Because the dungeon exists here.”

That was when I figured it out. The Astral Crystal located at the very depths of the dungeon. This was the only dungeon in the entire world that had yet to be conquered. That’s what the sun god was after.

“Then you tell him this, too. ‘If you want it, come down here and get it yourself, clown.’”

“That will not be necessary,” Roland murmured to himself. The black ash had already eaten its way up to his chin. “*Sol nia spectus.*”

“Perfect. I’ll let him watch me take a shit, too. Tell him I’ve got the perfect seat ready and waiting, so he needs to get down here soon.”

Roland said nothing. The ash was covering the bottom half of his face. It felt like he was trying to tell me something with his gaze, but there was no way to ask him what he meant at this point.

Eventually, the black ash covered all of Roland’s head and, with a cold gust of wind, vanished. A bit later, the ash covered his body, which followed suit. The only things that remained were his clothes and shoes. Even the blood on my hands and outfit turned to ash and melted into the breeze.

“So long, flimsy little chicken-man.”

A momentary brightness left me squinting. Out the window, the sun was peeking through the clouds.

“I know you’re watching up there, toilet bug.”

Whatever the sun god was after, I wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction. The godly title and the curse that robbed me of my strength freaked me out. I’d fled in fear—from him and from my own powerlessness. That was how I ended up running into this bizarre scheme, all the way at the edge of the continent. If I couldn’t run any farther, I’d just have to steel myself and make a fight of it.

Plus, I couldn’t stand to let that bastard sit on his high horse any longer. If he was the one who came up with the formula for Release, he might also know the way to get Arwin back to normal.

Be your slave? Keep dreaming.

“Here’s my answer.”

I stuck my hand up and flipped off the sky. The sun hid behind the clouds again.

“So...what now?”

The silver lining was that I didn’t need to dispose of the body, but I was a total mess, visually and physically. We’d also made too much of a racket. Someone would come rushing over soon, and if they spotted me, it would lead to trouble. But I also didn’t have enough stamina to run. In fact, it felt like someone was rushing up the stairs. Already? Give me a break. There was no escape. I crawled on all fours toward the broken window, pulled myself up to look down, and scowled.

“Well, here goes nothing.”

I steeled myself, then rolled out the window.

After a brief weightlessness, I landed face-first on a mound of refuse. It was a damned midden, piled high with scraps of food and ash from fireplaces. Every ten days, some poor sap paid a pittance came by to collect and divvy it up, taking some to an incinerator, while the rest would be carted out to the farms

to be sold as fertilizer. It made for a decent cushion. I pulled vegetable peels and eggshells off my head and crawled off the heap.

“Ugh, I *reek*.”

I couldn't see Arwin now. A hundred-year romance would crumble on the rocks in the presence of this stench. Though I'd be fine with it if *she* stank. I think.

“Ah! What the blimey?”

I spun around to see a guard. It was the one with the little mustache. He'd also stumbled upon the scene with the Aston brothers. Busy fellow.

“You look positively foul, man. Did you get hurt?”

“I was set upon by some rather scary fellows who abused me terribly. I was beaten and kicked and tossed into the midden,” I said, giving him a look on the verge of tears. “And they emptied out my purse, too. I'd just received an allowance.”

I held it upside-down and shook; nothing came out. The allowance Arwin had given me was actually in my pants pocket.

“Come, sir. You'll get my money back, won't you? Please?”

“Forget it,” he said, roughly shoving me aside as I sidled up to him. I fell onto my butt. “That's just the kind of town this is. If you don't like it, I suggest you leave.”

“That's just cruel,” I lamented.

“Be that as it may, have you seen any suspicious figures about?”

“Aside from the guys who stole my money, you mean?”

“I found two bodies back there. Looked like drug-related trouble. Whoever did it can't have gone far.”

Those were Roland's doing. He just had to make things messy.

“Dunno.” I shrugged. “I do recall hearing quite a lot of noise coming from up there, though.”

I pointed upward, right as the darker-skinned guard popped his head out the

window. Great, he's here, too?

"Nothin'. Nobody up here. Jus' some odd clodes and shoez. Signs of a ruckgus, too. Maybe dey're related."

"All right. I'm coming up," the mustached guard replied. Just as he was about to go, he met my gaze, then pinched his nose and said with disgust, "Begone already, before I throw you into a cell!"

"Yessir."

I scampered off without another word. My back prickled with what felt like stares of derision and pity. A little bit of rest had given me enough strength to walk, at least, so I went to the street, where the passersby screamed and kept their distance. Apparently, I stood out more than I realized. I wiped a scrap of greenery from my hair and leaned forward, continuing on my way in excruciating pain.

"What's wrong with him? Disgusting."

"Eugh, the *stench*."

I could hear mocking, derisive comments from all around.

"Is that Matthew?"

"The one with the princess knight? Oh dear."

"He's filthy. Wish he were dead."

They cast annoyed glances in my direction, grimaced, and kept their distance. Not that I blamed them.

I'd once been an adventurer known as the Giant-Eater. With my superhuman strength, I had all the fame and money and women I wanted. I'd lost them all, for certain reasons, but I'd gained something in their stead. The cold stares of the public—and the privilege of being at the side of the beautiful princess knight. When Her Highness was lost in the depths of darkness, I would be there to pull her back out.

I am the kept man of the princess knight.

FINAL CHAPTER

A Year Ago (Postscript)

“Ah, so they haven’t found Polly yet,” Vanessa replied sadly.

“Nope. No sign of her since she left. Even her ‘coworkers’ haven’t seen her, they say.”

I tilted back my cup of ale. It tasted like horse piss. The only thing it had going for it was that it was at a pub close to the guild, and it was cheap.

“Where could she have gone...?”

“And it’s left me completely broke. I can’t even go out for drinks like this,” I complained, turning my pockets inside out.

Vanessa wore a smile that was like a mask. “I’m sure you’ll find a new customer soon. I’m willing to talk business, if you want.”

“I’ll pass. I prefer to do the touching.”

She gave me a piercing glare, warning me in so many words to watch my tongue.

“Well, let me know if she comes back.”

“Will do,” I said, looking sad. Polly would not likely ever come back. I was sad about it—but also relieved. So I had to make a face to express the proper contrition.

“Hey, whatcha talking about?” said Sterling the clownish painter just as Vanessa was about to leave. “Oh, it’s you. You work at the Adventurers Guild, don’t you? Doing item appraisal.”

He rather boldly took her hand in his own.

“Don’t,” I cautioned helpfully. “She’s got a very scary fellow named Oscar with her. Mess with her, and he’ll break your arms.”

“It would be worth it to be with a beauty like her,” he simpered. The thing about guys like him was that when it actually came time to get beaten, they always, always broke down and cried.

I gave up on trying to teach Sterling and said to Vanessa, “This is Sterling, an unsuccessful artist. To be honest, he has no talent, no money, and no redeeming qualities. I hired him to paint a portrait of Dez’s wife, and he came back with a painting of a crow with an earthworm for a head. Dez beat *me* half to death, too. He’s not worth your time.”

“Ooh, an artist, huh?” she said, staring at Sterling with great interest. His already slack features melted into a slime-like goop.

“What kind of paintings do you make? Are they abstract? What style? What’s your favorite material to work with?”

“Uh, actually—”

I’d never heard about any actual art education from him. He was just a dabbling amateur. He’d gotten his tools from a secondhand shop at random. Sure, some people could still produce a masterpiece that way, but Sterling’s aesthetic senses were completely whack.

“I want to hear more about you.” Vanessa, meanwhile, seemed to have confused him for an actual diamond in the rough and was fascinated. What was her obsession with completely worthless men?

“Be my guest, then.”

A talentless painter had to be better than a drug dealer, at least. I left the two behind to enjoy their conversation. I accidentally walked out without paying my tab, but she could consider that my fee for introducing them to each other.

Outside, the night air chilled me to the bone. My empty wallet felt even colder. I’d built up half a year’s worth of rent backlog. When Polly was around, collection tended to be delayed, but now that she was gone, the landlord was around just about every day trying to wrangle it out of me. I couldn’t pay it all on my own, so it was only a matter of time before I got kicked out. If needed, I

could probably bum a place from Dez for a bit. But imposing on their little family of three was likely to put strain on our friendship.

“Eh, things’ll work out.”

My life mottos were *Go for broke* and *Que será, será*. I could keep going as a beggar, or a picker, or anything.

“Here you are.”

It was a voice I never expected to hear again. I stopped short and spun around.

It was Arwin Mabel Primrose Mactarode in her armor, probably having just returned from the dungeon.

The first thought in my mind was simply one word: Why? She was not supposed to have any more use for me. Or was she here to assassinate me and clean up old loose ends?

“Ah, it’s you.” I smiled, hiding the anxiety I felt on the inside. “Is this about the jade pendant? I’ve been checking with all the pawn shops. I’ll leave it with Vanessa if I find it.”

“Your help is appreciated,” Arwin said, bobbing her head. “But that is not why I am here.”

“It’s about the other thing, isn’t it? Well, I’ve got my own issues to sort out. It might take a while longer—say, a thousand years?”

“And you want me to wait that long?”

Ah. It seemed the princess knight was unfamiliar with the subtleties of the common folk.

“That was a lie. A joke. I was merely testing your resolve, to see if you were truly the type to sacrifice your own well-being to save a whore. Well, congratulations: You passed. I can’t give you a prize, except for the gift of not having to deal with an overgrown fella for the rest of your life.”

“You’re saying that you deceived me?” Her voice was getting sharper.

“I apologize if I’ve hurt your feelings. My shadow will never darken your path

again. That should suffice.”

“You want to make me a liar?”

Frustration and impatience were beginning to prickle at my skin. I ran my hands through my hair. “You’re clearly off your rocker if you actively choose to sleep with a disgusting man like me.”

It was like we weren’t speaking the same language, despite the fact that she was so beautiful that it was all I could do not to throw my arms around her. Was she in some fit of desperate self-abandonment? This wasn’t right.

“I made you a promise,” she said with a stunning smile. A cold sweat broke out on my forehead. “But if you don’t want to sleep with me, that is fine. Instead, I have a different request.”

“What’s that?”

“I want to keep you around.”

I couldn’t believe my ears.

“Do you know what you’re implying?”

“I want you to be my coach, helping me and healing my fatigue and my troubles, in exchange for a modest price,” she said, quite matter-of-factly. I wasn’t sure how to respond to that. Did she still believe that nonsense?

“And,” she continued, “I think that Mardukas, ‘the Giant-Eater,’ from the Million Blades would be more than worth the trouble.”

“...You knew who I was?”

“Word of your fame reached my country, yes. And there are very few people who can speak so intimately with Dez, ‘the Mobile Fortress.’”

So she figured it out through Dez. You couldn’t have covered for me better than that, Beardo?

“I just give him attention because he doesn’t have any friends.”

“So you admit it,” she said. I hung my head in defeat. “Or are you already pledged to be someone else’s kept man?”

“Well, no, but...” I had just escaped my previous contract the other day.

“Then there should be no problem. It sounds like a deal to me.”

I sighed. For some reason, Arwin seemed rather taken with me. The Crimson Princess Knight should know what would happen with a creep like me hanging around her all the time. We would be harassed by the jealous and the self-righteous fools and have to deal with their nonsense. On top of that, Arwin had a huge secret to hide, and I had plenty of skeletons in my closet. I would probably have to dirty my hands again, too. Maybe it would just be some low-level thug, or maybe it would be someone close to me. In fact, it was much easier to see myself dying in an alleyway soaked in piss. But despite all of this, despite my rich and overactive imagination, the one thing I failed to imagine was the option of refusing her.

It was a worthless life anyway. And whether I got covered in blood or filth, she was going to be down in the dungeon where she couldn't see it.

“All right. Then let's talk about conditions. First, about the living situation...”

From there, I found my way into Arwin's home.

And here we are today.

And what happened between us after that? Did we do it or not? I get the question a lot. *Quite* a lot. But I'll never tell.

If I build up any more debt, my body will be the next one dumped into the dungeon. Please, let me keep my secrets.

Afterword

Thank you very much for reading *The Kept Man of the Princess Knight*. This was the Grand Prize winner of the 28th Dengeki Novel Prize. Ever since I started writing, I've dreamed of being a professionally published author countless times, and it can only be incredibly good fortune that I received this prize in real life, not my dreams. I'm stunned.

You may have thought it was an eccentric title. Different writers come up with their stories in different ways—in my case, it all started with the title.

A few years ago, I was glancing through the rankings of a particular online novel submission website when the title simply popped into my head.

My instincts said it was an intriguing title. If I were to write a story with this title, what kind of story would it be? I started putting together a background and structure from there. I had work to do and other things to write in the meantime, so I set it aside for a while. But I felt that if it was eternally unfinished, I would never be able to move past it, so I finished the story and submitted it. I never thought I would win; if it passed the first round of selections, I would have considered it a coup.

So I did things I'd never done before this point. I had Matthew do things that were unbecoming of a hero. I stirred up things I thought were entertaining and cool and boiled them until they were a toxic and unholy stew. I second-guessed my title but ultimately submitted it as is. The story would not have existed if not for that title, after all. I finished it up at a breakneck pace and submitted on the evening of the deadline date, according to the site.

You're aware of the result. Thanks to many coincidences and strokes of luck, my story has made it out into the world. And I've received help from a great many senior writers, who offered their kind words to promote the book. Thank

you all very much.

And more specifically, to Gakuto Mikumo, who wrote a comment of recommendation, as well as the other members of the prize selection committee; the Dengeki Media Works editorial office and everyone who was involved in choosing my work; my editor, Tabata; the wonderful Saki Mashima, for drawing our fabulous illustrations; and everyone else involved in publishing this book: You have my deepest appreciation and gratitude.

I pray this story will remain close to your heart.

Toru Shirogane

NEXT VOLUME PREVIEW

THE KEPT MAN OF THE PRINCESS KNIGHT

VOLUME 2

Story

Imperial Guard knights have been dispatched from the royal capital to maintain public order in the Dungeon City. Their presence sends shock waves through Gray Neighbor, disrupting the normal flow of things in the vice-filled city. One of the knights in the Imperial Guard has come to this turbulent, vermin-infested place to investigate the mysterious death of a guild appraiser—his own little sister. What will the kept man do when he comes face-to-face with this knight?!

The story of this dark world continues!

An illustration of a man and a woman in a dark, gothic setting. The man, on the left, has dark, spiky hair and is wearing a dark, long-sleeved tunic with a belt. The woman, on the right, has long, dark hair and is wearing a light-colored, ornate dress with a high collar and long sleeves. They are standing in front of a dark, textured background that resembles a stone wall or a building facade. The text "COMING SOON" is overlaid on the right side of the image in a large, white, serif font.

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SOON

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