



Toru Shirogane

Illustration by  
Saki Mashima

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THE  
KEPT MAN  
OF THE  
PRINCESS KNIGHT





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2







“You should cherish me more. Aren’t I your treasure?”

“Of course you are.”

With my hand on her shoulder, I drew her closer to me. This time, she did not resist.

“I will cherish you. I swear it. You have my word.”

“And to be clear, when I say ‘cherish,’ that also means that you will not make passes at other women.”

“...I’ll strive to remember that.”





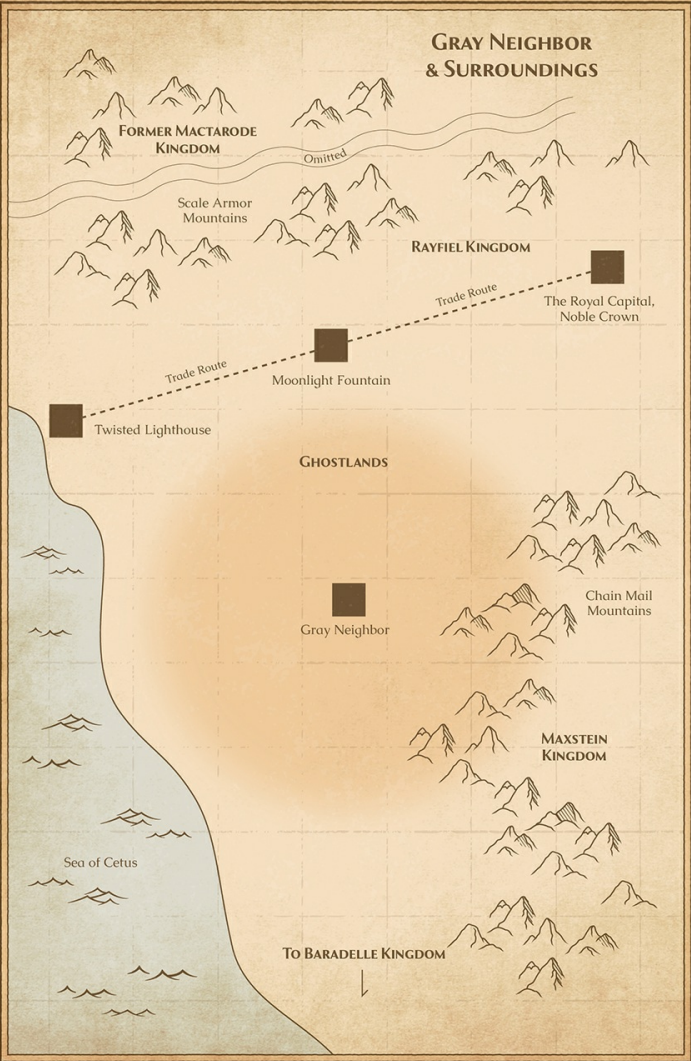
"It's *Vincent*," he corrected me.

"I'll be straight with you. I have come to this town to arrest the person responsible for killing Vanessa."

His sober, powerful declaration resonated in the room.

"I've heard about you. You're Vanessa's brother, right? If you want to learn more about your sister, I think you'd have a lot more luck at the pub, Vince."







## CHARACTERS

### Matthew

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



### Arwin

The vanguard of her party who tackles the dungeon. She has a childish side that she only shows to Matthew.



### Vanessa

A guild-affiliated appraiser. Matthew killed her when she learned Arwin's secret.



### Dez

A guild-affiliated adventurer. This cantankerous dwarf is one of the few who knows about Matthew's past.



### April

The guildmaster's granddaughter. The adults urge her to stay away from Matthew.



### Vincent

Leader of the Paladins. Publicly, he maintains the peace of Gray Neighbor, while privately, he searches for the person who killed his sister, Vanessa.



### Noelle

A new member of Aegis. She is Lutwidge's niece and practically worships Arwin.



### Gloria

An appraiser hired from another guild to take Vanessa's place. Likes to collect forgeries.





A dark silhouette of a woman with long, flowing hair, holding a sword. The background is a gradient of dark gray to black.

# THE KEPT MAN OF THE PRINCESS KNIGHT

## 2

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Saki Mashima



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## THE KEPT MAN OF THE PRINCESS KNIGHT 2

**Toru Shirogane**

TRANSLATION BY STEPHEN PAUL • COVER ART BY SAKI MASHIMA

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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*Afterword*

## PROLOGUE

### The Kept Man's Misfortunes

Amid the quiet rain falling from the dull gray clouds overhead, I pulled the translucent orb from my pocket and chanted, "Irradiation."

Bright light flooded the area. I could feel the strength returning to my limbs.

The men were startled by the unexpected flash, and covered their faces with their hands, at which point I rushed them.

The job was done in an instant. I broke necks, cracked skulls against walls, and crushed throats. Once I was certain they were all dead, I grabbed the floating orb and stuck it back into my pants pocket. That was my handy magical item, the temporary sun—a crystal sphere that accumulated sunlight.

I used their lanterns to illuminate the bodies: two sellers and one buyer. I plucked a little baggie from one of their hands and checked inside. No doubt about it: Release.

Release was a drug that had caused me great pain in the past, and now it was a very big and forbidden secret of Arwin's.

Ever since I'd gotten my hands on the temporary sun, acquiring the drug had been much easier. When it rained and the clouds were out in the middle of the day, I was less than half as strong as the average man. But with this tool, for a brief time, I could use the strength I'd had in years past. I'd be a lot happier about it if the orb didn't use the power of that accursed sun god. Borrowing the strength of the one who had cursed me to fight back against *his* curse made me nothing more than a puppet dancing on his strings.

"Hmm?"

The pocket of the man who'd been trying to buy the drug was oddly bulging. I



felt around and pulled out an oddly shaped pendant. The sight of it made me grimace: it was the sigil of the sun god.

There were two churches dedicated to the sun god in Gray Neighbor, but this didn't belong to either of them.

Of the different sects that worshipped the sun, Sol Magni was on the rise. Of course, anyone who worshipped that dingleberry sun god was clinically insane as a rule, but Sol Magni was the sort of group that attracted the real crazies. From what I'd learned, they recruited new members via aggressive means, and weren't above smuggling and murder to achieve their ends.

Based on how he'd sent Roland to purify this town, the puke-spittle sun god was clearly up to something. Maybe he'd given another lunatic one of his "revelations" and send another puppet monster in to wreak havoc. The city was a dung heap inhabited by pieces of shit, but that didn't mean I'd let it be destroyed. No one was going to stop Arwin's mission—neither god nor devil.

I would kill them before they could.

I stayed in the rainy back alley, laying low, until a man dressed in dark clothing wearing a wide-brimmed hat approached.

This was the coffin maker and disposer of corpses, Bradley the Gravedigger. I paid him the fee, and he silently wrapped up the three bodies in cloth. If the bodies were found, the underworld in the city would get involved, and they were annoying. It was much safer to just pay the money and have the dead taken care of before they turned into trouble.

It was a little over a year since I'd first made use of his services, and now I was a regular customer. The first body I had him get rid of was a drug dealer who caused me to kill a good friend of mine. I didn't regret it, but there were times when I found myself just staring at my hands.

I turned away to avoid a sense of rising disgust. Bradley was getting absolutely soaked, working in silence. That was nothing new; he was mute.

"You know, normally when you have such a frequent, faithful customer, you'd cut them a bit of a deal," I said, but got no response. He just continued to collect the dead bodies.

While he was anything but friendly, his work was trustworthy. Once the three bodies were bagged up, he dragged them to his covered wagon on the street. While he looked thin, his arms were wiry and strong. He was the total opposite of me in my current plight.

“Nice work.”

Before he stepped onto his wagon, Bradley turned back to me and tossed over a little bag. It was palm-size, and tightly tied at the mouth. I leaned closer and picked up a strange, sour scent.

This struck me as odd, until Bradley made a motion of smelling his own arm.

“Oh, that’s what you mean.”

The bag was meant to neutralize odors. The rain would help, too, but it had been quite a bloodbath earlier. The smell of blood could very well be stuck to my body.

“Very nice, so thoughtful. Thanks,” I said.

Bradley nodded and got into the wagon. I left the scene with the sound of trundling wheels in my ears. After a few turns, I took shelter from the rain under an overhang. Once I was certain there was no one around, I opened the bag of odor repellant and promptly gagged. It was a dead insect wrapped up in the cloth, presumably pickled in some kind of medicinal solution. The yellow-and-black creature had two feelers and six legs curled up under its body. By opening the bag, the sour stink was much more powerful, and it nearly made me retch.

“Hey, you,” said a gruff voice.

I spun around to see a man with a tattoo of an angel on his arm. Surely it had been a beautiful piece at one point, but because of his rippling muscles, now it looked more like a squirrel with its cheeks stuffed with walnuts. He also had a large scar running from his right brow over his cheek.

“What are you doing out in this rain?”

He pulled a knife out and gave the area a careful look.

“You’re not a buyer, are ya? Where are Kyle and Willie?”



He was another seller, then. I didn't know there were more of them around.

The look on my face must have told the tattooed man what he needed to know. A faint smile played across his lips. "Seems like you already know. Maybe I need to ask you in a more physical way, you big ogre."

There was murder in his narrowed eyes. I pulled out the temporary sun again and chanted the spell. But the translucent crystal did not light up; it just sat in my palm, getting wet with rain. I'd run out of time. Once it stopped shining, it needed at least half a day's worth of sunlight. And it only gave me strength to a count of three hundred—it just wasn't a fair trade.

"What the hell is that? You gonna tell my fortune?"

"That's right," I replied. "Your luck is atrocious. Here's a warning: make an about-face and go right home. Get ready to hang up all that laundry you've been saving up, or you'll have the very worst day of your entire life."

"I met a fortune teller like that once," the man said, rubbing his neck. "He turned over some cards and said, 'Today is your lucky day. Everything will go well for you.' I took him at his word, put all my savings into a game of chance, and lost it all. What do you suppose happened to the soothsayer? Suffocated on his own cards, strangely enough."

I gave him a simpering smile. "So *that* was the part that went well, huh?"

"As easy as shoving my wife's clothes into the closet," the man said, leaping at me. I kicked a nearby piece of trash at him and turned to run.

"Get back here!" he roared, giving chase. The rain was letting up, but the stone street was slick and treacherous. I splashed as I ran, nearly slipping several times as I turned corners. Nothing was forcing the man to chase me, but he did anyway. He toppled twice but got right back to his feet and closed the gap. The curse also reduced my running speed.

"You're done now, fortune teller."

It was a dead end ahead, I realized. Behind me, the man was advancing with his knife in hand.

The rain had stopped during our chase. It hadn't been raining that long, but

we were both soaked. Several puddles covered the ground in the narrow alley. He strode over them without concern.

There was no other escape. Even the low clouds that had finished dumping their rain seemed to block in the air overhead, flowing eastward with the wind. In less than a hundred seconds, I'd be flying through them without a body.

I lunged at him desperately, but he easily blocked my punch with his palm. It was so easy for him, in fact, that he looked a bit surprised.

A heavy impact took my breath away; he'd smashed his fist into my gut in response. I doubled over in agony, making it easy for him to kick my face like a ball. I slammed into the wall behind me and fell to the ground.

"Where did Kyle and Willie go? Speak, or that crystal ball will be your new eye," the man threatened, tapping my cheek with the flat of his knife.

"Have mercy," I said, rubbing my forehead against the ground and prostrating myself at his feet. "I don't know anything. I was just walking by, that's all. Spare my life, and I'll give you money. I'll kiss your boots, if that's what you want."

I could tell that his shoulders were shaking with laughter. "Wait, I remember you. Aren't you the Crimson Princess Knight's kept man?" He grabbed my hair and forced my face upward. "You want to live?"

"Yeah."

"Then bring her here to me."

"...To do what?"

"You know already. I'm gonna strip that uppity bitch to her birthday suit and jam my cock into her until she squeals. If I feed her enough of the drug, she'll happily bounce all on her own."

He leered, imagining his lurid scenario. Ugh, I could practically *hear* him getting hard.

"....."

"What's wrong? Say something."

"Here's my answer."



I stuck my middle finger right up to his nose.

“Suck a fart and die, you tiny-dick sleazebag born from your mother’s shit.”

He punched me. I kissed the cobblestones.

“Well, that’s an unfortunate answer. I was just about to spare your life!” The man’s knife rose. His expression was hideous. “Here’s my fortune for you...it’s raining blood today!”

The blade rose high enough to catch the sunlight, illuminating my face.

He turned it around to a backhand position and swung it down at me. I grabbed his wrist from the side and crushed it. The man’s face suddenly looked rather foolish. He couldn’t understand why his wrist was shattered, and why there was blood spraying everywhere.

“My arm...my arm!”

At last the pain had completed the arduous journey to his brain. The man screamed and arched his back, giving me time to stand. A ray of sunlight shone through the clouds and onto my back.

“I warned you to go and hang your laundry to dry.”

In the late afternoon, the rain stops quickly, and the clouds clear just as fast. After paying such close attention to the state of the sun and clouds, I’ve learned a thing or two about predicting their tempers.

I swung my fist down on the man who had curled around his broken hand. His skull crunched. He was dead on the cobblestones without even getting the chance to scream.

“This really was the worst day of your life.”

To me, forecasting the weather was just another kind of fortune-telling.

Once this fresh body was properly disposed of, I went home at last. There was someone waiting outside the door.

“You’re drenched.”

Her Highness the princess knight had returned. But why was she outside?

"I left my key inside. I've been waiting here for you to return and let me in," she said, wiping my face with a handkerchief. There was an umbrella leaning against the wall next to the door. She'd been waiting out in the rain this whole time, apparently.

"Welcome back. Were you cold?"

I moved in for a hug, but Arwin kept her distance.

"What have you been doing, and where?"

"Huh?"

My clothes were always tattered, and the rain should have washed off all the blood splatters. Oh, maybe it was just because my clothes were wet.

"What's that smell? It's awful."

Apparently, I'd been smelling it so much that my nose had gone daft. It was the scent remover from earlier. Arwin put a hand over her nose, glaring.

"Do something about it. My stomach's going to turn."

"Sure thing...*eugh!*"

The medicinal solution had surely weakened the insect's carapace, because the moment I pulled out the black thing, I crushed it in my fingers, spilling yellow liquid into my palm. It felt disgusting. I wiped it on the wall, but it didn't get rid of the stench.

I turned to the well, intending to wash my hands, when an insect crossed my vision. Many insects, in fact. They were all the same bug, growing in number. Before I realized what was happening, there were dozens of them swarming around me.

"What is this, Matthew?!"

"Ugh! Get! Go away!"

Maybe they were drawn to the bodily fluid of their own kind.

"Do something, Matthew!"



“I’m trying!”

I tossed the crushed insect body over the fence, but the stink of its guts still clung to my palm, so they kept coming after me.

“I have no choice.” Arwin grabbed the key to the house from me and leaped through the doorway.

Unbelievable. She locked the door on me.

“Wait, Arwin. Open up!”

“Not until you do something about those disgusting bugs!” the princess knight chided me through the door.

I washed my hands again and again, but had no luck in removing the stench, so I had to spend the night outdoors until the insects finally went away.

Bradley was gonna pay for giving me that weird junk. Mark my words.

Sorry for the late introduction. My name is Matthew.

I was once an adventurer known as the Giant-Eater. Due to certain unfortunate circumstances, I lost my strength, and wandered until I made a home here in Gray Neighbor.

Now I am the princess knight’s kept man and lifeline—primarily serving as the rope that strangles those who would do her harm.

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Princess Knight's Decision

Once again, I was upstairs at the Adventurers Guild, keeping the bearded dwarf known as Dez company. Usually, we just talked about pointless things, but every now and then our topic was meaningful.

“Say, Dez, you ever feel like...*returning* to the field?”

Dez would be a very welcome addition to Arwin's party. In terms of skill and experience, he passed every single bar, and best of all, he was utterly dedicated to his wife, so he wouldn't try anything funny with Arwin, like young Ralphie did.

“Nope.”

“Oh.”

That was the end of *that* conversation. It was worth a shot. I wasn't going to harass him about it.

“Why would you bring that up?” Dez asked, giving me a funny look.

“Her Highness is in a foul mood.”

Lately, there seemed to be a flood of adventurers passing through the city. Naturally, they were all after the last dungeon remaining in the world: the Millennium of Midnight Sun. Most were scrubs barely worth mentioning, but some were, in fact, talented.

There was Chrysaor, a party led by the formidable Rex, who wielded a sword and spear at the same time; Medusa, run by the spellcasting Maretto Sisters; and Argo, headed by the bandit-turned-scout Nick—all of whom were making great strides in the dungeon.

By contrast, Arwin's party, Aegis, was coming up short, consistently struggling in the shallower floors. With people who came along well after her overtaking her, she was bound to be upset. To rebuild her country, she needed the Astral Crystal that sat at the very bottom of the dungeon—the all-powerful item.

“Weren't they supposed to be getting a new member?”

“They should have been here ages ago, but their arrival's been delayed due to weather and whatnot.”

The trip took months to begin with. You can't cut us some slack? Even in matters like this, that filthy sun god is determined to trip me up.

“Don't use something that valuable as a toy,” he said. I looked down and realized that I was fiddling with the temporary sun between my fingers. “That's your lifeline, ain't it?”

“Lifeline? Not if I can help it.”

“Didn't it save your life not that long ago?”

I'd told Dez that this was a holy relic from the sun god. I had shone it on him, in case it temporarily cured his curse as well, but all he did was squint and say, “That's too bright, clown,” and hit me.

I also told him that the supposedly deceased Roland had come back as a “preacher” working for the sun god like a bit of turd stuck to a goldfish's tail, that I had fought him, and that the god had more plans for this town. There were some other details I hadn't mentioned.

“After what you told me, I couldn't help but wonder,” Dez said, looking uncharacteristically serious, “wasn't that relic meant *just* for you?”

“What do you mean?”

“You're the only one whose curse has anything to do with sunlight.”

“But people other than me can use it.”

Vanessa had given it to me, and she had used it. When I gave it to Dez to use earlier, he'd done it, too.

“If the sun god is spreading around curses for the sake of his ‘sufferers,’ or



whatever he says, then there could be similar kinds out there. Like yours, where you can't use any strength unless you're standing in the sunlight."

So it was for sufferers of the same category? That was a surprisingly sharp deduction by Dez's standards. In that sense, having a relic that only worked for a limited period was exactly the sort of shit this sun god would pull.

"In that case, maybe there are relics somewhere out there that are meant for you and the others, too."

"Maybe so."

"Do you know where *those guys* are?"

"Captain's running an adventurers guild off to the east somewhere, from what I hear. No clue about the rest."

"Me neither."

The members of the Million Blades had earned our share of grudges. We were too famous and had gotten involved in too much trouble all over the place. The others were too tough to get shanked in an alley, so I figured they were still lurking around somewhere.

"Just let me know if you hear of anything that seems to fit the bill."

It was infuriating, feeling like I was playing along with the sun god's script, but the more tools at our disposal, the better. If we had the means to use our full powers, they would come in handy at some point.

"Anyway, if Roland was correct, then more 'preachers' might make their way here. Kill 'em as soon as you see 'em. The head is the weak point. Either sever the neck or pull it off the spinal column," I said helpfully. Down below, there was a loud thumping, followed by cheers and murmurs. Something was going on downstairs. Probably more idiots getting drunk and starting a fight.

"You'd swear they had nothin' better to do. How about working your damn jobs? Get a life, you lazy bastards," Dez swore, making a sour face.

It sounded like someone was rushing up the stairs. In seconds, the door flew open.

"We've got trouble, Dez!"

It was April, the guildmaster's granddaughter, who liked to pretend that she was one of the guild employees. "There's a monster thrashing around down below! Come quick!"

She pulled frantically on Dez's arm. The look in his eyes shifted immediately—he grabbed an ax that leaned against the wall and hurried down the stairs, April pushing him the whole way. I followed the two of them.

"What, did goblins come crawling out of the dungeon?"

The Adventurers Guild was located just past the entrance to the dungeon. Normally it was closed off behind thick doors, but sometimes smaller monsters like goblins or kobolds popped out.

April replied to my question by shaking her head. "A monster we took from an adventurer just came back to life..."

As soon as we reached the ground floor, someone interrupted by flying toward us. They struck a guild member who just happened to be on the same trajectory, sending them both crashing into a counter. The first person wasn't dead, but knocked clean out. I turned to look out the doorway, where a massive man-faced lion was roaring.

A manticore.

The monster had the face of a human and the body of a lion, which was covered in ominous reddish-black fur reminiscent of twilight. There were numerous venomous barbs on the end of its tail. The creature was nearly twice my size.

"No way! We already killed that thing," gasped a disbelieving young warrior near the counter. Fool—it tricked you. Manticores were deviously clever. Playing dead was an easy game for them.

Manticore pelts and entrails sold for a high price. This aspiring adventurer must have chosen to save the trouble and time of dismantling the creature himself and had a carrier bring it out for him.

The manticore—chest, back, and limbs dyed dark red—growled and made biting motions to keep the other adventurers at bay. Its injuries only made it fiercer and more dangerous. The last thing we wanted was for the thing to get

loose in town.

“Let’s go, Dez.”

“Yep.”

The dwarf hoisted the ax over his shoulder and headed outside.

A breeze shot past us.

It was a young woman, around the same age as Arwin. Her black hair was cut in a neat bob, and her eyes were small and blue. She wore a black cloak tinged with red over leather armor. Her black gauntlets were quite oversize compared to the rest of her.

I knew just about every adventurer who hung around the city, but here was an unfamiliar face.

As she ran, she pulled out a black ball and hurled it at the manticore. It easily knocked the sphere away with its tail, only for the orb to split and issue a dark gray vapor.

A smoke bomb.

The screen quickly blocked the manticore’s vision. The woman leaped and pulled a large blade from her gauntlet, lifting it high and swinging it down on the base of the manticore’s tail, severing it.

Blood sprayed, and a hideous scream filled the air.

Despite faltering, the manticore’s rage and will to fight were fiercer than ever. It bared its teeth and charged through the billowing smoke at the woman. It was fast enough that it would toss her all the way onto the roof if it hit her, but she charged forward without fear. Just before they collided, she darted to the right and used the beast’s front leg as a step, leaping onto its back in one motion. Once she was straddling it like a horse, she plunged her blade into the manticore’s spine. The monster screamed and reared.

Attempting to throw her off, the manticore toppled over and slammed its face into the ground. The young woman leaped off before she could suffer the same fate; blood was shooting from the beast’s back. It was a very deep wound, and the monster wriggled and roared with obvious agony. It tumbled and



rolled, kicking the severed tail with its back leg. The venom-laced tail flew into the air, soaring over to the crowd of guild members who were looking on from a distance.

“Look out!” someone shouted. They scrambled, but a white-haired old man stumbled and fell. The venomous spike attached to the tail plunged toward him; he turned away and wailed. Just before it stabbed straight through the old man, a blade slid in from the side and lopped it off, pushing it aside.

“Are you all right, sir?” said a clear, beautiful voice.

A cheer arose. It was none other than the Crimson Princess Knight, Arwin Mabel Primrose Mactarode, who had rescued him. Her Highness. The other Aegis members were behind her—they had just returned from the dungeon, from the look of it.

“Y-yes, my lady,” said the old man, going down to a knee despite the hand she held out to him.

“It’s dangerous here. You should take shelter,” she warned the kneeling man, then rushed off toward the manticore. She instructed her companions, “Just because it’s hurt, don’t assume it’s down. Be careful!”

A dark shadow flew overhead.

“Hiyah!”

The woman from moments ago leaped over the heads of Arwin and her party, jamming her blade into the manticore’s forehead. The red lion’s body convulsed and collapsed on its side. The black eyes closed, and then it was still at last.

The crowd applauded. Naturally, their cheers were for the smaller woman, not the princess knight.

“That was amazing. She defeated that huge monster all on her own,” April marveled, her eyes sparkling.

The woman seemed unbothered by any of this. In the act of sticking her blade back into the sheath, a metal plate fell from her garments. It was the insignia of the guild. For each rank earned, the guild carved a star into the insignia, but there wasn’t a single star on hers.

Which meant that she was a brand-new member.

Her skill level, however, did not match someone who had just started adventuring. She seemed to have significant experience fighting monsters—she'd either been a mercenary or a hunter before joining the guild. You had to register with the guild if you wanted to delve into the dungeon.

"That was very impressive," said Dez, finally catching up.

"What took you so long?"

He jutted his chin toward a group of six adventurers who were trussed up on the ground. One of them was the very man who had brought in the manticore. They had been trying to escape during the chaos, so Dez had captured them and tied them up. He must have realized the woman's skill and chose to focus on apprehending the culprits instead.

From there, it was time to get back to work. Dez dragged them around the back of the building. It was time for their punishment. April tried to follow, but I snagged her by the back of the collar.

"That's grown-up business. You skip on back home and enjoy a nice piece of fruitcake."

"Don't treat me like a child," pouted the child.

Meanwhile, the new adventurer was surrounded by a crowd of admirers.

"That was incredible, young lady. Who are you?"

"Want to join my party?"

She ignored the praises and invitations, instead noticing something and rushing over. She dusted off her clothes and straightened her hair before kneeling in front of Arwin.

"It is a most humbling and wondrous occasion to lay eyes upon your regal countenance again, O Exalted Princess—"

"No need for that, Noelle. There is no need for a retainer's courtesy here," Arwin interrupted, pulling the woman named Noelle to her feet and gently embracing her. "I did not expect to see you here. You've improved since the last time we met."

“I have just finished my adventurer’s registration, so I may join you in the dungeon at any time. I would go with you there right now, if you’d have me.”

“Don’t be hasty,” Arwin said wryly. The young woman was quite overbearing. If Arwin didn’t watch out, Noelle would be stooping down to kiss her boots.

“I have served you since childhood, Your Highness. Please allow me to help. I would gladly risk my life to take my uncle’s place and *assume command*, for the sake of your noble goal.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

Noelle bobbed her head with great satisfaction.

“You must be tired from the journey. Rest for today. I’d like to hear news from you anyway.”

“Then I shall accompany you to the mansion. I will be your attendant, your maid—whatever job you wish!”







“No need,” said Arwin, looking slightly troubled. “This is not a game for me. I do not keep attendants or maids. I am doing everything on my own.”

Air rushed past my lips. I hadn’t realized that, apparently, cooking her dinner, taking her laundry to a washer, and cleaning her room had all been figments of my imagination!

I barely stifled my laughter, earning a vicious glare from Arwin, who had heard me. Of course, I was not going to reveal the entire truth and ruin the princess’s good reputation.

Instead, I smiled and leaned in to ask, “Would this happen to be the newest member?”

“That’s right. Her name is Noelle. She’s young, but very talented,” Arwin said, pushing her very shapely chest forward. She was clearly proud of the girl. “She’s the niece of Lord Lewster.”

“Ah, the elderly knight. A good man, that one.” If you ignored his infatuation with Arwin, which led him to hire adventurers to kill me.

Apparently, he was Noelle’s mother’s brother. She fixed me with quite a fierce stare.

“And you are?”

“I’m Matthew. Let’s just say I’m *involved* here. I’m not an adventurer, but I offer support of all kinds,” I said, deciding to leave the kept man detail out of the conversation, since it would only complicate matters. Surely some kindhearted soul would fill her in at some point. “Your uncle and I got along very well,” I continued. “I took him to a strip club, which delighted him very much. He went around sticking gold coins down the underwear of all the dancers.”

“Don’t lie; that was you.” Arwin jabbed me in the side. I would never, of course. I only used coppers at most.

“You really...?” Noelle’s eyes narrowed. Her blue irises were suddenly filled with thorny hostility.

“Did your uncle tell you about any of this, perhaps? Maybe he told you that



the whorehouse I introduced to him was a total rip-off. I think so too, actually. I'll write him a letter of apology soon. And I'll send along a salve that works for... certain diseases, as well."

Noelle seemed to think that I was just making things up. Her stare was getting colder by the second.

"Enough. Go home now."

Arwin pushed me away and out of the guild building. I looked back over my shoulder and caught sight of Noelle, who was still glaring daggers in my direction. She didn't look anything like her uncle, but she seemed to have one thing very much in common with him.

Poor girl. She didn't seem to notice that the three people behind *her* were giving her equally frightening looks.

I'd worried that, like her virgin uncle, she might try something right off the bat, and sure enough, the very next day, she came to the house. And for some reason, Ralph was with her.

"Arwin's not home right now. You want to come in? She'll be home in the evening."

"I wish to speak with you," she said, marching right in. Noelle ended up sitting across from me, while Ralph stood behind her, against the wall. I offered him a chair, but he ignored me, the git.

I asked what she wanted, and Noelle placed a bag of gold onto the table.

"This is fifty coins. Take it. Leave the princess and the city at once."

I cackled. "Did you travel here just to say this to me?"

"I've heard about you from my uncle."

"That I was the best-looking man in the realm?"

"That you were not to be underestimated. That I should not let your attitude and flippant way with words mislead me."

Apparently, he had filled his niece's head with stories, while keeping his own

shame hidden. What a rat. At least he seemed to be keeping my secret safe. He'd better, after the kind of threats I made against him.

"And does Arwin know about this?" I asked.

"I will suffer all responsibility for these actions."

The fact that she wasn't simply saying, "Of course," was a sign that she had an honest nature.

I sighed exaggeratedly. "Well...I'm disappointed. What a letdown."

"I don't know what you expected, exactly, but I'm—"

"Not in you. In the boy behind you," I said, nodding toward Ralph, who scowled. "It never occurred to me that he would take a ride on the whims of some young lady he's never met to get involved in such a stupid scheme. I wonder what happened to the Ralph who risked his life to rescue me from a group of ruffians?"

"It wasn't for you. It was for Her Highness!" he said, with absolute loathing, even a bit of fear. "The main thing is...you're just *fishy*. Most days, the adventurers treat you like a punching bag. I've even heard about you losing in arm wrestling to a child. And yet you've done these feats that surpass imagination, like stopping a lindworm charge all on your own. We simply can't afford to allow a man of your unsavory nature around the princess anymore."

Ah, referring to that whole situation. It had been so desperate that I hadn't been able to find a good excuse.

"It was just the old feat of strength in an emergency. I couldn't do it again if I tried."

"....."

"You look like you don't believe me. That's so sad, considering the words of love that passed between us."

"You said them, not me! Besides—"

"At any rate," said Noelle, pulling the conversation back on topic, "you do not have a choice in the matter. You will do as I ask and sign this."

She placed a piece of paper and pen next to the bag. I was not going to read it. No doubt just some contract promising that I would never approach Arwin ever again.

“I refuse. I stand to make a lot more money from living the rest of my life with Arwin than from accepting your paltry severance payment.”

“Or I could simply drive you out by force. The thought of—”

“—a filthy disgusting gigolo like me hanging around the princess makes you sick to your stomach, perhaps?”

Noelle looked at me in wonder. No, I hadn’t read her mind.

“See, I knew someone else who said the exact same thing you did: an old fellow with a face built for a mustache, named Lutwidge Lewster. The very same night I moved in with Arwin, he came to complain. The one thing he did better was have the balls to accuse me in front of Arwin, too.”

He went on and on and on, too. I barely got any sleep that night.

“.....”

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t mean that to sound nasty. You’ve got your good side, too. *You* brought me fifty gold coins, but your uncle only bothered with thirty, the skinflint.”

“I will not hear you slander my uncle.” Noelle’s finger strayed just the slightest bit toward her chest. Maybe she was thinking of grabbing a knife hidden in her shirt.

“Fine, fine, whatever. You want me to sign it, right?”

I had no interest in getting sliced up. I sighed, grabbed the pen, and promptly ran it over the paper before handing it back. Ralph took one glance at it, then slammed the pledge onto the table, his face beet-red.

“What is this?!”

“Oh! Sorry, I see what I did. I wrote your name by mistake. But I did get the spelling right, didn’t I? See, it’s all there: D-U-M-B M-O-T-H-E-R-F—”

“Enough!”

He finally drew his sword and pointed it at my nose. Some people are so touchy.

“After you’ve cut me to pieces, I won’t care anymore, but just for the record, are *you* going to clean it up? You wouldn’t make Arwin do it, would you?” I threatened. A pained grunt sounded from Ralph’s throat, and he faltered. If you’re just gonna back down, you shouldn’t be drawing it in the first place. “At any rate, my answer is no. Arwin needs me, and I have no intention of leaving her. If you’re going to kill me, then have at it. But it’s going to leave your precious princess knight in a spot of real trouble. I don’t think she’ll be able to stay around here anymore.”

“Devious bastard,” Ralph spat, withdrawing his weapon.

He probably took that statement to mean that I had arranged for horrible untruths about Arwin to be spread in the event of my death. I would never do such a thing, of course.

“Very well. I will withdraw for today,” Noelle said eventually, rising to her feet. She knew I could be bluffing, but as long as the possibility remained, she couldn’t be nonchalant about it. If she tortured me, I might not speak before Arwin returned, and the blood would make a mess of the house. She probably decided that it would be better to try her luck again later. She also diligently retrieved the sack of coins from the table, not that she *needed* to do that...

“Consider this a warning,” I said, right as Noelle was about to walk out the door. “I believe you came to this town in order to help Arwin. So rather than focusing on me, you should look around us instead. The dungeon isn’t the kind of place where skill alone will let you conquer it.”

Based on the fight at the guild earlier, she moved well, and was skillfully trained. In terms of pure ability, she was superior to her uncle. But that was all. She couldn’t be Lutwidge.

Noelle gave me a brief glance, then left.

“Same to you, Ralph,” I said, favoring him with a valuable life lesson, since he had bothered to come, too. “Adventurers who can’t think for themselves don’t live long. Use your head before you act.”

If he wanted to die a miserable and gruesome death, that was none of my business. But technically speaking, he was a member of Aegis. Merciful and caring Arwin would mourn him if he died.

Ralph snorted and threw the door open violently. What a prick. I should tell on him.

In the evening, Arwin returned home, so the first thing I did was tell on him.

"We've got a problem on our hands," Arwin said, her brow furrowing.

"Right? I'm thinking we should finally just kick the kid out and get another member who actually knows what they're doing."

"I'm talking about Noelle."

She sat down in a chair, looking exhausted. I offered her a cup of green herbal tea made from roasted leaves, with a little honey to make it go down easier.

"She's just so naive about the ways of the world."

"More than you?"

"More than me."

Noelle's father had been one of the most prominent military minds of Mactarode and had overseen border security. He'd spent his time in his fortress in the mountains, fighting off monsters. She was born and raised there, too.

"He didn't want his own daughter taking part in the fighting there, so as a compromise, he had the rangers and mountain men who spent time around the fortress teach her combat instead."

It was probably just a way to pass time for them, but Noelle had proven quite capable. Over time, she grew into a very respectable fighter, prowling the hills like a wild animal and hunting down monsters.

"Not only did she spend her childhood in distant regions learning combat, but she also had no friends her age. It's why she always seems to have difficulty with conversation. It's almost like she's trying not to get too close to others."

"I don't know. She seemed very smitten with you."

"I visited the fortress with my father on a number of occasions for



inspections. That's how I got to know her. The first time, she challenged me to a fight. I beat her, and she's been like that ever since."

After that, they'd kept up a written correspondence, Arwin said. After the fall of the kingdom, Lutwidge had ordered his niece to various points in the territory to vanquish monsters and recover mementos and family articles. Now she had come to Gray Neighbor to fill the spot he'd vacated.

"I'll have a strict word with both Noelle and Ralph. Don't worry about them."

"Cool."

Arwin put a hand to her head and murmured bitterly, "It just had to be Noelle..."

"Is she not your favorite?"

"Oh. No, Noelle is fine. You saw her skill in combat, and she's very earnest, so I know she'll be a big help in the dungeon. Her presence will benefit the party, without a doubt," Arwin explained hurriedly. It sounded to me like she was trying to convince herself of what she was saying.

That night, I enjoyed some drinks at a tavern near the guild headquarters with three other people.

"So what do you think? How does Arwin seem to you?"

A thirty-something man on his second cup of ale shook his head and emitted a beery belch. He had close-cropped gray hair and a face like a horse, but his figure was good. He was shorter than me, but very well-built.

"The same as ever. No difference. She does seem a little irritated, though. Probably because the dungeon progress is slow."

That was Virgil the warrior. He was from Mactarode too, and had been adventuring in other countries before Lutwidge recruited him for the party. He was an experienced fighter, and very hardy—certain to be a big help.

"It's not that. It's because of the new people coming in and making noise," interrupted a young man wearing a green coat. "Particularly the Maretto

Sisters. They're telling everyone about how they're the ones mastering the Millennium of Midnight Sun. I'm not sure where they trained, but wherever it was isn't instructing their apprentices very well," he muttered, red-faced.

He said he was twenty-four, but his big green eyes and cropped bangs made him look much younger than that. The high-pitched voice wasn't helping matters, either. This was Clifford the mage.

Magicians were a close-knit lot. They formed pretend families called "schools" and refused to teach their magic to anyone who wasn't part of it. The relationship between master and apprentice was absolute. Clifford started apprenticing for a mage at fourteen, and he had been recommended for the party by his master, who was acquaintances with Lutwidge.

"Well, Lady Arwin is very patient. I just hope she doesn't hold it in," said a woman with long silver hair, draining her glass of wine. She looked around twenty years old, but her real age was unclear. She wore a gray robe and had her oak staff resting against the table next to her chair. She was a narrow-eyed beauty, but I wasn't a fan of her skinny figure and fake-looking face. This was Seraphina the healer.

Of all the kinds of magic out there, mage schools specializing in healing magic were the least exclusive, taking anyone who would join and proactively recruiting more. Healing magic was a lifeline to an adventurer, so a talented healer would be welcomed warmly into any adventuring party.

Seraphina had originally been a freelance healer, but after she caught Lutwidge's eye, she joined an expedition of the Mactarode Royal Knights. There she met Arwin and made a good impression. After the kingdom collapsed, she heard the rumors of the dungeon to be conquered and volunteered to join the party with Lutwidge's approval.

Arwin the Crimson Princess Knight, Virgil the warrior, Clifford the mage, Seraphina the healer, and Ralph to round it out. That was the roster of Aegis at the moment.

From time to time, I sought out a chance to talk with them, to stay on top of things. Since I couldn't go into danger, they were the only ones who could protect Arwin. I needed to know everything I could about who they were as

people, what they could do, and how Arwin was faring down there. Sometimes I would have drinks with three of them together, and sometimes I went cup for cup with just one.

The only one I hadn't drunk with yet was Ralph. He always turned me down, the jackass.

"You're such a worrywart. If you're that concerned about her, why don't you just tag along with us?" teased Virgil.

"Maybe I will someday." I laughed.

"This is Matthew we're talking about. He might not even be able to beat a goblin," added Clifford.

"At least we know we wouldn't be bored. He'd be perfect entertainment while we're taking a break," said Seraphina. Their jokes made it amply clear how little they respected my ability, but that was fine by me.

It was better than being scorned as the obnoxious kept man leeching off the princess knight. Having drinks with them was a good defense against that viewpoint. All I wanted was to make sure that they were focusing on tackling the dungeon and being good party members, rather than wasting their time trying to eliminate me, like a certain uncle I knew.

"So what do you think about that girl? From what I can tell, Noelle's got some serious skill."

I did not miss the spike of tension in the air the moment I said that.

"She certainly has talent. She might be small, but she'll be a great help in battle," said Virgil.

"Indeed. At the very least, I would give her nearly full marks for her ability to fight monsters," said Clifford.

"And because she knows Arwin personally, I think that we can trust her." Seraphina nodded along.

"And she's Lord Lewster's niece. I bet she'll do great things for this party. In fact, I'm sure of it," I said. The others suddenly went quiet. Things felt even more awkward than before.

To help move things along, I added, “But of course, she said it’s her first time in the dungeon as an adventurer.”

“Yeah, that’s the thing. That’s my concern,” Virgil said, suddenly recognizing his cue to relay his doubts.

“And she’s so young. She’s been fighting in the mountains her whole life. She doesn’t seem to understand how the world works.”

“I understand why Arwin trusts her, but maybe too much trust is a bad thing.”

They had found a new topic to dive into. Gradually, they unloaded more and more complaints about Noelle.

Just as I expected. Now the question was, what was I going to do about this in the days ahead?

The next day, Aegis headed for the dungeon with Noelle in tow. Their plan was to work on coordination in the earlier floors and get comfortable before delving down onto a new floor.

The problems soon became apparent.

“Noelle isn’t getting along well with the others,” Arwin said with frustration at breakfast a few days after returning from the dungeon. “She doesn’t seem to be having any conversation with them. At first, I noticed her speaking to others on various topics, but over time she became more reticent, and on the last day I didn’t hear her speak a word.”

So they wasted no time with it, huh?

“And that’s not all. Ever since Sir Lewster left, it feels like the group doesn’t chat as much. There’s just a bad feeling between us when we go into the dungeon these days. It seems unpleasant to me. And I can’t even begin to guess what the problem is.”

She put her head in her hands and her elbows on the table—very poor manners. Mealtimes were meant for optimism, not concern. It made the food taste bad.

“It’s simple,” I said. “The problem is that Aegis *isn’t your party.*”

Her head shot upright. Her eyes were wide with surprise.

“The real party leader was Lutwidge. That old man was the one who built Aegis.”

The one who effectively managed the group, which used the rebuilding of the kingdom and Arwin’s shining star as an appealing motivation, was Lutwidge.

As far as I knew, he had assumed all the strategic aspects of party management, like price negotiation and refilling supplies. Arwin only decided the direction of the party and gave orders to the rest. Some of that was because she was a princess with a lack of real-world experience, I was sure. It was Lutwidge who had originally brought all these party members together. That was why I didn’t finish him off when I had the chance. I couldn’t do it.

“And that was why nobody heard you out when you went around asking people to join you a year ago. Because the real party leader was against it.”

At least three of them owed Lutwidge a favor, in one way or another. That made it difficult for them to oppose his decisions. Arwin suddenly looked frustrated, clearly remembering the feeling of powerlessness from that moment.

“It worked out well until this point, which is why I never said anything to interfere. It was better that way than fiddling around and ruining everything.”

In some parties, everyone was equal, and in others, one person was an all-powerful leader who used the others like manipulating limbs. The point was whether the organization functioned well or not. There was no right answer.

“Now that Lutwidge is gone, they’ve all been trying to fit into the empty space he inhabited. They all want to be the next Lutwidge.”

Virgil the warrior was now the oldest in the group. He was exerting more influence than before, trying to assume the leadership position.

Clifford the mage was educated and intelligent, so he proved it by always contradicting others when getting his opinion across.

Seraphina the healer had known Arwin the longest out of anyone in the party,



so she tried to use that trust as a cudgel against the others, but since Noelle showed up, she was worried about losing that bit of prestige.

But none of the three were a real replacement. The virgin knight was very good at what he did, he was experienced, and he had many connections. He was a successful man of the world.

Enough that he would hire adventurers to get rid of the obnoxious kept man foiling his plans.

“The three of them are in equal positions. They each must fend off the others, which was maintaining an unsteady balance. And now the niece is involved.”

Despite being completely new to the group, and a zero-star adventurer, Noelle was trying to take Lutwidge’s position simply because she was his niece. Of course the people who had been through so much with Arwin would not look kindly upon this.

“They’re responding rather childishly for now, but as time goes on, things will get much worse. If you’re going to act on it, now’s the time.”

And if they got worse, it was going to lead to feuds within the party.

“Then should I be like Sir Lewster, and simply give all of the orders myself?”

“I wouldn’t do that,” I said, shaking my head. “Everyone has their strengths and weaknesses. Managing a pocketbook and haggling with merchants isn’t your style. Didn’t I say something like that before? You shouldn’t try to take everything onto your own shoulders.”

Charismatic heroes were heroes because they *didn’t fail*. If she tried to handle unfamiliar duties, she was going to make mistakes. It would only accelerate the ambition of the others to fight for leadership so they could right the ship. What people wanted from her was not management and budget balancing. They wanted a leader with absolute skill who stood at the helm.

“Then what should I...?”

She put her head in her hands again. I really didn’t want to give her advice. It was better if I didn’t. The future of the party shouldn’t be affected by the whims of a kept man who wasn’t even a member. If it ever became common

knowledge, the others would lose trust in Arwin, and it would lead to the party becoming fractured. That was exactly the thing Lutwidge had been trying to prevent. That was why I always avoided giving direct advice on adventuring and party management. But Lutwidge wasn't around anymore. And the people who were left were all ignoring the captain and lunging for the rudder of the good ship *Aegis*, without looking at the map or compass. Such a ship would either founder on the rocks or sink—if the pirates didn't do it first.

“...I'm a failure,” Arwin muttered, running her fingers through her hair. “I'm still nowhere close to being the Tree of Cameron.”

“What's that?”

“It's a large tree that was in the castle courtyard.” She explained that it had been put there as a memorial of the founding of Mactarode Kingdom, and was centuries old. Every spring, its massive branches bloomed with a profusion of white flowers. When it rained, the leaves blocked the water from reaching the ground, and the massive trunk provided shelter from the wind. Once the freezing winter was over, the flowers always returned. “You could see it clearly from outside the castle, too. The people looked forward to seeing it bloom every year. It was like a symbol of Mactarode itself,” she said, looking into the distance with fond recollection. No doubt she was seeing the sights of the past. “I wanted to be like the Tree of Cameron, protecting the people and earning their love. It's why I learned how to use a sword.”

“You're doing great things.”

Arwin shook her head. “When I was eight, I wished to be strong. I buried the shortsword my father gave me at the roots of the tree. I told myself that after ten years, if I had become a great knight, I would use that sword to fight against all troubles that plague my people.”

“And what happened?”

She gave me a sardonic smile. “We were attacked by a swarm of monsters before those ten years were up.”

Mactarode had fallen. In one fell swoop, Arwin had lost her parents and her home.

“So that shortsword is still buried under the tree’s roots?”

“Assuming it hasn’t been trampled by the monsters. When I was a child, the ground was too hard for me to dig very deep into it.”

“.....”

“The Tree of Cameron’s either been knocked over by the monsters by now... or devoured by them. I should have brought a branch with me to remember it.”

“This Tree of Whatever didn’t start off as a giant either, though. It took time to grow out its branches. You’ll be the same.”

“Do you think so?”

“I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t.”

“But the problem is right upon us. And my time is limited. What should I do...?”

She put her head in her hands again.

The fair princess knight’s face was lovely even while grieving, but it hurt to see. I’d witnessed many such squabbles over power, from my mercenary days to my time as an adventurer. Sometimes I’d gotten tripped up by stupid feuds and internal sabotage, and sometimes I’d seen it work out successfully, with positive solutions. They hadn’t called me “Giant-Eater” solely because of the violence.

“Does she want to be the leader? Then let her do it.”

That evening, I went into town. Arwin gave me the cold shoulder, assuming I was going to visit another brothel, but I had something else in mind. No, honestly.

I arrived at a three-story inn called The Five Sheep. The ground floor was the tavern, while the two upper floors had private rooms. Many adventurers visited this place daily because of its proximity to the guild. This was also where all the members of Aegis aside from Arwin stayed.

I would’ve loved to sit down with the three stooges (plus Ralph) ruining Her

Highness's peace of mind, but today's business was different. I wasted a bit of time at the tavern enjoying a drink, and it didn't take long until the person I was after appeared, no longer wearing the large gauntlets and cape.

"Hi there, Noelle," I said, as soon as she came down the steps. She made a dramatically displeased face. "You haven't had dinner yet, have you? I was thinking we might share a meal and end up on friendlier terms. It'll be my treat."

"I decline," she said promptly, and turned away. How cold.

"Don't be shy now. I want to get along with you folks better, see. I have drinks with the others all the time, and I even shared a round alone with your uncle once."

That much was true. I had the drink and left right away.

"Please? I want to hear more about Arwin's life in years past. And don't you want to know more about what she's been doing lately?"

"....."

"I promise, I'm not up to any funny business. We can sit down in the tavern here, or somewhere else. It's your choice. And if dinner isn't to your liking, we can just have one drink."

"...Very well."

More and more adventurers were coming back from the dungeon now that it was evening. The tables were all full, so we sat side by side at the counter. I passed a menu to Noelle, who was on my left.

"What do you want? I'd recommend the wine here. Don't get the ale. Between you and me, it's not much better than horse piss. The rum isn't bad, though."

"I'll have water," she said firmly. Either she couldn't handle liquor, or she was being cautious not to get drunk. Well, it didn't hurt to have someone that cautious in charge of Arwin's safety. I ordered a glass of rum.

"Why did you ask me to do this?" Noelle said, once she'd had a sip of water.

"As I told you—for friendship. I think there's a misunderstanding between us.

I just want to clear everything up.”

“I assure you, there is no misunderstanding. If not for this, I would never have anything to do with you,” she said with a pout, refusing to look at me.

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“And not because your uncle told you to come here and take my head off?”

She glanced in my direction. It had been worth the attempt.

“I’m speaking on a hunch. Your uncle would easily give such an order. When you came to the house earlier, I thought you would do just that.”

Instead, Ralph was with her, for some reason. He wasn’t suited for assassination in any way. At best, he might serve as a scapegoat to take the fall for killing me.

“You don’t seem like you have any intention of killing me. But your hostility is abundantly clear. I can’t help but be curious about the contrast between those things. That’s why I asked you to spend time with me.”

Noelle’s eyes narrowed. She seemed stunned by this, but also more wary than ever.

“Who are you?”

“Didn’t your uncle tell you? I’m the handsomest man in all the realm, and the princess knight’s kept man. Do you know what a kept man is?”

“Yes, I *do* know that much!” she snapped at me. She’d probably learned that term the same moment she learned who I was. “You’re the enemy of women.”

“I happen to consider myself an ally.”

There were many who understood me, such as Arwin. But other ladies were intensely hostile. There was even an adventurer who picked up her weapon and chased me around with it. That one still showed up in my dreams.

“But *why* are you a kept man? Why don’t you get a job?”

“Because I don’t want to. It’s a chore.”



“I don’t know what religion you follow, but every god I know says that labor is a virtue...”

“I’m afraid you’ll need to get a demon involved if you want me to work.”

The last thing I wanted while sharing drinks was a theological sermon. Besides, there was only one goddess I believed in.

“So which is it? Do you want my head or not?”

Noelle hesitated, looking down at the quivering water surface in her glass.

“...I will admit that the topic arose.”

I knew it. The next time I saw Lord Lewster, I was going to shove rocks into his asshole. What kind of uncle doesn’t reveal the true identity of the target he wants assassinated? Maybe that was just a sign of how effective my threats were. Or maybe he assumed that with Noelle’s skill, it wouldn’t matter. Or that if she heard the name Giant-Eater, she might be intimidated and fail her mission.

“But I could not tell if it was really right to purge you or not.” She reached into her pocket and produced a letter that she set on the counter. “This came from Her Highness.”

That’s right, she had mentioned that they had a written correspondence.

“She sent me a number of letters after settling here. The words themselves spoke of smooth sailing and no troubles, but from her writing, it was clear that the opposite was true.”

Someone had to erase the term “false stoicism” from Arwin’s dictionary, for her own good.

“It worried me. I wanted to come here as soon as I could, to help her. Before things got truly out of hand.”

I took a sip of rum. The heated emotions I felt nearly spilled out in the form of words, but I kept them deep in my throat instead.

“But then she changed again, about a year ago. She felt like the princess I knew again, bright, reliable and admirable. The princess we all loved.”

“And that would be around the time she started living with me.”

Noelle nodded. “She wrote about you in her letters.”

“That she was head over heels for the strong, handsome, and manly Matthew?”

“That you were vulgar and shameless, had a filthy tongue and personality, and were an all-around good-for-nothing layabout.”

“Wow, was that really necessary?”

That was even worse than what Lutwidge said about me.

“I had the temerity to ask her the other day, ‘Why do you keep around such a man?’ She said, ‘Because Matthew is so crucial a lifeline for me that he’s worth it. So I hope you will take my word for it and have faith in him too, Noelle.’”

“.....”

She just had to go and say embarrassing things like that without an ounce of hesitation. Why would you do this to me, Princess? I feel ready to cry.

“I came here for Her Highness’ sake. It was not for Mactarode or her people, but for the princess knight herself.”

Noelle was not the best speaker, often choosing her words slowly and carefully, but this she said without any trouble.

“If you were the reason that Her Highness changed for the better, and your presence is necessary for her, then I cannot kill you.”

“And that’s why you tried to bribe me with money? To test my character?”

Noelle nodded.

“And what if I had taken the money?”

“I would have fulfilled my uncle’s clandestine mission for me. After I tortured you to extract the truth of your intentions.”

There was no value in keeping someone around Arwin who could be swayed by money. So she’d eliminate me before scandal could erupt.

I was coming around to her way of things.

“I see. You know, I kind of like you. I admire your loyalty and determination,” I said, patting her shoulder. “I think we’ll get along. Have a drink, I insist. We have lots to discuss.”

She might be stubborn and irascible, but her loyalty was the real deal. I could trust her to protect Arwin in the dungeon, so for now, she passed. Now if she could just get along with the others in the party, then she’d really be a success. But over time and drinks, I could teach her what being an adventurer was all about.

Noelle grimaced at the little cup of rum I poured her. After a few moments, she held her nose, then tossed the whole shot back.

“...And this is the result.”

She was conked out, resting against my upper arm. She probably wasn’t just sensitive to alcohol—this was likely her first time ever drinking. Even she hadn’t expected to get hit this hard, I supposed.

She writhed a little, murmuring under her breath. A wafting scent like peaches stimulated my nostrils. Her sleeping face was cute and childish.

“Well, what do I do now?”

In years past, I would have carried her up to my room for us to enjoy the rest of the evening together, but I didn’t have the strength for that now. Plus, it wouldn’t be a good idea to mess with one of Arwin’s party members. It was likely to be fatal, on top of immoral.

It was probably best to wake her up now. I turned my head toward her, but because of the difference in our heights, I was looking right down on Noelle. Her shapely chest was rising and falling with her breath. I could almost see something I shouldn’t through the fold of her clothes.

“Hmmm.”

Carefully, so as not to wake her, I reached across with my other arm and hooked a finger over the hem to pull it back.

Well, look at those. Very nice color, too. Maybe she was still a virgin.

“I’d better warn her to watch herself around here. Don’t want any strange men taking advantage of her.”

“I was just thinking the same thing.”

Beads of sweat flooded from my pores.

“I will have to warn her very strictly not to be taken in by any vulgar, shameless, filthy-tongued, twisted, good-for-nothing, sick perverts.”

I spun around. The princess knight herself was standing there with a smile.

“Don’t you think, Matthew?” She sat down on my right and boldly crossed her legs.

“Well, er, see...”

I removed my finger and carefully laid Noelle’s head onto the counter so that she would not wake up.

“I know what you’re saying. But I’m not going to make the kind of mistake you’re thinking about. It won’t happen. There’s a misunderstanding here. Let’s talk it over and clear it up.”

“Agreed. I would like to hear more about how you weren’t actually committing a lewd violation of one of my precious party members.” She grabbed my collar and yanked it upward. “The night is long. Get ready, because you’re not getting any sleep.”

I would’ve liked to hear that in a more romantic context.

“So we’ve solved the primary issue.”

Several days later, Arwin returned from the dungeon with a relieved smile on her lips.

I’d suggested to her a division of duties. In other words, treat each member of the party like the leader of a particular area.

Negotiations, logistics, command, odd jobs. Having the roles be too vague was causing squabbles, so giving each member a role and responsibilities kept them occupied. If they wanted their own territory, then give it to them.

By splitting responsibilities among the members, it also allowed for areas of strength to shine through. By overseeing a particular task and covering their own territory, each person satisfied their desire for recognition. They started talking more and coordinated their actions better.

“It’s thanks to you. I’m grateful.”

“I’m just glad to hear it.”

They were ungrateful boors for causing Her Highness anguish over such petty things. It ruined a good dinner. My herb soup and green sauce over chicken was a specialty, and I didn’t need it turning sour.

“But it does seem like there’s still some friction left.”

“Not surprised.”

This was just a temporary measure. Territorial feelings led to exclusion. As long as they weren’t having frank, open communication, they weren’t going to truly understand each other.

“What would you have done in these situations?” she asked.

“Fight.”

I wasn’t joking. It was survival of the fittest in the world of adventurers. The quickest way to assess one’s level and let them know my strength had been to use my fists. Anyone would be cautious when it comes to violating the territory of a powerful foe. If you demonstrated by force that messing with you would come with swift retribution, people were less inclined to disrespect you, and sometimes even respected you. The kind of folks who became adventurers worshipped strength. The other folks in the party were the same way.

I fought a lot when I was an adventurer. Whenever guys who boasted of their strength, like fighters and swordsmen, joined the party, I would challenge them to a friendly fight. Sometimes they beat me to it. If I didn’t like them, I’d crush them. Depending on the person, I sometimes went easy on them, and let them



look good. But I never lost. The only time I fought with all my strength and tied was against that dwarven Beardo.

“Get a stick or something, and thrash all of them with it. Punish them, and they’ll know who their master is. You can do that, can’t you?”

Even young Noelle had sworn fealty to Arwin because she’d lost to her in a fight.

“That might work with Virgil, but I don’t think it would have the desired effect on Clifford or Seraphina.”

“Maybe not.”

Smarty-pants types like them tended to be both proud and obsessive. They might pretend to play along, but deep down, they’d nurse a grudge like that for a hundred years.

“After that, the best thing is...”

My suggestion was interrupted by a knock at the door.

“Your Highness, there’s trouble. Your Highness!”

It was Ralph. In the middle of the night. Normally midnight trysts were supposed to be on the quiet side.

“What’s wrong, kid? Did you catch a disease? This is why I keep telling you to choose your whorehouses wisely...”

I opened the door, but Ralph ignored my teasing and rushed to Arwin, looking desperate. He seemed completely out of breath.

“Virgil and the others...in a fight...with some mobsters...”

It was one of those things that happened all the time. They had been drinking at The Running Treant, a pub near the Adventurers Guild, when a common thug accosted them over something stupid and inconsequential. Because adventurers were not supposed to pick fights with civilians, some turkeys liked to test their courage by challenging them. Of course, no adventurer was saintly enough to turn the other cheek and smile after getting punched—you’d make a

poor adventurer if you did. What idiotic ruffians didn't realize was that adventurers *were* allowed to fight back in self-defense. And of course, it was hard to say that anyone who'd pick a fight over such trivial topics was really a blameless civilian anyway.

Of course, once the fighting started, it was on. The cleverer types would let the punk throw the first punch, then give it back ten times as hard. Usually that was enough to make them run with their tails between their legs, but every now and then they had a more *professional* type backing them up. They'd usually say, "*I see you've met my subordinates here.*" If you bought a round of drinks for them, that was enough to smooth things over. But if you hit *those* guys, then you were in for some trouble.

They'd show up with every last member of their organization, looking to introduce themselves.

The bigger problem was their numbers. They were a pain if you got on their bad side. You might beat one easily, but if there were a few dozen, the odds were against you. They'd pin you down, immobilize you, and tie you up. Once that happened, you were done. They'd beat the crap out of you and drag you back to their hideout, where they could do whatever they wanted with you.

"So who caught them?"

"The Birds of Prey."

"Oh, that's just lovely."

Outwardly, they were a salt business , but in reality, they were a criminal organization that owned the southeast part of town. Their primary business income streams were smuggling, illegal gambling, and protection. They were known for being highly aggressive, and tons of their members were hotheads looking for a fight. I'd been beaten by them on multiple occasions and had lost what few coins I had.

"There were only a few of them at first, but then a man named Oswald showed up with about twenty more. That was when Virgil's group got caught."

Oswald was a lieutenant of the Birds of Prey. He was a fierce man over fifty. His head was balding, and his remaining hair and beard were white, but under

his bushy eyebrows, his eyes were dark and gleaming.

“And what are they asking for?”

If it was just murder, Ralph wouldn't have escaped to run off in the middle of the night. He was a messenger. He had probably been forced to do the impossible, at which point he'd run out of options and had had to come here out of desperation.

Dejected, Ralph admitted, “Her Highness's head.”

“Ridiculous.”

Three idiots against Arwin's life was hardly a fair trade.

“Couldn't we ask the guild to mediate the situation?”

“Of course they won't.”

Ralph was very naive in this regard. The Adventurers Guild hated getting involved with squabbles, especially when they involved mobsters. It was a lot of trouble for very little gain. They'd never choose to subject themselves to it. So we couldn't ask Dez for help here.

“Just have to forget about them, Arwin. They were unlucky. Ask Lord Lewster for help, and maybe he'll send along another stable of party members for you.”

“That won't happen.” Arwin got to her feet. “I will clear this up.”

She was going to go find them. It would be better to just leave it alone. But she was always a stubborn one.

“I'll join you,” I said reluctantly.

Ralph made a face. “Stay out of this. It's beyond your ability.”

“Do you know more about the *back streets* of this town than me? Because if so, I'll defer to you.”

If the rest of Aegis had, they wouldn't have gotten into trouble like this. Most adventurers who spent their time in the dungeon were a bit oblivious to the finer details of the city above, not just Arwin's party.

“Are you saying you know more than us?” he demanded.

“Yes, I might.”

Since coming here, I’d been proactive in gathering information on this sort of thing. If I got involved with the wrong people, that’d be it for me. Sidle up to the old folks and flatter them with a few drinks, and they’ll tell you all sorts of brags and stories. That was how I got to know a lot about how things worked in the dark alleys of town. It also helped me sniff out the spots where drugs were dealt.

“I won’t be underfoot. Just think of me as an advisor.”

“Whatever you say.”

This pompous boy. He wasn’t the one in charge.

I assumed that they’d been taken to the hideout, but he claimed that they were still at the pub. They were with a whole host of mobsters, waiting for the princess knight to arrive. Personally, I would’ve been happy if they just bit their own tongues and died. It would save us so much trouble.

“Right this way.”

Like a little guide dog, Ralph took the lead. Arwin followed behind him by several steps, looking concerned. She hadn’t had time to put her armor on, so she was in her ordinary clothes, with only her sword and cloak.

I walked next to her and whispered into her ear, “Do you have a plan in mind to resolve the situation?”

“No.”

“I didn’t think so.”

“What do you think I should do?”

“If money will solve it, that’s the easiest way. But I think we’re probably past that point.”

Adventurers and mobsters shared many common traits. Outlaws. Resorting to violence. Group-focused. Obsessed with honor and pride.

If it got out that Aegis had been beaten up by thugs and paid them off for forgiveness, their reputation would crash. They’d be mocked and dragged

through the mud by all other adventurers.

“For one thing, the Birds of Prey are after *you*. They always were. The other guys got set up.”

It was too elaborate and coordinated to have been a spontaneous event. Oswald had been too quick to show up. He’d been looking to go after the Crimson Princess Knight and had snagged her party members in a trap.

“Are they after my life?”

“No, not quite.”

They didn’t actually want Arwin’s head, I guessed—although the chances were still higher than zero. If that was what they wanted, they’d have had a better shot by lying in wait when she returned from the dungeon.

“I’m guessing that what their boss wants is your name and body.”

She was former royalty, the mighty and beautiful Crimson Princess Knight. There was certainly value in getting *acquainted* with such a person. Naturally, such a man would want to spend a night with her. Oswald was a man with carnal desires. He had mistresses all over the place.

“Stories say that he and the guildmaster are bitter rivals. For that reason, he’s always had it out for adventurers.”

Perhaps he was going after Arwin because he wanted to knock a famous member of the guild down to earth.

“This is ridiculous.”

“I completely agree,” I said, exhaling. “He should know that the princess knight already has a man who keeps her satisfied.”

I circled around behind Arwin, placed my hands around her waist, and pulled her closer. I also rested my chin on her shoulder and leaned against her cheek. Since I was much taller, I had to hunch my back to do this. A sweet smell filled my nostrils, and her red hair touched my face. It felt very nice and smooth.

She blushed and unleashed an elbow into my face. It hurt a little.

“Get off. I can’t walk like this.”

“Oh, sorry. Is this any better?”

This time, I put my arm around her shoulder gently, pulling her just close enough that our shoulders touched. I kept my pace shorted so that we could walk comfortably together.

Arwin glanced at my hand, then decided that it was acceptable. We walked side by side like this. The night breeze whistled down the street.

“Are you cold?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“Should we get a little closer? You’d warm up that way.”

“Then you walk ahead of me. You’ll block the wind.”

“Or what if you just clung to my back instead?”

“Then I won’t be able to see.”

“Here’s an idea, then. We’ll hug each other, face-to-face, and walk sideways...”

“Stop playing around!” snorted Ralph, who was impatiently waiting far ahead of us. “This situation is not a game! If you can’t take it seriously, go away!”

“I’m just trying to do my *job*, man. I take my flirting with Arwin very seriously. In fact, sometimes she even scolds me for not providing enough physical intimacy.”

“Fool.”

This time, the elbow found my side.

Ralph screwed up his face with frustration and continued striding forward. Was he seriously going to walk off and leave his precious princess behind? The boy needed some lessons in discipline.

I decided to compromise by putting my arm back around her shoulder and walking alongside her.

She asked, “So do you have a plan?”

“What do you say to a seduction caper?”

“Answer the question seriously.”

She pinched the back of my hand without looking at me. It was very difficult to offer a substantive plan when I didn’t even know what the enemy looked like in this case.

“The other guys have three of ours as chips. It will be difficult for us to offer something that matches their value. If we want to go that route, we’ll have to pony up some serious wealth. That’s an issue.”

I had a few ideas in mind, but I wouldn’t be able to choose one before we got there. Soon we arrived at The Running Treant, and saw that many onlookers were present. The Birds of Prey must’ve chased them out of the tavern, because some were still holding bottles or plates of food. Ralph was waiting at the door, lonely.

“What’s wrong? Go in there. You can be the first.”

“Um, well...” Ralph hesitated. Was he scared, after all this time? Pathetic.

“I’ll go in first,” said Arwin, who pushed the door. Ralph and I followed her in.

The first floor of The Running Treant was a pub, while the rooms for adventurers were upstairs. Candleholders were spaced out along the stone wall, providing light.

The place was an unholy mess. The wooden tables were clumped near the wall, and the chairs were stacked messily nearby. The only table still in the middle of the room was host to an oily-looking man: Oswald. I’d seen him before, so I knew it was him.

Around him stood a group of subordinates, looking surly and mean. And trussed up and seated on the floor nearby was a trio of stooges.

“Oh dear,” I groaned.

Standing across the table from Oswald was...Noelle.

“Noelle’s already here...”

*You could have warned us earlier.*

A bag full of gold was on the table. It was clear what she was attempting to



do.

And it was clear that it had displeased Oswald.

“Does this meet your needs? Take all you like,” said Noelle, who seemed unperturbed by the disgruntled, intimidating man across from her. “I’ll be taking them back now.”

“Not so fast,” grunted Oswald, folding his arms. “We’re not beggars here. You think you can just drop some coins and assume we’ll be happy with that?”

“What else could you possibly want? That must be your desire.”

There were outward motives, and then there were real motives. Their real motive was probably that they wanted money. But these were men who fixated on their reputation. When the shallowness of their true motives was shoved back in their faces, they would be too proud to admit it. Noelle couldn’t have imagined the subtlety of a mobster’s state of mind; she just wanted to solve this problem for Arwin as quickly as possible, and it was backfiring spectacularly.

Money could no longer solve this situation.

“Ordinarily I would not have any reason to give you this money, but here it is. Enjoy.”

“I can see you’ve got quite a mouth on ya, little girl,” snorted Oswald. He turned to his followers and gave them a bob of the head. They pointed their knives at the tied-up stooges. “When you come around giving lip like that, I’m afraid it forces my hand. We can’t back down now.”

“Then what do you want? Is it not enough money? How much must I pay you for you to be satisfied? Please be quick about it. We are too busy to waste our time dealing with the likes of you.”

Oswald roared and slammed the table. He tried to flip it over, but it only budged an inch. Noelle had quickly leaped on top and thrust her knife right at his throat. A droplet of sweat ran down his chin and dropped onto the blade.

The followers drew their own weapons. This was bad; it was going to end in bloodshed, and soon. She might kill Oswald, but his goons would kill the trio before we could save them.

“That’s enough,” said Arwin, who couldn’t stand to watch the situation deteriorate any further.

All eyes turned to us. Well, to Arwin.

“Lower your weapon, Noelle.”

“But—”

“That’s an order.”

Noelle quietly lowered the knife, then did a backflip off the table.

Instead, Arwin took a seat across from Oswald. Naturally, I was the one who pulled out the chair for her.

“Please pardon my associate. I have come in response to your summons. I am Arwin Mabel Primrose Mactarode.”

“Thank you for the formal introduction. I am Oswald the Cirrocumulus, lieutenant of the Birds of Prey.”

The epithet sounded tasteful, but it had a rather grisly explanation. Once he started fighting, he would simply destroy everything in his vicinity, leaving blood and shreds of flesh everywhere. In the autumn, cirrocumulus clouds often lead to rain and storms. Therefore, he took on that name, meaning that he rained and stormed wherever he went.

“I think you can see the situation here. Your followers got involved in a little tussle with some of our boys. We’ve got quite a few injured as a result. Then that girl comes in insulting us by tossing around money, and puts a knife to my throat, to boot.”

He slammed a fist against the tabletop.

“So how are you going to make this right?”

“If you want a fight, I’m not above it, but that will lead to more casualties. I assume you want to prevent that?” said Arwin. She gave me a sidelong glance; it was my turn now.

“Then I have a suggestion.” I clapped my hands, drawing attention. “This all started from a pub altercation. So don’t you think this seems the right way to

solve it?”

I placed a bottle on the table.

“It’s a simple competition. We take turns throwing back drinks, and the first to go down loses. And if the loser also has to pick up the tab, that should settle the dispute pretty cleanly, eh?”

“And you think that repairs our good standing, pretty boy?”

Oswald’s eyes gleamed like a predator’s. It was the first time I’d ever exchanged words with him, but he knew who I was. It was scary. I could start shivering at any moment.

“That girl over there treated us like beggars. Seems a little convenient to assume we’d be happy with an answer like that.”

“But if there’s more brawling, that means more losses. Plus the guards will be onto us. It does none of us any good if we’re all sent to the cells together.”

“You think I’m gonna pussy out over something like that?”

“Perhaps you wouldn’t mind it, but I don’t know about the organization as a whole. The difference between having you and not having you is going to affect the competition.”

The Birds of Prey had always been at odds with other groups like the Spotted Wolves and the Devil’s Alliance, and there were constant skirmishes over territory. Losing a fearsome fighter like Oswald was bound to have a negative effect.

“If trying to earn a little spending money and propping up your honor causes the entire structure of your organization to wobble, I’d say that makes you look a lot worse, doesn’t it?”

A brief note of hesitation appeared in Oswald’s eyes. I sensed this was my chance and pounced on it.

“If we win, you’ll release the three of them. If we lose, you can do whatever you want—sell ’em, bang ’em, who cares?”

The stooges raised complaints, but I ignored them, of course.

“We should just knock out all of these fools. Why do you insist on this silly competition?” grumbled Noelle.

“See, knocking out all the bad guys and everyone living happily ever after might have worked in the old days, but audiences are more sophisticated now. They want a twist on the old formula,” I said.

In a play, we might’ve beaten them and had the curtains drop, but real life didn’t work that way. We’d be lucky if the worst that happened were broken bones. If anyone died, it would mean an ugly morass of mutual retribution.

Oswald considered this for a while. Then he said, “Even if I were to agree to a drinking contest...I think we need a bigger pot, don’t you?”

There we go.

“First, the competition will be between me and the princess knight. And if I win, she becomes my woman. How about that?”

Arwin’s brow furrowed. “You want me to be your wife?”

“I have a wife. A wrinkly one I’ve been with for three decades,” he smirked. “I mean a lover. A paramour. A side piece. As the fancy lords might say, a concubine. And you’ll need to end things with that gigolo there, of course.”

Really?

“If you don’t like it, fine. We don’t have to do it this way.”

I could see what Oswald was trying to do. He wanted to seize the initiative back by making demands that were too much to swallow. There was no need to rise to the bait. I intended to ignore that suggestion, but Arwin opened her mouth to speak.

“Very well.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. “Um, Arwin?”

“You want to up the ante with that, right? Very well.”

Just because we were gambling didn’t mean it was smart to bet anything and everything.

“You mustn’t, Highness,” said Ralph.

“Don’t do this, Your Highness. I will take your place,” Noelle offered hastily. In this one case, I was highly supportive of their protests, but our beloved princess knight had not a care for her subjects’ concerns.

“He has singled me out. And you can barely stand a drop of alcohol, Noelle,” Arwin said, giving me a pointed glare, which I studiously avoided.

“You should say something,” Noelle demanded of me, realizing that she wasn’t going to get anywhere with Arwin.

I asked, “Are you really doing this?”

“I am.”

“...Well, that’s that.”

Once she made up her mind, there was no changing it.

“...Is she a good drinker?” Noelle asked quietly.

“She’s no pushover,” I told her. “But it might be a tall order to outdrink Oswald.”

Arwin rarely drank alcohol on her rest days, probably to avoid any ill effects during dungeon-crawling. If anything, the two of us shared a bottle of wine. Oswald, meanwhile, was known as a voracious drinker.

“Then why did you suggest such a competition?”

“Because if I didn’t, they wouldn’t have been interested.”

Nobody was stupid enough to accept a challenge they knew they’d lose. I intended to be our representative, of course, but while I had been working up to that, he’d struck first, and Arwin had unilaterally decided to accept.

“Don’t worry,” the princess knight told the pale-faced Noelle, favoring her with a reassuring smile. “I *will* win.”

“Do you have a plan up your sleeve?”

“I just need to drink more than he does. That’s all. I don’t *pussy out*.”

Well, that’s just great. Now losing was no longer an option. If push came to shove, I’d have to kill them all. That would probably lead to my identity being revealed, and I wouldn’t be able to stick around anymore. Most importantly,

Arwin would never forgive me for ruining a bet that she made. Come on, now.

I was interrupted from my grumbling by a tug on my sleeve from Arwin.

“By the way, what does ‘pussy out’ mean?”

“It means to turn around and run with your tail between your legs.”

The competition was simple. When an hourglass was turned over, the competitors would have to drink the alcohol poured in the cups in front of them, one at a time. If they passed out, vomited, or failed to empty the cup before the sand ran out, they would lose—and the losing party had to pay for all of it.

Pouring for the other side was Hector, one of Oswald’s flunkies. For us, it was Noelle. My job was turning over the hourglass.

A crowd of lookie-loos had gathered around the pub, interested in the outcome of the bet.

“Let’s start with wine.”

On Oswald’s signal, red liquid was poured into the two cups. It came from the same bottle, to ensure fairness.

“Cheers, then.”

They clinked glasses. That was the start of the bet.

One glass, then another. When the glasses were empty, a new drink was poured.

Two bottles were emptied, then a third. An edge was visible between the two competitors now.

By the time twenty cups had been emptied, it was clear who was winning and who was losing.

“Sand’s almost gone.”

“Shuddup!” roared Oswald, who then drained his cup. He smashed it onto the table and exhaled odorously. His eyes were unfocused, and his face was red. He

belched.

“Next.”

Arwin’s face was red, too, and her eyes were slow to move. She was really feeling the booze as well—but her words were still clear and firm. When she drank, she tossed it back in one go.

Her empty cup landed on the table. But Oswald still had half of his left to go.

“You can do it. That’s our princess!” cheered Ralph obliviously. The rest of the party looked at her with hope in their eyes. Oswald finished his drink just before the sand in the glass ran out. His breathing was ragged. He didn’t have much longer.

“Next.”

Arwin held out her cup. Noelle filled it with white wine, then handed the bottle to the mobster flunky.

“Oops.” The man dropped the bottle on the floor in the handoff. Clear liquid spilled onto the floor. A boozy smell wafted up from below.

“Watch yer grip!”

“Sorry, sir,” said the man, bowing and picking up the bottle. There was still some left inside. He hesitantly tilted the bottle over Oswald’s cup, filling it up.

“Next.”

“Uh, just a second,” I said, cutting Arwin off. “Watching you drink for so long has me parched. Give me a drink, too.”

“What the hell are you...?”

“This should do.”

I grabbed the bottle in front of me and put it to my lips. Someone exclaimed briefly. I audibly swallowed twice, then wiped my mouth with the back of my hand.

“Ahh, that was good. This is excellent stuff. Good mouthfeel, very drinkable,” I said, placing it back on the table. There was still one cup’s worth left. “Go on, continue. I guarantee the taste.”



“.....”

“What, you don’t want it? In that case, may I continue? Or, Noelle! You might actually enjoy this one. It’s very easy to drink.”

“No, thank you!” she snapped. Oswald grabbed the bottle and held it upside down over the floor. Then he glared daggers at his subordinate.

“Bad luck to drink from a bottle that was dropped. Bring out a new one.”

The subordinate hastily rushed off to grab another bottle. Oswald stared at me again.

“...Dump out yours, too. We’ll start fresh with a new bottle.”

“Sure thing.”

Once the cups were poured again, the bout resumed. They continued drinking, but not for long. In the middle of pouring the next round, Oswald and his chair tipped over backward. His henchmen rushed up to help him, but he was already snoring.

“That’s going to do it,” I announced, and a cheer arose from outside. It’d been a real close call.

Ralph promptly freed the other party members. Virgil, Clifford, and Seraphina gathered around Arwin awkwardly, taking a knee and bowing their heads.

“I am so terribly sorry for the mistake we made. I beg your pardon, my lady,” Virgil said, his face the image of contrition.

“.....”

Arwin said nothing. She gripped her empty cup with one hand and propped up her cheek with the other.

“Are you feeling unwell, Highness?” Noelle asked.

Arwin pushed her cup forward. “Next.”

The two of us shared a look.

“Um, Your Highness? The bout is over...”

“Next.”

It was like she didn't even hear Ralph. I gave her a closer look, and waved my hand in front of her eyes, but there was no response. She was just staring into the distance grumpily.

"Um, did you actually pass out a while ago?"

"Next."

Noelle carried the plastered Arwin on her back. She was the shorter of the two, so it seemed a little awkward, but I didn't want any other man touching Arwin, especially Ralph. I would've carried her myself, except that it was the middle of the night. I'd topple over within five steps.

"La-di-da, look at her sleeping. While I could have sworn my heart was going to stop."

She was snoozing quite blissfully on Noelle's back. Why, I could just kiss her.

Ralph grimaced. He was carrying Arwin's sword for her. "So you say. You were certainly bold enough to steal some booze from the drinking contest."

"That wasn't booze, it was just water."

They had seen the tables turning against them and had resorted to cheating. While we were focused on the contest, Oswald's subordinate secretly switched out the contents of the bottle of white wine for water. Then he dropped a bottle on purpose and pulled out the water bottle instead. Late at night by weak candlelight, he probably hoped it wouldn't be obvious, but he couldn't fool me. There's a different viscosity between water and wine.

"But it would have been poured for Her Highness next. Wouldn't it have been obvious to her?"

"That's why he tried to leave just the right amount in the bottle. If there wasn't two glasses' worth left, he could pour one and then get a new bottle for the other."





“Why didn’t you point out what he was doing, right on the spot?”

“They’re not gonna throw their hands up and admit surrender. Putting pressure on them just makes them more desperate, and then we’d be right back to fighting.”

The whole point of the drinking contest was to prevent people from getting hurt. So instead, I made a display of showing that I was on to their game, to keep them from taking it further. I assumed they’d given us back the other party members because they didn’t want word of their cheating to get out. There were many witnesses outside of the bar.

“Remember this, kid. Holding a blade to someone’s neck isn’t the only way to make a threat. The entire point is how you scare them,” I said.

“Don’t talk down to me, just because you happened to see through one attempt at cheating. You’re still just a no-good—”

“Don’t say that.” My head whipped around. Arwin’s face was raised, and she was smiling through sleepy eyes. “He’s a very useful man.”

“Good morning. How do you feel?” I asked her. She shook her head slowly.

“...Bad.”

“Because you drank too much.”

Once we got home, I’d make sure there was a bucket nearby for her.

“...I remember drinking with that man. But the next thing I knew, I was here. I guess...I won, then?”

She exhaled with relief. The three stooges offered their apologies. Arwin batted Noelle’s shoulders to make her stop, then slid down off her back. Stumbling, she stood before us and spread her arms.

“Well? What do I look like to you?”

“.....”

We didn’t respond. Except for Ralph, who was spouting nonsense like, “You’re a hero,” and “I respect you so much.” So I took it upon myself to give the correct answer.

“You’re a drunk. You’re completely soused. There’s a lot of booze running through you right now.”

“That’s right.” She swayed, laughing. “My legs feel weak. My head is spinning, and my words are strange. I can’t even get back home alone, much less fight. I can’t do a single thing without help from someone else. That’s me right now.”

Her words were self-mocking, but there was nothing derogatory or insulting in her tone of voice.

“I am not a warrior on Sir Lewster’s level, nor am I as world-wise as Matthew. I’m well aware of my shortcomings as a leader. Still, I swore to fight with my entire life for the sake of my people and country. I may not be strong, but I will be stronger. If that is acceptable, then please bear with me.”

Noelle and the others stared at her, dumbfounded. They didn’t know what to do or say. So I took it upon myself to demonstrate.

I knelt before her and took her hand.

“I do as you command, my liege.”

If this were a royal palace it might have been more impressive. Sadly, we were in a filthy side street. But it had no negative effect on her dignity and poise. That was the kind of person Arwin was.

Noelle was the first to react. She lined up next to me and bowed deeply.

“I swear my loyalty to you, Highness.”

The three captured members bowed their heads next, followed at last by Ralph. That was good. It was a good reminder that the person to protect before them was not a helpless princess, but a master they were meant to serve. This would turn Aegis into Arwin’s party in the truest sense.

Disaster led to windfall. It was a difficult situation, but it was all going to end well.

And that would be it for tonight. The only things left to do were go home,

take off the princess knight's clothes, massage her body, then enjoy what came naturally...er, to care for her. Unfortunately, there was an interruption.

Suddenly, thugs came swarming out of every part of the alley. There was no need to ask: these were the Birds of Prey. Oswald wasn't present, but there were still twenty of them.

"Was this Oswald's idea? No, he's not small-time enough to do something that would splatter mud all over his public image like this."

"Shut up!"

They hoisted bats and swords and rushed at us. This was all their idea, then. Oswald would never do something like this in the street. If he didn't do it fairly and in the open, his reputation would never recover.

So it came to this in the end. Apparently, the masses wanted easy entertainment after all. We'd done everything we could to settle the matter quietly, but there was no choice in the matter now. We'd just have to fight back.

"It's dangerous here. You're only going to be a liability in your current state. We should run..."

I pulled on Arwin's sleeve, and she flopped onto me. I peered closer and saw that she was soundly asleep again.

"Sleeping Beauty, eh? Must be nice."

It was nighttime, so I wasn't going to be any good in a fight.

"You take Her Highness away. We'll hold them off," said Ralph snottily, drawing his sword.

"Please do."

"It's for her, not for you."

"That works."

Of course, I couldn't just run away with Arwin because I couldn't carry her on my own. Instead, I tried dragging her away into the shadows. Meanwhile, the brawl was really on now.



“Don’t let them take a step past this line. In positions!” Virgil commanded, and the others snapped into formation. He and Ralph stood at the front, while Clifford backed them up with magic from behind. Noelle, meanwhile, raced back and forth through the enemy’s ranks.

She grabbed a bat from one of the thugs and smashed him with it. Their counterattacks hit nothing, except maybe each other, because she darted left and right so nimbly. One pounded his friend’s head in, then panicked long enough for Noelle to clonk him on the back of the noggin and knock him out.

It was all very heroic, but there were just too many of them. One of them swept her feet out from under her as she landed, and she fell to the ground.

“Now *die!*”

One of them lifted his bat overhead. Noelle tensed, waiting for a blow—that never landed.

“Were you talking about yourself?” This was because Seraphina had kicked him in the balls from behind. “Are you all right, Noelle?”

She reached down and helped the younger girl to her feet.

“Thank you,” Noelle said, her face cracking into a smile.

“No wasting time! They’re coming from the right!” Virgil snapped. The others buckled down. Five warriors roared in unison and charged into the Birds of Prey.

It seemed like, improbable though it was, the party was learning to fight together for the same goal. The best way to bring together a group with poor teamwork was to give them a common enemy to fight. This had been a convenient means, and it helped that there was a very easy villain to identify.

The truth is, I was planning to arrange for such an enemy already. Oswald just stepped in and picked a fight, saving me the trouble. Thanks for that.

This meant there was only so much I could do. At best, I might be able to throw rocks to keep them at bay. They were just pebbles, so there wouldn’t be much of an effect, but it might cause them to flinch, at least.

They might have been combative hotheads, but they were still just hoodlums.

And they'd only won in the pub because of their numbers and the limited space around them. In a proper fight in the open, their numbers were much less meaningful.

Pretty soon, nearly half of them were knocked out on the cobblestones.

Once it was clear that the tables were turning on them, a man near forty hastily gave the order for them to retreat. Apparently, he was the ringleader of this little stunt. There was a tattoo on his arm that looked like Baphomet, the goat-headed demon. He was Hector, the man who'd been attending to Oswald earlier. Well, at least he was diligent enough to go around collecting the unconscious members of the gang.

Didn't matter much, though. By tomorrow, Oswald would have his dead body tossed into the dungeon.

Hector ran off in a different direction from his flunkies.

"Wait, you!" Ralph chased after him though he really needn't have bothered. The idiot was getting carried away.

"Don't give chase! Get back here!" I warned, but he ignored me and stayed on Hector's trail. His young legs were spry, and in no time at all, he'd circled around and blocked Hector's path.

"Dammit!" Hector swore. It was followed by a woman's scream—he had taken a passing whore as a hostage. He had one hand around her throat from behind, while the other held a knife near her face. Ralph blanched, shocked. This is why I had warned him.

"You coward! Let her go!"

"Like I give a shit!" he roared back at Ralph. Noelle caught up, looking for an opening to attack, but Hector had the wall to his back now, and was using the woman as a shield. If they weren't careful, he would hurt her. Ordinarily the princess knight was the one who came through in situations like this, but she was still drunk.

"Back away now. If you don't, I'm gonna stab this bitch's face full of holes!"

Hector was serious, and desperate. He'd do it if we set him off, so we

carefully made a path for him.

“Don’t move, you got that? Not until I say...”

His threat was interrupted by the loud clicking of a boot heel. We all turned to look at a tall man walking down the darkened alley.

He seemed to be in his late twenties. His eyes were chestnut brown and sharp as a hawk’s, and his light brown hair was tied in the back. He was thin-faced and thin-framed, but not scrawny; rather, he seemed to have reduced any and all fat on his body. There was no weakness there. I thought he might be an adventurer, but I didn’t recognize him. Between the nice sword at his waist and the white jacket, he clearly had invested in his belongings. The calm, assured manner of his bearing spoke of years of training and education.

He was either a knight or a member of a noble family.

I had never seen him before, and yet I couldn’t shake the feeling that I *had*.

Where was it? Or did he look like someone else I knew?

Before I could figure out the answer, the man approached Hector without a word.

“Hey, stay back! Unless you want this woman to—”

The man had drawn his sword before Hector could finish his sentence. Silver light flashed twice in succession. The thin saber returned to his scabbard shortly before Hector’s hands fell to the ground. Dark blood sprayed from them, and the knife he was holding fell loose.

It was then that Hector finally screamed. He writhed and wailed in the pool of his own blood. The woman shrieked, too, blood splattered all over her face. She ran for her life, terrified.

Then the man seemed to think of something and turned to us.

“Are you adventurers?” His voice was surprisingly young. It was deep and easy on the ears.

“You could say that,” I replied for the group. Arwin was still resting, and the others were frozen in place. Technically, I was an outsider, but I didn’t have the time or obligation to be more accurate.

“I have a question, and perhaps you have an answer for me. Where are the graves that the Adventurers Guild manages?”

This took me by surprise. “You’re visiting a grave in the middle of the night? Are you a grave keeper? Or a grave robber?”

“I was planning to visit the grave tomorrow, but I cannot remember the place itself. I only remember that it is within a graveyard on the edge of town,” the man said. I expected him to be angry, but he completely ignored my trademark wisecrack.

“It’s directly west of the huge tree in the middle of that graveyard. You’ll notice the place at once, because there are rusted swords and bottles of booze littered all over.”

“I see. You have my thanks.”

“Also, there are two types of graves: personal and communal. The personal ones are for people who achieved things within the guild, and famous adventurers. Basically everyone else gets tossed into the communal graves. I don’t know which one your person would happen to be.”

Pour out a little wine onto the ground, and the deceased would surely be happy about it.

“That won’t be an issue. I am heading for a personal grave,” the man said. He inclined his head deeply. “It is where my younger sister rests.”

I repeated the word “sister,” and the man’s eyes flared with anger. It seemed that her death had not been a pleasant one.

“Oh! There you are.”

“We’ve been looking for you, Lord Carlyle.”

Several town guards came rushing over, looking relieved. I recognized some of them—the mustached guard and the darker-skinned one. Just as I’d thought, this man was clearly someone important.

“Pardon me. I wanted to walk around the town for the first time in ages, and it seems I wandered a bit too far,” said the man they called Lord Carlyle. He apologized and tasked them with carrying away the bloodied Hector. He was

likely to die of blood loss before they could properly question him, but Carlyle did not seem to care.

“Please, right this way. The master is awaiting you,” the mustached guard said politely.

Carlyle took a few steps before turning back to me.

“And what is your name?”

I hesitated, then answered truthfully.

“Matthew. Why do you ask?”

“Ah. So you’re the...”

He nodded to himself, trailing off. For an instant, I thought I saw hatred burning in his eyes. Did he know who I was?

“I am Vincent. We shall meet again.”

Vincent?

He noticed the effect this name had on me and smiled with satisfaction, then left with the guards.

I could feel the sweat trickling down my back as I watched them go. Now I knew who he was.

That man, Vincent...was the brother of Vanessa, the Adventurers Guild’s appraiser.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Guardian Knight's Anguish

Being a kept man was a harsh business, year-round with no holidays, but at least the job mostly took place at night. Because of that, I woke up late. Craftsmen and merchants were already up and about doing their jobs before my eyes even opened. My first meal of the day often served as both breakfast and lunch. But there were always exceptions, and on this day, I was out of bed before the sun rose.

"How are you feeling?" I asked.

Arwin was slumped over the breakfast table. She turned to me with great effort. Her face was pale. The Crimson Princess Knight was suffering from a hangover. Her cheeks twitched as she slowly lifted a hand.

"...No problem."

"So you feel terrible still. Understood."

I sat down across from her and put a cup on the table near her face.

"Drink that for now. There's fruit juice in it."

Arwin thanked me quietly and drank the sweetened water in the cup.

"...It tastes good," she said, sounding relieved.

Last night, she had engaged in a drinking contest with a mob boss and had collapsed into bed when she got home. Without changing, of course.

Therefore, I'd been very busy since then. I gave her water to drink, then removed the clothes of the beautiful princess knight, put her into the washing basin to scrub her body, then carefully and thoroughly dried off her skin and put her into fresh clothes. It was such a difficult and arduous task that I couldn't ask

anyone else to do it. Let me be the only one to suffer this lonely fate.

Of course, I also cleaned up her articles of clothing and heated up the water, so there was some tedium involved as well.

“You should rest and recover today. There’s nothing on your schedule, is there? If there are small errands, let the others handle it. I’ll pass along any messages you have.”

“That reminds me,” she said, after finishing her second cup of fruit water, “the man yesterday was named Carlyle, wasn’t he?”

“So you *were* awake.” I had assumed she had been unconscious at the time.

“I seem to recall that’s a knight’s lineage in this country, but it seemed like he knew you. Are you familiar with him?”

“Only his existence. Yesterday was the first time I ever met him,” I said. “He’s Vanessa’s brother.”

His full name was Vincent Barry Carlyle. The Carlyles were a renowned family of royal knights in the kingdom of Rayfiel. He was two years older than Vanessa. He’d been born the eldest son of an art trader and had shown an excellent physique and sword fighting aptitude from a young age. It was decided that he should be taken as a foster son by distant relatives of a family with knighthood, which was how he came to have the Carlyle name, Vanessa had once told me.

“He sent his firstborn heir to be a foster child?”

“Apparently he had no eye or mind for art. They’d never quite gotten along, either, so his father wanted Vanessa to take a husband who would carry on the family business.”

Based on the results, his plan was only half-successful. The art business cratered, but Vincent was a great success in his new life and was named a royal knight at the age of just nineteen.

“I heard he’s currently in a unit of knights that protects the royal city. What do you suppose brought him out here? It didn’t seem like it was just to visit a grave.”

The first possibility that popped into mind was that he’d given up his rank for



a chance at revenge. But given the way the guards were escorting him around, that didn't seem to be the case. And I didn't think he'd been sequestered out here for political reasons, or that he'd been sent as punishment for corruption. Given his good looks and knightly status, you would think the women would be after him, but he was not the lusty type, either. He didn't seem particularly drawn to Arwin or Noelle.

"It must be about the Paladins, then." Arwin lifted her head and used her fingers to comb through her hair. "I've heard rumors that they're getting more active now."

Thanks to her status as a former princess, Arwin often received information from powerful sources.

"What's that?"

"Simply put, they're the king of Rayfiel's peacekeeping force."

Among royalty and nobles, the lack of safety and security around Gray Neighbor had long been a concern. To them, the dungeon was a mountain of gold that contained all manner of curios and rare treasures, and they did not appreciate that the profits and items that came from there inevitably trickled into the underworld to line the pockets of criminal elements.

"They're an investigative body independent from the lord of this area. The guards will continue to patrol the town like before, but criminal investigations—particularly the trading of stolen goods, smuggling, and other group activities—will fall under their purview."

"Hah!"

It certainly sounded like the kind of pipe dream that the rich and mighty liked to think up. For one, it was guaranteed to fail. Adding more manpower wasn't going to cleanse the darkness that infested this town.

"It won't happen. They'll just end up taking bribes like our friendly, well-meaning guards. I'd bet on it."

"Now, give them a chance," Arwin smiled sadly. "We should be happy that this place might be safer than before. Even if it's too late to save me from the vices of this town."

“.....”

The candies that I gave Arwin were laced with Release, a forbidden drug.

I had told her that I was getting the material for the candy from an old acquaintance in town. If things got safer, crime would decrease. Drug deals would come under higher scrutiny, and acquiring a source would be more difficult than before. That was what Arwin was referring to.

Even a situation that most people would celebrate caused problems for others. It was wonderful that it would be harder to make the same mistake again, but this was still too early for her to go without a safety net. We hadn't gotten to that stage yet.

“No problem. Leave this to me. You don't need to worry about it.”

If she fretted, it would lead to a relapse of her condition: dungeon sickness. If she took a lot of Release to help her cope with the sickness, all our hard work would be down the drain. It wouldn't just be the crime aspect; it would also shorten her lifespan. And yet the flood of people looking for drugs never dried up. Humanity is a foolish and weak species. Which is why there was always a way to get more Release.

Arwin clasped my hand. “Just don't do anything too dangerous. I would hate for you to die because of my stupidity.”

“I have no intention of that,” I said. “I can't go letting your lifeline snap first. So I won't be dying, and I certainly don't intend to let it happen.”

I squeezed back. If I died, who was going to keep her safe?

“You have my word. I will protect you. No matter what.”

“Matthew...”

Her gaze warmed, her lids lowered.

A knock sounded upon the front door. Just when we were sharing a very meaningful moment. What loutish behavior was this?

Irritated, I headed to the door. Only one person knocked this way. I opened it up and confirmed that it was indeed a familiar face.

“Big trouble, Matthew!”

She must have been in quite a panic. April’s little body was frantically vibrating with purpose.

“These people called the Paladins are calling for you. They want to speak to you about Vanessa.”

She took me to the appraiser’s office in the secondary building of the Adventurers Guild. It was the very same room Vanessa had used; it had been vacant since her death. They were supposed to recruit a new appraiser but were having difficulty narrowing down candidates.

Three men were sitting on the other side of the glass partition. Vincent was in the middle. All three wore the same thing, which seemed to be the uniform of the Paladins. I felt a presence and turned back to see four more Paladins along the wall behind me, holding spears.

“Thank you for coming. Please, have a seat. Make yourself comfortable.”

Despite his words, it was clear that his manner was not friendly. Dreading this encounter even more, I sat down across from Vincent.

“Hello again. Thanks for your help yesterday. Allow me to introduce myself again: Matthew. A pleasure.” I held out my hand for a handshake, but he did not seem inclined to such pleasantries, so I withdrew my hand awkwardly. “I’ve heard about you. You’re Vanessa’s brother, right? If you want to learn more about your sister, I think you’d have a lot more luck at the pub, Vince.”

“It’s *Vincent*,” he corrected me. “You may refer to me by that nickname once we have become familiar with each other to a certain extent.”

“Yes, indeed, Sir Carlyle,” I said, straightening up.

“I understand you were close with Vanessa,” Vincent said, wasting no time.

“Yeah, I guess,” I admitted. “But nothing sexual about it. We were friends, more or less.”

We’d been alone in this very room on a number of occasions, and not a single

kiss.

“I’ll get right to the point. Do you have any idea who might have killed my sister?”

My eyes nearly popped out of my skull. “I’ve heard that someone in the criminal underworld did it,” I said.

“According to the guards’ investigation, yes. But that is merely conjecture based on circumstantial evidence.”

Her lover, Sterling, got involved in selling drugs, and ignored territory rules in doing so. When the mobsters found out, they killed Sterling as punishment, and in the process of destroying and hiding evidence, ran into Vanessa by accident, and killed her, too.

“According to the report based on the bodies, Sterling was pierced through the windpipe by his own chisel, and Vanessa was strangled, then doused in oil and burned.”

“It’s nasty stuff,” I groaned, lifting a hand to rub my forehead. “Only a demon would do that.”

“But they still haven’t found who did it. The actual perpetrator is yet unknown. The group that ordered it is fuzzy as well. There are many rumors, but nothing beyond the realm of speculation. So I had a thought.” Vincent’s eyes narrowed. “There was no criminal figure involved from the start. The real culprit is someone else.”

With a criminal gang involved, it would be quite understandable for the trail to go cold, with all evidence eliminated. Convincing the authorities of that would keep them away, or at least shift suspicion in a different direction.

“I’ll be straight with you. I have come to this town to arrest the person responsible for killing Vanessa,” he announced. His sober, powerful declaration resonated in the room.

“It’s not a mission for your Paladins?”

“Naturally, I will be restoring and maintaining the safety of the town. That was His Majesty’s order. Searching for Vanessa’s murderer does not conflict

with this mission.”

So finding a killer was going to improve the safety of the town, eh? Getting a bit greedy, are we?

“Well, to answer your earlier question, no. I understand how you feel, and I want to catch the killer, too. But if it’s someone other than a mobster, I’d guess maybe it was related to a man. All the men she dated were crackpots. If it wasn’t Sterling himself, then it could have been someone else she’d been with.”

“What about Diane Clark?”

“Who’s that?”

It sounded familiar, but I had no memory of the name.

“Shortly before she was killed, Vanessa had singled her out for drug abuse.”

That clicked. It was that woman, the one who reacted to Vanessa’s mercy by swinging a sword around in a crazed, desperate rage. Dez had caught her and thrown her into a cell, and that was the last I’d heard of her. It made sense that being publicly shamed would cause her to bear a grudge.

“Is she the killer?”

“She has an alibi. She was being held in the basement cells on the day it happened, and she is currently in a sanatorium.”

“What’s that?”

“Put simply, a facility for the treatment of drug addicts.”

My breath caught in my throat. “They have those?”

“Only temporarily. The Paladins have freed up a portion of their facility to house it. After all, only cracking down on dealers and addicts will do nothing to stop more from popping up. If it goes well, it should decrease the number of addicts in society.”

“Ahhh.”

Vanessa hated drugs, as I recalled. So he was carrying on his sister’s will in that regard.

“What do they do at this sanatorium? Feed people medicine to cure them?”

“Primarily, it involves holding the addict until the drug has left their system.”

Well, never mind then. I had been hoping to steal their idea if it was any good—so much for that.

“The medical institute in the royal city is also studying a curative method. I’ve made arrangements that if they discover a means, they will share it with us.”

“That sounds nice. Vanessa would be very happy.”

“And as long as I can arrest her killer, her soul will be at ease.”

“...Indeed.”

It had been a very interesting topic to hear about, but I just had to go and open my fat mouth. Sometimes I sickened myself.

“To return to the topic at hand, one never knows where evidence may come from. Sometimes the most insignificant forgotten details can connect to the real killer’s motive,” Vincent said, as cold and clinical as a hunter. “So I ask you again, are you certain there’s nothing else you recall?”

“If I remember, you’ll be the first to know,” I said, stretching and getting to my feet. “Is that all you wanted to speak about? Hit me up when you’re going out for drinks. Preferably three days early, so I can put it in my schedule. You’d be surprised how busy I am.”

“I hear you were an adventurer, Matthew,” he said, changing the topic.

“Over in the east, yes. I got myself in a bit of trouble there. Had to come here to escape it.”

The backgrounds of adventurers all had some kind of guilt or darkness in the past, in greater or lesser amounts. Whether it was debts owed or trouble with gangsters, Vincent had no standing to hold me accountable for crimes committed in other lands.

“I’ve heard that you retired. You don’t seem injured to me.”

“Maybe not at a glance. But I’m all torn up on the inside. I can barely even hold a knife and fork, much less swing a sword anymore.”

“And is that why you spend your time on idle entertainment, rather than

getting a job? I understand that before you found Lady Arwin, you were bouncing around, mooching off of a number of different women.”

“I provide a purpose for women who are lost in life.” There was a distinction there, and he would do good to remember it.

“And one of them was Polly?”

My eyes widened. “You know about her?”

“She was an old acquaintance.”

I recalled that Polly and Vanessa had known each other for years. I suppose that it would make sense that her brother Vincent would also know her. Maybe they were childhood friends.

“I hear that the flame went cold between you and her.”

“Which is why she dumped me. She got on a carriage, left town, and I’ve never seen her since.”

“But that, too, isn’t entirely certain. In the last year, one person around you vanished, and another died. What does that signify?”

“Coincidence.”

Either that, or a trick of the idiotic guidebook to life known as fate.

Polly had died in this town some days ago, but her unidentified body was dumped into the dungeon. Most likely even her bones were gone now.

“Vanessa cared for Polly quite a lot. She wrote letters to me about her.”

I could see what Vincent was thinking as clearly as if his head was transparent. He thought I had killed Polly, and then killed Vanessa because she found out about it. Oooh, so close. Only 70 percent on that one. You’re not getting to the right answer down that path.

“I’m aware,” I said. “She lamented not doing more for her. It was really weighing on her mind.”

“.....”

Vincent clammed up. He had been so incisive in following up my comments, but now he seemed as weak and passive as a scolded child.

“Very well,” he said, shaking his head and standing, signaling the end of our discussion. “I’m sorry for interrupting your day. If you figure anything out, please get in touch. Our office is in the north part of town, but I plan to set up outposts as well. There will be one near the Adventurers Guild, too.”

I turned around to leave, and promptly noticed something long and thin coming toward me. By the time I recognized it as one of the Paladins’ spears, my arms were already extended to catch it. The weight pulled me forward and toppled me onto the ground, face-first. It hurt like hell, and the spear was extremely heavy. It looked thin, but there was probably lead inside, or something.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I think his hand slipped. I apologize for my man there.”

It was intentional. He had them catch me by surprise to test if I was really as weak as I claimed.

“If you feel sorry about it, then get this damn thing off me.”

On Vincent’s command, the Paladin reached down and picked up the spear with one hand. He had no trouble with it, unlike a certain kept man.

“Again, I apologize. I’ll have my subordinate scolded for that,” Vincent said blithely. He was a man to watch out for.

I popped up to my feet, rubbing my forearms where they’d caught the weapon. I was just putting my hand on the door when he called out, “One last thing. Where were you the night Vanessa was killed, and what were you doing?”

“I was drinking with Dez, then I believe I wandered the streets. I don’t remember where, exactly.”

“So you didn’t go through Painted Lane.”

That was where Sterling, Vanessa’s boyfriend, lived. Her home was not far away from it.

“I don’t think so. But I was drunk, so I don’t remember much.”

“And what about Poison Swamp Alley?” He knew that much? He’d already scrounged up far more than I’d imagined. “That’s an area used often for drug



deals. What would you be doing in a place like that?"

"Look, I'm not on drugs, if that's what you're insinuating," I said. "You can ask anyone you like, and they'll tell you."

He shook his head. I thought that maybe Vincent was finally relenting, but instead, he came at me from a different angle.

"Based on the state of the bones in her neck, a large man strangled Vanessa."

"Or possibly a woman. There are giantesses and other types like that."

Vincent stared me top to bottom. "You're a very large man, Matthew."

"You're no slouch yourself, *Vince*." In terms of height, he wasn't far off from me. "See ya."

This time I did walk out into the hall. I hadn't been in there that long, but I felt strangely tired. I slumped against the wall of the empty hallway. Before long I was staring at my hands.

*What's wrong, Matthew? Are you feeling regret now?* I could hear a voice in my head ask.

"Hah. Never."

If the same situation arose a hundred times, I would do the same thing a hundred times over. In fact, I'd do it better the next time. I would strangle Vanessa as many times as I needed to. It was just as simple as that.

A while after that, the Paladins were officially assigned to Gray Neighbor. Vincent, guardian knight of the royal family, spearheaded efforts to wipe out crime in the city. Men wearing the Paladin uniform popped up on street corners here and there. One of their first steps was to crack down on drug smuggling. Officials who took bribes were punished. Even shady religious groups like Sol Magni were not treated with kid gloves.

For now, they seemed to be having success, but at the same time, the results did not surprise me. The people they were catching were all small-timers, and they weren't getting to the real power players.

Some of those they arrested were from gangs, but only the street-level members. They weren't closing in on the major lieutenants. The ones at the top were bribing even the nobility. They weren't going down easily.

And to no surprise, they were not getting along with the city guards. I'd seen them in antagonistic situations multiple times already. The going was not good.

"The real question is...what will Big Brother do next?"

Would he focus on rooting out crime to his own detriment? Or would he take dirty bribes like all the guards, limit his focus to petty dealers, and call it a done deal?

I couldn't say which was a better outcome. It was a valid life decision to be true to one's duty and beliefs, and it was also a valid career choice to be broad-minded enough to bend one's morality to get by at times.

Arwin headed to the dungeon this morning. The party's teamwork was getting better, so they were ready to resume tackling the dungeon in earnest. She was feeling highly motivated when she left. I'd be watching the house for quite a while.

She gave me some allowance to tide me over, so I was just thinking of heading to a brothel when visitors showed up at the house.

I opened the door cautiously, then groaned when I saw who it was.

"This isn't a gambling den or a cafeteria, gents."

In a sense, they were my acquaintances—the mustached and darker-skinned guards. They were usually out on patrol, but today, they were wearing Paladin uniforms.

"Did you change careers?"

"We're out on loan," replied the darker-skinned one. He had a distinctly nasal voice that I liked to mimic at times. "The Paladins are all outsiders, so they want folks who know the area. A couple of us from the city guard were selected."

"No change in salary, though," chortled the mustached one. "And the other guards treat us like turncoats. Look at us, trotting around the vomit and dust of the city with these fancy duds. I feel like a clown."

“My condolences.”

It didn't pay to be a guy at the bottom of the totem pole.

“Anyway, we've got orders from above, Matthew.”

They pointed their spears at me. I raised my hands.

“Sir Carlyle wands you. You're invided do the Paladin headquarters. You're the gues' of honor,” said the darker-skinned one, pityingly.

“Sorry, I still haven't picked out a dress. I also need to get my corset on.”

“Don't worry. It's a costume party tonight, and your costume is 'sad, helpless man-whore.'”

They jabbed me in the side, so I had to start walking.

“Your Prince Charming awaits you. Better remember how to dance the waltz while you have the chance.”

The Paladin building was on the north side of town, near the lord's castle. It was originally an old fort but had been renovated for this purpose. The gate in front seemed to have no purpose other than to look sturdy. There was a set of downward stairs as soon as we walked into the stone building. This was their interrogation room, apparently. The door was made of steel. It was a half basement, so the narrow, barred windows near the ceiling let in sunlight from above. The only other things were chairs and a table. Vincent was already sitting in the far chair. Four more soldiers stood on guard behind him.

“Seems like a bit much for party entertainment.”

I was given the seat across from him. They took my belongings again and put cuffs on my wrists. It went without saying that in my current state, I couldn't get them off.

Vincent ignored my joke and placed a wrinkled document upon the table. I didn't recognize it, but I had a hunch as to the contents and handwriting on it.

“You owed Vanessa money?”

“That's right,” I admitted. I had no reason to lie. There was no formal lending

contract, so Vanessa would've had a note about it somewhere. If I had asked to borrow money from her anywhere, it would have been at the appraiser's office at the Adventurers Guild, so she would have kept it there.

"Are you imagining that I killed her because I couldn't pay the money back?" By that logic, I would've killed Dez thirty times over by now. Assuming he could actually die, of course. "I've borrowed money from plenty of people, and I've also paid them back here and there."

"It does seem that you returned some of that money, bit by bit. And then promptly borrowed more," Vincent said, tapping the piece of paper. "You said that Vanessa was not your lover. Does that mean you wooed her aggressively with no success?"

"Well, she was a very good-looking woman. Although I hate to say this in front of her own brother, there were times I wished we could've been together. But that's all. I'm not a king with his own harem. No one is able to fuck every person he wishes."

"You didn't press your luck and try to force the issue?"

"Just imagined it."

"Perhaps you tried to force her against her will and put your hands on her throat when she made noise, but pushed a little too hard, and killed her."

"This is defamation. It's an insult to me, and to Vanessa. Are you jerking off to visions of your sister's death, you sicko?"

I was getting angry now. I knew it was all provocation. He was waiting for me to fly into a rage and give away my secrets. But there were limits.

"Arwin Mabel Primrose Mactarode," Vincent said. Instantly, I felt something like a cold stone in the pit of my stomach, as if ice water had been poured into it. He said, "Your eyes changed just now. You were so lackadaisical earlier."

"I don't want to hear her name coming out of your lips. It besmirches her."

"The first time we met, you were in a dispute with the Birds of Prey."

"Hurry up and send those guys to prison or the execution stand already. Isn't that your job?"

“To be honest, I noticed you protecting her during the brawl.”

“So you weren’t stepping in to protect *well-meaning civilians* from harm, but enjoying playing god with our lives, huh? Must be nice to have your job,” I said. Vincent ignored my provocation. His eyes glinted with fascination.

“I have seen a number of kept men in my time, but the way you look at Lady Arwin suggests neither lust, nor greed. You protect her like your life exists for her. Like a father, or a brother.”

“Or a boyfriend, or a husband. You forgot those.”

“Yes, perhaps you had no motive to kill Vanessa. But what if it was to protect Arwin? There are people in the world who would stop at nothing, even murder, to protect their loved ones.”

“Idiot.” I snorted. “There was never any trouble like that between Arwin and Vanessa...”

“I suppose not. I certainly didn’t find anything like that,” Vincent admitted. “Of course, it wouldn’t have to have been about money or men. But I told you earlier: One never knows where evidence may come from. Sometimes the most insignificant forgotten details can end up connecting to the real killer’s motive.”

He sent a signal to his subordinate. The man grimaced and set down a large sheaf of paper. It was about as thick as a dictionary.

“We’ve collected a series of statements about Lady Arwin. She is rather famous, of course. Many people offered their opinions and experiences about her. The majority are pointless, of course, but I feel certain that the truth lurks among them.”

Because she was so well-known, she attracted plenty of attention. It was possible that, unbeknownst to her, someone had seen some inopportune moment or inconvenient truth—much like I did.

When I didn’t say anything, Vincent tapped the stack of paper. “Let me be clear: This is only part of it. We will have more and more as time goes on. Can you truly say that since Lady Arwin came to this place, nothing at all untoward has happened? Is she truly *spotless*?”

“.....”

It was very possible that someone had witnessed her secret. But maybe they'd forgotten about it, or didn't really care, or got the wrong idea, or simply didn't think twice. That was how Arwin was still fine today. There had been no others like Oscar, stepping forward and trying to blackmail her.

But if asked for comment, they might remember. Yes, why *had* the princess knight been in a place like that? What had she been doing there, after all?

If they *had* shown up demanding payment to stay quiet, there were ways to deal with that. But it was impossible to take out dozens of potential witnesses at once. No one could say what threads would lead to the truth, and where they might be hidden. And there were too many uncertain variables to simply assume that nothing would turn up.

If her secret was brought to light, we were done for.

My throat was parched. Was there any way to get through this situation? Any way to ensure that Arwin was fine, at least? I moved my head, and the handcuffs came into my field of view. Restraints meant to bind the guilty, hard and cold.

“What’s wrong? Nervous about the cuffs? Or are you remembering when you killed Vanessa?” he said, noticing my gaze. Vincent leaned forward, staring at me with the crafty eyes of a predator. “What is it, Matthew?”

“Don’t ask pointless questions, Vince.”

I didn’t care if they hanged me from the gallows or cut off my head. Let them do their worst. I wouldn’t say anything, and I didn’t intend to. I’d take this secret to the grave, and all the way through the afterlife. Once I’d made up my mind, it was clear what needed to be done.

“First of all, of course I’m going to protect Arwin,” I said. “If she’s gone, I lose my way of life. Once that happens, it’s only a matter of time before I die on the street. So I’ve got no choice but to fight whoever’s against us, whether mobster or otherwise. Not that I’m thrilled about it.”

I certainly wasn’t about to share or hand over Arwin to someone else, no matter who they were.

“Isn’t it the specialty of any knight to put his life on the line for the woman he serves? Is it not that way for you?” I asked.

Instantly, Vincent looked like he had swallowed something bitter. His voice caught in his throat, and he tried to speak, but came up with nothing, it seemed to me.

In the silence that followed, fatigue smothered me like a heavy blanket. I leaned back against the chair.

“...I’m sorry to disappoint your burning desire for revenge, but I have a very important duty to watch the house. I think we’ve chatted enough, don’t you? Let me out of here now. And give back my wallet and stuff. You know, the crystal ball you took from me.”

“Is this that important to you?”

Vincent pulled a translucent little ball from his pocket. It was the temporary sun.

“I heard from a staffer at the Adventurers Guild that this was something Vanessa got from the guild’s possession.”

Fury smoldered in his eyes.

“Why do you have it?”

“Vanessa gave it to me.”

“Why? It doesn’t seem to have any effect, yet it is an authentic magic item. You could probably sell it for a good chunk of money. So why would she gift it to you, when she was already lending you money?”

“Her boyfriend Sterling got into trouble with some gangsters, and I solved it for him. She gratefully gave me this gift as a sign of her thanks.”

“Can you prove that? Will anyone speak to it?”

“No. There were no witnesses.”

Vanessa and I had been alone at the time. It was about counterfeit coins, so we couldn’t bring it up around others. And Sterling, who had made the mistake, was in the afterlife now, where he couldn’t vouch for me.

“You’re not suggesting that I killed her to steal it. Like you said, it’s weak.”

“And what if I am?” Vincent thrust the temporary sun at me. The sun god’s sigil hovered within the translucent orb. “Why would you carry this around with you at all times, if not because you’re a believer of the sun god?”

“No!” I shouted, jumping to my feet.

“Looks like I’ve found my answer,” Vincent said, staring coldly. “What sect? Are you pledging tithes to Sol Magni?”

“No! I said no!” I roared, leaning toward him. The Paladins rushed to hold me down.

Vincent looked down at me, writhing on the ground under duress, and said, “Worship of the sun god is not forbidden by law. But there are many who join their flock and commit crimes in the name of ‘revelations’ and the ‘Solar Palace.’ Sol Magni, in particular, has been especially violent as of late.”

Smuggling drugs and weapons, smuggling monsters using scrolls, and plenty of kidnapping and murder lately—they were doing it all. Those who had offered up their assholes to the shitbug sun god were truly a different breed.

“And what they view as the holiest of all are magical items containing the sigil of the sun god. They call them ‘relics.’ They will do anything to get their hands on a relic. They’re even going to other towns and committing murders there. In other words,” Vincent said, thrusting the temporary sun into my face, “this becomes a motive to murder. You people would happily strangle a woman to death in order to gain something like this.”

“Quit talking bullshit!” I screamed. “Fine, you want proof? I’ll speak a million insults about that piece of shit. If it would please you, I’d take extra delight in spreading my shit, piss, and vomit all over his church.”

“You could burn the whole building down, and it still wouldn’t be proof of anything. Not in the case of an *eclipse*.”

“What are you talking about?” I demanded.

“Don’t play stupid. It’s one of the teachings of the solar religion. *The sun is always in the sky. Whether covered by clouds or behind the moon, it is always at*



*our side, like a shadow.* Because of that saying, you are allowed to hide your faith to escape persecution, aren't you?"

Secret adherents, then. I hadn't known about *that*.

"Well, it's not happening here, either in the open or in secret. I'll never, in my entire life, worship that bald piece of shit."

"If you hate him that much, why did you have this? You could have thrown it away or sold it."

"My life would be a lot better if I could do that!"

"Are you saying it's a cursed item? There's no such magic placed upon it. You held on to this crystal ball of your own free will. And you killed Vanessa to get it in the first place. Am I wrong?"

"I didn't do it! I didn't do any of this!"

I tried to grab it back, but they held me down again. My upper half was pressed against the table, and they had two men to hold down my arms.

"This was your real motive, then," Vincent said with some surprise, fixing his mussed clothing. "Take him away. I'm certain that under enough duress, we'll find out about plenty of other crimes he's committed."

He clapped his hands, and the Paladins dragged me away. As I watched Vincent get smaller in the distance, I smiled weakly.

Who would have guessed that, protecting Arwin or not, I'd ever *admit to being a believer of the sun god*? Of course, I was aware of the minutiae about Sol Magni he'd mentioned.

If I had simply fessed up, Vincent would have been skeptical. So I denied it. And the more I denied and denied, the more determined he was to find something behind it. The smarter the man, the more convinced he would be. I'd pulled him off Arwin's trail, but in doing so, I'd dragged myself through a pile of shit. But that was still better than the alternative.

So, Vanessa...is this your revenge beyond the grave?

If so, it was a clever idea. This was pure agony.

After this came a predictable torture session. They tossed me into a cramped room, then four of them beat and kicked me, dragged me, tossed me, stomped on me, choked me, and hit me with clubs and whips. Even after the curse, my hardiness was fully intact. When I took a nap out of sheer boredom, they woke me up with splashes of water, screamed at me, and rubbed my face against the wall. I could just cry.

By nightfall, I still hadn't confessed anything, and the men were exhausted. They threw me into an underground cell, leaving me face down on stone that reeked of piss and shit. Soon footsteps were approaching.

I thought it would be Vincent, but it turned out to be the mustached guard.

"How are you doing?" he asked.

I turned my face, the only movement I could bear. "It's too much. I'm too sensitive. Any more and I'm going to come."

"You sound fine to me, then." The guard walked up to the bars and squatted to get a closer look.

"What do you want, you corrupt goon?"

"Don't be like that. I'm here to help you. Look, it's your supper."

He pushed a small tray with bread and water through the slot in the door.

"There had better not be poison in there."

"Probably not. But if there is, too bad."

How nice of him. But if he were really nice, he would have offered to taste test for poison first.

"What do you want with me? Are you letting me out?"

"Can't do that. Sir Carlyle seems determined to put you on the execution stand. If I make a stink to protect you, I'll suffer the consequences, too." He chopped his own neck with the side of his hand.

"Scary stuff, man."

“Yeah, everyone’s on edge about it. Especially us loaners.”

The guards in this town were all, to some extent, taking bribes from the underworld figures and the rich and powerful to look the other way, thus benefiting from their crimes. To them, Vincent’s crusade against crime was cutting into their potential profit. It was like mixing sand into the flour.

“So he takes money out of our pockets and starts setting up some nonsense called a ‘sanatorium.’ You really think something like that is gonna fix people for good?” he said mockingly. I did not laugh. “So I’d tell you to give up,” he added, his mustache twitching meaningfully, “but depending on how things play out, I might pass on a message if you want. It’s all up to you.”

I realized what he was saying.

“Is this about Poisonous Spider Square tomorrow?”

“Yeah.”

“Which match?”

“Last one. The main event.”

“Then put me down for Mr. Wise. I think August is better, but this one will have obstacles. Mr. Wise has the edge with jumping and agility.”

These were the names of roosters from the cockfighting ring. I was good at singling out the stronger birds, so sometimes I pretended to be an oddsmaker, giving betting advice.

“You’re certain of that?”

“Deadly.”

The mustached guard looked like he meant business, but underneath he was a ravenous gambler. Most of his pay he spent on cockfights and dice games. That was why he was still a lowly patrol guard at his age. He was so familiar with the streets because he walked them to get to all the games of chance around town.

The darker-skinned one, meanwhile, was a glutton. He went around to various business centers and offered what he called *protection services* in exchange for free food. He’d been allowed to get away with it—until recently—

because he only took little sweets and beer snacks.

“Should I tell the dwarf, then?”

“No, the shrimp...April, please.”

Dez was a good fellow, but not the smartest. His idea for how to save me would be to reduce this building to rubble. But April would go and cry to her grandpa. The old guildmaster of the Adventurers Guild should have enough power and potential pressure to have me released. I hated to owe him a new favor, but I was running out of options here.

“Not the princess knight?”

“No. I don’t want her to yell at me.”

I was certain that she would come flying over right away, but she was in the dungeon now, and it would be dangerous to bring her into closer proximity to Vincent. It would invalidate my whole reason for dragging myself through the shit.

“Tell her, ‘Nice Big Brother Matthew is being held by some bad people, so come save him.’”

“I’ll tell her those exact words,” the guard said, then scrambled back up the steps with impatience. Clearly his thoughts were so preoccupied by the cockfight that he’d come here just to get my advice.

With men like him around, it was only a matter of time before the Paladins rotted from the inside out. Perhaps they already were. The only question was whether the haughty guardian knight realized it or not.

From morning to night the next day, they questioned and tortured and generally fussed all over me. They needed to get a life.

On the following morning, a few hours after the sun rose, they came down to my cell and dragged me out. My destination was the same playroom where they’d treated me to the punching and kicking party of the past two days. This time, however, Vincent was there, too. He even had a club; he was ready to join the festivities.

“Do you feel ready to confess your crimes now?”

“...Two and a half years,” I replied, wiping my face with the back of my hand and the rim of the shackles.

“What?”

“That’s how long it’s been since Vanessa and I met. You speak of Vanessa this, Vanessa that, like the most caring brother in the world, but in all that time, she didn’t receive a single letter from you. Nothing even came after her death. You would have gotten word from the Adventurers Guild. Maybe you wouldn’t have made her service in time, but you didn’t even reply to them.”

“That is none of your business.”

“One more thing. You know the old lady named Amanda?”

“...Vanessa’s servant.”

She’d been living at Vanessa’s house, but was now with her grandson. I went to go visit her once, and she’d tearfully said, *“If only I hadn’t left when I did, Vanessa wouldn’t have died.”*

“She said that while she was grieving, a man showed up claiming to be Vanessa’s brother, all but accusing her of the murder. The poor old woman. She’s still recovering from the shock of that. Did you think that little wrinkled old woman strangled your sister to death?”

“I see that your wisecracks are in fine form today,” Vincent scoffed. “Are those part of your solar teachings?”

“Here’s my answer.” I stuck my middle finger right into his stupid face. “Go to hell, you stupid, thin-skinned sisterfucker!”

“...I’m very disappointed, Matthew.” The club in his hand creaked. “That round of drinks we were supposed to have together might never come.”

He threw aside the cracked club. Instead, he brandished a piece of paper covered in important-looking seals.

“The Paladins have been granted the right to execute criminals. Rejoice—you will be our first glorious test run.”

That wasn't joyful news at all.

"What is my crime? Revealing that you are a freak in love with your sister?"

"Theft, murder, and arson. That is more than enough to have you put to death."

And my motive was to gain a relic of my precious sun god. I wanted to cry.

"Your evidence?"

"Someone witnessed a person resembling you in the area at the time. You have no alibi. And if she was given sleeping drugs, even you could strangle her in your weak state."

"So you're going to put me to death on flimsy evidence like that? I guess when it's not your own life at stake, you're happy with doing a slapdash job."

"Take him away," Vincent commanded. His followers grabbed my arms. "The execution is in two days. Pray to your god in your cell until then."

They stood me up and pulled me out. Two days. If they at least did it out in the sunlight, I'd have a chance to do something about it.

There hadn't been any word from April yet. Perhaps her grandfather overrode her this time. He'd done that during the kidnapping a year ago, too. He'd forsaken a whore and her daughter, so it stood to reason that he would certainly forsake a good-for-nothing gigolo.

Which left Dez as my only hope. He would have heard the story from April by now. The Paladins were nothing against him. But if he broke a criminal out of prison, he'd be labeled a criminal, too. For all his faults, he was a family man with a wife and child, and I didn't want him to have to go on the run. Just stay cool, Dez.

I was just wondering what options I had left when I heard a voice.

"Beg your pardon!"

It was coming from outside the building. Looking confused, the Paladins went over to the window to look outside.

"Beg your pardon!" the voice said again. The first time, I chalked it up to an

auditory hallucination, but now there was no denying it. Only one princess knight would dare demand an audience with such a loud voice.

Things got very hectic inside the building. Footsteps stomped and voices rose.

“What is this? What’s happening?”

Vincent’s subordinates rushed out to see what it was. They opened the door to race outside, but practically tumbled back inside just as quickly.

“Excuse me,” she said, sliding past them and striding briskly toward us. “I’ve come to retrieve my kept man.”

But why was she here? She wasn’t scheduled to return from the dungeon for a while yet.

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, but this is not the sort of place for you. Please leave,” Vincent requested, maintaining his cool in the face of this unexpected visitor.

Arwin did not argue with him. She strode right past him and pulled out a white cloth to press to my head. “Are you all right? Seraphina will be here right after me. You’ll have to hold out until then.”

“Why are you here?”

“Isn’t it obvious? To take you home.”

She took a step back, drew her sword, and sliced through the shackles binding my hands.

“We’re leaving.”

“O-okay.”

I got unsteadily to my feet, pulled by her hand.

“Not so fast, please.”

Naturally, it was Vincent who stood in our way.

“This is Rayfiel. It is not your country—and yours does not even exist anymore. You have no power here.”

Arwin took a white piece of paper from her pocket and opened it for Vincent

to read. “I borrowed this from the guild. It is the form authorizing the removal of the temporary sun.”

This piece of paper was created when any appraised item was released from the guild’s control. Vincent’s face twisted. I couldn’t see it from here, but there was no doubt that if it was an authentic form, it would have Vanessa’s name on it.

“It contains descriptions of the features and effects of the item, but there is no mention of any sigil of the sun god on it. Meaning that at the point it was given to Vanessa, there was no sigil on it.”

“What is your point?”

“When did the sigil appear, then? If you cannot prove that it was there before Matthew received it, your supposition that he killed her to gain the sun god’s sigil has no factual basis. But beyond that, the sigil is irrelevant.”

Vincent’s expression was truly sour now. Not only had his logic been shattered, but the status of his investigation had somehow leaked to an outsider.

Next, Arwin produced a small booklet. She said, “As I hardly need tell you, her brother, Vanessa had a very methodical personality. There was an incident involving appraised goods being stolen, after which she kept copious notes on all the items. There is also a line she added here: *A present to Matthew.*”

“But—”

“This handwriting is undoubtedly Vanessa’s. If you still have doubts, you may visit the Adventurers Guild later to peruse her notes and confirm for yourself.”

In other words, the temporary sun had undoubtedly been gifted to me of Vanessa’s own will, regardless of any sun god sigil. Whether it appeared before or after she gave it to me, I would never commit murder *for the sake of that sigil.*

“In addition, I have also completed the steps for the release of this man. That is why I said that I have come to take him home.”

“.....”



Vincent pressed a hand to his forehead. He was utterly defeated. But to my surprise, the look in his eyes was still defiant.

“And one more thing,” Arwin announced, putting the document away. “Mactarode has not fallen. It will return to where it once stood. *It will.*”

“.....”

“Are we done here? If you’ll excuse me...”

“Lady Arwin,” Vincent called out once we had gone several steps into the hall. There was no need to listen to him. I was telling her to ignore him when the rest of his sentence arrived. “For the past year, you have been visiting Glowfly Lane, I understand.”

Arwin stopped. Glowfly Lane was the pleasure quarter of the town. There were several brothels to choose from, and endless opportunities to buy drugs there.

It was true that she had been in the area, a little over a year ago.

“Of course, there is nothing illegal about that. You are free to sleep with or buy the services of any man you desire. Such as that fellow with you.”

“.....”

“I believe you were most often visiting the Scarlet Coffin—oh, but there aren’t any male prostitutes there. Was there some *other* business that took you there?”

“Unfortunately,” Arwin said flatly, turning around, “I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re talking about.”

“Ah, I see. My apologies,” Vincent said, bowing superficially. “I look forward to our next meeting.”

Arwin walked off without further comment. She took my hand and led me to a stretch of empty corridor. Our footsteps echoed off the walls. I squeezed her trembling hand back.

“I know it’s been an ordeal, Matthew,” she said at last, once we were outside.

“I thought you were supposed to come back later than this.”

“We were camping in the dungeon when the messenger reached us. At that point, we turned back.”

The Adventurers Guild had messengers who went into the dungeon to alert guild members about emergencies. The mustached guard had told April, who went crying to her grandfather. The guildmaster summoned Arwin back from the dungeon to deal with my mess. That was how I saw the sequence of events.

“I heard the gist of it from that Paladin. He said, ‘Your degenerate man-whore screwed up and got thrown in jail, and he cried and begged me to save his life.’”

Maybe two words of that were accurate.

“I hadn’t heard that you were in possession of this, though.” Arwin handed me the temporary sun, which she’d retrieved at some point. “I thought you loathed the sun god.”

“I still do.” I didn’t even want to hear his name. “But at this point, this is a memento of her, you know? I can’t possibly throw it away now.”

“I see.” She smiled sadly.

“On the other hand, that Vincent piece of shit...”

“I know.” She averted her eyes. “He must have found out about me while he was investigating the criminal groups around the city. Don’t worry. He has no evidence. We can keep mum, and he won’t be able to do anything.”

If that’s the case, then don’t look so frightened as you say it. Makes me think that you’re doing nothing but bluffing.

“If it comes down to it, I’ll make sure you don’t take the brunt of the blame.”

“No, wait, I’m not—”

“They sure did beat you good, didn’t they?” said Arwin abruptly, intent on ending the conversation there. She took out a fresh cloth and wiped the blood and muck off my face.

“That hurts.”

“Suck it up.” She gave me a pitying look. “I know that was difficult, but you have to bear it for now. One day, all the accusations will be cleared.”

No, Arwin, you don't understand. It was my own fault I was hit. In a sense, I'd be willing to laugh it off and forgive them.

But some things left no room for forgiveness. If they touched Arwin with even a fingertip, it would instantly become a kill-or-be-killed situation. Even if it was just a threat, anyone who meant her harm was my enemy.

Sorry, Vanessa.

I have a feeling your brother will be joining you soon.

The next day, Aegis returned to the Millennium of Midnight Sun. Arwin looked concerned as she left, so I had to practically push her out the door. They were already behind enough in their adventuring, and I didn't want them to be delayed further on account of me. It would make the others hate me even more.

Plus, it would be harder to take out Vincent if she was around.

Another problem, however, was that he was a royal knight. It wouldn't be like snuffing out a low-level street thug.

If I just up and killed him, the Paladins would put their reputation on the line to catch the killer. I wanted it to look like an accident. To do that, the first step would be to understand his movement patterns.

First, his residence was a dormitory close to the Paladin headquarters, and most of his work time was spent inside the building. He occasionally ventured out for patrols or arrests, but he was accompanied by his subordinates each time.

When he wrapped up work in the evening, he went out drinking. He would walk alone, have two drinks, and return to his room. The more I saw this rigid, unerring routine, the more obvious it became.

This was a trap.

He probably assumed that if he messed with Arwin, it would prompt me to act. That was why he talked that nonsense to her. While he was alone on the street, he surely had a means of winning. He was trying to lure me into

attacking him, so he could eliminate me for good. The sneaky rat.

Realizing it was a setup, I considered calling off the tail, but on this day, it was different. At sundown, he went outside and took an irregular route. Either he realized that always going the same way was too obvious, or he was taken by a sudden whim. I followed very carefully until we came to a familiar street—the road to Vanessa’s house.

By the time night had fallen, Vincent had arrived at the remains of the building, like I had thought. Only the foundation and some burned pillars and walls were intact; the rest was a mound of rubble. Rumor said that it would soon be removed so that a new house could be built. Perhaps he’d come in search of memories of his sister. He took a few steps into the rubble, crouched, and picked up a charred scrap of furniture. I couldn’t see his face, but it all suggested that he was steeped in emotion right now.

Just when I was thinking that I could kill him right then, footsteps approached from multiple directions.

I tensed where I hid in the shadows, expecting a trap after all. Several men appeared from various alleys, holding blades. There had to be ten of them. Their dress was varied, but all had masks over their faces, and they rushed Vincent without hesitation.

He seemed rattled and surprised, but not afraid. He drew the sword from his waist, then turned to flee before they could surround him.

“Wait!”

One of the masked men shouted as they gave chase. His voice was not that of a coarse ruffian. He sped as quickly and powerfully as a warhorse. They made use of their numbers to block Vincent’s possible exit. Once he stopped moving, they closed in, successfully trapping him between them.

“Who are you? Thieves? Or do you belong to a gang?” Vincent demanded loudly. His eyes were darting left and right; he seemed to be trying to occupy them with conversation while he searched for a way to survive. The raised voice was clearly meant to attract the attention of a passerby. But in this town, there were very few who were well-meaning enough to stick their neck out for a stranger. There were several houses very close by, but no sign of activity from

any of them, even though the night was young, and no one would be asleep yet.

One of the masked men raised his sword and gave a very un-assassin-like roar. Vincent calmly and carefully deflected it, then used his momentum to slash at the man's wrist. The hand fell to the ground with a spray of blood; its owner cradled the arm and rolled on the ground, howling with agony. It only bought Vincent the briefest of reprieves, because a second and third attacker sprang forward at once. Vincent swung his sword, trying to find a way out, but the masked assailants were precise and sure of themselves. When one was injured, he stepped back immediately, allowing another attacker to step in and swing.

Vincent was doing his best to resist, but the footing was poor. Once his upper arm was slashed and bleeding, his movement was noticeably hindered. That was probably going to seal the deal. These were not just a rabble of criminals, but skilled assassins from some group, or soldiers who'd had training.

At this rate, he would very soon be losing his life in the same place where his sister died. It'd probably please the sisterfucker so much, he'd splooge. I wasn't going to need to get involved. They'd saved me the trouble.

So long. Now I'm the one who feels disappointed we'll never get to share drinks.

As I turned to leave, I realized that I was staring at my own hands again.

"....."

My resolve hadn't wavered. I would strangle Vanessa as many times as I had to.

Atonement wasn't my style. Vincent was a haughty, arrogant prick. I'd be very happy to see him go. His death would be very convenient for both me and Arwin.

But this timing and these circumstances were perhaps just a little bit inopportune. If Vincent died suddenly when he'd expressed suspicion toward us, what would Arwin think? This was not like the other cases where I'd cleaned up a problem without her knowing. She might have been raised as a sheltered princess, but she wouldn't fail to notice the unnatural but convenient death of a

very inconvenient human being.

That wasn't the only issue. Whoever was doing this, the assassins clearly weren't posing this as an accident. Everyone in the Paladins would be aware of the row between me and Vincent. This time, they'd arrest me on suspicion of murdering *him*. Plus, if Vincent died now, the temporary sanatorium would be shuttered. For the sake of the future, it was probably best to allow that meager bud of hope to grow.

So this was a simple matter of pros and cons. My debt to Vanessa, the possibility of Arwin learning my dirty secret, my own safety, the sanatorium and its method of treatment—the scale holding all of these tilted just slightly in one direction. That was all.

“Thiz way! Over 'ere! Sir Carlyle's in drubble!” I shouted, holding my nose to change my voice. It was my special imitation of the dark-skinned guard.

The masked men spun around. They didn't seem alarmed by the sudden call. With a quick glance, three of them peeled away and came in my direction. Did my impression of him not fool them? They were coming closer to my hiding spot in the shadows. Uh-oh.

I turned and ran. I rounded two corners, leaped over a drunk who was sleeping on the street, and, once I was certain Vincent and his attackers couldn't see me, pulled the translucent orb out of my pocket.

“Irradiation,” I said. The temporary sun unleashed a brilliant glow.

The trio of masked men faltered briefly, then continued their charge, keeping their eyes low. The fools.

It was instant slaughter, of course. I cratered one face with a fist, avoided a sword and reached out to crush his throat. When the last man froze with indecision, I grabbed his head and rammed it into the wall.

When I was certain that they weren't moving, I dug around in my pocket, looking for a familiar object: a whistle. I wiped it with my shirt, then blew it.

A series of short blasts was what the city guard used to call for help.

There was suddenly a great rush of noise. I returned to the scene to see the

masked men scampering off. Vincent watched them leave in stunned silence, then fell to his knees. His breathing was heavy.







“Hey, been a while,” I called out once I’d cleaned up. Vincent tried to jump to his feet, but grimaced, and sank back down. “Don’t push it. The patrol guards should be here in a minute. Have them help you out.”

“Was that your voice? And the whistle?”

“Maybe.”

If I was honest, it would only cause more trouble. Besides, I was a humble and reserved man. I didn’t go around bragging about the favors people owed me.

“You didn’t come here to kill me?”

“Oh, hardly,” I said, shrugging. “I’m still anguished by the wounds you and your ilk inflicted on me. It’s hard to sleep at night, so I took a little walk to clear my head.”

“I don’t trust you.”

“Whether you do or not is your business. But perhaps it was fate that brought about this meeting. I was going to deliver a warning to you. Ordinarily I’d charge you a pretty hefty fee for this, but don’t worry about paying me. I already got what I needed from your sister.”

I’d taken one, and now I’d saved one. If that would just wipe out my debt, I’d no longer have anything weighing on my mind.

“A warning?”

I held up a finger, because there were two parts to this.

“One was about the attack that just happened. That was the work of your companions, wasn’t it?”

They had moved like well-trained fighters. Even my excellent mimicry of the darker-skinned guard didn’t have much effect on the people who knew him. They recognized at once that it wasn’t his voice and came to kill me immediately.

“Does that ring a bell?” I continued. “I’m sure the ones who did it are the folks who are taking money on the side from the criminal underworld, though.”

“...No one is doing that,” Vincent said, awkwardly avoiding my gaze. It seemed

like he was wracking his memory for clues that would help explain what had just happened.

“And the other thing,” I said, raising a second finger. “You told me you came to this town for revenge. That was a lie, wasn’t it?”

“What?” he said, his voice hoarse.

“You were raised to join the knighthood at age nineteen, when Vanessa was seventeen. That was when the two of you were hit by a terrible tragedy.”

The failure of the family business, and their father’s downfall. In reaction to the loss of his art trading business, Vincent’s father turned to drugs, and quickly spiraled out of control from there. Vincent went to his foster destination, and the family’s turn for the worse caused his mother to turn sickly. Therefore, it had been up to Vanessa to deal with her father, virtually alone.

“Vanessa sent you letters but got no response. Since then, you hardly ever wrote to her. The reason, of course, was your knightly advancement. A young man hoping to be a proud and regal knight cannot let it be known that his father is a drug addict.”

“Be silent.”

“I understand why. It makes sense. When you’re at the precipice of a major advancement, you don’t want your inconvenient father dragging you down.”

So he had ignored his sister’s pleas. He had cut her loose, along with his own father. So his father died from the drugs, and Vanessa had to get a job with the Adventurers Guild, home of idiots and ruffians, in order to repay her debt.

“It would be nice to imagine that you lived happily ever after, but your conscience wouldn’t allow that. You still felt guilty about Vanessa.”

While he had a good reason, the fact remained that he had abandoned his sister. That guilt smoldered deep in Vincent’s heart. He couldn’t meet her to apologize because they were too far apart, and Vincent was too busy to even reach out and contact her. Their relationship fell to the wayside. He did not seek her out.

“During that time, Vanessa was very dedicated to her work, but spent her free

time dating a variety of terrible men. Oscar was a drug dealer, and Sterling was an incompetent painter. She probably only went to them because she didn't have you at her side to keep her straight. Or at least, that's what you think."

Maybe half of the blame for her dalliances with the trash and scum of the city went to her father and brother. The other half was her own personal taste.

"But before that could happen, Vanessa died. And you forever lost your chance to apologize for what you'd done."

Maybe if he had returned at the time, he could have gotten his father effective treatment. Maybe they could have kept the family business, and Vanessa would have married and brought her future husband into the family to inherit it. Rather than being saddled with debt and working at the Adventurers Guild, she would have lived in peace and comfort, and would still be alive today. Words like *will* and *perhaps* eventually turn into *were* and *should've been* with time. Those possibilities became lost futures that tied themselves around Vincent's heart, weighing him down.

Vanessa felt the same thing. She was always wracked with guilt over how Polly became a prostitute, and then went missing entirely. This brother and sister were alike in the strangest ways.

"Enough."

"Feelings of guilt grow by the day. Then came the topic of the Paladins. You came to this town thinking that doing good for the place where your sister lived would ease some of that guilt. Isn't that right?"

"What would you know?!" he cried, grabbing my shirt and pulling me closer. "You act as though you know any of this! What proof do you have of...?"

"Your eyes might have anger in them, but there's no heat."

Not because he was cold and calculating, but because he never had any interest in it.

"Even your quest for vengeance is just going through the motions because you want an escape from your guilt. You ignored those storage records on purpose, didn't you? Even Arwin, who was raised a pampered princess, was able to find them. There's no way you would have overlooked them!"

The storage records for a valuable curio would be the first place to check, of course. He'd probably singled me out because I made for the best and most likely culprit for the role. He hadn't discovered the truth. And the motive he decided on was only because it was the one that I gave the strongest reaction toward.

Vincent was never looking for the truth. He only wanted his sister's forgiveness. He wanted to be forgiven.

"Don't do your job out of guilt. Nothing good will come of it."

"Silence!" he roared and struck my cheek with a burst of fury. I toppled over the rubble and burned wood, and Vincent leaped onto me. He put one hand on my neck and raised the other one.

"You killed her! You killed Vanessa!"

I was lying face up on the ground, and my vision was soon blocked by Vincent's face and fist. His handsome features were twisted and ugly. It seemed like he was both crying and furious. It made me wonder what I had looked like when it happened. What sort of face had Vanessa seen as the life left her body?

"If that's what you want to think, be my guest. But sending me to the gallows won't erase the guilt you feel. That's your own problem to bear."

"I told you to be silent!"

"Shouldn't you at least go and visit her grave for once, rather than bothering yourself with me? You haven't even gone, have you?"

The fist stopped right before my eyes.

"How do you know that?"

"I went there this morning, and nothing was any different from before. I certainly didn't see anything that suggested you'd come by to offer something in her memory."

He had asked for the location, so he surely *meant* to go, but hadn't yet, for whatever reason. Probably because he couldn't work up the courage—the coward.

The strength left Vincent's body. I took the opportunity to slip out from

beneath him.

“First of all, you need to look within yourself and face Vanessa and your father. If you still want vengeance after that, it won’t be too late,” I said, getting to my feet and dusting myself off. Vincent did not attack me again. “That’s it for my warning. Consider my debt paid.”

I turned my back on him and walked away.

“Where are you going?”

“Home.”

After they’d used healing spells to help me recover, I’d been beaten until my face was starting to swell again. I didn’t want to make this any harder for Arwin.

“So long. Maybe keep your nighttime dalliances to a minimum next time,” I said, waving as I left.

“Ah, here you are.”

Much later, I was walking down Glowfly Lane in the middle of the day when someone called out to me: Vincent.

“That was your work, wasn’t it?”

“What do you mean?”

“You remember when I was attacked the other day.”

“Ah, you mean the time you assaulted me, yes,” I said, helpfully correcting him. For some reason, Vincent did not thank me for it.

“I’ve arrested those who assisted in the attack,” he said. The attackers had been members of the Paladins after all. The town guards weren’t the only members of the Paladins on loan. Some of them were knights who served the lord of this town. They were all subordinates to Vincent and the royal knights.

Even considering the difference in their masters’ status, they couldn’t be happy about an outsider coming in, assuming command over them, and messing things up in their home territory. Plus, it was harder to take bribes and women from merchants and gangsters these days. Even the lowest man will

want to take revenge when his miserable excuse for pride and wealth are both taken from him.

“Of those who took part in the attack, three were dead beyond the ones I cut down. Each one was slaughtered seemingly by someone with superhuman strength.”

A look of horror flitted across Vincent’s face. He had seen the bodies.

“And how is that my fault? You know I’m a weakling, don’t you?”

“The investigation found that the three who died were the ones who had gone running off to investigate that *strange voice*. Then there was a whistle, and you appeared. It seems too convenient to be a simple coincidence.” Vincent reached out and grabbed my upper arm. “It’s not possible to have such a large frame and be so physically weak. You claim that you are injured, but I don’t see any impairment in your movement. I think you are hiding your own strength.”

“While street punks beat me up and rob me?”

“I think you would do it for the sake of Lady Arwin.”

I snorted. “I came to this place long before Arwin was here. I’d already been beaten bloody and robbed more times than I can count. If you think I’m lying, sweep up some of those ruffians and ask them yourself.”

“You have companions...”

“Oh yeah? Who? Remember, Arwin’s party was in the dungeon that day, and Dez works nights at the Adventurers Guild. There’s no one else.”

Vincent went silent. He seemed to be observing me, checking to see if there was any falsehood in my statements. The pesky little gnat.

“Besides, those people were trying to kill you. Why do you have to run around looking for their killer? Is there any limit to how far you’ll go for someone else?”

“That is how law and order works.”

“Well, la-di-da.”

I didn’t understand it. I yanked my arm from his grasp, which he released

more easily than I expected.

“May I go now? I have somewhere to be.”

“Wait, I’m not done talking to...hmm?” Vincent turned toward a side alley. “You said Lady Arwin should still be in the dungeon.”

“That’s right. She’s supposed to return this evening.”

He was looking at a woman with long red hair, walking with her back to us. Before I could say a word, Vincent was racing after her.

“May I have a word?” he said imperiously, even smugly. The woman turned around. “Huh?” he squawked. She had similar hair and clothing but was clearly a different person. Her face was composed enough to be called pretty, but she did not look that much like Arwin.

While he’d initially been taken aback, Vincent cleared his throat and recovered admirably. He looked like the leader of the Paladins again.

“Who are you? Why are you dressed like the Crimson Princess Knight? That’s not a coincidence.”

“Oh, this? You mean my working outfit?” she replied, in a sweet and syrupy voice. “You know how popular the princess knight is. But no one can have her. So if I dress up like this, the customers like it even more.” She took off her wig to reveal short black hair. “They told me not to go outside dressed like this, but my customer left in a hurry and forgot something.”

“...How long have you been doing that?”

“Um, a little over a year. You remember how the princess knight solved that kidnapping incident? It was around then. If you’re interested, you should stop by the brothel. It’s just up ahead. We’re right next to the Scarlet Coffin.”

Crestfallen, Vincent told her she could go. Once the woman dressed as Arwin had vanished around a corner, he turned to me and said, “Did you know about this?”

“Just don’t tell her,” I said with distaste. “If she finds out that whores are bouncing on men’s cocks while dressed as her, it’s going to be raining blood around here.”



“You didn’t consider making them stop?”

“Oh, I told them. And they said, ‘We’ll lose business, so you can pay us to make up the difference.’ It’s a waste of time.”

“I see.” He sounded exhausted. “You’re right. Nothing good will come of it. In fact, I’ll issue a proper apology to Lady Arwin the next time I have the chance. Pardon me for that.”

The plan had worked.

Of course, the lady was a plant. I’d gone to her and asked her to walk around on the street right around the time Vincent would be patrolling. I’d known for a while that she conducted her business using that outfit. And though it was exceedingly distasteful, I was glad that I had let her live, just in case she might come in handy like this.

“Was there nothing else? I’ll be taking my leave, then. Make sure you give her a real apology.”

“Wait.”

“What is it now?” I spun around, annoyed at this point.

Vincent looked away awkwardly, avoiding my gaze. “I...went to Vanessa’s grave.”

“How was it?”

“I don’t know. But I feel as though some small weight came off my chest.” Sure enough, Vincent’s face was smoother and calmer now, like he’d exorcised some spirit from his mind and gained a little newfound peace. “I swore before her grave that I will never give up. I *will* avenge Vanessa’s death.”

“As you wish.”

So there was still a pain in the ass, but I could live with that. I’d let him live this time. But not the next.

With my errands complete, I headed for the Adventurers Guild. My prior plans had run into a bit of a rocky stretch, so I was going to call on Dez for help.

“What’s this?”

There was a commotion at the guild’s side building. There were many adventuring gentlemen gathered around the building, watching intently. It seemed like it was the appraiser’s office, specifically.

“Did something happen?” I asked a nearby adventurer. “Maybe a blond bombshell, shaking her ass for all to see?”

“That’s exactly right, man-whore,” said a burly fellow with a mean grin. “The new appraiser’s a damn fine woman, just like the last. Got a big ass, too. Not much like your princess knight, but she’s a sight for sore eyes all the same.”

“Oooh.”

I couldn’t help but be curious about a description like that. I peered over the heads of the crowd, looking for her, right as the door to the building opened.

“Aaaah.”

She had golden, flowing hair down to her back, narrow blue eyes, a fine nose bridge and full lips, combining glamorously. Because her body was all curves, the blue pendant she wore at her chest bounced with every step. Beneath her black jacket was a red mini dress that only went about halfway down her thighs. If she bent over enough, you’d be able to see her underwear. It was a perfectly salacious outfit. There were white gloves on her hands.

She was holding a small wooden box, which perhaps contained some item that she’d been identifying.

The idiotic adventurers immediately began hurling crude propositions her way, but she evaded them all. “Maybe later,” or, “Someday, perhaps.” Clearly, she was used to dealing with morons. She’d do fine here.

Satisfied with the eye candy, I was getting ready to walk away when our eyes met.

“You,” she said, slipping past the gawkers. Her voice was on the deeper side, but syrupy sweet. “Are you the kept man? What was your name again? Marvin?”

“Matthew.”

“Ah yes. I’m sorry, names aren’t my strong point,” she said, chuckling.

“Are you asking me out on a date? Believe it or not, I’m quite busy—but for you...”

I reached out to grab her shoulder, but the only thing I hugged was empty air.

“That’s right.” I tumbled forward, nearly losing my balance. She stood over me. “My name is Gloria. I have something to ask of you. Will you come with me, Mr. Kept Man?”

### CHAPTER THREE

## The Appraiser's Selfishness

I was at the appraiser's office in the guild's side building. A transparent pane separated Gloria and me.

"After such a passionate summons in front of the crowd, this is a rather unappealing date spot," I said. The sides of the room were partitioned off with wood panels to keep us hidden. Not only was it cramped, but it also felt almost claustrophobic. This was no different from usual, though.

The guild appraisers usually shared one office between three people, so they divided it up into three sections.

"It was a direct invitation from the guildmaster himself, and yet this is the treatment they give me, because I'm new. I feel hoodwinked," she said. Only the best and most important appraisers got a dedicated room, like Vanessa.

"Does that mean you were an appraiser with a different guild?"

"Yes, in Twisted Lighthouse."

That was a port town to the northwest. I'd never been there, but they said it was busy. Lots of goods tended to be brought to an adventurers guild in a place like that. Naturally, that meant a lot of work for an appraiser.

"Why did you move here?"

"Salary, mostly. He said he'd pay me double."

Even in an adventurers guild, talented staff are in high demand. Technical positions like appraisers got headhunted all the time. Before her death, Vanessa had gotten multiple offers from other guilds.

"I've been knee-deep in catch-up tasks for the past day. There's a huge

backlog of items to appraise after the last person died unexpectedly. I'm just completely swamped," she said, kneading her left wrist. There was a pile of wooden boxes and small barrels stacked up behind her.

"Sounds like a tough situation," I said. "You have my sympathies."

"That's right. Being an appraiser is a hard job. And yet adventurers come up to me and say it's 'easy' because I don't have to fight. It's so tiresome," she sulked, resting her chin on the table.

"If you want to get it off your chest, wouldn't a bar be more comfortable?" I'd be willing to spend all night with her, if she wanted...Wait, no. Arwin was coming back today.

"Oh, I forgot. I actually wanted to ask you for something, Mr. Kept Man."

Gloria pulled out an old and faded cloth. It was about the size of a cloak for a child. Over half of it was stained dark red, especially around the middle—probably blood. Even the parts that weren't stained were discolored brown and tattered with holes from insects.

"What's that? A vintage wedding-night bedsheet?"

"The Shroud of Bereni."

I snorted. That was a classic hoax object.

According to legend, there was once a girl named Bereni who was poor but pure of heart, living in a mountain village. Her parents passed away when she was young, so she had to make a solitary living by tending their little field. Bereni came of age and was betrothed to a young man from the village. One day, she was bringing in the laundry when she witnessed a bright light fall from the sky outside of town. She rushed over to where it landed and found a beautiful young man, lying bleeding on the ground. Without a second thought, Bereni used the bedsheet in her hand to mop up the young man's blood. He opened his eyes, thanked her, and returned to the heavens—he was a god. She returned to the village with the sheet, where her betrothed saw her and was furious.

“What is that blood? Did you sleep with another man?” he accused, then drove her right out of the village.

In despair, Bereni ran to the cliff with the bedsheet, intending to throw herself off of it. But the blood of the god on the sheet caused a miracle. Wings grew from Bereni’s back, enabling her to fly away. The bloody sheet continued to work miracles after that. Sometimes it created bread and wine, sometimes it healed wounds, and sometimes it became a huge shield that protected Bereni. She went all over the world, causing miracles with the sheet and saving people. In time, Bereni was hailed as a saint. After her death, she was buried in the sheet, and ever since, it was known as the Shroud of Bereni. The end.

The shroud was supposedly buried with her body, but subsequently stolen by graverobbers. Sometimes you saw scraps of cloth purported to be pieces of the shroud on display in churches, or used as sketchy props by unscrupulous priests, or sold as tattered rags at a secondhand store. I’d never heard about any of them being authentic.

“It’s fake, right?”

“Well, it’s quite old, based on the aging. And I can sense some magic power in it, so even if it’s not real, it might still be a valuable magic item.”

I thought it just looked like crappy old fabric. “And what does that have to do with me?” I asked.

“I want you to find the person who brought this in.”

“What do you mean?”

“The person who dropped this item off has gone missing.”

It was a bit over a month ago that a man had brought the rag in. He asked for it to be appraised because he thought it was the Shroud of Bereni. But because the appraiser who was supposed to examine it died unexpectedly the very next day, it had been gathering dust ever since. Gloria inspected it once she took over but couldn’t be certain. She was hoping to give a partial report, at least, but he’d already left the inn where he had been staying. There was no record of

him leaving the town, but his current location was unknown.

“Well, if he’s flown the coop, it probably means he doesn’t need it anymore, yeah? Why doesn’t the guild just claim it?”

“That’s not an option.”

According to the guild’s rules, an item could not be disposed of until either half a year had passed since losing contact with the original adventurer or said adventurer had signed it away. The rule had been enacted because there had been a nasty streak of appraisal items being embezzled by the guild.

“What happens if the client is dead?” I asked. That was how Vanessa had come into possession of the temporary sun she had gifted to me.

“Then it’s open season, but I have no evidence that he’s dead. I can’t dispose of the cloth as it is. I’ll have to wait half a year.”

“I guess you will.”

“And appraisal items go missing all the time.”

“Yep.”

Because people embezzle them. Not that I’d do such a thing.

“And wouldn’t that be a bad situation, if he showed up out of the blue after that happened? Plus, the guildmaster’s said that once I process all the items for appraisal, I get to move to the private office. I don’t like working around other people—I find it distracting.” She tapped on the board next to her with obvious distaste.

“Okay, so you want to find this guy. Why me? Your coworkers or actual adventurers could do that.”

“I asked the dwarf, and he said you’re good at finding people.”

Dammit, Dez. He foisted the job off on me and got away. Yes, the adventurers here were better suited for more violent deeds, not a delicate business like finding people. Even the staffers at the guild—the men, anyway—were the same way. And you didn’t necessarily want to send women on a dangerous chase, either.

“I might be willing to do this, depending on the reward.” It’s not like I had anything better to do. “But let me warn you, my price tag is steep. See, I’m on an exclusive contract with a very important person. It’s got to be a very tempting offer to make me break it...”

“I’ll spend the night with you.”

I was momentarily speechless.

“You mean, in a man-and-woman way, right? Not just playing darts or cards?”

“Sex, intercourse, congress, lovemaking, copulation, intimacy, coitus. That sort of thing. I don’t have much money, and given your occupation, I assume you’d be happy with that.”

“Very.”

“As long as you pull out, you can go all the way.”

Goddamn. I gave Gloria another look-over. Her face was quite fetching, of course, and her ass was a bit on the large side, but shapely. Her breasts seemed to fight back against the constriction of her shirt. All in all, it was a ridiculously voluptuous body.

“What do you say?” She leaned forward, allowing her shirt to hang loose slightly. I liked that. I liked it a lot. And if I asked Arwin to do it, she would unleash holy terror on me.

“And would you be amenable to *this* activity?” I leaned forward to whisper something into the clear board that separated us. Most of the brothels were charging extra for this one these days. It was such a shame.







“...I suppose.”

“Okay. You’ve got yourself a deal.”

She glared at me slightly, but a deal was a deal. She’d agreed.

“Just make sure you do it. Here’s the file on the man,” she said, handing me two sheets of paper. I rolled them and stuffed them into my back pocket.

“Just checking—do you pay in advance?”

“No.”

“I’d really like a deposit, all things considered.”

“Here, stick your face forward,” she whispered sexily, so I leaned in and pressed my face against the clear window. Gloria’s face came closer.

Through the glass, her red lips touched mine.

“That’s all you get for now.”

“I wasn’t looking for a child’s allowance,” I smirked, but the truth was, I was into this sort of teasing.

“There’s no time limit, but make it as quick as you can, Mr. Kept Man... Oh, sorry, you have a name. Er...Mushroom?”

“It’s Matthew.”

I left the appraisal office. I hadn’t expected to take on extra business like this, but the reward would be more than worth it. A single night would be all I needed. She’d come seeking me out for work next time.

My thoughts were firmly lodged in the world of carnal pleasures when a sudden, intense pain in my gut snapped me out of it.

“Quit makin’ those weird noises,” said the Beardo, who was glaring up at me with a scowl.

“Oh, it’s you, Dez. You’re so tall and thin, I mistook you for a pillar.”

This time he hit my side. Was the bearded demon trying to crush my liver?

“You don’t have to hit me every time. As a matter of fact, I was just wiping your ass after the mess *you* left behind,” I said, and explained everything about the job Gloria hired me to do. “She said she came from Twisted Lighthouse. Who is she, anyway? She’s not just some random appraiser.”

Her movements were too smooth. Only a practiced fighter moved like that.

“I don’t know much, either. Just that they say she was a ‘guard dog’ over there.”

“Ahhh.”

Each adventurers guild hired members for jobs—finding or finishing off missing adventurers, and sometimes punishing those who broke the guild’s rules. They called them guard dogs or hunting dogs, and such a job required considerable skill. Dez himself was a guard dog, but his legs were too short, so he was more like a guard boar. I wasn’t going to say that out loud, because he would literally try to kill me.

“She’s apparently a legitimate appraiser too, but they called her ‘Crazy Gloria’ over there. Rumors say she has a collection of some real freaky shit.”

“Please don’t say dead bodies.”

“Fakes,” Dez said, shaking his head with disbelief. “She loves to collect counterfeit versions of famous art pieces, apparently.”

“That’s...not what I was expecting.”

I supposed that would explain her interest in a Shroud of Bereni, given how littered the world was with its forgeries.

“So what are you doing here anyway? You didn’t come to borrow more money, did you?”

“Actually, I’ve got a very lucrative offer for you.”

My memory was jogged; I’d come here in the first place to find Dez. We continued talking as we headed to Dez’s waiting room.

“I’m supposed to have a rematch of arm wrestling with the squirt,” I said. A while back, we had talked ourselves into arm wrestling, where I was defeated by a girl of only thirteen or fourteen years. “You weren’t there to see it, but I

was *this* close to winning.”

“From what I hear, she whooped your ass.”

“Whoever said that, they’re exaggerating. They’re lying. You should cut ties with them at once. Anyway, April got it into her head that she’s the big dog around here and challenged me again. She said she’d pay me if I win, but I’ll have to work at the guild if I lose.”

“Sounds good.” He cracked his knuckles. “Hold out your arm.”

“Are you going to snap it in half?!”

“I’m joking.”

He absolutely wasn’t. The Beardo was a sick, violent monster. I quickly sped past the topic so that I wouldn’t dwell on it.

“Anyway, I accepted her terms—as long as I got to dictate the time and place of the contest.”

Dez started to roll his eyes. He could already see where this was going.

“It’ll happen outside, during the day. On a clear day, of course. In other words, my victory will be absolutely certain.”

“You’re cheating.”

“How is it cheating to ensure that I’m able to make use of the power that originally belonged to me?”

War wasn’t just a battle of numbers. You had to use the terrain and weather to your advantage when you engaged in battle.

“So here’s where you come in. I brought the topic up with Simon the bookmaker. But he says he can’t set up proper odds if no one’s going to bet on me. The gall of that man!”

“He’s right.”

“Here’s the plan, Dez. You have to bet on me. You see the sense in it, right? You’ll never have a better shot at getting rich quick.”

“That’s what all the frauds say.”

“C’mon, man. I’d only bring this up with you, no one else. Make a little money and buy something nice for your wife.”

“Tell your princess to do it.”

“I already did.” Minus the part about the conditions. “What do you think she said? ‘You should be ashamed of yourself.’”

“She’s got a very good point,” Dez said, the heartless cad. “Also, you have dreadful luck. You’d somehow draw the short straw when there’s only one long one left.”

“Ordinarily, sure. But the thing about good old Matthew is that he always lucks out when he needs it most.”

Dez exhaled. He sounded exhausted. “Fine. I’ll make a bet. It’s with Simon, you said? I’ll take care of it later.”

“You’re the best, Dez.”

“But I’m going to bet on the little girl,” he said, giving me a look that said it was only common sense. “She’s trying to get you to work, isn’t she? I’ve got to give you a push in the right direction. Stop fighting it and contribute something positive to society for once.”

I descended the steps of the Adventurers Guild, bereft and betrayed by my best friend. The stupid Beardo. I bring him a get-rich-quick scheme, and he turns up his nose at it. Well, see if I care when you go broke.

“Oh, Matthew!” April came bounding out from behind the counter when I reached the ground floor. “Perfect timing. Here, sign this.”

She handed me a contract with a huge smile on her face. It looked just like the contracts adventurers signed with the guild, but based on the writing, it seemed that April had written this one herself. It was quite well done.

“I made this because knowing you, you’re going to make up some excuse or lie your way out of it.”

Now, what a clever and devious idea. Where did she learn things like that?

I looked over the contract—and groaned. The content was simple. If I lost, I would be forced to work for the guild for a time. I would be performing all

manner of chores for the Adventurers Guild and assisting guild-hired adventurers. In other words, I would be working for Dez.

Ugh, please, no. He was going to beat me up more than he already did.

“I suggested it to Grandfather, and he came up with the idea. He said this would be something you could actually do.”

Did the old man have nothing to do but dote on his granddaughter?

“Now go on, sign the paper. And you have to write *your* name.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

She handed me the pen; I was under heavy scrutiny. With no other option, I wrote down my name as she instructed. I did have to wonder if the contract was truly binding, considering that the name I was using wasn't even my real one.

“There, that's done. Now just let me know when you decide on a time and place. No cheating, no trickery.”

“Yes. It'll be a legitimate battle of strength.”

Just you watch. I'm going to win, and I'm going to sink all your allowance money into the cockfights.

With that out of the way, I focused on Gloria's manhunt. According to the files from his appraisal request, the guy's name was Cody; he was eighteen years old. He came to this town to go into the dungeon. But unlike Arwin, he wasn't that serious about it. He just wanted to lurk around the higher floors, scalp a few monsters of their hides and scales, and make a quick buck.

According to the owner of the inn where he stayed, on the day he submitted the appraisal request, he'd gone to the dungeon like any other day. But when he came back, he looked pale, said he was paying off his stay, and handed over more money than he owed before vanishing.

In other words, something happened to Cody that same day. Something that forced him to go into hiding.

There were guards stationed at the exits of the town, so you couldn't just pick a direction and walk until you reached the open wilderness. Based on the guild's own investigation, it didn't seem like he had left the city.

Cody was still around here somewhere. The question was where—but I had a hunch about that one.

The way I saw it, Cody was afraid of something. He felt in danger for his life. But where could a guy go for safety when he had just come here? If he wouldn't, or couldn't, rely on the usual source of stability—the guild itself—then there was just one place he was going to wind up: the church.

The world was full of people who, despite having a head and arms and legs of their own, chose to become slaves to god. So even in a sordid place like Gray Neighbor, churches existed. Religious zealots were the type of people to think of themselves as incomplete but exalted saints, and thought of their lairs as hallowed ground. When people came to them for help, they would at least provide them with shelter, at a bare minimum. Cody had come from Baradelle in the south. There were several religions there, primary among them being the worship of the Earth Mother. The first thing I'd do was try those churches. There were three dedicated to the Earth Mother in the area. The northernmost one was for the wealthy neighborhood, so it would ignore a poor fellow like Cody. The two further south would be a better bet.

"I'm afraid I don't know any such person," said the priest at the second church of the Earth Mother near the southwest wall of Gray Neighbor, shaking his head sadly.

"Maybe he's using a different name. He has black hair, brown eyes, and a sturdy build. His skin is tanned, so he looks more like a farmer than a veteran adventurer," I explained, passing on the physical details I'd heard from the inn.

But he just shrugged. "There are many lost lambs who come to us every single day. I can't remember the names and faces of each one."

The church was cramped, in a word. I hunched down to look through the doorway, which was shorter than me, and saw the sigil of the Earth Mother on



the wall, plus a statue behind the pulpit. There were a handful of chairs, but that was all. Off to the side of the building, there was a small garden behind waist-high walls. It didn't *look* like the kind of church that was packed with followers. And could you really be a priest if you couldn't remember the names and faces of people? I smelled bullshit.

Next to the church was a two-story building painted in garish colors. There was no sign out front, so I suspected it was an unlicensed or illegal brothel. Despite it being the middle of the day, there were shrieks like that of a dying pig and unbearably fake moans coming from the building at deafening volume.

"No such man has come here. Would you like to look inside to see for yourself?"

"I'll pass."

In cases like this, searching was often a waste of time. People tended to be more forceful in their denial when they knew they had the upper hand. Also, I could see the gleaming in the priest's eyes at the thought of giving me a sermon. If I was stupid enough to walk inside, he'd lock the door behind me and preach until I converted.

"His family is worried. If you should see him, please contact the Adventurers Guild. Tell them you have a message for Matthew. They all know me."

I had a reputation. It just wasn't a good one.

"May the blessings of soil, grass, and water be with you," he said, one of their typical prayers, and I left. I made for home at first, then circled around to go in the other direction. This time, I passed the church and made my way around the back of the building where the deafening moans were coming from. Although it was hard to see from the main street, there was a straight line from the back door through the garden to the rear of the neighboring building.

Hiding in the shadows, I knocked quietly on the back door.

"The father sent me," I said quietly, referring to the priest. The door opened a crack, and a tiny eye peered out at me. I stuck my foot into the gap and gripped the door, shoving it open...if I'd had the strength, of course. Instead, I was just barely strong enough to keep it at a standstill. Only half of the face behind it

was visible.

“Hi. Sorry about this, little lady. I swear, I mean you no harm. I just want to speak with a guy here named Cody.”

A ten-year-old girl was trying desperately to close the door. She had tangled blond hair and green eyes. Her arms, legs, and torso were scrawny, perhaps from malnourishment, but she was a darling little girl. And I was fighting for my life to maintain a stalemate. No wonder I couldn't beat April.

“Get lost! Shove off, you giant prick!”

She had a filthy mouth, but the way that she threw her entire body against the door trying to get me out of the gap was somehow adorable. Being a grown and dirty son of a bitch, I had my own methods, however. I reached down and grabbed her wrist. She went pale and tried to pull away.

“You better come out, Cody! Otherwise something terrible's gonna happen to this fragile little arm. You don't wanna hear sobs of pain, do you?!” I shouted through the gap in the door. I wasn't lying—with the exertion I was putting it through, my fragile little arm was going to be in agony tomorrow, and I would be sobbing all day.

“Stop it!”

A young man with black hair and brown eyes came charging through the room. He was tanned and had a sturdy build, looking more like a farmer than a veteran adventurer. He also had a rusty-looking sword in his hand.

“Let go of the girl. What do you want?”

“Hi there, Cody. Nice to meet you. I'm Matthew. The Adventurers Guild sent me.”

“I'm surprised you found me.”

He'd shown me into the attic of the garishly-painted building. This was where they were hiding Cody.

“I guess,” I said. “This is part of the church, isn't it?”

Hiding in the church only got you so far when there were nonbelievers like me around. But if they built an unrelated building next door to hide the little lost lambs, they could throw off the pursuers. And nobody was going to look twice if they ran a real brothel with whores and everything. There were plenty of unlicensed brothels here. It was the moaning that tipped me off. If it were unlicensed, they would be trying to stay as quiet as possible, but here, they were belting it out as loudly as possible. Almost like they were trying to send a message that *this is a brothel*.

“This was originally a place meant for hiding women and children.”

It was a refuge for women who had nowhere else to turn—escaping their husbands’ violence, or their fathers’ beatings. From here, the Church of the Earth Mother could help them escape to another town or find them gainful employment. This was just a place to stay until then.

A teacup was thrust violently toward me. I turned around to see the girl from before glaring at me unhappily. I waved hello, but she ignored me and placed the other teacup gently before Cody.

“Shout if he tries anything,” she said, then turned with a huff and went down the stairs. She did not like me.

“Even her?” I asked.

“Her own father was about to sell her into slavery, so she took her little sister and fled here, she says.”

It was a nasty world out there.

“And what are *you* doing here?” I asked. “You didn’t flee here to get away from your wife, I assume.”

Cody said nothing for a moment, but with a pale expression, he eventually admitted, “That piece of cloth harbors a devil.”

It had been a coincidence that he found it. On the way to this town, he was resting at the riverside, and found a cloth stuck on the bank. At first, he was going to throw it away, but then he recalled the story of the shroud from back home, and decided to take it with him instead. All he wanted to do was come up with a likely story and sell it off at a used goods shop to make a little money.

Instead, when Cody reached the town, a strange man dressed in full armor came up the road. His armor was rusted and old-fashioned, and it covered his face. Cody could only tell from the register of the voice that it was a man at all.

“He reached out to me, and in a voice like something from the depths of the earth, said, ‘Give it back.’”

Terrified, Cody had fled. He regretted picking up the shroud, but it was too late. The armored man chased after him. In a panic, he rushed into the town for safety, but it was short-lived. Everywhere he went, the armored man showed up. He would simply appear from nowhere and plead to have the cloth returned. Whenever Cody asked someone for help, the armored man would be gone. Back and forth this process went, until Cody was at his wit’s end.

“Why didn’t you throw it away or give it to him?”

“I thought I’d be cursed. If I tossed it out or let it fall into his hands, who knows what horrible things might happen? So I hoped the Adventurers Guild would help and left it with them. I thought, if they appraised it, I might at least understand what that shroud is.”

Because the armored man appeared again after he left the guild, Cody panicked, paid his inn tab, and lost his wallet and guild pass in the chaos. That was the best way to vouch for a ruffian’s identity, so most inns refused to give him a place to stay without one. Some did, but they were either unlicensed or a scam.

At a loss for what to do, he’d recalled the Church of the Earth Mother from back home and rushed to one for shelter. Since then, the armored man had not accosted him.

“Hmm.”

Not every piece of his story added up, but the point was that I’d found him. The rest didn’t matter to me.

“Well, there’s just one thing I need from you: to sign this. You don’t need it anymore, do you?”

I handed over a relinquishment form for an appraised article. All I had to do was take it to Gloria, and my job would be done.

Cody glanced at the form with concern. “Um, they aren’t going to buy it from me?”

“For them to buy it, you have to add more appraisal fees. What’s the call?”

Whether it was a simple scrap of cloth, or a genuine magic item, you needed reagents and solutions to perform the proper tests. All that cost money.

“I can’t pay for something like that.”

“Then forget about it. Or you could leave this place and go get it back from the guild. Let’s hope that guy in the armor doesn’t find you.”

“You aren’t going to protect me?”

“Not part of my job.” You’d be wasting your time putting hope in a man who can’t overpower a ten-year-old. “You gonna spend the rest of your life fleeing from this guy? Go back home and till the fields or something.”

“But I don’t have any money. And if I wanted to go back home...I’d need at least a *little*.”

The son of a bitch. He was getting cocky, just because he hadn’t seen this armored guy in a bit.

“Well, take it from me: You can’t hack it as an adventurer. Just sign the form, or you’re in for a world of pain,” I threatened, cracking my knuckles. Cody paled. I’d long been known as a weakling in giant’s skin, but my size could be a useful threat against those who had no idea who I was. If we got into an actual fight, I was the one who’d get beaten and bloodied. Cody picked up the pen with trembling fingers and slowly began to write.

“A little faster than that. Remember, it’s your name. No funny ideas, or writing down dirty names, or anything like—”

A deafening scream cut me off, rather rudely. It sounded like it came from that little girl.

“Rita!”

Cody rushed down the stairs in a panic. I followed him. We headed for the direction of the scream once we were on the first floor.

I gasped.

A dark figure in rusted armor stood in the narrow hallway. The spots where the armor fit together, such as the joints and neck, were wrapped in black fabric that blocked the view of the figure underneath. This was clearly the armored man Cody had mentioned. Rita was cowering in terror at the figure's feet.

"Hurry! Get away!" Cody shouted, then threw a nearby flower vase at the armored man. It struck the torso and shattered. The armored figure was totally unperturbed and reached for us.

*"Will you give it to me?"* it said. The voice was deep and calm. It was strangely pleasant to listen to.

"H-how did you find me...?"

*"I heard your voice."*

That was when Cody shouted earlier, in the process of trying to save Rita. So it was my fault.

*"Please give it back."*

The armored man stumbled closer, drawn toward us by some strange force. It was like a zombie.

Cody had fallen to the floor and was scrambling backward to get away.

Well, damn.

I stood before the armor, blocking its path. I didn't want to have to witness a child being killed before my eyes. The older kid was a different story.

"Who the hell are you? Why do you want that tattered cloth? I don't think there's enough material there to make a wedding dress for your daughter."

*"I need the holy shroud."* The armored figure grasped for Cody. So it was still under the assumption that Cody had possession of it.

"What for?"

*"With it, I can be human again."*

"What are you saying? That you've stopped being human and turned into a monster?"

Silence. I took that for assent. Ugh, just great.

“What did you do, then? Make a deal with the devil?”

*“...Something like that,”* the armored figure said, in a tone that was between lament and self-hatred.

What kind of monstrous visage was lurking under that helmet? I was known as Matthew the Coward to many. If you make me piss my pants, I’ll use that shroud to wipe it up, monster.

*“...Allow me to show you.”*

The armored figure reached for its helmet. My throat convulsed against my will.

And in that moment, I sensed a swelling of lethal force.

Abruptly, I leaped on Cody to cover him. A breeze passed directly over our heads.

I could feel all the hairs on my back standing on end. Looking up, I saw a metal circle stuck in the simple wooden slat wall at the end of the corridor.

A chakram. What a rare weapon to see. It was a ring of metal, but with a deadly sharp edge. And it had not come from the armored figure.

“Who was that?!” I shouted, turning in the direction it had come from. Standing across from the armored figure was a man in a white.

He looked to be around forty. He had blond hair cropped short, and blue eyes. He wore a black shirt and pants, and a long white coat that went down to the ankles. There were many metal rings around his arms, but they were now split unevenly between the two, because he had just hurled one of them down the hallway. A pendant hanging around his neck sported the sigil of the Earth Mother.

The man in white glared at us and put his hand out with ill-disguised distaste. “Return the Shroud of Bereni.”

Not another one.

“How about you introduce yourself before you go giving orders? I hate impatient men. Just because this is a brothel doesn’t give you the right to pull your trousers down and whip it out the moment you walk through the door,” I said.

Another iron circle zipped past my side. I knew it was coming, so it was easy to dodge. The wall behind me cracked and crumbled. Cody shrieked as the shards of wood cascaded onto him.

“Twice already, before we’ve even brought in a lady for you? Looks like someone’s a Premature Peter.”

“Who are you?”

At last the man took an interest in me. Drawing attention was an arduous task for both women *and* men.

“As you can see, I’m the best-looking man in all the realm. That armored fellow was just demanding the shroud from us. We were having a wonderful time negotiating with him.”

“It belongs to my goddess.”

“The Earth Mother?”

“My name is Justin Rubinstein. I’m an inquisitor.”

Lovely. Another pain in the ass.

Religion was not a monolith, of course; there were many religions and sects within them. From the most populous branches, other splinter teachings were seen as incorrect, even wicked. They made efforts to find those “heretical” believers to “guide” them to the “proper” path.

In other words, it was a classic case of the majority picking on the minority. The inquisitors were the advance troops who did most of the work. They had the authority to do whatever was necessary and could perform investigations and rule judicially on internal religious matters.

The Earth Mother’s inquisitors, in particular, were famous for wielding their righteous hammer against other faiths as well. They claimed that it was heresy



even to worship any other god. They were freaks.

“The shroud was a relic held at one of our churches, until it was stolen—by that one,” Justin said, leveling a finger at the armored figure. “I am here to recover this sacred treasure from the brigand who dared take it.”

“Well, there you have it. And what’s your claim, over there?”

*“I need it.”*

Great. You just admitted it.

“You must return it,” Justin commanded, and swung his arm. The force of the swing hurled one of the chakrams off his wrist. The armored figure could not avoid it and ended up suffering blow after blow from the chakrams. They didn’t carve up the metal armor, but the impacts dented the plate, and caused the man to do an odd little dance.

The figure had had enough, it seemed. It turned around, passed by me and Cody, and eventually toppled against the far wall of the hallway. Justin leaped forward, closing the distance and drawing a shortsword that was as thick as a machete from his belt while in the air. He slashed at the armored figure’s back.

It fell over weakly. The metal armor clanked to the ground. The joints of its limbs bent at odd angles, and the helmet came off and rolled across the floor.

“Huh?”

It sounded too light. And despite the very deep blow with the blade, there was no blood. I glanced at the gaps in the armor; there was nothing inside. It was completely hollow, not even a bloodstain. I checked the helmet and gauntlets as well, and they were empty, too.

“He fled,” Justin spat with frustration, recovering his chakrams and placing them back on his wrists.

“Who was that guy?”

“I don’t know. But I didn’t feel anything from the blow.”

Was it a ghost? Or a magic apparition being controlled remotely via a spell?

“Pay it no mind. It won’t matter to a man about to die,” Justin said, leveling

the thick sword at me next. I raised my hands. “He didn’t have the shroud. What about you two? Give it to me.”

“The lady over there was using it as a cleaning rag...”

A momentary gust of wind brushed my nose.

“I will not hear any lies.”

Something smelled awful. I reached up and brushed the blood off the end of my nose. Justin narrowed his eyes and gave me a very searching and comprehensive look. It didn’t seem like any old lie was going to fool him.

“It’s at the Adventurers Guild. They have custody of the shroud.”

“...Is that true?”

“Better go find out, or it’ll join the other toilet cleaning rags.”

Justin clicked his tongue and returned the weapon to his belt. He turned and strode out of the room, clearly uninterested in anything else. But before he left, he didn’t forget to turn on his heel and say, in his most pretentious tone, “ May the blessings of soil, grass, and water be with you.”

I waited for a minute or two, but he wasn’t coming back. With the threat gone at last, I felt a sudden blanket of exhaustion, and sat down on the spot. It wasn’t good that I had mentioned the guild, but I hadn’t had much of a choice. My life came first. Also, even an inquisitor would have limited options when dealing with the Adventurers Guild. At worst, it could end up embroiling the Church of the Earth Mother in a conflict with the guild. He was surely wise enough to realize this. While he had an air of rabidity about him, a true rabid dog did not get made an inquisitor.

“All of that aside...”

Where had the thing inside of that armor gone? I had felt a presence inside of it when we were talking, but now it was empty and lifeless. Was there magic involved?

I examined the armor again, just to be sure, but it was just plain old iron

armor—quite old, but no more extraordinary than that.

“Hmm?”

There was something stuck on the inside of the armor. Using a shard of the broken vase, I scooped it up: a purple substance. I touched it, and a bit of it stuck to the skin of my fingertip. It was like touching acid. In fact...

“Hey, Cody. Isn’t this...?”

I spun around, but Cody was gone. He’d just been cowering on the floor moments ago. Where the hell had he gone? Rita popped her head around the side of the stairs.

“Cody just left,” she said. He had sneaked out during all the chaos. Neither Rita nor any of the whores at the brothel knew where he might have gone. His belongings were still here—he had just left.

“Oh, whatever.” He’d finished signing the relinquishment form. If he turned up dead somewhere, that was no concern of mine. “Sorry about the trouble. Here, this is for you and your sister.” I gave Rita a hard candy and some almonds. She was cautious at first, but when I showed her that they weren’t poisonous, she cautiously took them and smiled. “So long.”

I waved and left. Next up was the treat I’d earned. I was going to stop somewhere and enjoy some snake wine, perhaps. I’d be up all night.

Looking back over my shoulder, I spotted Rita giving the candy to a girl who looked like her. Her younger sister had a look of bliss on her face as she sucked on the sweet candy, and Rita patted her hair.

That evening, I hurried down the street to the Adventurers Guild, and positively bounded into Gloria’s appraiser’s office.

“Here.” I showed her the signed relinquishment form and explained the entire incident from start to finish. “Now the shroud belongs to the guild. Do whatever you want with it. Too bad about the freaky priest and monster that come with the package.”

“What are you talking about? I didn’t ask for that.”

“That’s what I said, too. But he wasn’t going to sell unless it was in a set. It’s a package deal.”

“Well, that’s just great,” Gloria groaned, putting her face in her hands. I didn’t blame her. She went from thinking her annoying paperwork was cleared up, to finding out that there was much more unexpected trouble involved.

“Don’t worry,” I said, grabbing her hand. Through her glove, I felt a soft sensation beneath my fingers. “I know you’re afraid, especially at night, when you’re lonely. But I’ll be with you tonight.”

“You really don’t need to...”

“It’s a bonus. Remember, we have a deal that I get to *appraise* you in bed tonight.”

“Uh, but—”

I removed her glove as we talked, so she couldn’t completely pull it away. I caressed her exposed skin. It was smooth and pleasant.

“Don’t worry, I won’t be rough. Believe it or not, I’m among the very best at *appraising* women. I’d treat you as gently, carefully, and thoroughly as I would a glass sculpture of a goddess.”

First I’d unwrap the packaging, before examining every inch of the goods to ensure they were pristine. After confirming the artistry on display with my fingers and tongue, I’d take my enjoyment of the statue’s interior...

“I wonder how much the appraisal value will turn out to be. It might set a new record.”

“Really? Perhaps I should get something appraised, too.”

Funeral bells tolled inside my head.

Something cold, sharp, and hard touched the back of my neck.

“This hallowed blade has been passed down through the Mactarode royal line

for generations. Others begged us to sell it countless times, but we always refused, claiming that it was worth more than any amount of money. At this point, however, I might be curious to know what sort of value it holds. No need to hold back; you can use your body to appraise its worth.”

I didn’t even need to turn around. There was only one princess knight in all the world who would have her sword pressed against the back of my neck like this.

I had forgotten that this was a three-part office. Naturally, there were other appraisers beyond Gloria. One of them had snitched to Arwin once she came back from the dungeon. And now I was noticing that Gloria had vanished, too.

“Come now, take it easy,” I said, slowly and carefully turning so as not to agitate her. But...maybe I was going to die anyway. “It’s a precious sword from your ancestors, right? You can’t sell that for money. Only you can give that sword worth. Never rely on others to tell you what it means to you.”

“And who was it who just bragged about their skill for *appraising* the goods of women?”

“That was so long ago. But these days, I get my fill from the finest-grade material I could ever hope to examine. Other women are like mere apes to me now.”

“Don’t be so modest. What would you like to go first? An arm? A leg?” She raised her sword. “Ah, no. I know *exactly* what you should lose first. Don’t worry—I’ll make sure it’s very quick.”

It’s a very sensitive spot, so please be gentle. Don’t use your teeth. Er, blade.

After much abject groveling without care for shame or reputation, I was able to survive the ordeal without being separated from my most precious organ. It had been ages since I was so grateful to be alive. Ahh, what a blessing it is.

“How deep inside does the rot go?” Arwin fumed, even through dinner once we were back home. The ginger soup, finely seasoned duck, and herb salad tasted like nothing at all.

We were seated across the table from one another for the meal, but in reality, it was an interrogation.

“Taking advantage of a woman’s desperation to demand her body in return! Have you no shame?”

“It was her idea, not mine.”

“If you accepted it, then you might as well have come up with it!”

I wanted to debate that, but the dangerous look in her eyes brooked no argument.

“You pervert, lecher, deviant, degenerate, freakish, reprobate of a kept man!” she said, punctuating each term with a kick of my leg under the table. Once she was satisfied with her insults, Arwin rested her cheek on a fist and looked away from me. Her lips were pursed in a picturesque sulk. “It’s not as though I’m as eye-catching a woman as her.”

“Oh, goodness. Are we jealous?”

“Not at all!” Arwin flushed, smacking the table. “I simply cannot abide such wanton and unprofessional behavior...”

“You don’t have to be shy about it. You know that my treasure is *you*.”

I stood up and slipped a hand around her shoulder, drawing her closer. I savored her sweet scent and smooth skin for a moment before she elbowed me sharply in the side. That hurt.

“My treasure is this sword and the companions who fight with me. And the people of my country. You are *not* on the list.”

Well, one doesn’t usually call one’s lifeline a “treasure,” after all.

“Everything else was taken from me. I lost it all.”

Her parents were dead, and monsters had destroyed her kingdom. They’d run roughshod over the land, and she still couldn’t regain her old territory. She’d lost many friends and family, as well. Even since coming to this town, one had died and another was maimed.

So many—too many—things had slipped through Arwin’s fingers.

“No matter how important and precious things are, you will lose them if you do not have strength. I learned that lesson when I was seven.”

“Did something happen then?”

“It’s not important,” Arwin said, smirking. “My mother had this jewelry box that she adored. It was so beautiful, I wanted it for myself, so I asked her for it.”

She had placed things that little Arwin prized inside the box, like ribbons and pretty stones.

“However, not long after that, I claimed that I wanted to be a knight. My mother was furious and took it away. I begged and pleaded for it back, but she never returned it.”

But she still chose the path of combat and the knighthood, so that told you what a stubborn child she was. And still is today.

“It’s been over a decade since then, and there’s so little I still have to my name. Still, I keep fighting—to get back what was lost, and to ensure that I don’t lose even more.”

“Your point?” I asked, uncertain of where the conversation was actually going.

“My point is that it’s hard to get back what has already been lost. And it’s also hard to protect what you have now!” she snapped, and then sidled closer to me. “You should cherish me more. Aren’t I your treasure?”

“Of course you are.”

With my hand on her shoulder, I drew her closer to me. This time, she did not resist.

“I will cherish you. I swear it. You have my word.”

“And to be clear, when I say ‘cherish,’ that also means that you will not make passes at other women.”

“...I’ll strive to remember that.”

Of course, I wanted to be loyal to her wishes. But from experience, I knew that such things lasted less than three days. I’ve always been easily bored, and the first thing I did for fun was gallivant with women. It’s not easy to change

one's nature.

For now, I'd consider her demands after I'd collected my payment from Gloria.

The next morning, I quietly sneaked out of the house.

Gloria might have thought that she'd left the situation murky enough, but I would not be fooled. She was going to pay up, with interest for the lost time. Get ready, woman. Also, Arwin was still asleep. I'd been up late with her trying to repair her mood, so I couldn't blame her.

I strolled into the guild, full of life and purpose, and found a crowd in front of the counter. Curious, I peered through it and found a familiar face from yesterday. It was Justin the inquisitor. He had stacked a pile of coins on the countertop.

"Do you need more? This is all I have on hand, but if you can wait, I'll arrange for twice the amount," Justin said impatiently. "I'll get you the money. Just give me the Shroud of Bereni. I know it's here."

Ahh. So he was trying the official method. The business of the Adventurers Guild was to buy the rare and valuable items that their members brought in and sell them for a good profit. They sold the most attention-grabbing items to rich collectors, put them up on auction, or pawned them off on their partnering merchants. There were exceptions, however. When word got around that an adventurer had found a particularly rare weapon or magic item, sometimes buyers would come to the guild before it had even been brought in.

When that happened, a buyer could skip past all the intermediate steps and purchase the item themselves. That was what Justin was trying to do—eliminate other rivals for the shroud.

The rights to the Shroud of Bereni had just passed from Cody to the guild. It wasn't even clear if it was the real shroud or not. The fact that he was willing to put up so much gold suggested that he had good evidence on his side. Justin looked at me and gave me a withering stare. I shrugged.



He was here as a customer; I wasn't going to bother him. Knock yourself out. The money was coming from the Church of the Earth Mother anyway. Their believers turned their blood, sweat, and tears into tithes to the church. How sad for them that their hard work was being spent on a filthy swatch of cloth.

April's grandfather, the guildmaster, appeared from the back. Gloria accompanied him, probably because she was the one managing the Shroud of Bereni. The guildmaster exchanged a few words with Justin, then instructed her to bring the shroud.

It was at that moment that Gloria noticed me. Her eyes widened, then she grinned and waved warmly. It was quite attractive. I waved back.

Eventually a guild member came forth with a small wooden box. He placed it on the counter and opened the lid. I couldn't help but stretch to get a better angle.

Someone shouted.

The box was empty. Justin picked up the box, which was dripping with a sticky purple liquid.

"What is the meaning of this?" He slammed the box on the floor. It splintered, and the force sent his pile of coins cascading on the counter. "Where is the Shroud of Bereni?!"

The guildmaster looked quite upset. He had no answer.

Gloria touched the purple substance, then turned to me. "Is this the material you mentioned being in the suit of armor?"

"Probably."

The man must have sneaked in somehow. He'd gotten the jump on the rest of us.

"What is the meaning of this?" Justin demanded, rounding on me, so I explained about the purple jelly that had been attached to the armor yesterday.

"He couldn't have gotten far. Maybe if we split up and search, we'll find him."

"Tell me at once if you do." Justin scooped all the coins into his sack and slung it over his shoulder. "I will pay if you find it. Don't forget: It belongs to *us*."

And with that, he left the guild, probably to search outside. The guildmaster's face looked even sourer than usual. Not only had his considerable profit just momentarily gone up in smoke, but the guild had also just suffered an embarrassing fiasco.

He ordered a search of the guild campus, but naturally, the shroud did not turn up. Instead, the search just produced a pile of ordinary rags and scraps on the counter. Gloria was forced to examine each one, which left her exhausted and slumped over the table.

"None of these are it. They're all just trash."

"That's what I thought."

We were in the appraisal office formerly used by Vanessa. Gloria's office was being searched, forcing her to come here instead. Additionally, two members of the guild were standing watch over us from the corner of the room, just in case.

"Don't you like fakes, though? You should be delighted, surrounded by inauthentic shrouds."

"What I like are counterfeits. These are just pieces of cloth. A counterfeit is something that people took time and effort to make appear like the real thing."

"Anyway, don't you have more left to do?"

"Ugh! Dammit!" Gloria swore, picking up a rotten-smelling piece of fabric with a scowl.

"Well, I'll be on my way," I said. I wasn't going to be seducing her today, clearly. Even I was feeling exhausted, especially after the prying examination I'd been given. They could have sent a female staffer to search every inch of my body, but it had to be two sweaty, swarthy fellows. I almost peed myself at the thought of them violating me.

I left the office and crossed the open space around to the back, where the trash heap was. They regularly burned the midden here, but it was also a storage space for items waiting to be hauled away.

"Ah, here we go."

I found the remains of the wooden box Justin had smashed earlier. It was

completely destroyed, and would not serve its original purpose anymore, but that didn't mean it was completely useless. I carefully scooped up the purple substance on the inside with my fingers, then pulled my thumb and index finger apart, creating little trails of slime.

Just as I thought.

I tried to wipe the substance off on my trousers, but it was too sticky, and refused to come off. Only after washing the skin again and again did it finally go away. It was extremely sticky.

Outside, the sun was high overhead. I'd showed up early in the morning, and it was already noon. My plans had gone completely awry. I wasn't in the mood for a brothel, and Arwin was probably awake by now. I supposed I'd go home early.

"Oh, it's Matthew," said April, who was coming the other direction. "Did something happen?"

"There was a bit of a controversy involving theft."

"Really?" she asked, wide-eyed. She turned and hurried back the way she'd come, so I called out, "Where were you?"

"I was doing errands for the guild," she said. I noticed that she was carrying a flattened sack. "There was a lot of them. I'm tired now."

"That's not your job to do. It's dangerous."

April wasn't even a staffer at the guild. She was just a little girl who cared about her grandfather. Considering the general safety level of the streets, this wasn't a wise action. She had guards with her, but sometimes danger could strike before that would make a difference, and by then it would be too late.

"Yeah, I know," April said, smiling in a conflicted way, "but I like doing this. And I like walking through the town."

"You can't just keep doing errands forever. What do you want to be when you're grown up?"

"I dunno. I'm thinking about it."

"Well, that's good."

Having enough options to not be sure about them was a positive sign. I had never had that.

“If you’re even in danger, just shout as loud as you can. That kind, caring grandpa of yours will come flying over to help.”

April made a curious face and stared at me. Since she was so much shorter than me, she was looking up at me through her eyelashes.

“Aren’t *you* going to help me, Matthew?”

“The best I could do would be to let them beat me up instead of you.” Now, as in the past, my hardiness was my one reliable trait.

“Oh, fine,” she said, sighing and shaking her head. “I suppose that I’ll help protect you if it comes to that.”

“I appreciate it.”

At the very least, she sounded like she’d be more effective than I would.

“But I won’t go easy on you in arm wrestling.”

“Why are you so desperate to force me to do work? Is it for Arwin’s sake?”

The princess knight’s live-in partner being an unemployed gigolo sounded bad, which I understood, but that was our problem to deal with. Any outsider who tried to interfere too much was just doing it to make themselves feel good.

“That, too, but I think it would mostly be better for you, Matthew.”

“For me?”

“I can’t really explain it, but I feel like you’re capable of incredible things. You might be a weakling, but you’re so tall, and you talk well, and you have lots of positive attributes.”

“.....”

“I’m sure that there are things you’re not suited to doing, or don’t want to do, but I just know that once you try, you’ll find new talents you didn’t know about. So try hard...for me, okay?”

“I see.”

I had to look away. I couldn't stare her in the face. Being the object of so much innocent, naive trust was unbearable, not to mention embarrassing. April was doing what she thought was in my best interest. It was my business, not hers, but it didn't feel bad to know she cared about me.

"Well, I'll get going. Arwin's going to scold me if I'm not back soon," I said, taking my leave. But as I walked away, she called out to me.

I turned around and saw April raising her arm skyward. "I'm going to win our next arm wrestling match, too!"

"Go easy on me, will you?" I said, waving back briefly.

Now that we were involved, I wasn't sure what to do. In the end, it all came down to greed. There was no danger to either me or Arwin. I could have pretended not to notice, but ultimately, it was better to have this matter settled. It would even help the little squirt.

A few days later, I visited a little apartment in a two-story stone building. The upstairs portion was Gloria's residence. It was a fairly new building, and the spots where they'd cut and sanded the stone were still visible.

I knocked, and she answered right away. I knew that she wasn't on duty today.

"Oh? Mr. Kept Man," Gloria said, promptly giving me the stink eye. "I can't believe you'd come to my door like this. Do you want to sleep with me that badly?"

"Well, that's a very tempting offer, but I have business to conduct first. Can't relax and perform the deed with trouble weighing on my mind."

Ignoring Gloria's protests, I pushed past her into the apartment. It was surprisingly tidy. There were two shelves going from the sides of the doorway to the middle of the room, lined with small wooden containers, after which was a table, chair, and water jug—that must have been her workstation. Next to the unlit hearth was a waist-high shelf that divided the room in two. Beyond that was her personal living space, with a bed, bookshelf, mirror, and what seemed

to be religious art.

“This is a very nice place. Gets good sunlight, too.” I pointed at the art in the back. “Are those all forgeries?”

“That’s right. They’re all fakes, counterfeits, copies,” she said sullenly. “What do you want?”

“I’m here to drive a stake through your charlatanry.”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re the one who stole the Shroud of Bereni.”

Gloria glared at me. “What in the world are you talking about?”

“When you asked me to find Cody, that was just the setup for you to steal the Shroud of Bereni.”

I pulled a sheaf of paper out from behind my waist. It was a list of the Adventurers Guild’s bylaws. It had been exhausting to read, because of all the complex legalese involved.

“I borrowed this from Dez. I didn’t realize that appraisers were under such strict rules and regulations.”

Items received from visitors were the easiest things to steal, which is why there were several restrictions on what appraisers could and could not remove from the guild. You couldn’t just walk out with them. And to transfer ownership of an article with no owner anymore to another party required several documents and signatures for authorization. Vanessa had been a rare exception to these rules because she’d earned trust over many years and had skill and success.

“In that case, why wouldn’t I just steal it outright? I had it in my possession, after all.”

“Because of what you already said. If Cody showed up again after you stole it, there’d be big problems.”

She could’ve switched it out for a fake or claimed that the appraisal showed it to be a counterfeit, but that would have been too risky, especially since she didn’t know how much Cody knew about the shroud. If he could show that she

was lying, she would be doomed.

“As long as you got the signed relinquishment form, it was yours. You could replace it with a look-alike and be in the clear. But then other people showed up in search of the shroud.”

She heard me talk about the armored figure, and decided to make out that it was his work. But Justin showed earlier than she expected and demanded to buy the Shroud of Bereni for a huge sum. In a panic, she whipped up a purple substance and stuck it in an empty box to make it look like the figure’s work.

“Only you and I knew about that sticky substance. I’m guessing you were going to have me confirm it later, but since I happened to be there early in the morning, you asked me right then and there.”

Then she asked April to do errands before it could be given to Justin. She was untouchable within the guild—no one would dare pry into the girl’s business. And she wouldn’t go around suspecting guild members of wrongdoing. It just wasn’t in her nature.

“It’s none of my concern if you want some dirty scrap of cloth. If you get your hands cut off, or get clobbered by Dez, that’s your fault. Do what you will. But there’s one thing I just can’t overlook: You used April.”

In the worst-case scenario, Gloria would have been chased down by two demons. And even knowing that, she had put April in danger.

“Well, nothing bad happened, did it?”

“Only in hindsight.”

It was like letting someone walk down a road in danger of being engulfed in a rockslide without telling them, then congratulating them on surviving the trip.

“Most importantly,” I continued, “if I don’t stop you right here and now, you’ll keep doing the same thing. And that means the squirt will be exposed to danger each time.”

Gloria chuckled. “Is that what you like, Mr. Kept Man? Children?”

“I hate jokes like that.”

Anyone who would attempt to violate a child could fuck off and die.

“And yet you tell so many jokes.”

“Would it satisfy you to know I’ve seen *many* children who suffered that fate?” I didn’t need to remember those things. “The next time you try anything of the sort, I’ll tell the old man. He’ll happily have you drawn and quartered, plucking each limb off like petals from a flower.”

Gloria winced at my ripping motions. Maybe they hit a little too close to home.

“That’s all I wanted to say. Do what you will with the rags. Hey, if you’ve got the real thing, it probably makes it easier to identify the counterfeits for your collection.”

She looked frustrated that I’d seen through her ruse so clearly—I assumed—but composed herself quickly and suddenly turned on her bedroom charm.

“Mr. Kept Man.” She removed her shirt and leaned against me. “Please, don’t tell anyone. If the guildmaster finds out, I’ll be in terrible trouble.”

She nestled her face against my chest and ran her hands over my torso. I could smell her perfume.

“In fact, I think I should give you that reward we talked about. Plus interest, for the time you’ve had to wait. We can even do that *extra* thing you asked about.”

“I appreciate that very much,” I said, breaking into a grin. “Hmm, but do I want it now or not?”

“Don’t hold back. I live here alone. No one’s going to show up. And the princess knight is in the dungeon, isn’t she?”

She put her arm around my neck. Her gleaming lips drew closer. I started to do the same when I suddenly felt something hard against my throat.

“Which is why,” Gloria said, grinning, revealing the thin razor-like blade between her fingers, “you’ll die now.”

With a quick hiss, she swiped the delicate blade horizontally. A red line was cut into my throat.

“Huh?” she squawked. She’d been expecting a spray of blood and had leaped



backward as she cut me. The part about her being a guard dog at her last guild must've been true. But she wasn't as good at sealing the deal.

I laughed. "Oh, sorry about that. You were kind enough to try to shave my stubble, but as you can see, my skin is very weak. It just gives way to razors. Rather shameful, isn't it?"

I rubbed my throat, which felt raw, but that was it. There wasn't even any blood. Gloria had miscalculated how tough my flesh was. Plus, we were in the sun. She'd need much more than a razor to cut my windpipe here.

"Are you...really human?"

"*And* handsome, as you can see," I remarked. "Come here. You want to silence me, don't you? A kiss will do the job fine. Especially if you use your tongue."

Gloria tossed the razor aside. This time she produced a needle with a barrel as thick as a nail. Her eyes were determined and dangerous, like a wild animal's. Well, well, from appraiser to guard dog. Not a good sign, when the agent in charge of enforcing the rules chooses to willingly break them.

"If there's one thing I hate, it's being taken for a ride."

"Oh, but I love doing that. Especially using my tongue. I'll lick you anywhere you want. We can even smear honey on it first."

"Disgusting!" Gloria snapped and lunged at me. She feinted a stab at my face with the needle but went for my legs instead. She was hoping to knock me off my feet, but I didn't budge the tiniest bit, leaving her clinging to them instead. I grabbed her by the back and pulled her up.

"That was rude."

I tossed her up against the ceiling. She crashed into it, spraying splinters. But instead of falling right back down, Gloria changed positions in midair and kicked off the wall toward me. She wrapped herself around my arm like a snake and lifted her legs to hook them over my shoulders. It was like she was getting a piggyback ride, but because she had one of my arms locked beneath her leg, I had difficulty moving.

Gloria hooked an elbow around my head to keep it in place, then used her other hand to bring the needle toward my eyes.

Oooh, that seemed painful.

I swung my arm down. It wrenched Gloria off of me and hurled her into the wall.

She got to her feet unsteadily; the impact had clearly taken it out of her. She'd been a guard dog at her last guild, but I was getting the picture that she was better at assassination than killing monsters.

"What are you, Mr. Kept Man? Are you a shepherd dog for the guild? Or a sheep?"

A shepherd dog was a spy meant to expose traitors within the guild's midst. They posed as ordinary guild members but kept an eye out for wrongdoing to reveal to the bosses. Sheep were accomplices hired to assist the shepherd dog, aiding the investigation by posing as adventurers or clients.

"I'm neither. Just a stray dog wandering the streets." Only with a collar, courtesy of the princess knight.

"I see."

Gloria rushed for the door; she was trying to escape. Once she got outside, she was going to claim that I tried to rape her, or something along those lines. If I gave chase, she'd certainly get away once I passed into the shadow.

But I couldn't have that.

I grabbed a scrap of cloth nearby and stuck it in the water jug, then hurled the piece of fabric at her once it had absorbed the liquid. It narrowed down like a whip, wrapping around her right arm as she tried to open the door. I felt the way it caught and yanked her backward. She flew past me and slammed into the windowsill.

"Welcome back."

I moved behind her and pressed the razor she'd tossed aside against the throat of its owner. With just a little bit of pressure, I could instantly fill the room with iron-sour tomato soup. Gloria dropped her weapon and raised her

hands.

“Was embezzling appraisal goods the reason you came to Gray Neighbor from Twisted Lighthouse?”

“It was a magic sword an ancient hero was said to have used. I couldn’t resist.” She laughed humorlessly, exasperated at her nature, but not regretting it, either.

“I’m surprised you got out alive.”

“Alive, yes. Whole, no.”

She slowly removed her gloves. The left glove fell off to reveal a metal hand.

“Easy there!” I grabbed her right hand without even looking at it. A drill-like point stopped right before my eyes. She’d been trying to catch me unaware the moment my attention was on her left hand. You had to be careful with this one.

“I don’t think you’ll live long, after all.”

“I’m sorry. That was the last one. I don’t have any more weapons, really. I won’t resist anymore. Please spare me. I like you, Mr. Kept Man,” she said desperately, throwing the weapon aside and begging for her life.

“Is that piece of fabric really worth all of this trouble?”

“Of course.” Her face twisted with hatred. “It was worth taking home and examining. That was the real thing. A burial shroud with the blood of a god on it.”

“Which one? The Earth Mother?”

“There are various stories. Some say the Earth Mother; others, the snake god, water god, *sun god*, and...”

“...I’ve changed my mind. I’d like the shroud back.”

“Huh? But—” The pressure in my fingers increased. “All right, I’ll do it.”

Gloria walked unsteadily to a wooden box on the shelf.

“And don’t give me a fake, assuming that I won’t be able to tell the difference,” I said. She glanced back at me, then grabbed the next box over and set it on the table.

“This is the real one. I promise.” She reached down and opened the lid. We both gasped.

There was no shroud inside the box, just a purple substance lingering in the corners.

“Oh, come on.”

“No! I’m not fooling you! It wasn’t a fake. It’s been stolen— I can’t believe it...”

She fell to her knees in disbelief. I decided it wasn’t an act.

I pressed the fleshy part of my finger against the purple slime. It had an acidic, prickly feeling to it. I hadn’t described that part of the sensation to Gloria. So this really was the work of the armored figure.

“Do you know when it was stolen?”

“It was here this morning. That was the last time I checked it. But no one’s even been in here except for you.”

So it appeared out of nowhere, and vanished into nowhere.

“Well, that’s not great.”

It was hard to play tag when you didn’t know where the other person came from or where they went. Justin would be furious, and the guildmaster would be humiliated, but it wasn’t my problem. I was mostly curious about what the armored man wanted. If the blood on the shroud actually turned out to be from that shitstain sun god, and the armored figure was another insane believer like Roland, it was sure to become a major problem soon.

“For now, I’m going to keep quiet about this. You didn’t see anything. Got that?”

I had considered killing her, but this incident had nothing to do with Arwin. Plus, if appraisers kept getting killed one after the other, I was going to be the prime suspect. The other appraisers at the guild had seen me talking with her.

“...All right,” she said glumly. She seemed to have lost the will to resist.

“Well, I’m leaving now. You can give me my reward later. I’ll make sure to

bring the honey.”

“Don’t you dare!”

Gloria threw a rag at me.

Several days later, I was ready for my arm wrestling rematch with April.

We were facing each other across a table we’d brought into the Adventurers Guild courtyard. A rope had been set up in a circle around us, to prevent the audience from getting too close.

I’d thought there wouldn’t be any gambling after all, until someone bet on me at the last moment. There was always someone willing to take the long shot. His odds were nine-to-one. Thanks, pal. Hope you enjoy the sweet intoxication of winning a big payout.

The sky was a brilliant blue overhead. Not a cloud in the sky.

On top of that, Arwin was in the dungeon. There wasn’t a single variable that could go against me.

So of course, the match turned out the way it did.

A rippling energy buzzed through the crowd.

“That’s a shame. See, this is what happens when I’m serious. Next time, don’t take adults for granted.”

“Rrrrgh!”

April was furiously attempting to push my arm over. But with my original strength, she couldn’t budge me. A mosquito would’ve had better luck.

“C’mon, squirt, what’s wrong? Weren’t you going to beat me?”

“Don’t call me squirt!” she roared through gritted teeth and flushed cheeks. She tried pushing even harder, but sadly, it was all for naught.

“Don’t give up, little lady!”

“Murder that fraud of a gigolo!”

The audience was entirely on April’s side. They were raising their fists and

roaring their approval at her.

“Take...this!”

Just the tiniest push at this point would touch the back of her hand to the table, but April persisted. She was going to have terrible muscle aches tomorrow. Look at how hard she tries for me, with that little twig of an arm.

Dez, who was officiating, gave me a dirty look. I’d known him long enough to understand what he was thinking. *You really have that much fun overpowering a little girl trying her hardest, as weak as she is?*

He had a point, but I also wasn’t such a big man that I was willing to let her win. Sorry, April. The day has come for you to learn some hard facts of life. It was nearly time to end this little charade.

But just as I was about to flex my muscle for the last time, something happened. Some excited observers jumped the rope and came right up to the table.







“Keep going! Don’t give up!”

“Destroy that kept man!”

While none of them were touching me, they were close enough to do so as they cheered for April. In fact, even the guy who’d bet on me was cheering her on. What happened to consistency?

The crowd squeezed in, making the ring around us denser and taller.

“Hey, knock it off. Get back!” I shouted, right as a shadow passed over my head. One especially tall lout was leaning over the table to get a better view.

The strength left my arm. My body felt heavy. April didn’t miss the change in me.

“Yah!” With a plucky shout, she smacked the back of my hand against the table. A momentary silence settled in.

“We have a winner: April,” Dez announced.

“Yaaaay!” she exclaimed, leaping to her feet with delight. The crowd roared.

“Hang on. That doesn’t count! They were getting in our space. That’s interference!”

“They were only overexcited. They didn’t touch you or the girl,” Dez said, the biased crook.

“You promised. You have to work now,” April gloated. But it was too early for that.

“I’m afraid it’s not that simple. You can’t *just* write up some documents. You need the personal sign-off from the person in charge...your grandfather. If he doesn’t stamp it, it’s just a sheet of paper.”

“Well, too bad,” she said. “I already got it stamped.”

“But is it real? You can’t just put any old stamp on it. You’re not an official employee of the guild. Maybe he thought you were just playing a game and used some random stamp to play along.”

“That’s not true. Grandpa gave it...” She removed a document from the briefcase beneath the table. “...a proper stamp. Look here, that’s the—”

“Yoink!”

I grabbed the paper right out of her hand.

“Hey, give that back!” She reached for it desperately, but with my height advantage, she didn’t stand a chance.

“Here’s another fact for you: documents like this hold no weight until they are submitted to the proper desk. In this case, that would be the office clerk, but you’ll find that trouble tends to strike at the most inconvenient times.”

I folded the paper down into a small wad, placed it in my palm, and opened my mouth wide.

“Nooo!” April shrieked despairingly. My jaws worked furiously, and after a few seconds, I swallowed.

“Too bad. Better luck next time.”

April’s face went beet-red. “You...pig! You dummy! You bum!”

She kicked at my shins, over and over. I had to make a quick escape; if I loitered around too long, the squirt’s fans would beat me black and blue.

“Just take this lesson to heart: As long as you never give up, life tends to find a way to work out,” I said, in the vein of someone giving wise advice, before I fled for good.

“Get back here, you swine!”

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Giant-Eater's Miscalculation

Through the window, the red tones of the sunset were seeping into purple and navy blue.

Arwin was not in the dungeon today, but she still visited the Adventurers Guild on business. She'd be back soon, so I was preparing a real masterpiece of a dinner for her—and I was late, so I needed to hurry it up.

I would've liked to go visit her, but ever since I earned the ire of the guildmaster's beloved granddaughter, I was keeping my distance from the guild. Things needed to cool off first.

There was a knock at the door. The princess knight had returned.

I hastily went to let her in. Arwin said nothing but pushed past me with a grimace and headed upstairs. Sensing that it was time for me to hear out her gripes, I removed the pot from the fire and headed up after her.

Though she was silent, I could feel the displeasure exuding from her. When I asked her what was wrong, she said, "Shut up," so I did that and helped in silence. When she was ready to talk, she would.

"Dinner is ready, when you want it."

"Later."

Arwin removed her equipment, sat on the bed, then toppled backward onto it. If that were an invitation to join her, I'd gladly do so, but if I tried to lie on top of her now, she would destroy me. Instead, I stood there without a word, waiting, as she stared at the ceiling.

"The nineteenth floor."

“What about it?”

“That’s how far the combination of Medusa and Argo have gotten.”

Both of those parties were gaining a lot of momentum at the moment. Medusa, which was headed by the Maretto Sisters, was particularly experienced in the dungeon. The word around town was that they were the foremost spelunkers of the Millennium of Midnight Sun, supplanting Arwin’s party.

“And now Chrysaor will be joining them. They’re very serious about conquering the dungeon.”

All united by a common purpose. How very noble.

“They invited us, too, but I refused. I knew that there would be fights over the distribution of spoils.”

Arwin’s goal was to use the Astral Crystal to clear her homeland of monsters and rebuild Mactarode. She was not going to hand over any share of that to others.

“...If they beat us to the destination...”

“Don’t overthink it.”

“I know. But this is a battle I cannot afford to lose. Defeat is not an option.”

“What’s your plan? Are you going to smack Ralph and Noelle on the ass and say, ‘Work harder, you lazy bums’?”

I sensed that Arwin was holding her breath. If the leader was out of sorts, the followers would lose faith. It was understandable that formidable rivals would have her feeling worried, but she ought to be more forthright in her position. The Millennium of Midnight Sun was not such a simple dungeon that it could be conquered in a day or two.

“The important thing is to take one step at a time. If you look for shortcuts, you’ll trip yourself up. Keep making progress, and eventually you’ll reach the bottom floor and find the Astral Crystal.”

And in doing so, stick it to the sun god. In a way, everyone wins.

“And after that,” she said, suddenly upright, “what will you do? If I, you know, finish the dungeon...”

I was here to help Arwin, who was unable to fight on her own anymore. At that point, there would be no need for me. We would have no reason to be together.

Originally, there had been no connection between the two of us. A worthless kept man and the princess of a lost kingdom. We should never have met, but fate had other things in store for us. The end would mean restoring the original balance. It was only raw sentimentality that claimed I’d miss her, or refuse to let her go. Eventually, these would all be fond memories.

“I suppose I’ll leave this town,” I said.

Once the monsters were gone, Arwin would return home and assume the throne. Of course, I wasn’t meant for serving royalty, and there was no reason for me to do so. On top of that, the muckety-mucks around her would never let it happen. Either they’d tear us apart or have me killed. There was no other outcome.

On the other hand, if I stayed here alone, I’d be the target of a lot of very stupid people looking for dirt on Arwin. They’d abduct or imprison me and demand that I tell them things I didn’t want to share.

I didn’t want to be an obstacle to the happiness she was trying so hard to find.

“I can survive pretty much anywhere,” I concluded. I was going to vanish before any such thing could happen. I wasn’t going back to my hometown, and I didn’t even know if my parents or siblings were alive. I’d go wandering and look for anywhere that felt nice. I’ve always been the rootless, drifting sort. If I needed to work, I wasn’t likely to find a good job, but I could probably do enough to feed myself. Maybe I’d find another lady to stay with and continue mooching. I’d managed to survive so far—I’d just be going back to the lone-wolf lifestyle for a while.

I’d probably have to change my name again, though. One way or another, the Matthew who lived with Arwin would need to disappear. Next time, I’d pick a name that was a bit more dignified and princely.

At this point, I noticed that Arwin's expression was clouded.

"Don't worry, I won't tell anyone about you. I promise."

"That's not it." She shook her head, spilling her red hair out in waves. "Would you be happy with it?"

"Happy doesn't enter into it. That's always been my plan."

Living happily ever after only happens in fairy tales. In one form or another, the day of separation always arrives. Until then, you treasure the time you have together. That's enough. That's all you need.

I was being as light and breezy as I could, but Arwin still looked downcast. She seemed frustrated, ashamed. I knelt next to her and took her hand.

"That's a long way away. I'll be here for a while. There's your health to consider, too."

Dungeon sickness and Release. Arwin was plagued in both body and mind. I couldn't ignore that.

"Let's focus on what's ahead of you right now, rather than me. If all you do is fret over these things, it's no wonder other people pass you."

"Yes, I suppose," Arwin said, hazarding a smile. She was clearly bottling up how she really felt.

"And if you really want, we can slip some deworming medicine in their food. They'll get a nice surprise once they're in the dungeon."

Of course, if we were serious about that, I'd use a poison rather than a laxative. A slow-acting paralyzing mixture before they left for the dungeon would turn them into easy pickings for hungry monsters.

"Don't say that," Arwin warned me. "Not even as a joke."

"Fine, fine." I didn't mind Arwin's fussy, serious side, though. "I think we're done with this conversation. Let's eat—and don't worry, there's no laxative in it."

"Of course there isn't."

At last, she gave me a full smile. Arwin stood up and left the room cheerily; it

seemed her mood had recovered. When she reached the bottom of the stairs, she spun around with a grin. “I’m hungry. I think I could eat just about anything today. What’s for dinner?”

“An eggplant, tomato, and mushroom stew, and fried eggplant and pork. Plus grilled eggplant.”

“Let’s eat out.”

She tried to walk out the door, but I grabbed her shoulder and spun her around. “Now, now, it’s not good to be picky.”

“I gave you money for food because you said you would put all your skill into it, so why does it have to involve that purple *abomination*?!”

“Because it tastes good.”

Eggplant was pleasant and healthy. I’d picked up a couple of easy cooking methods for it while at the market.

“You never spend my money wisely.”

“In this time of tribulation, would you really stand up before your beloved people and say, *I don’t want to eat this, I hate that*? For that matter, some of those people you claim to love so much probably planted and grew those ‘purple abominations,’ as you call them.”

With that deadly weapon leveled against her, Arwin turned her head away in a huff. I could only guess at the troubles the Mactarode royal chef went through with her.

“Were you always this picky?”

“No, I ate what I was served. I would just hold my nose shut.”

“Then you can eat my cooking, too. I was thinking of you when I made it.”

I wasn’t a picky eater. I’d eat anything that was edible. I wouldn’t have survived so long if I didn’t.

“The sooner you eat up, gain strength, and conquer the dungeon, the sooner we can celebrate at the palace with a gigantic eggplant party.”

“Never!”

Arwin sat down at the table, disgruntled. I just wished she wouldn't eat the food I made with one hand pinching her nose shut.

It was then that our warm and private meal was rudely interrupted by a knock on the door. Who could that be?

The princess knight was busy doing battle with grilled eggplant, so it was up to me to answer it. If I just yanked the door open, it could be an assassin ready to leap inside. So I peered very carefully through the crack, and it turned out to be Noelle and Ralph. And...more.

"Why are you here at this hour?"

Ralph started to explain, but a woman's voice interrupted him. "We're sorry to intrude on your evening. But we would very much like to speak with the princess knight."

Before long, there were eight people in the dining room. On Arwin's command, I cleaned up dinner. Four men and women sat across from us. In the center were two women with the same facial features. They had wide-brimmed hats and long black coats. Their brilliant golden-blond hair was tied in ponytails that ran down their backs. Their somewhat slanted lilac eyes were reminiscent of a cat's. Underneath their coats, they wore red shirts and long black boots. They were dressed identically and sat in identical poses.

Cecilia and Beatrice, the twin Maretto sisters. They were mages, and coleaders of the party known as Medusa. Sitting on either side of them were Rex and Nick, the leaders of Chrysaor and Argo. So the leaders of all three rival parties were gathered in one place.

Facing them was our beloved Arwin. Behind her, Noelle, Ralph, and I stood along the wall. It would be rather odd if I was the only one who bothered to eat my dinner. Ralph was sending me glances that demanded to know why I was here, but I ignored him, of course.

"I believe I declined your offer of a joint party," Arwin said angrily, right off the bat.

"It's a good deal, though," said Beatrice. She was the younger sister, apparently. Though they looked identical, you could tell them apart because



Cecilia had one ponytail, and Beatrice had two.

“The monsters are only going to get tougher from here on,” she continued. “There’s no point in having weaklings around, and the stronger members don’t want to be dragged down. So we want to take only the best from each party to create an even better one.”

“And those who are left out will be forced to act as support.”

In essence, what Beatrice wanted to create was an adventuring clan: an alliance of parties that would work together and reform into new groupings as needed.

A typical outcome was having just the very best members fight on the front line, while the others perform as backup, or on cleanup, transport, and refueling duty. That was almost surely what Beatrice was envisioning.

“Incidentally, it would be me and Sissy from our party, and Rex and Nick from Chrysaor and Argo. From you, we’d probably take you and maybe the little one behind you.”

They seemed to have an eye for quality, at least. Virgil and the others weren’t bad fighters, by any means, but those two were miles ahead of the others. I would make the same choice. Ralph was completely off the table. He didn’t even have the right to complain about being passed up.

“My answer is the same. I have no intention of joining with someone I cannot trust, no matter how great their skill is.”

While it was a logical idea, clans very rarely worked out. While knights and soldiers were one thing, adventurers were self-interested by nature. The kind of people who would grind themselves to dust for the sake of the group did not become adventurers. The more of them you had in one place, the harder it was to keep them on the same page and share the profits equitably. Once personal emotions got involved, people got upset, and then a breakdown wasn’t far away.

As Arwin said, trust was an issue, too. You had to trust the people at your back to protect your life. It was very hard to fully have faith in a person you’d just started working with. And in Arwin’s case, she had a huge secret to hide.

“If you want a temporary cooperative strategy, I’m listening. But any proposal that involves an alliance is going to get the same answer from me.”

“You could be the subleader of our new party.”

“Sounds like a demotion.” Arwin snorted. “Sorry, try someone else. We’ll keep doing things our own way.”

The table shook with a thump. Beatrice had plopped a foot down on top of it. “Who do you think you are? You might’ve been a princess once, but now you’re just an adventurer without a true home.”

“.....”

“We’re five-star adventurers, and we’re doing you the favor of an invitation. Where’s your gratitude?”

Her skill and renown aside, within the Adventurers Guild, Arwin was still at three stars. To rank higher, she needed to complete tasks set by the guild, but Arwin had refused all such work. Her goal was to revive her kingdom, not find fame as an adventurer.

In contrast, the Maretto Sisters had five stars. They were only twenty-two years old, so getting five stars by that age was a major accomplishment. They’d no doubt been through quite a lot.

“Respectfully, mind your own business. And I have no interest in the hierarchy of this tiny social circle.”

“Hah! Listen to the mouth on you.”

“Also...”

Arwin grabbed a corner of the table and lifted it up. Beatrice screamed—she lost her balance and would’ve tipped backward in her chair if not for Cecilia’s support.

“Putting your foot on a table is incredibly bad manners. As far as I know, this is common sense in all sectors of human society, but I suppose you were raised *somewhere else*.”

“Hey!” Beatrice shouted, getting to her feet in a fury. She pulled a strangely shaped staff out of her sleeve and pointed it at Arwin. A firefly glow began to

gather around its tip, but soon dispersed.

“If you inflict any more insult, I will not hesitate to strike you down as I would a brigand,” Arwin said. The point of her naked sword was right at the other woman’s throat. Beatrice’s features twisted with humiliation. She was frozen in place, leaning as far away from the sword as she could.

The combative mood had Rex and Nick on their feet. Noelle and Ralph were in position to draw their weapons at a moment’s notice. Only Cecilia and I hadn’t moved yet.

Silence passed. It was four-on-four, but I wasn’t a fighter, and Ralph was barely half of one, so it was more like four-on-two-and-a-half. We were at an unavoidable disadvantage, but our princess knight was the type to make up for that. They would not escape unharmed.

“Let’s go now,” murmured Cecilia Mareto, the slightly elder sister. Her cheek was resting on her fist. “We’ve gone and gotten ourselves all heated up. We can try again another day.”

“But I can’t back down after being humiliated like—”

“Listen, Bea,” she said sweetly, cutting off her sister. She cupped the cheeks of the identical face in her hands. “You’re the greatest. You’re so wonderful. A first-rate adventurer and a top-shelf woman. But when you get angry, the inside of your head goes as white as Mama’s laundry.”

Her face was so close to her sister’s, they could have kissed.

“If you have some way of getting the princess knight to say yes, then by all means, keep going. But if not, we should allow both sides to calm down so that we can offer a different suggestion.”

“I think that physical force would—”

“Lead to deaths. This entire negotiation is meant to make us stronger, so that would be completely counterproductive. Am I wrong?”

Beatrice clicked her tongue, pushed her sister’s hands away, and turned to Arwin. “Out of respect for Sissy’s wishes, I forgive you for now. But we’ll be back,” she declared, and headed for the exit. We’d escaped the worst possible

outcome, but tension still hung thick in the air.

“Before you go, I just have one question for the two young ladies,” I said, ignoring the mood. “Would you happen to have any other siblings? Older or younger sisters, say.”

“No,” said Cecilia. “Bea and I are the only Maretto sisters. It’s been that way since we were born. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, no reason,” I said, nodding. “Glad to hear it.”

If things got to that point, I didn’t want to find out it was actually three or four of them, like what happened before.

Beatrice looked perturbed by my question, but ultimately decided it was just a stupid joke, and left. Rex and Nick followed her out, leaving Cecilia as the last to turn and go.

“Until our next meeting.”

The door shut. After a count of ten, Ralph finally exhaled.

“That was a close one,” he said. “They’re really tough.”

“Why are you praising them, idiot?” I said to him, busying myself with wiping down the table. “What were you thinking, bringing all those people here at dinner? Deal with them yourself.”

“I didn’t want to bring them here, either! But they forced us to...”

“It’s fine. Water under the bridge,” Arwin said, mercifully covering for her idiotic subjects. “The answer will be the same, no matter how many times they ask. I decide who my companions are.”

But in my opinion, she needed to ditch Ralph. Nothing was worse than an incompetent ally.

“I’m very sorry, Highness. We will take our leave now,” said Noelle.

“Would you like to eat dinner with us?” I said, holding her back. “There’s enough here for you, too. It’s an eggplant feast.”

“Huhhh?” Arwin drawled, quite unbecoming for one of such noble blood. “I thought I told you to clean it all up.”

“I put it back in the kitchen, so it could still be eaten. The eggplant is fine.”

“Oh,” she said, clearly unhappy, but not wanting to be seen throwing a fit before Noelle and Ralph. In fact, she would eagerly let Noelle see her eat the eggplant and pretend that it was tasty. Which it was, of course.

“Would that be all right?” Noelle asked, eyes shining.

“.....Yes,” said Arwin, who had no choice. Ralph ended up eating with us, too. It ruined me inside to know that he was eating my carefully crafted masterpiece, but it was better than having it go to waste.

“I’ll bring it right out. By the way, do you like eggplant?”

“I love it. There isn’t a person in the world who doesn’t like eggplant,” Noelle said briskly. I gave Arwin a look.

“...Hear that?”

“She’s still naive, and doesn’t know much about the world...”

Now, now, let’s not turn picky eating into a matter of worldliness.

The next morning, Arwin was ready to go back into the dungeon for a while. She ate breakfast quickly, got into her armor, and left the house. The party was going to meet up at the Adventurers Guild.

“I’ll walk you there.”

“No need.”

She was in a foul mood this morning. Probably because she didn’t like the cheese-covered eggplant I served for breakfast. She also ordered me to “eat all of that purple abomination by the time she got home.” I made a mental note to ask the ladies at the farmers market for more recipes.

“Then at least let me give you a good-bye kiss...”

Instead, she left.

“Oh, shit.” I realized that I’d forgotten to give her the day’s candy. Arwin wouldn’t be able to fight without her supply. I opened the door in a rush,

hoping to catch up to her, but came to a screeching halt instead.

Arwin was still here. She stood just outside the front door with her back to me.

“What’s the matter?” I asked. Her face looked pale. There was a piece of paper in her trembling hands. I reached out and grabbed it from her. A note was scrawled on it in messy handwriting.

*I know your past.*

*No matter how you hide it, you cannot escape your sins.*

*You act the hero, but your true nature is ugly and shallow.*

*You are a crow picking at carcasses.*

“Where’d this come from?”

“...I just found it. It was placed under a stone just inside the garden wall.”

If it had been arranged to keep the wind from blowing it away, that eliminated the possibility that it was a random piece of paper that had skittered in on the wind. Someone had placed it here on purpose. I’d last seen the spot where she found the paper the previous afternoon, before leaving. The paper was a bit damp from the night’s dew. It had been sitting there for at least half a day. So it had been placed while I was out yesterday evening, then.

“Any ideas?”

Arwin shook her head; she still wouldn’t look at me. The writing was very sloppy, probably on purpose. There was no way to tell who wrote it. Or at least, I had no good ideas. Neither did Arwin, by the look of it. Some mysterious person was trying to threaten and frighten Arwin. The blood started rushing to my head but then I remembered the woman right in front of me.

“Matthew, I’m—”

“It’s all right.” I embraced her from behind. Her body was shivering as though

she was freezing in the snow. “This is just a nasty prank. There are no details, nothing specific,” I reassured her, rubbing her head with one hand.

The past, sins—these were words that applied to everyone. If they really knew Arwin’s secret and wanted to threaten her with it, they would use words with a bit more detail to convince us of it—say, her ancestors’ necklace, or the name of her old dealer.

“They’re just toying with you because they’re jealous of your fame. It’s a waste of time and energy to worry about it,” I said, as kindly as I could, patting her head. Once she stopped trembling, I said, “You should stay home and rest today. The dungeon isn’t going anywhere.”

“But I—”

“Going in there looking as pale as you do right now would be like announcing it’s feeding time to the monsters. You need to be safe and comfortable today. I’ll contact Noelle and the others to explain. Don’t let anyone inside in the meantime. If anyone tries to barge in past you, they mean you harm—cut them in two. Got that?” I said firmly. I took out a candy. “This is today’s dose. Just the one.”

“...I see.”

“I could feed it to you mouth to mouth, if you’d like.”

“Knock it off.” She snatched it out of my hand. She stared at the hard green candy intently, then closed her palm around it. “I’ll take it myself.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

She still looked pale, but at least she was calm enough to respond to my banter.

“I’ll go back in, then,” Arwin said, returning to the house. Once I was satisfied that she’d locked the door, I headed for the Adventurers Guild. The mystery note turned into a crumpled ball of paper in my hand.

Who the hell did this shit? The first thing to do was figure out the culprit. I’d show them no mercy, even if it was only meant as a prank. And if it was the start of a more serious kind of extortion, that was even more reason to get to

the bottom of it. I would find our culprit, for the sake of Arwin's peace of mind.

"Only one place to go first."

The ninth attempt was a beautiful woman with long silver hair.

"Hey, young lady. Are you a traveler? About to eat? You've got to watch out for the crooks around here. If you'd like, we can eat together, and I'll help... Oh, that's your boyfriend back there? Fine, fine, I'll buzz off. May you live happily ever after."

I trotted off, before she did more than just give me the stink eye.

Another failure. Next time, I'd be successful for sure, I told myself. But at that moment, I noticed a party of about eight Paladins approaching. Vincent was at the head of the group.

"Hey, Vince. Out on a morning patrol, eh? Nothing like good hard work."

"What are you doing here?" he asked, quite annoyed.

"Can't you tell? Trying to pick up women."

We were on the main street on the east side of town. If you came in through the east gate, it wasn't long before you saw a selection of eateries and inns catering to travelers. Not only was it a crowded area, but you could also go down the side alleys to find hotels catering to couples. Therefore, you saw many gentlemen vying for the affections of passing ladies, and women seeking to extract money from those same gentlemen.

"That chick acted like she wasn't interested earlier, but now I see her with that soft sack of a man," I grumbled, fuming.

Vincent sighed extravagantly. "While you refuse to work and have Arwin do all the fighting for you."

"But I am working hard—trying to pick up a woman. This *is* my job." I needed to keep honing my skills of conversation and seduction, so that the princess knight didn't get bored of me. This was important training.

Vincent stared at me with unvarnished disgust.



“How about you, Vince? With your looks, I bet you could hook at least one out of ten, if you talked to them.”

“I have a family.”

“You do? Is your wife hot?”

“That’s no business of yours.”

That told me all I needed to know: It was an arranged marriage for politics.

“Any kids?”

“I have a son. He’ll be five soon.”

“Did you bring them here?”

“Of course not.”

“I didn’t think so.”

If he brought vulnerable family members to this dangerous place, they’d be kidnapped in no time by criminal gangs and used as bait to extort him. That meant I didn’t have the option of doing that, either. Darn.

“But I’ll tell you this,” Vincent said, wagging a finger in my face. How rude. “I’m letting you walk for now, but you’re still a suspect in Vanessa’s murder. As soon as I find evidence, I’ll have you sent to the gallows. And don’t call me Vince. We are not on such close terms!” he raged.

“Whatever you say, *Vince*. But the thing is, *Vince*, I’m sure you also remember, *Vince*, that Arwin completely poked a hole in your entire argument, *Vince*. Figure it out, *Vince*.”

He grabbed my shirt and glared at me with demonic fury.

“If you drop one more wisecrack, I’ll throw you into a cell to rot.”

“I hear you loud and clear, Lord Carlyle.”

Such an impatient man. This was the real Vince, I was sure.

Vincent clicked his tongue and shoved me away. I nearly lost my balance and fell backward but was stopped by running into someone else.

“Oh, sorry. Are you hurt...? Oh, it’s Gramps.”

“Matthew? What are you doing?”

It was an old man, about sixty years old, staring up at me through bushy brows. He was short to begin with, and carried a huge basket around on his back, which gave him a hunched posture. Despite his posture, however, his frame was quite sturdy and healthy.

“As you can see, I’m picking up women. What about you, Gramps? It’s never too late for love.”

“Don’t got it in me anymore. Either in spirit or in body,” he said hoarsely, waving me off. It was the kind of self-deprecating humor unique to the elderly. “Sorry about yesterday. Here, take this.”

He pulled some red and yellow bell peppers out of his basket. I thanked him for them, even though Arwin probably wouldn’t like them, either. Maybe there was some way to get her to eat them.

“You’re too good to me. I’ll make it up to you sometime. Anything you want in return?”

“How about you break up with that princess knight?” the old man said persuasively. “She’s too good for the likes of you.”

“Whatever you say.” I already knew we weren’t a real match.

“So long. Don’t just laze around all day. Get a real job for once.”

“One of these days, maybe.”

Gramps raised a hand and vanished into the crowd. As he left, Vincent asked, “You know him?”

“He’s a carrier for the Adventurers Guild, but sometimes he loads up vegetables and sells them at the market like that.”

As the name suggested, a carrier was someone who transported things for the guild. They hauled monster bodies and parts out of the dungeon for adventurers, carried treasure and spoils of battle, and occasionally lugged the corpses of guild members. In this town, they went down in the dungeon with the adventurers. Carriers didn’t engage in fighting, so the job was often undertaken by former adventurers and tough guys without much else going for

them. Normally they accompanied adventurers and retrieved their belongings, but sometimes unscrupulous adventurers used them as decoys or meat shields.

Because it was dangerous and promised little reward, there were few people who wanted to do it, despite its crucial nature. Sometimes older folks like him did it.

“I saved him from some thugs who were messing with him at the South Market yesterday.”

So they turned on me and beat me up instead. Fortunately, the guards came running over before long. Gramps didn’t get hurt, and I didn’t get my wallet stolen.

“...Perhaps I should reassess my opinion of the market patrols,” Vincent said. He was so dedicated to his job. “Now get out of here. I’ll actually have you arrested if you engage in these licentious activities on the street.”

He tried to hurry past me, but I had one last comment. “You know, I heard something the other day... Is it true that you’re in the midst of reforming the Paladins?”

Apparently, Vincent was at the center of a movement to bring more discipline to the group. He was driving out corrupt officials and those who were making deals with unsavory criminals. Rumor said that half of the guards on loan from the town had been let go and returned to their original jobs.

“Safety and security cannot be restored to this town without a solid foundation beneath us.”

And yet *they* were the ones still left? Behind Vincent were the darker-skinned guard and the mustached one, who were glaring at me with open hostility. If these were the ones deemed worthy of staying, how bad were the ones that got fired?

“And that is why I don’t have time to deal with your nonsense. Stay out of pointless trouble,” Vincent snapped before leaving for good. I scratched the back of my head as I watched him go.

I could rule him out, I decided.

I'd been waiting for him in a place he was likely to pass through, thinking he might have some information I could use. But nothing changed in his attitude when I brought it up, and he didn't seem to be hiding anything. He didn't have anything to do with this, I decided.

Other suspects included the Maretto Sisters from yesterday and their partners in the alliance, but from what Noelle said, it sounded like they'd been in the dungeon since this morning. I wouldn't be able to ask them anything for another two or three days.

It would be a lot easier if I could find out who placed the note, but it had been at night, and nobody witnessed it. All the people who lived in our neighborhood had well-established identities; as far as I knew, the only person in the area whose story was dubious was me.

There weren't even any *gentlemen of the street* who might have witnessed it happen. We were close to the wealthy quarter, so the guards regularly patrolled the area. Anyone sleeping on the street would be tossed out with alacrity, lest they block the path of someone important.

Just in case, I spoke to the nearest gentleman of the street, and he said he hadn't seen anyone out of the ordinary.

While such gentlemen seemed like they were unbound by any rules, they actually respected strict territorial lines. There was a guild called the Gentleman's Alliance that managed these territories, and lurking above them were underworld folks. That meant a portion of the food and alms given out of charity to those in need went to dirty folks like them. It's a cruel world.

That meant I had hit a dead end for the time being. I was worried about Arwin, though, so I decided to go home.

"You there, big boy," said a voice, stopping me in my tracks. It was a lady who looked like a traveling entertainer. Her tits were huge. She leaned in and asked, in a seductive, clinging voice, "Are you from the area? Care to show me around?"

"Sorry, just remembered something I've got to do. Try me another time," I said, waving her off. She and the ladies around her were unperturbed. They promptly turned their attention to another man nearby whose hair was

thinning out.

I got back to the house around noon and headed up to Arwin's room to check on her. I knocked on the door, and she told me to come in.

Arwin was seated on her chair, reading a book. She'd taken off her armor, of course, but the clothes were the same thing she'd been wearing when she left the house this morning.

"You don't want to lie down and rest?"

"I can't just fall asleep when I'm not tired."

Instead, she was passing the time by reading. Her complexion was healthier now, so she seemed fine to me.

"Whatcha reading?"

"A collection of poems from Percy Malthouse."

"Are they good?"

"They've been read for over a hundred years." She passed the book to me to read for myself. "You tell filthy jokes every time you open your mouth. Maybe some poetry would do you good."

"Sorry, I was raised in the gutter."

But since she insisted, I gave it a try.

"This is a scene where the kindhearted princess is speaking to the knight who's trapped himself in a cave out of shame for his ugliness."

*"I am a monster. My face is scarred and hideous."*

*"No, those are the signs that you fought more bravely than any other. I would pledge my love to that face."*

*"My flesh is wracked by monstrous poison; my life shall not last the day."*

*"How can I laugh at you, when you gave what little time you had to protect*

me?”

*“I have no more soul nor courage left with which to fight. There is naught that I might offer to you, Highness.”*

*“Your love is a priceless treasure to me, more valuable than the gold which gilds the lost city, and glittering stars that fill the sky.”*

I clutched my stomach and roared with laughter.

“What’s so funny?”

“Sorry, sorry. I didn’t mean to laugh at it. I just can’t take this seriously.”

Beautiful, flowery language did not exist in my dictionary. All it contained was *shit, piss, ass, fuck*, and every possible synonym of those.

“Enough!” Arwin snatched the book out of my hands. “I was a fool for letting you read it.”

She placed the collection on the side table and left the room.

“Going somewhere?”

“Outside, to get lunch. I’m hungry.”

She hadn’t eaten much in the morning, and the sudden spike of anger probably didn’t help her stomach.

“I’ll go with you.”

“You stay here and eat your purple abominations.”

“C’mon, don’t be mad. Fine, fine, I won’t serve eggplants anymore.”

Not more than once every three days, at least.

I continued to apologize, wheedle, and flatter Arwin until she was finally in a better mood.

We enjoyed our meal and were wandering back along the main street when a voice called out from a passing carriage.

“Arwin!”

It stopped soon after, and a silver-haired girl jumped out: April.

She hugged Arwin with delight—and then shot me a look of withering scorn.

“Oh. Matthew the idiot is with you.”

My reputation had sunk into the muck after my stunt at the arm wrestling contest. The trust I’d built up bit by bit over an entire year was gone, just like that. But I’d earned this treatment, so I just had to laugh it off and deal with it. Besides, I was basically exclusive with Arwin. There wasn’t enough room for me to be a dog to two masters.

“Umm, I’m going to have a new dress made for me. There’s going to be a Founding Festival party at the lord’s manor. Grandfather and I are attending.”

That’s right, she was a fancy little rich girl. There was a much older woman next to the carriage who bowed to us. That was April’s attendant, Nora. It made sense that April was taking a carriage if she was with her maid.

“Wouldn’t it be easier for you to have the dressmaker visit your home?”

“Shut up, Matthew the moron.” She glared at me to make me shut up again. “Going to the shop to try them on is part of the experience. It’s no fun just trying them on in your own room.”

She shook her head, as if lamenting that anyone could be so stupid. Apparently she felt that changing her environment made it special somehow. Seemed like a waste of time and money to me.

“Oh, I know! Why don’t you come with me, Arwin? Let’s pick out dresses together.”

“No, I’m not—”

She was really more of a swords-and-other-deadly-weapons girl, not a dress girl. That, and weird books of poetry.

“Then pick out *my* dress for me. A princessy one,” April insisted.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

“I wasn’t asking you, Matthew the bum!”

A heartfelt piece of well-meaning advice, spurned without a thought. Was this the kind of world we wanted to live in?

In the end, April's persistence won out, and we were dragged along to the dressmaker's shop. It was a business on West Main Street for very wealthy and important people called the White Daisy. They made dresses on demand and had a selection ready for purchase. Women came here to have their measurements taken, and to choose from a great variety of sample textiles and designs, which the seamstresses would then assemble. However...

"How about this one? You know, you're a girl, and the flower pattern suits you perfectly," said Arwin. She proudly held up a fabric of pink with black and purple flowers on it. How could we possibly react? In the mirror, April and I were making the same face.

"Umm..."

"You should be honest with her. You're the one who has to wear it."

In other words, the regal fashion of Her Highness was simply too grand and forward for the lower classes to understand or pull off.

For some reason, April turned to me and whispered accusatorily, "Why is Arwin like *that*? Isn't she a princess?"

"It's because she's a princess."

She'd never picked out an outfit for someone else. On top of that, she was totally clueless when it came to fashion; she'd always worn whatever her mom or maids picked out for her. Even now, she was wearing clothes that I, or the tailor, or others around her had recommended. Because of that, her fashion sense was still rough, completely uninfluenced by the rest of society in any way.

"How about this one, then? It's got lots of nice frills," Arwin said, happily bringing out a style that had been in fashion a hundred years ago. April's face fell to an almost comical degree. She was caught between feeling responsible for accepting Arwin's suggestions, as it had been April's idea to bring her along, and her instinctual desire to not wear the bizarre dresses that were being offered to her.

"Let's switch spots. I'll pick now," I said. I was feeling sorry for the squirt. She



was going to be pecked to death by the hens at the party at this rate.

“Matthew the cheat?”

“You’re not going to go with something ugly, are you?”

The glares from the womenfolk were withering. Also, look who’s talking.

“I’ll choose something that actually suits April. First, the color.”

“Color?”

“Let me guess: the dresses you have are all black, blue, and white, right?”

“Um, yeah. Did I tell you that once?”

“I’m just guessing, because that’s what matches your silver hair.” The old man’s tastes were always going to be simple and safe. She usually wore black, as a matter of fact. “You’re bored of always wearing the same colors, right? So let’s pick out a different one this time.”

I glanced at the long list of samples and pulled out the color I wanted.

“What about red?” I held up the sample next to April’s hair. “Very nice. Maybe a slightly brighter red. That would be perfect for you.”

“Oooh,” April cooed with impressed surprise.

Arwin said nothing. She was standing a short distance away, toying with her hair and looking pensive.

Once we had a fabric picked out, next came the design of the dress. “Since this is a special occasion, you want to reach for something a little more grown-up. The latest style is to have the bodice more open, but you’re not ready for that yet. The old man would do a backflip and crack his skull if he saw it. Instead, let’s go with this open-shoulder type.”

I picked the sample dress that seemed to match her image best of all.

“And we’ll have the skirt go all the way down to your feet. Be careful with how you walk in it. If you run around like you usually do, you’re going to step on the hem and trip yourself. You need to keep your back straight as you walk. Red for your shoes will keep the color nice and unified, but let’s get you short heels. Otherwise you might twist an ankle.”

“Wow, this is looking really good,” exclaimed April, who was getting more excited with each piece of the puzzle.

“So here’s what the dress will be like. You’ll want a necklace to wear, too; I’d suggest ruby, to match the dress. You could go with diamond or pearl, but it’ll depend on the old man’s budget. Of course, if *you* ask for it, he’d probably sell off the entire guild to scrounge up the cash.”

“I didn’t realize you knew so much about this. You always wear the same clothes.”

To win the favor of the ladies, you need to know about clothes and beauty. And the reason I always wore the same kind of clothes was because I was getting beaten up by thugs all the time, and they’d take anything valuable from me, the way they took my wallet each time. If I wore expensive clothing, no amount of money would help me keep it.

By the time I’d finished coordinating the entire outfit, April was in a wonderful mood. Now the only thing to do was wait for the dress to be completed. She offered to take us home in their carriage.

In the four-seat carriage, I sat across from April.

“Thank you, Matthew. You really helped me.”

I’d managed to restore her trust in me.

“.....”

Meanwhile, the princess knight seated next to me was in a royal mood. She looked out the window when the carriage started and hadn’t budged from there since. Not a single word had passed her lips.

“Will you pick out the next one for me, too?”

“For you, that would be a pleasure...ouch!”

Someone stepped on my foot. Arwin studiously avoided looking me in the face, but spat, “Don’t get ahead of yourself.”

“Come on, don’t sulk.”

“I am not sulking,” she said. It wasn’t very convincing when she said it with a

pout on her face. "If I wanted to, I could do all of that."

"Then shall we talk about the time that I dressed up like a clown at your insistence, and got laughed and pointed at in the street?"

"They were laughing at your face."

"Ah yes. And I suppose that when I heard the children shrieking, 'That man's dressed funny,' that was just my ears playing tricks on me."

"You don't have to keep bringing up the past like this."

"I can't help it—I'm an effeminate man that way. I suppose it's why I'm a kept man."

Despite Arwin's protestations, I recalled exactly how she had walked alongside me at first, but steadily let the distance grow between us as she had realized what was happening.

"Come on, cheer up. Those puffy cheeks don't suit you," I said, grabbing her shoulder and pulling her closer. She brushed me away.

"Don't touch me. It makes me sick."

"Lying isn't good for you."

This time I lightly pulled her head closer. Because of the height difference, Arwin's head rested against my chest. To head off another furious resistance, I caressed her head and ran my fingers through her brilliant red hair.

"I'll pick out a dress for you next time."

"...Using my money, no doubt."

"I want to see what you look like wearing a dress I picked out for you," I said softly, right near her ear. With the other hand, I pulled her chin toward me so that she looked in my direction at last.

"What color would be best? I think you'd look good in white, red, or anything really."





The pools of her eyes stared right back into mine. I leaned in closer.

A throat was very audibly cleared. “If you don’t mind, please save that for when you are at home,” said Nora the attendant, with a rather frosty glance.

Arwin came back to her senses, pushed me away, and sidled over to the corner of the carriage seat. It had been a nice moment, but this *was* someone else’s carriage, after all.

“Ah, my apologies. I was acting as though we were already home.”

“I-it’s okay,” insisted April, her cheeks flushed. That had perhaps been too much stimulation for a young mind. “I was just a little surprised. You know, since Arwin always looks and acts so cool.”

“But she has her cute side, too. Come on over sometime. I’ll have her dance for you in a nice, frilly dress.”

Arwin called me an idiot and punched me in the side. After that, the ride continued with small talk until it reached our house.

“Good-bye, see you tomorrow,” April said, waving to us from the carriage as it rolled away. The sky was the color of early evening now.

“Shall we have some dinner, then?” The carriage had stopped by the market for us on the way here, so we had all the supplies we needed. The princess knight had reminded me, of course, not to include the purple abomination.

“Well, let’s hurry...” I said but trailed off as I stopped to crouch next to the door.

“What is it?”

“I see some dog poop. Probably a stray that wandered in here. You go inside, I’ll take care of this and put down some water and sand afterward.”

“Remember to wash your hands,” Arwin said, opening the door.

After she closed it, I crumpled up the *second* mystery note and stuck it into my pocket.

It must've been placed from midday to evening, while we were both out.

This was what it said.

*You will find no respite.*

*You will do penance for your sins.*

*Bask in your sloth now, while you can.*

*You deranged addict.*

The content of the message was almost the same. Full of insults and menace, but with no concrete instructions to do this or that. I would've guessed that someone in the Maretto Sisters' alliance had written it, but they were still in the dungeon. They could've had someone else writing these missives instead, but there wasn't enough evidence to say for sure.

But having the notes placed in such quick succession suggested a level of persistence. In any case, I needed to get to the bottom of this quickly. If Arwin saw it, she'd get upset again.

The next morning, Arwin gave me a funny look when I yawned in her presence.

"That's rude."

"Well, someone didn't put out for me last night, so I felt so horny that I couldn't get to sleep."

"...You could've slept in as long as you wanted. Forever, even."

Fine, fine, I'm sorry. Just don't draw your sword with a smile on your face.

"C'mon, let's have breakfast. I've got to make up the ground I lost yesterday," she said, full of motivation to tackle the dungeon now that she was feeling better.

After breakfast and a change of clothes, she was ready for the day. I offered her a hard candy. "Open wide. Aaaah."

"No need for that." She grabbed the candy out of my hand and dropped it into her pocket. "I've got to go."

She opened the door, looked at the ground near her feet, then exhaled with relief.

"Good luck down there," I said, watching her go. Then it was my turn to exhale, but with a different emotion. I'd been on watch all night, and it had been for nothing. If only they'd shown up, I could have destroyed them in an instant.

I returned to the dining room to clean up and found a small bag on the table. It had Arwin's candy inside; she'd forgotten to take it. If she ran out of her "medicine" in the dungeon, it could have life-or-death consequences. I quickly locked the door and hurried toward the center of town, where the dungeon entrance was.

"Please be in time," I murmured.

On the way past the guild, I noticed a crowd around the main building. I peered over their heads and saw Arwin on the other side of it. Good, so she hadn't gone in yet.

But her expression was dark. Was she in an argument with someone?

"Excuse me. Let me through."

I tried to push my way through the scrum, but it was always times like this that the biggest lugs blocked my way. From a distance, I could see that it was Medusa, the Maretto Sisters' party, that was facing off with Arwin's group. Not only were they a very talented group, but they also had the benefit of all six of them being young women. I wanted to hang out with them. Maybe I should try getting back into my old career.

As I was struggling to get closer, I heard Arwin raise her voice in irritation.

"I'm willing to go along with the joint strategy. It makes sense against a tarasque. But how can we only get ten percent of the share? It's clearly unfair."



They were arguing over the split of their spoils. A tarasque was a huge turtle monster, but it had the head of a lion, the limbs of a bear, and a snake for a tail. I'd fought one of them years ago; it was very difficult to inflict damage on, and quite a formidable foe. The best way to deal with one was to surround it with plenty of fighters and whale on it as hard as possible. Medusa must have come back to rustle up the extra help for their plan.

"Well, of course. You're three-stars, at the highest. We're all five-stars. Even a child can understand who's more important," Beatrice replied haughtily. Her sister, Cecilia, was seated in a chair nearby, tipping back a glass of wine in the middle of the day.

"The number of stars doesn't matter. Doesn't it stand to reason that the share should be split by the number of people, or parties?"

"Everything has its exceptions. Each team is taking thirty percent, for ninety in total, and you get the last ten percent. That's already been decided. It's written right on the summons."

She waved around the piece of paper in her hand. A summons was a form that the Adventurers Guild used when it needed to draft members. Ordinarily it would never have allocation of goods listed, too, so Beatrice must have forced it through. Or maybe she used her feminine wiles to seduce a staffer to do it for her.

It was a formal request, so there were penalties involved for refusing the summons without a valid reason. Depending on the circumstances, they might even forbid you from entering the dungeon. The dungeon was officially the property of the kingdom, but the Adventurers Guild was put in charge of managing it.

"Of course, exceptions are merely exceptions. It would depend on how you negotiate, wouldn't it?"

Essentially, it was a summons to join the clan. Beatrice had used the guild's authority as a tool to force Arwin to submit to her demands.

"Do you actually think that we're going to accept this?"

"I told her not to do it," said Cecilia, who merely shrugged. *What am I to do*

*with her?* she seemed to say. Clearly, she hadn't tried very hard.

"So what will you do, sheltered little princess? Go and cry to your kept man and have him comfort you?"

If she actually did come crying to me, that would be so much easier than the actual outcome. She could be so stubborn at times.

At times like this, the other members ought to provide Arwin with support, but none of them had the guts to defy the guild's authority. Useless bums.

"One question." Noelle, however, did rouse herself and stepped forward. "I have only been a member of the guild for a short while, so I am unaware of these things. Is having a five-star designation really that prestigious?"

"Of course it is." Beatrice giggled mockingly.

"Then if a seven-star adventurer made the same proposal to you, you would have no choice but to obey it in the same fashion. Because seven stars would be more prestigious than five."

"It's not just a matter of the number of stars. It's based on an overall assessment of our ability and accomplishments."

"Accomplishments aside, who was it that determined what your ability level is? You? Or the guild?"

"That should be obvio—"

Before she could even finish her sentence, Beatrice was falling. Noelle had sunk to ground level and swept her leg out from under her. When she fell to all fours, Noelle leaped on top of her and wrapped her arm around Beatrice's neck. She also twisted around so that her own back was pressed to the floor. Beatrice was caught in a stranglehold from below, facing the ceiling helplessly.

"Does this make me a five-stars now? In fact, I am stronger than you, so I suppose I should be six-stars."

Noelle rarely taunted anyone this harshly. She'd probably been holding this in for the last two days, ever since her beloved princess was humiliated by these sisters.

"Why, you..." Beatrice's face was red with fury and shame.

“Let’s continue discussing this matter on more equitable terms. With *everyone* involved present this time.”

“Let go of me, bitch! Get the fuck off!” Beatrice swore. She writhed and struggled, but barely moved. She was like a turtle on its back. Noelle’s legs were wrapped around her waist, making it impossible for the other young woman to move the way she wanted. “What are you all doing? Kill this little bitch!”

Her partners hesitated, however. Noelle was small, and her body was resting beneath Beatrice’s, so they couldn’t attack her if they wanted. Plus, with Noelle’s advantage, she could snap Beatrice’s neck, or use a hidden blade to cut the sister’s throat.

Beatrice’s face started going blue. She was starting to suffocate because she’d been screaming while in a choke hold. If Noelle didn’t let go soon, she really was going to visit the afterlife.

“H-help...Sissy...”

Cecilia stood wordlessly. She held an empty wine bottle in one hand and gestured with the other as she walked forward to slide a small staff from her sleeve. She looked down at her suffocating sister and pointed the staff at her.

“Float.”

Motes of light surrounded Beatrice’s body, which began to float in silence. This came as a surprise to Noelle, who let go and fell on her bottom. From behind her, Cecilia swung the wine bottle.

Glass shards spilled across the floor, adorned with droplets of red.

Cecilia gripped the anguished Noelle by the head and yanked her around. “Don’t touch my Bea.”

Her voice flickered with black flames of hatred and seemed to issue from the very depths of the earth. The guild was hushed.

“Now, now, Bea,” Cecilia said, changing moods abruptly. Her cheeks puckered like a child’s, and she grabbed her floating sister’s face with both hands and turned it toward herself. “You’re always so cool and rational and proactive and decisive and almighty and awe-inspiring, but when you get caught napping, you

turn as pale as Daddy when he lost his wedding ring.”

“Noelle!”

Arwin charged in for a body blow, but Cecilia nimbly dodged out of the way. She was skilled in physical combat as well as magic. Cecilia tossed away the broken neck of the wine bottle and produced another small staff from her other sleeve. She was aiming for Arwin now.

“Barrier.”

The spell generated a clear wall around Arwin. She punched and kicked at it, but it did not budge.

“Stay there and watch from the first row,” Cecilia taunted, and turned back to Noelle. Ralph and the others were blocked by the members of Medusa and couldn’t get closer. If this kept going, something really bad would happen. I called for Dez, hoping he would shut down the situation, but the crowd informed me that he’d gone into the dungeon to search for missing members. Bad timing.

“Float.”

Cecilia made Noelle’s body to float this time, instead of Beatrice’s. She was still conscious, but the blow had incapacitated her. Cecilia, meanwhile, was sweeping the shards of broken glass with her foot into the space below Noelle.

“Stop!” Arwin shouted, sensing what was about to happen. Noelle was an agile fighter, so she wore very light armor. Some of those shards were likely to inflict significant, bloody damage. Cecilia swung her staff.

The light surrounding Noelle vanished, and she dropped.

Glass pieces flew. Something tumbled across the floor.

“Noelle!”

“She’s fine,” I said, holding up a hand.

I’d slid into the scene across the floor to catch Noelle. I went feet-first, so most of the glass pieces got kicked out of the way. Only a few got embedded in my ass.

“Are you all right?” Noelle slumped in my arms. She was bleeding freely, and her eyes were vacant. “Was it scary? If you peed your pants, you have to tell me. I’ll forgive you, but only this once.”

“That’s not what’s coming out of my head, is it?”

“Not unless you’re really insane.”

I was about to hand Noelle over to Seraphina, the healer, when something hit my head this time.

I looked up to see Beatrice, her face twisted with fury, swinging a chair at me. I instinctually covered Noelle to protect her. There was another impact. My head felt woozy. Beatrice was slamming the chair on me like a woman possessed. I’d underestimated her strength; she was really smashing me with that thing. Maybe she’d used magic to augment her muscles. I couldn’t escape because Noelle was still in my arms. I was used to getting hit, but I could’ve really used someone to step in and put a stop to it now. Even Ralph would do. I’d give him a thank-you kiss in return.

With another crash, wooden shards fell over my head; the chair had given out. She tossed the leg aside with a click of the tongue and decided to brandish a magic staff at us instead. Was she actually trying to kill us?

“Stop it!”

There was a noise like breaking pottery. Arwin had smashed through the magic wall with her own power. She pounced like a wild animal and punched Beatrice in the face, then the stomach, then the jaw. Over and over she slammed her fist into Beatrice, who toppled against the wall. Then Arwin pulled her upright and cracked her with a headbutt.

“Lady Beatrice!” shouted the other Medusa members, who pushed their way past Aegis and seized Arwin. Two people restrained her from behind, while the others swung at her from the front. Arwin roared and wrenched her body so that a woman behind her was in the path of the punch. When the teammates hesitated, Arwin kicked one, punched another, and tossed a third over her back.

“God damn you!” Cecilia howled, brandishing her staff from the flank. Arwin hurled a nearby chair and leaped. When it interrupted her spell and forced her

to brush it off, Arwin kicked Cecilia in the face. It jolted her chin upward, but Cecilia did not lose her balance. Instead, she grabbed Arwin and slammed her against the wall. It was hard enough that it nearly shook the guild building. Then she clutched Arwin's red hair and picked up a piece of the shattered chair. The ugly, splintered end stopped just before Arwin's face. She was holding Cecilia's wrist, keeping the impromptu weapon at bay.

"Don't touch...my hair!"

She grabbed Cecilia's head with her other hand and smashed it against the wall, then again, and a third time. The woman's eyes grew unfocused. Seizing her chance, Arwin punched her in the face. Cecilia fell backward, bleeding from the nose. Arwin roared, straddling her opponent and hitting her in the face again. The other woman couldn't even defend herself, much less fight back.

"Hey, that's enough! You've won," I said. If she kept going, she'd kill Cecilia. Even with the guild's general rule of noninterference, she was going to be punished if she committed murder in front of a whole group of witnesses. But she kept hitting her, seemingly deaf to my words. What was wrong with her? Angry or not, this was unhinged.

"Stop it, Arwin," I said, leaving Noelle and grabbing Arwin from behind.

"Let go!" She yanked herself free of me, landing an elbow on my face in the process. My vision went momentarily woozy, but my pain wasn't important now. I grabbed Arwin again.

"Calm down. You're not in your right mind. You have to chill out."

"Shut up!" She wriggled and brushed my arms away. I cursed my own lack of strength.

Just then, I felt a shaking sensation in my entire body. And it wasn't just my body—the entire building was shaking.

An earthquake.

It was like a giant was swinging the entire guild around. The earth groaned, and the captivated audience ducked and screamed.

"Get under the tables. Cover your heads. Ralph, help Noelle!" I ordered,

against my better nature. I could hear cracks forming. Sure enough, there was a seam in the ceiling. That was the spot where a certain Beardo had jammed an idiotic adventurer's head. They hadn't done more than a stopgap repair on it, so the area was still brittle. It was going to collapse on us.

"Run, Arwin!"

It wasn't working. She was too agitated to notice. I threw myself over their heads. A moment later, something hard and heavy fell on my back. Yeow. Dust billowed.

That was the peak of the shaking, however, and it gradually subsided from there. The piece of ceiling that fell turned out to be not that big after all, and I was able to push it off and get out from underneath.

"Are you hurt?"

Arwin seemed dazed underneath me. The anger was gone from her eyes; she was back to normal, it appeared. Cecilia had survived, as well.

"Matthew..."

I'd be receptive to a passionate kiss of gratitude, but there was something more important to figure out.

"Come."

I grabbed her arm and stood her up, walking her away from the scene.

"I'm going to borrow a room. I need to examine Arwin's injuries," I said, making something up on the spot, then reached behind the counter past the dumbfounded guild staffers and grabbed a key before heading up the stairs.

"Matthew, I..."

I didn't feel like responding to her. On top of that, my head hurt, and my back was probably bleeding, but that was only a scratch. Right now, I needed to say what was on my mind. To be honest, I was *pissed*. I took her into a private room upstairs and locked the door before putting her into a chair. Arwin hung her head; she looked exhausted. Her body posture was withdrawn, like a child who knows it's about to be scolded. But I wasn't angry about her nearly killing the Maretto Sisters, or the elbows to the face she'd hit me with.

“How long?”

“.....”

“How long have you been *refusing your candy*?”

I should have noticed sooner. I hadn't seen her eating the special candy I made for her. When I handed it to her, she said she'd eat it later, and put it in her pocket. I thought she was just being self-conscious, but that wasn't it.

Arwin glanced at me, then confessed her sin.

“...Since the day before yesterday.”

“Why would you do something like that?”

I was maintaining my calm on the surface, but underneath, my insides were boiling over.

There had been warning signs, I realized. She always wore the mask of the Crimson Princess Knight in front of others, but instead she'd been exhibiting the same kind of childish behavior that she did when we were alone. I'd thought that it might be a good sign, that she was opening up to others, but it was nothing of the sort. She was just losing control of her emotions due to the withdrawal. Today's fight was the ugly consequence of that.

“...I'm sorry.”

“You can't just apologize your way out of this. It's your life I'm talking about.”

If the dungeon sickness flared up again, she would be instantly unable to fight. I could understand her hesitation to take the very drug that had led her to disaster. But when there was no antidote, no wonder cure for dungeon sickness, the only way to deal with it was to slowly lower the dose until she got accustomed to it. If she could conquer this with willpower and persistence alone, she wouldn't need my help at all.

I wasn't a doctor or an apothecary, but over the past year, I'd continued handling drugs against my better judgment, and I'd learned a lot about them. When I heard that certain herbs and plants were good for her health, I cooked them into our meals. I'd even ended the lives of people I bore no grudge against, just to protect her secret.



And here we were. No matter how hard I worked for her, it was all pointless if Arwin didn't feel like upholding her part of it. I felt furious at how stupid I had been.

"...If you can't trust me, just say so. I'll leave this town before the sun goes down."

"No!" Arwin shouted desperately. "In the year we've known each other, you've done so much for me. You've done more than I ever imagined you would. You have been an incredible help to me. *Too* much help."

"Too much?"

"The thought occurred to me that if we conquer the dungeon, you will leave this place. Isn't that right? And I wondered what would be happening with my body at that point."

If her health returned to normal, that would be ideal. But if she managed to beat the dungeon before she was cured, Arwin would be going back home dealing with a weakened mind and body—without me. Would she be able to arrange her own supply and keep her secret, all on her own?

It wasn't only that. Although Arwin might not realize it, she would be without a person who could eliminate inconvenient human beings for her.

"So you thought you'd try going without it ahead of time, to see if you could fight on your own? I didn't realize you were that arrogant. When we don't even know how many floors there are in the Millennium of Midnight Sun."

This was a dungeon no one had ever seen the bottom of. It wasn't clear that she could reach the end over the course of her entire life, and yet she was engaging in pointless exercises based on what would come after that.

"I'm sorry."

Arwin hung her head and didn't look me in the eyes. Her jade-green irises were downcast, like a guilty criminal waiting for her execution.

"Don't apologize to me." That just made it harder to be angry at her. Idle comments that I'd made without thinking had pressured Arwin to push faster. I wanted to strangle myself. "The main thing is, you're rushing ahead."

“Maybe you’re right. No, you *are* right...I want to be as strong as I can, as fast as I can.” Arwin smiled weakly at me. “You know my full name. Primrose was also my mother’s name.”

“It suits you.”

“I hate it,” she said flatly. “To be honest, I hated how weak my mother was.”

She began to tell her story, slowly but surely.

“My mother was a gentle person. She was born the daughter of a marquess, lived a pampered existence, charmed my father at first sight, and became a queen.”

But even in a small country, the palace was a den of monsters. Jealousy, rivalry, stupid squabbles over petty things. It was a world like a witch’s cauldron, bubbling over with malice and greed. Her mother couldn’t handle the weight and responsibility of being the queen. Her spirit was eaten away from within, and she was absent from many official functions.

“Those around her didn’t comfort her; they blamed her and called her slovenly. Someone even said, ‘Nothing is more useless than a queen who cannot bear a male heir.’ Can you guess who said that? Roland’s father.”

Like father, like son.

“I watched them disparage her right before my eyes, but I could do nothing but smile. It tore at me...which is why I picked up the sword when I was seven in order to get strong.”

I’d heard the rest of the story from there. Her father had kindly agreed to it, but her mother had been scornful. “A woman doesn’t use a sword,” she’d said to Arwin, again and again. She punished her daughter for not heeding her commands, and even spanked her once.

“Naturally, I rebelled. I said, ‘I don’t want to turn out like you, Mother.’ We never saw eye to eye after that. We barely even talked. I spent all my time focusing on the sword. In the end, they called me the greatest swordfighter in the nation.”

But the swarm of monsters killed her parents, and destroyed her kingdom.

“You tell me not to rush things, but time won’t wait for me. It doesn’t take long at all to lose the things that are important to you,” Arwin said, looking at her hands wistfully. She was seeing visions of the past, everything that had slipped through her fingers.

“May I ask one thing?” I said, breaking the ensuing silence. “In the end, did your mom ever accept you and your wish to fight?”

“Good question,” Arwin said vaguely, shaking her head. “When I started learning the sword, she told me, ‘If you don’t forget that desire, you’ll find out one day if I change my mind,’ but that day never came. Whatever my mother thought, it’s lost forever.”

“.....”

“Maybe I’d be happier if I had never asked.”

If she had refused to accept her, Arwin might never have recovered from it.

“At any rate,” I said, placing a hand on her shoulder, “talk with me before you do something drastic again. I’m your lifeline, remember? The crazier you act, the more likely that even a hardy rope like me will snap.”

With my other hand, I combed through her brilliant red hair. After the wildness of the fight earlier, she could use a little straightening up.

“You’re right,” she said in a tiny voice. Her hand rose to cover mine. “I’m counting on you, Matthew.”

Later, the guildmaster returned and punished both Aegis and Medusa. As a rule, the guild didn’t get involved in squabbles between members, so they were punished for causing a scene in the guild and destroying chairs and walls and such. But because the guild had also made the mistake of issuing a summons on Beatrice’s orders, they limited the punishment to a punch from the guildmaster and a fine. Because Noelle’s head had already been split open, he punched me instead. No fair.

The summons was retracted and canceled. Between tending to Noelle, getting a lecture from April (who showed up late), and cleaning up the building, it was already well after noon. It was another day with no dungeon diving. Arwin had a meeting with the party planned, so I left her and went home. I’d

made her eat a hard candy, so at least for now, I knew she would be fine.

For punishment, today would be a festival of eggplant. I'd throw in some bell peppers, too, and she'd have to eat every bite. As I approached the house, I noticed there was a white piece of paper flapping around on the gate.

It was a third mystery note.

*Ghoul forsaken by God.*

*I will give you an ending worthy of a coward.*

*The hammer of righteousness will soon descend.*

*And you will never fall under the sun again.*

I looked down at my feet. There were recent prints that did not belong to me, and they'd come to the gate and turned around.

It was at this point that I realized I had made a terrible mistake.

That night, after a dinner full of malevolent stares, Arwin went to sleep, and I ventured outside with a candle lantern. I turned a few corners and headed down a narrow alley. After a while, I found some gentlemen of the street sleeping in my path. This was a *social gathering* for such types. As I approached, they scattered to the wind. One such gentleman did not bother to flee; he sat huddled with exhaustion. His pants were frayed, and his sleeves and collar were torn at the ends. He'd probably been beaten. When I brought the light closer, I could see fresh bruises on his face.

"You all right?"

"Y-yeah."

He was still young. When he saw my face, he looked as though he'd just met the devil.

"What's wrong? Flabbergasted at what a handsome man I am?"

Sweat began to pour from the gentleman's face. I set down the lantern and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"You're the one who was placing those stupid letters at my house."

"Wh-what—?"

Before he could offer a rebuttal, I grabbed his ankle and flipped it over. There was white powder on the underside of his shoe.

"I crushed some shell powder and spread it around near the entrance. It looked just like this."

Fear and nervousness appeared on his face. "H-how..."

"How did I know? It's simple. All three were placed when we weren't home. In other words, someone was watching us from somewhere."

The neighbors around here were all people of status. If there was any place suited for keeping watch on our home, it was at the end of the street. In other words, a gentleman of the street. Once I had an idea, the rest was simple: just ask the guards. *Do you happen to know about any fools who might be setting up shop around my house?* And sure enough, it turned out there was a newcomer to the area who didn't understand the finer points of territory and where it was safe to do business.

"You're after me, aren't you? So here I am, like you wanted."

All those mystery letters were meant for *my* eyes. Arwin assumed they were about her, which is why I fell into the same way of thinking, but a closer reading showed that they applied to my old self, too. Especially the parts about being "forsaken by God" and "never falling under the sun again."

"I recognize your face. Are you a relative of someone I gave a love tap to years back?"

"Dale the Bear-Killer was my brother."

It was an ostentatious epithet, but I didn't recognize it. I didn't know the whole life story of every person I'd killed.

"I've been looking for you ever since. Especially once I heard that you earned God's wrath at the Tower of the Sun God and had to retire from adventuring.

Then, not long ago, I saw you being kicked at the market while protecting an old man.”

So it looked heroic to him, did it? I was merely helpless to stop the thugs from beating me.

“Then you followed me long enough to figure out where I lived, but you didn’t have the guts to beat me up, so you just left these shitty poems as a prank instead.”

I clenched his shoulder, and the gentleman twitched with terror. For a guy who’d been persistently chasing his brother’s killer, he didn’t have much skill or courage. And in fact, his face had a certain quality to it. He’d probably been born to a rich family. Perhaps the revenge quest was a way to prove himself to his relatives.

“Y-you gonna kill me, too? Go ahead. Do it. I’m ready for the worst,” he said through trembling lips.

“Put out your hand.” I dropped a small purse in his hand. Silver and copper coins clinked and slid inside. “I ain’t such a tight-ass that I’d kill someone for writing on two or three pieces of paper. It’s not worth getting my hands dirty. Take the money and use it to get back home. And have this, too.”

Next, I handed him a knife in a sheath.

“It ain’t much, but it’ll help you on the road.” I stood up. “If I see you again, you’re a dead man. Now get out of here.”

I picked up the lantern and headed back the way I’d come. After about ten steps, I turned back and saw that the young man was clutching the purse and wiping at his tears. He stood up and bowed to me, then turned around and walked in the other direction.

I called out over his shoulder. “The knife’s been sharpened, so be careful when you take it out.”

The moment the young man turned back, a shadow grabbed him from the side. They toppled to the ground together, at which point the figure grabbed the man’s trousers, breathing heavily, and tried to wrench the purse away. He was a gentleman of the street.

“Get off! Go away!”

He desperately tried to protect his new prize, but then another compatriot appeared from the other side. He kicked the young man in the face and punched him a few times. There was a beastly roar. He was trying to draw the knife when a third man appeared. They held the young man’s arms, immobilizing him. There was a series of heavy *thuds*. With each blow, I saw the man’s legs spasm. I could even see the shards of shell falling off the bottom of his shoe.

Once he was no longer moving, the other fellows took the purse and knife and vanished down the alley in the other direction. I made my way closer, stumbling intentionally to look shocked. Once closer, I could see that he was dead.

“Oh no, I can’t believe it. I’m so sorry. If only I’d known this was going to happen!”

I fell to a knee and made a show of howling. The gentlemen of the street around here were hardened survivors, and they weren’t going to let some outsider waltz through their territory with a fresh bag of coins. They would have just taken the money alone, but once he had a weapon, they resorted to more extreme measures. Nobody wanted to get hurt or to die.

He wasn’t worth dirtying my hands over, but I also didn’t want him going back home and telling people that I was alive. Most importantly, he carried the heavy sin of burdening the princess knight’s heart. I gave him a chance to survive. But he made the wrong choice and got unlucky. Poor sap.

“I’m so sorry. Forgive me!”

If I were on stage, I’d be getting a standing ovation for my moving monologue. I turned and headed home, wallowing in my sorrow.

The next night, Arwin and I ate dinner together. The menu was eggplant and ground beef; pickled eggplant; and eggplant, tomato, and cucumber salad.

“Today’s the last of it, so eat up.”

“I’ve eaten enough for a lifetime...”

Arwin groaned, looking pale. It was an ironic thing to say, given that the eggplant was all that she had left behind.

“You have to eat your fill and build strength if you want to fight.”

Noelle’s wounds were healing quickly, so they were planning to go back into the dungeon tomorrow. I’d told her that the mystery notes were from someone who knew me years ago, and that I’d given him some money and told him to leave. I wasn’t lying—he just got killed seconds after I walked away.

“I’m more likely to *lose* my strength,” the princess knight complained. I had just picked up the fork and pushed a bite of eggplant toward her when there was a knock at the door.

“I’ll get it,” she said, bolting to her feet with a force unbecoming of a noblewoman. There was a huge smile on her face as she headed for the door. How rude when we were in the middle of dinner. I followed behind.

“It’s an emergency, Highness,” Noelle said, as soon as the door was open. Not again.

“What is it? Are those sisters coming after us again?”

“Correct.”

The door swung fully open. Two identical faces appeared: Cecilia and Beatrice Maretto. After Arwin had beaten them up the day before, their faces had been swollen to twice their usual size, but now they were perfectly normal again.

“What do you want?”

“We’re here to settle things.” Beatrice handed Arwin a bottle of expensive wine. “Don’t worry, it’s not poisoned. We’re sorry about yesterday. I’ll admit that I had the wrong idea about you. I thought that being a princess meant you were a smug and spoiled bitch, but it turns out you’re actually a real badass bitch. That punch of yours is nasty. It felt *good*,” Beatrice babbled excitedly.

“Um...oh,” Arwin stammered.

“And I’m sorry to the little one for cracking her head open. I’ll make it up to you,” Cecilia said pleasantly. “We’ll put the whole unified party plan on hold for now. If you ever change your mind, you know where to find us. We’d be happy



to team up.”

“And you expect us to trust you after that?” Noelle interjected. She was finding this sudden message of contrition unbelievable after such a vicious fight just yesterday. But their reasoning was simple.

“I like strong people.”

Beatrice was an adventurer, too. If you demonstrated your strength to her, she stopped looking down on you, and might even find respect and courtesy. Adventurers were believers. They believed in strength and worshipped it.

“Does the same go for you?”

“If Bea’s fine with it, then I’m fine with it,” Cecilia said, looking away. It wasn’t that she was unconvinced, as much as uncaring, or bored. She had nothing to add. So I had no reason to harm them, either. If I killed them in these circumstances, the suspicion would fall on Arwin.

“We’re sorry for all of that. We were the ones who struck first. We’d like to take this occasion to apologize,” said Arwin, bowing.

“I-I’m sorry for what I did,” Noelle said a moment later.

Beatrice smiled and clapped her hands. “Then this puts it all behind us. Let’s try to get off on a better foot this time.”

“Is that actually possible? There’s only one treasure.”

“Now really, Sissy, do you have to be so cynical?”

“You’re too nice, Bea.” Cecilia walked around Beatrice and hugged her from behind. “You’re generous and merciful and enveloping, just like Grandma’s tummy.” She rested her chin on her sister’s shoulder and wheedled, “Are we done now? I want to go drinking.”

“Oh, Sissy. You can’t do anything without my help, can you?” Beatrice said, petting her sister’s head. “Anyway, we’re going back into the dungeon tomorrow. Just don’t forget...*we’re* the ones who’ll be conquering the Millennium of Midnight Sun in the end.”

She smirked cockily and turned her back on us.

“So long. Let’s meet up again sometime.”

“Cecilia Maretto. Beatrice Maretto.”

The sisters turned back when Arwin called out to them.

“I refuse the unified party plan, but I might be amenable to your cooperative strategy. As long as we split it half-and-half.”

Beatrice said she would consider it and turned away again. Cecilia clung to her sister like a drunk as they left the yard.

“Well, shall we continue our dinner? Would you care to join us, Noelle?”

“Don’t mind me—I’ve already eaten. About tomorrow, Highness...”

Arwin and Noelle started to discuss their plans, so I went back to the kitchen to prepare for the rest of the dinner.

After a little while, I heard the door close. Arwin came back looking happy. In fact, it was almost creepy how big her smile was.

“I just heard from Noelle about how you were protecting an old man in the South Market the other day.”

“Hmm? Yeah,” I murmured, feeling my heart beat faster. That was a topic I didn’t want brought up, by the exact person I didn’t want it brought up by. Dammit, Noelle, why did you tell her that? Was this going to turn into a total disaster?

“That’s wonderful. I’m proud of you, Matthew. You did well. But why didn’t you tell me about it?”

She leaned closer. I would’ve loved a kiss, but it seemed that the line of questioning was her main intent here.

“I didn’t think it was worth bringing up. The only thing it did was get me beat up.”

“So you didn’t think it was worth bringing up that the old man gave you those *purple abominations* as thanks?”

There was nothing but darkness before my eyes. In the distance, I saw an execution stand.

“No, well, you see—”

“Others who witnessed the incident said that you also accepted some meat and other vegetables from them. You’re so popular.”

“.....”

“The question is, if you got so many *abominations* and other ingredients for free, where did the grocery money go, in the end? I don’t suppose you still have it on your person.”

I was strapped down on the stand. The only thing left was for the executioner to swing the ax, and poor Matthew’s life would come to a swift end.

“Speak honestly. What did you spend it on?” she asked.

At this point, lying and equivocation would not work on her. I just had to suck it up and take the blow.

“...On a nice lady. She was a witness to the scene in the market. And she said she’d give me a good deal.”

“Meaning that you fed me *abominations* that you got for free, and used the money you saved to sleep with another woman?” Arwin nodded to herself, pondering this information. The executioner’s ax in my mind glinted cruelly. “And how was it?”

This was my chance to say something, anything that would improve her mood the tiniest bit. Like, *It was no big deal*, or *She had nothing on you*. I ought to make the effort to improve my chances of survival, but my innately contrarian nature caused me to go temporarily insane.

“It was incredible.”

If I could see my face in a mirror, I was sure that I’d see the biggest smile I’d ever worn.

“I see. So it was good.”

“Yeah.”

“I see.”

Arwin laughed. I couldn't help but join in. Our laughter filled the dining room.

Eventually, it died out. Arwin brushed away the tears in her eyes and exhaled, then turned to me.

“Matthew.”

“What?”

“Go to hell.”

It was a death sentence, straight from the princess knight herself.

I don't want to talk about what happened after that, and I don't intend to. Don't make me remember it. Simply be satisfied to know that I am still alive, and we'll leave it at that.

If there is a moral to be found in this story, something useful that can be taken away from my misery, it should be, *Even your own issues will not go the way you want, so it's natural that the rest of the world won't, either.*

But if you let life carry you along and do nothing on your own, you might as well not be living.

Crawl on your belly and surrender, and you only get stomped on.

That was something I'd learn in copious detail later, from none other than the drunken sun god and the dungeon.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### The Clergyman's Apostasy

Despite the incident, Arwin's party, Aegis, continued to delve further and further into the Millennium of Midnight Sun. They were in constant competition with the Maretto Sisters and other contemporaries to get further in the dungeon.

The very front line was not the only place that was lively these days. When the best adventurers were making great strides, the folks below them were emboldened to step their game up and push further, too.

In short, the guild was extremely busy. The staffers were frantic trying to deal with adventurers and fulfill tasks and orders. To contribute, April was a stenographer for those who couldn't read or write. She was going all over the place on errands and deliveries, too.

All of this meant that they were desperate for even a kept man's help, and she was now subcontracting me to do tasks for her. I had a bag slung over my back, and more bags on each arm for her.

"You're always coming and going from the guild anyway, so you might as well be on staff, Matthew," April complained, holding a brown bag of her own. From a distance, we looked like a father and daughter walking down the main street. But from my perspective, we were a young lady and her mule. "You'd just be drinking, anyway. The least you can do is carry things for me."

"For free?"

"It's your fault for cheating your way out of working, when you could have just taken the job."

She was still going on about that? I didn't want to be Dez's subordinate,

though. He had no idea what the word *moderation* meant.

“For one thing, Matthew—” April said, launching into another personal gripe, when the ground under our feet lurched. I leaned over her and pushed her head down.

“Don’t move. Duck and keep your head down.”

The buildings around us were swaying slightly and rumbling.

It was an earthquake.

Shouts arose around us. Cracks appeared in the stone walls. Tiles slid off roofs and fell to the ground before my eyes. April let the bag slip from her hand, covered her head with her arms, and screamed.

“You’re fine. It won’t hit you.”

We were in the center of the street, as far as possible from the buildings on either side. If the structures themselves weren’t crumbling, we would be fine. This would subside soon.

As I expected, the shaking grew weaker and weaker until it finally stopped. Relief flooded the air.

“You can stand up now. That was scary, huh?”

“Yeah. Thank you... I’m all right,” she said, even though her face was pale.

“Let’s go back for today. I’m sure things are crazy at the guild right now. The old man’s going to want to see you, to know you’re safe and sound.”

I scooped up the brown sack and started walking. April trotted to catch up to me and held on to my sleeve with both hands. This made it hard to carry the stuff, but I wasn’t boorish enough to scold her for it.

In the shops along the street, they were placing toppled items back on their shelves and cleaning up the tiles and fragments of wall that littered the ground. Some people had fallen over in surprise, or been hurt by fallen roofing, but no one seemed to have died.

“That was a big one,” April murmured.

“It sure was. I thought I was going to pass out.”

“There was a big quake a while back, and then again two days ago. I wonder what’s going on.”

“Well, there’s nothing you can do about nature itself.” There was a first time for everything. Something that had never happened before could just as easily happen tomorrow. “But if this wasn’t a natural earthquake, we’ve got a problem on our hands.”

“What kind of problem?”

“A stampede.”

That was the term for a massive spawn of monsters. There was a much longer and more elaborate term, but most people just called it a stampede. It was caused by either a major monster migration in search of food, or a wild rush sparked by panic.

This was a phenomenon that could happen anywhere in the world, but when it stemmed from the dungeon, the danger level skyrocketed. In that case, it was still a sudden influx of monsters, but mostly, settlements sprang up around dungeons—hence the term *dungeon cities*—so if monsters suddenly stampeded through the middle of a city, the results would be hellish, and the casualties astronomical. And the harbinger of a dungeon stampede was earthquakes.

“Dungeon cities are always surrounded by castle walls, like this one. Do you know why that is?”

“So the monsters can’t get inside the city?”

“It’s the opposite,” I said, shaking my head. “It’s to keep the monsters that spill out of the dungeon trapped within the city.”

That was why the walls around a dungeon city had ballista ports and catapults facing both the outside *and* inside.

“Some places also build multiple rings of walls, or interior walls around each main thoroughfare, to divide up the town. The important thing is to not let them get *out*. This is a prison for monsters.”

“But what about the people who live in the towns...?”

“They get an evacuation warning. If they’re too late, they’re too late.”

April covered her mouth in horror. If monsters spread, the damage would be even greater. And the powerful people in charge considered some amount of sacrifice to be a necessary evil. That was what it meant to live in a place like this.

“But there aren’t any gates that split up the inside of Gray Neighbor.”

“Nope.”

However many years had passed since this town was built, I’d never heard of any stories or records of a stampede occurring. For that reason, the development of the town’s defenses lagged behind others.

There were no gates dividing up the town, and though the wall around Gray Neighbor was thick, there was only one. The city had grown before such structures could be erected, and the zoning and development weren’t moving along as quickly as desired, though I suspected that was just an excuse. They didn’t want to spend the time and money on defenses, that was all.

“Then if a stampede starts here...”

“We’re screwed.” I gave the worried little squirt a pat on the head. “Look, we’re here.”

The gate to the Adventurers Guild was right before us. Sure enough, there was an uproar in progress over the earthquake.

“I’ll go and unload this stuff over there. You go check out the building. If another quake starts, hide under a desk. You can run out after the shaking’s stopped.”

This didn’t seem to have assuaged her concerns, but she was in a more productive state of mind now, and nodded to indicate that she was ready to do the job.

“Also, don’t go talking about what we were just discussing. It’s all theoretical.”

I didn’t want to get a beating from the city guards because I’d started a rumor about the town being in imminent danger. April might be fine, but I’d get locked in jail.



“And whatever you do, *do not* discuss a stampede around Arwin. Please.”

“All right. Why not?”

I hesitated, then sighed.

“Because they say it was a stampede that started the monster swarm that destroyed her homeland.”

The Kingdom of Mactarode was destroyed by a massive swarm of monsters, and she lost her country. But where did those monsters *come from*?

They were still there today and showed no sign of leaving the land behind. Some said it was the mountains that bordered Mactarode that were keeping them all in, but nobody knew for certain.

The real reason was a mystery to this day, but the most convincing theory was that it was a stampede. Perhaps there was an undiscovered dungeon within Mactarode’s borders, and things went awry for some reason, causing a stampede that destroyed the royal city and ransacked the land.

But there were problems with this theory, too. A stampede was a temporary event. As time passed, the monsters calmed down and returned to their original habitats. If it happened in a dungeon, then the assumption was that most of them would return to that dungeon. But the Mactarode territory was still choked with monsters to this day.

No one was foolhardy enough to charge through their midst to find the real cause. Or maybe someone was—but they never came back alive to reveal their findings.

Therefore, the truth was lost in the darkness.

“In that case, maybe the same thing will happen here as what happened to Mactarode—”

“What was that about my country?” said a voice right behind us. Our gallant princess knight had returned.

“Ah, welcome back. You made it out just fine, I take it? That’s good.”

Arwin grunted and nodded.

“Oh!” April said. “There was a huge earthquake earlier. You didn’t get hurt, did you?”

“I didn’t really feel anything down there. It looks like it shook things up quite a lot up here, though,” Arwin replied, glancing around at the damage. “So what was that about Mactarode?”

April panicked and looked away. She had no idea what to say to the princess knight about her lost kingdom. So I had to give her a helping hand.

“We were talking about it a moment ago. Wondering what your country was like.”

All I knew was that it was a small country surrounded by mountains; I’d never been there. It had a centuries-long history, but no particular exports or sightseeing locations of note. If it was famous for anything, it was the Crimson Princess Knight herself.

“It was a nice place,” Arwin said with a smile. “I wouldn’t say that it was a rich area, but it was at least wealthy enough in crops to feed its citizens, and there was little crime. The lakes glittered, the woods were lush, and the towns shone. I love my homeland.” The pleasant wave of nostalgia coloring her expression gave way to something much fiercer. “Which is why I will take it back. Whatever the cost. Whatever I must do.”

“You’re going to frighten the girl. Relax, relax,” I said, massaging the princess knight’s shoulders from behind. Through her shoulder guard, the effect was surely negligible at best, but she got the point.

Arwin grinned and took April’s hand. “If there’s anything else you want to know, just ask. In fact, as soon as I’ve restored the kingdom to its former self, you’ll have a personal invitation to visit. I’ll give you a tour.”

“Really?” April smiled.

“I promise.”

“Great.”

Arwin needed to take care of business inside, so she and April went toward

the guild building.

“Hey, Matthew!” called out a guild staffer, just as I was about to turn and leave, having dropped off my baggage. “The guildmaster wants to see you.”

“I hear you’ve been filling my granddaughter’s head with strange ideas.”

“You called me in here for that?”

Word got around quick. I suppose that made sense—her guards were also monitors keeping a close watch on her.

The man before me was around sixty years of age. His name was Gregory. Despite his stern looks, on the inside he was, in fact, even worse. This was the master of the Adventurers Guild, and April’s grandfather.

“Tell me the facts, then. Do you have a plan in case of a stampede?” I asked. The entrance of the dungeon was right across from the guild. If monsters burst out of there, this would be the battle’s front line.

“I have increased the number of watchmen, and we’re prepared to hunker down for a siege if something arises. I plan to double our food stores.”

“That’s just shuffling cards,” I said. A monster stampede wasn’t the kind of thing you could ride out with whatever you had on hand.

“To tell the truth, they were talking about building things properly around the time I first came here,” he said.

“Oh?”

“The lord at the time put together a budget and got the king to fund it, but at some point, the plans went up in smoke. That money managed to find its way elsewhere.”

Sounded like a typical story.

“I’m sure the real reason is that they didn’t want to spend a bunch of gold on something that *might* happen *someday*. As long as they got through their generation without it happening, they didn’t care.”

Whatever happened later was for those future people to figure out.

“And now it sounds like the bill is due, and we’re the ones on the hook,” I said.

“You? And what are you gonna do to pay that bill? Huh, pretty boy?” The guildmaster snorted. “I’ll tell you what: You’re going to stay at home and caress your little princess’s bum.”

“I’d love to hear you say that again in front of your granddaughter.” Old Grandpa might not be her favorite anymore.

“You’re the wrong man to be lecturin’ anyone about morals.”

“Didn’t you hear? Back home, I was known far and wide as a devout, godly man.”

“Ah, right. I remember now.” The guildmaster leaned back lazily in his chair, which screeched in protest. “We have a very honorable guest here to see you. That’s the real reason I had you brought in.”

“A beautiful thirty-something widow with big tits and more ass than she knows what to do with? Sounds wonderful.”

“I hate to ruin your fantasy, but this one’s much more virtuous than that.”

There was a knock at the door. A staffer opened it up and ushered in a familiar face.

“We meet again.”

The sigil of the Earth Mother glinted over his chest. Justin the inquisitor proceeded forward and gave me a civil bow.

“I was hoping we wouldn’t,” I said. He was indeed the virtuous type. I bet he was a virgin.

“You have my belated apologies for the other day. I was less than courteous,” Justin said, his head still bowed. “And despite this, I would like to make a request of you.”

He wanted to speak to me in private, so we went to one of the Adventurers Guild’s private rooms. It was just next door to the room where I’d recently been with Arwin, discussing a matter that was not meant for public ears. This time, I was alone with a creepy priest.

“What’s this about?” Being alone with a holy man in a cramped room? I had to assume he was after my chastity.

“You remember that man in the suit of armor the other day?”

I couldn’t forget it. The armored figure had showed up in search of the Shroud of Bereni, but when Justin clobbered it, the armor was empty inside, save for some strange goop. And after that, it had somehow discovered the location of the real Shroud of Bereni in Gloria’s apartment and stolen it from her.

We examined the armor left behind, but it was completely ordinary. The identity of the figure was still unknown.

“Do you know why he was after the Shroud of Bereni?”

“I seem to recall something about wanting to be human again.”

“In truth, he was a preacher for the sun god.” For an instant, my breath stopped. I’d thought it was a creepy and unsavory figure, and now I knew why. If only I’d known, I would have killed it when I had the chance. “And now I know why he is here. He intends to agitate the dungeon and cause a stampede,” he said.

“For what purpose?”

“After a stampede, the number of monsters spawning inside the dungeon is lowered, and those that appear are weaker than usual.”

“Meaning it’s the perfect opportunity to rush for the Astral Crystal.”

Justin nodded. “If there’s a stampede, there will of course be massive death and destruction. I came to this town to prevent such an outcome. I’d like to handle this clandestinely, if possible.”

Well, naturally. If word got out, there’d be a panic.

“How did you learn about this?” I asked. “I assume you didn’t find it written on some church bulletin or pamphlet.”

“We captured a follower of the sun god the other day and extracted the information from him. Sol Magni, I believe the cult is called? Its founder received a ‘revelation,’ he said.”

The sun god chose suitable followers from his flock and gave them “revelations” and special powers for them to do his bidding.

“Now that they have the Shroud of Bereni, they’re certain to carry out their plan. We don’t have any time. We have to find that armored man and put an end to him for good.”

There was a certain logic to all of this.

“I understand that you want to stop him. But why are you telling me? As you know, I’m just a lowly and weak kept man.”

“I don’t have the proper view of this place. It would be too difficult to find a monster hidden in an unfamiliar place.”

“Do you at least know what he looks like?”

“Why would that matter?”

True. He was always in a full suit of armor.

Justin looked around the room and said, “Also, I thought that, given your hatred of the sun god, you might be happy to help the cause, Mardukas the Giant-Eater.”

“Was that a revelation from the Earth Mother?”

Justin’s lips curled with distaste. “Let’s just say that I have eyes and ears of my own.”

“You seem to have confused me with someone else,” I said, “but all right, I’m willing to help you. Only if it’s worth my while, of course. Surely you wouldn’t say that all service to god should be done freely and willingly by the devout.”

He placed a bag of gold coins before me. “I was intending to make a very hefty *purchase* the other day, which I no longer need to do. If you happen to find the item, tell me, and you may have all of this.”

I whistled softly. “How many true believers did you have to swindle to make this much money?”

“If you don’t care for it, I’ll try someone else.”

“I’m just kidding. I would gladly undertake this quest for the glory of the Earth

Mother.”

Justin frowned with displeasure, but only briefly. He stuck his hand into the bag of coins. “Here’s an advance,” he said, and thrust a handful of them at me. What a bold fellow. “You’ll get the rest once we’ve caught that armored figure. I’m counting on you.”

Now that he’d given me part of the reward, I couldn’t refuse. In any case, knowing that the puke-caked sun god was involved, I was going to do whatever it took to clobber him. He was like a turd floating in circles through sewage water. And from what Roland had said, more preachers were coming to this town. I needed to gather more information.

The next day, I started my search for the thing inside the suit of armor. One would assume that trying to find a particular man whose name and face were unknown would be impossible. But doing nothing would produce nothing.

The first thing to do was try the only real clue I had. I visited the guard stations at the town gates. In the interest of time, I paid them a small information fee, and they coughed up everything they knew. There were four gates, one in each cardinal direction. I asked at the busiest gates in order, from south to north to east to west, but none said they’d seen someone wearing a full set of armor.

“I’d definitely remember if I saw someone dressed like that.”

No one went around dressed in full plate from head to toe in a country that wasn’t at war. And an old-fashioned suit like that one would stick out even more. It *should* be a very memorable sight.

I did not get any statements about a suit of armor passing through a town gate. And it didn’t seem to me like they were being paid off to remain silent. I did, however, receive an interesting bit of testimony from the guard at the east gate in charge of inspecting belongings.

He had seen an armorer bringing in a wooden box holding a set of armor that resembled what I had described. He’d looked inside the armor, just in case, but it was empty. Most likely he had taken off the armor to go through the gate,

then put it back on once he was through. But that still raised more questions.

How had he slipped through the checkpoint? Was he just like a real human being in appearance, or did this have something to do with that strange substance that stuck to my fingers on the inside of the armor?

I still had many questions, but at least there was a general route to follow.

For my next strategy, I headed for the armorer who'd brought the set into town. Either he, or someone in his vicinity, could be the wearer of that set of armor. Thankfully, the guard who did the search remembered the name of the store.

I headed to the store with high hopes but did not gain any knowledge about the inside of the suit. Instead, I learned more about the armor itself—it had been stolen.

"It ain't a product to sell. I was thinking I might put it on display in my home," he said. It was old, heavy, and impossible to sell, which was why an acquaintance had given it to him as a decoration. I asked him about the person who stole the armor in the first place, but he didn't seem to know.

"If he wanted to steal somethin', there's plenty of armor that's worth more and is easier to carry. It makes no sense."

I might have cast my gaze to the sky and lamented the dead end, but I had a sudden inspiration. "Are there any other shops that handle armor like that one?"

Why that particular set of armor, out of all the full-body sets in the world? Most likely it was because it was close at hand and could completely hide the figure's body.

The armored figure didn't want to be seen. And the gunk inside the discarded armor that stuck to my finger might have something to do with that.

Since the figure had discarded it at the hideout of the Earth Mother's church, it would probably have stolen another set of armor to wear from somewhere else.

He gave me the names of a few other armor shops, and I continued on my



way. The third one was what I was looking for. This one featured several full suits of armor. And it was also right down the street from the Church of the Earth Mother. I asked around the store and in the neighborhood but didn't get any eyewitness accounts. Either he'd been hiding somewhere without setting down a single toe outside, or he was only moving around in the middle of the night. Just in case, I asked about any likely hiding spots in the area, but only received funny looks in return.

My lead had hit a dead end again. I stopped at the side of the road to drink some water and take a break.

The sky overhead was cloudy. I'd made the right decision to bring in the laundry this morning. I did my own laundry and took Arwin's to a professional. I would've liked to wash her clothes, too, but hers had fine fabrics, and took a lot of time and effort to wash. The thought of damaging the delicate material was bad enough; I didn't want to leave it out to dry and find out that it got a strange smell on it, either.

So what next? I couldn't just give up now. I didn't want to let the follower of that pig-slop sun god roam free, and just as importantly, I couldn't leave all that money on the table.

"Hey," someone said. I looked up to see Vincent the Paladin. "What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"Taking a break. And how about yourself?"

"I'm on duty," he said brusquely, and turned away from me. "Begone. You're underfoot."

"Geez, what the hell?" It wasn't like I was sleeping in the middle of the street. "If you're that on edge, your stakeout isn't going to go very well."

Vincent grabbed my shirt. "What do you know?"

"I know there's something going if you're here."

Vincent was almost never alone. He probably had a few people on lookout nearby, while he came to inspect the scene in person. And then he spotted me, or received a report that I was here, and came over to investigate.

“...It’s none of your business.”

“You paused for a second there. Does that mean it *is* my business?”

“No. I said no.”

“Does it have something to do with Sol Magni?”

Vincent’s face froze. He’d treated me like a follower of the sun god earlier. I had my suspicions that he was doing something related to the sun god—bingo.

“Tell me more. Or else I might have to start shouting secrets at the top of my lungs.”

Vincent made a face and dragged me off the street and into the shadows. He stressed that what he was about to tell me was of the utmost secrecy.

“Sol Magni has been using every means to grow their base and expand their influence. Apparently, the son of a very powerful house is among their number.”

Ahh, so they’d reeled in another Roland, then.

“This man recently took a large sum of money from his home and vanished. It seems that he’s being sheltered in Sol Magni’s base.”

And so the order to save the insane rich boy from the crazed religious cult had fallen to the Paladins. Good luck, fellas.

“So raid their compound and throw ’em all in jail. You have the authority to do that, right?”

“We’ve gone into a number of their gatherings but didn’t find anyone matching the description. It seems they’re hiding in a secret lair. I suspect that’s where their weapons are, too.”

“Weapons?”

“There’s been word that Sol Magni has been buying up weapons and armor in recent days. We’re asking around for more information right now.”

And they were concerned that the money the little rich lad brought them was key to that process.

“You’re doing it in person? The captain?”

“We’re short on personnel.”

He’d been so busy firing all the dirty officials working for him that he had no choice but to do their work himself. Either he was a man of great responsibility, or he was diligent to the point of stupidity.

“From what we’ve learned, they have nearly a hundred weapons. I suspect that they’ve been raising funds from other believers that I don’t know about.”

Religion was a big business, apparently. Maybe I should start a religion, too. I could call it Princess Knight-ianity.

“Why don’t you just grab every believer you see and haul them in for a little *fun and games*?”

Vincent looked uncomfortable at the pointed reminder of what he’d done to me. “Most of them are completely ignorant,” he said. “They’re simply intoxicated by the allure of terms like happiness after death, and revelations.”

They reached out to the poor and offered them food, clothing, and a place to sleep. First they provided, then they taught them their creed. Once they’d completely soaked their new converts’ minds in their twisted teachings, they had brand-new puppets to control. When the time came for their uprising, they would agitate their members and turn them into soldiers ready to be martyrs.

“There must be a reason we met here. I’ll help you out,” I said. It was unlikely that I’d end up finding that armored figure following only the trail of the armor itself. But if he was a preacher for the sun god, he might have a connection to their flock. There was a possibility that the figure was a believer himself, or in hiding among them, at the very least.

“Get lost.”

Well, that wasn’t very kind. But I had my own reasons. I wasn’t going to give up and leave now.

“You want information, don’t you? I know more about what’s happening in this town than your average gentlemen of the street, even.”

“.....”

“It shouldn’t be this hard of a decision. The safety of this young man is the

highest priority, am I wrong?"

Vincent clicked his tongue. With a venomous look, he muttered, "Only this one time."

"If the kid wasn't abducted, then he had to have been recruited somewhere. You got any ideas about that?"

"We questioned a suspicious woman on East Main Street yesterday. She appeared to be a traveling entertainer of some kind; she had quite distinct features."

Yes, I'd seen her too. But I had moved on quickly because I was worried about Arwin at the time.

"We asked her about the young man, and she said that she only took him somewhere because she was asked to. She'd never seen the man who asked for it before. From what we could tell, she was also asking around for mercenaries and tough guys who might be good in a fight."

So that was why she flagged me down. At the very least, I looked like a big, burly man. It was a strange story, but plenty of people would happily dive headfirst into a job like that if it got them paid.

"So where was this place she took him?"

Vincent turned and jutted his chin out. There was a brightly colored two-story building across the way. It was the same damn brothel where they'd been hiding Cody and Rita.

It was very easy to see why a pampered little noble boy might willingly venture into such a place.

"Isn't that the Earth Mother's...?"

"I'm aware of the situation. The brothel is just a hiding place, isn't it? But they certainly could've been alone in a brothel. Plus, that place is unlicensed. All the conditions are right for crime."

"So what's your plan? Are you going in, or not?"

"Well, the problem is..."

He trailed off awkwardly. I had a burst of intuition.

“You’ve never been in a brothel before, have you?”

“As part of an investigation, I have.”

“But not as a visitor.”

“Certainly not!”

So he was dedicated to his wife, too. Just like Dez.

“If you’re going to raid it, the sooner the better, right?”

“We’re gathering our people now.”

What might happen to the rich boy while we were waiting for the preparations to come together? One of two things: he’d either die, or he’d catch a very embarrassing disease.

“All right, I’ll go check it out.”

“Stop.” Vincent grabbed my shoulder. “Do *not* foil this plan.”

“What do you mean? I’m not your subordinate or your noble servant.”

If I wanted to patronize their establishment as a customer, that was my prerogative.

“If you interfere with this investigation, I’ll arrest you myself.”

“Just come with me, then.”

If I was alone, I might not be able to handle the situation if it got violent. Vincent, at least, would be able to hold his own. I’d love to have a bodyguard. And standing around here arguing was the definition of pointless.

I grabbed Vincent’s arm and called out to the lady who was sweeping outside the door.

“Two girls for us, please,” I said. “Pretty ones, if you don’t mind.”

They took us to a small corner room upstairs. It was cramped but had two beds side by side. Ah, the memories. Years ago, I’d spent time with three, even

four at once. I'd been so young then.

Vincent was looking around the room uneasily. There were no chairs, so he stood right next to the door. I suggested that he sit at the edge of the bed, but he ignored me.

Since I was here again, I thought I might say hello to Rita, but from what I heard, she had already gone. She'd taken her sister and left with a young man she met here, off to live in another country. I could only pray for their good fortune and happiness.

"What is your plan right now? Surely you cannot intend to engage in intercourse right now."

"That's exactly what I'm going to do."

Vincent raised a fist, veins throbbing on his temple. It was just a joke.

"In short, we're going to make use of this place to find out if there are any crimes happening inside. It's quite simple," I said. "Listen for the voices."

The brothel was a dump. There was a constant refrain of cowlike lowing and death shrieks. That was one of the reasons Vincent had been wincing the entire time he'd been inside.

"If anyone's in here plotting bad stuff, they're not having their fun while doing it. So we check for rooms that *don't* have noise coming from them." I headed out into the hallway and listened outside of each room. "This one's fishy to me."

It was the room closest to the stairs. There were sounds of life inside, but I could barely hear any voices. And there were no smacks of kissing, or repetitive slapping noises, either. Verrrry strange.

Naturally, it was locked from the inside. But not with a key; it was more like a latch type, where a simple rod was run through a groove to keep the door shut. I stuck a needle into the gap in the door and lifted it upward.

"There, it's open."

"Out of the way!" Vincent muscled me aside and kicked the door open. "Freeze!"

He leaped into the room with his sword drawn—and froze.

There was, in fact, a naked man and woman on the bed. But they were entangled in a particular mouth-occupying activity. No wonder they weren't saying anything. That made much more sense now.

"Ah! Sincere apologies. Wrong room. Don't let us interrupt you," I said, grabbing Vincent by the back of the collar and dragging him out. Just as I was about to shut the door, a thought occurred to me, and I opened it back up a little. The man and woman were still frozen in the same position. "By the way, how is that? You'll have to let me know what you think."

"Just get out here!" Vincent roared, hauling me back into the hallway.

"I was a fool for trusting you." He ranted a steady stream of recriminations under his breath as he sped down the hallway. His face was crimson. That had been a bit too much for him.

"Hey, you jumped in there on your own. But you really did sound like a true knight when you did it. 'Freeze!'" I started laughing again at the thought of it. My stomach hurt. I was starting to fear I might die of laughter.

"Stop that."

"But hey, you learned something, didn't you? Take that one back home to your wife and try it out. She might fall in love all over again."

Vincent spun around and punched me in the face. The blow knocked me against the wall of the corridor. "Do not insult my wife."

"I'm sorry," I said. He looked truly furious. "I didn't mean to make fun. Honest. Allow me to make it up to you. I'll buy you a drink the next time we get together, Vince."

"We are not getting together for drinks, and I refuse to let you buy me anything. Also, *don't* call me Vince!" he snapped, and headed down the stairs.

"Wait a second," I said, once we were down on the ground floor. I pointed to a room. "This one's fishy, too. There haven't been any voices from here, either."

“Because it’s not in use, I assume.”

“I saw a man walk in here when we came in. He was alone.”

I reached for the knob, but it was locked from the inside. The mechanism was the same as upstairs, so I easily worked it up and out of the latch.

“Not again...”

“Quiet, Lord Carlyle.”

All done. The door slid open.

There were no visitors anywhere inside the room. The bed had not been used. There was a window, but it too was locked from the inside.

“No one’s here.”

Even Vincent had to admit this was fishy. He looked around the room while I felt around on the walls and floor, rubbing and knocking.

“Here it is.” I moved a large piece of ornamentation in the corner, and the floorboards came out with it. It was surprisingly light.

There was a staircase leading underground.

“What is this?”

“A hidden staircase.”

It was quite an elaborate contraption. But this place was run by the Church of the Earth Mother. What did it mean that the sun god’s cult was using it? Were there traitors among the Earth Mother’s followers?

Vincent walked past me and started down the stairs.

“Are you sure you don’t want to call for more help?”

“There’s no time,” he said, and descended the steps. He should know that rushing was a recipe for disaster.

But whatever. Now that we’d found the hidden staircase, it was only a matter of time until they found out about us. Better to charge in before they had a chance to muster their strength.

I followed him. The passageway was pitch-black. What could be ahead? There



was a spray of sparks, and the area was suddenly lit in pale light. Vincent had a candelabra in hand.

“When did you get a candle?”

“They were next to the stairs. I helped myself.”

Ah, so it was one of theirs. Very nice.

Vincent prowled forward, silent as a cat, his hand on the wall. Based on the texture, it was a stone passageway. The texture was worn down, which told me that people had often felt their way along like this.

The ceiling was very close. I might even hit my head if I wasn't careful. Vincent was tall, too, and looked like he was having trouble. Sometimes the world isn't made for the tall. Just when I thought we were going to be moles in a giant burrow, I saw a faint light up ahead. The passage was shorter than I expected; the exit was just in front of us. Vincent stopped, however. It was a dead end.

There was another staircase just steps away. A door was at the top of the stairs, it seemed, but it was probably locked. Vincent pushed, but it wouldn't open.

Well, that settled it. It was risky, but there was no turning back at this point.

“Whoops.” I pretended to lose my balance and knocked Vincent's candelabra to the floor, putting the light out. The underground passage was fully dark once more.

“Oh, sorry. Give me a moment,” I said, and removed the temporary sun from my pocket. “I'll handle this one. If it goes well, I might be able to undo the lock through the gap in the door.”

I chanted the magic word, producing a blaze of light. Vincent turned his face away from it. While he wasn't looking, I put a hand to the door and pushed it upward, hard. The metal latch came loose with an ugly screech. With the door open and my purpose fulfilled, I deactivated the temporary sun. There was only so much time it offered me, so I wanted to make efficient use of it.

“There, it's open.”

“What did you just do?”

“What do you mean? I pushed it. The light helped me see where it was rusted and brittle.”

“But—”

“Or maybe *she* gave me some help,” I said, showing him the temporary sun in my palm. For some reason, Vincent looked frustrated. “C’mon, let’s move. You can take the lead, Lord Carlyle.”

“I don’t need your permission.”

Vincent walked up the steps. There was the sound of combat, but only for a moment. When I reached the top, a guard was knocked out on the ground—not dead, by my estimation.

“This seems to be the enemy’s headquarters.”

Packed earthen walls surrounded us; we were still underground. There were stone caskets lined up here and there, packed with weapons and armor.

“So the catacombs are their armory,” Vincent said with anger and distaste. Depending on your view, it was either blasphemous or in bad taste. The Earth Mother’s believers couldn’t be happy about this.

“Hey, check it out.”

There was a large hole behind the line of caskets, through which candlelight was shining. I could hear voices, too. There wasn’t any lookout in sight, but just in case, I ducked behind the caskets and sneaked closer.

It was a huge hall with a vaulted ceiling and a massive goddess statue as its main feature.

It was in very poor taste. She held a huge sword high, and a massive shield in the other hand. I supposed this was the Earth Mother in battle gear. And it wasn’t a rock sculpture either, but steel. The cost must’ve been astronomical. And yet her face was cruelly disfigured.

In front of the broken statue was a stone slab that looked like a pulpit. Tied to the side of the altar was a blond-haired boy. I checked with Vincent, just to be sure, but this was clearly the rich boy we were looking for.

He was gagged, and they’d put an iron shackle around his ankle to ensure he

couldn't get away. There was no way he could escape on his own.

Before the altar was a long pew and many chairs. There were eleven in total, in fact, but half were empty. Those who sat in the others were a group of men and women of various ages. I didn't see anyone in full-body armor.

They were far enough away that it was hard to hear their voices, but it sounded like they were discussing what to do with the boy. Was it better to hold him hostage and demand money rather than killing him? Was it better to just off him and be done with it because the timing of the handoff would be the most dangerous and vulnerable moment? Either way, it didn't sound like he had much time left.

"What now?"

"We save him, of course." Vincent pulled out a sphere packed in white paper.

"Is that a smoke bomb?"

"No, it's a brightblast bomb."

A brightblast bomb confused the enemy with light and sound. Its materials were costly, but its effect was worth it. I'd used them many times as nonlethal weapons. And in an enclosed subterranean space, the echoes were likely to give you hearing loss.

"You made this?"

"It's from the Paladins' stock."

They have them just lying around? Well, it was bound to be worse than the ones made by a certain Beardo.

"I'll watch them and wait for the right moment," he said. "When I give the signal, you run into their midst and get them riled up. That'll be my cue to throw this. While they're faltering, you help the boy escape."

"So I'm supposed to be a decoy?"

"You chose to follow me. The least you can do is make yourself useful."

I didn't know knights were allowed to be so abusive.

"All right, let's do this."

“Not so fast.”

The voice was not directed at us, however.

Below the statue, an intruder with gray hair had appeared. He seemed to be somewhere around forty or fifty years old, dressed in black, with hazel-brown eyes that were narrow and sharp. While he looked gentle, there was a dangerous aura I could sense deep behind those eyes. He held a gem-embedded staff, whose end he pointed at the seated people. When had he appeared?

“Who’s that guy?”

Even Vincent seemed troubled by the intruder’s arrival.

“Return the child to his parents. If you heed my command, I will not harm you.”

A large man, probably hired muscle, threw his chair at the intruder. He was going to charge the man when he was distracted dodging or blocking the projectile.

But the intruder did not avoid it. He sent a bolt of lightning out of the end of the staff. With a powerful crack, it sent the chair flying away, and the man tumbled to the ground. He was only unconscious, by the look of it.

“I will repeat myself. Remain seated,” he said, a warning to those who were about to jump him next. There was no doubt about it—while it seemed a bit different, that was definitely the voice that had come from the suit of armor. Was he the one who had been inside of it? He was just some old guy.

Plus, the height was all different. He’d been shorter before. Was he using magic to control the suit of armor on its own? Or did he have a familiar or agent of some kind lurking inside of it? I couldn’t be sure what he was capable of. And strangest of all, why was the man trying to rescue the boy? Weren’t these people on the same side?

Vincent wasn't sure whether he should act, either.

"Have no fear. I am on your side," the strange man said, untying the boy's rope. A metal circle cut through the darkness. It did not hit him, but it did cause the man to back away from the boy.

"I've found you, Nicholas Burns," said a voice thick with hatred and triumph. It was Justin, the inquisitor of the Earth Mother. What was he doing here? "The stray hounds roused you out of your hole, did they? I'm shocked that you chose to show yourself."

"So it's you. I don't approve of attacking first and asking questions later." The man he called Nicholas waved the staff and caused a ripple of lightning. "What if the boy had been hurt?"

Justin ducked and avoided the thunderbolts, then came charging in with his chakrams in hand. He swung with enough power to crush bone if it landed, yet he touched nothing but air.

Nicholas had bent his knees and leaned backward to avoid it, as smooth and flexible as a willow bough. After the attack passed by him, he straightened his knees and slammed the end of his staff into Justin's exposed side. There was a muffled grunt and the sound of breaking bone.

"I'm not surprised. You've been on the run for *decades* now at this point. That takes skill."

"I detest violence, you see. I suggest you surrender."

"Same to you." The young boy had been taken hostage by the sun god's believers. "Drop your staff, Nicholas Burns. The time has come to atone for your sins."

"It is not I who will be atoning, but the sun god."

"Bullshit."

A knife was pressed to the rich boy's throat. Nicholas threw his staff aside.

"You're finished," Justin muttered with relish as he pounced. He drew his sword as he ran and slashed into Nicholas's chest.

Dark red liquid spurted from his mouth. Justin changed his grip on the sword

and jammed it backhand through Nicholas's chest this time. It pierced from his left breast through his back. Nicholas's hands spasmed, then he collapsed. The man in black sank into a pool of blood.

"That was surprisingly anticlimactic. How's this? Even you can't get away now." He stepped on Nicholas's face. "This sword is infused with the power of my god. The time of judgment has arrived. You will be at peace soon."

He pawed through Nicholas's robes.

"...Hmm, no Shroud of Bereni. No matter. I'll make *him* find it for me later."

I guessed he was probably referring to me.

"What do we do with the kid?"

"We got what we wanted, right? Kill him."

Vincent clicked his tongue and bolted out of hiding. He hurled the brightblast bomb high in the air, close to the ceiling. A surge of light and sound enveloped the chamber.

The believers covered their eyes and ears and fell to the ground, shocked.

"Now!"

"Yeah, yeah."

I leaped out as the light subsided, slipped past the believers, and grabbed the boy's hand, urging him to run. It wasn't quite the way we'd drawn the plan up earlier, but the result was basically the same.

For now, I told him to hide near one of the distant caskets. Then I returned to the huge chamber, where Vincent was in battle with the believers. They were probably still suffering from the brightblast bomb, because he was cutting them down like straw men.

The next thing I knew, he'd finished off all five of them.

But where is *he*? Vincent looked around, right as a dark shadow flitted over his head. He leaped nimbly out of the way, and a split-second later, Justin sliced right through the spot where he'd been standing.

"I am Vincent, captain of the Paladins of the Kingdom of Rayfiel," he

announced, brandishing his sword. “You are under arrest for kidnapping and imprisonment. Come quietly. If you resist, I will show you no quarter.”

“Kingdom. Ha!” Justin adjusted the chakrams on his hands. “We are all sinners before God.” He threw the metal wheels one after another.

“You leave me no choice... I must eliminate you!” Vincent bellowed, heading into the storm of chakrams. They were powerful enough that they could have broken his sword, but he adeptly deflected and redirected them all. I thought he might be at a disadvantage against Justin, but he was more than holding his own.

All the chakrams had disappeared from Justin’s arms, his stock fully depleted. Vincent took the opportunity to charge him.

“You’re finished!”

“Me, or you?”

Justin removed another metal circle from his ankle and threw it—he had had one in hiding. Vincent was too open and could not avoid a blow to his left shoulder. Though I heard cracking bone, he must’ve had armor on under his clothes, because it wasn’t powerful enough to sever his arm. And still Vincent pushed onward.

Justin drew the sword at his hip and readied it. Just before his fierce thrust could gouge Vincent’s belly, his target turned to his side. The blade passed by his chest, while Vincent swung his sword one-handed down at Justin’s head.

Silver blade dug into skull. Blood sprayed. Justin’s expression turned to shock, and the sword slid from his hand. He opened his mouth silently, like a fish, then fell backward to the ground.

Vincent fell to a knee, meanwhile.

“Hey, you all right?” I asked.

“Nothing to worry about. Just a crack in my shoulder,” he said, which was not the kind of thing to brush off when your face was clammy and ashen. “Who is this man?”

“Justin. He’s an inquisitor of the Earth Mother.”

“And what is such a man doing with these sun god believers?”

That was the question of the hour. But the answer was already apparent.

“It’s the *eclipse*.”

Vincent himself had said it to me.

“The sun is always in the sky. Whether covered by clouds or behind the moon, it is always at our side, like a shadow. *Because of that saying, you are allowed to hide your faith to escape persecution, aren’t you?*”

It seemed impossible that he had known my old name and was turning the graves of his fellow believers into weapon storage, but now it made sense. There was an undercover agent among the inquisitors.

“I’m guessing he’s—”

“Move!” Vincent shoved me aside.

A metal ring flew through the tiny gap that appeared between us.

I spun around to see Justin sitting up, reaching toward us. He must have scooped up a chakram and hurled it. That much was fine—it was the fact that his head wound was slowly healing that bothered me.

I knew it. Matthew’s bad hunches always came true.

Justin was a preacher who had received one of the wicked sun god’s revelations.

“You caught me by surprise there, but that won’t happen again,” he said. Justin stood up, pulled the sigil of the Earth Mother off his chest, and threw it to the ground, then stomped on it like a bug. He pulled out a small bottle full of white dust. It looked like Release. He pulled the stopper out and swallowed the contents of the entire bottle.

Almost instantly, his body began to shine brilliantly. He groaned painfully. His back, arms, belly, right leg—different parts of him bulged and contracted,



ripping through his clothes, turning him into something else entirely...into a monster.

His head was like a black lion's with enormous ears, and his blackish-blue hide grew cracks all over. Eyes without pupils appeared on his chest, followed by a lizard's snout and mouth. His arms bulked up like thick gauntlets, while his feet broke through his shoes to reveal birdlike talons that clicked on the hard floor. A lizard-like tail extended from his rear, smacking the ground with the force of a whip.

This was a different kind of beast than Roland's. Nobody asked you guys to distinguish yourselves this way.

"Hey, snap out of it," I said, slapping the vacant Vincent on the cheek.

"What the hell is he?"

"I wish I knew." What would have to happen to make you want to turn into such a hideous form? I couldn't understand it. "Your injury's only going to hold us back. I'll buy some time—you take the boy and run for safety."

"I cannot shame myself by..."

"Save your arguments for later." We didn't have time to hold a meeting in the middle of an emergency. "Your mission is to rescue the boy, isn't it? Fulfill your mission. Be smart."

More importantly, it would be hard to fight with Vincent watching.

"Get going, dammit!"

I shoved him to help him along and sped away. A moment later, I could hear Vincent running in the other direction.

*"Sol nia spectus."*

An obnoxious phrase that I never wanted to hear again. Justin threw a chakram at me. It came slicing through the air toward me, and I smacked it aside with a fist as I spoke the spell word of the temporary sun. It hurt a little

but wasn't a big deal.

A follow-up chakram didn't seem to be coming at first—and it was because he came straight for me himself.

A massive fist flew directly at my head, but I blocked it. When my legs stopped sliding, Justin hit me again and again. He had serious power.

“But it's nothing special.”

Superhuman? Certainly. But Roland had more monstrous strength than Justin did. I couldn't take that power for granted, but I could defend against it.

I grabbed a punch and pulled his arm, slugging him with my other hand for a counter. I felt and heard flesh deforming.

I could do this.

But when I tried to hit him a second time, Justin's body vanished.

I didn't lose sight of him. He literally disappeared in the span of an instant.

“Tch!” I had a bad premonition and tumbled out of the way. Justin appeared right over my head. His feet crushed the stone floor.

“How long can you keep evading me?” Justin taunted, disappearing again. He had some kind of damned extra power.

I moved to the wall and pressed my back against it, trying to limit the blind angles he might exploit.

“Come on. Show me what you can do.”

“As you wish,” said a voice behind my back.

A thick blue arm broke straight through the wall, grabbing my waist and lifting me up off my feet backward. Justin used my body to break through the stone wall, then slammed me down on the floor without losing any momentum. Broken rubble cascaded onto me. I felt dizzy. My upside-down vision was extremely disorienting. I gritted my teeth against the searing pain and threw an elbow behind my back, which helped free me from Justin's hand. I tried to crawl away on all fours but saw something large blocking my path. It was the statue of the Earth Mother with the broken face. Why don't you help me out with this

inquisitor of yours? If you help me, I might even become a believer.

I was screwed now. I turned around, but Justin was gone.

His presence was nearby. I threw a backhand behind me; I thought I'd caught him. But then it flickered like heat haze, and my fist hit nothing but empty air. The alarm bells in my head were ringing at full blast.

His fist pounded my side, right where it was vulnerable. My lungs stopped, and I flew off the ground. I broke through the ceiling and ended up somewhere bright. By the time I thought I recognized it, my body was hitting the floor again. I rolled over, clutching my side.

There was another statue of the Earth Mother here, but it was distinct from the one below. Aha, this was the church above. I figured that we were close to it, but all we'd done was move next door. I was fine being up on the surface in an isolated location, but the danger was still present.

Horrendous pain blazed through my entire being. I couldn't even hit him, because he was moving at the same instant. At this rate, the temporary sun was going to wear off. Ever since the last time I'd screwed up and run out of time, I made sure to keep a mental count. It was precise enough that I knew I'd run out at the current rate.

"I gotta hit back at him..."

"Well, too bad."

A chakram passed over my head at high speed. I thought it missed me, but then I heard a heavy sound, my vision went dark, and my body felt like lead. Damn—he was going for the temporary sun. The chakram had struck the little crystal ball, which rolled away across the floor until it wound up in Justin's hand.

"Now you are just an incompetent weakling."

The chakram flew at me again. I could see it, but this time I couldn't react to it. The best I could do was block it with my arm. A single strike felt as heavy as a metal ball bearing. I stumbled, giving Justin an opportunity to rush me. This time I couldn't dodge, and Justin's punch hit me square in the face. I toppled backward and hit the wall.

He smiled mockingly, but a little insect flew right in front of his face. He swiped at it with displeasure, knocking it out of the air, then looked at me with a strange note of admiration.

“You really are sturdy. An ordinary human would have died minutes ago.”

Yes. That was why I survived all of it.

“Just tell me one thing, Inquisitor,” I mumbled, sliding my back up the wall to a standing position again. “Why did you become a preacher...and follow the sun god?” An inquisitor wasn’t a job you earned through nepotistic connections. It demanded piety and accomplishment. There must have been rigors that I couldn’t imagine involved. And yet he threw it all away to be a slave to the sun god. It made no sense. “And you’re not an imposter or look-alike, are you? What did you wish for, eternal life?”

Justin got a faraway look in his eyes. Fond nostalgia and emptiness both flitted through his monstrous orbs.

“Thirty years.”

“What?”

“That’s how much time has passed since I walked through the Earth Mother’s gate,” he said. Justin had been born to a noble family. “But there are many in the world who are impoverished and starving. I always felt guilty at the way I was able to live without lacking for anything.”

“.....”

In order to salve his conscience, he made up his mind to be a religious man when he was fifteen and served the Earth Mother.

“In that time, so many lost souls have starved to death. Parents sell their children; children kill their parents. None of the hell of this world has changed or lessened in the slightest. Despite all my prayers and my devout service, the Earth Mother gave me nothing.”

Even after his faith and ability earned him the position of inquisitor, Justin’s feeling of emptiness never went away.

“That was when I received a revelation. I accepted my mission: to eliminate a

traitor and recover the Shroud of Bereni. That was all it took for me to gain this power.”

He sounded proud, even delighted.

“In a single moment, the Sun God gave me something that the Earth Mother hadn’t in over thirty years. Even a child can understand which one is offering the better deal.”

“And so you just took over the entire Church of the Earth Mother here,” I noted. Even the priest was a follower of the sun god now, eh? Justin must have showed up at the brothel so quickly because the priest informed him. I laughed. “So you were stupid enough to get taken in by a fraudster and ran to the arms of a different fraudster instead.”

“Silence!” Justin roared, smashing the floor. The hole he’d smashed me through got larger.

“Is that body the ‘salvation’ you were looking for? Is that going to save the poor and starving from the prison of sordid violence?”

Forcing other people to hear you out through strength was just a form of violence. And this strength that he had was not going to change the world. Not by a long shot.

“The real thing would find a place to send sisters whose father was going to sell them into slavery. Or a girl who already doesn’t have enough to eat, sharing her candy and almonds with her little sister. These actions make a real difference.”

“Enough of your bullshit!”

Justin vanished. He appeared, and blinked away, and appeared again, before punching and kicking me, then vanishing once more.

I wasn’t going to be able to fight back like this. He was just pounding away at me. While I tried to defend myself with instinct, I wasn’t successful at resisting him. He knocked me off my feet, and I collapsed against the wall of the church like I’d been crucified.

“This is your final warning,” said the piece of shit. “It’s not too late. Join us.

Become a sufferer, and offer the Sun God your faith and devotion.”

“Are there other preachers aside from you?” How many? There better not be a hundred.

“The Great One has been in this town since long before I arrived.”

“Who would that be?”

Justin stepped on my head and smiled arrogantly.

“That’s going to cost you.”

And the price was my faith, huh? Not a very good joke.

“How am I supposed to pay you something I don’t even have?”

“Then I guess there’s only one way out,” Justin sighed. “You’ll have to be a sacrifice to the Holiest of Holies.”

“I don’t think so.”

A silver light flashed behind Justin. Blood sprayed from the back of his neck, and he slowly began to crumble. The blood that spurted from the wound turned into black ash.

Out from behind the large blue bulk of the creature across from me stepped Vincent, captain of the Paladins.

“That took longer than I wanted. The boy is safe now. The Paladins should be arriving soon.” He offered me his shoulder to help me up.

“Why did you come back?”

“I would not sleep well if I allowed you to die. And I have questions that need answers.

“Plus,” he said, turning away from me, “we were supposed to share drinks, were we not?”

Oh, don’t do that, now. You’re gonna make a guy’s heart skip a beat.

“And you can have this back.” He handed me the temporary sun. “This is yours, I assume.”

I told you, don’t do that.

“I’ll handle the rest. Your wounds need tending...”

He was about to start walking with me on his shoulder when he came to an abrupt stop. He turned to look over his shoulder at Justin, who had a hand around his ankle. The black ash had stopped spilling forth, and the wound on his neck was healing.

“He’s still alive! Finish him!”

“Too late!”

Justin flipped his arm upward with Vincent’s ankle trapped, hurling him toward the ceiling. His body smashed against the top of the church, stayed there for a moment, then slowly changed course and descended. I hurried to the spot where he was falling and caught him. Ordinarily I would’ve easily done so, but in my weakened state, the best I could do was act as a cushion.

“Hey, wake up. Hey!”

Vincent was out cold. He just had to show off.

I didn’t want both brother and sister to die on my account. I sicken myself.

But nearby footsteps broke me out of my emotional moment.

“You’re next.”

I turned around and faced Justin.

“I see.” I held the temporary sun on my upturned palm and sandwiched it with my other hand on top, rolling it around.







“What are you doing?”

“Believe it or not, I’m actually a very good soothsayer. I’m just predicting your fortune now.”

I gripped the translucent little ball and chanted the magic word.

“Irradiation.”

In response to my voice, the temporary sun emitted the light of the sun and rose into the air. Power rippled through every bit of my body, and I lifted my middle finger.

“Rejoice, Justin,” I said. “This is the day you die.”

I charged at the monstrous form of Justin. There was no time. In less than the count of a hundred, the effect would wear off. If I didn’t deliver the finishing blow in that time, we would lose.

My fist swung with every ounce of my strength and hit nothing but air—just as I expected. Just as quickly, I swung a backhand behind me, and dented in a monster’s face. He grunted with pain and staggered backward. I raised my leg and kicked him right in the gut. Justin’s body floated upward and only vanished right before it fell to the floor. His usual teleportation. But it wasn’t good enough.

“There!”

I hurled a fallen piece of rubble upward. It came to a sudden stop, and Justin’s form appeared out of thin air; it was stuck into his skin near the eyes on his belly. He plummeted to the floor.

“H-how...?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” I shrugged. “It was the blessing of the Earth Mother.”

I wasn’t letting him hit me all those times for nothing. There was a pattern to

the places he appeared after disappearing. He always aimed for the maximum effect on the minimum effort. In other words, he always tried to circle around to the target's blind spot. So I knew just where to find him.

"You seem very confident. But have you forgotten something?" Justin smirked. "I know that your relic has a time limit. I can simply wait it out, then I'll have all the time I want to finish you off."

Of course he could.

"But I'm not letting you do that," I smirked back. "I've already got you trapped."

"What?"

Justin looked down at his legs, where black insects were gathering. It wasn't just one, but two or three, with more joining by the second.

"What? What is this?"

"I told you: the Earth Mother's blessing. She's come in the form of lowly bugs to punish the wicked."

It was the black bugs that Bradley the Gravedigger used in his odor-repelling material. They flocked to the smell of the bodily fluid of their own kind. When disposing of the body of a certain dealer with an angel tattoo on his arm, I'd gotten a little extra bit of the stuff and had saved it for a useful occasion—which, as it turned out, was now, when I rubbed it on his legs.

"Get off!"

"You seem to be in a panic. Would that happen to mean that you can't teleport if other living things are touching you?"

He didn't reply, but his desperate reaction told me all I needed to know.

"So you can't escape now, I assume."

He could kill more and more of them, but they'd just keep coming. The liquid and odor wouldn't be going away for quite a while.

"Pardon me." I borrowed Vincent's sword. It was narrow, but still sturdy enough to cut his head off. I lifted it into position and closed in on Justin.

He was afflicted by the black insects, a look of sheer alarm on his features... until it abruptly switched to a confident, triumphant sneer.

“You fool!”

Instantly, his entire body was wreathed in flames. The blast of heat caused me to stop and put a hand up to shield my face. Through the gaps in my fingers, I could see the insects burning up into nothing or falling off his skin. By the time the flames subsided, there wasn't a single bug on Justin's body.

Who'd have figured he could do a trick like that...?

While I was momentarily stunned, Justin took advantage and closed the gap. I tried a meager escape, but it wasn't me he was after. He grabbed Vincent's sword and smashed it with his other fist. Then he tossed the two pieces of the sword aside, unimpressed. They made a dry clatter.

“Well, it's a shame to ruin such a good plan,” he mocked. I didn't feel like biting back at him. I went down to one knee and deactivated the temporary sun. There were only seconds left in it.

“So you recognize your defeat, eh? Then let's savor this...”

He came closer, one steady step at a time. I did not move.

But just when he was nearly at me, Justin stopped.

“Aha. I see what it means,” he said, suddenly snapping his gaze to the ceiling—specifically, the large hole Vincent had made moments ago. “You're waiting for sunlight to shine through that hole. You're right underneath it. A very cautious man. But an unlucky one. See?”

There was a layer of leaden gray clouds in the sky, very thick and foreboding. I couldn't count on the sun's rays peeking through.

“And how long can that relic of yours continue to shine? A hundred seconds? Two hundred? No—I think it'll run out within ten.”

“.....”

Bingo. Not that you get a prize for guessing right.

There was also the true last resort of my sheer willpower, but once I used

that, there was nothing else. If he stayed out of my range, that was the end of me.

This was bad.

*It should almost be time.* But not yet?

“What’s wrong? Aren’t you going to come at me? Or are you waiting for the sky to clear? I’m afraid I won’t be giving you that much time.”

Justin’s body burst into flames again. The floor beneath our feet heated up rapidly as he approached me.

“You will burn to a crisp...just like those insects!”

He pulled back his fist to punch me, right as something cold trickled down my cheek. A large drop of water, followed by more, fell from the sky.

“Hmm?”

Justin looked upward at the rapidly increasing amount of rain coming through the hole in the roof. It was really pouring.

As soon as the rain hit Justin’s body, it fizzled into steam. Soon he was surrounded in a white mist. It was like smoke rising from his body, obscuring his vision.

By always being so aware of the clouds, I’d learned to predict the imminent weather quite accurately. I knew when it was about to clear up, and when the rain was going to come down in the late afternoon.

Initially, I was planning to attack when he got rained on and distracted, but the fact that he’d lit himself on fire made it much easier than I was anticipating. In fact, it was hard to hide the grin when he flamed up again.

Now, time for punishment.

I let the temporary sun flare up again. With the strength filling my body once more, I circled behind Justin and got an arm around his waist. I tensed my core, lifted him up, then forcefully moved backward.

“Wh-what are you doing?”

“It’s simple.” I could see the end point now. It was the hole to the basement

that he'd created with me earlier. "I'm helping you kiss your goddess."

With Justin's huge bulk in my arms, I leaned backward and plummeted straight through the hole in the floor. We were directly above the statue of the Earth Mother. We plunged upside down toward her raised sword.

"Time to meet your maker!"

I felt an impact. My vision shook erratically. My back hit the floor, and I tumbled a few times before hitting the wall. The next thing I could tell was that my arms were still wrapped around Justin's body.

"Ow!"

The translucent crystal ball landed on my head. Time was up. I put it into my pocket, looked up, and exhaled with relief.

"I think it worked out."

Impaled on the tip of the goddess's sword, high overhead, was Justin's head.

"Can you hear me up there, boss?" I called out to the severed head, getting up and away from the body. Justin's eyes were glaring down at me, bloodshot and hateful. Black ash was spilling from where his neck had ripped off the body.

"I warned you. This is the day you die."

Being well-versed in the weather made me an expert at predictions.

The ash ate away further and further into Justin's body. This time, he really was going to hell.

"I figure I might as well ask: *Who* are you working with?"

"Do you think I'd tell you?"

No, not really.

"Either way, this town is finished. You and that princess knight and everyone else will die."

“Is that *your* prediction?”

“It is fate.” Justin smirked. “The Great One has said it so.”

“And who would that be? Speak!”

“Come closer so I can whisper it into your ear. I’ll rip your head off with my teeth.” The head laughed.

The ash was spreading further, to the point that the head fell off the statue’s sword. There was no throat, or mouth, or tongue left, but the head laughed anyway. I felt like I could still hear it. Even the torso had completely crumbled to ash. There was nothing but empty space on the ground.

My relief was only momentary. I heard many footsteps up on the surface. The Paladins had arrived. They could handle things from here.

And I didn’t want to wait around to get questioned for hours on end. I just wanted to go home and rest.

But there was still a major job left to do.

I dragged my brutalized body over to the statue of the Earth Mother. Nicholas was still there on the ground, his eyes open.

Justin’s sword was stuck through his chest. I picked up a nearby cloth and wrapped it around both my wrist and the handle, then leaned backward with all my weight. If I couldn’t pull it out with strength alone at this point, I could at least leverage my body. Bit by bit, the sword worked its way out of Nicholas’s body.

“There we go.” I grunted, yanking the last bit of sword out and falling on my bottom. “How’s that? Can you move again now?”

His body promptly twitched.

“Ah, you’ve saved me,” he said, sitting upright. So he *was* alive.

Justin had pierced him through the chest, but never said that he “killed” him.

“Never would have guessed that he had something like this. He very nearly got me. Your name...you were Mr. Kept Man, yes?”

So he *was* the figure who took the Shroud of Bereni from Gloria’s home. He must have sneaked out with it when I barged in and all that stuff happened.

“It’s Matthew.” My tone was light, but I wasn’t in the mood for smiles. The wound in his chest was closing up before my eyes—along with his clothes. I’d just seen someone who did a very similar thing, and it made me uneasy.

“Are you a preacher?”

“I suppose I’d say you’re half-right,” Nicholas said wryly.

“And what’s the other half of you?”

“A sinner.”

Nicholas stood and then stuck his arm into his own chest. It rippled outward like a water surface, and out of it he pulled a large sheaf of cloth: the Shroud of Bereni.

In the next moment, Nicholas’s body crumbled like mud. It changed color; his arms and legs completely melted and mixed together, and when it was done only a huge mass of purple-colored goop was left. I gave it a tiny tap with my finger, and it tried to stick to my skin.

I was baffled. Then the huge mass moved, rolling over the Shroud of Bereni and absorbing it back into its midst. In the next moment, Nicholas was once again a man dressed in black.

“Allow me to introduce myself. I am Nicholas Burns. And I once received a revelation from the sun god Ariostol.”

He didn’t seem to be hostile, so I decided to hear him out. We went to the upstairs of the guild building.

“It was over twenty years ago. At the time, I was a priest in Sunnyhaze.”

Sunnyhaze was the holy land of sun worship, with a plethora of sects sharing space in the area. Nicholas ran a small church all on his own there. Because it



was close to the Tower of the Sun God, there were many believers who went through, and by selling travel souvenirs and trinkets to the faithful, other churches flourished and grew, but Nicholas was not swayed by momentary trends, and maintained his humility in faith.

One day, he heard a voice in his head.

It was a revelation.

He understood it to be the voice of God and did not doubt it.

It commanded him to create a medical concoction for the purpose of furthering the sun god's teachings.

Intoxicated with the elation of serving his deity, Nicholas began to produce the holy elixir. He had been a learned man in the ways of herbology, and even maintained an herb garden behind the church.

Once he had completed the holy elixir, he offered it to the faithful who lived nearby, or those who were traveling through Sunnyhaze.

“And I dubbed it ‘Release.’”

But it was not a panacea, or a miracle elixir. It was a horrifying drug that drove people crazy and sent them sliding into hell.

The next thing he knew, there were dozens of people wracked by withdrawals and driven into ruin. Nicholas regretted what he'd done. That was not the voice of God. It was a demon that had used him. He tried to destroy what he'd created it, but it had already spread to other towns, and was now out in the world.

On top of that, a criminal group stole the records where Nicholas recorded the steps to produce Release and kidnapped him on top of that. They forced him to help them make the stuff in the building where he was held prisoner. Eventually, he was rescued by the town guards, but he had already lost his will to live.

“I even considered suicide, which is forbidden by God.”

In the depths of despair, he went into his church, took Release, and hanged himself. He perished at that moment but woke up inside a grave. It was as he desperately dug himself out of the soil that Nicholas realized he was no longer in human form.

“Preachers use Release as a means to change their form, through prayer to the sun god and their own innate qualities. Having lost my faith, I was no longer fit to be a preacher, and lived on in that form.”

Revived, Nicholas tended to people suffering from Release, and swore to destroy the sun god’s ambitions. His invertebrate form was both hard to move about in and very noticeable, so he spent most of his time hiding within full suits of armor.

“That was when I learned that the Shroud of Bereni was real. A burial shroud stained with the blood of the sun god.”

I recalled the sight from just minutes ago and grimaced. It was going to be hard to have an appetite after this.

“With this, I can limit the power of the sun god to an extent. I cannot return to human form, but I can at least maintain it for a while.”

Over a long time, he finally discovered the real item in a church of the Earth Mother. He was spotted in the act of stealing it and fell into the river while fleeing. He lost his armor, and the Shroud of Bereni drifted downriver. And it was Cody who first passed by the spot where it ran aground. He could’ve just left it there, but he picked up the rag, and tried to falsely sell it off as the real thing, not realizing what he possessed.

And here we are now.

“There’s a lot I’d like to ask you, but I’ll start with the important stuff,” I said. “Can you cure Release addiction? What do you use?”

If I could just find the right stuff, my work would be done. I wouldn’t need to sully the good name of the princess knight any longer.

But Nicholas shook his head. “At the moment, the answer is no. Given my

usual appearance, it is difficult to conduct further research.”

“But it might be better in the future?”

“Let us say that the possibility is greater than zero.”

“I see,” I said. Even if it weren’t imminent, the fact that there was a possibility had to be taken as good news. “If you ever need any help, just let me know, and I’ll do what I can. Let’s work together to fuck over that asshole sun god.”

How much I could trust or help the former priest wasn’t clear, but I knew that I needed to maintain ties with him. It was just what I’d been waiting for: an expert in Release. I couldn’t let that slip through my fingers.

“So what’s his ambition?”

“To be reborn.” Anger smoldered in Nicholas’s eyes. “He abandoned the body that was banished by the gods and seeks to return to earth in a new one. And to do that, he needs—”

“The Astral Crystal.”

And to do that, he was going to cause a stampede and weaken the monsters left in the dungeon.

“That reminds me, do you know anything about this Great One that Justin was talking about?”

“Well,” Nicholas said with a tilt of the head, “I was too busy trying to escape to pay much attention. I don’t know the details. But he seemed to be in contact with other believers, so it may be someone related to that.”

“I see.”

“You should be careful. I suspect they are also a preacher.”

“Doesn’t matter.” I was going to kill them, whoever they were. “At any rate, I’ve got some decisions to make about what to do now.”

## FINAL CHAPTER

### The Lifeline's Severance

"The next is my final question," said Vincent.

"About time." I laid my face against the desk.

The Paladins brought me in for questioning about the incident. They asked me every conceivable question starting early in the morning, and I was exhausted.

I did, however, make sure to conveniently omit several inconvenient details. I told him that the fight with Justin had been a draw, and that the blow Vincent gave him was what sealed the deal and caused him to perish.

I pretended not to know why Justin had taken that monstrous form. I explained away Nicholas's body disappearing by saying that he was still alive, and that he had used recovery magic to heal himself.

There were other reasons, too, but the main thing was that it wasn't a fatal blow.

"So what else do you want to ask? I can do my measurements, starting from the bust..."

"Who are you?" Vincent asked, more a plea than a demand. "I thought you were a deadbeat who leached off Princess Arwin rather than get a job, but you risk your life to protect her. I thought you were slovenly with money, but you stick your head into trouble that won't earn you a single copper. You even tried to save me—again and again—when it's clear that you hate me. It's all inconsistent. It's contradictory. There's no unifying trait in your actions. Who are you?"

"Arwin's kept man." Whatever my past had been, that was clearly my present. "And just to be clear, it was incidental that I saved you. You were

nearby, so I saved you, simple as that. You were lucky.”

In truth, I’d considered killing him at one moment. I would have done so if he’d proven to be harmful to Arwin. It was just his coincidental good luck that he hadn’t done that. Nothing more, nothing less.

“Also, I don’t actually hate you. Believe it or not, I’m a magnanimous man. I can laugh off a beating, to a certain extent. Buy me dinner or a drink, and I’ll consider it water under the bridge.”

Vincent didn’t seem satisfied by this answer but didn’t press any further.

“Is that all? Then I have a question for you,” I said. “What happens to that brothel? The one the Church of the Earth Mother was using as a hideout.”

All members of Sol Magni had been either arrested or killed. Justin was their apparent leader, and he had vanished. Even the priest had been arrested as an accomplice.

The workers at the brothel and its owner were seen as unrelated, so they escaped arrest—but they were chastised for their unlicensed prostitution. Before this, they’d gotten by because they didn’t draw the attention of the guards or the rich and powerful, but now that they’d been part of something so visible, the authorities were forced to crack down on them.

“The brothel and church will both be demolished,” he said.

That meant the whores would be out on the street. Either they’d stand on the corners to search for buyers, or they’d find a spot at other brothels. The believers of the Earth Mother had lost one hiding spot for the time being. It was one less place to conceal the victims of violent husbands, and parents who wanted to sell their children into slavery.

That was the result you caused, Justin.

This wasn’t a happy ending. The weak merely got weaker.

“For the moment, everyone at the brothel has been left with the southeast branch of the Church of the Earth Mother. They’ll be able to work as staff at the church or children’s home over there.”

“I’m surprised they were willing to take them.” The other church would have

the same problems with cash flow as any other, I assumed.

“The name of the kingdom carries much weight.”

“So you used political power to ram it through.”

“It makes things quicker,” Vincent said, without a hint of irony. “I also contacted the northern branch of the church.”

In other words, he forced the other branches of the same church to clean up their brethren’s mess. Vincent was a man who could play by the book or get a little dirty. That was all fine and good.

As for me, I could only pray that he didn’t cross the *final* line.

“Got it. Thanks for the update.” I turned to leave, but one more question popped into my head. “When should it be? You know, our promised night out over drinks. I’m a busy man. I’d really appreciate it if you reserved the time at least three days in advance.”

“I never made such a promise,” Vincent said flatly. “I merely asked if we were *supposed* to get drinks. I never stated that I would join you.”

“Oh, fuck you! Is that how a royal knight acts?”

“Say whatever you will. I will never share drinks with you. Now begone.” He put on a wry smile. “But it seems like your partner is here to pick you up.”

Footsteps approached and did not stop, even as a voice called out for them to halt. The door flew open.

“Are you all right, Matthew?!” Arwin cried, tumbling into the room with wild eyes. “I just heard someone yelling. What happened? He didn’t torture you again, did he?”

As a matter of fact, Arwin was present for today’s questioning. I was supposed to come alone, but after the previous round of *fun and games*, she had been violently opposed to me being questioned again.

“*I won’t have you inflicting violence upon him again,*” she’d said. So after a discussion with Vincent, it was agreed that she would wait in the adjacent room.

“As you can see, I’m perfectly fine,” I explained, trying to calm her, but Arwin proceeded to examine every inch of me, including a general pat down. It was like she was my mother.

Was there anything more exquisitely shaming than a beautiful younger woman nearly a head shorter than you treating you like a child? I was kind of into it.

“He didn’t do anything to me. We just finished, in fact. Let’s go.”

I put an arm around Arwin’s shoulder as we walked out. The moment the door closed, I thought I caught Vincent smile.

“By the way, did he ever give you an apology?” I asked Arwin on the way home.

“Yes, of a sort. If it was all a mistake, then I’m not interested in holding a grudge.”

She didn’t seem bothered about it. What a generous and bighearted individual. For now, I decided to stay quiet about the look-alike.

“And how’s the dungeon? It sounds like you’re doing well.”

“It *is* going well.” I thought I detected a note of elation in her voice. “Virgil and the others are starting to feel a bit pressed. I think they realize that we’re going to be passed if we’re not giving it our best. They’re doing their own training on off days and gathering materials about the dungeon to study.”







“Huh.”

So the rise of their rivals was having a positive effect on them. They must have realized that their stupid internal fighting was dragging them down. And since then, the Maretto Sisters hadn't messed with them. If anything, they were proactively trading information and seeking interaction. Rivals who can make each other better are a valuable thing.

“I want to get as far as we can now, while we have the chance.”

Beating the dungeon was a long-term project. Factors like physical and mental condition, timing, rivalries, luck, and misfortune all combined to form waves of momentum. Right now, the wave was carrying them forward.

“Just be careful.”

“Of course. One can never be too careful,” Arwin agreed. After another minute of walking, she said quietly, “One day...”

“Yes?”

“One day, we'll conquer the dungeon and wipe out all the monsters in my kingdom. I will make it happen. And when it does...”

She paused and took a deep breath, then turned to me with great purpose.

“When it does...I will show you my homeland.”

I gave her a funny look. “Are you proposing to me?”

“Who would ever want to do that?”

Yeah, I figured.

“I am the only person in the entire world who can handle a kept man like you. And that means...that I will never, ever let you go.”

“I see.” I stared back into her eyes and grinned. It all made sense. People didn't need to pray to god to bestow kindness on other people. “I'm looking forward to that.”

Days later, I visited Sages Street on the northeast side of town. There were

several doctors and apothecaries here, where the common and rich men alike came to purchase medicines and herbs. On this particular corner was a business with no sign outside. It had previously belonged to an herbalist who sold his own special crops. He was a friendly fellow, but also a quack, and was soon out of business. I opened the door to find an empty interior. There wasn't a single medicine on display. I walked through the barren room and spoke to the man in the back.

"How are you?" I asked.

Nicholas turned to me with fatigue. "You can't keep coming back every day like this. I can only do so much."

I was having Nicholas research a cure for the effects of Release. Despite his reputation, he did know a thing or two about herbs, and had the materials and tools for the job. A wanderer like me couldn't get authorization, so I used Dez's name instead. I was paying the cost of the labor and materials for him. I'd rifled through Justin's place and helped myself to that bag of unused gold coins. I'd found Nicholas, which was the job I'd been assigned, so I had a right to the coins. It felt rather silly that a gigolo like me was now supporting yet another person, however.

"Please. You're the only one who can help me, Doctor."

He'd explained to the nearby residents that he was a retired herbalist. Sometimes he would give advice about herbs, too. So I followed the locals' habit and called him "Doctor," too. The Shroud of Bereni was still within Nicholas's body. I had no obligation to hand it over to Gloria, and if him keeping it would help advance research on a cure, I much preferred it this way.

"I'll do my best," he said.

Arwin still didn't know about this place or Nicholas. I didn't want to get her hopes up, in case it didn't amount to anything. Right now, only me and Dez knew who he really was.

"And how is the dungeon?"

"Seems to be stable for the moment."

Arwin was down there again today. And my reach did not extend into the

dungeon.

Three days ago, Arwin left the house and said she would return, but that was not a guarantee. People died without any warning all the time. Someone very important to me could be in mortal danger, and I would have no idea or premonition of it. I could forecast the weather, but not a person's fate.

"Well, as long as the money holds up, I want you to keep going, Doctor..."

I was momentarily interrupted by a shaking. It seemed small and insignificant at first, but then the sideways shaking turned violent. The vibration caused a shelf to topple over.

The doctor had already ducked under a table for safety. I held my hands over my head and ducked. Maybe it looked stupid, but I was going to be safe, dammit.

Eventually the rumbling calmed, and I could look up again. Shelves had fallen over, and some tools were broken, but only the cheap ones.

"Another quake. That was a big one."

"Sorry, Doctor. I'm going to step out and look around," I said, leaving the cleanup to him. I headed out of the lab and toward the Adventurers Guild.

It had been a very large quake. Maybe the cause of the earthquakes really was a stampede. Depending on the circumstances, I should probably have the guild send a messenger in the dungeon to have her come back.

Once again, the guild was in chaos.

The courtyard was full of people who'd bolted right out of the building when the shaking started. They were all discussing the event with concern. A man was carried out of the building on a stretcher. There was a reddened cloth around his head, presumably because something had fallen on top of him.

"Matthew! Oh no!" said April as soon as she saw me. She came racing over. "I was just going to call for you. There's an emergency."

"What happened?"

"They say there's a huge surge of monsters in the dungeon. Everyone's worried that it's the sign of a stampede. And we don't know where to find the

people who are still inside there...”

My heart leaped into my throat. “And Arwin’s party is down there right now.”

April nodded painfully.

“What’s the guild going to do?”

In the case of an unpredictable event like a stampede, expert staffers were dispatched to rescue adventurers. But if it was too risky or difficult, they also had the option of just abandoning them.

“Grandpa says he’s going to send a rescue team. But the staff alone aren’t going to be enough, so they’re recruiting volunteers from the parties that are here on the surface.”

“Where’s Dez?”

If he’s around, there’s no problem. He was the kind of man who’d come back from the very depths of hell. He would bring Arwin out safe and sound.

“Dez went on vacation yesterday. He was going to visit a friend in a distant area,” April told me.

Oh right. He’d mentioned something about that. Why at such a pivotal time? He should have put it off for a while, I thought, but it was pointless to rue his absence now.

“Maybe we can catch up to Dez if we send a really fast horse,” April suggested.

“That won’t work.”

If he was making a long trip, then he was down in the dirt now. Probably eating a packed lunch in the dark with a scowl on his face. Unless you were a very special dwarf, you weren’t going to be catching up to him.

I pulled at my hair, trying to think of a plan. If caught in a stampede, your chances of survival were very low. Even the greatest of heroes or champions would get overwhelmed by the sheer number of monsters. Her life could be running out even as I stood here. She could already be dead.

An ever-present reality that I’d kept tucked away in a distant corner of my

mind came rushing up to me. Arwin could die in the dungeon any time she visited. And inside the dungeon, I was useless. I couldn't do anything to help. I would only hold her back.

But even still...

"I made her a promise."

*"No matter what happens, I will protect you."*

"Matthew?" said April with concern. I rubbed her head.

"It's all right." I walked right into the Adventurers Guild and headed for the guildmaster's office. "Pardon the intrusion."

I knocked and walked in at the same time, where the old man was glaring at papers on his desk. Four guild staffers stood nearby. They were in the middle of reporting back and formulating a plan, I guessed. A furrow formed between his eyebrows when he saw me. It was the kind of face that said, *What the hell are you doing here, when I have important things to do?*

But I walked up to him anyway.

"I'm gonna say something that's incredibly stupid. And I know what you're going to say, but let me do this first. You're going into the dungeon to search for adventurers, right? It's about that."

I looked him right in the eyes.

"Take me into the dungeon with you."

## *Afterword*

Thank you for reading the second volume of *The Kept Man of the Princess Knight*.

Your support has helped me get this follow-up published. The response to the first volume was much better than I expected, and we received very passionate responses.

There were a great many people who helped with promotions. We even got comments from the characters of other, more famous writers under Dengeki Bunko, and from voice actors.

And that was what made writing the second volume so difficult.

The first book was a submission I wrote for a contest, and I got to put my ideas and storylines in just the way I wanted, but in a second volume, you have to write what happens next. There were many characters in the first volume who didn't make it out, so I needed to introduce more. Given the story development, I needed to be clearer about certain details with the setting and background. And most importantly, Matthew needed to receive retribution for what he'd done. In a sense, this was a volume I had to spend performing clean up.

My biggest concern was how I could satisfy the people who enjoyed the first volume. Would they like this? Was this enjoyable? I asked myself these questions all the time. I even went back on some plotlines I'd laid out and changed them.

You've all read the result now. As the author, I can only pray that the results were satisfactory.

In the next volume, Matthew and Arwin are going to go through hell. Their journey is not easy or safe. It's a path of thorns, where the further they go, the more they bleed. And their destination will probably be in even deeper

darkness. But despite that, they will continue down the road they've chosen.

I intend to reach a certain milestone of the story in the third volume. I hope you'll continue to read about Matthew and Arwin's paths in life.

At the same time, there are new projects brewing. The illustrator of the *86—Eighty-Six* series, Shirabii, will be making a collaboration illustration, and a manga adaptation is in the works. It'll be drawn by the artist Keyyang and featured in the magazine *ComicWalker*.

I really hope you enjoy that, too.

Lastly, I must take this time to express my gratitude toward everyone who helped this book come together, especially Saki Mashima for the wonderful illustrations. Thank you all so much.

*Toru Shirogane*



NEXT VOLUME PREVIEW

# THE KEPT MAN OF THE PRINCESS KNIGHT

## VOLUME 3

### Story

In order to save Arwin, who has been left behind in the dungeon, Matthew decides to descend into the labyrinth himself. Because of the sun god's curse, he is unable to use his full strength, and many challenges lie ahead of him. Will the weak kept man survive in the labyrinth, where sunlight cannot reach?!

The third installment of this dark  
world accelerates!

# COMING SOON



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