



ONE COUNTRY'S DUNGEON INVESTIGATION REPORT

What Is a Dungeon?

1

The reality of the dungeon is that it is a higher life-form called an "astral beast." Beyond humanity's world, there is the astral world (space), which is home to many massive astral beasts that sometimes take root in our world.

The Formation of a Dungeon

There are five stages in the creation of a dungeon.

- 1. The astral beast aligns with the planet, absorbing energy sources such as magic.
- 2. When the absorbed energy reaches a certain level, it manifests within the earth.
- 3. Its heart (the Astral Crystal) manifests as well, along with an "entrance" to the surface that acts as a ventilation shaft.
- **4.** To protect the Astral Crystal from enemies (humans and surface monsters), the beast expands and transforms.
 - **Example 1:** It forms multiple floors, growing in complexity and arranging pits and other traps.
 - **Example 2:** To protect against exterior threats, it generates monsters that act similarly to an immune system.
- **5.** Once the interior of the astral beast reaches an adequate size and level of complexity, it is considered a complete dungeon.

The Growth of a Dungeon

3

2

After manifesting, the astral beast continues to absorb energy from its environment. Once absorbed, the earth in the area becomes barren, supporting neither grass nor trees. Entire countries have fallen into ruin by not reacting quickly enough to the emergence of a dungeon. The dungeon will continue to grow, sometimes altering already-constructed levels.

Conquering the Dungeon

4

Faced with the realization that dungeons cause deterioration, humanity (including elves and dwarves) has attempted to conquer the dungeons. Originally, this process was led by nations, but over time, it has become the job of adventurers.

Death in the Dungeon

5

Whatever or whoever dies in the dungeon is absorbed for nutrients. Not even bones are left behind, but clothing and other personal items are. It is said that the souls of the dead remain trapped inside, unable to move on to the afterlife, until the dungeon is conquered.

About the Astral Crystal

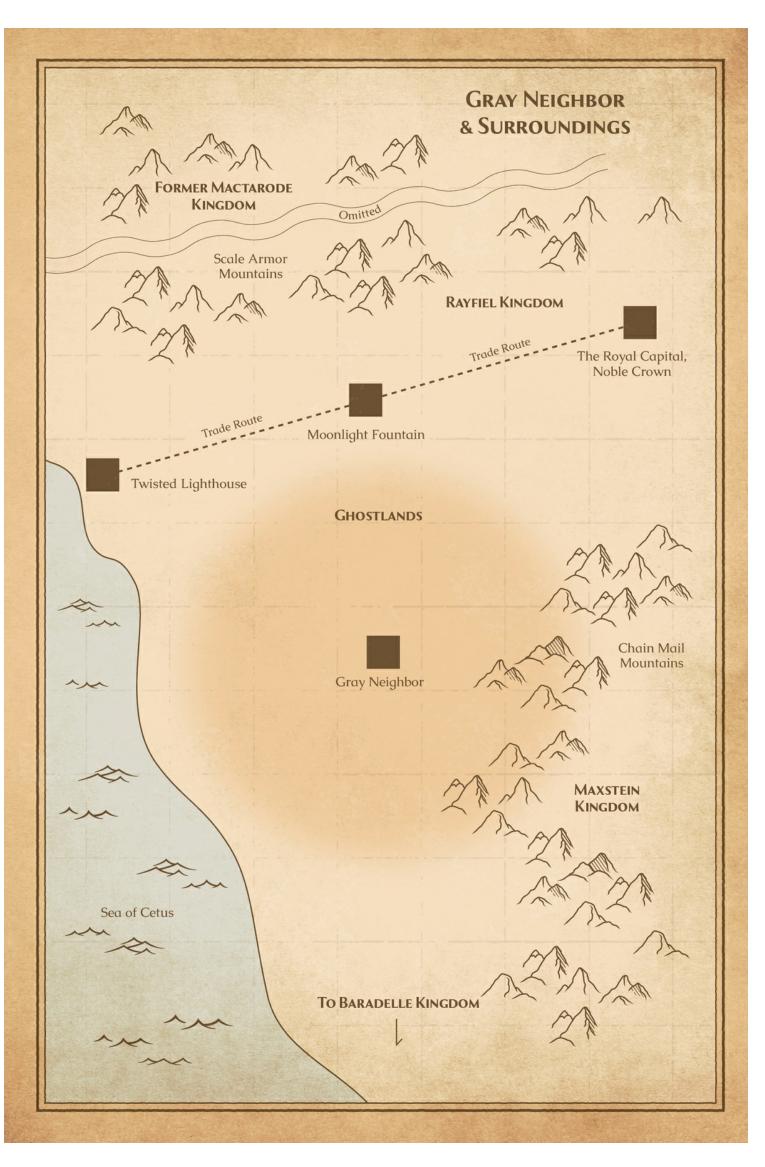
6

It rests in the deepest part of the dungeon. There are creatures that guard the Astral Crystal, commonly called "retainers" or "guardians." Because the Astral Crystal contains a vast store of energy, it can accomplish things that would be impossible for humans.

About Stampedes

Ex.

After an explosive increase in numbers, monsters spread outward in search of food, or they become frightened and cause a mass panic called a "stampede." This phenomenon is even more dangerous when it occurs within dungeons because the dungeon cities located near the entrance are at risk. Earthquakes are often observed before a stampede.



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.



Gloria

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



Nicholas

A former priest and preacher of the sun god's church, he now works with Matthew to stop the sun god's schemes.



KEPT MAN POF THE PRINCESS KNIGHT

3

Toru Shirogane

Illustration by
Saki Mashima



Copyright

EKEPT MAN THE PRINCESS KNIGHT 3

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.

HIMEKISHISAMA NO HIMO Vol.3

©Toru Shirogane 2022

Edited by Dengeki Bunko

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

English translation © 2024 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property.

If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On

150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor

New York, NY 10001

Visit us at <u>yenpress.com</u>

facebook.com/yenpress • twitter.com/yenpress

<u>yenpress.tumblr.com</u> • <u>instagram.com/yenpress</u>

First Yen On Edition: October 2024

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Leilah Labossiere Designed by Yen Press Design: Liz Parlett

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Shirogane, Toru, author. | Mashima, Saki, illustrator. | Paul, Stephen (Translator), translator.

Title: The kept man of the Princess Knight / Toru Shirogane; illustration by Saki Mashima; translation by Stephen Paul.

Other titles: Himekishi-sama no himo. English Description: First Yen On edition. | New York: Yen On, 2024-Identifiers:

LCCN 2023056023 | ISBN 9781975374990 (v. 1; trade paperback) |

ISBN 9781975375010 (v. 2; trade paperback) Subjects: CYAC: Fantasy. | Adventure and adventurers—Fiction. | LCGFT: Light novels.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.S517736 Ke 2024 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2023056023

ISBNs: 979-8-8554-0126-4 (paperback)

979-8-8554-0127-1 (ebook)

Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

[PROLOGUE] Request to Mobilize

[CHAPTER ONE] The Search Begins

[CHAPTER TWO] Downfall

[CHAPTER THREE] Loss

[CHAPTER FOUR] Temporary Withdrawal

[CHAPTER FIVE] The Search Resumes

[CHAPTER SIX] The Discovery

[CHAPTER SEVEN] Resurrection

[CHAPTER EIGHT] Surfacing

[FINAL CHAPTER] Double Disaster

Afterword

Yen Newsletter



PROLOGUE

Request to Mobilize

"Take me into the dungeon with you."

The guildmaster snorted at my request.

"You want to kill yourself? Find a rope; it's faster."

"I'm serious."

"We don't have the wherewithal to take along deadweight. What can you do for us?"

"I know I'm a talentless, deadbeat hack. But I'm still asking you to take me."

A huge surge of monsters would soon begin raging out of control in the dungeon beneath this town: a stampede. Their numbers were already increasing, a likely precursor to the event. Many adventurers hadn't been able to leave the dungeon in time and were now missing—including Arwin's crew, Aegis. They were sending in a rescue party now, but I couldn't just let a bunch of strangers do that.

My instincts were telling me one thing: This stampede would be a bad one.

If I didn't go rescue her now, Arwin's life was going to be in serious danger.

Apparently, my desperation won out. The old man sighed with annoyance. "You boys wait downstairs. I'll be there in a minute," he said, sending the other guild staffers away.

Once we were alone, he took out a pipe and lit it. Smoke curled and wafted around him, and he glared at me like a teacher would at a particularly

incompetent student.

"Even an organization full of ruffians and scoundrels like mine has rules. If I took along someone who's neither an adventurer nor a staff member, my head would roll."

"I have qualifications," I said, glad that I'd brought it along. I unfolded a piece of paper and handed it to the old man.

It was a contract written up by the guildmaster's granddaughter, April.

She was a sweet girl with a good heart, unlike her grandpa, and for whatever reason, she really wanted me to work for her. Just the other day, she'd tried to make me a temporary guild staffer through the arm-wrestling competition we had. I'd been unlucky enough to lose, but using the wiles of adulthood, I had grabbed the contract out of her hand, pretended to eat it, and slipped it into my sleeve. What am I, a goat? I wasn't going to eat *paper*. It'd make me sick to my stomach—I assumed. I'd never tried it.

"According to this, I'm working for Dez. And Dez's job is to rescue adventurers who've gone missing in the dungeon. He's on vacation, though. So I'm going in his place."

"I can't believe you'd stoop to such a trick," the old man said, disappointment in his tone. "You've fallen so far, Giant-Eater."

"Oh yeah?"

I wasn't surprised. Even Arwin—a somewhat sheltered princess—had figured out something was odd about my past. The cunning and worldly guildmaster would have seen through me ages ago, of course. Obviously, he'd let me wander around on a loose leash. Knowing that kind of secret would give him something to hold over me, ordinarily, but I couldn't be blackmailed now. Arwin's safety was more important than my identity or well-being.

When this didn't have the effect he intended, the guildmaster jerked his head like an annoying bug was flying around his ear.

"I understand why you're worried. Your woman's in danger, so you want to go after her. It makes sense. But everyone has their station in life. You're cursed; you can't be her Prince Charming. You know that."

If I were Mardukas, seven-star adventurer and world-renowned heartthrob, the old man would be showing me his ass like a bitch in heat and begging for help, but alas, I was only a lowly kept man in possession of the loser's triple threat: no money, no strength, no job.

"Take my advice. Stay here and wait. Your responsibility is to be the first one up here to welcome your precious princess knight back when she comes out safely."

"Your advice is most gratefully accepted," I said.

The old man was correct. Thanks to that clown-assed sun god, I was no better than a scrub in anything but open sunlight. I would lose to a lowly goblin. In the dark depths of the dungeon, I was a useless waste of space. He wasn't wrong about my role in all this. I understood it, too.

But that was the extent of it.

"I've already made up my mind, however."

I was the princess knight's lifeline, after all.

If she was down there so deep that I couldn't reach her, then I would just have to lower the line to the bottom—down to where she could grasp it.

"Even a bag carrier...would be too much for me, but I could serve as a decoy when you really need it."

The old man scowled, his expression skeptical.

"If you want to die down there, that's no business of mine, but it's going to hurt her, too."

"She's nice that way." She really didn't need to care about me at all. "Trying to keep a girl not much older than your precious granddaughter all to yourself? Aren't you stretching yourself a bit thin, there? If April finds out, she'll be so disgusted with you. I hate you, Grandpa. You make me sick! she'll say."

"Watch your mouth, man-whore."

Apparently, my impression hadn't been to his liking. There was real anger in his voice. That alone was enough to chill the room. I could practically see flames in his eyes. Oooh, scary.

"I overlooked your bullshit because you made a good playmate for my granddaughter. If I wanted to, I could kill you ten times over in between bites of food."

"A conservative estimate." Back in his prime, he could've done it a hundred times. "But if I'm a man you don't mind killing, then surely there's no issue with bringing me along. Am I wrong?"

He sighed.

"If you're that determined, then do as you will," he grunted, waving dismissively and giving up on talking me out of it. "She's getting to be of age, and I was growing tired of seeing a scoundrel hanging around her all the time. If you want to die, then do it and get out of my hair."

I was so grateful that I could cry.

"So, temp, here's your first job," he continued, pulling a letter out of his drawer. I'd just seen the same thing moments ago: an adventurer summons. It was the message the guild used to gather its members.

"Take this and teach those girls down there what it means."

CHAPTER ONE

The Search Begins

"This is why I warned her not to do it," the blond woman grumbled, waving around the piece of paper I'd handed her. She was seated near the first-floor counter and had a half-empty wine bottle nearby.

It was Cecilia Maretto, a five-star adventurer and the vice-captain of Medusa. She was Arwin's rival in conquering the dungeon.

"But Bea just had to come up with that stupid plan, and now look where it's gotten us."

Cecilia was talking about how they'd tricked a guild staffer the other day into issuing a summons for their own personal profit. They'd been trying to use the power of the guild to pressure Arwin's party into joining forces with them. It had backfired and led to a huge fight between the two parties.

"Nothing's changed," replied Bea—her sister Beatrice, the younger of the twins. "We'd still be going to rescue her either way, right?"

Cecilia answered by planting her cheek sullenly on her fist. "Can't imagine what you see in that spoiled princess."

"Aw, Ceci, are you jealous?" said Beatrice, folding her arms around her elder sister's head and stroking her hair, like she was soothing a child. "It's no fun losing a rival over something like this. Besides, what are you going to do, just sit here and wait?"

"I'll go," she replied instantly. "I'll follow you into hell itself."

"Of course you will," said Beatrice with satisfaction.

"You don't need to ask the others?" I asked. Medusa was a six-person party,

all of whom were women.

"Bea made the decision, which means it's final," Cecilia remarked, as though I was stupid for not realizing that.

"What about the people beyond them? You know, the ones in the alliance with you."

Chrysaor and Argo were also extremely talented dungeon-delving parties. Their names weren't on the summons, but they'd be a huge help if they came along.

"I'll reach out to them. I'm sure they won't refuse."

"Thanks."

"It's not for you. And not for the princess knight, either, of course." Cecilia slapped her cheeks, just to pump herself up. She grimaced. "A stampede will mean more than the usual number of monsters. I'll make sure we have double the amount of monster-repelling herbs and barrier stones."

"You should get even more than that. The more monsters there are, the quicker each one wears out," I warned.

Beatrice's nose wrinkled. "Have you ever even been inside the dungeon?"

"Many years ago. But it wasn't this one."

"You're not going to convince me that you were in some deep-delving party."

"Oh, no. I came right back out."

I'd gone into the dungeon to get the horns and fangs of monsters that only lived in that area. I'd never once conquered a dungeon. Back when I was in Million Blades, there were only a handful of dungeons left, and it didn't seem worth the trouble. I didn't need an Astral Crystal. We could do anything back in those days. Or at least, that's what I *thought*. I don't think that anymore.

"I'm no use in battle. I need your help. Please, help rescue Arwin's party," I said, begging them. Beatrice and Cecilia seemed surprised for a moment, but they nodded as one.

The rescue team was assembled.

First, to handle the monsters, the trio of parties was spearheaded by Medusa and the Maretto sisters. Beatrice acted as leader of the rescue team as a whole. The last time I'd seen them, the sisters both had short staffs. But this time, the younger of the two had a truly massive staff slung over her back. It was held by a fastening hook, so she could take it off to use whenever she needed it. The thing seemed unwieldy to me, but I didn't know much about magic, so I wasn't going to speak up and expose my ignorance.

Then there were fifteen guild staffers and noncombatants who would be carrying supplies and sending messages—plus me. There were thirty-three of us in all. That was quite large for a rescue team. Ordinarily, when adventurers didn't come back, you didn't send anyone after them.

"Too bad. What a shame."

The reason this was such a production was the sheer number of adventurers affected by the stampede, plus a need to assess the situation up close, and a dash of generous sympathy from the old man. If a bit self-serving. He certainly wouldn't want rumors getting around that he'd callously abandoned Arwin, the former princess.

Speaking of the old guildmaster, he was staying on the surface to issue orders.

We met at the entrance to the dungeon and started preparing for our trip. In just a few minutes, we'd be punching our way down into the depths of hell. There was a crowd of lookie-loos around already. Word had gotten out that Arwin was trapped down there.

"Matthew!" cried a frantic, silver-haired girl pushing her way through the mob. It was April. She had a crumpled piece of paper in her hands.

"Hey, squirt. You seeing me off?"

"Are you really going into the dungeon, too, Matthew?" It was a sign of how panicked she was that she didn't even react to me calling her squirt. "You can't, Matthew," she said, her whole body quivering with anxiety. "It's the dungeon! There are so many monsters there. You'll never beat them."

"We'll figure that out when we get there."

"No!" April grabbed my arm. "Don't go! Arwin will be fine on her own. Okay? Let's just wait here. Be a good boy."

She really thought she could hold me back by force. It was sweet of her to try. Grandfather and granddaughter, each trying to get me to stay—for very different reasons.

"Sorry, but that's not an option," I said, gently prying her fingers away. We were in the sunlight, so it was no issue for me. If anything, I had to be very careful that I didn't accidentally break a finger or two. "I have to go. I'm a man."

"...Is this because of me?"

On the verge of tears, April spread out the wrinkled-up piece of paper. It was the contract I'd just given her grandfather.

"Because I told you to work so many times?"

"It's not that," I said. I'd made use of April's contract, but even without it, I would have found a way to force myself into the group. "No one ordered me to do this, and I'm not going because I have a death wish. I'm going in to save Arwin because I want to."

"But, Matthew, you're going to die..."

"No I won't." I wiped her tears away with my thumb. "I promise. I'll return with Arwin."

"...Okay. You promised," she said. Already her tears had given way to a smile. Now I really had no excuse for dying.

"You're all set?" The old man was giving a speech to the rescue team outside the entrance to the dungeon. A little going-away party. "Your mission is to find the missing adventurers and bring them back to safety. You'll be going downward, keeping track of your route along the way. Once you find them, bring them back out."

It would be a half day at the shortest—and several days at the longest. No going beyond our limits, or else they'd need to execute a double rescue.

"Well, folks-"

"Ah! I'm glad I made it in time," interrupted a relieved voice. I turned to see a

middle-aged man carrying supplies on his back and making his way toward us.

It was Nicholas Burns. He'd been a priest for the sun god until the god himself lured the holy man into creating Release, the demonic drug that tore lives apart. When Nicholas realized what he'd done, he fled in an attempt to ruin the sun god's plans. I'd met him just a few days ago and was now sheltering him. He was working as an herbalist and trying to develop an antidote for Release.

"Why are you here, Doc?"

He was prepped for travel—no, for adventure. The locals called Nicholas Doc, so I did the same.

"I heard the story. There are adventurers stuck down there after the first signs of a stampede began, correct? Well, would you take me with you?"

The guildmaster stomped over in a foul mood, probably due to being interrupted.

"Who the hell are you?" he demanded.

"This is me," Nicholas said, producing a significantly aged Adventurers Guild card.

"Nick Burnstein...three stars."

He registered under an alias? When did that happen?

"A healer, huh? I don't recognize you," grunted the guildmaster, comparing the card to Nicholas. "What were you doing—and where? You've been around a long time, by the look of you."

"I'm originally from the south. I came here to be with family in my retirement, but now my family is missing. I was at a loss for what to do when I met Matthew here. He's helped me out quite a bit."

The old man gave him a piercing, skeptical look.

"I put my life on the line," I confirmed.

"The young man is risking his life, so I feel it's only right for me to risk mine," said Nicholas wryly with a little shrug. "As you can see, I'm not much in a fight, but I do believe I might serve as a healer."

"What can you heal? Just wounds?"

"And a bit of detox. I can also undo curses, put up barriers, and add some resistances."

The old man nodded his head in approval. "The more tactical options, the better. Follow their orders while in the dungeon," he commanded, pointing to the Maretto sisters.

I leaned toward Nicholas's ear and whispered:

"Why are you here?"

If anything happened to him, he'd be unable to create an antidote to Release.

"I told you. My goal is to stop our common foe. If he's involved in this stampede, I can't stand by and let it happen. Plus, I've always wanted to see the inside of the dungeon here."

"But does it have to be now?"

"Someone you care about is down there, yes? Perhaps I will prove useful, then."

Aegis was trapped in a nest of raging monsters. It was quite possible that Arwin's party was heavily injured. In that case, we could use every healer we could get.

I gave up on talking him out of it and chose a different question.

"When did you get that guild card made?"

He wouldn't be made a three-star adventurer within just a day or two of joining. Was it a fake?

"Oh, back when I was still *human*," Nicholas said, with an impish little grin. "Running a church does involve so many little costs you don't think about."

So he'd registered as an adventurer to make a little money on the side—killing monsters, healing other adventurers, and using the money to help pay for the furnishings of his church.

"Of course, I was listed as deceased years ago. So it's not a fake, per se, but it's not valid anymore, either."

Despite the unexpected interruption, the time had come at last to head in for the rescue.

"Let's get going."

A common mistake was thinking that the dungeon was buried just under Gray Neighbor; it wasn't. It was a place both on this earth and not. That was how dungeons worked.

Long, long ago, some bigwigs decided they would expand the dungeon entrance and ordered workers to dig up the earth around it. But when they stuck their shovels into the dirt beneath the entrance, they found nothing. There was just a black hole hovering over empty space. The entrance to another world was open *on top* of the ground, simple as that.

That was why people could still get water from wells—and dig basements. Many citizens of dungeon cities didn't know that, so underground was the perfect place to create a hideout. Here, they built a door to block any monsters that might come out of the entrance and encircled the door itself in a stone-walled shrine of sorts.

There was a staircase inside it for easy access to the dungeon entrance. I stared down at the dark hole in the ground.

Please be safe, Arwin, I willed, and took my first step toward the dungeon.

It was dingy and dim on the inside. There was enough light to see by, but nothing like full daylight. The ceiling itself was glowing. I suppose the best way to describe it would be similar to twilight. Unlike a natural cavern, you didn't need lanterns or torches or anything like that here.

The ceiling was over twice my height for the most part, though it depended on the location. There was no worry about jumping too high. The ground was hard and slightly gritty. It was easy to run on, but it would hurt if you fell.

In terms of overall atmosphere, it was the same as the dungeons I'd been in before.

We split up into six teams and spread out as we proceeded. The adventurers

took the fore and rear, while the guild staff stayed in the middle, where it was safer. If we were too bunched up, a sneak attack could easily wipe us all out at once. If we were too far apart, the enemy would be able to split us up.

The route into the dungeon was already obvious. Even a rookie could get farther, if they wanted. But there would be plenty of monsters along the way, and they got tougher the deeper you went. Adventurers placed special monster-repelling stones and incense as they went to ensure safe passage. The beasts would stay away for now, and we'd avoid needless battles.

But in this den of monsters, such effects would not last forever. The miasma the monsters emitted would wear down the stones and incense over time, so adventurers had to place more stones at regular intervals.

The more adventurers attempting the dungeon, the wider and sturdier the path became. The fewer there were, the sooner the stones' effectiveness wore off, causing the safety of the path to lapse. That was why any dungeon city needed lots of ambitious adventuring parties—to maintain that momentum.

In the Millennium of Midnight Sun, there was currently a safe route through to the nineteenth floor. If anyone was on that route, they had a direct exit back to the surface. But in a stampede, the explosion of monsters and their miasma would cut off that safe route, making it impossible to secure their return. They might be forced to take a detour. Adventurers who got lost would eventually run out of strength and succumb to the dungeon.

According to the guild, including Arwin's party, there were twenty-nine adventurers in the dungeon now. Our mission was to find and rescue them, or at least determine their status.

"You're a man of strange whims, Matthew," said Gramps, the carrier. He was hauling an enormous backpack that was nearly as tall as he was. Most days, he removed monster bodies from the dungeon and sometimes sold vegetables for side income. I'd saved him from some thugs at the marketplace not long ago. The only reward I got was a beating.

"You're here, too, Gramps?" I asked.

He made a circle with his fingers to indicate coin.

"I wouldn't be here at such a dangerous time otherwise."

So he was after compensation. It was hard to be poor. I could sympathize.

"And you're doing what? Just throwing your life away for the sake of the princess knight?"

"I've been less than a perfect gentleman lately. She's rather cross with me now," I said, laughing it off. I wasn't much for gloomy topics. "I've got to win some points with her before she kicks me to the curb."

"If she does, come work with me. We'll sell veggies together."

If that happened, the first thing I'd do would be to send a mountain of eggplants to Arwin. But that could only happen if she got out of the dungeon alive.

"I appreciate the offer," I said.

"Hear me out. Go back to the surface. You can still make it. Unlike the thugs, monsters won't run away when they see the town guards."

I was well aware.

"Listen, this is for Arwin. If she commanded it, I'd dive into flames, into water, and into the belly of a beast for her. That's what loyalty is all about."

"Says the pimp."

"Now do you see my quandary? If I lose her, I'm flat broke."

"Well, don't say I didn't warn you," Gramps said, shaking his head.

I was outfitted for adventure with a pack on my back as well. Of course, I had the temporary sun with me. I might end up having to use it in front of everyone, but this was an emergency. There was no replacement for Arwin's life. I even had some of her candies, just in case. My supplies also included rope, waterskins, flint, jerky, dried yams, monster-repellent incense, and so on.

"Ah, shit."

Voices of dismay floated back from the front. The reason was immediately apparent: The monster-repelling stones at their feet were ashen gray, rather than white. They were losing their strength; once black, they would be just like

any other stones.

We were only on the first floor, and already the safe route was in danger of vanishing.

As a matter of fact, the denizens of the first floor, like goblins and kobolds, were watching us from a distance. If the stones' effectiveness wore off completely, they would attack right away. It was sickening, seeing them licking their lips in anticipation.

"Let's warm up by pulverizing them into pulp—"

"Ignore them," Cecilia said, cutting off Beatrice's suggestion. "We don't have time to waste on scrubs like them. For now, contact up above and have them prepare as many stones as possible. Securing the route is the top priority. We need the people who get this far to be able to return on their own. Ask the guildmaster to keep the route open. Don't want to get lost on the way back."

On her orders, one of the guild staffers rushed upward to report back.

"...How was that, Bea?"

"Yes, that's about right. I was just thinking of doing the same thing."

Were you really?

"What if they're not along the main route?" I asked. Hopefully, they'd be able to get back on their own, but if not, the only thing that awaited them was death.

"We'll just have to give up on them," Cecilia said simply. "We don't have enough people to walk every inch of the dungeon. It would be suicide. We'd get wiped out, and we'd have wasted enough time that it'd be too late to save anyone on the lower floors. It's more dangerous the deeper we go."

"…"

She wasn't wrong about that. Even Dez would have difficulty finding our targets by just wandering aimlessly around the dungeon.

"We're going down to the next floor as soon as we possibly can. And if the princess knight is around, she'll be on a lower floor."

"That's true."

We didn't know how far down they'd made it, so our only option for now was to keep descending.

Please, Noelle, Virgil, Clifford, Seraphina—keep Arwin safe. You can abandon Ralph if it's necessary, though. Use him as bait to escape. I'll forgive you.

"At this rate, I assume the route's already vanished on the lower floors. We've got combat ahead of us. Let's be prepared for battle, Bea."

"I'm ready, Ceci!" said Beatrice, brandishing her fist excitedly.

Cecilia's prediction came true very quickly. The monster-repelling effect weakened on the way to the second-floor stairs, and we were attacked by a pack of dogs the size of calves.

Hellhounds. They had golden eyes and hairless, exposed skin that gleamed as though smeared with thick oil. Like any regular dog, the hellhounds had teeth and claws to attack with, but these were over twice the size. Plus, there were more than twenty in the pack. They would normally be on a lower floor, but the stampede's effect had pushed them up higher. Individually, they were not a major threat, but in a large group, they were dangerous.

"Here they come!" Beatrice shouted, raising her staff. A plethora of little flames appeared around the end of the weapon. "Burn them all! Flame Needle!"

She waved the staff like a flag, causing the pointed flames to shoot off like arrows. Red lines burst through the darkness of the dungeon, piercing many of the hellhounds facing the group. Flames burst out of the wounds on the black-skinned hounds, burning their skin and causing them to panic and die on the spot.

"That was easy."

"Careful! It's not over!" I cautioned, as the beasts that escaped the needles lunged forward toward Beatrice, the closest target.

"Oh, don't be stupid," she smirked, turning around to face me. "I said that

because the fight's already finished."

Before she was even done with her sentence, another staff lunged forward beside her.

"Wind Sickle."

A series of blades made of air emerged from Cecilia's staff. The hounds screamed as the translucent blades neatly and precisely cut through their snouts and throats. It was possible to sense the blades by the air movement around the room, but the darkness made it very difficult.

The next thing I knew, all twenty-odd hellhounds were dead.

"See? What did I say? With Ceci on the job, we're absolutely, positively, unequivocally unstoppable."

"Enough flattery. Take a step back," the elder sister replied, pushing her out of the way. "You're the leader, so you should be letting everyone else handle the weaklings. How many times do I have to tell you not to waste your magic...?"

"It's *because* I'm the leader," said Beatrice, puffing out her chest. "If I make a big show of kicking ass, it'll raise the party morale—and everything else will be easier from here on out," she insisted proudly.

Cecilia sighed.

"Just don't overwork yourself. If you try to coast on sheer momentum, you're going to throw out your back like Auntie."

"That's right. Please rein it in a little," interjected Rex, the leader of Chrysaor. "If you use all your magic at the start like this, it'll leave us in trouble later."

"Not for me," Beatrice said blithely.

"Yes, I suppose that's right—you have Cecilia. But things are different for us. If we fight our very hardest against the smaller foes, we'll run out of steam at the most important moment."

"That's because you're—"

"Bea." Cecilia grabbed her sister's sleeve to interrupt her. "Don't forget the

goal."

"Yeah, yeah." Beatrice brushed off her sister's warning, rested her staff on her shoulder, and started walking off like a scolded child. She turned back and said, "We're pushing ahead to thin out the numbers. You people stay back here and put down stones, or something."

She motioned to the rest of Medusa, who followed her lead.

"You shouldn't—"

Rex started to warn them but stopped short. I could sense it, too. There was a menacing aura all around us.

Rex cautiously took a fighting stance. The others followed his example, raising their weapons and watching our surroundings carefully.

"Above!" I shouted, grabbing the old carrier by the back of the neck and forcing him down to the ground. I didn't have any arm strength, but my weight was enough to move him. A moment later, dozens of imps leaped at us from above. They were about the size of infants, with enormous yellow eyes. Their claws were long and sharp, and their faces were as wrinkled as an ancient hag's. Their heads were pointed and red, resembling little hats.

"Watch out! Redcaps!"

They were a type of fairy—small and weak but vicious in temperament. They attacked people in packs, tearing at vulnerable points like throats and eyes with their sharp teeth and claws.

These weren't first-floor monsters, either. It was the stampede's doing.

The redcaps hurled themselves in groups at the adventurers.

"What are you doing, Gramps? Get farther back!"

"M-my leg..."

There was a redcap clinging to his leg already.

"Get off!" I kicked at it as hard as I could. I was weak, but the redcap was tiny and, therefore, light enough that even I could pry it off. "We've got to go, Gramps. They'll wrap it up in no time."

These weren't monsters found on the first floor, but they were more nasty than powerful. A calm, experienced adventurer could easily defeat them. The two of us distanced ourselves from the fight and found the safe route. The stones here were fresh, so I wasn't worried about being attacked.

"Th-thank you, Matthew."

"Don't worry about it. We watch out for each other."

"I owe you some vegetables next time. What's your preference?"

"Eggplants."

She was putting me through hell. I was going to feed her a mountain of the things.

Despite the sneak attack, Rex and his party recovered quickly and counterattacked. The redcaps fell, one after the other.

Just when it seemed like things were going to be all right, there was a scream. I turned to see an adventurer with a number of redcaps stuck to his head. His neck and chest were bloody.

"Calm down! Don't move!" Rex commanded, but the panicked adventurer only seemed to flail harder. He was trying to pull them off himself, but they were stuck to his hands, too, and he couldn't move his fingers accurately.

"Shit!"

Rex dashed forward and leaped onto the adventurer, beginning to yank off the redcaps. The other adventurers finished the creatures off as they landed on the ground. There were just two left when the adventurer's legs gave out, and he fell onto his back. The impact knocked the remaining redcaps loose.

"You all right? Hang in there, Al!"

There was no response. His face was a bloody mess, with chunks of flesh torn out and gnawed on here and there. White bone was exposed on his cheek, and his nose was crushed.

It was clear at a glance that he was dead.

Rex took the hand of his fallen companion and reached up to close the man's

eyes.

Already one casualty.

"Can't believe someone from Chrysaor is gone so early," muttered the old carrier with equal parts worry and disappointment.

"It's kind of late in the game to say this now," I said, "but this is a dungeon. And it's the Millennium of Midnight Sun, the last dungeon in the world. Anything can happen."

Though we'd suffered a big loss so early, the rescue team continued deeper into the dungeon. The adventurers pummeled monsters, and the guild staffers set fresh stones to reinforce the safe route. Once the monsters were cleared out, the stones went down, and we moved on. It was a long and repetitive process.

Since I was tall, my duties were to help place stones and watch out for approaching monsters. I was also a cheerleader. They didn't like me blowing kisses, for some reason, so I offered vocal encouragement instead.

"It's all going well for the most part," said Beatrice optimistically. She'd heard that we were already down one person but seemed to have forgotten that. Naturally, Rex shot her a vicious look, but it bounced right off her.

"I almost wish we could *always* go in with this many people. Like, with a whole knighthood and everything."

"Not gonna happen," I said.

"I don't think that's happening," said Cecilia at the exact same time.

"Why not?" said Beatrice innocently.

I rolled my eyes.

"Because the dungeon is designed to kill armed forces," I explained.

In the past, there had been dozens of such dungeons in the world. When a dungeon appeared, it absorbed nutrients from the soil around it, turning the area into a dry husk. The land became depleted, and the people starved. The

leaders of the world put everything they had into conquering the dungeons, but it was a series of failures.

For one thing, whether infantry or cavalry, soldiers weren't good at fighting in a dank, dark cave. Sometimes it was too narrow for more than one person at a time to move forward. And there were traps all over the place. Without coordination, a large army cannot utilize its advantage. It was said that some great country ages ago sent ten thousand soldiers into a dungeon, and before half the day was gone, they were all dead. The practice of sending large numbers of soldiers into dungeons didn't last very long.

Subsequently, what became popular was the "expedition" style. First, they set up a base on a relatively shallow floor, traveling deeper from there, setting down barriers as they went, and claiming territory until they eventually reach the bottom floor. It took money, time, and effort, but it was the safest method.

That, too, fell out of favor, because it cost too much. Kingdoms had responsibilities beyond conquering dungeons. Even an Astral Crystal could only grant wishes to a certain extent. There was at least one instance of a kingdom focusing so heavily on a dungeon that it ignored strengthening the realm, only to be invaded and overrun by their neighbors, who promptly finished the job and claimed the Astral Crystal for themselves.

Another reason the expedition method was discontinued was that dungeons themselves developed a resistance to the practice. The miasma that filled the dungeons turned safe ground into perilous territory. Monsters would fill in the supposedly secure route back, and the unexpected arrival of new foes would result in the loss of supplies meant for the front line.

The success rate of conquering dungeons dropped. Massive investments of money and resources produced no results, to the extent that it led to rebellions. From that point on, leaders were forced to choose between two options: conquer or coexist.

If ignored, the land around dungeons dried up, and plants wouldn't grow anymore. But inside the dungeon, there were rare monster parts, ores, and flora to be harvested. A person could even get rich if they played their cards right.

A disaster and a gold mine. The handling of dungeons became much more complicated.

Whether conquering them or coexisting with them, *someone* needed to be dispatched into the dungeons. But sending their own soldiers in would just be repeating the mistakes of the past.

The solution to the problem was developing and utilizing experts.

Small groups of people who could adapt to any dangerous situation. More importantly, people who could die without inconveniencing the larger population. In other words, mercenaries and adventurers. The Adventurers Guild was formed to manage and utilize these people in useful ways. They perform a wide variety of jobs now, but they were originally established just to tackle dungeons. At one point, they were official groups, but now each guild franchise is privately run.

World history is the history of humanity's fight against the dungeons.

"Oooh, really?" Beatrice said with fascination, nodding along. This was the sort of topic that the veterans liked to tell over drinks, again and again.

"Are you sure you're a five-star adventurer?"

"Want to test me?" She started to pull the giant staff off her back, but it caught on something and wouldn't come loose. "Huh? Hang on! Wait! What's going on?"

I sighed.

"Maybe you should just calm down a little. We're not here to play...games..."

My hands rose as my words slowed and came to a halt. Behind her, I noticed her sister pointing a magic staff at me threateningly.

"Don't insult Bea," Cecilia snarled. "You won't get a second warning."

"Understood."

If they started blasting me in the dungeon, I wouldn't stand a chance.

"Hey, Ceci, can you help me? I think it's caught on something."

"Don't panic. When your hands are shaking like Grandpa's after he runs out of

booze, it's only going to make it harder." She went around her sister's back and unhooked the staff. So nice to see such sisterly care.

"First the princess knight, now the beautiful twins," said a man a head shorter than I was. He was broader than me, but the poor man's looks were well below even half of my own. That was not to say he was ugly, by any means. I'm just that handsome.

I'd already forgotten his name, but he was in Argo, as I recalled. He laughed bitterly.

"Already looking to score, eh? Aren't we a hotshot?"

"You should try, too, my friend. Don't be shy." If I got bothered by every snarky comment, I'd never make it through the day. "There are plenty of beauties out there for a man like you. Goblins, orcs, zombies—the world is your oyster."

As I expected, he hit me.

"Maybe you should watch your surroundings rather than focusing on me. There are monsters about," I warned, rubbing my cheek. There was nothing but empty space where I pointed. Neither hide nor hair of any monsters.

"What nonsense is this—?" he started to say, but right then, the earth bulged upward.

It was a beast like a black wolf, camouflaged against the ground. The creature leaped at us before anyone could react.

Screams arose. A ball of fire flew in from the side and charred the monster.

It was Beatrice Maretto. Once she was satisfied that the beast was dead, she approached me with keen interest.

"You could tell it was there."

"I had a hunch."

I'd always been sensitive to the presence of others, which made me good at spotting people who were hiding. I didn't like being noticed for it, but I didn't want us to lose any more members. He might've been an asshole, but his death would only make this harder for us.

"Well, keep it up."

"If I spot something...," I said, right as another unpleasant thing crossed my vision. "Look over there."

I pointed at a dark shape behind a pillar.

"It's a body."

Whoever it was had been just short of reaching safe ground when they perished. The body's guts had been devoured. It wasn't Arwin, of course. I was relieved. The dead had been about twenty-two or twenty-three, with black hair and a burly body. A horned helmet rested on the ground nearby.

"That's Sylvester, from Cornucopia."

I'd seen him at the guild a few times. He'd tried to make a pass at Arwin and dumped a drink on me vengefully when he got nowhere with her. At this point, I just felt sorry for him.

That was not the only body. There were four in total—the end of Cornucopia. They hadn't been half bad as a party, but luck hadn't been on their side.

We weren't going to retrieve the bodies. It was too much work to lug them all the way back up to the surface.

"Pardon my reach."

Instead, I pulled the guild card off the body—and helped myself to any valuables. These would go to his family, not my own pocket. Didn't want them complaining that the total recovered didn't match, so I handed them to a staffer for the amount to be recorded.

"All right, do the thing."

We removed all their guild cards, put the bodies in a pile, then burned them. When adventurers died inside the dungeon, there was a high chance they'd come back as undead. If their grudge or desire for retribution was fierce enough, they'd return as ghosts or wraiths, even if cremated. Some said it was because their souls were trapped inside the dungeon, but nobody knew for sure. When Al from Chrysaor had died earlier, his companions had done the same thing to him.

They had to be thorough, or it would lead to tragedy later. After going through good times and bad with companions, seeing them turn into monsters and attack allies was an experience one could never get used to, no matter how many times it happened.

"Let's go."

Once the bodies were very charred, we continued onward.

Down and down we went. All the monsters were viciously hostile. Even the ones that normally were content to mind their own business if you left them alone were baring their fangs and leaping at us. And they just kept coming, more and more of them. This was clearly the precursor to a stampede.

So far, we'd found seven survivors in need of assistance, nine who had made it back to the safe route on their own, and five dead. That was on the low side, for a stampede. Once the survivors had been healed up until they weren't actively bleeding, we either let them head back on their own or sent guild staffers to escort them to the surface.

I asked everyone we saw, but none of them knew if Arwin was alive or dead.

"Let's take a break here," announced Cecilia, once we had descended to the seventh floor. "The miasma's thicker than I imagined. We're all tired now, and it'll only get harder to set up a safe spot farther down."

For some reason, she turned and asked me if that was a good idea. I nodded.

I wanted to find Arwin as soon as possible, but stretching ourselves too thin would make it that much harder later on. If I—someone who wasn't even an adventurer—tried to push people faster, it would only make them resentful.

We used repellent herbs and stones to set up a safe zone, then sat down to rest. During the break, I passed out hard candies to the adventurers. Sweets are a good pick-me-up. And these were easy to eat.

"Here you go." I tossed a wrapped candy to Beatrice, who was resting up against the wall. "Eat that. Something sweet always hits the spot when you're tired."

"There better not be anything nasty in this."

"Just sugar and water."

My usual ones also contained the boiled essence of some medicinal herbs, but in the dungeon, the simple sugar kind was the quickest and easiest fuel source.

Beatrice wrinkled her nose at the candy but popped it into her mouth. She grimaced.

"...It's salty."

"Oops, sorry. That was the salty kind."

When people worked up a sweat, they needed to replenish their salt. I mixed some of the candies with salt for quick absorption. I gave her a sweet one instead. She rolled it around in her cheek and started inspecting her staff.

An adventurer's nature and mentality were truly on display during a break. It wasn't just a time for eating and resting. Some confirmed their current location and route, inspected their equipment, and jotted down notes. There was much to do. A small discrepancy in the amount of preparation could mean the difference between life and death. This group was well suited to being a rescue team; they all knew what they were doing.

"Got any other snacks?" Beatrice asked pleadingly, tugging on my sleeve. I hadn't been trying to tame her with food or anything like that.



"Don't give Bea anything sketchy," Cecilia warned me, then handed her sister an apple. It had been peeled and cut into five slices, neatly arranged on a plate.

"Eat that, and we'll be on our way."

"Okaaay," Beatrice replied lackadaisically, then offered the dish to the other party members. Each one took a slice. What was this, a picnic?

"You should eat something, too. You'll probably lose your appetite on the next floor," Cecilia warned me, nibbling on a bit of apple.

"Why, is that the undead floor?" They were a pain in the ass. Fatal blows to ordinary living things would not stop the likes of them.

"Some people throw up when they see zombies. So maybe you're making the right choice by not eating."

"Do we have any holy water?"

You can defeat zombies and skeletons by grinding them down until they can no longer revive, but the easiest way to get rid of ghosts is to use holy power. Either that or infuse your weapon with magic that temporarily bestows a purifying ability.

"We have a priest," Cecilia said, glancing at her party, "but it's hard to coordinate when we have such a long line of people. And we can't move forward as a giant clump, either.

"Normally, we'd knock them out of the way with a spell or something else, then rush past them, but that's not an option here."

It might end up harming the people in need of rescue, for one thing.

"Beyond that, I guess we do this expedition style."

That meant proceeding in bunches of four or five. The priest would cast a holy enchantment on the first group, then they'd move forward. After a certain distance, the priest would put that magic protection on the next group and have them go, and so on, and so on. Once it was down to the final group, the priest would accompany them.

"We already know the way, so we should proceed on the shortest possible

route."

"That's useful information," she said, pounding a fist into her palm.

I narrowed my eyes and gazed at her coolly.

"You know, I've been wondering," I said to Cecilia, "why you keep asking me all these questions. I mean, I appreciate that you're taking my opinion into account, but shouldn't you be asking other people, too?"

Her companions in Medusa, and their alliance partners in Chrysaor and Argo, were all with us in the dungeon. These were experienced adventurers. They weren't fresh-faced boys like Ralph.

"Because you seem to have the most experience."

"I was only an adventurer years ago. I'm not as sharp as the ones on active duty."

"Don't bother trying to hide it. I know you're the *real* leader of Aegis," Cecilia smirked confidently. "I knew after that fight we had. The little one... Noelle, was it? You jumped in to save her, and when the earthquake happened, you were the first to give orders."

"I panicked—and acted before I could think. The orders were just the first thoughts that popped into my head."

"I've heard the stories about you." She poked me in the chest. "You're all talk. A real pushover. A scrawny weakling, leeching off your woman...and I don't buy a word of it. The image I have of you is nothing like that."

"You're just imagining things." I really didn't want her to know about my past. That kind of trouble tended to cascade and hit all at once. "I'll tell you one thing: Arwin is the leader of Aegis. There's no question about that."

I was not going to act like Lutwidge, and I had no intention of replacing him.

"Then we can ask her in person to be sure," she said, and gave the order to depart. The adventurers rose to their feet; if they took too much time, it would only make them more fatigued. Best to resume activity before their muscles cooled off.

We resumed the search. More challenges arose after our break, just as

before. There were additional monsters, of course, and their strength was greater than usual. The minotaurs were larger than ever, the golems were tougher, and the griffins were faster.

The search party was suffering damages, too. In addition to Al, two guild staffers and one member of Argo perished.

This was bad. A drop in battle readiness due to fatigue was one thing, but the emotional toll was larger. The adventurers were suffering from diminished morale.

Is it worth the loss of our friends to rescue these people? their expressions said, even if their lips did not.

Who cares about other parties? Adventuring is a life-threatening business. They don't have time to worry about strangers. Whether they live or die is their problem to solve. If not for the guild's dispatch, they would never have come down here.

Everyone's got their hands full dealing with their own issues.

Not everyone who knows pain can be kind.

I understand how that feels, but there's one more important factor they're forgetting: The people waiting for rescue also have family and friends who care about them. That was my reason for being there.

We'd made our way down to the thirteenth floor, but Arwin herself was still nowhere to be found. The only people still unaccounted for were the members of Aegis and two others. They'd probably noticed the anomaly happening and turned back toward the surface. We should be running into them at any moment now.

Exhaustion was etched into the features of the adventurers. *Keep pushing onward or turn back?*

"What do we do now?"

"I'm thinking," Beatrice told her sister.

Everyone could feel it. If we returned now, they wouldn't be back down here until after the stampede was done. They were unlikely to even recover any

personal effects, much less rescue survivors. This was our first and only chance.

"Shouldn't we be goin' back up now?" muttered the dolt from Argo. "We're only gonna find bodies at this point. She's now probably a zombie with a minotaur for her boy toy, rather than this clod."

"That was the stupidest joke in the history of the world," I said, putting a hand to my face. "Consider this a warning: You have no sense of humor. Never attempt comedy, wit, or sarcasm again. You're only exposing your utter ignorance and uselessness. You'll do your best work puking up your stomach in a pub, wailing about piss and shit."

"You're talking to *me* about being useless?" He glared, grabbing my shoulder. I burst into laughter.

"Oh, come on. You don't expect me to feel afraid of a tiny tot of a man, do you? How would you like me to react? Burst into tears? Wahhh, the mean man is picking on me!"

"If you want to do a whole comedy routine, can you wait until we get back on the surface?" said Cecilia with undisguised annoyance.

Just at that moment, I noticed something white silently hovering underfoot. Before anyone else could detect it and speak up, it had surrounded us and was continuing to spread.

"What is that, smoke?"

"No, it's mist."

"Mist inside a dungeon? That's crazy," the adventurers argued. All the while, it got thicker and thicker. Soon the white mist had enclosed our position, completely blocking our vision.

"What is this...? What's happening?"

"Calm down, Bea," said her sister. The Marettos had been to the thirteenth floor time and again, but even they didn't know what this was. There were some monsters that emitted mist or smoke, but this did not seem to line up with them.

It felt like something was approaching. Claws scratched stone, and roars

emerged from the mist.

"Careful!"

There was a long, trailing scream that died out with a growl. It must have crushed someone's throat. That was the start of a wild, frantic battle. Sword clanging and shrieks came through the mist. The fools were panicking.

"Don't swing your weapons around haphazardly! You'll hit your allies! Keep up a dialogue and track where each other is as you fight. If it seems dangerous, withdraw!"

There I went again, giving orders against my better nature. But it seemed to be having an effect—I heard voices call out names, and fewer screams. I might've even been impressed at their skill and resilience, if I'd been comfortable enough to think about things like that.

A monster came toward me. I could only sense and hear it, but not see it. However, the information was enough for me to make an educated guess.

I guessed it was a Nemea Leo—a lion with a pelt as hard as rock. They were very hardy and would shrug off just about any kind of physical blow. Their weak points were the neck and flank, but in my current state, I'd just be food for it. I scampered away through the mist, running for my life. I was only going to be in the way here, so I tried to retreat to the floor above, but I found myself cut off.

As I expected, it was a Nemea Leo that parted the mist. Its body was like brown sandstone, blocking my path. Its purple eyes glinted greedily, its mane ruffled, and it growled as it padded closer to me. Apparently, I was on the menu for dinner. On top of that, the mist was even thicker now. I could barely see the nose at the end of my face.

Sorry, boss. You're the one who's getting made into a pelt today.

I turned my back to the adventurers and pulled out my temporary sun. The rays of sunlight covered my body, filling my every muscle with strength right as the Nemea Leo leaped at me. I avoided its jaws, which could bite through metal armor, and grabbed it by the throat. With a single flex, I crushed its spine through the thick muscle of its neck. Fight over.

I stared at the slumping lion, wiped my hand off, and deactivated the

temporary sun. Just in case, I turned back, but the mist was still so thick that I couldn't imagine anyone had seen me. Relieved, I headed for the twelfth floor to evacuate—but came to a stop.

I'd heard a voice, but only barely.

It had sounded like Arwin's.

"Arwin, are you there? Say something again!"

But there was no response, and no sound of anything approaching. I'd have to go to her, instead. I put my hand to the wall and continued forward, vainly searching for any sign of a human presence.

"Hey, where are you? Your beloved Matthew has come to rescue you!" I shouted. It might bring more monsters down on me, but I was willing to risk that. My personal safety wasn't the top priority at this very second.

"Are you there? Say something! Anyone! Virgil, Clifford, Seraphina, Noelle, Ralph! Ralph the ninny!"

There was no answer. The fighting was still happening, so it wasn't easy to listen for signs of them.

Did I just imagine it?

"Hmm?"

Just when I was losing confidence, I stubbed my toe on something. I jumped back instinctively, and when I saw what I'd nearly stepped on, I gasped.

It was a black-haired mage lying on the ground, eyes open.

Clifford the mage, member of Aegis.

There was a gaping hole in his chest. He'd been killed by a single blow from behind.

"...You jackass."

How was he supposed to help Arwin if he was dead?

I closed Clifford's eyes and removed his guild card. This made it clear, though: Arwin was on this floor. And she was in danger.

Knowing her personality, she would not leave the body of a comrade behind. It meant that she was in a situation that left her unable to retrieve him.

The sound of fighting drifted through the mist from up ahead—air being cut, frantic footsteps, and shouting from the fair princess knight herself.

The mist was getting thicker again. I might run into an ambush, but there was no time to hesitate now. I rushed in the direction of the sounds, turning left and right where applicable, hurtling deeper into the dungeon.

I came to an open area. It must've been near the center of the thirteenth floor.

Two shapes were darting quickly and violently through the mist. One was Arwin.

But who was the other?

I heard an explosion nearby, probably from a magic spell. It didn't hit anyone, but the force of it sent a gust blowing through that cleared some of the mist.

With the increase in visibility, I could finally make out Arwin and a bizarre monster.

CHAPTER TWO

Downfall

Two enormous golden eyeballs were on the side of its head, and its face was as smooth as a brown eggshell, but there were fangs protruding in bunches from its maw. It was not wearing any clothing, and the black limbs extending from its gray torso were long and thin, like insect legs.

Around its bicep was the sigil of the sun god.

Is that a preacher?

The preacher-like monster was avoiding Arwin's attacks, dodging left and right and occasionally blocking a sword blow with his arms. The skin looked soft, but it must've been quite hard. She seemed to have hit him many times but wasn't doing any damage. This was bad. Even Arwin would struggle against a preacher.

There was no time to waste. Revealing my secret was only a secondary concern. I took out the temporary sun and started to chant the incantation, but a tug on my sleeve stopped me.

"W-wait..."

It was a bloodied Virgil, slumped on the ground against the nearby wall. Seraphina was on the ground next to him; her neck was red with blood. It was clear she had already perished.

"Matthew? Why are you...?"

There was no time to explain. Virgil's wounds were deep. I crouched down and started tending to his wounds, but the most I could do was staunch his blood. Only his sheer vitality would determine if he made it.

"What happened?"

"...I don't know. We were attacked out of nowhere. Clifford went down, then Seraphina..."

Why would a preacher be going after Aegis? Was there a specific reason?

I wanted to ask for more information, but he was gritting his teeth in agony, and I knew I wouldn't get anything else out of him.

"I'll call for help. Just stay put."

I pulled out a whistle and blew it. The guild had distributed them. It might call down more monsters, but I was willing to take the risk.

Virgil shook his head and grabbed my hand.

"...Run. No...help Arwin and the others escape. Please."

Oh, right. What about Noelle and Ralph? Had they been killed, too?

At that moment, I realized that I'd seen them both collapsed behind Arwin earlier. Noelle was bleeding from the head, and Ralph was trying to drag her away, but his leg was injured, so he could only wriggle back and forth like an earthworm.

He just had to drag his heels when we needed him most.

I finished helping Virgil and took off running, speaking the command to activate the temporary sun again.

"The neck! Aim for the neck!" I shouted, scooping up a nearby rock and hurling it at the preacher. With my monster strength, even a pebble would at least serve to keep the enemy at bay.

Just when I expected to see it slam into the creature's head with incredible force, the preacher flickered like a heat haze. The stone I threw went right through him, hit the wall, and shattered.

Another freakish power. I glanced over and noticed that Arwin was looking at me with confusion in her eyes.

"Matthew? Why are you here?"

"The neck is his weak point. Cut off his head!"

"...I'll hear your story later!" she warned, and closed the gap at once, striking at the monster. It was a jaw-dropping slash, but no matter where she struck, head or otherwise, her blade just passed through, like hitting an illusion. The preacher's black arms lashed out to counterattack. Arwin was lifted right off her feet and slammed into the wall.

"Piece of shit!"

I took a swing at him from the side, but the preacher did not budge. My fist, too, went right through his body. It felt like nothing.

So our attacks were useless, but he could hit us and do damage. Infuriatingly unfair.

"How unfortunate for you, coming all the way down into the dungeon to rescue your precious princess knight," mocked the preacher. His voice was muffled. "This town will fall to ruin. All the foolish rabble on the surface will die out. And then our god will come take his rightful place on Earth again."

"Well, well, listen to the big words coming from an errand boy for the maggot egg of the gods."

"Your soul cannot comprehend it now. But after much training and study, you too may better your soul until understanding naturally comes to you. Let it come to you. Accept it, Matthew."

I started to retort against the madness of his sermon, but a light flickered on in my head.

"Are you...the founder?"

There was a preacher—different from the others—who was deeply involved in Sol Magni, the sun god's cult. It would make perfect sense that its founder was also a preacher.

"...If you're going to flee, you'd better do it now. I won't hesitate to kill you."

The preacher neither confirmed nor denied it. No matter. Whether he was or wasn't, I'd kill anyone who meant Arwin harm. That's all there was to it. I was ready to send him to hell right then and there. At that moment, a shadow moved in the corner of my vision.

"It doesn't matter who or what you are," Arwin said, getting to her feet and lifting her sword. "You will suffer the price of taking the lives of my companions. Now, step forward and receive your punishment, scum!"

The preacher faltered, crouched slightly, and paused. It was a strange motion. Was he planning something? Or was it a posture for casting magic of some kind? I watched and waited.

The creature's body shivered, and he clenched his fists. He stared down Arwin and hurled an arm forward. Blue-white lightning crackled around his palm. My skin prickled; this was only the lead-up before he actually emitted his power. Something tremendous and disastrous was on the way.

"Don't...tell me...what to do!"

Something had elicited his wrath. He was livid and intended to finish her off in one blow.

"Not so fast!" Arwin rushed forward, attacking before he could stop her.

"Run away!" I warned, leaping forward. Bathing in the rays of the temporary sun, I threw my body toward the enemy and pulled back my fist. As long as I hit him somewhere on his body, I knew I'd knock him off his feet, and even if it didn't kill him, it would stop his attack. At worst, I would at least be able to absorb the attack for Arwin.

But my fist...my whole body simply passed through the preacher's like he was air. I felt no sensation at all, and in the moment my body occupied the same space as his, I felt our eyes locking. Was it pleasure, joy, or mockery? Whatever the emotion in those massive eyes, I felt nothing but chagrin as I passed through him and slammed against the wall.

My vision went woozy for a moment, but I was on my feet again in no time.

And that was when a ray of horrendous, wicked light shone from the preacher's arm. Sound tore the air, and in an instant, the light destroyed the sword that was her family heirloom, and pierced Arwin's breast.

I felt like all color had gone from the world.

The sound of sword shards clattering to the ground resounded twice—the blade half, broken at about the middle, and the handle half that fell from her hand.

Dark blood spilled from her mouth. Disbelief haunted her features. She reached out for me and fell backward.

"Arwin!"

I scooped her up and pressed her cloak to the wound, but the blood would not stop flowing.

"Ma...tthew... I'm...so...rry."

"Don't speak. It'll only make it worse."

"How easily the Crimson Princess Knight succumbs in the end," mocked the preacher. He then produced a black sphere from *inside* his body. It looked like obsidian.

He chanted, "Ecce, Deus. Temus festem." (Behold, God. It is time for the feast.)

Mysterious writing appeared on the surface of the sphere, which began to float above the preacher's head and rotate.

"Grasu amus festerie." (Grant your favor upon our festivities.)

Eventually, it plummeted toward his feet and hit the ground of the dungeon. Ripples spread from it momentarily, before they disappeared without a sound. The floor was still seemingly normal.

"It is over. No one can stop the stampede now."

The preacher turned toward us. His outstretched hand began to shine with light again. The same attack as before?

"You must be in pain. Allow me to ease your suffer—," the preacher said. His voice choked up, his gloating caught in his throat. He clutched at his chest in pain, gasping for breath.

What just happened?

"Shit! I was so close..."

He glanced over at us and snorted.

"No matter. She will not last long. Enjoy your agony."

With a chuckle, his form was shrouded in a new wave of mist. It quickly dispersed, and then there was no sign of the preacher.

"...Did he run away?"

He could have easily killed both me and Arwin, with the way it had been going. Did he spare me because I was a "Sufferer"? A gasp of pain pulled me out of my thoughts. There was something more important right now.

"...Ma...tthew."

"Save the apologies, thanks, and scolding for later. We have to get you patched up. Stay awake; stay focused!"

"Is...this...the...end?" she croaked, grabbing my arm with bright red fingers. "I...don't...want...to...die...yet."

"Yeah, and you're not going to. Not here. You've got to make your triumphant return home, remember? After you've wiped out all the monsters there and restored your kingdom."

The wound was deep; it pierced all the way through her back. This was the same thing that had killed Clifford the mage. She was going to die before the count of a hundred at this rate.

The mist was getting thinner, probably because the preacher was gone. Clearly, he was the source of the stuff.

"It's...so...dark... Ma...tthew...where...are...?"

Her grip was getting weaker.

"Hey! Is anyone there? I've got someone in need of help! Come quick!" I shouted. If any monsters came down on me, I'd destroy them all myself. I just needed help.

Where are they? How many things that are truly precious to me must I lose?

I was starting to feel the icy dullness of despair closing in when footsteps

approached.

"Are you all right?"

It was Nicholas. Some of the other adventurers were with him.

"Over here. Come quick, Doc. Arwin's in bad shape!"

Nicholas rushed over, took one look at her wound, and shook his head. "I'm sorry...but she's not going to make it."

Darkness was closing in around my vision, but I stood firm.

"No! Don't tell me that!"

"You can ask the other healers if you need a second opinion. Magic won't help her now. It's a miracle that she's still alive," he said simply.

I let go of Nicholas. If I lost Arwin now, everything would be lost. The restoration of Mactarode, naturally, but also the town resting atop the stampede, and myself.

"...There is one way that she might be saved."

My head shot upward. Nicholas looked grave, however.

"But it will mean placing very heavy shackles upon her. She might decide that she would have been better off dying."

Arwin was already carrying such a heavy burden that it beggared the imagination: attempting to defeat the dungeon in order to restore her lost kingdom. On top of that, she struggled with the silent shame of dungeon sickness and Release addiction. How much more suffering could she possibly withstand beyond that? I wouldn't be saving her; I'd be casting her into an even hotter hell. Or at least, it was a real possibility.



And on the other hand, if she died, she would be free of all her pain.

I would've asked Nicholas what he thought I should do, but I already had my answer.

"It's not a problem. No matter how deep she sinks, I'll pull her out."

I didn't care that Arwin's death would result in me being out on the street again or that everything I'd done would go up in smoke. The calculations and logic meant nothing to me. Arwin had said she didn't want to die, and that was enough. In fact, there was an even more direct reason.

I didn't want Arwin to die. Simple as that.

I was going to keep her alive for my own selfish reasons. I'd pay whatever price it took to make it happen.

"Very well," Nicholas said heavily. He looked like a person making a terrible and weighty decision. "I will attempt a desperate gamble of a secret art. Please step back; it will be dangerous."

He motioned for everyone else to keep their distance.

"What are you going to do?"

Nicholas grinned.

"Cling to the power of God."

He put a hand to his chest and extracted a filthy rag. It was the Shroud of Bereni—a holy relic that embodied a past miracle, because it was stained with the blood of that horse's ass of a sun god. Apparently, it was the shroud that allowed Nicholas to retain human form.

He ripped the piece of cloth in half, then put half of it back into his own chest and placed the other half on Arwin's. Then he spread his hands above her chest, muttered a number of incantations, and made a translucent liquid drip from his palms. "What's the plan?"

"Seal her wound with my flesh and blood, using the shroud as a catalyst."

"You can do something like that?"

"According to the legend."

Once upon a time, the shroud had made bread from nothing. So healing wounds would be a snap, too, I supposed.

"I've never actually done this before. Watch closely."

The substance that fell onto the shroud entered Arwin's wound. As the flow of liquid increased, the gaping hole began to close. The blood stopped flowing from it. Not only that, the piece of shroud itself was shrinking.

"As I told you, the shroud is a catalyst."

It was acting as a mediating substance, transforming Nicholas's flesh and blood into Arwin's, by all appearances.

How much time had passed?

"It is done."

Arwin's wound was completely sealed. There wasn't even a mark left. The piece of the Shroud of Bereni was gone, too. Arwin was breathing.

"She is still unconscious, but if she gets enough rest, she should wake up eventually," Nicholas said wearily, sitting down on the spot. "I was figuring it out as I went, so I'm glad it worked."

"Thank you, Doc." I clasped his hand. "It's all thanks to you."

When I told them of the attempt's success, Noelle and Ralph came rushing over.

"Princess!"

"Your Highness!"

They'd only had relatively minor injuries, so the other healers had fixed them up. Their wounds were gone.

"What about Virgil?" I asked. Noelle shook her head. So he hadn't made it.

The other missing adventurers in need of rescue had all turned up as corpses.

"So that's everyone."

Of the six, Clifford, Seraphina, and Virgil were dead. Aegis was down to half of its strength.

I'd been Arwin's kept man for a bit over a year. The three who'd died had spent most of their time in the dungeon, so our interactions had been rather brief. When we did speak, they were snide and mocking, so it was clear that they had no respect for me. After Lutwidge's departure, in particular, they were more touchy and prone to both infighting and even squabbling with local mobsters.

To be perfectly honest, there was a part of me that cursed them for being incompetent enough to fail Arwin.

Still, they were people I'd shared drinks and small talk with. They failed to protect Arwin because they were up against a preacher who ambushed them. It was just more than they could handle.

So I was willing to let bygones be bygones. Wait for me, and I'll see you in the afterlife.

But the living still had to think about what came next. That meant Aegis's recovery and replenishment. Even if we had Lutwidge send more new members, they would still need to fit in and learn how best to work together and communicate. There were many challenges ahead.

I wanted to return to the surface as soon as possible, but everyone was exhausted from the battle. We decided to rest a bit before heading back. Naturally, I took the role of caring for Arwin.

Noelle and Ralph were preparing for the trip to the surface. They helped dispose of the dead adventurers off to the side with the other parties—organizing the articles of the dead, recovering their guild cards, and burning the bodies. They had to be feeling especially powerless and despondent this time. Why wasn't I able to save them? Why am I still alive? I knew exactly how that felt, but it was a challenge they just had to overcome. Adventuring was a profession that put them face-to-face with death.

However, there was another question that arose now. I turned to Nicholas and said, "By the way, that monster. Was it...?"

"Yes, a preacher, I suspect," he replied, his voice thick with hatred. "He was most likely trying to activate the stampede."

After the warning signs of the stampede, no one but the dungeon itself knew how much time remained until its explosion. Sometimes, it took over a year. He must have come down here to speed it up, then. That made sense.

"He was in the middle of our fight when he left without finishing us off. I don't understand why."

"Probably out of time."

"What does that mean?"

"The sun god's power doesn't reach into the dungeon. So a preacher can't use his abilities for very long."

So that was why he'd retreated. It also explained why he was gathering up Sufferers: They were soldiers to be sent into the dungeon.

"I thought it was weird that they could mass-produce monsters like that but still wanted *normal* human beings."

"It is not mass production," Nicholas noted, shaking his head. "In my experience, the preachers are few in number. There seems to be a limit to how many they can create at once, either due to time or power constraints."

But that only led to a different question.

"And yet you're not suffering?"

Nicholas was a renegade preacher. He would be under the same conditions as the other guy. But Nicholas did not seem to be in particular pain or torment.

"Because I have this," he said, pointing to his chest. The Shroud of Bereni itself emitted the power of the sun god, and it was virtually infinite. So that was how he could still be effectual down here in the dark.

"Then why didn't that spoiled shithead of a sun god...? Oh, right."

He couldn't mass-produce his followers. The other gods were holding him

back in that regard. And that was why he'd ordered Justin to retrieve the shroud.

Now it was in Arwin's chest. If the preacher found out, he'd tear her open to get to it. So that was another problem to worry about. Even still, just letting her die hadn't been an option. At least, not for me.

"It has already fused with her flesh and blood. They cannot pull it out now, even by tearing us to pieces," Nicholas reassured me. The problem was, some people tried to do things *because* they seemed impossible. Plenty of fools did things without thinking of the consequences. If they found out about this, Arwin would be a target.

Still, I had no regrets. I'd let myself be kept around as the lifeline for a princess knight with a mountain of baggage weighing her down; one or two more difficulties at this point wasn't such a big difference.

"Ngh..."

She opened her eyes when I put a hand to her forehead.

"Are you awake?" I asked.

She turned her head toward me. I alerted Noelle and the others, and they came scampering over like rats.

"Princess!"

"Your Highness!"

The words flooded out of them—exultations of her safety and lamentations of their own inability in the same breath. They could've saved all that for later.

"Hey, how are you feeling?" I asked her. "Heard you were in trouble, so I braved every manner of danger to reach you. That's right. Your prince has come for you. This is the part where you embrace him and we share a loving kiss."

She said nothing. But she did put her arms around my neck and hug me tightly. Even I was surprised by that; I didn't think she'd actually do it.

Ralph and Noelle were wide-eyed.

"So impatient. If you want to enjoy some time together, we'll have plenty

once we get home," I joked, to hide my alarm. I embraced her shoulder but let go immediately. She was shivering to an extreme extent. "Arwin?"

I examined her face. It was turning blue. There wasn't a hint of blood in it. I tried calling her name again, but she started wailing.

"What is it, Arwin? Hey, snap out of it!"

I tried to get her to focus, again and again, but she struggled like a child throwing a tantrum. Her face was a rictus of horror. At that moment, I realized that my fears had come to pass.

Her dungeon sickness had relapsed. She was once again afflicted with the illness that instilled terror in the hearts of adventurers who had been through too many close brushes with death. At its worst, the sick couldn't even get through daily life, much less delve into a dungeon again. Arwin shouldn't have been in a state to fight, originally. She'd become addicted to the horrific drug known as Release and was just barely strong enough to withstand its effects and go into the dungeon now. Things had calmed down recently, but the shock of being on death's door had caused the sickness to come roaring back with a vengeance.

"Calm down. We're all on your side. No one here is going to hurt you."

"No!"

She pushed me away and fled to a corner of the wall. Her hair was a mess, and tears streaked down her face. When I tried to console her, she pushed, punched, and kicked me away.

Hearing the commotion, other adventurers came over to see what was happening.

"Hey, help me out!"

I didn't want their curious gazes on Arwin, but in my weakened state, I couldn't even hold her down. Despite my most extreme reservations, I called out to Ralph for help, but the beautiful princess knight's miserable turn for the worse had left him stunned, and he wasn't getting off his ass to help.

At least Noelle, who was looking ashen, tried to help hold her down. But she

seemed hesitant, too, and Arwin slapped her hands, keeping her at bay. The end of a magic staff entered the picture.

"Sleep," chanted a voice, and Arwin's body swayed. Her eyes closed as though someone had placed weights on them. In moments, she had fallen to the floor and begun to slumber.

Cecilia Maretto remarked, "Easier this way."

I cradled Arwin and pretended to tidy up her hair, while actually using it to cover the spots on the back of her neck. They were the signs of someone addicted to Release.

"...I can't believe it."

"Poor thing. I can't blame her, after nearly dying earlier," said Nicholas casually. I lashed out, grabbing at his shirt.

"What does this mean? I thought you healed her! Or is this what you meant by 'heavy shackles'?"

"It has nothing to do with healing her. This is her own problem to solve," he said wisely, taking my hand off his shirt. "The wound in her chest is sealed. But the wound in her mind is not, it seems."

"If you thought that line was clever or profound, you win zero points, Doc. I only want to know one thing: Will this sickness get better?" And then an idea occurred to me. "Can't you do the same with that power again, but fix her mind this time?"

Nicholas only shook his head sadly. "Even the gods have no power over the minds of humankind," he said, delivering the cruel truth.

Ah, this geezer really is a dyed-in-the-wool holy man. He always puts on that beatific, arrogant smile when he talks about big things like gods and fate.

"And?" said a cold voice. Cecilia was tapping her shoulder with the side of her staff, staring down imperiously at Arwin. "Who's going to carry the princess knight?"

In her current state, she was likely to start thrashing about again once she woke up. We'd just have to let her sleep—meaning that someone would have

to physically carry Arwin all the way up to the surface.

"Good question..."

I was literally powerless. And even if I decided to reveal my secret past and use the temporary sun, it would only last for a matter of seconds. As much as it galled me, I would have to let someone else do it. Since she was healed now, Noelle would probably be ideal. I got up to ask her but felt something pulling on my hand.

I turned back, wondering who the hell was doing that, and gaped at what I saw: Arwin's index finger, hooked onto my sleeve. I squinted at her face, but she was still sleeping. She'd been crying and wailing just before she fell asleep, which was perhaps why a clear droplet fell from the corner of her eye. Though her eyes were shut, her teeth were gritted with pain. She looked like she was struggling against a nightmare. Like a little child, separated from her parents and trying to find them. I removed her finger from my sleeve and held her hand in mine.

"In that case, I'll—"

"No," I said, cutting Ralph off. "I'll do it."

"Huh?" he exclaimed in disbelief. "This is not your burden to carry. Stay out of it, man-whore."

"You're stealing my line, cripple."

Ralph was fatigued from all the fighting. He could be physically healed with magic, but his stamina was still spent. It was all he could do to take care of himself right now.

"Can you even carry Her Highness with your miserable muscles? You lose to little girls at arm wrestling. I can already see you breaking down and tearfully begging me to take over after a few minutes."

"Who the hell do you think you're talking down to?" I'd picked up an entire woman or two with just my pinkie. In the old days.

"In that case," Noelle said, stepping forward, but I gently set her right.

"I appreciate the offer, but no. There will be monsters on the way back. You

won't be able to fight if you're carrying Arwin. So I'd be the better choice, right?"

We'd had to fight for every inch of the safe route on the way down, and there had been even more monsters than we expected. There were spots where we'd been tempted to give up. The more people capable of fighting, the better. And Ralph would be more helpful in battle than I, even in his current state.

He reluctantly murmured his acquiescence but still shot me a glare. "If you drop her, I will kill you myself."

"In your dreams, boy." I would absolutely never let go of her.

"Are we all settled?" Cecilia asked, with little enthusiasm. She didn't care who hauled Arwin out. She just wanted to get back to the surface as soon as possible.

"Sorry. I'll carry her. Give me a little help."

I removed the sleeping Arwin's armor so that I could carry her. I felt pathetic, but I had to give her sword and gear to the others to carry.

Then I got down on my hands and knees and had them place Arwin on my back. I got up on one knee and tried to stand. For a moment, I nearly lost my balance and stumbled, but I managed to stay firm. Ralph kindly and helpfully warned me not to fall over. I hunched forward, put my arms around Arwin's thighs, and tucked my hands under the back of her knees. That should work.

Even this was excruciating. Sweat was already pouring off my forehead. It wasn't a question of whether I could carry her to the surface. I had no choice. I would do it.

"Put up with it for just a bit," I told Arwin. She didn't respond.

"Let's head back, then," Beatrice instructed, and we began our march.

Before we rounded the corner, I looked at the charred bodies of Virgil, Clifford, and Seraphina. The others had seen to them not long ago. Behind me, I heard Ralph sniffling. They hadn't been weak, by any means. They'd had plenty of skill and experience. But they didn't have luck. And Noelle and Ralph did. That was all it came down to.

Arwin was...very fortunate. I decided to call it that.

I climbed up the steps to the twelfth floor, surrounded and protected by the other adventurers. In the past, I could have carried a woman around all day long, but now my body was creaking and screaming for mercy after just a little walk. Pathetic.

"You're sweating like a pig," said Ralph, who couldn't stand to watch anymore, it seemed.

"Yes, well, I'm just a scrawny little thing, as you can see," I retorted.

Would I be sore tomorrow? That public pisser of a sun god made me weak, but some things never changed. Apparently, I was just denser than most people. It made me quite resistant to torture. When I was a mercenary, I'd been captured and tormented. They had demanded that I give up my allies' location and strategy. Compared to that, the Paladins' recent attempts on me were nothing but a little playtime session. The other mercenaries had wailed and demanded to be killed and put out of their misery, but I had withstood the same pain fairly easily.

"I'll take her. Give her to me," the boy wheedled, even though he could barely stand.

"Stop worrying about me and keep your eyes peeled. The adventure lasts until we're back outside."

People said that more were killed on the way out than going deeper into the dungeon. The easiest time to get caught unawares is when you relax.

"Isn't she heavy, though?" Beatrice asked.

"No more than a feather," I said. You'd never catch me calling her heavy. I'd get annihilated later. And for the sake of her honor, I'll have you know that the struggle was on account of my weakness, not Arwin's weight. Even if her well-trained physique made her heavier than other women her size.

"Just give someone else a turn, Matthew," said the old carrier. He extended a hand, trying to be nice, but I shook my head.

"Believe it or not, I'm the jealous type. I don't want to see her in any other man's arms."

The weight on me seemed to increase again. My wisecracks were making me lose concentration. Stay focused, Matthew. You're the invincible Giant-Eater.

My lucidity was starting to fade. But I could neither set her down nor abandon her. I was Arwin's lifeline. If I snapped, who else was going to support her?

We climbed more stairs. Walked. Climbed stairs. The process cycled. Not only was it repetitive, but my legs also felt as slow as if I were trudging through a muddy swamp. My mind was getting fuzzy.

"Where are we now?"

It was dark, and the sweat was running into my eyes; I found it hard to grasp our location.

"We just got to the tenth floor," someone replied.

We'd found Arwin on the thirteenth floor, so there was still a long way to go. I didn't need to think about any of the other stuff. Just the next step. I put my foot down and leaned forward into it. Then the next step. The others could worry about the other details. Just move your legs, Matthew.

"Hey, hurry up!" someone urged me from up ahead. At some point, I'd fallen behind the rest of the line.

Sorry, someone keeps asking me for a kiss over my shoulder, so I guess I fell behind, I said in my usual wisecracking fashion. Or at least, I meant to, but no voice had emerged. My strength was running out. My vision was blurry, and I wasn't hearing well. But that was all. If I fell over, Arwin would take a tumble, too. I could sense fighting ahead.

Sure enough, the route had been interrupted, and monsters were coming for us. The Maretto sisters, Ralph, and Noelle were desperately fighting off the attackers, so it was my job to protect Arwin. Yet not only was I running out of stamina, but hiding, stopping, sneaking, and otherwise changing my speed only wore me out faster. That was all there was to it, though.

Just walk. Keep moving forward. I could worry about hitting my limit or dying

later.

We continued toward the surface, interrupted by combat several times. Thankfully, it didn't seem that anyone had died so far.

"How far now?"

"Sixth floor."

It sounded like Ralph. So we'd gotten halfway there already. I was doing very well, all things considered.

My body was still screaming. Every inch of me was covered in sweat. I knew that if I sat down, I'd never stand up again, so during the last break, I merely stood and drank the water they'd offered me.

I walked near the back of the line. Only Ralph and Noelle were behind me. It was good of them to be so loyal, but they needed to make sure they were watching for danger.

That was when I spotted a strange shape out of the corner of my eye.

"Don't lose focus." Ralph elbowed me in the arm, noticing that I'd slowed down. "I can't believe I have to leave Her Highness in the care of this worthless scoundrel..."

Since he was too busy muttering and complaining, I helpfully offered him a word of admonition.

"Something behind the pillar over there."

"It's just a statue, fool."

"You're the fool. What statue changes positions? It's..."

The thing realized it had been noticed. In an instant, it transformed from stone to a small purple demon.

A gargoyle.

It beat its wings to take flight, then dived at us swiftly from above.

"Look out!" Noelle cried, throwing some knives. But they all bounced off the creature's stony skin. Ralph swung at it, but the gargoyle slipped by him and circled around behind me. It extended white claws and swung them down at

me like a pitchfork intent on reaping my life.

I felt an impact, and my vision blurred. It had cut my forehead, and soon there was red coating my vision.

It was all I could do just to stay upright. Arwin...was still all right. The gargoyle, pleased that it had wounded my head, circled around the pillar and came back toward us.

"Matthew!" Noelle cried. She was a blur of red through my bloodied vision.

"It's just a scrape. Watch out, here it comes again!"

As I expected, it was swooping at us irregularly, flying back and forth. It was looking for the right opportunity to strike.

"Shit!" Ralph swung his sword, trying to drive it off, but the gargoyle merely kept at a safe distance, biding its time.

"You're not going to beat it by waving that thing all over the place. Lure it in closer and aim carefully!"

"Shut up! You stay quiet!" he shouted, ignoring my advice to chase the gargoyle some more. The numbskull was letting the blood go to his head. He chased the creature out of sheer anger. The next thing I knew, the gargoyle was trapped between Ralph and the wall.

"I've got you now."

The ceiling was lower here, too, so he'd be able to reach the gargoyle with his sword before it could fly over his head again.

"No, stop! It's a trap!"

You didn't corner it. It lured you in.

"You're finished!" Ralph crowed, lifting his sword for the coup de grâce. That was when a second gargoyle burst onto the scene. It barreled into his side, knocking him over sideways off his feet. The sword fell from his hand, clattering to the ground. Ralph tried to stand back up, but his body wouldn't cooperate. I'd warned him.

Who decided that there was only one monster?

The pair of gargoyles cackled madly as they flapped and cavorted, pleased with how easily they'd caught their foolish prey. I expected them to finish him off, but after circling around him several times, both gargoyles came my way. They must have sensed that he didn't have the strength to fight anymore.

I was carrying Arwin, was injured, and had impaired vision. The two of us would be easy pickings for the gargoyles. There was no way I could abandon her. And even if I managed to escape, I'd only survive a few moments longer. I wasn't going to die harboring terrible regrets. So I did nothing. I just stood there, with Arwin on my back.

The gargoyles came at us with their claws flashing, but still, I just stood there.

That made it easier for her.

"Don't move!"

A massive blade flew over my head. It spun through the air twice, brutally severing the gargoyles' wings. Both creatures were knocked to the ground, and at last, I saw a dark shape kick off a pillar. It was Noelle. She drew her blade from the back of her gauntlet and stabbed a gargoyle in the back. It made a horrible, bizarre shriek. Pierced through to its stomach, it stretched out its arms and turned back into stone in that position, then crumbled to pieces. The surviving gargoyle could only scamper away on all fours.

"You're not getting away!" Noelle snapped, shooting a metal wire from her gauntlet this time. There was a weight at the end that wrapped itself around the creature's neck. The tugging pressure bent it backward, where it lost momentum.

Now it was a tug-of-war, but Noelle was at a disadvantage due to her light weight. She dug in her heels, but it was pulling her along.

"I told you: You're not getting away."

From behind her back, she pulled out a golden needle. It was too long and thick for sewing. In fact, it didn't seem metal at all. She flung the golden needle like it was a knife. It flew true and stuck into the back of the gargoyle's head, but nothing else happened. It was hardly a fatal blow.

The gargoyle paused, then started moving again. But suddenly, it started to

writhe in pain. It was clawing at the back of its head, vocalizing something that might have been a scream—or a cry for mercy. Purple blood spurted, and it fell to the ground. After a few spasms, it stopped moving. All that was left was a chunk of shattered stone and the golden needle.

I looked down at the object. Noelle snatched it away before my eyes.

"Are you all right?" She wiped my head with a cloth. It was probably meant to tend to my forehead injury, but the bleeding had already stopped. And my mind was on something else right now.

"That was a manticore's poison stinger, wasn't it? From the one you defeated not long ago."

"Please keep that a secret," she said without looking at me.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of."

Some adventurers used weapons and tools that took advantage of monsters' qualities. Poison was a classic example. It could do more than kill: It put targets to sleep, paralyzed them, charmed them, confused them, or drove them mad. You could cause burns, frostbite, petrification, and any other status ailment. Depending on how you used it, poison could be the ultimate weapon. Some called it toxinmancy or poison magic.

"It is not appropriate for Her Highness's party."

But while it was effective, many detested its use. Simply using poisons was considered a taboo act. And many felt revulsion at the thought of utilizing a power that came from monsters. On top of that, using monster poisons was hard. There were stories of parties in which the poison stockpile had leaked in combat and killed the entire group.

So only a small handful of adventurers dabbled in toxinmancy. Say, someone who was used to acting alone and engaging in scouting and guerilla ambushes.

"It would affect her reputation."

"I don't think Arwin would mind." After all, if Noelle felt she had gone down the wrong path, she wasn't alone in that regard. "Failing to protect the core of what you care about because you're too worried about the exterior would be putting the cart before the horse."

In fact, if she'd used that poison on the preacher earlier, maybe Arwin would still be in good health now.

"…"

Noelle was silent.

"Anyway, are you going to just leave that half-dead dimwit over there? I'm fine with it if you do," I said. She rushed off, flustered, to help Ralph.

Watching her run away, I was suddenly hit by a wave of exhaustion. I already had only the minimum of my strength left, and I'd just used up a sizable amount. It was the pits.

After a minute, Ralph came rushing back with his shoulder and arm bandaged. Apparently, the blow had been lighter than it looked. His shoulder was hurt, but not badly.

"Is Her Highness unhurt?" he demanded. I liked that single-minded part of him. When he saw her on my back, he exhaled. Then he glared at me. "Why didn't you run? Were you *trying* to expose her to danger?"

"I couldn't escape."

If I'd tried to avoid their attacks, it would've opened Arwin up to harm. And if I had fallen over, the sleeping beauty would've awakened, without a doubt.

"What happened to the people up front, then? They didn't abandon us back here, did they?"

"I don't think they would've..."

"They would."

No one had the strength left to wait around for those who were struggling to keep up. It was perfectly possible that we'd been abandoned to our own ends.

"Hey!" said a group with Nicholas in it, rushing over as we made our way toward the fifth floor, attempting to catch up. "Sorry, we had a monster attack. Once we finally cleaned them up, we realized you weren't there and started to panic. I'm glad to see you alive."

They cast healing spells on our wounds.

"Is this going to cost us?"

"I'll put it on your tab."

"Good. Just ask that stupid boy over there to close it out when we're done," I said, ignoring Ralph's angry retorts.

We were almost there. As soon as that thought occurred to me, I felt the weight dragging me down again. Shit.

I heard someone call my name. I looked up and saw a thirty-something man place his hand on my shoulder.

"You've done really well. Let us take it from here. It's a straight path from this point," said Rex, the man from Chrysaor.

"No, I'm good." I brushed aside the hand that he reached for Arwin. "I made it this far. I'll take her all the way. Your concern is duly appreciated."

"You don't want the princess knight touched, I understand. Our women will carry her. That should be all right with you."

It's not your decision.

"Can't be too careful. Some dimwits like Ralph back there might lose focus and get badly hurt."

"We're not going to screw up like that."

I wasn't so sure. The ones who assumed they were special were the ones who died. I could attest to that.

"Don't be so stubborn. It's slowing everyone down to match your pace."

"That's your real concern," I noted. He could have just come out and said it first. Instead, he flattered me with false praise. "You want me to walk faster, is that it? Okay, you got it. I'm gonna run back to the surface as fast as I can. Just try to keep up."

"The only part of you that's running is your mouth." Rex snorted. "Look at yourself. You can barely stand. You're at your limit."

"Bullshit," I said. I'd passed my limit ages ago.

"Come on, just give us the princess knight..."

He reached for her again, clearly tired of bantering. He was trying to get an arm around her shoulder to lift her up when he froze.

"…"

Rex backed away, his face pale. A five-star adventurer, someone who had slain many monsters in his time, looked as timid and frightened as a baby mouse.

"What's wrong? Is there something on my face?"

"Er, no...," he stammered, shaking his head.

He didn't want to admit that he was terrified of the look a mere kept man was giving him. Coward. Don't touch her with your filthy hands if you're not ready for that.

"What's the matter?" asked the Maretto sisters, who had come by to inspect the commotion.

"Oh, er, it was Matthew. He's falling behind," Rex mumbled, excusing himself. Did the man have any balls at all?

"Hmmm," murmured Beatrice, giving me a searching gaze. "Monster activity's even more frenetic than I would've thought. From what the guild people say, it's all they can do to maintain the current route."

"So it seems," I said. The route we were walking now was already vanishing. As time went on, it would get harder and harder to maintain.

"If you fall behind, we're going to leave you and Arwin. Do you understand that?"

"Loud and clear." I wouldn't have taken her weight on unless I expected an outcome like this.

"Fine," she said disinterestedly, and turned her back. "Well, we're moving on. Good luck bringing up the rear."

Beatrice joined her sister and headed for the staircase leading toward the surface. The route was already broken here and there, so they were going to

clear out the monsters, I expected. Rex gave me an awkward glance, then trotted after the sisters. Ralph hurried to take his place.

"Are you sure about this?"

"Stop complaining and watch our rear. Protect Arwin."

I expected nothing from little Ralphie. If he died first, it just meant that much more of a chance of us escaping alive.

The stairs were ahead of us. But these were as steep as a mountain path, and each step was tall. It'd be a great ordeal to climb them, but I'd already claimed my intentions, so I would have to do it.

"Then I'll help from here," Noelle said, circling behind us and leaning forward. She was pushing up against Arwin's back. "You can't complain about this, right?" she smirked. "You're not going to tell me not to assist you."

I laughed. "Thanks."

Ralph took a turn pushing as well, and we made our way up the stairs and closer to the surface. We continued onward from there with no battle, but stepping over the occasional monster corpse. It was getting brighter up ahead. I could sense more faint and flickering sources of light.

"It's the exit," Ralph cheered, grateful to be alive. He started pushing Arwin harder.

"Hey, are you trying to crush her? Keep your eye on our sides and rear," I snapped.

Many people died on the first floor of the dungeon: fools who assumed they'd only find weak monsters up here and softheaded types who got lazy once they were close to the surface. They failed to notice the goblins and kobolds and slimes sneaking up on them, got caught unawares, and died. And a stampede was imminent. We could easily come across monsters much stronger than expected, like the hellhounds and redcaps from earlier.

"Matthew! Hey!"

Ralph impertinently smacked my shoulder. I didn't need to turn around to know why. You couldn't miss all the footsteps.

A throng of goblins and kobolds was closing behind us. They were pushing and jostling each other in their haste to reach us and tear us to pieces. It was like a dark, bloodthirsty tsunami.

"Run!"

If they caught us, we were dead. I used my very last bit of strength to run. There was no time even to take out the temporary sun.

Noelle turned back to throw a dagger or other weapon now and then, but it didn't even slow them down. The creatures didn't hesitate to scramble over the bodies of their own kind.

"Ignore them. Focus on running."

"You should do the same!" Ralph shouted, pulling ahead of me. I didn't need his encouragement; I was already running as fast as I could. My legs just couldn't keep up. There was no feeling in them anymore.

"You're the last ones! Hurry!" called out the guild staffers at the exit. There were a number of them waiting, ready to close the door as soon as we were clear.

"Quickly!" Noelle called, halfway up the stairs. The goblins were right behind us.

"Just go!" I yelled. If they stood around, Noelle and Ralph would go down with us, too.

First Noelle, then Ralph exited through the gate. I hurried up the steps, watching them pass through. Five more steps, four more, three—and that was when I felt myself being tugged backward. I spun around on sheer instinct.

The claws of the goblin at the head of the pack were yanking on Arwin's cuff.

I couldn't even fight back against the strength of a goblin. The bulk of my weight and Arwin's tilted backward. This was bad. If I got stopped here, the other goblins would catch up—and both of us would be going to hell. But I didn't have the stamina to resist at this point.

"Motherfucker!" I yelled.

"But enough about you."

An enormous staff extended toward us from above. It knocked away the goblin's claws like a spear, then thrust at the creature, shoving it back down the stairs.

"You took so long. I thought you two were dead," said Beatrice Maretto. I could sense great magical power concentrating in her staff. As we reached the surface, she unleashed a spell into the dungeon. "Buh-bye now... Detonation!"

I felt a trace of heat on my backside. The sounds of slaughter were drowned out by the blast. The force of it pushed me forward and onto my knees.

"Now! Close it!"

Once we were out, all the guild staffers pushed the specially made door shut. It was also augmented by magic. Under ordinary circumstances, it would never be broken.

"Welcome back," Beatrice said insincerely, before walking away toward her sister.

"Thanks," I said. She waved over her shoulder.

Here on the surface, all the adventurers who'd taken part in the search and rescue operation were seated on the ground. I assumed they'd be universally exhausted, but some of them chatted happily or were already drinking and carrying on. They seemed energetic—and here I was, about to pass out.

That was when I realized it was night. When in the dungeon, one's sense of day and night went all funny. Even the pubs and inns had their lights dimmed. It was very late. The squirt was asleep, too, I guessed. The breeze felt nice. A moment's relaxation caused the tension to go out of my body. I bent down and repositioned Arwin on my back. I couldn't drop her now.

Someone called my name. I turned to see Noelle standing right next to me, rubbing Arwin's back. She was still fast asleep.

"Let's put the princess down, Matthew."

"No. I'm taking her home," I said, shaking my head. "She won't get a restful sleep on the hard, smelly beds at the Adventurers Guild. You must be tired from today, too. We can talk more tomorrow. Good night."

She tried to say something, but I had already turned and started walking away.

It took twice as long as usual to get home. The final hurdle was the set of stairs to the second floor, which I ascended to put her in her bed. Arwin was still sleeping.

Somehow, I'd made it back. We'd sacrificed much and lost much. But somehow, some way, Arwin was back alive. The feeling of relief drained the tension in my muscles. This time, I couldn't fight it off. I went to lie down on the bed and turned my back to her. There were so many things still to be done. But for now, I wanted to sleep. I was exhausted. As soon as I closed my eyes, I was unconscious.

CHAPTER THREE

Loss

The next morning, my extreme exertion came back to haunt me. My entire body was racked with muscle pain at even the slightest movement, but after eating a big, meaty meal and going back to sleep, most of the discomfort was gone by the following day. There was no lasting effect after that. My quick healing was the same as it had ever been.

Five days had passed since Arwin's rescue.

She awoke the morning after we brought her back. Her injuries were no problem. You couldn't even see a scar where the hole had been in her chest. But her heart and mind hadn't recovered yet. She wasn't thrashing about anymore, but she shivered like a baby mouse and occasionally fell into bouts of hyperventilation.

Naturally, she wasn't going on any adventures. She was staying home to recover, so she was always either lying in bed or sitting in her room with the door shut. I brought her food; she did not venture outside. She tried once, but went pale and dashed back inside.

The story of Arwin "contracting" dungeon sickness had made the rounds. At the guild, people were rumoring that Aegis was done for, and that the party would have to break up, or that they already had and had left town.

In fact, three of the six were dead, so those assumptions kind of made sense.

Noelle, one of the survivors, came by every day. She would talk to Arwin for a while, leave a gift of some kind, and depart. I asked what she was doing with herself, and she said she was keenly aware of her shortcomings and was going out of town to train herself. Speaking of training, so was Ralph; he spent all his

time at the guild's special training grounds.

They'd already sent back a messenger pigeon to old Uncle Lutwidge. There would be new members arriving to fill the gaps soon. But if Arwin couldn't fight, then no new member was going to change the party's situation.

And there was zero concern about being passed to the dungeon core. The Adventurers Guild and the other parties had bigger fish to fry.

Old Gregory, the guildmaster, had decreed that the dungeon would be temporarily sealed. The door was barred shut and reinforced, but from time to time, there were sounds from the other side, like scraping claws and the muffled thuds of something running into it.

When the dungeon in a dungeon city was off-limits, it redefined the direction the city was heading. It was like a mine had run dry of ore: Only decline could follow. The quickest-acting adventurers would leave town first. Others might venture out of town to collect rocks and herbs, trying to get by on scavenging. Some of the dafter adventurers were trying to petition to have the dungeon reopened, but the old man was rebuffing them all. If this situation lasted, however, the adventurers would all leave, and the town would turn into a husk of itself anyway. His only options were two evils.

Unease was spreading throughout the town. The powerful party, Aegis, had fallen apart, and the dungeon was locked up. And as if to take advantage of that uncertainty, Sol Magni was growing more active.

I'd thought they would lie low, but they were increasing their numbers instead. Sometimes they found fresh blood by practically kidnapping them into the cult. Rumors said that they executed attempted escapees—and even performed sacrificial rituals of innocent maidens. Devil worshippers, by the sound of it.

And to back up these rumors, there were bodies of children and young men and women turning up all over town. Some even showed signs of torture or had their hearts cut out, they said.

The town guard and Paladins had labeled Sol Magni a malicious cult and were cracking down on them. They'd found and eliminated several hideouts but had only caught a few low-level believers. As long as their "founder" was alive, they

weren't going to slow down. No doubt Vincent was displeased with these developments. I wanted to help if I could, but there was no way I could take my attention away from Arwin at the moment.

I finished folding some laundry and walked up the stairs, only to hear a noise coming from my bedroom.

"What are you doing?" I asked. Arwin spun around. She looked awkward and guilty. "I've already given you today's."

```
"Please. It's all I have."
```

"No."

I wasn't a doctor or an herbalist, but I'd seen tons of people with addictions like her. I'd seen how their lives crumbled.

"You're in the process of reducing your dosage. If you take a whole ton all at once, your symptoms will only get worse. Then you'll *never* come back."

Everything I'd done over the past year would be for nothing. Not only that—her very life would be in danger.

"I don't care. It's all I have anymore."

"No."

"Please, Matthew."

I shook my head. This was pathetic. Where was her dignity? She was just a junkie now. She'd do anything for it—maybe even spread her legs.

"This is what you want, isn't it?" I took a small sack out of my pocket and removed a green-colored candy. Arwin's eyes lit up.

"Give it to me, Matthew."

She was like a dog in heat. I was hoping she'd have a bit more self-control.

"You want it, you can have it."

I tossed the bag. Arwin caught it in midair, grabbed the candy, and shoved it in her mouth. It rolled around on her tongue and put an odd expression on her face.

"It's an herbal one. There's less sugar, so it'll be a little bitter."

"No! Not this!"

She spit out the candy and leaped at me. I tried to resist, but she easily managed to slam me against the wall.

"Where?! Where is it?!"

"In your room."

She scrambled across the floor back to her bedchamber, where she began throwing the drawers open and knocking over items on her shelves.

"No, that's not it. Where did you hide it?!" She began picking up clothes and sundries and tossing them out the window with undisguised annoyance.

"No need to rush. I'm getting it ready right now." If you want it that much, have as much of a taste as you like. "Here."

I held up a small mirror right in front of her.

"And here's some extra."

I put a pendant I'd removed from her desk drawer around her neck. It was a precious heirloom that had been in her family for generations, but she'd given it away once before to get more of the drug.

Her eyes bulged with despair.

The only way to know what passed through her mind would be to ask her. She grunted and turned away, then emptied the contents of her stomach onto the floor. She hadn't eaten much in the last few days, so it was mostly liquid.

I patted and rubbed her back until I heard her sobbing. I whispered that I was sorry, but the only response was a quiet shudder.

I helped her tidy up and put her into bed.

"There's no rush. You can recover at your own pace. Run too fast, and you'll only trip and fall."

"…"

"Anything hurt?"

She'd very nearly died. The possibility of aftereffects was there. But Arwin just buried her face in her pillow.

"I think you should rest. This is the time for healing," I said, caressing her clammy face. Ordinarily, she would pout and demand not to be treated like a child, but she didn't even have the energy for that now.

"Matthew," she said instead, reaching out pleadingly. I took her hand and squeezed it.

"It's all right."

I didn't know what was "all right," but I had to say it anyway. Even if it only sounded like an empty reassurance, the feeling I put into those words was anything but hollow.

"Call for me if you need anything. Good night," I said as I shut the door, once I had tidied up the room. It had been the right call to put her weapons and armor away in the storage room.

"Well, damn."

How long is this going to continue? Dammit, Dez. Come back already. You're the only one I can count on now.

I went downstairs and out into the yard. The items she'd tossed out the window were scattered all about. I had to pick them all up before some enterprising thief made off with them.

I was in the process of collecting the clothes and books when I heard someone say, "Hey." I looked up to see a woman leaning over the fence. Ashblond hair went down to her neck. Her eyes were hazel, and she appeared to be about twenty. She was quite the looker.

"You dropped this," she said brusquely, and handed me a book. It had landed out on the street, it seemed.

"Ah, thanks," I said, scratching my head. But she remained on the fence after I took the book.

"And how is, um...Lady Arwin?" she asked, looking up at the window. This had been her real intention.

"She's not taking any visitors," I said, waving her off. "If you want an autograph, you'll have to come back sometime later."

"Oh."

She looked aside, her suspicions seemingly confirmed. It hadn't been just a curious whim on her part, then.

"And you are?"

"...You can just call me Fiona," she said, giving me a sly wink. "You're Matthew, right? Thanks."

It was a bit disconcerting to be thanked for something before you even knew who the other person was.

"I was in the dungeon. You saved me. It's the only reason I was able to get back to the surface."

"Oh."

She hadn't been in the rescue squad, so she must've been one of the trapped adventurers. Now I saw that there were calluses on her palm, and her arms were muscled like a warrior's. I didn't see her in the dungeon, so she must've been saved by one of the other groups. Or else she'd made it back on her own, thanks to us setting up the route again.

"So you know Arwin?"

"She's helped me out before with things. I was wondering how she was doing, after...you know."

"She's alive."

But her mind is still wandering the dungeon.

"And you're just doing chores or something?"

"Like I always do."

She always liked things tidy but had no idea how to clean up after herself. It had been awful when I'd first moved in.

"Will she get better?"

"Good question."

Maybe she will. Maybe she won't.

"I'm doing everything I can for her. She's resting right now."

"And that wound?"

She was looking at a trickle of blood on my arm. Arwin had probably scratched me when she leaped on me earlier.

"Just a scratch," I said. It wasn't worth making a fuss about. It had hurt much worse when I'd brought a woman into the house, and Arwin had struck me on the head with a sword handle.

Fiona's eyes narrowed with envy.

"You work so hard to cure her."

"That's where you're wrong," I stated flatly. "Arwin's working hard to get better. I'm just helping."

In the end, it was the strength and willpower of the afflicted that would actually cure the disease. Her desire for candy was a result of her seeking a resolution to the current situation—it was just the absolute wrong way to do it. That was how it always went.

She constantly reached out for methods that she shouldn't attempt.

Fiona's gaze went vacant briefly. Then she blinked and nodded with satisfaction.

"I heard you were a real bottom-of-the-barrel scumbag, but you seem all right to me."

"It's all lies. Jealous people, spreading nasty and baseless rumors about me. If you ever hear them again, feel free to set the record straight. You can tell them that Matthew is undoubtedly, unquestionably, verifiably the most handsome and debonair man in all the land."

"Your wisecracking's pretty good, too."

How rude.

"If you manage to find any good healing herbs, tell me about them."

"I'll let you know first if I do."

"Appreciated." As long as it wasn't another weird drug, I was willing to try anything. "Hey, do you want to come inside for a cup of tea?"

"Maybe another time," Fiona said, bidding me good-bye and silently dropping back down to the other side of the fence.

It didn't seem like she was casing the place. The landlord had dropped by to check on Arwin and informed me that there were odd, shifty sorts loitering around—probably burglars who'd heard about the princess knight's bout with illness and who were looking for a chance to break in. It was the way of this town—and the world in general—that they sucked up to the powerful and beat down the weak below them. Morals and virtues didn't fill their stomachs.

I resumed grabbing stuff and was gathering the garbage in the entryway when the book Fiona had picked up caught my eye.

The cover looked familiar. It was a collection of poetry by someone named Percy Malthouse. Arwin had read some to me before, and I'd laughed myself silly at the pretentiousness of it all. Ordinarily I'd never give it another look, but I was feeling low and could do with a laugh.

"Hmmm."

Despite the embarrassing turns of phrase, I gathered that it was a story of chivalry. I wasn't much for reading books, so I skipped and skimmed, but I got the gist of it.

A knight born to a noble pedigree wandered the lands, performing deeds of righteous valor for the sake of the people, defeating monsters, and fighting bravely against the armies of enemy countries.

He was wounded in a fierce battle and was ultimately disfigured and scarred. In the end, the knight was a miserable sight, unfit for polite society.

Ashamed of his ugliness, the knight hid himself deep underground in the land of darkness. There, he was visited by a princess. She braved danger and ventured into a cave of monsters to get the magical herbs that would help the knight who had so bravely saved her life and her people. She traveled all the way down underground where the knight had hidden and reunited with him.

That was where it got to the embarrassing part I remembered from the last time.

Cured by the magical herbs, the knight felt his spirit restored and made a triumphant return to his homeland to defeat evil once and for all.

Then you would assume that the knight and princess lived happily ever after... but instead, the knight went off on another aimless journey, seeking wrongs to right and innocents to protect. While the princess awaited his return, the kingdom was invaded by an enemy, and she was mortally wounded. Just before her soul was taken to heaven, the knight returned to her. She was able to profess her love for him, just before her short life came to its tragic conclusion. The end.

"This is bullshit."

I thought I'd get some mirth out of it, but I didn't even chuckle. If anything, I felt *more* depressed. Nothing was going right. I clicked my tongue and went back inside.

After several more days, Arwin's condition was not improving in the slightest. She was holding back on the candy ransacking, but one candy per day was clearly not meeting her preferred intake. When I gave her the candy, she didn't look at it but instead stared greedily at the bag in my other hand.

So I started taking just one actual candy with me into her room, so that it didn't matter if she snatched it from me. The rest were plain sugar candies. I had to bring a bunch, because Arwin would get depressed if I only brought one; it was as though I didn't trust her. She was a handful to deal with.

One day, I went downstairs after delivering her candy and heard knocking at the door. I approached it cautiously; just two days prior, some brigand had been bold enough to try sneaking in, having heard that the princess knight was unable to fight. Bradley the Gravedigger had taken his corpse away for me. So I was out some money, and the temporary sun was soaking up more rays right now. It took half a day to recharge.

Just in case, I had multiple locks on the door.

I peered out through the crack and saw a silver-haired girl there, smiling awkwardly.

"Apparently, Matthew carried you on his back, aaaall the way out of the dungeon. Do you remember that?" said April from the side of Arwin's bed, gesturing excitedly to punctuate her story. "He's weak enough to lose to me in arm wrestling, but when you were in trouble, he went right down into the dungeon. I was amazed. It's like, normally he's so lazy, but when it's something really important, he finds a way to get it done. I think he should just try that hard all the time, though."

Mind your own business, squirt.

"I told him it was impossible. But Matthew said, 'I would walk into the fire and flames and down to the depths of hell for the sake of my beloved Arwin!"

Hey, stop making things up.



She also told stories of funny events from the orphanage and silly things that happened to her to various degrees of exaggeration.

"…"

But Arwin remained silent. Sometimes, she blinked and squinted as though the sun were shining in her eyes—and she paid April only the briefest glances of attention.

Sensing that a change was needed, April jumped up and began to dance as she told her stories, but it had the opposite effect. All her energetic attempts to cheer Arwin up garnered no reaction, and it made the poor girl look like a bad jester or comedian.

In the end, she couldn't get any real conversation or response from Arwin. She just wasted her time. It was already right before sundown. Time for her to go home.

"Sorry. Thanks for coming over."

"Oh, it's fine," April said cheerily. She was so sweet. "I wonder if Arwin will be like this forever. I heard that dungeon sickness doesn't get—"

"It does get better."

I'd heard stories to that end. If it was a light case, it would wane immediately. Some people made their way right back into the dungeon. Others were still able to fight outside normally, even if the dungeon was too much for them. But the more serious the case, the harder it was to even live one's daily life. Unfortunately, Arwin's symptoms were severe.

"Hey, Matthew," said April timidly. She wanted to know the answer but was afraid to ask the question.

"…"

I waited for her. I felt that prompting her would only make it harder.

April hesitated, then summoned her courage, clenched her fists, and spoke her mind.

"...You aren't going to abandon Arwin, are you?"

It didn't sound like she was joking. Her gaze was filled with concern, and her jaw was tense.

I cracked a smile. "Why do you think that?"

"Because you were with someone before her. And then you split up and got together with Arwin."

She was talking about Polly, I gathered. It had happened once before, so it was possible that I might latch on to another woman this time. Especially with the state Arwin was in. Your average pimp would either drop the deadweight and find another woman or sell off the princess knight to a brothel for some money.

"I was the one who got dumped," I clarified. "It was the merciful princess knight who took me in after that."

Romantic relationships between people were fragile things. They spoke of eternity and being bonded for life, but when the passion was gone, it was over.

"But Arwin can't fight anymore, and then you'll run out of money..."

"The money will sort itself out."

It wouldn't do to underestimate old Matthew's life skills. I was good at wagering on cockfights, and I could scrounge up some money from Dez. And the reason Arwin was suffering was because her relatives were all useless. *They* should be sending us money. We weren't just a kept man and his matron, sticking around due to money, physical intimacy, and nothing else. At the very least, it wasn't such a "liberated" relationship that I could cut her loose and run at the first sign of trouble.

"This is the first and last chance I'll ever have to be with a beautiful princess knight like her. I'm not such a lunatic that I'd cast my good fortune into the gutter."

"But what if you get an invitation from a rich woman who's even prettier than Arwin?"

"Then I'll tell her, Sorry, my schedule's full at the moment. Come back and see me in about a hundred years."

"But..."

"On top of that," I said, bending down to ruffle her hair, "Arwin's going to be fine. She's got you worrying for her sake, after all."

"Then you won't..."

"Of course I won't abandon her. I'll be around to the bitter end."

April smiled. "Really?"

"Really, really."

"You have to swear to it."

"I do."

"Oh, I'm so glad," April said, sighing with relief. This must have been hanging like a cloud over her mind. "I'm sorry."

"It's fine. I'm not bothered."

I'd been with another woman before Polly, too. I was not a man who settled down, so I couldn't blame her for thinking that. I'd earned it through my reputation.

"Okay, Matthew. Take care of Arwin," she said, and ran off. The kid had energy. I hoped that she'd grow up to be kind and caring and not a bitter old miser like her grandfather.

I watched her go, then turned around to go back inside, when I heard a scream.

It was April's voice.

I turned and rushed in the direction it had come from. In the back alley, gloomy with the sun going down, some men in black masks had April and were trying to load her into a nearby covered wagon.

"Stop right there, you freaks!" I shouted, rushing up to them, but they easily avoided my weak punch and knocked me right to the ground.

"Matthew!" said a muffled voice. To the side of my field of vision, I saw April being tossed into the wagon, which started pulling away.

What numbskulls were these? Of all the girls in the world to abduct, they chose the beloved granddaughter of the Adventurers Guild's Guildmaster? And what happened to her guards? He was supposed to have put bodyguards on her to shadow her every move.

That was when I noticed the other man and woman on the ground. I recognized their faces. They must've been attacked and knocked out from behind. They were still breathing; the woman seemed to be holding something. She'd grabbed this and torn it loose while grappling in the fight. It was the sigil of Sol Magni. The fanatical bastards.

The wagon was pulling farther away with every moment.

Given that they had gone after a pampered young lady with bodyguards, this was clearly a planned abduction—either for ransom or to be a hostage and put pressure on the old man. But the problem wasn't their purpose but what would happen to the poor squirt.

More than a few children got abducted in this town. If these were the type of well-mannered folk to return their hostages after they got what they wanted, they probably wouldn't have been labeled a cult in the first place.

"Well, shit."

I rushed back to my room, grabbed the temporary sun I'd left on the windowsill, and leaped right out the window. Before I'd even landed on the ground, I was chanting the command.

"Irradiation."

The crystal orb floated out of my hand and began to shine with a brilliant light, sending strength all throughout my body. I reached up to grab the rainspout and lifted myself onto the roof.

If I'd just run through the street, I would have tipped them off and drawn attention. Instead, I sprinted across rooftops, smashing tiles in my pursuit of the wagon. It was more difficult to run this way, but I was still gaining ground. The wagon was going to slow down in the streets anyway, because nothing stood

out more than a vehicle racing pell-mell through those cramped alleys.

In no time at all, the wagon was right below me. I jumped off the roof and onto the covered wagon, tearing through the canopy and landing on one knee. The light of the temporary sun illuminated the interior. There were four of them inside, with April blindfolded and gagged. It was horrible—but suited me just fine.

Their eyes bulged behind their black masks.

"Who are you?"

I answered that man by punching him in the face. Blood burst inside his mask, and the smell of iron and rust filled the carriage. Another masked man, seemingly undisturbed by the sight of his fallen comrade, drew a shortsword from his waist and leaped at me. He was the one who'd hit me a minute ago.

After two or three feints, he slid up close to stab me. Just before his blade struck my left breast, I fell sideways and threw my fist at him. His blade grazed my chest and continued onward, while my counter flattened his face like an overripe tomato.

Realizing they were overmatched, the other two tried to escape the wagon. That was a smart idea—but too late. When they turned their backs on me, I brought down a fist on the back of one of their heads, while I circled my arm around the other's neck and snapped it in one motion.

Now that they were all dead, I leaped onto the driver's seat and stopped the horses. Looking around, I could see that we were on Red Whale Street, in the northwest part of town. Most likely, their hideout was around here, but I'd have to search for it later.

I returned to the wagon and checked on April. She was immobilized and wriggling like a worm. She seemed to be terrified, not knowing what was happening around her. I put a leather sack over her head from behind so she wouldn't see me and pushed her off the back of the wagon.

The poor thing would just have to deal with it for a bit longer.

April ceased all resistance and curled herself up like a roly-poly. I lifted her onto my shoulder and looked around—what now?

At this point, I was likely to be confused for one of the kidnappers. I would prefer to take her right back to her grandfather, but it would be troublesome to explain the situation.

Maybe there was someone I could leave her with. I looked down the street and found just the thing: the pair of Paladins with the little mustache and the tanned skin. They would recognize April, too, so it was perfect. They could take credit for saving her. Be grateful to me for that, boys. I undid April's bonds, sat her down in the path they were walking, and quickly distanced myself.

Once I was safely in the shadows and could turn around, I saw the two men hurrying over to April, all flustered. Perfect.

It was already nighttime, and I'd had to waste time with this. The temporary sun was out of power again. I was hungry and thirsty as well. I wanted to grab a snack and find a place to drink, but I was too worried about Arwin being alone to do that now.

Time to get home. I rushed back to the house.

Arwin was probably missing me right now. I'd need to cook her something that would get her appetite going—but just as I approached the house, I noticed that the door was open. That wasn't right. It had been closed when I left. Inside, there were footprints that didn't belong to either of us on the stairs. Several sets.

I rushed up the steps, feeling all the hair on my body stand on end. I slammed my body against the door, bursting into Arwin's room.

There were ruffians inside, four in total. They had her limbs held down and were trying to rip off her nightgown.

Arwin was wailing, but she was unable to put up much resistance. Ordinarily, she'd have been able to handle these louts barehanded without breaking a sweat.

"You sons of bitches!"

I leaped inside, only to be struck from behind. Looking up, wincing from the pain, I saw a man hiding behind the door, tossing aside a large stick. That hadn't been all of them. He bent down and began to tie me up with a rope.

Gritting my teeth against the pain and fury, I noticed something familiar out of the corner of my eye: the badge of the Adventurers Guild.

That's right—they were adventurers. I'd seen them at the guild building before. They were always lurking in the corner, watching the accomplishments of Arwin and the other successful adventurers with jealous loathing, and muttering insults under their breath. They were lower than scum.

"You stay there and watch, man-whore." One of the wretches pulled back my head and poured a strange liquid into my mouth. "That's a numbing agent. Might be a bit harsh, 'cause it's meant for monsters, but it won't kill ya."

As he warned, my already dulled senses were feeling even more distant now. Arwin could only murmur for them to stop. Her face was pale as a sheet.

"Seems like it's true that the princess knight can't fight anymore, eh?"

"Don't worry, we ain't gonna kill her. We'll have our fun with her and be on our way out of this town. We'll all take good care of her."

He pulled down his trousers and showed off something so pathetic as to be silly to describe, brandishing it like it was some demonic sword.

Don't wave that tawdry thing about.

I heard Arwin scream, "Help me, Matthew!"

She was immediately silenced by a sharp slap. Someone mocked, "'Help me,' she says! What's a great lump of a man like him going to do?"

He's right. I'm just Matthew the weakling, the man with muscles feebler than applesauce. I could fight you a hundred times and never come close to winning once.

But my princess knight has called upon me.

So I have no choice but to fight.

"The princess knight's going to leave you and start sucking on mine, instead."

"Yeah, it's a real shame," I said. I collected my breath and focused on the chains within my head that represented the curse afflicting my body—and ripped them apart.

I got to my feet, swaying. The rope that was holding me captive snapped open and fell to the floor.

"A shame that I won't get to torture you all to death."

It was sheer willpower. Though the shitstain sun god's curse left me unable to properly use my body, I was able to regain my original strength for a very short time on my own. Where I used to be able to use 100 percent of my power, now it was only 1 percent. So if I used 10,000 percent, instead, I could briefly get back to 100. It was afterward that I'd have to pay the severe cost of my indulgence and suffer extreme agony and immobility.

I leaped at the flies swarming over Arwin, splitting one head from behind and breaking another's neck, then slamming their heads into the other two.

The man who'd hit me turned white and tried to run. I scooped up the stick he'd used and swung it down on his head while he tried to descend the stairs. The stick caved his skull in, embedding itself in his brain. Without so much as a peep, his body slid lifelessly down the steps.

"You all right, Arwin?"

She was unconscious. That was a relief; but at the same time, also an ominous sign. She'd been this helpless to protect herself? At the moment, Arwin was less capable than even the average girl. No one overcome with terror could help in a fight. It was a sign of just how serious her dungeon sickness was.

Agony ran through my muscles, and I slumped over at the side of the bed. My body was already protesting its overuse. I wasn't going to be able to move from here.

What to do about the bodies? For the moment, I didn't have any option other than asking Bradley the Gravedigger to dispose of them. The guild wasn't going to pry much into the disappearance of a bunch of lowlifes like them. The real problem was how to explain this to Arwin. Would she accept the story that a righteous hero had appeared and killed all her attackers in her moment of need? Probably not.

I suppose I could pretend that I passed out and play dumb about the whole thing.

Just then, there were more sounds on the stairs. Multiple sets of feet, in fact. Could there be more of them?

Dammit. I can't fight back now. I didn't even have the strength left to stand up and hit one of them, at the least. In no time, they were in the room.

I didn't recognize any of them, but I could tell from their manner that they were not ordinary people. They were adventurers, or mobsters, or something of the sort.

They groaned when they saw all the bodies.

"Holy shit. They're all dead."

"But the poison's working. Look at his face. He's practically dead already."

So these were the ones who'd put the adventurers up to this. I gathered they'd also been the ones to supply the numbing poison.

But who were they?

I received my answer right away. Another person was coming up the stairs.

When he entered the room and saw its contents, he whistled.

"I knew you weren't no ordinary man."

"It's you..." I recognized him: Reggie, from Tri-Hydra. I'd never forget his face. He'd dabbled in child abduction and human trafficking about a year ago. Because Arwin and I got involved, his part in the slave trade failed, and his gang went to pieces. "You're still alive." Rumor said that he'd fled to another town. Well, now he was back. "Why are you here?" I asked. "The autograph session's scheduled for tomorrow. This is the problem with you overeager fans: You just don't have any patience."

"You know why I'm back: revenge. I've got a score to settle with you and that princess knight," Reggie said, cackling happily.

"And those shitheads were your shock troops, huh?"

"Can't be too careful."

So he'd heard that Arwin wasn't in a fighting state anymore, and he'd decided to make his move. And he'd even lined up some hooligan adventurers to do the

heavy lifting for him.

"Just so you know," he said, "I'm not the kind of reprobate who tries to have his way with a resisting woman."

He slapped Arwin to wake her up, then dragged her off the bed. She huddled up in terror as he tossed a sword in front of her.

"What's wrong? Fight back. You should be able to slice all of us to bits in seconds."

"Do it, Arwin. You can do this."

"There, your pimp says you can. So what'll it be?"

Arwin shook her head. Reggie grabbed her by the hair, pulled her upright, then slammed her to the floor and stepped on her back. Even still, all she did was cower and tremble.

"What a waste of time," he muttered, his interest in her all but lost. "Very well. I suppose I'll have the heads of both the princess knight and her boy toy. I'll start with her," he said, chuckling. "More fun that way."

"Dammit! Get off me!"

I couldn't rush to her aid, because of not only the numbing poison and the rebound of my secret weapon, but also the fact that Reggie's thugs were holding me down. It was so frustrating—there were only three of them!

What are you doing, Matthew? The woman who means so much to you is about to die before your eyes. Are you just going to take a nap here? Does it hurt that much? They didn't rip your limbs off. Who cares about your limits? Who cares how long you'll be paralyzed, or if you live or die after that? Arwin's in danger.

But despite all my recriminations, my body would not respond. If willpower alone solved every problem, no one would ever pray to the gods for help.

"I'll start with her eyes." He lifted his knife.

"Stop!"

"Scream all you want. No idle heroes are going to traipse by to help you."

"Sorry, were you talking about me?"

A moment after I heard the voice, the window shattered. Numerous fireballs flew in through it, lighting Reggie's goons on fire and burning them alive. When the ones resting on top of me leaped away, I was able to stand, fighting against excruciating pain to jump on top of Arwin and protect her from the fire. I looked up to see that the only survivors inside the room were the two of us, plus Reggie, who had just barely avoided the projectiles.

Flames were spreading inside the room, filling it with searing smoke that caused Arwin to cough.

"Uh-oh."

Next there was a spray of water orbs that doused the flames, pushing out the billowing smoke with white steam. The place was full of charred marks and burned bodies.

"Pardon the intrusion at this late hour." My eyes went wide as a mage dressed in black leaped through the empty window onto the shards of glass on the floor. "I suppose my sudden appearance has startled you. Don't worry, I'll be out of your hair once I'm done. You don't have to stand there frozen like an old man getting out of the bath," sang Cecilia Maretto, of the party known as Medusa.

"Who the hell are you?" snarled Reggie, who was quite suspicious of this new interruption.

"A poisonous adder with her fangs locked onto you, perhaps?"

She unleashed lightning from her staff. Reggie just barely avoided it and darted at her. But she had already completed her next spell.

"Float."

His body lifted into the air. Despite his attempts to resist, his flailing limbs found no purchase; there was no escape. Reggie's body passed through the

broken window and came to a stop in midair.

"That should be safe." She then pulled out a second staff and used it to emit an enormous ball of flames from the end. Reggie's body burned with tremendous fervor. He screamed and screamed, turned into a charred husk, and flew beyond the nearest rooftops and out of sight.

"You look like a wreck," Cecilia smirked, pointing her staff at me. A pale light infused my skin, healing my wounds. I didn't know she could use healing magic. It took away the effect of the numbing agent, but the horrible pain still racked my body. It wasn't just the muscles; even my bones were creaking. Ralph would've passed out by now. I would've liked to just stay down and sleep it off, but sadly, I was too used to pain.

Despite being far from my best, I could still move a little.

"Are you all right, Arwin? Any injuries?" I asked, shaking her shoulder. She clung to me; her face was sallow, and her breathing was rough.

"[...]..."

"Poor thing, you must've been terrified. Don't worry. The bad guys have all been burned to a crisp," I reassured her, rubbing her back. Arwin suddenly stiffened and convulsed, before vomiting all over my chest. "That's all right. You're fine. Let it all out. I know, it was hard."

Once she had ejected everything she could, she slumped to the ground again. She was unconscious.

I changed her clothes and laid her down on the bed.

"Rest well."

When I left the room, Cecilia was seated on the stairs. "The guards came by, but I gave them a story to send them away," she said. "Told them it was an adventurer's vendetta. Didn't say anything about the princess."

Making public a story that the Crimson Princess Knight was helpless to avoid a near rape at the hand of a pack of hooligans served no one and would be nothing more than a humiliation. I was grateful to Cecilia, not only for saving us, but also for taking the time to help in this way, too. I bowed my head.

"Thank you. If you hadn't come, both of us would be dead. I'm incredibly grateful to you." I owed her a great debt. Thinking of how it might come due gave me the shivers. "I can't offer you much, but I'll buy you a drink sometime. Whatever you want."

"Ah yes," Cecilia said without interest. I sat down on the step next to her. It was a tight fit, but she didn't complain.

"Why did you come here?"

"I was returning to my lodging house when some adventurer-looking type called to me, saying that you and the princess knight were in trouble and needed help."

"Who was it?"

"A blond woman, I think. I'd never seen her before."

Blond? Who?

"But based on her bearing, I think...," Cecilia murmured, before eventually shaking her head. "No, forget it. I will, too. Just a coincidence, I'm sure."

She abruptly decided to drop the subject. I believed that Cecilia was telling the truth; if she were lying or trying to cover up something, she'd have a better excuse. She could have said, I was passing by at random at the right time. Maybe she had a reason to hide the identity of the adventurer who saved us.

"Seems like payback, huh? It's tough to be popular," she said. The change in subject told me she wasn't going to reveal any more.

I gave up on asking and replied, "I'd prefer not to be popular with haters." It was a pain to fight them off like this. "Where's your sister? She's not with you?"

"Bea's over at Glowfly Lane. Said she wanted two at once tonight."

That was the pleasure district, packed with brothels. There were a few that featured men for hire, as well.

"She's been in a bad mood recently. She likes to blow off steam that way. I just hope she doesn't hurt them too badly."

So the sister had particular tastes. Might be an unpleasant time for a fella

who only had a handsome face and the cock to match, but little else.

Cecilia grinned slyly at me. "Are you one of those men who thinks women have no sexual appetite?"

"Given my line of work, I'd have to disagree."

Human urges exist in human beings, men or women. It's how we're built. Simple as that.

"Indeed," Cecilia murmured, tilting her head back. "Bea and I have a great relationship, but that's one area where we don't see eye to eye. So I was enjoying some drinks alone. We've got an early morning, though, so I'm going to head home."

"You've got something to do?"

"I need to pick up Bea. We're meeting with a client tomorrow, and I know she's forgotten all about it."

If the dungeon was closed, then adventurers would have to find another source of income, such as doing outdoor work like vanquishing monsters and collecting herbs outside of town—even Medusa was no exception. Their financial situation was worse than it looked from the outside. But was that due to the closing of the dungeon or their leaders' extravagant spending?

"Sounds like a lot of work to watch over your sister."

"She's the leader of the party."

"But you're the one actually getting stuff done, aren't you?"

She was calm, collected, and savvy. The only time she lost her cool was when it came to her sister. Cecilia had been the one to devise the rescue team plan, set the course, and even make the decision to pull back.

As for Beatrice, she just shot magic all over the place. She wasn't the charismatic leader who did everything, like Arwin. Yes, she was strong, and merry, and a good cheerleader to motivate her party, but I wouldn't have said she was leadership material.

Beatrice was more like a flag bearer, while Cecilia was the true leader. They were like the older incarnation of Aegis that way.

"Keep a firm hand on her reins, then," I said, leaving it at that.

She thrust the point of her staff at me and glared.

"I'll be very clear: Bea is the leader of Medusa. There's no question about that."

"You're not good enough?"

"I'm too introverted."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

Cecilia began to tell me about their past.

Cecilia and Beatrice were born into a farming family in a small rural village.

The twins looked identical, but their personalities could not have been more different. Cecilia was serious and hardworking. She excelled in both studying and physical activity. Beatrice, on the other hand, was merely average at both. She was restless and often acted on whims. She lacked forethought and patience.

"In all honesty, I looked down on Bea when we were kids. I wondered how she could be so inferior, despite our similarities."

The family loved each girl equally, and they had a typical and peaceful life, until an event in their eighth year changed their lives drastically.

A fortune-teller came to the village.

The fortune-teller settled at the edge of town and foresaw starvation and disaster, quickly earning the trust of the village elders.

"The fortune-teller said that the recent years of drought were caused by the anger of an ancient earth god."

To quell the god's rage, a child would need to be sacrificed every year. In the fourth year after the practice began, the fortune-teller's divine oracle chose Cecilia.

By that point, her family members were already believers in the fortune-

teller's veracity.

"My mother tearfully told me, 'It's for the village. You just have to do it. I love you.' She believed the nonsense this stranger of a fortune-teller said and would allow her own daughter to die. Where's the love there?" she said sarcastically. I could feel the lament and despair of a daughter abandoned by her mother, however. "Still, I never considered defying our parents. I just cried in bed into the night, expecting to die. But then Bea slipped under my covers and said, 'The fortune-teller and that god are crazy if they want to sacrifice you, Ceci."

The two girls worked together to dig into the identity of the fortune-teller. As it turned out, he was a principal member of a cult who'd fled from the neighboring kingdom, and all his "sacrifices" had been sold off to slave traders.

Their accusation succeeded in having the fortune-teller chased out of town, but no one knew where the previous child sacrifices had been sent, and none of them ever returned.

Cecilia survived, but the cost was steep. There was an irreconcilable rift between her and her family. They had become the followers of a cult leader and had tried to sell away their daughter. The village elders gave her disapproving looks as well. You mucked everything up, and now they all think we were in cahoots with that man. How dare you.

She was isolated, unable to trust anyone else in her life.

"And that was when Bea suggested we leave the village."

If they didn't want her around, she'd oblige them. The world was larger than their village. She'd always wanted to see it. Beatrice was feeling ostracized for chasing away the fortune-teller, too. They wrote a note and left home in the middle of the night.

"We came across a passing magician, took lessons, and now we're mages in our own right."

"I see."

So Beatrice was the first to speak up on ideals and dreams—and lead her companions. That was indeed the quality of a leader. To Cecilia, her sister was her savior and the hero who had pointed out a way for her to live.

But ideals alone would only get a person so far. One needed practical skills, too—negotiating for food and supplies, and other tedious tasks that would help bring those dreams about. That was where the elder of the twins stepped forward to take over. I was jealous. The best Arwin had was a virgin holy knight who'd let his mind stray into the gutter.

"Is it my turn now?" she asked, ready to be done with this tedious topic. "Who are you? A number of them were dead before I got here, and I know she didn't kill them."

"They were fighting each other. Started as an argument over who got to go first, and they ended up killing each other over it."

"Heads pulverized, necks completely crushed—those aren't typical deaths in human-on-human combat."

"There was a half ogre, half orc among them. The one with the pig nose," I explained. It was a very good and logical explanation, but Cecilia didn't seem to buy it. "Besides, if I had that kind of strength, I wouldn't be a miserable little kept man, would I? I'd have a regular job or be an adventurer, too."

"That's just it." She pointed the staff at me, as if to say that *this* was what she was getting at. "What are you going to do now?"

"About what?"

"You know as well as I do that the princess knight's fried," she said, as casually as mentioning that she'd taken out the trash. "She's no adventurer if she can't even summon the will to fight back, much less hold her own anymore. I don't know if it's dungeon sickness or whatever, but she ought to go back to her homeland to recover... Oh, wait, she can't."

She chuckled. The Mactarode Kingdom was overrun with monsters now. Even in the old days, I wouldn't have been able to go in there and come out alive.

"She's going to have a hard time supporting herself in any way, not just as an adventurer. The best she can hope to do is sell her body." A gigolo needs a woman to support him and his lifestyle. In her current state, Arwin wouldn't be making a living fighting. In short, I was out of a job. Cecilia gave me a searching look. "I could support you, if you wanted."

"I'll pass." I'd just promised April that I wasn't going to abandon Arwin. But I didn't have that option even if I hadn't said that earlier. "If I was going to leave her now, I wouldn't have gone into the dungeon to save her in the first place."

"Oh." She nodded, satisfied. It was hard to tell how serious her offer was in the first place. "I wouldn't want someone who jumped ship to a new master whenever he felt like it, either."

She stood up and headed down the stairs.

"Well, I'll leave you alone now." Right as she reached the door, she turned back. "Until the next time we meet."

The door closed.

In the silence that engulfed the house, I slumped onto the floor and exhaled.

Too much had happened today. I wanted sleep, but there was more to be done. Arwin's room was a wreck, and the bodies needed to be cleaned up. We also had to find a new place to stay; it was too dangerous to remain here. There were always more fools out there waiting for their chance to strike.

When dawn came, we'd evacuate to the inn where Noelle was staying. I could go and talk it over with the others tomorrow. I was just getting up to check on Arwin when I heard a knock at the door. My heart leaped into my throat.

No more fighting, please, I begged. But my ears recognized that knock. I opened the door.

"What in the hell did you do?" said the Beardo impertinently, pointing up at me with an accusatory finger as soon as he saw my face. "Why's your upstairs burned to shit? Did you start a fire or something?"

It was Dez, giving me a reproachful look as he stood there in his traveling clothes.

Over the course of the night, I took Arwin to hide at Dez's home. He lived in a place called Hammer Lane, which was occupied by imposing artisans who all knew each other. Anyone up to no good would stick out like a sore thumb. And most importantly, Dez was here.

Dez's home was a two-story building with three bedrooms. He gave us one to use. I put Arwin in the bed and slept on the floor.

"Huh. Sounds like a hell of a time," Dez said the following morning, after I'd given him a quick summary. Arwin was still sleeping upstairs. Dez's wife had gone out to buy some supplies and necessities for Arwin. His son was asleep in his tiny bed. "Here, have a drink."



He offered me an aged brandy. The gift of such a fancy drink this early in the morning was a mark of sympathy from Dez. This was how he showed it.

"So where did you go anyway?" I asked. It wasn't like him to take off work and go traveling.

He replied by showing me an unfamiliar sword. It was narrow, but the blade was thick, and there was golden inlay on the silver-colored metal. Red fabric was wrapped around the hilt, the guard of which was fashioned like wings. There were strange letters written all over the fabric.

Though I wouldn't be able to swing it in my state, I could tell that it was a very fine weapon.

"Natalie's old man gave it to me."

"Oh?" A smile rose immediately to my lips. "You met her? You should have invited me along. How is she doing?"

"I didn't meet her, and she's not doing well," Dez said sadly. "She's under the dirt."

I clenched the hilt of the sword.

Years ago, Dez and I were adventurers. We were in a party of seven by the name of the Million Blades. All of us were seven-star adventurers, talented and experienced and strong.

One of the seven was Natalie—known as the "Tempest."

She had short black hair and long, almond-shaped black eyes. She was quite a fine woman, though we never slept together. She was a swordfighter, and the youngest of the group. She was one of the best swordfighters on the entire continent, in my mind.

I leaned back in my seat and gazed up at the ceiling. My throat felt dry as a desert, so I finished my drink before speaking.

"...Was it the curse?"

"Aye."

Like Dez and me, Natalie had suffered the effects of a curse from that filth-

eating sun god.

The curse took her good arm. Her left hand could no longer grip even a cup, much less her sword. She'd lost all the tremendous technique she'd built, and the devastation it caused her sent her back home to her village at the very edge of the continent. I'd heard that she had moved in with her father.

"Used her own sword to cut her throat."

She'd sliced through so many monsters and miscreants with that sword, but the last thing it cut was her own throat. A sick joke.

Natalie's father had found her body and had it buried in the village's graveyard.

Thanks to that dung heap fly of a sun god, I'd lost one of my old companions. I had had a feeling this day would come eventually, but I hadn't thought she would be the first. Dammit all.

I'd met Natalie's father once. He was an artisan who made furniture and fixtures, so he got along well with Dez. The reason Dez had found out about Natalie's passing was from a letter her father had sent him.

"And that's why you left town."

I couldn't blame him for going to pay his respects to a friend. It was just bad timing. He could have asked me, and I'd have refused anyway. Even without all the recent unpleasantness, I couldn't leave Arwin.

"This isn't her sword, though," I said. Natalie's blade was thinner and didn't have this decoration on it. She'd had several backup weapons, as I recalled, but this was not her style.

"I did go to her grave, but that wasn't the reason for my trip," he said, snatching Natalie's sword from me. In return, he placed a letter on the table. "In her old man's letter, it said, *There's a sword in my daughter's collection that I don't recognize.*"

The letter even contained a little illustration of it.

"What's his point? She liked swords, so maybe she had it in her—"

"Look," Dez said, showing me the pommel. Immediately, a sour taste filled my

mouth. Carved into the bottom of the handle was the sigil of the cowshit sun god.

"We talked about this before, didn't we?" he continued. "That there are weapons for the 'Sufferers' like us. This is one."

So this was a holy relic meant for Natalie. Her father didn't know where it came from. A sword relic for Natalie, after she couldn't use a sword anymore. It was more than ironic—it felt malicious.

"It's called Dawnblade. There's a brand carved into it."

"So how do you use it? Do you chant a spell, and then it goes flying off and jams itself up the hemorrhoid-encrusted ass of the sun god?"

"Watch."

Dez held the sword and said something. I couldn't make it out, but it sounded foreign. The next moment, the sword leaped up like it had a mind of its own. I thought I saw something red move on the back of his hand. Something diamond-shaped, like red scales, burst up from between his fingers and the bottom of the hilt and started crawling up Dez's arm like a many-legged insect.

"Hey!" I shouted, alarmed, and Dez let go. The sword fell to the floor. The red scalelike things vanished into dust. "What the hell was that? You all right?" I asked, checking his burly hands. He didn't seem hurt.

"Get off me," he snapped, brushing me away. This was the thanks I got for being concerned for the well-being of Beardo. "It doesn't hurt. Just feels like a bit of my strength was siphoned away."

So it was the type of magical weapon that exhibited its power in exchange for a bit of the user's life.

"What was that red thing, then?"

"I don't like this kind of freaky shit." Dez knew a lot about weapons, but he drew the line at cursed weapons and magic items. "It's probably got something to do with the sword's power, but I can't really work it."

Probably because it wasn't meant for him. I tried it out, too, but the crawling, insectoid sensation was so horrible that I let go at once. Yep, wasn't meant for

me, either.

"A magic with an unknown use."

What an odd thing to leave behind. She should have used this thing as a mop handle to clean a lavatory.

"Or maybe it won't work unless you're a believer of the sun god?" Dez blathered. I tried to stop him, but he beat me to the punch in saying the accursed words: "Sol nia spectus, right?"

"Don't!" I snapped. Why did I have to listen to such an upstanding man speak a phrase of adulation toward a scummy piece of shit? "What you ought to speak out of that bearded mouth of yours is adoration and gratitude toward your loving wife and son. Tell them you love them as many times as you can before you're dead!"

"…"

Dez turned away and said nothing. I knew he was imagining what I said and blushing. What did he have to be shy about? He'd already had a baby with her.

"Your wife and son are going to be sick and tired of you. Go on and tell them until they get fed up. It's not going to wear out your mouth or your beard."

"Shut up!" He took a swing at me, but I'd already backed away, so he hit only empty air. "And what about you?" he demanded, sitting in his chair again. "What are you going to do with the princess now?"

We'd gone down an unexpected detour, but at last we'd arrived at the real point of the conversation. I summed it up for him.

Thanks to the stampede and that preacher, three of the six members of Aegis were dead.

Arwin had been terribly injured but had just barely managed to survive. The experience exacerbated her dungeon sickness, however, and she wasn't even able to function in her daily life, much less go back in to fight. There was no miracle cure for dungeon sickness, nor a reliable method to cope with it. I tried tiding her over with Release-soaked candies, but that didn't help. And if I gave her extra, it would kill her. Plus, she had suffered a major loss of reputation

within the Adventurers Guild. Ralph and Noelle, the other survivors, were drowning in survivor's guilt and the weight of their perceived failure—unable to adequately support our princess.

On top of all that, some thugs had muscled in on the house last night, and we very nearly died. She'd lost companions, honor, pride, and the will to fight. The only thing you could say for her right now was that she was still alive, barely.

That was the Crimson Princess Knight today.

The way ahead was pitch-black. We were hanging by a thread, you might say.

"Will you have that herbalist look at her? Nicholas?"

"No."

He was the first one I'd asked for help, and he had refused. Obviously, I couldn't go back and ask again. Besides, he was working on an antidote for the effects of Release addiction—not a cure for dungeon sickness.

"I've decided to go on a journey."

How would I save Arwin? I'd racked my meager brain in search of a solution. I thought of going alone, but this recent experience sealed it: I couldn't leave her behind.

It would be dangerous, but I'd have to take her with me.

"Where are you going?"

To answer his question, I tossed him a book full of helpful life advice. I'd brought it with me, among all the necessary items and clothes.

Dez's eyebrows twitched as he read the cover. "What is it?" he said, examining the book of Percy Malthouse poetry with distaste. Like me, Dez did not read books.

"I've decided to follow my forebears."

I wasn't the kind of person to cling to the possibility of miracles, but at this point, I had nothing better.

"It'll be a long journey. I'm hoping you'll come with me."

"Where are you going?" Dez repeated.

"Her homeland," I said. "To Mactarode and the royal palace."

CHAPTER FOUR

Temporary Withdrawal

Dez scowled. It was like he didn't know whether to be furious or just exasperated.

"Have you completely lost it?"

"You know the answer to that question."

Of course he knew that I had.

"But why?"

"For Arwin, of course. There's no way for her to rest and recuperate in this town. I figured she'd do better in her homeland. It's the perfect opportunity. Let's go and take a vacation together."

"Tell me the truth!" He slammed his hand on the table. "That's not the reason you'd put her in danger, given the state she's in!"

"…."

"Talk to me. What's in Mactarode? What are you going to do?"

I couldn't pull the wool over Dez's eyes. We'd known each other too long. If only it were Ralph; he'd be considerate enough to believe my story.

"I already told you, it's to help cure Arwin," I said, sighing. "I was thinking of going to retrieve a miracle cure."

"What's that?"

"Something Arwin left behind."

She had lost many things. Whether she went back to tackling the dungeon or gave up on it entirely, if she was going to recover, she needed to be reminded

of her origins, the reason she was fighting in the first place. The memories she told me about, the ones that supported her desire to be stronger.

"In front of the palace is this huge tree called the Tree of Cameron, and it's her favorite thing. She grew up looking up at it. That's our destination."

I knew I wouldn't be able to uproot it, but maybe there was a chance we could take a branch back with us.

Dez was giving me a look of disbelief. Oh, how I loved to see that stupid look of shock on his face.

"And that's going to fix her?"

"Dunno."

The reasonable ways to attempt healing her might take years, if they worked at all. So I might as well try an unreasonable way. It was an all-or-nothing gamble. And dungeon sickness wasn't an incurable disease. Sometimes the most insignificant things could lead to recovery. I just had to hope that this was one of those things.

"And if that doesn't work, maybe it'll help bolster her spirit at least."

If I could show her that tree, still standing strong with its roots planted firmly in the soil, even with the land overrun by monsters, maybe something would change inside of her.

"The royal palace in Mactarode is the one place that's *most* infested. You really think that tree is still there now?"

"I have no idea."

It had been abandoned to the monsters for years at this point. Maybe it had been knocked over, or chewed up, or withered by monster venom. In any case, it probably wasn't in pristine condition. It might be a miracle just to find that it still had roots intact.

"I don't suppose you could just find a branch somewhere and tell her..."

"No, I couldn't."

Arwin had looked up at that tree since she was a girl; I didn't think I could fool

her on this one. Besides, I didn't even know what the Tree of Cameron looked like.

"Do you think she can make that trip in her condition?"

"No. That's why I'm going on my own."

When speaking about Mactarode Kingdom, one often used the words destroyed or lost or fallen. I'd thought of it in those terms myself. But from what Noelle said, only the royal city and other major centers had fallen to the monsters, along with the monarchy itself. Along the border, there were a few regions and villages that had escaped destruction and monster attacks, and people were still eking out a living there. But there were more monsters than before, and many of the settlements were isolated and lacked trade with their neighbors.

After the collapse, it had been Noelle's role to visit these villages and support the populace in escaping to neighboring countries, acquiring supplies, vanquishing monsters, planting monster-repelling herbs, and otherwise protecting the people. When the kingdom, the royal family, and the royal knights were all gone, it was a true knight who sacrificed their all for the people.

One of the places Noelle visited was a mountain village named Yuulia. It was less than half a day from the royal city. I'd take Arwin there. Otherwise, it would be too risky to leave her in someone else's care for days upon days at a time.

"How many months do you think it takes to reach Mactarode?"

We'd have to cross the ghostlands and scale a number of perilous mountains to get there. Noelle was one thing with her healthy legs, but that was a hardship that Arwin was in no way ready to handle in her current state.

"That's why I'm asking you, the dwarf. I know you took it to get back, didn't you?"

Dez's eyes went wide.

"Are you demanding use of the Dragon Hall?"

"Bingo."

The dwarves were a people who lived in the holes they dug underground.

There were tunnels they'd created crisscrossing the entire continent—and no, they didn't care where the human borders were. The dwarves called this warren of tunnels the Dragon Hall. But centuries ago, some king from some kingdom had led an attack on the dwarves, trying to claim the use of the tunnels for himself.

In response, the dwarves decided they would rather destroy their own Dragon Hall than have them used by humans, and they rendered them all useless—or so it was said. In truth, they only destroyed a small portion of the tunnels, and many of the routes were still connected across the continent. Only elders and other dwarves with special privileges could use them, however.

"How do you know about that?"

"You think too highly of your fellow dwarves."

Not everyone was as honest and virtuous as Dez. While they all seemed stubborn and cantankerous, some of them did have loose lips. Give them enough to drink and pay them a few compliments, and they'll tell you whatever you want to know. I even heard a story or two about Dez's past.

"And you can use them, can't you? Being the hero who saved the country and all."

There had been a swarm of giant ants in the territory Dez called home—tens of thousands of ants, all the size of humans. The dwarves had been up against a desperate struggle and couldn't even escape to the surface, because the exits were blocked. Just when it seemed that all was lost, a single dwarf stood to fight.

Quiet, plain, and unassuming, he went into battle against the swarm of giant ants with weapons and armor he'd made himself. After a ferocious battle of seven days and nights, he managed to wipe them all out, including the queen ant. There were no tricks or clever strategies. He was just stronger than all of them.

Dez was hailed as a hero and given all sorts of rewards. One of them was the use of the Dragon Hall. He also had the opportunity to marry the daughter of the territory's chief, making him the eventual successor, but Dez wanted to be an artisan, so he spurned that status and came to live in the human world,

eventually joining the Million Blades. And here he was now.

"Back to the topic at hand, I hear that a part of the Dragon Hall extends to just about the border of Mactarode. Use that, and it's only three or four days of travel. Including the time to get to the entrance, that's maybe ten days total, am I right?"

"You want me to give you, a human, the right to use it?"

"Yeah."

Based on history, humans were a no-go, as a general rule. But as a *general* rule, that meant there were exceptions in the past, such as humans working for dwarves. I didn't want to pass myself off as his servant, but this was for Arwin's sake. I'd just have to swallow my pride and wag my little doggy tail.

"It ain't like up here. There's no light. You'd be walking in a place darker than the dungeon for days at a time. Can she really handle that?"

"I'll figure out a way."

"And what will you do once you're there? The place is swarming with monsters."

"Well, I have the perfect guide now." A lady who'd been running around all over this country not long ago.

"Encounter any monsters at night or in the shade, and you're done. They'd flatten you in an instant in your state."

"I know."

"You think this'll work?"

"I'd say fifty-fifty." The question was whether I'd come back unharmed. There were only two possible outcomes.

"This is ridiculous," Dez snorted. "I always thought you were a dunce, but this seals it. You've really lost it."

"You knew that already." If I were a less-ridiculous man, I'd be six feet under.

"And you're still going to go?"

"Yep."

Since I'd met Arwin, I'd gotten myself into all manner of trouble, but Dez was right; this one was extreme. Even I wasn't sure I'd make it out alive. My chances of dying were probably higher at this point.

But so what? I wasn't intending to die, but if I did, I wasn't going to miss the life I had. If there was a right way to expend your life, this had to be it. How many men are lucky enough to get to risk their lives for a woman?

Dez sighed. "I feel sorry for the poor girl, getting trapped with a man like you."

"She was the one who asked for my services. She said, 'I want you to be my kept man.'"

"Oh, fuck off."

But it was true.

"When are you leaving?" Dez asked brusquely. "It better not be right away."

It was difficult to fight back the grin that threatened to take over my face. "Two days from now, I expect. I've got things to get together first."

"Uh-huh."

"Sorry about this, Dez."

He'd just returned from a trip of his own, and now I was forcing him on the road with me.

Dez gave me a very cynical look and said, "You're using me as your emergency last resort, aren't you?"

"Of course," I admitted. "You're a great guy. I'm grateful to you. So glad we're friends."

"Creep," he scowled.

"But I'm serious. If I were a woman, I'd be stealing you away from your wife."

He hit me.

"For one thing," Dez said, setting straight the chair that had flipped over with me on it, "you don't need to take the princess with you. If you're worried, just leave her in the care of the guildmaster." "I can't trust that old man. He's a real bastard." He'd absolutely sell out Arwin if the situation was right.

"You don't know that..."

"I do," I stated. "He's like me."

After that, we discussed the mechanics of such a trip. There was an entrance to the Dragon Hall in the mountains to the north. He couldn't tell me the exact location, so we'd have to go over it in more detail when we got there. I'd just have to trust him on that.

All that was left was to prepare for the journey. Dez arranged for a carriage, supplies, and food. I knew that he could handle that on his own. I enjoyed this process; it felt like the old days. If it were just Dez and me going on a journey together, we'd have a lot of fun.

But in reality, the situation was dire. Dez had a wife and a son, and I was weaker in the dark than a goblin. I also had no money, so Dez had to pay for all the supplies.

Lamenting the situation wouldn't fix a thing. I just had to do my job. If I demanded that Dez do everything, he would hit me again, so I set about trying to acquire necessary tools and supplies on my own, too. I had a connection.

"What? You're traveling back home, Mister Kept Man?"

"Not my home. Arwin's."

I was in the appraiser's office at the Adventurers Guild. Across from me was Gloria Bishop, an item appraiser with the guild. The office was shared between three appraisers, but Gloria was alone right now. I could have visited her at home, but I'd already caused trouble there once, so I decided the workplace was better.

"I've heard. She's sick? Do take care," Gloria said, filing the nails on her right hand. "And? Why should I assist the princess knight in returning to her homeland? I've barely ever talked to her."

"Call it a social obligation. Don't you feel any pity for her?"

"No."

Gloria blew on her fingers. She held them out to inspect them, then nodded with satisfaction.

"Plus, I always thought it was going to turn out like this. That princess knight is a fake."

"What do you mean?" I asked, starting to get to my feet. Gloria shook out her hand with the file gripped in it still.

"I'm not talking about body doubles, or that she's not of royal lineage, or anything like that. It's more of, I guess, an issue of humanity?"

"Would you explain it so that even a dummy like me can understand?"

"Basically, the issue is in here," she said, pointing to her chest. "Yes, she can use a sword, and she's beautiful, and she gives grand speeches. She seems smart, and I think she's a first-rate princess and knight. But there's a part of her that's going through the motions. Either her beliefs, or her courage, or her motive for fighting—something she's got isn't hers. It's why there's something warped and brittle about her. It's kind of like a very fanciful replica crafted by a master artist."

"….."

Though the analogy was a peculiar one, she was on the mark about Arwin. She bore the hopes of multitudes, had no one she could turn to for help, contracted dungeon sickness, and clung to drugs so she could keep fighting. The difference between the hopes of the public and her personal disposition was a vise that had her trapped.

"Let me be clear: I'm not insulting her. I'm praising her. You can't do what she does and pass yourself off as genuine without extraordinary effort and willpower."

It was the sort of thing a counterfeit collector would say.

"And what about you, then?"

"I'm the real thing, of course. The real Gloria Bishop."

Gloria had a firm and unshakable sense of self. Not because she was beautiful

or strong. Fate declared that she was to lose her left arm and have it replaced with a metal limb, but she could still proudly claim that she was Gloria Bishop. It was that simple. If Arwin had that same boldness and sense of self, she wouldn't have felt the weakness that led her to take the drugs. But the circumstances and burden each of them carried couldn't be more different. You couldn't compare a person who bore the life and death of many against one who only lived and died for herself.

"I didn't come here to listen to your sermon," I said. "I don't like to bring this up, but you owe me something."

"No I don't."

"Whatever happened to that night together? You haven't made good on that bet yet."

"I'm sorry; I didn't hear that. My hearing's going bad. Can you repeat what you just said? Preferably in front of the princess knight."

"Certainly. Getting punched in the face will be like a mosquito bite compared to the damage you did to the old man's reputation."

The old guildmaster would happily rip off her other arm.

Gloria made a face and rolled her head to crack her neck.

"I really don't like battles of attrition." She faced me directly through the glass window of the appraiser's office and pointed her nail file at me. "What are you after? And I'll be honest: I don't have money."

"It's not money. I want you to use your name to get me something."

"You want me to steal something from the guild? Or embezzle some appraisal item for you?"

"No. Being an appraiser, you must have connections to various trading companies here and there. I want you to acquire something for me."

"Is it a drug? Because that's outside my expertise."

"I want powder of warding mums and blackweed salt. Preferably as much as possible, but at least one bag of each will do."

Gloria squawked with disbelief.

Warding mums, as the name suggested, were herbs that warded off evil. Lighting them on fire caused a smell that monsters hated, so they were prized supplies while camping. Blackweed salt, meanwhile, was a black salt that could be used in cooking, but it usually made the food look worse. It was more useful as a toothpaste. Neither of these things made their way to Gray Neighbor. The only places that had any in stock were either luxury shops or black market traders, and I was not welcome in either, money or not.

"Why would you want something like that?" Gloria asked.

Her skepticism was warranted. Warding herbs and salt could be found in ample supply if you looked for other kinds. Both items were of fine quality but not so desirable that one would use them to settle an old debt—but only if you used them in the *normal* way. I didn't need to conceal what I'd do with them, but it would be a bit difficult to explain to Gloria, so I chose not to elaborate.

"I'm a man of discerning taste."

Ordinarily, it would be best not to need these at all, but considering the level of danger on this particular trip, we would want them. It hurt to lose out on the dream of a night with her, but Dez didn't have any of these, so I would have to get them.

"Please. I'll put it down in writing, if you'd like."

"...Very well."

It was clear from the look on her face that Gloria didn't understand why I'd want this, but she also didn't want to have any more favors owed between us.

"I think I know where I might be able to get some. I'll reach out after work."

"I appreciate it."

We covered a few more details, at which point I was ready to leave. But a sudden thought occurred to me.

"You were talking about real and fake earlier. What about me? Am I real? Or a fake?"

"I don't really know," she said, a bit perturbed by the question. "You're kind

of fake, but you're also kind of real. It's almost like you're a real treasure that's been painted over in sludge and mud? Like, something real that's passing itself off as fake."

Oh my. Someone's got a sharp eye.

"And what do you think of yourself, Mister Kept Man?"

"I'm real," I said. "An honest, legitimate, bona fide kept man."

The preparations were made. Now it was time to do the convincing.

When I suggested going back home, Arwin looked like I'd told her it was the end of the world.

"No! I don't want to go back!"

She shook her head, wriggling like a child. She seemed to take the suggestion that her adventure had failed as a death sentence. I rubbed her back, trying to calm her agitation, and spoke as gently as I could.

"It's only for a little while. We can't relax and have you rest up if shitbags keep invading our space like before. When you're better, we'll come back here," I said. I explained that Dez and Noelle would be along on the trip for protection—and that we'd use a secret route that would make the journey much faster. "This is a time for recovery. When you're stretched to your limit, things aren't going to go well. I know it sounds like a big detour, but this is actually the shortest and best route to get where you want to go."

"I can't leave this town..."

I slipped my hand around the back of her neck. There were black spots there: the cost of her abuse of Release. It was a dead giveaway of someone who was addicted. Using drugs was illegal here, so the guards at the gates would be able to spot it right away.

"Just slap a compress over it, and you'll be fine. Tell them it's a bandage because you were wounded, and they'll take your word for it."

They would also let you pass if you slipped them some money, but that also

announced to them that you had something to hide. We could go see old Toby in Blue Dog Alley, and he'd help us get out of the town without passing through a checkpoint, but it wouldn't help us on the return trip.

"But...but..."

Arwin was still uncertain. Even with the worsening dungeon sickness, her constant suffering, and no will to fight, she hadn't given up on returning her kingdom to its former glory. She simply couldn't bring herself to do that.

"You haven't been back there since you came here, right? Maybe you should go back and see what your country looks like now, with your own two eyes. It could help you in the future."

I reiterated that this was just a temporary return. Arwin would never accept it otherwise. And I was doing all this for her.

"...All right," she said at last, after a long silence. "Being stubborn and refusing to leave will only make things worse for you."

It seemed she had remembered the recent attack. Her face was full of unease.

"I don't think of it that way. At any rate, you should rest now. Let Noelle worry about where you'll stay over there," I said. To be honest, I still had to ask her, but I knew she wouldn't refuse.

"Matthew," Arwin said, rolling over on the bed and reaching out.

"I know." I took her hand and squeezed it.

Since the attack, Arwin didn't want to be separated from me. She was always looking for me, finding reassurance in my presence, like a baby bird imprinted on its parent. If I didn't hold her hand like this, she wouldn't fall asleep at night.

It felt good to be trusted, but not as a one-sided dependence. She was only clinging to me because she was anxious. She was a grown woman who could stand on her own two feet. This was not the proper way of things. I was her kept man, not her babysitter.

If anyone was supposed to be clingy and begging, it was me.

From there, I headed over to see Noelle at the Five Sheep. The real problem would be what came after we left the Dragon Hall. After hearing Dez's explanations and perusing a map, I found that it would take three or four days by carriage to get to the royal city after exiting the tunnels. Naturally, there would be dangerous monsters all around during that time. If we had to do any serious fighting, we would never get there.

I wanted to ask Noelle to guide us to the city—preferably, near the palace itself.

That was not a trip I could chalk up to "rest and recuperation," so I told Noelle that I wanted to go and check out the palace for Arwin's sake.

"It's called the Tree of Cameron, right? I remembered that Arwin was very fond of it. I want to go and see it for myself. And maybe bring back a branch with me, if I can."

"...This is foolish."

"Yes, I'm aware." I knew she would be against it. The real negotiation starts once she says no. "I'm not asking you to come with me the whole way. I just want a guide along the route, that's all."

"...I can't do it," Noelle protested. I sighed.

"Because you failed to protect Arwin?"

Her head bobbed. "I didn't keep her safe when she needed me most, and she nearly died because of it. I should have been the one to take that blow for her."

Sure enough, she was still carrying the burden of failure from the other day. This was the problem with young people.

"I wasn't able to do that...not like Lady Knightley."

"Who's that?"

"She came here to be Her Highness's bodyguard and perished in the dungeon."

"Oh."

The one who was eaten by the lindworm, then. Her name was Janet, if I

recalled correctly. I hadn't asked Arwin for details, because I didn't want to dredge up old wounds. If she was a lady, then she must've been nobility.

"Was she strong?"

"I never saw her myself, but I've heard that she was the equal of Her Highness in combat."

"But you were picked to replace her, right? So with your ability..."

"Oh, no." Noelle's face blanched. It was like I had uncovered some sin of hers. "I was never meant to come here."

It was someone else who'd been chosen to fill the gap left behind—a survivor of the Mactarode Royal Knights who was very skillful, with youthful strength aplenty. They should have been a worthy addition to the party, but just before it happened, the knight left a letter behind and fled. Apparently the letter said that the knight had received an official position in a different country and could not engage in "idle dreams" such as dungeon crawling, a backhanded reference to Arwin.

"And at a loss for what to do, your uncle sent you instead."

In the fall of Mactarode, many knights and soldiers lost their lives. The survivors were initially determined to strike down their foes and rebuild the country, but as time dragged on, their enthusiasm cooled, and they took a more measured look at their personal prospects. Everyone gets hungry. They need clothes to wear and a place to live. To get food, money is required. If there's a family in the picture, they must be provided for. When basic needs aren't met, ideals get ground down like gears, leaving only scraps behind.

For better or for worse, reality easily breaks willpower.

"All right. So you were just a backup choice. So when do their backups come? You've contacted your uncle, haven't you?"

Even if we managed to get Arwin back on her feet, she wouldn't be finishing the dungeon with just two people in her party. They'd want at least two or three more. There should be other survivors from the knighthood.

"No one's coming."

"Huh?"

"I'm the last... I'm the final warrior. Uncle said that before I came here."

Some of them were dead, but the others had all refused to go, apparently. Some took positions in other countries to make ends meet, some became mercenaries and trickled away, and others gave up their swords and converted to farming or trading.

"Uncle used all his connections to reach out far and wide, but there are no other fighters who wish to take part in attempting the dungeon."

Knights made their glory on the battlefield; surviving the dark, dingy dungeon wasn't part of their job description. Some of them could hold their own, but it made sense that they would hesitate to jump into dungeon diving, which was a very different beast.

"Was Arwin aware of that?"

"Uncle told me she was."

I recalled the troubled look on Arwin's face when Noelle arrived. That's what it was about, then. Noelle was the ace up their sleeve—but also their final notice. There wouldn't be any further reinforcements coming.

"So we're out of options," I lamented. "Well, I suppose we'll have time to think about what to do."

If we couldn't replenish members, we'd just have to recruit our own. As long as Arwin recovered, there would be people who wanted to join us. All we had to do was kick Ralph out and get some real badass adventurers in his place.

"It all starts with Arwin. And to repeat myself, I need your guidance over there. Please come with us."

After the rampaging monster swarms, the landscape was probably different, and some roads might not be traversable anymore. But Noelle had been all over the country, even after the fall of Mactarode. In a sense, she knew the terrain better than anyone.

"I told you, I cannot..."

"You're still in one piece. You didn't lose your life. You're just depressed

because you screwed up. Right?"

"What would you ...?"

I put a hand on Noelle's shoulder.

"I didn't realize you were such a naive dummy. So putting your arms around your knees and moping about it is going to help Arwin's condition improve?"

"Well..."

She looked away guiltily. Noelle was smart enough to know the truth: What we needed now was not an escape from reality or assuaged guilt. It was to restore Arwin to her normal self.

"You came here for Her Highness, wasn't that what you said? Was it just a lie? Or did you try to say something that sounded cool and ended up with something that was insincerely devotional?"

"No! I just..."

"If you want to be punished, you simply have to say the word. I'll give you all the punishment you want." It was a wish easily granted. I'd give her a spanking, or a slapping, or a whipping, or whatever she desired. "Whatever you want."

Noelle shivered. The blood drained from her face; she had taken my meaning.

"Don't waste your time whining about these things when you still have work to do. Move your arms and legs. You're still alive. If you have better ideas, I'm willing to take them into account. And I don't think you're incapable of understanding what I'm saying. Are you?"

"…"

"Plus, after your kingdom got overrun by monsters, you fought yourself ragged for the sake of your people. You're the very model of a knight. You have nothing to be ashamed of. There's something that only you can do for us. And I could really use that help."

Her reply was silence. Since I couldn't drag her along by force, I had no other option but to call upon Noelle's sense of loyalty.

"We're leaving in two days. From the north gate, before sunrise," I informed

her. "If you're really her backup, then you ought to see your duty through. Now's the time. So long."

I got up to leave—and was just heading out the door when I remembered something important and turned back.

"Don't tell Arwin about this conversation, if you'd be so kind. I wouldn't want her to worry. Bye."

I waved and left for good this time.

Frustration led me to click my tongue through the trip down the stairs. These people. Did they think that if they hung their heads, someone else would come along and solve all their problems? Nobody was doing anything for them. The world was a hard, unfair place.

...Yeah, that's right. It's obvious that not everyone in the world has the same ability to take action. There are people who wish they could help, but can't. Which is why I'm using the meager brains I have to move my shriveled arms and legs to run around all over the place.

"What's wrong? You seem upset," said something from above. I looked up to see, peering down the steps, the woman who'd picked up the book of poetry. Her name was Fiona, if I had that right.

"You're staying here, too?"

"I can tell you the number of stains on the ceiling by now."

Sounded like quite a long stay, then.

"Tell me..." Maybe it was fate that we met here. There was a question on my mind, so I decided to broach it. "Were you the one who asked for help from Cecilia...the elder of the Maretto sisters?"

There were plenty of young blond women Cecilia could have meant, but after our encounter the other day, the first face that had floated into my head was Fiona's.

"That's right," Fiona admitted. "I knew about the danger that, uh...Lady...

Arwin was in, but I didn't think I could stop them. She just happened to be passing by, so I hailed her down for help."

"Well, thank you. You saved us. I'm very appreciative."

There had been five male adventurers, plus Reggie the mobster. That was a lot for one woman to deal with, even an adventurer. She'd made the right decision.

"You spared us from the worst possible outcome. I'll buy you a drink."

"Some other time," Fiona said bluntly. Maybe she thought I was trying to make a pass at her. For my part, I was making a sincere offer of gratitude. There was nothing hopeful or opportunistic about it—I thought. For now.

"Where are your people?" I asked.

Fiona sighed and said bitterly, "Enjoying some free time. They'll have to come back and join up eventually, though."

Sounded like her party wasn't on good terms internally. They'd probably split up for the moment while the Millennium of Midnight Sun was closed off. It happened. The unity of a party was important to adventurers, but it was easy to throw off. Differences in opinion and direction, share of spoils, money trouble, and even romantic issues popped up. On top of that, adventurers tended to be headstrong types, so if you showed any sign of weakness, they would try to take advantage of you. That was why adventuring parties needed strong leadership —like in Medusa and Aegis.

Fiona lowered her voice. "Anyway, I overheard you talking with that girl a moment ago. Is it true that Lady Arwin's leaving town?"

"Keep it a secret."

Of course, if she left, the rumors would spread on their own. But the last thing we needed was a fuss starting before that point.

"Just for a little recovery. Maybe for a month at the quickest..."

"Don't come back," she said. The note of pleading in her voice stunned me. "Getting the Astral Crystal, rebuilding the country—why does it matter? What will fighting get you? She's just going to be hurt again. Maybe she'll die next

time..."

"That's true."

Fiona's point was correct. It was a miracle that Arwin had survived at all. And if Nicholas hadn't been there, she absolutely would be dead right now.

"But only Arwin can make that decision for herself."

If she came to her senses and decided to give up on the dungeon, that would be fine. If anything, I would find that ideal. I wouldn't have to fret about her never coming back. It wouldn't hurt to find some safe town to live in.

But that was entirely my own hope, which was not in alignment with her wishes. And right now, Arwin was not in her right mind. If she acted with her current state of mind, she would regret the consequences. Whether she kept going or pulled back, it should only come after careful, calm consideration.

"Your advice is appreciated. I'll let her know about it. But ultimately, it will be her decision to make. You know—she's very selfish and prefers not to listen to others."

Fiona chuckled wryly. "I guess I overstepped my bounds. Sorry about that. I won't tell another soul."

"Please don't."

"Take good care of Arwin."

"Of course."

Finally, it was the night before our departure. I visited "Doc," better known as Nicholas.

"So you're leaving."

"I'll be away for a while, so wait for me to return. This should cover costs while I'm gone," I said, placing a bag full of gold coins on the table. He'd need more supplies to create the antidote to neutralize Release withdrawal.

"I can't stop you from using that to visit the ladies of the night, but just don't go every day. And make it as cheap as possible."

"...It's been a long time since I received such a pointless warning," Nicholas smirked, taking the bag of coins. "I'll be looking into the dungeon and that preacher while you're gone, then."

"Thank you."

I wanted to be back as soon as possible, but this was one thing where there was no guarantee.

"By the way, about Arwin," Nicholas said with a sigh. I could feel my eyebrows lifting higher on my forehead. "I gave her a part of my body while healing her fatal wound. In that process, I realized something. If I'm not mistaken, is she...?"

"Listen, Doc," I said, cutting him off, "I appreciate all your help. If not for you, Arwin would be dead. I know that I'm always talkin' nonsense—it's why they call me Wisecracker—but I'm being real with you right now. I owe you one. I mean it: Thank you."

"…"

I bowed my head but got no response.

"In a way, we're two of a kind. We've got a shared goal in taking down that shithead sun god. I want to help, for whatever that's worth. I think we're going to need your help in the future, Doc. It might end up being an imposition on you. But if you need help as well, I intend to do everything I can to aid you. Just say the word. Don't be shy."

"...Erm, I see," Nicholas managed at last. "I suppose I was mistaken. You are the one who saved me. I have a home and funds thanks to your largesse. I hope that relationship will continue."

"Yeah."

We smiled and shook hands.

It seemed to me like Nicholas's smile was twitching a little, but that was surely my imagination.

After a few more pleasantries, I went back outside and exhaled deeply.

"You gotta be kidding me."

Don't go sticking your head in business that ain't yours, man. At long last, I'd found someone who might be capable of curing the addiction to Release. I'd never find someone better suited to it than Nicholas. And I didn't want to have to soil my hands again.

I'd been very firm about pushing aside his questions, so I supposed it would be all right for now. But as time passed, if Arwin's symptoms worsened, his priestly virtues and morals might come back to the fore.

"Just hurry up and make a miracle cure. That's your job."

"What's that about a job?" said a voice to my side. I flinched and spun to see Vincent, captain of the Paladins. He was with a subordinate.

"Don't scare me like that, Vince," I snapped. I'd been so absorbed in my thoughts that I didn't notice his approach.

"Have you finally gotten yourself a job?"

"I do have a job. It's hard *physical* labor, every day of the year." You'll never find a more hardworking kept man in the entire world. "So what are you gents doing here?"

It was a safe area of town, so there was really no need for the Paladins to be present.

"We're searching for Sol Magni," Vincent said, scowling. "We've looked everywhere they ought to be. Now we're expanding our search."

"Ah. Well, good luck with that."

"Wait," Vincent said as I attempted to leave. I stopped and turned, but he did not elaborate. He seemed to be hesitating.

"What?" I prompted helpfully. He looked uncomfortable.

"I've heard that...Lady Arwin is injured."

He should have known already that she was dealing with dungeon sickness. He was just trying to be diplomatic.

"About that—she'll be going back to her homeland for a bit."

"To Mactarode?"

Even stoic Vincent was surprised by this. Venturing *into* a realm of monsters clearly just sounded like suicide. Well, the guy who came up with this idea wasn't thinking logically to begin with.

"It's not like the entire place is covered in monster shit. It's a better place to rest and heal than here."

At the very least, you wouldn't have to worry about thuggish adventurers breaking into your home to attack you.

"Are you going with her?"

"Of course," I said. "We've been together for over a year. I'm not going to abandon her just because she's sick."

"…"

Vincent's expression twisted. He was recalling a past that he himself wished to forget.

His father had gone off the deep end due to drug use, and Vincent had abandoned him for the sake of his own career, pushing all the responsibility onto his sister, Vanessa. He was still feeling the shame and guilt of that decision. It wasn't the sort of thing you could just forget, no matter how much you wished you could.

"Sorry. Didn't mean that as a veiled insult," I said honestly.

"It's fine." Vincent swept back his stray bangs. "Are you ever coming back from there?"

"Depends on Arwin." That was one thing I couldn't predict. If we went to Mactarode and nothing helped, then it would just be a vacation. "Of course, if she's cured, I plan to come back. What do you say? Want to share one last drink before I go?"

"Are you still trying to make that happen?" he said, aghast. "I haven't the slightest interest in sharing any drinks with you!"

"Aw, what's the harm? I want to talk about Vanessa. I could tell you about the time she was tricked by her unemployed pimp boyfriend into buying a

worthless vase for dozens of gold coins—or the time she let herself be put up as collateral for an itinerant gambler's card game..."

Vincent squawked. "Shouldn't it be the other way around?"

"Nope. It happened just as I said it. Honest truth." I'd watched the whole thing happen.

Because they had lived apart for years, there was a side of Vanessa that Vincent was completely ignorant of. Over time, the image of her in his mind had been beautified until only the good memories remained. It was simply a measure of how far it was from the truth, however.

"The problem is, I tend to be forgetful, so if you want to know, you'll have to ask me now."

"...Just get out of here," he snapped. As cold as ever.

"In that case, I'll be on my way. Watch over the town while I'm gone."

"Who do you think you're talking to?" the captain of the Paladins said, smirking confidently. "I'll have every last loose end tied up before Lady Arwin returns."

"Just don't get hurt out there."

One knight putting it all on the line wasn't going to make a dent in the darkness gripping this place.

On the morning of our departure, I led Arwin by the hand out of Dez's house before dawn.

"You're bringing that with you?" I asked him, pointing at a sword wrapped in a white cloth. What was the name, Dawnblade?

"Ominous thing to have lying around the house," he grunted. He'd kept it in his waiting room back at the guild but didn't think it was good to leave it unattended. I didn't like being in proximity with the ringworm sun god's sword, but maybe it would come in handy at some point.

I went to the Adventurers Guild with Dez, where we rented a vehicle—a

dusty, old covered wagon. It wasn't going to offer elite comfort, but the bed was sturdy, and the canvas had recently been replaced, so it would hold firm against the elements. Our horse was a chestnut, hale and hearty. It wasn't the speedy type, but it would be tough and reliable.

"Seems up there in years."

"It was a transport horse for the royal army before they sold it off."

"Sounds good."

An experienced horse was less likely to scare if there was any trouble.

We put our belongings in the wagon bed—Arwin's items, clothes, and so on. Her royal heirloom sword had been broken, and her armor was under repair. We brought a sword for her in case it was needed for self-defense, but it was hardly a replacement.

Next, we boarded the wagon, with Dez driving. Arwin sat next to me. Her bum would freeze if she sat right on the wood, so I gave her a handmade cushion to sit on. She held my hand, probably due to nerves. I gave her a reassuring smile and squeezed back.

We made our way down the main road. There were travelers and other coaches stopped near the northern gate, waiting to go in or out. The person I was looking for was among them.

"Hey, Noelle," I called out. Noelle came trotting over. She was carrying a large backpack.

"Thank you for having me," she said. Her look was determined. Whatever reservations she'd had, she was over them now.

"Thanks for coming," I said. Of course I was grateful; she was coming along on this reckless plan. "Got everything? Let's get going, then."

I would've preferred to say good-bye to April, too, but the old man had her on house arrest. I couldn't blame him; she'd almost been abducted. I'd left a message with her handmaid, though. The squirt was probably shedding tears at the thought of being separated from her dear companion Matthew right about now.

```
"Um," Noelle prompted, looking around, "I don't see Ralph yet..."
What was she talking about?
"He's not coming."
"Is he feeling unwell? Or did he get injured somehow?"
"I didn't invite him."
Noelle's eyes went wide. "Why not?"
```

"Because he's useless."

He didn't have the overwhelming combat ability of Dez, nor did he have a remarkable disposition. We had Noelle to guide us. Plus, he looked upon Arwin with lust, and punched me over every imagined slight. I had no reason to bring him along.

```
"But he's still a member of the party."

"He's a member of your party. Not mine."

"....."
```

"Also, what purpose will he even serve on this trip? And not in a vague *If only* we had one more person kind of way."

Noelle considered this question, opened her mouth, but said nothing. Apparently, nothing had come to mind.

```
"As I said, let's get going."
```

Since there were no further objections, we hopped into the wagon. Noelle still seemed skeptical that this was the right course of action—but of course it was. Not having Ralph around benefited my mental health. Noelle's seat was on the other side of Arwin from me, so that we protected her from both sides.

```
"Halt."
```

We had joined the line of carriages to leave, and it was our turn for an inspection by the time the sun was up.

```
"I'm going to inspect your cargo."
```

They were trying to prevent the smuggling of contraband. If we resisted, it

would only make us more suspicious.

"Go right ahead."

The guards peered into the wagon. Some began to leer; they had noticed Arwin. I'd thought about putting a hood on her, but they were going to find out anyway, so we might as well get it over with.

"Say, is that the Crimson Princess Knight?" asked one of them facetiously. The other guards came over to see. They stared at her with curiosity and lust. Arwin shrieked and clung to me. I'd covered the black spots on the back of her neck with a compress, but if they pulled it off, there would be no hiding the evidence. And I had a bag of drug-infused candy on my belt. It might not look like drugs, but if they tasted one, they'd know right away.

"Why is the princess knight leaving town when she's supposed to be tackling the dungeon? You couldn't be turning tail and fleeing for home, of course," one of them taunted.

I clenched my fists. The word about her dungeon sickness had gotten around. It brought them a sick pleasure to see the famous and beautiful Arwin brought low like this. There were scum of this sort everywhere. In the old days, I'd knock out two or three of his teeth for making a comment like that.

"Can we have you come down for a bit to see your lovely face?"

"Here you are," I said, sticking my nose right in their faces. An inch closer, and our noses would've kissed. I got down from the wagon and spread my arms, still face-to-face with them. "You want to inspect? Have at it."

It was clear that they were going to use the excuse of "inspection" to put their hands all over Arwin's body, the lecherous pricks.

"Don't be shy, go on. You want the clothes off? Your wish is my command," I said.

I stripped off my clothes and undergarments and stood in the nude. It was the inspection point, so there was a crowd of people standing around and waiting. Their curious gazes fixed on me. Some women shrieked.

I didn't care at all about showing it off. If they wanted to make an example of

us, I'd be proud to serve. It was no skin off my back.

"Who asked you to strip?! We want..."

"Who did you want to get naked, then? The Beardo up there? Oh, sorry, did you prefer them hairier? I wouldn't recommend it. You'll be dumbstruck by his hirsute magnificence."

"Shut the fuck up! If you try to interfere—"

"Who's interfering with whom?" I said, gesturing to the captive audience around us. "As you know, the dungeon is currently off-limits. Our princess knight is taking the opportunity to travel abroad and deepen ties with the folks in her old country. It's a noble endeavor, and you shouldn't be sabotaging it."

"This is our duty!"

"Then get on with it. There's a line backed up."

Behind us snaked a lengthy list of carts and wagons. If they took too long inspecting us, folks would be here all day long.

One of the guards gave his companion a look; the other man silently shook his head. I took this as a sign that he hadn't seen anything amiss.

The guard gave me a solid jab with the butt of his spear. "Go on, then."

"Much obliged," I replied, rubbing my cheek as I hopped back onto the wagon seat. I was used to that level of minor violence. "Goodness sakes. There are few things more obnoxious than stubborn officials."

I passed by Noelle and sat down next to Arwin, grumbling.

"Anyway, that's cleared up now. Let's get out of town so we can start our trip at last."

I put an arm around her shoulder to pull her closer but found myself shoved away by a powerful force. Blinking with surprise, I learned that it was Arwin, who was beating me with the cushion in her hands.

"What? What's wrong?" I asked. Now Noelle was standing before me, face red, hands shaking. She actually had tears in her eyes.

I sighed. "What, are you smitten with me after that dashing performance?

Sorry, but there's another woman who occupies the space in my heart..."

"Just put your clothes back on!" Noelle snapped, bringing down the pommel of her sword on my head.

Despite some minor trouble, we managed to get safely through the gate.

"So you're running after all, then? Coward!"

"I knew it! Women are good for nothing but bouncing on a man's cock!"

The jeers started up as soon as we were outside. Noelle got to her feet, flushing with rage, and put a foot on the lip of the seat.

"Let them talk," I said, grabbing her arm before she could go and start punching people. It was a waste of time to deal with losers like them.

"But—"

"They'll be crying about it in the future. And now, as it happens."

Noelle spun around to look at Arwin, whose face was downcast in gloomy silence. Without any backing for her righteous anger, Noelle could only bite her lip and sit back down.

"Come back and give me one last blowie for the road, princess slut!"

I put my hands over Arwin's ears. The wagon carried the Crimson Princess Knight away from Gray Neighbor with jeers and slurs raining down upon it.

After leaving the walls of the city, we set a course for the town of Moonlight Fountain to the north, beyond which were the Scale Armor Mountains. That was where we would find the entrance to the Dragon Hall.

"The journey's just begun. Let's enjoy the sights and sounds of the road," I said as we passed through a scarred wasteland with nothing to see or hear. Arwin pointed behind us. Someone was running after us from the town.

"That looks like Ralph," said Noelle, peering out the back.

"So it is," I agreed. There was only one face that stupid and formless in all the world. "Pick up the pace, Dez, before he catches up."

"No, wait," Noelle pleaded. Ah yes. How foolish of me.

"Sorry, I misspoke. Turn around and run him over. Bonus points if you're able to kill him in the process."

"No! No bonus points!"

Ultimately, we had to wait for Ralph to catch up. It was all a waste of time.

"At last...I caught up...," he said breathlessly, grabbing the rim of the wagon and wiping his sweat.

"No need to see us off, really."

"Shut up! How dare you leave me behind when Her Highness is traveling back home?" he demanded. Apparently, the story had gotten around about Arwin's trip after we borrowed the wagon from the guild, and that was how he found out.

"All right, you've said your good-byes. Back to town with you."

"I'm going with you, of course."

"Get lost," I said, shooing him off, but Ralph the stray mutt wagged his tail and growled. "I'm a member of Aegis. Wherever the princess goes, I accompany her. I'm not taking orders from you."

"Clear off and get out of my sight already."

"I think we should bring Ralph along," said Noelle, letting emotion get the better of her. Arwin nodded in agreement.

"You say that now, but what use is he going to be...?"

"He can fight, at least," said Dez, to my utter and total shock. "He's an adventurer who's spent over a year going down to fight in the Millennium of Midnight Sun. Better to take him along than sit here arguing about it."

That made it three against one. I was outvoted. They were all out of their minds.

"That settles it," said Ralph, hopping on board with a smug smile.

Now we had an unplanned person tagging along. He'd better not drag us down.

Sadly, there was plenty of room in the wagon, so space was no excuse to kick him out.

What's going to happen now?

Looking out the back of the covered wagon, a pair of wheel ruts stretched toward the town in the distance. In moments, however, the dry wind of the ghostlands kicked up a cloud of dust that blocked our view of the place we'd just left.

It was like something was warning me that there was no going back now.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Search Resumes

It'd been so long. This experience was proving to be nostalgic.

In my mercenary days, I'd go to this and that battle to kill people, and turn enemies into corpses, and so on. After changing jobs to adventurer, it merely meant that I went into the wilderness with my party to cut up monsters, then hiked into the mountains to turn bandits into wild dog food.

It had been a rather grim and bloody life, but I had enjoyed it for what it was.

"And where in Mactarode are we going?" Ralph asked, sitting across from me and fixing me with a glare.

"On vacation," I replied. Find a place with a nice view, take in the sea, enjoy some drinks, and everything would feel better. Some fishing might be relaxing. A little dip in the water, too.

"That's all?"

"What else is there to do?"

Ralph turned on me furiously. "You're taking Her Highness out for nothing more than—"

"Um, Matthew wants Her Highness to have a chance to see the sights of Mactarode once again," Noelle hurriedly interjected. "He thinks that something might change in her condition if she breathes the air she was born and raised in again."

I was keeping the Tree of Cameron ploy a secret from Arwin, which made it difficult to speak of specifics in her presence.

"You could have simply said that instead," grumbled Ralph, returning to his

seat.

He asked Arwin about it this time, but she looked at him wide-eyed, then turned away.

"If Matthew wants to go there, then..."

"There, hear that?" I said. Despite hearing it from his own master's lips, Ralph seemed dissatisfied. "If this doesn't meet your standards, you can jump right off the cart. This ain't your mother's womb, boy. Just because you're sitting around sucking your thumb doesn't mean everyone's going to bend over backward for you."

His only response was a loud click of the tongue. The sulking brat.

Our route out of town was straight north. In two days, we'd reach Moonlight Fountain. It was located on the northern end of the ghostlands and flourished as a waypoint between Twisted Lighthouse to the west and Noble Crown, the capital city of Rayfiel, to the east. Moonlight Fountain had plenty of water and food, thanks to being in the downstream flow from the Scale Armor Mountains. We'd head there and stock up before going into the mountains.

There were fabric flaps over the ends of the wagon canopy to keep the dust out. No outside light could get in, so it was dark inside, but it was still much nicer than being in the brutal sun.

Much gratitude was due to Dez, who silently took on the job of holding the reins outside. I'd have to give his beard a nice brushing later. He would surely crush me for that.

Once the sun was directly overhead, we stopped the wagon in the shade of some rocks to rest the horse.

"How are you feeling?"

"...Okay," said Arwin quietly.

"Good to hear." Just getting a response from her at all was a positive sign.

After we ate, Arwin didn't seem interested in getting out of the wagon bed. I was concerned about her wandering around in the open, of course, but it was also unhealthy for her to hide inside the whole time. Her physical condition

would soften.

"...Shall we go for a walk?" I suggested. Not for a hike, just a little stroll around the rocks.

Sunlight was the natural enemy of the skin, so I put Arwin's hooded cloak on her and took her by the hand.

Unbroken blue sky stretched to the horizon in every direction. Wasteland surrounded us: rocks, sand, and the occasional tuft of weeds. We were close to the trade route from Gray Neighbor, so there were occasional knights on patrol to thin out the monsters, as hired by the lord of the region.

The monsters seemed to be aware of that, too, and we saw almost nothing on the road. Just the occasional sand lizard or desert snake in the distance, watching.

In the past, many people perished in the wasteland until a safe route could be established. That was the reason they called it the ghostlands; there were no reports or records of any undead monsters appearing. Even ghosts couldn't last in the desert.

With Arwin's hand in one of mine, I pointed toward the horizon with my other. "That's Gray Neighbor, where we came from, and over there is the royal capital. And that's the direction of Moonlight Fountain, our destination. Did you ever stop there?"

"For a bit," she mumbled uncertainly.

"I was there for a little while before coming here. It's a nice place. Good, fertile land, so the food is cheap, and the drinks are tasty. The rich there are active philanthropists, too. Almost no starving peasants, either. It's not like Gray Neighbor at all."

Because it was a midpoint between east and west, a lot of money and goods passed through, and there was fierce competition between black-market types to seize control of the commerce. The Spotted Wolves and the Devil's Alliance had active branches there, and it was also the home of the Birds of Prey.

"We'll get bathed when we reach town. There's plenty of water there. We don't have to be stingy with it."

"…"

"You're going back home, so we need to keep you clean and looking good. Don't want split ends, either."

I scooped up a bundle of her red hair. It was not as lustrous as usual. Her mental state was spilling over into her physical condition, too.

"I...," Arwin muttered, her face downcast, "I wonder what the people will think, seeing me now."

"I'm sure they'll think you're bold and brave."

"Liar. I'm..."

"How would you feel?"

Would she jeer and insult someone who risked life and limb to fight for the country—and returned wounded? Would she hurl stones and call them useless?

"A while back, you asked me what I'd do if the dungeon was conquered. What would you do? What do you want to do?"

"After what?"

"After you've beaten the dungeon, wiped out all the monsters, reestablished the Mactarode Kingdom, and taken your place as its founding queen. You'll have your country where you and your people live in peace. After that."

"...I've never thought about it."

If not for the great monster invasion, she would have eventually inherited the throne and ruled as queen. Then she would have chosen a suitably noble person to be her prince consort, and borne an heir to raise into the next monarch.

Whether creating a kingdom or inheriting it, there would be no greater task in her life. She was probably telling the truth when she said she'd never considered anything else.

"It's not such a difficult question. Just do whatever you want, even if it's a hobby or an idle pastime. You can be the queen and still paint, or play a musical instrument."

"What hobbies? Aside from fighting, all I do is care for my weapons and armor. Or maybe read a book..."

"And that's good enough, of course," I said. If she wanted to do it, she could care for all the weapons in the kingdom and collect an entire library of books to read. "You've been so busy dealing with what's right in front of you. This is a good chance to think about something a little further out. If you can see the far future, it might change your perspective on where you are now."

"[..."

The sound of the wind changed abruptly. In moments, a sandy gust tore through the area, casting us in shades of yellow.

"You all right?" I asked, batting the sand out of my hair. Arwin managed to nod. I brushed more sand out of the bit of Arwin's hair that was still in my hand, then lowered my lips to it. A slick move like this was only possible when you were a dashing and handsome fellow; when an ordinary and unremarkable man of mediocre looks attempted such a move, he invited only the lady's displeasure. Thankfully, I was the most fetching man in all the land, so it suited me even more than any noble or exalted knight.

"Shall we go back?"

Arwin said nothing. Her eyes seemed a bit wider than usual, but when she met mine, she just murmured, "You fool."

I took her hand and led her down the path back to the wagon. On the way, I noticed Ralph standing in the shadow of the rocks. I called out to ask what he wanted, but he turned his back and walked to the wagon without a word.

What was his problem? If he had something to say, he could beat me about the head the way he normally did.

We camped under the stars that night. Arwin and Noelle slept inside the wagon, while the rest of us slept in shifts outside.

Trouble struck in the morning.

I woke up and looked into the wagon, but Arwin wasn't there, only Noelle, who was getting ready for the day.

"If you want Her Highness, she went out with Ralph somewhere..."

That caught me by surprise. What did that dumbass want? He wasn't going to confess his undying love to her, was he? Even he wouldn't be that crazy. For one thing, he'd never succeed at seducing her, and her kept man was right here, along on the same trip.

I'd need to find them and make sure he didn't get any funny ideas. I headed in the direction that Noelle had pointed.

There were voices coming from the other side of a small hill nearby. Thankfully, I didn't hear any moans or slapping of flesh, but I still cursed myself for my lack of caution.

"Come, let's go back. We shouldn't be wasting our time around here."

In the shade a good distance away from the wagon, Ralph was clutching Arwin's hands and speaking passionately about something—but it was not his love.

"You must find your footing again. For the sake of Mactarode."

"Stop it," Arwin protested, shaking her head. She looked to be in significant distress, but Ralph was so agitated that he didn't notice.

"It's time for us to display our true valor. For the sake of our people, we should not be going back home. I will do anything it takes to fulfill our duty! Come, we must fight again!"

"Go on and die, then." I kicked Ralph in the back. He stumbled but did not fall. "Are you unhurt?" I asked Arwin, supporting her shoulder before she could lose her balance. I ignored the squalling oaf.

When Arwin noticed me, she opened her mouth to speak but wasn't able to form words.

"It's all right. You don't have to say anything," I said, caressing her head. I whistled three times.

"Is anything the matter?" said Noelle in a few moments, rushing toward us.

"Sorry about this. Seems Arwin's feeling under the weather. Will you take her back to the wagon?"

"Of course. But why aren't you doing it, Matthew?"

"I've got something to take care of first. I'll be right there once I'm done."

Noelle stared at me and then Ralph, then turned and shouldered the rather peaky-looking Arwin, taking her back in the direction of the vehicle.

I spun around. Ralph had the nerve to fix me with a look of loathing, his eyes narrowed. I sighed rather theatrically.

"Listen. You've hit me many times since we first met."

"And what of it?" he asked. Apparently, he considered this a natural occurrence.

"Yet I've never once lashed out at you. Why do you think I didn't hit you back?"

"Because you're a coward..."

"It's because you're not even worth striking."

Hitting a naive, sheltered, arrogant blockhead was a waste of time. It was such a waste of time that I'd let him get away with it until now. He wasn't very useful in combat, but he was loyal. That combination was just enough for me to ignore him.

Otherwise, I would have purged him well before I dealt with Lutwidge. And prior to this, Arwin would have noticed. For all his faults, he was one of her party members. I felt bad about the idea of hurting him.

But if he was going to be a harmful influence on Arwin, I would show him no mercy. I should have dealt with him long ago. I cursed my own softness.

"If you want to go back to town, be my guest. And never show your face to Arwin again."

"Huh? What right do you have to order me around like—?"

"Disposing of a talentless boy with his head so far up his ass he can't see sunlight would only soil my own hands. This is your final warning. Get lost, and don't come back."

"You're the one who's going away forever!"

Ralph swung at me. It was too close to dodge, and the punch struck my cheek. I faltered, but then I recovered.

"Was that all?"

"Why, you-!"

He rose to my cheap bait and swung again and again. He lost all thought of moderation and pounded my face and stomach like he was hitting a toy.

"You wretch! You vermin! You're all talk and no substance! How does a man like you—?! Get to be at Her Highness's side?! Die, you damned gigolo!"

I doubled over, and his foot caught me right in the stomach. I wobbled, and he hit me with a knee. I staggered, and he kicked my head like a ball. I rolled onto my back, and this time he stomped on my stomach, over and over, putting all his weight into his heel. For most people, this would mean broken bones at best—and punctured organs and a slow death at the worst.

"Petty jealousy is such an ugly thing."

But to someone built of stronger stuff, like me, this barely even hurt. I utilized the momentum of another of his kicks to get to my feet and back away.

"You have no idea what kind of place Mactarode is!"

"That's right."

I'd never been there. Everything I knew, I had heard from other people.

"What do you think you'll find when you get there? It's a den of monsters. There are monsters the size of mountains all over the place! What do you think you'll accomplish there? The only thing to gain from it is despair."

"Aren't you fighting to help do something about that?"

"Of course I am!" Ralph screamed, flying into a rage. "It's my home!"

He knocked me off my feet.

"So what's the problem with going back there?" I said.

"It's too early to do that." Ralph leaped and straddled me to give himself a better angle to hit me. As usual, they were very sad, weak punches. "We haven't beaten the dungeon. We haven't acquired the Astral Crystal. Going there means death, plain and simple! You must be off your rocker to want to take Her Highness there right now. If you're that curious, go on your own. Go there and die. Leave her out of it!"

He tried to take a big swing at me, but I moved my head to the side. His fist struck a rock on the ground instead, and he screamed. I used the distraction to slip out from under him.

After wiping the mud from my face, I pointed at the moaning half-wit. "But you're fine with this?"

"Fine with what?"

"You're fine with Arwin being the way she is now."

Frightened, reacting to the sound of the wind around her. It would be years before she was any better at this rate.

"Of course not!"

So we finally agreed on something.

"Let me ask you, then: What have you done?"

Since Arwin's collapse, he'd either drowned his troubles or practiced swinging his sword around like he'd gone berserk. He was a two-bit actor pretending to be a tragic hero struggling with setbacks and failure. He had been this way ever since the beginning, not just right now.

"You come chasing after Arwin's behind to the dungeon city, and the best you can do for her is beat on an unresisting kept man?"

I was closer to Arwin than anyone else. Of course I'd investigated his background.

Ralph was the son of a hunter in Mactarode. He'd gone with his father to hunt deer and boars in the mountains near his village on the north side of the kingdom. He should've spent his entire life there, chasing after wild animals, but everything went wrong when he accompanied his father on a trip to the royal city. It was there, upon seeing the beautiful princess address her people from the palace, that the young boy from the rural village fell in love.

Of course, a princess and a hunter's son had nothing in common. It was a one-

sided infatuation. Back home, he couldn't get over the princess and was pining after her when the monster eruption occurred. Fortunately, they didn't roam as far as his distant village, so there was almost no damage.

But with the collapse of the kingdom, the land was unsafe. Bandits began to roam, looking for targets to pillage. Ralph's parents abandoned their home and moved to the neighboring country.

Ralph tended fields in his new home, but upon hearing the rumor that the princess was attempting to conquer a dungeon, the feelings he'd bottled up were let loose once more. The poor yokel imagined himself some kind of radiant hero, and against his parents' wishes, he took all the weapons and money and supplies he could and left home. After that, he got chased around by starving monsters, was swindled out of his money, and was nearly robbed by the villagers who gave him a place to spend the night. He went through virtually every scenario you could imagine in a comical retelling of a country bumpkin's quest before he finally arrived in Gray Neighbor.

There, he sat in front of Arwin's inn for three days, pleading to be allowed to join Aegis, before she had mercy on him and gave him a position in the group. Despite Lutwidge's fierce, stern training, he must've been in heaven getting to be at the princess's side every day.

And he had no idea what kind of pain his beloved princess was undergoing.

"Your dream is to be at Arwin's side. Well, lucky you. Your dream came true."

The present situation was his goal, so there was no growth to be had. Physical growth notwithstanding, mentally, he was still a boy. What had changed between the time he hit me on our first meeting and now? It had been over a year, and he was still the exact same person.

When he'd come with Arwin to save me that one time, I had felt a glimmer of hope that maybe he'd matured, but this was just the same old Ralph.

"You only want to be her barnacle for the rest of your life. Rather than her knight in shining armor."

Of course, being the peasant son of a rural hunter meant he wasn't guaranteed to reach whatever goal he set for himself. And trying to better

oneself was always tiring.

"Shut up!" he yelled, throwing another series of punches at my face and stomach. They did nothing to me. There was no pain to be felt from the blows of a man who stood for nothing.

"What, are you angry that I'm right?"

A jumped-up underling started trouble with other adventurers, forcing Arwin and the other members to intervene and clean up his mess, and he acted like none of it was his fault.

"That's why you're still you," I said, stepping away from the shade. The morning sunlight fell directly onto my head.

"Die!" he shouted.

"You first."

He pulled his arm back and started to throw a punch but stopped—because I had thrown an uppercut right into his gut. Ralph doubled over and fell to his hands and knees. His face paled, and he promptly vomited. The stomachturning smell wafted upward as he writhed in agony on the ground, rubbing his face into his own puke. And that was me going easy on him.

"What's wrong? Even a low-down kept man can fight back."

He was speechless. He'd ejected all the contents of his stomach, moaning with his face pressed to the ground and his ass stuck enticingly into the air. I grabbed him by the hair and dragged him upward.

"Get lost. We've got no more use for you. You're unfit."

He had tried to force the issue with his own demands, cornering Arwin when she was in a mentally weak position. We didn't want anyone like that around.

"Why would I listen to you...?"

"Ah. Fine."

I put my hand over Ralph's mouth. I considered strangling him to prevent him from screaming, but another, more unpleasant memory stayed my hand. One honest, full-effort punch would be more than enough to send him to hell.

"I'll tell Arwin and the others that you had a sudden bout of cowardice and fled back home."

For the first time, fear appeared on Ralph's features. At last, he had realized that death was coming for him. Maybe he'd remembered that the man before him had singlehandedly stopped the gigantic lindworm's rampage. His lips trembled, the blood drained from his face, and tears filled his eyes. It was pathetic.

"I'll give you one thing: At least you didn't beg for your life."

I pulled back my fist. Ralph shut his eyes.

My lethal punch stopped just inches from his face, grabbed by a thick, burly hand. I spun around and saw a muscled Beardo holding my fist in his hand.

"You shouldn't be fighting this early in the morning," Dez grumbled, and shoved me backward. Even in the sunlight, I couldn't maintain my balance, sliding backward into the shade.

"Don't get involved in this."

"…"

Dez stood in front of Ralph, silently blocking me from him.

I stared him right in the face, but he refused to budge.

"Tsk!"

He just had to show his face and muck things up. The bothersome Beardo.

"I'm only joking," I said. "He was being fresh with Arwin, so I thought I'd scare him a little, teach him a lesson."

""

Dez was not impressed with my explanation. He fixed me with a piercing stare. I'd have to give up on this—I wasn't going to get into a serious tussle with Dez.

Ralph was still prone on the ground, terrified.

"Clean that up," I snapped. "Any bird that pecks at your puke is going to have a very upset stomach."

I tossed a large rock at his feet. He'd mistakenly think that the rock was what I used to hit him so hard. Hopefully.

After I turned to leave, Dez quickly caught up with me. I slowed my pace to match his.

"What do you think you're doing, getting so mad at the kid?" he growled, facing forward.

"Fools like him don't learn a damned thing until they've felt a little pain," I said. It was one thing if he gave lip to me, but I wasn't going to stand by while he brandished his own half-assed morals against Arwin.

His actions had the exact opposite of their intended effect. He assumed he was encouraging her, but he was only backing her up against the wall.

She had been coerced by others, had pumped herself up to fight, and had pushed herself as bravely as she could, and the result was Arwin today. She'd wilted on the inside and given in to the devil's temptations but continued to fight until she could no longer go on.

Righteousness and duty and courage alone could not save Arwin.

"Shallow, thoughtless encouragement is nothing more than poison."

"Then how would you cheer her up?"

"...I wouldn't," I said, shaking my head. "I've been thinking and thinking of what I'd do, and I can't come up with anything."

I could think of plenty of pointless words, but the most important ones eluded me. What should I do? I wished someone would tell me.

"So what are you gonna do about him?" Dez asked. I looked back to see Ralph curled up on the ground. He even had the temerity to slam his fist against the ground in impotent rage. Never in a million years, kid.

"Leave him there."

If he ran back home, perfect. Would save us the trouble of dealing with his stupidity.

"You're so nice to that kid," he grunted.

"How so?"

If were nice, I wouldn't be trying to kill him.

"If you didn't care at all, you wouldn't bother to say a thing to him in the first place."

"Which is exactly what I would've done, if he weren't Arwin's party member."

As a warrior, as an adventurer, and most importantly, as a mature adult—if he wasn't growing in these three areas, then he couldn't protect Arwin. Which was why, for over a year, I'd put up with his beatings and given him practical advice. This was the outcome: It had all been a waste of time.

"Why not give him another chance?"

"You take him under your wing, then," I said, knowing full well that Dez wasn't built to teach pupils. His method of teaching had always been "watch and learn." He was the model of how *not* to teach another person. I'd seen many promising youngsters eager to join the Million Blades, only to drop out because of him.

"I might do just that, as long as I'm allowed to hit him."

"Forget it, then."

Dez was a poor speaker and impatient, so he lashed out with little warning. He thought he was holding back, but his natural strength was so freakish that it felt like being swatted by a bear anyway. Even other dwarves couldn't withstand his blows, so a mere human wouldn't stand a chance. That was why he didn't attract any followers, despite the respect his strength earned him. In the end, he was another man who'd suffered from a difficulty when communicating with others.

He was surprisingly sensitive. It would be nice if he could exhibit some of that gentleness with me.

After breakfast, we cleaned up our camp and got ready to resume traveling. Noelle asked about Ralph several times, but I gave her nonspecific answers. He wasn't going to come back anyway. His adventure ended here. His final accomplishment was losing so badly in a one-on-one fight with a pimp that he

hurled his guts out. It was a very Ralph-like ending. Still, better this than leaving his corpse to be absorbed by the dungeon.

"I'm sorry for being so late," said Ralph himself, proving me wrong just before the wagon started off. He saw me, looked away uncomfortably, and sat on the front seat.

I kept an eye on him, but he did not tell Arwin or Noelle anything about what had happened. On the contrary, he was unnaturally silent. He said only the bare minimum of things to the women; he was already like that with Dez and me.

Before this point, I'd spoken to him on occasion in an attempt to keep the conversation going, but now he just stared at the sky or off into the distance, lost in thought.

"Is he all right?" Noelle asked out of concern. Personally, I was quite happy to have some peace and quiet in the wagon.

"Look, he's at a sensitive age. Let him worry, if he wants."

Worrying is a privilege of humanity. The ones who give their brains over to god don't have the option of worrying. So worry away, young lad. There is a famous saying: A man's brain changes places as he ages. When he is young, he worries with his crotch, and it is only when he uses his head that he takes the first step toward adulthood.

That's a quote straight from Matthew the Philosopher.

After the wasteland, we stopped at Moonlight Fountain, then continued on our way. Two days later, the grassland had turned to forest, then treacherous, rocky terrain. We were now in the Scale Armor Mountains.

From this point onward, Dez was our guide. He took us down the road, which was not much more than a rough, natural trail. We had just gone by a narrow stream and reached the midsection of the mountainside when he said, "We're here."

It was open rocky landscape all around, with no sign at all of a cave.

"Are you gonna cast a spell or something to make the rocks move?"

"Of course not," Dez grumbled, feeling the rock by hand until his thick fingers sank right into it. I touched it, too, but all I felt was smooth, solid rock.

So it was a combination of illusion and barrier magic, designed to feel like nothing but regular rock when touched. Very thorough.

"And the Dragon Hall is through here?"

"That's right," Dez said.

Ralph and Noelle erupted at once.

"Wait, did you say Dragon Hall? Like the legend?"

"It's not real, is it?"

I turned back to them in confusion.

"What, we didn't tell you?"

"No, you didn't!"

"But I did tell Noelle."

If I'd told Ralph, half the continent would know about it by now.

"What about the wagon?"

"We're riding it through, of course." Dez gave a signal, and the wagon passed right through the illusory rock.

Beyond it was a massive cavern. The rock surface was harsh and jagged near the entrance, but as we got farther inside, there were signs of damage where chisels and pickaxes had broken the rock. They must've been digging through a natural cave formation and connected the chambers together.

There were lights along both sides of the passageway. It was dim, but enough to see by. Up ahead, the rock floor sloped downward. The ceiling was high, too, so there was no problem with the wagon fitting through. Apparently, the caverns had been fashioned with horseback riders in mind.

Farther down on the sloped path was a cavernous entrance that looked like nothing more than a wall of blackness. You could fit an entire house in there, to say nothing of a single wagon.

"The titular Dragon Hall, I take it?"

I'd never seen such a thing in my life. The dwarves were true eccentrics to dig something like this underground.

"Just the entrance to the station, actually."

"Station?"

"The place where you load and unload, and people come and go."

"So we're going to ride in that thing."

There were several connected boxes with tremendous wheels attached. The boxes were long and narrow but roughly the size of a house. At the head of the cars was a huge mole creature, and you could fit a whole mountain shack inside it. It had a cinder-gray pelt, enormous claws on both its front and rear paws, a pointed nose that was red on the tip, and beady eyes. So this thing would be pulling the whole train.

"That's an earthwyrm."

"It's like a gargantuan snake."

There were seven boxes in total. The rear boxes were packed with livestock like cattle and pigs.

"The trip to the exit nearest Mactarode is about three days," Dez said.

And if we'd gone over land, it would have taken even Noelle more than a month to travel.

"I can see why someone would want to monopolize such a convenient thing."

Not just for the commercial benefits; the military uses had to be astounding.

"Trust me, it ain't that convenient," Dez warned. The downside of its utility was the tremendous cost of upkeep. Apparently, shifting foundations, cave-ins, rockslides, and flooding were constant hazards. It was a place where only dwarves, with their incredible strength and ability to stay underground for days at a time, could thrive.

Near the entrance to the great hole was a gaggle of little dwarves who glared at us with overt suspicion.

"No use for humans around here, eh?" I noted.

"Ignore them."

Dez did not relish a reunion with his own kind, but he went straight to a white-bearded dwarf in the back. He seemed to be the boss of this group.

I couldn't hear them talking, but I could see the scowl on the old dwarf's face. He did not seem eager to allow any humans through.

Come on, Dez. We can't come this far and then hear, Sorry, no go.

After enough time for a mug of hot water to cool, Dez came back.

"It's settled."

"Well done."

I went up to plant a grateful kiss on his bushy beard, but he hit me in the stomach. He didn't have to be so shy.

"Put the horse in the rearmost box. The wagon goes in the one ahead of that," he said.

Having the wagon itself transported was wonderful. We removed the horse from the wagon, took the reins, and loaded it into the box.

"We're up in the front. Let's go," Dez said, ambling off. I took Arwin's hand and hurried after him, but someone called out to us.

"Not so fast."

I spun around to see a dwarf with dark brown whiskers and a beard glaring impertinently up at us. His face was similar enough to Dez's, but his beard was dusty and frizzy, and his eyebrows had grown out as thick as caterpillars. Most notable of all was the way his eyes were as muddy as clay. In the past, I'd have punched this face as soon as I saw it. On his back was an ax that was taller than he was.

"This is my jurisdiction."

Dez scowled in obvious annoyance. According to him, the Dragon Hall was split into separate regions, and each region was under the management of a different dwarven clan. The dwarf with the frizzy beard was the boss of this

place, then.

"What's the meaning of this, Dez? What are you thinking, bringing humans down here? Huh?"

"Stand down, Gadd," interjected the white-bearded dwarf from earlier. "I gave him clearance. This isn't your call."

"I'm the supervisor now. Your time is over."

Ahhh. So there was a difference of opinion between the previous and current supervisors. Good to know that the dwarven world struggled with handing down titles, too.

"You're good to go, of course. But not those humans behind you," said Gadd with open loathing. Oh, how I wanted to smack him.

Dez's eyes narrowed. He was not a person who counted negotiation among his skills. If talking didn't do the trick, we'd either have to pull back or fight them. The white-bearded one seemed reasonable, but this one had it written plain on his face that he would rather tussle than have a dialogue.

With no better option, I decided to step forward.

"Of course, we don't come empty-handed. We can pay gold."

"It's not a matter of gold, giant," said Gadd, glaring balefully up at me.

"Naturally. It's a matter of your dwarven honor, loyalty, and pride. And what wonderful qualities they are." Despite the fact that one of your brethren had told me everything after two measly drinks. "Of course, I won't be telling anyone about your secrets here. And neither will the rest of us, right?"

On cue, Ralph and Noelle nodded rapidly.

"Don't trust ya," Gadd said, spitting. "Humans lie."

"Yes, that's right," I agreed. "Humans, unlike dwarves, are stubborn, greedy, and weak. They're also needlessly tall. We're not like your kind at all."

My strategy was to debase us. If we could steal the earthwyrm and ride off, that would be easiest, but I didn't know how to operate it. Plus, we were in dwarf territory. If they cut us off and sealed the exit, our journey would be over.

Arwin would not be saved.

"But if there is one thing you're willing to believe, let it be this: We are not tourists. We want to go home. You're aware of the tragedy that befell Mactarode, I trust? Even overrun with monsters, I think both humans and dwarves understand the desire to see one's homeland one last time."

Setting aside that I hadn't the slightest bit of fondness for my hometown.

"In order to do this, we need your help. If we were to tell anyone, we would gladly let you cut our tongues out. I'd even put that in writing. Please," I said, getting down on one knee for emphasis. When dealing with prideful types, the soundest strategy was to appeal to their greatness.

"Hmph. Homeland, you say," Gadd murmured, crossing his arms and sizing us up as he paced around us. "My brother was killed in an argument with humans. They shaved his entire head and dumped his body in a stable."

His face went red with humiliation and wrath at the memory of the sight.

"His wish to go home was his last one."

"I pray for the peaceful slumber of your brother's soul."

"Depending on how things turn out, however, I might be able to strike a deal with you," he said, grinning as he walked behind me. I had a bad feeling about this. Sure enough, he grabbed my head and forced me down until I kissed the ground. "But it'll require you striking the right attitude with me!"

His manner was quite high-handed, not that pushing me lower was going to help him grow any higher.

"Hey, boys. This lofty human here says he wants to play with us," Gadd gloated, summoning a few more of the dwarves. There was a sadistic gleam in their eyes. They must've all suffered at human hands before, and now they had the ideal target to inflict their anger upon.

"Of course," he continued, "only a coward would beat upon a helpless target. And we're no cowards. So let's make it a duel."

I'd never heard of a four-on-one duel before. Although I had experienced it.

"Don't worry, we won't use weapons. Just our fists."

"Dez," I said, giving a warning to the Beardo I could sense rushing up to join me. "Handle the rest without me."

"...You sure?"

"I'm just going to play a game with them."

They weren't going to kill me. None of them were prepared to have a serious confrontation with Dez. All of them put together couldn't hold a candle to him.

"I'll get everything ready, then."

Dez really was my best friend. He turned on his heel, scooped up Arwin, and put her over his shoulder. She shrieked briefly. The thought of even Dez putting his hands on Arwin galled me, but this was an emergency. I would allow him to do it, just this once. Appreciate it, Beardo.

Arwin squirmed and writhed defiantly but could not escape Dez's grip. He carried her away toward the lead box of the earthwyrm. That was for the best. I didn't want her to see what was going to happen next.

The location for our fight was a section of the cargo loading area. It was spacious, and all the cargo had been loaded already, so we could tussle to our hearts' content. I set down my stuff and faced the opponents at a distance. They looked as smug as could be; victory was already theirs. This was a little diversion to entertain them before sending off the earthwyrm, nothing more.

The rest went as you can guess it did. The little dwarves, trod upon by human society, got to indulge in beating a gigantic wimp like me under the guise of a duel. Fate always comes back around in a circle. I was punched, kicked, stepped on, had my hair pulled, and was forced to kiss their shoes.

"Thank you," they demanded I say, prostrate on hands and knees. If this was what they considered satisfying, they were quite childish, indeed.

"I think you've done enough, now," Noelle snapped, quite irate. She was less concerned for me than she was for general fairness and moral concerns. Anyone would feel sick over what was happening. Ralph wasn't speaking up in my defense, however.

"Don't bother," said Dez, who came back to keep her under control.

```
"Why are you stopping me? Aren't you Matthew's friend?"
```

"Shut up and watch."

"But—"

While Noelle fretted, I was in the midst of getting beaten to a pulp.

"Uh-oh, you look all filthy. Let me help wash you off."

With my face pressed to the ground, all I could see was Gadd's trousers lowering before me, revealing hairy shins.

A warm liquid trickled onto my head, pale yellow-brown, running from my forehead down my cheeks toward my chin, then dripping onto the ground.

The dwarves erupted in laughter.

Then they hurled a brown lump onto the ground before me. Horse dung. It was freshly dropped, steaming and pungent. Someone pushed my head with his foot, shoving my face into the shit. The stench was unbearable; both my nose and eyes hurt.

"That's enough," said the white-bearded dwarf. "I don't want anyone dead on my hands."

Gadd snorted. He'd probably misinterpreted the old dwarf's meaning. You were the ones in danger of dying.

"All right, old man, we'll let you save face," he grumbled. "Psh. Coward."

As he pulled up his pants, Gadd gave me one last parting gift with a kick to the face. One of his subordinates brought him the ax he'd been carrying on his back. Alarms bells rang in my head. I tried to scramble away from my position on the ground, but the subordinate jumped on top of me.

"Oops, my hand slipped," Gadd smirked, and lowered the ax. Blood sprayed onto my face. My left arm had been severed below the elbow.

I writhed in pain. The lower part of my arm just rested on the ground beside me.

"Matthew!"

"Stay back!" I warned Noelle. Didn't her parents ever warn her not to

approach any man covered in shit and piss?

"But your arm—"

"I noticed!"

This one *did* hurt. But worse than the pain was the loss of sensation from my arm. There was blood gushing all over the place, and I felt sick. My blood pressure was getting low.

The footsteps were growing distant. I'd been beaten and kicked all over, smeared in shit and piss, and now they'd cut my arm off. You just had to laugh.

"But we have to stop the blood—"

"There's something else to do first."

This time it was water that had been dumped on my head. When I opened my eyes, Dez was standing there gruffly, holding a bucket. He also had my arm, which he handed to me.

"It's a nice, clean cut. Shouldn't be a problem." He opened up the little bag from my case. The one with the powder of warding mums and blackweed salt.

"Didn't think we'd need to make use of this before we reached Mactarode."

"Can never be too careful," Dez said, and started working on me.

He tied the wound above the cut and rubbed in the warding mum powder. After rinsing off the cut on the other half of my left arm, he added more powder, then joined the two parts of my arm on the cuts, sprinkling the blackweed salt on top. Lastly, he added a stick for structure and wrapped the whole thing with a bandage.

"How does it feel?"

I tested my left arm. It wasn't moving yet, of course, but there was a little bit of sensation left. That meant it should recover quickly. It also meant, however, that our emergency supply was gone. We hadn't planned for this—the blasted little bearded buggers.

"Huh? What just...?" Ralph gawked.

"We're healing it, as you can see."

For some reason, rubbing powder of warding mums into a wound made it mix with the blood and rapidly seal the cut. The blackweed salt purified the wound and accelerated the effect of the powder. It was a kind of folk healing that I'd learned when I was a mercenary.

The rest of the world had the convenience of healing magic and magic potions, which could heal wounds at once. But none of us here could use healing magic, and potions were too expensive for the average person to afford. On top of that, neither of them was capable of reconnecting a severed arm.

This combination of items, however, could repair even a severed limb. If too much time passed, of course, rot would set in on the ends and make it impossible. That was why I didn't want to tell Gloria about this. It felt a bit cruel to ask a woman who'd lost her arm for the ingredients to a trick to put severed limbs back together.

"But your arm—"

"So what? It's not the first time it's happened."

Get into a fight with people swinging blades, and you were going to lose fingers and maybe arms. I'd gotten a leg chopped off before. Every time, some powder of warding mums and blackweed salt had been my friend. It wasn't cheap, but you could get a dose for the cost of about ten uses of potion.

"I've heard of this before, but this is the first I've actually seen someone using it," said Noelle with equal parts wonder and fear as she stared at my arm.

"As long as I change the bandage a few times a day and regularly rub more blackweed salt onto it, I'll be fine."

If I was lucky, it would be perfectly mobile again in half a month. With training, it would be more like a full month, but for me, it was closer to seven days.

With the healing finished, Dez brought around a bucket of water again. I wiped off the filth, and liquid splattered on my face. I must look absolutely miserable.

"His urine smelled sweet to me. He's got some kind of disease, mark my

words."

"The illness of a serious drinker," Dez remarked. "His legs'll rot and fall off in time."

"With how short they were, he'll barely notice." I laughed. "What about Arwin?"

"Go calm her down once you've changed clothes." Dez tossed my bag to me. "She keeps wailing on about Matthew this, Matthew that. She needs to see that you're doing all right."

Oh, our princess knight, always a handful.

"You go on back first and explain the situation to her. Tell her that Matthew cut those rogue dwarves to pieces with a single nose hair."

"I don't think I have the vocabulary to describe such an act," Dez grunted, tossing me a towel. "Just make it quick."

He returned to the head of the train. What a great pal.

"...Why didn't you fight back?"

I turned around to see Ralph staring at me with ill-disguised outrage. Noelle was with him.

"You think I could beat the likes of them?"

Here in the darkness of the cave, I was the usual powerless coward. Of course, I wasn't going to explain my secrets to Ralph and Noelle.

"But a few days ago, you—"

I knew what he wanted to say. The guy who hit him so hard he barfed had just been beaten and pissed on by a bunch of furry little men. Naturally, Ralph wanted to know what that meant for *him*, having lost to me first.

"I didn't fight back because it wasn't the right time for it. That's all."

It would have been easy to flatten them—we had Dez. But what if they sulked about it and sabotaged our ability to get through the cave? We'd have to spend months traveling over the mountains. We'd also have to deal with mountain bandits, monsters, and steep trails that would send us straight to hell if we fell.

"Look, we'll be using this same route on the way back. We can pick a fight and destroy them then, if you want. I'll put you in charge of that one."

"You're going to force us to do it?"

"I have a policy of not dealing with scrubs."

And I had no idea if I would be coming back here alive in the first place. I was going to face thousands upon thousands of monsters. The shrimpy dwarves were not on the docket.

I wasn't one for crafting my own will, but if he remembered it on the way back, one good punch would serve them right.

"Look, just don't tell Arwin about this. I'll cry if she decides she's disgusted with me."

I changed clothes and sprinkled some perfume to cover up the smell before going to the front of the vehicle, where Arwin clung to me. I calmed her down by demonstrating that I was fine. Those dwarves were lucky. If the princess knight had been her normal self, they would have all perished by her blade.

She asked about the bandage on my arm, but I only told her that it was a wound gallantly earned. She'd probably hear about it from Noelle or Ralph at some point.

Around the time my clothes were dry, the earthwyrm departed the station.

With a shriek like that of a rat, the giant mole began to crawl, slowly at first, but gradually increasing in speed until it was moving as fast as a horse. It was indeed quite speedy. And because there were no obstacles or changes in elevation, like on the surface, it was just a direct line.

On the sides and roof of the cave was a type of glowing mushroom called lightshrooms, growing at regular intervals. It wasn't full daylight, by any means, but they cast enough light for us to identify each other's faces.

Apparently, we were the only passengers in this car. The others were in other boxes, presumably, but we'd been isolated from them to avoid any recurrence of trouble. We had the lead car all to ourselves.

From what Dez said, we'd be moving northward with a number of rest stops along the way. There were no seats or anything inside the earthwyrm, just the exits and windows along the sides. It was made up of simple wooden boards, so the experience was anything but comfortable. We'd brought cushions from the wagon, but a long-term trip was going to be hell on my buttocks.

The windows were kind of useless, too, showing nothing but the same endless sights. It was nice that we got a bit of breeze, but there was absolutely nothing to see. I was bored.

Arwin sat by the window and hugged her knees. She'd been clinging to me to an almost obnoxious degree earlier, but when I tried to speak to her, she just looked away awkwardly.

Did I still smell? I sniffed at my sleeve, but I couldn't really tell.

Maybe she'd figured out what happened with that incident earlier. She might even have sneaked a look at me. Was she disappointed, seeing me in such a pathetic, humiliated state? I couldn't help but worry.

For now, she wasn't thrashing about, but her face was pale. I had a feeling that the enclosed darkness of the cave was reminding her of the dungeon. I'd heard about people with dungeon sickness who were so afraid of the dark of night that they put on enough lights to mimic midday to feel safe enough to sleep. She was fine at home, but this experience might bring back some painful memories.

Suddenly, she sprang into motion, putting a hand to her head and closing her eyes in pain.

"No..."

Arwin got to her feet, swaying.

"Hey, watch out," Dez said. We were in a moving vehicle. It was constantly jostling, and if she wasn't careful, she was going to fall over.

She didn't seem to hear him. In fact, she made for the door in an attempt to get out.

"Stop it! If you jump out here, you'll only die!"

Being thrown off a horse could cause major injuries. We were traveling faster than a horse, and everything around us was a rocky cavern. Any fall was bound to be fatal.

The four of us stopped her and sat her down again, but Arwin continued to tremble. I sat down next to her and pulled her head closer to mine.

```
"If you're bored, would you like to hear a story?"

"I..."
```

"Here's one from when I was still an adventurer," I said, regardless. "It's the story of how I nearly died fighting three chickens."

I proceeded to tell her a variety of stories. Humorous stories about my foibles when just starting out; the time I lost big in gambling and had to cross an entire mountain naked to rejoin my party; the time I saved a village and was rewarded by being made a sacrifice to the spirit beast of the mountain; the time I found out that an ancient message left behind in some ruins was a love letter from a legendary hero of the past, and so on. The tale of how I was captured by bandits and left to die in the desert—and had to walk three straight days and nights to survive. Even the stupid story of how I went to vanquish some ghosts, only to learn that the place was a hookup spot for young couples. I told her every story I could think of. I'd spent a long time making a living as a mercenary or adventurer, so I had tales for days.

I could tell heroic stories of how I'd vanquished vampires, demons, and dragons, but this was better for Arwin's current state. I left out any ones involving caves or dungeons.

Times were good back then. I was able to solve just about every problem with strength. Money was plentiful, and women loved me. I had companions I trusted. I didn't need to look out for darkness and always try to stay in the light. That had been the peak of my life.

And look at me now. My unparalleled strength was basically gone, I had no money, and rather than dozens of women, I just had one very needy princess knight. My faithful companions had scattered to the wind, save for one unfriendly, violent, and loyal friend.

So many things, so many precious things, had slipped through my fingers.

The stories I described were fond memories of the past—and skeletal husks of it. They were useless to me now, but maybe they could at least pass the time.

"...so I kept running for my life. I'd completed the job, but I got no rewards for it, so I was flat broke. I'd busted my ass and had nothing to show for it except fatigue."

Something rested softly on my shoulder.

"Arwin?"

She was asleep. At least my old stories served as lullabies.

"Sleep well."

We'd be in this dark cavern for a while. The more sleep she could get, the better.

I carefully separated myself from her and laid her down sideways without disturbing her sleep. The cushion would serve as her pillow.

"There's more time until the next station. Get some rest while you can," Dez informed us.

"Good idea." My throat was parched from telling all those stories. I was reaching for my waterskin when Noelle came crawling over.

"Were those stories true?" she asked. Her eyes were large in the dark.

"Of course not," I said, shrugging. "I made them up. Just put together a bunch of different tales I heard years ago and improvised some extra details. *Right*, Dez?" I asked, making sure to cover my bases before I forgot.

"...Right."

"Maybe I have some talent as a storyteller. I do like telling tales, so maybe I could find some job that involves telling people stories."

"Like a huckster," Dez remarked sarcastically.

"Shut up! Anyway, I'll tell more stories to Arwin if it keeps helping to calm her down. Maybe the one about how I dressed up like a nun in order to sneak into a convent."

"Uh-huh..."

The lack of interest on Noelle's face was telling. Sorry, kid, but I've got my reasons.

Ralph was huddled in the corner with his arms around his knees. Occasionally he stole a glance at me and Arwin. Was he spiteful, envious, furious, or miserable? Probably some combination of all of them. He was free to have his youthful angst, but I didn't like that he looked away every time I glanced back. It made him seem like a shy girl in love.

After a long while, the train's speed began to slow, and it eventually stopped.

"Time to switch," Dez said. I looked out to see a long, narrow passage running off the side of the Dragon Hall, down which some dwarves were bringing another giant mole.

So our steeds needed rest, too.

"There's a privy there, too. Use it now, if you need it."

"What incredible convenience."

"In the past, you'd just go wherever in the cave, but it started to attract bugs and rats and disease. So we try to be mindful of that now. Everything improves with work and iteration."

The fact that the air in the cavern wasn't stale was a product of dwarven innovation and hard work, then.

Our break was soon over, and the earthwyrm resumed its trip.

"It's about time to eat. Should be nighttime up top."

"You can tell?" Ralph asked Dez with wonder.

"His stomach clock is very precise," I added.

"Once we eat, we'll sleep in here. The train will be moving, so there's no need to take shifts."

The cave was regularly patrolled by dwarves, and there were guards stationed on the earthwyrm as well.

"That's perfect."

It meant we could reach our destination even in our sleep. I had been afraid that they might force us to do hard labor, like rowers on a slave ship. Instead, I could focus my attention on Arwin.

When the earthwyrm resumed moving, she took my hand again. Her face was still pale, but she was getting used to the sensation and didn't wail or try to jump off anymore. She only swung an arm around and struck me in the face or solar plexus a few times. I'd gotten much worse than that when she found out I'd been visiting an establishment in which naked women rendered services.

In the afternoon of the third day, the earthwyrm reached its destination at last.

"Gettin' off," Dez grunted. He led our wagon back up another stone hill and through another illusory wall.

"Oooh."

We emerged onto a rocky mountainside with forests sprawling below. At a point in the distance, however, the forest stopped abruptly, beyond which a sandy, blasted wasteland awaited.

"That is Mactarode," Noelle said, her voice thick with emotion, pointing toward the horizon. "Our home."

CHAPTER SIX

The Discovery

From here, Noelle took over as the guide. She sat up front next to the driver as we made our way out of the forest and into the wasteland.

I was convinced that the moment we headed out there, we'd see monsters strolling about as if they owned the place, but it was surprisingly quiet. At most, I spotted the occasional giant monster in the distance, sleeping or grazing.

"The monsters around here are still placid and won't fight us unless we approach them. The closer we get to the capital, the more monsters there are—and the more combative they will be."

"I was expecting something a bit more dire."

"...The major settlements have all collapsed. It's not a functioning kingdom anymore."

"Sorry."

That had been a careless comment. The land might be intact, but the kingdom itself had ceased to operate. It was a total collapse.

"There are only a few small villages left. Even they are not 'safe,' necessarily," Noelle explained. The number of monsters and the danger they posed were dramatically higher, so people could not leave the shelter of the villages. "Plus, many packs of monsters roam around along bizarre routes. Some places were spared in the initial disaster but were destroyed by those wanderers."

The villages weren't able to coordinate anymore, and no traders came traveling through, so they couldn't get outside sources of food and were unable to make money. Without money, they couldn't get food. Every village was on its own.

"People have starved to death. Some left to look for help at risk of their lives. As far as I know, none of them have ever returned."

So it's hell to leave—and hell to stay.

"How are the people in the villages surviving?"

"They till what few fields are inside the village, shoot down birds that fly overhead, and then there are people like me who travel around to provide support."

Each of the groups of survivors were making ends meet in their own way. The villages that failed to do that collapsed. The kingdom of Mactarode was no more, but its people were still alive and suffering.

"The village of Yuulia is about two days ahead. I do know some of the locals, so they should be willing to give us shelter there."

"I'm glad to hear that."

After the fall, Noelle's job had been to help guide Mactarode's refugees out of the country, or retrieve their treasured mementos or valuables. She had risked her life to help the people in the wake of the collapse. If the kingdom was ever reestablished, her exploits would be spoken of in heroic terms.

"Quickly, hide!" she whispered, guiding the wagon to a nearby rocky outpost. "Get out now. Hurry." Despite the obvious tension and concern in her voice, she gave us detailed instructions. "And stay quiet. Don't talk."

From the shade, Noelle watched the surroundings nervously, waiting for something. I soon found out what it was.

A massive shadow passed over our heads at an impossible speed. I looked up and saw a giant lizard, framed against the sun, wings spread wide as it soared through the air: a wyvern. They were a subspecies of dragon that excelled at flight. Sometimes they landed to feed on livestock or humans. If you wanted to defeat one, you either had to hit it with magic or use crossbows at a distance—or hit them when they landed.

The wyvern seemed to identify us as food, because it continued to circle over the desert. There were no people or animals around, so it was probably desperate to find new prey.

"After a while, it should give up and move somewhere else. We just have to wait it out," Noelle said.

If only it were that easy; the wyvern did not seem to be willing to give up on its lead. It greedily watched the surface, searching for the target that would fill its belly. It was only a matter of time before it noticed us.

While we were in the shade, the sunlight in the open wasteland was brutal. Sweat ran down my skin. Between the nerves and the heat, Arwin was going to hit her limit soon.

"No worries," I said, putting an arm around her shoulder. "If it comes down to it, we'll use Ralph as bait to get away. He said he'd gladly sacrifice himself for you."

"No, I... I mean, yes, that's true, but—," Ralph stammered, hoisted by his own past statements.

"Shh, don't make any noise. Here it comes...," Noelle warned. Up above, the wyvern was still circling the desert, searching. It didn't seem to have noticed us yet.

Just when it seemed like something might be wrong, the ground bulged upward, revealing a hole large enough for a person to enter. Emerging from the new aperture were a series of ants the height of a grown man.

I thought I heard Dez clicking his tongue with disgust. These could be the same colony or same species of ant that once invaded his hometown.

More and more ants came streaming out of the hole. There were more than dozens of them—there were thousands, if not tens of thousands. As new ants arrived, they climbed over those in front of them, and the ones behind them continued in the same way. As they rose, taller and taller, they became a black mass that reached the altitude of the wyvern's low flight. When it realized that, the wyvern changed directions. Parts of the mass of ants leaped off the pile. Several of them were caught by the wind and fell to the ground, but one of them eventually clung to the wyvern's leg. That was when the situation changed. The wyvern's elevation dropped a little, giving the ants an opening. A

second, then a third ant leaped onto its back. It started a corkscrew tailspin to knock off the ants, but that only allowed more of them to gain purchase.

The wyvern fell to the ground as a black mass. The vibration and dust of its crash reached our location.

The fate of any fallen bird is a sad thing. Despite its advantage in size, it had no response to the sheer weight of the swarm. A shriek and a sour stench arrived on the breeze. They were ripping its hide and flesh to shreds.

"Now's our chance. Let's go," said Noelle, motioning us back to the wagon. The giant ants were more focused on their prey than us.

We quickly returned to our vehicle and resumed traveling. I looked back over my shoulder and saw the ants trudging back to their hole in neat lines.

Next to me, Ralph's face was pale. This was probably a sobering reminder of an unavoidable fact: Their homeland was now a hellscape of deadly monsters.

We encountered more and more monsters after that. In the morning, we were nearly crushed by a giant worm; during the day, we were chased by a carnivorous horse the size of a house; in the evening, an alraune nearly ate us; and at night, some vampires attempted an abduction. There was such a variety of monsters that if you added the kinds we saw from a distance, from goblins to giants, you could put together an entire monster encyclopedia.

We also nearly fell off the path into a canyon, so if not for Dez, we'd have died five times by now. On the third evening, exhausted from fleeing for our lives, we finally reached our destination, the village of Yuulia.

It was surrounded by large stone walls. They were freshly built—probably made after the collapse of the kingdom.

The gate was wooden but reinforced with iron beams.

"This is Noelle. I've come back to visit. Please open the gate," Noelle called out. They opened it at once, allowing the wagon inside.

"Oh, welcome home, Noelle," said a woman in her fifties, who came rushing out to see us. Noelle quietly explained that she was the mayor of the village.

Originally, it was her husband, but he had been on a trip to the royal city when the monster outbreak happened and never came home. Since then, she'd been acting as the mayor in his stead.

"Here, these are for you," Noelle said, lowering her pack and opening it up. Inside there were rations, oil, clothes, needles, thread, and patches for sewing, plus metal nails and other consumable products that couldn't be acquired around here.

Emergency supplies, then. That was the reason for her oversize pack.

"...And who are they?"

"Her companions. Noelle said she wanted to visit home for your sake. We're just along for the trip," I made up, before she could say anything.

"Oooh. And Her Highness?" the woman asked, eyes shining. She was filled with hope at the sight of us.

"She's..." Noelle hesitated.

I was about to step in with an answer when I felt a tug on my sleeve. Arwin had come out of the wagon and was grabbing my hand with concern. Though it was hidden under her hood, her hair color was unmistakable. They would know it was her, even if they hadn't seen the princess before.

"Unfortunately, Arwin...er, Her Highness is busy elsewhere. We're here in her stead."

"And who is that?" the mayor asked, glancing at Arwin.

"This is...Allie," I said, lowering my voice. "She's the princess knight's body double."

Because there were many people who stood to lose out if Arwin finished off the dungeon, her life was constantly at risk, and therefore we had to arrange for a body double, I explained. This was a total lie, of course, but the mayor just exclaimed "Oh my" and put a hand to her mouth with concern. I also turned to Noelle and the others to get them to back me up.

"What a story. Well, ours is a small village, but make yourselves at home."

She showed us to an unused home at the edge of town where we could stay

the night. Noelle explained that she stayed there, too, when she came to this place.

"How are the defenses here?" Dez asked Noelle, once we had settled in for a minute.

"They're strong for now. There's a monster-repelling shrine."

"Shrine?"

"In the center of the village. There's a magic circle inside that creates a magical barrier around the village."

In the distant past, a famed wizard had stayed a night in the village for free, and he had set up the magic circle that kept monsters away as payment. It was quite an extravagant offering for a single measly night.

"But that was quite long ago, so it could wear off any day now."

"Do they have a plan to escape if it comes to that?"

"I think it would be very hard," Noelle said, shaking her head.

The villagers were all women, children, and the elderly, as far as I could tell. The men had been enlisted as soldiers, and they had probably all perished fighting monsters. The villagers looked miserable and exhausted. The anxiety that they might be invaded by a swarm of monsters on any given day was clear on their faces, and the longer such nerves wore on, the more they would lead to physical fatigue.

"You'll have to cross the mountains from here. It's easier once you pass the eastern valley, but there are very steep cliffs along the way, so we can't put bridges over them. The other route crosses the western wastes to the border, but that involves not only monsters but wild beasts and bandits, as well."

That was a harsh requirement for people who weren't steady on their feet. Given those options, the people of Yuulia were pessimistic about getting away. They were stuck here. In fact, it was practically a miracle that they'd lasted this long.

From what Noelle said, a village along the western border had just been wiped out by monsters the other day. It was in a location like this one, but one

day, the monsters caught scent of their presence and swarmed the place, trampling all the buildings. All that was left was rubble, bloodstains, and human remains so thoroughly torn apart and chewed up that they couldn't even come back as zombies.

"They're not able to pick as many monster-repelling herbs, either. The walls only offer the smallest pittance of safety."

If the magical barrier went down, this village's luck would run out. Clearly, Noelle was hoping to help the populace flee the country before it came to that. She turned to Dez and pleaded, "Is there any way we can help them? If not with an earthwyrm, then at least taking them to the station."

In other words, she was asking him for the right to use the Dragon Hall.

"Can't," said Dez. It wasn't cruel, but pragmatic. He'd already worked a miracle by getting four humans through the passage, despite the law against it. Trying to bring in dozens more would be a scandal. For one thing, there was no way that dozens of people would hold their silence about the event for life. Someone would talk—and then the conflict over the Dragon Hall would break out all over again.

Also, Dez and his family would be tried for his actions. He would be cast out from dwarven society, banished forever. Dez's chivalry toward his friends extended infinitely, but only as long as it affected just himself. Once there were consequences for his wife and child, any man would hesitate. Before, he would act on his own convictions and care little for the results. Some might say that he was weaker now, but they would be wrong. He now had responsibilities as a husband and as a father.

"But..."

"That's enough," I said, cutting off Noelle with a hand on her shoulder. "Beardo's got his own standing and circumstances to worry about. Don't make this any harder on him than it already is."

Dez probably wanted to help them, too. He was a kind man, but not to the point of sacrificing his own wife and child. Everyone cares more about their immediate family. It's much more painful to lose a pet dog or cat than to hear about a hundred strangers dying. It's not logic; it's just the way it is.

"...I'm sorry," Noelle said begrudgingly. Of course, Noelle wanted to help those close to her as well. It was a balance of needs, but in this case, the cost to Dez would be higher.

"So we'll take a little vacation here today. No swimming, but it's the perfect place to beat the heat," I said lightly.

"Actually, speaking of heat, this place gets snowed in during the winter, so there won't be any escape then."

Meaning that now was the time.

I looked through the window at the rest of the village again. I'd thought they all looked dead-eyed and beaten on the inside before, but now I noticed that some were gambling with cards, while others were braiding straw stalks into rope. One section of wall was covered in childish scribbles.

Even in a situation where tomorrow might bring death, they were finding the joys in life. Humanity was a lot tougher than one might think.

"As for what you mentioned," Noelle said quietly, leaning in so no one could overhear, "when should it be?"

"...Tomorrow, maybe," I said, checking the sky. According to Noelle, the eastern winds were warm and led to clear days at this time of year. I suspected the same would happen here. Tomorrow would be a sunny day throughout. Thanks to all the rest and staying off my feet, my wounds were healing quickly. It wouldn't be a problem.

"Get an early night tonight. I want to leave before dawn," I said.

"I'll do that."

The empty home was surprisingly spacious, so we had three rooms to spread out among. Arwin and I had one room, Dez and Ralph in another, and Noelle in the third.

Arwin couldn't be on her own, and I worried about her being with Noelle. Aside from Ralph, who predictably whined and complained, there was no issue with this arrangement.

There were two beds in the room. I wouldn't have minded sharing a bed with

her, but due to complaints from the others (particularly Noelle), we put a screen between the two. I was also chained around the left wrist, with the other end stuck to the wall. No trust at all, I tell you. Maybe that was to be expected. Was there no charity to give a man one last ride at the end of his life? I guess not.

While I lay in bed, feeling horny and frustrated, I heard a voice beyond the screen say, "Matthew."

"What's wrong, can't sleep?"

"I'm a dirty coward."

She was feeling guilty about hiding her true identity.

"Well, if you tell them, things will get out of hand. They'll overrun you with autograph requests. What if some old man asks you to sign his stomach? The saggy skin will make the letters all sloppy."

"Don't tease."

"We're here on vacation, to rest and recuperate. Think of it like undercover reconnaissance," I said, inwardly sighing.

We were here in the hopes of shedding some of her baggage and lightening up, but instead, she was taking on more. It wasn't responsibility anymore; at this point, it was more of a curse. As royalty, as a princess, as a proud knight, she'd held herself to a high standard of behavior, always climbing, and she'd taken a fall. Now she was clinging to my lifeline with one hand. Any kind of shock to her system would make her let go at this point. And then she would fall headfirst into a lightless abyss.

And we were supposed to be setting down her baggage to make her lighter and prevent that from happening. There was no telling when a lifeline might snap, too. If only she would learn that.

Was she that trusting in me, or that careless about me?

I heard scraping and rustling and looked over to see Arwin moving the screen. She pushed it to the corner of the room, and once satisfied, she rolled back into her bed and reached out to me.

```
"Hold my hand."

"You'll get in trouble." Get me in trouble, I meant.

"I can't sleep. Please."
```

"Fine, fine."

I held out my hand, and she squeezed it.

"You could use my arm as a pillow if you want, but you'll have to come into this bed first."

"I'm fine," she said flatly.

The only illumination in the room was moonlight.

"How are you feeling?" I asked.

"Fine, for now."

For now.

"...But I get scared when I'm alone. Everything frightens me. Even when I'm out in the open, it feels dark and cramped, and I start suffocating. Like I've been buried alive in a coffin."

"That sounds freaky."

"I just keep fretting that things are slipping through my fingers. I don't know what I should be doing with myself anymore. Even when I know the answer in my head...my heart won't keep up to match it."

The pressure in her fingers increased. When she lost her mental balance and didn't know what to do, she stepped down the wrong path and fell into hell. If she hadn't met me, she would probably be in even deeper depths right now.

"...It was a mistake to have turned to such a wicked thing for help. I thought it made me stronger, but it was only a fleeting illusion."

```
u ,,,
```

"It's hard to even believe that I used to go into the dungeon to fight down there. It was so normal that I took it for granted...and now I can scarcely believe it." "I see."

"...I made a promise to you, didn't I?" Arwin said, facing the ceiling. "That once I conquered the dungeon, I would show you my homeland."

"That's right; you said that."

"It was a much better place once. We lived here in happiness. It wasn't supposed to be overrun with monsters, while the people live in fear."

Supposed to be.

Her beloved homeland was now infested with monsters. Even now, she couldn't admit it, didn't want to admit it. Unable to accept that reality, she had chosen the most unrealistic method of coping: an all-or-nothing gamble. Now the game was up, and life was coming to collect.

"...I wonder what the Tree of Cameron is like now," she mused.

"Let's hope it's fine."

"If possible, I'd like to go see it. I want to see it with my own eyes, so I can know."

"Please don't."

"I get it." I could sense her smirking to herself in the dark. "The royal city is a den of monsters. I can't survive there... Even the old you might not be able to."

"Maybe not."

"But I want to know," Arwin continued, "if that tree still has roots in this land. If it does...then maybe I can find my way back onto my feet."

"You are you." No matter how much she cared about that tree, that was no reason to bind her fate to it. "You're standing on your own feet. You put away that standing screen on your own, in the dark of night."

"...."

"Go to sleep for the night. We can come back to see once you've finished the dungeon off."

"…"

"Arwin?"

There was no response. I turned my head and saw that Arwin was asleep with my hand cradled in her arms. She looked very peaceful.

"Good night."

I would've given her a little kiss, if not for the chain around my wrist.

My eyes opened. On the other bed, Arwin was still asleep.

If all went poorly, this might be the last time I said good-bye to her.

But I wasn't going to indulge in sentimentality. It was always like this. Even before this, Arwin had been fighting for survival. She just happened to make it out fine, but every time she left for the dungeon could have been our final parting, particularly the very last outing. This time, it was my turn.

I took off my bandage. The wound was almost entirely sealed. There was no problem with my range of motion.

They must have slipped the key to the cuffs under the door at some point, because it was on the floor now. I used it to remove the cuff and picked up my pack, which I'd loaded up the night before. Because I was weak in the dark, I kept my supplies at a bare minimum.

"Here you go. This is for today."

I placed a sack of candy at her pillow, quietly, so I would not wake her. I even left a letter by it, which was not my style.

I'll be out for a bit. Be a good girl and wait for me to come back.

I chose my words for brevity and ease. I didn't like long and florid letters, and it would only make her worry more. I carefully opened the door to minimize the sound and stepped out.

It was before dawn.

Noelle and I were at the edge of the village. Dez was here, too, but he was staying back to guard this time.

"Sure you don't want me along?"

"Yeah."

This plan required quickness and agility. Bringing along someone slower than me was just bringing a victim who would get picked off.

"Stay here at the village. We don't want to come back and find it destroyed."

"Don't force me to care for the princess."

That was Dez's way of saying, *Make sure you come back alive*. I'd known him long enough to be able to translate his crude ways.

"I'll commit that to memory."

I would be back alive. Otherwise, Arwin would never get better.

"So long."

I leaned down, parted Dez's beard, and kissed him on the cheek. He got me in the solar plexus. I couldn't breathe.

"Get off of me, you creep!" he said with a growl. He had such a violent way of expressing his shyness.

"We'll pick up where I left off on my return, darling," I said, waving to him as I strolled away from the village. If I didn't get a move on, he'd rip me limb from limb. I looked back and saw Noelle standing stock-still in shock.

"You mean...you don't just dally with Her Highness...but Dez, too?"

"Don't tell Arwin." I smiled, winking. This girl was so innocent that I had to worry about her. "Remember, he's got a wife and family. I've no desire to break them apart."

Noelle and I crossed the wasteland.

As the sun rose, the winds did as well, dry and hot. According to her, there was a shortcut around here.

"From what my uncle says, there's a secret cave not far ahead," she said, pointing to the mountains. "It's an emergency tunnel. It should lead us directly

to the palace."

So it was an escape route for only the most important people before the castle itself collapsed. If it was underground, then there wouldn't be any sunlight to use. But if all went well, we could get right to the Tree of Cameron at the palace without meeting any monsters. That was huge.

"Did Arwin use this, too?"

"Her Highness did not, as I understand," Noelle said apologetically. "She tried to fight to the bitter end. Several people had to team up to bind her and put her on a horse to escape the palace."

Even back then, she was a reckless little filly.

Arwin was going to wake up eventually, once the sun was high enough. You'd better behave and watch the village while we're gone, all right?

There was a large tree surrounded by dried-out grasses ahead. At its roots was a large hole, which proved to be much deeper than it appeared at first. It was twice as deep as a person's height... No, over three times.

Noelle examined her map, then declared that this was the place. She hung a rope around the tree, then descended into the hole first. There was a side passage down there that turned into the tunnel, apparently.

"Come on down," she called back through the hole, once she had determined it was safe. I hopped into the hole after her. A few moments later, my feet thudded on the ground.

"Faster this way."

It was a very logical decision, but Noelle just rolled her eyes at me.

The side passage was a bit cramped for my height, but she was able to walk right through it without difficulty. It was completely dark.

"Just a moment," Noelle said, starting a light. The passage was jagged rock, cracked in places. It seemed they had made use of a natural cavern shaft for their escape route. Water dripped from some of the cracks. The whole thing smelled dank and moldy.

Unlike in the dungeon, losing our light here would mean being plunged into

absolute darkness.

"Let's keep moving."

We continued onward, following the faint light source. The wet ground made it easy to slip, but overall, it was much easier going than I had imagined. I expected some monsters along the way, but there was no sign of anything so far. It was quiet.

On the other hand, occasional vibrations from overhead caused tiny cascades of dirt and sand. It seemed like the rampaging of some titanic monster like a dragon or behemoth on the surface. That only made our choice to go underground seem even wiser.

Safety was the best policy. This was not just committing needless risk, or jumping headlong into a burning building.

Though the path turned here and there, it always carried us in the same direction. Normally, such escape passages were packed with traps or mazelike warrens to deter thieves, but they probably hadn't had the time to bother. It was just very, very long. It was traveling from the palace all the way under an entire mountain, so it made sense. It wasn't going to be a quick trip.

"How far is it from the exit to the Tree of Cameron?"

"Not far, I think. You should be able to see it from anywhere in the city."

"Assuming it's still standing."

It might be the symbol of the kingdom, but it was still just a tree. I doubted it would be in a pristine state. The only question would be how much of it was left.

"If we don't see it, we can head for the eastern side of the palace, because that's where it was planted."

"Got it."

Come demon or snake, we would find out what we'd find out.

"If anything pops up, I will deal with it. You focus on doing what you need to do," she said. That firmness was a sign of confidence, at least. She was going to fight the source of all the shaking around us, if she had to.

I was about to ask my next question when Noelle said, "Why is it that Her Highness trusts you so much?" She kept her eyes and face forward. "It is not just a bond of man and woman, in my mind. I have seen many pairs of lovers and married spouses, but she and you... I cannot explain well, but I feel that you are slightly different."

Bingo. Noelle was clearly trying in her own way to understand.

"We've spent a lot of time together. Call it an accumulation of familiarity."

"But I have experienced that with her, too. And so had my uncle, and Ralph, and the others who passed away. But she trusts you more than anyone else."

"I think you're expecting too much of me," I said. I knew Arwin's secret. Sharing someone's secret is an effective way of bringing two people closer together. "If anything, the way you call Arwin 'Highness' is your answer."

It was a difference of station. A princess and her loyal retainer. That gave Noelle the ability to grow closer to her. But in addition to bringing her closer, that relationship also kept her at a certain distance.

"Is it different for you?"

"I'm a simpleton. For me, it comes down to whether a woman is beautiful or not."

"…."

Noelle said nothing. She kept her eyes forward, so I couldn't see her expression.

"If you want to be trusted, you need to force yourself into the other person's business. Manners and propriety are important, of course, but there are times when those methods won't help you."

And Arwin was looking for someone who would do that.

"When we get back, you should ask her about it. Don't *talk* to her about it, just *listen*. People like to talk, you know. They're grateful just having someone to listen. Arwin will scowl often, but she's actually quite—"

I was interrupted by an utterance from Noelle. I looked up and groaned.

The passageway ahead of us was blocked by rubble.

From the way it had crumbled, it looked like a collapse from above. Those giant meatheads stomping around on the surface, then. Some particularly fragile section of the tunnel had collapsed. Of course, I couldn't unblock it in my current state, and even if I could, it might just cause a further collapse that would bury us alive. It was going to be a major waste of time if we came this far and had to turn back.

"Any other passages?"

"There are," Noelle said, pointing to the right. There was another passageway leading off to the side. Unlike the bare rock up to this point, it had been carved out and looked sturdier. "But this one will lead to a different exit. I believe it goes outside of the city."

"That's perfect." Even that would be a major victory.

"But it will put us right in the middle of the monster den. It's too dangerous. I think we should turn back."

"Any other exits?"

"Yes, but..."

She explained that they were all similar in terms of distance and safety.

"Then we'll just have to keep going."

"Very well," Noelle said, and proceeded down the path on the right. I followed without another word.

After heading down the stone-block-reinforced tunnel, there was eventually a light up ahead. There was a dead end that was just wide enough for a single person to reach, but there was sunlight streaming down from overhead.

"This is the end point?"

"Yes," Noelle said, looking up at the sky. It was a little blue square above us. The exit (or entrance) had been disguised as a well on the surface, it seemed. It was going to be a pain to climb out.

She pulled a grappling hook out of her pack and hurled it upward. Once it had

caught on the lip of the well, she hauled herself up the rope as nimbly as a monkey. With her help, I made it up, too.

Outside the well, we were in some kind of garden. The walls had collapsed, and there wasn't a single blade of grass left, just a few small holes where trees had previously been planted, I guessed. The neighboring mansion had no roof left, just the barest remnants of recognizable walls and foundation.

"Where are we?"

"The Lewster family garden, I believe."

So old Uncle Lutwidge's home. What a fine design choice: a special passage that they, and only they, could use to escape. The very model of a chivalrous knight.

Noelle suddenly gasped and hurriedly pulled out an earth-colored cloth that she placed over both of our heads. A second later, there was a tremendous rumble, and through the folds of the cloth, I saw something that looked like a monster's leg.

Had it sensed our presence and come looking to eat us? We'd probably be a good meal for it.

"Don't speak. Hold your breath, and stay absolutely still," Noelle warned me in a barely audible hiss. I slowed my breathing, hiding my presence.

Something massive was writhing right next to me, I could sense. A simple adjustment of its foot, and it could flatten us both.

The sun was out, so I could jump out into the open and choose to fight, but I wanted to avoid that. Fighting would draw other monsters to us.

Just a single movement of the creature caused the air to shudder and channel into gusts of wind. To something this size, we had to be the size of insects.

Eventually, the presence drifted away. It had probably lost interest when it lost sight of us and wandered somewhere else.

I exhaled. "First thing that happens once we're up here. That was scary." I sighed and turned to Noelle. "So where in the city are we?"

"If this is my uncle's home, it's on the eastern edge. The palace is to the

west."

"Got it." I took a small bottle out of my pack and sprinkled its contents over my head. "Smell remover."

It contained an extract of some monster secretions and dung. With it on your body, you could slip among the monster's own scent and be harder to detect.

The only problem was that it smelled hideous to human beings, making you stand out a mile away. I could feel the hair in my nose getting singed already.

"All right, off I go."

"I'll go with you," she insisted.

"No, you stay here and protect the passage."

What would be the point of going to get some evidence if our route back was blocked when we returned?

Just in case, I borrowed her map of the city and asked her for the location of other escape routes. In an emergency, I might need to use one of them, instead.

"But—"

"I'll borrow this, too." I grabbed the cloth we'd just hidden beneath. It would be perfect for concealing ourselves.

"...Just make sure you come back alive. She'll be very sad if you die."

"I know."

"Good fortune in battle to you."

No need to pray for battle. If you need to pray, do it for Arwin.

I placed the brown cloth over my head and started running.

After a brief climb over the rubble that had been the mansion's walls, I was out in the open. With a better vantage point, I found that the area was so desolate, it was hard to even call it ruins.

You would have expected some remnant of a city, being the center of the entire kingdom, but after being stomped into the dirt by giant monsters, the

buildings had fallen into rubble, then been crushed into dust and subjected to wind and rain, such that there was scarcely any sign of their original majesty.

Enormous monsters rambled through the wasteland. If a person slew one of them, he or she would be called a national hero, but here, they were everywhere, wandering, sleeping, and hunting. It seemed they were devouring weaker, smaller monsters. It truly was a kingdom of monsters now.

I looked to where the palace should be but saw nothing resembling a building. It appeared to be a mountain of wreckage now. The Tree of Cameron, which was said to be visible from anywhere in the city, was nowhere to be seen. It had probably been knocked over by the monsters, but from here I couldn't tell if there were roots left.

Geographically speaking, it had to be on the high ground, so at least I knew which way to go.

I was hoping to make a beeline for it, but there were hill-size monsters along the way. It was too risky to try slipping between slumbering beasts. Even if they didn't notice me, it would be all too easy for them to squash me by accident.

If I moved along the wreck of what I took to be the outer wall of the city, I would have more places to hide, so it would be safer—relatively speaking, at least. A longer route meant more time taken, though. If I didn't achieve my goal and return by sundown, I was certain to die.

And the scent remover would only last so long.

After some uncertainty, I settled on the long route. Rushing was more likely to get me killed. At my best, I was confident that I could win a fight. But if dozens or hundreds of monsters became aware of me and started blowing fire, I'd never make it to the Tree of Cameron. I had to focus on the goal.

I moved along the outer wall. My travel was by necessity in the shade, so I made sure to have the temporary sun ready to go at any moment, in case of a surprise attack. Naturally, it was fully charged with sunlight.

My progress was as silent as I could make it, and I took in the remains of the town as I went. Despite the rubble everywhere, I could get a vague sense of what used to be there. There were mansions, homes, markets, workshops, and

even brothels.

There must have been fine beauties there. I would've liked to visit one. I wondered what happened to them. Were they eaten by monsters or trampled? If they'd survived at all, they would've lost their homes and jobs. Any life spent after that point would have been a very difficult path to tread.

Many, many people's fates were thrown awry by the monstrous disaster here, from whores to princess knights.

I noticed a few iron rods sticking up out of some rubble nearby. There were also rotting wooden boards with numbers written on them, plus signs with a sigil of a chain and dog on them.

That would be a slave market, then.

Arwin said that her home of Mactarode was a good kingdom. I believed that she was sincere in that belief. But even in the most peaceful of countries, there is torment and torture. The presence of a king who loves his subjects won't change that. Humans are not gods.

I was trying to hurry on my way when something in my field of vision moved. My instincts immediately sounded the highest alert, and I turned tail and fled. There was an explosive sound behind me, and the sound of rubble flying past. I took a stone to the back, then turned around to see, through the dust, a gigantic centipede emerging from the earth. It extended upward to the height of a castle, then landed on the ground and began to crawl after me on countless legs.

Damn, I've been spotted. I launched myself into a sprint. I just had to get noticed by a particularly dangerous creature, and now there was no way to hide. I'd only seen it for an instant, but based on the size and head markings, I judged it to be a tyrant centipede.

The progenitor and king of the centipedes. Its body was harder than iron, and its favorite food was human entrails. It was said that the tyrant centipede had died out long ago, but there was still one living here, apparently.

It pursued me, running over rubble and the remains of human civilization, spraying bits left and right. I'd thought that running near the outer wall of the

city would make it harder for the creatures to follow, but this one crushed wall and interior ruins equally in its pursuit. The noise alone was as loud as nearby thunder. It also had the advantage in number and length of legs, so it was closing the gap on me. The nasty stink of centipedes stung my nose. For being so huge, it was damned fast. It was going to catch up to me.

But right now, I wasn't just some useless kept man. Under a cloudless sky, I was Matthew the Giant-Eater. If you thought I was going to be terrified of some overgrown critter, you thought wrong.

I scooped up one of the iron bars in the rubble as I ran, then changed directions and started running up the wall at a diagonal incline. When I reached the lip of the wall rampart, I leaped.

Below me, the tyrant centipede loomed, huge and long. It noticed me and lifted its head—the fool. That was my goal. I spat at the end of the rubble in my hand, then roared and slammed it against the tyrant centipede's eye. There was a bursting, spurting sound, and gouts of disgusting fluids shot from the centipede's head. It writhed around at the loss of one of its eyes. Not to worry, I would be putting it out of its misery soon.

Next I leaped onto its antennae. Despite the wild bucking, I managed to steady my feet against it and yanked out the antenna in my hands. There was another gush of sticky, foul liquid.

I spun the antenna over my head and spat on the end again, then jammed it against the remaining eye.

A grating sound like teeth gnashing arose around me. The creatures did not have voices, so this was the closest thing to a scream it could emit.

Without its eyes, the tyrant centipede could only thrash about in agony, gradually losing strength. They *hated* human saliva.

Eventually, it rolled onto its back, curled up its legs, and went still.

I exhaled with relief. If I took this back to the Adventurers Guild with me, I'd get at least a hundred gold coins, but this wasn't the time to be earning pocket money. For one thing, other monsters would probably be coming over to see what was happening... Uh...

Just like this one.

Already there was a massive black monkey leaping into view.

It was a calamity ape. They were said to be able to paralyze and kill living things with their vocalizations alone—a skill they called the Song of Certain Death. Another legendary monster. What the hell, man?

The calamity ape did not heed my grumbling and sucked in a deep breath.

I promptly covered my ears and hid behind a nearby wall. An immense sound shook the air, crashing over me like a flood. Ugh, it was so noisy. I'd end up hard of hearing. Once I was certain the sound had subsided, I grabbed a nearby rock and flung it as hard as I could. If I got too close, it was just going to make that sound again. Best to attack from a distance instead. With my strength, the average rock turned into a mortar. But the calamity ape easily sidestepped it and used its long arms to chuck some rubble back at me. I leaped out of the way; the spot where I'd just been standing exploded, leaving a hole in the city wall.

Its strength was ridiculous. Get close, and it hit you with sound; stay away, and it hit you with rocks. It was good at mid-to-long-distance aiming, but that strength was going to be its downfall.

I grabbed another rock, leaped out from hiding, and hurled it at the calamity ape. It wasn't just one rock this time, but several, all in a row.

The ape smirked confidently, bounding forward and back and forth to evade the projectiles. This time, it was going to try its sound attack from a distance I couldn't avoid.

My back hit something hard. In my attempt to escape, I'd come to the edge of the city wall. Before me, the calamity ape was sucking in breath. There was no escape to the sides and certainly none over the top; if I tried to jump, it would hit me with a rock. I was trapped. But one creates one's own luck. I gripped a rock, swung my arm back, and hurled it. The missile was sure to land, but the calamity ape calmly watched it pass by. It resumed unleashing its Song of Certain Death but stopped, wide-eyed. A rock had just struck it in the back of the head.

The ape spun around and saw the body of the tyrant centipede I'd defeated minutes earlier. If I'd thrown the rock right at my target, it would easily have avoided it. Instead, I'd taken aim at a body harder than iron and used it to deflect my shot back at the target.

While my attack had caught it by surprise, the giant ape was still perfectly fine. The deflection robbed most of the stone's velocity—but that was fine. The distraction was enough for me to close to the gap and reach my opponent.

I grabbed the calamity ape by the throat.

"In the end, a man's got to use his own two hands."

Two black arms trapped my head in response. It was going to try to crush me like a grape—or twist my head off.

But it was too slow.

My wrist and arm strength were enough to break the ape's neck. Instantly, the strength left its body. When I let go, its neck was imprinted with the shape of my fingers.

The calamity ape slumped to the ground. Just to be sure, I used my knife to sever its spine. Once I was certain it was dead, I quickly moved on.

I could see more huge monsters coming this way. I considered running from them, but they would catch me in no time. A game of tag would do me no favors.

The situation was dire. I was never going to reach the palace at this point. I'd run out of strength long before I wiped out all the monsters coming after me.

I'd just have to take a gamble.

I headed toward the swarm of monsters. If I tried to engage them in direct combat, I'd only be trampled to death, but their massive size was my key to victory.

At the head of the monsters was a three-headed demon dog, a cerberus. Perfect. If I misjudged my timing, it would mean instant death, but if all went well, I'd buy myself some breathing room. I clung to its front leg. It neurotically tried to pry me off, but I swung up the leg and onto its back in the meantime.

"Now git!"

I slapped its rump. The three heads yelped in unison, and it started running in circles, trying to throw me off its back.

The shaking was tremendous. I'd managed to calm a bucking horse on several occasions, but none of them had been too big for a saddle.

I gripped the hair on its back, which was longer than I was tall, and looked for the next horse to break. The cerberus started thrashing about, clearly upset with my presence.

Other monsters started to turn their hostility toward the wild cerberus. Up ahead was the very symbol of monsterkind: a dragon.

Sparks were gathering around its mouth. Uh-oh. I leaped to a nearby behemoth.

The instant I found purchase on its tail, the dragon's flame breath enveloped the entirety of the cerberus. The three-headed giant dog was completely aflame. I was able to escape the flames themselves, but not the searing heat they gave off. I could feel my skin crackling and getting singed. The pain was stronger than the feeling of heat.

The cerberus was blackened to a crisp before it could even howl. It fell to the ground and was still. I didn't even have the time to gape at the horror of it; now the behemoth I'd leaped onto was starting to thrash.

It wriggled and turned onto its back like a cat, trying to roll over me. Please don't. I circled around onto its belly, trying to stay in the sunlight; I felt like a flea. Somehow, I managed not to be crushed under its back, but now I was in danger of the same on its belly as it started to roll again. I needed to find another one to ride, or I'd never make it. When I was on the behemoth's back again, I tried rushing up its spine, racing until I reached its enormous horns and using the momentum to launch myself skyward. For an instant, it felt like I had frozen in the air, and then I plummeted straight down. I just couldn't get used to falling from heights; no matter how many times it happened, I still felt my balls shrivel up in their sack.

The next mount I leaped onto was an enormous turtle. I ran across the back

of its shell, looking for my next destination.

The most important thing was to stay in the sunlight. I had to be within the sun's rays at all times. If something got overhead, that was bad news for me. So I went over the monsters' heads. I went from one to the other, exchanging them at a moment's notice and discarding them like used rags. Sorry, you were just a single night's dream. Don't start acting like my girlfriend just because I rode you the one time.

They couldn't see me if I was above their heads, making it hard for them to attack me. And if I played my cards right, I could get them to attack each other.

On and on I leaped, from monster to monster, staving off death. The instant I landed on a huge crab, I felt my body suddenly turn heavy. Somehow, I was in shadow.

But when did that happen?

The answer was above me. At some point, an eagle with colossal wings had flown over me, far above: a roc. Yet another bothersome creature.

My body lurched. The crab was waddling left and right, trying to throw me off. And with my lack of strength in the shadow, I couldn't even hold myself on.

Gravity tugged at my body, pulling me off my feet. I reached for a protrusion on the crab's shell, but the next big lurch would knock me off for good. If I fell to the ground amid these enormous beasts, I would end up flattened to a pulp.

Well, shit. Never thought I'd need to use this outside in the middle of the day! "Irradiation!"

With the magic word, the temporary sun began to shine. Strength filled my body once again.

I ran from the shell of the monster crab toward its arm, then leaped off its upraised pincer and felt myself floating in air once again. My arm stretched, hand waving, fingers grasping for the leg of the airborne roc.

Thankfully, I latched on, and before it could react, I crawled from its leg up its belly and onto its back. With the natural sunlight on me again, I deactivated the temporary sun. The air was cold and harsh; we were up high in the sky by now.

Down below was the wasteland I'd just been rushing across, and a great horde of monsters.

This was perfect, though. Now I didn't have to worry about shadows, and I could ride the beast all the way to the palace. The thickness of its feathers kept the roc from noticing my presence, it seemed. It circled around the royal city, screeching. We were nearly over the palace now. Once it descended a bit closer to the ground, I would jump down.

It was at that moment that I noticed something shining down below, right around the center of the swarm of monsters. I didn't need to squint to make it out; there was no doubt that it was the same dragon unleashing its flame breath again.

Its power was breathtaking, just as I'd seen with the cerberus. But the range of its breath was not very long. With the wind, I felt confident in saying it wasn't going to reach us up here. Sure enough, the jet of flames did not even reach the roc's feet.

Eat shit! I thought, throwing a very satisfying middle finger down at the distant dragon, when I suddenly caught a detail that made all my hair stand on end.

There was a new kind of light gathering around the dragon's mouth. It crackled and flickered like lightning, gradually condensing and strengthening at the center of the beast's maw.

"Is that a dragon lance?"

Like the flame breath, it was an attack the dragon emitted from its mouth, but the power of this one was many times higher. It converted the dragon's vast store of magical energy into a beam of light and shot it all at once. The energy formed a lance that penetrated anything and everything in its way. Trying to defend against it was pointless.

The roc, sensing danger, turned around in an attempt to escape. If it managed to get away, it would only get me farther from my destination. We were too high up for me to jump down without dying in the fall, and if I stayed here, I would only get shot through along with the bird. And even if it somehow managed to avoid the lance, it was going to stay away from the area for a while.

Well, fuck it.

I made up my mind. It was time for the brown cloth to come out again. I waited until we were directly over the palace, then activated the temporary sun, held the cloth in both hands, and jumped off the roc's back.

I spread out my arms in the air so that the cloth would catch some wind underneath; that would help soften the shock of landing a little. It also shaded my head, which was why I needed the temporary sun. The strain on my arms was considerable. I had to grip as hard as I could to maintain control.

There was a flash of light below, and then an explosion above me. The dragon lance had shot through the roc. Suddenly, a blast of wind was pushing me downward, speeding up my fall toward the ground. It felt blazing hot; the aftershock of the dragon breath must have started a fire. *Shit. I better not die.*

With the impact of landing, my vision went black.

Bright light flickered through my eyelids. When I opened them, I saw the temporary sun shining right over my head. Once I'd had a moment to check around me for monsters, I turned off the light.

Apparently, I'd been unconscious for just a moment. My ears were ringing. It felt like I'd been blasted to pieces, but the pain I was feeling meant I was alive. My arms and legs were still attached. Maybe I'd broken some bones, but I could move, so it was no problem.

I sat up and looked around.

I was on a high outcropping overlooking the wasted remains of the city. There were piles of rubble around me, but I could tell that the materials were very fine. A wall had fallen nearby, but I could tell that there had been a relief carving on it. Clearly, I was in the remains of the palace.

That meant the Tree of Cameron had to be nearby. The grass and other plants around here were all barren and dried, but it was a huge tree, so maybe there was something left of it.

Somehow, I dragged my pained body along the wall. The tree was in the

palace garden, so I just needed to look for a spot that seemed to fit that description. Up above, more flying monsters like the roc and wyvern from before circled around. Being spotted would be very bad, so I kept myself hidden as I turned a corner and emerged into an open spot.

"Oooh, this is ugly."

There had definitely been a massive tree here. The trunk was thick, probably centuries old. But it had broken close to the roots, and a hollow was now exposed at its center. Simply touching it caused the bark to crumble.

It was completely dead. If I brought a piece of it back with me, it would only crush Arwin.

"What about the ground, though?"

If the top of the tree was gone, maybe there was hope at its roots. It might have grown new shoots and started branching and sprouting leaves.

I took out the monster-repelling herbs from my bag and lit them on fire. This was a task that would take some time, and I didn't want to be disturbed. Of course, with the sheer number of monsters around, they wouldn't work half as well as they usually did. I had to be quick and precise.

I took out a small shovel and began to dig around the tree. Over time, the ground shook here and there as large monsters stomped in the vicinity. There were also plenty of little rocks in the soil that halted my shovel's progress. It was quite annoying.

"What's this?"

After a while, I found something wrapped in a white cloth. What emerged from within was a very fine shortsword. The scabbard was decorated with gemstones.

"This must be what Arwin mentioned."

When she was eight, she wished to be a great knight and buried this weapon at the roots of the tree.

I pulled it from the scabbard. There was noticeable rust after being underground for so long. But once shown a little love, it would be a fine

weapon.

"I wonder if this will cheer her up to see," I said, putting it in my bag and resuming the task at hand.

The rest of the soil was just as rocky. Some stones were rounded, and others jagged. I tossed them aside until I got something large and rectangular. Carefully, I dug it up and brushed off the dirt. At last, I had what I was looking for. Gingerly, I checked our final hope, the roots of the stump, but they were all rotting. The Tree of Cameron was truly dead. The only thing here was its carcass.

Arwin's wish would never come true.

...But I had completed my mission. I had a gift to bring back. The only step remaining was to return to Arwin.

The sun was going down now. If I wasn't quick about it, I'd be trapped in the middle of these deadly monsters with no means to protect myself. The problem was where to go. There were too many monsters to get back to the Lewster home. And it would be very hard to hitch a ride on a monster's back again for a shortcut.

I'd probably have to take one of the other secret exits to the underground passage. The nearest one came out in the garden of the palace, but I already knew that one had caved in already. The next closest after that was at the church on the south side of the palace grounds. According to Noelle, there was a passage under the altar that connected to the passage we'd taken.

There was an abrupt flash from the direction of the city. Before I even registered what it was, I leaped away from the Tree of Cameron and ducked.

Light and sound exploded overhead. A gust of wind nearly lifted me off my feet, but I managed to stay on the ground. Dust and smoke billowed into the area, causing me to cough as I rose to my feet. The Tree of Cameron was gone, replaced by a hideously scarred patch of earth.

There was no need to think of why or how. I already knew what was coming this way.

The dragon from earlier hadn't given up yet.

It beat leathery green wings, its massive bulk hovering leisurely as it flew.

I had no weapons or armor right now. If it hit me with a dragon lance at close range, I would die...probably. I'd never tried one before. Fleeing seemed like the best move.

But if I simply turned and ran, it would easily catch me. I looked through the rubble and picked up a stone about the size of my palm.

Rocks were the world's most convenient long-distance weapons. They didn't have the range of bows and arrows, but it was practically impossible to run out of stock. Just look for another rock nearby and throw it. I'd been using them since my mercenary days, so my control was good.

I drew back my arm for a big windup. The destructive and penetrative power was also inferior to a bow and arrow, but in my current state, I was the man they used to call "Giant-Eater."

I hurled the rock at the approaching dragon. It flew with all the momentum of a sling-hurled missile, tearing through the thin membrane of the dragon's wing. It wasn't a very large hole, compared to the entirety of its body, but it was currently in flight. That was enough to throw off its balance and cause it to fall. The huge bulk of it slammed into the earth, sending more rubble flying as it slid along the ground.

I clenched my fist in triumph and felt a jolt of pain run through my left arm—I must've reopened my wound. This was my chance to turn and run. The dragon wasn't dead, I was sure, and I wasn't going to stick around to fight it. The sun was going down.

Now was the time to reach the tunnel exit to the south and travel underground to meet up with Noelle. We could be back by tonight.

A nasty shiver ran down my spine. I felt heat on my back and promptly dived onto my belly. A beam of light shot through the air over my head. It burned.

Once the light was gone, I looked back to see the dragon staring balefully through the pile of rubble it had accumulated. White smoke tendrils rose from its mouth.

Scaly bastard—it had shot another dragon lance at me. But the fall to the

ground had bent its wing, perhaps, because one of them was twisted sideways. Dragons had powerful natural healing, but it wouldn't be flying anytime soon. It could try to crawl after me, but other monsters were in the way along the route to the palace. They had taken its dragon lance as a signal to attack and started heading toward it.

Sorry, but I'm going to win this race.

I stood up and started running but immediately noticed that I felt much lighter than before. Looking over my shoulder, I saw that the things I'd packed into my backpack were all over the place.

Damn. It was the dragon lance.

I thought I'd avoided it, but it must have nicked the edge of my pack. The hole it created was larger than I'd have thought. The pack was useless to me now. I tossed it aside, took out a cloth sack, and started picking up whatever I could, from crucial supplies to the less necessary items. Once I'd scooped up enough of them, I tied it shut. That would have to do.

Then I turned back, checking to see if I'd forgotten anything, and felt my heart leap into my throat.

An item wrapped in a white cloth was resting next to the rubble: the shortsword that meant so much to Arwin. I rushed over to grab it but felt a nasty pain go through my left arm again. It caused me to pull up short, at which point a huge shadow fell over the sword.

There was a rumble.

An enormous golem flew onto the scene. The shock wave of its landing caused the rubble to swallow the white cloth.

No—it had been knocked away.

I turned again and saw the dragon from earlier fighting another monster. The dragon had managed to hurl its opponent all the way over here. I raised my arms to block the falling bits of detritus and cast about for the sword.

It was something precious to Arwin. Maybe showing it to her would bring back some of her old spirit.

Where—where did it go? I started picking up rubble and tossing it aside, looking through the area where it had been.

And then I found it. The white cloth was faded with dirt, and because it hadn't been wrapped tightly, the contents of the cloth were jutting out. The blade had snapped from the base, and the tip of the blade was chipped, too. Even the gems in the hilt were cracked.

Repairing this would be impossible. It would be a patchwork job and would never be the same sword again.

I tried to at least collect the pieces to take to her, but even that was not allowed to me.

The golem that had been tossed nearby got back to its feet to move and stepped on what used to be the shortsword. The sound was much lighter than I expected. The golem headed, stumbling, away from the palace, presumably to continue fighting the dragon. There was nothing wrong with two enemies fighting one another, but something inside of me had just snapped.

"Wait up."

I punched the golem as hard as I could from behind. Its stone back dented inward, and it flew into the remains of the palace. As it lay there, face down, I grabbed its ankle with both hands and pulled as hard as I could.

As I pulled, I rotated my body, causing the golem to rotate with me. It steadily picked up momentum until the stone creature was airborne.

Sorry, I know this is taking out my frustrations on you. But I've lived a very self-absorbed lifestyle. Surely I can be allowed to do something useful for someone in the end.

Once I felt that my momentum was at a maximum, I let go.

The stone body flew like a meteorite and slammed against the dragon's body.

The dragon screamed; it hadn't been fatal, but it was a major blow. The horrible lizard spit up blood and writhed in agony. I gave it the finger and hurried on my way.

The sun was going down, and now my left arm was bleeding. It wasn't quite

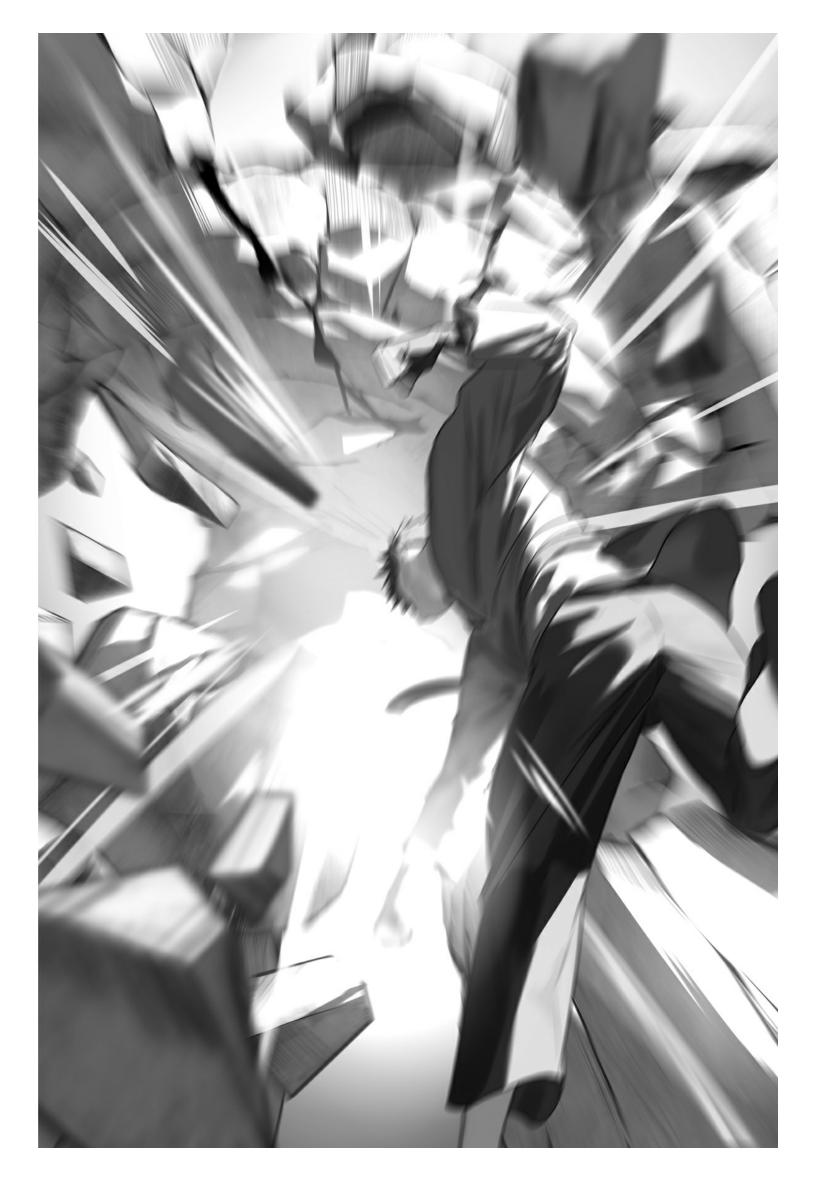
working right, either.

"...I'll be damned."

Looking down from the palace, I saw a gathering of monsters in the vicinity of the church to the south, where the escape tunnel would be.

I didn't know if they were determined to keep me here, or if it was just a coincidence, but I didn't have enough time to slice my way through all of them. I'd expire partway and be a snack for the rest of them.

Rushing through them in a mad scramble was an option I considered, but I'd run out of time and would lose due to the number of them.



There was still a little charge in the temporary sun, but even then, I didn't know if it was enough to get the job done. Was there any way to get to the underground tunnel entrance?

No, wait. There was a way.

I turned on my heel and headed back toward the palace.

Right as the sun was sinking below the horizon, I met up with Noelle at last.

"You're all right?" she asked.

"The lady was simply insatiable, and I couldn't help but pay for extra. Sorry to keep you waiting," I said. Noelle made a disgusted face but did not yell at me for my comment. She could see what I'd been through from the way I looked.

I had decided to use the tunnel exit in the palace itself—the place we intended to use in the first place. It had caved in, so the passage was full of rubble.

So I used the temporary sun for as long as I could to remove the blockage. Thankfully, it was enough to get me through the tunnel. If my body were just 10 percent bigger, I wouldn't have made it in time. From there, I continued along the passage and met back up with Noelle.

"I'm surprised you managed to get through there."

"The rubble was much looser than it looked at first. I was lucky," I lied. Thankfully, Noelle didn't demand a more detailed answer.

"And? Did you get what you were looking for?"

"Yeah," I said, "thanks to your help. And what's that?"

Noelle was carrying a great big sword about as tall as she was. It had a plain black sheath and a rather nondescript hilt, but I could sense that it had immense power.

"I found it beneath the Lewster mansion," she said. "I remembered that my uncle had asked me to do this."

Apparently in their escape, they had left behind an heirloom weapon in the basement armory. It certainly looked fine enough to be worth the trip back to retrieve it.

"It forms a pair with my uncle's sword, apparently," she said. Indeed, it did look rather familiar to me now. "I took out a number of things, so let's not waste any time getting back."

There was a buoyant note in her voice; I could tell that she was pleased about this.

"Hmm?"

There was noise behind us, in the direction from which I'd just come. The lantern didn't light all that far, but I quickly detected a high-pitched, crow-like call and a distinctive smell of carrion.

It was a pack of goblins.

"It seems that they found an entrance to this tunnel from the surface and got inside."

Dammit. I should have sealed off the other exit.

"What shall we do now?" Noelle asked.

"Just gotta run for it." I'd used up my temporary sun's power, so if they caught up to us, I was dead.

"Indeed."

Noelle took off running. I hurried after her.

The goblins came after us with teeth bared and stone knives and sticks in their hands. They shoved and jostled one another, each trying to be the first down the cramped corridor.

"Hurry! They're going to catch us!"

"I've got a good idea," I said, catching up and running side by side with her as I gestured to explain. "You stay here and hold them off...while I take the area up ahead and gain distance on them. What do you say?"

"Stop telling stupid jokes!"

I was quite serious, though. If I was the one who stopped, I wasn't going to hold them back at all.

"You got any ideas, then? Maybe you could draw your uncle's sword and slice and dice them up."

"There are too many!"

The sword might be very fine, but it was only as good as its wielder. Noelle was not a swordfighter.

"What about the poison you used on that gargoyle?"

"I don't have enough!"

It had been taken from a manticore's tail, but she didn't have enough stock for dozens of targets.

"Maybe this will work..."

She pulled a white ball out of her bag.

"Is that a brightblast bomb?"

"Not quite."

She turned around and hurled the white ball as we ran. It struck the goblin running at the lead of the pack and emitted white threads. The goblin was instantly tangled and fell over, totally immobile. Others were also stuck in the plethora of sticky strings.

"It's sentry spider thread."

"Ohhh."

Spider-type monsters often shot webbing, but sentry spider thread was particularly sticky and difficult to remove. Once it was on you, it seemed like it would never come loose. Tug too hard, and it would probably remove your skin before it came off.

"Do you have more? Can I see them?"

"Go right ahead."

I took a ball from her and charged at the goblin horde. I was accurate with my

throws, but my lack of muscle meant I needed to be closer before I threw it.

"There we go!"

At the right distance, I chucked it at the goblins, who were just climbing over their ensnared brethren and resuming the chase. My projectile hit the tallest among them. The tendrils that shot off did so in a wide array, casting themselves over the heads of the other goblins. Even the ones coming up from behind them ended up stuck.

Now that I'd immobilized the rest of them, I started running again. When I had caught up with Noelle, she remarked, "That was well-done."

"I've always been a good stone thrower. Had to learn the ropes when I was a mercenary."

We used to lure the enemy into a riverbed before pelting them with stones. With my super strength, I could put a stone inside a man's torso through his armor and split his head straight through his helmet.

"You were a mercenary?"

"A long time ago."

"I see. I always thought you seemed strangely knowledgeable and had a very level head on your shoulders."

"Maybe in terms of spirit, but my actual strength is worthless."

The goblins' presence was drifting away. It seemed we had escaped them, but there was no use sticking around. I wanted to get out of here as soon as possible.

We rushed through the underground tunnel until we finally emerged from the entrance we'd originally taken to get inside. The sky above was dark blue, and the last sliver of sun was vanishing behind the mountains.

"Somehow we managed to get back alive."

"Let's not make assumptions," Noelle said.

"Good point." The adventure wasn't over until we were back with our princess knight.

But Noelle couldn't hide her excitement, either. After we went our separate ways, she had wandered around the neighboring area and done some investigating. The state of the royal city was virtually unknown outside this region, so the knowledge she gained was huge.

"You'll have to tell me what it was like at the palace later."

"Sure thing."

It was basically just a big pile of junk. Maybe I could have found some treasure if I'd dug through it. A shame to miss out on that.

If we kept on toward the village, we'd arrive in the middle of the night, and Arwin would be fast asleep. Maybe the morning would be a better time to give her the souvenir.

Without warning, Noelle stopped. She crouched and peered ahead, listening intently for something. I wasn't sure what it was until the ground shook beneath my feet. A great rumbling rush of footsteps was approaching.

"Run for cover!" Noelle cried. I clung to a nearby tree. I could feel wild animals rushing past my feet—not just rabbits and deer, but boars, wolves, bears, all sprinting for their lives like they were being chased.

"What was that all about?" she asked.

I didn't have an answer. Usually when animals acted as one, it was when danger was approaching. Volcanic eruptions were often cited as a cause, but I didn't see any fire. I had a bad feeling.

"Let's get back in a hurry."

We encountered animals twice more on the way back, but otherwise returned to the village without trouble. It didn't look dramatically different as we approached, but on the inside, there were fires lit all around. A man with a bow and arrow was standing in the watchtower. They were clearly on guard.

"Did something happen?" Noelle called out. With fury and vexation, the guard told us to get inside. When we'd left, he had told us to take care. Half a day, and all that civility was gone.

"You're back," said Dez, who greeted us inside the village. He was as gruff as

ever, but I could tell the difference in his expression. This was his face when there'd been trouble.

"What happened?"

"The village's magic barrier is down."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Resurrection

The village had a barrier that kept monsters away. Its presence made it harder for beasts to even sense the people within. There was a shrine at the center of the village specifically for the barrier, and there were magic circles and other such arrangements set up inside it.

If the barrier was broken, then the village was defenseless. And they were out of incense. The settlement was in grave danger now, and the monsters were starting to gather in the area, sensing their new prey.

So that was the reason for the animal stampede.

"How many of them are approaching?"

"I don't have an accurate number, but it'll easily be enough to flatten this village."

"Anywhere to run?"

"Nope."

Outside the village, it was monster territory. If they managed to evade the first round of attackers, they'd just get eaten by a different one.

"They've got the women and children in the storehouse, and they're setting up a defense system to fight back," Dez said. Ralph had been enlisted in the cause, too.

"Is Her Highness safe?" asked Noelle.

"For now," he said ominously.

"Sorry, can you help the villagers for me?" I asked her.

"Very well." She rushed off to the other side of the village.

"Are we good now?" I asked. Dez nodded. We needed to discuss something that would remain between us. "What's the reason the barrier broke?"

"If I'm being accurate, it didn't 'break.' It 'was broken.'"

"What?"

Someone had gone into the shrine without permission and accidentally shattered the stone structure that was forming the magical barrier. Because of that, the magic had vanished, leading to the present panic.

I scratched my head. Why did it seem like every little thing was determined to go the wrong way?

"What absolute shithead decided to break it? No, no, don't tell me. It was Ralph. He's stupid enough to go kicking things over with a finger two knuckles deep in his nose."

Dez paused, his eyes narrowing in discomfort.

"It was...the princess."

"Huh?"

"She was losing her mind when you weren't here, looking all over the village for you. That's when she broke the shrine."

"...."

So my decision not to tell her where I was going—in an attempt to keep her from worrying—had come back to haunt me. Then again, if I'd told her the truth, it would still have led to terrible consequences.

"Where's Arwin?"

"In the underground storeroom back there."

"Underground?"

"They built it out of a natural cave. I put her in there to keep her out of harm's way."

"Thanks."

Dez's decision was a sound one. Whatever the reason, Arwin had brought disaster to the village. If she'd been left out in the open, the villagers would have flown into a rage and beaten her senseless.

The situation was far worse than my worst-case scenario. There was nowhere to run. If we fought, Dez and Noelle were the only ones we could count on. Ralph was useless, and I was deadweight at night. How many people here would survive to see the sunrise?

"And just so you know, I'm not goin' down with the ship."

"I know that."

Dez had a family. He would do whatever it took to get home alive. Even if it meant abandoning the entire village. He was incredibly strong, but it wasn't the sort of strength that could protect a large group of humans at once.

"But we can at least take one person back with us, right?"

He gave me an exasperated look. "You're a real son of a bitch."

"I know."

Noelle and Ralph were in the village. There were women, children, and the elderly. People we'd traveled with, people whose lives bore no special sin—who were in grave danger now—and I was willing to let them all hang if he just spared Arwin's life. Yes, I was a son of a bitch.

"Well, if you're going to take on that task for me, that's all I'm asking. I'll do my part," I added.

"I never said I was going to do that for you!"

"But you will."

If this was my final request, Dez would do it. That's the sort of man he is.

"So long. Call for me when the time comes," I said, raising a hand as I turned away.

"They're not going to wait for you."

"I'll make sure it's quick," I said. Not that it was likely to be.

Following Dez's directions, I found the underground storeroom among some

rocks on the hillside on the outside of the village. There were wooden planks on the ground, and by lifting them, a ladder going down appeared. It was like a trip straight down to hell. I descended and lit a lantern. Making my way through the dark by hand, I came to a thick door with a simple bolt on it.

I slid the bolt back and opened the door. It was surprisingly small inside. Between the dark and size, it felt more like an ice cellar than a food stockpile. Though I hadn't noticed it up above, there was a small window at the top that allowed in a tiny bit of moonlight.

The pale rays landed in a corner of the room. That was where I found Arwin.

She was sitting on bare ground, without so much as a rug, head down as though begging for forgiveness. She was wearing her nightclothes and didn't even have any shoes on. Very poor manners.

"Hey. I'm back."

Arwin's head rose. Her eyes widened, and then she leaped at me.

"Where have you been?! I looked all over for you!"

"Sorry, I was on a walk seeing the sights and got lost. I just found my way back. I brought you something."

"I don't care about that! Don't ever go anywhere again!"

"Fine, fine," I said, caressing her head. "I heard that there's been some trouble back here."

She immediately went from a smile to a crestfallen expression and hugged her knees.

I sat down next to her and placed the lantern on the ground. The weak light cast a deep shadow across her face. Guilt and regret over what she'd done covered her features. It was just like when I'd heard her story back at the Adventurers Guild, a bit over a year ago.

"Once things have calmed down, you can go and apologize for it. I'll be with you."

Arwin shook her head. "It's too late..."

"No, it's not."

No one was dead. Yet.

"Dez and Noelle are rushing around, preparing to fight back against the monsters. They'll do fine. A simple flick of their fingers, and the creatures will go flying."

I didn't care about Ralph, but I knew he'd pull a small amount of his own weight, at least.

"...It's too late for me."

"Why, because you screwed up? Everyone screws up. Dez and Noelle and Ralph and I—we've all screwed up. People make mistakes. But..."

"That's not what I mean," Arwin said, chuckling sardonically. "I'm royalty. And not only did I make a mistake, I panicked and tried to run away. I was scared. All I could think about was that I needed to run away."

"…"

"I once caught a thief in town," Arwin said. That should be worthy of praise, but she made it sound like a confession. "From what he said, he was terrified he would be chastised for stealing. So he knew he needed to run. Just like me."

"Well, that's good," I said. Arwin was startled. "You're able to understand how the weak feel now. If the same thing happens again, you'll know what other options you have now, won't you?"

"...There won't be a next time."

"There will."

As long as you kept fighting, there would always be another chance. If you lived, there would be another day.

"But it seems like you'll need my strength for that to happen."

"What ...?"

I told her the state of the village in as brief and light a way as I could, but Arwin's face still paled to an extreme degree.

"So you see, everyone's very busy. They could even use a kept man like me.

I'm going to go back up there. You stay down here, drink some juice, read a little poetry..."

"No, wait!" Arwin interrupted. She grabbed me. "You can't go, Matthew. Stay here! Why would you go up there? You're only going to make things worse."

"…"

She put her arms around my neck, buried her face in my chest, and tearfully clung to me.

"Don't go, please! If you die, I don't know what I'll..."

"I'm not going to die," I said, giving her the brightest and cheeriest smile I could, attempting to calm her down. Arwin's cheeks flushed, and she looked away in embarrassment.

"Don't go. If you stay here with me, I'll..."

She put a hand to her own chest. I was not so naive as to fail to understand what she was insinuating, and neither was she. She was trying to sacrifice herself to keep a man from going off to his death. In a play, it would be a real tearjerker of a scene.

I put my hand on hers. Then, shaking my head, I pushed her away from me.

"Unfortunately, I have a prior commitment."

I was like a teddy bear helping to keep the fear of the dark away. There were women all over the world who clung to men and offered themselves up because they were scared. But women like that didn't need me specifically.

"I mean, I wish I could leave that violent Beardo dwarf to his own proclivities and spend some fun time with you. But he *is* my best friend, after all."

How could I abandon the man who, despite his grumbling, had actually brought me out here? And if this really was Arwin's fault, someone had to take responsibility for the mess. Ordinarily, I didn't work. I just received an allowance, drank, gambled, and went whoring. I had to be useful for once in my life, or I really would be a good-for-nothing layabout.

Arwin's face was so pale that it was pitiful to look upon. Maybe she had realized her own frailty. Or maybe she felt the shame of hiding in a safe space,

having abandoned her own people to their fate.

"...Enough."

She placed her hands on the floor. Her face was downcast, but it was clear from her body language that she was feeling crushed by despair.

"Leave me and run away."

I was about to laugh it off as a comment in a moment of weakness, but I held my tongue. Arwin was quite serious.

"You want me to abandon you?"

"I am going to die here."

I was stunned.

"What about Mactarode? Hasn't everything you've done been for the sake of bringing it back?"

"And I failed. I couldn't do it." Her fingers curled helplessly against the ground. "...I wanted it back... I wanted to bring back the Mactarode that was at peace, when my father and mother were still alive. I wanted my old kingdom back," she confessed, the emotion almost bloodcurdling. I understood it, somehow. What Arwin wanted wasn't to rebuild her kingdom but to bring back what had been. She wanted to restore the homeland that she'd lost to the state it was before that day. Which is why, of all the options, she chose the dungeon. If she reached the Astral Crystal, she could use its almighty power to bring back the glory days of her kingdom. She chose the most miraculous option...and thus, the least realistic.

"And because of that, I lost many companions and stooped to very foolish behaviors. This is the fruit of my labor." She laughed—it sounded hollow. "I know why you brought me here. You thought that if I saw my ravaged homeland, and the way my people suffer from the monsters around them, that it might move me to change my ways, didn't you? I was hoping for that, too. It's why I came with you."

"…"

So Arwin, too, had been thinking hard about how to change the situation.

"But it didn't work. When I saw the monsters running wild over my home, and the suffering of the people, my heart was not moved. Nothing changed!"

Coming here had been a last resort, a shot in the dark, but it had had no effect on her dungeon sickness. Even the thing she loved so much, the thing she swore to protect, could not salvage her heart. It was that realization that had plunged Arwin into despair.

"I'm a lost cause. I don't have the spirit to fight; I only cower in fear. I know I need to fight, but I cannot move my limbs to do it. My heart flutters like a small bird, terrified and without courage. The horrible memories won't leave my mind. I still think about them now. I think I'm going out of my mind. If continuing to live only shames my ancestors' name, then I would be better off dead."

Forget about bringing back the country; she was ready to give up on life. If I left this room, she was going to cut her own throat. And I was the one who gave her the last push toward this end. How cruelly ironic.

What do I say? How do I save Arwin?

She'd lost her hope, her courage, her righteousness, and even her noble goal of saving her people—how do you save someone like that? It felt like the more my mind raced, the further I got from the right answer.

"You've been a great boon to me. I can never fully express my gratitude," she said, as though this was our final farewell, my own thoughts on the matter be damned. "Thank you for everything..."

Her hand drifted away from mine. I reached out and grabbed it back. I didn't have an idea in mind. It just happened. But the moment I grabbed *her* hand, I had the answer.

"Do you really think all is lost?"

"Yes."

"Do you really think you can't fight anymore?"

"As if I would say these things as a joke," she said, shaking her head in disbelief that I refused to understand. "It's always happening. No matter what I

do. Even with my eyes closed. I'm talking to you right now, and the memories won't leave my..."

Her voice stopped abruptly.

My lips were covering hers.

Her jade-green eyes were wide in stunned disbelief.

I waited until the count of ten to pull back.

"Has that made a new memory to help you forgot the old ones?" I said to her, as gently as I could. She was still in shock.

I'd been thinking about this until we came here—ever since Arwin had gotten like this, in fact. What can I do? What can I say to her? But I never had an answer. No amount of fancy words or appeals to greatness would make her budge an inch, coming from a good-for-nothing gigolo. There was only one thing for me to say...one thing I wanted to say.

I put a hand on her shoulder and stared into her eyes.

"I know I've said this a hundred times, but what's one more? I love you. I'm madly in love with you."

I could feel a slight tremor in her slender shoulder.



"You said you can't get it out of your head. You said you're going out of your mind. Well, it's the same for me. I keep thinking about you. I think I must've lost my mind ages ago."

When we're together, when you're down in the dungeon, when I'm with another woman, even in my dreams.

"But I don't regret it. Meeting you was like finding a curtain of stars sparkling over the hell that my life had become."

After I lost my strength, I was utterly adrift. I found myself swept away into the gutter of a town that was Gray Neighbor, where I sank to the bottom and began to rot. It was in that world of gray that I met you, and color began to return. Over a year ago, I was first illuminated by your radiance, as you gave your all for the sake of others, no matter how desperate your situation was. You made a good-for-nothing man believe in himself again. Even a tiny bit of light was enough for me. I hate the sun, and the moon is too bright. I'm here today so that the kindness of your heart isn't colored over by the night of cruel reality —or hidden behind the clouds of malice.

"If your arms won't move anymore, then use mine. If you can't stand up any longer, use my legs. If your heart won't beat, then take mine. They're all for you. Take them with you."

They might be a little oversize, but I can vouch for their reliability.

Arwin started to call me a fool, but no sound emerged; her lips worked silently.

It seemed my earnestness had gotten through to her.

I'd given her many things since we first met. My limbs were just another in the list by now. I was giving her my life, so my heart was an easy gift.

"To be honest, I would prefer to give you fine jewels and dresses instead, but as you're well aware, I'm only a kept man with no wealth to my name."

If I did have any money, Arwin would not be pleased about that. It wasn't what she really wanted.

"...So this is all I can give you."

I opened the object in my hands, a bundle of white cloth, and made a show of presenting it to her.

It was an old jewelry box.

```
"Huh...?"
```

She seemed to be at a loss. She didn't know if this was a dream or some kind of vision. This was the jewelry box her mother had once taken away from her.

"The box is a little busted up, but the contents are still perfectly fine. Look." I opened the lid to show her. "This was the ribbon you talked about, isn't it? It looks perfect for you. Here's a rock. Doesn't it look a bit like a dog's face?"

There was also a golden button, a hair clip, and other such treasures, which I took out and placed in Arwin's palms. Soon her hands were full of junk, but to her seven-year-old self, they would have been treasures.

"I think that's all of it. You can check for yourself later."

She looked at her hands, then at me, and murmured, "How...how do you have this? Why is this here?"

"You told me about how you had that fight with your mom. It just popped into my head back there."

Arwin had started sword training against the wishes of her mother, who told her young daughter, "If you don't forget that desire of yours, you'll find out one day if I change my mind." It was a preposterous thing to say. Whether she accepted her daughter or not, she should've just been direct. She'd made it sound like there was already an answer, and Arwin would have to carry that burden.

"Your mom already had her mind made up. So she hid the answer in a place that she knew her daughter would see one day."

```
"Where was that?"

"Your very favorite place."

Arwin gasped. "You mean...the Tree of Cameron?"

"Exactly."
```

Technically, she'd placed it directly underneath the shortsword that Arwin had hidden there. Arwin had told me that she'd buried her favorite sword in the roots of the Tree of Cameron, signifying her desire to be a great knight. She couldn't have put it farther down because something else important to her was already there.

A child's treasures would never wind up in a real treasury. So considering where to hide Arwin's treasures, her mother must have arrived at the answer automatically. Of course, I'd never met her and had no idea what she looked like. But I felt that, knowing Arwin, this was exactly what she'd do. If I were her mother, I'd put it in the same place.

"The tree was absolutely wrecked. But it did protect your treasures under its roots."

Arwin's mother must have hoped that she'd find the box at some point—but had miscalculated and buried it too deep. She should have found the sword when she was eight, yet it ended up buried in the soil until today.

Thanks to that, it remained safe even through the monster rampages that ravaged the palace. You never knew what silver linings life would hold.

Arwin stared at me. It seemed that she had forgotten to breathe.

"Did you go to the palace?"

"It was a little too far for a picnic, I'll admit."

She put her hands on my body and rubbed all over, muttering about how unbelievable this was. My clothes were tattered, and I was cut and bruised all over. I'd come here as soon as I returned to the village, so there hadn't been any time to clean myself up.

She gripped my shoulder.

"...Did you bring us to Mactarode...just to get this back?"

"I guess."

Arwin had had a kingdom, and a family, and riches, and status, and honor, and pride, and every last one of those things had slipped through her fingers. Some of them, she hadn't won back yet, and others would never return. But

surely she could be allowed to have one thing back.

"You did all of that...for this? You could have died a hundred times over. And yet..."

"I wanted to cheer you up."

The moment I put it into words like that, it clicked into place within me. Yes, that was right. It turned out I was a much simpler man than I thought.

"But...you... It could have been destroyed years ago."

I knew that it was still buried, but it was a gamble that it would still be intact. There were two possible outcomes there, so fifty-fifty odds weren't bad.

"When you think it's impossible, and you strike gold just at the right time—that's a Matthew special."

"…."

Arwin said nothing. Either she was flabbergasted beyond belief, or she was so moved she couldn't find the words. I hoped it was the latter.

"If I tell you to pick up your sword, it's not for your country or your people. It's not for your companions or me. It's not for you to defend yourself. It's for the sake of that seven-year-old girl who wanted to protect her mother."

So you don't want to turn out like your mother, who had to turn the other cheek against insults and mockery?

You picked up the sword because you were angry—and wanted to be stronger?

Don't be stupid.

The Arwin Mabel Primrose Mactarode I know isn't that kind of woman.

She'll fight for the sake of a prostitute, even if it puts herself in danger.

A woman who fights not out of frustration but a desire to protect.

In my personal estimation, she truly wanted nothing but to keep her mother safe from harm at the start. But when her mother came out against the idea, and they fought over it, Arwin had altered that memory in her mind until she no longer remembered its genesis. It was the sort of thing that happened with kids

all the time.

"But my mother is gone. I'll never see..."

"She's right here," I said, taking a letter out of the wrapping cloth. "This was inside the jewelry box. It's addressed to you."

I handed her a white envelope that said *To Arwin*.

She took it with trembling fingers and slowly opened it up.

There was only one line of text on the paper. It was written for a seven-yearold girl, so even with my level of literacy, I could easily read it.

I want you to follow the path you believe in.

Arwin gripped the letter. She bit her lip and murmured "Why?" over and over.

I knew what was hurting her. If only she'd said that to Arwin's face, they could have made up so long ago.

Looking at Arwin, it was easy to imagine why.

She was dead serious and never changed her mind. But at the same time, she was shy and susceptible to shame. If mother and daughter were alike, they would've repelled one another in the same ways and found it hard to see eye to eye. Just another clumsy family relationship.

Even though both of them wanted the best for the other.

"It sounds like your mother accepted your choice. And she did it a long, long time ago."

"Stop it!" Arwin wailed, shaking her head. Tears streamed down her cheeks. She sobbed and tore at her hair. "I'm not that kind of person. Everything about me has changed since then."

"But you can always start over. You're a grown woman who can stand on her own two feet."

"I'm a foolish woman who turned to drugs."

"How can anyone laugh at a woman who ground her body and spirit down to the bone, fighting?"

"I don't have the courage to fight anymore. I'm a weak woman, timid and cowering."

"But someone still loves you for that, and is with you even now." I took Arwin's hand. "If this jewelry box is your treasure, then my treasure is the time I've spent with you."

From the moment we first met until now. Every memory of the time we spent together was an irreplaceable treasure. Cooking meals for her. Washing her back in the bath. Her rescue of me when I was in danger. The beating she gave me at the brothel. Every last one of them.

Arwin's voice trembled as she sobbed. At this point, she was just arguing to argue and had run out of retorts. Sorry, but you'll have to do better than that to beat my wisecracks.

"I can't even eat eggplant..."

"I got a good recipe from the ladies at the market. We'll try that one together."

She struck my shoulder and called me an jerk. Her voice was soggy with tears. I just rubbed my hands up and down her back.

For a while, there was nothing but the sound of Arwin's sobbing.

Then I heard a loud, clamorous sound from overhead. I got to my feet.

"I'm going to go see. If we're lucky, I'll bring you back another present."

"No, Matthew, wait."

She reached out for me. I evaded her grasp and pushed on the door handle. I hated to go, but it was time.

"So long. Be a good girl down here."

"Wait, Matthew."

I opened the door and stepped through. As I closed it behind me, I heard her scream, pleadingly, "Just tell me!"

I looked back into the storeroom, where Arwin knelt in the center, her hands clutching at the ground beneath her.

"What should I do? How can I be as strong as you?"

At first, I almost wondered if that was a joke, but I could see from the look in her eyes that she was dead serious.

"When you can't fight—and get punched and kicked and robbed—you never change who you were in response. You have always been true to yourself without being able to fight. Tell me, Matthew. What do I have to do to be as strong as you?"

"You're joking," I said. "What I haven't isn't 'strength.' It's just the way that I was born."

I had innate muscle strength that was off the charts—and a very sturdy physique. It enabled me to do whatever I wanted and live according to my id. I had money and women, and I could beat up anyone I didn't like. It wasn't a strength that I strived for nor worked hard to obtain.

And that was why I couldn't live any other way or choose any other life. Once a bird's wings are broken, its only options are to live with useless appendages that get in the way—or die.

"Real strength is when you run around trying to help a whore and her daughter, even when you're dealing with your own struggle."

To me, having the ability to care for others when you are already in the pit of despair is evidence of true strength.

"Matthew..."

"I promise. I will come back for you." Whether I was alive or dead. If I died, I bet Dez would carry me back to her. "I love you. I'm in love with you... I wish I could say it a million times, but there's other business to take care of now. When I get back, I'll tell you the other nine million, nine hundred and ninetynine... Wait, do I have that right? Whatever. I'll say it until you're sick of hearing it. Get ready for that."

"Wait, Matthew."

"So long. I love you."

I stepped outside, waved, and closed the door. Then I opened it again.

"Subtract that last one from the total, too."

This time, I truly left her behind.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Surfacing

An unexpected visitor awaited me on the way up to the surface.

"Oh, you're still here?" I'd assumed he had taken off long ago.

"I would never run away and leave Her Highness behind!" snapped Ralph. The gall of this kid.

"You aren't going to say good-bye?"

If he was here, then he presumably had something to say to Arwin.

"...Not right now," he said sulkily. "I'm going to survive this. I'll find a way to last so I can continue to serve her."

"What a hero."

Apparently, he'd done some thinking to come up with that answer. Maybe it was worth punching the contents of his stomach out, after all. Not that anyone asked him for this.

"And how is Her Highness? What did she say?"

"I couldn't tell ya," I said, shrugging. The rest was up to Arwin. "If you survive, you can ask her."

It would be up to Ralph whether to stay here or return to Gray Neighbor.

He looked at me with something between caution and curiosity.

"...Who are you?"

"You're just asking this now?" Why would he care about my identity after so much time?

"I asked you before, but you never answered me."

"My answer will be the same, no matter how many times you ask," I said. "I'm Arwin's lifeline."

Dez was ready to fight. He wasn't in full battle gear, but he did have his favorite war hammer, Number 31. He would be fine.

He asked me, "What's our strategy?"

"Just gotta barricade ourselves in."

I wanted to help the women and children escape, if nothing else, but there was no time and no safe route for that. There weren't enough of us to strike out of the safety of the village. And many monsters were nocturnal. Plenty slept through the day. If we could last until dawn, we had a chance.

"You think we can make it until morning?"

"Don't have much of a choice."

If the monsters came attacking recklessly, they would tear right through the walls. Once they were inside, it would be a scene of absolute chaos and slaughter. Pillaging bandits would seem warm and cuddly by comparison.

We had to fight them off if we wanted to prevent that. I hated relying on "guts" as some mythical quality, and I wasn't usually the planning type, but we needed to do something, or we'd die. So we'd do it. Simple as that.

Three sides of the village were surrounded by mountainside. It made for a kind of natural fortress, making it hard to climb those sides. Therefore, it made sense to defend the one exception, to the east. Sure enough, the monsters were approaching from the east side at this moment.

We'd focus on fighting at the east side and hide the women and children in the storage area in the meantime.

"I've had Noelle send a carrier pigeon to her uncle. They're going to carry out an evacuation plan to leave the country that was already in the works before this." That involved traveling west, crossing the wasteland, and then getting over the border. The road was relatively flat, but the number of monsters made it extremely dangerous. Lutwidge was going to arrange for some help, but we didn't know how helpful they would actually be.

"Because this is close to the capital, there are more monsters, and the townspeople were against it, but they're not going to argue now."

"Against it? Why?" asked Ralph, baffled.

"Think about it. They're much more likely to get attacked while on the move. They might end up totally defenseless out there. Of course they're scared of that."

There was also the question of their livelihood. Even if they made it, they'd be refugees. Not all these people were self-sufficient in the way Ralph's family was. And most of these people were farmers. Strangers couldn't fathom the pain of being forced to give up their fields and crops. Even if they understood the logic of the decision, their emotions might not catch up. They always went to check on the fields, whether there was a storm coming or a monster attack. It was the foundation of their lives.

"You know a lot about this," he said.

"I came from a farming family." At least until I was eight.

In any case, Yuulia's fate was all but sealed. Staying here meant either running out of food or losing the barrier at some point. This was just a little earlier than they had counted on.

"All of this assumes we survive the night, of course."

How close were the monsters? I considered climbing up the watchtower to see, but Noelle came rushing up. There was a white cloth cradled in her arms.

"What will you use for a weapon?" she asked.

"Don't need one."

In my current state, I couldn't handle anything bigger than a child's weapon. Maybe a dagger or shortsword. Two or three would be more than enough. And who knew if that would even do anything against these monsters?

Noelle opened the cloth to reveal a longsword. She made an obsequious show of presenting it to me. "Please use this."

"Is that from your uncle's place?"

"It is the heirloom blade, Merciful Rain."

I examined the weapon with admiration, pulling it from the white sheath and holding it up to the moonlight. It shone brightly and had a good edge to it. This was clearly a fine weapon fashioned by a master smith. It had a unique feel, too. If it was a treasured weapon, then maybe it even had some kind of magic effect.

"It was so named because its cut is so sharp that its enemies perish before they even have a chance to suffer," she said. That was more violent than the name sounded, actually. "I have my uncle's permission. He said I should feel free to use it when it is needed. So I wish to give it to you..."

"Nah, I'm fine."

I wasn't going to be able to do anything with it in my current state.

"But..."

"Go ahead and give it to the kid, then."

"To me?" Ralph asked, wide-eyed.

"You'll have a better chance of surviving that way, right?"

I'd noticed the envious glances he was sending my way. And Ralph's sword was probably ready to break anyway. If my memory served, he'd been using that one for over a year. It was all well and good to be familiar with one's weapon, but he was going to get a nasty surprise in a pitched battle if he didn't upgrade. Plus, Lutwidge would be happier if Ralph used the sword, rather than me.

"I don't mind, of course, but then what will you—?"

"I'm not a fighter. Cutting up monsters is outside my job requirements."

"Then at least put on some armor."

"No point."

It would only make it harder to run away. My mediocre foot speed would only be a worse drawback if I put heavy iron on over my clothes.

"I'm going to do what I can do," I said, glancing at the bag on Noelle's back.

"Give me that weapon from before. The sentinel spider threads? The one we threw down in the tunnel."

With a toxinmancer's weapons, even I could inflict damage.

"But those are—"

"I'm not asking for your judgment. I'm asking you to give them to me."

I didn't care if it damaged the reputation of the princess knight or caused the villagers to despise us. Survival was my only priority.

She handed me the bag, and I set it down at my feet and removed the white orbs, wrapping them in a cloth and tying the end with a string. Now I had an impromptu sling. By swinging this around before I released it, I could get more distance on the throw. And once the toxinmancy weapons were gone, I could keep using it with stones.

"Also, javelins. As many as we have."

I knew there was a stock of them in the armory. I was confident in my control. Better that I used them than the villagers.

"Wait," said Ralph, grabbing my wrist and twisting it backward. It was painful. "I knew it."

He clicked his tongue before I could even complain about it.

"You can't use that freakish strength of yours right now."

Ralph was confident, sure of himself. Yes, that's right. It's nighttime. If we were in the light of day, you'd be kissing the ground right now.

"What do you mean?" I said, playing dumb just in case. Ralph twisted my arm further.

"...I felt your freakish strength firsthand. There's some condition to your ability to use it, and you can't do it now. Is that right?"

He just had to go figuring things out while we were busy with more important

matters. Of course, after all the hints I'd given him, even a dimwit would figure it out. I didn't confirm his suspicions, but he continued as if I had.

"Throwing them with your current strength won't help. They'll just fall short before they reach the target."

"You're not a good talker, are you?"

Basically, he was trying to say that it was pointless for me to throw the javelins. Just say that from the start, kid. Don't go through all these steps in between.

I'd give him credit for trying to think things through for once, but even this was a shallow attempt. How many years had I spent as a weakling? Of course I had ideas for how to make up for my weakness.

I called out for Dez, who immediately knew what to do. He handed me the tool I was looking for.

It was a stick with a protrusion on the end. The middle was scooped out, so that it looked like a tube that had been cut in half lengthwise.

"What is that?"

"It's a spear-thrower."

Hook the end of a spear or arrow under the end, and you could hurl them much farther—and with more velocity, of course. With this auxiliary device, even I could be useful in battle.

"This is how you use it," I said, fitting the butt of the javelin into the protruding hook and whipping it forward with the other end of the thrower. The javelin flew well over the wall and out of sight. Eventually, a monster's death scream arrived on the wind.

"All right, get ready, people."

That sounded like the scream of a lizard-orc. Most likely a scout, since the main force would be farther off.

"Next one's the real deal."

The rumbling footsteps turned into the roar of a horde as the enemy drew

closer.

From the top of the watchtower, the mass of monsters was like a churning river coming up the hill. Most were scrubs like goblins or kobolds, but I saw some bigger foes like ogres and minotaurs in the mix.

There were easily over a thousand of them.

Ordinarily, monsters of different types never worked together. We lumped them together into the common category of "monsters," but to them, anything that wasn't their own kind was an enemy or food. It was very rare for multiple species of monster to act together. The most notable form of this cooperation was a stampede.

"So the theory that Mactarode was destroyed by a monster stampede was correct, I suppose."

"Stop yapping and work," Ralph yelled from the other tower. He let an arrow fly, whistling onward until it struck the head of a goblin.

"I can tell you're the son of a hunter. Maybe you should change things up and be an archer instead."

"Just get to work, like I said!"

I didn't need his urging to do it. Before Ralph could ready another arrow, I put one in the spear-thrower and chucked it. The arrow flew in a high arc before coming down into the eye of a rushing kobold.

In front of the gate, Beardo was a terror. He brandished his own handmade weapon, turning any monster that dared challenge him into a mass of dead flesh. He didn't bother with defense. Anything that came within range of Number 31 was crushed into a pulp.

Because he was so slow, he wasn't suited for rushing through the enemy's midst, but he was very good at fighting them back. Both he and I played the role of attackers in the past, but we couldn't have fought more differently. I flowed through the enemy's formation, wreaking havoc, while Dez obliterated anyone who came at him.

In the old days, I would have been in the middle of it all, slicing them up. I'd let my strength do the talking, killing everything that got near me, no matter the size.

Now it was Noelle playing that role.

Of course, she couldn't let her strength do all the work like I used to. Instead, she used speed and body control to zip between the monsters, cutting them down dexterously. She made for an excellent commando. Even then, she was vastly outweighed by the sheer volume of hostile monsters, but she kept on the move, evading their attacks and occasionally leaping over the gate to escape.

The four of us together had already killed at least a hundred of them. Most of which were thanks to Dez, to be honest.

Even still, they just kept coming. They stomped over the bodies of their own kind, defiling the corpses of their companions, parents, brothers, baring their fangs to reach us for their unholy feast.

"It's not looking good."

My javelins ran out first. I couldn't even fetch them back to reuse them, because most had broken already. Next went the arrows—our stock ran out, and even the bowstring snapped.

When Ralph was out of arrows, he started hurling lit sticks instead. Noelle tossed oil onto the monsters' heads from above and threw flames at them.

"Damn, that's not bad," I murmured.

"Would you keep moving?!"

I protested that and tossed my toxinmancy balls at the horde of monsters. They had a variety of effects: paralyzing some monsters, causing others to vomit blood, or tangling them up in spider string. Once they were immobilized, we just had to wait for the monsters behind them to trample them to death as they rushed forward.

They didn't care what happened to their kind. They just charged forward in a wild rush. Losses of fellow monsters meant nothing to them.

We were running out of weapons faster than I expected. Against other

humans, we could get them to fall back by throwing shit or piss, but that had no effect on these creatures.

"What do we do now?!"

"I'll tell you what we do—keep working, not yelling," I told Ralph helpfully, placing a rock in my sling. I could hit them with it, but the force really wasn't there. All it did was make them angrier.

In front of the gate, Dez was still swinging Number 31, smashing monsters left and right. But he could only cover that spot and nothing else. The monsters that went around him reached the walls.

The villagers poked them with spears, or threw lit torches, but it only had the smallest effect.

It seemed to me that we were going to slowly but surely lose this fight. As it turned out, I was wrong.

"They've broken down the north wall!" someone shouted.

Collapse had come swiftly, after all.

Odd screeches were coming from inside the village. The monsters were inside.

Goddammit. Ralph and Noelle and Dez were occupied dealing with the enemies in front of them.

"I'll go," I said, starting down the watchtower.

But then the wind shifted. A gust rushed past me, strong enough to shake my body.

"Whoa, what was that? What happened?" Ralph yelped. I could feel a cold sweat drip down my spine.

I looked up.

There it was.

A massive form was descending from above with a roar like thunder.

"Run away!" I shouted, falling to the ground. A second after I took off running, a powerful blast of wind knocked me off my feet.

I tumbled a few times along the ground before I managed to get upright again.

The thing had crushed the very gate we were just defending. Its green scales reflected the moonlight, and the wings on its back had a tremendous span. The dragon lifted its head and roared.

What the hell kind of joke is this?

But I knew why it was here almost at once.

There were chunks of stone embedded into its torso that oozed red blood. This was undoubtedly the very same dragon I had seen in the royal city of Mactarode earlier today.

Apparently, having that golem hurled into its side had enraged the beast. It must have flown everywhere, looking to get revenge on me. And now it had found its quarry.

Well, damn. If it shot a dragon lance, it would wipe this village off the map in an instant. Clever tricks and schemes were meaningless in the face of such overwhelming power. Both Noelle and Ralph had been knocked a distance away by its arrival.

That meant this would be the Beardo's problem.

"Dez, talk to me. This is your turn! Fight, Beardo!"

"Shut up!" Dez roared, hurling an ax that was on the ground near the smashed-up gate. The sound caused the dragon to take flight; the huge, twirling ax passed through the space where it had just been standing and continued straight toward me.

I leaped out of the way of the weapon, which smashed through the wall right next to me with astonishing force. It could have severed my torso completely in half. Yikes.

Meanwhile, the dragon cried out and began to circle around the village. Dez's ax-throwing hadn't convinced it to flee.

Nearby footsteps alerted me to the approach of Dez, who, with a foul frown, was tugging on a chain attached to the end of the ax he'd thrown. It pulled

stone and wood shards loose as the weapon came free.

"Damn. Missed. Lucky bastard," he grunted.

"Are you talking about the dragon or me?"

"Good question."

Dez was never much of a comedian.

"So now we've got a big boss to deal with. Is that their leader?"

"Perhaps," I said. I could tell him about how I'd flipped it off at the capital later.

The dragon's instincts told it to be wary of Dez, but eventually, it would land again. It could also choose to blow fire from a distance, but I wouldn't do that if I were a dragon. Even it had to fear that ax coming after it again. The moment it stopped moving, the ax would hit it. So my guess was that it would continue flying and testing its luck with smaller attacks. If it did so, Dez was at a major disadvantage. He was too slow to react and to run.

"What now?"

Dez could probably manage the dragon, but I couldn't say the same for the attempt to protect the village. He might end up being the only survivor when all was said and done.

If there was a silver lining, it was that the rabble of monsters storming the gates had fled for their lives. If we could beat the dragon, we'd be able to last until morning.

"This is a tough one," Dez said, contrary to my mood at the moment. "Don't think I can handle two dragons at once with the gear I've got."

"Wha-?"

I gaped, right as a line of light shot through the sky.

The brilliant beam soared past, and the peak of the mountain behind the village exploded.

"What, you mean you didn't notice?" Dez said, pointing upward as he dodged pieces of rock. "That dragon's a female. And of age, judging by her size. So

there's no surprise she'd have a mate."

There was another gale, this one stronger than the one before it. A tremendous rumble forced me to my knees.

Apparently, earlier I'd hurt his beloved wife.

An even larger dragon was staring me down with death in its eyes.

"This fucking sucks."

Now that there were two dragons, the possibility of everyone but Dez dying was now an acute probability, rather than just a possibility.

The villagers would die, and neither Noelle nor Ralph nor Arwin nor I would make it home alive.

All that would be left would be one very grumpy Beardo. He'd dig up the dirt on his stumpy legs, clear away the rubble and stack the bodies to cremate us all, then find some items to bring back to the Adventurers Guild for a report. He'd probably tell the others from the Million Blades about my death with his usual disgruntled look, too.

It made me laugh.

"Guess we just gotta do this."

If I put Dez through any more grief, he'd just get more white hair.

"You take the hubby. I'll handle the wife," I said. She was already injured, so I had a better chance.

"Can you take her?"

"Who do you think I am? Matthew, the best-looking man in all the land," I said, giving my worried friend a wink.

"Whether you're dealing with dragons or elves, just use a few moves on them and say some sweet nothings, and they all spread their legs. Watch that dragon cry tears of blood when I take his wife right before his eyes."



"I don't think there's a cure for the kind of stupidity you have."

That was Dez for *Don't die out there*. After all, even death won't cure a fool of his stupidity.

"Thanks, pal."

I clapped him on the shoulder. He snorted and started plodding toward the male dragon.

It was already wary of Dez's strength. The dragon roared, beat its wings, and flew away from the village, keeping at a distance. Dez trotted after it on his short legs.

Now it was up to me to handle my own problem. Fortunately, a plan was already formulating itself without me.

"Come on down," I said to the female. "You're dealing with me. We'll have plenty of time to chat in bed." I was hoping to lure it into a close-range battle, but it seemed I'd have no luck.

Light was gathering around its mouth. It was going to fire off a dragon lance.

"Well, that's uncalled for. C'mon, let's talk it over. You can tell me all about the gripes you have with your husband."

The dragon ignored my offer and assumed the full position of a dragon lance.

"Wow, really? Hey, listen, you're still young. You don't have to do this!"

The light was condensing. In another breath, the surge was going to burst forth and completely eradicate us.

"Otherwise...you're really gonna regret it. Right, Noelle?!"

On that signal, two spheres flew upward from nearby. It was my homemade bola. The rope-connected rocks tangled around the flying dragon's mouth, snapping it shut.

I didn't know how a dragon's anatomy worked, just that they shot bad stuff out of their mouths. And it was obvious what would happen if you forced that mouth shut right before it could emit the bad stuff. There was an eruption of wind and sound in the sky above the village and a momentary flash of daylight. My ears rang. The shock wave flattened me to the ground. I hit the wall of a house and finally stopped, and in the next moment, something heavy crashed into the earth.

Black smoke curled out of the dragon's mouth. Half of its jaw had blown off, exposing shattered teeth. For such a young dragon, it was going to need dentures. The dragon lance was an incredibly powerful means of attack, but it could also be devastating to the body that produced it.

"We did it," Noelle said, rushing over. I had noticed her presence and what she was planning to do, which is why I'd made sure to draw the dragon's attention first.

"Not quite yet," I said, pointing at the fallen dragon. "It's still alive. Gotta finish it off."

Go on and kill it... Seize the title of dragonslayer and make that dimwit Ralph seethe with jealousy.

"B-but—"

"Dragons don't die from just one thing like that. They're too tough."

The creature roared. Despite the blood coming from its mouth, it smacked the ground with its tail, dragged its claws in the dirt, and howled.

It was definitely very alive. I'd have thought it almost a goner, but the life force of a human and a dragon were not the same. Even a dying dragon could easily kill a hundred humans before it perished.

"Hurry!"

Noelle took out the thick, fancy sword and rushed at the dragon. But she wasn't as quick as I remembered.

"Uh-oh, look out!"

The dragon's tail shot out like a whip and smacked Noelle away. She managed to jump and lessen the shock that way, but it wasn't enough to keep her from being battered like a scrap of paper. Her body flew high in the air and crashed to the ground.

"Noelle!"

I rushed over and scooped her up. She was unconscious. She'd barely managed to absorb some of the blow but had broken several ribs at the very least.

"So that's why..."

I touched her leg, and she grimaced in pain. She must have injured it when the dragon crashed into the village earlier.

Noelle's strength was in her agility and quickness. In this state, she was less than half the fighter she should be. It wasn't a fatal injury, but it was going to keep her out of this battle for good.

Despite its grievous wounds, the dragon began to charge at us. It opened its tattered mouth and extended a long tongue. It was going to try to eat us both.

In my current state, I couldn't pick up Noelle and run. I considered sacrificing one arm and running away, but it would only buy me seconds at most. I'd be devoured shortly thereafter. I was still trying to formulate a plan when the dragon opened its tattered mouth wide, fangs gleaming.

"Noooooo!"

Ralph stood between us and the dragon.

He took a swing at the beast's head. Its eyelid was as tough as steel, but Merciful Rain sank deep into it. One eye was split, and with its sense of direction and balance lost, the dragon slid across the ground to the side of us.

"Are you all right?" Ralph asked, cradling Noelle.

"It won't be fatal."

"I wasn't asking you!"

"I was talking about Noelle." As usual, he was an utter bore to speak with. "Now hurry up and finish it off. I hate to give you the glory, but it's yours. Kill it —and call yourself a dragonslayer forevermore."

"You don't need to tell me twice!"

He carefully laid Noelle down, readied the sword, and rushed at the dragon.

The loss of its eye made the beast even more vicious. It swung its claws,

snapped its jaw, and whipped its tail, thrashing wildly. Ralph had to keep his distance. He hesitated and pulled back.

Just then, the dragon sucked in a deep breath. Was it going to do another dragon lance?

"I don't think so!"

Ralph plunged forward in a desperate attack.

The dragon's eyes crinkled with mirth.

"No, it's a trap!"

The dragon turned toward me and Noelle. It smirked and unleashed hellish flames.

"Look out!"

Ralph threw himself in front of us and began to swing his sword around with wild abandon. For an instant, it seemed like the flames weakened, but Ralph himself was engulfed. He screamed and rolled on the ground. I rushed up to beat the flames out.

He was still breathing. The hole in the dragon's mouth had weakened its ability to project. Merciful Rain had probably helped to batten down more of the flames' power, too.

"What were you thinking, dumbass?"

"It wasn't for you. I was trying to protect Noelle..."

"I know that."

They were both gravely injured now. Dez was off fighting the other dragon. All that was left was one half-dead boy toy.

The dragon had its claws planted in the ground, slumped over. Blowing fire while it was injured had surely damaged it badly.

We were all fools here.

But there was no time left. It was going to begin moving again soon.

I'd just have to resort to the ace up my sleeve... My desperation skill. I could

only fight for a few moments that way, but even then, I could take out a dragon in one hit.

I steadied my breathing, then inhaled deeply, focusing hard, and tried to summon my voice from the pit of my stomach. In doing so, my breath caught, and I coughed and hacked.

"So much for that..."

It was a means of fighting back against a god's curse, so the physical toll was tremendous. I'd already been fighting monsters from morning until night, so my stamina and concentration were beyond spent. There was no power left to summon. Poor, pitiful Matthew.

My ace card was a failure. The dragon was already rising again, fury and hostility clear in its manner.

"What do you say? Call it a hard-fought draw?"

The dragon's response was a swipe of its claws. I just barely managed to jump out of the way. The attack upturned earth and stone, and it was followed by an attack from the other arm. I tumbled out of the way, but the end of one claw caught my back. It hurt like hell.

I scrambled to my feet, trying to get away. For its part, the dragon was so frustrated at being unable to finish me off that it was just trying to crush me with its bulk at this point. It clawed at the ground, pulling itself after me.

"What's that? Have you changed into a *crocodile*? Are those wings on your back just for show?" I taunted.

The impact of its fall must have damaged its wings, because it showed no signs of lifting off. But it was large and strong enough that it could smash through the village houses as easily as if they were sand, scattering their parts all around. All I could do was drag my wounded body out of harm's way. If I didn't distance myself from Noelle and Ralph, they'd be victims of the dragon's wrath.

"Your hubby's over there cheating on you with the Beardo. He says those soft, luxurious whiskers are far better than your cold, hard scales. I can't believe you're getting cucked by a dwarf. Sad times."

A tail flew at me. I couldn't move in time; it smacked me away like a flyswatter. I smashed through the wall of a nearby stable, then the adjacent house, finally rolling to a stop past that. I felt dizzy. Thankfully, I'd minimized the damage by bracing with my arms and backing away at the moment of impact, but I was still in agony. Clearly, I'd struck a nerve with the comment about her husband.

I was battered all over and at my physical limit. I couldn't even feel pain anymore. If I kept fighting, I was clearly going to perish in combat. I just wanted a nice soft bed to sleep in. And preferably a pretty girl's shapely bum to caress. Instead, all I got was a dragon who was a married woman and in terrible shape, herself. She was charging through houses in her quest to stamp me out for good.

Somehow, I got to my feet, but I had no strategy, no plan in mind. The dragon was nearly upon me. I didn't have much choice but to accept my fate, but I wasn't going to go easily. If she ate me, I'd sacrifice a limb or two and unleash hell from within her stomach.

"Wait!"

It was a voice I didn't expect to hear.

I spun around. There stood Arwin in her nightgown.

She cradled a sword to her chest.

Had she pulled it out of the storeroom?

"I'm..."

Her voice was pained, like there was something stuck in her throat that she was trying to force out.

"I'm your opponent!"

She took another deep breath and shouted, fists trembling.

"I refuse to let anyone else I care about be taken from me... I don't want to lose them!"

She pulled the sword from its sheath. Was that Dawnblade? She must've retrieved it from the wagon.

The dragon changed tack and moved for Arwin instead. It was clear that it didn't see her as a threat. There was an almost confident saunter in its pace.

Arwin, meanwhile, was quivering and had tears welling in her eyes. She hadn't been miraculously cured of her dungeon sickness. She was about to be another dead body on the pile.

And yet, she had rushed to the scene.

This was our chance.

It was time to fulfill my calling.

She'd finally reached out to me.

You'd better grab hold of your lifeline.

"Come at me!"

"Wrong, wrong," I called out. "Didn't I tell you what to say at times like this? Remember, at Roland's mansion?"

Arwin considered this for a moment, then said uncertainly, "Kiss my ass...?"

"Too quiet."

"Kiss my ass!"

"From the bottom of your gut."

"Kiss my ass!"

"Ten more times."

Hair bedraggled, writhing with effort, she called out again and again, and soon the dragon was right before her. It stared down at the red-haired woman, its massive body swaying.

Arwin brought forth her hands and steadied the sword before her. The wind whipped her hair. She clenched the handle, eyes burning brightly.

"Kiss my ass!"

The dragon swung at her. Even on the verge of death, its claws' weight and speed were terrifying. Arwin stepped out of the way of the fatal blow and slashed its arm. The impact sounded hard. Some scales came off the dragon.

She clicked her tongue and moved sideways, trying to keep the rest of us out of harm's way, putting more distance between us.

The dragon went after her at once. It had decided that we could be eaten at any time. Or maybe it had decided a livelier prey was more appetizing at this moment.

It wasn't able to blow more fire, it seemed, but the dragon's size was more than enough danger on its own. It dragged its bulk forward, eager to chow down on fresh young female meat.

Ordinarily, this would be a golden opportunity for us, but Arwin's movement was sluggish. She'd been more or less bedridden since her injury in the dungeon. She wasn't in shape anymore. Whatever she'd set her mind to do, her body wasn't able to keep up. She'd hit the dragon several times by now but hadn't left a single mark.

That good-for-nothing sun god's sword is true to its maker—completely useless when you need it most!

"Use this!"

I rushed past Ralph and took Merciful Rain from his hands. I didn't have the strength to throw it, so instead I kicked it along the ground. Arwin ducked out of the way of the dragon's teeth and picked it up, then spun around and slashed the beast's massive lower jaw in two.

Blood sprayed. It screamed.

"Time for the finish!"

"Wait!"

The dragon's spirit wasn't broken. It roared and lashed out with its claws. With a heavy clang, Merciful Rain flew out of Arwin's grasp.

She fell onto her back. Spitting blood, the dragon opened its mouth, then closed it.

I screamed.

There was a sound like hard things scraping against each other.

Dawnblade had just barely managed to block the arm-size fangs. But the two sides were only matched for a moment. In size and weight, the enemy had too much of an advantage. The dragon's teeth were bearing down on Arwin.

"Run away!"

"...I don't think so." A pale foot pressed against the dragon's snout. "Who do you think I am? How can I expect to get my country back if I can't deal with an opponent this insignificant?"

"But—"

"Don't worry... I won't lose this fight. You..."

She closed her eyes and muttered something under her breath. Suddenly, the stalemate broke. The dragon's mouth closed over Arwin.

It felt like time stopped.

I fell to my knees. Then the dragon's snout rose in an unnatural fashion.

"Sol est extrica, avasolus ix terra crea." (The sun rules over all, absolute creator of heaven and earth.)

That spell... Could it be?

Pushing up the dragon's snout was something like a mass of diamond-shaped

red scales. They jutted forth from Arwin's arms, filling the dragon's mouth like a swarm of insects. But...that wasn't right.

It was Arwin's arms that were jutting through the dragon's mouth. The red scales had gathered around them, forming a massive gauntlet that protected her from its fangs.

"Torrisclade moa phosistoris." (Deliver humiliating defeat and death to our enemy.)

Arwin was intoning spell words to make use of the sun god's magic sword. Dez had done the same once. How did she know what to do?

The dragon tried to escape her grasp, but the red gauntlet was even bigger now. The red scales were clinging to it, preventing it from moving. In the meantime, Arwin stood up. In her tattered, muddy, and bloodied nightgown she rose, holding the glowing red sword.

"You're finished."

With it, she pierced the dragon's brain. Blood gushed through its mouth. It convulsed twice, the light left its eyes, and it toppled face down to the ground. There was even a stream of piss coming from its nether region.

It was dead for good this time.

Arwin let go of Dawnblade. The red scales dispersed like mist into thin air. She stumbled a few steps backward and fell onto her bottom.

For a while she sat there, stunned, taking in what had just happened. Within moments, her shoulders were shaking with laughter.

"I did it, Matthew."

"Like hell you did," I said, walking unsteadily toward her. "You nearly caused my heart to explode, seeing you in danger like that."

"Not to worry," Arwin said. "You've got five or six hearts in there."



"No I don't." Or so I assumed. I'd never looked inside to check. "Why do you have that sword? And what were those spells?"

"I was looking for a weapon and found it in the bed of the wagon. For the spell, I just read this," she said, pointing out the symbols on the red cloth around the handle. "They're written right here."

"Those are letters?" She was so well-read. "Well, at least you're all right."

Relieved, I found my eyes naturally resting on Dawnblade.

Arwin had used the sword that was meant to be given to Natalie. Even Dez had been able to activate it, so as long as you said the right words, it wasn't a surprise that she'd been able to use it. But even knowing that it made sense, I couldn't help but feel something ominous. Hopefully that sensation was only a coincidence.

"Lady Arwin!" Noelle cried, embracing her joyfully. "I'm so glad you're all right! So, so glad..."

She was sobbing. Even Ralph was looking weepy.

"Sorry to worry you like that. Thank you," Arwin beamed, rubbing the girl's head.

"Hey. All done?" asked Beardo, who came strolling up from outside the village.

"Seems like you got your business settled."

Dez turned back and grunted. There was a large furrow in the ground formed by the head of the dragon he was dragging behind him.

"You mean, you killed that all by yourself?" Ralph gaped. "Who are you...?" he asked timidly. There was a lot more natural respect and awe than what he showed around me. Naturally, Dez ignored him.

He walked over and held out a freshly plucked tuft of grass.

"Is that repellent grass?"

"Just happened to spot it on the way. That should hold for a good while," Dez said. He started rubbing down the dragon head, which he'd dragged up to the

entrance to the village. He was getting it prepared for treatment. Dragon fangs and bones could be sold for good money. Ordinary folks wouldn't be able to put a scratch on them, but Dez was strong enough, no problem.

The outline of the mountain began to glimmer. The sun's rays shone upon us. It was dawn.

"Matthew," Arwin called out. "There are so many things I want to say and ask, but first I need to change. I want to bathe. And I want food. Help me."

"Oh, stay there," I said, keeping her from getting up. Arwin had no stamina left, either. She was also barefoot. I didn't want her walking around.

For my part, I just wanted to sleep, but there was still work to be done.

"Hup."

With the sun on my back, I picked Arwin up and carried her sideways. Ralph was giving me an envious look, but I was never going to hand her over to him.

"I'm going to take you to your castle now. Have just a bit of patience, Princess."

"Very well," she said, nodding in satisfaction. "How are your wounds? Do they hurt?"

She put a hand to my cheek. I'd been fighting constantly since the previous morning and was bruised and battered all over. I was sure I had more than a few cracked bones.

"I'm better now."

"Don't be stupid."

"It's true. I'll dance a waltz with you right now to show you."

"Don't. You'll drop me."

I spun her around briefly, and she clung desperately to me. I felt bad, so I left it at that and resumed walking normally.

"Anyway, what do you want first? A meal? A bath? A romp in bed with me?"

"Fool."

Seven days passed.

In that time, we made our way through the western wastes, guarding the villagers, and saw them off close to the border. There, we met with some guards and guides hired by Lutwidge, who took the villagers off our hands.

Along the way, Arwin apologized over and over. I did as well. We even paid them reparations, though it was a pittance. Some villagers accepted it, and some never forgave us to the very end. I couldn't blame them. They'd lost their land and livelihood.

Perhaps they'd never forgive us for as long as they lived. That was a burden Arwin would shoulder, too. She had more baggage than before. You just had to shake your head.

Along the way, we suffered monster attacks and a tiff with some enraged villagers, but I could get into that later. The important thing was the result: We got them all out of the country without a single one dying. We'd kept them all alive.

After seeing them off, it was our turn.

We were going back through the Dragon Hall to Gray Neighbor.

"You could afford to spend more time here. It's your big homecoming."

We didn't have much of a choice, because our monster-repelling herbs were running out, but it still seemed strange to me that she'd *want* to return to that gutter pool of a city. As soon as she had her feet back under her, she wanted to start sprinting.

We made our preparations to return home amid the ruins of what had once been the village. It was a busy morning, and I was tending to the horse. It never panicked during any of the monster attacks; this thing had nerves of steel.

"Hey."

Ralph came over and sidled up next to me.

"What do you want?"

"Nothing."

He didn't say another word after that. If you don't have anything to say, don't start talking, half-wit.

Merciful Rain was hanging from his hip. After discussion with Noelle, he had officially accepted the weapon from her. Was she sure about that? He'd probably end up selling it off to some intermediary. At least, that's what I would do.

"Her Highness...is incredible."

"How so?"

"...The way she conquered her dungeon sickness. I think she's made of different stuff from me. I can't even compare myself to her..."

"You dimwit."

What a nincompoop. I turned to Ralph and hit his stupid face flush with the blunt end of reality.

"Do you really think that Arwin's gotten over her dungeon sickness?"

"What do you mean?" Ralph asked. He looked baffled. "I mean, she's back to norm—"

"For now." You could easily see it as a temporary state caused by elevated emotions. "The cure for it isn't clear. How can you say that she's permanently better? Did it not occur to you that she might relapse?"

"Really?"

"It's a possibility."

No one could predict when it might return, not even Arwin herself. It could be in a year, or ten years, or maybe it would never come back. Maybe tomorrow, or today, or right at this very moment, the dungeon sickness would strike with a vengeance. Unlike a physical injury, you couldn't see it, which meant there was no way to know how much it had healed.

If you'll forgive the cheap metaphor, the human mind is more complex than any twisted, turning dungeon.

Ralph suddenly looked unnerved as the ramifications finally sank in. "Then... what happens if it hits her again? What are you planning to do?"

"That should be obvious," I said. "We'll go on a real vacation this time. Go soak up some rays at the beach and hit on pretty women."

His face went slack, then dropped in utter shock. When he lifted it again, his teeth were gnashing.

"Mactarode has no beaches!"

"It doesn't?"

"How...how can this be the man who...?"

He wandered off toward the storehouse, muttering insults under his breath.

What did he think he was doing anyway?

I resumed tending to the horse. The abandoned village was utterly silent. Peace and quiet were all well and good, but the occasional monster flying overhead gave me the chills.

We had the wagon piled high with souvenirs, including the fangs, blood, and scales of the dragon Dez slew. There was too much bone and meat to fit in a single wagon, so we only took a small amount that could be sold for good cash. Even this much would be worth a fortune, but almost none of it would stay with Dez. From what he said, most of it was going to be taken as a toll to use the Dragon Hall. If it cost that much, he could have just said something. If I'd known, I would have pitched in a few coins. I had a whole seven coppers to my name to spend. It was one of the standoffish aspects of the Beardo that he knew that about me and thus didn't bother to let me know. Some of the extra meat and bones we'd given to the villagers of Yuulia before we left them, as a parting gift and last reparation. The other dragon—the one the rest of us had worked together to beat—was too badly damaged to be worth dismantling.

"Seems like such a waste."

It had been such a heroic feat.

"No use getting greedy; it only screws you up," said a voice behind me. I turned to see the Beardo himself, looking fretful and fidgeting with a round stone. He motioned to come with him around the back of a building. There was a pile of wooden boxes left behind by the villagers.

"What do you want? We're not the kind of folks who meet up for a romantic tryst away from prying eyes. Although, if you're interested, I'm open to suggestions."

"Look at this," Dez said after he had slugged me, opening the lid of one of the boxes. I groaned in pain.

Inside the box was a dragon eye. It looked disgusting. The pupil was white and blotchy, and it stank of blood. The rot would probably set in later. Dragons were famously hardy creatures. Even their meat was so hard that it would break your teeth.

Dez scooped up the eye in his palm and held it up to me.

"Stop it; what kind of prank are you playing?"

"Just look at it, dammit."

At his urging, I peered into the eye—and gasped.

Etched deep into the cloudy pupil was none other than the sigil of that ringworm sun god.

"What does it mean?"

"That's what I'd like to know," Dez said, shaking his head. "I noticed it when I was dismantling the parts. Although it fell apart, I noticed a similar mark in the wife's eye. I guess both of the pair were his servants."

So it wasn't just a pair of dragons that were flying around Mactarode like all the other monsters?

The same sigil had been present in Roland and Justin, the preachers I'd stopped before. But this dragon wasn't a preacher. And its body didn't dissolve into black ash.

"I was thinking," Dez said, "maybe this thing is actually one of us."

The way he said it got the message across instantly. A Sufferer.

The greedy sun god sought individuals with power—but they didn't need to be human. Dez the dwarf was eligible and had been chosen. A dragon, one of the most powerful of monsters, would have enough power with plenty to spare.

"You think this dragon cleared the trials or whatever?"

"Maybe it skipped a few grades. As if it needs to be tested at all."

Selected for the team right away, then. I wasn't jealous. If anything, I felt pity for it.

"So what I'm saying," Dez murmured, tossing the stone in his hand like a ball, "is that maybe the sun god had a part in the fall of Mactarode, too."

For now, this would remain a secret between Dez and me. It was hard to explain and would require me to reveal my own closely held secret. Most of all, there was no certainty to any of it, and I didn't want to disturb Arwin's mental peace for nothing.

"By the way, what's Noelle up to? She still not back yet?"

We were getting ready to leave, and I hadn't seen her since yesterday.

"Not yet. She said she'd be back by the morning."

After the fall of the kingdom, Noelle had traveled around the countryside. She'd said she wanted to stop by one of her bases of operation yesterday and went off on her own, even though her leg hadn't fully healed yet. Were all the women of Mactarode so hasty?

"Are we ready?" said the beauteous Arwin.

She wasn't in her armor, but her bearing alone was almost regal.

At her side, she wore the sword she'd received from Noelle, the weapon that had come from the Lewster mansion. I'd forgotten the name, but it was supposed to be just as fine a sword as Merciful Rain. Dez still had Dawnblade for now. Arwin wanted that one, claiming that it felt good to use, but he refused, saying it was a friend's memento. I didn't want her using that toilet

cricket sun god's sword anyway.

"There she is," Arwin murmured. I looked up to see Noelle, striding toward us with her hand raised. She'd made it in time.

"I apologize for the wait." Noelle was shouldering an enormous bag.

"What's that?"

"My handmade weapons and tools."

The last time she had been in a hurry, and it had been too much to carry, but since she was traveling by horse-drawn wagon, she'd brought them with her.

"I think they might help."

What in the world could it be? Well, the more weapons on hand, the better.

When we got back to Gray Neighbor, we'd probably have to fight that creepy preacher again. If he was trying to cause a monster stampede, he was an enemy we would have to face.

Just you wait, motherfucker. You won't lay a single finger on Arwin this time. I'll rip out your eyeballs and stuff horse shit into the sockets.

We hopped into the wagon and left the village.

Despite the repellent herbs we had lit, there was no telling when an attack might happen. We had to move quickly.

After the abandoned village, Dez steered the wagon along the mountain path we'd taken to get there. In the cargo bed, Arwin turned to look out the rear.

"...I will be back."

Her quiet murmur vanished into the wind, but I knew that it reached someone's ears somewhere.

After three days of travel, we reentered the Dragon Hall from the mountains. After another half day's wait, we got onto the earthwyrm at last. It was a different mole from the last one, but it worked the same way, pulling a train of

long, narrow boxes, five in all.

We left loading the wagon and the other official stuff to Dez and stepped into the first of the five boxes. It was just as dark and gloomy as the last one, but it felt nice not having to walk. I sat down on the floor and rested my back against the wall.

The sense of relief caused fatigue to hit me like a brick. My body felt heavy. I wanted nothing more than a hot bath. It had been a harrowing trip but worth the trouble. We'd solved one of the major problems facing us. Taking care of Arwin was like night and day compared to when we were going the other way. My left arm was feeling much better, and all I had to do now was drink and wait to arrive. The thought alone caused my eyelids to grow heavy.

"Matthew."

I opened them again. Arwin was next to me. She looked a bit uncomfortable and wouldn't meet my gaze.

"I, um, I wanted to ask you something, but, ah..."

She kept stammering. I had felt that she had something to say to me the last few days. Now she was finally ready.

"Why don't you just say it? Nothing you ask is going to surprise me at this point."

Satisfied, Arwin cleared her throat and looked me in the eyes. "Well, I heard from Noelle..."

"Yes?"

"That you and Dez were lovers..."

"Stop, stop, stop, stop!"

I bolted upright. What in the hell was she talking about?

"She said you confessed your love...and there was that time before when you chose him over me."

"I was kidding! Just talking shit. I've known him a very long time, but I swear to you now that there's nothing like *that* between us!"

Apparently, you couldn't even tell a joke in Noelle's presence without her misunderstanding it. I ought to spank her for that one.

"Oh... I see," Arwin said, clearly relieved. But instead of being satisfied with that answer, she sat before me, hung her head, and stared at her knees, practically in a pose of penitence.

"...I'm sorry," she said, struggling to get the words out. "I should have said this a while ago, but I couldn't. I feel terrible. I've made a horrible mess of it all. I've done things that were pathetic and things that were shameless. I know that I've put you through hell."

Now that her dungeon sickness had calmed down, and she was feeling like herself again, she was ashamed of all the recent memories. She didn't need to bother, really.

"You...you saved me from myself. And not only that—because of you, I've realized how my mother felt about me. I want to thank you. In fact, I cannot possibly thank you enough."

She wrung the words out of herself, one drop at a time.

"I'm grateful to you. But what can I do to possibly repay your service to me? I have no idea what I ought to do for you. But, well..." Her words grew steadily more passionate. "Matthew, I..."

"Is this going to be a long conversation?"

"Huh?"

The interruption was so unexpected that Arwin was left completely dumbfounded.

"So much has happened recently, I just feel exhausted. If it's not an urgent topic, maybe we can have this talk another time. Mainly I'd just like to sleep until dinner."



I wasn't lying. Hearing her extended monologue was making me drowsy again.

"O-oh. Of course," she mumbled.

"Good night, then."

I turned onto my side, rested my head on Arwin's thighs, and closed my eyes. They were softer than I expected. She tensed for a brief moment but didn't push me off or smack me until I got up.

A lap pillow from the princess knight? I was a lucky man, indeed.

I could sense that Arwin was looking down at my face. Her hair brushed and tickled the tip of my nose. She smelled nice, and that only hastened the sandman's arrival.

"Ah! Hey, you!" bellowed Ralph, right when I was nodding off. The pest.

"Who said you could put your head on Her Highness's lap? Get off now!"

Footsteps thudded loudly closer to me. He probably thought he was going to kick me off her.

"Stop it, Ralph," Arwin instructed him, before he could get too close. "It's fine."

Gentle fingertips brushed my bangs. In the darkness, I thought I saw her smile.

"This is what he wants."

That's right.

The earthwyrm carried us quietly through the Dragon Hall, back in the direction of home.

FINAL CHAPTER

Double Disaster

"What? You know the Crimson Princess Knight?"

"Know her? We're closer than relatives, even."

"What's she like? Is it true that she bathes in rose petals?"

"Oh, that's hyperbole."

We'd left the Dragon Hall behind and emerged on the surface. From here, it was just another trip down the road we'd first traveled to reach Gray Neighbor.

But caution was paramount. In this dangerous world, you never knew when an attack could strike. Especially at night, in the quiet hours. That was why we had to camp out the same way we did at the start of the trip.

Sometimes, we ran across other travelers. And when they happened to be beautiful and delicate ladies, they needed special attention. It was a dangerous world out there.

"Tell me more about the princess knight, I'm so curious."

They were traveling actresses. This one's quirky, curled black hair was quite adorable, and her figure wasn't bad, either.

"I'd be happy to. But there's a cost to hear more," I said, putting a hand around her shoulder. "Let's take our time and enjoy the conversation."

"Oooh, that sounds naughty." She giggled. It certainly didn't sound like she minded being naughty.

"Well, I can tell you a lot more about it in bed..."

My breath caught in my throat. If there was ever a definition of bad timing,

this was it.

I had sensed a new presence in the vicinity and turned around to see the redhaired princess knight herself.

I couldn't make out her expression. It was slightly downcast and out of the range of the campfire light, such that a shadow fell across the top of her face.

"Arwin?"

She did not reply. She lowered the bag in her hand to the ground. Fruit that she had probably picked herself rolled through the dirt. Sensing danger, the other women fled the scene.

I was all alone now. Arwin took large strides toward me.

"No, it's not what you think, see, I was—," I stammered, backing away, but it was clearly having no effect. She closed the gap quickly, her hand on her sword hilt.

"Just how low will you sink?!"

Despite the mental and physical punishment I suffered at her hands the night before, the princess knight was still in a towering rage.

"I take my eyes off you for one minute, and this is what you do."

"Look, I've been thinking about nothing but you for days upon days. I relaxed for a little, and it just...happened."

"Wandering off to some other woman does not just happen!"

Listen, everyone makes mistakes.

"And is there some inconvenience to you about thinking of me all the time?"

"Y-yes, a few."

You know, things that she would probably destroy me for saying.

"Anyway, you're going to tell me about it today."

"That story again?" I was tired of this.

"There is simply no way that you went to the palace of Mactarode and came back alive, all on your own. Even with a hundred lives, you could not do it!"

"I told you already, I barely escaped with my life—my *one* life. I slipped past monsters left and right and only made it back by the very skin of my teeth."

"And you think I'm going to buy that answer?"

"Whether you buy it or not, it's the truth. Ask me a hundred times, and you'll get the same answer a hundred times."

I had had a feeling this would happen. Arwin was completely skeptical of my answer now, though I couldn't blame her for being so. You would never think that a weakling like me could go into a swarm of vicious monsters and come back alive. Arwin might be naive in the ways of the world, but it would be very hard to talk her into accepting this one. I thought about just opening up and telling her the truth, but I still hadn't decided on that yet.

"And that is not the only question. What about that monster that appeared in the dungeon? What was that? Why did you tell me to aim for the neck? You haven't answered that one."

She was talking about the preacher. I'd thought she might have forgotten, given the whirlwind of events that transpired after that, but the world was not so forgiving of poor Matthew. I wasn't sure if I should tell her about the preacher, either. It might end up dragging Arwin into my personal troubles.

"Be honest. You're hiding something from me."

"Yeah," I admitted. "I told you that I only went to see that girl at the Rainbow Goddess once, but in actuality, it was seven times."

"Fuck you!" Arwin flared with rage, her cheeks red.

"I know, I know. I'll be more reasonable in the future."

"When I said 'fuck you,' it wasn't just for going to another woman or lying about the details—it was all-encompassing!" She grabbed my shirt and shook me back and forth. I felt like I was going to get a concussion. "You can't change the subject on me this time. You're going to tell the truth today!"

Oh, please, no.

"Look, um, it was a miracle, yeah? The power of my love worked a wonderful miracle, and wings grew from my back, carrying me through the sky. And then, uh, a big rainbow came shining down from above, and I, uh...eh, whatever."

"Don't give up in the middle of your story!"

And she kept harassing me like this every single day, which was the worst. Of course, I told her what I'd seen about the miserable state of the city, and the Tree of Cameron, but she always settled on this specific sticking point.

"I think I know what you're expecting from me," I said, dejected, "so I'll just say this. I don't have the power to stop a stampede, and I won't and can't be a new member of Aegis. It will *never* happen."

If I let her get her hopes up, it was only going to make things worse later on.

```
"No, I just..."
```

"What's all the noise about? Pipe down, Matthew," said Ralph, the little snot, cutting off Arwin. He was sitting up in the box. Why did he only yell at me? "We're almost to Gray Neighbor."

I leaned forward and out of the wagon bed to see a gray wall in the distant wasteland, getting steadily larger. A little over a month had passed since we left the town behind. The sky was clear, but I was sure that the situation there was even worse.

From the information we'd heard along the way, the signs of a stampede were growing day by day. Tremors were shaking the town constantly, and strange monstrous screams and clawing sounds were constantly coming from the dungeon entrance, day and night. There was a rotting stench around the door as well. And some people had reported seeing monsters and ghosts in town, as if they'd managed to slip out of the dungeon before the others. A stampede could occur at any time. More and more people were leaving by the day, they said.

"If we're unlucky, the dungeon could explode before we even get there."

```
"…"
```

I looked over to see Arwin wearing a downcast expression.

"What's the matter? We're finally back. You should put on a big, confident smile."

"...The townsfolk will not be pleased by my return... Not after the disgrace I made of myself leaving."

The word had gotten around long ago that we'd left Gray Neighbor. Arwin was being talked about like some miserable loser, no doubt. It wouldn't be like it was before. Even the Adventurers Guild wouldn't be a safe respite for her. When she showed up, the oafs might all flock out of the woodwork hoping to make an example of her.

"Then we'll just have to show we mean business."

Would she return to being a hero or remain a pathetic underachiever? I'd give her all the support I could, but in the end, it was up to Arwin herself. If she put in the work, fame would come with it. Her defeat would just be a little spice in her personal story to make it exciting.

If she smashed a few of the adventurers' skulls in, the rest would come wagging their tails like they did before.

"And what is it that you say when you mean business?"

".....Kiss my ass!"

"Very good."

The situation was dismal. The preacher who'd inflicted that grievous wound on Arwin was still out there somewhere. If we tried to stop the stampede from happening, he'd likely show up somewhere.

But for now, Arwin had what it took to get back up.

"Come and see the glorious return of our princess knight."

The Crimson Princess Knight was the hero whose sword brought courage to the terrified people and turned their despair into hope.

If she was ready to play that role again, I would do everything in my power to support her.

As we drew closer to town, we passed more and more carriages and wagons. I'd thought they were fleeing the town, but they were uniformly cheery. Looking behind us, there was a line of more vehicles and travelers forming, and a man on horseback who looked like a knight rode past us.

We made our way through the north gate and into town.

The morning marketplace was buzzing with activity. People flooded the main street, visiting lively stalls and stands that hawked their wares loudly. Entertainers stood here and there, putting on demonstrations that awed onlookers. The occasional dropped ball or missed cartwheel led to bursts of laughter.

Nowhere I looked could I see a frightened or anxious face. Gray Neighbor was bursting with energy and life.

Ralph, Noelle, and even Dez seemed shocked by this change.

"What's happening?" Arwin wondered quietly. I had no answer. I just watched the strange scene unfold as we passed them.

The market district was as colorful as a rainbow, with signs proclaiming FOUNDING FESTIVAL all over. The people were all abuzz with the topic. I'd forgotten that we were on the verge of the biggest holiday in the country. With the stampede imminent, you'd think that a festival would be the last thing on people's minds, but they seemed filled with the holiday spirit. Even the guards looked like they were enjoying the change for once. There wasn't the slightest hint of the frankly menacing air that had hung over the town when we left.

What about the stampede? What happened while we were gone?

The artificial feel of the revelry around us brought a cold sweat to my back.

From everywhere and nowhere, I thought I heard the sinister laughter of that preacher again.

<u>Afterword</u>

Thank you very much for buying the third volume of *The Kept Man of the Princess Knight*. I would like to express my deepest thanks once again to Saki Mashima for the wonderful illustrations, and everyone else involved in the publishing of this book for their help.

This series has been advertised as a kind of "isekai noir," but this volume is the most heavily fantasy-based so far, in my opinion. I'll let you all decide whether the events that transpired can be attributed to miracle, coincidence, or just plain plot opportunism.

Next volume, we get into the second half. What trials await Matthew and Arwin on their return to Gray Neighbor? I hope you look forward to finding out.

Lastly, on a personal note, while I was writing this book, my pet cat passed on to heaven. The one in the picture I use on author bios. She was very old and frail and would wobble around the house the last few years. Still, she had a full appetite just days before she passed and would come to beg me for treats while I was writing. Now I won't hear her begging meows or feel her pads whacking me on the arm for attention anymore. For her sake, as a form of dedication, I'll place her favorite dried treats at her grave. But not too many, in case she overeats and throws them up again.

Toru Shirogane

KEPT MAN PRINCESS KNIGHT

-Volume 4

Common Story Common

Arwin and Matthew make it back to the Dungeon City, but rather than the panic and chaos they expect, all is peaceful.

A joyous atmosphere fills the air as people celebrate the Founding Festival. However, one of the sun god's preachers is moving in the shadows, looming over the kept man and his princess knight.

The story intensifies in the fourth installment of this noir other world!

COMING SOON

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Sign Up

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink