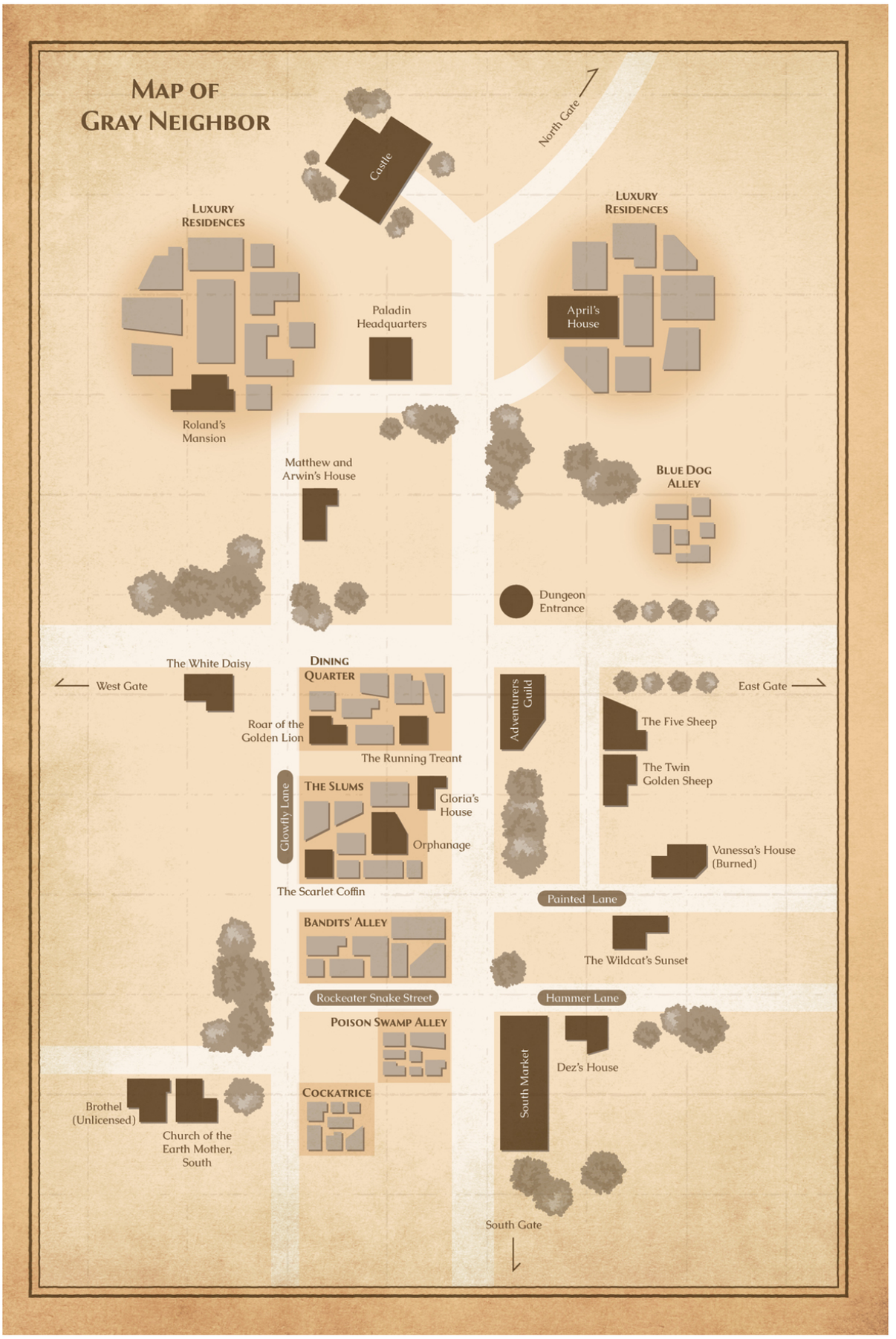

Toru Shirogane
Illustration by
Saki Mashima
4
THE KEPT MAN OF THE PRINCESS KNIGHT


THE KEPT MAN OF THE PRINCESS KNIGHT
4


"I bet normally you could have dressed up like me and had a good time, Arwin."


"I suppose this would make me a heretic. Or maybe..."
Arwin considered her answer, her voice bright.
"An iconoclast, let's say."


Map of
Gray Neighbor
North Gate
Castle
Luxury
Residences
Luxury
Residences
Paladin
Headquarters
April's
House
Roland's
Mansion
Matthew and
Arwin's House
Blue Dog
Alley
Dungeon
Entrance
The White Daisy
West Gate
Dining
Quarter
Roar of the
Golden Lion
The Running Treant
Adventurers
Guild
East Gate
The Five Sheep
The Twin
Golden Sheep
Glowfly Lane
The Slums
Gloria's
House
Orphanage
Vanessa's House
(Burned)
The Scarlet Coffin
Painted Lane
Bandits' Alley
The Wildcat's Sunset
Rockeater Snake Street
Hammer Lane
Poison Swamp Alley
South Market
Dez's House
Brothel
(Unlicensed)
Cockatrice
Church of the
Earth Mother,
South
South Gate

CHARACTERS



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



"You're my lifeline."

Matthew

A former adventurer with a mysterious background. In town, they mock him as a weakling and a coward. In actuality, he's an experienced fighter who, due to the sun god's curse, can only utilize his superhuman strength in the light of the sun.

Arwin

The vanguard of her party who tackles the dungeon. The princess of a lost kingdom who searches for the Astral Crystal. She has a childish side that she only shows to Matthew.

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.



CHARACTERS

Noelle



Member of Aegis.
Lutwidge's niece.
Obsessed with Arwin.

Ralph



Young warrior in Aegis.
In love with Arwin.
Hostile to Matthew.

Cecilia



Adviser of the up-and-coming party known as Medusa. The elder twin sister of Beatrice, who calls her "Ceci." Scary when mad.

Beatrice



Leader of the up-and-coming party known as Medusa. The younger twin sister of Cecilia, who calls her "Bea." Rather fickle.

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.

Vanessa



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

Gloria

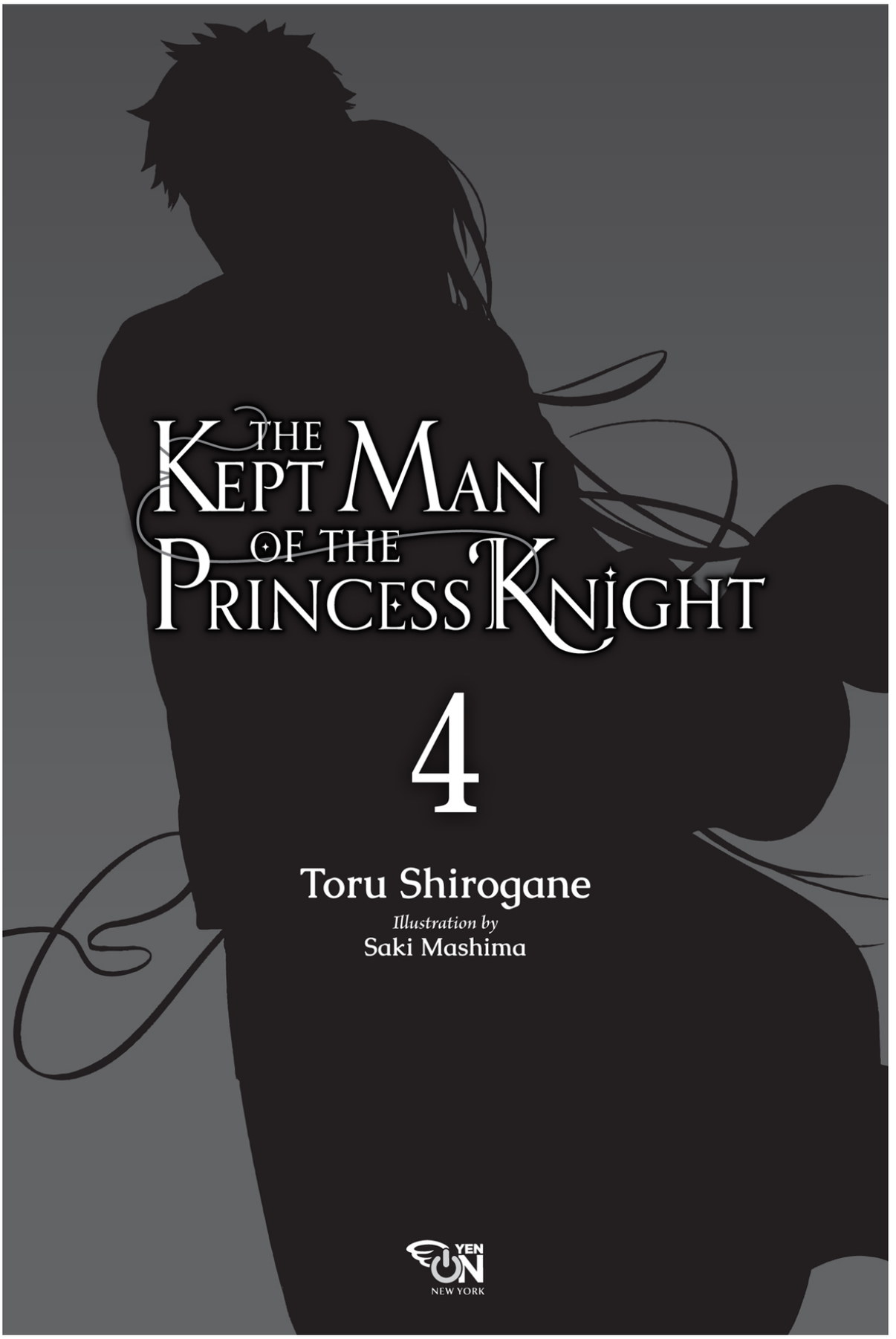


Guild appraiser. Likes to collect forgeries and steals compulsively. Wary of Matthew and his secrets.

Nicholas



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



THE KEPT MAN OF THE PRINCESS KNIGHT

4

Toru Shirogane

Illustration by
Saki Mashima

YEN ON
NEW YORK

Copyright



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.4
©Toru Shirogane 2023
Edited by Dengeki Bunko
First published in Japan in 2023 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo. English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

English translation © 2025 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, 6th Floor
New York, NY 10001

Visit us at yenpress.com
facebook.com/yenpress • twitter.com/yenpress
yenpress.tumblr.com • instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: April 2025
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: 979-8-8554-0757-0 (paperback)
979-8-8554-0758-7 (ebook)

Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

[PROLOGUE] The Sin of Ignorance

[CHAPTER ONE] Town of Sloth

[CHAPTER TWO] Goat of Wrath

[CHAPTER THREE] The Envious

[CHAPTER FOUR] The Price of Lust

[CHAPTER FIVE] The Gluttonous Stampede

[CHAPTER SIX] The Preacher’s Pride

[CHAPTER SEVEN] The Greedy Princess Knight

[FINAL CHAPTER] The Princess Knight and Her Kept Man

Afterword

Yen Newsletter

CONTENTS

[PROLOGUE] The Sin of Ignorance

[CHAPTER ONE] Town of Sloth

[CHAPTER TWO] Goat of Wrath

[CHAPTER THREE] The Envious

[CHAPTER FOUR] The Price of Lust

[CHAPTER FIVE] The Gluttonous Stampede

[CHAPTER SIX] The Preacher's Pride

[CHAPTER SEVEN] The Greedy Princess Knight

[FINAL CHAPTER] The Princess Knight and Her Kept Man

Afterword

PROLOGUE

The Sin of Ignorance

When we returned to Gray Neighbor from Arwin's homeland, we were greeted with the sight of a crowd of revelers as far as the eye could see. Stalls were set up on either side of the street, which was bustling with visitors. Not only were they selling tasty dishes like meat, sweets, and soups, but also accessories like hair ornaments, bangles, and necklaces. On top of that, there were fortune-tellers and even little games of chance. Bards strummed on lutes and sang pleasant melodies as people tossed coppers into the upturned hats at their feet.

We stood there in shock, allowing more crowds to pass by us. I recognized some of them as the same people who had been trying to flee the town in terror due to the imminent monster stampede.

"This does not match what the rumors said," remarked Arwin, who was putting on a brave face but was concerned on the inside. Ralph and Noelle were unable to hide their consternation. Dez fiddled with a stone in his hand as he scanned the area cautiously.

Maybe what I'd heard was out of date. There was nothing in the attitude of this crowd that suggested even a smidgen of fear that there might be an explosion of monsters at any moment.

Look at them all, laughing and cavorting. No sense of self-preservation.

Some decorations and signs installed here and there along the street told us the reason for the revelry.

"It's almost time for the Founding Festival…," Arwin said, her voice trailing off and vanishing into the throng.

In the distant past, theirs was a land of unending war. Tribes, settlements, villages, and towns feuded, small nations

rose and fell, and battle over territory was constant. Within that environment, one man arose—merely a noble from a modest principality but skilled in the ways of war. He expanded his lands, conquered his neighbors, and eventually amassed a major kingdom. That became Rayfiel, our home. The Millennium of Midnight Sun had already been discovered at that point, but there had been no trace of the dungeon city around it yet.

After the death of the first king, Rayfiel declared the date of the kingdom's founding a national holiday, and a celebration was held to commemorate it every year: the Founding Festival. This year was the tercentennial, so it was an especially significant holiday. There were plans for the festival in this town, too, but I'd thought they'd been canceled because of the stampede.

A heavy silence fell among us. Eventually, Ralph buckled under the pressure and broke it.

"For now, let's go to the Adventurers Guild. Maybe we'll learn something about this."

I didn't like how he was trying to assume command, but I agreed with his statement. We needed to return the wagon, too. For now, we kept moving. Arwin and I sat in the driver's seat. Now and then, people in the crowd stared at us with shock and covered their mouths, probably because they'd noticed Arwin. They all looked so bizarre. Some of them seemed to be saying something, but it was drowned out by the noise of the crowd. Whatever it was, the expressions on their faces were not friendly.

Contrary to the vitality of the townspeople, there seemed to be a funereal pall over the guild.

Few adventurers were coming and going, and the doom and gloom was apparent on their faces. The entrance to the dungeon in the center of town was closed and sealed. No wonder they looked depressed. The dungeon was an adventurer's hunting ground. A hunter without a quarry was bound to starve eventually.

"I'll return the wagon. Go ahead and finish your tasks," said Dez. He split from us at the gate. Inside the guild building, the reception area was desolate. No adventurers hung around carousing. A fierce-looking receptionist was busy digging the

dirt out from under his fingernails. He finished, yawned, and suddenly stiffened. The other staffers did the same. Their attention was focused on Arwin, of course.

The princess knight had been injured and fallen ill to dungeon sickness, then fled to her homeland. *Why has she returned to Gray Neighbor?* The question was written clearly on the face of every person here.

“Call the guildmaster,” Arwin said to the surly receptionist, ignoring the unpleasant gazes. “Tell him that Arwin Mabel Primrose Mactarode has returned, and he’ll understand.”

“Um, the guildmaster isn’t around right now, so…,” the mean-faced receptionist said, sweating profusely and avoiding her eyes. He seemed very taken aback by her presence. He’d heard the princess knight was no longer active and had no idea how to handle her return.

“Get someone else, then. I have a report to make, and I have some questions.”

“Oh, you’re back,” said a sudden visitor. My goddess of lactatio…of salvation had arrived.

It was Gloria Bishop, the appraiser.

I approached her and said, “Yes, we just returned, and we’ve got some questions. After being away for a little while, we want to catch up on what’s happening.”

“That’s not an appraiser’s job,” she said, shooing me away.

“Now, don’t be cold. I do have some work for you, as well.”

Dragon scales gleamed slightly in my hand. I’d nicked a few while Dez had been busy dismantling the monster for parts. It only took her a glance to realize what they were; she blinked with surprise and fascination.

“I suppose it’d be worth hearing your story,” she said, scooping a scale from my hand and examining it closely. “All right. I’ll tell you what you want to know.”

Gloria’s appraising office was too cramped, so we used Dez’s room instead. He wasn’t there, but I felt at liberty to use my friend’s place. There was a table—sturdy, if nothing else—where Arwin sat across from Gloria, with Ralph and Noelle at attention behind the princess. I leaned against the wall off to the side.

On the other side of the table, Gloria sat in an unsteady chair much too small for her. The ends of her mouth perked upward.

“You seem well,” she said to Arwin. “Already over that dungeon sickness?”

“Yes, thank you.”

Technically, she was only temporarily better. Even Arwin couldn’t know when it would return to plague her.

“But I want to know what’s happening in town. What happened with the stampede?”

Gloria considered this question for a moment. “Well, to sum it up, we’re saying the stampede is already finished.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

Sounding bored, she explained, “It means we destroyed the Sol Magni group that was trying to cause the stampede.”

CHAPTER ONE

Town of Sloth

It'd all started with the attempted kidnapping of April, the guildmaster's beloved granddaughter.

The Sol Magni cult, worshippers of that moronic sun god, had been abducting women and children and slaughtering them as human sacrifices. About a month ago, they'd attempted to do the same to April. They'd knocked out the two adventurers guarding her and had been trying to take her away in a carriage when *someone* had fortunately rescued her and taken her to the Paladins for protection.

They had tried to sacrifice the girl, however unsuccessfully. The guildmaster had been furious. He'd used the power of his status and reputation to the fullest extent, marshaled all the adventurers he could, and set out to obliterate Sol Magni.

After turning the town upside down, they'd sniffed the group out in an abandoned building in the southeast part of town and attacked them.

"Medusa and Argo took the lead. All the high-ranking teams that were still in town took part. It was almost like they were slaying a dragon."

"That's an exaggeration."

That little Beardo could handle a single dragon all on his own.

"And every last member of Sol Magni who was there was either imprisoned or killed."

"Any bizarre monsters among the bunch?" I asked. "Freaks with big eyes shooting light from their hands…?"

That monster was the founder of Sol Magni and a preacher of that slug of a sun god. He'd appeared on the thirteenth floor of the Millennium of Midnight Sun and nearly killed Arwin. If

that was really their base of operations, he should have been there, too.

"They say Medusa beat it."

"The Maretto Sisters?"

"It was very strong, and two or three adventurers died in the attempt. But in the end, the sisters' magic turned it into ash, they said."

The papers found in their hideout had revealed their plans. They'd been trying to cause a stampede to "purify the town," supposedly. The kidnapped women and children had apparently been ritual sacrifices intended to help bring it about.

With the defeat of the monster had come an end to the frequent earthquakes. The adventurers sent in to investigate had reported that the number of monsters inside the dungeon was subsiding toward pre-stampede levels.

"And the Founding Festival is very soon, right? At first, they were going to cancel it, but since the stampede was over, the people decided to go ahead with it, and that's what they're prepping in a hurry now. The whole town is abuzz."

The dungeon was still closed off, just in case, but the plan was to reopen it after the festival.

After a period of silence, Arwin asked, "What was that monster?"

"In the past, they say some people were turned into monsters after making a deal with the devil. Maybe it's one of them?"

That scenario wouldn't be too far off for one of the earwax gremlins who worshipped the nose-faucet sun god. Everyone would agree with me on that.

"Did the monster really die?"

"I don't know. I didn't see it myself. But since then, the town's been utterly peaceful. Maybe there are some survivors somewhere, but the view of the wise and powerful is that they can't do much of anything anymore if so."

Of course, they would have more security than normal for the event to be vigilant for those remnants, but the Founding Festival was going forward as usual.

Arwin frowned. It was clear she couldn't completely believe Gloria's story. It was more than a small letdown to get back to town only to find out that the object of her revenge was gone and the problems were completely solved already.

Even I could only half trust what I was hearing. Nothing in my life was *this* ideal.

“So…,” Arwin started to say, but she was interrupted by the sound of footsteps pounding up the stairs.

The door flew open, and a silver-haired girl burst into the room.

“Arwin!”

It was April, the guildmaster’s granddaughter. She seemed to be fine. So much had happened since we’d saved her that I hadn’t had time to talk to her. Her eyes filled with tears at the sight of Arwin, and she leaped onto her.

“You aren’t hurt, are you? Where have you been? Are you better now?” the girl asked.

Arwin smiled and rubbed April’s head. “I’m sorry to have worried you. I’m perfectly fine.”

Clearly, this had been weighing on April, and now the floodgates were open. Her face scrunched up, and she began to bawl like a baby. She even had a rope of snot hanging from her nose.

“C’mon, you’re ruining your good looks,” I said, ever kind and considerate, and offered her a handkerchief. Instead of gratefully taking it, however, April just shot me a dirty look and turned to kick me right in the shin.

“Stupid Matthew! How dare you leave without telling me?!”

“I left you a note, didn’t I?”

“I can’t read that awful handwriting! And you didn’t even spell my name right! I keep telling you, you need to practice reading and writing more!” she ranted, kicking my legs repeatedly. She was a terribly abusive teacher. “And tell me when you get back!”

“Look, we got back a few minutes ago. And don’t cry and rage and smile at the same time. You gotta pick one.”

“Shut up! Stupid!”

“Sorry, sorry. I’ll give you candy if you cheer up.”

“I don’t care!”

She turned away in a huff to the sound of laughter. It wasn’t just Arwin, but Noelle and Ralph and even Gloria. I’d get them all back for this.

April started talking to make up for the time we’d been apart. After the kidnapping, her grandpa had kept her under

lock and key for a while. It was just the other day that she'd finally been allowed to visit the guild again.

"And Grandpa says I can't go to the Founding Festival, either. Don't you think that's just awful?"

"It's a travesty," I agreed dramatically. "You're clearly old enough to tell people stories designed to make them feel sympathetic while guiding them to the answer you seek, so it shouldn't be a problem."

She kicked me in the shin again. There was another round of laughter. The mood in the room had become quite lighthearted.

"I think that's enough for today," said Arwin, smiling as she stood up. The topic wasn't one to continue with April around to hear it anyway.



“You’re leaving already?” April asked, taking Arwin’s hand pleadingly.

“I’ll be back.”

“It’s fine now. I believe in you, Arwin. So—”

Arwin hugged the girl before she could continue, stroked her hair, then left the room. She was so good at that sort of thing. If I did the same, they’d throw me in jail. Once her footsteps began fading down the stairs, Noelle and Ralph quickly followed.

I was about to be the last to leave when Gloria said, “Hang on, we’re not done yet. Where did you get these scales?”

“Ask Dez about it.”

I doubted he’d actually tell her anything. Probably wouldn’t want to reveal certain details about the Dragon Hall.

She persisted in asking questions, but I brushed her off and went downstairs, where Arwin’s group was speaking with someone: Rex, the leader of the party called Chrysaor. I’d hardly seen him since Arwin’s rescue. In fact, I hadn’t thanked him yet, so I started walking over to join the conversation when Ralph gormlessly spat, “That’s horseshit! The princess would never do such a thing!”

He was so loud that staffers leaned over the counter to see what it was about.

“Don’t shout like that, Ralph. You’re bothering people,” Arwin said soothingly.

“But—!”

He was obviously still upset. While Noelle wasn’t saying anything, it was clear she was holding back her anger as well.

“There’s no use getting mad at me about it. I’m just telling you what the rumors are. I’m not the one spreading them.”

“What’s this about?” I asked. For some reason, Rex looked away awkwardly and said no more.

Arwin said offhandedly, “There are some nasty rumors about me, that’s all.” I asked her what kinds of rumors they were. Anger flashed in her eyes. “That the person controlling Sol Magni and trying to start the stampede was *me*.”

Here was the rumor in a nutshell. Arwin, “the Crimson Princess Knight,” had plotted to cause a stampede to acquire the Astral Crystal at the core of the dungeon as soon as possible. After the stampede, the monsters would recede and be much

weaker, making it easier to get farther into the dungeon. So she'd recruited her old countrymen, formed the Sol Magni cult, and had them do her dark bidding. At the same time, she'd pretended to go missing at a certain point so she could perform a ritual deep in the dungeon. However, she had been betrayed and sabotaged by three of her companions. She'd killed the three to silence them, but she'd been hurt in the process, so she had made up a story about some mysterious monster that'd done it to her. Then she'd left the rest to Sol Magni and fled town to heal and avoid the stampede. But through the great valor of the adventurers, Sol Magni had been vanquished, foiling her plans. However, because Arwin the ringleader was still alive, they couldn't be careless. She was surely waiting outside town for her chance to strike. If anyone saw her, they were to alert the guards at once.

"Bullshit."

It was ridiculous. Just a willful distortion of the facts to create the story they wanted to believe. There were plenty of ways to disprove it.

"This is just idle nonsense. There's no reason to take it seriously or react to it."

"But apparently it's the talk of the town," Arwin said detachedly.

Yes, I'd detected some strange glances on the way here. I'd assumed they were just surprised Arwin had returned, but now I realized they'd been glares of hatred, suspicion, and derision.

"We don't believe it, of course. No one who took part in the rescue does," Rex said, a little too forcefully. "If that was all an act, you should be the star actress in the royal theater."

He was referring to her confusion in the dungeon. That had been a terrible time.

"But not everyone took part in the rescue. And they find it easier to believe. Especially the ordinary townsfolk."

Even those who'd been born in the Dungeon City did not necessarily know everything about the dungeon itself. Plenty of them went their entire lives without ever setting foot in there.

"Who is casting such aspersions on her?! Dammit!" Ralph swore, kicking the wall. Hey, you break it, you buy it, kid.

"I heard it started about half a month back. A while after you'd left town."

"And are the stories still going around?"

“Yeah.”

“Seems *quite long-lived*.”

Plenty of people were happy to spread irresponsible rumors and stir up trouble, but those stories usually died down when people got bored of them. There was always other gossip ready to take its place.

“You think someone’s spreading it on purpose?” I asked.

“Could be,” Rex agreed.

Arwin had many fans, but also some haters. People who didn’t like the idea of a woman wielding a sword. It didn’t surprise me that someone would take the opportunity to ruin her reputation while she was absent from town.

“Just be careful when you’re out and about. You don’t know what people will do if they believe the stories.”

“I appreciate your warning, Rex,” Arwin said earnestly. “But I’ve come back to resume the fight. I can’t simply run away from—”

She was interrupted by the door of the building banging open. Everyone turned to see a bent-backed old crone step inside. She wore a gray dress with a white shawl draped over her shoulders. By my eye, she was a common citizen. Her white hair was bedraggled, and her eyes were bloodshot as she reached for Arwin with veiny, wrinkled hands, her lips trembling.

“It’s you, isn’t it? You would know. Where is my Sonia?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t pretend you don’t know! Everyone says you took them away. Give her back. She’s only sixteen! You’re feeding her, aren’t you? She loves tomato stew!” the old woman wailed.

Arwin was unsure of what to do. First this stranger accosts her, then she starts babbling about something unrelated.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t know any women named Sonia, so I don’t know where she is.”

“Look, see right here? She’s got moles right in the same spot I do! We always showed them off because they made us look identical!”

The old woman pointed to her neck, where three black moles formed a line on her saggy skin. She was very forceful in pointing them out, demanding Arwin’s attention. She kept pushing the same line of questioning, and in the end, we got the story out of her.

About ten days ago, her granddaughter, Sonia, had gone to visit her friend's house, and she hadn't returned. After the death of her parents, Sonia had lived with her grandmother. They were not well-off, but they had a good relationship.

"The hags in the neighborhood tell me she found a man and ran off with him, but it ain't true! She'd never abandon me like that!"

She had searched all over but couldn't find the girl. Complaining to the guards just earned her the cold shoulder and nothing more. Once she'd heard Sol Magni were kidnapping children and young people, she'd looked for someone who seemed like they might be one of those cultists but had no idea where to find them.

In a desperate frenzy, she'd happened to spot Arwin today and had chased her all the way here.

"…I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I don't know where Sonia is, and I have nothing to do with Sol Magni. If anything, I despise them. Also, I only just returned to town today," Arwin explained with sympathy. The princess knight was merciful and understanding, but in this case, it was having the opposite effect.

"Liar! You won't fool me!"

When people are backed into a corner, their thoughts narrow, too. Once they make up their mind about something, it's very hard to change that view. They'll shout and struggle and do anything to impose their opinion on others. In this case, it resulted in drawing a crowd. It was all the evidence I needed to understand Rex's story. In her triumphant return, the princess knight's reception was indeed quite chilly.

"Just take me to her! Where did you hide her? Speak, you kidnapper!"

"That's enough!" Ralph roared, tired of hearing his leader spoken of that way. He angrily shoved the old woman, who collapsed to the ground like an unresisting twig. Her body bent, and she grimaced in pain.

"Stop it! You go too far, Ralph!" Arwin snapped, scolding her incompetent follower, and she tried to help up the old woman. But the granny slapped her hand away, buried her face in the floor, and began to weep.

The glares from the crowd got even frostier. Eventually, a man about the right age to be her son came to get her. He was a

friend of her deceased son, apparently. With his help, she managed to leave, swearing furious oaths as she went.

"Goodness."

Rex's warning had proved true immediately. Even Arwin herself looked troubled at the woman's predicament.

"I wish we could have heard her story in more detail…"

"Some other time."

Despite Arwin's pity, the rest of us couldn't afford to be so magnanimous. There were many, many things to do. For one, it still wasn't clear if this was Sol Magni's doing or not. If they were involved, there was no telling what might happen.

People went missing daily in this town. Some of them were elopers, to be sure. But plenty of people in town were also pieces of shit who'd happily sell off a young woman for the right price. Also, we could only take the old woman at her word that Sonia would never abandon her. Only the girl could say how she truly felt.

I had warned Arwin long ago that if she wanted to correct all the wicked deeds in this town, she would never finish.

"If she's really been abducted, then we'll find her as we track these people down. Once that happens, we can tell her that her grandma's waiting at home with a warm pot of tomato stew."

Arwin acquiesced, although it looked as though she'd been forced to swallow a very bitter pill.

"Probably best to get back home for today," I continued. I'd been considering stopping somewhere along the way, but at this rate, it would just cause another scene.

"Staying at the Five Sheep again?"

"That's the plan."

"You should reserve your room quickly, then."

A festival celebration meant visitors from the surrounding area. Adventurers were the usual clientele at the Five Sheep, but once the other inns filled up, the tourists would come in search of rooms there, too. The owner of the inn was the wicked type who would be willing to put up the princess knight pariah and her companions. His motto was, *Anyone can stay, as long as they pay.*

"Let's call it a day, then," Arwin suggested, but Ralph and Noelle were firmly against it.

"It's too dangerous!"

“At least let us escort you home…”

They found all sorts of reasons to insist, but Arwin outlasted them. The group agreed to meet up at the guild the next day, and then we went our separate ways.

“Don’t tell anyone what we saw in Mactarode. Just make up whatever to get them off your back. Especially you, Ralph.”

The Dragon Hall was home to dwarven secrets. If he caused Dez to be shunned from dwarven society, I would wring his scrawny neck until he was dead.

“Of course,” said Noelle obediently.

“I know that already!” fumed Ralph, the indignant idiot. “Don’t give me orders! You always think you can just say whatever you want and get away with it. Thanks to that *ridiculous* report you gave after the dungeon a while back, we’ve been forced to play accomplice to…”

“Pardon us,” said Noelle, pulling Ralph away.

Just when I thought he might be growing, he’s right back to being the old Ralph. Grow up already, kid.

After that, the two of us left the guild and headed west down the main street, but there were so many pedestrians that it was hard to make progress. Given the rumors we’d just heard, Arwin had put her hood up to hide her face. Of course, I still stuck out like a sore thumb, so we weren’t exactly incognito. I tried to put some distance between us, but Arwin refused to leave my side.

“Listen, Matthew—”

“Just a minute.”

I could see a sixty-something-year-old man sitting on the side of the street. It was the old carrier. The top of his head was bare, but there were still white tufts around the back and sides of his dome, as well as bushy eyebrows on his face. He carried a large crate on his back. Arwin briefly froze when she saw him, most likely because the crate was piled high with eggplants.

“Yo, Gramps,” I called out. He lifted his head and looked at us with sleepy eyes.

“Is that you, Matthew? You survived,” he said, straightening up and slapping my arm to show his surprise.

“I just got back from my travels. About to do your business, Gramps?”

“Got a sudden order from one of my client’s shops. Lots of people in town for the festival, so they’re running out of ingredients.”

He shook his crate to demonstrate. Arwin blanched but recovered, steadied her breathing, and asked through gritted teeth, “Is this fellow with the guild…?”

“Yes, he’s a carrier.” Carriers were guild-hired transporters. They scooped up monster bodies, treasures, and other bits of loot inside the dungeon that adventurers couldn’t pick up and brought them back to the surface. It was a crucial job, but it made little money, so most people only did it as a side gig. “I guess I didn’t thank you yet, did I? You were a huge help. The princess is alive and well thanks to you.”

“Don’t mention it. We all need to stick together in times of need.”

“And I ought to thank you as well,” Arwin said, stepping forward. “Matthew told me all about what you did for us. I intend to formally demonstrate my appreciation later, so for now, allow me to say thank you.”

“Please, no. I’m not worthy of being thanked by Her Royal Highness,” he murmured, looking downward and rubbing a hand over his shiny pate. The shift in his balance caused a few of the eggplants to topple out of his crate. “Oops. Sorry about that.”

He reached out to grab the vegetables and suddenly froze in an awkward posture. A carriage rode by just behind him, horses whinnying. Were they in a hurry or something? You can’t just blindly whip the poor things. I looked back at Gramps. His shirt hung loosely in this posture, revealing a black symbol around his shoulder.

“Gramps, are you…?”

He noticed my gaze and came back to his senses, abandoning the eggplants and putting his hand over his shoulder.

“Don’t look at me!” he shouted.

“Sorry.”

Arwin was wide-eyed with confusion, but I had a feeling I knew what it was. The mark on his shoulder was the brand of a slave, and slavery was a practice that existed across the entire continent. I picked up the eggplants for him and put them back in his crate.

“It’s been a tough life for you, too, eh?”

“All in the past.”

The practice had been outlawed in this country, as far as I knew, but many places still made use of it.

Slavery wasn’t a single, fixed system, either, and it took various forms in different kingdoms. Some countries had laws against cruel and brutal treatment, while others treated slaves like disposable items to be used until they were discarded. There, they didn’t get a name; they were just ordered around with shouts and whistles and whips. Resistance was forbidden, and anyone seen slacking off would be whipped, beaten, and kicked. Slaves of the same status could receive wildly different treatment, too. The master’s favorite lorded it over the others and disdained the less efficient workers. Live under such a system long enough, and one eventually comes to be proud of a shiny collar.

There are three ways to escape slavery. Either buy one’s own freedom, escape, or die. Whatever method he had used, he couldn’t have had an easy time of it. And even if one becomes free, there’s no erasing the past. Gramps had probably had a brief flashback when he’d heard the crack of the driver’s whip.

Arwin and Noelle had dealt with their own troubles before coming here, and even Ralph had experienced hardship in his life. I didn’t intend to make light of those things. But they were not the same as the pain of losing one’s dignity.

“I thought you were from this land.”

“It wasn’t long ago that I wound up here. About three years back or so,” Gramps said, wiping his sweaty palms on his pants. “But don’t bother yourself with me. There’s been strange rumors about these days. People saying the princess was involved in the stampede.”

“We’ve heard,” Arwin admitted.

The old man got around and saw a lot of people. He must have picked up on the rumor very early on.

“Well, it’s completely false. Don’t spread it to anyone,” I warned. He looked a bit guilty for some reason.

“That’s all of them,” Arwin said, putting the last of the eggplants into his crate, although she was delicately pinching them between two fingers to do so. After patting her hands clean of the imagined taint of eggplant, she said gravely, “Sir, it is a shame the pains you’ve had to go through. Forgive me.”

“Er, it’s not your fault…”

“I shall be praying that the rest of your life is spent in ease and good cheer.”

Then she called for me and marched off, back straight. How gallant.

While I admired her, Gramps glanced at her, then back at me, sizing me up.

“You two aren’t a good match,” he said.

Hey, fuck off.

“Come on,” the princess knight said, already several steps ahead of me.

“So long, Gramps. If you wind up with extra eggplants, deliver them to our house. I’ll buy the whole lot.”

“Your house? But that’s…hey, wait!” he said entreatingly. I just gave him a quick wave and headed off after Arwin.

After Gramps, we resumed the route home. It was still light out, so we didn’t have to worry as much about being attacked. But the rumors meant I kept sensing nasty looks from time to time. It was very distracting, and it made me pick up my pace so we didn’t get harassed like earlier.

“About Sol Magni,” Arwin said once we had left the main street for the residential district, walking side by side. I grunted, suddenly focused. She had surely sent Ralph and Noelle off to make it easier to speak with me about this. “Do you really think that monster is dead?”

“I find it hard to believe. What about you?”

“I don’t mean to sell those girls’ skill and worthiness short, but I have a hard time imagining it being an easy fight,” she said.

Arwin had faced off against that preacher. Despite her incredible skill, she had fallen and lost three of her companions.

Then again, there were always other factors in battle: affinities, luck, circumstances, trade-offs. It was always possible to be taken unawares by an inferior opponent. And the Maretto Sisters were magicians. They could have won with powers Arwin didn’t have.

It was also possible they’d only beaten a clever fake or a body double, but we didn’t have enough information to say for sure. It’d be better to talk to them in person.

“So what is that monster, really? You know, don’t you?” she asked.

So here we were. If I told her, I would have to explain about the earthworm sun god. Even if I managed to tiptoe around the topic of my curse, it could easily mean involving her in my personal battle.

When I didn’t respond right away, Arwin exhaled mightily.

“I’ve relied on you in so many ways. More recently, you’ve seen some very ugly sides of me. I understand if you can’t trust me at this point. But,” she said, gazing intently at me, “if that monster is still alive, it will come after me again. And once that happens, it’ll already be too late. This is my fight.”

She put a hand to her chest.

“And not just that. I died back then, didn’t I?” she asked, though her tone of voice said it was more a statement than a question. “At the very least, they weren’t wounds I should have survived. I doubt magic would have cured them. But here I am now. In what little consciousness I had, I saw you speaking with that Nicholas fellow. You two saved me, didn’t you?”

“Or maybe we just dragged you into hell instead.”

If she had died, at least she’d be at peace now.

“Even still,” she continued, grimacing, “we’re only speaking now because I’m alive. For that alone, I’m grateful.”

When it came from the very pit of her stomach like that, I couldn’t possibly argue.

“I know.”

I was resigned. Even if that monster truly was dead, as long as she was around me, another preacher would come along to torment Arwin. It would be too late to regret it once the moment had arrived. We needed to act—for her sake.

“He’s a preacher. A henchman of that cowshit sun god.”

And then I told her what I could. That the sun god’s follower was seeking the Astral Crystal inside the dungeon. That he was trying to eliminate the town and people in it who might interfere. That the preacher had been pulling the strings on the stampede, and that he’d been the one who had nearly killed Arwin. That he was likely the founder of Sol Magni. When she learned her cousin Roland was in league with them, she went pale. I told her it was Dez who had beaten him.

I also told her about the piece of the shroud in her heart. Just that it was a precious object related to the sun god, without

any other information regarding Nicholas.

Once I was finished, she rounded on me with anger, just as I'd expected.

"Why did you not tell me?"

"Because it started off as *my* problem." I didn't want her to have anything to do with that latrine of a sun god. "And I don't want to make your burden any heavier than it already is."

Arwin's mouth clamped shut. She didn't accept that reasoning, but she didn't have a good rebuttal, it seemed. She had just given in to her burden in the recent past. Instead, she switched to a different topic.

"When that preacher, as you call him, caught me by surprise," she started. The worsening of her dungeon sickness had made her memory foggy for a time, but she was recalling events more clearly in recent days. "He thought he had killed me and let down his guard. After casting a strange spell on the dungeon, he said, 'Now I no longer need to enter this infernal hole.'"

According to Nicholas, the dungeon limited the power of the preachers. And the guy had run out of strength and needed to flee before he could kill Arwin for good. He'd probably muttered that due to the agony of being in there.

"This means two things," Arwin said, holding up a pair of fingers. "That monster is holding the stampede back right now. And he was part of the rescue team that went to help Aegis."

"Hold on a sec."

The first part, I got. If he had control over the stampede now, he wouldn't need to go in the dungeon again. But what did she mean by the second part?

"His power only works for a short period of time within the dungeon, I believe. So how did he get down to the thirteenth floor? And more importantly, has any nonadventurer been going in and out of the dungeon?"

The guild controlled access to the dungeon. It would be very difficult to get inside without being noticed. If he could turn invisible and slip past watching eyes, then he wouldn't need to deal with us at all.

"I think he joined the rescue operation as a human, then turned into the preacher on the thirteenth floor to perform that ritual. But then he encountered us, and it turned into a battle."

And after defeating them, he had resumed the ritual. Once he'd had control over the stampede, he'd returned to his previous form and rejoined the group, which had been none the wiser. That fog before we'd found Arwin's party had probably been his doing. It'd been a piece of staging that made it easier to split the rescue team up and make his own absence believable.

At the time, aside from me and Aegis, there'd only been a few adventurers and guild staffers on the thirteenth floor. And the monster had been one of those few? Son of a bitch.

I'd beaten Roland and Justin after they'd transformed into hideous monsters, so I'd never considered the possibility that they could turn back into humans. Now that I thought about it, it seemed like quite the sacrifice if they had to stay in monstrous form forever after that.

They were henchmen of the dogshit-on-my-shoe sun god. He'd probably taught them the way to return to human form in exchange for a tongue bath of the soles of his boots. Only one question remained: Who was the preacher? The dungeon was already dark enough, and then add in mist. No one would remember where anyone else had been. We could take statements and compare them all, but if it wasn't done very carefully, the mole would be tipped off and strike back at us.

"And one more thing," I said, raising a finger. "He hates you."

The preacher had gone into a vengeful rage just before finishing off Arwin, saying, *"Don't tell me what to do."* He had felt humiliated by being ordered around. Even though he had seemed completely confident and fine when talking to me. He was a proud man, sure, but there had to be a different reason he'd flown into a rage.

"Any ideas?"

"None," she said firmly. "I'd never forget such a distinctive face once I'd seen it."

I suppose not.

"If that preacher is still alive, then this won't be the end of it. He'll try to cause the stampede again, without a doubt."

Which meant he would again come across our path. Indeed.

"Let's return to the Adventurers Guild tomorrow and ask around."

At least we were back in town, but the problems ahead of us were numerous. Having the entire town quivering in fear was troublesome, but having them celebrating was annoying. Festivals tended to get people's guard down and distract them. It was the perfect setting for plotters and saboteurs.

"Well, I bet it'll work out," I said, feigning optimism. I didn't want Arwin to feel down and have a sudden relapse of dungeon sickness.

"By the way," Arwin said, suddenly seeming awkward. "About the other matter…"

"Which matter?" There were so many damned matters that I couldn't begin to guess. She needed to be more specific. "Was it about me going into the Mactarode royal city? I've told you several times now, it was a combination of luck and coincidence, all overlapping."

"I'd like to hear about that, too, but no," she replied, refusing to meet my eye. "It was, um, beneath the village, when you, uh…"

"Ahhh." It clicked into place. "You mean my confession? Of overwhelming and astonishing passion?"

"Don't say that about yourself!" Arwin shouted, red-faced. "Listen. I have a mission and a position to uphold. But I, um, don't want to trample all over your feelings, so…"

"Hey, don't worry about it."

"Huh?" She came up short, taken aback for some reason.

"Just forget it. Say it was only a dream that appeared to you that night, and then it was gone."

I'd expressed those feelings because of the circumstances of the moment, but we came from different social classes and upbringings. It wasn't right to hope for a fairy-tale ending. That sort of conclusion, I'd left behind ages ago.

She looked briefly stunned, then rounded on me with rage in her eyes.

"But you…I…how much I've—!"

This had clearly been weighing on her mind, and having it brushed off so easily made her furious, I suspected. I raised my hands placatingly.

"Sorry, sorry. I apologize if it's been bothering you."

"…Never mind."

She let go and walked quickly past me, making it clear she intended to leave me behind.

“It’s dangerous,” I called out, trotting after her. She got angry so quickly.

I rounded a corner and saw her standing stock-still. We were in front of our house. At first, I thought she’d waited for me there, but I soon realized there was a different reason.

Our home was in ruins.



“What a mess.”

It had been burned to a crisp, from floor to roof. What had once been furniture was now nothing but crumbling ashes.

“Seems burglars got in while we were away.”

It looked like they had gone through our valuables and then set fire to the place. After Cecilia Maretto’s magic had singed the place, they had finished the job. Maybe those rumors had something to do with this, too. If there was a silver lining, it was that *only* the valuables had been lost. The truly priceless things and dark secrets had either been moved to a secret location or destroyed already.

“What now?” Arwin asked. There were no beds, not even a clean floor to sleep on. We couldn’t stay here. The sun was going down, too. If we didn’t do something soon, we’d end up camping out on the streets.

“Get in touch with the landlord and rent a different place, I suppose.”

“Is that possible on such short notice?”

It depended on the property, but the immediate time frame might severely limit our options.

“Either that, or an inn.”

Ralph and Noelle were staying at the Five Sheep, an inn conveniently close to the guild, but we didn’t know if they had any vacancies. Even if we got a room, Arwin had her own circumstances. It was best we didn’t share a room. Also, there were overly horny idiots prowling all over the city, and you never knew if one of them might be bold and foolhardy enough to try breaking into her room. It wasn’t a very reassuring situation for her. And other inns might be even worse.

“Is there anywhere else we can stay, Matthew?”

But when my princess knight makes a request of me, I can’t tell her no.

“Don’t worry,” I said with a smile. “I’ll get us the greatest possible place to spend the night.”

CHAPTER TWO

Goat of Wrath

I woke up to the feeling of something scurrying quickly across my feet.

There was a gray, beady-eyed rat sitting on my legs. When it sensed my awareness, it leaped away and hurried through a tiny hole in the corner of the room.

The bed wasn't my size, so I was once again sleeping on the floor, wrapped in a blanket. It was better than sleeping outdoors, but it still wasn't great. I got up, yawning. There were many craftsmen and workshops in this area, so the sound of clanging hammers and grinding whetstones started early in the morning. I didn't hate the noise of life happening around me, but the banging and pounding of hammers in particular didn't need to start *this* early in the day.

"Hey."

I went downstairs and found Dez sipping tea. In his other hand, he was playing with some mud or a stone or something. He still had that thing? He should be using that hand to fondle his wife's ass.

"Gonna borrow this."

I took a cup from the kitchen and used it to drink some booze I'd filched from Dez's room: his secret store of fruit brandy. He'd dunked some apples into it over the winter. It was a little too sweet, but it was still the perfect thing to pick up a tired body in the morning.

"Really? You just woke up."

"You were the one who suggested this practice to me not long ago."

It was when Arwin and I'd showed up on his doorstep. Probably his idea of how to cheer us up.

"That was then."

“And I’m just as depressed today. Ugh. House burned down, Beardo taking away the one simple joy in my life. It’s all hell.”

“Don’t drink it right in front of me.”

“But you love it, don’t you?” The adventuring days when we’d spent all night drinking together were fond memories now. “Anyway, I’ll take some tea, too. And something to eat with it.”

“Get it yourself.”

“And if I had a beautiful lady companion, too, I’d have nothing to complain about. Anything you can do for me there?” I asked.

The next moment, my body slammed against the wall.

“You really flew like a scrap of paper this time,” he said.

“Your attempts at jokes are so unfunny,” I complained.

For one thing, you’re supposed to say you’ll hit someone before you do. If you say it first, then it becomes a joke. But in Dez’s case, he hits you, *then* announces, “I just hit you,” so it’s not funny in the slightest.

I was getting back up when a very fat, round rat ran over my foot again.

“You keeping pet rats here?”

“Lots of them lately,” he grunted.

“Must be because of the stampede.” The frequent earthquakes had probably eliminated some of their dens, forcing them to seek shelter in Dez’s house instead. “You should probably set up traps. Don’t want them biting your little fellow.”

“I’m already ahead of you,” he said, pointing out a rat trap on the floor of the kitchen.

“What’s all the noise about?” asked Arwin, coming sleepily down the stairs. She was wearing a simple outfit of a men’s white shirt and pants, which only made the high quality of the materials much more apparent.

She’d dropped off her broken armor for repair, but it wasn’t finished yet. After breakfast, I washed the dishes—my lodging payment.

“You’re going to the Adventurers Guild to ask around today, right?” Arwin asked over my shoulder. She’d offered to help with the dishes, but I’d repeatedly declined. If she suffered so much as a patch of dry skin, Noelle and Ralph would beat my brains in.

“I was thinking of speaking to Medusa and some of the others.”

Had anyone been acting strange during the raid on that hideout or the dungeon rescue? It might be pointless to ask, but I thought it was worth doing my due diligence.

“Then I’ll leave that to you. I believe I will go confer with Nicholas.”

I dropped the plate in my hands. It shattered at my feet.

“Wait, are you into silver foxes? I could have dyed my hair if you’d just said a word about it.”

“Idiot.” I turned to see that Arwin’s face was beet red. “I want to ask him about my body.”

“Does it hurt somewhere?”

“No, it’s perfectly well,” she said reassuringly, putting a hand to her chest. “But I find it hard to believe there is a legendary shroud held within my own body. There are some questions I have for him. I’ll take Noelle and Ralph along. That should satisfy you.”

Noelle was one thing, but Ralph was only going to make things worse. I could easily imagine it.

Before long, the pair arrived. We had already told them the previous night about our plans to stay at Dez’s and the change in meeting place.

“Listen up: Your duty is Arwin’s protection. I need you to defend her from stupid thugs, stupid adventurers, and a stupid brat with delusions of grandeur that he’s fit to serve as a bodyguard,” I told Noelle pointedly before leaving Dez’s home. Ralph looked displeased, but I ignored him, of course. I would have preferred to keep drinking and go back to sleep, but I’d probably earn myself a punch for intruding on Dez’s family time. And who knew how long I’d be there, so I needed to stay on his good side.

Just like yesterday, the Adventurers Guild was nearly empty when I got there. Not only was the dungeon closed, but the Founding Festival was also at hand. Only the truly broke would bother to come looking for work in these circumstances. And those few stared miserably at the meager offerings on the job board. I get it. Who wants to work when others are having fun? It’s way better to have fun while others are working.

I wanted to ask the old guildmaster for the news, but he was hustling around to confer with a bunch of muckety-mucks,

apparently. What good was having power if it meant you still had to run around and be busy when you were old? The kept man life was still the best lifestyle.

“Hey, you.”

After a decent wait, the exact ladies I was looking for made an appearance: Beatrice and Cecilia, the leader and sub-leader of the adventuring party known as Medusa. The twin Maretto Sisters.

“Didn’t you go off with the princess to her country?” asked the elder of the two, Cecilia.

“We were visiting a relative of hers to rest and recuperate. Just got back yesterday,” I lied. It was a secret that we had used the dwarves’ hidden Dragon Hall to make the trip. “And now Arwin’s doing much better. Before long, she’ll be able to go into the dungeon again.”

“Oh,” she said without interest, tapping her shoulder with her staff. “Is that all?”

From their perspective, Arwin was a rival plunderer of the dungeon. They’d been aggressive toward her in the past, and they’d also risked their lives to save hers. You would think they’d be at least a *little* interested in her status.

“But she’s done and gone, isn’t she?”

It wasn’t said with malice. It was as casual and plain as if saying, *It’s a cold one today*, or, *They have good deals at that store.*

“I had high hopes for her, but not after that miserable display. Very disappointed. I think I’m done with her.”

It was a very harsh grade. But Cecilia made it clear she viewed Arwin as someone who had been competition in the race to beat the dungeon but was no longer a threat. Simple as that.

“I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“We’re not lending you any money.”

“I want to hear about what happened while we were away.”

“Some other time,” she yawned. How disrespectful.

“I’m not asking for free, of course. I want to thank you for what you did before all this,” I said patiently. Cecilia’s brows rose. It seemed like she might be interested in what I had to offer.

But I was interrupted by another voice calling Cecilia from the other direction.

“They’re asking for us by name again. What do you think?” said Beatrice at the counter, holding up a request form.

“Let me see? And don’t accept it without asking me first again,” she said to her little sister, then turned back to me. “Sorry, but I’ve got work to do. So long, Kept Man.”

That was all I was going to get. I’d have better luck asking the others, it seemed.

I tried asking for details from the other adventurers who were around, but I didn’t get anything useful from them. They were all second- and third-rate chumps, so I couldn’t expect more. Some of them had also been present at the raid on Sol Magni, but they didn’t give me any information I hadn’t already heard from Gloria.

“Hey.” Suddenly, Beatrice was standing next to me. She forced my attention toward her and asked greedily, “Got any candy for me?”

It seemed I had trained her to expect it.

“Afraid I’m all out at the moment. You’ll have to make do with this,” I said, handing her a package of almonds from my pocket instead.

She popped one into her mouth.

“Mmm, yummy.”

“I just bought them at the West Market. They taste sweet, don’t they?”

They’d make for good ingredients in a confection, too. I could even bake cookies with them, although I didn’t carry those around with me, in case they crumbled.

“Got anything else?” Beatrice asked, dangling the empty package upside down. She finished the whole damn thing already?

“Here’s the last of what I’ve got,” I said, giving her peanuts this time.

“These are salty, but they’re pretty good,” she said.

Hey, don’t eat them before I even have a chance to describe them.

“Salted and boiled in the shell. Having nothing but sweets gets tiresome, after all.”

“Didn’t I tell you not to feed strange things to Bea?” snapped Cecilia, glaring over Beatrice’s shoulder. They were perfectly fine items of food.

“These are good. Want to try, Ceci?”

“Maybe later,” she said, snatching the bag of peanuts away and stuffing it into her sister’s pocket. “Let’s get going. We need to meet with our client.”

“Glad to hear business is booming.”

“Until we meet again,” they said, waving as they left.

“Well, damn.”

It didn’t seem like I was going to get any useful information around here. And I was concerned for Arwin. I valued that fallen holy man turned doctor, but our ethical values were quite different. I worried he was going to spill the beans.

So I left ahead of schedule. I had just stepped out of the guild grounds when I nearly got run over and had to leap out of the way. It was another familiar face.

“Yo, Vince.”

It was the captain of the Paladins, Vincent. His handsome face soured when he saw me.

“What are you doing here?” he snapped.

“Just got back to town,” I said, feeling like I’d just had this conversation with Cecilia. “I’ve got some questions for you.”

“Get lost.”

“You’re still looking for the remnants of Sol Magni, aren’t you?”

The thing that made vermin a threat was the inability to easily eradicate them. This was a big town. The old man had a lot of influence, but there was no way to investigate every possible location. They were definitely still hiding out somewhere.

“…It’s none—”

“Don’t tell me it’s none of my business. We were both at the Earth Mother’s brothel, remember? We spent a very memorable day together.” Very memorable, and very hellish. “If you’d found their location, you would’ve tried to take care of it with your group. The fact that you’re here means you’ve come across an enemy you can’t handle, doesn’t it? Like with that monster, Justin.”

“…Come with me,” he muttered, giving up and leading me around the back of the guild. “Yes, we found the Sol Magni hideout, but I came here to deliver a warning.”

“Warning?”

“It seems they’re putting together a plan to target an adventurer.”

He went on to explain that the hideout had been abandoned, but they'd learned of the project through papers that had been left behind.

"They're preparing to disguise themselves as a client to trap their target."

Not all people paying for adventurers were legitimate. Some of them harbored their own dark secrets. One of the classic scams was hiring the guild to steal back one's items from a thief, when it turned out the client was the real thief. Taking part in smuggling, getting manipulated into a contested border situation, deceiving and being deceived—it was a world full of sordid business like this. Of course, the guild filtered out suspicious jobs and clients based on their own good judgment, but sometimes things slipped through. So a smart adventurer had to check the contents of the listing first. Cecilia wouldn't fail to do a thorough assessment, even if Beatrice would.

"What about the town guard?"

If it involved the peace and security of the town, they ought to help.

"They're too busy providing security for the Founding Festival." As far as they knew, the group had already been eradicated. If they're not presently causing trouble and generally staying low, the guards didn't want to go around looking for their lair. It would be too easy to get a nasty surprise that way.

"Well, I'm going. Don't go around asking too many questions," Vincent said. Rather cheap fellow, to demand that I hush without paying hush money. He spun on his heel, but then he hesitated and reluctantly looked over his shoulder to say, "Give my best to Lady Arwin."

"Will do."

I liked that considerate side of him—whether or not it suited his line of work.

So the Sol Magni remnants were going after adventurers. Now that Arwin's party, Aegis, had fallen, the biggest impediment to them in this town would be Medusa, most likely. But the best adventurers were also cautious. They were highly likely to see through a falsified client listing. If I were to try it, I'd…

I decided to return to the guild to see if my momentary suspicion was just idle paranoia. Fortunately, there was just the

one sullen-looking fellow at the counter. He rested his cheek on his fist, the bored sap. I fell onto the counter, holding on for dear life, and put on a convincing display of lack of breath.

"Terrible news. Something's wrong with the door to the dungeon again. I think the monsters are trying to claw their way out!"

"Are you serious?" the man said, going pale. He rushed outside to see for himself. When I was sure no one else was around, I went behind the counter.

The people who worked here were the type to assume that killing me didn't count as a crime. They would never give my questions real, thoughtful answers. So I went into the box of accepted quests on the back desk. It had to be somewhere. I'd be able to tell with my eyes closed. I'd been in this room so many times.

"Here it is." The request Medusa had accepted earlier: *Bring back the liver of a sandy black fox.* Sandy black foxes were monsters from the wasteland to the west. Boiling their livers and sipping the broth was said to be good for joint pain. They were hard to spot in the sand, but they weren't very tough. It was a three-star request at best. Easy work for Medusa.

Nothing about it seemed suspicious. The client was Thomas from Sages Street. I knew Thomas—he was a forty-something scrivener who worked a legitimate job but had some friends in organized crime. He'd been punished a while back for failing at a job. He'd lived, but he was wracked with complications from his injuries and was in constant need of help to ease his pain.

This was not his first request; he'd asked for roughly the same thing twice already in the past month. Medusa had accepted both jobs. This would be the third time.

"Bingo."

I put the document back and jumped over the counter. They offered a normal job the first time or two before they conned their targets with the last one. A classic swindle.

There was no longer a Thomas on Sages Street.

He would have lived a bit longer if he hadn't turned to drugs. But he had, and now he was goblin shit in the dungeon.

Cecilia would've been cautious at first, but after two successful jobs, she probably trusted it was a legitimate client. But this was clearly a trap. It didn't have anything to do with

Arwin, but I hated to see Sol Magni get anything they wanted. And I owed Cecilia a great debt.

"I can't just let this happen, I suppose."

I took a shortcut to a two-story stone building on the outskirts of Sages Street. I'd passed by there a number of times on the way to Nicholas's home. The scrivener sign was out, but it didn't look like anyone was doing business. The windows were boarded up, and the door was shut, but I saw signs of recent passage. They'd taken over the storefront of someone who was deceased. I was positive Medusa had come in here. The peanut shells littering the ground nearby elicited a sigh.

It didn't seem like anyone was inside. The door was locked, of course, but my thief-like picking skills helped me get past it.

The air inside wasn't dusty. If the place wasn't cleaned properly, Cecilia and Beatrice would've been suspicious that it might not be a legitimate business.

To tell the truth, this was my third visit. The first time had been purely as a customer, and the second had been to check on Thomas's "stockpile." Now I searched around, but I couldn't find a soul. There was no one upstairs, either. That was when I recalled something.

There had been a storage basement, too. In the back room, there was a mess of bottles of alcohol—a quick and easy anesthetic—and a hatch had been underneath them. It wasn't all that big down there, but it could hold several people. I found signs it had been accessed recently. Had the girls not noticed or thought it suspicious?

Just then, I heard someone rushing toward me. By the time I turned around, there was a man swinging a bottle at me.

Immediately, I pulled a crystal ball from my pocket, spoke the activation word, and hurled it at him.

"Irradiation!"

The temporary sun shone with a dazzling light, burning the man's eyes with sunlight and causing him to drop the bottle and back away, covering his face. I only saw it for an instant, but I did recognize his mug. He was in Sol Magni—and that meant interrogation would get me nowhere.

Instead, I charged him and slammed my right fist into his face. I could feel flesh contorting and giving way under my fingers. Once I was sure he was dead and none of his cohorts were around, I checked the body. In his pocket, I found that

damned eye-melting sigil. Then I pried open the lock on the basement hatch and deactivated the temporary sun.

"I was right."

Cecilia and Beatrice had been lured down there.

The only notable things I spotted in the room were a wallet and a filthy idol of that garbage sun god. I tossed the disgusting figurine into the trash and helped myself to the contents of the wallet.

Down in the basement, there were lit candles on the wall.

"The hell is this?"

An enormous hole yawned in the wall of the basement, likely dug out by a pickax or shovel. The edges of the hole were naked earth; it didn't take a genius to know who'd done this.

Whether they'd found this basement by coincidence or aimed for it from the start, it was clear Sol Magni had infiltrated this place. It was too dark to see farther in. It seemed to go pretty deep. No point dawdling now. I grabbed a nearby candleholder and went into the hole.

The path turned to the side immediately, then continued straight before opening up into a cavern with rock walls. Water from the surface dripped down from above, and several stalactites hung from the ceiling.

They'd clearly made use of a natural cave. Based on the way sound echoed, it seemed quite large. I could see a bright light in the distance. I used the candles to make my way in that direction, where I began to hear signs of combat. It was difficult to control my impulse to rush ahead. I stuck to the wall and stayed low, peering into the distance.

The ceiling here was high, and there were more candles installed on the walls, so I had no issues with visibility. Near the end of the cave, there was a spacious room, rather worn and aged, so it definitely hadn't been built recently. Someone had used it as a storage space in the distant past, and Sol Magni had found it and were reusing it, I theorized. There was an altar in the center with a small stone statue on it: the sun god. They just had to bring such a vulgar thing in here.

And a little way from the center, the Maretto Sisters were battling an enormous monster.

It was a goat-headed demon with black wings growing from its back, plus human arms and a human torso. Its lower half

was furry, with legs ending in goatlike hooves. A baphomet, then.

That was a bad sign.

Baphomets were highly resistant to magic. A garden-variety spell wouldn't harm them, and anything that would had to be strong enough to destroy the whole area. They might end up burying themselves alive. Maybe they had lured the girls here to prevent them from using their most powerful spells. And Medusa's strength was their offensive magic, starting with the Maretto Sisters. This was a bad matchup.

In fact, one of their party was already injured, resting on the ground at a distance from the fighting while another member healed them.

There were a number of bodies strewn about the area, but these were Sol Magni cultists, not Medusa. A few of them looked like gangsters, too, for some reason. There were no other figures present.

Blood was dripping from the altar. Resting on top of it was what had once been a human, although the remains were barely recognizable anymore. Based on the size of the body, they looked to have been about as old as the squirt.

So that was why they had kidnapped her. The thought made my blood boil.

"Burn right through! Flame Needle!"

Fire issued from Beatrice's enormous staff. It formed projectiles that pierced through the baphomet, but they didn't appear to leave any marks. The massive, powerful beast was carrying a stone pillar and swung it about wildly, causing a gale. One hit from the pillar would mean instant death.

"Ugh, this is so infuriating!" Beatrice ranted, clawing at her hair. Her magic spells were all-powerful in the sturdy dungeon, where structural integrity wasn't an issue, but she had to be much more careful in a regular subterranean environment. "I think we've got no choice. Get *that* ready, Ceci!"

"Calm down, Bea," Cecilia said, trying to placate her younger sister. "If we do that now, we'll be helpless afterward. There might be more of them after this. I'm going to distract it. You take everyone else and go back to the surface!"

"Got it," said Beatrice immediately, either because she trusted her older sister or she just lacked critical thinking skills.

She hung her staff over her shoulder and hurried to her party mates.

The baphomet tried to go after her, but Cecilia intervened. She generated dozens, then hundreds of small fire orbs and hurled them at the demon. They didn't seem to do any damage, but they did pelt and push it around relentlessly. When it came to a stop, the baphomet's legs went out from under it thanks to Cecilia's magic. It lost its balance, the pillar went flying, and the monster fell to its knees. This was the real goal, not damage via the distracting fireballs.

Realizing it couldn't walk, the baphomet beat its wings instead, but that just changed the target of the fiery orbs to its wings. This was just to buy time, because they couldn't really hurt the creature. When the beast fell to the ground, Cecilia used another spell to transform the rock around it, binding the baphomet's body to the floor.

It was growing tired of the interference. The baphomet smashed the rock binds and hurtled to its feet, then jumped away. When it landed, it sat down cross-legged and sucked in a deep breath. This wasn't good.

"Cover your ears!" I shouted, sticking my fingers in my own.

A wordless bellow erupted from the creature. The very air seemed to tremble around us.

"Why…Matthew? What did…I…?"

A chill ran up my spine. The memory of a woman, lying on the ground, tears in her eyes, came vividly into my mind.

It was the baphomet's psychic attack. Some kinds of magic could elevate the mind and inspire courage. The opposite was also true.

Every human being has painful memories that accrue over the course of a lifetime. These mental wounds, even among the seemingly unflappable, continue to bleed deep down, never scabbing over and healing. The baphomet's roar could dredge these memories up to the surface and amplify them.

Just hearing the sound threatened to overcome one's mind with the awful experience. At that point, the target would be paralyzed with agony. There was no way to fight it—one could only weep, curl into a ball, and beg for forgiveness. I saw the

members of Medusa holding their heads, tearing at their hair, and writhing about.

The baphomet rose to its feet with a smirk, pleased with its success. It strode toward Medusa, confident in its victory.

Beatrice was flat on her back, unable to go to her friends' aid, and Cecilia was on her knees with her head in her hands.

I didn't think they were weak or pathetic. Any adventurer would have come across unpleasant experiences. And Cecilia had been abandoned by her family at a young age.

The same was true for me. Memories I never wanted to recall were flooding through my mind and swirling around in there. If I were in bed, I'd be hugging my blanket, rolling around, and shouting loud enough to drown out the voices. But this was a battle, and the enemy was in our presence. If we did nothing, then we would die, simple as that. So would you pipe down for just a minute, Vanessa?

"Irradiation," I said, popping out of the hole and lighting up the temporary sun.

I took off running as I landed and skidded to a halt in the baphomet's path.

"Hey, boss. Lookin' pleased with yourself. What's up, got a date-and-mate with a hot goatess tonight?"

The goat head promptly looked displeased. I get it, pal. It's no fun hearing the comparisons, even if they are accurate. People used to call me horse-face.

"Unfortunately, your date's off. She's gonna be mating with a much more handsome goat than you," I said, picking up the stone pillar the baphomet had been using moments earlier. I thought I detected momentary alarm in its eyes. "Well, you overgrown livestock, come on! I'll cook you up however you like—minced, diced, barbeque, you name it."

The baphomet bellowed and came after me, thankfully. That would save me some time.

"Here goes!"

I spun the pillar around and smashed it against the goat's head. It broke in the middle, sending stone chunks flying.

"Try this out."

I hurled the remaining half of the pillar against the baphomet's stomach. Liquid sprayed from its mouth, though whether it was saliva or stomach juices was unclear, and frankly, I didn't care to know.

The baphomet, as it so happened, had the same weaknesses as a regular goat. Its skull was thick, but its belly was soft. It bent over and then charged at me, holding its arms over its stomach just in case I attacked it there. It also lowered its head to maximize defense, knowing that if I hit it, its skull would hold firm. And it was correct—against anyone but me, that is.

Right as the baphomet reached me, I leaped up with a roar and slammed my fist into its forehead. It made my hand go numb, but I'd been expecting that. When the demon fell backward with its eyes spinning, I grabbed one of the goat horns and put a foot on its face.

"Just gonna borrow this."

I flexed the muscles in my back and wrenched the horn out of its head. Gouts of blood erupted from the baphomet, coating its goat face red. The creature screamed and thrashed in agony.

"Oops, sorry. Here, you can have it back."

I turned the horn around and jammed the point right into the base I'd ripped it from. Red blood oozed from its eyes. The baphomet collapsed backward and was still, aside from some twitching. Then it turned to gray dust and vanished. When demons from another world perished, they returned to their original home, it was said. Once I was sure another one wasn't forthcoming, I turned off the temporary sun.

"Hmm?"

Suddenly, I sensed a presence from the passageway, probably a companion of some of those dead bodies strewn about. Maybe they'd come to see what had happened when their buddies hadn't returned from the cave.

"It's you…"

I recognized the voice behind that involuntary mutter. I grabbed a candleholder and turned toward the new arrival. The meager light revealed a face covered in bandages. The build was clearly male, but there were bandages around the hands and body, too, not just the face. The skin around the eye sockets was hideously burned. I recognized those beastlike eyes.

"Are you…Reggie?"

He had been a mobster, formerly a lieutenant of Tri-Hydra. Arwin and I had ruined their human trafficking scheme, and the group had collapsed after that. Reggie had fled, swearing vengeance, and he'd come back to attack Arwin when she had

been suffering from dungeon sickness. He'd even convinced some very unsavory adventurers to join him.

It was Cecilia who'd saved us at the last possible moment. Reggie had been hurled away, his body engulfed by magical flames. I'd had no idea he was still alive.

Now things were coming into focus. Somewhere, somehow, Reggie had gotten connected to Sol Magni. And given his expertise, he'd be familiar with shortcuts and secret passages that officials and adventurers didn't know about.

He also wanted revenge on Cecilia for roasting him alive. We'd been out of town for a while, so he'd targeted Cecilia instead of us. The summoning of the baphomet must've been meant to neutralize their magic.

"Not you again! Why are you always ruining my life?!" Reggie shrieked, full of rage that had built up over the years.

"That's exactly what I wanna say to you, seriously." The last thing I wanted to do right now was deal with him. "But I suppose fate has brought us together again. I'll take you on," I said, pointing at the area where the baphomet had been. Reggie backed away. He'd seen the fight, and he didn't want a piece of me—but I had a desire to settle this simmering feud for good.

"Tsk!"

He clicked his tongue with frustration, turned his back, and ran. Hey now, I don't think so. I reached into my pocket and tried to take out the temporary sun, but a shock ran through my fingers. The translucent orb slipped from my hand and began rolling away in the darkness.

"Shit!"

A smug look of triumph came over Reggie's face. He'd pretended to run away, then hurled a rock at my hand.

"Aw, too bad. I know your game. That little thing's the source of your power, ain't it?" he gloated, wiping a knife on his bandages and approaching.

"That's where you're wrong," I said. Technically, it was regaining the power I already had.

"Well, I don't care, really. The point is, you're just a namby-pamby kept man now, ain'tcha?"

"I don't know, am I?" I taunted, flexing my fists. Reggie wasn't moving too well; he was clearly still wounded from his burns. I hoped maybe that would give me a chance, but reality was cold to weak little Matthew. In a blink, he pushed my back

up against the wall, trapping me. Reggie loomed before me like a figure out of my nightmares, brandishing his knife and leering at his prey. “I don’t suppose we could talk this over?” I figured I’d at least ask.

“That’s not a very clever joke! Already out of wisecracks, are we? What about your smoke bombs?”

He was talking about the time I’d raided his hideout. Those smoke bombs had done wonders throwing Reggie and his henchmen into confusion and chaos.

“Didn’t I tell you already? It takes about a week for me to stock more.”

“It’s been over a year since then,” Reggie snarled. “And I believe I told you then, ‘I want them *now*!’”

He swiped at me with his knife. I twisted to avoid it, but my body moved as slowly and helplessly as if I were on the seafloor. The blade was bearing down on my chest. Sweat exploded from every pore of my body.

And in the next instant, flames shot out of nowhere and hit Reggie in the back. He screamed and backed away as his bandages caught fire. I took the opportunity to get away from the wall and crawled away from him.

“Stupid bitch. Not this again…,” he growled, turning around to see a confused woman holding a massive staff.

“What do you mean?” asked Beatrice. “Also, who *are* you?”

“That’s Reggie, a mobster. Your sister turned him into a fireball a while back. Seems like this is supposed to be his revenge,” I explained to her.

“Ah, I see now,” Beatrice said, nodding repeatedly. “I’ll do it, too, then.”

She fired several Flame Needles with a swing of her staff. In an instant, his bandaged body was wreathed in flames.

He let out a wordless howl and tumbled onto the rocky floor of the cave. In the darkness, a flame in the shape of a person rolled and crawled until it abruptly vanished along with a trailing scream.

“So he fell through there.”

I held up the light to see a yawning hole near the side of the cave. He should still be burning, but I couldn’t see him from here. I tried tossing a rock down the hole, but I didn’t hear it land. No way to confirm his dead body now.

I would've liked to get some information from Reggie. I'd have to be satisfied that he couldn't take home any intel about us to his friends.

"You saved me there. Thanks," I said.

"So are we even now?" Beatrice asked smugly, sitting on some rubble. The only thing larger than her attitude was the cleavage I was staring down at from above.

"If you spend a night with me, I'm willing to wipe the slate clean."

She did not accept the deal.

The effects of the psychic attack wouldn't last long. The baphomet that had cast it was defeated, so they'd be back to normal soon. Sol Magni and Reggie's goons showed no sign of returning, so we'd be all right waiting around. I recovered the temporary sun, but it didn't have much charge left, so I couldn't carry everyone out of there.

"You all right?" asked Beatrice as the members of Medusa unsteadily got to their feet. Their faces were pale, but they were recovering—except for one.

"Ceci!"

As soon as Cecilia woke up from her unconscious state, she began writhing in agony. Her breathing was heavy and labored, she went on all fours like an animal, and she balled her hands into fists. Even her eyes were bloodshot. She was clearly unwell. She covered her head with her hands and screamed, ripping at her hair and arching her back. It looked like she was going to slam her head into the wall.

Her priest companion got her in a headlock, but Cecilia was strong and desperate enough that she was going to break free before long.

"Can't you use magic on her?" I asked.

When Arwin had been suffering the same way, Cecilia had used magic to put her to sleep. Surely that would work here, too.

"That was Ceci's spell, not mine!"

Oops.

"Pardon me," I said, crouching down in front of Cecilia to take her hand. It was clear she was going to hurt either herself or her companions. "Listen, I get it. That bastard stirred up all kinds of stuff inside your head. I'd want to thrash around, too.

But everyone here is on your side. There's nothing to be afraid of."

From her hands and knees, she launched herself forward and head-butted me. The bridge of my nose stung. Her head was hard as a rock.

"Take a deep breath, then start counting. We'll go down from a hundred. One hundred, ninety-nine, ninety-eight…," I counted, pretending I didn't feel it and looking Cecilia in her bloodshot eyes.

She scratched and slapped at me, but eventually she realized I meant no harm and slowly calmed down. Before I finished counting, she had taken a deep breath and sat down. It seemed like she was in control now. Beatrice hugged her and whispered something into her ear.

I stepped away for a moment, sensing she didn't want to be overheard. After a bit, the sisters' conversation wrapped up, so I handed Beatrice a cup that had been sitting at the edge of the chamber.

"Give her something to drink. Should help her relax a bit."

Even worshippers of the decrepit sun god experienced hunger and thirst like any other human being. And as this was their base, they had a stock of water and food. Even some money.

Beatrice gave me a skeptical look. "There's nothing weird in it?"

"I already checked it out."

After all, there could have been drugs in the water that turned those who drank it into airheads. If I were a cult founder, I know that's what I would do.

We gave the others water to drink, too, to help put them at ease. Then I was ready for a break. During that time, I considered exploring the place, but Beatrice approached me, hoping to talk. I sat down on a rock by the statue while Beatrice cremated the bodies of the children who'd been sacrificed at the altar.

"I want to thank you for earlier. In Ceci's place."

"If you want to thank me, a night together would—"

"The way you comforted her, it felt like you had experience doing that," she said, refusing my suggestion again. "Is that a trick of the trade? As a kept man, I mean."

"You could say that."

When you live long enough, you learn how to deal with people who bring you plenty of trouble. Like ex-lovers.

"So why are you here anyway?" she asked.

I gave her a brief explanation. I'd heard a story about Sol Magni's remnants attempting to assassinate some adventurer or another. I'd followed the trail, hoping to warn their victims, then seen that this place had been entered recently. There, I'd found Beatrice's party locked in a desperate battle, and it was at that point that a mysterious and handsome Adventurer X had appeared, slaying the baphomet with great bravery and daring before vanishing like the wind as quickly as he'd appeared.

"Yeah, yeah, enough of that," she said, cutting through my brilliant story. Apparently, I wasn't going to be a successful playwright anytime soon.

"You guys took out their hideout recently, didn't you? I want to hear more about that," I said, probing for more information.

"Are you saying you came all the way down here to ask me that?"

"It just turned out that way," I said. I'd never have chosen to venture all the way underground otherwise. "You get it, right? Sol Magni isn't wiped out. That monster you defeated was either a fake or a substitute. I think the boss is still lurking around somewhere."

Beatrice scowled with displeasure.

"You had that big showdown with them, right? Did you notice anything? Tell me what you learned."

"Nothing."

"I'd like to hear what your sister has to say."

"Ceci will tell you the same thing."

So they'd blown them away with magic, and it'd been over in a blink. A breeze, then, but sloppy work.

"Now it's my turn," Beatrice said meaningfully, giving me a piercing stare. "Who are you really? And don't say 'Arwin's kept man.'"

Well, what was I supposed to say if my entire existence was apparently an invalid definition?

"You're so insanely powerful. Where'd you get that strength? I thought you were a minotaur. And yet you never once went into the dungeon until that trip to rescue Arwin. Why?"

So she'd seen me. Damn.

“I don’t like the dark,” I said. “It’s a struggle just to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night.”

“Liar.”

“You could spend a night with me and see for your—”

Beatrice slugged me with her staff. “And have you used your strength to slaughter every thug who tries to go after Arwin?” she asked.

So Cecilia had talked. These sisters shared too much.

“Your sister’s got the wrong idea.”

“Not Ceci. It’s not possible. Ceci is too smart to be wrong.”

She stated it as a fact. This girl loves her sister too much. Especially since she has the same face.

“I’d prefer if you kept that a secret,” I said.

“No,” Beatrice declared, shaking her head. “I’ve already sworn not to keep secrets from Ceci.”

“Oh. Great.”

Give me a break. I was getting absolutely nothing for saving both of their lives.

“And what about you, are you feeling all right? Say the word if it’s still tough. You’re both in the same boat.”

The closer to the source of the baphomet’s psychic attack, the worse the damage. Beatrice had been the closest to the brunt of it, but she had been the first to recover and seemed totally fine.

“I’ve never been the type to hold on to the past,” she explained.

Maybe some people were uniquely resistant to the nature of the baphomet’s mental attack, but it seemed strange that someone would be unaffected. Either she had an extremely strong mind or an extremely simple one.

“But Ceci is different. She’s…been through some stuff.”

“So I’ve heard. You saved Cecilia when you two were little.”

Beatrice’s eyes bulged. “She told you?”

“Must’ve been the atmosphere at the time.”

“Then did you hear what happened after that?”

“The part about you being found by a wandering magician who taught you how to use magic?”

“Ah, up to that part,” Beatrice remarked, nodding. “Well, our mentor was the reason we became adventurers, too.”

“I wasn’t really asking. I’m not interested.”

“Well, too bad. I want to talk.”

And then Beatrice proceeded to tell me about their dream.

Cecilia and Beatrice had been forced to leave home at a young age because of an incident that had alienated them from their family. A few days out from their rural village and lost on the roads, the sisters had come across a magician.

"That was Dahlia Maretto. She became our grandma."

Dahlia took the sisters to her village. They were disturbed by how similar the mountains there were to their hometown. She'd said to them, "*I'm giving you a choice. Do you want to join my family and be mages or not?*"

Magicians have a rule that they only teach magic to their relatives. So when they take apprentices, the students must take the master's last name.

Dahlia had many apprentices. Magicians are human, too, and they are wracked by negative emotions and experiences: grudges, bullying, unfair treatment, abuse, violence, and so on. They were people who were treated like shit until they could no longer stand it and ran away—and they'd all ended up at Dahlia's.

When assuming a magician's name, even if it was just for show, it went against the rules of magic society to apprentice under a different mage. But Dahlia actively scooped up all the dregs of magic society who had dropped out of other schools.

"She was too nice. It wasn't becoming for a mage."

Without anywhere else to go, the sisters apprenticed under Dahlia. The training was very harsh, apparently. Beatrice did not have a natural talent for it, but Cecilia showed promise and learned spells rather quickly. She also learned magic from other magicians, not just Dahlia.

While they may have been dropouts, the school was full of mages of all kinds. Different schools taught different types of magic, and it required a certain amount of innate talent to learn multiple types of magic, but Cecilia proved herself skilled enough to do it. The two sisters were the only young girls in the group, and the others doted on them.

"So when Cecilia mentioned her daddy and mama…"

"Yes, she was talking about our family at the Maretto school."

A decade later, the Maretto sisters had to decide on their future path.

Not all magicians are created equal. Some fire off attack spells in combat, while others are scholars who focus on the pursuit of grand truths. Some live like hermits in the forest to pursue inner wisdom, while others are court magicians who use their knowledge to serve royal and noble families.

Dahlia Maretto was the scholarly type. Her field of research was dungeons. There were many mysteries surrounding the formation of dungeons and the nature of their existence. Her goal was to solve these mysteries.

“We had so many dreams back then. There were so many options.”

But those options were wiped clean in a way they’d never expected.

One day, one of Dahlia’s apprentices brought back a strange statue from a journey. It had been found at the bottom of a dungeon by an adventurer. But while examining the stone statue, it began to release a purple mist—and then a swarm of monsters attacked the village.

It had been the work of another magic school that chafed at Dahlia’s presence.

Naturally, the Maretto apprentices fought back, but their magic was inaccessible. The purple mist that came from the statue absorbed their magical power and prevented them from making use of it.

Dahlia and the rest of the Maretto school were wiped out. Cecilia and Beatrice were the only survivors because they just so happened to be running an errand out of town. Having lost their family once again, the sisters tracked down the magicians who had orchestrated the sabotage, and enacted their revenge.

Once that bloody act was complete, their next goal was rebuilding the Maretto school…to ensure the name of Dahlia Maretto and her pupils was not forgotten. To tell the world, *The Maretto school is right here, damn you!* Cecilia and Beatrice turned into adventurers and traveled around in search of the dungeons Dahlia had studied so fervently. The story would be continued in our next lecture.

“That sounds like quite an ordeal,” I said with great sympathy at the end of her very long story.

In essence, their goal was fame, not the Astral Crystal itself. Their oversize attitudes and posturing were designed to sell that image. While they weren’t going to pull off the adventuring

clan they'd proposed before, they might have the chance to fight alongside Arwin for a short period. It was a major boon just knowing we could negotiate with them now.

"I'm not looking for sympathy."

"I certainly understand how much you love your big sister."

Beatrice had left her village, continued training as a magician, and challenged the dungeon here, all for Cecilia. While she seemed freewheeling and selfish, it was all with her sister in mind. The elder cared for the younger, and the younger for the elder. It was a beautiful example of sibling love.

"Of course I do. I couldn't be prouder of my big sister, Ceci," she said happily. "Oh, she's up."

Beatrice's expression rapidly shifted. She ran over to her companions, where Cecilia's eyes were open now and she was sluggishly working her way up to a sitting position.

"How do you feel?" I asked.

Cecilia clicked her tongue with annoyance. "Terrible, now that I've seen your stupid face."

"Hmm, that's strange. Usually, everyone's delighted to see me."

"Only the princess knight is."

"Maybe you're right."

Though she'd probably be furious if she heard that.

After a while, we made our way out of the cave and up to the surface. The sunlight was blinding.

"Oh, right, speaking of the thanks from earlier," I said, "could you keep my part a secret? Just say you were the ones who wiped out the Sol Magni remnants and the baphomet. Especially around Arwin, of course."

"What is this, pity?"

"Hardly." I didn't have any need to waste that emotion on first-class adventurers. This was necessitated by my own situation. "I'm leaving now. I'll pop into the guild, so if you recall anything, let me know."

"…There's nothing to recall," said Cecilia behind me. "Is this about us crushing Sol Magni? Sure thing, I'll tell you everything. What do you want to know?"

"I was going to ask about the monster, but it doesn't need to be right now."

"He died. He was just as you saw him. An egg-like head, large eyes, strange fangs, and black limbs. Oh, there was a

strange pattern on his upper arm. Not quite the same as the one you mentioned, though."

"I see."

"I wish I could show you the body, but it erupted into red mist and vanished."

"Uh-huh."

Red mist, eh?

Damn, that was a lot of trouble to learn one little detail like that.

"Got it. Well, until next time."

I left them behind. I thought I heard murmurs of hesitation, but I chose to ignore them. It wasn't like turning back was going to get me anything good.

I'd learned that from years of experience.

CHAPTER THREE

The Envious

As the sun went down, I stumbled back home.

It had been a horrible experience, but not without merit.

That preacher was still alive.

He was lurking around like a sewer rat, waiting for his chance to sneak out once more.

I could easily guess why: He wanted to massacre the townspeople. The richest members of town had already fled in terror. The stampede would fade eventually, and the dungeon would be reopened. Once the monsters were gone, the citizens could take their time returning. So the preacher had chosen to play dead and temporarily quell the stampede. He was going to make everyone think it was safe for good and flock back to the town before he caused an explosion out of nowhere.

Roland had said, "*I will* purify *this city.*"

With his last words, Justin had claimed, "*Either way, this town is finished. You and that princess knight and everyone else will die.*"

Lastly, the preacher had announced, "*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.*"

Their tenacity knew no bounds. They would do whatever it took to destroy this city.

They were playing dead, skulking about at this very moment. The preacher was timing out the Founding Festival, waiting for the population to peak before activating the stampede. And unlike the other dungeon cities, there was no

protection and no plan in place here. Many, many people would die.

"Ah."

"Hmm?"

I looked up to see a woman who seemed to be an adventurer staring at me through the window of a pub.

Her name was Fiona, if I recalled correctly. She was still around the city, then. Or else she'd come back for the Founding Festival. In either case, she'd be better off leaving at once. It was thanks to her that both Arwin and I were alive today. And I always repaid a favor.

I was thinking of saying hello and giving her my warning when she beckoned for me to come inside. It didn't seem like an invitation to drink. And the look of annoyance in her eyes suggested she wasn't going to sweet-talk me, either.

"What are you doing here? I thought you left town. What happened to Arwin?" she asked, peppering me with questions. There was only one answer.

"I'm here because it's what Arwin wanted."

"Well, consider this a warning," Fiona said, looking tense. "Get out of town right away. There's no time. The stampede could start at any moment."

"How much do you know?" I asked. The other adventurers assumed it was over, but Fiona knew it had yet to begin. Based on her tone of voice, she was quite certain of it.

"…I can't go into detail. But it's true."

"Well, we came back here to stop it."

If there was really going to be a stampede, Arwin would never flee out of its way. Fiona rested her elbow on the windowsill and shook her head as if she were suffering from a headache. I saw her lips silently mouth the word "*fool*."

"I've been hoping to talk to you about something—are you really an adventurer?" I asked. At the very least, I hadn't seen her around the guild. She claimed to know Arwin personally, but only by her own admission. With everything that had happened, I hadn't been able to confirm with Arwin. I didn't even know if Fiona was her real name. She could be a spy sent by Sol Magni, and I would be none the wiser. Maybe when she'd happened by our house back then, she'd actually been casing the joint. But she *had* saved us when we'd been attacked. I

doubted the cult's followers would do such a thing. So for now, I still wasn't sure of her identity or goals.

"That's right," Fiona said firmly, but I caught a hint of hesitation and worry.

"Do you have a guild card?"

All adventurers had one. It was essentially a form of identification.

"Oh, that. Yeah." She patted herself all over, pretending to look for it, then gave me an embarrassed smile. "Not right now."

"How many stars? What's the name of your party?"

If I knew the name, it would be easy to look up her story. Every party going into the dungeon was required to register with the guild so there was a record of who should be there if anyone got stranded inside.

"I'm three-stars, if I guess right. The name of my party is a secret."

She gave me an atrocious attempt at a playful wink. She wasn't used to this.

"So you have no proof to back up your story."

"I'm telling you myself, so that should be proof enough. Besides, do you know every single adventurer around town?"

"The ones who go into the dungeon, yeah."

If anyone posed a threat to Arwin, it was adventurers. They were strong, but they were also stupid and greedy. They had no scruples, and were constantly in the dungeon along with Arwin. I'd already "persuaded" several adventurers to change careers to dead bodies ripe for the picking by bandits.

"But there are some people whose faces you'd recognize, but not their names, right?"

I started to say no, but then a number of people I knew but wasn't on a first-name basis with crossed my mind.

She had me there. A small village would be one thing, but a place the size of Gray Neighbor had more folks that inhabited that wide social circle. I didn't ask shopkeepers what all their names were, for example. Even people whom I considered random faces in the crowd were their own individuals, the protagonists of their own lives. To them, *I* was the random stranger.

"Let's be friends starting now, then. I'd appreciate it if you taught me a few things."

“Are you trying to talk your way into my bed? Wouldn’t your lover girl be upset about that?” she teased, but it was obvious she was trying to change the subject.

“I’m not Arwin’s lover. Just her pet.”

“Huh?” Fiona squawked.

“Do I look that worthwhile to you?”

No money, no strength, no job. No influence, no connections. I had nothing.

“Unbelievable. What is that princess thinking…?” Fiona said, finally convinced after I insisted several times. She hung her head in her hands.

The situation was getting even more bizarre. Our *outward* appearance was famous around this town. I hadn’t been trying to flaunt it, but our whole “the beauty and the scoundrel” pairing stood out and got people talking.

If Fiona was really a spy trying to blend in, would she blatantly act so suspicious about our “performed” relationship when it was well-known all over town?

“It seems there’s some confusion between us,” I said. At this point, it’d be quicker to ask her directly. Physically. “Why don’t we get together and have a long, slow chat? All the way until morning. We’ve got time.”

Fiona got the message. She smiled and said, “Fuck off and die.”

My vision went black. The next thing I knew, I was on the ground. I had no idea what had happened to me, but I hadn’t felt any pain or impact. Fiona was gone. I peered inside the building but didn’t see any sign of her.

“Who is she anyway?” She seemed concerned about Arwin, but without knowing her true identity or purpose, I couldn’t let my guard down. “Better double-check with Arwin, too.”

“What about me?”

I spun around to see none other than the princess knight, standing there.

“How’d it go for you?” I asked.

“Fine, for the most part,” she said, smiling awkwardly. That man better not have put any funny ideas in her head. I’d have to find out the details later. “And how about you?”

“Oh, I’ve had my ups and downs,” I said before proceeding to tell her about the Maretto Sisters. Naturally, I left out the

parts about dealing with the baphomet. “In short, it was Reggie trying to get revenge.”

Reggie had connections to Sol Magni. He was probably the one who’d provided that cave space. Well, not only had his vengeance gotten interrupted, he’d been thoroughly roasted. Thanks to the sisters, Sol Magni had lost many members to imprisonment or death. They probably had some common goals that’d brought them together.

“That’s part of it, I suppose, but I think there’s another reason,” Arwin said.

“Such as?”

“To prevent anyone from stopping the stampede, perhaps.”

“Even a very talented adventurer isn’t going to go charging into a horde of monsters,” I countered. It would be like trying to block the path of a waterfall. You could try to stand firm, but the flow would win out in the end. Still, Arwin had a point. If I hadn’t gotten involved, Medusa would have at least lost some members, if not been wiped out entirely. Losing party members meant losing overall effectiveness. Maybe they just wanted to decimate some of the most potent opposition for when the stampede arrived. “In that case, Chrysaor and Argo are in trouble, too.”

They’d lost some members, but they were peers of Medusa.

“We can ask Noelle and Ralph to check on them, but if we’re thinking of other prominent adventurers…,” Arwin said, thinking. I recalled the conversation I’d just been having.

“By the way, do you know a woman named Fiona? An adventurer with short blond hair.”

“…Can’t say I do.”

I relayed the earlier scene to her, but Arwin only shook her head after taking a while to ponder it.

“I only know one Fiona,” she said.

“Who’s that?”

“A legendary lady in Mactarode’s history.”

“Was she hot?”

“She was the wife of a nobleman who died of illness. After that, she raised her child on her own.”

A widow. That settled it: She was definitely hot.

“At the time, the king of Mactarode was a wicked man. He was gripped by an immoral greed and led the country into war over treasure.”

“So even Mactarode has suffered under poor leadership.”

“Everything has its exceptions,” Arwin said with a wry smirk. “I suppose I have something in common with that king.”

“You’re joking.” If anything, she’d be the exception for being a hero.

“Eventually, wracked with paranoia, the king stopped trusting even his own family, and he sent soldiers to purge his younger brother the prince and his family. At the time, the prince’s family was staying in Fiona’s manor.”

Oh my.

“The servants were all slain, as were the king’s brother and his wife. Only Fiona, her son, and the king’s nephew Ambrose survived. Fiona had sent the boys into the stable to hide, then returned to her bedchamber.”

She’d offered herself up as a sacrifice? How gallantly tragic.

“When a soldier attempted to assault her, she stole his sword and cut off his member.”

Oh, let’s not talk about that. I’m likely to shrink back up inside my body.

“The soldiers continued to attack, and Fiona fought them all on her own. By the time reinforcements came to her aid, she had died of blood loss. Only her son and Ambrose survived.”

So she had sacrificed herself to protect the royal line and her own son.

“Eventually, Ambrose rose up in rebellion against the king. The king’s vassals turned against him, and he fled the country, making Ambrose the new king.”

“And eventually, his descendants included you.”

Arwin nodded. “Fiona’s son became a decorated knight and served King Ambrose for many years. For giving her life to save her son and the eventual king, Fiona was upheld as a proud symbol of motherhood. If she had not sacrificed herself to protect her son and my great-grandfather, Mactarode would have fallen into ruin generations ago.”

“Hmmm.”

It was hard to find a link between that great historical figure and the mysterious lady today. Maybe my hunch was wrong.

“And this was that knight’s reward,” Arwin said, taking out a ring with a blue gem in it. “This is a ring passed down through

the royal line. It is said to protect the wearer from disaster and evil. Although that's only a saying," she added sadly.

The ring had supposedly been gifted out of the royal line, yet Arwin was in possession of it. There must be a story behind that.

"The real problem is Sol Magni, though." Whatever they were planning, we couldn't do a thing about it without finding out where they were. The Paladins were busy hunting down the stragglers, but the all-important founder was still missing. The guards were too busy with the festival to spare any help for a task like this. "I asked around among the adventurers, but the results were unhelpful. Everyone seems to think this is all done and behind them."

It had little to do with them to begin with. The big, splashy attack had only succeeded in temporarily abducting the guildmaster's granddaughter. Once the quest was over, the rest wasn't their concern. And that was the way of an adventurer: *Don't make business personal.*

"I thought about bringing it up with the local lord, but even that seems difficult at this point."

"We don't have any evidence, after all," I said. They'd just turn us away at the door. We were only speaking hypothetically—even if what we warned about *did* come to pass.

There was no doubt they were lurking somewhere in town. But we didn't know where. I'd been all over the place, but I was still technically an outsider. We didn't have enough people to conduct a proper search. And even if we found the cult members, unless we also took out the one running the show, it would just result in a repeat of the whole thing.

"So we're out of luck."

"Not exactly," Arwin said, giving me a meaningful look. "If we're short on help, we just need to borrow some. Right?"

"A sound argument, but how?"

It would be easy to hire adventurers as long as we paid them. But they were better suited for combat, not searches. It wasn't clear to me that they'd be helpful in a situation where Sol Magni was lying low.

"You know. People who know this city well and can do their jobs effectively."

I had a bad feeling about this.

“And I just got to know one of them not long ago,” Arwin said, searching back through her memory. “I believe his name was Oswald the Cirrocumulus? The lieutenant of the Birds of Prey.”

“No! Absolutely not!” I waved my hands as fiercely as I could. “I get what you mean. And I agree they would be effective—up to a point.” The fellows steeped in the criminal underworld here were old hands with a lifetime’s worth of knowledge about the city. They knew Gray Neighbor far better than Sol Magni or me.

“But the risks are too great. You shouldn’t be getting involved with people like them.” Arwin didn’t understand the kind of people they were. Once they had their hooks in you, they’d suck the marrow from your bones, cremate you, and use the ashes as fertilizer in the groundwork to trap their next prey. Even if they saved the town, that would only give them license to demand who-knows-what-else afterward. “Besides, we don’t even know if they’d keep their word.”

Once, after they’d lost a drinking contest, they had attempted to dispose of Arwin’s party in secret. They would happily break a promise if they realized they were at a disadvantage. Even if Oswald didn’t command it, such betrayal was a fact of life for criminals like them.

“But there’s no time. If those Sol Magni people are going to cause a stampede, they’ll time it to coincide with the Founding Festival. We need to find them and put a stop to it before then, and that might mean making some sacrifices.”

“It doesn’t have to be *you* making the sacrifice.”

“Someone has to do it. If that someone turns out to be me, then so be it.”

What was it with her and rushing headlong into this kind of trouble, one thing after the other?

“…And if they demand *you* again?”

She crossed her arms and murmured, “Then we’ll have another drinking contest.”

And that was how I failed to talk her out of going to the Birds of Prey.

The next day, we paid a visit to the Birds of Prey headquarters. We reached out to Noelle and Ralph, too, of course. Honestly, I would’ve liked for Dez to come along as well,

but he was an Adventurers Guild employee and needed to remain neutral.

The place was a luxurious mansion at the edge of the upper-class area of town on the north side, with white walls and a white roof. At first glance, it looked like any other noble residence, except for the rough-looking men standing guard at the gate. A real noble place had more class.

“So a gangster lives in a palace like this, huh?”

“Did you think they lurked in the sewers with all the rats and sludge?”

They had money. When people had money, they could build whatever house they wanted, wherever they wanted, whether they were nobility or not.

“And this ain’t the only one. He’s got three houses for his lovers and four for his concubines. He can support ten with what he’s got. Not like you.”

We were ushered into a reception room. Arwin and I sat down on a three-seater couch, while Noelle and Ralph stood behind us as bodyguards. The two young’uns seemed nervous. If the situation went bad, it could easily turn into a battle here.

Which was exactly why neither Arwin nor I touched the tea they served us. How many people’s blood, sweat, and tears had been shed for the fine furniture and carpets that adorned this room? Just imagining it made me sick to my stomach.

“Thanks for waiting,” said an imposing man who entered the room after several minutes, joined by some of his followers. It was Oswald, the “Cirrocumulus.” He glared at us, then sat down heavily on the couch across from us, which creaked in protest.

“We have a request,” Arwin said, wasting no time. “We want you to find someone known as the founder of Sol Magni. I’ve come here because I believe you are capable of it.”

“…And what made you think that?”

“Because the town guard and others who know this area well have searched and found nothing. It would be natural to assume someone is sheltering him. People who are very tight-lipped, I suspect. In other words, people like you.” This was the sort of thing that, if spoken carelessly, could easily cause one to lose their life. “Even still, I imagine people in your line of work hear things from one another. I believe you might have heard about this.”

Sheltering human beings creates traces of a certain kind. Money, food, clothing, a place to sleep, a privy. As long as it was a flesh-and-blood human being, all these things were necessary to live. The more people you were hiding, the more supplies needed, and the more people would notice.

"Who's sheltering them? Is it the Devil's Alliance? The Spotted Wolves?" The mention of two rival organizations made Oswald raise an eyebrow. Arwin noticed and smirked. "Or maybe it's you."

Instantly, the Birds of Prey bristled with fury. If Oswald gave the command, they would spring into action. I was unarmed, but Arwin and Ralph had their sword belts. Noelle had hers over her back, for once. It was wrapped in cloth, so I couldn't tell what it was, but I imagined it was powerful.

Maybe we'd be wiped out, but they would suffer a great loss as well. We'd kill Oswald for sure, and a few dozen of his goons on the way out.

The trick to negotiation was to make it clear careless actions would come at a massive cost.

"Knock it off," Oswald said to his men. They lowered their weapons, though they made no attempt to hide their anger. Very scary people. I could just about pee my pants. "Let's say we locate this founder for you. What are you going to offer?"

"What a silly question," Arwin said, blinking innocently. "This is a mass of heretics bent on destroying this town. I would assume finding and crushing them would be to your direct benefit."

These men were feeding off the town we lived in, after all. A parasite couldn't live without its host organism.

"If they destroy it, they destroy it. We move elsewhere."

"Is that the excuse you intend to give to your…main family? Main base? Is that what you call it in the Birds of Prey?"

"There's no excuse to be given when we're talking about a natural disaster, essentially."

"But this is very clearly man-made. It's closer to arson. You know where the arsonists are. Or at the very least, you're in possession of the means to know. But you don't do anything about it. Why?"

"Because he doesn't want to stick his neck into trouble," I said, putting Oswald's mindset into words. Then I continued, directing my analysis at him. "Even you would have trouble

with them. And they're crazy, on top of that. Mess with them in a careless way, and you have no idea what will blow back on you."

With these guys, they could exhibit attitudes that seemed utterly insane, but in most cases, it was all about business. They acted like rabid dogs most viciously when they sensed money was on the line. So they probably knew exactly what a *truly* rabid dog was like, and they didn't want to get bitten.

"Sorry to bother you. We will try elsewhere." Arwin got to her feet.

"Where will we go?" I asked.

She put a hand to her chin thoughtfully. "Either the Devil's Alliance or the Spotted Wolves would do. They probably have more leads than these folks do."

"Please, be my guest," Oswald said, motioning to the exit with his palm. "If you think I'm going to fall for such a cheap provocation, you're quite mistaken. Even if they manage to find that founder for you, there's no guarantee you or anyone else will be able to handle them. And then it'll all be over."

He laughed it off, telling us not to waste our time.

"You'll just be crying over your dungeon sickness again. Better to behave yourself and bounce on some cock—"

His words abruptly stopped.

Arwin's hand was on the sheath of her sword.

Oswald's men raised their weapons again. Noelle and Ralph reached for theirs, convinced the moment had come. Even I clutched the temporary sun in my pocket. I hadn't had time to recharge it fully, so it might not last to the count of three hundred, but it would have enough juice for me to kill all of them, at least.

The tension was broken by Arwin's stately voice.

"Now." Noelle quickly handed over the weapon on her back. They had clearly planned this. "So, still want to try me?" she said, pulling the cloth off the weapon.

I could scarcely believe my eyes.

It was Dawnblade. But when had she…?

"Oh, no, don't…"

But before I could stop her, Arwin was intoning that horrid spell.

"Sol est extrica, avasolus ix terra crea."

Instantly, wedge-shaped red scales erupted from the hilt of the sword. Their insect-like scuttling caused the thugs to screech and leap away. Oswald didn't yelp, but he grimaced, clearly feeling creeped out.

The red scales closed over Arwin's arm, forming a gigantic arm of their own. It was only from the elbow down, but it was as large as another human being.

"Torrisclade moa phosistoris."

This time, the gigantic arm grabbed Oswald, and before he could even fight back, it shook him up and down.

"What's wrong? I thought bouncing was supposed to be fun," Arwin said mockingly.

The red arm let go of the man, and Oswald fell helplessly onto his bottom. Arwin swung the sword, dispersing the red arm.

Oswald's men stared at her with murderous glints in their eyes, but they were also so overwhelmed by what they'd just seen that they were holding back. It seemed even Oswald was frozen where he lay on the ground.

"I have no intention of losing to the same opponent twice," Arwin declared.

This broke Oswald out of his paralysis. He gazed at Arwin's sword uneasily, putting distance between them.

"What is that thing? A cursed sword?"

"Something like that," she said. But that had been in Dez's care. When had she taken it? "So what will it be? I can do that again, if you wish."

"Is that meant to be a threat, young lady?" Oswald said evenly, projecting calm, but I noticed him glance behind himself briefly.

I suspected that deep down, he was willing to work with us, but he didn't want to agree right off the bat in front of his subordinates. He would be setting a poor example if they thought he was throwing in the towel right after Arwin's threat.

"What do you say, boss?" I said, sending him a life raft. "We share a common enemy in Sol Magni. Why don't we form a unified front? You seem to be willing to pick up and move to another town, but it takes hard work and money to start over from scratch."

And other towns already had their own black-market groups. It costs a lot to take over territory and push others out. Money, time, manpower, and lives. If it worked out, great for him, but anything less than that could come back to bite him. He also definitely didn't want to be a burden on some other branch of the Birds of Prey. It could get him removed from his current senior position.

Oswald knew all this already. He was trying to bluff his way into a more advantageous position, but he'd chosen the wrong opponent to test. The princess knight was not susceptible to such things.

"Two hundred gold," Oswald said, patting the dust from his backside. "I'll cut you a deal."

"Sure thing."

The princess knight was broke at the moment, but once she was the town hero, money would come and find her. Assuming she became the hero.

"That settles it," Oswald said, reaching out for a handshake.

"Sounds good," I said, snatching his hand instead. He looked dissatisfied, but I pretended not to notice. I didn't want his oily hand touching Arwin's.

"Are you sure this is what we want?" Ralph grumbled pensively as we left the mansion.

"At the very least, their information network is better than ours."

Under their command was a group of fellows on the street known as the Gentleman's Alliance. The gentlemen who were its members were everywhere in this town. I thought they might even be able to find Sol Magni.

"The more methods, the better. I'll use everything I can, even if it's shit. Simple as that."

I clicked my tongue; my shoulders were hunched with irritation. Somehow, I had wound up in front, so I held back and made Ralph go first. That meant Noelle naturally took the rear position, putting me and the princess knight side by side in the middle.

"And give that back," I said, grabbing Dawnblade from Arwin's hip. She'd taken it from Dez's house, I was certain. I'd have to put a lock on the storehouse so it couldn't be removed again.

I held it with both arms, earning me a glare from Arwin.

“Is the sword really that precious?”

I’d only used both arms because I was weak and feeble. But then I found myself giving her a different reason.

“It’s a memento of a friend.”

To tell the frank truth, I didn’t care about this sword. That fruit fly of a sun god’s possessions deserved to be used as mixing sticks for a cesspool. But my intuition was telling me it was dangerous for Arwin to keep using it.

“Any plans to give it away?”

“None,” I said firmly. “This is a cursed sword. Use it, and your hair will fall out. Your farts will be stinkier.”

“I thought it was a memento of your friend.”

“Yes, a friend without a hair on his head. Eyebrows completely gone.”

“Who are you talking about?”

A carriage rolled past us. Leaning out the window was the squirt, April.

“What are you doing here at this hour?” I demanded. What if she got abducted again? She repaid my concern for her well-being by leaning farther out the carriage window.

“Hey, listen up!” Whenever she puffed her cute little cheeks out like this, it was usually so she could complain about her grandpa. It turned out he was worried about the granddaughter who’d practically been kidnapped recently and had forbidden her to go to this year’s Founding Festival. “Even though he promised to take me to the parade.”

“Parade?” Arwin asked.

“A big special offering of the festival,” I explained. People wearing costumes and riding decorated floats would go down the main street. They started from the four gates to the city and met up in the center. Once everyone was there, a bigwig dressed as the founding king issued the declaration of a new country. In other words, it was a historical play. There were no limitations on the floats, so people could decorate them however they wanted.

“You don’t know about it, Arwin?” April asked. “They did it last year, too.”

“She didn’t express any interest in it.”

Last year at this time, Arwin had been in the dungeon. She told me to shut up and elbowed me, an adorable act of love.

The kids April was watching over at the orphanage wanted to see the parade. But it was too dangerous to let them go on their own, and there weren't enough adults to watch over them. April had agreed to take a few of them, but her grandfather had vehemently objected.

So not only was she not taking them, now *she* was forbidden from going herself. April had thrown a fit. She'd raged and squalled and fumed, but he hadn't relented, on the grounds of safety. Grandparent's and grandchild's demands remained on a parallel course, never to reach agreement.

"He promised he would take me," April said again. She seemed to think he was forbidding her because of the threat of kidnapping again, but this wasn't the case. Her grandfather was afraid she'd get stuck in the stampede. He was the guildmaster; if anyone had good intel on this, it would be him. She was simply unaware of the troubles on his mind. Of course, there was a good reason he couldn't tell April: then the entire town would know. She'd be the cause of mass chaos.

"Listen, I understand you want to have fun at the festival. But you're better off sewing or weaving back home this time. Make something nice for your grandpa, and I'm sure he'll let you go next year."

From the window of the carriage, April whacked my head. Damn, that hurt.

"Whose side are you on, Matthew?"

"In this case? Your grandpa's."

There were crazy people trying to unleash monsters on the townsfolk. You didn't need to be smart to understand what would happen to anyone walking the streets when it happened.

April's house was large and sturdy. Her gramps had most certainly stocked up on a ton of monster wards. Apparently, they had a basement they could hide in during an emergency. Staying home gave her a much better chance of survival. Honestly, I wished they would let *us* shelter there.

"The dungeon still hasn't been reopened. Don't give your dear granddad more headaches to worry about."

"Oooh, I know!" April said, eyes suddenly bright. She'd just had an idea. "Hey, Arwin, want to walk around with me?"

What was she talking about?

"Basically, Grandpa's worried because there's not enough protection, right? But if you're with me, Arwin…"

“Sorry, but she’s already spoken for,” I said, making a show of putting my arm around Arwin’s shoulder. “We’re going to be enjoying the Founding Festival by ourselves. Sorry, kid.”

“Awwww!” April protested. “Come on, let’s go together!”

“Nah, not interested in escorting a little brat around. Get lost,” I said, making shooing motions, but April did not give up. How was I going to get her to relent?

Then, from under my arm, Arwin said, “You know, it’s a good opportunity. Let’s do that.”

I tugged on her sleeve and muttered, “Let’s not.”

This wasn’t the time for fun and games. It could very well end with April in danger again. But Arwin stayed firm and admonished me for my refusal.

“You know what April is like, don’t you? If we don’t oblige her, she’ll be on her own, and then she’ll be at much higher risk.”

“Which is why she should be at home.”

“Do you think a girl her age,” Arwin said, with supreme confidence, “is going to behave herself at home on a festival day?”

“Are you speaking from personal experience?”

“Maybe I am,” she said, turning her head away.

“You promised. You have to take me!”

In the end, we agreed to take April, and she went home happy. She was celebrating as if she’d already gotten permission from her grandpa.

“So what is your actual plan, then? Don’t tell me you’re going to ignore the possibility of the stampede and just have a ball touring the town,” I said.

If April was underfoot when Sol Magni showed up, it was going to be a problem. And there were the orphanage kids to worry about, too. Even the most talented fighter couldn’t protect them all. Hopefully, there would be a safe location to evacuate them to, but outside of April’s house, our options were limited. The Adventurers Guild was sturdy but right on the front lines of a stampede. The old man wouldn’t allow it.

“I have an idea.”

“Huh.”

“You don’t believe me,” Arwin said, sulking. “Even though you trust Dez so much.”

“Sorry, but he’s just incomparable, even with you.”

How many times had that Beardo saved my life? I trusted his ability, and I trusted him on a personal level. I had faith in Arwin, too, and I loved her, but I'd known Dez much longer.

She hung her head, crestfallen. "So it's true. You and Dez…"

"Not like that! I've told you so many times!" Why did she have this obsession with connecting me and the Beardo in that way?

"All right. I'll prove it to you," I said, pulling her by the shoulder closer to me. As sweetly as I could, I crooned, "You won't be getting much sleep tonight."

She looked blankly at me for a moment, then took my meaning and gave me a big smile.

When Nicholas saw my face, he burst out laughing.

"Your journey was a whole series of tribulations, wasn't it?"

"If that was supposed to be a joke, you get a failing grade," I muttered.

What kind of a holy man looks at a fresh handprint on a man's face and *laughs*? It's unconscionable. For that matter, the princess knight could've held back a little.

"Well, have no fear. I haven't told her anything about you. I mean, I haven't even heard your story in detail in the first place."

"And what about *your* story?"

"I kept the details hazy. Though I did tell her what I had worshipped before."

That made sense. Given that he had the shroud, there was no hiding the connection between Nicholas and the sun god.

"I've only disclosed that to you and her. Here in town, I'm simply an apothecary and a healer," he said. That was good. The fewer people who knew the secret, the better.

"But I do have good news," he added, pulling out a small package of what looked like medicinal powder from a drawer. "Fairly soon, I should be able to produce an experimental antidote to test out."

He pointed at a flask, where a translucent liquid was swirling.

"It was difficult to get the right ratio. But if it works, it should neutralize the traces of Release within the body." I examined the flask with great interest. "It should take about… four more days until it's done."

The day of the Founding Festival, then. Ugh, of course it just had to be *exactly* then.

"I'll take it to you when it's finished."

"And once we have it, there's no need to use the drug…"

"It's not quite that simple." Nicholas grimaced. "If a single sip could cure a disease, we wouldn't need doctors and apothecaries. She needs to continue taking it—the worse the symptoms, the longer the rehabilitation."

He explained that the real problem was on the mental side. "Unless she changes her inherent mindset, it'll just be the same thing all over again. Words and magic and brainwashing and drugs are all just external stimuli at the end of the day. The only thing that can truly change a person is that person themselves."

Before the holy man could start lecturing about personal responsibility, I got us back on topic.

"And? You say this is an experimental mix. When is the next one?"

Nicholas avoided looking at me. I had a bad feeling.

"It cost quite a lot to get to this stage. Creating that test mixture completely cleaned me out." Seriously? At a time when we're broke, too? "I was hoping to ask you for more support. What can you do to help?" Nicholas asked. At this moment, I hated the man.

For now, I promised more money and left. Ordinarily, Arwin herself would be the one to give him more funding, but if *I* had money, I'd bet it all on her not paying up. She cared more about the safety of the town than her own health. Of course this would be a secondary concern for her. Could he create an antidote for her stubbornness, too?

I sighed and made my way back to Dez's house.

The next day, the town was in a celebratory mood, but I felt miserable. We had no leads on the founder's location, and his identity was still a mystery. We'd been asking around, but we hadn't found any good info. Arwin, Noelle, and Ralph were taking part in the search, too, but none of us were successful.

"It's at depressing times like this that I could go for a good drink."

"You're not supposed to say that when you're *already* drinking."

I looked over my shoulder at Ralph, who was glaring at me with undisguised disrespect. I held out my cup of ale. “Want a sip?”

“Absolutely not.” He sat down next to me. The seats at this bar were too close together. Rubbing shoulders with people on either side was guaranteed. “So you choose to abscond from your job here, eh?” he said.

“Do you take me for a working man?”

“This town is in peril.”

“It’s not my town.”

“Would you say the same thing in front of the princess?”

“Dunno,” I said, and I ordered another ale.

“…What would you have me do?”

“Pick whatever you want. But you’re paying.”

“Not about that!”

“Hey, don’t shout.” It was the middle of the day.

“I did barely anything on that trip.”

“That’s true.”

At least he was developing some self-awareness. Good for him. Incompetence’s greatest friend was the belief that one was competent and therefore did not need to improve further. He’d taken one step forward.

“I know I’m not proving myself at this rate. But I have no idea what I should do,” he continued.

So the punk was feeling pressured to better himself. He’d finally realized just swinging his sword wasn’t going to help Arwin.

“I’ve trained quite a lot, and I’m stronger than I was before…I think. But it’s still nowhere near enough. I don’t have the strength to protect the princess.”

“Or the intelligence, the bravery, the judgment, the rationality, or the experience.”

“Don’t tease me.”

“It’s true.” I accepted the fresh ale from the bartender and tossed it back in one long go. “You haven’t even done enough to be depressed about it. If you feel you’re short on something, go and get it. Work out. Read more books. Ask for help.”

“Help?”

“You want to know what you’re most sorely lacking? I’ll tell you: the humility to ask for help.”

Even if he had talent or promise, his pride was standing in the way of further growth. If someone didn't have humility, they'd never ask their betters to teach them. He thought he could handle everything on his own, the way young people often did.

"You should find yourself a mentor and ask them to teach you."

It wasn't just about skill. Without experience and wisdom, the range of choices one had was limited. In a dangerous situation, one needed rationality and courage to make good decisions. And he had long since passed the stage of being able to shrug off his lack of these things and tell himself they weren't his problem.

"Would the princess…?"

"No, obviously not."

She was already busy enough dealing with her own issues, and she was a good enough person that she would gladly reach out to help others without considering how it would hurt herself. Don't add to that burden any more than you already are, kid.

If anything, the lack of any growth on Ralph's part already proved she wasn't leading by example. The results spoke for themselves.

Same thing for Noelle. She was ignorant of the world in a different way from Arwin. She wasn't suited to being a teacher.

All I could think of was the old guildmaster. Setting aside whether he'd actually accept such a request, his skill and experience were undeniable. But he wasn't ideal to be Ralph's teacher. They weren't suited for one another. He was like a cunning old wolf in human clothing. He'd make Ralph stronger, yes, but he would only turn him into an inferior imitation of himself. Whatever Ralph's unique qualities were, they would shrivel away.

He started to suggest someone else when the door to the pub opened. I glanced to the side, then stood up. Here was the person I'd been waiting for.

"Well, here I am."

It was a large, dead-eyed man. He wasn't badly dressed, but there was a certain unsavory air to him. He was one of the younger folks from the Birds of Prey.

"Boss wants to see you."

“Got it.”

I placed the money for the drinks on the table.

“Follow me,” he said.

The young man turned and left the bar. I followed him out, and with haste, Ralph brought up the rear.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Price of Lust

Oswald had summoned us to a pub called the Roadside Weed. This was a principal gathering place for the Birds of Prey. The building had little to note, except that it was made of stone and sturdy. On the inside, it smelled of cheap booze, smoke, and the faint whiff of piss and shit. This place was known for facilitating the trade of illegal substances. It wasn't hard to imagine some folks losing control of their bowels.

As for Oswald himself, he was seated on a long, very nice couch in the back. There were no other guests here. I sat across the table from him. Ralph stood behind me. I invited him to sit, but he refused with all his willpower. I could tell he was trembling.

"Did you find them?" I asked.

The man next to Oswald handed me a piece of paper as an answer. Was it a map of the town?

"We've identified their hideout. We caught a few who'd been coming and going, but they were all small-time. So we did a little raid, and we found this weird map drawn on the wall. This is a copy."

"Appreciated," I said, accepting the map. While it wasn't too specific, it looked accurate to me.

"Look at the circle there."

There was a large circle drawn near the center of the town.

"That's the Adventurers Guild, huh?" It was hard to believe they'd attempt an attack on the place where adventurers hung out the most, but the scary thing about idiots was that you never knew what they might do. I'd have to tell Dez about this later. "So what happened to the scrubs you caught? You didn't let them go, did you?"

Oswald grinned. "You wanna know?"

“Based on the look on your face, no. I’d rather keep my lunch down.”

They probably wished they were dead. Nasty work.

“And what about the founder?”

“None of them knew his face. They said he always wore a creepy, egg-like mask.”

So exactly the way that preacher had looked.

“He’d pop into the hideout irregularly and deliver funds, food, and weapons. And then evangelize some horseshit about how ‘the Sun God will save you from your agony if you beseech Him for help.’”

Why is it that so many people turn to gods to free them from the things that ail them in reality? You’re the one getting hungry, or your parents, siblings, wife, and children.

“So his identity’s unclear. Always wears a big, baggy coat, so they can’t tell his figure. They only even assume it’s a ‘he’ because of his voice. He talks kinda like an old person, so I’d guess he is. At the very least, he’s not young.”

So middle-aged or older. That didn’t narrow things down all that much.

“What about the rumors?”

“Still waiting on those. They’d been given orders, but the Sol Magni folks have been on the run. For the most part, they’ve barely touched on it.”

It’s difficult for someone in hiding to spread rumors. So someone had to be free and available to propagate the story, someone who wasn’t under suspicion of any connection to Sol Magni. One of them would probably be the founder…that preacher.

“Hey, what’s up, baby?” said a sultry voice behind us.

I turned around to see a rather gaunt-looking woman inside the pub. Her long black hair was bedraggled, and though it wasn’t summer yet, she wore very sheer clothing that exposed her thighs and upper arms. In this town, only the whores dressed that way. Her skin was a bit neglected, but it was pale and fetching, so she’d be able to attract customers. But her eyes were vacant, and her steps were uneasy. Oswald’s men were shouting at her, but she didn’t seem afraid. And I didn’t smell any booze in the air, so she wasn’t drunk.

“Get lost,” said one of the men, irritated that she was ignoring him. He reached out to grab her, but she abruptly

climbed up onto a table and began to remove her clothing.

"What is she *doing*? Did you hire her?" Ralph demanded of me, his face reddening.

"If I did, I'd choose a girl with some more meat on her bones."

And the dead-eyed stare as she stripped was a mood-killer. However, the men around me, despite their wariness, were still men. They were all leering over her.

The woman took off her skirt and tossed it among the mobsters. She only wore undergarments down below. Her shirt was quite sheer, so there was nowhere she could hide a knife.

Some idiot actually whistled. Just as the noise reached a peak, someone slammed a table.

The pub went silent at once.

"Toss her out," Oswald commanded. His men paled and grabbed the woman.

"Who are you, huh?"

"Are you on drugs, bitch?"

They dragged her down from the table. When she struggled against them, they pinned down her arms, then her legs. She couldn't move.

But the bad feeling I was getting did not ease. Alarm bells were clanging inside my head. My skin was prickling. Based on experience, that was the nasty feeling of murder in the air.

Someone slapped her and split her lip, but the woman's little smile remained.

Oswald was getting impatient. He stood up and moved toward her.

Then the woman bared her teeth and pulled on her sleeve. There was a string attached to it, which pulled on her top. A piece of white parchment was rolled around her stomach. No—it was a scroll.

"Get away! Now!"

The pattern on the parchment around her stomach glowed. The instant I recognized the magic circle, I launched myself backward and grabbed Ralph's sleeve, pulling him down with me.

A split second later, there was a blast and screams.

Blazing heat burned my chest and face, and I ended up on top of Ralph. Shards of wood pierced my back. It hurt like hell.

The explosion subsided, giving way to smoke. I looked up to see that the whole room was reduced to cinders. The walls and supports still stood, but groans and whimpers were everywhere around us. There was a hole in the floor a short distance away. The woman seemed to have blown herself up without leaving a trace.

“You alive, kid?”

I sat up. Ralph did not respond. He looked like he was having a nightmare. Had he hit his head? I tried to feel around to check on him and felt something warm and sticky. It was something I’d felt before, and it wasn’t pleasant.

Sure enough, Ralph’s left arm was trapped under the rubble. Blood was pouring through the cracks. A part of the ceiling had fallen in and crushed him.

“My arm. My arm,” he murmured, over and over, his face twisted in pain. He looked pale; he’d lost a lot of blood. “What’s happened to me? I can’t move my arm at all. It hurts.”

“I bet it does,” I said, taking a piece of nearby cloth and wrapping it tight around his upper arm. Stopping the bleeding was the first step. Otherwise, he would die of blood loss.

“My arm. My arm.”

“Yeah, I know. You said that already. Don’t talk. Just close your eyes and grit your teeth.”

I put my hand over Ralph’s face, not to calm him down, but to keep him from seeing what I was about to pull out.

“Irradiation.”

For just an instant, I flashed the temporary sun, using that second to push the rubble off Ralph.

“Hmph.”

He was an absolute mess. Broken bits of rock and wood were jammed into his forearm, which was nearly falling off.

“What’s happening? I can’t move my arm.”

“It doesn’t look good. You need help soon, or it’ll go bad and you’ll have to cut it off.”

“Hurry. Hurry, to a doctor…”

“The blast blocked the doorway with rubble. It’s gonna take a little while before we can get outside.”

A noise like a flute escaped from Ralph’s throat as he inhaled. It looked like his world was ending. He began to bawl.

“C’mon, don’t cry.”

“How would you know how I feel?!” he wailed, and he began to cough violently on the ground. “I can’t hold a sword like this. I can’t serve the princess…”

“Are you sad about that?”

“Of course I am!”

I sighed. “Okay, look, I’m sorry. I exaggerated a little. You’ll still be able to move your arm. All is not lost.”

“I don’t want your pity…”

“Do I look like a man who traffics in pity?”

I would not say this to Ralph for the sole purpose of making him feel better. I’d said it because I knew it to be true. I pulled a small bag of powder from my pocket and unsealed it. After pouring some booze on the wound to sterilize it, I sprinkled the powder.

“What’s that?”

“You saw it before. A powder of warding mums and some blackweed salt.”

This little mixture had helped quite a bit back in the dwarves’ secret Dragon Hall, where they’d cut my arm off. It was a good thing I hadn’t used the whole bag back then, because it was very handy right now.

“There you go.”

After rubbing it into the gash, I wrapped the cloth around his arm like a bandage. It was the end of my supply of warding mums and blackweed salt, but so be it. Things happen.

“Now you’ve learned something. If someone’s injured, use this to heal them. I’ll tell you how to do it some other time.”

“……”

Ralph frowned and looked away, thinking hard. I was giving him some very good lessons, and he had nothing to say for himself, to my annoyance. Instead, he unleashed a rattling scream. Apparently, the feeling had come back to his arm. That was a good sign.

“This is just emergency treatment. You’ll have to pay good money to have it healed with magic. Don’t skimp out.”

There were healers with clinics in several spots around town. Healing magic was the quickest way to recover from injury and the most effective, but it was pricey. And their range of skill was wide, so if someone tried to pay the cheapest possible healer, they’d regret it—either because the limb didn’t work very well or because of terrible side effects.

“What the hell happened? What did she do?” Ralph murmured. Now that he knew his injury would heal, he’d recovered some of his original personality, and he took note of his surroundings.

“I think she unleashed the magic that was in that scroll.” Scrolls were useful things that temporarily held monsters or spells. To actually contain them within the scroll required a considerable amount of magic power and special tools, but even an amateur could unleash them. “You’re normally supposed to point it toward your opponent, but that woman wrapped it around her own body and unleashed it in all directions.”

It had affected a wide area, centered around her.

“But if you do that…”

“Yes, you naturally suffer all the blowback from the spell.”

She’d blown up completely, without leaving so much as a bone behind. The stronger the spell sealed inside, the more damage the caster suffered. She would have known this would happen. I recalled the three moles on her neck, and I scratched my head.

“She…she was smiling before she exploded. I couldn’t hear her voice, but I know what she was saying. The sun god thing,” Ralph muttered, squinting up at the ceiling as though it were bright inside.

“*Sol nia spectus*, you mean?”

“That.” I poked Ralph’s arm through the bandage. He screamed. “What was that for?!”

It was to punish you for making me recite that horrid phrase. So she was a Sol Magni believer. They must have trailed Oswald’s men. She’d hoped to clean up a bunch of bothersome meddlers.

“Stay there and rest,” I said, bored of dealing with Ralph already. I had other things to take care of. “For the moment, I’ll look for survivors. The guards should be coming by soon after that blast.”

“You’re going to save them?”

“If you’d rather get murked in the dark by the Birds of Prey, you can go ahead and leave now,” I remarked. There were screams and wails of agony all around, and he wanted to ignore them? The inhuman savage.

I found survivors and got them to help pull their buddies out from under the rubble. Some were still alive, while others had wooden chunks through the heart or crushed skulls. When we found a dead body, we ripped the clothes off to use as bandages for the living. Even in my weakened state, I could at least perform emergency care.

After a search of the area, I found no sign of Oswald among the living or dead. He had been right in the vicinity of the explosion. Had he been blasted to bits?

He was a bothersome old man and had dared to try his luck with Arwin. I'd be happy to know he was dead. The real problem was how we'd search for the Sol Magni founder without him.

I was formulating my next plan when I heard rubble under the table shift. A pile of wood crumbled, revealing the sooty face of Oswald.

"You're tough to kill, eh?"

"What happened? What's happening?" he raged, glancing around the shattered pub.

"Seems like they found out what your folks were up to. She blew herself up."

Oswald clicked his tongue and then spat. There was blood in the spit.

"How many survivors?"

"From what I've been able to tell, there are five, including you."

He'd come with ten subordinates, so that meant they'd taken out six in one explosion. The pub's owner and staff were all alive. They were lucky to have been in the back because Oswald's crew had shooed them out of the room.

"Shit!" He kicked over a broken-legged chair and stared up at the hole in the ceiling. "Goddamned hexes. You and that princess knight both."

I had to agree. Since getting involved with Arwin, I'd been hit much more than before, and my hands were constantly being soiled with dirty work. But I couldn't leave her now, and I didn't want to. She was a big hassle, honestly.

"Is there something on your hands?" Ralph asked from the ground. I chuckled and wiped them on my pants.

Soon after that, the guards arrived, having heard the blast and commotion, and they helped move all the rubble. Along

with some tending of our wounds, we underwent some on-the-spot questioning.

I did mention Sol Magni, and I was honest about the safe parts of the story, but I didn't tell them all that much. It was clear they didn't believe me. They just thought I was making excuses for some mob warfare. They listened to the story, then called it a day. So long, gentlemen.

They questioned Oswald, too, but the guards were intimidated and didn't push him on anything. Once they finished, about twenty burly Birds of Prey members showed up to carry off their wounded companions and the dead. The guards did not lift a finger to interfere, of course.

"Hey," Oswald growled, just before they left. "There will be hell to pay for this. Mark my words."

They'd awakened the demon within Oswald, "the Cirrocumulus," then. It was the calm before the storm. Very intimidating.

"Let's go."

There was no reason to wait around here, so I took Ralph and left the pub. It was already evening.

"Hey, where are we going?" Ralph whined. I turned around, but instead of being right behind me, where he should have been, he was trailing about a building's distance behind. I had longer legs than him.

"If we take the third left from here, there's a clinic called Panacea. That's the best spot around here. Get them to heal you with magic. Tell them Matthew sent you, and they'll do the job."

The old woman was a greedy skinflint without a shred of mercy in her heart, but she was a damned good healer. Clergy and healers were different jobs that shared some features, but it proved you didn't need to be pious to save lives.

"Aren't you coming with me?"

"Dealing with the squirt is all the babysitting I can stand."

He could walk on his own. He could manage getting there.

"I mean, don't you need a rest, too?!"

"No time for that." I walked back to him with big strides and brandished a piece of paper in front of his squinting eyes.

"Is that the map of theirs that you got?"

"If this intel is correct, Sol Magni's going after the Adventurers Guild. We can't just ignore a tip like that."

A lot of time had passed already since the attack on us. If I were them, I'd go after my real target before the story got out and spread. Whether I was in time or not, I needed to at least give them a warning.

"Even though you were almost killed just now?"

"That's exactly my point." If they weren't careful, they'd turn out just like us. "So go on and get to that clinic. You want to help Arwin, don't you?"

That should be enough motivation to make him behave. If he couldn't even follow that advice, I had no more use for him. Let him suffer.

Ralph looked unconvinced, but he did leave, cradling his arm. Once I was on my own, I headed straight for the Adventurers Guild. They were bound to laugh me off on my lonesome, but there was no helping that. Ralph's presence wouldn't make it any more believable. It was *Ralph*.

Inside the gates at the guild, staffers were buzzing and running about. They were in a state of chaos, like none of them quite knew what to do. I tried calling out to one, but he ignored me and hurried past. I couldn't tell that anything was wrong with the building. Maybe something had happened to someone.

"Oh, Kept Man."

Gloria was passing by. Perfect timing.

"What's this? Did something happen?"

"Oh, yeah. It did," she said vaguely, and smiled. "The guildmaster was ambushed."

This was the short version of the story. Late at night, returning to the guild after a meeting, the old man's carriage had suddenly been swarmed by a large group of people. Thankfully, he'd had plenty of security with him, and the guildmaster was a formidable combatant on his own, despite his age. They'd been fighting back against the crowd when someone leaped onto the carriage, unrolled a scroll around his body, and promptly detonated himself. The guildmaster had avoided the brunt of the blast, but he'd been hurled out of the vehicle and set upon by the attackers and their blades.

So the symbol on the map hadn't been a raid on the Adventurers Guild itself, but the guildmaster. We'd been an afterthought, apparently. Our intel was too slow. We were constantly on the defensive.

“How do you feel?” I asked. The old man laboriously sat up and straightened himself.

He was resting on a massive bed. It was a bit on the large side for one elderly person to use, and the mansion in the richer part of town was too big for just a grandfather and granddaughter to live in. Even this room could fit three of mine inside it. And he had numerous private guards. His security was tighter than that of most noble mansions.

“How did you talk your way in this time?”

“I resent that wording,” I said. “I was honest with her. I said, ‘I want to pay your grandpa a visit, so let me through,’ that’s all.”

He clicked his tongue. Look, if you didn’t want this, you should have taught your granddaughter to be less gullible.

“Did you get poisoned?” I asked.

He was bandaged beneath his pajamas. A typical stab wound could be easily healed with recovery magic.

“There was a curse on the blade, I guess. It’s healing slowly, no matter what spells they cast on me.”

“Was it Sol Magni?”

I sat down on a round chair at his bedside. The attacker had stabbed the old man, then ended his own life. The other one who’d used the scroll had clearly been using the same method as the woman at the pub. There could be no doubt it was the work of the same group.

“I would assume so.”

“Who’s backing them?” The old man’s hawklike eyes narrowed even further. Scrolls were pricey, and there were limitations on trading them. One couldn’t just come across them unless they were commissioning them. There was no way Tri-Hydra had that kind of money now, so someone else had to be bankrolling Sol Magni. “Is that why you’ve been so busy lately? Because you’re dealing with them?”

“You’ve got a keen nose for shit like that,” he grunted, annoyed. “If only the people in my guild were as capable as you.”

“Well, you reap what you sow.”

The guild’s staff were all good at their jobs, but they had almost zero political power on their own, especially when it came to negotiation or tactics. That was because the old man never taught them how to be proactive, fearing they’d

ultimately undermine his leadership. He was the tyrant of his own guild and controlled it exactly as he desired. The result was that when he wasn't around to lead, they were useless.

"Damn them all. As soon as they learn the tricks of the trade, they start looking to line their own pockets."

"So you expect pristine behavior from your subordinates."

"It's one thing to make a little money on the side. It's another to scheme to take over my position. I had to cut them loose."

And knowing this old badger, he probably meant that in more ways than one.

"So who's the would-be pious idiot?"

"Why would you ask that?"

"Oh, you know."

Obviously, I'd try to ambush or otherwise attack them and cut off their funding. Otherwise, these maggots would keep bubbling up to the surface to cause trouble.

"Well, you can't handle it," he growled.

"Why's that?"

"It's the Northeast," he said simply. That was a kind of jargon. The royal city was located to the northeast of Gray Neighbor. And when it came to residents of the royal city, there was *one* clan more notable than any other. So when referencing the Northeast, one spoke of certain extremely high-born folk.

"Of course, it ain't the one at the top. Just an underling of a subordinate of one of the folks in the royal vicinity. This is the royal family's land, after all."

If anything happened to this town, it would represent a blow to the royal family's power. Some would celebrate such a thing. The guildmaster was capable and well-spoken, and while he wielded some power, he was ultimately a commoner. His ability to fight back was limited.

You might wonder how such an exalted and powerful figure might be connected to Sol Magni, but if the remnants of Tri-Hydra were facilitating the connection, that would explain it. They had been one of the premiere criminal groups in the city once—and power, money, and violence were always bedfellows. There was surely some lingering connection being utilized there. And if Sol Magni could remove the guildmaster, they would have a much easier time taking action.

“We paid the price, but we’ve got evidence now. The big shot’s going to have to withdraw. He’s not going to want to go down with them.”

If the story got out that a nobleman was funding people attempting to overthrow the peace in the royal family’s land, he would be a ripe target for his political rivals. He might even be stripped of his title and executed. So instead, he would attempt to remove all the evidence and wash his hands of the matter.

“Well done,” I said, leaning forward until the chair creaked. “Now then, who’s the traitor?”

If I knew anything about this old man, he would already have been aware he was in their sights and would have been careful about the route he took back to the guild late at night. But he was still attacked. Since Sol Magni had managed to carry out their ambush, it only made sense that someone had leaked information. One of his own dogs had bitten the hand that feeds, and I figured he would be furious. My hope was that giving him an opening to vent would get him talking, but instead, he clammed up.

“Ha-haaah.” It was all adding up. Based on his attitude, his silence wasn’t because he couldn’t say, but because he didn’t want to. And the key to that was the nature of the “meeting” he had been having late at night. “Your young lover?”

“Shut up.”

I was right. She’d probably been seduced by some dashing, handsome young man. And why wouldn’t she be? A young man in the prime of his life was bound to be more appealing than a wrinkled old man like him.

“How could you, Grandpa?”

“Just fucking die already!” He threw an entire pitcher of water at me. What a horrible old geezer. But that was enough teasing for now. “Shut your wisecracking mouth for just a damn minute. Your voice gives me a headache.”

“It’s nothing compared to the headache you’re about to have.” When one’s funding dries up, they starve sooner or later. So before they perish, they go on the offensive, hoping to vanquish their foe first. Most people placed in desperate situations responded the same way. “Sol Magni’s going to stir shit up at the Founding Festival. They have control over the dungeon right now. They’re planning to cause a stampede on the big day to destroy the town.”

“I figured as much.” Of course the old man would’ve had that information already.

“Is there any way we can cancel the event?”

“I would’ve done that days ago if I had the power!” He struck the bed in frustration. “I keep requesting it, over and over, but the answer’s always the same: ‘It’s already been decided.’”

Many people flocked to the festival. Crowds meant lots of money being spent. With the dungeon being closed for over a month now, that was a major source of revenue for the town. And they didn’t want to cancel on less than damning evidence. Even the guildmaster of the Adventurers Guild didn’t have control over management of the town.

“They’re going to claim this was a personal score to settle with me,” the old man grumbled.

“Ah, the conveniences of the high and mighty.” Apparently, he’d been whipping up support, trying to request that the Paladins crush the remaining bits of Sol Magni. Vince was likely to get an ulcer. “What will you do about April?”

I would expect him to evacuate her out of town, but I hadn’t heard a word of it from her. She seemed intent on attending the festival.

“I’ve heard you’re going to be her bodyguard.” The old man grabbed my hand. “Please. Please watch over her.”

His face now looked weak and old, the way he should have been at his age.

“She doesn’t listen to me anymore. You don’t know what she was like after you left town. I told her time and again how dangerous it is here, but she insisted she would stay, no matter what!”

“Maybe she’ll rethink it if you bring all the children and staff from the orphanage in here.”

“And what next, all the guild members and adventurers? The old woman from the sweets shop we patronize on the way home?”

April was a sweet, well-meaning girl. She would want to save everyone she knew personally. But reality wouldn’t allow such an extravagance. Even a certain princess knight couldn’t pull that off.

“You could also lock her in here,” I suggested.

“I thought of the very same thing. But then, this wound…”

He pointed at his chest. He wouldn't be able to pull that off by force. And the servants here all loved April and wouldn't want to do something she hated. Plus, the news of the stampede wasn't something he could spread all willy-nilly.

"And the people who failed to kill me are going to try again on the day of the Founding Festival. I want to keep her away from this house until I know it's safe."

"So you want the squirt taken to a safe location, then?" Knowing how kind and caring she was, she might decide to cancel her trip to the festival out of concern for her injured grandpa. If the stampede started, she'd demand to be taken back home. The old man wanted us to watch her and make sure she didn't run back to the house if anything happened. "You're gonna owe me one."

"I know," he grunted reluctantly. "Are we done now? I'm ready for bed."

"Uh, one last thing," I said. He raised a skeptical eyebrow at my outstretched hand. "What's the situation with my salary? You know, from when we went in to rescue Arwin's party."

Like it or not, I'd been a temporary member of the Adventurers Guild for that time. Surely, I should be paid for my work. I'd nearly died down there. If anything, he owed me hazard pay.

"Fool," he snapped, slicing my hopes and dreams in two. "You only went to work for that one day! And you clowned around in your report about the rescue team. You've been fired already for consecutive absences from work. Fired!"

"That's a relief to hear." I wasn't one for wearing a collar around my neck. "So long. Eat some meat for protein and get some rest. And don't you dare make the mistake of calling a woman in here, or I'll tell the squirt about it."

"Get the fuck out!" he roared as I walked out of the room.

The Founding Festival was in two days, but we had no further leads on Sol Magni's whereabouts. The Birds of Prey had their members on the hunt in full force. They'd wiped out a few small hideouts, but there was still neither hide nor hair of the founder himself.

My thoughts about what to do next were interrupted by the sound of a distant mourning bell. There was a massive burial

monument in front of me. This was the Adventurers Guild's shared grave site.

Once a year, the guild held a joint memorial service for all the adventurers who'd died. Normally, it was earlier in the year, but with all the stampede nonsense and preparations for the festival, it had been delayed until now.

Arwin was attending, too, of course. At April's request, I had been pressed into service.

I came to the graveyard often, but I hadn't been to a service since Vanessa's. A priest was reading words of prayer before the grave. They all looked so gloomy. Some were mourning their dead companions, others were worried about the near future, and some were even suppressing glee at the death of hated rivals. Everyone had their own circumstances.

All the people being remembered were familiar faces to me, but rarely for good reasons. I'd been beaten, insulted, and threatened by their lot. Some of them I was even relieved to see dead. So I didn't feel any sadness. But for this moment, I was magnanimous enough to wish for their eternal peace.

Once the service was over, people began to leave, presumably to drown their sorrows at a bar and remember the dead. Maybe to toast to a brighter tomorrow, even.

As for me, I wasn't in the mood to go back home. I found myself wandering over to an individual grave. It was a relatively new and fresh one, with a white flower already laid on top. White flowers were just the sort of thing your brother would choose, Vanessa.

"This might be the last time I come here."

If the town got destroyed, visiting graves would be the last of my concerns. I'd be as good as dead anyway.

"Did something happen?"

Fiona popped up between the graves.

"Oh, it's you. Don't scare me like that," I said, grabbing the temporary sun in my pocket while I pretended to be relieved. I'd already checked with the guild: There was no adventurer named Fiona in this town.

For the moment, the suspicious woman with a hidden identity did not show any signs of hostility or intended harm. I hadn't been able to force her to spill her secrets because I hadn't known where to find her. There was no record of her staying at the Five Sheep, where I'd met her before. Not only

that, but no one had reported seeing anyone like her. I was desperate enough to squeeze the answers out of her, but not here. There were still other adventurers and mourners around.

“Were you at the service, too?” I asked.

“You could say that,” she remarked, resting an elbow on Vanessa’s gravestone and brushing off some fallen leaves. I didn’t feel motivated to scold her for her blasphemous behavior.

“You knew Vanessa?”

“Years ago. She did me a favor.”

“I see.”

If Vanessa were still alive, would she know who Fiona was?

“How did she die?”

“The man she was dating got himself involved in some nasty business. She was an unfortunate casualty of that.”

“I had a feeling it would happen to her eventually,” she murmured, shaking her head and tracing the gravestone with a finger. “Putting a grave here and mourning at it doesn’t matter, though. She’s not here.”

The souls of the dead were sent to the afterlife. That was where they got sent to either heaven or hell.

“It’s meant for the living. That’s not where her ghost resides.”

It was for us to indulge in our memories of the dead and to be a source of comfort and relief that we would be there with them one day, too.

“I suppose so,” Fiona said, reaching out with both hands to embrace Vanessa’s gravestone and rub her cheek on it. “I’ll be joining you, one day… I just don’t know when. Let’s share some more drinks when we’re together.”

“Fiona?”

“What’s up, Matthew? Visiting a grave?” said a man behind me, carrying a large crate on his back. It was the old man, the carrier. This time, he had an assortment of colorful flowers on his back.

“That’s quite a load you’ve got. How far back are we mourning, a hundred generations?”

“It was a special order.”

So he was even doing business with flower shops? Busy man.

“Well, I’m discussing date tactics with the lady here. No need to tell Arwin about this.”

“With who? You’re alone.”

“Huh?” I spun around and found that Fiona had vanished. I looked all over, but I didn’t see any sign of her. “Well, she’s rather shy. Doesn’t like to show her face around people.”

“I’d recommend against dalliances in a graveyard. You’re likely to be dragged under by a zombie. Then you’ll be the one eulogized by…what was the fellow’s name…Nick?”

“Ah, yes.”

I recalled Nicholas was using an alias with the Adventurers Guild. Nick Burnstein, if I had it right. I had to be careful that I didn’t accidentally drop his real name.

“Well, anyway,” the old man said, looking around and dropping his voice to a whisper, “this is what I’m hearing on the wind. You know the guildmaster was ambushed, right? It seems the one behind it all was none other than the princess knight—”

“Gramps,” I said, placing a hand on his shoulder, “don’t go spreading that story around.” I held my hand there long enough to send a message, and he paled slightly and apologized.

“W-well, I’ve got to get going. Can’t wait for that festival!”

I murmured something in agreement and waved at him as he left. With that out of the way, I went to the entrance of the graveyard, where I could hear words like *charlatan* and *murderer* and *devil* being thrown around. I looked to see a familiar old woman braying like some kind of wild animal. The men next to her were dragging her out, but she continued to scream insults and obscenities. The target of her anger, standing stock-still in the distance, was the princess knight. Arwin had just finished with her own grave visit; her friend Janet was memorialized here.

I rushed to her side, uncertain whether I should mention the rumor I’d just heard.

But Arwin spoke first. “Matthew, I have a request,” she said, her voice firm with resolute and certain will. “I want you to gather guild adventurers. As many as you can.”

“What’s your plan?”

“The situation has evolved beyond our ability to control. We’re going to be firmly on the defensive, doing nothing but reacting.”

In other words, she wanted to beseech other adventurers for help. The few of us together could only do so much to counteract Sol Magni.

“You’ve grown.”

“Don’t tease me.”

“I’m complimenting you.”

It was a major step forward to see Arwin actually relying on me and her other companions now.

“The problem is how to get them to agree to help, I imagine.”

Arwin’s concerns were not for nothing. For better or for worse, adventurers worshipped strength. They protected the weak and obeyed the strong. Her ability notwithstanding, the princess knight had the flaw of “dungeon sickness” permanently etched into her reputation, and she had lost the people’s trust. Adventuring was a dangerous enough career that no one rallied behind the banner of the weak.

“And we don’t have money.”

Our spending in the last month had been extravagant. The payout to the families of the three dead party members, the cost of treatment and living expenses during her period of worsening dungeon sickness, an unplanned trip out of town, the loss of our home—all these things had drained Arwin’s funds. Now that she’d paid up front for the Birds of Prey, she couldn’t possibly hire all the adventurers.

“This isn’t work. This is a problem that faces everyone who lives in this town.”

But adventurers were outsiders by nature. There were many living in the town, but they weren’t locals. They were drifters here in search of work—in the dungeon. Outlaws, you might call them. No one bats an eye when someone they don’t care about dies. They weren’t from here. Even if we could convince people of the wisdom of this, how many would actually say yes?

I couldn’t see this pitch working out.

“Do we have to?”

“We do,” she said, as stubborn as ever once she had made up her mind.

“A word of advice, then,” I said. “If you’re going to talk adventurers into something without mentioning money, you cannot use words like *cause* and *justice* and *the right thing*.” In

other words, they were like beasts. Victory or defeat? Would you gain or lose? Those were their only real concerns. Noble justifications were important, but these weren't the kinds of lofty dreamers who took to battle without something to be gained. "Right here," I said, pointing at my heart. "You have to sway their emotions."

That evening, there were twenty-six adventurers in total at the guild, not counting Arwin's party. That was fewer than I had expected. There'd been over a hundred here not long ago. Some had left town because of the stampede, but the majority had simply chosen not to come.

We were right at the counter on the first floor of the guild building. The guildmaster had given us permission to hold this meeting here, figuring no one was going to commission or post jobs anyway.

Ralph and Noelle and I had gone through the building to arrange enough chairs for everyone to sit, but over half of them were empty.

"I appreciate that you've all shown up on such short notice," Arwin said, addressing the group from the counter and cutting off all the idle chat and gossip going on.

"What do you want?" asked Rex, the leader of Chrysaor.

"I have a request."

And then Arwin explained everything. About the fact that the "founder" of Sol Magni, whom they'd defeated recently, had been a fake. That the real one was still alive, plotting to cause a stampede and destroy the town in order to seize the Astral Crystal. That they were working to trigger that stampede on the day of the Founding Festival. That many people would perish as a result. And that we were running out of people and time to prevent it.

The corner of Rex's mouth curled upward. "And we've been dealt a bad hand, is that it?"

"It's a sign of how crafty the enemy has been," Arwin said delicately, trying not to anger anyone. Everyone in town was on the defensive right now. We were all dancing in the founder's palm.

"And your evidence?"

"We've got it," said Ralph, who described the self-detonation events from earlier. His arm was back to normal, but he was

still a poor public speaker. He got stuck partway and abbreviated his story where he didn't need to, but I was there to fill in the gaps.

"No gangster in this town would give one of his people an expensive magical item to turn them into a sacrificial pawn. This is clearly the kind of move a fanatic would make."

They stared at one another, muttering and whispering among themselves. Apparently, our story was sounding more and more believable to them.

"Remember that group Tri-Hydra? The survivors have been aiding them. That's how they've been able to remain on the run," Arwin explained when the murmuring died down. "Of course, we're still searching, and if we're able to stop the attack this way, that would be best. But I think we should be prepared for the worst, as well."

"And?" Beatrice asked coldly. "What exactly do you intend for us to do?"

"Guide the people and vanquish the monsters."

On Arwin's signal, Noelle unfolded a large piece of parchment on the wall. It was a map of the town.

"By the town's laws, in the case of a monster stampede, the gates are to be closed and barred to prioritize the safety of the surrounding area."

The adventurers stirred in unison. Even those who had lived here for years weren't exactly attuned to the laws about security and disasters, and the drifter adventurers were naturally less inclined than them. If the gates were barred, the town would turn into an abattoir. The number of deaths would surge.

"I want to keep the town from being locked down somehow. And I want your help with that."

"Are you joking? You want us to attack the town guards?"

"They're going to lock us up!"

"You wanna try that line in the dungeon next?"

The adventurers did not take kindly to the suggestion. I interrupted to say, "If the stampede starts, you won't have to worry about being locked up at all. We'll all be dead." When one spent all their time in the den of monsters known as the dungeon, they had a tendency to think of the town as being essentially safe. These people had no imagination. There was plenty of danger all around the town. They could easily find

themselves dead; all they needed to do was get stinking drunk and pass out face down in their own vomit. “A word to the wise: Don’t think of this as someone else’s problem. They believe the guild and its adventurers are their enemies. They’re the ones who attacked the old man.”

Mentioning the guildmaster sent murmurs through the audience. He had once been a renowned adventurer himself, and his name was still legendary. It was how he held such a strong sway over these ruffians and brigands. Even in his old age, he was feared and respected by the adventurers of Gray Neighbor.

Unperturbed, Arwin continued, “No need to explain the part about vanquishing monsters. Simply eliminate them as they emerge in town and guide the townsfolk to safe locations.”

Capable fighters would be absolutely necessary to minimize the damages.

“Of course, there is plenty of other work to be done,” she said. By reinforcing the doors with magic, the damage could be minimized. At the very least, it would delay the monsters’ rampage through the town and allow more people to get out of harm’s way.

“There are more evacuation sites to be designated and coordinated, which I will handle. I just want your help with all this.”

“And we’re supposed to just *trust you*?” said a black-haired man who got to his feet. He was a three-star adventurer, as I recalled. “You know the rumors about yourself, don’t you? You expect us to trust you? And that’s assuming everything you’ve said is even true. You’ve got dungeon sickness, don’t you? If we follow you and it flares up at the worst possible moment, what are we going to do?”

Dungeon sickness was a mental ailment. No one could see it, so it was impossible to tell from the outside if it was cured. Maybe a doctor could give them a note or a guarantee saying, *You’re fine now*, but it was up to these people to believe them.

“You raise an excellent point,” Arwin admitted. She took a knife from her pocket and pointed it at the man. “If I am found to be an agent of the sun god or unfit as a leader, stab me with this knife.”

I held my breath, feeling a nervous sweat begin to form on my skin. Arwin was serious. She was putting her life on the line

to save this town from the imminent stampede. It was a dedication that threatened to swallow her whole.

Someone whistled—it was Beatrice. It wasn't *that* cool, though.

"There's no way we can protect a town this size on our own," pointed out Nick, who was from the party known as Argo.

"The Adventurers Guild will be offering support. They also intend to join in the fighting. We have the guildmaster's sign-off," I said.

The adventurers' gazes gathered on the counter. The grizzled-looking staffers nodded, crossing their arms in front of their chests.

"Ordinarily, we'd never do such a thing, but the fate of the town rides on this. It's an emergency exception."

Arwin shot a glance in my direction. I hadn't done a thing—just called in a favor I was owed. And the old man was eager to protect his beloved granddaughter. I wasn't going to let anyone complain about this. Arwin was the perfect person to speak for the guildmaster.

"Will there be something in it for us?" Rex asked. "We're just a bunch of uncouth jacks-of-all-trades. We do whatever people need us to do—as long as the conditions are right."

Adventurers worked for money. A stampede would mean seeing the town plunged into chaos. And Arwin wanted them to cut through that chaos, fight monsters, and save the citizens. It sounded simple, but in fact, it would be extremely difficult. And there would undoubtedly be casualties. The risks were just too high. If these people were going to do the job, it would be because they were promised a reward that matched the risks.

"How much money are we gonna make for playing the selfless heroes in this situation?"

"…The guildmaster is negotiating with His Lordship in the hope of eliciting a reward payment."

That was a long shot with the skinflint lord, however. Even if he did pay, once it was split among everyone, it might as well be chump change. If the Adventurers Guild paid up directly, it still wouldn't be anywhere near making up for putting their lives on the line. Arwin had lost her country and largely been abandoned by her relatives. And she'd used up most of her

savings after the recent travels. One couldn't buy life with gold, but one needed gold to protect lives.

"What a joke." Rex stood, and others began to follow his lead. "Thanks for the warning, though. We're going to clear out of town."

I wasn't surprised. Everyone wants to save their own skin. If the town was about to be destroyed, they'd leave. Every adventurer worth their salt had a nose for survival.

"How impatient we all are. Surely you don't need to leave *now*, do you?" I called out. Rex scowled for just a second, then turned his back on us fully.

"If you want to be a hero, be my guest," he said.

Footsteps proceeded toward the exit, but one voice cracked at their heels.

"Well, I'm staying," snapped Beatrice proudly, crossing her legs. The adventurers who had stood up paused and turned around. "I'm not such a coward that I'll tuck my tail between my legs and run."

She gave Arwin a sly grin. It was the face of one delighting in the return of a fated rival. She had surely been carefully assessing the princess knight up to this moment, until at last she had made her decision and bet on Arwin.

"Hey, don't be an idiot. You wanna die?" Rex demanded, turning on her.

"Well, if this all happens, they're going to have the Astral Crystal all to themselves. You want that? Because I don't," Beatrice said, shaking her head in disbelief.

"I get how you feel, but being courageous and being reckless are two different things."

"What's the difference?"

"Leaping into a fight you have no chance of winning is simply stupid."

"In that case, this is courageous," Beatrice said, nodding to herself. "Ceci and I are working together. Of *course* we're going to win."

"…Well, you heard her," said Cecilia with a sigh, sitting down again. "If Bea says it, then it's as good as fact."

The other members of Medusa took their seats again.

"Just think about it rationally. Are you really going to lose your lives over some temporary emotion? You have to be more logical."

“I think you’re the ones who need to apply logic,” said Arwin, more calming than scolding. “We are adventurers. We decide how we live or die. They’ve made the decision to stay. You’ve decided to leave. You take responsibility for your own decisions. It’s as simple as that.”

“You’re committing suicide.”

“That was my intention.”

My breath caught in my throat.

“When Mactarode, my home, was sacked by monsters, I intended to die fighting them in the palace. I was unable to protect the country I’d inherited from my ancestors. It was the only way I could shoulder that responsibility.”

“……”

“But today, I am glad that I didn’t choose to die back then. I never want to see that disaster happen again. I don’t want this town to be a second Mactarode. And if I’m going to succeed in that, I will need your help.”

“Look, I understand where you’re coming from, but…”

The standing adventurers looked to one another for help. They were sympathetic, but they still valued their own lives more.

“You folks seem to think as long as we survive this stampede, everything goes back to normal, but I’m going to be honest: That’s naive of you,” I said.



“What do you mean?” They all turned toward me.

“After the stampede, the town will be ruined. The buildings will be trashed. There won’t be any food or enough places to sleep.”

“But that’s not…”

“Naturally, crime and disease will run rampant. No one will be safe. If all the monsters return to the dungeon, more will just come into town from the outside instead. The walls and gates will have fallen, too.”

Years ago, I’d visited a city that had experienced a war. Pain and sadness and hatred had oozed from every crevice of the miserable place. The same would happen here. A stampede was a war against monsters.

“What you have to remember, most of all, is that Sol Magni and their founder are at the center of this. What do you think they’ll do once the town is destroyed? They’ll claim all the surviving townsfolk and bring them into their cult. It’ll be easy with a little flash of money and food.”

Human beings are weak to the desires before their eyes. They’d have no choice but to wag their tails for even the men who’d killed their own families if it guaranteed survival. The more they wagged, the more they’d become susceptible to religious teachings, until eventually they would treat the deaths of their relatives and companions as necessary sacrifices to their god.

“Even if that *doesn’t* happen, after they’ve lost families and homes, where do you think their anger will go? Against the monsters? Their feudal lord? No. Against us, the adventurers.” Someone asked why. “Because we defeated their ‘founder’ and declared Sol Magni to be eradicated already. If a stampede happens, they’re all going to think we lied.”

The guards and mobsters would go along with that, too. If the peace of the public demanded a scapegoat, adventurers were the ideal target. Wanderers. Outsiders. The perfect people to blame for their problems. The guild would already have been destroyed in this scenario, too. It was right outside the dungeon.

“No one’s got anything to gain from it. They’re the ones who will be laughing in the end. In fact, they already are. They’re giddy with the realization that they can easily pull off their stampede thanks to the idiocy of the adventurers.” In adventuring, one’s business was kaput if they lost face. It was

nearly impossible to regain lost honor. It was one of the major problems the princess knight was facing. “And don’t imagine you can just leave and try again elsewhere. The adventuring world is surprisingly small. Word gets around—especially the bad kind.”

Silence fell upon the room. Everyone was looking at the floor, unwilling to speak up. Some of them looked outraged, but none relented and returned to their seats. We’d tried appealing to their pride as adventurers, but that hadn’t worked, either.

That left only our final option. I would be the fall guy to bring the rest of the group together. When you needed to unite disparate people, the easiest method was creating a common enemy. If Sol Magni wasn’t enough to do the job, a degenerate kept man would surely get them raising their fists as one.

But before I could open my mouth to speak, Arwin strode boldly up to Rex.

“Further debate is pointless, it seems,” she said scornfully. “Let’s settle this.”

Adventurers worshipped strength. They followed those with power and might. When opinions differed and they could not find common ground, violence was the quickest way to settle that difference.

“You mustn’t, Princess!” Ralph shouted, but I grabbed the back of his collar. Since I was in my weakened state, however, I couldn’t halt his momentum, and the result was both of us on the ground.

“What are you doing?!”

“Just shut up and watch.”

While we were horsing around, Arwin had gotten in Rex’s face. He looked startled at first, but he recovered and put a hand on his sword pommel.

“I see. Nice and simple.”

I noticed one of his companions jabbing forward with a spear.

“Then let’s settle it, right here. If the princess knight wins, we’ll do as she says. If she loses, we’ll be out of town befo—”

But she was already upon him. Before he could even react, she had grabbed him by the hand. Even without her sword, Arwin was a capable fighter. She had beaten up the Maretto Sisters and Medusa almost entirely on her own not too long ago.

She could either dislocate a joint or throw him before he could fight back.

Rex groaned and gritted his teeth, bracing himself for the shock to come.

Then, with his hand in hers, Arwin sank down to one knee.

“I ask you again, Rex and companions. Please, lend me your strength.”

He was completely stunned.

“What are you doing?”

“Ordering you about by force will not persuade you to follow me faithfully, will it?” Maybe their bodies would obey, but not their minds. An unthinking puppet never helped when it was needed most, because it didn’t have a mind of its own. “I want to save this town. To do that, I need your help,” she said.

Well, yeah. She didn’t have enough people.

“I—I see,” Rex stammered, clearly disconcerted. And it wasn’t because Arwin’s tactic had taken him by surprise. I would bet on that.

“I want your help. Please, give it to me.”

“Uh…y-yeah,” Rex said, nodding like a dope. He even had the temerity to blush. Hey, watch it. She’s too good for the likes of you to touch, you rat. I clicked my tongue.

Noelle gave me a look. “What’s the matter? You look like you swallowed a bug.”

“Yeah, it flew into my mouth earlier. Just trying to work it down my throat,” I snapped. She looked concerned and wished me luck with that.

“Well, all right. I guess we’ve got no choice, then!” Rex said loudly, to the resounding cheers of the other adventurers.

It had taken a lot of hounding, but it looked like they were finally on board. I leaned over to Arwin’s ear and whispered, “I didn’t think you’d do something like that.”

“Like what?”

She looked at me like I was speaking in tongues.

“Squeezing Rex’s hand that way.”

“Oh. You’re jealous.”

“No! Hardly.” I waved my hands exaggeratedly. “I’m Matthew, handsomest man in all the realm. Why would I be upset by a little hand-holding?”

“So do you understand how I feel now?” she asked.

“A tiny bit.”

I'd have to cut down on my visits to the pretty ladies from now on. For at least three days.

Following this, we got down to dividing up duties and planning out strategies. I was ready to leave for Dez's house to prepare, but Rex pulled me over to a corner first.

"What, are you going to kiss me?"

"Who are you?" he demanded. There was fear in his eyes, the look of a spooked rabbit. "I've been through my share of battles. Nearly died several times. I've been attacked by bandits and rogues of all kinds and almost eaten by monsters."

"If you just want to boast to me, can we do this some other time?"

"But that was the very first time in my life that I thought another person was going to devour me."

He was talking about the trip back up to the surface after rescuing Arwin. I'd been nearly dead with exhaustion and then had had to put up with Rex spouting bullshit, so I'd given him a death glare, as I recalled.

"What, like in bed?"

"Don't be an ass."

So I wasn't going to joke my way past him.

"There are very few people who can emit that kind of aura. You were like some kind of monstrous beast. I heard you were an adventurer before. How many stars? Why do you hide your past?"

They could simply choose to ignore me and leave me alone. Why did they all want to know so badly? It seemed clear that if I pretended to be weak, Rex wasn't going to buy it, however.

"Here's a warning." I reached out toward him. Rex raised his hands in self-defense, but I ignored it and flicked his forehead. "Keep your mouth shut. You really want it getting around that the leader of Chrysaor was terrified of the man who lost twice in arm wrestling to the old man's granddaughter? Won't be good for your reputation, will it?"

He nodded eagerly and hastily. Rex was a capable fighter. We really didn't need to be losing valuable manpower when the situation was so dicey.

"Oh, but one more thing," I said, turning back before I walked away. "Thanks for saving Arwin back then. I really do appreciate it. Please stick around."

I waved good-bye and left the room. I didn't glance back to see the look on Rex's face. It was probably to his benefit that I didn't.

"I'm back."

The place was dark and gloomy. No lights on, even though it was already evening? I lit a candle and went into the living room to find Dez drinking alone. He was fiddling with a rounded stone, like always. I didn't even feel like teasing him about it.

"Repair's done," he grunted, like an old man trying to use as few words as possible. Thankfully, our long years of knowing one another helped me understand what he meant most of the time. "It's in the back. Check it out later."

"Your wife already left?"

"Aye."

Dez's wife had taken their son to shelter with some relatives ahead of the stampede. A number of other guild staffers had sent family out of the city as well. He could have gone, too, but he was a stubborn and foolish man unable to abandon his job.

"Gimme some of that," I said.

"Pour it your own damn self."

"Say no more."

There was a small jar of the stuff below the boards in the kitchen. This was the finest of Dez's homemade apple brandies. I'd taken a taste myself, so I would know.

Dez scowled at me but thrust an empty glass over for me to use. I took a sip. The sweetness of the apple melded well with the bite of the alcohol. I could finish several glasses of the stuff.

"You really are in love with that girl, aren't you?" Dez grunted once I'd downed my first glass. I understood his point. Thanks to the runt flying-squirrel sun god, I was pitifully weak and useless in battle. But if Arwin was staying, then I was staying here, too. Even if it meant my death.

"Whaddaya want on your tombstone?"

That was Dez's way of saying, *If you have anything to get off your chest, I'm all ears.* I already knew my answer to that question.

"I don't give a shit." Once I was dead, there were no more worries to deal with. If I left a body behind, just dump it wherever and move on. Dump it in the dungeon, even. I wasn't

going to complain. If he wrote an epitaph like, *Here lies the man who perished out of love for Arwin, the Crimson Princess Knight*, it might eventually be made into songs by the bards years later, but I didn't want to be the soundtrack to drunks getting wasted. "What I want you to do is look after Arwin. Help her do what she wants to do."

If I died, she was done for. She wouldn't get any Release, and nobody would be willing to do the dirty work of silencing the nosy. Her dream would come crashing to earth. Still, I wanted her to go on living.

"All right."

"C'mon, don't grieve like that. It's a waste of your luscious beard," I said, running my fingers through the carpet on his chin. He punched me.

"How many times do I have to tell you not to touch my beard before you take the hint? Hmm?"

"Look, if you're going to punch me, can you at least do it with your empty hand?"

He had struck me with the one holding the rock, so it hurt more than usual.

Dez seemed confused, however. "What do you mean?"

"I'm talking about the stone in your hand."

"Huh?" He stared down at his palm, wide-eyed. "What the hell is this? When did I pick this up?"

He hadn't realized he was holding it? Dez was terrible at telling jokes and equally bad at acting. I knew that from years of experience. He wasn't lying.

"Let me see it."

I snatched the rock from his hand and examined it closely. There was no sign of any carving or etching. But it also looked much too even and perfect for it to be a natural shape.

"Do you remember where you found this?"

As far as I could tell, he'd already been carrying it when we'd left the village of Yuulia in Mactarode.

"As far as I can remember, I saw it on the ground near where we killed the dragon," he said.

So he'd been holding on to it ever since, without realizing he was doing it?

"And your wife didn't say anything about it? Her husband in bed with her, tweaking a stupid little rock rather than her own breasts? You'd think she'd say something like, *Play with me, not*

that stupid—” He punched me. I hit the ceiling, then fell to the floor. “Do you think this is a cursed stone?” I wondered, rubbing my jaw as I gave it back to him.

“What kind of curse?”

“You know, from that hairpiece-wearing, bald sun god,” I said. Then a thought occurred to me. “Oh! Do you think this could be *your* relic?”

We looked at the stone together.

“Can you tell what kind of stone it is?”

It looked common enough to me. You could find a hundred like it in a riverbed.

“Give me a second,” Dez muttered. He went into the back room and came out with a small adze for splitting wood. He set down a flat stone on the floor, then placed the round stone on top of it. “Hah!”

He grunted and swung the adze. The blade clanged and broke off at the base, whistling over my head. It could have split my skull.

“Hmph. Not a normal stone.”

Well, obviously. If Dez couldn’t break it with his abnormal strength, the stone was abnormal, too.

“But we don’t know if it’s got anything to do with the sun god. For one, how are you supposed to use it?”

Now it was my turn to go into the kitchen. I came back with a rat that had been caught in a trap there. I put the rat into the glass I’d just been drinking from, flipped it over, and put it on the table. From under the cup came sounds of scampering and pitiful squeaks.

“Now hold this.” I placed the round rock in Dez’s hand and held it over the cup. “Here we go!”

I placed all my weight upon his hand. Even without arm strength, I still had weight, at least. The cup on the table broke under Dez’s hand and my body. Red blood squirted through the cracks.

“The fuck was that for?!”

But I pointed at Dez’s hand. It had worked.

The round stone in his burly palm was glowing. The light was coming from the sigil of the sun god, shining from its surface.

There. I’d sacrificed fresh blood, as it desired. Even a rat was too good for the rotten maggot sun god, to be honest. A

parasite would've been better. He'd never get fed a human life again.

"That's your answer. It's a relic of the ratty sun god."

"……"

"Hey. What is it?"

Dez was silent. His eyes were closed, like he was sleeping. I leaned in closer to see what was wrong with him, and he smashed me in the face with a backhand.

"Mmm. Ah. Oh, I'm here," he muttered, blinking himself awake.

"What happened? It seemed like you were out. Was it…?"

"Yeah," he said, grimacing. "I heard the sun god's voice."

In my case, it had been a message via Roland, but Dez had heard it directly.

"What'd he say?"

"That the second trial has been passed, and next is the third trial."

In other words, basically the same as my message.

"I also learned what this thing's name is and how to use it," Dez continued, glancing at the rounded stone in his hand.

"What, did he recite the manual for you?"

"It was the feeling of it. The name of this stone is the Heart of Flame," Dez spat unhappily.

"Even though it's a stone?"

"You think I know why the hell it's called that? I didn't come up with it."

"Sorry. I apologize."

Not only had I crushed a rat under his hand, I'd forced him to hear the ass-face sun god's voice. Of course he was irritated. I probably deserved another good beating. Maybe just slightly gentler this time. Even I would die if Dez hit me often enough.

"It's not that," Dez grunted, squeezing the Heart of Flame. "It's the thought that he's trying to placate me with this. I don't like it."

CHAPTER FIVE

The Gluttonous Stampede

The day of the Founding Festival had arrived at last.

I woke up early and checked the room, only to find that Arwin was already awake.

“I guess you didn’t need a wake-up kiss, then.”

“Spare me your jokes,” Arwin said, jabbing me in the chest. “Where is Dez?”

“He already left.”

Dez would be on call at the guild all day. That way, he could be at the dungeon if anything happened. It was the front line. In an emergency, Dez would be the one facing the monsters down directly.

Arwin would go to the northern square, where there was a high chance of a “preacher” appearing. The Founding Festival involved the entire town, but the square near the lord’s manor on the north side was set up with stalls for the parade. Last year, it had been right outside the entrance to the dungeon, but this year they’d moved it up here. Supposedly, it was for the extra room to accommodate a rise in visitors, but the real reason was the stampede. There would be important people at the festival. Placing it farther away gave them a better chance of escape if disaster struck.

I would be there, too, as Arwin’s escort, officially serving as April’s protection.

Adventurers had spread out across the town to bolster security. Noelle and Ralph were among them. The guild’s staff served as messengers and aides accompanying the adventurers. That way, they could inform the guild as soon as anything happened. As for the guild itself, the walls and gates had been reinforced to serve as an evacuation point for the townsfolk and any potential wounded.

The location of the founder himself was still unknown, however. Ideally, we would kill him before he caused the stampede. We hadn't had any word from the Birds of Prey since the explosion. I assumed they hadn't found him.

"We might not ever be able to come back here," Arwin murmured.

"We will."

Or at least, you will. That's what I'm here for.

The weather was bright and sunny, and the sounds of music and merriment were already in the air outside.

"I've got a present for you," I said, guiding Arwin to the back room. Her eyes went wide. "The repairs are finally done. Dez went and got it yesterday."

It was Arwin's set of armor. The hole that the preacher had put in it was patched up. There wasn't a single scratch on it. No wonder Dez personally recommended this craftsman.

She shuffled forward and caressed the surface of the breastplate. Anger, regret, determination, courage—so many emotions fought for control over her features. Once she had satisfied her need to touch it, she turned to me and simply said, "Help me."

"You got it."

The armor had front and back pieces that had to be fastened together. There were also gauntlets and greaves that had to go on, one at a time.

Lastly, she donned her red cloak. The Crimson Princess Knight had returned.

After that, I offered her the usual hard candy.

When she saw the piece in my hand, her face darkened. It was clear she felt disappointed to be relying on it once again. But distaste for it would not change the reality of the situation: If she didn't take it, she would eventually go into withdrawal and be unable to fight. Nicholas still hadn't delivered his antidote.

She closed her eyes and popped it into her mouth, rolling it around on her tongue, then exhaled with relief.

"…It's finally time." Win or lose, live or die, it would happen today. "It's been about a year and three months since I met you, hasn't it?" Arwin said as she began walking, reminiscing on the past.

"That sounds right."

Since becoming her kept man, I'd been in no small amount of trouble. First, I had nearly been killed by her holy protector, then she had been embroiled in a succession battle, and then I had even killed a friend. There was more. I'd gotten into fights with mobsters, then suffered a beating at the hands of the commander of the Paladins, who'd been trying to pry into her secret. When she'd gone missing, I'd gone into the dungeon to rescue her, and I'd even headed all the way to her monster-infested homeland to find something she'd left there.

If I hadn't met Arwin, my life would've been much quieter. But it would doubtless have been a life not much better than death, mooching off Polly or some other woman. I couldn't tell which would be worse.

"A lot's happened."

Since living together, she'd dressed me in strange clothes and gotten me to do housework. When I tried to bring women home, she hit me, and when I tried to visit their places of business, she choked me instead. There'd been plenty of misery, but good things, too.

In the spring we'd seen flowers, we'd eaten refreshing watermelon together in the summer, in the fall we'd talked all through a stormy night, and in the winter we'd shoveled snow.

I would have done none of these things without Arwin.

"It's too early to indulge in memories."

Even after the stampede, our goal would remain the same. Arwin needed to go into the dungeon and find the Astral Crystal. I would acquire a supply of the drug she needed and erase any loose ends caused by people who learned too much about her.

"Everything's still ahead of us. We haven't achieved anything. The first step is getting through today."

"Yes, that's right," she agreed, clenching her fists. "We *will* save this town."

We'd arranged to meet outside the orphanage. On our way there, we received plenty of nasty glares. The rumors were still getting around, then. When we arrived at the orphanage, April was already there with the children. There were five of them in total, including her. And if disaster struck, we'd have to protect them, too. The thought brought a dry chuckle to my throat.

"You're late." The pampered, fussy girl pouted. "And why are you dressed like that?" she continued, stunned by Arwin's

full set of armor.

“We’re your protection today. This is to make sure no one gets any funny ideas around you,” Arwin explained. April didn’t exactly look thrilled. She was probably reminded of her kidnapping.

Meanwhile, the usual guards were watching from a distance. They’d better be on their game today.

“I bet normally you could have dressed up like me and had a good time, Arwin.”

But even if it were just a normal festival, Arwin would not have done that. Not even on a day off.

“Is that the dress I picked out for you the other day?” I asked. April did a little spin to make the skirt flare out. “Ah yes, it *does* look good on you. Just as I thought. No, even better.”

I’d made the right choice. The red dress helped the silver of her hair stand out.

“Are you sure you want to wear this through town?” I asked. The material was fancy, the kind of stuff worn for a ball or a formal occasion.

“What, this? Oh, it’s fine. It’s not that expensive anyway,” she said. That was rich girls for you. “But since you coordinated my outfit for me, I thought I should wear it on this holiday.”

“I’m honored,” I said, bowing respectfully. For some reason, the princess knight did not look entirely pleased. She was fiddling with her hair.

“Well, let’s get going. It’s about to begin,” April said, ready to start running off.

“Ahhh, not so fast. Here,” I said, beckoning her over. I placed a bow in her hair designed to look like a rose. April’s eyes sparkled like jewels. “I picked it out to match your dress and hair.”

“It’s so pretty.” She beamed, taking the bow and examining it. She really liked it. “Thank you, Matthew.”

“It’s nothing, really.”

“Yes. I was the one who paid for it,” I heard someone nearby say jealously. Hopefully, April wasn’t bothered by that.

“Thank you, too, Arwin.”

“Of course,” she replied, turning away self-consciously.

“Since we’re all here, I’ll put it on you,” I offered.

“It’s okay.”

“C’mon, don’t be shy.”

For all her fussing and protesting, she stayed as still and obedient as a doll while I put the bow in her hair. If only she were this nice all the time, my shins wouldn't be nearly as damaged.

"It looks very nice on you."

"Wait, is there a mirror?" she asked, looking around like she was searching for a lost child.

"Here." I held out a hand mirror. "I brought one along because I figured I'd need one."

"You're so prepared," she said, impressed, and she took the mirror. "It's so pretty…" Her cheeks flushed red. "I'll treasure it forever."

"I'm just glad you like it," I said. It'd been worth the trouble of picking out.

"And it was my money that paid for it!"

"Yes, yes, we know," I said. The princess knight was as grumpy as a sleepy child past nap time. "There's no need to be angry. Nobody's trying to deny your part in this. April's very grateful to you."

"Says the man using my money to look good. The man who almost never buys *me* presents."

She kicked my shin. With all her armor on, it hurt a lot.

"I gave you that present not long ago. You know, the extremely spiffy one."

"It belonged to me already," she said pedantically. "And I didn't ask you to get it for me."

I wasn't going to be obnoxious and demand she show gratitude, but this comment was crossing the line.

"Fine, then. I'll go and bury it right where I found it. Give it back."

"Why would I do that? I'll never let go of it again," she said, turning away and pretending to hold a jewelry box.

"Then you could stand to show a bit more appreciation for my sacrifice."

"I have. And I paid you for it," she said, folding her arms and gesturing toward her lap. "You said it was what you wanted."

"Still, labor involves a certain amount of pain that is deserving of an equivalent reward."

"I'm sorry, which saucy mouth just said that?"

“You know the one,” I said, finding myself grinning. “You know from the inside out, from the tip of the tongue to the feel of the teeth.”

“You clown!”

“Um, hey.”

Someone pulled on my sleeve. April’s face was beet red. I realized this had probably been a bit too much for a girl her age, but then I realized she was stopping us for a different reason: A large crowd of onlookers had formed to observe our bickering with glee.

“C’mon, let’s go.”

“You got it,” I said. I didn’t want to make Arwin into any more of a sideshow than she already was.

“This is your fault, Matthew.”

Even if she herself blamed me.

We left the orphanage and headed north toward the festival. Ropes had been strung along the sides of the main street to allow the floats to pass. It meant less walking room and more foot traffic than usual. The pickpockets would be busy today. Like the gentlemen of the street, pickpockets had their own union that punished outsiders and newcomers who didn’t affiliate with the rest. Mobsters watched over the union and skimmed off the top in the form of protection money.

“This way.”

I might be able to withstand the crush of the crowd as the floats and parade went past, but the little squirts wouldn’t. I’d set up a special vantage point for them.

“Are we going into a store or something?” April asked.

“Nope,” I replied.

The upstairs areas of the restaurants and inns facing the main street were already packed with people enjoying the sight of the floats and crowds below. One needed to reserve a spot in those places, and it would be costly. No, there was a much safer and, more importantly, *free* place where we could watch.

“Pardon me.”

I passed through a gate built into the remains of an old fort, then opened a door in the corner of the outer wall and began climbing the spiral staircase inside. Eventually, it ended in a watchtower. The wind was brisk, but the stone tower offered a view of the entire main street.

“Oh, wowww!”

“It’s so high.”

“No horsing around, kids. You don’t want to fall,” I said, pulling back one of them before they toppled over the railing. They would not survive the drop.

“I’m amazed you were able to borrow such a place, Matthew,” said April.

“Yeah, I know a guy,” I bragged. Quick steps came rushing up the stairs from below, and the door at the top slammed open.

“What do you think you’re doing?!”

“Hey, Vince.”

The commander of the Paladins ignored my greeting and grabbed my shirt.

“This is not a place to bring citizens for a gander! And you lied to them that you had my permission?!”

“I forgot to bring it up. Sorry,” I admitted. “I just thought as a protector of the kingdom and an avatar of justice and righteousness, the captain of the Paladins would make the dreams of these innocent young children come true.”

“This is not a playground! Leave the tower at once.”

“You’re a real prick, you know that?” I said, turning back to the orphans. They looked to be on the verge of tears.

“We’re not allowed to be here?”

“But I wanna stay!”

“I want to shee the feshtival…”

They all began to whine and moan in turn, pleading with Vincent, who was taken aback. He clearly didn’t know what to do. Despite his stern demeanor, I knew he regularly wrote letters to his wife and child. My guess had been right: He was susceptible to the tears of children.

It’d been worth giving them acting lessons beforehand.

“C’mon, have a heart. It’ll make the Paladins look better.”

“Only until noon,” he said.

The children thanked him in unison. The red-faced man closed the door behind himself. Once his quick steps had taken him down the tower, I finally exhaled.

“Sheesh, what a mess.”

“This is what happens when you don’t clear everything with the proper people first,” murmured Arwin, who had been busy ignoring the situation and staying out of it. I glared at her.

“Hey, it was your idea, remember?”

Yes, I had learned the layout of the place when I had been brought here earlier. The Paladins' base was big and sturdy, and it might very well withstand the effects of a stampede. There were especially sturdy cells underground, too. It also aligned with the old man's desire that his granddaughter should be protected. I didn't think it was a bad idea.

But the first time I'd heard her suggestion, I'd had to wonder if she was drunk.

"I thought I instructed you to clear it with him first," she grumbled.

"You know that wasn't going to work," I said.

It was why I'd had to just do it and pretend I'd put in a word first if it came to that.

"Hey," begged the kids, who tugged on my sleeve. They were still pretending to cry and be pathetic.

"Are we done yet?"

"Yeah, you're good now," I announced. They stopped crying immediately.

After wiping off their cheeks, they clung to the tower's railing again. A procession of people dressed up as soldiers from three hundred years ago passed by, followed by more extravagant floats.

"Ah, look. There are the floats."

"Oooh, wow, it's like a castle."

"That gigantic fish looks real!"

The children were very pleased with their view of the floats. April was equally pleased she had fulfilled their request.

"Look over there, Matthew," she said, pointing out a float very excitedly. Two pretty blond women were riding on one decorated to look like a snake.

"Are those the Maretto Sisters?"

"So it seems," said Arwin, looking aggravated. The rest of the Medusa party was riding in the float behind them. I'd heard they would be going to the north square, but not like this.

"Are they in the parade, too?"

"So it seems."

It would be a good vantage point from which to monitor the rest of the festival, to be sure. The Maretto Sisters were responsible for vanquishing the preacher. The real one was still alive and probably nursing his wounded pride. He might try to

restore his honor by attacking them, unless he was afraid of sticking out too much.

"Hey, aren't you thirsty?" I asked the children, who were spellbound by the floats. "Here's some sparkling lemonade."

It was lemon water with a bit of honey for taste, mixed with a dash of baking soda at the end to make it bubbly. The mixture wasn't especially fancy, but it wasn't a common treat around here, so it was very exotic to them.

"My mouth is prickling."

"It's kinda weird?"

"It hurts, but it tastes good."

For the most part, they seemed to like it.

"Where did you buy this? I didn't see any stands selling it," April wondered, staring at the bubbles in her cup.

"I made it."

"You did?"

"Yeah."

"That's amazing!"

For any adult, I'd prepare a good stiff drink, but that wasn't an option for these kids. I figured, why not give them something they hadn't likely had before?

"Once again, he'll do something special for *April*," muttered the princess knight under her breath. Let's ignore that.

"But how did you get the ingredients?"

"They were provided by a very kind person."

More footsteps started coming up the stairs.

Arwin had paid for the ingredients, in fact.

"Pay me back later," she said, glaring as she put away her purse.

"Yes, yes, I know. In fact, I'll pay you right now." I grabbed her around the shoulder and pulled her close. She stomped on my foot.

"In *cash*. Nothing else."

I pursed my lips. "You know, the princess of a kingdom shouldn't be such a greedy cheapskate. You're setting a bad example for all other princesses, Your Royal Highness."

"Stop that," she snapped, fixing me with a piercing look. "Don't call me 'Royal Highness.'"

"Why?" I asked honestly, realizing this was not the time to tease her.

"…It's a matter of my reputation." Regardless of her thoughts on the matter, Mactarode Kingdom had been invaded and destroyed by monsters. Arwin was former royalty but was now a refugee without a homeland. "The first time I came here and called myself a princess, they said I was a pretender. It pained me," she said. No matter how highborn she was, no matter how noble her blood, Arwin was not royalty without an existing kingdom to represent her claim. "It is a grievous crime to name oneself royalty without a proper title in any country, not just this one. If others call me a royal princess, it is as if I named myself as such, and I will be judged for it. That is why I do not call myself a royal princess, even if I want to. You are forbidden from it."

"Then what about 'princess knight'?"

"…There is no official title or position known as 'princess knight.' Therefore, I have no problems with anyone using it."

Just an epithet, then.

"I had no idea."

"I didn't think it really needed pointing out. When I came to this town, I asked the guildmaster to make the distinction clear to the other adventurers."

If she allowed others to call her by the formal title, she could be held responsible for the crime. That threat had been made clear to the adventurers, and they were behaving accordingly. Instead, they'd arrived at the "Crimson Princess Knight" nickname.

"Even then, some who are *too used* to calling me that do it anyway. I bring it up to them every time. Consider yourself warned."

Noelle had called her by that title after arriving in Gray Neighbor, but she had mended her ways since.

"Understood," I replied. It felt like the utter darkness ahead of us had given way to just the tiniest bit of light at the end of the tunnel.

Most of the floats had passed our position by now. All that was left was the customary reading of the founding declaration, the centerpiece of the festival. It was too far away to make out the square from here.

"We're changing shifts. Now you're the one leading the children," I said, patting April on the shoulder. "Just stay put up

here. If anything happens, follow Vincent's instructions. He's the funny man from earlier."

We'd asked him earlier; surely he wouldn't just abandon the children. There was already an evacuation spot lined up for them.

"Where are you going?"

"On a grown-up date."

Arwin and I descended the stairs and left April and the kids behind in the tower.

The square was surrounded by huge fences on all sides. Inside, they'd built a stage about as tall as a person. Three sides of the stage were surrounded by high walls, and just before the square, the floats and parade marchers were all lined up cheek by jowl. The security was tight. Guards stood everywhere, and only those authorized could pass. All those seated in the audience were important people; the commoners had to watch through the fence. I could see some adventurers, too, but they were mostly there to guide people along the evacuation route.

"Do you think something will happen here?"

"I do."

Sol Magni had lost several bases and many underlings, but they'd still stuck around. This was the grand occasion they had been waiting for. There was no way they'd just cause the stampede without any fanfare. The preacher *would* make an appearance. He'd make some announcement about "God's wrath" and "purification" or whatever. That was when we'd strike.

Meanwhile, Noelle and Ralph were waiting nearby in case anything happened to us.

The buzz of the crowd died down, and a band of musicians began to play.

"It's starting."

A man dressed in extravagant clothing took the podium. He looked about as old as me, or a bit older. He was monkey-faced and lanky, as thin as a dead tree: He was the feudal lord of this town. Because of his funny face, he looked less like a nobleman and more like a clown backstage after washing his face paint off, but if you treated him the way he looked, you would be making a grave mistake. He had been given command of this dungeon city, a remarkable place located on the royal family's own private land. Such an important location would not be

placed in the hands of an incompetent. One didn't live long by playing by the rules all the time, either.

After declaring the start of the festivities, he began to announce the winner of the float parade. This was determined by a panel of judges, which was ultimately just a game of one-upmanship and earnings management.

"And now, today's winner is—"

But before he could declare a champion float, a huge ball of fire appeared in the sky.

Screams rang out. It dropped straight toward the stage like a meteorite. The lord leaped out of the way at once, but the projectile's velocity was much higher. If it exploded, it was going to immolate the entire area. Shrieks of despair sounded from all around just before the fireball erupted in the air.

The sky burned white, then became even brighter with an evaporating sizzle. Somehow, the square hadn't been charred even the tiniest bit, however.

"Did that get blocked?" I murmured, impressed, as a black monster landed on the stage. It had enormous golden eyes in its egg-shaped head. Long, insectoid limbs writhed and wriggled.

That was it. *Him.* He was alive.

"Not bad, girls."

Two women with identical faces had leaped and bounded across the floats to land on the stage: Cecilia and Beatrice, the twin Maretto Sisters. Their magic had blocked the explosion of the fireball. The other members of Medusa quickly joined them in flanking the creature.

"Come on," said Arwin, who had pushed her way through the crowd. Why was she so insistent on running ahead? I would've caught up to her, but I was being swept away by the wave of people running in the other direction and couldn't make smooth progress.

While we tried to get there, the combatants on the stage held a little conversation.

"Just to confirm: You're the real one this time, right?" Cecilia asked.

"Ah, yes," the creature said, adding things up. "You were the ones who got carried away thinking you had defeated me. That was quite laughable."

"You can save your cheap provocations," Cecilia continued, holding back her younger sister, who looked ready to launch

herself into a fistfight. “The only thing that matters is that you’re the piece of shit who tarnished our sterling reputation. And even if you’re another fake, I’ll still destroy you.”

“And we won’t hold back against the real thing!” Beatrice called out. They began to cast spells. A magical barrier limited the damage to the surrounding environment so they could team up on the trapped preacher within its bounds. The preacher clicked his tongue and began to waver. It was that mist transformation again. Once he had dissipated, no amount of magic would stop him from just floating away.

“I was expecting that!” Cecilia shouted triumphantly, unleashing a spell. It hurtled toward the alarmed preacher, and Beatrice cast the finishing touches.

“Pierce and rumble! Lightning Spear!”

A dizzying, crackling bolt struck the preacher directly. Instantly, his wavering body returned to its former outline. He was thrown backward until he struck the magical barrier and slumped to the ground.

“Mist is basically just water vapor. Naturally, water is going to conduct a lightning bolt,” Cecilia boasted happily.

Basically, his powers were weak against lightning.

“So what do you think of what Ceci can do? But we’re just getting started!” Beatrice said. She launched the next spell.

“Blast him off the horizon! Sledge Storm!”

“Crush my foe! Rock Fall!”

“Freeze and shatter! Ice Halberd!”

The sisters alternated casting their spells, preventing any chance of a reprisal. They intended to bury the preacher under the weight of their successive magics. The other four kept up a stream of augmentation spells to boost the power of the offensive magic, and they stood in front of the twins to shield them from harm in the case of a counterattack. Thanks to the magical barrier, the preacher couldn’t even flee if he wanted to.

“Should we go with a big one now, Ceci?”

“Wait. Something’s wrong. He’s been too defenseless.”

“You think this is another fake?”

“No, this one’s real.”

In that instant, a black arm thrust upward from under the stage. It grabbed Cecilia by the ankle and dragged her to the

ground. Then the figure burst up through the stage, revealing another creature that looked the same as the preacher.

"And *so am I*," it said, throwing Cecilia by the ankle with one hand. She flew through the air and hit Beatrice, knocking them both off their feet and sending them into the magical barrier they had erected. The other preacher loomed, standing over them.

"That one hurt. If that had gone on much longer, I might've been in trouble."

"…Hang on, you're twins, too?" Beatrice noted sarcastically, grimacing in pain.

"More than just twins," said the original preacher, plunging one of his arms into his own head. He rummaged around, like he was searching for something, then grinned. He grunted and, with some effort, pulled the arm back out, holding what looked like a red egg.

"Though I've never tested it, there should be at least ten or twenty."

He hurled the egg, which split and issued red smoke. It billowed out, steadily filling up the air and taking shape.

In moments, it had turned into yet another identical preacher. So he could create copies of himself. That had to have been what the Maretto Sisters had initially defeated at the hideout.

"Shit!"

Cecilia tried to get up, but she faltered. The creature's grip on her ankle had broken something. Another member stepped in to offer her protection, but she did not even serve as a diversion.

"Begone."

The three preachers pierced hearts, lopped off heads, burned bodies, split skulls, and utterly devastated the women of Medusa. Blood sprayed across the stage, and four women were left in their own pooled remains.

Cecilia's eyes were as wide as they could go. Flecks of blood hit her cheeks, and she bellowed in something between a scream and a roar of rage.

"You sons of bitches!"

An enormous fireball shot from her staff. It swallowed up the three preachers, shattered walls, and sent up a pillar of flame on the stage.

“Die! Die, you fucks! Burn in hell!” she shrieked, shooting off flame after flame. The pillar grew in size and intensity, whipping up winds. Black shapes writhed amid the fire, and a light flickered in its midst.

“Look out!”

Beatrice threw herself on top of her older sister. The bright light shot directly over their heads.

“So much noise and fury.” One of the preachers made his way through the fire. Behind him, another preacher was burned to a crisp and promptly transformed into red mist. He had sacrificed one of his doubles to take the brunt of the flame instead. “If you want to act like snakes, then stay on your bellies and stick your tongues out instead!” he snarled, kicking both sisters off the ground. They flew like scraps of paper. Cecilia tumbled off the stage, but Beatrice collided with the body of one of her companions and just managed to stay on. With her giant staff as a support, she got back up and leveled her weapon at the preacher with eyes full of hatred and competitive spirit.

“Take this!”

“I’ve heard enough.”

She tried to chant a spell, but it was a desperate move. In an instant, the preacher kicked her arm and staff away. There was the sound of bones cracking. Then he hit her in the face, knocking her to the ground.

“Ah…sh…”

“Oh, you’re still alive. Er, which one were you, again? Not that it matters.” The preacher lifted a leg, preparing to crush her skull. “You’re finished.”

Before he could stomp on his prey, a silver blade slashed open the preacher’s chest.

“Are you all right, Beatrice?!”

Arwin swung her sword again, pushing the preacher back and creating enough room for her to help Beatrice up.

“…Where’s Ceci?”



“She’s all right. Just knocked out,” I replied for Arwin.

“What about the other girls?”

Arwin just shook her head.

“Oh…”

Beatrice sprawled out her limbs and looked up at the sky through empty eyes.

“So it’s just me and Ceci again…”

They’d left their family behind and lost the teacher and mentors they respected. Like Cecilia, Beatrice had been grappling with the feeling of loss for many years, one guessed. She just didn’t show it for the sake of her older sister. Now they had lost the companions who’d looked up to them, too.

“Beatrice Maretto,” Arwin said, squeezing her hand. “I know how you’re feeling so well, it hurts. But right now, you need to push down that sadness and regret. If you don’t want to leave your sister all alone in the world, get on your feet. And if you think it’s really over and you can’t go on, just repeat these words inside your heart.”

Her shapely lips formed the words.

“Kiss my ass.”

“Oooh, how filthy you are.” Beatrice chuckled. And how rude *you* are!

“It’ll help you get back on your feet. If it doesn’t work after one time, try ten. I guarantee its effect,” Arwin said, smiling. She stroked Beatrice’s cheek. “I’ll be waiting.”

“Oh my god, I’m going to fall in love,” Beatrice joked, and then she turned to crawl toward her sister. “You can handle this one.”

“That’s my intention.”

“You certainly talk a lot for someone who just barely escaped death,” snarled the preacher from off to the side. He had already healed all the damage from the magic spells earlier and the wound Arwin had inflicted.

“Now, my captive audience,” he said, spreading his arms, “the time has come to purify this town in the name of my god. And that means all of you must die.”

Just as he raised his skinny arms, a building somewhere exploded. Pieces of rubble flew all over, striking the people nearby. Another scroll, I guessed.

The paper was so thin that it could be hidden anywhere on the body. All his followers had to do was activate them, at the

cost of their lives.

And it wasn't just the one. Again and again, buildings and carts exploded. Screams and cries for help rang out, creating a disharmonious cacophony no musical instruments could produce. The preacher exulted in the light of the fires.

"Die, heretics. The only reward that awaits you is eternal damnation."

"Stop it!"

Arwin slashed at the creature, again and again. She might have had more options if she could use magic, like the Maretto Sisters; instead, he simply turned to mist and reformed. But despite all the evasion, she continued to attack.

"I won't let you start that stampede. I will have your life…"

Suddenly, the preacher began to laugh, a high, cold sound. "You truly are ignorant of the world, *Your Royal Highness*." His black arms pointed toward the center of town. Toward the door to the dungeon. "The signal for the stampede was launched *long* ago. Reinforcing the door cannot prevent the momentum behind it."

There was a loud boom. First, there were the explosions, and now a sound like rumbling was coming from the distance. I didn't need to think about what that meant.

"So this was all just buying you time?" Arwin muttered. The preacher cackled.

"You thought yourselves hunters, didn't you? You are not. You are the beasts. You have been chased into your pen, and the only thing left is your inevitable demise."

We were on the north side of town. A panic up here would send the people fleeing to the south, taking them to the center of Gray Neighbor—right next to the dungeon.

"And you're that intent on seeing scores of people die?"

"I am exterminating vermin. Of course it is enjoyable." The preacher was positively squirming with delight. "It is a feeling of accomplishment and purpose. Most of all, I feel pride. When everything is complete and all goals are achieved, I will climb to even greater heights."

"By sacrificing your underlings and companions?"

"Such things can always be created anew. Didn't I just demonstrate that to you?" He shrugged theatrically. "It is a bother to be chased about by large groups. I have puppets that are just right for occupying you fools."

The preacher was already holding another of those red eggs. He hurled it onto a nearby roof. When it hatched, it would turn into another one of those preachers and roam about the town, chasing the citizens. A beater to drive the wild prey out of its hiding spots, then.

“You’d better go after that one. Otherwise, the damages will quickly spiral out of control.”

“You wretch!”

Arwin’s sword sliced through the air. The preacher launched itself up onto a roof. Then it spread its arms and spoke to the crowd.

“The festival is only beginning. Savor the experience!”

CHAPTER SIX

The Preacher's Pride

The rumbling was deafening, as was the pounding of feet. The chaos was reaching its peak.

I looked up to find that the bastard was already gone.

"I'm heading for the dungeon," Arwin said as soon as I'd climbed up onto the stage. "I want to meet up with Noelle and Ralph so we can find and defeat that founder. You go to April. You can still get there in time." As time passed, the monsters would steadily fill the town and make movement much harder. If they were going to run, it was now or never. The defenses would be better around the Paladins' base, too. "The Maretto Sisters shouldn't be a problem. The healer's on the way."

"I know, but—"

"We accepted responsibility for her. She's bound to be worried now."

"…All right."

There was no time to sit around and strategize. As soon as I checked in on April and confirmed she was safe, I could catch up.

"I'm going to put a stop to that stampede. He is not invulnerable. I will come back victorious. Just wait for me, Matthew."

"Don't die in there."

"Of course I won't."

Arwin smiled at me.

I split off temporarily and headed for the Paladins' headquarters. I could only pray this was just a temporary parting and not a permanent one. The crowd had already fled in all directions, and the street that had been so packed with revelers was now desolately empty. The odd shoe and hair

decoration littered the stones. Festival signs and decorations were broken and trampled, covered with shoe prints.

"Matthew!"

The voice brought me up short. April came running up to me. Once she got within range, she practically collapsed onto me.

"What's happening?" she asked.

"It's a stampede. Monsters have come out of the dungeon."

Her face went pale.

"What about Arwin?"

"She's fine for the moment. She's gone off to fight the monsters." I reassured her, rubbing the squirt's head. "Our princess knight is very strong. She'll wipe out all those monsters and come right back. The real problem is you. I want you to go back at once. It's dangerous out here." If we wasted time around here, the street would soon be overflowing with monsters. "Your grandpa's gonna be fine. Your house is the second-safest place in this town. The safest is that spot where we left you earlier. Don't worry, that funny man won't do you wrong."

He had to be sheltering other evacuees at this very moment. I knew he'd been preparing for that.

"It's not that," April protested, making it clear my reassurances were about the wrong thing. "It's Luke. I don't know where Luke is."

That was one of the orphanage kids. He was around seven, a bratty little boy with tawny hair and hazel eyes. I'd spoken to him several times. He was a memorable one to me.

"The kid who wants to be a kept man?"

If he was already hoping to be supported by a woman at that age, he was showing great promise.

"I think he was worried about everyone at the orphanage and went to check on them," she said.

I couldn't blame him after seeing the carnage that had unfolded. But it didn't take a genius to know what would happen to a child out alone in a town overrun with monsters.

"I'll search for him. You go back," I said, rubbing the squirt's head.

"But—"

"Listen, April," I said, reflecting on fond memories. "Your grandpa and Dez are right: I'm a good-for-nothing scoundrel. But I know one thing. You're going to *stay here*."

She looked up with a start, then nodded.

“Help us again, Matthew… Wait, behind you!”

Her shriek drew my attention to our rear, where a man-faced lion was prowling toward us from the other side of the street.

“A manticore.”

The monsters were already coming this far. This beast was much smaller than the one that had gone on a rampage in the guild courtyard not long ago, but it was still a problem. And I couldn’t easily clean it up, because the sky was unfortunately cloudy.

It was a thin layer and should clear soon, but that was more than enough time to prove fatal to us. During the previous encounter, Noelle had defeated it almost entirely on her own, and Dez had been around, too. Now it was just us.

“What should we do…?”

“Back away slowly. Keep facing it.” If we turned our backs on it, then it would strike. “We’ll go to the far street.”

Once there, we would be in sight of the Paladins’ base. It was tempting to try shouting for help, but the creature would feast on us before rescuers could arrive.

Manticores were sly and cautious creatures. If they believed a target was too difficult to kill, they would not recklessly pursue it.

I could sense that April was following my lead. She squeezed my arm. Step by step, we backed away.

“Don’t look it in the eyes. It’ll take that as a sign of aggression.”

Bit by bit, we distanced ourselves from the manticore. That was it. Almost there.

The clouds were thinning out overhead. If the sun broke through, I could make do, even if it attacked.

We were just a few steps from the street when small shadows hopped down upon us: a group of small imps. They had red, pointed heads that looked like hats.

Redcaps! Why now?

“Get going!”

I pushed the squirt out of the way as the redcaps jumped on my head. I slammed against the wall, trying to pry them loose, but they gripped my hair with their long claws and held on for all they were worth. Never in my life had I wished so hard that I

was bald. I couldn't shake them off because the sun was still behind the clouds. The redcaps were clinging to my arms and chest, too, so I couldn't even pull the temporary sun out.

"Matthew!"

"Just go!" I shouted.

But the kid was rattled by the sudden attack and turned her back to run.

Before I could warn her, the manticore took off running after April.

"Shit!"

As a last bit of resistance, I reached out for the creature as it passed by, but my fingertips only grazed the manticore's fur.

"Run!"

When April realized she was being chased, she started sprinting, arms swinging, but the manticore was faster. It closed the gap in moments, crouched, and pounced, swiping with its claws at its prey. April turned to look back, her face pale with panic.

Just before the sharpened talons could rip through April's body, a shadow hurtled in from the side and knocked the manticore away. The monster twisted in the air, regaining its balance, and landed on all fours, growling.

April's eyes were sparkling. Gloria Bishop ran her fingers through her hair and stared down at me imperiously.

"Listen to this, Mr. Kept Man." No sooner did the question of what the Adventurers Guild's appraiser was doing here pop into my head than she began to whine. "Just because we're short of manpower doesn't mean I should be pressed into service doing security at the square; then weird things show up and everything goes crazy! The square is ruined, and everyone ran away, so I turned to go back to the guild, but then monsters showed up, and it's just *awful*. I should never have come to this town," she ranted, and then she hung her head in disgust. Was she drunk? I didn't remember her being at that meeting.

A roar sounded nearby. The manticore had changed its target to Gloria. It jumped onto the side of a nearby building and bounced off at an angle toward her.

"Ugh! Enough!"

She practically tumbled forward to avoid its charge and hurled a long needle from her sleeve. It sank into the

manticore's side, but it didn't seem to do much to slow it down. It shook its body and sent the needle clattering to the ground.

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me."

She'd probably coated them with poison, but manticores were poisonous themselves and had resistance to the stuff. Depending on the type, they might be completely impervious. Plus, they had thick pelts, and a throw that weak wasn't going to break through. The manticore seemed to think this was an opportunity and struck again, leaping onto Gloria as if to crush her. She didn't have any more needles. April screamed.

As the shadow of the beast fell over her, Gloria raised her left arm and grinned.

There was an ear-rending blast. An enormous pillar of fire shot upward and enveloped the manticore. The lion's body soared through the air, burning fiercely, and when it fell to the ground, there was no head on it.

Gloria straightened up and swept back her stray hair. Her left hand was smoking.

"Annoying piece of shit."

The redcaps clinging to me had fled, startled by the explosion.

"Thanks, you saved us," I said. "And I *knew* you had that metal hand outfitted."

"It cost a lot," she said, pointing with her remaining hand at the prosthetic dangling at her side. "The problem is that it can only fire once, and it's hard to manage the power output."

Ah. So she couldn't have used it in her room, that time I visited.

"Oh, and I nearly forgot," Gloria continued, pulling out a small package. "Um, what's his name, Neil Burnstone? The old healer. He gave me this, said to give it to you."

"Nicho—er, Nick Burnstein?" I said, quickly correcting myself with his alias. The package contained some white hard candies.

He had written something on the back: *I tried mixing up some candies for you. Give them to your patient and it should neutralize the problem.*

If only it had come a bit earlier. But better late than never.

I thanked Gloria and put away the bag. I'd give one to Arwin when I saw her again.

“Oh, um—!” April called out, her cheeks flushed. “Thank you for protecting me and Matthew! You saved our lives.”

“Ah, yes,” Gloria muttered sluggishly. “I think I’d get yelled at by a very scary man if anything happened to you.”

April blinked. “Oh, uh, right. Grandpa…I mean, my grandfather can be frightening when he’s angry.”

“Yeah, that sounds about right,” she said. Don’t give me that meaningful look!

I explained the situation to Gloria and left April with her. She was a calculating, scheming woman, but that was why I could trust her. She wouldn’t do anything that would get her in trouble with the old man and me.

Fortunately, it was sunny now. If I played my cards right, I should make it to my destination in one piece.

I left them behind and proceeded south down the main street. Monsters were raging around the town. They weren’t just eating the food from the festival, but even the decorations, too. They were having their way with the place.

Shrieks were coming from everywhere. Chaos and terror were rampant. Unfortunately, I didn’t have the time to go around protecting people. If anyone had the power and time to save every person here, they would have to be a god, and the only god I knew was the biggest piece of shit in history. No use counting on him.

Somehow, I forced my way through the packs of monsters and made it to the orphanage.

“This is a mess.”

It was already half destroyed. Monsters had trampled the building, the yard, and the flower planters. But though it was a mess, I didn’t see any bodies. They must have evacuated before the monsters had arrived. The problem was Luke. I went through the destroyed building and heard a familiar voice behind some rubble. That was Luke’s voice, I was sure of it.

“You all right?”

I clambered over the rubble and saw Luke, sitting on the ground in what used to be the orphanage’s backyard. An enormous snake was terrorizing the boy—I recognized that one, too.

It was a lindworm.

They’d brought this monstrosity out of the depths of the dungeon, too? Maybe it was hungry or just looking to pick up a

snack for the road. Its massive bulk shook as it opened wide, ready to swallow its prey whole.

"Move it!"

I leaped forward, scooping up Luke just seconds before he could be gobbled up. We rolled across the ground, buffeted by the wind and force of such a large object racing past. We had so much momentum that we hit a wall, but Luke was unhurt.

"You all right?"

"Oh, it's the old kept man."

"If you want to find success later in life, you should learn to say *young* kept man," I said, giving him a very valuable lesson. Then I pointed out a storehouse in the back of the alley. "Run through there. It's too big to follow you through."

"Come with me, Mr. Young Man!"

He took my hand and tried to pull me up. His expression was pale and panicked. He could see that the lindworm had turned around and was ready for another charge.

"I've got a date, and it's a little too spicy for kids. Close your eyes and cover your ears for a bit."

I pushed him toward the storehouse down the alley and got him running. Once I couldn't see his back anymore, the lindworm's menacing mass was almost upon me.

"Too bad, snakey."

It made the right move by trying to block the sun over me, but it wasn't enough. I leaped sideways to keep myself under the rays of light and punched the lindworm in the stomach.

It momentarily rose up and stopped its forward momentum. That gave me time to spot something helpful on the ground nearby: a decorative flag from the festival, complete with pole. I scooped it up and jammed the pole deep into the lindworm's eyeball. It sprayed blood all over the national flag. The snake's head rocked back and forth in agony, forked tongue extended. The last thing I needed was for it to cause a dust cloud.

I picked up a piece of pointy rubble and jumped high into the air, then used the piece like a stone knife, jamming it into the monster's head. It screamed and writhed, but its movements rapidly slowed and dulled.

"It's over."

For good measure, I punched it in the head, causing it to spit up blood. The lindworm slammed its head onto a pile of rubble,

sending up dust, and fell still.

Once it was dead, I rested against the corpse and exhaled.

Nearby, I noticed a scroll on the ground by the building. Upon examination, it was blank. Now it made sense. I'd thought it was strange that such a large monster had appeared so soon—but it was Sol Magni's work. At the start of the stampede, they had unleashed monsters here and there across town to put pressure on the fleeing humans. That meant there would be more of this sort of beast to come. The situation was worse than I'd expected. The town would be leveled within the day if we didn't at least shut the door to the dungeon.

"You all right?" I asked. On the other side of the door to the shed in the alley, Luke looked stunned.

"What about that big snake?"

"This really great adventurer came along and beat it."

"Whoa, really?"

He jumped out of hiding and was shocked to see the dead body of the lindworm lying still on the ground.

"Wow! Who was it? The princess knight?"

"Someone you wouldn't know," I said, picking him up to rest on my shoulder and tousling his hair. The sun hid behind the clouds again. "That's your punishment for sneaking out on your own. The squirt says she's gonna spank you."

Luke turned around with a start and pointed at the lindworm's body, which began to twitch. How? I knew I'd killed it. But the creature's mouth opened to reveal a yellow ball of light, which spat out a fluid-covered rodent. It was about the size of a child but had large teeth. It crawled out of the corpse's mouth and stood up on two legs.

A wererat.

It must have been swallowed alive by the lindworm. And not just one of them; a total of five emerged. They carried short swords with chipped blades and stone axes. It was honestly impressive that they'd survived in the beast's belly.

Clearly, they were in a foul mood. The wererats' red eyes gleamed with hatred as they turned on us. That was bad, because in my present state, they could beat me. I had to at least find some way to spare Luke. But just as I took a combat stance, arrows flew through the scene from off to the side.

One wererat caught an arrow to the brain and flipped over, with the shaft sticking upward like a grave marker. The others

faltered, and from behind us, a voice roared, “Kill ’em!”

A bunch of grizzled combatants rushed past us and ganged up on the wererats, using clubs to pound their targets and jabbing them with spears. The wererats had no way to fight back, and soon their bodies formed a stinking pile.

“Everyone good here?”

I groaned. It was Oswald the Cirrocumulus, lieutenant of the Birds of Prey. Several menacing armed men waited behind him. Each one had either a sword, spear, or ax in hand.

“What are you doing here?”

“What’s it look like? We’re protecting the town.”

He jutted his chin out to indicate some bodies nearby. They looked like orcs, perhaps, but they had clearly been ganged up on and beaten en masse. There was hardly anything recognizable left.

“Your boss gave the order?”

“Listen, we’re scoundrels. We’re meant to be hated.”

So you’re aware of that, at least. I didn’t dare say it out loud.

“But still, there are some things ya just don’t do,” he continued. Anger flashed across Oswald’s face. “After that bullshit they pulled onstage, we got a score to settle. Right, boys?”

The men behind him answered in unison.

“I see.”

I wasn’t expecting much from them, but more numbers would be helpful.

“Oh, and I got some news for you,” he announced.

“What? Did you find out who the founder is?”

“No, the other thing.”

The matter of who was spreading the wicked lies about Arwin, then.

“It was tough, but we finally narrowed it down. Just a single person who was doing all the work.”

When he told me the name, things immediately clicked into place for me.

“Thank you. That helps a lot.”

“You’re going to settle the score, right? Want some of my boys to tag along?”

“I’ll pass,” I said. I didn’t want to cause any needless casualties. Oswald took my refusal in stride and didn’t press the matter.

“We’ll be to the southeast, then. Swing by if you need anything.”

“Will do.”

Once the Birds of Prey had left, I took Luke by the hand and headed for the Paladins’ base. The sun was out again, so I figured we would make it. I put the boy up on my shoulders, and at some point, he pulled on my hair.

“Shouldn’t we go with them?”

“Listen up, Luke,” I said, giving him a fair warning. “If you wind up owing people like them a favor, they’ll chase you to the ends of the earth to collect it. Best to steer clear of them whenever you can.”

After dropping Luke off, I turned right back around to head for the dungeon. I wanted to clear up the score with that preacher as soon as possible, but I didn’t know where he was, and the monsters at the dungeon needed stopping first, or we’d perish.

I took the route to the dungeon through the back alleys, avoiding the big streets. That was a risk, because there was more shade, but if I wanted to get through without being stopped, this was the quickest route.

I could hear countless footsteps behind me. It sounded like bipedal creatures, but the cadence of the steps was weak and unbalanced. I knew it wasn’t an army of drunks, so I glanced over my shoulder, then gasped.

It was a horde of the dead.

Skeletons, zombies, ghouls—they were all lower-tier undead. That was fine. They were easy to beat because they moved so slowly and stiffly. There was just one problem: They were all dressed like adventurers.

These were the souls of people who had died in the dungeon and come back as undead. It was said if one died in the dungeon, their soul was trapped and forced to wander around in suffering until the day the dungeon was defeated.

It was sickening. Their companions were probably still alive somewhere in town. Some of them were basically just bones now, while others barely looked any different from the living.

I considered fleeing to the main street, but that would just trap me between two sets of monsters. Instead, I slipped down an even tighter alleyway. They gave chase, but without any real

intelligence, they had no efficiency. They each tried to push the others out of the way, causing logjams. Some of them even attacked and bit each other. It should've been easy to pull away from them, I thought, if not for the dark shadow approaching up ahead. It looked like more of the undead.

There was nowhere to run now. There were countless undead behind me and just three in front. I slipped my hand into my pocket, ready to rush past them—when I stopped in my tracks.

I recognized these three.

"I guess I made the right choice coming here alone."

It was Virgil, Clifford, and Seraphina.

Former members of Aegis who had perished in the dungeon.

We'd burned the bodies and crushed the bones, but the dungeon, activated by the catalyst of the stampede, had faithfully recreated them for us.

They were wearing clothes and didn't have any exposed bones or rotting flesh falling off their frames. Still, it was clear they were dead. Their skin had an ashen pallor and a greenish, sickly tint. On top of that, their pupils were completely dilated.

"It's been a little while. How have you been?" I tried, to no avail. They had not retained any of their personality. Virgil bared his teeth at me and then leaped like a wild beast. I kicked a nearby rock at him and hit the ground. The rock struck Virgil and knocked him off his feet. Meanwhile, I scuttled low past Clifford, circled around, and pushed Seraphina's back. They collided and fell together, at which point I turned and ran for all I was worth.

…Or so I would have liked, but in the shade of the cramped alley, I was as slow as molasses. They would catch up to me in no time. They seemed to have forgotten how to use their weapons, however, and swung them around at random as they chased me. Because of the narrow dimensions, they ran into each other accidentally, struck each other's heads with their weapons, and smacked their hands and arms against the side walls, but they weren't giving up. Damn, they were persistent. For Arwin's sake, I wished they had shown such dogged determination in life as they did in death.

The gap was closing.

Again, I put my hand into my pocket, but this time, something landed behind me in the alley. I stopped, perhaps foolishly, and turned to see another familiar face.

“Sorry I’m late.”

Fiona brandished a sword against the trio of former adventurers. There was no time to stop her.

Virgil swung his sword as hard as he could, clipping the wall and cutting marks and grooves in the ground. Sometimes, he went so hard that he lost his balance and flipped over the sword.

It was sheer violence, and unlike how a living person would do it, he had no restraint. It didn’t matter if he hit something and injured himself—he swung at full force anyway. Fiona easily handled a few attacks that would have killed her if they’d landed. She turned sideways to avoid a massive downswing, then dodged a lightning-quick thrust in just the nick of time. She wasn’t just trying to escape, though. She deflected a sideways swipe by smacking Virgil’s sword upward, then used that momentum to cut off his arm while he was unbalanced.

There was no wasted movement. She had clearly studied classical sword fighting.

Virgil dropped to one knee, and Clifford and Seraphina attacked instead. Neither of them used magic, nor did they have weapons. They just set upon Fiona with an agility and strength they had not possessed in life.

Meanwhile, Virgil was busy reattaching his own arm. Within a count of ten, he was bending it and checking to see if it worked.

“Leave this to me! You go on ahead!” Fiona cried.

“Are you sure?”

“I have some things to discuss with them,” she joked, but I could see that her eyes were filling with tears. “You can’t let Arwin face these three, right?”

She gripped the handle of her sword. It was at that moment that I randomly noticed there was a groove on her left hand where a ring had once gone.

“…Got it.”

I turned my back and started running. The sound of sword fighting behind me got even louder for a moment.

From there, I continued to make my way toward the dungeon through the alleys and shortcuts between buildings. Where was Arwin?

The closer I got, the more monsters there were. I couldn't walk down the main streets anymore. I climbed the side of a building and made my way by rooftop. Down below, the streets that had been packed with people were a hellish nightmare of monsters of all kinds. They were starting to show up in the sky, too. Winged monsters like gargoyles and rocs were swooping about like they owned the place. They grabbed people who had climbed up for safety and carried them off into the air. One man was strung upside down, where he was helpless to fend off the gargoyles' talons and fangs. They tore him to pieces like carrion birds.

At last, I was coming into view of the dungeon's entrance. The door that was meant to separate the dungeon and the surface had been shattered, and monsters were streaming out of it. From lower-level grunts like goblins and kobolds to ogres, minotaurs, basilisks, cockatrices, chimeras, scyllas… It was a true Wild Hunt.

Dez and the other guild folk had erected a defensive line around the guild itself. They had created magic walls that kept the monsters away and tried to push some back, but there were just too many. The adventurers and staffers were doing their best, but it wasn't enough.

A shadow blotted the sky overhead. I looked up and saw a gargoyle descending upon me, intent on its next prey. Before I could even react, I was being lifted high off the rooftop, dangling by one arm. If I worked myself loose, I would fall smack into the midst of the monsters on the street below.

Other gargoyles gathered around me. I was about to be the next to suffer a grisly death.

"The banquet's over there, you uncouth bumpkins."

With the power of the sun on my skin, I grabbed the gargoyle's wrist with a backhand and crushed it. I was hanging upside down from the shattered wrist, and we soon plummeted toward the gargoyles below us. After colliding with some of them, I felt an impact. My vision went black for a moment as I hit the ground. Then I saw a bearded face more familiar than my own mother's.

"That was quick."

“I’ve been through some stuff.”

With Dez’s help, I got to my feet. I’d fallen smack into the middle of the Adventurers Guild. Thankfully, the gargoyle had served as a cushion for my fall. I would have thanked it, but its head was caved in, and it wasn’t going to reply.

“Where’s Arwin?” I asked.

“The princess is on patrol, cleaning up monsters. She was fighting near here earlier, but I don’t know exactly where she is now.”

“Okay.” So she was searching for the preacher as she fought. “What’s the situation?”

“Just how it looks.”

“Then you can *sum it up for me*.” Don’t get lazy with your answers.

“Big monsters showed up at each of the four gates.”

It was too fast for them to have come from the dungeon in the center. That was Sol Magni’s work again, summoning monsters with scrolls to block the town exits. They were determined to massacre the entire population.

“Guild staffers headed to the east. Argo and some other adventurers are moving to the west now.”

“And north and south?”

“The guards and Paladins are handling the north gate, as I understand it.”

Vince was a knight. Vanquishing monsters was part of a knight’s duty.

“And the south…”

“Is where we’re going now,” said Rex, leading the rest of Chrysaor.

“Good luck.” Most of the poor folk lived on the south side of town. Many of them wouldn’t have fled the city in time to escape.

“Given the situation, I’m going to be honest with you,” Rex said to me under his breath. “I’ve tried to woo the princess knight once before.”

“I’ll fucking kill you.”

“She turned me down. She said, ‘I appreciate your affection, but I cannot possibly leave my lifeline,’” Rex said with a shrug. He didn’t seem as disappointed as his words suggested.

“That sounds right.”

“…She really trusts you.”

“We’re not together just because of romantic fancies.”

There were complicated factors that entangled us. We had secrets we couldn’t share with others.

“You’ll have to tell me how exactly you got together someday.”

“Maybe over some nice whiskey. Single malt, real expensive.”

“I’ll…keep that in mind.”

Rex led Chrysaor off on their way. I turned back to Dez.

“Where’s the doc?”

“He was helping with the injured in the guild just a little while ago before he went to help folks out in town.”

He just couldn’t settle down, could he? I was relying on him in case anything happened to Arwin again.

“And how are things here? What’s going on with the monsters?”

“We’ve got a defensive line laid down, but it ain’t stoppin’ ’em. They just keep flowing out into the town,” he replied.

The guild had turned into the medical tent for the battle out in the field. The ground floor was overflowing with the wounded. They were casting healing magic on adventurers and injured townsfolk. They were trying to triage the patients to determine the neediest first, but there were just too many people. Plus, companions and family members of the injured kept beseeching them for attention, so it wasn’t going well. I wanted to see the door to the dungeon restored, but the steady stream of monsters prevented anyone from even approaching the place.

“We have a means of buying time. For now, we can block more monsters from getting out of there.”

“What do we need to do?”

“First, we gotta deal with the monsters in sight.”

“This many of them?”

They were streaming out of the dungeon. There were hundreds just in the vicinity of the door. Years ago, Dez and I together might have managed them ourselves, but we didn’t have enough help this time.

“And that’s our path to getting through this?” said a voice. Dez and I spun around.

It was the Maretto Sisters. They’d made their way here. Their clothes were bloodied, but they were steady on their feet.

It looked like healing magic had taken care of their wounds.

"You're good now?"

"Can't stay off my feet forever in the midst of this disaster," Beatrice muttered, swinging her huge staff. "And…we've got some revenge that needs taking."

Cecilia clenched her two staffs. "We're caught up on the situation. Take out the monsters here, and things will work out, huh?"

"Temporarily."

At the very least, it would give the townsfolk time to run for safety.

"Got it." Beatrice turned her back on us. "Me and Ceci will clean up the grunts. You buy some time while we're doing that."

"You sure?"

She hadn't seemed like the type of woman who liked to be a sacrificial pawn or the stepping stone for other people's success.

"They have to pay the price for taking our people from us."

"…Yes, that's basically it. Let me and Bea take it from here."

"The real problem is those guys."

At some point, the eggheads in question had taken position atop the collapsed door to the dungeon. There were six of them in total. The real preacher didn't seem to be present, but they would be a significant problem if we didn't take care of them.

"I guess we're up, Dez," I said, but he was already on the move, stomping forward with his low center of gravity. One of the doubles instantly circled behind Dez and swung a vicious chop at him.

There was a flash of light.

The next instant, the double's arm blade was embedded in the head of its companion. Dez's battle-ax had cleaved through the torso, hurling the monstrosity's upper half into one of the others. The lower half toppled over in the breeze.

"Kill! Kill!"

They instantly locked onto Dez as a threat and converged on him. But that was what he wanted. It was easier when they came to him. He didn't have to do as much running.

With each swing of his battle-ax, trails of light appeared. Whatever was in its path got cut in two. Not just because of Dez's natural strength, but because the weapon in his hands was the very greatest he'd ever crafted, Number 22. Those things didn't stand a chance.

“The head, Dez. Aim for the head!”

They were weaklings, but their vitality was off the charts. Even cut into pieces, they were still moving around.

“Doing it now,” he grumbled, chopping the heads off the doubles strewn about the ground.

“We’re all ready to go,” called out the Maretto Sisters, who had assumed a very odd position.

Beatrice the younger sister was on one knee, with her enormous staff tucked under her arm against her body. Cecilia the elder sister was standing on her back, brandishing her two staffs.

“Stand back. We’re about to unleash something massive.”

“Now witness our power.”

“No, Bea. They’re not supposed to watch.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Beatrice said, abashed.

“Shall we, then?”

The two spoke in unison, wearing confident grins with identical features.

“Gods reigning supreme—”
“—over all creation—”
“—demon god of the stellar sea—”
“—who rules the otherworld—”
“—we are—”
“—thine instrument—”
“—thy divine missile—”
“—conveying thy will—”
“—to the ignorant.”

Taking turns, Cecilia and Beatrice completed the statement with perfect, unbroken flow. Were they both casting the same spell? With each swing of her staffs, Cecilia created a new, small magic circle. Balls of light arose from the circles, gathering before Beatrice’s enormous staff.

“Serpent—”
“—of flame—”
“—lion—”
“—of ice—”

“—wolf—”
“—of gale—”
“—and hawk—”
“—of earth.”

With each turn, their voices grew stronger and the words came faster.

““Become the sword of light that smites our enemy.””

Now I couldn’t even tell who was saying which part. It was magic of one, by two.

““Blot out our foe! Dark Ray!””

A surge of light covered us. It was all I could do to shut my eyes in time. I expected an earsplitting explosion, but nothing came, and there was no blast of air that knocked me off my feet.

It was just a blinding light, so bright that even with my eyes shut, the view through my eyelids was pure white.

Eventually, I could tell the light was fading, and I hesitantly opened my eyes again, blinking.

There was nothing there.

Over a hundred monsters that had been present in the area, including the preacher’s body doubles, had vanished without a trace. I was completely stunned.

Behind me, I heard shrieks of delight. Beatrice and Cecilia were sharing fist and elbow bumps, celebrating their success.

“Listen, I hate to ruin the fun,” I said coldly, glancing toward the dungeon, “but that wasn’t the end of it.”

By clearing out the ones in front, the flow of monsters had sped up as there was now room for more to make their way out of the entrance.

“Can you do that one again?”

The Maretto Sisters glanced at one another, then silently shook their heads. I didn’t think so.

We would soon be back at square one.

“Where are you, Dez? It’s your turn.”

I had only joined in here because he’d said he had a plan.

“Over there,” Beatrice said, pointing out Dez, who was standing before the gate. When had he gotten there?

“I’m doin’ it now.”

He was lifting a round stone: the relic from the dung beetle sun god called the Heart of Flame.

“What are you gonna do with that?”

The monsters were leaping out of the dungeon again, having determined it was safe to proceed. Right before them was Dez, the closest target they had. But he was just standing there with the stone held high, unmoving. What was he, an idiot? And his Number 22 ax was just stuck in the ground.

“Are you asleep? Hey, Dez! Wake up!”

A swarm of goblins rushed at Dez. They were going to use their rock blades and claws and teeth to slice and chew that bearded dwarf to death. Just before their vicious, beady eyes and teeth could touch Dez, though, their bodies shivered involuntarily.

Thin, thornlike needles had shot forth from the round stone, piercing the bodies of the goblins. Despite being bloodied and sewn to the ground, they flopped their limbs, attempting to break free and leap onto Dez again. Another wave of needles extended from the stone, piercing the goblins’ brains.

He gave the stone a squeeze, and all the needles retracted to the original stone.

“See, this changes shape into whatever I will it to be.”

Just as the goblins were dying, however, more monsters came bursting out of the dungeon. This time, there were three.

Dez snorted and hurled the stone. Halfway along, the Heart of Flame changed shape into an ax that spun as it hurtled through monster after monster. Basically, because the fat-assed sun god had decided to take away Dez’s skill as a craftsman, he had also given him a little toy that could change shape at will. Go to hell, man.

“Here goes again!”

After cleaning up a wave of monsters, Dez hurled the Heart of Flame. Just before the round stone passed through the dungeon entrance, it swelled up and billowed like an enormous cloth, clinging to the frame of the doorway and filling in the gaps of the broken door.

“Well, that’s done.”

“Hell yeah, Dez, you did it! You’re the freakin’ greatest, man!” I said, resting my chin on his head.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” Dez grunted, punching my chin with an uppercut. “This is just a temporary measure. We

haven’t stopped the stampede itself.”

“So we can’t just sit here with the door covered and wait for it to end?”

Dez gestured with his chin. Indeed, I could feel the presence of countless creatures beyond the door. They were wailing, striking, clawing, gnashing, and begging to be let out.

“It won’t last forever,” he said. “It’ll turn back into that stone again before long.”

“All right, I get it.” I turned to the other guild staffers around. “Master Dez has stopped the tide of monsters for now. Hurry and take this time to evacuate. Also, mop up all the monsters in town.”

Monsters still prowled the town. We needed to clean them up and save as many townsfolk as possible.

“Well, you handle the rest.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’m tired. Gonna take a bit of a break.”

It was valuable time that Dez had bought for us. If I didn’t use it fruitfully, he’d strangle me.

Arwin wasn’t here. At this point, it’d be more efficient to just strike at the enemy rather than search blindly for her. There was only one way for us to survive this: defeat the preacher and stop the stampede. I had a hard time imagining him fleeing town. He meant to watch over the destruction of Gray Neighbor, so he would have his own special perch from which to observe the show. So where was it? The lord’s mansion? The tallest tower in town? No. It would be a place in the center of town with a view of the dungeon’s entrance.

“Meaning, right here.”

I walked through the gate of the Adventurers Guild.

My first destination was the counter. Ordinarily, it would be packed with adventurers accepting quests, but now it was surrounded by the wounded. The heavily injured were allowed to lie down, but those who had shallower wounds were simply given emergency care and made to wait. That was where I found the person I was looking for.

He leaned against the wall by the window, head down, nearly about to cry. It looked like he was lamenting the disaster that had befallen him.

“Hey, Gramps,” I said. The old carrier looked up with annoyance, then surprise.

“You ran away, too?” He rubbed my arm. “You’re all right?”

“Why, did you get hurt?” There was a bandage around his arm.

“Hmm? Ah. Just a scratch,” he said, waving his arm to show that it was nothing. “I was drinking at a pub and suddenly people were screaming about monsters coming out of the dungeon. So I fled here in a panic. In the rush, I got knocked over.”

“Sounds like you’ve had a day,” I said, glancing around and lowering my voice to a whisper. “This is good timing. I’ve found some good booze in the warehouse here. The guild’s got a little stash set aside. Let’s go and drink some.”

I swung a bottle in front of his face: a fine thirty-year whiskey.

“Really? During all this chaos?”

“What better time than now?” I laughed. “It might be the last thing we ever have to drink. Don’t you want it to be a good one?”

“I’ll drink to that,” he said, cracking a smile.

“Tell the truth, I’d rather be alone with Arwin, but she’s somewhere else now. I’m sure it’s fate that’s brought us together. C’mon, let’s have a drink,” I said.

“You know, I think my arm is suddenly feeling much better,” Gramps said, hopping to his feet.

“Let’s find a spot with a nice view,” I suggested, pointing out the window. “How about over there?”

In an emergency, the Adventurers Guild could be used as a fortress. In other words, there were several buildings inside its walls. One of them was a lookout tower.

The lookout was in the back of the guild grounds. Its stone walls were thick and sturdy. I’d pilfered the key earlier. Inside, it smelled rotten. Each floor of the tower was a storage space, and they stored monster corpses and parts here. It was why none of the staffers wanted to come here.

We climbed the spiral steps and opened the hatch up onto the roof. It was a round platform with only a railing around waist height. The wind up here was strong and cold. Monsters were rampaging all around below us. They were flying into

whatever buildings they fancied, looking for food. Gripped by hostility, violence, and hunger, there was nothing that could prevent them from satisfying their urges. Some of them could fly, like the gargoyles earlier, but the guild had monster-repelling herbs burning around the place to keep them back for now.

I handed Gramps a cup I'd stolen along with the bottle and filled it to the brim. We leaned back against the railing and shared a toast.

It was good stuff. Better suited for drinking with a beautiful woman and a view at night.

"This town is done for. The only question is how many will survive. At least we might last for a while in here," lamented the old man, glancing down at the foot of the tower. A stampede didn't last forever. Once the wave subsided, the monsters would naturally return to their home, the dungeon.

This place was much safer than any other building and had plenty of spells and wards to keep monsters away. There was a stockpile of food. It was right in front of the dungeon, so one would expect it'd be first to get trampled in the event of a stampede—which was why it was built like a fortress. The goal was to stay inside for safety and fight for one's life, and maybe survive this thing.

"Yeah, I suppose you're right," I said, and I cracked my knuckles. Then I continued, saying:

"It's time to end your little plan."

With the sun shining on my back, I raised my arm.

The old carrier scrambled out of the way.

"What the hell d'you think you're doing?"

"You were the one spreading those stories about Arwin."

"What? I never—"

"It's fairly easy to trace rumors back to their source. Even details most people wouldn't remember can be summoned with ease when asked by a scary-enough man. And out of all the rumors out there, the ones that are most unspeakable and foul all came from *you*. That information has the Birds of Prey's seal of quality on it."

"…You're going to trust mobsters over my word?"

"Yes. Because they're businessmen."

Betrayal was a common feature of dealing with the mob, but if they were paid, they were actually quite honest. And most importantly, the Birds of Prey had no reason to frame this old man.

"But why would I do such a thing…?"

"I already know who you are, Gramps. Or should I say, *preacher*."

Gramps scowled, then looked down and began to weakly fiddle with his hands.

"What do you mean?"

"Where were you born?" I asked.

"What does that have to do with any of this?"

"Let me guess. You're from *Mactarode*."

The old man paled.

"Arwin doesn't let any of us call her 'Royal Highness,' because it's a crime, and she doesn't let the people around town do it, either. But you've called Arwin that. Twice, in fact."

Apparently, only people from Mactarode did that. The preacher had called Arwin that, too. And Gramps had been inside the dungeon when the preacher had done so. It was more than enough cause to suspect him.

"Did I say that? I don't remember."

"Let's dispense with the silly games." I'd caught him dead to rights. He wasn't going to wriggle out of this one. "You know Nick Burnstein, I believe."

"Ah, that healer, you mean? What about him?"

"Why would he *eulogize* me?"

Nicholas acted as a healer with the guild. Healers and holy men were similar but distinct professions. And healers did not usually give eulogies.

"You know who he is. And because of that, the word *eulogize* naturally came to your mind back there."

"I don't know what you mean. You're going to treat me like a monster because of a word I said? I thought you were better than this, Matthew."

"Monster? When did I say anything about a monster? You weren't there when it happened. And don't try to claim you could see him after all. There was no seeing through that mist."

If he had been within visible range, I would have seen him, too.

"I heard about it afterward. I heard you talking about it!"

"How did I describe the monster?"

"Uh, a black head, yellow eyeballs, upper arms with the sun god's—"

"Jackpot." I pointed a finger at him. "This is what you heard, wasn't it?"

Earlier, I had gone behind the counter to borrow the official account of our rescue mission, as recorded by the guild. It included my testimony:

"I'm not so good at reading, so you'll have to do it for me. I'm sure you'll find it written down right there: 'on his arm was a symbol like a *gaping asshole*.'"

Gramps froze, his mouth agape in shock.

Arwin and Noelle and Ralph and I had been present in the moment. Noelle and Ralph had both been wounded, as had Arwin, of course, so the guild staffer had taken the statement from me instead. I'd told Noelle and Ralph to match my story later, too. So they wouldn't have had any details more specific than what I'd said to them.

"There's not a single word on that form about it being the sigil of the sun god. Not a word."

"But…but… Oh, right! The monster that just showed up at the festival—"

"How would you know about that if you were drinking at the pub this whole time?"

"……"

"Because *you're* that monster. Or at the very least, you're working with it." He didn't reply. "But if you want to keep bluffing and playing dumb, go ahead. You'll just force me to take more drastic actions."

I wasn't a town guard or a magistrate. All I cared about was protecting Arwin, not the law.

Gramps stared up at the sky in a stupor, then exhaled enormously.

"I really did get sloppy if I'm getting caught for the most foolish of things," he said, craning his neck back and forth,

pressing his hands there so he could roll his head around.

“That’s right. I’m the preacher.”

His demeanor had changed. Not his face or shape, but the aura surrounding him was on another level. The malice and hostility of one used to violence was seeping from his every pore.

This was who he really was. And I’d been totally taken in by his act. If I’d known he was like this, I would never have saved him in the dungeon.

“Stop the stampede, right now.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that.”

“Then I’ll have to force you,” I said, putting my hand in my pocket.

“Just a moment,” Gramps said, holding up a hand. “Why don’t we talk about it first? Go on, have a seat.”

He pointed over where the cups we’d been using were resting on the floor.

“Gonna make a break for it?”

“I wouldn’t be so cowardly.”

We poured new drinks and sat facing each other. He was smaller than me, but it was clear if I judged him on appearances, I would pay sorely. The noise from below seemed especially distant.

There were so many things I wanted to ask. Why was the founder of Sol Magni acting as a vegetable-selling carrier? Did he bear some personal grudge against Arwin? All these questions naturally led to one.

“Who are you?”

“Rather impatient, are we?” Gramps smirked. He took a sip of his drink and faced me. “My name is Levi. Levi Paul Verland Mactarode.” His voice was suddenly brimming with power and authority. “I was once the *king* of Mactarode.”

“Bullshit.” I snorted. “Next you’re gonna tell me you’re Arwin’s father?”

“More like a distant relative.” Then Levi proceeded to tell the story of a foolish life led by a man of grand ambition. “As I told you, I was once the king of Mactarode Kingdom.”

A small kingdom in a mountainous land. He would inherit it peacefully, rule his kingdom, create an heir, and depart the

mortal realm.

“But I did not want such a plain and uneventful life, something meant to take up a single line in the history of my kingdom. The thought of never amounting to more filled me with the fear of death.” Obsessed with that classic goal of many a ruler, eternal life, he found the means to conquer death: the Astral Crystal. When he learned one of the neighboring countries was close to retrieving it, he invaded them, under the pretext of protecting his own people from invasion. He brought down the capital of his neighbors, who had spent the majority of their wealth attempting to conquer dungeons, and took their Astral Crystal. “However, the crystal I acquired was hollow, out of magical power. I prayed and wished, but my dream of eternal life never came to be.”

The price for this reckless wish was heavy. The war was unaffordable and left the kingdom broke. The noble class despised him.

“So I slaughtered everyone who dared to complain. And that forceful step cost me dearly. A rebellion formed against me, and I had to flee for my life and go into exile.” Levi survived by leaving the country behind and was abandoned by his vassals and servants. Hell awaited him beyond that point. While wandering the countryside, he was captured by slavers. “From there, I went all over the region—as a slave.”

He was forced to do hard labor, repeatedly escaped and was caught, and underwent terrible punishment.

“While my wish for eternal life did not come true, what faint traces of magic were still left in the Astral Crystal made me age slower than others. Thus, I have lived twice as long as others—in a life of pure hell.” When his owner passed away, he was sold to another slave merchant. Several times he changed hands, until finally, he was sold into Mactarode Kingdom. By this time, Arwin’s father was in power.

The former king was the property of a slave trader outside the royal city.

From morning until night, he was abused, and he was whipped and beaten if he ever showed the slightest defiance. Between the changing generations and the changes in his face from a lifetime of beatings, no one recognized him as the former king, and Levi never claimed to be. If he did, he would be put to death. So he kept his head low, hiding his identity and

lurking in fear within his former kingdom. All he was given was the bare minimum of food and a floor to sleep on. For years, he did not die, but he could not be said to be fully alive, either.

"Every single day, I prayed. But I received neither blessings nor mercy. I simply waited in my cell to fall ill and eventually decay into nothing. Every day was a cascade of fresh terror. But that was when I received a revelation from my god."

If only he'd let this guy die. That would've been nice. Instead, the millipede of a sun god had interfered for no good reason and turned Levi into a preacher.

"Sounds like you just changed slave masters."

"But a different master comes with different treatment."

"So you admit you're still a slave. There's nothing so pitiful as a slave who's proud of how shiny his collar is."

"The other gods did nothing for me. Only He bothered to offer me salvation."

So he doesn't get irony, then.

"And what did the sun god order you to do?"

"To restore the dungeon. Specifically, the dungeon Pandemonium Prison, from the country whose Astral Crystal I stole."

While its power was lost, the Astral Crystal had been stored underground beneath the Mactarode royal palace. With the power the sun god gave him, Levi stole the Astral Crystal from its hiding place.

"But it was hollow and didn't have any power left, right?"

"Yes, precisely," Levi said smugly. "An empty vessel merely needs to be refilled."

So he channeled power into the Astral Crystal and brought back the dungeon.

"The Astral Crystal desires power. It needs power to absorb the energy of the land and create a dungeon once more."

So Dez's guess had been right. Not only was all this related to the downfall of that country, it turned out the bed-wetting sun god was the one behind it all.

"So there's an entrance to that dungeon somewhere in Mactarode?"

"No. The entire country *is* the dungeon."

It took me some time to absorb the meaning of Levi's words.

"I turned the country of Mactarode itself *into* a dungeon."

"How is that…?"

“Don’t think too hard about it. A dungeon is like a disease to the world itself. Other dungeons swelled up within the body, but in the case of Mactarode, it erupted from inside the body to the skin itself.”

That was why the monsters did not roam anywhere, but stayed within Mactarode’s boundaries. It was their home.

“Then where is the Astral Crystal?”

“I don’t know… Oh, don’t glare at me. I really don’t. It’s *moving*.”

“What does that mean?”

“I told you. I turned the entire country into a dungeon. When the crystal stays in one place, it grows roots and creates a dungeon. So to keep that from happening, I cast a spell on it and hurled it to a height even birds cannot reach. It continues to float high above the land, absorbing its strength. Will you search for it? Maybe you’ll find the crystal, if you’re lucky enough.”

It would be like trying to find a single unique grain of sand in a desert.

“So the monsters in that land…”

“Come in two varieties. Those created by the dungeon, and the monsters from outside that were incorporated into the dungeon—in order to be nutrients and materials for the newly born monsters.”

“What did you gain by doing such a thing?”

If he’d just wanted to put energy into the Astral Crystal, one of the traditional dungeons would have done just fine.

“He bade me resurrect the Pandemonium Prison. He did not dictate the means how. So I took it upon myself to choose the way.”

“Why?”

“Must you ask? To make it so *no one* can live there.”

If he’d simply leveled it to nothing, eventually, someone would have moved in. Burning the fields down would not have stopped the grass and forests from growing again and enriching the land. If he’d created a simple dungeon, once discovered, it would have led to the creation of a city just like Gray Neighbor.

“It was my country originally, until it was usurped by the nephew I failed to kill. The descendants of those who exiled me were living large on my land, shitting all over my legacy. Wouldn’t *you* be furious?”

So if it couldn't be his, it couldn't be anyone's. He looked like a withered old man, but on the inside, he was a petulant child.

It was his fault Mactarode had fallen into ruin and the only surviving royalty was the princess. Because of the monsters, the land was uninhabitable. Those who were still eking out an existence at the margins would eventually drift away to neighboring countries or be trampled by the monsters. It had all gone according to his plan.

"Was it vengeance that made you spread those lies about Arwin?"

"There were more people willing to sympathize with a coward who tearfully fled back home due to dungeon sickness than I had anticipated. It infuriated me. It never occurred to me that the rumors might get traced back to me, however."

It took all my willpower not to beat him right now. But I still had questions to ask.

"You must've had any number of opportunities to kill Arwin."

"I am merely a preacher in service to the Holy One. My duty is all that matters. Besides, if I killed her and it led to my unmasking, that would complicate matters," he said without a hint of shame. "After my success in Mactarode, the Holy One gave me a new duty and revelation. That is why I came here. I became a vegetable seller to more easily blend into the town. It was merely happenstance that the Adventurers Guild hired me."

"So you're not satisfied with Mactarode alone?"

"That was merely a warm-up. It takes decades to build up the strength needed. This is the real prize."

So the pudding-brained sun god's goal was to resurrect himself with the Astral Crystal. If the crystal was empty, he couldn't use it. Time was needed to fill it with power once again. So his aim had shifted to the Millennium of Midnight Sun, the last and greatest of the dungeons. Or maybe Mactarode had only ever been the opening salvo, and this had always been his goal.

"The Holy One has arranged for those who would be my limbs in achieving this quest." That would refer to Roland, Justin, and the like. "You have cost me dearly, but I completed my duty. This town is done for."

I could hear the screams and footsteps below the tower. Someone from town was running around, no doubt. Someone from town was fighting.

Levi tossed back the rest of his drink and held out a hand.

“You should join me, Matthew. I believe I recognize your ability more than anyone else.”

“You do?”

“You have astronomical strength and a surplus of intelligence and experience. Most of all, you have a soul that remains unblemished despite all you have suffered. You are too good for her. She cannot handle you. You are wasted in her service.” So that was why he’d suggested I should split from her before. “I understand how you feel. The Holy One’s divine plan has left you unable to use your strength as you wish. But that is because your soul is inexperienced. If you cling to His glory and follow His teachings, you may reach a new stage.”

“So if I say yes, he’ll restore my strength?”

“Of course. The Holy One seeks mighty Sufferers. He needs your strength.” Levi’s gaze smoldered. “Cast aside your reservations, and you can be much stronger. You will have all that you desire. Money, women, land, status. It will all be yours.”

“He’ll really give me everything?”

“Yes, which is why…”

“I refuse, you moron.” I thrust my middle finger up right in front of his nose. “For such a glorious speech, you’ve got nothing inside. You were much more gallant and admirable when you were just selling vegetables.”

“You dare—?”

“Go ahead and talk big, if you want,” I said, taking another drink, “but your vengeance won’t be complete, even if you raze this entire town to the ground. The person you want to kill is somewhere else.”

“What do you mean?”

“You nearly killed Arwin in the dungeon.”

“That’s right. What of it? Do you despise me for it?”

“Before that, you did something very strange. Now I realize it wasn’t a pose for your spell, or summoning your strength, or showing obeisance to that black mold sun god. You were prostrating yourself—*like a slave*.”

Levi said nothing, but a vein pulsed on his forehead.

“It was yourself you were angry at. Even now that you have power, you are unable to break your old habits. Even Arwin, whom you supposedly look down upon, is ‘Royal Highness’ to you. That lifetime of enslavement beaten into your nature refused to omit that title. So you took your frustration out on her.”

“Silence!”

“Very intimidating. You can wear that monstrous form like a cloak, but it can’t hide the rot seeping from inside you.”

The source of his power was his feeling of inferiority. Born a royal heir, he could not stand his ordinary reign as king and had dreamed of something greater. It’d ended with him in chains, abused for decades. That wretched past was the source of Levi’s power and the memory he sought to erase.

“Well, it’s been a very enlightening chat with you, but I think it’s time now,” I said, wiping my mouth as I got to my feet. “Let’s get this started, boss. No one’s around to stop us.”

“So you think yourself the hero saving the town?”

“Do I look that *shallow* to you?”

I had no aspirations of being a hero. Wasn’t interested. Don’t ever saddle me with your hopes and dreams and admiration. I wasn’t well-meaning enough to put on a righteous act. There was only one reason I was here.

“I’m here to beat the shit out of the asshole who messed with my woman.”

Rays of sunlight shone down from above.

“Bite down, egg-man.”

“Hold your tongue, boy!” Levi cried, and he threw down a white package. “I’ve been prepared for this. I am no amateur.”

His body began to bulge and billow. It looked like it was bubbling, as though his blood itself was boiling. A great gush of liquid erupted from Levi’s mouth. It quickly bound itself to him, surrounding and transforming his body.

His head became a large brown egg with two enormous eyes, and rows of large teeth jutted from his mouth. The limbs extending from his gray body were as long and spindly as an insect’s. This was the very image of the preacher from the thirteenth floor of the dungeon.

“Sol nia spectus.”



★ ★ ★

Before the words were even out, I was punching. Just before my fist could connect with his face, it passed through. I ended up on my toes, leaning forward, but managed to leap sideways just in time. There was a tremendous noise a split second later, and a lightning bolt struck the ground. It would have charred me had it landed.

Shit, not again.

When fighting him, my punches would go right through him. Maybe I could manage if I had magic spells like the Maretto Sisters, but if I couldn't punch, kick, strike, choke, or flatten an enemy without a body, I didn't have much in the way of tactics. Meanwhile, Levi used blades of light to attack me from a distance. It wasn't a fair matchup. If he was able to evade everything, I didn't have a way out.

Technically, I *did* have a secret weapon, but it was useless if it couldn't hit the target.

"What's wrong? What happened to all your bluster?" the preacher taunted.

"Hang on. Matthew's gonna give you a show of the trick up his sleeve."

"I'm eager to see it."

Levi didn't want to open himself up to the remote possibility that I might hit him at close range; he was staying at a distance, peppering me with blazing rays of light. They only lightly charred the floor of the tower, so they probably weren't that powerful, but there were many of them. All I could do was dodge. If I stopped, I'd be riddled with holes. I dived back down the stairs.

"So first you play tag, and now it's hide-and-seek?"

Levi came to the edge of the stairs. That's right, come on down. The moment he set foot on the steps, I shone the temporary sun, ducked, and lunged, grabbing Levi's ankles. There was a sensation there, so I squeezed and felt them crunch.

"Aaagh!"

He screamed and rolled back onto the roof, just as I expected.

As mist, he wouldn't be able to stand on the ground or move about. In other words, I had expected that at the very least, his ankles were solid, and I'd turned out to be right. Before I could continue the attack, however, Levi's ankles slipped through my hands, and his body sank through the floor. Clicking my tongue in irritation, I turned off the temporary sun.

"He went down below."

The damage to his legs should've dulled his movements, but he was able to regenerate damage very quickly. I needed to pursue and finish him off before that. But right as I started down the stairs, I had to leap out of the way.

A bolt of light shot through to the ceiling right where I'd been standing. He was shooting at me from the floor below now. He'd probably been aiming by sound or presence.

More holes opened in the floor below me. I danced around left and right, trying not to get hit. And I couldn't hit back, because my fists couldn't go through the floor. I could've thrown a rock through the holes, but they were only the size of little pebbles. Any rock would just bounce off the side.

"He's got me trapped, huh?"

Just when it seemed like I was doomed, my feet suddenly lost their stability. He'd shot so many holes that my foot had tripped over one. No sooner had it registered to me than another bolt of light passed through the floor and grazed my leg. It didn't hurt too bad, but it caused me to lose my balance and fall.

The next thing I knew, I was face up on my back. The light of the sun was streaming down from the west.

I couldn't move. If I did, I'd get shot through from below.

I kept my breathing shallow, doing everything I could to hide my presence. Just when I thought it might work, a wide beam of light came from a diagonal. Because he'd lost sight of me, he must've started a more thorough approach. Removing the sound of my footsteps was working.

Still, the situation wasn't good. The roof of the tower was not large, so he would eventually hit me by luck. And even if I kept evading him, once the sun went down, I was screwed. I could already see Levi's monstrous face gloating gleefully.

"So I'll do *this*."

I lifted my arm up and drove it into the floor as hard as I could, then rolled to move out of the way. Several rays of light

burst through the floor up into the sky.

A cracking ensued. Fine splits spread across the roof like spiderwebs. With enough holes, this was bound to happen. Especially if he was putting holes across the roof.

Eventually, the cracking became irrevocable, and the rooftop plunged down into the tower. The impact shook the entire lookout tower. Dust bloomed upward, blotting out my vision. Once it had cleared, I jumped down.

“You’ve really done it now, Matthew,” said a muffled voice. “This is pointless resistance. If you think these tactics are going to help you win, then you are sorely mistaken.”

I could pass through the roof as well. It just needed to fall in first.

“Come out, Matthew! Where are you?”

He launched more rays of light toward the sky. Of course, I had no obligation to answer him. I held my breath and waited for the right moment.

I had his location now. Now that his vision was blocked and he was locked in confusion, this was my chance. I pulled the ace out of my sleeve—and threw it from *outside* the window *into* the tower.

“Go ahead and lick my boots, you old bastard.”

It tore through the air and pierced through Levi’s leg.

He screamed.

I broke through the window and fell inside. Wind blew into the tower and cleared up the visibility.

Levi was curled up on top of a pile of rubble, cradling his leg in agony. The knife I’d thrown had the top of his left foot pinned down.

“Wh-what’s this?”

“Justin dropped that.”

He had used it on Nicholas to immobilize him. According to him, it had the ability to bottle up the power of the preachers—of the sun god. That meant it should work on Levi, too. When the roof of the tower had fallen in, I’d hopped over the side instead and, clinging to the window frame, waited for my opportunity to strike.

It wasn’t going to be fatal to him alone, but now I had the perfect chance to kill him.

I circled behind Levi’s back and put my hand around his neck.

“Do you think strangling me will prove fatal…?”

“Do you think I’m patient enough to wait that long?”

I clenched with both hands. Veins bulged on the monster’s dark neck—the fact that this beast even had veins was a realization I wryly tucked away in my mind.

“Sure, I could look around for an ax or knife, but don’t worry about it. I’m just blowing off steam.”

His carotid artery and windpipe were compacted already, keeping him from breathing properly. It was his fault Arwin’s parents had been murdered, she’d lost her people and country, and she’d had to encounter the likes of me. There was a score to settle here. His neck was half as thick as it had originally been.

“So long. If we meet in hell, pass me a few eggplants on the side again, will you?”

Levi’s body tilted forward, and then there was a bursting sound. The smell of iron rust filled the air as reddish-black blood spilled from his throat. The egg-like head bounced two or three times before rolling away and coming to a stop next to some rubble.

“Cheers.”

I hurled it like an opened wine bottle. The blood stopped, and black ash began to ooze from the wound instead.

With a heavy sigh, I sat down on the spot.

I’d defeated their leader. This should mean the end of the stampede. The problem was what happened between now and then. How long would it take the monsters to go back to the dungeon?

Just be alive, Arwin.

“Are you truly so concerned for that woman?”

I spun around, stunned, just as a ray of white light pierced my shoulder.

I toppled backward. Through the sudden burst of agony, I could barely believe what I was seeing.

“Is this a joke?”

Levi was standing there, holding his own head under his arm.

“Your experience has *cost* you this time, Matthew,” said his head, giving a toothy grin from his armpit. With his free hand,

he reached down to pull the knife out of the top of his foot, then crushed it in his palm. Pieces of knife clattered onto the rubble.

"Even a preacher dies if his head is struck off. But everything has its exceptions."

The blood just keeps running. Shit, I need to staunch the flow.

"I did tell you I received *two* revelations."

Levi held his head aloft.

The mouth, brimming with ugly fangs, moved to speak those hateful words.

"Sol nia spectus."

And then Levi's head split into two. Blue liquid spurted out of it, trickling down his arms and covering the headless torso and legs, eating away at them. Within the blue substance, something seemed to jump and bounce, swelling and shrinking as it changed shape.

Bit by bit, the blue liquid trickled off and onto the ground, rebuilding into a freakish monster of a different kind than the others.

It was taller than me, about two yul (around three meters) in size, and covered in blue scales. A long neck extended from its shoulders and ended in a fishlike face. The body was long and round, like a cactus, with short, fat limbs. There was also a spiked tail growing out of its back.

He had transformed again. That was against the rules, dammit.

This new form looked slower, going by its shape and size, but it was surely more powerful.

"What do you think, Matthew? Beautiful, isn't it?"

"It's the most hideous thing I've ever seen," I said honestly. Levi's massive form lifted off the ground. I leaped away in self-preservation, and with an enormous crash, a hole opened in the floor as the creature landed. I peered over the side of the hole to see two fish heads with four dead black eyes staring at me.

"Come on down, Matthew. Or are you too scared to jump?"

"It would've helped if you hadn't destroyed the staircase."

"Then I shall come to you," Levi said, crouching slightly and leaping up above my head.

I checked on the sunlight coming through the broken window, then raised my fist. I wasn't going to lose in a battle of

strength. I was Matthew the Giant-Eater, dammit. I didn't lose fights to freaks just because they were bigger than me.

"You fool!"

Lightning shot from Levi's arms. The bolts didn't hit me, but between the pain in my shoulder and the exertion of dodging, I lost my balance. He circled around behind me and squeezed my head in one of his giant palms.

"I could split your head as easily as a pomegranate."

Well, I'd screwed up. It was like being squeezed in a vise. My skull was fit to crack. I couldn't fight back because he was holding me from behind and dangling me in the air. I had nothing to push against for leverage. The most I could do was flail my limbs, and that would feel like nothing more than a gentle caress to him.

And while there was a giant hole in the ceiling, we were still inside a building. If Levi moved to the shade, I would be back to the usual wimpy Matthew.

"Oops, I nearly forgot."

He even took the temporary sun from my pocket. Now I was totally helpless.

His grip on my head tightened. I was starting to bleed. Death was almost certain now.

I'd experienced near death on many occasions, but I'd survived each and every one. Sometimes I'd gotten through it on my own, and sometimes I'd been saved by companions. Dez was the most frequent of the latter, but he was tackling the dungeon and wouldn't come to my rescue. If he did, I was going to kiss him right on the lips.

"Here is my final warning, Matthew. Serve the exalted Sun God. If you do, you will know the greatest of bliss."

"Back in my hometown, we didn't call it 'bliss' when you sank to being slave to a god."

"I see."

Levi brought a strange object out of who-knows-where. From the side, it looked like a round, coin-like piece of flat metal with a narrow stick attached. Strange symbols were carved into the bottom of the circular plate.

"This is evidence of fealty to the Holy One."

Levi spat flame from his mouth onto the plate. It began to turn a glowing red color.

So it was a brand.

“Once it has been pressed into your flesh, your way of thinking will change.”

“Torturing me won’t work.” I had a much higher tolerance for pain than the average person.

“This is not just any brand. It strengthens the connection between us and the Holy One. It will make it easier to hear His voice.”

“If this is an execution, just call it that,” I said, slumping. “If I have to hear that voice all day, every day, maggots are going to infest my brain and kill me.”

“Your wisecracks will become words of thanks to the Holy One,” he said. I could feel heat on my back. That was where he was going to brand me.

“No thanks. I don’t take advice from the asshole of the limp-dick sun god.” I said, making sure I flipped him off where he could see it. “My religion is a devotion to the princess knight, and if I convert, she’s going to cut my manhood off.”

“Have no concern. You will be the one doing the cutting. You’ll kill her with a smile on your face.”

I tried to say I was going to kill *him*, but the pressure on my head grew stronger, and the only thing that came out of my mouth was a scream. My back was burning; he was just about to press it against my skin.

I squeezed my eyes shut and braced for the pain.

Then a whistle of wind filled my ears.

The pressure on my head vanished. I fell downward as the wrist by my ears fell off with me.

It was a hard landing on my butt, which I rubbed as I tried to get to my feet. A helping hand reached out for me to grab.

“Are you all right, Matthew?”

It was the Crimson Princess Knight.

“I’m sorry I took so long. It took a while to defeat those other ones from earlier.”

How did she have such a knack for arriving in just the nick of time? This time, I wanted to plant an actual kiss on her lips, but one detail caught my eye.

Arwin was holding Dawnblade, the relic of the sun god. She’d taken it from its hiding place again.

“We’ll talk later,” she said, sensing I had scolding words for her and taking the initiative.

“No, not later. Why is it that every single time, you—?”

“What’s this monster?” Arwin interrupted, pointing the sword at Levi.

It was irritating to be dismissed like this, but I made a mental note to get her back for it.

“It’s Levi…the carrier for the guild. He’s the one behind all this. That’s the second form of the monster that put the hole in your chest,” I said. Then, after weighing whether I should continue, “The henchman of the one responsible for destroying your country and the agent who carried it out.”

“…I’ll hear the details later,” she replied, then stepped in front to protect me. “I’ll take it from here. You escape while you can.”

“Escape to where?”

The town was full of monsters. Maybe I’d be safe at the Paladins’ headquarters, but that was across town, and I’d be attacked on the way there.

“Well, just hide, then!”

I wish she would take more responsibility for that.

“So you come waltzing right up to me again, you fool,” Levi said through his two mouths. “You managed to cling to your life once and come to lose it again, stupid woman.

“Will you make for a miserable sight again, on the brink of death?” Levi mocked. “Will you cling to that man to make you feel better?

“Do you think yourself a heroic knight?” he continued. “Do you think your kingdom an earthly paradise?”

Arwin’s idea of goodness was not always right. Prejudice, poverty, inequality. These things existed in all countries. They could never be eliminated.

That was simply the nature of humanity. We love seeing those weaker and inferior to us. We want to eliminate those different from us and to see them come to ruin. We want to be wealthier than others. We don’t want to be like them. We want to think, *I might be poor, but at least I’m better than* him. We feel better by comparing ourselves to others. We are selfish creatures.

“More mouths means you have more boasting to do, I see,” Arwin said with loathing. “I will merely do what I must.”

Levi snorted. “What is that? Vengeance for the destruction of Mactarode? Or for your parents?”

“No,” Arwin said firmly. “I must stem the tide of suffering and sacrifice created by your wicked ambitions.”

“Don’t subject me to your hypocrisy. You’re upset because your friends were killed. You feel embarrassed that you yourself nearly died.”

“Arwin,” I warned. He was just taunting her. No reason to listen.

“You are correct. I was unable to save the lives of so many people I care about, and yet I still live today. I will never forget how powerless I felt. I questioned why I should have been the one to survive.”

“……”

“But by surviving, I am here now, fighting against you. I am working with those who are close to me. That is the thing I need not feel any shame for: my life.”

Quietly, calmly, she pointed the tip of the sword at Levi.

“I will save Matthew.”

“And you will die in exchange,” Levi said coldly, grabbing my neck with his other hand and hurling me into a wall. I held my head and grunted in pain, then looked up to see something shocking.

Rubble, hurled by Levi, raining down upon me.

“Matthew!”

“I’m alive,” I said, sticking my head out. The stone chunks pressed down on me as heavily as a turtle shell. I could crane my neck, but that was about it; my limbs were trapped.

“You stay there. Our ritual will resume later,” Levi said before emitting a blue mist from his body. That same stuff again? Soon I couldn’t see him anymore.

A black shadow took form over Arwin’s head.

“Above!”

Arwin leaped out of the way just as Levi’s massive form landed. The floor cracked under his weight. He craned his snakelike neck in the direction Arwin had fled, charging after her. She dodged this, too; he broke through the wall in his haste.

They were out in the guild courtyard. There had been a manticore rampaging here once, but it was nothing compared to the monster we faced now.

Arwin leaped through the hole to the outside, chasing after Levi. “I see you’ve gained some weight,” she quipped.

“As well as other things.”

He shot blue lightning from his mouths and his arms for four times the power. These would certainly prove fatal. She had to dodge them left and right, but Arwin didn't seem troubled by this. She was almost confident.

Arwin charted a circle around to Levi's back. This was surprisingly easy, because his large size meant he couldn't be as nimble in his turning.

"What's the matter? You were much tougher when I fought you in the dungeon."

"Not quite," Levi said, charging right at her. Rather than attacking with points and edges, he was opting for the entire surface area of his body. He was much larger now than before and with roughly the same speed. Arwin slashed and thrust as she evaded him, but to no avail. He was making good use of his size advantage.

In no time, she was trapped against a wall. There was no escape. If Levi charged, he could flatten her into a mural.

"What's wrong? Aren't you going to beg for help like you did so miserably back in the dungeon?"

"You seem to be mistaken," she replied with a dazzling smile. "Who said I came here alone?"

A shadow appeared above, then something landed on Levi. Noelle thrust her sword into his back as she made contact. Levi arched his back, only for Ralph to charge from the front. He gouged Levi's belly deeply with Merciful Rain.

Levi's body shook violently. He screeched with pain and swung his arms, but Ralph ducked past them and added another slash along the beast's side. Blood shot from the wound.

"Know your place, you giant slug," Ralph said, cockily taking position right next to Arwin.

"For the sake of the town, we will put a stop to you," added Noelle.

"Ah yes, I remember you," Levi's two faces mocked. "And what will three of you do that one cannot? You couldn't stop me when there were six of you."

"Would you like to find out?" Arwin asked, raising her sword. "You'll see we aren't the same as before."

It was Noelle who launched the next round. She circled around Levi and tossed a black rope around his arm. When it tightened, white smoke arose from where it dug into his skin.

That black rope was probably made of some monster part, whatever it was. Crafting weapons and tools with monster venom and fluids was an art all its own. This largely despised technique had names like toxinmancy and poison magic. Noelle was one of those rare practitioners.

She'd brought back many handmade weapons and tools from Mactarode, one of which was this black rope, presumably.

"Tsk!"

Levi deflected Arwin's attack with his free arm and used it to pull on the other one.

In a tug-of-war, we didn't stand a chance. Noelle didn't panic, however. She switched to tossing a blue ball that burst and splashed a clear liquid at Levi's feet. Of course, some got on his body, but it didn't seem to do any damage to him.

"What do you think you're doing?!"

But Levi suddenly stumbled and lost his balance. He tried to get back to his feet at once, but he couldn't maintain balance and slipped. Was it oil, then? It seemed too slippery for that.

"It's a mixture of hazerat sweat and oil," she said, pulling on the black rope and hurling poison-coated knives at the beast. If one stepped on a hazerat, they would become unsteady, as though experiencing seasickness. So that ball wasn't an attacking tool but one that weakened targets. Levi couldn't handle the effect and fell to one knee, making him a better target for Arwin's sword.

"Shit!"

She cut him many times on the arms and faces because of the lowered mobility he had from being unbalanced. He regenerated the flesh that was split, but Arwin didn't slow down.

"You fool!"

Suddenly, Levi vanished as mist filled the area. It was the same stuff he'd used deep in the dungeon. Arms crackling with blue lightning appeared behind Arwin.

"Look out!"

Noelle hurled a red, fist-sized ball from above. It landed between Arwin and the preacher and rapidly ballooned in size. In moments, it was the size of a grown adult, pushing Arwin and Levi aside.

After that, the red ball shrank, like a balloon losing its air, until it was flat. So that had been meant to separate Arwin and

her foe.

“That saved me. Thank you, Noelle,” said Arwin, getting to her feet. Noelle looked relieved and did a quick bow. Arwin should have known what weapons Noelle used by now, but she didn’t seem to mind this new one. She was generous like that.

Noelle continued running around Levi, and as she passed him, she tossed several white balls. When they hit the target, they erupted and sprayed a white phlegmy substance.

“This liquid was created by melting sentry spider webs,” she explained, circling behind the boss and tossing more of the white balls. “It won’t come off easily.”

“And what of it?!” snapped Levi, turning one of his heads toward her. He opened his mouth wide and shot volcanic projectiles that hurtled toward Noelle. They stuck into the ground, smoking, and created jets of flame that Noelle dodged left and right, but between the hazards and smoke, she couldn’t get any closer to the enemy.

Ralph attacked from the other side. The slashes must have hurt Levi before, because the preacher threw ice whips from his arm to keep the magical sword’s menace at bay. Ralph could only dodge and twirl to stay out of harm’s way. Sometimes, he managed to deflect a whip with his sword, but overall, he was too concerned with taking damage to get closer. Where had all that bluster gone?

Then our illustrious leader Arwin attacked head-on. Levi used his other arm to fend her off. But unlike the last round, Arwin was on a different level. And most importantly, her sword was different.

He was being sliced up by his own boss’s sword. He had to be happy about that.

Even still, Levi wouldn’t go down. He was getting slashed on his arm repeatedly, but his regeneration was incredible. The wounds simply sealed up again as soon as they were inflicted. The spots where Noelle and Ralph had hit him earlier were already whole. Cutting off the head was the only way, it seemed. This time, however, he had two of them.

We’d probably have to cut both off at the same time, lest they grow back.

The three-on-one battle was more of a stalemate than I might have expected. That meant we were at a disadvantage. Unlike the preacher and his unlimited supply of stamina,

Arwin's team were flesh-and-blood humans. They would hit a wall eventually. And sure enough, Noelle was the first to falter.

Not only was she the smallest of the three, but she was also moving the most and hurling her homemade weapons. She threw skin-burning acid, paralyzing poison, and occasionally, blinding flashes of light.

These tools would have ended a fight against a normal opponent quite a long time ago, but the preacher was different. His seared skin, poisoned flesh, and blinded eyes regenerated in a heartbeat. Her exhaustion had to be significant. And so was the futility of her actions. Her movements began to slow.

"Urgh!"

Noelle's feet tangled, and she fell. The wear and tear were worse than I'd realized. It didn't look like she was going to get back up.

Levi's expression became one of gloating.

"You'll be first," he proclaimed, gathering fire in his mouth. If he blew that on her, she'd be charred to cinders.

"That's right," she said, one knee on the ground, and she lifted her arm. There was a string around her wrist, running to the white substance on Levi's flank. "I'll be first."

She pulled the string. It snapped right off the surface of the substance, causing a massive roar and a billow of black smoke. Chunks of Levi's flesh flew in every direction from the explosion.

So there had been something else in that substance besides the phlegmy material. The bit about the sentry spider webs had just been a misdirection.

Every surface in contact with the substance exploded. The damage had to be inflicted simultaneously. When Levi faltered, Noelle crawled closer along the ground, evading his arms and sliding until she could cling to his ankle and wrap herself around it, twisting more than a full rotation. By the time she had somersaulted away, Levi's left ankle had been severed clean off, the foot left behind on the ground.

He lost his balance and landed on his behind. Ralph roared and charged.

"Stupid child!" snapped Levi, swinging his whip. If his mobility was negated, he would just have to attack wildly, cracking and freezing the air with the ice whip. It was like watching an extremely localized blizzard.

But Ralph did not stop. He leaped right into the range of the whip.

If it hit him, it would shred his armor in half, to say nothing of his flesh, but he could see it coming the entire way. He stopped, crouched, jumped, and evaded the cracks. Though the whip itself was too fast to see, he kept his eyes trained on the wrist to anticipate the movements instead.

If he was good at one thing, it was measuring distance. It wasn't a coincidence that he had had the lightest of the injuries against Levi the last time. He'd probably been trained well, coming from a hunting family. His ability to judge the distance between himself and his prey was excellent. I just wouldn't tell him that, because he would get cocky about it.

"Curse you!" Levi snapped, cracking the whip harder than usual. It caused his momentum to shift, unbalancing himself. That was when Ralph slid in close.

"Diiiiiie!"

The weapon in his hand flashed. Merciful Rain could make itself momentarily sharper. He brought it down with a roar, the sword glowing on its own with a pale light. It was just about to split Levi's forehead in two when the sword came to an abrupt stop.

Levi had trapped Merciful Rain between his two hands.

"How unfortunate for you."

So his loss of balance had just been a feint to lure Ralph in.

"Dammit!" Ralph tried to push his blade through, but there was no way to overcome the preacher's monstrous strength.

"You're finished."

"Let go!" I shouted, right as Levi tilted his arms. Ralph ended up kicked upward, his legs flying in the air as he came off the ground. He hit the wall and fell, landing in a sitting position against it.



The idiot. He'd gotten careless, and it'd come back around to hurt him.

Noelle and Arwin tried to rush over to him, but Levi blocked their attempts. He swung Merciful Rain around, having wrenched it from Ralph's hands, and kept them at a distance.

"Your worthless followers have not done you any favors," Levi said with a note of pity. "Now it is only two against one."

The balance had toppled. He had the upper hand.

I was going to have to get involved. Thanks to my bit of rest, I felt more mobile now. For that alone, Ralph's bold stand was worth it. I could give him that much credit.

But the moment I opened my mouth to call for help moving the rubble, something unbelievable happened.

"No! Screw this!"

Ralph was clinging to Levi's back and screaming. Even Arwin and Noelle were standing stock-still in shock.

"I've had enough of being humiliated! Give it back! Give back that fucking sword!" he ranted, reaching over Levi's back for Merciful Rain. Levi tried to pull him off, but the sheer size of his body left him a little too bulky to maneuver.

"If you want it so badly, have it!" Levi snapped, falling flat on his back. If he crushed his attacker, that would be the end of that.

"Screw you!"

Ralph swung around the creature's neck and smashed a white ball against Levi's face. It cracked open, splattering the substance inside on his face and covering his eyes. Perhaps it was blocking his windpipe, too, because he reached up to his face and struggled.

"How do you like that thing I got from Noelle?!"

Levi's right head writhed in agony, and he dropped Merciful Rain at last.

"That's for earlier!" Ralph crowed. He rolled off and scooped up the sword, unleashing its magical power again. It exuded a powerful light and chopped off Levi's right head.

Both heads screamed—the one remaining on his torso and the other floating in the air.

Arwin leaped into action. "You will pay for your sins in the afterlife," she said, pulling back her blade of judgment and taking aim at the left head.

Levi smirked. "You don't care about *that*?"

The egg-headed monster—Levi's body double—had a human child in its arms. So it was still around.

"Coward!"

"Call me whatever you like."

Levi backed away, scooped up his severed head, and pressed it to the stump it had come from. The eyes in that head were rolled backward, but in moments, color began to return to it. In a similar fashion, the foot that Noelle had cut off was connecting again. What a convenient body to have.

The child in the monster's arms was unconscious and seemed unlikely to wake up. We could've just abandoned them to their fate, but everything would've been different if we were the kind of people who could do such a thing. Certainly, the princess knight would never.

"The tables have turned," said Levi, standing at his full height. "I'll start with you, for cutting off my head!"

He swung a fist like a boulder down at Ralph.

"Stop!"

Arwin leaped in front of him. For an instant, my vision went black.

Just before Levi's fist could strike Arwin, a translucent wall dully reflected the punch.

A magical barrier?

Levi froze, stunned. A flame arced toward his enormous back and struck it full-on. He screamed and fell to his knees. Two figures approached from the shadows.

"Will you let us join in?"

"You're not going to leave us out of such a juicy opportunity to show off, are you?"

It was Beatrice and Cecilia.

"What about the child?" Arwin asked.

""They're fine,"" the girls answered and shrugged.

"My goodness, I'm glad we made it in time. That was a close one," said a gentle voice that sounded out of place amid such violent combat.

I turned my head to see Nicholas, who was now holding the unconscious child. The monster from earlier was on the ground at his feet.

"Nicholas Burns," Levi muttered with loathing.

Casually, he replied, "Ah, nice to meet you. The founder, I presume."

“You’ve already met him,” I said, pointing out Nicholas’s mistake. “This is Levi, a carrier with the guild. Remember, he was there when we went down into the dungeon before?”

“He was? Oh dear. My memory’s not what it used to be. But if you say so, I suppose it’s true,” he said saucily, scratching his head. “So, Levi, you said? Thanks to you, Levi, we’ve been through quite a lot of trouble.”

He laid down the child in a safe spot and strode forward, tapping his shoulder with the staff in his hand.

“You…you heretic!”

Levi spat a gout of flame that again deflected off a translucent wall, dissipating before Nicholas’s eyes.

“Oh, I nearly forgot,” he said. His staff glinted, and Arwin’s wounds began to heal up. So did mine. It stopped the bleeding, but what I could really use now was someone to get the damn rubble off me. “So shall we pick up where we left off?”

Hey, don’t ignore me.

“It’s been quite busy, healing the wounded and fighting monsters, so I’m glad we made it here in time. I have something to ask of you,” Nicholas added without missing a beat.

It was about the sun god, I figured. Unlike Roland and Justin, Levi seemed to be closer to the sun god’s true aims. He would have information we didn’t know yet.

“If you’re gonna torture him, I’d like to help. I know some good tricks.”

“…I will respectfully decline,” Nicholas said with an awkward smile. It wasn’t a joke, though.

“The tables have turned.”

Even without me, it was now six-on-one. Levi knew he was at a disadvantage. His demeanor was clearly more desperate than before.

“As you heard, this will likely be rather unpleasant. It would help us all out if you simply shared what you know willingly,” Nicholas suggested.

“I will not hear these japes!” Levi ranted. He held up his arms, then rammed them into his body, pulling out a number of those red eggs again. The Maretto Sisters fired off some spells, but they bounced off a barrier Levi erected this time. Meanwhile, his eggs hatched, creating more doubles.

“Arwin,” I called out to the beautiful princess knight while Levi was distracted.

“I’ll get you out soon. Just a few more moments,” she replied. Yes, I was hoping for some help, but that wasn’t why I’d spoken to her.

“Lend me your ear.”

“Why?”

“Just come here. I’ll tell you the special trick we need to beat him.”

She leaned in closer, the skepticism written plainly on her face. I whispered something into her ear.

“…Truly?” she asked.

“Absolutely. It’ll have the most effect with *you*.”

She nodded, then turned toward Levi and his many body doubles. There were over thirty of them now.

“There’s no time. Little parlor tricks won’t stop the stampede now.”

“Then we shall have to crush him first.” Arwin strode boldly forward. “This time, I will strike his heads off for good.”

When Levi took down his magical barrier, the doubles attacked.

The six combatants took positions together and countered. Arwin cut down the lead double, followed by Ralph and Noelle. The Maretto Sisters handled the targets farther back; Beatrice burned them with fire, and Cecilia blasted them with lightning.

The doubles leaped backward and stood side by side in a line. Their arms began to shine—the same attack the original used.

All at once, they unleashed a powerful light. Another translucent barrier appeared before the beams could pierce the humans, eliminating them. It was Nicholas’s defensive wall again.

He timed out the interval of their attacks, then removed the barrier. The Maretto Sisters’ flames burned and broiled the body doubles.

“Let’s go!”

With their organization in disarray, Arwin took initiative and charged at the enemy, slicing through the burning doubles and opening a path toward the real one. Noelle threw a red ball that expanded and burst when it hit the ground, blasting the doubles aside.

With the route clear, Arwin sprinted forward. Noelle and Ralph followed, taking on the doubles that tried to close the gap behind her.

“Stay away from the princess!” Ralph wailed, swinging Merciful Rain to and fro. He wasn’t beating any of them, but he helped keep them off Arwin’s back as she reached the main foe.

Panic was clear on Levi’s two faces. Creating that many doubles at once had to be draining. And the power of each individual was waning as he made them. The choice to fight with numbers was taking its toll.

“Shit!” he spat, turning and producing that mist from his body again. Was he hiding? No, trying to escape? That was bad. If he got away now, we’d never find him again. The town would be doomed.

“Have to borrow this,” Arwin said, snatching the black rope from Noelle and smacking it against the ground. The dry crack reverberated.

“*Kneel*, Levi!” she cried. Instantly, Levi froze. The two-headed body was crouched at an odd angle, the faces looking crestfallen. The nature that had been beaten into him by years of servitude still lingered, even in this monstrous form.

“You bitch…”

He spun around again, his faces dark with humiliation and rage.

“Don’t make me say it again!”

Arwin gripped her sword and spoke the command.

“Sol est extrica, avasolus ix terra crea.”

Once again, those red scales formed from the hilt of the sword. They crawled along the ground like insects, straight toward Levi. He clearly sensed this was a dangerous development, as his silhouette rapidly began to blur. Could he still turn to mist in that other form?

“His power is from the sun god, like that of that sword, but it does not bode well for him,” Nicholas noted sagely. “Mist is destined to burn away before the light of the sun.”

“Torrisclade moa phosistoris.”

Within the cloud of mist, the red scales piled up on top of each other, forming a shape. By the time the mist had cleared, Levi was dancing in agony, his entire form surrounded by the scales.

"*Kneel.* And beg for the forgiveness of my father, mother, and all of those you killed."

"Why? You're just a girl! How?"

Held in place by the scales, he toppled forward.

"This girl—dear God. Cast Your judgment upon her! Bring her low and punish her!"

"I don't think that will work," Nicholas said, then added:

"Not even gods can affect the human soul."

Levi stood, his final act of resistance. He charged at Arwin, stripping the red scales off his body as he ran.

Noelle and Ralph darted forward, severing Levi's arms as they rushed past him. He fell to his knees and bent over, agony written plain on his face. He looked like a prisoner on the execution stand waiting for the guillotine.

Arwin raised her sword.

"It's over."

She cut off the prisoner's heads in one smooth motion. The two heads fell to the ground, leaving behind a headless body that fell to its knees and toppled forward. The impact traveled through the ground.

"Yes!" Ralph exclaimed, raising his fist. "We've won!"

"Don't celebrate early," I warned, while the others helped me out from the rubble. This monster had been worse than Roland and Justin. They'd cut one of his heads off and watched him stick it right back on. His body was turning into black ash, so it was undeniable he was in the process of dying, but you couldn't be too careful. I was about to tell Ralph to finish him off when a burst of laughter stopped me.

The right head was more than half gone. The black ash was eating away about half of the left head. His body and arms were in the process of vanishing, too. Levi's death was imminent. But he continued to laugh.

It was the sound of his last death gasp.

"Should we burn it, Ceci?"

"That's probably for the best."

The sisters pointed their staffs at him, but Levi's laughter continued.

"It is futile. Killing me will not stop the stampede."

"What?"

"Then what should we do? How can we stop this disaster?" Arwin asked desperately.

He gave her a very smug smile. "You saw it, Matthew. That black sphere. *That* is my holy relic."

That strange sphere was his relic?

"Simply go deep into the dungeon and destroy it. Too bad for you, no human can destroy a relic. Even if you have monstrous strength."

Go down to the thirteenth floor of the dungeon, with monsters streaming out of it, and destroy a relic humans could not shatter? It was insane.

"I am not afraid to die. I will be a martyr. My death will result in God returning to the world. I will be the foundation of His return. I have nothing to fear! I have won!"

He laughed again, but it was weak this time. One of the heads had evaporated already, and his body was going, too…

The limbs had turned to black ash already, but the torso remained. That was the only place where the spread of the burning was slow. It was as though he was resisting its advance with his last bit of strength.

Alarm bells clanged noisily inside my head.

A milky-white mass popped out of Levi's body. It was a scroll. In a final act of vengeance, the scroll unraveled, creating a magical pattern.

"Run!"

I grabbed Arwin and dragged her to the ground, just before the explosion enveloped my back.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Greedy Princess Knight

Between the ringing in my ears and the dizziness, I felt sick, but somehow, I got to my feet. There was a hole in the earth where Levi had been. Little flames licked the ground like weeds, issuing delicate tendrils of smoke.

The old bastard had had a scroll hidden in his stomach. He'd used the last of his strength to pour the magical essence into it and blow himself up before he could disintegrate. The madman.

"Are you all right, Matthew?" Arwin asked, rushing over. She didn't seem particularly hurt.

"As you can see, I'm right as rain."

"What happened to Ralph and Noelle?" she asked, glancing around with concern.

"I'm here," said Noelle. Her clothes were tattered, and her face was sooty, but I didn't see any serious injuries. "Ralph protected me."

Ralph himself was passed out atop some rubble. He wasn't going to perish from his wounds, but he needed healing, and fast.

The Maretto Sisters were seated near him, waving.

"What about the doctor?"

"I don't know," said Noelle, pointing toward a shattered wall. "But before the blast, I saw a purple shape fly off in that direction."

Nicholas's true body was a purple monster of an indefinite form. The shock of the explosion had probably undone his ability to maintain a human figure. I assumed he was all right, but if he had been left immobile, I'd do well to find and collect him.

"I'll go and look for him. Stay here and watch over Ralph."

"I'll join you," said Arwin. "How shall we look for him?"

“Let’s go up.”

Smoke and dust were everywhere thanks to the monsters, so visibility was poor. A higher vantage point would be best. The lookout tower had fallen in the fight, so it wouldn’t offer us much in terms of altitude.

“Let’s go there.”

Behind us was an abandoned church. The priest had been a kindly man, but he’d left town at the first sign of the stampede, and it had been unused since.

The gate was locked, so I had to climb over the graffitied wall to get inside. The building was empty; anything valuable had either been taken on the trip or stolen. There was a torch in the gloom that I lit and took with me. There was a single holy statue that I flipped off, and then I went up the spiral stairs in the secondary building.

“This leads up to the belfry. We should have a decent view of town from there.”

It would be easier to find the doctor—and for him to find us.

“You know a lot about this spot.”

“I guess.”

When I’d first come to this town, I’d looked all over in the hope of finding a way to undo my curse.

After a short climb up a ladder, we were in the belfry. The pointed roof was supported by four pillars. It was fairly tall, and without any walls, the wind was strong. There should have been a small bell in here, but it had been taken, too.

The sun was already sinking to the west. It’d been a tougher climb than I had hoped.

“So where is he?”

“…Matthew,” Arwin said. She sounded despairing. I turned and saw the reason why. There was a limit to Dez’s abilities after all.

The gates that had blocked the entrance to the dungeon had been blasted off their hinges, and monsters were streaming out of them.

They stormed out through the broken gates.

Dez was fighting at the front. He had to have completely exhausted his stamina, but there he stood, using that relic as a wall to stem the tide of monsters. Even that had a limit, however. Try as he might to change its shape, it could only

cover so much. The monsters that made it out of the hole burst through the wall and raced into the town. Other adventurers tried to fight them, but there were just too many.

The guards and Paladins joined in the battle, too. Vincent was ordering his men around, but the power of numbers was too great to overcome.

The two familiar guards with the tan and the mustache were evacuating and guiding the townsfolk. Even the Birds of Prey were out on the main street, beating on monsters with their weapons of choice.

Every last person was doing what they needed to do, as hard as they could.

Fighting with everything they had in order to survive, to protect what they cared about.

But I could tell all of it would be futile.

There was no stopping a stampede. Many people would die. Some would survive—but the town was finished. It would be trampled flat by monsters, and centuries of history would come to an ignominious end.

If there was any positive angle to this, it was that the damage would likely be constrained to the town and the surrounding environs. For them to flatten Gray Neighbor and cross the ghostlands to reach Moonlight Fountain or the kingdom of Baradelle would take a long time. There would be time to plan for them, and they would end up fighting the monsters in the wasteland, too.

If there was anything I could do, it would be to evacuate Arwin and the others and convince that stubborn goat Dez to leave and go to his loving wife and son. He would be galled by the idea, but he cared more about his family. He had chosen that life for himself.

In any case, there would be no escape if we stayed here. We would only be feeding the monsters.

“Arwin, let’s get out of here.” She stared at the horde of monsters in shock. “I know this is hard for you. I didn’t want this to happen, either. If it weren’t for you, I’d be rolling around on the ground and weeping.”

“……”

“The fight is over. He won with sheer tenacity. He’s taken this town down with him, at the cost of his own life.”

“It’s not over yet.”

“What are we going to do? We’re both falling apart. Continuing to fight is only going to get us killed.”

Arwin didn’t respond.

“Even this insanity will eventually fade. After that, you’ll have a chance. Come back with new companions and try the dungeon again. You’ll still be able to gain the Astral Crystal and save your home. That’s why you’re here, remember?”

“No,” Arwin said, shaking her head like a petulant child. “That’s not good enough.”

Yeah, I’d known this would happen. I knew her sense of right and wrong wouldn’t allow her to leave this situation behind.

She probably thought if she fled the town, everything would turn out the way her country had when it’d collapsed. The same way she hadn’t been able to save her father and mother.

But when something was impossible, it just wasn’t going to work out.

People fell from high places to low. Water boiled when it was heated. Babies aged, became seniors, and eventually died. These were all facts of life.

“Neither you nor I are all-powerful. Isn’t where you are now the result of attempting to do something impossible?”

Her internal balance had crumbled, and she had succumbed to dungeon sickness, yet she’d continued her pursuit of the Astral Crystal to save her country, only to plunge into hell.

“C’mon. We’ll go find Ralph and Noelle. We gotta find the doctor, too.”

Standing around talking was only a waste of time. I took her hand and started to walk off, but she sternly shook it loose.

“And you’re fine with that? Dez, April…there are people in this town you care about.”

But the squirt was in a safe location, and the Beardo wasn’t going to die in a place like this.

“What I want to protect more than anything else is you.”

Arwin’s breath caught. For an instant, her eyes smoldered with emotion, but then she looked down like a stray dog that’d been splashed with water.

“I appreciate you saying that,” she murmured, putting a hand to her chest as she suppressed her feelings. “But I cannot simply run away from this. There are many, many people who

live here. Each one of them is precious to various other people in the world. It may be a town of sin and vice, but many of these people are doing their best to live. I cannot abandon them."

"So what are you going to do?" I shouted, irritated by her stubbornness. "Does your righteousness demand you die attempting to fight an impossible battle? Standing here and gazing at the town isn't going to solve anything. Are you just going to watch people die like you're gambling at the cockfights?"

"And have *you* forgotten that this is the place where you and I met and have spent so much time together? It cannot mean nothing to you!"

"But it's not your country!"

Arwin's eyes widened. She clenched her fists and said quietly, "Matthew…I have faith in you. Please have faith in me."

I had a bad feeling. A voice inside my head said this wasn't the moment to hesitate. I needed to use the temporary sun if I had to—anything to force her to escape the town with me. I stuck my hand in my pocket to pull it out, but Arwin already had something in her hands.

The sun god's brand that Levi had held.

"Hey. Don't."

She held it up to the flame of the torch, then pressed it against the back of her hand. Arwin's face contorted with pain.

"What do you think you're doing?!" I shouted, rushing over toward her, but she held up her hand to stop me.

"…Doing what it takes for me to fight anywhere. I can believe in the version of myself that you believe in."

All the hair on my body stood on end. Arwin was about to do the most outrageous and unbelievable thing yet.

She must have gotten the truth from Nicholas. That she had the magic Dawnblade sword, a relic of the sun god, and part of Nicholas the preacher inside her with the shroud containing the sun god's blood, plus Release in her bloodstream.

All the conditions were right.

"Stop. Don't do this."

"Don't worry."

"You know it won't work!" I shouted, unable to bear it. "Are you going to turn yourself into a monster? You might never go back to normal!"

“Trust me, Matthew,” she said, smiling arrogantly. “I will not die. And I will *not* let you die. This time, I will protect all those precious people in our lives!”

I had to stop her, by violence if necessary. It was the only option. I had to do it.

My hand was just extending when she said the words.

“Sol nia spectus.”

Instantly, Arwin’s body began to shake. She shivered and jittered as though wracked with feverish chills. The red scales from the magic sword exploded outward and began to cover her body.

“*Verba gracias magna nos cosdeit.*” (Let us offer thanks to the Great One who watches over us.)

Words of prayer to the sun god streamed from her mouth. The scales covered her limbs, armor and all, coating her body all the way to her neck.

“You have to stop this!”

“Don’t make me repeat myself, Matthew.”

When I tried to rip the scales off her, Arwin just smiled. She turned her wrist and brought the tip of the brand to the back of her other hand, searing the sun god’s sigil onto herself.

“*It infermi, spurcus.*” (Go to hell, filth.)

The red scales covered Arwin, turning her into a pulsing, ovoid shape. What was about to be born from its midst?

What should I do? Destroy it? Even as I hesitated, the pulsing of the red scales was getting faster. It was like a heartbeat. How much time had passed? Suddenly, a crack appeared in the shape. It spread and moved, then burst. A woman emerged from within the scales.

She had Arwin’s face, but her hair had gone from fiery red to platinum white. Her eyes, too, had changed from deep jade green to a golden topaz. She wore what looked like silver pauldrons covering her neck to her shoulders, along with burnished red armor from chest to waist. Below that was a red dress that hung down to her ankles.

“I told you to trust me.”

“Arwin?”

Had she really done it? Had she gained the power of a preacher?

“I suppose this would make me a heretic. Or maybe…”

Arwin considered her answer, her voice bright.

“…an iconoclast, let’s say.”

And then she jumped down from the belfry.

“Hey, wait!”

She had really just jumped right off. In no time, she was out of sight.

How willful this princess could be. I’d never catch up to her if I used the stairs to get back down. I tensed up and jumped off, too. The shock came a few moments later. I’d tried to land cleanly, but I couldn’t pull it off, rolled along the ground, and hit the wall of the church to stop. Sometimes, I was grateful for a body that enabled stunts like this, and sometimes I cursed it. This time, it was both.

Unsteadily, I rose to a standing position and gave chase.

Where had she gone? We were close to the center of town, so I could hear screams from all around. Decorations from the Founding Festival were strewn about and trampled.

Monsters that had evaded Dez’s defensive line were starting to pop up around the town. It seemed like she was going to start by taking care of those first.

I hurried after Arwin. In an alley, a woman was clutching a girl to her chest and trembling. It seemed she had given up and accepted her fate, because they weren’t trying to run. As she ran past them, Arwin’s sword took off a monster’s head.

“Move! Now!” she said, and she continued running, heading off to the next person in need of help before anyone could thank her. I stopped and pointed out the way to the main street to the stunned mother and child before resuming my chase.

From that point on, Arwin zipped around the town as swiftly as if she had wings on her back. She protected an elderly woman from a horde of goblins, cut down a pack of garmhounds to rescue a child stranded atop a street cart, slew a

band of orcs to save a merchant who was hiding in a well, spared a ruffian from the slum a nasty fate by running her sword through a rock golem, and cut off the head of a dragon to defend an adventurer. Young and old, man and woman, good and evil—Arwin helped anyone she came across.

When she had just about cleared out all the monsters she could find, Arwin changed directions and headed for the center of town: the dungeon entrance. With her sword raised, she cut a menacing gargoyle in two and severed the wings of a roc.

Dez's group was outside the shattered door. The Maretto Sisters were there, too, as was Nicholas. So he was still alive. He must've sensed the shift in the situation and come running. Vincent was also present. Even the mustached and dark-skinned guards were still alive. The other adventurers were bunched up, maintaining a formation, but it was only a matter of time before they were swallowed up in the sea of monsters.

"Make way!"

Arwin leaped high in the air. Her sword split the sky, producing a flame that swept through the monsters, burning and searing. The next thing I knew, there was a path between her and the others.

"Sorry I'm late," she said.

Everyone who saw her was taken aback by her appearance.

"Why do you look like that? Is it a costume?" Beatrice commented.

"I suppose the title of this painting would be, 'The Righteous Princess Knight Leads the Adventurers,'" added Cecilia. Despite their remarks, they were both wide-eyed with surprise.

"We can chat later. I'm going into the dungeon to remove the cause of this madness. I only ask that you hold out here until then," Arwin remarked.

Beatrice asked, "How long will that take?"

"Less than the time it takes to boil water."

"I'll have the coffee ready, then." She put a hand on her sister's shoulder. "You hear that? Hang in there, Ceci."

"Yeah, yeah," Cecilia said with annoyance, brushing the hand away. She readied her magic staff and took aim at the horde of monsters crawling out of the dungeon doors. "You're still good, right, Bea?"

"Of course…"

They crossed their staffs.

“Destroy them! Flame Fist!”

A tremendous pillar of flames erupted. The burning air cooked the monsters alive, roasting and charring them. After the light and sound died down, the monsters had been wiped clean away, leaving a wide path clear to the entrance.

“Now you owe us one.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

It was all up to Arwin now. Once again, I was useless when it mattered most; I could only pray she would return safely.

But contrary to my expectation that she would immediately fly through that door, Arwin paused, sensing something, and looked around. What was it? Then her eyes met mine. She strode up to me with great purpose and grabbed my hand.

“You come, too!”

The next moment, I was soaring through the air, yanked along by Arwin. After a brief sense of weightlessness, we sped up and fell through the entrance to the Millennium of Midnight Sun. The next bunch of monsters was already gathering below us.

“Daaah!”

She unleashed Dawnblade, wiping away another group with flames. They charred in an instant, giving us a clear space to land upon.

Before I could even chide her for that reckless stunt, Arwin was rushing into the dungeon with me. Inside, it was a literal den of monsters. They formed numerous walls that blocked our way in.

“Hah!”

Even still, we…that is, Arwin, did not halt her descent. She would stop at nothing to save the people who lived in this corrupt town. With her crimson clothes and white hair, the Crimson Princess Knight forged onward. Dawnblade’s flames turned every monster to char and ash. The walls of monsters gave way to fire. Onward and downward, Arwin burst through her own magical flames to go ever deeper. No monster could withstand her assault, and every forward attack created the route she would take, down and down.

She was heading for the thirteenth floor. If she could just destroy the black sphere that old piece of shit had buried there, this whole nonsense would finally end.

“Almost there,” I reassured her, at which point I noticed the unhappy look on Arwin’s face. Her momentum was decreasing, bit by bit. I thought she might be getting tired, until I saw some of the usual red color was also returning to her hair.

Understanding came swiftly to me.

Her current state was possible with the sun god’s power. His influence could not reach into the dungeon and could only do so much here. The holy shroud was contained within her heart, but it didn’t seem to be so all-powerful that she could maintain such incredible abilities indefinitely.

“Are you sure you shouldn’t leave me here?”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” she snapped, turning back to me. “I cannot possibly leave you behind.”

“Then why did you bring me?”

“You’ll see very soon.”

Monsters were streaming forth from the floor below. One flaming swing from Arwin’s sword dispatched them, but there were hundreds, thousands more right behind them.

Her haste was beginning to color her features. Sweat was beading up on her brow. Every single fight was steadily consuming more of her strength. At this rate, she was going to collapse before we reached the thirteenth floor. Of course, there would be no rescue. The route we’d taken to get here was already bristling with more monsters. We were so close, but it was looking more and more likely that we would be crushed before we reached the destination.

What could we do? Arwin was clearly spent. It wasn’t physical stamina, either, so healing items and magic would not help. If there was any way to restore the sun god’s power, I would have destroyed it already.

But then I had an idea. Of course! Whether Arwin realized it or not, her choice to bring me along had been a good one.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out a small orb.

“Irradiation.”

The temporary sun stored up sunlight: the power of the sun god. This would surely help Arwin, too.

Her speed picked up again.

“Is that a memento of Vanessa?”

“It’s brighter now, isn’t it?”

Arwin chuckled to herself.

“But we’ve gotta be quick. This thing won’t last long.”

“Understood.”

She went even faster. My feet weren’t even touching the ground. After another burst through a long, long corridor full of monsters, we finally leaped down onto the thirteenth floor.

“Where is it?” Arwin cut down more monsters, glancing around the area.

“In the center of this floor. Where it opens up.”

“All right.”

She shot forward, pulling me along. We zipped through one hallway, turned a corner, and came face-to-face with a dark vortex.

On the floor in the center of the wide-open room, right around the area where Levi had embedded that black orb, swirled a dark whirlwind.

With each gust of air, my skin prickled. It felt like a solid mass of malevolence and hatred.

Eeriest of all, however, was the mass of flesh oozing and crawling out of it that seemed different from any other kind of monster in existence.

It was like hell itself emerging. And in the center of that vortex, I could see the orb.

There was no getting closer, however, because of the sheer pressure of the gusts of wind that burst forth from it.

“Hyaaah!”

Arwin roared and swung her sword. The blade of flame cut through the black vortex, only for the darkness to reshape itself an instant later.

The noise behind us was tremendous. Another horde of monsters was rushing at us. It wasn’t even “monsters” anymore, just a mass of flesh and evil.

The clarion call of the sphere pulled them in, pushing and shoving and crushing, intent on reaching us.

There was no escape. In less than the count of thirty, we would be flattened.

“What do I do?” Arwin asked, panic setting in.

I gave her as gentle a smile as I possibly could. “You want to ask Matthew the great sage how to stop this thing? I’ve got a good idea in mind. I’m going to weaken this whirlwind. Once there’s an opening, you jump in and slash that damn ball in two.”

“What are you going to do?”

“It’s simple.”

The temporary sun still shone above my head. As long as it was lit, I could use my original strength, even in the dungeon. I reached up and grabbed it.

According to Levi, that black sphere was another one of the poop-smeared sun god’s relics, and the relics couldn’t be destroyed by human means. But what about another relic? It was worth an attempt.

The only relics we had were Arwin’s Dawnblade and my temporary sun.

This would be the only way to use it, then.

“Flatten it with our strength.”

I hurled it at the black vortex with everything I had.

The little ball of light flew in a straight line. Light and shadow—the twin powers of the sun god cut through the dark whirlwind without pause and struck the black orb.

I heard something crack. The black sphere hurtled out of the center of the vortex and through the air. Instantly, the gusting wind lost its potency and weakened rapidly.

“Now!”

On my signal, Arwin hurtled forward. She wove through the hideous creatures, slicing and leaping. Dawnblade rose and fell, cutting through the black orb.

It split into two pieces that shattered when they hit the ground. The fragments scattered across the area and soon began to melt like powdery snow.

With that, Arwin seemed to run out of strength and fell to one knee. Her hair and eyes returned to their original color. The scales fell from her body, revealing the usual armor she wore underneath.

The horde of monsters converged on the princess knight where she fell. I couldn’t even move my legs to help her. The rational, calm part of my mind told me I wouldn’t make it in time anyway.

I shouted.

The limbs, neither fang nor talon, but sharp nonetheless, flew toward Arwin.

But just before they could tear her body to shreds, a shadow rushed ahead.

“Arwin!”

I stood behind her, trying to block her body, right as a flash of silver cleaved the hideous mass of flesh open.

By the time I realized who it was, the freakish globs were bursting, turning to black ash and vanishing, starting around the spot where the black sphere had split.



A chain reaction of monstrous screams arose around us, traveling outward and upward to the floors above.

The next thing I knew, the black vortex had dissipated, the creatures from hell were gone, and nothing else moved.

Even the dark silhouette from a moment ago was gone.

Apparently, it had worked out.

“You did it.”

There was no response. I thought she might have passed out, until I saw Arwin was actually gritting her teeth and trying to work her way through some momentary episode that had her sweating.

“What’s wrong? Does it hurt?” I asked. Immediately, she shouted and writhed in agony.

The red scales that had crawled out of the magic sword were digging into the back of her hand. Like man-eating fish, the scales crawled up to her neck and face. Her hair went silver again, and her eyes were flickering between gold and deep green, like a glowfly turning off and on. Perhaps her control over the preacher’s power was coming undone. *This is why I warned you!* Like Roland, Justin, and Levi, she was going to succumb to the sun god’s control.

“Matthew…run…away…”

“Are you sleeptalking? I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that.”

I reached out and grabbed Dawnblade over her hand, trying to pull it loose, but it had broken through the skin and was digging into her flesh now.

“Stay focused. Don’t let it take your wits from you.”

“I can’t,” she said, shaking her head painfully. It was difficult for her just to talk.

That settled it, then. I pulled her closer to me.

“This will stop the pain.”

I brought my lips to hers.

The tension drained from Arwin’s body.

She swallowed.

The sword slid from her fingers and clattered onto the ground. The red scales turned to dust and vanished.

Her hair and eyes returned to their proper color, and her red armor and dress also turned to dust. Even the brand burned into the back of her hand vanished. The usual princess knight was in my arms once again.

“And how did your wake-up kiss taste?” I asked, crumpling the wrapper and stuffing it into my pocket.

It was the test antidote Nicholas had made. My hope had been that it would weaken the toxicity of the Release, and apparently it had.

She turned her face away.

“It was bitter.”

Knowing the priest, he’d probably just mixed his herbs and whatever else without giving a single thought for the taste.

“Care for a palette cleanser, then? It’s good for you, too.” I waved a wrapped candy of the normal kind. Arwin grimaced.

“Those are the bitter kind. Don’t you have anything else?”

“Sorry, that’s the only sort I’ve got.”

Everyone just keeps begging me for treats.

“…Anyway, was that you who called my name earlier?”

“Yeah. Why?” I lied. It was more convenient for her purposes that way, in my opinion.

Arwin lowered her eyes with disappointment. “I heard…a familiar voice. I thought maybe my time had come. I suppose it hasn’t yet.”

“Were you planning on dying here?”

“Certainly not.” Arwin had a mission. She could not rest until it was completed. “But I am tired.”

She pulled away from my arms and lay down on the floor. I tried to warn her against that, but I suddenly found myself exhausted as well.

We both splayed out on the floor, extending our limbs. This would normally be asking for death in the dungeon, but there was no sign or presence of any monster. All I saw was the dim ceiling of the dungeon above me.

“…It’s so quiet.”

“It is.”

“I’ve never felt the dungeon so calm.”

“You’d better not be expecting to continue through to the core.”

The absence of monsters was just a temporary rebound from the end of the stampede. They would come lurking out of the shadows before long. The chances of us reaching the Astral Crystal before then were practically nil.

“It was just a thought.”

Yeah, I bet.

“You really don’t listen to anything I say, do you?”

All my warnings, she’d ignored.

“I suppose not,” Arwin murmured, staring into the distance. “And I’ll probably keep acting recklessly. I’ll keep putting myself in dangerous situations.”

That was her destiny and the path she had chosen for herself. And woe unto the man who was subjected to those whims.

“And that’s why I need a lifeline like you.”

“There are limits to what I can do.”

If I were superhuman enough to solve any problem, I wouldn’t be here right now.

“Well, if it happens, it happens,” Arwin said. “I wouldn’t be clinging to you if I didn’t believe you could save me. Right?”

You’re the greatest princess a guy could ever hope for.

“Shall we go back?”

I would’ve been happy to continue lying around, but we didn’t have time for that. I wanted to get back to the surface so I could sleep in a nice comfy bed. But while I could get to my feet, it didn’t seem like Arwin was going to rise at all. Her limbs were still splayed out.

“Arwin?”

“I think I’ve used up all my strength. I’ve been trying to get up, but I can’t move,” she said, as calmly as though it were someone else’s problem, not hers. I could feel the blood draining from my face. “If I rest long enough, I should recover. It’s just a question of whether I’ll survive that long.”

She wasn’t panicking at all. She was lucky just to be alive, so being so exhausted she couldn’t move was well within expectations.

“You sure you’re all right?”

“I think so. I can still feel everything. I just don’t know how we’ll get back,” she said.

That was the point that a light went on in my head.

“Wait, is *this* why you brought me along?”

She wanted me to carry her back to the surface again? In this exhausted and weakened state?

“I could have asked Ralph, I suppose,” she had the temerity to say, not meeting my eyes. “But then someone would have been jealous.”

“Did you overhear that?”

“Did I?” Arwin grinned. “Well, this is a pinch of trouble. What should we do, Matthew?”

I was hit by a sudden bout of dizziness. I hunched over and groaned.

She was the worst.

The instant I hauled her onto my back, the sweat started pouring off me. Last time, Ralph and Noelle had been there to help, but now it was just me. And I was carrying Arwin, her armor, and Dawnblade, too. Still, I gritted my teeth and managed to get to a standing position. From there, I took an unsteady step. Then another.

It wasn’t that hard. I’d done this once before. And unlike the last time, there were no monsters blocking the way. All I had to do was safely walk back to the surface. Simple as that.

Once back on the surface, the stampede would be over. We’d be greeted by raucous applause. I could do this fine, even without the temporary sun.

“Am I heavy?”

“As a cow.”

Arwin yanked on my ear. I hadn’t said she *was* heavy. There were calves. Maybe I’d been talking about a cow doll made of paper.

“Make it quick.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I knew the route to get back up. I just had to walk it. The first time, I’d barely been conscious, but I’d still managed. Surely, I would manage this time, too.

The stairs were tough, though. Each step threatened my balance. But I couldn’t possibly drop her.

I got us to the twelfth floor, panting heavily. I was already exhausted and ready for a break, but that wasn’t an option.

As time passed, monsters would start to appear throughout the dungeon. Once that happened, we would be a helpless treat to them.

Yes, the difference this time was that we had a time limit and no other members of the rescue party to protect us. There was no time to stop and rest. Just keep moving. Walk, walk, walk.

“…Are you still angry?” Arwin asked hesitantly when I didn’t speak for a long while.

“Furious.” Everyone had their invisible lines that couldn’t be crossed, even me. The position of those lines changed depending on who the other person was. In this case, she had gone way past mine. “You don’t listen to people. You make decisions on your own that affect others. You’re selfish. You’re self-centered. And you think you’re the most woeful, misfortunate person to ever have lived. You’re the worst. You fool. You clown.”

“…You didn’t need to say *that* much.”

“Don’t try to smooth this over now. It’s too late for that. However you boil it down, you’re just a selfish, spoiled princess. Me and Noelle and Ralph, we’re all slaves to your whims. It’d be nice if you realized that for once.”

“…I see.”

If not for that situation, I would never be in this dangerous pit, trying to find treasure.

“So stop trying to shoulder every burden on your own. Trust others and use them. Who cares about causing trouble for other people at this point? Let them call you ignorant and stupid and naive. Don’t even give them the time of day.”

“…I suppose I should’ve done that,” she murmured, relieved.

“Also, this isn’t the end. I’m giving you an entire lecture when we get back to the surface.”

“It’s the reverse of the usual way.”

“That happens sometimes.”

But I wished it didn’t. I liked being the worthless kept man, with her as the proud and regal princess knight. It was better that way.

My feet stayed on the move as we talked. The only sound was our shuffling through the dark, quiet dungeon. Eventually, we came to more stairs.

“Watch out, it’ll be a bit wobbly,” I warned her, but Arwin’s eyes were closed. She was asleep. What a careless princess. *You’re not in a carriage or on your trusty steed, but a gigolo with nothing but size on his side. How can you look so secure and peaceful in a situation like this?*

I took a deep breath and ascended the stairs, each one producing a new burst of sweat from my pores.

“Oh shit—”

I nearly stumbled but regained my balance in time. That would've been bad—I'd have toppled down the stairs with Arwin beneath me.

"Don't drop her," said a voice from the foot of the steps.

I glanced back to see a blond woman resting her elbow on the step, looking up at us.

"Hi, Fiona." Her appearance did not startle me. Realizing her identity explained everything about why she would be down here. "You saved us back there."

She was the one who had come to Arwin's aid.

"I'm the one who should be thanking you for protecting Arwin."

"It's nothing deserving of thanks," I said. "So did you take the name Fiona from that great noblewoman of the past? Or should I just call you *Janet*?"

She was Arwin's friend and a former member of Aegis. The brave knight who had died in the dungeon when she had been half eaten by a lindworm.

Janet just smirked and rolled her eyes. "So you knew."

"I guess."

There had been hints. It was well-known around the town that I was Arwin's kept man. If an adventurer came here from elsewhere, it was one of the first things they'd learn. Only an adventurer who hadn't been around here in over a year would be unaware of it. Janet had been eaten by the lindworm before Arwin and I had met.

Souls that perished in the dungeon did not go to the afterlife but remained there to wander. It seemed the same had happened to her soul.

She hadn't turned into a tool of the dungeon the way Virgil and the others had because of the power of the ring she wore. It hadn't protected her from disaster, but it had at least prevented her soul from being despoiled.

"I thought it would cause problems if I used my real name, so I borrowed my great-grandmother's."

"Was it the stampede that allowed you to reach the surface?"

Janet nodded, rubbing at the ring finger of her left hand. "My mind's been hazy this whole time, like I'm in a dream, but it sharpened up right as you were carrying Arwin."

And I am again now.

“I knew I had died, but I couldn’t help but be curious. Despite my better judgment, I let you carry me back to the surface.”

So she was haunting me? Was that why Cecilia had spoken so vaguely of Janet? Had she realized the woman was a ghost?

“Well, you could have been nice and told *me* the truth,” I said.

“I wasn’t entirely positive if you were trustworthy or not. Plus, it wasn’t easy for me, either. Because of *him*, I couldn’t leave town or speak up. If I didn’t stay focused at all times, my mind could have easily been sent off somewhere else.”

So Levi’s manipulation of the stampede had put limits on what Janet could do.

“So when the stampede helped you get a body, you came to help us.” I glanced over my shoulder at Arwin’s face. “Should I wake her up?”

“Let her sleep,” Janet said, shaking her head. “Otherwise she’s just going to get herself hurt again.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

If she knew her close friend’s soul was still trapped in the dungeon, she would stop at nothing to conquer the dungeon for good.

“Well, I’ll get going now.”

Already, Janet’s body was beginning to fade. She would return to being a ghost again, fated to wander through the dungeon forever, until the day the Millennium of Midnight Sun was defeated.

“Get back up there. The monsters will be returning soon.” She glanced at my back and smiled sadly. “Take care of Arwin for me.”

And with that, Janet vanished into the depths of the dungeon once more.

I nodded to the darkness, then turned and resumed the trek to the surface.

How far had I climbed? My stamina should have been drained long ago. Arwin still slept. The area around us looked quite memorable. Was this where we’d been attacked by the gargoyles last time?

Ralph the idiot had gotten carried away and nearly died. The memory started to make me chuckle, which was a bad

thing, because it made me woozy.

My shoulders heaved with each breath. My vision was growing hazy. It was to the point that my life was probably in danger.

The exhaustion I felt now was nothing like the last time. I had already been wiped out when I'd started, and now I was getting loopy. I was so tired that I could feel myself becoming dumber.

This was the sixth floor. I remembered. We were halfway there. If I didn't get a move on, the gargoyles would come back to split my head open.

I reached another set of stairs. Once I climbed them, I'd be on the fifth floor. Not the fourth or the sixth.

Step, step, step. My empty-headed ascent continued. Thinking just used more strength. The sad fact was that even coming to that realization involved thinking and thus more waste.

All these wasted thoughts came back to bite me: I slipped. Maybe the step I'd been putting my foot on was wet. The next thing I knew, I was toppling backward, dragged down by Arwin.

I knew it was bad, but I didn't have the physical or mental strength to recover my balance, to hold it together. Gravity took me downward toward the bottom of the stairs.

I was going to crush Arwin beneath me. At the very least, I needed to turn us over so we were on opposite sides—and that was when a dark shape crossed my vision.

Just like that, I was stopped in the middle of the descent, held at an awkward and unstable angle. Behind me, someone exhaled with relief.

"We made it in time," said Noelle.

"What are you doing?"

I looked forward and saw Ralph above me on the stairs, reaching out with his left hand to grab my arm.

"Does it look like I'm giving a horsey ride?" With Noelle pushing from behind and Ralph pulling from the front, I was able to get back up the stairs. "Oh, that was easy."

"Stop telling jokes and walk," Ralph fumed.

"You came to get Arwin?"

"And you."

"Aw, thanks." I laughed, unable to help myself.

“Let’s hurry,” warned Noelle. “Before we run into any monsters on the way back.”

Ralph took the lead and glanced back at us constantly. “Is the princess…?”

“Don’t worry, she’s fine.”

“And that thing she did…”

“Some kind of special power passed down by the royal family, apparently. Remember when we went to Mactarode? It was inside the box we brought back,” I lied. When Arwin woke up, I’d have to go over the story with her so we had it straight. “And it was only a onetime thing. The next time she attempts to use it, she could die.”

“…Yeah, I figured,” said Ralph. Even he could understand that a power that great did not come without an equally great cost.

“This is a request from me, not an order: Don’t let Arwin use that power again. You’re the only ones who can see to it that she doesn’t.”

If she tried to do it again, it would be in the dungeon. There would be no guarantee she’d be safe. I would rather die than see her turned into a slave of that puke-spittle sun god.

Ralph nodded gravely. I could sense that Noelle was doing the same.

“Are you sure you’re not tired? Want to trade?”

“Hell no.”

“I didn’t think so.”

He stared down at the ground. It almost looked like disappointment to me. He just wanted that full-body contact with Arwin, the little perv.

“Do your best. We’re almost back out,” said Noelle. I looked up and saw a faint light in the distance. Somehow, we had made it back to the first floor. We had entered the dungeon in the evening, and it had to be well past midnight now.

“Matthew.”

She tapped my shoulder. I glanced back at her and smiled.

“Need a wake-up kiss?”

“Just let me down.” Arwin climbed down from my back. Her feet were unsteady, but her mind seemed sharp, at least. “I’m grateful to you two as well.”

“Oh, no, we didn’t…”

“We only did what anyone would do,” said Ralph, who had the audacity to blush.

The stairs were just ahead. Climb them, and we’d be on the surface again.

“Let’s get out of here. We’re still in the dungeon, and anything can happen,” remarked Ralph, taking the lead and watching our perimeter. He thought he was being careful, and he looked stupid doing it, but vigilance was a laudable quality here, it was true.

Noelle went up first. When Arwin reached the surface, an enormous cheer exploded.

Outside, I could see a massive crowd waiting for Arwin to return. The Maretto Sisters and the other adventurers were among them, as were Dez and Nicholas.

They all knew full well who had stopped the stampede.

While Arwin stood there, stunned, I distanced myself and whispered over Noelle’s shoulder, “I’m heading back first. You and Ralph are responsible for getting her home. Understood?”

“Huh? But—”

I left Arwin behind to the roars of approval and gratitude, slipped through the crowd, and departed the area. In such a bright and joyous scene, the last thing anyone wanted to see was a shifty, disreputable kept man.

The night was still and quiet. There were no lights in the houses. The evacuees around here wouldn’t have returned yet. Either that, or they were so terrified that they’d locked themselves inside. Fortunately, the stars were out, so I had enough light to walk by. I was exhausted beyond measure, but I felt elated for some reason. Probably because I’d seen Arwin receiving the attention and esteem she deserved. She, more than anyone else, had done everything she could, to the last possible moment, to save this town. If anyone deserved a hero’s welcome, it was her.

“Oops.”

The next thing I knew, I was standing before our charred house. Whoops. I’d been walking in a daze and gone the old way home without remembering what had happened.

I hadn’t been here since the day we’d returned to town, and it looked even worse now. The floorboards and pillars, which had escaped more damage than the rest of the house, had been

removed and scavenged. It felt ready to collapse with a stiff breeze at any moment.

It would be easier for us to rebuild it from scratch at this point. The stampede was over, so the rebuilding would need to be done quickly. If we asked Dez's contact, we could probably get a sturdier house built this time. It would cost more, but we could figure that out.

Suddenly, a shock stung my side. Someone had run into me. Startled and annoyed, I turned my head to see a man with a black hood thrusting a dagger into my side.

I swiped out with my arm, mostly as a reflex, and knocked the man's hood back. I could scarcely believe my eyes.

His face and hands were bandaged up. Only around the rims of his eyes could I make out nasty burn scars. He looked like he'd come straight out of the graveyard, but I remembered the vicious look in those eyes. This was Reggie, formerly of Tri-Hydra. He was alive?

"Are you a fan of mine or something?"

"Yes, and I'll happily go with you to hell if it means I've killed you."

A moment later, the pain and impact finally hit, and I fell to my knees. Reggie's dagger came out as I fell.

Blood gushed forth, staining my shirt.

My entire body was already wracked with muscle pain, but the wound in my side caused a fresh wave to flare up all over. I couldn't even tell *what* hurt anymore. I felt like I was going stupid. I already am? How dare you.

I expected a follow-up attack, but Reggie fell right to all fours and coughed. I'd thought it didn't make sense that he was alive and well, but he was decidedly *not* well. In fact, he didn't have long to live. He had wounds even magic couldn't heal, and he was going to spend his last moments dedicated to revenge against me and Arwin. What a waste.

"Sure you'd rather not call for a healer?"

"Not until I've killed you."

Reggie wiped dark blood from his mouth and raised his dagger again.

I didn't have the strength or willpower to resist. I just scrambled for dear life.

"Fire! Look out, there's a fire!" I tried to bellow for all I was worth, but as spent as I was, I could only muster the weakest

fart of a voice. That probably smelled bad.

“You waste your time! Everyone around these parts ran for the hills! There’s no one left!”

Our choice to live in the more expensive (and thus safer) area had backfired on us here.

I continued to scramble on all fours, unable to get to my feet. Reggie crawled after me in the same manner. We were like two babies chasing one another, only these babies were two grown, bloodied men locked in a death struggle. It was no one’s idea of cute.

In a race, the winner would be the one with more speed and stamina. Reggie was badly hurt, too, but he didn’t have to deal with the snot-headed sun god’s curses, he hadn’t been fighting any preacher monstrosities, nor had he carried any princess knights up thirteen floors of dungeon corridors.

In other words, I was running on less fuel. Reggie’s hand caught my ankle. I used my other foot to kick at his face and arms, but Reggie did not budge. Because I was already on the ground, I couldn’t put any weight into my kicks. On top of that, Reggie was so motivated by fury that he didn’t seem to feel any pain at all.

Agony jolted through my ankle. Reggie had stabbed it with his dagger, pinning me down.

“Now you can’t escape,” he crowed, stumbling to his feet and leering with victorious pride. He looked like a snake just about to devour a rat. “Give up and accept your death.”

“Nah.”

I pushed myself backward on my hands, sliding on my behind. The temporary sun was out of juice. I had run myself so ragged that even the technique of breaking through with sheer tenacity was off the table. Still, I refused to sit back and let it happen. Especially not to someone like him. I didn’t care if I got covered in soot and my ass was covered with mud. I was going to struggle to the very last second.

Ahead of me was one of the house’s few intact posts. Behind me stood Reggie, bloodied and bandaged, brandishing his knife. By any objective standard, it was curtains for me.

“Don’t worry. I’ll send that princess knight after you in short order,” he said, lifting his knife. “So long, wisecracker. This is the end!”

“For me, or you?”

Just before the tip of Reggie's knife could ram through my chest, I twisted, just enough. The breath caught in my lungs. I could tell from the pain that he hadn't hit my heart, while I grabbed his arm and toppled backward as hard as I could. My back landed hard, and the posts around me began to topple.

Reggie had been so hell-bent on chasing me that he didn't notice, after all the arson and looting here, that what I had just snapped was the central pillar that supported the whole house. What would happen to a building that was already weakened and then lost its load-bearing pillar? The answer was simple.

He grunted like an idiot and looked up. Even weakened by fire, the pillars and beams that made up the skeleton of the house were heavier than a man—and several of them were falling right toward his head. That included the roof. And the walls.

It would hurt. A whole lot. If it trapped him, he wouldn't be able to move.

I hated the idea of having this idiot as a travel companion to the underworld, but that was life for you.

"See you in hell, baby."

The building began to collapse on top of us. Reggie freaked and tried to run. Pillars and beams toppled. Walls and floorboards rained down, sending up clouds of dust. I shut my eyes against it. Surprisingly, there was no pain.

I thought I was dead, but no angels were coming to greet me.

Eventually, I opened my eyes.

There was nothing but rubble and lumber surrounding me. But nothing, not a single splinter, had landed around me. The angle of the pillars tilting and falling must have worked in my favor. It was like they'd formed a tentative dome over my position.

Reggie, meanwhile, was buried under several posts. His head was split open, his tongue extended, and his eyes were unfocused. His pupils were dilated, so it was undeniable that he was dead. His luck had finally run out.

Somehow, I managed to crawl through a crack in the pile. As soon as I made my way out of the rubble, the rest of the house collapsed entirely.

It was tempting to say I was lucky, but things in my life never worked out this well for nothing. There would always be

some reason for anything good that happened to me.

And sure enough, in my pants pocket was a ring with a blue gemstone in it: the relic of the Mactarode royal family, which was said to protect its bearer against disaster and evil. Arwin was supposed to have possession of this ring. Why was it in my pocket?

The logical answer would be that it had slipped off and landed in there while I'd been carrying her on my back. But I had a feeling there was a different reason in this case.

It was a gift from its *previous* owner.

Apparently, the princess knight's friend had spared a little good fortune for me. Unfortunately, it was too small to fit on any of my fingers.

I smirked, and I instantly felt the last of my strength leave me. This was all I could do.

I sat on the ground, then fell over. I needed sleep.

"Matthew!"

Through my fading wits, I heard Arwin's voice. I thought it was a dream, but it was real. She rushed to my side and helped me sit up.

"Are you all right? Matthew! Hey!"

"Perfectly fine, as you can see. Doing great."

She said nothing, but she pressed a cloth to my side and wrapped it up. Apparently, that was her way of treating me. It didn't seem likely to do much, but I let her have at it. I couldn't have stopped her even if I wanted to. Instead, what I wanted was to get some shut-eye.

"Why are you here?" I asked. She should have been on a stage somewhere receiving a medal for saving the town, or in a banquet hall being feted by grateful townspeople.

"I came looking for you." She looked like an exasperated mother who'd been desperately searching for her lost child. "I had a feeling you would wander off somewhere. You weren't back at Dez's home, so the next place I thought to try was here."

What a worrywart.

I reached up to Arwin's face.

"I'm not going anywhere."

I just needed to rest for a little while. The pain was ebbing away, which was making it much easier.

"Don't die, Matthew!"

I’m not going to die, I said. Or I thought I did, but I couldn’t be sure.

My eyes closed.

If the last thing I ever saw was Arwin’s face, it wasn’t a bad way to go.

My consciousness sank deep into darkness.

FINAL CHAPTER

The Princess Knight and Her Kept Man

“See, I told you I was fine,” I said with a laugh. It was three days later, and I was in bed.

They shouldn’t have doubted the great Matthew’s sheer vitality. If a little stab wound in the side was enough to kill me, I’d have a lot fewer problems to worry about. I’d simply run out of strength due to total exhaustion and blood loss. The attack hadn’t critically wounded any of my organs, so after a full day of sleeping, my strength had recovered and the wound had healed over. Enough food, and I’d make all the blood back.

“It’s your fault for being misleading,” Arwin said, pouting from the side of the bed. Her eyes were red.

“Were you watching over me from my bedside this whole time?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?!”

“I thought I heard a voice whispering sweet nothings into my ear. Like, ‘Don’t die,’ and ‘You’re my precious lifeline.’”

“Shut up. Stop talking,” she grumbled, and she pinched my arm.

“That hurts.”

“I wish you had just died back there.”

“Stop, stop, you’re going to make it bleed again.”

Who punches a man in his side, right where he got stabbed? It’s ridiculous.

Once she was satisfied with the number of times she had punched my wound, Arwin brusquely shoved a bowl of soup in my face. There were large purple chunks floating in it.

“Here, it’s your favorite.”

“I don’t actually like eggplant, you know…”

“If you leave any of them, you’re in big trouble.”

You don’t have to threaten your bedridden patient, you know.

“Thanks, I’ll gladly have some,” I said with an awkward smile, and I took a sip. It wasn’t bad. “You’ll have to send my thanks to Dez’s wife.”

Dez’s wife and son had evacuated out of town during the disaster, but in the time that I’d been asleep, they’d returned.

“…Why do you assume it was her?”

“It’s too good for you to have made it.” If Arwin had made the soup, the eggplant would have been raw, or perhaps completely whole. “You want to taste it for yourself?”

“No.”

“C’mon, don’t be shy,” I said, scooping the largest chunk of eggplant out of the soup and holding it out for her. Arwin turned her face away.

There was a knock at the door downstairs.

“I’ll get that,” Arwin said.

“Let Dez handle it.”

“He’s out running errands with his wife and son.”

She practically fled down the stairs to escape. Very unladylike.

“Be careful, all right?”

There was always the possibility of another attacker. I got up and followed her down the stairs. My wound still hurt, but I could put up with that.

“Good morning.”

It was Noelle at the door. And Ralph.

“Why are you here so early?”

Noelle awkwardly glanced over her shoulder in explanation. There were two more people behind Ralph.

The Maretto Sisters.

We ushered them into the dining room, where Cecilia and Beatrice sat across the table from Arwin. Ralph and Noelle stood behind her. Since I was injured, I was allowed to sit at Arwin’s side.

This had happened before. The last time, it had nearly ended in a fight. Of course, now we all knew each other better. At the very least, the Marettos weren’t coming in looking for blood.

Arwin said, “What do you want?”

“Don’t glare at us. This is something that could benefit you, too.” Beatrice grinned, twirling her little staff. “Would you like to team up with us?”

Noelle and Ralph raised their voices in protest, but Arwin just frowned. Her brow was knitted. “What do you mean?”

“Just what it sounds like. No hidden meanings,” Cecilia said, picking up the explanation. “The dungeon will be opened again in the near future. There will be a bunch of new adventurers flooding in when that happens. This is our best chance.”

After the stampede ebbed, the monsters appearing in the dungeon were weaker, and even better, they were fewer in number. This was big. You could go farther in with less resistance.

“You’re exaggerating…”

“I am not, boy, and neither am I bluffing,” Cecilia snapped at Ralph. “To an adventurer, this dungeon is the final frontier.”

There would still be adventurers after the Millennium of Midnight Sun was conquered. There would be monsters to slay, clients to protect, and valuable ores and plants to collect. But those jobs were not much different from a simple mercenary’s. Any ancient ruin had been picked clean of treasure by now, and there hadn’t been any new sites found in decades. The age of adventurers dreaming of glory and riches was coming to an end.

“But we’ve lost companions recently, too, and we’re not ready to jump into the dungeon right away.”

“So I think you should team up with us. Serves us both well, in my opinion,” added the younger sister casually, putting her hands behind her head.

The Maretto twins were five-star adventurers and legitimate fighters. As mages, they needed warriors to stand in front of them in battle. Aegis, meanwhile, had one princess knight, an immature would-be fighter, and a scout, with no proper mages or healers to stand in the back row.

So it wouldn’t be a bad idea, in terms of making up for each other’s weaknesses.

“I believe I already declined this offer once.”

“We were talking about an alliance back then. This is different. Bea and I are going to join Aegis. You shouldn’t have any complaints about that.” Even Arwin was taken aback by

this. “And you’ll still be the leader, of course. What do you think?”

She didn’t reply. She was struggling to answer. I filled the silence by asking, “And you’re fine with that, too, Little Sis?”

Beatrice’s goal—the sisters’ goal—was to earn fame by conquering the dungeon.

“Well, I’m a very generous soul. I’m willing to give you the glory.”

So she’d chosen a more practical approach to achieving her aims.

“Of course, if you prove yourself to be incompetent, then I’ll wind up as the leader anyway,” she continued, then pointed her little staff, challenging Arwin to rise to the bait. It was hard to say if they were trustworthy or not—but they would definitely have a major impact on the group.

“…All right,” Arwin agreed. “But we split any gains evenly. I’m not budging on that point.”

“Fine. We can talk more about things like that later,” Beatrice said, avoiding any definitive statements. Very shrewd of her.

“Then it sounds like you’ve reached an agreement,” said a voice as someone entered the dining room.

“You’re bad for the heart, Doc.”

“I beg your pardon?” Nicholas said slyly, taking a seat at the end of the table between Arwin and the sisters.

“Why are you here anyway?”

“For the same reason as these ladies,” Nicholas said. “I’ll be joining Aegis, too. I’ve come for a formal introduction to the group.”

“Huh?” I squawked. Of course, I was surprised by him joining, but that wasn’t all. Nicholas wasn’t asking; he was stating it as a fact. Meaning his presence in the group was already accepted. “I didn’t hear about this.”

“I was going to tell you,” said the princess knight shamelessly. “He’s certainly worthy of the position, and he has a trustworthy nature.”

I glanced back and saw both Noelle and Ralph nod along. Ralph seemed a bit miffed, but Noelle was more relieved than anything. Fewer uncertain variables for her to worry about, I guessed.

I grabbed Nicholas by the arm and pulled him out of the room.

“What are you thinking? Weren’t you supposed to be finding an antidote for Release?”

“Of course. That’s very important, too,” he said pleasantly, removing my hand. “But as long as the dungeon contains the sun god’s objective, I would like to see it for myself.”

“But—”

If anything happened to Nicholas, there would be no one left to create that antidote for us.

“The problem is that the antidote work is currently stalled due to lack of funds. I’ve tried every material that’s easily available. If there’s anything else nearby that might work, it’ll be in the dungeon. Plus, we can make good money down there.”

The depths of the dungeon were a true wonderland in that sense. There were unknown plants and probably believed-extinct monsters to be found. And most importantly, the sun god couldn’t wield his power in the dungeon. In a certain sense, it was actually *safer* in there.

I was still of a mind to argue, but Nicholas added quietly, “Plus, if she experiences any *anomalies* in the dungeon, I’ll be there to help.”

“……”

Since I couldn’t go down there myself, it would be very helpful to have a member of the party who was aware of the full facts of Arwin’s situation. There was no denying that.

“What do you say?”

“Fine, fine,” I snapped, tugging my hair. The holy man was surprisingly stubborn. “But let me be clear: I haven’t forgiven you for the ideas you put into Arwin’s head.”

The false priest’s unwanted advice was what had caused her to engage in such an insane, reckless stunt. I should be killing him right now.

“Well, I’m sorry about that. I’ll be more careful from now on,” he said coolly, clearly not intimidated. Some other adventurers had shriveled up in their pants from this sort of threat. Either he was extremely bold, or just completely numb. The thing was, it was impossible to tell which. The old man simply refused to be read.

We returned to the dining room, where Beatrice, cheek resting on her fist, gave Nicholas a skeptical glance. “You seem

pretty old. Are you sure you can keep up?"

"I may not be as young as you all, but I have plenty of experience to make up for it," he said, grinning. A very clever answer; he was much, much older than he even appeared.

"Well, fine. You seem like you know what you're doing. I don't have a problem with it," Beatrice said, accepting him into the group as though she had been a member all along.

"And if you try to hit on Bea, I'll kill you," said her older sister, who gave him a death stare.

"You have nothing to fear from me," he said easily, letting the threat bounce off him. The guy was a pro.

So the group was set.

Arwin as the leader, with Ralph the sort-of-warrior, Noelle the scout, Cecilia and Beatrice the mages, and Nicholas the healer.

This was the new Aegis.

"Then shall we celebrate our new friendship over some drinks?" Beatrice offered enticingly.

"It's still *morning*," Ralph retorted. What an idiot.

"But doesn't it taste the best when other people are busy at work?"

Yes! Exactly. She and I saw eye to eye on this one.

"I'll pass," said Arwin, who took my hand without getting up. "I have a wounded acquaintance to see to. We'll have to do that another time."

"Well, you heard her," I chimed in. Apparently, she *really* wanted to feed me that eggplant soup.

"Oh, that's a shame. Hopefully we can get around to it later," Beatrice said, rising to her feet.

"Let's shake on it, then," Arwin said, standing from her chair with her hand out. Instead, however, Beatrice approached —and planted her lips on Arwin's cheek.

The entire room froze.

"Come to me if you ever get bored of your boy toy. I'll show you sweet dreams," she said with a bewitching smile, then turned and left the room.

After the door had closed, I turned to Cecilia. "She's on *that* side?"

"*Both* sides."

"Oh. I see."

A *dual-wielder*, then.

“But I’m only interested in men,” Cecilia said, giving me a very pointed look I pretended not to notice. Nothing good would happen from getting involved in that way. Especially when I was in the presence of the princess knight.

The next day, the guildmaster and the lord of Gray Neighbor came together to publicly announce the end of the stampede.

A few days later, a mass memorial was held. The damage to the town had been significant, but the repairs were proceeding here and there. The dead would not come back, but the living could still move forward. That was how the world had come as far as it had, and it was what we would do, too. Simple as that.

After a few more days, the Millennium of Midnight Sun was reopened to adventurers. Early in the morning, they gathered around the hastily repaired doors, eager to get back inside and make their fortunes. Nick and his group Argo were there, with a replacement for the member they’d lost. There was no sign of Chrysaor, however. They had broken up after the loss of Rex, their leader, in the stampede. He’d had money, so they were able to afford a private grave for him. I was planning to treat him to a drink sometime. It’d have to be a cheap bottle, though; couldn’t afford to waste any good stuff.

So some were gone, but others had just arrived. There were already more adventurers coming from other towns, some of them new and unfamiliar.

And standing at the head of the pack, of course, was Arwin and the new configuration of Aegis.

There was a crowd gathered around them to watch. They all wanted to see off Arwin, the town’s hero. From their midst, I watched her carefully. She looked stiff; she was clearly nervous. Probably because there was one question on her mind.

Had her dungeon sickness truly been cured?

The last time she’d gone in, she had been in a bizarre form, but it’d been well over a month since she’d ventured inside as her usual self. Not since the time of the stampede’s early signs, when she had lost three companions and nearly died herself.

If the horror of those memories flooded back, she was going to have to deal with the dungeon sickness all over again. And this time, her reputation would truly crater. I’d given her some candy, but one couldn’t be too careful.

“Arwin,” I called out from the crowd. She spun around to look, right as a cheer exploded from the crowd. The guild staffers had gathered—it was time to open the doors. The excitement in the crowd was palpable.

It was so damn loud, I was going hard of hearing. There was no way she could hear me now. That left me with no option but to mouth the words, over and over.

For an instant, she looked suspicious, but then she suddenly smiled and mouthed some words back to me.

“Kiss my ass.”

I nodded.

The doors creaked open.

Adventurers roared and plunged into the dark gap, all eager to be the first. Some of them would likely not return. They had families, acquaintances, parents, children, all of whom would mourn their deaths. That was the business they engaged in.

Once the rush had thinned out, Aegis followed them in. The favorite always waited until the end.

Arwin walked first, her strides long and slow and purposeful. Just before she passed through the doorway, I thought I saw her pause. But the next moment, she had stepped across the threshold and into the dungeon, and from there, she vanished straight into the darkness without a look back.

“Come back alive,” I said, a message for no one to hear, and I turned around.

This would be the start of act two for Arwin the princess knight and her band of merry companions. While I was curious and worried about their progress, I had my own things to handle now.

A bright light flashed at the end of a back alley. The men there faltered, and I dented their skulls and crushed their throats. One man tried to turn and run, but I grabbed him by the back of the neck and snapped it. Once I was sure they were dead, I retrieved the cracked temporary sun. The fracture had happened when I’d thrown it against the black orb. I could still use it like normal, but it seemed like the crack was getting deeper. It was still a holy relic, so I’d asked Nicholas, but he didn’t know how to repair it, either. Someday, it would shatter completely, but that was a problem to worry about later.

I placed it in my pocket more gently than usual, then crouched to rifle through the pockets of the three bodies.

They were all dealers, and I found what I was looking for: Release.

With my recent travels and such over the past month, I'd run out of my stock. When Arwin got back, she would need more of her forbidden "medicine": Release mixed into a hard candy form. Without a proper antidote, I had to keep giving her the real thing to keep the withdrawal away. And that meant regularly getting my hands dirty.

I hunched over and made myself small as I left the scene, trying to stay out of sight. After turning a few corners to make sure no one was trailing me, I walked away casually, like it was any other day.

At a market vendor, I bought a bag of salted beans. The relief was making me hungry.

I opened the bag and popped one in my mouth. It was a bit *too* salty, but it wasn't bad.

In the distance, I heard a scream. At first, I thought someone had discovered the bodies already, but it turned out to be a simple fight.

"Great, and it just had to happen on my wife's birthday," muttered a guard as he rushed past. My condolences, pal. The guys I killed might've had wives and kids, too.

I didn't feel sympathy. They would have died sooner rather than later, even without my involvement. Maybe that would be me one day. Them today, me tomorrow. We don't get to die in our beds at home, surrounded by loving families. We'd chosen a life that precluded that. Or maybe it had chosen us.

You want to blame anyone, look at the gods. Particularly one underwear-thief sun god. He was worth blaming for anything.

"Oops."

I was so lost in thought that I bumped into someone and dropped my bag of salted beans. I'd just opened it up, and now all the contents had spilled out.

"Aw, c'mon, man." I just bought that thing!

I bent over to start scooping up my fallen beans, but I froze just as quickly.

The salted beans were lined up in a way that was unnaturally clean and tidy. In fact, they looked like letters.

Well done. You have passed the third trial.

"Huh?" I squawked. Even I thought I sounded stupid. But I wasn't in any mood to laugh. Instead, I swept my hand across the beans to scatter them. The sight of the white legumes flying brought me back to my senses.

What was that? I glanced hesitantly down at them again, but of course, the beans weren't even forming a child's scribbled picture, much less a written message. They were just dirty and dusty on the path.

"What a damn waste."

It was just my eyes playing tricks on me. Pathetic. Matthew the miserable coward.

I crouched down to pick out the few that still looked edible, but I heard a sound under my foot. Had I stepped on one? I lifted my leg, then felt my heart race. The fragmented pieces, too, were spelling out another message.

A new Sufferer and preacher have been elevated to the next stage.

The hairs on my arm stood on end. A new Sufferer and preacher?

Meaning…

Fuck you, you slanderous bottom-dweller! What are you going to do to my friend and woman?

I stomped on the beans, over and over. Even after they split into mush, I continued to stomp on them. Damn that bean seller. He'd sold me a bad bunch! I punched the wall for good measure.

But my strength was paltry, of course, so the only thing it did was disturb some dust. The flecks danced in the air and stuck to the wall again, once again forming words.

The fourth trial will confront you one day.

Forget the damn beans. He was spying on me, watching from somewhere.

I spun around in place, like a weather vane on a blustery day, searching for a sign, but I saw neither hide nor hair of him.

“What’s the matter?” said an old man passing by who’d noticed my strange actions. He was wiry and kindly-looking.

“Ah. I dropped a few coins, but I can’t find them now.”

“Well, that’s a shame,” he said sadly, crouching down. “Let me help you find them.”

“No, it’s fine,” I insisted. Even I wasn’t so twisted that I’d allow him to look for money that wasn’t there. “Don’t worry about it…”

“I have high hopes for you.”

The old man’s face froze up like a mask for an instant. I couldn’t forget that voice, much as I might want to. It was *his*.

“Hey!” The next thing I knew, I was holding a fistful of the man’s shirt. “Who are you? Are you a preacher, too?”

“Wh-what are you doing? I’m just trying to be nice…”

“Huh?”

I blinked, and the only thing in my hands was a nice-looking old man. The masklike expression was gone.

“Let go! Unhand me!” he wailed. I disengaged at once and walked away.

After turning three corners, I glanced behind to see if anyone was following, then exhaled in relief. Had that been another of the sun god’s revelations? Since he didn’t have a preacher around to deliver the message this time, he’d had to resort to more fishy measures, I supposed.

“I should just go home.”

Clearly, this wasn’t my day. Better that I stay at home.

The next thing I knew, I was at Bandits’ Alley.

“Hey, Matthew, feel like stopping in today?” said one of the ladies charged with attracting customers. Normally, I’d take her up on the offer, but I wasn’t in the mood now.

“Next time, my dear.”

“You’d better be telling the truth. Madam’s getting up our bums about the lack of earnings. I’ll give you a deal, too.”

But when I tried to brush past her, she grabbed my sleeve. “Sorry, but this really isn’t the day. It’s the anniversary of my mom’s death, so I’m supposed to behave,” I lied—but I froze when I saw the look on her face.

“I seek mighty Sufferers.”

Like the old man, her face was now like a stone mask. I snatched my hand away from her and rushed off, practically tumbling through an alley onto the main street. My destination was Nicholas’s home. He wasn’t there, but if I searched the place, I might find a means to end this tasteless game of whispers. As I ran, I heard his voice in my ears.

“Follow me.”
“I see all before me.”
“You cannot escape my grasp.”
“You must exhibit your strength.”
“To bring about my return to the world.”

The piece of shit. What was this nonsense?

I’d rather die than be your slave.

“Oh? Matthew?” said a familiar voice.

I stopped and turned on my heel. “Oh. It’s you, squirt.”

“How many times do I have to tell you not to call me ‘squirt’?!” April pouted, trying to kick my shins. I thought she was coming to tell me she hadn’t been able to see Aegis off at the dungeon or something. Instead, she was running an errand, judging by the sack in her arms. What a diligent young lass.

“Are you feeling better now?” she asked.

“It was just a scratch.”

I’d received some healing magic, and after some good meals and rest, I’d gotten better at once.

“Do you know how worried Arwin was? You shouldn’t push your luck.”

“That’s how I feel about her. The princess knight is always acting with wild abandon…” Then I remembered my current destination. “Sorry, I’ve got something to take care of. We can hang out another time.”

“Let me guess, you’re going to another woman’s place again,” she scolded, wagging a finger at me. “Oh, Matthew, you’re such a…”

She stopped abruptly, and her face tilted downward.

“What’s wrong?”

I peered at her. It felt like something was gripping, squeezing my heart.

April's face had become a stony, expressionless mask.

"You belong to me."

Moments later, April blinked back to life and looked around.

"What's the matter, Matthew? What did I just do…?" she asked, shriveling up in lonely fear.

"Don't worry about it. I think you just got lightheaded. How do you feel? Any pain?"

"No, I'm fine," she said, smiling weakly.

"If you feel bad, go to a doctor to get seen. Got that?"

She still had adventurer bodyguards watching over her. If anything happened, word would get back to the old man.

I waved good-bye and left her behind. Around the corner, once she was out of sight, I went into the shadows and punched a wall again. It didn't leave a scratch, of course, but that was a good thing.

If I'd had my original strength, I would have smashed clean through it and anything else that caught my eye. My stomach trembled with the raging heat bubbling over in its depths.

"I'll kill him, I swear," I muttered.

"…So then Vanessa smashed him over the head with a vase and finally cut ties with him. Of course, ten days later, she'd already fallen prey to the wiles of a lady-killer who styled himself a wandering troubadour," I concluded.

Vincent slumped over the table and put his head in his hands.

"What was she *doing*?"

"She was a woman of many loves."

And much more entertaining than you would have thought from the look of her.

We were seated in the Purple Iron Steed, a pub frequented by the town guard and Paladins thanks to its location near their bases on the north side of town. That was also why I was suffering an endless series of nasty glares and glances. Still, I felt utterly accomplished—I'd finally gotten Vincent to buy me drinks.

"You make good money. I was expecting you to treat me to something a little more expensive."

"You don't like it, don't drink it."

“Just kidding. I *love* cheap swill. Especially when they make it so drinkable by adding plenty of extra water.”

“Go home already.”

He tried to wrap things up, but I held my ground. I had a peasant’s tongue anyway; how would I understand more subtle flavors? Cheap or watery, if I could drink it, that was fine.

“…Did you really bother me so many times just so you could tell me these stories?”

“I have my reasons.”

Brother and sister could never again come to understand each other. This was a cheap way to atone for my crime a little.

The door opened, and two familiar faces popped in: the mustached guard and the dark-skinned one. Mustache leaned over and whispered into Vincent’s ear. His handsome face twisted. He stood up and placed a gold coin on the table.

“I’ve got business to see to. Drink as much as you like.”

Now there was a generous offer. This man was a true king among men.

“Did something happen?”

“They’ve found bodies in an alley. Drug dealers.”

“Oh dear.”

“And apparently they’ve all been slaughtered with some *monstrous* strength.”

“Sounds quite scary,” I said, giving a little shiver for effect.

“For the past year, dealers and addicts alike have turned up dead in the same way. Every last one was robbed of their purse and stash.”

“That stuff is worth good money. Or else this killer is using it.”

“The guards see this as the work of a junkie, or someone who has a strong personal grudge against drugs.”

“Ah, that’s another angle,” I said, nodding.

Vincent clenched his fist. “What were you doing before you came here…?”

“Just wandering, wasting time. Why?” I said without interest. I gave him a little yawn for effect.

“I understand you carried Lady Arwin out of the dungeon.”

“I’ve got confidence in my longevity. Especially down here,” I said with a smirk, grabbing my crotch. Stamina and brute strength were very different things.

Vincent's eyes narrowed briefly. Then he nodded and murmured, "I've got to see to this. Do as you will."

"Take care," I said, waving to his back. Sucker.

I'd thought I had put him off my trail, but he was still sniffing around, then.

For now, I ordered another drink. If I pocketed the coin, I'd just get stuck up by some thug before I got back home. The only option was to drink it all, of course.

"So he's finally gone."

Taking Vincent's place without a minute to spare was Oswald, from Birds of Prey. He had a collection of flunkies behind him.

"You know that official?" he asked.

"What do you want, sir?" I replied. He'd clearly been waiting for Vincent to leave, despite his casual manner.

"I wanted to thank you and the princess knight."

"I've done nothing to deserve your thanks."

"Thanks to you folks, everyone's saying we helped stop the stampede. People are coming to us for help. It's tough just to get some free time to have a drink. A good problem to have, you might call it."

"You're getting into construction and job mediation now, I hear?"

It would take time to get the town rebuilt. Money was needed, but even more than that, manpower. Every construction site needed more laborers. There were plenty of people who'd lost their livelihoods and needed money, too. And the best way to get labor together in this town was to go to the mob.

Birds of Prey had leaped ahead of their underworld rivals in making a name for themselves. People had soon learned that, unlike the others, who had run to save their own skins, the Birds of Prey could be trusted in a pinch. But what they did was no different from the others. They skimmed off the top of their clients' daily pay and called it a finder's fee. Even the percentage was basically the same as what other organizations took.

"Even the main family have been impressed by our work."

"That's great for you." It was going to change the power balance in town. But it wasn't really my problem to worry about. "None of this affects me and Arwin."

“Now, don’t be hostile.”

Oswald gave me a very nasty smile. If he thought it could make him money, he would latch on to whatever he found. After the connection we’d built up through the stampede, he was going to demand some impossible thing. He might even use Arwin’s name in wicked ways.

“Just tell me if you’ve ever got a problem you need solved,” Oswald said, getting to his feet and placing a hand on my shoulder. “We should stick together, Giant-Eater.”

“What’s that?” I replied. Oswald clicked his tongue; he didn’t like my response.

“Whatever. Tell the princess knight I’d enjoy sharing another drink with her,” he said, and he left along with his followers. Once I knew they were gone for good, I exhaled.

“I knew it would come to this.”

It was why I didn’t want to get involved with gangsters. Once they had somebody in their grasp, they would suck the marrow from their bones. If left unchecked, he would pose a threat to Arwin. I wanted to be rid of him sooner rather than later, but he was always accompanied by a large retinue, probably out of caution against an enemy attack.

If it came to it, I’d just have to risk danger to clean up this loose end.

How many people would I be forced to kill?

I wanted something to wash down the foul substance that rose in my throat. Fortunately, I had some cheap swill already.

Three days later, Arwin’s party returned safely. They hadn’t lost a single member.

“You’re not hurt? How do you feel?”

“No problem.”

She hadn’t had any flares of dungeon sickness and was stable for now. We were still living at Dez’s house. Now that Arwin had returned, I was back to sleeping on the floor.

“We made it to the fourteenth floor this time,” Arwin said while she was changing. “There were monsters everywhere. It had been so quiet before.”

“I’m not surprised.”

Monsters were the guards of the Millennium of Midnight Sun. They weren’t going to leave the path to the throne open forever.

“In good time, we’ll reach the twentieth floor. The guild’s requested it of us.”

The farther parties got into the dungeon, the easier it was for the parties following them to acquire safe passage, and that meant increased survival rates for adventurers overall.

“You don’t have to listen to the old man.”

“This whole affair was a big setback. I want to get back to our previous pace.”

“But there’s no rush,” I said. If the worst happened, she’d never come back out.

“I’m not rushing. It’s just that now is the time to push forward,” she said firmly. I rolled my eyes to the heavens.

“How are the new kids?”

“Nicholas is one thing, but those sisters are wild broncos,” said Arwin, taking her turn to roll her eyes. They didn’t listen. They shot off their strongest spells without warning. They loved to act on their own without orders. “But in terms of skill, they’re the real thing. We got to the fourteenth floor even without a safe route because of them.”

So they were mighty but could harm you if you didn’t use them carefully. A double-edged blade.

“Don’t worry, though. I will learn to control them.”

“I hope so.”

As part of resting and recuperating, we went into town to run errands the next day. There was furniture and an array of daily needs that had to be purchased. Construction was proceeding on our new rental home. The old building’s rubble had been cleared away, and the new one was coming together. There were craftsmen working round the clock on the home for the hero who had saved the town, after all. The layout would be virtually the same as the last one but with a separate bathhouse. I was looking forward to using it with her. Assuming she agreed to it.

We walked side by side through the town. It was awkward to match her gait, but I was used to it.

“First, we’ll need bedding at the furniture store.”

“Let’s get a big one we can share without cramping each other.”

“You sleep outside.”

“Wow, really?”

Thanks to the princess knight, the stampede's damage to the town had been minimized. People called out to her all around the place. She was the darling of Gray Neighbor now. Her succumbing to dungeon sickness was now just a bit of flavor to make her heroism more potent.

But while the dungeon sickness had calmed down, the addiction lingered. If she stopped using, she would still undergo a hellish withdrawal cycle. Even now, she was an addict and regular user. We had an antidote, but not enough money for more.

The town was saved. And the lives that had been spared were not all saints and innocents. They were villains, scum, bastards. The kind of people whose deaths could only make the world a better place. People who leeched off this town, wielding violence, spreading drugs, and enslaving women and children. The ills of this pestilential place were as toxic as ever.

Many things had changed, and nothing was any different.

"By the way, Matthew," Arwin said, "you asked me once before what I would want to do if I conquered the dungeon, yes? I've been thinking about it, and I found an answer."

"That's great. What is it?"

"Remember when you told me about the women of the east who dive for fish and clams? I want to try that."

It wasn't the sort of job a princess did, but she was oddly gung ho about it. That was fine, though. It was good to have a reason to live.

"Good for you. But can you swim?"

"I can sink."

"Uh, that's not good enough." There was no point going to the seafloor if you couldn't get back up.

"You just have to pull me out before I drown."

"So I'm going?"

"Of course you are," Arwin said. "You're the only one who can hold my lifeline."

Indeed.

"You're going to be working overtime for me from now on. Just like my kept man should."

"Listen, I've been meaning to say this for a while," I started up, seizing on the opportunity, "but can you stop saying that around other people? You know I'm not actually a pimp. Or, uh, an 'instructor for wayward women.'"

That stupid virgin knight had just had to give the game away—and on the very night I had been scheduled to start living with Arwin. It should have been the greatest night ever.

“I don’t mind.”

And yet the princess knight herself still called me that.

“It’s a convenient title to keep people from realizing our actual connection.”

She had a point. I couldn’t go around telling people I mixed drugs into her candy so no one realized she was an addict.

Arwin turned to me and continued, “Plus, I don’t actually know what to call our connection.”

It was a complex knot. We weren’t just a kept man and his lady, and we weren’t anything as syrupy and romantic as lovers or a married couple. Servant and master, pet and owner, teacher and student, doctor and patient, devil and contract-signer. All those bonds were bad relationships.

We were tied with many bonds. Each one was as thin as a spider’s thread, but they tangled us up so tightly that it was hard to get loose. It had only been a year and three months since I’d met her. But the more time we spent together, the more threads there were. And the more threads, the more tangled and inextricable we became.

One day, this mess was going to strangle us. We would each wind up choking the other.

As long as we walked side by side, our path was leading us straight to hell.

But despite that, there was no severing the bonds that connected me and Arwin.

Going to hell didn’t necessarily mean the path was a mountain of dead with rivers of blood. There could be flowers on the side of the path. There would be birds singing. The stars would twinkle at night, and the breeze might even be pleasant at times. If we had time to walk in each other’s company and savor some meager happiness every now and then, that wouldn’t be such a bad life.

If I was Arwin’s lifeline, then she was mine, too.

“Anyway, when are you going to do that thing?” Arwin asked, suddenly blushing.

“What thing?”

“You know…the thing you were going to do a million times.”

She was talking about what I had said in the basement in the village of Yuulia.

“You really want to do that?”

“You were the one who said you would.”

“Let’s not. You’ll get tired of hearing it. I know you will.” And my throat would get parched.

“How could you claim you’ve already told me a hundred times? You’ve never said it once!”

“Really?” That’s weird. “But I said it when I got captured… Oh, wait, that was Ralph I said it to.”

“I’d think a grown man could be responsible for what he says. It’s only 9,999,999 more times…”

“Wait, wait, wait. That number’s not right. It was a million times, so there should be—”

“Don’t try to wriggle out of this one. You’re not allowed to get out of this. Now stop making excuses and…”

“I love you.”

“What?! You can’t just spring it on me out of nowhere—”

“I looove you.”

“You’re already being silly about it?”

“I wub-wub-wubs you, my baby-boo.”

“Stop being annoying! That doesn’t count!”

“I love you, Arwin. I’ll always, always love you.”

“Don’t whisper into my ear like that!”

“…I can see you’re very close,” said a mirthful voice behind us.

“Oh, I’m sorry to have bothered you,” Arwin said, blushing. Then she elbowed me in the stomach and hissed, “This is all your fault!”

“So what? If someone wants to watch this, let…them…”

When I spun around and really looked at the woman behind us, the words trailed off.

She *would have* been in her late twenties now. She was a bit shorter than Arwin, with black hair that went down to the nape of her neck and narrow dark eyes. She wore a dark green hooded robe and a leather breastplate. There was a long staff on her back and two thin swords, plus a leather pouch hanging from her belt. Worn leather boots to complete the outfit made her look like a traveler. Her hair was a bit longer than I

remembered, but the soft, neutral features were the same. And most importantly, her head was actually *attached*.

"It's been so long, Mardukas. I'm relieved to see you alive and well… Oh, pardon me. It's Matthew now, isn't it?"

"Do you know her?" Arwin whispered to me, sensing an abnormal atmosphere between us.

You've got to be kidding me.



I thought I'd just said farewell to ghostly women. Now there was *another* one to haunt me?

"Dez filled me in. He said you have it now. I'm lucky to have caught up to you here."

Her quiet, calm voice and detached way of speaking were just as I remembered. She was exactly like she'd been back in Million Blades.

"Can you give me back my sword now?"

Smiling, Natalie, "the Tempest" held out her hand.

Afterword

Thank you very much for buying the fourth volume of *The Kept Man of the Princess Knight*.

This marks the end of part one of the story. It's only because of reader support that I've gotten this far. Thank you very much. I would also like to express my deepest thanks once again to Saki Mashima for the wonderful illustrations; my editor, Tabata; and everyone else involved in bringing this book to life.

As you no doubt noticed, the third and fourth books form two halves of a single story.

My original plan for part one was to finish in three books. I had a rough plot drawn up that accounted for this, too, but the more I wrote and fleshed out, the clearer it became that this was going to take well over a single book's worth of space to tell. So I made the decision to split the plot into two and put the second half into the fourth volume instead. That was why I said we'd be reaching a milestone in the afterword of Volume 2 and then had to say, "The next one's the second half" in the afterword of Volume 3. Boy, does it feel like there's egg on my face. I feel very foolish for that.

As for this volume, I'd thought that because I already had the plot structure created, it would be a quick one to write, but once again, as I started fleshing things out and describing scenes, it just kept growing and growing until I was running right up against the deadline.

This is entirely a mark of my own failings as a writer. Please forgive me for my immaturity.

While I'm talking about all my failures, I still do hope you enjoyed this book. As the author, it's all I can do to trust that is the case.

Matthew and Arwin have overcome a massive trial at a dear cost. But their journey is not yet at an end. There is much

more pain in store for them. Part two will begin in the next book. I plan to dig into Matthew's past.

I hope you continue to follow the lives of Arwin and Matthew, our princess knight and her kept man.

Toru Shirogane



NEXT VOLUME PREVIEW

The Kept Man of the Princess Knight

Volume 5

Story

The vice-filled city has returned to normal, but at a great cost. Now that the reins have been loosened, there's no going back. And spilled milk can't be put back into its container. What will Matthew do when his old friend appears before him—but their presence should be impossible?

This other-world noir enters the next stage!

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