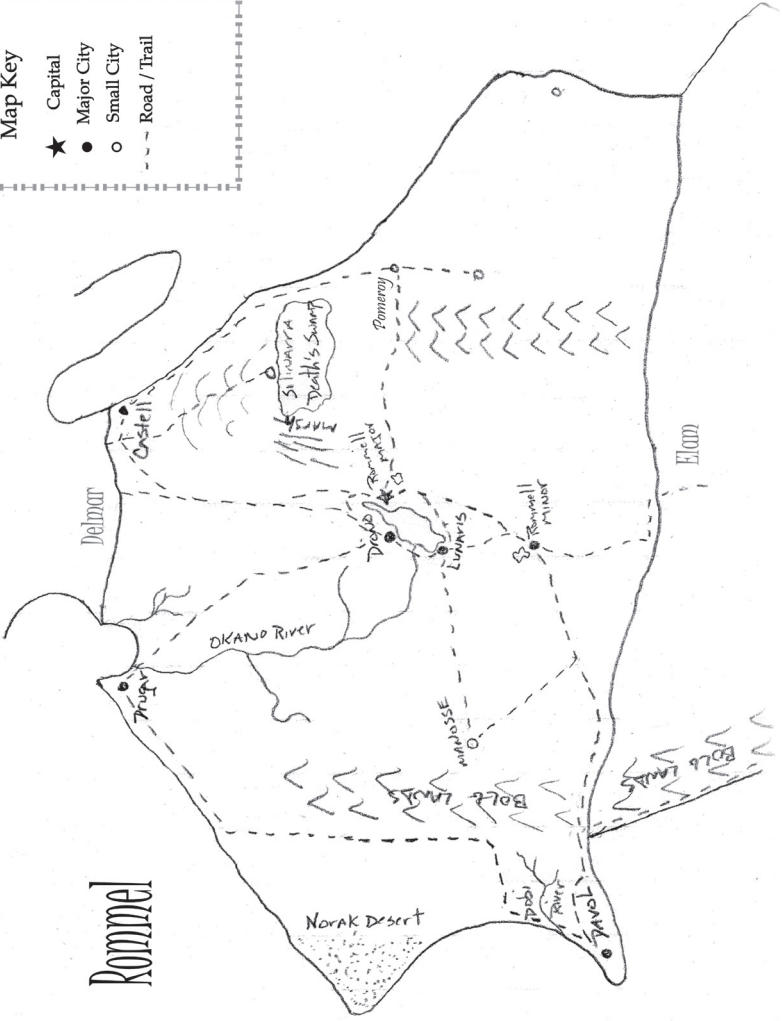


**Map Key**

- ★ Capital
- Major City
- Small City
- - - Road / Trail





“I said I wanted a drink!”

Para Sedi raised her emerald gaze from her mug to the rowdy group in the east corner of the tavern. “Trouble there, Mun.”

The warrior inclined his head, his eyes not shifting from their regard of his ale. Instead, he adjusted his position to better reach the sheathed claymore on his back.

For the past week Para and Mun had traveled the nation of Rommel seeking work. Unfortunately, a swordsman and ranger weren’t in high demand, even considering her knack for sleight of hand.

In all her twenty-some years she hadn’t had such a challenge finding the next earned wage. She needed a different line of work. But considering her wages thus far included bartending, bouncing and even merchant’s guard or caravan cook, line of work wasn’t the issue. This particular season no one needed an extra hand—at least not in Rommel.

“We should go before trouble blows this way.” Para chucked a silver coin onto the table. “Shall we take a turn to see what’s

about town?"

Mun glanced toward those mercenaries and ruffians the tavern master attempted to soothe.

"It isn't our squabble." She swiped her felt cap from her short-cut red hair and slapped her friend's shoulder. "Come on. Up and out. The inn down the street a pace beckons, and it promises me a mug."

The tavern master rushed to their table. "Is the drink not to your liking?" He darted a look to the quieted rabble-rousers.

"The drink was fine, milord barkeep, what I had—"

Another fracas ensued in the far corner. The tavern master stepped into their line of sight. "Please, friends, stay. There is a private room beyond that hall where you may take your meal."

"That's right kind, but we need to take a turn around town to see where we can put our names in for a wage-hire." Para noticed Mun's continued focus on the tussling men in the corner.

"Let me inquire for you, friends. You're travel weary. You should take a meal and rest yourselves."

"A private room, you say?" She tapped a corner of her cap against her lips.

The tavern master signaled the barmaid to prepare the room.

"We'll take you up on that then." Para smacked Mun's shoulder to gather his attention. It shifted, just. "Come along, Milord Meek. We're in the private suite today."

He gestured toward the corner table. The tussling had quieted again. "I can escort these men outside," he said to the tavern master.

"Leave it, I said. It isn't our squabble." She marveled again at her friend's one flaw: a compulsive need to be helpful at no

charge.

“No, no, sir,” the tavern master told the warrior. “Please don’t trouble yourself.”

As she feared, once Mun decided to take an action that ended any preceding line of thought.

Para blocked his path, a hand on the chest of his braided leather armor. “Consider. You’re on your own in this one. You hear me? I’m tired, and I want my ale. Until I get that, you’re treading alone.”

The warrior responded with a simple smile.

Para shrugged. “I’ve had my say. Now I’m off to my *private room* to eat, drink and be merry. Mayhap I’ll be in a better mood to lend a hand after I’m refreshed.”

“Fair enough.”

He stepped past, adjusting the sheath on his back with a simple shrug. Mun was among the best swordsmen she knew, that being the main reason she joined up with him. But wise in choosing his battles he was not. His habit was to help without regard to arranging a hefty wage beforehand for the deed.

Para frowned as the five ruffians surrounded the warrior. The tavern master did his best to soothe the situation, but it was clearly beyond that point. This seemed a common situation for Mun, and he never felt the least bit concerned. Of course, standing well over six foot and weighing more than two hundred pounds may have contributed to that attitude. Of course, such a fact didn’t matter because she hadn’t yet finished a complete mug, and likely wouldn’t until this crew was dealt with. Taverns were for the weary, and the weary didn’t appreciate being disturbed in the middle of a pint... or three.

She cast the private room a longing glance. Unfortunately, the stench from the rough crew of mercenaries overpowered any delight at the prospect of a bowl of warm stew. The ruffians were dressed in the usual gear of trail-worn leather and dilapidated chain mail. Their aroma of old ale and horse dung was pungent, even across the common room, and a dark mood of trouble hung over the group just as dank. It was the type of ruffian she preferred to contend with, if she had anything to do with them in the first place, because there was no great risk to her person—especially when Mun was determined to be of use.

Of course, he was always single-minded in that regard.

“Bah.” She squashed her cap upon her head and stepped toward the group. Whether she regretted the action or not was beside the point. These men had put her in this mood, so why shouldn’t they feel the punishment as a direct result?

The tension over the group swelled as she approached, and she could read the tautness of action in their stance. Mun would find a fist thrown his direction very soon. This would start a brawl, of course, and the whole fracas wouldn’t end without at least one cold bit of steel being pressed into someone’s space.

Their life was nothing if not exciting!

The fist thrown caught the tavern master in the side of the head, to his misfortune. The blow sent him staggering backward into a table, which overturned and sent the man reeling heels-over-head over the other side. The offending ruffian received a headbutt from Mun in return, the result of which collapsed the man’s nose and sent blood spattering over the entire group. To Para’s surprise, the mess caused a complete shutdown of action. In fact, the mercenaries stared at Mun in shocked horror before looking to the

blood-speckled faces and clothes of their comrades.

Mun shoved the ruffian with the now-broken nose sprawling into the group. “Another?” It never ceased to amaze her how intimidating Mun could be when he spoke in single-word sentences. Who needed eloquence when his expression and stance spoke volumes?

“We’ve but come for a drink,” one of the group complained. “Why you be roughin’ us up as if we’re criminals? I’ll call the lord’s guard on you!”

“Aye, that so, milord?” Para came to stand at Mun’s side and swept the group with a jovial gaze. “It seems to me that you and yours have caused a bit of a ruckus for nigh on one hour. In fact, wasn’t it your comrade here that sent the good barkeep over his now-broken table?”

“That couldn’t be helped! Your man ducked!”

“Ah. That puts it all to rights, of course.”

The man growled and lunged, tripping over one of his fellow’s boots to stagger into Mun’s fist. Dazed, the man didn’t cry out when the warrior grabbed a fistful of shirt and tossed him into a heap near the tavern master’s inert body.

Once again, Mun focused on the dwindled group and asked, “Another?”

Para rested a leather-gloved hand on her friend’s shoulder. “Now, Mun, let’s give the men a chance to—”

A chance they decided to squander on a full onslaught. Much like a cornered animal, panic grabbed their body and thrust them into a situation that wouldn’t end well. They made an admirable showing, but there wasn’t much to do against a warrior of Mun’s caliber.

He grabbed a fistful of hair and ears and knocked their heads together like so many melons. They yowled and folded, leaving Para room to dodge a jab-hook combination. She swiped the man's feet out from under him and he tumbled backwards to sprawl into the chair behind him. He dove forward again. But in one graceful motion Para drew her rapier, side-stepped, and clubbed him over the head with the pommel.

He moaned and fell.

She sheathed her weapon, grumbling under her breath about the lack of common sense as she helped the tavern master to his feet. "Are you well, milord barkeep?" He shook his head to fend off the fuzz. "That was quite the clock-and-tumble they gave you."

"Y-yes...."

Para sent a quick glance to the shocked barmaid standing in the hallway. "Miss, a hand?"

The maid scurried forward and helped the tavern master to his quarters at the back.

"Bah. As I said, no excitement here, and I need my ale!"

The warrior gathered two of the ruffians by their belts and lugged them out the front door and into the dusty streets. "See to your refreshment, Par. I'll put these away."

"Thank you, I think I will. If they've even kept it in their head to give me a pour."

Peeking down the hall, Para caught sight of a pint and pitcher on the table and sounded a shout of jubilation. Hurrying to the room, she just kept from tipping the pint in her excitement of snatching it to her mouth. She chugged it in its entirety, slamming it to the table followed by a tremendous belch.



"You know the name of this here burg?"

Mun leaned his scabbard against the chair beside him. "No."

"We've finished a whole day twittering about and don't know what its blazed name is?"

"So it would seem."

"Bah." She dumped the contents of her leather pouch into the middle of the table. Her brows furrowed as she pushed the few coins about. "Fifteen silvers, Mun. That's all we have to our name unless we can find a wage worth its salt. If it weren't for the tavern master giving us the use of this room, we would be sleeping in the stable as early as day after tomorrow."

Mun reached behind him to retrieve a black velvet pouch from under his armor and between his shoulder blades. He emptied its contents to mix with Para's. The treasure revealed a bluish stone, a token of some kind, and two silver coins.

Para's green eyes widened as she pointed at the stone. "Munwar, what is that?"

"Naught but a pebble found in the river a fortnight ago."

"A pebble?" Para snatched up the pouch and stone and scrubbed it free of grime. The stone twinkled in the moonlight. "Mun, this is a star sapphire! It would fetch a pretty price in the market square. Pretty enough to keep us living an easy jaunt for at least a year, if we played it right."

Mun accepted the gem back. After a moment of silent consideration, he offered it back to her. "You may sell it."

"We'll sell it all right, but not until it's our last hope for

survival." She pointedly ignored the offered sapphire and took up the token. "What is this little bauble?" She gave the dull gold metal a bite.

"My charm."

"Luck? I didn't figure you for one to put much stock in that nonsense." Mun gestured for the token and Para handed it back. She watched with interest as he rolled the coin with ease along the tops of his fingers. Then he flicked it into the air and caught it on the tip of his nose. "Nefa's ass! Do that again!"

Mun complied, however, this time he finished with a flick from the tip of his nose, up over his head, and behind him to catch the token with his hand. "Each morning and evening I do this exercise."

"Let me see that."

Mun chucked the coin to her. It took her several unsuccessful attempts before she was finally able to manipulate the token in a similar fashion. "That is a good exercise. Mind if I make it a habit of my own? Seems right handy."

"By all means." He tucked the token and silvers away, hesitating at the star sapphire. "Should I keep the gem?"

"You found the thing. Who would suspect a warrior the size of a mountain having anything like that anyway? Maybe we'll keep all our gems with you."

She hadn't much luck finding anything a gem of similar quality on her own, so she viewed it as a good luck piece. Finding a star sapphire in a river bed? Yes, that was definite luck of the highest value.

Para tucked her coins away. "Maybe we'll walk along more river beds. What do you think?"

Mun chuckled and retrieved his sword from the scabbard and a whetstone from a leather pouch at his belt. There sounded a rap at the door and the tavern master peeked around the door. His eye had swelled shut and was a horrid shade of blue-green. It actually caused Para to wince. "Come in! Have a seat."

"Ah, thank you, no, friends. I have word of a wage."

"A wage, is it?" Para stood and ushered him further inside. "Come and tell us, milord!"

"Oh dear, thank you, no, I don't need to sit."

"So, let's have it. What news of the wage?"

"A messenger from Lord Pomeroy stopped for a bit of ale and told me of his lord's request for help. He didn't offer much for information, I'm afraid, and said he will be returning to Pomeroy in the morning."

"Pomeroy." Para tapped the table-top, her brow furrowed. "Pomeroy... Mun, have we heard of Pomeroy?"

"To the north."

"Ah! That's right. In Dengal, was it?"

Mun nodded.

"That's, what? Must be a fifteen-day hike; seven by horse?"

"The messenger said he would arrange horses for those adventurers who agree to the journey. I have but to tell him to expect you." The tavern master gestured behind him. "Should I tell him you're to travel with him in the morning?"

"What say you, Milord Meek? We don't know a whit about the wage, save that a lord needs help, but... I say we journey and decide after the fact whether it's worth our effort."

Mun tapped his chin with the pommel of his sword, his expression stoic as he stared at the table. Para smirked. He was a

deliberate man in any action. It amused her to no end, though mostly because she was well-versed in the jokes of warriors who knew as much as a cave mouse about anything other than swordsmanship. Mun fulfilled a few of the tales, and that only because he suffered from compulsive chivalry at inopportune times. He was a fairly intelligent man about a great many things.

Mun lifted his gaze and offered a single nod.

“Done!” Para clapped the tavern master upon the shoulder. “Tell your messenger he will be accompanied by two: Para Sedi and Munwar Meek, at your service.”

The tavern master bowed as he backed toward the door. “Very good.” Then he had gone, closing the door behind him and scuffling down the stairs to relay the message to aforementioned messenger.

“A lord, Mun! Think of the wage that could come of this task.” Para’s imagination swelled with images of gold and gems of even greater value than the star sapphire warming in Mun’s velvet pouch. “If it wasn’t for the fact I enjoy the adventure of travel, I could retire.”

Smirking, Mun readied his whetstone and began his daily task of sharpening his claymore.

Para tapped the table, gathering the warrior’s attention from the sharpening of his sword. “What in blazes made you take up the clay instead of something more practical? A bastard or long sword is the thing nowadays. No one uses the claymore anymore, do they?”

“It was my father’s.”

“What accounts for the runes on the blade? Was he a soldier for some arch magi?”

“He was an arcanist.”

“Your father? He owned himself a claymore?” Para wrinkled her nose. “Arcanists don’t wield swords if they want to survive a moment’s battle. The sword is for men, like you.”

“He was a fighter beforehand.”

Para scoffed. “Why would he become an arcanist if he was already training to be a fighter?”

“You misunderstand. He learned to be a fighter from his father, the local constable. He wasn’t a true apprentice. He began his apprenticeship as an arcanist with the Guild in Carmaline. He had little skill with a sword, but it was the one way he could help his family, at the time.”

“Merchant guard, more than likely. Not much skill needed for something like that, and it pays well if the merchant gets from point A to point B.”

“Indeed. He was a fighter until thirteen, which is when he was able to become an apprentice with the Guild, though they almost didn’t accept him.”

“Bah. If he has skill as an arcanist they should take any and all!”

“Many do not share your view. However, he had natural talent, which encouraged them to overlook his age. His limited skill with the blade also led them to accept him.”

“Hoping to have the first sword-wielding arcanist in their midst?” Para scoffed. “How did that work out for him?”

“At his first battle he almost lost his foot. He tripped over a stone and dropped his weapon.” Mun hefted the blade to show a scar on the hilt.

She restrained the laughter, nodding with somewhat

feigned interest as she pointed at the mark in the wrapped leather. Imagining Munwar Meek's father as a clumsy fighter turned arcanist was a chore considering the man's innate talent. His grace in battle was exceptional.

"What made you decide to train as a fighter if your father was an arcanist?"

"I was not one to study."

Para's eyebrow twitched upward. The man studied sword play and practiced his routines like a religion, yet he didn't care to study spells? "Ah. Well, good for you. There are too many robe-wearing flame throwers around, if you ask me, and not enough fighters who can actually hold their own in anything but a controlled fracas." She stood and gave a stretch. "I'm done for the day. I'll see you in the morning."

Mun nodded and continued the duty of sharpening the blade, inspecting the edge for long moments at a time.

She kicked off her soft-soled boots and crawled up onto the massive feather-down bed. Then she wrapped herself in her emerald-green cloak and drifted to sleep.