

To Save A Soul

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“I said I wanted a drink!”

Para Sedi lifted her green-eyed gaze from her mug to the rowdy group in the east corner of the tavern. “Trouble there, Munwar,” she said under her breath.

The warrior seated to her right inclined his head, his blue gaze not lifting from their scrutiny of his frothy mug of ale. Instead, he adjusted his position to allow a better reach to the sheathed claymore on his back.

Para and Munwar had traveled across Rommel for the last week seeking work. Unfortunately, there wasn’t much need for a swordsman and a ranger with a knack for sleight of hand. In all her twenty-one years she didn’t remember a time when finding the next earned wage was such a challenge. *I need to find a different line of work*, she mused. But, considering she had taken jobs that ranged from bartending to bouncing, and from merchant’s guard to caravan cook, a different line of work wouldn’t solve the problem. This particular spring, no one needed an extra hand—at least, not in the nation of Rommel.

“We should go before trouble comes over this way,” Para offered. She stood and tossed a coin onto the table as she stood. “Shall we take a turn around town to see what we can see?”

Munwar glanced toward the far corner of the tavern and the mercenaries being soothed by the tavern master.

“It isn’t our squabble, Mun,” Para reminded. She swiped a hand through her short-cut red hair and smacked her friend’s shoulder with her cap. “Come on. Up and out. The inn down the street is calling my name, and I didn’t get to finish my drink.”

Seeing their intent to leave, the tavern master rushed to their table, sending a darting look over his shoulder to the quieted rabble-rousers. "Is the drink not to your liking?"

"The drink was fine, mi'lord barkeep, what I had of it—"

A fracas ensued on the far side of the tavern, drawing their focus. "Those blasted.... Please. Stay. We have a private room in the back where you and your friend may take your meal."

"I appreciate it, but we're new and need to take a turn around the town to see where we can put our names down for a wage-hire." Para noticed Munwar's continued focus on the tussling men in the corner.

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

"A private room, you say?"

The tavern master nodded, snapping his fingers to summon the barmaid to prepare the room.

"All right, we'll take you up on that room." She smacked Mun on the shoulder, gathering his attention. "Come along, Mun. We're in the private suite today." Para bowed, doffing her cap and eliciting a smirk from her friend. "After you."

Munwar gestured to the corner table where the tussling had quieted. "Would you like me to escort these men out?" he asked the tavern master.

Para hissed. "Mun, it isn't our squabble. Leave it." Her friend had one flaw, and that being a compulsive need to be helpful.

"No, no, sir," the tavern master assured.

As Para feared, that didn't stop Mun. Once he had decided to take an action, there was no stopping him. She blocked his path, a hand on the chest of his braided leather armor. "Mun, you're on your own in this one. You hear me? I'm tired, I'm cranky, and I want my drink. I am not going to help you escort anyone anywhere until I get that drink."

Mun's response was a simple smile.

Para shrugged. "I've had my say. Now I'm going to the private room to have my drink. If you are still dancing with those goons, I might lend a hand."

"Fair enough. Enjoy your drink." He stepped past her toward the tavern corner, adjusting the sheath on his back with a shrug of his shoulders.

Para proceeded to the private room, shaking her head as the low rumble of the conversation began. Mun was one of the best swordsmen she had met in her travels, one of the main reasons she had chosen to join up with him. When it came to picking and choosing when to get involved, however, Munwar Meek was the worst of the worst. He always chose to help when they could have worked out a nice, healthy wage beforehand.

Para glanced over her shoulder toward the corner, hissing displeasure at the tell-tale signs of the pending fracas. Mun was surrounded, a common position for him, and didn't seem at all concerned. Of course, standing six foot three inches and weighing well over two hundred fifty pounds had something to do with that. The tavern master had hurried to the group and even now – though it was beyond ceasing – he attempted to dissuade the conflict that Para knew was about to start.

There were five men, all dressed in the usual rough gear of a mercenary crew, mostly leather and old chain mail. They were unshaven, smelly – she could smell their aroma of old ale and horse dung across the common room – and the mood of trouble hung over them as dank and dark as their nasty scent. These men were itching for trouble simply to make someone else as miserable as they appeared to be. That was the type of fighter Para preferred to contend with, if she had to do something of that sort with anyone at all.

And I am cranky, she reminded. A fracas might be just the thing to release her from the crank and get her on the better path of a lighter mood. There wasn't necessarily a risk to her person. Especially not with Mun so determined to be of use. Of course, he was always determined in that regard.

She sighed 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? Taverns were for the weary, and the weary didn't appreciate being disturbed in the middle of a frothy bit of ale.

The tension hanging over the group heightened, and she could easily read the tautness of action in their stance. Mun would find a fist thrown his direction very soon, which would start the brawl and very likely end with a sword at the throat and a dagger in the hand. Their life was nothing if not exciting!

The fist was thrown, catching nothing but air as Mun easily cocked his head to the side. Unfortunately, the tavern master caught the fist on the side of the head and staggered backward into a table, that being immediately overturned and sending the barkeep heels over head over the other side. The offender received a head in the face from Mun, the blow collapsing his nose and sending blood spattering over the entire group.

To Para's surprise, the blood caused a complete shutdown of action. The mercs, instead, stared at Mun in shocked horror before slowly lowering their gaze to their comrades' blood speckled faces and clothes.

Mun shoved away the merc with the now-broken nose, sending him sprawling into the group of three standing directly behind. "Another?" Mun prompted, and again it amazed Para how intimidating his smirking face could be when he spoke in single-word sentences. His expression and stance spoke volumes.

Warriors definitely didn't need eloquence to get their point across.

"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!"

"Oh really now, mi'lord mercenaries?" Para prompted as she stepped to Mun's left side. She swept the group with a jovial 'tread lightly' gaze. "It seems to me that you and your group have been

causing a bit of a ruckus for mi'lord barkeep for nigh on one hour. In fact, wasn't it your comrade here that sent him heels over head while breaking his table?"

"That couldn't be helped!" the man complained. "Your man ducked."

"Ah. Meaning he defended himself against a first attack.... Of course, that makes it all the better."

The man growled and lunged, tripping over one of his comrade's booted feet to stagger into Mun's fist. Mun then grabbed a fistful of his shirt front and threw the man over his shoulder to land in a heap very close to the tavern master's inert body. Once again, Mun focused on the dwindled group and asked, "Another?"

Para laughed and rested a leather-gloved hand on her friend's shoulder. "Mun, let's give the men a chance to—"

A chance they decided to squander on a full onslaught against the pair. It always amazed Para how similar in action a cornered man would behave compared to a cornered animal—panic took over their brain and their body and propelled them into situations that wouldn't end well. They made an admirable showing, as mercs go, but there wasn't much they could do against a seasoned warrior of Mun's quality. Grabbing a fistful of hair of two of the four, he knocked their heads together much like a pair of melons.

They yowled and collapsed, leaving Para room to step to one side and dodge a jab-hook combination that would have bothered her to no end. She swiped the man's feet out from under him, causing him to tumble backwards and sprawl into the chair directly behind him. He gazed up at her in shock before growling and diving forward. In one graceful motion she drew her rapier, side-stepped, and clubbed him over the head with the pommel of her weapon.

He moaned and collapsed.

With a sigh, Para shook her head and sheathed her weapon. “No excitement here, Mun, and no relief for my irritation. I’m still a crank and need my ale!”

Mun gathered two of the men by their belts and lugged them to and out the front door into the dusty streets. “See to your froth, Par. I’ll put these away.”

“Thank you, I think I will.” She helped the tavern master to his feet, steadying him as he gathered his bearings and shook his head to fend off the fuzz. “Are you well, mi’lord barkeep? That was quite a clock and tumble they gave you.”

“Y-yes....”

Para sent a quick glance to the barmaid standing in shocked silence in the hallway leading from the private room. “Miss, a hand?”

She scurried forward, draping the tavern master’s arm around her shoulder and leading him away to what Para supposed would be his private quarters attached to the back part of the tavern. Peeking down the hall, Para noticed with delight a pint and a pitcher on the table.

She swiped her cap from her head with a shout of jubilation and hurried into the room, nearly tipping the pint with her excitement of snatching it to her lips. She chugged the drink until the froth kissed the bottom of the pint and slammed it down with a loudly pleased “Ah!” followed by a somewhat less than feminine belch.

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“What is the name of this little burg?”

Mun lowered himself into the seat at the dinner table in their private suite at the tavern, setting his sword against the chair beside him. He simply shook his head in answer.

“We’ve been here a day and don’t know what the blazes its name is?”

“So it would seem.”

“Bah.” She straddled the chair, arms crossed against the back as she dumped the few remaining coins from her leather pouch to the table surface. “One gold and 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 letting us the use of this room for free, we would be sleeping in the stable.”

Mun reached behind him to pull a black velvet pouch from between his shoulder blades, emptying its contents to mix with Para’s. His treasure revealed a blue gemstone, a token of some kind, and two silver coins.

Para swiped up the gemstone, her green eyes widening as she held it up to the light. “Munwar, what the devil is this?” she demanded.

“Just a pretty pebble I found in the river a fortnight ago.”

“A pebble?” Para snatched up his velvet pouch and spat on the gem, using the pouch to clean it free of the caked mud and grime. It twinkled in the moonlight filtering through the window. “Mun, this is a star sapphire! It could fetch a pretty price in the market square and keep us living an easy jaunt for at least a year, if we played it right.”

Mun accepted the gem back and stared down at it for a long moment before offering it to her yet again. “You can sell it.”

“Keep it. We’ll sell it all right, but not until it’s our last hope for survival.” She took up the token, examining the front and back before giving the dull gold a bite. “What is this little bauble?”

“My charm?”

“Luck?” Para handed the token to her friend, watching with interest as he rotated the coin with ease between and over the tops of his fingers before flicking it into the air and catching it on the tip of his nose. “Nefa’s ass.... Do that again!”

Mun complied, but this time he flicked it off his nose, up over his head, and behind him to catch it with his hand. “Each morning and evening I do that. Keeps me alert.”

“Let me see that.”

Nodding, Mun flicked the coin to her with his thumb. She caught it and immediately began attempting a similar manipulation with her fingers. It took her several unsuccessful attempts before she was able to get the token to cooperate and travel along the backs of her fingers. “That is a good exercise,” she acknowledged, tossing the coin back to him. “Mind if I make it my habit?”

“No.” He tucked the token and silvers away, hesitating at the star sapphire. “Should I keep it?”

“You found it, so you keep it. Who would suspect a warrior the size of a mountain having anything like that anyway?” She motioned toward the black velvet pouch. “Maybe we’ll keep all our gems with you.”

She hadn’t much luck finding anything even remotely similar to a gem of that caliber, but she was willing to view it as a good luck piece of possibilities. 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.

A knock sounded at the door as he retrieved his sword from the scabbard and a whetstone from a leather pouch at his belt.

“Enter!” Para called.

The tavern master gingerly opened the door, peeking his head around to reveal a shiner the likes of which he had likely never had before. Para felt sorry for the man. “Come in, mi’lord barkeep.” She motioned to the chair beside her. “Have a seat.”

“Ah, thank you no, my friends. I have word of a wage.”

“A wage, is it?” Para stood and ushered him further inside. “Come and tell us, mi’lord!”

“Oh dear, thank you, no, I don’t need to sit.”

Para once again straddled the chair. “So, let’s have it. What news of the wage?”

“A messenger from Lord Pomeroy stopped by 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 furrowing as she watched the action.

“Pomeroy.... Mun, have we heard of Pomeroy?”

“To the north.”

“Ah! That’s right. In Dengal, was it?”

Mun nodded.

“That’s, what?, a fifteen-day hike? Seven by horse?”

“The messenger said he could arrange for horses for those adventurers that agree to the journey. I have but to go and tell him to expect you.” The tavern master gestured behind him. “Should I go and tell him you’re to travel with him in the morning?”

“What say you, mi’lord Meek? We don’t know a whit about the wage but that a lord needs help, but... I say we journey and decide once we arrive whether it’s worth our effort.”

Mun thoughtfully tapped his chin with the pommel of his sword as he stared blankly at the table top. Para smirked. He was a very deliberate man in any action he decided to take. It amused her to no end, but mostly because she was very well versed in the jokes and tales of warriors who knew about as little as a cave mouse in regards to anything other than swordsmanship. Mun fulfilled many of the tales, but not all, as he was a fairly intelligent man about a great many things.

Finally, Mun lifted his gaze and offered a single nod.

“Done!” Para exclaimed, clapping Mun on the back the same moment she focused on the tavern master. “Tell your messenger that he will be accompanied by two: ranger and warrior, if he needs the class. Feel free to confess our names as well: Para Sedi and Munwar Meek at your service.”

The tavern master bowed as he backed toward the door. "Very good, my friends." Then he had gone, closing the door firmly 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."

With a smirk, Mun readied his whetstone and began his daily task of sharpening his claymore.

Para tapped the table, gathering Mun's attention from the sharpening of his sword. "Mun, what in blazes made you take up the clay instead of something more practical.... A bastard or a long sword? No one uses the claymore anymore, do they?"

"It was my father's," he said simply.

"Well, that certainly accounts for the runes on the blade. Was he a soldier in the lord's guard?"

"He was a mage."

"What? Your father, a mage, owned a claymore?" Para wrinkled her nose. "Magic users don't wield swords if they want to survive a moment's battle. The sword is for men, like you."

"He was a fighter before he was a magic user."

"Why would he become a magic user if he was already training to be a fighter?"

Mun shook his head. "No. You misunderstand. He learned to be a fighter from his father, the local constable, but he wasn't a true apprentice. He became an apprentice when he began his studies as a magic user with the guild in Carmaline. He had little skill with a sword, but it was the only way he could help his family."

Para nodded along with the tale. "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."

Mun nodded. "He was a fighter until he was thirteen, which is when he was able to become an apprentice with the guild, though they almost didn't accept him, saying he was too old."

"Bah. If he has skill as a magic user, they should take any and all that approach them!"

"He had natural talent, which helped them overlook his age. His limited skill with the blade also led them to accept him."

"Hoping to have the first sword-wielding magic user in their midst?" Para scoffed. "How did that work out for him?"

"At his first battle he very nearly lost his foot when he tripped over a stone and dropped his weapon." Mun hefted the blade to show a scar on the hilt.

She restrained the laughter, silently nodding with somewhat feigned interest as she pointed at the mark in the wrapped leather. Imagining a clumsy fighter turned mage as Munwar Meek's father was a chore considering the man's seemingly innate talent with a blade. His grace in battle was unmatched.

"What made you decide to train as a fighter if your father was a magic user?"

"I didn't take to book-learning."

"Ah. Well, good for you. There are too many mages around, if you ask me, and not enough fighters who can actually hold their own in anything but a controlled fracas." She stood to her feet and gave a stretch. "I'm done for the day, Mun. I'll see you in the morning."

Mun wordlessly nodded as he 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, wrapping herself up in her emerald-green cloak and drifting to sleep.