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“Traveling to Pomeroy through Dervia is like crapping sideways, isn’t it?”

Para stared at Henry with a blank expression, her body frozen mid-mount. Even Mun paused adjusting his saddle to stare at the Sylvan. “What?”

“You said you’re going to Dervia, but you want to go to Pomeroy.”

“Pomeroy, yes.” Para sent Mun a questioning glance, to which he shrugged in response. “What’s so wrong about traveling to the town of Dervia on our way to Pomeroy?”

Henry wrinkled his nose. “Calling Dervia a ‘town’ is generous. It’s just a farmer colony. There’s no inn or tavern, either. Only houses for stupid farmers.”

“Hm.” Para leaned against her horse, arms crossed as she regarded the elf. She motioned toward him with a lift of her chin. “You know a better way to Pomeroy than on the road through Dervia?” Henry nodded. “Is it extra?”

“No! That’s what you hired me for,” he complained.

“Good answer.” She pulled herself up into the saddle. “Lead the way.”

Unfortunately, on their journey out of Vielle the weather grew as irritable as Para felt.

The overcast sky didn’t seem to affect the bright outlook of the Sylvan, and neither did the drizzle. It wasn’t a storm, from what Henry said, which would have been better. Why? Storms usually pass to make room for clear skies. The drizzles, on the other hand, could last for days and could soak a person from the inside out – including any type of optimism that remained in a person’s soul at the easy journey that far.

Para was quickly losing any positive outlook gained from her bath.

Henry was a good guide, even if he was a bit too cheery for her mood at that moment, and led them through the nearby forest in order to protect them from most of the drizzle. That made the forest

seem a bit more comforting than it likely was, but Para only had that vague thought because of a constant prickle on the back of her neck.

She shrugged her shoulders, moving them about as a person would shift to adjust a shirt or bit of armor that didn't fit quite right. The prickle remained; in fact, it intensified to the point that she could no longer keep it to herself. With a slight hiss she gathered Munwar's attention as he rode a bit ahead of her. He reined his horse in to walk beside her, his expression mildly curious.

"I'm not feeling aright," she told him, this confession accompanied by a darting glance around the surrounding forest.

Nodding, he adjusted the sheath on his shoulders with a slight shrug, unlocking the first portion of the sword to make it easier to draw and strike should they have unexpected company. For all intents and purposes, Henry appeared at ease, even so far as to hum and occasionally break forth into a measure of a melody. The rhythmic dripping of the drizzle collected and then falling from the forest leaves even gave the impression of singing along with the elf's bit of music; uncanny, to say the least, and creepy enough to give Para a case of the shivers.

"Why do they always choose places of this sort to bother us?" Para grumbled as an aside.

Mun shrugged, the action causing his sword to lift a fraction higher from his sheath.

"The horses will likely bolt, a dagger or two will be lost in the brush – and I'm down to only four! – and we'll be covered with ichor that will require another bath. You won't take one," she continued to grouse, "because that's the greatest sin of all time, and I can only afford a couple per week or else not have my pint of froth." Para swore as she adjusted one hand on the hilt of her rapier the same time she checked the position of her bow slung across her back.

"The last time we found a map to treasure," Mun reminded.

"I know, and that bit of adventuring was fun, but my arm was in a sling for two weeks and now it aches whenever it snows."

“At least you—”

“Know when it will snow. Yes, I got that.” She grimaced. “There’s a good time. Can’t we move to a nice desert some place that doesn’t have that infernal white madness? You don’t know how much it hurts, my arm.”

“Sand mites,” Mun reminded.

Para pressed her lips into a thin line. “Nefa’s bones, you just had to say that, didn’t you?”

He shrugged.

“All right, you win! Get me to a nice quiet place that has no desert and no winter, with pretty scenery, lots of adventure, and the occasional gem to drop in my path. That’s not too much to ask for a girl, is it? I would even put up with some lord telling me what to do – or a kind of job even! As long as I had a room of my own with a nice couch and maybe a pint of the froth each evening to go to bed with, I could put up with that!” She smiled, her green eyes brightening. “You know, that sounds right delightful. Yes, I want that. “

With an adjustment to his leather gauntlets, Mun nodded. “Pleasant.”

“Is that all? It sounds like this side of heaven, mi’lord Meek, and you right well know it.”

“Will y’all be silent!”

Mun and Para both reined their horses to a sudden stop at the male command sounding from the deeper portion of the forest above their heads. Neither of them had noticed when Henry had stopped humming, and he and his small pony were now behind them staring up into the trees.

“And just who thinks they’re important enough to be telling me to be quiet?” Para queried the trees.

A single man dropped from the lower limbs of an oak, followed almost immediately by four others. All were dressed in the usual garb of a brigand. “That’d be me,” the first man said, and he showed a grin missing several teeth.

"I see. No one I know." She sent Mun an inquisitive glance, even though he continued to regard the brigand leader. "I don't believe I'm going to follow his order. What do you think? Too bold?"

The brigand leader guffawed. "You w'dnt be so bold, missy, if you done know'd what's waitin' if you don't gives me your coin. And right quick."

"I have need of my coin," she huffed, frowning while doing her best to seem as pathetic as possible. With how bold the brigand behaved, even though he could clearly see Mun would be skilled with the sword, there had to be at least two or three archers still hidden in the trees. They were going to be the challenge, mostly due to the fact it would be hard to find them without first becoming a target. Fighting swordsmen, even if they weren't skilled, was always more difficult when under fire—

A water flask whooshed by Para's head straight into the face of the brigand leader, sending him sprawling backwards. Then there was a flash and smoke began to billow upward and around them. "Run!" squealed a voice behind them, followed by the staccato sounds of pony hooves and the bump as Henry's pony pushed between Mun and Para's mounts.

Mun and Para did as ordered and kneed their mounts into a gallop, bursting through the smoke after two furlongs and continuing after the pony as arrows whistled and thwipped in all directions.

"What in Nefa's fire was that?" Para asked, breathless.

"Don't ask questions!" Henry called over his shoulder. "They can still get you with those bows, you know." As if to prove his point, an arrow sang and landed in the tree directly to her left as she galloped beyond.

The group didn't stop their quickened pace for quite a while, thinking it better to get closer to their destination rather than tempt the Fates with a premature rest for their horses. The hurried pace actually served well to put Para in a better mood, though she was still perplexed as to how the little Sylvan would have had the wherewithal to make some type of smoke bomb out of a water flask.

Henry Sidgwick was proving to be quite the handy addition to their party.

They slowed to a sedate walk, and Para pulled her mount even with Henry's pony. The elf didn't look at her, too intent on pulling a small wooden flute from the knapsack draped over his pony's withers.

"Henry," she prompted in a stern tone, drawing his attention, "what was that?"

"What was what?"

"The poof and smoke madness back there," she reminded, using her hands as a dramatic reminder for effect.

Henry waved it aside with a scoff. "That wasn't anything, just a little elfish powder stuff. It works every time." He wrinkled his nose in disgust. "We get those dumb brigands all the time and they never leave anyone alone. They stole my favorite flute just last month!" he informed, wide-eyed. "I had to work all day and night to carve this one just the way I wanted it, and it still isn't like the other. My goodness, was I mad!"

Para couldn't imagine Henry mad at anyone. "Sorry about your flute," she mumbled, urging her horse ahead. Mun followed. "Something tells me this quicker way to Pomeroy isn't going to be a simple stroll through the forest."

"I was having that thought, too."

Sighing, she gave a shrug. "I suppose the best way to have an adventure is to go all the way, right? Hill giants, hydras, maybe a dragon or three to get the ball rolling...."

"Par, don't tempt the Fates with snide remarks."

"It makes life more... interesting that way."

Mun sent her a dubious glance.

"All right. I'll watch my tongue, you old hag." She sent Mun a wink. He smirked. "I can't believe you don't want to try your hand at fighting a nice, little green dragon. Imagine the coin to come from

that? To say nothing about the treasure if I tracked it back to its lair before your sword had words with the beast.”

“Dragons are more trouble than they’re worth.”

Para blinked at him. “You’ve fought a dragon?”

“That’s what I was doing before I found you in that cave.”

Para thought back to the cavern where she had first met the huge warrior three years before.

“There was a dragon in the cave, too? I thought there was just that lich.”

“No, there was a dragon also. They left each other alone, for the most part. I don’t know why.”

“So... did you fight the thing by yourself? There’s a good time!”

“Of course not.”

Para waited for more, leaning so far to the side that she nearly fell out of her saddle. “What happened, you ogre!”

Mun heaved a great sigh. “There were four of us: myself, Eveniah the cleric, Orion the mage, and Drew.”

“What was he?”

“I don’t know. He was never much use.”

Laughing, Para motioned for him to continue.

“It was a long battle. When I woke, somehow I was rendered unconscious, the beast was dead, and I was alone.”

Para’s jaw went slack. “Your group left you for dead? Nefa’s ass.... That cleric should be burnt at the stake.”

“She wasn’t a very good cleric. She preferred to beat the enemy over the head with her mace rather than heal the group. I asked at one time and she said it took too much concentration.”

Scoffing, Para made a mental note to check the references of any cleric that wanted to join their party. The last thing she needed was a battle hungry cleric getting in her way.

Then there was the question of whether or not they could still be considered a cleric if all they wanted to do was beat people over the head. Passion for their beliefs was one thing, but beating their followers into submission was another one altogether. *Sounds a bit on the evil side, if you ask me*, she mused. Of course, there was an evil side to anyone, more or less. Even she had been accused of being more evil than good. She scowled and adjusted her hold on the reins of her horse.

“I can go back and fetch one.”

Para blinked and focused on Mun with a confused expression, her green eyes dark. “You what?”

Mun motioned behind him. “The brigands. If you need, I can go back and fetch one here.”

“Why would I want you to do that?”

The warrior motioned to her face. “Your expression is dangerously angry, so I would rather you beat on a villain than take it out on Henry.”

“Hah!” Para laughed. “Mun, you always know what to make a girl feel special.” This time Mun frowned. “It was a compliment!” She pointed at him. “Why do you always do that? I give you a compliment and your face gets as hard as a stream of rocks.”

“I have a hard face,” he said simply, looking away.

“You know, I think that is exactly what I said the first time I saw your face. Remember? I found the way out of that cave.”

Mun’s gaze snapped to meet hers. “I carried your unconscious body up the side of a mountain in that cave and pushed you outside.”

“Ah, but I was the one that found the trap that revealed the way out. Which means, also, that I saved your life.”

He stared at her with a blank expression for a long moment before one side of his lips twitched upward and he chuckled. "That is one way of looking at it, I suppose."

"That's the only way I choose to look at it. My ego is a fragile thing."

This time he scoffed. "Par, a dragon could beat you at a mind game and you would still believe that you are the more intelligent of the two."

"Why you— I wouldn't."

"Just like you wouldn't try to open the trap in the cavern that nearly killed us both?"

Frowning, Para's gaze darted away. "I thought I had seen that one before. I bet you a gold piece that I would have cracked it if that... that mouse hadn't ... erm..."

"Kicked up that bit of dust?" Mun offered.

Para laughed. "Oh shut up. So I should have left the trap alone like I said I would. So damn me."

"You do a good job of damning yourself."

That sent her into a fit of laughter which nearly landed her out of her saddle. Only then did she notice Henry on his pony, between their two horses, and grinning up at them with his hazel eyes twinkling. "What?"

"You're funny," he observed for the second time.

She frowned. "Henry, not all people enjoy the thought of being 'funny', to say nothing of having the talent of amusing a Sylvan."

"There's nothing wrong with being funny!"

"I'm a ranger. Everyone believes we're dark and mysterious, so having you point and laugh and tell everyone 'you're funny' isn't the best for my reputation."

Henry's eyes widened. "Oh."

"How about you keep that our little secret? You like secrets, right?"

He nodded, and it struck her as odd at how much he acted like a kid even though he was older by about ten years at least. *Those are the elf people for you.* She hadn't had a lot of experience with them, but the little she had made her hesitate to have much to do with them other than a momentary meeting. It was hard to trust someone who lived so long.

They knew flocks of secrets.

At the thought of those secrets, Para sent Mun a sidelong glance. To her chagrin, he shook his head. Of course she wouldn't have done anything horribly unfair to the little Sylvan; she only wanted two or five of the most valuable secrets in his repertoire. All she would have done, more than likely, was play a game of chance with the boy. After all, what did Sylvans know about games like that?

"Hey, Henry, you want to play a game?" This time Para ignored Mun's furrowed brow as she pulled a deck of cards from the inside pocket of her blouse.