

## Free

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

Para’s body halted mid-mount as she stared at Henry Sidgwick. Even Mun paused adjusting his saddle to stare at the sylvan. “What?” she asked.

“You said you’re going to Dervia, but don’t you want to go to Pomeroy?”

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

Henry wrinkled his nose. “Dervia isn’t a town. It’s just a farmer colony. There’s no inn or tavern, either. Only houses for stupid farmers.”

Para leaned against her horse, her arms crossed as she regarded the elf. “You know a better way to Pomeroy than the road through Dervia?” Henry nodded and her gaze narrowed. “Is it extra?”

“Of course not! That’s what you hired me for.” The boy actually began to pout... mostly. The expression faded much like

the sun in winter.

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

On their journey from Vielle, the weather grew as irritable as Para. The overcast sky didn’t seem to affect the bright outlook of the sylvan, however, and neither did the drizzle. But it wasn’t a storm, and from what Henry said a storm would have served them better. Storms passed to make room for clear skies. The drizzles, on the other hand, could last for days while soaking a person from the inside out. That mucked up any remaining optimism of the easy journey that far.

Para lost all positive outlooks gained from her bath.

Henry was a good guide, even if his cheer settled like warm ale on a hot day. He led them through the nearby forest in order to protect them from most of the drizzle, the comfort of the forest’s canopy doing little to overpower a constant prickle on the back of her neck.

She shrugged her shoulders, much like a person would shift to adjust a bit of armor that didn’t fit quite right. The prickle remained; in fact, it intensified to a point she could no longer keep it to herself. With a slight hiss she gathered Mun’s attention. He reined his horse to walk beside her, his expression colored by curiosity.

“I’m not feeling aright.” This confession accompanied a darting glance of 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 break forth into a measure of a melody. The rhythmic dripping from the forest leaves even gave the impression of singing along with the sylvan'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?"

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

"The last time we found a map to treasure."

"I know, and that bit of adventuring was a gas, 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. "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 that is."

"Sand mites."

Para pressed her lips into a thin line. "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. "

The warrior made an adjustment to his leather gauntlets. "Pleasant."

"Is that all? It sounds like this side of heaven, Milord Meek, and you right well know—"

"Will y'all be silent!"

Mun and Para both reined their horses to a sudden stop. Neither of them had noticed when Henry 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?"

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. His lips parted in a rather toothless grin.

"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 that right quick."

"I have need of my coin," she huffed, frowning while doing

her best to seem as pathetic as possible. With the brigand acting so daring, at least two archers must have hidden in the trees. They would be difficult to find without first becoming a target. Fighting swordsmen, even if unskilled, was always more difficult when under fire.

A water flask whizzed by Para's head into the face of the brigand leader to send him sprawling. Then a flash illuminated the forest shadows and smoke billowed upward and around them. "Run!" squealed a voice behind them, followed by the staccato reports of pony hooves and the bump as Henry pushed by.

They urged their mounts into a gallop, bursting through the smoke as arrows whistled in all directions.

"What in Nefa's fire was that?"

"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 thudded into the tree to her left as she galloped past.

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 served well to put Para in a better mood, though how the little sylvan had the wherewithal to make some type of smoke bomb out of a water flask still perplexed her.

Henry Sidgwick proved to be quite the handy addition to their party.

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

pony's withers.

"Henry." Her stern tone drew his attention. "What was that?"

"What was what?"

"The poof and smoke madness back there." She waved her hands as a dramatic reminder.

Henry scoffed. "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! I had to work all day and night to carve this one just the way I want 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 had that same thought."

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."

Para thought back to the cavern where she had first met the huge warrior three years before. "There was a dragon, 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 tempted a tumble from her saddle. "What happened?"

"There were four of us: myself, Eveniah the cleric, Orion the arcanist, 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, the beast was slain and I was alone."

Para's jaw went slack. "Your group left you for dead? That cleric should be burnt at the stake!"

"Her talents were elsewhere. She preferred to beat the enemy over the head with her mace rather than tend to injuries of the group. I asked her of this at one point in time and she informed me that healing 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 begged 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 focused on the warrior, her face twisted in confusion. “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. “Your expression warns of building rage. I would rather you beat on a villain than take it out on Henry.”

“Hah! Mun, you always know what to say to make a girl feel special.” This time the warrior frowned. “It was a compliment! 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 looked 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 and pushed you outside the cavern’s small opening.”

“Ah, but I was the one that found the trap that revealed the way out. This 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. “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.”

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?”

Para laughed. “Oh shut it! 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 almost toppled her from the saddle. Only then did she notice Henry on his pony grinning up at her with twinkling hazel eyes. “What?”

“You’re funny.”

“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 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. What little she did... well, she always hesitated to trifle with them, other than a momentary meeting of course. It was hard to trust someone who lived so long. They knew flocks of secrets....

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