

Two

Para scowled at the tavern master. “What do you mean ‘he’s gone?’?”

The man wrung his hands as he shifted his gaze from Munwar to Para and back again. “I let the messenger know you planned to travel with him. He said he had to get away early. To make rounds to the other cities with his lord’s message.”

“Nefa himself doesn’t roll out of bed as early as we have, and the messenger has already been gone an hour?” Para scoffed. “What do you suggest, Milord Meek?” She focused again on the tavern master. “Did he at least arrange for some horses?”

“I took the liberty on that, friends. They are out front, though I’ve only just begun piecing together your supplies. I’m not a traveler, so I’m afraid the list of items may be rather small.”

Para offered him a silver coin. “Thank you for your trouble, milord, and the bed. We’ll away with the horses and stop at the mercantile to pick up what you haven’t packed. Can we trouble you for some bread and cheese as a breakfast?”

“Of course, of course.” He scurried away to make it so.

“Sons of a—I guess we’re on our own, Mun, although I’m not

so certain I remember where Pomeroy is other than 'north.' We should stop at a town or three along the way and see if we can pick us up a map. I'm sure there must be at least one to be rustled up somewhere."

"We could ask the tavern master?"

"Indeed we could— By the gods I will! He must know something about it. If not, we'll trip over that later."

The tavern master returned in a flurry with a canvas sack filled with two loaves of warm bread and a wheel of cheese. "I hope this is to your liking, friends."

"Ah, milord, it smells delightful. Thank you muchly." She handed Mun the bag. "Now, have you the names of towns we might see along the way? Vielle is the first, isn't it? About a two-day?"

The tavern master nodded.

"Would you know who we can talk to about a map?"

"I've a friend who runs a mercantile there: *The Traveler's Query*. Arthur Pomrae is his name. It seems to me he hired a cartographer. Perhaps he knows of a map?"

"That's just the bit we need. What name shall we give him, milord barkeep?"

"Oh dear me! I am Les. Les Randalofson."

"That's a mouthful of something!" Para laughed. Les joined with a twitter and nod. "Thanks again, Milord Les, for the use of your establishment. Milord Meek, let us be off."

They purchased the supplies still necessary and even made certain to procure extra. Such was always the better suggestion in their combined experience venturing into the unknown—or even venturing into the known. People were funny creatures,

and often did unexpected things.

The morning sky shone bright as Mun and Para set off for Vielle. Melancholy bit at her head, though, and a bright morning wasn't doing much to ebb it away. She didn't want it to drive her to the doldrums, so she took to the task of distracting herself away from reasoning out the causes. Someone told her once that if you thought too much about the sour side of things, they came to pass more often than naught.

The first day of travel passed without event, much to Para's surprise. Due to her state of dread she figured there to be ghouls or some other sort waiting for a stray step. But there wasn't so much as a wild dog to bark at them. That, in addition to docile horses and weather that was mild and beautiful, put Para into a foul mood.

Calm weather on an adventure was never welcome— at least, not for her. Of course, she was a superstitious lass when it came to many things, be it adventures, new horses, new houses, new castles, or even a new dog. She had a curse breaker for almost everything. Some of her rituals were rather outrageous if you asked an innocent bystander, but she would perform them regardless.

Although, now that she thought about it, she hadn't performed a ritual for at least a month or so. Nothing too extremely horrid had befallen the two, with the exception of their lack of a good wage, of course. But that was hardly a matter of life or death.

As twilight approached, Mun found a campsite to his liking. While he secured the horses, Para took it upon herself to delve

into a nearby thicket and persuade a rabbit or wild boar to join them for dinner. While the boar would have been an honored guest, the best she could persuade was a pair of plump rabbits.

Just remember, Par, you're heading to a lord's castle. He'll have a wild boar or three you can gnaw to your heart's content. The delightful prospect invited her imagination to detect the aromas in her meal that night.

"What do you suppose it could be, Mun?" Para asked. She cleaned her iron cook plate with a fistful of grass. "What would cause a lord to scatter messengers so far from his own bit of home?"

"A personal matter."

"Aye, it could be at that, since he didn't feel it necessary to give the messengers much detail to pass along. Lord's have plenty of 'personal matters' to attend to, don't they?"

Mun smirked.

"We were last out Pomeroy's direction when? Must have been a year at least." She shook her head, tucking the plates away into the saddle bags. "These lords can be an interesting lot. Some can be trusted at their word; still others would give Nefa himself pause as to whether or not to believe a word that rolled off their tongue."

"Indeed."

Para retrieved a pipe from her pocket and filled it from the pouch at her belt. After lighting it with a stick from the fire, she settled back against her horse's saddle to stare up at the night sky. "Do you have a bad feeling about it all?"

"About the journey?"

The stars twinkled down at her, the occasional bit of cloud

blocking a section of stars from her sight. “The journey, the weather, the breakfast this morning...” She focused on him for a moment before shifting her gaze to a large reddish star overhead. “Just about anything at all.”

“I found it odd the messenger could not wait for us this morning, but no ‘bad feeling.’ Do you?”

Para grumbled under her breath and brought an arm across her body at a sudden chill. “Maybe it’s just a peck at the head, but it won’t let me walk by without looking, and I don’t know what I’m looking for!” She frowned. “It’s got me in a mood.”

“You’re always in a mood.”

“Bah!” She offered him the long-stemmed pipe. “I’m cautious.”

He accepted a few pulls and passed it back. “And cranky.”

“Yes, well, I never said that wasn’t the truth. But that—aye, it isn’t much different than being in a mood.”

Mun smirked as he retrieved a polishing cloth for his sword from the pouch at his belt.

“All right.” She tapped the grounds from her pipe and tucked it back into her pocket. “I will take second watch, if you don’t mind. Wake me if something exciting happens.”

Nothing exciting happened.

They packed up before dawn, waking to hot coffee and bread with cheese as they roused their minds out of the mugginess of sleep. They both enjoyed the adventure of a new location each day, so the act of waking wasn’t a challenge. In fact, some days they found themselves in at least three locations before the day drew to a close. All depended on whether or not they wanted to

journey long, journey hard, or simply wander.

Today, Para decided to race.

"I'm telling you my mount is faster than yours, you son of a sod-dweller. Look at the length of those legs? You can see the glimmer of flight in his eyes, too. Why, he could be a direct descendent of Pegasus himself!"

Mun fixed her with his usual stoic expression of nonplussed disbelief before shifting his gaze heavenward.

"Look, Mun, you don't have to race if that's what makes you look to the gods for rescue. I'll just meet you at the first tavern I see. How's that for fairness? I'll even warm a seat for you!"

"And should you break your horse's leg?"

"Then I'll be cranky and sitting on a dead horse when you finally catch up to me. Good thing your beast looks hefty enough to carry the both of us."

His stare blanked and Para grinned. "Par," he finally said, "if you want to arrive ahead so as to be free to get information, go. You don't need such exaggerated scenarios."

Statements of such insight always sent a shiver right down her spine to make her toes curl. "Aye, aye. I want to get there first so I can do my own information gathering. Having you along makes it difficult to move without attention."

He nodded and turned to mount the saddle.

"But I still want to race. I'm sure my horse is as fast as the wind."

Mun heaved a sigh as he pulled himself fully upright. "Very well. You start."

"Nefa's ass, Mun. If you just let me go on ahead, it isn't any kind of challenge and I'll be crankier than a red dragon at the

end. You either let me go without the promise of a race, or you race me.”

Mun met Para’s glittering green gaze with one of calm and patience. “You sound like my sister. She’s twelve.”

Para blinked at him. “You have a sister? I’ve known you for three years and you never told me you had a sister.”

“It didn’t seem important.”

“It’s not. But you having a younger sib is a bit on the odd side.”

Mun smirked. “I was hatched?”

“Hah! No, I’m not saying you’re the egg of a dragon, or whatever. You seem an only, though I couldn’t tell you why. Maybe I assume you’re an only because I am. That’s a bit of foolishness, isn’t it?” She swiped her usual cap from her head and scratched at her scalp. “I need a bath. I smell worse than my horse.” Pulling herself into her saddle, she sent Mun a wave. “I’ll see you in town. Try and pick up a few star sapphires on your way in.”

She kned her mount forward.



Welcome to Vielle, the faded sign read. Para had to squint to read it as she passed under. It wasn’t a good omen, but of what it warned she wasn’t quite certain. At first glance the town seemed small but wealthy, which didn’t follow the drab state of the sign. It was an interesting bit of a conundrum that piqued her interest.

She dismounted. Her gaze swept the populace and collection of structures a second time. The people seemed friendly, to each other, waving and smiling at those neighbors and friends

they had likely known since childhood. To her they nodded in greeting, some with a smile, but overall the welcome was muted. She took this in stride, though, because it was a normal state of affairs for a travel-worn adventurer such as herself.

She tucked her felt cap into the belt of her breeches and scrubbed at her scalp. The action elicited a grimace. She hated feeling as if she wore more layers of grime than clothes.

A search of the immediate area revealed a public bathhouse and altered her course. On her way she noted the location of two taverns, a bank, two mercantile – one being *The Traveler's Query* – and an inn. *Bath, then information.*

An actual hot-water bath was a rare luxury that Para would have fought the god of death himself to experience. Of course, if it ended up costing more than the silvers in her pouch she would duck out the back so as to prevent being forced to meet him in person.

That was never a good time.

The bath felt delicious.

Tempted to stay for an additional hour, Para forced herself from the tub and into her spare change of clothes. As it was Mun had likely beaten her to *The Traveler's Query* and retrieved every bit of information he would need for the remaining journey to Pomeroy.

The only tidbits left to discover would most likely consist of myths and rumors about this treasure, that haunting, or that family sword stolen away by such-and-such a family thereby starting a feud of some renown.... It seemed as if the stories didn't vary all that much from hamlet to town to city.

"Your own fault for not liking the rub of grime between your cheeks," she muttered to herself.

She tapped all her pockets to check contents. Then she snatched up her scabbard and cap and hurried out the door, tossing a coin to the serving girl as she passed.

Mun hitched his horse outside *The Traveler's Query* as Para exited the bathhouse. When he caught sight of her, he offered a wave and halted his step onto the raised walk. She returned his wave, slipping her cap over her damp hair before strapping her sword around her waist.

"Bathed?"

"Yes, leave it."

"Cranky."

"Always." She motioned into the mercantile. "After you, Milord Meek. I'm still on the disheveled side of things." The one downside to bathing was the difficulty it caused with dressing. Clothes delighted in sticking to that part of the body that was the most challenge to unstick. It was the curse of the bath, she was certain—

Para grimaced. "You smell fouler than the dead!" After tossing him a silver coin, she motioned behind her to the bathhouse. "It's on me."

Mun stared down at the silver with his usual blank expression at anything out of the ordinary. "You want me to bathe?"

"Yes, right over there." She directed him, again, to the bathhouse.

His expression shifted to that of horror. "I will not bathe there. It is a public house."

“So? What of it?” She indicated his tall, muscular stature with a single motion of her hand. “You think no one’s seen a body like yours before?”

His rugged cheeks flushed as he shoved the coin back into her hand. “I will bathe in my room at the inn. Where is it?”

“I haven’t got us a room yet.” Her focus honed on the duty of tucking her coin back into her pouch. She could sense his stare of incredulity clear enough. “My mind has been preoccupied with putting together a strategy for what questions to ask of Milord Pomrae.”

“You don’t require strategy to ask for a map.”

“All right, so I took a bath! A bath long enough to give a sea serpent the wrinkles, but at least I’m clean and not smelling like Death’s Day warmed over in a swamp. Perhaps Milord Pomrae will answer my question about the map before he gets a whiff of you and keels over!” Para gave a brusque nod and crossed her arms.

“I am not bathing in the public house.” With that said, he stalked to the inn – *Gwendella’s Guests*.

Para hissed a stream of expletives and snatched the cap from her head to throw it at his retreating figure. It fell just short, landing in a puddle with a plop moments before being further humiliated by the wheel of a farmer’s wagon. “Sons of a—” She glowered at the cap, the wagon, the retreating figure of her warrior partner, and then the public bath house which could be held to blame for the entire fiasco.

She kicked at a raised floorboard of the walk and retrieved her now soggy and horribly treated cap. “I just got this one last month, too.” She wrung the water from its felt softness. It had been her favorite thus far, and she wasn’t one to think much of a simple

cap.

Grumbling about warriors with odd sensitivities and not understanding about a girl's need to bathe, she made her way to the inn. No one paid her much heed as she entered, and she noticed a maid escorting Mun upstairs.

A young woman approached from the back of the inn. Para motioned after Mun. "I'll just follow them."

"He's taking a private bath, so that would be 'no'. But if you're staying the night, I'll take seven silvers for each of you. I will, however, offer you a credit for his bath and accept twelve silvers for both."

"Twelve—" Para's lips formed a thin line as she eyed the beautiful innkeeper. "Too rich for my pouch, Milady. We'll look elsewhere."

"Dervia is just another half day's ride. They could give you a place for shelter at nightfall unless, maybe, your friend would rather stay?"

As they were only there to get the map for their journey to Pomeroy, she didn't foresee them needing to take much longer than an hour – to allow Mun time to wash the filth from his bones.

Para lifted a hand the same moment she stepped toward the common room. "Too rich, too rich, Milady. I'll wait here for my friend. Better yet..." She turned toward the entrance. "I believe I'll take care of my business and come back. The beast will be awhile, I think." To Para's mild surprise, the innkeeper followed her onto the walkway just outside the entry doors.

"You are a thief," she said in a low voice.

Para shot her a sharp look, her green eyes narrowing. "Best

not to throw accusations of that slight around; they may strike you back.”

The young woman’s blonde eyebrow arched. “You deny that? You wear the dagger hidden in your cuff and boot. You also have the scar on your right wrist, as those born to a thief.”

“Bah!” Para only just prevented a rub of her wrist. “I am who I choose to be, milady, and I don’t wear that title. I am a ranger.”

The woman regarded Para for a long moment before lifting her delicate chin in a nod. “Very well, lady ranger, I will leave you the title you choose. Come see me if you don’t mind wearing a second. I am Mariah Greenwood.” Then she turned and once more entered the inn.

Para glowered after her lithe form. She scoffed and stepped off the walkway toward *The Traveler’s Query*. No one could miss the business, as its name stood out in bold letters. In the window stood a set of full plate armor and a large shield still waiting for its coat of arms.

“So you should have a map, they say.” She regarded the simple store front with a tilt of her head. “Let’s hope you’re worth my trouble.”

Once inside the mercantile she was accosted by the sweet and tangy aroma of some type of tea. She wrinkled her nose and closed the door behind her, allowing her gaze to perform its usual roaming to gather any necessary tidbits of information – be it other shoppers, proprietors, dangerous louts hanging about, or bits of supplies she might find useful later. This particular sweep of the eye only the proprietor, whom she assumed was Arthur, and a young blond-headed boy sitting on a stool on one side of the counter.

“Welcome!” Arthur came around the counter with his arms raised in greeting. He was an interesting sort, with a balding head and only standing up to her armpit—and she stood about a foot shorter than Mun. If the proprietor hadn’t such a wide girth to him, he wouldn’t have seemed so short she wagered.

“I was told you had a map to sell.”

“A map? A map? I have many maps,” he agreed while attempting to lead her to the far corner.

“To Pomeroy?”

“Just so, just so.”

Para began to wonder if he would find a way of repeating each answer. “I’d like to see that one.”

“Ah, yes, yes, just so.” He scurried back to the counter, making an awful racket while searching through myriad of doors and cupboards.

She leaned against the counter, offering the boy a nod of greeting.

He grinned wider than Para would have thought possible for a small face such as his, and the twinkle of excitement in his green eyes made dread rise.

“A map to Pomeroy?” the boy asked in a bright voice. “Are you going there?”

“Ah... no. Just need the map to make certain I take the furthest route away from.” She hated foolish questions.

The boy tilted his head as he regarded her—and broke out laughing. “You’re funny,” he said, pointing. “I like you.”

“For the love of—” She stood on tip-toes to peek over the counter at Arthur, who was now on hands and knees searching quite a ways back in the cupboards. “Map?”

“Yes, yes, I’m looking. No... not just there....” There was a loud crash as Arthur hit the back of his head on the cupboard frame while pulling back. “Ow, ow, ow....” Then he ducked his head back into the same cupboard.

Para tapped her fingers on the counter while trying to keep from looking at the boy, as she felt certain it would encourage conversation.

“I could lead you there!” His exuberance caused him to almost jump up onto the counter. “If you take me along, I could show you the way!”

Her eyes darted to the boy. He stood on the stool, his hands pressed flat against the counter. “Your parents wouldn’t have anything to say about traipsing around with strangers? My warrior friend might get hungry and decide to eat your leg.”

The boy laughed again, this time also bouncing upon the stool so that Para felt certain it would topple him into a wall.

“Look—” Her hands shot out to steady the stool. “Will you sit down? I just want to buy a map. I can’t pay a guide.”

“You can! I’ll lead you for... ten silver! You have ten silver.”

“Even if I had ten silver I wouldn’t pay you that much for doing what I can do myself—with a map!” she insisted to Arthur, who had momentarily ceased his search.

“Ah!” He startled back, retrieving a kerchief from his apron pocket to wipe his sweaty face. “I’m afraid I’ve misplaced it, oh dear oh dear.”

“Misplaced it!” She fisted a hand, her eyes narrowing. Instead, she looked to the boy. “Two silver.”

“Eight.”

“Three.”

The boy tapped his lips with a single finger. "Five."

"Oh all right! But I only give you two now, and the rest when we arrive." The boy scurried off the stool as he nodded his acceptance. She grabbed his arm. "Just how old are you?"

"Older than you!" His quip rang cheerful, even though he stuck his tongue out at her.

"I knew it, you're sylvan." She grimaced and released his arm. "But a deal is a deal. Here; two silvers. Don't make me regret this. What's your name?"

"Henry. Henry Sidgwick."

"Para. My warrior friend – who might have you for his snack – is Munwar. You better get any gear that's yours, because we're off to Dervia as soon as he's done bathing."

Henry scurried outside and around the corner. Para shook her head and stepped out into the sunshine. "A sylvan, Par? Nefa's ass..."