

2

Para frowned at the tavern master. He wrung his hands and shifted his dark gaze from Munwar to Para and back again. "What do you mean 'he's gone'? I thought we were to travel with him this morning to Pomeroy!"

"I let him know you had plans to travel with him, but he said he had to away very early this morning to make rounds to the other towns and cities with his lord's message."

"Nefa himself doesn't roll out of bed as early as we have, and the messenger has been gone an hour already?" Para scoffed as she began slapping her cap against her leg. "For the love of—Well, mi'lord Meek, what do you suggest?" She focused again on the tavern master before Mun could form a response. "Did he at least arrange for some horses?"

"He did. They are out front, though I've only just started piecing together your supplies. I haven't done much travel, my friends, and so I'm afraid my list of items is rather small."

Para waved it aside as she offered him a silver. "Thank you for your trouble, mi'lord, 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' of here. 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?" Mun offered.

"Indeed we could, and by the gods I will! He must know something about it, and if not...well, maybe he knows who to ask?"

The tavern master hurried from the back of the establishment with a canvas sack filled with two loaves of warm bread and a wheel of cheese. "I hope this is to your liking, my friends."

"Ah, mi'lord, it smells delightful. Thank you muchly." She offered the bag to Mun. "Now, have you the names of some of the towns and hamlets that we might see along the way? Vielle is the first, isn't it? About a two-day?"

The tavern master nodded.

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

"I've a friend who runs a mercantile there: The Traveler's Query. Arthur Pomrae. It seems to me he had a cartographer on staff there. Perhaps he knows of a map?"

"That's just the bit we need. Thank you." She doffed her cap and offered a bow. "Thanks again, mi'lord, for the use of your establishment. Mi'lord Meek, let us be off."

They procured the supplies they needed for the journey, making certain to purchase extra as was always the better suggestion. Then they set off to north for the town of Vielle.

The morning was bright as Mun and Para guided their horses out of town, and she found herself hoping it an omen to the type of weather they could expect along the way. She had a nasty bit of melancholy biting at her head, and a bright morning wasn't doing much to ebb it away. *Don't let it drive you to the doldrums, Par my lass*, she mused, and she did her best to keep herself distracted from reasoning out the possible causes.

She had heard 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 rather uneventful, much to Para's surprise. She had figured that, due to her state of dread, there would have been ghouls or some sort waiting for any type of wrong step. There wasn't so much as a wild dog set to bite and bark at them. Their horses were docile

creatures with no tendency to suddenly set to flight, and the weather that met them on the way was mild and quite beautiful.

It put Para into a foul mood, truth be told. Calm weather always did that when she was on an adventure. Of course, she was a superstitious lass when it came to mostly everything: be it adventures, new horses, new houses, new castles, or even a new dog. She had a curse breaker for mostly everything as well. Some became pretty 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 silly ritual for a little while. Nothing too extremely horrid had befallen the two, either, with the exception of their lack of a good wage, of course. But that was hardly a matter of life or death. Para smirked. *Perhaps I'll keep forgetting those little curse-breakers until I really need them?*

Mun found a camp site to his liking close to twilight and set camp as Para took it upon herself to travel into a near thicket and persuade a rabbit or wild boar to join them for dinner. While the boar would have been an extreme honored guest, the best she could persuade was a pair of plump rabbits that must have still been groggy from the winter. As near as she could tell they were mostly meat rather than skin, and so she settled for rabbit stew in place of a roast ham.

Just remember, Par, you're heading to a lord's castle. I'm certain he'll have a wild boar or three you can gnaw to your heart's content. It was a delightful prospect that had her imagination detecting the aromas in her meal that night.

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

"A personal matter," Mun supposed.

Para absently nodded. "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 lips twitched upward.

"When was the last time we were out Pomeroy's direction? Must have been a year at least."

She shook her head, tucking the plates away into the saddle bags. Then she retrieved a pipe from her pocket and filled it from the pouch at her belt. She lit the pipe with a stick from the fire. "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," Mun said with a nod. He accepted a few puffs from her pipe and passed it back.

Setting her back against her horse's saddle, Para stared up at the night sky. Her fingers gently held her pipe as her other hand cradled her head. The stars twinkled down at her, the occasional bit of cloud blocking a section of stars from her sight.

"Do you have a bad feeling about it all?" Para asked the stoic warrior across from her.

"About the journey?"

"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 that the messenger could not wait for us this morning, but no 'bad feeling.' Do you?"

"Harrumph," Para grumbled under her breath and shifted her hand from behind her head to across her body at a sudden chill in the air. "Maybe it's just peck at the head, but it just won't let me walk by without looking, and I don't know what I'm looking for!" She frowned and puffed at the pipe. "It's got me in a mood."

"You're always in a mood."

“Hey,” she objected, pointing at him with the long-stemmed pipe. “I’m cautious.”

“And cranky.”

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

Mun smirked and 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 gathered their minds out of the mugginess of sleep. It never took long for them to be alert and ready to move on, and that mostly due to the fact that both of them really enjoyed the adventure of a new location each day. In fact, some days they found themselves in at least three locations before the day was done. 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 eyes heavenward and heaving a great sigh.

“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 as he stared down at her. Para grinned. "Par," he finally said, calmly, "if you want to arrive ahead to be free to get information, go. You don't need to go into such exaggerated scenarios."

Statements like that always made her wonder just how intelligent he was, when all was said and done. He had an uncanny knack for some things that sent a shiver right down her spine and made her toes curl. One of these days she was going to be so shocked by a turn of phrase that tumbled out of his mouth that she would likely keel right over.

"All right, I want to get there first so I can do my own brand of information gathering. You're easily noticeable and make 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's expression went blank. "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 of short-cut red hair. "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 sign read, faded as it was. Para had to squint to read it as she passed under. It wasn’t a good sign, but of what she wasn’t quite certain yet. Signs were important to some and only supplemental to others. At Para’s first glance of the town it seemed small but wealthy, which didn’t follow with the drab state of the sign. It was an interesting bit of a conundrum that piqued her interest.

She dismounted and led her horse along behind as she let her gaze sweep around the town 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 a greeting, some with a smile, but the welcome was slightly muted—which she took in stride as a normal state of affairs for a travel-worn adventurer such as herself.

Her beauty always was a blessing and a curse.

She chuckled, giving her head a shake as she tucked her cap into the back of her breeches and scrubbed at her scalp. *Bath. I need a bath!* She hated feeling as if she wore more layers of grime than clothes. Searching the immediate area, she saw a public bath and altered her course while noting 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 out of 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 rest of their journey to Pomeroy. The only tidbits she would be left with discovering would consist mostly of myths and rumors about this treasure, that haunting, and that family sword stolen away by such and such a family starting a feud of some renown.... It seemed as if the stories didn't vary all that much from town to town to city.

"Your own fault for being a light-weight," she muttered to herself. She tapped all her pockets to check contents and then snatched up her sword and scabbard and cap in one hand as she hurried out the door, tossing a silver at the girl with the apron as she passed.

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

"Bathed?"

"Yes, leave it."

"Cranky."

"Always." She motioned into the mercantile. "After you, mi'lord Meek. I'm still on the disheveled side of things." The one down side to bathing was the difficulty it caused with dressing. Clothes seemed to delight 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 of it.

Para grimaced as she caught a whiff of Mun while she followed along behind him. "You smell more foul than the dead," she complained. Tossing him a silver coin, she motioned behind her to the bath house. "It's on me."

Mun stared down at the silver with his usual blank expression when anything new and out of the ordinary happened. It usually only took him a moment to know how to respond. "You want me to bathe?"

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

He looked up and met her gaze with an expression that seemed to say she asked him to commit the most horrid of acts. "I am not going to bathe there," he objected, adamant. "It's a public house!"

"So? What of it?" she asked, indicating his tall and muscular stature with a single motion of her hand. "You think no one's seen a body like yours before?"

His rugged cheeks flushed a bright red as he handed the coin back again. "I will bathe in my room at the inn. Where is it?"

"I haven't procured us a room yet," she grumbled. Her focus honed on the duty of tucking the coin back into her pouch rather than to see the stare of incredulity on his expression. She could see it clear enough in her imagination based on the lifting of the hairs on the back of her neck. "My mind has been preoccupied with putting together a strategy for what questions to ask of mi'lord Pomrae."

"You don't need a strategy to ask for a map to Pomeroy."

This was true enough to the point that Para knew she had slopped up quite a mess by bathing for an entire hour and a half. "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 mi'lord Pomrae will answer my question about the map before he gets a whiff of you and keels over!" Para gave a quick nod as she crossed her arms.

Munwar's already granite countenance hardened. "I am not bathing in the public house," he said in a low tone. Then he stalked past her and beyond to the inn – Gwendella's Guests.

Para hissed a stream of expletives under her breath the same time she snatched the cap from her head and threw it at his retreating figure. It fell just short, landing with a plop in a puddle moments before being further humiliated by the wheel of a farmer's wagon. "Son of a—" With hands on hips, 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 before stepping down and retrieving her now soggy and horribly treated cap. "I just got this one last month, too," she mused as she wrung the puddle 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 that a maid escorted Mun upstairs.

She motioned after him. "I'll just follow them," she informed the young woman approaching her from the back of the inn.

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

"Fifteen—" Para's lips formed a thin line as she eyed the beautiful inn keeper. "Too rich for my pouch, mi'lady. We'll need to look elsewhere."

"Dervia is just another half day's ride from Vielle. 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, Para didn't foresee them needing to take much longer than an hour – to allow Mun time to wash the filth from his bones – before they could get underway again. Besides that, the prospect of staying under this particular roof didn't settle well with Para. To be truthful, the lady set Para's teeth to grinding – which usually only happened when in the presence of someone with the same sleight of hand skill that she herself lauded.

Para lifted a hand the same moment she stepped away toward the common room. "Too rich, too rich, mi'lady. I'll wait here for my friend. Better yet..." She halted, turned, and made her way for 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 inn keeper followed her onto the walkway just outside the entry doors.

“You are a thief,” she said in a low voice.

That comment drew a sharp look from Para, 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 to her high forehead. “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 of a guild.”

“Bah! I am who I choose to be, and I don’t wear that title. I, mi’lady, 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 for a long moment before sounding a loud scoff and stepping off the walkway toward The Traveler’s Query. No one could miss the business, as its name stood out in big, bold letters and did an admirable job of calling attention to itself. 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 said under her breath as she regarded the simple business. “Let’s hope you’re worth my trouble.”

Stepping 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 notice any necessary tidbits of information – be it other shoppers, proprietor’s, dangerous louts hanging about, or bits of supplies she might find useful later. This particular sweep of the eye only saw the proprietor, whom she assumed was Arthur, and what appeared to be a young blond-headed boy sitting on a stool on one side of the counter.

Upon her entrance both looked over at her and smiled after a moment’s amazement.

“Welcome!” Arthur chimed as he came around the counter, arms raised. He was an interesting sort, with a balding head and only standing up to her armpit—and she was only average height, about half a foot shorter than Mun. If he hadn’t such a wide girth to him, he likely wouldn’t have seemed short.

“I was told by the tavern master in Vielle that 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,” he said, nodding.

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

“Ah, yes, yes, just so.” He scurried back to the counter with the young boy and bent to make an awful racket while searching through a calamity of doors and cupboards.

She came to lean 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 her dread rise a bit.

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

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

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

Thrill. She stood on tip-toes to peek over the counter at Arthur, who was now on hands and knees searching way back in the cupboards. “Map?” she prompted. Children made her uncomfortable.

“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,” he complained. Then he promptly ducked his head back into the same cupboard.

Para tapped her fingers on the counter, trying to keep herself from looking at the boy as she was certain that would encourage more conversation.

"I could lead you there," he piped up, his exuberance causing him to practically jump up onto the stool or the counter, or both. "If you take me along, I could show you the way!"

Her eyes very nearly rolled into the back of her head. Instead, they darted to the boy. Sure enough, 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 and send the boy into a wall.

"Look," Para said sharply, her hands shooting 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; he 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 clenched her jaw and fisted a hand to keep from leaping over the counter at him. Instead, she looked to the boy. "Two silver."

"Eight."

"Three," she countered, frowning.

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

Sighing, she nodded. "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!" he quipped cheerfully, sticking 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 sent her another excited nod and scurried past her and around the corner of the mercantile outside. Sighing, she shook her head and stepped out into the sunshine, fists on hips as she commiserated her fate of inviting a mischievous Sylvan elf into their mix.