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“You are late,” Mun said. He approached the cart and paused from climbing up in the back, his eyebrow lifting at the sight of the wrapped body. Then he heaved himself up without a word and stood behind the cart bench. Para and Henry still gaped up at the warrior, even as he gestured to the double gates ahead of them. “There is a plague therein and they won’t allow us to pass. You will need to reason with them.” He met her stupefied gaze. “What?”

“That’s what I should be asking! What are you doing here? You’re studying to be a paladin, remember? Too busy to go gallivanting around this place looking for escaped arcanists with wicked swords and the like?” She frowned. “And how in all that’s holy did you beat us here?”

“I got information about the plague in Winset soon after you left. But I didn’t know which direction you traveled, so I stopped in each town on the way looking for you.” Mun focused on the Sylvan and smiled, clasping Henry’s shoulder in greeting. “It is good to see you again, Milord Sedgwick. I see you have crafted another flute. A fine piece.” Henry grinned, his face as bright as a star. Para scoffed. The contempt drew back Mun’s attention. “Par—”

“Don’t ‘Par’ me, Mun. Do you have any idea what I just went through to get here?”

“Yes.” Mun looked behind to the road leading up to the woods. “The forest is plagued with the same evil that terrorizes these townspeople. It keeps them from leaving.”

Para’s gaze fell to the body tightly wrapped. “Explains finding this poor job so near the exit, or entrance. Did they send someone out for help? Is that who he is?”

Mun uncovered the man's face and then offered a somber nod. "I tried to escort him through the forest. Somehow we were separated. When I found him again, it was too late and I had only enough time to exit the forest before it closed in on itself." Mun pulled away the canvas and retrieved a pouch from around the man's neck. "We were to deliver this to the nearest town."

Para took the pouch and retrieved the folded and sealed note from within. "What is it?"

"They didn't tell me. Only that if I helped this man through the forest and returned with help, they would let me enter."

"Oh, just that?" She scoffed. "They were asking you to take your life and throw it away. They know exactly what broods in that blasted wood!"

"They are desperate."

"Yes, well, that doesn't mean they can just send everyone else to do their own dirty work."

"This was the mayor's son."

"Oh." Para cast the man and then her friend a surveying glance. "Sorry— Blast. Is there some kind of charm on this wax seal? I can't open it." She offered the letter to Henry. He turned it over in his hands and then shrugged as he handed it back. "What in Nefa's blazes does that mean? A shrug? Come out with it, Henry! Is it a—"

"I don't know."

"Gah!"

"Par." Mun clasped her shoulder. "Don't let the evil oppress your spirit."

She glowered at the gates of the town for a long moment before giving a curt nod. She could still feel the cruelty of the forest, and the helplessness of that encounter goaded her to temper. “What are our options? Do we try and get our way past and through that forest nightmare? Or do we persuade them to let us in by promising to defeat something we don’t even know about?”

“Let’s camp out here first,” Henry said. “We shouldn’t try to get in somewhere when there is a lot still to know about what is over that wall.”

“That is the truest statement I have heard all day.” Para guided the gelding and cart off the road. “I’m for some hot coffee and a hearty stew, corpse or no.”

Mun chuckled.

Para served Mun and Henry and then herself. They were on their second helping of range stew before she asked her first question. “How long have you been waiting out here looking like some giant from the Spine?”

“Not yet a week.”

“A week?” Para only just kept from choking on a bit of tuber. “When was the last time you ate something other than field rations?”

“I fell a deer on the first day and only just finished it.” He motioned to a mound of rocks near the gate. “There is an underground river there where I stored the meat to keep it from rotting.”

Para stared at him, nonplussed at his simple brilliance. Henry cheered and then munched away on another large morsel of carrot. “Wait, wait, wait. You were out here for nigh on a week? What about those lycanthropes? Did you see anything other than your own shadow?”

“Wolves like I’ve never seen before.” Mun stared into his bowl of stew. “They are the size of men and leap this wall with ease. I am uncertain if it serves as a prison or a haven.”

“Nefa’s ass.... I didn’t use that cursed sword more than once on a body! Have you fought any?”

The warrior shook his head and set aside his unfinished bowl. “They steer clear of me. The first night a pack charged me and then stopped. I have never seen such a glare of malice as they turned away. It shook me to my core.”

A wave of nausea nearly overwhelmed her. There wasn’t much that shook Munwar Meek. But if he was so moved, why didn’t they attack? Para frowned. “Mun, I didn’t prick or slice but maybe one other than the General. And it hasn’t yet been a month since that! How could there be so many as to plague an entire city?”

“These are not from your sword,” Mun said. He set down his bowl and retrieved his claymore from beside him. “From the fortifications, this town has been cursed with these creatures for a longer time than a month.”

“What makes a lycan? They don’t just pop out of the ground like a bad turnip.” She unfurled her bedroll and then tugged off her boots. “I mean, what is it? A plague? A freak of nature? A spell? A curse? Do they really only come by a bite of another lycan? Or, in Pomeroy’s

case, a slice of that cursed sword? Vampires sell their soul, or that's what they say. So what does a lycan do?"

"I don't know the answer." Mun's gaze did not shift its focus from the duty of whetstone and blade. "You shouldn't take off your boots or scabbard, Para. The beasts will attack when the moon is highest. We should be ready for them."

"Nefa take the beasts!" She shuddered. "I need a holiday from all this evil and mystery. My nerves are frayed to the last bit, and I roar at everyone like a banshee. It's no way to live, I can say that for certain!"

Henry played a short tune on his ocarina and then rolled over and seemingly went to sleep. Mun chuckled. "You aren't used to this brand of evil, Par, and you have never cared for not knowing how to fight an enemy. You will settle into your duty once you know."

"I hope to the stars you're right. Right now I flail around like a first year apprentice and can't tell my head from my backside. It steals my confidence, and makes me no good to anyone."

"Trust your own wit and ability."

"Hm." Para grimaced and then stood. "I'm going to take a turn and stretch my legs."

"Do not stray far from the fire's light."

"I won't. You can count on that."

Mun watched Para slip into the shadows just outside the light of the fire. Her action of merging in with that line between light and darkness was instinctual. He had noticed her

penchant for stealth when he first met her more than three years ago. It was the biggest surprise considering her fondness for using every spare moment of breath for speaking. Never before had he met someone who said so much about so little while, at the same time, revealing quite a bit about herself.

If she suspected how much she admitted about herself with her talking she would become mute without a second thought.

A sharp sound near the town gates drew his attention and he released the lock that kept his claymore within its sheath. It was still too early for the beasts to crawl from their cover of darkness, but there was still a lot that he didn't know about them. In his travels he had come upon many evil creatures – undead, werewolves, liches, banshees to name but a few. But these... beasts like these lycanthropes were a puzzle. They acted outside their normal instinct and seemed more demon than beast. Did they even remember that they had been human at one time?

Priest Derek was right.

Mun set aside his father's claymore and retrieved another sword from his scabbard. Para insisted he take it from the Kensington estate, but he had only done so at Derek Kensington's insistence. Now, he took it with him wherever he went, securely hooked to a scabbard at his waist. When Priest Derek asked about the habit, Mun hadn't been able to account for it; he couldn't leave it, or sell it, or trade it to another for anything in return. This bastard sword was as much a part of him as his father's claymore. Perhaps there was a blessing upon it? Not all weapons and armors held curses. It was a mystery he was content with, as he almost felt there was an unspoken purpose to its presence—

Para backed slowly into the light, her hands raised. “Mun,” she said under her breath, “we have visitors. I hope you have that clay of yours handy.”

In one fluid motion he unsheathed the bastard sword and jerked Para back behind him. She tripped over Henry and tumbled to the ground, Henry waking with a startled cry as he leapt to his feet. Ten sets of yellow and red eyes glimmered just outside of the light of the fire, alternately winking at their prey in malicious delight. Mun adjusted both hands on the sword, his gaze sweeping all of the things in turn. They snarled and crept a few steps closer, still hovering just outside the light. He heard Para draw back her bowstring and smirked. Even Master Sedgwick likely had a spell ready to cast. They worked well as a team, these three friends.

“Stay away from our city.”

The graveled voice came from the beasts outside the fire’s light and sent shivers racing up and down his spine.

“Why?”

“It is ours and we will have it.”

“What are those people to you? What have they done that you would torture them?”

“They are ours and we will have them.”

“They are their own, and you have no right to their souls.”

A black wolfish face broke through the shadows, its feral eyes ablaze with loathing and depraved intelligence. “They have sold us their souls and we will have them.”

“You will not!”

A quick slice and the head rolled away, blood spraying all. The others scattered, the sounds of their thundering steps rumbling away in all directions. Para and Henry's gasp drew Mun's attention. They stared at a man's head laying in a puddle of his own blood, only a few feet from its twitching and naked body.

Mun uttered a prayer under his breath as he covered the body and head with a blanket. Then he built up the fire and burned the corpse without a word, staring at the blue and white flames in stoic silence. *'They have sold us their souls and we will have them.'* "What evil is at work here?"

Para laid a hand on his shoulder. "I don't know, Mun. We'll find out, though. We always do."

He recognized the calm determination from their shared quests in the past. The resolve to an accepted challenge. It was this strength that he respected in her most. He met her gaze, and her green eyes burned bright with all these characteristics. Yet there was something more. "You will be this city's champion?"

"If it's the same arcanist, it's my fault. Aye. I'll be their champion."

Guilt. A powerful motivator. "Do not blame yourself for what we've seen here, Par. Evil would find a way with or without our help."

She smirked. "Let's get in its way this time. What do you say?"

Mun accepted her grip, his lips broadening in a rare smile. "Agreed."