

2

"Pinch my south end once more, milord, and you will find that sword someplace it oughtn't be." Para straightened and offered the brown-eyed fighter a sweet smile as he stared up at her, mouth gaping. She tousled his hair, which urged him to his feet with an expletive and a dangerous expression hardening his rugged face. When he grabbed her wrist, she unsheathed a dagger from her hidden sheaf at her cuff and dug the tip into his belly. His hold loosed and then released. "You best behave yourself, milord. I've had the best bath this side of the Spine and don't want to soil myself with even a drop of your blood. Now, sit down, drink your mug, and eat your supper like a good lad."

The tavern master shot Para and the fighter a dark look. She shrugged and sheathed her dagger before once again taking up her empty platter. She made her way to the bar to present her order for the cook and the barkeep. The tavern master's eyes narrowed. Para ignored him, accepted the drink orders, and turned to dispense them to their rightful owners. It wasn't her fault she didn't take to being groped and fondled like a bit of fabric in a merchant shop.

"Should have confessed I was a bouncer in more than my fair share of towns." She grimaced and pulled at her bodice. "Shouldn't have agreed to wearing this contraption just for tips." But a skirt and low-cut bodice were seen as a requirement for waiting tables. Wearing anything less (or more, rather) wouldn't get her access to any form of special information. And if she truly wanted to track down the arcanist who had made that god-awful sword, she wouldn't get squeamish about showing a bit of cleavage.

Para cast a hard look of death to a man at her right when his arm moved toward her backside. He grinned and lowered his arm. "Can I get you something, milord?"

"It's getting worse, Rory." The furtive whisper came from the near northeast corner and grabbed her attention. "Since he come, we're not even safe in the day. He's a devil, I tell ye."

Her eager glance darted to the corner where three men sat with heads together. She finished taking the order of the man with the straying hand and then moved surreptitiously toward the secretive group.

“If he is a devil, then what do you think we can do against him? It’s madness! And you were right to come away when you did.”

“And what of our friends?”

“They’re fools for staying.” The man took a long draught from his mug while shifting his gaze around the room. Para paused at a nearby table and busied herself with laughing and joshing with the group of hunters. “I told you all to come away and leave the devil to his lusts. Land is land, but our lives?” He spat.

The table fell silent, all men staring into their mugs with varying gazes of distress and disgust. A devil was it? Sounded intriguing enough to continue her search for a bit more information.... She made her way to their table and gathered their attention with as pretty a smile as she could muster. She even attempted to adjust her bodice with a shift of shoulders. “What can I get for ye, milords? Another round? A bit of broth? Some hot bread and cheese?” Her expression shifted and her brow furrowed. “Now hold one minute. You all seem a bit on the familiar side to this lass. Ah-ah. Don’t tell me. I’m right good with names when I come to it— Rory! From the north side of this blasted bit of Rommel, isn’t it?”

The man’s eyes widened. “That’s my name, lass, but I’m sorry. I don’t know you from these others. Are you from Winset?”

“No, milord, but I’ve been here and there.” Para leaned in and lowered her voice to a hushed whisper. “What’s this I’ve been hearing around the hall about some dark devil? An arcanist, is it?”

The man and his friends pulled her down onto a seat close to them. “Shh. The devil has eyes and ears everywhere, damn him. If he knows we’re talking our tongues will be cut out while we sleep. Or, worse yet, he’ll devour our souls.”

“For truth? Nefa’s ass....” Para cast a glance over her shoulder. “What’s it about? What’s he done?”

“A pact with the devil, or that’s what they say.” Rory’s counterparts nodded. “Runs with the wolves he does and makes them do his bidding. Our flocks and chickens eaten until there’s nothing to live on. He possesses our souls and turns us to demons!” All the men crossed themselves.

Para arched an eyebrow. "Why hasn't your lord done something? Sure as there must be plenty of adventurers willing to put an end to the devil?"

"Poor souls...." Rory gulped down his ale. Para took up the mug. "No one comes back from the hunt the same as when they left. Mad. Changed." He cast a furtive glance over his shoulder and then leaned closer. "Werewolves."

Para shuddered, the memory of the lycanthrope in the dungeon burning bright.

"You're right to shudder, lass. Demon spawn they are, and him being the one that did the deed! There's no light for those poor souls trapped in the town of Winset. Best that god would raze the place to the ground."

She tapped an absent rhythm on her platter and then stood, leaving the men to their morose contemplation of the table and mugs. Winset. At the bar, she placed her orders, retrieved those that waited, and then turned to make her deliveries. At night's end she would be on the road to Winset, her pouch full of coin and a star sapphire. It wasn't the same as riding into a demon-infested town with Munwar Meek at her side, but she felt certain she could hire an army of fighters for the price of that sapphire.

"What? That's highway robbery!" Para fisted her hands to keep herself from scrambling up and over to throttle the weasel-faced jeweler. She pressed her lips into a thin line and grappled with her calm before speaking again. "This is a star sapphire. Do you have any idea what one of those is worth? How rare they are? I know for a fact that one of these is worth at least a year's wage!"

"You are thinking of a black star sapphire. That is an ordinary star sapphire, which is much more common."

"Nefa's ass! A blue star sapphire is as rare as a black one, ya yob!" Para grabbed the man's shirt-collar and only just kept herself from dragging him over the counter. "You think you're going to get away with offering me a tenth of what it's worth? Do you think I have porridge for brains?"

"All right! All right! But I can't afford to pay you what it's worth."

Para released him. "I'm listening."

“I can offer you a purse of coin now and pay you the rest at a later date. In fact, I can offer you a writ as proof of account.” The man riffled through the drawers of a nearby desk for the necessary documents, completed the form, and then presented it to her with a quill for her signature.

She snatched the document from him and read, analyzing each word and phrase. “Fine. Give me that. There. It’s done.” When the man reached out for the writ, she kept it back. “Purse now. Then you prepare another writ, which will be your copy, and I will sign that one as well.”

The jeweler frowned but acquiesced. A few minutes later, Para stalked from the establishment and took a moment to gather her bearings before heading north on the main street toward the mercantile. If the end of her journey stopped at a demon-infested town that had little to no internal defense, she would need to bolster her own supplies by leaps and bounds. She jingled the purse at her belt and struggled with the guilt at parting with Mun’s prized gem. Then she shrugged it off and stepped up the pace.

The store keeper at the mercantile seemed as wary about accepting the writ as the jeweler was in letting it out of his grasp. Then he simply shrugged and slipped it into his jacket pocket. He retrieved a tablet from his desk and waited for her to list her order. Para ambled up and down each aisle of the mercantile listing what she needed, the quantities, and where to have them delivered. She even purchased a small wagon that her gelding would have no difficulty hauling. As the store keeper disappeared to his tasks of fulfilling the order, Para stood wide-legged in front of a map of the area, arms crossed as she regarded it through narrowed eyes. She was to the north of the Rommel border and there looked to be a main road that shot straight through to the town of Winslet on the other side. If she traveled day and night with occasional naps... it would take her little more than two days to arrive.

There was a shuffle beside her. She adjusted her position to let whoever pass and continued to scrutinize the map. Of course, if there were any hamlets or farms on the way she could gather more information about this so-called dark devil of Winslet, which would lengthen the trip by a few hours at least. And if there was a demon infestation in the city, how welcoming would they be of strangers?

“About as welcoming as if a leper came to visit.” She scoffed. A recognizable snigger raised the hair on the back of her neck. She slowly looked down— “Henry! How in all that’s holy did you find me?” And in another mercantile even.

“I wasn’t looking for you.” The Sylvan, Henry Sedgwick grinned at her.

“Oh. Hm. Not necessarily the best way to make a girl feel important.” He laughed. “I know. I’m funny. So, what are you doing here if not looking for me? Getting into some type of mischief for someone else?”

“Nope. What are you doing? Are you going a long way? Do you need a guide?”

“I’m looking for someone. No, not a long way. I have a map so no, I don’t need a guide.” Henry’s expression fell. “You can come along if you want. No law against it, and I’ve been bored to tears most of the time anyway. Did you know that Mun is studying to be a Paladin? Left me high and dry, the rogue.”

“Who are you looking for? Where are you going?”

“Remember the arcanist?”

“The one with the blood?”

“Hah! Interesting you’d remember that of everything. Aye, that’s who I’m looking for. The arcanist with the blood and that blasted werewolf-making sword. I think he’s in a town to the south. Near the Rommel border. Winset.”

“You don’t want to go there.” With that, Henry turned and ambled away.

Para stared after him, slack-jawed. She hurried after him and took him by the arm. “What do you mean ‘you don’t want to go there’? Didn’t you hear me when I said I’m looking for that arcanist?”

“Winset is a bad place. You don’t want to go there.”

“Henry, I am going there. Now tell me what you know about this place. Is the arcanist this dark devil I’ve heard about?”

“Psh. Arcanist shmarcanist. They won’t let you in.”

“Who won’t let me in? The arcanist?”

“The people. If they aren’t all dead already. It’s a very bad place!”

“Henry! Will you please make sense? Why is Winset a bad place? Why would they be dead already? Why wouldn’t they let me in?”

The Sylvan let out a long drawn out breath before taking Para’s hand and leading her out of the mercantile and across the street to the tavern. Once he settled them into a far corner away from the crowd and ordered an ale for both of them, he focused on her with a serious expression and crossed his hands. “The people of Winset won’t let anyone in. If they do, you don’t ever go out again. They have the lycanthropes there. In the woods. In the houses. Everywhere. They will say it’s a plague, but it’s not. It’s the lycanthropes.”

Para sat back in her chair with a grunt. Lycanthropes. The arcanist and his sword. The wolf’s blood. She frowned. “I’m going, Henry. You don’t have to go with me.” This was as much her problem as it was for the people trapped in that town. “But if you’re not going, I need you to tell me everything you know.”