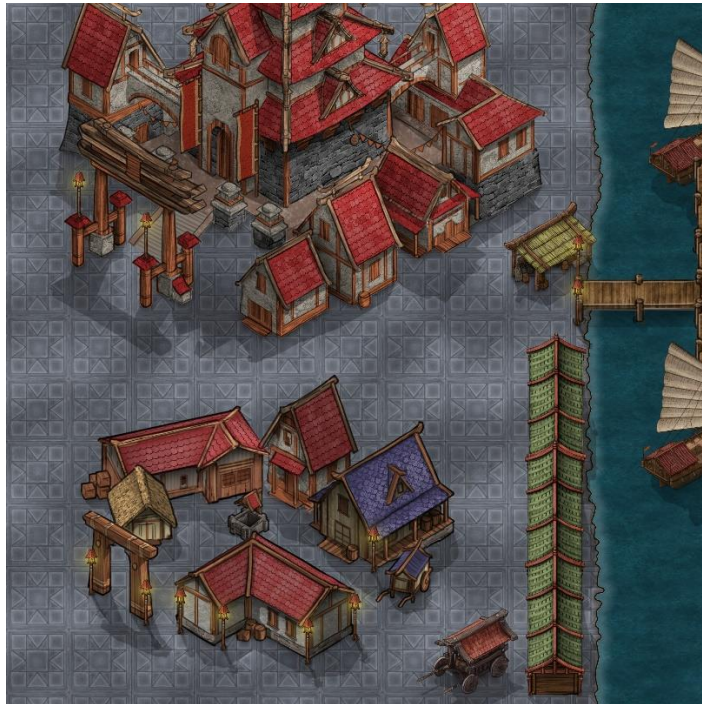


Chapter 17



Riptide is a fancy, rich town mostly inhabited by snobby nobles. Well, according to Mira at least. The ground is made of decorated tiles, the houses all look new and well put together. There's a large manor taking most of the attention from anything else in this town. There's a dock towards the east, and in contrast to the rest of the towns you've visited with docks, these are actually manned and busy. Not by nobles, of course.

You take a quick look around town, thinking Oftenbridge might be performing in the square or something. As you look for him, you come across a small, red building with a black sign hanging outside of it. On it, "Bimble's Bookshop," is written in beautiful, cursive writing. "I want to go in there!" you say to Mira, and she looks up at the sign and the store.

"Okay," she says and heads inside. You had expected her to object and say that you didn't have time, so this is surprising. Not that you're complaining. You head inside, and you're immediately hit with a mix of old and new book smells. You love it already. Looking around at all the books, you spot something that immediately makes you stop. On a shelf containing some moderately aged books stands a version of your favourite book. It's the same book you brought with you when you first went on your journey. Mira stole that book from you but gave it back after your coronation. After that, the book has sadly just been collecting dust on your shelf at home. You pick it up and a wave of nostalgia hits you as your fingers brush across the cover.

"Oh, it has a sequel," Mira says, and your head snaps towards her. She's holding a book, turning it over in her hands. It has the same font and style as the one you're holding.

“What? Let me see!” Mira hands it to you, and you immediately recognise the name of the author. Reading behind it, it’s clearly a continuation of the same story you know and love. “I had no idea it had a sequel!”

“Get it,” Mira encourages. You hadn’t brought that much money with you, and you sometimes forget that you’re the princess and are now rich.

“No, I’ll wait. It’s better to save the money in case we need it for something else important. Maybe Ronn wants more than just ale as a bribe, you know.” With a sad sigh, you put the book back on the shelf next to the first one.

“Come on, let’s find Oftenbridge and get to Fomo,” you say and move towards the exit.

“Wow, usually I’m the one eager to move on,” Mira says as she follows you outside.

Realising you’re not going to find Oftenbridge out in the street, you both agree that your best bet would be the large manor. The inside of the manor is elegant and rich, with marble flooring and fancy décor. You see a man talking to some servants outside an arch that presumably leads into a grand room. He looks distressed and fed up. As they hear your footsteps, their heads turn towards you. Your breath hitches as he catches your eyes. This man is the most gorgeous, breathtaking man you have ever laid eyes on. You approach them and face the servants. “Hi, excuse me. I’m looking for a Mr. Oftenbridge. Do you know where I can find him?”

“I’m him,” the handsome man says, his gorgeous, blue eyes boring into yours. You feel your cheeks burning. Stupid cheeks, betraying you like this.

“Hi, I’m... We’re...” you try to speak, but your words fail you, your tongue stumbling. You can hear a little snort next to you, before Mira speaks. “Hi, I’m Mira, this is Pernille. We just came from the camp with your friends, and they asked us to find you.”

His attention turns towards her. “Oh? Did they forget something?”

Mira looks at you, checking to see if you’ve found your words yet. You swallow and try again. “No, they didn’t forget anything. We just met them on our way to somewhere else, and invited them to a Christmas party in the capital. Not to play or anything, just to have a good time and celebrate the holidays. They accepted and asked us to invite you too if we saw you. And we see you, so we’re inviting you.” Internally, you’re hating yourself for making this so awkward. You’re rambling, and they all hear it.

“Yes, I’ll come,” he says a bit too quickly. “Any excuse to get...” he starts, looking at the servants, “to visit the capital.” He puts on a very charming smile that makes your heart race.

“What’s this I hear about the capital?” Behind Oftenbridge, a tall, slender man is descending some stairs. He carries himself properly, his hand resting on the railing. “You’re not thinking of leaving, are you?” he says to Oftenbridge.

“Just for a little bit, my lord. These young ladies need me for something very important.”

“Well, they can find someone else. You are hired to perform for me. I will not let you leave for some party.” He’s fully descended the stairs now and is moving towards you.

“If I may, lord...” Mira starts, waiting for him to fill in the blanks.

“Shieldonn,” he says, and he looks almost offended that she didn’t already know that.

“Oh of course, I am sorry. Of course I have heard of you and your brilliant research, lord Shieldonn. I simply did not have a face to connect to the name. I must say, your work is quite remarkable.” Mira is using her extra polite, posh voice. You sometimes forget she basically conns people for a living, but it’s interesting hearing this politeness coming from her when you know how she normally acts.

“Flattery will get you nowhere, young lady,” he says, but he can’t hide that he very much enjoyed her flattery. “Mr. Oftenbridge is my entertainer now, and he will remain here with me.”

“Of course, we understand,” Mira says and turns to you. “I guess we will just have to do without him. Let us leave.” She turns back to Shieldonn, give a polite nod and says, “My lord,” before walking away. Except, you’re not ready to just give up. He can’t just keep him here if Oftenbridge wants to leave. Mira senses your feelings and gives you a look telling you to follow her lead. Shieldonn has now lost interest in you and starts to walk away. You’re not sure where she’s going with this, but after a moment’s hesitation, you follow her.

“I am quite looking forward to the Christmas gathering,” she says, still in her posh voice. Her voice is a bit too loud for casual conversation with you, making sure Shieldonn can hear her. “With all the people arriving, it will be such a good opportunity for some fun social experiments.” You can hear Shieldonn’s footsteps stopping, his interest piqued. Then they start again. It’s not enough.

Mira senses this too and continues. “Oh and I wonder how they are doing with that human-bird hybrid. You know, the science experiment that went wrong. Last I heard, even our brightest scientists could not figure out how to reverse it.” You look down as you walk and she talks. In front of you, your shadow extends far down the hall, caused by a low light from behind. As you notice this, you also notice that Mira’s shadow is not there. You’re about to say something, when you are interrupted.

“On second thought,” you hear behind you and turn to face Shieldonn. “Some new environments might be good for me. We will both come.” He looks at Oftenbridge. “I will need entertainment on the road.” He’s pretending not to have changed his mind due to what Mira mentioned, but his real intentions are very obvious. Oftenbridge gives you both a grateful look, clearly regretting having stayed behind when the others left.

“Great, we’ll see you there,” you say, and you both turn to leave.

Once outside, Mira says, “You know, I was just baiting him, but from what I’ve heard he does actually have a brilliant mind. He might be able to help save your bird-friend. I’m sure he’ll be happy to at least try, for the sake of science.”

“You think so?” you ask, and Mira nods. You do actually remember seeing his name on the books in the castle library, but you never read his work.

You start walking, ready to leave riptide when you remember, “Mira, where’s your shadow?”

“What do you mean? It’s right there,” she points towards the space where her shadow should be and...it’s there? You swear it was gone inside the hall. You look up at her confused, and she just winks at you.

“Mira, please. I don’t want to see that creepy side of you I saw in camp again.”

“Let’s just get to Fomo, yeah? It’s the next town, we’re almost done!” She says as she excitedly walks out of the town and towards the main road again, completely ignoring your comment. Then she abruptly stops. “Oh wait, before we go, I’m just gonna quickly check if any of these stores have a restroom.”

“I’m coming with you,” you say, not trusting her to go alone at the moment. She doesn’t object as you head to the first store you see. It’s a cute little antique store, and it luckily has a restroom you can borrow. Mira heads to the restroom, as you look around while you wait. Your gaze is at the antiques, but your mind is somewhere else. You don’t like the direction Mira is headed in, and you decide that after all of this is over, you’re going to find a way to help your friend.