**Mercenaries in Nevros**

It’s hot out. The grass agrees, having paled to a light brown in the relentless sun. It’s so dry it crunches when you step on it. Cavernous cracks scrawl over the ground, like numerous mouths begging for water. Miv gnashes down on the strand of straw in his mouth and spits, giving them a pittance. Straw in the summer always gets stuck in his teeth, too thin and dry. At least in the spring it has some water in it. Len takes a swig from his canteen, and Miv does the same. The brothers can see the town on the horizon, but have a ways to go. If only they’d the money for a horse. Even just a donkey.

Miv reaches for his pocket by habit, but stops himself. Len hates it when he smokes. He supposes he doesn’t need to add heat to his situation, anyway. Instead, he stops by the side of the dirt road and looks for the greenest piece of grass he can find. He plucks out the least yellow one and rubs the cut end on his shirt before popping it in his mouth.

“C’mon now, we gotta get there before night.” Len calls out, a surprising distance away.

“I know, gimmie a sec.” Miv jogs to catch up. On the way he pats his pocket and raises his eyebrows. “‘Ey, you got the cards right?”

“The ones from the boss?” Len pats his pants pockets, then his jacket, before reaching into his shirt pocket and pulling two white cards out. “Yea, got ‘em here.”

“No not--Well, good. But the playin’ cards.” Miv clarifies.

“Thought you had ‘em.” Len says with a shrug.

Miv groans and throws his head back.

“What’s a man gonna do in town with no cards? Bum off a stranger’s game? Sure way to lose a buck.”

“Didn’t you say you could beat anyone in this backwater alley?” Len’s teeth flash in a grin through his bristly brown beard.

Miv scowls and adjusts the brim of his hat to shade his eyes. The sun is angling down at an annoying angle now. No use boiling over it. He goes over the plan in his head once more. Get into town, show the cards to the guy with the red pin at the inn, get orders, and work. The informant mentioned vaguely what the task is, but didn’t seem to have much information himself. Miv ponders it a while before speaking up.

“Say. What do you think the boss has got all us spreading out for? Pretty sure there’s at least one of us in every town in this whole region.”

“Hm.” Len joins in on the pondering. “Instinct says it’s someone we gotta catch. Maybe a guy that knows too much.”

“Yea, that’d make sense.” Miv nods. “But there’s a lotta money involved in this. You think it’s someone from up north that requested this? Maybe some sorta grudge.”

“Imagine if it was the Queen herself!” Len guffaws.

“All of us for one guy? I’d ask for a ticket to the capitol as pay!” Miv responds with a chuckle of his own.

The two take more guesses at what could be going on in this nearly empty land. The idle chat makes the time fly by, and dulled the soreness in their feet. As the sun begins to set, they arrive at the gates. A guard requests identification and they say their names. The guard looks through a list of approved individuals and allows them to pass, begrudgingly. Miv didn’t think they were all that shady, maybe the listing shows their affiliation. The boss doesn’t have the greatest reputation, after all.

The village is identical to many others in the area. Same long stretch of a main road with hastily built shelters. Same tried-and-true wall design to keep Elementals out. Same dusty smell, and the same dry brown dirt. Miv thinks back to his time up north. Not quite at the capitol, but nearer to the mountains. The water there was immaculate, heavenly! As he finishes his canteen and gets it refilled at a water spout, the stark difference in quality strikes him soundly. The dust here is inescapable.

Miv returns to Len, who’s talking to a villager. They get directions to the inn and start making their way over. Outside the orderly main pathway that splits the village in half, the roads are winding, confusing, and barely maintained. The ramshackle stone and wooden huts loom high, and suspicious eyes leer from their posts. Miv keeps a hand in his pocket, just in case. Len’s size--not to mention his bat strapped around his back--is a pretty good deterrent for mugging, though.

The duo round a corner and see the inn. A sturdy stone structure with three flimsy wooden floors above, each smaller than the last. The building seems to tilt dangerously. The sun having fully disappeared, the brothers quickly enter the building. The interior is dimly lit and claustrophobic. The ceiling seems far too low--Len has to lean forward a bit. The old man at the main desk sports an eyepatch and sits next to a knife conspicuously near to his hand. He’s reading from papers on the desk when the brothers approach.

“Evening, mister.” Len says. “We’d like to check in. Names’re Len and Miv.”

The clerk looks up and sifts through some papers. The brothers do their best to put off a friendly aura. No trouble today, please.

“Here ya are.” The clerk lifts up a particular document to eye it closer. “Mihv and Len.”

“Pronounced Mee-v.” Miv pipes up. He tries to afford a smile. The clerk responds by darting his eye from the paper to Miv. The younger brother feels a jolt in his spine, his fight or flight summoned.

“Ah, Miv, apologies. You’ll be in, eh…Second floor, room 3.”

The clerk leans forward again and resumes reading whatever was consuming him before. Miv’s shoulders drop as he releases his tension. Len leads the way into the stairwell, having to bend down even further to get through the sunken doorway. Thankfully, the second floor isn’t *too* noticeably tilted. A door with a ‘3’ hanging from it sits just down the hall. The brothers enter and unpack their pockets of belongings. At least, the ones they don’t mind getting stolen. Len hands Miv the white card with the smaller man’s name on it.

“All ready?” Len asks.

“I’m good to go.” Miv answers.

The two go back downstairs and round a corner to find the inn’s bar. Sparsely populated, it’s quiet. A mumble of chatter graces its air once in a while, but all keep to themselves at their tables. Miv squints in the smoky dim light, searching for the man with the red pin. He sees a couple at a table, a strange tension between them. A group of three or four men in the corner, huddled about their table, overdressed in cloaks. Len bumps his elbow into him and gestures to the bar. The two sit down, Miv leaning forward and catching a glimpse of the red pin on the patron beside them. It sits on the chest of a man wrapped in a rather dirty brown cloak. Len sits right next to the figure, and Miv right next to Len.

Len slides his card down the table to the man, and Miv follows suit. With a deft look down, the cloaked figure slides the cards into their coat, then gets up and gestures for them to follow. The figure swoops out of the bar, around the corner, and out of the inn. In pursuit, Miv notices that the clerk is gone. The night air is dry and hot as ever. No moon shines at this hour, and it is near-pitch. The two catch sight of the cloak flapping as their contact rounds a corner into an alley. The brothers exchange a look, placing hands on their weapons.

No ambush awaits in the alley, though. Just the figure taking off their hood and standing by the wall. In the dim light, the brothers need to move closer to see them clearly.

“Oh! You’re a woman.” Miv says, failing to conceal his surprise.

The woman lets out a dry cackle. Her voice sounds ten years older than her youthful face and black hair portray.

“Why did you hide your face? We didn’t--It doesn’t make sense.” Len asks immediately. The question seems to have been bugging him.

“Too many times has a drunk come stumbling at me, spewing their recommendations. I’m tired of it, this is an easy way to avoid it.”

Miv raises an eyebrow and Len nods.

“I was worried this was some kind of secret situation. We’re not the best at keeping quiet when working.” Len explains. “So, to get to it, what’ve you got for us?”

“I’m glad we’ve got some brawn here. I’m not much of a fighter, myself.” The woman says. “Strange things happening around here. Not just this town, all of ‘em in this area.”

“We noticed there are a few of us being sent out to all the villages in the area.” Miv says.

“Mm. I can guarantee it’s not Elemental in nature. There’s definitely some sort of human element to it. There were raids on supplies, but those stopped pretty quickly when the militia investigated. But now there are disappearances. Commoners, rich men, whoever’s doing it doesn’t seem to discriminate.” The woman goes on.

“Why would bandits stick around to start kidnapping?” Len inquires.

“Not sure they’re bandits to begin with. But they’re damned hard to catch. You might not have luck with that. What we needed brawn for is what comes after a disappearance. This is actually something to keep quiet--A few days after someone’s gone, a beast will attack a village. It’s not Elemental.”

“What is it?”, “What are they?” Miv and Len ask at once.

“The militia knows, but they aren’t talking. I haven’t seen one myself, only heard conversations. But they’re truly something horrific, it seems. The rich men here also seem to know more about them, but are painstakingly paying guards to shut up about it. I’d bet they fear the populace panicking.”

“So what should we do?” Miv puts a hand to his chin. “I’d like to just get ahold of one of these elites and wrestle the info out of ‘em, but…”

Len gives him a look.

“That’s not applicable here...” Miv finishes.

“I’ve got a target that knows something.” The woman says. She pulls out a sketch on a scrap of paper. “Previously a guard. Dropped from the force right after a battle--I’m guessing with one of the beasts. Disappeared for a while himself, but came back to town. Looked different, and has been quiet since.”

Len takes the sketch and has a look, then shows Miv. It’s a heavy man, thinning hair up top, no facial hair. In the margins of the page are some of his usual haunts, and his name: Broy. Len pockets the picture.

“Are you going to stick around here? Any more of us here?” Miv asks the woman.

“Mhm. I’ll be around, but I’m going to take a backseat for a bit. I have a feeling some of the richmen are onto me. There are few of us left here. You may run into Fros or Gul, they were here a few weeks ago, but I think they were going to Nevros proper.”

“Got a name for us to find you by?” Len asks next. The woman smiles.

“You shouldn’t need to find me--I’ll be around if you need me. But, you can call me Enva.” The brothers nod and Enva puts her hood back on. “Good luck to you both. And be careful. We’ll plan to meet in the inn again next week.”

With Enva departed, the brothers stroll back to the inn, absorbing the information. Len lists off the locations Broy has been, and Miv consults his rusty memory of the town’s layout. Last time he saw a map of it was years ago now. While Len frowns and tries to conjure the same knowledge, Miv’s mind strays to the well-trod memories of that time.

“Someday, I’d like to own a house.” Miv says. “Somewhere up north.”

“Yea? In capitol lands?” Len asks.

“I guess.” Miv shrugs. “Just somewhere that’s ours.”

“Ours, huh?” Len muses.

“What, were you thinking of dumping me off in Velos once ya get enough money?” Miv says, half-joking. Len lets out another guffaw.

“We’re better off sticking together for a good long while, I’d say.” Len composes himself. “Anyway. Did you remember where this uh…Barnan Plaza is here?”

Len points at the map and shows Miv again, tilting it to catch the lantern light near the inn as they approach.

“Uhh…West side of town I think. It’s not a plaza--I remember that. It’s a corner of a building with two shops, one on each side.” Miv scrunches his brow, trying to conjure up *just* the memory of the map. No more baggage for now.

“Anything in the vicinity we can use as landmarks?”

“One of the shops on the corner is a bar, the other sells smokes. Or at least used to. Maybe there’ll be a lotta people around there, still.”

“Not much to go off of, but it’ll do. We’ll tackle that tomorrow.” Len assures Miv.

The brothers enter the inn and head up to their shared room. The beds are distressing, to say the least. Blocks of wood with covers on them. A pillow of crumpled up cloth, stuffed in slightly higher quality cloth. The covers are light and thin, at least. The night passes, cool air sneaking in through the cracks in the window. In the morning, the two get up early. Broy usually goes to Barnan Plaza before noon.

“Just gonna stick around there till midday, then?” Miv asks, straightening his shirt and patting out his jacket.

“Best chance right now. Tonight we can go to that inn on the other side of town. Sometimes he drinks there.” Len answers. He bumps his toe into the wood bed and curses. Damn squashed building. The two head out only slightly unkempt. Miv hasn’t had a shave in a few weeks, and it’s showing. His scruffy facial hair forms patches and makes him look like a sleep-deprived rat. The town is certainly livelier during the morning. Friendlier, too. No peering eyes from high buildings. Just people moseying down the streets, trying to live their lives and get the day done.

The brothers stop by a food cart and get some local cuisine. Similar stuff to the other villages in the area, but Len grabs an apparent specialty: Candied cactus. It’s bright green, on a stick, shiny with sugar--Irresistible. Making their way to the east side of the city, they find it to be much better taken care of. Must be where the rich live. They delve somewhat deep into the east side, getting to the middle of that sector, before Miv points out a sign to Len.

“Look there. ‘Smokes and Meats’.” He says. “And ‘Barnan Plaza’ right below.”

“Mm, yep. That’d be the way--Good eye.” Len says. He chews on the cactus, finding it extremely hard to bite through. It’s gummy and odd. Not much taste besides sweet and salt to it. What a let-down.

The square Barnan Plaza occupies is not so much a plaza as a corner of two roads. On one side is a colorful smoke shop, on the other a butcher. Miv supposes their target is more likely to need smokes than fresh meat. Len agrees, but expresses reluctance to actually go inside.

“How ‘bout you go in and I’ll stay out here?” Len proposes. “I’ll just view the corner for passersby.”

“That’ll work!” Miv says, barely hiding his excitement. The smokes he got from Velos are little more than charred weeds gathered from some farm. This shop seems promising, given the colorful advertisements on the walls.. Miv pats his pockets and realizes Len has the wallet. He hesitates, and Len looks his way.

“Changed your mind?” Len inquires.

“Ah--No, just. …Why don’t I hold on to the wallet? Might be dangerous out--” Miv is interrupted.

“You’re not buyin’ smokes with our money. You still got some, right?” Len pats Miv’s chest pocket and pulls out a small box. “A whole pack! You got a whole damn pack and you want more?”

“These are trash! Tastes like smokin’ a tree branch. C’mon, I just want one pack of somethin’ spicy.” Miv pleads. Len rolls his eyes.

“Okay listen. Go in there, find a pack you like, come back and tell me the price and then we can decide. We’re real limited on money right now.”

Miv scoffs at the treatment. Len still thinks he’s a kid.

“Just come in, damn. The smoke won’t hurtcha. Don’t make me sidle back over here with my tail between my legs.”

“Hell no. The smoke burns my eyes and gets me coughin’. You can smoke whatever you like, but this is our money. It’s gotta be worth it.” Len stays stalwart.

Miv curses and snatches his pack of smokes back. He stomps away with his hands in his pockets. The interior of the shop is filled with a purple haze. Smells like lavender. It’s a bit strong for Miv, even. He strolls over to the flavored section and looks for something spicy. Numerous made-up flavors are all around, some he’s had before in Velos. He eyes the prices--most are notably expensive. He gets to the cinnamon ones, but only finds the fancy fat smokes, ones you need to smoke differently. They’re way too expensive, not even remotely in the budget.

Finally Miv finds a cheaper section. They pretty much only have mint. The price is…Reasonable, he’d wager. It’ll be fine. Meekly, he walks out of the shop. He feels the eyes of the employees on his back. Damn that Len. The larger brother is standing on the corner across the road from the smoke shop, looking south. Miv crosses and tells him the price. Len furrows his brow and pulls out the wallet, counting their credits.

“One pack. Thas’all.” Len says, handing Miv a couple bills.

“Appreciated.” Miv says, his excitement dulled by the treatment.

The next hour is spent loitering out on the street. Miv tries one of the smokes, and Len excuses himself to check inside the butcher shop. The mint comes through surprisingly softly, it’s a nice cooling feeling. Miv takes a look at their target again, pulling out the now-crumpled sheet of paper. Fat guy, scared look. He didn’t notice just how somber the guy’s eyes looked before. Wonder what he saw.

As another puff of smoke fills the air around Miv, he wonders what they’ll even ask Broy. Should’ve thought about that earlier, huh. Pocketing the smokes, he supposes they’ll just ask what the beasts are. Maybe he knows why they’re attacking. Who’s causing disappearances, what for, that kinda stuff. Miv gets up and crosses the road, heading into the butcher’s shop. Len’s chatting with the owner, an older man with bristly gray hair held tight in a net.

“So it’s been rough, seein’ that.” The butcher says.

“I can imagine.” Len responds. He turns to see Miv entering. “Hey there.”

“‘Ey.” Miv says curtly. “Found anything?” He tries to keep his inquiry vague.

“This fella used to fight on the guard, and knows the boss. Talking to him about the disappearances.” Len says outright. Miv is taken aback.

“Wait wait, shush, right? Isn’t this kind of a quiet thing?” He asks.

“Ah, naw. Telin here says it’s safe to talk about. Everyone knows about the disappearances.” Len says, referring to the butcher.

“And the beasts? I thought Enva said it was kept quiet.” Miv is still confused.

“Beasts? Oh…” Telin the butcher clears his throat and looks down a bit. “That one, yeah. Should be okay talking about it here, but the nobles don’t like guards sharing that info. Keep it quiet outside of here, alright?”

The brothers nod. In the butcher shop, there are only a handful of other people. A couple employees are chopping and packaging meat behind the counter. An aged father and his adult son are examining products nearby, and two women are chatting in a different section. Telin looks around at them, saying their names under his breath as he recognizes them.

“These are all trustworthy. We’re good.” He assures the brothers.

“Tell us more about the beasts.” Miv demands. Len looks his way, then back at Telin.

“Well. I only seen one.” Telin puts a hand behind his head to scratch at his neck. His brow is furrowed.

“Had beasts appeared before?” Len asks.

“Once or twice. No one was reporting disappearances yet, though. Just one night, I was on the walls, looking north. Heard an alarm to the east, was told to get over there. Definitely thought it was an Elemental, some sort of hybrid maybe. Big, hulking thing. Four limbs, short legs like a Dark Elemental--Ever seen one of those?” Telin looks at Len.

“Ah yea, they’re around more. Usually nuisances though, never seen one too big.” Len says.

“Yea, I’ve seen some human-sized ones. This thing was the height of four men. But it was kneeled over, it’s back arched. It supported itself with its elbows. Thought maybe it could be some sort of Earth Elemental. But the area got lit up with flames from our troops, and it was clear it wasn’t.”

Len has taken out his notepad and is scribbling. Miv looks at Telin’s face. His forehead is scrunched and he scratches his neck faster.

“It was uh…Looked like it was melting. Black, shiny liquid. It had a hard carapace on its back, and dark red flesh underneath, all covered in that stuff. It had sort of a…Human-like head. Hair soaked with that oil, and two burning eyes. Glowing red like embers…” Telin pauses.

“How was it dealt with?” Miv asks.

“It wasn’t too mobile, but it grabbed a few of our troops that got too close and crushed them. So we kept our distance and flamed it until it stopped moving. Then we just kept going, until it was a pile of ash. Commander said turn it to dust.”

“Maybe some sort of human-Elemental hybrid? The wild men in The Crook commune with Elementals.” Miv proposes. Telin shakes his head.

“Never heard of that. And this had no recognizable Elemental aspects. Not to mention, it’s screams were like nothing I’d heard. Like…Like the chittering of cicadas, but deep and rumbly. Slowed down.” Telin’s shoulders shake a bit. “Eugh. Remembering it gives me chills. Damned thing.”

There’s a short bit of near-silence. Len is scribbling notes away. Telin is looking down and away. Miv doesn’t know where to look, so he busies himself with the ceiling, letting Len finish.

“When’d this all start? Any events around then?” Len asks.

“ I left the guardforce last year. That stuff started happening a few years ago now…I really can’t think of anything out of the ordinary from before then.” Telin seems tired.

“Appreciate you going into it.” Len says, flipping a page. “One last thing.”

“Fire away.” Telin says, adjusting his stance.

“Know of any link between the disappearances and the beasts? Seems like there’s something there.”

“That I don’t know for sure. But I’ve thought the same. It’s just…Gods I hope those beasts aren’t those people. They really can’t be--I…There’s no way.”

Miv purses his lips. The thought occurred to him, too, but he similarly rejected it. Len seems to have accepted it as probable, based on his stern eyes.

“I understand. Thank you again for your time.” Len says, pocketing his notebook.

“Ah--Wait, Telin.” Miv draws attention. “D’you know a guy named Broy?”

“Broy?” Telin asks.

“Older guy, ex-soldier like you. Bald head, sullen eyes?”

“Uhh…Oh! Yea I think I know who you’re talkin’ about.” Telin recalls. “He comes around every week or so, gets some smokes, sometimes a hamhock. I see him walking down the street now and then. Why do you ask?”

“We--” Miv is interrupted.

“We’ve heard he knows some stuff about this, too.” Len talks over him.

“Ah. Well, if ya need a safe spot, come here. The nobles can be nasty about spreadin’ info like this. But a passing bird let me know there’d be some folks stickin’ their noses around.” Telin says with a laugh.

“Appreciated.” Miv says quickly.

The brothers exit the store and resume standing by the side of the road. Noon turns to afternoon as Len checks his notes and Miv keeps an eye on the road. The two chat off and on, trading shifts to examine passersby. They certainly get a few odd looks, but it’s not a new thing. Their reputation in this town is piss anyway. And a few rumors about some strangers staring pale in comparison to the rumors about noble corruption and kidnappings.

“There.” Len says, lifting a hand for a moment. He pulls out the sketch of Broy to cross-reference. “I think that’s him. Shaved.”

Walking into the smoke store is a fat man; he’s bald, and has a mess of scruffy hair around his mouth. Neither Miv nor Len saw his face clearly, but it’s their best bet so far. They make a show of not hurrying as they cross the road and approach the smoke shop. Entering, they find only a few other people browsing. Miv makes it to the man first.

“Hey there sir.” He says, friendly. The man turns. Even in the smoky haze inside the shop, Miv can tell it’s Broy. Those sullen eyes. Len comes up behind Miv, looming.

“Uh, yes?” Broy says. His voice is higher than Miv would imagine. Has a bit of a warble to it.

“What--” Miv is interrupted.

“We were talking with Telin, the butcher next door, and he said you might know more about the subject.” Len says first.

“Ah. Um, sure. Lemme buy some smokes and I’ll have time to chat.” Broy says. His voice cracks on ‘chat’.

“Gotcha, we’ll be by the door, sorry to bother ya all of a sudden.” Len says.

Miv conceals his frustration and takes position by the doors. There’s more important things to focus on right now. He keeps an eye on Broy while seeming to browse on his own. Len covers his mouth so as to breathe in less of the smoke, coughing once in a while. Broy is near the back, perusing the expensive stuff. As he waits, Miv notices that Broy seems fidgety…And he’s been standing in that one spot for a while. Len lets out an especially loud hack and fishes for his handkerchief in his pockets. Miv turns to look at him for a second.

Faster than Miv thought the man could move--Just out of the corner of his eye--Broy sprints for the counter of the shop. He hops it and bursts through the back door. Miv yells and takes off in pursuit. Len stumbles forward, caught off guard. Miv ignores the yells of the employees as he follows Broy through the back door, into the dark alley beyond. Len apologizes as he runs through a second later. Broy is sprinting, full-tilt, down the long alley. Miv follows closely behind, but can only gain so much before they come back out to a street.

Broy takes a hard left. Miv tries to mimic it but slips, catching himself but stopping. Len comes up, breathless.

“Too quick.” Len says between gasps.

“Getcher bat, we’ll snag ‘im.” Miv says quickly, taking his knife out.

“Lotta people. Be careful.” Len responds, taking out his bat and readying himself.

“Just lots of curves. I got a good read on him.” Miv’s knife glows a tarnished blue as he grips it tightly. “Pop!”

Miv tosses the knife up in the air. It spins slowly down in front of Len. When the handle is towards him, he swings in an instant. Miv closes his eyes and holds his hands in front of him. The knife zips forward with great speed, swerving around the many citizens standing confused in the road. Miv’s fingers twitch with each movement. He can feel Broy’s essence getting nearer. The knife dips, Miv clenches his fist and raises it. With a swoop the knife slips under Broy’s shirt and pierces through the fabric. Miv leans forward a bit as Broy is raised a foot into the air by his clothes. The knife arcs to the side, embedding deeply into the wooden wall of a building. Broy hangs just off the ground, struggling.

People clamor as Miv and Len push through the crowd to their target. Len brandishes a shiny badge from his pocket to allay everyone’s fears. It’s got a lot of very fancy-looking markings on it. All gibberish and nonsense, but fancy. Miv ties Broy’s hands behind his back with his handkerchief before letting the man down. He seems resigned to his fate, but is terrified.

“Hold now, we’re not gonna hurt ya.” Miv pats Broy’s back lightly. “We’re not that type. Just got some questions about whatcha seen.”

“Thought we made a friendly first impression.” Len says, approaching.

“I thought, maybe, you guys were from the nobles. Maybe I had let something slip--They’d never--” Broy stumbles over his words.

“Shush up, we know. Let’s get somewhere we can talk about this.” Miv says.

Broy is escorted back to Barnan plaza. Len talks briefly with Telin the butcher, and the brothers are allowed to bring Broy around back. They enter an alley beside the shop and turn to find the back door. Entering, they find themselves in the kitchen. Telin comes back and assures them that he’ll keep an eye out for unscrupulous eavesdropping. The brothers thank him, and he gets back to work up front. Miv and Len take a seat and offer Broy to do the same. The middle-aged man is still extremely stressed. He’s sweating and twitchy, looking around.

“Alright. Now then.” Len says. He leans forward with his elbows on his knees. “First. What did you think we’d ask about?”

Broy stays silent for a while. He seems to be thinking very hard. Just as Miv opens his mouth, Broy lets out his breath.

“I’m sorry. I can’t talk about my time as a guard.” The older man says plainly.

“Why? Who told you not to?” Miv asks immediately.

“Authority.” Broy curtly says.

Len sits back and crosses his arms with a humph, thinking on the matter. Miv thinks on what to say, trying to start a few times, but failing to. A guard’s adherence to authority isn’t something to sneeze at. He stares at Broy. The man still seems nervous. His eyes are darting quickly. To the side, then back to the floor. Miv follows his gaze. On the floor, there’s nothing. To the side, nothing. The pattern becomes more apparent the longer Miv watches. What is he looking at?

“Do you see something?” Miv asks, breaking the silence.

“What? No. I don’t.” Broy says. His voice sounds sincere but his manner reveals the truth. His eyes stick to the side now.

“What--Listen. You’re not gonna get attacked here.” Len says with a groan, standing up. “Telin ensured this place is safe. We talked to him about the beast he fought during his time as a guard. The disappearances. We think they’re connected. And he said you fought one of those things, too.”

“What?! He’s crazy to talk about it--Does he have a deathwish? Nobles are one thing, but they--” Just as Broy begins to talk in longer sentences, a knock is heard from the door to the main area of the shop. All heads turn that direction. Arguing can be heard behind it, Telin’s voice growing louder. The knob turns and the door swings open faster than Miv or Len can react.

“I could report you for this!” Telin claims. He trails behind two men who stroll into the room. Both are tall, silver-haired, and hawk-eyed. One is clean shaven and the other has a well-maintained mustache. Must be high ranking guards.

“The Overseer himself requested this.” The guard in the back says. “You won’t get much with a report.”

“There you are.” The mustached guard in front says. At first it seems he’s speaking only to Broy, but his eyes glance evenly at Len and Miv in time. “You there, the scruffy one. Name?”

“Uh--Miv. Sir.” Miv says meekly. He exchanges glances with Len. Escape seems to not be an option. Len’s brow furrows in thought.

“And you?” The guard says.

“Len. We’re here with--” Len is interrupted.

“Fine, break into my establishment. Traipse around all ya like. You’ll never be welcome back, damn you! I’ll tell the damn merchant guild to blacklist ya!” Telin’s argument with the other guard erupts. The butcher leaves the situation and gets back to work.

“You two caused quite a scuffle out there.” The guard says. Miv eyes his blade, sheathed but present on his hip.

“This man here--” Len tries again, to no avail.

“And it seems you kidnapped this man.” The guard interrupts again.

“Listen.” Len’s voice drops. He hesitates for a moment, still unsure how to approach the situation. Miv looks at him. He’s stuck, dammit. Time to throw caution to the wind.

“We’re with Weaver.” Miv blurts out. “Mercenary guild. Sent here under Queen’s orders.”

Disclosing the name of the boss and their affiliation doesn’t always go great. Depends a lot on how much people know about Weaver’s past. A desperate appeal to authority, but it beats instant imprisonment.

“Uhhuh. And, you got proof of Queen’s intentions?” The clean shaven guard asks.

Damn.

“We’re looking into the disappearances. It’s become an issue for the whole region.” Len is freed from his choice paralyzation, and dives even deeper into the difficult topics. “Outside Nevros it’s hush-hush.”

“And so you’re kidnap--” The mustached guard begins. This time, he’s the one cut off.

“Broy here knows about the disappearances, we received a tip that he may know who’s doing it.” Len continues, as if he never paused. His eyes flash to Broy, the older man sits with his eyes fixed on the ground. “He acted extremely suspicious, fled when we simply asked to talk about the disappearances. Others around here know about the disappearances, it’s a common talking point. Sprinting when the topic is brought up means he knows something.”

There’s a heavy pause in the room. Len looks like he still needs to say something. That pressure seems to be enough to stop the guards from speaking up just yet.

“Due to him possibly being a danger, we got hold of him for questioning. We planned to visit the guard right after to report this incident.” Len finishes. Miv lets out his breath quietly. Quick brain, Len. The shaved guard looks to the mustached one, who shifts his stance. He seems to be thinking.

“Weaver. That’s uh, they’re centered in…” He starts.

“Velos.” Miv finishes for him. “Eastern Velos.”

“Velos, right.” The guard sighs. “Well, we’ve had a lot of you mercenary types around lately. Ya’ll are a bit more careful than some others, I’ll give you that. But you can’t--I mean, it should be obvious right? You can’t just rough up some townsperson when they run from ya.”

Miv is about to speak up. Len knows what he’s going to say. Point out they didn’t rough him up. Len speaks up first.

“You’re right. We apologize for that. We’ve been in smaller towns without guards for a long while now, not used to a fully formed Nithran town.” He explains. Only a half-lie. Things like this usually blow over easy in those small settlements.

“Now…Ugh. I s’pose we can’t throw you in a cell right away. I’d rather not chance Queen’s ire. But all three of you are going to need to come with me back to the guardhouse. There we can do some real questioning.” The mustached guard says. It’s more of a demand. Pretty hard to beat that compromise.

“Gotcha.” Miv says, once Len gives him a nod.

“Understand.” Len agrees.

Broy stays silent. His head hangs low.

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The guardhouse is cramped, but chill. The altitude it sits at is blessed with comparatively cool winds. Not to mention, it sits atop the western wall, catching the freshest winds. Len catches his breath in a chair as Miv stands beside him. Had to walk across town to get here, and up five flights of stairs. Broy sits in the corner, hands tied, this time with a rope. The shaven guard, Ilo, stands beside him, arms crossed. Man tried to get away--Again. Two guards, two mercenaries escorting him, and he tried to sprint for it. Miv couldn’t believe his eyes. Broy has his eyes down once more. In the center of the room, against the back wall, the mustached guard sifts through papers and scribbles stuff down. Didn’t catch his name in the scuffle.

“Say uh, what’s your name, sir?” Miv directs the question at the busy guard. Mustache stays silent for a while. A bit too long. Miv’s about to re-ask.

“Uh--Sorry. Name’s Frum. Just one more second here.” Mustache goes back to his work.

Miv leans back against the wall. Len seems to have composed himself by now. Miv’s eyes wander to Broy. He’s looked up now that people are talking. He looks hopeless, damn. All heads turn to Frum as he shuffles papers suddenly.

“Alright.” He says, standing up. “Broy.”

The sorrowful man looks like a whipped pup.

“Have you seen anyone being abducted?” Frum completes his question.

Broy’s silent for a bit. He speaks eventually, just as the room begins to feel like a pressure cooker.

“Nope.” His voice cracks.

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