

Chapter 1

The Adventurer's Guild was alive with the usual sounds of mercenary life—clashing tankards, the murmur of a hundred conversations, and the occasional outburst of laughter or anger. A grand hall of stone and timber, it smelled of sweat, mead, and burning candle wax, with long wooden tables lined by warriors, rogues, and mages alike. The great quest board stood near the entrance, its surface cluttered with parchment bearing the promises of coin, glory, or a swift death.

At one of the many tables, Henry Alden sat with perfect posture, his polished armor gleaming under the lantern light. His fingers tapped anxiously against the hilt of his longsword as he reread the quest slip in his hand.

Blightling Extermination – Reward: 10,000 Eras.

A simple mission, or so it seemed. A fitting start for a newly anointed knight.

He took a steady breath. He had dreamed of this day since he was a child—his first true adventure. The first step on the road to knighthood, to honor, to becoming a legend like the heroes in the stories he had grown up with.

He was about to take a sip from his goblet when a shadow fell over the table.

A woman dropped into the seat across from him, the chair creaking under the weight of her armor. She was tall, with wavy red hair, emerald-green eyes, and a presence that seemed to drink the warmth from the air around her. Her movements were slow, deliberate—like a predator that had already won the hunt and saw no need to hurry.

She studied him for a moment, then spoke.

"You the knight?"

Henry straightened, clearing his throat. "Yes. Sir Henry Alden, of House Alden. Pleased to make your acquai—"

"Shut up, kid. You'll die if you talk that much in battle."

Henry blinked.

The woman leaned back, stretching, her dark cloak shifting to reveal a suit of heavy plate armor that had seen its fair share of battle. This woman was clearly a very experienced fighter. She exhaled sharply, as if already regretting this interaction.

"Name's Emma. I'm on the same quest. Try not to slow me down."

Before Henry could formulate a response, someone else practically flung themselves into the seat beside him.

"Ah-ha! So this is my party! What a merry band of misfits we shall be!"

Henry turned to see a small woman with a wide grin and a lute strapped to her back. She had wild dark hair, a loose, short sword at her waist, and what looked like a large walking stick slung on her back, wrapped in cloth. She held the kind of mischievous eyes that suggested she had nothing but bad intentions. "Name's Lillian! You're lucky to have me! I am a bard of legendary proportions, and, most importantly, the best drinking partner you'll ever have!"

Henry frowned. Emma sighed.

Before either of them could comment, another voice cut through the din.

"Ugh. You must be joking."

A high elf woman stood over them, arms crossed, eyes full of bored disdain. Her platinum hair cascaded over her finely tailored robes, and the way she carried herself suggested she had been born expecting the world to serve her on a gilded platter.

"These are my companions?" She scoffed, shaking her head. "I should have stayed in bed."

"You're free to leave, y'know," Lillian said cheerfully.

The elf scowled, then sat down.

"Elowyn Vaelaris," she said, as if it was supposed to mean something.

"Lovely to meet you," Henry offered.

Elowyn made a noise that suggested it was, in fact, not lovely to meet him.

Emma rubbed her temples. Lillian grinned like she had just won a bet with herself.

Then, the final member of their doomed little party arrived.

The ground trembled slightly as the largest orc Henry had ever seen pulled out a chair and sat down. Grom had gray skin a bald head, and a face that looked like it had been carved from a particularly serious mountain. He held a large tome in his hands that he was reading from. He continued flipping through the pages as if completely uninterested in the conversation.

After a long moment, without looking up, he muttered, "You are all going to get me killed."

Henry sighed. Emma downed her drink.

Lillian clapped her hands together. "Well, then! What are we waiting for? Let's go kill some blightlings!"

And just like that, their adventure began.

Henry was the first to break the awkward silence as the mismatched band made its way out of town, their weapons jingling and clanking against their armor.

"So..." he began, glancing around at his fellow adventurers, "has anyone fought blightlings before?"

Grom continued to walk with his head down, engrossed in his book, not paying attention.

"Yeah," Emma grunted. "They're fast. Stay alert."

Elowyn gave a haughty sniff, her nose high in the air. "I'm well-studied in the ways of monsters. They are primitive and best dispatched with cold, logical violence."

"Uh huh," Lillian said, giving Elowyn a sideways glance. "And what kind of monster have you fought?"

The elf hesitated, her lips pursing slightly. "I've... studied."

"Studying is different than doing, y'know?" Lillian pointed out.

"Silence, peasant," Elowyn snapped. "My knowledge will prove far superior to your brutish impulses."

Henry frowned. "We're a team. We shouldn't be fighting among ourselves."

"What are you talking about? It's good banter! Builds morale!" Lillian grinned, elbowing Emma lightly in the side.

Emma's face was expressionless as she replied, "Touch me again and I will break your arms with your own legs."

Lillian laughed nervously, scooting a few steps away from the stoic woman. "Right. Point taken. No touching."

Elowyn rolled her eyes, and Henry sighed, adjusting his grip on his sword.

Grom continued to walk in silence, his brow furrowed as he flipped the pages of his book, muttering to himself under his breath.

Lillian turned back towards Elowyn, a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. "So, tell us about this vast monster experience of yours. Have you slain many dire rats in your noble castle?"

"Enough!" Elowyn snapped. "My expertise far surpasses any of your pathetic attempts at monster slaying. You'd be nothing without my knowledge!"

"But you've never actually killed anything," Emma said matter-of-factly.

"Of course I haven't," Elowyn replied. "I am of noble blood. We don't sully ourselves with such base activities."

Emma snorted. "Then why are you here? Scrabbling for basic quests like any common mercenary?"

Elowyn flushed, her jaw clenching. "That's... that's none of your concern, you low-born ruffian."

Lillian laughed. "Oh, she's got you there, Princess!"

"I told you to stop calling me that!"

Henry held up his hands. "Please, everyone. We're a team, remember? Let's not fight."

"Yeah," Grom added. "You're all annoying. And we're all going to die because of it."

Elowyn threw up her hands. "You see? This is what I have to work with!"

Emma sighed, and Lillian burst into a fresh fit of giggles.

Henry just shook his head, wondering if this really had been the best decision for his first quest. He glanced back at Grom, still lost in his own world of arcane theory. He wasn't sure what he was more afraid of—the blightlings, or the journey ahead.

After an uncomfortable silence that hung in the air like a dark cloud, Emma finally spoke.

"We're getting close. Let me see the map again."

Henry fumbled for the parchment in his pouch and handed it to her.

"Looks like the blightlings have a lair up ahead," she said. "Grom, how good are you at fire spells?"

Grom shrugged, not looking up. "Fire is fine. But cold and electricity have interesting synergistic effects that are often overlooked. For example..."

"Another time. We need fire now."

Grom grunted in acknowledgment.

Emma turned to Henry. "What's our plan of attack, boy?"

Henry straightened. "As a knight of the realm, it is my duty to lead the charge and protect my companions. I will—"

Emma punched him in the chest. The force of the blow knocked him back a step, and he gasped, coughing. He blinked, still wheezing. "Wh...why did you...?"

"You're not ready to take point."

"But I'm a knight!" he protested.

"Punch me, boy. Right here, as hard as you can," she said, pointing to her breastplate.

"I will do no such thing!" he sputtered. "As a knight of the realm, I would never lay hands on—"

"Do it," she insisted, leaning down, hands on hips, her face cold, commanding. "Now. If we're to fight alongside one another, I need you to understand your place, and your limits. So hit me."

Henry stared at her. "This... this doesn't seem right."

"I wouldn't ask you to if I couldn't take it, my boy." Her eyes seemed to darken in challenge. "So come on. Punch me in my chest, as hard as you can. Or have you never struck a woman before?"

He frowned. Then he raised his fists. He drew his arm back and swung with all of his might. His fist connected with a dull thud. Emma barely flinched. It felt like he had just punched a solid steel wall.

"I'm taking point, kid," Emma said, giving him a gentle pat on his shoulder. "So revamp the plan. What's our move?"

Henry blinked, flexing his hand to make sure he hadn't broken any fingers. Then he took a breath. "Alright. We... we move slowly. I will follow, and the rest will stay close to me. Grom can use his magic to cover us."

She gave him a nod, a hint of a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. "Better."

"Um..." Elowyn said, "just one thing: how are we supposed to find the blightlings? I don't want to walk around in the forest all day."

"They'll be where there's a lot of rotting plants, and maybe animals." Grom said. "Blightlings are very destructive, and very obvious. I'm sure we'll run into them sooner than we'd like."

"Fine." Elowyn sniffed. "Let's get on with it."

Emma led the way into the thick brush, and Henry followed. Grom and Elowyn trudged behind, while Lillian hummed a tune, swinging her lute.

After a short trek, they emerged into a small clearing.

"Oh," said Elowyn.

There was no need for further explanation.

The whole place reeked of decay, and a thick, black, slimy substance coated the ground.

Henry drew his sword, and Emma drew hers.

"Here we go," she muttered. She strode into the clearing, her footsteps squishing on the muck-covered earth.

Lillian was the first to spot the creatures.

They looked like something that might once have been a man or an elf or even an orc, but were now twisted and deformed by a vile, black, tar-like corruption that covered their bodies and dripped from their maws. They moved with jerky, unnatural movements, like puppets being yanked around by clumsy, drunken strings. Their mouths were open in a permanent, silent scream, their eyes vacant

and soulless. The stench of rot and decay hung in the air, and their claws dripped with a viscous, black ichor that burned the ground where it fell.

Lillian's voice cut through the silence like a whip crack: "Hey! Blightlings! Over here!"

And with a strum of her lute, the creatures were drawn to her, swarming towards the bard.

Emma let out an annoyed grunt. "Grom. Burn them."

Grom unleashed a torrent of fire that engulfed the blightlings and set them ablaze.

Lillian whooped. "Ha! Burn you vile beasts!"

But then a creature leaped from the burning muck, its limbs alight and eyes burning with a sickening green light. It lunged at Lillian with its razor-sharp claws.

Lillian screamed. Emma was there in an instant, her shield smashing into the blightling and sending it sprawling.

Lillian hurled a flame at the downed creature, finishing it off.

"Nice hit!" she said, grinning.

Emma grunted, then pointed. "Focus."

Lillian nodded, then began playing a jaunty tune that seemed to fill her companions with a sense of energy and purpose. Henry felt a surge of strength and speed course through him as the bard's magic took hold.

He rushed in, swinging his blade with newfound vigor. Emma was beside him, smashing blightlings with her shield, her movements quick and decisive.

Elowyn cast protective spells, weaving wards and shields that deflected the claws of the blightlings. Grom's firebolts and lightning bolts rained down on the monsters, searing through their muck-covered bodies and setting them alight.

The battle was fierce and frenetic, the clearing echoing with the sounds of clashing blades, magical explosions, and the screams of the dying blightlings. The air filled with the smell of burning flesh and the thick, cloying odor of the creatures' tar-like corruption.

Finally, the last of the blightlings fell, and the clearing fell quiet.

Emma surveyed the carnage. "Good job. Burn the rest."

Grom nodded and cast another fire spell. The corpses were engulfed in flames.

Elowyn looked queasy, while Lillian grinned.

"Well," she said. "That was a good start!"

Chapter 2

"Cheers!"

Their tankards clinked together, spilling frothy ale across the table. The tavern was rowdy, the air filled with the raucous laughter and the clatter of plates and tankards. Henry Alden's cheeks were already flushed from the drink, his bright blue eyes glittering with the thrill of adventure.

Elowyn Vaelaris took a dainty sip of her ale, her face souring as she tasted the commoner's brew. "Ugh," she scoffed. "This is positively revolting. How can you stand it?"

"Easy," Lillian said, chugging hers. She slammed the tankard down with a hearty laugh. "Gulp, gulp, gulp, repeat."

Emma sat quietly, nursing her ale, her eyes hooded and thoughtful. "We did good work today," she murmured. "Blightlings are nasty business."

Henry beamed. "Yes! It was a fine quest, and a good beginning to our partnership!"

Lillian chuckled. "Well, I'm just happy to be with people who don't look like they're plotting to rob and kill me. Well, not most of the time." She shot Emma a sideways glance. "What about you, Elowyn?"

The elf sniffed, pushing her hair back in a dramatic flourish. "I suppose it was... passable," she conceded.

Lillian laughed. "High praise from Her Highness, everyone."

"Shut it, peasant," Elowyn snapped, but without her usual venom. Perhaps it was the ale, perhaps it was the relief of surviving their first battle together, but the group was slowly starting to feel more at ease with each other.

Even Grom, usually silent and stoic, allowed a hint of a smile to flicker across his craggy features. He lifted his tankard and grunted, "To us."

The others echoed the toast, and for a moment, they were just a group of adventurers enjoying the camaraderie that came with facing danger and emerging triumphant. The noise of the tavern seemed to fade into the background, and the flickering candlelight bathed them in a warm, golden glow. They laughed, they joked, and for the first time, they felt like they were becoming a team.

After the celebration, the heroes stumbled their way to an inn. They had three rooms, which they divided the rooms amongst themselves, splitting into groups of two and one. Elowyn insisted that she be given her own room, which left Emma and Lillian taking the second room, and Henry and Grom taking the third.

Lillian walked in, humming a soft, relaxing tune. "Hey, hey!" She called, "Do you have any requests, Emma?"

Emma shrugged. "Something quiet would be nice. I'm not in a talkative mood, I hope you understand."

Lillian frowned. "Oh come on. Don't be like that. You're going to get lonely if you don't make any friends. Let me guess—you were an only child, weren't you?"

Emma stared at the bard, her face unreadable. "Sure."

"Ha, I knew it!" Lillian laughed. "Don't worry, we'll have you out of your shell in no time! We'll be the bestest friends ever!"

"I doubt that," Emma replied flatly. "I've seen your type, bard. Your kind get killed by their own 'friends' more often than anyone."

Lillian shrugged, unfazed by Emma's icy demeanor. "True enough, true enough! But that's part of the fun, isn't it? Never knowing if you can trust the person next to you? The constant thrill of betrayal? The unexpected stab in the back?"

"Or in your case, the throat." Emma mumbled. "Never you mind. Go to sleep. We'll need you rested tomorrow."

Lillian yawned dramatically and sprawled out on her bed. "You got it, boss!"

In a matter of minutes, the bard's snores filled the room. Emma watched her for a moment before rolling over and closing her eyes, letting the sounds of the inn settle into the background as she tried to fall asleep.

"We should stop by the guild," Emma announced over breakfast the next day, "and see if we can find some better-paying work."

"Oooh! Like what?" Lillian asked, leaning forward, eyes sparkling. She had woken up with more energy than any of them.

Emma shrugged. "Something other than fighting monsters for pennies."

"Right, right." Lillian grinned. "And what do you suggest? A noble's quest, a secret mission from the king himself? Oooh, or maybe a dragon hunt!"

Elowyn sniffed. "Unlikely. Dragons are practically a myth these days. No one has seen one for decades, if they even existed at all."

Lillian stuck her tongue out at Elowyn. "I'll have you know that in the mountains to the east, I have personally encountered many—"

"You don't have to make up stories, you know," Elowyn interrupted. "We're all quite aware of your lack of real-life experience."

Lillian huffed. "Oh yeah? What about you, princess? What do you have in the way of real-world experience?"

"I've been trained by some of the greatest mages in Aetheria, and have studied in the libraries of—" Elowyn began.

Lillian waved her hand. "Boring! That's just book-learning!"

Elowyn glared at her. "It's more than you can claim."

"Anyway!" Henry interjected, hoping to steer the conversation back on track. "We should check the quest board and see what's available."

Emma nodded. "Agreed."

The party finished their breakfast, paid their tab, and set out for the guild.

When they arrived, they were met by a wall of parchment, each piece bearing the promise of adventure—or at least, a paycheck.

Emma scanned the board. "What do we think? Anything catching your eye?"

"Oooh, how about this one?" Lillian pulled down a piece of paper with a flourish. "A noble wants an escort to another town!"

Elowyn scoffed. "How dull. I refuse to waste my time babysitting a pompous aristocrat."

"But it's offering 20,000 Eras! Per day!" Lillian said.

Emma frowned, glancing at the posting again. "I'd say that's too high. Must be dangerous, somehow. We're not ready for anything like that yet."

Grom nodded in agreement. "Probably bandits."

"Simple enough," Elowyn said. "I'll burn them alive, and then—"

"And then the nobleman dies because we were so focused on killing bandits that we forgot to keep an eye out," Henry said. "We need to take a quest where we won't get blindsided and die."

Emma gave Henry a grin and patted his shoulder. "He's right. But I do think it's a doable quest. Escort are easy money if you know how to handle yourself."

"I'm assuming you mean to tell me you do know how to handle yourself?" Grom asked, raising his eyebrow. "I don't like the sound of getting blindsided by a bunch of thugs."

Emma smiled. "Oh, don't worry. It won't happen."

"So we are taking the quest, then?" Henry asked, confused.

"For twenty thousand a day?" Lillian said. "I should hope so. That's twice what we got paid yesterday for the whole party."

"Then we're taking it," Emma said, pulling down the parchment. "Come on. We'll see who we'll be working for."

They were ushered into a grand, opulent chamber, filled with ornate tapestries and a large wooden table in the center of the room.

Sitting at the table, drumming his fingers on the wood, was the man they had come to see: the lord, Cedric Grey.

"Ah, finally! My escorts are here!" he exclaimed, standing and striding over to the party. "You must forgive the wait, but it was a necessary formality. One can never be too careful in these uncertain times, especially when it comes to those who are tasked with safeguarding one's life and possessions." He extended a hand, a broad grin plastered across his round face. His jowls wobbled slightly with every movement of his head.

"I'm sure you can understand. My name is Cedric Grey, a noble of great renown and influence," he declared, his chest puffing up with pride. "I have need of capable adventurers to accompany me to the city of Riseron."

Henry shook the man's hand. "Of course, my lord."

"Good, good. And you lot look like you know your way around a sword or spell. Or whatever it is you do. You know how to handle yourselves. Yes, very promising indeed."

Henry nodded. "Thank you, Lord Grey."

Cedric waved a dismissive hand. "Please, call me Cedric."

"Of course... Cedric."

"Now," Cedric continued, settling back into his chair with a satisfied sigh, "I'm sure you're wondering why I'm offering such a handsome reward."

Lillian perked up at the mention of money. "Oh, we are indeed!"

Cedric chuckled, a sound that was more like a rumbling wheeze than laughter. "Well, as a man of importance, I'm often the target of unsavory characters. Bandits, highwaymen, that sort of thing."

Elowyn rolled her eyes. "So we're to be nursemaids for a pampered noble, is that it?"

"Elowyn!" Henry scolded. "We don't talk to clients that way!"

Cedric held up a hand, his jowls wobbling with his chuckle. "Now, now, no harm done. The lady elf speaks her mind. I can appreciate that."

Emma cleared her throat. "I assume there is more to this story, Lord Grey? Bandits would hardly justify such a high fee."

"Indeed, indeed." Cedric leaned forward, his face growing serious. "There are certain... interests that would see my business venture fail before it begins. And my travels are often fraught with peril."

Elowyn huffed. "What business venture? Are you some sort of merchant?"

"Of a kind," Cedric admitted, spreading his hands. "I'm an entrepreneur, my dear elf. I see opportunities others do not, and I seize them. That's what I'm doing now. Seizing opportunity. And that requires travel to the city of Riseron."

"Why not bring your manor guard with you?" Elowyn asked. "Surely you have guards and knights to do your bidding."

"Alas, my guards are needed to defend my estate, and as such, are not available to escort me to the city." He sighed dramatically, his chins quivering. "Such is the burden of wealth and success. There are always those who covet what one possesses and seek to take it by force. Hence my need for capable, loyal adventurers such as yourselves."

"Very well, sir." Henry said. "When do we leave?"

"Tomorrow morning, my good man," Cedric replied, rubbing his hands together. "But of course, you will be paid for your time today, and I can offer room and board here in my estate. A-and should you need to purchase additional equipment or supplies for the journey, I'm more than willing to reimburse your expenses. Within reason, of course."

Henry nodded, a small smile on his face. "Understood. Thank you for your generosity."

"Yes, yes, think nothing of it. You are protecting my life and livelihood, after all. It is only fair that I ensure you have everything you need for the task." Cedric rose to his feet once more and extended his hand to Henry, who clasped it firmly in agreement. "Tomorrow morning, we set out for Riseron!"

The party exchanged glances as Cedric shook hands with each of them in turn.

"Well, that was easy enough," Lillian said, grinning. "And we get free room and board. Nice!"

Elowyn sniffed. "I'd hardly call this a luxurious arrangement. It's barely adequate."

Emma sighed. "Well, at least we'll be making some real coin on this job. That's something to celebrate, I suppose."

Grom grunted, crossing his arms over his barrel chest. "I still say we should have asked more questions. This feels like a trap."

Emma shrugged. "It might be. We can ask later."

"Let's not be so hasty, Grom," Henry interjected, trying to mediate. "We've got a chance to earn some good money here, and learn about the world outside of Aurelia."

Grom grunted, unimpressed.

"Besides," Lillian added, nudging the big orc, "if it turns out to be a trap, it will be interesting, won't it? And we're getting a free equipment run! What do you need?"

"A better book."

"Oh, boring! How about some armor?" She glanced at his bare chest and hide trousers. "You're a big guy, I bet you could carry an entire smithy's worth of armor!"

"I'll think about it." He shrugged. "You lot do what you need."

The group made their way back into the town, ready to make the most of the free supplies and accommodations they had been given, as well as the chance to prepare for the journey ahead.

They were gathered around the dining hall table, enjoying a hearty dinner provided by Cedric's kitchen staff. A rich stew of lamb and vegetables simmered in bowls before them, the scent filling the air with a savory warmth that set their mouths watering.

As they ate, the group exchanged looks, their faces reflecting various levels of satisfaction—or in the case of Emma, a stoic indifference. Elowyn, as usual, was the most vocal in her discontent.

"This is barbaric," she sniffed, prodding at her bowl with a long, slender finger. "How am I expected to dine on this... peasant food? And this wine is like vinegar!" She lifted her glass, swirling the dark red liquid within. "Is this what Aurelian nobility have been reduced to? Or is this Cedric one of those new money types?"

Emma shrugged, tearing a hunk of bread from the loaf on the table and dipping it into her bowl. "Who cares? Food's food, wine's wine."

Elowyn's eyes widened, scandalized. "How can you say such a thing?! These are matters of great import! Why, the wine we enjoy reflects our refinement, our taste, our status!" She sipped her glass, her lips puckering in distaste. "And this... swill reflects nothing of the sort!"

Grom, his large orcish form hunched over his bowl, slurped noisily at his stew, his tusks glistening with the broth. "I don't know what you're complaining about," he rumbled. "It's not very good."

"Oh, of course you'd think that, orc!" Elowyn retorted. "I'm sure your kind would be perfectly happy eating nothing but meat and ale!"

"What else do you need?" Grom asked, honestly confused. Elowyn just glared at him.

"Regardless," Emma continued, ignoring their bickering, "we should be focusing on more important matters. Like the job at hand. Cedric is clearly worried about something more than bandits, but he won't tell us what it is. I say we keep our eyes and ears open."

"He did mention he had many rivals, and that his business ventures were often met with hostility from his competitors," Henry added, mopping up the last of his stew with a crust of bread. "I'd be wary, as well. He's paying us a lot of coin for this job, so he clearly sees danger where we don't."

"Or maybe he's just rich," Lillian chimed in, popping a grape into her mouth. "He can afford to hire the best of the best."

"We're hardly the best," Grom rumbled, earning him a sharp look from Lillian. "What? It's true. We've barely survived our first job."

Emma shrugged. "Still, he could've turned us down, but he didn't. We should consider why that is."

"Maybe he likes our faces," Lillian joked, batting her lashes. "I've been known to make a man go crazy from just a glance."

Elowyn rolled her eyes. "Yes, that's exactly it. He saw your face and was so enamored, he hired us on the spot, no questions asked. Brilliant."

"Exactly! You understand me, princess." Lillian grinned.

"Enough," Emma interjected. "The point is, we need to stay vigilant. Keep our guard up, and watch each other's backs."

The group murmured their assent, returning to their food, their thoughts drifting towards the journey ahead, the unknown dangers lurking beyond the city walls.

As they finished their meal and retired to their chambers for the evening, the group couldn't help but feel a growing sense of anticipation. The journey to Riseron promised to be anything but ordinary, and as adventurers, they were ready to face whatever challenges came their way. With the warm glow of the hearth in the dining hall fading behind them, they slipped into restless sleep, dreams filled with the thrill of adventure, and the uncertainty of what lay ahead.

That night, Emma lay awake in her bed. Her room was dark and quiet, but she was wide awake. She desperately needed to bathe. But she wasn't going to risk trying to use a common bathtub. She requested an estate maid servant to fetch her a basin, some hot water and a rag. She would make due with a sponge bath for now. As the servant left her room, she slowly removed her armor, and her underclothes, and began to clean her body.

Emma looked at her own body in the mirror. Tattoos from her days in the cult covered her body. A huge blood eagle painted her back red: a full-body depiction of snapped ribs and ripped skin, pulled out lungs and torn veins—her first kill as a disciple, etched into her skin. And marked over the red

was the symbol of Magnus the Sunderer, the god of murder: a black ring, split in half and slightly offset. Other markings were scattered across her skin, intricate in the way they covered her thighs and her arms, black and detailed, the marks of an accomplished killer. She grinned into the mirror.

Emma heard a knock on her door, and quickly put her clothes back on. She opened the door, and saw Henry standing outside, waiting patiently. She stepped aside to let him in.

"I was thinking we should go over the plans for tomorrow." he said, standing by the table. He eyed the basin, and Emma's towel, but he said nothing of it. "You seem like you've done escort missions before, so I thought I should defer to your expertise."

Emma shrugged. "Not a lot to plan, really. Just keep an eye on the client and make sure he doesn't die. We ride in a wagon, he sits inside."

Henry nodded. "Right. And what about potential threats? Bandits? Or one of Cedric's rivals he spoke of?"

"Bandits, I don't think they will be much of an issue," she replied, looking thoughtful. "They won't attack if they think we aren't worth it. But an organized attempt on his life, though? That might be something to look out for. Keep an eye out for anything suspicious."

Henry frowned, thinking. "Like what? Cedric seemed to think it was something serious."

Emma sighed. "I don't know. Usually, I'd recommend catching one of their scouts, gutting him slowly so they can hear his screams, and displaying him atop one of the carts, but I have a sneaking suspicion that's off the table for you." She flashed him a terrifying grin.

Henry looked disgusted, then gave her a hard look. "Are... are you joking? Tell me that was a joke."

"If that makes you feel better, then of course I was." Emma laughed, her eyes twinkling with dark amusement. "Anyway, the most likely threat is going to come when we're isolated. So we'll keep moving when we're in secluded areas or at night. We'll get our rest on main roads during the day, or take our rests in villages in between here and Riseron."

"Okay," Henry said, taking a deep breath. "That seems like a good plan. We should go over it with the others tomorrow morning."

Emma nodded. "Sounds like a plan. Now get out of my room, boy. I've got a bath to finish." She said, grinning at him. "Unless you'd like to stay?" she purred.

"I'm leaving!" He yelped, rushing for the door. He slammed it behind him.

Emma chuckled as she returned to the basin, dipping the cloth back into the warm water, a sly smirk on her lips as she continued her cleaning routine.

Chapter 3

"Could I interest any of you fine folk in a tale or two?" Lillian asked, strumming her lute, the wagon rolling gently down the road as it left Aurelia's city limits.

Henry shrugged, sitting atop the wagon, his legs dangling. "I don't see why not. Anything to pass the time."

Lillian grinned. "Well, then! Gather 'round, friends! I'll tell you the story of a sweet little lass named Lillian, and her quest for fame and glory."

Elowyn rolled her eyes, Emma snickered, and Grom didn't even seem to notice, not bothering to look up from his copy of "Applied Magical Theorems."

"There once was a lass named Lillian, who was as fair as a summer's day," she began, her voice ringing out over the countryside. "You fine folk may know her the bard of legend, the minstrel of myth. But alas! Even the tallest mountain was once a mere stone, ere the rain and the wind carved her shape into beauty."

"Did you write these lines yourself?" Henry asked with a smile.

"Of course not!" Lillian laughed. "I do not memorize lines, my goodman, for the true minstrel has the power of improvisation on her side. The ability to make words flow from the tongue, to paint pictures in the mind's eye! But enough of this, for I am distracting myself from the story, and that is a poor show. Now, this sweet little lass named Lillian—myself, you understand, and I shall refer to myself by name for the purposes of the narrative, but it is me, I promise—" she paused, waiting for the laughs. She didn't get any. "Now, Lillian, as a child, never knew her parents. They died when she was but a wee little lass, and her first memory was of the deep woods of Huashan. So, you see, my dear friends, she was raised by none other than a pack of wolves!"

"Of course she was," Grom rumbled from the corner, not looking up from his book.

"Why, I'm glad you asked, dear Grom! Yes, a pack of wolves!" Lillian exclaimed, strumming her lute in a quick flurry of notes. "For in those deep, dark woods of Huashan, where the moon hangs low, and the shadows dance with a life of their own, a young Lillian found her first family among the pack. At least, until her coming of age, at the ripe young age of seventeen."

"What happened when she came of age?" Elowyn asked, a bored expression on her face. "Did they throw you out for being a filthy human?"

Lillian shook her head, a somber look in her eyes. "They didn't, no. But our young lass wanted more than simply musk deer and howling at the moon. She had a thirst for knowledge. For music. For adventure."

Emma nodded along. "And so you went out into the world."

"Yes!" Lillian's face broke into a wide grin. "She went out into the world. Oh, and what a wide, wonderful world she found! She traveled far, saw strange lands and met many people, some good, some bad, and learned to sing, to dance, and to play the lute. For the power of music is the one universal language that all folk understand. Why, in Huashan, she learned to play the this lovely lute you see here!"

Emma smiled at the lass. "So, what did you do next? How did you become a bard?"

"Well, once she learned to sing, and to dance, and to play the lute, she set out on many a wondrous adventure!" Lillian's eyes were sparkling, her fingers dancing on the strings, the melody of her music setting the pace of her tale. "Oh, such adventures! And she met many wonderful people too! She fought alongside heroes, drank and sang with rogues and scoundrels, and bedded the fairest of folk! It was an exciting time for young Lillian!"

Grom sighed. "And now you are a bard, traveling from tavern to tavern, entertaining folk with songs of your own adventures?"

"Why, of course!" Lillian exclaimed, strumming the lute with a flourish. "What could be a better way to make one's living? For the life of a bard is a free life, one which flows like the wind and rivers! The only life I know how to live, and the only one I wish to know."

Henry smiled, shaking his head. "And what about you, Emma? What is your tale?"

Emma chuckled darkly. "I doubt you'd believe it."

"I'll believe it if you tell it," Henry insisted. "Come on, Emma. You've barely shared a thing about yourself."

"Very well." She cleared her throat. ""I was raised in the north. I had a normal upbringing," Emma shrugged. "I always wanted to be a paladin, ever since I was a child. I always wanted to bring order and justice the the world, and protect the weak from evil." She glanced at Henry. "I was a member of the Knights of the Revenant before they fell. Surely, you've heard of them, boy."

"Who hasn't?" Henry smiled brightly in awe. "Their stories are legendary! Surely, you weren't at the Battle of the Red Plains, were you?"

"Of course she wasn't!" Lillian laughed. "She's still here, isn't she?"

Emma laughed bitterly. "No, no. I was there."

"You were?" Elowyn asked, looking up, surprised.

"I was."

There was a brief moment of silence. Then, Emma continued. "Anyway. After that, I guess I just kept working as a paladin. Just as a solo adventurer instead. I never really liked working in teams until this one." She smiled at Henry. "The Knights were a special bunch of folk. A cut above the rest. They always did good work."

"Amazing," Grom rumbled, turning the page. "So that is why you're here? To do good?"

"Of course." Emma shrugged. "I'm a paladin. Noble, honorable, and just. I am a paragon of virtue and valor." She smiled.

Lillian chuckled, strumming the lute in her lap. "Of course you are! That's why I like you, Emma! You're the real deal!" she said with a grin. "A true hero!"

"Sure." Emma shrugged, looking away. "A true hero." She smiled. "Thanks, Lillian." She looked out the wagon. "But that's my tale, really. Not much to tell. I'm just a hero. Like you, Henry." She smiled at the boy, who grinned back at her.

"I'm glad you consider me one," he replied with a grin. "It is nice to meet other knights, especially ones like you. It's an honor, really."

Emma laughed. "No need for flattery, kid."

"Are we there yet?" Elowyn groaned, her legs folded underneath her, a thick tome propped open on her lap. "We've been traveling for hours. How much further must we go?"

Cedric, who sat at the front of the wagon, chuckled. "Oh, hardly, my friend. Risington is quite the ways away. But of course, that is exactly why I'm paying daily instead of a flat rate. One must compensate their help accordingly. Why, I have no doubt that we shall be the best of friends by the end of this journey!"

Elowyn rolled her eyes. "If we must. At least tell me we'll be stopping in one of the villages soon. I'd rather not spend more time than necessary on the road."

Cedric nodded. "Yes, yes, of course. Much safer in the villages, after all. One mustn't risk traveling in the wild, especially with so many bandits about these days. Yes, yes, we shall stop at the first village we encounter. And what luck, too! For there is one not a day's ride away, at our pace."

The elf sighed, her shoulders slumping in relief. "Thank the gods. I've had quite enough of this rocking wagon."

The rest of the party, seated on the long wooden bench in the center of the wagon, exchanged glances. Grom, his eyes fixed on the pages of his spellbook, merely grunted in response, while Emma chuckled.

"What's the matter, elf?" she asked. "Don't like the fresh air?"

Elowyn huffed, her nose wrinkling in disgust. "I'd rather be in civilized society, thank you very much. After all, that is why civilized society was invented. To avoid this," she gestured vaguely at the countryside passing by them, "horridness."

Henry laughed. "Oh come on. The fresh air, the sights, it's all quite lovely, don't you think?"

Elowyn sniffed. "If you find fields and dirt so appealing. I can't understand how anyone can live like this. No shops, no theaters, no fine dining, it's positively barbaric!"

Lillian giggled. "Barbaric, you say? My, do I have stories to share with you, princess. Tales of adventure and excitement. Why, I was once in the wild, hunting a vicious bear with my friends, when—"

Elowyn groaned, her eyes widening in dismay. "Please, no. Spare me the tales of your escapades in the woods. I'd rather not hear about the time you spent seducing bears, or whatever other nonsense you're about to share."

Emma chuckled. "Aww, Elowyn, why not let Lillian have her fun? It's a long trip, and we need something to pass the time, right?" She leaned back on her bench, her legs stretching out in front of her, and her eyes sparkling with mischief.

Henry shook his head. "Please don't encourage her, Emma. We're going to be on the road for hours."

Elowyn huffed, pushing her hair over her shoulder. "Fine, I'll humor you, peasant. Go on, regale me with your stories."

Lillian grinned, her fingers strumming on the strings of her lute, a lively melody filling the wagon as the horses trotted down the road. "Alright, so there I was, hunting a vicious bear..."

That night, they had arrived at a village, a small but well-defended little hamlet that seemed to have seen its share of attacks. They were all eager for a hot meal and a soft bed, but there was only one inn. And it was small.

The party was forced to take up the entire second floor. Two rooms - the men would have one room, the women would have another. It was a simple enough arrangement.

After a filling meal, and some time to unwind, Emma had excused herself, and headed back upstairs. She waited for a few minutes for her friends to start going to bed as well.

Lillian plopped into her mattress, her long brown hair fanning out behind her as she sighed contentedly.

"Hey, Lillian?" Emma said. "Could I... Could I ask a favor from you?"

Lillian looked over to her and cocked her eyebrow. "You're a knight of the Revenant and you're scared of the dark or something?"

"No," Emma said, a hint of embarrassment creeping into her voice. "Could you play that last song again? It was... It was nice."

"Of course." Lillian smiled. She reached for her lute.

"Ugh," Elowyn groaned, pulling the covers over her head. "Could you do that someplace else, please?"

Emma shook her head, her voice soft. "Oh. Nevermind."

"I'm not staying up for that," Elowyn huffed.

Lillian winked. "We can go somewhere else." She stood up, gathering her lute. She opened the door and stepped outside, waiting for Emma. "Coming?"

Emma followed, her eyes sparkling. The bard led her out into the fields, the tall grass swaying in the breeze under the stars. "You didn't have to come out here, you know," she whispered, as the two of them walked together, away from the town. She felt exposed. Vulnerable. Her skin prickled. She had stripped her armor and left it at the inn.

"Don't be silly. I'm happy to play for you. Besides, the moon is lovely tonight. And we don't get to see many nights like this, do we?" Lillian said, looking up at the starry night. "It's nice, isn't it? A peaceful moment."

"Yeah..." Emma's voice trailed off, as she sat on the grass, looking up at the sky, the stars twinkling like tiny diamonds. "I guess it is."

Lillian sat next to her. She began to play her lute. A soft melody, a slow and sweet song, filled the air between them. "At fifteen, I was sent to war, at eighty I returned..." she began, her fingers strumming gently along the strings. Emma felt something inside her ache. Something that she hadn't felt for years.

The song continued on, about an old warrior, returning home from war, but to nothing. He prepared a meal, but wept when he had none to share it with. It was an ancient Huashanese poem, from the Fractured Era. The lyrics spoke of loss, of loneliness, and of the pain of coming home to a world he lost before he had the time to love it.

Emma closed her eyes as Lillian's soft voice filled the night air. She leaned sleepily against Lillian's shoulder as she felt tears forming in her eyes.

"Are you okay, Em?" Lillian asked, her fingers never ceasing to play the lute. She gently pulled the woman closer. "It's a sad song. It was always one of my favorites. But I guess it's a bit much."

"It's fine." Emma opened her eyes again, staring up at the stars above, the tears spilling down her cheeks. "It's a beautiful song." She rested her head against the girl's shoulder and listened to her play. "I like this." She sniffed. "It's been a long time since I heard anything like this. A long time."

Lillian nodded, her own eyes shining. She continued to play as Emma drifted off.

When they awoke, they were still in the field. The sun rose just beyond the trees, and the sounds of birds filled the air. Emma felt... well rested. Better rested than she had felt in months. Years,

perhaps. She felt a soft, small form shift in her arms. It was Lillian, her lute placed softly on the grass beside them. Her hair had come undone in the night. Her long brown locks spilled out across Emma's lap.

She smiled, running her fingers through Lillian's hair. She looked at the sleeping bard. Her eyes flickered, her lips parted slightly. The sunlight danced on her face. Lillian's eyes fluttered open.

"Wha...?" She mumbled sleepily. She looked up at Emma, a small smile on her lips. "Good morning."

Emma blushed. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to keep you out here all night."

"Don't be." Lillian grinned, her eyes still heavy with sleep. "You're really warm, you know?"

Emma laughed. She stood up. "Well, let's get back before the others wake up." She helped the bard stand.

They returned to the inn. Lillian looked back at Emma, her eyes sparkling in the morning light.

"Thanks, Lillian." Emma mumbled.

The bard laughed. "No problem, Em."

They opened the door to their room. Elowyn was still asleep, snoring loudly. She seemed to be a heavy sleeper.

"Perhaps we should have breakfast instead?" Emma suggested.

"Sure." Lillian smiled, following her.

Elowyn snorted, her snoring stopping for a moment, and then she rolled over, muttering in her sleep.

Grom sat at a table in the inn common room, munching on a piece of bacon, and looking up from his book when he heard footsteps coming down the stairs.

He looked up to see Lillian and Emma enter. They sat at his table.

"Morning," he said, looking back to his book.

"Morning!" Lillian smiled. "How's the food?"

"It's quite good."

Lillian laughed. "Of course Grom the Big would like the food."

"Hey, hey... I didn't get this big from gluttony. What are you impling?" Grom said, looking over to them with a mock hurt look on his face.

"Well, how did you get so big, then?" Lillian teased, a playful look in her eyes. "You're the biggest orc I've ever seen."

"I was born this way!" He said, crossing his arms. "It's in my name, you know."

Emma grinned, leaning in. "Grom the Big? Figures." She paused. "Why... why do you use magic, anyways? You'd be an absolute menace with an axe. You're huge."

Grom shrugged. "That's what my sister always said. And I did use weapons for a while." He chuckled, slipping a strip of silk between the pages he was reading and closing his book. "I had this large club, carved from an uprooted tree. Used to swing it around like a toy. But that got old pretty quick."

Lillian nodded. "And then?"

Grom sighed. "I got tired of it. I was always the best. There was no challenge in that." He smiled. "But magic... now that was something I could dedicate time to learning. Something that I could start from the ground up and build. There's a beauty in learning, you know?"

Grom picked up the book he was reading, showing the cover to Lillian. "Take this, for example. It covers the fundamental theorems of arcane casting, specifically the entropy of magical energy, and the practical application of said theorems in a controlled laboratory setting. Fascinating."

"That sounds horribly boring," Lillian groaned. "Magic is supposed to be flashy, loud, exciting! Like my lute!"

"Yes, of course, but understanding why your lute works the way it does is what allows for further experimentation. That's what I'm getting at. Learning the fundamentals allows you to build, to explore, to create new things," Grom replied. He pointed at her lute. "Take that instrument of yours, for example. Do you understand what makes it function the way it does?"

"Of course I do!" she huffed. "It's an enchanted Huashanese instrument."

"Right." He pointed at it again. "But do you know why it works the way it does?"

She nodded. "Because the life breath of my ancestors flows through me, and I use the lute to tap into that and bring the music to life. That is how it works. I feel my ancestors, and the music comes."

Grom gave her a strange look. "What?"

Emma snorted.

"You wouldn't understand." Lillian crossed her arms, puffing out her cheeks. "It is a Huashanese thing."

"I'm sure." Grom nodded slowly. "You'll have to... explain it to me sometime. It sounds interesting."

"The cheese here is to die for!" Cedric exclaimed, as the group of adventurers sat around a large table at the inn, enjoying a hearty meal. "You can't go wrong with a good, aged cheese! Ah, such flavor! Such complexity!"

Elowyn, who had been poking at her plate with a fork, sighed. "I just don't understand why we can't go anywhere with proper seasoning. Why must everything be so... uncouth? I've had boiled water with more culture than this." She pushed the plate away from her, shaking her head.

Lillian, who had been shoveling the food down her throat with a vigor that surprised the rest of the group, laughed. "What's the matter, Elowyn? Can't handle the food of commoners?"

Emma smirked, leaning back in her chair. "It's not that bad, really. It's certainly not the worst thing I've eaten, that's for sure." She took another bite, chewing thoughtfully.

"What is the worst thing you've eaten?" Lillian asked.

"Story for another time."

Cedric shook his head, his jowls wobbling as he chewed on a mouthful of cheese. "I'm just glad to have found some good food after that long journey. And, of course, good company!"

Henry smiled. "Thank you, Lord Cedric."

Cedric laughed, a deep, hearty sound. "Ah, Henry! No need for such formalities. You are my escorts, my friends. I trust you with my very life!"

Henry smiled. "Thank you. It is an honor to serve you, my lord."

Cedric waved a hand, his face breaking into a broad grin. "Think nothing of it! Now, eat, drink! We have many miles to go yet."

Lillian looked up, her mouth still stuffed with food. "Hey, Cedric, where are you going, anyway? You've never really said what your business is in Risington."

"Oh, nothing special, my dear. Just some business dealings. The life of a merchant, you know." He chuckled, taking a sip from his mug. "Buying and selling, wheeling and dealing. The lifeblood of commerce!"

Grom raised an eyebrow. "What business, though?"

"Oh, a bit of this and that. Trinkets and baubles. The sort of things that rich folk love to have around their houses. You know how they are, always wanting to show off their wealth and status."

Lillian nodded, grinning. "Sounds fun."

"Fun indeed! And lucrative, my dear. Quite lucrative."

"Really?" Elowyn's eyes narrowed. "If you are so wealthy, why do you need us to escort you at all? Couldn't you hire your own guards?"

"You're here, are you not?" Cedric chuckled. "My... impromptu guard! A blessing, really."

Grom leaned in. "Why are you really in Aurelia, though? It is rare that merchants from Riseron come out this way. It is quite far from home for a trinket and bauble salesman, isn't it?"

"Business, my good man! Business. Opportunity calls, and one must answer!" Cedric exclaimed, waving his arms. "Besides, I have always been a fan of travel. The open road, the endless possibilities. It's exhilarating!"

Elowyn rolled her eyes, a bored look crossing her features. "If you say so."

"I do, indeed!" Cedric nodded. "Now, eat! Drink! We must be well-rested and well-fed for the journey ahead."

Lillian nodded, stuffing a slice of cheese into her mouth. "Don't mind if I do."

Chapter 4

"So, Cedric, why don't you have any guards of your own? Surely, you can afford them?" Henry asked.

The sun had set, and they were on the move once more. Emma, Grom and Henry sat at the back of the wagon, their eyes peeled for danger, while Elowyn and Lillian sat at the front, chatting with Cedric.

Cedric laughed, a high, nasally sound. "Well, I don't usually transport this sort of cargo. Besides, it's much less conspicuous with a merry band of adventurers, as opposed to an army of hired guards." He winked.

Grom looked around, scanning the landscape for potential threats, and then back to Cedric. "What do you mean by 'this sort' of cargo? Are you hauling something dangerous?" His hand slowly crept toward the tome in his bag.

"Oh, nothing like that, my friend! Nothing like that at all," Cedric chuckled, waving his hands. "Just..." He paused for a moment, glancing at the adventurers. "Important cargo. Valuable. It's not often that I have the chance to work with such rare and precious merchandise. It's quite the opportunity for a man like myself."

"What kind of rare and precious?" Emma asked, her hand resting on her dagger handle, ready to draw at a moment's notice.

Cedric's eyes widened. "Oh! I, um... it's, er... confidential, I'm afraid. I can't just go around blabbing about what I have in my possession. You understand, don't you?"

"Confidential?" Elowyn scoffed, raising an eyebrow. "If you have something that dangerous, you should tell us. It could be a matter of life and death, and I would rather not die in this wagon."

"No, it's not dangerous!" Cedric laughed nervously. "I assure you, it's just..." He paused again. "Important. Ah, sentimentally, of course. Just, ah... just trust me."

Grom leaned in. "And why should we trust you?"

Cedric waved his arms. "My dear orc, you are my guards, after all! We're all on the same side here! We have a contract together, don't we? We're partners in this endeavor! A shared goal!"

"A shared goal you have told us nothing about!"

"Why, to get to Risington safely, of course! That is the goal!" Cedric smiled.

Emma frowned, looking to Grom and Henry, who looked equally suspicious. "Right."

Elowyn shook her head, a small smirk on her face. "I knew he was shady, but this is ridiculous. The nerve of him."

Cedric laughed. "Now now, my lady, there is no need for that sort of talk! I assure you there is nothing sinister at work here!"

Henry raised an eyebrow. "What exactly is in this wagon? You hired us to escort you. What is it you're escorting?"

Cedric adjusted his collar nervously. "Ah, now, that's a little personal. I can't go around telling everyone about what I have. Especially not to strangers." He eyed the party suspiciously.

Elowyn crossed her arms. "You hired us. We are escorting you. You should be able to trust us."

"Trust?" Cedric snorted, looking away from her. "I don't trust anyone. That is the way of business. I'm sure you know that, my dear elf. No, I'm afraid you must remain ignorant of my wares for now."

"Have it your way, then." Emma shrugged. "I'll just gut you, leave you on the side of the road, and find out myself."

"Emma!" Henry looked horrified. "We're not murdering anyone!"

"Not if he spills." Emma grinned, unsheathing her dagger and resting it against her shoulder. "Now talk."

Cedric paled, his hands gripping his robes tightly. "Now now now, my lady, there is no need for that sort of behavior!" He stammered, looking at her in alarm. "I... I'm just... just..."

"Talk," she demanded, stepping towards the front of the wagon. She slipped a dagger from her belt, holding it in front of him.

"It's... it's... my life savings!" Cedric exclaimed, throwing up his hands in defense. "Well, half of it, at least! All in this one wagon! It's everything I've earned over the years, everything I own!"

"And where are you taking all your life's earnings?" Henry asked.

Cedric swallowed, his eyes flickering between the dagger in her hand and the stern looks on the faces of the other adventurers. "Risington! I told you that already! To... to invest! I'm meeting a potential business partner there!"

"Why the hell didn't you go through the banks or the Merchant's Guild or something?" Grom asked. "That's an absurdly reckless way to transfer that amount of wealth."

"I... I can't go to the guilds!" Cedric cried. "They're in bed with my rivals, they are! They're trying to steal my hard-earned money! And they charge a despicable amount for their services, anyway. This was much cheaper. And safer! I have guards now!"

"This is absurd," Emma growled, her grip on her dagger tightening. "What are you playing at, Cedric?"

"He's not playing at anything," Lillian interjected. She had slipped to the back of the wagon, where she had opened one of the crates and was rummaging around. "It's money. Gold coins."

"Look, I was scared to tell you!" Cedric cried out. "I didn't know how you would react to seeing so much coin!"

Elowyn laughed. "So much coin? This is a lot to you?" she scoffed.

"What? It's more than most adventurers will ever see in a lifetime!" He stammered. "I didn't know if you would try to rob me or not! It is a legitimate concern!"

Emma sighed. "We're adventurers, Cedric, not thieves."

"And if we were, your risk assessment is terrible," Grom muttered, turning back to his book. "The Merchant's Guild might charge high rates for large ventures, but it's still better than having it all stolen if you picked the wrong party."

Cedric let out a breath, his eyes still darting nervously between the adventurers. "Well, now you know the truth," he said, wiping a bead of sweat from his forehead.

Emma nodded, putting away her dagger and leaning against the side of the wagon. "You're welcome."

"You know what this reminds me of?" Lillian grinned, hopping over to Emma. She leaned against the larger woman, resting her head on her shoulder. Her fingers hovered over the strings on her lute. "A song. I know a song for this moment!"

"Oh gods, not another one," Elowyn groaned.

"Oh, great heavens!" Cedric cried. The wagon bucked as they raced down the dirt road, their horses at a full gallop. Trees rushed by on either side, and the sound of thundering hooves filled the air.

Emma gripped the sides of the wagon as it swayed, the wheels bouncing over rocks and roots. Lillian clutched at her, holding on tight. "I think I can hear them getting closer!" Emma called out over the noise, her head snapping around to look behind them.

"I see them! Three riders!" Henry shouted his eyes fixed on the horizon.

Grom scanned the map. Lillian stood next to him, holding up a lantern in the dark. "How far away are we from the nearest town?" she asked, her voice strained.

"At least a full day's ride!" Grom shouted. "But we're almost out of the forest! We can cut through the mountain pass into the badlands!"

The badlands?" Cedric cried, his eyes wide. "That's orc country!" He paused for a moment, the realization dawning on his face. "Oh."

Grom grinned. "Yes, I think it's our best bet right now."

"Even if we can lose them there, that's still a good distance." Henry frowned. "How fast can the horses run for that long?"

"They don't need to run," Emma pointed towards the rocky hills. "They just need to get into the pass. The terrain is a natural choke. They can't flank us. It'll be hard going for the horses, but that's the same for whoever is chasing us." She turned to Grom, who was looking up at the hills as well.

Grom looked over at Emma. He grinned, nodding his agreement. "Exactly."

Henry nodded. "Alright, let's go for it then."

"Hang on tight!" Cedric shouted, whipping the reins. The horses charged onward, galloping at full speed as they raced towards the rocky outcroppings.

The wagon bounced wildly as they made their way up the mountain. Cedric trembled as they swayed and jostled. "Oh, gods! Oh, gods!" he cried. "This is madness!"

"Lillian, snuff that lantern." Henry commanded. "We need to stay as hidden as possible." Lillian nodded, extinguishing the light. "Grom and Elowyn, watch our backs." They both turned to face the darkness, watching for any signs of the riders.

The moon was bright, and it illuminated the rugged landscape around them. The mountains loomed overhead, casting dark shadows across the hills. The sound of the horses' hooves was deafening, and it was impossible to hear if their pursuers were close. But the silence that had fallen over the group was tense. Lillian began plucking at her lute, muffling the strings slightly with her palm as she did so.

"Do you think they're bandits? Or some of our client's enemies?" Emma asked.

Grom shrugged. "Who knows? Doesn't matter."

Emma smiled, glancing back at him. "True enough." She looked ahead, the path getting steeper and steeper as they climbed.

"Can't believe they'd follow us into the mountains." Grom grunted.

"Why not?" Emma asked. "Especially if they knew what we're hauling."

Cedric, who had been holding on to the reins with a death grip, shivered. "Oh, gods. You don't think... they know, do you? I mean... surely not..."

"You're the paranoid one. You tell me." Emma glanced at him, her expression cold. "You've told us nothing about your business."

"I've said it once, and I'll say it again! My business dealings are my legitimate!" Cedric replied. "I have nothing to hide!"

Grom sighed, shaking his head. "You know, for a merchant who values discretion, you seem very willing to shout your secrets to the entire world."

"I'm just..." Cedric stammered. "I suppose so. Perhaps I might've let it slip sometime before and not known it."

"Look, it doesn't matter how they know." Emma sighed. "All that matters now is that we lose them."

"I see them!" Elowyn whispered. "They're just behind!"

"How many?" Grom asked. "Still three?"

"A lot more than that. It's too hard to tell." She frowned, squinting in the dark.

Cedric gulped, looking around nervously. "Oh gods. What do we do? Do we turn and fight them?"

"We keep going," Henry said. "Grom and Elowyn, keep an eye on them. Throw a few spells if they get too close."

"Now you're speaking my language, friend," Grom chuckled. His fingertips glowed slightly. "Just say the word, and I'll blast them all."

Elowyn nodded. She kept a watchful eye on the trail behind them as the riders approached. Lillian had stopped playing her lute. Her hands clutched her cloth-wrapped walking stick, and she was humming softly to herself.

"They're gaining!" Elowyn shouted. "Now, Grom!"

Grom grinned. He conjured a ball of fire in his palm and flung it towards the pursuing riders. It traveled not five feet when a high pitched whistle sounded through the air as the fireball was snuffed out.

"Shit... there's a mage in their party," Grom growled, his brow furrowing. "Powerful one, too. I'm getting countered."

Elowyn scoffed. "Typical wizards. Meddling with arcane forces not in their blood." She smirked. "Step aside, you hack. I'll show you how real magic is done."

She raised her hand, a blue aura forming around her fingertips, as she closed her eyes, whispering something. A bolt of lightning shot out from her hand. It arced through the air, and was snuffed out as a second high pitched whistle echoed through the air. "Well, shit."

"Our pursuers have a mage!" Grom shouted. "Powerful one! These aren't regular bandits!"

Cedric gulped. "What do we do now? What can we do?"

A bright flash erupted within the wagon as a deafening crack sounded from inside the wagon. The horses reared, whinnying, and bolted forward. Cedric yelped as he yanked back on the reins, trying to steady them. Emma grunted, holding on tight.

"What the fuck was that?!" she shouted. "Lillian?!"

Lillian was crouched on the floor of the wagon. She exhaled steadily, her eyes fixated on a point behind them, as her hands slowly lowered her walking stick. She had unwrapped it, the plain canvas pooled along the floor at her feet. In her hands, she clutched a Huashanese matchlock rifle. It was long, and thin, with a stock of hard elm wood. The well-worn barrel was black, shaped like a long, snarling dragon.

Smoke curled from the muzzle as she poured a fresh load of celestial powder into it, then jammed a lead ball inside, humming softly to herself. She cocked the hammer, leveled it, braced it against her shoulder, and fired again, the rifle flashing and cracking with a brilliant light as she did so. A loud whinny echoed in the darkness. Another rider slumped on their horse, falling off shortly after.

"Lillian, that's a matchlock," Grom said.

"Yes." Lillian smiled, glancing up at him as she reloaded another shot.

"Your walking stick was a matchlock rifle."

"Yes." Lillian fired again. Her shot narrowly missed her target, hitting their horse, and causing it to scream and rear, throwing its rider.

"You're an actual fucking lunatic." He laughed.

"You just figured that out now, Grom?" she grinned at him.

Cedric stared at her in shock. "Where the blazes did you get a matchlock rifle?"

"My father! He's a veteran from the Jade River Wars!"

"I thought you were raised by wolves!" Elowyn scoffed.

"Doesn't matter!" Lillian grinned. "I'm from wherever I'm standing."

"Where the hells did you learn how to use that thing?!" Emma demanded.

"My father!" She replied. She fired another shot, hitting true once more. The pursuers started to turn away.

"Are we still continuing to the badlands?" Cedric asked. He had a worried look on his face as he glanced over his shoulder, looking back at the way they came.

"Of course we are," Henry said. "It's only little ways away now."

"But those were no ordinary bandits!" Cedric exclaimed, looking between the other adventurers.
"We don't know who they are, what they wanted, or even where we are!"

"They won't follow us into the badlands," Grom assured. "It's orc territory."

"And what are WE going to do in orc territory?" Elowyn asked. She glared at Grom, who was leaning against the side of the cart.

"I'm an orc. It'll be fine." He grinned at her, winking. "Besides, I have friends there."

Cedric paled, his face growing more and more concerned. "And... you think they will take kindly to an old man traveling alone in a cart, with five strange adventurers, all of whom are carrying an absurd amount of coin, none of whom know the area, or its people?"

"I believe they will," Grom said, smirking. "You have an orc with you."

"You're awfully confident of yourself, aren't you, big boy?" Lillian grinned, nudging Grom. She held her rifle tightly in her hands, running a rag over it. She looked up, grinning at the large orc, who just shrugged.

"I am."

They crossed the rest of the pass with little issue, making their way into the badlands with a renewed sense of security. The landscape was arid, dotted with scrub and sparse, gnarled trees, and it stretched out before them in a seemingly endless expanse.

The roads were gone, so Cedric had to navigate via Grom's directions and landmarks alone. It took a while for the sun to rise over the horizon, casting its rays across the dry land, but the group pressed on regardless.

It was nearly midday by the time they came to a halt in a dusty clearing, surrounded by jagged hills on all sides.

Cedric yawned, stretching his arms out in front of him. "I suppose it's high time to get some rest."

Grom nodded, looking at the sky above him. "We can set up camp here."

The party pitched a couple tents and watered the horses as Elowyn prepared a fire to cook their rations.

Grom and Henry stayed in the wagon, discussing something quietly, while Lillian and Emma sat around the campfire. Cedric had disappeared inside one of the tents, and they could hear his muffled snores. Elowyn was busy tending to her cooking pot, stirring it occasionally with a wooden spoon.

Suddenly, they heard the loud bellow of a war horn in the distance.

"Who is it? What's happening?" Cedric asked, stumbling from the tent, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "Who are these... oh, dear..."

In the distance, they could make out a large war band of mounted orcish warriors, their faces and bodies covered in thick armor, their weapons gleaming in the sun. At the front was a woman on a large, gray stallion. Her hair was black as night, tied up into two thick braids. Her skin was a pale ash grey. Her face was marked with red war paint, and she wore the armor of a chieftain.

She rode forward on her steed, a massive greataxe in her hand. Behind her were several hundred orc warriors, their faces grim, and their eyes narrowed.

She dismounted from her horse, her boots kicking up dust as she landed. "Who is in charge here?" she called out.

"Uh..." Cedric spoke. "I-I am. Lord Cedric Grey a-at your service, your... uhm... highness?"

The chieftain laughed for a moment, then narrowed her eyes as she approached Cedric and stood right before him. "Lord Cedric Grey..." She smirked, her fingers adjusting her grip on her greataxe. "I am Thokka the Breaker. Chieftain of the Bloodspiller Clan. These lands are mine, from the mountains to the edge of the badlands. You trespass without permission."

Cedric stammered for a moment. "I-I-I... we are merely travelers. Travelers, seeking to pass through to Risington." He held out his hands in a placating gesture.

"I do not care." Thokka raised her axe above his head and brought it down. Cedric yelled, squeezing his eyes shut as he flinched, only to be shoved out of the way by the paladin.

Emma's shield cracked as Thokka's axe cut into her arm. She stood between Cedric and the chieftain, eyes wide as her blood splattered onto the floor.

Thokka grinned, laughing. "I like this one. She has guts." She looked Emma up and down, nodding. "Shame you will die. But it will be a heroic death."

"Emma!" Lillian cried, scrambling to unwrap her rifle. She raised it to fire, pointing it straight at the chieftain's head. "Get back!" she yelled, her voice shaky.

"Thokka!" Grom's voice boomed from behind the party as he stepped from the wagon. Thokka froze, her eyes darting from Grom to the Huashanese woman aiming her weapon.

Thokka grinned, her teeth flashing in the sun. She pulled her axe out of the paladin's arm, causing the woman to grunt in pain. "Grom! The Big!" She shouted. "You are back!"

Chapter 5

"Hold still!" Elowyn hissed. "I'm trying to patch you up!"

Emma grumbled. "I'm fine." She winced as Elowyn's fingers touched her arm, the wound still bleeding freely, staining the front of the elf's tunic a deep red. Elowyn made a disgusted sound under her breath as she muttered, her hands glowing. She placed her hand over Emma's arm. The paladin grunted. The pain in her arm dissipated slowly.

Thokka watched with a bemused look on her face. "Your human has guts, Grom, I give her that much. Not a bad death, trying to defend an ally." She turned her attention to Cedric. "Now, you are traveling with some interesting people. What are you carrying?"

"I..." Cedric paused for a moment. "Nothing. Nothing of interest. I am merely a traveler."

Thokka laughed. "Do not lie to me, old man." Her voice took on a dangerous edge as she leaned closer to Cedric. "What is in this wagon?"

"Um..." Cedric hesitated, glancing nervously at Emma and Lillian. "Well..."

"He's got gold," Lillian muttered, taking a bite out of a piece of jerky, chewing loudly as she eyed Thokka.

Thokka grinned, her gaze turning to the sorceress. "Gold?"

Lillian nodded. "A lot of it, too."

"I see..." Thokka nodded thoughtfully. "I will escort you and your people through the badlands. For a fee. Half."

"What?! That is robbery!" Cedric shouted.

"No," Thokka growled. "I'm offering you protection, human. I do not have to. You are on my territory. You would do well to be grateful that I do not slaughter you where you stand."

"I-uh-well..." Cedric stuttered. He stared up at the massive woman with wide eyes, unable to form a response. Thokka bared her teeth in a predatory smile, and leaned forward. "Do we have a deal?" she asked.

"I suppose... yes." Cedric sighed. "We have a deal."

Thokka laughed, a loud booming noise. "You are so easy to break, old man! How did you end up so wealthy when you are so bad at bartering?"

"I'm an excellent salesman!" Cedric argued. "I'm quite skilled at logistics, mercantile strategy, and economics."

"You buckle the moment you are pushed. No matter." She stepped back from him. "You may keep your gold. It's not very useful in the badlands, anyways. I will escort you through my lands. And you will owe me a debt, in exchange."

Cedric swallowed nervously. "A debt?"

Thokka smiled, her expression hungry. "Yes, human. You will owe me. You will pay me what you can afford when you are in a position to pay me. Do we have an accord, merchant?"

Cedric stared up at the orc woman for a long moment before he let out a breath of relief and nodded. "Yes. We do."

Thokka smiled, extending her hand. Cedric grasped it, wincing as Thokka squeezed his hand in hers. "Then it is done. We will camp here tonight. Tomorrow, you are under the protection of the Bloodspillers." She grinned, letting go of his hand.

"Thank you," Cedric said.

"Now." Thokka grinned at Grom. "We have unfinished business."

Grom stood in front of the chieftain. He had stripped down to just his leggings, his chest bare. Thokka had done the same. Her thick muscles flexing as she rolled her shoulders. The two stood in the middle of the camp, their warriors cheering them on.

"I have been waiting to finish this," she said, a wild grin on her face. She looked him up and down, sizing him up. He was bigger than her, though only slightly. She flexed her bicep. "I have grown stronger in the time you've been away. While you have been reading your little books and studying party tricks, I have been honing myself for battle."

"You've never beaten me, Thokka. Not once." Grom smiled. "But I will gladly teach you how to lose again."

The crowd around them cheered louder, their fists pounding on their shields and swords.

"Ready?" she asked.

"Of course I am."

"Bard!" Thokka called. "Give us a rhythm to fight to!"

Lillian grinned. Her fingers danced along the strings of her lute, the sound reverberating throughout the clearing. She began to play, her fingers flying over the strings, her song picking up pace, and getting faster, and louder, and harder.

Thokka grinned, crouching low and raising her hands into a guard. Grom mimicked her, his eyes locked onto her face. He moved forward slowly, circling her.

She launched forward with blinding speed, dropping low as her hands clamped around one of Grom's legs. With a roar, she lifted, ripping him off his feet and flipping him onto his back with a thundering crash. The crowd exploded in cheers.

Lillian laughed, her song shifting into something triumphant, fingers dancing across her lute as she spun around the fire.

Grom barely had time to breathe before Thokka lunged in, relentless, scrambling to pin him down. He twisted, rolling to his side as her weight bore down on him. She was fast - almost too fast. Almost.

He kicked his legs, creating just enough space to break free into a wild scramble. The moment his feet hit the ground, his hands shot out, one snatching Thokka's wrist as the other locked his own grip. His elbow framed against her arm, his fingers snaking through like a constrictor before clamping down tight.

Grom locked his grip. He felt the strain in Thokka's arm, her muscles tensing, trying to fight the inevitable. She twisted, trying to rip free.

Grom lunged forward, yanking her arm with him. He stepped behind her leg, cutting off her escape. Thokka snarled, planting her feet to resist, but she was already too far gone.

With a violent heave, he tore her forward, using the trapped arm as a lever. Her body lurched, weight tipping past the point of no return. The moment she faltered, Grom whipped his hips under hers and drove through.

Thokka slammed into the dirt, her back crashing against the ground as Grom landed on top, his grip still locked in tight.

She thrashed, breath ragged, but he had her now. He wrenched the arm tighter, feeling the joint strain in his hand.

Thokka screamed as she struggled to pull free, but there was no escape now. She had one final choice, and Grom was all too willing to make her take it.

Thokka's eyes flicked up, staring at Grom, who had a wicked grin plastered on his face. Her gaze drifted to the orc warrior at her side. She bit back the pain, tapping Grom's side several times.

Lillian whooped as she strummed the final notes in her song, reaching its triumphant climax. Her fingers danced across the strings, and the crowd roared. The two combatants untangled themselves, both breathing heavily, covered in dirt and sweat.

The orcs around the clearing cheered wildly, many raising their fists into the air. Lillian laughed, strumming her lute as the warriors shouted.

Grom helped Thokka up to her feet, grinning at his sister, who winced as she rubbed at her arm.

"You still have the strength of the mountains," she said. "Next we meet, I will challenge you once more."

"When are you going to stop challenging me, Thokka?"

"When I win."

"So never, I take it." He smiled.

"Shut it," Thokka smiled, wrapping her arm around Grom's shoulder as they walked towards the cheering orcs. "We will feast and celebrate! My baby brother has returned!"

The celebration was festive, rowdy, and filled with music and merriment. Orcish food, mostly grilled meat, was shared, along with a hefty amount of wine, ale, and liquor. Emma had her arm bandaged and in a sling. It was healing quickly, thanks to Lillian's magic. Elowyn also gave her a couple healing spells. Her injury didn't seem to affect her appetite, and she was currently chomping her way through her fourth plate of food. Grom and Thokka sat at the center of the gathering. Thokka had brought up a large chair to the bonfire, and the two orcs were sitting next to each other, laughing loudly.

"So, Grom," Thokka asked. "Ever think about coming back?" She smiled at him. "You've defeated me in ritual combat every time. You are the rightful leader of the Bloodspillers. Your birthright. It's your choice."

"I know," he replied. He took a long drink from his tankard of mead, his eyes distant for a moment. "But it's a life I never wanted."

"Why?" she asked. "It is an orc's duty to be strong, to protect his clan and its people."

He nodded. "It is." He paused, looking at her, and then back into his drink. "But I love learning. Exploring. Magic. It is my passion."

"Magic..." She chuckled. "You are a strange one, Grom. The greatest warrior of our time, yet you choose to read books and cast spells instead of lead our people?"

Grom smiled softly. "I know. It's a strange existence. But I am content with it. Besides, you have the heart to lead. To fight for your people." He smiled. "You will be a good chief."

"Perhaps. I hope to make our ancestors proud," Thokka said, raising her mug in salute to her brother. "To our people."

"To our people," Grom replied, clinking his cup to hers. The two orcs smiled, raising their drinks high and draining them in unison.

They left in the morning after Thokka's warriors escorted them safely through the badlands and to the edge of Risington. Grom and Thokka embraced, promising to see one another again soon. Cedric and the rest of the party were also bid a fond farewell.

Thokka took a large scimitar from her belt and tossed it into the wagon. Cedric looked at the blade, confused, then back to her.

"You're under my protection now and have my permission to pass through my lands. This is my banner, and I give it to you. If any trouble should befall you on the road, brandish that blade. Anyone who dares harm you shall be made into the enemy of the Bloodspillers." Thokka smiled at them. "If anyone is foolish enough to harm you, then I will crush them."

"Thank you." Cedric nodded.

"Safe travels," she said. She turned her horse around and rode back towards her camp, the orcs trailing behind her.

Cedric and the others resumed their journey. As the sun rose higher in the sky, they arrived at the edge of Risington.

The city itself was massive, a sprawling metropolis of buildings, streets, and people. A large stone wall encircled it.

"Ah," Cedric grinned. "Home at last!"

"It's... impressive," Grom admitted, taking in the cityscape.

"Let's get inside," Henry said, spurring his horse forward.

They rode up to the gate and presented the guard with their paperwork, who waved them through with a bored look on his face.

Cedric grinned as they passed into the city. "Ah, here we are, finally. Risington, capital of Riserre!"

Risington was a massive, bustling metropolis, filled with people and life. The streets were lined with shops, taverns, inns, and markets. There was an energy here that wasn't present in other parts of the world, something that could only be felt within the city's walls.

Cedric guided the wagon through the streets, the horses plodding along slowly behind him. He had been to Risington before and seemed to know his way around well enough.

"Where to?" Elowyn asked. She sat in the back of the wagon, leaning against the side. Her cloak was drawn tight, and her hood was low, casting her face into shadow.

"To my estate, of course! In the upper city! I'll have you all paid and on your way!""

The party made their way through town, and up towards the wealthy upper city district. Cedric pulled the wagon to a stop outside of his home.

"Here we are! My estate!" he proclaimed. He pointed towards the gate, where a pair of guards were standing watch. They nodded at Cedric as the wagon passed through the gates and onto the grounds.

It was a beautiful mansion, surrounded by lush gardens and fountains. A large, circular driveway led to a pair of ornate iron doors, beyond which was the main entrance. A small stable was off to the side, with room to park the cart and the horses.

The adventurers stepped out of the cart, stretching and yawning after the long ride. Emma stretched, wincing slightly at her arm.

Elowyn pulled her hood back. She was a bit more comfortable in this wealthier section of town. She stared up at the estate, a mild look of surprise on her face. "I must say, this is far more impressive than I expected." She nodded in approval. "Of course, my family's estate is larger, but still."

"I am glad you approve!" Cedric beamed, looking at her with a smile. "Now, let me go inside and fetch your payment! You lot are more than welcome to stay the night as well, of course! I'm sure you'll find the beds much more comfortable than any inn!" He laughed, walking into the house. The rest of the group stood outside, taking in their surroundings.

Lillian whistled, looking up at the estate, her eyes sparkling. "I'm glad this job has ended well!"

The party gathered for dinner in Cedric's dining hall. It was an impressive affair. A large, round table stood in the center of the room. There were many seats, and they were all filled. Lillian, Emma, Henry, Elowyn, and Grom all sat together at one end. The rest of the chairs were taken up by Cedric and his servants.

A massive chandelier hung above the table, casting the entire room in a soft, warm glow. A roaring fireplace sat on one wall. Large, ornately framed paintings of various landscapes and portraits adorned the other three.

Servants scurried about the room, bringing trays of food to each of the guests. Wine was poured freely, and soon, everyone was enjoying a delicious meal. Cedric's servants brought course after course, all of them sumptuous and rich.

Lillian devoured a leg of roast chicken, pausing to suck her fingers. "So... Cedric! You have a fine house!"

"I'm glad you appreciate it!" Cedric replied. "It's a beautiful place, and it's been in my family for years! Passed down through the generations!" He took a sip from a glass of wine, his eyes twinkling as he continued to count his money. "Three days, at twenty-thousand eras per day, plus a bonus for finding off those raiders—never really found out who those were—and we have a total sum of one-

hundred-and-sixty-five thousand, three hundred and seventy-five eras. Divided evenly, that's thirty-three thousand and seventy-five per person."

Emma whistled. "That's quite the sum."

Cedric grinned, sliding a sack of coins to each member. "You have earned your fair share of coin, I think."

Chapter 6

The party retired for the night, their pockets full of gold, and their spirits high. They slept comfortably, each enjoying their own private bedroom within the manor. It was a luxurious experience, something that they were all quite pleased to enjoy for a while.

Emma stripped off her armor, sabatons, gambeson, and shirt, and sank into the bed, letting out a soft moan. Her arm had been bandaged, but it was almost completely healed, thanks to Lillian and Elowyn's efforts. She lay there for a while, not quite falling asleep yet. She changed into her nightgown and trudged into the bathroom to take a bath.

Emma never really bathed alone, but the rest of the party had retired to their own rooms. She figured it was safe enough. She grabbed some soap and a few towels and made her way towards the tub, where she ran some hot water. She stripped down and sank in. She let out a content sigh, enjoying the sensation of hot water on her skin. She leaned back, resting her head against the wall. After a few moments of relaxation, she began to wash herself, making sure that she got every inch of herself clean.

Emma had not taken a proper bath in such a long time. Her highly illegal tattoos were awfully inconvenient for her to be naked in public. She sighed, closing her eyes. The bath was wonderful, and she savored the experience. She ran a soapy washcloth across her skin, taking special care to scrub away any dirt that she may have missed.

She had almost drifted to sleep when she felt someone enter the bathroom.

Emma turned around to see that the door to the bathroom had been opened. Standing in the doorway, dressed in a nightshirt that hung off one of her shoulders, and a pair of loose-fitting breeches, was Lillian.

She stared at Emma, trembling silently. Her eyes were wide with fear. "M...Magnian..."

"Lillian! I..." Emma froze, staring back at the bard. She swallowed nervously, her throat dry. She stepped gently out of the bath, holding her arm out. "Let me explain..."

"No... no..." Lillian whispered. Her breath was shallow, and her chest was rising and falling rapidly. "Magnian..."

"Lillian, let me just..."

"No!" Lillian shouted. She bolted, dashing down the hall and disappearing from sight.

"Fuck!" Emma hissed, chasing after the bard. She caught a brief glimpse of Lillian disappearing around a corner, and she followed. Emma raced through the mansion, following Lillian. "Lillian! Stop! Please!" Emma pleaded. "Please!" Emma shouted, but Lillian continued running.

Lillian ran down the stairs and out of the house. Emma was hot on her tail, her heart racing.

Lillian dashed down the steps and into the bedroom corridor. She dove into her bedroom and shut the door behind her, but not before Emma's arm slipped in the doorframe.

The paladin grunted. She grabbed her wrist. "Lillian! Open the door! I'm not trying to hurt you!"

"No! Leave me alone!" Lillian cried. She reached out to grab her lute, but Emma kicked the door open, knocking her to the floor.

"Please..." Emma panted. Her hands were raised in front of her. "Let me explain, please."

"Stay back!" Lillian screamed, reaching for her lute and scrambling to her feet. "Stay back!"

Emma slowly stepped forward, keeping her hands out in front of her. "I am not going to hurt you. Just give me a chance."

"No!" Lillian stuck a power chord, knocking the paladin backwards.

Emma stumbled backwards, crashing into the dresser. She struggled to get to her feet.

Lillian dashed out of the door, leaving Emma behind.

Emma stood up, bolting after the bard as she ran down the hall.

Lillian sprinted through the corridor, screaming and pounding her fist against the neighboring doors. "Help! Help!"

Emma caught up closely behind Lillian, grabbing onto her hair and yanking her back. She snatched the lute out of the bard's hand and slammed it into her forehead, knocking Lillian to the ground. She rolled onto her stomach and tried to crawl away, but Emma shoved the jagged wooden remains of the lute's headstock into her neck. The bard choked, blood spurting out of her throat as she thrashed, desperately clawing at the instrument lodged into her flesh.

Emma stood over Lillian, breathing heavily. The bard lay on the ground, gurgling, clutching at the lute that was lodged into her neck, gasping for breath. She stared up at Emma, her eyes wide. She gasped one final time, then she was still.

"What in the hells is the ruckus all about?" The door beside them clicked open as Elowyn emerged from the bedroom. "Do you know what—" Her eyes went wide as she stared at Lillian's corpse on the floor. Then back at Emma, her bloody fists, her pale face, and her Magnian tattoos.

Elowyn stumbled back, incanting a spell, and raising her hand to blast Emma to pieces. The paladin ducked as she jolted forward, dodging the blast. She slammed her fist into the elf's stomach, doubling her over. Emma shoved her hand into Elowyn's mouth, clamping her thumb and forefinger onto her tongue. The elf's eyes widened, trying desperately to bite Emma's hand and screaming as the paladin ripped the organ from her throat.

Elowyn clutched her hands to her mouth as blood poured from her lips. Emma stepped behind her and wrapped her hand around the elf's chin. She yanked Elowyn's head up and twisted sharply. There was a sickening crack. The elf slumped down to the ground.

Emma turned, panting as she heard the gentle, metallic sound of a sword leaving its sheath.

"What... what have you done?" Henry whispered, standing in the doorway, staring in horror at the dead bodies. He held his longsword in front of him, his hands shaking as he stared at Emma.
"Why?"

"You see my back, boy. You know why." Emma whispered.

"I... I trusted you, Emma!" Henry cried. "I can't believe I even considered you to be my hero! Someone I looked up to!"

"Do you think this world is as simple as the fairy tales your parents tell you to make you sleep at night?"

"Shut up!" Henry shouted. He lunged forward, slashing at Emma with his longsword. She caught his arms, holding him tightly as the sword came down towards her. Emma twisted her wrist, wrenching the blade out of Henry's grip and throwing him across the hall. The young knight crashed against the wall and slumped to the ground.

Henry looked up, panting. Emma was standing above him, her eyes burning.

"I trusted you..." He whispered, his voice quavering. Henry's face was wet with tears, his body shaking with sobs. He looked up at Emma. "Why did you have to kill them, Emma? Why?" he asked, sobbing.

Emma looked down at Henry. "Wrong place, wrong time." She grabbed Henry by the collar of his shirt and lifted him up into the air. Henry thrashed weakly, but Emma slammed his face against the wall. She lifted him again and slammed his head into the wall. Again. Again.

The boy slumped, his limbs twitching. Blood pooled around his body.

Emma stood over the body, her chest rising and falling heavily. She stared at the young man, his eyes empty, lifeless.

"I am sorry," Emma whispered, her voice shaking as she picked the sword up from the floor. She looked around the room. "But it had to be done."

The orc had always been a heavy sleeper. He didn't even wake up when the blade sliced cleanly through his neck.

Emma sat in the bath again, the bathwater a pale red.

"Well, well, well." She heard a familiar voice from behind her. She didn't look, just stared at the bathwater.

"Magnus..." she said.

"Yes, my child. It is I." The old god stepped from behind the shadows, standing behind her as she stared at her reflection. He was tall, dressed sharply in a black suit and tie, and his skin was pale as bone. "You've left me quite the gift. I'd say it were some of your best work, but... you always do such fine work, don't you, Emma?"

Emma was silent. "What the fuck do you want?"

"I simply wanted to thank you," Magnus chortled. "You are my greatest creation, after all, and you do such beautiful things. I simply wanted to express my gratitude."

"Fuck off," Emma spat. "Why're you wasting your time on a heretic, anyways? That's what they call me, isn't it? You here to kill me?"

"Heretic? Oh, dear, no! My dear, dear Emma... you're not a heretic." He smiled. "Not at all."

"What?" Emma blinked, looking at Magnus.

"I've been waiting to tell you, actually." Magnus smiled at her. "But then you went and had to ruin all the fun by being a paladin with a stick up your ass! But now..." He chuckled to himself. "I see you're back."

"Get to the fucking point." Emma snapped.

"Oh, dear Emma, I do love you so." Magnus smiled, patting the side of the tub, causing the bathwater to splash about. "Come back to us when you awaken. After all, you never really left."

Emma opened her eyes. Her body was soaked in sweat, and her heart was pounding. She looked down—she was laying in bed in her room at Cedric's estate. Her armor and gambeson were piled up on the floor beside the bed. Her arm felt stiff, but she was otherwise fine.

She sat up in the bed and looked around the room. Everything was as it should be. She took a few breaths and collected herself, shaking the nightmare from her mind. She got out of bed, changed into her nightshirt, and stepped to the door.

She half expected to see the bard's corpse on the hallway floor, twitching in a pool of her own blood. But it was clean as it ever was. Emma breathed a sigh of relief, trudging over to Lillian's room and softly rapping her knuckles against the solid wood door.

A few moments later, and the door clicked as the bard's eye peeked through.

"Hey, uh, can we talk?" Emma said, rubbing the back of her neck.

"Of course!" Lillian's smile was everything the paladin needed. "Come in!" Lillian turned and led the way back to her bed. She hopped onto it and picked her lute back up, resuming her tuning.

Emma walked into the room and closed the door behind her. "I, uh..." She took a deep breath, trying to calm her nerves. "I... can't sleep. Well, I mean, I did fall asleep, but I was having nightmares. So... uh... do you mind if I sit in here? I... just don't want to be alone."

"Oh." Lillian's eyes were wide. "Well... yeah, of course. Sit." The bard grinned. "You can take the other half of the bed. It's big enough."

Emma smiled at her. She took a deep breath and lay herself down on the bed, listening to the soft plucks of the bard's lute.

"What did you have a nightmare about?" Lillian asked.

"I, um... just things from my past," Emma said. "Bad memories."

"Oh." Lillian nodded. "Well... if you need anything, let me know."

Emma smiled, closing her eyes and relaxing into the bed, her muscles finally unwinding.

Lillian smiled back at her and continued to play her lute, her voice singing a gentle tune. Emma listened, her heart slowly slowing, and her mind clearing. She was asleep soon after, her breath deep and even, and her face calm.

Chapter 7

The next morning, the party had a hearty breakfast and left Cedric's manor, heading off into the city of Risington.

"We should check out the Adventurer's Guild here!" Lillian exclaimed.

"You're quite eager to start up a new quest," Elowyn commented, rolling her eyes. "We just got paid a lot of money. Can we take some time to enjoy life first? Or maybe get some upgrades for our gear?"

"That's a fair point," Emma nodded. "That latter one." She glanced at Henry, who was still wearing the same chain shirt, greaves, and gauntlets that he wore at the beginning of the journey. "Maybe we can look into some proper plate armor for you, Sir Henry," she said.

"I suppose I would enjoy some more protective gear," the knight agreed.

"It's settled, then." Elowyn grinned. "Let's go find a nice, fancy shop and spend our money." She paused for a moment. "And by we, I mean me. I've been using the same damn staff since I left home. I think I should get a nice upgrade."

Risington's lower city market district had many stores and shops catering to every sort of trade. Blacksmiths, jewelers, leatherworkers, and even more esoteric trades were represented. There were many stalls selling all sorts of exotic goods and curiosities. The party split up and agreed to meet at the Risington Adventurer's Guild Hall after they were finished shopping. Emma was walking with Henry. He seemed a little nervous, and he was staring at his feet.

"What's on your mind, Henry?"

"Well... I've been thinking, and I want to tell you something."

"Go on," Emma encouraged, giving the young knight an encouraging nod. He seemed hesitant, as if he had a hard time putting the words together. Henry sighed and began to speak.

"Remember what I said about wanting to be like the knights in stories?"

"Yes," Emma nodded. "What of it?"

"I think... I think you are one," Henry admitted.

"Me?" Emma's eyebrow went up.

"Yeah. You're kind, brave, strong, and honest. I think that you're what a knight is supposed to be." He looked up at her. "Please... I want to be just like you."

Emma laughed. "Henry... I am not what a knight is supposed to be."

"But..."

"Look. Just... don't base yourself around me. I don't care what your opinion of me is. Look up to yourself. Or the knights you read about as a boy. You have a good head on your shoulders. I'm not some hero in a story." She shook her head, patting his shoulder. "You'll be a better knight than I ever could be."

"But..."

"Let's find a smithy," Emma said, shaking her head.

Emma had just finished with getting Henry fitted with his new set of armor. The smith was a gruff man with a huge beard and a massive belly. He had measured Henry, taken note of his measurements, and told him that he could have a suit ready within a week or two.

Henry was smiling. He seemed to have a renewed sense of vigor. "I'm excited! This'll be the first set of full plate I've ever had!"

"I'm surprised your parents didn't buy you a full suit. You are from a noble house, aren't you?" Emma asked, glancing at him.

"They offered, but... well, I thought I'd get it myself. With my own coin." He looked at her. "I'm just... tired of being handed everything. I wanted to work for it myself." He looked down. "I know that's kind of silly."

Emma shrugged. "It's your life, lad. If that's how you feel, then that's how you feel. Let's go get a drink, shall we?"

"It's still early."

Emma chuckled, looking around at the busy street around them, the market district bustling and full of activity. "Well... never too early for a beer. Let's head to the guild hall and meet up with everyone else. They probably have a good place for a pint nearby."

"Emma!" Lillian called, rushing over to the paladin and the knight, who had just walked out of the blacksmith's shop.

She grasped Emma's arm, her face lit up. "Can I borrow some of your gold? Please?"

"You're broke, aren't you?"

"...yes." The bard grinned sheepishly.

"How the hell did you manage to run out already? I thought Cedric gave us each thirty-thousand or something."

"Thirty-three and some change! But... I spent it."

"What could you have possibly bought to spend thirty thousand gold pieces so quickly? That's a small fortune."

"I bought... some stuff," she said, not meeting the paladin's gaze. "I, um, needed some things..."

"Like?"

"Not important!"

"You are ridiculous." Emma rolled her eyes, reaching into her pouch. "How much do you need?"

"Just come with me!" Lillian insisted. She took Emma's arm and led her away, back into the market. "Come, I want to show you something!"

"Ugh..." Emma groaned, but she didn't protest as Lillian led her back through the streets. They made their way down a narrow alleyway and stopped outside of a door with a small sign hanging on the wall.

"The... Jade..." Emma paused. "Lantern? What is this place?"

"A shop!" Lillian grinned, pointing at the door. "Come in, I have something to show you!"

"Alright..." Emma opened the door, stepping inside the store. It was dark and cramped. There was an overpowering smell of incense and spices that burned Emma's nostrils and stung her eyes. Shelves lined every inch of the walls, filled with all kinds of strange objects and curios.

"Hello!" A short, thin woman dressed in a black and white robe bowed at her. Her hair was tied into two large buns, and her eyes were wide and sparkling. She bore a similar appearance to Lillian, with eyes that held the same almond shape and wheatish skin that spoke of the far-east kingdom of Huashan.

"Oh. Hello." Emma nodded, smiling.

Lillian scampered over to the counter. She unwrapped her matchlock rifle, which had been wrapped in its plain canvas again. She set it down on the counter and began conversing with the clerk in a tongue that Emma didn't understand. She glanced around the emporium awkwardly, her arms crossed, waiting for the bard to finish.

Lillian turned to Emma. "Can I borrow a thousand eras? Please?" she pleaded. "I need some supplies for my rifle!"

"A thousand?" Emma asked. She reached into her belt and pulled out her pouch. She opened it and counted out a few large gold pieces, then tossed them onto the table.

"Thank you!" Lillian exclaimed, wrapping the paladin in a hug. Emma sighed and gently pushed her off, looking at the clerk.

"So, what is this place?" Emma asked.

"Oh, just a store that sells imported goods from my homeland," the woman answered. She had an eastern accent that was soft and lilting. "Weapons, herbs, clothing, food, art... whatever you desire. You're free to browse!"

Emma looked around, taking in the sights and sounds. The air smelled sweet and spicy. It was a pleasant, calming aroma. There were racks upon racks of exotic weapons, clothing, and other goods. "I'll take a look around, thank you."

"Let me know if you have any questions," the shopkeeper smiled.

"What do you mean they won't be ready until next week?" Elowyn growled.

"Exactly as I said, miss." The shopkeep, an older woman who bore a stern countenance, was unmoving. "We simply don't have enough materials."

Elowyn groaned. "Why not?"

"It's not a simple matter," the woman sighed, leaning on her counter. "The war has left us with little in the way of resources. Most supplies are bought by the armies of both the Empire and Coalition, which leaves very little left for us here in Riserre. Even the simplest of reagents are becoming more and more expensive."

"Fine, fine," Elowyn grumbled. "What do you have now, then?"

"I can sell you a couple basic staves for around twenty-five-hundred each."

Elowyn grumbled. "Never mind. What about clothing? Something enchanted, preferably."

The shopkeep shrugged. "That I can help with, at least."

"Finally," Elowyn sighed. "Show me what you have. And don't try to upsell me again."

"How the hell do you manage to wear this all day?" Henry groaned. "It's so hot!"

"You get used to it," Emma muttered, not bothering to turn her head. She was sipping her pint and watching Lillian attempt to charm a few patrons with rambunctious stories and bawdy lute

playing. "Besides, most knights don't wear the full plate all the time. Just the gembeson and light clothing up until the battle."

"But you do. Every day. Even in the desert."

Emma sighed. "I don't particularly enjoy people seeing my skin. And my gambeson is enchanted to keep me comfortable."

Henry chuckled. "Modesty to the hilt. Admirable as always, Emma."

The paladin just took a long swig of her ale. "You have a good heart." Emma paused, looking at the knight. "But sometimes, I just can't figure you out."

"What do you mean?" Henry asked.

Emma shrugged. "Never mind that. Turn around. You're missing the show."

Henry turned his attention to the center of the room, where Lillian had stood up on one of the tables and was playing a rowdy tune while telling tales of her exploits to a spattering of weary soldiers and mercenaries.

"I'm actually a deposed empress," Lillian winked, playing a jangly chord. "My father was the heavenly emperor of Huashan! But his brother, my uncle, murdered him in his sleep! He usurped the throne, and my family was killed! I barely escaped, but I fell off a cliff and into the sea! I washed up on the shores of a distant land, and now travel across the world, in search of revenge!"

"She does know how to entertain, I'll give her that." Emma chuckled.

"Do you think any of those are true?"

Emma laughed. "Hell if I know. I thought she was raised by wolves."

The next few hours passed uneventfully, Lillian telling stories and singing, Henry and Emma chatting with one another. Eventually, Elowyn entered, looking annoyed, but wearing an ornate new robe of silk, with embroidered, arcane runes and golden, glittery thread. Her old robes were packed neatly away in her new leather satchel. "Gods, I hate this city," she grumbled, walking over to Emma and Henry and taking a seat at the bar beside them.

"You have a nice robe, though."

"It was the least I could find in the entire marketplace. I can't believe this place. You can't even get the most basic reagents for enchanting! Even the simplest of spells are a rarity in this town!"

"Well... at least it looks pretty," Henry grinned. "Right, Emma?"

"Very pretty," the paladin nodded, taking another sip of her drink. "You're a vision of loveliness."

"You two can go fuck yourselves." Elowyn sighed. "This whole thing is a godsdamn mess."

"Gods, I love this city!" Grom, the massive orc, walked into the guild tavern and sat himself down next to Emma.

"What did you do?"

"Their library is incredible. And the bookstores even better!"

Elowyn snickered. "You went to the bookstores? Really?"

"Yes!" Grom grinned, grabbing a mug of ale from a nearby barkeep. "I'll have enough reading material for weeks. Maybe even months."

"Glad someone had a good time," Elowyn rolled her eyes.

"Well, now that we're all here, I suppose we can get started." Henry glanced up at the bard, who was still cantankerously playing her lute and telling her stories.

"Give her a moment." Emma sighed. "I don't think she'll be stopping soon."

"Gods, you two are insufferable." Elowyn stood up from her seat. She marched towards Lillian, interrupting the bard and pulling her down from her table. "We've got to go," she hissed.

"Aaah!" Lillian shouted. "I shall be back! Worry not, my fans!" She winked and waved at the weary soldiers and mercenaries, grinning like a maniac as she was pulled along by Elowyn. "The deposed empress is always ready to entertain!"

Chapter 8

"I'm not doing another goddamned escort quest," Elowyn groaned.

They sat in front of a large bulletin board that was pinned to one side of the guild tavern. It was covered in dozens of postings, and there was a constant flow of adventurers coming to look at it, many of them adding or removing jobs. Elowyn was reading each one carefully, while Emma and Henry stood beside her.

"What about this one?" Henry asked, pointing to a post. "Investigate the murder of a prominent nobleman and his wife?"

"Murder?" Emma raised an eyebrow. "What are the details?"

Henry cleared his throat, reading the post carefully. "A wealthy landowner, Lord and Lady Alderman, were recently found murdered. The city guards have no leads. Anyone capable of solving the murder will be handsomely rewarded by their surviving children. Inquiries may be made to the address listed. It sounds..."

"Take it." Emma grabbed the posting from the board. She held it up to her face and read the rest of the details.

A few hours later, the party arrived at the address in the posting. The building was located in the city's upscale neighborhood, a large, sprawling estate that sat in a large, well-groomed park.

Emma knocked at the front door.

"Just a moment!" A voice called out from within the house.

After a few moments, the door creaked open. A young man dressed in fine silks stood before the group. He had brown hair and dark eyes, with pale, freckled skin.

"Who are you?" he asked.

Emma held up the posting and looked at him sternly. "We are adventurers with the guild. We are here to investigate the murders."

"Oh!" He breathed out, a relieved smile on his face. "Please, come in!" He held the door open wider, beckoning the party inside.

They followed him through the halls, and he led them to a large, luxurious dining room, filled with tables, chairs, and expensive art. "I am Thomas. Thank you so much for coming." He gestured for the party to take a seat. "My sister is upstairs in our rooms, and I'd rather she not be involved with

the matter, but..." He sighed, sitting at the head of the table and gesturing to the others to take seats around it.

"Your sister... she was the one who wrote the posting?" Elowyn asked. The others sat at the table as well, except for Emma, who leaned against a nearby wall.

Thomas nodded. "Yes." He rubbed at his forehead, sighing. "She was... very close to our parents. I... well, we're both still in shock, and I don't think she should be dealing with all of this."

"So, what can you tell us about your parents?" Emma asked, crossing her arms and looking at the boy. She had an intimidating look on her face that caused the young man to shift nervously in his chair.

"I, um, well..." he stammered. "My father, Lord Alderman, was a prominent landowner in the region. My mother, Lady Alderman, was an alchemist and healer. They were murdered three weeks ago."

Emma nodded. "What happened to them?"

"Well," the young man started. "The housekeeper discovered them. They were found in the bedroom. There were... stab wounds. Clean. Precise. I'd imagine they were killed with some sort of knife."

Emma frowned. "Were there any witnesses? Or anything else suspicious?"

He shook his head. "No. No witnesses. We have no idea who did this, or why. The city guard has no leads, either."

"Any enemies?"

"Not to my knowledge." He sighed. "My parents were loved and respected by all."

Emma nodded. "Alright. We'll take a look around. Could you show us to the bedroom where they were killed?"

"Certainly." Thomas nodded, leading the party to a staircase. They climbed the stairs and followed Thomas through the house, eventually coming to the room where the bodies had been discovered. Emma stepped forward, pushing the door open.

The bedroom looked fairly normal, save for the bloodstains on the bed where the victims had been discovered. Emma stepped inside and examined them.

"No tearing on the sheets," she murmured. "No signs of struggle."

"Perhaps they were asleep?" Lillian suggested, stepping inside and examining the bloodstains as well.

"Most likely," Emma nodded. "And with a precision weapon too. Either a stiletto or a misery dagger, I'd say." She glanced around. "Some coin and jewelry still remains. They were not killed by bandits."

Elowyn let out an exasperated groan, stepping inside as well and rolling her eyes. "Well, aren't you just the detective of the century," she muttered sarcastically, turning towards the young man. "Show me where your parents' study is."

"Of course," he replied, leading the sorceress to the next room over.

It was a smaller room, lined with shelves filled with books, and several large chests. The elf plopped herself down into the large wooden chair and glanced at the documents scattered about the desk. She sifted through them, reading the titles and contents. After a few minutes, she pulled out a drawer, where a large book lay, bound in black leather.

Thomas stood next to her. "What is that?"

"Probably nothing," Elowyn murmured, placing the book on the desk and returning to the drawer. She knocked at the sides, then felt around. "There's a false back." She smirked. "Typical."

Thomas raised an eyebrow. "How do you know that?"

"Easy, you see..." Elowyn trailed off, feeling the back of the drawer and muttering under her breath. After a moment, she reached in and slid it open. The back of the drawer had come off. She reached inside and pulled out a stack of documents. She set them down on the desk. "Here we go." She began reading, flipping through the papers, raising an eyebrow. "Where are your parents from?" She glanced at the young man.

"They were born and raised in Riserre," he said.

"Bullshit. Nobody born in Riserre has this much money."

"Excuse me? How dare you—"

"Oh, don't give me that crap, your little gilded tricks won't work on me. Spill it, or I'll call that brute of a woman in the other room." She narrowed her eyes, leaning closer. "Or maybe I should have her question your sister, hm?"

"Fine, fine." He sighed, lowering his voice. "They're from Caerwyn. But why does it matter? We're in neutral territory now, it doesn't—"

"Of course," she hissed. "They're from Coalition territory." The sorceress shook her head. "So much for no enemies."

"Look, what does this have to do with—"

"This has everything to do with it." Elowyn glared at him. "Your parents are weren't murdered." She stood up, heading out the door, returning to the bedroom, where Emma and Lillian were busy inspecting the cabinets.

"We're leaving."

"What?" Lillian blinked. "Why?"

"We have our answers," the elf snarled, not bothering to look at them as she made her way down the stairs. Henry and Grom were sat at a table, scribbling some notes on a piece of parchment, discussing something about the layout of the manor. They looked up as the elf entered the room.

"Let's go," Elowyn hissed. "We're done here."

"What? But..." Henry glanced at the sorceress, then back at the parchment.

"This was no murder," Elowyn said. "I'm sorry for your loss," she nodded at Thomas, "But your parents were war casualties. Simple as that."

"Excuse me?" The young man blinked, his face twisting. "My parents were—"

"Assassinated, not murdered." Elowyn interrupted him, her face hard and expressionless. "They picked the wrong side of the war." She turned towards the front door. "Just be glad you didn't waste enough of our time to demand a bounty." With that, she stepped outside.

The rest of the party glanced around awkwardly.

"I'm... very sorry," Emma said, looking at the young man and following after Elowyn. The others filed behind her. The young man's eyes followed her out.

"I don't understand."

"Neither do I." Lillian shrugged, following Emma out the door.

Emma caught up with Elowyn outside, the rest of the party trailing behind them. "What the hells was that all about?" The paladin demanded, looking down at her with an accusatory glare. "That was not an appropriate way to act, especially in a neutral territory."

"They're from the Coalition." She sighed, looking at Emma. "Both of them are. Or were, at least."

Emma blinked. "So?"

"So?" She scoffed. "I thought you of all people would understand. The war between our countries isn't just some petty skirmish, you know." She looked away. "This was a political assassination of our enemies."

Emma grabbed Elowyn's arm and spun her around to face her. "And that gives you the right to just treat him like dirt?"

Elowyn glared back. "You want me to be all lovey-dovey and sympathetic for a Coalitionist because they were murdered? I don't think so."

"He lost his parents!"

"And what do you our people lost, hm?" Elowyn snapped. "We've lost countless. Countless, Emma! What makes his grief so much more special than theirs?"

"That is no excuse!"

"I'm not making excuses," the elf said. She sighed. "I'm sorry that they died. But I'm not sorry for how I acted. He's lucky I didn't burn that house down." Elowyn shook her head and turned around, storming away from Emma and the others.

Emma stared after her. "I don't believe this," she muttered.

"She does have a point." Henry shrugged. "Not that I agree, but I understand where she's coming from."

"I'm sorry, but that's a little too cold for me." Lillian frowned. "And we needed that bounty!"

"Right." Grom shook his head, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "We'll find another bounty soon."

"Hopefully." Lillian sighed.

Emma sat in a chair across from Elowyn at the tavern, her eyes fixed on the sorceress as she took a sip of her ale. Elowyn's eyes were closed, her brow furrowed.

"Elowyn." Emma said, leaning forward slightly.

"What?" the elf snapped. "If it's about what I did today, I'm not sorry, okay? I don't even understand. The orc and that idiot of a musician are foreigners, but you and Henry are from Aurelia too. You know the Empire is in a state of war. How can you just accept the enemy so readily? And what about that boy?"

"It doesn't matter." Emma said, looking at Elowyn intently. "He was our client, and he lost his parents. Even if he's from the Coalition, it doesn't matter. We're supposed to be in neutral territory."

"Oh, of course. Neutral." She sneered. "They were trafficking weapons to the front lines, you know. I'm sure that the people of the empire appreciate it. Or do you just not care? Your dead comrades from the Revenant Knights can rest easy knowing that you're cozying up to the people who probably supplied their killers."

"That's not the point, and you know it."

"Fine, then what is it?"

"It's about us, the party." Emma sighed, rubbing the bridge of her nose. "We need to work together. You can't just go off and ruin a bounty for all of us just because of your political opinions"

Elowyn scoffed. "Opinions? This isn't some debate about whether taxes should be raised. We are at war. Have been for longer than you've been alive, I'm sure."

"I'm not asking you to forgive them. Hell, I'm not a sympathizer myself." Emma took a sip of her drink and sighed. "All I'm saying is that you can't let that affect the way you deal with clients. Not when it affects our pay."

The elf took another long, deep swig of her drink. "Fine. Whatever."

Emma nodded. "Just talk to us about it first before you blow up, alright?"

"I suppose."

"Good. Let's get another round."

Chapter 9

A few weeks passed. Bounties had grown scarce. Most of the jobs were simple things: bandit raids, caravan escorts, or the occasional hunt for some sort of beast or creature. They weren't very lucrative. But they paid the bills, kept them fed, and put a roof over their heads at night. Plus, the party's escort mission had put a solid amount of coin in their pockets. Save for the bard, it would seem, who had somehow lost it all on the first day. Emma didn't ask, and she was sure she didn't want to know.

"This one's interesting," Lillian mumbled, staring up at the bulletin board. She plucked one from it. "Defending a minor village from recent attacks." The bard grinned. "Protect the common folk, fight the good fight. That sounds fun!"

"Hm." Henry took the paper, scanning it over. "They're offering five-hundred gold each, which isn't much. And it says it might be bandits, monsters, or anything in between." The knight glanced over it again and passed the parchment to Grom. The orc scanned it and passed it to Elowyn, who gave it a glance before handing it back to Lillian.

"It's worth a shot, at least." The elf shrugged.

"You going to play nice if we run into Coalitionists?" Lillian smirked.

"Maybe."

Emma sighed. "Let's go check it out. We could use a break from the city."

"Agreed," Henry said, nodding.

The party arrived in a small farming community a half day's walk from the outskirts of Risington's walls. It was a quaint, picturesque scene. Fields of wheat and oats, dotted with trees, and surrounded by a wooden wall.

"It's a cute place." Lillian grinned, looking around at the town. "A shame about the attacks, but it's a good place to rest for a while, too!"

"I'll take that," Grom agreed.

They approached the village gate and knocked on the wooden door.

A few moments passed, and then a voice called out. "Who's there?"

"We're from the guild!" Henry shouted back. "You posted a job, right?"

"Show the paper!"

Lillian waved the parchment through the slats of the gate. There was a pause. Then the door opened. A short, stout man with a round face stood before them. "Good, good, come in!" He gestured for the group to follow him inside.

They walked into the center of the village. It was small and quaint, with a single road winding between houses. "We're a small village," the man explained. "And these attacks have been happening more and more often. Our food stores are running low, and the attacks are growing bolder. They come in the night and try to break down the gates. It's getting dangerous for us to even leave to trade."

"Bandits?"

"I think so," the man nodded. "They come in large groups, armed, but we don't exactly get a good look at them before we drive them off. We haven't lost any men, thank the gods, but... well, they've been trying to burn the gates, or at least, it looks like that. They've gotten better at doing it, too. We've only just managed to put the flames out before they spread and burn the gate down. If that happened..." He trailed off, shaking his head.

"How many are they?"

"A dozen at most."

"Which direction do they come from?" Emma asked, her arms crossed. She glanced at Lillian.

"I don't know. They seem to change their approach each time, but they tend to come from the eastern woods."

"Coalitionists," Elowyn murmured, crossing her arms and shaking her head. Emma shot her an annoyed glance. "Well, it's true. The Empire is west of us."

"Is that important?" Lillian asked.

"It could be." Henry nodded.

Grom shook his head. "We don't know for certain. Let's just focus on defending the town for now. And figure out what's happening."

"Fine, fine," Elowyn waved her hand. "But when we catch them and see that I'm right, I'm not going to let you all forget that."

Elowyn and Lillian lay concealed just at the edge of the woods, overlooking the town from their hiding place. Lillian had her rifle propped on the trunk of a tree. She looked at Elowyn and grinned. The sorceress was crouched beside her, a wand clutched tightly in her hand.

"So," the bard whispered, adjusting her weapon, "you come here often?"

"Are you seriously making small talk?"

"What?" Lillian whispered. "It's a slow night. We should get to know each other."

Elowyn sighed, rubbing her temples. "What do you want to know?"

"How old are you?"

"Didn't your mother tell you it's rude to ask a woman that?" Elowyn scoffed. "Oh wait, you were raised by wolves, that's right. Or, oh wait, you're actually a deposed empress, aren't you?"

Lillian snickered. "That doesn't apply to elves. You live forever. It's just a number to you. Now tell me." She turned, a broad grin on her face. The elf sighed and turned, her eyes narrowing.

"Two-hundred-and-thirteen," Elowyn answered flatly, looking away.

"Huh." Lillian blinked. "Quite the spring chicken, eh?" She winked at Elowyn.

"Oh, shut up."

Lillian chuckled. "You know, I've always wanted to see the elven lands."

Elowyn sighed, closing her eyes and resting her forehead against the trunk of the tree. "They are beautiful." She murmured. "Meadows, rivers, lakes, and forests. The air is clean and fresh, the land fertile and full of life."

"You should take me someday!" Lillian giggled. "It sounds lovely."

Elowyn sighed, opening her eyes and glaring at Lillian. "You are the single most annoying person I've ever met in my life."

"Aww, come on!" Lillian pouted. "You wouldn't want to deny the rightful empress of Huashan, the jewel of the east, now would you?" She grinned, leaning closer. "Besides, I bet you're loads of fun when you're drunk. Come ooon, you have to tell me some of your secrets. I promise not to spill."

Elowyn groaned, rubbing her temples again. "You are the last person I'd trust not to spill my secrets, Lillian!"

"Really? Then who's your first, huh?" The bard poked her tongue out at Elowyn. "Is it the dashing knight? Or maybe the big, beefy orc, hmm? Tell me! I'm dying of curiosity."

"I'm going to kill you." Elowyn growled.

"You'd have to get through Emma first!" Lillian grinned. "And I'm pretty sure that woman can break you like a toothpick!"

"You have a lot of confidence in her willingness to give a shit," the elf smirked. She glanced towards the treeline, where the paladin and knight had gone. They had gone to scout out the area. "Maybe I'll get lucky and she won't bother to save you from my wrath."

"Hey!" Lillian protested, her face falling. "That's not fair. I thought we were becoming friends."

"We are not."

"Yes we are!"

"Gods, you are so fucking insufferable," the elf growled, pinching the bridge of her nose and turning away. "You know what, fine, whatever, sure. We're friends."

"Yay!" The bard grinned, reaching over to pat Elowyn's back.

Elowyn slapped the hand away, her head turning quickly. "Shut up. I heard something."

The two froze, and the elf pointed out towards the village gates. A dozen men stood at the gates. They held torches, swords, and crossbows. The lead one was carrying a lit torch. They approached slowly. "Huh. Bandits after all, I suppose."

"Yep, looks like it." Lillian smirked, adjusting the aim on her rifle. "Ready when you are."

"Okay," Elowyn murmured. "Aim for like we discussed."

Lillian nodded and took a deep breath. She murmured an incantation and lit the matchcord in her rifle, taking a slow breath as she aimed, staying as still as possible. Elowyn began her own spell. The elf's hands glowed as she began weaving the magic. "Alright..." She took a breath.

The world around them turned completely silent. The sounds of the forest and the wind were gone. The silent aura was a common spell, often used to prevent mages from uttering incantations, but it had other uses, such as silencing the crack of a celestial powder rifle.

Elowyn moved away from Lillian, exiting the silent aura. The sounds of the night returned, and she could hear shouting and the town's bells pealing.

A flash from beside her erupted for a split second, and one of the men fell to the ground. She watched the others turn in surprise and confusion, unable to identify what had happened.

Lillian had already begun reloading, her fingers dancing over the mechanism.

The elf watched as another bandit fell, clutching his side. Another pointed at the treeline, in the general direction she and Lillian were hiding.

The village gates opened and a cloaked figure stepped out, brandishing a large shield and a longsword. The bandits began to back up. Some raised crossbows, others drew their swords and began to move forwards.

Lillian fired again, a silent flash in the night as one of the crossbowmen dropped his weapon, falling backwards with a cry of agony. Emma charged, her sword glowing as she slammed the into the nearest bandit, sending him flying. The man was sent flying across the field and slammed into one of his companions.

Elowyn smiled, raising her hand and murmuring another incantation. A monsoon of rain burst from the sky. A moment later, a blast from within the village gates froze the water on the ground into solid ice.

The bandits stumbled on the slick ground as Elowyn and Lillian began to make their way towards the fray. The bard emerged from the silence aura, whooping and cheering, plucking a simple but energetic tune in her lute as she ran.

“Let’s go, let’s go! Let’s show them what we’ve got, boys!” The music flowed into Elowyn, Henry, and Grom’s ears, filling them with an adrenaline-fueled, almost ecstatic sense of urgency.

“Twelve total,” Emma counted, muttering as she separated the captured bandits from the dead ones. “Seven still breathing.” She glanced at Lillian. “And three of the dead have your marks.”

“What?” Lillian grinned. “It’s not exactly the easiest thing to hit a man’s leg in the dead of night, you know.”

“Impressive,” Henry murmured, nodding at the sorceress. “Good work, Elowyn. And you too, Grom.”

The orc nodded. "It would've been a perfect opportunity to demonstrate what I was talking about a few weeks ago, actually. About the synergy between lightning and cold magics. But of course, you did insist on not killing them."

"Yes, well, some of us aren't particularly fond of killing," Emma replied.

"Alright, let's start with you." Emma crouched in front of one of the captured bandits, who sat, bound and gagged. The bandit leader was tall, muscular, with short black hair and a scar across his nose. He glared at her defiantly as she removed his gag. "Tell me, where are you from?"

He spat in her face.

"Gods!" Emma cursed, wiping the spit off with the back of her hand. She struck him with the back of her hand in turn. "Answer me."

"Fuck you." He spat.

"Who do you work for?"

He remained silent. Emma cracked her knuckles. She glanced at Lillian. "Give me a truthsaying charm."

"Oh, of course!" Lillian plucked a string on her lute, a glowing note rising from it as the air filled with the sounds of an orchestral symphony, bathing the room in a milky, pearlescent light. "No lying allowed now!"

Emma turned back to the man. "Alright." She smiled coldly. "I'll make this really simple for you. You answer my questions, or I start cutting pieces off."

"You can't do that," he growled, struggling in his bonds. "You're a paladin."

"I am, aren't I?" She grinned. "Well, then this should be a fun experience for us both. And once I've finished with your fingers, we can move onto other parts. You ever taste marrow? It's quite rich and buttery. Very good." She pulled a knife from her belt.

The man looked at the blade in her hands and swallowed nervously, glancing at Lillian and the rest of the party, his eyes darting back and forth. "You wouldn't. The gods wouldn't let you. Not if you were a true servant of theirs."

"Oh, but you know I'm not lying, am I?" She twirled the dagger in her hand. "Not according to the bard's magic."

"I... uh..."

She held the blade up, inspecting it closely, a cruel grin on her face. "Tell me, what part should we start with? Perhaps the left pinkie?"

He stared at the dagger in horror. "Wait! No! I'll talk! I'll talk!" He trembled. "We... we were sent here."

"I knew it!" Elowyn smirked. "Sent from where? And by whom?"

"To plunder and pillage," he gasped, straining against the magical compulsion, sweat forming on his brow as he struggled to hold back the words. "To attack the villages. Burn them to the ground."

"Who sent you?" Emma pressed, her hand resting on his throat.

He swallowed nervously. "C—" his throat tightened as he fought back the word. He shook his head, trying to avoid the compulsion, but it was too much. He cried out in pain as his jaw began to move on its own. "C-Calista!"

Chapter 10

"What?" Elowyn froze. She glanced at Lillian. "Recast the truth charm. That's impossible!"

Lillian nodded. "Alright." She plucked a string on her lute. "Try again."

"Who sent you?" Emma demanded.

"Calista." His eyes bulged, blood beginning to dribble down his nostrils as the magical compulsion continued to fight him. He let out a cry, his voice growing weaker. "Empress Calista, the Undying!"

Emma's grip on her knife tightened as she stood up and backed away from him slowly.

"I don't believe it." Elowyn stared at the bandit. "That can't be true. The Empress... She can't possibly..."

"Fuck," Emma growled. She stood, sheathing the knife and turning away. She walked out the door, her footsteps echoing through the night.

Henry followed, leaving Lillian and Elowyn alone with the bandits.

"What the hells was that?" Elowyn hissed, grabbing the bard's shoulder and spinning her around to face her. "What is wrong with your spell? You've made him insane!"

"What?" Lillian looked at her in surprise, her brow furrowing. "I'm not responsible for this! I did the charm right!"

"Did you? Or did you just fuck up again?"

"Hey!" Lillian crossed her arms and glared at the sorceress. "There is nothing wrong with my magic."

Elowyn scowled at her, crossing her own arms. "You're useless. I'm done with you. Go away." She waved a dismissive hand.

Lillian turned on her heels, stalking away. She stopped and glanced back. Then, she turned and left.

"Emma," Henry called out as he caught up with her, grabbing her arm and turning her around to face him. "Emma, wait."

"Fuck, kid," Emma sighed. "I know, I know. But you can't say I didn't warn you about me."

"What?" Henry paused. "Oh, that. I mean, yeah, it was a bit... startling. But that's not what I came to talk about." He paused. "Do you really think the Empress is responsible?"

"Who the fuck knows?" She shook her head, giving Henry a quick sidelong glance before continuing. "But it doesn't make sense."

Henry sighed, nodding. "No, it doesn't." He crossed his arms and frowned, staring out into the distance.

Emma turned to look at him. "Look, kid, I get it. I've seen your family crest." Henry's face turned slightly pink and he coughed. Emma continued. "You got some pretty close ties to the imperial court. You're a pretty devout Aurelian, aren't you?"

"I am," Henry said. He sighed. "It just... it doesn't add up."

"Yeah," Emma said, nodding. She took a deep breath, shaking her head. "But then again, nothing does."

"Alright," Henry said, rubbing his temples and pacing around the room. "Let's think this through. We've been sent here to defend the village, right? And we did that. We've also discovered the bandits are from the Empire."

"Allegedly," Elowyn grumbled, glancing at Lillian. The bard sat on the floor, plucking a string on her lute absentmindedly, looking annoyed. She had insisted she did the charm correctly.

Henry sighed, rolling his eyes at Elowyn. "Right. Allegedly. And apparently, they were acting on the orders of the Empress. Maybe not directly under her command, but under Imperial orders, at the very least."

"That can't be right," Lillian murmured, plucking the string again, her voice distant. "There has to be another explanation."

"Yeah, maybe they were lying," Elowyn shrugged, sitting down in a nearby chair and crossing her legs. "Because someone here doesn't know how to properly perform a truthsaying."

"Oh, come off it." Lillian groaned. "My truth charm worked just fine."

"You keep telling yourself that, dear," the elf said, her tone dripping with disdain. "I'm sorry if I don't exactly trust the truthsaying spells of a fabulist."

"I don't know," Grom murmured. He stood leaning against the door. "I can't say I know enough about charms to say who's wrong and who's right, but the man's story makes no sense."

"That's the point." Elowyn nodded, her voice firm and clear. "He's obviously lying."

"At least," Grom continued. "It makes no sense considering the information we have. But our views on the war may simply be wrong, as I've been saying."

"What, are you saying we're wrong now, orc?" Elowyn snapped. "Are you saying we should be supporting the Coalition?"

"Gods, that's not what I said, elf." He glared at her.

"Hey!" Lillian stood up, holding her lute. "We need to get along, alright?" She strummed her lute. The air filled with a light, airy sound that drifted through the room. "Just take a nice, deep breath." She plucked another string. The music flowed over them, calming and soothing.

"Fuck." Elowyn rubbed her temples, her eyes narrowed in frustration. "What the hells is going on?" She groaned. "Can we not all get along, at least until we're done figuring out this bullshit?"

"We are figuring it out," Henry sighed. "And we will figure it out. We just have to work together."

"Alright," Elowyn perked up. "Have we considered that maybe the village is actually some secret military outpost? That they're secretly stockpiling weapons or resources? That they might be the aggressors? That they might even have been working with the Coalition all along, and that's why they're being targeted?"

"What?" Henry raised his eyebrows, looking at the sorceress with a puzzled expression. "That's absurd. Where did that come from?"

"Think about it!" She waved her hands. "It's not that crazy. They were the ones that hired us to come out here to fight the bandits."

"Because they were under attack," Lillian murmured. She glanced down at her lute, wondering if it might be time for another charm on the elf specifically.

"Yeah, or, maybe, they were under attack because they're a military target" Elowyn nodded. "Come on, Henry, use your brain."

"That's..." Henry muttered. He shook his head, turning and looking out the window. "Highly doubtful."

"I agree." Emma sighed. "That sounds a bit... out there."

Elowyn rolled her eyes. "You people. You just don't understand anything. Look, it's obvious, okay? Think about it."

"Think about what?" Lillian groaned.

"Everything! Gods!" She stood up, pacing around the room. "Think about what the village is. Why they would need mercenaries, of all people, to defend them from bandits. Why they would have enough money to pay us, of all people. Why they would even care enough to call us here at all."

"Maybe because they're a peaceful little village, and they don't want to die?" Emma muttered.

"No!" Elowyn hissed. "Don't you see? It's all connected!" She took a breath, closing her eyes and composing herself. She smiled at them. "Look. Just humor me for a minute. Let's pretend, for the sake of argument, that everything is a lie. Everything. Every single thing we've ever heard. Every fact we've been told."

"Except the attackers bring from Aurelia."

"Yes," Elowyn nodded. "Except for that. Now, let's assume that the Empire is behind the banditry."

"Alright." Henry nodded, crossing his arms. "And that means that we can assume that the Empire is attacking this village."

"Right." Elowyn nodded, pointing at Henry. "So, the next logical question is why, right? What's the village got that would make it worth the time and expense to attack it?"

"I don't know," Emma sighed, rubbing her forehead. "And this is starting to get really old."

"Just, bear with me, okay?" The elf rolled her eyes. "Now, the village has a few things. There are fields. They grow food. They're self-sustaining, for the most part. But the bandits don't seem to want their food." She paused. "They're going after the villagers."

"And why exactly would Aurelian soldiers go after the villagers?" Grom asked. "And in the guise of bandits, at that?"

"Because they're all guilty!" Elowyn exclaimed excitedly. "Of... something! But they can't just attack neutral territory without causing an incident. Hence the disguise!"

"Elowyn," Henry sighed. "Please. I want to get to the bottom of this as much as anyone, but your explanations are just..."

"Just think about it," Elowyn said. "If you look at it like this, it all makes perfect sense. And it explains the man's testimony."

"Oh?" Grom asked.

"Yeah!" Elowyn nodded. "He wasn't lying, the bard's charm worked fine!"

Lillian perked up, grinning. "Told ya!"

"Shut up." Elowyn snapped. "Anyways, the lead bandit was telling the truth when he said he worked for the Empire. But we didn't ask him who he was. We didn't ask him why he was doing what he did."

"So... we should interrogate him again?" Henry sighed. "To get to the bottom of it all?"

"Exactly!" Elowyn beamed. "I knew you'd get to it eventually!"

Henry groaned, rubbing his forehead. "Okay. Let's go ask him, then." He opened the door to the room, gesturing for the party to follow him. They filed out.

Elowyn was the last to leave the room, following after them, muttering to herself. "It's obvious. Obvious."

Emma stood over the lead bandit, her arms crossed. "Heal him a bit," she ordered. Elowyn sighed and waved her hand, a pale light surrounding the bandit as her magic flowed through him. "Alright, Lillian," the paladin continued. "Do the charm on him again."

"Right," the bard murmured. She plucked her lute again, bathing the room in the same milky, pearlescent glow.

"Hey." Emma gently kicked the man, nudging him with her foot. "Wake the fuck up."

The bandit groaned, slowly waking from unconsciousness. "Huh? Wha—" His eyes snapped open. "What's going on?"

"You tell us," Elowyn hissed, crossing her arms and looking at him. "You said that the Empress ordered you to attack the village."

"Uh..." the man looked at Elowyn and Lillian. Then he glanced back at Emma. "Yeah... yeah, I did say that, didn't I?"

"Tell us," Henry demanded. "Why. Why are you attacking this village?"

"Why? Because..." he began to stutter, the magical compulsion taking over. "I... uh... no! I... we... I can't... it's..." He let out a strangled gasp as he strained to resist, his face turning bright red as blood dribbled from his nostrils again. Finally, with great effort, he managed to spit it out. "We were told to bring the villagers back to the capital!"

"Why?" Grom asked, raising an eyebrow and stepping forwards.

"Because!" The man gasped. "The war! It's stagnating..." he choked and gasped again, blood trickling down his cheek from the corner of his eyes now. "And the empress needs them... she doesn't want to... lottery... again..."

"Fuck!" Elowyn cursed. She stepped forward and slapped the man, knocking him out. "Enough of this!" Her eyes flashed. "Stop lying!"

The bandit leader slumped, falling unconscious once more.

"You fucked up again!" Elowyn glared at Lillian. "Your stupid charm isn't working!"

"It's working fine!" The bard retorted. "You said it worked perfectly!"

"Yes, well, it clearly wasn't this time!" Elowyn sneered at Lillian. "If it was, this moron be giving us a reasonable explanation, not this bullshit!"

"What, and it's my fault somehow?" The bard rolled her eyes.

"Oh, come off it," the elf retorted. "It's your magic. It's clearly broken, as usual."

"It is not broken!" Lillian snapped. "It's your stupid, ridiculous hairbrained ideas about Aurelia that are broken! As usual."

"What? Are you a Coalitionist now too?"

"I don't give a damn about either side!" The bard retorted, throwing her hands up in the air. "I'm from Huashan, remember?"

"Well maybe you should just go back there then."

"Well, maybe you should go back to your prissy little elven paradise and leave the real world to the people who actually know what they're talking about!"

"I can't go back!" Elowyn shrieked. "I'm an exile!" She took a deep breath, her voice shaking. "I... I can't..." Tears welled in the elf's eyes as she fell silent.

"What?" Lillian's anger softened somewhat, and she stared at her, stunned. "You're what? An exile? How... Why?"

Elowyn turned away, shaking her head and wiping the tears from her eyes. She stormed out of the room. "Just forget it," she said. She left, slamming the door shut behind her.

"Wait!" Lillian ran towards the door, stopping with her hand on the handle. "Shit," she murmured.

"Lillian," Henry spoke, walking towards the bard and resting a hand on her shoulder. "Leave her be. Give her some space."

"I can't!" Lillian looked up at the knight. "Not like that! She's my friend, I have to..."

"No." Emma shook her head.

"Right." The bard sighed. She stepped away from the door.

Chapter 11

Elowyn wandered in the forest outside the town, alone, the sunrise low on the horizon and casting a golden hue across the trees and undergrowth. She wandered, kicking the occasional branch as she went. Tears continued to stream down her face.

"Gods." She wiped the tears from her cheeks and sniveled, sniffing and clearing her throat. She sat on a nearby log and buried her head in her arms, her shoulders trembling and heaving. "Fuck... fucking dammit..."

"Here," a voice came from her side. From the last person she wanted to talk to right now.

Elowyn looked up and glared at the bard standing beside her. She was holding out a handkerchief.

"What the fuck are you doing out here, Lillian? Leave me alone." She turned her gaze away, looking off into the woods. "You're the last person I want to speak to. I have no intention of listening to any of the bullshit you have to say."

"Well, that's too bad." The bard shrugged and sat on the log beside the sorceress. She put an arm around the other woman, who pulled away and scooted along the log.

"Don't touch me." Elowyn hissed. She turned to look at Lillian. "I don't need your sympathy."

Lillian shrugged, unslinging the lute on her back and placing it in her lap. "Then you can have my company. We're a party, you and I. If you won't listen to a friend, then listen to an ally. And if not that, at the very least, listen to someone that you don't really care about all that much."

She plucked the strings on the instrument, a soft tune filling the air. It was a soothing melody, a calm and relaxing song that flowed through the air. Elowyn sat silently as the notes played, and slowly her breathing grew less rapid and her shoulders less tense.

Lillian smiled at her. "Feeling better?"

"Better," the elf grunted, looking down at the ground and frowning. "Not good."

The bard grunted. She continued playing in silence, a slow and soft melody echoing through the trees. The morning sun cast its light over the forest, shining down on them.

Elowyn glanced over at the musician, looking at the instrument. She sighed and turned to the other woman. She turned back and stared out at the trees. The sorceress leaned forwards, her arms crossed over her knees, and stared at the ground.

"You wanna—"

"No."

Lillian shrugged. "Suit yourself. Want me to stop playing?" She paused, turning to look at the elf.

Elowyn was silent for a long moment. Then, she shook her head.

Lillian smiled. "I'm not going anywhere," she said, continuing her melody.

"Okay." Elowyn mumbled, nodding. She leaned back on her hands and closed her eyes. She listened to the music, the gentle tune washing over her.

They sat like that for what seemed like an hour, neither of them speaking, just sitting in the morning sun, letting the cool breeze wash over their bodies, the birds chirping above them. The forest was alive, teeming with life and activity, and all around them was the sounds of nature.

"It's peaceful." She said.

"Yeah." Lillian murmured. "It's nice."

"It is." Elowyn sighed. "I'm tired."

"Let's get back," Lillian nodded, patting her shoulder. She stood, slipping her lute back onto her back and extending her hand to help her companion up.

"Alright." Elowyn murmured. She didn't take the bard's outstretched hand.

* * *

"So what's our next move?" Emma asked, looking at Henry. "We have seven still alive to worry about."

"We could turn them in to the authorities in Risington," the knight said. "We have the village constable's word, that counts for a lot."

"If they're under the Empress's employ, that won't do us much good." The paladin sighed, shaking her head. "She'll get them out in a day, and we'll have greater issues to worry about."

"What should we do with them?" Grom asked, his hand on his chin as he considered their options. "Should we keep them prisoner?"

"How? In the fortified jail that we just so happen to have on hand?" Elowyn scoffed.

"I see two options," Emma murmured, looking at the others. "The first one being that we turn them in. Not to Riseree as criminals, but to the Coalition as prisoners of war."

“What?” Elowyn blinked. “How would that even work? And the other option?”

“We kill them.”

“What!?” Henry turned and looked at Emma, a horrified expression on his face.

“Hold on, what about the third option, hm?” Elowyn asked. “The one where we hand them over to the Empire, prove our loyalty to Aurelia.” She paused, looking at Emma’s expression. “And look, before you say it, I know it’ll forfeit our bounty. But, we might get an even bigger bounty from Aurelia if they see that we are on their side, yes?”

“Or, they’ll just kill us to keep things quiet,” Emma pointed out.

“They wouldn’t do that.” Elowyn shook her head. “I’m a member of House Vaelaris. And Henry, you’re from House Alden, aren’t you? A-and you, Emma, you’re a former Knight of the Revenant!”

“Oh, okay,” Lillian said. “So they kill Grom and me, and the rest of you walk out scot free. That’s fine then. Let’s do that.”

“No, no!” Elowyn hissed, running a hand through her hair. “You and Grom can… you can go back to Huashan! And the badlands! Or stay in Riseree, whichever you’d prefer!”

Emma shook her head. “Look, El. I get what you’re trying to do here. You want to help Aurelia. You think this is all a big mistake, and the best thing we can do is to clear the air.” She sighed, closing her eyes. “But you need to see the situation realistically.”

“I am!” Elowyn insisted.

“Really?” Emma gave her a look. “Calista’s sending raids on neutral territory, and you’re going to try to convince us that she’ll reward us for bringing her soldiers back?”

“Well…” the elf sighed, slumping in her seat. She fell silent, her arms crossing over her chest as she sulked.

“It’s either the Coalition or we end it here,” Emma said. “It’s not ideal. I don’t like it either. But learn to read the writing on the wall in addition to all your damn books.”

Elowyn let out a loud groan and buried her face in her hands. “I fucking hate you.”

“It’s okay.” Emma shrugged. She turned to Henry. “So, what’s it gonna be, kid? The decision’s yours.”

Henry was silent. He stared off into the distance for a long while, mulling over his choices. Finally, he took a deep breath, looking up. “The Coalition,” he murmured.

The trip back to Risington was mostly silent, although the bard did attempt to lift everyone's spirits with a cheerful melody every so often. Eventually, they made their way to the Alderman manor. Emma knocked on the door.

The door opened and a young man peeked out at them. He looked them up and down, eyeing them suspiciously, before speaking in a timid voice. "What... what do you want?"

"Master Alderman," Emma said, stepping back. She grabbed Elowyn, and dragged the elf to the front. "You met Elowyn, didn't you?"

"What the hells are you doing?" The sorceress demanded, trying to pull herself away.

"She's come to apologize for disrespecting your family," Emma explained. She glanced at the elf, narrowing her eyes. "Isn't that right, El?"

Elowyn froze, looking at Emma with wide eyes. Her face flushed a dark red and she turned away, staring at the ground. "Y-yeah. Sorry. About that, I mean."

Emma nudged the elf in the ribs with her fingers, prompting a pained gasp from the other woman. "Go on," the paladin murmured.

"I, uh... I was insensitive and cruel and—"

Another jab to the ribs.

"And, and I... I'm sorry." Elowyn bit her lower lip. "I shouldn't have dismissed your grief. That was wrong. And I shouldn't have disparaged you, your sister, and the loss that you feel. So. I'm sorry."

"Oh," The young man replied. He was silent for a moment. "Is that all?"

"No," Elowyn coughed nervously. "A-and... we need your help."

"What am I supposed to do with this?" Thomas Alderman stared at Henry. "You brought seven captured soldiers here?"

"You heard my explanation," Henry said, crossing his arms. "And we can't exactly turn them in to the Riseree authorities. They'll do anything they can to retain a neutral status."

"So you want us to smuggle them across the border?" The young man raised an eyebrow. "That's not exactly my expertise, you know. My parents were the ones who managed all of our political affairs."

"You have connections, don't you, little lordling?" Elowyn asked. She paused. "Uh... sir," she added.

Thomas gave her an annoyed look. He turned his head. "Emily! Any luck on figuring out a contact for the Coalition?"

"I might have a lead," an older woman walked out of a nearby room, her eyes glued to a ledger in her hands. She had her brown hair tied up in a tight bun, a pair of thin glasses resting on her nose. She flipped through the pages. "I'll have to visit with them in person. See if they'll even accept an unofficial offer. But they're in the upper city too, so it shouldn't be hard to reach."

The group of six sat around the Aldermans' living room. Emily had left an hour prior, and they all were idly waiting for her to return from her meeting.

"I can't believe this is actually happening." Lillian shook her head. She grinned. "It feels unreal. I'm practically bouncing off the walls over here!"

"You seem to be taking this rather lightly." Emma raised an eyebrow at her. "Considering the gravity of this situation."

"Eh?" Lillian shrugged. She began playing her lute. "Don't be so dramatic! This is the pinnacle of storytelling material!" She strummed the strings of her instrument, a loud and upbeat melody flowing through the air. "It's got everything you could want! Intrigue, mystery, action!"

"Yes, yes, told by a deposed empress who was raised by wolves and her veteran father figure." Elowyn rolled her eyes at the bard. "When do you stop making things up, Lillian? Do you plan on spinning stories until the end of time?"

"Spin?" Lillian feigned offense. "No mere spinster am I!"

"Not what that word means," the sorceress sighed.

The front door to the estate clicked as the lock opened, and Emily Alderman stepped inside. "I have returned. With good news, and an esteemed guest." She held the door open. "Right this way, Lord Grey."

A stout man stepped through the threshold, his eyes lighting up when he saw the party. "Aaah! My old friends!"

"Oh fuck," Elowyn groaned. "Him again?"