

Octopath Traveler: Eight Travelers, Four Side Roads
～八人の旅人と四つの道草～

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Preface

Alternative Format

I understand reading in a book format is not for everyone, particularly on mobile devices. While this document is the way I believe this work is best presented, if you find it too cumbersome, hard-to-read, or otherwise inconvenient, you can also read each chapter [on my blog](#). Note that the blog will not reflect the most up-to-date revisions and edits, so consider this document to be the definitive version of my translation.

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Translator's Note (and a Note on Translator's Notes)

As a rule, I'm opposed to translator's notes. I think they break the flow of a text, overly insert the presence of the translator between the reader and the original text, and generally reflect a failure on a translator's part to appropriately transform the text in a way that is both faithful and understandable to the target language's audience. That said, when I find that translator's notes are absolutely necessary to explain something that's otherwise untranslatable (or that would be awkward to translate with total fidelity, but which bears preserving), they'll be found as hyperlink-enabled endnotes in their own section at the end of the chapter. If you have any questions about the original text or my writing choices, I'm more than happy to field them on [Twitter](#), [Tumblr](#), or via [email](#).

You can read more of my translation work on [my blog](#).

Happy reading!

Chapter 1

Professor Albright's Hands-On Learning

Month of Sealticge, Week 1, Windsday

So much time has passed already since I first set out on my journey. I left home all alone, but before I knew it, it was like I'd become part of a big family! Every day is so lively.

Professor Albright and I seem to get excited about a lot of the same topics – the Flatlands and the Coastlands are right next to each other, after all. Professor Albright isn't really much of an emotional person, but he's not cold or distant or anything at all! Honestly, it's a huge help having such a composed, reliable adult around.

Still, he's got some mysterious parts to him, too... It all started on our way to Stonegard, a few days after we left Atlasdam –

The eight of them varied wildly in birthplace and upbringing alike, making their journey unconventional, to say the least. To start with, the only ones among them that could really be considered experienced “travelers” were Therion, the wandering stranger; H'aanit, ever so particular about their camping arrangements; and Olberic, the seasoned warrior. As for the others, they had hardly left their hometowns, much less gone on a grand journey like this.

“If we proceed at this rate, we should reach the Coastlands by nightfall,” Olberic announced, spreading out the map as he walked along the main road.

They were proceeding faster than normal today, making good time to leave the Flatlands before long. It was with all this in mind that H'aanit, walking in the middle of the group's formation, turned to look back at the rest as she muttered, “Everyone's tenacity far outstrippeth my expectations.” They'd been walking non-stop for a considerable time since departing Atlasdam, yet she'd not once felt even short of breath. Linde, her snow leopard, sat down by her side with an unbothered expression.

Leaving the others in the back a few paces behind, Cyrus expressed his agreement as he approached. “Quite so. It seems neither Alfyn nor Ophilia have known

little of travel at all, but despite that, they've kept up quite nicely, without any show of complaint." He, too, had managed to match their steady pace without even a hitch in his breathing. As for the rest of the group, Primrose and Therion led the group with Olberic, while Tressa, Alfyn, and Ophilia trailed behind. H'aanit raised her eyebrows, bemused.

"Thou art no less included when I say 'everyone,' Cyrus."

"Oh, is that so?" he asked breezily, seemingly not taking any offense. "I'm sure you have an image in your mind of scholars cooped up in their studies, doing naught but reading dusty tomes all day. Naturally, that kind of thing is important, but as for myself, I'm not the kind of person to neglect the value of field work, you know. One's body is a precious resource. My muscles are hardly carved from stone, but I do believe I can handle a little walking."

"Speak'st thou true, I wonder..." H'aanit murmured as she craned her neck to look past the back of the group. There, further down the slope, a small figure with a massive bag strapped to her back continued to climb, weakly gasping for air. It was Tressa Colzione – though a bona fide merchant in both willpower and way of speaking, she still hadn't quite grown out of her teenage looks. Right behind Tressa were Alfyn and Ophilia, who called out in concern as they kept moving.

"Tressa, if you'd like, I can hold your luggage for a bit...?"

"Grrrr.... I'm alright, Ophilia...." Tressa gasped, her voice strained through gritted teeth. "Don't.... Don't take us merchants lightly, you know...! A hill... like this... is *nothing*!"

It was a beautiful day, and the travelers and road before them baked in the Flatlands sun. Sweat beaded on Tressa's face as she continued to limp down the main road step by step.

"She's got quite the burden there, hasn't she?" Cyrus mused, stroking his chin as he gazed back at the little merchant. "It'd be easy to think she isn't particularly strong, but judging from the size of it, carrying that baggage of hers all this time must be no small feat." One's eyes couldn't help but be drawn to her luggage, even from such a distance. She'd strapped those bags to her back ever since she left home in Rippletide. It was natural that she had far more to carry than her companions, given she also had to carry everything she had for sale. They'd proposed she borrow a mule to help carry at least some of it, but she insisted on carrying it all on her lonesome. If she wanted to carry her own merchant's burden by herself, there wasn't much any of the others would say to object. Cyrus, as a scholar, and H'aanit, as a hunter thought perhaps someone should object. The group of eight carried on amidst this strange dynamic.

"H'aanit, I propose we take a short rest here. What say you?"

"Aye, perhaps that would be best." She looked towards the front of the group and nodded slightly as she watched Olberic fold up his map. This wasn't Cyrus offering his wisdom as a scholar, nor H'aanit consulting her expertise as a hunter. This was simply two traveling companions watching Tressa, against all odds, take that last laboring step up the slope and offering her time to catch her breath at last. Perhaps at that proposal, at least, the others would be in agreement.

“Finally... I made it!!” A wide grin split across Tressa’s whole face as she raised her arms in celebration of her achievement. “This is it... it’s actually the top of the hill! You can see the whole ocean from up here! It’s so beautiful... Alfyn, Ophilia, come see!”

“H-hey, Tressa!”

“Tressa, maybe we should rest a little first...” But seeing the girl’s exhaustion begin to melt away into pure excitement, Alfyn and Ophilia nonetheless ran to catch up to her. Cyrus, watching this lively scene play out before him, merely shrugged.

“Do you think our worries were perhaps unfounded?”

“Certainly not. ’Tis absurd to think I wolde not agree she worketh herself too hard. The sooner we maken camp, the sooner she can taken some well deserved rest.”

“Quite so.” Cyrus nodded at her. It was hard not to feel a twinge of pride, watching Tressa excitedly show the other two the scenery from the top of the hill. Cyrus remembered something. When they had first departed Atlasdam, Tressa had told him she had come up from Rippletide, taking the northern road. In that case, she should have passed across this slope once before on her own already. It musn’t have been a pleasant climb then, either, yet it seemed she’d nonetheless discovered something valuable on the way – namely, the picturesque scenery before them. Past the plains and beyond the hill were the Coastlands from which Tressa hailed, a land of salty sea breezes and the roar of the waves, of endless clear skies and the deep blue ocean, where the wind carries the aroma of the shore as you approach. The profound impact of seeing this scenery for the first time must have been something for her and her alone. Now that he thought about it, Cyrus realized he wanted to know more about the reason she had set off on her journey in the first place. He, too, knew the thrumming and ringing in one’s chest that comes with crossing the threshold into worlds yet unknown, how moving and exciting that sense of discovery could be. He walked over to Olberic, who stood in the shade of a tree, unfurling his map to study it once more, and asked, “Olberic, have we made good progress?”

“Indeed. In fact, we may even be going somewhat too fast. I believe we should slow our pace a little.”

“I see. I was thinking of proposing the same myself, actually.”

“Well, when you see how Tressa is faring...” Olberic’s line of sight settled on Tressa, who was now sitting on the ground, monolithic luggage still strapped securely to her back. She had been practically jumping up and down with excitement a moment ago, but now she was making no effort to hide her exhaustion. Taking her into account, as well as the others who were not yet accustomed to travel, it was a reasonable plan Olberic had proposed. Looking at the group as a whole, though, there wasn’t any urgent need to worry too much about their pace from here on out.

“Olberic, do you perhaps know anything about why Tressa began traveling in the first place?”

"Hm? Now that you mention it, I don't believe I've ever asked her. I get the impression that it differs from the reasons you and I have, though. I have the impression the experience of traveling itself seems to be part of her goal."

"That very well may be. I know she frequently refers to a journal she received from someone, but I don't believe it draws her towards any particular objective." To this, Olberic simply offered a "Hm," as he closed the map once more.

"I take it you haven't simply asked her directly either, then."

"That's right. I can't help but find myself taking some interest in it, though."

"If you're so curious, just go on and ask her. That would save you a good deal of time rather than trying to do your usual roundabout method of investigation."

At this, Cyrus stopped. This idea was so brilliant that it was as though he had been slapped upside the head with it as he nodded with deep satisfaction.

"I do believe you're on to something. All this superfluous enquiry is somewhat of an unintentional bad habit of mine, I believe."

"Have you even the slightest self awareness...?" Olberic muttered, too quiet for Cyrus to hear.

* * *

Just as Olberic predicted, they were able to cross into the Coastlands well before nightfall without any real delay in their overall itinerary. They made camp on a spot by the side of the main road, accompanied by the sound of the waves. As each of the companions passed time in their own ways, night finally came.

"Month of Sealticge, Week 1, Lightsday... I'm back in the Coastlands for the first time in forever!" Outside the tent, with the aid of the light of a lamp, Tressa scribbled furiously in her journal. *"The view of my hometown I could see from the Flatlands was so beautiful..."* At this, her hand stopped, and she looked up. When they'd returned back to the area she'd grown up in, the first thing she was surprised by was the sound of the waves beating against the shore over and over again. *"I can't believe how loud the waves are!"* All that time in Rippletide, she'd never realized. Spending such empty, pitch-black nights in the Coastlands truly made one feel as though they were being swallowed whole by the sea. Thinking about her time on the road after leaving home until she eventually arrived in Atlasdam, she realized that sensation was rather familiar. *"At first, it was really scary! Until I reached Atlasdam, I was all on my own."* Countless times she'd had dreams of the waves along the shore catching her unawares and taking her out to sea. Each time she awoke, she dragged her sleeping bag another five steps away from the beach.

Tressa looked down at her journal once more and continued writing, committing everything she felt, everything she thought, everything she said during her time here to paper one by one. *"But now I'm traveling with so many new people, and I don't feel so uneasy at all anymore... There!"* Inside the tent were Primrose, H'aanit, and Ophilia, while Olberic, Therion, and the others were in the men's tent a bit away. She wondered what it was that led each of them to keep traveling. The beginnings of each of their journeys couldn't have been too long ago, but by now she'd already forgotten the concrete reasons. Yet before she knew it, one of them, then two began walking by Tressa's side, until somehow in between the eight of

them had become such a big family. Each and every one of them had been an invaluable companion to her.

Alfyn, worried about her after walking nonstop so long, had prescribed Tressa a salve infused with medicinal herbs to help with the fatigue. Combined with a cold compress, he assured her it would ease her sore, aching muscles. At once, she'd applied the medicine to her calf and wrapped a cool cloth around it just as he told her. The feeling of the cloth, chilled by the sea breeze, was wonderful. She decided to write about that, too: "*Alfyn still told me he wouldn't take any money for his medicine today.*" Each time Tressa tried to propose a price she'd pay for his prescriptions, he gently declined. She tried more than a few times, but no matter how many times she told him, "I'm a merchant! There's no way I can just take an apothecary's medicine without paying for it!" his reply would never change:

"In that case, I ain't an apothecary. Consider it a personal gift from me to you, Tress." She was yet to push past his unshakeable goodwill and get him to take even a single leaf. Still, she understood that refusing payment like that was just what Alfyn believed in.

"*Maybe stuff like that is why Alfyn started traveling – he wants to help people all over the world with his medicine.*" Without realizing it, Tressa's scrawling across the aged paper of her journal had moved to the topic of her companions. She wrote about Olberic and his journey to confront his former brother in arms, about H'aanit and her search for her master who disappeared without a word. "*Everyone's got their own goals to follow. As for me...*" Tressa's pen, which had so fluently been soaring across the page, came to a stop. "As for me... I'm... Er..." *What about me?*

Tressa set down her pen. She crossed her eyes and grimaced, looking up at the sky, then looked back down to scowl at the ground. No matter how much she moaned and groaned to herself, it never came to her. *The reason I'm on this journey.* Naturally, Tressa had one as well. Yet when she lined it up with the others' it felt so... insignificant, almost childish. It wasn't laden with conviction or ideals, or even any kind of special emotions. She wanted to know what was beyond the walls of her hometown, to follow in the footsteps of the nameless traveler whose journal he'd left behind, but that yearning for the open road felt like it was all too commonplace a dream. She tried embellishing it in her mind, qualifying it with all kinds of fancy words and a degree of braggadocio, but still it never felt right. Then, while she was turning this all over in her mind,

"Oh my. You're still awake, Tressa?"

She looked up at the sound of a familiar voice. The face of a man emerged from the pitch black of the night, illuminated in the dim lamplight; a man whose age was difficult to discern, as his youthful looks clashed with his unusually composed presence – Cyrus Albright. As for his reason for taking to the road, Tressa had actually asked him directly. Though his journey had been short, he had a precise goal clear in his mind: He sought to track down *From the Far Reaches of Hell*, a tome that had disappeared from the library of the Royal Academy, in pursuit of his ideal that knowledge ought to be spread far and wide, shared with all people. Tressa thought this was a reason more than worthy of praise.

"Er... I just got wrapped up in writing in my journal." She decided to answer truthfully as she shut the book resting on her knee.

"I see." Cyrus' gaze dropped for only a moment down to the journal, then back to Tressa. "Do you mind if I sit?"

"Oh, go ahead. Sorry it's not exactly the most luxurious seating." With a small "Well then," Cyrus sat himself near Tressa on a reasonably-sized boulder.

"Surely anything you're writing about doesn't warrant such deep forethought. It's best to just write it down precisely as it is."

"As it is...?"

"That's right. Just as it is, with no need for any flowery language or embellishments. Particularly if you're simply writing for yourself. The most important thing, Tressa, is that you write down your thoughts in exactly the same way you have them..." At this, Cyrus suddenly grinned. "...Even that, though, can still be quite a challenge. Might I perhaps be of some assistance in helping you organize your thoughts?"

"Um..." Tressa hesitated for only a moment before making up her mind. This was Cyrus Albright, after all – a man who commanded attention at the Royal Academy with the tip of his teacher's pointer. There wasn't a better person in the world she could consult with. An audience with him was worth more than what money could buy. She forced herself to tuck questions about a fraught business proposal of hers into the recesses of her mind and laid her actual worry bare: that she worried that her own journey lacked the same kind of conviction and earnestness of her companions'; that from the moment she departed her dream was one that lacked anything special, that just about anyone could have. She didn't want to come across as self-deprecating, but it was at that point in her thought process that she could no longer put things into words.

"I see." Cyrus nodded slightly and stroked his chin. Amidst the silence broken only by the sound of the waves, the dim lamplight illuminated Cyrus and Tressa's faces dazzlingly.

"Professor, you set out to go find that lost book, right?"

"That's right. Of course, it also happened that I found myself to be no longer needed at the Academy... Well, I suppose you could just as well consider either of those to be my reason for departing Atlasdam." There was nothing on his face to suggest he felt any anger or regret about the situation. "Tressa, I believe you flattered me by calling my own reason 'more than worthy of praise,' is that right?"

"Erm... yeah." Tressa gave a small nod. "It feels like it suits you too. Holding fast to your ideals, it's so... grown-up."

"I also happen to be some twelve years older than you. It would be unbecoming of me to set a poor example." He laughed drily, then continued, "But following one's ideals doesn't just take one form. I can see from how you conduct yourself that there are certain principles of your own you adhere to, and in them I respect you a great deal."

"Really?"

“Really. ...But I suppose that naturally it’s difficult to simply take my word for it at face value.” Gazing up at the star-filled sky, Cyrus continued on to the main topic at hand. “If I may, there’s actually something I wished to ask you, Tressa.”

“Me, Professor? What is it?” Her eyes widened – it seemed she felt she couldn’t possibly have anything to offer him except perhaps her expertise as a merchant.

“As a matter of fact, it was what your reason for going on such a journey might have been. A moment ago, you said you felt it wasn’t so grand as the motivations of Olberic and the others, but I don’t believe I ever asked you precisely what it actually was, have I?”

“I don’t think so...” Tressa scratched her cheek. She wanted to talk, but she was too embarrassed to put it into words; at the very least, this wasn’t something she was very proud of. But she’d already agreed to talk to him, so keeping quiet now was out of the question.

“It’s really nothing important. But there was something I wanted to see.”

“Something you wanted to see?”

“Mhm.” Tressa clutched her journal as she stood and took in the scenery around her, cloaked in the curtain of night. Lit only by the faint stars and the light of the moon, it was hard to see the deep black ocean clearly. In that silent world, the horizon over the water dissolved in the thick darkness, and the sky and the sea and the vast land around them all blurred together. There was only the sound of the waves to accompany the passage of time, to tell Cyrus and Tressa that these really were the Coastlands.

“I wanted to know what was beyond that horizon.” Tressa had been born and raised in the port town of Rippletide. In comparison to those she traveled with, nothing terribly dramatic had ever happened to her. She had lived a life that anybody could have had for eighteen perfectly normal years. Every day, she woke up and learned the fundamentals of commerce from her parents, hearing those same waves and bathed in the sea breeze. Yet one day, staring at the water past the port, that question finally occurred to her. *What in the world could be on the other side of that water?* And so, that was the reason Tressa began her journey. Certainly there were ways for her to learn of the world beyond without needing to leave home, but not a single one ever left her satisfied. When she first set foot in the Flatlands and looked back upon the path she’d traveled, that uncertain curiosity solidified into conviction. Beyond that, there was no other reason she’d begun her travels. Of course, what motivated her to leave at all was Captain Leon and the journal he’d given her – the words written on its aging pages kindled her desire enough to give her that final push.

“I see.” Cyrus closed his eyes and nodded deeply. Tressa worried she’d disappointed him. Cyrus wasn’t the kind of person to thoughtlessly deride what other people thought, but she truly felt she hadn’t said anything so dramatic as to provoke any kind of special emotion.

“So, Professor, I really think that–”

“That’s a marvelous reason, isn’t it?”

"H-Huhh?" His response startled her so much she accidentally raised her voice. "B-but Professor, that really is all there is to it... Going on such a dangerous trip with such a vague reason in mind just feels so childish...isn't it?" Yet Cyrus' face showed every indication he was being serious.

"If I may, Tressa. When we have doubts about something, when there is something which we desire to know – that is the first step on the stairway to the door to scholarship. Moreover—" As he spoke, his words became tinged more and more with passion. Tressa had only been at the man's side for a brief time, but that was enough to know full well how his voice became packed with energy when he was confronted with a topic he cared deeply about.

"Moreover, those doubts encompass a great, great many things. Yet the people who are able to open that door – in other words, those who depart on the quest for that knowledge – are very, very few. Tressa, when you, in pursuit of your own curiosity, took your hand and opened that door, you placed your foot across the threshold dividing the known and the unknown. As a scholar myself, I cannot help but express my marvel and admiration in face of your motivation to journey on." Cyrus' expression as he heaped on this praise was unbelievably earnest. Tressa squirmed a little, and couldn't help but feel a bit embarrassed.

"I don't know about all that, ehehe..."

"I'm certain of it. Tressa, your inquisitiveness truly is well-suited to scholarship." Cyrus was not a man given to flattery, certainly, but being confronted head-on with such lavish compliments was almost too much to bear, not to mention being told she was "well-suited to scholarship" by a man who stood as a professor at the Royal Academy in Atlasdam.

"I mean, I'm just a merchant..." She tried to protest, but she couldn't help but break into a grin. "But if you say so, Professor, I'll hardly take offense!"

"Wonderful. Do you think you'll be able to keep writing from here?"

"Yes, thank you so much, Professor!" Cyrus smiled gently listening to Tressa's earnest words of gratitude as she placed the journal on her knee and opened it once more. After hearing Cyrus' words, she once again sorted out her emotions. She tickled her forehead with the feather of her pen as she paused to choose the right words, then dipped its nib in ink and set it racing against the page. "*As for me, I set out to learn about what's beyond the horizon that I've been fascinated by for so long.*" She didn't care if anyone praised her for it. It didn't matter if anyone else approved of it – why Tressa left on her journey was something that belonged to Tressa and no one else. Nevertheless, though it may have been just the exhaustion of the long journey, something about Cyrus' words tugged deeply at Tressa's heart. "*I still haven't found the answer yet... But I hope I can pack this journal with all the time before I do.* ...Aaand, done! Mhm, not bad at all!" Tressa held the journal up proudly over her head, pages spread open. Cyrus nodded contently towards Tressa, seeing her look up from the book.

"Hey, don't you know it's rude to read other people's journals, Professor?"

"Ah, my apologies. In my defense, I wasn't reading your journal, but rather watching how swiftly your pen darted across the page. You had the most wonderful

expression on your face, you see.”

“That so...”

“I certainly thought so. I’ll confess I can’t help but wonder of what you were thinking, of what you were writing, but I know prying into other’s business is a poor habit of mine. Whatever the contents of your journal may be are for your eyes only.”

Tressa closed the book and put it back into her bag. “But Professor, I thought you hated people who kept knowledge all to themselves? You said something like that to me once, I think...” She’d blurted out the question without thinking, but Cyrus merely responded with a “Hm,” offering neither denial nor agreement.

“It’s true that I believe knowledge is something that should be open to all... But what is recorded in that journal of yours is not ‘knowledge,’ but rather ‘experience.’ That experience is not something that can be deciphered simply by reading your notes. Not to say that that itself can’t be valuable in scholarship, however.”

“Hmm.... I think kinda get it... But I also kinda don’t.”

“Really? In that case, allow me to explain this in a way that may be perhaps more understandable...” As Cyrus retrieved a stick from the ground, preparing to make ready use of the ground in place of a chalkboard, Tressa frantically rushed to intercept him; this was a clear sign that they were on the precipice of a lecture that may not be able to be stopped once started.

“Oh, I- I think I get it now, Professor! All of a sudden, it just clicked! No need to worry about it!”

“Is that so? But don’t you want to know more?” Tressa’s scowl would have been truly spectacular, had Cyrus not been so engrossed in diagramming in the sand.

“There’s a most wonderful book from a scholar by the name of Susanna Grottoff, you see...”

“P-Professor! Come on, it’s night already! It’s really getting late, so maybe we should call it... Right!?”

“...I suppose you may be right.” The relief Tressa felt in her chest as Cyrus finally looked up from his makeshift chalkboard was palpable.

“At any rate, the most important thing is that our conversation was able to be of service to you, Tressa.” With the air of a teacher dismissing his class, he set his stick back on the ground.

“Mhm. Really, you were a huge help. Thanks, Professor.”

“No need to thank me. It was privilege enough to get to know you that much better.” Cyrus stood as he spoke. “Now then, you should go get some sleep. We’re getting back on the road bright and early tomorrow morning.”

“Good idea. You too, Professor.”

“Actually, I believe I’ll be awake just a moment longer. I thought I’d roam around the area a bit, you see.”

“Huh??” For Tressa to respond in such a way to Cyrus was natural. That simple “Huh??” contained a multitude of meanings: “Why on earth??” and “Just go to bed already!” for instance.

Yet in Cyrus' ever indefatigable fashion, he simply said, "It's been quite some time since I was last in the Coastlands, you know. There's an endless amount of things I wish to examine, but I wouldn't dare slow down the pace of our travel. Thus, I can only take the time to investigate to my heart's content in the middle of the night..."

"I-I see..."

"Nevertheless, you should go rest as soon as you can. If you allow your fatigue to persist into tomorrow, it would put all of Alfyn's care to waste." Tressa looked at the cold compress Alfyn made with so much care for her.

With no more than a "Well then," Cyrus stood once more. It seemed he was serious about going on his nighttime excursion – and alone, at that. It wasn't that the area around Rippletide was dangerous, really – Tressa had managed alone fine, after all – but she couldn't help but wonder what on earth he was going to investigate at this hour. Just as Cyrus began to walk away, Tressa grabbed at the hem of his cloak.

"Hold on a second, Professor!" Naturally, he looked down at her with surprise. She looked back up at his face, illuminated by the lamp and the starry sky.

"What's wrong, Tressa?"

"I'm going too!"

* * *

Why had Tressa said such a thing? Even she wasn't quite sure. The idea that she was worried about Cyrus wasn't particularly convincing. If that were the case, it would be all the more reason for her to stay behind and have someone like Olberic or H'aanit accompany him. If she had to admit the real reason she'd blurted out "I'm going too!" like that...

"Are you curious?" Tressa tilted her head, watching Cyrus from behind. To be honest, she thought seeing what Cyrus found interesting about her native Coastlands was interesting in and of itself; on top of that, though, she'd never actually walked through the shores near Rippletide at night before. The idea was somehow exciting.

In other words, yes, she was curious. She hadn't expected that inquisitiveness Cyrus had praised in her just a moment ago to manifest itself at a time like this.

Cyrus turned back to face Tressa and asked, "Won't you stay behind?"

"I'm okay. Really, I don't feel so tired anymore."

"Is that so? I truly do not wish to potentially put you in danger. If you are still ailing, I'd prefer that you be honest about it." She didn't get the sense he was unnecessarily needling her; this really was just Cyrus looking after her health, assuming the role of the adult in the room. Tressa wondered if he showed every single one of his students at the Royal Academy this much care. *I can see why he was so popular...* Cyrus' real tragedy was that though he excelled at demonstrating such care, he was equally capable of impressive insensitivity towards girls' feelings towards him. Well, perhaps it was simply that he saw them not as female suitors, but merely as his students. Tressa studied his face in profile as she caught up to him.

“Hey, Professor, can I ask you kind of a weird question?”

“What is it, Tressa?”

“Why didn’t you really object? When I said I was going, I mean.” Even though he seemed worried for her, his resistance was at most mild before he agreed to her coming along. Something about her fatigue lasting into the next day. Even so, when she’d burst out with her “I’m going too!” he’d not said anything at all at first.

“Hmm... That’s a rather difficult question.”

“Huh? Really?”

Cyrus smiled faintly as he elaborated, “Even when I was working at the Royal Academy, it was rare for me to have pupils ask such difficult questions. It’s true that, as the adult in this situation, perhaps I should have been more opposed to you joining me...”

“Right.”

“If I were to speak honestly, though, I think it was that I was delighted at your suggestion.” Tressa’s eyes widened. She hadn’t expected him to say anything like that at all.

“D-delighted?”

“That’s right. I think if I were to search for an appropriate word for it, that would suffice.” The way Cyrus spoke was always impossibly circuitous. When she tried to square what “delighted” could possibly mean inside his head with his normal speech and conduct, she couldn’t help but feel as though she were trying to solve a jigsaw puzzle with pieces missing. She thought about trying to probe him further to reclaim those pieces, but in the end decided to keep her mouth shut.

* * *

“Ah, I do believe we’re here.” They’d just arrived at a sandy beach, not far separated from the sea road by which they’d made camp. At their feet, lying in wait, was the gaping maw of a large cave. Tressa realized this must have been his destination. This was new to even her, who’d been born and raised in the Coastlands.

“I had no idea there was such a huge cave this close to Rippletide...”

“I chanced across it some years ago doing fieldwork in the Coastlands. It piqued my interest immediately, but my original pursuit offered me no time to investigate.” Cyrus held up their lantern, shining it into the cave. It was hard to understand how such a cave could be surrounded by nothing but sandy beach, but they were nevertheless assured by the overpowering scent of the sea.

“The entrance facing the sea at such a small distance has allowed the waves to erode it in quite a curious way, don’t you think? It’s a most mysterious place.” Cyrus’ face took on a strange light as he spoke. His youthful looks already made it difficult to believe he was in his thirties, but at times like this his smile was like a little kid’s. That wasn’t quite it; it was as though the man was embodying curiosity and drive itself.

“Y-yeah...” Tressa warily peeped into the entrance to the cave. She was still filled more with unease than curiosity at the moment. Then – with an “Ah!”, she stepped into the cave.

“Tressa?”

"Over here, Professor! Come look at this!" Tressa had picked up a spiral shellfish that had been stuck along the entrance wall. Amidst the darkness, its shell gleamed with a brilliant fluorescence. "It's a glassfish! I've never seen one this big before!"

"Oh my... Now that you mention it, Tressa, there certainly were a good many shells strewn along the beach on the way here."

"All the kids in the Coastlands gather them up so they can sell 'em for a little pocket money." Glassfish shells and their shattered fragments were common sights along Coastland beaches. The beautiful transparent shells reflected light, shining red and blue. There were people in the area who made a livelihood out of trawling up and down the beaches for them, making a couple leaves out of each one. When Tressa was younger, she'd done the same. Yet although the shells were plentiful across the shore, it was much rarer to see a live glassfish, much less one like this.

"I see... The translucent shell refracts light, making the body appear as though it were glowing..." Looking intently at the glassfish perched upon Tressa's palm, Cyrus nodded eagerly.

"I can't believe we found one in a place like this... I wonder if there are any more..."

"I'd say the probability is quite high. From the look of things, I'd take it people rarely set foot in this cave at all."

"Somehow," Tressa gulped, "somehow, it's a little thrilling."

"...Isn't it?" Cyrus' lips slackened into a boy's loose grin.

* * *

Even after only walking a short distance, the passage became unexpectedly wide, opening up into a vast, complicated underground cavity. If they strained their ears, they could hear the faint echo of the waves lapping at some distant corner of the cave – another sign of its mysterious entwining with the sea. The air was perfectly clear, with a distinct sensation in their lungs. Cyrus and Tressa continued their investigation, their footsteps echoing in the serene cavern. About ten steps in, Tressa noticed another glassfish stuck to the side of a boulder. Although she was trying not to accidentally take too many, she nevertheless gleefully tucked it away into her bag.

"Oh, I wish I could tell my younger self about this place! I coulda made a pretty penny here."

As for Cyrus, he was walking a couple steps away. "Tressa, rather than going straight forward, let's take this passage to the right here."

"Ah, okay!" Tressa had been single-mindedly following the trail of glassfish, snatching them up with abandon, but at Cyrus' words, she swiveled around and went to go file behind him.

"What about you, Professor? Find anything interesting?"

"Indeed, this entire place is richly fascinating. I'm glad we decided to take this little nighttime excursion."

"Hehe, me too." Tressa grinned and looked up at the ceiling. Finding so many high-quality glassfish naturally had lifted her mood considerably, but she was en-

joying the cave expedition as a whole much more. She loved the sensation of being somewhere new. The scent of an unfamiliar wind blowing through this cave, a place she'd never even known was so close to Rippletide, delighted her.

"‘The world is full of treasure,’ huh?" She remembered those words written in her journal, words she'd read over and over, time and time again. She wasn't sure if it could be called treasure, but the experience of discovering an unexpected place so close to somewhere so familiar to her filled her heart with a certain kind of joy.

"Come to think of it, Professor, haven't you noticed how there aren't any monsters in here?" They'd only been walking a short while, but the thought tumbled from Tressa's mouth nonetheless. They weren't terribly strong, but even the Caves of Maiya to the west of Rippletide were well known to contain monsters. When Tressa had business there, she tended to only need to bring the bare minimum of equipment to fend them off. Ever since she'd set off with Cyrus and the others, they'd ventured into caves many times; without exception, they too had always met with monsters. Just as inevitably, she always managed to use her keen eye to make off with some valuable minerals to exchange for leaf later.

It was with this in mind that Tressa found the absence of monsters in this particular cave so unusual. But then Cyrus said, breezily,

"Oh, there most certainly are, Tressa. As far as I can tell, it seems we've only managed to take a detour around their usual routes thus far."

"H-huh?" Tressa whipped around to find Cyrus once again studying the ground intently. As though he felt her gaze, he looked up and gestured with his head past the edge of the path. Amidst the cave's complex, intertwining network of passageways, the one they presently walked was suspended over another below, stretching across like a bridge. She peeked over the edge at where Cyrus indicated, and—

—she felt a gasp escape her lungs. Prowling below them was a colossal monster the likes of which Tressa had never seen. It looked as though a whale had sprouted limbs and crawled out of the ocean. Though they had entered the cave not long ago, she couldn't believe she hadn't yet noticed such an enormous beast walking along with them.

"P-Professor, do you mean... you knew this whole time!?"

"Not from the start, of course not. If I'd known it was so dangerous, I never would have taken you along." He crept to Tressa's side, all the while fixing his eyes on the monster's movements. Could it be that when he was so furtively studying the ground and the walls of the cave, he was really searching for its tracks...? As she watched his profile closely, he continued, surmising her unspoken question:

"...I've learned the hard way that although studying the nature of a newfound monster is deeply fascinating, it is an indispensable skill for any scholar to be able to handle themselves when encountering with such fearsome beasts."

"A narrow escape from death, huh... I'm glad I didn't know about this place when I was little."

"Indeed. This would've been quite a dangerous place for little Tressa to go on her own." He began walking once more, this time moving as though to draw Tressa

to him. "Let's go back, shall we? It's quite late, and I don't want to worry the others any more than I'm sure we already have."

"R-right." The image of the land-whale's hulking body wouldn't escape her mind. Her heart hammered like an alarm going off, and she clutched the glassfish she'd just picked up tightly in her hand. Could it be that it was her fault they were in this situation? That she'd been too excited and wandered too far into the dangerous recesses of the cave? If Cyrus were alone, wouldn't he have turned back the instant he saw these huge monsters? Tressa began to worry.

Cyrus gave her no time to stew in her thoughts, though, as he said,

"I was well aware of the danger this cave could pose only minutes after we entered. It's nothing you need worry yourself over, Tressa."

"R-really...?"

"Really." Cyrus' voice was calm and steady, as it somehow always was. No matter what the danger was, he never wavered and he never lost his wits. His unflappability had saved Tressa and the others time and time again. Yet it was precisely because he was so constantly composed that at times like these she couldn't quite tell what he was thinking. It made her a little nervous.

"Hm." Cyrus glanced over his shoulder. "It may have been somewhat imprudent of me – irresponsible, even – but I wanted to avoid causing you too much worry. That's why I didn't speak up earlier."

"Huh?" *What's he saying all of a sudden*, Tressa thought. A faint smile played at Cyrus' lips. He laid a hand on the cave wall and looked to the ceiling.

"You know, Tressa. I personally find these conditions to be great fun."

"You mean... finding all these new things in this cave?"

Cyrus nodded. "That's right. To venture into foreign surroundings and experience all their new and unknown contents...it's a wonderful experience. But that's not all."

"Watching you walking ahead of me, likewise exploring those new surroundings and taking in everything around us...seeing the joy of discovery on your face – now that's something I certainly couldn't experience alone." It was then that Tressa remembered what Cyrus had said shortly before they entered the cave. *I was delighted* – that was the reason he hadn't objected to taking her along. They had arrived at the mouth of the cave just then and she forgot to question him further, but those words had been nagging at her ever since.

"It's a unique delight to watch sensitive young people like yourself awaken to the joy of discovery. That's why I didn't want to worry you – and why I would be grateful if you were able to keep on just as you have up until now." So that was it. Tressa felt a lump in her chest. Cyrus' roundabout way of talking always made him feel a little distant, but she could tell he was being truly genuine. That this was the reason he'd brought her along and ventured into this cave with her – it was surprisingly satisfactory.

"You know, you really do live up to the 'Professor' in 'Professor Albright!'"

"I'm... not quite certain how to interpret that, but I'll choose to take it as a compliment. Thank you, Tressa." Once more wearing that gentle smile, he turned back to the path ahead of them.

"Of course, my self-indulgence and the danger of this cave are two separate matters entirely. As the adult who brought you here, the proper thing to do would be for us to turn back and return to camp in one piece."

"Yes, please, Professor Albright!" Cyrus began walking once more, and Tressa followed suit.

"Say, Professor, what was that monster from before, anyway?"

"Hm. Indeed, that's an excellent question, Tressa. I must confess this is my first time seeing something quite like it firsthand. The literature shows that similar creatures exist in the Coastlands, but to my knowledge, this is the first any have been found so close to Rippletide. If I recall, the previous sightings were near the western end of the highway to Grandport."

"Grandport, huh... I wonder if I'll ever have the chance to visit it myself..." There were too many places in the world she hadn't yet gone. Could her dream to see them all really come true? Tressa still didn't have the first clue what kind of things could be found in a place like Grandport.

They had only been walking for a short while when Cyrus stopped once more. He held out one hand to stop Tressa and put the index finger of the other to his lips.

There was a monster. Treading as lightly as she could to avoid making a sound, she crept to Cyrus' side and peeked ahead of them.

"Professor... that's..."

"A monster like that...that, too, is rare to see in these parts." At the end of the passage before them, a group of enormous crabs were clustered together. Of course, compared to the land-whale from earlier, they were positively tiny, but they were still each nearly as big as a person. Their bodies were a sickening, ominous color, and Tressa couldn't avert her eyes from their jumbo-size claws.

"The literature has only documented these around the Grandport area as well. For them to be this close to Rippletide... this cave has an unusual ecosystem indeed. I can't say I'm not fascinated, but this is certainly neither the time nor place for that."

"Uh-huh... What do we do, Professor?"

Cyrus stared intently at the end of the passage, estimating its size. It was by no means narrow, but it wasn't especially wide, either. About halfway, it split into several branches. At least one of these must have been connected to an exit, as a faint breeze could be felt.

"If we can divert the monsters and sprint for the exit, we should be able to make it out...Tressa, can you run?"

"You bet! My feet are raring to go!" The morning's exhaustion had all but disappeared – presumably thanks to Alfyn's cold compress.

"At my signal, we run for it. Now then..." Cyrus produced a small bundle from his breast pocket and opened it. Inside were several meatballs wrapped together.

The instant they came into contact with the air, the black crabs began to move with a terrible rustling.

"P-Professor, what are you...?"

"These are a specially-made kind of feed – one which monsters are particularly fond of. H'aanit told me about it. Apparently, the people of S'warkii use it to great effect in the hunt."

"Wow..." While she admired Cyrus' handiwork, Tressa prepared to run for it. All the glassfish she'd found were snugly tucked away into her small bag.

It was lucky they were downwind. It was clear the crabs had caught the scent of the meat, but they showed no signs of having noticed Cyrus and Tressa. Cyrus scattered the meatballs near where the path split into branches. All at once, the crabs started to scuttle in the direction of their meal. Cyrus and Tressa's eyes met.

"Let's go!" Tressa nodded and began to sprint. Cyrus was a little later to move, but they were soon running more or less side-by-side. As they sprinted headlong for the exit, Tressa glanced over her shoulder to see the black crabs beginning to huddle together. Their extraordinary size and the sickening click of their pincers made her skin crawl.

"Gah-!" Tressa's foot caught on a stray pebble and she lost her balance. With a great clatter, the glassfish that had been safely tucked away in her bag came free and scattered across the cave floor. She managed to regain her footing, but in an instant she was spotted by the cluster of crabs.

"Tressa, are you alright!?" Cyrus called out from behind her.

"I-I'm fine!"

"Good to hear – now, let's hurry!"

"Right!" The huddle of black-clawed monsters was now right at their heels. Tressa and Cyrus were running as fast as they could, but the crabs were even faster, and the sickening click of their pincers was growing ever louder.

"Gah!!" The very tip of a crab's coarse claws caught on Tressa's slender shoulder. The monster growled. Noticing her plight, Cyrus reached out and shoved her forward. What the dark pincer had nicked was not her shoulder, but in fact the bag slung across her body. The bag's strap was sliced in two, and it fell to the ground with a thunk.

"Ah!! M-My-" She instinctively reached out to retrieve it, but Cyrus snatched her wrist before she could touch it.

"Tressa!"

"O-Oh... Right!" she cried, coming to her senses. Cyrus sensed something in even her brief moment of hesitation, but this wasn't the time or place to discuss it further. The monsters were growing ever closer, passing where her bag lay on the ground. Cyrus grabbed Tressa's arm and the two once again began sprinting down the narrow passage, Tressa shooting furtive glances behind her along the way. In the wall at the end of the passage was a slim opening, barely more than a crack, just wide enough for one person to move through at a time – through which a faint sea breeze could be felt.

"Tressa, there!"

“Got it!” Cyrus gave her a small push from behind as Tressa squeezed herself into the thin gap, worming through with ease thanks to her slight frame. Cyrus then followed, deftly preventing his cloak from snagging. The black crabs, unable to pursue them through the gap, clustered around its mouth and clicked their pincers furiously, but before long seemed to give up and disperse.

“Now, then...” Cyrus examined their surroundings. To have come this far, the exit couldn’t be much farther. They couldn’t let their guard down quite yet, but if they could keep moving and find the exit, it seemed they would be able to declare their investigation over and return safely to camp. But Cyrus knew that wouldn’t be all. Even while they were running for their lives, he couldn’t possibly have missed Tressa’s lingering concern for her dropped bag.

“Tressa, you took a bit of a fall earlier. Are you alright?”

“O-Oh, mhm. I’m all good. No worries...” She nodded vigorously, over and over. But Cyrus simply shook his head softly.

“...It’s your ‘merchandise,’ isn’t it?”

“Ah...” She awkwardly lowered her gaze.

When her carefully gathered glassfish had tumbled to the ground, Tressa had gotten ready to start running again in an instant, sparing no thought of trying to retrieve them. Cyrus thought that split-second decision was laudable – a merchant has a duty to the safety of her wares, but any careless action in a situation like that could have cost her her life. Yet when her bag was cut down, he had unmistakably seen her waver.

(Then that must have been...) Without a doubt, she had been carrying something precious in that bag. But what was it? He arrived at his answer in an instant, during the infinite peace between the ticks of the second hand of a clock.

“Tressa, could it be that in your bag...”

“That’s right...” She nodded, her gaze fixed at the gap in the wall. “...I kept the journal in that bag.” So his guess was right. After all, it was clearly so precious that even while facing such dangerous monsters, dropping her bag had stopped Tressa dead in her tracks. There was simply no other answer. But why bring something so precious to such a dangerous place...? When Cyrus put himself in Tressa’s shoes, though, he supposed it was natural. That journal was her first true encounter with the unknown. It was the very thing that had given her the final push to quench her aching thirst to know more of the world. It was the only record of that unknown traveler’s long-ago journey whose path she now doggedly traced, and now it stood as a testament to the experience and knowledge she’d gained along the way.

“...I suppose there’s no helping it, then,” Cyrus muttered softly, closing his eyes. Tressa’s shoulders slumped.

“Y-Yeah, I guess you’re right. No helping it, huh...”

“Well then, I’ll be right back.”

“H-Huh!?” She hadn’t expected such a response at all. She lifted her drooped head in surprise. “B-But Professor Albright, won’t it be too dangerous...?”

Cyrus nodded. “Certainly, there is a very real danger in going back. I can’t deny that.” He placed a hand on the rocky cliff face. “But I still bear the responsibility

for having brought you this far. And while it's true that I just grabbed your hand and dragged you away from that danger by force... I couldn't bear for you to give up on your journal, Tressa."

"I-It's not that I'm not giving up, but..."

"Excellent. That's all I wanted to hear." Without a word more, he promptly began stuffing himself back through the crack in the cave wall, quietly returning to the path they'd left not moments before.

"Professor Albright..." Tressa whispered. This was so like Cyrus. She'd been privately overjoyed when he told her he would go and retrieve the journal himself, and surely he could more than handle himself in a fight. She told herself this, but it didn't change the fact that it wasn't something that could serve any use to their party... was it really worth risking his life? Yet despite that, he'd promised to go and take it back for her; that he bore the responsibility for it. Tressa clutched the hem of her shirt. Maybe that was true, but surely that wasn't all. This was the proof that he really meant what Cyrus had told her when she was agonizing over what to write. That he really wasn't laughing at her reason for setting out on her journal, that he really thought her dream was a noble one.

"In that case, there's no way I can just sit here and—" At that moment, she saw in the corner of her eye a dazzling light erupt from the depths of the cave and gave a start. Once, twice, the cave lit up in rapid succession. A roar reverberated from within. Tressa understood in an instant – that light was undoubtedly Cyrus' magic. ...In other words, he'd gotten himself into a fight.

"Already!?" Tressa steeled her nerves and made for the crack in the cave wall.

* * *

Just as she'd anticipated, when she entered the cave she saw Cyrus locked in combat. It seemed as though he'd managed to sneak past the monsters' eyes and reach her bag, but as soon as he had made to return to Tressa, he had an unlucky run-in with one of the crabs. Its pincers clicked menacingly as Cyrus carefully put some distance between them.

"This will all be for nothing if I can't get out of here now..." Cyrus muttered, steeling his inner resolve. Cyrus could make the best use of his magic at medium-to long-range, and it was a lucky thing that at that distance he was safe from those vicious-looking claws. Bracing himself for the very moment he could secure his position, he began chanting, preparing to unleash his power.

There were once people who specialized exclusively in the magical arts – so-called "sorcerers." In Cyrus' time, such people no longer existed. The vast majority of the magical abilities that made up the techniques of those sorcerers of old were handed down in each part of the world as regional charms and incantations. At Atlasdam's Royal Academy, though, research continued in unraveling the mysteries found in ancient texts, reviving and reshaping their now-arcane knowledge for the modern era. The magic Cyrus made such liberal use of was the product of that research. His accomplishments and the work of his forebears were the crowning jewels of Atlasdam's cumulative wisdom. Those scholars who brandished that wis-

dom as a weapon, freely wielding magic as an offensive tool, necessarily lurked in the background.

“O lightning, smite them down!”

At Cyrus’ incantation, a surge of lightning flooded the cave. With a dry *crack!*, the walls of the gloomy cave shone brilliantly, and electricity snaked along the crab’s body, searing meandering zigzags into the surface of its shell. The crab roared.

Yet it was stalled for only a moment before its movements began once again, gradually closing the distance between it and Cyrus. It seemed as though his magic had had no effect at all.

“Ghk...!” Cyrus spluttered. He was beginning to get uncharacteristically flustered. These monsters, usually native only to the Grandport area, seemed to have bodies orders of magnitude tougher than those found near Rippletide. By all accounts, they should have been outside of their range, which was concentrated closer to the Central Sea, but it seemed these monsters were an exception to that rule. It would be difficult for Cyrus to have any real impact on its absurdly thick shell. Eventually, crab hot on his heels, he found himself pressed up against a rock face.

“Well then...” Now more than ever, Cyrus needed to keep a cool head. There was no doubt that he was in quite the dilemma, but there *had* to be a way out. He observed the crab’s movements intently. It was true that this species’ large claws were their signature feature, but this specimen’s seemed to be particularly massive. All he needed to do was to find a way to slip past them and strike at a weak point. But how to do that...?

While he thought, the crab’s pincers grew ever closer to Cyrus. His thinking was interrupted, however, by a thundering cry that echoed throughout the whole cave:

“The winds of fortune are howling!”

It was a voice Cyrus knew very well. Just like the incantation promised, a fierce wind gusted through the cave’s narrow passage. The overwhelming pressure furled the hems of Cyrus’ clothes and stole the air from his lungs.

“T-Tressa!”

“Professor Albright!”

There was no mistaking it. Tressa’s incantation was that of a piece of folk magic common in the Coastlands, a relic of what had once been pure elemental wind magic.

“Professor, are you alr-*Hyahh!!*” Sprinting to Cyrus’ side, Tressa jumped at the monster just feet in front of him. But on closer examination, the crab’s movements were clearly dull and sluggish. Its pincers limply fell to the ground. Swiftly moving just beside the monster’s body, he turned to Tressa.

“Tressa, why on earth did you follow me? Of course, it’s only thanks to you I escaped at all, but...”

“Oh, well, that’s... It’s hard to say, I just...” It wasn’t as though she didn’t expect him to ask, but still she found herself at a momentary loss for words. But lifting

her head and looking at Cyrus, she said, "I couldn't stand letting you get yourself into danger all by yourself."

"I'm certain we already discussed this earlier, I—"

Tressa didn't let him finish. "I know that, but still!" Stepping over the monster's limp leg, Tressa walked over to Cyrus and forcefully took his hands into hers. "I know that, but... Professor Albright, this is still my journey, too."

"Mm..." There was force in her words, and it didn't seem she was going to wait for him to respond.

"I left home of my own free will, and I chose to go with you on my own free will, too... It just doesn't seem right for someone else, even if they're an 'adult,' to go and shoulder the responsibility for that."

Cyrus was stunned. Looking at Tressa, seeing the steadfast resolve in her eyes, he realized for the first time that perhaps he had been looking down on her all this time.

"You're absolutely right. I'm sorry, Tressa." Out of concern for her youth and her inexperience, in the face of her curiosity and promise, he had unconsciously grown overprotective. Of course, he should worry about her in the way he would worry about any of his companions, but at the very least he saw Tressa had the resolve to take responsibility for her own actions without passing off the blame to others.

"I hope I haven't gone so far as to unwittingly insult your prowess as a merchant."

"H-huh!? No, I don't think you went quite that far, but..."

"Well, one way or another, at least we managed to recover your prized possession." Tressa scooped her bag off the ground and looked it over. The strap was torn, so she wouldn't be able to sling it over her shoulder, but it seemed the contents escaped any real damage. Her treasured journal was tucked safely in the deepest part of the bag.

"Let's not overstay our welcome, huh, Professor Albright?"

"Quite right. Let's hurry back to camp." There was no knowing if the monster would come to its senses and pursue them anew. Keeping an equal eye on Tressa, who ran ahead of him, clutching her bag, and the passage behind him, the pair made for the exit.

Life truly is full of learning experiences, Cyrus mused. Over the course of their travels, he had learned many things from his companions. This time, too, exploring the cave with Tressa had shown and taught him much. She truly could have had the makings of an outstanding scholar. *What a shame*, he thought to himself.

"Heh..."

"Huh? Did you laugh just now, Professor Albright?"

"I was just thinking what a wonderful companion you are, Tressa."

"Oh? Praising me all of a sudden isn't gonna earn you a discount, you know."

* * *

Slipping through the crack and finally leaving the cave, it was just as pitch-black outside as it had been when they arrived. They walked the length of the beach and

left the sea – its water so dark it seemed it could swallow them whole – behind them as they made for camp. There they were greeted by a scowling H’aanit, arms crossed grimly.

“Heavens, Cyrus! And having the nerve to bringen her with thee!” The rest of the party, a diverse array of expressions on their faces, were also awake to greet them. As they told it, H’aanit had woken in the middle of the night and noticed Tressa hadn’t returned to the tent yet. She then woke up Linde, who had been sleeping in the treetops, to ask if she had seen anything. Apparently, Linde had been awake at least long enough to see Cyrus and Tressa talking. Thinking Cyrus might know something, H’aanit made her way to the men’s tent, only to find he was missing as well. It seemed Cyrus and Tressa had made their grand return just as the rest of the party was arguing over whether or not there was any need to go and search for them. Therion, standing a bit away from the group, seemed to be making a face that all but said *I told you so...* or perhaps not. In any case, they could go over the particulars later, but for the time being Cyrus was in for quite the remonstrance from H’aanit.

“I can only express my deepest apologies. I was the one who put Tressa in danger.”

“Knowinge Tressa was still exhausted from the day, thou still durste...!”

“H-hang on a second!” Tressa tried desperately to intervene before H’aanit could enter full Lecturing Mode.

“Geez, you’re too good at scolding people, H’aanit...”

“E-e’en so? Thanks, I suppose... Forgive me if I lost myself. Well, what is it you wish to sayen?”

“If anyone is getting scolded, you should scold me, too! Even after Alfyn went to all that trouble, I was still the one who told Cyrus to let me go with him...” As Tressa saw it, it didn’t make any sense at all for Cyrus to be the one taking all the heat. If she made a mistake, she was the one who should pay the penalty and no one else. Tressa wondered if H’aanit had expected her to try to stick up for Cyrus. She seemed somewhat stunned. Then, she crossed her arms and breathed a deep sigh.

“Quite so. Tressa, you sholde have taken better care of your body. That staying up and writing in your journal is precious to you, I know and wille not protesten, but when that is done, it were better to have simply gone to bed. If you needs must steal away to take part in Cyrus’ foolishness, at the very least wake us to letten us know.”

“Right... I’m sorry I worried you all.” Tressa bowed her head in apology.

“Excellent.” H’aanit, apparently satisfied, once more made to stand before Cyrus and resume her lecture with a vengeance. Somehow, watching H’aanit scold Cyrus as though it was something she had done a thousand times, Tressa wondered if this was what H’aanit’s relationship with her master had been like before he disappeared. That much seemed obvious, having a front-row seat to her masterful remonstrance. As Cyrus continued to apologize for his rashness, carelessness, and so forth, Tressa walked a little to where Olberic stood.

"Hey, Olberic?"

"What is it, Tressa?"

"Well, first I wanna apologize for worrying you guys... But also, I have something I wanted to ask you about..." She opened her now-strapless bag. Once she told him what she was thinking, he hummed thoughtfully.

"Certainly, they would be good to have for our future travels. The thought had crossed my mind at some point or another, but..."

"Mhm, I think once we get to Rippletide, I can use some of my contacts and try to pull some strings for us."

"Understood. Well then, I'll leave that to you."

"Great!" Tressa jumped up and down a little and pumped her fists in the air. She then went to go apologize to Ophilia and Alfyn as well, but at that moment H'aanit finally seemed to give Cyrus some reprieve.

"Hello again, Tressa."

"Good hanging in there, Professor." As Tressa and Cyrus swapped greetings, neither of them could stop a smile from escaping.

"I'm just glad we both made it out safely. That being the case, I'm truly glad I had the chance to explore that cave with you."

"Mhm, me too! We had a lot of close shaves, but we got some things out of it too, huh?"

"A moment ago you were talking to Olberic about something, right? Was that perhaps one of them?"

So he saw that, huh, Tressa thought, but she honestly couldn't say she was too surprised. "There's that, too." She nodded. "I was thinking once we got to Rippletide, I might be able to borrow some horses, so I went to ask Olberic what he thought."

"Packhorses, then? I see."

"Mhm. I still feel pretty bad that us staying up all night is gonna affect our progress tomorrow, so I thought it'd be nice if I could help make things go a little smoother from here on out."

"How do you intend to handle the funds for that, though?" Cyrus suspected he already knew the answer. Tressa grinned and opened her bag they'd worked so hard to recover. Inside the bag, countless glassfish shells of all shapes and sizes were crammed together, gleaming with the pale glow of so many fireflies. Cyrus was stunned – he couldn't believe she'd managed to gather this many.

"You certainly did your due diligence picking these up."

"To tell the truth, while I was on my way to go rescue you, an old merchants' saying crossed my mind. 'Even if a storm moors your ship, scour the port for wares,' or something along those lines."

"I see." He nodded deeply, fully taken in by her words. "A merchant through and through, aren't you?"

"You betcha! It's only natural! And you're a scholar through and through, huh, Professor Albright?"

Cyrus looked up at the sky. Following his lead, Tressa tilted her head. Before they knew it, the star-scattered inky night sky had given way to a deep ultramarine. Dazzling light had begun streaming from the eastern horizon. Only the waves, crashing along the shoreline in their constant ebb and flow, pierced the early morning silence. As if reminded of their conversation before setting off for the cave, Cyrus suddenly spoke.

“I truly do pray that someday, you’ll find that brilliant treasure of your dreams.”

* * *

That was my very first homework assignment from Professor Cyrus Albright. That night, I was reminded all over again how wonderful it feels to know that even if the world is filled with so many things I don’t know and I’ve never seen, I just know that someday, I’ll be able to discover them all on my own! Professor Albright isn’t really much of an emotional person, but he’s not cold or distant or anything at all! Honestly, it’s a huge help having such a composed, reliable adult around. But he’s still got some mysterious parts to him, too... when he smiles, he looks just like a little kid. Whenever I see Professor Albright get all excited about something he doesn’t know or something new, it just fills me with determination!

I really do believe that someday, just like Cyrus said, I’ll find the brilliant treasure of my dreams, a treasure that’s special just for me.

I’ll leave it here for today!

*On the highway to Rippletide
Tressa Colzione*

Chapter 2

Trust and Betrayal

“WHEW, that was really somethin’, I tell you!” Alfyn made a peculiar whole-body gesture as he recounted the party’s grand exploits in Noblecourt. Sunlight spilled over the table, and the beautiful girl with short-cropped golden hair seated across from him giggled as she listened to Alfyn’s (somewhat embellished) story. So we set the scene: a tea party in the garden of the Ravus estate. How Alfyn came to participate will require a little explanation.

Alfyn was continuing to travel alongside his seven companions. They were a motley party with respect to origin, vocation, and motivations, but they got along well and continued to support one another in working towards their respective goals. For one of their companions– Therion, the thief–the reason he had embarked on his journey was indeed that very House Ravus. In the course of their travels, the party made a stop in Bolderfall and decided it may not be a bad idea to say hello while they were there. And so, they had been invited to a tea party. As such, the girl now listening eagerly to Alfyn’s tale was of course the current head of House Ravus, Cordelia Ravus.

Alfyn, evidently quite charmed by his own storytelling, recounted to Cordelia one after another the events of one of the party’s most recent adventures.

“And so, we walked way upstream – turned out, there was a fella there poaching all the fish! No matter how much we talked to him, he jus’ wouldn’t listen, so Sir Olberic and H’aanit...”

“Oh, my. So how did all it turn out?”

“Well, eventually all the fish came back to the river just fine, so it all wrapped up with a happy ending! Tressa wouldn’t stop fumin’ the whole time, though – said she couldn’t believe someone would hog all those fish to themselves like that, way more than anyone could eat.”

So far only Alfyn had been chatting up a storm, but of course he was not the only one there. A little behind Cordelia stood her butler, Heathcote, and Therion, of course, occupied a seat as well. He hadn’t spoken a single word since they arrived, and the tea prepared for him sat untouched on the table. Therion had been adamantly opposed to the idea of stopping by House Ravus in the first place, so

perhaps that was only natural. Alfyn had had to drag the man half by force out of the inn. Primrose had joined them as well. *So that you don't offend our noble hosts*, apparently.

"Would you care for another cup of tea, madam?"

"Yes, I'd love one." She smiled softly at Heathcote, as always unmatched in her grace and elegance. Alfyn was reminded once again how different her upbringing was from his own.

"I'm glad you two are here to share all these interesting stories. Since Mr. Therion won't talk at all..."

"No kiddin'!" Alfyn crossed his arms and nodded in firm agreement. Then, for the first time, Therion opened his mouth.

"What about it? There's no need for me to talk to you. The only thing I agreed to do for you was steal back the three dragonstones. Am I wrong?"

"W-well, no, but..." Cordelia seemed to lose her words at Therion's reproachful tone. She hung her head.

"H-hey now, Therion, there's no need for all that, is there?"

"Once again. Am I wrong, medicine man?"

"I'm not sayin' you're wrong, just the way you're saying it is a bit harsh, is all."

"Hmph. Don't care." Therion had set out on his journey in order to steal back House Ravus' three missing dragonstones. Naturally, he wasn't doing it out of a sense of duty or out of the kindness of his heart. There was a reason there, one which implicated both his pride and his honor as a thief, but it wasn't something he'd frivolously allow an outsider like Alfyn anywhere near. At least, the few times Alfyn had tried to chat or crack a joke at Therion, he'd made no reference to it.

At any rate, Therion had pledged to use his skills as a thief to steal back the heirlooms of House Ravus. Alfyn had actually helped Therion out to steal one of the dragonstones from a scholar back in Noblecourt. There was more than one place where the heavy labor made Alfyn want to groan out a complaint or two, but it gave him the chance to see with his own two eyes Therion's incredible skill as he effortlessly snatched away the red dragonstone. Therion then returned to Bolderfall to deliver the stone to Heathcote and Cordelia directly. Alfyn hadn't accompanied him, of course, but he was pretty certain Therion didn't go in order to boast about his success at the work that had been foisted upon him. *Well, he ain't exactly the guy to brag about his accomplishments in the first place, is he...* Alfyn thought, watching Therion's demeanor.

Primrose cut in before the atmosphere could sour any further. "Oh, Alfyn, how about you tell her *that* story next? It's quite the tale, after all."

"*That* story?"

"From before we arrived in Bolderfall. It was quite the struggle fighting off that herd of monsters, wasn't it?"

"Oh... Ohhhh, right, *that* story! Yeah, alright!" Alfyn once again clapped his hands and nodded with gusto.

It had happened only yesterday, a couple days after making their way into the Cliftlands. Bolderfall was right before their eyes when they were attacked by a flock

of Birdians. Alfyn wouldn't go so far as to say it was 'quite the struggle,' though. As she often did while the party made camp, Ophilia had split off to pray when she was set upon by the Birdians. Of course, the rest of the party had rushed to her aid immediately and made short work of fending them off. Still, Primrose had a good idea – if Alfyn could spice up the story a little bit to make it more of a thrilling tale, they could salvage the tea party's rapidly-sinking mood. Primrose really was handy to have around at times like this.

"...I think I'll take my leave now, then," Therion muttered, standing from his chair.

"Eh? O-oh, let me at least see you out, then, Mr. Therion..."

"Don't bother. We're here in the first place because our medicine man over here said we should come greet you all. We've greeted you all. So I don't have any reason to stick around, do I?"

"W-well..."

"I don't need you looking after my well-being. Either way, I'll take back the last two dragonstones." Therion's voice was as icy as ever. Cordelia made to follow him out anyway, but Heathcote stopped her. The gentleman's gaze, firm despite his age, met hers, and he shook his head softly. Cordelia clenched her fists and lowered her head.

"I understand what Mr. Therion is saying, but... I mean, I'm the one who put the cuff on him in the first place..."

"I see. You made a pact with Therion that you'd remove the Fool's Bangle if he returned your heirlooms, is that right?" Primrose nodded at Cordelia's words and set her teacup down. "Then I imagine he has some rather complex feelings towards you. Please, try not to take too much offense at it."

"No, it's not that I'm offended, I just..."

"...On top of that, I have a feeling that the reason he left is simply that the story Alfyn is about to tell might be rather embarrassing for him."

"Eh...?" Primrose chuckled a little; Cordelia's shock was written all over her face.

"You see, when Ophilia was attacked by monsters, the very first person to come to her aid was Therion, after all. Isn't that right, Alfyn?"

"H-Huh? Y'know, now that you mention it, you're right..." At that time, Therion simply happened to be the closest to Ophilia's location, but the way Primrose said it made it sound as though he'd rushed to her side like a knight in shining armor. He was the closest, so he moved the fastest – it really didn't go any further than that. Not only that, Ophilia was defenseless while she was praying – Therion doubly needed to move quickly in order to cover her. Nevertheless, Alfyn spun the tale for Cordelia, embellishing here and there in order to make Therion look as good as possible. He wasn't quite certain how much of it she believed, but at the very least it seemed as though she was enjoying the story. That was enough for Alfyn.

* * *

When they finished their story, the sun had begun to set. In the Cliftlands, surrounded as it was by its sheer precipices, sunlight hours tended to be shorter.

Night fell in Bolderfall faster than in neighboring regions. Bringing their conversation to an end, Alfyn and Primrose gave House Ravus their regards and departed from the estate.

"Still, it's a relief," Cordelia said as she saw them out.

"A relief? What is?"

"To know that Mr. Therion has such kind traveling companions. Keep taking good care of him, alright?" As Cordelia bowed profusely, Alfyn and Primrose's eyes met. *Taking good care of him*, she had said.

Of course, Alfyn thought of Therion as his companion. But he was tight-lipped, unsociable, and often outright rude. One couldn't ever really know what he was thinking. *He really ain't easy to get along with, huh?* was a thought that had crossed Alfyn's mind more than once or twice. Still, when he'd offered to buy Therion a pint back in Noblecourt, the man had willingly joined him for a drink. *Can't be such a bad fella after all, eh?*, he'd thought at the time. Alfyn couldn't help himself from wanting to know more about him.

"Yeah, leave him t—" "Of course, leave him to us. Therion is our dear companion, after all." Alfyn and Primrose started to say the same thing at exactly the same time, but only Primrose finished her thought while Alfyn's mouth uselessly flapped open and shut for a moment.

As they left the Ravus estate and made their way back to the inn, Alfyn and Primrose chatted a little.

"Cordelia's really a good egg, isn't she? Seems like she's worried an awful lot about Therion."

"Indeed. Not only is she kind, I think she must also be an incredibly strong person."

"Strong?" It wasn't a word Alfyn easily associated with sweet, dainty Cordelia. Primrose nodded lightly.

"She's surely been through many a hardship until now...or so it seems to me, anyway."

"Many a hardship?' What d'you mean by that?"

"Who knows?" Primrose turned to look back at the Ravus estate. "I imagine outsiders like us couldn't even begin to guess."

"Then what makes ya so sure about it in the first place?"

"Hmm... call it a woman's intuition?"

"G-gotcha..." Alfyn had a feeling she was just trying to dodge the question, but maybe there was something to this 'woman's intuition'... He decided to stop poking further and leave it at that. While Alfyn was mulling this over, Primrose, uncharacteristically, continued the conversation by changing the subject.

"Say, Alfyn? Have you ever noticed? Therion's bangle, I mean."

"The... 'Fool's Bangle,' was it? Seems to me like it'd be the ultimate humiliation for any thief. No wonder Therion's so desperate to get the thing off." Therion never wore anything but long sleeves, and he always took great pains to conceal the bangle as much as he possibly could. Even Alfyn could figure out that much, so

he'd made a point to never ask Therion about it. Primrose chuckled at the unusual grimness on Alfyn's face.

"No, not quite. You see..." Just as they reached the inn entrance, Primrose leaned over and whispered in Alfyn's ear. As soon as he realized what he heard, Alfyn's eyes widened in shock.

"Haw!? You're kiddin'! I mean, Therion..."

"I'm not kidding, I promise you. I clearly saw it myself."

"B-but then, why would he...?" Primrose once again chuckled at Alfyn's astonishment.

"Who can say? But once I realized, I felt a lot better about having him as our companion, honestly. It clearly shows that Therion isn't the type of thief to work for nothing but his own gain, don't you think?" Primrose opened the door to the inn and walked inside. "Well, goodnight, Alfyn."

"Y-you, too..." As he watched Primrose go, Alfyn folded his arms and replayed her words in his mind. "So all this time, Therion's been..." He already had the inkling of the idea that Therion wasn't so bad after all, but he still couldn't quite believe what Primrose had told him. "Where'd he scurry off to, anyway? Sure doesn't seem like he's back at the inn yet... Maybe I'll walk around a little and look for him."

* * *

Not long after he set out, Alfyn ran into Olberic and the others on their way back from their errands. When Tressa heard they'd gone to greet House Ravus, she mournfully rued missing a valuable business opportunity by choosing to accompany Olberic. The full story would take a while, though, so they decided to leave it at that.

The town of Bolderfall was cleanly stratified into three sections, the lowest of which consisted of a rowdy slum. Bolderfall already suffered from a dearth of taverns, but the vast majority of those alehouses it did have were concentrated in the slums. If Therion was still out and about, Alfyn figured he might find him there.

Even though geographically, the Cliftlands were relatively close to Alfyn's native Riverlands, the two couldn't have seemed further apart. Bolderfall's bustling townscape, too, was utterly foreign compared to Clearbrook's bucolic scenery.

It had been a shot in the dark in the first place, but Therion was still nowhere to be found. After walking around the slum for a while, Alfyn decided to rest for a moment and plunked himself down on a flight of stone stairs.

"Howdy there, little miss!" As cheerily as ever, he offered a greeting to a small girl similarly seated on the stairs. Her head shot up, apparently surprised at having someone unexpectedly call out to her. It was then that Alfyn noticed she had still-fresh scrapes on her cheek and knees. Maybe she'd fallen down those stairs?

"Woah, you're hurt! Let me take a look."

"H-huh? B-but..."

"Don't you worry! Even if I don't quite look it, I'm actually an apothecary!" He produced a pre-prepared salve from his medicine bag and moved to apply it to her wounds. Before he could, though, the girl squeaked out,

“U-um, I don’t have any money...”

“That’s alright, I’m not askin’ for your money! It’s no good to try ’n just grin and bear it with scrapes like these.” Finally, the girl nodded slightly. Once Alfyn finished examining her injuries and applying the salve, he said gently, “Now, it’s gettin’ awful dark. Stay safe heading home, okay?”

“O-okay...” The girl briefly bowed, then disappeared once again into the crowd. As he watched her go, he put his hands on his hips and gave a satisfied nod.

“And just what are you up to, medicine man?”

“Gyah!!” Alfyn jumped at the sound of a voice from behind him. He whirled around to find a man a little shorter than him, nasty expression on his face, glaring at him with suspicion.

“Th-Therion!? Guess you’ve saved me some time lookin’ for you, but don’t go scarin’ me like that...”

“Saved you some time ‘lookin’ for me? Why? There’s still time before we’re supposed to leave, isn’t there? If you wanted me to stay in one place so badly, you should’ve put a rope around my neck.”

“Y-You’re not a horse, y’know...” Alfyn strained a smile in the face of Therion’s incorrigible bluntness. He moved to the side of the street to avoid the throng in the center, and Therion followed. He stole a glance at Alfyn’s medicine bag and sighed.

“I saw that, you know. You keep showing off your strange brand of kindness in a place like this, someone’s gonna pull the rug out from under your feet before long.”

“What’s that ‘strange brand of kindness’ supposed to mean? I jus’ wanted to make sure that little girl got her scrape looked at...”

“And that’s exactly what I mean, medicine man. What if, hypothetically, that girl was some pickpocket’s accomplice? What would you do then, hm? The moment you go to pull out your medicine, they could swipe anything of value off you in an instant.”

“Eh!?” Panicked, Alfyn quickly went to check his bag, only to find that – thankfully – not a single leaf was out of place. Just to be sure, he rifled through his other belongings and confirmed that nothing else was missing. “Nothin’ to worry about. She didn’t steal a thing!”

“I said *hypothetically*, didn’t I? All I’m saying is there’s nasty characters out there, ready to take advantage of your generosity by wheedling medicine out of you.”

“I guess, when ya put it like that...” Alfyn scratched his head. Therion clicked his tongue.

“Now, don’t follow me.”

“C’mon, no need to be so upset...”

* * *

Alfyn followed behind Therion, matching the thief’s brisk, determined pace. His pace was fast, but Therion simply walked with a huff, without telling Alfyn to get lost or go away, until the two walked through the front door of a tavern in the

middle of the slums. Alfyn sat himself at the same table as Therion. The other man let out a sharp sigh.

"I thought I said *not* to follow me."

"Didn't I say I was lookin' for you? I had a mind to grab a drink with you."

"We've drank together once already, haven't we?"

"And how long ago was that, huh? That was then, and this is now!" After all, the whole reason Alfyn had been searching for Therion was to get the chance to speak to the man. Primrose's words from earlier still played in his mind, and he kept shooting furtive glances in Therion's direction to try and confirm them for himself, but he continued to hide his wrist with the most natural-seeming of gestures. Perhaps he'd noticed Alfyn staring.

"Got a problem?"

"N-naw, not at all..." The ale they'd ordered arrived and Alfyn made to raise his glass, but Therion refused to follow his lead, merely lifting his own tankard to his lips.

Damn, he really ain't easy to get along with, he once again found himself thinking. He tried to think of something he could try and use to make conversation, settling on talking about his own past.

"S-say, did I ever tell you? 'Bout how I've got a good pal back home, an apothecary just like me."

"..." Therion continued to sip his ale, all the while glaring at Alfyn. His fierce gaze from behind his white hair seemed almost to stab Alfyn, and he felt cold sweat drip down his neck as he nevertheless continued talking.

"His name's Zeph. Maybe if we end up swingin' round Clearbook one of these days, I'll introduce you. He's a real good guy. We've been runnin' around together ever since we were kids, so he's honestly like somethin' closer to a brother to me."

"A brother, huh..." Therion muttered, barely more than a whisper. Alfyn was honestly delighted to have elicited a response at all from ever-brusque Therion.

"Yeah, a brother! I can't say I thought of him like that till right now, but it sure fits. When I told him I was settin' out, he was nothing but supportive – to be honest, Zeph gave me the last push I needed to hit the road. If it weren't for him, I don't think I'd be traveling with y'all at all." *I was just talkin' in the heat of the moment,* Alfyn thought, *but I sure can't deny there's truth to that.* Alfyn had begun his journey in order to help people all over the world with his medicine. That way, he thought, he could save others' lives just like the man who had once saved his own. But by giving him the courage to depart, not only had Zeph helped Alfyn start to fulfill that dream, he had given him the opportunity to meet Therion and their other companions. He couldn't help but think of that as a precious treasure.

"I see. That Zeph certainly seems like a good friend of yours." Therion nodded, setting his now-empty tankard back on the table.

"Y'see? Glad you think so, too--"

Therion cut him off. "But at the end of the day, no matter how good a friend he is, you're still unrelated. Just another stranger," he said curtly. Alfyn was at a loss for words, crushed by his misunderstanding of Therion's agreement, as Therion

launched a follow-up attack. “You can yap about your ‘brother’ all you want, but you really are more naïve than I thought, medicine man. When all’s said and done, you’re just yourself. That’s all you’ve got. Other people are other people.”

“Y-ya think...?”

“I do. Then that makes us two nothing but perfect strangers.” Therion crossed his arms. Total rejection brimmed from his eyes, boring into Alfyn. *We’re not “companions.” There’s no way we can ever really understand each other. So don’t go prying any further.* Therion may not have said as much in words, but his aura more than insinuated it. Even Alfyn couldn’t stay on the offensive when confronted head-on with such an attitude.

“You show too much of that kindness, that gentleness, to others, the only one who’s going to pay the price for it is you.”

So don’t show them any weakness they can take advantage of.

Just live only for yourself, and that can be the end of it.

Therion tossed the leaves for his ale on the table and stood up. Without saying another word to the speechless Alfyn, he turned his back to him and left the tavern.

“...” Alfyn could do nothing but watch him go. No matter how optimistic he always managed to be, even he couldn’t hide his shock. “What in the world happened to him...?” Is that really how he feels, from the bottom of his heart? *You’ve only got yourself. Other people are other people. So you shouldn’t bother associating any further.* Could someone who thinks like that really exist?

“Then Therion, why go and...?”

“Oi, brother! What’s got you all down in the dumps now?” Alfyn’s muttering was loudly interrupted by a wildly overeager shout. Alfyn looked up, surprised, to find a pair of men he’d never met at his table, clapping him on the shoulder. Their faces were rough, and their voices sounded slick with alcohol – the kind of people one could find in any town’s slums. Alfyn forced a strained smile onto his face.

“Ahh, my bad. Just had a nasty sip of my drink here – guess it showed on my face.”

“Somethin’ bad happen to ya? Eh?” “Come on, we’ll hear you out, yeah?”

After getting lectured like that by Therion, Alfyn was honestly glad to hear some kind words from these men he’d never met. Alfyn’s bitter smile morphed into his genuine trademark grin. He quaffed the rest of his ale and set the tankard aside.

“You sure know how to drink, brother!” “Nothin’ bad you can’t forget with some drink!” Grins split across the men’s faces as they clapped Alfyn’s back again – and again, when they saw Alfyn’s own smile.

“Got that right, friends! Guess you could say this is some kinda fate – have a drink with me!” *Maybe Therion’s right – maybe other people really can’t be more than strangers. But so what? The world’s full of all kinds of folks.* Alfyn ordered another round.

* * *

He’s honestly like somethin’ closer to a brother to me. Buffeted by the night wind, Therion turned Alfyn’s words over in his mind. The gusts blown up from the valley floor, characteristic of the Cliftlands, tousled Therion’s snow-white hair.

Refreshing as the night wind was, it didn't blow away the lingering aftertaste of cheap liquor, nor did it help to quell the whirlpool of emotions brewing in his chest.

To Therion, the word "brother" held a special meaning – especially when used to refer to a connection not of blood, but of particular familiarity.

Therion, huh? That's a good name. Nice to meetcha, brother¹!

Damn... I'm no match for you, brother!

Why? Simple, brother.

Now, die for me. ...Brother.

"...Darius." The words spoken by the man Therion had once called his brother replayed in his mind. He was the first person Therion, as a lonely young man, had ever learned to trust, and the first person to ever betray him. Then, too, the wind was howling up from the valley as Darius' assault sent Therion plummeting to the bottom of the cliff.

Darius had done nothing but use Therion. He had discovered Therion's genius as a thief and used it as a stepping stone for his own gain. Certainly that was nothing like Alfyn's relationship with Zeph. Certainly, theirs was built on a relationship of mutual trust, without self-serving calculation – one look at trusting, naïve Alfyn, and he could tell. And certainly as Alfyn thought of Zeph as his brother, Zeph would think of Alfyn the same.

Then, what about Therion himself and Alfyn? Not just Alfyn – what exactly was his relationship with the seven others he was traveling with? Therion had chosen to continue traveling by their side because it was convenient, and nothing more. When it came to a fight, a warrior and a hunter were valuable to have; when there was information to be gathered, it was a scholar's time to shine; and when deploying even Therion's pickpocketing finesse proved troublesome, letting a merchant handle the business negotiations made obtaining valuables painless.

Indeed, Therion was doing nothing but taking advantage of them; just as Darius had done to him. Yet it was precisely for that reason that he wanted to avoid showing the others any sign of weakness.

"..." As he walked, Therion felt a disturbance in his usual sense of balance; a chill down his spine and a strange bodily sensation. He realized these were the signs of some kind of illness. Fortunately, he knew a few empty houses nearby from the years he was active in the area. He could lay low in one of them and, hopefully, recover in time to regroup with the others before they left Bolderfall.

As he passed through the slums, a vulgar, thick voice grated on his ears, interrupting his thoughts.

"Nice goin', brother!"

"A rube like him? That weren't nothin'!"

Therion turned around to see two of Bolderfall's dime-a-dozen ne'er-do-well thieves strolling along in high spirits. *Pulled off a good job, huh? That's nothing to sneer at*, Therion thought, but as he watched the two pass, he narrowed his eyes at

their hands. They were, without a doubt, holding Alfyn's belongings. One of the thieves opened his coin purse and peered inside.

"Seems he wasn't carryin' much on him."

"Damn, ain't apothecaries supposed to rake it in? Didn't expect that. Can probably make good coin off these, though." *Tsk.* 'These' meant Alfyn's apothecary tools. Therion didn't have a clue how any of them were used, but he could at least tell that Alfyn took carrying them around seriously. *Just as I thought. Looks like someone took advantage of him after all. Can't say I didn't warn you. If those tools were so important, why would you put them somewhere where anyone could lift them off you?*

"He's probably worryin' about how he can't even pay for his ale right now! Poor guy!"

"His fault for sittin' there with a face practically screamin', 'I'm an easy mark, come rob me,' ain't it?"

"Got that right! Gahaha!" Oblivious to Therion's gaze, they put Alfyn's coin purse and tools back in their bag and began walking off again towards another pub – no doubt to buy themselves another round with their spoils. He watched them go in and staggered along once more.

* * *

"You got some nerve, thinkin' you can get yerself a free drink off me, boy!"

"N-no, I wasn't– It was jus' there, I swear! It can't be..." The barkeep stared down Alfyn with a menacing glare as he frantically scavenged for his missing coin purse. Just moments ago, he'd decided to leave the tavern, only to find when he went to pay that his belongings were nowhere to be found. Of course, checking the pocket he usually kept his coin purse in and turning his coat inside-out did him no good. Then, what about his bag? Just as he went to look inside, he was interrupted by a familiar voice from behind.

"And just what are you doing, medicine man?" Alfyn whirled around, surprised.

"Th-Therion~!" The small-framed thief was staring at him, arms crossed. Alfyn broke into a wide grin as he called his name. Therion looked back and forth from Alfyn's pathetic smile to the barkeep, veins bulging out of his head, and instantly surmised the situation.

"Barkeep, I'll cover for him." Alfyn had clearly been relieved just at Therion's mere arrival, but it didn't seem he expected Therion to actually come to the rescue. After all, it was Therion who had just admonished him so mercilessly for trusting others.

"Eh? Therion, you sure?"

"I didn't say I'd be *treating* you, medicine man. You'll pay me back."

"N-naw, I got that, I just... Thanks. You're a big help." Shaking off his bewilderment, the first things that came out of Alfyn's mouth were words of gratitude. At any rate, Therion had rescued him from this particular pinch. His thanks were accompanied by a friendly smile. Without responding in kind, Therion merely walked to the tavern door. Just as he was about to leave, though, he asked Alfyn,

"Where's your coin purse?" Alfyn gave a bitter smile and rubbed the back of his neck, embarrassed, as he answered,

"Guess I lost it." The instant he said that, he felt a trace of danger enter Therion's gaze. Therion so rarely let people read his expressions, but Alfyn could clearly detect a quiet anger emanating from him. He didn't realize it, but the target of Therion's ire was Alfyn himself.

"It was *stolen*." His voice was low and his reply brief, but his announcement was more than clear.

"A-ah... That so?"

"It was *stolen* because you're so *obviously* soft, and it makes you defenseless. In the time it takes to cross this room, I could strip you naked and rob you blind."

"Sorry, but if it comes to that, think ya could at least let me keep my underwear?"

"..." Alfyn's joking reply, rather than lightening the mood, instead only served to get on Therion's nerves. "You are aware I'm a thief, aren't you? What guarantee do you have I wouldn't do that?" He closed in on Alfyn and lifted him by the collar.

"W-what are you sayin'? Therion, there's no way you'd do somethin' like that, right...?" Good-humored Alfyn, with understanding of why his traveling companion – even if he was a thief – was targeting him with such naked rage, wasn't sure at first whether he should apologize or fight back.

It was then that he noticed that Therion's thin body seemed to be staggering. No – it didn't merely look that way; his balance was shaky, and the trunk of his body was unsteady. At the same moment, he noticed for the first time the drops of sweat beading on Therion's face.

"Woah there, Therion, you're not well, are you?" He was careless for not noticing until now. No, that wasn't it. Therion had made sure he wouldn't notice. Not because he didn't want Alfyn to worry, but rather out of a refusal to show any sign of weakness to anyone else. "What happened to you? Let me take a look."

"Don't... Don't worry about it...!" Therion slapped Alfyn's hand away. He still had more strength than Alfyn expected. As if nothing was wrong, Therion walked a little further to leave the tavern, but before long crumpled again, clutching the fence overlooking the cliff face.

"Hey, look out!" Alfyn made to support him, and this time, Therion had no strength left to shake off Alfyn's hands. He was running a high fever. It was obvious he had been overdoing it for far too long, and that the symptoms had suddenly taken a turn for the worse over the course of just a few hours. Alfyn lifted the languid Therion onto his back, slung his now-empty medicine bag over his shoulder, and sprinted for the inn.

* * *

"He's got peacock fever." Alfyn closed the door of the room where Therion had been put to bed and announced his diagnosis. The inn corridor was packed with their companions, staring at him with variously concerned expressions. "It's carried by avian monsters and spreads through open wounds, but it's nothin' too tough to

treat. I know how to make the medicine for it, too; 's just a matter of gettin' ahold of the ingredients."

"What do you need?" Olberic asked. Naturally, he immediately understood what Alfyn was trying to say. Of course, it wasn't just him; the rest of the party nodded at Olberic's question. Alfyn glanced at the door behind him as he responded,

"Peacock fever's carried by avians, but they don't get it themselves thanks to their natural resistance to it. So all I need is the blood an' feathers of an avian – the bigger the better. Then I can whip somethin' up with the ingredients I keep on hand. It's just a question of whether we'll be able to find one big enough..."

"Aha..." Cyrus realized something and raised his head. "If I remember correctly, there are several caves in the Cliftland valley which were once used for sky burials – the bodies of the deceased would be left there to be eaten by birds. I'm certain we ought to find a monster that suits your needs there."

"Very well, then we shall look there." They came to a conclusion at once. The sun was already setting, and there was no small danger in traveling the mountain roads of the Cliftlands under cover of darkness, but no one raised any objections at setting out then and there. Without any thoughtless remark on the risk his companions were taking on, Alfyn merely said,

"I'm countin' on you, sir."

"Of course." Olberic and the others made their preparations and set out to gather Alfyn's ingredients at once, leaving their various parting words: Primrose's *We'll leave the bedside care to you, then*; H'aanit's *We willen return anon – waite but a moment*; and Tressa's *Tell Mr. Therion I hope he feels better!* Alfyn and Ophilia were the only two who remained to look after Therion. While they waited for the materials, all they could do was continue treating his symptoms, laying an cloth wet with ice-cold water on his forehead and disinfecting and wrapping his wounds. Fortunately, the party had just restocked, so there was no shortage of supplies.

"Mr. Alfyn?" Ophilia suddenly whispered while carefully continuing her treatment. "If Therion has peacock fever, then he must have caught it when..."

"Yeah, must've been, huh..." Their close encounter with a flock of Birdians had occurred only a couple days before arriving in Bolderfall. Therion was the one who had rushed right to Ophilia's side as they attacked her. When Alfyn and the others caught up to him, it didn't seem as though he was hurt, which was surely why he had been too late to notice Therion's symptoms, but he had indeed sustained a fierce gash on part of his arm covering Ophilia from the Birdians' assault.

"It's nothin' you oughta fret over, Ophilia."

"...Of course." It seemed Alfyn thought she was blaming herself. "After all, just as Mr. Therion saved me then, I'm returning the favor and saving him now."

"Now, ain't that a good thought? Well, then." Alfyn was honestly grateful to have Ophilia with him. She seemed to have experience nursing patients, and she was quick on the uptake. While they waited for the others' return from the valley with his ingredients, they split the job of taking care of Therion. The man himself was sleeping on the bed wearing a pained expression. It wouldn't be an

exaggeration to say that no matter how unfavorable a position he found himself in, he would never let his anguish or despair show on his face. The thief was so steadfastly dedicated to concealing any sign of weakness from others that it had taken him to the point of near-total collapse hiding his infection with peacock fever.

You're defenseless. It was only one or two hours ago that Therion, pressing up to him, had said that. The reason he hid his every weakness was to avoid ever being taken advantage of. He had lived alone that way his entire life – he was probably alone even now.

You are aware I'm a thief, aren't you? What guarantee do you have I wouldn't do that? Alfyn stared at Therion's face, drenched in sweat, and placed a hand to his own forehead.

"A guarantee, huh... Do I really need somethin' like that...?" His voice wrung-out, the words slipped out of their own accord. *Can't I trust you won't do that to me even without a guarantee? Is that really so wrong?* Of course, Alfyn trusted in Therion even now. It didn't matter that his coin purse was stolen – he was certain Therion wasn't the culprit. It was then he remembered Primrose's words to him earlier.

No, not quite. You see... Just after they had left the Ravus estate, Primrose had whispered into his ear. *...the lock on Therion's so-called "Fool's Bangle" has already been undone.* When Alfyn went to examine the wounds the Birdians had left on him, he looked at both of his arms. The bangle was certainly there, but when he put his hand to the clasp, it opened effortlessly with a tiny *click*. The thief was already as free as he had ever been. There was no way Therion himself was unaware of this. He had already lost the very reason for reclaiming the stolen treasures of the Ravus family. Yet even now, he was dutifully covering his wrists with his long sleeves, continuing his journey with Alfyn and the others, and pursuing the same goal he had from the start.

"I guess, after all, you really do..."

"Mr. Alfyn?" Ophilia tilted her head curiously and peered into Alfyn's expression. Only then did he realize he had been voicing his thoughts aloud the whole time. Even if he hurried to cover his mouth with his hands, it was too late. Embarrassment washed over him. "If you're tired, perhaps it wouldn't be a bad idea to rest a little. You still have to make the medicine once everyone returns, after all—"

"N-naw, don't you worry! It's not that, I swear!" As Alfyn waved his hands, desperately trying to defend himself, Ophilia giggled.

"Were you thinking about Mr. Therion, I wonder?"

"W-well, I guess you could say that. Somethin' or another happened with him, y'know..." Caught, Alfyn had no choice but to grin sheepishly. That's right, "somethin' or another" – nothing there was any need to fight about. Therion had told him he couldn't put his trust in other people. Of course, that had seemed like nothing so much as an indication that Therion himself didn't put his trust in Alfyn. Yet that couldn't explain Therion risking his life to protect Ophilia, nor could it explain continuing his journey to restore the Ravus treasures to their rightful owners. Alfyn couldn't pretend he understood everything about Therion, but he felt that a piece

of the other man's true feelings revealed itself in that tiny contradiction. "Therion told me, 'You're just yourself. Other people are other people.' – that I'm a right fool for trustin' him or anyone else," Alfyn continued, recalling the words Therion had spat at him. "Then lookin' from that perspective, no matter how far we travel, I'm just me, and Therion's just Therion, right?"

"I suppose so. You're Mr. Alfyn and no one else, of course." Alfyn's manner of speaking lacked certainty, but Ophilia thought she understood what he was trying to say.

Therion had a sharp tongue and spoke bluntly, and there was no denying he could be endlessly difficult to get along with, but as far as Alfyn was concerned, he wasn't a bad person at all. On the contrary – though the man himself would probably laugh in his face if he said so – Alfyn thought of him as, in his words, "a real good guy." No matter what Therion said or what attitude he took, that was just the kind of person Therion was. In the same way, worrying after Therion and working to cure his illness, even when Therion would never ask him to, was just the kind of person Alfyn Greengrass was.

"Alright! I'd better get things set so I'm ready to go whenever Sir Olberic 'n the others get back!" Hyping himself up, Alfyn opened his medicine bag and went to pull out his synthesizing equipment and medicinal herbs. He stared into the bag and instantly paled.

"What the-?!"

"Wh-what's the matter?"

"They're... gone..." His tools were gone. Missing. Simply not there. That was impossible – he had put a salve on that little girl who fell on the steps just that evening. He was certain they were in his bag then, and he hadn't opened it since, so it was difficult to imagine they'd simply fallen out. If they'd been stolen, then he had no choice to admit Therion had been right about that. It was his fault for realizing only now, but it occurred to him that perhaps the thief hadn't been simply conjecturing.

At the tavern – that pair of men.

"Th-those bastards...!" The normally easy-going, mild-mannered young man had a look of utter betrayal on his face. He should have realized how light his bag was when he was carrying Therion. Perhaps he had simply been in too much of a hurry.

"M-Mr. Alfyn...?"

"Ophilia, can you look after Therion!? I gotta head out real quick!" Alfyn opened the door and flew out of the room almost before he'd finished his sentence. He had no clue where the two thieves could be, but he didn't have any choice but to get searching. At a time like this, Alfyn was the kind of person whose body moved before he had a chance to even think.

"M-Mr. Alfyn-!" Alfyn dashed away from the voice calling out to him and into the night of Bolderfall.

* * *

Bolderfall was by no means a small city. If it came to it, Alfyn might have to gatecrash the Ravus estate and ask for their help. If at all possible, though, he wanted to avoid making Cordelia worry any more about Therion than she already did. However, it turned out there was no need to worry. He caught sight of the two thieves not far from the tavern where he'd shared a drink with them. They walked past in high spirits, shoulders joined, and Alfyn tailed them with a long stride.

"...Scuse me."

"Haaw?" Alfyn called out to them and they whirled around, apparently having taken no notice of him until now. They seemed to be quite drunk. Their faces were ruddy, and their eyes darted, unable to focus their gazes on any one spot. They also seemed to have been possessed with a certain... big-heartedness? Even staring in the face of a man they'd robbed, without any sign of running away or feigning ignorance, they simply grinned dumbly.

"My apothecary's tools... would you two fools happen to be the ones who stole 'em?"

"Shay, if it isn't our sittin' duck from earlier!" One of the thieves, in a shrill, foolish voice spoke up, while the other guffawed. Alfyn balled his fists and glared at them.

"Give 'em back. Those are important to me, y'know." His voice was low, with barely concealed anger, but the two drunk idiots continued just laughing at him.

"Apologiesh, brother, but 'fraid we can't do that!" After cackling a little while longer, one of the men drew a knife and yelled. Alfyn simply continued silently glaring at their crude smirks.

"Shee, as a matter of fact, we happen to've jusht ran out of drinkin' money! If ya don't cough up shomethin' a little more valuable, ya might have to get hurt!"

"Good thinkin', brother!"

Alfyn's patience had reached its limit. After a beat, he drove his fist into the solar plexus of the man brandishing a knife.

"Ghk-!" Alfyn hadn't been traveling abreast with combat professionals like Olberic and H'aanit just for show. The instant Alfyn's heavy punch connected with the man, his eyes rolled to the back of his head as he was knocked out cold.

"You bastard!" The other ruffian pulled out a knife of his own and rushed at Alfyn. Alfyn turned to avoid his thrust and punched him in the cheekbone. As he recoiled and dropped his knife, Alfyn closed in with a follow-up blow. It seemed the men were oblivious of their own actions even at the best, most sober of times. Alfyn's clenched fists connected with the man's face so cleanly it was almost pleasant. Blood dripped from his nose as he staggered, face tilted up. Alfyn hit him one final time, for good measure, and he flew into a heap of garbage piled up in the alleyway with a crash. Only his foot could be sticking out from the mountain of garbage.

"Damn...!" Of course, he'd overdone it. It wasn't generally in the job description of an apothecary to generate additional casualties. He grabbed the arm of the man and heaved him up. The man he'd struck in the stomach was almost too-perfectly

unconscious, but the eyes of the man he'd launched into the trash were still wide open.

"I'll ask ya one more time. Where are the things you stole from me?" These were perhaps cruder means than ideal, but in the end his goal was the return of his apothecary's tools.

"S-sorry, brother. We've already gone 'n spent your coin..."

"I don't care 'bout the leaves. That ain't what I'm after right now. I want my tools. They must've been in my bag too."

"W-we..." The man's voice trembled. "We ain't got 'em."

"What'd you say!?" Alfyn couldn't believe he'd heard correctly. They don't have them, he'd said? "No, you're lyin'! Don't tell me y'all went and fenced 'em already!?"

"That ain't it! They jus' up and disappeared, alright!? I won't deny we nabbed 'em, but we ain't got your coin purse or medicine or your tools no more!"

"N-no way..." *No way you think you're gonna fool me with a lie like that*, Alfyn wanted to say, but he just hung his head. The man's panic seemed to be the real thing. It didn't look like he was lying. Alfyn decided to change course and press for details. "I-in any case, tell me the whole story."

"S-sure..." The man's story went like this. The two had eyed Alfyn up at the tavern as an easy mark and struck up a conversation with him. Hearing it from the man himself made Alfyn's stomach boil, but he sucked it up and listened. As far as this case was concerned, he had no choice but to concede that Therion was right. The two made contact and struck up a friendly chat. Once they'd disarmed any caution Alfyn might have had, the rest was simple. They'd torn open his bag, looking for his coin purse and anything else potentially of value. They obviously didn't have any real knowledge of medicine, so they simply took a few of his medicinal herbs at random and whatever looked like specialty tools. Even though they didn't know what any of them did, they handled them as carefully as they could. If they couldn't get a good price for them here in Bolderfall, they were planning on trying to sell them for as much coin as they could get for them in Clearbrook or S'warkii or even all the way out in Victors Hollow. But before they knew it, the coin purse, the medicine, and the tools simply vanished.

"Nothin' unusual happened to you in between?"

"N-naw, don't think so... If I had to guess, we mighta bumped into someone walkin' through town, but..."

"Bumped into someone?"

"Yeah... Used to see his face 'round here in Bolderfall all the time. Young guy, dressed up in purple with white hair..."

Therion.

No, he couldn't have already...

"Damn it...!" He couldn't help but curse. *In that case, you shoulda said so first! I've taken a hell of a detour thanks to you!* Still, his sigh of frustration was undeniably mixed with one of relief.

“W-well then, hehe, we’ll just be off...” On his hands and knees, the ruffian lent his unconscious friend his shoulder and made to sneak away.

“Hang on just a minute.” Alfyn called out to them. The man jumped and slowly turned around to face Alfyn, shoulders shaking. Blood dripped from his forehead and bruises were already forming around his eyes. “Let me take a look at those cuts. I got somethin’ good for the bruises, at least.”

“N-no, you... Huh?”

“I’m in a hurry here, y’know. Hurry up and lemme see. Y’all probably ran into Therion, so I can’t risk leavin’ even little scrapes like these alone or you might end up in the same sorry state he’s in.” Fortunately, the salve he’d used on the girl that evening was still safely tucked away in a pocket of his bag. He pulled out the container and held it out in an effort to hurry up the man, whose eyes were still wide with disbelief.

* * *

When he returned to the inn, Ophilia came out to greet him, eyes full of worry.

“What happened, Mr. Alfyn? You rushed out all of a sudden...”

“Sorry ’bout that. Just had something I needed to go look for.” *Even if it ended up being a waste of time...* Alfyn looked at Therion on the bed. Until he could make the medicine, it was too early to make any predictions, but compared to the time he spent moaning in pain earlier, his condition seemed to have stabilized significantly. Ophilia and Alfyn’s nursing had had its desired effect. Alfyn took Therion’s small satchel into his hand.

“Don’t mind me. I’ll just be takin’ a little peek, here...” Just as he’d predicted, its contents were not Therion’s possessions, but Alfyn’s. Indeed, he’d been right on the mark – he produced his coin purse, his medicine, and his synthesizing tools from the bag. Every last thing in the bag belonged to Alfyn Greengrass.

“Mr. Alfyn, don’t tell me...”

“That’s right. Therion went and got them back for me.” It had probably been right after those two had snuck Alfyn’s things out of his bag and left the tavern. Therion had probably surmised not only that the two were thieves, but both from whom and what they’d stolen. Knowing Therion, he’d probably clicked his tongue at that, Alfyn imagined. No doubt he’d thought, *Told you so*, too.

Even then, Therion must have been showing symptoms of peacock fever. His body was hardly in peak form, but Alfyn could be certain the sharpness of his skill hadn’t suffered from it. After all, the two who had stolen Alfyn’s things didn’t even notice they themselves had been robbed. Then Therion had taken Alfyn’s things back just before returning to the tavern and witnessing his plight.

“So that’s what happened, is it?” Ophilia smiled.

“C’mon, whaddya mean, ‘Don’t you think I could’ve done it?’” Alfyn wondered what would’ve happened if they’d continued their back-and-forth at the tavern. Maybe Therion would have showed Alfyn the contents of his bag, gauging his reaction. Or maybe he would have just handed them back to him. The mostly likely possibility in Alfyn’s mind, though, was that Therion would have simply slipped them back into Alfyn’s bag when he wasn’t paying attention.

"Like you said before, that's just how Mr. Therion is," Ophilia replied with a soft smile. Alfyn nodded. She was right – Therion was just Therion. No matter what he tried to say, Alfyn wouldn't stop believing in him. And that was enough.

* * *

For a little while longer, the two slept in shifts while they continued looking after Therion. Olberic and the others didn't return until the following morning. Fortunately, no one had sustained any particularly nasty injuries and everyone appeared to be safe.

"Will this be enough?" Olberic asked as he held out several large, iridescent feathers. From the looks of the bag strapped to Tressa's back, there were probably even more.

"More'n enough, thankee."

"Is there perhaps anything we can do to be of assistance?" Cyrus asked, but Alfyn just laughed and shook his head.

"Naw, I'll be alright on my own from here. Y'all are probably tired, so go 'n rest – if I get any more patients on my hands we'll be right back where we started!"

"I see. Pity, I'd had some interest in seeing what the medicine for peacock fever looked like... but I can't deny that what you say is true. Very well."

And so, the rest of their companions began retiring to their inn rooms. The room which had been allotted to the men had been taken over for Therion's treatment, so they were forced to rent yet another room. Fortunately, no one objected. When Alfyn began preparing to mix the medicine, the women of the party still remained.

"Is Mr. Therion going to be okay?"

"No worries! He ain't the kinda guy to lose so easy to some fever. Not only that, he's got the medicine y'all so kindly helped get."

"R-right!" Tressa's usual smile returned to light up her face as she, too, left for her room.

"Well, the rest is up to you, then, Alfyn."

"You can count on me!"

"Shoulde the need arisen, lette us know at once."

"I think I'll be alright from here. Thanks." Primrose and H'aanit, small smiles on their faces, followed Tressa out of the room. It was just time for him and Ophilia to switch shifts, so she left to go sleep as well.

"Hey." Now alone, Alfyn turned to face Therion and called out. "No matter what you say, everyone's worried, y'know. About you." *Damn blockhead* – only those final words caught in Alfyn's mouth. He began mixing the medicine. He'd never prepared the special medicine for peacock fever himself, but he had everything he needed right in front of him. It was smooth sailing from here.

Alfyn suddenly looked up and laid his eyes on his medicine bag, passed to him from Zeph as a farewell gift. It wasn't only his companions at Alfyn's side now – even now, Zeph was supporting him. Thanks to him, he could save the people traveling alongside him. Somehow, he couldn't help but feel overjoyed.

Therion continued sleeping while his fever began to ebb. It wasn't for another two days, when Alfyn came in to check on his condition, that he finally opened his eyes.

"...What the...?" Therion muttered.

"Howdy," Alfyn greeted him, smiling broadly.

"...Medicine man."

"Finally woke up, huh? Must be hungry. Your stomach's still weak, though, so I ain't lettin' you eat anything big." The party had surmised Therion would wake up before long, so they'd all prepared a few things for him to eat and left them in their rooms. There was probably someone still next door, so if he went by and knocked, he could have them get something for him. Things like applesauce or milk porridge were ideal: food that was nutritious but easy to digest.

"...So, I collapsed, did I?" It seemed Therion finally grasped his situation. He silently returned his rolled-up purple sleeves back to their usual state.

"You sure slept a while. How d'you feel?"

"Hard to say. Not great, I'll say that much."

"I bet. You still gotta take it easy." Alfyn called over to the other room and asked them to make something simple for Therion to eat. Therion stared at him and muttered,

"...Mistake of a lifetime."

"It ain't like you to let the likes of Birdian leave even a scratch on you. It's cause you were tryin' to protect Ophilia, wasn't it?"

"It wasn't like that. I created a debt. Now she owes me one," Therion grumbled with irritation.

"Like hell you 'created a debt.'" Alfyn's reply was deliberately blunt. "You weren't tryin' to make a bargaining point or anythin' like that. You were just doin' as you pleased. Same way as you're still trying to return Miss Cordelia's family's secret treasure."

Therion fell silent, clutching his wrist – the place where the Fool's Bangle was supposedly fastened. Clearly, Alfyn knew that Heathcote had already undone the lock on the bangle. Of course, Cordelia had no idea. Therion didn't want her to know.

"Look, Therion." After a short silence, Alfyn continued, "I haven't given a second thought to you bein' a thief, not once. I can't deny that our relationship is one where we don't know a thing about each other, but that don't mean it's one where we gotta use each other, or keep pushin' each other away, or make and repay debts." Their companions had chosen to remain here until Therion recovered all on their own. Their sojourn in Bolderfall had already gone longer than expected; they had planned to leave yesterday. Therion was a skilled member of their party, to be sure, but if that was all he was to them, they easily could have left him here and moved on. Not necessarily simply by abandoning him – they could have left Therion in the care of the Ravus estate, having Cordelia and Heathcote take over for Alfyn until he recovered.

“I...” Therion began to speak, but cut himself off. He wasn’t sure what he wanted to say. *I never asked for your help*, probably.

“Say, Therion,” Alfyn sat himself in a chair, raised his hands, and said, “you stole my tools back, didn’t you?”

“...”

“I still haven’t said thank you yet. So, thanks. They’re awful important to me.” Therion had nothing to say in response to Alfyn’s honest feelings. After a long silence, though, he quietly opened his mouth.

“I threw cold water on you and your friend’s relationship. I apologize.” Alfyn hadn’t expected taciturn Therion’s response to start there. Had that been bothering him – calling his relationship with Zeph one of that between strangers? It was a little surprising, but Alfyn chose to simply accept his clumsy apology without a word. “Still, medicine man. That’s not a bond you can make with just anyone.” Alfyn felt a touch of loneliness bleed into Therion’s words... unless he was imagining things. They sounded like words Therion desperately wanted to make someone believe – more than likely himself. “Not as long as you keep being so endlessly soft.” His tone grew into something lower, colder than usual. Therion’s sharp glare pierced into Alfyn. “As long as you stay that naïve, before long, you’re going to experience the bitter taste of betrayal.”

“That supposed to be just advice, or is it a warning?”

“Take it how you will. I don’t care.” The thief abruptly lowered his gaze.

“Then I’ll say this to you, Therion.” As if in retaliation, Alfyn raised the corners of his mouth. “Before long, there’ll come a day where you’ll see how good it is to trust someone, ’n to get them to trust you.”

“And is that a warning? Or is it advice?”

“Who knows? But either way, there’s no mistakin’ it.” Leaving Therion with only those words, Alfyn stood and threw the door wide open. The Cliftlands’ trademark wind, gusting up from the valley floor, blew into the inn room. The curtains swayed softly and blue sky and dazzling sunlight poured in.

“Medicine man.” Alfyn heard the fluttering of small birds taking flight. Therion’s voice, so small it should have surely been lost in the noise, made its way to his ears. He turned around to face him without a word. Therion continued, gazing out the window, “I’ll say it too. You helped me.”

“...Sheesh.” This was the first time Alfyn had ever heard words of gratitude from Therion. They didn’t quite match an honest ‘thank you,’ but the feeling was undeniably packed into Therion’s words. It was more pleasant to his ears than he could have imagined, and he couldn’t keep a smile from breaking across his face. He looked up at the brilliant azure sky, joy pouring from his grin. “You’re too damn quiet.”

Translator’s Notes

1. The English localization of *Octopath Traveler* has Darius and Therion use the word ‘partner’ to refer to one another. The original Japanese word is *kyoudai*, which literally means ‘brother(s)’ or ‘siblings.’

but can also mean something similar to ‘partner in crime,’ as it is also used to refer to sworn brothers in, e.g., organized crime. These lines are verbatim from the game in Japanese, but since they either use the word ‘partner’ in place of *kyoudai* or omit it entirely in the localization, I had to rewrite them to include ‘brother,’ as this conflict relies on the intermingling of the various senses of the word.

Chapter 3

On the Eve of a Blizzard

“I CANNOT agree to this, H’aanit. It’s too dangerous.” Olberic’s face was grim – but that was only natural. The party was in the town of Stillsnow, which, just as the name suggested, was blanketed year-round in a layer of silver-glittering snow. However, the blizzard raging outside was unusual in its ferocity even for the Frostlands. The windows of the lodge, which should have been more than sturdy enough to withstand a snowstorm, rattled perilously, and the view outside, even though it was nighttime, was pure white as far as the eye could see. Yet amidst the fierce snow, H’aanit was determined to search for Ophilia.

“I knowe ’twill be dangerous – but I do not intende to doen anything rash, nor am I without preparation.” H’aanit’s voice was strained but firm. Hers certainly was not the voice of someone who had lost their cool.

“But...”

“’Tis no trouble for me to followen Linde’s tracks, even if they be faint, and the place is not so far from here.”

It was a few hours ago that the party had been separated from Ophilia. Snow began to fall as they left the white forest behind and were making their way back to Stillsnow, and although the distance wasn’t particularly far, their vision was stolen in an instant. Disoriented by the harsh snowfall, Ophilia took a wrong step, lost her balance, and slipped away from the rest of the group.

Ordinarily, it would be a given for ever-attentive Ophilia to proceed with caution and certainty, even in such harsh conditions. Yet for the past several days, she had been clearly wracked by some kind of worry, and it had begun to tinge her behavior with a certain lifelessness – ultimately culminating in her slip and fall. H’aanit had rushed over in an instant and stretched out her hand, but couldn’t get ahold of Ophilia’s arm. With a blank expression on her face, as though she herself wasn’t quite sure what was happening, Ophilia disappeared into the snow in the blink of an eye.

As her companions rushed to find a way to rescue her, the one who acted with the greatest clarity of purpose was none other than the snow leopard Linde. H’aanit exchanged a brief glance with her companion and understood what Linde meant to

do at once. Some food, alcohol, and the other bare necessities to endure the bitter cold were strapped to Linde's body before she, too, disappeared into the snow, determined to follow after Ophilia.

Unfortunately, as long as the party was unable to properly get their own equipment and supplies in order, it was too dangerous to remain in the middle of the blizzard any longer. There was nothing else for them to do but make the trek back to Stillsnow.

"Linde haileth from the Frostlands," H'aanit said as she donned her pelts and laced snowshoes to her boots. "Even amidst a blizzard such as this, 'twould be a trifle to finden her quarry. I've no doubt she is fast at Ophilia's side by now – but whether she is unharmed is a separate question, indeed." H'aanit cast her gaze towards the snowstorm on the other side of the window. "In conditions such as these, the danger that she maye freeze to death only groweth, and Linde's tracks willen growe harder to finden. If we are to searchen after her..."

Cyrus, who had remained silent until now, interjected, "I see. The time to follow after her is now, while we can still hope for both her safety and finding Linde's tracks,"

"...Just so." H'aanit nodded. Olberic's expression remained severe, and he let out a groan.

"Still, it's dangerous for you to travel alone. Perhaps it would be better to have someone else accompany you..."

"I'm not so sure of that, Olberic." Cyrus laced his fingers together before the fireplace. "Someone like H'aanit, a hunter from S'warkii, might be accustomed to navigating the middle of a blizzard like this, but I don't know if we can say the same of anyone else. I'm sure a knight of Hornburg has some experience traveling through snow, but I doubt you've had to weather a snowstorm like this, am I right?"

"...It's as you say." Olberic sighed. H'aanit imagined that was precisely the cause for his concern – Olberic was the only member of their party with experience commanding troops, and that made him all the more inclined to take up the role of opposing any rash movements as a matter of principle. On the other hand, it was as Cyrus said. H'aanit was more than accustomed to pursuing a target through even the worst conditions; she hadn't imagined the day would come where being forced to handle all her master's countless unreasonable requests would come in handy like this. She hardly wanted to suggest that bringing anyone else would just get in her way, but there was no denying that for something so time-sensitive, she would prefer to be able to move as lightly as possible.

As the party continued to mull over the best course of action, the door opened with a *bang*, and snow-bearing wind entered the lodge room along with Primrose, shivering even while bundled up in her coat. As she dusted the snow from her hair with a grim look on her face.

"We had a chat with the people at Arianna's brothel – they said once the storm calms a little more, they could arrange a carriage for us."

"But at this rate, it's hard to say when exactly that'll be," Therion added, entering a little after Primrose, as he shut the door behind him. H'aanit thought over

their predicament once more and finally said,

“There’s no need for worry, Olberic. ’Tis heartening to knowen your concern, but I am not one to acten rashly – rather, I am all too often one to advisen others against doing so. Should I determine it too perilous to proceeden, I shall returne at once.”

“..Very well.” Olberic finally nodded, defeated. “But please don’t do anything risky, H’aanit. You know the saying – the tiger bites he who chases after rabbits.”

“Thou wouldst really level such a proverb at a hunter of S’warkii?”

Ceding the fireside to Primrose and Therion, Cyrus chuckled. “Speaking of proverbs, Olberic, perhaps ‘teaching Bifelgan his own trade’ would be more appropriate?” Olberic could really do nothing in response to that but let out a long sigh and shake his head, conceding at last, before allowing the corners of his mouth to slacken into a small smile.

“Quite right. Godspeed, H’aanit – we’ll leave Ophilia to you.”

At last fully dressed to keep the cold at bay, H’aanit, voice muffled by the pelt covering her mouth, replied, “Of course.”

“H’aanit!” “Miss H’aanit!” Before H’aanit could walk out the door, she was stopped by Alfyn and Tressa calling from behind. “Ya never know what could happen out there – lemme give you some salve for frostbite, okay?”

“And here’s a hearthstone! If you get too cold, you can use it like a hot water bottle!”

“My thanks to you both.” H’aanit nodded and accepted their parting gifts before opening the door and stepping outside. Throwing herself into the middle of the snowstorm, awaited by her companion and her partner, she, too, melted into the silver-tinted landscape before long.

* * *

When Ophilia Clement awoke, she found herself lying upon the rugged surface of a rock face. She reflexively shrank into herself, her coat (or any coat, for that matter) insufficient to keep the bitter cold at bay. Her consciousness still hazy, she surveyed her surroundings to realize she was in the middle of a cave.

“That’s right... on the way back to Stillsnow, I...” A full, throbbing pain began to spread throughout her body like a bruise. Pressing a hand to her forehead, she struggled to recall clearly what had happened to her. “I, fell...? Right, I missed my footing...” Ophilia cursed her own carelessness – they had been traveling along a snowy road, and in the middle of a blizzard to boot. Even if she’d been restless, even if she’d been distracted, she should have known better than anyone among her companions how dangerous moving through such a snowstorm could be.

But it was no time for her to be throwing herself a pity party. Her worries were far from cleared, but what she needed to focus on now was making it back to the party alive. Odds were they were already back in Stillsnow and more than likely worried about her. She’d like nothing more than to return at once, but it would be foolish to try and blindly rush back into the middle of the blizzard.

What Ophilia needed to do now was to get her bearings and get a clearer picture of her situation. With her vision obscured by the snow, she’d probably slipped and

fallen to the side of the main road from a decent height – luckily, without sustaining any serious injuries.

Inwardly expressing her gratitude to the Sacred Flame for shielding her from peril, Ophilia looked around her once more. There was one more person besides the Flamebringer deserving of her thanks:

“Just who carried me here, I wonder...?” She’d fallen into the snow, which is what had let her escape with only bruising. If she’d been left there for much longer, though, her body temperature wouldn’t have been able to hold; the fact that she now found herself in this cave was the only reason she’d avoided hypothermia or frostbite. As Ophilia cast her gaze around in search of her savior, it landed upon a large, shifting shadow – a decidedly inhuman shadow. A nervous chill shot down her spine. Her adoptive father had often told her stories of the monstrous snow leopards found in the Frostlands. They were said to live in great numbers along the trail to the Whitewood, and Josef’s fairy tales about them had always terrified the young Ophilia.

Luckily, she spotted her staff not too far away. Stiffening her face and putting on a dignified brave face, she managed to retrieve it. Trying not provoke the beast into lunging at her in an instant, she slowly backed away from the shadow in an attempt to maintain some distance.

“Grrr...”

“...!” That was unmistakably the low growl of a monster. Ophilia’s eyes reflexively widened at the figure of the pure white beast now emerging from the shadows. “Y-you’re...!”

“Grrrrrr...”

“L-Linde...!? Linde, is that you...!?” She couldn’t contain her disbelief at this sudden, unexpected appearance. Linde – the snow leopard H’aanit kept at her side as her partner. She resembled the monstrous variety of snow leopard, to be sure, but small differences could be found in things like the shape of her ears. Most telling was the small leather bag wrapped around the neck of the beast before her; the bag, inscribed with the mark H’aanit placed upon all of her possessions, eliminated all doubt that this was indeed Linde. “Linde!!” Overjoyed at her reunion with one of her companions, Ophilia rushed to Linde’s side and threw her arms around her neck. The warmth of her body heat could be felt through her soft fur, flooding Ophilia with relief. “Oh, thank you! You saved me...!”

“Ghuu...” Linde purred softly. Ophilia wasn’t exactly fluent in Snow Leopard, but she could tell at least that it wasn’t a noise of displeasure. She then untied the leather bag fastened to Linde’s neck and checked its contents. Inside she found a small amount of food and alcohol, tools for starting a fire, et cetera.

“Then H’aanit must have packed this for me...”

“...” Linde seemed to surmise what she meant upon hearing H’aanit’s name. She made a gesture something akin to a nod. *What a clever girl*, Ophilia thought. She’d never had the occasion to try and communicate one-on-one with Linde like this before, but as she interacted with her, Ophilia understood there was a kind of meaning to her every action.

“Thank you and H’aanit both so, so much.” With her nervousness beginning to untangle, Ophilia smiled sweetly before retrieving a piece of flint from the leather bag. Just when it occurred to her she didn’t have any firewood, she spotted some dry sticks and twigs – Linde must have gathered them while Ophilia had been unconscious. She was able to get a fire going in no time.

She couldn’t be sure when the snowstorm would relent, but it would be safe to wait a little while longer like this; still, they needed to figure out their next move before their modest provisions ran out.

“...Linde, are you hungry?”

“*Gauh.*”

“Hmm... is that a yes or a no?” Ophilia smiled faintly, bemused. She still couldn’t quite be sure how much she understood of what she said. H’aanit was regularly communicating with Linde; Linde understood everything H’aanit indicated, and H’aanit didn’t have any problem interpreting what Linde was thinking. Still, that didn’t necessarily imply that a snow leopard could have a total grasp on human language. The communication between H’aanit and Linde was born of their bond, not of a shared language. Even if the ways in which the two expressed themselves were different, they could overcome the barrier of species between a human and a snow leopard and understand each other completely. Ophilia couldn’t help but envy them a little thinking about it. *Still, it’s not as though Linde dislikes me*, she thought, gazing at the leopard lying by her side.

She remembered the time, just after the party arrived in Stillsnow, when she and H’aanit had exchanged some words while watching the local children pet Linde. Ever since she’d first laid eyes on Linde, Ophilia couldn’t help but want to try stroking her coat – after all, it looked so soft and so warm... But she had thought that Linde wouldn’t permit it from anyone but H’aanit, so she’d always kept that desire in check. When H’aanit told her that Linde liked nothing more than to be stroked and groomed, she was shocked – and immediately afterwards pet Linde to her heart’s content. And naturally, since she had the opportunity now...

“Your white fur really is so pretty. I can see why you’re so proud of it,” Ophilia said as she stroked under Linde’s chin. The large snow leopard closed her eyes and purred, apparently enjoying herself. She was still unsure how much Linde knew what she was saying, but she certainly looked somehow boastful. The two continued to pass the time together for a little while longer, Ophilia running her finger’s along Linde’s soft, warm fur, and Ophilia gradually felt herself beginning to relax before the campfire.

In truth, Ophilia didn’t have the time to be leisurely enjoying herself. If it were possible, she’d like to race to Wispermill at once and extract the true intentions of her childhood friend – the girl she considered her own sister. Indeed, that burning desire was exactly what had thrown her mind into such disarray and distracted her to the point of slipping from the road back to Stillsnow. But with things being as they now were, there was nothing to be gained in getting impatient and rushing herself into further anxiety. Knowing that actually helped to calm Ophilia further.

"I've never had the chance to spend the time alone with you like this before," Ophilia murmured as she continued to pet Linde, "but I'm actually also from the Frostlands, just like you. Staring into a fire on a cold night like this brings back memories from when I lived in Flamesgrace."

"..." Linde lifted her head ever so slightly and looked at Ophilia.

"Well, I suppose you've never lit a fire for yourself. But I'm sure looking at the snow all piled up reminds you of home, too, right?" Still not knowing if anything was getting across, Ophilia kept speaking to Linde.

Ophilia was born in the Riverlands, but Josef had taken her in when she was five years old, and she'd been raised in the Frostlands ever since. The streets of Flamesgrace, blanketed year-round in glittering snow, was unmistakably "home" to Ophilia. She'd heard from H'aanit that Linde also came from the Frostlands. It was hard to imagine a beast with that kind of white coat faring well in any other region, so it wasn't all that surprising.

"I wonder, how did you and H'aanit get to know each other in the first place? Raised like siblings under H'aanit's master... Hehe, it's almost like Lianna and me." While Ophilia kept petting her head, Linde looked up at Ophilia with only her eyes. Ophilia hadn't necessarily meant anything by that last comment at first, but she found herself whispering, "It really is just like Lianna and me..."

When Josef had taken in Ophilia as a war orphan, he'd raised her as nothing less than family in Flamesgrace. H'aanit, too, saw her master Z'aanta as a kind of father figure, and just as Ophilia had always had Lianna by her side, H'aanit had always had Linde. Ophilia found herself once again feeling jealous of the two – that they were able to journey by each other's side.

As Ophilia kept stroking the top of Linde's head, she noticed her ears suddenly twitch.

"What's wrong, Linde?"

"*Gwauh.*" The snow leopard growled curtly and got up. Ophilia was able to gather that the noise wasn't one of warning, at least. Linde's gaze was directed towards the entrance of the cave, and Ophilia naturally followed suit.

"Ophilia! Linde! Aren gyt there!" Along with the yell, a large noise could be heard from beyond the snowstorm.

"*Gau!*" Linde growled, as though in reply, and Ophilia joined her.

"H'aanit!" The woman herself, covered in snow and wrapped in furs to protect from the cold, entered the cave and lowered the cloth covering her lower face to reveal a gentle smile.

"'Tis a relief to see thee safe, Ophilia."

* * *

Ophilia had never questioned H'aanit's abilities as a hunter, but she was deeply impressed all over again when she heard that H'aanit had reached the cave just by following the faint tracks Linde had left. After all, in a blizzard like this, just finding the tracks would be a herculean task, let alone following them all the way here. Ophilia was well acquainted with how fearsome snow country could be.

“Thank you so much, H’aanit.” Ophilia profusely expressed her gratitude, but H’aanit only shook her head¹.

“No, in truth I muste thanken you. After all, I have made you joinen me this far.”

“Huh...?” Ophilia unwittingly replied. While H’aanit placed a small pot over the campfire, she stared into the flames. Into the pot went the ingredients H’aanit had brought with her, and the two made a soup as the snow melted around them. H’aanit stirred the soup with a small ladle and slowly, oh so slowly, began to speak.

“’Twas I with business in Stillsnow. Surely your friend weighs on your mind, no? Yet, still you lent me your strength. Had we not your power fighting the dragon of the Whitewood, we surely would haven lost.”

“Has–” Ophilia dropped her gaze. “Has it really been that obvious...?”

“I can discern that much – we’re companions, after all,” H’aanit said, shooting a glance towards Linde curled up by the fire. “Linde was worried, too.”

“L-Linde, too!?” *Was it really so obvious that I worried even a snow leopard?* Ophilia suddenly grew embarrassed, but H’aanit only smiled as she stroked her partner’s head.

“Indeed. She says when you pet her in Stillsnow, she felt doubt in your fingers.”

“S-she can tell from just that...!? Linde...?”

“When you fell, she moved first out of that concern. It also seems she was quite pleased you praised her fur.” At those words, Linde sat up and batted a paw at H’aanit, seemingly displeased – as though she were trying to say, *Don’t go telling everyone!* H’aanit soothed her partner with an apology and began serving the soup with the wooden bowls she’d brought. “How about a simple meal? ‘Tis a relief you appear mostly unharmed, but ‘twould be best to warm your body from the inside.”

“O-of course. Thank you.” Ophilia accepted the steaming bowl and carried it to her lips. The soup was salty and laden with dried meat and beans. She felt a comfortable warmth spread throughout her body. Despite its simple ingredients, the flavor was rich and complex. “It’s delicious...” Ophilia murmured. “H’aanit, you’re quite the cook, too.”

“‘Tis glad it is to your t– Hm?” H’aanit suddenly seemed at a loss how to respond. After serving herself a bowl of soup and giving some of the leftover dried meat to Linde, she scratched her cheek awkwardly. “Well, my master did not cook... at first, we woulde take turns, but his work was terribly sloppy, so it became my task alone. Thinking ‘pon it now, it does rather feel as though I’ve been cheated.”

“You think so?”

“...So it seems..” H’aanit made an unpleasant face and sipped at her soup before continuing her story.²

“In the wood, one must be self-sufficient for their food, and with ingredients limited, so strove I to refine what I could maken. Surely Master Z’aanta felt the same and developed for himself some cooking prowess. Then intentionally making

¹From here I kind of lost H’aanit’s voice – need to go back and refine

²Can insert image here once I have it

a mess of our meals must have just been a way to tactfully shoven the responsibility upon my shoulders,” H’aanit concluded with a sigh.

“What do you think, Linde?” Ophilia asked. The leopard opened one eye and gazed up at her from her resting place on the ground.

“*Gau.*”

“You–!” H’aanit scowled at Linde’s response.

“What did she say?”

“‘Twas something like, ‘Don’t care, it’s not my problem.’ And then...”

“And then?” H’aanit grimaced – apparently she truly, from the bottom of her heart didn’t want to say it. Ophilia decided to leave it alone, then, but Linde batted her front paw at H’aanit once again, this time as if to urge her on.

“She said, ‘But when Master would praisen the taste of your cooking, you seemed fairly pleased, so was it really so bad?’ Linde, you knave, did I truly appear so...?” Linde’s response to her partner’s stern glare was to simply lie back down and close her eyes with an utterly serene expression.

They really are just like two sisters, Ophilia thought. Z’aanta, H’aanit, Linde, and then Z’aanta’s partner, the direwolf H agen – to Ophilia, they all truly seemed as close as could be.

“Can Linde understand what I’m saying?” Ophilia asked, suddenly curious.

“‘Tis not as though she has perfect comprehension, but the nuance is conveyed. You can gleanen her mood from her disposition, can you not? ‘Tis similar.” Then the words she’d spoken before H’aanit arrived hadn’t been totally lost on Linde?

According to the hunter before her, magical beasts such as Linde had remarkably higher intelligence and lifespans compared to ordinary animals. They were well-suited for more complex work, and they regularly made their thoughts and feelings known. Thus, a partner such as Linde who had accompanied H’aanit for so many years had naturally picked up some words here and there.

“She is especially familiar with the names of people and places. She understands perfectly the names of our traveling companions, for example.”

“Really...! That’s incredible! Even me?”

“Of course. She knows your name to be Ophilia – and that you, too, were raised in snow country.” Linde cheerfully supplemented H’aanit’s explanation with a *Gau*. “...And, apparently that you are a discerning woman who can appreciaten her coat of fur.”

“Hehe, it’s an honor.” She was truly quite the clever snow leopard to understand so much. Ophilia was delighted to be able to hear what Linde thought of her. She was reminded all over again that Linde really was a full-fledged member of their party.

As they talked, Ophilia noticed Linde’s ear twitch again. The leopard got up, flicked her ears several times more, and turned towards the depths of the cave. H’aanit, too, noticed the shift in her partner’s demeanor and grabbed her bow from the cave wall in an instant.

“It seems there is something further in the cave,” H’aanit whispered as she glanced at Linde tensing up with her fur standing on end.

“...A monster?”

“Most likely.” At those words, Ophilia went to retrieve her own staff. However, surprisingly, Linde hurried to stop her.

“Linde...?”

“*Gau*,” Linde barked sharply at the surprised Ophilia. H’aanit grinned.

“‘Sit back down,’ she says. ‘Let me go assay the danger.’”

“What? But...”

“Fear not, please do as she says. ‘Tis Linde’s way of taking care of you. After all, you’ve not fully recovered your strength, have you?” H’aanit she set her bow down and dropped to one knee. She scratched her partner’s neck and said to her, “Very well. Then I too shall remain here with Ophilia. Should there be danger, let us know at once.”

“*Gau*,” Linde barked and turned back around before moving to dash into the cave. However, Ophilia called out to stop her.

“Linde, wait!”

“...?” Linde stopped and looked back. Ophilia raced over and crouched down to meet her gaze with Linde’s. Her staff still resting against the wall, she softly gave Linde her blessing.

“May the Sacred Flame protect you.”

“...” Linde cocked her head, seemingly puzzled. Perhaps offering prayer to the gods wasn’t exactly a familiar part of beast culture. Although apparently still somewhat confused by the strange behavior of the cleric before her, Linde lowered her body slightly as though to offer her acknowledgment before finally turning around for good and running towards the depths of the cave.

“‘Tis the first time I have seen a cleric offer prayer to a beast,” H’aanit said when Ophilia returned to the campfire.

“Linde may feel it to be unnecessary... but I don’t think it’s meaningless to offer her a blessing.”

“No, ‘tis as you say. Although it may be an unfamiliar practice for Linde and me both, surely your care and concern for her were conveyed loud and clear.”

“Of course.” Ophilia smiled widely and once more sat back down beside the campfire. H’aanit looked at her and closed her eyes partly, seemingly dazzled.

“You are strong, Ophilia.”

“Huh? Y-you think so...?”

“Indeed. You are a strong, splendid woman.” Ophilia floundered at this sudden praise, and H’aanit quickly elaborated. “I do not mean to tease, and I apologize if it sounds so. I was simply recalling what happened in Goldshore – among those nonbelievers who sought to interfere with your rite, there was...” As she struggled to get the words out, H’aanit stared into the campfire. “...your old friend.” Ophilia felt a sudden sharp pang in her chest.

Just as H’aanit said, Ophilia’s Kindling had been stopped by none other than Lianna herself – Archbishop Josef’s daughter, and the girl Ophilia had been raised to think of as her own sister. She had stolen Ophilia’s Lanthorn and seemingly made her way to Wispermill.

And that wasn't all. Lianna had told Ophilia of Archbishop Josef's death.

On the way to Stillsnow, the party had taken the opportunity to stop by Flames-grace. Until then, Ophilia could scarcely believe Lianna's words. No doubt these traumatic events bearing down on her one after another had worn her spirit thin, causing her to lose her focus and ultimately leading to her present situation.

Lianna had stolen the Lanthorn in the hope of bringing Josef back to life. Ophilia didn't know if that was even possible, but at the very least, Lianna believed it was – and there was someone whispering in her ear, pushing her down that path.

"I believe I canne understand somewhat. After all, I continue to travel hoping to rescue my petrified master. Despite being in a similar predicament, you can still hold your faith in the teachings of the Sacred Flame – that takes great strength, I feel." H'aanit still seemed to have trouble articulating herself. Ophilia could tell she was choosing her words carefully, taking great care to avoid speaking too sharply – but she understood what H'aanit was avoiding saying directly. She recalled the words of the people who had interfered with the Kindling in Goldshore.

In the end, he's just another half-wit believer.

He can pray all he wants. It's not going to bring him any miracle.

What did your church do for your father before his death?

Finally, she remembered what Mattias, the trader with the Leoniel Consortium, had said to her.

Sometimes, I even find myself wondering... Do the gods truly exist?

More than likely the words H'aanit was taking care not to say were something along those lines. It wasn't as though she were decrying the teachings of the Church, though; rather, she was expressing admiration at Ophilia's ability to speak of "the Sacred Flame's protection" even after everything that had befallen her – to H'aanit, that was a kind of strength.

"I suppose I hadn't thought of it like that before." Ophilia let out a quiet laugh. There truly had been no hint of doubt or suspicion in her heart when she had prayed to the Flamebringer Aelfric for Linde's safety.

"Then, believe you that your prayer can bring about miracles?"

"No, not quite," Ophilia said plainly. "It's not as though I believe my prayer is certain to grant a miracle. That is naturally true of my words to Linde earlier. I believe in the teachings of the Flame, of course, but whether or not that faith can bring about miracles? I couldn't say."

"Then... why?"

"I suppose it's just as you said earlier."

"What I said...?" H'aanit tilted her head, puzzled. Ophilia nodded slightly. When she had prayed to the Flamebringer for Linde's safety, neither Linde nor H'aanit had rejected the unfamiliar custom. Rather, H'aanit had watched Ophilia pray and simply said, *your care and concern for her were conveyed loud and clear*.

"Prayer is nothing but a person's expression of their humble desires – a wish that something were so. Whether or not those feelings truly reach the Flamebringer is beyond my experience to say. But people still strive to bring those humble desires to fruition – and in those moments of action, could it not be the 'protection of the

Sacred Flame' which keeps them moving forward?" Ophilia continued. "In their darkest hours, when they have no one by their side, people are afraid to move forward. Even when we push ahead, it isn't certain that we can make our wishes come true. I believe that people need prayer in order to gain that meager courage to keep going."

"You truly are strong," H'aanit whispered softly.

"Really? I mean, don't you yourself keep your master's teachings close, too? I think it's much the same thing."

"That's... I suppose you have a point." H'aanit's expression looked as though she had been momentarily caught off guard before morphing into a gentle smile. Ophilia, too, felt the load on her chest lighten ever so slightly by talking to H'aanit. "We shall rescue Lianna in Wispermill. I swear it."

"Of course." Ophilia nodded. "Z'aanta, too – I know we'll save him. After all, your master still lives."

"...Just so." H'aanit nodded firmly in turn.

Not long after, a fierce growl echoed from within the cave. H'aanit grabbed her bow and stood in the blink of an eye. She shot a glance at Ophilia, so she nodded and followed suit in gripping her staff.

That was likely Linde's signal – there was some kind of monster, and they needed to make ready for battle. Linde had told Ophilia to stay put, but if there was danger, she could hardly sit idly by.

"Let's hurry, H'aanit!"

"Aye!" The two rushed into the cave without a moment's hesitation.

* * *

Lying in wait in the cave was a horde of Lizardmen – a fairly populous race of demihumans in the local snowfield. Across the continent, demihumans had a tendency to grow larger the further one traveled from the midlands, and those living in the snowfield were no exception; and now, several of them, spears in hand, had cornered Linde, who was crouching low and growling at her adversaries.

"H'aanit..." Ophilia called out with a hushed voice. "We need to hurry!"

"Shh... 'Tis still alright." While hiding in the shadow of a boulder, H'aanit and Ophilia assessed the situation. H'aanit remained perfectly calm as she nocked an arrow to her bowstring. More than likely, Linde had already noticed their presence. If they sent her the signal, the three of them could probably mount an attack in waves, but they ran the risk of the Lizardmen pouncing on Linde all at once.

For now, Linde's intimidation tactics were remaining effective – the Lizardmen were still keeping their distance.

"If only we could drawn their attention..."

"T-then... how about I become a live decoy?"

"A live...?" H'aanit unwittingly echoed her words, seemingly perplexed by the sudden suggestion. It was a perfectly sound tactic, of course, but Ophilia and the role of a live decoy seemed to her as though they couldn't be further apart. Whenever the party formed a strategy like this, such a role almost always fell to Therion or Olberic. Even if Ophilia was more than accustomed to battle, she wasn't exactly

a brawny warrior – not to mention she had been passed out in the snow not even a couple hours ago. Her recovery still wasn't certain, and if it could be helped, H'aanit would prefer not to put her in harm's way, but...

"You're not the only one who wants us to all make it out of this alive, you know," Ophilia said, gripping her staff.

"...Of course." *She truly is strong*, H'aanit unconsciously murmured to herself. It wouldn't do to be overprotective. Ophilia was just as capable a fighter as any of their companions. She had vowed not only to rescue her own childhood friend, but also to save H'aanit's master. "Then just a moment shall do. We needen only a single opportunity. Linde and I shall step in ere we allow their spears to reach you."

"Got it." Ophilia nodded firmly. Keeping her body low, she stealthily emerged from the shadows and made to cut across the passage before catching the attention of one keen-eyed Lizardman among the group surrounding Linde.

"Gyageeh! Geeh!"

"Gyauh!" The Lizardmen began a commotion at once. Using her staff as a support, Ophilia quickly rose to her feet and turned to face them. Her gentle features elegantly drawn tight, she braced for their attack, holding her staff like a spear.

However, the one most surprised by this turn of events ended up being Linde, who shot a momentary reproachful glance towards H'aanit's hiding place in the boulder's shadow.

Don't look at me. 'Twas her idea. H'aanit replied in her head as she kept an eye on the situation. Before the Lizardmen could make a move, Ophilia began chanting an incantation. H'aanit gave her partner the signal – *Close your eyes and get down.* Just then, Ophilia raised her staff and cried out,

"*May the Sacred Flame shine forth!!*" A blinding light flooded the cave in an instant. One of the Lizardmen who had tried to approach Ophilia let out an especially loud yelp. The Sacred Flame was well-equipped to smite the impure with its holy light, but in such a dark, cramped space as this, it also happened to double as an excellent smokescreen.

"Now, Linde!"

"*Gau!*" Just as the light flickered out, H'aanit and Linde made their move. H'aanit shot several arrows at once towards the cave ceiling. The arrows cut a beautiful arc through the air before hailing down upon the heads of the Lizardmen. Already dazzled by Ophilia's sudden flash of light, they now found themselves on the receiving end of H'aanit's rain of arrows. Meanwhile, as though she knew where each and every arrow would land, Linde weaved through the onslaught and launched herself at the panicking Lizardmen, extending her claws and baring her teeth. As though she were cracking a whip, she extended her long, supple tail and skewered a Lizardman behind her.

Only four Lizardmen remained. One of them, having dropped its spear, barreled towards the nearby H'aanit. Cornered, H'aanit swapped her bow for her hatchet and deftly leapt backwards. She chanted a spell passed down in S'warkii, and the air crackled with a burst of lightning. The Lizardman recoiled, and she snared it

with a leghold trap, utterly arresting its movement. As her opponent writhed in panic, H'aanit cracked her hatchet against the crown of its head.

Only three left!

However, those three had already run from H'aanit and were now moving in Ophilia's direction.

"Linde!" H'aanit shouted. Her partner leapt into action at unthinkable speed, but still only managed to take down one of them. H'aanit nocked an arrow to her bowstring once more and aimed for another, but despite her best efforts, she couldn't land her shot.

Yet not a trace of fear could be found in Ophilia's eyes – she simply gripped her staff tightly in her hand and held it aloft like a supplication.

"*Aelfric, Bringer of the Flame!*" In that moment, Ophilia's own words played back in H'aanit's mind. She had said that she didn't invoke the names of the gods in order to bring about miracles; that prayer was simply an expression of desire, with the goal of squeezing out that last bit of courage necessary to keep people moving forward.

But maybe, just maybe, could it be that what people call a "miracle" was indeed that very courage – that power to stir people's very hearts?³ As H'aanit wondered to herself, before her very eyes, Ophilia was faintly wreathed in flame, with a color greatly resembling that of the Lanthorn of the Kindling she had so reverently carried this far. Even though the cave should have been cut off from the outside world, H'aanit felt a sensation well up much like a gust of wind.

"*Let the Flame guide you true!*" The moment Ophilia's eyes shot open, dazzling light erupted all around her. Power surged through H'aanit's body. She couldn't be sure of the exact mechanism, but there was no question it was due to Ophilia's words just now – the strength budding in her body now was, without a shadow of a doubt, thanks to Aelfric's Auspices.

With unprecedented speed, H'aanit loosed an arrow, effortlessly vanquishing of the Lizardmen as another fell to Linde's fangs and H'aanit nocked another arrow in a single fluid motion.⁴ The instant she fired her second shot, Linde, too, twisted her body and launched herself. The final Lizardman was run through by H'aanit's arrow and Linde's tail alike.

"*Gah...!*" In its death throes, the Lizardman coughed up blood, staggered forward with its spear as a support, and collapsed to the cold cave floor.

"Ophilia!" "*Gau!*" H'aanit and Linde raced towards Ophilia at once.

"Are you hurt!?"

"No, I'm perfectly alright." Ophilia smiled weakly, and H'aanit and Linde finally relaxed. It seemed there really was nothing wrong. H'aanit found herself thinking, *Is it over?*, but it seemed there was yet more for Ophilia to do. She softly crouched before the corpse of the fallen Lizardman, closed its still-open eyes, and offered a prayer.

³help. "very" has stopped looking like a word

⁴I want this to feel fast and fluid but I worry it just reads like a runon

"I pray that the merciful Flame grant peace to their souls..."

H'aanit met Linde's gaze and nodded. They had seen something like this once before, when they had journeyed to the Sunlands to take care of some of Olberic's business. After the party defeated the horde of monsters attacking the village of Wellspring, Ophilia had prayed for the repose of their souls. Come to think of it, those monsters, too, had been Lizardmen.

H'aanit had admired her for that – although Ophilia's life as a cleric differed greatly from her own, she shared the hunter's ideal of treating any and all life with the same reverence. Even if it wasn't certain how much stock monsters held in a prayer to the gods, Ophilia could offer it all the same simply because those monsters, too, were alive – just as H'aanit had said before, she was truly splendid.

Aha. Linde sat down by H'aanit's side, and as H'aanit stroked her head, she felt everything suddenly snap into place. "So that's why you love her too, is it?"

"Gau." H'aanit wondered what it was like for her partner, just as much of a "beast" as those Sand Lizardmen, to see Ophilia pray for them. Perhaps it would be insensitive to even ask.

"I'm all done, H'aanit. I'm sorry to make you wait." Having finished her prayers, Ophilia returned to H'aanit and Linde.

"Tis no worry." H'aanit nodded. From the moment they caught sight of Linde, there was probably never any chance of avoiding a fight with these Lizardmen; after all, they had no hesitation in attacking humans. Still, it wasn't as though she had killed them for fun or enjoyed doing it. Using what one can of one's quarry is a hunter's way of paying respects to their fallen prey – in this case, that happened to be the Lizardmen's dwelling. At the same time, by praying for their souls, Ophilia was carrying out a cleric's way of paying respects to the dead. "Thank you, Ophilia. For praying for them."

"Of course." Ophilia gave a broad smile at H'aanit's words.

A prayer is a wish. Such sweet words – surprising even herself, H'aanit wondered if she would ever find herself praying to the Flamebringer. If she did, she hoped she could take those words to heart.

* * *

After that, they spent a little while stoking a campfire near the mouth of the cave. Wrapped in blankets H'aanit had brought and nuzzling against Linde's warm fur, H'aanit and Ophilia slept in shifts. As dawn broke, the blizzard had stopped entirely, the light of the sun shining from the cerulean sky reflected dazzlingly off the silver snow.

"Heeeey!"

"Miss H'aanit! Miss Ophilia!" From the white world outside, someone's voices rang out – the dearly familiar voices of their companions. Hearing those voices, Ophilia was roused from her dozing.

"Those voices..."

"It would seem they've come to pick us up."

"Oh, thank goodness..." The horse-drawn sleigh carrying their companions finally came into view. In the coachman's seat sat the seer Susanna's bodyguard,

Alaic. As he confirmed their safety, relief spread across his stern expression. Tressa and Alfyn stuck their heads out of the sleigh and waved broadly.⁵ Ophilia waved back with a smile. Shooting a furtive, sidelong glance at her, H'aanit asked,

"It may be a little late to ask, but... will you be alright, Ophilia?"

"Huh?" Ophilia was caught off guard by the question at first, but quickly realized what H'aanit was asking. She nodded right away. "Yes, I'll be alright. I'm sorry to have worried you and Linde." H'aanit was asking about Lianna. Ophilia had been worried about her all this time, and even if it was Ophilia's problem to solve, H'aanit had been frustrated at her inability to offer any help. "It's not as though all my worries are gone, though. All this time, I had no idea Lianna had been pushed so far to the brink. I truly regret not having been able to understand how she was feeling." H'aanit listened silently as Ophilia spoke. "I did find myself feeling a little jealous of the bond you and Linde have, though."

"You mean how we can understand each other even without a common tongue?"

"That's right." Ophilia smiled. "But after spending the night in a blizzard with you two, I understand it now. Your bond is extraordinary, but at the same time, it isn't. You share an understanding, but there are still things you don't know about each other. In that way, it's just like Lianna and me."

"Just so." H'aanit nodded. It wasn't uncommon for the beast-taming hunters of S'warkii to hear similar things from outsiders envious of their ability to form so strong a bond of trust with their beasts. However, those outsiders were prone to mistaking that relationship for something exceptional beyond just crossing the barrier of species. There was, of course, a firm bond and great trust between H'aanit and Linde; however, that was all. Their thoughts and feelings still needed to be conveyed to each other in order to be known. To borrow Ophilia's words, it was extraordinary, but at the same time, it wasn't. Their bond was no different from those among humans; nor, for that matter, from that between Ophilia and Lianna.

H'aanit traced her mind along the trajectory of that thought. H'aanit could understand how Lianna felt – when Z'aanta had been turned into stone by Redeye, H'aanit had done everything in her power to seek out a way to save him, and was lucky enough not only to find one, but to find one that was within her power to achieve.

What if she hadn't been so lucky, though? What would have become of her? That was a difficult question to answer. All she could say was that even if she was unable to find a way to save him, at least she still had Linde by her side. When she first saw her petrified master before her eyes, it was only because her partner was with her that she could stay calm – and if she had lost her composure, surely Linde would have been able to keep her in check.

Just as H'aanit needed Linde, surely Lianna, too, needed Ophilia. In that case, H'aanit would do everything in her power to see that Ophilia reached Wispermill safe and sound, and if Ophilia needed help even after that, she would happily lend her strength.

⁵how do you indicate the Size of a wave. in jp you wave bigly

"We *will* rescuen Lianna, Ophilia." The promise they had exchanged in the cave naturally fell from her lips once more. "I swear it."

"Yes, of course." Ophilia again nodded firmly at H'aanit's words.

"*Gau.*" Linde, who had stayed silent all this time, growled brusquely. H'aanit scrunched her face. Ophilia looked at their faces in turn and cocked her head.

"What did Linde say?"

"W-well, that's..." H'aanit, taken aback, glared at Linde. Linde jutted her chin out in response, as if to say *Go on, tell her!* H'aanit scowled as she translated faithfully.

"Sure is a pain having such a foolhardy sister, isn't it?' ...she says."

"Oh, my."

"Linde, did you call me *foolhardy*? Compared to Master, I-!" H'aanit began grumbling in earnest, but her partner made no pretense of lending her an ear. Instead, she simply stared at Ophilia, who in turn smiled softly as she met Linde's gaze.

"I've never once thought of Lianna as a 'pain.' Surely you feel the same way about H'aanit, don't you?"

"*Gau.*" The leopard raised the corners of her mouth, baring her teeth ever so slightly, then turned her face away in a huff.

Even without H'aanit's translation, Ophilia understood the meaning of that last growl. She stroked Linde's prized fur, a gentle smile on her face.

Translator's Notes

Chapter 4

A Dance After Journey's End

“PRIMROSE...!?”

Olberic gripped his sword tightly, utterly failing to mask his surprise. Before his eyes was, without a shadow of a doubt, one Primrose Azelhart – his once-indispensable companion on a long, long journey. There she stood, a gentle smile on her face.

“It’s been a while, hasn’t it? How have you been?” If that was all, perhaps Olberic wouldn’t be so shocked, but the time and place were all wrong. More than that, though, it so happened that in Primrose’s hand was a long, thin saber – and it was pointed squarely in his face.

“Wh-what’s the meaning of this? Why on earth are you here!?”

Chapter 5

Epilogue