

Chapter One: Adelaide Adams

If there were three things princesses were known to do in the Age of Might, they were to be pretty, to get married, and to be kidnapped. Nobody was fond of this arrangement, save perhaps the odd evil knight whose eyes flashed with treachery, but that's the way things were. Kings ruled, queens managed, princes went on adventures and rescued damsels, and there had to be damsels to rescue who were on those princes' level, right? So that was simply the way the world worked. Suffice to say, being a princess was dangerous and called for a certain level of caution. They couldn't just kill their parents and become king, after all, that was a prince's game.

Our tale begins in the year of 1214, when an adopted noblewoman by the name of Adelaide Adams simply wasn't having any of it.

"What do you mean, she was taken!?" Adelaide shouted angrily. Her adoptive father, a mustachio'd lad of some forty years, cast his usual sarcastic glare down from the other side of his impressively rectangular nose.

"I mean that she was demanded, as tribute, by a mob of bandits while she was in town and she surrendered herself." Adelaide glared at him, teeth grinding.

"And none of the people-" He lowered his head and squinted with contempt, squeezing the bridge of his nose and using the other hand to wave dismissively at her.

"Peasants, child. *Peasants* have their own to look out for, they can't be expected to put their necks to an axe for a ditz who'd spare them at her own expense so easily." Adelaide's snarling expression softened somewhat, more from defeat than acceptance. He was right. Damn it all...!

"So! They might not be able to-"

"ENOUGH!" Shouted the man hard enough to make the room quake. "If you think I care about the favor of a dead girl you're sorely mistaken. I've half a mind to banish you unless you bring her back yourself!" With that, he stormed off in a huff. Adelaide did too, but he'd gone in the direction of her chamber so she had to wait a minute or it would be awkward. Once she did she bolted the door and screamed into a pillow.

The rest of the day went without incident. Adelaide overheard a newer servant crack a joke about her taking the princess' place by locking herself up only for them be gently whacked by a more tenured one. That shook her out of her mood and she got to thinking.

"Princesses who get kidnapped are rescued, that's just how it works!" She reminded herself as she gazed at the mirror. "If everyone just left the task to someone else, there'd be no heroes!" She felt a sudden warmth in her chest, and recalled hearing those words as a small child as her original father "read" to her. It had been a picture book of his own making, made from pages sold at tremendous discount for errors in their making and bound in homemade leather. She grinned and nodded at her reflection. She'd leave. She could do it.

There was a knock at the door.

"M-may I?" Piped Piper, one of the maids. Adelaide jolted, then flushed with embarrassment and opened the door, hand on the back of her head as she laughed nervously.

"H-hello, Piper. How may I help you?" Piper did that adorable flustered grin of hers that she did whenever they talked. The princess had insisted several times during her visits that the girl held feelings for Adelaide, but the lesser noble wasn't sure why. It's not like she had anything to offer, anyway.

'Well, I was just-supper came and went without you..." There was an exceptionally long pause as Adelaide stared, wide-eyed, straight forward in shock without moving. Piper looked taken aback. "Madame? Mistress Adelaide, what's-" Adelaide's stomach growled and she seemed sluggishly to come back to life, putting a hand over her stomach. "Nobody was sent for you?" Adelaide shook her head no, eyes fixed off to the side with annoyance. Piper gasped and covered her mouth. "How horrible! That won't do, stay, ah, stay here! Stay right put! I'm sure we can throw something together for you!" She pivoted on her heels to make off but Adelaide caught her wrist.

"It's fine, really, sweetheart, I'm touched. You guys are treated badly enough-"

"No!" Piper turned again, deftly twisting her wrist and easily slipping out of Adelaide's grasp. Clearly, the self defense classes the maids were taking was kicking in. "You are the only member of this family that shows us a lick of decency and if I have to skip a meal for you so be it!"

Adelaide waved her hands dismissively, face bright red. "It's REALLY not needed Piper, I appreciate it but-" Annnnd Piper was flying down the stairs. Amazing how agile she was in that poofy uniform, Adelaide thought to herself as she trudged back to her bed. She hoped the others felt as generous as Piper-not for her own sake but because Piper would absolutely hand over her entire meal for the night and pretend it was a community project.

It wasn't long before Piper was back. Not wanting to disrespect such a show of devotion (but nevertheless feeling a pang of guilt worse than the hunger would have been) Adelaide chewed through the portion of bread, cheese and potatoes that was an average night's helping for the

help. The two talked afterwards, into the night, but not long, for Piper was needed elsewhere. Before she could leave, Adelaide snuck a few coins, some gold and some silver, from her purse into the pocket of Piper's uniform. It wasn't much-certainly not enough-but it would suffice to enrich her family's life, and it wasn't enough to risk making the household suspicious she stole it from them. She had to give it this way, for Piper would never accept it. Piper knew Adelaide had done it, because Adelaide was as discrete as a ham centerstage at an opera, but she hadn't the heart to ruin such a gesture.

Emotionally drained, Adelaide collapsed onto her bed. She took a long time to fall asleep, and had to get up and stride uneasily back and forth across the stone floor of her room a few times, but eventually her mind drifted off. Now, as even the least up to date peasant could tell you, the Age of Might was a strange era to live in and dreams stranger still. Her body tossed and turned that night, and her mind even more so.

Chapter Two: The Dream

Adelaide found herself in her room, but something wasn't right. It was daytime out one of the plain windows and pitch night out the other, the walls weren't...quite the right shapes and shifted and squirmed like the gorgeous lines of a beautiful watercolor painting. Almost everything was gone: her dresser, her mirror, the small enchanted torches, even the single door, leaving only herself, her clothes, her bed and the windows. The ceiling was incredibly high, as well: looking up, she could practically see the sun, enclosed within the bizarre walls of what wasn't her room.

"Ho, maiden! Have a seat!" Rang an androgynous voice behind her. She spun to face it, falling to her bed in the process. Space seemed to twist, placing the pillow directly beneath her. Before she could process that she saw the speaker: a young boy, seeming about fourteen, with a white and blue theater mask. Not four feet tall, he hovered so his knees were level with her face. As her eyes traveled up his body they got snagged on a pair of massive, translucent wings like those of a giant butterfly. They flapped in wide, ovular motions to keep him alight, though his body didn't seem to bob like it ought to if that's how he was floating.

"Salutations!" Came the voice as she inspected closer. His left hand held a disk of flame, brilliant red with flashes of a phantasmagorical green pulsing along it every so often. The other arm wore many rings and what seemed like a macabre bracelet, but which closer inspection revealed to be a crown, covered in jewels and thoroughly, THOROUGHLY encrusted with blood.

"You're-you're a fae!"

The fae nodded and performed an extravagant bow in midair, only to flip in place back to its original position.

"Thou speaketh right, lass of nineteen!" That was how old she was. "Mine apologies for the frightening display." He moved his arms outward as if welcoming a hug. Adelaide noticed a protrusion from his collar bone, as if something were stabbed into him and left them. "I am Wiglaf, fair lady! A damsel has been taken, no?"

For the first time this conversation, Adelaide took her eyes off of Wiglaf and clutched at her arm, knuckles white. She felt a familiar wave of heat and fury wash at her insides. She could feel it: in her face, in her hands, in her bones. Whoever did this had to pay for it. "Yes," Adelaide admitted, making a fist, "What of it?"

She could feel a condescending myrth when he spoke. "Loyal companion thou art, intending to rescue her yourself!" So he knew. Not that he'd be visiting otherwise. Fairies didn't invade your home to tell you to keep doing nothing, that would be silly.

"Yes!" She barked defiantly against the patronizing tone of his voice, jumping to her feet. She stayed suspended an inch or two in the air for a moment, which threw her off, but even as she awkwardly floated down her eyes bored into his mask, burning with a steely determination that contrasted her inelegant flailing. "I'm going to kill her captors and burn any who dared hurt her to ash! I'll level mountains and make canyons of the sea if I have to! What of it, interloper!?" Wiglaf smiled with such intensity that his mask fractured like glass struck by an arrow.

"I see your heart burns for justice, and your hands thirst for bloodshed. Is thy mind as ready? Perhaps. I have deemed thee worthy, waste not this gift-lay waste instead to the wicked!"

In the blink of an eye Wiglaf violently grabbed at the object in his collarbone and messily ripped the protrusion free. It was a fang, and it had been deep in him. A thick fluid, green and black and red, dripped from its point to the ground where grass grew in a patch. More and more began to trickle into it; the grass grew and spread, and a bush of thorny stems sprouted from the center. The surreal facsimile of her chamber began to break apart at its seams, and Adelaide felt herself flung skyward. Her hand caught a bedpost and clung tight, straining to hold her entire body. A torrent of wind violently erupted from the ever-multiplying cracks in the now shattered stone floor, making her body flail in the wind. She felt her hair whipping about as her legs did the same, but her attention was on the plant. The bush coiled and fused into a single great stem as thick as a tree trunk, from which emerged a single great blossom. Wiglaf sprung into action and swiftly sliced the bush with the flame in his left hand. The flower—a rose—shrank instantly to a size one could fit in a vase, while the rest of the obscene greenery combusted. A violently bright combination of neon green and rich, saturated crimson engulfed the room as it all burned to nothing, the fire blasting Adelaide into the air, towards that sun!

And she landed on her bed. The room was back to its previous, albeit still fuzzy, state. Wiglaf's mask was back to normal and the tooth, be it of a beast or dragon or demon, was again firmly

planted in his shoulder. Instead he held in his right hand the flower, its petals now the black and white of a sketch on paper.

"This blessing will grant thy body the same strength as thine indomitable will. In addition I leave thee a magical sword; let thy believers empower it as they embolden thy heart." And with that he flicked his wrist. The flower flew like a dart, driving through her sternum with ease. She opened her mouth to scream-

Chapter Three: Departure and Generosity

Adelaide woke violently, feeling something in her upper body. She pawed groggily at the spot, and it indeed seemed to have something protruding from it. Then she noticed a sword was in her bed. Then she fell off of it.

"WHY IS THERE A SWORD IN MY BED!? I DON'T KEEP SWORDS IN MY BED!" Adelaide rubbed her head where it had hit the ground and winced. If that dream was...real...well, that about explained the sword. Getting to her feet, the girl crossed her arms. Whatever entity had given her this (she couldn't quite recall what it had been?) almost certainly had some ulterior motive-and a cost. There was always a cost.

Adelaide shook her head and squeezed her palms together. No use lamenting, she was on a quest now. The word felt right somehow: a *quest*. But the bandits certainly had...caravans, or a ship? At least horses. She'd never catch up to them on foot...

One of the newer maids approached Piper. "Is she...alright?" Piper's eyes flashed nervously towards Adelaide's room.

"No. She's been pacing, muttering under her breath, and biting her thumbnail all morning. I left her breakfast on the counter with her mirror but she didn't even seem aware I was there. I even called her name a few times..." The two looked nervously into the room. Sure enough, Adelaide's piping hot tea sat on a tray, steam flowing from it as Adelaide continued in her thoughts.

"Is that-Is that a sword?" Whispered the other maid, making a fearful gesture at the bed. Piper's emerald eyes grew wide. "It is! Why's it in her *bed* of all places?"

Now it was Piper who wasn't listening. Since her youth Adelaide had favored polearms, though she supposed the sword was a symbol of nobility. She was technically a knight, as well, so it stood to reason she'd probably own at least one.

Adelaide stubbed her toe, which seemed to snap her out of her fixation. She hopped on one foot while clutching the other, shouting a blend of aristocratic swears and bizarrely specific profanity more befitting of a farmer.

"Maggot-swallowing, half-rotted heap of filth! Yellow blooded cow!" Then she noticed the tea and froze in place. The flabbergasted maids could only watch as, still perched on one foot, her eyes locked onto the breakfast on her desk and she slowly, hopping up and down multiple times while staying uncharacteristically still, pivoted in place to stare directly at them. The three were still as sculptures for an uncomfortably long time, none making a sound, before Adelaide's body remembered it had poor balance and threw her unceremoniously down. Adelaide landed on her side, whining quietly and clutching her head.

"I'm just...I have..." Muttered the other maid, slowly backing away as she pretended she didn't see Piper's panicked eyes and frantic gestures begging her to stay. Once she'd reached the socially acceptable distance she turned and properly fled, leaving a worried Piper behind. Piper sighed and then took a deep breath in.

"Hey what's that on the door?" Asked Adelaide in an attempt to regain normalcy, pointing to a piece of paper on the wall. Piper blinked a few times and Adelaide continued, voice cracking with forced enthusiasm. "It must be a note from my dad. Silly thing to do to me when I can't read." She averted her eyes and spoke again. This time she sounded hurt and down to earth. "Unless that's *why*."

Knowing this was a sore spot Piper tore the paper from the door, already scheming how to ruin the lord's day without getting anyone else in trouble or tipping him off as to what the motive was. She examined the letters and started reading. In a chipper, male voice.

"Ho! I assume thy morning one of chaos, dearest lady. Fret not! I have one more gift: Information! The lord of this manor wishes you gone, but dares not reject a desire of thy maiden so soon after her most unfortunate departure! Fortune smiles! This gives thee leverage! And I feel generous, so after whoever reads this finishes they'll forget everything about it. May thy fortune be fair and bright!"

With that the paper vanished into the air like it had been burned. Piper blinked a few times. "Hello, mistress Adelaide! Can I help you?"

Adelaide scarfed down her breakfast while Piper stood and watched.

"So what you're saying is, you need a horse?" Piper asked. Adelaide paused, mouth clamped around a drumstick and hands reaching for a handkerchief, to nod. Her hand stayed suspended in midair and grabbed the drumstick the instant Piper finished talking to assist in her almost bestial attack on the innocent piece of meat that had done her no wrong. "Well...that might be hard. I can't help and you definitely can't afford to just *get* one, even if you're a noble."

The drumstick, having been brutalized and stripped mercilessly to the bone, fell to its tray as Adelaide much more delicately took to a pastry. Piper failed to hide a look of pride and glee at the sight. "So...any suggestions, my lady?" With a look of what one might call "all-consuming terror," Piper opened her mouth to rephrase what she'd said but was cut off when Adelaide spoke, taking a moment to wipe the crumbs from her face.

"Well...I've been thinking. My dad hates me." Piper interjected the instant Adelaide's sentence ended, but was silenced just as quickly by a gesture to let her continue. "I know he does, Piper. It's hardly a secret. But the thing is, I can use that." Piper tilted her head like a puppy seeing something quizzical. "He wants to get rid of me. But he can't." Piper's face lit up with the kind of aura that would frighten a gargoyle.

"I see! Well then, I have a plan...but first, finish eating! I have a gift when you're done."

"Your plan...our situation does not justify the plan you came up with."

"Yes it did! I just didn't tell you that one."

The exchange had come after they finished, and Adelaide had mulled it over in her head countless times in the hours since. She had probably intended to spit in the lord's food or something. No, she was far more devious than that. Perhaps Adelaide should warn one of the other maids who liked her? Probably. But Piper had never been caught before, and she took care not to implicate anyone else. It was incredible, really-

"Ahem." Adelaide came back to earth again. Her father stood in that usual pompous stanced of his, back straight and held directly up, sneering down at her like an obnoxious animal. "I believe an apology is to be had for you insolence, young woman." Adelaide had been debating which pose of false submission would pacify him better, but in the heat of the moment her rational mind wasn't driving. She stood up, chest puffed out, and performed the nation's military salute. Staring back into his eyes without a shadow of doubt clouding her own, she barked at him like he had done to her so many times.

"I, Adelaide Adams, propose an offer! In exchange for one nimble horse, a few days' supplies, a squire to pen a letter of intent, and thy signature on that letter, I renounce my nobility and, with it, my claim to inheritance!" The man took a step back, pale for a moment at her sudden display of intent. The moment was brief, but she savored it.

"I see no reason why not..." He muttered as he rubbed his chin. "Bring one of my writers!" He shouted at an attendant, who scurried off. "Ready a horse from the stable for her!"

Adelaide glanced one last time at her room. It wasn't terribly significant to her, but she felt nostalgic all the same. Piper stood with her back straight, bouncing up and down with excitement. Straining not to be sidetracked by how cute that was, Adelaide focused on herself. She had a pack, her sword, and the letter. That was about it. One last inspection allowed her to notice in the mirror that her hair had grown to a point halfway between her elbows and shoulders, probably from the dream, and turned a rich lusty pink. She admired the look, then went over what she had that she'd bring. This led to another while spent packing various goods, including her father's leatherbound book. At last, she was ready.

"Before you go!" Adelaide turned to see the speaker. They were Piper's sister, Penelope. She grinned and presented a red and black military-style jacket. "The princess commissioned this. I had to eyeball your measurements but I have a knack for that!" Penelope extended the jacket and Adelaide gingerly slipped it on. It fit well, made of heavy, warm material with some kind of lining.

"Penelope, Piper, I adore this, but I can't possibly accept it!" Penelope flashed a devious grin and leaned on her younger sister, propping an arm on Piper's shoulder. Seeing as Penelope stood at an impressive six foot two, this was not difficult.

"Thought you would say that. Alexandria commissioned it herself. Gave me plenty of extra to spend on extravagant materials...and a tip on top of that." Piper squirmed and made small noises signalling half-hearted discontent, which got a laugh out of the other two.

"That was supposed to be for your birthday, but it took a long time for the enchanted wool to come in. That stuff's hard to get."

For a moment Adelaide found herself questioning how a commoner whose two professions were cleaning and tailoring even did that, but she assumed Alexandria had given her a hand. It was entirely in character for all of them. She admired her reflection: her shoulders seemed more pronounced with this on, but it was warm, reasonably comfortable, and seemed durable. Plus it looked cool.

“Thank you so much, Penelope. I’ll be sure to let her know how well you did.” Penelope beamed with pride, leaning over enough that Adelaide was pretty sure if her sister moved-like, performed any amount of motion at all-Penelope would just immediately topple and plant her face in the floor. Trying not to laugh at the mental image she picked up her pack and gave a patient smile.

“Let’s be off, then!”

A young woman entered a town late under the light of the moon. She had rich, dark blue hair, a white mask, and skin with just a bit of pigment to it. Her feet wore an unusual pair of sandals, and her plain shirt and shorts contrasted with the light blue coat-one that was several sizes too large for her-which hung from her shoulders, a clasp connecting the ends of its collar and adorning her neck like a necklace. Her black, fingerless gloves were not the most striking thing about her, nor the wooden, vaguely bat-like mask she wore, nor even the certainty with which she walked in the dead of night. The most striking thing about her was the curved sword hanging at her hip, clearly the kind of weapon too expensive to belong to a commoner but too practical to have been made for spectacle alone. It was the tool of a warrior, and despite being somewhat small and obviously quite young she wore it with confidence.

The little warrior walked into the market, one hand resting on their belt, and grew pale under their mask. Then they exhaled a weak, trembling gasp and the air of mystery about them was destroyed. The girl’s insides grumbled loud enough to be heard from across the street as they wandered two, three more steps on wobbly legs and collapsed.

Hours passed as they were wont to do. It was bright out. The market was just beginning to bustle with life, like any other day, but this time there was an unconscious traveler on the road. While rare, this sort of thing was hardly unheard of, at least in stories: lone wanderers with features like unusually colored hair, birthmarks in the shape of stars, horns, or distinctive disfigurements were the rank and file of heroism.

This posed a dilemma: while helping such a figure was likely to be morally just (assuming, even, that one’s disposition did not hold helping those in need righteous without regard to who it is in need), and even had potential to be lucrative, heroes tended to be the dangerous sort, and to bring equally dangerous foes with them. This was the reasoning of the forming crowd as they stepped around the body in the dirt; while some gave a respectful distance, all were wary. Not all of them were too wary to give a helping hand, though-the stranger was in luck, for a traveling blacksmith with a good heart was in town that day.

This helpful metalworker stood some six foot four, with broad shoulders and sharp eyes that contrasted with the dark circles under them. To onlookers it might be fair at first glance to assume that this person was a man. They had a wide torso and big, thick arms pulsing with muscle. Their chin bore stubble. They were not, however, a man-they were a woman, and just about everyone who'd ever traded metal goods in this region or interacted with her Iron Union knew it. The woman knelt over the limp body in the street and put two fingers against their neck. Feeling the movement of blood and breathing beneath the girl's skin, she began to gingerly pick them up and remove them from the spot.

"Lousy folk," She muttered under breath, casting an evil eye at the road and setting the girl on an unattended bench. With a tentative motion, she removed the mask the girl was wearing. She had hazel eyes, though Samara couldn't have known, with them closed. "Hey, you there, can you hear me?"

The answer she got was a trembling moan, spiced with the remnants of the word "hungry" after it had died valiantly fighting its way to her mouth. She gave a quick look to the girl's body: no visible injuries. Likely she was just hungry and exhausted. The woman wondered who they were: clearly that was no ordinary person. Samara decided she'd have to feed them and walked back into the crowded road. Before long her favorite soup maker waved to her, cauldron of rabbit and carrot stew bubbling with a wonderful constant wave of sound. The hot, familiar smell of cooked vegetables, she thought, was equally pleasant.

"Good morning Shamir! The usual?"

"Samara." She gently corrected, then followed with, "And yes, please. I'd like a second, smaller bowl as well, if that's alright."

"It sure is!" Answered the seller, scraggly brown hair tied back as he enthusiastically prepared two bowls full of his trademark foodstuffs. "If you have time, there's a stranger passed out on the road not far from my stall!" One ladelfull was delicately poured into a bowl, then another. The broth was brown with a bit of red. Family secret, he liked to say.

"I saw. Though, I appreciate you saying so." Samara made circular motions with one arm, stretching one of her broad shoulders. Her pronounced face aimed at the food on the counter as a slight breeze made the thick, fluffy ponytail that hung to her tailbone flutter a bit. Another ladel's worth was added to the first bowl. Samara ran a hand over the stubble on her chin and then spoke again. "I -really- hope they're okay. Just because-"

"-You've talked to a surgeon from the empire doesn't make you a doctor." The man finished Samara's sentence for her as he topped the first bowl off with a small scoop of soup. He took a moment to pause, stirring the cauldron with a large wooden spoon before taking his ladle to and half-filling the smaller one. "That's why you're getting this one?" A headshake.

"That's why I came. I got a second because I'm hungry." That made the man laugh, spilling some broth on his leg. Both parties hissed through their teeth as, impressively, the man behind the counter hopped off their stool to grab a cloth and remove the liquid while also getting the rest of the ladle where it was supposed to go. The instant their work was done they put the ladle down and punched the counter a few times.

"Food's, on, me," He cried out as his eyes welled with tears. "When. Can. Please. Get ice."

Samara laughed, promised she would, and took a bowl in each hand.

Samara smiled as the young traveler sat up. All it had taken was a few chopped up pieces of steamed carrot to get them conscious. As soon as they were, they snatched the bowl from her hands and set upon it like a wild animal! One gulp! Two! Three! It was incredible! Each mouthful they devoured seemed to destroy twice as much as it should have. In a matter of seconds they'd annihilated all the meat and veggies. For a moment, there was peace.

"You intend to eat that?" Rai asked Samara, pointing half-heartedly at the bowl in the bearded woman's hands. Samara gently shook her head. After what she'd just witnessed? No. Definitely not.

"THANKYOUTHANKYOUTHANKYOU" Was the noise escaping the poor girl's body as she seized the smaller bowl and went to war with it. Before she was done talking, a chunk of rabbit snapped between her teeth-the bone made a viscerally upsetting crunch as it was effortlessly destroyed. Samara visibly flinched, although the offender seemed not to notice. In less than a minute all the soup was gone. The girl heaved as she leaned back, face pointed upwards. "Ahhh...ah, that was delicious...haaaaah, I haven't eaten in three days..." Samara blinking, feeling her pupils expand like the maw of a yawning cat.

"You...what?" Asked Samara. The younger girl lowered her face and twiddled with her fingers, looking dejected.

"Bandits stole my bow and I can't hunt without it..." Hearing tears in the young woman's voice, Samara patted her shoulder.

"Happens to the best of us. Why your bow? Was it expensive? A family heirloom?" For some reason this stoked a fire in the girl and she grinned up at Samara, eyes blazing like the morning sun,

"Cause I injured one of them before they could get anything else and the cowards ran away!" At this, Samara laughed slightly.

"I'm a smith. Let's go get you a new one, alright?" Samara could practically hear the spring in the girl's step as she launched to her feet and nodded with intensity. Then clutched her stomach and collapsed.

"Owwwww..." Samara rose to her feet, assisting her younger acquaintance back onto the bench.

"Rest here while the food settles. I promised a favor, I'll be back within the hour. Before I go, you have a name?" The young warrior smiled up, albeit weakly. With a singsong tone of joy and pride she answered,

"My name is Rai!" An unusual name, thought Samara. Probably foreign. It would explain the sword, jacket and mask. Samara turned and disappeared into the marketplace.

True to her word, Samara was back before long had passed. She carried a bow, made of yew, and a quiver with plenty of arrows.

"I take it you haven't any money?" Rai's eyes lit up with a concoction of fear and surprise. They patted themselves down, finding nothing.

"I...don't." Blood flushed to her face as she scratched the back of their head. Samara nodded gravely, handing over the supplies they'd brought.

"I'm afraid I haven't much to spare, but this ought to do." Samara lamented and gave them to Rai. Rai nodded, taking a face of grave seriousness as she affixed the bow and quiver to her back. Samara spoke once more. "I won't charge you. Is this enough? I could ask a few favors for you-"

"This will do. I can hunt with these arrows and sell the meat. You've done far more than I would dare ask." Rai bowed, although she did so on her feet, by lowering her body to a right angle. "I will not forget anything you have done. I swear that given the opportunity, I will repay you several times over." Samara smiled and nodded at the kind stranger, then went upon her day. The traveler set off, probably continuing whatever quest had taken her so far from her homeland.

Chapter Four: A Quest

Adelaide sighed and cast one last gaze at the castle in the distance. She'd lived there for some time now. Seven years? Nine, ten? No, it dawned on her, it could not be that a teenager already when she moved in. Couldn't have been more than six. It was a curious thing to consider, really. It felt like it had been forever since the last time she heard her father's voice, or did farmwork.

Almost instinctively, she felt for the small book her original father had made. It was in a little compartment in her horse's saddle. The old leather, worn and with an array of small imperfections she'd long since memorized, reminded her of him. Simple, and not perfect, but trying. She remembered her days spent leatherworking, milking cows, herding sheep. Wanting, some day, to be a knight. It had wounded his spirit, she recalled, not out of some notion women shouldn't fight but because it was something he couldn't provide. Commoners didn't become knights except by chance. He'd taken her wishes personally.

Adelaide rode for a long time. Hours passed, then days. She didn't know how to set up a tent but she had good luck finding comfortable places to sleep. She carried and dined on dried meat, courtesy of some local villagers. The flower in her chest was becoming less and less intrusive as the days slowly passed.

She experimented with it and learned that she could flex certain muscles to bury it back under her sternum or press it out on command. The rose intrigued her, as she traveled and her thoughts turned inward. It was a rich, kind of dark pink color, not the usual red one would associate with roses. If she stabbed it out all the way, its petals took rigid and almost sharp edges. Also exclusive to when she flexed it out as far as possible was a short, fat stem with dark green flesh and harsh stabby thorns that seemed to anchor it to her body. She wondered often, lying on her back with her steed tied to a nearby tree, what exactly the flower did. It was clearly magical. She'd received it in a dream from...some creature that left a magical note on her door and a sword in her bed. It seemed to have become a part of her body. She could manipulate it to some degree by contracting the right muscles. Once or twice she fell asleep pondering the subject.

A week passed in Adelaide's journey and she arrived at the town where her princess had last been seen. She trotted through on her small grey horse, feeling suddenly out of place even as she tied it to a post to gather information on foot. As she asked some intrepid townsfolk about the abduction, she couldn't help feeling odd. She was on a quest! Taking action, of her own, like a hero!

"Alexandria?" Asked one woman, a stocky lass who looked about forty with ashen skin and a beaten green dress. "I saw her get got fifteen suns back, no?" Adelaide laughed awkwardly.

"I'm not some stuffy prince, milady. You can just say days. Just over two weeks then, you mean?" The woman laughed, sounding giddy and ecstatic. Adelaide thought she might see a slight blush under the dirt on the woman's face but couldn't quite tell. This was possibly her second time speaking to a noble, ever. The concept of someone feeling that excitement at seeing Adelaide flattered her. She couldn't believe it.

She was a hero!

"Two weeks and a day, yeah! I think I heard them say they were going east to the Empire. Cross those mountains y'see!" Adelaide rubbed her chin and made a face of deep thought. The Empire, the Old World, it went by many names. It sat on the other side of the Devil's Gums mountain range, which was as deadly and infested with bandits as the name suggested. Stories claimed it was so evil that ruffians spawned fully grown from its wicked soil like natural hazards. "Princesses fetch a pretty penny, that's what they said! Why, if I had my husband the smith's hammer on me I'd have beaten them senseless! That's no way to talk about anyone, let alone a fine little lady!" Adelaide laughed. She liked this woman. They'd make a good knight.

"Thank you, I agree. I'll knock them around some for you." Adelaide reached into the pocket of her jacket, where she'd stashed a few coins to jingle when she needed something to occupy a free hand. She pulled a sum against her palms and pressed them into the woman's pocket.

"What are you doing." They stared awkwardly. Embarrassment struck Adelaide with the resounding force of a god's wrathful hand.

"Compen...sating you? I probably should've just handed you the money." Adelaide admitted with a sheepish grin. The woman laughed and patted Adelaide on her head a few times.

"What a sweetheart, aincha? I'll pray for you, little miss. Wish more of your ilk were like you, I do!" Adelaide blushed and fiddled with her hair. "They took off in a big metal ship-lookin thing, one that can travel the air, is what I hear! Go thrash em for me, okay?" Adelaide nodded and watched as the lady walked off to attend to whatever labor needed her doing for the day. Adelaide returned to her horse, untied it, and lead it to an inn. She needed a place to rest and she still had change for room and board.

Money had materialized in all sorts of places between when she geared up and her final departure. Presumably the maids were far better at reverse pickpocketing than she would ever be. Adelaide found the town's inn with little trouble and rented herself a room. That night she dreamed restlessly of her friend Alexandria.

The princess of another land stood tall, hands tied behind her back. Princesses, as an astute reader may remember, were kidnapped often during the Age of Might. It was kind of their thing. Look pretty, be wed, get abducted. Her captors, however, were not treating her like one would expect.

"YOU FEED HER!" Roared the oafish one she'd gathered to be an ambitious tool to his superiors. Plain, with brown hair and beard. White skin with just enough of a tan to make his hair color even less striking. Brown eyes too. His face was so aggressively bland he looked like an intelligent being had designed him to be as bog standard and thoroughly forgettable as a human man could possibly be. He stood on her left, some ten feet away.

"NOT AGAIN!" Screamed his cohort. They were much more interesting: a runty little bastard with a face like a rat and a wispy little grey ponytail to match. They raised one finger of their silver left hand at her in an obscene gesture that lost some of its impact on account of the fact she'd bitten part of that finger off. Why he was allowed to keep such a thing was way more interesting to her than anything the drab bigger dude could possibly bring to the table. "NEVER AGAIN!"

"Well, someone has to." The first man insisted. "If she starts starving she'll be worth a lot less. You think we're gonna sell her to some noble? I hear princess blood is in vogue in some places. Illegal as hell but that's never stopped anyone."

"I'm not going anywhere near that cursed girl!" The guy with the prosthetic insisted and shook his head wildly. "Never again! Never again!" The brown haired one sighed and picked up a tray. He walked to where Alexandria stood.

"Gonna untie me so I can eat?"

"Hell no." He glowered. "Not after what you did to Tim." Ah, Tim. That must have been the handsy one that she'd choked out. And then battered severely for his trouble. "Or Greg." Greg? He might have been the handsy ruffian, then. She pondered her memories for a moment. On second thought, she was fairly sure Greg was the one whose spine she had snapped for refusing to let her look at his axe.

One uncomfortable session of being spoon fed-made tolerable by her captor's obvious terror at being near her-later, Alexandria was left to her own devices. She spent a time trying to ignore the itching in her wrists and ankles (where she was bound) by instead thinking about her predicament. Greg (or, if it wasn't Greg, the man she cared about too little to remember that he had a name which was, in fact, not Greg) had died that morning, in all likelihood. A broken back tended to have that effect and it was unlikely any of his compatriots were skilled doctors or especially proficient with healing magic. She laughed a bit internally at the thought.

It was fools and fools alone who underestimated her. This motley crew knew now, and it was knowledge they'd purchased with their blood. They seemed to have intended to take her to the empire to sell or something. Now, though, their mission had become something more like "find a client dangerous enough to stop the unhinged foreigner from hunting us like animals the moment we release her." It would be a difficult task, and the probability of their failure pleased the princess.

The room holding her rocked unsteadily. she fell on her side and made a slight noise of pain. Damnit, Alexandria thought to herself, now she had to stand back up. It took some doing but she managed anyway. Their ship was huge, metal and able to fly. She suspected that the craft

was the only reason these weaklings dared do what they did-the space between her abode and the Empire's capital would be dangerous without a way to circumvent the choice between the Devil's Gums mountain range and the Cold Dead Hands river. Whether they had stolen it, or such things were mundane enough in their homeland to be within the reach of common thugs, she knew not. The excitement of finding an answer to that question sustained her self control in its struggle to keep her from murdering her hosts.

How long had she been there?

Adelaide stretched her spine and her arms. Her body was sore from her long days on her noble little steed, and she'd run out of both coin and settlements in her travels. She found herself foraging for the first time in a decade, give or take. The region had berries and roots aplenty, and she had occasionally managed to stun a small animal with a tossed stone long enough to kill it. Had she been less generous, she'd have been able to stock up better in the last town-but this matter was one for which she felt no regret.

Her mind snapped back into the present and she shook her head vigorously. A heavy fog floated all around her and her horse was wary of it. Anything in the distance became a vague cloudy shape or else vanished entirely, swallowed by the mist. She had arrived at the foot of the Devil's Gums mountain range. Adelaide gazed upward, the ominous white curtain denying her vision of the obstacles to come. "Here, girl," she muttered soothingly as she leaned over and gave her horse some gentle strokes to calm them. This proved quite effective. Adelaide had been warned by an innkeeper not to move too early or too late traversing the mountains.

"Mornings and nights alike in those thrice-damned peaks are pregnant with death and treachery!" She remembered him saying. He'd been a stocky lad with big powerful arms but a round face that made him look always to be pouting. "The early hours bring a blanket of fog cursed with ill intent, blinding travelers and leading them astray. Bandits who've lived there long enough can resist its foul magics, letting them prey on the lost with ease." His voice was deep and authoritative, but the timber in his consonants sought to guide instead of dominate. Adelaide recalled the red glow of a lantern accentuating the mild brown of his skin and intensifying the shadows of the room. "And the black of night brings with it evil creatures who fear naught but the campfire. Camp early and embark only when the morning dew has passed, do you hear me?"

He was a kind man. A good man. Adelaide had found herself out of coin to purchase a map, only to have one thrust upon her regardless. That map had served her well. There was just one problem.

Adelaide did not have time to be safe. She guided her horse up into the mist, her skin tingling and the flower in her chest felt heavy and tight. The mountains were just mountains. Even if the fog was magic like she'd been told, she had no choice but to fight her way through it.

Her quest was not going to wait.

Chapter Five: First Blood

Adelaide moved forward in the mist. Her head felt fuzzy. The shapes of trees and homes came and went in the infinite white, trembling like the visions of a drunken prophet. Four different times she saw the same obelisk mere feet away and spent twenty minutes approaching it, only for it to be nothing. Weariness encroached faster than usual, on both Adelaide and her horse. Eventually, the fog rolled away. She was lost.

"I should have listened..." muttered the knight who knew not where she was. Her stomach grumbled. She looked around, seeing trees aplenty. Trees with a familiar type of vine. "This will have to do..." she muttered and unsheathed her sword for the first time ever. The blade was long and brilliant white, curved on one side and tapering on both to a point. She brought her tired mount next to a tree and hacked at a vine. It proved resistant to her blade but after three or four swipes she managed to tear it open. A strange fluid began to seep out.

Liquor ivy, that's the name that this plant was called by common folk. It was a vine of moderate breadth with a unique fluid flowing through it. That fluid tasted bad, but it was highly nutritious and could be refined in several ways into different delicious delicacies. Adelaide filled two small satchels with the stuff and managed to force down some herself. It was thick, bitter, and had a very unpleasant texture but she wasn't foolish enough to turn down nourishment in her current situation. With this source of sustenance, at least starving wasn't an issue. Once she'd drained the vine she also stripped away some of its flesh and placed it into one of the pouches on her saddle. The vine's skin was useful in lots of ways. It had several medicinal properties, possessed a handful of magical uses according to some superstitions, and if one ground it into a powder it could be used to make perfumes or in leatherworking to give products slightly greater durability. She saw no reason to be wasteful in what was essentially enemy territory.

With her neck liberated from one stranglehold, Adelaide focused on the others. She was still lost. If she stopped moving during the mornings she would be slowed considerably. She could get her bearings by moving in a single direction until she either escaped the mountains or came to a landmark, but that was time wasted just getting herself into a position to start progressing again. At the end she decided to simply treat the direction where the ground curved upward as "forward," and to also move forward. The day was mostly calm until night started to fall. Adelaide found herself, then, questioning what to do. If she made camp, she'd be safe from monsters if the innkeeper was correct and they were a threat. She trusted his word, but she knew she didn't have a moment to lose. Besides, she reasoned, monsters could slow her but she'd still be making progress.

With her decision made, Adelaide pushed onwards. Her stamina seemed to have come back without the cursed mist to drain it from her. Her horse seemed to have recovered likewise, which was welcome news. Night fell late but abrupt. The sunset didn't even seem to get to happen, as though the scenery's pure evil were actively warring with those beautiful parts of nature and would not allow it. In the span of half an hour the midday sun surrendered to the black of night. Adelaide lit one of three torches she'd brought, letting her and her horse continue. As time crawled by, the black around her seemed to shift from the neutral menace of the unknown to active malevolence. Danger loomed all around her. She could not see what threatened her but, somehow, she knew deep in her soul that it unquestionably did.

The night stretched onward. Adelaide's torch burned just as bright but the light seemed to retreat and shrink with time. She considered making camp this time, but changed her mind. Besides, it was late enough she feared if such creatures watched she'd be ambushed as she set up camp. The only choice was to survive until dawn.

Rustling began to trail her. Eyes, red like rubies and glowing like flame, would glare at her then vanish as the glow of her lantern came near. Adelaide needed often to comfort her horse. They were scared. They knew.

Crash!

A tree fell before her and Adelaide's steed reared with a scream. She was thrown to the ground and her mount fled into the shadows.

"No!" Adelaide reached out to her horse as she tumbled. The ground scratched at her and shadow enveloped her entirely.

Adelaide's stomach lurched in horror. Her lantern was affixed to the saddle. Without her horse-

"Stay back!" Adelaide drew her blade for the second time. It glimmered as it had before, but the light seemed not to reach beyond its blade. The flower in her chest seared with pain. She was in grave danger.

A snarl exploded from the dark! On instinct Adelaide swung towards the sound. Her weapon met a beast and drove it away. Eyes. More eyes. All around her.

Some kind of wet tendril met her shoulder and she spun, flailing steel in its direction. Slimy bits of something fell to the dirt and whatever she'd cut retreated with a pained scream. Adelaide took off in a run towards where her horse had gone, striking wildly in the appropriate direction whenever something made a noise too close to her or made contact with her skin. Her feet pounded at the earth and she flew across the ground. Where had it gone?

Adelaide sprinted. Her heart struck with force. She moved in a line, glaring into the nothing. Her horse had to be somewhere!

"Neiiigh!" She heard off in the distance! Adelaide thundered towards the noise, her feet assaulting the earth like they never had in her life. She heard the sound of her beast of burden twice more, and each time hurled herself towards the noise. Sure enough, she saw the lantern's glow. And a thing of horror.

Her steed lay on the ground, bleeding from its flank. A great foot with four toes, each tipped by a staggeringly large and wickedly curved talon, rested within the lantern's diminishing glow. Attached was a long leg adorned by feathers the black of night.

And attached to that leg, was an abomination. A gigantic fiend resembling a crow stood tall, a wing the size of two or three grown men extended from each side of its hideous form. Five heads with giant beaks turned to face her, each with two burning ruby eyes.

They were not eyes like those of animals-not even ones the stark red of rubies and bearing the hateful flame of evil intent-either. In place of eyes, two literal rubies were embedded in each of the creature's oversized heads. Each eye was stunningly large and blazed with literal flame that lacked anything in the way of safety or of warmth. Adelaide gulped and held up her sword. Fear formed a knot in her throat. She shoved it down.

"Heed me, monster!" She cried with all the bravado she could. The beast swiveled its heads to turn its eyes, or the things it had in place of eyes, towards her. Three of those heads seemed to regard her with interest, and a fourth licked at its golden beak using a tongue that sported atop it and on each side what looked like rows on rows of serrated dagger-like teeth. The fifth kept its regard set on the lantern. "Begone, creature! Lest I maim you!" She gripped her sword until her knuckles were white.

The beast beat its massive wings gently and assaulted her with a buffet of wind. She stumbled backward and felt her hair whipping behind her. Her sword quaked as she struggled not to let the air push it aside. "I'm not scared of you, fiend!" That seemed to do it. The creature jumped towards her and one of its massive jet-black sickle-like talons glinted on the way towards her. She deftly jumped and rolled away, trying not to be horrified by the sound of the beast slicing a swath into a huge tree. Adelaide scrambled back to her feet and her eyes darted back and forth between the animal and her own wounded companion. Whatever it was, it feared flame. One of the beast's heads jerked violently between her and the horse. Either it was contemplating the risk-reward of eating her horse, or it was intelligent and had discerned her train of thought. The beast lifted a foot but made no motions to approach her. It took Adelaide a moment to discern that it had gotten a talon stuck in the ground. She moved with cautious tread towards her steed as the beast twisted and yanked with its leg. Two of its heads opened wide and shrieked. Its body twisted and it swiped at her with one of its enormous wings. Her sword swung in an arc

and tore into the appendage. The beast's other heads howled in agony and a thick red blast of blood erupted from the wound she'd made.

And into her face. Pain tore at her and everything vanished. She stumbled backwards and felt a crackling in her chest as her vision rapidly sprang in and out of existence. Heat flared across her upper body as the blood quickly evaporated. At least, she could see again. The spout of blood from the beast's injury came to a stop and now all five heads cocked their necks with an expression that would resemble intrigue if it were not worn by a two story or more hellspawn with burning gemstones where the windows ought be to its soul.

So it *was* intelligent. And its blood ran HOT. That was worrisome. Adelaide took a defensive posture and grimaced. The beast circled her on the ground like a wolf, or a vulture. It must have freed itself while she couldn't see. Adelaide realized that, already, her foolhardiness had failed to leave her permanently blind only because of the flower in her chest. She reminded herself that she was a knight.

And killing monsters? That was just what a knight *does*.

She stepped forward cautiously. The monster lunged, four heads screeching completely out of tune from each other and the fifth striking at her with a giant beak. She moved aside and rose her sword, then drove its pommel down on the beak to deflect the attack. Its maw slammed shut beside her leg and yanked away. Two others flew open and their horrific tongues lashed out at her. One sliced at her upper body but the pain did little; Adelaide swung her blade and screamed. The sword met feathered neck and cleaved one of the heads from its body. All four remaining heads screamed and blood blasted out, propelling the monster backwards. Its massive wings smashed branches with their flailing before it regained its balance.

But Adelaide wasn't done. She loosed a bloodcurdling cry of violent intent and charged. The girl's legs launched her into the air, and her arms hurled her sword in a swing that tore a second head from its host. The beast screamed in pain and swung its new stump to bathe her head to toe. White hot agony greeted her front and a searing hose of burning liquid threw her across the air like a boiling ragdoll. She landed with a thud and the blood rapidly boiled away. Her burned body quickly returned to normal with the flower's help. Her foe was not so lucky. Three heads screamed to the uncaring night sky and the body they guided stomped away, cutting boulders and flattening trees. Adelaide rose and panted. It was over.

The fight. Not the night. She still had to make a campfire.

Chapter Six: Observe

The morning came and with it, the enchanted fog. Adelaide had made a campfire the previous night and harvested some more liquor ivy to feed herself and disinfect her horse's injuries. The beast thrashed when she treated it but she managed to sooth it and finish treating them. The horse was probably going to die but Adelaide would NOT abandon them.

The two sat put next to a dwindling fire and waited for the fog to subside. Adelaide contemplated her map and hoped they were going in the right direction.

And then her map tore. An arrow planted itself in the ground, map adorning its shaft. Another whizzed past her and hit a rock.

Adelaide was in danger. She jumped to her feet and drew her sword.

But she couldn't see.

An arrow ripped past her arm. Pain stung where she'd been grazed, then the injury crackled and closed. Even her jacket fixed itself.

Well, she realized, her flower repaired her clothes too. That was convenient.

An axe surged out of the fog. Adelaide jammed the flat of her blade to the shaft and drove the attack aside. A fist took its place and clocked her, knocking the knight back. Another two arrows whistled towards her, one cutting her leg and the other striking her square on the shoulder. Adelaide howled and tore it out, almost blinded by pain but still seeing an axe coming in time to parry. This time she lunged past it and buried the head of the arrow she'd taken somewhere in the body of an unseen attacker. They yowled and retreated. Four shadows whirled in a circle around her and spiraled in. Two vanished and two, one on each side, gave way to the forms of bandits. A short, curved blade lashed at her back and a large bearded axe flew at her side. The blade cut her and she hissed in pain, then turned away the axe with a flick of her sword and swung twice at its wielder. Both blows landed and as they fled they were seriously wounded.

The enemy behind her dropped their weapon and threw their arms around her, yanking the girl into a headlock. Her vision clouded some but seemed to refuse to get any worse. She flailed wildly but could not land a solid hit on the body behind her. Arrows struck her shins, then she whirled and one planted itself in the lower back of the grappler. He yelped in pain and let go just long enough for her to take a half step away, twist and clobber his head with the hilt of her weapon. He fell unconscious. Where was the archer?

There was silence. Adelaide turned repeatedly and brandished her sword at the shapes in the mist. A moment passed. Warily she ripped the projectiles from her legs. Still, nothing.

"You're safe now." Came a voice. She turned to face it, panting heavily.

"How can I trust you?" She questioned. The voice laughed.

"Well, I killed the guy who punched you and drove away the archer. If that's enough." The fog began to lift and she saw the speaker. They were tall, slender, and androgynous. A soft handsome face with fluffy blonde hair and a pair of triangular cat ears sat on the neck of a slender and athletic-looking body that wore a fancy black-and-yellow coat and sported a tail which matched both the jacket and their unusual ears. They grinned wide, their teeth positively sublime and also unusually pointy. "My name is Schrodinger, what's yours?"

Adelaide shakily sheathed her weapon. "I'm...Adelaide. My name is Adelaide Adams."

"Intriguing!" The cat person walked in a circle around them, fingers tentatively stroking their sharp chin. "Your horse died, by the way." Adelaide's heart sank. "Surprised those bandits had the nerve to attack you after last night."

Adelaide blinked. Last night?

"Yes, yes, last night."

"I didn't say anything."

"But you might have!"

"What do you mean, I MIGHT have!"

"I meant what I said," replied Shrodinger. They plucked a dead mouse from a pocket in their jacket and ate it whole. "You seem lost, my dear, where are you going?"

"I'm..." Adelaide wasn't sure if she should trust this person but without her horse she felt she had no choice. She opted to tell the truth. "I-" She hesitated. On second thought, she could tell the truth without revealing everything. "I am lost."

"Headed to the Empire! Splendid!"

"But I didn't say-"

"You didn't, but you MIGHT have! You wanna see if your horse had anything?"

Adelaide let the cat...person guide her to her horse, and she retrieved everything from the saddle that she could carry. She turned to face her new companion. They sat cross-legged on a stone, examining long ebom claws that stretched out of their fingers. She looked to them.

"Are you...a boy or a girl?" She asked.

"Yes. No! Just call me they."

Adelaide nodded slowly. Sure, that was fine. One of Alexandria's maids went by "they" exclusively. No problem. "What did you mean, last night?"

"Last night, is what I meant." Schrodinger flashed another toothy grin. "You killing the big bird monster. I think. Inspiring stuff, that. Most people would have died." How did he know?

"You...were watching that?" Adelaide asked, hand moving towards the hilt of her sword. They did another laugh.

"Not...watching, per say. Not you specifically or I might have tried to help out. Just, I know what transpired. Got really good ears, you know? I know when things happen. The bandits here can see through the fog cause they've been here so long their eyes have adjusted to the actual fog and they're sort of inoculated to the magical parts, but me? Raw feline talent. I got the best eyes and ears in the business, baby." They posed as though they were taking a big hat off and placing it to their chest.

"What...business?"

"Ah!" Schrodinger's eyes glinted with playful intent. Adelaide noticed they were gold, with vertical slits. "I'm a player, you see. Not in the 'weirdo who takes girls and then breaks their hearts' way, though, I'm...how you say, an actor. If you've heard of the *Globe Wheel*, I'm one of their guys. Using guys gender-neutral, mind you, in that case."

Adelaide had not, in fact, heard of any such thing as a *Globe Wheel*, nor was she really aware of what an actor was. It sounded like a more specific kind of performer, so she decided to just assume that's what it was. "I haven't."

"How unfortunate!" Schrodinger, moving with inhuman speed, retrieved a knife from their belt and threw it. A bird dropped from the sky, dead. They scooped it off the ground, and much like they had with the mouse, they devoured it in its entirety. Adelaide was perturbed but had already sort of committed to traveling with this person.

"You said...you said it was good I was headed for the Empire?"

"Indeed it is, very fortunate, that!" Schrodinger performed an exaggerated bow for a moment. "I'm heading there myself. That's where the *Globe Wheel* performs, you know. We go all about, performing for kings and festivals and all that, but mostly we stay in the Empire. I'd be eager to help guide you, adventurer."

Adelaide shrugged. "Sure. But...there has to be some kind of price."

"Nope!" They answered. "I'll do you a solid. You're a hero, and heroes are entertaining." Adelaide rolled her eyes but decided it probably wasn't worth questioning.

The rest of their journey was frankly rather unremarkable. Moving only during midday and setting up a campfire each night meant that the greatest dangers of the mountains were irrelevant. Schrodinger's cavalier attitude and strange habit of randomly devouring small animals were all that stuck out. Adelaide took to looking over her little picture book each night and reminiscing about times long gone.

The days went the same. Each morning Adelaide sat still while Schrodinger hunted and foraged. Once or twice cutthroats attempted to ambush the duo, but Schrodinger made short work of them and all that got past the fierce cat person died by Adelaide's hand. They moved during the day, with Schrodinger telling Adelaide of the fantastical world across the Devil's Gums mountains. There were metal devices that used explosions to fire projectiles, iron vehicles that traversed the sky, and steel constructs that moved on their own.

"Those are rare this far out, though," they rambled one day as they used their claws to force through a bush, "Expensive and made of rare magical metals. Usually kept towards the heart of the motherland. I've only seen one or two in my time. They're incredible!"

At night the pair set up camp and sat around a campfire. There was a persistent sense that they were being watched, and glowing blood red eyes often glowered at them from just beyond the reach of the campfire's soft light. To distract from the imminent danger that surrounded them, Adelaide and Schrodinger spoke nonstop until weariness took them. They exchanged stories, Schrodinger of the Empire and Adelaide of her homeland. When they slept, Adelaide dreamed invariably of her old life, or of Alexandria.

A young woman gripped a pitchfork in her arms and hardened her face into an enraged look of determination. Her arms ached as they always did after an honest night's work, but this time her purse was void of silver; in fact, it did not even jingle with the sound of even a single piece of copper. She felt guilt at leaving the two women with broad powerful arms who toiled alongside her so early in the day, but what she sought to do had to be done. Besides, she knew deep in her soul, her failure would not leave any children orphaned nor any man or woman widowed. If someone else tried this and paid with their life, it would force innocents to grieve. Her? She didn't even have parents to risk forcing to bury her.

The air was heavy with the tired light of afternoon, and the sky had undergone its daily metamorphosis from the bright blue of midday to the breathtaking yellows and pinks that pursued the sun as it crawled beneath the horizon. The young woman was on a time limit, and

she was well aware how she'd endangered herself by neglecting to bring a torch or lantern. The horse she'd stolen proved remarkably obedient as she lead him towards an abandoned shack.

"Someone will save her dear, don't you worry." She recalled one of her fellow farmhands trying to console her. "Rescuing damsels is for heroes and princes, not us common folk. She'll be perfectly fine, I promise." The older woman might have been lying, she suspected, but if they had not believed their soothing words then they'd shown no indication. Even so, the others she worked alongside had been indifferent, bordering on cruel, about the subject.

"She's a dead girl. These things happen. Best not concern yourself with the petty squabbles of nobility." Adelaide grimaced. It hurt to even think about what the others had said. Besides, even if that was true, letting a child suffer for it was...it was wrong. And she refused.

Adelaide would not stand by while an innocent suffered.

Adelaide snapped back into the present and saw the shack. It sat in the center of a clearing amidst a fairly dense forest, ramshackle and in disrepair. It looked like the lodging of a witch or a hermit, but she knew from experience it was not. It was used on and off by passing groups of bandits, thieves and travelers, much like the ones she was after. Sure enough, a man she'd never seen before leaned against it. A hatchet hung from his hip and he stared at the ground with his arms crossed. This guy was bad news. She had to get past him. Adelaide considered her options. If she snuck past him, she risked being caught and she'd still have to get past him a second time on the way out. If she fought him without dismounting she'd have an upper hand in the form of her enhanced reach, but that would endanger her horse. Having technically stolen it from an employer, that seemed tasteless and potentially immoral (to say nothing of the even greater evil of making an animal she had no bond with risk their life for her). Plus she still had to get back, so the better shape the horse was in the better. She dismounted...and her heart sank.

She had nothing to tie the horse with.

"St-stay here!" She ordered the animal with a panicked whisper. "You'll be safer here, I promise! If they see you and come for you, run! Leave me!" She waited a second to let the horse show her that he understood. No such thing happened. She turned to the shack and gripped the pitchfork in one hand, resting her other on the handle of a big knife she'd inherited from her father. It was strong and sharp, probably not enough to kill anyone on the spot but definitely sufficient to remove someone from a fight with one motion if it was planned and performed well enough.

The intrepid girl moved along behind some of the trees, getting as close to the building as she could. She took a few deep breaths. It was now or never.

Adelaide sprinted out of the wood, pitchfork ready. Her target saw her and hurled his axe, but it struck her weapon instead of her body and fell aside. The hit sent a jolt up her arms, which

injected an emotion into her brain which it had never felt before: fear, specifically of death. Her jaws flew apart and she screamed with fury she didn't know she knew, thrusting for his head. He scrambled aside but the attack caught his flank and her weapon tore into him. He froze up on contact, then went limp. Adelaide leveraged her makeshift spear and pushed his body into the ground, then yanked the head out of her fallen adversary's side and panted to catch her breath. One down.

Figuring she'd lost the element of surprise, Adelaide screamed and kicked in the front door, greeted by the sight of a hallway going straight, a room off to her left, and a big staircase going up. She could hear two things: footsteps moving towards her from the second floor, and muffled sounds of panic coming from down the hall. The bandits and the princess, respectively. Adelaide saw a bald man sprinting down the stairs with a big mace, and reacted just as he brought the weapon crashing down. She stepped inside the attack and struck his knee with the shaft of her pitchfork, which knocked him down, then kicked him full-force in the ear. His body flopped onto the wooden floor and sprawled out dazed, the mace clattering to the ground out of his reach.

Then a truly massive man was before her and seized her weapon with one hand. Adelaide struggled against his grip but it was in vain. He readied a swing with a mighty-looking hammer-

And screamed. Adelaide realized all too late that she'd let go, unsheathed her knife, and buried it in him. He dropped both weapons and started swiping at her with both arms like an enraged gorilla. Adelaide's body wriggled and dodged, propelled by raw instinct and fear, as she slashed and stabbed at his torso with her knife. He managed to grab both of her arms and shoved her against a wall...only to start weakening. As blood drained from his multiple lacerations he lost strength and slowly toppled. Adelaide gulped two several horrified mouthfuls of air.

But it wasn't over. She had a girl to save.

Adelaide Adams woke up.

"Slept in," Schrodinger snarked at her, sitting and using a branch to draw in the mud. "Good. Fog is rolling away early today and we're almost there." The two packed their supplies and got moving. Adelaide found herself hoping Alexandria was okay. "Two or three days' travel remain, depending how cooperative the mist feels like being." Adelaide nodded and followed her guide. Something had been bugging her.

"Why are you helping me?" She asked, procuring a satchel full of liquor ivy sap and downing some of it. She regretted the timing immediately. It made her look like she was disgusted with him. Drinking the stuff hadn't made it less unpleasant.

"Why wouldn't I?" They asked, eyes twinkling with concern and sincerity. Adelaide felt her cheeks burn.

"W-well, it's slowing you down. The mist isn't a problem for you."

"Yes, and?" They answered, unperturbed. "It is a problem for you. So I'm helping. You're a good natured person, Adelaide, shouldn't this make perfect sense to you?"

She froze, realizing they were right. She'd been asked similar questions herself, and she'd never questioned her own motives like this.

"Kindness is its own justification, Little Knight. That noble spirit of yours is the sort of thing more cynical minds dismiss because they can't comfortably acknowledge that sometimes...things just exist that are good. Things like your kindness. Allowing people to make you believe that every good deed **MUST** be justified, that nobody ever helps anyone else unless it costs them nothing? It's poison. A venom gladly sipped on by selfish people because it lets them pretend they do no wrong. Don't let ANYONE slip that venom into your heart." For a moment Adelaide's eyes burned and grew wet. She wiped at them with her sleeve and nodded. Then, suddenly, Schrodinger returned to their antics.

In this case, dear reader, it should be pointed out that "returned to their antics" meant "burst spontaneously into song and started acting out a part which, because she had neither the benefit of context nor of any other players, Adelaide could make neither heads nor tails of." This continued for several hours. Schrodinger danced about, stood on stones to gesture profoundly at the sky, and made snide remarks about events which were not happening to an audience which was not there. Adelaide just followed in silence, content to note that their companion was talented but feeling nevertheless confused.

"I'm rehearsing!" They proclaimed, seemingly to nobody. Adelaide opened her mouth to ask who they were speaking to, as she hadn't asked, then realized that it would be quite rude and elected not to say so. "Nobody's watching me, but it's not impossible we're being observed!" Could Schrodinger read her mind? They were obviously...something. a fay, maybe? Part fay? "I make sure to be presentable at all times. As an actor your living is never *truly* secure, you know? Best to maximize the chance of being funded as many times as possible."

"In an evil mountain range?"

Schrodinger shrugged. "It's not impossible."

With that, Schrodinger returned to their performance. Adelaide worried about being ambushed but it seemed that these parts of the woods were abandoned.

And then, a scream. Schrodinger froze and hissed in its direction. Their ears went rigid and their tail poofed out.

"It shouldn't be able to come out in broad daylight!"

"What shouldn't-"

A tree exploded into a storm of wood and splinters. A familiar abomination stomped angrily across the ground and glared at them. It had only three heads now, and all three were visibly furious. Adelaide readied her sword in an instant and interposed her body between the beast and her friend.

"I beat it before! I can take it now!"

"That's the spirit!" Schrodinger extended their claws. "No fear! Fight!" The beast screamed with two of its beaks, lowered its body, extended its wings menacingly, and stomped towards Adelaide. Instead of biting her, however, its whiplike tongue sprang forward and lashed at her hands and her sword. Adelaide failed to parry and her sword got torn from her hands and tossed aside into a tree, where it landed with a heavy thunk. The beast recalled its tongue and clucked like it was laughing, then swung one of its giant wings like a hammer and smashed her into the ground. She struggled to push against the creature but remained pinned. It turned its heads to her companion.

"Well...that's not good." Schrodinger admitted. They dropped to all fours and scrambled past the beast, slashing at its legs and lower body as they went. Blood burst from the small wounds and the beast howled in pain, lifting its wing and taking flight. A veritable whirlwind attacked the ground and sent both of its targets tumbling. It landed again and spread out its wings, heads watching the two it sought to see dead. Schrodinger, who happened to have been sent to the tree with Adelaide's sword in it, shakily rose to feet and pulled it out, then brandished it half-heartedly. Adelaide got up and realized she had no weapons. The beast knew. It could smell her fear.

The monster stomped once, twice, towards her. The sun glinted off its hellish gemstones and despite its lack of a face it seemed to be taunting her.

"I got you covered!" Shouted Schrodinger. They sprinted up the monster's back and slashed at it furiously. Blood blasted from the cuts. The fiend screeched, twisted its necks, and grabbed Schrodinger's leg in one of its beaks. "Oh no." The monster whipped its neck around and threw them at her. Adelaide managed to sidestep their body before they hit the ground on their feet and slid backwards, blood oozing from the leg. "Your...sword!" They gasped, holding it out. Adelaide took it and pointed it at their enemy. Schrodinger gripped their upper thighs and panted like an exhausted runner after a tough race. "Well. This isn't ideal. Ow."

Adelaide looked at their friend's injury and grimaced. While it wasn't life-threatening, it was definitely bad. The beast, though... "We have to kill this thing. You think it'll die if we take off all the heads?" Schrodinger looked up at the monster and took a stance to fight.

"Don't see why it wouldn't. Monsters traditionally either die without their heads or get stronger when you try to remove them."

"Alright then, decapitation central!" Adelaide sprinted towards the monster. It leaned back and swung each wing at her in turn, but she drove away each blow with the hilt of her sword. When she reached its body it lifted a leg. "Right. Fuck." A pair of four gigantic talons rushed to meet her and she blocked them with the blade of her sword, only prompting the foot to grasp it. The bottom toe's immense claw ripped a gash through her stomach, which closed on the spot. "Damn it THAT HURT!" The beast began beating its wings, crashing one torrent of wind against Adelaide after another. She gripped her weapon for dear life, but the gust wrenched her off her feet and tore her away from it, sending her through the air to land against a tree. It brought its foot down, heads lurching forward to eye her with menace.

"Schrodinger?" Adelaide's voice cracked. She had no idea if she could do this. The flower in her chest seemed to shrink into her. Fear started taking hold in her mind. She was going to die here. She was never-

"Never give up!" Schrodinger, in an astonishing display of agility, whipped between the monster's legs, stole the sword back, then leapt through the air to one of its heads. Blood oozed from their leg but they cared not. "NEVER SURRENDER!" They swung the weapon wide, severing one head and cutting the neck of another. A blast of blood launched the nimble cat person away as a gold beak snapped shut on the space where they'd been, then they hit a tree feet first. "FIGHT! FIGHT! FIGHT!" Without a moment's hesitation, Schrodinger catapulted from the tree and flew past the beast, lopping off its penultimate head with a quick slash from Adelaide's sword. They flipped forward head over heels and landed on a tree branch above Adelaide, bowing with a flourish.

"BEHIND YOU!" Adelaide screamed as the beast took to the air and hurled itself at them. Schrodinger's eyes glinted with mischief.

"I'm well aware, fair lady. Observe." They quipped and jumped, flipping again. The beast's tongue lashed out and gripped one of Schrodinger's legs, then whipped about wildly. The eccentric individual screamed in agony but still managed to flail their sword about, taking a chunk out of the last neck. The beast went limp and crashed into a tree, Schrodinger hung from its tongue, which bit deeper into their leg as gravity pulled them against it. It took a concentrated effort, but with a single stroke they cut themselves free and fell to the ground, landing on their injured legs before collapsing. "By the GODS that stings!" They coughed, face growing pale as their badly lacerated leg positively geysered blood.

“Schrodinger!” Adelaide crouched by her friend. They laughed, but they were obviously fading. “Schrodinger, you’re going to die! Sit still a moment!” She carefully pulled away the tongue, making sure not to complicate the injuries if she could avoid it. “Here, let me-”

They shook their head. “I am only probably going to die, fair lady. Here, take-ACK! Take...this...” They pulled a compass from their jacket pocket and pressed it into Adelaide’s hands. “But I need to rest. Use this, go-ack, ack!” They sputtered weakly. Their voice was growing shaky. Tears built in Adelaide’s eyes. “Take this, go northeast. You’ll...find a small city. That’s the Empire., You’re so...close...” Adelaide gripped the device tightly.

“No, I’m not leaving you!” They laughed. It was a grim laugh.

“I’d slow you down. Why would you agree to that?” They laughed again. The grim nature of having what she’d said echoed at her made her heart sink once more. “I’ll be fine if I have rest. Go. We all have things we must do. Whoever you’re helping, go to them.” Schrodinger leaned backwards into the grass and went limp, but they were breathing. Adelaide sprinted about, stripping down several lengths of liquor ivy and using their flesh to treat and wrap Schrodinger’s mangled leg. She stood over them for a moment, then steeled herself. If they said they might be okay, it was entirely possibly they would be. She looked at the compass and discerned which way was northeast. She continued with a heavy heart, thankful to the wanderer for their help and making a note not to let it go to waste.

Chapter Seven: A Stranger Comes to Town

The city of Samriq was a small one. It didn't get visitors often, on account of being sort of in the middle of nowhere, so its populace was fairly well aware when a stranger passed through. Rumors traveled quickly there, almost as quickly as the Empire's tax collectors. They were an insular people, but not strictly speaking hostile.

Two strangers, word buzzed, had appeared within three days of each other. A pink haired girl with a military jacket, and a teenager with a weapon from a distant land. The populace of Samriq found itself wary of these travelers but nonetheless tolerated them. These eccentric types were often heroes, and to tamper with their goings on was dangerous and foolish. These things happened from time to time, and the city lived with or without them.

Rai walked from one building to another. She clutched a single portrait in her hand, on which was painted the face of a man with a ponytail and a beard. She asked each face she saw if they had seen the one in the drawing, and each time they had not. It had been two whole days she'd spent wandering the city, and nobody had seen the man she pursued. She took a seat on a bench and buried her face in her hands, trying to fight the feelings of hopelessness in her belly. Her face began to convulse. This was it. She'd traveled months, possibly even a year.

"You're so stupid...!" The young warrior muttered to herself in between seizures of her jaw and lower lip. Her mouth gasped down gulps of air in the wild, strangled bursts that one can't help but use to punctuate sobs. "It's over, it's hopeless...!" The portrait slipped from her grip and floated away on a gentle stream of wind, its ruffling sounds lost to the gentle din of people going about their day.

Adelaide noticed a young lady crying on a bench. They looked out of place: they carried a weapon and their clothes didn't match that of the city goers. She deciphered that this person must be far from home. Then it hit her that she could see a young lady who was obviously not in her element crying. That simply wouldn't do. It wasn't right. "Hey..." she murmured softly as she approached the younger girl. "What's wrong...?" They didn't seem to hear her, and they also didn't notice the parchment they carried falling from their hand and floating away. Adelaide immediately ran after the paper and snatched at it. It seemed not to want to be captured, though, and danced through the air in just the right way that her outstretched hands never quite touched it. The air carried it up and away, and Adelaide awkwardly ran and squeezed past a crowd in pursuit. No piece of paper was going to outwit her.

The parchment landed on the roof of a small stall. Adelaide jumped over and managed to snatch it up before she crashed into the road and hit her head. She shook her head and returned to her feet, gripping her prize tight. Next step was to return it.

Adelaide approached the girl, who had progressed by now to sobbing full-force. She took a seat next to them and awkwardly clasped her hands in her lap while absently kicking her legs. What to say to them...?

"Hey there," she said in her best calming voice, "what's wrong?" Nothing. She cleared her throat and tried again, a bit louder. "Hey there, what's wrong?" This time got the girl's attention. They looked up at Adelaide and sniffled.

"W-well..." they crossed their arms gloomily. "I'm looking for someone, a-and I've been at it for months, and, and-!" They gulped and clenched their fists. "I went across the entire outer edge of the Empire and n-nobody's seen them! They're gone! He's GONE!" Tears, presumably ones they'd been holding back, poured out from their eyes and their entire body quaked with emotion.

"There, there..." whispered Adelaide, "You'll find them eventually! Okay?" They shook their head. "You want a hug?" They nodded yes. Adelaide pulled them into a light embrace and rested their body against hers. They clung to her torso like a caterpillar resisting the winds of a storm, and Adelaide could tell they needed it. "There, there. Let it out," She rested her chin on their face. The girl's crying went strong for a while, then slowly started to die down. After it had, they found themselves smiling slightly.

"Thank you ma'am."

"I-I'm not a ma'am!" Adelaide shot back by reflex. Then she felt guilty. "Sorry, sorry. You're probably just trying to be polite, aren't you?"

"Mhm."

"Well, you can call me Adelaide. Or if you must, I'd accept Miss. I don't like Ma'am, it doesn't sound right and it makes me feel old."

"Okay, Miss." The girl moved away and Adelaide smiled warmly. They seemed better now. "My name is Rai."

"Hi, Rai." Adelaide smiled. "I like your name."

"Thank you..." they replied, beaming. "My dad gave it to me." Adelaide chuckled.

"It's a pretty name. Suits you." She said quietly, then retrieved the paper. "Here. You dropped this." Rai's eyes went wide and they grabbed the paper, then stuffed it into a bag that they carried.

"Thank you, thank you so much!" Their eyes practically sparkled with joy and they shot to their feet, doing a little bow.

"You're welcome! And tell you what. I'm looking for someone too. Why don't we work together?"

"Really!?"

"Really." Rai reached out and hugged Adelaide, who patted her new friend on the back. Then Rai's stomach grumbled. "Hungry?" They nodded.

"Can't...hunt in the city." Yeah, Adelaide figured, that made sense.

"Well, I have some stuff I can probably trade for money. Failing that I do have some liquor ivy sap."

"Liquor...ivy?" They asked with an expression of confusion.

"Yeah, uh, it's a type of vine that grows in this area. It has sap which is really filling and good for your health but it's also SUPER not fun to actually have to drink the stuff." Rai nodded.

"I'll just take that, really, you don't have to-"

"No, no, no." Adelaide insisted. "We are getting you some actual FOOD for you to EAT and I'm not forcing a child-

"I'm not a child!" Fair enough. They looked to be fifteen or sixteen. Not too much younger than her in the grand scheme of things.

"Okay, yeah, you're right. I'm sorry. But I'm not forcing a teenager to subsist on this grime if I have the option not to."

Alexandria, age twelve, sat in the living room of an abandoned cottage. She had been tied up, and the ropes binding her limbs stung because they were too tight. Her arms and legs were sore from being held in place for so long. The taste and texture of the rope gagging her had been burned into her memory, too, although that one was mercifully not tight enough to bite into her and cause pain. She'd long since run out of tears. Was she going to die? Would she ever see her family again? She pondered whether her brothers would mourn her. And the thought which had been breathing ice down her spine reared its head once more.

They wouldn't. Of course they wouldn't.

She was an unremarkable sibling. She couldn't ride a horse, she struggled to grasp the inane rules of courtly behavior and worst of all, she had been born first...and a woman. Her brothers might lie and say that they missed her, but she knew that nobody in the family wanted a girl as the heir, let alone a bad one like her. Nobody was coming to save her. She was doomed.

The princess supposed she should just accept her fate. There was nothing she could do. She was a lone girl in a world she was unfit for. Maybe if she'd been a better princess, her father would care enough to send someone.

A scream snapped her out of her miasma. She twisted in place to look around the corner but she couldn't see anything. The man watching her slowly crept to the room's entrance and poked his head around. Then somebody smashed a door open and he whipped behind the wall reflexively. More sounds stamped through the room. Sounds of a struggle. The thud of somebody hitting the floor, then the walls rattled from an impact. After that, heavy breathing and another thud. The cottage went silent. The man crept to the shortsword he'd menaced her with when they met. Was he going to kill her...?

"PRINCESS!" It was a...feminine voice? A girl who wasn't much older than Alexandria ran into the room with a pitchfork. Her face was dirty and her body was toned like a working man's. She was saved...! "It's okay, princess, I'm here now." The stranger dropped their weapon. Alexandria's heart spiked. No! They weren't safe yet! The girl approached and drew a knife,

stepping over the pitchfork and kneeling beside her. "Lean over, kay? There, there." Alexandria's eyes dilated and she tried frantically to find where he'd moved. The girl slipped the knife, gently, tenderly, between the back of the princess' head and the rope in her mouth. Alexandria heard movement.

"RMPH!" The princess flung her head forward, snapping the rope on her hero's knife. "GET DOWN!" She hurled her body at the girl and knocked them down. A blade whizzed through the air above them and crashed into the floorboard. The man yanked it free, but he was too slow. The hero skittered across the floor to seize their pitchfork, then charged their attacker with it. They stabbed at his jaw, but missed. The prongs went around his neck and the center struck his throat and drove him against a wall. He dropped his weapon to grab at hers, but it was too late. She twisted. His head bent with a snap at an angle it shouldn't have. His arms instantly went limp and he fell to the floor. Alexandria's hero panted.

"O...okay. NOW it's okay." The girl walked over to the princess and picked her knife back up. "Sit still, okay? You've been through so much. It's over now." Alexandria nodded silently and tears rolled hot down her face. Something changed in her that day. As the heroic girl lead her outside, helped her onto their horse, rode to town to find a guard or a messenger...she had never seen a girl like them before. She liked it. She liked them.

They made her feel safe.

Alexandria woke up. She'd been having that dream a lot recently. It always left tears in her eyes. She didn't mind, though. They weren't sad tears.

She *usually* didn't mind, anyway. Today she minded a little because she couldn't wipe at her face.

On account of being tied up again. Her mouth wasn't, though, at least. She awkwardly wiped her face on her tunic. The men holding her captive dared not say anything about it, though, which she found intensely amusing. The day went as usual, until the ship landed. A frightened ruffian entered the room with a key and used it to open the iron block clamped on her ankles and remove the chain connecting it to the wall. Then lock it again.

"Not letting me walk?"

"Shuttup! You can walk in those just fine, harlo-"

Alexandria shot into the air, crunched her body, and fired both her legs out. Her heels impacted his nose and destroyed it, launching him off his feet to land on his ass. The metal floor hurt her back when she landed, but it was well worth the visceral crunching noise his face had made.

Alexandria awkwardly squirmed and wriggled to her feet so she could smirk down at the dazed criminal.

"Talk shit, get hit." She laughed to herself. "Want to try that again, but politely this time?" He stumbled to his feet with his head drunkenly flopping about like his neck had been replaced with a prosthetic made of especially bendy rubber. The man stumbled with wide shaky steps across the entire cell and slumped against the barred doors.

"How...did you DO THAT!?" He growled. His nose was bent practically at a right angle and blood poured slowly from it. He took slow unsteady breaths. She just shrugged. "We're...at port..." He tried to sharply inhale through his ruined nose and winced in pain. "AAAGH!" Alexandria just chuckled and waddled past him.

"You guys found a buyer?"

"No..." he answered with an evil smile. "A butcher."

Wow, thought Alexandria. And she laughed.

What an idiot.

Alexandria threw herself backwards and rolled across the floor. In seeming defiance of natural law she got her arms around the block encasing her feet and plucked the hairpin her hair was tied around. Now, this may not sound especially frightening, but it is worth mentioning that Alexandria's "hairpin" was a stiletto: a long slender knife with an excellent pointed tip for use in stabbing. The man's eyes grew wide with horror and he silently stared at Alexandria.

"H-how...!?" Alexandria put the blade between her teeth, gripped it, then pressed her bonds against the blade. With reckless abandon she sawed at the rope and sliced it, severing the knot. The ropes fell to the ground and she removed the knife from her teeth, holding it in her left hand. She rose to stand tall, twirling the stiletto and giving a confident smile.

"I'll let your buddies know you personally signed their death warrant." She kneeled and jammed the blade into the keyhole. All it took was some finagling and she picked the lock. The clamps on her ankles loosened enough to let her step out. She stretched her legs and laughed with malicious intent. "Make peace with any gods who might listen. You'll need it."

Adelaide lead her new friend Rai across town. They asked everyone they could about the portrait, and Adelaide asked everyone who had patience about the princess afterwards. Unfortunately, a full day of asking found them nothing. What was more fortunate was the stroke of luck they came across earlier in the day.

Adelaide bumped into a girl wearing a pale red hood and jumped away with a noise of concern. "I'm sorry! You okay?" They turned to face her, eyes a pale silver. The girl had skin a kind of rich, light brown color and a slender face with very subtle cheekbones. Her hair was black, poofy and frizzy, but not very long.

"I'm fine, Miss!" They smiled. Adelaide noticed they had pale silvery eyes and weren't looking straight at her. "How is your day?"

"W-well, we're doing alright." Adelaide saw something moving and suddenly realized that the girl held a small stick made of some kind of smooth material in one hand and had a leash wrapped around the other. Something behind the girl moved to her side and eyed Adelaide warily. It was a huge dog, easily three or four feet at the shoulder, and flame crackled and licked on and off at the air around its paws, jaws, and ears. The creature's tail, which was a bit less than a foot and a half long, was also crackling with flames, but rather than fire spouting from it and vanishing at intervals the tail just steadily smoldered. The beast wore a harness, and the leash the girl held was tethered to that harness.

"Hooray! I'm Nina and this is my seeing eye dog, Barge." Nina smiled wide. "What's your name?"

"I'm Adelaide. This is my friend Rai." Adelaide gestured at Rai. She eyed Barge and fought the urge to ask about him. The idea of an animal companion helping people with their daily tasks was nothing new to her but they usually didn't look like they'd been adopted from the pit.

"Rai? That's not a name the Empire would use. Nor any of its territories. I take it they're not from around here?" Rai nodded. There was an awkward silence. Adelaide stoically punched their shoulder. It took a second for the girl to realize her mistake.

"Oh, uh, yes! Very astute." Rai blushed and scratched nervously at her head. It was cute.

"I'm, ah, not from around here either actually." Adelaide followed. "We're both travelers. We're...looking for people. Have you heard about a foreign looking swordsman with a ponytail or a princess with white hair kidnapped by bandits?"

"I can't say I have." Nina said, putting the stick under her arm and fishing around in her pocket. "But I wanna help. Us outsiders gotta give each other a hand, you know?" She reached out. Her palm contained a few silver pieces and three or four made of copper.

The girl waited for Adelaide to take the change. Then she took her stick and waved it through the air a few times.

"May any winds that bring you change, dear travelers, carry naught but weal. And my blessing I cast upon your next meal." Then the end of the stick got sparkly. Nina muttered what Adelaide could only imagine to be some kind of incantation, then the sparkles glided into the air, swirled around her and Rai, and dissipated. "Have a lovely day, you two!" With that, she spun on her feet and made off. The encounter meant they could at least eat and refill Rai's quiver, even if their queries continued not to bear any fruit.

"So, nobody's seen him. He's probably just not been around this area. Empire's big." Said Adelaide through a mouthful of a bizarre and alien confectionary she had never seen or heard of before. It was called *pasta*. "You said you've crossed the outer edge of the empire?" Rai nodded. "Then we'll just have to go inland!" Adelaide smiled. "We'll find the man, okay?" Rai nodded once more. "I think that's really impressive, making it this far on your own. How old are you?" Rai blushed and looked away.

"I'm...I'm sixteen. I look a bit younger than I am." Adelaide smiled wide. Were they embarrassed? That was so cute!

"Still! A sixteen year old, on their own this far out? That's amazing!" Rai's face turned bright red and they ignored Adelaide entirely to devour what was left of the ration of chicken they'd gotten themselves.

"Y-you're not that much older." Rai pouted. Adelaide had a little giggle and ran the numbers in her head.

"I dunno, I'm nineteen. That's three years and at our age, that's a fair bit. I look a little younger than I am, too. Maybe it's a hero thing." The joke didn't quite land. They finished eating in comparative silence. That night they used the remaining money from what Nina had given them to get a cheap room with one bed and, at her insistence, Adelaide slept on the floor.

Chapter Eight: The Empire

Richard was not pleased. A lesser noble whose house's heir had been implicated in a recent scheme to take the throne, he'd been banished to some middle of nowhere town along the empire's outermost reach and assigned tax collection duty. The relative lack of responsibility was freeing, in a sense, but he could never quite shake the feeling he was going to be stabbed in broad daylight by someone who held a grudge, or at the crown's demand if the safety of distance no longer felt sufficient. He'd never even seen a member of the royal family in his life and his older brother, until a poorly-formed plan lead him to his death, likely hadn't either. Still, despite going unspoken, it was a truth universally known that the emperor had been ruling for so long it was practically unthinkable that an heir, traitor, or other kind of successor had not supplanted them at some point. If it was a different person than it once was who ruled, and their

position had been attained through illegitimate means, they would naturally harbor a sort of paranoia about falling victim to the same.

Richard buried his face in his hands and groaned. His little faux sheriff's office clashed with the design sensibilities of the rest of this little city, even its actual mayor's office (if that was even the form of governance it had, and Richard did not know or care if it was). If these rumors about traveling heroes were true then he could very well be on the hit lists of two or three different parties by the night's end. He opened the door and trudged through to his swivel chair, which he collapsed unceremoniously into. A black bird glared at him from inside a bird cage and seemed to judge him as he spun his chair and muttered.

"What to do...what to do..." he asked himself. If he stayed quiet then the instant word got out he would die. If he told the truth and the town got wind, someone might be enraged enough to try and kill him. If that happened, he knew for a fact nobody from either the city or the empire would bother to aid him. He was some lowly noble with no special skills and he was most notable for being the younger sibling of a failed usurper. He certainly garnered no favor from townfolk, being both the only member of a distant regime most of them interacted with *and* said regime's tax collector. He rested his gaze on the dark-plumed avian and rested his chin in his hands. The dull, dusky air of the office made its eyes look a little more sinister than they usually did.

"..." he thought, and thought, and after he thought he found that he pondered. In the end, he decided that he trusted the silence of his companion more than he trusted gambling on the competence of strangers from lands he knew nothing about. He opened the bird's cage and allowed it to flutter onto his shoulder, where it perched. "Listen closely. Gamma protocol." The bird gave the usual bizarre squawk to signal its orders were clearly heard and completely understood. "Two wanderers sighted in Samriq. Inquiring about a bearded man with a ponytail and a princess taken by bandits. Both carry swords. One magical. Very high likelihood one or both are heroes."

He paused, then nodded to signal the message was over. The bird gave the same squawk. Then it repeated the message in the offputting rich and dulcet tones ravens were wont to adopt in their imitation of human speech. Another nod to confirm it was repeated correctly. Then the raven took to wing and flew from the building in the direction of the nearest outpost. Richard fell back into his chair.

Adelaide woke up with something in her face and moved it aside as she sat up. She groggily remembered that when she fell asleep the previous night she'd been looking at her father's book again. Then she realized sleepily that Rai was staring at her. Specifically the region that seemed to capture their interest was in her upper torso.

"That flower's magic, isn't it?" Oh, right, that. Adelaide felt the thing retreat halfway into her body before she realized there were at least three reasons not to care about hiding it and relaxed, letting it slide back out.

"Oh, uh, this? Yeah." Adelaide yawned. Her back did not feel great. "A, an, uh, fay gave it to me. In a dream. With the, uh, the sword." She gestured at her sword, which leaned against a wall a few feet away from her. "Whenever I'm hurt, this thing seems to immediately pump magic through my body and heal the injury." Rai's mouth dropped open and they made a sort of noise best described as an excited squeal.

"That's so cool! Is there some sort of limit? Condition? Is it going to strangle your heart in vines if you haven't done something by midnight on new year's eve?" Her questions struck Adelaide as...strange.

"Not that I...know of?" Rai smiled.

"Then you're safe! From that, at least. Faye don't use fine print that they haven't at least alluded to. It spoils the fun to win on a technicality if the other person was not at least given the opportunity to ask for the fine print." Adelaide tried to remember the dream.

"It said the flower would give my body the...same strength as my 'indomitable will.' Not sure what that means." When she'd said "indomitable will" she'd performed a gesture with her fingers she'd heard Piper and Alexandria call "air quotes." She had no idea what that meant. "It doesn't seem to make me stronger though. I don't think. Mostly it's just healed me." Rai scrunched up her face and rubbed her fingers together, thinking. Then her eyes lit up.

"Maybe its magic is proportionate to your determination? Like, it'll stop working if you give up or get weaker if you doubt yourself?" Adelaide blinked, taken aback. That made sense.

"How...do you know about magic? Are you a wizard?" Rai laughed and waved dismissively.

"No, no, no, nothing so grand as a wizard. I just, my mom's a witch, so she taught me a few things." An awkward pause. Shadows fell on Rai's face. "Crap, crap, nooo! I'm not supposed to tell anyone!" Rai balled her hands into fists and retreated into a ball, rocking slightly and muttering insults about herself. Adelaide flew onto the bed and gave her a small hug.

"Heyyy, hey, that's alright buddy. I'm not gonna hurt you okay? Your mom sounds lovely." Rai looked up at her and slowly, bit by bit, relaxed. Once Rai had calmed down, Adelaide hopped off the bed and started gathering their things. In a minute, she was ready.

"H-hey, Adelaide? I know sleeping on a hard floor is bad for your back so..." She procured a small bowl with some seeds in it. "I snuck out this morning and bartered information for these and a few coins at an apothecary. I cast a spell on them, too, so if you eat them your bones will

feel better and any muscle fatigue will go away faster." Adelaide gave a gracious thank you and dumped the bowl's contents down her gullet. Sure enough, she felt rejuvenated almost instantly.

"Oh hell, that worked wonders! I like you, kid." Adelaide returned the bowl. Rai giggled.

"I can't actually do all that much, really. I'm nothing special."

"Oh shush, you can do magic!" Adelaide grinned and watched the younger girl ready her sword and bow. "Wait...if you aren't supposed to tell me, why'd you do the thing with the seeds?"

"I was just gonna tell you they were magic, on their own." Rai laughed nervously and pulled out a map. "This is what I got the money for, by the by. I bought a map with it." Adelaide nodded and got behind the younger girl to look at it. Rai had marked the map where she'd been. "Your princess was taken?"

"W-well no, not MY princess," stammered Adelaide with a blush, "I'm not her...oh." Two things occurred to Adelaide at once and embarrassed her quite badly. First, that Rai had simply meant "the princess of your homeland" and not "*your* princess" like one might say to a noble referencing the princess of another land they were enveloped in a whirlwind romance with-and second, that she was about to say she was not Alexandria's knight, which was quite simply a falsehood. "Yes, my princess, I suppose. She was taken. We're from...there." Adelaide tapped the side of the map, with the mountains. A bunch of little pixies with tiny tridents and a cartoonish, oafy looking pirate guy with an axe were drawn over the crude carrot-like symbols representing mountains. She tried not to feel offended that this drawing was somehow belittling her run-in with the awful five-headed hellbeast that wounded Schrodinger. "They took her over the mountains. In some kind of flying ship." Rai nodded.

"Alright, so they'd probably be headed northeast, or at least to somewhere in that direction from here. No big cities for a long while in any direction, and that's the way towards the closest." Well, it was as close to a lead as they had. Rai rolled up the map and put it in their coat's pocket. Then Adelaide realized something she felt dense for not having noticed.

"You wear your coat weird."

"Yeah?" Rai asked, arching one eyebrow. "What of it?"

"Just...I dunno, it seems strange." Adelaide scratched the back of her head. "Just made me curious is all." Rai sighed and fiddled with the clasp.

"It's...an old coat of my dad's. He used to tell me I'd grow into it, that he was proud of how I'd look when it fit. It makes me feel strong, I guess? It reminds me of him." With zero warning Adelaide yanked her into a hug, and made a somewhat bizarre whimpering noise.

"I'm sorry! That's so cuuuute," she half-cried into Rai's shoulder (an impressive feat, given that Adelaide was the taller of the two by at least a quarter to half a foot). They stood there for a moment before Adelaide let go. "Is that...who you're looking for?" Rai nodded. "Well! We're gonna find your dad, I'm sure of it!" Adelaide smiled confidently and made a fist. Rai seemed cheered by her infectious enthusiasm and loosed a shout of excitement herself.

The two asked around the city one more time. This day they only made rounds for a few hours, and in between Rai gave a few streetside performances with her sword. The way she handled the weapon was unlike anything Adelaide had ever seen. The air hummed and danced as her blade sliced through it with a combination of elegance, speed the eye struggled to track, and unspeakable raw force which was both compelling and terrifying. A child saw fit to toss a melon her way and, delighted by this development, Rai turned her back and let the sword hang at her hip...only to turn and easily slip her other hand under it, catching a small slice of the fruit and tilting it so the rest, cut away from the portion in Rai's grasp, sailed through the air on exactly the same trajectory it would've had otherwise. The kid was delighted and their parents seemed to appreciate that, because they left three gold coins and eight or nine silver ones with her before they left and chattered with the child and each other, exchanging many happy laughs and revelling in what they'd seen.

"Oh my gods that was AMAZING!" Adelaide shouted, bouncing on the tips of her shoes. Rai laughed and shook their head.

"No, no, it's nothing special. Just years and years of practice. My dad taught me." The two took Rai's earnings and bought supplies. A tent, a small cauldron, dried meat, torches, and the like. Eventually Adelaide noticed that the storage in Rai's pockets was...a little much.

"How are you doing that?"

"Doing what?" Asked Rai as they casually stored an entire cauldron in their coat pocket.

"THAT! How much room is in there!?"

"Yes."

"Wh-that's not an answer!"

"Magic." Rai shrugged. "I'm not the one who enchanted it. The pockets just have a lot of room." Annoyed but unable to argue with that, Adelaide accepted this and the two carried on with preparations. They chose as their next destination Corderbordair, a small town of a settlement north-northeast of Samriq. The two left Samriq an hour and a half past noon, taking roads well traveled and both feeling more confident in their odds than they previously had.

Chapter Nine: Sunset

Shadowfall glided at a bit beyond a leisurely pace, which was almost as fast as an ordinary bird of its kind could dive. The metal collar around its neck poured gentle, soothing magic through its body which stalled the processes of hunger and weariness, allowing it to continue for up to a week without stopping for rest and to eat as little as a few ounces of seed a month with no penalty. Some of its kind disliked this but put up with it out of necessity, but Shadowfall quite liked the arrangement. It quite enjoyed watching the world around it and couldn't really do that in its sleep. Besides, the collar didn't force the body to forgo food or sleep, its power just essentially negated the consequences of going without them.

Shadowfall gazed at the world below it. The road was paved, now. It was inside the Man's Nest proper. Now, dear reader, one must understand that, for all its enhancements in both body and mind, and for the upsetting cleverness of even the standard raven you might know, Shadowfall was, at the end of the day, a bird. A bird with magically amped-up muscles, a collar which allowed it to fly almost indefinitely, and some extra computing power in its head and limited innate magical abilities, but a bird nonetheless. Birds do not typically think of things in the same way people do, and if they did I suspect many would, much like Shadowfall, pay little heed to the goings-on of human governments and geopolitical powers. They are, after all...birds. Except global warming. They might have something to say about global warming.

Shadowfall knew it was in the empire's territory, its *actual* territory and not just the outlands it controlled, but it neither knew nor cared what an "Empire" was. It followed the gravelly road towards the Central Southwest Information Center, or as Shadowfall's thoughts might label it if they were translated into English, the Place With The Annoying Lady That Doesn't Share Her Sugary Human Foods. Shadowfall was not fond of the Place With The Annoying Lady That Doesn't Share Her Sugary Human Foods. The bird's destination was on the other side of one of the big steel forests humans in the Man's Nest had constructed. This was one of the smallest instances of the unnatural biome unique to the Man's Nest, but it was still a sight to behold. Shadowfall flew towards it.

When the metal forest was in view, an unshakable sense of malice seemed to pulsate beneath Shadowfall. It looked down and saw a human riding an animal. It swooped down and pulled into a glide to get a closer look, letting it see that the figure below it was riding a skeleton.

Something was wrong.

Without warning, the human whipped out a silver instrument the bird recognized as a one-handed variant of that loud weapon humans liked. And pointed it up.

Oh no.

Shadowfall's heart exploded into a terrified frenzy. Below it the human fired its weapon three times. Shadowfall wheeled through the air and felt gusts of wind as the metal blood seeds of its attacker's lethal weapon rocketed past it. It immediately dove to pick up speed careening wildly side to side as metal pellets speared empty space inches from its wings and disappeared. The hooves of the human's awful steed grew louder and it galloped horribly fast, gaining on Shadowfall.

It couldn't outrun this hunter. It had to outsmart it.

But this hunter was a human. With both a weapon and a mount.

If Shadowfall had any notion of a last will it might be distracted thinking who would take its shiny things, but Shadowfall's mind had far fewer concepts such as inheritance in it than complex memorized tasks and the specific noises its handlers made to let it know when to do them. Shadowfall pulled up as a sixth and seventh shot failed to puncture its body. The man had to fix it before it could fire any more.

Shadowfall saw an alley and pivoted instantly to vanish into it. A sense of victory bloomed in its heart as it sailed over a Mesh Wall, but that sense was obliterated when the pursuer crashed through it, hot on Shadowfall's talons. Shadowfall pulled in to rise inches from a wall and soared straight up until it cleared the top of the building.

And the terrible skeleton thundered up after it, the abomination's horrible bone-hooves breaking bricks and ripping them from the wall as it roared upwards and left a cloud of dust in its wake. Shadowfall dove and swerved to the side, flying as fast as it could and ignoring the beautiful sight of the sun in the glass windows. The hunter rode along the rooftops, jumping from one to another and firing whenever they got an opportunity. Each blood seed ejected from the thunderous herald of demise was a jarring clang at Shadowfall's death knell, and each time it swerved wildly to avoid certain death. After flying at uncontrollable speeds across several buildings Shadowfall dove-they spotted an open door. With startling accuracy the bird deftly whipped a full two hundred seventy degree turn in and instant, pulled its body into a vertical position, and flew through the narrow space of a closing door with nanosecond to lose. Shadowfall wasted no time hurtling to a nearby staircase and ascending directly up the middle with terrified, frenzied flapping. It heard feet drumming rapidly after it. It was being hunted on foot.

Shadowfall turned and flew into an office, swirling and rolling through the air to dodge people as it frantically looked for an open window. It saw one cracked ajar by mere inches five feet away and slammed its wings as hard as it could to launch its body at the opening. Behind it, Shadowfall heard four shots, then horrified noises of humans rushing for cover, and then the projectiles ricocheting madly. By focusing on those noises above the panicked crowd, Shadowfall predicted exactly how and when to unfurl its body to avoid being obliterated.

Its body crossed the boundary to outside the building and Shadowfall beat its wings once to interrupt its decent, then twisted its head one way and its wings another. Glass shattered behind the bird as four bullets simultaneously whizzed past it: one passed between its talons, one sailed less than an inch over its head, and one passed between the curled lengths of each wing, ripping out a few of Shadowfall's feathers.

The raven immediately flew to the side as hard as it could and it heard the human jump out the newly made hole in the building behind it. A light flashed behind the glass a few yards ahead of Shadowfall-

BOOM!

Fire, smoke and shattered glass roared ahead of Shadowfall in a big black ball of death. The raven was punched in the beak by a wall of intense force, violently ripped from its flight path and thrown down and backwards. Towards certain doom. Shadowfall immediately regained its senses and turned into the force of the blast, turned the attack's momentum into its own and *wooshing* into the air above the building. The horrible bone beast followed in hot pursuit, extending an unnaturally long neck to snap at Shadowfall with a beak made of bone. It swerved left and right to evade each strike and cleared the building, then beat its wings furiously to escape. The monster jumped from the edge of the roof to land on it and its mouth started glowing blue. The sky ahead seemed to darken as Shadowfall flew forward, then instinct suddenly told it to dive. A bolt of lightning punched through the air where it had just been and a deafening scream of raw power tore the ears of every living thing in the city.

The sky was not an option.

Shadowfall turned vertically and flew along the edge of a building of the sort it called a Sky Tooth. The wall was entirely of windows. Glass shattered behind it in droves as the hunter's steed ran at speeds no animal should.

Shadowfall began to serpentine as one snap f another of the bone monster's horrible face tried to seize it. It saw in the reflection of the glass that the human stood, gripping a big hat in one hand as they marched slowly up the creature's spine. Shadowfall pressed forward with everything it had and continued to dodge. One strike, another. The man arrived on the beast's skull and half-crouched. Wind blasted at all three members of the chase as they roared across the building leaving a trail of shattered glass. The man reached out and...his fingers...almost had the bird...

Shadowfall slowed a bit. As soon as the human made their move, the trap was sprung. The bird dragged every last molecule of adrenaline from deep in its primal brain and surged forward, zipping around a corner to perform an instant ninety degree turn. The man lost his balance and fell. Shadowfall did not.

Shadowfall flew.

Shadowfall fled.

Adelaide and Rai consulted their map. They were almost at Corderbordair. Travel was going smoothly, and an almost suspicious number of birds and small animals kept wandering within the sight of the road for Rai to snipe.

"We really need to thank that witch if we ever meet her again." Rai said quietly as she skinned that day's dinner, which was a rabbit.

"Who? Your mom?"

Rai groaned in annoyance and gave Adelaide a scolding look. "No, the girl with the dog who couldn't see. She was a witch."

"Ohhh," Adelaide responded, realizing suddenly that the sparkly thing that girl had given them did seem to be paying off with the good fortune it promised. "How can you tell? Aren't witches...um...usually old lady hermit types?" Adelaide realized that was probably a stereotype and felt bad.

"No. Sort of. A witch is just a practitioner of magics that come from nature without being completely tied to it. Generally either non-sedentary or live in the woods. Spooky forests, like, magically attract them." Adelaide nodded. This made sense. "The stereotype actually describes a *hag*, which is...something else." Rai retrieved a canteen from one of her pockets and downed a small swig of water. "And getting them confused is *extremely* rude."

Adelaide gulped and sputtered out a nervous apology. Rai accepted it.

"Anyway, witches tend to attract a certain...bitterness. People in power tend not to like them for...various reasons. Stereotyping, feeling threatened by the free help that more kindly ones give to the masses for no or little price, a general distrust of forms of power that one does not possess...a soul that carries enough magic, left to simmer in that bitterness for too long...sometimes, it changes people. Makes them cruel, uncaring. They try to deal with the pain by becoming the one who inflicts it. That affects the body too...they become monsters. It affects each one differently, but beyond a certain point it can never truly be undone all the way. They lose sight of who they are, cease to be who they are. The person, their personality, it dies, it's...replaced by something evil."

They came to a stop.

"My mom told me to avoid them at all costs, never start a conflict with one and that if I must fight, to kill them quickly and offer a prayer to who they once were. But, in short, no. Witches are not by and large dangerous. They mostly just want to live in peace and in some cases also help people." Adelaide swallowed.

"I'm...sorry."

"It's...okay. Just, no more of that."

"No more. Promise."

They walked in silence for a few hours, then made camp off the side of the road. Rai cooked the rabbit she'd slain earlier and the two split the game, along with some dried vegetables and meat. Night came. In the morning they continued. The awkward silence slowly abated and was replaced by questions about Rai's father. They were genuine, and the sincere glee with which Rai answered made Adelaide extremely happy.

"He's calm, and smart, and he taught me everything I know about my sword." Rai sported a fond smile as she recalled gentle days. "He's from a faraway land, and I wanna go visit it someday if I can. That's, uh, why my sword is how it is." She patted the sword. "He used to read me stories and proverbs out of these books he carried with him, every night, as we went to sleep. He left them behind but..." Rai sighed. A shadow fell over her face. "I can't read them." This piqued Adelaide's interest. She gave Rai a sunny smile.

"I can't read either! We could learn-" Rai shook her head sadly.

"I can read. Just not the language the books were written in. My father never taught me his mother tongue." That struck Adelaide as peculiar but she dared not to pry further. She placed a hand on Rai's shoulder.

"I'm sorry. We'll find him, okay? And you'll get to visit his homeland, I'm sure." Rai teared up a little and gave thanks. Adelaide took one of the younger lady's hands in her own and gave a reassuring squeeze. Rai felt something akin to a sunrise in her heart.

"Thank you. What about the person you're after? The princess?" They walked quietly for a moment as Adelaide looked for words. With some hesitation, she started to answer.

"She's sweet. Confident. Giving. When we first met I saved her from some kidnappers with a pitchfork and a knife my dad left me. That was the first time I'd ever fought another human being, I think. I was...thirteen? She was a bit younger, I want to say twelve. It was harrowing. I'm amazed she's not more scarred by it. Visibly, anyway." They stopped to watch a bird flying by. Rai considered taking a shot but chose to preserve her remaining arrows. Also, that would

require letting go and she had never held hands before. She quite liked it. "She treats all her maids well. Gives them self defense classes and pays them heftily. Goes into towns to deliver wealth and pay for doctors and repairs and such as often as she can." Rai's wide grin came to bare the slightest bit of a frown at its ends.

"She's...a princess, right?"

"Yeah, why do you ask?"

"Well..." Rai gulped. She had to choose her next few words carefully. "That...sounds like it would be trouble...for her, right? Wouldn't her family get all tut tutty about it?" Adelaide considered whether to point out the stereotyping her younger friend had done, but seeing as the ordinary noble (her "family" included) did so much harm to the common folk and how literally none she knew except herself (who, she noted, had technically ceased to be nobility in taking this quest) and Alexandria were not that way, she decided Rai had done nothing worthy of admonishment. Besides, she was *right* in her observation.

"Yeah, her dad and her brothers hate it about her. When they try cutting her funds she just steals from them though. I think her dad even tried to have her killed a few times."

"He WHAT?" Adelaide laughed nervously. She always forgot how bizarre that sounded.

"Yeah, multiple assassins have come after her but they always seem to suffer some catastrophic failure on account of bad luck and die. She never seemed all that put off."

"As...assassin?" Rai asked with a quizzical expression. "What's that word mean?"

"Well," Adelaide started, "They're like a warrior or a mercenary, but with no honor. They don't fight in battles, they get hired to seek out a specific person and kill them. Preferably, they do so in a way that makes it hard to tell who did it or that gives no evidence they were involved at all. They keep their employers a secret, too."

"So, like a ninja?"

"What's a ninja?"

"Like what you described except they mostly eavesdrop and stuff."

"Yeah, I guess!"

The two continued to exchange questions and stories. Rai told of the first time she killed a deer, of her mother teaching her which mushrooms were safe to eat and which weren't, and her father teaching her how to use a sword. Adelaide talked about her birth father, her arguments with her

adoptive one, and musical performances she saw with Alexandria and her adoptive father. They laughed, learned, and grew closer. All the while, they walked. The city of Corderbordair came within a day's journey, and they found a grove of trees next to the road which featured within it a clearing next to a little waterfall.

The clearing was beautiful. Water gently trickled along a river that sparkled beautifully in the evening sun. Grass and little flowered speckled the ground next to it and seemed almost to bounce in the gentle zeitgeist of moving air. The trees' leaves floated lazily like sheets of paper to the ground and the waterfall's soft constance provided soothing sound. The sky was a rich pink, and soon the sun would descend. Remembering both the failure that a mad dash for her objective had consistently brought, and that her princess' life was at the very least unlikely to be considerably endangered, an idea came to Adelaide.

"Ever seen a sunset?" Asked Adelaide.

"No." Rai answered. Adelaide gasped. The sun's rays were beginning to dwindle. They'd not be getting much farther anyway.

"Let's stop and watch." Rai reluctantly nodded and sat down. Adelaide followed suit. The two sat and witnessed as the gold glorious sun sleepily sank beneath the horizon, and the pinks and reds and yellows of the sky intensified and danced. The light in their cozy little space transformed with the infinite expanse above them. Rai sat transfixed for over an hour until the sun had vanished entirely. The last crimson and pink slipped under the horizon in pursuit of their golden master and the quiet sounds of grasshoppers began to sing from around them.

"That was...beautiful." Rai muttered, moved. Adelaide lied down on her back.

"Mhm. Sleep tight little buddy."

Chapter Ten: Information

Annabell Jet, or Kite Anne as her underlings and enemies often called her, walked on heavy steps into her station at the Central Information Spire. She had forgone the grey and brown suit of magical armor she sometimes wore in favor of normal clothes and a flowing white coat. Her face made it readily apparent to any onlooker that she had not slept well recently. It had an almost caricaturish squareness to it and the bags under her eyes were more pronounced than usual. She gripped a teacup by the handle in her right hand and a clipboard with paper bearing a list of the day's duties under her other arm. She collapsed into her plush commandery chair and resisted the urge to melt onto the silver panel in front of her. The woman took two long gulps of piping hot coffee from the cup and then placed it on the small table next to her seat. One of her coworkers burst into the room. It looked urgent.

"Ma'am!" She rolled her eyes and swiveled to face him.

"What is it?"

"W-well." He saluted. "Lots of troubling news to report!" She rolled her eyes. Of course there was. There was never trouble on a day she wasn't already stressed out. She took another swig and motioned for him to give it. "Well, the good news is one of our stolen ships was recovered in some two-bit kingdom where its hijackers had died."

"And the bad news?"

"W-well, there's a message from the Center Southwest Information Center. Two travelers with swords were in Samriq, looking for a foreigner and a princess. Both have swords, one is of a rare type and the other is probably magic. They're most likely heroes." Annabell sunk her face in her hands and made the kind of noise someone having a bad day might if they poured a bowl of sugary cereal to relax and, despite having purchased it two days ago, chipped a tooth on their first bite because it was so stale. "So, um. That. Also it sounds like the raven which reported this had an encounter with Gunpowder Sunset on the way there." At this Annabell froze halfway through taking a drink. Piping hot liquid poured out of the cup and burned her.

"SON OF A BASTARD!" She screamed as she jumped and flailed. Coffee got on her control panel and made it spark. She cursed again and gestured. The air seemed to bend and refract as a panel-like body of glass formed within it, reflecting her wild antics, then shattered and stabbed dozens of sharp pieces into the panel. This destroyed it instantly. The soldier, not keen on being shanked by magical air glass or having his face melted, left quietly but nevertheless in a hurried panic. Annabell grimaced at her ruined console even as she muttered incantations to reduce the heat of the liquid scalding her and channel that heat out and away from her faster. Once it was down to mildly uncomfortable levels she kicked the table over and screamed from deep in her lungs.

The town of Corderbordair was not a particularly breathtaking one, but it was a welcome sight to Adelaide and Rai alike. The small buildings, dirt roads and open air reminded Adelaide of the rustic countryside that raised her and while its humble form afforded no such nostalgic comforts to the younger warrior, it was far closer than most of the Empire's locales to the quaint cottage where they'd grown up amidst the wilderness.

The houses were different from those Adelaide recalled, but not in a way she'd be able to put to words. They were square-shaped, had windows, and some were even multiple stories high despite still looking gentle and homely. Rai almost immediately left on her own to investigate

what herbal remedies, flowers, and other new things this place might be able to teach her about, but not before handing Adelaide two of a trio of rabbits she'd caught that morning. It took Adelaide a minute or two to understand the implication, but eventually she realized she was meant to sell them, took the bodies to a butcher, and did just that.

After carrying out the exchange, Adelaide took the meager earnings it had gotten her and explored. The people of the town resembled the peasants where she came from, but there didn't seem to be any of the large tracts of land for them to farm. In fact, the ground on which the town stood seemed terribly unused. A whim overtook her and, following it to its conclusion, the jacketed knight wandered what seemed to be the entire town with her eyes peeled specifically for the sight of any land being put to use. Instead, she found nothing. Confused how this could be, she started to ask about it. One passerby after another eyed her awkwardly and left as if they had suddenly always been late for something. Half a dozen, a dozen, two of them. She found nothing. Frustration started to build. Was she insulting her culture? They'd all seemed more defeated than angry, so she doubted that was what drove them to react how they did. Eventually she gave up and went to a tavern, one that had a boar's face emblazoned onto the entrance using blue paint.

Adelaide had never been to a tavern before she departed on this quest. She never strayed all that far from the castle after she'd been adopted, except at the insistence of Alexandria or father. Well, that and when doing so let her help some of the family's servants with their lives or duties. Men and women (but mostly men) sat at round wooden tables with three legs each, conversing or playing cards or absorbing whole tankards of ale into themselves. She made her way to the bar and sat next to a young man about her age, perhaps slightly older than herself, who had dark skin and a sleek beard.

"You're not from around here, are you?" They asked with an inquisitive grin. There was something...almost hostile about their tone, but Adelaide couldn't quite put a finger on it.

"N-no, I'm not," she awkwardly forced out. "Perceptive! What gave it away?" They laughed forcefully and slapped the counter repeatedly with a powerful hand. All the tension seemed to dissolve.

"I like this one!" He shouted to nobody, then turned to face her.

"It's obvious, mate. What you're wearing isn't any local fashion and you carry what looks like an officer's sword without bearing the Empire's colors. If you WERE from around here you'd have too many enemies to be strutting about like that." Adelaide slowly nodded. That made enough sense. "What's your name, stranger? Actually, no, don't give me an answer. Dangerous for you. Or maybe risky is a better word."

"Risky?" Adelaide asked, audibly astounded. "How so?"

"Well," the man started just in time to pause and down a swig of some truly rancid smelling alcohol, "The guy who runs this town is cruel but very...hands-off. Doesn't like dealing with us rabble. So what he does, is he has our little establishment, by which I mean Corderbordair, not this tavern," another pause. More of his drink. Adelaide saw without meaning to that it was black and bubbly. She did not like that. "Cursed. Every night at midnight the curse asserts itself on twelve or so random people. Then, the next night at midnight, it moves to different people and instantaneously informs him of everything seen, said, or thought deeply about by the previous day's afflicted."

He sighed and took a deeper gulp. "Last guy was worse I guess. Instituted what he called the 'Land Rite.' You notice how nothing's grown here, stranger?" Adelaide nodded her head. "That damn law is why. Basically if you try to grow food, it belongs to him. Failing to both inform him of and provide his people with all of it is grounds for execution. New guy only does imprisonment. Big whoop. None of us ever come back alive anyway." Adelaide felt ill and it must have shown in her face.

"That's...unforgivable," she gasped out. All this perfectly good soil was right here. There weren't any spaces for big farms, maybe, but taking away someone's ability to feed themselves without your help..."Surely he can't do that?" The man snickered and downed more, giving her an almost condescending look. It didn't bother her. She'd be acting similarly, in his shoes. "What...I don't understand. What's even the point?"

"Control. Cruelty. Evil. Who even knows. Not like he'd tell you a truthful answer." The man finished his beverage. "We have to trade for food. Money from selling wild game and the water in a nearby spring that's rich with magical energy, mostly. We used to be partners with a mining town but its mines are starting to run dry." Adelaide nodded softly. "New guy set up a system that prevents us as a town from being 'taken advantage of,' but where's the sense in that!" More laughter. This time it was dark and sad. "How kind, making sure his underlings don't shove us TOO hard back under his wheel." A healthy mix of depression and rage had taken root at the base of Adelaide's spine. She couldn't just pass through the town and leave things unchanged.

There was a time of silence as she thought. The bartender seemed to notice that she wasn't looking so well and brought her a drink, insisting it was free both of charge and of alcohol. At the man's insistence, and hoping that her flower could mend poisoning like it could injury, Adelaide drank some. It helped quell her stomach, but not her mood.

"Any idea where this new guy presides?" She eventually asked. More bleak laughter. The man sitting beside Adelaide eyed her with an expression of amusement.

"He's the local baron. Has a small castle to the east with its own town he bleeds dry in a similar fashion. You think he'll listen to some random traveler?"

"No," said Adelaide, "But he might listen to a hero." At this the man guffawed once more, slamming his palm on the table three times with such force it was almost painful to watch.

"What, are you going to impress him with your iron-clad morals? Wow him with tales of compassion until he mends his ways?"

"No." Answered the young knight, fire burning in her pupils. Her hair seemed to light up a little bit. "I'm going to put a tyrant where they belong-in a closed casket." There was silence. The man maintained his skeptical grin but did not laugh this time.

"Do you have comrades? An army?" Adelaide shook her head. She had Rai, but dragging the younger girl into this might not be a good idea. "You're a fool. He'll be replaced, just like the last one. The Empire will bring its heel on your skull until it's crushed."

"Perhaps," Adelaide answered, feeling bravery welling in her gut as she considered the choice she was about to make, "But I'd rather die than allow an injustice like this to live." The parts of her that remembered her life as a farmhand were churning. Depending on money and other people to sustain oneself was all too familiar to her. If she had the power to change that situation for someone else, she wouldn't be able to live with herself after consciously deciding she would not. Maybe he was right. Maybe she was screwed. She didn't care.

"You're really just...doing this?" The man asked her. "Baron Ghast is an accomplished sorcerer. You could very well be killed by him alone." That could be an obstacle. She'd never fought a magician before. Or was that not the right word? What even *was* a sorcerer, anyway?

"Yes." She said with slightly less enthusiasm. "I won't stand by while something like this continues." The man seemed to size her up for a moment. His eyes changed, as though her determination was proving infectious.

"Well...if you do what you're saying, good luck. I don't expect you'll manage, but godspeed to you on the attempt."

On the way out, Adelaide found herself wondering whether this was a good idea. That line of thought vanished when she saw a young man standing outside a small house, flanked by two people whose bodies were hidden beneath suits of armor made from purple and black plating. Each gripped in one hand a wicked looking poleaxe, and one used the other to contain the back of their poor victim's tunic while the other presented a potted plant.

"There's no record of this in your lord's possession!" Sneered the one holding him in place. Adelaide tried to conceal herself in plain sight so she could keep watching, using the onlookers as cover. "And yet here it is! Isn't it!?"

"Please!" Sobbed the man, trembling and flailing uselessly. Streams of tears ran unsteadily down the jagged bone structure of his underfed visage. "I only grow a pitiful amount to feed my children!"

"Shove it!" The one holding him stomped with a foot clad in an iron boot, which made a visceral crunch as it no doubt destroyed several of the thin fragile bones in the toes below it. The man screamed in pain and his pleas dissolved into unintelligible gibbering.

"They were grown in imported soil!" Shouted one of the onlookers. The soldier holding the pot threw it down and destroyed it, scattering dirt all about. Then, with a guttural scream, he took his polearm in both hands and wildly hacked the plant to pieces. "ON WHOSE LAND, SMARTASS!" Adelaide glared and tightened her fists until her knuckles went white. She'd seen enough.

"Hey! You, in the plate!" She stomped forward, face set in defiance. Adelaide drew her sword, which gleamed in the sunlight, then pointed it at the thug in a uniform who held the poor man. "That's quite enough!" Her two newest enemies seem to pause in regard of her for a moment. The one she'd decided was her quarry shoved his victim away. The man stumbled face first into their house and took to cowering in a ball.

"And who are you, girl?" That one asked, taking a combative stance and gripping their weapon in both hands. Adelaide saw at this point that bits of silver seemed to decorate both their suits of armor at points, mostly along their limbs and shoulders. The one who'd just spoken had an emblem on the chest of his, two, which Adelaide reasoned probably marked him as the superior. She nicknamed him Mand in her mind (short for Commander), and dubbed the other Shouty.

"A traveling hero," She gave as her retort with a confident grin, "who refuses to watch evil prosper." Both of them snickered and chuckled, which only pissed her off more.

"Oh, my apologies, *Hero*. I forgot that laws don't exist if your type don't like them." Mand shot back. Shouty's body visibly shook with laughter. "You're in the wrong neighborhood, little girl. The Empire doesn't enjoy heroes sticking their noses everywhere. Now, why don't you go off and run on home?" Her skin and face heated up with anger.

Both of these men were **dead**.

Adelaide shot off across the ground and swung at Mand's throat. He twisted and caught her sword beneath his axe, yanking it aside and to the ground. The change in momentum took Adelaide off balance-she tumbled to the ground with little fanfare.

"Another overeager kid," Mand muttered with a tangible layer of disgust. "You!" He took a hand from his weapon and pointed half-heartedly at Shouty. "You kill her. I'm not paid to dirty my

hands on peasants." Adelaide watched from the ground, getting angrier. When the axe came down-

It hit dirt. Adelaide rolled between her attacker and his weapon, landing in a crouch and twisting into a punch. Her fist struck a flimsy piece of armor on the side of Shouty's knee, pulling it out from under him and into a formation the joint was never meant for. She sprang to her feet and tore the weapon from Shouty's hands, then, before either soldier could react, she smashed the bottom end of the pole into Shouty's throat. It made a horrible noise and he started thrashing in a vain attempt to breathe. The lackey was a goner, and his commander remained. Adelaide took a stance of her own, the poleaxe glinting in the sun as her sword had earlier in the fight.

"...Oh, come on." Mand groaned heavily. "I can't believe he got himself killed attacking an unarmed target that was ALREADY KNOCKED DOWN." A deep inhale. "I'm going to kill you, grab the convict, go home, and forget any of this happened." Suddenly-

Something moved behind him! A flash! The wind surged! Rai was behind the man, sliding her sword into its sheath. Mand's weapon slipped from his fingers and clattered on the road. Blood trickled from the back of his neck.

"My comrades' enemies are my own," Rai muttered, her jacket-cape fluttering madly. "Go to hell." Mand tried to turn in place to strangle his assailant but his body was numb. Armored knees buckled and sent him crashing to the dirt. His face, hidden behind a visor, spasmed in the throes of death.

And after that, the streets of Corderbordair went quiet.

Chapter Eleven: Another, Smaller Quest

"Thank you." Adelaide said to Rai as she retrieved her own sword and put it back in its sheath. "How'd you do that?"

"A lot of practice," was Rai's answer. She blushed and looked away, not accustomed to her skills being treated as so impressive. Adelaide giggled and patted the younger girl's head, then turned to the man on the ground.

"Hey, you there. You okay?" He nodded shakily and got to his feet. The crowd made all sorts of noise, awed at the two.

"Wh, why'd you...help me?" He asked. Adelaide shrugged.

"Right thing to do. They'd have carted you off to prison, wouldn't they?" The man nodded at her, fearfully wringing his hands. His crying hadn't stopped, but it was considerably slower now.

"Yeah. And I, I'd have died there. I owe you my life!" One, two heavy gulps of air. His face was taut like fish out of water. "I can never repay you, I'm so sorry, but, but I do have something I can give in return, I have-" Adelaide raised a single finger in a gesture suggesting that he stop talking. The man's speech sputtered to a stop, slowly and awkwardly. He eyed her, his face uncertain.

"I will not ask payment for saving you. You're struggling as it is." Adelaide gave him a warm, patient smile. Then she walked in a small circle, extending the gentle kindness in her eyes to everyone present before she turned it back to him. "I-or rather, I guess, we- have a bag or two of liquor ivy sap, and the body of a freshly deceased rabbit. Take it, okay?" On cue, Rai produced from her coat's mystical pockets the things Adelaide had named, and handed them to the man in need. He clutched them to his weak tattered ribs and looked desperately at the two of them.

"Why...why are you doing this?" He asked. His voice cracked with effort and disbelief. Again, Adelaide gave him a shrug.

"Cause it's the right thing to do. That's what we heroes are for, isn't it? Doing battle for the weak when they are unable to fight for themselves." Adelaide turned on her heels. She'd crossed a line from which there was no, could BE no, return. From here forward, she was an enemy of the Empire. The odds of killing the Baron before midnight were zero. The chance that, by that time, not one of those afflicted by the curse would know of this conflict were similarly insignificant. Even if it happened by some miracle that all afflicted by the curse made it to midnight ignorant of the two guards killed in the street, with each passing day the odds of the curse failing to inform him shrank ever smaller. She couldn't back down. The gauntlet was thrown. She WOULD rise to the challenge.

"Rai, stay in this village. Go hunting and share what you catch." She made her way on heavy steps towards the town's eastern entrance. More and more people gathered watching her. Her sword and her hair seemed to glow, and they both felt a little warm. Near the town's edge, she felt something tug at her sleeve and give her pause. It was Rai.

"You can't go alone," they muttered, glaring at the ground before them. "You can't do this on your own." Rai's voice was shaky and concerned, but Adelaide was not going to be swayed.

"And you're fifteen years old, Rai. I can't drag you into this." She shot back. "Thank you for saving me. I don't doubt your ability but I will *not* endanger a child." She tugged against Rai's grip; there was resistance, but only briefly. Adelaide trudged a bit farther. She heard Rai making a noise behind her but couldn't make out any words...only pain. The former noblewoman felt cruel, but she was certain deep down that dragging her companion into this lopsided contest of might would be a far greater cruelty. "I'm sorry. These people need help too. I don't know if it's that girl's blessing, or some talent of yours, but your foraging skills are amazing. Please?" The sounds stopped. There was no acceptance of what she said, but it was still the best she could hope for.

"W-wait!" Shouted a boy, about fourteen. Both young women turned to face him. He brought a horse, humble but nevertheless majestic in that way every horse is. "My...the guy you saved, his wife is good friends with my dad. I told him about the fight, he said to give you this!" The boy lead the horse to Adelaide and put the reins in her hands.

"A...horse? How did you keep this animal alive?" Adelaide asked almost as soon as the thought formed in her brain. The boy scratched the back of his head and took a moment to find words for his explanation.

"Well, we have...we have a deal with the baron. Horses help us gather the local water from that magical spring, so my family is allowed to grow enough food to sustain them using pots full of magic soil. I think my dad feels guilty about it, since that's where Ghesap-he's the chap you saved!-that's probably where he got the idea. My family would share the extra grain and apples but all the food our magic dirt grows is toxic to people. If we can help by lending you this, we're eager to do it." Adelaide nodded and mounted the horse. She chose not to mention what happened to her last horse she borrowed, feeling confident she'd be able to keep this one alive without an evil magical mountain range or giant five-headed monster seeking its blood.

"I'll return when the Baron is dead," Adelaide cried to the now dense crowd behind them. It seemed as though the town's entire population had come to watch. "Rai, I leave the townspeople to you!"

Adelaide had followed the roads for a day or two. There were signs, and while she couldn't read them there was only one path that went east. She hoped quietly that both Rai and Alexandria were doing alright. This was going to be her first encounter with any sort of nobility within the Empire and they'd almost certainly know she was coming. Depending how exactly the curse worked, they might even know her name and face already. She wasn't exactly eager to face more of the soldiers that had put her on the back foot so easily, but it was something she had to do eventually. Her sword felt warm at her hip and it had seemed to glow slightly since the incident at Corderbordair.

"In addition I leave thee a magical sword; let thy believers empower it as they embolden thy heart."

Adelaide remembered the figure in her dream saying so, after they'd stabbed the flower into her. Was it growing stronger as more people believed in her? She supposed it must be. The sword hadn't done anything particularly magical since she'd woken up with it in her bed, but at the same time she hadn't given it the opportunity to do anything in quite the same way that she'd tested the mettle of the flower buried in her sternum. She recalled, as her new steed lazily

trotted across the dirt road, that in her father's tall tales of heroes and brave knights their weapons often had names. She slipped hers from its sheath to examine the blade, which glittered nicely in the gentle morning sun. Perhaps she ought to bequeath it one. It felt presumptuous, though-such names were given on creation by their makers, or otherwise granted by the welder's peers-or those they used it to save-after its loyal service enabled specific acts of dashing and heroism. To name one's own armament, simply out of a feeling resembling obligation, felt self-congratulatory. She wasn't a hero yet, after all. Rather, Adelaide was just a knight on a quest. Two quests, actually, at the moment. This thought lead her back to more pressing matters.

She knew nothing about this Baron Ghast, other than his name, the curse, that damnable law he upheld, and that he was proficient in some sort of magic. She realized she could potentially run into trouble if she had difficulty identifying him, on top of the more obvious perils of arriving on the property of a noble seeking their head without the element of surprise to shade one from the bloodthirsty spears of the target's guard. This had put her on the back foot mentally for the last few days, and it had taken a bit to come to any kind of plan that felt helpful. In the end, she'd figured she would have to hang around in the castle town and try to investigate the subject.

The town of Corbrint was a bigger one than Corderbordair; it was closer in both scale and style to those of Samriq than to the place Adelaide was on a mission to liberate. She arrived on her horse to see bustling streets and a lively market. A quick ride around its simple network of roads lead her past stalls of all sorts where people with varied skin tones, body types and styles of clothing were selling goods of many kinds. Ore, fruit, dried meats, spices and salts changed hands following small sacks of coin. Adelaide dismounted before long and allowed her borrowed horse to be tethered at a kind of small rental stable, which took the form of a dark green tent with stakes. She watched as the man she'd payed tied her horse to one, whereupon runes she did not recognize glowed upon its surface and a small chamber made of ethereal wood popped into existence around the beast.

While Adelaide was distracted, the man pressed something wet and flat to the back of her hand. It left a green and red symbol that looked like a horse with the pointed teeth of a hunter.

"Wha-"

"Stamp." The man replied impatiently. "Yer horse is in a magically expanded space. 'Fore I let you take it back we remove the stamp and it'll leave a mark for an hour, looks like a number, based on how long you've had the stamp. Higher the number, more you owe."

"And..." answered Adelaide, fear caught in her throat, "if...I can't pay..."

"Horse is mine." The man glared. "If'n Less you wanna go vacationing in debtor's prison."

Right, time limit. Adelaide laughed nervously, signalled she understood, and walked away to find clues. She didn't make it far before she ran into a familiar face. Sort of. She bumped into someone wearing a green and yellow coat, opened her mouth to apologize, and was cut off.

"Hellooooo, Little Knight!" The figure turned around, vibrant blonde hair and toothy (practically fanged) grin making her heart flutter.

"Schrodinger!" She cried. The two hugged tightly for a second. They felt nice...wait...

When Adelaide and the actor pulled away, she realized their body was different. Curves in the chest and hips. Slimmer shoulders, longer legs and fingers.

"I'm a girl right now, kay?" They giggled. Adelaide nodded and tried not to blush. The heat filling her face politely let her know that her efforts were in vain. "You can use she. I don't mind they, though, in case that's easier!" They plucked a dead rodent from their pocket and devoured it so quickly Adelaide never saw maw meet mouse. "What are you doing here?" They asked in a playful tone.

"I-what!? What are YOU doing here?" Adelaide asked, flailing their arms in confusion. Schrodinger shrugged and made her way to a nearby stall. The girl with cat ears leaned over a market stall with lots of dried fish and made a slight rumbling noise. "You're-you were-you were *dead!*" Schrodinger stood and turned to face the knight with a look of bemused indifference.

"I dunno." She shrugged. "I don't really like being put into a box like that. What'll this buy!?" They turned their face toward the stall and flicked a silver coin onto it. The merchant checked its authenticity before answering.

"That'll be any of the three farthest to the left." Schrodinger walked to that side of the stall and grimaced.

"You sold the biggest of these to a human for two bronze pieces," Schrodinger muttered as she lifted one from the stall and walked away. Lacking for leads, Adelaide followed her. The sight of Schrodinger rending scales from flesh and meat from bone jumped out at her as she watched the cat girl devour what she'd bought and toss the bone into some kind of bin beside the road. Her stomach suddenly upset, Adelaide chose to at least distract her mind.

"Sooooo. What *are* you doing here?"

"I'm with the Globe Wheel." Schrodinger flashed that lazy confident grin of hers. Adelaide realized that they were wearing something she'd heard her adoptive father call a "top hat," but

with holes to let their fluffy yellow ears stick out. They seemed to twitch with excitement. Schrodinger tipped the hat with a smile. "We've got a performance before the baron himself!"

Adelaide felt inspiration strike her like a bolt to the brain (lightning or crossbow, either felt appropriate). She knew how she'd be approaching the baron.

Chapter Twelve: In the Works

"You WHAT!" Shrieked a very short man. His nose flared with rage, which made his prominent twin spikes of moustache hair (that formed an upside down V and extended a little past his jaw) twitch like the whiskers of an upset cat. With his somewhat large head, skinny body, and short arms the ringleader was hugely different, no pun intended, than the figure Adelaide had been expecting.

"I'm...going to kill the baron." Adelaide stood her ground. "He's an evil, evil man milking innocent people dry even if it kills them. I cannot allow that to continue!"

"Yes, yes," the man muttered, spinning a prop walking stick idly. "And we, madam, are a business. I'm sorry to say that we're not in a position to risk our neck for you." He turned on his heels. "Speak to my players if you like. You are a guest of Schrodinger, which means I'd be ill advised to demand you go on your way immediately. As such, feel free to stick around until we get moving. Past that point in time, leave and know that you'll be on your own. I wish you the best."

"No you don't!" Adelaide shot to her feet. It took only a moment to recall the name Schrodinger had used when introducing the two. "If you wanted the best, Mort, you'd-"

"Shall I turn you in myself? An assassin with a magic sword would keep my entire crew fed for months." They turned halfway, shooting an evil eye that could make a lion turn tail in Adelaide's direction. "I'm acting out of selflessness just giving you the opportunity to enact this asinine plan on your own. Begone. You may stay but only as a guest. Thank Schrodinger if you must." A torrent of anger came to Adelaide's throat. She wanted to scream that he was a craven beaurocrat, a rotten-gutted fish swallower, a brazen obstruction of justice with nose hair in place of character. Instead she swallowed it all and walked solemnly out of the oversized carriage that served as Mort's office.

"Don't take it too hard, mate." Said a brown haired lad with sandy skin as he followed her out. "He's...a cynical bastard. I'm sure if he were confident you might succeed he'd come up with something himself and bring you along."

Adelaide sat on a box and watched two of the actors mock swordfight. Two blunt cutlasses dashed about in the air, striking each other and making showers of sparks. Each contact meant

a flash of light, a dance of fireflies, an exciting noise, and a deft trading of strikes. It almost revived the childish joy she'd felt as a little kid watching the odd knight move through the town where she lived.

"Yeah, sure." She muttered. The boy crouched next to her. "The baron is just some spoiled noble. Why would it be doubtful I can take him?"

"Well, uh." The boy reached into his boot and retrieved a rolled up map. Adelaide tried not to think about how impractical and kind of gross that was. "This is the town." He pulled over a small crate, set it next to Adelaide and flattened the map across it. His finger rested on a cute drawing of a colorful little town. "THIS is where we are. And this is the way to the Ghast Castle Estate. It's not a castle but we gotta call it one." His finger followed a trail from the castle town...along a windy road...through a forest...that turned black...to a giant purple splotch of colors and headstones and skulls. The words "TRESPASS HERE AND FEED THE WORMS" were written in big bold letters across it. Yikes.

"Ah." Adelaide's brain took a second to comprehend. "Why is it like that?"

"Because Ghast," the boy looked her in the eye, "is a necromancer."

Adelaide gulped. A necromancer? She knew what *that* term meant, unlike sorcerer: that this was a dangerous man, who presumed power and victory over Death itself. One of the most menacing foes a hero could face that was still human.

"His predecessor bore a curse that made any fruit, vegetable, or root taste so foul to them as to be inedible. They pissed off a fae that had appeared to them as a farmer, you see. In the times following that incident they seemed to take the curse supremely personally, and used magic and their authority to inflict it on the two or three towns in their small domain. The people threatened violence and rebellion if their cruel overseer were not replaced, and petitioned the vile noble's peers to make it happen. It...worked, in a way. But now Ghast is in charge. He isn't cursed-he upholds the laws set before him because they're the norm he inherited. He doesn't execute the people who violate it, but he might as well. Nothing's really changed beyond the boot being worn by someone with better PR. "

Adelaide nodded and frowned. "I...hate this."

"We all do." Sighed the boy. He smiled. "You're good, Adelaide. I hope you succeed. I'm Todd. Mort and I...our relationship is complicated. I play music! You wanna hear some?"

Adelaide nodded, figuring a distraction might be nice. Todd ran off and returned with a violin. She closed her eyes and listened as he made his strings dance with agile movements of a regal-looking bow and filled the air with a beautiful sound. Raw joy and elation reverberated through Adelaide's very bones. The music carried her away like a fluffy cloud. For some minutes

there was only Adelaide and that whimsical sound of strings being played, chittering and yelping and prancing with joy. Eventually, though, the tune swung like an axe into a mournful cry. The violin seemed to howl with the fury of a grieving animal. Adelaide felt as if the music were physically tearing past her ribs to her heart. By the time he slowed his performance to a halt, she was crying.

"S-sorry. I should've asked if you were in the mood for that one, I-"

"No no!" Adelaide grinned, sniffing as the tears stopped. "That...felt good."

"It's called catharsis." Todd did a curtsy with an endearing little grin. "That's the appeal of tragedies. Sometimes you need a good cry. Us players, we're good at finding people's heartstrings, plucking them like those of any other instrument. People have a lot pent up and we help them let it all go, if only for a few hours."

And that statement held true. Adelaide decided to get to know the others, seeing as she might encounter the troupe again in the future.

"Hey," said a slender young man with pale skin, white hair, and dull blue eyes, who tossed a knife up and down absentmindedly in one hand. "You're a friend of Schrodinger?"

"Y-yes, I am. My name's Adelaide. Adelaide Adams."

"Mine is Dan. This guy is Mack. Mack Oberton." Dan suddenly pulled his arm back and then snapped it forward and threw the knife with an uncanny precision. The instrument flew through the air towards a large and muscular target, who pivoted a full one hundred eighty degrees to catch the very tip of the blade between his teeth, then casually remove it and pivot back to the conversation he was immersed in. With...nobody. "He's rehearsing. Schrodinger does that too, as you may have seen." Adelaide laughed a little. "You come to see a show?"

"No," Adelaide felt herself tremble slightly with relief. She'd almost expected the knife to kill that guy. She must have looked it, too, because Dan laughed.

"Relax. Mack is...I'd call him a beast but he's more like a machine. Got the reflexes of a diving falcon, that one. And besides, we haven't used throwing knives that weren't mostly dulled since we left the circus." Adelaide froze, processing a lot of information at once. Her brain seemed to only retain the end.

"What's a circus?"

"Just a...well, it's kind of like this thing we've got going here. The Globe Wheel, I mean. But instead of telling stories that might happen to involve a dangerous stunt or a flashy swordfight, it's just dangerous performances, start to finish. Guys doing acrobatics dozens of feet from the ground, putting an apple on someone's head and impaling it with an arrow, that kind of thing."

"How is...shooting an apple dangerous?" Dan froze up with a giant grin, eyes twitching madly as he tried to identify whether Adelaide was actually missing something or had a deadpan sense of humor worthy of legend. Her confused expression convinced him of the former, which sent him into fits of laughter.

"Oh...Hah! HAH! HOLY CRAP I'M SORRY BUT AAAAAHAHA!" Dan clutched his rapidly convulsing ribs and laughed horrendously loud. Mack turned to him with a look of concern and almost asked if something was up before the laughter stopped. "Aaaahhhh...good one. Thanks, I needed that! I like you. But ah, to answer your question, it's dangerous for the person with the apple on their head."

"Oh." Adelaide snickered and had a laugh herself, "that makes much more sense."

"It does." Dan took another knife from his belt and began to twirl it idly. "We joined at around the same time. I had a skin condition with a bad reputation and he was a huge buff guy with abnormally good reflexes so we were added to the freak show." He said that last part like he was choking on a rotten vegetable as the words traversed his tongue. Adelaide decided not to press that, and in a panicked moment asked the first question to come to mind.

"You...what do you mean by that, a skin condition with a bad reputation?" Dan went silent and eyed her with a difficult emotion to describe. Guilt gripped Adelaide and she immediately started to apologize. "I'm sorry, that was insensitive-"

"It was." Dan pursed his mouth and furrowed his brow. "But you seem to genuinely not know, so I'll elaborate. I have...I believe the Empire's doctors call it albinism." He gestured at himself. "But some parts aren't especially fond of people like me. We have pale skin and white hair. There are other varieties of the condition, if I understand correctly, but I'm the type everyone thinks of. Our skin is 'corpse-like' and we burn in the sun, so people call us White Devils. Which is real damn rich, seeing as nobody who uses the term isn't part of the Empire. You know what the skin of everyone who runs it looks like?"

"Pale?" Adelaide guessed awkwardly.

"Yeah." Dan crossed his arms and looked annoyed. "I don't have it too bad-you should see the way this awful regime treats people whose skin is *darker* than theirs. Really churns my stomach. I'll never understand what it's like to be one of them and neither will you." Adelaide nodded along. It occurred to her that most of the people she'd seen out of the corner of her vision back in Corderbordair had darker flesh than her.

"Sorry, I...sorry I asked that question. It was insensitive."

"Apology accepted. Anyway, I originally served double duty-I was part of the freak show and I did the 'shooting an apple' bit I mentioned. But the sun sort of...ruined my eyes, over time. Another *fun* part of being what I am. I couldn't see very far anymore, still can't, so I switched to throwing knives. Mack was a natural partner for my talent so we formed an act together. We called it Dan's McOb." Dan had a little bit of a laugh and brushed back some of his bone white hair with one hand. "Eventually he became so synonymous with our act that I and some of the other performers started using it as a nickname for him. Mack and I got...real close. Became partners in more ways than one, if you catch my drift."

"I...do not catch your drift." Adelaide had no idea what that phrase meant and was scared to ask. "Why would that affect whether you two are together?" Dan broke into another howling fit of laughter. When he'd recovered he kept talking.

"It's just a saying. It's basically a sarcastic rhetorical question." Adelaide went to speak. She must not have known what a rhetorical question was. "That's a question you're not supposed to answer." She stopped and smiled. She looked satisfied. Dan had to fight the urge pump his fist and do a self-satisfied little jump. "Anyway, yes we're an item. But back to the story..." his face shifted and looked grim. The knife trembled as he gripped it so hard his hand refused to stay put. "The bastard let an elephant crush a child. He refused to take responsibility and blamed the parents. The elephant was killed and he went unpunished." Adelaide chose not to ask what an elephant was, knowing this obviously wasn't the time. "I...stabbed him in his sleep and ran away. Mack came with me. And eventually, we joined the Globe Wheel." He grinned, but it was a hollow one. "Hey Mack! Sometime tomorrow morning let's show the new girl our Dance of Death! For old times' sake!"

Schrodinger returned to her carriage and found that Adelaide was lying down inside of it. The Little Knight seemed at a loss.

"I take it Mort wasn't on board?" She asked.

"Yes. Or...no? Whichever means 'you are correct. He's not on board.' In this case. I think it would be no?"

"Damn." Shrodinger took a seat on the wooden floor of the vehicle and rested her face in her hands. Her tail swished idly. "Sorry about that. I realized he'd probably reject your request after I said something, but it still seemed like it would be worth a shot. Any sign of the person you're looking for?"

"No." Adelaide felt her heart sink, but shook it off easily enough. Abandoning these people in pursuit of her own interests would be wrong, even if those interests were another person's wellbeing.

"What's wrong? Are you doubting yourself?"

"A bit. I suppose. What am I doing here?" Her voice shook. She almost wanted to curl into a ball. "The Empire is...huge. I'm...I'm just one girl! This isn't even my fight! What am I doing!?"

"Your best," purred Schrodinger. She moved to sit next to Adelaide and patted her lap. Adelaide looked at her, confused. "Well? You want to use my lap as a pillow or not?" There was a moment of hesitation before Adelaide decided that she did. The other young woman's lap was soft and warm. Schrodinger started purring, which was off putting for a second but very soothing once Adelaide (quickly) adjusted to it. Schrodinger gently stroked Adelaide's hair with her nails. "What are you doing? What you think is right, no matter how powerful the people are who it will make enemies of." For some reason Adelaide found that rather comforting. Muscles she didn't know were tense started to unwind.

"What...?"

"You're doing your best, Little Knight." Schrodinger rested a palm on the back of Adelaide's head. It was...comfortable. Adelaide sighed. "And that's all the justification you should need. Fight evil, do good. You're not flawless, and that's okay." Adelaide yawned. So did Schrodinger. They were both...tired...

"When I get out of here I'm decapitating whoever is responsible."

Adelaide heard as she groggily came to in a cell. Her wrists and ankles were trapped together in stocks and her back hurt. Her eyes adjusted slowly to dim light before managing to let her know that she was in a small, barren cell with a makeshift bed (constructed from hay) and literally nothing else. She yawned as her brain flew into a belated haze of questions.

How did she get here!? What happened!? Who was that next to her!?

"We were captured, they put us to sleep using magic, and it's me, Schrodinger. I'm on the other side of this wall."

Adelaide was too tired to point out that she hadn't actually asked any of those questions out loud, but she wasn't too tired to sit up. So she sat up.

"Someone must have ratted us out." Schrodinger continued. "Perhaps that fish lady that shortchanged me, or maybe someone got suspicious and Mort did it to save his hide. It's also possible a soldier saw us together earlier, I guess."

"I didn't see anyone in uniform," Adelaide muttered as she experimentally tried positioning her arms and legs to see if her bonds had some flaw she could exploit. They didn't yield any. "Probably wasn't that last one." Schrodinger laughed.

"Oh, come now!" Schrodinger cackled. Adelaide could hear her fall over laughing, sit back up, and double back over multiple times. "You think they always wear their uniforms!? I got bad news lady, they don't give a shit. They'd disguise themselves as children if transformative magic was easier for humans to cast reliably or if it was easier to mask." Well. That was unsettling.

"Maybe it was, then." Adelaide groaned. She was functionally immortal but she hadn't counted on being taken prisoner. The flower in her chest reached out of her body and flexed with tension, stabbing curved thorns into her flesh around it. "OW!" She fell on the metal floor and winced. "Then...what do we do?"

"Not much we can do." Schrodinger answered. "Someone will come bust us out, I'm sure. You ARE a hero."

Little did they know, that was already happening.

The door to the Corbrint Provincial Jail flew open and a man wheeled in on a black, heavy-looking wheelchair. He had an odd look about him: like a pirate with the arms of a lumberjack, the fashion of a middle-ranking noblewoman, and a lower body which made it look like he had skipped leg day for most of his life. His legs were thicker than those of an average man, but not by much, and certainly not by as much as the barrel chest or tree trunk arms that shared a body with them. A navy blue bandanna was tied around the top of his somewhat plain face and a dress of the same color covered his torso and some of his lower body. His eyes were blue, too, but the light blue of a clear sky, and he had a light reddish tint to his skin.

There were two officers in the room: one behind a counter and one sorting through papers. The one at the desk gave the newcomer a wary eye.

"You got a crime to report, sir? Or are you here to-"

He never did finish that sentence. The man in the wheelchair rolled to the counter deceptively quickly, launched himself into the air by shoving down on the handrests, landed on the counter, seized the top of his wheelchair, lifted it over his head, and before the stunned onlooker could

apologize for whatever overtly racist thing they were about to say, smashed them with the entire wheelchair. Wham! Wham! Wham! Five or six times in the space of an instant the officer's body bounced in the air like a ragdoll with the impact. The one to the side dropped his forms and reached for his gun.

Too late. The intruder threw his makeshift weapon.

The wheelchair rocketed through the air and smashed his head against the wall, denting it pretty badly. Wheelchair and body fell to the floor equally lifelessly and for a moment, all was still. The man in the dress dropped to his feet and winced.

"You...owe me for this, Schrodinger." He took slow and unsteady steps to the wheelchair, then lifted it and set it right with a grace and care that contrasted heavily against his sudden and chaotic outburst mere moments before. Once it was in position he turned and lowered himself into it.

The man exhaled shakily. His body trembled a bit as he allowed the tension to seep out of it. Then he wheeled down the hall. He didn't have a moment to lose.

The jail wasn't very big. The man sped past small empty cells (and small occupied cells that held strangers) for a minute or so, eyes snapping back and forth in search of a familiar face. He cursed under his breath, hoping the two were near each other.

If he had to inspect the entire building to find Schrodinger, then go all the way back so they could find her friend, he was going to snap. There were only two halls in the building, but having to backtrack and head through another would be wearisome enough *without* having to then do the entire rigmarole a second time. As he came near the end of the hallway a familiar voice passed into his ear and gave him a moment of reprieve from his mounting irritation. He rolled up to the pair of cells the voice had come from and, sure enough, the sight of Schrodinger greeted his eyes.

"Hey, Schrodinger. Here to help." The cat lady, her wrists and ankles restrained in metal stocks, looked up at him with an excited twinkle in her eyes. She made a sort of happy yowl.

"Collin!" Schrodinger cried. Collin turned his head to look at the inmate in the adjacent cell and recognized its inhabitant based on how Todd had described her hair. That was good. His remaining dread for the notion of having to inspect an entire jail twice vanished.

"Yeah, just me. Semi-Collin, at your service." He gave Schrodinger a smarmy wink and pulled up to the stranger's cell. "Your name is Adelaide, right?" The girl nodded enthusiastically, regarding him with a look of interest.

"Yeah. Adelaide Adams." He realized he didn't have a key and decided...screw it.

Collin wrapped his big meaty hands around two of the iron bars and tightened his jaw. He planted his feet on the floor and half stood, half lifted himself into position using the iron bars in his hands as leverage. He sort of hung there for a second, gathering will and preparing himself. Then a strangled, continuous scream rumbled out of his throat and his entire body went taut. The heavy thrumming sound of his effort beat at the air and filled the hall. Collin's face scrunched up and started turning red with effort. Slowly, noisily, his arms pulled at the bars and bent them away from each other. Once he'd created a sizable gap he collapsed backwards into the wheelchair and gasped heavily for air.

Schrodinger was standing next to them, muttering something. "And...presto! *Brekis bodni!*" The stocks restraining Adelaide seemed to crackle and shake with magical energy, which took them apart and left her freed. She jumped to her feet and strolled confidently through the new exit in her containment.

"Thank you, Collin!"

"Please," he panted, unable to make a sarcastic expression but clearly trying to anyway. "Call me Semi-Collin. We're all comrades here."

"Okay, got it. Semi-Collin." Adelaide grinned. Time to leave. "Let's bust out of this-wait, what the hell Schrodinger!? You didn't need help! Why couldn't you-"

"Had no chance." Collin wheezed.

"What?" Adelaide was confused. "No, she-"

"Couldn't escape on my own," Schrodinger giggled a bit. ""Had no chance of pulling it off without help. With good ol Semi-Collin here to bust us out, though~" Adelaide sighed in defeat.

"Well, we're lucky this prison has ramps at least-"

"It's a jail, technically," Schrodinger interrupted.

"And it doesn't." Collin winced, then swallowed a mouthful of oxygen. "Had to carry my wheelchair in places."

"O-oh." Adelaide flinched. "Sorry. That sounds awful."

"It was." Collin chuckled. "Anyway, I saw the inventory closet on the way here," he managed to get out between bouts of his slowly regulating panting. "Your jackets are probably there. They love stealing valuable shit like that."

"And my sword?" Asked Adelaide, her feeling of rejuvenated enthusiasm somewhat weakened. One could tell from her voice.

"Maybe." Collin gulped down air a few times. His body seemed to have mostly recovered. "It would be on the way to either destruction or the Baron if they follow protocol, but Imperial authorities are absolute bastards. Someone could very well have stolen it, or hidden it in the locker so they could steal it later." He started to roll away from their cells. A moment later he cast a tentative look backwards, not having heard either companion's footsteps. "You two coming? Exit and the inventory are both this way."

Chapter Thirteen: Unlucky Day

The Mine of Rexgis was a perilous place, and it had been for generations. Located, predictably, in a mountainside territory often called Rexgis, a name which meant "King's Gift" in a tongue nobody truly spoke any more, the mine had once been a central feature of a proud and thriving kingdom with culture and trade and an identity. Historians theorized that some of the greatest advancements, and almost all of the most fundamental ones, in mathematics and science which had given the Empire a foundation for its technological prowess were discovered in the region, or by individuals who called it home. You wouldn't know any of this from looking at a map, though.

A lone wanderer's skeletal horse carried them across one of Rexgis' dirt roads towards the entrance to the town nearest the mine. The rider stared blankly ahead, one violet eye gleaming with intent. They wore a poncho, which was yellow and decorated with red and brown figures on it depicting people, and a high-topped tan-yellow hat with curled brims. They wore normal clothes, besides-a shirt, pants, gloves, a belt, and a pair of black boots. An abnormally large revolver sat in a holster strapped to one of their legs, and to the other was tethered what looked like the detonator one would employ alongside a stack of dynamite. They resembled an archetypal figure that would be recognized by anyone in the Empire, save for a single difference:

This figure was black. Their skin was distinctly, unquestionably dark. From head to toe, their body was a color that took the sun's gentle embrace in stride. Their hair, though that on their head was hidden from view, could be seen in the soft and nice-looking curls of the short beard on his mighty jaw, and was the majestic black of the night sky. Their name was Gadisa, and when they saw a sign next to the road he spat at it.

"*Rexgis*," Gadisa thought to himself angrily, pulling at his undead stallion's reins. It reared for a moment, and flailed its unusually long neck. After planting its front hooves back on the earth, it pawed aggressively at the road with one. "*A pretentious and cruel name to inflict on a place.*" He prodded with his heels at his macabre steed and it took the command to resume its march. The

man's empty left eye socket grew warm and irritable, but it was no trouble for him to keep both hands on the reins. Outwardly he showed no indication he'd felt a thing. A mere hour or two later he arrived in the settlement his mind refused to insult by calling it the name the sign had used.

The sprawling town was crawling with men in the black, silver and purple of the Empire. Gadisa knew he was their enemy, and so did they. Yet, these men so accustomed to being the greatest danger in the room, none showed any hostility. When his mount confidently trotted past the two men guarding the town's entrance, they immediately understood who he was and yet they let him through anyway, shaking with terror. When four men carrying arms that could each shred a lightly armored vehicle with ease saw him, all four trembled and made believe that they didn't. When Gadisa hopped off of his companion and entered the guild hall, none followed.

The day, like many of the days gone by recently, had been going poorly for the Westward Metalworks Union. One of their organizers stood, mouth dry and tensions high, against a wall in the guild hall of the town christened Rexgris by the Empire. She was a black woman in her late thirties, with frizzly dark brown hair and skin reminiscent of reliable oak. Her eyes were sunken like all those unfortunate enough to labor under the Empire, but they retained a certain spirit indicative of someone who courted hardship by obligation yet allowed it no quarter. Eight or nine other figures from her union were scattered throughout the small, poorly lit room. The dim glow of enchanted candles and torches just barely illuminated the red and yellow of Rexgis's former colors, which clung defiantly to ragged old banners on the walls.

Two soldiers stood in the adjacent hall, clad head to toe in the black, purple and silver of Imperial armor. They carried guns, heavy two-handed rifles to be specific.

The organizer squinted at them. She had a bad feeling about this.

"Amanuel?" She asked her left hand man, who sat at a desk near her in a gas mask that covered the bottom half of his face. He looked up from a pile of parchment, his hazel eyes uncertain but determined. Amanuel was extraordinarily large, coming up to the already taller than average organizer's shoulder sitting down.

"Yes, Gianna?"

"Nothing in those papers about those guards, is there?"

"No, unfortunately." Amanuel cast a defiant glare at them. "I've scoured them thrice over and I've found nothing. There *is* nothing."

"Damnit." Gianna crossed her arms and fought the urge to bite her thumb nail. Leaving was out of the question. Amanuel rose from his chair and stood awkwardly, eyes trained on the two enemies as he turned his body to face them and moved towards Gianna slightly.

"I think those are just magically enhanced ballistics." He whispered in a hushed tone of grave severity. "If I rush them-"

"No, none of that!" Gianna practically hissed back. "I'm not sacrificing a human life to *maybe* get out of a tight situation with no further casualties if I can help it. Besides, they're probably not the only ones here." The tension in the room grew ever thicker. The others paced, whispered among themselves, cast nervous glances at the enemy. What felt like hours passed, though with no timekeeping device or windows it was difficult to tell. The guards fidgeted slightly and occasionally pointed their visors into the room for a minute or so at a time.

Then, something changed. An air of grim finality wafted in through the hall, as though a breeze had carried in a yawn from Death itself. For those in the room, it was hardly any different; but for those in uniform, it was terrifying. "Wh-what's happening?" The union organizers heard one of their keepers mutter, the imposing voice granted by his helmet only making his abject fear funnier. Footsteps, soft and graceful, echoed through the room from the hall. Both guards turned their back on their unofficial captives and trained their weapons down the hall. The footsteps grew closer.

"Is that-" muttered one of Gianna's brothers in arms in disbelief.

"It can't be!" Gaspd one of her sisters. Gianna looked down the hall...and saw a man.

Now, dear reader, it cannot be overstated how different the sight of that man was for his various beholders. Gianna, Amanuel, and their comrades saw someone wounded by the Empire, whose spirit refused to die. A living, walking legend that proved their oppressors could be fought, could be *beaten*. His warm face and single eye shone with the kind of concern born of pain, born of struggle. His confident steps were of a warrior who could not and *would not* be broken. He was a force of justice that endured lifetimes beyond his own so that he could stand against evil for those who could not stand in its way themselves. As soon as the nine in the hallway saw a wide-brimmed hat and a poncho, they knew what that atmosphere was, and their hearts soared.

To the men in armor, the men bearing guns, he was something vastly different. A foe their proud and mighty homeland could not hope to defeat, one who endured every bolt and bullet and spell sent his way who invariably killed the deliverer. The man they saw in the hallway put the fear of Gods in the hearts of men who believed in none, who believed themselves sovereign over all. He was a nightmare their recruiters had warned them about, that their friends made jokes about in training. He was an enemy as powerful and distant as the Sun itself. To see him quietly appear opposing them was something like waking up from a cozy nap trapped in a tar pit.

To these men, Gunpowder Sunset was essentially the devil himself.

"OPEN FIRE!" One shouted. Four shaky hands pointed two oversized rifles at a single target and a hail of bullets smashed through his torso, shredding him. The onslaught blew through his body and obliterated every desk and vase in the hall behind him.

Curiously, this seemed to have no effect. He walked through the downpour of white hot lead without slowing down at all. He leaned forward, gritted his teeth, and gripped his hat in one hand, but otherwise even as pounds of ammunition tore through him he didn't so much as flinch. He reached his enemies and they stopped shooting, taking a step back. One turned partway to the workers, a plan in mind, but it was futile-their foe seized the guards' weapons by the searing hot ends of their barrels, yanked them from their hands, and effortlessly clubbed their helmets in with the stocks. Both guardsmen fell limp to the ground before the sizzling sound of his burned hands had ceased. What looked like purple electricity arced about his palms as his hands continuously healed, only for the guns they held to burn them again.

The union organizers stared at him in stunned silence for a second before he dropped his stolen weapons and nodded silently at them. All stood stock still for a moment as the dread that held them in place gradually drained from their bodies. They realized, only now, that they'd been holding their breath and keeping their jaws clenched. Relief wafted through the air. They were safe.

Gianna felt herself running-or perhaps it was more like she was stumbling-towards him, and caught herself about a foot away. The man cast one eye-mournful, compassionate, gentle, in her direction. There was silence. Then he turned on his heels and walked away on heavy, dignified steps. A dozen or so guards, each both armed and armored, came like a swarm to see the cause of the gunfire. Each stopped in their tracks when they saw.

Gianna silently urged the others on. All of them made their way through the guild hall to the exit. It was unsure whether they'd be attacked, but the cover of an appearance by Gunpowder Sunset himself was the greatest safety they could even have prayed for. Sure enough, none of the guards they passed opened fire. Some seemed to raise their gun with hostile intent, but each who did invariably panicked and turned themselves towards the bigger threat. One, presumably the superior officer, was barking orders into his visor. What those orders were, they didn't have time to discern.

Gianna, Ammanuel, and their allies burst through the entrance. A hive of Imperial guardsmen was forming outside the building, but there were gaps. The organizers hurtled through one such opening, one after the other.

They were in the clear.

A man surrounded by Imperial troops plodded on heavy steps. He wore a custom uniform, which resembled an incomplete variant of the sleek enchanted armor worn by Imperial enforcers who, through specific magical prowess or loyalty proven in battle, had earned a place among the Empire's higher ranks. This one was red, white and brown (instead of the usual purple, black and silver) and it only had the chestplate and half each of a set of greaves and arm coverings. The rest of his ensemble was garb one might expect of a traveling warrior dedicated solely to humility and combat.

He had the air about him to match it, as well. He stood tall, with his arms crossed behind his waist. His face was obscured by a plain wooden mask with a reddish brown sun painted onto it. The soldiers around him inspected the building they occupied, muttering curse words as they did.

"Couldn't have gotten far," a soldier in a slightly fancier suit than the others commented from just outside the man's peripheral vision. He nodded and looked around for himself.

The building was trashed. Computer consoles lined the walls of the first floor, all smashed or wildly sparking. Broken glass from windows and monitors alike littered the ground in every direction. Something smelled like smoke.

"Damnit, they started a fire," moaned the decorated soldier behind him. "I was supposed to retire this weekend!" The man tried not to laugh. Another soldier, this one wearing the equipment of a standard grunt, ran up to them and saluted. "Sir! The first floor is swept! The second is underway. Sir!"

The soon-to-retire officer grunted. He pulled a weapon from a slot in the leg of his armor, which seemed to be a small metal thing shaped like a long, narrow can. He clicked something into its side with his thumb and, almost in an instant, the device explosively unfolded into something far more menacing. It was a large one-handed axe, double-bitted and with teeth resembling those of a chainsaw lining the edges of each blade.

"I'll investigate the third floor myself," the higher-ranked officer declared. "You all take the second." He bounded towards a nearby staircase, leaving his subordinate and the man in the mask to carry out his demands.

Alexandria crouched behind a wall. A young black woman sat in front of her, wincing in pain.

"Can you walk?" The princess asked. They shook their head and winced. Damn. That complicated things. A piece of shrapnel was embedded in the thigh of the woman's left leg. It was bleeding, but not too badly.

"Everyone else is out!" Shouted a girl behind Alexandria, watching the two with a worried look. "We have to get out ourselves!"

"Bad news," Alexandria answered. "A piece of the wall fell on something near the stairway on the next floor down while we were climbing and blew it up. We're mostly unharmed but some shrapnel got in her leg." Alexandria paused a moment. "Looks like she can't walk."

"W-well, what do we do?"

"Take her. Use that wind magic of yours and escape through a window. Find some of the people she was with and get her help."

"What!? But that might-"

"She's the priority!" Barked Alexandria. "She's hurt. Would you leave her!?"

"I'll be-fine." The woman sputtered, shakily trying to rise to her feet and making it onto one knee. "Must-ack!" She fell forward onto her hands, then recoiled back into a sitting position. "Hahaha...ow. That stings...!" She bit her lip. "You'd think security and basic safety would be a bigger deal somewhere like this."

"Of course not!" Alexandria laughed in a grim voice. "Why would they care who knows what they do? It's not like they hide it all that well." The woman laughed and shot a sarcastic grin Alexandria's way.

"Hehehe. I suppose not." Footsteps grew closer.

"Shit." Alexandria turned to the third woman in the room, an albino girl with thick curled hair dyed bright pink. "Go, Sofia! Take her!" Alexandria drew their knife.

"Wait." The injured woman sputtered as she got up enough for Sofia to lift her over her shoulder and into a three-point carry. Once secured, she asked a question. "My name is Vana, after my father Vahn. Yours?"

"I'm..." the princess smirked. An alternative name had been rattling around their head for a while. "Call me Alexandrite, actually. I'm giving it a spin. Like it better than my old one."

"Got it. Good luck!" Sofia ran off to a nearby window and said a quick magic word. A sphere of air swelled and burst, punching a hole in the window and shattering the rest of it. She clambered up onto the windowsill and, muttering another incantation, dropped out onto a cushion of wind.

Alexandrite turned and ran towards the stairs, eager to fight a mighty foe.

Chapter Fourteen: A Gast

"Just like old times!" Shrodinger snarked, pushing Collin's wheelchair slower for a moment so she could give Adelaide a cheeky grin. The trio had made their way through Corbrint and onto the wooded path that lead to the baron's estate. It took Adelaide a moment to figure out he was referring to their time together in the Devil's Gums mountains.

"I guess." Adelaide moaned, doing stretches with her shoulders. She scanned the plants around them to see if she recognized anything. Some of the trees were familiar, but she'd never done too well learning what specific trees were called. No liquor ivy, which was almost a relief. She'd finally worked through all the sap she'd gathered. Still, it was a quick, fairly easy meal and disproportionately nutritious given that ease of access...

Her favorite!

Adelaide dove behind a bush with no warning. Schrodinger immediately let go of the wheelchair and went back to back with it. Likewise, Collin tensed up and raised his fists. Schrodinger's ears twitched. Wait, she didn't hear anything.

"Adelaide! Where's the enemy?"

"Enemy?"

Adelaide popped her head out from the foliage. Her mouth had halfway enveloped a gigantic yellow fruit, which was vaguely egg shaped and had a series of faint purple hexagons along its hide.

"NO DON'T EAT THAT!" Adelaide awkwardly removed the fruit from her mouth and pointed at it. Schrodinger nodded.

"Why not? These are delicious."

"They're poisonous." Schrodinger replied. Adelaide pouted.

"I've had them before and-"

"You've probably had a variant of them." Collin tapped at the handrests of his wheelchair. A rune on the axle of each wheel lit up green and a double helix of light snaked out from the base of each wheel, traveling along the ground and terminating at Adelaide's feet. Dirt, grass, and gravel in the way shifted to make the ground more even. Collin rolled to her and pointed to one of the hexagons on the fruit. "See that shape?" Adelaide squinted at it a moment and then nodded. "There's a breed of this plant which produces a similar looking fruit, but that one isn't poisonous and the shapes on it have eight sides. You've probably had that. It tastes better, too."

"That's neat," Adelaide remarked. She still looked dejected.

"Well, the good news is you can prepare it in ways that neutralize the poison. Takes a while though. Doesn't taste that good afterwards either, isn't really worth it."

"Oh phooey." Adelaide frowned and tossed the fruit into a spot where it seemed like it would compost. The three turned back towards the trail and continued. A few hours went by as they marched. The woods were getting thicker. It was getting dim.

"Thank you for your help." Adelaide said suddenly, a grim tone seizing hold of her. "I know this is a huge risk for you both, especially after..."

"You're welcome." Collin answered, eyes set forward. He took a deep breath. They continued along the dirt road. The trees seemed to grow closer together. A heavy air fell over them in the thickening dark cast by the canopy above. The road got bumpier and rougher. Schrodinger was forced to slow down and every so often she had to deliberately maneuver her companion's wheelchair over or around the odd thick root that protruded from the ground.

"So...Schrodinger's an actor, Dan and Mack are also actors and they have that knife throwing act, what part do you play Collin?"

"I prefer to keep that a mystery." The giant of a man replied. Adelaide shot a confounded look at Schrodinger. It was too dark for them to make out specific visual details like expressions, but she figured she probably had night vision or something anyway. She must have been right because Schrodinger chuckled.

"Yeah, no, none of us can help you there. He's explained it to us before and it never helps. Something about breaks?" All three laughed. It was getting dark enough to warrant a torch. Adelaide didn't have one...

"It's getting late." Collin interrupted her train of thought. "Shall we pitch camp?"

"Not a bad idea." Said Schrodinger. She snapped a branch from a tree and muttered an incantation. It caught flame at the tip.

"I'm afraid we don't have much in the way of-" started Adelaide. Collin grinned and tossed something from a compartment in his wheelchair. When it hit the ground the air thrummed and rumbled. Cloth exploded outward and quickly took the shape of a huge tent, warped in shape but somehow not confined in size by the dense foliage flanking it on each side of the rough path.

"A gift from our boss," he smiled, "That Mack persuaded him to lend me." Adelaide stood tall and stared up at the structure that had just erected itself. Her eyes sparkled with excitement and her mouth hung open.

"That's so cool!" She bounced on her feet.

"Appreciate the enthusiasm!" Collin stood from his wheelchair and walked, somewhat unsteadily, through a massive zipper that faced them. Schrodinger and Adelaide followed suit, the former bringing Collin's wheelchair with her.

The inside of the tent was a huge blue room, which notably had a solid floor like you'd see in an inn. It was silver and polished to a shine. The walls were the same rich blue as the outside of the tent, and the same canvas material, hanging from a domed ceiling on which one could see paintings of three figures. All three seemed to be women, but only one looked like a human. The other two looked to be made of some sort of brightly colored liquid, one yellow and one green. They stood back to back, singing with one fist clutched to their chest and the other hand outstretched above them. To the side stood the third figure, a woman with bright white hair and whose brow was crowned by a thin ring of braid.

"Wow..." Adelaide marveled upwards. She could hear Schrodinger and Collin collapsing into beds. She made her way to a third and laid down in it, hearing a pair of beautiful singing voices in her ear the instant she made contact with the mattress. Any worries she held became smoke and vanished. She hit the pillow like a sack of bricks. A comforter slid over her under its own power like she was being tucked in. Adelaide had never felt so comfortable in a bed before in her life. She hadn't had a bed with quality near that of the one from her room back at her now former home since she left, but even the familiar mattress of that chamber had not been half as cozy or soft as this one. She fell asleep almost immediately.
