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## [019] [Road and Stars]

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Early morning came with a fog-bank descending upon the village. Neither of the two suns had come out, and things were quiet as Damon stepped out of Linda's house. He carried a large backpack that was mostly empty and a bag with gold, silver, and copper coins dangling from one side of his hip. The wooden club hung from the other.

He found Idina waiting for him near the village entrance. She'd been talking with one of the users but quickly hurried to greet him. "Sir." She bowed a little.

Damon hid the grimace, also trying to ignore the surprise in the eyes of the users that were standing guard. "The others?"

"They are just outside."

"Welp, time to hit the road." With a slight pause, he turned to the two guards. "Careful with the traps."

They startled a little, standing straight. "W-will do, sir!"

Damon shot them a weird look as they walked into the milky white fog. "I'm going to have to get used to people getting startled or scared of me, aren't I?"

Idina gave him an apologetic shrug and a little nod.

Keeping the grumbling mostly to himself, he focused on the wagon Sybil and Han had bought. As well as the dark gray clopper that was to be their steed of choice. The two users were checking straps and double-checking the contents from the various boxes and parcels.

"This seems expensive."

"We bought enough to spare." Han mumbled under his voice. "We can sell off everything that's left when we get to Sky Bridge."

"Which is why protecting the cart and clopper are very important."

"Clopper looks like he can protect himself just fine."

Han shook his head as he reached out to pat the flanks of the beast. “They’re very shy, and easily startled. They’re not harmless, but when they panic they’re as likely to hurt others as they are to hurt themselves.”

Damon eyed the furless demon-horse with suspicion. “Is it a monster?”

“Depends on who you ask. But the simple answer is yes.” Han heartily patted his way up the beast. The creature leaned forward to sniff at the cloak. “They’re one of the few kinds of monster that’s been successfully domesticated.” From within his pockets, he pulled out something that looked like a purple potato, and gave it to the clopper to munch on.

The animal made a happy kind of sound that was a middle-point between crackling glass and the purr of a diesel engine. Damon observed for a moment, nodding absently. “And how does this domestication work?”

“Food.” Sybil hopped onto the cart, taking the reins. “Certain monsters enjoy normal food, and you can use that to train them. Only works if you start soon after they break out of the ground, if you wait too long they become aggressive and stay that way.”

“I agree that cloppers are terrifying, sir.” Idina spoke in a half whisper, hopping to sit on the back of the cart.

“What do monsters eat anyway?” Damon asked.

“Nothing.”

“That... that doesn’t make sense.” Damon frowned.

“Monsters don’t starve. If you capture one, it can survive indefinitely, barring exceptions.” Sybil declared. “They’ll sometimes eat each other, and eating people is something they’ll usually seek out, but they can also go without food entirely.”

“They just become more lethargic.” Han added with a nod. “Dragons are the more known example. They spend most of their time sleeping and only awaken when they detect food or a threat.”

“Don’t touch the sleeping dragon, got it.” Damon nodded. “Let’s get going! Whole day ahead and lots of road to cover.”

Sybil looked over her shoulder at him. “You’re going to walk?”

“At least for a while. If monsters show up I’d rather be warmed up.”

She didn't seem to buy his excuse, but had nothing else to say. With a tug of the reigns, the clopper set off, and Damon kept pace. With the fresh morning air and the two suns slowly peeking over the horizon to illuminate their path, the day looked like it was going to be a good one.

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It was most certainly not a very good day.

"Why the fuck are there so many!?"

Damon roared, swinging his club. The piece of hardened wood connected with a teether's skull. The rat-thing's cranium exploded like a water balloon, blue blood spraying all around. He hadn't even finished the gesture when another had leapt to take a bite out of his good arm.

He managed to spin and bash the monster's face in with his shield-wielding arm, turning the long snout into something more closely resembling a pug.

"It's a rebirth from the caravan's trip!" Han called out as he stood next to the cart. "You're doing well! Don't worry, they're young!"

"This is good practice."

Sybil's voice oozed with amusement as she kept herself on one of the branches on the tree, looking down as Damon continued to swing at the horde of teethers. Each arch would end with something turning into a splatter of blue gore.

"Move-."

"Forward, I know!" He growled, the teethers had been trying to get at his ankles. He took two long steps towards a fallen tree, kicking several of the monsters out of the way as he did.

With the trunk as a waist-high barrier, he only needed to swipe at whatever tried to get over it. The horde was quickly moving around it, and Damon had to change locations again. The dance continued, the monsters only and exclusively focused on chasing him down as more of them would fall to his club, shield, or boots. The numbers dwindled, and after four more laps around the fallen log, the teether horde was no more.

Damon, splattered in blue goop, was staring daggers at Han and Sybil.

“I should’ve fucking known something was up.” He dropped the club. “Nooooo, it’s just one lone teether! *I’m sure you can handle it on your own.* **What could possibly go wrong!?**”

“And now you know to be careful with how you kill a lone monster.” Sybil proclaimed.

“Yes, monster blood makes monsters go on a frenzy. I knew that!”

“Sure didn’t seem that way when you turned that teether into an overripe piece of fruit.” Han tossed a metal bottle at Damon. “Better start cleaning up before it dries.”

He grumbled, opening the bottle and pouring the water onto himself. Han was right, of course, Damon hadn’t been mindful about the blood situation, he’d just wanted to kill the monster and get on with the road. But surprise surprise, after the first one turned to chunky soup, more started popping out of the forest and zeroing on Damon.

Was it wrong that he’d been a bit eager to test out the club against the ugly things? Now he had so many cuts on him he’d probably need to get everything Han had to offer in terms of healing.

“What are you doing, Idina?”

The sasin perked up as she was carefully inspecting the area Damon had fought in. “Picking up your spoils, sir. Unfortunately it seems Han was right, these monsters were very young, there wasn’t much laying around.”

“Do teethers give anything useful?” Damon asked, emptying the third bottle of water, removing his shirt to squeeze as much of the blue-tainted water out of it as he could.

“Teether bones are a good source of salt.” Han commented idly. “And their fangs are a very cheap alternative to needles. That, and their leather repels water quite well.”

Damon glanced at the metal bottle he’d been holding, and the little metallic string hanging from the cap. The wither seed was a cube that appeared to suck up humidity from the environment and dribble it out through the string down into the bottle. “If this is going to be a habit, I’m going to need to get my hands on a bunch of wither seeds.”

Taking a long swig, he emptied the rest on his head, doing the best he could to try and get the blood off of him.

“If there are too many in an area, they start losing efficacy.” Sybil commented offhandedly. “But if worse comes to worst, you can always bleed a monster.”

Han visibly shuddered at the proclamation, the grimace clear even across his thick golden beard.

“That doesn’t seem appealing.”

“It’s not. Monster blood is mildly toxic, to properly bleed one out, you have to put a wither seed inside them. The water tastes horrible, and it still has some toxins in them. Drinking that water will give you severe stomach pain. But it’s better than dying... by a very slim margin.”

“That feels like it has a story.”

“Let’s just say that I know that biters give two days’ worth of water for a single person, and that I will never go back into the western sands even if you pay me a mountain of gold.” Han visibly shuddered again, tossing the next metal bottle for Damon to use to clean himself up.

Grumbling, he moved to remove his pants so he could work on that instead.

“By the way.” Damon made a gesture at the sky. “Where are we going to make camp for the night?”

“I’d say two hours further down the road. If we stay here, the smell is likely to attract more monsters down wind.”

“Peachy.”

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Damon sniffled, rubbing the underside of his nose as he lay on a mantle on the cart. The night air was cool, but not enough. It was comfortable, almost as if summer was right around the corner. They were taking guard rotations, but so far he’d been unable to fall asleep.

“Sys, can you at least do motion tracking?”

[...]

Query Answer:

No access to visual feed found.

[...]

“Then how in the blazes can I read the prompts and windows?”

[...]

Error

Query answer not found.

[...]

“What about keeping track of my hand gestures?”

[...]

Query Answer:

Access to touch and kinesthesia detected.

[...]

“Could you register this gesture...” he paused, frowning. “Scratch that. Could you register this gesture of only my right hand as an equivalent to dismissing a text window?” He made a vague swiping motion. “Apply change to user and admin systems.”

[...]

System Update:

Changes applied to User system.

[...]

With a smile, he made a swiping motion.

And nothing happened.

Damon frowned.

“Sys, why didn’t the window get dismissed?”

[...]

Query Answer:

Input did not match dismiss window command.

[...]

“What!?” He began making swiping motions. “This doesn’t match!?”

[...]

Query Answer:

Input did not match dismiss window command.

[...]

“It feels like you’re not really helping me figure out the problem here. Could you give details, Sys?”

[...]

Query Answer:

Kinesthesia as well as tactile input did not exactly match the dismiss window command.

[...]

“Now that just feels like I’m getting sassed, dismiss.” He rubbed at his temples, trying to chew through the problem. If the axon only recognized exacting input, then... would it ever be possible to replicate a registered gesture? Especially if the requirements were so stringent? “I really hope I don’t end up having to learn programming to be able to work this out.”

With a weary sigh, his gaze moved up to the night sky.

Damon remembered that first time he’d gone to his uncle’s ranch, so far out, away from everything. The air tasted of dust and had the lingering scent of manure. He’d hated the place right away, his nose scrunched up every time he breathed a little too hard. The food was mostly microwaved, and his uncle had absolutely no shits to give. The cranky old man had been a slave driver, pushing him to help with all the tasks throughout the day. By the end of it, right as the sun started to set, Damon had his first beer as he sat in the worn-out creaky house.

It was like a magic trick. Just like that, all the effort from the day had felt worthwhile.

They’d shared the silence until the stars came out. Back then, Damon had been shocked by how many there could be. He was no city kid, but the night sky he knew of was dull and boring, milky-gray with a hint of orange. Out there, so far out from everything, even electricity wasn’t a guarantee. The night sky had been beautiful.

And yet, it paled to the one he was looking at right now.

From horizon to horizon, countless tiny brilliant dots covering a tapestry of purple, orange, and red formed out of gas far off in space. Upon the firmament, it looked as if four giant cloths were being dragged in entirely different directions, sprinkling glitter in

their wake. And smack in its center, right above everything, a rusty red moon a size too large, an orange shadow cast over a part of it.

Damon bitterly realized that he couldn't pick out or find a single constellation. Just how far away from home was he?

"That red star is Janus."

Damon almost jumped, glancing up and seeing Idina. Had she just been pretending to be asleep at the corner of the cart all this time?

Her hand pointed up to the red dot that shone the brightest, right next to the moon.

"You don't say." He laid back on the sheet, keeping his focus upwards. "And the rest of the stars?"

"The heroes." She replied, quietly.

Damon allowed the pause to linger, just breathing in the cool air. "So all those dots up there are heroes..."

"Once the Nameless One had been struck down, the Gods left. And they rewarded the great heroes, taking them along." She proclaimed, then let out a soft sigh. "It's one of the few stories I remember from when I was young. When each hero left, Janus made a tiny hole in the darkness, so that the night would be full of light for the rest of us that were left behind."

Damon's gaze lingered on the shining dots lingering overhead.

"Sir?" Idina interrupted the silence.

"Yeah?"

"I've been thinking of your... weapon. The sling."

His brow furrowed ever so slightly. "What about it?"

"I tried using it. I couldn't."

"I mean, the edict of peace kind of fucks with that, doesn't it? You're a non-user."

"No, sir, I couldn't use it at all." Idina spoke, leaning to look at him with a serious expression. "I can throw rocks at trees just fine, so long as there's no one there, I thought I could make a sling and try it as you had. But I couldn't."



Damon sat up, meeting her gaze for a moment. “What are you trying to say, that there’s an edict?”

“It didn’t feel like one.” She muttered. “Edicts paralyze you, they make you feel so much fear you stop moving entirely. No, this was different.” The young woman wrapped her arms around her knees, staring at something in the distance. “I was angry, when I thought of using the sling the way I’d seen you do it. I was so angry that I broke it, tore it into pieces. Just thinking about it felt wrong. Unnatural.”

Damon looked around, Sybil and Han weren’t there, patrolling the area further off. In the darkness of the night, he could barely make out their silhouettes roughly thirty or so meters from the cart. Sybil could see far better than any of them in the dark.

“Could you keep this secret? There might be something else going on and we should approach it carefully.”

Idina nodded. “I will, sir.”

“Thanks. Now go to sleep, tomorrow’s going to be a long day.”

She did, but Damon felt himself unable to.

Indeed, something was off about this whole damned place.

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## [020] [Towns]

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Traveling across the mountain was an experience that would have been quite leisurely if not for the frequent number of monsters that would pop out to try and make a meal out of them. They would never come alone either, and though most had been teethers, they'd also had to handle at least a dozen gapers before they reached the first trade-hub in the region, passing a handful of tiny villages along the way.

The trade-hub was a town that actually looked decently outfitted to defend itself from monsters. Six wooden watchtowers, two gates, and guards moving about all over the place. And as soon as the place had come into sight, Sybil had pulled her hood right back on.

"I don't get how you can be sitting under so much damn sunlight and still be wearing that hood and cowl without suffocating." Damon grumbled, looking at Sybil as her eyes had a lingering smirk to them. "Teach me your secrets."

"Icer seeds and a regulator piece." Han answered. "Expensive stuff if you try buying it down south. Sucks up moisture, outputs it as chilled mist. The seed itself gets hotter as it goes until it shuts down for the day."

"It's rude to share the secrets of others." Sybil's voice had only a hint of annoyance but was mostly amused.

"Man, monster parts, monster seeds, it's almost like they were made to be useful, however they're killed."

"Of course they were. The Nameless One would have his servants scour the battlefields to pick up the remains of his creations. That way they could use the parts to build powerful weapons."

"Small lesson in religion." Han piped up with a groan. "If you have a flame-sword and someone's glaring at you as if they want to pluck your eyes out, they're probably a follower of Janus." He coughed. "Which is not how I met Sybil."

"I know I detracted some points from this world for not having dogs, but I'm going to add a couple for there being such a thing as a *'flame-sword'*." Damon proclaimed. "Exactly how bad-ass is it and how expensive?"

“Flamer monster bones are what’s used to make a flame-sword, and it is something that is mostly aesthetic and entirely useless.” Sybil stated. “The affront of creating weapons as the Nameless One did aside, the flame-sword only ignites when drenched in a special oil, and is likelier to burn the user than the target.”

“Why have them at all?”

“Because they are ceremonial weapons used in stage plays,” she said. “Often by whomever is taking the role of the Nameless One. Many foolhardy users spend their coin on a flame-sword thinking it is a sure way to appear ‘*mean*’ or ‘*tough*’.” This time, her tone took an edge of mirth. “In Han’s case, he was trying to impress women.”

“I did no such thing!”

“It’s ok, Han, people in my world spend ridiculous amounts of money on dumb things thinking it’ll impress the ladies too.” Damon chuckled. “They’re kind of like peacocks.”

“What’s that?”

“A kind of bird that has impressively large tail feathers. These feathers make the bird so heavy they cannot fly comfortably, thus making them easy prey.” A smirk followed. “The only use the tail has, aside from ensuring a quick death, is to impress the female peacocks.”

“That was Han.” Sybil nodded sagely, much to the complaints of the golden bearded sasin next to her.

“It was not!”

“The bluster nearly got him killed during his first monster raid.”

Damon quirked a brow. “I thought you’d been a user for longer than Sybil.”

“I am.” Han’s silver ears drooped as he turned away. “I just... didn’t spend as much time hunting monsters.”

“He was a glorified bodyguard.”

“I protected my clients from bandits and users.” Han declared sullenly.

“Nothing wrong about protecting folk from other folk.” Damon shrugged.

“As a bearer of the gift of Janus, users not fighting monsters is like a blade that never leaves the scabbard.” Sybil stated, crossing her arms with what little sternness was left in her. “As attested by Han nearly dying. He was rusty.”

“I only nearly died because I had to heal you rather than myself.”

“And that was because I was protecting you, the healer, when you specialize in shields.”

“Speaking of protection.” Han very quickly moved the conversation in a new direction, reaching into one of the boxes and pulling out a large cloak. “You’re going to be wearing this. And a mask.”

Damon frowned, looking at it with a frown. “Because I don’t startle people enough?”

“We’ve been thinking about that. It’s easier to explain away that you’re keeping your hymn blocked as a form of self-imposed training. And so long as people can’t see what’s under the cloak, they’ll assume you’re freakishly tall because you have some special grafts.”

“It will still be unnerving, and it will still draw attention. But less likely for it to be dangerous attention.”

“Because in this world I’m somehow a freak?”

“Exactly that.” Han nodded. “Acolytes attempting to train in odd ways is one thing. Rare, but not unheard of. But no one has ever heard of humans let alone seen one.”

Damon grumbled. “I hope this isn’t as bad in the larger cities.”

“Larger cities have crowds, far easier to hide the lack of a hymn there. But this is just a town.”

A sigh and a nod, he looked at the ‘mask’, a slightly curved piece of blue wood with two holes poked through them. Blinking for a moment, Damon’s expression shifted, a grin spreading across his lips, he searched for the piece of charcoal. “Okey dokey.”

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Radka Garbi had a comfortable life considering the sort of task she fulfilled. The Master had a need for eyes, ears, and hands all across the continent, and Radka had been fortunate. The only thing she needed to do was keep oversight of the Blue Mountains within the northern regions, a place once bustling with activity from unearthed ruins. Now the north was nothing more than a blip on the map, notable only for the export of glow-wood and the severely lowered monster threat. Most users moving through her town came for an easy experience or with hopes of finding some ruin that had been somehow missed.

Thus, Radka's job for the Master was to make sure the northern lands remained ignored. Quiet. All she had to do was make sure the stream of non-registered axons kept flowing and that was that. Sometimes, one of the assets wouldn't meet their quota, and she'd have to send one of her men to convince them to keep up the good work.

But such events were quiet things, easily brushed under the metaphorical rug.

Until it hadn't been.

The hagsier merchant with the clipped ear had assured her he'd get the knight back in line. Then proceeded to get eaten by a monster, and users came back with a recorded confession from the knight himself!? They'd contacted the order of the knights, put in requests, left a paper-trail, and worst of all, they'd discovered a place of power for Janus! Now the north was no longer going to be quiet and peaceful, no doubt a new wave of users looking for ruins would also start showing up.

It had been so fast there had been no opportunity to put a stop, prevent word from getting out. Nothing. Barely even attempt to delay things. Now the only option was to find a way to sink the investigation into the now-dead merchant's activities. The Master would not tolerate threats to his operations. And Radka would be a fool to consider she could not be replaced if the Master deemed her unfit for the shifting circumstances.

Normally, Radka would have merely needed to put in a small word here or there, and the knight and his daughter would be executed by the order of the knights themselves. But the users had put in the blame entirely on the hagsier merchant. And thus, her problems were the knight and his daughter. So long as they lived, they could share information that could compromise the rest of the operation.

If they hadn't already.

She expected the users she'd sent to be more than enough to clean up the mess.

Reclining inside her office as she worked on the parts tasked to her as a knight, she filled out the documentation and record-keeping of the town she oversaw. It was with a swift pen that errors would be corrected, taxes estimated, names and dates written.

She was corrupt, not sloppy.

She felt the presence of a familiar hymn approaching. Its nervousness caught Radka's attention. She put aside the ledgers, allowing the ink to dry as she turned to greet the incoming report of what would no doubt be success. She expected they might have lost a user or two, but such would've been a reasonable expense to clean the mess.

There was no other explanation for the anxiousness in the hymn of the men she'd sent out to deal with her issues. These men were experienced in the task, trustworthy. But then again, what was that sense of underlying panic? The only reasonable conclusion Radka could reach was that far too many agents had died.

She approached her office's door and unlocked it, allowing the one-eared sasin to burst inside. "We have a problem." The first words that came out of Ura's mouth did not bode well, the fact that he was paler than a corpse made it worse.

"What is it?"

"We weren't enough."

Radka scoffed. "Have you lost any to the monsters? You were twelve strong."

"And it won't be enough."

"**Won't be.**" She locked on to the word, narrowing her eyes, her hymn scalding. "You haven't dealt with them already?"

"The knight will die before the replacement gets to the village. But there is no way we can touch the gatherer girl. They have a... something with them." Stumbling down, the man took the visitor's seat and looked at Radka with exhaustion, his hymn frayed at the edges. "I wouldn't call him a user. He is a beast."

"Explain."

"We planned to ambush them. Drew in over fifty teethers with some monster-blood. But it didn't matter." He swallowed. "The teethers didn't stand a chance."

Radka nodded in consideration. A drawn out fight was the best approach against experienced users. "Fifty fresh teethers should have exhausted two users well enough. Even experienced ones."

"There were three."

"I fail to see the difference in outcome. Twelve fresh users against three exhausted ones."

"You do not understand." He declared. "They needed just one."

"One?"

“The third user. Tall, taller than any man I’ve ever seen.” His hymn shook violently, hands reaching for his head. “He killed them all. He killed the monsters. On his own. The others watched, amused, as if it were normal.”

That gave Radka hesitation. None of the reports mentioned... Her eyes turned towards her ledgers. The two users had come to inform of a user that had killed the knight. Radka had thought it would be one of the two, could it have been a third?

“Describe this third user.”

“A man and a half tall, with round pink ears and brown hair. He had no grafts I could see, but...” There was a shudder. “I could not hear his hymn.”

“A stealth graft, then. Expensive and rare, no doubt.” A slight nod. “So why did you not attack? Killing that many monsters should have exhausted him.”

The green eyes were wide, the hymn shrinking from the fear, his voice a whisper. “It didn’t. He killed them all, and then walked, keeping pace with the carriage.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“I AM TELLING YOU!” His voice rose in a crescendo of panic. “I watched him kick a teether on the gut and it exploded as if it had swallowed an air-cannon. I saw him swing a club that would take anyone else topple over from the weight as if it was nothing more than a rapier. I saw him rip the leg of a teether with his bare hands just so he could pummel another to death! He bathed in their blood like there was no way to amuse himself other than by facing them all at once! And he. Just. *Kept. Going!* We threw them four more monster ambushes, and nothing would slow it down!”

The man crumbled back onto the chair, staring at Radka with shaking hands, the hymn speaking of the horror he’d witnessed far more loudly than his words ever could have described.

“How would you propose this be handled?” Radka pushed. “We do not need to- Where are you going!?”

“We’re done here.” There was a pause as he looked at her with a scowl.

Radka whirled, shocked. “What!?”

“I don’t know why you need that girl, but-.”

*Knock knock.*

They both froze at the tapping against the door. There was no hymn there, there was no one near the door. Was it some foul prank? A monster? She grasped at the hilt of her sword, checking on the condition of her men. They were still standing guard at the entrance of the building, but they were nervous.

“Hello?”

“He’s here.” Ulra whispered, going pale as his hymn screamed, the tone no different than that of a scared villager girl about to get eaten by a monster. “He’s here, we need to... I need to...” His gaze turned to the window, as if seriously considering his options by jumping through the glass.

There was another knock.

Radka felt herself tense, sharpening her senses as much as she could. There was nothing there, not even a mute little chirp of emotion. An empty void of nothing. She looked at Ulra, he’d stuck with his back to the wall and had gone still like a statue.

The door opened just a little, enough to show a sliver of the corridor behind, and of the figure taller than the door itself that was behind it. “Is it ok for me to come in? Or is it a bad time?”

Ulra looked at Radka, begging her as he shook his head. Her hymn flashed, warning that she was busy and unwilling to meet a visitor.

“Uh, you guys ok?”

The door opened, the hooded figure bent down to pass through the frame, ignoring Radka’s hymn. The cloaked figure stepped inside and straightened out to stand at his full height. Radka had to twist her neck up to look upon the mask the thing wore. One made out of blue glow-wood, drawn upon the mask was a crude circular face, one with an impossibly wide soulless smile with too many sharp teeth and hollow eyes that allowed the thing to look upon her from the darkness under its hood.

It was as if he were staring through her.

As if she were nothing.

Ulra held his breath, clearly unwilling to risk detection.

The creature loomed closer to Radka, silent, its presence invisible if not because she was looking at it with her very eyes. It was impossible, how could something so big be so... quiet? “What... what are you?” She gasped, feeling a shudder run through her.



“Just a user.” The voice spoke with an inflection that lacked any accent, but she could sense the smile in the male’s tone. A smile much like the mask’s, amused at the thick layer of fear in the room. “I was told to report to you. The route north has been cleared of the rebirthed monsters.”

North.

To the village with the knight.

The teethers.

Suddenly, Ulra’s warnings felt like knives stabbing into her chest.

This was the giant man that tore monsters with his bare hands as if they were little more than amusement.

Radka’s eyes widened, nodding mutely, all color draining from her face.

He’d found out. Somehow, maybe he’d followed Ulra, the fool dooming them both. It didn’t matter. He could have just as well picked off the hymns from the conversation. Someone with this much control would no doubt have incredible sensitivity. Radka had heard of such users, able to pick out hymns from the other side of a valley, impossible to detect save when they wanted to be seen.

Radka knew they were going to die.

Their hymns screamed in terror. Would her guards make it in time? Could they even stop the hooded figure if they did? Was there a chance of survival if she fought along with Ulra? Her henchman appeared entirely rooted on the spot, caught in place, frozen.

“I-I-I will make sure you are properly repaid.” Radka proclaimed. She had to buy time, something, anything that might give them an opportunity.

“Just send the gold to the needle-shoe inn and I’ll call it even.”

Bribe! He was looking for a bribe! This was more to her speed. “Yes! Of course, wh-what name should I... send it to?”

“Just Damon. They know who I am.” He leaned back, standing tall enough his head nearly brushed against the ceiling, looking around the room for a moment and focusing on Ulra. “Oh, sorry, didn’t see you there.” A chuckle followed, as if the sasin’s hymn crying of terror was nothing more than amusement. “Nice to meet you.”

A hand emerged from the darkness of the cloak, Radka was surprised it wasn't a claw or some graft. No, it was pink flesh, a large strong hand that could grasp one's skull and crush it. A hand Ulra took with a trembling grip.

"Have a good day." He'd turned to leave, but halted. "I almost forgot."

Turning to face Radka again, he bowed. "This user greets the knight and wishes for a shining future." It was the traditional way for a user to show respect to the local authority, but it was all wrong, the bow was too shallow, and the hymn had not even shown itself to reveal sincerity. Radka instantly knew it to be nothing more than a mockery, as if to make clear he held little regard for the corrupt knight in this forgettable town.

"Y-yes..." She said, mutedly watching as the user, Damon, turned to leave.

The door closed with a soft click.

Radka collapsed on her chair, shaking like a leaf in an autumn storm. She reached down for the flask of spirits she reserved for only the most strenuous of occasions and took the longest swig she could. Next to the bookshelf, Ulrid had stumbled to sit on the chair, looking at his not-crushed hand in disbelief.

"It was like being held by stone." He swallowed, turning to Radka. "He knew. He must have known we were going to ambush him."

"And spared us all anyway." She nodded grimly, pouring a glass and passing it over as she took another long swig from the bottle. "The Master will not be pleased."

"Fuck the Master." Ulrid declared. "We shed the leaves and put in a new graft."

Radka frowned. "What are you suggesting?"

Ulrid spoke quickly. "This user couldn't have come out of nowhere. I think the Order of knights sent him." His hands were trembling as he pulled the glass up, downing it in one go. "And they're letting us live, despite knowing what we've done."

Radka tried to scoff, but her words came out as a weak whisper. "They can't know, we've been careful."

"They must at least suspect. You had a knight killing users right within your territory!" He spoke in a harsh whisper, his hymn was desperate, looking for a way to survive. "I say fuck the Master. I say we go straight and narrow, bow to the Order, cooperate, ask for protection. Pray to Tora or Janus or whatever Gods have mercy left in them to never meet that *thing* again."

She took in the words, swallowing them as a horrible realization dawned on her. “You must leave.”

“What?”

“The knight! I sent users to kill the knight. We have to stop them! If he does care, and finds out, we could be dead already!”

Ulrid shot to his feet, nodding, determined even if the hymn was drowned in a sea of fear. “I’ll find the fastest cloppers and set out immediately.” He rushed to the door but hesitated as he opened it, peeking on the other side as if to confirm the cloaked figure had truly gone. Only then did he break into a run.

Radka could only pray to the gods that she wasn’t too late. That the users she’d sent to end the knight had not fulfilled their task.

If this cloaked creature was protecting his daughter, then their life would be forfeit the moment the knight’s was taken. Of this she was sure. Ulrid was right, the Master be damned, her best protection would be the Order of the knights.

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Meanwhile, walking across the town, Damon grumbled inwardly as he reconsidered his options.

It was clear the smiley face was not helping make people any less nervous around him. Maybe he should put something else?