



FROZEN
STARS
OVER
WONDERLAND

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Frozen Stars Over Wonderland

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Cover art by Akira

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Chapter One

Alfre was unsure how it happened. She wasn't even sure WHAT happened. But now she was running through a deep, dark wood, sword at her side and white hair billowing out behind her and the sound of wild, animalistic growls at her heels.

She did not always have white hair. And it had never been this long before. She reached up to push up glasses that were not there and would probably never be again as she jumped to avoid tripping over an exposed root. The sounds of growling faded behind her but she continued her sprinting. The how and why of this situation could wait until she was safe, and she wouldn't be safe until she was back in the city.

But where was the city? And how could she get back?

She cursed as a low hanging branch caught on her hair and tugged a few strands from her scalp. In a moment of clarity brought by the pain, she swore to chop all of her hair off the moment she got back to the city.

She caught sight of a break in the trees just ahead of her. The end of the forest? No. A meadow. A meadow with a small, squat structure in the middle of it. Shelter, supposedly. At this point, she'd take any thing. Her lungs burned and her legs threatened to give out from under her if she ran even one more meter.

She slowed to a stop as she approached it. It was a cottage, abandoned some time ago. Moss grew up the stone walls and the window was dusty and cracked. The door hung ajar, but it didn't seem broken, which was a good thing. The last thing she needed was a shelter with a busted door. It creaked loudly on rusted hinges as she pushed it open a little more. Nothing seemed terribly out of place inside. It was dusty, true, and cobwebs hung in the corners where the walls met the ceiling, but there seemed to be no sign of an attack or a struggle. Whoever had lived simply up and left, leaving behind a small, unmade bed, a tiny kitchen, and a fireplace.

She closed the door behind her, sliding the bolt to lock it against any possibly intruders. She didn't dare try to light the fire, not that she had any real way of doing so even if she wanted to. The moonlight that shown threw the small, dirty windows would have to be enough. And enough it was for what she needed. She wandered the few steps necessary over to the bed. She smacked at it, causing the dust to go flying. She sneezed loudly, groaning at the pain it caused in her chest. She slapped the mattress a few more times in an attempt to clean it enough so that she wasn't covered in grime come morning. Satisfied, she unhooked the belt that held her thin, simple rapier to her hip and set it aside, leaning it against the

wall within reach of the bed. She toed off her simple, black leather boots and collapsed on the bed. Despite the fear that coursed in her veins, despite the adrenaline yelling at her to run more still, her eyes grew heavy and sleep came as beasts growled just outside the door.

Chapter Two

She awoke sometime later; she had no idea how long she slept, only that it was light out, to a rapping on the door. She inhaled sharply, sitting up far too quickly and making herself dizzy in the process. Once the world stopped spinning, she turned her gaze to the door, staring, waiting for the knocking to begin again.

Sure enough, it did. Three short, precise taps in succession. "Hello?" a clear, melodic voice called. "I know you're in there! I saw you through the window. Are you alright?"

She stood slowly, slipping her feet back into her boots as she reached for her rapier. She drew it, leaving the scabbard behind as she approached the door, slowly, cautiously. The voice sounded friendly, but she couldn't trust anything right now. Her hand wrapped around the sliding bolt.

"Who are you?" she shouted through the thick, dark wood. "I warn you, I'm armed!"

"No worries," the voice called back, and Alfre could tell it was a man's voice. "I'm a friend."

Alfre felt her stomach flutter as hope filled her. A friend? It almost sounded too good to be true. It still could be.

"If you're lying to me, I'll gut you," she warned.

The voice laughed. "Well, it's a good thing I'm not lying then."

Alfre steeled herself, hand tightening its grip on her sword. She slid the bolt open and let the door creak open. Sunlight hit her eyes and she was forced to squint against it. If whoever had knocked on the door meant her any harm, that was the perfect time to do said harm. But nothing happened, and eventually her sight cleared.

It was indeed a young man at her borrowed door. A young man in a finely tailored three piece suit that looked very out of place in the forest around them. A young man with brilliant red eyes. A man with snowy white hair just like her own. A man...with very large rabbit ears sticking out of his head.

"Umm..." Alfre said intelligently.

"Oh! You're an Element Blade!" the man gasped, his ears twitching excitedly. "Then you must be a new player. Oh, you poor thing, it must have been terribly frightening out here in the Wilds all by yourself, especially given the circumstances."

“Y-yeah.” Alfre managed. “Started yesterday...won an early access from a contest so I got to make my character before the expansion pack...launched.”

Yes, that was how it started. This...this world was supposed to be a game. A fairly popular game. A game whose first major expansion pack had launched yesterday...and then this happened.

“Well,” the rabbit man said sheepishly. “Welcome to Wonderland, I suppose.”

“Thanks,” Alfre muttered, turning back inside the cottage to retrieve her belt and scabbard.

“I’m Elias, by the way,” he called after her. “Magician and butler extraordinaire!”

“Alfre,” she replied curtly, sheathing her rapier and returning the belt to her waist.

“Pleasure to meet you, Alfre,” Elias chirped. How someone could be so perky in this circumstance, Alfre couldn’t quite comprehend. “It’s a shame you had to start the game this way. The first few hours where everything is fresh and new are honestly the best parts.”

“I’m sure.”

She didn’t mean to be rude, really. But she was tired and sore from running for her goddamn life and she was starting to feel the hunger pains coming on. He’d caught her at a bad time. A very bad time. And trying to convince her that the first few hours in this world were supposed to be the best was NOT welcomed at this point.

“You must be hungry,” Elias said suddenly, reaching into some small bag that Alfre hadn’t noticed before and pulling out a somehow steaming bread roll. “Here, it’s not much, but it might tide you over until we reach the city. Or until we find something else to eat, which ever comes first.”

She reached out hesitantly to take the offered food. True enough, it was warm to the touch. Any attempt to hold herself back went out the window as she stuffed the bread into her mouth, taking as much as she could in that first bite. It was airy and buttery and absolutely perfect. She devoured it like a wild woman, nearly choking on the final bite she attempted the swallow without fully chewing.

She met Elias’ eyes and blushed a little. Despite finding no judgment on his face, she felt embarrassment welling up in her gut. She looked away, the pretty, powder blue of a patch of wildflowers catching her attention.

“Thanks,” she mumbled.

Elias chuckled a little. “You’re welcome. Come on, we won’t make it back to Spade by standing here. Oh, did you want to mark this place on your map? Who knows, it might make a nice little house once you have the coin.”

“My map...how do I...?”

“It’s pretty fascinating, actually,” he explained. “You just kind of think ‘bag’ and a bag appears with all your game inventory in it. Call it magic, I suppose.”

Alfre remembered the bag that suddenly appeared on Elias’ shoulder just before he handed her the roll. It was gone now. She looked down at her side, where she’d assume a simple messenger bag or satchel might hang and imagined one being there. She felt something of a rush and one blink of the eye later, surely enough a bag appeared. She opened it to find it seemingly empty. Well, she reasoned, surely the thing she wanted would appear much like the bag itself did if she wanted it badly enough. She thought of her map, the map given to her when she created her character. A small, pale roll of parchment shimmered into existence at the bottom of her pouch. She pulled it out. All that appeared on the map was the forest itself, in a strange, almost holographic manner. In the center, where she assumed she and Elias stood, was the tiny meadow with its tiny cabin.

“How do I...?”

“Just about the same way you’ve done everything else,” Elias offered. “Just think about how you’d open the drop down menu to mark the spot in the game.”

She hadn’t really gotten the chance to really try out the game before ‘falling down the rabbit hole’ as it were. But she assumed it worked just like any other game menu. She imagined placing a small, powder blue dot on the map, just like the powder blue flowers in the meadow. The tiny mark blinked into existence on her map. A small smile graced her features, the first smile she’d afforded herself since arriving in Wonderland.

“Perfect, you’re catching on already,” her new companion praised. “Right, let’s get going. We’ll want to cover lots of ground today. It’s a fair way from here to the city.”

Alfre rolled up her map and stuffed it back in her bag, feeling first the map and then the bag fade away around her hand in a strange, almost smoky manner.

“Weird.”

She followed after Elias, finding it nearly impossible to actually walk side by side with him given the difference in their strides. Alfre was a very, very tiny girl, not even five feet tall. Despite her almost adulthood at age nineteen, many people assumed her to be much younger, usually middle school aged. She kicked the last person who assumed she was an elementary school student in the balls her first time in a pub. Her roommate at the time never went back with her.

Elias, by comparison, was a giant. He towered over her by almost two feet, the damn rabbit bastard. At least she didn't have to duck under most of the branches. No she wasn't bitter about her unexplained shortness, what are you talking about?

The stroll was fairly quiet, save the chirping of birds and the crunching of leaves under their feet. Until Elias decided it was time for conversation again.

"So what made you decide to start playing Wonderland?" he asked casually, glancing back over his shoulder at her. She noticed he purposefully lessened his stride to greater match hers.

"Like I said, I won it in a contest," she answered. "I hadn't really the desire to play it before hand. But I had the opportunity, so I figured why not. Had I known this would happen, I wouldn't have bothered."

Elias frowned, which was more of a quick downward twitch of his lips than an actual frown.

"Yeah, this...this was unexpected."

"That's an understatement."

There was silence again. Elias' ear twitched. He threw out his arm to stop her, though he nearly smacked her in the face. She glared at him.

"How much experience do you have with combat?" he asked quietly, his voice little more than a hiss.

"I remind you I joined the game right before this debacle happened," she hissed back.

"So none?"

"So none."

"Get ready to earn some experience points, then."

Before Alfre could open her mouth and ask what he was talking about, a small band of short, green skinned creatures with large pointed ears and tiny fangs crashed into her line of sight. They carried what seemed to be broken off tree branches in their hands.

“Goblins,” Elias supplied before she could ask. “In this part of the Wilds they shouldn’t be any stronger than level five.”

“Given that I’m level one, that doesn’t exactly make me feel better,” Alfre snapped, hand going to her rapier.

Elias grinned, a long, slim cane appearing in his hand. “Don’t worry, you’ll be fine as long as I’m here.”

Something warm slid over Alfre, filling her limbs with a tingling sensation. She felt stronger, more solid, but yet lighter.

“What...”

“I’ve buffed your defense and speed,” Elias explained. “That’s my job as a magician. I’ll tell you more about it later. Given your color scheme, I assume you’re a Winter Blade?”

Alfre nodded, icy blue eyes fixed on the approaching goblins.

“Your sword should do magical ice damage along with its regular physical damage. That’s good. It’ll slow the goblins down and make them easier to hit. I’ll debuff their defense. Have at it!”

Alfre, filled with a sense of confidence at Elias’ words, rushed forward, rapier at the ready. She could feel the cold of her magic, her Winter, just under the warmth of Elias’ spell. She jumped at the last minute, soaring high into the air. She fell upon her first opponent, thrusting her blade forward with a shout. It pierced the goblin’s leathery skin easily, viscous green blood spilling from the wound and onto the goblin’s thin cloth armor. That was, until frost formed around the puncture. Alfre pulled her sword free, slashing at the monster’s face, making a cut across its left eye. The creature gave a gurgling cry of pain before disappearing in a puff of smoke. Alfre briefly heard a jingle of coins before turning to the next goblin. It swung at her with its club, moving faster than she anticipated. The club caught her in the side, knocking her prone. Pain radiated from the bruise forming there, dull but throbbing.

“Alfre!” Elias shouted her name, a sliver of panic creeping into his voice. He cursed under his breath and sent a small, blue-green fireball at the remaining goblins.

Alfre slowly struggled to her feet, hand reaching for her rapier. There was one last goblin left after Elias' spell. It was badly burnt and obviously on its last leg. Gathering the bit of courage she'd lost upon finding out that things in this world hurt just as much as they did back home, she charged once more, swiping at the goblin's strangely thin neck. Blood sprayed the ground around her feet before this goblin, like its comrades, disappeared in a puff of green-grey smoke. Again, there was the sound of jingling coins in her ear.

She felt a gust of wind billow up from about her feet. Looking down, she found that she herself seemed to be glowing. The phenomena passed quickly, leaving Alfre feeling...stronger, perhaps? Yes, it wasn't by much but she definitely felt stronger.

"Well, look at that," Elias laughed. "You got your first level up! Congratulations."

Alfre blinked owlishly at that. "I'm surprised that sort of thing still exists."

Elias shrugged, striding casually over to her. "Why not? The inventory still exists. The loot still exists. Surely you heard the gold being added to your purse. This world still retains the mechanics of the game, it's just a material world now instead of a digital one."

Alfre kept quiet, whipping her rapier on the grass before returning it to its sheath. It was strange for a world that looked and sounded and felt this real to have such strange, fantastical rules. Her hand traveled without thought to the bruise forming against her ribs. It didn't hurt quite as badly as before. Possibly because she'd gained more hit points. She couldn't be sure without some kind of stats screen. And even with everything she could do in this game like world, she doubted she could conjure a stat screen on command.

She continued on with Elias, running into all manner of beasts. It was much easier to dispatch of them with Elias with her. It felt good to not have to run. It felt even better to absorb the majority of the experience points because she got the final blow. With each level up she felt a little bit stronger, a little more capable.

Chapter Three

Night fell quickly, almost too quickly.

“Wonderland follows a twelve hour day,” Elias explained when she asked. “We’re lucky this happened in summer, since the days are longest then. In winter, the sun is out for maybe three hours at a time. Which is great for anyone who chose vampire for their race, but not so much for everyone else.”

They climbed into one of the large, towering maple trees, hiding from the beasts below in its leaves and branches. It was far less comfortable than the mattress from the night before, and Alfre found herself unable to sleep for more than a few minutes at a time. There was something about sleeping in a tree, not a tree house, just a tree, that made her uneasy. The idea of falling wasn’t something she was particularly fond of. And she felt so exposed without the four walls and roof her little cottage had provided for her. Someday she was going to go back to that little cottage and give it the fixing up it deserved for keeping her safe that first night.

They dropped out of the tree early the next morning. They were still a ways away from the city, and would have to walk from sun up to sundown to make up for the time they used up fighting monsters along the way. Alfre had no idea what level she was at this point. It wasn’t like she could concentrate really hard on herself and bring up a game menu or something.

Or could she? She certainly had been able to bring out her inventory and map simply by thinking about it real hard. She wondered what shape it would take. The map had been a literal map, her inventory a simply leather satchel.

She thought really hard, concentrating on herself. She squeaked loudly when something fell from just out of her sight to the forest floor. Elias whipped around, scarlet eyes wide and hand on his cane.

“What is it?!”

Bending down slowly, Alfre scooped up a small leather bound book. “This fell in front of me.”

She squeaked again when Elias suddenly appeared at her side, staring over her shoulder at the book.

“What is it?” he repeated.

She flipped open the book, finding a two page spread that reminded her much of a stats screen or info page from a game guide book. “Well, I wanted to know

what level I was. And since I was able to make my inventory appear by thinking really hard, I figured I could do the same with a stats screen.”

One page was a full body sketch of what she’d look like in the game’s anime inspired art style. The page next to it listed her equipment, skill stats, and, right at the top of the page under her name, her level.

“Level five,” Elias mused. “Not bad for all the fighting we’ve been doing. You newbies gain levels much faster than us old guard.”

Alfre hummed, continuing to walk as she thumbed through the pages of her ‘little black book’ as it were. Farther back were pages for her ‘friends list’, which was understandably blank. Maybe once they were out of this ridiculous situation, she’d add Elias’ name to her list. It certainly wouldn’t hurt.

Once again, night came far too quickly. They found a hollow created by a tree’s roots to hide in for the night. It certainly felt safer than being in the tree branches, but not by much. Just as they were settling down, Elias’ ears twitched.

“What?”

He shushed her, finger pressed against his lips. His ears swiveled this way and that, trying to locate whatever noise he’d heard. Alfre reached for her rapier, her whole body tense and ready to snap at the slightest provocation.

“Wellllll, isn’t this a cozy little camp you’ve made.”

Alfre jumped to her feet, head just barely grazing the tree roots the created the ceiling of their little hovel. She spun, drawing her sword in one quick, smooth motion. The tip stopped just in front of the smooth, white skin of their uninvited guest’s throat.

The woman at the end of her sword raised her hands slowly, almost mockingly, as she stared them down with deep, brilliant sapphire blue eyes. She grinned toothily at them, and Alfre’s eyes were drawn to her unusually long canines.

“Well, that’s certainly one way to welcome a guest,” the woman drawled. “A rude one, but who am I to judge.”

“Who are you?” Alfre demanded, pressing her blade forward just a hair. “What do you want?”

“Put that sewing needle away, darling,” the woman warned, voice silk and steel. “You’ll poke someone’s eye out.”

Alfre glanced briefly in Elias' direction. The rabbit man nodded and Alfre stepped away from the woman, sword falling to her side but not returning to its sheath.

"Better," the woman said with a nod. She settled herself on a root, crossing her legs at the knee and smirking at them. "Now, as for your questions. I'm Spica-

"There's no way that's your real name."

The woman, Spica, glared at Alfre, eyes flashing dangerously in the dim light of the tiny fire Elias had made earlier. "Don't interrupt, darling, it's very rude."

Alfre scowled, but kept her mouth shut.

"As I was saying, I'm Spica," Spica continued. "And I'd like to join your merry little band."

Elias and Alfre exchanged another glance. This time, Elias spoke. "Why?"

"I'm sure you've heard the saying 'safety in numbers'." Spica waited the briefest moment for them to nod before continuing. "There's also the fact that I'm a vampire. I'm perfectly fine on my own during the nighttime, but during the day...I'm an assassin, I don't have the raw power to cleave through enemies. That one-" She pointed at Alfre, who glared at the offending finger. "Can make my enemy encounters go far quicker. Besides...it's lonely out here with no one but the goblins for company. They make terrible conversation partners. They don't even react to my witty banter."

Again, Elias and Alfre look to each other. He shrugged. "I have no issues with it. If she wants to come along, I say the more the merrier."

Alfre shot a glance in Spica's direction, frost meeting sapphire for a brief moment before Alfre closed her eyes and sighed. "Fine, whatever. It's not like I have much of an argument against bringing you along."

"Oh, I wasn't going to give you a choice anyway," Spica informed her with a smile.

Elias roused the two of them early again the next morning. He pulled more bread rolls from his bag, admitting that it was going to take them far longer to reach the city than he thought. Alfre took her offered breakfast without comment other than a softly spoken 'thank you'.

"I don't suppose you have anything...meatier on you, would you?" Spica inquired.

“Ah, I’m afraid not,” Elias apologized. “The rolls were cheaper than any meat I could have bought, and I’m no chef, so any raw meat would have been useless to me.”

Spica pouted, tossing a few strands of her crimson hair over her shoulder. “A pity. Well, you’ll know for next time we party, magician.”

“I don’t suppose I could convince you to call me Elias?” he asked, a nervousness leaking into his voice.

“You could,” Spica agreed. “But it might take some time.”

Alfre rolled her eyes, standing up and dusting off the back of her white pants. Those probably needed to be laundered but that would have to wait, for how much longer, she didn’t know. She clambered out of the hollow, eyes sweeping the surrounding woods. She called the all clear and Elias and Spica joined her. Elias, in what Alfre had come to consider his typical fashion, bounded ahead, a bounce in his step. Spica slid into step beside him, carrying herself with a grace Alfre wasn’t used to seeing and certainly hadn’t expected to find in the woods. She fell in behind them, scowling as their long legs took a step for every three of hers.

She rammed into them from behind when they stopped suddenly.

“Why are we stopping?” she hissed.

“Goblins,” Spica said simply.

“Already?”

Elias sighed. “So it seems. They seem peculiar recently, usually you only catch them in the evenings.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Spica soothed. “We’ll handle them. Get ready.”

She vanished into the treetops with only the barest whisper of sound to give her away. Alfre drew her sword, feeling Elias’ buffs taking effect almost immediately. The goblins crashed into view, tree branch clubs swinging wildly, only to run right by them.

Elias fell from his fighting stance, turning to stare after them in confusion. “I wonder what that was about.”

Spica reappeared beside Alfre, twirling a long, metal needle between her fingers. “What a shame, I wanted to see the little one in action.”

Alfre swiped at her with her empty fist. "My name is Alfre!"

"That's nice, darling."

There was a deep, rumbling, growling noise from behind them. They turned slowly to find a very large, terrifying looking bear with strange, white, crystalline structures protruding from its midnight black fur.

"What the hell is that?!" Alfre shouted, ducking behind Elias.

"Ursa Major," Elias said shortly, hand trembling as his grip tightened on his cane. "That certainly explains what the goblins were running from."

"Plan?" Spica demanded. "I doubt running with work."

"What sort of debuffs do your poisons have?" he asked.

"Speed and defense," she replied. "They also knock off five damage a second for six seconds for each needle I land."

"It'll do. Fire as many as you can and I'll debuff its attack as much as I can. Alfre!" Elias turned to her. "I'm going to buff your speed and attack. When it's been slowed down, run in and slice it to bits."

She swallowed thickly, trying to force down the bile clawing at her throat and the tremors running up and down her arm as she stared down the Ursa Major.

"If I die, I'm blaming you."

Elias laughed, but that might have been the panic and the adrenaline mixing weird. "You won't die. And if you do, I probably won't be far behind."

The buffs felt warm under her skin. She could see Spica darting up into the trees, needles flying, piercing the bear's thick hide. The crystals turned a sickly green color, possibly to indicate that it'd been poisoned.

"Alfre, now!"

She ran, though not away from the fight like she wanted to, but towards the giant bear. Her steps left frost in her wake. She thrust with her rapier, her blade skidding along the bear's right foreleg. She saw the blood dripping down onto the grass. Again, she struck, slashing down the beast's flank. It swung wildly, but this time she was fast enough to tumble out of the way and get back on her feet for another strike. Spica's needles were still flying; coming from whichever side Alfre wasn't on. Which was considerate of her, Alfre had to admit. Even Elias got

aggressive, throwing volleys of his blue-green fireballs. The Ursa Major roared in anger and pain.

Alfre gritted her teeth as another wind billowed up from around her feet. Another level up. A thought, unbidden, flashed through her mind. The image of the bear with a spear of ice protruding from its flank in a dark approximation of its crystal growths.

“Stand back!” she shouted. “I’m gonna try something and it might not end well!”

Elias jumped back several feet. Alfre didn’t even know where Spica had gone, but all likelihood was she’d already snuck away by the time Alfre had finished shouting.

She pointed her sword dramatically at the Ursa Major, recreating the image she’d just seen in her mind. Cold gathered about her, ice crystals forming at the tip of her rapier. They coalesced and grew into a long, thin spear of ice. The Ursa reared up on its hind legs, giving her the perfect target.

“Reothadh Sleagh!”

The ice shot forward, blasting her with chilly air as it sailed forward. The Ursa stopped, its roar cut short. The ice hit its mark, sticking out of the Ursa’s gut by a good foot still. The beast fell forward, dissolving into the same black smoke as the goblins and everything else they’d fought previously. Alfre wondered for a brief moment what that meant.

But first...

“Frost spear? Really? Is that as creative as the bloody bastards could get?”

Elias laughed heartily at her offended shout. “Well, it sounded cool at least.”

“You’re lucky I know how to pronounce the damn words,” Alfre grouched. “Bet the wankers who programmed it plugged random words into Google translate and just took whatever popped out.”

“Probably,” Elias agreed. “But it was still very impressive. How did it feel, casting your first skill?”

Alfre flexed her hand, letting it clench into a fist before relaxing it. “Strange.”

Spica shrugged her shoulders. “I haven’t given it a try yet. You’ll have to let me get the finishing blow next time, see how it feels.”

“You’re welcome to it...if you can beat me to the punch.”

Spica grinned wickedly. “Oh, you are just adorable.”

Chapter Four

It was another day and a half before the party reached the edge of the Wilds. Before them, jutting up against the wide, blue ocean was a city. The city towered over its own walls, the buildings a strange mishmash of different eras and styles that still somehow made sense. It reminded her of her own home city, where old and new mixed seamlessly. There was no gate in the wall, just a wide arch. She could see people streaming in and out of the opening.

“Welcome, Alfre, to the City of Spade.”

Alfre tore her eyes from the sight before her to shoot Elias a quick smile. After days and days in the wild woods just behind them, she'd almost given up hope of seeing any signs of civilization beyond her tiny cottage.

“Come on,” Spica snipped. “I don't want to be stuck out here when it gets dark and the gate closes.”

Alfre blinked owlishly at that. “The gate closes?”

“Well, it didn't used to,” Elias said with a frown. “But we don't know what's changed since the Incident.”

That's what they'd come to call what'd happened to dump them all here, for lack of a better word. Incident. Event. Simple words to refer to what must have been a complicated occurrence. It was easier to talk about something when you had a word for it. Not that they wanted to talk about it. Not yet anyway.

“Where are we going to stay once we get there?” Alfre asked. “I doubt I have enough gold for a house. A week's stay at an inn, maybe.”

“Don't worry,” Elias soothed. “I have friends with a very large guild hall at their disposal. I'm sure they'd be happy to lend us a room until we get on our feet.”

“Might want to give them prior warning, magician,” Spica warned. “Most people don't like it when you drop in unannounced.”

“How do you expect him to do that?” Alfre asked.

Elias pulled out a little black book similar to the one that held Alfre's player information. “I've been fiddling with this while on watch. Turns out we can still send DMs through the friends list.”

A thin white brow twitched on Alfre's face. “How convenient.”

“Games need to have some conveniences,” he replied. “Otherwise people wouldn’t play them because they were too difficult.”

“But this isn’t a game,” she argued back.

Elias’ smile fell. “No, I suppose not.”

Spica rolled her eyes. “Well aren’t you two sunshine and roses.”

“Says the vampire,” Alfre muttered.

“And doesn’t it say something that I have the perkier attitude here.”

“That’s a lie and we all know it. Bunny boy is far perkier than you.”

“Oh, so I don’t get to call you ‘magician’ but SHE gets to call you ‘Bunny boy?’” Spica gasped, her voice pitching up in mock offense.

Elias’ shoulders fell in defeat. “I never said she could call me that.”

The mood lightened, at least for the moment, the three made their way down the steep hills towards the grassy fields that led up to the city walls. The city itself was built atop the cliffs that dropped precariously down into the sea, following the hill down to the rocky beaches just to the east of it. Small farms also surrounded the city and Alfre could smell the animals as they approached. Generally, the animals looked much the same as normal farm animals back home, though some cows were far more golden in color than she was used to seeing. And instead of horses, many people seemed to ride around on large stags.

“Who runs the farms?” she asked.

“Wonderlander NPCs, mostly,” Elias answered. “But if a player chose the Farmer subclass, then they can run farms as well. It’s a pretty good way to make money.”

“Subclasses?”

“You really are new to this,” Spica observed with a laugh. “Subclasses are...little bonus classes that don’t really have anything to do with the core combat gameplay. Mostly they’re just used to sell the whole ‘role playing’ thing. The magician is a butler, so he could feasibly be hired by a guild or NPC to look after an estate and earn extra gold doing so.”

“Ahh,” Alfre murmured in acknowledgement.

“They aren’t required,” Elias elaborated. “But I think it adds to the fun. Depending on the class you choose, you can even make items. High level tailors can make all sorts of armor and enchanted garments to give you buffs in battle.”

Alfre hummed again, her attention more on the people they were passing than the conversation at hand. She wasn’t sure what she’d expected the NPCs of Wonderland to look like, but they all looked like normal, everyday people (especially when compared to her traveling companions). They were easy to pick out from the player characters, given their lack of armor or fancy clothes. Even the players working the farms seemed far better dressed than their occupation would suggest.

Her eyes darted over to Elias and Spica. Elias’ three-piece suit wouldn’t have been out of place at some Regency Era ball. Spica was dressed in all black, as an assassin probably should be. The material of her clothes seemed to shimmer in the light, reflecting colors in a way that could constitute for camouflage. Her armor, while light and mostly hidden under her clothes, was made of a silver-white metal that Alfre, given what she knew about fantasy in general, could only assume was made of mithril.

She glanced down at her own attire and frowned. Compared to the two of them she felt terribly underdressed and unprotected. She stood out like a sore thumb between the two of them in her snow white and frosty blue garments. Her armor was flimsy at best, leather in make and, again, white in color. The only thing on her that broke this pattern were her boots, which were black.

Spica noticed her frown and reached out to pat her on the head in a way that Alfre couldn’t decide if it was supposed to be comforting or condescending.

“Don’t worry, darling, we’ll get you some better armor once we reach the city.”

Alfre smacked at the offending hand with a huff.

The streets of Spade were wide and well paved. The main boulevard was some kind of market street, lined with produce stalls and small businesses. Despite the early evening hour, there was very little bustle. Those who were on the street stood huddled together in tiny clumps, shooting suspicious glances their way. Alfre’s hand went to the pommel of her sword, the paranoia rubbing off on her.

Elias placed a hand on her shoulder and pulled her along. His tone was light, but Alfre could hear the worry creeping in. “Come on, my friend is waiting for us at her guild hall.”

He turned them down a narrow side alley, glancing over his shoulder just once. Their route took another turn onto a larger street, this one lined with flowering

trees in a deep purple hue. He stopped in front of a corner building, peering into its lower windows. Alfre stared up at the towering structure. It was a good eight or nine stories tall, far taller than a guild hall needed to be if you asked her. It was built in the style that reminded her of the narrow houses that lined the streets of historic Edinburgh. The bottom floor, as far as she could tell, seemed to be a pub, its name painted on the large windows in metallic silver paint.

“Latte della Luna?”

“It means milk of the moon,” Spica said.

“I know what it means!” Alfre grumbled. “I’m just trying to figure out why the hell anyone would name a pub ‘moon milk’.”

“I think the name came with the building,” Elias said with a nervous laugh.

He pushed the door to the pub, finding it mostly empty. Spica and Alfre followed close behind him, unwilling to stray far in the unfamiliar territory. But Elias had been here many times before, when the game was confined to his computer screen. The smell of hops and spiced wine filled his nose and made the whole place feel...homey. Even the music drifting over from a dragonling bard in the corner felt familiar. Oh, it was! How the bard was able to play the autumn seasonal theme from the game on a violin he had no idea, but he was happy to hear it.

Suddenly there was a bang from the largest table at the back of the house. Alfre and party all turned to see a young woman with wild, short brown hair (save for a long, thin braid that hung over her left shoulder) and golden eyes stand climb up onto the table. A feral grin spread over her face as she locked eyes with Elias.

“Who’s that bunny bastard with the big old ears coming through my door?” she shouted jovially. “Is that you, Elias? How the hell have you kept that damn suit of yours that clean, being out in the Wilds for days on end?”

“A butler’s secret,” Elias called back, matching her energy one for one. “How you been, Ren? Finally found out how to use that siren charm for good?”

The woman cackled and jumped from the table, landing with a heavy thud on old wooden floors. “Why use it for good when I can use it for personal entertainment? C’mere!” She wrapped her arms around Elias’ waist and lifted him up into the air with a laugh. It was an impressive feat, given how much shorter the woman was than him. “Ahhh, it’s good to see you. Literally this time. Are you actually this tall or is that the game helping you compensate?”

“I’m not that tall, Ren,” Elias argued gently. “You’re just short.”

“Bah, details.” She waved him off with a grin. She finally decided to pay Alfre and Spica some notice, her eyes scanning over Spica’s form briefly before settling on Alfre. An eyebrow quirked up. “You didn’t tell me one of your party members was a child, Elly.”

Alfre let out something that sounded like a mix between a sigh and a growl. “I’m not a child, I’m nineteen.”

“Really? What the hell happened? You part leprechaun or something?”

“One, I’m Scottish, not Irish,” Alfre snarled. “And two, you’re not that much taller than me ya rocket!”

“Pffthahaha, where’d you find this one, Elly? She’s great.”

“In the Wilds,” Elias said. He turned to Alfre and Spica with a long-suffering smile. “Alfre, Spica, this is Ren, an old friend of mine. Ren, this is Alfre and Spica.”

“That can’t be your real name,” Alfre muttered.

Ren shrugged, that wicked grin never leaving her face. “No one knows me by my real name here, snowflake. Wouldn’t do me a bit of good. Besides, it’s a brand new world, I’m gonna go by the name I chose for myself while there’s no one to stop me.”

Alfre hadn’t even thought about taking a different name. Sure there were usernames, every online game required one, but if someone had asked for her name, she never would have thought of giving them a fake one. She frowned thoughtfully.

“Anyway, you were saying something about needing a place to stay?” Ren turned her attention back to Elias.

“Yes, please,” Elias said with a nod. “I never bothered buying or renting a house in game, even for storage, so I don’t have anywhere to go. Alfre’s new, so she really doesn’t have a place to stay.”

Ren hummed as she considered this before turning to Spica. “What about you, Red?”

Spica shrugged casually. “I used to have a house back on Kowhai, but I gave it up when I decided to start playing on Siniy. That was only a week ago now.”

Ren nodded, and it was at that point that Alfre noticed the golden feathers braided into her hair just behind her ears as they bobbed with the movement. They were very pretty, and Alfre wondered where she'd gotten them. On a quest?

"I'm going to let you lot stay cause I like you, Elias. But that doesn't mean you get to just mooch. You stay in my guildhall; you help around the guildhall. I don't care if you join the guild itself, we've got plenty of members with out you, but you're not gonna eat our food without helping to stock the kitchens."

"We understand completely," Elias promised, turning to Spica and Alfre with a forced smile. "Don't we?"

"Don't give me that look, I wouldn't have expected any other kind of arrangement," Spica snapped.

Alfre shrugged. "If it's between do chores or pay for an inn, I'd rather do chores."

Ren slapped her hands together; the clap noise resounding in the pub and causing the chatting players to suddenly got quiet and turn to see what was going on. "Great. I'll find my brother and he'll figure out what rooms we can shove you in." She turned to shout over her shoulder back towards the table she'd previously been sitting at. "Oi! Ran! Get your ass over here and do your job!"

"You mean running the guild while you sit on your ass?"

The voice that replied came from a young man with surprisingly long hair the same shade as Ren's and similarly gold eyes. However, instead of feathers he had fox ears perched atop his head, and instead of a braid on his left, his braid fell over his right shoulder. Yes, it was very obvious that Ren and Ran were related...even before you stopped and said their names back to back.

"I guessing the names were on purpose?" Alfre snarked.

Ran rolled his eyes as he came to stand beside his sister. "It was her idea, but everyone in the guild seems to love it, so whatever."

"Somehow, I'm not surprised."

Ran eyed her before grinning in a way that was far too similar to his sister to be a good thing. "I think I'm gonna like you, snowflake."

Alfre sighed dramatically. "That's going to be a thing now, isn't it?"

"Once Ren starts something, it always becomes a thing."

Ren smirked. "It's something of a super power."

Ran jerked his head towards the back of the pub, where a set of stairs led up into the higher levels of the guildhall. Ran explained the floors as they went. The first floor was the pub of course, which was open to those outside of the guild. The rest of the hall was closed off to anyone without permission, which seemed to be something that could be given verbally now that the world was real. Spica and Alfre would be added to Ren and Ran's friends list, just in case. Elias was already a friend of the twins, and had been for over a year.

The second floor had meeting rooms and libraries for guild members to use, as well as several rooms built specifically to help built subclass skills, though if someone was a chef they'd have go down to the pub's kitchen. The skill building rooms and libraries would be off limits to them, unless they decided they wanted to become guild members. The top floor was dedicated to Ren and the rest of the guild leaders, also known as Ran and a friend of theirs called Silver. No one was able to access the rooms there except for the three of them, but since the roof was considered a floor, anyone could pass through on their way up. The floors between were used by the guild members for just about anything. Most of the rooms were initially used for storage, since there wasn't really a need for sleep in the game. But sleep was definitely necessary now, so the guild's carpenters and tailors worked together to supply each room with a small bed and a set of sheets.

"Our biggest issue has been figuring out bathrooms," Ran said with a laugh. "Can't quite get the plumbing to work past the first floor. So if you gotta take a dump, you're gonna have to run down to the pub. Can't really do showers either, but some of our members who are civil engineers or whatever built us a decent sized bathhouse out back. Ever been to one of those Japanese bathhouses?" Alfre and her party members shook their heads. "Well, we'll have someone show you how it works. Basically, you wash yourself before you get in the bath. 'Cause you're sharing the water."

Alfre made a face. The last time she'd shared bath water, she was two, and her mother and aunt thought it'd be cute if she and her cousin took a bath together. She certainly didn't want to think about sharing a bath with strangers. But if that's what she'd have to do to keep clean...

He showed them to their rooms on the fifth floor. They were 'coded' to only allow the 'owner' of the room in, unless the door was opened to a visitor by the owner themselves. Alfre very much doubted she could fit many visitors inside. It reminded her of her dorm at university, long and narrow. The twin bed looked far more comfortable than anything she had at university, thankfully. Right by the door was a wardrobe that she assumed was much like the inventory satchel. There was a small desk along the opposite wall of the bed, with a tiny, old-timey lamp that didn't seem connected to any electrical outlet. The walls were a neutral cream color and her furniture was made of a light, honey colored wood. Her quilt

was a patchwork thing of different shades of green and blue. It looked comfy and warm.

Spica's room was right across the hall. Elias was down another hall completely. Alfre wondered if the rooms were separated by gender, like dorms were in the real world. She closed the door as she left, wandering back down the stairs with Spica and Elias. Ran was already down there, sitting with his sister and a young man with shoulder length, flaming red hair just a shade lighter than Spica's.

"You got any questions?" Ran asked.

"Yeah," Alfre spoke up. "What's with the atmosphere in the town? Everyone looked like they were just waiting for us to rob a place."

Ren's ever present smile faded into something of a scowl. "It's a pretty long story, you might want to sit down."

The three of them parked themselves on the long wooden bench that constituted seating at the table. Ren sighed and ran a hand through her hair, mussing it up even more.

"Have you guys experienced combat yet?"

Elias looked at her like she'd grown two heads. "We just came from the Wilds."

Ren laughed, but it sounded forced. "Right, of course. But I'm guessing none of you died out there."

"If we'd died, we wouldn't be sitting here," Alfre said.

"Well, you might be," Ren argued. "Cause everyone who dies in combat...just gets respawned in the town square. Just like in the game."

Elias' already pale face lost what little color it had. Spica's hands clenched into fists atop the rough wood of the table.

Alfre's gaze flittered back and forth between her friends and the guild leaders. "But...isn't it a good thing people aren't dying?"

"I would be," the red haired man muttered, "if assholes weren't using it as an excuse to rob players by killing them in a PvP match."

Elias stiffened even more. "They can initiate PvP in the city?!"

Ren shook her head. "No one knows. Know one's willing to risk it. No, what Silver mentioned only happens outside the walls. But that doesn't mean bad stuff

isn't happening within the walls. Once everyone figured out there's no way to 'log out' as it were, the newer players started trying to join guilds in masse. They thought the more experienced players would help them grow stronger so they could survive in the world. But the guild leaders are concerned with their own survival. Most of the kids and newbies that join the bigger guilds get swept up and shoved into easy to level up subclasses and used to help fund the guild instead. No one wants to deal with the long grind it would take to get them to a decent level. The only ones really thriving in this kind of environment are the farmers and the merchant guilds. And the Wonderlanders, of course, who are probably wondering why the Fell are acting like the world just ended."

"The Fell?" Alfre echoed.

"That's what they call us, according to the game lore," Ran explained. "Because the first of us supposedly Fell from the sky."

"Okay...why not the Fallen, then?" she asked.

Ren shrugged, a wry grin on her lips. "Because the game developers were pretentious tools, is why."

Silver elbowed her. "You don't know that."

Ren shoved him back. "I do so know that! I asked the game director at a con! He said they used 'fell' because it sounded cooler."

Silver rolled his eyes. "Whatever. The point is, things are shitty in the city and you probably should have found yourselves a little cabin out in the Wilds and stayed there."

The irony of that statement was not lost on Alfre, who snorted in an attempt to hold back a laugh. She covered it up with a cough when the guild leaders stared at her.

Elias' ears drooped. "There's got to be something we can do."

Ren shrugged helplessly. "There's really not much we could do. We're only one guild, and we're not exactly the kind that's known for being badass. I mean, we kind of are, but we're more mid-level than the other guilds, even if we have more members than most."

"We should be worrying about ourselves first," Spica reminded. "Just because we have a place to stay doesn't mean our survival is guaranteed."

"It kind of is," Alfre argued, though it sounded more like she was just thinking aloud. "We can't die."

“We can’t die by combat,” Spica clarified. “There’s no guarantee that we won’t die by starvation. Or exposure. Or illness. Or drowning. Or...”

“We get the point,” Elias interrupted. “But isn’t that more of a reason to make sure no one else does, either?”

“I’m all for being altruistic and shit,” Ren said. “But we don’t know how.”

“Have you talked to any of the other guilds?” Alfre asked.

“We have a few guilds we’re allied with,” Ran said with a nod. “We’ve been talking with the guild leader of Sweet Summer Children and the Knights of the Burning Oak. But that’s just two guilds. And neither of them is particularly huge.”

“Well, then find out who the largest guilds are, the ones with the most people that make up the majority of the city’s population, and call them together for a meeting. If you can convince them to come together, surely you can convince them that fixing the city is important.” Alfre suggested.

Ren and her companions shared a look, something that seemed to say ‘it might work’. Ran shouted over to a tall, wiry looking girl with pointed ears and long, ginger hair.

“I need you to get a message to June and Atticus for me.”

Chapter Five

June and Atticus were away from their guildhalls when Ren's messenger arrived, and they weren't likely to return for a few days. They were out in the Wilds, trying to find their guild members who weren't in the city when the Incident happened. Their second in commands, who had been left behind in case people returned without the search party's help, took the message and promised to pass it on when they returned.

That left Ren and the others with very little to do until they returned. Ran was insistent that they don't make a move until June and Atticus arrived to give them back up.

Alfre took the opportunity to wander the city, though she was never allowed to leave on her own. She was only level eight after all. She was out wandering with Ran and Elias, who didn't seem to like letting her out of his sight. While Alfre appreciated the company, she was far too old to have a babysitter.

The city of Spade was an interesting labyrinth of a place. Major boulevards and lanes ran in a north-south, east-west sort of grid, like any major city in the real world. But between these main thoroughfares were any number of twisting and turning alleys and side streets. Ran pointed out that the side streets tended to have the most interesting places in the city. Like the one little hole in the wall that served the best Italian food in the city, or the tiny book shop that sold all the history books she could ask for, especially if she wanted to know more about the lore of the game.

It was as they were stepping out from a side street onto the main north-south boulevard that they found him.

He was a tall young man, all lean muscle and baggy druid robes. His hair was long and white, much like Alfre's. His neck and shoulders, from what could be seen from under his robes, were covered in shimmering white scales. Despite his stature and build suggesting a man of strength, he cowered away from the circle of players that had him pinned against the pale stone wall of a potion shop.

"What kind of dragonling plays druid?" one of them, a thin woman in darkly colored sorcerer robes, asked mockingly. "What a waste of a strength stat."

"And it's not like he's worth shit as a healer either," a man in heavy plate armor added. "Not at level one. It'd take forever for him to be useful."

"How about you just give us your shit," an assassin with deep purple hair suggested menacingly. "That way, we won't have to kill you and waste our abilities."

“How about you shove off, ya scrote,” Alfre snapped, earning groans from Ran and Elias behind her. “Since we all know you won’t risk initiating PvP in the city.”

“Oh?” The assassin said, moving until he was just inches away from Alfre. He was a thin, pole of a man, not much more than skin and bones. If Ren was with them, she could easily snap him in half. “And what makes you the fun police around here, girlie?”

“What makes you think that harassing someone is fun?” Alfre shot back.

“You’re pretty brave for someone who’s obviously a newbie and too low of a level to even be able to buy decent armor,” the knight sneered, turning away from the druid, who took the chance to slide away from his harassers and towards Alfre and Ran.

“And your bum’s out the window,” Alfre replied.

The three players stared at her. “What does that even mean?”

“Means you’re talking shite and everyone knows it!”

The knight growled. “I’ll show you talking shit!” His hand went to the broadsword at his belt. Lucky for him, his friends jumped into action, grabbing his hand and shoving the sword back into its sheath.

“Don’t be an idiot! Do you want to end up in the dungeon for god knows how long?” The sorcerer hissed. She turned and glared at Alfre and her party, who by this point were hiding the dragonling behind them (not that it did much considering the he towered over both Elias and Ran by at least a head). “Fine, keep your useless druid. Bet he didn’t have anything good on him anyway.”

They stalked off, but not before Alfre kicked a pebble on the ground hard enough that it shot out and hit the assassin in the shoulder. He yelped and turned to glare at her over his shoulder, but kept moving regardless.

The druid sighed in relief, pale hands loosening their grip on his oaken staff. “Thank you, I appreciate the help. Guess I should be more careful about who I try and party with.”

“Probably,” Ran acknowledged. “It’s a good thing we showed up when we did. I’m Ran, one of the guild leaders of the Crystal Moon Kingdom. This is Elias, the bunny butler, and Alfre, whose accent gets thicker in correlation to her anger.”

“Shut ye geggie.”

“See what I mean?”

Their new friend laughed, his body language becoming far more relaxed. “I’m Izo. I just started playing when whatever happened...happened. My cousin convinced me to play, so I’ve been trying to find him.”

“What’s his name?” Elias asked. “Maybe we know him.”

“I’m not sure what he goes by online,” Izo admitted. “But his name is Lance. He should be a dragonling like me, but with red scales instead of white.”

Elias thought for a moment before shaking his head. “I don’t know a Lance.”

“I definitely don’t,” Alfre agreed. “I’m just as new as you are.”

“I know a Lance,” Ran said. “He’s a knight with the Burning Oak guild. Does that sound familiar?”

“A little bit,” Izo admitted. “I know he’s part of a guild, but he never mentioned its name.”

“If we’re talking about the same Lance, then you’re out of luck,” Ran informed him. “He’s out of the city right now as part of Atticus’ search party. I’m not sure when they’ll be back. But until then, you can stay with us. There’s plenty of room at the guildhall. And we can always use more healers. Our members are always coming back busted up from their stints into the Wilds. You could get some easy experience patching them up when they get back.”

Izo’s big blue eyes lit up at the idea, and he nodded emphatically in agreement. Ran took his hand and led them back through the city. When they returned, Ren welcomed Izo with open arms (quite literally, she seemed to have a thing about lifting people who were a good deal taller than her, perhaps as a show of dominance). Not a lot of people played healer in her guild, it seemed. Or in Wonderland in general. It was a stressful position to be in during raids or quests, and it was a rather thankless job. As such, there were at least three people who were still missing hit points from the raid they went on the day before. It wasn’t enough to waste a healing potion, especially since healing potions could be expensive, but it was enough to be irritating to the player in question. Izo’s low level healing spells took care of it easily, and Alfre could see the satisfaction and embarrassment mingle on Izo’s face when he received thanks. It didn’t surprise her when he decided then and there to join the guild. Ren was excited for it, but somehow Ran seemed even more pleased than his sister.

Chapter Six

June returned before Atticus did. She barely took the time to receive Ren's message from her second in command before marching straight over. She was tall and willowy, her auburn hair braided and tied back away from her face into a long, flowing pony tail that cascaded down her back until it reached her hips. Her pointed ears gave her away as an elf. Alfre wondered if all elves were this pretty. With her was a cat eared young woman with hair so orange it was almost blinding, but it went well with her dark skin. She carried with her a small harp, so Alfre assumed she was a bard.

"What's this I hear about creating a player government?" June asked the moment she strode into the pub.

Ren greeted her with her signature grin, which quickly fell away when they actually got down to business. "I'm sure you've noticed how messed up it is out there."

June nodded. "There was a swarm of new players joining my guild just after the Incident, we barely have room for them. The poor things are scared out of their wits."

Ren leaned forward to rest her arms on the table. "Understandably. They're lucky they joined your guild. I've heard not so nice things about what happens when they join some of the more aggressive guilds."

"I've been away, so I don't know much about what's going on," June admitted with a frown. "What have you heard?"

Ren scowled, her hands clenching into fists. "These poor kids rush to join the bigger guilds in hopes they'll be trained in relative safety with the big guys watching out for them, only to be shoved into the guild hall and forced into easy to level up subclasses. They're practically being used for slave labor. They may end up being a level fifty tailor, but they'll never survive out in the Wilds because their main class is still only level one or three. But I can't do anything on my own. Which is why I sent messages to you and Atticus."

"What does Atticus say about all this?" June asked.

Ren sighed, sitting back in her chair. "I don't know yet, he's out in the Wilds like you were. I have no idea when he'll be back. But we'll need his muscle power if we want to look formidable to all the big raid guilds."

June hummed in agreement. "I'm glad you thought of me, though. My guild may not seem like much, but we merchants have more connections than you'd

think. My guild's average level may seem subpar, but we've got more money in the bank than all those big scary raid guilds combined."

"That's what makes you so damn scary," Ren said with a laugh, that wild grin of hers reappearing for a moment. "How many friends in high places you got that you could maybe convince to join my little council session if I sent them an invite?"

June tapped her chin in thought. "For something like this? I bet I could get the leaders of Wall Street Spade to join in on the fun. A healthy, lively city atmosphere is good for business after all, and something like a fourth of the Fell owned shops in town are run by their guild members. I may not like Ouroboros, but they are the biggest scholars' guild in Siniy. And Ludovico owes me a favor for that giant order I expedited to him a few months ago. If my name is on the invitation with yours, he'll get the message."

"And if not?" Ren queried.

June flashed her a terrifyingly sweet smile. "Then he'll figure it out when I cut off all his accounts with us if he fails to comply."

Ren gave a harsh bark of a laugh. "Like I said, damn scary."

"Level can only do so much when it comes to intimidation, my friend," June said, her smile becoming more genuine. "You'd be amazed what supply and demand can make people do. Say what you will about the big scary raid guilds, they'd be powerless without the merchant guilds supplying them with their items."

"Which is why diversity in a guild is important," Ren agreed. "Look, thanks for backing me up with this stuff. There's no way I could do this on my own."

"Of course, what are friends for?" June soothed. "Any one could see that what's going on isn't good for the city. I'm just glad you're trying to do something about it."

"Well, not yet I'm not," Ren amended. "Not until Atticus gets back to lend some muscle to the whole thing."

"Let me know when he comes back," June insisted. "I'll be here to back you up if you need it."

It turned out that Ren didn't need the back up at all, even if she appreciated it. Atticus was in total agreement with them that something needed to fix what was going on in Spade. His guild had gotten flooded with new players after the

Incident just like everyone else. He was lucky that his guildhall had a designated space for level grinding. That way, he could train his new members in a controlled environment until the players deemed themselves strong enough to venture into the Wilds with the regular parties. He understood not everyone had that kind of luxury, but that didn't excuse the exploitation that was going on in the guilds.

"There should be a way to fund and build public works," he offered. "That way, we could build a training ground open for everyone to use, that way there'd be no excuse for not helping the newbies get stronger."

Atticus was a hulking beast of a man. A dragonling, much like Izo and most of the Burning Oak guild, he towered over pretty much everyone, his black scales glittering in the dim light of the pub. He exhaled a brilliant ruby red flame when sighing, far different from the pale silvery blue of Izo's flame. Ren had to remind him several times to hold back on the flames, most of the pub was made of wood after all. Despite the intimidating aura about him, he was polite and passionate about the idea of brining the city together.

Like June, he'd brought a friend with him: Izo's cousin, Lance. Lance was just barely taller than Izo, but he had broad shoulders and obvious musculature that made him seem far larger than Izo than he actually was. He'd embraced his cousin warmly the moment they locked eyes from across the pub.

"I was so worried!" he shouted, grasping Izo's arms tightly as the two of them pulled away from the hug. "I'm sorry I didn't find you before I left. I couldn't be sure you were logged on. I'm so glad you're alright. You joined a good guild, Ren and the others will take good care of you."

"I know they will," Izo soothed. "Thank you for worrying, I'm okay. You should thank Alfre, she's the one who saved me from bandits and introduced me to Ran and the others."

Lance released his cousin and turned to Alfre, who was sitting off to the side, sipping on a warm cider drink and attempting to go unnoticed. Lance knelt to meet her eye to eye and she never felt so self-conscious about her size before in her life. Bitter, most certainly, but never self-conscious.

"Thank you," Lance said solemnly. "Thank you for taking care of my cousin. Right now...he's all the family I have in the world."

Alfre cleared her throat in embarrassment. "It's nothing. Don't worry about it. ...Please stand up, people are staring."

Spica gave a tiny giggle in amusement, hiding her smile behind her hand when Alfre turned to glare at her over her mug. Elias pointed looked away from the two as he sipped on his glass of sangria.

June drew up a sample of the invitation they'd be sending to the other guilds. The paper was far fancier than Alfre had expected, with its gold leaf border design. It would be a weeklong conference, if necessary, beginning on July third. Or, what the Wonderland calendar said was July third. The invitations would be sent several days in advanced, to give anyone traveling in from the Wilds a chance to make it to the city. It would be held in what was considered the city hall, a large, old palace in the center of a large green space that was used for special events. That way no one could have the home field advantage, everyone was on equal ground.

"You'll come too, won't you, snowflake?"

Alfre blinked owlishly at Ren. "Why would I come?"

"Because newbie representation is important," Ren insisted. "I'm not saying you'll be asked to give a speech or whatever, but June thought it'd be a good idea for the three of us to bring some of our newbie members to show those assholes how you should treat someone who comes to you for help."

"But I'm not a member of the guild," Alfre reminded.

"It doesn't matter," Ren said. "You live in my guildhall, you're under my protection, you might as well be a guild member. I've asked Izo to come along too and he's already agreed. And it's not like you two will be the only ones with me. Ran and Silver are coming too. Elias has been thinking about joining us as well."

That was a lot of people. Likelihood was even more than that would end up going when the time came. Ren's guild members loved her, and would support any endeavor she attempted. But she was being asked personally. That meant a lot. Ren put a lot of stock in her, in her view of what was going on.

"I'll think about it," she finally said.

Ren nodded. "I'll take it."

Chapter Seven

Time passed far too quickly in Alfre's opinion. Before she knew it, July third was dawning and she'd hardly gotten any sleep the night before. She stood from her bed and dressed in the nicest things she owned, which was basically everything she'd started with, plus a wonderful white leather coat that billowed out around her calves and supposedly boosted her ice magic. It was a new item, developed to go along with the release of the Element Blade class that the expansion pack had introduced. June had managed to get her hands on it, and sold it to her for what she insisted was a fair price. And by sold it to her, she meant Elias had bought it for her. It was a lovely thing, white with large cuffs of icy blue with swirling black accents. Despite the fact it should have been much too warm to wear such a thing in July, she felt comfortably cool. Siniy was the northern-most continent in Wonderland, she'd been told, and it didn't get very warm there in the first place. But her status as a Winter Blade made it so that it was consistently cool around her, so she likely would never get warm no matter what she wore.

She barely ate the breakfast that was served down in the pub, no matter how good it smelled she just couldn't force it down. Elias seemed just as nervous, his knees bouncing wildly under the table. Spica seemed unfazed, perfectly poised as she sipped her tea. Ren chugged a mug of coffee and gobbled down the omelet her chefs had made. Satisfied, she stood from her table, a wild, confident look in her eye.

"Alright, everyone who's coming with me has five minutes to finish their food and meet me at the door."

Ran groaned and gulped down the last of whatever it was he was drinking and picked his quiche up off the plate and carried it with him to the door. Silver, who'd already finished his meal long before Alfre had even stumbled down the stairs into the pub, stood and followed loyally after Ren. Several other guild members that Alfre had yet to really acquaint herself with abandoned their meals to follow. Alfre grabbed a blueberry muffin from the basket on the table and hoped that would be enough to tide her over until she could eat again and stood to follow. Elias, Spica, and Izo crowded around her as they followed after Ren.

They marched down the streets towards the palace, joining with June and Atticus' parties at the gates to the public gardens that surrounded the palace' grounds. They entered together, streaming into the gardens like a river into a lake. From her position at the edge of the group, Alfre could see another, much smaller party entering the gardens from the western gate. Most of them were large and heavily armored, probably one of the raid guilds. Another group was already waiting at the palace's large, ornate double doors. Unlike the heavily armored group coming in from the west, these players were all dressed in fancy,

flowing robes...save for a young minty haired elf girl in a rather frilly looking maid costume.

“Looks like Ludovico got my message,” June noted with a pleased hum.

“Hunter brought the Fell of Duty, too,” Atticus pointed out, looking towards the group coming in from the west. “That’s two guilds. Let’s just hope the rest arrives soon.”

Ren was the one to push open the doors to the palace, leading the group into a large dining hall where a round, pale marble table has been set up. Chairs lined the walls, and Alfre hoped it would be enough to fit everyone. She went to sit along the wall with the others, but Silver caught her arm.

“Ren wants you to sit with her at the table with Ran.”

Alfre paled, which was quite a feat considering her already pale coloring. “I can’t sit up there with them!”

“Yes, you can,” Silver insisted. “It’s okay. She won’t let anything happen to you. Neither will Ran or June or Atticus.”

Alfre swallowed thickly, forcing the bile back down her throat. She nodded, letting Silver guide her back to the table. She sat at Ren’s left, between her and Lance. The table and everyone at it felt terribly large and she felt terribly small. She felt a heavy hand on her shoulder. She turned to see Lance smiling down at her, his ruby red eyes warm under the red mop he called hair. Alfre breathed deeply, steeling her expression into something resembling calm determination. That didn’t stop her from hiding her shaking hands under the table.

There was something like twenty guilds present. Alfre wondered if that was all the guilds that were based in the city or if there were still some that were uninvited or refused to come. Most of them only brought four or five representatives with them, nothing nearly as massive as the parade that had followed Ren, June, and Atticus into the palace. The expressions ranged from curious to annoyed, which meant the meeting could go in any number of ways, most of which Alfre didn’t really want to think about.

“Alright, Tsukino,” the heavily armored man Atticus had referred to as Hunter snapped as everyone was getting settled. “What exactly is this all about?”

All eyes turned to Ren, who gave Hunter a tight smile. “Well, I guess there’s no need to thank you for coming, since you obviously want to skip the formalities. Which is fine with me. I’ll get straight to the point. The atmosphere and living conditions in Spade suck, and it’s partially the guilds’ fault. So we’re going to fix it. And if you don’t comply, you’re going to have issues.”

There was a commotion as guild leaders and members began to shout protests or whisper amongst themselves. Ren's expression never changed, even as Hunter spouted insults that even Alfre would never dare repeat. Well...maybe if someone chopped off her arm she might.

"Enough!" Atticus' voice resounded against the marble and decorative metals of the room, the deep, booming baritone startling all present into silence. "Hear her out first."

The other guild masters settled back into their chairs, save for Hunter, who continued standing, looking like he was going to leap across the table and tackle Ren at a moment's notice.

"Sit *down*, Hunter," Ran ordered, a barely veiled warning in his voice.

Hunter growled loudly, but did take his seat again, arms crossed tightly over his chest. The two on either side of him looked just as wary of him as they were of Ren.

Ren leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table and steepling her fingers as her eyes swept over the group gathered around the table. "Like I said, living conditions in Spade are far from ideal, and a lot of that is the fault of the guilds."

"What are you saying?" the man with fox ears that Alfre remembered June referring to as Ludovico interrupted.

Ren glared at him. "If you let me talk, Ludovico, instead of interrupting..."

Ludovico made a 'go ahead' gesture, but didn't look a little bit sorry for interrupting.

"When the Incident happened, lots and lots of new players were caught and trapped here with the rest of us more experienced players," Ren explained. "While those of us who've been in Wonderland a long time could take all this in stride knowing we were strong enough to handle most threats that came our way, the new Fell didn't have that luxury. So they came to us, the guilds, for protection and help. Instead, they are swept away, forced into subclasses, and used as free labor. Not only that, but because respawning still occurs, bandits have popped up around outside the city walls where PvP is and always has been allowed. They prey on these low level players, attacking, killing, and looting them. Is this really what we want our city to be known for? Is this really the reputation our guilds desire?"

Many of the guild masters shifted uncomfortably in their seats. Others shot accusatory looks towards other guild masters.

Hunter, however, shrugged nonchalantly. “They came to our guilds, it’s up to us how we deal with them. If they don’t like it, they can leave.”

Hands slammed down on the table. Alfre’s neck popped as she looked to see June standing, hands planted firmly on the table. Her hazel eyes blazed angrily.

“That’s not the point!” she shouted. “No matter what circumstances they joined your guild under, or what level they were at when they did, they deserved to be treated with basic human decency! They’re not your slaves or indentured servants that you can boss around and keep locked up in a gilded cage. They’ll never be able to protect themselves if you don’t take the time and help them grind! You were a newbie at one time! How would you feel if this happened to you?”

“When I joined the game, it was still a game!” Hunter argued. “I’m not going to put my best men at risk just to help a bunch of noobs who joined at the wrong time! They wanted protection, so I’m protecting them!”

“You’re imprisoning them!”

“Your logic is flawed, Hunter,” Ludovico interrupted smoothly. “There is no risk to your men, since respawn still exists. And are your men really so weak that helping newbies fight level five goblins and wild boars is going to put them at risk? Looks like the Fell of Duty guild isn’t as powerful as you boast.”

“What did you say, you fa-“

“Don’t you dare use that word!” June snapped.

“Everyone, let’s calm down,” Atticus suggested, his deep voice calm and soothing. “We’re not going to get anywhere by yelling at each other.”

Ludovico smirked at Hunter, who sat back in his chair with a huff. June sat, her hands still pressed firmly against the tabletop, as if ready to push herself up again should it be necessary.

A dwarven man with an intricately braided ruddy red beard cleared his throat. “I am in agreement. Playing within the city was fun because it was lively. But it’s been anything but since the incident. And this atmosphere is bad not only for my guild’s business, but for everyone.”

Another guild master, a young looking human woman with dark hair in sorcerer robes spoke as well. “I agree. It’s obvious that we’re going to be here a while. We might as well make the best of it. What were you thinking, Ren?”

“Atticus had an idea to set up a public works system,” Ren mentioned. “I know no one likes the idea of taxes, but if each guild contributes....um, lets say one gold coin per member of the guild every month or so, then we could easily fund improvements to the city. Atticus thought a public training ground like the one his guild has might be a good idea. That way, even if you don’t want to take newbies out into the Wilds for grinding, they could grind in the city in a more controlled environment with fewer risks. Fewer surprises.”

“Who would be in charge of the funds coming from these taxes?” the dwarf asked.

June spoke up this time. “I propose a council made up of the different merchant and trade guilds. They can also come together and discuss proper pricing on projects and services. We used to have the game market for that, but we don’t exactly have access to that information anymore. If necessary, we could enlist the help of the Wonderlanders for this.”

“We must also allow newbies to choose their own subclass,” Ren insisted. “No more sweatshops of tailors or blacksmiths.”

“We need to let everyone know that even if they aren’t in a guild they aren’t without a safety net,” Ran said. “I suggest we see about setting up a cheap housing program within the city. Inns are expensive, and most of the new players can’t afford them. Guilds with extra rooms in their guild hall could rent them out to Fell at a discounted rate, to be decided by the Market Council.”

“Also patrols,” Alfre blurted, feeling her throat go dry as everyone turned to stare at her. “Patrols to cut down on the banditry around the city. No one’s going to leave to go questing or grinding in the Wilds if they’re scared to step outside of the walls.”

“Raid guilds and other combat focus guilds could be in charge of that,” Lance suggested. “We could set up a rotating schedule. Each guild would be in charge of setting patrols during a certain week of the month.”

Murmurs of agreement bubbled up around the table as more suggestions were thrown out. Even Hunter, who seemed the least excited about the whole event in general, seemed to relax and listen intently. His eyes lit up at the idea of patrols. Alfre supposed the best way to redirect his apparent need to lord over those weaker than him was to give him power to dole out punishments to people who were just as big of an asshole as he was.

“But what about when unexpected things come up...or decisions need to be made on what to do next?” the dwarf that Alfre had come to understand ran the Wall Street Spade guild asked. “Who’s going to make those choices?”

“A guild council,” Ren answered readily. “I propose the creation of a seven member council, made up of the guild masters or other high ranking members of some of the guilds present here. Of course, as the guilds behind this initial meeting, Sweet Summer Children, Knights of the Burning Oak, and Crystal Moon Kingdom will all have guaranteed seats on this council. The other four seats can be decided amongst the rest of you.”

Hunter opened his mouth to argue again, but a small, rabbit eared girl spoke first. “That sounds reasonable. We should try to have a fairly even number of each kind of guild on the council, yes? So if we have a general guild, a raid guild, and a merchant guild already on the council, then we should have another one of each, right? And then the fourth seat can go to a scholars guild or some other specialized guild.”

“As Ouroboros is the only scholar’s guild on the continent, I suppose that fourth seat is ours,” Ludovico declared, a self-satisfied smile on his face.

“Wall Street Spade is the largest merchant’s guild in the city,” the dwarf (Alfre never did catch his name) stated. “The second merchant guild spot should go to us.”

“Fell of Duty is on the council,” Hunter snapped. “Unless someone else thinks their guild is a better choice?”

There were mutters and low growls around the table from other combat guilds, but no one was willing to argue. This was likely the only way to get Hunter to agree to everything else that had been proposed.

“Cherry,” Ren turned to the little rabbit girl who’d spoken up earlier. “Would your guild like that last spot? I know it’s pretty small, but we’ll need the perspective of the smaller guilds too.”

The girl’s eyes went wide and her ears twitched excitedly. “Well, if you’re offering, then we’ll take it.”

Ren grinned. “Perfect, then the Guild Council is decided. Other councils like the Merchant’s council or the City Guard can be decided later. Though it probably should be decided before the end of the week. Don’t want to lose our momentum, yeah?”

“I’ll have my scribes draw up a declaration to post about the city,” June offered. “So everyone knows what’s going on.”

“Sounds good,” Ren agreed. “Well, shall we adjourn for the day?”

Chapter Eight

News of what was being called the Conference of Spade spread like wild fire. Within a week, the Guild Council as well as the Market Council, Public Works Commission, and City Guard had been founded and staffed. Patrols began immediately after the founding of the Guard. Each of the three founding guilds held a spot on one of the secondary councils. June's second in command Doremi headed the Market Council, Atticus held seats on both the Guild Council and the Public Works Commission, Ran took up Crystal Moon Kingdom's seat on the Guild Council while Silver represented them at the City Guard. Declarations were posted on the corner of every street and in windows of every Fell owned building, letting all citizens know about the new system that they were building.

Soon after, players that had rushed to join guilds left them just as quickly. Now that patrols had been set up around the city and its surrounding area, people felt safer leaving for the Wilds, which many did each day to train and grind and get stronger.

The first batch of taxes was collected at the end of the month. Even those from outside the guilds handed over their gold coin when the Market council took to the streets to collect them. (Though it was decided that perhaps it would be easier to set up an office for the Market Council and have everyone go there to pay their taxes instead of going door to door.) It ended up being a good sum of money, nearly twenty seven thousand gold. Alfre was amazed that that many people resided in the city. The place didn't seem big enough for that many people. And that didn't even count the Wonderlanders that lived there. There had been talk about taxing the Wonderlanders as well, but no decision had come about.

The gold gathered was enough to buy a fair sized, abandoned building that looked to Alfre a lot like a public elementary school. This was to be the location of the public training ground, though there wasn't enough money to formally begin construction. But the next tax collection would certainly fund it. Atticus was very excited about the whole thing, and he talked about it near constantly to anyone who would listen. He reminded Alfre of an excitable puppy...a Great Dane puppy, but a puppy nonetheless.

"The tax rate seems to be pretty well received," Elias noted to Ren one night during dinner in the pub.

"Because most guilds earn five times that money in two weeks," Ren explained. "A guild earns half the amount of gold each member does when they go on quests or raids. For guilds like Knights of the Burning Oak, who are all about that sort of stuff, they could easily pay the tax every time they left the city. It's nothing to them."

“What about the other kinds of guilds, though?” Alfre asked. “It’s probably a bigger deal for them, yeah?”

“Other guilds don’t have the member count raid guilds do,” Ren said, taking a sip of her sake. “Specialist guilds like Ouroboros have twenty members at the most. And they make their money in other ways, like consultation fees. Merchant guilds make plenty of money without even leaving the city or the farmland around it. General guilds like us have our hands in everything and therefore can make plenty of money. Believe me, money is not something guilds worry about...not unless they’re aiming for something big.”

“Something big?” Alfre echoed.

Spica’s eyes lit up in understanding, a knowing smile spreading across her lips. “You’re trying to become a kingdom, aren’t you?”

Ren smirked. “S in the damn name, isn’t it?”

Alfre looked back and forth between the two women, confusion evident on her face. Ran laughed heartily at her expression.

“Guilds, if they’re big enough and have met certain qualifications, can apply to become a kingdom,” he explained. “Most guilds don’t bother, cause it’s kind of a hassle and doesn’t come with enough benefit to outweigh the work put into it, but Ren’s set on it. Been set on it since she found out it was a thing.”

“We’ll be the first Fell kingdom on the continent,” Ren added, pride in her voice. “The only ones who could feasibly do it before us are the Knights of the Burning Oak, and Atticus isn’t all that interested in doing so.”

“Why do you want to?” Spica inquired.

Ren’s smile turned nostalgic. “I’ve always wanted to be a queen.”

“Will you be giving up your spot on the council once that happens?” Alfre asked.

Ren looked thoughtful. “Depends on if there’s someone I trust to take it over for me.”

“I think I should take you and Izo out for some training,” Elias said one day apropos of nothing.

Alfre looked up from the selection of melons she had been perusing, a small, confused frown on her face. "Where'd this come from?"

Elias laughed a little. "Well, now that everything has settled down and the patrols haven't sighted any bandits within the past week or so, I figured things are safe enough that we could leave the city without worrying too much."

It had been little over a month since the Conference of Spade had flipped the city on its head, for the better of course. Things were finally starting to settle down. The streets were livelier now, people were happier. Merchants were traveling from Spade to the Wonderlander cities that scattered over the continent, bringing in new goods, which stirred up business. The only people who weren't happy were the bandits that kept getting their asses kicked.

"I guess I am getting kind of bored," Alfre muttered. Despite Ren's insistence that the three of them do chores to pay for their room and board, she hadn't really had them do much of anything, save for small errands around the town.

"Besides," Elias said, "Keeping the two of you cooped up in the City will stagnate your growth. The training grounds won't be ready for another several months, so the only real way to get you guys levels would be to go out in to the Wilds."

Alfre nodded. She hadn't gained any more levels since coming to the city. Sure, she was doing better than most newbies, but she wasn't content sitting pretty at level eleven. Izo, even with all the work he was doing with healing the guild members, was only level five. He'd never even used the few combat skills he had.

"I'll ask Izo about it," Elias said. "And see if Ren knows a good place we can go train. Preferably some place with decent shelter so we're not camping out at night. I had enough of that when we were traveling to the city."

Izo was very excited about the idea. He'd never seen combat before, only the aftermath of it. Going along on a training trip with Elias and Alfre sounded like fun to him. Once Spica caught wind of the trip, she insisted on tagging along herself. Couldn't let Elias have all the fun with the newbies, now could she?

Ren pointed out a small, forested region on her map, a good few days north east of Spade. They would find plenty of decent level monsters to fight there, plus, there was an abandoned farmhouse they could use for shelter once they got there. Siniy was littered with abandoned buildings, half of which were reminiscent of buildings one would have found in the real world, like the elementary school Atticus had bought to be the public training grounds.

They packed light. Elias had invested in a single, large tent that could fit the four of them if they snuggled. Izo and Alfre were in charge of food and drink

rations. Spica insisted they buy some kind of raw meat to satisfy her vampiric nature. Izo admitted to being fond of rare meat as well, being a dragonling and all. It was something he'd discovered not long after joining the guild, since there were chefs at the pub that actually asked how he liked his food. Alfre bought several loaves of bread along with butter and cheese and jam and even some dried meat (she couldn't afford the fancy prosciutto, but she was informed the salami was just as good). She knew from experience that lots of different meals could be made with bread and a few other choice ingredients. Spica had offered to carry a few healing items, in case they were caught off guard while Izo's healing spells were on cool down.

Clothes weren't really much of an issue. Izo and Alfre only had what they wore on their backs. Elias and Spica, given their level, had several changes of clothes, but decided not to take them along. Should anything get ripped or damaged, Spica could easily fix them given her tailor subclass. She probably could make them each a few changes of clothes as well, Alfre pointed out. Spica said nothing in reply.

Ren and the others walked them to the gate, early one mid-August morning; sending them off with cheers and shouted advice that Alfre questioned the merit of. They traveled slowly those first few hours, passing through the farmland that surrounded the city. Alfre stopped at one point to pet a sweet tabby farm cat that proceeded to follow them a few meters down the road before getting bored and turning back to its farm.

Once they reached the edge of the Wilds, they walked quicker, wanting to get as far into the Wilds as possibly before nightfall. Spica took to the trees, traveling silently along the branches. Elias explained that it was an assassin skill called Silent Footsteps. It allowed her to travel stealthily along any terrain, as long as she wasn't within someone's direct line of sight when she activated it, hence her taking to the trees. Alfre was reminded of that one anime with the ninja...the name of it escaped her. That was going to bother her all day.

The sun was just starting to set when they stopped for the evening, camping under the canopy of the largest oak tree Alfre had ever seen. She passed out the bread and meat and cheese she'd purchased as Elias built a small fire. They had settled around the crackling flame to eat when Spica stopped suddenly and glared into the darkening forest around them.

"What?" Izo asked, his voice quiet.

There was a chorus of howls and the sound of paws running along the ground. The group jumped to their feet, reaching for their weapons and flickers of fur and glowing eyes ran circles around their camp before coming to a sudden stop. Footsteps caught Alfre's attention and she whipped around, pulling her rapier from its sheath.

A hand gripped her wrist, a rough palm against the beating of her pulse. A young man with shaggy looking brown hair and brilliant green eyes stared at her, his head tilted curiously to the side, a set of large, brown wolf ears twitching atop his head. He leaned closer to her face, sniffing at her. A slow, wide grin spread across his face.

“It’s been a while since I’ve smelled a Fell this fresh,” the man whispered, his voice low and rough. “There’s hardly any scent of Wonderland on you. You can’t have been here more than a month, maybe two.”

“Let her be, Canus,” Elias snapped.

The wolf man, Canus, raised his head to look towards Elias, his smile falling into a scowl. “You’ve got a lot of nerve ordering me around, bunny. You’re in my domain, after all.”

“W-who are you?” Alfre demanded, flinching at the stutter in her voice.

Canus’ too green, too wild eyes were back on her. He smiled once again, and Alfre could see his wickedly sharp canines glinting in the firelight. “I guess fresh meat like you wouldn’t know. You Fell never did worship me like the Wonderlanders do. I am Canus, Wolf’s Blood, god of the Wilds.”

“God?!” Izo whimpered from where he was hiding behind Spica.

“What, don’t you Fell have any?” Canus asked with a harsh laugh. “Or are you fresh meat too?”

“Leave him alone,” Alfre hissed, tugging at the grip Canus had on her wrist.

Canus laughed again. “Fresh meat has some spunk to her.” He leaned close again, his nose right up against hers. “Good. Keep that fire, lass. It’ll do you well out here.”

He pulled back, releasing her wrist as he did. “Maybe, if you lot are brave enough, you could even take on one of my dungeons. My friends would be happy to test you.”

The mood seemed to lift, Elias’ stiff posture loosening and Izo stepping out from behind Spica. Alfre looked towards Elias. This was his expedition, he knew this world better than Alfre or Izo did.

Elias shrugged. “Maybe on the way back.”

Canus grinned, less feral and more excited. "I look forward to it. See you around, fresh meat."

Alfre gasped as he shifted, falling forward onto his hands before transforming into a large, brown and grey wolf. He woofed at them before loping off into the forest, followed swiftly by his wolf companions.

"What was that?!" Alfre yelled, whirling on Elias and Spica.

Elias looked sheepish. "That was Canus, one of the four Wonderlander gods. If you stick around long enough, you'll probably learn about the rest, if not run into them."

"No, I mean the turning into a wolf thing!" Alfre corrected.

"Oh, well, that's just a Familiar thing," Elias explained. "That's one of the races of Wonderland. I'm a rabbit Familiar. See, watch." He seemed to think hard about something for a moment and Alfre watched wide-eyed as he shrunk and shifted and transformed into a small white rabbit.

"Did you not know we could do that?" the rabbit asked, nose twitching adorably.

"No!" Alfre shouted, feeling very, very stupid in that moment.

"Oh, well, it's a thing," Elias said, shifting back into his human form. Or...more human form. The bunny ears remained, and Alfre wondered if all people with animal ears were Familiars.

"Can Izo turn into a dragon, then?" she asked more forcefully than she meant to.

"Oh, no, I can't," Izo replied. "Dragonlings are a subspecies of the Demon race. We get special bonuses depending on the terrain we're fighting in, but we don't have any transformative abilities. That would be pretty cool though."

"Well, at least I don't have to worry about shitting my pants when a giant dragon appears out of no where when we're training, then," Alfre grumbled.

"Well, you might still see a dragon, they're pretty common in Wonderland. But it just won't be me."

Alfre groaned.

Chapter Nine

They traveled several more days, fighting every encounter they came across as they went, before arriving at their destination. It looked very much like an old, abandoned, overgrown farm. The farmhouse was in a state of disrepair, its paint peeling, its shudders falling off, and several of its windows were cracked or outright broken.

“I think I prefer our tent,” Spica muttered as they approached.

“It’s not as bad on the inside,” Elias said. “At least, that’s what Ren told me.”

Indeed, the farmhouse was far less disastrous on the inside. True, there was a thick layer of dust over everything, and the floorboards creaked noisily as they entered, but it reminded Alfre much of her little cottage.

“There’s a water pump and a large, metal tub outside,” Izo informed them after poking his head out the back door. “I bet if we really wanted a bath, we could light a fire and heat the water that way.”

“Not sure how I feel about taking a bath in the open air,” Alfre admitted.

“Oh, it’s wonderful darling,” Spica insisted. “Think of it like skinny dipping.”

“Never done that, either.”

“What a boring life you must have led.”

“Thanks...”

“There’s only two rooms upstairs with beds,” Elias said. “Izo will take the single bed in the guest room. Spica and Alfre can share the master bed. I’ll take the couch down here. Sound fair?”

“Fair enough,” Izo agreed. “What should we do first?”

“Got any wind spells that can clear the dust out of here?” Spica asked, wiping a finger along the edge of an end table and wrinkling her nose in disgust at the layer of dust that stuck to it.

“I have one,” Izo answered. “It’s not very powerful, but it might do the trick. Open some doors and windows for me. Then you might want to get out.”

Alfre, Elias, and Spica rushed around the farmhouse, opening windows gently and throwing open doors. Then they high tailed it out into the front yard and waited.

“Liten Vind!” Izo called.

A burst of crisp, sweetly scented air burst from the house, bringing with it a cloud of dust. A loud sneeze sounded from inside the house. Followed by two more in quick succession.

“You alright, Izo?” Alfre shouted through the open door.

“Peachy,” Izo replied, stepping into her line of sight. “I think most of the dust is gone...a good chunk of it up my nose, but that’s neither here nor there.”

“Wonderful,” Spica crooned, striding past them. “Now this place is actually livable.”

Alfre rolled her eyes.

The next morning they rose early to eat a quick breakfast before heading out into the farmland. They wouldn’t find many goblins, according to Ren, but they would find lots of wild boars, monstrous rats, and small, ferret like creatures with plant and flowerlike growths on them called florrets. Those were the tricky buggers, as they had pollen attacks that caused status effects like poison or paralysis that were a pain to deal with, especially for lower level players.

Boars were easy to deal with, because their attack pattern was just to charge in a straight line and then stand still for a minute or two and then turn and charge in a straight line in a different direction. Boars were child’s play. Even Izo could deal damage to a boar once it entered its cool down period.

The rats were a little trickier, but even they were fairly easy to deal with. Their attacks were more random and harder to predict than the boar, but they didn’t deal much damage when they landed a hit and were quickly disposed by long ranged attacks. Alfre only had her one distance attack, and the cool down period for it was too long to make it viable save for a finishing move, but Izo, Elias, and Spica had plenty of low level, long ranged attacks that could be fired off one after another.

At the end of the day, they would hunker down in the abandoned farmhouse, because no one wanted to deal with the stuff that came out at night. Night was dangerous in Wonderland, every monster that appeared was higher leveled than the creatures that came out during the day. Higher leveled, and just plain nuts

when it came to attack patterns and status conditions they could inflict. No, they were not dealing with the nighttime monsters, not for a while.

At one point, Elias showed Izo and Alfre how to allocate the skill points they earned during level ups. Every stat gained a few points during the level up process, but each player also earned a handful of points they could allocate to different stats to customize their playing style. He had plenty of advice for Izo, who needed lots of defense and wisdom if he wanted to last on the battle field and have plenty of magic points to cast spells as necessary. Alfre, however, was on her own. She was the first of her class he'd ever met, the only one in the city of Spade. No one knew the best way to play a Winter Blade. Alfre knew two things: she wanted to be strong, and she wanted to be *fast*. So the majority of her skill points went into her attack and speed stat. Spica warned her that being a glass cannon was only useful when you had tanks or healers to back you up. Izo suggested that it wouldn't really matter that she was fragile if nothing could hit her in the first place. Elias ended the argument saying it was Alfre's choice, and Alfre's choice alone how she built her character. Spica obviously wasn't convinced, but she didn't argue.

Both Alfre and Izo earned new skills during their time at the farmhouse. He learned new, more powerful healing spells, some of which also came with buffs, and a few offensive techniques, mostly having to do with plants or wind. Alfre's techniques just seemed like variations on the first: either shooting a larger spear of ice at a monster or shooting lots of little spears of ice at a monster. It wasn't until she reached level fifteen that she got something a little different. By jamming her sword into the ground, she could cast what Elias called an 'area of effect' spell that froze the ground and not only damaged any enemies caught within the circle, but slowed them as well. 'Talamh Reòta' it was called. Frozen Ground. The game developers weren't very creative with their names.

She felt a little bad that neither Spica nor Elias was gaining much experience during their training. Sure they got the same amount of experience points as she and Izo did, but it didn't mean nearly as much to them, given their higher levels. Where she and Izo had already gained three levels each within the first few days, Spica took a week to gain one, and that was even with her being about half way to the next level before they even started. She did gain a new ability with her level up, a higher-level poison that did far more damage and lasted much longer than the poison she had before. True it didn't come with any special debuffs like lots of her lower level poisons, but if she wanted to deal damage, she now had a better way to do it.

As much of a good experience it was, Alfre quickly got bored of fighting the same three monsters every day. Especially since the farmland was teeming with monsters at all hours of the day. She was starting to miss the goblins. And even the Ursa Major. Just a little. But was she going to go off on her own and try to take on the nasties that haunted the Wilds? No! Of course not! She was bored, not

stupid. Besides, Elias had promised they'd take on a dungeon on their way back to the city. That should more than make up for any boredom she was dealing with.

Her and Izo's levels rose steadily over the several weeks she and her mentors stayed at the farmhouse. By the time they left, she was twice as strong as she had been the day they arrived. Izo, who had come at a lower level than her, was almost just as strong. Elias lent him a higher level staff the druid could use until they got back to the city and bought him a proper druid staff that would last him a little longer than the starting item. Alfre was in need of a new weapon as well. Her damage output exceeded the maximum damage her rapier could inflict upon an opponent. It was frustrating to see her knocking off twenty five hit points each strike when she knew her spells should be dealing twice that damage at least. But unlike Izo, no one else in the party used the same weapon class as she did. Elias and Izo used staves, and Spica relied on what were known as 'hidden weapons'. So Alfre was left with her pathetic little starting rapier until they could get back. Unless they found some particularly good loot in the dungeon that is.

Alfre marked the location of their little farmhouse on her map before they left, just like she did with her little cottage. It would be nice, she thought, to come back to this place and renovate it into an actual, official training camp. Or maybe it'd be nice just to have a little farmhouse to go to every now and then.

The trip back was less of a march and more of a casual stroll. They didn't need to fight every random encounter that came their way anymore, but they certainly didn't complain about the extra experience points. It was nice to see the goblins again, after going so long without fighting them.

"If we keep going this way, we'll pass by the Briarwood Thorns dungeon," Elias mentioned, staring at his map as they continued their trek through the woods. "It's the lowest level dungeon that Canus' controls. Mostly level fifteen to twenty enemies. Might be just the right amount of challenge for you."

"I suppose you did tell him we'd stop by," Spica said thoughtfully. "I haven't done one of his dungeons in months, years even. I wonder how much easier the Briarwood Howler is now that I'm not a newbie anymore."

"Briarwood Howler?" Alfre repeated, looking over her shoulder at her two friends.

"That's the dungeon boss," Elias clarified. "All of the dungeons run by Canus have a wolf boss at the end of them. They give pretty good loot. I bet it's changed since the expansion pack."

"You might find a new sword, Alfre!" Izo encouraged, clutching at the alder staff Elias had lent him.

Alfre perked up at that. “How far until the dungeon, Elias?”

“We’ll probably get there late morning tomorrow,” he replied. “Midmorning if we’re fast.”

Alfre grinned. “Then let’s go fast!”

“Alfre, wait!”

“Ah...” Spica muttered. “She’s gone. Told you we should have encouraged her to hold off on boosting her speed so much.”

Chapter Ten

The Briarwood Thorns, as it happened, was something of a very small canyon or very large ditch (depending on how you looked at it) covered in thorny branches of some kind of plant. It seemed to appear out of no where, the only warning you got was the slight uptick in thorny plants that littered the ground where sunlight peeked through the leaves. A small, dirt path slope led down into the dark depths. The thorns interlocked so well over the dungeons ceiling that hardly any light got through.

One of Canus' direwolf companions eyed them as they approached, an almost bored expression on its face. Alfre reached out to it, palm up, like how one would approach any unfamiliar dog. The wolf cocked its head curiously, and leaned forward to sniff at her hand. Apparently pleased with what it found, it gave her palm a gentle lick. It turned its head away and closed its eyes, allowing them to pass. They shuffled down the incline into the mouth of the thorn-made cave. Elias led the way in, tapping his cane twice on the packed dirt floor and summoning two small orbs of light that illuminated the area around them just enough that they could see but it would certainly not enough light to read a book without getting a headache.

"Mostly the same kind of enemies down here that you saw up at the farm," Elias said. "Might find some nasty bats in here too, and a few wolves. But nothing you haven't seen before."

Sure enough, the first enemies they encountered were a pack of florrets, only a few levels higher than the ones they fought at the farm. They seemed to drop more gold than usually when defeated, along with a handful of status healing potions. Low-level monsters never dropped items out in the Wilds, so this was new for Izo and Alfre. They divvied the loot up evenly amongst the four of them and continued deeper into the dungeon. Unlike many high level dungeons that were full of puzzles and mazes, the Briarwood Thorns was a pretty straightforward path from the start to the final boss. The path didn't so much twist and turn as gently curve in one way or another. Alfre would have marched straight through if Elias hadn't stopped her to point out a chest hidden in a small alcove just out of sight.

"The best loot in a dungeon is often hidden just out of sight, to reward players who take the time to explore," he explained, though to Alfre it sounded like he was chiding a small child. She would have resented him for it, if the chest they found did have exactly what she needed.

The rapier was longer than her current one, its point and bladed edges far wickeder. The basket was an elegant swirl of silver-white metal. She flicked it experimentally, throwing specks of frost to the ground below her.

“I like it,” she decided, taking her old rapier from her belt and replacing it with her new one. “Hopefully I can actually pull my own weight now.”

“To be fair, darling, there’s not much to pull,” Spica teased. Alfre scowled, but otherwise didn’t react. This was just par for the course it seemed.

She stuffed her old rapier in her magic inventory satchel, and decided to leave figuring out what to do with it until after she returned home. The rest of the loot inside the chest was fairly standard, mostly potions of some kind or another. There was, however, a small pendant that, upon inspection, revealed itself as an equipable item that buffed one’s healing magic. This was immediately passed to Izo, who slipped it around his neck without a second thought.

They wandered further into the dungeon, where they eventually met their first wolf encounter. Unlike the weaker enemies, that seemed to come in packs, the wolf faced them alone. It wasn’t nearly as big as the wolves from Canus’ party, but it growled just as fiercely at them.

Izo cast a spell to tangle the wolf in vines, effectively cutting its movement down to none. Spica disappeared into the shadows, her needles whistling through the air to stick into the wolf’s side. Alfre could see the purple glow about the beast, alerting to her that Spica’s poison had taken hold. She waited for the familiar warmth of Elias’ buff before she charged. She held her rapier close to her side, elbow and shoulder drawn back and ready to thrust.

The wolf broke from Izo’s trap just as she reached it, dodging out of the way of her strike. As a result, she only barely nicked it in the shoulder. She concentrated, forcing her magic to travel through the sword and into the mob’s flesh.

She laughed breathlessly, almost manic, as ice erupted from the small wound she’d left. She righted herself, turning on the tips of her toes like a goddamn ballerina, and thrust her sword again, this time at the wolf’s flank. The larger target meant she was practically guaranteed a hit.

And hit she did. Her rapier pierced the wolf’s side, and with a pained howl, it poofed into the same cloud of black smoke all enemies faded into. There was the ever-familiar jingle of coins filling her purse as she sheathed her sword. The wolf, like many of the other monsters they’d encountered in the dungeon, had left something behind. She bent down to pick it up.

“It left its fur behind...” she whispered, half in awe, half in sadness.

“Give it to me,” Spica told her. “I can make something of that when we get home. Wolf fur is a pretty rare drop, even in dungeons. We’re pretty lucky to have it.”

“I feel bad taking it,” Alfre admitted, feeling somewhat childish as she handed the fur over to the assassin.

“You didn’t take it,” Spica corrected. “It was given to you. Think of it as a gift. The wolf thought you were worthy of having its fur for defeating it.”

Alfre didn’t look entirely convinced, but didn’t feel like arguing. She simply nodded, turning back to stare into the dark depths of the dungeon. If they were fighting wolves now that had to mean that the dungeon boss wasn’t too far away.

The farther they went into the dungeon, the more wolves they faced. Very few of them dropped their fur like the first one did, but Spica insisted that they were lucky to have as many as they did, considering the normal drop rate of wolf fur.

The dungeon suddenly opened up before them, sunlight peeking in through gaps in the thorns above them. Before them, lying on a small, rocky platform in the warm sun was a wolf much larger than any of the ones they’d seen previously. Its fur was a deep golden color, stiff and coarse and sticking up in all directions. From a distance, it almost looked like the wolf itself was made of thorns.

Alfre shifted her weight just a tad, her foot slipping on a pebble. She caught herself, but not before slipping ever so slightly closer to the wolf. The beast’s eyes shot open, locking with hers. It jumped to its feet and howled loudly, causing shivers to run up and down Alfre’s spine. Now she knew where the name Briarwood Howler came from.

“Battle formations everyone!” Elias shouted. “Izo, trap it with your vines just like you’ve been doing. Spica, hit it with debuffs before you try and hit it with the big damage dealers. I’ll buff our defense. Alfre, try that area of effect spell you got.”

Glowing green vines burst from the ground, snaring the Briarwood Howler in their clutches. Spica faded into the shadows, but Alfre caught glimpses of her every time she passed through a patch of sunlight to hurl needles at the beast. Alfre felt the warmth of Elias’ buffs surge through her and she shot forward, stopping just on the edge of Izo’s vine trap. She thrust her rapier down into the ground, calling the name of her spell. She could see, if she concentrated enough, a thin, glowing blue line that designated the edge of her spell’s range. Within that circle, frost and ice spread over the ground, crawling up the Briarwood Howler’s legs. It howled in pain, tugging uselessly at the icy shackles.

“Good job!” Elias called. “Now do some damage!”

He shot fireballs over their heads, smashing into the beast’s shoulders. It growled, tensed, and its spiny fur hardened even more, transforming into actual thorns before shooting out in a cascade around them. Alfre ducked and dodged out of the way, a thorn or two catching her shoulders and back as she went. It stung, a more direct and intimate pain than the dull throbbing of the bruises she got from the goblins they’d faced. Her speed had saved her, though. If she was any slower, she’d been impaled five or ten times over.

“I’ve got you, Alfre!” Izo assured. True to form, Alfre felt the tingling sensation of Izo’s healing magic slide over her skin, stitching flesh back together and numbing the pain.

Spica, who’d been out of the range of the attack along with Izo and Elias, kept pelting the Briarwood Howler with her poisoned needles. Elias sent fireball after lightning bolt at the dungeon boss, but magicians like him were built for support, not damage dealing. He could hit the beast as much as he wanted, but he’d run out of magic points long before the wolf ran out of hit points.

“Alfre, if you wouldn’t mind,” he called to her, “do you think you could send this bastard on his way? This is getting tedious.”

Alfre nodded, getting to her feet. Her Frozen Ground spell had worn off, and it was still on cool down. She couldn’t use it again. Izo had cast his vine spell again as soon as he had it back, so the beast was still trapped.

She extended her arm upwards, rapier pointed at the sky. She gathered her magic, feeling the cold run from her core up her arm and into the tip of her sword.

“Fuar Uisge.”

She brought her sword down in a grand motion, ice crystals falling from the sky above her opponent, stabbing into his back and, as he fell, his side. Hundreds and hundreds of tiny, frozen daggers of ice fell like rain, almost like a mockery of the Briarwood Howler’s signature attack.

The smoke this time was white, more of a mist than a smoke as the beast vanished from view. Left behind was a small chest, and an extended jingling of coins. Spica opened the chest, pulling out several items for their perusal. A staff of dark mahogany, decorated with the colorful feathers of some unknown bird. Two poison daggers, weak compared to what Spica already had, but useful nonetheless. A rabbit’s foot charm, which boosted luck when it came to mob drops. Elias took that and tucked it into an inside jacket pocket. And finally, a

small hair pin in the form of a silvery flower. They weren't sure what it did, but Spica tucked Alfre's long hair back with it anyhow.

"It suits you," she insisted. "Though it'd be better if it was a snowflake."

Alfre huffed, blushing pale pink. She turned to Elias to change the subject. "How do we get out of here?"

Elias pointed back through the dungeon with his cane. "Back the way we came. Since we defeated the boss, however, nothing will spawn until we leave."

They walked quickly, eager to leave. True to his word, no monsters spawned in the dungeon, making it almost too quiet.

Alfre flinched at the sound of a pained, sorrowful howl. It sounded too human to be the direwolf at the dungeon entrance, but too animal to be a Fell adventurer. Dread settled heavy in her stomach as she and her party ran the rest of the way through the dungeon, bursting into the sunlight as they passed through the exit. They flinched against the bright light.

Sobs reached Alfre's ears and she turned, her vision clearing, to see Canus kneeling over a body. A wolf's body. Alfre's eyes flickered over to the spot where the direwolf had been sitting when they arrived, only to find it gone. She turned back to Canus. The wolf he sobbed over was too large to be just any wolf.

"W-what happened?" Izo asked, his voice trembling.

"Murderers!" Canus snarled, his voice feral and pained. "Poachers! Monsters! They slaughtered her! They slaughtered her and violated her! Her fur! Her precious, beautiful fur!"

Alfre flinched at the sight of the bare muscle exposed to the evening air. They'd taken all of it, even her head and tail. The rest had been left to rot.

"I don't understand," Elias whispered, disbelief in his voice. "The direwolves...you aren't supposed to be able to kill them. Not if they're his."

"Who did this?" Alfre demanded, anger burning in her chest.

"If I knew, they'd be dead by now," Canus hissed.

Alfre's hands clenched into fists at her side. She felt sick to her stomach. The wolf hadn't done her any harm. It was a sweet as any mutt she'd met back before the Incident. There were plenty of wolves in the Wilds, why go after this one? Because they could? Because it wouldn't bite you first?

“I’ll find them.”

Canus was on his feet and in her face before she finished her sentence. “Say that again.”

Alfre meet his eyes, determination blazing within their frosty depths. “I’ll find them. Who ever did this won’t go unpunished. I’ll find them, and I’ll bring them back to you. I promise.”

The fierceness in Canus’ eyes never faded, but the anger did. He reached out and took a few strands of her hair in between his fingers. Alfre stood impossibly still as he lifted the strands to his nose, inhaling the smell of Wonderland and winter in her hair. “Thank you, snowbird.”

Chapter Eleven

“I can’t believe you made a promise to a GOD!” Izo gushed, falling into step next to Alfre as Elias led the way out of the Wilds.

“I can’t either,” Spica muttered. She turned to look at Alfre over her shoulder and spoke again, louder this time. “That was a very stupid thing to do. What are you going to do when you can’t find the person who did that? Never go into the Wilds again?”

“Who said I wasn’t going to find him?” Alfre challenged. “Whoever killed that wolf skinned her perfectly. There wasn’t a bit of fur left behind. There can’t be that many people with that kind of skill.”

“They’d have to be a high level hunter,” Elias agreed. “Probably with either a tailor or farmer subclass, they’d be the only ones with the skill to handle that type of material.”

“And if they’ve done something that’s supposed to be impossible, they’re going to be bragging about it,” Alfre insisted. “Like I said, I’m gonna find the asshole who did it. What Canus does with them is his prerogative.”

“How are you going to get him out there for Canus, then?” Spica demanded. “There’s no way you can defeat them if their level is as high as you think it is.”

“I’ll figure that out when I get there.”

Spica groaned, rubbing at her temples. “You’re going to be the death of me.”

Ren was the first person Alfre talked to when they returned to Spade. Alfre watched as anger, sorrow, and disgust swept over the guild master’s face.

“It’s no one from our guild,” she assured Alfre. “We don’t have many high level hunters, and none of them have farmer or tailor as their subclass. And believe me, if it was one of my guys, I’d be more than happy to hand them over.”

“I know you would,” Alfre assured her. “But, keep an ear out for me. People are more willing to talk to you about things than they are me. If you hear anything, let me know.”

“You got it, snowflake.”

She talked to Doremi next. The bard was something of a gossip, and always seemed to know things that no one else knew. She had to travel to the Sweet Summer Children guildhall for that. It was along the main shopping street of the city. While Crystal Moon Kingdom had a pub on its first floor, the Summer Children had a simple general store. All of the items were made in house, the young elf at the counter told her enthusiastically. Well worth the price, she insisted.

“That’s nice, lass, but I’m looking for Doremi,” Alfre interrupted gently. “I have something I need to talk to her about.”

The elf eyed her suspiciously. “Buy something first, then I’ll get her.”

Alfre’s shoulders dropped in disbelief. “You’re kidding me!”

“No purchase, no gossip,” the elf told her. “We’ve got a living to make, you know.”

Alfre growled and snatched the cheapest healing potion she could find and tossed her coins onto the counter. “Doremi, please.”

The elf’s smile was sickeningly sweet, a sure sign that she’d been training under June. “Of course, ma’am, right away. May I ask who’s asking for her.”

“Tell her Alfre from Crystal Moon Kingdom is here.”

The elf jumped from her stool behind the counter and scurried off. Alfre stood awkwardly at the counter for several long minutes, eyes perusing the shelves around her. She nearly jumped out of her skin when someone tapped her on the shoulder. She whirled around to see Doremi leaning across the counter, an amused smile on her lips as her orange ears twitched.

“Lucy said you wanted to see me?”

“Yeah, I was wondering if you’d heard about something.”

She explained the situation to Doremi, who listened with a mix of interest and barely hidden anger. There seemed to be some unspoken rule that if you couldn’t get something as a mob drop, you didn’t go out of your way to illegally obtain it. Direwolves, by their nature as being unkillable mobs, didn’t drop things. But the rules had changed, it seemed. Canus’ direwolves were in danger now; especially if it got around that you could skin them. Who knew what kind of properties their pelts had.

“I’ve not heard anything yet,” Doremi admitted. “But I’ll keep an ear out for you. If I hear anything, I’ll let you know. When you find them, give that bastard a right hook for me.”

Alfre nodded and left the shop, running a hand nervously through her long hair. What kind of trophy hunter didn’t brag about his kills? Or maybe they hadn’t gotten back yet. What if they were still out in the Wilds? Her stomach sank at the thought. Spurred into action, she turned in the direction of The Knights of the Burning Oak’s guildhall. Unlike most guildhalls that resided along major streets in the city, the Knights settled themselves along the wall of the city, on a tiny side street that was lined with overgrown gardens.

She asked for Lance when she entered the building, staring down the heavily armored knight that acted as bouncer for the guildhall’s first floor. There wasn’t much to the building’s first floor, it reminded Alfre much of the hotels they had back home, a simple desk and two sets of stairs just off to the side, one that went up and one that went down.

Lance was quick to come down the stairs after he was called for. He raised a questioning brow at Alfre.

“Not that I’m unhappy to see you, Alfre, but what are you doing here?”

“I need a favor,” Alfre explained plainly. “Something happened in the Wilds and I wanted to know if you’d heard anything about it.”

“What kind of something?” Lance asked, crossing his arms loosely over his chest.

“Someone killed and skinned one of Canus’ direwolves. One of the ones that’s supposed to be unkillable. I’m trying to find the bastard who did it. Have you heard anything?”

Lance’s ruby red eyes went wide in shock before a darkness fell over his expression. He turned to the knight manning the desk. “Bring me the recent reports. If anyone’s heard anything, they’d have mentioned it in one of their reports.”

The younger knight scurried off into the room behind the desk. He came back some minutes later with a large box stuffed with papers. He set it down on the desk with a grunt. “These are all the reports from the last week. If it’s in any reports, it’d be in these.”

Lance lifted the box easily with one hand and nodded for Alfre to follow him up the stairs. She followed silently, climbing two, three, four flights of stairs before Lance sharply turned down the hall. He nudged open a door with his foot,

revealing a small office space with a large, ornate, dark wood desk with a chair on either side of it.

“Take a seat, we’ll go through these reports and see if we can’t find something.”

“What are these reports you keep talking about?” Alfre asked, sitting in an oddly comfortable wood chair across the desk from Lance. “Do you have your guild members hand in their diaries?”

“No, nothing like that,” Lance said with a short laugh. “But we ask them to write down anything interesting they hear in the city in case something comes up. It used to be for reporting to admins when cheating or harassment happened during the game. Now, well...it’s mostly just a habit that carried over.”

“I see,” Alfre hummed, watching as Lance pulled stack after stack of paper out of the box. “I guess we should get started. This will probably take a while.”

Chapter Twelve

It took them hours. The two of them were extremely thorough in their reading of the reports, not wanting to miss even the most passing mention of the direwolf situation. Lance, at one point, stuck his head out his door and shouted for two lower leveled guild members to help them out. At some point, Alfre had sequestered herself in a corner of the office, tucking herself into a very large pillow with two stacks of reports on the floor before her. One that had been read, the other those that still needed to be read. So far, she'd found nothing.

"Hey, Captain?" one of the lower ranked members, Alfre thought his name was Leo, called from his seat against the far wall. "I think I might have found something."

Alfre and Lance were on their feet and flanking him in a flash, staring at the paper in his hands.

"It's not a lot," Leo admitted, "But one of our patrol officers mentioned seeing a hunter entering the city wearing a very large wolf pelt, larger than usual at any rate."

"Is there a description of what he looked like?" Alfre asked, eyes scanning desperately over the page.

"Not really," Leo apologized. "He saw him at a distance."

Alfre cursed under her breath. But at least she knew for a fact it was a hunter who'd skinned Canus' wolf. And there were only so many hunters in the city.

"We'll put out an order to keep an eye out for him," Lance assured her. "He won't get away with it."

Alfre nodded, the wind taken out of her sails. Two steps forward, one step back it seemed. She thanked Lance for his time, helped him pack the reports back up into a box, and then left.

It was dark out at that point. The days were slowly getting shorter and the nights longer. Fall was coming soon. Alfre wandered back through the streets of Spade towards the Crystal Moon guildhall.

"Hey, you the girl looking for the hunter who skinned a direwolf?"

Alfre's hand went to her sword as she turned cautiously towards the voice. Leaning against a building, dressed in greens and gold, was a young woman with a sweet looking face and wavy brown hair.

"Who's asking?" Alfre demanded, her voice calm but her eyes fierce.

"A potential friend," the woman assured. "I've got info for you, but I want something in exchange."

"What kind of something?" Alfre asked, her hand never leaving the handle of her sword.

"I want in at your guild."

Alfre blinked. She hadn't expected that. "It's not my guild."

"It might need to be," the woman said mildly. "If you wanna find the bastard that made Canus cry, you'll need a guild behind you."

"And you can't just ask to join the guild the normal way because?"

"Mmm, you must be new to Wonderland," the woman said with a hum of amusement. "You see, I'm what's called a Hero, a beta tester who decided to take the easy way instead of just starting over like everyone else. Because our accounts didn't carry over from the beta to the full release of the game, we testers were offered the Hero class, which not only gives us the ability to access abilities from all of the warrior and rogue classes, but we gain levels far quicker than normal players. Normal Fell didn't like that very much."

"I don't really care," Alfre admitted bluntly.

"Regardless, I need someone's good word if I'm going to get into a guild," the woman said. "And you seem pretty popular."

"Why do you need to join a guild anyway?" Alfre asked.

"Even Heroes get lonely, little one."

Alfre scowled at the endearment. "Whatever, fine. I'll introduce you to Ren. But you better have good info."

The woman smiled. "Wonderful. Call me Traveler."

Chapter Thirteen

“Had any luck?” Ren asked when Alfre walked through the pub door.

“Maybe,” Alfre said. “Depends on what this one has for me.” She jerked her thumb behind her at Traveler, who smiled.

“Who’s that?” Ren questioned.

“She calls herself Traveler,” Alfre explained. “She wants to join the guild. If she does, then she’ll give me whatever info she has.”

Ren’s brows furrowed at the agreement. “I guess she can join. It’s an odd arrangement, though.”

“She’s a hero, or whatever.”

Ren’s eyes narrowed. “Well, that explains a lot.” She sighed dramatically. “Whatever, it’s not like I care. And if any one is bothered by her joining then they can bite me.”

Traveler beamed serenely at that. “Thank you kindly, guild master.”

Ren snorted into her sake. “Call me Ren, hero. Now you better start talking, Alfre’s made a promise to a god, and that’s not really a promise she wants to break.”

Traveler nodded, sitting down at the table as Alfre wandered around to sit at Ren’s side.

“I have the name of the person you’re looking for,” Traveler said. “He used to be a beta tester along side me. He joined pretty late in the game, however, so he didn’t get the Hero offer like I did. He always resented that, I think, because he’s been doing minor cheating ever since the full game was published.”

Alfre couldn’t bring herself to be surprised. “Yeah? What’s his name?”

“His real name is Trevor,” Traveler informed them. “But online he goes by Lokki.”

“Sounds like a real tool,” Ren muttered, taking a sip of her drink.

“Oh, he is,” Traveler grumbled, resting her cheek in her hand, looking like just mentioning the guy made her tired. “I can’t count how many times he tried to get me to cyber with him. He’s gross. He sent me a message a day or two ago trying to

convince me to 'meet up' again. Tried to impress me by mentioning the direwolf thing. That's how I knew about it."

"Do you know where he is now?" Alfre asked.

Traveler shook her head. "Sorry. I reinstated the block I'd put on him right after he messaged me. Turns out they didn't carry over after the Incident."

Ren scowled at that. "Going have to bring that up with the others at the council meeting next week."

Traveler turned to meet Alfre's eyes directly. "If I had known you were looking for him, I would have waited."

Alfre waved her off. "Don't worry about it. At least I have a name I can ask around for. Was he part of a guild?"

"He used to be," Traveler said, tapping her chin in thought. "But I think they kicked him out for harassing their female members, particularly their hunters."

"God, I haven't even met the guy and I want to punch him," Ren said with a chuckle.

"Well, get in line, Canus has first dibs," Alfre reminded.

Alfre passed the name on to Doremi and Lance the next day. After that, there wasn't much progress. Lokki or Trevor or whatever he was called didn't hang out in the city much, it seemed. Most guilds and guild run businesses had long since figured out that he was a gross guy and had banned him from their places of business. While that was probably a good idea, it made things much harder for her.

And as much as Ren and Ran and Silver liked her, she couldn't access all of the guilds records and other resources without actually joining the guild. Which, honestly, she didn't know why she hadn't already. She lived in their guildhall and ate food at their pub; she might as well be an official member of the 'family' as Ren put it.

"I want to join the guild," she announced at breakfast.

Elias choked on his tea, not expecting that sort of announcement. Spica nodded, like she'd been waiting for this eventuality. Ren's lips split into their signature wild grin.

“Well it’s about damn time!” she shouted happily. “I’ll get the book!”

She disappeared up the stairs, coming back several long minutes later with a large, leather bound tome tucked under one arm and a fountain pen tucked behind her ear. She slammed the book down on the table, causing cutlery to bounce comically. She flipped through the pages before coming to one that was only partially full. She turned the book around and pushed towards Alfre, handing her the uncapped fountain pen.

Alfre’s eyes scanned down the page, reading the unfamiliar names with vague interest before her eyes stopped about halfway down the page. Izo’s was there, written out in flowing cursive script. Of course Izo would have amazing handwriting. Traveler’s name was just below his, in a more casual, but still very nice looking print. Alfre set the pen down on the page just below Traveler’s name and carefully wrote out her own name. The ink glowed on the page.

Without warning, Spica snatched the pen from Alfre’s hand and wrote her own name in some overly fancy, loopy cursive that was almost illegible, despite how nice it looked. Elias sighed, sounding almost fond of them, and took the pen from Spica and scribbled his own name down. Ren grinned at them all, slamming the book shut before they could change their minds.

“Three in one day,” Silver mused. “That’s the most we’ve had since that initial flood after the Incident.”

“Hahaha!” Ren laughed triumphantly. “I’ve finally got you. It’s official.”

“We are free to leave later, though, right?” Alfre asked in a small voice.

“Pfft, of course you are,” Ren assured. “Just don’t go joining Atticus’ guild or nothing. I finally have more members than he does. And I’m gonna rub it in his face that I’ve got you three. You’re pretty popular, Alfre. People just seem to like you.”

“I don’t know why,” Alfre muttered.

“Probably ‘cause you’re so obviously a main character.”

Alfre raised a brow at that. “I beg your pardon?”

Ren gestured at her. “Look at you. You even look like an anime character. Like a magical girl or something. Obviously you’re a main character.”

“You’re talkin’ mince,” Alfre informed her.

Ran reached up and smacked at his sister's head. "Ignore her, she's a weeb. She even does the Naruto run out in the Wilds."

"Says the guy with the swimming anime body pillow!" Ren shot back.

"Hey, even you have to admit Makoto is prime boyfriend material."

Alfre stood from the table. "I'm gonna leave now."

Elias and Spica rose from their seats with a chorus of "Same."

Ren flipped through old guild records, trying to find anything she could about Lokki. He'd applied for guild membership once a few years back, not long after being kicked out of his first guild. Though he'd apparently had immediately revoked his application when he found out the guild leader was a girl. The more Alfre learned about him, more he seemed like the worst kind of gamer. She'd even gone to his old guild, the one Cherry the Rabbit Familiar now ran, and asked about him. He'd left the guild long before Cherry had even joined, before the old guild master had left Wonderland permanently. Any information they could have given her was terribly old.

She didn't know how he was able to avoid being found for so long! It'd been weeks by now. He'd pop up as a blip on the radar only to disappear before she could even reach the place he'd been spotted. He obviously didn't live within the city walls; there were only so many places a guy without a guild could live, after all. But that left the entirety of the Wilds for him to be in. There was always the possibility he was a farmer and lived in the farm lands just outside of the city walls, but if that was true than surely he'd be seen by the patrols more often than he was.

She was getting tired and frustrated. All she had was a name! Traveler even admitted she hadn't seen Lokki face to face since the game went public. And changing character appearance, while fairly expensive, wasn't hard.

"Maybe I can at least give Canus his name," Alfre muttered to herself, leaning back in the library's comfiest chair.

"It's worth a shot."

Alfre squeaked loudly, nearly falling out of her chair in surprise. She turned to see Elias leaning on the back of her chair, smiling encouragingly at her.

"Don't DO that, dumb bunny!" she snapped, though there wasn't much bite in her words.

“Do you want us to come with you?” Elias asked, ignoring the insult. “Probably better that you don’t go alone, yeah?”

Alfre sighed. “Yeah. Yeah, let’s go.”

Alfre was starting to notice that she had a ‘standard party’ that she adventured with. Elias and Spica went with her everywhere. Elias because for some reason he felt responsible for her. Spica because she didn’t really have any other friends in the guild. Izo tended to come along too, which was good because they needed a healer. Recently, however, Traveler had been tagging along. She was a big damage dealer just like Alfre. She held back, however, because she was almost at maxed level anyway. It was good to have her along anyway, in case something unexpected happened.

Ren would joke that they were going to be famous one day, like the Seven Samurai or something. Alfre highly doubted it, even as they got stares as they walked through the city on their way out into the Wilds.

They didn’t make it very far into the woods before they heard the howling of wolves. Alfre swallowed thickly and led them deeper in. Leaves crunched under their feet as they walked, filling the silence that hung over them. They came across the entrance to the Briarwood Thorns just as the sun was starting to set. A new direwolf sat at the entrance. Unlike the first direwolf, this one growled at them as they approached, fur standing up on its shoulders.

“We’re friends, I promise,” Alfre whispered to it, stepping forward with an outstretched hand. “We’re looking for Canus. I need to speak with him.”

The wolf eyed her cautiously, sniffing at her. It seemed to recognize her, its eyes sparkling for a brief moment before it tipped its head back and howled.

Alfre felt him before she saw him. The heat up against her back, the energy of the woods and land radiating off him in waves. She turned slowly, looking up over her shoulder at him. He stared down at her, anger barely hidden in his eyes.

“Where is he?” he asked, his voice low and dangerous.

“We don’t know,” Alfre admitted. “But we have a name. We’re still looking.”

Canus growled, stepping away from her, his fists clenched. “How hard is it to find one man?!”

“In a city of thousands? Pretty hard,” Alfre said. “And we’re pretty sure he doesn’t even live in the city, which leaves the entirety of the Wilds. But we have made progress. We know who he is.”

“Who, then?” Canus snarled. “Who killed my packmate?”

“He goes by Lokki,” she told him. “He’s a hunter.”

“Of course he’s a hunter!” Canus shouted, throwing his hands up in frustration. “What else would he be? Why are you wasting my time with this when you could be hunting that bastard down?!”

“We’re trying, okay!” Alfre shouted back, feeling anger boiling in her gut. She was trying her best. She was putting her all into this, couldn’t he see that? It was hard! She wasn’t a detective; she didn’t have any experience in finding people who didn’t want to be found. “I’m sorry it’s taking so long, but there’s only so much we can do! I’m not giving up until he’s found, but I’d like it if you didn’t shout at me.”

Canus drew a sharp breath, flexing his hands in agitation. Despite his anger at her lack of progress, he had to admire his little snowbird for her guts. Not many people, Fell or Wonderlander, would talk back to him like that. The only ones that ever did were his wolves.

“You-“ whatever he was going to say was cut off by a loud, panicked barking not far in the distance. “Not again!”

He bolted off into the woods, the direwolf that guarded the dungeon taking off after him. Alfre spared her friends the briefest of glances before they too followed.

Chapter Fourteen

The woods were growing dark, which only seemed to increase the urgency of their sprinting. Another pained howl filled the air, and Alfre drew her sword. She pushed her magic into her legs, increasing her speed past that of her comrades and closer to that of Canus and his wolves. She smelled the blood before she saw it. A thorny rope trap, the type meant to catch florrets and rats by snaring them about the middle. The direwolf must have gotten their paw caught in it. It looked chewed through, and a path of blood droplets led further into the woods. The howls and snarls were louder now. They were close. Alfre pushed her legs faster than she thought possible, pushing past Canus and his wolves, already far ahead of her companions.

She broke through the tree line into a small clearing, not even big enough to build a tiny home in. The wolf was there, caught in a bear trap, snapping and snarling at a human dressing in a hooded cloak of deep, forest green. Alfre gave a frightening shout and charged the person, catching them by surprise. They turned towards her at her shout, gasping and then shouting in pain as her rapier pierced the flesh of their shoulder. The speed and force at which she ran into them knocked them prone, her landing on top of them, blade still buried in their shoulder. The person, obviously a man now that she got a good look at them, glared up at her with deep blue hazel eyes.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?!” he shouted. “You got in the way of my kill!”

“That’s the bloody point, ya scrote!” Alfre hissed. “Where do you get off killin’ a creature like that?”

“I’m a hunter, bitch, it’s what I do.”

“If you wanted a damn wolf’s pelt so bad you could have done a dungeon like the rest of us decent folk!”

“Where’s the fun in that? Besides, everyone has normal wolf fur. No one has direwolf fur. Getting that proves I’m the best damn hunter! Better than those Legolas fangirls.”

“You killed my wolf...to prove yourself?”

Alfre turned to see Canus stalking towards them, fangs bared. Her friends were just behind him, unsure what to do. Traveler looked...unsurprised by the confession. Disappointed, but still unsurprised.

“Get off him, snowbird,” Canus said with a growl. “He’s gonna make you dirty.”

Alfre yanked her rapier none too gently from Lokki’s shoulder and picked herself up. The hunter hissed in pain, but the look of fear in his eyes when he looked up at Canus was far more satisfying to Alfre. He scrambled back against a tree, unable to run away any further.

Canus’ anger had calmed into an icy fury that made even Alfre feel cold. He pointed down at Lokki, the smell of grass and a woody breeze filled the air as he glowed with some ancient magic.

“For taking my wolf away from me,” Canus said, his voice low in both timbre and volume, “the only punishment I see worthy is for you to take her place, from now until the end of your days. Your mind shall remain, unable to forget the crime you committed, but unable to fight the instincts that will consume you.”

Alfre and her companions stared in shock and horror as Lokki’s scream of pain morphed into a feral howl. His body twitched and buckled, fur of a deep midnight black sprouting over his body and his bones cracked and reformed. His clothing ripped and fell to the forest floor as hands and feet transformed into paws, his face elongating into a snout. Where once sat a human man now stood a direwolf with fur of midnight black and eyes of the same hazel blue that Lokki the man had.

“Holy shit,” Elias breathed.

“Any arguments against my chosen punishment?” Canus asked, his voice a challenge.

They said nothing.

“Good,” Canus growled. He stomped over to the bear trap that kept his wolf in place, wrenching it open with his bare hands. “Perhaps, if a pup is born within the next few moons, I will release him. I’d rather a true direwolf in my pack than that monster.”

“Jeez, Canus, tell us how you really feel,” Traveler muttered. “Though, I must say, it’s probably a more effective method than killing him. He’d just be sent back to the town.”

“Ah, but what about the pelt?” Izo asked. “He wasn’t wearing it. And if he’s a direwolf then he can’t access his inventory.”

“He might have it hanging in his home somewhere,” Spica suggested. “Where ever that is.”

Canus turned to Lokki. "Take me to your home, boy."

Lokki seemed to hesitate for a moment, flinching back from the voice. Eventually, however, he turned a loped off into the woods. Canus followed behind him, leaving his injured wolf in the care of Izo. The party remained in the clearing, unsure what to do next. Alfre paced anxiously as Izo saw to the wolf's injuries. Elias tossed out their tent, sure that they would be spending the night in the Wilds. Traveler and Spica disappeared into the woods, going the opposite direction of Lokki and Canus, and reappeared some time later with armfuls of wood.

They had a fire roaring by the time Canus and Lokki returned, the beautiful gold and white fur of the deceased direwolf in Canus' arms. The god of the Wilds hesitated before stepping forward and presenting the pelt to Alfre.

"Take it, as payment for doing all you could," Canus said quietly. "Efforts such as yours should be rewarded."

"I wasn't looking to be rewarded," Alfre told him, her voice just as quiet.

Canus smiled, a small, sad thing. "All the more reason that you should be. Take it. Winter is coming and it will keep you warm."

Alfre thought to argue some more, but decided against it. Instead, she simply nodded and tucked the pelt gently into her satchel. As she retracted her hands from the magic bag, Canus reached for them. He brought them to his lips, pressing the softest of kisses to her knuckles.

"Thank you, snowbird."

With that, he shifted into his wolf form and bounded away into the woods, Lokki and the now healed direwolf hot on his heels.

"You mean to tell me that Canus, one of the big bad gods of Wonderland, *kissed* you?" Ren stared her down across the table, her bright golden eyes dancing with mirth. "Man, snowflake, and here I thought you were some normal noob."

A red blush spread across Alfre's cheeks. "It was just on my hands. It's not like it was a real kiss or anything."

"Yeah, but that's, like, never happened before," Ren argued. "Even in the game lore, the only god that ever did any kissing was Koseret, and her kisses were reserved for plants."

“Can we just move past it, already,” Alfre begged. “I made the mistake of letting Spica tell Doremi what happened. Now the whole city probably thinks I made out with Canus in the middle of the woods.”

“Well, it’s not the worst rumor about you to have,” Silver said, supposedly trying to make her feel better. It wasn’t working. Alfre groaned and slammed her head down on the wooden surface of the table. It hurt, but at least she didn’t have to look at anyone.

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” Silver continued. “People will stop caring in a few days. Unless something else happens between you and your boyfriend, that is.” He smirked.

“I hate all of you,” Alfre groused.

Ren snickered. “We know.”

The door to the pub swung open and Alfre lifted her head to see Ran wander through the door, dark circles under his eyes and a slouch in his usually perfect posture.

“What’s up with you?” she asked, desperate to get the attention off of her.

“The council is trying to establish communication with the other Fell cities on the other continents,” he explained, falling into a seat at the table. “It’s not going well.”

“What, are friends list messages not going through?” Ren asked.

“No, it doesn’t seem so,” Ran said with a sigh. “It’s like they have a range now, like a radio signal. So we’re trying something different. Summoners are attempting to send their summons out with messages. Like homing pigeons or something. We’re not sure if it’ll work, but it’s worth a try. If it does work, we might be able to set up a post office kind of thing.”

“Sounds like a good idea to me,” Silver said. “But are we sure summons don’t have a range as well. They did in the game, didn’t they?”

“Not in the way you’re thinking,” Ren corrected. “If you got a certain distance away from your summon, it would teleport back to you. They had time limits though, normally didn’t stick around for longer than an hour. But again, this isn’t a game anymore, and we can’t be sure the rules are the same.”

Alfre tuned out the rest of the conversation as it strayed into different game mechanics she hadn’t been privy to before the Incident. Instead, she picked at the fish and chips that sat before her. This world, a world that was never meant to be

fully lived in, was full of questions like the ones Ren and her boys were discussing. It was impossible to tell what did and did not carry over from the game. Even now they weren't sure that player verses player fighting was indeed banned in the cities.

She sighed, abandoning her food and standing from the table. She wandered up the stairs, passing by an open door into a tailors studio where Spica was working with the direwolf pelt Canus had given her. Spica had insisted she'd make something nice out of it for her, so it wouldn't just sit in her inventory and take up space. She hadn't told her what she was making, but Alfre was sure it'd turn out both very pretty and very functional.

She climbed several more flights of stairs, passing by Elias and Traveler as they sat and conversed in one of the bay windows that adorned the end of the hallways. She turned down her hallway and slipped into her room. It was still terribly plain; she couldn't bring herself to decorate it, not with Ren bragging about how close they were to kingdomhood. She closed the door behind her with a soft click. She slipped from her boots and tossed her coat over the back of her chair before falling face down on her bed, falling asleep the moment her eyes slipped closed.

Chapter Fifteen

Fall flew by in the blink of an eye. Alfre didn't even realize the harvest festival was coming up until it had already passed. The weather turned cold and rainy, and then cold and snowy. Alfre was indeed glad for the direwolf pelt Canus had given her. Spica had transformed it into a fur lined coat and a set of warm boots. The buffs that came along with it were far and beyond what she'd expected. She'd snuck off into the Wilds by herself to find Canus and show him what Spica had made. The wolf god was both happy that she'd found a use for it and sad at the reminder that his friend was gone. One of his other wolves, however, was pregnant, and would give birth late into spring. If the pups lived into adulthood, he would likely release Lokki. Lokki was very docile as a wolf, Alfre noted, and hoped that the new personality would carry over when he was turned back.

"I mostly said the 'until the end of your days' thing to scare him," Canus admitted. "Don't really want to deal with him for that long."

Ren approached Alfre and her friends one day early in December with a favor to ask. The guild was very close to reaching the last milestone necessary to become a kingdom, but most of her usual quest takers were tired and worn out.

"It's the second to last quest," Ren told them. "But no one wants to deal with it. C'mon, please? It pays super well. And it's not one of those boring ones like 'kill fifteen boars in the Cobalt Farmlands' or anything."

"Why don't you do it, then?" Spica asked.

"Cause I'm saving the last quest for myself," Ren answered. "And besides, you guys haven't been on a quest since that thing with Canus and the asshole hunter or whatever."

The group exchanged looks ranging from curiosity to mild irritation. Alfre turned to the guild master. "What's the quest?"

"You got to go out to the big Wonderlander kingdom out west and return their prince to the throne, cause some random tyrant's taken it over or something," Ren explained casually. "Meet up with the prince at the Dormouse Inn right when you get into the city. Ask for Alessio."

"We'll have to rent elk if we're traveling that far out," Elias muttered. "Any of you ridden elk before?"

Traveler nodded, but she was the only one.

“I’ve ridden horses before,” Alfre offered. “Is it much different?”

“Couldn’t tell you,” Elias admitted with a snort of a laugh. “I haven’t ridden one since the Incident.”

They packed for the long journey, bundled up in the warmest clothes they had. Elk were easy enough to rent, a Wonderlander run stable rented them out for fairly cheap. They left early the next morning, before the sun had even risen above the horizon. Traveler led the way, haven traveled between the City of Spade and the Wonderlander kingdom before. From the story she told, when the Incident occurred, she appeared inside the Wonderlander kingdom, having been there completing a quest when the Incident happened.

“What’s the kingdom’s name?” Izo asked, his voice wavering a bit as his elk trotted over the frozen ground.

“Sapfir, if I remember correctly,” Traveler replied. “Most things on this continent are named after blue things, even the continent itself. I’m unsure what language they’re using for their naming conventions, though. Something Eastern European.”

“It’s Russian,” Spica supplied. “Considering the fact that half the continent is frozen tundra, I’m not surprised. The developers weren’t very creative when it came to naming things.”

“I could have told you that,” Alfre joked.

The journey was long and fairly boring. They ran into a few bands of goblins, all wrapped up in patchwork furs for warmth, and a few boars. But for the most part, mobs stayed where they were warm, whether that is huddled together in hollow trees or tucked into burrows in the ground. There would be no Ursa Major this trip.

They passed through several small villages along their trip, most of them farming communities. The Wonderlanders stared at them in awe and suspicion as they passed through. Several times Alfre overheard a small child commenting on her stature to their parent. She ignored it. There was no use getting angry at a child for something like that.

Now when a full-grown man commented on it...well, no one could prove she was the one who caused the snow on the roof of his house to fall on his head and knock him to the ground.

The Kingdom of Sapfir was smaller than Alfre expected. It wasn't much bigger than the City of Spade and its surrounding farmlands. The walls surrounding the royal city were tall and white, banners emblazoned with a red crown hanging on either side of the gate. Wonderlander soldiers in black armor patrolled the roads, staring Alfre and party down as they rode by.

"Kinda funny how a kingdom on the blue continent has red in its banner," Izo noted absently.

"Pretty sure that's the usurper we've been hired to deal with," Spica whispered. "Best not say those sorts of things too loudly. Any monarch worth their salt has spies everywhere."

The Dormouse Inn was fairly easy to find. It was tucked against the outer wall and a small, rundown looking thing. They left their elk at the watering trough and entered. The main dining hall was practically empty, save for a young man in far finer clothes than one would expect given where he was and his two companions.

Alfre approached them first. "You Alessio?"

The two on either side of the young man shushed her frantically, glancing around nervously. "Be quiet! You never know where the Red Queen's agents are hiding."

Alfre rolled her eyes. "Even if they were here, they wouldn't be a match for us. So are you the person who hired us or not?"

The young man nodded, his brown eyes dark and tired, but still blazing with rebellion. "I am. You may call me Alessio, heir to the Maddigan line who has ruled this kingdom for generations...until that woman came and forced me from my throne."

Elias and the others came to sit around the now very crowded table. Spica sat with full view of the door and the rest of the dining hall, eyes bright and watchful. Alfre sat facing the prince, her pale eyes meeting his.

"How did it happen?" she asked, folding her hands on the rough surface of the table in front of her.

"She threatened to burn and pillage the farmlands outside the walls if I didn't agree," Alessio explained. "She'd placed spies in my army. Only those who guarded me directly were safe from her manipulation. It is said she can control the hearts of men, be it with her magic or her wiles. She would have turned my army on the people. I couldn't risk it. Not until I had more help that is."

He looked to each of the party members in turn. "I...had hoped for more, I must admit."

"Probably should have mentioned that in your request," Alfre teased, hoping to lighten the situation. It didn't help. She turned to Elias and Traveler instead. "Is it really possible for her to have mind control magic?"

"There is a magician spell that allows casters to turn an mob against other enemies," Traveler said. "I don't know if it can be used against Fell though, I've never tried it. Not a magician, you know."

"I've never tried it in PvP combat," Elias admitted. "The spell description specifically says mob or non-player character."

"And what about her wiles?" Spica asked, a little bit of sarcasm leaking into her voice. "Are we at risk of falling into the 'I have boobs, you must obey' trap?"

"Well, I'm not," Izo said plainly. "Not really interested in boobs. Or...ladies in general, really."

Traveler shook her head as well, "I'm more of a butt girl than a boobs girl. Nice butts are more universal."

Alfre shrugged. "I'm not going to fall for any wiles, regardless of who they come from."

Spica's eyes landed on Elias, who smiled fondly at her. "You know the only wiles I'd ever fall for are yours."

Spica smirked. "I'll hold you to that, magician."

Alfre turned to smile at Alessio. "I think we'll be pretty safe."

Alessio seemed...unconvinced. So did his two guards. Well, that was their problem.

"So how are we doing this?" Traveler asked. "I doubt we can just charge through the front door."

"There's a secret escape tunnel, the one I took to escape with my guards after it became clear that the Red Queen wasn't just going to let me go quietly," Alessio said.

"Of course there is," Alfre muttered under her breath. Elias elbowed her in the shoulder.

“It comes out just along the wall a mile or so north of here, near a secondary gate that’s rarely guarded,” Alessio continued. “If we follow it back towards the palace, it should come out in my bathing chambers...that is, if the Queen hasn’t discovered and sealed the tunnel.”

“Even if she has, it’ll probably be easy to blow open,” Elias assured the young prince. “Especially if Traveler has a gun equipped.”

Traveler merely grinned.

“It would probably be best if we enter the tunnel under the cover of darkness,” one of the prince’s guards, an older woman with greying black hair, spoke up. “That way, we’ll have a greater chance of taking them by surprise.”

The party exchanged glances before Alfre nodded. “Works for us. Are we doing this tonight, or should we wait?”

Alessio shook his head. “I do not wish to wait any longer.”

“Very well,” Elias agreed. “Once the sun has set, we’ll make our move.”

Chapter Sixteen

Alessio paid for the care and keeping of their elk, along with the two small rooms on either side of his where they could rest until the night came. They left through their windows once darkness had settled over the city, Izo having the hardest time with this given his stature. Spica and Traveler moved across the roofs without making a sound, along with Alessio's female guard, who appeared to be a hunter in class. His other guard, a dark skinned man in his early thirties, was a gunner like Ran.

They used the narrow alley between the buildings and the wall proper, keeping off the major streets as much as possible. Despite the late hour, there were still people milling about the streets, a good deal of them being those soldiers in black armor. Alfre was happy they didn't have any knights with them, the heavy armor they tended to wear made too much noise for something this dependent on stealth. She was lucky the direwolf pelt that lined her coat and boots allowed for her to pass virtually unnoticed when she wanted, much like an assassin like Spica would. It worked better in the Wilds, but it did its job just fine here.

The entrance to the tunnel was a large, loose piece of stone in the road right next to the side gate. It was harder to lift from this side than it would have been to push it open from below, though that was likely the point. She climbed down a rickety wooden ladder and let Alessio's guards close the opening behind them. The female guard led the way, Elias right beside her with a spell to light the way. The tunnel was dark and dusty, but at least it wasn't a sewer or catacomb. Alfre didn't think she could deal with people's poop water or skeletons everywhere.

They traveled quickly and quietly through the tunnel. It was unnerving to have the only sound be the echoing of their footsteps, but Alfre refused to let the spooky atmosphere get to her. As they reached the end of the tunnel, she could just barely see another ladder ahead in the darkness. The female guard rushed forward, climbing up the ladder and pressing her ear to the opening, listening. She pushed whatever counted as a lid up and peeked out into the room. She finished pushing it up and aside and motioned for us to follow.

"Watch your heads," she warned in a quiet voice.

The opening was tucked in a space between the two sinks of the bathroom, covered with a marble counter top but otherwise open to the room. The room looked mostly unused, a thin layer of dust covering the tile flooring. They slipped silently through the room towards the double doors that Alfre assumed led into the bedroom. The hunter peeked out and, once deeming it safe, motioned for them to follow.

The bedroom was empty, save for the furniture of course. The Queen apparently didn't think the prince's chambers were good enough for her, and had left them well alone after Alessio had escaped.

"Where do you think she would be?" Izo asked as quietly as he could.

"Rumor has it that in the evenings she holds private meetings in the throne room," The male guard whispered. "She might be there now. Either there, or in her bed chambers, the ones where his highness' mother used to sleep."

"Try the throne room first," Elias suggested. "Boss fights tend to happen in throne rooms."

"What fights?" Alessio questioned.

Alfre patted him on the shoulder. "Don't worry about it."

They snuck through the elaborately decorated hallways, allowing Spica to apply sleeping poison to any guard they came across. They wanted to be sneaky, and a long drawn out fight was not something that would help them. The palace was large, and there were many twists and turns to their path. They were lucky to have Alessio and his guards with them. Had they had tried this on their own, they surely would have gotten lost.

They came to a small door tucked away from any other door. A door used for quick escapes from the throne room, should things get rowdy. Spica placed her ear against the dark wood this time, listening intently.

"There's three voices," she informed them. "Two masculine and a feminine. I'm guessing that's the queen. She's definitely there. What's the plan?"

"Burst in and kick her ass before they know what hit her," Alfre said plainly.

Spica rolled her eyes. "Best get your buffs going then, darling."

Elias was casting his buffing spells before she even finished her sentence. They opened the door as quietly as they could, not wanting to alert the Red Queen to their presence until it was in their best interest. They could only barely see the Queen's dress from the angle they were at, but standing before her was a man in samurai armor and a man in no armor at all. There was a glassy quality to their eyes that unnerved Alfre, especially since they showed no emotion on their faces.

"Take out the samurai first," Elias suggested. "The other one is just an NPC, don't worry about him. Then we'll go for the Queen."

“No! That’s my father’s oldest friend and military advisor,” Alessio hissed desperately. “Please don’t hurt him.”

Alfre groaned. “If we take out the queen first then it doesn’t matter how many people she has under mind control! We’ll focus on her.”

“Fine,” Elias grumbled. “But if any of us get killed because of him, that’s on you, your highness.”

Alfre’s eyes were drawn to the queen, who stood from the throne for whatever reason. The reason didn’t matter, because if she gave Alfre a good shot at her back. She flashed forward, each step crossing the distance of three, rapier drawn. At the last moment, the queen sensed her presence and side stepped the blow, the blade leaving a long, thin cut in her gown rather than piercing her flesh.

She really was pretty, Alfre realized absently as she regained her balance. Blonde hair with just the lightest hint of curls, big blue eyes, an hourglass figure that some women would kill for, the Red Queen definitely looked like the kind of woman that people would fall for.

The queen lifted a finely manicured hand to hide her giggles behind. “Is this really the best Alessio could do? A child?”

“Screw you, ya bawbag, I’ll be twenty before the month is up,” Alfre snapped.

“It seems your temper is as short as your stature,” the queen drawled. “And my time, like you, is short.” She held out her hand, sending a bolt of lightning in Alfre’s direction.

Alfre thanked whatever gods existed that she’d piled so many points into speed as she side stepped the bolt and ended up on the other side of the room. The queen gasped, whirling about to try and find her. Alfre took the chance to charge once more, coating her rapier in cold. Her strike was truer this time, landing a blow on the queen’s shoulder blade. Frost crawled down her arm, making it unusable for the time being.

The queen shrieked, calling for her guards. Elias and the others decided now was the time to get involved, Izo forming a wall of thorny branches over the entrances to the throne room. Spica slid into the room, putting the samurai and the other man to sleep. Alessio’s guards moved them out of the way as the queen’s guards threw open the doors and began hacking and slashing at the branches that blocked their paths. Taking advantage of their preoccupied state, Elias cast several debuff spells on them, sapping them of their strength and speed. Those who had hacked large enough holes in the branches were ticked off one by one by Traveler’s elemental sniper rifle.

That left Alfre with the queen, trying to keep her attention off Alessio. The queen threw bolt after fireball after icicle after Alfre. Most of the attacks missed her by a mile; those that did hit did far more damage than Alfre liked. Maybe Spica was right and she should have put more points into her defense stats. She felt the cool healing magic Izo sent her way, more that happy that he was on her team. Her strikes were quick and generally of minimal damage. It didn't help that the Queen seemed to have a plethora of hit points. Spica helped out where she could, but the queen seemed immune to poisons, at least those that mainly caused damage. Alfre was more than grateful for the debuffs Spica placed on the queen.

"You little trollop!" the queen hissed, a dark aura spilling over her skin. "How dare you scar my beautiful body?! How dare you try and steal my kingdom from me?!"

"To be fair, you stole it first," Alfre reminded, a wild grin she'd picked up from Ren on her face.

"SILENCE!" The queen threw out her hand, a storm of needles made of the same dark aura that surrounded her darting towards Alfre.

"Shit!" Alfre zipped out of the way, but not quickly enough. A handful of needles caught her leg. She fell to the ground, skidding some distance away. The pain crawled its way up her leg, stinging and burning like nothing she'd ever felt before. Tears pricked the corners of her eyes, the room blurring before her eyes.

The queen laughed triumphantly. "Let's see you scurry around the room now."

Alfre hissed in pain, trying to keep sobs from escaping her throat. There was a crashing noise as the queen's guards finally made it through Izo's barrier. Her friends focused their efforts on keeping them at bay. She was on her own. Dammit, where was the cavalry when you needed it?

"Leave her be, witch!"

Alfre blinked her eyes as clear as she could get them, staring up in awe as Alessio stole the still sleeping samurai's sword, brandishing it at the Red Queen.

"Alessio, you idiot!" Alfre shouted at him. "Get out of here!"

"I will not have you risk your life for me while I cower in the corner!" Alessio shouted back. "What good am I as a king if I don't fight for my kingdom?"

"You're nae good as a king if you're dead before you can sit your arse on the throne!"

“Ran’s right. Your accent does get more pronounced the more upset you are.”

Wha-?” Alfre looked up to see Izo kneeling over her, the coolness of his healing magic seeping into her leg.

Izo smiled at Alessio. “Thanks for the distraction, your highness.”

“Any time, friend.”

The Red Queen gaped at them, before her scarlet lips twisted into a scowl. She raised her hand to gather the dark magic again, but Alfre didn’t give her a chance to cast her spell. Ice and frost gathered around her sword, incasing it and her hand in a giant icicle. She dashed forward, the room going by so fast it was almost like she had tunnel vision; the only thing that was clear was the Red Queen and her unprotected chest.

“*Claidheamh Deigh!*”

The great sword of ice pierced the valley between the queen’s breasts, her blood painting the clear blue surface of the weapon red. Alfre stood frozen for a long moment as the Red Queen gave her last shuddering breaths; that finely manicured hand wrapping uselessly around the frozen blade before falling limply to her side. Alfre pulled her blade free, the ice melting away from her sword as the Red Queen faded into the same smoke that all of her defeated opponents did. As much pain as the queen had caused Alessio and his companions, in the end she was no different than any other mob in the game.

And wasn’t that a depressing thought? The queen certainly had more personality and a greater goal than any goblin or boar, but even she was just an obstacle to be defeated and sent off where ever the defeated went. She didn’t even have a name, now that Alfre thought about it. Just a title, a designation. Like goblin, or Ursa Major.

“Are you alright?” Izo asked softly, a heavy hand on her shoulder.

“Dunno,” Alfre admitted. “It’s weird how she didnae even leave a body. Like she wasn’t even a person.”

Izo flinched, retracting his hand and letting it grip his staff. “This world is strange. I’m afraid I don’t have an explanation for you.”

“I doubt anyone does.”

The guards that had been attacking the door stood around dumbly, almost as if they were unsure what they were doing there. The old samurai man woke

suddenly, his eyes far clearer than they had been before. His eyes teared up at the sight of Alessio, who embraced him like family.

The prince turned to the party with a smile. "Friends, I have no words to express my gratitude. You have restored me to my throne and you have returned my people to me. Thank you."

He turned to his male guard, who carried forward a small wooden chest. He opened it for their inspection, and they found it brimming with gold.

"Your payment, as promised in my request," Alessio said. "And what's more, if you find yourselves in need of aide, you may call on Sapfir. We owe you a debt I could not even begin to repay."

"The gold is a good start," Spica said, only partially joking as she took the chest.

Chapter Seventeen

There were no arguments when Alessio offered them a place to spend the night at the palace. He sent his guards to fetch their elk as he took them on a tour of the palace proper. It was only three stories tall, fairly short for a palace, but it was long and wide, and its grounds were meticulously maintained.

Alfre stopped in front of a portrait as they wandered down a hall lined in paintings. It was of a young brunette woman, her face similarly shaped to Alessio's. She was dressed in a lovely blue dress under a white coat that fell off her shoulder to hang about her elbows. On her lap was a cat that Alfre could swear was grinning at her.

"Alessio?" she called. "Who is this?"

Alessio wandered over to stand by her, staring up at the portrait with a smile. "Oh, that's my ancestor, the first queen of Wonderland before it fell apart into the separate kingdoms it is today."

"What's her name?" Alfre asked. She couldn't shake the feeling that the woman in the painting was familiar.

"Her name was Alice, she was Fell like you actually."

All eyes were on Alessio, wide and disbelieving.

"Alice...like Alice Liddell?"

"Yes, I believe that was her name before she married my great-great-great-great-great grandfather," Alessio replied. He turned to Alfre, head tilted in curiosity at the shock in her eyes. "Why? Have you heard of her story? I wouldn't be surprised. She was the first Fell in Wonderland."

Alfre looked to her friends. Elias, Spica, even Traveler looked shocked. Whatever Alessio was talking about was not something they'd heard before.

Alessio continued on, rambling about the various paintings in the hall. Alfre and her friends crowded together behind him, whispering amongst themselves.

"Have you heard about this?" Alfre asked.

"No, that was never part of the lore of the game," Traveler said, her voice flat and unwavering.

“What does this mean?” Elias whispered. “If there’s lore beyond what the game creators wrote...”

“Then that means that this world is either expanding,” Traveler theorized, “Or it always existed along side ours. Alice fell into this world eight generations ago. Who knows how much has changed since then? The world of the original Alice in Wonderland could indeed be the same Wonderland we’ve been playing in.”

“That’s insane!” Spica hissed.

“Insane like being transported on masse into the world of a video game?” Elias questioned.

“There’s only so much weirdness I can believe, alright,” she shot back.

“But Alice went home, right?” Izo said. “At the end of the story she went back. And in real life she married and had children. So if she went home, maybe we can.”

Alfre didn’t want to get her hopes up. A lot of time had passed in this world between the time of Alice and the present. Who was to say the way Alice used to get home even still existed? And if it did exist, would everyone want to leave? They were so much more here than they were back home. Yes, she missed her family and friends, but by this point they were probably written off as dead in the real world. Alfre wasn’t sure she wanted to cause that kind of emotional upheaval. There were too many questions and variables.

Best not to get her hopes up.

The winter solstice was almost upon them by the time they returned to the guildhall. And with the solstice came Alfre’s birthday. She had tried to avoid mentioning it to anyone, but somehow they all found out anyway. She discouraged them from getting her gifts, but she couldn’t talk Doremi out of throwing her a party. They held it at the pub, because of course they did. Drinks and food flowed freely from the kitchen and behind the bar. A large, multilayer cake was brought out, positively covered in candles. Alfre was certain there were more than twenty candles on the dumb thing but she didn’t complain. She blew out the candles dutifully, receiving the first (and largest) slice of cake with a grateful smile to Traveler, who had chef as her subclass (something Alfre had been unaware of up to that point).

The chattering that filled the pub stopped suddenly as the door swung open and Canus stepped into the room. Then the whispers started up. Canus was never seen wandering about the Fell cities. Or even Wonderlander cities for that matter. No, Canus always kept to the Wilds. But there he was, wandering into the pub like

he belonged there. Alfre gave him a nonplussed look as he approached her, setting her fork down on her plate.

“Canus, what are you doing here?” she asked. “Not that I’m not happy to see you.”

“Someone let me know today was your day of birth,” Canus explained. “I am told it is customary to give a gift when a Fell turns one year older.”

“You don’t have to,” Alfre said, waving her unoccupied hand pacifyingly.

“I wanted to,” he insisted. He reached into his cloak and pulled out a small, thin, silvery whistle. “Here, this is for you.”

“Th-thank you,” Alfre took the tiny pipe gently in her hand, turning it over and watching the way the light played over the metal. “What is it?”

“It’s a Direwolf Pipe,” the wolf god told her. “If you are in trouble, just blow the whistle and one of my wolves will come to your aide.”

“I see,” she murmured. “That’s very kind of you.” She tucked the whistle into the pocket of her direwolf coat. She turned back to gaze up at Canus. “Um...would you like some cake?”

“I still can’t believe he showed up,” Alfre mumbled as she swept crumbs off the tables and onto an already dirty plate. “How did he know there was even going to be a party?”

“Well, uh...” All eyes turned to Izo, who blushed a brilliant red. “I, um, might have seen him one night while I was on guard duty on our way back from Sappir and told him that your birthday was soon. He asked what Fell did for their birthdays and I said that on our birthdays we tend to receive gifts from our loved ones.”

Ren wagged her brows at Alfre as she whipped down the tables after dusted off. “Does that make Canus one of your loved ones?”

“He’s a friend, I did him a favor, he feels indebted to me,” Alfre huffed. “That’s literally all it is. Quit talkin’ mince.”

“There’s no need to be shy about it,” Spica cooed. “That item he gave you was very rare. You could only earn it in game by doing all of his dungeons in a twenty-four hour period. Which is pretty much impossible unless your at least level eighty.”

“You know what would be funny,” Traveler said out of nowhere. “If Lokki was the direwolf that showed up when you blew the whistle.”

“Funny’s not really the word I would use for that,” Silver muttered as he passed by her with a dustpan full of crumbs to toss out into the street.

“Ironic, then?” Traveler amended.

“That’s closer,” Elias agreed.

“I doubt Lokki would be the one I get,” Alfre said. “Canus doesn’t plan on keeping him a direwolf for much longer. One of the original wolves is pregnant. If the pups survive to adulthood, he’s gonna turn Lokki back.”

“That will take at least a year, though, if direwolves are anything like normal wolves and dogs.” Ran had joined the conversation now.

“Still, I doubt Canus would send me his least favorite, he likes me, apparently.”

Spica hummed, obviously entertained by the whole thing. “I suppose the question now is: do you like him?”

Alfre paused in her cleaning. *Did* she like Canus? Well, kind of. He was nice enough to her, even if their first encounter hadn’t been ideal. He didn’t seem to expect anything of her, which was nice. How many boys had she met that were only decent to her because they wanted something? Too many to remember properly. Canus just wanted to pay her back for catching Lokki for him, even if she hadn’t actually done much catching. But that wasn’t the kind of liking Spica was talking about.

“Idunno,” she said in response.

She smacked at Ren when the older girl boomed.

Chapter Eighteen

Ren, Ran, and Silver had been gone for several days now. They'd left on the guild's thousandth quest two days after Alfre's birthday. They ended up missing Christmas, and the party June and Doremi had thrown for everyone. Alfre slipped out in the middle of the festivities. Too many people in too tight a space. The air was cold, but Alfre didn't mind, in fact she relished in it.

"You Fell seem to hold celebrations for everything." She turned to see Canus slinking out of the shadows of the park's barren trees.

"It's good to find things worth celebrating," Alfre replied. "Makes life more fun."

Canus grunted noncommittally.

"We'll probably have another party when Ren and the others get back," she continued. "Since they'll be ready to apply for kingdomhood."

Canus gave her an odd look. "How does one apply to be a kingdom?"

Alfre gave a little laugh and shrugged. "I have no idea."

Canus' ears twitched. "You will leave with them. To go to their new kingdom."

She nodded. "Probably. I'm part of their guild after all."

"I will miss you."

They shared a look, Alfre's cheeks becoming rosy for reasons that had nothing to do with the cold. "It's not like we'll be leaving the continent. I can still go into the Wilds and find you."

Canus grunted again.

"Probably be better than you coming into the City all the time," she said, feeling like maybe she was rambling a bit. "It must feel strange for you to leave the Wilds."

"It is," he agreed. "But I like coming to see you. You always seem so surprised. It's cute."

"Come see me too often and I'll stop being surprised," Alfre warned jokingly. "Then what will you do?"

Canus grinned, flashing his too sharp canines at her. "Find some other way to surprise you."

Alfre smiled back. "I have no doubt you will."

Ren and her party came back two days later, riding back into town triumphantly. The wild grin Alfre had come to know and love never left Ren's face as she regaled the guild with a tale of their thousandth quest: slaying a dragon. Despite what Izo said, dragons were not very common in Wonderland. There were two on every continent, bosses of some of the biggest dungeons in the game. Some very important and rich someone wanted a bag full of dragon scales, and had paid handsomely to send Ren, Ran, and Silver through the dungeon to get some.

Coin in pocket and guild quest log tucked under her arm, Ren and a sizable company of her guild members (Alfre and party included) marched right up to the guild registry. It was a fairly small building, the registry, tucked away in the corner of the city. A Wonderlander manned the desk, and looked understandably overwhelmed when half the guild attempted to cram into the room after Ren. Ren slapped the quest log down onto the desk along with a bulging bag of gold.

"Crystal Moon Kingdom has come register for royal land," Ren announced, her voice louder than necessary so the people at the back of the crowd could hear.

The Wonderlander manning the desk nodded and reached out with shaking hands to leaf through the quest log and all the achievement the guild had earned. Her eyes got wider and wider as she skimmed the pages.

"E-everything seems in order there," she said, her voice wavering. She quickly counted the money Ren had presented her with. "Yes, yes, everything is as it should be." She nodded and presented Ren with a winning smile. "Your application for kingdomhood has been accepted. Please allow us to survey available land for you to choose, and then we will discuss civil design with you. It will take several days to iron everything out. Is that alright?"

Ren shrugged, her grin never leaving her face. "I've waited this long for a kingdom, what's a few more days?"

Ren was gone often during those next 'few more days'. There was far more to this becoming a kingdom than Alfre had first anticipated. Wonderlander land surveyors sent back photos and data about plots of land Ren could build her kingdom on. After that was settled she had to talk civil design: what sort of materials did she want her city to be built from, what sort of street layout did she want, what sort of palace did she want to live in? Those sorts of things. Even after

that was done, they had to wait for the initial town to be built. The Wonderlanders worked supernaturally fast but they weren't magic, they couldn't just summon a city from nothing.

Oh, but what a city it was. The streets were paved in a brilliant mishmash of colorful, reflective crystals. The buildings were built with a pale white stone, the door of each painted a different color. Streetlamps glowed with the same magic that Elias cast when he used his light spell. But the palace, the palace was the most impressive thing Alfre had ever seen. White stone walls and deep blue roofs rose up and towered over the town below. Tall, thin windows were covered in stained glass. It reminded Alfre most of the palaces she'd seen in the travel books of Japan she'd snuck glances at in the library. The castle itself was backed up against a great mountain at the end of the long range that separated the more temperate forests of the southern half of the continent from the tundra of the north.

"There's plenty of farmland for anyone with a farmer subclass," Ren explained as they walked through the city towards the palace. "And smithies for blacksmiths and a big old library for scholars and..."

She rambled on and on, sometimes talking too fast for Alfre to comprehend, but she understood the feeling. Ren was *excited*. No, more than that, she was elated! She'd achieved her dream, and not only was she able to see her kingdom, she got to stand in it, touch it, smell it. She didn't just get to play a queen online; she got to be a queen.

"And of course you guys will be staying with us in the palace."

That caught Alfre's attention. "I'm sorry, what?"

Ren grinned at her over her shoulder. "Well, I'm going to be living there, of course, since I'm the queen. And Ran's gonna be there cause he's my freeloading brother."

"Hey!"

"And Silver's living there because every queen needs a prince consort."

"Please don't diminish my role to arm candy."

"And of course every queen needs a lady in waiting." She looked pointedly at Traveler. "And a Butler." This time at Elias. "And a royal healer." Izo this time. "And an assassin to do my dirty work." Spica smirked when their eyes met. "And a personal guard." Alfre flinched back in surprise when Ren's golden eyes fell on her once more.

“Really?” she asked. “You sure you don’t want someone else you’ve known longer to do that? Like Silver? Or literally any of the knights that have been in your guild way longer than I have?”

“Silver’s my prince consort,” Ren insisted. “And probably my captain of the guard. Plus, I have a feeling you’ll disappear on me if I don’t give you something to do.”

Alfre couldn’t argue with that. She hated being idle. Especially now that she had this big huge world to live in and fight things and powers beyond what her former self could have dreamed of. Well, okay, they were mainly variations on the same small set of powers, but still.

“Alright,” Alfre muttered. “But that doesn’t promise I won’t leave anyway.”

Ren shrugged. “I’ve been expecting that since day one.”

Chapter Nineteen

Alfre was bored. Terribly, terribly bored. Even with her position as Ren's personal guard, she had little to nothing to do. She and Spica followed Ren pretty much everywhere (her in broad daylight and Spica in the shadows), and you'd think that would mean she was present for some pretty exciting things. But you'd be wrong. You'd be so wrong. Ever since Ren put on the Royal Armor (or whatever the item was called) it was like no one wanted to mess with her. Well, very few people wanted to mess with Ren in the first place, she was one of the highest level monks on the whole continent and had a reputation for overkill. Alfre didn't even know why she thought she needed a personal guard; she could easily take care of any threat herself.

Alfre sighed heavily, sharing a look of discontent with Spica from where she could barely see the assassin in the shadows of the throne room. Ren was meeting with some ambassadors from the City of Spade, specifically members of the Sweet Summer Children and Knights of the Burning Oak guilds. No one else was willing to make the three-day trek to the Crystal Moon Kingdom.

"Alfre?" The winter blade twitched at the sound of Ren's voice, looking up at the queen. "Take a break, I can hear your sighing from over here. You too, Spica. We're among friends here. I'll be fine."

Alfre turned and exited through a side door just behind the throne, leaving it ajar for Spica to slip through, the assassin closing it silently behind her.

"Three months," Alfre groaned. "Three months of *nothing!*"

"Hard for me to do her dirty work when she has no dirty work for me to do," Spica agreed. "I think the only one who's busy is Elias...and Izo if the rumors about him and Ran are true."

"Maybe Traveler had the right idea, leaving when she did," Alfre murmured.

Traveler's sudden and unannounced departure was still a sore subject among the four of them. They'd simply woken up one morning to find Traveler's chambers bare and her name scratched out of the guild ledger. A note had been left, pretty obviously written by her, thanking them for their companionship. But her name was Traveler for a reason, and the winds were taking her off to other corners of the world. Ren had been particularly bitter about it. While she had expected Alfre to leave, Traveler had been pretty adamant about joining the guild. They'd all thought she would stay.

It was for this reason Alfre was so hesitant about leaving, even when she was itching for adventure, for some new goal to set her mind to. She remembered her little cottage in the woods. Did she have enough to buy it? And after that did she have enough to fix it? Was it even still there? Had it been destroyed by the monsters that haunted the Wilds? Had someone taken it from her without her knowledge?

“If you leave, you aren’t leaving without me,” Spica told her plainly.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Alfre assured her. “But would Elias come with us?”

Spica flinched, most people wouldn’t have noticed it but Alfre knew her well enough to see past the mask of perfection the assassin tried to wear.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “He seems awfully happy here.”

“We need to talk to him about it,” Alfre said, though it sounded like she didn’t really want to do what she was suggesting. “The worst thing he can say is no.”

They found him out in the garden, setting up some kind of teatime by the lotus pond. They didn’t really know why, Ren never drank tea. So unless the teapot poured warm sake, the whole thing was going to go to waste. Elias hummed quietly to himself, smiling as he set the delicate china on the table about a tea tower of cookies and tiny cakes.

“Elias,” she called.

His long white ears turned towards them before the rest of him did. He smiled at them before fully processing their unhappy expressions. His smile quickly fell into a concerned frown.

“What is it?” he asked, taking a few quick, long strides towards them. “What’s wrong?”

“We need to leave, Elias,” Spica told him. “There’s nothing for us here. All Alfre and I do is sit around and follow Ren up and down the same halls day in and day out. We’re wasted here.”

Elias’ ears dropped, his eyes fell from their faces. “I see.”

“We won’t go now, but soon. We’re going to tell Ren, and give her plenty of time to get used to the idea before we go,” Alfre said. “We won’t be like Traveler.”

“But you’ll leave the guild when you go,” Elias guessed.

It was Alfre’s turn to look away. “Yes.”

“We were wanting to know if you were going to come with us if we left,” Spica admitted. Her too blue eyes met Elias’ scarlet and held his gaze.

Elias took a deep breath and gave her a small, reassuring smile. “I’d never let my girls go without me. Who’d keep you two out of trouble?”

“To be fair, magician, you’ve never been able to keep us out of trouble.”

Elias laughed, clear and joyful. “It’s true, I suppose. But I can always try.”

Alfre felt better about leaving knowing Elias was coming with them. She briefly thought about asking Izo to come with them. He’d been a part of their party for a long time, and they’d need a healer. But then she caught him standing close to Ran as they held hands and spoke in whispers. The way Izo smiled as Ran rubbed his thumb in little circles on the back of his hand told her that there was no way she’d ever convince him to leave. She didn’t even feel like it would be right to try.

She cornered Ren the next night, catching Ren as she was entering her private chambers.

“We’re leaving,” she said, telling her as simply as she could. Like ripping off a Band-Aid, she thought. “Spica, Elias, and I. At the beginning of next week. I wanted to let you know.”

For a brief moment, Alfre swore Ren would argue. The queen’s shoulders squared, her hands clenched into fists, and a dark look flickered through her golden eyes. But then, as quickly as it built, the tension faded. Her shoulders slumped and her hands fell open. She met Alfre’s eyes; a sad smile on her face, so different from the wild grin Alfre was used to.

“I knew you would eventually,” Ren admitted, stepping further in to the room. “I tried my damndest to stop you, or at least prolong the inevitable. I guess I couldn’t. You never gave your heart to the guild, not like I did.”

“It’s your guild, your kingdom,” Alfre agreed. “It would be strange if you weren’t emotionally invested in it.”

Ren nodded. She sat on her bed, settling next to Alfre. “Where will you go? What goal has caught your eye?”

Alfre shrugged. “I don’t know. When...when we were in Sapfir, the prince mentioned that Alice Liddell was the first Fell. She made it home eventually. Maybe we can try and find that? I don’t know if I want to though. I miss my family, of course, but...I’m so much more here than I was back home, you know?”

“Of course I know.” Ren laughed, a soft, bitter noise. “Here, I am a queen. There...I’m no one.”

Alfre reached out and placed her hand over Ren’s and squeezed. “You’re a great queen, Ren. And probably one of the best friends I could have here. Thank you for looking after me all this time.”

“Don’t get sappy on me, snowflake,” Ren joked. Despite her words, she pulled her hand free and wrapped her arms around Alfre’s shoulders, squeezing her tight. “And just so you know, even when you leave the guild, you’re always welcome here. So try and visit every so often. Izo would get sad if you forgot about him.”

Ren, Ran, Silver, and Izo saw them off at the city gate the morning they left. And like every other time Ren wandered out to do something, she amassed a small army as she went. Half the kingdom came out to see them off, it seemed. Alfre recognized faces, but knew no names. In the back of her mind, she wondered if she could bring herself to stay if she had bothered to get to know more members of the guild. It felt like she’d done herself a great disservice in keeping to herself for so long. But there was no time to dwell.

They set out into the early spring morning as the dew was still clinging to the grass. Their first destination was the City of Spade. Alfre had the wild idea to make the three of them a guild. Any group of three or more players could form a guild, and guilds had a much easier time doing things than individual players. She’d come up with the name already, something that had been rolling around her head since the Christmas party, standing out in the cold staring up at the apparently unmoving stars.

The trip took them three days by foot, walking all day and half the night. Boars and goblins did nothing to stop them now. The last time Alfre had checked her little journal she was level fifty. Which was an impressive feat considering a little over half a year ago she had been level one.

By the time they reached the city they were all exhausted, dirty, and in need of a decent meal that consisted of something other than hunks of cheese, dried meat, and plain bread. They stopped by the Knights of the Burning Oak to say hello to Lance and Atticus, who looked both excited and saddened to see them. Apparently Ren had sent word ahead that the three of them were heading their way and would be in need of accommodation until they could get settled. The Crystal Moon guildhall was left abandoned, vacated when the guild left for its kingdom. No one had bought it up in the meantime, most guilds already having halls of their own, and as such no one could access it.

Atticus offered to let them rooms to stay in for the time being. Well, Lance offered the rooms, and Atticus just shrugged behind him. Lance would always be fond of Alfre for how she had helped Izo all those months ago, it seemed. Alfre was certainly grateful for the warm bath and soft bed.

They stopped by Sweet Summer Children the next day, June and Doremi sweeping them up into hugs. Or, they swept Alfre up into hugs. They couldn't really sweep Spica or Elias up into anything, let alone a hug. When they mentioned registering as a guild, June immediately launched into a half-rant about the types of guildhalls they could or couldn't afford.

"Do you think you'd buy the old Crystal Moon Kingdom guildhall?" she asked. "The pub would be a good source of income if you kept it open to the public. I'd be harder to make as much profit as Ren and them did, since they manned the kitchen with guild members, but you could probably hire a few Wonderlanders at a decent price."

"That's a little big for us," Elias admitted. "It's a shame the space is going to waste, but I don't think that's something we were considering."

"I like the idea of a tall guildhall, though," Alfre said thoughtfully. "Maybe not as wide. I'd love to have a rooftop garden. My uncle had one of those at his flat."

June's eyes glimmered and she ducked down and pulled out a thin pamphlet out from her inventory bag. She slapped it down on the table, quickly thumbing through it. "The Market Council has started putting out this real estate brochure every month, it's freaking great. Here!" She turned the brochure around and pushed it across the table for Alfre and the others to see. On the page was a series of pictures of a four story, sandy colored brick building. One of the photos was of a rooftop garden area, complete with open-air planter boxes and a small greenhouse.

"This baby has been on the market for months," June said excitedly. "It's labeled as a guildhall, but it's too small for most of the guilds around here. There's no shop or anything on the first floor, which most people consider a downside as well. But it might be just what you're looking for."

Spica snatched up the brochure, getting a better look at the property. "Looks cute. But photos can lie. Can you take us there?"

"Of course," June chirped. "Now, you won't be able to purchase it until you've registered your guild. Have you done that yet?"

"No," Elias said. "But I can do that while you're taking Spica to the property. Alfre?"

Alfre flinched, turning back to the conversation and away from the windows she'd been staring out of. "I want to let Canus know we're back."

Elias chuckled fondly and Spica hid her smirk behind the brochure.

"Let's meet back here later, shall we," June proposed. "Say, at dinner time? It shouldn't take too long to register the guild. And Canus always seems to know where you are, Alfre, so I doubt it'll take long to find him."

Alfre hated how easily her pale skin blushed. June giggled, standing from the table and shooing everyone out the door. She took Spica by the arm and led her off. Elias turned down the main street, heading towards the guild registry. Alfre, happy to get away from the teasing, hurried off in the opposite direction, towards the gate and Wilds beyond that.

Chapter Twenty

The farmlands had been extended somewhat, she noticed. The Fell farms remained close to the city walls, but once she passed into the Wilds proper, she noticed new, well-worn paths. Following one curiously, she quickly found herself at the edge of a large, cleared out space in the middle of the Wilds. A village had been built there. It wasn't much, a few small houses, a windmill, and several barns and plowed farm plots. It was cute, she decided. She probably wouldn't find Canus here, but her curiosity begged her to explore. This was obviously a Wonderlander village, Fell stuck to the City more often than not. She wondered, however, why she didn't see more people out and about. It was still light outside, and it was early spring, planting season.

She tensed at the sound of a scream. Her legs were carrying her in the direction of the sound before she could even register that she was moving. She turned around the side of a barn, discovering why there weren't more people around.

A troop of goblins had a young man cornered against the barn. He held his pitchfork out to keep them at bay, but this was a farmhand, not a knight. Alfre's gaze shifted from the young man to the goblins. Level twenty, maybe. Nothing she couldn't handle, even without Spica and Elias there to back her up.

She drew her rapier, the same one she'd found in the Briarwood Thorns. It'd done her well so far, with a few upgrades thanks to Ran's blacksmithing skill. She shot out a series of freezing needles of ice at the goblins, cutting their numbers in half in a single strike. Even with how easy the fight was, Alfre reveled in the action. How long had it been since she'd fought like this? Too long. It got her heart thumping. Got her blood pumping. This, this is what she'd missed, holed up in Ren's castle.

She dove into the crowd of goblins, her rapier moving faster than they could react, one mob fell after the other, so many fell so close together that the black smoke was almost too much to see through. The young man stared up at her with big, brown eyes as the smoke cleared, something akin to awe on his face.

"You alright?" Alfre asked, reaching out her hand to help him up.

"Y-y-yes ma'am!" the boy stuttered. He was so much taller than her, but he couldn't be much older than she was, maybe even a year or two younger. His ginger hair was shaggy and unkempt, which Alfre decided went well with his freckle covered face. "Thank you kindly, ma'am."

“Call me Alfre, I’m too young to be called ma’am by anyone,” Alfre insisted. “What’s your name?”

“Wallace, ma’am...I mean, Alfre,” the young man, Wallace, said. “My mum calls me Wally. I live on this farm here with my family. They left me here to look after it while they went to market a day or so’s journey west with the rest of the village.”

“Ah, so that’s why I didn’t see anyone else,” Alfre said with a hum. “Do you normally have goblin problems?”

“No, not usually,” Wally admitted. “There’s usually a lot of us around, so they don’t get brave enough to do much. I guess they figured I was easy pickings all on my own. I owe you.”

“You don’t owe me anything, Wally,” she said, smiling up at him. “I was just passing through. I’m looking for a friend and I stumbled across your little village here. It’s very nice.”

“Yeah? Well, thank you kindly.” Wally smiled at her. It was a nice smile. Made her want to pinch his cheeks. “We don’t see a lot of Fell out here, though. Who are you looking for?”

“You’ve probably heard of him,” Alfre joked with a grin. “His name is Canus.”

“C-c-c-Canus?” Wallace stuttered and shouted. “Why are you looking for him?!”

“To let him know I’m back in Spade,” Alfre explained blithely. “I’ve been gone for a while, and before he left he told me he’d miss me. So I wanted to let him know I’ve returned. Figured that’d make him happy.”

Wallace reached up to scratch at his head, looking terribly confused by her explanation. “What kinda relationship do you have with him that he’d miss you like that?”

“A fairly friendly one, it seems,” Alfre said with a shrug. “I helped him catch a hunter who’d gone after his direwolf. He’s been fond of me ever since.”

Wallace’s eyes narrowed. “You sure you’re not one of the gods playin’ some trick on me?”

Alfre laughed. She caught the sight of a blush spreading over Wally’s face. She hoped she hadn’t embarrassed him. “I’m sure. Now, I should probably be going. I need to find Canus and then get back to the city to meet up with my guild.”

“What guild are you from?” Wally asked suddenly. “S-so I know who to send requests to if we ever have another goblin problem.”

Alfre smiled winningly. “The Alliance of Frozen Stars.”

Alfre wasn't very far from Wallace's village when she found herself bowled over by a very large and very affectionate wolf. It yipped and sniffed at her, licking at her cheek and neck once it found her acceptable. Alfre laughed, recognizing the brown and grey fur of Canus' wolf form.

“Hello to you too, Canus,” she greeted, running her fingers through his fur. If wolves could purr, she was sure he'd be doing so now. “Miss me?”

He shifted back into his human form, Alfre's fingers tangling in his hair. “More than you know, snowbird,” he said, a soft affection in his voice that made Alfre feel all warm and giggly inside. He nuzzled into her hair, breathing in her scent. She still smelled like winter, pepperminty and cold.

“I just wanted to let you know we're back in Spade,” Alfre said, finding she didn't want to disengage from the strange cuddling they were doing on the ground. “Elias, Spica and I, that is. We're starting our own guild. Spica is looking at a guildhall for us.”

“Then I'll have a new place to surprise you with visits,” Canus murmured, laying his head on Alfre's small shoulder.

Alfre smiled. “You will. Though I'm still not sure why you couldn't come visit me the last three months.”

“Winter is hard on the wolves,” Canus explained. “And Fell kingdoms are strange. We gods do not have the same power there as we do the rest of the world.”

“You seem fine when you visit me in Spade,” Alfre reasoned.

“That city has been there since the first Fell, many, many years ago,” he said. “It is as much part of the world as the Wilds. But your Fell kingdoms are new. They are not meant for us who belong to Wonderland.”

Alfre frowned. “I see.”

Canus sat up, looking Alfre in the eye properly. He smiled at her, not his usual feral grin, but something softer. “But you have returned. And it is spring. I will be able to visit you as often as I like.”

“I look forward to it.”

“How was the guild registry?” Alfre asked, walking up to Elias who sat at June’s table with a large leather book before him.

“Efficient,” Elias replied, patting the book. “We have our own ledger. All of our quests will be recorded here, as well as any of our members. I set you as the guild master, I hope you’re okay with that.”

“It was my idea, after all.” Alfre nodded.

“How was Canus?” Elias asked, a look that straddled the line between curious and knowing on his face.

“He’s good,” Alfre said, taking a seat across from her friend. “He missed me. The reason he didn’t visit while we were with Ren is because Fell kingdoms do something weird to the Wonderlander gods. It’s like they’re just normal Wonderlanders there, I guess. Because Fell kingdoms aren’t meant for them, or something like that.”

Elias sat back with a hum. “Makes sense, I suppose. Fell kingdoms, while built into the code of the game, are technically completely player made. The Fell hub cities were already in the game when we got here, they’re more part of the world than the kingdoms are.”

“I also ran across a Wonderlander village while I was out,” Alfre said. “Saved a farm kid from some goblins.”

“That’s nice,” Elias said distractedly, as if his mind was still on the previous subject.

“What’s nice, magician?” Alfre and Elias turned to the door to see June and Spica walking through.

“Alfre saved a Wonderlander from a bunch of goblins,” Elias answered.

“Did you get paid for it?” Spica asked.

“No?” Alfre replied. “It wasn’t a quest or anything, I just happened upon a situation and helped out. He was kind of in awe of the whole thing, it was kinda funny.”

Spica hummed. “A shame, we could use the money, especially after we buy the guildhall.”

Elias' ears twitched. "So it's good? You approve?"

"Don't sound so surprised, magician," Spica said, reaching out to swat lightly at his shoulder. "My standards are high but they're not unmeetable."

"Pretty sure that's not a word," June muttered under her breath, earning her an icy stare from Spica. "Anyway, we'll be able to purchase it at the guild registry tomorrow, it's probably closed by now. C'mon, I've got rooms available to you if you'd like them."

"That's quite alright, June," Elias assured her. "Atticus already has rooms for us back at his guildhall. We wouldn't want to impose on you any further."

June huffed good-naturedly, her hands going to her hips in a way that reminded Alfre of her grandmother. "Alright. I'll meet you at the guild registry bright and early tomorrow morning then, since I'm fairly certain none of you know how to haggle like I do."

Chapter Twenty-One

Sure enough, the trio were up early the next morning, snagging breakfast from the Burning Oak dining hall before heading out into the streets of the City of Spade. Only a few people were out and about that early in the morning, most of them merchants doing morning preparations in their shops or bakeries and cafes who were open for breakfast. Alfre decided this was the type of atmosphere she liked best, this and late into the evening when everyone was closing up and only the drunks stumbling home from the pubs and the tired merchants were out in the streets.

The registrar looked...not unhappy to see them, but like she *really* didn't want to be dealing with people already. June, however, was perky as ever, parrying each and every tired offer the young Wonderlander made for the guildhall they were attempting to purchase.

"One hundred thousand gold," she started.

June looked appalled. "Are you kidding me? This building has been on the market since the Incident! It's tiny and doesn't even have a shop front! Fifty thousand gold."

The registrar's eyes narrowed. "Eighty thousand gold."

June grinned at her. "Sixty thousand."

"Seventy five thousand," the Wonderlander snapped. "And that's as low as I can go."

June leaned back from the counter, a pleased smile on her face. "See, now that sounds reasonable. Isn't it wonderful that we could come to an agreement? Alfre, do you have the gold?"

Alfre and her companions pooled the money they'd been saving for this and shoved the bag across the counter. The registrar hefted the bag, feeling the weight. She peeked inside, counting the coins too quickly for any normal person.

"Very well," she said finally. She disappeared into the back, depositing the gold and returning with a roll of paper. "Guild master has to sign for it. Just sign your name and the guild's name at the bottom of both deeds. One for you, one for us. Yes, thank you." She snatched up one of the deeds and tucked it into her bell sleeves. "The property is yours. Please try not to burn it to the ground."

Alfre muttered her thanks, tucking her copy of the deed into her inventory. They left the registry, saying goodbye to June and letting Spica lead the way to their new home.

It was surprisingly well kept, considering it'd been unoccupied since before the Incident. There was only a thin layer of dust on the floor and other surfaces. Alfre was used to seeing much more dust in abandoned places, like her cottage and the farmhouse. The first floor seemed to be a standard living space, an open foyer to the three levels above, a kitchen in the back that was far bigger than the three of them needed, seeing as none of them were chefs (Alfre still hadn't decided on a subclass, the way she was going she probably never would), and something akin to a library or lounge. The walls were lined with built in bookshelves, all of them empty. Two sets of curved staircases led to the next level, which consisted of several smaller rooms and an overly large bathroom. A wide, fairly shallow tub took up half of the room. Alfre sat in it, her head sticking up over the edge. When Spica did the same, her shoulders rose above the edge. She didn't seem terribly bothered, in fact she was rather amused that all three of them could fit in the tub at the same time with room to spare.

The next two floors were bedrooms, closets with sliding doors built into their walls. There were more than necessary, but certainly less than a standard guildhall. Most guilds had upwards of a hundred bedrooms in their halls. This building had maybe ten at the most between the two floors. But it was the rooftop that excited Alfre the most. The view of the city was awfully nice and she was pleased to see that the planter boxes and the greenhouse were still in good shape.

"So, what's the first order of business?" Elias asked. "Other than a good dusting?"

"Claiming rooms, I suppose," Alfre said. "I liked that one on the fourth floor, with the big bay windows. That one's mine."

"Fine, I suppose I'll have to go with my second choice," Spica complained, though Alfre knew she wasn't really all that upset. "I did quite like the one with the fireplace."

"Just don't go burning the hall down for your aesthetic," Alfre warned.

Spica sniffed. "Why do you two have such little faith in me?"

"To be fair, I'm pretty sure no one has faith in anyone in this guild," Elias admitted with a chuckle. "I'll take the room with the bookshelves. Hmm, the fourth floor must have been made for the guild leaders, considering how much nicer they are than the rooms on the third floor."

“Those rooms will probably never be used,” Alfre mused. “I doubt anyone’s gonna want to join our merry little band.”

“You never know,” Elias said.

The rest of the day was spent out in the streets, shopping for essentials. The bedrooms were bare of any furniture and the kitchen needed to be stocked not only with food but plates and cutlery as well. The money that they saved thanks to June’s haggling quickly disappeared under all the other things they needed to buy for the hall. They came back with arms loaded with bags of goods. Carpenters were sent ahead by the shop merchants to assemble their furniture, a service Spica was grateful for. She was tired of sleeping in borrowed beds and sleeping bags. Alfre was laden down with bed sheets and other linens. Spica insisted on getting the softest sheets with the highest thread count possible. This was their home, she insisted, more so than anywhere they’d stayed before. There was no need to skimp on anything. Including the plates and cutlery that she herself carried with a grace that Alfre could never pull off carrying anything remotely heavy.

“I think I can probably cook something nice with what we’ve got,” Elias said, his ears the only thing Alfre could see over the paper bags packed with groceries in his arms. “It won’t be fancy, I’m a butler not a chef, but it’ll at least be edible.”

“That’s all I’m asking for,” Alfre muttered, juggling her bags as she opened the guildhall door.

“Miss Alfre!”

Alfre jumped back with a squeak, spilling the linens all over the floor as she did. Standing before her, a wide grin on his freckly face, was Wallace with a heavy looking knapsack over his shoulder.

“Wallace?” she shouted, trying to keep the squeak out of her voice. “What are you doing here?”

“Well, I just couldn’t get you out of my mind, you see. And I knew I had to pay you back for saving my life like you did. But my folks don’t have much in the way of money so I decided to pack up and come and find you and see if you wouldn’t let me work for you to pay back my debt.”

“Wallace...”

“And so I came to this city, it’s a pretty nice city you got, and started asking around for you.”

“...Wallace...”

“And these nice folks pointed me towards the guild registry. So I asked the lady at the desk where I could find your guild. She didn’t look to happy when I mentioned you, which I thought was kinda weird.”

“Wallace!”

“And she pointed me in the right direction and-“

“WALLY!”

The farmboy blinked in surprise. “Yes?”

“What made you think you had to pay me for saving you?” Alfre asked. “I never expected anything and I’m pretty sure I told you that.”

“Yes, well, I just couldn’t let it go, Miss Alfre,” Wally insisted. “And it’s not like they need my help on the farm, that’s what my brothers and sisters are for. I’m the runt of the litter and I was never much good at nothin’ cept watering plants and if they needed someone for that they could probably ask any one of my six siblings. Oh, please Miss Alfre, let me work for you. You won’t even have to pay me, I’ll work for room and board.”

Alfre sighed, trying very hard to ignore Spica and Elias’ barely contained giggles. Why did this sort of thing always happen to her? She looked up at Wallace, who stared down at her with the biggest set of puppy dog eyes she’d seen since her aunt’s spoiled corgi back home.

“Fine,” she acquiesced. “We’ve got some planter boxes and a greenhouse on the roof. They’re your responsibility now. Can you cook?”

“My mum’s been teaching me,” Wally agreed. “It won’t be anything fancy, but it’s filling and tastes pretty damn good if you pardon my language, ma’am.”

“Pretty sure I told you not to call me that,” Alfre muttered with a long-suffering sigh.

“Yes ma’am, sorry ma’am...I mean Miss Alfre.”

“You can drop the ‘miss’ too, if you don’t mind.”

“Alfre?” She turned over her shoulder to see Elias’ look becoming more curious. “Who’s this?”

“This is the kid I saved from goblins the other day,” she explained. “Elias, Spica, this is Wallace. His mum calls him Wally. Wally, these are my friends Elias and Spica.”

“Look at that, she admitted we’re friends,” Spica cooed.

Alfre glared at her playfully. “Don’t push your luck. Everyone knows you’re actually just my minions.”

Spica smirked. “Kinky.”

“Don’t be gross.”

Wallace looked to Elias. “Are they always like that?”

Elias sighed, though his smile was affectionate. “You have no idea. Now, since you claim to know how to cook, maybe you can help me with dinner. Spica? Bring the pots will you?”

Alfre climbed the stairs up to the roof. Wallace had been disappearing up there for hours at a time the past few days, coming back with dirt under his nails and sweat on his brow each evening. She wanted to see what he’d been up to. She squinted against the bright light as she opened the door, raising a hand to shield her eyes.

“Wally?”

“Yes, Miss Alfre?”

Alfre ignored the fact he was still calling her ‘Miss’ and walked further out onto the roof. “What’cha doin’ out here?”

Her eyes adjusted to the light, allowing her to see the area around her properly. Wally was kneeling by one of the planter boxes, a mostly empty bag of soil beside him and a trowel in his hand.

“Ah, just getting some plants started in the garden, Miss Alfre,” he explained. “Already got some different berries and such growing in the greenhouse. Those will be nice and ripe in a few weeks. But I’m planting some tomatoes in this here box. Thinking about getting an apple tree or something to put in that deep one over there.”

“Mmm, looks like you’ve been a busy little bee,” Alfre murmured appreciatively.

“Actually, I wanted to ask you about that,” Wallace said. “I was thinking of getting an apiary started up here. It’d be good for the plants. I could even plant some nice flowers. Do you have any favorites?”

“Mmm, well I know Spica likes roses and Elias is fond of tulips,” Alfre mused. “I don’t think I have a favorite. I’ve never really thought much about flowers.”

“Then I’ll plant all kinds until you find your favorite, Miss Alfre.”

Alfre laughed, taken aback by Wally’s earnest pledge. “If you say so.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

“I want to go on a dungeon raid,” Alfre announced. It’d been several weeks since they’d moved back to Spade. The guildhall was finally starting to feel like home, which meant Alfre was getting antsy. “We haven’t done one since the Briarwood Thorns.”

“Ah, that’s true,” Elias agreed. “You’re much stronger now than you were then. Maybe we could try something different.”

“How different?” Alfre asked.

“A dungeon that’s not under Canus’ purview,” Spica suggested. “We could try the Gates of Death dungeon. I haven’t attempted that one in years.”

“Gates of Death?!” Wallace shouted. “No, Miss Alfre, please don’t go down and fight him, you might never come back!”

The name and Wallace’s reaction intrigued her. “Gates of Death?”

“The lore is that you’re going down into the Wonderland version of hell to defeat the god of the dead,” Elias explained. “It’s a long and hard dungeon and the dungeon boss is literally the Wonderlander’s god of the underworld. No one under level fifty should even try it, but since you’re right at that level, it should be fun to try at least.”

“Might as well,” Alfre agreed, ignoring Wallace’s distressed cry. “Worst case scenario, we die and pop back up in the city square with a dock to our experience points and a few items missing. I haven’t died yet, though, and I’m not about to end that streak.”

Wallace looked paler than usual, listening to the whole conversation as he scrubbed at the dishes. “Please be careful, Miss Alfre. I know you Fell are special and all, but don’t let him steal your soul.”

“No one’s stealing my soul, Wally,” she assured, reaching out to pat his arm. “It’s frozen stuck to me like a tongue to a cold lamp post.”

“A lovely image, darling,” Spica muttered, the sarcasm practically dripping from her words.

“We’ll get packed up and leave tomorrow morning,” Elias suggested. “It’s a good few days travel to the dungeon itself. We’ll be going down below the mountains, so there will be no real place to rest once we get started.”

Wallace saw them off the next morning, looking close to tears as he stood just beyond the gate and waved at them until they were out of sight. They rode elk, just like they had when traveling to Sapfir. The Gates of Death were even farther from the city than Alessio's kingdom had been, so they definitely wanted the mounts if they were to have any energy left for the raid when they got there.

They were about three days' journey through the Wilds when Canus appeared beside Alfre in his wolf form, scaring her mount. She shushed the great beast, rubbing soothingly at his neck as she glared down at Canus.

"If I'd fallen off it would have been all your fault," she snipped at him.

"Sorry, snowbird, but I caught your scent and wondered what you were doing all the way out here?" Canus said by way of apology.

"We're headed to the Gates of Death," Alfre said. "I wanted to raid a dungeon and Spica suggested it."

Canus ears folded back against his head. "Be careful, snowbird. Abital isn't fond of you Fell storming his throne room."

"Abital? Is that his name?"

"Yeah, I suppose you could call him my brother, though to my knowledge we share no blood," he explained. "Orli likes us to play like family."

"Orli?"

"The Wonderland goddess of light and life and the daytime and all that sort of stuff," Elias called from his mount a few feet in front of her. "Abital's opposite in every way. The Wonerlanders love her."

"She's alright," Canus said with as much of a shrug as a wolf could pull off. "Bit up her own ass sometimes, but it's not like she's a bad person. Just lets the attention get to her."

Alfre hummed in acknowledgement, unsure what to say to that. Canus stared up at her, nudging at her foot with his nose.

"Use my gift when you're there," he said, half an order and half a suggestion. "You haven't yet. I want you to see the wolf I chose for you. Plus, it'll show that prick that you're under my watch."

Alfre chuckled, leaning down to run her hands through his fur quickly. "I'll do just that."

The entrance to the dungeon lived up to its name. It gaped at them like a maw, stalactites hanging down precariously from the ceiling as cold wind howled about the opening, making it sound like the mountain itself was moaning. They could see nothing beyond the first few feet, darkness consuming the cave. The elk bleated and fussed, pulling at their reigns.

“What the hell are we going to do with them?” Alfre asked. “We can’t take them into the dungeon, can we?”

“Not like they’d go even if we wanted them to,” Spica muttered.

“We’ll tie them to one of those stalagmites at the entrance, get them out of the wind,” Elias decided. “Hopefully they’ll still be here when we come back.”

They left the elk at the entrance of the cave, which was about as far as they could drag them in anyway. They were out of the wind, at least. Alfre dumped some feed out for them before they walked off, because she had no idea how long this would take them, and she couldn’t stand the idea of the poor things going hungry.

They ran into bats first, lots of them. They were small at first, speedy and a pain to get rid of. The farther in they went, the larger they became, slower but with more hit points. Alfre didn’t know which ones she found more annoying. Spica, being a vampire, was ignored by the things, which Elias protested was entirely unfair. Alfre felt a good deal of sympathy for him, considering the bats seemed to really like his ears.

Next came the skeletons. Alfre hated skeletons. Her rapier was a thrusting weapon, and there was nothing to thrust into with skeletons. With no circulatory system to carry her poisons, Spica was similarly useless. Elias had to simply blow them to bits with the few attack spells he had.

Farther in were ghouls. Alfre could handle the ghouls. They were slow, with just enough meat on them that she could sink her rapier in and do some real damage. She especially liked planting a small seed of ice that a few seconds later would explode like a grenade, expanding and shooting out of the ghoul’s body in crystalline spikes. Minimum effort, maximum results.

Finally, there were the hellhounds. Nasty, two headed beasts with eyes and mouths the glowed red and fangs too big for their jaws. They reminded her of Canus’ direwolves in a way. They were smaller, though, and meaner. She was tempted to summon her companion with the Direwolf Pipe, but she held off. She wasn’t sure if there was a time limit, or if the wolf would run off if ran out of hit

points. No, they were going to need all the help they could get with the dungeon boss; she'd wait until then.

She growled at the hellhound that snapped at her with its two heads. She kicked at it, her foot landing right in the gap between the hound's two necks. It whimpered as it flew back and rolled across the cold cave floor and for a moment Alfre felt bad. But then it got up and shot a dark, purplish-red fireball at her and she felt better about kicking the damn thing. Spica melted out of the shadows and slashed at the hound with a dagger that Alfre didn't remember her having.

"What, no poison needles?" Alfre asked, a joking lit to her tone. "And here I thought you were a ninja."

"Poisons don't work great on the undead, darling," the assassin corrected gently. "Better to save my supply for the big bad at the end of the cave then waste it here where they'll have minimal effect."

Alfre shrugged, ducking under a swipe of the hellhound's paw. "Fair enough."

They had to stop after the wave of hellhounds, ducking into a small alcove in the cave where low and behold, they found a small chest. Inside was a fairly large bag of gold and a new dagger for Spica.

"This one has plus ten percent chance of a crit against the undead," Elias pointed out.

"How convenient, give us a thing we need when we're more than halfway through the damn dungeon," Spica grumbled.

"What can I say, game developers are dicks sometimes."

They rested, drinking down health potions that tasted like watered down, sugarless tea. Alfre missed Izo and his healing spells. She also missed Traveler and her seemingly endless supply of weapons she could use in any situation. Mostly she missed Traveler's guns. Those were convenient. Especially that elemental sniper rifle she was so fond of using. At least Spica and Elias had stuck around. She didn't want to think about adventuring without them.

With their breaths caught and their bodies aching less, they continued on. There were more hellhounds waiting for them, until there weren't. The last few meters of the cave were eerily quiet and devoid of any mobs. It got warmer as they went as well. They downed another round of health potions.

There was light at the end of the cave, faint and flickering like fire. They came upon a large, ornate archway, carved from the dark, shiny stone that made up the rest of the cave. It was deceptively pretty, considering where they were. Alfre

peeked into the room just beyond. It was large and round, and it was indeed ringed with fire to illuminate it. The fire reflected in pillars of different colored gemstones, some red, some purple, some sickly green, and others still pure white. At the opposite side of the archway sat a throne, and in that throne sat a man. He didn't seem much larger than a normal person, but then again Canus wasn't much taller than Elias was.

The man dressed in robes of red and black and white. His hair was long and tangled and fell in a way that hid his face in shadows from the way he rested his face in the palm of his hand. His whole posture seemed melancholy and Alfre felt a pang of sympathy for the man before her.

"Well, now or never, I suppose," Elias muttered.

Alfre and Spica nodded, and the three stepped into the room. The man – the god – before them looked up at them, and Alfre caught sight of his dark red eyes, shuddering as their gazes met. She reached inside her coat and pulled the Direwolf Pipe from her pocket. With trembling hands she brought it to her lips and blew. A clear, high tone filled the air. The god (Abital, Alfre reminded herself) raised a thin brow at the action, his eyes flickering to the archway as the howl of a wolf came echoing through the cave. A beautiful, silvery white wolf came bounding into the chamber, coming to a stop at Alfre's side. It looked up at her expectantly, dark eyes wide and excited. Alfre extended her hand absently and ran her fingers through its soft fur.

Abital's eyes widened minutely, his mouth opening in surprise before his face returned to its original despondent expression. He looked away, his hair casting shadows on his face again. He still hadn't attacked them yet. Why hadn't he attacked them? They'd stepped into his chamber, hell they were already half way across the room. Why wasn't he attacking? What kind of dungeon boss was he?

And why did he look so sad?

Elias frowned and tossed a fireball at Abital. The fireball exploded at his feet. Abital raised his eyes once more, a look of melancholy acceptance in his eyes, and lifted his hand from the arm of his throne. A dark beam of black and red magic shot from his finger tips. Alfre bolted, her wolf hot on her heels, skidding to a stop a few meters away from where the beam had landed. Spica had jumped back several feet, a hiss falling from her lips. She hadn't quite managed to dodge the magic completely. Her leg had been caught in it. Magic damage always stung like a bitch and Abital's was no exception. Elias hadn't moved from his spot, a shield he'd thrown up protecting him from the worst of the damage.

Abital lowered his hand again. Alfre didn't understand. He'd attacked finally, like any mob should, but why did he stop? Why had he only attacked when Elias attacked? What was going on?

Spica swam through the shadows, melting back into sight once she was within range of her opponent. She threw her poisoned needles, striking Abital in the hand. The god flinched, raising his hand to peer at the needles sticking out of his hand. He frowned a little more deeply, shaking his hand to shake the needles free. He sent another bolt of energy at Spica, who disappeared back into the shadows and reappeared beside Elias some distance away.

Alfre's direwolf whined at her, stomping at the ground anxiously. She'd summoned it, but she wasn't letting it do its job. Alfre petted at its head, shushing it with soft coos. She wanted to understand what was happening. Elias and Spica looked just as frustrated as she felt. If only Canus was here, Alfre thought, then maybe he could explain what was wrong with Abital.

Alfre blinked. Wait. She saw the problem now. There wasn't anything wrong with Abital. The problem was with them!

"Wait!" she shouted, catching her party members' attention. "Don't attack him!"

"Why the hell not?" Spica demanded.

Alfre sent her a look that begged the assassin to trust her. She walked slowly out into the middle of the chamber, facing Abital with hands up in a gesture of peace.

"You're Abital, right? That's your name?"

Abital blinked owlishly at her. When he spoke, his voice rasped like it hadn't been used in a long time. It was deep and gravely, totally different from the light and breezy tone Canus' voice had. "Yes. How did you know, little Fell?"

"Canus told me," Alfre explained. "Told me a bit about you actually."

"Yes, it would seem the wolf blood is fond of you," Abital murmured. "He sent his favorite to you, after all." He gestured at the white direwolf that stood pressed up against Alfre's side. "How did you come to be in such good favor with him?"

"Ah, well..." Alfre laughed as she stumbled over her words. "It's kind of a long story."

Abital shrugged, a tiny smile tugging at his lips. "That's alright. I am fond of stories."

Alfre swallowed thickly, her heartbeat kicking up at the sight of Abital's smile. He had a nice one, not as wild as Canus' grin, but sweet and a little shy. Like he didn't get to smile very often. "Um, sure. Okay. Well, what happened was..."

She regaled the guardian of the underworld with the tale of Canus' murdered wolf and her resolve to find the poacher that had stolen not only the wolf's life but also its pelt. She patted at her coat when she mentioned how Canus had given her the pelt when it had been retrieved from the hunter as a thank you, and how the pipe had been a birthday gift.

"And, uh, that's when we met up with him on the way here," Alfre finished. "And he told us your name."

"But knowing my name does not explain why you did not attempt to injure me like other Fell," Abital mused.

Alfre shrugged helplessly. "It didn't seem right to. No one should have to fight if they don't want to."

Abital tilted his head curiously. "You are a strange Fell."

"So I've been told," Alfre said with another shrug.

Abital smiled again, a little wider this time. "Thank you, little one, for telling me your story."

"Oh, um." Alfre felt her cheeks heat up. "You're welcome. Uh, if you want, I have lots of other stories. You can visit me sometime and hear more of them. Do you eat? Our friend Wally makes really good food. You could, idunno, come over for dinner?"

"Did she seriously just invite the god of the dead over for dinner?" Spica muttered incredulously.

Abital thought for a moment, then nodded. "I would like that, little one."

"Alfre. My name is Alfre."

"Alfre," Abital repeated, looking thoughtful as he tested how the name felt on his tongue. "It is a good name."

"People around here don't use it very often. They like giving me nicknames."

"Don't complain, darling, it means they like you."

Alfre shushed Spica over her shoulder, noting with no small amount of regret the amused looks on her and Elias' faces. Oh, she was never going to live this scenario down.

"And what does wolf blood call you?"

Alfre avoided looking at Abital. "Snowbird."

If Alfre didn't know any better, she'd say that Abital's eye twitched at the admission. "I think I prefer Alfre."

She let out a tiny snort of a laugh. Because honestly what could she say to that? Abital stood from his throne and stepped down from the small dais to stand before her. He made some strange, arcane gestures with his hands and several items winked into existence around him.

"Normally, a Fell defeats me to gain these items," Abital said. "But for you, they are a gift. Thank you, Alfre, for your kindness."

The heavy looking sack of gold settled at her feet. The dark cloak wrapped around her shoulders, spilling black, smoky wisps about her feet. Finally, a tall, dangerously sharp halberd practically fell into her hands, her fingers wrapping tightly around the woven white leather that covered the shaft of the polearm. She could feel her Winter resonate and sing along the blade.

"Thank you," Alfre murmured dumbly, unsure of what else to say.

"I am looking forward to that dinner," Abital said, and Alfre swore she heard a laugh in his voice.

"R-right," Alfre stuttered. "Um...see you later? I guess."

"Yes, I shall see you soon."

Alfre stood dumbfounded, rooted to her spot until Spica took pity on her and dragged her away. Her direwolf companion (she really needed to figure out if it had a name, and give it one if it didn't already have one) trotted after her, smiling a wolfy smile at her.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Elias waited until they were nearly to the entrance of the dungeon before saying anything.

“What on earth was *that*?!” He shouted, his voice pitched up in something (Alfre assumed it was barely contained panic).

“Honestly, I have no idea,” Alfre admitted. “He just seemed kinda sad and he wasn’t acting like the Briarwood Howler did. Something was wrong, and I eventually figured out what it was.”

“And what’s that?” Elias asked, calmer this time.

“We were treating him like a monster instead of a person,” Alfre said, watching the surprise play over Elias and Spica’s faces. “He’s probably really lonely down there, with no one to keep him company. And when people do come, it’s to fight him. If I lived that kind of life, I’d want someone to just sit down and talk to me too.”

Elias nodded in understanding. “We were treating it like a game still. Game mechanics may have carried over, but the Wonderlanders are living, breathing people now. And that includes their gods.”

“Are we just going to ignore the fact that Alfre now has three Wonderlander boyfriends following her about?” Spica queried, looking far too amused for Alfre’s tastes. “Two of which are gods?”

“They’re not my boyfriends,” Alfre corrected.

“Are you sure?” Spica teased. “I mean, the god of the underworld just gave you the Cloak of Night’s Shadow and the best halberd in the game just for telling him a story.”

Alfre felt the heat crawling up her neck. It wasn’t her fault Wonderlanders liked her! And it certainly wasn’t her fault that Canus and Abital liked giving her things. She was just nice to them and they wanted to repay that kindness. Same with Wally! So what if they all happened to be cute boys with nice smiles and...

Alfre shook that thought from her head, deciding it was best if she changed the subject. “Speaking of the halberd...my Winter likes it, like it likes my rapiers. What does that mean?”

“Elemental blades have two weapons each class can use their magic with,” Elias explained as he untied the elk from the stalagmite. “Summer blades get katanas and hidden weapons like throwing knives and shuriken. Spring blades have broadswords and axes. Autumn blades can use scimitars and battle fans. Winter blades like you have rapiers and polearms. You know, spears, lances, the like.”

“I see,” Alfre murmured, looking over the halberd in her hand. “Seems like a pain to carry around, though.”

“I’d keep it anyway,” Spica advised. “You could use some range.”

Alfre grumbled some nonsense about showing Spica range as she mounted her elk. She looked down at her wolf. “You coming with us, pup?”

The wolf made a ‘wuff’ noise and settled beside Alfre’s elk, which looked...not exactly unhappy with the situation but it certainly wasn’t pleased either.

The elk seemed more than happy to push it if it meant getting as far away from the Gates of Death as they could that first day. By the dawn of the second day of travel Alfre was starting to wonder how long her wolf was going to stick around. She didn’t mind it being there, but she was starting to get curious. Most summoners could only call forth a monster for so long, if the monster didn’t get its hit points wiped out first. Was the magic of the pipe different because it came from a god? She couldn’t be sure.

She still didn’t know if it had a name, or whether it was a boy or a girl. She felt bad calling it ‘it’ in her head the whole time. But when Canus didn’t appear during their journey through the Wilds, she started to get concerned. Usually she couldn’t step foot in the Wilds without Canus coming to see her. Maybe he found someone else to visit. Alfre’s hands tightened on her reigns at the idea. It would be good for Canus to have friends other than herself, of course. She knew that. But she couldn’t shake the feeling that she really didn’t want that to be what was actually going on. Her wolf nudged at her foot in the stirrup of the saddle, somehow noticing something was wrong. She reached down to pat reassuringly at its head. The wolf gave her a look that clearly said it didn’t buy it for one bit. Alfre decided then and there that the dumb wolf was too smart for its own good.

Chapter Twenty-Four

They got stares as they wandered through the City of Spade after returning their elk to the livery stable where they'd been rented. Well, to be fair, Alfre was the one receiving the stares. Alfre had to admit, of all the things she'd seen since the Incident, a tiny woman walking around in a black cloak that spilled shadows out the bottom and a giant wolf by their side had not been one of them. The halberd strapped to her back probably didn't help. Spica was very good at ignoring the stares, but she got odd looks all the time. Perks of being pretty, Alfre assumed (not that she'd know, all the stares she tended to get where because of her height). Elias, however, ducked his head and tucked his ears down, trying very hard not to meet anyone's eye.

A rather panicked looking Wallace greeted them when they returned home. "Welcome back Miss Alfre, Miss Spica, Mister Elias. Um...Miss Alfre, you might want to see this."

"See what?" Alfre asked, taking off her cloak and the direwolf coat that she was so used to wearing she hadn't even thought to take it off when wearing the Cloak of Night's Shadow.

Wallace waited for her to hang her outerwear up before taking her by the hand and leading her into the main floor's lounge. There, on the dark brown couch that Alfre found herself falling asleep on more often than not, was Canus, napping away.

"He showed up the other day, demanding to know if you'd returned from the dungeon yet," Wallace explained in a hurried whisper. "When I told him you hadn't, he insisted that he'd wait for you. I-I didn't know what to do! What kind of food am I supposed to make for a god?! Do they even eat?"

"I don't know, but you'll be finding out sooner or later," Alfre said with a laugh. "Cause I might have invited Abital for dinner."

Wallace paled, his freckles standing out even more on his face. "You did WHAT?!"

Wallace's loud squeak roused Canus, the wolf god snorting like a pup and grumbling as he rolled onto his side. Alfre walked around the couch to crouch in front of him, her wolf following dutifully. Canus opened his too green eyes just enough to peer at her.

"You're back," he murmured sleepily.

“I am,” she replied, reaching up to scratch at the spot at the base of his ears that she knew the direwolves loved. It only made sense that he’d love it, too. His eyes closed again, a hum starting up in his throat that Alfre equated to the Canus version of purring. “You gave Wally quite the scare, showing up like that. I’d wondered where you’d gone. I’ve been meaning to ask you something.”

His eyes blinked open, more focused than before. “What?”

Alfre jerked her head in the direction of her wolf. “What’s this one’s name? I feel bad not knowing it.”

“I called her Beira. She’s the only pup ever born in winter.”

Alfre smiled. “Beira. It’s a good name. Someone important where I’m from is named Beira.”

Canus’ ears twitched at that. “Who?”

Alfre glanced up, noticing that Wally had stepped further into the room, Spica and Elias just on the other side of the doorway. They seemed curious.

“Beira, Queen of Winter, was the mother of the gods,” Alfre said quietly, almost as if she was telling a child a bedtime story. “She rules the earth between Samhainn and Bealtainn and with her magic hammer created the mountains of Scotland.”

“Scotland,” Wally echoed. “Is that where you’re from, Miss Alfre?”

Alfre nodded, feeling her throat tighten up like it always did before she started crying. She hadn’t talked about her home much with anyone since the Incident. She didn’t want to think too hard about it, just in case she never went back.

“It must be a wonderful place, if it made someone like you.”

Alfre’s breath hitched, she could already feel the tears prickling at the corners of her eyes. “It is. I’d love to show you all some day. The glens and the lochs. You’d love my cousin’s farm. She’s got the cutest hairy coos you’ve ever seen. Right sweet buggers, those fuzzy bastards.”

“Ah, don’t cry snowbird,” Canus sat up, reaching out to wipe away her tears. “I’m sure you’ll see your home again someday. You Fell always leave eventually...”

Some new sadness gripped her heart at the defeated tone of Canus’ words. She...she didn’t want to go home if that meant leaving them all behind. God knew where Elias and Spica lived, or if she could ever find them again if they went

home. She knew nothing about Doremi or June. She had no idea where Izo or Ren and Ran or Silver lived in the 'real world'. Atticus and Lance were just as much of a mystery as everyone else. If she went home, she'd lose them all. But mostly, she'd lose Canus and Wally and Abital. These new wonderful friends that she only had because the game had become real. She'd never be able to ask Alessio for that favor he swore he owed them. She missed her old home, yes, but she'd never be able to go back if it meant sacrificing her new one.

"What have you done now, wolf blood?"

Alfre whipped around to see Abital standing in the corner of the room, a dark portal of smoke and shadow closing behind him. His red eyes were trained on Canus, cold and displeased. Wallace gasped behind her and Alfre could practically hear his shaking.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Canus snarled, baring his too sharp teeth.

"I come to collect on the dinner Alfre so kindly offered me only to find her crying at your feet," Abital drawled coldly. "You can only imagine how this looks on my end."

Canus' jaw dropped and he turned back to stare at Alfre. "You did WHAT?"

Alfre snorted and burst out into laughter. "Th-that's what Wallace said!"

"Alfre is very kind," Abital informed Canus smugly. "Far kinder than any other Fell I've met yet. She must have invited you to dinner as well, yes? I can see no other reason why you'd be here."

Canus' ears drooped as he hit Alfre with the most pathetic looking puppy dog eyes she'd seen yet. He could easily give Wallace a run for his money.

"You'd show up even if I didn't invite you to dinner, Canus," Alfre reminded him.

Abital frowned. "That's very rude, Canus, you should only show up when invited."

"Oh, I don't mind," Alfre insisted, standing up fully. "I like the surprise visits. Brightens my day. You're welcome to visit any time as well. Seems only fair."

"Alfre, please don't invite the god of the underworld to show up randomly at our guildhall," Spica drawled. "People will get the wrong idea."

Alfre looked at her over her shoulder, a confused pout on her lips. “What do you mean?”

“They might think we have a murder dungeon in our basement,” Elias grumbled lightly.

Alfre’s brows furrowed as her confusion grew. “But we don’t have a basement.”

Spica and Elias stared at her, sapphire blue and ruby red eyes incredulous.

Alfre shrugged.

Wally was still not over his panic. “The god of the underworld is in our living room. The god of the underworld has come for dinner. The god of the Wilds has been crashing on the couch for days and is also staying for dinner. What is my life? How did it come to this? What is my life?”

“You alright there, Wally?” Alfre asked.

“Peachy, Miss Alfre,” Wally muttered blankly. “Just wondering what the divine usually have for dinner.”

“Fresh venison,” Canus offered.

“I am fond of summer berry wine,” Abital said with a shrug. “Though I do not do much eating. It is not required, though I do enjoy the taste of food sometimes.”

“You don’t need to eat real food because you devour souls,” Canus quipped.

Abital scowled. “That is a lie and you know it. Stop scaring the Wonderlander.”

The wolf god gave a bark of a laugh, trotting off after Wally as the poor boy wandered robotically into the kitchen. Beira loped after him, smiling a wolfy smile. Alfre shook her head, trying and failing to keep the fond smile off her face. She turned to Abital, who looked like he was pouting.

“I’m glad you came,” she told him. “Though I didn’t expect it to be so soon.”

His pout fell into a true frown. “I...do not have many friends. And after meeting you, I found that once you have made a friend, it is easy to get lonely without them.”

Alfre nodded understandingly. “I know the feeling. Like I said, you’re welcome to visit anytime. I can’t promise we’ll be here, but if we are, we’d be happy to talk.”

Dinner was, as it turned out, not venison but mutton. Wally had been saving it for when the party returned from their quest, whether as a pick-me-up after a failure or as a celebratory dinner should it have been a success. He admitted that he hadn't expected guests, but had simply bought extra because the kind dwarf girl who'd sold them to him had given him a good deal. His unintentional foresight, however, meant there was enough for everyone.

Abital did not speak much during dinner, letting Canus dominate the conversation, as the god of the Wilds was wont to do sometimes. When Alfre glanced his way, however, he flashed her a smile, which she returned with a pleased grin. He seemed to relax when Spica brought out a bottle of rosé from the tiny wine 'cellar' that was little more than an extension of the pantry. It turned out his fondness for traditional Wonderlander summer berry wine extended to most any kind of sweet wine. Wally looked like he was going to have a heart attack when, after his third or fourth glass of wine, Abital burst into laughter as Elias told a story of his early years playing Wonderland.

"Good to see that even you have a sense of humor, soul eater," Canus shouted with a laugh.

"I've always had a sense of humor, wolf blood," Abital replied, swirling the wine in his glass. "Your jokes have just never been particularly good."

"Burn!" Alfre shouted, startling Beira who lay at her feet.

"And that's the last glass for you, darling," Spica muttered, snatching the scotch glass from Alfre's hand, ignoring the girl's loud protest.

"Ah, I'd be careful if I were you, Spica," Elias warned. "You just took a Scotswoman's alcohol from her. She's still armed you know."

"Perhaps, but so am I, magician," Spica reminded with a smile, leaning closer to his face than was purely necessary.

"Ahhh," Canus sighed, standing up from his position on a particularly large throw pillow by the fire. "I should probably head out. Things to do, Wilds to patrol. You know how it is, don't you snowbird?"

"Aye, I know," Alfre replied with a sleepy smile. "You be careful out there. You've had just as much scotch as I have."

He grinned wolfishly. "True, but I'm also twice as big as you."

"Rude!" Alfre tossed a pillow at him. "If ya gonna be like that, you can leave."

“Alright, alright, I’m going,” he said, laughing and holding up his hands in surrender. As he passed by he gave Beira a pat and bent down to nuzzle at Alfre’s hair. “Sleep well, snowbird.”

“I would say the same to you, but I doubt you’ll be doing much sleeping tonight.”

Abital watched Canus leave, a curious frown on his face. Once the door had clicked shut, echoing in the mostly empty foyer, he turned back to Alfre, who shared the couch with him. The swordswoman’s frosty blue eyes were drooping as she stared at the smoldering fire.

“Are you tired, Alfre?” he asked, his voice soft. He didn’t fail to notice Spica herding Elias and Wally out of the room with murmurs of cleaning the kitchen and putting the booze away.

Alfre hummed, scratching at her neck absently. Abital took that as a yes and stood, the supposed effects of the alcohol sliding off him. His eyes were bright and his movements steady, contrasting the lax way he’d been behaving before. He leaned down to gather Alfre into his arms, marveling at how tiny she felt cradled in them. How a woman so small and yet so powerful could exist in this world was beyond his comprehension. He tucked her close to his chest as he climbed the stairs, feeling out the residue of Alfre’s soul in the building. It felt cold, but soft, like fresh fallen snow. He followed its path, seeing where Alfre spent her days in the guildhall. He could feel the others’ as well. Wallace’s like grass stains on callused hands; Spica’s like the metallic taste of blood on the tongue; Elias’ like the nervous energy of someone expecting company. He liked this place, he decided. He wanted to spend more time here, in this good place filled with good people with good souls.

He found Alfre’s room, Beira nosing open the door that had been left slightly ajar for him. She gripped the blanket and sheet gently in her teeth and tugged them back for him, so he could lay Alfre down. The sheets were soft, a white color that seemed grey in comparison to her hair. He drew up her covers, brushing her hair from her face, letting his fingers linger on her cheek as he did. Beira huffed at him, giving him a look that was far too knowing for his taste. Damn Canus and his wolves, they were too smart for their own good.

He spared Alfre one last glance and a whispered ‘good night’ before slipping out her door and through a portal of smoke and shadow back to his dark and lonely throne room.

Chapter Twenty-Five

There was a letter waiting for Alfre the next morning when she awoke. She stared at the elegant font on the envelope, hardly recognizing Ren's name in such a fancy script. It certainly wasn't Ren's handwriting. She'd seen Ren's signature before, and it didn't look like this. She must have gotten a scribe, lazy ass. She tore open the envelope, unfolding the letter tucked inside. Her eyes slid over the words before her, written in a much easier to read print – Ren's actual handwriting.

“What does it say?” Elias asked, passing Spica her morning coffee (black, easiest cup to make in the morning).

“Apparently, when Ren left with her guild, she made everyone on the council agree that she could choose who took over her seat,” Alfre informed them, continuing to read over the letter. “And now that we've established ourselves, she wants us to take over. Especially since there's something important she needs to inform us of.”

“Something important?” Spica echoed. “And she couldn't just put it in the letter?”

“I guess she only want to have to say it once,” Alfre said. She wondered what it could be. Did it have something to do with the intercontinental communications project her guild had taken on? Had they finally heard back?

“I assume this means she's called a meeting,” Elias guessed, his ears twitching nervously.

Alfre gave a hum of agreement. “They'll be here at the end of the week. Though it's important enough that she wishes we had ‘trains or something’ in the game to make travel easier.”

He frowned. “But she loves riding the elk...”

“Not right now, she doesn't,” Alfre muttered.

Alfre called on June and Atticus, trying to figure out if they'd heard anything else from Ren about the meeting.

“We got letters a few days ago,” June said. “She asked us to support you when you take up the position on the council. And that something bad is happening in Ahmar.”

“You haven’t heard about it?” Elias asked, sounding concerned. “But I thought you were part of the intercontinental communications project.”

“I am, but we split the workload between a few of us,” June informed him. “My guild’s been in charge of creating lines of communication with Berdea. And Wall Street Spade has been in charge of contacting Kowhai. When we split up the work, Ran offered to take up contact with Ahmar. He’s been continuing to work on it with the Crystal Moon Kingdom even after they left the city.”

“Have you had any success with establishing lines of communication?” Alfre asked, hands clasped on the table before her, looking to June all the more like a guild leader than she’d expected.

“Yes, to varying degrees of success. Berdea is, by design as the southern continent, the farthest away from Siniy. Maldrom’s had more success with Kowhai. He’s used a combination of summons and teleportation spells. Both have limits, you know, teleports can only go so far and summons can only hang around for so long. He lost a few messages in the ocean the first few times. I hadn’t known what sort of system Ran had been using, or what the success rate was.”

“What had you been doing?”

June looked a little sheepish. “Paying Wonderlanders to carry messages for me. I think the establishment of a post office using Wonderlanders might be a good idea. But the process of sending a message that way is long, and fairly arduous. As I’m sure you can imagine.”

“If you were going to use Wonderlanders, you’d need more advanced methods of transportation,” Spica pointed out. “Even something like a single engine propeller plane would be better than elk back or sail boat.”

June and Atticus nodded.

“That’s why we’ve got some engineers in the Public Works Committee working on designs for new modes of transportation,” Atticus said. “We have a power source here we never had in the real world.”

“Magic?” Alfre guessed.

Atticus nodded again. “Even the most basic engine running on magic would be far more efficient and clean than any steam engine back home.”

Spica raised a thin brow. “Steam engines? Why work with something so rudimentary?”

“Because it’s so rudimentary,” Atticus explained. “It’s easier to build and work out the math on steam engines than anything more advanced. We may have magic, but everything else here is early Industrial at best.”

Alfre sat back and crossed her arms over her chest. “So you’ve had some success with communication. Do you know if the other continents have heard anything from Ahmar?”

June shook her head. “They’re all trying to perfect their communication strategies with us before they try anything else. Right now, we’re the information hub.”

“And yet we have no idea what’s going on with a quarter of the world’s Fell population,” Alfre muttered, running a hand down her face. “Ran, what are you doing?”

“More than that.” Alfre looked up at Elias when he spoke. “Ahmar is the largest continent, and its Fell city, the City of Heart, has the highest population of the entire game. We’re not missing communication with a fourth of the Fell, we’re missing communication with half.”

Alfre sighed. “Well that’s doubly not good, then. Ran, you bawbag. If this is the extent of your communication skills with your friends, I hate to see how well you communicate with your boyfriend.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

The meeting came sooner than Alfre expected. Eyes were on her as she marched into the same room the first meeting had been held in, though the table in the center was a little smaller than it used to be. She marched in confidently, shoulders thrown back and direwolf coat billowing out behind her. Beira trotted along at her side, Elias and Spica just behind her. The three seats meant for Ren and her seconds were empty between Doremi and Lance. Standing at the opposite end of the seats was Ren, Silver and Ran flanking her like they always did. Alfre held her eyes as she took the seat that used to belong to the queen. Ren smirked at her.

There was the loud clattering of chairs being thrown back and the yelps of surprised council members as two more guests entered the room. Alfre turned to look over her shoulder, catching Abital and Canus' gazes. She smiled at them and motioned for them to come closer.

"I hope you all don't mind that I invited a few friends to this meeting," she said casually to the other council members. "I figured they might be able to give us some insight into what's going on else where in the world." She turned to stare Ran down. "That is what this is about, right? You're finally deciding to share with us your communications with the Fell of Ahmar?"

Ran shifted uncomfortably, obviously ashamed at being called out. "That's right. Something has come to my attention through my communications with a friend of mine in Ahmar, and I think the council needs to hear about it. Since this affects us all."

Alfre leaned forward, steepling her fingers like Ren had done during the meeting that had founded this very council. Every eye in the room turned to Ran, who looked uncomfortable, though not because of the stares. No, something else was bothering him.

He inhaled deeply, pulling out a small stack of papers and laying them on the table. "As some of you know, when the intercontinental communications initiative was established, it was decided that three different guilds would be in charge of establishing communication with one of the three other continents. Sweet Summer Children was to establish lines of communications with Berdea in the south, Wall Street Spade with Kowhai in the west, and Crystal Moon Kingdom with Ahmar in the east. We have been somewhat successful, though I didn't want to share our methods until I was one hundred percent happy with their efficiency and reliability. But now, I see no other choice.

He sighed heavily, his shoulders sagging and a deep frown Alfre had never seen before tugging at his lips. "The City of Heart has fallen."

Heavy silence fell on the room before it exploded into chaos. Everyone was shouting, asking questions, demanding explanations. Beira whined, tucking her tail about her paws and attempting to hide her head in Alfre's lap. Alfre carded her fingers through the direwolf's fur soothingly. She watched as Ran let the shouts wash over him, his brows furrowed and his shoulders so tense they were shaking. Everyone was so loud he couldn't hear any one individual's questions.

"ENOUGH!"

The room grew silent even as it echoed with Ren's voice. She glared them all down, golden eyes flashing dangerously. Alfre wondered absently if that was the last thing monsters saw when they met Ren on the battlefield.

"Let my brother speak!" she commanded. "Maybe then you'd get your answers."

Ran sent his sister a small, thankful smile. His expression fell grim once more as he addressed the council. "According to a friend of mine that I'd been writing to during the experiment, tensions between the Wonderlanders and the Fell were far more...evident there than they are here. Ahmar is far more heavily populated with Wonderlanders, after all, given how large it is and how much of it is farmable prairie land. There had been...confrontations between the Fell and the largest of Ahmar's Wonderlander kingdoms. The last confrontation...led to a war of a kind. The City of Heart doesn't have the same defenses as the other Fell cities. We have our walls and the cliffs to deter invaders. Clover is built in the middle of a delta and is more maze than city. Diamond's valley is easily defensible, and their river makes evacuation easy. Heart doesn't have any of that, save for it's many rings of walls."

"I don't understand, Wonderlanders don't respawn," the rabbit familiar, Cherry, spoke up. "How were they able to defeat the Fell?"

Ran grimaced. "Because Fell helped them."

"WHAT?!"

"That's impossible!"

"You must be joking! Tell me your joking!"

Alfre tugged at Abital's robes. He bent down so she could whisper in his ear. He nodded silently and slipped from the room through a portal. She turned back to the table, listening to the shouting of the council members. None of them seemed

to be able to comprehend that players would turn on each other; as if they had forgotten the days when bandits would kill any player they stumbled across. And really, toppling a regime was something Fell had done before. It'd been the first major quest that Alfre had ever been on. True, Alessio had been the proper ruler, but she still brought down a monarch. It would make even more sense if Heart had remained divided like Siniy had once been.

She felt the hairs stand up on the back of her neck as Abital returned through a portal of smoke and shadow. Cherry squeaked at his sudden returned, earning him the attention of the other council members.

"It is true," he informed them gravely. "The Fell city has been ransacked, the outer two rings are burning and the people are fleeing. I do not know where they expect to go. There are few kingdoms on Ahmar who would go against the Granato Empire."

Hunter turned to Ran. "What exactly do you expect us to do?"

"There are people running, scared for their lives," Ran said slowly. "We...we need to be prepared for the possibility that they might come here."

One of the knights with Hunter slammed his fist down on the table. "No way! What if one of the Fell that helped the Wonderlanders comes in with them? We could be opening ourselves up to invasion."

"If they sold out their own people, who's to say they won't sell us out too?" Maldrom, the dwarf who ran the Wall Street Spade guild, joined in the panic.

"They should stay and fight for their city," Hunter argued. "Not go running off the moment something bad happens."

"You're all being selfish bastards, you know that?" Atticus snapped, his eyes blazing. "These are people, people who are scared with no where to go. How would you feel if you had lost everything but the clothes on your back and when you asked for help you were turned away? Why the hell would the Fell who helped take down the city want to come to Siniy? They're probably living it up with whatever spoils the Garnato Empire promised them. The people who would be coming to us would be those most devastated by the invasion: the low-level and the guildless. We have plenty of room in the city; half the available guildhalls are empty. This city was meant to hold far more Fell than are currently living here. We can offer them shelter."

"And we can offer them something else," Alfre spoke up, eyes flickering from Atticus to her.

"And what's that, Alfre?" June asked.

“An army.”

Chatter once again rose up around the table. Ren barked at everyone to shut up, and they did.

“We give them shelter, help them get back on their feet,” Alfre said, her voice strong and determined. “And then, when the time is right, we help them take back their city.”

“That’s a tall order, shorty,” Hunter grumbled. “Why should we risk our necks to get them their city back?”

“You mean other than it’s the right thing to do, you pompous bampot?” Alfre snapped. “Because the only way to fight Fell is with Fell. A bunch of assholes used their power to bully those weaker than them, just like the bandits did when the Incident was still new. Like you lot did when you kept the new players locked away in your guilds and used them like slave labor. Because helping them take back their city is the first step to making sure this never happens again.”

The table was silent, each council member meditating on her words. Alfre was right; she knew she was. They had to see that. Didn’t they?

Finally, Ludovico Volpe spoke. “We’ll need help.”

June nodded. “We’ve got steady communication with both Diamond and Clover. I’ve got lots of friends in both cities. I’m sure they’ll help us.”

“We need to get more reliable communication going with them, though,” Maldrom grumbled. “It takes weeks to send a message and then get the reply back. Especially if it’s going to Berdea.”

“I can help with that,” Ran insisted. “We’ve had decent communication with Ahmar for a short while now. Having the resources of a kingdom behind you helps more than you know.”

“First thing to convince them to do is to take refugees,” Atticus reminded. “We can storm the castle after we get everyone who needs shelter out of there.”

“He’s right,” Alfre agreed. “But to move that many people that quickly...we’ll need something better than the fishing boats we’ve got lying around.”

A young dragonling girl next to Maldrom raised her hand. “We’ve almost got a prototype for the first arcane steam engine built. If it passes the tests well enough, we could start building steamboats. They aren’t the fastest ships, but

they're faster than sail boats and would hold more people. And now that we know how to build one, replicating it is easy."

"How fast can you finish it and get those tests done?" Ren asked.

The girl shrugged, her green scales shimmering in the light. "Two weeks? Maybe a month? Depends on if we have to do any tinkering on it."

"That's a long time..." Ran muttered.

"Would it be possible to replicate the engine now? If we had multiple engines to run the tests on, we might be able to get it done faster," Cherry suggested.

Maldrom crossed his arms and hummed thoughtfully. "It's possible. But it's taken us three months to build the engine we have now..."

"But that included the time necessary to design and figure out what materials you needed," June reminded. "You know what you're doing now, it should go faster."

The dwarf nodded. "We can give it a shot."

"What about getting the ships there and back?" the knight beside Hunter asked. "If the Wonderlanders there are so weary of Fell, there's no way they'll let boats run by us anywhere near the continent."

Alfre grinned. "I can take care of that. I have a Wonderlander prince who owes me a favor."

"But how are they going to explain taking ships there in the first place?" Lance asked. "There's no way we can just have them out and out say they're taking the Fell away."

"Hide it under the guise of a trade mission?" June suggested. "There must be something Siniy has that Ahmar doesn't."

"Lumber and ores," Ludovico answered. "Ahmar is prairieland and semiarid deserts. They don't have vast forests like Siniy and Berda have. And we have the mountains. They, at most, have really big hills they build their cities into. Send Alfre's friend with a few crates of gold and a couple of pallets of lumber. Create secret compartments under the deck to hide the Fell. Simple."

"Simple isn't the word I would use, but it's an idea, at least," Silver grumbled.

"What if they don't believe us? What if they attack the ship?" Panic was back in Cherry's voice as her mind swam with all the ways the mission could go wrong.

“Then we’ll send some of us with them, play it under the guise of a quest. If they attack, we’ll take care of it,” Hunter stated simply.

“Or, we can hide them, make it less obvious,” Ren amended. “If they see Fell right away, they’re likely to attack without asking questions. I like the secret compartments idea. We can build them into the ship’s cargo hold, yes? Hide the openings behind stacks of fake crates?”

Maldrom stroked his beard. “It’s a possibility. It might be tricky, though.”

“I thought you liked a good puzzle, old man,” June challenged, a wicked smirk on her face.

Maldrom smirked back. “Oh, I never said we couldn’t do it, child.”

“So we’ll hide the refugees in the cargo hold or below that in the engine room,” Ren reiterated. “And any Fell escorts that go with them can hide in empty crates or among the pallets on deck. Better for them to be up top if anything should happen. If it works well for us, we can send the designs to Berdea and Kowhai and have them run similar missions until everyone is out.”

“Or at least everyone we can get out is out,” Ran muttered. “We have to be prepared for at least some failure. There’s no way we can save everyone.”

“Why the hell not?”

All eyes were on Elias. Even Alfre was surprised that he spoke up when he did.

“What good are we as knights, as sorcerers, as healers, as PEOPLE if we don’t do everything we can to save them all?” Elias demanded. “We’re half way to gods in this world compared to the Wonderlanders, if we can’t pull miracles out of our asses then what use are the powers we’ve been given? I won’t accept this mentality of surrender before we even start. The Fell of Ahmar are counting on us. If we give up on ourselves before we even try, then how could we expect them to put their faith in us in the first place? Besides...that sure as hell doesn’t sound like the Ran I know. You’ve defeated a dragon before with only yourself, your sister, and your best friend. And a dragon is a hell of a lot scarier than a bunch of Wonderlanders and their pet Fell. And you’ve got every player on Siniy on your side. If you can’t save everyone with a literal army of demigods on your side, then maybe you should hand command over to someone who can.”

“Elias, there’s no one in the world that can pull a feat like that out of their ass,” Ran argued, sounding terribly tired all of sudden.

Canus let out a bark of a laugh beside Alfre as Abital chuckled quietly with a smirk. All eyes were on Alfre now, flanked as she was by two literal gods. Alfre glanced up at Canus and Abital with a look that screamed 'really? Did you have to do that?' and sighed.

"I have been known to pull bullshit solutions out of my ass every so often," she admitted.

"She befriended the god of the underworld," Spica said, a smirk playing on her red lips. "That's about as much of a miracle as one can expect."

"It's not a miracle if the solution is sitting down and talking," Alfre grumbled. "Which I have a feeling is half the issue Ahmar had."

Mutters rose up around the table once more. Hunter and his entourage eyed her warily. Cherry and her friends seemed unsure but mostly excited by the possibility. It wasn't very often Fell worked with the Wonderlander gods after all. Ludovico stared at her, a spark of curiosity in his eye. The minty haired elf maid that stood just behind his chair smiled in a sickeningly sweet manner.

"What do you say, Alfre?" Atticus asked. "Think you can handle the job."

One thin, snowy brow rose at the question. "The job's half done for me. We have the plan laid out for us already. All you need is someone who doesn't like giving up. And I'm a Scotswoman." Alfre grinned and the council members were taken aback by how much she looked like Ren in that moment. "Stubbornness runs in my veins."

Ran looked to his sister, seeming all the world like a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Perhaps, Alfre mused, he was so hesitant to put faith in the endeavor despite his experience was because he was used to this world being a game. If he failed, there were minimal consequences. Even if they failed a quest and died along the way, they would simply respawn in Spade with a few items missing from their inventory and a small chunk of experience points gone. A slap on the wrist really. But if any of the Fell in Ahmar died during the mission, they'd end up back in Heart, and more than likely captured by the Garnato Empire. Not something anyone wanted to happen. There were real consequences to failure here. Anyone who knew this world when it was fun would be hesitant to take on something this important.

But Alfre had never known this world as a game. It was always real for her. Maybe that was why he handed over the reigns to her so easily. Maybe that was why Ren had given her seat on the council to the Alliance of Frozen Stars, because if anyone was going to take this world seriously, it was Alfre.

“They’ll need a place to go in the meantime,” Silver said. “Someplace where they can gather safely that’s easy for us to find.”

“Tell them to go to my dungeons,” Canus offered. “My wolves will keep them safe.”

“You have dungeons on Ahmar?” Alfre tried not to sound too surprised.

Canus grinned. “I have dungeons everywhere, snowbird.”

“Is there one close to the shore?” Ren asked. “Someone get me a map.”

Doremi pulled out a large, intricately detailed map of the four continents. It spanned half the table, large enough for everyone to see. She dug out a few chess pieces to use as markers. She handed over a castle to Canus. He circled the table slowly, getting as close to the pictured outline of Ahmar as he could before setting his piece atop a small cluster of hills not too far inland.

“There,” he said lowly. “Sandfur’s Den. It expands under the entirety of the hills. There will be plenty of room for them there.”

“And the mobs there won’t attack them?” Hunter questioned, leaning forward to stare the wolf god down.

Canus met his eyes with more intensity than Hunter had expected. “I control all in these dungeons. If I say they are safe, they are safe. The Wilds are mine to command. You will do well to remember that.”

Hunter sat back, crossing his arms over his chest defensively. He looked like he wanted to argue (though honestly that’s just how Hunter looked most of the time) but there was nothing that could be said to that. Canus returned to Alfre’s side, his tail wagging when she reached out to squeeze his hand in thanks.

“Is that the plan?” Ren turned her golden eyes to Alfre.

Alfre smiled. “Sounds like it. Ran and the others should get the message out to everyone they can. Ahmar needs to know we’re coming to help, and Berdea and Kowhai need to know we’ll be calling on them soon.”

There was a brief moment of hesitation before the council flew into action. June and Maldrom latched onto Ran, tugging him away and talking animatedly about what to tell the other Fell and how to get the message to them as fast as possible. Maldrom’s dragonling guild member rushed out with Doremi and the other members of the Sweet Summer Children and Wall Street Spade, pulling blueprints out of their inventory pouches as they went. Atticus barked orders and the Knights of the Burning Oak and Fell of Duty both jumped to follow them.

Ludovico swept away with the others, his face a strange mix of thoughtful and manic.

When the room was just about empty, Alfre stood along with Spica and Elias. She was stopped, however, by a hand on her shoulder just before she left the palace. She turned to see Ren smiling at her. Not grinning, like she usually did, just smiling.

“I knew I did good when I picked you,” she said.

Alfre smiled in return. “Thank you, your majesty.”

The walk back to the guildhall was long, and silent. Spica wrapped her arm around Elias', walking close to him with a pensive frown on her face. Elias' ears drooped as he grasped Spica's hand tight. Abital and Canus, for once, had no argument to pass the time. Beira pressed up against Alfre's side, allowing the Winter Blade to run her fingers through the thick, soft fur of the direwolf's pelt for comfort. Wallace met them at the door, his smile falling as he saw the looks on their faces.

“What happened?” he demanded. “What did they say?”

Frosty blue met warm, earthy brown and Alfre smiled sadly at him.

“We're going to war.”

Megan Atkison has been starting stories for nearly twenty years, yet only just recently gotten around to finishing any of them. When she's not writing, she's playing Dungeons and Dragons, and when she's not doing that, she's watching ninjas kick animated butt. This is her first original published work.

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