

The first thing Silver does is correct my pronunciation of Mont-Real. I'd just asked if she was from there, based on her accent, and I pronounced it the way I've always heard it said, "mount", as in a small mountain. And then "real" as in something that is real instead of imaginary. Turns out, she's sensitive about it, it's "mon" the "T" is silent. "Real" is with an accent on the 'e'. "Reh-al"; so "Mon-reh-al".

Once she's happy with my pronunciation, she accepts my invitation to adventure, and Brandon stares.

"You said we needed someone else," I point out.

"She's not who I have in mind," he replies. "And she doesn't know us, so just why does she want to come?"

"She's right there," I tell him. "How about you ask her directly?"

"I want an adventure," she says before Brandon asks, which annoys me. After treating her like she wasn't there, he should have had to address her directly.

"You can't be serious," he replies.

"Aren't you the one going out gallivanting for a chance to fight monster and discover relics?" I ask.

"That's not the same. I'm an explorer."

"And I'm a bard," she replies before I can point out not everyone who goes out exploring as the class.

"I don't see how that explains tagging along," he says.

"Brandon, how about maybe she just wants to help?"

"How about you let me defend myself?" she says, amused, and my face burns.

"Go ahead," Brandon says, smirking.

"I'm a bard."

"You all—"

"A bard needs stories," she cuts him off. "And I don't want to just repeat the stories I've been taught. I want to have stories of my own. And that means going on my own adventures."

"Wasn't the trip here adventure enough for you?" Brandon asks.

"Okay, what is your problem with her?" I demand.

"People don't just hook up with strangers to 'go on adventures'," he replies.

"Isn't that what you did with me?"

"That's not—" He closes his mouth. "You don't know her."

"I don't know you."

"I saved your life!"

"She saved ours."

"We didn't.... I could have..." he lets out a growl of frustration then gets to his feet.

"What's your health like?" I ask. Mine's a stopped increasing little under a third.

"I'm fine."

"That's not what I asked." I stand and offer him a healing bar.

"I don't need it."

"I know Grit Strike needs you to be hurt to kick in, but we're in the city. Do you think Xander hired an entire army to kill me, or did we, well you, take care of them?"

He tries to calm himself, I can see that; not that I understand why he's angry. When he takes the bar from my hand, it isn't quite a snatch, but the ripping of the wrapper isn't gentle.

"Come on," he instructs before biting into it and starts walking.

I chew on mine as I follow. "Didn't anything happen on the trip from Montreal that you can tell stories about?" I ask Silver, making sure to pronounce the name of the city correctly.

"I traveled with a caravan. I entertained them once we stopped for the day. The most adventurous thing to happen was some of them getting sick from food that had gone bad."

"That's..." I'm at a loss as to what to say.

"So, what's at the Knox?" she asks.

"I don't know. Brandon, did you learn anything about the Knox?"

"No." He slows his pace and we catch up to him. "Look, Silver. I'm sorry for my reaction. I'm not used to someone offering to help for nothing."

"It isn't for nothing," she replies. "I get something from it. I get my own stories to tell."

"I'm sure that means as much to her as—"

"Dennis," he cuts me off, sounding slightly exasperated. "I know that stories are currency. Alright. You can heal, buff and debuff. How are you in one-on-one combat?"

"I do my best to avoid getting into actual fights."

"You get that adventures nearly always end up in fights, right?"

"I can help you by weakening the enemy. I can buff you a little."

"What level are you?" Brandon asks.

She hesitates. "Five."

"Same as me!" I grin and she brightens.

Brandon sighs. "I guess I can't use that as a reason. Does your class come with any offensive ability?"

"Unless you mean me offending someone, no. I'm not the kind of bard that belongs on the battlefield."

"So you're pure support. You have mana. Does your class limit the spells you can get?"

"No. Although it gives me boosts to certain types, like illusion and emotions magic."

"Then are you willing to spend points on attack magic if you get the chance?"

She hesitates, then nods. "I want to be helpful."

"Alright." Brandon sounds mollified. "Do you have available spell points?"

"No. I spent them before leaving Montreal."

"Then we'll see to it you have some by the time we reach the next city." He looks at me. "It's going to have to be Detroit."

"I was warned not to go there," I reply, as Silver lets out an impressed 'oh'.

"I've heard stories about it," she says.

"And they're probably all true," Brandon says. "Which includes the ones about it having the largest archive of information available on this side of the continent."

"Isn't it a city of thieves and murderers?" I ask.

“Oh yeah. It is not a city for the faint of heart. But if there’s any information on the Knox out there, that’s where we’re going to find it.”

\* \* \* \* \*

We stick to main streets as we cross the city north and slightly westward. The buildings improve, drop in quality, go up again, and by the time we turn onto a smaller street, I’d say we’re in a middle ground area. The buildings are close together at first, then separate until there’s a yard in the front and I see yards at the back between them.

The whistle that escapes has Silver and Brandon looking at me.

“We don’t have a lot of houses with yards in Court. Even the Mayor doesn’t have one. Mister Carbone and Lady Trevail are the only two I know do, and people are always on them to stop holding onto the land so we can increase the population and go up a settlement level.”

“When a city gets large enough,” Brandon says, “population numbers aren’t the only factor in growing. Quality of life is one. Toronto basically started as a city when the system arrived, so a lot of the original larger lots at the outskirt were kept and sold to those with more to contribute.”

“And this person that’ll help us is one of them?”

“Her parents are. They left her the house when they decided the city wasn’t for them anymore. And she’ll help if I can convince her to.”

“I’m sure you’ll be able to,” I tell him, since he doesn’t sound confident.

“You don’t know...” he shakes his head. “You don’t know her.”

When he pauses before house, it’s in better state than the others, not only the two-story house, but the yard. The grass is lush and vibrant green. The two trees are tall, providing a lot of shade, and colorful flowers grow along a stone path leading from the street to the door.

Brandon lets out slow breath before stepping onto the path and I shrug at the look Silver gives me. I don’t know who can live here that’s making him act like that.

The door is wood and nearly three meters tall. While it’s square and fits neatly into the frame, there’s something about it that isn’t quite... I mean, I don’t know everything about wood, but I used to spend a lot of time in my dad’s workshop, so I’ve seen him work with all kind of lumber. He told me a lot about what he does, back when he dreamed I’d be a carpenter like him.

The wood in the door isn’t worked. It’s not made of boards. It’s one slab without any marks from tools. Magic was used to make it.

Brandon’s hand hangs in the air for a long time before he finally knocks and steps back.

A few seconds later, it opens, and a woman stands in it, her head nearly touching the top.

She isn’t human; that’s the first thing that registers. She’s too tall and too slender. Like, if a human woman had been stretched to that height. Her copper hair falls down to her shoulder blades and shimmers in the sunlight that makes it through the canopy. Her skin is both paler than mine and more vibrant. Her eyes are green, and her ears pointed.

“Hey sis,” Brandon says in the silence. “I need your help.”

\* \* \*