



*THE
TRANQUIL
LANTERN*

NINA CARVER

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Thank you to my little dog Bisco. This book would have been written faster if not for you, but I wouldn't have had it any other way.

CHAPTER 1

Sophie raised yet another hide from the tanning vat. The cow skin was sturdy and flexible, and Sophie's trained eye knew that it would be suitable for the market. Unblemished, a good color; perhaps it would even fetch a whole silver piece.

"Miss Bumdell!" Sophie called into the neighboring room, "This one looks like a real winner. Would you like to come see?"

"I doubt anything that *you* tanned could be called a winner," snarled a cruel voice from the other room. Miss Bumdell stomped in, her swollen feet spilling out of their wooden clogs. She fixed her black beady eyes on Sophie's work. "Just as I expected, a total disaster. I couldn't even sell it back to the cow."

Sophie didn't flinch. Though Miss Bumdell always managed to find something to criticize, Sophie was confident in her work. She knew exactly what this hide was worth, no matter what her mistress said.

Miss Bumdell scoffed and flicked the hide with two sausage-like fingers. "Look at these stretch marks. See the lines? They're not from the cow, you dunce. This hide has been improperly worked." The old woman smiled, her four remaining teeth jiggling nastily in their gums. "Throw it on the trash pile with the rest of your junk."

"As you wish, ma'am," Sophie said. She had learned to keep her head down when Miss Bumdell was in one of her frequent foul moods. With a final scoff, Miss Bumdell clomped out of the room.

Sophie set the hide down alongside the other rejects and pulled an unworked skin from the pile. She began the process anew, working the animal skin from its raw state into a finished leather. It was a difficult, tedious, and most of all smelly job. Sophie's arms and shoulders ached from the arduous dehairing process, and her hands, perpetually chapped and peeling, had even started to blister. The stench of the

tanning chemicals that suffused the tannery had long ago permeated her clothes and hair.

Until recently, none of that had ever bothered Sophie. She took pride in her work and in the quality of her leathers. But over the past few months, something had changed inside her. It was becoming harder and harder to put up with Miss Bumdell's constant degradations. And how the villagers would plug their noses every time she walked by! When Sophie first applied to be a tanner's apprentice, her mother warned her that she would never find love with such a vulgar job. Now, three years later, she was starting to think that her mother had been right. At the tender age of twenty-five, Sophie had never known even the sweetness of a lover's lips.

After a few hours spent working the new hide, Sophie heard a familiar stomping as Miss Bumdell climbed the stairs to her living quarters above the tannery. That was Sophie's cue to set down her work and head back home. She collected her personal effects and headed for the door. Just before she walked out, she discreetly snatched the finished hide – the one Miss Bumdell had rejected – off the heap and stuffed it into her satchel.

Sophie took a deep breath. The fresh air felt wonderful in her lungs after a day hunched over the rancid chemical vats in the tannery. She looked at the setting sun and estimated that she had only an hour to get back home before nightfall. That was plenty of time, assuming she took a shortcut through the center of town.

She made her way uneventfully down the cobblestone streets until she reached the main town square. A few stray dogs lounging underneath a now-vacant food cart looked up expectantly at Sophie as she passed by. They were fat and sleek, made tame by the kindness of her fellow townspeople. Sophie stared back at them with envy as jeers rang out from across the way.

“Oi, if it isn't Stinkhand Sophie! Smelling up the square once again.” Sophie quickly averted her eyes. A group of drunkards called out to her, all leaning against a tavern wall.

“Stinky, smelly Stinkhand Sophie. Never gonna please a man with those hands, are ya?”

Sophie’s face went beet red. Hot tears welled up in her sockets, but she held them back; she was too proud to let these louts see her cry. She walked faster, eager to retreat to the safety of her cottage. The horrible men laughed and returned to their flagons and conversation.

Sophie hated walking through this part of town. With their inhibitions lowered by drink, people felt free to say what they really thought about her. And they clearly didn’t respect the importance of her craft, nor her skill as a tanner. They only saw her as Stinkhand. She felt a tear leak down onto her cheek and she suddenly broke into a run.

Just as the last few fingers of rosy dusk settled below the horizon, Sophie threw open the door to her cottage, welcoming the sight of her cozy home after such a grueling day. She waited for the water to heat up for her evening bath, massaging the soreness out of her arms and stretching her tired muscles. And as she lowered herself into the bathtub, the townspeople’s cruel jibes ringing in her mind, she knew that she could not work even one more day at Miss Bumdell’s tannery. It was time for a change.



The sun had barely risen, yet already Sophie was hard at work. She hummed to herself as her fingers folded and stitched her supple leathers into more useful shapes. She was excited, for once, to be working the hides. Working from the comfort of her own home, no longer did she have to keep one ear open for Miss Bumdell’s clomping. She was her own boss now.

The stolen leather made for a fine, if mismatched set of adventuring gear. The pants were tight. The shirt was loose. And the belt had plenty of pouches to store all the treasure she was confident that she would find along the way. When Sophie donned her full adventuring kit, she felt confident – daring, even. Her transformation was almost complete. All she needed before she could finally put her plan into motion was a weapon.

Sophie looked over the pots and pans hanging in her kitchen. They were made of heavy iron, certainly sturdy enough to knock out a home invader or a common ruffian. But for what Sophie had in mind, she'd need a real, proper weapon. Every hero had a sword, but how could she afford something like that? She didn't have much money... but maybe something to trade? Sophie eyed what remained of her stolen leathers as a plan coalesced behind her gleaming green eyes.



Gruffkin was sitting in his smithy, hammering away at a red-hot blade, when he heard the doorbell clang. "Come on in," he yelled over the din of his continued pounding. "I'm just finishing up a batch of swords. Made with the highest-quality iron, imported from across the sea." He held up the still-glowing blade with a thick pair of tongs. Sophie eyed it appreciatively from beneath her leather hood. It had a cruel curve to it, like the talon of a great roc.

Sophie put on her most hard-boiled voice. If Gruffkin recognized her as Stinkhand, she knew he wouldn't give her the time of day. "That's a fine sword, Gruffkin," she said disguisedly. "But why don't you show me the good stuff?"

Gruffkin was outraged. How dare this woman barge into his shop and demand to see his finest wares? He wouldn't whip those out for just anyone.

Sophie sensed his trepidation and bit her lip nervously. She knew that she would have to make a show of what she had, so she pulled one of the hides out from beneath her cloak and tossed it on the counter. "Does this change your mind about anything?"

Gruffkin didn't so much as glance at the counter. "I don't take barter," he said, his gaze still fixed on the cloaked stranger.

With a flick of her wrist, Sophie dumped the remaining leathers on Gruffkin's dingy counter. "This should be enough for one single, paltry blade, don't you think?" Sophie's voice cracked a little, and she damned her nerves. She needed

Gruffkin to take her seriously, else she'd have no chance of negotiating a fair trade for her goods.

But she quickly regained her composure when she saw Gruffkin's reaction to the hides. His eyes went wide as they traced the soft folds of the leather cluttering his counter. "This is some of the finest tanning work I've ever seen..." he muttered. "That color, that natural patterning... Let me bring out some swords."

Though decades spent alone at the forge had hardened his demeanor, Gruffkin was a finer smith than any smooth-talking youngblood. The swords he brought out for Sophie's perusal were of unquestionable craftsmanship. Laid out for the taking were blades with wicked curves and sharp serrated edges, swords with grips that elegantly covered the hand, and whisper-thin blades like sewing needles.

Sophie's attention fell on one sword in particular, an awkward-looking blade with a dull, rounded end. "What happened to this one?" She hefted the blade off the counter. It was heavy, and her hands were small enough she could get them both around the grip.

"Nothing *happened* to it," said Gruffkin a touch defensively. "That there is an executioner's blade, meant for taking heads." He paused for a moment. "Not much demand for 'em nowadays, what with the ban on public execution. If you want that one, I'd throw in some other supplies along with it, bandages and the like."

It was perfect, Sophie thought. An executioner's blade to put an end to her old life as Stinkhand. She met Gruffkin's eyes. "I'll take it."

CHAPTER 2

Sophie had spent countless hours daydreaming about what would happen if she broke free of this dreadful town. Now that she had her supplies, all that remained was to leave.

Sophie pulled on her leather boots, gleaming with a fresh coat of oil, and took one final look around her cottage. Her most treasured possessions – her grandmother’s sapphire pendant, a detailed vellum map of the region surrounding her village, and an ink bottle and quill – she tucked away in a secret inner pocket of her jerkin.

Her thick cloth blanket was rolled tight and bound with cord as a makeshift bedroll. Her satchel was stuffed with rations, herbs for poultices and soothing teas, bandages, whetstones, and miscellaneous sundries befitting an adventurer. She had even assembled leftover leather scraps into a portable, makeshift tent. All her other belongings, she left behind. They would only slow her down.

As Sophie crossed her cottage’s threshold for the last time and closed the door behind her, she felt an unexpected pang of loneliness. But her sadness passed when she looked up at the cloudless autumn sky. Sophie felt as though the world was suddenly opened up before her, as though all its richness and treasures were now hers for the taking. For the first time since she started her apprenticeship under Miss Bumdell – maybe even for the first time in her life – Sophie felt like she was in charge of her own destiny.

She pulled out her map to once more trace out her route for the day. The great necropolis of Jazz Katan was a mere half-day’s hike from her cottage. Centuries ago, when the mad sorcerer had ruled as king of the Midlands, his necropolis had served as the seat of the kingdom – and, by extension, the principal site of Jazz Katan’s innumerable atrocities. Officially, the structure was left intact as a monument to his victims. But even the meanest peasant had heard the rumor that the necropolis was secretly Jazz Katan’s tomb, and that it

was still haunted by the sorcerer and his noble court, allegedly forced to join him in death. The meanest peasant knew, too, of the aristocratic predilection for being buried alongside their riches.

And so in the six centuries since Jazz Katan's reign, speculating about what treasures might be contained inside the necropolis, and what fearsome traps might guard them, came to be a favored pastime among the locals.

Sophie knew better than to believe in rumors and secondhand accounts. Luckily for her, with her village so close to the necropolis, she had met countless travelers who had sought their fortunes in its depths. To the one, she encountered them at the village tavern, empty-handed and drinking away the misery of a failed quest. Indeed, they told her, the necropolis was a deathtrap when it was first constructed. Every inch had concealed a pressure plate waiting to spring a whirling blade or trigger a gout of flame. The place had teemed with skeletons and shambling corpses, all apparently bound in servitude to the mad king and hungry for heroes' blood.

But nowadays, they lamented, the place was nothing more than ruins – crumbling to bits and largely overtaken by local wildlife. Jazz Katan's tale was so famous that the necropolis had attracted countless adventurers over the years, so by now every trap had been sprung and every necromantic guardian splintered. Worst of all, all of the valuable treasures had been plundered long ago. What paltry loot remained was hardly worth taking.

It struck Sophie as the ideal spot for a practice quest.

Her years of work at the tannery had prepared her well for the physical demands of adventuring. She was barely feeling winded by the time she reached the edge of town.

Sophie turned and looked at her hometown of Pilora one last time. From somewhere far in the distance, she could swear she heard Miss Bumdelly loose a scream of impotent rage. Sophie smiled and pressed on.

As Sophie hiked west, the well-worn cobblestone of the village road gave way to packed earth, then narrowed to a deerpath. At a few spots, the way forward was obscured by overgrown grass and low-lying shrubs and Sophie had to stop to get her bearings.

It was twilight when Sophie saw the next sign of her destination. Perhaps five miles ahead of her, a solid black line peeked over the horizon, spanning to the left and right as far as she could see. At first, Sophie wasn't quite sure what she was looking at. But as she drew closer, she realized that this wasn't some geological feature, but rather the colossal, black stone walls and shattered obsidian towers which marked the outer perimeter of the necropolis.

Sophie had known, of course, that the necropolis would be large, having been constructed as a literal monument to Jazz Katan's power, but seeing it in-person left her awestruck nonetheless. The area the walls bounded must have been at least ten times the size of her village. Sophie picked up her pace, hopeful that she could make it to the necropolis before nightfall.

In two hours of brisk hiking, Sophie had followed the path all the way to the base of the necropolis wall. Somehow, the structure was even more imposing up-close. Made of a uniform black stone, it loomed four stories above her without any mortared gaps or stonework joints. Sophie took a moment to feel around for seams or invisible junctions where two blocks met, anything that would help explain how it was constructed. She felt only a cool, smooth, uniform surface under her fingertips: no chisel-marks, no mineral intrusions, no seams. It was unlike any man-made structure she had ever seen. And more pragmatically, Sophie knew she stood no chance of climbing it. She'd have to find a proper way in.

Sophie jogged further down the path as it veered sharply left to follow the curve of the necropolis wall. Mercifully, within an hour the path led her to an entrance: a massive opening in the otherwise uniform stone, protected by an equally-massive, wrought iron portcullis. The portcullis was

rusted out beyond repair, and in its center there was a jagged, person-sized hole.

Though she was pleased to find an entrance so easily, Sophie didn't have the least desire to explore the ruins in the fading twilight. She felt unsettled by the place's strange architecture and hoped she might feel a renewed sense of confidence in the light of day. Besides, a sprained ankle could put a premature end to her first adventure. She picked out a flat section of ground a short distance from the path and made camp.

As she bedded down for the night, she failed to notice the thin wisp of smoke that rose above some far-distant wall of the necropolis.



Sophie woke up at dawn with a renewed sense of determination. She had her tent broken down and her bedroll neatly packed before the sun had even risen over the necropolis' crumbling outer walls.

She scarfed a quick breakfast of beans and crusty bread before jogging towards the rotten portcullis. Just at the threshold, Sophie hesitated. "Back in the old king's day, this adventure would have been suicide," she whispered to herself, as though nervous to rouse some nonexistent necropolis guards. "Worse than suicide, even. If they got their hands on you, those court wizards would drain your soul from your body, strip your skeleton clean, and put your bones to work doing whatever hard labor they didn't have enough living servants for!"

Sophie shivered and shook away her dark thoughts. With adventure so close at hand, she was irrepressible. After a deep breath to steel her nerves, she shimmied and squeezed her way through the hole in the portcullis, making sure to avoid snagging her clothes on its jagged metal edges.

She emerged into a giant overgrown courtyard, encircled by the outer wall of the necropolis. In front of her, straight across from the gate, a pathway had once been laid with heavy stone. A few tiles were still visible through the thick grass and

gnarled roots that had overtaken the courtyard grounds. At the end of this path towered the necropolis itself: vaguely pyramidal, steeply terraced, and made of the same plain obsidian as the outer walls.

A great stone staircase rose up the center of the necropolis, ending in a foreboding stone archway. Sophie knew that this must be the main entrance, the way to the most well-mapped and well-traveled route through the necropolis.

Sophie rested her palm on the hilt of her sword, ready to brandish it at a moment's notice, and made her way down the path. From a distance, she could make out weathered carvings on the necropolis' stone blocks. As she drew closer, the carvings resolved into grisly scenes of human sacrifice, surrounded by macabre grinning skulls. Sophie averted her gaze to the ground and pressed on.

A nervous tension was growing in Sophie's gut. She could almost feel the evils that had taken place here. Their ghosts still lingered, haunting the grounds, almost but not quite smothered out by nature.

Sophie shuddered to think what this courtyard had looked like six centuries before, when the necropolis was still active and brimming with dark power. Her imagination ran wild, conjuring up visions of hunched zombies and depraved necromancers. But after a minute these images faded, leaving Sophie with only the strange, uneasy beauty of the overgrown courtyard and the looming central stairs of the necropolis.

As she climbed the steps towards the main doors, she noticed gouges on the face of the necropolis, empty insets where robbers had wrenched off gemstones and peeled away precious metal inlays. *It's almost pathetic how badly it's been picked over*, Sophie thought. *There probably isn't a single skeleton left wandering around the place. I wonder if I'll even see anything dangerous at all...*

Sophie finally reached the stone archway at the top of the stairs. She pulled out her torch and, sword in hand, crossed the threshold into the dark necropolis. Inside she was greeted by a bare hallway branching to the left and right, made of the same

familiar obsidian as the outer walls. She turned the corner and cleaved an imaginary zombie in two. “I guess I should have chosen somewhere just a little more dangerous for my first adventure,” she said to the imaginary corpse at her feet. Her voice echoed back at her mockingly in the empty hall.

The necropolis’ labyrinthine mess of branching passageways and interconnected rooms had prevented the elements from intruding too far inside. Despite the lack of dirt or overgrowth, it was clear the place had been abandoned long ago. For one, the interior had been practically picked clean. All that remained were those objects too large to be carried out the front door and those too damaged to be of any value.

Sophie peeked her head into rooms filled with half-rotten furniture, sporting cushions that looked like they would unravel at the slightest touch. Other rooms were empty, without the slightest clue towards their original purpose. She had spent an hour tramping through the necropolis’ main floor, and so far the most excitement she’d had was a sneezing fit when she took a breather on a dusty old lounging sofa, and the subsequent spill she’d taken when it collapsed beneath her. She rubbed her bruised butt. This minor injury hadn’t slowed her down in the least – not that there was much to run from, except the few bats she’d disturbed peeking into yet another boring, empty chamber.

Sophie had discovered only one room of note. When she first poked her head in, she had been assaulted by a wave of hot steam and had jumped back instinctively. She quickly recovered and cast her torchlight inside to get a better look. A sunken pool of water stretched nearly from wall-to-wall, roiling and bubbling away, one outlet of the natural hot spring which Sophie knew flowed beneath the necropolis. On the far wall, a narrow doorway led to stairs descending deeper into the necropolis.

Despite her best attempts to keep a positive attitude, Sophie’s spirits were starting to fall. Her attempted “adventure” was turning out to be a total wash. She imagined herself walking back to the tannery, her head hung low, and asking Miss Bumdell for her old job back.

She just couldn't accept that outcome.

She thought through her other options. If she could just find some trinket, something to prove she had been here, maybe she could beg the adventurers' guild to let her in. *At the very least, I could take it to a city and try to sell it as an antique. Maybe get enough money for a new life somewhere.*

She charted out her path to a lower floor, praying that it would lead her to some undespoiled treasure.



Meanwhile, somewhere deep within the necropolis, an elf with skin as gray as stone padded down the dark halls. He moved effortlessly, silent as a ghost but very much alive.

He came to a halt before an unremarkable section of wall and reached towards it with one hand. There was a burst of blinding white light – and somehow, impossibly, the wall folded in on itself, thick stone crumpling and twisting like wet parchment. The elf blinked, then continued down the newly-opened passageway.



Sophie was starting to panic. She knew she had come this way, she distinctly remembered coming this way, so how did she manage to get so hopelessly lost?

She had tried to return to the baths in order to take the servants' staircase to the next floor down. When she got to the spot that should have had the doorway to the baths, she had even put her pack down to mark the direction she'd come from. But when she stepped through the door, she saw this was just another empty, featureless chamber, not the distinctive bathhouse that she remembered. Inside, there were no natural springs, no steam, just smooth black tile and scattered pebbles.

Even worse, when she stepped back into the hallway to retrace her steps, she found that the hallway itself – where she had been standing just moments before – was now completely unrecognizable. The air hung thick with spiderwebs and the walls were lined with faded paintings that she had no recollection of seeing. And to her horror, when she looked

down she realized that her pack was missing, vanished altogether, along with all of her food and supplies.

Something is wrong here, Sophie thought, breathing deeply in an attempt to calm herself down. *The hallways must be shifting around somehow...*

All she could think about was getting back to the front doors as quickly as possible. Her sword rattled against her thigh as she ran down the halls, throwing open any door she could find in the hopes that it would bring her out of this nightmare. *I can't believe I was so stupid! Everyone was right, I'll always just be a tanner's apprentice!*

Sophie ran until she was out of breath, wild-eyed and panting. Only then did she stop to think. In all the stories she had heard about the necropolis, she had never heard of any shifting hallways or changes to the layout. Then a horrifying realization dawned on her: nobody could tell stories about the trap that killed them. Now Sophie started to cry in earnest, tears blurring her vision as she ran blindly down the corridor.

In her current miserable, frenzied state, Sophie failed to notice that the hallway she stumbled into was in a condition of utter disrepair. A loud crack shot through the air; the floor buckled and caved below her feet; and before she had time to even let loose a scream, Sophie plunged into the dark with a gurgling gasp.

CHAPTER 3

The elf brushed his silky white hair away from his eyes and inspected his schematics. Yes, this had to be the place: a hidden door right where two of the strongest leylines intersected. He could hardly believe that in the hundreds of years since the tomb was constructed, no one else had discovered it.

He carefully replaced the schematics into his pack and peered into the now-opened door, letting his keen eyes adjust to the darkness. All he could see was a narrow staircase spiraling down. The elf had taken just a single step past the threshold when a loud crash echoed up the staircase from somewhere below him. He jumped back, startled. Had opening this passage triggered a trap? He sniffed the air. His sensitive nostrils detected neither poison gas nor wafts of necromantic energy. But, to his surprise, he caught a whiff of freshly-oiled leather.



Sophie rubbed a few of her more delicate spots to verify that everything was still intact. Her body was battered and sore, and she was sure to have a few vicious bruises come tomorrow, but fortunately the fall didn't seem to have done any lasting damage. Still groaning, she stood up and tried to get her bearings.

She was standing in a large circular chamber lined with lit torches. To her bewilderment, the torches' flames glowed a pale blue, and didn't seem to lick up from the sconce as much as float *around* the sconce, unlike any natural fire she had seen before. The walls were banded with intricate shining patterns: golden inlays, Sophie realized, that had not yet been pilfered and pried from the walls.

Sophie had gotten her wish. She had found an undiscovered portion of the necropolis.

She stepped off the rubble and onto the colorful mosaic set into the floor. An intact human skull gleamed up at her from

the mosaic's center, set into the obsidian as though it were just another porcelain tile. Sophie swore she saw it wink at her, but maybe it was just a trick of the torchlight. She quickly looked away.

Now that Sophie had gotten her first real taste of adventure, she worried that she had bitten off more than she could chew.



The elf stood at the base of the stairs. Though he was satisfied that there had been no trap, he still felt on-edge. He had no idea what sort of mechanism could have produced that sound.

Faintly, he heard a groan echo down the hallway to his left. Not a mechanism, then, but some creature. Down that hallway, Filoro saw a ghastly blue light seeping out from under a heavy stone door. He tensed and drew his rapier from its sheath. Taking careful footsteps to avoid alerting whatever horrible beast awaited him to his approach, the elf prowled towards the door and prepared to do battle.



Sophie heard the door to the circular chamber creak open. Suddenly, a dark shadow darted into the room. Sophie took a step back, hoping to get away in time to draw her blade – only for her foot to catch some stray rubble, sending her tumbling helplessly to the ground.

She gasped and looked up. She could hardly make out any of the intruder's features. But she did see the glint of a drawn sword, fixed in her direction.

The shadow stepped towards her, and a masculine face was briefly revealed in the flickering torchlight. Sophie almost gasped. She had never seen a man like this. He had all the angular features of an elf: high cheekbones, strong jawline, and piercing eyes. But there the similarities ended. He was clearly no common elf. Stark white hair cascaded down to his shoulders. And it was hard to tell in the room's blue illumination, but his skin seemed to be a pale bluish-gray. *A dark elf? Sophie thought. No human has seen one in generations... and lived to tell of it.*

The elf took a step forward, his eyes locked on Sophie. “Wait!” she said. “I fell through the floor. I was just trying to find my way back to the main stairs, back to the exit.” But the elf said nothing and kept his sword trained on her. “My name is Sophie,” she continued, a tinge of desperation entering her voice. “I’m a tanner from the village of Pilora.”

The elf stared at her with his strange, pale eyes. Sophie realized with a start that she didn’t know whether they even spoke the same language.

But then he cocked his head to the side and took a small step forward. “What business has a tanner in such a place as this?” he asked quietly. “Perhaps you are not a tanner. Perhaps you are a liar.” The elf extended his blade towards her. His sword arm didn’t waver, not even a little, and Sophie couldn’t help but notice the corded muscles of his bare forearms.

“I’m not a liar!” said Sophie angrily. “I *was* a tanner... but I quit, just yesterday. Now I’m an adventurer.” She glanced conspicuously at the sword belted to her hip. “And I’m armed, too, so I’d be careful if I were you.”

For a few moments the elf merely stared at her, silent and unblinking. Sophie wondered whether she would have the chance to draw her heavy executioner’s sword before the elf ran her through. Then she heard the elf chuckling low in his throat.

“What are you laughing at?” asked Sophie. She could deal with being killed on her first adventure, but being mocked first was too great an indignity to bear.

“You,” he said. “Held at swordpoint yet issuing threats, like a cornered animal.” The elf lowered his weapon. “I find that I do believe you, nonetheless. And more importantly, I see no reason to harm you.”

He stepped forward and proffered a slim hand. “But I tell you this in all seriousness: this necropolis is no place for a would-be adventurer. There are dangers here beyond your comprehension.” Sophie took Filoro’s hand cautiously and allowed him to pull her to her feet. The elf’s skin felt as

smooth as a river pebble and warm as a river pebble that had sat out in the sun.

“I’m Filoro,” he said. “Come with me if you want to escape the necropolis.”

CHAPTER 4

Sophie was practically jogging, taking two steps to match each of Filoro's long strides as he led her through the halls of the necropolis.

Sophie knew that she should really keep her wits about her. After all, Filoro had greeted her with bare steel at their first meeting. Had the elf deemed her a threat, Sophie had no doubt that he would have killed her on the spot. And judging by the numerous scars that criss-crossed his hands and forearms, he had clearly survived his fair share of fights in the past. Sophie wouldn't have stood a chance.

Even now, who's to say he's really taking me back to the entrance? He must think I'm the perfect mark. For all I know, he's planning to sacrifice me in some horrible dark elven ritual! Sophie had never heard of any dark elven rituals before, let alone ones involving human sacrifice. But in the depths of the necropolis, anything seemed possible.

Sophie was so caught up in her thoughts that she bumped right into Filoro when he stopped abruptly at the top of a set of stairs. "What's going on?" she whispered nervously, craning her neck to try to see over the elf's shoulder.

"I have come this way before. I know that these stairs lead to a specific room on the main floor, not too far from a secondary exit. Yet..." Filoro gestured into the chamber in front of him. "Somehow, I do not recognize this chamber."

"Right," she said slowly. "That's what I noticed when I was upstairs earlier, before I fell. All the rooms started shifting around. That's how I got lost in the first place." Sophie stared hard at the back of his head. "But you still know how to get out of here, don't you? You'll still take me to an exit?"

Filoro ran a hand through his hair. "Well, no. I have been following the leylines deeper into the tomb, towards an arcane convergence point. It would be impossible for me to follow them back out."

He noticed that he was blocking Sophie on the stairs and graciously took a step forward to let her pass. “These are the main floors of the necropolis,” he said, gesturing ahead of him. “They’re well-explored and properly cleared out of danger. You wouldn’t need my help to find your way out, I’m sure.”

Sophie’s mouth hung open. “You can’t leave me here – this place is a maze! I’ve lost all my supplies, I’ll starve to death before I find an exit!”

Filoro turned to face her, his expression blank. “Regretfully, I can’t escort you out. I have urgent business to attend to further in the tombs. If the layout is shifting as you say, then it’s imperative that I return to the lower floor before the layout shifts again and I lose my path.”

A thought popped into Sophie’s head. This was the perfect opportunity to learn from a seasoned adventurer – and such a handsome one, at that. “What if I came with you? I’m sure you could use some help down there. And some company,” she added.

“You would never survive in the depths, rife as they are with traps and danger. I assure you, you would be better off trying your luck at finding an exit up here.”

He smiled, flashing a set of pearly-white teeth. It was not a comforting expression. “And now, I truly must return to the lower floors. I wish you the best of luck, former tanner Sophie.” With that, he turned on his heel and vanished back down the staircase.

Sophie froze. Her best chance at becoming a proper adventurer was slipping through her stumbling fingers. After a moment’s hesitation she cursed and chased after him. But when she reached the bottom of the stairs, Filoro was nowhere in sight. Sophie groped her way down the dim hallway, praying that she could find her way back to the staircase if she failed to locate the dark elf.

Sophie was in luck, as she spotted Filoro after only a few minutes. The elf was sitting cross-legged with his back against a wall, one of his vellum scrolls unfurled across his lap. His

eyes were closed and he was totally motionless as though lost deep in a trance.

Sophie waited impatiently for him to acknowledge her presence. At last the elf's eyes fluttered open. "I have identified a secondary sphere of leylines."

Sophie beamed. "That's great! A way back to the entrance?"

"No. The new leylines should lead me deeper into the necropolis, towards its heart." He stood up and quickly repacked his scroll. "You followed me down here despite my advice to the contrary," he said, staring Sophie down.

Sophie felt herself shrink under the elf's attention, but she managed to glare back at him stubbornly. "I'm coming with you," she said. She thought she could see a smile tugging at the corner of his gray lips.

Filoro uncrossed his legs and stood up. "Then come." Without another word, he started down the hallway. Sophie followed behind him, careful to stay close to avoid losing him in the dark corridors.

Though Sophie considered herself to be reasonably fit, she had trouble matching Filoro's pace and was soon panting from the exertion. The hallways were nearly pitch-black, and she found herself constantly banging her knees and elbows against protruding bits of stonework along the passage walls. Filoro would occasionally pause to repeat his cross-legged ritual, and Sophie would take the opportunity to slump against the opposite wall and try to catch her breath.

They walked for what felt like hours. Just when Sophie thought that she could go no further, Filoro came to a stop. Sophie leaned against the wall, gulping down as much air as she could, and waited for the elf to enter his trance once again. But instead, he turned to face her. "We must rest here. I don't think I can perform another tracing for some time," he said.

Sophie furrowed her brows. "Tracing?"

"Yes, *tracing* the leylines," he said, tapping at his scroll tube. "The magic involved is quite draining. And though I'm

convinced that we're still on the proper path to our destination, the trail has grown faint."

Sophie nearly gasped. *Magic?* Of course she knew the stereotypes around dark elves' predisposition for the magical arts. In folktales and plays, dark elf characters frequently appeared as powerful evil sorcerers, ready and eager to massacre whole villages with a single incantation. But Filoro didn't seem nearly as villainous as the characters from those stories. And with his lithe, muscular body, he hardly fit her mental image of a wizard.

Sophie decided to play it cool. "No problem," she said. "I could use a little rest myself. So what now? Do we wait for you to recharge your magical energies?"

"Yes," he said, "For a period of some seven or eight hours. I call it 'sleeping'." He reached past Sophie's shoulder and pressed his palm into a jutting piece of stone.

Sophie yelped as the wall she was leaning against suddenly slid down and vanished into the floor. She began to tip backwards through the new opening in the wall, but Filoro grabbed her shoulder and steadied her. Maybe it was Sophie's imagination, but she could swear his hand lingered a moment longer than was strictly necessary.

"Woah! Give a lady some warning next time!"

Filoro smiled politely and peered over Sophie's shoulder. "This chamber should make a fine place to rest for the evening," he said.

Sophie squinted into the chamber, but it was pitch black. It was impossible for her to make out the least feature of the room inside.

"Ah, how rude of me," Filoro said. "I knew that humans had poor vision in darkness. I didn't realize to such an extent." The elf rummaged about in his pack and produced a long wooden torch. He paused, staring at it intently for a moment. Just as Sophie opened her mouth to ask if he had forgotten to bring a flint, the head of the torch erupted into flame.

Sophie gaped at the torch wide-eyed. Filoro let out an easy laugh. “Are you impressed by my little parlor trick? I assure you, it was far easier than the leyline tracing I performed earlier.”

Sophie stared up at him dumbly. “You really *are* a sorcerer,” she croaked. “I thought that maybe you were pulling my leg with all of that leyline stuff.”

“You thought that was a joke? Surely you’ve seen basic spellwork before. I had thought that your people were able to use magic, despite your other... deficiencies.”

Sophie glared up at him. “No, I’ve never met a sorcerer before,” she said. “Most people – humans, I mean – need to be taught magic before they can use it, even if they have the talent for it. And it’s not like most people can afford a tutor or a class just to find out if they have powers, not to mention how expensive tuition is at the magic universities.”

Filoro harrumphed. “For a species to have the capacity for magic, yet leave the ability dormant in so many... it is barbaric.” He stroked his chin thoughtfully. “Perhaps, if you’re interested, I could try to teach you a trick or two. Nothing complicated, of course, but a few elementary spells, like those an elf child might know.”

Sophie’s breath caught in her chest. She could hardly believe it: she’d be an adventurer *and* a sorcerer! And this was only her first day! Filoro noticed her gleeful expression and quickly cut in. “I can’t promise anything, of course. Some people simply lack the ability.”

Despite Filoro’s hedging, Sophie was determined. “Teach me,” she demanded. Filoro beckoned her into the newly-opened chamber.

Inside, the two of them sat cross-legged on the floor, facing one another with the torch upright between them, wedged between two loose tiles. “Position your hands just so,” Filoro commanded. His fingers pushed between her own, delicately turning and moving them to precise angles. Sophie hoped vainly that the flickering torchlight would mask the blush spreading across her cheeks. As exciting as it was to learn

magic, Sophie found herself equally excited by the way the elf's hands were playing with her own.

"I didn't see you making these hand signs when you lit the torch," Sophie said, partially in an attempt to focus her attention back on the lesson. "Are these gestures really necessary? I thought that the true magic came from within, or was living inside of you the whole time, or something."

The elf furrowed his brow in an irritated expression which only helped accentuate his pale eyes. Sophie hastily looked back at her hands, worried that he would notice her furtive glances.

"I don't need these gestures, because *I* am an accomplished sorcerer," Filoro said. "Without the aid of such physical reminders, a novice like yourself is as likely to set their clothes aflame as their torch."

Sophie swallowed hard. Maybe she could afford to pay less attention to the dark elf before her and more to the task at hand. She tried to concentrate on moving her hands just as Filoro guided, carefully noting his adjustments to her form. But within minutes, she found her mind wandering to the warmth of his hands. She wondered how warm the rest of the drow's body was... and whether he was as gentle in bed as he was during his magic lessons.

Filoro's voice cut through her reverie. "Sophie, let's pick up the lesson another time." A tinge of frustration had crept into the dark elf's voice. Evidently, he had higher hopes for Sophie's innate magical talents.

"Oh, but I'm so close to getting it, I just know it!" Sophie pouted.

The elf shook his head. "It's time to stop. I'm in need of a full night's sleep if I'm to guide us down the leylines in the morning." His voice softened to a more playful tone. "And if we practice tired, you might make a mistake and blow the both of us into pieces. How could I train you then?" With that, Filoro unrolled his sleeping mat and prepared to turn in for the night, leaving Sophie to sit beside the unlit torch.

“Um, Filoro?” asked Sophie. There was no response from the elf, so she continued. “I did mention that I lost all my supplies upstairs, right?” Filoro stopped fluffing his bedspread and looked at her blank-faced.

“And among those supplies – which, again, are missing as a result of circumstances totally outside my control – was my bed roll.”

Filoro kept staring, so Sophie pressed on. “I therefore no longer have a surface... uh, upon which to rest my weary noggin.”

Filoro grimaced. Sleeping beside a stranger wasn't a very tempting prospect, no matter how beautiful she may be. He still knew very little of Sophie's motives. What if she had come to the necropolis for the same reasons as he had?

But he shook off his suspicions. Though Sophie wasn't entirely helpless, it was obvious that she was completely out of her depth. It would have been foolish for her to turn against him, to lose such a valuable ally as himself. And as much as he hated to admit it, he knew that the extra heat from her body might be nice; it was always easier to chase down the ley-lines when your joints weren't stiff from the chill.

Sophie was still looking at him expectantly. Filoro knew he had to make a decision.

“If I lay my bedroll beneath us,” he said, “I suppose we could both fit on top. We can use my tent-cover as a blanket.” The words escaped his mouth with agonizing slowness, as though he were still mulling over his decision. “It will be perhaps less comfortable than we're both accustomed to, but at least neither of us will freeze overnight.”

Sophie tried to keep her expression neutral as she thanked Filoro. But inside, she felt a twinge of pleasure.

She laid beside Filoro in the dark of the necropolis, hugging her arms to her chest to keep warm. Their makeshift blanket helped somewhat, but the cold air of the necropolis still crept in around the edges. Part of her had hoped that Filoro would suggest sharing the bed-roll – sharing it properly,

that is, cuddled up within its folds. It would have been snug, intimate, even, but they surely both could have fit inside. *This is still nice, though*, she thought. She smiled, enjoying the shared warmth at the few points where their bodies touched, and fell asleep.

CHAPTER 5

Filoro was the first to wake. His torch had sputtered out while they were sleeping, leaving the room impenetrably dark even to the sharp-eyed elf. In the windowless necropolis, it was impossible to tell how much time had passed, or even whether it was morning or night. Regardless, Filoro didn't plan on sticking around any longer than he needed to.

He rifled through his satchel for the proper scroll, then sat on the floor, closed his eyes, and reached out with his mind to the leylines. The lines were considerably more complex down here beneath the main levels, all twisted and criss-crossed and miserably faint. Navigating them was going to be a serious strain, made all the more difficult by having to keep an eye on his new companion.

After fifteen minutes of concentration, Filoro had formulated a solid plan for their initial route. He stood, stretching his aching body, and looked over Sophie's sleeping form. The leathers she wore were of excellent craftsmanship. They were comfortable, too, if her deep slumber was any indication.

Filoro stretched again, trying to ease the heavy tension that had built up between his shoulder blades. He hated sleeping in chainmail, but had thought it wise to protect himself from the threats posed by both the necropolis and also by the stranger sleeping at his side.

Seeing Sophie as she was now, in vulnerable repose, he could hardly imagine her to be his enemy. She was beautiful – for a human, of course. From a distance, her slender legs and sharp nose could even be mistaken as elven. But her body's shapely curves, barely visible beneath his makeshift blanket, betrayed a femininity rarely seen among elven women.

I should probably wake her, Filoro thought. And stop ogling.

He bent down, took Sophie's shoulder in his hand and gave her a light shake. "Sophie, it's time," he whispered. But she

didn't wake up. Filoro shook her again, harder this time. Sophie flopped around like a rag doll under his ministrations, but still she didn't respond.

Filoro probed his magical senses to check if she had been put under some sort of sleeping hex. But no, he didn't detect anything out of the ordinary.

“Sophie, we are in a dangerous, uncharted region of the palace of an ancient sorcerer king. I do not understand how you could be sleeping so soundly, but I need you to have your wits about you.”

Filoro grabbed the collar of her leather armor and hefted her bodily into the air. Still her eyes remained closed. At first, Filoro was concerned – had she fallen victim to some soporific toxin? Or had the evil aura of the necropolis simply broken her mind? But upon lifting her high enough that her feet cleared the floor, Sophie's eyes snapped open. She spasmed and kicked her legs, struggling to find purchase. “Let me down!” she gasped. “I'm awake, you stupid elf! I was just messing with you! What's your problem?!”

Filoro furrowed his brow and stared Sophie down, holding her fully off the ground despite her protests. She was just *messing* with him, a near-total stranger, in a place like this? What was she thinking? If she kept at her shenanigans, she was sure to get both of them killed.

“Have I not sufficiently impressed upon you the seriousness of our situation here?” Filoro began, as Sophie wriggled about in his grasp. “I have allowed you to accompany me so far as a kindness – and, to be honest, out of a sort of grim curiosity as to whether I could keep you alive despite your obvious inexperience– ”

But rather than wait for the end of what was gearing up to be a long and condescending lecture, Sophie kicked up one of her legs and swiftly kned Filoro in the diaphragm. All the wind was knocked out of him, and he bent over forwards sputtering and coughing. Just for a moment, he loosened his vice-grip on Sophie's collar, and she took the opportunity to squirm free.

Once Filoro had recovered from her surprise attack, he looked up to find that Sophie had regained her footing and was now glaring daggers at him. One of her hands rested on the pommel of her sword. *Maybe I underestimated her*, Filoro thought. *She's no warrior, but I can't deny she's strong.*

He wrenched himself upright. "Well, you're certainly able to land a suckerpunch," Filoro said bitterly. "But if you expect to hold your own down here, you're going to have to learn to fight properly. I see that you parade around with a big sword, but I'd wager you don't even know how to use it."

Sophie's face twisted into a sneer. "Well, if I can catch even *you* unawares, you being such a powerful dark elf warrior and all, I should be able to fight some dusty old skeletons just fine."

Filoro shook his head, irritation and disappointment clear on his face. "That tells me exactly how little you know. These 'dusty old skeletons' you're imagining are *revenants*, husks animated long ago by Jazz Katan himself, imbued with his very own power. You have no concept of the forces he once commanded. There are horrors lying in wait here that would easily overpower even the strongest sorcerer. What chance would you have against them, I wonder?"

"And I assure you," he continued, "Not a single footfall lands in this necropolis unnoticed by these forces. Not in the outer courtyard, not on the main floor, and certainly not here in the depths."

Filoro watched with some satisfaction as Sophie's smile vanished and her eyes fell to the ground. "You shouldn't have picked me up," she said in a quiet, hurt voice.

Although Filoro was capable of managing the logistics of any adventure, managing the logistics of this woman's fickle heart was proving to be an entirely different matter. He sighed. "No, in retrospect I suppose you're right. I shouldn't have picked you up. You'll forgive me, I hope. I have other things on my mind beyond your comfort... namely, our continued survival."

Sophie continued to stare pointedly at the floor, apparently refusing to continue their discussion without hearing a proper apology. Filoro could feel the tension hanging between them in the musty necropolis air. *I'll have to get back in her good graces somehow*, he thought. *And she did seem to enjoy the magic lessons earlier...*

“You still haven’t answered my question,” Filoro said. He nodded towards the sword adorning Sophie’s hip. “Are you trained to fight with that blade of yours, or not?”

Sophie scuffed the ground self-consciously with her boot. “No. Not properly, anyway. I did some practice drills at home to get my stance right.”

Filoro took a step back. “Go on, then. Show me some of what you’ve learned. It’s better that I know what you’re capable of, in case we find ourselves in any scrapes.”

Sophie raised her heavy sword. She spun in a tight circle, slicing the air with slow overhand chops. She then executed a few halting horizontal blows, both hands on the grip, swinging the sword like a woodsman’s ax.

Despite her poor sword-handling, Sophie’s feet were expertly staggered, her core flexed, her shoulders low and pinned back. And most importantly, her eyes were gleaming with battlelust.

“Yes, I can work with this. I hope you wouldn’t mind if I gave you a few pointers?” he asked, drawing his rapier.

Before she could answer, Filoro lunged forward, blade flashing. Sophie instinctively reeled back and knocked the rapier out of the way with her own sword. Filoro pressed the attack by slashing at the side of Sophie’s torso.

This blow came too fast for Sophie to parry, and Filoro slapped her in the ribs with the flat of his thin blade. Grunting, Sophie launched a brutal retaliatory strike, a slow two-handed uppercut. Conscious of the dangers of sparring with live-edged weapons, particularly with an overeager novice, Filoro carefully danced out of the way.

“Again!” he called, whipping his sword once more at her side. “Faster this time. Keep light on your feet. Let me show you a different stance you can try...”

They sparred in this manner for twenty minutes before Filoro called it off. They flopped to the ground, Sophie red-faced and sweating profusely, and set to a recuperative breakfast of bread and hard cheese. Though Sophie’s past as a tanner had bestowed her with uncommon physical endurance and power, it was clear that she would need a fair deal more training before she could be trusted in a fight. Nonetheless, Filoro was pleased with her improving footwork and sword-handling, even after such a short training session.

And most of all, Filoro was glad that his gambit had paid off. Sophie was smiling ear-to-ear while she gobbled down the bread, their earlier squabble all but forgotten.

“You know, I’ve been thinking about what you said earlier,” Sophie said between munches. “If the skeletons, the constructs or whatever, know everything that goes on inside the necropolis, why haven’t they dogpiled us already?”

Filoro stopped slicing off a hunk of cheese and looked at her thoughtfully. “Hm. By all rights, they should have. I expected to be assailed as soon as I descended below the main floors. If the histories are to be believed, there should be hundreds of revenants roaming these grounds.”

“Well, then where are they?” Sophie asked. A few crumbs flew out of her mouth with every syllable.

“I can think of two likely explanations. First, perhaps we’ve been lucky. It’s well-known that Katan’s magical influence here has been fading over the years. It’s possible that some of the constructs have simply failed, that the creatures that were set to patrol this area, so far from the heart of the necropolis, have grown too feeble to mount an assault on intruders.”

Sophie nodded. “Right, that’s what I thought. The place might just be as empty down here as it was back on the main floors.”

Filoro laughed. “The uppermost floors were only ever occupied by Katan’s most trifling servants. It’s no wonder the place was empty. Any common rogue or two-bit highwayman could have cleared it out. But down here? No, not a chance. The halls are quiet, but they’re by no means empty.”

“Alright, then,” said Sophie. “If the constructs are still here then they’re dormant, too weak to pay any attention to us.”

“Yes, that’s possible,” Filoro said slowly. “But the other possibility... the other possibility is that it’s simply not the right time yet.” He gave Sophie a very serious look. “The other possibility is that the revenants are watching us, and waiting.”



After packing away their cheese and bread, the two broke camp and made for the passages. Though her legs were still sore and there were fresh blisters forming on her heels, Sophie felt surprisingly energized. She was ready for some action and hoped that the day had more in store than another interminable series of dark, cramped corridors.

Filoro had given her the torch, so at least today she could make out some details of her surroundings. The walls were made of the same black stone that she had seen outside the necropolis. Unlike the outer walls, though, the obsidian here was veined with gold filigree and covered in delicate engravings. And every few minutes, Sophie and Filoro passed by a masterfully carved sculpture or a jewel-encrusted mosaic, which, despite Sophie’s burning curiosity, they never stopped to investigate.

Eventually they entered an enormous vaulted room, which seemed to be the focal point of at least a dozen separate hallways. Sophie’s eyes were drawn to a conspicuous set of bone-white double doors on the far side of the room, so tall that they seemed to reach the curve of the ceiling.

She just couldn’t restrain herself any longer. She stopped and pointed at the ivory doors. “Filoro, hold on a moment,” she called. “Do you know what’s inside here?” Sophie recognized that she was being petty by insisting that they

investigate this particular room. But for hours, they had walked straight past every noteworthy thing in favor of more endless obsidian hallways. It was driving her mad.

Filoro gave the door a cursory inspection. “*Those* doors, the white ones? Hm, I’m not sure what’s inside. Maybe some traps set out to catch nosey intruders.” He turned his back and kept walking.

Sophie raised her eyebrows, still pointing at the doorway. “Oh, come on, there wouldn’t just be traps lying around. People lived and worked here, right? The necropolis was practically a whole self-contained kingdom, from what I’ve heard. What if a servant made a wrong turn and got blown to smithereens?”

The elf sighed. “Even if the room’s not trapped, Sophie, why would you want to bother with it? I assure you, we’ll come across plenty of points of interest along the way to the heart of the necropolis. Poking around where we don’t need to is just inviting unnecessary risk.”

Sophie crossed her arms. Filoro was being a real spoilsport. These floors had been sealed tight since the fall of Jazz Katan’s empire; there was doubtless some magnificent looting to be done here. Not that she would endorse grave-robbery under normal circumstances, of course, but plundering the tomb of a despised tyrant didn’t seem so wrong. In fact, Sophie could argue it was basically her moral duty to strip the place bare.

“Could we at least take a look inside? Even if it’s a bit of a detour, maybe it’ll lead us to something important, something helpful. What if there’s a big ol’ map carved on the wall in there?” She paused and rubbed the back of her neck. “I don’t know, it just seems reckless to me, is all, for us to charge blindly along some alleged magic trail, deeper and deeper into the necropolis without ever pausing to investigate our surroundings...”

Filoro sighed and stopped walking, finally relenting to Sophie’s near-suicidal curiosity. “Alright! If it will get you to keep moving, I’ll examine the doors. Then we can lea—”

“And then you’ll report back everything you see? So that, as a group, we can decide whether or not the chamber warrants further investigation?”

Filoro strode past Sophie and over to the double doors. “I will investigate, and tell you whether whatever magic is inside the room has the potential to harm us.” He raised his palms to the doors and half-closed his eyelids, entering one of his now-familiar trances. He stood there motionless for what felt like ages, Sophie fidgeting impatiently all the while.

Finally, Filoro lowered his hands and quirked his head to the side. “Oh, interesting,” he said under his breath, more to himself than to Sophie. “A control room of some sort? Or a switching station, perhaps?”

Sophie couldn’t stand the anticipation any longer. “Hey, Filoro, are you gonna share your findings?”

The elf stroked his chin in contemplation for another few moments before he piped up. “I detected traces of arcane energy, flowing to and from this room. Residues left behind by previous magical events.”

He peered intently at the door. “Based on these traces, there were once large amounts of energy at play inside this room. A powerful magical process took place here long ago... I suspect that this place was vitally important, in some way, to the necropolis’ operation.”

Finally, something exciting, Sophie thought, *And not only that, but something Filoro could be convinced to investigate further.* “Well, based on your description, it seems like we’d have to be idiots *not* to take a look around. I mean, you said it might be a control room, right?”

Filoro raised his eyebrows.

“Take magical traps, for example,” Sophie pressed on. “It would be pretty embarrassing for us to get snapped up by a ravaging pit that we could have turned off with the flip of a lever, if only we’d taken the time to explore the control room.”

He inspected the engravings on the door, tracing them with his fingers and soundlessly moving his lips. “You know, if my translation can be believed, we’re in some sort of utility area. ‘By the power within this and connected chambers, we humble servants ensure the everlasting care and maintenance of the kingdom of Jazz Katan, dread beloved Wheel-Striding king, Bringer of the Darkness’, and so forth.”

He glanced at the other doors that dotted the hallway, all marked with similar engravings. “If this is a maintenance area, I’d venture that every room in this section is tightly secured against intruders, tampering, or sabotage.”

Sophie was about to make a noise of protest, but Filoro cut her off. “Nonetheless, as you pointed out, it’s prudent that we investigate.”

Sophie crossed her arms triumphantly. With an aggrieved sigh, Filoro pushed open the enormous ivory double doors. Despite their size they swung open with ease, revealing a few feet of dimly lit pathway with nothing but darkness to either side. Filoro swung his torch into the room – but to little avail. The torch didn’t even seem to illuminate the pathway itself, which remained a uniform, dim gray. It was as though the room was *resisting* being illuminated.

“I can’t see a thing in there, Filoro. It’s like the room is swallowing up all the light.” Sophie leaned through the doorway and tried to focus her vision beyond the path, trying hard to make out the least feature in the inky black room. But she saw nothing. It was darker than looking at her own eyelids at night.

Filoro grunted. “This darkness may well be magically induced. We must tread carefully. Stay near me and do exactly as I say. If I sense any changes in the magical field, if I see anything unexpected, we pull out immediately.” Sophie nodded, then fell in close step beside the elf as they entered the room.

Despite her earlier bravado, only a few paces beyond the threshold, panic began to creep into Sophie’s mind. She felt like she was drowning in an ocean of darkness, like the room

was closing in on her from every which direction. She could swear she felt tendrils of shadow wrapping around her ankles, threatening to pull her off the path.

“H-hey Filoro, maybe we should just head to wherever it is we’re going and get out of here. We really don’t have to— “

“Shh!” Filoro’s hush echoed through the darkness. “I think I see something moving towards us,” he whispered hoarsely. “Don’t you? Look up ahead.”

Sophie squinted into the black, and sure enough there *was* something there: a pinprick of ghostly blue light, steadily growing in size and intensity. “Yeah, I see it,” she whispered back. “Looks like it’s coming right for us. Listen, we should really get moving, right? The door didn’t even swing shut behind us. We can slip right back out into the hallway, slam it shut and find a chair to wedge behind it.”

Sophie was babbling and would have continued indefinitely, had Filoro not put his hand up. “Wait a moment,” he said. “I think those are... torches?” He squinted toward the still-growing light as it split down the middle and surged towards them.

As the wave of light approached, Sophie could dimly make out its source: sconces set at even intervals on the walls were bursting into life one-by-one, as though ignited by an invisible rush of flame. In their pale, unnerving glow, Sophie could see that the room itself was narrow and high-ceilinged – a perfectly straight tunnel, so long that she couldn’t make out its end.

She laughed nervously. “Yeah, you’re right. It was just torches. Sorry about that. I guess I overreacted a bit, huh?”

In the torchlight, Sophie could now see that she and Filoro had walked out on a narrow stone bridge running parallel to the tunnel walls. To either side, the bridge simply ended and fell off into nothingness, without even a guardrail for protection. Like the room itself, the bridge seemed to stretch forward interminably into the distance. Sophie took a deep breath and craned her neck to look over the side of the

walkway. Despite the torchlight, she saw only more darkness, as though the path was suspended over an endless chasm.

In the dim torchlight she caught the glint of sweat beading on Filoro's forehead, saw him wipe it away with the back of his hand. It was strangely comforting to know that he had been frightened, too.

"There's no shame in being afraid," he said. "It's only if you start to panic that your fear becomes a threat. Otherwise it can be a great boon. If you can use it to guide you, as a warning that it's better to fall back than to keep pressing forward, then your fear can keep you alive."

Sophie nodded. Of course she wanted to take Filoro's advice to heart. She had always prided herself on her coolheadedness, her ability to grin and bear Miss Bumdel's most harrowing tantrums. But here in the belly of the necropolis, it seemed like the slightest thing was liable to set her off into a panic. She was starting to question whether she had an adventurous spirit after all.

"Having said that, I think it's for the best if we carry on," Filoro continued. "We've clearly chanced upon some sort of maintenance shaft. As you pointed out earlier, we may discover something here that could make our journey forward more palatable, if only a map or shortcut." With that, Filoro resumed walking down the path, still holding his torch out in front of him. Sophie followed, conscious of every footstep, careful to stay plumb in the middle of the bridge.

When she dared to lift her eyes from the path, Sophie inspected the now-illuminated walls of the passageway. At the entrance to the tunnel, the walls had been featureless and bare, made of the same black obsidian as the rest of the necropolis. But as they made their way down the tunnel shaft, she began to see etchings in the rock. At first these etchings only appeared in sparse patches, the occasional skull carved into the wall, or a solitary hooded figure surrounded by indecipherable glyphs. As they proceeded deeper in the tunnel shaft, the depictions grew denser and more elaborate, until eventually the tunnel walls and ceilings were completely covered in a sort of carved mural.

One especially disturbing section depicted hooded figures wrenching the limbs off of their cowering, still-living enemies. Hordes of skeletons were carved into the shadowed wall below them, their arms raised and mouths opened wide in screams or cheers. The etching descended far past the illumination of the flickering blue braziers, down into the darkness of the chasm.

Sophie had to quickly look back down at her feet to steady herself. She couldn't help but wonder if the engraving had some special significance. They had passed countless artistic reliefs and carvings on the way here, but the scenes depicted in this tunnel were larger and much more detailed than anything she had seen before.

After what felt like ages walking along the narrow stone bridge, an end to the tunnel was in sight: an enormous skull, wrought in gleaming gold, protruded from the face of the far wall. And to all sides, carved deep in the tunnel wall, was an avalanche of sinewy, wailing bodies, all grimacing faces and grasping hands, their forms cascading down into the darkness below the torchlight's reach. *Why would the necromancers bother putting something like this in a maintenance shaft? No one but the servants would ever even see it...*

A shock of fear coursed through her when she saw that the bridge led directly to a single door set far inside the skull's yawning mouth. Sophie got the creeping impression that she and Filoro were standing on its long, stone tongue – and that if they continued any farther, they might find themselves eaten alive. *Ocean below, I can't keep going.*

“Are you sure we should be here?” she whispered to Filoro. The elf started taking another step forward without responding, but she grabbed him by the arm. “Filoro!” she protested.

He locked eyes with her over his shoulder. “No one should be here.”

Sophie gulped, but she withdrew her hand and followed behind him through the mouth of the great golden skull. The door slid open as they approached. On the other side of the door, the darkness was just as impenetrable as it was in the

chasm below the bridge, and similarly unaffected by the torchlight.

Filoro drew his rapier. “Stay right behind me and keep your sword at the ready. There’s no telling what we might find inside.” The light dancing on their naked blades diminished with every step they took further into the skull’s gaping maw. Sophie caught another view of the carvings on the tunnel wall and shuddered. The carved mass of bodies looked even more horrendous close up.

They took a final step past the threshold of the door and were plunged into total darkness. Sophie felt the breath catch in her throat; each and every instinct rebelled against her going further into the pitch black room. She felt like entering this room had condemned her to this place, as though if she took even one more step forward she would simply dissolve into the necropolis. And more practically, without being able to see the stone beneath her feet, one wrong move, or a single moment of confusion, could mean a fatal tumble off the edge of the walkway.

Can Filoro see anything in this? I guess a dark elf would be used to living underground. But then, he did have torches in his pack. I bet even he’s blind in this darkness. Sophie reached forward and took a hold of Filoro’s shoulder. “Wouldn’t want to get separated in here,” she whispered. Filoro only grunted in response, but she was gratified that he didn’t pull away from her touch.

A sickly green light suddenly erupted before them. It was coming from a point some fifteen paces ahead, where light seemed to be flowing down the sides of a waist-high stone slab. From there, it spilled onto the ground and formed a circle inside the perimeter of the chamber. Unfamiliar shapes and sigils lined the circle, their forms alight with the same green glow.

“W-What is this place?” Sophie stammered. She could feel her heart pounding in her chest as Filoro slowly approached the stone slab. He muttered a brief incantation and the circle of light flickered in response.

“Looks like a teleportation circle. An uncommonly large one, too. I wonder why they needed so much room.” He let out a nervous laugh. “They must have been summoning some enormous creatures in here.”

Sophie’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “But the only way out of here is the way we came, through the skull. And that door isn’t too big. I don’t think the two of us could even pass through it side-by-side.”

“Hm?” Filoro knelt beside the glowing circle, tracing his fingers along the glyphs inscribed in the stone floor.

“Look around,” Sophie insisted. “Do you see any other exits? This place is a dead end. Anything that teleported into here, if it wanted to leave it would have to go through that door, right? Otherwise it would be stuck in here until they teleported it away.”

“That’s true. Then I wonder if there’s another way out,” Filoro said. He stood back up and started feeling around on the wall. “Maybe a hidden panel, a trapdoor, a lever tucked away in some seam... aha!”

He swung his torch towards the wall. “There are more glyphs over here, Sophie, look! Alike to the ones on the floor. But these ones haven’t been activated yet.”

Sophie looked over, and indeed there were more strange runes carved into the wall, their unlit shapes cast into stark relief under Filoro’s torchlight.

“Can you read them?” she asked.

“Yes. ‘Open’. Seems promising.” Filoro hovered his palm over the wall and spoke another incantation. The glyphs sputtered into life, glowing the same sickly green as the ones lining the teleportation circle. “Then we just give it a kick...” A pulse of energy radiated out from Filoro’s direction. The inscription beneath his palm flared a brilliant white, and a moment later the circle of glyphs on the floor flared white as well.

Suddenly a loud roar split the room, accompanied by a simultaneous blinding flash of light. Both Sophie and Filoro

shielded their eyes from the intense glare. Once her vision adjusted, Sophie nearly jumped out of her skin. A heap of skeletons now lay crumpled and motionless inside the teleportation circle, all still decked out in their ancient, rotting clothes.

“What’s going on? Did we trigger a trap?” Sophie said, edging back towards the door.

Filoro stood tensed with his sword at the ready. After a moment, long enough to be satisfied that none of the multitude of skeletons were going to start moving, he lowered his blade. “Damn it all! No, Sophie, I think those glyphs worked exactly as intended. ‘Open’, they read... they must have been enchanted to open the portal. But, then...”

His eyes narrowed. “Sophie, I don’t believe the necromancers were summoning monsters in here. I believe that they were summoning *victims*.” He gestured to the pile of skeletons. “Back when they were still alive, all of these people must have been corralled somewhere in preparation to be teleported to this chamber. When Katan vanished, well, I guess they were just trapped.”

He threw Sophie a sorrowful glance. “All these people likely starved to death somewhere far away from here. They were among Jazz Katan’s final victims, slain by the tyrant’s dead hand. Senseless deaths...”

Sophie looked at the pile of bodies and shook her head in outrage. What could the necromancers have planned to do to all these poor people? What was this place even *for*? Her mind reeled at the possibilities.

This was getting all too grim for Sophie’s taste. Couldn’t she see it was pointless for her to have come here at all? Maybe she could just go back to town, apologize to Miss Bumdell for missing a day or two of work, and forget about all this. Maybe she could—

Sophie and Filoro clapped their hands over their respective ears as a grating, ear-piercing screech assaulted them from all sides.

And then something was moving in the dim green light. Sophie frantically scanned the room to try to pin down its location, to assess whether she was in danger, but this proved impossible. There wasn't something moving in the room – the whole room was moving. The walls were sliding around the circular perimeter of the room, moving faster and faster, drawing inward with every rotation. The walls were closing in.

“Filoro! Run!” Sophie yelled, praying that her voice would carry over the grinding roar of stone on stone. They turned tail and raced for the door, running at a full sprint out through the golden skull. As they crossed the threshold back into the tunnel shaft, Sophie saw more movement out of the corner of her eye and hazarded a glance to the tunnel walls. The carved figures that had lined the tunnel had somehow animated and were now sliding down the walls like liquid. Stone bodies scraped against the wall in an echoing chorus as they disappeared into the dark chasm below, their carved figures seeming to writhe and twist in the dim torchlight.

Sophie didn't realize she was frozen in place watching this grisly scene unfold until Filoro grabbed her roughly by the arm. “Come on!” he screamed, pulling her further along the bridge.

Sophie obliged him and sprinted like she never had before, running for her life, her legs pumping as though by their own accord. The stone walkway was rumbling violently beneath her feet, and with every step she risked being knocked off balance. At the speed she was going, even a minor stumble was liable to throw her clear off the bridge and send her plummeting into the darkness.

Just keep moving... just keep moving..., she repeated to herself like a litany between footsteps, keeping her eyes locked on the ground in front of her.

“Up ahead!” Filoro called. Sophie lifted her eyes from the floor. The bone-white doors to the outer hallway had come into view, looming large on the otherwise featureless far wall of the tunnel shaft. As Sophie opened her mouth to respond, the bridge beneath her feet shook with a sudden, massive force.

Sophie was thrown forward, landing hard on her hands and knees. She tried to stand, but another quake knocked her off her feet and threw her towards the lip of the bridge. Just in time, Filoro wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her upright.

As abruptly as it had started, the shaking stopped, leaving the tunnel unnervingly still and calm. Sophie and Filoro huddled together in hushed anticipation, Filoro still holding her in a loose embrace – but nothing happened. “Huh. I guess that wasn’t so bad,” Sophie said.

A faint and distant *ping* echoed down the tunnel shaft, followed by a mechanical whir; and the narrow stone bridge suddenly tilted beneath their feet. “Grab on!” Filoro shouted, as both he and Sophie tumbled to the ground and started to slide down the now nearly-vertical walkway.

They both managed to grab onto the stone lip of the bridge, their fingers catching a few thin tiles just barely jutting up from the surface of the walkway. With every passing second, Sophie could feel her grip weaken as the smooth obsidian became slick with sweat. Her hands were sliding slowly but surely off the stone lip.

“Filoro...” Sophie said quietly. Filoro’s face took on a solemn cast as he repositioned his hands on the ledge beside her.

“Grab onto me,” he grunted.

Sophie shook her head. “I can’t– I’m sorry, I can’t let go of the ledge.”

“Sophie, grab onto me!” Filoro roared. Sophie took a single, deep breath to steel her nerves then flung her body to the side, releasing her grip on the ledge and reaching for Filoro.

At first she thought she was a goner; her fingers slipped down the front of Filoro’s chainmail armor without finding any purchase. But just before she fell out of reach, in a last ditch effort, she threw her arms straight up and somehow managed to grab hold of the elf’s legs. She clung desperately

to him, slowing her breathing to try to tamp down the adrenaline coursing through her veins.

Above her, Filoro hung motionless from the ledge. His eyes were closed, his face contorted in a grimace. He was clearly struggling just to hold on.

Meanwhile, even more ghostly blue sconces were igniting, these ones lower in the tunnel shaft, illuminating deeper and deeper into the chasm. Far below, Sophie could make out a massive trough of sickly green sludge, stretching all the way along the tunnel shaft. “Filoro, look down,” she whispered

Filoro’s eyes flicked down into the pit. He let out a stream of curses, then took a deep breath. “We’re going to have to try to jump for the wall,” he said with an air of forced calmness.

“There’s no way,” Sophie said. Her vice grip on Filoro’s legs tightened.

“I know what this place is now, Sophie. I know what the necromancers did here. They needed a steady supply of bones to make their constructs. And this... this is where they got them.” He swallowed hard. “If my intuition is correct, that thing below us was their rendering trough. The tank where they stripped the flesh from their victims’ skeletons.”

Sophie just shook her head, too panicked to even listen to what Filoro was saying. “I can’t make that jump, Filoro. I just can’t do it. We need another plan.”

Filoro let out a guttural groan as his fingers slipped on the slick obsidian. He caught himself by his fingertips.

“Oh, I should have just stayed home and made leather,” Sophie wailed.

“Well you *didn’t*, did you?” Filoro said, panic creeping into his voice. “So unless you’d like to die here, I suggest that you take my advice and *jump*.”

Sophie sniffled and nodded into Filoro’s thighs. This was no time for fear. She unburied her face, braced her feet against Filoro, and pushed off his body to propel herself towards the tunnel wall. She swung her arms forward, reaching towards the wall—

But her jump fell short. She was free-falling down the chasm, with nothing to grab onto, no way to stop her descent. She heard a rough scrape and a curse as Filoro leapt after her, both of them now plummeting towards the ancient flesh-rendering trough.



As Filoro sank into the slime that filled the rendering trough, he judged that there were two good things to be said for his current situation. Firstly, the stuff inside the trough evidently lost some of its flesh-melting acidity over the centuries since the structure had been abandoned, as he didn't feel his skin burning where it touched him. Secondly, it the slime felt pleasantly warm against his skin.

Beside him, maybe five feet away, Sophie had somehow fallen into the trough head-first. She was visible only as a set of legs protruding above the slime's surface, kicking and flailing around in a violent panic.

Although Filoro could hold his elven breath for a staggering twenty minutes without suffering any ill effects, he was well-aware that Sophie might not have time on her side. Acid or no, the thought of suffocating in a centuries-old ooze didn't particularly appeal to him. And the longer he waited and assessed the situation, the farther they both sank down into the viscous slime, making their escape all the more difficult.

He had to act fast to get them out of this goopy situation.

Filoro struggled against the dense slime, straining to get into a better position. After a few attempts he was able to brace himself against the side of the trough. He pushed off and propelled himself towards Sophie, but even though he kicked off the wall as hard as he could, he moved scarcely a few feet through the ooze. Sophie, now only visible as a pair of feet poking out above the slime, was still too far out of reach. His arms outstretched, Filoro wrenched himself towards her and tried to eke out the final distance between them.

Fortunately, whether she heard the sound of his struggles or was somehow able to see his body through the translucent slime, Sophie realized that he was trying to reach her. She bent

her knees, angling her feet towards Filoro to eke out the last precious inches they needed.

Filoro wrapped a hand around one of her ankles. He plunged his other arm below the surface of the slime and hooked it around her thigh, dragging her, still upside-down, into his embrace. Then he started to chant.



Muffled by several feet of interceding sludge, Sophie could faintly hear Filoro muttering what sounded like some sort of prayer. By this point, she had mostly recovered from the initial shock of being dunked head-first in the slime pit. She had even regained enough composure to help Filoro reach her. But now, submerged in slime and held in the elf's arms, she felt herself losing her cool. Maybe it was just the blood rushing to her head from being upside-down for so long, or maybe she was going loopy from the lack of oxygen. But something definitely felt off. The slime around her felt almost like it was pulsating, slurping and sloshing against her flesh.

She heard Filoro shout out a single, muffled word.

There was a sensation unlike anything Sophie had ever felt before. First she felt an intense heat emanating from Filoro's body, so hot it threatened to squeeze the breath from her lungs. Then, in an instant, the heat was gone and a ripple of force blasted through her, a powerful pulse centered on Filoro. She heard the sides of the slime trough shatter with a resonant crack, and the sludge that had surrounded them tore away from their bodies as though it had been buffeted by a ferocious gust of wind. If Filoro hadn't been holding onto her so tightly, Sophie was sure that she would have been thrown clear across the room along with the slime.

Sophie took in a merciful gasp of air – at least she wasn't going to suffocate to death. But this feeling of relief was cut short. No longer buoyed by the thick slime, and with Filoro's magic now dissipated, Sophie and Filoro started to fall.

Quick as lightning, Filoro drew a small crossbow from his waistband. Still with one arm wrapped around Sophie, he pointed it up towards the bridge and fired it in a clean arc.

There was a faint whistling noise followed by a dull thump. Not a moment later, Sophie felt a sickening jerk as their fall came to a sudden halt. Sophie craned her neck up and saw that Filoro was clinging one-handed to a thin, shimmering rope, hanging down from where the hooked crossbow bolt had found purchase on the edge of the carved stone of the bridge.

Sophie was starting to get a little embarrassed by the way Filoro's strong arm was clasped around her thigh. And still upside-down, there wasn't much she could do except try to break the tension and distract herself from the closeness of their bodies. "You know, Filoro, I've never been held upside-down over an enormous flesh-melting trough before."

She paused for a moment, but Filoro didn't grace her comment with a response. She took a different tack, hoping to catch him off-guard. "In a way, this all feels strangely familiar," she said.

Filoro raised one slender, gooey, elven eyebrow.

"I mean, as a leatherworker I was always peeling the skin off carcasses, melting off all the unwanted meat and fat and stuff," she said. "And this seems like the same thing, but with me on the receiving end of it. Like, now *I'm* the one in the chemical vat. And necromancers want to strip all the flesh off me so they can get to the good stuff, in this case, my bones—"

"That's a lovely sentiment, Sophie, and I'd be delighted to hear more about those parallels in the future," Filoro said flatly. "But right now, I have to ask a favor of you."

A favor? What could he possibly want from a goopy, gloopy, upside-down woman?

"I need you to climb over me and climb the rope yourself," he continued. "I can't reposition myself while I'm holding onto you like this."

Sophie hesitated for a moment. Having climbed plenty of trees in her youth, Sophie had no doubt she'd be able to climb the rope. The real issue here would be getting herself right-side up without breaking Filoro's grip. She would have to keep

right on top of him the whole time to keep their weight centered straight down from the rope.

No doubt, things were going to get a little too close for comfort – or maybe, if she played her cards right, just close enough. Sophie smiled mischievously. A glob of slime leaked out of her boot and almost fell into her mouth.

“And quickly, if you please. I’m not sure I can hold on much longer,” Filoro added, perhaps sensing that Sophie was brewing up a dangerous idea.

“Okay, Filoro. I’m going to get myself upright, but you absolutely *can’t* move. Just let me do my thing and I’ll be up that rope in a jiffy.” Sophie was ready to work her magic. First, grabbing onto Filoro’s legs for support, she shimmed herself up. She worked her hips up Filoro’s torso until her thighs were at his shoulder level. This maneuver left her face pressed dangerously close to the point where his thighs met his hips.

Sophie then slowly kicked her legs forward, resting her thighs on his shoulders. She squeezed her legs, gripping his head between them.

“I’m close, Filoro, just hold on a moment,” she called up to him, realizing that this position was even more compromising than she had intended.

“‘Urry hup!’” came Filoro’s muffled voice from above her. His mouth warmed the fabric of her pants in a way that made Sophie blush.

“Just hold on a second. I’ve almost got the rope.” Sophie hooked her legs down Filoro’s back and started to flex her core, curling her torso up in a crunch. As she did so, she felt Filoro’s face pushing into the fabric of her pants, not unpleasantly, between her legs.

After a few moments’ struggle, she managed to get her upper body high enough that she could grab hold of the rope. She shot up the rope all the way to the lip of the bridge and clambered up, leaving Filoro to dangle alone in the darkness.

Perhaps a minute passed before Filoro followed and pulled himself up over the edge, still dripping with slime. Without so much as a glance at Sophie, he turned away from her and busied himself with recovering the hooked crossbow bolt from where it had caught on the stone bridge. Sophie could see a hint of a flush fading from his sharp, ashen gray cheeks, but otherwise his face did nothing to betray his emotions. *Is it just my imagination, or does he seem upset?*

Filoro quickly coiled the rope and loaded the bolt back into the crossbow before shoving it back into his pack. Before Sophie could say a single word, he turned around and started making his way back to the chamber door. Sophie followed a few feet behind him. Hopefully, the elf just needed a few minutes to recover from their encounter with the slime pit. But as they continued on their inscrutable path through the black halls, it became clear to Sophie that Filoro was brooding, as he remained unusually sulky even as he led them along the invisible leylines.

Maybe I laid it on a little too thick back there in the slime pit. I didn't mean for things to get so intimate... it did really seem like the best way to get to the rope. Is that what he's upset about? Or is he mad that I got us into that mess in the first place? He was the one who wanted to keep poking around, I gave him an out! Whatever it was she'd done to upset him, she wanted to know about it. She jogged to close the gap between them.

“Hey, wait up a minute. What’s got your horses all nickering? Can we talk about what happened back there?” But the dark elf said nothing.

“Come on, Filoro. We have to work together here. There’s no way I could’ve known we were going to end up dumped in that trough. And we *both* agreed to investigate the tunnel.”

“It’s nothing like that.” Filoro stopped walking.

“Then what are you so cross about? Did I embarrass you back there on the rope?”

“Just drop it, Sophie. ”

But Sophie pressed on. “Don’t tell me I’ve offended your elven sensibilities. Because we were in a real life-or-death scenario hanging over that slime pit. I was just doing what I had to in order to climb out.”

“Sophie, it’s not...” Filoro sighed. “It would be difficult for me to explain. I’m not upset with you, no need to worry about that. Just... let’s keep moving. We can make our camp in a while, clean this sludge out of clothes. We can talk later.”

Once again Sophie noticed a flush spreading across the elf’s face. But she figured it was prudent to drop the issue. She hefted her sword to her shoulder and set her boots to walking, now side-by-side with the frustrating Filoro.

CHAPTER 6

The sludge that soaked their clothes and hair had dried into a greasy, foul-smelling substance. Just the feeling of the stuff on their skin was enough to set both Filoro and Sophie's tempers running hot. They stifled curses and tried to pick and peel as much of the substance off themselves as they could as they ventured further into the necropolis.

They walked down the labyrinthine corridors without much excitement until they discovered a series of sitting rooms, all bizarrely interconnected by wooden doors identical to the first, and all decked out with identical crimson sofas and rugs. Sophie followed Filoro as he traced the leylines from room to nearly-identical room, muttering angrily under his breath all the while.

Within just a few minutes Sophie was utterly disoriented, with no idea how to get back to the hallway they had come in through. She could have sworn that they were revisiting rooms they had already been in, retracing their steps through previous chambers. Once she even saw flecks of greasy slime on the rug and upholstery, clear evidence that she and Filoro had passed through before. But she made no mention of this to Filoro. His grumbling aside, he seemed to have the situation under control – and even if he didn't, she had no desire to upset his already-foul mood.

“Finally!” Filoro growled, as he pushed open another door. Sophie was pleased to see that it didn't lead to yet another sitting room, but rather to a high-ceilinged, arched stone hallway ending in a set of enormous stone double-doors. Each door was about two Filoros wide and three Filoros high at the peak of the arch.

Filoro walked forward. “This is it. The entrance to the heart of the necropolis. Only the necromancers and their most trusted servants were ever permitted beyond this point,” he said, slowly running his hands over the door's stone surface.

He looked at Sophie. “There are no chronicles of what awaits on the other side. We need to be prepared for anything.”

Sophie didn't like getting ordered about, but she knew Filoro was right: if there was trouble, she'd better be ready for it. She leveled her executioner's blade and nodded to the surly elf. Filoro in turn drew his rapier, took a deep breath, and pressed his shoulder hard into the stone doors.

They swung open without any resistance at all, sending Filoro tumbling to the ground. “Be careful!” Sophie whispered, leaning over him to peek inside the open doors. She caught a glimpse of a steamy bathhouse the size of the Pilora town square, the walls glimmering with delicate gold filigree. *Oh, it's wonderful!*

Then the flash of a blade cut across her vision, headed straight for the prone Filoro.

“Watch out!” Sophie cried as she lunged forward to deflect the blade with her own. Her aim was true, and the other sword bounced off the ground with a metallic clatter.

She glanced up at her new adversary – and found herself staring straight into the empty eye-pits of a grinning skull. *Now this is more how I imagined the adventure going!*

Sophie pivoted on her back foot and launched a horizontal swing into the skeleton's ribcage. She hit it dead-on, and the creature's ribs splintered as though they were made of rotten wood. As the skeleton lurched forward, Sophie finished the job with an overhand strike to the cranium. The skeleton clattered to the ground, its sword still dangling uselessly in its grip.

Filoro got back onto his feet. “You saved me!” he said incredulously. But Sophie's attention was focused on the room behind him. Through the thick steam, she could see ripples disturbing the still water of the bath. There was a faint wave, a strange turbulence – and ivory skulls, too many to count, began poking over the water's surface. Apparently, this bathhouse had its own retinue of skeletal guards.

“I don’t think there’s time for thanks right now, Filoro. If you haven’t noticed, we have a horde of bone-butts to deal with.”

The first of the skeletons emerged from the water, its naked bones dripping and steaming in the torchlight. It leveled a rusty scimitar in Sophie’s direction and clacked its teeth menacingly. Its friends, similarly armed and clacking, followed close behind.

“And it looks like they want to stop us from taking a bath!” Without waiting for his response, Sophie charged forward.

She had dispatched six skeletons by the time Filoro caught up to her, every stroke of her blade transforming bone into osseous dust. Skeletons crumpled and shattered under her relentless assault.

She wasn’t sure what the exact requirements were to kill a necromantic construct – was it sufficient to destroy the skull, given that the creature probably didn’t have a brain? But inflicting grievous, bone-shattering injury seemed to work well enough. Even the toughest skeleton she faced, one with bones like a shotputter’s and a heavy greataxe to match, fell lifelessly to the floor after a few solid whacks to the spine and shoulder.

Sophie’s arms were beginning to burn from swinging around her heavy sword, but she pushed her discomfort aside. The sight of this bathhouse, and with it the promise of a good scrub-down, had put a second wind into her sails. Sophie was on the warpath, and nothing could stand in her way. Every skeleton she cleaved in twain was another step towards her new goal, the most critical object of her desire: a hot, steamy bath.

After a few minutes, the bones were piling up on the bathhouse floor and the horde was visibly thinning. The process was almost mechanical: approach a skeleton, parry its lazy scimitar swipe, smash it to bits. Between blows, Sophie found herself thinking about how well she’d done today, regardless of Filoro’s grumbled protestations. Plenty of

skeletons smashed, a few traps thwarted, and now a little workout before a refreshing dip.

Yet another bone exploded in the wake of Sophie's blade, and she let out a triumphant shout. But something nagged at the back of her mind. Down here, the necropolis appeared well-maintained, free of dust and mold and vermin – even still beautiful in its own grim way. The undead were clearly keeping the heart of the necropolis in tip-top condition.

So why were the custodians themselves in such bad shape? In her years at the tannery, she had cut through her fair share of animal bones. She knew exactly how difficult it was to hack through the hard outer layers. But these skeletons seemed to shatter after even a glancing blow. They were practically falling apart beneath her touch.

“Hey Filoro, what's the deal with these skeletons? Why are they so weak?”

Filoro frowned as he sidestepped a clumsy blow from the skeleton in front of him. He followed up with a slap from his rapier, which shattered the creature's tibia and left it writhing on the ground. Filoro stood there for a moment with his hands on his hips and a puzzled expression on his face. “Now that you mention it, they do seem rather fragile. And it's strange, because—”

Filoro paused to deal with yet another skeleton, this one already missing one leg and most of its teeth. He broke its spine with one well-placed thrust of his rapier. “It's strange, because these skeletons are revenants: corpses imbued with magic then set to their own devices. They are animated and guided by that initial magic, and subsequently exist independent of the sorcerer who raised them. In theory, a revenant can exist for thousands of years without weakening in the slightest.”

“The only other way to animate a corpse is for a sorcerer to channel their own energy, their own life essence, into a vessel,” Filoro continued. “But without the sorcerer, the magic fades. All of the channeled constructs here died when Katan did.”

Sophie finished off another skeleton and spat out a mouthful of bone dust. She spun around looking for her next undead victim but came up empty. They had obliterated every last skeleton.

She turned back to Filoro. “So these skeletons should be as strong as the day they were animated, right? But didn’t you say this was the only entrance to the center of the necropolis? It doesn’t make sense for Jazz Katan to have posted such lousy guards at a chokepoint.”

“Indeed. Well, it’s certainly puzzling,” Filoro said, wiping his rapier clean on his pant leg.

Sophie shrugged. Now that skeletal horde had been vanquished, she found her attention drawn to the bathhouse itself. Maybe she was just spoiled by her daily baths back home, taken diligently in an attempt to scrub out some of the stink of the tannery, but the combination of sweat and bone dust that had accumulated on top of the leftover dried slime was completely intolerable to her. Not to mention, this bathhouse was far fancier than anything she had ever seen back in Pilora. Clearly the sorcerer king and his court took their hygiene seriously.

She looked around the room for any knobs, valves, or buttons she could fiddle with to create a positively royal experience. She was sure she would find soaps so ancient they were already ancient in the time of Jazz Katan, along with oils that would polish her skin so smooth a sword would slick right off her. And the water! Oh, the water! Springing up from far underground, sourced from some mysterious reservoir where deep things grew fat on enchanted life water.

Sophie tore off her leather armor, stripping down to her plainclothes, and raced around the room. But to her chagrin there was neither soap nor oil to be found, not even a single lousy scrub brush.

Sophie dropped to her knees. “My royal soaps... my ancient oils,” Sophie groaned. “My... enchanted water...” She groped around the stone floors in search of a hidden compartment or control panel.

Filoro saw her pitiful plight but didn't offer to help. "I hate to spoil your fun, but I'm not sure it's prudent for us to stay here. We should press on towards the heart of the necropolis," he pointed out.

Sophie looked back to him with an expression so heart-wrenching that Filoro knew this was an argument he'd never win. He continued cleaning his equipment while he waited for Sophie to come to terms with the situation. She moped about the room, trying to press down every last obsidian tile.

To Filoro's surprise, Sophie evidently *did* find a hidden switch. The bath sprang to life, bubbling and roiling away with renewed vigor. Sophie let out a gasp of delight and leaned over the edge of the pool just as its fountain features came on. A gout of water shot out and splashed her in the chest, drenching her thin cotton shirt.

"I think I got it running, Filoro! Must have hit a control lever or something by accident," Sophie called out excitedly.

"Oh, that's... that's great, Sophie," Filoro replied.

As Sophie turned to face him, she caught Filoro staring in her direction. He quickly averted his gaze, all of the sudden very interested in the far wall of the bathhouse.

Sophie looked down and realized how sodden she was – and, more importantly, how sheer her shirt was when it got wet. She looked practically naked from the waist up.

With her bosom barely hidden behind the translucent cotton, she couldn't help but blush a little. Filoro had been ogling her! Sure, the elf was a bit of a grouch. Frankly, today he had been downright rude at times. But realizing that Filoro had noticed her in a romantic way sent butterflies fluttering in her stomach. Back in Pilora she had felt untouchable, unapproachable, with the stink of the tannery forming a bubble of protective unattractiveness around her. Now, as she started to undo the clasps of her shirt, she could hardly make out any of those familiar tannery smells. In their place were the musty odors of sweat, slime, and ancient bone.

She smiled to herself and turned back to the bath. She figured Filoro probably wasn't bold enough to keep looking in her direction, but she nonetheless made no attempt to hide herself as her shirt hit the floor in a soggy heap. Her boots and pants joined the pile, and Sophie slowly lowered her naked body into the dark, roiling water.

She had foregone the stone steps that descended gradually into the water, opting instead to go straight for the deep-end. The water was the perfect temperature, hot but not scalding. She settled down on the stone bench that ran the length of the bath just under the surface. Undercurrents in the pool tugged at her legs, stripping away the layers of grime from her skin, as Sophie allowed herself to sink lower into the water, all the way up to her neck. She tilted her head back and closed her eyes, luxuriating in the experience.

Despite his earlier comment, it seemed that Filoro had decided to join her in the pool. Had Sophie peeked through half-lidded eyes to watch him (and she never would have admitted to doing such a thing, even if she had) she would have seen that he was in the process of stripping off his filthy armor. And underneath his fine elven chainmail, Sophie was astonished to see that Filoro was wearing nothing at all. His masterfully crafted armor was so soft and supple inside that it didn't dare chafe even his most sensitive body parts.

Had she kept watching him, Sophie surely would have noticed the delicate scars criss-crossing his shoulders and back like strands of wayward silk, perfectly placed to accentuate the curves of muscle on his back. They were clean lines and obviously intentionally inflicted. Sophie couldn't help but wonder how Filoro had acquired the strange marks – whether they were common among dark elf men, or a fashion statement peculiar to Filoro himself.

If Sophie had continued to sneak glances his way, she would have seen how his legs, slender and deliciously toned, rose all the way up to a most appealing set of buttocks, so smooth and firm she had to stifle a gasp (or would have, had she been watching). His leather trousers had concealed a

strong, shapely, perfectly proportioned rump, the sort that Sophie longed to squeeze.

Filoro started to turn towards the pool, and Sophie hurriedly closed her eyes and feigned disinterest. She heard his footsteps approach her on the damp stone floor, then grow more distant as he headed for the steps into the shallow end. There was a faint splash as he entered the water, and Sophie thought that now might be a perfectly reasonable – in other words, plausibly deniable – time to take a gander at the elf.

Filoro stood in the shallow end, facing away from Sophie. The surface of the water drew circles around his powerful thighs. The room's dim torchlight highlighted two dimples flanking his spine, surprisingly delicate despite the musculature of his lower back. He sighed contentedly as he leaned forward and splashed his face and chest with water.

Sophie scrubbed herself absentmindedly with a bar of rough, musky-smelling soap she had plundered from Filoro's bag. The soap smelled like him, and Sophie that she supposed that she would, too, by the time she was dried off and dressed. The royal soaps and ancient oils she had fantasized about hadn't materialized, so for now this would have to do.

Her lack of fancy soaps aside, she had to admit that she was pleased to finally be able to bathe again. She tried her best to just savor the moment as wisps of dried ooze peeled off of her skin and drifted to distant corners of the dark pool. She even risked another quick glance towards Filoro's tragically un-oiled backside.

However, instead of grazing the wide pasture of his back, she found herself meeting the elf's pale gaze. He had turned around to sit on the same underwater ledge as her and was now facing in her direction.

They both quickly averted their eyes. *Oh no*, Sophie thought, *how much did he see? I know he saw me get drenched by the water spout earlier, but at least I was still technically covered up. If he's been watching me all this time, he must have seen... well, everything!*

The redness of Sophie's face began to fade, but heavy blusher that she was, she knew she still likely looked faintly of tomato. *What gives him the right to ogle? He's been on my ass all day about not knowing how to adventure properly, and now... wait...*

What if... what if he's got the, you know, the hots for me? For all of Filoro's grumbling and guardedness, he *had* gone out of his way to pull her out of a tight spot or two. Adventuring solo must have been lonely for him, and she knew that lonely people could catch feelings fast.

She, of course, hadn't developed any real feelings for *him*. No, it certainly took more than saving her bacon a few times to get into Sophie's heart. But even as she had that thought, she knew that it wasn't true. Filoro had become more than just a fellow adventurer. She caught herself imagining what she might do if Filoro were to get up and sit beside her. The blush that had been fading from her cheeks sprang back to life, crawling down her shoulders and chest.

She badly wanted to keep looking at the naked Filoro. *But what if he catches me looking at him again? What if I've got this all wrong?* She spent a minute fidgeting, but finally worked up the courage to sneak a glance.

Filoro was staring right at her.

"Sophie... is there something I can do for you?" Filoro's question was met with silence. "If you're upset about my demeanor earlier today, I'm sorry. I know that I can be harsh at times." He closed his eyes and sighed, breaking their shared gaze. "I let myself get too concerned," Filoro continued. "I felt angry with myself, thinking that you might come to harm here. And I would have been to blame, personally at fault, for leading you straight into danger."

The water rippled as he sank deeper in. He spread his arms along the lip of the pool, brushing the gold filigree with his long, slender fingers. "I know this place's reputation as well as anyone else: a harmless historical landmark, too damaged to serve as a fort or hideout. The perfect place for a novice to get

a feel for adventure without more danger than a stray pack of raccoons.”

Sophie blinked.

“That’s why you came here, isn’t it?” he continued. “To get a new start? You weren’t supposed to stumble across me, not when following me would eventually lead you down a path of pain.” His words echoed across the bathhouse. “No one survives walking beside me, Sophie. Not for very long, at least. And I want... no, I *need* to make sure you make it through this. I can’t lose anyone else. Not even a stranger.”

Sophie looked at him askance. “We’re not strangers anymore.”

“No, I suppose we’re more than that.” Filoro was still looking in Sophie’s direction, but she had the impression he wasn’t looking at her but past her, into some cold and distant past.

Sophie waded over until she was right beside him. She sank down into the water and stared out with him into the blackness at the far side of the room. “I’m sorry, Filoro. I know I’ve been reckless. I’ve always been a bit chaotic when I’m scared, but I hoped I could hide it. I hoped that you’d think I was strong.” She folded her arms over her chest. “I just wanted to get away from it all. Away from my little hamlet, away from my job. Away from Miss Bumdel.” Sophie paused. “You don’t know her. She’s horrible.”

“I know this is a dangerous path I’m on, but it at least leads somewhere... and even if it doesn’t, I know I’m happier taking the scenic route.” She looked down at the mirrored surface of the water. “I’m sorry if your path has been unkind to you, Filoro. But no matter what happens, I’m really glad we met. The past few days have been so much more exciting than anything else in my life.”

She dangled her legs from the edge of the stone bench. “I promise I’ll try to be more careful from now on. I don’t want to admit it, Filoro, but I’m scared.”

And that was the truth. For all the ogling and posturing she'd been getting up to just a few minutes before, the emotional toll of the danger she'd been in all day had finally caught up to her.

Maybe it was the tranquility of the bathhouse that let the feeling really sink in. She felt like sheer luck had kept her alive this far: that the bathhouse guards had been so weak, that the ooze, now cleansed from her body and clothes, had lost potency over the years. If it had still been effective, she and Filoro would have been stripped to skeletons, forced to join the dead army of a dead sorcerer. It hadn't happened that way, of course, but who was to say it couldn't have? Or that the next time they wandered into a trap, that their luck would hold?

Sophie would have felt very small and very scared, but just at that moment Filoro's strong arm descended around her shoulder. Had she not felt his calloused yet smooth fingers clasp her shoulder, she might have cried right then and there; but he put his arm around her, and he held her shoulder tight, and he even pulled her close. Somehow, he could just tell that she needed it.

It felt shockingly normal as their thighs touched and her arm pressed into Filoro's side. Even in the hot water, Sophie could feel the heat of his body beside hers. She leaned over and rested her head against his shoulder. They sat like that for a while, just the two of them, and listened to the low burbling of the bathwater.

"It's so peaceful," Sophie murmured. "I never would have thought... with everything the necromancers did here, I never would have expected a place like this."

"Mm," Filoro agreed, lightly squeezing Sophie's shoulder. His eyes were closed, and the moisture from the steam was beading on his forehead and cheeks. He looked completely at ease. A certain tension was absent from his face, a stiffness about his eyes and jaw that Sophie hadn't even recognized until it was gone.

A droplet formed on his brow and threatened to fall onto his eyelid. Sophie reached up and brushed it away with her thumb – and then, without thinking, she allowed her hand to linger, holding his cheek in her hand. Filoro opened his eyes, eyebrows slightly raised. She lightly turned his head to the side, to face her.

Filoro pulled her closer, his hand against her back. He pulled her close enough that their lips were brushing and his face was all she could see. She could smell the earthiness of his skin, the faint smell of fresh sweat mixed with soap. Then they kissed. She felt the warmth of his lips spreading into hers, and she melted in his embrace.

After a moment Filoro pulled back and locked his eyes with hers. Sophie could practically hear her heart pounding in her ears. “Filoro, you know I’ve never...,” she whispered.

“I know,” he murmured back. He leaned toward her and his lips traced a line from her jaw down to her collarbone.

She felt her breathing quicken as she put her hand on his bare knee. “But what I’m trying to say is that, if I... if either of us died here, if it ended like this... well, it would be a shame.” She slid her hand halfway up his inner thigh.

“Sophie...,” he stammered. She shifted her hands and in one clean motion hoisted herself into his lap, facing him while straddling his thighs. It was so easy to reveal herself to him, now. *This is crazy, I was so terrified just a moment ago.*

“If you’re okay with it, Filoro...” Sophie’s hand found the slope of his collarbone. She followed it down his sternum to and over his broad chest. His ash gray skin was smooth as polished stone and she swore it faintly buzzed with magic.

Filoro’s gaze, in turn, traveled down from Sophie’s eyes, lingering on her neck and breasts before falling even further down her body.

Sophie’s hand had continued moving downward, sliding over his water-slick abs to stop just short of his slowly engorging member.

“If you’re okay with it, Filoro... then so am I.” She cupped his manhood in her hand. Her own pulse intensified when she felt his hammering in her palm.

Sophie gulped. She knew what to do in theory. She’d done her research, read all the books, and even had some practice in the theater of her mind, so to speak. But now that she was here, actually in this position for the first time, she found herself shaky, nervous, and eagerly excited.

Filoro had taken her thigh in one of his hands. With his other hand he traced up past her butt, over the curve of her hips, and came to a rest cupping her breasts. He held Sophie there in a distant embrace. “Just do what feels right. I’ll do the same,” he whispered.

She nodded and grasped his member – not too tightly, just enough to feel the shape of it in her palm – and slid her hand along the hardening shaft, massaging the tip with the flat of her thumb. There was a gasp, subtle, but enough for her to hear, to feel. She laid his firm member against her mons and got up on her knees, angling herself until his tip was barely a hair’s breadth from her clitoris. She paused there as Filoro’s hands made their way to the front of her body, lightly grazing her hips along the way. He gently pressed up from under her breasts until they were cupped in his palms.

He rolled one of her nipples between his thumb and forefinger, eliciting a soft gasp. She’d never had someone touch her like this before. It was... nice. The warmth of the bath, of his body, of his hand as it made its way down her stomach, down past her mons...

She felt him adjust his position so his tip was rubbing against her clitoris, along with his thumb. His hand was strong but he touched her with a light pressure, massaging her in slow circles. Sophie felt a familiar heat welling in her loin. He was almost as good with her body as she was – how was that even possible?

He still had a ways to go, though. Sophie bucked her hips against his hand, encouraging a little more pressure, a little more speed. With anticipation growing in her belly, she felt

him release her breast. He brought the other hand to bear, pushing back the sensitive skin over her even more sensitive clit. She gasped again, more forcefully this time, and more firmly grasped his manhood. She dragged the tip along the length of her vulva, now wet with more than just the bathwater. As she moved his shaft against her she felt him shudder. His thighs flexed beneath her with every stroke, and sometimes, when she got the movement just right, she could even feel his thumb curl reflexively against her clitoris.

She was beginning to feel something building up inside. She pressed one hand against his stomach. “Wait,” she gasped. “This is how I always... I want this time to be from something different.” Filoro stopped massaging her but didn’t let up on the pressure. He smiled at her from his position below. She aligned him with her entrance and began to lower herself, but his warmth and pressure suddenly vanished

“Woah!” she gasped as Filoro stood up, took her in his arms and lifted her out of the water and onto the warm obsidian tile beside the pool. Her loins felt cold in the absence of his touch, without the tip of his manhood brushing against her. But the coolness went away as soon as she felt his breath fall against her inner leg.

She almost shivered, paradoxically, at the warmth of his lips as he kissed his way up her thighs. She suppressed a gasp as his tongue swam through her folds and kicked out against her clitoris. She wrapped her legs around his back to press his face deeper against herself. The feeling between her legs was familiar and different all at once. It was closer, more intimate, than when he had just been using his hands.

Her back arched as Filoro settled into a comfortable pace, one of his hands finding her breast, sending shivers through her body. His hair felt silky and soft in her hands, and she was still holding him tighter and tighter between her legs. She feared if he kept going she might squeeze the breath out of him, but she couldn’t let go now. The pressure and warmth inside her was growing at an alarming clip.

“Filoro, I...” she gasped. His face was so warm against her thighs and his hands were intoxicating on her body, and with

his tongue against her, it was too much, it was just enough, she was right up at the ledge, just about to be pushed over it, she was—

INTERLOPERS

A voice boomed out.

**YOU DARE ENTER MY DOMAIN WITHOUT
INVITE?**

It wasn't coming from any direction.

SEEK AUDIENCE OR FACE MY WRATH

It was coming from everywhere.

**THE WRATH OF THE BONE-CURDLING LORD,
THE WHEEL-STRIDING KING, DRINKER OF
SECRETS DEEP AND VISIONS FAR**

It was coming from inside their heads.

THE WRATH OF JAZZ KATAN

CHAPTER 7

It was quite the way to ruin an orgasm – and what had been shaping up to be a really spectacular one, at that. Sophie was still laying right where Filoro had left her. *At least this will make for a good campfire story*, Sophie thought. *Getting clit-blocked by the most powerful sorcerer who ever lived, the master of death himself.*

Filoro had scrambled to his feet and grabbed his sword in a blink. Now he was standing stock-still as he murmured an incantation, rapier in hand. Sophie's position on the floor endowed her with a rather exciting view of the elf's undercarriage as he worked his magic. But her excitement was tempered when she saw the look on his face. Filoro was wide-eyed and panicked, his mouth set in a tense line. Even as he muttered his spell, his eyes darted around the bathhouse as though danger was lurking in every steamy corner.

I guess now I'll probably die a virgin, just to get turned into a virgin mega zombie in this horrible necropolis, Sophie thought as she propped herself up on her forearms, her feet still immersed in the bath. *Unless what we did counts as sex? I guess it doesn't really matter what you call it... it still felt great.* Of course she wished she'd had the chance to climax with Filoro – not to mention what would have come after the main event. She wanted to straddle him in the bath again, just their two bodies surrounded by the steam and water. They definitely would have kissed some more, and held each other, and had five orgasms apiece, and later Filoro would have cooked her a nice hot meal back at camp. But somehow Jazz Katan had endeavored to ruin her entire evening from beyond the grave. Of all the evils ever perpetrated by the foul sorcerer, this might have been the worst.

Filoro's chant came to an abrupt end. A pulse of magical energy radiated from his direction and a burst of light illuminated every corner of the room. Filoro cautiously lowered his sword arm and glanced down at Sophie. "Nothing there. We're safe. At least for the time being."

Sophie laughed. “Come on, Filoro. You know that wasn’t really Jazz Katan talking to us. He’s been dead for hundreds and hundreds of years.”

Filoro said nothing, but his expression remained grim.

“So that means that us hearing that voice is part of a trap,” Sophie continued. “A spell left here in order to lure tomb-raiders like ourselves into some kind of ambush.”

“I thought the same thing at first,” Filoro said. “That the message may have been recorded ages ago and magically inscribed into the bathhouse, set to trigger when intruders came too close to the heart of the necropolis. However... when the voice spoke to us just now, I sensed a magical impulse coming from outside the room. From that way.” He pointed to the far wall of the bathhouse. “Someone, or *something*, is in the necropolis with us. And whoever or whatever they are, I believe they cast a spell which projected the voice into our minds.”

“So you think he’s still here? Jazz Katan, I mean, you... you really think he’s still alive? You think he... that voice... was telling the truth?” Sophie asked. *Please tell me I wasn’t just summoned by the conqueror of the Midlands*, she thought. “Because I don’t buy it, not for one second.”

“No, I don’t believe it, either. But *someone* cast that spell. Furthermore, based on the magnitude of the arcane impulse I sensed... whoever cast it, they’re a powerful sorcerer.” Filoro paused. “Now more than ever, I’m sorry that you’re getting caught up in all this.”

“What do you mean ‘caught up in all this’? You said we’re not in any danger here. We can just leave the bathhouse, try to go back the way we came. We’ll find an exit eventually,” Sophie said nervously.

“Sophie, whoever our mystery sorcerer is, they know exactly where we are. They’re stronger than us. And despite that, rather than kill us on the spot, they’ve opened up communications with a fairly diplomatic request. At least for now, we should do as they ask and go find them.”

“That’s crazy! We’re walking right into a trap!”

Filoro smiled glumly. “We have no choice.”

Sophie sat up and drew her knees to her chest, trying to conceal the goosebumps rising on her arms despite the hot, steamy air swirling around her. *I’ve seen him worried before*, she thought, watching Filoro rummage through his pack for a towel. *I’ve seen him agitated, even. But I haven’t seen him scared like this.* And if even *Filoro* was frightened, despite all his confidence and experience, Sophie didn’t know how she should feel. Should she be panicking? Keeping her eyes peeled for some flaw in the necropolis, some crack to slip out of to return to the surface unharmed? Or should she be racking her brains for things to offer this sorcerer who had it out for them in exchange for a quick death?

Filoro must have seen the look on her face. “Besides,” he said quickly, “We would be heading in that direction anyway. I double-checked the leylines and we’re not far, now, from the spot where they converge.” He gestured again toward the far wall of the bathhouse. “The convergence point is an easy walk away. And unless I am mistaken... that’s where we’ll find our friendly sorcerer, as well.” Filoro smiled at her, his face a pale mask. The smile slipped off his face as soon as he broke eye contact.

The two of them took turns drying themselves, Sophie too on-edge to even bother sneaking any extra peeks at Filoro before he covered up. They finished dressing in their respective suits of armor, repacked their bags, and headed out. Filoro didn’t even need to consult the leylines to track down their destination. As they exited the bathhouse, a trail of braziers sprang to life along the walls, guiding them through the narrow, twisting halls. The braziers extinguished themselves as soon as Sophie and Filoro passed them, so that only the way forward was illuminated. Even if they wanted to turn back, Sophie knew they would be hard-pressed to retrace the path back to the bathhouse. Someone was guiding them deeper in.

Filoro searched for traps incessantly as they walked, sending magic pulses every which way. He found plenty: dart

launchers, gas vents, even a row of scythes hanging down from the ceiling. But they were all apparently inactive – or perhaps they had been deactivated in anticipation of Sophie and Filoro’s approach.

The trail of braziers finished at a door, encrusted with rows upon rows of skeletal arms and hands. “This must be it...” Sophie whispered.

Filoro was busy testing the door, running his magicked fingers along the inlaid bones. One of the skeletal fingers slowly unfurled. Filoro cocked his head and quickly pulled his hand back to his chest. “Well, I believe we’ve come to the right place,” he said. “If anyone visited here uninvited, these arms would dislodge themselves from the door and tear the intruder to shreds. Thankfully for us, we seem to have been given clearance.” He gestured for Sophie to stand back as he pulled on the handle, an entire human femur which had been grafted lengthwise to the door.

Inside, Sophie saw what appeared to be a waiting room. Wood chairs and benches lay collapsed and half-rotted on the floors and against the walls. But the focal point of the room was the enormous double doors on its far wall, at least three stories tall, reaching all the way up to the high vaulted ceiling. Spanning both doors was a great jawless skull. Twinkling jewels and gemstones flashed in its eyes and teeth, and whorls of gold leaf formed an artistic backdrop.

But what threatened to throw Sophie into conniptions were the two skeletons half-sunk into the obsidian on the doors’ either side. They loomed as tall as the doors themselves, each one of their bones as thick across as Sophie’s entire body. Their arms were outstretched across the doors, each skeleton clasping the other’s forearm just in front of the doors’ central seam.

“Those can’t be real... Filoro, are they real? Are they statues?”

Filoro peered up at the skeletons alongside Sophie. “Hm. Giants are typically grotesque, deformed in some way. To my eye, these skeletons are too... regular, un-abominable, to have

been pulled from corpses.” He paused for a moment. “But statues? I doubt that. I expect that Katan molded human bones into these forms, then alloyed them with magic. They’re powerful necromantic guardians, I expect.”

Sophie gulped. “So is this the— “

Filoro cut her off. “Yes, I’m certain that this is the place. It’s unmistakable. The leylines all converge here.”

Sophie hadn’t even really needed to ask; she could feel a pressure, an unmistakable evil radiating out from the door. She was struck by revulsion; the last thing she wanted to do was to approach. But Filoro’s expression brooked no argument. It was time for them to meet the sorcerer who had summoned them here. *Whoever the sorcerer is who summoned us, they have to be crazy for choosing to camp here, of all places.*

As they made their way closer to the doors and their skeletal guardians, Sophie and Filoro realized that they had a problem: notwithstanding the skeletons holding the doors shut tight, there was a distinct lack of knobs or handles. Filoro pondered the door unblinkingly. Sophie waited next to him, pushing down the growing urge to flee.

After a minute’s waiting, Sophie just couldn’t take it anymore; she ran forward, reached up, and gave the door a solid knock, her fists barely reaching above the skeletons’ ankles.

She met Filoro’s look of exasperated horror with a shrug. “Look, it was between *that* and just screaming for someone to let us in, you know?”

Before Filoro could respond, both he and Sophie suddenly jumped back in startlement. As if in response to Sophie’s knocking, the skeletons shuddered and leaned forward, raining down tiny fragments of obsidian and bone. Sophie and Filoro continued stumbling backwards as the skeletons swung their clasped arms forward then slammed them back into the door, striking the stone with a deafening *crack*. The skeletons did this once more; then a third time, and finally the great doors heaved open behind them, revealing an opulent throne room.

With just a momentary glance, Sophie was struck by several strange sights. Inside, she saw an ornate ivory throne, gold-tasseled and empty. She saw a figure standing with his back to her, a man stooped and hunched and dressed in tattered robes. She saw a beam of shimmering light, issuing from a small lantern seemingly tossed into a corner of the room.

And suspended within the beam, frozen stock-still ten feet in the air, she saw another man, his face plastered with an expression of unbridled hate and rage. His regalia hung colorful and pristine on his body; silver jewelry dangled from his neck and wrists, frozen motionless mid-swing. His sunken black eyes glistened like wet stones in the lantern's light, and though he didn't move a muscle, Sophie knew that he was looking right at her.

Sophie was unable to tear her eyes away from his as she and Filoro slowly walked into the room. She held his gaze even as the stooped man called out, "At last! Someone has finally come, my Lord Katan, to help me kill you."

CHAPTER 8

“Excuse me?” Sophie blurted out, appalled. “You want *us*? To kill *Jazz Katan*? The Warden of the Midlands? The Wheel-Striving—”

“Wheel-*Striding*,” the stooped man corrected. “Yes, indeed.”

“But... but...” Bile rose high in Sophie’s throat. “Jazz Katan is dead! He’s been dead for centuries!” She looked to Filoro for help. He opened his mouth, closed it, sighed, and turned to the stooped man before them.

“What are you, creature? I’m certain that the path here was sealed tight for ages before my arrival... which means you must be another one of Katan’s servants. And yet...”

HAH! THIS BEAST IS MY RIGHT HAND AND MY BETRAYER. HE IS MY ZOMBIE, THOUGH NO LONGER WORTHY TO CARRY MY GIFT OF LIFE ETERNAL

The voice once again set Sophie and Filoro’s skulls a-ringing. Sophie flinched and reached for her sword, but the stooped man – *the zombie*, Sophie corrected herself – raised his hand in a beatific gesture. “Fear not! You are in no imminent danger. My master has little influence on the world now; ‘tis a great strain upon him to even commune with you in this way.”

Sophie thought he had aged pretty well for a zombie. Sure, he was withered and stooped and his skin was a nauseating shade of greenish-yellow. But he still seemed to have all of his essential parts. Most striking of all, unlike the mindless skeletons she had faced in the bathhouse, it seemed like he was still lucid.

“Back to your question, young murk-elf,” the zombie said. “My master spoke true; I am Lord Katan’s slave, pledged to eternal undeath and thus bound to his power. But I serve him no longer.” The zombie spat on the ground, his phlegm thick

and custardy. It was enough to send Sophie's stomach churning. "Finally, with your arrival, my long vigil may come to an end. Jazz Katan's reign of tyranny will be well and truly finished."

"Let me be frank," the zombie continued. "My master will no doubt make you an offer. He will promise you something great: an immortal body, unending power, a barony within the lands he once held as sovereign."

The zombie hung his head. "I have never been one to lie, so I confess: the Lord Katan would make good on his word and grant you whatever such boon he promises. But heed. Should you accept, should you choose to restore his power, you will be forever chained to his dread will." He looked down to his own withered body before leveling his sunken eyes at Sophie and Filoro. "A most... unenviable fate, I assure you," he said, his voice quivering.

Sophie butted in. "Hold on a second, mister. How are you even *talking* to us now? I didn't think that Jazz Katan's constructs could think for themselves. I thought they... uh, you, I guess... were, like, his puppets."

The zombie folded his arms in front of his chest. "I am no *construct*," he said pompously. "Myself, along with my fellow nobles of the court, were left with our minds intact when we committed ourselves fully to Lord Katan's service. For a time we reveled in it. The power, the control, the fear reflected in our subjects' eyes... it was intoxicating."

A pained expression crept onto his face. "But over the centuries, Lord Katan's cruelty grew beyond reason. He turned his hatred upon even his own court, upon we who were once his most loyal subjects. It took us years to rebel against him. Years of planning, of mustering our strength and resolve, all to lash out with one single, desperate blow. It cost many lives... but we were successful."

He gestured towards the lantern, then up to the figure of Jazz Katan suspended in its twinkling light. "The Tranquil Lantern, you see, was one of Lord Katan's most coveted treasures: an artifact of great power which he pilfered long ago

from some distant kingdom. Anything caught in its path is immobilized, held in an arcane stasis so complete that time itself is brought to a halt.”

The zombie peered up at Jazz Katan with a dreamy smile. “Just to speak with you, to overcome the lantern’s grasp in even that miniscule way, is a great effort for my master. Especially considering how much his magic has weakened over the years he has spent in stasis.”

Sophie tried and failed to catch Filoro’s eye. The elf was utterly fixated on the lantern, staring at it like he was entranced. He didn’t even seem to notice the beads of sweat dripping down his brow. He was frowning more deeply than usual – and Sophie thought she saw a hint of worry in his eyes.

Sophie turned back to the zombie. “I’m not sure what you need *us* for, then. If he’s trapped by the lantern, why can’t you just kill him yourself?”

The zombie let out a raspy sigh. “So long as he is paralyzed within the beam, my master cannot be harmed. Any assault would be frozen in the lantern’s light ere it touched his wretched body. Yet I cannot release him. I am bound to Lord Katan’s power; were he free, it wouldn’t take him but a moment’s concentration to alter the terms of our magical connection. With a thought, he could turn me into just another of his mindless servants, entralling me completely.”

The zombie paused. “*You two*, however, are under no such constraints...”

**LISTEN NOT TO THIS WORM. THE MOMENT YOU
RAISE BLADE OR SPELL AGAINST ME, YOUR
BONES WILL BE FLENSSED CLEAN**

Katan’s voice boomed in Sophie and Filoro’s minds, loud enough to bring tears to their eyes.

**MY SLAVE SPAKE TRUE ON BUT ONE MATTER: AID
ME, AND ANY WISH WITHIN MY VAST POWER, I
SHALL GRANT YOU**

**FILORO, I SEE YOUR ANGUISH. YOUR DESIRE TO
RETURN, TO MAKE AMENDS**

Sophie dropped to her knees, the voice overwhelming her senses. *Oh, the secrets are all bubbling up now.*

SOPHIE, YOU SEEK GLORY, VENGEANCE; OBEY ME AND I SHALL GRANT YOU BOUNDLESS POWER. YOU SHALL GRIND MISS BUMDELL TO DUST BENEATH YOUR FEET

An image rose unbidden to the forefront of Sophie's mind: her hometown of Pilora crumbling to ash as its villagers crowded around her and begged for mercy. She flushed, embarrassed and concerned. *Is that really what I want?*

ALL THIS AND MORE I PROMISE YOU, ONCE YOU HAVE FREED ME FROM THIS IGNOBLE PRISON. DEFY ME, HOWEVER, AND I SHALL SERVE YOU A DEATH MOST EXCRUCIATING

Filoro writhed on the ground, his hands clapped over his ears, as Jazz Katan barked out a final message.

SEEK OUT THE SHUTTER AND RELEASE ME

Then the voice disappeared abruptly from their minds, leaving them to ponder the mad sorcerer's words in the stillness of the throne room. Sophie was exhausted; being on the receiving end of Jazz Katan's power, even when it was dulled by the Tranquil Lantern's magic, was apparently quite the ordeal. Filoro pushed himself back onto his feet and brushed the dirt from his armor. He was shaky and pale, but quickly managed to compose himself.

The zombie graciously gave them a minute to recuperate before he piped up. "My master and I do agree on this one matter: you must go now to the vault, and quickly, to recover the lantern shutter. It is the only thing that can sever the beam and render Lord Katan vulnerable. But first..."

The zombie dug around in the deep folds and recesses of his tattered robes. After a few moments he produced a black, glittering stone. "This keystone opens the recess of the treasure vault which holds the shutter. I have kept it in my possession for centuries."

He locked his jaundiced, glassy eyes to Sophie's in an unblinking stare. "I entrust it now to you, young warrior. I do so knowing that you may use it for evil; that you may choose to unleash my master upon the unready world. I would be powerless to stop you. Yet I beseech you... you must not follow that path. For the good of the land, in the name of my fallen comrades and Lord Katan's countless other victims, you must use this to destroy my master for good."

Sophie nodded, her breath catching in her chest, and reached for the keystone. The zombie's cold hand lingered on the object for a moment, as though it pained him to let it go. Then he sighed, deflating, and Sophie pocketed the keystone.

"And now my part in this is finished. Ah, one more thing," the zombie said. "One other nobleman from our group of conspirators still remains. He was meant to have locked himself in the treasure vault recess along with the shutter. A sort of last line of defense should Lord Katan have tried to meddle and somehow recover the object for himself. I fear he may be... unwell."

"Unwell?" Filoro asked, a slight edge to his voice. "Could you be more specific?"

The zombie grimaced. "My apologies, murk-elf. It pains me to recall. The day we enacted our plan, there was but a single hiccup: Lord Katan noticed my compatriot sneaking to the vault. As we ensnared him in the lantern's beam, my master intimated that he had... altered, in some fashion, the fellow's mind." The zombie rubbed his forehead. "I cannot predict how my compatriot will react to your presence. You must prepare for the worst when you unseal the recess."

"I see. And how do you see *yourself* fitting into this plan?" Filoro interjected. "You said it yourself: when we shutter the lantern, Katan will be free to take your mind as well, and use you however he sees fit."

The zombie smiled, exposing yellowed, rotting teeth. "I've had plenty of time to think about this, murk-elf. I am under no illusion as to my fate. Before you shutter the lantern, you must incapacitate me. A quick beheading should render my body

immobile, I'd think. Once my master is slain, the magic that animates me will be severed. I will finally be at peace."

"Fine. Are you ready, then?" Filoro asked. He flexed the fingers of his sword hand.

The zombie chortled. "At ease! I would see this mission through to its end. When you return here, shutter in tow, ready to dispose of Lord Katan in one fell swoop... *then* it will be my time."

Filoro nodded and put a hand on Sophie's shoulder. "Fine. Sophie – let's go."

Without another word, Filoro marched Sophie back into the waiting room. As they left, Sophie couldn't help but steal a glance back into the throne room, to look one more time at the zombie, the mad sorcerer, and the enchanted lantern which entwined their fates.

CHAPTER 9

Sophie followed behind Filoro in silence for a time, unsure of what to say. It was all too much to process: that the sorcerer king Jazz Katan still lived, that he had spoken to her directly, that the literal key to his destruction was bouncing around in her pocket alongside her grandmother's necklace.

But as they walked down the halls of the necropolis, guided by the now-familiar trail of arcane torches, one subject in particular kept nagging at her. She had been happy to join Filoro on a dangerous treasure hunt, hoping to learn from him – and to learn *about* him. But if Filoro had come here on a quest to destroy the still-living remains of Jazz Katan – or worse yet, to parlay with the mad sorcerer – well, that was another matter entirely.

“Did you know, Filoro, that he was still... that Jazz Katan... is that why you came here?”

Filoro stopped dead in his tracks. “If I'd known that Katan still lived, I never would have found the courage to set foot in the necropolis.” He put on a smile, the expression eclipsed by the worried furrow of his brows. “Maybe it's for the best, then, that I didn't know.”

“It was *for the best*? Are you nuts?” Sophie said. “Look, Filoro, let's just leave. Jazz Katan is trapped. He's been trapped for centuries. There's nothing he can do to us – or to anyone *else* for that matter – if we just hightail it out of here.”

“Sophie, I can't.”

“I don't care how long it takes,” Sophie pleaded. “I don't care if we have to try every single passageway in this dump in order to find a way back to the main floor! But getting involved in this is just crazy.”

“Sophie, I *can't*.” A bead of sweat trickled down Filoro's cheek.

Sophie paused. “It's the lantern, isn't it? You were eyeing it back in the throne room like you knew what it was. The

Tranquil Lantern, the zombie called it... that's what you came to the necropolis to find, right?"

Filoro looked away. "Believe me," he said, "I never wanted... damn it all, Sophie, the last thing I want is to put you in danger! But I have to finish what I came here for." He paused, and a subtle hardness came over his face. "You're right, of course: I'm here for the lantern."

"But—"

"I'm seeing this through to the end. Even if it destroys me," he said with a note of finality.

Why is it so important to him that he's willing to risk his life? They carried on wordlessly down a few bends, through an empty barracks and a stately ballroom, following Jazz Katan's trail of torches all the way.

"It can't be that valuable, Filoro. Not enough to risk releasing Jazz Katan into the world again," she said quietly. But Filoro didn't respond.

Then Sophie had an idea. "We're walking to the treasure vault anyway, right? There's bound to be something locked away in there that's even *better* than the lantern. Some artifact that isn't, you know, the only thing preventing Jazz Katan from resuming his reign of terror."

She thought back to the stories she had heard in the village tavern. "Like Jazz Katan's famous ruby sword, right? The one that can cut from a hundred paces away. Or the bangles that turn your skin to stone, so that blades just bounce right off? Or... oh, never mind," Sophie huffed. Filoro was being taciturn again, just like before; just like before the bathhouse, before they had talked, and reconciled, and touched.

Do I even really know him? Know what he's capable of? She stopped walking, and after a few paces Filoro did too. "You *are* going to try to destroy him, right?" Sophie asked. "Jazz Katan, I mean. Because if you're planning to... if you're going to take his offer—"

Filoro turned and closed the gap between them before she could finish the sentence. He calmly laid his hands on her

shoulders. “I know my decision is difficult to understand. I know I must seem completely unreasonable to you. But the Tranquil Lantern is just too important. I cannot leave without it. If the shame of leaving here empty-handed didn’t kill me, Sophie, my people would.”

He looked deep into her eyes. “But I promise: I would never ally myself with a monster like Katan. Never. No matter what the cause.”

Filoro paused. “And, by the way, it doesn’t matter how valuable any of the other artifacts in the treasure vault are. Odds are they’re all cursed, every last one. If you so much as *touch* one of Katan’s artifacts without the proper keystone, you’ll—”

I NEGLECTED TO MENTION

Jazz Katan’s voice echoed through their skulls.

**I’VE NO CONTROL OVER THE SENTINELS THAT
GUARD THESE GROUNDS. THEY WILL SURELY
ATTEMPT TO STOP YOU**

The voice faded from their minds and was replaced by a dull, persistent clatter: the sound of bone rattling against bone. Sophie drew her sword, and before she had time to think, found herself shoulder-to-shoulder with Filoro as a squadron of skeletal guards rounded the corner ahead of them, armed with glaives and tall shields and wearing rusted plate armor. They were the most heavily armed and armored sentries Sophie had seen, a sure reminder that she and Filoro had made it to the dark, beating heart of the necropolis.

But something else caught her eye. One of the skeletons was hanging back, keeping a few paces behind the advancing line. Unlike its fellows, this one was unarmed and clad in a frayed cloth gown, so dingy it was hard to discern its original color. Sophie could make out only the glint of golden thread woven around the hems.

“Filoro, the one in the back, it’s different!”

Filoro shifted his gaze just in time to catch the robe-clad skeleton performing a series of strange gestures.

“Sophie, get behind me!”

Without having to even think about it, she found herself ducking behind Filoro. Just days ago, Sophie would have been frozen with panic: about Filoro’s command, about their situation, and especially about the wisps of smoke and sputtering sparks issuing from the bony fingers of the skeleton in the far back. But somehow her time in the necropolis must have honed her senses.

Not a moment later a gout of flame erupted from the skeleton mage’s outstretched hand, heading straight for Sophie and Filoro. As the stream of fire flew towards them, Filoro brought his own hands up in a magical gesture. Sophie flinched and shielded her eyes, expecting to be engulfed in flames. But just a few feet from Filoro’s raised hands, the skeleton’s fire collided with an invisible barrier. Filoro grunted at the magical impact, but he managed to keep his hands up. He didn’t drop his defenses as the skeleton mage continued issuing fire at them from across the hallway.

Sophie imagined Filoro with his eyebrows singed clean off and almost made a quick joke at his expense, but she was quickly brought back to earth when she realized just how hot it was getting in the tight quarters of the hallway. Another minute of this wizardly duel, and she and Filoro would be broiled alive.

Filoro grunted again and wrenched his hands to the side. The stream of fire spasmed, then twisted in on itself like a ribbon to lash out towards the line of skeletal pikemen, shattering their bones and melting their armor into heaps of formless slag. The skeletal mage did nothing to acknowledge the destruction of its comrades and showed no sign of letting up. Filoro shuddered as the stream of fire righted itself, catapulting right back against his arcane barrier. The mage tirelessly pressed its assault even as Filoro’s knees buckled and his arms shook from the stress of maintaining his defensive spell.

Sophie noticed that the skeleton’s bony fingers were charring and slowly disintegrating beneath its own summoned flames, flecks of bone ash falling to the floor. “Filoro, look at

its hands!” she yelled over the roar of the flames. “I don’t think it can handle its own magic anymore. It’ll destroy itself!”

Sophie’s excitement melted away when she saw Filoro’s face streaked with sweat, his teeth bared in an agonized grimace.

“Do you think you can outlast it?” she asked. But she was afraid she already knew the answer. Filoro shook his head, panic and desperation flashing in his pale eyes. In that instant Sophie knew that she was going to have to do something brave, heroic, and undoubtedly stupid if they were going to make it to the treasure vault alive.

She clenched the hilt of her naked executioner’s sword. “Fine,” she yelled, “Then just don’t let me get burned!”

Behind her, Filoro executed another quick gesture and wrenched the stream of fire to the left, whipping it into the side of the narrow passageway where it cracked the obsidian wall and melted the decorative inlay into rivulets of molten gold.

“Go!” he screamed.

Sophie exploded out to the right, darting around the side of Filoro’s barrier and racing down the hall. Bone and blackened metal crumbled into powder beneath her boots as she rocketed past the charred remains of the pikemen. She ran faster than she had ever imagined herself capable of, spurred on by a heady mix of fear and adrenaline.

Sophie had halfway closed the gap with the skeletal mage when the creature seemed to notice her for the first time. It rattled its jaw in a voiceless moan and fixed its empty eye sockets in her direction. Fire was still issuing from its charred and crumbling forearm; its hand had been consumed down to the wrist by the flames.

“Go, Sophie! You can make it!” Filoro yelled from down the hallway. The skeleton was straining mightily against Filoro’s magic, attempting to pull the ribbon of flame back to the center of the hallway, back into Sophie’s path. The fire was

now blisteringly close; if the mage gained even another foot of ground, Sophie had no doubt she'd be burned to a crisp.

Faster, I need to go faster! She had to dig deep, to prove to Filoro, to *herself*, that she was worthy of adventure, independence, of her entire new life. She broke into a sprint. Her legs screamed at her to stop; whether the burning in her thighs was from her intense exertion or the torturous heat of the fire, she couldn't say. And with the skeleton still so far away, Sophie knew she would never make it in time before the creature wrenched the fire straight at her.

But then she blinked; and she was suddenly, inexplicably, within striking distance of the skeleton. It seemed impossible – but there was no time for thought. With a mighty heave, Sophie brought her sword crashing into the creature's shoulder, sending carbon char and splinters of bone flying back into her face. The searing heat that had filled the room suddenly vanished along with the ribbon of fire as the mage crumbled to the floor in pieces.

Sophie straightened, ready to flash a victorious grin back at Filoro. She never got the chance. From where it lay on the ground, the mage's severed, blackened arm sputtered with unstable magic. There was a sudden burst of light; a searing heat; and as Sophie was blasted off her feet, the last thing she heard before it all went black was Filoro's guttural cry of anguish.



As she drifted back into consciousness, Sophie noticed a smell: nauseating, putrid, and disconcertingly sweet. For a moment she struggled to place it. But then it came to her: it was the smell of the tannery on intake days, when she and Miss Bumdell would burn and scrape away hair from freshly rendered cowhide. *Oh, no... I'm dying... My life is flashing before my... nose?* Sophie pondered this for a moment, but even in her present delirious, semi-conscious state, this didn't seem quite right. Besides – if she really *was* dying, she would hope she'd get to relive better memories than just another day at the tannery.

Then a wave of pain coursed through her and snapped her back to reality. It was like someone was holding a torch against her flesh, a white-hot, burning pain that radiated across her torso. She shifted around to try to get more comfortable, but even the slightest movement shot new ripples of pain across her body. She let out an involuntary groan.

“Sophie! You’re awake!” Filoro’s voice sounded like it was coming from only a few feet away. “Try not to move. I used some magic to help soothe the pain... but still. You’ve been injured rather badly.”

With great effort, Sophie managed to wrench her eyes open. They were itchy and dry, as though she had spent a few weeks standing right over a bonfire. Her armor and shirt had been removed, leaving her chest bare, and despite the seriousness of the situation Sophie couldn’t help but feel strangely exposed. “Hey, you took my boobies out!” She laughed, and the movement sent her into a new fit of pain.

Filoro smiled. “Easy, now,” he said, laying a hand on her shoulder. “I didn’t think you’d mind, given the circumstances. Besides,” he added slyly, “I’ve seen it all already.”

“Hmph.” Sophie scanned her eyes slowly, hesitatingly, down her body and towards her injuries. She wasn’t sure if she even wanted to see what condition the skeleton’s magic had left her in. But she knew that she’d have to find out sooner or later.

She took a deep breath and looked down. The entire left side of her torso, from her elbow up to her shoulder and onto her upper chest, had been burned an angry, raw red by the mage’s fire. Patches of flesh on her shoulder were blackened and cracking. *Ugh, that explains the smell*, she thought. But there was another smell mixed in now, too, a bitter scent, wafting up from a vial Filoro produced from his backpack.

“I was waiting for you to come to your senses for this part. Didn’t want to startle you,” he said, kneeling at her side. He tipped the vial into his hand and out glopped a thick, whitish liquid. Sophie was hit with a strong waft of its bitter herbal aroma.

“It’s a healing salve,” Filoro explained. “I bought it off an herbalist of some renown, so I trust that it still has some potency even after all this time. Try to hold still; this may be uncomfortable.”

Sophie grunted in affirmation and Filoro rubbed the substance delicately onto her wounds, starting from her shoulder and making his way down her body. The salve did sting at first, and when Filoro rubbed in it, it was all Sophie could do to stop from screaming. But once it sunk in, the cool liquid was a relief on her burned flesh.

“That should do it,” Filoro said. “I’m going to activate its magic now. Given the depth and severity of some of your burns, the healing process may feel... unusual.”

“Unusual how?” Sophie asked.

But Filoro just shook his head. “You’ll see.” He pressed a hand into her chest and gingerly grasped her elbow, eyebrows furrowed. He began to chant something she couldn’t quite make out, and then the *twisting* started. It was unlike anything Sophie had ever felt before, like the meat of her arm was rebelling and straining against the bones. It wasn’t painful so much as unnerving. Her muscles seemed to contract sideways; and her skin violently rippled and deformed. The blackened patches on her shoulder twisted like whirlpools, the flesh roiling and churning all the way down to the bone.

At the borders of her injuries, the salve Filoro had applied glowed white. Filoro, still chanting, slid his calloused hands along her burns, stopping every few inches to press down hard. Sophie gasped; wherever his hands passed by, the skin beneath regrew and knit closed, immediately alleviating her pain.

She was almost disappointed when he finished activating the salve. Despite the less than ideal circumstances, his touch seemed to soothe her nearly as much as his magic.

“It’s not perfect, but I’m afraid that’s the best I can do right now,” Filoro said quietly. Sophie looked down at her body, expecting a horrific burn scar at the least, but all that Filoro’s

magic had left behind was a slightly raised pattern of twisting lines and whorls running up her arm and onto her chest.

Sophie just shook her head. “I can’t believe that worked,” she said.

“The ointment leaves a rather particular mark, unfortunately. When we’re out of this place, I can find someone to remove it.” Filoro was peering at Sophie with a strange, intent expression, like he was waiting to see how she would react. *Does he think I’m going to be mad at him?*

She inspected the silvery whorls on her shoulder, where her burns had been the most severe. She smiled. “I don’t know, Filoro, I think it might grow on me. Adventurers are supposed to pick up some cool scars, right?”

Filoro chuckled, relieved. Then he glanced at the floor, suddenly solemn. “What you did back there was very brave. You saved both of our lives. If I had been alone...” Filoro’s voice trailed off.

He cleared his throat, then reached into his pack and pulled out a billowy white shirt. “I regret to say that I was in such a hurry to assess the extent of your wounds, I had no choice but to cut your shirt off. You’re welcome to a spare one of mine, if you’d like it.” It was way too big for her and its sleeves puffed out unstylishly at the wrists and shoulders, like something her great grandfather might have worn, but she accepted the shirt gratefully nonetheless. Anything was better than having to wear her leather armor over bare skin.

“I do have another piece of news,” Filoro continued. “Your leather overshirt likely saved your arm. Unfortunately, in the process...” He picked up a charred object from the floor and held it up for her to see. It was her armor – or what was left of it. The left arm was gone, crumbled completely to ash, leaving a ragged, charred hole extending up the shoulder. The entire overshirt was covered in a thick layer of soot, the decorative tooling burned away. To Sophie, this was an abject tragedy. So much time and love had gone into crafting her armor, not to mention heaps of leathers stolen from Miss Bumdell; she

found herself thinking back on the countless nights she had spent tooling delicate patterns around the collars and hems.

She sighed wistfully. “Well, I guess my armor served its purpose. I just hope nobody goes for ol’ lefty again, or else I’ll really be in trouble,” she said as she pulled her borrowed shirt on. It was surprisingly soft and smelled faintly of Filoro, an added benefit that she swore she’d never mention to him.

“By the way, how much of that healing salve do you have left? I have to know how many blasts like that I can take before I’m *actually* a goner.”

“I used it all,” Filoro said.

Sophie’s mouth fell open in disbelief. “You wasted that entire potion on me? Something like that’s gotta be worth a pretty penny. Not to mention, what if you get hurt later on? What if you need—”

But Filoro cut her off. “I didn’t waste it. I used it exactly how I wanted – helping you,” he said softly. “You’re no good to anyone dead, Sophie.”

Sophie stared at him. “I’m not sure if you’ve realized this by now, Filoro, but there’s no way I’m going to be any help dealing with Jazz Katan,” she said. “I can’t even bust up a stupid skeleton without getting the stuffing knocked out of me. If you put me in front of Katan, he’ll turn me into mincemeat.” She shook her head wistfully. “You should have just laid me out in a hallway somewhere and come back for me later.”

Filoro’s hand fell on her shoulder, his grip firm yet comforting. “I told you that I was going to get you though this alive. I intend to keep my word.” He smiled at her. “Besides, I think you might be more skilled than you’re letting on. Or perhaps you didn’t realize what happened during that scuffle...”

“I blew a skeleton up in my face?” Sophie asked glumly.

“Well, yes. That’s certainly true. But before that, Sophie... you were channeling magic.”

Sophie’s ears perked up. “What?”

“I felt it, first: a pulse of magic, and very unlike the arcane signature that was emanating from the skeletal mage. Then you flew across the room so fast, you were like an arrow loosed from a bow. You were a blur. I couldn’t believe my eyes... and you did it without even the use of an incantation or arcane gesture. It was startling to see.”

Sophie thought back to the battle, before she had blacked out. She remembered her burst of speed, how she had found herself suddenly face-to-face with the skeletal mage. It had seemed incredible at the time. But magical?

She crossed her arms. “Come on, Filoro, be serious. I don’t know how to cast a single spell,” she protested. “How could I have *magicked* myself across the room?”

“It’s well known that duress can cause sudden eruptions of magical power. It can be a great advantage, if you learn to harness it. If uncontrolled, such outbursts can be quite dangerous.”

Sophie was almost too shocked to respond. “No, that can’t be true,” she stammered. “I’ve been in stressful situations before... wouldn’t this have happened to me before? Wouldn’t I have known by now?”

Filoro raised his eyebrows at her. “Well, you didn’t seem to recognize your magic for what it was this time, either. I suspect that this *has* happened to you in the past, and simply escaped your notice in the heat of the moment.” He shrugged. “Believe me or don’t, that’s your prerogative. But if you put your mind to it, I believe your magical abilities could progress rather quickly.”

Sophie pondered this for a moment. It seemed too outlandish to be true. Magic manifesting in *her* of all people, a simple tanner from Pilora? But then again, so much of what she’d experienced since entering the necropolis would have been unthinkable to her even a week before. So was it really so far-fetched?

Filoro must have sensed her doubts. “Can you still feel the magic inside you?” he asked quietly.

Sophie closed her eyes and concentrated; and then she realized that she *could* still sense it, the feeling she had when she had put on her desperate burst of speed. The feeling lingered deep in her chest, like a small flame waiting to be stoked into a blaze once more. It felt like conviction.

Her eyes snapped open. “Yeah, I can still feel it... I guess I do believe you. About me using magic, I mean. On the one hand I *can't believe it*, you know? But I guess I believe you.” She laughed, shaking her head at the strangeness of this new discovery.

“Okay, seeing as how I have magic powers, how long before I can pull off a stunt like that skele-mage did with the fire? Maybe I can just melt Jazz Katan as soon as we shutter the lantern.”

Filoro smiled his wry little smile. “It might take a bit of time for you to learn that particular spell. For now, perhaps we can focus on channeling your power into enhanced speed. You've already proven that you have the knack for it, after all.”

Sophie nodded her agreement. Filoro took a step toward her, bringing them face-to-face. “At first, you may find it difficult to bring your full power to the fore,” he said. “It may take a few attempts for you to establish the proper mental pathways. For now I can help draw your power out. If you'd like, of course.”

Again Sophie nodded; and Filoro placed one hand behind the small of her back and drew her close. As he placed his other hand over her heart, she felt – strange. Suddenly, Sophie saw herself through Filoro's eyes: freshly scarred and haggard-looking, her eyes closed. Then the strange sensation was gone and a warmth spread through her. It felt like her mind itself was being held in Filoro's embrace.

As his magic drew them closer still, she felt him reaching down, down into her soul where he gingerly stoked the embers of magic inside of her; power swelled within her; and then she saw Filoro being pinned to the ground by the gray hands of a dark elf woman.

Wait, what? Sophie didn't understand – where was she? *When* was she? Sophie saw the woman press her tongue into Filoro's mouth, and she covered her eyes instinctually – but she couldn't help but peek through her fingers. The woman was raking herself along the length of Filoro's manhood, bucking and jerking her hips as she went. Sophie heard a moan building in Filoro's throat. Just as the elf woman murmured something tenderly into Filoro's ear, Sophie lurched back into the real world.

Filoro's strong hands caught her as she stumbled from the shock of bouncing back and forth between reality and... well, whatever that just was. *I must have been inside one of Filoro's memories, somehow. The woman he was with, the dark elf woman... does Filoro already have a girlfriend?! And he didn't even tell me!*

Sophie conspired to shoot Filoro one of her most withering glares. But her anger faded when she saw Filoro's pained, mournful expression.

"I'm sorry, Sophie. What happened just now, it wasn't my intention." Filoro paused, looking unsure of himself. "I believe... I believe that when I coaxed your power out, your mind drew too close to mine. I can't be sure. It all went so fast..."

"Well, I don't know if it *went* fast, but that lady sure *came* fast," Sophie said, letting out an awkward laugh. Filoro met her with a sad half-smile. *Come on, don't joke around while he's close to tears.*

Sophie got the sense that he was looking for something: an apology, perhaps, or maybe just some validation. But she couldn't bring herself to give it to him.

"Who... who were you with, there?" she asked. Then in a smaller voice: "Is she waiting for you back home?" She wriggled out of the elf's grasp and set her weight back on her mostly-solid legs, still feeling as though she'd run a marathon in half a minute.

The mist cleared from Filoro's eyes, and in a moment, he had fully regained his composure. He smiled at Sophie.

“No, there’s no one waiting for me at home,” he said. “Yet I wish dearly to return, all the same.”

CHAPTER 10

After their magic lesson went awry, it wasn't long before Sophie and Filoro reached the vault door. For the past ten minutes, they had been standing before a massive portal cut into the obsidian wall, a round, perfectly symmetrical opening plugged with a door made of thick burnished steel.

They had to be at the right place; Jazz Katan had led them right to it. But the door to the treasure vault was shut tight, with neither keyhole, handle, nor lever to be seen. And worst of all, Filoro's latest incantation had revealed that the door was made of autumn steel, an alloy totally impervious to magical tampering.

Luckily, things hadn't been *too* awkward between them as they followed Katan's trail of torches down the necropolis halls. Filoro had explained that memories could sometimes cross over when two people shared a pool of magic, and that he'd been struck by an especially strong recollection at the worst possible moment.

Sophie wanted to know more about the woman she had seen, but Filoro had sidestepped every last one of her questions. *At least he doesn't kiss and tell*, Sophie thought, but Filoro's unshakeable silence on the matter did nothing to dispel her curiosity. She couldn't help but wonder about the mysterious woman in Filoro's memory. Was she his wife? A girlfriend? Whoever she was, Filoro clearly had deep feelings for her; and had clearly been quite deep *in* her, at one point or another.

Sophie sighed. She knew she couldn't be mad at Filoro, not really. It had been an accident that Sophie saw the memory in the first place, after all, and more Sophie's fault than his.

A loud thump jolted her back to reality as Filoro slammed his fist into the wall. With no clear path forward into the vault he was getting frustrated, and justifiably so.

"We've made it all this way!" Filoro shouted. He looked around the hallway, eyes blazing. "Katan!" he roared into the

empty air. “Katan, let us in! I know you can hear us! You ordered us to come here. If you want us to recover the shutter, then open the damn vault!”

“I don’t think he’s gonna answer,” Sophie said softly. “Maybe he can’t open it even if he wanted to. You heard the zombie talking about how much the Tranquil Lantern was holding back his master’s power.” She eyed the door quizzically.

“The zombie gave us that special rock, right, the keystone? Maybe we have to show it to the door, wave it around a little bit?” She pantomimed a mocking dance at the door, to no avail.

Filoro sighed. “Why don’t you try that again with the keystone this time, hm?” he asked. A small blush grew on Sophie’s cheeks as she fumbled the keystone out of her pocket.

She wasn’t about to repeat her performance, especially not on Filoro’s command, so she took a moment to inspect the zombie’s gift. It was the first time she’d really taken the time to properly look the keystone over. It was a flat slice of obsidian the width of her palm. While one of its sides was plain polished stone, the other had been set with delicate gold filigree. Its corners were rounded smooth – perhaps, Sophie imagined, from centuries of being toyed with by the zombie’s idle hands.

She took a deep breath. First she tried waving the keystone towards the vault door. Then she held it aloft. “Open!” she commanded. “Vault, open! Door, open! Uh... door, activate?” But nothing happened. She looked over at Filoro, who just shrugged in return.

Sophie ran her hands over the keystone, probing it for any possible clue as to its function. But she found no answers there, either. *It’s a key, right? So maybe I just...*

She stepped forward and pressed the keystone against the metal of the vault door, with the filigree side facing out. Light danced and rippled across the door’s surface. There was a harsh grinding sound; tremors shook the hallway as the vault door receded a few inches back into the wall, vibrating the

walls and floor so intensely that Sophie felt as though her skeleton might shudder apart inside her.

Sophie snatched her hand away and took a hasty step backwards. The door slowly rolled to the side and into some hidden recess in the stone wall, sliding into its final position with a dull, echoing thud.

Through the opening, in the blackness of the treasure vault, a row of hanging lamps began to shed a familiar, eerie blue light, beckoning Sophie and Filoro into its depths. “Do you reckon it’s safe for us to just walk in?” Sophie asked. The vault was sure to be just teeming with traps, and she didn’t look forward to dealing with the inevitable pressure plates, swinging axes, and riddle-posing doors they’d find inside.

“I don’t see that we have much of a choice, really,” Filoro replied. He flashed Sophie a mischievous grin. “Of course, you’re welcome to return to the throne room and spend some quality time alone with Katan and the zombie. Leaving me to locate the shutter all on my own...”

He saw the exaggerated scowl Sophie was throwing him and chuckled. “It’ll be fine, Sophie. Just don’t touch anything.”

After spending so much time traversing the cramped necropolis hallways, stepping into the cavernous treasure vault felt like crossing into a whole other world. The vault door had deposited the two of them onto a narrow metal catwalk. Other bridges and walkways criss-crossed overhead, all limned in the braziers’ ghostly blue light. Sophie could hardly guess at the vault’s depth, at how many similar catwalks stretched above and below. The braziers’ light didn’t seem to reach the ceiling, and Sophie had the impression that she was looking up into a starless sky, one which loomed with the weight of soil and stone.

In the distance, Sophie could make out obsidian columns jutting from the ground like stalagmites, each one as large as a castle tower. And somewhere far below them in the multi-tiered maze of the treasure vault, she saw an entire palace made of white stone and gleaming steel, its elegant design so

at odds with the familiar, brutal architecture of the necropolis. It was like the structure had been plucked off its foundations and transplanted, wholesale, into the vault. *Did Jazz Katan really take entire palaces as loot? No, not even he could possibly be that greedy...*

As they made their way down the illuminated catwalk, Sophie and Filoro passed by numerous display cases, each one overflowing with various trinkets and talismans: clockwork gadgets and mummified body parts, sparkling amulets and dark ceremonial daggers, and all manner of other strange objects, all begging Sophie to reach out and touch them. *Just a brush of the hand*, they seemed to murmur. But she recalled Filoro's warning about the curses Katan had laid on his stolen treasure and kept her hands tucked away safely in her pockets.

The treasure vault yawned interminably before them as they walked past rows upon rows of pilfered weapons, all arranged most pleasantly to the eye. There were swords boasting flawless gemstones in pommels, dark-stained wooden shivs with sinister auras, and battle-dented greataxes far too large for any human to wield. Sophie looked at the weapons with great interest, wondering what magical properties they must possess for them to have drawn Jazz Katan's covetous attention.

Once, Sophie jumped when the braziers' light glinted unexpectedly in the glass eyes of a grotesque taxidermy creature, its twisted body unlike that of any animal Sophie had ever heard of in the natural world. At least, Sophie *hoped* it was taxidermy. The alternatives were all too horrible to consider.

Then, their destination was in sight: the hanging braziers illuminated a path all the way to the far wall of the treasure vault, ending in a wide, solid steel door. Sophie noticed that the display cases lining this last strip of catwalk were empty. She nudged Filoro and pointed to the empty shelves. "Looters, maybe? Looks like someone's already been through here," she said.

But Filoro just smiled and shook his head. "More likely that Katan never got the chance to fill his coffers to his liking."

Sophie nodded and let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding in. It was a strange thing to take comfort in, but even knowing that there was an *end* to Katan's hoard came as a relief. In a way, it made the mad sorcerer seem fallible – and maybe even vulnerable.

Sophie quickly scanned the door's surface for some clue as to how to enter. Much like the door to the vault proper, this one was devoid of latches, buttons, switches, or other clear means of ingress. Its only notable feature was the brazier embedded in its center, identical to the ones that had guided Sophie and Filoro down the catwalk. The brazier glowed like a great burning eye in the door's face, flickering and flitting with the same magical, heatless flame that Sophie was now very familiar with.

It was difficult to tell in the ghostly blue light, but this door also appeared to be made of autumn steel. Sophie didn't know too much about the stuff beyond what Filoro had told her, that it was exceptionally impenetrable to magic and exceedingly valuable. The use of autumn steel on the outer vault door had likely served as a show of wealth and power for the arrogant Jazz Katan; its defensive properties aside, the door would have been worth enough to buy a whole city. But why use autumn steel *here*, so far in the depths of the vault? Anyone who made it to this point would have already seen piles upon piles of treasure... which meant that there was no need for Katan to waste the precious metal just to make an impression. This door wasn't just for show. Whatever was stored beyond it must have ranked among Jazz Katan's most prized belongings.

Sophie bounded forward. If Filoro was surprised by her boldness, he did a good job of hiding it and didn't make any move to stop her. It was nice that he was starting to believe in her, or at least starting to trust her not to mess things up too badly. Suppressing a smile, she produced the keystone from her pocket, and without a moment's hesitation dropped it into the brazier's magical flames.

She heard Filoro suck in his breath as the keystone fell straight down, hitting the bottom of the brazier with a soft clink.

A moment passed. Sophie's stomach churned; had she made a terrible mistake? Would she have to return to the zombie empty-handed and tell him that she had lost the keystone, and with it the only way to truly defeat Jazz Katan? And nevermind the zombie – how would Filoro take the news that she had lost him his chance to recover the Tranquil Lantern?

But Sophie's nervous musings were cut short. The brazier's flame suddenly died down, sputtering and hissing in response to the keystone's presence. Through the metal grate of the brazier, Sophie could see tiny tongues of fire dancing about the keystone. She had the absurd impression that the fire was alive, that it had noticed the keystone and was now probing its surface, paying particular attention to the filigree pattern that decorated its one side. After a few seconds, as though satisfied with Sophie's offering, the brazier's flame blazed bright white and shot back up to its original size. Then the door began to grind open, its hinges creaking and groaning under the weight of the heavy autumn steel.

Filoro stepped beside Sophie, appreciation clear on his face. "I'm glad you figured out how to open that on your own. I wouldn't have wanted to be the one to suggest we drop the keystone into the fire."

"I'm just glad it worked," Sophie chuckled nervously.

"Indeed." He gave her a sidelong glance. "Are you ready for this, Sophie? If the zombie was correct and this chamber is, in fact, the place where Katan stashed the lantern shutter, its location must have been a fiercely guarded secret. I doubt that any mortal has ever entered this space before now."

"I'm as ready as I'll ever be," Sophie laughed. But inside, her gut was tying itself in knots. On top of her nervousness, she felt a new and unexpected emotion: sadness. *What's gonna happen after this?* she found herself wondering. Once they recovered the lantern, would she and Filoro just go their separate ways, like nothing had transpired between them, like they were still strangers to each other?

I've got nowhere to go afterwards, either. It was a troubling thought. When she had first set out for the necropolis as a total greenhorn, she had thought that begging her way into the adventurers' guild could have been a perfectly rational next step. But after all she'd been through in the past few days, Sophie couldn't stand the thought of apprenticing herself to some crusty old guildsman. Nodding along to tired, played-out stories in the guildhall, waiting for little scraps of adventure to get tossed her way... that kind of subordination just wasn't for her. Not anymore. She knew that she could do better for herself.

Maybe I could tag along with Filoro, wherever he goes next. He can keep training me. I could learn all sorts of magic, and survival skills, and swordplay, and... Sophie's thought trailed off. She had heard that dark elves were masters of more secretive, sensual arts as well. She gulped. *Don't jump the gun just yet, girl. You still have to get out of this deathtrap in one piece. Not to mention the woman from Filoro's memory...*

After an agonizing wait, the door to the vault recess finished grinding open and the brazier spat the keystone back out onto the ground. Sophie pocketed it nervously.

The door had opened to a small hexagonal room. Each of the room's six corners was occupied by an ornately carved pillar. The walls were lined with display cabinets, all bearing expensive-looking trinkets. And in the center of the room was a pedestal, holding an object that Sophie recognized on sight. Its design was an unmistakable match to what they had previously seen in Jazz Katan's throne room. She and Filoro were mere feet away from the shutter to the Tranquil Lantern.

It would have been theirs that very instant, too, but for the presence of a man slumped over the pedestal, grotesquely disfigured and holding the shutter in his grasp.

Sophie shot Filoro an uneasy glance. Her expression went unnoticed, so absolute was Filoro's focus on the pedestal and its prize. Suddenly the body jerked upright, its torso crooked and broken-looking, and leaned backwards on weirdly-angled hips.

“Aha! About time someone came to our rescue. You’re here for *this*, I suppose?” the thing shouted in a pompous voice, holding the shutter aloft.

Whatever Jazz Katan had done to this poor creature had deformed him past recognition. Jowls swung loose below his twisted chin and quivered with every word he uttered. Three additional eyeballs seemed to have collected in his right eyesocket, which had shifted down along its face by a finger or two. Sophie felt nauseated just looking at him.

“Oh, but this is marvelous, simply marvelous,” the thing continued. “I was beginning to suspect that no one would *ever* find this place. Silly of me, I know. Obviously adventurers from across the land have been clamoring for the opportunity to take Master Katan down once and for all, the old bugger!” The thing’s speech was clear despite his absurd disfigurement – surprising, as judging by the spiral creases running across his throat, his neck had been twisted clockwise a fair few times.

The disfigured thing began to walk a horrible, crooked walk around the pedestal, heading eagerly towards Sophie and Filoro. His mouth, or at least the flaps and folds where his mouth once had been, was pulled back in a revolting smile.

Sophie shot Filoro another significant glance, really putting some neck into it this time. The elf’s eye flicked to hers as he laid a hand upon the hilt of his rapier. “Zombie, halt a moment, would you?”

The thing froze in place as Filoro continued. “Your compatriot in the throne room spoke of you with more than a little wariness. Unease, you might say. Forgive me for my frankness, but how can we be certain that the object in your hand is truly the lantern shutter? And that you haven’t tampered with it?”

“You accuse *me* of meddling?! After all I’ve done to bring down Master Katan?” The creature’s face dropped suddenly into a soundless howl of anguish. He quickly righted himself before replacing his expression with the same easy smile he had worn moments before. Sophie stifled a shiver of revulsion;

she just wanted to take the shutter and get as far away from him as possible. He clearly was not right in the head.

The thing dipped his head toward them in a grotesque mockery of a bow. “Understandable, completely understandable,” he said pleasantly. “My appearance alone must give you ample reason to distrust me. So disgusting. *Disgusting!*” He screamed, so loudly and unexpectedly that Sophie jumped. Beside her, Filoro’s knuckles were going white on the hilt of his sword.

“No, don’t say that. You’re not...” Sophie trailed off, trying to hide her disgust enough to console the foul creature.

The zombie just glared at her. “Check the keystone,” he huffed. “It details when the chamber has been opened and closed, and lists what treasures are held inside. If *that* doesn’t reassure you that this object is what you seek, I don’t know what evidence would possibly satisfy you.”

This time it was Filoro’s turn to shoot Sophie a significant glance, his pale eyes twinkling in the dim blue torchlight. Sophie poked and prodded at the keystone a few times, tracing her fingers along the delicate gilding that framed its surface. But she didn’t notice any meaningful markings or symbols. Locking eyes with Filoro, she leaned close to the keystone and whispered, “Uh, vault contents?”

With that, the keystone’s filigree suddenly sprang to life, swirling along the stone surface and rearranging itself from abstract patterns into legible text. The top half of the keystone was now embossed with a list of dates, all in chronological order. The final date on the list was *today*; and the date just before that was some six hundred years before. *Six centuries ago... that must be the day that Jazz Katan vanished.*

Below this list and stretching to the very bottom of the keystone, just as the zombie had claimed, there was now a list of various artifacts. At a glance, these names seemed to match the objects which Sophie had observed in the room’s display cases: *Golden Carapace, Decorative mount, Srinthral Blade of the Midlands, Matching parrying dagger and sheath* – and

there it was, smack in the middle of the list: *Tranquil Lantern, Shutter*.

Sophie lifted her eyes to Filoro. “The date matches up, I think. And the shutter does seem to be in this room. So, yeah, I think he’s telling the truth.” She nodded towards the object in the zombie’s hand. “That might... that might well be the shutter.” Filoro raised his eyebrows, looking for a certain answer. She shrugged back at him. It seemed like this was the most confirmation they were going to get, at least until they could take the alleged shutter back to Jazz Katan’s throne room.

“Without a doubt the date matches up,” the creature cut in. “The date of my *changing*, the date I was locked inside this recess to wait out my miserable years in solitude. What other date would it be?”

He grew suddenly cheerful again. “As for tampering? Oh, but you flatter me! No, tampering with such a powerful artifact would have been beyond my abilities in my prime, let alone in my current state!”

He held the shutter out towards Sophie and Filoro, his arm jerking forward so violently Sophie worried it might wrench itself from its socket. “Please, just take it from me.”

Sophie moved to pluck the artifact from the thing’s gnarled hands, but Filoro put out an arm to block her. He stepped forward himself, one hand still resting on his rapier while the other reached towards the zombie.

“Though I must warn you,” the zombie said, smiling. Filoro’s hand was scarcely a hair’s breadth away from his. “I’ve been finding myself to be of two minds of late...”

As soon as Filoro’s fingertips brushed the shutter, the zombie’s arm buckled. Filoro dove out of the way just in time, as in an instant, the meat of the zombie’s arms had torn asunder, the flesh ripping all the way to the shoulders. Blackened, filigreed skeletal arms lunged out, their talon-like fingers aimed straight for where Filoro’s face had been mere seconds before.

Filoro rolled back onto his feet, putting some distance between himself and the vile thing. The creature's skull was pressed forward in its face and its ribcage jutted out a foot further than it had any right to. It looked, for all intents and purposes, as though the thing's skeleton had moved independently of the rest of its body.

"Aghh, 'ou 'ill hafta excuse me for that," the thing said, his speech returning to normal as he leaned forward, moving his flesh to match his skeleton's new position. "Believe me, I do sincerely want you to take the shutter from me. It's only... ever since the day I locked myself in here, my skeleton has seemed to conspire against... well, the rest of me. I suppose Master Katan must have cursed my bones. How embarrassing! How droll!" As he spoke, his skeletal arms snatched the shutter from his fleshy, boneless hands.

Filoro eyed the creature distrustfully, rapier in hand.

"Here," the creature said. "I know just how to allay your suspicions. Please allow me to wedge myself – bones included! – into a corner. It will make things easier for all of us." But as he took a step backwards, his skeleton did not move with him. The bones of his leg, blackened just like his arms and etched with strange runes, ripped free of the flesh with a wet squelch. And then, seemingly of its own accord, one skeletal leg took a step towards the door.

"Ah, that *is* a problem, isn't it?" the creature said. His leg bones took another step back, threatening to tear his entire skeleton out of his body. He hurriedly adjusted his flesh's position to match. "Well, you'll have to figure this one out for yourself. I'll do what I can to slow myself down. Ta ta!"

The creature rocketed for the door, his skeletal legs propelling him with such ferocity that Filoro had no choice but to once again throw himself out of harm's way.

From the floor, Filoro managed to spit out a short incantation, and the thing's flesh assumed a lingering, pale yellow glow. Then the creature was out the door. He vaulted over the edge of the catwalk and was gone, far gone into the

depths of the treasure vault, a pinprick of light trailing off into the cavernous darkness.

CHAPTER 11

“Filoro... how are we going to get the shutter now? It’s going to be impossible to catch up to him,” Sophie whispered, dreading the thought of chasing the twisted creature through the treasure vault. Finding their way to the recess with the lantern shutter had been simple enough, guided as they were by the trail of lit braziers. But straying from the authorized path struck Sophie as a different prospect altogether. *Even if we somehow manage to avoid springing any traps, just finding our way back to the vault entrance afterwards will be a nightmare.*

Before Filoro could respond, a loud, mechanical screech reverberated up from somewhere in the depths of the vault. The sound was followed shortly after by a guttural, alien-sounding roar. After the echo died down, Filoro turned to Sophie with a thin-lipped smile. “Well, that might be our solution,” he said. “I suggest we let the traps do some of the work for us.”

Sophie furrowed her brows. “The vault’s security is targeting the zombie? But he was one of Jazz Katan’s nobles – wasn’t he allowed to be down here?” Another thunderous roar split the room; on some distant catwalk in the vault, Sophie saw the yellow-lighted pinprick of the zombie briefly bathed in a gout of fire. Then the fire faded and the pinprick was once more surrounded by darkness.

“Yes, without a doubt.” Filoro said. “The zombie must have been one of Katan’s closest advisors, given that he was permitted to enter the vault in the first place. But... those you allow closest to you are the ones who can most profoundly betray you. As Katan surely knew,” he added. Sophie noticed a slight shake in his voice, his indifferent air belied by a hint of emotion. But she decided not to press him on it. Whatever secrets haunted Filoro’s past, they’d have to wait until after they had made it through the treasure vault intact.

“Well, it seems like Jazz Katan had his betrayal coming for him,” Sophie said. “He must have been a pretty bad boss, if even his most devoted servants decided to lock him up.”

“I suppose.”

Another crash rang out from somewhere in the vault as yet another gout of fire pierced the darkness. Sophie heard a cry of pain which trailed off into a gurgling whimper. The sound made her flinch. She wasn't especially *fond* of the twisted zombie, but she was discomfited nonetheless to hear him in so much pain. True, every trap he triggered was one fewer for her and Filoro to have to worry about themselves... not to mention that every injury he sustained might damage his accursed bones, making it that much simpler to catch up to him. But Sophie had too much pride to let the pitiful creature keep getting hurt just to make her task easier.

“Maybe we should try to catch up with him sooner rather than later,” she said. “Who knows what kind of trouble he's getting into down there? Don't want to risk the shutter getting melted into a puddle of metal.”

Filoro looked at Sophie queerly, as though trying to determine whether her suggestion was one made out of prudence or out of sympathy for the fleeing zombie. After a moment's consideration he nodded. “Fair enough.”

“Okay, well, the longer we wait, the farther we'll have to run into the vault to catch up to him,” Sophie said. “So unless you have some big, heroic plan in mind, I think we should just get moving.”

Filoro sighed and shook his head. “No, I don't have a specific plan formulated, except...” He swiped his hand along the flat of Sophie's sword, setting it aglow with an unfaltering light. “No sense running in there entirely blind.”

Sophie held her sword out in front of her and gave it a few test swipes. Its bright glow left streaks across her vision. She nodded to Filoro, and without another word, they ran out the door and into the vault. Sophie barely had time to take in the mystical sights and priceless artifacts as they dashed across the

metal catwalk, following the trail of destruction left behind in the zombie's wake.

They ran past shattered display cabinets and scattered talismans, and leapt over wands and staves which sputtered and popped with magic flames, dying remnants of the fire traps they had seen from the vault recess. Sophie was counting her lucky stars that she and Filoro had managed not to trigger any traps of their own, when she felt something crunch like glass beneath her heel.

She clenched her eyes shut and waited for some horrible magical curse to befall her. But nothing happened. She breathed a sigh of relief – and woke with a start as Miss Bumdell wrenched open the door to her workspace.

Sophie quickly righted herself, accidentally knocking a sheaf of rabbit pelts off of the crowded worktable in front of her. “Sleeping on the job again, you good-for-nothing lout?” Miss Bumdell screamed.

Sophie paused. *Had* she been sleeping? She vaguely remembered that she had been caught up in some task, something that had felt very important at the time. But it must have been a dream. Miss Bumdell had been picking up more business than she could handle, and Sophie had barely slept all week trying to get everything tanned, stitched, and finished in time.

Despite all of her hard work, Sophie was still running late on her latest batch of pelts. Not due to a lack of skill, mind you; but rather because for every order Sophie eked out ahead of schedule, Miss Bumdell found an extra two to load on top of her until ‘ahead of schedule’ became ‘on-time’, and ‘on-time’ became ‘unacceptably delayed’. Inevitably, the backlog would grow large enough that customers would start banging on the door demanding refunds, or sending harsh letters threatening not to pay. This, in turn, would send Miss Bumdell into a frothing rage, which naturally would get redirected back to Sophie.

If *Sophie* were in charge of the tannery, she knew that the place would be flush with coin. They'd have regular

customers, instead of needing to find new clients every week to replace the ones who canceled their orders. If only she had the chance to build a reputation off the quality of her tanning, maybe she could even score commissions from the adventurers' guild or the kingdom's honor guard!

Sophie sighed. It would never happen, of course. And if she didn't finish this order in time, Miss Bumdell was sure to lock her in the tannery for the night.

Miss Bumdell struck Sophie between the shoulder blades with the thick and bulbous clod of meat that served as her hand. "Are you dumb, girl? I asked you a question!"

"Yes, ma'am... I'm sorry. You're right, I must have dozed off," Sophie replied meekly. "I was just thinking about the next steps for these pelts, Miss Bumdell. I promise you that this will all be finished before sundown."

Miss Bumdell glared at her a moment then spat, hucking an enormous clod of phlegm onto the tannery floor with an audible plap. She turned and walked to the door on her piggish trotters. Before she left, she turned her beady gaze back to Sophie, eyes brimming with malice. "I told your parents that I'd care for you as my own once they croaked. But keep damaging my business like this, and I'll have no choice but to cut you loose."

Sophie could feel the bile rising in her throat. Before her parents had succumbed to illness, when they were both lying on their deathbeds, Miss Bumdell had sworn to them that Sophie's apprenticeship would continue as planned. Moreover, Bumdell promised that she would adopt Sophie as her own daughter, ensuring Sophie's eventual rise to the rank of master tanner. Of course, this magnanimous offer had just been a ploy to guarantee herself some cheap, permanent labor; she paid Sophie just enough for her to continue living in her parents' old cabin and not starve on the street, hardly fair pay for Sophie's level of skill and experience. And if her behavior towards Sophie was any indication of how she would have treated a trueborn child, it was a good thing she didn't have one.

Miss Bumdell continued her tirade, “It wouldn’t be all bad if I cut you off; I’m sure you’d find some way to apply yourself. I would say you could make it as a common whore, but I doubt you’d find anyone who could handle your reek!” She giggled revoltingly. “If you want to change my mind, you ought to sell that little shack of yours and stay here with me. Maybe you’d actually get some work done, for a change!” She lost herself in shrieking, warbling laughter, her spirits clearly uplifted from tormenting Sophie, and finally left the workroom.

Sophie was relieved that her mistress was gone, but something was still nagging at the back of her mind. She had never been one to fall asleep on the job, especially not when she had so much work keeping her busy. So why had she dozed off today? And that dream she had, the one that felt so significant, what had it been about? She just couldn’t seem to remember...

She shook these useless questions from her mind. She had work to do. These leathers weren’t going to tan themselves, and Sophie so badly wanted to attend the Hotspring Festival tonight. All the traveling merchants would be in town for the event, peddling their fragrant oils and perfumed soaps to celebrants bathing in the springs. In Sophie’s experience, these specialty wares were the only things powerful enough to strip away the revolting scent of tanning agents from her body.

Maybe that explained why Miss Bumdell was being particularly cruel today. After last year’s Hotspring Festival, when Sophie had come back to the tannery smelling *normal* for once instead of rancid, it had sent Miss Bumdell into one of her worst episodes yet. It was like she knew that Sophie getting the least wink of positive attention might make her lose her favorite punching bag. Sadly, Sophie’s odiferous reputation had prevented her from any “intimate” interactions with the other townsfolk... but it had been nice to be able to eat inside the tavern, for once.

Through the dusty, yellowed window of the workroom, the sun was beginning to dip down over the distant mountains. Sophie had slaved away all day over these rabbit pelts, and

now she was finally putting on the finishing touches, plucking the last remaining hairs and kneading the hide back and forth to keep it soft and pliable. All her hard work had paid off: it looked like she'd be able to make it to the festival, after all!

Sophie stashed the finished leathers in the cabinet below her worktable. Stretching the stiffness out of her shoulders, she tossed her work apron over the back of her stool and made for the door, finally ready to have some fun –

The door was locked. She rushed to the window, but it was closed and barred.

She was locked in.

Sophie cursed herself for being too slow; she cursed Miss Bumdell for her abject cruelty; and most of all, she cursed the missed opportunity to smell like something other than a chemical vat for once. Tears welled up in her eyes. “Might as well get more work done, I guess,” she muttered to herself as she trudged back to her tanning station.

But then she felt something well up inside herself: a boldness that she'd never felt before in the tannery, a feeling that she'd only had during her most thrilling and adventurous fantasies. Defiance burned like a lead ball in her gut. She wouldn't miss the festival this year, Bumdell's anger be damned! She picked up a nearby sword and cleaved the door in two.

Why was there a sword just lying around the tannery? And why is it missing the pointy bit at the end? Sophie just shrugged and tucked the sword away in the nearest cabinet; no point in tacking theft on top of the property damage she already committed. Then she stepped boldly out into the brisk dusk air.

She felt strangely free, totally (and rather uncharacteristically) unconcerned with the consequences of destroying the tannery door. Logically, she knew that the punishment she would surely face at Miss Bumdell's hands tomorrow wouldn't be worth it. But tonight, Sophie just didn't seem to care about the consequences. She made a break for the foot of the mountains, where, as the sun faded, the glow of a

bonfire began to filter out from between the trees, and the sounds of music and revelry swelled into the night.

The springs were full of light and life when Sophie arrived, still wheezing and panting from her run across town. She stopped to catch her breath on the outskirts of the clearing. The last thing she wanted was to embarrass herself in front of the troupe of traveling merchants, who always seemed so interesting and worldly compared to anyone she knew from Pilora.

She took the opportunity to plan out her route through the Festival grounds. First, she'd run over to one of the booths that sold her favorite magicked soaps and oils, preferably one with a handsome shopkeep to boot – but with so little time to spare, she knew she couldn't be too picky. Next, she'd hop over to one to one of the smaller, peripheral pools so that she could clean off in the hot springs without offending the caravanners' delicate sensibilities. After all, she had heard that dark elves had sensitive noses – and all of the caravanners were dark elves.

Huh, I don't remember any of the merchants being fae last year, let alone dark elves. Did the caravan get sold, or something? Sophie scanned the merchants' booths and wagons for some sign that the caravan had changed hands, but all the names she saw seemed unremarkable. She was pondering the situation, trying to scratch an itch somewhere deep in her mind, when she caught sight of a familiar sign:

OILS AND ABLUTIONS: FINEST SCRUBBERIES IN ALL THE MIDLANDS

There we go, perfect! It was the very same booth that she went to last year, so it was sure to have just the items she was on the market for – and oh yes, was its shopkeeper handsome. His white hair cascaded down to his perfect, muscular shoulders, silky locks framing striking pale eyes that twinkled like faceted gemstones. As she approached the booth, she recalled that dark elves hadn't shown themselves to humans, or any other mortal species for that matter, in generations. So why were these elusive fae now running a caravan at the Hotspring Festival? It struck her as more than a little odd.

The elf turned to face her, brushing away stray locks of hair as they fell across his forehead. “Sophie!” he called out to her cheerfully. “Come and see what we have for you this year!”

Did the clerk just call me by name? But... how? This certainly wasn’t the same person who had sold her soaps and oils at the last Hotspring Festival. Last year’s merchant had been a plump, doddering old woman who mistook Sophie for one of her grandchildren. Even if Sophie had wanted to, she wouldn’t have been able to forget that particular merchant.

Not that Sophie *minded* this dark elf being so friendly with her. She even considered flirting right back at him, even though it would’ve been the first time she’d done such a thing in ages.

“H-hey there,” she stammered, “Good guess with the name. And what do you go by?”

The elf gave her a puzzled half-smile “Ah, Sophie, you wound me! Do you truly not remember asking me for oils plundered from the vaults of Jazz Katan? For perfumes hidden away since the days of the First Kingdoms?”

Bleugh. Oils from Jazz Katan, that old dead wizard? What’s this guy talking about? The elf’s marketing skills clearly left something to be desired; who’d want to smell like some bag of bones, anyway? It was a peculiar thing to advertise, even if, as much as it pained Sophie to admit it, smelling like a necromancer’s corpse would be an improvement over her current odor.

The elf was lucky he was such a hunk. If he weren’t so charming, there was no way he would have been allowed to run the scrubbery booth. “I think you must be confusing me with someone else,” Sophie said. “Actually, I don’t think we’ve been acquainted. When I came here last year, there was a little old woman running the shop. A human woman, I mean.”

The elf stroked his chin thoughtfully. “Are you certain it’s not a *different* shop that you’re thinking of? Things have been so busy up in the Geysers, there must have been dozens of caravans through Pilora of late. And anyway,” he added with a

wink, “I can positively guarantee you that we’ve met before. I could never forget such a mesmerizing face.”

“Oh, you’re too kind,” she stammered back. Then she blushed, internally kicking herself. *Focus, Sophie, you’re supposed to be flirting back!* If she played her cards right, maybe she would find herself whisked far away, taken along with the caravan to peddle wares in distant and exciting lands. Maybe she’d even marry into a rich family of dark elf merchants! Oh, but she’d have to deal with all the drama and responsibility of being a successful trade baroness...

“What can I get you, then, Sophie?”

“Just one of those,” Sophie replied, leveling a finger at a pyramid of soap bricks on the display shelf beside the handsome merchant.

As he placed the soap on the counter in front of her, Sophie absently moved to brush his hand with her own. But distracted by her fantasies about her future life as a wealthy merchantess, Sophie’s hand went wide and smacked into the side of the booth with an embarrassing thump.

If the elf noticed Sophie’s failed attempt, he was kind enough not to mention it. *Ouch! How do you seduce a man, again?* Embarrassed, Sophie dug one of her few precious coins out from her tattered pocket and slid it across the counter. Then she noticed that the merchant had placed not one, but two bars of soap out for her.

“Oh, I only wanted one bar. I don’t have enough...” *Ack, now he’s gonna know that I’m just a poor apprentice!*

The elf winked at her. “Take it. It’s a free sample. I figured you wouldn’t object if I threw in a little something extra, just for you.”

Sophie blushed. Was he really still interested in her, despite all of her missteps? Or was he just putting on the salesman’s charm?

“Oh! Thank you, that’s very nice,” she said. “But... I’m still not convinced that we’ve met before. You never shared your name, by the way.”

“My friends all call me Filoro. But you... can call me later.” The elf winked again, and Sophie’s blush spread down her neck and shoulders. “In fact, maybe you could come back later tonight? Once my shift ends?”

Sophie’s heart skipped a beat. “Oh! Yes, that sounds – y-yes, of course I will!” She stammered a quick thanks and scurried off for a distant spring, thanking her lucky stars that Filoro seemed so interested in her even after her lame attempts at seduction.

Filoro, huh? Why does that name sound familiar? Sophie puzzled over her strange interaction with the dark elf as she lounged in a pool of hot, roiling water, far enough off from the main Festival that the sounds of laughter and revelry were only faint and distant echoes. *Filoro*. It wasn’t a common name in any culture she was familiar with, not that she was well-versed in that sort of thing. Nor did it jog her memory from any books or plays – although these days, nobody knew enough about dark elves to bother writing stories about them. At least not stories that painted them as anything more than subterranean fiends, creeping aboveground to disappear young princesses or drown villages in the blood of their occupants.

No, Sophie knew for a fact that she hadn’t met this ‘Filoro’ before. Surely she would have recalled meeting a handsome dark elf, of all people! But somehow he had known her name, had recognized her on sight. And he *did* seem inexplicably familiar...

She put aside her concerns for the moment as she lathered up a bar of cleansing soap, savoring the comforting tingle of magic in the suds. It felt just as wonderful as she remembered from last year. All the sweat and grime that had accumulated over the past few weeks sloughed off her body, leaving Sophie feeling somehow even more naked than she had when she’d first disrobed in the cool summer air.

What a beautiful evening, she thought. But just when she was reaching peak relaxation, tendrils of doubt started to worm their way into her mind. Why had she come here tonight, after she’d resigned herself to missing the Hotspring Festival altogether? What was that weird, heavy sword doing in Miss

Bumdell's tannery? Why was the caravan, ostensibly the same group of merchants as last year, now populated exclusively by dark elves?

And most of all, why did that Filoro fellow seem familiar, and why had he been laying on the flattery so thick? Not that Sophie minded, not really; she had to admit that it was nice to be noticed for once. She imagined what it would be like to unbutton his shirt, how strong and lean his body must have been underneath his shopkeeper's garb. And his skin, ash gray and so supple and smooth – at least, Sophie certainly hoped that a skincare merchant would have nice, smooth skin. She wrapped an arm around her own belly, imagining that it belonged to the elf, and began to slide the other hand down, slowly pressing it between her legs.

No one will even notice... I just need to work some of my nerves out so I don't embarrass myself later tonight. She pressed her fingers against herself. A sigh escaped her lips as she imagined the elf's slender fingers working themselves in gentle circles and pressing themselves between her folds.

A branch cracked the forest behind her, snapping Sophie abruptly out of her reverie. She rocketed to her feet, taking a wide, naked stance in the pool of water.

“Hey! Watch out! I've got fists and I know how to use 'em!”

Did she know how to use them? What a strange thing to say. She didn't remember ever learning how to fight, but she found herself very confident in the fact that she could, in fact, hold her own in combat.

“Well, I certainly hope that you won't have any need for them,” Filoro's voice rang out as he stepped out into the clearing. He looked away from Sophie, graciously averting his eyes to preserve her modesty, and held up a bottle of wine. “I brought something I thought you might like. I couldn't bear to wait around the shop any longer. I was starting to worry you might run off.”

Sophie frowned. She was pleased to see Filoro – pleased, but confused. She wished that he hadn't startled her so badly,

that he had tried to make a little more noise as he approached from the treeline. Although, perhaps his lithe elven body just couldn't help but glide silently through the woods.

““Run off”? What's that supposed to mean?”

Filoro laughed and shook his head. “I apologize, Sophie, that was poorly said. I only meant that... well, I'd heard some of the townsfolk speak rudely of you. I was concerned you might head back to town early, believing that I wouldn't give you a chance, or that I was planning to stand you up.”

“Apology accepted,” Sophie said, lowering herself back into the water and allowing her tense muscles to relax once more. “You know, I *was* planning to head back to the Festival grounds after I bathed... but, seeing as you're here now, I'd love it if you joined me. You *and* your wine,” she added with a wink.

Wow, am I really doing this? Inviting a strange man – a strange fae – into my hot spring in the dead of night? It was like a dream come true, like something out of her secret fantasies. It was so unlike her, though. When had she gotten so bold?

“Oh?” Filoro asked with a grin. “I'd love to join you. But, of course, I can't come into the springs with all my clothes on. Perhaps you would be able to help me fix that particular problem.”

Oh yes, I most certainly would. Sophie stood up, baring it all to Filoro as she stepped out of the piping hot water and into the chill air. She was so focused on the elf that she barely felt the goosebumps ripple over her skin as a cool breeze caressed her body.

She could feel the firmness of Filoro's chest muscles through his button-down shirt, the warmth of his skin radiating out through the thin fabric. Sophie undid the first buttons carefully, before giving up and wrenching the whole thing open in one go, revealing the elf's perfectly toned stomach and chest.

“Oh, I’m just *so cold*, Filoro. You’ll have to warm me up,” she whispered slyly. Without wasting a second, she pressed herself against his warm body. He was perfect; his back was just as thick and muscular as she remembered it, and his—

As muscular as I remembered? Remembered from when? I don’t know him, we’ve never even met before...

A shiver ran through Filoro as their bodies touched. Sophie coaxed the loose fabric of his shirt over his shoulders and moved her hand down to his belt. As she did, she felt a tightening in his pants, a hardness pressing against her lower stomach.

“Not yet,” she chortled, more to herself than to him, before abandoning the tie of his now loose pants and pressing her hands against his backside. His butt was firm and round, nearly overflowing her cupped palms. She gave it a playful squeeze.

“Enjoying yourself, Sophie?” Filoro teased. “Shall we pick up where we left off last time?”

Last time? Sophie wondered. Even as she mulled his question over, she found herself responding to him, her mouth moving before her brain had a chance to catch up. “Last time... do you mean in the bathhouse?”

There was a pause. Filoro didn’t respond. “Filoro?” she murmured. But his face was blank and vacant, strangely unblinking, as though her question had thrown him for a loop, had broken him out of some pattern. *Something’s wrong here...*

Sophie recognized that she, herself, had been behaving strangely all night, acting on memories that bubbled up inside her which she struggled to place or understand. And now Filoro was acting strangely, too?

Then it hit her.

She had to try something stupid. If she was wrong, what she was planning would jeopardize the entire night and ruin any chance she had at pursuing a relationship with the handsome dark elf. She would never be able to forgive herself

in that case. But if she was right – well, something told her that the consequences would be dire if she didn't try to find out. *I'd hate to ruin a good thing, but...*

“Ah! Sorry, Filoro, I was just kidding! I meant to say that I'd *love* to pick up where we left off last year with all your hunky friends, do you remember? It was all going so wonderfully, until your boss showed up and interrupted our fun!”

Filoro's face snapped back into a dreamy smile. “Haha! Oh, Sophie, I had forgotten how much of a riot you are. Of course I remember! I believe that before we were so rudely interrupted, my friends and I were about to massage you with some of our finest oils. Come now!” Filoro put an arm around her shoulder and turned her back around to face the hot spring, which was now full to bursting with some of the finest male specimens Sophie had ever dreamed of, let alone seen in the flesh. *Oh. Shit.*

“We're so happy you're here with us at the Festival,” the beautiful elven men said in unison. This was unnerving enough to give Sophie some pause, but she didn't have time to comment – she was already getting led back into the pool by Filoro.

“Our bodies have been waiting for you for so long, Sophie!,” the chorus of hunks continued.

Sophie gulped. *Okay, this definitely isn't real... but I'd be an idiot not to enjoy it while I can.* She lowered herself into the water as the harem of slim, musclebound hunks got to work massaging her feet and shoulders. They crowded around her, rubbing floral-smelling oils into her skin and slowly, ever-so slowly massaging further and further up her thighs and between her legs. Their strong hands kneaded the tension out from her aching muscles and subtly caressed the curves of her body.

“Sophie, it makes me so happy that you're gracing us with your presence,” Filoro moaned from behind her, cupping her head in his hands and stroking her hair.

Sophie laughed out loud. “Nope, that’s not the Filoro I know.” More memories started to flood back: the necropolis, the bathhouse, Jazz Katan and his zombies...

The sky above went black, stars twinkling out of existence one by one, and forest glade faded away into nothingness. For a few seconds longer, Sophie felt the hunks continue to massage her body. But then that sensation vanished as well, and Sophie found herself standing cold and alone in the treasure vault, shattered glass underfoot, one hand clenched around the hilt of her trusty executioner’s sword. No, she wasn’t alone – Filoro, the *real* Filoro, was standing beside her, frozen in place. He was poised to take another step but utterly unmoving, staring unfocused into the middle distance.

He was trapped, just like Sophie had been, though clearly having a harder time breaking free from his dream.

Still lamenting the loss of her hunky masseurs, Sophie lifted her boot to take a better look at whatever had triggered their strange visions. Amidst the shattered glass of the broken vial, she could make out the last dregs of a thin, purple liquid, so volatile that tiny wisps of it were visibly evaporating into the air around her feet. She stepped delicately to the side, careful not to inhale any more of the vapor than she already had.

“Hey, grumpy gus,” she said quietly to Filoro. “I didn’t want *my* dream to end, either, but our pal with the shutter isn’t getting any closer. Time for us to get back to the chase.”

She grabbed his shoulder, intending to shake him awake. But as her hand made contact she found herself suddenly kneeling on a decrepit wooden floor. She knew with inexplicable certainty that she wasn’t supposed to – wasn’t *allowed* to – look up. Her joints ached as though she had been kneeling motionless in the same spot for hours. An ominous weight hung in her stomach, a feeling of great horror and anxiety that made her feel physically ill.

Ack, why did I have to grab him? Of course I’d get dragged into his dream too. It had seemed like a sensible thing to do at the time, but now that she was trapped in some terrifying

vision in the dark recesses of Filoro's mind, she wished that she'd just thrown something at him instead.

I have to break him free before he loses himself entirely.
Sophie started to stand up, hoping to get a better look around and see exactly what Filoro was dreaming up. But before she could rise to her feet, there was an explosion of pain in her chest. A heavy boot kicked her square in the sternum with an impact so powerful that it laid Sophie out flat on her back.

Sophie managed a glimpse of the room during her ignominious fall to the floor. A few feet ahead of her was a pillow-lined throne. The throne wasn't particularly gaudy, not plated with gold or dotted with precious gemstones, but it was grand and solemn and imposing of its own right.

And standing in front of the throne there was a woman, tall and broad shouldered, gray of skin and white of hair, a severe-looking dark elf of similar build and complexion to Filoro. Her waist-length hair was tied back into several, plaited ponytails, all bound together with wicked-looking barbed pins. She wore an iridescent dress, her legs on full display through hip-high slits. Her arms and torso were fully covered and adorned with straps of ornamental leather, and the dress's collar extended up her neck all the way to her jawline, where it exploded out in a ruff of iridescent red feathers.

Most strikingly, the woman was missing one of her eyes. The socket was fitted with an amber globe dotted with cloudy, shimmering inclusions.

She sneered down at Sophie, her features twisting into an amused smirk as Sophie's head slammed into the ground. Then the woman's voice rang out, authoritative and icy. "I thought your little rat would have learned some manners by now."

Another voice rang out from beside Sophie. It belonged unmistakably to Filoro. "I apologize, my liege... shall I kill her?"

The woman chuckled. "In here? You know how much these floors cost. Unless you're ready to scrub the resulting mess

yourself, I'd prefer that you wait to handle your minion's impudence until you're both outside."

Here we go, this is the classic dark elf stuff, just like in the stageplays! Sophie had always assumed those portrayals were over-the-top, caricatures that had grown all the more exaggerated over the centuries since dark elves had last frequented mortal lands. But if the past few minutes were anything to judge by, dark elf culture was just as cloak-and-dagger as the stories described. It was shocking, nonetheless, to hear Filoro so casually offer to kill her.

Sophie coughed, thoroughly winded from the woman's kick, as the ceiling swam into focus. She decided to remain on her back for now and let the situation play out a little longer. Of course she'd have to pull Filoro out of his vision eventually, but she couldn't resist the opportunity to learn more about his past. Besides, the pain she had felt from the woman's kick had been all-too real, and Sophie didn't want to risk angering her any further.

"I won't mince words with you, Filoro. I'm sure you know why I called you here," the woman's voice rang out again, cold and poisonous. "You've always been one of my most loyal subjects. It would be unbecoming for the both of us for me to have to spell out your offenses."

"Of course, my liege," Filoro cringed. "But was it necessary to—"

A loud *thwack* cut him off mid-sentence.

"I don't care one whit whether the orders were *necessary*, and neither should you. They were yours to follow. And now you've left me no choice but to clean up after your mess."

Sophie heard Filoro shift uncomfortably beside her. "Yes, my liege, I understand." A hint of confusion entered his voice. "Forgive my indiscretion, but is the simplest solution not... my execution?"

"Hah! Under normal circumstances I would agree with you. But given my *delicate* situation with the council, I can't afford any embarrassment. You know those vipers well enough

to understand. They're waiting for any opportunity to relegate our house to the sidelines. Acknowledging your crime would give them just the ammunition they need."

A tension filled the air for a handful of moments.

"Oh, smile, Filoro! This should come as good news: you live to see another day. And you'll be welcomed back with open arms, should you return."

"Ah. So it's to be an execution by exile, then," Filoro said.

"Ocean below! I thought you'd be pleased to learn that I didn't call you here just to kill you." The woman sighed. "Functionally, yes. You're right. I don't *really* expect you to succeed in recovering the Tranquil Lantern. No offense intended, of course."

"The... Tranquil Lantern?" Filoro asked. "But that's been lost for—"

"Lost for centuries, yes, I know," the woman interrupted, her voice bored and strangely casual. "Seven centuries, in fact, since that bastard Katan stole it from us. As the story goes, Archvicar Salk's grip was so strong that his hands were ripped clean off along with the lantern."

"Yes, but... my liege, Jazz Katan's necropolis is halfway—"

"Yes, yes, halfway across the world, through seventeen-hundred fathoms of dark tunnel, buried forest, and subterranean lake. It would probably be for the best if you stayed below-ground for as much of your journey as possible. We don't want rumors of our presence to spread amongst the humans. Or any of the surface fae, for that matter." She paused. "If you're spotted by a surface-dweller... well, you don't need me to tell you what needs to be done. Don't fail me again."

"No, my liege," Filoro said sadly. "I understand."

These dark elves really do value their privacy, huh? Sophie thought. *I just hope Filoro didn't end up having to kill any 'surface-dwellers' on his way to the necropolis.* She had a moment of shock. *Wait, does that mean he has to kill me?!*

Sophie tamped down the panic she could feel rising within chest. There was no sense getting worked up yet; she could just ask Filoro about it once she snapped him out of his vision. She slowly sat up, hopeful that the woman would be too focused on Filoro to deliver another one of her devastating kicks.

“Oh. Filoro, your little rat is at it again.” The woman snapped her head in Sophie’s direction, throwing the sharp angles of her face into clear relief. Her single, baleful blue eye glinted malevolently.

It’s okay, she’s just a figment. She’s not real, she can’t hurt me. A shudder of doubt ran up Sophie’s spine as she recalled the earlier kick. *I guess I’d better break Filoro out of this trap, and fast.*

She thought back to her own vision. Somehow, she’d have to get Filoro to realize that something was amiss, just like she had back in the hot springs. It was time for her to shake things up.

She cleared her throat. “Hey, lady! What was your name again? I must have missed it, between all your blabbing and commands and threats.”

The woman’s eyes went wide. “Filoro, you’re lucky you’re so valuable to me. Otherwise I’d have you kill *her* and then *yourself* on the spot.” She slowly approached Sophie, who was now scrambling desperately to her feet. “You, little rat, are about to have the honor of being killed by Leonora, Vicar of the Tower of Stars.”

“My liege, I beg you to forgive her... this woman, Sophie, she does not know our ways,” Filoro pleaded, still kneeling with his head bowed to the ground.

“Silence!” Leonora commanded. “Or else I’ll have to rethink the generous deal I’ve offered you. Do you—”

With Leonora’s attention briefly drawn to Filoro, Sophie fired off a savage kick straight at her nethers. Her aim was true, and the kick left Leonora sputtering and gasping.

“What do you think you’re doing, Sophie?!” Filoro screamed. “You can’t just... wait, who... how are you...?” His anger rapidly faded to confusion. “But I was alone when this happened, it was just me and Leonora. No one else was supposed to know...,” he muttered, eyes widening.

Sophie gave Filoro an approving nod, happy that he was finally starting to piece things together. *This seems to be snapping him out of it. We’ll be out of here soon enough.*

Sophie just couldn’t resist going in for another blow; not because it was *fun* to fight a powerful, elven noblewoman without any consequences, but really just to help snap Filoro out of the vision. She stepped forward and wound up a punch – but in a flash Leonora had plunged a knife into Sophie’s gut, burying it up to the hilt. The knife looked like a nice piece too, a decorative sidearm, though it was a little hard for Sophie to interrogate through the wave of pain that made her vision go dark around the edges.

After a moment blood began to leak out around the sides of the wound. Leonora laughed. “Looks like you’re going to clean her entrails off my floor after all, Filoro.”

Filoro was staring at Sophie, momentarily perplexed.

“Filoro, did you hear me? Hello?” Leonora said. “This last campaign seems to have badly affected you. You should count your lucky stars that I need the Tranquil Lantern back.” She pulled her knife free of Sophie’s gut with a sickening squelch then offered it to Filoro, hilt-first. “Take this, gut *her*, and get out of my sight. I expect you back as a returning hero, or not at all.”

Sophie tasted hot blood in the back of her throat as Filoro took the knife in hand. She knew her time was short, and just prayed that her injuries wouldn’t follow her from the dream back into reality. “Hey Filoro,” she managed to gurgle. “Do you figure... if I die here... that I’ll die in real life? Like... if you chop my head off here... will my actual head pop off, too?”

“Sophie... I have no idea who you are, much less how I know you. But don’t test my patience,” he hissed at her

through his teeth. “Try not to struggle and I promise that I’ll give you a quick death.”

Sophie felt her consciousness fading fast as blood rushed out of the wound in her stomach. “If you don’t know who I am, then how do you know my name?”

“What. Are. You. Doing. Filoro?!” Leonora screamed, her voice rising to a pitch that could have shattered glass, “*Kill her!* I gave you a direct order!”

Filoro was staring at Sophie intently. “What’s going on? Why are you here?”

“I’m here to wake you up, numbnuts.” Sophie leaned in and kissed him on the mouth, her lips wet with blood, and the world around her seemed to fade away.

She opened her eyes to the darkness of the treasure vault, her face inches from Filoro’s. She quickly scrabbled at the front of her stomach, searching for a mortal wound, but the knifing she’d received at Leonora’s hands hadn’t followed her out of the vision.

Filoro’s took a great gasping breath, his eyes fluttering open. Sophie pulled back from him and smiled. “So, I *am* going to have to ask you about some of that, you know,” she said. “For instance, do you have to kill me now? I’m a surface-dweller, after all.”

“You’re not dwelling on the surface right now, are you?” Filoro replied, shaking out his stiff limbs. He saw her indignant expression and laughed. “I’m kidding! I swore an oath to keep you safe. Do you really think I would renege on my promise?”

“Okay, okay... then what about that crime of yours Leonora mentioned? I never would’ve taken you for a criminal! What’d you do, bed the king’s daughter or something?”

Filoro just grinned at her mischievously. “Come on, Sophie. That zombie isn’t going to catch himself.”

“Hey, come on, you’ve *gotta* tell me more! It’s not like I’m gonna go and tell anyone else about it afterwards! Spill the

beans!” Sophie begged.

Laughing to himself, Filoro started running towards the shrinking pinprick of light which marked the zombie and the lantern shutter, somewhere in the dark distance of the treasure vault.

Sophie took off running behind him “Spill just *one* bean! Come on, we can walk and talk! Hey!”

CHAPTER 12

“After all we’ve been through together, I suppose I do owe you a little insight,” Filoro said. Sophie had managed to catch up with him as they resumed their mad dash through the cavernous treasure vault.

“You may ask me one question, any question, and I’ll answer it to the best of my ability. But first, I’d like to know how you broke us out of that spell.”

Sophie was nearly sprinting to keep up with Filoro’s easy pace, and her response came out ragged and breathy. “Well, first, I... first I was in... one of my... old memories. Time when I missed out on... Hotspring Festival...,” she wheezed, her breath catching in her chest. She may have overestimated her ability to hold a conversation while running beside a partner with such long legs.

“Hold... hold on a second. I’m... I’m gonna try to...”

She dug deep into her memory, searching for the sensation that had bubbled up inside her when she had channeled her magic earlier in the day. She even shut her eyes to concentrate more intensely. She thought she could feel it, that same sense of determination and focus, but was it working?

“Woah there, Sophie! Don’t get too far ahead!” Filoro called from somewhere behind her. Sophie’s eyes snapped open and, lo and behold, Filoro was no longer by her side. Judging by the tiles racing away beneath her feet, every one of her steps was rocketing her forward by at least five paces.

Not quite ready to brave the vault on her own, she slowed her run to a more comfortable rhythm in order to let Filoro catch up. Once he made his way to her side once again, she launched back into her daring tale of heroism.

“Back to your question about how I rescued you? You see, Filoro, it was actually quite easy for me to escape the trap,” she began, hamming it up a little. She felt like she deserved to

brag, given that she had single-handedly rescued the both of them from a magical curse.

“I was reliving an old memory of mine, a bad one. There was a time when I didn’t get to do something I really wanted, when I didn’t get to go to this summer festival I had been looking forward to. And – in my vision, I ended up doing things differently this time. I mean, different than how it actually happened. This time, I actually *went* to the festival. The whole thing started falling apart from there, really, and I figured out that I wasn’t in reality. There were just too many inconsistencies.”

She pointedly left out the role that Filoro himself had played in this ‘inconsistent’ version of events. Some things were just too embarrassing to share.

Filoro nodded. “I see. I suppose that you must have found a way to enter *my* dream, afterwards, where you forced things to go differently as well,” he said. “Well, that’s very interesting.”

Sophie looked at him quizzically.

“It’s interesting that you were able to change events so drastically in your dream, even before you realized that it wasn’t reality. It suggests that you’ve changed a lot from the Sophie who lived the original memory. After all, the old you *didn’t* get what she wanted.”

That sounded almost like a compliment.

“Hm. You weren’t able to break out of *your* dream on your own,” she teased. “Does that mean your journey from your homeland didn’t change you very much? Wait, wait! That doesn’t count as my question, so don’t answer it if you don’t want to!”

They leaped over a pile of weapons scattered haphazardly across the floor. “This piece of information, you can have for free,” Filoro said. “No, I don’t suppose I’ve changed much. It took me little more than a year to reach the necropolis, after all.”

He saw Sophie open her mouth for a rebuttal and interrupted her. “Ah, I understand your confusion – a year

must be a fair amount of time by human standards, but it passes in a blink to a dark elf.”

He paused. “So. Ask your real question, Sophie.” A twinge of sadness entered his voice, as though he already knew what she was going to ask.

“What was your crime?”

A long moment passed, and Sophie feared that she had asked the one question he *wouldn't* answer. But then he responded in a low, slow voice. “You must understand that the laws of our peoples, of humans and dark elves, are very different. What I did... for a dark elf, it was a crime of the highest order. An unforgivable, irreconcilable shame upon me and my House. To speak it aloud would be more humiliation than I could bear. It would mean accepting the stain on my honor, permanently.”

Oh, well, that isn't ominous at all. “Huh. Maybe you could just give me a hint, then?” Sophie asked. She knew she was pushing her luck. She didn't want Filoro mad at her, but his non-answer had made her curiosity burn all the brighter.

He sighed. “As you will. Under the laws of your people, I believe my crime would be described as... murder.”

Sophie flinched. She had braced herself to hear that he perpetrated any number of crimes, but *murder*? She was taken aback. The Filoro she knew seemed too proud, too honorable, for such a thing. There had to be some good explanation. She wanted to know more, but by the dark expression now clouding Filoro's features and by the thin line of his tightly-pressed lips, she knew that probing the matter any further would only hurt his feelings. She couldn't bear to incite another argument, or even worse, to set off another long, uncomfortable silence between them. But she had to say *something* to lighten the mood as they climbed up a dark pillar and onto some kind of mezzanine between catwalks.

“So did you and Leonora, ever... you know...?” Sophie asked, waggling her eyebrows suggestively.

Filoro pulled Sophie up over the mezzanine railing, lifting her to a higher level in the treasure vault. A small smile crept onto his face, marring the solemn expression he'd been wearing for the past few minutes. "Are you sure you want to hear about that?"

Sophie's mouth hung open. "No way, you did?! Did you really?! Wasn't she some hotshot noble, the Vicar of... something'?"

"Vicar of the Tower of Stars, yes. Leonora certainly is a hotshot noblewoman, as you put it. And she'll be an even *hotter* shot once I return to her with the Tranquil Lantern." A dreamy look came over Filoro's face. "Suffice it to say that we did lay together occasionally, back in my early days of service to the Tower. I won't burden you with the gory details."

He must have noticed the flicker of surprise that crossed Sophie's face, because he quickly continued. "It behooves me to tell you that dark elves don't typically pair with a single partner for life, as I know is a frequent practice among surface-dwellers. My intimacy with Leonora was not as scandalous as you might be imagining. And it did not have much impact on our relationship as liege and vassal."

They only did it in the early days, huh? "So why'd you stop? Being with Leonora, I mean. Was it something to do with that other lady, the one I saw in your memory?" Filoro was silent for a few moments, leaving Sophie to worry that her interrogation had gone too far, that she had struck too raw a nerve by prodding him about his old flames.

"Yes. She's the reason," he said. Filoro's voice was an odd mixture of joy and sorrow, but his face was an inscrutable mask. Sophie didn't question him any further after that. Whoever the woman was, she clearly meant a lot to him. *He'll find his way back to her, I'm sure of it*, Sophie thought. *And... even if it's not what I want, I'll do whatever it takes to make sure he finds happiness again. Even if it means I lose him.*

Sophie chased after the glowing zombie with newfound purpose, once more following the path of chaos it left behind. In the time Sophie and Filoro had spent in their respective

visions, the situation in the treasure vault had only gotten worse. Now, avoiding stepping on fallen treasure was the least of their worries. Around every corner, ghoulish spirits moaned and wailed and lashed out with tendrils of magic, their essences freed from their shattered cages.

And more pressingly, the taxidermy creatures Sophie had seen on the way into the vault were gone, all of them now missing from their stands. There wasn't the least sign of them – but on several occasions, Sophie and Filoro heard angry snarls and heavy footsteps coming from adjacent catwalks.

After leaping over a particularly harrowing sequence of smoldering pits and hissing acid pools, Sophie and Filoro finally got a moment's respite in relative peace. Not even a stray gout of flame split the quiet. All Sophie could hear was her and Filoro's labored breathing as they continued jogging towards the twisted zombie's glow, now just a few hundred paces away.

Then, somewhere ahead of them, a deep, rumbling roar shattered the quiet, freezing Sophie and Filoro in their tracks. The sound echoed off the metal catwalks before fading away to nothing. It had to be one of the taxidermy guardians – a big one, by the sound of it – and it was definitely coming from the direction of the zombie.

Sophie broke the hush with a whisper. “What are we going to do? You saw those *things* on the way in, right? Do you think we'd have a shot if we had to fight one?”

Filoro leaned in close. “With any luck, the zombie and the vault guardian will tear each other to shreds without any effort on our part,” he whispered back. “If not, then, perhaps we can wait the guardians out. I suspect that after a while they'll retreat back to their original posts and deactivate, to conserve energy.”

Sophie nodded. “Hunker down, then?”

Filoro nodded back. The two of them crouched low to the ground, making themselves as small as possible to try to keep out of the sightlines of any wandering sentries. Filoro muttered incessantly to himself, reciting incantations and debating

which spells and rituals he could use if they came to battle with the taxidermy creature. Sophie kept her ears perked to listen for any sounds that might suggest a scuffle had commenced between zombie and beast.

Their concentration was broken by a wheezing shout from the zombie. “I say, I hope you fools are in pursuit!” he yelled. His telltale yellow glow was still several hundred paces ahead of them and impossible to make out with any detail.

“I do believe my skeleton has been sufficiently hobbled. It will hardly put up a fight at all if you come to collect your prize. And when you do – and please, forgive my boldness – but might I ask that you do me the favor of smashing these bones of mine to bits? This experience has been a terrible, simply *awful* strain.”

Sophie signaled for Filoro’s attention. “Do you think it’s okay? Can we just walk over to him? He didn’t mention anything about the taxidermy things... they might not have spotted him yet. Whatever made that noise might have walked right past him.”

Filoro scrunched his brow in thought. “If this creature is telling the truth and his skeleton is truly incapacitated, this may be our best chance to recover the shutter.” He sighed. “We’ll approach him. Just move slowly, keep your eyes peeled, and have your sword at the ready.”

As Sophie stood up from her crouch, Filoro put a restraining hand on her shoulder. “And... try to hold your magic at the forefront of your mind. If we have to run, we’ll have to run *fast*.”

With that, they carefully walked towards the zombie. He wasn’t hard to find, as his magical glow was so intense that it illuminated the entire obsidian clearing in which he lay. It was obvious that there had been a fight here, a big one. Busted display cases littered the floor, splintered wood fragments and shards of glass intermixed with a number of enormous, shredded animal parts.

Sophie quickly realized that the whitish material spilling from the animal limbs parts wasn’t gore, but rather cotton

stuffing: soft and fluffy, a strange juxtaposition to the grisly pile of meat and bone lying in the middle of it all. The twisted zombie lay in ruin, still grasping the precious lantern shutter in his gold-filigreed, skeletal arms.

Sophie and Filoro slowly approached, stepping over the bits of taxidermy in their path. One piece in particular, a severed goat head, made goosebumps rise on Sophie's skin as she passed it by. Somehow, impossibly, the thing still looked *alive*, and she had an uneasy feeling that it would try to take a bite out of her leg if she got too close. She flinched away, giving the thing a wide berth.

"Ah, you've made it! I'm so pleased you've found me," the twisted zombie called out. "And I see that you've taken a liking to the Great Goat of the Midlands! You know, I was personally responsible for the creation of that particular beast."

Filoro stepped to Sophie's side. "Is that so?" he asked. He was visibly on-edge, his eyes darting rapidly around the vault.

"Indeed, murk-elf! I designed the Great Goat to be a guardian, to protect our kingdom's farmers, shepherds, caravans, and so forth. A damn good design it was, too! Luckily we were able to maintain its fire-breathing capacity past the initial prototype. When that apprentice of mine, what was his name, Sven? Well, when he sewed through the fire bladder, I thought we'd have to scrap the beast entirely."

"Ah, Sven," the zombie mused. "He was a gentleman. Unless you've met him already, I surmise his bones are still wandering the necropolis somewhere. And the Goat... well, the Goat ended up being a pest more than anything, which is how it ended up he—"

Filoro interrupted before the zombie could ramble any further. "Zombie, do any of these animated creatures remain? And is your skeleton damaged enough that we can safely approach and recover the shutter?"

The zombie issued an irritated sigh, gesturing vaguely with its twisted, fleshy arms. "Damaged *enough*? Does it look li—"

SKRUCH

The zombie was crushed flat as an enormous, winged beast crashed down in the middle of the clearing. Its legs were thick as tree-trunks and ended in the scimitar claws of an apex predator. Its mane was a wreath of barbed quills, and its tail, a cord of pure, sinewy muscle, terminated in a bramble of wicked spines. Each beat of its wings produced a gust of wind so powerful that it threatened to knock Sophie off her feet.

The creature loosed a low, gurgling roar that set Sophie's nerves on fire. *The thing's as big as a house!* She began to back away, but froze when the creature's shiny glass eyes locked with hers. Its gargantuan body lowered, ready to pounce at a moment's notice.

From somewhere underneath the creature's legs, the zombie's pained and muffled voice called out, "Ah, I've been... *ugh!* Crushed by a greater... forest quillfry. A... most impressive... specimen..."

If the zombie could help them *fight* the thing half as well as he could name it, maybe Sophie wouldn't have felt so afraid. But the sound of the thing's gnashing teeth – *the greater forest quillfry's gnashing teeth*, she corrected herself – was tying her stomach in knots.

"Filoro, do we try to fight this thing?!" she asked, repositioning her executioner's sword in her sweaty palms.

"I'm afraid we do," he said.

They moved in near-unison, Sophie and Filoro each darting out to either side of the quillfry. Sophie saw Filoro vault over one of its feet, nimbly dodging its claws to drag his thin blade along the creature's stomach. But even on its vulnerable underbelly, the quillfry's hide was thick and tough, and Filoro's rapier glanced off without even leaving a mark.

Sophie, meanwhile, was debating which part of the thing to bother taking a swing at. Her first choice was to try lopping off one of its legs in order to throw the massive creature off-balance – but as she decided, a sound like a whip-crack split the air as the quillfry launched its barbed tail in her direction. Sophie managed to duck just in time. She suppressed a shudder; had

she waited a moment longer, the spines on the end of the tail surely would have decapitated her.

She took a deep breath to steady herself, then wound up a heavy overhand chop at the quillfry's leg. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the creature wrench its backside towards Filoro.

"Sophie! Tail! Behind you!" Filoro screamed. The quillfry suddenly spun around, whipping its tail in her direction. Sophie was mid-swing with her executioner's sword, her heels planted firmly on the floor. There was no time to get out of the way, and no way she could avoid its surprise attack. She was dead in the water. *Unless...*

Sophie pivoted, turning her body in toward the quillfry in order to meet its attack head-on. She brought her sword down in a vicious blow and was rewarded with a shower of cotton fluff and the thump of the creature's severed tail flopping to the ground.

Using the creature's own strength against it had been a gamble, but it had been enough. Not enough to *kill* the wretched thing, but enough to stay alive. For the moment, at least.

"Go for the ass, Filoro!" Sophie shouted. Filoro dove behind the quillfry and hacked at the frayed bit of hide where tail had once connected to body. In a moment, he had expertly cleaved the thing from rump to ribcage, his rapier slicing cleanly through the creature's exposed, cotton innards. The quillfry stumbled forward a few steps. It took a final, halfhearted swipe at Sophie, who easily sidestepped the blow. Then the quillfry flopped quietly to the ground, dead, its taxidermy glass eyes still open and disconcertingly lifelike.

Filoro was sweating profusely and bouncing from heel to heel, still full of adrenaline. Sophie shakily lowered her sword, hardly able to believe it was over. But, of course, it wasn't; they had to recover the lantern shutter, still held in the zombie's mangled, bony arms. Amidst the beast's spilled fluff, Sophie once more noticed the remains of the zombie, now trampled flat in addition to all his previous deformities. He

was somehow still moaning and twitching despite his grim condition, Jazz Katan's magic binding him inescapably to life.

"Zombie!" Filoro called. "If you can hear me, know that we defeated the quillfry. I'm going to try to retrieve the shutter now. Prepare yourself." Keeping at a good distance, Filoro extended his rapier towards the shutter. "Just have to hook it underneath..."

There was a clank of metal-on-metal. "There! Got it!"

But as he started retracting his blade to pull the shutter out of the zombie's skeletal grasp, the zombie's remains spasmed violently. The shutter fell out of Filoro's reach as the zombie's blackened skeleton began to deform, its bones flowing and morphing like water. Bone seeped out of the zombie's flesh in torrents of black dust, shredding the zombie's body to pieces. It was one of the gruesome scenes Sophie ever had the misfortune of seeing. *Well, he definitely can't help us now.*

"Filoro, what's going on?" she yelled.

"Stay back!" Filoro commanded, himself taking a few hasty steps backwards.

Streams of bone dust continued to pour out from the zombie's remains, forming a swirling cloud so thick and opaque that Sophie could hardly see what lay behind it. After a moment, a shimmer danced across the cloud of bone dust, rippling along its surface. As it passed, the cloud congealed into a solid mass of material, a gleaming shell of black bone – with the lantern shutter trapped inside.

Filoro and Sophie stared at the bone orb, each of them separately wondering why nothing could ever be easy.



"I have good news and bad news," Filoro said. At this, Sophie perked right up. They had spent the better part of an hour standing around the bone orb, Filoro probing its surface with various spells and incantations while Sophie kept watch for more taxidermy guardians.

"The good news—"

“Bad news,” Sophie demanded.

“What?”

“I want the bad news first. It goes down easier that way.”

Filoro shook his head. “In this particular instance I’m electing to give you the good news first. I think I’ve found a way to get to the shutter. It will take some effort, but I’m confident that we will be able to break through the orb.”

“Okay, well that’s a start! So what’s the bad news?”

Filoro sighed. “The zombie’s bones were imbued with powerful magic, far more powerful than I had originally surmised. There’s a specific spell I know that should be able to break the enchantment, but it’s... well, it’s no mere incantation. Casting it will require considerable effort on my part... as well as a ritual.”

What’s so bad about that? “Unless I’m missing something, that doesn’t sound so bad,” Sophie said. “Hopefully we can rest up outside the vault for a bit afterward. So what, does the ritual take a long time? Or does it require that we make, like, a blood sacrifice?”

“No, no, nothing so grim as that. It’s just... how do I put this delicately? This spell requires that the caster undergo a specific physical stimulus, paired with a heightened state of emotion. It’s... well, to be blunt, Sophie, it’s a sexual ritual.”

He cleared his throat. “It doesn’t require intercourse, necessarily. It all depends on the strength of the skeleton’s enchantment relative to the amount of energy I’m able to channel.”

Sophie raised her eyebrows. “You’re not just trying to get in my pants again, are you?”

Filoro brought a palm up to his forehead, but whether he was exasperated or embarrassed Sophie couldn’t tell. “Of course not. And if this plan isn’t agreeable to you, perhaps we could drag the orb and its contents back to the throne room. Katan and the other zombie may be able to help us. But...”

“But what?”

“For one, there’s no guarantee the zombie’s skeleton won’t recover in the meantime, perhaps even enough to return to its original shape. Not to mention, if we’re approached by another one of the taxidermy sentries, we’ll have no chance for a quick escape if we’re lugging the whole orb behind us.”

Sophie nodded but didn’t say a word, still mulling over Filoro’s proposal. *A sex ritual? I’ve never properly done it before – not all the way, anyway – and now my first time is gonna be in service to some magic spell?*

Sophie’s thoughts must have been plain on her face. “It’s up to you, of course,” Filoro said. “But I think it’s our best hope of getting out of here in one piece.”

Sophie sighed. It wasn’t every day that a handsome, brooding elf asked her to get freaky in order to reclaim a long-lost ancestral treasure. And while this wasn’t something she had specifically put on her bucket list, it seemed like precisely the sort of thing that the *new* Sophie – Sophie the adventurer, no longer Sophie the tanner’s apprentice – would do. Besides, hadn’t Filoro already seen her naked, already been intimately familiar with her back in the bathhouse? Was this really so different?

“Yeah,” Sophie said. “Yeah, I’m in. Magic sex ritual. What do I... what do *we* have to do here, exactly?” She jumped down from her perch on the greater quillfry’s leg to stand beside the elf, staring down the thin sheet of bone that separated them from their treasure. Filoro looked at her and smiled wickedly.



“Now face me,” Filoro instructed. Sophie had stripped off her armor and was down to just her plainclothes. Filoro, for his part, was still wearing his leather jerkin and trousers. The two of them were standing inside a chalk circle that Filoro had hastily scrawled on the floor just a few paces from the bone orb. He had drawn a similar circle in chalk on the bone orb itself, the target of their ritual, this one smaller and ringed with innumerable magic runes.

Sophie's discarded armor and weapons were cast off to the side, lying in a messy heap. Although she was still partially clothed, Sophie felt strangely naked in the darkness. She felt very conscious of the fact that there was nothing to protect her should some new monstrosity approach them from the cloying shadows deeper in the treasure vault. She shivered and looked up at Filoro, wondering what, exactly, this ritual was going to require of her.

"Alright. Stand close," Filoro said as he placed his hands on her shoulders. "Are you ready?"

She supposed she *was* ready, even if this didn't seem nearly so romantic as their prior tryst in the bathhouse. That encounter had seemed so intense: both of them exhausted, fresh out of an argument, sore muscles relaxing in the steam. Things had just opened up between them as though by a miracle. By comparison, their current situation felt almost clinical. It would still be *nice*, she was sure. But the knowledge that her and Filoro's success, and maybe even their *survival*, depended on her sexual prowess... well, it certainly added a pinch of anxiety to the mix.

"I'm ready," Sophie breathed, heart racing in her chest. Filoro moved his hand up her body, tracing her neck and jawline with his delicate fingers before cupping her cheek in his warm palm. His hands did feel nice; they were gentle and warm, surprisingly soft despite the calluses built over years of swordsmanship.

Sophie felt his warm breath on her throat as he pressed his face into the crook of her neck. She let her head fall to the opposite side, allowing herself to lean against his cradling hand. A warm shiver ran through her body as she felt his lips brush against the sensitive skin of her neck, first tenderly and then with a bit more vigor. *Maybe this won't be so awkward after all*, Sophie thought, as Filoro's hand made its way around to her back and down between her shoulder blades, kept apart from her bare skin by nothing more than a thin layer of fabric. He paused there for a moment, still kissing her neck, before continuing down to caress her lower back.

She could feel Filoro's breathing quicken as he pressed her body closer to his, marking a path of kisses up her neck and jaw before finally planting a light peck on her lips. It felt good, but... strange. Empty, almost. She felt like she was missing something. She tried to capture the lust she had felt in the bathhouse and mirrored Filoro's own movements, holding his lower back with one hand and caressing the side of his face with the other. But no luck; something still wasn't clicking.

Come on, Sophie! You've got this sexy dark elf falling all over you and suddenly you can't get in the mood? You practically sat on his dick a few hours ago! She tried to shake away her thoughts. Chastising herself wasn't going to help the situation any. Now even the buzzy, shivery sensation from his kisses was starting to dissolve away to nothing.

Filoro pulled back, holding her at arm's reach. "Sophie... are you okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, it's just... all the pressure of this being part of a magic ritual. I'm having some trouble getting in the zone, you know?" She rested her head against his armored chest. Everything was falling apart: the quest to recover the lantern, her romantic future with Filoro, her life as an adventurer... it was all falling apart, and it was all her fault. Why couldn't she just play it cool? She *wanted* to be with Filoro, so why was she feeling so nervous all of the sudden?

"Agh, why is this so hard? I don't know why I can't... we were *just*..." She smacked her forehead against his chest with a dull thump. "I feel silly, is all. This important mission is getting held up just because of me."

Filoro's hands found her shoulders again. Looking her straight in the eyes, he gave her a firm, reassuring squeeze. "I know this was an unusual suggestion, Sophie. We can find another way—"

"No! No, I don't want to find a different way," she said. She wanted this, she wanted *him*. And she would do whatever it took to get them out of this deathtrap of a treasure vault the fastest. How could she make this work? The sterility, the air of

clinicality about the experience was just too much. But maybe, if she could make things feel just a little more intimate...

A blush began to spread across her cheeks and spill down across her chest.

“Okay, I think I have an idea,” she said as she undid the buttons of her undershirt, the one Filoro had leant her, oversized and with puffy sleeves. She let it hang open, revealing herself from her clavicle down to her navel.

Filoro was still holding her at a distance, both hands on her hips. He raised his eyebrows in surprise – and maybe in appreciation – as he looked her up and down.

“I just figured... I just figured it might be nice if we both got a little more comfortable,” Sophie said, looking bashfully off to the side. She slowly undid the ties on her waistband, loosening them enough to allow her pants to fall down a few fingers. She could feel Filoro’s pulse hammering in his hands as his eyes were drawn down along the curve of her hips, towards her now barely-covered mons.

Taking the cue from Sophie, Filoro tugged his chainmail jerkin up over his head in one fluid motion and let the garment fall uselessly to the floor. Lust welled up in Sophie as she looked over Filoro’s bare torso, the lean muscles of his chest and shoulders glistening with sweat. Behind him, the bone orb was now glowing with a faint, pale light.

The two kicked their boots off in unison. Sophie was glad the elf seemed just as eager to shed his clothes as she did. He was either excited about whatever was to happen between them, or trying to make Sophie more comfortable.

Her face burned with embarrassment as she struggled to disentangle her foot from her underclothes. She was just straightening back upright when she caught sight of something *else*, which was seemingly undergoing the same kind of transformation. Her bent-over position had put Filoro’s manhood directly in her line of sight. It was fully exposed in front of her, the base of it wreathed in fine white hair, half at attention and half unsure of precisely what it was meant to be getting up to.

“Don’t worry, I can give you a hand,” Sophie said quietly.

She looked up and saw a hint of a blush darkening Filoro’s gray cheeks. “Sophie, are you talking to me, or to...?”

She could only laugh in response as she gingerly cupped his member in her palm, kneeling down in front of it to get a better look. It was warm to the touch, and she watched with some pleasure as it began to grow to its full, impressive size, spilling out of her hand as all of the embarrassment and awkwardness she’d felt earlier began to melt away. *Should I...? No, not yet, there will be time for that later.*

She stood back up, still holding his manhood, and gave him a light squeeze as their eyes met once again. She could feel his pulse quickening under her hand. Filoro let out a gasp, a faint and sexy huff. Breathing more heavily now, he brought his hands up past Sophie’s hips, underneath her loose shirt and slowly up her sides, allowing his fingers to explore her stomach and ribs. He came to a stop just below the line of her breasts. *Oh come on Filoro, just go for it!*

As Sophie’s breathing quickened, she saw a hazy light out the corner of her eye. The chalk ring on the bone orb had begun to glow.

Filoro leaned forward and kissed Sophie hard on the mouth. After a few moments he leaned away for a breath of air, but Sophie pressed her hand behind his neck to greedily reel him back in. They kissed for what seemed like ages, their mouths locked, tongues gently touching and testing. Their hands teased each other’s bodies, Filoro’s wandering up Sophie’s torso to fondle her breasts. Sophie could feel a dampness developing in her loins as Filoro’s member jerked in her palm. He was rock hard beneath her touch.

The light radiating from the bone orb grew and grew in intensity... but nothing else happened. The shell was still intact. Sophie pulled her mouth away from Filoro’s, growing concerned. Was something going wrong with the ritual? Should it be taking so long for the magic to work?

Filoro wrapped his arms around her back and pressed their bodies close together, close enough that could feel the heat of

his member on her belly.

Sophie stole another glance at the bone orb; light was still emanating from its surface, but it looked *dimmer*, if anything. Not by much, but a noticeable difference. *Oh no, is the spell failing? Does it need more energy?* Sophie pushed back against Filoro and dropped to her knees. She never expected her first time giving head to be in some dusty old tomb, but she was damn well sure going to see this ritual through.

“Sophie?” Filoro murmured. Sophie smiled up at him. She ran her fingers along the delicate flesh of his thighs and took a long, deep breath. Then she leaned forward, savoring the moan that escaped Filoro’s lips when she took the tip of his manhood in her mouth, feeling him jerk and buck his hips as her tongue worked its way around his head.

“Oh, Sophie...,” he moaned. He reached down and traced the twisting whorls that painted the newly-healed skin of her shoulder, sending a tingle shooting down Sophie’s spine, then gently held her head in his hands. For a moment, Sophie worried that he might try to pull her further towards his hips, or hold her still while he thrust, but Filoro did no such thing. He just held her, tenderly stroking her hair as she teased and sucked on his manhood.

Sophie stole another glance up towards the bone orb. It was still glowing intensely, the runes around the inscribed chalk circle now pulsing in time with Sophie’s movements. But the orb itself was solid as ever, an impenetrable shell. *This ritual is taking more sexual energy than I bargained for!*

Sophie brought her hands up his thighs and around to his rear. His backside was a marvel, firm yet perfectly squeezable. She caressed him for a moment, then used her new position to pull his hips closer, taking his shaft wholly in her mouth. As Filoro’s breathing grew more ragged, Sophie heard a sound like gravel on stone. She paused for a moment to check their progress on destroying the orb. Tiny shards were flaking off its side, crumbling to dust as they hit the ground. She could even see the zombie and the lantern shutter through tiny gaps in the bone shell. *Time to finish this!* She pressed his member back

into her throat – and, at the same time, pressed her hand between her own legs.

“Oh, Sophie... I’m–!” Filoro’s wild bucking suddenly stopped, and Sophie felt his member pulse against her lips and tongue. His hands found a resting place on the back of her head as his member twitched and spasmed in her mouth. The experience was strange; she had never imagined it would feel so intimate. Sophie continued touching herself as she worked her tongue against him. She was so close...

“That was– that was incredible! You–” Filoro began. But Sophie wasn’t listening. She removed his manhood from her mouth before standing up and leaning against his warm pelvis, grinding desperately against him until she felt an orgasm spread through her. For just a moment in the lonely darkness of the necropolis, she felt like everything was going to be okay. She sat back on her heels, basking in the glow.

“Sophie,” Filoro murmured as he knelt beside her. “Are you alright? I didn’t anticipate that things would have to go that far.” Sophie looked over at the bone orb – at least, she looked at the spot where the bone orb had previously stood. The entire structure had crumbled away to dust, the enchantment binding it together now dispelled for good.

Sophie smiled at him. “Yeah, I’m alright. More than alright, I feel great.” She laughed. “You know, I’m pretty sure the ritual was finished before *I* was.”

Filoro looked over at the crumbled orb, confusion plain on his face. “The orb was already destroyed? For how long?”

“Not too long ago, I don’t think. It was still intact before you came. I’m sorry, Filoro... I know that we’re strapped for time, but I guess I got carried away. Seeing you like that, I just couldn’t help myself.”

Filoro returned her smile and shook his head. “I can’t complain,” he said. “But we should get our armor back on. We wouldn’t want to miss our appointment with Katan.”

CHAPTER 13

The ritual to destroy the bone orb had left the lantern shutter a bit dusty but otherwise unharmed. As she rolled it around in her hands, Sophie almost couldn't believe that *this* was the object upon which Jazz Katan's fate rested, and with it the fate of the Midlands. It certainly didn't look like anything special, nothing more than a plain, circular metal disc of the same color and beaten texture as the lantern she had seen in the throne room.

Sophie felt strangely disappointed. When Filoro had handed it over to her for safekeeping, she had felt a wave of anticipation at the thought of holding such a powerful artifact – or at least a component of one. She had expected to feel a jolt of arcane energy when she touched it, to sense the thing's power coursing through her. But she had no such experience. The only indication that the shutter was the least bit magical was that it gave off a constant, inexplicable warmth, as though it had been left out a few hours on a hot day.

She continued toying with the shutter, passing it back and forth between her hands, as she and Filoro traced their path back up through the wreckage of the vault. They made their way across the catwalks slowly and methodically, careful to avoid accidentally springing another trap. Sophie didn't mind the easy pace, happy for any chance to recuperate before returning to the throne room. Besides, she was still recovering from the exertions that Filoro's ritual had required of her.

Sophie wisely restrained herself from pocketing any of the scattered treasures she passed by. Even knowing as she did that they were all cursed, the artifacts seemed to have an irresistible allure about them. *It might have been nice to have a souvenir, just a little magical something to prove to everyone back home that I was really here*, she caught herself thinking. *But then, what do I care what anyone in Pilora thinks of me?*

By the time they made it to the vault entrance, the leisurely walk had worked the ache out of Sophie's muscles and cleared

the tiredness from her mind. She was relieved; she wanted to have all her wits about her when she returned to Jazz Katan's throne room. *And then, afterwards...*

But Sophie cut herself off, trying hard to steer her thoughts far away from that particular topic. She didn't enjoy thinking about where she would go, about what she would do once she left the necropolis. This past week had been an adventure beyond her wildest expectations. It would be hard to top – unless, of course, Filoro took her to accompany him on the long journey back to his home kingdom.

Her chances of joining him were slim. If the legends could be believed, dark elf culture was fiercely xenophobic and hostile to outsiders, a fact that Filoro's dream about Leonora had only cemented in Sophie's mind. She wasn't likely to be welcomed by dark elf society, and Filoro likely wouldn't be willing to risk his reputation by bringing her along. Yet, she couldn't bear to part ways with her new adventuring companion – her new lover. She had to take a shot.

She cleared her throat. "So, Filoro. I guess this is just about it then, huh? End of the road, and all that."

"Mm," Filoro grunted in agreement. His mind seemed to be elsewhere.

"I've been doing some thinking," Sophie said. "Wondering about my future, you know? About my next steps." She paused for a moment as she gathered her courage. "If you... when you bring the Tranquil Lantern back home, what if I came with you? Would I be allowed into the dark elf territory?"

He raised his eyebrows in contemplation. "Perhaps if I told them that you were my prisoner, you would be permitted to stay within the kingdom for a time. Long enough to be interrogated, at least, before you were executed."

"Oh, I see," Sophie said. "Then you wouldn't recommend that plan?"

"I'm afraid not."

And there it was: she'd be heading off on her own, assuming the both of them weren't killed by Jazz Katan first. Sophie stifled a sigh of disappointment.

They slowly made their way back to the throne room, Filoro occasionally checking the leylines to confirm that they were still on the right path. This struck Sophie as odd, as they were still following the line of torches that Katan had lit for them and it would have been nearly impossible to have gotten lost. Sophie suspected that Filoro was just stalling for time. Maybe he was nervous about confronting the mad sorcerer king. But... was it possible that he was upset, just like she was, at the prospect of ending their time together?

The next time Filoro stopped to check the leylines, Sophie just couldn't keep silent. She spoke up in part to alleviate tension that was growing between them, but mostly because she knew that if she didn't, the sorrow that was welling up inside her would become unbearable.

"I know where *you're* going, after all this," she began. "Back home, back to Leonora with the Tranquil Lantern. As a hero. And I know that's somewhere you can't take me with you."

Sophie paused, trying hard to get a hold of herself, to tamp down the emotions raging inside her. "Ocean below, Filoro, I just don't know what I'm gonna do with myself. I don't know what I'm gonna do without you."

Sophie dropped her eyes to the floor, too embarrassed to meet Filoro's gaze. *Don't say something like that to a guy you've known for all of a week! Now he'll remember you as this naive, fawning girl instead of the one who got away.*

With every passing moment, Sophie's embarrassment grew and grew. By the time Filoro responded, she was considering just asking Jazz Katan to strike her dead once she got to the throne room.

Finally. Filoro spoke up. "Well, you're an adventurer now, are you not? So you'll simply have to find another adventure. As a first order of business, I would advise you to find a few similarly-minded companions. In dangerous situations, one

always stands a better chance with allies by their side, and I've always found—”

“You're one to talk! When we met, you were exploring this necropolis all by yourself.”

That gave Filoro some pause. He spoke slowly, chewing over his words. “True... but these were unusual circumstances. No one back home, save Leonora, even knew I was leaving. I couldn't let anyone know of my crime, my shame. So who could I have asked to come with me?”

He frowned. “In hindsight, I was foolish to make the journey alone. It was a death wish. If we hadn't met, I don't think I would have survived even this long.”

Sophie nodded, hastily blinking the tears from her eyes. “Yeah. Well. Glad we met. Hopefully you don't run into any trouble on the way back home, when you're on your own again.”

Filoro's expression darkened, and Sophie could see his jaw clench and unclench behind his cheek. But he said nothing, and the two of them brooded in an awkward silence.

They carried on through the tomb past all manner of mural and stonework until they reached the outer door to Jazz Katan's throne room. *We're here, now. It's really time.* She again rolled the lantern shutter between her fingers, trying to calm the frenzied pounding of her heart and quiet the terrified thoughts screaming in her mind.

They entered the waiting room and headed straight for the great doors to the throne room, still guarded by the two gargantuan skeletons. This place felt somehow even more sinister than when had first obeyed Katan's cryptic summons. Maybe it was just that this time, Sophie knew for certain who awaited them on the other side.

The doors began to swing open as Sophie and Filoro approached. *I just hope we're doing the right thing here.* If something went wrong, if they made even a single misstep, they would be responsible for releasing the greatest evil the world had ever known. What if she and Filoro had been

playing right into the mad sorcerer's hand this whole time? What if Jazz Katan's long imprisonment in the Tranquil Lantern hadn't drained his power as much as his zombie servants believed? If she and Filoro failed to kill him, then shuttering the lantern would simply set him free.

But Sophie *had* to believe that they were going to destroy Katan. After all, the zombies believed in her, and they had seen Jazz Katan in the prime of his power. Who was she to argue with them?

They had to do it. They had to wipe Jazz Katan out for good and see their quest through to the end. *Through to the end... and then what?* Sophie stepped into the throne room alongside Filoro, her heart beating in her throat. She was about to do something worthy of the history books. But all she could think about was how she could possibly patch things up with Filoro before they parted ways forever, whether by continuing on their separate journeys or by dying at Jazz Katan's hands.

CHAPTER 14

“Zombie!” Filoro called out. “We are returned with the shutter. Are you ready?”

The frozen figure of Jazz Katan loomed above them. His ornate robes, suspended mid-motion, rendered him in a frightful frame of frozen commotion.

Even knowing that Katan was imprisoned by the lantern’s light, even knowing that the sorcerer didn’t currently pose a threat, Sophie couldn’t help but feel intimidated by his presence. It was like he was sneering directly at her, just daring her to disobey him. The expression he wore on his face – though Sophie felt strange describing the revolting mockery of life stretched across his skull as such – looked so natural on him that he must have spent more time sneering than not back in the days when he ruled over the Midlands.

The zombie shambled out from behind the throne and gave Filoro a polite bow. “I have been ready for this moment for centuries, young murk-elf.” He turned his stern, dead gaze on Sophie. “My sweet children, you have accomplished a feat most impressive! I commend your efforts. However, now you must surpass even yourselves. Should you fail in this final ordeal, all your struggle shall have been in vain.”

Despite the gravity of the zombie’s words, Sophie was having trouble keeping her attention on his speech – and off the floating, frozen sorcerer who seemed to be watching their conversation from on high.

She put a hand over her mouth, blocking it from Katan’s view. “Hey, zombie. Why hasn’t he said anything?” she asked, gesturing discreetly towards Jazz Katan. “I would have guessed he’d be gloating about how he’s about to be free, or threatening us with all kinds of torture if we disobey him, or something like that, you know?”

The zombie gave her a solemn nod. “Yes, it is dreadful, child, is it not? Even after the centuries I’ve spent in my

master's company, I've yet to grow accustomed to the pall his silence casts."

The zombie looked up, as though addressing Katan himself. "My master conserves his energy. He has already expended himself so thoroughly today, gambled so much of himself in an effort to sway you two to his side. Pitiful," he said, shaking his head. "The final, futile gasps of a man facing down his destruction."

He turned his gaze back to Sophie and Filoro, clearing his throat. "And now I must ask you... how did my accomplice fare, the gentleman who I suggested you might chance upon in the treasure vault?"

"He fared poorly," Filoro said. "He was severely injured in the course of helping us recover the shutter. Though to his credit, he struggled valiantly against Katan's influence until the very end."

"He was 'severely injured'?" Sophie repeated, horrified. "Give it to him straight, Filoro. He deserves to know the truth." She tore her eyes away from Jazz Katan in order to throw the zombie a sympathetic look. "I'm very sorry to tell you this, but... your friend is dead."

"Hah! Well, I rather doubt that," the zombie said, unfazed. "Regretfully, only Lord Katan's death can set us free. Even if my compatriot's body were burned to ash, our master's necromantic magics would sustain his life essence indefinitely."

The zombie took on a solemn aspect. "And on that note: the time is nigh, my children. You must destroy Lord Katan! You must face him quickly, before your wills weaken and you accede to his dark temptations."

He lumbered close to Filoro and bowed his head low to the ground. "But first you must honor my request. My final wish, so that my master may not turn my flesh against you in battle. Please, murk-elf. Decapitate me. Do it now, while I still have my resolve!"

Filoro drew his rapier and raised it with a flourish. “Ah ah!” the zombie tutted. “I would prefer, if it’s not too much of a bother, that you use the *bigger* sword for this task.”

“Oh, yes. Of course,” Filoro said, clearing his throat. “Sophie, if you would?”

Sophie passed Filoro her heavy executioner’s blade. Without a moment of hesitation, Filoro lifted the sword high overhead then brought it down in a single, artful stroke.

The zombie’s body thumped to the floor. His head followed just a few moments later, bouncing off the obsidian tile with a sickening thud. The sound alone made Sophie feel like she might retch. Busting up Katan’s fleshless skeletons had been one thing. Seeing her sword cut through the zombie’s flesh was way more gruesome than she had anticipated.

She felt even queasier when the zombie’s eyes rolled around in their sockets to look straight at her. “Ugh, a most unpleasant sensation,” the zombie said. With every syllable, his vocal cords jiggled and twitched where they hung from his severed neck, flinging droplets of gore every which way.

“Now, child, would you move my head far away from my body? I fear that Lord Katan may induce it to reattach itself spontaneously, in the brief time that he’s free from the lantern. I would hate for my beheading to have been in vain.”

With some trepidation, Sophie picked up the zombie’s disembodied head and carried it out to the waiting room. She placed the head on a chair facing into the throne room. *He might as well get a good view of the action. Though, if we lose...* She didn’t want to consider what thoughts would run through the zombie’s mind, watching helplessly as his one chance at freedom evaporated before his eyes. And she especially didn’t want to think about what Katan would do to the traitorous zombie’s remains, if he was given the opportunity.

As Sophie stepped towards the throne room the zombie called from behind her. “Child! Prepare yourself. Steel well your body and mind, for the fate of the Kingdom – of our very world! – rests now on your brave mettle.”

Sophie shivered, but she didn't turn back. She didn't want to keep Filoro waiting.

Back in the throne room, Filoro had laid both his and Sophie's swords on the ground. He was now busy unwrapping a burlap bundle he had pulled out from somewhere deep within his pack. "Ah, you're here," he said. "I thought you may like to see this part."

With a final flick of the wrist, Filoro pulled away the last wrapping of burlap cloth to reveal a slim wooden canister, its sides adorned with strange carven symbols. Sophie had spent enough time around the elf to recognize these symbols as arcane runes.

"Leonora gave this to me just before I left for the necropolis," Filoro said. "She instructed that it was only to be used in the most dire circumstances, and only in pursuit of fulfilling my duty to recover the Tranquil Lantern." He gave the cylinder a twist. Its cap popped off as though its contents were under pressure and a thin plume of vapor rose from the top, dark and smokey. "I'd say our current situation fits her criteria."

He lifted the canister to Sophie as if making a toast before upending it over their blades. More of the dark vapor poured out, flowing smoothly from the canister before settling, fog-like, just above the ground. The substance lingered for a few moments around their swords, then dissipated – but a faint darkness was left behind around the honed edges of their blades.

"It's done. I only hope that it proves useful." Filoro stashed the empty cylinder back into his bag. "Be careful not to nick yourself with your blade. This stuff – 'assassin's delight', it's called among my people, and for good reason. If it gets into a break in the skin, the surrounding flesh becomes fragile and weak, liable to tear with the smallest movement. Even cursory wounds grow fatal at its touch."

Filoro paused and shifted uncomfortably. "Fatal to dark elves and humans, at least. I only hope it will have some effect on an unliving creature like Katan." He picked up Sophie's

executioner's sword off the ground and offered it to her hilt-first. Sophie took it gingerly, careful to keep the blade far away from her body. She didn't want to dwell on how, exactly, Filoro knew that the substance worked on humans as well as dark elves.

"I just hope we get a chance to try it on him. If the zombie was wrong... if Katan is stronger than the zombie thinks... we might be dead as soon as the shutter falls," she said. After all, there was really no way for them to know what would happen once they shuttered the lantern. Would Katan come out swinging, bringing his full magical powers to bear against them? Would he collapse into dust, centuries of aging and decay held off by the lantern's stasis catching up to him in a single instant?

The anticipation alone was enough to scare Sophie senseless.

Filoro must have noticed her trembling sword hand because he gripped her shoulders tight. "Sophie, listen to me. I know that this is *my* fight, my duty to bear. You have no obligation to stay for this. You can leave now, while Katan is yet imprisoned by the lantern. You can try to find your way back to the surface, or even just find someplace to hide in the necropolis. I wouldn't hold it against you."

Sophie's eyes widened indignantly. "Are you kidding me? You think I'd run away *now*, just when things are about to get interesting?"

"It's not cowardice to—"

"I don't want to hear it!" she interrupted. "Besides, if Jazz Katan killed you and went free, I'd wish that I died with you once he started enslaving the Midlands again."

Filoro looked Sophie over for a moment, his head cocked to the side as though gauging her resolve. Then he nodded, satisfied. "I suppose I can't argue with you there. Well then, we'd best not fail. Come on. It's time."

They made their way to the corner of the throne room, passing under Jazz Katan's frozen form along the way. Though

he was totally motionless, the sorcerer's eyes seemed to follow them as they crossed the room.

Sophie and Filoro stood beside the Tranquil Lantern, neither wanting to look directly into its brightly shimmering beam, neither wanting to make the first move. A shiver ran through Sophie, brought on by the knowledge that she was standing in the precise spot where, centuries before, the traitor zombie had changed the course of history by trapping Katan in the lantern's beam. *They trapped him forever... until now. Until we interfered.*

She gulped. If they didn't shutter the lantern soon, she knew that she would lose her nerve. "Okay, Filoro. So where do we stand?"

Filoro raised an inquisitive eyebrow "Stand? Oh, what formation should we take for the battle?"

"Isn't a formation of two always a line?"

"Why don't you just stand beside me, then?" Filoro said curtly. Sophie recognized his tone. He was trying to hide it, but she could tell that Filoro was feeling just as nervous as she was.

Filoro took a deep inhale through his nose. "And pass me the shutter, Sophie, when you please."

She dug the lantern shutter out of her pocket. The metal was still giving off an unnatural warmth and was now vibrating faintly, as though proximity to the lantern had somehow renewed its enchantment. She handed it off to Filoro then took up her wide battle-stance. She knew precious little sorcery, and her heavy sword still felt awkward in her hands – but she would give it her all to defeat Jazz Katan.

Filoro crouched down beside the Tranquil Lantern, poised to slot the shutter in place. He hesitated, his hand hovering just above the lantern's beam. A bead of sweat dripped down his brow.

"Go on then," Sophie prodded.

Filoro let out a curse and dropped the shutter into place. The lantern's light vanished. And for the first time in six

hundred years, Jazz Katan was free.

Katan flew backwards, propelled by some force that had been held in stasis by the lantern's power. Then he fluttered gracefully to the ground, landing on his feet some twenty paces away from Sophie and Filoro. He smiled coldly as he looked around the room, his gaze lingering on the headless body of the zombie who had once betrayed him. Then he turned to Sophie and Filoro, and to the lantern behind them.

"You made a grave mistake by challenging me," Katan said. His voice was gravelly from centuries of disuse, but it sent shivers running down Sophie's spine nonetheless. To hear Katan speak truly, in-the-flesh, was no less chilling than hearing his words projected directly into her mind.

"And after I promised you such boons... what a waste."

Filoro was staring unblinkingly at the sorcerer, his body tense as a coiled spring. "Be ready to move," he whispered to Sophie out of the corner of his mouth.

"Yet, you have done me a great service by freeing me from the lantern," Katan continued. "Yes, a great service, indeed. And for that you are owed some measure of magnanimity."

He took a shuffling step forward. Even as he moved, Sophie thought that Katan seemed uncannily, unnaturally still. Then she realized why: he wasn't breathing. He didn't need to.

"Lay down your swords. Prostrate yourselves before me, beg my forgiveness, and I shall grant you a quick and painless death."

Sophie tightened her grip around the hilt of her executioner's sword. "And if we d-don't?" she stuttered, trying her best to stand tall on legs that felt like jelly.

"Then suffer!"

And without any warning, Katan vanished – though Sophie thought she saw his image smear briefly to the left. That perception likely saved her life, because she glanced to the side just in time to see Katan barreling toward her, his body a blur of motion.

There was no time to turn to face him. Nor did Sophie have the expertise to execute a flashy side-block with her sword. So she did the only thing she could think of: she dropped to the ground like a sack of rocks. Her knees and forearms shrieked at the impact, but she figured it had to be better to hit the floor than to get sacked by the ancient sorcerer.

Katan was moving too quickly to stop his own forward momentum. He let loose a scream of rage as he tripped over Sophie and went tumbling towards Filoro. From the waiting room, Sophie heard the zombie howl with laughter.

She couldn't help but smile as she sprang back to her feet. It hadn't been particularly graceful, but she had landed the first blow against Jazz Katan.

Katan collided with Filoro in an impact powerful enough to send the two of them hurtling across the throne room in a tangle of limbs and robes. They skidded past the throne itself, their bodies still intertwined, sending up a cloud of thick gray dust that obscured their forms from Sophie's view.

Sophie ran towards the dust cloud, ready to join the fray. She heard Katan rasp out a word, then—

BWOOF

There was a roar and a flash of light. A sudden blast of force pulsed out from Katan, knocking Sophie off her feet and hurling her bodily away from the fight. By the time she landed, the ancient sorcerer had managed to grab Filoro and was holding the elf aloft by his slender neck. Filoro gasped and coughed as cadaverous fingers squeezed his throat in a vice grip. *He's gonna pop Filoro's head off!*

Sophie rocketed to her feet, but she didn't make it even a few steps before Filoro managed to sputter out an incantation of his own. Another pulse of magic split the air, dropping Filoro to the floor and sending the necromancer careening into his former throne. At first, Sophie wondered whether Katan had simply released his grip on Filoro out of surprise. But then she noticed that Katan's hand, now attached to nothing more than a grisly forearm, was still wrapped around Filoro's neck. And it was still squeezing.

Filoro wheezed, his face growing purpler by the second as he tried in vain to pry Katan's fingers from his throat. "Hang on!" Sophie screamed. She rushed towards him, raising her sword in preparation to hack at the disembodied forearm.

Before she could bring her blade to bear, Katan's arm suddenly shuddered and writhed; and in the blink of an eye, thick veins were shooting out of the gaping wound at the end of the severed forearm. They sprang out like a swarm of angry ropes to wrap around Sophie's arms and legs, binding her in place mid-swing.

"Fools," Katan laughed. "Did you really think that you could challenge me? Just because that pathetic traitor of a zombie claimed you could, claimed that I was weak?"

Sophie struggled against the veins holding her in place. She couldn't believe that this was how it would end: with her trapped in a mass of veins and her new lover strangled to death by a necromancer's severed arm.

Katan stepped toward her. "Well, well, Sophie. What do we have here?" He grabbed her chin and jerked her from side to side as though trying to inspect her from every angle. "You've a pleasing bone structure, dear. It's a shame you keep it covered with all this... meat."

Sophie tried to pull herself out of his grip, but only succeeded in digging Katan's nails further into her jaw and cheek. She wanted to look away, but the sorcerer's sunken onyx eyes refused to let hers go.

"You wanted so badly to make a name for yourself, little Sophie. For betraying me, I'll make sure no one ever learns it. Your bones will rot to dust in a long-forgotten outpost. Your nameless skeleton will be put to work on some menial task in my service." He released her and stroked his chin. "How does an eternity working the flesh rendering vats sound to you? You'll be dead, of course, but I can perhaps permit a mote of awareness to linger in you."

Katan spun on his heel to face Filoro, who was still gasping and sputtering in the sorcerer's disembodied chokehold. "And you, fae so far from home! Oh, but I remember your ancestors

well, Filoro. You come from the Tower of Stars, yes? Such a proud people... it must have been quite the embarrassment, losing the Tranquil Lantern to a human like myself. Even *if* that human happened to be the greatest sorcerer to have ever lived.” Katan’s smile stretched so wide that Sophie thought his corpse-waxed skin might split from ear to ear. “Your leader... Salk, I believe was his name?”

Filoro could only gurgle in response. He was still clawing at Katan’s fingers around his throat, trying desperately to pry them away. Sophie couldn’t believe that he was still conscious; how long, exactly, could Filoro hold his elven breath?

“But all that was before your time, I suppose,” Katan continued casually. “Did you know, Filoro, that Salk held onto the lantern so tightly that his *wrists* broke before his grip did? His hands popped clean off, Filoro! Such stubbornness I could hardly—”

“Ghak!” Filoro suddenly released his grip on Katan’s disembodied arm, allowing it to squeeze his neck without resistance. Sophie screamed, sure that she was about to see Filoro killed. But the elf had freed himself enough that he could execute an arcane gesture. There was an ear-splitting peal of thunder as a lightning bolt launched from Filoro straight into Jazz Katan’s bony chest.

Katan was caught by surprise, and the rope-like veins binding Sophie’s arms momentarily slackened. It was all the opportunity Sophie needed. She brought her sword down, slicing through most of her bindings in a spurt of blackish blood. She managed to jerk herself free of the few strands that remained before turning her attention on the disembodied arm still choking Filoro.

She executed another overhand chop. There was a sickening, squelching crunch as her executioner’s sword cleaved forearm from wrist, sending Katan’s hand tumbling to the floor.

Filoro gasped, finally free from Katan’s stranglehold. He scooped his fallen rapier off the ground, glanced back toward Katan – and immediately tackled Sophie to the floor.

Strands of muscle and nerve whipped through the space where Sophie and Filoro had just been standing. The strands reconnected to the dismembered hand on the floor and then quickly retracted, returning each chunk of flesh to its proper place on Katan's outstretched limb. The flesh knit together instantly. Not even a scar was left behind to show that the forearm had ever been severed.

"I don't think that even hurt him, Filoro," Sophie whispered. "What do we do now?"

Filoro didn't respond. He was staring up at Katan, breathing heavily, his face contorted in an expression of horror. Sophie almost panicked, thinking that he had resigned himself to die at the necromancer's hands – but there was a certain hard glint in Filoro's eyes that gave her pause.

Katan laughed cruelly. He began uttering a new incantation, his bony fingers tracing magic sigils in the air. The smell of ozone stung Sophie's nose and the air around her crackled with power. Squashed under Filoro's weight, Sophie took a deep breath and waited for the end.

The ancient sorcerer uttered one final syllable; he brought his arms down in a wicked flourish; and then, rather unceremoniously, his hand fell off. *The poison, the poison on the sword! Ocean below, it worked!*

Katan managed to let out a snarl of protest – but that was about all he managed to do before the arcane energy in his hands started to destabilize, and all the power Katan had gathered for his spell was suddenly released. Arcs of light sparked into existence from Katan's outstretched arms for just a moment before the spell collapsed, detonating right on top of him.

Chunks of obsidian tile went flying, shattering against the walls and adding to the commotion. Sophie quickly dropped her head to the ground to avoid getting pelted. She was suddenly glad to have Filoro's weight pinning her down; even with the elf on top of her, it took all of her strength to keep from getting blown across the room.

The roar of the arcane energy overhead grew to a crescendo. The necromancer loosed a blood-curdling scream of pain.

And then, abruptly, it was over. The storm of arcane energy which had devastated the throne room faded to a gentle breeze. Sophie poked her head up and hazarded a look around. Katan's disrupted spell had left a deep, scorched crater in the center of the room. Gouges were scored into the walls and floor, making a spoke-like pattern around the spot where Katan had stood. But of the necromancer himself, there was no sign.

Filoro stood up and offered a hand to Sophie. She took it gratefully and rose to her feet. She was feeling sore all over. "Is he dead? Like actually dead?" she asked.

"I don't know. I hope so." Filoro bit his lip and cautiously made his way toward the crater at the center of the room. Sophie hung back, her heart pounding in her chest.

As Filoro approached, a sickly green light flared in the crater's center. It seeped up from the ground, congealing into the figure of a man wearing ornately decorated robes – the figure of Jazz Katan. Then the figure began to smear. It blew past Sophie and Filoro in an oily cloud, arcing to the far wall of the throne room, where it focused down to a narrow point and finally disappeared.

There was a *ping*, followed by a metallic clatter as the Tranquil Lantern tipped onto its side and rolled a few inches across the floor. Filoro sighed deeply.

"Did he just... did Katan get sucked into the lantern, Filoro? Filoro?" Sophie repeated. Beads of sweat were forming on the elf's brow, but he didn't respond.

"Is that something the lantern can even do? Filoro, please tell me! What's going o—"

"Katan's soul was bound to the Tranquil Lantern all along," Filoro muttered angrily, more to himself than to Sophie. His knuckles were going white on the hilt of his rapier. "He was bound to it from the start, and that zombie never told us."

“Zombie!” Filoro yelled. “Answer me, damn you, what’s the meaning of this!?” But there was no response from the other room. The zombie was well and truly dead, and beyond any interrogation. Filoro stood for a moment in wrathful, simmering silence, then turned on his heel and began his journey across the ruined throne room towards the lantern.

“Hey! Filoro, wait! What’s it mean that Katan’s soul is bound to the lantern? I... did we win? Did we beat him or not?” Sophie ran to Filoro’s side and clapped a hand onto his arm, stopping him in his tracks. “Please, what’s going on? What are you doing?”

“What I’m doing is destroying the lantern.”

“Isn’t... isn’t it your only ticket home?”

“It *was* my only way home. Now it’s just a bottomless reservoir of energy for Katan to feed on.” He paused, clenching his jaw. “The zombie told us that Katan could be killed. He conveniently neglected to mention that Katan had bonded his soul to the very object I sought. As soon as Katan’s body was destroyed, his soul retreated within the Tranquil Lantern. It contains enough power to restore Katan to his former strength a thousand times over. No doubt he feasts on its magic even as we speak.”

He cursed and struck the ground with his blade. “If the lantern isn’t destroyed, eventually Katan will regain enough power to construct himself a new physical form – or just to take over an existing one.”

“Hold on! There has to be another way,” Sophie said. “How long do we have before Katan has enough energy to make a new body? Could you just... you know, take the lantern back home with you anyway? Take it intact, with Jazz Katan inside?”

“How long do we have? I don’t know. Years. Decades, perhaps, before he absorbs enough of the lantern’s power. It doesn’t make a difference! There’s not a sorcerer alive who could sever the soul bond between Katan and the lantern. And Leonora would never allow it to be destroyed; it would be too great a dishonor for her to bear. Katan would linger inside the

lantern for however long it took, biding his time... until, eventually, he would be free.”

Filoro shook his head. “So – no. Thank you for the idea, but no. Taking it home is just not an option.”

He resumed his sullen march towards the Tranquil Lantern, still awash in Katan’s oily green glow. Sophie lagged a few paces behind him, trying hard to think of any other strategy, any way for them to escape with the lantern intact – and with it, Filoro’s honor. But she came up short. Katan obviously couldn’t be allowed to go free, and the only way to destroy him for good was to destroy the lantern. There were no other options.

The lantern was in arm’s reach. Filoro raised his rapier high into the air–

“Wait!” Sophie shouted.

Filoro lowered his blade questioningly.

“Wait – take this. It’s heavier, better for smashing.” She offered him her executioner’s sword. Filoro accepted it and, once more, raised the blade high overhead.

BWFOOOOM

A gust of greasy light issued from the lantern and swallowed the two of them in a nauseating embrace. Jazz Katan’s voice spilled out of the light, unctuous and thick, clinging to Sophie’s mind like tar.

**FILORO, YOU DID WELL TO DESTROY MY
MORTAL BODY**

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Sophie let out an indignant gasp. *Filoro* destroyed his mortal body? Sure, Filoro had handled himself well enough in the fight, but *she* was the one who struck the killing blow. She shook her head. Katan was definitely up to something.

**YOU MUST SEE REASON! THE TRANQUIL
LANTERN NEED NOT BE DESTROYED**

Filoro paused, still holding the executioner’s sword high overhead. His expression was inscrutable through the haze of

oily green light that separated them.

KILL THE WOMAN BESIDE YOU THAT, I MAY TAKE HER BODY AS A VESSEL. YOU HAVE SUCCEEDED IN YOUR DUTY, FILORO; NOW YOU MUST ONLY CLAIM YOUR PRIZE. KILL THE WOMAN, AND THE LANTERN SHALL BE YOURS

The oily light parted. Sophie saw now that Filoro's face was twisted with anguish; his eyes were sightless pits of grief. His hand gripped the hilt of the executioner's sword so tightly that Sophie worried it might snap in his grip.

"Filoro, don't listen to him! You can't listen to him, he's evil!" she whispered. She wasn't even sure that Filoro heard her. *No, but he wouldn't, not even to return home... would he?*

DO IT NOW, FILORO! OPEN THE WAY INTO HER BODY. MY BOND TO THE TRANQUIL LANTERN WILL BE SEVERED COMPLETELY. THE LANTERN WILL BE YOURS WITHOUT QUESTION, YOURS ALONE. ON THIS I SWEAR MY MORTAL SOUL

The gleaming blade hung in the air like a guillotine waiting to fall. Katan's greasy green light danced mockingly across its surface. "Filoro..." Sophie whispered. But the elf didn't respond. The blade fell through the air with the intensity and inevitability of a hurricane. Sophie squeezed her eyes shut.

The executioner's sword drew close; and then it passed her by. Filoro brought the sword down on the Tranquil Lantern in a cacophony of shattered glass and crumpled metal. Sophie opened her eyes just in time to see Katan's greasy light struggling to congeal into humanoid form.

TRAITORS! I'LL KILL YOU YET! I'LL REND YOU TO PIECES! THE MIDLANDS ARE MI-

His impotent threats shot through their minds for a few moments. Then the green light of his soul dissipated to mist, and Jazz Katan's voice faded away forever.

Sophie took a deep breath, her heart still pounding away in her chest. *It's over. He's really gone.* She glanced over at Filoro. "You know, you had me a little worried there."

He turned and gave her a sad smile. “I promised to get you out of the necropolis alive, didn’t I? If I reneged on that promise in order to regain my honor by Leonora... well, it would have been an empty honor. I would always have remembered the oath I broke.”

“Also,” he continued. “Katan never said that he’d allow me to *return home* with the lantern if I killed you, just that I could *claim* it. It’s a classic necromancer trick. They do that one all the time.”

Sophie let out a long sigh. “Right. Of course. I’m sorry for doubting you. I can’t believe I thought you might actually chop my head off.”

“I would never have chopped your head off! What purpose would that have served, decapitating Katan’s new physical vessel? He would have been furious. Not to mention the mess on his throne room floor...”

“That’s a horrible thing to say!” Sophie huffed. “And what are you just standing there for? Why aren’t you picking up the pieces of the lantern?”

Filoro raised an eyebrow in confusion, so Sophie went on. “We have to go get it fixed, don’t we? I know that we don’t have any of your fancy dark elf artificers here in the Midlands, but there’s gotta be someone out here who could at least point us in the right direction.”

“Did you say that ‘we’ have to get it fixed?”

“Well... yeah. I mean, you can’t go back to Leonora with it broken like this. And if you’re not returning to your kingdom, I don’t see why I can’t tag along. Besides,” she added, “I was as much a part of this adventuring party as you; I have a fifty-percent stake in the lantern. *At least* fifty-percent. And I vote that we try to get it fixed.” She folded her arms across her chest.

Filoro smiled back “Huh. I’d like that, Sophie. It would be an honor to have you by my side.” It seemed like he really meant it, too.

“So where do we go next?” Sophie asked.

“I was hoping that *you* could tell *me* that, actually. We’ll need an artificer of legendary skill and knowledge, a once-in-a-generation sort of talent... and I don’t know the first place to start looking.” He brushed a stray strand of hair away from his eyes. “I admit that I’m not overly familiar with the surface kingdoms. Were I alone, I think I’d join up with a merchant caravan, just the first one I set eyes upon. Merchants can be trusted to pass through the largest cities and trade centers, places where an artificer might set up shop. It would be a gamble, but one I’d have to take.”

My dream about the Hotspring Festival! The caravan! It was a prophecy! She pushed the thought away. “Hold on, you would’ve tried to join a *caravan*?” Sophie asked. “What happened to all of your dark elven secrecy? Leonora commanded you not even to be *seen* by humans. I didn’t get the impression that she’d let that kind of thing go, even if it was for a good reason.”

Filoro rolled his eyes. “Perhaps you still don’t understand. Destroying the Tranquil Lantern was more than a simple breach of protocol. If I don’t find a way to repair it, and quickly... well, being spotted by a few Midlanders will be the least of my problems.” Filoro sighed. “I’m already a criminal in the eyes of my people. I can either forsake my duty and remain a fugitive forever... or I can break a few petty laws and try to restore my honor, and the honor of the Tower along with it. To me the choice is clear, Leonora’s orders be damned.”

Filoro resheathed his rapier and set his hands on his hips. “So, Sophie. I turn the question back to you. As my guide to the Midlands, tell me: where do we go next? Where will we find the most skilled artificer in all the surface realms?”

I’m to be his guide to the Midlands? This necropolis is the farthest I’ve ever been from home! Sophie had never been to a village larger than Pilora, let alone a city large enough to have its own artificer. She racked her brain anyway; she couldn’t let Filoro down.

Perhaps they could try somewhere in the Geysers, far to the frozen north? They were home to the most prestigious academies, and certainly housed their fair share of artificers

and other magical artisans. But a journey to the wasted kingdom would have been perilous at any time of year. Heading there now, in the early autumn, would have been downright suicidal.

Grizveld? No, last she heard it was struck by plague, its gates shut tight to outsiders. The Keening Cliffs? Just a year ago, all of their sorcerers were ejected following a particularly devastating magical explosion. There would be no artificers to be found there – at least, none operating in the open.

So where could they go?

I'm thinking about this all wrong. The Tranquil Lantern is a fae artifact. We need to take it to a fae artificer, not a human. The settled elven tribes were none too friendly to humans, and the forest elves were elusive to say the least. And they couldn't take the lantern back to the dark elves, of course. But maybe there was someone else?

Then Sophie knew where they should go. “The Great Hive of Bzorian could be a place to start. It's a fae city, but humans are allowed in. At least, human merchants are.”

“A hive city... it must be an Apoide colony, then. And you're sure it allows outsiders?” Filoro's voice was a curious mix of wonder and apprehension.

“I mean, that's what I heard,” Sophie said. “It was just gossip from caravanners who passed through Pilora. They said that the bees who ran the place – I don't know what they're called, but whatever they are, they're *definitely* not elves – were very welcoming. Always eager to trade.”

Sophie left out a few other tidbits the caravanners had mentioned: that the streets of Bzorian ran thick with golden honey, free for the taking and strangely intoxicating; that the bees found humans just as exotic and otherworldly as humans found them. She didn't want Filoro to think she had ulterior motives.

“A hive city,” Filoro repeated, shaking his head in amazement. “Apoides, engaging in trade! I didn't think they were capable of such complex behavior. Well, okay. Let's try

it, then; we'll seek our artificer there. There's a certain logic to it, that a fae would be most capable of fixing a fae artifact, however distant the relation between our peoples."

Sophie and Filoro kneeled on the ground and gathered up the remnants of the Tranquil Lantern. It was broken beyond recognition, Filoro's blow having left nothing in its wake but shards of glass and prongs of twisted metal. Nevertheless, they scooped up all the fragments they could find and stuffed them in Filoro's pack.

Once they were satisfied that they had recovered as much of the lantern as they could, Sophie and Filoro exited to the waiting room. The zombie's head was still positioned on an ancient chair, finally inanimate, his expression one of utmost peace.

Dusk was just beginning to settle as they emerged from the necropolis. After so long inside its torchlit chambers, they found even the fading daylight to be blinding. Both Sophie and Filoro had to shield their eyes as they set up camp, their sight and spirits gradually adjusting to the outside world.

That night, their plain camp food tasted especially delicious and the air felt cool and fresh inside their lungs. Their laughter rang out against the outer walls of the necropolis; and when they bedded down for the night, their tent quickly growing warm from the heat of their bodies, their sleep was full of shared dreams of redemption and adventure.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nina Carver

When she's not busy writing about blossoming romance, dark secrets, and harrowing undead sorcerers for the Tranquil Lantern series, Nina loves to walk her little dog around the parks of sunny California.

An avid consumer of stories, you can catch her devouring the latest fantasy, romance, and adventure novels in her favorite coffee shops (or just on the couch in her cozy apartment).

BOOKS BY THIS AUTHOR

The Tranquil Lantern

Book one of the Tranquil Lantern series

Shrikebane (Coming April 2024!)

A Tranquil Lantern Novella