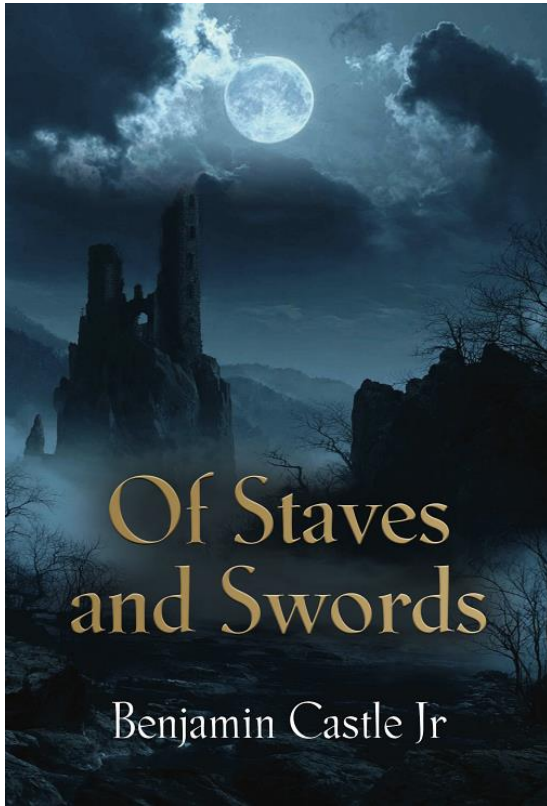




Of Staves and Swords is a story following a man known as Leland Graham, a pacifist and apprentice Court Magician after an accident leads to his mentor's possession and capture, and the journey Leland and party take to save him.

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By Benjamin Castle Jr

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Prologue

“You know Master, if His Highness finds out I’m forging your signature again he’s going to be rather cross with me.” The young man sat up at the old wooden desk, stretching his arms above his head, and letting out a soft grunt as he tried to work the stiffness from his lower back, straightening out his beige cloth shirt and pants. It was hard to tell exactly how long he’d been cooped up within his master’s tower, the dim flickering of the handful of levitating orbs providing his only source of light within the cold stone walls of the lower floors, lazily floating through the circular room, leaving most of it obscured by shadow. Rubbing the weariness from his eyes, he looked over to the tall figure knelt before a large circle on the cold stone floor, using a small brush to paint sigils and signs with the utmost care.

“Yes that’s fine, I’m sure he’ll forgive us.” was the only reply he could coax from the pointy eared sage, his master of over ten years. Letting out a soft sigh, Leland returned his gaze to the endless piles of papers and scrolls on the desk in front of him, letting his mind wander as he skimmed the words sprawled before him, right hand perfectly mirroring the signature of Sabramand the Bashful, esteemed Court Magician of the royal family of Este, and advisor to the crown prince and princess in the absence of their late father, King Raeus, a signature the man himself shortened to a concise “SM.” A proposition for an increased allotment of funding for workers implementing new public use irrigation channels caught his attention, and brought his focus back for just long enough to decide to recommend declining the proposition, complete with another simple but elegant forged signature on the bottom. The original proposed budget for the project should more than suffice, barring any major setbacks that have yet to be reported.

“Are you certain it has to be this ritual, Master? I was not able to find anything about it in any of your spellbooks, or anything I’ve read before. If all you want is to commune with the dead, surely there’s a more efficient way by now.” Although, Sabramand was the resident expert on the subject. Leland wasn’t doubting his master by any means, the Elf’s knowledge of Ritual Magic eclipsed his own tenfold—he simply failed to follow his mentor’s free-spirited trains of thought.

“Of course it does, because this one will be the most interesting.” chimed the ever chipper Elf. The young magician never quite understood his master’s infatuation with style over substance, but resigned himself to accept that as the best answer he was going to get tonight. The Elf turned to him, a wide grin on his face, which was partially

obscured by his absurdly long golden hair, and Sabramand's deep green eyes gazed upon him with what he could only assume was pride. His master was rather young for his position, even for an Elf, but his knowledge of Ritual Magic and alchemy was second to none in his kingdom. Taking this as an excuse to stretch his chair-weary legs, Leland stood from the worn wooden desk, walking over to his master and standing beside him, looking down at the magic circle painted in a deep red shade on the worn limestone floor.

"Well, at least this one is an actual circle." With a roll of his verdant eyes the Elf chuckled, brushing back his locks with his long, thin fingers. "Although, this one's rather heavy on the earth element, is it not? If you're using blood as your catalyst, I would assume that the water element would be a much bigger part of this spell. And you have barely any air element, would that not—" His master cut him off, raising one slender hand and shaking his head, loosening his endless strands of hair tucked behind his long ears.

"The target of this ritual is not just any spirit of the past, but one in connection to the peculiar curse afflicting so many. I believe that is why every attempt thus far has failed, both my own and those of other magicians. Rather than reaching as far back as possible and hoping for an answer, I will attempt to grasp at the thread of fate linking our condition to the past, as far as that will take me. Using Theodore the Backward's Grand Summoning formula, and several other spells that target specific specters of one's own bloodline, I devised this formula, to target the earliest afflicted ancestor whose soul remains intact enough to be summoned to this plane." replied Sabramand, and Leland nodded as the silky but soft spoken voice of his mentor finally held for longer than one distracted sentence.

Leland looked down at the inside of his left wrist, to the strange thorny vine pattern that wrapped around it, black in color. A yet dormant curse speckled across the continent of Antora, the magician could see the darkness of the mana fused into his own wrist, and little else. The young magician turned his wrist back and forth for a moment, as if wishing for the marking to do something before turning his eyes back to the ritual circle painted in front of him.

"So, that would explain the unorthodox composition. Interesting, I had never thought of that." He should be, as usual, impressed by the ingenuity of his master. Looking over the multilayered circle again, the flow of energy was indeed backward compared to a traditional magical formula, spiraling counter-clockwise toward the group of air element sigils within the center. "If you standardized this spell, you'd probably win another superficial title from Kesselmark." Widely renowned as the

magical capital of the continent, Kesselmark was home to more magicians than anywhere in the world, as well as home to the prestigious Institution of Practical and Theoretical Spellcraft. He had never attended as a student, but Leland had visited the city and the institution more than once, both with his master and for him as a stand-in, the latter of which being far more common.

“Yes, I’m sure Roxa would love to scribble down my latest fun, nitpick it until it’s plain and boring.” Remarked the Elf, shaking his head. Leland supposed that when you live as long as an Elf, you can afford to use an affectionate shortening of a name like Roxalius, the founder of Kesselmark well over a thousand years in the past. He had never met the founder and institution’s headmaster, but recalled rumors of him being an Elf himself, which would help explain his particularly friendly relationship with his master. The young man silently wondered if Elves do display kinship after all. “He can wait with the rest of the world, until I finish making a few minor adjustments with some practice summonings. What do you say, care to try it out with me?”

“Even if I said no, you’d just keep asking until I did it anyway, so why not.” Leland was more than familiar with his master’s tendencies when it came time to test out a new ritual. Sitting down cross legged next to his kneeling master, he was reminded just how abnormally tall the Elf was compared to himself, his own long haired head barely reaching Sabramand’s shoulders as they sat side by side, the sage absolutely giddy with excitement. His slim arms reached beside the circle, grasping at a small wooden bottle and an even smaller knife, silver blade glistening in the inconsistent yellow light provided by the floating spheres overhead. The Elf opened the bottle, carefully dripping the clear liquid inside onto the blade of the knife, shaking it clean before setting the bottle aside once more and pricking his finger with the tip of the blade, just enough to cause a small number of dark red beads to slowly begin trailing down his finger. Holding his hand above the first sigil for fire, Sabramand dripped several drops of his own blood onto it, and Leland began his portion of the experiment. With his eyes closed, he focused on gathering his magical energy, and placed his palm gently against the Elf’s shoulder, steadily taking control of his mentor’s powerful but gentle mana.

“Okay, hold steady, just like that.” His master didn’t need to encourage him, but as the young man guided Sabramand’s mana through his long, slender arm and into the magic circle before them, he knew he should appreciate the confidence regardless. His master declined the use of flowing, regal robes for sleeveless attire, specifically for this cooperative spellcasting—a sentiment that Leland held no strong opinions of

his own robes were worn so rarely. He continued guiding his mentor's mana, pouring it into the fire sigil before the circle began to softly glow with a lighter shade of red, the energy flowing counter-clockwise around the outer rings before branching off, spiraling into three smaller circles spaced evenly within the boundary of the first, and continuing inward before culminating in the center, leaving the entire array glowing with faint light for a few seconds before Sabramand slowly stemmed the flow of mana, letting out a content sigh and clapping his hands together one time as the light faded from before them, leaving the dark red blood as little more than paint on the ground. "I'd call that a success! Now all that remains is to get the material components in the right quantities..."

"While you work on that, I'm going home for the night. It's rather late at this point." He certainly did not wish to be late again, and with his master giving a half wave without glancing back at him, Leland took that as his leave. Finally standing from the cold stone floor, he grabbed his satchel from the chair at the desk, slinging it over his shoulder and nearly tripping over another pile of scrolls and books left out by his master. With a wave of his hand the magician's mana extended from his body, forming into hair-thin threads and stringing the objects up into the air, guiding each back to its proper home along the various shelving lining the stone walls. Even if he couldn't see in the dark, he had been in this room more than long enough to memorize where every piece of furniture rested. With another wave of his hand, heavy bolts retreated from the stone floor and ceiling back into the thick, metal door that marked the entrance of Sabramand's tower, and torchlight flooded into the room, from behind yet another tall, albeit intimidating figure standing before him. "Hm. I must be late again."

"I've been banging on this door for an hour now. Yes, you're late." growled the beastly figure obstructing his path. "But, I can tell you're working pretty hard in there, so I forgive you." Stepping to the side so Leland could exit, the grey furred creature shook her head and waited to be followed, then led the way through the stone corridors of the eastern palace wing. "What're you two even doing in there, anyway?" In better lighting and in similarly plain attire stood Selina, his oldest friend, a Lycan with thick, short grey fur from head to toe, pointed ears flicking and turning toward the direction of any other sound as they walked.

"Master Sabramand is trying to perfect a new ritual, which means all of his usual duties are my responsibility until he's satisfied with it." replied the magician, letting out a soft yawn as his eyes adjusted to the light. Looking over his companion clearer now, he could see the outline of her muscles underneath her sleek fur, sleeves and

pants torn at the knee and elbows, likely due in part to the unique shape of her legs. Without thinking, his fingertips reached over, gently tracing over the taught back of her cloth shirt. “You keep putting on more muscle and I’ll have to sew sheets together to make your clothes.”

“Come do some jobs with us, and you can afford real clothes that fit me.” The wolf shook her head with a smile, but he couldn’t help but note her somewhat bushy tail begin to swish a bit faster from side to side as they walked. Moving through the central hall and out of the main gate, their walk took them through the quiet, moonlit streets of Este’s capital, Lanshire. Traversing the cobblestone streets, they worked their way southeast, toward their home near the outskirts of the city. “Dinner’s still warm, by the way. You’re welcome.”

“Thank you, Selina. I’d probably starve without you.” Not that he wouldn’t eat, Leland simply had no time to cook proper meals nor any desire to waste the time. As long as his body got the nutrition it needed, he was content, but he knew better than to waste the time and effort she put into cooking. With her mother being a maidservant in the estate of Francis Calbin the Earl of Wysteria, the wolf was raised with great etiquette that was promptly discarded once she came of age and announced that she would become an Adventurer. Leland was fortunate however, that her skill in the kitchen was not so hastily thrown away, as evidenced by the savory scent on the air as they drew near their home, and the saliva beginning to collect under his tongue. The building was well maintained, and relatively new compared to those in eyesight; comprised of large stone bricks fused together at the edges, a wooden roof tiled neatly and packed underneath with straw.

“Probably, so be grateful and stop making me wait so long for you, or I’ll let it get cold next time.” she responded as the pair opened the wooden door of their quaint but cozy stone home, a single candle lighting the kitchen and visible through one of the four windows. The straw lining the roof kept bound tightly by rope, ensuring the warmth remained trapped within the otherwise cool stone. He removed his leather shoes at the doorway and left them outside as Selina wiped the pads of her paws on a small mat before entering behind him. “As much as I’d love to stay and have another meal, I can hardly keep my eyes open much longer, so I’m turning in. See you in the morning.”

“Sleep well then, and thank you again for supper.” he smiled slightly at his friend as she walked to the right of two bedrooms tucked behind thick wooden doors along the far wall. To his left, resting over a small fire was a pot with the lid slightly ajar, and after acquiring a wooden bowl and ladle, Leland helped himself to its contents, a

thick stew with chunks of potato, ham, legumes, wild onion and garlic. The thick, brown broth spread warmth from his stomach out to his fingers and toes, sending a slight shiver up his spine as he carefully sipped from his spoon, before letting out a soft sigh of warm air after swallowing. Reflecting on the day's events, the young magician ate in silence, thoroughly cleaning his bowl and utensil by creating a sphere of water within the palm of his hand and using it to rinse them off before tossing the dirty water through the window. With the pot covered and the fire put out, he turned to see his bedroom door ajar, and could hear the unmistakable sound of snoring coming from behind it.

Walking up to and entering his bedroom, he considered for a moment waking the behemoth sprawled across his bed to inform her that she has her own, before quickly dismissing it, deciding not to spark her ire any more than he had that evening. Shimmying his way under the covers, he attempted not to disturb her, weaving between her outstretched arm and the soft down mattress beneath until he reached a comfortable enough position to fall asleep, which was short lived as the wolf wrapped her arms around his slim build, pulling him against her and pressing her snout between his neck and shoulder, her cold and wet nose sending one more slight shiver down his spine as her snoring was pressed nearly right to his ear. Knowing escape was futile, he resigned himself to his new position, laid flat on his back while she, on her side, held on to him. Slowly and carefully reaching into his pillow, he pulled a small wad of cotton from inside, rolling it tight and sliding it just into his ear, somewhat dampening the endless roaring snores coming from right beside him.

With his eyes slowly drifting closed, he found himself melting into the softness of her fur, the warmth of her body as she clung to his, and of her breath as it trailed down his neck and across his chest. He imagined this must be what it was like to own a dog as a child, and wondered if he had ever had a pet when he was younger. With his thoughts slowly drifting further and further away from coherency, he let the heaviness overtake his limbs, and his mind sink slowly to slumber.

Her eyelids opened as the sunlight crossed through the shuttered bedroom window, casting its early rays across her face and the chest of her chosen pillow. Selina yawned softly, wiping her lips with the back of her hand as she sat up, looking down at the human she'd all but smothered in the night, reaching over with her other hand and smiling softly to herself as she brushed his dark brown hair from his face. He'd seemed so tired lately, the wolf thought to herself, that she ought to do

something nice for him, as a reward for all his hard work at the palace. Forcing herself away from the warmth of the sheets, she got to her feet and made her way outside.

Following her usual routine, Selina began by jogging outside, her claws clacking gently against the cobble streets as she followed her usual route along the outskirts of the capital. During even the dim morning hours, the city was much more vibrant to see, even on the edge like she was. Stained glass reflecting colored lights from shop windows, owners putting up signs and setting chairs for morning customers, maids and servants next in order, *probably running some mundane errands for their precious lords*, she thought to herself. Every morning she was reminded how close she was to sharing in that same fate.

Continuing to admire the sights and smells of the early morning, Selina observed the slowly deteriorating conditions of the brick and board homes and buildings closest to the outskirts of the city, making a mental note to pester Leland about it later. She had rounded to the other side of the capital by this point, and an hour had already passed. *Must be getting sloppy—stopping to smell the bread every morning is just too irresistible*, she thought, rounding another corner and taking her jog directly through the main street, and through the city square.

Compared to the outskirts, the innermost part of the city was practically shining, with expensive marblework and stained windows lining shops with large signs hanging from roofs or staked outside, a cathedral to the west of the square, and across from it, the Adventurer's Guildhall, where her next group of regulars was already beginning to flow to and from. While there are many tasks one may request an Adventurer for, her personal favorite would always be hunting Monsters. Every time she passed the Guildhall on her morning runs, all the excitement she first felt walking through the large metal doors came rushing back to her, and today was no different. Feeling rejuvenated, Selina began sprinting, dashing between townsfolk less than pleased that something the size of a horse just sprinted past them.

The slight scent of smoke caused her nose to twitch as she rounded the corner emptying out onto their street, a signal that her sleepy comrade finally woke up and began reheating the stew for breakfast, so the second half of her morning routine began. Walking over to the side of the house, slightly skewed from view from the street, she looked at the several stones of varying sizes, each one carved for her by Leland, and each sporting a handle of varying length, from one foot to nearly four. Picking up the one that was closest to her, she felt the heft of the smooth stone tool, lifting it slowly above her head and swinging it the same as she'd swing her weapon, picking up the next heaviest one once her arms grew used to the weight, the largest

of which her friend swore weighed as much as a horse. Leland called this one in particular special, and claimed that she'd find out why eventually, but it's been nearly five years since she's been able to lift it and its secret still escaped her.

"Good morning, Selina. Food's warmed up now, I'm sure you're hungry." Her ear twitched as she heard the front door open, following the footsteps as they traced along the short grass to her training spot. She set down the large stone, and smiled a toothy grin at her friend, leaning against the corner of the building, looking him over. His eyes were slightly sunken, the gold hue of his irises offset by his pale skin, simple tan clothing clinging to his slim build. In spite of how tired he looked, the magician wore a small smile, the one that always caused a twinge of pain in her chest.

"Finally, I thought you'd never wake up!" she chuckled, slapping his shoulder and walking past him, only now noticing just how much sweat was dripping from her clothes and fur. "Actually, I think I should wash off first. I'll be back!" Brushing past him, she bolted inside and to the right, closing the door to the bath behind her, smirking as she took note of the ceramic washtub in the center of the room, already filled with clear, softly steaming water. Stripping off her plain shirt and cloth trousers, she stood in front of the rectangular, full-body mirror sitting against the wall next to the scone, flickering candlelight the only light in the bathroom, save for the solitary window above her head letting in sunlight.

Standing in the nude, looking over her own body, she admired her growing musculature, carefully honed by twelve years of daily practice, flexing her bicep and chuckling, thinking back at how many men she'd scolded for doing the same thing in public. Her gaze drifted down her waist to her legs, the thick muscles in her calves, around her unorthodox leg shape, then back up her front, her own fingertips trailing up from her knee, over the abdominal muscles in her stomach, to her modest bosom, and the collarbone that stood out just above it. She felt more feminine than she'd imagined she would with her lifestyle, but that never got in her way. *Maybe I should buy a dress. I'd look good in a dress*, she thought, slipping into the warm water of the tub.

She opened the door again twenty minutes later, stepping briefly into her own bedroom while wrapped in a towel, before emerging once again in a sleeveless green tunic and tan trousers. Walking into the kitchen, she nearly tripped over Leland, who had sat himself against the wall, eyes closed and legs crossed with both hands in his lap. She could smell faint traces of magic surrounding him, and tapped his leg with her paw as she stepped past. "Meditating again? What's the point of it? And do it somewhere more convenient."

“Well, I had intended for this to be a study, where I’m sitting is close to a Layline so it’s the best spot for it.” he said, getting to his feet and brushing back his hair before sitting in his seat at the table, while she scooped enough stew into her own bowl and sat across from him.

“Alright, I understand that, but I don’t think you’ve ever actually explained it to me before.” Their legs crossed beneath the smaller wooden table, ever so slightly dulling the chill from the hardwood floor beneath her paw pads.

“Think of it like training your lungs. You do exercises to hold more and more air in your lungs, it’s sort of like that. Laylines are like the planet’s veins, and they carry a lot of mana, so letting that mana flow through me not only helps replenish my own mana reserves, but also helps me to hold more mana. It’s a very delicate and time consuming process.” the magician replied, slowly sipping from his bowl. She noticed his eyes never leaving its rim, and her grip on her own bowl tightened slightly.

“That sounds pretty interesting, did you learn that from the Elf?” she asked, feeling her ears slowly turn back atop her head. She had never asked her companion very many questions about his work or abilities—she barely got to see him as often as she did.

“From Master Sabramand, yes. He was even the one who told me about this Layline. There’s three in Lanshire, which is rather unusual, but could well explain the city’s prosperity. Other than the one beneath his own tower, the third is actually underneath Mr. Clark’s bakery.”

“Seriously? So his bread doesn’t just smell magical, there’s real magic in it?” One ear perked up as she neared the end of her bowl, setting it empty on the table. If magic could be added to food, then maybe she would find it more interesting. She had nothing against the practice or the people who used it, but even listening to Leland explain how it all worked made her head spin sometimes.

“Mm, I don’t think so, Mr. Clark isn’t a magician. He probably has no idea there’s a Layline under his shop.” Leland set his own bowl down, and she felt a weight lifted from her shoulders to see it empty. His work kept him for most of the day, just about every day—but at least she could take some small comfort in the fact that he always finished her cooking. If he was determined to work himself ragged, then she would be equally determined to feed him so well that never happened.

“So? I’m not a magician, but I can still use magic, you said that was normal.” said Selina, holding one hand with her palm up over the table, flames sparking to life and dancing dimly in her palm before being snuffed out. It was something she learned the feeling for as a girl—shortly after Leland began his apprenticeship. All she had to do

was push that feeling into her fingertips and the flames sputtered to life, though she couldn't create anything as grand as large orbs of fire like some magicians could.

"Yes, in fact there are many more people who can use magic than there are magicians. Most are like you, who happen to have affinity with one particular type of spell or element of nature. You're able to use simple fire magic, likely due to one of your ancestors either having notable magic power or being a creature tied to fire in some way." he said.

"What do you mean 'creature?' As in... a Monster or something? That can happen?" her curiosity got the better of her as she mulled over the prospects of Monsters mixing with people. Her first reaction to the concept was to label it horrible, disgusting even—but Leland had a way of explaining things that made everything seem more realistic. She had never heard any accounts of it herself, but that was probably something that others kept to themselves.

"Monsters, Spiritual entities, Magic Beasts, lots of people can claim at least something strange in their family tree, the ones who hold notable magic power anyway, mostly magicians. Less than a hundred years ago, all beast-kin were widely suspected to be Monsters fused with humans, maybe there's some truth to that after all." he said, without shifting his tone. He wasn't accusing or even proposing anything as certainty, but she couldn't help but hope he didn't think she was different or wrong because of something like that. *Is it... even a bad thing, really? Who knows...*

"Well keep talking like that and I may just decide to eat you for it. What about you then, huh? Any weird Monster-y bits I don't know about?" the wolf asked, playfully nudging his leg with her paw a few times. Regardless of everything else she didn't know, what she did know was that Leland had never treated her as any worse or different than anyone else, even if he treated nearly everyone the same.

"I don't believe I've sprouted any fur, feathers or scales anywhere, I'll let you know if I find any." he said, lips curling into that half smile she loathed so much her stomach threatened to give back her breakfast. "And before you get any ideas scaring your poor mother any more than she already is, I shouldn't need to remind you that likely none of the aforementioned mixing of the species happened after nice candle-lit dinners."

"Yeah, I assumed that part." she said, shaking any remaining unpleasant thoughts from her mind. Her eyes wandered downward, to their legs crossed together under the table. *Not that lighting a candle will bring you home any faster*, she thought to herself before looking into his pale golden eyes. Her mouth opened again, but Leland stood before she could speak.

“I’m going to head back to the palace, get back to the endless mountain of paperwork. I hope Master Sabramand fed himself this morning, he’s no use when he’s hungry.” said the man, rubbing his eyes and straightening the same clothes he’d worn the previous night. She barely had time for goodbyes before he’d walked out the door, leaving her alone in the silent house. Feeling her ears and tail begin to droop, staring at the closed front door, she sighed, and stepped out after him, walking down the front path.

“Don’t get lost in your work again, we’re meeting the others at the hall tonight to celebrate, remember?” she called out to him, after which he turned his head slightly to her and stopped. She smiled as she watched him mumble something to himself as he continued on his way to the palace, and she returned inside their home, only to exit minutes later and begin her walk down the opposite street. Leland may never be where she wanted him to be, but she knew he was doing his best, and that was good enough—for now.

Half a day south, Lark led his female companion through the damp, musty corridors of the decrepit temple that had recently been discovered in the forest, insects skittering about in the dimly lit hall as he held his small torch to light the path forward through the labyrinthine layout. Roots and vines had reclaimed nearly the entire structure, and the half-Elf used his knife to cut away at them, exposing simple paintings and carvings on the walls, as well as the half crumbled path forward. Looking over the murals, they depicted a battle of some kind that had taken place nearby, showing what looked to be two groups of humans fighting each other with spears, wyverns flying above the battlefield and other beasts on both sides.

“Hey, Xenia, you think these guys were Monster tamers? These paintings look like they had Monsters fighting with them.” he asked his magician companion, who was holding a notebook while she scribbled notes and doodled down sections of the murals. Once she had finished, she retrieved her staff from its spot resting against the wall, with a simple wooden shaft and a spiral pattern at its end, where the wood coiled around a circular blue gem roughly the size of an apple. Shaking her short black hair from her face, she adjusted her circular spectacles and tapped her chin.

“It’s certainly possible, there wasn’t much record of the civilizations of this region before they died out, they may have relied on Monster taming in a time when magic was much less known. We already found depictions of dungeons further back, maybe they used Monsters to clear them? Either way, can we hurry up? It’s getting really humid in here...” replied the magician girl with a whine, her short blue robes torn at

their white trimmed sleeves and skirt, leaves having gathered within her lowered hood. Lark chuckled and sliced down another bundle of vines, turning his gaze back toward the path ahead.

“We’re getting close to the central chamber now, keep your eyes peeled for anything valuable.” said Lark, taking careful steps along the disheveled stone pathway. He would use his toe, tapping the front of his leather boots against the stones before applying his weight, one step at a time. The girl stayed behind him, occasionally glancing over her shoulder or to the side, eyeing any potential split paths. The pair stepped into a large chamber nearly an hour later, sunlight streaking through small holes in the ceilings and walls, dust disturbed by their arrival wafting through the blades of sunshine that stood in place of crumpled support pillars and nearly half of the room, sitting in a pile of rubble that had collapsed inward into the chamber.

As they looked around the area, several pots could be seen lining the walls—some intact but most broken to some degree—a small group of sarcophagi narrowly avoiding the rubble from their resting place in the center of the room, and between them on moss covered stone pedestals sat jewelry, gold and silver coins, and a ruined book, blackened by the mold that grew once the rain could get in. Xenia looked over the sarcophagi curiously, while her male companion eyed the pile of gold and gems sitting on the pedestal. Reaching his hand over towards it, he let out a yelp and recoiled slightly as the magician slapped his wrist.

“We’re not supposed to take anything, remember? If they found out, we’d get into serious trouble. All we’ve been authorized to do is scout the temple out, look for any threats, and report back once we’ve located the main burial chamber. I don’t want your sticky fingers getting us in any more trouble!” she exclaimed, shaking her head disapprovingly while he pretended to nurse his wound.

“Oh, you’re no fun. It’s not like they’d ever know if we just took one or two.” he replied, though he relented in his attempts to pilfer any of the burial offerings. Once the magician had finished sketching the scene into her notebook, she pointed her staff toward one of the sarcophagi, and a magic circle formed in front of the blue gemstone embedded within her staff. It glowed a soft blue as it developed two layers, sigils forming along its outlines that almost took away his attention before he suddenly snapped to his senses, leaping at the girl. “You idiot, get down!”

They each let out a grunt as the taller man tackled her to the ground, narrowly avoiding the thick metal spikes that had launched themselves from the sarcophagus as soon as her spell had lifted the heavy stone lid, which lowered itself back into place with a firm “thud” once she had stopped supplying the spell with mana. Xenia looked

up at Lark with a slight blush on her pale cheeks, unable to help but notice his sharp jawline, the collar bone peaking from beneath his undershirt, or the way his slightly muscular build pulled the strings on his leather chest armor and leather bracers with his hands on either side of her head. Her deep blue eyes locked with his bright, pale green ones, but she pushed him off of her after another moment, the both of them clearing their throats as they assessed the situation.

“Well, that was... close. Thank you, Lark.” she said, giving him a soft smile as she dusted herself off. Her robes sleeves came neatly to her wrists, and the skirt ended exactly at her ankles. Though it wasn’t made of a particularly expensive material or color, she did her best to keep the tailor made garment clean as she could— contrary to the armor her companion was wearing, which was covered in tears, cuts, worn through and clearly never maintained. The half-Elf brushed himself off as she did, and looked more closely at the thick metal rod now embedded into the base of one of the crumpled stone pillars.

“Well that just goes to show how little old civilizations knew. Not a single decent trap all the way here, and the only one protecting their dead is so simple I could disable it in my sleep. These things aren’t even coated in poison! I think they’re mocking me.” replied the rogue with a hint of relief in his voice, sighing and shaking his head before picking up his discarded torch, grateful the flame persisted through its short fall to the ground. “Well we found the stupid chamber, let’s get out of here already. I want a bath, and then I want some booze!”

“We’re celebrating my academic achievements, don’t use that as an excuse to drown yourself in ale! Though, we should also celebrate another job done without any instances. I hope the others join us again soon, this is way too stressful to do it on our own!” she wailed in response, to which Lark shook his head and scoffed.

“Oh what, because I’m not good enough? I could do these on my own, you know, I have been for years.” he said with a bit of bitterness. Shaking his head and waving his hand once Xenia gave him a confused eyebrow raise, he turned back and motioned for her to follow, trying to ignore the slight feeling of inferiority he was experiencing, hearing his comrade wish for someone else’s presence. *That’s probably all it is*, he thought to himself, leading the both of them back through the route they came from, and after twenty minutes they finally gasped in the fresh air, basking in direct sunlight for only a moment before they were quickly crowded by men and women of thin stature, half of which were wearing robes of a similar blue color, though with varying shades, and varying colored trim lining them.

While his companion showed off her notes and spoke with the other mages, Lark walked over instead to a man sitting under a tarp canopy, looking over reports on a shabby wooden table as he stood with his back to the temple. From the lip of the expedition site, Lark saw workers still digging through brush, rubble and dirt, clearing away the surroundings of the temple. The building was formed of large stones, with a rectangular base and stacked up in layers that gradually grew smaller as they reached the top of the building and the entrance, covered in dirt, mud, and roots all being cleared away by laborers. Taking an empty sheet of paper from a small pile next to the reports the man was reading, the Adventurer began to draw a simple but neat map of the inside that the two had explored earlier.

“Like I thought, this one’s built almost exactly like another temple that was unearthed about three days west of here twenty or so years ago, so you should find more passages somewhere here and here, on the other side. I couldn’t find any traps on the floors or walls, but they should still be careful. The sarcophagi in the main burial chamber are trapped, so someone should disarm those before they’re tampered with. For a small extra fee, I’d be more than happy to—” he said, his words cut off by the other man. Standing no shorter than himself, the older human shook his head, short black hair graying with age.

“The magicians can handle that, that’s what they’re being paid to do. All we needed from the two of you was to map the area and ensure safe passage for them to reach it. Good work, you may receive your pay from the guild.” replied the guild associate dryly. Dressed in simple leather boots, cloth trousers, and a leather chestpiece with the guild’s insignia of a sword held upright by one hand, this man oversaw the expedition, and unfortunately, did not have their reward, causing a long sigh to escape from Lark.

“Fine, so be it. Good luck with the rest of your dig. Hey Xenia, let’s go!” the half-Elf called out, his companion’s attention caught and her wave noticed as she walked up the slope towards the edge of the dig site. After she’d waved to the other mages, the two walked back to the hitching posts to the side of the main campsite, released their horse and Lark helped his friend into the saddle before mantling up in front of her, taking the reins of their brown and grey mare, and bringing her up to a gallop as they made their way towards the road. “So what’re they lookin’ for in there, anyways? We found the loot already.”

“It’s important to know as much as we can about the people who lived here before us, how they lived, how they died, the things that were important to them,” began Xenia, her arms wrapped around his waist as she clung to him from behind for

support. “Magicians, Adventurers, and the whole kingdom can benefit from the secrets held by those who aren’t around anymore.”

“Sounds awful borin’ to me, I say just nab all the treasure and split!” Lark cackled in return, causing his friend to slightly pout and tighten her grip on him. *She’s grabbin’ me awful tight...* he thought to himself as they finally reached the main road, the sun still high overhead as he shielded his pale green eyes, grateful that she was sitting behind him as his mind wandered once again to the moment after he’d tackled her to the ground, with their faces only inches apart. Shaking his head to clear it with a sigh, he kept his gaze forward, while his companion attempted to do the same, without as much success as she struggled not to enjoy the pinewood and lavender scent coming from the man she was clinging to.

The sun had sunk much lower by the time their horse reached the front gate of Lanshire, passing through it with a quick wave to the guards who were keeping watch on either side of the gate, Lark and Xenia went their separate ways once within the city. The half-Elf watched his magician friend walk towards her home in the middle ring of the city, before he took his horse across it, going towards the north western section of the city, and cutting through the center of town to get there. Looking around, he could see who he thought to be Selina, though it was difficult to tell with how many people were crowding around the square that evening. The setting sun had hovered just over the peaks of the mountains west of the city by the time Lark had made it to his own disheveled abode, the stone building just sturdy enough to stand upright.

Another hour later and he left through the crooked wooden door of his home, now adorned in dark green pants with black leather shoes, a clean white undershirt and a matching green tailcoat with brass buttons and leaf pattern embroidered in silver along the waist and wrists. Shining the garnet on his silver ring, the half-Elf straightened his pointed ears and fluffed his fiery red hair before strutting his way down the cobblestone streets as the sun continued slowly setting, and torch lighters began to light the streetlamps lining the main roads. Lively as ever, the Guild hall doors stood open in the cool night air, light coming from inside as he stepped through the opening and smiled, spotting Xenia and Selina sitting at a table in the left corner, and walking over, helping himself to the seat across from Selina, next to Xenia, leaving the Lycan to sit next to the wall.

“Good to see you Lark, you’re looking well.” said Selina, the large canid wearing a sleeveless dress made from silk, the dark orange fabric sleek along her figure, with a slit through the side for her legs to bend more freely in it. Hemmed with gold along

the edges of the fabric, she also had a bright yellow tulip pinned on the left side of her chest. Lacking any human-like hair, her fur had been trimmed down again, short and neat with a slight mane trailing down her neck.

“I know, a hero has to keep up appearances!” replied Lark, snickering as the other two rolled their eyes. He took a moment to look over Xenia’s outfit, which consisted of a flowing rippled skirt made from black cotton threads, paired with a light blue blouse, frilled along the sleeves, which went just past her shoulders. Her spectacles sat just above her ever-so pink cheeks, and her shoulder length black hair was neatly brushed and the front left was braided down the side.

“Here’s your cut from today, Mr. Hero.” chuckled the young magician, sliding a small bag of coins across the wooden table to him, which he scooped up with a disappointed look on his face.

“That’s seriously it? Now I’m starting to remember why we do so many Monster slaying jobs.” he replied, tucking the small bag into his breast pocket without opening it. Rubbing his chin, he began eyeing the quest board located across the room against the right wall when his attention was interrupted by the approach of a woman sporting long, brown hair tied in a thick braid, a plain white blouse and long brown skirt. On the left side of her blouse was a pin with the name “Caroline” etched into it.

“Are we ready to order yet, or do you still need some time?” she asked, looking between the three of them. Lark started first, holding up his hand while she prepared to note down his hoarder, before he was cut off by Selina.

“Can you give us just a bit longer? We’re still waiting on our last party member. He shouldn’t be long.” she said, to which the serving girl nodded.

“Very well then, not a problem!” she replied with a smile, lowering her notepad. “Shall I get you anything to drink while we wait for your friend?” Selina’s ear twitched, causing Lark to raise an eyebrow as she smiled.

“I apologize for taking so long, I lost track of time again.” said a voice as it approached through the noisy guild hall, belonging to the disheveled magician walking up and sitting in the chair next to Selina and across from Xenia. The man was in his robes for the first time in months as far as Lark could remember, tailored to his lanky build in a deep gold hue, with a lighter gold trim along the edges, and a gold sash around his waist with even more sigils he couldn’t decipher embroidered into it. Leland set his satchel on the back of his chair and hanging from his cloth belt was a small stick, just curved enough at the top to hook his sash.

“You’re actually just in time, Lark just got here. I didn’t expect to see you in that ensemble though, yours are so pretty!” replied Xenia, to which the other magician nodded.

“I was not able to congratulate you at your graduation ceremony, so I thought it would be appropriate to offer you my official congratulations on your earning of the Wyvern rank. I’m sure you’ll continue to impress us with your growth.” Leland responded, smiling slightly at her. His long auburn hair was tied back slightly off center, skewed just to the right, and his messy bangs slightly obscured his golden eyes. His blank expression was one Lark was all too familiar with, while Xenia on the other hand had swollen with pride as she attempted to keep tears from falling down her pink cheeks.

“That’s sweet and all, but I feel like I’m missing something here.” said Lark, receiving a stern look from Selina as she patted the shoulder of the young girl, before everyone’s attention was pulled by the serving girl clearing her throat.

“Now that everyone’s settled in, why don’t we order something?” said Caroline, still holding her note pad and inkpen. Once a roasted chicken, two steaks, a leg of ham, and a potato soup had been ordered for the table, three of them ordered ale, and Leland ordered milk instead. With their orders placed, the serving girl smiled and walked off to tell the kitchen, and after a few minutes brought back their drinks, setting their mugs in front of each of them before leaving again with a small wave, walking to another table of adventurers to take their orders.

“I still don’t get why you won’t just drink with the rest of us, you stiff.” Lark commented, looking at Leland over the rim of his mug as he began to slowly drink the dark brown contents, feeling the alcohol burn down his throat and ride the exhale through his nose.

“Alcohol impedes the mind, which makes using magic almost impossible to do while inebriated, so I’ll pass. The rest of you can enjoy being hungover without me.” he replied, without glancing at the rogue, which left a sour taste in Lark’s drink. His stomach rumbled all the same once platters of their food began to arrive at the table, and each of them began helping themselves.

“Speaking of, that reminds me, what exactly are we celebrating tonight? Don’t get me wrong, I’ll never need an excuse to drink and eat a bunch, but how did she “graduate into a wyvern,” exactly?” Lark asked, in between drinks from his mug and bites from the section of roast chicken he’d carved out for himself.

“Oh, I can tell you that part! Magicians are classed into four tiers of ability, lowest is Wyrm, then Drake, then Wyvern, and then Dragon. It’s supposed to tell others

roughly how good of a mage you are, compared to the Monster your title goes to!” replied Xenia, to which Selina chuckled and shook her head.

“Not exactly, but you aren’t far off. When Dragons and their kin were more commonplace, magicians would try to learn magic from them, since Dragons were probably the most powerful and knowledgeable creatures alive at the time, and most of the magic we use today was based on magic observed from Monsters and Magic Beasts. The advancement of the tiers shows a general mastery level over your magical specialties, with Wyrms being beginners, Drakes having mastered one kind of magic, and Wyverns being magicians who have mastered at least two kinds of magic, your own being barrier magic and water magic. Mastering the latter and performing to an adequate degree in front of your professors is what earned your graduation.” replied Leland, to which Xenia nodded.

“Yeah, that’s what I meant! There’s also Dragon as the highest rank you can reach, but almost nobody ever reaches it because you have to master five different kinds of magic for it!” she giggled, which was returned by Selina. Lark looked at the two magicians and shook his head. His friend’s explanation was exactly what he wanted without being pompous, which irritated him more than he cared to admit.

“Sounds like it’s a pretty big deal then, huh? How come we’re at the Guildhall instead of a nicer restaurant then?” he asked, flagging down the serving girl to refill his empty mug, scooping some of the warm, thick soup into a bowl and letting its rich, creamy scent fill his nose.

“Because we like the atmosphere here a lot better, and it’s a lot cheaper.” replied the Lycan, to the agreement of the two magicians, whose plates couldn’t be any different. Leland looked to be competing with his beastly friend to eat more meat; a steak, chicken, and ham piled high on each plate, while the younger girl had almost entirely soup and grilled vegetables on her own. Lark sighed and shook his head.

“Well, at least the drinks are cold!” he said, chuckling and tilting his newly filled mug back, draining the contents without coming up for air, and letting out a soft gasp for it once it was empty, feeling the warmth spreading from his belly up his chest, down through his limbs and settling in his cheeks as they grew slightly rosier. Their celebrations grew as the night did, and soon enough the entire guild hall was singing, drinking, eating, and someone was getting sick in the corner. By the time the sun had begun to shine through the doors and windows once more, Lark had barely scraped himself off the floor, cradling his head as he staggered to the table to support his weary legs.

After making sure his companions were still breathing, each slumped into their chair or against the wall nearby, he attempted to reason with his gut to remain still as he less than dexterously stumbled his way home, bursting through his creaky door and letting it close behind him. Slumping onto his bed, Lark yawned as he sprawled across the sheets, eyelids closing as he drifted off to sleep, mind occupied by the image of Xenia sleeping soundly with a small blanket draped over her, leaned against the wall of the Guild hall. *She's actually kinda pretty for a human, I guess...* he thought to himself, as he was dragged into unconsciousness.

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Selina found herself burying her snout under her arm with her ears flat against her head, trying to escape the violence being done to her tired eyes by the morning sun as it pierced through the open doors and windows of the guild hall while her fellows in arms betrayed the piercing ache striking through her skull with their raucous morning behavior. Swallowing down the aftertaste of the ale from the previous night, the beast slowly sat up with a groan, tenderly rubbing her eyelids as she attempted to regain control over her weary and blurred vision, pain shooting across her scalp from the back of her skull and causing her to wince slightly. Sitting up in the wooden chair she'd slept in all night, she carefully checked her surroundings, while keeping her left eye shielded from the sunlight pouring in through the window beside her, and her ears and tail dropped slightly more when she didn't see any of her allies.

"Ah, perfect timing. Here, drink this, it should help." Her ears perked up again, and she held back a wince as she heard Leland's voice from behind her, turning to see him walking her direction and up to the wooden table, holding a small glass vial to her containing a bright orange and yellow liquid. She eyed the opaque substance before removing the cork stopper and putting the vial to her lips, closing her eyes and letting the bitter liquid flow over her tongue and down her throat, leaving an aftertaste that was equally fruity and metallic.

"I got worried the rest of you left me here." Selina joked, setting the empty phial down and putting the cork back into the mouth of the tube, and handing it back to Leland, who had since changed clothes from his elegant robe to simple brown trousers and a beige shirt. She could feel the pain slowly ebbing from the back of her skull and behind her eyes, and stood from her seat, slowly stretching her stiff limbs before remembering what she was wearing, and adjusting her dress.

"You know I would never do that. I gave Xenia's to her, and walked her home while you were still asleep. Lark had already gone home by the time I awoke, so I left his with him. He can use it when he wakes." replied Leland, offering his arm as he motioned to the front door, which the larger girl linked with her own arm, and smiled softly down at her friend as the two made their way from the Guildhall, walking down the stone streets toward their home to the southeast part of the city. "I told Master Sabramand I was feeling tired after the celebrations, but I doubt the other two would like to take on any work today."

“Then the two of us have it to ourselves, I don’t have any plans for the day. Should we stay in? It doesn’t look like it’s quite midday yet.” she said, the effects of whatever Leland had brought her already having eased her hangover back, letting her move normally and enjoy the sunlight shining down on the two of them as they walked through the streets, her dress swishing back and forth as her long legs moved beneath it. She took a moment to straighten the tulip she’d pinned to the left side of her chest with her free hand.

“I suppose we could, though it may be wiser to make sure our equipment is in good condition, and that we have enough supplies to take on a job tomorrow or the day after. Our funds are a bit light to purchase anything new right now, but we can see what’s available.” replied the magician, his arm still linked with hers. It was a nicer feeling than she expected, to be led while wearing such a silly outfit.

“That’s a good idea, we haven’t gone shopping in a while, wonder if there’s anything neat on the shelves.” she responded with a smile, humming softly to herself as the two approached their home. Opening the thick wooden door, Leland stood inside, watching as Selina approached her bedroom before she turned back, looking at him and taking the skirt of the dress and doing an exaggerated bow, giggling to herself. “You never commented on it. What do you think? Does it look good?” she asked, looking at him.

“I don’t remember ever seeing you wear one before, it took me by surprise at first. It’s a very elegant look, I think it works for you.” he replied, leaning against the wall as he observed her display. Her ears flicked and she chuckled at his rather plain, riskless compliment.

“And as much as I appreciate that, it’s not the answer I wanted, so try again.” she responded, letting out a chuckle as she continued smiling at him. He raised an eyebrow, then brought his hand to his chin as the man tried to figure out what she wanted from him.

“Very well then, I must apologize. It looks very lovely on you, Selina.” he said after a moment, and she smiled wider in her victory as she walked to her bedroom and closed the door behind her to change.

“Much better! Though, as much as I like the dress, it isn’t very practical.” she called back through the closed door, navigating the piles of clothes and various discarded equipment as she made her way through her bedroom and to her wardrobe. *I really have to wash all this at some point...* she thought to herself as she selected her next attire, sliding the dress up and over her shoulders before hanging it through the arm holes on the knob of the dresser. Once her fresh undergarments were in place,

she slid a dark yellow tunic over her head, nearly tripping as her other hand pulled the waistband of a pair of cloth trousers up her legs, and fashioned the strings tight once they were fully around her waist.

Stepping from her bedroom, she looked across the entryway and saw Leland once again sitting cross legged against the wall next to the kitchen and dining space. She could smell the slight scent of magic in the air as she silently approached, sitting slowly across from him with her legs crossed and her hands in her lap, attempting to replicate her friend's posture as she closed her eyes, and attempted to feel the magical flow of the Layline resting beneath them, her impatience impeding her concentration. Finding herself bored just a few moments later, she opened her eyes and looked at Leland again.

His hair was still messy, but the bags under his closed eyes had faded, and his skin had just a bit more color than it had over the previous few days. Selina let out a soft sigh of relief at this progress, and reached over to brush his bangs from his eyes before her clawed finger was met with an octagonal, paper-thin prism of hard light, flickering into existence just long enough to stop the momentum of her hand, letting out a soft "tink" as her claw tapped against it, before it flickered from existence. Just behind it was a pair of golden irises softly glowing, and for just a moment she could swear his pupils squished into vertical slits, but nothing looked amiss by the time her eyes focused onto his.

"I wasn't trying to annoy you. I was just going to brush your hair from your eyes. You should cut it soon, it must be a hassle to deal with." she said, the image already fading from the back of her mind as the magician yawned softly, sitting up straight and stretching his arms above his head, his shirt lifting as he did so and exposing his flat stomach.

"I apologize; I had actually fallen asleep again. I suppose I have been working with Master Sabramand an awful lot lately." he replied, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. This time, Selina's outstretched finger reached its target, and she chuckled as her soft jab to Leland's belly caused his arm to twitch, and gently swat away at her hand as the two of them rose to their feet.

"Not too late to change your mind and go back to sleep." she said, one hand on her hip and still smirking slightly. He shook his head and brushed his bangs from his eyes, which looked directly into hers.

"No, we've plenty of time to handle errands today, so we should. You should probably have your gear refitted, you've put on a bit more muscle since we last took a job. It—" the magician was cut off, his face staying lax as he looked up at her, having

just put her hand over his mouth to silence him. She loved him to death, but Leland should know better.

“It’s impolite to make comments about a lady’s physique, young man.” she said, chuckling as she released his mouth, her hand sliding to cup his cheek for a moment before sliding further up and patting his head before she turned and walked back to her room to gather her things. Placing one piece of equipment after another into a large sack she usually used to carry laundry, she hoisted it over her shoulder and returned to her friend, nodding. “Alright, I’ve got everything. Should we go straight to Carlo’s?”

“I suppose we should, then you can return your equipment here while I procure some more potions.” he replied, pushing open the door and stepping with Selina back out onto the path, the two of them reaching the main street and heading north east. Her eyes shifted between his face and any movement that she caught in her peripheral, triangular ears tilting and turning toward the various sounds that echoed along the stones to reach her.

“Sounds good to me, except for the part where you leave me behind again, so you’re sticking with me instead.” she remarked matter-of-factly, her tail swishing behind them as they approached the sound of metal banging against metal, and reached a building with a sign hanging on the doorpost of a hammer striking an anvil. Stepping through the door, Selina could instantly smell the scent of charcoal and oil, her ears twitching as the hammering sound grew louder. Inside the building were shelves on the long right side wall, holding daggers and short swords on the leftmost, with spears, halberds, and large maces on the rightmost side. To their left were individual pieces of armor, and full suits of plate mail further from the door.

“I’ll be just a moment! Please look around!” called out a gruff, male voice from behind a swinging door, in a blessed moment of relief from the banging noise, which began again right after. Leland took the bag containing her armor to the wooden counter near the far wall, while Selina peered over the craftsmanship of the weapons laid out on the wall before her. While Lycan tribes typically fought bare handed, and without metal armor, Selina had several weapons stored at home to use while on jobs for the Guild, and couldn’t begin to count how many times Lanshire steel kept her from losing a limb. She had selected a short spear from its rack on the wall, testing its heft before placing its base on the floor, eyeing down the shaft from the head to measure its straightness as the endless banging finally stopped, the shop’s owner stepping out from behind the swinging door while wiping his brow with a dirty cloth.

“So! What can I help the two of you with today?” he asked. The man stood just shorter than Leland, with short black hair that was already receding, skin tanned from hours working in the forge and in the sun and glistening with sweat, much like what was soaking through his once white shirt. Leland stood on the other side of the counter, and motioned to the bag he had set next to him on top of it.

“We’d like to make sure this fits properly, and if you have any sales or special items for sale, we’d be interested in looking at those as well, though this is the only purchase we’d planned to make today.” the magician replied. Carlo looked into the bag and nodded at Selina.

“Sure, no problem. If you step into the fitting room, I can retake your measurements and see if anything needs adjusted.” said the smithy, scooping up the bag of armor with one hand and leading her to the side of the counter, where another swinging door stood. She glanced at her friend, looking over something in a display case without much of an expression before following the smith into the small fitting room, lit by a small stone in the ceiling that glowed a soft yellow light.

“Glowstones in your fitting room? Someone must have a new benefactor.” Selina said as she removed her shirt and torn pants, setting them inside a basket sitting on the floor nearby. As the smith pulled a small measuring spool from his apron pocket and wrapped it around her neck, bicep, bust, and waist, she looked up at the stone embedded in the ceiling.

“Tell your man there to buy some armor so I can afford more, deal?” chuckled the older man, to which Selina shook her head with a smirk. A feat of Dwarven ingenuity, the glowing stones only needed a pittance of mana to produce light for hours on end. She recalled asking Leland to procure some for their home, which he dismissed as wasteful spending when he could do the same thing for free.

“I’d like to, but he’s neither “my man” nor someone willing to wear armor. Won’t even put mail under his robe when we’re on jobs. Can’t say I blame him too much though, this stuff gets kind of heavy sometimes.” she replied, looking down as the smith was writing down a series of numbers in a small notepad he had tucked in another of his apron pockets.

“Well then it looks like I’m not making any money today. You have got a bit bigger than last time, but not so much that I gotta redo the straps. Just loosen ‘em a little and you’ll be good to go.” the smith replied, to which the Lycan nodded with a smile, and quickly put her shirt and pants back on as the smith left the fitting room. Once she stepped out as well and stood next to Leland, she looked into the case he had been eyeing, but instead of a weapon or piece of armor, inside this glass box

sitting in front of the counter was several pieces of jewelry. Necklaces, rings, what appeared to be armbands and even earrings were sitting on velvet padding, with very large price tags sitting in front of each tiny piece of jewelry.

“Looking for something to give a girl you fancy? I’ll help you look.” she said teasingly, leaning down next to him and observing the delicate craftsmanship. She may have been joking, but if he answered wrong, she may just hit him. Leland shook his head and straightened up, looking at her. If nothing else, the pieces he seemed to be looking at were pretty.

“I overheard your conversation, it’s convenient we don’t have to get your gear refitted yet. With how long you’ve had it, it may be better to simply replace it when the time comes.” Leland replied, motioning to the bag that the smithy had returned to the counter. *I guess no answer isn’t quite a bad answer*, she thought to herself.

“But I like it how it is. I’d like to keep it, as long as it isn’t broken.” she responded, shaking her head and taking the bag from the counter. He may not share her sentimental attachment to the steel plate, but she saw it no differently than he must see his robes, that armor was part of her identity as an Adventurer. Leland pointed to the display case, and the smith walked over.

“Interested in some jewelry? It may not be as fancy as what the nobles wear, but these’ll last! Guaranteed, any girl—” he was cut off when Leland shook his head and raised a hand to stop him.

“I’m a magician, I was actually looking for something a bit more receptive to magic than these pieces. The quality is not an issue, but the blend of metals doesn’t respond very well. Do you have any that have a purer blend of metal? And, if possible, the gemstones should be cut into simple shapes.” Leland responded, and the smithy shook his head.

“I’m sorry, but this is what I got. Anything more refined, you’d better ask a jeweler. Made these with some spare materials, figured someone might like the look.” said the dejected smith, resting his burly arms on the wooden counter. The magician nodded with the same blank expression.

“I understand, and apologize that we wasted your time. Good day to you.” he said, the two of them exiting the store and stepping back to the busy streets. Leland turned to her and asked “Well, since that didn’t take long, do you want to return the armor now, or carry it with us the whole time?” Selina thought for a moment and shrugged, slinging the bag over her shoulder with one arm.

“It’ll be fine like this. What else do we have to do today?” she replied, looking down at him as her tail slowly swished side to side. The weight of her gear was heavy,

but not so terrible that she would not be able to carry it for however long their outing took—and she wasn't ready to go home yet when they had only just left.

“With just the two of us, we should go to the apothecary, ensure we have enough potions.” he said, the two of them setting off further east through the main road, and taking a side path through an alley. Selina had a good idea of the city's layout from her morning exercise—though the strong smell of mold that struck her nose as the pair stepped through the alley reminded her why she only ever walked the main road.

“Come to think of it, you've mentioned this alchemist before, but I don't believe I've met them.” Traversing away from the busier streets, where they now found themselves was a smaller building tucked behind an inn and a large storage warehouse closer to the edge of the capital. It looked to be made entirely from wood, with dim light shining through the window and the slanted roof missing a handful of shingles. Leland stepped inside first, and Selina walked cautiously through the slightly crooked door.

“Hm, I suppose we've never had a reason to come together. This shop is run by Kai, an acquaintance of mine. It isn't a sanctioned alchemy workshop, but that's why Kai is an apothecary. This is where I acquired those hangover cures, in fact.” said the magician. The inside of the building was lit by floating spheres of light that looked somewhat different than Leland's, somehow looking thicker as they drifted through the air above their heads.

“Well then I'll have to thank them for all their hard work, those cures work like miracles.” responded Selina, looking around. Small piles of powder could be found in glass display cases, resting in vials and on ceramic plates. Roots, dried leaves, and other strange objects could be found whole as well, kept in glass displays that seemed almost too shiny.

“Then do me a favor, and don't ask what's in them, or tell anyone where you got it. Even if I could use the business!” called out a voice from another room, the doorway in the opposite wall of the small building. From it, walked a being in the shape of a Lagan, a race of rabbit beasts similar to Lycans, however this individual was instead tinged a slight pink and mostly translucent. Selina couldn't hide her bewilderment at what had just walked through the door. While its shape was certainly of another beast race, there was no fur or feather to find on Kai, whose androgynous body was entirely made of some sort of slime. Wearing no clothes, and with no distinguishing features otherwise, the bare bodied shop owner chuckled at her reaction.

“You should be wearing your disguise during normal hours, Kai. I could have brought anyone here with me, and you would be found out.” scolded Leland, shaking his head. Selina looked behind the counter toward the dark doorway Kai had come through, and rabbit shaped footprints of slime trailed behind them as they’d come up to the counter.

“It’s fine, I know you wouldn’t give me away, you need me too much!” chuckled the shopkeeper, looking in Selina’s direction. “So, you gonna introduce yourself or just stare?” they said. She blinked, her focus being brought back as she cleared her throat.

“Yes, I’m terribly sorry. I’m Selina, one of Leland’s friends and comrades. It’s nice to meet you, Mist-er, miss...?” She felt a slight twinge of guilt at being unable to identify her new acquaintance, but the slime chuckled and shook their head. Confusion from the situation itself would need to be cleared first before she could worry about something like that.

“Whatever feels right is fine, it’s all slime either way.” they responded, shrugging their shoulders before returning their attention back to Leland. “Lookin’ for anythin’ specific?”

“Just the usual potion bundles. And if she needs anything for herself.” he replied, motioning to her. The slime nodded, and turned back to Selina. It was curious to watch as the being’s body shifted and jostled slightly, mimicking the movements of a person without the efficiency she had come to expect from other people, as if its movements were more jagged or less practiced.

“Well? Need a little more kick to your healing potions? Extra sour mana potions? Some...” the pink rabbit leaned in, holding one hand to cover their lips as they whispered. “Contraceptives, perhaps?” The Lycan blinked once, before the meaning of the word returned to her. She shook her head, but the words caught in her throat as her discussion this morning with Leland flashed at the forefront of her mind. It wasn’t the kind of thing she wanted to think about, but she couldn’t deny the possibility. There was also the fact that she wasn’t always going to be able to deal with certain urges by herself.

“Just... yes, please.” she said, thinking to herself that she’d have to remember the location of this shop in case they could help with her yearly issues. After a nod from the slime, they disappeared into the back of the shop again, and Selina let out a sigh, ears and tail drooped down in embarrassment. As the gooey shopkeeper walked back into the reception area, they set a crate on the counter roughly a foot long on each side, and Leland set a small pouch of coins next to it. Selina noticed the strange pair

of gloves Kai was wearing, eyeing the thin, grey fabric as they picked up the pouch and counted the small silver coins inside it, which didn't escape their own notice.

"Pretty neat, huh? I needed something that kept slime off of everything I touched, so Leland made these for me. They're very thin, so I can still work and handle things in front of others without leaving them covered in slime!" they said with a beaming grin, holding both hands to Selina. She leaned forward, eyeing them more closely, and gave the gloves a curious sniff. She couldn't place the scent itself with so many muddling her nose, but a hint of sea salt caught her attention.

"It may sound strange, but the fabric reminds me of the sea somehow." she replied, looking down at the small pouch that had been placed in front of her. She opened it while Leland reviewed the contents of the crate, potion vials clinking softly together before she slid the small pouch into her pocket, hoping he didn't catch a glimpse of the small white capsules inside it.

"Probably because it's made from mermaid skin. I needed a material that would keep all the slime inside, without leaking any, and Mermaid skin naturally absorbs high amounts of water. Since slime is composed mostly of water, it was the perfect choice." he said without turning his attention from the box and its contents, which shocked the Lycan.

"Mermaids? But... they're intelligent! That can't be allowed." she said, feeling rather disappointed in her friend. She had no proof he did anything himself so she wasn't going to start accusing him of anything, but anger began to build as her hands closed into fists at her sides. He looked at her finally, raising an eyebrow.

"They are intelligent, but that's also part of the problem. Merfolk aren't people, you know. Technically speaking, they're a race of Magic Beasts, who are intelligent enough to speak. The ones who try to live alongside civilization are left alone, but they are known sometimes to lure fishermen to their deaths with their hypnotic singing, so when this becomes an issue, those individuals must be dealt with." he responded, his eyes held to hers. He wasn't wrong, but she still didn't like his answer.

"Even so, they're close enough to people that they should be treated like it. What about beast-kin then, are we not people either, just because we look monstrous to humans? What about Kai? Slimes are Monsters, should we regard them as one?" she said, feeling her tail begin to bristle, and her pointed ears pushing forward on top of her head.

"Like I said, those who choose to live alongside people are treated fairly. Just the same way we don't hunt Monsters to extinction, it isn't as if we hunt merfolk when it's not necessary and trying to contain them without killing them is a difficult task to

say the least. Humans will kill other humans who become too big of an issue, this is no different than that.” he responded, picking up the small crate holding their newly purchased potions, resting in the straw used to cushion the crate.

“I—... suppose, you have a point. But I still don’t like it. You magicians can be so heartless sometimes.” she responded, sighing as she crossed her arms. Leland stopped moving for a second, their eyes meeting as she looked disapprovingly down at him. He said nothing, and his expressionless face only frustrated her more before Kai began to urge him out of the store.

“Come on now, out, you bought your things now lemme talk to her in private, thanks for the business!” they said, shouting over Leland’s protests at being nudged out of the door and having the door closed on him. Selina raised her eyebrow, cocking her head to the side.

“What did you do that for? I thought the two of you seemed quite friendly.” said Selina, looking down at the walking slime as it carefully removed the gloves, and set them down on the counter.

“Slimes don’t have eyes, you know. We can’t see things quite the same way as you guys can. Not really. For us, we see the outline of your energy. All the little traces of magic that make up everything, and differentiate between objects based on that. The same way a human and a rock both have those same magic building blocks, but are two different things, Monsters also have unique energy. Like everything in the whole world has its own flavor! So don’t feel bad, just cause some things look like people, even if bad things happen to them sometimes. I may be a little unique, but even I’m still a slime, right?” they said, leaning against the wooden counter as translucent pink slime slowly dripped onto it.

“Even so, intelligence cannot be ignored in other species. I recognize the benefits of utilizing materials gathered from Monsters, but I don’t have to like it.” she replied, letting out a sigh but uncrossing her arms. She’d calmed down enough that she began to wonder if she’d been too angry with her friend, ears and tail beginning to droop again as she imagined him having already left.

“And that’s fine too, you don’t gotta be exactly the same as he is, but I do think you should apologize for what you said. I owe that guy a lot for what he did to help me out, and that was a pretty mean thing to say to your friend.” they said, which came as a surprise to the Lycan. The slime motioned to a chair leaning against the wall, and Selina pulled it carefully closer to the counter, sitting in it as Kai shifted to sit up on the wooden counter, causing a small splash of slime underneath them.

“You seem like the two of you have a bit of a history, would you mind sharing?” she asked, slightly insulted at their insinuations but curious by what they meant when they claimed to owe her friend.

“Sure! You can probably guess, but my father is what you’d call a... strange individual. Apparently he’s a Lagan, a kind of beastman that looks like a rabbit standing straight up, and my other parent is a slime. I was born in a sewer, in a city called Greton that’s a week away by horse. A city worker found me when they were checking the other slimes down there, and eventually I was captured and taken by a magician who kept me inside a giant glass vial, doing all sorts of weird and painful things to me. My memories are a bit hazy from back then, but slimes are born as full adults, if you didn’t know.” they said, slowly swinging their legs from atop the counter, droplets of slime landing in a small puddle forming underneath them and another against the wall opposite them.

“I believe Leland mentioned that once, when we were younger and—... hunting slimes as beginner Adventurers. My apologies.” she replied, sheepishly looking down at her own legs, studying the tear patterns in her pants, while Kai giggled.

“Don’t worry about it, seriously. Every two weeks or so, slimes will go on feeding hunts, eating just about anything they can. After that, they store all the energy they got from absorbing the magic and nutrients from whatever they ate, and if they store up enough, then they use it to form a new core, and split off from the main body, creating a new slime that usually contain traits of the environment, or at least whatever the slime had been eating. That’s why some are unaffected by certain kinds of magic, like an icy blue slime that can’t be frozen with ice magic, for example. I’m sure you knew all that as an Adventurer, but when a man becomes “friendly” with a slime just as they end their feeding time, their material can be used as the new core.” they said, pointing with one finger to a small opaque sphere she hadn’t noticed before, floating lazily inside Kai’s translucent pink abdomen.

“I see. I was only recently made aware that crossbreeding with Monsters was even possible in the first place. It’s not something most people really think about.” replied Selina, the small wooden chair creaking slightly under her weight as she adjusted her position.

“Yup. Only, that brings us back to the fact that slimes aren’t people. So I was born as something that was too much of a person for a slime, and a mean old magician kept throwing magic at me every day until Leland showed up. See, slimes still have organs and muscles like all living things, only, they’re goop just like the rest of me, except the core, which is apparently supposed to house my slime soul. I don’t know all the

details exactly, but after Leland let me out, he told me that since my body was too much slime for my soul, I couldn't hold my form, and I was constantly on the brink of losing my soul without even knowing it. If he hadn't shown up, I'd be just like any other slime, probably still eating shit down in those sewers." they responded, shaking their head.

"That sounds rather complicated, I'm not sure I completely get it..." Selina said, rubbing the side of her temple as her ears fell to the sides.

"Yeah, me neither, but he said I was basically all slime *and* all Lagan. That it was taking too long for my soul to get integrated into a body it wasn't supposed to be in, and I could lose it. So before my body either tore itself apart or reverted back to being a regular slime, he split me up into two beings. I don't really get how it works, but it's basically the same as doing it to a regular slime. If you split them apart without destroying the core, the parts can regenerate or come back together and reform. So he made another core, and put it into this body so it would stabilize. That way, half the slime and half the soul made each body, and both of me could exist." said Kai, leaning back as they looked at her. The tale made her head spin a bit trying to understand how such a thing was even possible.

"So, in that case you really do owe Leland quite a bit. I can't even begin to imagine how one would split a soul between two bodies." Shaking her head, Selina looked back at the rosy tinged shopkeeper. "Is your other body here as well?"

"No, I dunno where that one got off to. We don't share memories or perceptions or anything. We may have been one being in the beginning, but at this point we're two separate entities. Pretty neat, huh?" they responded. Selina shook her head, giving up on trying to understand how it works.

"I had no idea any of this was even possible. It's a lot to wrap my mind around. Thank you for sharing. I assume after you were freed, he brought you here, but why set up an apothecary?" she asked, watching the slime continue dripping down the counter.

"Well, there wasn't much to do coming back, but Leland had some potion recipe books with him so he used them to teach me to read and write. Once I could see the alphabet and knew all the letters, memorizing stuff came easy, and this way I can support myself without drawing much attention or relying on Leland. According to him, it would be bad if anyone found out about me being a sentient slime, so I usually just do this." they replied, beginning to concentrate. She could feel magical energy flowing through the slime's body, as color slowly bloomed from within them, white and brown coming to the surface, a deep brown forming on their irises.

“That doesn’t seem like just an illusion, is it?” She was bewildered as Kai let out a soft sigh, having transformed their appearance by changing the color of their entire body, mainly white with spots of brown in various shades. Even faux tufts of fur had risen from their body. They let out a chuckle, smirking proudly at their display.

“Well, it’s the best I can do right now, since I can’t use real magic like a magician can, but as long as nobody looks too hard I pass for any other Lagan out there! Slimes can change their shapes as much as they want, and by swallowing small amounts of paint or powder I can change my colors at will, and spit them out later when nobody’s around.” they responded, and Selina stood from her seat, looking down at Kai.

“Well, thank you again for your help and for sharing your story with me. It was a pleasure, but I’m sure my companion has already made it home, so I shouldn’t keep him.” she said, reclaiming the bag holding her equipment and slinging it over her shoulder as she reached for the door.

“Oh, before you go! The whole reason I pushed him out was so I could tell you about those capsules in a bit of privacy. As long as you take one every day, you shouldn’t have to worry about any little yous running around. Take it either in the morning or at night, but make sure it’s always the same time or you could get sick. If you do decide you wanna have kids, just stop taking them for about two weeks.” they said, stepping down with a “squelch” as their paws landed in the puddle of slime.

“Is that all? Sounds simple enough to me. I’ll return when I run low of them.” Selina replied, smiling and nodding at the slime.

“Sounds good to me! You’ve got enough for about a month, and sorry for talking your ear off, I don’t get much business right now so I kind of got distracted talking. Enjoy the rest of your day!” they exclaimed, smiling and waving. Selina returned both, stepping back out into the fresh air, and to her surprise nearly onto Leland, who was sitting beside the door with the crate. He stood as she closed the door behind her, looking at her with his usual blank expression.

“Are you ready to go? You were in there quite a while, so I assume you got whatever you needed.” he said, turning and walking with her down the street. The sun had lowered itself somewhat in the sky, which was slowly darkening from blue to purple and gold as they walked through the emptying streets of the city.

“Yes, and yes again. They told me about how you rescued them. And scolded me for calling you heartless, so I want to apologize. It was unfair of me to say, and I’m sorry, Leland.” she said, her tail drooping and her ears pointing back and flat against her head. The magician shrugged, not turning around as they walked.

“You weren’t incorrect. Magicians have to be heartless sometimes, and that doesn’t bother me.” he replied, but she put her hand on his shoulder regardless, turning him to face her. His slim frame offered little resistance as they stopped in the middle of the street, their eyes meeting once again.

“I mean it, Leland. I’m sorry.” she said, fiercely gazing directly into his golden irises. The sunset reflected in them, streaking across the deep golden color around her own silhouette. They remained still, neither blinking or moving before the magician gave in, and closed his eyes with a sigh.

“Very well, I accept your apology, Selina. I’ll let you off with a warning this time, but if it happens again I may slap your wrist.” he responded, and her tail began to wag slowly again as they continued along.

“You still have a poor sense of humor, though. And I’m not apologizing for that.” She smirked as she wrapped her free arm around his shoulders, and he returned with his signature half smile. As little as she liked that, she could breathe easier now that the squeezing sensation had left her heart. When the familiar sight of their home finally came into view, Selina began preparing dinner for the two of them while Leland sorted the potions they’d purchased into four small satchels.

Hours later, with the moon rising in the night sky, she stood in his bedroom doorway, holding one of her arms as he shifted in bed to look at her. Without speaking, he moved forward, using one arm to hold up his blankets. She smiled, walking quietly over to his bed and slipping in behind him, wrapping her arms around him and pulling his back to her chest. His body was warm against her, and she slowly breathed in his scent with her eyes closed.

“Having trouble sleeping?” he asked, the sleepiness present in his voice. She nodded, then realized he probably couldn’t see it.

“I kept thinking about Kai’s story. It sounds horrible, being imprisoned, being experimented on while your very life is in jeopardy. I don’t even want to know what it would feel like, having your soul struggling against your own body.” she replied, absentmindedly squeezing the young man against herself.

“It doesn’t feel pain or anything, so don’t worry too much about that. It was a risky gamble, but at least it worked. Though, I doubt I could do something like that again on purpose.” he responded, and she could feel one of his hands gently trace her arm, feeling his soft fingertips run along the muscles in her forearm.

“Can you tell me more about it? They were a little short with details regarding the process, and what came after, other than that you split them into two beings, and taught one of them alchemy.” she said, her other hand rubbing slowly up and down

his chest and stomach. He didn't have much muscle, but his body still felt firm against the pads on her fingers.

"The Lagan soul wasn't binding properly to the slime body, due to slime reproduction being more like a cutting from a tree than actually producing offspring. The soul was loosely hanging onto it when I arrived, so I had to carefully isolate it without damaging it, then split the slime equally into two halves, and very slowly distill the soul into both at the same time. Then I had to use conventional means to travel so I could observe their behavior, once I purchased them from the magician in Greton." he yawned, and she blinked in surprise.

"Purchased, I see. And, what did you decide? Where is the other Kai?" she asked, looking down at him. It was obvious to her that he was intentionally avoiding telling her much of anything about the other magician, but their society was completely separate from everything she knew—and they could surely police themselves.

"Their ability to memorize information was intriguing, so I used a little leverage with the person in charge of official business permits and asked him to officiate an apothecary for Kai, while I named Mera and sold it to a colleague from Kesselmark who flew out to meet with me halfway on my way back from Greton to here." he answered.

"You sold them? To another magician, to be experimented on again?" The shock was clear in her voice, but he shook his head, and she resumed her relaxed position. *You're going to give me a heart attack...* she thought silently to herself.

"No, I wanted to test something. A Monster with a person's soul has never been properly documented before. Kai and Mera are different from someone who is part Monster. So while I'm observing Kai and its development, my colleague is studying Mera in a different environment. I asked to have it taken care of in privacy, but with privilege. I was curious to see how that would affect its personality and its half of the soul, compared to Kai who is being taught independence and self-sufficiency." he responded. She wished he would have a little more emotion in his voice when talking about the lives of two people he bought and sold.

"Well, thank you for explaining to me. I don't get exactly how it worked, but the important part is you did a good thing, even if I disagree with the reasoning behind it." she responded, and dragged her wet tongue across his cheek in a sloppy dog kiss, which he turned away from.

"All I did was act on curiosity, don't go making it into some act of heroism. And stop drooling all over me." he said, the latter half she ignored while giving him another squeeze, her tail thumping softly against the bed behind her.

“You can’t fool me. I’ve known you for too long, you love my slobbery licks. And even if you don’t, I’ll keep giving them to you anyway.” She smiled, and rested her head at that, mulling the day’s events over in her own mind. “Still a person, even if they aren’t human, huh?”

“What was that?” Leland asked, the sleep heavy on his voice by this point. She smiled again and once again cuddled up behind him as the memories began to drift to the forefront of her mind.

“Oh, it’s nothing. Just something I heard from someone a very long time ago.” she replied, resting her head on the pillow next to his, her eyes closing. She could hear in his breathing that Leland had already fallen asleep, and she wasn’t far behind, holding onto him from behind as she drifted slowly off to sleep.

A few days had passed since the group celebrated Xenia's promotion, and the four had finally gathered together again, trekking through the forest to the east of Lanshire a few hours before midday. A group of Trolls had been seen by travelling merchants, wreaking havoc along the trade routes and posing a threat to anyone coming or going east. They had assembled at just one of those sites of destruction, with trees snapped in half, deep gouges in the dirt, and wagons crushed to pieces and strewn about with litter from corpses, cargo, and plant life. Lark and Leland scouted slightly ahead, following the large footprints made in the soft soil by the behemoths while Selina searched the area for survivors, and Xenia drew down the scene in her notebook.

"How many were there?" asked Selina as the two men rejoined their companions back at the scene of the wreckage. Sparsely armored, the Lycan stood wearing thick steel greaves, vambraces, and cuirass, with a leather skirt that cut off just above her knees, featuring scaled metal plates down the length of it and fashioned around her waist with a thick leather belt. Her size and the unique shape of her legs made full sets of armor unfit for regular use. In her left hand was a thick rectangular metal shield, banded around the edges but without ornament, and a similarly plain short spear in her right. Lark had seen the beast-kin wield a variety of weapons, from her own claws to an axe that weighed more than he did, and she was equally efficient with anything put in her hands.

"Three different sets of troll footprints, which matches the story we got from the Merchant's Guild testimony. Looks like they lead pretty deep in, we must be on the edge of their territory. It's possible they have a den set up in the deeper part of the forest." replied Lark, shaking his head. The half-Elf was wearing his usual poorly maintained leather armor, covering him from the neck down. Small cracks and tears could be seen throughout his chestpiece, fashioned as a vest with two layers of darkened, boiled leather, and small iron sheets woven between them. His left arm wore a long, fingerless leather glove, reaching up to his shoulder, while his shirt sleeve and a studded leather bracer was all for his right. Knee high boots kept his lower legs covered, while his waist remained relatively unprotected, only wearing simple cotton trousers. Various pouches had been sewn into his vest, and from his waist hung a similarly tarnished leather quiver, holding his arrows while his wooden longbow was holstered on his back by a small iron hook. A short, curved blade rested in its sheath on his left hip.

“No, not quite yet. Though they’d have finished one within a few days’ time.” said Leland, who had taken the small stick hooked around his cloth belt and placed it against the exposed root of a nearby tree, knelt down next to it with his eyes closed. For a brief moment, the half-Elf could almost hear something coming from it, a soft vibration emanating from it and the surrounding trees before Leland stood to his feet, looking at him directly. Both magicians had donned their robes, the high quality golden fabric almost glimmering in the brief spots of sunlight that streaked through the leafy canopy overhead.

“How do you know? The trolls had plenty of time to make a den, right? The attacks have been going on for over a week now.” asked Xenia, holding her staff with both hands in front of her waist.

“Cause Leland knows all about Monsters. He goes off Gods know where for Gods know how long all the time cause his teacher’s a lazy aristocrat, he’s probably killed Dragons out there by himself, right brother?” replied Lark before his friend could, wrapping one arm around his shoulders and pulling him into a sideways hug.

“I studied Monsters and their behaviors in order to *avoid* running into them entirely. A magician is weakest when they’re on their own, and unless I successfully surprise my target and take them down in one shot, then I’d have given away my position and any advantage I had. On top of that, the reason I know is because I sent mana throughout the nearby root system to survey the area until I found where three large Monster traces currently were. There are still too many roots intact in that area for them to have settled into a den.” replied the monotone magician, to which Lark rolled his eyes and shook his head.

“Brother, I think you may be the blandest human I’ve ever met. Which is a crime, because I know what you’re capable of. If you can beat me, you can shoot a Dragon right out of the sky, c’mon!” the rouge exclaimed, slightly shaking Leland as their companions giggled to themselves. He shook his head again, and Lark finally released him, though he thought it would have been nice for Leland to respond to his familiarity for once.

“Dragons and other Draconids are intelligent, many of them are even capable of speech. While I have encountered them before, it’s not ideal to do so. They’re among the strongest of all Monsters and Magic Beasts, and very proud. If possible I avoid them, and if that isn’t, then ideally I would use words to convince them to let me pass.” he replied, the four of them following the trail of footprints deeper into the forest.

“And if you can’t?” asked Selina, whose eyes scanned the area around them while she led the group forward. The magician had no response for her. As they pressed on, the damp, earthy scent grew on the air, and the light able to sneak past the leaves shone less and less. Other than the words they spoke aloud, there was an eerie quietness in the forest, lacking any birds chirping, any wind blowing through the branches, no insects buzzing about. It raised the hairs on the back of the rogue’s neck to walk through such a stagnant forest.

As much as he wanted to continue teasing his meek comrade, the four of them knew better, silently walking through the path of wreckage left behind by the brutish Monsters nesting in the area. Trees uprooted and knocked out of the way of the massive humanoid footprints trailing the soft soil. Lark’s eyes were peeled, scanning between the trees as they continued on. Soon enough something unseen must have caught Selina’s attention, and she signaled for the group to stop.

“I smell blood on the air. We must be getting close.” she said softly, barely a whisper. Leland nodded and pointed to the northwest, the group detouring from the path left by the trolls and weaving between tall trees and patches of shrubbery and broken branches. Xenia gripped her staff tightly, and was already beginning to break a sweat as she tried to steady her nerves. Lark placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder, and she thanked him with a soft smile. He barely had time to turn back to the front before Leland stopped the group, the four of them kneeling down as he pointed once again. In a clearing made by bashing and tearing up trees and other plants, sat the three Trolls they had been tasked with eliminating.

What skin wasn’t covered by blood or muck was pale and grey, as if the creatures were carved sloppily from stone. When standing, each one was taller than a wagon, and wider than a horse was long, but these three had been distracted by their meal. Sitting in a triangular formation, the trolls’ lumbering arms and misshapen heads dipped into a pile of something that couldn’t be seen from behind them. Wet crunches and cracks could be heard as they fed, and the scent of blood was heavy enough for the rest of them to smell it, even from several yards away. Lark noticed Leland’s eyes narrow slightly for a moment, before they all heard the whimper let out by their female magician, including the troll closest to them.

Everyone turned to Xenia, who had wide eyes and a face drained of any color. Covering her mouth with one hand, she stared as the troll turned its head to the treeline the group was hiding within, the upper half of a corpse dangling from between its gnashing jaws, before the spine was fully bitten through, and the rest of the body fell, splattering on the well trampled and muddy ground. Xenia could barely stop herself

from retching, and her legs refused to move as an intense wave of frigid fear gripped her in place. Her hands trembled as she pointed her staff forward, only for Lark to yank it downward and kneel down lower, grabbing her by the arm and tugging her with the rest of them. He could feel how much she was trembling as he waited with his breath stuck in his throat, and slowly exhaled as the troll turned back to its meal, scooping up the female corpse half it had dropped and stuffing it past its blood soaked lips.

While Selina looked worriedly at the other girl, Lark and Leland locked eyes for a moment as the other magician turned to them, and the half-Elf could only offer that cold gaze a pleading look as the girl steadied her breathing, sitting up somewhat. He released her, but left a hand on her shoulder anyway as she rested against the tree next to her, tightly gripping her staff. Lark recognized the anguished look he saw on her face, and the pit in his stomach grew as she wept silently. With a loud enough rumble to shake the trees around them, meal time was over and the giants began to get to their feet. Out of time, the other three began to move, Lark jumping up from his spot, using his natural agility to swing up a nearby branch and into the tree next to him, silently clambering halfway up before locking his legs around the trunk, unhooking his bow from its hook on his back and nocking an arrow, drawing back his arm and taking aim.

Selina was the first to leave the cover of the trees and shrubbery, a loud roar escaping her fanged jaws as she dashed toward the group of trolls, knocking her spear against her shield several times. The metallic clanging echoed slightly between the dense forest, drawing the attention of the group of Monsters, who returned with their own roars, much more guttural by comparison as blood and spittle was flung from their faces, the large Monsters scrambling to their feet. She leapt forward, pushing her shield in front of her and slamming it into the face of the troll closest to her with a firm “thud,” the creature’s nose crushed against the thick metal and dark red blood began spilling from it as she pushed off of it with her powerful canine legs, leaping backwards and sending the creature toppling backward onto its meal and groaning in pain as the other two began to close in on her.

First one, then a second arrow flew from his bowstring, Lark firing from above in his tree perch and striking true as the first arrow wedged itself into the left eye and left knee of the troll closest to him, which was moving around the right side of the large pile of corpses, causing it to let out a yell and grasp at its own face. His third arrow pierced its hand, and the fourth helped to pin it to the troll’s face as it stumbled backward. The beast on the left reared back its fist to swing at Selina, who had begun

closing the distance to the one in the middle as it attempted to lift itself from the bloody, muddy mess it had been knocked into, only to slip and fall flat on its back as she hurled the spear in her hand, which lodged itself into the troll's upper chest. As the third creature swung however, its fist slammed into a thick wall of hard golden light that had materialized between it and its target, in a shape with eight sides each a few feet long.

Leland had emerged from the treeline, staff in hand and erased the barrier, Lark firing another arrow into the troll on the right side to make it step back and attempted to fire at the leftmost, but the magician pointed his staff at its face and said something Lark couldn't hear over Selina's growl as she jumped above the middle beast, using her weight and momentum to drive her spear deeper into the troll's stony hide, piercing it deeper as she landed on her weapon lodged in its chest. A small sphere of water swirled into existence just beyond the tip of Leland's staff, before shrinking itself to roughly the size of his arrowheads, and Lark was caught by surprise at its speed, the small projectile launching itself almost too fast for Lark to track with his eyes, boring straight through the skull of the leftmost troll. Blood and grey chunks of flesh began spilling from the new opening in its face, and the troll collapsed forward with a loud "thud," blood spreading from beneath it through the trampled grass.

With his attention drawn away by Leland's magic, the rightmost troll had begun ripping its pinned hand from its face, tearing the arrows from its face and eye, which tore free of its socket and hung limply against its cheek, held barely by its own connective tissue. Lark aimed for its socket again, but stopped once the beast began slowly stepping back, its gaze shifting to its fallen comrades as Selina wrenched her spear free of the now dead middle troll. Before it could flee however, came another arrow of water from the tip of Leland's staff, piercing its skull from side to side. The half elf could hear Xenia wretch at the base of the tree as the beast fell forward to its knees, blood spilling from its nose and eyes before landing face first into the muck. Letting out a sigh, the rogue slipped down from his perch, landing on his toes and turning to the young girl still cowering in the bushes. She'd begun crying once more, or perhaps never stopped, refusing to open her eyes as she clung to her staff like her life depended on it.

"Selina's securing the ears. Please go with her and return to the guild, so someone can collect the corpses to be given proper burials. I've asked her to burn the trolls once the ears are collected, so I'd also like you to—" began Leland, who Lark hadn't noticed walk up to the two of them from behind. He grabbed the magician by the shoulder, looking him in the eye.

“Can’t you do something to help her? Don’t you know any spells to calm her down?” he asked, gesturing to their curled up friend. He was slightly surprised once more as Leland gently removed his hand from his shoulder, walking up to and kneeling in front of Xenia. He held his left hand in front of her face, with his palm facing her, as a circle began to draw itself upon his palm, dark purple in color with strange symbols and a spiral pattern from the outside rim to the center. It glowed softly once it was complete, and the magician spoke again as he cast his spell.

“Drowsing Mist.” spoke the magician softly, and a small puff of something akin to steam released from the glowing circle, washing over her face. Her body instantly relaxed, dropping her head and her staff, the former of which Leland caught on his shoulder. Lark looked at her, the feeling boring down through his stomach finally beginning to subside as she was induced to sleep. Leland’s own staff shrank down slowly in his hand, and he hooked the curve onto his sash once more when it was returned to its former small size, picking up Xenia’s with his free hand. “I’m not able to use most magic that charms or hypnotizes a person, putting her to sleep was the best I can do for her. I’m going to take her directly to the Cathedral so she can rest.”

Breathing a sigh of relief, Lark nodded, and hooked his bow back onto the hook on his back, looking to Selina, who had dragged the Monster corpses on top of each other in an area slick with mud. Leland pointed Xenia’s staff in that direction, moving it in slow circles as the mud began to swirl in the area, building upwards as it rose from the earth circling the Monster corpses. Selina nodded to him once the mud had solidified around the bodies, forming something akin to a bowl, and while she began piercing small holes around its base, Leland repeated the process a few feet away from her. This process allowed them to create something akin to a furnace, by placing one on top of the other with the “rims” sealed together, using stones, mud and clay to encase the Monster corpses. As he approached Selina to help place broken branches and other plant material within the makeshift kiln, the rustling of leaves overhead pulled his eyes upward, and he watched as Leland rose into the air with Xenia in his arms, and began soaring through the air straight toward the city. Baffled by this sudden flight, he turned to the Lycan.

“Since when could he do that? Why are we still taking horses and walking everywhere if he can fly?” he asked, shaking his head as he began tossing sticks into the giant clay bowl to serve as kindling. Selina had set large branches aside, and using her notable muscle, began breaking them into smaller pieces using her powerful legs to hold them, and pulling upward with her arms to snap each in halves until they could fit, and tossing them inside.

“I had asked him once,” she began, lifting the giant lid and carefully placing it on top of the bowl with notable difficulty, trying to maneuver it over the contents as Lark climbed up to the lip, helping guide it over the pile of flesh and wood before it finally settled into place. “According to him, being able to fly without growing wings or something on yourself is kind of a big deal for magicians. I don’t really get it, so you’d have to ask him.” Taking hold of another stick, it burst into flames in her hand, and she used her other hand to pierce a large hole a few feet from the topmost part of the lid, angled diagonally, and dropped the burning stick through it. After a few moments, Lark could hear the crackling of the fire spreading within, and the sound of air being sucked in through the holes near the bottom. The Lycan sat against a tree once it had begun, next to where she had set her spear and shield.

“Well it sounds like someone’s been holding out, if you ask me. I bet he’s got way more tricks up his sleeve.” muttered the rogue, sighing as he joined his friend by the tree, sitting cross legged as the smoke began billowing out from the hole she’d pierced through the top. He watched it while using his hands behind his head as a pillow against the tree, as it lazily floated into the clear blue afternoon sky. “Say, you didn’t use any magic symbols did you? How come you can use magic without any catalyst?”

“It isn’t the same as what Leland or other magicians do, it’s kind of hard to explain. I never really think about it, it’s just something I know I can do by instinct. What’s with the sudden interest, looking to learn some magic yourself? Actually, I think that may be the worst idea I’ve ever had.” she responded, and Lark looked at her with pretend shock on his face.

“What the hell! I’d make a great magician! Why wouldn’t I?” he asked, turning to the Lycan who had turned her face toward him with a smirk.

“Because you’re a perverted bum with dubious intentions, an unclear past and half a wit.” she replied, to which the rogue let himself fall sideways, clutching his chest dramatically and letting out a slight sigh.

“Oh you wound me, but I think it’s a great idea. Never really cared much to learn it, but if I can just get a few good ones from Leland, that’s all I’ll need.” he said, staring upwards as the smoke continued rising from just outside of his vision. “Though, I suppose it’s a good thing that he can do amazing stuff like fly through the air, in situations like this where getting somewhere fast is important.”

“You were closer than I was, what happened with her? She was just fine dealing with wolves, goblins, even highwaymen. Maybe she has some bad history with Trolls?” she asked, the cackling of the fire growing louder than before as the stench

of burning flesh caused their noses to turn, only partly obscured by the plant material they'd stuffed in with it.

"She panicked. Realized that she was in way over her head with this one, and lost her composure. We'd have been charged for sure if I hadn't been able to cover her mouth in time, that would've been messy." he let out a sigh with his words, still worried for their newest friend and her fragile state. "Never put much stock in the Gods either, but at least the ladies at the Cathedral can take care of her till she pulls herself together." Selina nodded, and Lark closed his eyes, sighing once again through his nose as he turned slightly away from the furnace, the flames continuing to grow hotter and hotter, to the point that he could feel the heat from over a dozen yards away. Eventually however, they died down, after most of the afternoon had passed, and once no more crackling could be heard, the two rose to their feet. Lark stole a glance at the human corpses, who had been strewn about by the earlier scuffle, and felt a twinge of guilt that they couldn't do much more than avenge them.

That same evening, after the half-Elf and the Lycan had submitted their report with the Adventurer's Guild, Lark caught a glimpse of Leland's golden robes entering the palace, and chased after his friend. Once he had been cleared by the two guards holding post at the main entrance, he walked into the clean stone hall. It was not his first time being within the castle walls, but his sense of curiosity and exploration was curbed by his intentions to speak with Leland. The rogue was completely out of place as guards, merchants, nobles and their children went about their business within the stone corridors, his sharp eyes eventually picked his friend from the crowd, only for his stomach to leap to his throat once he saw who the magician was speaking with.

Standing in white cloth pants with a dark blue doublet, black leather shoes, a gold circlet around his head and a gilded red cape held with a golden chain, the Crown Prince Zachary von Este sported a scowl as he exchanged words with the magician, standing alone in the corridor of the palace's eastern wing. Lark had never met the man personally, but his curiosity had begun to get the better of him. As the two of them walked deeper into the corridor, the half-Elf silently followed, inconspicuously moving behind pillars and slinking between shadows cast by the torchlight in the mildly lit stone path, their words whispered and distorted as they echoed through the hall, eventually stepping through the large set of metal doors that led to the magicians' study and workshop, closing the door behind them.

Unwilling to rush headfirst into enemy territory, the rogue let out a defeated sigh, knowing that door was unbreachable for him. Minutes burned into hours as the rogue sat slumped against the wall, lazily toying with his curved knife when the metal doors

eventually swung open again, the prince scowling even now as he walked out of the workshop without paying Lark any mind. The rogue noted the sweat on his face, his newly ruffled shirt, how uneven his circlet sat on his brow now was. Despite being younger than Leland was, his face was aged with stress wrinkles around his eyes and forehead. *Flustered royalty fleeing from a magician's private chambers? Scandalous*, he thought to himself, slipping inside before the doors closed behind him.

Realizing he'd never actually entered Sabramand's tower before, the half-Elf looked around the dimly lit first floor, with books and scrolls sitting everywhere they'd fit. Floating spheres of colored light drifted lazily just above his head, and he noted a staircase along the far side of the circular room, walking up toward the brighter source of light shining down from a floor above. With the main room being roughly thirty feet from floor to ceiling, Lark noted the staircase seemingly circled the entire length of the tower, reaching up toward other floors and curving out of sight before his attention was pulled by the well-lit second floor, with circular walls isolating it as a solitary room with a wooden door facing the stairs, hanging open.

The stone floors and walls of this room were well lit, spheres of white light hanging in regular intervals as they followed the walls curves, sitting against the stone ceiling roughly five feet above his head as Leland sat at a wooden desk, his robes having been draped over the back of the chair he was sitting in, leaving him wearing only a pair of cloth trousers and rather well fitting shirt. He looked up for a moment, raising an eyebrow as Lark walked into the room, who smiled and shook his head.

"Well if that's all it takes to be a court magician, I should have tried it when I was still in Galia." the rogue proclaimed, walking up to the wooden desk and sitting on the corner of it, looking down at his friend.

"I've no idea what you're referring to." he coolly responded, his eyes shifting back down to the set of maps he had sprawled in front of him. Lark noted that they detailed land west of Este's border, the mountainous regions surrounding the Dwarven capital city specifically. "And before you even ask, no I am not at liberty to disclose what His Majesty and I were speaking about, so don't make a habit of eavesdropping."

"Relax, that's not why I came. Checked up on Xenia after making our report to the Guild, she's gonna need some time to get her head straight again." he responded, looking around the room. Other than the desk and chairs, a small bookshelf sat against the wall, and to the right of the room was a wooden bed where the wall was indented under the stairs that spiraled up, bedsheets unkempt with a loose curtain obscuring

part of the indented area. “This some kind of second home? Why not just go home or live here?” he asked, turning back to Leland.

“Master Sabramand said he had no use for this space so I use it to handle official business, and sometimes when my work keeps me, I’ll sleep here rather than walk home.” responded the magician, who stood from his seat and walked over to the bed, fixing the sheets and picking up something small he couldn’t see from them before releasing the other curtain, hiding the bed entirely as he returned to his seat and began rolling up the maps on the table.

“So, you do business with the royalty very often? You don’t talk much about this job.” Lark turned as he heard footsteps approaching, and nearly fell from the desk as Zachary burst into the room, looking even more flustered than before. His dark blue eyes glanced at Lark for a moment before reaching Leland, who had stood and bowed his head as soon as the prince entered the room. He turned back to Lark, and seemed to recompose himself almost instantly.

“Give us the room, Elf. This is official business.” he snapped, and Lark felt himself bow halfway and bolt through the door before he even thought of correcting him, closing the wooden door behind him. Gritting his teeth, he lamented silently as he pressed his pointed ear against the wood, listening to what was happening on the other side.

“I believe something precious was left here, Leland Graham. Find it.” barked the voice of the prince, and Lark heard some soft shifting of wood, likely Leland moving from his chair.

“Yes, I found it while tidying the sheets, your Majesty. I never had the pleasure of meeting his late Majesty, but I’ve heard his hands were rather large compared to most. If the Signet ring isn’t a good fit for your Majesty, perhaps refitting—” began Leland’s voice, before it was cut off by a loud slamming noise, accompanied by wood creaking.

“Silence. I’ll not hear it. To tamper with my father’s ring would be to spit upon his legacy, are you suggesting I piss on his grave next?” Lark was caught off guard by this, not expecting the prince to be so hard stuck about something as simple as a ring.

“Of course not, your Majesty. It was foolish to suggest such a thing.” replied the magician, and the half-Elf heard some more shifting.

“Obviously it was. Remember that I own you, Graham. Someone like you doesn’t deserve to share an opinion with Royalty. You’re an object of my discretion, and I certainly never ordered you to question me.”

“Of course, your Majesty. I have not forgotten.”

“I should think not. You’re lucky I haven’t had you tossed to the street, or flogged for insubordination. Your usefulness only just outweighs my contempt for you, so don’t forget that.” Lark barely had the time to remove himself from the doorframe before it swung open once again, Prince Zachary storming from the room, face somehow even redder than before. After making sure he wasn’t turning back around, Lark let himself back into Leland’s office and closed the door behind him with a heavy sigh.

“What the hell was all of that!” he demanded while gesturing after the prince, once he had turned back to Leland, who had sat a chair upright and adjusted his shirt collar. Imprints on his cheeks indicated his face had been grabbed with two hands.

“I already told you that I’m not at liberty to—” began the magician, to which the rogue shook his head and frustratedly slumped into one of the other wooden chairs.

“Then I’ll ask another way. What in the world is his problem with you, brother?” he asked, raising an eyebrow. Despite how tense the rogue felt, his friend didn’t seem to care much more than usual.

“I won’t claim to know His Majesty’s thoughts, but he has never been very fond of me. My position here is unorthodox to say the least, and His Majesty has plenty to keep him busy and stressed. He often has specific, sensitive tasks for me, magical or otherwise.” he replied, to which Lark shook his head.

“So despite you being a Court Magician, you’re still just another servant to him, is that it?” he asked, and Leland looked like he was thinking for a moment. Lark had his own thoughts of royalty and was more than happy to share them—though his companion couldn’t be more different. The magician rarely even spoke of his palace duties, let alone complained.

“I suppose that’s one way to view it. Following his direct orders exactly as he wishes is necessary for me to continue as Master Sabramand’s official apprentice and to retain my position as a Court Magician. It isn’t all bad, some discrete tasks every so often in exchange for all the knowledge and resources I could ask for is worth the hassle.” he responded.

“Well, if you’re agreeing to it, then I guess there isn’t much I can say about it.” shrugged Lark, who brushed aside his red hair and looked at Leland, swallowing the growing pit in his stomach. “There’s another reason I came, though. I want you to teach me to be a magician.”

“Oh? I assume this has something to do with what happened this afternoon with Xenia.” replied Leland, who had settled back into his seat and looked across the table

at Lark. The rogue always felt a sense of anxiety, staring at his own reflection in the bright gold irises locked onto his, like staring directly into the eyes of something that would bite him in half.

“Yeah, you could say that. Don’t think I didn’t notice, what you did. Taking down two trolls by yourself using only barriers and water magic. I don’t think she was really able to pick up on it, though.” he responded, to which Leland shook his head.

“There was no ulterior motive, it was simply the most efficient way to deal with the situation. My question is, why do you want to be a magician? Your talents as an archer and scout are already valuable assets.” he asked, still staring directly into Lark’s eyes, like he was looking straight into his soul, the pressure causing Lark’s gaze to shift slightly.

“Being a rogue is a lot of fun, but I know that I can’t keep up with the two of you forever with just a bow and a knife. Even if it’s something simple like what Selina can do, I want to keep being useful. Keep helping people. And hey, if it ends up being something really powerful, even better!” he chuckled, but Leland shook his head.

“If you were going to awaken innate magical abilities like Selina, you’d have done so in adolescence. For a half-Elf, being between one and two hundred years old means you’re certainly as matured physically as you’re going to be, if none have surfaced yet then they won’t.” he explained calmly.

“Okay then, that’s off the table, fine. You can teach me spells, the same way you taught Xenia.” he said, and the magician shook his head once more.

“Without a basic understanding of magic formulae and the structures of a magic circle, you could memorize spells until your head melts off your shoulders, and you’d never be able to use them. On top of that, I have no way of knowing what your potential affinities may be, and testing from—” the magician was cut off when Lark spoke up.

“My mother is an Elven magician. Half siblings too. I don’t know about them, but she uses light magic, wind magic, plant magic and water magic. Probably more, but I never got to see.” he said. Bringing up his relatives curled the corners of his lips downward, as Lark ignored residual memories attached to the memories of his mother’s magic. Leland took a sigh, and sat back in his seat, pondering while Lark waited with baited breath.

“You’re searching for a tool or a weapon to give you an edge in battle. If that’s all you want, then you’d be better off finding that, not studying magic. I won’t teach you to be a magician with a reason like that.” said Leland, and the rogue’s heart dropped to his stomach.

“Come on, we both know how useful I’d be! And I’d only use it for good!” he pleaded, but the man’s eyes didn’t waver, and neither did his answer.

“There’s more to being a magician than using magic. It requires a specific mindset, dedication, the resolve to search for the most obscure information just for the sake of understanding it, to face down a foe many times your might with only your own wit and creativity, to risk and lose everything you’ve ever cared for. If you want to be a hero, then be a hero, it’s a far nobler path than being a magician. It isn’t for everyone.”

“So, what, I can’t be a magician because my personality isn’t a good fit? What a load of shit, if even a sweet girl like Xenia can become one, so can I. And if you’re willing to teach magic to her, you can teach me something, too.” the rogue said, feeling his frustrations grow. He wasn’t asking for the world—just a little help.

“I understand where you’re coming from, but my answer is no. I didn’t teach her to be a magician, all I did was show her something useful. Frankly once she recovers, she won’t be joining us in any future combat focused work for the Guild, and I plan to recommend she return to Kesselmark to pursue an academic career and give up being an Adventurer.” replied Leland’s monotone voice. Lark hadn’t even realized his arm had moved until he saw and felt his right fist connect with the magician’s cheekbone. For a split second, it felt as though Lark was pushing his fist against solid steel, his pale green eyes still locked onto Leland’s golden irises before the slim man was sent careening backward, the chair under him tumbling and breaking under the impact, Leland sliding a few feet from the table. Lark’s stomach dropped as he realized what he did, and he rushed over to where the other man had landed.

“Shit! You can be a real heartless bastard sometimes, Leland.” he stammered, pulling the magician up to his feet by his arms and brushing off his clothes for him before Leland motioned for him to let go, adjusting his own clothes back into place. There was slight bruising on his cheek from where his fist had struck, and the skin on Lark’s knuckles had split.

“I apologize, I must have made you rather angry.” replied Leland calmly, looking to the destroyed chair. He lifted one hand, and the broken pieces began to softly lift from the ground, splinters sliding back into place as the chair seemed to repair itself, legs fusing back together and the object resting upright as if nothing had happened to it.

“I mean, you did, but still. That wasn’t cool of me either. Sorry.” he responded, guilt mixing with his frustration. The two sat in silence for a few moments, before

Leland motioned for Lark to come closer. Raising an eyebrow, he stood, walking over to him.

“Kneel down in front of me. I’m going to show you something.” he said, and his seriousness almost brought Lark to snicker.

“I feel bad for hitting you, but not *that* bad.” he instead replied, shaking his head with an eyebrow raised. Leland shook his head, clearly missing his intent.

“Sit facing away from me, so I can hold your head. I’m going to project the image of something into your mind, it would be faster than explaining it with words.” he said, and Lark hesitated for a moment before following his instructions, sitting in front of Leland and letting the magician gently place his palms on either of his temples.

“And you’re going to show me, what exactly? And this better not hurt.” he said, closing his eyes and waiting. As soon as his eyelids shut, he could feel as though his body was growing further and further away from him, as he retreated within himself, pulled along by a force he couldn’t see or touch.

“I’m going to show you what all magicians are tasked with obtaining. After that, maybe you’ll understand why I said the two of you are unfit to chase it.” replied Leland, his voice echoing inside the emptiness in Lark’s mind, as the darkness surrounding him was suddenly cleaved through by an intense streak of light, colors erupting from the wound in the void. Endless streams of color flooded through his mind, clouds of green and red floating past his disembodied field of view, his entire being mingling with the sensation of warmth, cold, tingling with energy as eruptions of color shot past him and through him and from him, endless spiraling lights careening just out of reach. Lark was speechless, everything unfolding before him filled him with an intense sense of wonder, shaking him down to his core. More and more color bloomed from the void surrounding his consciousness, flying past him at impossible speeds, everything spiraling into being from one single point, growing and twisting and wrapping around his view, before Leland’s hands released his head, and the half-Elf gasped audibly, panting and clutching his own jaw as sweat spilled down his face.

“What... was that?” he managed to ask, his throat and eyes dry and scratchy. It was impossible to know just how long he had been held like that, but his screaming lungs indicated he had begun holding his breath at some point.

“That is the spell that created everything. This world, and every other, every star and heavenly body we can or cannot see. That is what it means to become a magician. The first magic, pinnacle of sorcery, where all spells stem from and creation itself.

What do you feel right now?” asked Leland, and the half-Elf stumbled to his feet, his mind still spinning from the experience.

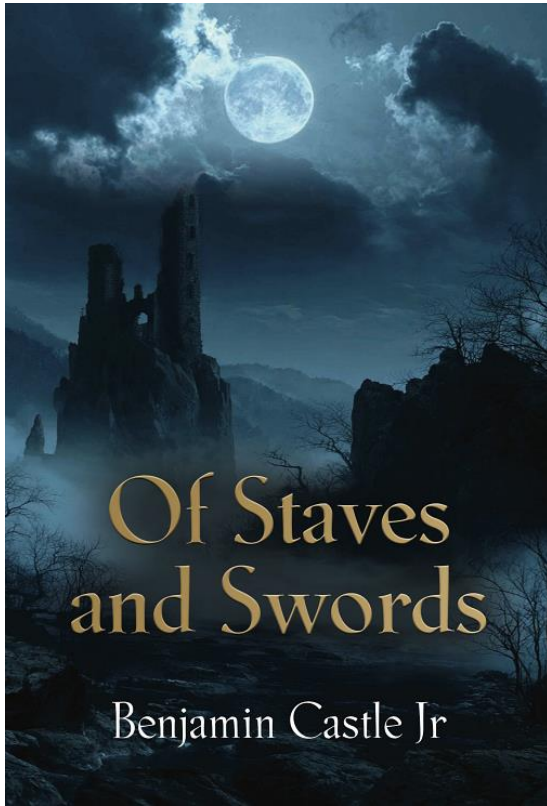
“I-I feel... kinda seasick honestly...” he responded, slumping his shoulder against the cold stone brick wall for support. Truthfully, what he had just seen was as frightening as it was beautiful. Each of those tiny specks of light was a world, a star, a moon, maybe even something else he had no word for. The thought of actively reaching for something like that terrified him.

“That was a visual recreation, the actual spell was such a high magnitude of magic that nobody can possibly hope to contain it in a simple mirage. That spell is the single goal that all magicians set out to achieve, to recreate the Original Magics. In other words, to ascend into the realm of the Gods. Someone like you is much better off being a hero than being a magician.” he said, and though he hated the thought, Lark knew his friend was right. The magician stood from his seat, walking over to the bookshelf against the wall, pulling a large leather tome from it and flipping through pages written in a language the rogue was unfamiliar with. “That being the case, should you decide you still wish to attempt to learn spellcraft to compliment your abilities, I’d need to test your affinities and magical aptitude. I’m unable to use plant magic, but the other three shouldn’t be an issue.”

“So, you’ll teach me after all? Then what was all of that?” asked Lark, confused but excited. He returned his attention to Leland, sitting once again in his seat. The magician set the tome on the table, and sat across from him.

“I told you that I would not teach you to become a magician. I stand by that. However, more people than just magicians use magic. You may still be disappointed in what you’re ultimately able to achieve, but the best I can do is teach you the magic circles for some basic spells you may be able to use. For that however, you must first understand the fundamentals of constructing magic circles—” he began, and Lark stood from the table, walking for the door.

“You know, I think we’d better save the studying for someone who likes that sort of thing, just draw them and tell me how to cast the spell, I’ll figure it out! Thanks brother!” he exclaimed, less enthusiastic about sitting through a lecture as he excused himself from the study, then the tower, and finally the palace itself. The moon had already risen to its peak in the starry night sky, and Lark had a moment of wonder as he stared up at them all, if he had just seen any of them be born in his own head. Shrugging, the half-Elf continued on his way, content with himself for the evening.



Of Staves and Swords is a story following a man known as Leland Graham, a pacifist and apprentice Court Magician after an accident leads to his mentor's possession and capture, and the journey Leland and party take to save him.

Of Staves and Swords

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