



THE
DREAMWEAVER'S
LAMENT

JENS RAVENS

CHAPTER I

ROSEMARY AND SMOKE

The sunset over Lethmere's lavender fields had no business being this perfect. Sunsets, in Rhonda's considerable experience, were typically rushed affairs. The sun stumbled drunkenly below the horizon while you were busy running from guards or counting stolen coins. But this one seemed to be taking its time, painting the endless rows of purple flowers with gold and crimson. It clearly had nothing better to do.

Which, Rhonda supposed, it probably didn't. Suns were notoriously underemployed.

She adjusted her wire-rimmed glasses and scowled at the picturesque scene. Her ears twitched with annoyance. Long, pointed ears that marked her as distinctly out of place among the humans of Lethmere. Forty years of professional thievery had taught her that pretty views were usually distractions from someone picking your pocket, and a lifetime of being a goblin in human settlements had taught her that standing out was rarely advantageous. Though in her current circumstances, sixty-five years old and retired and approaching a festival, she supposed the only thing being stolen was her time.

"Festivals," she muttered in her best attempting-to-be-menacing voice, which came out somewhere between a growl and a squeaky hinge. "Organized chaos for amateur pickpockets."

Her fingers unconsciously liberated a perfectly worthless gray pebble from the path. She examined it critically, deemed it sufficiently important, and pocketed it with the careful reverence of someone filing away evidence that would never be needed.

The village ahead bustled with preparation, the sound carrying across the fields in fragments. Hammering, laughter, someone arguing about banners. The smell of fresh-cut wood and beeswax drifted toward her on a breeze that was unreasonably warm for the hour. Paper lanterns were being strung between houses like a spider's web designed by committee. Someone had convinced a ladder it was load-bearing, which it was objecting to. A woman with long black hair pinned up in an elaborate arrangement that was already coming undone was arranging flowers. The flowers did not appear to be cooperating, and the woman was winning through sheer determination. Her practical skirt and blouse were covered by a well-worn apron, and she kept fidgeting with a small copper pendant at her neck.

The ladder made its final argument, tilting sideways with a merchant's son still clinging to the top rung. The woman caught it one-handed without looking, steadied the whole contraption, and told the boy to climb down before she told his father. She did this while still holding the armful of wildflowers and without interrupting whatever instructions she was calling to someone across the square about the placement of the bonfire kindling.

Near her, a small boy with striking red hair darted between decorations, adjusting everything twice. He couldn't have been more than eight, but he moved with the practiced efficiency of someone who'd been helping with festivals since he could walk. Every few moments, he'd glance back at the woman, clearly his mother despite the contrast between his bright red locks and her dark hair, checking whether she needed anything. When she reached for a higher branch, he was already there with a stepping stool, earning himself an affectionate hair ruffle that made him grin despite his attempt to look dignified.

The cobblestones were still warm from the day's sun, heat seeping through Rhonda's thin-soled boots as she entered the village proper. Her feet, trained by decades of silent movement, made no sound on them. This proved problematic when she materialized behind a stocky merchant.

"BLESSED MOTHS!" he shrieked, jumping high enough to qualify for local folklore. "Where did you—how did you—"

"I walked," Rhonda said flatly, cleaning her glasses to avoid eye contact. "It's a revolutionary form of transportation. Involves putting one foot in front of the other. Very technical."

The merchant clutched his chest, breathing heavily. "You should wear a bell or something!"

"Defeats the purpose of a lifetime developing perfect stealth, doesn't it?" She tried to loom menacingly, which was difficult when you were three-and-a-half feet tall and your target could use your head as an armrest. "Besides, bells are for cows and festivities. I'm neither."

A small human child, no more than six, tugged at her cloak. Rhonda looked down to find the child offering her a slightly crushed purple wildflower.

"For you!" the child announced. "You look sad."

"I'm not sad," Rhonda protested, her ears drooping despite herself. "I'm menacing. Completely different thing. Note the scowl."

The child considered this. "Your scowl looks sad too."

Before Rhonda could craft a suitably stern response, the child had tucked the flower behind her ear and skipped away.

“Sorry about her!” A breathless voice called. The red-haired boy jogged up, his freckled face flushed from running. He’d been watching from behind a nearby stall, his eyes bright with curiosity. “That’s my friend Mari. She gives flowers to everyone she thinks needs cheering up.” He paused, studying Rhonda with surprisingly perceptive eyes. “Though she’s usually right about who needs them.”

Before Rhonda could respond with something suitably gruff, he had darted off again, calling “Mom needs me!” over his shoulder as he rushed back toward his mother.

Rhonda’s hand moved to remove the flower, stopped, then fell to her side. The flower, she decided, was clearly a tactical advantage. No one would suspect someone wearing a purple wildflower of anything nefarious.

She pressed on. Someone nearby was trying to juggle torches and succeeding at roughly half of it, which Rhonda felt was an optimistic ratio for open flame.

Then the scent caught her. She was passing the first food stall when it cut through the smoke and the sugar and stopped her mid-stride. Rosemary and smoke, tangled together in a way that made her step falter. Her hand found the copper coin in her pocket, worn smooth by fifteen years of rubbing. It was impossible, of course. That particular combination had died with—

No. She was here for the festival. Just the festival. People traveled hundreds of miles for Lethmere’s Summer Solstice celebration. Perfectly normal. Nothing to do with avoiding the anniversary. Nothing to do with running from memories that had grown teeth.

But the smell lingered, tugging at the lock she’d put on fifteen years of

memories.

Her ears perked up despite her best efforts, tracking the source like a compass finding north. Through the crowd, past the lanterns and the laughter, she spotted an elderly human with a magnificent white beard standing beside what appeared to be...

Rhonda blinked. Adjusted her glasses. Blinked again.

... a walking stove.

The stove stood about four feet tall on clickety legs, puffing steam from its chimney like a contented metal grandfather with a pipe habit.

The elderly man beside it was engaged in what appeared to be a serious conversation with thin air, though Rhonda noticed his occasional glances at the stove suggested it might be a participant. His leather apron bore the scorched testament of either failed experiments or successful ones that had gotten exciting. Wire spectacles perched precariously on his nose, sliding down every time he nodded, which was often.

“No, no,” the man was saying to the stove, adjusting a pot on what Rhonda assumed was its... head? Top? Stove part? “The parsley goes in last. We’ve discussed this. Yes, I know you prefer it early, but that’s because you have no taste buds. Advantage of being a stove, I suppose.”

The stove made a sound that could have been metal settling or could have been disagreement. Rhonda found herself leaning toward the latter.

“Excuse me,” a voice said beside her. Rhonda didn’t jump. She was far too professional for that. Her ears, however, swiveled dramatically, which ruined the effect. A young woman in purple robes stood there, clutching a leather-bound book like a shield. “Oh! I’m sorry, I should introduce

myself. I'm Lyra." She shifted the book to one arm and offered a hand awkwardly. "Are you here for the festival?"

The girl wore a purple wizard hat that looked like it had been chosen by someone who'd read about wizards but never met one. She was practically vibrating with nervous energy, the kind that suggested she'd practiced this conversation in her head several times and was now forgetting all her lines.

Rhonda stared at the offered hand for a moment before giving it a brief shake. "No," she said automatically, then remembered she literally was. "I mean, yes. Obviously. Why else would anyone come to..." She gestured vaguely at the village. "...this."

"Research!" Lyra said too quickly, then blushed. "I mean, some people come for research. About the festival. The historical significance and the... the cultural implications of collective celebration and its effects on..." She trailed off, apparently realizing she was lecturing a stranger.

"Thrilling," Rhonda deadpanned. "Nothing says festival like cultural implications."

Lyra's blush deepened to a shade that clashed magnificently with her purple robes. "I just meant—"

"That you're here studying something you're not telling people about," Rhonda finished. It wasn't a question. Forty years of thievery had taught her to recognize someone hiding something. Lyra was about as subtle as that walking stove.

The wizard's eyes widened behind her book. "I don't know what you—"

"And that's fine," Rhonda continued, turning back to watch the old man

and his ambulatory kitchen appliance. “Everyone’s running from something.”

She felt rather than saw Lyra relax slightly. The wizard mumbled something about needing to check the festival preparations and hurried off, purple robes billowing. Her book slipped in the rush, falling open for just a moment before she caught it against her chest. Long enough for Rhonda to see the margins. Not just notes. Sketches. People’s faces, drawn quickly but carefully, the way someone draws things they can’t stop looking at but don’t know how to approach.

The smell was stronger now. The old man was serving something from the pot on the stove’s top to a growing crowd. Each person who tasted it got the same expression: surprise, then a pause, then a slow nod.

Against her better judgment, which had been protesting steadily since she’d decided to come to this festival, Rhonda approached. The crowd, she noted with professional approval, was perfectly positioned for pick-pocketing. Her fingers twitched with muscle memory before she firmly clasped them behind her back. She was retired. Retired thieves didn’t pick pockets at festivals. They came for the... cultural implications.

“Ah!” The old man looked up as she approached, his spectacles immediately sliding to the tip of his nose. “A new face! Welcome to Lethmere! First festival?”

“First mistake,” Rhonda corrected, but it came out less stern than intended. Up close, the man had the kind of face that had smiled so much it had forgotten how to do anything else. His white beard bore single marks that told the story of a long and adversarial relationship with open flame.

“Mistakes are just discoveries in disguise,” he said cheerfully, offering her

a bowl. “Hungry? Oh, where are my manners. I’m Cinder. Old Man Cinder, as the young folks insist. And this here is Ashby.” He patted the stove affectionately. “We made our special solstice stew. Family recipe. Well, Ashby’s adopted, so technically it’s more of a found family recipe, but those are often the best kind, don’t you think?”

The stove made what sounded distinctly like a pleased chime.

Rhonda stared at the bowl. The smell was impossibly familiar. Rosemary and smoke, yes, but underneath that, the ghost of a campfire she’d tried to forget. The last evening before everything went wrong.

“I don’t—” she started.

“Please,” Cinder said, pressing the bowl a little closer. “Melody always said...” He paused, a flicker of something crossing his face before the smile returned. “Well, she always said food was meant to be shared. No point in cooking for one.”

Rhonda’s fingers closed around the bowl before she could stop herself. The clay was rough against her palms, kiln-warm and solid. Heat traveled up her arms, settling somewhere near her heart like an old cat finding a sunny spot. Steam curled against her chin, thick with rosemary and roasted root vegetables.

“Old Man Cinder!” The red-haired boy appeared again, tugging at the old man’s apron. “Mom says to ask if you need help setting up the evening lanterns. She’s worried you’ll try to do it all yourself again.” The boy’s tone suggested he shared this concern.

“Ruu, my boy,” Cinder chuckled, ruffling the child’s bright hair. “Tell your mother I’ve been hanging lanterns since before she was born. These old

hands know what they're doing." He wiggled his fingers, which were trembling slightly, undermining the argument entirely. "But thank her for the offer. And here." He ladled some stew into a smaller bowl. "Take this to her. She's been working since dawn."

The boy carefully took the bowl, his small hands steady despite their size. He glanced at Rhonda curiously, then back at Cinder. "She appeared behind Mr. Hedgeworth earlier and he jumped so high I thought he'd land on the roof." A mischievous grin spread across his freckled face. "Are you a ghost?"

"Ghosts don't eat stew," Rhonda said flatly, pointing at the bowl in her hand.

Ruu grinned and darted back toward his mother with Cinder's offering, calling over his shoulder, "Maybe you're a very hungry ghost!"

The boy's laughter faded into the festival noise, leaving Rhonda staring down at the bowl. The smell was stronger now, impossible to ignore. She lifted the wooden spoon with fingers that only trembled slightly. A shameful lack of professional composure that she blamed entirely on retirement rust.

The first taste hit her like a punch from a very small, very determined fist.

Her glasses fogged. The noise of the festival fell away.

"More rosemary, you said?" Tibbo's voice, clear as the day she lost it, echoed from somewhere behind her ribs. "You sure? It's not exactly traditional for stolen bread."

"Since when do we do traditional?" she'd snapped, but she was laughing, and he was grinning that crooked grin that could charm locked doors into opening

themselves. The firelight danced across his green cheeks as he sprinkled more herbs into the pot with theatrical flourish.

“Fair point, my light-fingered love. Though I maintain that adding rosemary to everything doesn’t make you a proper cook.”

“I’m not trying to be proper anything,” she’d said, stealing the spoon from his hand to taste the results. “I’m trying to make food that doesn’t taste like boot leather and regret.”

“Mission accomplished.” He’d leaned over to kiss her temple, his voice warm against her ear. “This tastes like home.”

That had been their last campfire. Their last meal together before the job that was supposed to set them up for a quiet retirement.

“Memories can be stubborn things, can’t they?”

Rhonda’s glasses had fogged completely. She blinked hard, the festival swimming back into focus around Old Man Cinder’s gentle voice. Her hand was shaking. Not trembling. Shaking. And somehow the bowl was empty.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said automatically, her voice coming out rougher than intended. She set the bowl down with unnecessary care, afraid it might shatter from her touch.

Cinder nodded thoughtfully, adjusting a pot on Ashby’s surface without looking at her directly. “My Melody used to say that about her grandmother’s recipe for honey cakes. Claimed they were just cakes, nothing special.” He paused, his smile taking on a distant quality. “But every time she made them, she’d get this look. Like she was seeing something the rest of us couldn’t.”

“Who’s Melody?” The question slipped out before Rhonda could stop it. She immediately scowled at herself for showing curiosity.

“Was,” Cinder corrected gently, still not meeting her eyes. “She was my wife. Been gone thirteen years now.” He stirred something that didn’t need stirring. “She had this way with cooking. Never measured anything, never followed recipes proper, but somehow everything tasted like...” He searched for the word.

“Home,” Rhonda said quietly, then looked startled that she’d said it aloud.

“Exactly.” His smile returned, warmer now. “You had someone who cooked like that too, I’m guessing. Someone who knew that rosemary goes in everything because it tastes like sunshine.”

Rhonda’s hand drifted to her pocket, touching the smooth copper coin that had become her anchor. “His name was Tibbo,” she heard herself say, and immediately wanted to take it back. She hadn’t said his name aloud to a stranger in fifteen years.

“Tibbo,” Cinder repeated gently, testing the weight of the name. “Sounds like he was someone special.”

Rhonda nodded stiffly, unsure why she’d shared even that much. “He... he had a way with food. Made everything taste better somehow.”

“I understand,” Cinder said gently, finally looking at her with kind but knowing eyes. “Takes one to know one, as they say. People who’ve loved cooks develop a certain look when good food brings back ghosts.”

Ashby made a low, warm sound that somehow conveyed sympathy despite being kitchen equipment.

“Your stove is staring at me,” Rhonda said accusingly, grateful for the distraction.

“Ashby’s got good instincts about people. Probably just offering sympathy.” Cinder patted the stove’s side affectionately. “Built him myself about ten years back, after Melody passed. Thought I needed something to keep me company in the kitchen.” He smiled sadly. “Turns out, he’s better company than most people. Good listener. Terrible gossip, though. Tells everyone everything with that chimney of his.”

Despite herself, Rhonda found her professional fingers liberating a slightly bent ladle from Cinder’s collection of utensils. The action was so automatic she didn’t realize she’d done it until the metal was warm in her palm. Fifteen years of retirement, and her hands still moved without her permission.

Cinder noticed. Of course he noticed. But instead of calling her out, he simply smiled and turned to rearrange his display, leaving a convenient gap where the ladle had been.

“Keep it,” he said without looking back. “You never know when a good ladle might come in handy.”

Rhonda stared at the ladle, then at the old man, then at the impossibly understanding stove. “You’re all completely mad,” she said finally, but there was no bite in it.

“Best kind of mad to be,” Cinder replied cheerfully. “Keeps things interesting.”

A melody drifted across the festival air then, soft and haunting, played on what sounded like a lute with strings that had seen better days but

still remembered how to sing. The tune seemed to loop back on itself, beautiful but somehow unfinished.

“That’ll be Floria,” Cinder said, following Rhonda’s gaze toward the sound. “Lovely girl, plays like an angel, but she’s got a terrible habit of forgetting how her songs finish. Says she dreams them, then wakes up with only half the melody.”

Rhonda found herself walking toward the music without quite deciding to. The bent ladle was warm in her palm, and Tibbo’s copper piece seemed to pulse against her ribs in time with the tune. Behind her, she heard Cinder call out a gentle, “Safe travels, friend. Don’t be a stranger.”

When she glanced back, he was already serving another customer, and Ashby was puffing contentedly. She continued toward the music.

The crowd grew thicker as she approached the bonfire. Paper lanterns swayed overhead, their candles giving off the faint honey smell of cheap tallow. The woodsmoke was stronger here, layered with roasted nuts and spilled cider and the particular warmth of too many humans standing close together. At the center of it all, a young woman sat cross-legged on a makeshift stage of stacked crates, her worn lute cradled in her arms.

Floria—it had to be Floria—couldn’t have been more than twenty, with wild curly hair that seemed to move to the rhythm of her own music. She wore a simple green dress that had seen better festivals, and her feet were bare, toes tapping against the wooden crate as she played. Her voice was clear and sweet as she sang about summer nights and lavender fields, but just as Cinder had said, when she reached what should have been the final verse, she smoothly transitioned back to the beginning with a little laugh that somehow became part of the melody.

“Oh, bother,” she said cheerfully, still strumming. “Lost the ending again. Well, I suppose that means we get to enjoy the good parts twice, doesn’t it?”

The crowd laughed with her, not at her, and several voices called out encouraging words. This was clearly a familiar occurrence. The crowd didn’t seem to mind.

Rhonda positioned herself at the edge of the crowd, close enough to hear but far enough to maintain her professional paranoia about exits and escape routes. The firelight danced across the faces around her. Merchants and farmers, travelers and locals.

Tibbo would have loved this, Rhonda thought. She waited for the usual twist in her gut. It didn’t come. *He would have tried to learn the tune, gotten it half-right, and convinced me to dance to it anyway.*

She pressed her palm against the coin in her pocket, feeling its familiar warmth.

The music continued, looping endlessly, and Rhonda found herself sinking deeper into memory. That last job. The orphanage needed money or the children would be scattered to poorhouses. She’d been against the heist. Too risky. But Tibbo had convinced her.

“It’s not for us, Ronnie. Those kids need a roof over their heads more than we need comfort in our old age.”

Everything had been perfect until the trap closed around them in that moonlit courtyard. Someone had sold them out. Tibbo pressed the gold purse into her hands.

“The window, Ronnie. Now.”

“Not without you!”

“I don’t care about the bloody children!” she’d screamed, but they both knew it was a lie.

Tibbo’s hands found her shoulders. For one moment, she thought he was going to kiss her goodbye. Instead, he shoved her backward with all his strength, sending her tumbling through the open window behind them.

She hit the ground hard, the gold purse clutched against her chest, and by the time she’d scrambled to her feet, she could hear steel ringing against steel from inside the courtyard. Twenty guardsmen against one thief with too-kind eyes.

The bent ladle in her palm felt suddenly heavy, pulling her back to the present. Around her, the festival continued. Laughter and music and people sharing warmth on a summer night. Normal life, the kind she and Tibbo had dreamed of but never gotten to live.

The bonfire crackled, sending sparks spiraling into the star-filled sky. Floria’s song looped back on itself again, still searching for its ending.

Rhonda pulled her cloak tighter and took one step closer to the fire, then another. The heat pressed against her face and hands, loosening muscles she hadn’t realized she’d been clenching. Sparks drifted past her glasses like drunk fireflies.

Floria’s lute suddenly went quiet. A tall figure in a deep blue cloak had swept onto the makeshift stage beside her. Not climbed. Swept. The kind of theatrical presence that could command attention from three counties away. The woman threw back her hood to reveal an elaborate pile of rich brown hair and a face that knew exactly how magnificent it was.

The crowd's murmur died completely. Even the children stopped fidgeting. This was clearly someone who expected to be the center of attention and had never been disappointed in that expectation.

The singer, for that's what she had to be with that posture and that way of surveying her audience like a queen reviewing her subjects, smiled with the satisfaction of someone who had just stolen every eye in the vicinity. She raised one perfectly manicured hand, and the silence deepened. Floria scooted back on her crate, suddenly looking like a village mouse next to a peacock.

The singer's chest rose as she took a deep, theatrical breath, preparing to unleash whatever vocal magnificence she'd brought to grace their humble festival.

CHAPTER 2
SUGAR AND CINNAMON

The afternoon sun was doing pleasant things to Lethmere's market square, turning the cobblestones golden and making the distant lavender fields look like something from a painting. Deni guided her cart through the growing crowd, pleased with her timing. Not too early when the square would be empty, not too late when all the good spots would be taken. A few vendors were still setting up, and families were beginning to arrive for the evening's festivities. Perfect.

Her cart announced itself before she did. Bells chimed in a pattern that seemed almost like a melody if you listened closely enough, though no one ever quite managed to remember the tune afterward. The wheels, which should have struggled with the cobblestones, rolled smoothly. The path simply agreed with them. The cart was painted in swirls of pink and gold, festooned with ribbons that fluttered even when there was no breeze, and it emanated the warm scent of sugar and cinnamon that made mouths water from three stalls away.

"Oh, what a lovely spot!" Deni exclaimed to no one in particular, though her voice carried exactly far enough to reach the ears of the nearest vendors. She'd chosen her location with the same precision a spider chooses where to spin its web. Not that anyone would make that comparison about a young woman with cornflower-blue eyes and a smile that could light candles. The spot was perfect: visible from the main thoroughfare, adjacent to the fountain where children played, and conveniently positioned where parents would have to pass her at least twice during their festival circuit.

She began unpacking with practiced efficiency that she disguised as charming clumsiness, dropping a ribbon here, fumbling with a jar there, each “mistake” drawing helpful attention from passing villagers.

“Need a hand there, miss?” offered a stocky merchant, already reaching for one of her jars.

“Oh, how kind of you, Master...?” she paused with a questioning smile.

“Hedgeworth,” he supplied, puffing up slightly at being called ‘Master.’

“Master Hedgeworth! What a distinguished name. You must work with leather, I can smell the tannin.” She smiled warmly. “My father was a tanner, I’d recognize that scent anywhere. Do you have children? I always try to keep extra honey drops on hand for the little ones during festivals.”

Hedgeworth beamed. “No children, but my wife will be by later, I’m sure. Can’t keep her away from sweet stalls during festivals.”

Deni laughed, a sound like silver bells that made three children stop their games to look over. “Then I shall save some of my best treats for her. It’s so nice when families can enjoy the festival together.”

She stepped back to admire her handiwork. Every jar in place, every ribbon perfectly curled, every sweet positioned to catch the light. It was the kind of display that made children tug at their parents’ sleeves and adults pretend they were buying treats for their little ones. She had perhaps three seconds to enjoy this moment of perfection before she heard someone approaching with the determined gait of a person who had opinions to share.

“Such beauty,” a voice sighed dramatically behind her. “Such terrible, dangerous beauty.”

Deni turned to find a man in his forties wearing what had once been an expensive velvet jacket, now showing its age at the elbows and cuffs. A faded green sash crossed his chest, the words “Most Handsome Man” embroidered in what had once been gold thread. He stood positioned so the late afternoon sun hit him at what he clearly believed was his best angle. The left side, she noted. He was already running a hand through his thinning hair, slicking it back with something that smelled of rose po-made.

“I beg your pardon?” Deni arranged her face into an expression of polite confusion, though she’d already catalogued everything about him: the way he kept checking his reflection in her glass jars, the slight tremor in his hands that suggested he was nervous despite his grand entrance, the way he stood like someone who’d once commanded attention and couldn’t quite accept that he no longer did.

“Forgive me,” he said, not looking remotely sorry. “I am Oleg Varn. You’ve probably heard of me. Former Most Handsome Man in the Three Provinces?” He gestured to his sash the way a knight might present a coat of arms, fingers lingering on the faded thread. “I feel it’s my duty to warn young people about the perils of physical beauty. The curse of it, you might say.”

“How thoughtful of you,” Deni replied, maintaining her sweet vendor smile while calculating how long this would take. “Would you like to try a butterscotch drop? On the house, of course. You look like someone who appreciates the finer things.”

Oleg’s eyes lit up even as he waved his hand dismissively. “Oh, I’ve transcended such material pleasures. After what beauty did to me. The fame, the admirers, the constant attention. I’ve learned to find satisfaction in simpler things. Inner beauty, contemplation, the life of the mind.” He

paused. “Though I suppose one small piece couldn’t hurt. For politeness’ sake.”

She handed him a butterscotch drop, noting how he angled his face when he took it, ensuring she saw what he considered his good side. He popped it in his mouth and his eyes widened slightly. Whatever else could be said about Deni’s nature, her sweets were genuinely extraordinary.

“Exceptional,” he admitted, then quickly added, “Though of course, I barely notice such things anymore. My palate has become quite refined since my days of being invited to every noble’s feast within a hundred miles. Did I mention I was the Most Handsome Man in Three Provinces? The burden of it nearly destroyed me.”

“How difficult that must have been,” Deni said, arranging some sugar flowers while he talked. She’d met hundreds of Olegs over the years. People so wrapped up in their own stories they never noticed anyone else’s. They made perfect cover for someone who preferred not to be looked at too closely.

“You have no idea,” Oleg continued, warming to his theme. “Every mirror was a trap, every glance from a stranger an invitation to vanity. And for what? It all fades. Everything fades.” He looked at her significantly. “You’re young and lovely now, my dear, but trust me. Beauty is a curse disguised as a blessing.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Deni said mildly, offering him another butterscotch. “Though I find that making sweets brings its own kind of satisfaction. Creating something that makes people happy, even if just for a moment.”

Oleg took the second sweet without any pretense of reluctance this time.

“Ah yes, creation! That’s what I focus on now. I’m writing a philosophical treatise on beauty’s corrupting influence.” He launched into what was clearly a well-rehearsed opening about mirrors and souls. Deni nodded at appropriate intervals while serving other customers, her hands moving automatically as she wrapped purchases and made change. She’d learned long ago that the best way to remain unmemorable was to let others fill the silence with their own noise.

“Fascinating,” Deni said, in a tone she’d practiced until it was flawless, warm enough to seem genuine, vague enough to mean nothing. “Your insights must come from deep personal experience.”

“Exactly!” Oleg beamed, then sighed heavily. “Though I try not to dwell on those days now.”

A movement across the square caught Deni’s attention. A woman with dark hair escaping from its pins struggled past, arms full of paper lanterns that rustled like captured birds. Beside her walked a boy with striking red hair, carrying his own stack of lanterns nearly as tall as himself.

“Ah, young Ruu,” Oleg’s voice softened unexpectedly, interrupting his own monologue. “Remarkable child, that one. Actually listens when you talk to him.”

Deni made an appropriate sound of interest while studying the boy. Eight years old, she’d guess, though he moved with none of the chaotic energy children that age usually possessed. He matched his mother’s pace exactly, never rushing ahead or lagging behind. When she adjusted her path to avoid a cart, he was already moving in the same direction. When she slowed, he slowed.

How refreshing, Deni thought, watching the fluid dance between mother

and son. Most children his age would be darting about like startled rabbits, demanding attention, dropping things for the sheer joy of making noise. This one walked like he belonged exactly where he was.

“Told me my jacket was ‘distinguished’ last week,” Oleg continued, smoothing the worn velvet. “Remarkable perception for his age.”

The lanterns should have been awkward for a child to carry. Yet the boy’s grip was steady, his small hands managing the load without visible strain. No fidgeting, no shifting the weight every few steps to draw attention or sympathy. Just quiet, unfussy competence. The sort of reliability that made adults forget he was still just a boy. Useful. Very useful indeed.

Then Deni saw it. His mother’s hair fell across her face as she bent down to check the lantern at the bottom of her own stack. Without being asked, without making a production of it, the boy smoothly transferred his entire stack to one arm. The balance should have been impossible for a child, but he held it steady while reaching over with his free hand to tuck the loose strand behind her ear.

Ophelia smiled down at him, not with surprise but with the warmth of someone receiving a familiar kindness. He smiled back, took the lanterns in both hands again, and continued walking. No pause for thanks. No expectation of praise.

Deni’s fingers drummed once against her counter.

Perfect.

“Oh my,” Oleg said suddenly, squinting across the square. “Is that Master Hedgeworth? I simply must tell him about my new chapter on the burden of fame. He seemed so interested last time.” He paused, clearly expecting

Deni to beg him to stay and share more wisdom.

“You mustn’t keep him waiting,” Deni said warmly, already reaching for another customer. “Thank you so much for the warning about beauty’s curse. I’ll be very careful.”

Oleg beamed, took one more butterscotch “for the road,” and strode off with renewed purpose, his hand already moving to slick back his hair.

As the afternoon wore on, Deni continued to serve customers with practiced charm, but her eyes were elsewhere. Mothers counting coins, fathers hoisting tired toddlers onto their shoulders, older siblings tugging at sleeves for the best spots near the bonfire. And through it all, one particular red-haired boy making trip after trip past her stall, each time carrying something different. Bundles of kindling, a small crate of decorations, always that same quiet competence.

The sun began to paint longer shadows across the cobblestones, and the air filled with smoke from the growing bonfire. One by one, vendors started the elaborate dance of deciding whether to pack up or stay open just a little longer. Children grew restless, their purses now light and their energy focused on the promised evening entertainment.

Deni had already decided. She began packing with the efficient movements of someone who’d done this countless times before. Every jar nestled into its exact spot, every ribbon wound precisely around its spool. The cart that had seemed too small to hold everything somehow swallowed it all without complaint. Within minutes, her entire stall had vanished into the painted wooden depths, leaving no trace she’d been there except the lingering scent of cinnamon.

“Closing already?” asked a passing merchant. “The night’s just starting!”

“Oh, I wouldn’t miss the bonfire for anything,” Deni replied, securing the last latch. “Besides, children tend to have their sweets money spent by now. Time to enjoy the festival myself.”

She guided her cart to a secure spot between two buildings. It would be safe there. Nothing of hers had ever been stolen, and she saw no reason that should change tonight. She joined the river of people flowing toward the bonfire.

It was remarkable how naturally she ended up walking near the same families she’d observed earlier. Ophelia and Ruu were just ahead, the mother’s hand on her son’s shoulder, holding him close against the press of bodies. They’d been joined by a smaller girl, six years old perhaps, who was chattering excitedly about giving a flower to a goblin lady. Mari, Ruu called her.

“Stay close, Ruu,” Ophelia said, her hand resting lightly on his shoulder. “The crowd’s getting thick.”

“I’m right here, Mom,” the boy replied, walking steadily beside her. When Mari stumbled on a cobblestone, he steadied her automatically.

“Careful, Mari. Where’s your mother?”

“Over there!” Mari pointed vaguely at the crowd, unconcerned. “She said I could walk with Ruu.”

Ophelia smiled and nodded, her hand still resting on her son’s shoulder.

The crowd thickened as they neared the bonfire. Deni let herself be carried by the current of bodies, always keeping the red hair in sight. When the family found a spot with a good view of the stacked crates that served as a makeshift stage, she found a spot within earshot. Just another face

in the crowd.

Music drifted from atop the crates where a young woman with a worn lute was performing, but Deni's eyes were on Ruu, standing on his toes to see over the adults in front of him. A perfect opportunity.

She reached into her pocket and felt the special sweets there, warm and faintly humming against her fingertips. She moved closer with the casual drift of someone adjusting their position in the crowd.

"Here," she said quietly, offering a wrapped sugar flower to Ruu with a warm smile. "For being such a helpful boy today. I saw you with all those lanterns earlier."

Ruu looked up at her, then at his mother for permission. Ophelia glanced at Deni, recognized the sweet vendor from the market, and nodded.

"Thank you, Miss," Ruu said politely, taking the candy with both hands. His eyes widened slightly at how the sugar caught the firelight, seeming to glow from within.

"Save it for after dinner," Ophelia said automatically, but she was smiling. "That's very kind of you."

"Oh, I have plenty," Deni said, producing another for Mari. "Festival nights are for treats, don't you think?" She let her gaze rest on Ruu for just a moment longer than necessary, noting how carefully he held the sweet, turning it slowly in his fingers. Such a thoughtful child.

The lute's melody suddenly went quiet. A tall figure in a blue cloak moved onto the makeshift stage beside the young minstrel with fluid, theatrical grace, the kind that belonged on stages far grander than this humble platform. The crowd's attention snapped toward the newcomer like iron

filings to a lodestone. This woman had genuine presence, born from years of training and absolute confidence in her ability to hold a room.

The hood fell back, revealing elaborately styled brown hair and features that belonged on a noble's portrait. The kind of beauty that spoke of expensive tutors, careful breeding, and the leisure to perfect one's appearance. Conversations died mid-word. Children forgot their games. Even the bonfire seemed to quiet its crackling.

But Deni watched Ruu instead. The boy stood motionless, the wrapped candy held gently between his palms like a caught butterfly. While the adults stared with the reverence reserved for visiting nobility or famous performers, his face showed only mild interest. He clearly didn't understand why everyone else had forgotten how to breathe. Deni's fingers drummed once against her thigh.

The woman on the crates lifted an elegant hand with the authority of someone who had never doubted she would be obeyed. The gesture belonged in a royal court, not a village square, yet somehow it didn't seem out of place. Her chest expanded with the controlled breathing of a trained singer, drawing in air for whatever performance she'd prepared for this little village and its humble celebration.

CHAPTER 3

SOUP AND GRIEF

The festival pulsed around Lian like a heartbeat she couldn't quite match. From her table at the edge of the celebration, she watched humans dart between stalls and gather around the bonfire, their laughter rippling through the warm evening air in waves that somehow never quite reached her. The sound should have been infectious, but it washed over her and kept going, finding nothing to catch on.

Her golden eyes tracked movement with predatory precision, a habit she couldn't shake no matter how many festivals she sat through. A child's shriek of delight made her ears twitch toward the sound before she realized it was joy, not danger. A woman's sudden laugh made her shoulders tense. She forced them back down.

You're safe, she told herself, the same words she'd whispered every morning for three months. This is what peace looks like.

The problem was, peace felt remarkably like drowning.

Lian's fingers moved unconsciously to her ankle, where Mei's jade bracelet rested against her skin beneath her boot. The stone was warm from her body heat, its surface worn smooth under her thumb. Three months since Mei's funeral. Three months of wandering from village to festival to market, following a dream that had died with the woman who'd dreamed it.

"I want to see celebrations," Mei had whispered during one of their rare quiet moments between training sessions. "Not the kind we protected from the shadows, but the kind we could join. Dancing around bonfires, sharing food with strangers, listening to music that doesn't signal dan-

ger.” Her voice had carried that particular note of longing Lian had never learned to resist. “Imagine what it would be like to be ordinary people at an ordinary festival, with nothing more dangerous to worry about than whether the ale runs out before midnight.”

Lian had promised they would see those festivals together when the war ended. When their duty to the monastery was complete. When they could finally lay down their weapons and learn to live instead of merely survive.

The war had ended. Their duty was complete. Only Mei hadn’t lived to see it.

A group of teenagers passed her table, their chatter dying mid-sentence when they noticed her. She recognized the pattern: the double-take at her amber-striped fur, the nervous glances at her pointed ears, the way their eyes lingered on her hands, checking for extended claws. One whispered something to the others about “wildfolk,” and they steered around her table, their celebration resuming at a carefully maintained distance.

Lian had grown accustomed to the staring. Humans saw her feline features and thought predator. They weren’t entirely wrong. She’d been trained to kill with her bare hands, had ended the war with a single strike to the enemy commander’s throat. But without Mei’s laugh to anchor her to the world, she felt less like a predator and more like a weapon someone had forgotten to put away.

The festival’s joy swirled around her, distant and untouchable.

Lian’s hand moved to her ankle again, pressing the jade through the leather of her boot. What was she supposed to do now?

The jade grew warmer under her touch, and suddenly Lian was somewhere else entirely. Somewhere cold and gray, sharp with the scent of incense and steel.

The Silent Lotus monastery had walls that whispered secrets and floors that never creaked, no matter how heavy your footsteps. It was a place designed for ghosts, and Lian had been its most accomplished phantom. At seventeen, she'd already earned the name "Breeze," not because she moved like wind, but because she struck like one. Sudden and devastating and gone before you realized what had hit you.

The other novices kept their distance during meditation sessions, their eyes tracking her movement with the wariness usually reserved for dangerous animals. Even the masters spoke to her in careful, measured tones, apparently worried that too much enthusiasm might accidentally set her off. She'd grown accustomed to the isolation, had even convinced herself she preferred it.

She was sitting in her usual spot, back corner with a clear view of all exits, when the new novice arrived.

Mei entered the meditation hall like sunlight through a crack in shutters: unexpected, warm, and entirely too bright for the monastery's carefully cultivated shadows. Her robes were the same gray as everyone else's, but somehow they seemed to catch light differently. She had kind brown eyes that crinkled at the corners. She clearly smiled more often than monastery life typically allowed, and when she bowed to the master, there was genuine respect rather than the fearful deference Lian was used to seeing.

Most remarkably, when Mei's gaze swept the hall and landed on Lian, she didn't look away. Instead, she offered a small, tentative smile. The sort of greeting one person might give another they hoped to know better.

Lian had stared back with the flat, emotionless expression that usually made people remember they had urgent business elsewhere. Mei's smile had only widened.

After the session, as Lian moved through the courtyard with her characteristic silence, she'd found Mei sitting by the lotus pond, feeding something to the fish from a small cloth pouch.

"They're not supposed to eat that," Lian had said, more from habit than concern. The monastery had rules about everything, including fish nutrition.

"Probably not," Mei had agreed cheerfully, sprinkling more crumbs onto the water's surface. "But they seem to enjoy it, and enjoyment is rare enough here that I thought it worth the risk." She'd looked up at Lian with those impossibly warm eyes. "I'm Mei, by the way. Though I suppose you already know that, considering how quickly word travels in a place this quiet."

"Breeze," Lian had replied automatically, then immediately regretted it. Names had power, and she'd just handed hers to a stranger.

"Breeze," Mei had repeated thoughtfully, testing the weight of it. "That's what the others call you, isn't it? But I don't think that's who you are when no one's watching."

The observation had landed so precisely on the part of Lian she kept hidden that she'd taken a step back before she could stop herself.

“You don’t know anything about me,” Lian had said, but it came out less sharp than intended.

“No,” Mei had agreed easily. “But I’d like to. If you’d let me.”

Lian had stared at her for a long moment, searching for the trap, the angle, the hidden agenda. There was none.

“Why?” she’d asked finally.

Mei had considered this seriously, still scattering crumbs to increasingly excited fish. “Because you sit alone during meals, but you always position yourself where you can see if someone needs help. Because you practice your forms later than anyone else, but it’s not because you’re struggling. It’s because you’re trying to perfect something that’s already flawless. Because when that novice broke his arm during sparring last week, you were the first to step forward, even though you pretended you were just checking his technique.” She’d looked up again, and her smile had been soft and knowing. “Because I think you’re lonely, and loneliness is a terrible waste of someone who clearly cares as much as you do.”

Lian’s claws had retracted. She hadn’t even noticed they’d been out.

That conversation had lasted until the evening bell, and then again the next night, and the night after that.

It was Mei who’d given her the jade bracelet three months before the war ended, pressing it into Lian’s palm after a particularly brutal training session where Lian had been forced to demonstrate seventeen different ways to kill someone with her bare hands.

“For luck,” Mei had said simply. “Though I suspect you make your own luck.”

“I don’t believe in luck,” Lian had replied, but she’d accepted the bracelet anyway, drawn by its smooth warmth and the way it seemed to pulse with life.

“Then keep it as a reminder,” Mei had said. “That there are people who believe the world is better with you in it.”

The memory dissolved like steam from a cup as a shadow fell across Lian’s table, accompanied by the most extraordinary rustling sound she’d ever heard. Someone had apparently stuffed an entire library into their pockets and decided to take a brisk walk through a windstorm. She looked up to find herself face-to-face with what appeared to be either a very dedicated chef or a very confused prophet. Possibly both.

The man standing before her wore robes that told a story of culinary devotion spanning decades. Patches of faded gingham were stitched alongside canvas stained with what looked like the archaeological record of a thousand meals, while recipe cards and cooking manuscript pages fluttered between the seams like prayer flags in a kitchen-themed monastery. A chef’s hat perched atop his stringy hair with the determined optimism of a flag planted on conquered territory, despite having clearly seen better days. Possibly better decades.

“Sister!” the apparition declared with the fervor of someone who’d just discovered fire and wanted to share the news immediately. His eyes held the intense gleam of the truly devoted, or possibly the recently concussed. “I am Greef, humble servant of the Great Soup, and I have been sent to you in this moment of your spiritual hunger!”

Lian blinked slowly, the way one might when encountering a talking badger claiming to be the minister of transportation. “I’m sorry, what?”

“The Great Soup speaks to me,” Greef continued, his voice rising with prophetic certainty as he gestured dramatically with both hands. “And it tells me that you, sister, are a noodle in need of proper broth!”

There was a moment of profound silence in which Lian considered several responses, ranging from polite confusion to the sort of violence her monastery training had made second nature. Instead, she found herself asking, “Did you just call me a noodle?”

“All life is broth,” Greef proclaimed, his robes rustling as he gestured with a wooden spoon. “And we are the noodles! You are strong, resilient, but currently floating alone in a broth that has grown cold.”

Lian’s ears twitched despite herself. “I see,” she said carefully.

“The noodles connect us all, sister! When we float separately, we miss the great exchange that makes life meaningful. But when we come together—” He stirred the air dramatically. “We create something greater than our individual parts!”

Despite everything, Lian’s ears relaxed. Here was someone who had built an entire philosophy around soup, someone who looked at a grieving wild-folk warrior and saw only a lonely soul in need of better sustenance.

“The Great Soup has shown me something,” Greef continued, his voice softening to something approaching genuine kindness. “You carry an empty bowl, sister. And you keep looking into it, hoping it will fill itself.”

The observation hit closer to home than Lian was prepared for. Her hand moved instinctively to Mei’s bracelet, fingers closing around the warm

stone.

“Join us, sister,” Greef said, extending his hand. “Come taste the Enlightenment Bisque. Let the Great Soup show you that even the loneliest soul can find connection. We gather each evening around my sacred vessels to share and celebrate the bonds that unite us all.”

Lian looked at his outstretched hand, at his hopeful eyes. She could almost see it: sitting around his cooking pots each evening with other lost souls, letting his absurd philosophy wrap around her like a warm, if slightly stained, blanket.

It would be so much simpler than trying to figure out what came next. So much easier than carrying the weight of Mei’s dreams and her own purposelessness through festival after meaningless festival.

But something in her tightened against the warmth of it. Dissolving her grief into communal comfort would mean letting go, and she was not ready to let go. Not of Mei. Not yet.

“Thank you,” Lian said, and meant it. She lowered Greef’s outstretched hand gently, her touch brief but not unkind. “I appreciate what you’re offering, truly. But I think I need to figure out my own recipe for now.”

Greef’s face showed no disappointment, only the serene understanding of someone who had long ago accepted that not every noodle was ready for the cosmic soup bowl. “The Great Soup will wait for you, sister,” he said with gentle certainty. “When you’re ready to stop floating alone, we’ll be ladling out wisdom and warmth in equal measure.” He bowed with surprising dignity, his patchwork robes rustling like autumn leaves. “May your broth never grow cold.”

As he wandered off toward a group of confused festival-goers who looked like they might benefit from an impromptu sermon about the spiritual significance of stock, Lian watched him go and caught herself almost smiling. Still, she should move before he returned with further elaborate metaphors about the restorative qualities of herbs.

Lian's eyes scanned the festival for the nearest person who might serve as a conversational shield. Her gaze landed on a young woman in purple robes standing near the fountain, clutching a leather-bound book like it might protect her from the festival's cheerful chaos. The woman was watching the crowd with the careful attention of someone studying a particularly complex academic problem, occasionally scribbling notes in her book's margins.

Perfect. Someone who looked as uncomfortable with large social gatherings as Lian felt.

She approached with the measured stride she'd perfected at the monastery, confident enough to avoid seeming threatening, casual enough to suggest she belonged wherever she happened to be walking. As she drew closer, she could see the woman was younger than she'd first appeared, maybe early twenties, with long brown hair that caught the light from the paper lanterns overhead. Her purple wizard hat sat at a slightly awkward angle. She'd clearly put it on while thinking about something else.

"Excuse me," Lian said, keeping her voice carefully neutral.

The young woman jumped and nearly dropped her book. Lian's silent approach had that effect on people. When she looked up, her eyes went wide at the sight of Lian's feline features, and a blush immediately bloomed across her pale cheeks.

“Oh! I—yes? I mean, hello. Can I—are you—” She took a steadying breath and tried again. “I’m Lyra.” The name came out as half question, half statement. She didn’t seem entirely sure that’s who she was supposed to be in this moment.

“Lian,” she replied, offering a small nod. “You looked like you might be waiting for something.”

Lyra’s blush deepened to a shade that clashed magnificently with her purple robes. “Research,” she said quickly, then seemed to realize that wasn’t quite an answer. “I mean, I’m studying how people perceive celebrations like this. How their thoughts and expectations shape their experience of the festival.” She held up her leather-bound book, and Lian caught a glimpse of the title: “How Thought Shapes Reality.” She paused, apparently hearing herself. “Which probably sounds terribly abstract.”

“Not at all,” Lian said, and was surprised to find she meant it. After Greef’s soup sermon, someone discussing how thoughts shape reality felt refreshingly grounded. “What kind of patterns are you seeing?”

Lyra’s grip on her book loosened slightly, and for a moment her nervous energy shifted into something more like scholarly enthusiasm. “It’s fascinating how people’s preconceptions influence what they notice. Someone expecting magical entertainment focuses entirely on the performer’s gestures, while someone here for community connection watches the audience more than the stage.” She gestured toward the bonfire, where a young woman with a lute was performing on the makeshift stage. “Take that minstrel, Floria, I think her name is. She keeps stopping mid-song, but watch how differently people react. Some see it as charming spontaneity, others as incompetence, depending on what they came expecting to find.” She scribbled something eagerly in her notebook. “Their

thoughts literally create different realities of the same event.”

Lian followed her gaze and noticed she was right. Even as Floria played, there was an undercurrent of expectation in the crowd, people unconsciously positioning themselves, already waiting for something more.

“What about the people who aren’t watching anything?” Lian asked. “The ones sitting alone.”

Lyra’s pen stilled. She glanced toward the periphery of the festival where a few solitary figures nursed drinks or stared at nothing. “Those are the most interesting ones, actually. They come to a place full of people and then sit where they can see everyone without being seen themselves.” She pushed her spectacles up her nose. “In my notes I call them spectral attendees. Present but not participating. They want connection, or they wouldn’t have come. But wanting and reaching are different verbs.”

She said it with the clinical detachment of someone describing a specimen. She didn’t seem to realize she’d just described both of them, standing at the edge of a fountain while a festival happened around them.

“Are you planning to stay for whatever comes next?” Lian asked.

Lyra nodded, then seemed to catch herself being enthusiastic and immediately became self-conscious again. “I heard there’s supposed to be a performance by Madame Callix next. She’s quite famous, actually. I’ve read about her performances in several cities.” She clutched her book tighter. “I thought it might be interesting to observe how anticipation for a renowned performer changes people’s perception of what they’re currently experiencing. How knowing something exceptional is coming affects their enjoyment of the present moment.”

Right on cue, a figure in a deep blue cloak climbed onto the makeshift stage with practiced grace. “Oh!” Lyra said, her notebook forgotten. “That’s her. Madame Callix herself!” The festival crowd began to quiet as Lyra closed her book with a soft snap, glancing at Lian with a small, tentative smile.

CHAPTER 4

SCALES AND GLAMOUR

Mira Mira Ondawahl adjusted her false beard for the fifth time that hour, ensuring that the elaborate creation of curls and waves still looked convincingly dwarven. She'd purchased it from a traveling wig merchant who'd sworn on his mother's grave that it was made from genuine dwarf hair ethically sourced from barbershop floors, though Mira suspected it was actually yak fur that had been through some sort of existential crisis. The magnificent creation of curls and waves had taken three hours and an entire jar of Madam Follicle's Miracle Holding Pomade to achieve, a jar that had come with seventeen separate warnings, including "May cause spontaneous folk singing," "Not responsible for birds attempting to nest in results," and most concerningly, "If beard achieves sentience, do not make direct eye contact." To the festival-goers of Lethmere, she was a female dwarf merchant with impeccable taste in facial hair. To himself, he was Marmaduke Snide, a kobold destined for the same legendary greatness as his ancestor, temporarily reduced to hawk-ing trinkets instead of commanding fear and respect like a proper descendant of dragons should.

Her left eye twitched as the third customer in a row haggled over the price of a perfectly ordinary brass compass that she'd already marked down twice. Mira maintained her professional smile, practiced in the mirror until it showed just enough teeth to be friendly but not enough to reveal her distinctly non-dwarven dental structure. Her inner monologue composed elaborate revenge fantasies involving fire, brimstone, and the complete incineration of everyone who'd ever dared suggest that three silver pieces was "a bit steep" for an item that could literally prevent them from

dying lost in the wilderness.

Great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather Snidemmaw would have eaten this fool by now, she thought, watching the customer's Adam's apple bob as he swallowed nervously. One quick snap of the jaws. Maybe a light toasting first, just to add some flavor. A sprinkle of paprika. Would that be wrong? That would probably be wrong.

"Two silver and seven copper," the customer offered, apparently unaware that he'd just insulted the entire concept of commerce, dragons, and the very fabric of reality itself.

"Two silver and nine copper," Mira countered in her well-practiced dwarf voice, her elaborate disguise quivering with barely suppressed indignation. If she'd been an actual dwarf, this would have been the achievement of a lifetime. The Platonic ideal of dwarf beards, the facial hair that all other beards secretly dreamed of becoming when they grew up.

The customer agreed with visible relief and scurried away with his compass, probably to get lost immediately out of spite. Mira watched him go while mentally calculating her profits for the day. Seventeen gold, thirty-two silver, and enough copper to fill a small sock. Not exactly a dragon's hoard, but it was a start. Great cities weren't burned in a day, after all. Wait, that wasn't how the expression went. Great cities weren't built in a day. Although if dragons had been involved, they definitely would have been burned in a day. Possibly less. Dragons were very efficient when it came to municipal incineration.

She adjusted the display of "curiosities and fine goods" that decorated her stall, each item positioned with the strategic precision of someone who understood that presentation was nine-tenths of sales and the other tenth was not setting your customers on fire no matter how much they

deserved it. There was the selection of crystals that certainly weren't just pretty rocks she'd found by the river. They were, but she'd found them very thoughtfully while contemplating the meaning of geological disappointment. The collection of "ancient" scrolls that contained either mystical wisdom or recipes for particularly good stew, depending on how you translated the water damage. One appeared to be either "The Secret to Eternal Life" or "Marjorie's Prize-Winning Cabbage Soup," and honestly the cabbage soup seemed more likely. A set of "divination bones" that were absolutely not chicken bones from last night's dinner, despite what the small bit of remaining gristle might suggest. And her pride and joy: a silver hand mirror that showed your reflection exactly as it was, which was surprisingly rare in a world full of enchanted mirrors that insisted on showing you your heart's desire or your doom or what you'd look like as a radish.

The late afternoon sun painted Lethmere's festival square in shades of gold and shadow, the perfect lighting for someone of Mira's carefully concealed coloring. Which was to say, someone whose skin certainly didn't have the faint reddish-orange shimmer that might suggest kobold heritage if anyone looked too closely, which they wouldn't, because the beard was that distracting. This was the magical hour when customers' purse strings loosened along with their critical thinking skills, when a smooth talker could convince someone that yes, they absolutely needed a compass that pointed to "what you need most" instead of north. It was broken, but broken in a very philosophical way. Currently it pointed steadfastly at the nearest tavern, which Mira argued was both completely wrong and surprisingly accurate, depending on one's existential priorities and current level of sobriety.

This is still hoarding, Mira reminded herself as she counted coins for the third time. *It's just... administrative hoarding. Preparatory hoarding. A*

more civilized approach that requires patience and paperwork instead of raz-ing villages and demanding virgin sacrifices. Although honestly, the virgin sacrifice thing had always seemed unnecessarily specific and logistically nightmarish. What was wrong with sacrificing married people? They'd had more time to enjoy life. If anything, that seemed fairer. Plus, how exactly were you supposed to verify? Did dragons of old carry around some sort of virginity authentication scroll? Was there a questionnaire? Please check the appropriate box: Virgin, Not Virgin, It's Complicated, Prefer Not to Say. The whole system seemed designed by someone who'd never actually tried to organize a proper sacrifice. Probably a committee. It had that committee feel to it.

She glanced around the festival square, noting the paper lanterns being strung between posts, the children running between stalls with sticky fingers and stickier faces, the general atmosphere of joy and community. All those things that definitely didn't make her feel a hollow aching in her chest where her draconic legacy should be inspiring awe and terror. No, she was perfectly content being Mira Mira Ondawahl, respected dwarf merchant, bearer of the realm's most magnificent fake beard, and absolutely not a kobold named Marmaduke Snide who spent her nights practicing small sorcerous tricks in her tent. Last night she'd tried to manifest dragonfire and had instead produced what could generously be called a warm burp with delusions of grandeur. The tent still smelled faintly of sulfur and disappointment. But she kept practicing, dreaming of the day when she'd finally achieve the legendary status that was her birthright. When people would speak her name in the same hushed, reverent tones they used for Snidemmaw the Hungry, though hopefully without the addendum "the Mildly Flatulent" that the kobold in the next tent had started using.

The cosmic injustice of it all would have been unbearable if she hadn't

been so exceptionally good at being unbearably optimistic about her inevitable rise to greatness.

“Now this,” Mira said, holding one of her finest crystals up to the light with the practiced reverence of someone who definitely knew what they were looking at and wasn’t just hoping the customer would be impressed by theatrical squinting, “is clearly a stone of considerable... stoneness.”

The customer, a nervous-looking merchant who’d been browsing her wares for ten minutes without committing to a single purchase, squinted at the crystal with the expression of someone who suspected they were about to be robbed but couldn’t quite figure out the mechanism. “It looks like a rock.”

“It looks like a rock,” Mira agreed with the confidence of someone whose entire understanding of gemology came from a single afternoon spent reading “Shiny Rocks and Where to Sell Them” by someone who’d clearly never found any, “in the same way that a diamond looks like a rock, or the way a dragon egg looks like a rock. Many of the world’s most valuable objects look like rocks. That’s basically the first rule of geology. See how it catches the light? That’s the universal sign of... luminous potential. Quite rare in stones that lack such properties. Fifteen gold, and honestly I’m losing money at that price.”

She was about to launch into an elaborate explanation about crystalline structures she’d completely invented when movement across the square caught her eye. A figure in deep blue robes was adjusting something near the bonfire stage, and suddenly the crystal in her hand might as well have been the worthless river rock it actually was.

It was Madame Callix. The legendary Madame Callix.

Mira had seen her illustrated likeness on festival posters from here to Downtown, the kobold colony where she'd grown up, named by someone with all the creative imagination of a particularly uninspired census taker. On those posters, she was always depicted mid-song with notes floating around her like devoted butterflies. Mira had once paid two silver just to hear a drunk minstrel badly recreate one of her songs, and even that fourth-hand interpretation had made her scales tingle in ways that definitely weren't just the cheap ale.

But seeing her in person was like comparing a child's crayon drawing of fire to an actual dragon's breath. She moved through the crowd with the kind of presence that made gravity rethink its priorities. People didn't so much step aside for her as find themselves mysteriously elsewhere, the universe clearing her path out of professional courtesy.

"Is it cursed?" the customer asked, apparently interpreting Mira's stunned silence as grave concern about parting with such a treasure.

"What? No, it's—" Mira tore her gaze away from Callix just long enough to remember she was supposed to be closing a sale. "It's so uncursed it's practically blessed. In fact, it's so blessed that curses likely cross the street when they see it coming. This stone could walk into a room full of curses and they'd all suddenly remember urgent appointments elsewhere."

Across the square, the performer was testing the balance of her ornate cane, though she clearly didn't need it for support. She moved with the fluid grace of someone who'd negotiated a separate peace treaty with physics. The cane was purely decorative, but what decoration. It caught the light in ways that suggested it had opinions about the nature of luminosity and wasn't afraid to express them.

What truly captivated Mira, though, was how Callix had become some-

thing legendary without claiming ancestral greatness, without desperate fumbling with inherited sorcery that produced embarrassing sulfurous burps. She'd simply decided to be magnificent and reality had shrugged and gone along with it.

That's what Snidemmaw would have appreciated, Mira thought. Not the bloodline, but the audacity.

"I'll give you two copper for it," the customer offered, growing emboldened by Mira's repeated lapses into reverent staring.

"Sold," Mira said absently, her attention fixed on the way Callix's shadow seemed to lag behind her movements by just a fraction of a second, following at a respectful distance.

"Two copper?!" The customer blinked, clearly having braced himself for the kind of aggressive counter-offer that would require at least twenty minutes and possibly a mediator. "For the stone of... luminous potential?"

"Yes, yes, the luminous..." Mira paused, finally processing what she'd just agreed to. Two copper for a crystal she'd spent fifteen minutes pitching at fifteen gold. She'd done all the work. She'd deployed "luminous potential." She'd invoked the first rule of geology. And then she'd let it go for less than the price of a bread roll. But the legendary performer was now adjusting her elaborate hair, which defied not only wind but also the fundamental concept of dishevelment, and Mira's merchant instincts had temporarily relocated to watch from a safe distance.

Callix turned slightly, and for one heart-stopping moment, her gaze swept across the market square. Mira felt it pass over her like a searchlight looking for something worth illuminating. Her every gesture contained the

kind of gravitas that made other people's movements look like rough drafts.

The customer pressed two copper coins into Mira's palm and snatched the crystal before she could reconsider, scurrying away with the urgency of someone who'd just committed a crime and wanted to put as much distance between himself and the scene as possible.

Mira barely registered the transaction, automatically pocketing the coins while her mind reeled. Callix had transformed herself so completely that even the air around her seemed to stand up straighter.

Someday, she thought, watching Callix speak with someone near the stage. Someday I'll command that kind of presence. Not because my great-great-great-great-great-grandfather ate villages, but because I'll make the choice to be legendary.

Callix was testing her voice with a low hum that somehow made the air itself pay attention.

Tonight, Mira decided, I'm going to watch her perform. I'm going to study every gesture, every note, every pause between breaths. And I'm going to learn how transcendence wears its costume.

Somewhere across the square, a nervous-looking merchant was probably showing his wife a crystal of considerable stoneness and luminous potential that he'd acquired for two copper pieces. Mira barely noticed. The performer had stepped away from the stage area, moving through the crowd and temporarily disappearing from view behind a cluster of festival-goers. Callix left her with nothing but the memory of that voice humming the air into silence and the growing realization that she'd just made the worst business decision since dragons stopped accepting virgin sacrifices due to paperwork complications.

With Callix temporarily out of sight, her attention drifted across the festival square and landed on an oddly intense conversation happening near the fountain. A woman with elaborately pinned dark hair was gesturing warmly while explaining something to a younger woman in distinctive purple robes. The older woman had the practical, capable air of someone who could organize a military campaign and still have dinner ready on time. Her companion clutched a leather-bound book like it contained the secrets of the universe or at least a really good recipe for anxiety management.

The red-haired boy standing beside them, probably the older woman's son judging by the careful way she kept him within arm's reach, was holding an armful of purple paper lanterns that seemed to be the focus of the younger woman's increasingly pointed questions. From her merchant's perch, Mira couldn't hear the specifics, but she could see the purple-robed woman scribbling notes with the fervor of someone documenting either groundbreaking research or a particularly complicated tax return.

What caught her attention, though, was the way the note-taker kept scribbling with unusual fervor, pausing occasionally to study the lanterns with the kind of intense focus usually reserved for particularly challenging crossword puzzles. She was asking questions with the methodical precision of someone conducting research, though her companion seemed perfectly content to chat about festival traditions without realizing she was being systematically interviewed.

The older woman continued her animated explanation while the younger woman took increasingly detailed notes, occasionally glancing up from her book with a slight frown that could have been academic concentration or mild confusion about something that didn't quite fit her expectations.

Interesting, Mira thought, her merchant instincts detecting the scent of potential drama. In her experience, nothing drew customers like a good mystery, and nothing emptied purses faster than people who thought they needed magical protection from whatever was making them nervous.

She was contemplating whether this might represent a business opportunity when a familiar figure in deep blue robes appeared in a quieter area near the edge of the square, away from the main crowd. Callix standing relatively alone. This might be her chance to actually approach her without having to compete with dozens of other admirers for her attention.

Now or never, she thought, quickly rearranging her wares and hanging a hastily scrawled “Back in Five Minutes (Unless Something More Important Comes Up)” sign on her stall. The moment I’ve been preparing for my entire life. Well, technically I’ve been preparing to become a legendary dragon, but approaching legendary performers is clearly related professional development.

The walk across the square felt simultaneously like an eternity and far too short. With each step, Mira’s confidence oscillated between “I am the descendant of Snidemmaw the Hungry and therefore worthy of conversing with greatness” and “I am about to make a complete fool of myself in front of the most magnificent person I’ve ever seen and she’ll probably have me thrown out of the festival by whatever passes for security around here.”

As she drew closer, she could see Callix more clearly. The performer stood with the perfect posture of someone who’d never slouched a day in her life, her ornate cane planted beside her like a scepter. Her elaborate brown hair caught the lantern light, each strand seemingly negotiated into place.

“Madame Callix,” Mira said, executing what she hoped was a sophisticated bow rather than the nervous bob it probably looked like. “I am Mira Mira Ondawahl, traveling merchant of fine curiosities. I hope you’ll forgive the intrusion, but I simply had to express my admiration for your artistry.”

The words came out exactly as she’d hoped they would sound in her head, but somehow they landed differently in the actual air between them. Less confident merchant conducting important business and more slightly desperate person trying very hard to sound important.

Callix turned her full attention to her, and for a moment Mira forgot how breathing worked. When she smiled, actually smiled, it was like watching sunrise decide it could happen twice in one day if it really put its mind to it.

“How refreshing,” she said, her voice carrying a resonance that made even simple words sound like they’d been composed by angels with particularly good taste in poetry. “So few people appreciate the true nature of performance art. Most simply expect to be entertained without understanding the profound responsibility that comes with commanding an audience’s complete attention.”

She’s talking to me, Mira’s brain announced unhelpfully. The legendary Madame Callix is having an actual conversation with me and I haven’t fainted yet. This is going considerably better than anticipated.

“I’ve long believed,” she managed, drawing on every merchant skill she’d ever developed to sound like someone worth talking to, “that true artistry lies not just in the performance itself, but in the transformation it creates. In the artist, in the audience, in the very air around them.”

This was possibly the most sophisticated thing she'd ever said, and she was quietly proud that she'd managed to work the word "transformation" into it without immediately launching into a lecture about her draconic heritage.

Callix's smile widened, and Mira felt her fake beard shift dangerously.

"Precisely!" she said, and there was genuine warmth beneath her regal demeanor. "You understand what draws me to places like Lethmere. There's something in the air tonight, an aura of divine proportions. I can sense real magic brewing in this crowd, the kind of authentic feeling that demands one's most powerful performance."

She gestured gracefully toward the festival with her cane.

"I've traveled to festivals across three kingdoms," Callix continued, "but rarely have I encountered such... potential. The very atmosphere thrums with it. Stories waiting to be told, transformations waiting to unfold, destinies preparing to reveal themselves."

Mira nodded with what she hoped looked like sophisticated understanding rather than the slightly glazed expression of someone trying to process that her idol was not only talking to her but sharing her professional insights. She couldn't help but notice that Callix spoke about the crowd the way Mira thought about a particularly promising batch of customers.

"Your Festival performances," she said, "I've heard they're... transcendent."

"Tonight's performance," Callix said, "will be unlike anything Lethmere has ever witnessed. A new song came to me last night. In a dream, of all things. I woke with every note already in place, every word waiting on

my tongue. The Dreamer's Feast. I have never performed it before, and yet it feels as though it has always existed."

She paused thoughtfully, her gaze sweeping across the crowd with the practiced eye of a performer assessing her audience.

"I can hardly wait to hear it," Mira breathed, and meant every word.

Callix studied her for a moment longer, and then her expression shifted into something that might have been approval. "You know," she said, "true appreciation for art should be rewarded with the best possible viewing position. Would you care to accompany me to the stage?"

She's inviting me. Mira's brain briefly short-circuited, leaving her standing there with what she hoped looked like sophisticated contemplation rather than complete mental collapse. *Madame Callix is personally inviting me to watch her legendary performance from the best seat in the festival. This is officially the greatest moment of my entire life. Including that time I successfully haggled a customer up from my opening offer.*

"I would be... deeply honored," she managed, and was proud that her voice only cracked slightly on the word "honored."

Callix smiled and began walking toward the bonfire stage with Mira trailing beside her like a particularly well-dressed shadow. The crowd unconsciously rearranged itself around them, people stepping aside without seeming to realize they were doing it.

So this is what command looks like, Mira thought, watching the way conversations paused and heads turned as they passed. She walked a little taller, imagining how it would feel someday when people would step aside for her. Not because she was disguised as a dwarf merchant, but

because they recognized the legend she was becoming.

As they approached the makeshift stage, Mira could see that Floria, the young minstrel, was already performing on the crates. Her lute produced a gentle melody that drifted through the crowd like mist. She was mid-song when the legendary performer appeared at the edge of the performance area.

Without a single word or gesture of dismissal, Callix simply stood there with the kind of presence that made it immediately clear that the stage now belonged to her. Floria's voice gradually faded, her fingers slowing on the strings. The crowd's attention, which had been warmly focused on the minstrel's charming performance, sharpened.

Floria looked up, saw the imposing figure before her, and her eyes widened with the dawning realization that she was about to be upstaged by a legend. Without protest, without even seeming surprised, she began gathering her things.

"Thank you, dear," came the gracious but dismissive response, words that somehow managed to sound both kind and completely final. "Your performance was... charming."

The word "charming" hung in the air with the kind of finality that suggested no higher praise was forthcoming.

She claimed the stage with movements so fluid they seemed choreographed, each step calculated for maximum dramatic impact. The festival square, which had been filled with the pleasant buzz of conversation and laughter just moments before, fell into an expectant hush.

She stood there for a heartbeat, letting the silence build, her ornate cane

planted beside her. The crowd leaned forward almost unconsciously, dozens of people suddenly unified in their anticipation.

Mira found herself holding her breath, her heart hammering against her ribs as those perfect lips opened to begin The Dreamer's Feast. This was it. The moment she'd been waiting for her entire...

"HELP!" The scream cut through the festival air from the edge of the square, panic making the voice shrill and desperate. "UNDEAD! THERE'S AN UNDEAD ATTACKING THE VILLAGE! IT JUST... IT CAME OUT OF NOWHERE!"

CHAPTER 5
LADLES AND CORPSES

The scream that tore through the festival air hit Mira like a bucket of ice water thrown by someone with surprisingly good aim and questionable motives. One moment she'd been basking in the reflected glory of standing next to Madame Callix, imagining how she'd retell this story to make herself sound more impressive than she actually was, and the next her entire body was executing what could generously be called a strategic retreat but was definitely just panic with delusions of tactical sophistication.

"UNDEAD!" Her voice cracked through three octaves as she stumbled backward, catching her foot on her own elaborately embroidered merchant robes and executing a pirouette that would have been graceful if it had been intentional instead of the flailing of someone whose entire understanding of combat came from badly illustrated adventure novels where the heroes always looked dashingly windswept rather than terrified and slightly damp.

The creature that shambled into the festival square looked wrong in ways that made Mira's brain file several complaints with reality's quality control department. It moved with the jerky, unnatural gait of something that had forgotten the basic social contract between joints and the concept of bending in reasonable directions. Its skin had the waxy, grayish pallor of someone who'd not only missed several important meals but had possibly missed the entire concept of being alive. Its eyes were milky white but somehow still managed to convey a sense of purpose, like frosted windows that nevertheless let you know someone was definitely watching from the other side. Mira's fake beard quivered.

“THE END TIMES!” Mira shrieked, her voice under stress having developed an accent that was somehow simultaneously from three different regions and none of them convincingly. “THE PROPHECIES SPOKE OF THIS! Well, actually they mostly spoke about tax reform and something about turnips, BUT THIS IS DEFINITELY ADJACENT TO WHAT THEY MEANT!”

She spun around, looking for the best direction to run, and in her theatrical panic managed to knock over a display of festival ribbons, crash into a pickle vendor’s cart, sending brine cascading across the cobblestones in a wave of vinegary doom, and somehow get her fake beard tangled in a decorative wind chime that had absolutely no business being at shin height. The chimes rang out a merry tune that seemed wildly inappropriate for the current apocalyptic circumstances, adding a soundtrack of whimsical bells to what should have been a scene of gothic horror.

Snidemmaw the Hungry would not have run, a small, deeply buried part of her brain noted with disappointment. Snidemmaw would have roasted this abomination and possibly made a light snack of the remains.

Yes, well, Snidemmaw probably didn’t have to worry about her beard achieving sentience and judging her life choices, the larger, more practical part of her brain retorted while her body continued its impressive demonstration of how many things one kobold could crash into while attempting to flee. Also, Snidemmaw had actual fire breath instead of whatever this embarrassing sulfur situation is that I’ve got going on.

“EVERYONE REMAIN CALM!” she shouted, waving her arms in what she probably thought was a helpful manner but actually looked like someone trying to conduct an orchestra while being attacked by the entire brass section. She pointed dramatically to the left. “THE EXITS ARE—” She changed her mind and pointed right. “NO, WAIT, THEY’RE—” She spun

in a complete circle, pointing in three different directions. “EXITS ARE EVERYWHERE! JUST... JUST GO SOMEWHERE THAT ISN’T HERE!”

A mother clutching her child looked at her with the kind of expression usually reserved for people who’ve just discovered their accountant has been doing their taxes with a ouija board. “You’re making it worse!” she hissed, pulling her daughter away from both the undead and Mira, clearly unsure which posed the greater threat to public safety.

I need to do something heroic, Mira thought desperately, her hands already moving through the gestures for a protection spell she’d memorized from “Practical Thaumaturgy for the Ambitious But Untalented” by someone who clearly had a very loose definition of the word “practical.” This is my moment! My chance to prove that the blood of dragons flows through my veins! Probably very diluted dragon blood, possibly just dragon-adjacent blood, but blood with aspirations nonetheless!

Her attempted protection spell fizzled into existence with all the magical potency of a damp birthday candle. Bronze sparkles erupted from her fingertips. Not the impressive cascade of protective energy she’d envisioned, but more like someone had sneezed glitter during an especially disappointing magic show. The sparkles hung in the air for a moment, almost embarrassed to exist, twinkling halfheartedly in quiet apology for not being more impressive, before dissolving into nothing with a sigh of relief.

This was immediately followed by a belch that could have stripped paint from a barn door and possibly violated several environmental protection ordinances. The sulfurous cloud that emerged from her mouth had the kind of presence that made everyone in a ten-foot radius seriously reconsider their life choices and also their proximity to whatever Mira had

eaten for lunch. The smell was part rotten eggs, part burnt rubber, and part something that meant Mira's digestive system was staging its own chemical rebellion.

"Is that... is that supposed to help?" someone in the crowd asked, their voice muffled by the hand they'd pressed over their nose. Two people behind them had already started walking in the opposite direction with the quiet determination of people who'd just decided that undead were actually the lesser problem.

"IT'S DRACONIC PROTECTION MAGIC!" Mira insisted, her fake beard now dangling at a truly spectacular angle. One side had come completely unglued and was flapping in the breeze like a defeated flag, while the other side clung desperately to her jaw. "VERY ANCIENT! VERY POWERFUL! POSSIBLY VERY EXPIRED, BUT LET'S FOCUS ON THE POSITIVE!"

"What positive?!" someone else shouted, backing away from both the advancing undead and the expanding cloud of sulfur with equal urgency.

"I'M... I'M STILL WORKING ON THAT PART!"

The undead continued its shambling advance, completely unimpressed by either the sparkles or the sulfur, which seemed rather rude considering the effort she had put into producing them. It moved with disturbing purpose through the crowd, ignoring the screaming adults, the overturned merchant stalls, and even the spreading puddle of pickle brine that was making the cobblestones treacherously slippery. Its milky eyes remained fixed on a single target, heading with unwavering determination toward—

Oh no, Mira thought, her panic suddenly crystallizing into something sharper and more focused. *It's heading straight for that red-haired boy with the lanterns.*

The boy stood by the bonfire, small and red-haired and completely unaware that something dead was walking toward him with the kind of single-minded determination that Mira usually reserved for haggling over wholesale prices. The boy's mother was turning, reaching, but she was still processing, still caught in that terrible gap between seeing and understanding. And the undead was closing, each shambling step covering ground with mechanical persistence.

I should run, Mira thought. This was the reasonable assessment. The sensible, practical, survival-oriented assessment that any kobold with a functioning sense of self-preservation would arrive at. She was not a warrior. She was not a hero. She was a small kobold in a collapsing beard who couldn't even manage a basic protection spell without burping sulfur like a defective furnace. Her legs were specifically designed for situations like this. Running was one of legs' primary functions, right after standing and immediately before dancing badly at weddings.

But the boy was right there. And the dead thing was right there. And between those two facts was a gap that someone needed to fill, even if the someone in question was five feet of merchant robes, ruined cosmetics, and rapidly deteriorating facial hair, and even if filling that gap was the kind of plan that could only be described as "technically a plan" in the same way that jumping off a cliff could be described as "technically flying."

Mira filled the gap.

She didn't decide to do it so much as her body simply stopped accepting instructions from the parts of her brain that wanted to survive and started taking orders from some small, inconvenient part that apparently had opinions about children and dead things and the distance between

them. She planted herself in the creature's path with her arms spread wide, which was either the bravest or the stupidest thing she'd ever done, and given that her track record included attempting to purchase a live basilisk through mail order, that was saying something.

"HALT!" she shouted, her voice cracking so badly the word came out in two separate syllables with a small squeak between them. "IN THE NAME OF... OF SOMEONE IMPORTANT! HALT, I SAY!" She couldn't think of anyone important enough to invoke, so she just sort of gestured vaguely at the sky, which she hoped conveyed "backed by powerful celestial authorities" but probably conveyed "having some kind of episode."

The undead did not halt. It didn't even acknowledge her existence in any meaningful way, which Mira would have found personally offensive if she'd had time to process it before the creature's gray hand caught her across the chest. One moment she was standing heroically in the path of darkness, arms spread, beard flapping, channeling the spirit of every legendary dragon-blooded warrior who had ever faced down evil with nothing but courage and determination. The next moment she was horizontal, traveling sideways through the air with the aerodynamic grace of a thrown sack of turnips, heading directly for the pickle brine at a velocity that suggested gravity had strong opinions about her heroism.

She hit the brine with a splash that would have been impressive if it had been intentional and deeply undignified since it wasn't. Her remaining beard detached on impact and landed three feet away like a small furry animal that had finally decided it wanted nothing more to do with this situation. Her merchant robes absorbed an astonishing volume of brine. Her elbow found a cobblestone at exactly the wrong angle. Something in her back made a sound that backs should not make, a sort of wet click that suggested several of her vertebrae were filing a formal complaint.

She lay there in the pickle brine, staring up at the festival lanterns swinging in the evening breeze, tasting vinegar and failure in roughly equal proportions. The creature shambled past without a backward glance, continuing its relentless march toward the boy, and Mira had the distinct and humiliating realization that she had accomplished absolutely nothing except getting very wet and losing her last beard. In the grand ledger of heroic acts, her contribution would be listed somewhere between “thought about helping” and “was briefly in the way.”

Snidemmaw would have roasted it, the small voice in her head whispered, and for once the larger, more practical part didn’t argue back. It just lay there in the pickle brine with her, equally defeated, equally soaked, equally certain that Mira Ondawahl had just proven once and for all that the distance between wanting to be a dragon and actually being one was measured in failed spells, lost beards, and the precise volume of pickle brine required to drown whatever dignity she had left.

Deni had been maintaining her perfect festival position. Close enough to seem part of the crowd, far enough to observe without being observed, exactly three merchant stalls and one decorative fountain away from where Ruu stood with his mother. She’d been waiting for the performance to begin, calculating angles and contingencies with practiced patience. The chaos erupting instead was unfortunate timing, certainly, but she’d worked through worse.

Much worse, if she was being honest, though honesty wasn’t really her strongest quality.

The undead’s appearance had sparked the predictable pandemonium. Moth-

ers clutching children, fathers attempting heroics that mostly involved shouting unhelpful directions, that ridiculous dwarf woman with the suspicious beard creating more hazards than the actual threat. But while others saw mindless undead horror shambling through their pleasant evening, Deni saw something far more interesting: purpose. The creature moved through the scattering crowd like water finding its level, ignoring easier targets, dismissing closer victims, drawn with magnetic certainty toward one specific point.

Toward her investment. Toward her carefully selected prize. Toward Ruu.

Well, she thought with perfect calm, *that simply won't do*.

Her hands were already moving before her conscious mind had finished its calculations, reaching into the special pockets she'd sewn into her merchant dress. The candies she pulled out weren't from her regular stock, weren't the pretty confections that made children smile and parents reach for their purses. These were older, stranger, their sugar gone dark as old amber, warm against her palm despite having sat in her pocket all evening.

Light moved inside them, visible through the dark sugar the way a candle shows through cupped fingers. Each candy contained a tiny star that had been convinced through extensive negotiation to take up residence in crystallized sugar.

The distance between her and the creature was eleven feet, three inches. The distance between the creature and Ruu was eight feet and shrinking. She knew because she always knew exactly how far she was from things that mattered, and right now the thing that mattered was getting between that shambling collection of bad necromancy and her investment before the math stopped working in her favor.

Ophelia was already moving. No hesitation, no calculation. She threw herself in front of Ruu with her arms spread wide, putting nothing between her son and the walking corpse except her own body. She had no weapon, no plan, no chance of stopping the thing. She didn't care. Her hair had come loose from its pins and hung across her face, and her apron still carried stains from the morning's cooking, and she planted herself in the path of the dead like a woman who had decided that this thing would have to go through her first.

Deni moved.

Not with the dramatic flourish of a hero or the desperate lunge of someone acting on instinct, but with the fluid efficiency of someone who knew exactly what needed to be done. Three quick steps to close the distance on the creature, each one placed to avoid the pickle brine, the overturned ribbons, the spreading edge of panic that had everyone else stumbling into each other. The dwarf merchant was face-down in the brine, apparently having attempted something brave and geometrically inadvisable. Deni stepped over her without breaking stride.

She planted herself directly in the undead's path, holding up her glowing candies like the world's sweetest ward. The amber light they cast threw no shadows and made the cobblestones beneath her feet look like they were covered in honey.

The undead stopped.

Not gradually, not with the slow recognition of an obstacle, but with the sudden completeness of something hitting an invisible wall. Its milky eyes, which had been locked on Ruu with disturbing focus, shifted to the candies in Deni's hands. The creature tilted its head, something almost like recognition stirring behind that clouded gaze.

“That’s right,” Deni said, in the same tone she’d use with a customer who couldn’t decide between butterscotch and caramel. “These are much more interesting than little boys, aren’t they?”

The undead swayed slightly, caught between its original purpose and this new, confusing input. The amber light from the candies thickened around the creature’s feet, pooling on the cobblestones like something poured.

Behind her, Deni could hear Ruu whimpering, could hear parents grabbing their children and retreating, could hear the crowd rearranging itself around the edges of the square with the shuffling urgency of people who wanted to be somewhere else but couldn’t quite commit to running. The creature strained against the ward’s hold, its milky eyes flickering between the candies and whatever it could still sense of the boy behind her. Deni kept her attention on the undead, on the way its clouded eyes tracked the movement of the candies as she slowly moved them from side to side.

“Someone raised you with a purpose,” she observed, loud enough for others to hear because an innocent sweet vendor would surely want everyone to know what was happening. “You’re not wandering. You’re not hungry in the way undead things usually are. Someone pointed you at that boy specifically.” She paused, then added with perfect confusion, “How strange. Who would want to hurt a child at a festival?”

The question hung in the air like smoke from the bonfire. Several villagers glanced around nervously. Because of course, that was the real question, wasn’t it? Not why there was an undead at their festival, but why it wanted Ruu specifically.

And more importantly, Deni thought while maintaining her concerned vendor expression, who else is hunting in my territory?

Lian's combat instincts snapped into focus before her conscious mind had even processed the word "undead." Years of monastery training compressed into a single beat. Threat assessment, tactical positioning, escape routes, the locations of every child and elderly person within thirty feet, all happening simultaneously while her body settled into the stance that preceded violence.

The candy vendor had placed herself between the creature and the red-haired boy with impressive speed. The woman held up dark sweets that cast a steady amber glow, and the undead had stopped, caught between its original purpose and this new, confusing input. It swayed in place, its milky eyes tracking the candies the way a cat tracks a bird through glass. Held, but straining. Whatever magic those sweets contained, the creature was fighting it. Its fingers twitched. Its weight kept shifting toward the boy.

The boy was still there. Right there, eight feet behind the candy vendor, half-hidden behind his mother. Ophelia had put herself between Ruu and the creature, arms spread, her whole body a wall. No weapon, no magic, nothing but the stubborn architecture of a mother who had decided this was where the line was. Her hands were shaking and her jaw was set and she wasn't going anywhere.

The vendor can't hold it forever, Lian thought. The creature's milky eyes kept drifting past the glowing candies, searching for the boy behind them. The ward was a wall, not a cage. It could still go around. And the boy was still within reach if it did.

Lian moved.

She didn't think about it. Didn't weigh the options or calculate angles the way she might have done at the monastery, where every action was a considered thing, a meditation in motion. She just moved, because a child was standing in the path of something dead and purposeful and Mei's jade bracelet was warm against her ankle and some things didn't require contemplation.

She crossed the distance in three strides, low and fast, her feet finding solid ground between the pickle brine and the scattered festival debris with the kind of precision that came from years of crossing rooftops and temple gardens in the dark. The crowd parted for her without realizing they were doing it. People moved instinctively out of the path of something that moved like a predator, even when the predator was trying to save them.

"Come here." She said it quietly, directly to the boy, because shouting would have been a waste of air and possibly drawn the creature's attention away from the vendor's ward and that was the only thing keeping it in place. Ruu looked up at her with wide eyes that hadn't quite caught up with the situation, the expression of a child who was still processing whether this was a real emergency or a particularly aggressive bit of festival entertainment.

Lian scooped him up. He weighed almost nothing, or maybe everything weighed almost nothing when your body was running on monastery training and the particular clarity that came from knowing exactly what needed to happen next. She turned, placed him in Ophelia's arms, and pushed them both toward the nearest alley. Not gentle, not rough. Efficient. The kind of push that communicated "move now, be offended later" without requiring words.

Ophelia didn't need to be told twice. She clutched Ruu to her chest, already turning to shield him with her body as she retreated.

Lian stood for a moment, watching them go, making sure nothing followed. The creature was still held by the candy vendor's ward, still swaying, still straining. But its milky eyes had lost their target, and something in its posture shifted. Less purpose, more confusion. A puppet whose strings had gone slack because the thing it was reaching for had been moved out of reach.

That's not hunger, Lian thought, watching the creature's movements with the cold precision of someone cataloguing details the way others might catalogue spices or fabric patterns. *That's targeted acquisition. Someone aimed this thing at that boy specifically.*

The corpse was perhaps two days dead. Pine needles clung to its rough-spun clothes, and dried mud caked the boots. No wounds marked the body. No blade, no arrow, no predator's marks. This person had died of something that left no external trace, walked out of the forest, and been sent shambling into a festival with terrible purpose. Someone had killed quietly, raised the body, and pointed it at a child. The precision of it made her skin crawl.

The purple-robed young woman she'd been speaking with earlier, Lyra, shifted in the shadows near the fountain. It was a small movement, barely noticeable in the chaos, but Lian's trained eye caught it immediately. The wizard's fingers worried at the binding of her book, and there was something in her expression that went beyond simple fear. Guilt? Knowledge? Or just the nervous energy of someone who'd read about undead in books but never seen one shambling through a pleasant evening?

Whoever did this is still here, she thought. *They're watching their creation.*

And they just watched it fail.

Mei would have made it look easy. Would have scooped the boy up with grace and certainty and that particular smile she wore when she was protecting someone, the one that made violence look like kindness. But Mei wasn't here. Lian was, and the boy was safe, and that would have to be enough.

Rhonda had seen enough theatrical nonsense in her sixty-five years to recognize it when it shambled into view, and this undead creature was putting on a performance that would have embarrassed a third-rate traveling troupe. The thing moved with all the subtlety of someone who'd read about being undead in a poorly illustrated manual and was now trying very hard to get it right. Too purposeful to be mindless, too clean to be a proper corpse, too convenient to be anything but someone's extremely unsubtle message.

Amateur necromancers, she thought with the kind of professional disdain usually reserved for people who tried to pick locks with hairpins because they'd seen it done in a penny dreadful. *Can't even raise a proper shambling horror without making it obvious they're pulling the strings.*

The dwarf merchant with the catastrophically failed beard was lying face-down in pickle brine, which showed either remarkable bravery or a truly inspired lack of self-preservation instincts. The candy vendor had the situation somewhat contained with those amber sweets that had no business glowing like that. And wasn't that interesting, a sweet seller who just happened to have corpse-repelling confections readily available. The cat-woman had grabbed the red-haired boy and deposited him with his

mother with the kind of quiet efficiency that Rhonda recognized immediately.

Everyone was treating this like some grand mystery, some terrible threat that required careful analysis and strategic positioning. Rhonda saw it differently. She saw a problem that needed solving, preferably before her feet started hurting from standing still too long.

Her hand found the bent ladle Old Man Cinder had given her, still tucked into her belt where she'd placed it with the absent-minded efficiency of someone who'd spent forty years making sure everything valuable was within easy reach. The metal was warm against her palm, carrying the memory of countless meals, of the old man's gentle insistence that food was meant to be shared, of that impossible taste that had brought Tibbo flooding back into her throat.

Well, she thought, adjusting her wire-rimmed glasses with her free hand, if I'm going to hit something with kitchen equipment, might as well commit to it.

The torch was easy enough to acquire. Festival torches were designed to be grabbed quickly in case of emergency, though the designers had probably imagined emergencies more along the lines of "the decorative bunting caught fire" rather than "there's an undead creature heading for a specific child and everyone's standing around gawking like it's street theater." She liberated it from its bracket with the smooth efficiency of someone who'd spent decades taking things that weren't technically hers, though in this case she supposed borrowing a torch to deal with an undead problem was probably covered under some sort of civic duty clause.

The crowd had formed the kind of semi-circle that suggested they wanted to watch but also wanted plausible deniability if things went badly. The

undead swayed in front of the candy vendor's glowing sweets, caught in some kind of magical stupor now that the boy had been pulled out of reach. The creature's clouded eyes tracked the magical candies with the vacant intensity of someone trying to remember why they'd walked into a room.

Right then, Rhonda thought, rolling her shoulders with the resignation of someone about to do something inadvisable but necessary. Let's get this over with. Some of us have solstice stew to finish.

She moved with the deceptive quickness that had made her one of the best thieves in three kingdoms. The pickle brine the dwarf had spilled made the cobblestones treacherous, but Rhonda had navigated worse. Rain-slick rooftops. Ice-covered bridge railings. That one memorable evening involving olive oil, a duke's marble floor, and a very surprised peacock.

The undead, fixated as it was on the glowing candies, didn't notice her approach. Neither did most of the crowd, because people had a remarkable ability to not see small, elderly goblins when there were more dramatic things to focus on. It was a skill Rhonda had cultivated deliberately over the years, though she suspected some of it was just that humans genuinely didn't expect anyone her height to be particularly dangerous.

Their loss, really.

The ladle connected with the back of the creature's knee with a satisfying clang that rang out like a dinner bell announcing that someone was about to have a very bad evening. The undead's leg buckled. Apparently whoever had raised it hadn't bothered to reinforce the basic structural mechanics of knee joints, which was just sloppy work. It stumbled forward in a graceless lurch that ruined whatever menacing presence it had been trying to maintain.

“Oh, for the love of—” Rhonda muttered, bringing the ladle around in a backhanded swing that would have made her old weapons master proud, if her old weapons master hadn’t been the kind of person who thought pride was something that happened to other people. The metal connected with the creature’s other knee, and down it went, hitting the cobblestones with the wet thud of meat that had forgotten it wasn’t supposed to be moving anymore.

The crowd gasped. Someone screamed. From somewhere near the pickle cart, a brine-soaked voice that might have been the dwarf merchant shouted something about “vanquishing” that nobody had the energy to respond to. Rhonda ignored them all. She gave the creature one more crack across the skull with the ladle for good measure, then brought the torch down in a practiced motion that spoke of someone who’d had to set quite a few things on fire over the years, usually while running away from them.

The undead caught fire, though not with the enthusiasm Rhonda had hoped for. The torch flame licked at the creature’s rough-spun shirt, which began to smolder in that reluctant way that cloth does when it’s not particularly interested in burning. A human body, even an animated one, wasn’t exactly kindling. The flames crawled slowly across the fabric, producing more smoke than fire, filling the air with the deeply unpleasant smell of burning hair and something worse that Rhonda chose not to think about too carefully.

Right, Rhonda thought with the resignation of someone remembering basic facts at inconvenient times. *Bodies don’t actually burn that well without accelerant. This is going to take a while.*

She stood there holding the torch to the slowly smoldering corpse like someone trying to light a particularly stubborn campfire, except the camp-

fire used to be a person and was still trying to crawl in the general direction of where the boy had been, despite being on fire and the boy being long gone. She'd set fire to a lot of things over the years, but none of them had ever tried to crawl away with this much determination.

From the stage, an indignant voice cut through the crackling of the flames and the murmur of the crowd. "EXCUSE ME?" The woman in the blue cloak, Callix if Rhonda had heard correctly, stood with her hands on her hips in a pose that suggested she was personally offended by the entire situation. "I came all the way from Millhaven for this festival! I was about to perform, and THIS is what happens? Amateur necromancers ruining the atmosphere?"

She gestured dramatically at the burning corpse. "Do you have any idea how hard it is to recapture the proper emotional resonance after something like this? The crowd's entire energy is wrong now! Someone owes me a performance fee for this disaster! A full performance fee! Plus travel expenses!"

Rhonda found herself oddly impressed by someone whose primary concern during an undead attack was getting back on stage. It showed a commitment to priorities that she could respect, even if those priorities were completely ridiculous.

The corpse continued its slow, reluctant burning, the flames having finally caught properly but nowhere near the dramatic conflagration Rhonda had envisioned. It would be a good long while before there was nothing left but ash, which meant everyone was going to stand around awkwardly watching a body burn, which wasn't exactly festive. She noticed the wizard in purple robes, Lyra, the nervous one who'd tried to make small talk earlier, standing in the shadows near the fountain. The young

woman was staring at the smoldering corpse, pale, her book clutched to her chest like a shield. Her hands shook against the cover.

Interesting, she thought, filing that observation away with all the other suspicious things she'd noticed over the years that might or might not matter later. *Very interesting indeed.*

The cat-woman had positioned herself near the red-haired boy and his mother, her whole body radiating the kind of readiness that suggested she expected this wasn't over. The candy vendor was tucking those glowing sweets away, her expression one of sweet concern that Rhonda didn't trust for a second. The dwarf merchant had managed to get herself upright and was wringing pickle brine from what remained of her merchant robes, beardless and bedraggled but somehow still managing to look indignant about it.

And Old Man Cinder, she noticed, had used the chaos to distribute his solstice stew to anyone who looked shaken, because apparently some people's response to crisis was to make sure everyone was fed. Ashby the walking stove was puffing away contentedly, seemingly unbothered by the whole undead situation, which either meant it had seen worse or simply lacked the capacity for existential worry.

The copper coin in Rhonda's pocket seemed heavier than usual, worn smooth by her thumb and the memory of Tibbo's last smile as he shoved her through that window. He would have found this whole situation hilarious, probably. Would have made some terrible joke about the undead having "grave" intentions or something equally awful that would have made her groan while fighting off a smile.

Later, she told herself firmly, pushing the memory back down where it belonged. *Deal with the undead nonsense now. Feel feelings later. Preferably*

never, but definitely not now.

The festival had that particular quality of disrupted celebration, where people weren't quite sure if they should go back to enjoying themselves or start running for the hills. The bonfire still crackled cheerfully, apparently unaware that its festive purpose had been somewhat undermined by being used to incinerate a corpse. The decorative lanterns swayed in the evening breeze, casting purple shadows that now seemed sinister rather than celebratory.

“Well,” Rhonda announced to no one in particular, tucking the bent ladle back into her belt with the satisfaction of someone who'd done a job adequately if not artistically. “That's sorted. Can we get back to the festival now, or is there more amateur dramatics scheduled? Because my feet hurt, that stew's getting cold, and if I wanted to watch terrible theater, I'd have stayed in the city where at least they charge admission so you know what you're getting into.”

The crowd stared at her. The small, elderly goblin woman who'd just calmly beaten an undead creature with kitchen equipment and set it on fire like a particularly troublesome weed. Some of them looked grateful. Some looked terrified. Most just looked confused. Humans always did when competence came from unexpected sources.

Rhonda adjusted her wire-rimmed glasses, made sure the purple wildflower was still tucked behind her ear. She had standards, even when dealing with the undead. She turned toward Old Man Cinder's stew stall. But the path was blocked by the still-smoldering corpse, and she wasn't about to step over it like some kind of barbarian. So she stood there, ladle at her side, waiting with the patience of someone who'd spent decades standing in shadows.

Next time, she thought, watching a man quietly vomit behind the pickle cart, I'm bringing lamp oil. If you're going to set something on fire, at least have the decency to do it properly.