

## **“Like it or not, the god of fire is my bestie”**

### **Chapter 1**

“Go to the shrine,” his grandmother said between labored breaths. “Receive the blessing of the fire god, before you become an adventurer.”

These were the last words spoken by the grandmother of Freis Lancenhorn. For the first 14 years of his life, he heard stories from his grandmother about her days as an adventurer. The shrine she spoke of had been considered abandoned almost 300 years ago. Freis had never been there, personally, but he knew of it. Just like he knew his grandmother was one of the few people to receive that blessing, for as long as anyone could remember. When his father left, his grandmother moved in, and was more insistent that if Freis wanted to follow in her footsteps as an adventurer, he had to go to the shrine first. His mother didn't want Freis to have any part of it, and certainly didn't want him visiting that abandoned shrine. Despite his mother's wishes, despite his trepidation regarding the shrine, wanderlust still called to Freis. An urge to escape his small town and small life, to move out into the large world. In the lead up to the seventh anniversary of his grandmother's death, he could resist no more. And so, he had to go...

It used to be tradition. A long time ago, every child of the town of Immel would stop at the Shrine of Immolation before setting out on their adventure. Immel was the closest settlement to Mt. Trueflame, the volcano on the eastern coast of the continent. This volcano was said to be the home of many strong red dragons, and the place of power for all who worshiped the god of fire. Mt. Trueflame was remote, and far from what most would consider civilization. Immel was the last refuge of civilization before several days walk to the volcano. The people of Immel initially built the shrine to protect the town from the wrath of the volcano. Once it was built, it became used by many as a general means of worshiping the god of fire. It was once considered a holy site for those dedicated to fire magics. The tradition of visiting the shrine had been to bestow upon young adventurers the blessing of the fire god, before officially enrolling in the guild. Eventually, though, attendance to the shrine decreased. At some point, it became known as a hot spot for fetishists. Understandably, the people of Immel didn't like the reputation this was building, and eventually started shooing tourists away. Over the ages, the town came to ignore the shrine completely.

Freis pushed the wooden boards away from the entrance to the shrine. He looked around the small room, and saw a thick coat of dust. He was clearly the first person to come here in decades. There were two doors on the back wall, which Freis supposed was where the devotees used to live. There used to be devotees, back when the shrine was maintained. But it had clearly been a long time since anyone had been inside. There were cobwebs everywhere. Mushrooms had started growing out of the wood. In the darkness, he could barely tell where he was supposed to put the offering. “Ah”, he thought to himself, as he noticed someone had put a clump of dirt and a sapling in the ceremonial bowl. A casual blasphemy. Freis lifted up the bowl, and dumped the dirt and sapling onto the floor. He removed a piece of cloth from his pocket, and cleaned the bowl's surface. He set the bowl down, and then took a folded strip of paper from his pocket. He unfolded it, verified the writing he had done earlier that day, folded it back, and placed in the bowl. He hoped he had written the spell correctly, just to please his

grandmother's spirit. Even if he didn't receive a blessing, Freis could say that he tried. He lit a match, dropped it into the bowl, and stepped back.

At first, nothing happened. Suddenly, roaring flames filled the bowl. Four smaller bowls, raised up around the central bowl, also spontaneously spewed flames. With a rush of red-orange fire, a feminine figure stood before Freis. Well, more accurately, a figure floated an inch above the ground. This entity had long, orange hair, perfectly smooth and unblemished skin, and wore an "outfit" of flame; three triangles of fire, which left nothing to the imagination. With arms magnanimously spread outwards, the figure spoke.

"MORTAL! You stand before Ensmolderon, the all-powerful god of FLAME!"

The fires wooshed up a little higher, but then reduced to simple levels sufficient to light the room. Additionally, small lamps around the edge of the room slowly lit up, and cobwebs burned away. It was still in pretty poor condition, but Freis could tell that this was what the shrine looked like, back when it still had devotees.

"Now, I forgive your peoples' long delay in bringing me tribute. First, let us handle business."

With a flick of the wrist, a fire danced out of each of the smaller bowls of the shrine, into the air. Slender, beautiful hands, with nails in fiery red, twisted and moved, manipulating the dancing flames. Suddenly, all four flames shot into Freis's body. They didn't feel hot; in fact, they vanished into his flesh and gave him a comfortable, cozy feeling, while also harming none of his clothes.

"There, you have now received blessing from the god of fire. You may, if you wish, now go and continue your adventuring. However...."

With a gesture to the door on the left, the way opened to one of the back rooms.

"I would awfully, awfully appreciate it if you would spend some time with me."

The figure's voice had changed from magnanimous to plain out sultry.

"You humans have neglected my home for a long, long time... I have grown... quite lonely. Come with me for a while."

Freis had been looking down the whole time. Every bit of this display, from the second the figure appeared, made him uncomfortable. The brief warmth from the blessing had calmed his nerves for a moment, but his mood soured again when the god's attitude changed. His words came out as a mumble.

"No... I'm going to be going now," he said, keeping his eyes trained on the floor.

Freis turned around to face the door. Almost as quickly, the divine form vanished in a burst of flame, and reappeared before the young man. However, Ensmolderon's composure was shaken.

"Wait. Look at what you're missing. Surely no one can resist the siren's call of Ensmolderon." There was a moment's pause. "Perhaps... Perhaps this is what you're after."

With a spin, the floating body changed entirely. A lean, toned man with medium-length red hair was now the form taken by the god. This new body had skin just as perfect as the last, eyes as smoldering and strong as the last, with underwear made of flame.

Freis still averted his gaze.

Frustrated, the god approached, and with a hand, lifted Freis's chin up, to inspect his face.

“What’s wrong? Are you blind or something?” Observing the averted eyes elicited a frown, “No, even my voice and aura should radiate the concept of ‘hot’... I’m the god of flame, baby. I’m on fire. Nobody can resist my company when I work my charms. No... body...”

Finally, the two sets of eyes eyes had locked. Freis was immensely annoyed by this. But Ensmolderon had... a different reaction entirely. A dropped jaw marked the shock.

“Boy... what is your name...”

“Freis. Freis Lancenhorn.”

“H... How strange. Freis. Tell me why you won’t stay.”

Fries balled his fists. He was tired of these divine shenanigans.

“I knew I shouldn’t have come!” he retorted, hotly. “My grandmother still believed in you, to her dying breath. You used to be something. This shrine used to be something. But now, I see all the rumors are true! You’re nothing but a sex pest! A creature of lust. And you’ll say anything to have your way with me. I received your blessing, and now I’m leaving. Move out of my way.”

Ensmolderon was surprised. The divine aura of a god, the indomitable charisma of fire, that was usually enough to bend a mortal to their divine will. A god couldn’t force a mortal to have sex, but it usually worked for just about everything else. The lone patron of the shrine was starved for interaction. There was something else, though. Something that made this rejection feel... even worse. However, blocking the adventurer’s exit would not do. With another burst of flame, Ensmolderon returned to the front of the shrine.

“I will not have sex with you if you don’t want me to. That is not what is important. I just would like someone to spend a little time with me.”

Freis didn’t turn, but he had a strong suspicion that the god was crying. Well, at least shedding a tear or two. He had a hard time believing this wasn’t an elaborate trick. Still, Freis wasn’t heartless.

“I’ll tell the villagers that you’re lonely.”

“No, I want *you* to spend time with me.”

“... What?” Freis’s fists tightened.

“No, uh, I mean... never mind...”

Silence filled the chamber. The two stood still for five minutes. For them, however, it felt to both of them more like an hour. Freis walked to the door, and stopped for a moment before opening it. Ensmolderon reached out an arm, but it went unseen. And so, the adventurer left the shrine, much to the dismay of the shrine’s patron.

“Aaaargh! What is happening to me!”

The god punched the wall of the shrine so hard that Freis, a few steps away, heard the impact.

“What kind of mortal can... what kind of mortal DARE to deny me. Sure, sex would have been great, but.... Rrrgh! Maybe something happened to me. It has been a good few decades since I last saw someone.”

Ensmolderon didn’t actually need to walk, due to floating. Despite that, stomping while traveling to the open bedroom just felt right. A mirror once adorned this room, and a few cracked pieces of it still remained on the frame. The god stared at the broken glass intensely.

“No, I’m still hot... Still the most attractive avatar of fire to exist. I look damn good. I’d do me. Anyone would do me.”

With a spin, the divine figure once again took feminine form. Those smoldering red eyes admired the form reflected back in the mirror. The god struck various poses before their own reflection.

“Anyone would be honored to be in my presence! To be witness to my legendary beauty. To have... To have no reaction at all like that is... It should be impossible.”

A twinge of pain came from Ensmolderon’s chest. Commanding composure fell into slumped shoulders.

“Why do I even care... He’s just one stupid mortal. I’ll, I’ll show him. I’ll let him see me with other people. I’ve got to make dead sure I haven’t lost my touch, after all. Then he’ll see! I’ll show him exactly what he’s missing.”

After tidying up and making a few adjustments, the god left their shrine. It was, actually, the first time they had ever been outside. The shrine had a few windows, so they had seen the view before, though never they had never taken any interest. They looked around, eyes adjusting to the light. In the distance, they saw a figure, and flew in that direction. Ensmolderon traveled by leaning forward while still floating above the ground. However, when traveling so fast, they emitted an aura of flame, burning the grass beneath. They traveled until they reached that first figure they had seen. It was a human, but not Freis. It was some passing-by farmer, a man in his 50s. Once they were in his presence, they had his complete attention.

“Tch. Wrong human.” they said, dismissively.

The man swooned on sight. Anyone would have taken interest in such a flawless feminine body wearing next to nothing. That reaction wasn’t assurance enough; Ensmolderon wanted to use this opportunity to see how much their powers worked.

“Say, do you think you could do a headstand for me?” they asked with a lovely smile.

The man nodded vigorously, but did not say a word. It took a few attempts, for the man was getting on in his years, but eventually, he was able to do it. He fell over forwards shortly afterwards.

“That will do. Receive gracefully, the appreciation of flame.”

To thank the man for being a test subject, Ensmolderon flicked their wrist and a puff of flame deposited a smooth ruby into their hand. They flicked it towards the old man, and it landed gently on his stomach. With this, the god was off again, leaving a black path of singed grass in their wake.

The next human they found was indeed Freis. They felt relieved, and slowly came to a stop.

“Lo, young adventurer. Is this the path to the town of Immel?”

Ensmolderon was trying to play it cool.

“Y-You again? What in the nine hells?”

Freis was a whirl of emotion. Mostly anger, but also shock, due to the audacity and persistence.

“Oh? I am just a passing-by human, a bit lost on their way to the town.”

“... You literally looked like this twenty minutes ago. Also, no human woman floats above the ground, leaves flames in her wake, and just walks around with only fire covering their naked body. Also... are your earrings on fire?”

They felt pleased to hear that last bit, though they weren't sure why. They brought their hands next to their ears to draw attention. They were tiny, tiny bowls, which contained live flames. A golden string on either side of each bowl connected them to their ears. If Freis cared to look closer, which he didn't, he would have noticed they were literally two of the bowls from the shrine room, magically shrunken down.

“Oh, you like? I made them myself”

“They're fine. But that's not the point. Why are you here. How are you here.”

“Oh, how? Actually, it's the earrings. The shrine itself is the bridge between my astral form and this realm, but these earrings allow me to be connected to that bridge remotely.”

They seemed rather proud of themselves. And were missing the point. Freis put a palm on his face.

“All that trouble just to take me, huh? You're the absolute worst.”

Being a major deity, Ensmolderon is extremely difficult to harm. Even this vessel, this fraction of the god of fire, has never taken damage. But now, a sharp, sharp energy passed through their torso. Was this what pain felt like? They clutched their chest and reeled backwards. Freis, still thinking this all an act, was beyond done. And yet, he knew he was powerless before a god. He'd given up. His shoulders slumped and he turned around, and slowly headed towards the shrine. It took Ensmolderon a few moments to notice.

“Wait... what are you doing.”

Ensmolderon was worried. An unfamiliar pain began growing in their stomach.

“I'm submitting myself to your demands. I'd just rather do it inside.” Freis replied in a dead voice.

Ensmolderon was a panic of emotions. Are gods so powerful they can display every emotion at once? Of course they are.

“No, no, nonononono. You misunderstand. I just... how to put it. Seeing someone again after so many decades, I was really, truly lonely. So, I want to travel out into the world. You're fine. I don't want anything from you.”

Parts of that were true.

“Then why are you dressed like that?” Freis asked suspiciously

“First of all, that's rude. Just assuming I was wearing this to draw out your lust.”

That was, of course, exactly what they were doing, though.

“Second of all... How about this.”

The god twirled in the air, and clothing formed around their body. It was a low-cut red dress with orange flares around the bottom, and thigh-high boots. They also had a traditional mage's hat, in red, and a staff holstered in their belt. No matter the situation, they always had to look good.

“Okay, fine, so you don't want my body. Why are you here.” Freis asked, doubtful.

“You went to get my blessing because you wanted to go and be an adventurer, right? You want to travel the world. I also want to travel the world. I'll come with you. It's just... convenient. Plus, you wanted my divine protection, right? What's better than the real deal?”

Freis shook his head. He was having a hard time processing all of this.

“You can follow me to Sparrowwind. That’s where the guild is. You can find your own adventuring party when you get there.”

Freis wanted as little to do with this being as possible. If they were being truthful, this should be enough. He could endure it for this long.

Ensmolderon, meanwhile, was willing to take the temporary win.

“Alright. Adventuring partners.”

They proudly reached out a hand, to make it official. Freis rolled his eyes and started walking back to town. Ensmolderon blinked in confusion, and then followed.

“If you want to be seen as a normal human, you should walk.”

Ensmolderon floated down, until their feet touched the dirt path, acting like there hadn’t been a trail of burnt grass in their wake. The pair of them walked back to Immel.

## Chapter 2

When they reached the border of the village, Freis came to a stop. Ensmolderon stopped right afterwards.

“Uuuughh. Maybe we should just... take the long way around and not go into the village”

“Why is that?” Ensmolderon said, curiously.

“My mom is in there. I... you... she’ll get ideas.” Freis just hated the situation he was in.

“I see.” They didn’t see.

“Let me th-- you can turn into a man, right?”

“I’m genderfluid. I’m neither. Actually, if you could call me ‘them’ or ‘they’, I’d really like that.”

“No problem.” Freis said. Just because he didn’t like the person he was with, didn’t mean he had to be mean. “Anyway. You can present masculine, right?”

“Yes.”

“And still with clothes?”

They rolled their eyes. “Yes. I can whip up some clothes.”

“Okay, so, my mom thinks I’m straight, and so does everyone else in town. If you just... present masculine, everything will be fine.”

“Oh? If you’re not heterosexual, are you perhaps asexual?”

Something in their voice sounded hopeful. Like that would explain things. Not everything, but certainly why Freis was immune to divine charisma.

“No. I’m bisexual.”

“So you want me to present masculine because...?”

“Because I don’t want people to mistakenly think there’s interest between us.”

Their jaw dropped and another burst of current ran through their chest. To do their best to hide this reaction, Ensmolderon quickly spun around to change. This time, they were still the same lean, toned, attractive young man as before, but now they wore the flowing robes one would associate with the wizarding profession. Their outfit had a hood, but also a very low V cut in the chest, and exposed arms. Also, the boots now stopped just below the knees.

“Yeah, sure, good enough.”, Freis said, dismissively.

Once again, Ensmolderon found themselves dismayed at the lack of recognition. God of fire, baby! Hotness incarnate. They used to just feel angry about this, but now they felt... unhappy.

“One last thing... We can’t call you Ensmolderon.”

“I suppose not. Gods interacting with humans directly has had a fraught history. What if we just had people think I was the guardian deity of the shrine?”

“No,” Freis shook his head, “That won’t do at all.”

“Why not?” they said, confused.

“People don’t exactly have strong positive emotions about the shrine. In general, the people don’t like it, so much that they pretend it doesn’t exist.”

“Ouch,” they said. It made sense; they barely had any power from the praise of people, over the past 300 years. “What about your mom.”

“My mom especially doesn’t like it. Remember; I told you that my mom didn’t want me to go to your shrine to get blessed, even though grammy did.”

“Okay then, I’ll be a human. A human with a new name,” they said. After some hard thought, there was only one idea that felt comfortable. “What about Smolder?”

“That’s pretty odd.” Freis said, rubbing his chin.

“Smoldy?” they suggested with a weak smile.

“Yeah, Smolder will do.”

The pair walked into town, silently. Smolder tried to process their thoughts as Freis lead. Without meaning to, Smolder was turning heads all over town. Most women, and some men, were taken in by their masculine beauty. If they simply knew how well their power worked, they would perhaps feel a little better... But they had other thoughts on their mind.

Eventually they came upon a two-story house, made of stone, with a rainwater basin on top.

One of the first-floor entrances was a storefront, but that was closed right now. Freis walked to the door on the side, and knocked.

“Okay,” he muttered, “Just try to act... normal.”

Smolder had no concept of “normal”, aside from perhaps a synonym for “boring”. So, they decided to act very boring. It didn’t really fit with the flashy outfit, though.

Within a few moments, a woman of about 40 years old opened the door. She was tall, looked young for her age, frame slender, with a tiny bit of muscle. She wore a fashionable blouse underneath a rough but defensive leather tunic, underneath an apron, which bore some black stains. Her skirt went low, to draw minimal attention to her lower right leg, which was made of metal. Both legs ended with leather boots, but the left one clearly fit better.

“Freisy!!! How was the shrine?”

The boy was embarrassed to be called Freisy in front of anyone, even the weirdo of a god he picked up today.

“Oh, hey Mom. The shrine? Oh, it, uh, it went alright, yeah. Actually, I made a friend just outside the shrine. This is Smolder.”

Freis stepped sideways so as to introduce Smolder. The woman named “mom” was slightly entranced by Smolder’s visage.

“Why hello there, Smolder. I’m Saffron. Saffron Lancenhorn. But my friends call me Saff”

“Nobody calls you ‘Saff’, mom.”

“Why don’t you come in, Smolder. Make yourself at home.”

Saffron held open the door for Smolder, but let go after they were through. Freis rolled his eyes, and let himself in.

The first floor consisted of a kitchen, a set of stairs to upstairs, a door to the storefront, and a living room. The living room had a large table with four wooden chairs around it. There were a few other chairs against the walls, and a few cheap pieces of art or taxidermy on the walls. Saffron lead Smolder to a chair, pulled it out for them, and seated them. Then she sat down. The two were facing each other. Freis took a seat perpendicular to the two.

“Are you doing that on purpose” Freis muttered to Smolder.

“No, this just sometimes... happens.” they muttered back.

Saffron was just... taking in the look of Smolder. As soon as Freis started talking, she was brought back to reality, but still felt a little fizzy on her skin whenever she looked towards Smolder.



"So, Smolder, this is my mom. She's the best leatherworker in Immel."

"Hee... I'm the only leatherworker in Immel, though."

"Still makes you the best."

"Aw, thanks honey" she said, to her son, while still looking mostly at Smolder. "This new friend of yours... tell me all about him"

Freis sighed audibly. He looked over at Smolder. Smolder was... trying not to make eye contact with Saffron. Whenever his vision made contact with Freis, it tended to... get stuck there from time to time.

"This is Smolder. *They* are a person I met on my way back from the shrine. They're a spell-caster, specializing in fire magic."

Saffron nodded along.

"They wanted to visit the Shrine of Immolation", Freis continued, "but saw it was all decrepit."

Saffron nodded.

"I had made my way into it, but it was still really dreary"

"But you got blessed, right?"

"Yeah, mom, I got blessed."

"Didn't get harassed by the spirit?"

"Not really, no."

"Well, Grandma will be happy."

Smolder spoke up

"Could you tell me about the shrine, ma'am?"

"Oh, there's not much to tell. There's a reason we don't talk about it anymore."

"Please, tell me."

"Oh, well, the spirit who lives in the shrine is supposed to be a representative of the fire god, and thus will give people the blessing of the fire god. It is traditional that people from this village will get blessed before they become adventurers, but some used to do it before they started, say, blacksmithing."

"Uh-huh"

"Buuutt... one day the spirit just started getting really... horny. It tried to sleep with everything. Eventually people were coming from even the west side of the continent just to see the lecher god. A bunch of... weird people swarmed the town."

"I'm... I'm sure it's a more complicated story than just that."

"Who knows? Gods, am I right, Smoldy? People boarded the place up... over 200 years ago. The people of Immel were sick of being associated with it. I'm surprised a nice boy like you has heard about it."

The room slowly fell silent. Freis made a loud cough in order to snap the two back into reality.

"Well, I'd tell you about my life, but it's kind of boring..." said Smolder, trying to draw attention away from themselves.

"Oh, but I'd love to hear."

Freis was uncomfortable. Have you ever seen your mom slightly swooning for a person who only looks a few years older than you? And also that person seems to be occasionally giving you lovey eyes? Freis felt proud of himself for not going upstairs to his room.

“Oh, what about you? You’re Freis’s mom; what’s your story?”

“Oh, sure sweetie. I’m just a simple leatherworker. An ordinary mother, aside from that. I used to live here with my husband, but he was conscripted into the military. I couldn’t afford to raise Freis on my own, so I asked my mom to move in with me, and I took up leatherworking. Mom was always telling Freisy about adventuring. And it was her who wanted Freis... to.. visit...”

It was at that moment that a few gears began to click together. The way Smolder was looking at Freis. Smolder’s name. Smolder’s shrine story. The history of the shrine. This charisma. She blinked repeatedly, as though she had been sleeping and just woke up.

“It was my mom who wanted Freis to visit the shrine. That awful, accursed shrine.”

Previously, when Saffron spoke ill of the shrine, she was just repeating a well-known story. She was just stating facts. This time, it was slathered with a sense of... vindictiveness.

The moment that Smolder felt that vindictive sting, they realized that Saffron Lancenhorn had broken free of their charisma. Maybe this is normal, they thought. Maybe Saffron just has the same power of resistance that Freis has.

“Personally, I never wanted him to go to that... Fetishist Shrine. But unfortunately, my mom’s dying words were that Freis should visit the shrine. I didn’t see why he had to go. I never went.”

“Mom, you never needed the shrine. Grandma went because she was an adventurer.”

“R-right...” She paused. “I don’t know if you know, but you can join the guild at 16. Freis spent the last 5 years working for the local blacksmith. I’ve always thought it was because he wasn’t sure about the shrine, but wanted to heed my mom’s advice.”

A novel thought struck Saffron.

“Oh, Freis. Have you said goodbye to Master Clint yet?” she asked, while knowing the answer.

“Ah, uh, no...” Freis really, really didn’t want to do that. Expected.

“I have something I want you to give him, okay?”

She retreated into the kitchen. First, she lit a spark next to a magi-burner to activate it. Then, she went to the sink and filled a tea kettle with near-boiling water. She put the kettle onto the magi-burner, and then went back to the sink. She ducked underneath it to a chest where she kept some odds and ends. After some rummaging, she found an artifact consisting of a crude nail driven through a green gem, the entire thing set in gold. She put this object into her apron’s front pocket. Then, she moved to the low cupboard next to the sink, silently moved some pots out of it, to find three locked chests. She moved one to the front, removed a pin from her hair, and used it to open the lock.

“Mom...?”

Freis called from the living room. She was taking a bit longer than he was expecting.

“Just a minute~ I’m putting on some tea to have with Smolder while you see Clint.”

“Ah, okay.”

Well, that wasn’t false. But, as she was saying that, she was also taking items from the opened chest and put them on her person. A bracelet of resist charm went on her left wrist, an amulet of resist flame around a necklace was slipped under her blouse. A few throwing stars went into her left boot for good measure. She pulled up her skirt to check her two garter belts, each with three daggers. She shook her head; these wouldn’t do. She removed all six and put,

from the box, golden daggers with red gemstones, to replace each of them. Finally, she contemplated a short sword. It might be hard to conceal this one... She placed the sword on the kitchen table. Then, she closed the box, pushed it back into the cupboard, and put the pots to replace it. She was ready for war.

She poured out the kettle into a teapot, dropped some tea leaves in, and returned to the living room.

"Sorry, sweetie. I had a hard time finding it. So silly of me, I know."

She pulled the artifact out of her apron, and presented it to Freis.

Smolder and Freis stood up, and walked over to get a better look at it.

"What's this? ... Is this one of my first nails?"

"That's right! Mommy saved one of them, and had it turned into this nifty little trinket for Clint to remember you by!"

The son was embarrassed, but a little impressed with the craftsmanship.

"Who put the nail in for you?"

"Oh, you know, mothers have their secrets. Now, go give that to Master Clint while I have some tea with your new friend."

"Well, I could..." Smolder moved towards the door. They would rather have gone with Freis.

Saffron smiled warmly; her eyes shut so as to hide her true intent.

"No, I insist. Stay a while. Go ahead now, sweetie."

Freis was glad for a moment of respite from Smolder, so he took the trinket and went towards the blacksmith. He really didn't want anything to do with his former teacher anymore, but being polite would keep peace in the village.

Saffron continued smiling warmly, even after Freis had left. Once enough time had passed, she stepped forward. She took another step towards Smolder, ever smiling. Nervously, Smolder took a step backwards. They had no reason, really, to be nervous. She was just a mortal, after all, right? Something deep inside them wanted to make a good impression for Freis. After a few steps, they decided it was time to turn on the divine charm, to put an end to this. It didn't work, though. This continued until Smolder's back was against the wall.

"M-Ma'am?"

"What are your intentions?"

She continued smiling. Anyone would find this smiling unsettling by this point.

"I... I don't know what you..."

Her face turned stern.

"What are your intentions towards my son?"

"What do you mean 'intentions'? I just met him today, I---"

She slammed her arm against the wall behind him, just right of his head. Smolder had been in this situation before, except the aggressor had an open palm, and intent to flirt. They looked, and it was a fist, and it made an impact a half-inch deep into the wall.

"If you have deflowered my son, or will deflower him, then I swe--"

"It's not like that!"

“DON’T INTERRUPT ME IN MY HOUSE. Not when you come in here with *my* son. I don’t go to your shrine and interrupt you, do I? Oh, that’s right, I don’t go to your shrine. NO ONE DOES.”

“How do you know that?”

She deftly drew a dagger with her left hand, and it instantly went up to Smolder’s neck.

“Do you think I’m an idiot? Did you mistake me for a common, ordinary villager? Listen up, Small God, you’re going to tell me why you’re following my son around, or else.”

There were a lot of indignities that Smolder was willing to endure in order to get along with Freis’s mom. However, two words struck a chord. They spoke with more confidence than any lesser being would when put in this imposing situation.

“Small God? Excuse me, ma’am, but I am no small god. I am Ensmolderon, flame incarnate.”

Saffron had no reason to believe this. No mortals were privy to the inter-dynamics between shrines, avatars, and gods. She assumed this was a bluff, and called it.

“Bullshit. You’re the god of that shrine, right?”

“Yes.”

“The legendary lech.”

“I suppose...”

“What kind of upstanding true god would let that shrine reach that state? What kind of god would be so indulgent? Do you have any, ANY idea what you’ve done to the reputation of this village? Do you have any idea how many times my mother cried, when she heard rumors about your exploits? You’re a sham god who has taken Ensmolderon’s name, in order to gain praise. His Lordship just gets praise by association whenever you’re patronized. As a citizen of Immel, in His name, I will today correct that mistake.”

“No, listen mortal, you misund--”

“Die.”

She slashed at the god’s exposed neck. Just as the blade hit, Smolder disappeared in a puff of flame, and reappeared on the other side of the room. She had been expecting this, and launched throwing stars in that direction. Smolder was hit, and drew blood, but seemed otherwise unaffected. She took a second dagger into her right hand and rushed in.

“Please, let me--”

“You tainted this town. You let down my mother. You use a true god’s name in vain.”

She slashed in between words, which Smolder evaded with some effort. Saffron got a hit in, grazing the god’s arm. Smolder had to concentrate to not show a hint of pain. These daggers were specially made to cause harm to the divine.

“But the last straw, The Last Straw, is you coming in here and taking my son. Any mother would not stand for that. Unlucky for you, I am not just any mother.”

“Wait, wait! I care about Freis too!”

“You’re lying.”

Smolder purposefully took a dagger to the hand, so that he could pull it from Saffron’s grip. Saffron produced another one to take its place. She tried to direct the fight towards the kitchen, where a greater weapon lay in wait. All of Smolder’s actions so far had been evasive. They valued Freis, and thus didn’t want any harm to come to his mother. Surely, if they were to

burn this woman, Freis would hate them forever. The very thought brought misery. How does one describe these emotions?

“Surely if I were a creep, I wouldn’t bother taking a victim to his mother’s home and showing him off. I’m here because he wanted me to come.”

“You are a creep. You’ve done nothing to disprove you’re the very same sex creep minor deity who’s brought nothing but shame to this village.”

She sweep-kicked Smolder, who fell to the ground. To follow up, she dropped down on them with all of her weight going behind the dagger in her right hand. Smolder tried to roll away, but Saffron had been prepared for this and launched a dagger at them with her left hand, landing perfectly in the calf. They got up with the dagger still sticking out of their body. Saffron, of course, produced another dagger. Smolder was making for the door.

“Fine, I’m not going to explain myself to you!” they exclaimed.

With a burst of speed that was aided by a magical wind, Saffron appeared in front of the door.

“Oh, you’re not going to explain. You’re just going to die.”

Smolder went instead towards the kitchen, in hopes that they could use a window to escape. A hideous grin grew across the mother’s lips. Just as planned.

Saffron threw another dagger, this one on a string. The dagger was wide of the mark, but meant to herd her target into the kitchen. After it struck the wall, she recalled it.

“Honestly, I’ve wanted to kill you for quite some time.” If she wasn’t so angry it might almost sound casual. “I’m grateful to Ensmolderon that you’d come right into my den.”

“I AM them!”

They were in the kitchen now, running towards the window behind the sink. She followed, while performing a series of hand motions without dropping her daggers. The dirty dishwater in her sink, along with some of the dishes, rose to form a wall of water, blocking the window.

“I suppose I should thank Freisy as well. Perhaps I should bake him something.”

Smolder grabbed a dish and threw it at her as she talked, but she kicked it out of the way. Saffron launched a stringed dagger again, and the god-shard blocked with their arm. An electric current traveled through the string and into them. They gritted their teeth, before pulling the dagger out and throwing it to the floor.

“I don’t want to fight you!”

“I don’t care.”

She drew another, identical dagger, making Smolder wonder just how many of them she had. She suddenly charged again; her arms becoming a blur of blades. In panic, Smolder grabbed the first thing they found... a sheathed short sword. They held it horizontally to block the attacks with the scabbard.

“Hahaha! Good! This will end it!”

Saffron threw both daggers from her hands into Smolder’s feet, pinning them. In a swift motion, she grabbed the sword’s handle with her right hand, pulled it out of the scabbard, spun around, and struck at them from her left, swinging high. Smolder quickly blocked with the scabbard, vertically. Saffron lunged her knee into his exposed torso. The two fell to the ground, her leg pinning them down. She struck again, now towards his neck. As expected, the scabbard was used to block. She reached out her left hand, and grabbed the scabbard, holding it in place. She raised high the sword in her right hand, and changed to a reverse grip. With a shout, she

plunged the sword down into their perfectly exposed chest. The sword penetrated the entirety of the body, making contact with the floor. Smolder's arms went limp, releasing the scabbard, then falling to the floor.

Time passed. This actually hurt Smolder quite a bit, but they were enduring it. They felt like they deserved it. Freis's mother had every right to hate them, and they knew it. Smolder lay perfectly still. They weren't trying to play dead, they just had no idea what to do.

Saffron panted. It had been a while since she had to exert herself that much, and she felt out of practice. After she calmed down, something felt wrong. Shouldn't this small god be consumed by the sword? Nothing was happening. She was the first to break the silence.

"... You're not dead."

"... No, I'm not."

A pregnant pause filled the air. Saffron's eyes widened.

"No! No no no!" she pulled the sword out, and threw the scabbard to the floor. The wound sealed itself nearly instantly. Her eyes started to fill with uncontrolled rage. Smolder, for their part, had no idea how to react. She took the sword into both hands, and slashed wildly. The hits barely drew blood.

She threw the sword to the ground, and took out her last dagger. She plunged it into her opponent's gut. It went two inches in and stopped. She left it in, took another blade from the floor, and stabbed multiple times in various places with it. Her right arm kept shoving the blade in their stomach, to no avail. She tried to pull it across their body with both hands, but again, nothing.

"I'm sor---"

"FUCK YOU!!!" she shouted.

They said nothing.

Saffron let go of the dagger, letting it stay in Smolder's gut. At this point, the only thing Smolder was trying to do was not show pain. She punched down into his chest, to no effect. She punched again, and again, and again.

"Why aren't you even fighting back. Am I a joke to you? Is my family just a set of toys?"

Smolder only said what came to mind.

"You're his mom"

"So!?!?"

"... I... I want Freis to be happy. And if you get hurt, he'll be sad."

"You... what?"

She stopped punching and blinked in confusion.

"I don't know either. But, I can't bear to bring harm to either of you."

"What ARE you"

"I told you. I'm Ensmolderon"

She let out a long exhale. There was no other explanation, was there? But, it still raised more questions than it answered them.

"Then... Why do you love my son?"

"I-i-it isn't I-love" Smolder said, in complete denial.

She rolled her eyes.

"Is it lust? Are you going to use my son as your little doll?"

"No! I would never! Not, not unless he wanted me to...."

“Then it’s love”, she said, while getting up. She looked down and reached out an arm. They looked up, quizzically.

“Get up. I need to clean this place up before he gets back.”

“Why? Don’t you want to kill me?” They said.

“Yeah, but it seems that I can’t, so I’m going to hear you out, I guess. What choice do I have.”

With the two working together, everything was put back in order. There was no sign a fight had even occurred. Well, there was a half-inch dent in the wall, but you wouldn’t see it if you didn’t know about it. Saffron collected all of her daggers, and left the sword sheathed on the kitchen table. Saffron placed the teapot, some cups, sugar, and cream onto a tea tray, and brought it out to the living room table. They sat across from each other again. In silence, she poured into two cups. Finally, she had to break the silence.

“How do you like your tea?”

“Light cream, three sugars.”

With awkward silence, she prepared the tea, and pushed it across the table. This time, Smolder tried to start the conversation.

“You hit pretty hard for an ordinary village leatherworker,” they said, before sipping the tea.

“That fight took more time than I expected. I let the tea steep for too long.”

“It’s still pretty good. You didn’t really answer me.”

“I didn’t think that was a question. Speaking of questions, I have an awful lot.”

“Yeah... let’s just say I’ve done a lot that I’m not proud of.”

“I’ll say. Even if you are Ensmolderon, you still have done badly by this village. And my mom.”

“And for that I am truly sorry. Please, tell me how to redeem myself.”

“Why? Why would a god do all that? Why would a god seek redemption?”

“I... I don’t know.”

The answer lingered in the air before Saffron asked her next question.

“Why do you love my son?”

Smolder choked on their tea a little bit.

“I-it isn’t love...”

“You said that before. And I’m calling bullshit. I can tell.”

“A-anyway, love isn’t an emotion befitting of an immortal.”

Saffron let out an “mmhm.” before sipping some more tea.

“I don’t claim to know the gods, but I thought nothing was supposed to be impossible for them”

“Sure, but still... love? No.”

The knowing mother rolled her eyes.

“He doesn’t love you back, though, does he?”

“... no.”

“Mmm. If I was a weaker parent, I might feel bad for you. So, what are you going to do.”

“... With your permission, ma’am, I’d like to go adventuring with him. I... at the very least want to be with him. It just... makes me happy. Not the empty slut I had become.”

"I'm honored that His Lordship thinks he needs my permission to do something. But, if you want to make me happy, I've got two conditions. Firstly. Don't you dare make physical advances on him without his explicit consent."

"I'm not a monster. I don't do that to anyone."

"Secondly. You're going to go out, and with my son, do good. To make up for all the shit you caused for my hometown."

"Yes Ma'am."

"Be a god worthy of my son, so that my mother's spirit can rest in peace."

Smolder nodded.

Some time passed. They both sipped their tea.

"So, that nail into the gemstone... Guessing you slammed it in yourself."

"Hell Yeah." Saffron said with a sense of pride she tended not to show around her son.

"Professional work, not having the gem shatter."

"Ehhh, it was my third attempt. I broke the first one, and the second one got all cracked."

"That's definitely more physical power than an ordinary leatherworker needs."

"I never told Freis, but I used to be an adventurer. It was how I lost my right leg."

"Why'd you never tell him?" Smolder asked, curiously.

"I had... a bit of a rough time. I didn't want him to follow in my footsteps. I couldn't really stop my mom from telling him stories, though. Especially after my husband left."

"What really happened with him?"

"Oh, that wasn't a lie. Conscripted when Freis was 8, hasn't been seen since. So, my mom helped me raise him. You should thank her, by the way. She insisted that he visit the shrine before going to Sparrowwind. I didn't want him to."

"Ah..." They did feel thankful.

"Oh right, so I suppose you're going to register with the guild as well as him, then."

"Should I?"

"Oh, absolutely. If you're really the avatar of a god, you're going to need to do something. There's going to be a bit where the guild will take a sample of your blood. It's going to tell them your age. You need to make them think you're 18. I don't know how gods work but I imagine your blood is half a millenium old."

"Thereabouts. Could I have some more tea?"

They pushed the teacup across the table.

"Yes, certainly. That's the big thing you need to look out for, though. That, and suppressing your power. Can't have a G rank adventurer who can break boulders with their hands or suchlike."

She prepared a second cup of tea, and pushed it back.

"I'm pretty weak to begin with, as the locals have not given me much praise. This body, anyway."

"Still, you need to try really hard. You want to be in the same rank as him, right?"

"Yeah. Hey, can you tell me what to expect as an adventurer?"

"Ah, come on. The fun part is finding out."

Smolder let out a disgruntled noise and drank some more tea.



Shortly thereafter, Freis returned. He seemed exhausted. A little of the exhaustion was physical, but most of it was emotional.

"If I never see that man for the rest of my life, I will be happy."

Freis was pleasantly surprised to see his mother and his new acquaintance enjoying tea together. He had no idea a battle had taken place here. Though, there was a strange short sword on the table.

"Welcome back, honey."

"Yes, welcome back."

"Well, I'm glad to see you two are getting along."

Freis went into the kitchen, with the intent of getting a glass of water. He came back out of the kitchen with a glass in one hand, and a sheathed sword in the other.

"What's this doing here? Mom, you can't use a sword, right?"

Saffron panicked. She forgot to put the sword away. She used the first idea that came to mind, which was also technically true.

"This sword.... Was your grandmother's! I had just been telling Smolder about how great an adventurer my mother was, and I remembered this sword. I'm sure that Grammy would want you to have it, now that you're adventuring."

"Oh, well, thank you! I'm more of a long sword user, I think, but it would make a good backup weapon."

The mother held back a smirk. If only the three small gods which this blade had slain knew it was to be used by a G-ranker as a "backup weapon"...

Smolder finished their tea and Freis finished his water, in relative silence.

"Well, off you go! Don't let me keep you in little old Immel. It's a long walk to Sparrowwind!"

Smolder stood up, and bowed.

"Thank you for the tea, ma'am."

"Of course, deary. Freis, do you have everything?"

Freis patted himself down, and ran through some mental checklists. He nodded, and wedged the scabbard between his back and backpack. Then, his mother got up, grabbed his shoulders, and kissed both of his cheeks. She watched Smolder's reaction as she did this, and she felt her suspicions confirmed.

"Aaah! Not in front of my friend!"

Even if Smolder was barely a friend, it felt embarrassing.

"Goodbye Freisy! Goodbye Smoldy! Drop me a letter some time!"

"Bye mom!"

"Goodbye, ma'am."

And with that the two were off.

Saffron popped out of the door to yell one last thing, as they went towards the distance.

"If you see your dad, don't forget to punch him in the face for me!"

## Chapter 3

The long walk to Sparrowwind started silently.

It wasn't a terribly long walk from Immel to the major road. The path they were on was called a road, but it was really just dirt that had been stomped on so much, it could no longer support grass. On one side of the path, there was a wooden fence, marking the boundary of a farm. On the other side, there was a stone wall, about three feet tall. About halfway between Immel and the road, there was a gap in the wall, and a stone path. Freis made a turn, onto the stone path.

"Wait. Freis, the road to Sparrowwind is over there."

Freis turned back towards Smolder, and just... looked at him. Nobody ever looked at Smolder like he was an idiot, so he didn't recognize the expression. After an awkward pause, Freis tried to explain.

"This is the cemetery."

"Oh, okay. But, the road is over there. Actually, Sparrowwind is west. This way is east."

Freis pinched the bridge of his nose. He didn't want to explain, and felt he shouldn't have to. Turning on his heel, he pointed again down the stone path.

"Listen. You don't have to join me. I know you just care about adventuring, so I'll... I'll be right back, alright? Just stay there."

He walked down the path. There was just one last thing to do before going on the road to Sparrowwind. He wasn't sure when he would next be able to.

Smolder was curious, so they followed. Feeling the gravity of this situation, they levitated a little bit above the ground. They weren't stalking, they were just... following silently. That's what they told themselves.

The stone path went under a few trees, and then opened into the cemetery. It was a long hill with a mild but irregular incline, that continued down until it hit a stream. A second path, made of different stones, with occasional steps, went directly from the entrance down to the stream. The path had perpendicular branches every eight meters or so, but the stones only continued a few meters down the branch. From there, the only guides were the rows of headstones. Freis knew exactly where to walk, how many rows down and how many headstones over. He took to a knee, clasped his hands, and closed his eyes.

Smolder was a little perplexed by all this. They waited for Freis to get up.

"Who's Alex Stormslayer?"

"Gah!" said Freis, in shock. "I thought I told you to stay back at the road"

"Oh, you had said 'You don't have to join me', so I thought that my options were to join you or to stay there. So, uh, who is, or uh, was this guy?"

"Alex Stormslayer was my grandmother."

"Oh..."

"Yeah, so, show a little respect."

"Ah, well um, what do... how does one do this?"

"Oh, I just meant that as 'don't be rude'"

"I know. But, I really feel like I should do something." As they said this, Smolder took a similar pose to the one that Freis had taken. "I'm sorry; I've never done this before."

Freis felt confused, looking at the being who had, just earlier today, identified themselves as “the all-powerful god of FLAME!” now kneeling in front of a mortal’s grave.

“Is her spirit supposed to be called here? Should I say something to call her?” Smolder asked, with eyes still closed.

“I think you just say things and hope they get to her.”

“But she isn’t here.”

Freis crinkled his face in anger. Gods probably knew more about this sort of things than humans did, but you weren’t supposed to say that in a graveyard. Especially not when you’re talking about the relative of the person next to you.

“Just pretend that if her remnants or her gravestone can hear it, that she can hear it.”

Smolder knew that made no sense, but they also knew that Freis was annoyed.

“Alex Stormslayer, you took my blessing at a time when few others would. You believed in me, even when I was giving your town a bad reputation. Really, thank you for telling your grandson to come visit me. From now on, I intend to adventure and do good, in order to earn the respect you’ve shown me. Thank you.”

Smolder stood up. Freis was shocked. He didn’t expect to hear such sincere sentiment out of this mercurial entity.

“Do you want me to do anything else?” Smolder said, looking at Freis.

“I don’t even understand why you did that. I’m not going to tell you what to do.”

“I’m not sure I can explain it, myself. It felt right? I’m not sure.”

“I see...” Freis didn’t see. After a pause long enough to definitely be awkward, Freis turned around and went back to the main path. Smolder followed on foot.

They left the cemetery, and continued on the road out of Immel. The proper road, the one that lead to Sparrowwind, was around twelve meters across, with bricks laid at the edges to delineate where the “road” was. All the grass had been ripped out a long time ago, though some was trying to sneak in, from between the bricks. It was pretty firm dirt, with some grooves where carriages tended to drive. The two headed west. At first, this walk was silent.

Ensmolderon, or rather a piece of Ensmolderon, was reflecting on all that had happened so far. They were hotness. Raw fire. In both a literal sense and in a figurative sense. People had even flocked from other continents to bask in their radiance. And also feel their warmth... if you know what they mean. Being denied was... positively confounding.

The true, the core Ensmolderon, in the astral plane, to whom this one was connected, felt a little bothered by this circumstance. There existed other, lesser gods, but Ensmolderon was one of the high six. They should be all-powerful. It was irksome. They briefly considered immolating this “Freis” mortal on the spot, with their own, true power. But no. It cannot be a simple outlier. That was the problem with humans... if it can happen once, it will happen again. An elf, a dwarf, even simpler creatures like goblins, they respected divinity. If you killed an elf for doing something, no elf would do it again. Not humans. This Freis was an aberration. They needed to observe the human. Find the source of this ability. This resistance. It could be the god of water playing a trick on them, but they had to be sure. They knew their shard was weakened from the temple’s disuse, but any piece of this great god ought to be able to spot supernatural meddling. They would allow his shard to play as it wished. It would be some good, vicarious fun, at the very least. Their shard seemed bothered by this “love” thing. It was possibly

related. But no, the core wasn't bothered by this. They would, of course, freely allow their shard to continue acting on their wishes. It would be as to deny a piece of one's self, to try and stop them. They just didn't feel the need to concentrate on it too much. Yes, they had many godly duties to attend to. They could not just, as a supreme entity, sit around thinking of Freis's lovely eyes...

The entity who had lived in the shrine, Ensmolderon, the shard, the lustful one, was confused by love. Why did they love. What is love? It was, at the very least, a want. A need. They had never "needed" anything. Anything casually desired was usually obtained, and in short order. It wasn't just that they had never been denied... They had never waited any time to get ANYTHING. If that wasn't enough, this "love" thing made the pain of this circumstance harder to cope with. It was, to them, a realization that they had never really been complete until this moment. That being accepted would make everything right. And yet, it was met with nothing. They had no idea how to cope. Looking back at all their history and things experienced, what was the closest they could hope to achieve? The concept of "best friend" was the closest they could find. It lacked all of the romantic connotation. It lacked all the lustful acts. But aside from that, it was close enough. If this was all they could make Freis accept, it would have to do. For now.

Freis was fine with the walk being silent. He had a lot to think about. His mom seemed to like Smolder well enough, despite the two being alone together. And this act of remorse softened Freis a little, but he was still annoyed that someone was ruining his planned journey. If he could just ignore Smolder, he could pretend that nothing weird had happened today. He had been looking forward to this walk for a few years. No, really, he had been looking forward to this journey since before Grammy died. After she died, he knew for sure that he would have to walk this path alone, and had been imagining it for years. If he could just forget that someone was following him, it would all be as it was supposed to be...

"Hey Freis... Do you love anyone?"

Without intending to, Smolder broke the silence in as awkward of a way as possible.

"No? I mean, uh, I love my mom. But not in a weird way."

"Okay, so romantically. Do you?"

"No."

"Have you?"

"Yes."

There was a pause.

"... Why are you asking me this?"

"Ah, well..."

Smolder had to think of a lie. Something about lying to Freis felt wrong. They tried to tell the smallest half-truth that they could.

"I asked Saffron about your dad. I was just... wondering about love, I guess."

"Oh, because mom wants me to punch him?"

"... yeah." Smolder saw this as a good way of avoiding what they actually wanted to talk about, so they went with it.

“Yeah, I don’t... really know. I think mom feels abandoned? After he left, it was just mom and grammy taking care of me, forever. Actually, mom worked the storefront, so it was more grammy. So for seven years, it was just her and me.”

“Mmm... hey, this is a little awkward, but I don’t... really appreciate human timescales. Is seven years a lot?”

Freis stopped walking.

“What?”

Since Smolder was only following, they also came to a stop.

“I was mostly asleep for 300 years. I woke up occasionally. Literally today has been the last time in 300 years that I have been not asleep for more than an hour.”

“Wait, what were you doing for 300 years?”

“Sleeping. I just said.”

“No, I mean... that doesn’t make sense, does it? You must have been doing something during that time.”

“What do you mean ‘must’? There’s barely anything a god ‘must’ do.”

“But, what was going on with you? How did you feel? What happened during those 300 years?”

“If I would have ‘felt’ those moments, I would have ‘felt’ loneliness. Would you want that? I didn’t. So I didn’t take the journey, just the destination.”

“What? That makes no sense? Time doesn’t work that way.”

“Freis, time is just a social construct.”

Smolder said this as though it was common knowledge. This had Freis completely floored. In Freis’s world, this “common knowledge” that the god-shard had was patently untrue.

Looking at Freis’s blank expression, Smolder tried to come up with an analogy.

“Okay look, do you understand the idea of money?”

“What? I worked for a blacksmith for five years. That wasn’t all hammering metal. I understand money.”

“Then surely, you understand that money, too, is just a construct, and not real. It’s made up. Time? Same thing.”

They crossed their arms and nodded. Once again, an immutable truth had been said.

Freis was incredibly frustrated.

“Listen, I’m not an expert or anything, but money is used to represent value! A sword is made of raw iron, that a blacksmith heated up, hammered, and dunked in water, over and over and over again. When you pay for a sword, you’re paying for the iron, and you’re paying the blacksmith for the value of the time they spent. Money is... okay, it’s made up in the sense that the rate of value to money differs from person to person. But money... IS something.”

All this time, the two had been stood still, in the middle of the road. A carriage traveled toward them, eastbound.

“Out of the way!” yelled the carriage’s driver.

Freis moved to his right, giving the carriage a wide berth. Confused, Smolder looked around, and followed.

“Okay, let’s talk as we walk.” said Freis, already walking. Smolder followed.

“Sure... What were you saying?”

“Money represents value, which can sometimes mean expenditure of effort, but can also represent rarity of materials, but that itself kinda represents effort, to find it.”

“I see... Well, okay, it’s less made-up than I thought, but still made-up. As in humans, made it up in order to try and convert value to coins.”

There was probably no point in questioning why a god, or part of a god, didn’t understand money. Freis pressed on.

“Time? Time is completely not a concept. Time is limited.”

“Time is limited?”

“For humans, it is. I mean, time is limited for elves, and they live to 200 years old. I’ve been alive for 21 years, so grammy being dead is, well, a third of my life. You can understand the idea of a third, surely.”

“... Yes, I understand the idea of a third. But... how old is Saff?”

“Please don’t call my mom that. It’s... it’s super weird.”

“She told me to call her that.”

“Yeah, well, I’d rather you wouldn’t. She’s my mom, so call her my mom.”

“Okay, how old is your mom.”

“Oh, she’s... Huh. That is a good question. Gimme a minute.”

Putting his hand on his chin, Freis tried to think really hard about it...

“Forty-something? I don’t know, late 40s.”

“Don’t go acting like I’m weird for not knowing things when you don’t know how old your mom is!”

He sighed.

“It was never important. On her birthday, for the last few years, at least, she told me she was celebrating her 39<sup>th</sup> birthday.”

“If she was 39 for several years, doesn’t that just prove that time is a social construct?”

“No, no, that’s not how time works. One year you’re 39, a year later you’re 40, then 41... you get the idea. I just don’t know exactly how many times she told me that she was 39.”

Smolder shook their head. They might never understand humans.

“Okay, okay, I think I get it. Let’s say she’s 45. Your grandma passed 7 years ago. That’s one sixth. It’s also the most recent sixth. I think I get that.”

It definitely wasn’t worth it to explain how that logic was wrong. What was important was that they understood that it was important.

“Right, well, Dad was conscripted six years before that, I’ve been told.”

Smolder nodded, taking a moment to process that.

“So... he’s been gone for two thirds of your life! Surely you should more angry.”

Freis shrugged.

“Maybe I should be. You probably don’t understand childhood either, but the time he was around for was time that I barely remember. To humans, at least, the more recent time is the more it matters.”

“I see... This is all really hard. Time, I mean.”

“How long have you been alive?”

“Forever,” they said matter-of-factly.

Freis, thinking that Smolder was being purposefully obtuse just to show off, rolled his eyes. He was starting to get irritated by this exact mix of haughty and unworldly.

“No, I mean, you, you.”

He spun around, and pointed at Smolder’s chest. Smolder wasn’t expecting this, so their exposed chest made contact with Freis’s finger. Physical contact. This made Smolder smile, which only made Freis think that they were just messing with him.

It took Smolder a moment to compose themselves.

“Oh, this part of me? 843 years, three months, twelve days, and... exactly four hours.”

Freis was shocked. Who could possibly remember such a specific number so fast?

“How can you understand that and not understand time?”

“The time that this part of me exists doesn’t really matter.”

Not sure how to respond to that, Freis started walking again. Moments later...

“Then why did you say you were lonely?”

“I said it because I was lonely. Not me, me, but this me, me.”

There were only three explanations for this, Freis thought. Maybe Smolder was just consistently messing with him for kicks. Maybe the gods themselves are crazy. Maybe the gods are so complicated, that what seems simple to them is just really foreign to mortals. The truth was mostly the last option, but in Smolder’s specific case, that second one was true as well.

“Okay, we’re getting nowhere. Listen, here’s how I understand it. My mom misses my dad. Because she misses him, she’s actually really mad that he’s never come home. He might have good reason to be gone, but I don’t think that she cares. He hasn’t even written me- us a letter.”

Freis tried to correct himself, but wasn’t quite fast enough. In truth, he was a little sad that his father had never given either of them a sign that he was alive. He had kept telling himself that it was because his dad was dead, but there was no way to know for sure.

Smolder, of course, noticed that. They inscribed that sentence into their memory, to bring it up at another time. They had another line of questioning they wanted to pursue for now.

“If she wants you to punch him, does that mean she doesn’t love him?”

That gave Freis pause. He kept walking, of course, but stayed silent.

“No... no, I think... Listen, love is complicated.”

Smolder thought to themselves “*I’ll say*” but didn’t vocalize it. Freis continued.

“I remember, one time a sage told me, ‘the opposite of love isn’t hate, it’s indifference.’ I think that means that mom is mad at dad *because* she loves him. Does that make sense?”

“No. It doesn’t.”

Smolder thought to themselves, either humans are crazy, or humans are so complicated, that what seems simple to them is just really foreign to the gods. The True Ensmolderon probably would have assured their shard that the latter simply wasn’t true. Smolder, however, had doubts.

“Yeah, well, it doesn’t to me, either. I can’t act like I truly know my mom, I just have to figure it out with what I’ve got.”

The two walked in silence for what was perhaps five minutes. The last things that had been said actually gave the two a lot to think about. Although, not for all of the same reasons. Eventually, Smolder spoke again.

“What do you know about your mom?”

“Huh, what do you mean? She’s my mom. Like she said, ordinary mother, only leather-worker in Immel. Once a month she travels to buy animal hides in bulk, and spends the next three days tanning them. For the rest of the month, it’s sewing and selling. You didn’t really see

it, but half of our first floor is just a shop. That's where she keeps a lot of the leather armor and such. Actually, the jacket I'm wearing is lined with leather armor that she made me."

Smolder wasn't satisfied. Freis's description sure didn't sound like a description of the woman who tried to kill them.

"What did she do before she was leatherworking?"

"You know, I don't think I actually know? I'm sure it was something boring. I suppose that my dad earned the bulk of the income when they were living together, because I don't remember grammy taking care of me until he left."

"What did she do before she met your dad?"

"I have no idea. She never talked about it."

The truth was, Saffron kept her past a secret. Nobody in the village knew what she was up to in the time between when she became an adult and when she came back. She didn't want Freis to know. She didn't want anyone to know. Smolder was slowly figuring that out.

"What about her leg? I mean, I'm no dummy; I can tell that's an artificial leg. What do you humans call those again?"

"The proper term for it is Alchemic Prosthetic Body-Augmentation, but people just call them prosthetics. So, you would say, my mom has a prosthetic leg. My understanding is that a feral boar attacked her when she was younger, and bit her leg off. I don't know when she got the prosthetic. They aren't cheap. I offered to buy her a new one with the money I was making blacksmithing, but she was insistent that I didn't. It was probably going to be about two years pay, but I was willing to do it."

Smolder had a hard time believing that the woman he fought would have ever found a feral boar to be a threat. It must be a lie that she was telling Freis.

"You must really care about her."

"Yeah. I do. She's my only mom, you know? In fact, I guess... since grammy died, she's all I've got."

The discussion was starting to turn sentimental. Freis's voice sounded a little shaky, and Smolder was worried he might cry.

"Eh? You've surely got friends in town?"

"No. Immel's a really small town. Most kids, when they reach adulthood, leave town. I'm the only one of my friend group who stayed. At this point I have a better relationship with their parents than I do with them."

"Hold on. I still don't understand time as humans do. I roughly get the difference between an adult and a child. But in terms of time, how does that work? How long was that?"

Freis sighed. He wondered if his life was going to be answering the mundane questions of this quirky god-ish entity. He was really hoping that when they hit Sparrowwind, Smolder would find someone else that would catch their interest more. He was absolutely wrong, but had no earthly way of knowing.

"Sixteen. That's the official age when you become an adult. Generally adults want your life to be about education before then. Well, some people argue that adulthood is 21, because that's when you can drink liquor."

Smolder remembered a line from his discussion with Saffron. She wanted them to manipulate their blood, to pretend to be 18. Why 18, then?

"Do you like drinking liquor?"



"I've only had a little bit and it kinda tastes really weird. But, I guess I'm glad I waited until I was 21 to go join the guild. What I want is a normal adventuring life. Hanging out at the guild-hall in my off hours, drinking beer with my friends and sharing stories. If I was only 16, it just... wouldn't feel the same? I want everything to be normal."

Smolder had been given liquor before. Plenty of times. It was a common offering. They'd also sat around with humans who were drinking liquor, and listened to them tell stories. Apparently this was a thing that humans did. Despite the fact that humans liked it, alcohol was, in essence, poison. Being a divine entity, Smolder suffered no ill effects from poison, alcohol included. Still, if Freis wanted to drink beer with his friends, Smolder would have to pretend to be 21. It seemed pointless, because they were actually 843, but there might be a problem with the blood test Saffron mentioned if he was 843. They made a note, not to manipulate themselves to let out 18-year-old blood when hit, but 21-year-old blood.

"So, you stayed in Immel for five years after you became an adult?"

"Yeah. Worked for the local blacksmith."

"Blacksmithing is big in Immel, right? Big blacksmithing town?"

That was what they remembered hearing. They had never been outside the shrine, but the town had been described to them in great detail. There was a picture of the town in Smolder's imagination. But the town they walked through felt much smaller, and less lively. Moreover, there weren't nearly as many plumes of smoke in the sky. They didn't seem to feel much fire energy in the area, either.

"Eh? No, not really. I'm told most towns have a blacksmith, so we have one. Aside from working on new weapons, I've got to do some repairs to some beautiful armor. A few adventurers would come by here before heading further east, and had armor damage from things on the way. I, uh, kinda have my dream armor all planned out. How I'll look when I become a proper adventurer."

Planning out armor was strange, Smolder thought. They didn't have an awful lot of imagination, compared to humans, so they thought wasting that on armor seemed pretty silly. But they'd leave that for later.

"That's a shame. Centuries ago, I gave my blessing to almost as many beginner blacksmiths as I did adventurers."

"I... I did not know you gave blessings to blacksmiths."

"Yeah. I did. You could've come visit when you were 16, you know. Really, a few circumstances aside, it SHOULD stick on you all your life."

"I thought it was just for adventurers. For, you know, good luck adventuring. Grammy didn't really talk much about it, other than it being one of the things one does before becoming an adventurer."

"Good luck adventuring'?" they repeated, confused.

"Well, yeah, that's what it's for, right?"

"Why would you think I dealt with luck? That's outside my purview."

Freis nodded, and the two continued walking. Freis thought it over some, then asked a question.

"So, if the 'blessing of the fire god' isn't good luck, what IS it?"

"Oh, it's what would formally be known as a minor blessing of resistance from fire and flame damage, as well as resistance to heat, and an aura of reduced enflamability."

“Eh? What? You’re kidding me, it’s actually something that specific and detailed? I thought gods worked in mysterious ways.”

“The way we accomplish our long-term goals are mysterious, but only in so far as mortal knowledge is limited, and you’re unable to see the broader picture. No offense personally meant. The actual way we take care of business? The nitty-gritty details of individual transactions? Quite specific.”

“Wow... I don’t think anyone I’ve met knew that that’s what it was.”

“Well, it’s a mouthful to say, isn’t it? That’s why it’s called the blessing of the fire god. Furthermore, it’s a package deal. You can’t lose one piece without losing it all. If you make a pact of devotion to a different god, all parts of it are void. Also void when you become undead. I think by now, mortal sorcerors’ dispel capabilities might be able to peel it off, but it would take some work.”

“Wow...” Freis was speechless. To most mortals, these inner workings of godly matters were a complete mystery. These were the sorts of things that scholars dedicated their lives to figuring out. But this godly avatar was just spitting these details out like it was nothing.

“Every time I caught fire at work, I could have avoided it?”

“If you had been blessed first? Yes. Well, it’s just resistance; if you really want to get yourself burned, you’ll get yourself burned. I personally have no idea what motivates you in your actions, and neither do flames. If I had given you some sort of... I don’t know, flame-quenching aura, you’d never be able to use the forge, right?”

“I suppose that’s true.”

“Right. Can’t give mortals some sort of power to make flames obey their wishes. Not for free to everyone. But, hey, I understand that most mortals are kinda fragile when it comes to fire, so why not offer some protection?”

“Why are you telling me all this?”

Smolder blushed. They felt very glad that Freis was in the front. They hadn’t figured this love thing out yet, but their interactions with mortals told them of the concept of a “special someone”. The answer to Freis’s question should have been as simple as “because you’re my special someone”, or “I want you to be my special someone”. Mortals work in mysterious ways, Smolder might be tempted to say. Surely at this point, telling him that they loved him wouldn’t be received well. They could not afford to be so straightforward. And yet this was the reason their lips moved so easily. Perhaps some massaging of the truth was in order. They would have to get their story straight when they talked with mortals other than Freis.

“I’ve wronged the people of Immel. I’ve wronged your grandmother. I want to redeem myself.” Smolder decided to leave out the fact that this was what Freis’s mom told them to do.

“What’s all this got to do with me?”

“You woke me up. You woke me up, asked for a blessing, and made me aware of my bad reputation.” Smolder omitted... a number of other details here.

“I’m pretty sure it happened because I denied your advances”

“No no no, the fact that you denied me simply lead into me understanding my reputation.”

This bit here, this was a complete lie. Too much was omitted in that chain of events to make it anywhere near the truth. Freis could tell that there was something more, something wrong about this, but couldn’t put his finger on it.

"It seems to me that the most expedient way of redeeming myself would be to be an adventurer. My understanding is a little limited based on my perspective, but I understand that adventurers are thought of as 'do-gooders.' People who go around, doing good deeds."

"I know what a do-gooder is. That's not all an adventurer is, though."

"That's just it, though. That's roughly where my definition ends. I could list some good deeds, I suppose. Flushing out arrogant dragons, rescuing cats from trees..."

"You're not interested in the camaraderie? The loot? The exploration of the unknown? What about the thrill of battle? All of the... adventure." Freis had a lot of strong, positive emotions about adventurers.

"If any of those happen, it's secondary to my true goal." It was secondary to their true goal, it's just, really, doing good was secondary as well. Camaraderie, specifically being with Freis, was the real end goal. "I guess I wouldn't mind learning about those things. No piece of me is all-knowing, but people expect it of Ensmolderon."

"Hey, earlier you said that 'Gods interacting with humans directly has had a fraught history.' What exactly did you mean by that? And why can you interact with me?"

"Well, by humans, I really meant 'society as a whole'. One human is fine; after all, I can be visited at any time in a shrine. But that's simple interaction. Regarding the fraught history, when gods walked among humans, we were given special preference and disrupted society's natural progression. So I want to be seen as a human, if I can help it."

"Well, that means no shape-changing when people are around. Act normal."

"Ugh, how boring," Smolder was bugged by the word 'normal'. "Back to adventuring, why don't you teach me more about it? Furthermore, doesn't this seem the easiest way of handling things? You want to be a new adventurer, I want to be a new adventurer... Let's be partners once we get to Sparrowwind!"

"Ugh. I suppose you're going to have trouble registering without me. Listen, I'm not going to promise to be your partner or anything, but yeah, we can do some adventuring together. If someone as strong as you would even want me around."

Freis remembered the ranking system for adventurers. Depending on your initial assessment, you could be placed in G, F, or even E rank. Smolder was surely strong enough to qualify for E. Even if they only qualified for F, they were sure to shoot up the ranks. The more different your ranks, the less appropriate it was to go on quests together. Freis was in no hurry; he wanted to savor the adventuring life. If he could make it to B rank before he died, he'd be happy.

"Ah, come on. I'm sure I'd be completely lost without you. Plus, you already know my secret. The fewer people I have to share my identity with, the better."

"Why does it need to be a secret?"

"Because gods work in mysterious ways."

"But earlier you said--"

"Mysterious. Ways." Smolder insisted.

Freis sighed and continued walking. He was brewing up a plan.

Eventually, the sun set. Freis looked east, trying to see something with the last of the sun's light. Then, he shielded his eyes while trying to look ahead, west.

"What are you looking for?" asked Smolder.

"I was hoping there was some sort of rest stop ahead," Freis said, still looking.

The road extended pretty far forward, with barely anything on either side. Several hundred meters to the road's north, there was a dense forest, but only a few trees dotted the field in between the road and forest.

"Didn't we pass a covered campsite a little bit ago?" asked Smolder.

"Smolder, that was an hour and a half ago."

The road went over a tiny hill between said campsite and where they were. Freis had looked east, only to see that the campsite wasn't even visible anymore, because of the hill.

"Sorry," they shrugged. "Bad with time."

"It's fine," Freis said, with a twinge of disappointment. "I was just looking for a safe place to spend the night. The forest outskirts will have to be good enough."

"I thought we were going to walk all the way to Sparrowwind." Smolder said, confused.

"Well, it's dark out. We can't continue for long."

"I can make fire anywhere. I could light our way" said Smolder, not understanding the nature of the problem.

"What? No, no, I need to rest. Humans can only stay awake for so long."

"I thought humans could stay awake for over two days."

Freis had a strong feeling he was going to grow exhausted at Smolder's lack of common sense.

"While that's true, most humans like to run on a cycle of 16 hours of being awake, 8 hours of sleep. Roughly."

"Oh. You know, I can just fly us to that big city to the west, if you want," said Smolder, as if it were no big deal. "I didn't mention it before because we were going to walk the whole way."

"No thank you," said Freis, slightly insulted. "I've had this walk in my mind for at least a decade. I'm not going to take any shortcuts. I'm going to start the normal adventurer life with the normal walk to Sparrowwind, like my friends and all the adventurers from Immel before them."

Many of Freis's school friends actually pooled together money for a carriage ride. But Freis's grandmother had talked about the walk, so he was going to walk.

Smolder decided it wasn't worth it to question Freis's use of the word 'normal' at this time.

"So, should we go over to the forest right away?"

"Meh. Let me walk for another hour."

Smolder shrugged, and the two continued.

After walking for an hour and a half, Freis suddenly turned north, towards the forest. A few trees into the forest, he took off his backpack and sat down with his back to a tree, legs out. He made sure to position himself directly on the north side of the tree. Smolder sat down, cross-legged, in front of him.

"Yeah, this will be good. Are you good with this?" Freis asked.

"I don't need to sleep. I'm only stopping where you're stopping."

"So, you wouldn't mind being lookout? Watching for enemies while I'm asleep?"

Smolder realized that, in a way, Freis was asking them to keep him safe. That was a sign of trust. It took some effort for them not to beam with delight. Instead, they nodded.

"I can do that."

“Thank you,” he removed a thick rectangle from his backpack. The outer layer was hand-folded wax paper. “Hey, do you want some food? I have some extra.”

“I don’t need food in any way. It would be a waste.”

“Probably for the best. They don’t taste great, they just preserve well. Water?”

“Also don’t need it. And I’m not a huge fan of the stuff.”

“Oh. I guess that makes sense.”

Freis unwrapped and ate the rectangular ration, drinking repeatedly from his flask until the ration was finished.

“Anyway,” Freis continued. “Am I correct in guessing that you need to follow me because you need to understand human society better?”

“Yes,” said Smolder. That was one reason, anyway. “You also seem to have a lot more ideas about adventuring than I do.”

“And perhaps if you understood these things better, you’ll feel confident enough to go adventure on your own?”

“Perhaps.” There was no way that was happening. “Hey, aren’t you supposed to sleep?”

“Right, I’ve got a lot of explaining to do. I just finished walking, and I ate. I need to relax for something like a quarter of an hour to an hour, to let all the energy leave my system.”

“I thought walking drained energy.”

“It does, but it gets our bodies in a state of... tension? Of being ready to expend energy. The food helped tell my body that it was time to wind down, to head towards a state of rest. Then, while I rest, my body is going to relax all my over-used muscles, while using the food to restore my energy”

Freis found it difficult to explain such basic concepts. He had some experience babysitting local children in the evening, so he wasn’t completely lacking when it came to simplifying ideas. They were just ideas that were such a part of everyday life that he had forgotten about them.

“Hey, so is that energy like mana? Humans are always talking about mana, right? Is it just that it’s food energy? Is that the secret of mana?”

“I’m not a wizard or a cleric or whatever. I don’t know things about mana. Isn’t that supposed to be your purview? That a mage gives you their mana?”

“Ah, that is a common misconception. The mana is actually used for safely creating small holes in the barrier between realities. Through these holes, sentiment, energy, and matter are exchanged.”

“Wait, so do they give you their mana or not?”

“Most of what they do with the mana is open a hole. But yeah, they give it to my Astral Form, which holds onto it as energy.”

“What do you mean by sentiment?”

“Oh, I thought you humans understood that. It’s prayer and such. You wrote me a very lovely little note to summon me this morning. When you burned it in the bowl, the sentiment reached me, even if it was a little insincere.”

“So, offerings. Mana is an offering, prayer is an offering, and in exchange... fireballs or whatever?” asked Freis, feeling like maybe he understood.

“Well, that’s how I interact with humans. I understand that mana is used for different things by different types of spellcasters. I was hoping you could tell me more.”

"I'm just a blacksmith who swings a sword at people. I know less about mana than you do, it seems. Wait, so, the thing I say every morning at the forge..." he trailed off, wondering.

"The blacksmith's oath? Yeah, I hear that. Well, not me, me. But the big part of me."

"Alright, now I have to ask," he said, shaking his head. "What do you mean by you, you and big you?"

Now was Smolder's turn to explain basic concepts. Luckily, Smolder had a little more practice in putting this information in words humans could understand.

"This body that you see before you, this is just a vessel. A shard. A fragment. I'm one of a dozen avatars that Ensmolderon has on this planet. When a mage casts a fireball, they're not talking to me, to this body. They're contacting the astral plain, where the truth of Ensmolderon is. That's where they get the fire from. But at the same time, all fire fundamentally is them. Just as I fundamentally am them."

"You keep saying fundamental," Freis shook his head. "I don't understand it. Furthermore, doesn't that mean you're in multiple places at once? A thing can't be in two places at the same time."

"Ah," Smolder said, understandingly. "That is a common misinterpretation of a different rule. What you're thinking of is 'two things can't be in the same place at the same time.' That is what the rule is. Even then, 'place' has more space than most people think it does."

Freis stared blankly. Smolder stood up, and walked by Freis. They touched Freis's head.

"This is you, right?" Something about making physical contact with Freis gave Smolder a pleasant feeling, which rippled through their body.

"Yes. I'm here," said Freis.

Smolder then walked over to Freis's feet. They squatted down, and grabbed a foot. Too much cloth was in the way, so the feeling wasn't the same. They let it go.

"But you're also here, right? This is still you, isn't it?"

"I suppose..." Freis was reluctant, but he saw the point.

"If I had placed a bottle here, and a bottle there, you wouldn't complain that there were two things in one place, would you? So it's not the same place."

Freis nodded. "Why bottles?"

"People seem to think I like wine," they said with a shrug.

"Okay, and I guess next you're going to say that you and Ensmolderon are connected through a dimension or otherwise means that I can't see?"

"That's correct," said Smolder, nodding.

"Is it anything like there being a tether through a hole created via mana?"

"It's nothing like that," they said, not knowing why someone would even think that.

Smolder walked back to where he was before, and sat back down.

"A long time ago, we god-shards used to use the word 'hand' to describe ourselves, because, you know, we're like an appendage. The term 'hand of god' got a bit..." they hesitated, "out of control, and as a result, we're not really saying it anymore."

Freis nodded in understanding.

"So, every fire is similarly a piece of you?"

"Here's where it gets a little more tricky," Smolder said, "While every fire can be a part of me, they aren't necessarily. They're... inhabitable? Like clothing? No, not like clothing, like..."

"Like the hairs on my arm?" Freis offered helpfully.

“No,” Smolder said with a frown. “It’s not really like that. It would be like if your hair were to be cut off, but you could still willingly manipulate it with your thoughts, and also if other people tried to use the energy in your hair to make something in the shape of your hair, you could still manipulate it as though it were your own hair, because in a sense a tiny piece of you exists within all energy in the world in the form of heat, I mean in the form of Freis, with this analogy.”

Freis was completely lost.

“Mysterious ways?” he offered.

“Yes. Is there anything else I can help you with?”

“Not tonight. I’m going to lay down, keep working on my cover story for you, and go to sleep.”

“Alright. I’ll ask about it in the morning.”

Freis stood up, and positioned his sword next to the tree, with his backpack on top of it. He tossed his grandmother’s sword to Smolder, who caught it easily. He laid down such that his head was on the backpack, and his legs were pointing a little more westward than the had been before. He turned his back to the east, and to Smolder.

“Good night. Thank you for keeping lookout.”

“Of course.” Smolder said. After a pause, they quickly appended it “It’s not like I have anything else to do tonight. So why not, right? Plus you’re helping me out, with this whole Adventurer thing, so...” he trailed off. They noticed that Freis was motionless, and decided not to bother him.

Smolder stood up, and quietly unsheathed the sword. They inspected the blade in the moonlight.

Morning came without incident. When Freis woke up, he heard the sound of sharp gusts wind. Smolder was practicing sword techniques. Mostly they were just practicing the motions that they had seen Saffron use the previous day. Every now and then, they would cover the blade with flame during a slash, only to cut it off for the next slash. Freis sat up, and observed. After finishing a set of moves, Smolder stopped and turned to Freis.

“Good morning. That’s what I say, right?” said Smolder.

“Yes. Good morning to you, too. How long have you been practicing?”

“Most of the night” they said with a shrug. “Nothing better to do. I’m not used to being awake for this long.”

“Well, your technique is very good. In fact, you should---” Freis cut his words short. What he had wanted to say was “In fact, you should try to be less good so that you don’t seem too strong.”, but that was ultimately contrary to his overall goal of parting ways with Smolder.

“I should...?” asked Smolder, curiously.

“You should keep that up. One thing, though, please don’t melt my grandma’s sword.”

“Oh, no, don’t worry. The blade doesn’t get hot from this at all.”

“If you say so...” Freis said, reluctantly.

“I’ll show you,” said Smolder, with an eerie calmness.

Making no motion, Smolder willed flames to cover the blade. They walked forward to Freis. It was somewhat intimidating, so Freis forced a smile. Once a few feet away from him, Smolder extended his arm and the blade, so as to put the tip of the blade at eye level, and

about a hand's length from Freis's face. The flames extended further, and Freis felt the heat on his face. Without any warning, the fire vanished. The heat vanished. Smolder smiled.

"See? Touch it. Quickly now."

Freis moved his right fingertip to touch the tip of the blade. As promised, it wasn't warm at all. It did draw a little bit of blood, though.

"Ow! That thing is sharp. But yeah, it's not hot. Hey, actually," he said as he inspected the blade. "This thing has been kept sharp. Someone definitely sharpened it in the last few years."

Freis found this very curious; it didn't make sense. Smolder had to bury the lead, and fast.

"Oh, but this is a magic sword, isn't it? See the energy auras near the hilt? So maybe that's making it stay sharp when it shouldn't."

Freis kept looking at the blade. "No... I'm a lot more of an armor expert than a blade expert, but this has definitely had work done on it. Mmm, I wonder how that happened."

Freis turned away, back to his bag, and drank from his canteen. In this time, Smolder sheathed the blade and sat across from Freis.

"Maybe she was getting it ready for you?" Smolder offered.

"Maybe... It does look like it should be a family heirloom, even if it's not exactly my style. I dunno, though, maybe she was practicing it for self defense? Naaah, there's no way, right? I would know if that were the case, surely."

"I don't know, Freis. You didn't know how old your mom was."

"Ehhh, that doesn't count. I knew she was kidding... after a while. I mean, I figured it out when she spontaneously jumped from 29 to 39."

"I'm not an expert regarding time, but it sounds like she's been serially lying to you for years. Maybe she used this sword and sharpened it for herself," they said, with a degree of seriousness.

"I guess it's possible. But unlikely. It's really hard for me to imagine her swinging that around. Whatever, though. She gave it to me, and I'm letting you borrow it until you find a nice sword. Alright?"

"Okay. So are we walking again?" Smolder was at least glad that was over.

"No, hold on. I need to exercise."

"Walking isn't exercise?"

"It's great for the legs, but I need to work out my upper body as well. Gotta have balance." Smolder shrugged.

(A full day passes, then another morning. Plenty more exposition during that time. then we get to a big ol' city in the distance)

(Note: Placeholder names approaching. Deal with it.)

With a population of around 50,000, Sparrowwind was the third largest city in the kingdom of Seiken. For comparison, the town of Immel had a population of around 400. The city was close to Seiken's western border with both Densetsu and Koutetsushin. That was where its tac-



tical value lay, to the kingdom. Between Sparrowwind and the three-pointed border, there were a few farming villages, barely worthy of being called towns. Whenever it looked as though unfriendly troops were gathering at the border, the villagers would flee into Sparrowwind. Its sturdy walls would afford the royalty the time to negotiate the defense of the town with adventurers, and to relocate the country's soldiers. For that specific reason, the kingdom had decided that the main branch of the adventurer's guild would be there. Not being terribly fond of being used as tools, the guild de-emphasized the branches in other major cities. Furthermore, they took personal steps to strengthen the wall, for their own use. That being said, the last time either Densetsu or Koutetsushin had a problem with Seiken was over 100 years ago. All of this is to say that, for good reason, this city's walls were really freaking big.

At this point in time, the city walls were the largest man-made structure that Freis Lanchorn had ever laid eyes on. He was amazed, and just took in the sight, dumbfounded. Archers patrolling the top of the wall murmured to each other about how long a kid had been staring at it.

In a manner of speaking, this was also the largest thing Smolder had seen. Well, Ensmolderon had seen far, far greater things than this, and if one were able to ask the true form of Ensmolderon, they would find this city to be barely significant. As a result, Smolder was both confused and unimpressed. Perhaps if someone had explained to them the tactical significance of the wall, they would at least understand why it was there. For now, it was actually a bit of an eyesore. An eyesore that Freis was staring at, which of course made them and Freis a sight that other travelers were staring at. Smolder was content to let his buddy gawk for as much as he wanted.

A set of bells within the city walls chimed, and then let out three deep rings. It was 3pm.

"Wh-what is that!?!!" said Smolder, thrown off balance.

"That, my friend, is a social construct." Freis said with a smirk.

"Oh, it's a clock tower," they said, after having received the information from their astral-plain self.

"Yeah. We used to have one in Immel, but eventually nobody knew how to maintain it. The town doesn't make enough money to want to get it fixed. I tried to calculate how much metal I would need and, well, it was a lot."

"Hey, we should go in there, so I can see this clock tower."

Smolder wasn't really interested in the clock tower, but they felt that perhaps Freis had been staring at a wall for too long.

"Oh, I guess..." Freis trailed off, still taking in the sight.

Smolder waited the few more minutes it took for Freis to be satisfied. Then they entered the city through its eastern gate. Freis waved at the gate's guards, who remained motionless.

Inside,

(Notes: Going to describe the inside of the city before reaching the guild. A thing of note is that there's a 'shrine to Ensmolderon', which looks nothing like them and is a bearded blacksmith.)

## Chapter 4

Freis stopped at the large double doors of the guildhall. Smolder stopped as well, but was a little confused. Freis turned to Smolder, who in turn turned to look at him. The young man firmly planted his hands on the god's exposed shoulders. They felt... tingly. Good. And he was looking them in the eyes. Even if his eyes had a stern expression right now, to Smolder they always had... a certain beauty to them that they could not put into words. Fries's stern words soon snapped Smolder out of their dream world and back to reality.

"Okay, this is important. We talked about this, but let's go over this again."

"Right. We have to get our story straight."

"Yes. Because, please, all I want is to become a normal adventurer. Like grandma. I want a life of climbing the ladder of the guild system, slowly, and without any divine help. And to that end..."

"...I need to seem as normal as possible."

"Right."

Far to the east, Mt. Trueflame was rumbling again. A part of all this sat uneasy, deep in the lower abdominal region of the god-shard's body. However, it was what Freis wanted. There was nothing, nothing in any plane of reality, that Smolder wanted to do other than spend time with Freis. The divine dignity of the god of flames would have to endure this slight against them, in order appear "normal".

"I know how to do this. Remember, this vessel you see before you is but a conduit for my divine supremacy."

"... Also try not to talk like that."

"I'll try. As this ves-- body of mine is but a conduit, I can control how much divi-- strength I embody out of the whole, in the spirit realm. I can, when the guild scans me, suppress my powers, so that I have the... what did you say? Statistics? ... of a normal adventurer."

"Good, good. What else."

"My name is Smolder. Smolder Lancenhorn"

"No it isn't."

"Smolder Flametruth."

"Yes."

"My family is from Vesselmere, and became shipwrecked on the southern coast two generations ago. Because they were afraid of persecution, they lived away from society. As a result, I know very little about Sparrowwind, the guild system, and so on."

"Good, good."

"But, I knew I had a natural talent for fire magic, and felt the call to adventure."

"Almost everything..."

"And it was when I was on my way to Sparrowwind that I met you, my true lo-- bestie. My new bestie."

Freis sighed. That was probably the best he was going to get.

"Okay, good, let's go."

Fries opened the doors to the guildhall. Directly before them were a dozen long tables and benches. At each table, there sat adventurers, men and women, enjoying food, drink, and each

other's company. There were high, vaulted ceilings, and on the walls were large paintings of adventurers. Champions of old, each one with their name listed under them. If one looked directly forward, there was a large board, with many papers stuck haphazardly to it. Most of them said things like "WANTED!" or "QUEST!" on top of an image, with a description underneath. To the left was a counter for ordering food, a door to the kitchen, and a bar with a bartender. To the right were four teller counters, manned by the staff of the guild. Behind them was an area with files and materials, a few more members of staff, and a door to the guild master's office.

Even conducting as little power as possible, Smolder's visage drew the attention of a few women in the hall. One even let out a wolf-whistle.

"Hey pretty boy, you wanna join my party? It's in my pants, and you're invited!"

The rowdy woman was nudged by her friends to sit down and stop making a spectacle. A few other women and men did wish they had the courage to have done the same.

Freis and Smolder tried hard to be unfazed by the blatant sexual harassment, and pressed on to the first teller window that was open.

"Sorry about Marjorie... We've tried to get rid of her, but her grand-aunt holds a significant amount of power in the town council."

The girl had short red hair, green eyes, and a pair of large, black-rimmed glasses. She was very exhausted by this sort of behavior, and at the fact that she herself was powerless to stop it. "Nepotism", she thought. She looked directly at Smolder, even though they were standing behind Freis and to the right. A firm, steely look told them that she was deadly serious.

"If she touches you, even with a finger, a member of the guild will throw her out on her ass."

Smolder wasn't really bothered by this. They were used to that sort of attention. If anything, he was a little more surprised that this clerk didn't seem to feel a tinge of the same feelings. The clerk turned back to Freis and put on her best customer service smile.

"Anyway, welcome to the Sparrowwind branch of the adventurer's guild! I'm Emily. How may I help you today?"

The woman didn't seem TOO enchanted by Smolder's good looks. Freis breathed a sigh of relief for small favors. At the next window over, however, there was a teller who already looking dreamily in Smolder's direction.

"Hi! I'm Freis, and my new buddy Smolder and I would like to join the guild! I've heard a lot about the guild, but my friend isn't from around these parts."

"Oh, very good! I'm glad that Marjorie's outburst hadn't dissuaded your friend. I suppose, then, as your friend is new, I will give you two the whole speech about what we do here."

"Oh, please do, ma'am."

"Welcome to the Sparrowwind Adventurers Guild! We're an official member of the Boegumi Guild Association, meaning that when you register with us, you'll be respected as an adventurer across the whole continent of Boegumi. People come to the guild because they have problems. Our job, as the guild, is matching problems to adventurers, in order to find solutions. We also make sure adventurers get paid fairly for their efforts, and stop young heroes from being manipulated by nefarious clients. If you register with our guild, you can be sure that all your adventures are above-board. Now, when you first join the guild, we will assess your overall abilities to grade you as an adventurer. We grade quests we receive, according to who is

qualified to handle the expected level of danger. People from all walks of life give all sorts of problems to the guild. Officially, we call them Jobs, and people colloquially call them quests, missions, etc.. But, in the end, they're all problems that need to be solved, preferably by an adventurer! Aside from being graded, jobs are also divided into three broad categories; Destruction, Collection, and Protection. That is to say, the job is all about hurting stuff, getting stuff, or defending stuff. A cat up a tree might be listed as Collection. Or you could guard a merchant caravan, which is Protection. But the most important part of a guild isn't the jobs, it's the people. When you register as an official guild-sanctioned adventurer, you have a place where you can talk to or get in contact with a variety of people from a variety of walks of life, all fellow adventurers, who can help you on your personal growth. We also hold lessons in the afternoons, and sometimes hire guest instructors. All so that you can be a better you, and do more to help the people of Boegumi."

Freis clapped. Smolder looked unimpressed.

"I don't get it... why do you need to advertise? It's not like there's other adventurers guilds."

"We ARE the alternative to the Thieves' Guild, Mercenary Guild, and the various Royal Armies of the continent. Also, there's no law that truly defines an adventurer, so we can't exactly stop a random archaeology professor from the local college from raiding the various ancient tombs in the area."

That felt like too specific an example for Freis.

"But, most importantly, I'm told to tell you that to stress how safe you'll be in our hands. I mean, adventuring isn't 'safe', but by bargaining as a collective, we can force nobles who would ask for skilled labor to give proper compensation."

"I see..." said Smolder.

"Well, I walked three days here for this! I'm on board!"

"Excellent. And you, sir?" she said to Smolder.

"Ah, well, I'm just following his lead, so, yes, make me an adventurer."

"Great! Now comes to the matter of registration. We need to view your stats in order to be sure we know which rank to place you in, to start. Furthermore, your guild ID will keep track of your jobs done with the guild, for the sake of rank evaluation. We will deny you access to posted jobs that are above your rank, so as to make sure you don't get out of your depth. We also allow you to register a "class name" so that other adventurers can get a rough idea of what you bring to the table, without you needing to reveal any secrets. It looks like Gwendol isn't seeing anyone, so your red-haired friend can register with her, to my left."

Neither of the pair were particularly thrilled about being split up. Smolder just didn't want to be separated from Freis. Freis was worried that Smolder would flub their lines. But, not following the clerk's instructions on the first day would be bad. Not normal. Freis wanted to be normal. He shooed Smolder over to the next window, not noticing the look in Gwendol's eyes.

"Okay, so first we need a drop of blood, and then for you to put your hand over this orb so that we can evaluate your stats."

Freis panicked a little bit. Nobody had told him that there was a blood test. It was too late to do anything, he could only hope that Smolder was capable of bleeding.

For his part, he complied. The two waited for the magical item to produce a light display, then Emily read the numbers.

“Okay. Pretty normal stats for a human your age. Strength of 20, Stamina 17, Magic 5--”

“For my age?”

“Oh, yes, the blood test told me you were 21. Don’t worry. These stats are about what we expect. I’m guessing you’ve been doing a physical job since you became of age. Resistance is 7--”

Freis’s stress level went up again. Age? What the hell was Smolder going to do about that? How old is a god’s age? Smolder never told Freis what Saffron had told him, so Freis was freaking out.

“Do, uhh... do the stats? Come from the blood?”

“What? No. The blood is just stored as identification. I... I suppose I shouldn’t tell you this but... the blood is on file so as to help us properly identify your corpse should it become mutilated. Age is just a weird side effect.”

Freis looked way more relieved than anyone should look about hearing about their own mutilated corpse.

“I’m sorry, please go on.”

“... okay. Agility is 15, Luck is 9. This is pretty middle of the road for our lowest rank, G. Unless you know a variety of spells, I’d recommend you tell people you’re a Warrior or a Swordsman or some such.”

“Swordsman, please. My grandmother was a swordswoman.”

“Sure. Finally, your name.”

“Freis Lancenhorn,”

Emily looked shocked. Then she blinked, repeatedly, out of surprise, and gave her cheeks a quick slap to wake herself up.

“I’m sorry, could you say that again?”

“Freis Lancenhorn,”

“You, uh... you wouldn’t happen to know a Saffron Lancenhorn, would you?”

“Oh, that’s my mom.”

Emily stood on her chair and coned her hands around her mouth. She shouted into the crowd.

“HEY EVERYONE!!! THIS KID HERE!!! HE’S SAFFRON LANCENHORN’S SON!”

Freis’s face turned white as a sheet.

As this was happening...

Smolder casually strolled over to Gwendol’s counter. It was at this point that they realized Gwendol’s infatuation. This was a lot more familiar to Smolder; they were used to mortals being wooed by their mere good looks. Men would tend to react more to their various feminine presentations, and women would react to the male ones. This wasn’t reliable, but presenting as the opposite gender was a good way to start. Of course, there would be those who bucked that trend; mortal sexuality varies from person to person. Smolder could never quite get the hang of mortals, and wished to be able to interact with them without effort. Even getting this registration handled would require some work. Gods and god-shards alike hated having to work in order to get what they wanted.

It would be so much easier to get the registration taken care of if Smolder could just change shape, but Freis forbade them from flippantly doing so in the presence of mortals.

Smolder would have to suppress their aura even further, and make sure to keep the conversation on track.

“Why, yes, hello madam.”

“Hello. You can call me Gwendol. Or Gwen. Or Gwenny. Or...”

“I am here to register in your guild system. I believe you will need a drop of blood.”

“...”

“guild registration”

“Right, right. Yes, please prick your finger and put it here, then place your orb above the hand, sweetie”

“... hand above the orb, right?”

“Yes, that’s what I said.”

Smolder sighed. Well, here was the moment of truth. Saffron had warned them about this. The one good gift that terrifying woman gave them. Smolder bled, that much was not the issue. But, if one were to look at the blood, it would probably register as around 800 years old. It took some magical manipulation to freshen their blood, and then quickly, in the time it took to move the hand from one place to the other, drain as much divinity out of their body as possible. After putting their hand above the orb, Smolder gave his speech. Gwendol looked attentive, but probably wouldn’t remember any words.

“My name is Smolder Flametruth. My ancestors hail from the continent to the south. My grand great parents shipwrecked on the southern coast. As they were from Vesselmere, they were worried about how the simple locals would treat them. However, I could resist to the call to adventure for no longer, and came here to Sparrowwind, to join your fine guild. Though I met Freis just on my way here, I can tell you proudly that he is my first and best friend.”

The stat screen had displayed stats just before the last sentence, but Gwendol was content to let Smolder finish. If they began reading the index of a bestiary, Gwendol would probably have let them finish. Upon completing their rehearsed lines (with only two mistakes), they drew the awestruck woman’s face back to the task at hand.

“Oh, yes, right. Let’s see here. 21 years old. 12 strength, 20 stamina, 30 magic, 30 resistance, 9 agility, 9 luck. You sure are good with magic...”

“Oh, uh, perhaps it is because my parents’ parents’ were not from here?”

“... Well, could be. Anyway, I’m sure it’s no big deal. The gods clearly blessed you with great charisma, maybe they added magic as well.”

“Oh, I’m sure it’s not something so related to divinity...”

“Anyway, looking everything over, we can safely start you at F rank. Honestly, we could even petition for E rank if you’ll take some tests.”

“Ah, no, no, no special treatment. G rank is fine.”

“You sure, sweetie? Seems like a waste...”

“Let’s continue.”

“Hm, yeah, let’s put a pin in that. Now, your class... Safe to say you’re a fire mage? Because you’re so hot?”

Smolder smiled, genuinely.

“Yes, yes, register me as that.”

“Finally, you said your name wa----”

“HEY EVERYONE!!! THIS KID HERE!!! HE’S SAFFRON LANCENHORN’S SON!”

In seven of the twelve tables, everyone stopped talking immediately, or at least was signaled to by their companions. Four more noticed the sudden silence and muted themselves in turn. Once Marjorie’s friends got her under control, all twelve tables were silent. One voice spoke from the crowd.

“Really? That kid? You’ve got to be pulling my leg.”

A woman stood up. She was tall, in heavy armor, and looked like there was no wall she could not tackle her way through. As this woman approached Freis, he got legitimately scared. Smolder looked ready to ignite the wall of a woman at a moment’s notice. She had to bend down to look him eye to eye. She inspected him carefully. He hadn’t been this uncomfortable since the shrine. Something around his neck caught her eye.

“Is that... Well, I’ll be damned.”

She reached in to get a better look at the good luck charm. To maybe anybody else, it was just a big tooth. This woman, though, knew it well.

“You know what this is, right kid?”

“She... She said it was a good luck charm??”

“This here... Is one of the teeth of the dragon that bit your mom’s leg off.”

She let go of the necklace, then turned to face the crowd. She raised her arms as she yelled

“HE’S SAFFRON’S KID, ALRIGHT! WA-HEY!!!”

The crowd all raised their arms. Half of them with genuine joy, and half of them going with the flow.

“WA-HEY!!!”

The tall woman of iron turned back to Freis and gave him an affectionate, though hard, push on the shoulder.

“You finish up your registration, then come over to my table. And bring your friend. Tell him that if Marjorie hits on him again, I’ll ram her face into the wall.”

She called over to the clerk,

“Hey! Don’t worry about his registration fee! It’s on me!”

Emily yelled back

“Like I’m going to charge Saffron’s kid! It’s already waived. The guild master isn’t here, but I’m sure he’d approve.”

“Hell yeah!”

And with that, the woman went back to her table. Freis was terribly, terribly confused. He turned back to face Emily.

“You should have told me you were Saffron’s kid first thing.”

“I, uh, I’m confused. Does everyone here know my mom? Why is she a big deal?”

“You don’t know? You don’t know??”

“I never knew she was an adventurer. She never talked about it...”

“Holy hell. Kid. Your mom was a prodigy. She rose through the ranks of the guild faster than anyone had before or since. Until her accident, her quest completion rate was 100%. She was our golden girl. We would tell the other branches of the guild how great she was.”

“Wow... I never knew.”

"Yeah, let's get you all finished up. Then you can go sit with Lily and hear about how great Saffron was. Put your hand back on the orb so that I can save this. Hey, uh... out of curiosity, where does your mom live nowadays."

"Oh, we're from Immel. Grandma's from there, so it's where Mom moved when she got married."

"I see. Immel. She's from Immel, huh... see, she'd never say where she was from. Wouldn't talk about family either. ... you said your grandma was a swordswoman, right?"

"Yeah. Mom never talked about adventuring, at all. I heard all my stories from grandma."

"Huh, weird... You wouldn't happen to know your grandma's name would you?"

"Alex."

Emily could barely contain herself. She smiled from ear to ear while forcing down chuckles.

"Short for Alexandra?"

"Probably."

Emily looked back and forth, to see where everyone's attention was. It wasn't on Freis, for now. She put her finger to her mouth, the universal sign for "quiet, this is a secret", then beckoned for him to come closer. Hesitantly, he approached. She spoke with hushed tones.

"I'm not going to spoil the surprise, but... Look up there. Fourth one to the left."

Emily pointed at one of the paintings on the walls of the guildhall. Above it were the words 'S Rank' and below was the name 'Alexandra Stormslaye'" And it was... a younger version of his grandmother. He stumbled backwards in surprise. Emily whispered again.

"Be sure to tell Lily."

This was not the way to become a normal adventurer.

Even Gwendol, too young to have met her, knew the name Saffron Lancenhorn. Her co-worker's loud statement snapped her out of Smolder's unintended grasp. Her focus instead lay on the young boy, and the interaction from the towering Lily Rook. Smolder was irked by this. Their first instinct was to turn back on the godly charm, to bring Gwendol back to their attention. They instead let the interaction play out. They couldn't help but feel upset, though, at the amount of attention that Freis was getting. It wasn't just that they wanted the attention, it was that they wanted to be the one to make Freis feel special. Smolder hadn't really noticed how dismayed this made Freis.

Gwendol even joined in the "WA-HEY!!"

Eventually, Lily sat back down. Gwendol was still amazed to be looking at the son of the prodigy rogue. Thankfully, Smolder only needed to clear their throat to make the clerk's eyes come back to them.

"Sorry, sorry. Where were we?"

"I need to finish my guild registration. G rank. We were almost done."

"Sorry, sir."

Smolder didn't have the emotional energy to say anything to that.

"Yes, yes, everything looks alright here", she continued. "You said you were Smolder Flametruth, the Fire Mage, right?"

"Yeah."

"Please place your hand back on the orb."

"Right" Smolder complied.



"Huh, Flametruth. Have you ever been to the volcano, Mt. Trueflame?"

"No, hadn't heard of it.", he lied.

"Yeah, it's supposed to be where Ensmolderon, the god of flame resides. You look like you might be a fan."

"Oh, my parental figures had a different name for that god."

Gwendol didn't think that sounded odd. She was trying very hard to balance work, the pretty boy before her, and the recent arrival of the celebrity, Lancenhorn.

"Well, anyway, you should check it out! Be careful, though, there's this old shrine off the path. You shouldn't go there."

"Oh? What do you mean?"

"I think it's called the Shrine of Immolation? It used to be the major shrine to Ensmolderon in the area. But basically, Ensmolderon would just boff everyone who went there. Such a weird thing for a god to do, right? The western shrine to Ensmolderon doesn't seem to report such problems. Some people think the shrine is cursed by some sort of sex spirit. Others think that being this sort of a slut is an aspect of Ensmolderon's true nature. That doesn't seem right to me, though. Anyway, the shrine eventually was closed down and ignored, because people felt really uncomfortable about going there. The town next to it stopped advertising it. Damn shame really."

Smolder was keeping a straight face. There was an odd liquid buildup around their eyes, but aside from that, everything was fine. To the east, however, Mt. Trueflame was erupting continuously.

"I see. That is a shame. Are we done here?"

"Oh, one last thing. The registration fee. 50 silver coins."

This was, perhaps, the last straw. Smolder had heard that Freis didn't have to pay. They slowly combed their fingers through their perfect orange hair, and gave Gwendol a steely look.

"Because I'm Lancenhorn's best friend, my fee is also waived."

Gwendol swooned, her face filled with pure serenity.

"Yes, of course. Your fee is also waived. Have a great day."

"Have a great day."

Smolder put their fingers against their lips, kissed their fingers, brought the fingers down, and blew in Gwendol's direction. At the moment that the "kiss" should have "hit" Gwendol, she fell over, filled with bliss. Smolder then childishly ignited a few of her desk toys. Satisfied, they returned to Freis.

"As normal as possible, huh Freis?"

"She didn't tell me about this!! Nobody told me about this!! Did she say anything about this to you?"

"No, she just told me about the blood test."

"Oh, phew, I was worried."

"Thank you for your concern."

"We had better go meet Lily, I guess."

"Oh, is that the name of that walking battering ram?"

"I think she was friends with my mom, so let's try to be polite."

Smolder really, really wanted to say “I hate your mom”, but they just couldn’t bear saying it to Freis.

The two walked over to Lily’s table.

On Lily’s half of the table, there were five adventurers. The table was long, and so at the other side was a group of six. The giant tower of iron armor smiled cheerfully at the two new members of the guild. Even sitting down, Lily Rook was taller than Freis and Smolder, which made Freis nervous. Smolder was just glad to be next to Freis again, and to them it didn’t matter how many or what kind of mortals were present. Lily slid sideways along the bench, and patted the area where she had once been. The dwarf that she had been next to slid the opposite way, so as to make more room. The human woman patted the spot where she had once been, beckoning for Freis to sit there.

“Come on, son of Saffron! Your food and drink is on me!”

She shouted to a server on the other side of the hall.

“Martinus! Two beers! And two of large servings of the mutton combo for my friends here. Put it on my tab!”

Lily turned to look at the pair, who had not sat down yet.

“Oh, are you two old enough to drink?”

“Yes”

“Scratch that! Four beers!”

Freis stepped over the bench, and sat down. With this, there was enough space, but as Smolder sat down next to the dwarf, it was clear that it wasn’t a terrible amount of space. He was sandwiched; between a giant wall of iron armor on his left, and Smolder on his right. For their part, Smolder didn’t seem bothered by the cramped space, and quite enjoyed being thigh to thigh with their ‘Bestie’.

Once Freis and Smolder were seated, the rest of the guild was slightly less loud than it had been before. As if by magnetism, every other adventurer, without leaving their own table, slid slightly closer to Lily’s table.

“Ah, uh, I... didn’t know that my mom was such a big deal.”

An elven man on the opposite side of the table responded.

“She was a pretty big deal. New recruits looked up to her for as long as she was around. Shame what happened.”

A human man in white robes continued.

“So, if she never told you about the guild, you may not know. There’s a pretty strict limitation on how long you can be in one rank before appealing to be promoted. Once you appeal, they re-evaluate your stats, look at your quest history, and so on. There’s no general guidelines for how many quests you need to do per rank, but most of us think we roughly know the guild-master’s criteria. Your mother, Saffron, was always promoted up the ranks in the smallest amount of time.”

Now, a woman with skin of wood and hair of leaves, a Dryad, added to the discussion.

“She took on a lot of quests. Lots of people would ask her to slow down. Whatever the requirements were on quests to rank up, she had well exceeded them.”

The dwarf nodded.

“The five of us, you see, we’re registered as a party. A lot of people do it. Saffron had no time for that. The problem with a party is waiting for all members to be ready to take on a

quest at the same time. But sometimes your sister is getting married, your hometown is under attack, or you just get sick. Parties don't go unless they all can go. Saffron... she was aiming for the top. She didn't have time to wait. So she was what we call a freeblade. She would join parties only temporarily, or go on missions with other freeblades. So she could be questing non stop."

Freis finally spoke up.

"Did she ever say why she was doing it?"

"She always said she wanted to be one of the greats.", Lily said while looking at the pictures hung high.

Freis had a good feeling he had some information that would make things make more sense to them. He had a feeling that more embarrassment was in his future, though.

"Some people are in it for the money, or the thrill of the fight, or it's the only way you can make a living. But she was aiming for being a legendary adventurer," said the man in white robes.

Smolder was... bothered that nobody was paying attention to them. The elf and Lily had at least thrown a few looks their way. They jumped into the conversation, feeling they had something to add.

"I met her three days ago, and she was sure something."

"Oho..." said the elf "You just met his mother, eh? Are you two..."

"No, we aren't." said Freis, sternly.

Smolder kept a normal face on, but they were crying on the inside.

"We're adventuring buddies." Freis added quickly. He tried to contain the damage.

"Oh, right, we haven't even exchanged names yet.", said Lily. "I'm Lily Rook, and I call myself a Fortress Knight."

"Misten Virtueleaf. Forest Sniper."

"Lutz Arnold. Cleric."

"Willow. Stabby Assassin! Stab stab!"

"Nonul Flintchin. Sparkling Chemical Reaction"

"The Mundane Novas!" they all said together, clinking their glasses.

There was a brief pause. Even Smolder, a newbie to adventuring, could tell that something was inconsistent about their "class names". Freis spoke up first, or rather, he raised a finger and opened his mouth.

"Yeah, we know, the titles, they don't seem similar" Lily said. "We argue about this every time they allow for a class name change, which is every two years or every rank up. I try to keep my title descriptive of my specialization. Misten says he does too, but nobody else thinks Forest is a helpful descriptor. Lutz has just been a cleric forever. Willow just likes to put adjectives in front of 'Assassin' even if that isn't helpful. Nonul always treats it like the prefix to a childrens' hero play."

Everybody nodded. Those were their stances, and nobody was particularly compelled to explain to everyone else why theirs was the only right one.

"Right, well! I am Smolder Trueflame! I mean, Smolder Flametruth! I am registered as a Fire Mage!" They created a tiny ball of fire in their palm.

The Mundane Novas clapped.

"I am Freis Lancenhorn, and right now I am a swordsman."

Everyone clapped again.

Emily came over, holding two beers in each hand. She set two down in front of Lily, one in front of Freis, and one in front of Smolder.

"Your food will be ready in a few more minutes..."

"Where's Martinus?" asked Misten. Lily would have asked, but she was already downing one of her new beers.

"He'll be here with the food. I just told him that I'd take this one. Wanted to *remind* the new kid about something." said Emily.

"Oh, I'm just... hearing about my mom for now. I'm sure whatever you needed to remind me of, it can wait until after that."

"Mmm, that's reasonable. Just as long as you don't forget."

And with that, Emily returned to her station.

Everyone could tell that a secret conversation had just happened, out in the open, and stared at Freis, if only because they couldn't stare at Emily.

"Hey, just... just keep going on about my mom, I guess. Tell me--"

"Shouldn't they have called her a freeblades because she used two daggers?" Smolder chimed in.

"Hahaha! Yeah, you're right! I guess they should have!"

Nonul let out a hearty laugh. Lily, Misten, and Lutz all looked at each other, and then at Freis with suspicion. Freis's face responded with an expression of "your guess is as good as mine". Nobody was quite sure why Smolder already knew that.

"Speaking of freeblades," Misten said, steering the conversation, "Saffron was a freeblade because she wanted to climb the ranks so quickly. To be the best, I suppose."

He, too, gestured at the upper wall.

"I've been in this guild a very long time. Getting to S rank by being a freeblade is quite novel and bold."

"Why is that?" Freis asked.

"Most parties don't trust freeblades. Most freeblades don't trust freeblades. There's always the concern that they'll take more than their fair share, or that they won't be concerned about their allies, or they'll run away..."

"Being a freeblade means you're saying 'I might not be there when you need me'" Lutz interrupted. He shrugged "That's the reason they get bad press. I don't care."

"But, Saffron Lancenhorn," continued Lily "was a person you could trust. Not only did she take tons of quests, with or without allies, she had a perfect record."

"It was actually unprecedented," Misten said, as a matter of fact. "Clients can give you a 'Fair' rating if your performance in the job was lacking. If, say, goods are spoiled, late, or dented. Typically a guild representative will debate the matter, so nobles don't habitually under-rate adventurers."

"Wait wait wait" Freis had a feeling he knew where this was going, although he still had difficulty coming to grips with this legendary adventurer being his mom. "Let me guess. Not only did every solo mission she was on have a flawless rating, but every group mission had a flawless rating, regardless of that group's track record?"

The entirety of the Mundane Novas nodded solemnly.

“The worst that would ever happen is that a party member or three would lose a limb.” said Nonul, “It’s regrettable, but there are prosthetics. The rich can even get them regenerated.”

“Oh, right! You had said that a dragon bit off her leg. Tell us about that!” said Smolder, trying to contribute to the discussion.

The five-man band went quiet. Many other adventurers in the hall also fell silent.

“What? What did I say?” Smolder was oblivious.

Lutz was the first to speak up. “We had said she had a... nearly... perfect record, right... Well, turns out a record like that is a blessing and a curse.”

The four nodded solemnly. (Willow had no idea what was going on. She was the youngest adventurer by a stretch, but she knew to nod when everyone else did)

“When you’re in our profession, people get hurt,” Lutz continued, “People die. And sometimes... it’s not your fault. Stuff just happens. Some say ‘Not even the gods control fate’”

Everyone nodded solemnly again.

Smolder first felt outrage at such a saying. But, the more they thought about it, the more they realized the ‘Love’ predicament they were in agreed with the saying, and so had no complaint.

After some silence, Lutz continued. He didn’t seem to mind that he was doing all the talking, and he was about to get to why.

“I’m a cleric, and I’m pretty damn good at my job.”

“Indeed. I’ve seen many come through these doors” the elf interjected.

“Right. Not the best, but pretty damn good. But even I’ve had people die on me. Adventurers die. Shit just happens. I nearly endured a Total Party Kill myself, before I met these bozos. A group of six, and only two of us made it out. But the prodigal rogue... never had that.”

Silence fell again. Except for Marjorie in the corner, making a ruckus.

Smolder whispered to Nonul.

“Was that her official class name? Do they let you give yourself a title like that?”

“They don’t. Misten tells me that other people made her do it, as it had been her nickname for so long.”

Misten nodded.

Lily took over.

“This is only her account, of course, but there were no other accounts to be had. She had gotten to B rank just a month prior, and took a job with some C ranks because jobs were a little dry. It was supposed to be a simple dragon expulsion. A dragon made a nest in some caves near a farm, and was hunting livestock. Some C rank adventurers had to go coax it to make its home somewhere else. It’s a pretty normal C mission. But there’s always risks. The reconnaissance was bad. We later found out that it wasn’t some young buck, but a foothold. They were expecting one lesser dragon, maybe a normal dragon. What they got was two greater dragons. It was a bloodbath.”

“It is legitimately impressive that she was even able to kill them both.” said Misten, sagely, “I told her, it’s quite an accomplishment to kill two greater dragons and only lose one leg.”

“One leg and six people.” corrected Lutz, angrily.

Freis was awestruck. He was pretty sure he had put the rest together, but he was going to let them finish the story.

“She told the guild that she was going to retire for a year, so she could save up for a prosthetic. But everyone knew the real reason. She couldn’t deal with the deaths. She had been burning the candle at both ends for eight years, and then this. We never saw her again. From the sound of it, she found your dad within a few years, and had you. We’re no strangers to losing adventurers, be it from death or quitting, but the whole guild felt less without her.”

“A shining star that faded out before it reached the apex.” said Misten.

More silence. A waiter, holding two large platters, had been behind Smolder and Freis for some time now. He now spoke up.

“Gentlemen, your large mutton combos.”

Everyone at the table helped move things around so that Martinus could set down the plates before them. They each had a big plate of sliced meat, which was surrounded by sides like mashed potatoes and grilled vegetables. Once the plates had been settled, things were solemn again. Neither Smolder nor Freis could bring themselves to eat, with this atmosphere. Freis was sure that the information he had would change the mood. He hoped it would be for the better.

“And still to this day, you wonder. What drove her to such lengths. To burn the candle at both ends.” Freis spoke up, commanding the room’s attention. There was a nervous energy in the air as nobody knew quite where he was going with this.

“Tell me,” he continued. “Did she ever say anything about her mother?”

“No” shouted a voice from the crowd. “She never said anything about her family at all”

“Well, I knew her mother. She was my grandmother. My grandmother always told me stories about how she was a great adventurer.”

The guild was on edge. They wanted to hear more. Freis was doing a decent job dramatizing this. After all, Granny’s stories always gave him courage. Just being able to hype her up filled him with joy.

“My mother had told me, specifically, that she made up a new last name because she didn’t want to be in her grandmother’s shadow. I didn’t know what that meant at the time, but now I get it. For that woman I called granny waaass...”

Emily, hearing this from her counter, let out a tiny “squee”

Freis pointed to the picture on the wall as he spoke.

“Alexandra Stormslayer.”

“WHAAAATTT?????” said at least two thirds of all adventurers in the guild. They didn’t believe it.

Smolder, for their part, was really happy about all this. Back when the Novas were talking about Saffron, be it her rise or her fall, it felt wrong. Everyone’s attention wasn’t on them. That wasn’t how things should be. This many people? And not a single one with a lowered head in deference? It was unnatural. But, as Freis started talking, as he became the center of the guild’s attention, Smolder felt... Surprisingly okay with this. They didn’t mind. They almost even liked it.

“What? No” “This doesn’t make any sense” “Who raised Saffron, her dad?”

Numerous shouts came from the crowd, offering doubt. Freis got a little nervous. The Mundane Novas were of no help, though Misten seemed to be doing some calculations in his head. But suddenly, a spark of inspiration hit Smolder. They stood up on the bench, though there really wasn’t a lot of room.

"I can prove it! You all are doubting my Bestie, but I have the proof!"

"'Bestie?' What are you, like 300?"

"Shut up! I'm bringing it back! It means Best Friend."

"Okay, where's your proof?"

"My proof is THIS!"

Smolder unsheathed the short sword he had been given, and held it high in the air.

"We can't tell what that is!" yelled a voice from the crowd.

Smolder sighed and leaned down, handing the sword off to Misten, before sitting back down.

"If I am correct, this Short Sword of Greater Godslaying has been previously used by Alexandra Stormslayer. It has slain three small gods, as you can tell by the energy auras on the hilt. This should match her legends."

Well, all this did bank on everything they had heard being true... They had to hope that there was some record of this.

Misten spoke.

"It is possible. Certainly, Stormslayer killed three gods, and this short sword has the markings to suggest it is so. We could only be sure if we knew someone who had been there."

"I am the one you seek" spoke an old, old elf druid from two tables over. It felt like it took forever for his old bones to make it over to Misten. "I was a member of Stormslayer's party for nearly two years." even his words were slow. "This is indeed hers. I would know it anywhere."

"Wa-hey?" suggested Smolder.

The adventurers all looked around at each other before throwing up their arms.

"WA-HEY!!!"

For the next hour, the guild would be nothing but merriment. Stories of warriors of old were shared. Whenever it was one of Granny's stories that he knew, Freis would chip in a few details. The older adventurers loved this. Everyone was overjoyed, except for Marjorie, who was removed from the building for displaying a bit too much joy. Emily groaned thinking "*She'll just be back tomorrow. Goddamn Nepotism.*"

For the most part, Smolder and Freis ate in peace. While looking down at his plate, Freis spoke softly, so only Smolder could hear.

"Thanks... Smoldy"

Smolder was brimming with joy.

"Of course, Bestie."

## Chapter 5

Just as he had wanted, Freis had gotten completely plastered last night. He partied with the Mundane Novas and all their friends. Smolder pretended to be drunk. They had a lot of practice; mortals haven't really gotten drunk any differently in the past 800 years. As the night went on, eventually the clerks left for the night and guild functions were ceased. Freis wanted to stay; they were still serving food and drinks. Smolder repeatedly reminded Freis about how he told them that he wanted to get to the guild early the next morning. Eventually Smolder dragged Freis out of the guildhall, and walked to the nearest inn; the Travelers' Rest Inn. It was overpriced, because it knew that it held the best location in town. It also advertised free breakfast.

Smolder used their power to transport enough silver for the night from near the city's statue to Ensmolderon. It was theirs anyway, really. They paid for a two-bed room, and practically carried Freis over to it. Freis sat down on the sub-par bed and immediately fell asleep. He didn't even take off his backpack.

Smolder lay down in bed and pretended to sleep. They were accustomed to this; pretending to sleep. They easily could have set their earrings down and vanished into them, but they had no desire to. Just being asleep in the same room as someone for once felt nice. Being around people was nice; Smolder was an extroverted creature by nature. But the guild was a bit overcrowded; they had never been in the same room as so many people before. Just occupying the same space as a single other person was more than they had had for some 300 years. They stared at the ceiling for a while.

Halfway through the night, they realized that this was a good opportunity to practice performing what humans called 'magic'. They sat up, formed a fireball in one hand, and held it in place. This lit up the room.

"Hnnn... Cut off the light, ma..." Freis mumbled in his sleep.

Was Freis in some sort of semi-conscious state? Smolder hadn't figured out this part of sleep yet, but thought he'd use it to his advantage. The fireball vanished as quickly as it was made.

"Freis, are we friends?"

"mmmmhmmmm" It sounded like a yes.

"Are we best friends?"

"ehhhhhhhh" it sounded noncommittal.

"Are we... more than friends?"

"nnnnnnnnnnnnnn" A definite no.

Smolder stood up, and did a spin to take a new form. They were now an elegant female elf, clad in a red robe. The outfit wasn't appreciable in the dark, but this form also came with a distinct voice.

"Do you... have a lover?" said Smolder, with a serene and melodic voice.

"nnnnnnnn" Still no.

Smolder kept this form through the night, as they lay in bed and thought of their new life.

In the morning, someone knocked repeatedly on the door. Smolder jumped out of bed, and got the door. It was a lanky, underpaid attendant, holding a tray containing two cups of



(watered down) juice, two apples, two spoons, and two small bowls with some questionably edible gruel. The kid was slack-jawed at the sight of the elegant elf before him.

“Oh, right, this...” Smolder said, remembering their form.

They winked, and put their first finger in front of her mouth. Then, they took the tray from the kid with one hand.

“This will be our little secret, alright?”

They had already transported another coin into their hand, which they gently tossed to the attendant. They shuffled backwards while pulling the door closed. After putting the tray on their bed, they stretched out their arms and looked at themselves.

“Damn, I wish I could go around looking this good, but it’s going to attract more attention than I want.”

They spun around, and returned to the body they had used through all of yesterday.

After a mediocre breakfast, the two returned to the guildhall. Upon opening the doors, they were greeted with a distant but hearty “heeey!” from the tables. Not many people were here this early. Freis waved back at his new fellow guild members. This was good, he thought. Normal. The first thing he wanted to do was check the jobs board. In all the commotion of yesterday evening, Freis never got to check the board. As he approached, he noticed a large man in a nice brown suit, standing in front of the board. His arms were folded, his stance was wide, and he was looking directly towards the door, with his back to the job board. As soon as Freis noticed the man’s presence, his path veered right, so that he could walk around the man. The man’s eyes followed Freis as he did so. When Freis got close enough, the man spoke.

“Are you Freis Lancenhorn?”

Freis gulped. The man had the sort of deep voice that you associate with a person you didn’t want to cross. Smolder turned his attention to the man, ready to attack if need be.

“Y-yes. I am.”

“I am Bartholomew Andrews.”

Freis wasn’t sure what that was supposed to mean. He stood still.

“The guild master. Your boss.” Bartholomew clarified.

Freis felt slightly more relaxed, but not very. Okay, so on the one hand this wasn’t just any burly man. On the other hand, why would the guild master have business with a second-day G-rank recruit?

“Oh. Good morning guildmaster. Mister Andrews. Your honor. Sir.”

Freis was trying so hard to make things seem like they weren’t a big deal, that he was failing miserably. Bartholomew was a busy man, and didn’t have time to deal with calming Freis down.

“I understand that my staff treated you rather poorly yesterday, Mr. Lancenhorn.”

“I wouldn’t really say that...”

“Our staff was extremely unprofessional with your registration yesterday. I wanted to personally tell you that actions are being taken to ensure that such conduct does not happen again. Ms. Amalie is being reprimanded for her actions.”

“Wha...?”

While Freis was trying to process this, the guildmaster turned to Smolder.

“I assume you’re Mr. Flametruth?”

“Who? Oh, yes, right. That’s me. I’m Flametruth.”

“While I cannot say that she is being quite as well-reprimanded, the guild would also like to offer its sincere apologies for the actions of our member, Ms. Marjorie Lee.”

Smolder remembered, but they didn’t really mind. They shrugged it off; being told they were attracted or being catcalled wasn’t exactly new.

“Don’t worry about it, chief.”

“Unfortunately, we cannot eject Marjorie from the guild. Not as long as her great aunt, the Duchess Constance Lee, sits on the town council. However, other guilds have been notified about her appearance and behavior, so if she goes to another guild, they are allowed to deny her access. For now, our staff will make sure that appropriate distance is maintained between you two.”

“I’m sorry, did you mean Emily?” spoke Freis

“Yes, Ms. Emily Amalie. The clerk who served you. Mr. Lancenhorn, the guild makes it a point to not pry into the personal and family affairs of its members. Even if your mother and grandmother were noted guild members, which they were, Ms. Amalie had no right to ask about either of them, reveal your mother’s identity to the crowd, or pressure you into telling the crowd about your grandmother. This is not guild policy, and her pay is getting a temporary cut. For now, you can have Ms. Gwendol Lynn as your personal guild liaison.”

“Personal guild liaison?” repeated Freis, confused

Smolder remembered Gwendol. She was one of those people who couldn’t keep her head on when they were present, even with Smolder trying to suppress his divinity.

“No, no no no. Emily-whomever is okay. That’s fine. Not Gwendol, please.”

“Well, her fee will be waived, if you choose to use her as your liaison. She did tell you about the liaison services, yes?”

“Oh, I’m sure I just forgot! A lot happened yesterday.”

The guildmaster narrowed his eyes. He didn’t believe Freis, but was willing to let it slide.

“I think that covers everything. I look forward to seeing your work.”

He reached out a hand. Freis shook the guildmaster’s hand, then Smolder did.

As the guildmaster walked away, he smiled. He had just gotten to shake the hand of not only Saffron Lancenhorn’s son, but also Alexandra Stormslayer’s grandson, at the same time. He was quite pleased.

Freis and Smolder stood around, looking at each other after the large man left.

“Well, that was weird.” said Smolder.

“Yeah. I’m starting to get tired of all this special treatment. I just want to be a normal, ordinary adventurer.”

“Freis, buddy, hear me out for a moment. You keep using the word ‘normal’... Even I know, among mortals---”

“Let me guess, among mortals, I’m always going to not be normal because I’m related to them? Or because I have your help?” Freis interrupted.

“No, Freis. Among mortals, adventures aren’t normal. A normal adventurer is not a thing that exists.”

“No, you don’t know anything. I’ve heard stories all my life. I know how I want this to go.”

“Stores you heard from her?”

Smolder pointed to the picture of Alexandra Stormslayer, S Rank Adventurer, elevated high on the wall.

"N-n-not just from her! From travelers! And other... former adventures!" Freis stammered. It was getting harder to admit that Smolder didn't have a point.

"I can tell that this is getting to you. I'll drop it, okay? Let's just go talk to Amalie. Emily? Whoever she is, let's go talk to her."

Freis looked back at the job board for a moment. He felt its call. But, he also really felt bad that the clerk had been reprimanded. Probably the best idea was to pay her a visit.

"Yeah, let's go talk to her."

Freis continued to take the lead, and Smolder followed. They stood a few feet away from the clerk's counter, until they were recognized.

"Welcome to the Sparrowwind branch of the adventurer's guild! I'm Emily. How may I--- oh. Oh it's you two. M-mister Lancenhorn. I am very, truly sorry about yesterday." She brought down her head in deference.

The two walked up to the counter.

"Please, call me Freis. And just... treat me like any other, normal adventurer."

She raised her head and looked, not fully believing him. It would be impossible to treat him like any other adventurer, anyway. All of the female senior clerks would talk about how great Saffron Lancenhorn was. Despite never having met the woman, she was kind of a fan. But, she was a professional, and had a job to do. She took a deep breath, to clear her mind.

"Okay, Freis. How can I help you today?"

"I actually wanted to start by apologizing for all the trouble I've caused you. I didn't know my mom was such a big deal. I mean, to me, she's always been just my mom..."

Emily smiled, but behind her back she was making a tight fist with her right hand, digging her nails into her palm. Causing herself some physical pain was the only thing stopping her from showing she was upset.

*"Gods love him, I can't believe that his mom was so well known. Did nobody from the guild ever visit and say something? She was just such a legend... I guess she was just trying really hard to hide it from absolutely everyone,"* she thought.

"But, I've heard you've been reprimanded somehow? I'm really sorry, Ms. Amalie. I never held anything that happened yesterday against you. I'm hoping that we can still work together."

She loosened her grip on her own palm, and felt some relief.

*"Good to see that Saffron raised a respectful boy. But the fact that he's apologizing for something he had no active part in? I'm not going to deny it was my fault that everything happened yesterday. Alright, Emily, put on your work face..."* she thought.

"Oh, damn. They told you my last name, huh. More than fair, right? Still..."

"Yeah, it's kinda weird," Smolder said.

Freis immediately elbowed Smolder in the side.

"What? It is, though. It sounds almost like her first name. It's just 'Am-ah' instead of 'Em-ee'."

Emily was used to this, actually, and nodded.

"My full name is Emily Molly Amalie. My parents named me that. On purpose. I kinda think it's great that your mom had the guts to use an alias for her last name."

“Ugh, if I had known what Lancenhorn meant around here, I would have changed my name. I just want to be a normal adventurer...”

Smolder coughed. He was starting to understand that this was how humans brought discussions back on track.

“Right! Well! The guildmaster told me about something called a... personal guild liaison? I think I heard you say liaison yesterday, but I don’t know the details.”

“Aaaah! Shoot, that’s right. After I finished registering you, I was supposed to tell you all about guild liaisons. I think I forgot when I heard the name ‘Lancenhorn’. Please don’t tell Mr. Andrews that I forgot about that.”

“Just tell me about it now and we’ll be fine.”

“Okay, right. Thank you, by the way. You have two options when it comes to taking on jobs. There’s the job board, over there. You’d just pull a job off the board and come talk to me about it. If you’re somehow ill-equipped for it, I’ll let you know, but for D rank and below, I’m not allowed to deny anyone the right to do a job they meet the rank requirements for. A lot of people who want to keep their abilities secret will take this course of action.”

“Huh, well, that sounds good” said Smolder. Smolder was perhaps the exact type of entity who would want to keep their abilities secret. Even now, they were suppressing some of the power of Ensmolderon which filled their vessel.

“Okay, but what about liaisons,” said Freis.

“So, the other option is having a personal guild liaison. I should make it clear, the ‘personal’ just means that I’m not going to share any of your private information with any other clerk. I still have around ten other teams or individuals that I’m acting as a liaison for. For obvious reasons, I can’t share the exact details.”

Freis nodded. Smolder found this all a little confusing, but waited for Emily to continue.

“You would come to me, and I would offer you jobs that are well suited to your skills. I also have access to a number of jobs that are not posted on the board. I am allowed to deny you enrollment in these jobs. Some of our clients are very picky about their jobs, and some jobs are a bit too dangerous for us to just let anybody take. But, this gives you jobs that you are more suited for. This does mean that I’ll be interviewing you, before I become your liaison, and I’ll be keeping tabs on the new abilities you’ll be getting. This is confidential, but it’s so that I can give you better guidance. Oh, and starting at F rank, I can potentially match you with other teams or freeblades for the sake of a job. Normally, as a liaison, I get a five percent cut of any monetary gains granted from completion of a job. Money you pick up during the job, items found during a job, and items granted upon the completion of the job, are all yours. My cut is used to incentivise me to keep you alive, give you good jobs, and so on. However, generally when the guild wants to apologize to a client, such as yourself, they waive the liaison cut for a month. In my case, because it’s my fault, I wouldn’t even be recompensed by the guild.”

“I’m sorry, say that last part again?” said Freis.

“I’m saying if I was your liaison, the first month would be pro-bono. That being said, if you’re here, that means you still want to be an adventurer after yesterday. I’m willing to take that cut for you, Mr. Lancenhorn. Both because I’m sorry about yesterday, and because I just have an instinct that we’d be working together for long enough for it to be worth the sacrifice.”

“I’m sorry, this is all very new to me...” said Freis.

“Me too” said Smolder. Not just because they felt like he hadn’t been contributing to the discussion, but because this was indeed very new to them. They were too busy processing all of this new information to realize that they were fine with not being the center of attention, as long as Freis was.

“Can you give the two of us some time to talk about this?” Freis asked.

“I don’t know,” she said in a sarcastic voice, “I mean, look at the long line of people I have to serve today...”

The two looked behind themselves, then looked around. The teller in the window next to Emily’s was twiddling his thumbs. There was one woman at another counter, and nobody who could be seen as being “in line” to see Emily, or any other clerk. When the two looked back at Emily, she waved her hand.

“No, seriously though, take as much time as you need. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Thank you, Ms. Amalie,” said Freis.

“Please, call me Emily.”

“Thank you, Emily” they both said, before walking away.

There were many empty tables in the guildhall at this time in the morning. It wasn’t hard to find one that was empty, in Emily’s field of vision, and far enough away that if they whispered she wouldn’t be able to hear. The two sat down.

“Okay, Freis, you’re the leader, what do you want.”

“W-What do you mean I’m the leader? You’re the, you know, the g-o-d.”

“Yeah, but all I want is to adventure,” Smolder stopped themselves from ending the sentence with “*with you.*” They continued. “You have this idea of being a ‘normal adventurer’ that you want to accomplish.”

“This again? What’s so wrong with that.”

“I’m not trying to say I have a problem with it. I’m just saying that your goal is more specific than my goal. I’m willing to let you take charge, so that we can both get what we want.”

“Aren’t you worried that I’ll slow you down, by the way?”

“What, that I won’t climb the ranks as fast? My idea of time is different from yours. It’s irrelevant. Besides, isn’t having teammates normal?”

“Mom didn’t have teammates.”

“I think we can agree that the ‘prodigal rouge’ does not fit most definitions of normal. Did your grandmother have teammates?”

“Well, yeah...”

“Right, so we’re a team, and you’re in charge.”

“Well, I still don’t know which one is more normal. I mean, nobody mentioned liaisons to me, before now. That’s gotta mean they’re not, right? It feels like you’re paying for a fast track.”

“In terms of paying, it’s five percent. That’s one-twentieth. That’s small. But, I guess it would be easier to keep my identity secret if we just used the job board. Emily seems nice and all, but I don’t think we have reason to believe she can keep a secret.”

“Oh, right, aren’t you supposed to be bothered that she’s not super into you?”

“Hey. Come on now. I am trying very hard to turn over a new leaf, here. To reform my previous ways. You heard me, I promised your grandmother. Besides, I’m not Emily’s type as I am right now.”

“She what now?”

“Nevermind. Point is, I guess if you don’t care either way, I don’t want a liaison? But if you care strongly one way or the other, I’ll manage.”

“Mmmm... it isn’t that I don’t care what you think, but... They both have pros and cons. Regardless of her ability to keep secrets, it would be nice to have some guidance. But it also feels wrong. Like that’s not how I’m supposed to be doing things. Is it cowardly of me to ask Emily if my grandma had a liaison?”

Smolder had to think about this. It wasn’t that they didn’t know what their answer was, it’s that they wanted to address something else, but couldn’t figure out how to phrase it. What did it matter, how Freis was ‘supposed’ to be doing things? Nobody had decided that except Freis. Ensmolderon understood that humans cared about what other humans thought. But wasn’t Freis taking this too far? Was the idea of a ‘normal adventurer’ a part of that? They wished he could see it their way, but it wasn’t worth the effort.

“No, I don’t think it’s too cowardly.”

“Well, I guess I’ll go up and ask.”

Freis got up, and went back to the counter. Smolder waited just a moment before following, so that Freis couldn’t necessarily tell.

“Ms. Emily.”

“No, it’s Ms. Amalie. No, no, I told you to call me Emily!”

“Sorry. Emily.”

“How can I help you, Freis?”

“Did grammy,” he paused, “did Alexandra Stormslayer have a liaison?”

Emily blinked. She didn’t see the relevance.

“Well, my understanding is that the liaison system wasn’t formally in place during her day. So, strictly speaking, no. However, you don’t get to be S rank under nothing but your own power. That is to say, there’s not a lot of A rank or S rank postings on that board over there. They’re all back here. And I understand that’s how it worked in her day. So, when she hit A rank, someone on my side of the desk was helping find jobs for her party.”

“I see, I see. And what about when she started? At G rank?”

“There’s no way to be sure.”

“Hmmm...”

Emily decided that she’d give this confused boy a bit of a helping hand, liaison or no.

“Freis Lancenhorn, why do you want to be an adventurer. This isn’t a formal question, so don’t feel obligated to answer. I want to make it perfectly clear that I have no authority over you, and will keep your answers private. But I want to know, personally.”

“Oh, because my grandma told me all these stories...”

“Please tell me what you mean. My mother told me about how the earth god was enraged by the sea god, and forced the land to rise up, forming our continent. But that didn’t make me want to get mad and make mountains of mud.”

Smolder wondered why they never got included in that story. Terranior absolutely could not have resisted Hydrus without Ensmolderon’s help. Why didn’t mortals understand that?

“Oh, I guess... because it was exciting? I really enjoyed listening to the adventures, the perils, the time spent with friends, and so on.”

“You understand that this job is dangerous, right? No offense meant.”

"I get that. I'm not aiming for glory like my mom was. I just want to be a normal adventurer."

"There's that word again. Normal."

"What? Not you, too..."

Smolder had his arms folded, and was nodding in agreement. It didn't take long for Emily to realize who Freis meant by 'too'.

"Smolder told you this already and you didn't believe it? I suppose he's just one guy, but he's right."

"Well, I mean, what does Smolder know, right? They're not an adventurer."

"Alright, Freis, listen to me. I'm not an adventurer, but I have known a lot of them. I've known more of them than your mom worked with. I might know more of them than your grandmother did. So please trust me when I say, there's no such thing as a normal adventurer."

Freis felt disheartened. He slumped. Both Smolder and Emily looked to Freis, and then each other, with a sense of panic over hurting the boy's feelings.

"But that's okay, Freis. Every adventurer is unique. Even among two people who have decided to name themselves the same class, no two are alike."

"But... but... I had all these, these plans. I remembered all the things that grammy told me, and I've imagined myself doing them. I imagined the walk from Immel to Sparrowwind, and then this weirdo follows along..."

Smolder reacted like he got shot in the chest. Emily noticed, but decided that was a discussion for later.

"You're not going to have the same experiences your grandmother had. It's not that you're incapable, it's that those experiences were hers. If you're going to be an adventurer, you're going to have yours. Not even the gods control fate. You can't just dream a future and have that exact thing."

"R-right. Grandma said... 'An adventurer sculpts their fate with their own two hands'."

As before, remembering things his grandmother told him gave Freis courage and energy.

"Hah, that's an old one, but I'm familiar with it! You know, the elves came up with that phrase. But in elvish, there's a word for 'sculpt' that means 'to create' and a word that means 'to force only roughly into place'. The latter comes up a lot when elves talk about humans trying to control trees."

Smolder decided he would add some wisdom.

"That's right. Elves really love to let trees be completely free. They coexist with nature. Humans try to use nature to their own desires, with varying degrees of effectiveness. But there's also a saying in elvish, that 'even if you want it to be a cedar, an oak is still an oak'. It's something they tell to their children, but also say it about humans a lot."

"So you're saying... I can't force my life to be what I want it to be?"

She stood up, folded her arms, and tilted her head upwards, though her eyes were closed.

"Even if he wants to be Alexandra Stormslayer, Freis Lancenhorn is still Freis Lancenhorn." said Emily, adjusting up her glasses. "But that doesn't mean he can't become an S-rank adventurer someday. You're still gonna have adventures, if you want them. They just won't be the exact same. We aren't saying they won't be close. So, please think about this and answer me again. Freis Lancenhorn, why do you want to be an adventurer?"

“Because I want to travel the world. I want to fight monsters. I want to help people. And I want to do it my way.”

“That’s the spi---”

“WA-HEY!!”

The three were stunned silent. Emily very slowly, and with fear, turned around to the source of the voice behind her. It was her boss, Bartholomew Andrews. He was in his usual arms-folded pose, but tears were streaming down his face. He approved of everything that had transpired, but Emily was a bit too shocked to notice. She turned back towards Freis and Smolder.

“Howlonghashebeenstandingthere?” she said in panic.

“Hmmm... about the first time you said the word ‘normal’” Smolder responded.

“Wh-Why did you not tell me...”

Freis and Smolder could only stand there and look apologetic. Freis actually had never noticed the guildmaster walk up behind Emily, but thought maybe it wasn’t helpful to say that.

“Ms. Amalie, you understand! You truly understand! I could not have said it better myself!” Bartholomew was still crying, but it was clear now that they were tears of joy. “I must admit, I had some worry when I overheard the boy was having a crisis, but I decided I would let you handle it. I... I admit I had some doubts, as you’re not an adventurer yourself, but you truly get it. You truly understand the spirit of an adventurer! Bravo!”

Due to yesterday’s events, Guildmaster Bart was a little concerned with how Emily was going to react to Freis wanting her to be his liaison. He had asked a nearby clerk to alert him if anything was going wrong. Around the time that Emily said “why do you want to become an adventurer” for the first time, said clerk had requested that Bart come over.

Emily was extremely relieved that she hadn’t gotten herself in more trouble.

“Does... does that mean that my pay reduction is removed?” she asked, hopefully.

The guildmaster’s face turned from joy to solid sternness.

“That’s not how this works,” he said, before walking off.

Emily sighed. At least all that was over. The guildmaster was a former adventurer himself, and was still quite intimidating.

“Right. I guess I should ask, Smolder Flametruth, why do you want to be an adventurer.”

“Oh, me? I suppose there’s two reasons. I don’t want to get into it, but I’ve done some bad things in my past. I think if go out and do good, maybe that person’s spirit will forgive me.”

Smolder trailed off, and tried not to look at Alexandra Stormslayer’s picture.

“The second?”

“The second is...”

“A-he-hem” A voice coughed behind them.

Emily looked even more deflated. She knew the figure she was looking at; the one who coughed. It was a G-ranking guild member who was still pretty rough around the edges.

Freis and Smolder turned to look. It was a rather voluptuous female, of a race fairly different from their own. Two antennae stuck out from her black hair atop her head. Her eyes, while in the rough shape of human eyes, had no distinction between white and iris, and were sub-divided into many tiny hexagons. Her nose was flat to the point of almost being non-existent. She was garbed in the furs and leathers of a ranger, though the jacket had holes cut in it, leaving



room for her second pair of arms, and four wings. Completely unadorned, her large, large black-and-yellow striped abdomen, complete with a sharp end, stuck out from behind her tail-bone for all to see.

Freis stood in shock. He had never seen anything like this person before. He had only left the town of Immel a few times in his life. Immel was a fairly integrated community; there were humans, dwarves, lizardfolk, one elf couple... Freis also did a lot of armor repairs for passing-by adventurers. It was a minimum one and a half day's walk to any other city from Immel, so the town saw its fair share of guests. However, in all his time interacting with the various races that came through Immel, he had never seen one like this.

Smolder had seen a Halictidite, sometimes called a "bee-person", a few times before. When one first visited their shrine, some 800 years ago, they researched the species thoroughly. They could tell you more than enough about their habits. But, Halictidites seldom left forests, and the areas of forests they were in were always marked as specifically theirs. Often these forests would open into large fields, of which they were similarly territorial. All this is to say that Halictidites had a strong sense of property, and similarly, they tended to only be seen within that property. Seeing one in human city like Sparrowwind, let alone one dressed as an adventurer, was a rare sight. This one composed herself like any other he had met; arrogant. However, they had to appreciate her raw sense of style, which complimented her natural beauty.

She had cleared her throat with the intent for the two to move, so that she could talk to Emily. Her upper pair of arms were folded across her chest, while her lower arms were placed on her hips. Her lower-left arm held a job poster in its claw-like hand. She looked at the men before her with contempt.

"Move aside," she said. If she had more of a nose, she'd be looking down it.

"Lady, you know that the next window over is open, right?" said Smolder.

She leaned sideways to look. It was a man. She curled her upper lip up.

"No, he will not do. Why don't YOU go talk to him."

"W-We were here first" Freis attempted to assert.

"Shoo, shoo, little man. The women need to talk." she said, dismissively.

Both her right arms attempted to wave them aside.

Smolder knew it was no use. Halictidite women expected complete obedience.

"We can wait, Ms. Amalie" they said, before pulling Freis to the side, and taking several steps back.

Emily had time to take a deep breath and compose herself, before the woman walked forward.

"Ms. Rosenectar---"

"Queen Rosenectar" she corrected

"Queen Rosenectar, I was seeing another client. You need to be more respectful of the other adventurers, even the male ones."

"You agreed to be my liaison, did you not?"

"Yes, but the order is first come, first serve."

"No priority for a queen? For your client?"

"Ma'am, you need to stop doing this. You're lucky those two aren't the type to levy complaints."

“Ugh, fine. I’ll wait for the little creatures to be done first. Will this take long?”

“... sadly, yes. Listen, is this about a posted job? Or is there more?”

Queen Rosenectar held up the piece of paper. “Just this.”

“You don’t need your liaison to register you for a public job. You could have gone to Gregory. Or...” She leaned over her desk a little bit. “Excuse me, Freis, can you tell me if Lulu is serving anyone?”

Freis turned around, and observed. “There’s no adventurers at any other desk.”

“Ma’am, could you please go five desks over to Lulu? And, in the future, if you cannot wait for me to be free, you can talk to Lulu.”

She narrowed her eyes at Emily. “I’ll remember this.”

Rosenectar turned towards Freis and Smolder. Both of them decided to get out of her way. Without any sign of thanks, she walked past them, to Lulu’s desk.

Freis and Smolder returned to the desk.

“Wow, a Halictidite, eh? I had no idea that there were Halictidite adventurers” said Smolder.

“We’re almost certain that she’s the first. Mr. Andrews was so excited that he mailed the other guilds to ask if they had ever seen one. They haven’t gotten back yet. Hey... how do you know about Halictidites?”

Smolder gulped. “My, uh, my family had seen them. In Vesselmere. They told me stories.”

“Huh.” she said, taking a mental note of that. “Anyway, Mr. Andrews has told me to be lenient and patient with her. But she’s... she’s a lot. As you might expect, not a lot of people want to go on jobss with her.”

“How’d you get saddled with her?” asked Smolder.

“How do you think? I was the only woman working a counter that morning.”

“She really has a thing against guys, huh...” said Freis.

“Well, she’s a Halictidite. They have about one female per 300 males. Kinda like a queen bee and a hive. Men have an unequal role in their society.” said Emily. She had read a few books on the species over the past week.

“I thought the queen was just a special female bee and the rest of the hive was males and females.” said Freis.

“That’s why I said LIKE a queen bee and a hive. While there’s some relation to ordinary bees, as well as the ability for them to communicate, they’re essentially a different species. So, huge gender dymorphism there. Way more than with us Naiad.”

“Naiad? What’s a Naiad?” asked Freis.

“She’s a Naiad, dummy.” They gestured to Emily.

Freis’s response was a blank stare.

“A river spirit. Like a dryad, but for rivers instead of forests.”

“Shouldn’t she have a tail or so--” Freis realized mid-sentence he was talking about someone in front of them. He went completely silent.

Emily rolled her eyes. She was used to it, but still slightly annoyed.

“I’m not a mermaid. I’ve got proper legs.”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so so---”

“Freis, does it matter to you if I’m a Naiad?”

“No, of course not. But, uh, I had assumed...”

“Freis, shut up and stop worrying. If anything, I’m surprised that Smolder can tell. I put on a lot of makeup, because clients generally act nicer if they think I’m human. But he saw right through me.”

She pulled down her collar a little, revealing her blue-ish neck. Tiny gill-like organs on the sides of her neck extended. After putting her collar back in place, she pulled back the hair around one of her ears. It was blueish, and somewhat elven in shape. She had a few silver earrings on, despite her ears being hidden.

“You shouldn’t have to, like, dress yourself up to interact with people...” said Freis, feeling bad for her.

“Hey. Stop that. It’s my decision. Listen, if you want to be respectful, you’ll just have to shut up about it and listen to people who are being affected. I kinda like you, Freis Lancenhorn, and I’m going to chalk this up to you being a country bumpkin.”

Freis took a step back, as if he had been shot by an arrow in the chest. He thought of himself as a cool youth. Nobody had called him a country bumpkin before. This was his first time in a major city, so it was completely true... but it still hurt.

“One last thing” Emily said as a very dark and serious expression came over her face. “If I ever hear you calling me a mermaid, I will jump over this desk and show you how fully functioning my legs are as I kick the shit out of you.”

Leaving Freis in shock, she took a moment to notice Smolder. They had been pretty silent and understanding this whole time. Based on the backstory she heard from Gwendol, Smolder lived an even more secluded life than Freis. And yet they seemed to know about Halictidies and Naiads. The gaps in Freis’s understanding was reasonable. One can understand that he knew some things about adventuring from his grandmother, but was otherwise a country bumpkin. But Smolder... what was Smolder? If they were going to work together, she’d have to find out.

She put her work face back on. “Now then, where were we.”

“Freis was going to decide if he wanted us to have a liaison.”

“Oh no no no. No. You were going to tell me why you wanted to be an adventurer, Smolder Trueflame.”

“Flametruth. And I told you. My actions have disappointed people, and I want to redeem myself. Do good.”

“Ah ah. You were going to tell me two reasons. What’s the second.”

The last time they had been asked, Smolder didn’t know what to say. What they wanted to say was “to be by Freis’s side”, but they didn’t want Freis hearing that. They weren’t entirely comfortable telling other people either. Queen Rosenectar’s interruption bought him time to come up with a new reason, even if it wasn’t a good one.

“The second reason is that I want to get out and see the world. Like, physically see it. The landscapes. The space I was living in before this was very small. So, I want to do good and go places.”

Smolder was in no way lying. Well, they did want to see the world. They also used to live in exactly three rooms. Maybe they had an extra reason, but they were only asked for two.

“Uh-huh. Well, yeah, if you’re up to the physical challenge that comes with it, great! You certainly look fit enough. So, Freis. It’s back to you.”

“Oh, right. I need to ask... Is this binding?”

"It is only bound on a per-job basis. That is to say, once I'm getting commission again, if you register for a job, I'm guaranteed my 5%. Aside from that, it's basically all your choice. I'm bound as a clerk of the guild to not misuse information I get on adventurers. That applies to information I get from being your liaison. Everything else is based on trust. It's in my best interest to give you good jobs, so that you keep coming to me for your jobs. More of a social contract, really."

"What do you mean exactly by 'information you get on adventurers'?" asked Smolder, with trepidation.

"As part of the liaison registration, I need to see a demonstration of your abilities. Furthermore, I'll be keeping tabs on your adventures. If you gain any new skills during your time with us, it would be helpful if you told me. In-house, this is only used so I can match you up to the best jobs for you. I'll also use it to help you find partners for larger jobs. This does mean I'll have to share some information with other clerks."

Smolder mulled it over in their head for a moment. "That's fine. I accept."

Emily and Smolder both looked to Freis. It was his decision.

"Yeah! Let's do it! Normal adventurers get help from other people, right?"

Both the god and the naiad had to stop themselves from rolling their eyes at the word 'normal', but let it slide for now.

"Great! As you're both G rank, I'm going to put you each down as a freeblade. Or, you could officially be a party as of right now."

"Oh hey, could we be, say, paired freeblades? 'Freebesties' or something?"

"'Besties'?" said Emily with a confused look. "Oh, right. Buddy, that's been out of use around these parts for centuries."

"I'm bringing it back. Besides, it's still very popular in Vesselmere," said Smolder, completely aware that this was untrue.

"Hey. Stop," interjected Freis. "We can change at any time, right?"

"Well, I'd really rather you not switch back and forth flippantly, but yes, you can just tell me and I'll change your status from team to freeblades." she said.

Freis thought about how helpful Smolder had been the evening before. He also didn't remember how he got to an inn last night, but he knew he had Smolder to thank for it. He could at least throw the poor entity a bone for now.

"Please register us as a team, Ms. Amalie." he said.

"Right. Team name?"

"The Fire Besties!" said Smolder, grinning from ear to ear.

Freis rolled his eyes and said, "I can change that later, right?"

"Uh-huh," said Emily, understandingly. "Freis, I'm registering you as leader, which means you can change that. Limit one change per week."

"Okay. For now, Fire Besties," said Freis, just to please Smolder.

"Alright, I'll put together some paperwork to make it more official," she said, while moving some papers around, beneath where clients could see, "For now though, before we do assessments, I think I know what a boy who dreamed of being an adventurer wants to do on his first day."

Freis had almost forgotten. He looked quizzically to Emily, as if to ask if she was thinking the same thing he was thinking. She nodded to confirm it. The young man gasped. His eyes grew wide and hopeful. Smolder was left completely clueless.

“Even after all that talk of no ‘normal’ adventurer?” Freis asked, just to confirm.

Emily nodded. “Some things are just tradition.”

“What is it? What’s going on?” asked Smolder, slightly annoyed.

Freis and Emily looked at each other, smiled, and looked at Smolder. They spoke in unison.

“Killing slimes!”

## Chapter 6

In the plains outside the city walls, smolder shot a fireball at a small blue creature, destroying it. Freis slashed a similar creature, which cleanly split into two pieces, before disintegrating. Both targets left behind a small clump of blue matter.

“Okay, explain this to me again,” said Smolder, picking up the small remains.

“These are slimes. They’re the most basic monster to exist.” said Freis.

“I know that much. Fire slimes exist. I know about all creatures, great and small. What I’m asking is what we’re doing here.”

“Killing slimes. It’s the traditional first quest for an adventurer. It’s easy, profitable, and helps you practice technique,” said Freis. He talked to enough customers at the blacksmith to know that this tradition survived to this day, and wasn’t merely one of grammy’s stories.

“We’re killing creatures for sport? I mean, I’m fine with it, but...”

“No, we don’t think of it like that,” he said, slicing another. “If we don’t keep their numbers down, they’ll spread to the farmlands, and make life difficult for peasants and passers-by. Also, their remains are the core ingredient for most potions, so this pays decently.”