

THE ONCE AND FUTURE NERD
Book II - MYTH MADE FLESH

Chapter 9
"A Handful of Bodyguards"

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PART ONE:

(Episodes now regularly begin with the Western arrangement of the theme music.)

1 EXT. WESTERN FOOTHILLS - DAY

1

The party of eight is walking through a prairie-like field.

BILLY

(a lightning bolt)
Oh shit!

JEN

What?

BILLY

Is *The Matrix* about Jesus? Ohhhhh, damn. That's what Ms. Meecham was talking about with that allegra stuff.

NELSON

(audibly nursing a stress headache)
Yes, Billy, it is a Christ allegory.

BILLY

'Allegory,' that's it.

NELSON

(this is him earnestly trying to open up)
It's also, to quote my dad, about reclaiming free will and self-identity under the ideological hegemony of late global capitalism. In hindsight he missed all the trans stuff, but I think it's all of a piece, you know?

BILLY

Hegemony's the chick from *Harry Potter*, right?

NELSON

I tried. Jen, I'm sorry, I tried. I just can't.

NELSON HUSTLES UP AHEAD.

BILLY

Oh, my bad, I mean - the young woman from *Harry Potter*.

Billy **clicks his tongue** as if to say "I gotchu."

VANDERBERG

All right, y'all, hold up.

THEY COME TO A STOP.

VANDERBERG

Town up yonder's called Pacific Ridge. And never was there a town less well-named. But that's where our business will come to an end. Services at Lulu's Alehouse should get you in touch with your man. Assuming he still has my prize.

REGAN

The bargain was "to the town."

VANDERBERG

Don't worry, I'm not sending you in alone. Come on out boys!

NARRATOR

At Vanderberg's call, six men with drawn crossbows emerged from tall grass surrounding the party.

REGAN

Hergh!

NARRATOR

Regan reached for her swords on instinct, but was stymied - primarily by the surge of pain from her recently broken arm, and secondarily by the fact that she no longer possessed said swords.

REGAN

(strained)
What is this?!

VANDERBERG

These men here are for your safety and mine. Can't have you getting in the wrong hands, not with what you know. Careful of that one, boys, she's a mage.

NARRATOR

Three of the six crossbows swung to aim at Jen.

BILLY

Whoa hey FUCK OFF POINT 'EM AT ME YOU CHICKENSHITS!

REGAN

If any of my crew gets hurt by one of these goons I swear...

VANDERBERG

You swear what exactly? You don't seem to have the lay of the land. You've got fast hands, I'll give you that, but they don't seem to know their new limits yet.

NARRATOR

Regan seethed and scowled at Vanderberg, but made no move.

VANDERBERG

But it ain't all bad. Once our deal is done, you'll have a very powerful ally. You're about to close a deal with the one and only boss of Pacific Ridge.

SIX RANGERS **CHEER.**

VANDERBERG

Enough chatter. I need to check in on my business. Make yourselves comfortable but keep your head down and don't mention the statue to anyone, or there'll be trouble for both of us. I'll swing by Lulu's tonight for an update on the delivery.

NARRATOR

And with that, Vanderberg's men prodded the group into motion towards the town.

2 EXT. THE TOWN OF PACIFIC RIDGE - MAIN STREET - EVENING

2

We're in a medium-sized town that feels distinctly "Old West." There's not a ton of wildlife but there are plenty of farm animals, and people milling about. Most of the activity is centered maybe 100 yards or so away.

NARRATOR

Upon arriving at the town of Pacific Ridge - which they did just before dusk - our Party of Heroes was met by a single thoroughfare, lined on either side by a row of simple buildings. These were raised a foot or so above the dusty clay ground by wooden stilts.

The party's footsteps - and those of the goons - come to a stop at the center of our sound field.

NARRATOR

At the far end of this thoroughfare was a town square. This was *not* where the party was, shall we say, impolitely directed by their new unsolicited chaperons. And so, their clenched fists and angry scowls notwithstanding, it was *not* where they headed.

Everybody begins walking off left.

NARRATOR

It is however where I will take you for a few moments.

3 EXT. THE TOWN OF PACIFIC RIDGE - TOWN SQUARE - CONTINUOUS

3

There's only a subtle shift in ambiance here - the center of activity that was previously 100 yards away is now all around us.

NARRATOR

Now, this town of Pacific Ridge was home to a few hundred souls. How their time was occupied will be further expounded upon soon enough. But for now, suffice it to say that they were not completely without opportunity for leisure.

Note: For this guy, 'coyote' is pronounced with two syllables.

COYOTE CARL

Step right up, come one come all! Try your skills at Coyote Carl's latest challenge! With our biggest payouts yet!

NARRATOR

And of course, this niche in the local economy was filled by a particularly enterprising individual, who stood at this moment in the town square, hawking his services.

COYOTE CARL

One throw for just a copper, three throws for two! Won't find a better deal than that, folks!

NARRATOR

This enterprising individual, who'd dubbed himself "Coyote Carl," wore a wide-brimmed hat, a vest made from the pelt of the eponymous prairie canine, and honestly the most ostentatious mustache I have ever seen. And that's including the seaborne raiders of southeast Iorden such as Alf Firebeard.

COYOTE CARL

Test your skills against this most infamous Orc!

NARRATOR

Next to him, manacled by his ankle to a stake in the ground, and painted all over with an ashen grey, was a tall, broad-shouldered man - with bright red eyes.

COYOTE CARL

Born of the cave-people, he killed four Elves to escape the mines, and then fell in with the hill-people, whereupon he rose to become the most fearsome warrior the Rangers of Pacific Ridge have ever faced! The one the Orcs call the Man-Wolf!

There's a bit of sparse - awkwardly sparse -
applause.

NARRATOR

Carl and his colleague had caught the attention of a young couple strolling through the square, among others. So it is now with some unease that I introduce you to a freckled woman in a frilly dress and bonnet, and the stout but densely-built man onto whose arm she held. They were called Janey and Bill, respectively.

Two sets of footsteps sidle over.

JANEY

(fascinated by the novelty)
Oh my goodness gracious, would you look at him?

BILL

(so only Janey can hear)
Janey, will you watch how you talk in public?

JANEY

(private)
Oh come on, Bill, when was the last time we did something fun?
(to everyone)
Why do they call him the Man-Wolf?

COYOTE CARL

Ohhhh, let me assure you. In his heyday, you'd've rather faced a pack of wolves than one of him. Why I've known many a brave man who turned tail and fled when they heard his fearsome howl.

NARRATOR

Carl caught the eye of the large man beside him. The man returned his gaze, but took no other action.

A beat.

NARRATOR

He tried as surreptitiously as possible to jerk his head towards his two prospective clients. The large man cocked an eyebrow.

COYOTE CARL

(sotto voce)
Gods dammit, do the thing.

NARRATOR

The man rolled his eyes, and then...

THE HEEL LETS OUT A GROWL - IT'S LOUD BUT HE'S CLEARLY HALF-ASSING IT.

At this, a crowd begins to gather and buzz. A few people sound intimidated.

NARRATOR

This, at last, attracted a modest crowd over to Coyote Carl's little paddock.

COYOTE CARL

But not to worry! The Man-Wolf owes me a life-debt.

JANEY

A life debt?

COYOTE CARL

(bombastic, was waiting to spin this yarn)
 Why yes, ma'am. You see I was there the day the Man-Wolf's war party was finally out-maneuvered. I was with my company of Rangers, led by a detachment of Elves from the White Forest. It was only by great martial feats of Elvish horsemanship that we were able to get the drop on them. But they were resolved to fight to the last orc. And the Man-Wolf was the last orc standing. He had already killed quite a few amigos of mine, you see. When finally he was out of arrows, spears and throwing axes, the Elves - and not a few of my fellow rangers - were ready to shoot him where he stood. But I begged clemency. Isn't that right, friend?

THE HEEL

(a very flat performance)
 ...That's right.

COYOTE CARL

You see, I hated him for what he'd done. But I could not help but respect his warrior spirit. I orated on his behalf, friends, oh I orated! How long did I orate, friend?

THE HEEL

(can barely bring himself to play along)
 Ohh, it was so long I lost track of time.

COYOTE CARL

My comrades relented! And released him into my personal custody. Now it is the custom of his people when one man saves the life of another for that man to serve his savior the rest of his days. And that's why he's here. Now who wants to try their skill?

The crowd erupts with enthusiasm.

COYOTE CARL

All right, all right. One at a time! You sir, you were here first. It's one throw for a copper, three throws for two. What'll it be?

BILL

Sorry, maybe tomorrow.

COYOTE CARL

Don't you wanna impress your lady friend there?
(when that doesn't work, some good-natured ribbing)
You ain't scared, are you?

NARRATOR

In an instant, any sense of fun drained from Janey's face.

JANEY

(quiet, but desperate)
Bill.

BILL

(ignoring her - NOT good natured)
Scared? You know who the fuck you're talking to?

COYOTE CARL

Whoa-hoh - easy there, fella. I apologize sincerely for any offense, it was a...jest deriving from the absurd, as anyone can see you're brave as they come. But if you've other business to attend--

BILL

--No, I'll play your little game. Three throws.

A small amount of money changes hands.

BILL

What's the rules?

COYOTE CARL

Very simple, my good man, very simple. You throw this here axe at yonder stump. Get as close to the bulls-eye as you can. Then this here lumbering tower of Orc'll throw. If he gets closer to the bulls-eye, you lose. If he doesn't, you win! Are you ready?

BILL

You bet your ass.

COYOTE CARL

Righty then, give her a go.

An axe whooshes through the air and sticks into wood.

There's some...gentle and polite applause.

COYOTE CARL

All right, not bad at all. Wolf?

Another throw and thud.

The crowd goes "awww."

COYOTE CARL

Well I reckon he's got you beat by at least an inch there, buckaroo. Give her another shot.

Whoosh. Thud.

The applause is more enthusiastic this time.

COYOTE CARL

Damn, son! Not bad at all. I'm sure glad I apologized to you.

There are some chuckles.

COYOTE CARL

Well let's see how the Man-Wolf fares.

Whoosh. Thud.

Disappointed oohs and aahs.

BILL

Shit.

COYOTE CARL

Well shucks. Bested again. All right - last time. For all the bacon. Let's give our contestant a round of applause, shall we?

The crowd gleefully obliges.

COYOTE CARL

All right, settle down now. Let the man concentrate!

Again, they do. Coyote Carl's got them wrapped around his litte finger.

BILL TAKES A BIG DEEP BREATH.

Whoosh. Thud.

The crowd goes apeshit!

COYOTE CARL

Hot diggity damn! I'd call that a bulls-eye, my good man! That's gonna be tough to beat. Even for a vicious killer such as this one. And folks, we don't wanna see that happen do we?

The crowd boos and jeers.

NARRATOR

The red-eyed man reared back with his throwing axe...

Whoosh.

Wood splinters!

NARRATOR

...And shattered the prior axe with it.

That shuts the crowd up.

Everything is silent for a beat.

JANEY

This shit's rigged!

The crowd bursts into an angry din.

COYOTE CARL

(starting to get nervous)

Everyone, I assure you, this is a completely fair game.

BILL

You're fulla shit, Carl.

RANGER 1

Hey, shut the fuck up, Bill. You're just sore you lost, let one of us play!

JANEY

Why've you always gotta be such a rude horse's ass, Ned?

RANGER 1

Janey, you shut the fuck up too. You're just sore you picked a man with a little fish bait pecker.

BILL

What'd you say, you limp-dick Rosebud bastard?

RANGER 1

You heard me, you stinkin' Mulberry son of a bitch!

A punch is thrown.

The whole crowd explodes into a BRAWL.

We cut in very close to Carl and the Heel:

COYOTE CARL

(aside, to the Heel)

Think we oughta take our leave.

NARRATOR

At this, the large red-eyed man effortlessly pulled the stake to which he was manacled out of the ground, and began to spin it above his head as a makeshift flail.

A chain with a weight on the end of it whirs rapidly above us.

THE HEEL

(booming and impressive)

Everyone give us some room!

HARD CUT TO:

4 INT. LULU'S ALEHOUSE - ROUGHLY SIMULTANEOUS

4

Sudden, boring quiet.

The setting is an old west-style tavern, but it's not lively. The poker chips are un-dealt and the piano's un-played. All we hear is someone at the bar wiping down glasses, a few people wordlessly eating stew.

NARRATOR

With this, we may now jump backwards in time by a paltry few minutes and rejoin our primary protagonists. They had been not-quite-willingly escorted to a saloon. And it is here we find them, sat at a table in the back, their "protection" positioned inconspicuously around the bar room, but always in sight. Not that there was any danger of the travelers from the east comingling with the locals. All but the proprietor gave the newcomers a wide berth.

(All conversation is hushed until talking to Lulu.)

BRENNEN

Your Grace, we need a plan.

REGAN

I'm workin' on it.

NIA

No doubt. But perhaps we might work on it together rather than you keeping it to yourself.

REGAN

(a bit passive aggressive)

Yeah, ok, you wanna hear what I got so far?

JEN

Totally.

Long uncomfortable silence...

REGAN

That's it.

YELLOWYYN

What?

REGAN

(tired)

I've got nothing. That Vanderburg prick got it right, we don't have the lay of the land. We don't know shit from soup out here. All I know right now is we're not giving him that damned statue.

JEN

Ok, that's....something. Can we work the problem? Start with not giving him the statue. How do we do that and not get killed?

REGAN

(deflated)

Fuck if I know. We've got nothing to work with here. I don't know these people and they don't know me. We've got no leverage, no feet in any doors. Fuck, I don't have a toe in a window. I don't have a cunt hair in a letter box.

JEN

Jesus, why would you want--

NIA

--With respect, that assessment is flawed. You are forgetting that we have some small amount of items that can be bartered if need be. Additionally, you have the

(MORE)

NIA (cont'd)
mind of a master thief and six people willing to fight
for you.

NELSON
Plus a maybe magic baby!

NIA
Yes, also we have a babe.

BRENNEN
Your Grace, you don't need to do this all on your own.
With all due respect, fighting on your own is how you
ended up with broken arms. We are your court, we all
have skills and knowledge you can lean on to help in
your time of need. We are...tools at your disposal.

BILLY
Who's a tool?

A set of footsteps approaching

REGAN
(sigh)
Fine.
(a beat)
Thanks. I'll be sure lean on and dispose of you as I
see-
(full volume)
Hi. We're *still* ok over here.

LULU
Right, look. Y'all seem...generally bewildered so I
reckoned I'd let you know. First plate of bread and
first bowl of stew is free for newcomers 'round here.
So long as they're gentle folk who behave themselves.

BILLY
Free?

BRENNEN
Free?

LULU
Y'all want any?

REGAN
(maximum cynicism as always)
...What kinda stew?

JEN
Regan!

NIA
Your Grace.

REGAN
Yeah, okay. Fuck it.

LULU

Right. Back in a sec.

A beat here. We can imagine some hangry stares.

REGAN

What?

JEN

I think everybody's just really hungry.

REGAN

Well congrats. We're not just broke and captive anymore, now we owe somebody something.

NIA

She said it was free.

REGAN

I heard what she said.

Plate clunks on the table.

LULU

Here's the bread, stew's coming next.

JEN

(extra nice to compensate for Regan)
Thank you so much!

BRENNEN

(whispers, to be polite)
Your Grace. I think there's something wrong with this bread.

BILLY

Ho-ly shit, they got tacos here? I'm getting a chalupa, who wants one?

NELSON

There's nothing wrong with the bread, it's just a tortilla.

YELLOWYYN

A what?

JEN

It's unleavened, and they make it with corn instead of wheat. Try one.

She slides the plate his way.

BRENNEN

What is...corn?

JEN

We're gonna eat if you aren't.

She slides the plate back.

BILLY, JEN, AND NELSON START **STUFFING THEIR FACES.**

JEN

(face stuffed)
Omigod, they're really fresh.

NELSON

(also face stuffed)
Yeah, these are bomb.

BILLY

(also face stuffed)
Mmhhh.

BRENNEN

Well don't eat them all.

He slides the plate back again.

THE REMAINDER OF THE PARTY **DIGS IN.**

Lulu returns.

NARRATOR

It was then the proprietor of the alehouse returned from the kitchen with seven steaming bowls of stew, and placed them before her seven hungry patrons.

She puts seven bowls down on the bar.

LULU

There we are. Rancher's stew. My secret recipe. Enjoy!

NELSON

Thank you!

JEN

Thank you!

THE THREE KIDS **DIG IN.**

BILLY

(face stuffed yet again)
Yeah, thanks!

NARRATOR

But the four members of our Party who had lived their whole lives in Eastern Iorden were more cautious with the food, as much of its aroma was entirely alien to them.

BRENNEN SNIFFS HIS BOWL.

BRENNEN

What's in it?

LULU

It's meat, beans, and a paste made from savory fruits.

NIA

I'm fascinated by the concept of savory fruits, I'd love to ask you more about it later.

BRENNEN TAKES A BITE.

BRENNEN

It's good!

LULU

Well don't act so surprised.

REGAN TAKES A BITE.

REGAN

Yeah, you know, that's pretty--

SHE SPITS IT OUT AND STARTS WHEEZING.

REGAN

Poison! It's poison!

**A BUNCH OF CHAIRS ARE THROWN BACK FROM THE
TABLE IN A PANIC**

LULU

It ain't poison! Why would I poison you?!

JEN

Maybe she's allergic to something? Oh, god, they don't have epi-pens here do they?

NIA

What do you feel?

REGAN

My mouth's burning!

THE KIDS ALL START LAUGHING WITH RELIEF.

JEN

Oh my god, Regan.

BILLY

You had us going for a bit.

Their laughter dies down, at which point we notice that a few of Lulu's other proprietors are chuckling.

NARRATOR

Regan faced her comrades, with a look of incredulous betrayal, that they would laugh in the face of her pain.

NELSON

It's not poison, it's just seasoning.

REGAN

You mean they cook it like that on purpose?

JEN

Drink some water, you'll be fine. Or milk, milk's better. You have any milk?

LULU

Hasn't been fresh for three days.

JEN

Water then.

LULU

Water's not that fresh either. Wanna beer?

REGAN

Yeah, fine, beer. Put it on that guy's tab. Why do they cook it like that?

BILLY

I dunno, it tastes good?

JEN

Also, it makes you sweat without raising your body temperature. So it helps when it's hot out.

REGAN

Did that not hurt you, Brennen?

BRENNEN

There's a wee stinging, I suppose. It's worth it for the flavor.

REGAN

You're all out of your fucking minds.
(then, almost mad about it...)
 ...Dammit it is really good.

SHE RESUMES **EATING**, THIS TIME **VORACIOUSLY**.

But, like, she's still in a lot of pain.

REGAN

(ad lib. under her breath, e.g...)
 Fuck me, gods dammit.

Note: For the entire rest of this scene,
 Regan should be struggling with a truly
 intense amount of phlegm.

YELLOWYYN

I don't feel any stinging.

LULU

Yeah, birds and Elves. The hotberries don't affect them
 the same. Who can say--

--The doors swing open

RANGER 2

(out of breath)
 --There's a brawl in the square! Y'all better come
 quick.

NARRATOR

The Party's chaperons stood so quickly that it seemed
 like a reflex.

RANGER 3

You three stay and watch them, like Les said. We'll go
 check it out.

Three people scurry off.

NARRATOR

And just like that, our heroes' protection was halved
 in number. The other six instinctively looked to Regan
 for cues on whether they should do anything to take
 advantage of this sudden change. But Regan, for her
 part, surreptitiously lowered her usable hand with the
 palm facing down, as if to tell her comrades to remain
 still. All the while her attention was rapt to the
 goings-on in the barroom.

LULU

(to herself but not trying to be quiet)
Lovely, 'nother brawl. Gally, Lulu, why's your beer always warm? Ohhhh, I don't know, maybe because I'm always using up my precious little ice to treat black eyes.

She clomps down a set of stairs behind the bar.

NARRATOR

And with this exasperated aside, the saloon's proprietor stomped off into the cellar.

Beat.

NARRATOR

And for a moment...there was peace again. But not for very long.

Two people walk in.

NARRATOR

For soon thereafter did our Party first encounter Coyote Carl and his employee, who entered the saloon in something of a hurry. Needless to say, they were somewhat fascinated by Carl's appearance, and very fascinated by the appearance of the large man who was with him. These two ducked into a booth near the front window, but such was their state of excitement that their conversation was still largely audible to our protagonists.

COYOTE CARL

Gods, you see that one kid? What was he, seventeen? Took a rock to the head the size of a roast ham.

THE HEEL

I saw.

COYOTE CARL

Think he'll live?

THE HEEL

Doubt it.

COYOTE CARL

Gods damn. This town, I tell ya.

THE HEEL

I told you to hire a handful of bodyguards.

COYOTE CARL

And I told you it's fucking impossible around here. Hire from the Rosebuds, the Mulberrys show up and fight

(MORE)

COYOTE CARL (cont'd)

'em. Hire from the Mulberrys, the Rosebuds start shit. You hire some from both, they fight each other! Entire town's full of bodyguards and it's the most dangerous place I've ever lived. Besides, I thought you'd be my security, you know? At least a little.

THE HEEL

You don't pay me enough to do security. You barely pay me enough to do what we agreed on. Speaking of...with things as dicey as they are, I might have to split town sooner rather than later.

COYOTE CARL

What? Split town my ass. Our deal was until the first snow of the season.

THE HEEL

Our deal was until the first snow of the season *unless* things got unsafe. Then I said I'd leave if I had to and you'd pay me for the time I did work.

COYOTE CARL

(bitter)
Right. Gotta have your silver, don't you?

THE HEEL

("Why else would I be here, asshole?")
I'm told that's how your people conduct commerce.

A coin purse clinks on the table.

The coin purse is opened.

THE HEEL

This isn't the raise we talked about.

COYOTE CARL

The raise was to do the new axe-throwing game. But we didn't make any fucking money from the axe-throwing game, now did we?

THE HEEL

And how's that my fault?

COYOTE CARL

You didn't play the part right! What was that bullshit with the howl?

THE HEEL

("You tell me.")
What was that bullshit about a life debt?

COYOTE CARL

Our deal was you play the part I tell you to, no if's and's or but's.

THE HEEL

(being a ball-buster)

I *did* do the howl when you asked me to.

COYOTE CARL

I shouldn't have to say it out loud, you lunkhead. I was giving you a signal.

THE HEEL

I'm a big dumb Orc, remember? Can't expect me to pick up the finer cues of civilized society.

COYOTE CARL

You got a real shit attitude, you red eyed bastard. I pay you an honest wage for an honest day's work. There's not many here who'd do the same for your kind.

THE HEEL

You gonna pay me what you promised, or are we done here?

Carl angrily throws a few more coins on the table.

COYOTE CARL

Here! You fucking greedy bastard. That what you want?

THE HEEL

Again, I'm told that's why your people work...

COYOTE CARL

(ignoring him)

Yeah, yeah, we're fucking done here. I'll see you next year once you've pissed away what I gave you.

Footsteps from behind the bar.

NARRATOR

Coyote Carl rose from the booth in a huff, just as Lulu emerged from the cellar with a bucket of ice.

COYOTE CARL

Howdy, Lulu.

He leaves.

NARRATOR

And soon after his departure, the large man painted grey approached the bar and spoke with Lulu.

Very heavy footsteps cross the room.

(They speak quietly)

THE HEEL

I think I'm gotta split, Lulu. You mind if I take some supper in the cellar first.

LULU

Sure. Head on down, I'll bring it to you soon as I can.

THE HEEL

Appreciate it. Anybody asks, I slipped out the back.

Now he walks down into the cellar.

NELSON

We should DEFINITELY talk to that guy.

REGAN

(A bit distracted)
Yeah...for sure.

NARRATOR

Nelson was pleasantly surprised to see the flush of crimson rising to Regan's cheeks.

NELSON

That pissed you off too, right? That guy was clearly getting--

REGAN

--Outta my way, outta my way.

Her chair is thrown to the ground as she runs.

REGAN

(A few feet away now)
Holy fuck, where's the shitter?

She sprints out the back door.

LULU

(sighs)
Another banner day, Lulu. "Go west, young woman. Go west," they said. Lots of space out there, lots of peace.

And then the front doors swing open again.

JANEY

LULU!

NARRATOR

Vanderberg's men reached for their hips on instinct. When they saw who was darkening the door, they relaxed, but their hands stayed near their hips.

LULU

Oh for Galadon's--

NARRATOR

--And when Lulu saw who it was, she too softened immediately.

LULU

(genuine care)
Janey! Are you--

JANEY

--Give me the crossbow.

LULU

(finally, relieved)
You bet.

NARRATOR

As Lulu rushed behind the bar, Janey paced near the entrance, casting furtive glances toward the door.

JANEY

The son of a bitch threw a bottle at Cottonball, Lulu. Cottonball! Gods know I sass off sometimes, or have a few too many and flirt with someone. But Cottonball never hurt a living thing in all his sweet little life. It's too much. If he ever hurt that innocent little thing...

NARRATOR

Lulu returned, putting a rather antiquated single shot crossbow in Janey's hands.

LULU

You remember what I showed you, right? How to use that?

NARRATOR

Janey continued to stare at the crossbow in her hands.

LULU

It's already loaded so all you need to do is aim and shoot.

JANEY

...I don't know if I can do this...

LULU
Sure you can, sweetie. Just aim and shoot.

JANEY
If I miss...

She can't fully spell out the end of that thought.

And then she has another.

JANEY
Gods, and what if I don't? I love him, Lulu.

LULU
I know you do, but this is no way to keep on--
--The doors swing open.

BILL
--Janey, will you quit being such a--

--A bolt looses and sticks in the wood wall.

NARRATOR
Bill stormed into the bar, catching Lulu and Janey by surprise. So much so that Janey accidentally let loose a bolt that narrowly missed the man's head.

A beat of stunned silence all around.

NARRATOR
Bill looked back at the bolt in the wall, took a moment to comprehend, and then flared his eyes and nostrils as he wheeled on Janey.

BILL
YOU STUPID--

--Three chairs scrape against the floor.

NARRATOR
--But he stopped short as he saw three gangsters stand, hands on holsters.

BILL
This ain't got nothing to do with y'all. You not see her try to kill me?

LULU
Bill, look at her! She's shaking like a tumbleweed - anyone can see it was an accident!

BILL

Accident my ass.

RANGER 4

You and your woman ain't our business, Bill. But keeping Lulu's as neutral ground sure is.

BILL

Oh. I see. She ruttin' on you Rosebud bastards too? D'you fellas know this bitch is tainted? She's sweet on that greyskin that Lulu keeps feeding.

NARRATOR

Our party was already rapt by this exchange before Bill let loose this particular slur but now they were on highest alert.

JANEY

(verge of tears)

I ain't ever stepped out on you. Ever!

LULU

Bill for once in your foul-spotted life, piss off!

BILL

Like Selbirin I will! You don't think I know whose crossbow that is, Lulu?

LULU

So what if it is? Ain't I got a right to shoot a mad dog who barges in here?

BILL

Yeah, right - neutral fucking ground. You're fulla shit Lulu.

(to the Rosebuds)

Y'all three are breaking the pact. I'm gonna get my crew and we'll see what they've got to say about that.

(to Janey)

And honey, we ain't finished by a damn sight.

NARRATOR

And with that final outburst, Bill left the bar room, leaving everyone else in stunned silence.

A beat of quiet.

This one actually sticks.

JANEY AT LAST STARTS **SOBBING**.

LULU

Come here sweetie, it's all right.

NARRATOR

Looks passed back and forth between our entire party of seven. Nia in particular sought to catch the gaze of Jen, but Jen had a hand on the shoulder of a tense and shaking Billy.

LULU

What do you need? A drink? A bath?

REGAN

Somebody to shoot that piece of shit for you?

NARRATOR

...Offered Regan, re-emerging from the back door.

BUT IT ONLY MAKES JANEY SOB HARDER.

LULU

Generous, no doubt, but maybe mind your business?

NARRATOR

Having thus offered what she could, Regan rejoined her comrades at their table.

JEN

Hey. You missed--

REGAN

--I heard most of it. We just learned a fuck of a lot about this town. Starting with who I wanna kill first.

END OF PART ONE.

PART TWO:

5 INT. LULU'S ALEHOUSE - CONTINUOUS FROM THE END OF PART ONE

5

(Same ambiance as the end of the last episode.)

REGAN

I got enough to start us on a plan.

NARRATOR

If you'll recall, the exiled queen and her court had just learned a f--a...lot about their new surroundings. Some of it through clever deduction, and the rest through some very direct albeit unpleasant channels.

REGAN

We learned there's two gangs in this town, yeah?

YELLOWYYN

The Rosebuds and the Mulberrys, if I recall.

REGAN

They're always at each others' throats, and this town's barely holding it together. Which makes me think they're the *only* two gangs in town. 'Cause if there were more, there'd pr--

BRENNEN

--There'd probably be more peace.

REGAN

(*impressed*)
Right.

NIA

I'm sorry, you're suggesting more gangs would keep the peace?

BRENNEN

Aye, in a wretched sort of way. They would all have their own wee fiefdoms, but none would be strong enough to rule alone. You'd see skirmishes on the borders now and then, but none would try in earnest to destroy the others, because an endless stalemate is safer.

There's a beat of quiet surprise.

BRENNEN

(*realizing this as he speaks*)
It's...not...terribly different from the Great Houses of Iorden.

REGAN

(somewhere between an aside and a dig)

Finally he starts to get it.

(to the whole group)

Anyway I think those two gangs put a big old crack right down the middle of town. If we play it smart, we can wedge ourselves in there.

BILLY

Where, in the big old crack?

REGAN

Yeah I heard it while I was saying it. But we gotta think fast, before that shithead Bill gets back.

This next exchange should be off to the side and hushed.

JANEY

I don't know, Lulu. I did embarrass him in town.

LULU

For the last time, Janey - it's nothing to do with you. He was sore about how the brawl turned out and you were the closest thing he could take it out on.

JANEY

Maybe.

LULU

You know it won't get any better, right?

BILL

(from outside)

Alright you rats! Come on out so we can give you a piece of our mind!

NARRATOR

Vanderberg's men shared a look, then calmly made their way towards the door.

6 EXT. STREET OUTSIDE LULU'S ALEHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

6

We're out on the main thoroughfare, but it's closer to night now.

RANGER 3

Figures you Mulberry curs would want to ruin the only bar in town. Does Cliff know you're out here stirring up shit at Lulu's? Not sure he'd approve.

NARRATOR

The rest of the bar room's inhabitants gathered near the windows facing the street where they saw a crowd of nearly three dozen men, all with crossbows, some with torches, some with pitchforks.

BILL

I'm stirring up shit? Y'all stood by while I got shot at with Lulu's bow. And you can bet your ass Mister Weston'd want me to stop y'all taking over Lulu's .

RANGER 1

Sorry you can't see so well, always forget the brown in your eyes is actual shit. We were having a drink! You were just looking for an excuse to start something on account of some filly trouble.

BILL

If you weren't scheming to take over Lulu's, then why do you have an Elf in there?

THE CROWD **MURMURS** .

NARRATOR

Taking a quick read on the crowd that seemed suddenly riled by his presence, Yllowwyn attempted to hide beneath a table. But at an average height for an adolescent Elf, he was a good foot too tall to fit comfortably.

BILL

That's right, you worms, we know you're scheming up something with the Elves. Don't think we didn't know Vanderberg traveled out east. From what we hear, he seems to be in high spirits. Got anything to do with what y'all have been chatting about with that Elf and his posse?

VANDERBERG

As clever as you think you are, you really are just a fool.

NARRATOR

A crowd of people came down the street, Vanderberg at their head.

VANDERBERG

Neither organization has claim to Lulu's Alehouse, nor do we intend to change that.

BILL

Then explain why I nearly got my head skewered by Lulu's crossbow and three of your men were ready to back up the one who took the shot.

VANDERBERG

I don't know for sure but it's likely you were being as much of a horse's ass as you usually are, Bill.

(yelling)

That about the way of it, Lulu?

LULU

Just about. Everyone could see it was an accident. It were Janey who pulled the lever - after Bill startled her.

NARRATOR

At this, Vanderberg's head snapped towards the alehouse in surprise. Bill, taking this momentary distraction as an opportunity, reached for his crossbow.

Crossbow shoots and hits flesh.

NARRATOR

In a blur, Vanderberg drew his crossbow and shot Bill in his shooting shoulder, all before the man could level his own crossbow.

BILL

ARGHHHH!

VANDERBERG

You always had funny ideas, Bill, but thinking you could draw on me has got to be your funniest yet.

BILL

THIS ISN'T OVER. I DEMAND A DUEL.

NARRATOR

At this outburst, the amassed crowd grew still, awaiting the response, anticipating more violence.

VANDERBERG

There you go one upping yourself all over again. But if you insist then I agree. Not to worry, I'll make it quick as I can so you won't have to worry about your sorry life much further.

BILL

Then you accept?

VANDERBERG

I do.

BILL

Then I name Weston as my proxy.

WESTON

And I accept.

NARRATOR

A man detached himself from the shadow of an awning across the street from Lulu's and stepped into the torch light, smiling at Vanderberg. The crowd, having grown to include those noticing the commotion and wanting to know what was going on, grew uneasy, as these two imposing figures now stared at each other.

7 INT. LULU'S ALEHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

7

BRENNEN

I imagine that's the leader of the second gang.

NIA

Given that crossbows appear to be the weapon of choice, speed appears to be the key to a successful duel.

REGAN

And we know Vanderberg's fast, and this other guy seems more than happy to duel him. So he must be pretty fast himself.

JEN

Is that gonna be a problem for us?

REGAN

No. I think if anything I hear opportunity knocking.

YELLOWYYN

(on the other side of room)
Someone tell me when I can come out please? My feet are very badly asleep.

8 EXT. STREET OUTSIDE LULU'S ALEHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

8

VANDERBERG

Well...been a while, Weston.

WESTON

If I didn't know better, I'd think you were ducking me.

VANDERBERG

We both agreed to leave the town split. Seemed no point in breaking that deal.

WESTON

Yet here we stand.

VANDERBERG

That we do. Suppose you put this together?

WESTON

Heard maybe you were getting a little too settled, like maybe you needed a reminder of why the town's split. I'm still here, Les, and still will be after you finish another of your schemes.

VANDERBERG

Like the scheme you had about having one of your lieutenants sleeping with the only person in the town with a mind for sums?

WESTON

Doesn't sound too far off from your scheme to head out east to make a deal with the fuckin' *White Forest* before the next Elf visit. Guess we'll see if you're still around to make good on that deal when they get here in two days.

NARRATOR

Vanderberg's eyes widened in surprise.

WESTON

Oh, interesting. You really didn't know they were coming so soon, did you? Huh. Maybe you're up to something else. But I know you've got a plan. Let's cut the act and finally have it out. One last duel, that only one of us walks away from.

REGAN

Or...

NARRATOR

Regan emerged from the saloon.

REGAN

...you both end up killing each other and some loose catapult like Bill ends up in charge - fucks the whole thing. I've got information on something very VERY valuable. You can either split the value for both your gangs, or one of you will take the other out and become the only boss in town.

VANDERBERG

Hey, this wasn't the deal!

REGAN

Deal's still on, just the conditions have changed. You're no stranger to that, right Vanderberg?

VANDERBERG

I kept my end, you still--

REGAN

--Doesn't matter. Here's what's going to happen: you two, and only you two, are gonna go with my squire to make the pick up. You'll leave at dawn tomorrow, that way you'll have enough time to pick it up and get back here before the Elves arrive.

WESTON

And why should I trust this isn't some ploy you're working with Vanderberg?

REGAN

Because the best actor in Armstrungard couldn't fake that vein he's about to pop in his head.

WESTON

(chuckles)

I reckon you're right. But I ain't goin' anywhere til I know what we're picking up.

REGAN

The White fucking Lady. Genuine article.

WESTON

(laughing)

Right, you lot managed to get across the mountains on the promise of...

NARRATOR

But as Weston glanced at Vanderberg, he saw no amusement, just determination to get what he was owed. As well as the vein in his forehead, growing to double the size.

WESTON

...Well shit. Suppose that's worth a trip.

VANDERBERG

(through clenched teeth)

Fine. We'll both go.

REGAN

Right then, we'll see you tomorrow. Oh and by the way, Lulu's is still neutral ground, but if you start trouble, you'll have to answer to me or one of my knights.

NARRATOR

At this, Brennen and Yllowyyn stepped out of the bar and took positions behind Regan.

REGAN

Also, if any fighting between your two gangs happens while their dads are out of town, we'll get word to the drop and the deal is off. Oh, and Vanderberg - lose the babysitters, yeah? Me and my crew have got every reason to stick around now.

NARRATOR

The gangsters into whose care Vanderberg had entrusted our party looked to their superior for guidance. After a brief deliberation, he tersely cocked his head in the opposite direction from the inn, and his underlings stepped away.

REGAN

Alright! You all should run on home to get plenty of sleep, some of you need to be up bright and early.

NARRATOR

The crowd began dispersing, confused by the lackluster and sudden conclusion of the night's events. Weston and Vanderberg lingered a short while longer than most, eyeing each other, before they both turned away and made their way back to their respective sides of town.

9 INT. LULU'S ALEHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

9

NARRATOR

Regan, Brennan, and Yllowyyn re-entered the barroom.

BRENNEN

That seemed to go well, Your Grace.

YLLOWYYN

Yes, a well-baited trap if I may say.

REGAN

I'm not counting on anything just yet, but it's a start. Billy, I just put your ass down as collateral. You're sure you're up for what we talked about?

BILLY

(maybe a little overconfident)
Don't worry, I got this. Besides, our crew doesn't have a bigger pain in the ass than me.

REGAN

Right. Annnnd speaking of...
(rushing to the bathroom)
Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck.

10 INT. LULU'S ALEHOUSE - CELLAR - NEARLY CONTINUOUS

10

NARRATOR

As the High Queen of the Human Realms of Iorden rushed off to the latrine once more, a man sat alone in the cellar, crouched amongst casks of ale and whiskey.

Footsteps head down the stairs.

THE HEEL

That you, Lulu?

NELSON

My name's Nelson. Lulu gave me your food to bring you.

THE HEEL

You can leave it at the bottom of the stairs.

The footsteps come to rest.

NELSON

Hey man, are...are you okay?

THE HEEL

Am I okay?

NELSON

Yeah. This place seems kind of, uh...hostile.

NARRATOR

Cautiously, the large man stepped out from his hiding spot, and got a good look at the rather diminutive figure standing at the base of the cellar stairs with a tray of bread and beans.

THE HEEL

(still suspicious)
I know how to handle myself.

NELSON

Yeah. Still though. You know. What's your name?

THE HEEL

Look, I don't know what your angle is but I prefer to be left alone.

NELSON

There's no angle. Just...as my dad would say, you're family. Feel me?

THE HEEL

If you're one of those who thinks just because I do Carl's show for money that maybe I'll do *anything* for money, let me tell you right now--

NELSON

--Oh, no no no, gross dude.
(*Beat - better clarify!*)
I mean not gross in like a homophobic way, gross in like a fetishizing way, and in a "I'm sixteen" way. That's not...yeah, no.

THE HEEL

Tell me why you're still here or else please leave me alone.

NELSON

Because my friends need your help even if they don't know it yet. And because I know what it's like to be a spec of pepper in a sea of salt.

THE HEEL

(*not convinced*)
That so?

NELSON

Where I come from, my skin color is the one everyone seems to be having a problem with.

THE HEEL

This is paint. Washes off.

NELSON

Right. But does it, though?

THE HEEL

Where do you come from?

NELSON

Really far away, dude. There's this huge empire called the U.S.A. It enslaved my ancestors, up until my grandparents' grandparents. Nowadays...they tell us to get over it, but I think they're the ones not over it.

THE HEEL

They got Elves in Yuessay?

NELSON

(chuckling - never thought of it like that)
Huh. That's a really good question. ...We've got something close enough.

(beat)

What's your name?

THE HEEL

Folks 'round here call me Henry.

NELSON

But is that what you call yourself?

THE HEEL

No, but people round here can pronounce it. So it's easier.

NELSON

Well tell me your name then, gimme a shot.

A beat.

THE HEEL

O'an Ritsl.

NELSON

That's dope. Tzan Reetsil you said?

O'AN

Not quite. But I do appreciate the effort.

NELSON

I'll keep trying.

O'AN

Are your friends like you?

NELSON

Eh...not exactly. Two of them are from where I'm from but none of them have my same ancestors. But...they're really trying to be on the right side of things.

O'AN

Even the Elf?

NELSON

Yeah, actually. He didn't used to be, but he shot another Elf over it. A General.

O'AN

No shit. How come?

NELSON

The leader of our crew - the short one, with the knives. She...saw something. Murders. A lot of murders actually.

O'AN

I bet I can guess who it was got murdered.

NELSON

(uncomfortable giving this news)
Yeah. Yeah, bet you can. I'm...sorry. But it changed her. It changed a lot of them honestly. And now they all wanna get back at the Elves.

O'AN

(Considers a beat)
Why do you think they need my help?

NELSON

Because you've for sure noticed things about this town that those nice white ladies upstairs haven't.

O'AN

Can you tell me what they're planning?

NELSON

It's probably easier if you come upstairs and hear it yourself? The last step of the plan gets over on the Rangers *and* the White Forest.

O'AN

Ha! Okay, you got me - I've gotta hear this at least.

11 INT. LULU'S ALEHOUSE - NIGHT

11

REGAN

So are you all just shitting yourselves constantly?

LULU

(What a weird question)
No...

NARRATOR

Admittedly, the Queen wasn't starting her planning with the most pressing of details.

JEN

I think you might have like a food sensitivity or something? Or maybe you're not eating enough fiber.

REGAN

Why do you even have this stuff? What lunatic decided to eat it?

Nelson emerges from the cellar with O'an.

NELSON

Hey y'all. You know Tzan?

LULU

'Course

NARRATOR

He returned their greetings with a very polite but not excessively friendly nod.

NELSON

I think he should help us with our plan.

REGAN

I think you're probably right. That's good thinking, Nelson. Tzan was it?

O'AN

O'an.

REGAN

O'an. How's it hanging? I'm Regan, Aeron Regan. The, ah...the fuckin'...

BRENNEN

Champion of the Civilized Peoples and High Queen of the Human Realms of Iorden.

REGAN

That's it.

O'AN

(wry)
Civilized, huh?

He gives that just a second to hang in the air...

JANEY

(sniffly but recovering)
And I haven't properly introduced myself to any of y'all. Janey. Howdy.

REGAN

Nice to meet you, Janey.

O'AN

(threading a needle - polite but not familiar)
Ma'am.

JANEY

You put on a good show in the square before. I almost had fun for ten minutes, watching Bill get embarrassed like that.

O'AN
Just doing what I'm paid for.

JANEY
Regan, was it? That was...well, you got a lot of guts. I can't thank you enough for stopping them coming in here. Can I put your next drink on my tab?

REGAN
I'd like that.
(a probing silence)
But...I've gotta ask for something more important. I need to know all I can about this town.

JANEY
Oh yeah? Why's that?

REGAN
(some swagger to this)
So I can get rich.

LULU, JANEY, AND O'AN ALL SHARE A **CHUCKLE**.

LULU
Guts indeed. But that'll only get you so far 'round here.

REGAN
So why don't you tell me what else I'm missing? C'mon I'll introduce you to my crew.

They head over to the Party's table.

Note: This "cloak" exchange can happen while they walk and should be played as a throwaway, but it should definitely be intelligible to the audience.

JANEY
I love this, uh...what do you call this?

REGAN
My cloak?

JANEY
May I?
(beat)
Auch, you can't find craftsmanship like this out here.

They arrive at the table.

Regan clocks...something, but leaves it be for now.

REGAN

Right...So this is my crew.

NARRATOR

Look, as you may have realized by now, this story has quite a few heroes, and you already know their names. So I'll spare you the ritual of saying them all aloud. Suffice it to say, once introductions were made, planning began in earnest.

REGAN

Okay. So everyone here's either a Mulberry or a Rosebud.

LULU

'Cept for me.

JANEY

And me.

O'AN

And me. And Carl, now I think of it.

LULU

Can I get anyone anything else to--

REGAN

--Another rancher's stew. I'll open a tab.

LULU

Suit yourself...

JANEY

I reckon there's a fair number of folks who aren't one gang or the other. But all the Rangers are anyway.

O'AN

Which is to say - everyone who takes money to kill.

REGAN

So that's the racket. And who do they take money from?

JANEY

Anyone who needs to hire an army. Usually Elves.

REGAN

Why would an Elf need crossbows for hire? What about the Knights of the Wood?

LULU

As it sounds like you know too well, it's quite a trip from the White Forest. And turns out the Th'ar lo-Hyy1 ain't at the beck and call of every middling Elf who gets a farm charter.

REGAN

Interesting.

O'AN

So the Buds and the Blossoms fight over the contracts. But never too hard. They gotta make this shithole seem orderly and dependable, else they're worried their masters will take their coin elsewhere.

JANEY

And word is there's a real fancy pants Elf coming through in a couple days' time with a big juicy contract.

NARRATOR

One would have had to know Regan well and be watching her closely to notice her muscles tense in this moment. But tense they did.

REGAN

What do we know about this Elf? Suppose just...for example that a friend of yours was...whatever the opposite of welcome is in the White Forest.

O'AN

I think the opposite of welcome in the White Forest is Orc. But go on about your "friend."

REGAN

Would you tell that friend to lay low while this Elf was in town?

O'AN

If that's what your friend's worried about, then they're in luck.

REGAN

Oh yeah?

JANEY

This particular Elf has kind of made a name for himself telling anyone who'll listen that the White Forest is too big for its britches.

LULU

Yeah, written a few things what's ruffled feathers. The phrase "tiptoeing up to the line of treason" was thrown around.

REGAN

We might just need to meet with this guy.

O'AN

Yeah, well...you'll have to do that meeting on your own.

JANEY

Him coming is why Weston and Vanderberg are so on edge, and so keen to get their hands on that statue of yours. And it's also probably the only reason those two scuffles stopped before they burned half of Main Street.

REGAN

Right. Now Vanderberg and Weston - suppose, just for a second, they were out of the picture. What's that do to the situation?

NARRATOR

A look of genuine apprehension passed between the Queen's newfound local contacts.

JANEY

You got guts, but please don't be stupid.

O'AN

As much as I'd like to see 'em both dead, they're fast. Really fast. A thousand young bowslingers each have tried to challenge 'em, and not one in those two thousand is gonna get to grow old.

REGAN

But what if we got 'em out of the picture without fighting 'em?

O'AN

How you fixing to do that?

REGAN

Let's just say the drop-off they're going to tomorrow is gonna keep 'em away longer than they're expecting. What's that buy us?

O'AN

They cast long shadows, those two. It wouldn't be enough to get them out of the way. You'd have to turn all their men against them, which is gonna be no small feat.

REGAN

But suppose we managed to do that. Then what?

O'AN

Well...I reckon one of two things. Either another leader presents themselves, and the town rallies around them, or else no one does, and the town burns to the ground, Elves be damned.

JANEY

There's no one in either gang right now who can match Vanderberg or Weston.

LULU

And I can't afford to have this town burn. So if you really are fixing to get rid of those two, you'd better find a fitting replacement and fast.

REGAN

What if I was the replacement?

O'AN **SNORTS.**

LULU

No offense, dear. They'll never trust an outsider.

REGAN

What about an outsider with more money than this town's ever seen?

JANEY

(puts it together)

You were never gonna give Vanderberg or Weston that statue, were you? You're gonna fence it yourself, while they're gone. Hmm. Guts *and* brains.

REGAN

Would that work?

O'AN

It might. If there's one thing Rangers worship more than their bosses it's silver.

REGAN

So we need to figure how to turn the Rangers against their bosses.

Beat.

LULU

I'll put up a pot of coffee.

END OF PART TWO.

PART THREE:

12 INT. WHITE FOREST CONSTABULARY - NIGHT

12

We're in a small room that's built into the center of a huge tree. The sound of burning torches mixes with the nocturnal stirrings of woodland life.

As this ambiance fades in, so too does...

YLLODYK'S WRACKED SIGHS AND GASPS.

She's been crying all night and has truly run out of tears. Now it's just her lungs going through the motions of crying.

NARRATOR

I'm going to take you away for a bit from Regan's new court. And for now, to the constabulary of the White Forest.

ELF CONSTABLE

I truly am sorry for your loss, dear.
(*but somebody else needs this room, so...*)
If you like, we have a small bereavement room, where you may--

YLLODYK

--You're sorry?! That's it? Can you do anything?

NARRATOR

Built into one of the sturdiest trees in the Forest, the constabulary was where all Elves were taught to go when faced with a danger they could not handle themselves.

ELF CONSTABLE

Well from what you've described, it all sounds like a tragic accident. From which you were fortunate to survive I might add.

YLLODYK

Have you not been listening to me?

ELF CONSTABLE

Why of course I have, child. Very closely. Your house girl mistook poisonous mushrooms for benign ones, and cooked the former into a stew. Sadly your parents ate the stew, which proved fatal, and you did not - hence here you sit, drawing breath. The house girl, realizing her error too late, decided to end her own life.

(MORE)

ELF CONSTABLE (cont'd)

Whether to escape shame or punishment I cannot say. But she explained it all plainly in the note that you yourself read.

YLLODYK

I told you - if Ruby made that stew once then she made it ten thousand times. She would have never made so glaring an error.

ELF CONSTABLE

(I'm sorry to break this to you, but...)

I fear we often give the Memyet too much credit at our own peril. All the latest science shows they learn by mere rote, rather than by deduction as you or I might. We cannot know what went through the poor girl's head when she grabbed the wrong mushrooms - only that obviously for some reason she did.

YLLODYK

But what of the four ruffians who entered our house unbeckoned and unannounced? "He said make sure it was done right." Those were his exact words.

ELF CONSTABLE

Mm. Admittedly that doesn't fit with the suicide letter...

YLLODYK

I should say not!

ELF CONSTABLE

Is it possible your parents contracted to have some work done in the house?

YLLODYK

...Do you have a supervisor I might speak with?

ELF CONSTABLE

(Scoffs)

No, dear. Now about that bereavement room...

There's a knock at the door.

ELF CONSTABLE

Come.

The door creaks very loudly because of course it does.

NARRATOR

I swear on all that is--it's called lub-ri-ca-tion! And its sources in nature are plentiful!

(MORE)

NARRATOR (cont'd)

(Calms himself down and then rushes through the next line)

Anyway at this moment a lower-ranking constable entered the small room and handed the higher-ranking constable a note.

(Gives this line the weight it deserves like the professional he is.)

And then, having processed what she'd read, the senior constable looked at Yllodyk with a focus and clarity she'd not shown at any point prior in this interview. Consciously or not, Yllodyk perceived this change, and shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

ELF CONSTABLE

Child, forgive me, I've been...distracted. Perhaps at a distance I have missed things that you would have noticed up close. Why don't you tell me - calmly and in your own words - what you think happened.

YLLODYK

(a bit wary now)

Well...naturally I suspect foul play.

ELF CONSTABLE

Mm. And is there anyone you think might have wanted to hurt your parents?

Replay:

WYYN

We now have an enemy in Ry'y lo-Th'yyt. Not to mention that dreadful Ba'al Syndyyk. And both of them are the kind whose ambitions far outpace their consciences. We must be exceedingly careful.

A beat...

ELF CONSTABLE

Child, it's very important that you tell me everything you can. So that I may help you of course.

YLLODYK

You know, now that you mention it...

(intentionally works herself back into tears)

...I think I might use that bereavement room. It just comes and goes in waves, you know?

ELF CONSTABLE

Yes of course, but I am very curious about--

--YLLODYK CUTS HER OFF WITH SOBS TOO LOUD TO TALK OVER.

ELF CONSTABLE
(has to raise her voice)
 RIGHT THIS WAY DEAR.

THE **CRYING** CONTINUES AS...

Three sets of footsteps walk down a hard,
 echoey corridor.

NARRATOR
 As the two constables escorted Yllodyk down a narrow
 corridor in the constabulary, the young Elf found it
 quite easy to summon tears. For though her motives for
 crying were at least somewhat disingenuous, the grief
 she drew upon was real and fresh enough.

They stop walking.

ELF CONSTABLE
 Just in here, dear.

YLLODYK
(manages to croak out...)
 Thank you.

ELF CONSTABLE
 And if you need anything, you needn't even call.
(very pointed)
 Simply open the door and we shall hear it.

The creakiest door we've heard on this show to
 date slams shut.

YLLODYK **STOPS CRYING** - QUICKLY, BUT NOT INSTANTANEOUSLY.

A moment of quiet...

NARRATOR
 Yllodyk surveyed the room around her. Though natural
 light was abundant via a hole in the tree's trunk far,
far above her head, there was no clear route of egress,
 save for that *ominously loud* door.

She looked to the small table at the room's center,
 where provisions for the grieving were provided: A
 basket of lily-white silken handkerchiefs. A tasteful
 candle. A small tray of rich but simple biscuits and a
 pitcher of water with slices of fruit. And some
 pleasant-smelling ointment concocted to restore
 moisture to one's hands.

He's waiting for something...

(MORE)

NARRATOR (cont'd)

...Which, perhaps, she is clever enough to realize is a form of lubrication?

One more beat of waiting.

And there it is! She's got it.

We hear gooshy, sloppy, lotion noises. (It should be pretty over-the-top.)

Now, having never lotioned the hinges of a door before, Yllodyk was not entirely sure how much was necessary. So she played it safe and used the entire container.

The lotion sounds continue for what is a maybe intentionally uncomfortable amount of time.

...It was a rather large container.

The continue for another moment or two and then finally stop.

And once she had run out, she said a short, silent prayer, and pulled - not too swiftly and not too slowly - on the door. It opened...with merciful silence. And Yllodyk tiptoed away down the corridor.

13 INT. CAVE UNDER THE BLACK MOUNTAINS

13

NARRATOR

As you'll recall, Mag Uidhir had made a deal with a great and ancient dragon that he would answer their questions in exchange for quills of the dragon's plumage to unmake his many terrible injuries. With it, Mag Uidhir could return to his previous form, before the dark magic of Renault had raised him from the dead.

DRAGON

What work did you do in order to 'achieve' this body?

MAG UIDHIR

A lot of things. Training, to be a good soldier. Certain medicines. A surgery. A great deal of pain, all told. The work to become a man. Every man holds a great forest in his heart. To keep it alive, he must sometimes burn its driest parts. The Elves made my position harder also. I only hope that with your help, I can get back what they took from me.

DRAGON

The Tree Folk, you mean. How did they take your body from you? And why?

MAG UIDHIR

Ah. Bit of a long story but I suppose...I fought against them when they came to Iorden. Successfully enough to be made example of. When at last our army was defeated, they gathered its leaders, including me. They brought us to our Queen's great hall. Then they put swords through us, not to kill us, but to keep us pinned down to our seats. And they burned us alive. Once the fires had gone out, they left us in our seats, but piled earth atop the entire hall. We were hidden, but not buried. Forgotten by our descendants in this world, yet unable to join our ancestors in the world beyond.

(We can almost hear a bitter smirk)

But the joke's on them, it seems. Bastards should have known - that which you never properly bury never properly dies.

DRAGON

If you cannot die in this form, why would you willingly choose a form that can die?

MAG UIDHIR

What I have now is a half-life. I do not feel the warmth of the sun. If I had a lover, I could not feel the tenderness of his touch. On the way here, a bear trap nearly tore off my leg, and I was angry at the inconvenience, but I felt no pain. It is much like when I was young, and felt myself both puppet and puppeteer. I am not alive. I am just not properly dead. I would like to be a man once more, and not a monster of Renault's.

DRAGON

Ah. You deem your life yours alongside your body. Without the one you cannot have the other.

MAG UIDHIR

Do you not, oh venerable one?

DRAGON

I do. But I do not think we share our reasons for it. Riverlings have been hunted and killed, perhaps even treated as cattle by their own and by the tree folk. But I do not know that their hair has been stolen to make rope, that their nails and teeth have been displayed as a sign of prowess. That to make weapons from their bones or to kill their wandering young is cause for adulation.

NARRATOR

Mag Uidhir swallowed. He looked up at the dragon's enormous body, and down at his own injured limbs. He pressed his lips together for a moment before speaking.

MAG UIDHIR

It occurs to me, oh venerable one, that I have not asked for your name.

NARRATOR

The Dragon's eyes grew and their great head pulled back, their eyes scanning Mag Uidhir.

DRAGON

Nor have I asked yours. My kind do not much value names, they come and go like your tongues and cuts of cloth.

MAG UIDHIR

My people have always cared more for names. Will you indulge me?

YRRSYLAX

...Very well. Perhaps...

(Considers)

I think I should like to be called Yrrsylax.

MAG UIDHIR

Very well. It is good to meet you, Yrrsylax. I am Cían Mag Uidhir of the Blue Elk Forest. I thank you for your kindness, in giving me freely what so many have sought to take from you.

NARRATOR

Yrrsylax's massive eyes crinkled a little, and their lips quirked up at Mag Uidhir's words, revealing a few more of their enormous teeth.

YRRSYLAX

You are welcome, riverling. I care for the sanctity of my body, because I care to be seen as a whole and not as parts. But to continue my questioning, it seems you seek something more. You mentioned... the 'work to become a man', your desire to 'be a man once more'. Do all men do as you have?

NARRATOR

Mag Uidhir tilted his head in thought for a moment, grateful for the question.

MAG UIDHIR

I suppose it depends on what you refer to. No man does and lives the same as any other. There are things most do, and things fewer have done, and I have my share of both. In some ways, my path was rarer and rougher. Most men do some sort of work to become so in their lives.

YRRSYLAX

Why is it so important to you?

MAG UIDHIR

I am not sure. Why is it not important to you, oh venerable one?

YRRSYLAX

Lack of habit, perhaps. I do not speak to riverlings often. And they keep changing the meaning of things. I remember once, 'women' were the ones with the long, flowing clothing. Then it was cold for some time, and long flowing clothing was worn by all. At which point women were the ones with the flowers. The ones that wear colours, the ones that don't. And men were the ones who went to battle, unless there was peace, in which case battle was cruel and ought not be done...

(Scoff)

Truly, river folk change their tongues and fashions so often I have given up on keeping track. It all seems... Unfounded in meaningful principle.

MAG UIDHIR

You make a good point, oh venerable one. We often ignore how similar we are, and where there are few differences, we expand or create them. You have no reason to care for the distinctions.

YRRSYLAX

And yet you do. Enough that you would bargain with me for it. Why?

MAG UIDHIR

...I am not sure myself. In a way, it is something I had to discover I cared about. I found myself yearning for things others did not. And when I spoke to my sisters and cousins, they found it odd. My brothers and uncles understood. I was curious, gravitating towards their habits... Which is to be expected of some girls, of course, but the manner in which I wished to be grew further from them with time.

(MORE)

MAG UIDHIR (cont'd)

I remember the horror I felt, when it came time for my first blood. I wished I could fight a thousand battles in its stead. My eldest sister laughed, said I would never be a mother. She meant it to mock me, but... Words cannot explain the relief I felt at the thought. As I grew, and could make more choices... I made the ones that would give me a body I would bargain with a dragon for.

YRRSYLAX

I see. So you chose to do the...work, to become a man.

MAG UIDHIR

Aye. It was common enough in my time, before the Elves came. I fear it is less so now that they have built the world they wanted out of mine.

NARRATOR

The Dragon watched Mag Uidhir with sharp, careful eyes, considering him.

MAG UIDHIR

I believe that is seven quills you owe me, venerable Yrrsylax.

YRRSYLAX

...You are correct.

NARRATOR

In a slow, deliberate motion, the Dragon moved their tail towards Mag Uidhir's frame, resting its tip between the two of them, so that he may pluck the six quills. With gentle care, Mag Uidhir separated a single quill, and pulled at it.

When it proved much sturdier than he had at first anticipated, Mag Uidhir took out a small knife, and began to carefully cut off six individual quills. Having them in his possession, he was suddenly much more at ease. The dragon moved their tail closer to their claws once he was done.

MAG UIDHIR

...This will heal my wounds?

YRRSYLAX

(Reluctantly)

...No. At least, not by itself.

MAG UIDHIR

(a little testily)

What else do I need?

YRRSYLAX

(Ominous and scary)

In an ancient tablet hidden away within the depths of this mountain, lay the instructions to prepare a powerful potion, of dragon's plumage and mountain's blood, glowing silks and cave flowers' bud. It must be prepared in darkness, boiled for hours, and drunk through the back of a skull.

MAG UIDHIR

(A little suspicious)

...And where is this great tablet to be found, oh venerable one?

YRRSYLAX

(Sheepishly)

...Just down the path, second on the left.

MAG UIDHIR

(struggling not to laugh)

I see. And may I--

YRRSYLAX

--Yes, yes, of course, I'll show you the way.

Sounds of standing up and powerful, thunderous steps, followed by Mag Uidhir's much less powerful and thunderous footsteps.

MAG UIDHIR

Does our deal stand, oh Venerable one? Seven may not be enough.

YRRSYLAX

It does. I wish to know more.

Walking continues

NARRATOR

And so, as Yrrsylax and Mag Uidhir ventured deeper into the caves, they came upon the ancient tablet. Yrrsylax read out the recipe to Mag Uidhir, and they set out to find the first of the ingredients, a pinch of cave flower's bud.

MAG UIDHIR

How much is a 'pinch'?

YRRSYLAX

About so much as you can hold between two fingers.

MAG UIDHIR

My fingers, or your fingers?

YRRSYLAX

Dragon fingers.

MAG UIDHIR

..So is that a fistful?

NARRATOR

Yrrsylax grabbed a handful of pebbles from the nearby underground river between two of their massive claws. It was perhaps as much as two human fistfuls.

MAG UIDHIR

I see. 'Cave flower's bud' meaning that rock formation?

NARRATOR

The dragon nodded. Mag Uidhir climbed up the stone and began to hack at the cave flower with a spear he had found amidst the dragon's hoard.

We hear the sounds of metal against stone.

Long, arduous work for several minutes resulted in the stone finally cracking, and part of the formation falling off. Sadly, the part that fell off was much smaller than what was required of a dragon's 'pinch'. As Mag Uidhir prepared to continue to hack at the formation, Yrrsylax held up a claw, prompting him to pause.

Yrrsylax then stared at him for a long moment, and simply flicked their claws at the formation, prompting the rest of it to fall, and providing much more than the necessary pinch in the process.

Stones crash to the cave floor.

YRRSYLAX

Sometimes I overestimate riverlings' abilities, I apologize.

MAG UIDHIR

It is a great honor to be overestimated by a dragon.

NARRATOR

They continued to wander, gathering what ingredients they needed for the potion.

We hear footsteps.

YRRSYLAX

I must say, Mag Uidhir, that I am glad I accepted this exchange. It has been... Quite some time, since I have wandered so far in the caves. My legs thank me for the stretch.

MAG UIDHIR

Is it very difficult, venerable Yrrsylax? Given your size, and how they grow narrow in some parts?

YRRSYLAX

No. If needed, I can always carve out a path for myself.

MAG UIDHIR

...Then why?

YRRSYLAX

I do not know. I suppose, since I made my oath, I have been in a more... contemplative mood.

MAG UIDHIR

...I see.

YRRSYLAX

Now we turn left, and it should be just ahead.

NARRATOR

A suspicion began to nag at Mag Uidhir, but he chose not to voice it. Instead, they arrived at the location of the glowing silks. While the caves had featured the creatures here and there thus far, the one Yrrsylax had guided him to was massive and incredibly beautiful. Little dots of light littered the ceiling like shivering, blinking stars in the night's sky, their light falling gently down towards them as the silks dangled downwards.

We hear a tranquil and beautiful underground river flowing.

The river that flowed leisurely through the cave reflected their lights in the water, its gentle current blurring the light from the glow worms' silks. The entire cave had a gentle flow to it, lighting the two of them in pale blue hues. Mag Uidhir approached the cave wall, and finding it much too slippery to climb, he glanced back at Yrrsylax.

MAG UIDHIR

Venerable Yrrsylax, would it be possible for you to gather the silks, so that I may collect them in the container?

YRRSYLAX

It would be better for the potion if it was done by your own hand.

NARRATOR

Mag Uidhir nodded, and looked up at the starlike beauty of the glowing silkworms' work.

MAG UIDHIR

Could you perhaps lift me to it?

NARRATOR

After a moment, Yrrsylax offered one of their massive limbs to Mag Uidhir, and lifted him up towards the ceiling of the cave. With a gentle hand, Mag Uidhir pulled out one of the crystals they had already gathered and began rolling it gently around the watery, sticky threads, until he had gathered enough to cover the crystals in the container and no more.

Once it was done, Yrrsylax's great appendage lowered Mag Uidhir down, and they began guiding the way out of the cave. Mag Uidhir lagged behind, staring at the starlike twinkling lights of the insects with the same wonder that so many other creatures had before being drawn too close, and trapped by the silks' viscous grip to be eaten by their makers.

As the cave entrance approached, he stole one last glance at the pulsing blue lights, and stepped outside to follow Yrrsylax to the next ingredient.

MAG UIDHIR

Thank you for showing me such beauty, mighty Yrrsylax.

YRRSYLAX

I suppose.

MAG UIDHIR

I can't recall the last time I...paused. For any reason. Even with my unnatural long life, there is much of worth in this world that preceded me and will survive me. And perhaps even you, Venerable One. I find the reminder...welcome.

YRRSYLAX

I am glad it is a comfort to you.

MAG UIDHIR

...Have you any further questions for me?

YRRSYLAX

Oh, I do, yes. Thank you for reminding me. I used to have much keener philosophical inquiries. One time, I spoke with a communitarian fellow for twelve years, and could easily recall which points they had made in a winter or a summer.

MAG UIDHIR

(suspicious)

...Has this also changed since you took your oath, oh venerable Yrrsylax?

YRRSYLAX

I suppose. I have not had much opportunity to speak to anyone else. Over the past few hundred years, other sentient beings shun my company. And I shun them in turn.

MAG UIDHIR

(more suspicious)

...I see.

YRRSYLAX

(Scoffs)

Enough of my sorry state of affairs. We must turn left for the mountain's blood.

14 EXT. MOUNTAIN PASS - NIGHT

14

It's a raging blizzard.

A shambling set of footsteps (plus one walking staff) hobbles towards us through the snow.

NARRATOR

If you were to travel up from these proceedings several hundred feet as the mole burrows, you would find that winter had at last come in full to the Black Mountains. Conditions were cruel and miserable - almost as cruel and miserable, in fact, as the two creatures to whom we now turn our gaze.

The footsteps come to a stop.

Mixer: Renault and Jethro both converse through magical means.

RENAULT

I can see the cave but it's nearly snowed over. We'll never be able to dig through.

JETHRO

Dig through? No. Melt through - now there's a thought.

RENAULT

I never claimed to be a fire mage.

JETHRO

Don't you worry, I know me a spell or two. Do you reckon you can cast air from this here staff? Shouldn't be much different from the way you're managing to speak.

RENAULT

Yes, that should be quite simple.

JETHRO

Well then, just point me towards the cave. I'll light the tip of the staff, and you push the air.

First we hear a whoosh of ignition, and then a few seconds of roaring fire like a flamethrower.

After a moment, the fire stops. We're left with the sounds of dripping icy runoff.

RENAULT

(to himself, pleasantly surprised)
Almost effortless...

JETHRO

I'll say...this here staff of yours is as good a conduit as it is a vessel. You've molded it well, young fella.

RENAULT

Yes, this collaboration continues to pay dividends.

JETHRO

(a dark joke)
Well...after you. I'm afraid I must insist.

The walking through snow resumes.

15 INT. CAVE UNDER THE BLACK MOUNTAINS

15

NARRATOR

And now we return once more to the tale of Mag Uidhir and Yrrsylax. After having obtained the rest of the ingredients, Mag Uidhir set about following the instructions on the tablet as carefully as he could.

We're awash in bubbling, gurgling, crashing, crunching...various cooking sounds.

The two of them had found their way to one of the cavernous mountain's openings, and now cooked the potion in the night air. There, Yrrsylax continued to inquire about Mag Uidhir's life.

YRRSYLAX

What did you love so much that was taken from you? What is to change?

MAG UIDHIR

...I would like to feel my hands once more, gripping the hilt of a sword. To feel the breeze on my chest when I run. To hear my own voice, my own laugh once more. To feel the beating of my heart in the rush of battle as I defend my people.

YRRSYLAX

Why did you fight them?

MAG UIDHIR

I saw the world my ancestors had built, and I saw the world the Elves wanted to build. Decided I'd rather die for ours than live in theirs.

YRRSYLAX

Go on.

MAG UIDHIR

...Their world is one of greed and speed. Once, difference was a virtue, like colourful threads in a tapestry. Now, they have made it shameful, inefficient, as though it is the speed of the loom that matters most. Their lives are long, but have no time to wonder, to wait, to watch something grow into what it is meant to be.

(pauses to reflect once more)

Never has a people been so deft at producing a blanket, yet unconcerned with whether their neighbors are warm.

(MORE)

MAG UIDHIR (cont'd)

...It occurs to me, oh venerable one, that we are missing the last ingredient.

YRRSYLAX

What? We have everything on the recipe, you've executed it well thus far, we need only wait until-

MAG UIDHIR

The skull. Do you have any skulls I may drink from?

YRRSYLAX

(laughs)

Oh. No, that was... for atmospheric purposes. One of the goblets will be fine.

Yrrslyax clangs and moves something heavy around.

YRRSYLAX

Here.

NARRATOR

Mag Uidhir took the goblet. Inside was a handful of additional quills for the potion.

MAG UIDHIR

Thank you. I... Words cannot express...

YRRSYLAX

It may be only cold comfort now, but that one of my kin even considered your request is a great credit to the justice of your cause. I understand now why they listened.

MAG UIDHIR

But you still won't.

YRRSYLAX

I can't.

MAG UIDHIR

Might I ask more about this oath you took?

YRRSYLAX

What do you want to know?

MAG UIDHIR

Why did you make it?

YRRSYLAX

The taking of life from a creature that knows pain is something I could no longer justify to myself. The main

(MORE)

YRRSYLAX (cont'd)

reason I had done it before was for food. But I can subsist perfectly well down here on fungus and moss.

MAG UIDHIR

But if by taking one life you could spare many others...

YRRSYLAX

I do not possess anywhere near such power. Suffering and killing will go on no matter what I do. Even if I rid Iorden of your enemies, do you think the wolf will no longer slay the fox? Shall I kill all the wolves? And then what? Will the foxes not gorge on the rabbits?

MAG UIDHIR

But those are beasts! I'm talking about saving people - who love and have dreams and make art and--

YRRSYLAX

--And how can you know what is in the rabbit's heart? Do the tree folk not justify their violence by saying you are not as sophisticated as they?

MAG UIDHIR

But they're wrong!

YRRSYLAX

You may think it obvious that you're smarter than a rabbit. But that is because a riverling and a rabbit need to know different things.

MAG UIDHIR

That may be. You may be right that there shall always be predator and prey, and that is the law of nature. But the nature of the Elves is invasive to the nature of this land. Their wars are slaughters, not skirmishes. They...

NARRATOR

Mag Uidhir looked at the dragon for a moment and smiled.

MAG UIDHIR

(Speaking like he has a hidden ace up his sleeve)
You are a great and wise dragon, oh venerable one, who has chosen not to take a life to feed. But most of your kin do not take such a vow, and live as the greatest predator of the land, do they not?

YRRSYLAX

...That is true, yes.

MAG UIDHIR

Imagine if there were hundreds of thousands of dragons. If there were not enough great bulls or bears or horses to feed them, if they ate their way through wolves and foxes alike. Would that be mere nature?

NARRATOR

The dragon looked at Mag Uidhir, clearly uncertain about how to react to the comparison. Their throat tightened and briefly, Mag Uidhir worried that he might have made a terrible mistake.

YRRSYLAX

Nature corrects itself. My kind would simply begin to die in that scenario, due to lack of food. Thus allowing the natural balance to reassert itself and return to our current numbers.

MAG UIDHIR

How many species ought go extinct before that point? How many will be lost forever?

YRRSYLAX

How many have already? It is not up to me to decide that whichever new creature takes their place does not deserve to live also.

MAG UIDHIR

But it is in the nature of those who will die to fight against it. In whatever way they can. For as long as they can. It is up to them to declare that their lives are worth saving, to sacrifice all they can to ensure it. To fight to the last breath.

NARRATOR

The dragon's lips quirked up around the edges.

YRRSYLAX

Yours is a formidable spirit indeed. Tell me about your war. Every detail you can recall.

MAG UIDHIR

(very pleased with potentially getting the dragon to budge)
As you wish.

END OF PART THREE.

PART FOUR:

16 INT. LULU'S ALEHOUSE - LATE NIGHT

16

Same setting as the end of the last episode,
except now there's probably a fireplace lit.

NARRATOR

We now rejoin Queen Regan's court in the barroom where we left them. They were scheming, you'll recall, on how to remove the town's two bosses, sever the loyalty of their men, and install Regan in their place. And the hour was already quite late.

BILLY

What about a pizza party?

BRENNEN

A...pizza party?

BILLY

Remember when they took us on a field trip to that state park to see the big hole in the ground?

JEN

Oh yeah! And they forgot Joey Cannavale and left him behind at the park until after dark.

BILLY

Yeah and then they threw us a pizza party and told us not to tell our parents. Nobody snitched. So maybe that's the move.

LULU

Coffee? Anyone for coffee?

REGAN

What the fuck is coffee?

JEN

Extremely diuretic is what it is. Maybe you should skip it.

JANEY

(stunned out of concentration)
Oh, gally! How long has it been dark out?

LULU

Coupla hours now.

JANEY

Damn! My rabbits need to eat. Do you...I hate to ask, but do you think one of your men might walk me home? Bill's probably waiting for me.

REGAN

I'll walk you home.

O'AN

You might wanna take your men too. Bill's a horse's ass, but you can get your skull kicked open crossing a horse's ass.

REGAN

Sends the wrong message if a bunch of us go. Besides, I watched Bill try to draw on Vanderberg. If *both* my arms were broken I could still take him.

JANEY

(*considers...*)
All right then.

17 EXT. STREET IN PACIFIC RIDGE - NIGHT

17

REGAN AND JANEY ARE WALKING ALONG TOGETHER.

JANEY

(*rambling*)
A dog or a cat can miss a meal here or there and it's no harm done. But a rabbit's more like a horse, they need to graze all the time or they can get really sick. They're also prey, not hunters, which a lot of people don't understand. You try to play with them or pet them like you would with a dog, you'll scare the sweet things half to death.
(*gets self-conscious*)
I'm sorry, I don't know why I'm talking so much.

REGAN

I think you're nervous.

JANEY

...Reckon I am.

REGAN

Look, you hardly know me, so there's no harm if I just say this. Bill sounds like a real piece of shit. All offense.

JANEY

Lulu's been trying to get me to leave him for years, but...I don't know. He can be so sweet sometimes too.

REGAN

Anyone can be sweet when they want something from you.

JANEY

(a little testy)

And I guess all your sweethearts have all been saints, that right?

NARRATOR

This flicker of an outburst prompted a turned head and cocked eyebrow from Regan.

JANEY

Sorry...Sorry, it just gets tiring sometimes, everyone talking like they know what's good for you.

REGAN

Yeah, well...that we agree about. I'll leave it be. Tell me more about your rabbits.

JANEY

...It gets tiring to cry all the time too. To be scared in your own home.

(beat)

But I don't know. My daddy had a temper too. And him and my momma made it work. Besides, you seen the other fellas in this town?

REGAN

You mean you're not gonna strike silver digging in shit?

THAT GETS A **BELLY LAUGH** OUT OF JANEY.

JANEY

Good Gally, you said it.

JANEY CONTINUES TO **GIGGLE** FOR A BIT.

JANEY

You're fun. I'm glad you're here.

REGAN

I've been called a lot of things, but fun is new.

JANEY

Well...goes to show what passes for fun around here I guess.

REGAN

You could leave, you know.

JANEY

Pff. Where would I go?

REGAN

This world's fulla towns that aren't this one.

JANEY

Maybe. But I reckon it's also full of Bills. At least this one, I know.

BILL

(several yards away)
--Janey?

They stop walking.

BILL

Janey, honey, I'm sorry.

REGAN

(sotto voce)
You don't have to cry tonight. Or be scared.

JANEY

(meek)
I don't wanna talk to you right now.

BILL

That's all right, I just want you to listen. Now I know I ain't perfect and I know I ain't always treat you how you deserve.

REGAN

(sotto voce)
Stop me if you heard this one before.

BILL

But you know how folks around here is. I think I just get so scared sometimes of someone else mistreating you.

NARRATOR

But Janey could not quite meet Regan's eyes.

BILL

It's about the only thing I am scared of. And I let it spin me all up 'til I can't even think straight. And then I--

JANEY

(stronger this time)
--I just wanna be left alone, Bill.

BILL

Now Janey, listen. I don't work my ass off keeping you safe just for you to be so gods damned stubborn.

REGAN

You got your answer. Now step away from the door.

BILL

Yeah, and who the fuck are you?

REGAN

(almost jovial)

Me? I'm nobody. I just gave this nice lady my word I'd see her safe to feed her rabbits. And she said she wants to be left alone. So you're gonna do the gentlemanly thing and step aside.

BILL
Or what, you're gonna make me?

REGAN
If I have to.

BILL **LAUGHS UPROARIOUSLY.**

REGAN
(okay, now she's out for blood)
I don't know what the fuck you're laughing at.

BILL **SUDDENLY STOPS LAUGHING.**

A high dissonant orchestral note starts building.

NARRATOR
With a flare for the dramatic that I did not know she possessed, Regan chose this moment to flip open her cloak and reveal the truly staggering number of armaments concealed within.

A cloak flips open. There are two short footsteps as Regan squares up.

REGAN
'Cause I didn't tell any fucking jokes. See when people laugh, and I don't know what the joke is, I start to get the crazy idea that maybe they think I'm a joke. And where I grew up, if someone thinks you're a joke, then someone's gonna rob and kill you. Which means I treat being laughed at like it's a threat on my life. So now you have ten seconds to tell me that you just... thought of a funny thing that happened last week or something. Like I dunno, maybe you got mule shit on your cock and it wouldn't wash off. Is that what it was? Five seconds now, mule fucker.

BILL
You fixin' to draw on me with that busted-ass arm?

REGAN
You got a busted arm too. And mine's getting better. Yours is swollen and you're sweating like a pig. Three. Two.

BILL
Fffffffuck!

The orchestra cuts out.

NARRATOR
Bill held up his empty hands.

BILL
You got lucky this time, caught me while I'm ailing.
But this shit ain't over.

He starts to walk away.

BILL
(under his breath)
Crazy fucking bitch.

JANEY
(genuine)
You really should get that arm looked at Bill. You
don't look well.

NARRATOR
Only once Bill was out of sight did Regan relax her
free arm and close her cloak.

JANEY
Gods, you really are something else. Thank you - again.

REGAN
Believe me, pleasure was mine on that one.

JANEY
I'm shaking.

REGAN
Come on. We'll walk it off.

They start walking again.

JANEY
Look at you. You're steady as a seamstress' hands. I
wish I could be like you.

REGAN
I actually don't recommend it. But sometimes it comes
in handy.

The footsteps stop.

JANEY

(shaky, but...a different type)
Here she is. My humble abode.

REGAN

I can keep watch while you feed the rabbits.

A moment of decision for Janey.

JANEY

I think...maybe I was hoping you'd come inside.

REGAN

Meaning?...Yeahhhh thought as much. Look, you've VERY fucking cute but I don't think I'm good for you right--

JANEY

--Thought I already told you.

(walks closer while talking until she's right up on the mic)

Stop talking like you know what's good for me.

18 INT. JANEY'S BEDROOM - LATER

18

JANEY LETS OUT A **VERY CONTENTED SIGH**.

JANEY

Good Gally in Selbirin, I needed that.

REGAN

Like any good Queen, I live to serve.

JANEY

Oh, right, did you...want me to--

REGAN

--Get me back another time.

(quietly to herself)

Once I stop with that damn stew.

JANEY

Guess that's three I owe you.

REGAN

Well I always try to be a magnanimous leader.

(beat)

You should feed your pets, and we should get back before my knight starts to panic.

Sounds of Regan standing and getting dressed.

JANEY

Right. I should show you something before we do. Tell you something, really.

REGAN

(ready for anything)
Okay...

JANEY

See those two big books on the desk over yonder? Take a look inside.

We hear Regan walk across the room.

REGAN

I uh...Reading's never been my strong suit but I think this is a book full of numbers.

JANEY

Those are the ledgers for the Rosebuds and the Mulberrys.

REGAN

They're what?

JANEY

That's how I make a living. Not many people good with sums in a town full of bowslingers it turns out.

REGAN

Right. And I'm guessing there's numbers in there that'd be very embarrassing to Misters Weston and Vanderberg.

JANEY

You guess right.

REGAN

Hm.

(Processing)

I know why you didn't tell me before, and I don't blame you. Why are you telling me now?

JANEY

'Cause I decided I can trust you.

REGAN

Pff. Look, I got no plans to double-cross you. But free advice for this shitheap world - one good lay is no guarantee of anything.

JANEY

(that's not what she meant)

I decided I can trust you to keep Bill away from me.

REGAN

Well, yeah...that you can.

JANEY

That's my offer to you then. You keep him away from me and my babies.

REGAN

We're talking rabbit babies, right? Just checking I know what I'm agreeing to.

JANEY

Yes, my beautiful little bun-buns. And I'll tell you everything you need to know from those there books.

REGAN

...I got a counter-offer. And I think it's better for everybody.

19 INT. LULU'S ALEHOUSE - A LITTLE LATER

19

Batwing doors fly open.

REGAN

All right, listen up, new plan!

NARRATOR

...Bellowed Regan, into the barroom of Lulu's inn. And then, upon seeing the faces looking back at her, particularly Nia's raised eyebrow and Jen's eye patch...

REGAN

(saving face with a dash of sass)
Which I submit to my council. For approval.

NARRATOR

And right behind her was Janey of course, carrying a blanketed basket containing four rabbits. She and Lulu nodded an unspoken understanding to each other.

JEN

Tell us.

REGAN

We're putting Janey in charge. Or more like making people realize she's been in charge.

BRENNEN

Er...she has?

REGAN

(to Janey)
May I?

LULU

(knows what's coming)

Janey. You sure you're willing to burn Les and Cliff?

JANEY

They've been in charge since I was a little girl. And aren't things just *dandy* on account of it? No, I figure this town could use a change.

O'AN

I'm...lost, I think.

JANEY

I've been keeping the books for both gangs, going on ten years now. I know everything they don't want each other to know.

REGAN

And no matter how you shake it, you two were right. Nobody knows me here. But Janey - everyone seems to know her. Everyone seems to trust her. And nobody else can do what she does for the town.

NARRATOR

Consideration crossed the faces of Regan's co-conspirators.

O'AN

And where would your crew fit into this new order?

REGAN

At first, we're putting up funds. That statue we've got could be a real juicy sign-on bonus for anyone on the fence about the transfer of power. And it'll fill the town's larders while we ride out the winter. We'll take some contracts in the spring, and come summer we collect; Janey gives me leave to take any Rangers who'll come on a damn fool suicide mission across the mountains. We all good with that?

BRENNEN

Aye. A just bargain if ever I've heard one.

NELSON

Good deal.

YELLOWYYN

I'll abide by it.

O'AN

I want a say on the contracts.

A beat - of something like surprise.

JANEY

No offense, Henry, but I'm not really sure that's yours to claim.

O'AN

I think my help's been valuable and I didn't have to give it. Don't have to keep giving it, in fact. I think some stake in the outcome is only fair.

REGAN

I'm open to it, but why that? Why not just some of the money?

O'AN

Because not a few of the contracts that come through this town are to kill people like me. Nelson here said you all aren't fond of Elves and their lap dogs, led me to believe things would be different with you in charge. I helped you because I believed him. So I'd appreciate you not making a liar of him or a fool of me.

REGAN

Did Nelson tell you why we're not fond of Elves?

O'AN

A bit of it.

REGAN

It's kind of a long story. We can fill you in later. But if we valued Elf-gold more than your people's lives I promise we wouldn't be here.

NELSON

(to O'an)

She ain't lying, bro.

(To the rest)

And I don't wanna take any contracts he doesn't like anyway. I trust him to know who's on the level around here.

JANEY

If you all think it's a good idea, then we'll ask Henry before we take any contracts. That sound fair?

NARRATOR

There were nods of agreement all around.

REGAN

So that's settled then. Now we just gotta take what Janey knows and use it against Vanderberg and Weston.

LULU

Right, that's what we were talking about when you came in. Henry had a good idea, didn't you?

O'AN

I figure the whole town hates at least one of them already, and there's a lot of blood been spilt defending one or the other. If you make it seem like they've been working together, that'd be an unforgivable betrayal to both their gangs.

REGAN

Oh, that is good.

LULU

And mine's the only watering hole in the whole town, so if there's gossip, it's gonna come through here.

REGAN

I knew I liked you guys.

FADE OUT.

20 INT. HORSE'S HEAD INN - EVENING

20

It's a pretty good crowd for a Saturday.

NARRATOR

I take you now back East, to another tavern. Maeve Bailey's establishment - where we've already spent quite a bit of time - was bustling this evening. But the proprietor's mind was not on business.

A door opens to the outside, and footsteps approach the bar.

In her current state, she was quite relieved to see the soldier you know as The Professor darken her doorway.

(They speak in hushed tones throughout this scene.)

BAILEY

Thank you for coming.

THE PROFESSOR

I told you you need only call, Maeve. Am I to understand that your suspicious guest is of The Forest?

BAILEY

Aye. She took pains to cover her ears but I caught a glimpse. And here's what struck me even more. She came

(MORE)

BAILEY (cont'd)

in, sat where you're set right now and asked for a private room. Then she took out the biggest sapphire I've ever fecking seen and put it on the bar like it was a few coppers. Asked if it would be enough for a fortnight! Enough for a fortnight! It'd probably pay for fourteen years if she found an inn-keep fool enough to take it. I just pray nobody saw it before I shoved it back in her purse.

THE PROFESSOR

Gauging your reaction, perhaps?

BAILEY

I've a decent nose for guile and I didn't get a whiff. She's either got the mind of a child or she's very good at pretending.

THE PROFESSOR

Or, she's never left The Forest before.

BAILEY

So why leave now and why come here of all places?

THE PROFESSOR

Mm. Is she in a room now?

BAILEY

Aye. End of the hall on the right when you go up the stairs. Here's the key.

A key clinks onto the bar.

THE PROFESSOR

I'll ring the service bell if I need you.

21 INT. PRIVATE ROOM IN THE INN - CONTINUOUS

21

Yllodyk is writing on a small escritoire.

YLLODYK (V.O.)

I fear this must all sound like the ravings of a lunatic. But if you've ever believed me about anything, believe me about the contents of this letter. For reasons which I hope are obvious, I cannot tell you where I am or how to contact me. But know that I miss you terribly. You must admit it's dreadfully romantic for us to be separated by circumstance such as we are. It reminds me of Lady Greenwich and her Mathias from *Duel of Cronos*. My...

(feels weird even as she says it)

...my loins ache for you?

She stops writing.

YLLODYK (DIAGETIC, OUT-LOUD)

Euchk. They say that all the time in *Duel of Crones* but does anyone alive actually find it appealing?

She crosses that out and resumes writing.

YLLODYK (V.O.)

You are...in my thoughts?

Writing stops...

YLLODYK (OUT-LOUD)

No, *that's* too chaste. Hmm.

(*thinks for a moment*)

Ah, yes.

...Writing resumes quickly.

YLLODYK (V.O.)

You are in my thoughts, some but not all of which are sexual in nature.

She stops writing and puts her quill down.

A beat...

(*We're diagetic for the rest of the scene, no more VO.*)

YLLODYK

Well...it's factually accurate.

(*one more moment of reflection*)

You know, I'm resolved to choose gratitude they've finished as many *Duel of Crones* books as they have. Writing is difficult!

There's a KNOCK at the door.

YLLODYK

(*blurts out in a panic*)

WHO'S THERE?!

THE PROFESSOR

(*through door*)

I'm a friend of the inn-keepers. Are you decent?

YLLODYK

What do you want? Go away! I requested privacy!

THE PROFESSOR

(*through door*)

I know, but we must speak. I'm coming in.

YLLODYK

I'll scream!

The Professor opens the door and shuts it behind him.

THE PROFESSOR

But that wouldn't be very private, now would it? I do regret the terribly rude intrusion, but there's nothing for it you see.

YLLODYK

Who are you? Can I pay you to go away?

THE PROFESSOR

(a dry chuckle)

I'd have a much more comfortable life if you could. But sadly for me, I've learned that I'm quite a loyal friend.

YLLODYK

...Friend to whom?

THE PROFESSOR

Well the inn-keeper, for one. A bit of a bind an inn-keeper finds herself in, wouldn't you agree? Discretion is essential if they're to attract and retain a clientele. Yet these total strangers are literally sleeping in her home. There comes a point when her need for safety must come before her patrons' need for privacy. Do you see what I mean?

YLLODYK

No. Well--yes, but not what it has to do with me.

THE PROFESSOR

Here's the crux of it - I need to know whether any trouble is liable to come following you.

YLLODYK

(unnerved)

Why would trouble come following me?

THE PROFESSOR

I don't know. But it's hard to imagine you left the White Forest to come here because things were going well for you.

YLLODYK

(scrambling)

I've always been fond of Memyet music. I wanted to hear it in an authentic setting.

THE PROFESSOR

And that's why you've secluded yourself up here demanding privacy, is it? Instead of downstairs in the barroom where music is played?

A long beat. She's busted.

YLLODYK

I...just need to be somewhere that no one will think to look for me for a while, all right? I don't want any trouble. I apologize for the deceit but - how did you say? - there's nothing for it I'm afraid.

THE PROFESSOR

And why is it so important that you not be found?

YLLODYK

If I respectfully refuse to say any more, you'll throw me out in the middle of the night to freeze to death, will you? To say nothing of refusing my money.

THE PROFESSOR

There's a crisp breeze tonight *at worst*. And the kind of money you're carrying is far more trouble than it's worth. Gods, you've really never left the Forest before, have you?

(more serious)

And yes. This may shock someone of your background but I would gladly inconvenience you to protect my friend's life. So tell me a story that makes some sense, or else gather your things.

A loonnng beat...

YLLODYK

...As you wish. My parents are dead. All evidence points to murder. And until I know more, I can't very well hang around the Forest waiting for the murderers to find me too.

THE PROFESSOR

I'm terribly sorry for your loss.

YLLODYK

People with duplicitous motives keep saying that to me.

THE PROFESSOR

As I said, I've no motive beyond protecting my friend. And suffice it to say, there's reason to believe someone in the White Forest might bear you ill will.

YLLODYK

I suppose I can't deny it.

(MORE)

YLLODYK (cont'd)
(*vulnerable*)
Are you going to kick me out?

THE PROFESSOR
Not my decision.

The Professor rings a service bell installed in the room.

They wait for an uncomfortable moment.

YLLODYK
I imagine there's no point in my asking. But why is your friend the inn-keeper's safety in question?

THE PROFESSOR
She can tell you herself if she chooses.

The door opens, and then quickly shuts.

BAILEY
So. What have we learned?

THE PROFESSOR
Your guest here believes her parents were murdered.

BAILEY
(*to herself*)
Gods.
(*to Yllodyk - detached but courteous*)
I am sorry to hear that, dear.

THE PROFESSOR
She came here to hide from the murderers. Whoever those might be.

BAILEY
I see. So all's to say, there *are* some Elves who bear you ill will and might come looking for you.

YLLODYK
What would you like me to say? I'm doing all I can think to do to steer clear of them.

A beat - Bailey considering her next play.

BAILEY
You got a fella? Back in the forest?

YLLODYK
A what?

BAILEY

A beau, a boyfriend, a paramour.

YLLODYK

Oh. ...Yes?

BAILEY

What's the worst he's ever let you down?

YLLODYK

(knee-jerk)

He hasn't let me down!

BAILEY

Good. You're as shitty a liar as I'd hoped. So here's a few of the cards I'm holding.

(beat)

You see, me and him? We lost someone very dear to us, not too long ago. And we think the White Forest had something to do with him as well. We don't know much more than that, but we're trying to figure it out. So here's the deal I'll make you. First - and this should go without saying, but I find those are the first things you ought to say - if we're all alive long enough for you to get some actual, spendable coin together, I expect to be paid a fair market rate for your room and board.

YLLODYK

(genuine and confident)

Of course.

BAILEY

Plus interest. For the back pay *and* the risk I'm taking.

YLLODYK

(a little less confident)

That's...only fair.

BAILEY

And don't even think of waving that sapphire around my barroom. You'll need to find some other way.

YLLODYK

(the least confident yet)

Right.

BAILEY

Second - and this one I have to insist on receiving immediately - you're going to tell my friend and I everything you know about the inner workings of the

(MORE)

BAILEY (cont'd)

Forest. Until something gets us closer to our friend's killer.

YLLODYK

You shouldn't overestimate my station within the Forest. There's much I don't know. But I'll answer you honestly and as best I can.

BAILEY

Then I think we've reached a deal. Roy?

THE PROFESSOR

Seems reasonable to me. Shall we get right to it?

YLLODYK

Where would you like to start?

BAILEY

Sorry for starting indelicately. But might you know the means of your parents' murder?

YLLODYK

I should say so. They died of poison before my very eyes.

NARRATOR

Maeve and Royne made no effort to conceal the widening of their eyes, or the look that passed between them.

THE PROFESSOR

Poison, you say.

YLLODYK

Yes.
(*figures it out*)
Oh. Your friend as well.

BAILEY

Already getting somewhere. Roy, fetch us a few cups of cider.

22 EXT. STREET OUTSIDE LULU'S ALEHOUSE - EARLY MORNING

22

NARRATOR

And back West, the sun was just cresting the horizon as Weston and Vanderberg approached Lulu's Alehouse. Regan leaned against a post, looking alert and on edge in spite of her bloodshot eyes. Billy sat on a step, leaning on the opposite post, and lightly snored. As the gang leaders drew near, Regan prodded Billy with the toe of her boot.

BILLY

(shooting awake)
I didn't do it!

REGAN

Wake up, kid. It's showtime. Hope you got enough sleep.

BILLY

(yawning and stretching)
Oh yeah. I'll be good.

REGAN

Morning.

NARRATOR

Vanderberg and Weston simply spat on the dirt as a greeting.

REGAN

Okay. One last item to address - you'll both be leaving your crossbows here for this trip.

WESTON

Ha. And why would we do that?

REGAN

I'm sending you with my unarmed squire. I saw how fast one of you can draw on a man, I'd rather Billy here have a chance on the trip back.

VANDERBERG

I don't like it, but she's right. Might make the trip a bit more comfortable if I'm not watching my back all the time.

NARRATOR

Vanderberg began unbuckling his crossbow holster but stopped short when he realized Weston hadn't moved.

REGAN

(after a beat)
You wanna get with the show here? You're burning daylight and you've got a long trip ahead of you.

NARRATOR

At that prompt and with a sigh, Weston began working the buckle on his holster.

REGAN

Good. Now Billy here is your guide-

NARRATOR

As Vanderberg's holster came fully free and hung loose at his side, Weston drew on him in a flash. As he leveled on his rival, an arrow hit his crossbow, throwing the weapon from his grip and its shot well wide.

WESTON

Gah!

NARRATOR

Realizing what just happened, Vanderberg reached for the crossbow sitting in his now limp holster, but the leather was cut by another arrow, causing the crossbow and holster to fall on the ground. As Vanderberg reached down for the weapon, Regan placed her foot on the crossbow, as Billy retrieved Weston's empty crossbow from the street.

REGAN

Well that could've gone better for the two of you. I know you're fast, but I doubt either of you could outdraw an Elf.

NARRATOR

Regan nodded toward a window on the second floor of Lulu's, where all but the hands and bow of Yllowynn were obscured by the reflection of the rising sun. Billy deposited Weston's crossbow in Regan's hand.

REGAN

Anyways, now that you've got that out of your system, you ready to start the trip? Billy'll be your guide, I'd prefer you don't kill him in the process. Do what you will to each other for all I care.

NARRATOR

Vanderberg and Weston sneered at each other until Billy awkwardly walked between the two of them.

BILLY

Hey dudes. We're heading that way, and if it's alright with you, I think I'd prefer if you two walked in front of me.

NARRATOR

The two gang bosses stood awkwardly, neither wanting to make the first move after the attempts both had made just moments before.

BILLY

Oh my god, we get it! You guys hate each other! You're definitely gonna try some shit on the trip! We all know how this goes, no one is impressed or surprised so let's goooooooooooooowah!

NARRATOR

Finally, at Billy's outburst, Vanderberg and Weston seemed to relax a little bit, at least enough to start walking in the way Billy indicated.

REGAN

Get back quick as you can once you've made the pick up!

NARRATOR

Billy as a reply turned back to Regan with a wink and what I believe are referred to as "finger guns".... before nearly tripping over his own feet.

REGAN

(under her breath)
This is who I'm supposed to lean on.

NARRATOR

Just then, Jen and Nia emerged from the ale house, each with a pack on their back.

JEN

That seemed to go alright, yeah?

NIA

While I don't think it was necessarily the ideal departure, all three of them are still alive...for now.

JEN

Is he gonna be safe?

REGAN

Look. You know I'm not Iorden's biggest Billy fan. But I wouldn't have given him this job if he wasn't very well suited to it. You two work out a signal like I said?

JEN

Kind of.

NARRATOR

Regan looked at Jen with exasperation.

JEN

What? He said to be on the look out for "when I come running like I'm being chased by a zombie bull or some shit."

REGAN

(sigh)

Sure. You two ready?

NIA

We have the necessary provisions and should be able to follow stealthily enough to avoid detection.

REGAN

Good. I'd wait until they get a bit further along to set out. You'll have the advantage of the sun at your back so they probably won't be looking too closely behind them. Yllowwyn will cover your ass and make sure no one else is trying to tail them, but we'll need him back here before too long.

JEN

Got it.

REGAN

All right, now we just gotta do our part.

END OF PART FOUR.

PART FIVE:

23 EXT. HILLTOP CEMETERY - DUSK

23

NARRATOR

The sun was at its peak in the lands west of the mountains, as Vanderberg, Weston, and Billy crested a small hill topped with scrubgrass, into an old forgotten cemetery. The day had gone by with no further physical attacks as the journey had quickly begun to take its toll on the travelers.

VANDERBERG

Seems as good a spot as any for you to meet your end.

WESTON

Ha. You couldn't beat me in a fair fight and you know it. But when our duel comes, know I'll leave you out for the birds. 'Bout all you're good fer...

NARRATOR

That isn't to say the two gang leaders didn't continue to spar with one another. Their day-long trip had included many colorful insults, threats, promises, and descriptions of what would happen to each others' bodies after they died.

VANDERBERG

How much further, boy?

NARRATOR

For his part, Billy was uncharacteristically quiet. At current, he was taking the opportunity granted by higher elevation to look over the ground they had covered.

WESTON

What's the matter? Someone following us?

BILLY

Huh? Oh, uh, no. But, uh, we're here! This is the spot!

WESTON

What?

VANDERBERG

This is where we're meeting your man?

BILLY

Yup. Well, actually, not exactly. This is where we're getting the statue though.

VANDERBERG

I don't follow.

BILLY

Oh, uh, it's already here.

NARRATOR

At this, both men looked at Billy curiously, then started to scan the old headstones for a flash of white, eager to have their prize.

BILLY

Oh you're not gonna see it. It's buried.

VANDERBERG

What?

WESTON

Huh?

NARRATOR

Billy began walking through the cemetery.

BILLY

You know, I kinda thought one of you would've taken out the other one by now. I know once either one of you gets this thing, I'm gonna be useless to you. So I'd rather you two have it sorted who is getting this thing before I tell you where it is.

VANDERBERG

You know, Cliff, I'm fixin' to just kill this little shit now and get it over with. What do you think? Then we can just dig up every grave here until we find the Lady.

WESTON

Doesn't sound so bad, Les.

BILLY

You could try that. So long as your men are on board playing fifty two pickup with grandpa's bones. And so long as you think you can fill the graves back in before the Elves get here.

NARRATOR

Both Vanderberg and Weston squinted at Billy warily.

VANDERBERG

How do you expect us to do this sorting?

BILLY

I thought maybe you could wrestle for it.

WESTON

You want us to just brawl for the right to run our town?

BILLY

Not brawl, *wrestle*. And not the kind with suplexes and piledrivers either. I'm talking Greco-Roman wrestling.

NARRATOR

The gang leaders, for possibly the first time ever, looked to each other for guidance.

BILLY

You guys don't have wrestling here? Oh man, this is great! Plus now you can totally have a fair fight.

VANDERBERG

How you reckon that?

BILLY

Well, neither of you know the rules so you'll both be starting from scratch. Plus, added bonus, we'll do rounds so you can talk shit. That's half the fun honestly.

WESTON

Wait, how do you mean rounds? Doesn't one man win and the other is either dead or dyin'?

BILLY

No, but that's also great, cuz you get to shove it in their face that you won. You've got a clear winner at the end. I figure, whoever loses has to dig. Cool?

NARRATOR

Vanderberg and Westond glance toward each other, then looked at the collection of headstones, searching for any tell for the location of the statue. Finding no answers, they looked back to Billy.

WESTON

Well...reckon I could use a break after that hike.

VANDERBERG

You can rest after you've finished digging up my prize.

BILLY

Cool! So here's how you wrestle.

(MORE)

BILLY (cont'd)

(long long beat)

...Ok there's actually a lot of different rules, but I think for you two the basic thing is gonna be pinning your opponent's back and shoulders to the ground for three seconds. Also no nut shots or hair pulling or anything like that. Also no weapons. You guys aren't hiding any weapons are you?

A beat of silence

BILLY

Who are we kidding, of course you are. All right, gimme your clothes.

VANDERBERG

Are you out of your mind?

WESTON

To Selbirin with that!

BILLY

It's gotta be a fair fight if it's gonna decide who runs the town. Unless you're both too chickenshit to fight with bare hands like real men.

NARRATOR

At this, both allegedly real men instinctively grabbed and unsheathed hidden blades from within their clothes.

Two knives come out.

VANDERBERG

I'll gut you like a fish!

WESTON

I'll skin you like a hog!

NARRATOR

And then, realizing the other's transgression, they turned their gazes on each other.

VANDERBERG

You cheatin' bastard.

WESTON

You lyin' son of a bolt.

BILLY

See, that's what I mean. Can't trust either of you. Strip down and leave your clothes over here.

NARRATOR

Both men glared at Billy, before spitting on the ground...and then reluctantly beginning to disrobe.

BILLY

And hey look, I'm not trying to see your old ass balls and taints and stuff so - show of good faith - while you two get bareass, I'm gonna write the name of the grave on this rock, okay?

NARRATOR

A few minutes later, Billy used his toe to draw a large circle in the ground around two nude men.

BILLY

Here's your ring. You'll need to stay in here while you wrestle. Ready to do this thing?

NARRATOR

The two opponents squared their shoulders, and locked eyes as they began to circle each other. The waning sun sent an orange pall over the match.

BILLY

(a la Good, Bad, and the Ugly theme)
Wah wah wahhhh.

NARRATOR

Vanderberg and Weston sent a dubious look toward Billy.

BILLY

Oh, uh, it's a traditional wrestling song. Okay, ready? Aaaaand wrestle!

VANDERBERG AND WESTON SHOULD AD LIB. GRUNTS AND CUSSES THROUGHOUT THIS.

NARRATOR

Both men appeared to be hesitant to make the first move until, suddenly, Weston rushed Vanderberg, tackling him to the ground. Vanderberg, to his credit, took the tackle in his center mass. As they went to ground, Vanderberg managed to keep his torso upright to keep his shoulders away from the ground. Weston lunged for both of his opponent's shoulders, but Vanderberg managed to tuck it sideways, ending up with Weston laying on his stomach. Vanderberg pounced on Weston's back, shoving his head into the ground. Desperate to get out from under his opponent, Weston threw an elbow into Vanderberg's ribs to create some space, before scurrying forward. Vanderberg caught his breath and reached out to grab Weston's foot to prevent him from getting too far, but rolled to the side as a rock whizzed past him.

VANDERBERG

Hey! That's against the rules!

WESTON

To hell with the rules!!

VANDERBERG

Fine then!

NARRATOR

Vanderberg grabbed a handful of grit and dust and threw it in Weston's eyes.

WESTON

Shit!

NARRATOR

He then sprinted to the rock which Billy had written on and left on the ground.

VANDERBERG

...What in Selbirin?

NARRATOR

But as he puzzled over the writing thereon, his opponent snuck up behind and clobbered him with two fists balled up together.

VANDERBERG

Gurgh!

NARRATOR

This blow floored and stunned Vanderberg long enough for Weston to pick up and read Billy's rock.

WESTON

...What in Selbirin? Hey Kid!

NARRATOR

Weston glanced to where Billy had been standing but Billy was gone. Along with both men's clothes.

WESTON

Oh THAT LITTLE SHIT!

24 EXT. WESTERN DESERT BELOW CEMETERY - CONTINUOUS

24

Billy sprints furiously.

BILLY

Wah wah wahhhhh!

NARRATOR

Billy was running as fast as he could back the way he had come, searching the fairly barren landscape for any sign of life.

BILLY

Really....don't....want....to run....all....the way....

NARRATOR

Just then, Nia appeared as a Billy crested a dune.

BILLY

Oh fuck yes!

NARRATOR

Billy trotted up to Nia and threw his arms around her.

NIA

Oh! I'm...pleased to see you too, Billy, but you are ...sweating quite profusely.

NARRATOR

Billy released Nia and doubled over, breathing heavily.

BILLY

Where's Jen?

NIA

Just over there, but she requested to not be bothered. Summoning a sandstorm is not an easy task.

NARRATOR

Billy turned to see Jen lying on the dune, staring in the direction Billy just came from.

BILLY

(quietly)
You got this, babe.

NARRATOR

A sudden wind picked up, and a storm began brewing...

25 EXT. THE TOWN OF PACIFIC RIDGE - ESTABLISHING

25

We hear the hubbub of the town under the narration.

NARRATOR

Meanwhile, back in the now leaderless town of Pacific Ridge...

26 MONTAGE OF RUMORS SPREADING

26

LULU

You know both of them have a hold on the third floor when there's no Elves in town. That costs a pretty penny, I'll tell you that...

O'AN

Been hearing they have an agreement with the Elves to keep this place in check. You ever think they're working together?

JANEY

Well I hope I'm not talking out of school but by now you'd expect one to have pulled ahead of the other. Unless they've been splitting jobs. Or skimming more off the top than they let on. But they wouldn't do that, would they?

NELSON

I heard they play cards together. And this whole feud is over one hand a few years ago.

BRENNEN

Been gone a while. Could be they've already left this place behind and took their bloody man-geld with them.

YELLOWYYN

It is the nature of Memyet with power to deceive those without.

JANEY

If it ain't too personal a question, Liam - what was your share of the last contract?

BAKER

Heard maybe they've been working together this whole time. Skimming off the top even.

STABLEHAND

Could be they've already left together, off to run this ruse on some other poor town.

RANGER 1

No way they've been working together, boss wouldn't be caught dead working with--

RANGER 2

--That's just it, they've killed each other out on the sands. They ain't coming back.

RANGER 4

Y'all are talking crazy!

RANGER 3

Are we? How much you take home from the last contract?

We should hear some continued murmurs and ad libs in the background under this next bit of dialogue.

NARRATOR

It was the evening after Billy had left that he, Jen, and Nia returned.

REGAN

How'd it go?

BILLY

I trolled them so good, dude. They're BIG mad.

NIA

('awesome' isn't necessarily a good thing)
Jen's sandstorm was an awesome sight.

JEN

Yeah I kinda can't believe how big it got once I got it started. I feel bad for those guys to be honest.

NIA

That is good, Jen. Your powers are...

REGAN

Needed. You did what had to be done.

JEN

How's the plan going here?

REGAN

We're getting there I think.

RANGER 4

But without them two, who'd set up our contracts?

BLACKSMITH

Who's running the damn town?

RANGER 1

Who's in charge?

RANGER 2

Who?

BAKER

Who?

STABLEHAND

WHO?

ALL

WHO?!?!?!?!?

REGAN

So everyone here seems to love Janey, huh?

RANGER 3

Boss always said Janey's the only person in the whole town can keep a secret.

STABLEHAND

Good head on her shoulders, that Janey.

BAKER

I know I'd be lost if Janey didn't keep my books.

BLACKSMITH

Janey!

RANGER 1

Janey!

RANGER 2

Janey!

ALL

JANEY!

27 INT. LULU'S ALEHOUSE - MORNING

27

Murmur of a crowd waiting for something to begin...

NARRATOR

In a small town like Pacific Ridge, the stories spread like fire, stoked as they were by the work of the group residing at Lulu's Alehouse. In the course of a day, about every conceivable story had been spread around, from Vanderberg and Weston had been lovers and run away to spend their life together, to they had killed each other on the sands armed only with a deck of cards, even one about how they were specters sent to Pacific Ridge to make the town pay for the past transgressions of their ancestors.

STABLEHAND

(from outside)
Where's Janey!

BAKER

(also outside)
Yeah get her out here!

JANEY

I can't believe I let you talk me into this.

REGAN

I was just asking questions and letting people know how things work in this town, who's really keeping them fed. You really don't need to do much different.

JANEY

Except go be in front of them.

REGAN

You think that's a big crowd? You should come back east and see the mobs we have in the cities. Trust me, this is nothing.

JANEY

Never going east, got it.

REGAN

Ha ha. Go talk to your town, then we'll discuss whether or not you'll ever come east.

NARRATOR

Janey nodded, turned toward the door, took a deep breath, and walked out.

28 EXT. LULU'S ALEHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

28

THE CROWD **CHEERS** FOR JANEY AS SOON AS SHE EMERGES.

JANEY

All right, y'all, settle down. Settle down.

THE CROWD STARTS TO **SETTLE**.

JANEY

I ain't never done anything like this before. But since my best efforts to talk y'all out of it have failed, I'm gonna do my best.

RANGER 1

But Janey, that Elf is here! Ahead of when we heard.

We should start to hear a horse-drawn carriage approach.

RANGER 2

That's his carriage rolling this way!

RANGER 3

What are we gonna tell him?

JANEY

That I can handle.

NARRATOR

At this moment, it would have been impossible not to notice the ornate carriage approaching Lulu's alehouse by way of Pacific Ridge's main thoroughfare.

The carriage comes to a stop dead-center in our sound field.

We hear the driver hop down, scurry over to the cabin, and open the door.

NARRATOR

From this carriage emerged a finely dressed Elf. He was new to the town of Pacific Ridge, but you dear listener, are already acquainted with him I believe.

Two feet step down from the carriage.

TYYMOS

Greetings and salutations, my good woman. Tyymos lo-Jyf. At your service. Am I to presume you're the proprietor of this inn?

JANEY

No, sir, she's inside. But I think you'll want to speak to me anyway.

TYYMOS

Perhaps I will once I've arranged for my lodgings, But if you'll excuse me--

JANEY

--Am I to presume you wanna talk to Lester Vanderberg or Clifford Weston?

TYYMOS

Why, yes. Do you know where I might find the gentlemen?

JANEY

Well see that's the thing. Both of them have...taken an indefinite leave of our town. I've recently been appointed to fill both their roles.

TYYMOS

Hmm. Well I must admit it puts me ill at ease to hear that. In my correspondence with them, I was assured a certain...continuity of leadership here. Dependability, if you like. And while I've no reason to doubt your leadership abilities...well, I mean no insult but I've also no reason to trust them.

JANEY

No insult given but I hope you'll let me give you a reason.

NARRATOR

At this, Janey reached back inside the door of the alehouse, and produced a cloth-wrapped bundle, which she hastily unwrapped. And lo-Jyf's eyes widened when he saw what it contained.

TYYMOS

...Is that what it looks like?

JANEY

If it looks like the genuine and original White Lady, then yes.

TYYMOS

My, my, my...

JANEY

The trick of course is that everyone you ask would say it's priceless. But I'm sure we can agree on *something*. I look forward to negotiating that with you, alongside the contract I've heard you brought.

TYYMOS

Subject to a proper appraisal, I look forward to that as well. I must admit you've made a tremendous first impression upon me. But now you truly must excuse me - I am tired and frankly dusty from my journey. We shall begin our discussions in earnest at dawn tomorrow? Assuming of course that the storied Rangers of Pacific Ridge trust you to bargain on their behalf.

NARRATOR

As if to make one final assessment of his new negotiating partner, the Elf made a show of scanning the gathered crowd.

ALL

(building chant, one by one)
Janey...Janey..Janey...Janey. Janey. Janey. JANEY!
JANEY! JANEY!

JANEY

There you have it, sir.

TYYMOS

Dawn it is.

CHEERS AND APPLAUSE.

NARRATOR

But just then, amidst Janey's moment of triumph, did two new waves of dismay begin to roil from two different sides of the crowd.

From the left and right rears of the crowd, we start hearing concerned murmurs which slowly spread towards the center.

A FEW PEOPLE ON THE LEFT

(ad lib. e.g.)

Vanderberg! Is that Vanderberg?

A FEW PEOPLE ON THE RIGHT

(ad lib. e.g.)

Look, it's Weston. Weston's back!

NARRATOR

Upon realizing that Vanderberg and Weston had returned, Janey reflexively concealed her precious statue once more. But the two men now stumbling, delirious, through the crowd were not the same men who departed.

Shambling footsteps wade through the crowd on either side.

VANDERBERG

(barely conscious, panned left, ad lib. e.g.)

Deece. Who here's got the family name Deece? Do you know the Deece family?

WESTON

(barely conscious, panned right, ad lib. e.g.)

I'm looking for Tuov. What's your grandpappy's name? Anyone got a forebear named Tuov?

NARRATOR

They were naked from head to toe, and every inch of their respective bodies was either caked in a thick layer of dust, furiously sunburnt, or both. And as they shambled among their former underlings, barely able to stand, they were muttering two names with feverish obsession.

VANDERBERG

(slight left now)

Deece. Deece? Anyone called Deece?

WESTON

(slight right now)

Tuov. Tuov? What do you know about Tuov?

NARRATOR

And in fact they were not shocked back into coherence until they reached the center of the crowd and saw the Elf Tyymos beside his carriage. Both men jerked up straight and hastily covered their privates.

VANDERBERG

Mister Jyf! Welcome!

WESTON

Didn't expect you so soon, sir!

TYYMOS

("what the fuck?")

Mister...Vanderberg, I presume? And Mister Weston. Can you please explain...the state of you?

VANDERBERG

Uh, well, sir, we were out looking for a...a fabulous treasure to make you a welcome gift.

TYYMOS

A treasure?

WESTON

We got waylaid. But don't you worry, that treasure's just within reach.

NARRATOR

As if just now remembering the circumstances that brought them to this moment, the two men turned towards the alehouse with unbridled fury.

VANDERBERG

BILLY!!

WESTON

SEND THAT LITTLE SHIT OUT HERE!!!

NARRATOR

Billy emerged from the alehouse, with a flagon of ale in one hand and a stew-filled corn cake in the other.

BILLY

Oh hey guys! Who won the wrestling match? I split when I got bored with the storyline. It's like ugh I saw that heel turn coming a mile away.

VANDERBERG

WHERE'S THE GRAVE, YOU SHIT-ASS LITTLE FUCK?!

WESTON

We searched that whole graveyard in a GODS-DAMNED SANDSTORM and didn't find jack shit!

VANDERBERG

He knows, Mister Jyf! He knows where it is!

TYYMOS

The...treasure?

WESTON

It's buried in the grave of a man named Deece, first name Tuov. But we can't find the grave. And he knows where it is.

VANDERBERG

And if he doesn't tell us right the fuck now I'm gonna pull all his teeth and shove 'em up his ass!

WESTON

Tell us you little prick! WHERE CAN WE FIND TUOV DEECE?!

NARRATOR

The giddy grin on Billy's face threatened to cleave his whole head in twain.

BILLY

Awww, buddy. They're right here.
(*beat for dramatic effect*)
TUOV DEECE NUTS!

BILLY LAUGHS LOUDLY AND HYSTERICALLY AT HIS OWN JOKE, AND THIS CONTINUES UNTIL SPECIFIED OTHERWISE. NO ONE ELSE DOES.

NARRATOR

Billy notwithstanding, the gathered crowd was completely silent. Even Vanderberg and Weston were too dumbfounded for rage. Inside the ale house, Jen buried her face in her palm and massaged her temples. Nelson placed a comforting hand on her shoulder.

TYYMOS

This is a...Memyet joke?

BILLY

(*still laughing*)
Yeah dude, I got them so fucking good.

TYYMOS

Explain it to me please.

(Billy's laughter settles but he keeps on having the giggles for a good long while.)

BILLY

Oh, yeah, so see...I made him look for a guy called Tuov Deece so then he asked me where to find Tuov Deece and I said Tuov Deece nuts. Like how it sounds like "two of these nuts." Like balls. Gonads. Like he wanted me to put my sweaty 'nads in his mouth or something.

TYYMOS

And I take it this is meant to be humiliating to him?

BILLY

Yeah, I mean...nobody wants 'nads in their mouth, right? Well...I guess some people do. And if you do that's cool, like no judgment or anything. If you're consenting adults or whatever. Now that I think about it, I guess it is kinda...what's the word? Is it homophone?

NELSON

(shouting from inside the inn)
Homophobic, Billy!

QUICK CUT:

29 INT. LULU'S ALEHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

29

NELSON

(still shouting but present in our sound field now)
The word you're looking for is homophobic!

JEN

It's actually both, if you think about it. It's a homophobic homophone.

QUICK CUT:

30 EXT. LULU'S ALEHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

30

BILLY

(shouting, to Nelson)
Thanks Nelson!
(to Tyymos)
Anyway, you get it?

TYYMOS

Thank you, I understand perfectly well now. Mister Vanderberg, Mister Weston? It's clear to me you've been outsmarted by an imbecile.

BILLY

Haaaaa, get wrecked dipshits!
(barely half a beat)
 Hey, wait...

TYYMOS

As you've clearly misrepresented your own abilities,
 please consider this a termination of any implied
 agreements we might previously have had.

VANDERBERG

What?!

WESTON

Who in Selbirin are you fixin' to contract through,
 then?

TYYMOS

This woman here has proven herself quite competent. I
 see no reason not to deal with her.

VANDERBERG

Janey?

WESTON

Janey?

VANDERBERG

Y'all just gonna stand by and let the town fall apart
 like this?

RANGER 1

Sorry, Les. We all just got to thinking that Janey's
 the only one that's got everyone's best interests at
 heart. Just makes sense to put her in charge.

JANEY

It's no hard feelings. Just business.

WESTON

No hard feelings my ass! Y'all are getting played for
 fools by those outsiders he brought in! Lemme inside
 and I'll tear them apart!

JANEY

No can do, Cliff. That there's my inner circle. Now
 would you all do me a favor and see these two to the
 outskirts of town before they do anything rash?

YELLOWYYN

Everything seems to have gone according to plan, Your
 Grace.

BRENNEN

And Janey seems to be settling into her new role well.

REGAN

I know. I'm kinda waiting for the other axe to fall.

O'AN

Well, it's coming from one of two places you ask me. One is Bill. He ain't bright, but he can be one mean son of a bolt when he's got egg on his face. And far as I can tell you egged him good.

REGAN

I've known plenty of men like Bill. I'm *hoping* he gives me cause to end him.

O'AN

The other one to watch for will be that Elf. If he's staying here, then that's my cue to leave. But you be wary of him. Elves have this way with words. They dress up the vilest things you can imagine all fancy and call it "the law."

REGAN

Yeah, we know a thing or two about that.

O'AN

I mean it.

REGAN

So do I. Believe me, if we liked licking Elf boots, we wouldn't have walked our asses all the way under the Black Mountains.

O'AN

You still owe me that long story, but time's short. I'll see you around, Aeron Regan. Miss Lulu. Miss Janey.

We hear him walk about the back door.

NARRATOR

And no sooner did the back door of the alehouse close than the front door swung open.

Janey and Tyymos walk in.

JANEY

That's them, Mister Jyf. Nicked that statue from right out under the White Forest's nose.

TYYMOS

Well. I'll be very interested to speak with you all come the morrow.

(MORE)

TYYMOS (cont'd)

(to Lulu)

Miss Louise Beauregard, I presume?

LULU

You can call me Lulu, Mr. Jyf. Your quarters are waiting for you. Third floor is all yours.

NARRATOR

And with that, the Elf tipped his cap and headed up the stairs.

One graceful set of footsteps heads up the stairs.

NARRATOR

And of course porters came scurrying behind him with a truly outrageous amount of luggage.

A bunch of suitcases clomp unevenly up the stairs for the next several minutes.

The following are all semi-private conversations that we can place at different points in the sound field.

Conversation A:

REGAN

So. How's it feel to be in charge?

JANEY

Feels like I need some more help with my rabbits.

REGAN

I'll take a bath and meet you upstairs?

Conversation B:

JEN

I'm glad you're safe, babe. You did a good job.

JEN GIVES BILLY A **KISS**.

BILLY

Did you hear when I made them ask where to find two of deece nuts?

JEN

(trying so so hard to keep up the positive reinforcement)

Yeahhh. Yeah I did.

Conversation C:

NIA

Did you learn anything? Talking to that Orcish man.

NELSON

Yeah. I learned I understand this place better than I thought.

NIA

Come. Perhaps you can enlighten me.

Conversation D:

YELLOWYYN

I never thought I'd see the day, Brennen. But with every new challenge our Queen impresses me more and more.

BRENNEN

There is no blade so blunt it cannot be honed, under the right conditions.

This is to everyone:

LULU

I reckon this calls for a round on the house.

CHEERS ALL AROUND.

NARRATOR

Lulu filled a flagon to its brim and raised it up high.

LULU

To a *truly* Pacific Ridge.

EVERYONE

(ad lib., e.g.)

Cheers! Hurrah! To Pacific Ridge!

Sounds of general merrymaking continue, as we...

DISSOLVE TO:

32 INT. A SHACK ON THE EDGE OF TOWN - SIMULTANEOUS

32

A small campfire crackles.

NARRATOR

But there was considerably less merriment in a small shack on the edge of town, where the man called Bill removed an iron from a fire, bit down on a strip of leather, and held the iron to his suppurating arm.

BILL SCREAMS A BITTER AND WORDLESS CURSE. BUT WE HAVE A PRETTY GOOD SENSE OF WHO HE'S CURSING.

DISSOLVE TO:

The insects are just beginning to sing.

NARRATOR

And there was perhaps even less merriment still, on the outskirts of another town, several miles to the west...

A mule-drawn cart rolls up to us.

STEADY RIVER

Woah, Daffodil.

The cart slows to a halt.

FIRST SNOW

Why are we stopped?

STEADY RIVER

I thought you might appreciate a moment to collect yourself before we crossed the bridge.

FIRST SNOW

Oh. I mean...I would, but...you're right. Bad news is best delivered as soon as possible.

STEADY RIVER

It's not *all* bad news. You've secured us quite a few blankets and logs and bows.

FIRST SNOW

Do you really believe the things you say?

STEADY RIVER

Well I'd like to believe I'm not a habitual liar.

FIRST SNOW

You just always find the good in the most dire situations. Do you really feel that way? Or do you just say it because it's what you think people ought to hear?

STEADY RIVER

I find the good when I talk with you because it's what you need to hear, First Snow. When I talk to someone who is prone to unfounded optimism, I politely remind them of costs and dangers. Everything is about perspective, girl. You'll never know the shape of a stone unless you look at it from several sides.

FIRST SNOW

Sometimes it feels like you try to talk me out of sadness. And I don't think that's what we should do with sadness.

STEADY RIVER

Hm.

She considers for a good, long moment.

STEADY RIVER

Sometimes, perhaps that is what I'm doing. You have my apologies, dear. You see? Sometimes even I don't look at the stone from enough sides.

FIRST SNOW SUDDENLY LETS HERSELF **WEEP**.

FIRST SNOW

Auntie - I'm so frightened. Without the Federation we'll never hold the town, and everyone's going to hate me for challenging the Elves.

STEADY RIVER

No one will begrudge you challenging the Elves. We know their treachery all too well.

FIRST SNOW

Then they'll hate me for bearing the news that we're doomed.

STEADY RIVER

You're right that our chances of holding the town are slim. And I don't ever mean to get in the way of your grief. But I need you to know that a great loss is not the same as doom.

FIRST SNOW

Auntie, you're doing it again!

STEADY RIVER

I am not. There is a difference between allowing a fire to run its natural course and throwing fuel on it. There's enough to grieve without making things out to be worse than they are, yes? Now will some of your neighbors be angry with you? Sure, but they won't hate. Do you really think they'll hurt you? Cast you out? Never forgive you?

FIRST SNOW

...No.

STEADY RIVER

Then let them be angry. Just as you let yourself be sad, or frightened.

FIRST SNOW **CONTINUES TO CRY** FOR A WHILE LONGER.

Until eventually...

THE FEELING RUNS ITS NATURAL COURSE...AND **STOPS**.

FIRST SNOW

I think I'm ready now.

STEADY RIVER

Only if you're sure.

A beat.

Some wooden objects clatter around.

FIRST SNOW

These are fine bows. The Elves and their lapdogs will come to hate them.

Reins snap.

FIRST SNOW

Giddup, Daffodil!

The cart begins rolling away from us.

FIRST SNOW

(quieter)
Before I lose my nerve.

The cart soon crosses from grass and dirt onto a wooden bridge.

We just sit in the moment as the cart rolls away from us.

It takes a while...

...but eventually it's gone. And all we're left with are the evening sounds of the prairie.

END OF CHAPTER.