

-Chapter 1. Seasick-

The sound of waves crashing against the rocky coast faded as the stone pier disappeared behind a hill. A man in a tunic and black boots headed down a cobblestone path cutting through the plains into the distant mountains. Morning dew glistened in the sunbeams piercing through the storm clouds. The man drew a deep breath of salty air, spreading his broad shoulders as he let himself sink into the flowery grass. An old lantern post stood tall next to a small wooden arch flower trestle behind a stone bench on the path. The man in a tunic rubbed his goatee as he took his seat and snacked on some bread from his satchel. "Why didn't you eat on the ship?" said a scrawny girl, her voice irate. The muscular man ignored her as he ate. "Bort!" Bort looked up at her with an eyebrow raised and mumbled some nonsense through a mouthful of bread. She sighed as her arms flopped limp. "We've only been walking for 5 minutes."

Bort finished chewing and smacked his lips, the breadcrumbs collecting in his facial hair. "Yes, Sol, but we've been sailing for 5 days so maybe you can just give me 5 seconds and go kick rocks."

The young girl crossed her arms defiantly and scowled at the giant man. "What are you gonna do, slit my throat?"

Bort glared through her, his war-torn features stoic as ever. "Don't test me."

She glared back and crossed her arms. "You won't touch me."

Bort fixed his gaze for a moment longer. "Let's not find out." With that, Bort went back to his meal and slumped into the stone. The girl rolled her eyes and meandered into the grass. "Don't go far," Bort instructed.

She mocked him to herself and appreciated the post-storm morning ambience. "It's been longer than 5 seconds."

"That's very interesting," he replied, eyes closed.

A gentle breeze carried the leaves over the plains into the evening, finely running its fingers through the flowers as the sun began to set. They had been walking all day, and the girl was starting to get tired. Not a single cloud obscured the starry sky. The moon was out in full, illuminating the closing mountains. Another identical lantern post, trestle, and bench came in to view as the duo continued down the path. "We're stopping here, right?"

"We've only been walking for a day, are you tired already?"

Her face contorted. "What do you mean *only*?"

Bort handed her a piece of bread from his satchel as the two of them sat down on the bench. "Five days at sea and you're fit as a fiddle, but a little bit of walking?"

She shrugged and sank into the bench. "I'm not used to it," she admitted. "And I enjoyed the boat ride."

"*Boat ride*," he repeated in finger quotes. Bort finished his bread and let his head fall back.

"Um, actually I'll be sleeping on the bench," she corrected. "You can sleep on the ground."

"Um actually I can sleep wherever I want, thank you," Bort replied without moving. The girl paused, deeply considered her situation, and suddenly kicked him toward the edge. "Sol, knock it off!"

"Make me!" she barked back as she kicked again, struggling to shift his heavy body.

Bort locked his eyes on hers, grunted, climbed to the ground, and lay on his back. "Petulant child."

"What was that?"

Bort cleared his throat. "I said *petulant child*."

She gasped indignantly, but then a flash of reality cleared her mind of such trivial things. "What if someone finds us while we're sleeping?"

"I'm not sleeping," Bort assured. "I'm resting, I'm aware of our surroundings, go to bed," he assured her. She didn't respond. "I'm serious, you can sleep, I'm keeping watch for the night."

She needed a minute to process that. "What about your sea sickness?"

Bort chanced a peak through a closed eye up at her before responding. "This is why I took a nap after the boat ride this morning. Sleep." Sol kept her eye on him for a moment, and then she reluctantly sank into the stone. The man was a dangerous pain in the wing, but he wasn't stupid. That was frustrating, but comforting enough to fall asleep.

3 days passed, and the hazy mountains in the distance now dominated the flowery scenery. Stone towers peeked just above the forest canopy struggling to climb the mountain rock. There was another lantern post with a trestle and bench in sight just where the trees began to grow thick and the path wound its way in. Bort heaved a hearty breath and sighed with relief. "Finally, something!"

"I thought you liked walking," Sol replied.

"Yeah, we can keep going if you want."

"I'll pass."

Bort adjusted his sword hilt. "Well that's good because we're here," he said, referring to the towers upon which they closed. He rummaged through his satchel and selected a pair of shackles.

"Really?" she asked. "Iron?"

"Just to be safe."

"I can't use magic," she reminded. "You know that."

"We know that, but they don't... yet."

He had a good point, Sol thought.

A long wall along the path began to emerge from the towers. A variety of flowers sprouted around the bushes against the wall where they could. They eventually came upon where the path split into a gatehouse with conical roof towers framing the portcullis. Simple but quality violet banners embroidered with what probably wasn't real gold adorned both short and simple guard towers, each with a crest Sol didn't recognize. Bort stopped and grabbed Sol's wrist. "Don't speak unless spoken to, keep your wings hidden, and... just don't draw any more attention to yourself than we have to."

Sol wanted to argue but he was right, and she stuck close by him. "I won't."

The two of them approached the portcullis and stood at the gate, and guard presented himself. "Good afternoon." His rank wasn't clear but it couldn't have been that high.

"Hello. My name is Bort. We're from Milkweed. This is my... god child, uh, Elly." Sol's eyes widened, but she quickly assumed character. "I- she, er..."

"Please, I'm desperate," Sol interrupted. "We're from across the sea, and I need the help of an archmage, may I please have a moment of their time?"

The guard looked puzzled and straightened up. "Give me a moment." Another guard could be seen jogging away deeper into the town. He came back a few minutes later with good news. "Welcome to Oak Thistle," said the guard, and the portcullis slid open. "You will be escorted to the library." Sol winked to Bort, and the two of them passed through the threshold into town with the guard.

The rooftops of the various brick and cobblestone buildings bathed in the afternoon sun along with the occasional tree within the walled city of the forest. The flora and fauna were

plentiful but maintained; the whole town seemed like one well-kept garden. The guard escorted them to a building up ahead. Square bushes lined the vaulted arch walls beneath the glass dome roof. This wasn't anything like the wood and clay cottages and food stores in Milkweed, Bort thought to himself. Sol couldn't be bothered to pay attention to such pointless details, her eyes were transfixed instead on the most beautiful creature upon which she had ever laid eyes; a fat unicorn, whose white coat and silvery mane sparkled in the reddening sun.

The guard had them stand by the heavy wooden door of a small mossy stone brick building as he knocked. "Come in," replied the voice of an older man. The guard opened the door, granting them passage to a quaint but cozy library illuminated mostly by sunlight. Bort stepped in, tugging Sol close behind as she longed for the unicorn just out of reach.

Slouching in a comfortable chair at a cluttered table was an old man in a lazy robe by a fireplace writing in a book. The old man peered over the rim of his glasses at Sol, and his eyes slowly squinted as he realized what he was looking at. "That'll be all, you can go," he said to the guard who nodded and disappeared. The old man smiled kindly and gestured to the two empty chairs across from him. "My name is Pastor Dale," he greeted. "Welcome to my study. Please, sit." The two of them took their seats. Bort was about to speak, but the pastor shook his head and lifted a cup to his lips full of tea that seemed to be stirring itself. He set the cup aside and took note of Bort's sword. "So I understand your... *godchild*, is in need. It's uncharacteristic of Oak Thistle to turn down help to a friendly stranger." Pastor Dale briefly darted his eyes to Sol and back. "So why, may I ask, did a no doubt valiant warrior from across the sea, a week's journey at least, decide to bring into my library... a fairy?"