

Maeve had not seen so many wizards in one place since she had passed her magisterial council test, six years ago. Almost two dozen were in the front room of the tavern now, and most had given her brief, dismissive glances when she'd crossed their line of vision after coming inside. A table would invite company; she settled at one end of the bar, setting her books and cauldron on the end against the wall. Took, her raven, hopped down off her shoulder to eye a bowl of nuts a few seats down as she ordered something strong.

An argument in one of the back rooms briefly caught her ears, but it was just about money, so she turned her attention back to her drink. She was crazy, probably; a band of mercenaries was hiring a mage, and she was certainly not the most qualified. That her skin was the delicate spring-green of an Anjou pear, and her canines were... well, noticeable – the orcish heritage generally didn't go over well.

On the other hand, she wanted out of this damned town, and she didn't have the money to do it on her own. The petty magic – potions and hexes and charms – brought in enough cash to feed her, but not much beyond that.

Occasional calls of *Next!* were thinning out the ranks of wizards over the course of the afternoon; Maeve was fairly sure that no matter how often they called it, she would be last. Took occasionally edged closer to the bowl down the bar, and she kept dragging him back.

"They're tree nuts, hon'," she said finally. "You're not that into tree nuts. Meat and offal and whatnot, remember?"

"Squirrels eat them," Took said, "and squirrels are quite delicious."

"Oh, you're trying logic again," Maeve frowned. "You're leaving out the whole process of digestion that turns nuts into squirrel."

"Tch."

Maeve had found over the years she'd known him that *tch* was as close as Took could get to an expression of displeasure that wasn't exactly a word.

"You've eaten nuts before, Took. You didn't like them. Have you forgotten that already?"

He just *tched* again, and Maeve turned her attention back to her drink. The wizard population in the room had dropped considerably, and the autumn sun was fading. She was crazy, to even be considering this – crazy or desperate, and she disliked the idea of the latter much more than the former. She was, as much as she hated to admit it to herself, a city girl, and she had no idea – well, practically no idea – how to get along outside an urban environment.

"Anyone else? No?"

Maeve turned her head to glare at the doorway of the back room as the man who had inquired to the front room, now devoid of wizards besides her, turned to go back into it. Either they had already made up their minds, or she wasn't even going to be considered. Probably the latter.

The half-dozen men, most of them armed, spilled into the front room a few moments later, settling further down the bar towards the door, since the tables had mostly been claimed by the locals.

"No, Took," Maeve murmured to the raven as he speculatively hopped a couple steps down the bar. "We're not interested if they're going to be like that."

A pair of them were discussing her, judging by the gestures and the glances, and she settled against the bar to brood. Potions, hexes, and charms. Witch work. It was depressing, really – she wasn't a witch, didn't have the people skills for it. *Charms* were something of a joke, too. She couldn't lie with magic, and she *wouldn't* control other people with it. Not that

people didn't think it; if she didn't open her mouth, she was just a homely, green-skinned woman with a black dress and a pointy hat.

Well, homely for a human. She wasn't sure there was a standard of beauty that applied to a half-orc. Her skin was actually fantastic, just green. She had good teeth, straight and sound; although her canines hadn't quite reached the point of protrusion, there was no hiding them if she spoke. Her hair had been envied before – thick, glossy, down-to-her-waist hair the color of Took's plumage. She had hidden in that hair when she was younger, let it hide her more obviously orcish facial features, but it was too impractical for anything but a braided rope down her back anymore.

It was her brow that was off-putting to most humans, she'd decided. Their cranial features were more delicate; she had a noticeable brow ridge. And a thick skull – thieves in the city had learned not to try to hit her over the head, grab her bag, and run. Firstly because she was generally unfazed by a blow to the head, and secondly because she had adored telekinetics when she was eleven and could simply take the bag back. The bag recovery was generally followed up with a hex, and when enough of them suddenly found themselves with spasms or bowel problems or other minor but annoying difficulties, her paltry earnings were no longer worth their time.

One of the mercenaries broke off from his companions and walked over to stand next to her in the ample space the neighborhood men had left beside her.

"So what's a witch doing at a call-out for wizards?" he asked her. She gave him a wary glance.

"I'm not a witch."

"No?" He looked her up and down once. "No staff?"

"I realize the face is generally confusing, but the chest has been pretty obvious for quite a few years." She took another swallow while she waited for him to parse that. She had never needed a staff to focus her magic, but turning that question into an anatomical one every time it was posed to her was, for some reason, easier than explaining the metaphysical purpose of a wizard's staff.

"So you're saying you're a wizard, without a staff?"

"I'm not going to debate the nature of magic with someone who thinks I'm a witch," she said. She narrowed her eyes at Took, who had edged closer to the man. "Leave him alone, Took."

"Shiny," the raven said, plaintively.

"God, you're as bad as my mother," she muttered at the bird. "You've seen chainmail before, and you *know* what it does to your beak."

"Your bird?" the man asked her.

"Unfortunately."

Took hissed at her.

"You left half a mouse in my shoes," she said to him. "If I had wanted to deal with random deposits of mangled rodents, I'd have gotten a cat."

"You know, half a dozen of the wizards we talked to today felt obligated to warn us you were here," the man said to her.

"Yeah, I'm not particularly popular."

"Who'd you have to kill to get that kind of reputation?"

"Kill? You don't have to kill anyone to be reviled in the local wizardry guild. You just have to have ancestry that's supposed to be too stupid to understand the arcane. It offends their

egos, and *no one* has an ego like someone who screws around with physics on a daily basis.”

“So you’re some kind of prodigy?”

“Nope, just average. Most wizards are, really. The *really* good ones work for people with a lot more money than most mercenaries offer, or are heading one of the magisterial academies in a city with a lot more to offer than a place like this.”

“Who did you study under?”

She frowned at him. “Did I not just tell you about the ego of a wizard?”

“Oh, you’re offended and no longer interested,” he said blandly.

“Jobbing potions and hexes is better than working with people who think you’re a witch,” she said.

“You *do* rather look the part.”

“This is a difficult color to cultivate, you know,” she said. “Too much sun and I’m damned near fluorescent. Too little and I look perpetually ill.”

He shifted closer to her, and her frown deepened. “I’m not afraid of the orc blood. Throwing it in my face isn’t going to make me go away.”

“If you don’t back off half a step, I’m inclined to blind you,” she said.

“Do you not want me to explain this job to you?”

“What makes you think I’m likely to take it at this point?”

“You didn’t leave yet.”

“Why would I leave? I’ve got another,” she glanced in her mug, “oh, twenty minutes worth of drinking left here.”

His eyes narrowed slightly. “What are you drinking?”

“Stout.”

“That’s not exactly a woman’s drink.”

“And?”

“Why did you come here today?”

“Potions and hexes aren’t steady work,” she shrugged, then reached over to pull Took back away from the bowl of nuts. “It’s preferable to other options, though.”

“Has it not occurred to you that every other wizard who came here today turned *us* down?”

“Not surprising. Wizards are a fickle lot.”

“Yourself included?”

“Oh, most certainly. You’re trying my patience, Took,” she growled as the bird edged back towards the bowl.

“What’s the harm in him eating a few nuts?” the man asked her.

“To him? Not a lot. I know what he’s had that beak in, though. I don’t generally inflict that on strangers.”

He raised a brow at the raven. “You did say something about half a mouse, didn’t you?”

“Judging by the volume,” she said, taking another drink.

“You’ve heard of the Lirian Fen?”

She was quiet a moment, not sure how to answer that. Heard of, certainly. Spent four months in... She was a city girl, and she had known she was out of her ken going in, but that had been the task the magisterial council had deemed her test.

“Something like that,” she said finally.

“There’s a tomb—”

“Heh.” She’d had her mug halfway to her mouth again, and she set it down so she

wouldn't spill it. "I've left this town exactly once. You don't have to explain the fen to me."

"You've *been* there?"

"What, none of the wizards who were so eager to warn you about me told you that? The magisterial councils determine the tests that either graduate you to full wizardry, or, typically, kill you. Mine was the fen."

"None of the others were willing to go there..."

"There's only one tomb in the fen, and it's occupied by a vampire. He's metaphysically chained, sure, but he's still quite dangerous if you get too close."

"Did you get too close?"

She raised a brow at him. "I'm not dead."

"You passed your test, then?"

"Again, not dead."

"Cheater," Took hissed.

"Oh, get off it already," she said to the raven. "I didn't *cheat*. They were quite clear on that. I just did things they hadn't expected."

"Why would anyone think you'd cheated?" the man asked her.

"Because the vampire's not dead. Well, not dead again. The whole death-undead thing... anyway. The council told me to bring them a lock of his hair. There are a lot of ways to go about doing that, most of which involve killing him to get close enough to get one. I didn't kill him, but brought them the hair."

He raised a brow at her. "The vampire is into five-foot-ten and green?"

"Ha, no. I wouldn't know how to go about that."

He waited a moment. "You're not going to explain?"

"Explain what? How I got them a lock of his hair? No."

"There is an artifact in his possession we need to recover."

Her brow twitched. "The Meeris Stone?"

He nodded slightly.

"Did you tell that to all the wizards you talked to today?"

"Well..."

"Get out of town. Tonight. Before they have a chance to tell the local magisterial council what you're up to. Holy God, you'll unleash him if you take that thing out of the tomb, and the magisterial council will kill you if they think you're that dangerous."

"You could help us do it?"

She rubbed her jaw. "The task isn't really that difficult."

"Should I say that we're not *asking*?"

"You do realize that I can blind you with hardly the bat of an eyelash, right? I *am* a wizard, and I *can* defend myself."

"All you're threatening is blinding."

"Right, you've got a priest sitting among your buddies," she frowned. "Blinding is just such a nice, uncomplicated curse."

She straightened slightly to drain her mug, then reached over to pull Took away from the nuts again.

"Come on. These guys are unnecessary trouble."

The man beside her had reached to unsheathe a knife, and she caught hold of his other wrist, murmuring in a tongue she had learned when she was four. His strength sapped by the spell, he crumpled against the bar as she eased him down.

That, of course, meant that his five companions, between her and the door, were now moving in her direction.

“Not your brightest move,” Took said to her as she grabbed her books and cauldron off the bar and headed for the stairs.

“Shut up and get moving, bird,” she growled.

Only two of them followed her up the stairs; the second floor was mostly boarders, and Maeve guessed the others had gone outside to see which window she exited. She skipped the windows at the end of the hallway and continued up the stairs to the attic, which had been carved out into a handful of garret apartments.

“This is where invisibility would come in handy,” Took said to her, adjusting his grip on her shoulder as she tried doors in the attic hall before finally swearing under her breath and flicking enough magic at one of the locks to open it.

“You know damned well I can’t do invisible,” she growled. “Hold on tighter.”

She growled a word Took had never heard her use before, opened the door, and stepped through as the two men following her reached the top of the attic stairs.