

It had been three months since he last saw her, dressed in some third-hand adventuring gear that she'd just barely managed to scrounge up from a travelling salesperson after pinching every piece of gold that she could for the better part of two years. For the young gnoll farmhand, it felt as if those three months had crawled by at a rate so slow as to be downright torturous; without his better half by his side, days passed at such an excruciatingly glacial pace that it stopped being funny a couple of weeks in, and if not for the occasional piece of correspondence detailing how his beloved was doing her best to find a party to settle in with, the farmhand might've lost hope entirely. Those letters were his most precious possession, the one thing he kept in his mind when he left his home to tend to the fields and spent hours working under the sun. At the very least, it was planting season, giving him *something* to do in order to pass the time; heavens above only know what he might be like if it was the dead of winter. Three months had passed, and just as he was expecting to receive yet another letter detailing how the search for an "adventuring group" still continued, the missive handed to him by one of the local lord's couriers was clearly different from the rest: the paper was cleaner, crisper, and it even came with a wax seal on the back, emblazoned with heraldry that the gnoll had never seen before. He could only assume that something special had happened, and thus spent the rest of the day speculating on what it might be; once he adjourned to his small home on the outskirts of the village, he sat down by his table, prepared a rushlight in case the letter turned out to be particularly long, and set about reading about what his wonderful Yatel was doing.

My dearest Ildi,

Much has changed since the last time I've had the opportunity to write home, and all of it for the better! I'm happy to tell you that I've finally found a group of adventurers willing to take in lil' ol' me, even in spite of my complete lack of experience. "We all started somewhere," they told me, "and besides, it would be remiss of us not to give people a chance." Lovely fellows, all of them, even if the bard is prone to exaggerating a few things whenever we stop at a tavern and recount our exploits to the locals; surely, anyone with half a mind would be able to tell that we wouldn't be paid such a pittance if we had indeed slain a nine-headed dragon or a giant the size of a mountain. But the wonders I've seen, Ildi, oh the wonders I've seen! So many years stuck in that corner of the world (no offense), so many years spent fantasizing about what the great realm beyond would be like, believing that songs and tales couldn't possibly be telling the unadulterated truth... oh, how wrong I was, for the world is so much more beautiful than I could've even imagined! I only wish that you could be here with me, for the things I've seen, the stories I've heard, would put any of the minstrel's ballads to shame if you were to hear about them. Why, just yesterday we arrived in the great port city of Cintra, on the shores of the Boreal sea, from where I write to you this letter; by the time you receive it, we will probably have moved on, as we're tracking a target on behalf of the local governor. It's dreadfully cold up here, so much so that we had to spend some of our coin buying fur clothes just to stop ourselves from shivering all the time, but the sights! There are so many people from so many places that I've

*never even heard of that it feels like my head is about to explode at any given moment; my travelling companions find this endearing, I believe, and like to tease me about how “sheltered” I am, but I don’t care. Just being here is its own reward, especially when I get to hear about great feats of valor that I’d never once have been able to dream of! The talk around town in the past few days has apparently been of a great warrior that also came from the south like us, except he bore no weapons beyond his own fists; he spoke barely a word, and yet any who looked upon him knew that he was master of the fighting arts. The local guard were hard-pressed because of a goblinoid issue somewhere to the east, and asked the man if he’d be willing to help; still silent, he rose from his seat, nodded but once, and set off into the wilderness without receiving further instruction... and, at least according to everyone we spoke to, came back a single day later, having eradicated the infestation all by his lonesome! He chose to forgo a reward, saying he had other places to visit, and vanished in the middle of the night, leaving behind naught but a sack of gold to pay for his stay at the inn. Honestly, I don’t even know how much of this is pure fabrication, but it seems that everywhere I look I find people who either heard of someone who did something of similar bravery, were involved in the effort, or **were** that person to begin with; it’s a city of heroes, they tell me, thanks to its proximity to the Reaches, and a place where would-be adventurers come to strike for their fortune. I can only presume that fate brought me here, for that is precisely what I intend to do, even if I need to work extra-hard at anything I do. Really, Ildi, that much I need to admit that you were entirely spot-on; I did not expect the nitty gritty, the everyday monotony of adventuring to be so **tiring**. Having to keep my equipment in order, repairing it whenever it suffers any damage, needing to keep my eye out for tears or torn stitches, not to mention the sheer mind-numbing boredom of maintaining my weapons in proper shape! I’m sure eventually it’ll become a routine I’m used to, but for now, it feels as if the world is testing my resolve... and I intend to prove that I can handle whatever it can throw at me.*

One day, I shall return to your side, and we will have years for me to recount every step of my journey. Until then, I can only hope this letter finds you well, my love.

Yours for eternity,

Yatel

The rate of correspondence slowed down somewhat after the first letter from Cintra came around, though given what he was told when he asked somewhere where the city even was, Ildi figured that made some sense; his beloved *had* been out and about for three months, so it was quite likely that, much like the letter said, she was nowhere near the place by the time he read about it, but rather neck-deep in some other adventuring business that he couldn’t fathom. Still, she was finally getting some progress done, and for that, the gnoll farmhand could only be happy, ecstatic even; more than once he found himself gushing about Yatel to whoever would listen, and though he was certain very few people believed what he was saying, he *knew* for a fact that the adventuress would never lie to him. Day after day he woke up and worked the fields, only a slight part of him worrying about what he’d do once most of the farming work was done, hoping to see the by-then familiar figure of the lord’s courier walking down to the dirt path...

until, finally, the young man walked up to him carrying yet another missive, giving the gnoll a wink and a nod; Ildi didn't understand why at first, but as soon as he take his letter, he immediately understood: it was actually *inside* a small paper wrapper, with his name and Yatel's written on the front! It was even fancier than the last, enough that the farmhand almost felt like he'd been elevated to minor nobility just by being in its presence, enough that it genuinely hurt him that he had to tuck it into a dirty shirt for safekeeping. His excitement knowing no bounds, time seemed to speed up for the rest of the day, and practically a moment later he was sitting by his table, carefully removing the wrappings around what was revealed to be an immaculate piece of parchment with the endearingly familiar chicken scratchings written on it.

My dearest Ildi,

*As detailed in my last letter, surely you remember that Cintra is the closest city to the Reaches. It struck me, after I wrote and sent it, that I failed to tell you what the Reaches even were to begin with, and by the time I remembered that, our group was halfway to the border already. Suffice it to say, anything beyond the frontier outposts can be safely considered to belong to no one; there are nomadic tribes out there, somewhere in the vast distances, but most of the place is just one continent-spanning plain stretching from the Boreal Sea all the way to whatever ocean may lie on the other side. Thousands of miles of wide-open, untapped wilderness answering to no lord or master, there for the taking if only one would be strong and charismatic enough to unite its disparate peoples; I recall a few folk in Cintra saying that the threat of a unified invasion was always looming on the horizon, but after seeing how huge this place is, I doubt such a thing would ever happen. Regardless, our task here was simple: locate an escaped bandit who made off with some set of royal jewels or whatnot, bring them back alive and see if we couldn't find the goods while doing so. It took us the better part of a fortnight just to track him down, after which we found him cowering in a cave, the jewels strewn about the floor, looking so disheveled that it almost felt too easy to put him in shackles; he was staring at something further into the cavern though, and you know me, I'm quite the curious type! I figured perhaps it was some haunted or cursed treasure of sorts, and wouldn't you know it, despite my friends calling out to me and asking what I was thinking, I found myself walking into an opening in the stone further down below... and in there, a crown! Sitting on a stone plinth, it was made of purest glass, looking so fragile that I knew better than to pick it up even if I didn't know that it must carry some terrible curse; unfortunately, I'm still the same chutz I always was, so when our resident ~~meat shield~~ warrior came rushing down the path and called out to me, I might've flinched a bit too hard and sent the damned thing crashing onto the ground. It... well, it broke, obviously, and though I won't bother you with the details, I think it should be enough to tell you that I required some hasty intervention on the part of our healer, who managed to fix the issue without any real lasting damage. Well, apart from the one to my ego, of course; I guess I learned better than to throw myself so close to a cursed item without warning the rest of the crew! Still, we had our target in tow, so it was just a case of getting back to Cintra and delivering him to the authorities; poor thing spent the whole trip back just **staring** at me, babbling incoherently and*

drooling about this thing or other. It was probably the crown, did something to the man's head and left him unable to think straight, but at least it made for an easy delivery once we got back within city limits. We were received with some pomp and circumstance; apparently word of our exploits had already reached the folks of Cintra somehow (probably the bard, I wouldn't put it past him to have trained pigeons to deliver messages), and soon enough we were being welcomed into a tavern for free drinks! Now, I needn't tell you, I'm not the sort of person to indulge too much in that sort of pastime, but when one is surrounded by both victorious comrades and a small crowd of people all happily reminding you of your exploits, it's difficult to say no. Thankfully, however, there was something else that caught our attention, or someone, to be more precise; just as we were getting started with the celebrations, and the ale began to flow properly, who would make themselves known in the establishment than another gnoll! I swear that they must've had their equipment enchanted, because at no point did anyone hear them enter the tavern, and they were... well, they were quite large, I'll say that. Their head was just inches off the ceiling, their shoulders so wide that it looked as if she could hold the rafters up just on muscle power alone; she looked like any other of our kind, just magnified a few times over like she'd been hit by some kind of size-altering spell. They were quite distracting on the eyes; even though they were clearly some kind of adventurer as well, at least going by how toned they looked (apologies for my lecherous eyes, but really, I have to admit I was tipsy by this point), but for whatever reason their curves were almost impossibly excessive; honestly, just looking her bust and rear left me feeling slightly woozy when all the blood rushed to my face, and I have to admit, if you'd done something stupid, I probably would've been right there behind you, Ildi! She just sat there, in the middle of the tavern, ordering drinks from the workers; they were probably known around those parts, because no one bothered to ask why someone of that size and shape had just walked in. Thankfully, there was more to the gnoll than we initially assumed, and over the course of several tankards of ale (and a few of mead; didn't like it at first, but it grew on me), we learned of some rather interesting adventuring opportunities off to the east. I won't bore you with the details, but you should most likely not expect any correspondence from me in the foreseeable future; our group is likely to try and cross the Reaches, an endeavour that will take us the better part of what remains of the year, and I'll be unable to send anything until our wizard finally bothers to learn how to remotely contact people. I'll make sure to bother him every other day so he reads the bloody scroll. Keep your chin up, my love; I'll send you a letter as soon as I can.

Yours for eternity,

Yatel

As his beloved had told him, no letters arrived for a long while. Planting season came and went, and with it the few distractions that Ildi had to keep his mind off of his perennial loneliness; with nothing to do but occasionally give the fields a once-over, especially once the rains began to come in from the north, the gnoll farmhand was left mostly to his own devices. In other years, he would've taken up carpentry, just like he always did, but without Yatel there to

help him with his tools and to remind him of what a straight edge was supposed to look like, it almost felt... pointless. It was less a trade and more something he did as an excuse to pass the time with her during the colder months, so with his better half somewhere in the middle of nowhere, Ildi was left with naught to do but prepare an overabundance of rushlights for after the sun began to set earlier. He spent most of his days by the river collecting plants and occasionally trying to catch a fish or two using a sharpened stick, occasionally stopping to sit down and have a rest, staring down at his reflection in the water; he wondered if he'd be able to recognize Yatel once she came back, worrying that her adventures might leave her so utterly unrecognizable compared to her old self that it would spill over into the realm of the physical as well. In his darkest hours, he fretted over the possibility that the gnolless might not even come back home at all; that she'd just carry on adventuring and leave him behind, as a relic of a past that she no longer identified with. It was during these times that he forced himself back on his feet to collect more rushes, or to head back home to try and force himself to cut a few pieces of lumber into firewood, a routine that repeated itself, day after day, until eventually he came back to his hovel to find the lord's courier carrying a missive.

"Special delivery today!" he announced excitedly, "Must've fallen in good with some rich bloke, where they are!"

The wink was unnecessary, the implication even less so, but Ildi was happy to ignore it for the sake of holding yet another message from his beloved. He practically sprinted into his door before remembering that it was locked, and only after sitting back down did the groll realize that he was looking not at a *wax* seal, but one apparently made from molten *gold*; how exactly that was supposed to work he had no clue, but he was lucky the courier either missed it, or apparently decided not to say anything.

My most beloved Ildi,

I lack the words to describe to you the kind of journey that followed my last letter. I'm no poet, no troubadour, you know this; if I were there to recount it, I'd most likely fall back on simply blathering on at length with half-formed words and high-pitched squeaking. Even writing this is enough to leave me on the edge of a giggling fit, and my one regret is that I'm not there, next to you, that I could regale you with every moment without having to try and condense it into a piece of paper (one that hopefully is slightly more legible than last time). They told us, back in Cintra, of all the things we would see in the Reaches, of the great many bizarre and wonderful beings and sights that existed in the great wilderness beyond; most of it, I assumed, was either entirely fabricated or heavily exaggerated, and yet, just as it happened when I first left home, I found myself not just being proven wrong, but shown up in an almost ludicrous fashion. Ildi, my love, civilization is but a curse on the wonders this land can produce, for what I saw out there in the Reaches, in the vast emptiness where no mortal has ever tried to lay a foundation, was far greater than anything I could've ever dreamed of. Even the very landscape itself seemed to be woven in such a way as to defy logic at times, and more often than not we found ourselves looking at things that shouldn't be alive, not at the sizes they operated at; I think the best

*example I can give you is when we were heading towards the only large hill we could see on the horizon, thinking it would at least give us a better view of the flats around us, only for it to suddenly sprout arms when we were halfway there! It then rose up on two feet, two immense legs, and before we knew it were looking at a mountain-sized rock elemental just traipsing about for a few minutes, crossing what had to be miles before stopping and settling back down, wrapping into itself until it was left as a "hill" again, a good half a day away from where it had been before, at least for our tiny little legs. We saw nomads, sure... but then we also saw caravans which were actually large insects, which had somehow learned to disguise themselves as they scurried about looking for prey, as did we see encampments that were fungal in nature, actually one large colony that mimicked the appearance of the tents used by the clans in order to lure more victims in; from what we were told by the few locals who deigned to speak to us, most of these large creatures were the creations of a group they call "the Fathers", supposedly an ancient civilization that once controlled most of the Reaches before imploding and leaving behind most of their knowledge in whatever random projects they had lying around. Presumably, if one were to dig deep enough, they would find plentiful evidence, but no one's going to invest in an expedition into the Reaches for the sake of investigating the legends of the "savages of the wastes"... leaving plenty of opportunity for us if we ever manage to secure the funds, but I digress. Our trek eastward was done with one purpose: reaching the coast. We heard from a reliable source that a group of ships that had set sail from Cintra some three years prior had successfully navigated around the world and reached the other side of the plains; they still had a wizard with them, albeit a novice one who couldn't yet send complex messages (sound familiar), but what information they **did** receive pointed to the existence of a whole slew of kingdoms and potentates that no one had ever heard of before! To say that this had the merchants in the city riled up and ready to throw money at anyone brave or foolhardy enough to cross the Reaches would be an understatement, but seeing as most adventurers were just there for easy frontier contract money, competition was still fierce. As for us, we chose not to go in that direction financially; rather, we sat down one night, and had a long chat about what we wanted to do, as a group. Though the conversation was highly emotional, far more than I'm willing to share over writing like this, one thing was decided: if we wanted to make a name for ourselves, we had to do something **big**, and what was bigger than being one of, if not **the** first people to ever head east across the Reaches and then return laden with treasures and news of far-off kingdoms? We swore that we'd succeed or die trying, of course, but I don't intend for the second option to ever come knocking at our door; I've gotten quite good at this whole fighting business, and though the curse of the crown still occasionally stings at me, I've been able to keep myself in one piece as it wears off. Granted, it makes wearing clothes uncomfortable at times, but at least the rest of the group doesn't seem to mind too much; don't worry though, nothing indecent, that much is left exclusively for you.*

You might be wondering where I am now, and if so, I would happily join you, because I have no idea either. By our reckoning, we should be about three quarters of our way to the eastern oceans, and yet there are no signs of civilization anywhere near us; the only reason this letter

even reached you at all was because I badgered our wizard to learn some teleportation magics so I could have it reach Cintra. I can only hope that it has made its way to you, but if not, I'll make sure to include a copy of it the next time I write, which should hopefully be from within some place that has an actual roof. Until then, remember that you are in my dreams always, and often quite literally; the tent's actually gone down a couple of times with how much I've thrashed about.

*Yours for eternity,
Yatel*

Half a year passed. It was the dead of winter, the crops had long-since been harvested, and with nothing else for him to do, Ildi was effectively *forced* to go back to carpentry, if only to keep himself sane from the lack of any communication from his beloved. Excitement turned to expectation turned to worry turned to panic, and eventually acceptable came knocking far before he wanted to take it into himself; he could but choose to believe that Yatel was still alive, that she'd simply gotten tied up in whatever great adventure her group had found. He'd heard the stories, he knew those got *very* involved... maybe. Day after day he woke up and whiled away the hours, hoping for something, *anything*; more often than not, he'd glue his face to the window of his hovel just to see if the courier was coming his way, only for them to simply never show their face. He was ready to give when the sixth month came to pass, ready to give up hope and accept that maybe he should move on, when a bright flash of light erupted in the middle of his living space, bright enough to blind him for several seconds as he'd been looking in its general direction; the gnoll was left flailing as his vision slowly returned, dotted with small blind spots, yet not enough to hide the root cause of his sudden distress: a *letter*. Never in his life had Ildi felt more grateful for bodily injury; he barely even took notice of the fact that the missive was sealed in some form of secondary paper container, one that was both embroidered in gold and bore a rather ornate wax seal that seemed mixed with some sort of green, glass-like gem. None of this mattered, for the most precious thing in there were the words addressed to him.

Ildi, my one love,

*It has been far too long, and for that, I must apologize. We were not aware that the Reaches could even **have** magical storms, but as it turns out, the biggest obstacle to our journey east were not the distances involved, but what the kingdoms here call the Cordon: a vast strip of land running from the frozen north to the searing south, one beset by perpetual maelstroms of magical energy powerful enough to prevent any remote contact with the rest of the world. That you are receiving this message is entirely the work of our group's resident wizard, a small forward from whom I've included in the bottom of the letter; I think he's earned that much, since he effectively transported this letter to you the **other** way around using calculations for the size of the planet that the local astronomers were gracious enough to provide. At least, I **hope** you're reading this; if not, again, I'll make sure to write a copy and keep it to myself, that I may give it to you once I get back home. As for what happened... it's too much for me to put into words. Suffice it to say*

that we ran afoul of a group of nomads who lived beyond the Cordon, were forced to engage in aggressive negotiations, and then found ourselves being invited to the home of a local lord, who wished to thank us for our service. Though, perhaps "lord" is not the right word to use; these folk are so unlike us that to try and explain it using what we know is... difficult, to say the least. I **still** don't understand how they rule over such a vast amount of territory without parceling the land, but if it works for them, then it works. Besides, with such an enormous amount of unpatrolled space, there's always work for those willing to take up the sword in exchange for gold, and let me tell you Ildi, there are **plenty** of those around here. Sure, their weapons and styles may be exotic, but the adventurer's soul is the same regardless of where the adventurer is, goes, or was born; be they a brawler like myself (I ditched the sword in favour of my fists, I'll explain at a later date) or a refined swordsman with flowery movements, we all want the same: the freedom to strike out on our own and see the world for all the wonders it has.

And **such wonders**, Ildi! If the Reaches were the wilds, the untamed beastly lands where monsters from another time eked out a living amidst the ruins of some grand, lost-long civilization, then the far eastern kingdoms are the exact opposite: the vibrant, the new, the modern, the height of the fantastical, where creatures of myth and legend coexist with the printing press (they actually made machines to write things faster! We're seeing if we can't bring the designs over, it'll make us a mint), where an adventurer like me can squeeze herself into a tavern and sit down with a monk who came down from the tip-top of a mountain a hundred miles away to pass on the knowledge of their order's martial art, then immediately head outside and be confronted with a line of soldiers dressed in sharp uniforms, wielding weapons that fire explosions! Well, not explosions, but I'm no chemist; something about a powder.

Point being, Ildi, it's like stepping into a different world altogether, like the Cordon was a portal and, on the other side, was this... this wondrous place that no one would believe existed. And the **creatures**, oh Ildi, my love, the **beasts** that infest this place! I can only imagine what sort of troubles these folks have had over the ages, because if you thought a living hill was bad enough, you haven't seen anything! Entire **mountain ranges** can decide to migrate, carrying with them colossal draconids whose hoards are so vast that they could crash the economies of every kingdom back home, terrifying beasts who don't **spew** fire, they somehow conjure it up from nothing! Lichfire, Ildi, the sort of thing wizards over there think is the exclusive purview of those who studied the arts their whole lives, is simply a matter of fact here, and one that the locals have learned to defend against as well; really, if I had to describe to you the **walls** around the larger cities, I'd need several letters!

But the small ones too, they're also there, and everywhere too! River spirits, lake spirits, earth spirits, tree spirits, it's almost as if everything that exists has **something** inside of it; apparently the people here worship these as some form of polytheistic pantheon? It's hard to describe; they don't sit in temples and sing hymns, but rather seem to interpret the will of these "gods" in whatever way they seem to think makes most sense. To them, the very ground they walk on is sacred, by sheer virtue of it being the ground they walk on; our resident dwarf has, naturally, taken quite well to this belief, even if he insists on bringing the Stone Mother up a few

too many times. As for me, I confess I quite enjoyed listening to the explanations provided; I honestly think it makes a bit more sense than what they teach us back home, but... I don't know, I'm not sure if the whole thing should feel so **familiar** to me; it's like I've heard it before, but I just can't remember where. Odd.

Regardless, we came here for a business venture and we weren't going to leave until we found one. Unfortunately for us, there weren't a lot of people willing to do any kind of business with us, mostly because we were adventurers... **and** also because we came from the west. They're apparently aware of us, you see, and seem to think that we have nothing to offer them in exchange for their own secrets; quite frankly, they're entirely right, which left us in a bit of a bind. I, of course, suggested we do what we did best: find a big beastie that needed killing and then collect the bounty. After our travels through the Reaches, we were sure that we could take anything on, especially with how much experience I gained always being at the front of the group; I'll say this: if you could see me now, you would **swoon**. I know how much you liked the idea of me being a buff gal whenever I brought it up, and while it's not anything special, I'm sure you'll enjoy the sight of me coming back home after such a good workout.

Regardless, we settled in for a few days, as thankfully the local merchants accepted our gold coins (which were, thankfully, actually made of gold this time around), until we found something worth doing. Apparently, a family of mountain giants had moved in a few dozen miles to the west, and, as I'm sure you guessed by now, brought with them a whole clan of flying creatures whose names I won't even bother trying to pronounce (I also can't write the local language, so that doesn't help). They're **like** dragons, but not exactly dragons, but apparently related to them, at least in the legends? Whatever the case, they were attacking livestock indiscriminately, and since trying to drive them off hadn't worked, we were contracted to kill enough of them that the rest wised up and left for new hunting grounds. There were rumours of another adventuress who'd also gone in that direction a couple of weeks prior, but had never returned; the locals had high hopes for them, on account of her being an absolute **giantess** of a woman, easily thirty feet tall and powerful enough to bring down a whole tavern entirely by accident (or so I'm told). She was a gnoll too, surprisingly; one can only wonder if our species is just unable to grow properly unless we're fed anything more than cabbages and wheat. Nevertheless, she never came back, so now it fell to us to rid the peasantry of their aerial menace before it could do any more damage to their food supply.

Naturally, I write to you **after** returning successfully from the expedition, because of course I wouldn't be so evil as to leave you hanging **again** after the last several months. It was surprisingly quick, all things considered, and though we found no traces of this supposed giantess that came before us, the citizenry back at the lord's home city was more than happy to welcome me with just as much enthusiasm. I'll tell you, getting back into the inn was a chore and a half with so many people outside, but at least the pay was good; I don't think I've ever spent so much money before and yet still had so much to spare, and apparently we're still in the outskirts of the kingdoms! From what we're told, the inner heartlands have even greater perils awaiting us, so we're likely to head there now; we heard talk of an "emperor" of sorts, though for

*whatever reason no one felt keen to discuss them with me around. Odd, isn't it? They tell us he's supposed to be a demigod of some kind, and that he "wouldn't be pleased" by me being there, then they just clam up; probably something to do with messing with the crown curse thing I got over a while ago, but we're not letting this get in our way. We'll travel to the capital and bounty hunt our way into the imperial palace if we have to, if only because now it's a **challenge**, and you know exactly how I'm like when someone tells me I can't do something.*

Hopefully, I'll be able to keep in touch more often now that our wizard can send letters remotely. Expect a new letter sooner than this one!

*Yours for eternity,
Yatel*

WIZARD'S NOTE: *I, Hemidore, would like to formally request that the receiver of this letter, Ildi son of Glan, place said letter inside its sleeve and then burn it at earliest convenience; I apologize for requesting such a thing, but it is necessary to establish proper transportation coordinates.*

Additionally, you will be pleased to know that Yatel has recovered significantly well from the curse she was afflicted by; if anything, it seems to have left her more resistant overall.

*Respectfully,
Hemidore Dorden*

As promised, the next letter to come through did so barely a week later, quickly enough that Ildi was utterly blindsided by it. At the very least, it gave him enough time to thoroughly inspect the missive itself: it was almost *excessively* decorated, to the point where he felt genuinely scared that by merely existing in the same room as him, the letter was attracting thieves like some sort of charm. There were a multitude of seals on it, none of which in a language he understood, with a handful of runic sigils burned into the outside of the paper sleeve (supposedly called an envelope?) where Yatel's party's wizard had placed the coordinates to the farmhand's home. The fact that his beloved's handwriting was still just as indecipherable as always, however, only served to make the whole setup look even more ridiculous; it was almost criminal to have handwriting *that* bad on paper that fancy... but it was Yatel, so he had to smile.

My beloved Ildi,

*The journey southeast has been going well, and has been mostly uneventful. Granted, being foreigners means we always have eyes on us, and not all of them in a good way, but it's nice to stick out from a crowd and enjoy some recognition, especially since word of what we'd done with the dragon infestation spread ahead of us; there were plenty of job opportunities for us to take, and indeed we picked up a couple here and there, mostly minor stuff to keep us going, as we don't really know what'll happen once we reach the capital. Honestly though, I can't tell how any of these people live here; back home, the most we'd have to worry about would be a small griffin, **maybe** a wyvern if we were unlucky, but we've been routinely asked to deal with entire*

*draconic clans and mass possessions by tree spirits and who knows what else. Honestly, if there weren't an overabundance of adventurers to thin the hordes, this entire kingdom would collapse under the weight of all the hostile wildlife and demonic **things** lying around; it's gotten to the point where I've begun to reconsider the possibility of buying me a new sword, because as fun as it is to be capable of wrestling a thirty-foot hellspawn to the ground using only one arm, there's only so much I'm willing to take before all the clean-up starts getting too much for me to handle. You wouldn't believe how difficult it is to get ichor off of fur, especially when I find a spot I missed and then I need to spend **hours** scrubbing it off; and there are a **lot** of blind spots on me, let me tell you that much. Take that with the fact that our very presence seems to attract those desperate for help and, well, you can imagine we've been somewhat busy the past week. Busy, though not necessarily in danger, no need to worry there; after the experience we gained in the Reaches and then handling the whole mountain affair, there are very few things that can stand up to us, and with every encounter we only grow stronger. I myself have developed **quite** the figure, as I told you in the last letter, which I can only assume the reason why the locals are so eager to call on me; they probably think I can smash the skull of whatever they want killed without even looking... and, to be fair, I probably could; getting to know my own strength has been something of a challenge as of late, especially since I may or may not have been slightly dishonest about the whole crown affair. See, I didn't want you to worry, so I **might** have undersold the effects of the curse; the recovery wasn't nearly as quick and painless as I made it out to be, and to be perfectly honest, I spent a good few days thrashing about in bed trying to beat it back. Even after it was cured, the effects it had on me were... noticeable, let's say that. You'll see when I get home, but I was never quite the same, and I think everyone around me knew that as well; I was lucky to get out of it the way I did, I won't say otherwise, but sometimes I wonder what my journey would've been like if the curse had just left me alone rather than saddled me with what I have now. Then again, all I have to do is flex or ~~bulk up~~ clench my abs (words are hard!) and I have a dozen people throwing money at me, begging for me to fix whatever problem their village has. You'd be surprised how much a punch can accomplish when you just throw it hard enough to break through solid steel plating, let alone a properly executed grapple; when I can, I'll write you a play-by-play of what happened the last time a water dragon tried to tussle with me and ended up tied in a knot and thrown into a well face-first. Granted, there was water down there, so he freed himself right afterwards, but I wrapped him up once, so doing it again wasn't that much of a problem. For the time being though, we continue our trek to the capital, no matter how often we're warned that the emperor won't accept us and that we're wasting our time; surely, if I knock hard enough, then they **have** to answer, as it'd be rather rude otherwise.*

Hopefully, I'll send you a message in the next few days.

Yours for eternity,

Yatel

Winter had never been warmer, at least for Ildi. Outside, temperatures had plummeted in one of the worst frosts their duchy had ever seen in the past few years, but for the gnoll, huddled up

in his hovel burning firewood and snuggling up against his firepit, he couldn't feel more comfortable than when he sat down, picked up one of Yatel's letters, and read it for the dozenth time or more. The only *better* feeling was when he got a fresh one, and with the wizard becoming increasingly more competent at sending those things, he didn't even have to worry about correspondence landing on his head anymore! Updates from his beloved came at a frequent pace, detailing their journey towards the capital city of whatever great kingdom they were in; it was quite like his better half to not even bother learning the name of the place, nor mention it anywhere in her letters, as it was indeed quite likely she never *did* find out what it was. The stories, however, would be unbelievable if Ildi didn't know for certain that Yatel would never lie to him that way: every letter that came in detailed something more far-fetched, more fantastical, and perhaps most interestingly, more... vast. If the story about the living hill in the Reaches had been surpassed by entire mountain-sized giant clans, now *that* had been thoroughly dwarfed by what the adventuring group was seeing the further they walked towards their destination. It felt as if every step they took made the monsters and assorted creatures ever larger, until it became common fare to see flying beasts that defied comprehension, bird-dragon-fish hybrids whose bodies turned day to night, blanketing miles upon miles of land as they soared high above the clouds; such sights were normal, along with other, even more unlikely ones, such as moving landscapes that *ate* the aforementioned mountain giants as their primary prey, living storms that spread across entire regions, and even mentions of godlike beings breaching through the sky, briefly exposing whatever realm lay beyond when an insignificantly tiny portion of their bodies shone through with enough force to blind everyone who dared look up for a radius of *thousands* of miles (he was quite certain Yatel was exaggerating there; there was simply no way she could possibly know it was that wide of an effect for certain). And yet, despite this, the people who lived there seemed just as eager as always to carry on living, as if they *didn't* live somewhere with creatures so incomprehensibly vast that they could end civilization without even realizing it; instead, they entrusted their care to adventurers, just like Yatel, then went back to their daily routines without a care in the world. It was a testament to their growing expertise that his beloved and their party took these contracts and somehow managed to turn them in for a reward every time; Ildi himself could only *imagine* what sort of terrifying powers they must wield, a thought that was only made more potent when he recalled that they'd barely been adventuring for a year together. Perhaps Yatel *would* be unrecognizable when she came back home; she left as a perfectly unassuming gnoll, tiny, frail, barely capable of lifting her own shoddy gear at times, and would come back looking like some sort of warrior woman, bulky and strong and rippling with tight musculature to sweep him off his feet and do with him whatever she wanted. It was an interesting thought, and one that certainly warmed him even more than usual, but just a thought nonetheless; he'd have to wait for Yatel to come back before anything more intimate happened. It was then, as if to deliberately break his concentration at the worst moment, that a bright flash interrupted his thought process; instinctively, he reached for the table to recover the letter, only to find that it felt... different. 'Twas only when he pulled it close to him that he noticed it wasn't made out of paper.

It was written in *gold foil*. Solid, somehow, and just as malleable as parchment for some unknown reason, but definitely gold, the lettering shining with bright silver light. Really, the only way Ildi knew it came from Yatel was, again, the chicken scratch; no one else wrote like that.

My most beloved Ildi,

*The meeting with the Emperor (well, former Emperor) went somewhat poorly. We convinced ourselves that all this talk of us not being allowed to see them was just tradition, which was fine and all, but certainly nothing that a band of by-now famous adventurers would have to worry about. You can imagine our surprise when, after reaching the outskirts of the imperial capital, we were accosted by a group of armed guards who informed us that we were under arrest, and were to follow them into custody. Now, I don't think I need to tell you, I'm not the sort of person to just go in quietly; not just that, but due to circumstances out of my control, being inside a cramped cell isn't exactly something I feel like doing just because I'm told to do so. So I raised my hand and respectfully disagreed, and the guards took some offense to that. Six hours and several neighborhoods later, we were barging our way through the gates of the imperial palace, only to be accosted by a group of wizards who, for whatever reason, tried to banish me? They must've thought I was a demon from another plane (who knows why, really), so we quickly took care of those as well. Needless to say, by this point, the Emperor was slightly peeved at us for having fought our way to him, not to mention all the injuries (no deaths, no point making it worse) and destruction of property, but he couldn't exactly tell us to go away without any guards to back his words up. Long story short, we had a vacant throne and I decided I might as well sit on it while no one else showed up, because if the royal line wasn't powerful enough to fend off a single adventuring group, then surely no one would mind if we took over in the interim while they found another person worthy of plopping their butt on the padded seat. It was unfortunately only then that I came to realize that the throne itself had quite a bit of magical power sealed away in it, power that quite quickly seeped into me the moment I decided to try out how comfortable the seat was; now, I don't want to alarm you, but I **will** say that I may no longer fit in our hovel, though frankly, by the time I get back home, I'll probably have enough to buy us a new home **and** not have to worry about working for the rest of our days. It'll be just like I always said it would, except you might need to put in a little more effort when we cuddle (not that you're bad at it, there's just more of me now). That said, our resident wizard promised to look into it and see if can't curtail the effects, so who knows, maybe I'll be the same-old Yatel that you saw leave the home a year back. Regardless, word of our unfortunate takeover was quick to spread, and from what we can tell, there's a civil war already brewing; I need you to understand that this was **not** our intention, and indeed we're working overtime to try and stop it, but it seems like the whole kingdom has decided to take the opportunity we created and use it to grab power for themselves, which frankly we felt was incredibly rude. The least they could've done was wait until we sorted the mess we made out, especially since the former Emperor **is** still alive and all; we just need a proper replacement! We resorted to the local storytellers, who were never short on tales about great heroes and heroines, each one more ludicrous and unbelievable than the last, yet every last*

one claimed to be nothing short of the complete truth. Great warriors and wizards whose feats were unparalleled, whose bodies were without equal or compare after years of garnering power and experience; conspicuously, no one seemed to know where any of these heroes were, and quite honestly I've heard enough from our own bard to recognize when people are just making stuff up for the sake of wowing a crowd. It seems we'll have to find a way out of this without an heir apparent ready to go, which is going to be a pain and a half seeing as there are at least three or so armies headed in our direction. Sure, I can take them without breaking a sweat, but it'd be a bit of a bother regardless. Hopefully the next letter will come bearing better news.

Yours for eternity,

Yatel

Silence. A week passed since the last missive, then two, then a whole month, and soon enough the winter frost gave way to the spring thaw, the seasons shifting and heralding the start of a brand new planting season in the horizon. Yet, that time around, Ildi was not at all concerned with Yatel's fate; not only was he utterly convinced that nothing would be able to take her down at that point, assuming of course she wasn't blatantly fabricating her entire adventure, but *stories* had begun to trickle down his way over the course of the last weeks of winter. Be they through travelling merchants or by someone's uncle's cousin's father's friend who worked as a tavern keeper and saw a lord's messenger who absolutely heard his master whispering to their courtesan, the gnoll farmhand heard her name: Yatel. It came along with others, Dorden the wizard included, and were all supposedly accounts of events that even the letters had failed to mention; no one really knew where these originated from, as anyone who was asked always pointed to someone else from whom they heard the story, as if the narrative itself had no true beginning, and merely existed as its own entity somewhere in the aether. It was certainly appropriate for the sort of absurd happenings that Ildi was made privy to, and as the days turned to weeks, the amount of stories floating about increased in both quantity *and* quality; no longer were they generalized retellings of things which may have happened, but included details and specific sequences of events, the odd nugget of information that *had* to be true, for it was so insignificant that no one would bother to make it up. Some of those were known to Ildi, others absolutely weren't, and a few were... odd. He felt as if he'd heard them, yet couldn't quite put his finger on where, ending up assuming they were somewhere in the large pile of letters he kept safely in his home. Yet no further missive arrived, presumably because Yatel was too busy dealing with a succession war that she and her colleagues had inadvertently started; Ildi intended to have words when she came back home, even if he knew he'd probably fall head over heels with the new gnolless and be unable to say or do anything other than worship the very ground she walked on. This would turn out to be significantly more literal than Ildi could've ever expected, because the last letter he would ever receive would only come *months* later; it was nearly summer again, and with most of the planting done, the amount of work to be done was low enough that the gnoll could afford to stay home and practice his carpentry more often than usual, occasionally glancing up at where the letters should arrive by sheer force of habit. None

came, but he wasn't left empty-handed, as rather than a piece of paper coated in gold, what he received were *tremors*. Barely noticeable at first, plus their lord *had* gotten involved with a spat with another noble a couple of duchies over, so it wouldn't be the first time a border skirmish ended with two wizards blowing one another up and failing. Yet, as time went on, the tremors didn't die down; in fact, they only grew more powerful, leaving Ildi significantly worried about whether or not he'd need to call for help to keep the crops from being burned to ash or frozen over by rampant spellcraft. He was about to get up when a bright flash of light erupted from the spot where the letters were meant to arrive, one far brighter than any previous one, enough to leave several blind spots in his vision for several seconds afterwards. Once his sight recovered, what he was left with was... a block of gold. A tablet, really, inscribed with brightly-glowing runic sigils that he'd never seen before, yet for whatever reason his mind recognized instantly; he had no idea what any of them meant, but once his hands touched the oddly-warm surface of the *incredibly* heavy object, it all made perfect sense. And as the tremors grew louder still, he began reading:

Ildi,

*As you read this, I am returning home. No doubt you've heard me already, so allow me to reassure you that yes, I **am** taking care not to step on anything or anyone, **and** I'm going the extra mile to ensure that all those whose properties I have to intrude upon are being adequately compensated (this isn't the only tablet I own now, just so you know). I should also tell you that I may have been embellishing my journeys in the past several letters, though not in the way one normally would; see, I didn't want you to worry, and I knew that if I just told you the truth then you'd spend your days doing nothing **but** worrying, so after consulting with my cohorts and having a long with our wizard, I decided to selectively forget to mention a few details. Now, however, I believe it's past time that I come clean, especially since the civil war is over and I found someone to take my place as empress, though not before the throne, fighting armies on the regular and absorbing the power of eldritch ancient dragons did a number on me. You see, the stories I've been mentioning, the ones that I "heard" when reaching new places, and all the tales of brave heroines and gigantic gnolls and whatever else? Well, they were certainly told **by** bards, if you want to be technical about it, or, to be more precise, **a** bard: our own. He's prone to exaggerating things a bit, but at this point, I'm not sure he even could, considering everything I've accomplished; turns out, the crown's curse, the one all the way back in the Reaches, was **meant** to sap the power of whoever put it on whenever they tried to flex their authority or attack someone in an way, in what Dorden assumes was meant as a way to deter tyrants by way of slipping their own demise onto their heads. Years of being buried, however, seemed to have turned the effect around, and seeing as we've done nothing but run around defeating increasingly more powerful creatures for money, you can imagine how things have gotten. Though, frankly, you don't really need to imagine anymore, not with me being so close; really, by the time you've finished reading this, I should be within eyesight, so why don't you put the tablet down (assuming you picked it up, that is; it's quite heavy) and just head outside? I've missed*

you, Ildi, and I'm sure you've missed your precious little Yatel. So why don't we have a hug? It's been a while.

*Yours for eternity and forevermore, a promise made,
Yatel*

The tremors only got worse as he went through the tablet. Ildi was sweating, though not in fear; it was hard to parse *why*, but everything, from the sounds to the shockwaves to the runic lettering had left him in a state of near-blind arousal from which he couldn't see himself recovering from. The gnoll genuinely had no clue why that was, but he *did* know that what he had to do was open the door, head outside, and look up... so he did.

There she was.

Yatel.

Her face, at least, was the same as always, even if nothing else was. She looked to be painted onto the background, her body too vast to be real, the perspective too odd for it to truly represent the reality of it; to say that she'd become a giantess would be to undersell what the gnolless' true size was, if "underselling" itself was not a euphemism for how utterly inadequate using that word was to begin with. It was excess, pure and simple; no wonder that whenever she took a step, her colossal musculature bulging, clenching and growing further from the strain, the very planet itself shook underneath her, incapable of withstanding the power packed into each motion. Her beautiful smile was impossible to look at for more than a second or so, for her head was surrounded by a bright glowing halo; not angelic by any means, but one exuding raw *power*, for she had become something more than a mere adventuress, a mere heroine. Perhaps it was underscored slightly by how it began with a curse, but seeing as Yatel was now so large that entire chunks of her body were covered by cloud formations, that hardly seemed to matter.

She was coming home, to *him*, to tiny little insignificant him, because she *loved* him just as much as she loved her. How they were supposed to live together was anyone's guess, but surely the newest goddess of that world had a few ideas.

She smiled. Ildi smiled back.

It *had* been too long.