

honey, meet vinegar

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Rhen and Lars strike a balance.

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When Rhen was growing up and getting into schoolyard scrapes, her Ma used to say that you could catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. Rhen wasn't sure she believed that, so one Tuesday she set out a bowl of honey and counted the flies that buzzed by and settled on it and on Wednesday she tried the same with vinegar. Then Ma said to stop encouraging flies to come into the house.

Lars Tenobor was as annoying and persistent as any insect Rhen had ever met, and unfortunately too big to squash with her hand or a stick like the spiders in the attic. She'd *thought* escaping slavery would mean she would escape him, but of course her way out was a ticket to the school he was so proud to attend. Rhen grit her teeth and ignored the rumors he passed around school about her, the way the other judging students' eyes followed her with everything from fear to dirty looks after he'd wormed his way into their heads. She would graduate, and she manage to find her way home, and she would never have to see him ever again in her life.

Then he invited himself on her quest to save the world.

Suddenly, she went from seeing him occasionally in the halls to every waking moment of her day. And if she had been foolish enough to think that the cooperation could be bearable, he would have destroyed her hope in the first week. He took any opportunity to correct her form as she performed spells, to tell her she was wrong about any fact she thought might prove useful to their journey, to question her right to make decisions for their party of two. Rhen was forced to split her attention and energy between two

enemies: the monsters she fought, and her new traveling companion. The one saving grace was that with the two of them alone, there was no one for him to badmouth her to.

It wore her thin. As they traveled, she could barely sleep; they took turns keeping watch, and her subconscious couldn't trust the boy who'd laughed at the concept of accidentally killing her to keep her safe. Every rustling palm frond or crowing feral chicken in the distance half-jolted her awake. During her shift, she considered running ahead, running away and finishing the quest by herself.

When instead she stuck around, for her troubles she was rewarded a cozy inn room in the mountains, and found herself forced to share with Lars.

They'd fought about that, too.

They'd stocked up on supplies first thing upon entering Thornkeep, after some nasty blows to Rhen's side and Lars's arms meant they used up much of the salves and bandages they'd already packed. It left them little else after the price of a room without scraping into Lars's savings, something he insisted against budging on. "I've already explained this. We only have the money for one room." Lars practically rolled his eyes as he said it, as if he thought her confusion was in basic arithmetic, and not the priorities that guided his calculations.

"You *have* more money. I saw what Rona gave you when you packed for school."

"For emergencies only."

If it had been anyone else, Rhen would have understood, if not agreed. But it was Lars, so she pushed. "You'll bow to your mother's every whim, even when she'll never know?"

He bristled. If he had a retort, it died in his throat. "Why do you even care so much, anyways? We've been setting up camp together for the last week. We shared a cabin on the ferry, and you didn't complain about that." Rhen found some satisfaction in the way he changed his angle, until he sneered, "do you think you deserve to be pampered just because some old woman thinks you're special?"

"Oh, that's *rich*, coming from you." Rhen sighed. "No," she said, shuffling her feet. "The rooms here only have one full-size bed."

Lars lifted a hand, shrugging. "Easy, then. You'll sleep on the floor."

It was strange. He didn't mean it to be cruel - Rhen could tell from the tone of his voice. But the simple dismissal soured something deep inside her stomach, twisting in her gut. She grew up sleeping on all kinds of floors - Peter's at sleepovers, the forest's on her most daring of adventures, Armaiti's temple on one special family pilgrimage - and she was almost ashamed of how much she *hated* the idea now. For the rough and tumble girl she grew up to be, she felt spoiled in her refusal, like some sort of pampered princess. But that rough and tumble Rhen hadn't spent three months sleeping on an unwashed blanket in the floor of the Tenobors' closet, and the idea that Lars would so casually send her back to that made something seize in her chest, far more personal and painful than the simple chill of the snow that rose through the ground.

When Rhen first encountered mosquitos on the Eastern Isle, she found some catharsis in smacking them against her arms and watching her own blood splatter back at her. She wished she could give Lars the same response. She wanted to scream at him, to step forward and shove at him with all the force she could, but they were in the Thornkeep Inn's common area, and she didn't want to cause a scene.

As she struggled for a response, the ground beneath them shook, and she and Lars both stumbled to the floor. It took her hands making hard contact with the carpet to realize it was an earthquake.

The dwarves sitting at a nearby table moved to crouch under it. It seemed large enough to fit another, so as the ground rumbled violently, she crawled on her hands and knees to join them. Lars was either too proud or bewildered to follow. She didn't care which. Let something fall from a shelf and knock him on his skull, she thought.

"The Mountain King?" she asked.

"Aye," said one of the dwarves, "fighting with his wife. You get used to it when you're in town long enough."

It did something strange to Rhen. She thought about this town, ravaged by blizzards and earthquakes because two deities couldn't set aside their differences for the good of their shared people. She wondered if the world, ostensibly in her hands, relied on her and Lars in the same way. Certainly, she owed him nothing. But he was the hand she'd been dealt, the partner she'd been given to rely on as she tried her best to save Aia. The task would certainly be easier accomplished if they could cooperate.

When the ground stopped shaking, she knew what she had to do. She crawled out from under the table and made her way towards Lars, who'd ultimately taken shelter under the innkeeper's desk. Rhen nodded at the dwarven woman, who smiled at her.

"I take it you'll want some shelter for the night, southerners?"

"Yes, ma'am. One room, please, and an extra blanket."

Lars nodded his assent.

The innkeeper stood and made her way to a supply closet just out of the corner of Rhen's vision. She returned with a thick, woolen blanket, setting it on her desk. "Thirty gold pieces for the room, one for the blanket."

Lars went to open his mouth and argue, but Rhen was counting out coins before he could. The innkeeper stuffed them into a right-side pocket on her apron, and fished out a key from her left. It was simple metal, with a wooden tag indicating the room number. "You have Room B - second door through that hall."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"My pleasure, travelers."

Rhen took the blanket off the desk and deposited it in Lars's arms, then made her way down the hall. He followed in silence until she unlocked their door. "So you *will* be sleeping on the floor," he reasoned, nodding his head towards the blanket.

"No," Rhen said simply. "You're going to wrap yourself in that, *I'm* going to wrap myself in the blanket on the bed, and we'll lay in opposite directions and pretend we're in separate rooms. If you don't want to touch your savings; fine. But you are not shoving me to the floor again while you maintain all the comforts of home."

Lars scowled. "Again? This is the first inn--"

Rhen watched as it dawned on him. He stumbled with his words, then elected to stop attempting to form them altogether. The embarrassment was almost as satisfying as slapping him would have been. Almost.

It was too cold for either of them to bother stripping off the outer layers of their student uniforms - not that either of them would have wanted to, anyway - so as soon as they'd removed their leather armor, Lars quietly got to work laying down and cocooning himself in the new blanket. Rhen

followed close behind on the opposite side. The blanket was thick and warm. If she rubbed the material between her fingers, she thought she felt coarse, separated fur, but the fabric itself was soft and plush to the touch. If nothing else, it got the job done, and buffered her from her roommate as effectively as the winter chill. Lars was a lump beside her, as easily a rock as a teenage boy.

She had to admit, it was the most practical option. Lars's savings might come in handy for something else, and he didn't try to argue with her again after she proposed it. And it was good to set precedents like this early in their journey.

It surprised her when she heard his voice in the darkness. "Rhen?"

"Yes, Lars?"

For a long moment, he didn't respond, and she wondered if he had drifted off to sleep or decided better of what he was going to say. Instead, he said, "you are not my mother's slave anymore. I had no intention of treating you as such."

"Is that so?" she asked wryly.

"You are *also* not my friend," he clarified.

"So there's the catch."

She could practically hear the roll of his eyes. "Good night, Rhen."

"Good night, Lars."

She slept through the whole night.

If the system worked, they didn't get the chance to try it. They slept on the road, or in the Hungry Boar Tavern, which may have been the road for all the comfort that it offered, until Elini joined them and replaced Lars's role of roommate, and they were all better off for it. The introduction of a third member of their party also provided Rhen with a buffer against Lars's worst behavior. Maybe he realized he didn't treat her with the same cooperative civility he did Elini. Maybe he simply didn't want a witness to his immature cruelty. Whatever it was, he mellowed from mocking to standoffish, from insults to eyerolls.

It was better, but Rhen couldn't pretend it was *good*. Which seemed like a

lot, if not an impossible feat, to expect of Lars, but as the days dragged on Rhen was forced to confront the fact that whatever dynamic she and Lars shared, she would have to deal with it for a *very* long time, under *very* high stress situations.

It made her remember her Ma's advice. Maybe he was making his way to the right direction, but they had built up too much animosity between them for him to close the gap by himself. Maybe he just needed proof that she would accept any apology or help he tried to offer to motivate him to try. Rhen resented the idea of being the bigger person, a concept that had always seemed unfair at best and naive at worst to her, but she couldn't help but wonder if she could make things a little easier on herself by extending the olive branch. He'd listened to her in Thornkeep, after all.

And so she said something she thought she never would.

"Good idea, Lars."

She was met with a genuine smile before he made his way to the altar, placing down the pomegranate that would ferry across to the inner caverns of Mount Orion.

Before long, she found herself saying it more and more often. It tasted less bitter in her mouth each time, came more naturally. And what surprised her was that Lars seemed to justify it more each time. His suggestions shifted from the obvious, things she thought of too but he simply beat her to, to more thoughtful, careful considerations she hadn't imagined him capable of. *Do you remember what that woman in the last town over said? Maybe this would help her.*

The idea that Lars could do *good* things, could show a sliver of decency, caught Rhen off guard.

In the weeks that followed, they struck a delicate balance. The arguments became less personal, carried the same weight as sparring. After all the time they traveled together, as the group grew in size, some part of Rhen couldn't help but feel like this was *their* quest to see through to the end. As if any other member of the party might one day decide they had better things to do, but Lars would still be there. In spite of themselves, Rhen and Lars gravitated towards each other; when the party split up, they were an understood duo.

The day the party returned to Veldt with a lamp in tow, they searched the shelves of the apothecary for a suitable alternative home for the genie. While Rhen was still content to sift through the gorgeous display of colorful blown glass bottles, Lars went to tug her out the door.

"They don't have any lamps," he said.

"Does it have to be a lamp?"

"Of *course* it has to be a lamp," Lars said, and then paused. "...Wait, you really didn't know that. Did you *actually* doubt the existence of genies?"

Rhen felt as though the ethics of the universe should prevent Lars from being right when she was wrong, and tried to fight off the embarrassment that burned in her cheeks. "Genies aren't a *thing* in Clearwater, Lars."

"They're not exactly prevalent in Ghalarah either, I just know about them. I assumed you did, too." He snickered. "It's fine; just funny. I thought you were too smart to agree with Galahad."

It occurred to Rhen that that was the closest Lars had ever come to complimenting her, and she was surprised how much the realization stung. "Oh, I'm too smart? When exactly have you ever acted like I'm smart *enough* for anything?" She realized too late that she'd failed to couch it in the teasing tone that had become their main form of communication with each other. The frustration bled through just a little too genuinely. She started walking.

Lars kept her pace, halfway just to stare at her, bewildered. "What is *that* about? What is *up* with you?"

"I don't know," she said, knowing full well, "maybe just the fact that I've been *trying* to be nice to you, far nicer than you have *ever* deserved from me, and the way you finally choose to repay me is to scoff in my face and tell me I should know better?"

"Whoa, wait, Rhen. What are you even talking about?"

Rhen stopped dead in her tracks and sighed. She met Lars with a firm gaze. "Somewhere along the quest, I realized you and I, like it or not, were going to be a team for a long time. And I thought we should act like it. So I started... pointing out when you did things right. Complimenting you here and there. Telling you when I liked your ideas." A little sheepish at the idea of admitting to seeking his validation, no matter the circumstances, she let her gaze drift to the ground. "I figured that maybe it would help smooth

things over with you, and... Believe me, I have been paying attention to how you treat me. And the nicest thing you've ever said to me is an apology."

"And I meant every word of it."

"I believe that! But it was cleaning up *your* own mess." She sighed. "I guess I just hoped you'd be more proactive by now."

"So what, you want me to tell you you're doing a good job?" he asked, exasperated. His voice softened a little as he clarified, "I figured that much was obvious."

She looked up at him, raising an eyebrow. "Really."

If she doubted his sincerity, the flustered way he struggled to meet her eyes seemed to confirm it. "I mean it. By the time I'd gotten over myself enough to try to say anything nice, like, genuinely nice, you already had Dameon complimenting you every chance he gets, and Galahad... *I think* whatever he's doing is supposed to be nice, but I really couldn't tell you. I figured the last thing you needed was someone else coddling you. And, okay, I'm not the most experienced in 'being nice', and I took the opportunity to take any excuse I could get not to be. Sue me. I couldn't have you thinking I was going soft on you."

"Because *that* would be unforgivable." Rhen smirked.

Lars shook his head. "No. But would you really want it?"

She was surprised by how much she had to think about it. Surely she should want him to be as kind as possible to her, to make up for what he'd done. But there was a certain earnestness in the way he'd just barely rounded out his edges, the sharp-toothed smiles he flashed her when he countered her ideas with a suggestion of his own. They didn't fight to bring each other down anymore; they fought to make each other better. She never wanted to see Lars, sneering and dismissive Ghalarah noble, again. But she'd gotten quite used to Lars, teasing and competitive Sorcerer.

"No," she decided. "I wouldn't."

In the end, it was just Rhen and Lars.

Not against Ahriman - no, even when it seemed their party would splinter down to seven, their group of eight held fast. That was good, as every one of them was needed in the end.

But when it was all over, and the crushing weight of the safety of the world was lifted from Rhen's shoulders and replaced with the crushing weight of having one day to decide her future, it was her and Lars on the steps of the Sun Temple, alone as she tried to block out the echoing voices behind them gossiping about her fate. She knew he wasn't, but somehow Lars felt like the only person who didn't expect anything specific of her.

"What are you going to do?" she asked, even though she knew the answer.

"Go back to Veldarah." Rhen nearly envied his certainty. "I'll teach for a while, but I'll be High Sorcerer before you know it."

"And what will you do with that power? Try to abolish slavery?"

"Hey, that sounds like a good idea," he said. "Wonder who could have come up with it."

She rolled her eyes. "Anyone with common sense, maybe."

Lars chuckled. "Yeah, okay, duly noted." He let her revel in being right for a minute, before reaching forward with the inevitable. "What about you? That's the question everyone *actually* cares about."

"I wish they'd all care just a little less, honestly. I just had one of the most stressful days of my life and now I have to decide my whole future."

He hummed. "The Oracle has the gift of prophecy, right? And she's still leaving it up to you. Nothing you pick can be the wrong option, just... objectively. If you were about to screw everything up, she'd stop you. So just do what you want."

It should have felt cliché and cheap, but Rhen believed him. That was the benefit of befriending someone as acerbic as Lars; he wasn't naively supportive, didn't sugarcoat.

So what *did* she want?

She wanted to keep growing. She'd explored the world under high stress stakes, and wanted to see more of it when it wasn't under threat of destruction - something she was afraid she wouldn't get the chance to do, back home in Clearwater or tucked away in Devin's cabin in the Wildwoods. But she also wanted to be *happy* - fulfilled for her own sake, not just checking off responsibilities given to her for the rest of her life. That was out of the question.

Rhen stood up.

"So you've figured it out?"

"I don't want this quest to be the end of what I do for the world. But I also don't feel equipped to be queen of anything."

He looked away to avoid smiling at her, standing up. "Don't tell me you're going to settle for High Sword Singer."

It would mean working beside Lars for the rest of her professional life. But Rhen had long since resolved that the issue with catching flies was that then you were stuck with them.

That didn't seem so bad, anymore.

"Lars Tenobor, you'll be putting up with me for a long time."