



C.A. MOSS

**THE DARK LORD'S ARMY
WANTS YOU!**

HOW I BECAME A THERAPIST IN ANOTHER WORLD
OMNIBUS 3

The Dark Lord's Army Wants You!

How I Became a Therapist in Another World
Omnibus 3

C.A. Moss

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Content Notes

Book 7: *The Salty Mageknight and the Sweet Dark Lord*

- Homophobia in Earth-based flashbacks — no slurs used on-page, but there are explicit references to homophobic bullying, both verbal and physical.
- Tons of swearing. More than the rest of the series put together. No sexualized / gendered swear words, just everything else up to and including “fuck.”
- References to / effects of depression, and a little dissociation. Moderate angst when the grumpy half of the grumpy/sunshine has the mic, at least for a while.
- References to armed combat (swords/clubs) and mild injuries (bruises and pulled muscles) resulting from it.
- There are no on-page sex acts, but there are references to and discussions about them. There is on-page kissing (some of which is fairly intense), cuddling and handholding. One of the leads visits a sex shop and talks about buying/reading pornographic books.
- Sexual content: All m/m. More than the rest of the series but still at a low-to-medium spice/steam level, about a 2 on the romance.io scale (Closed Door / Fade to Black).
- Still a reincarnation isekai, with passing mentions of the leads’ deaths. Very little detail or focus this time.

What happened to book 8?

It's part of the previous omnibus, *Herbs and Harmonies*, so that this collection could have a thematic throughline.

Book 9: *Evil Overlord for Hire (Authenticity Not Guaranteed)*

- Several scenes of violence, dueling with swords / other weapons and magic. One incident results in a 2nd-degree burn that persists for a scene before it is healed.
- Depictions of smoking and alcohol consumption.
- Impersonation of one character by another, with the impersonated person's consent, but not bystanders'. Mistaken identity and threat of discovery.
- References to same-sex attraction (f/f and m/m). No on-page sexual acts. Waltzes, steamy looks, swordfight-flirting, and a kiss.
- Some cursing, mostly by Solan.

Book 10: *On the Care and Feeding of an Evil Army*

- Mild references to homophobia/transphobia: a character from Earth expresses mild confusion/surprise when encountering a genderfluid character, and later asks whether same-sex couples and nonbinary people are common in this world. (Not a spoiler: They are.)
- References to wrongful imprisonment and coerced magic use in a character's backstory.
- Alcohol consumption.
- Smoking.
- Occasional swearing.
- Mild m/m romance side plot, on-page hand-holding and some kissing.

Please read at your own discretion.

The Salty Mageknight and the Sweet Dark Lord

How I Became a Therapist in Another
World Book 7



Original cover art for The Salty Mageknight and the Sweet Dark Lord, by Yirienkaki [<http://yirien.carrd.co>]

Drekar: On Top of the World

As the sun rose, I sat on the roof of the Bloodstone Tower and surveyed what wasn't my domain, technically. Last time I'd talked to the nearest noble with an actual claim on the area, she'd said it was a chunk of land nobody cared about. As long as I didn't rock my army into somebody's Christmas party again, nobody minded if we stayed here.

That was my bad, the Christmas party thing. I was new to the overlord game. Even now. I tried, and so far my army stuck by me, but I'd stepped in it more than once in my attempts. I had to watch myself or I'd end up getting overthrown or something.

It was too early in the morning to feel this glum. I lay on the conical roof and stared into the sky where it faded from pink to blue. It was gorgeous up here. I wanted to share it with someone. Framing a chunk of sky with my hands, I imagined someone lying on his back next to me, close enough to touch if I dared. I felt a familiar tickle in my midsection that was not a fear of heights. I was at least fifty stories from the ground with no guardrail, but if I fell, I could teleport to safety.

"Hey man, you up here?" My brother Jeff's voice echoed up the stairwell I'd asked him to install the other day. "Install" as in "create with his effectively boundless magic ability." Jeff was kind of infinitely powerful now. He had made this world real somehow, bringing it to life out of his notebooks, and after we each died, we ended up here. I don't actually know how that all worked. It made me dizzy to think about.

"I'm here," I said, sitting up. "Careful."

"Oh wow," my brother breathed as he reached the last step, his head craned back to take in the sky. Then he grabbed onto the railing alongside the steps. "You want me to put up a railing around the edge later, though?"

I thought about my guilty daydream of lying up here with someone who couldn't teleport. "Yeah, sure. Thanks."

My brother sat on the edge of the stairs, in easy reach of the rail. “You can see so far from up here. We oughta bring a telescope or something later and see what we can see.”

I looked over at him, frowning. Since coming to this world, he’d gained the ability to create any object he could imagine. If he wanted a telescope, he could have one. “Not now?”

“Oh, yeah, well, there’s a guy at the door for you.”

My brother had also gotten off kilter since we last saw one another, fifteen years ago by my reckoning of time, and many more by his reckoning. Fifty years wandering the land and a hundred or so in isolation on your island stronghold would apparently make you kind of peculiar. With worry gnawing at my stomach, I said okay and got up to follow him inside. It was nice to see him again. I’d focus on that.

“Like one of my guys, or...” I left my sentence extremely unfinished.

“One of your guys,” Jeff chirped. “She said she has the morning update?”

“Already? Crap.” I rubbed my face as I hurried down the semicircular hallway toward the front door. I liked to go to the daily briefing in my full regalia, minus the helmet, anyway, though I would tuck it under my arm for the effect. Last night Jeff and I had stayed up late talking, and I’d woken just in time to catch the end of the sunrise instead of doing my usual predawn practice routine. So I would have to meet my envoy in the shorts and undershirt I’d slept in. The whole camp would hear about it, I was sure. I was really screwing up this dark overlord thing.

At the last second, I decided I had to at least put on some pants, and dove into my room to grab something. I found some drawstring pants and hopped into them as I caught up with Jeff in the hallway. I ran my hands through my hair and probably left it looking even crazier. I hoped the envoy was Zilyana today. She might not even tell anybody. I trusted all my guys, but Zilyana was particularly cool.

Jeff took a turn toward the kitchen, leaving me to catch my breath and collect my thoughts on the way across the central room. The envoy knelt in obeisance on the mats that lined the practice area, her helmet sitting on the ground next to her, one gauntleted fist on the mats. Curly black hair, pointed elven ears. Yep, Zilyana. Whew.

I was glad she’d taken off her helmet, which was allowed in the penthouse here. It made her a lot easier to identify. All of the members of my army wore identical armor, and so with the helmets on, it was sometimes hard to tell them apart. Lately the guys had been jazzing up their armor with sashes and capes and stuff, which helped to distinguish

them in the field. I guess one of the patrols found a bunch of crates of silk abandoned in a ditch, and the quartermaster and his tailors were making the most of them.

And yeah, Zilyana was one of my guys. The fact that I called them all “guys” was kind of unfair, since almost half of them were women, and some of the rest weren’t guys either. I don’t know. They’re all my guys. Even the ones who aren’t men. I didn’t have a better word for it yet.

I stood at attention. “As you were, soldier.”

Zilyana stood. “Good morning, Dark Lord.”

“Good morning, Zilyana. What news do you bring?”

This was how we began every day, since there were no newsfeeds in this world. There were newspapers, but the nearest one only reported on the happenings in Crystalbrook, the nearest town. And I wanted to know as much as I could about everything. So every night my scouts put together a digest of the news in the area, and they reported shortly after dawn.

“Count Fournier and Duke de Luca have reached an accord over the contested land at their mutual border. They plan to seal the deal with a formal occasion.”

“Okay.” I had yet to attend any of these formal occasions the nobles threw at the drop of a hat, except the one I’d crashed back at Midwinter. At least I was mending fences with its hostess. She was a Visitor like me, someone who used to live on Earth, and she was friends with Sir Solan. She’d invited us to her castle for tea after he and I had our showdown, ostensibly to bury the hatchet. We soon told her that he and I had already buried it, and that we’d spent the next couple of weeks hanging out, talking about everything we had in common. Practicing swordfighting and magic and just...

Anyway. The countess seemed pretty cool. I hoped she’d invite me to something fancy someday. I’d do it right this time. Dress up. Not bring my entire army. Just a couple of guards. Keep the magic lightning to myself. Dance with a nice guy in a dashing outfit. I’d have to learn how to dance.

Duke de Luca and Count Fournier, on the other hand, I hadn’t met. I wouldn’t get an invite to that occasion. But it was good to know they would stop having skirmishes along their border.

“The dragon of the Southern Forest has been spotted,” Zilyana went on, “along with a much smaller dragon that some believe is a new spirit of the Western Plains. There haven’t

been any reports of the dragon stealing or returning treasure in some time. Not since our scouts encountered its human envoy, in fact.”

The whole dragon raid thing was before my time. I’d been — well, let’s not think about that right now. A lot of my guys had been private guards to nobles during the dragon attacks, and thus personally involved. As such, I’d asked for my news updates to include it. Besides, it seemed like a good idea to keep tabs on the most powerful creature within five hundred miles. Um, with the exception of my brother, now that he was in town.

“Who was the envoy again? Anyone we know?” I scratched the back of one leg with a bare foot.

“No, my Lord. A hedge witch from the forest.”

“Okay.” I was disappointed for reasons that were all too obvious to myself. There was another reason I’d asked for the dragon to be added to my alerts, and it was because of the dragon’s former nemesis.

Of course, the update crashed directly into that topic next.

Zilyana’s face remained coolly professional, though there might have been a curl of amusement in her voice. “Sir Solan the Mageknight was reported to have wiped out a nest of rock serpents at the edge of the mountains, directly east of Crystalbrook.” And therefore, not too far southeast of here. He could have stopped by. I swallowed and controlled my expression.

“Oh,” I said, instead of all of the questions crowding into my chest. “Rock serpents are a nuisance on the route through the mountains, aren’t they?”

My soldier inclined her head in agreement. “Yes, my Lord. They’re quite dangerous in numbers, especially to unarmed travelers. They’re perhaps the main reason traders take the longer southern route.”

“Right, right.” Would this make things any safer? It had to, at least a little bit. Sir Solan might also spend more time hunting rock serpents further into the mountains. Or he might not; he might want to stick around town, since he’d just gotten back from his journey to Jeff’s island.

I wanted to think I could divine his motivations. I wanted to think we knew each other pretty well, after hanging out for a couple of weeks, and the times we’d hung out after that, and the message he’d sent during the trip. He’d said nothing since he got back. Not even a note delivered by raven.

Shaking off my worry, I asked Zilyana to please continue. She went on with an update about some traveling merchants in the area, and what they had to offer; the progress of the farms in the region, which were busy growing crops and pasturing animals and whatnot; and finally an update on the army itself.

With satisfaction, I approved the final sketches for a permanent structure to be built behind the tower, the first such building in the camp that had formed to house my army. Even without my careful budgeting, we never wanted for money. It always showed up: tribute from nobles that we hadn't even asked for, thank-you gifts from merchants my guys had protected from bandits, even gifts of produce from local farmers. My army never wanted for pay. Neither had the architects and stonemasons who'd built the tower; I didn't have the ability to create something out of nothing, like my brother did. And yet we never ran out.

So of course I approved the building, which would house a hospital for any sick or injured members. I hoped it was the first of many. It would be nice to have a town, and not just a camp, once it got cold.

That concluded today's business, so I thanked Zilyana for her time. She saluted with one fist on her breastplate and left. Once I'd closed the door behind her, I jogged up the half-flight of steps to the practice floor and turned to the rack of weapons near the wall. Despite the late start, I wanted to burn off some of this nervous energy. It wasn't as fun to practice alone, but Jeff wasn't a fighter. I'd make do.

Solan: Hero Shit

“**A**nd don’t show your face this side of the plains again,” I snarled at the bandit’s back. As he ran off, I rubbed my temples. What kind of lame-ass line was that? Well, at least it had worked, and I hadn’t even had to hit anyone too hard. A few serious bruises. Mostly waving my flaming sword around and making threats. I didn’t like fighting humans, not to the death. I’m not going to say I’m some kind of hero or whatever, but it was still gross.

Once the bandit had fled, I turned my horse Nightstorm around and rode toward town. This bandit squad had turned out to be headquartered further away than I’d expected, and I’d killed most of the day finding their hideout.

Honestly, I should have spent the day chasing rock serpents. Those were an instant-gratification enemy, the best kind. But all those postings to wipe the things out had finally helped cut their numbers, because they were getting harder to find. In order to find some, I would have lost a day riding deeper into the mountains and then back out. I didn’t want to camp out overnight. I’d gotten my fill of camping, the last few months. At least for now, I wanted adventures that would let me sleep in my own bed at night.

My cheeks grew warm for reasons unrelated to the summer sunshine. Not that sleeping in my own bed had been very restful lately. I’d had a lot of fractured, agitated dreams. About the trip. About wandering through Jeff’s funhouse of a castle, searching for something. Sometimes searching for Drekar.

The most recent one hadn’t been so bad. I even remembered most of it. In the dream I’d been practicing swordfighting with Drekar, during my first visit. Not at the beginning, when we’d pretended we were out for blood, when conquering him had felt like it would prove something. Later, after I’d stayed a couple of days, when we were enjoying it as a sport and a challenge. When I knew that behind the horned helmet and black-steel sword

and everything, he was just a dork like me. Some guy who loved stories and died and came to this world with all the power he'd lacked.

Anyway, in the dream we were sparring in his practice room at the top of the Bloodstone Tower, except sometimes it was a field outside Crystalbrook. Whatever. We were well matched in skill, as we had been in reality. Our blades locked, hilt to hilt. And then he reached out and touched my cheek. We both wore gauntlets, except when he touched me, it didn't feel like leather or steel. It was warm. A real human touch. And I woke up drenched in sweat, my heart racing, a weird pressure in my throat.

I knew Drekar was gay. He'd told me after a day or two, when I was visiting. Real casual, not making a big deal of it. We'd been talking about our old lives, and he said something about a boyfriend he'd had, and when I stopped short in surprise, he told me. And the story moved on. That night, though, I'd lain awake for a while in the guest room where he was letting me stay, thinking about what an asshole I'd been back on Earth. And probably now, too. He was a decent guy. It wasn't fair that people like me would give him shit about it.

For a second I justified it to myself, like a dickhead — you can't *not* make fun of people, or someone else will turn and make fun of you instead. Then I thought about someone shoving Drekar into a wall the way they used to do to me in high school, and the rage rose in my throat till I was afraid I might throw up. Fuck all of that. He didn't deserve it, and I was an asshole for ever having said those things to other people. I felt sick, but what else was I supposed to do? I wouldn't talk shit like that again. That was all I could do.

He'd never made a move on me, though. Not the slightest hint, not for a second. We were friends. He was the first friend I'd made here, which was fucking my head up enough already. I'd been in this world for nine years, and now all of a sudden there was someone I worried about and wanted to see again. There was someone whose opinion I cared about. There was someone I cared about.

I turned my horse toward home. It was a long ride, and I had little to look forward to. First I'd take Nightstorm to the stable and give him a good brushing and some apples. He'd done great work on this trip. Then I'd walk over to the Two Claws Inn and get some dinner. Come home, polish my armor, and read a while if I couldn't sleep. Same as always.

Maybe I ought to take Lavender's advice after all. On the trip, as we'd paused on a high, windy parapet in the castle belonging to the guy who'd made this world, the other Visitor from Crystalbrook had told me I sounded depressed. She was a therapist, like on

Earth, “what does this ink butterfly remind you of” and what-all. She said I ought to talk to somebody about my feelings or whatever. Not her, which kind of pissed me off, though she said she knew me too well now to be an impartial observer. We’d been through that whole long quest together and everything. But she said if I could find another person who did the sort of thing she did, it would be good for me to talk to them.

I hated to admit she was right, with the sleep problems and everything. But I’d never heard of another therapist in this world, are you kidding? This is a fantasy world. Dragons and knights and shit. You didn’t have, like, therapists and accountants.

Still, though. It would be nice to talk to somebody about all the stuff swirling through my head. The only person I could think of to talk to was Drekar, and, well. Not about this.

Besides, Jeff was still visiting him. That’s the reason I told myself I hadn’t swung by and visited, though Drekar had said I could drop by any time. The two of them hadn’t seen each other for a complicated amount of time. It wasn’t right to interrupt them. And if Jeff stayed for, like, months, hey, I would have to go without seeing Drekar, right, because...

Because then I could avoid thinking about how much I wanted to see him. About how no one else I knew was so easy to talk to. About how I felt better around him. More relaxed. More normal, like I fit inside my skin. I felt like a person around Drekar, instead of a buzzsaw made of nerves and grudges.

Nightstorm took us across the bridge into town, and I turned us toward the stable. That was another good thing in this world. My horse was the other, well, person I could trust with anything. I’d found him after a couple of years in this world, and everything had clicked. I’d already dubbed myself a knight, gotten the hang of my magic, taken on a few quests, found a sword that I eventually upgraded. But once I had a steed, I finally believed I wasn’t making shit up. He gave me permission to be the person I wanted to be. Besides the literal fact that he’d carried me most of the way to the end of the earth and back, I owed him a lot. So I made sure to take the best care of him I could.

I took my time checking him in, brushing his shiny black coat, telling him he was good. Feeding him apples, and taking a minute to appreciate him. Sometimes I forgot I wasn’t alone in this world.



Crystalbrook had a couple of good restaurants, for a town its size. The Two Claws was this tavern type place that used to have hotel rooms for rent upstairs, but apparently they'd restructured to focus on food and drinks. Which sounded fine to me, because their food was excellent. I didn't drink much there. Or at all. In this life. Just beer and ale sometimes. I frequented the Two Claws for dinner because I knew fuck-all about cooking, the food was tasty, and I could get a table by myself where people would leave me alone.

Except the server.

The Two Claws was fairly busy when I got there, full of people at the bar and at the dining room tables. It was a cozy kind of place, I guess. High ceilings, a huge fireplace covered with a decorative screen in the summer, and solid wooden tables and chairs. From the back, their new bartender, an elf in black lipstick and heavy eyeliner, gave me a nod. I nodded back out of reflex, not sure, as usual, if it was an acknowledgement of a customer, or a Visitor, or somebody who appreciated the dark knight style. I never went to the bar part.

I found a seat at one of the smaller tables, and Lavender swooped in soon enough. The Two Claws had a couple more servers now, besides Lavender and the fox guy who apparently co-owns the place. Either I'd sat in her section, or she sought me out. "Hey, Solan, what can I get you tonight?"

Looking past her at the menu chalked on a board behind the bar, I picked the herbed roast chicken with grilled zucchini. Because now that I was dead, I ate vegetables. Liked them. Figures. Not that it would have changed how things went down last time, but you know. Irony or something.

Lavender left, and I sat back and zoned out. It was shaping up to be a decent week, apart from the dreams. I'd found a lot to do, and people had started to bring me a few new quests when they saw me around town. And not bullshit busywork, either, useful things like tracking down that pack of bandits. Hopefully I could keep doing this a while, and keep my mind off everything else.

In a minute Lavender returned with a glass of water with a wedge of lemon on the edge. She was wearing a practical server's apron and a dark blue dress with laces up the front. She had her light-blue hair braided all nice too. It was weird to see her back in townie mode after the trip, when she'd worn pants to ride and gotten as grimy as me on the road.

She was a Visitor like me and Drekar, and her face had changed a bit since she came here last year, aging up like I had. We both appeared to be in our early or mid-thirties

now. She was pretty, I guess, not that I usually noticed for about twenty reasons. First of which was her day job, wherein she knew how to look inside people's minds and figure them out or whatever. Scary as shit. And I had resented the arrival of another Visitor in my town, but over time I'd had to get used to it. Lavender had bought a house and opened a therapist office and gotten a girlfriend and everything. She wasn't going anywhere.

She paused, resting her hand on the back of the chair across from me, as I took a drink. "I heard you've been busy. How's that going?"

I set the glass down. "Pretty good. Drove off some bandits at the edge of the forest today." For about two seconds, I held back the urge to keep bragging. "Took out some rock serpents before that. No big deal."

"Well, I think it's a big deal. Those things are a menace. It would be a great help if we could get back and forth to Hearthpeak without dealing with them, someday." She drummed her fingers on the chair back. "How's Drekar?"

She didn't mean it like a jab. Having spent a lot more time around her, I could see that now. And so, barely, I refrained from snapping *how the fuck would I know?* It still felt like a punch in the gut. "Haven't seen him."

"Oh." She frowned. Concerned. Ugh. "Did you two have a falling-out?"

Stop asking about this, except don't, because part of me wanted to keep talking about Drekar. All the time. "No, it's just that Jeff is still visiting. And I wanted to give them time to catch up. And I've been busy."

"Ah, okay." With one more tap to the chair, she stepped back. "Well, your order's probably up. Be right back."

I drank more water as she headed for the back, and tried to calm down. It wasn't working. Because I couldn't stop thinking about something else she'd said, when we were alone for a minute in Jeff's castle. I'd admitted to her that wanting something, anything — specifically, wanting to see Drekar again — had changed things. That every day didn't seem flat and empty anymore. And Lavender had said it's okay if you have a crush on Drekar, and it's okay if you're just friends.

It wasn't what I needed her to say. I needed her to make fun of me, I needed her to say something mean so I could deny it and go on with my life. Of course she hadn't. And she'd called me out, reminded me she wasn't going to be such a hypocrite as to mock me for that. What with her orc girlfriend and everything. So I had to live with it. Live with knowing somebody had said that, and I'd let it slide.

Soon enough, Lavender brought my order, and I said thanks and dug in. As usual, it was delicious. Lavender's girlfriend was the head chef here, and everything I'd tried was amazing. The Two Claws had started offering desserts recently, too, though I hadn't tried them yet. In the meantime, I enjoyed the roasted chicken and zucchini. Lavender came by to refill my water and ask if I needed anything, but she didn't ask any more about my life. Not that there was anything else to ask about.

After dinner, I didn't want to go back to my empty apartment yet. I wandered around town a while. It was warm, even though the sun was close to setting, and I sweated under my armor. People overstate the whole thing about black absorbing heat, but it's still several layers of metal and leather. In the summer, it was a lot. I'd have to clean and polish it and let it air out overnight. At least that was something to do.

I found myself at the stable. They were open all day and night, so I passed through the lobby into the stalls to see Nightstorm. He was sleeping, so I felt bad slipping into his stall and leaning my forehead against his neck. There was no one else I could say this to.

"Hey, boy," I said, as quietly as I could, although there were no other humans around. "I'm obsessed with Drekar. I can't stop thinking about him." My throat squeezed, and I stroked Nightstorm's neck.

There was this time. Tenth grade. Trigonometry class. The guy who sat next to me saw my *Player's Guidebook* in my backpack and said he was into tabletop gaming too. I'd never played. Didn't have anyone to play with. But I was fixated on learning how. Imagining the games.

This guy had a sweet personality that was going to get him destroyed someday. He was all fired up about starting a gaming club, since there were two of us now. Before and after class we'd talk about plans for the club and the games, and at night I'd lie awake, wanting him to be friends with me so badly I couldn't sleep. Until one night I fucking broke and started crying in the dark like an absolute baby. Scared that I didn't know how to be his friend. Scared I'd screw it up. Scared of how big it was, how important it felt. Like my entire existence hung in the balance.

The next day, I told him the club idea was stupid and to stop talking to me. The confused look on his face hurt worse than anything.

"I can't push Drekar away on purpose," I whispered to my sleeping horse. "He's too good. I can't do that again. But what if I fuck up. What if he hates me."

I don't know what happened to the guy from trigonometry class. I tried not to notice him, and maybe he switched schools or something. It didn't really help. People smelled something on me, my wrongness, my fuckup-itude. Obviously I was a smartass who was good at science and math and loved *The Threefold Kingdom* and could not keep my damn mouth shut. But the thing was. *Nerd* wasn't usually what they called me when they punched me in the head or slammed me off a wall. And as much as I said it wasn't true, it didn't matter. Nothing I said ever mattered.

And so I said my biggest fear out loud. "What if they were right?"

Somehow it was impossible to put what Lavender had said into the same box, even though she was saying the same thing, technically. She thought having a crush on Drekar would be a normal thing to do, and not the reason I got a concussion in middle school. People here generally acted like it was okay. Nobody cared that Lavender was dating the head chef at the Two Claws, or that the tavern's owners were a pair of old married beastmen. I was glad no one would ever be mean to Drekar about it, either. Jeff said he made it that way on purpose, for Drekar's sake. Which was a great thing for a brother to do.

But I didn't want it to be true for me. Because then all those guys would have been right. And I would have deserved all those bruises, all those hours sneaking down halls the long way, almost being late for class. Destroyed textbooks and ripped gym clothes and paint poured into my backpack. The concussion. The suspension for bringing a box cutter one day when I'd gotten sick of throwing up on the way to school, and didn't know what else to do. I would have earned all of it.

If I was...if I felt that way about Drekar.

I stood with my face pressed against Nightstorm's neck and wondered if I ought to find some therapy after all.

Dammit.

Drekar: Overlord On Read

Turns out, I had a lot of free time in the afterlife. Now that the tower was built and I'd commissioned my armor and sword and gone around making speeches and drummed up an army, I didn't have too many other hobbies. And I didn't have a job other than being an overlord.

Hanging out with Jeff was nice. We talked a lot. He made us food most of the time — with magic, not pots and pans — so it was nice to not have to bother my guys to send food up. And of course I got my morning updates and visited the camp and listened to my guys' ideas about improving it. I encouraged them to bring up any improvements they wanted. We'd find a way to pay for them.

Maybe I should focus on that, I thought one morning, as I actually did my workout on time. Figuring out how to sustainably fund the army and raise its quality of life. Instead of constantly depending on luck, or magic, or whatever led to the coffers always being full enough. I could budget like a freaking whiz; it was still in my bones, even though I hadn't seen a spreadsheet in almost a year. I'd kept a ledger on paper to account for the army's needs and mine, and discussed it every week with the quartermaster.

Okay, so *that* was the closest thing I had to a hobby. I needed another one, though. Badly. Because every spare second that I didn't have something to focus on, my brain “helpfully” reminded me that I hadn't heard from Solan yet.

I had to be fooling myself, thinking I'd felt a spark the last time I saw him. I'd gone all out for him and Jeff and the countess and their friend, asking the guys to do the ceremonial welcome we'd practiced in case we got extra special honored guests. They did great. It was super cool. And I teleported down, and I was sure the nearest guys (Brigitte, my general, on one side; Vorgarag, my quartermaster, on the other) could hear my heart pounding through my armor as I waited.

And mostly, I was focused on taking in the fact that my long-dead brother was here and okay (mostly). But eventually I looked over at Solan.

I don't know, maybe we locked eyes for an hour? Again, delusion. More likely, I was nursing yet another pointless crush on a straight guy because I wanted to believe he had a good heart under the whole dark-knight exterior. And because he was easy to talk to. And had all the same hobbies as me. And was hot as hell, let's not forget.

There was no way he'd noticed me. I had not gone so far as to ask my guys to put "Sir Solan the Mageknight's love life" on my news alerts, because it was too embarrassing. But I listened hard for every single tiny scrap of gossip available in the Western Plains, and nobody had ever heard of him dating anybody. Ever. At the fancy rich people's parties, he was known to hang out with other knights-errant and talk shop. He never danced.

My guys brought me updates: he was busy battling rock serpents and bandits and helping the Crystalbrook town guard and the Cavaliers with keeping order in the area. Being valiant and helpful till I wanted to crawl into a hole at the end of every news update, and almost, almost regretted my "helmets off in the penthouse" policy, because I knew how hard I was blushing.

I didn't live that far away. I'd told him he could visit any time, before his trip. Like any time. At all. And there was a raven messenger station in Crystalbrook. So he must not be interested. Or I'd been too pushy. Too needy. Too obvious.

Except, except, except one time while he was on the road, on his way to meet Jeff — although no one knew that at the time. I'd been worried, but I hadn't expected to hear anything till he got back. We were friends, I told myself, because I desperately wanted to believe it could be true. It was cool. He was fine. When he got back, he'd tell me all about it.

Then I'd gotten a raven message from him.

I was in the middle of practice when the raven knocked on my window, and I set down my sword and sat on the floor to listen. The raven rambled in Solan's words about the trip, and finding this interesting town that was exclusive to Visitors, and maybe we could visit for a vacation sometime and hang out. And how he just wanted to talk to me.

You can ask a raven messenger to repeat a message, it turns out. It's free. I stopped after one repeat, feeling like I was going to burst. I thanked the raven, it flew away, and I lay on the stone floor of my tower and stared at the ceiling and admitted to myself that I had a massive crush on my new friend.

Since then, I'd been slightly insane, as per usual. Except in my old life, I could have done some light social media digging, realized I was being extra about a guy who would never like me back, and attempted to move on. Alone in my tower most of the time, I spiraled. Went back over all our interactions in my head. Imagined sparring with him when I practiced in the mornings. Looked up maps of the northlands and wondered how far he'd traveled. I was too much, as usual.

But the crush energized me, and that was addicting. I threw myself into my practice. Into reading more of the books I'd collected, getting a feel for the literature in this world. Into budgeting and planning with my army. I felt unstoppable, powerful, dare I say unyielding. I wanted to outshine myself by the time he got back. I was sure I'd impressed him, that there had been a spark between us that day when he returned from the end of the world.

And now.

Nothing.



"I think I'm gonna wander a while," my brother said one day, as we sat on the roof behind the railing he'd created. "See the world again."

I chewed my lip, remembering what he'd told me about the last time he'd walked his world. How people had come to him like a god and not a person, asking for blessings. Not seeing him at all. How it had messed with his head and sent him into hiding for a hundred years.

"If you're sure, man," I said. "You're welcome here anytime, you understand? Any time." There were a lot of unused floors below me; he could easily turn one into an apartment. But that would mostly be for my own benefit. I was being needy.

"Sure, thanks," Jeff said. His face had brightened. "I'll know where to find ya. Can't miss the tower."

It was so good to see him again. To give him one more hug and believe it wasn't the last one. To see him healthy and out on his own. I'd missed him so much. And I guess he missed me, too, and the world he dreamed for us when we were kids. Because I woke up every day in it. And I was grateful for that.



It's funny. Even with missing Jeff, it was a relief to not have a houseguest anymore. I struggled through my laundry — all by hand, you know, in this place — and finally called on the intercom to gather a couple of guys to help me out. I told them uniforms weren't necessary, a rare occasion. I didn't wear mine, either, of course; I was dressed in my practice clothes, damp nearly head to toe from dealing with the laundry, when I teleported down to the ground. A group of four people waited at the door, dressed pretty much the same as I was, only dryer.

First, I had them form a huddle. My teleportation magic works on anything I can touch, and it flows to the next person or item in line and so on. The larger the group, the more taxing the spell, which was one reason why we'd marched most of the way to the countess's castle at Midwinter and only used magic to get past her guards. Taking four people to the top floor of the tower was no big deal.

We all trooped into the guest room, and they helped me strip the bed and dust everything and wash the windows and scrub the guest bathroom and generally make it all fresh and new. Jeff wasn't a bad houseguest or anything, but it felt nice to refresh the place. The four of them were good at this.

Since we were all dressed casually and working together, we ought to be able to chat. We mostly got absorbed in the tasks, though, and only spoke up if we needed help with something.

In the middle of washing the sheets, I decided to talk to the guy who was hanging up the towels to dry. "Uh, hey," I said, like a suave person.

"Yes, my Lord?" The title felt a little weird today.

"I was wondering, do you know if any of the members of the army have any aptitude for city planning?"

The soldier turned with an armload of towels. "City...planning, my Lord?"

"Uh, yes. Like figuring out how roads should be designed, or where to put buildings. For the improvements we're planning."

"I see." He frowned. "You could hire someone, my Lord."

I waved my hands, sending soap suds flying. “Yeah, I know, but I wanted to see if anyone in the group is interested first. It’s okay, I’ll put up some flyers or something. So do you have any ideas for the camp?”

He did. Haltingly, at first. He was a trainer, specializing in pikestaffs. And the guys practiced in whatever open space they could find at the edge of camp. Whenever it rained, the pitch would get soggy, and when it was dry, sometimes guys would trip on divots in the ground or animal burrows. They didn’t have a dedicated place to practice.

“This is great,” I said, channeling my excitement into scrubbing the sheets against the washboard. “Keep it coming.”

The others took turns, nervously presenting their ideas. Cooking facilities. Better sanitation, devoted space for latrines. I said I was planning on building houses for everyone, with indoor plumbing. The two who were in the room at the time stared for a second.

“I mean, ultimately,” I said, feeling myself redden. “It’ll take a lot of houses. People will have to share at first. Anyway, I’m also looking for suggestions for things for us to do. Quests, I guess? What would you say we’re good at, as a group?”

This caused an outpouring of love for the other members of the army. Cohesion. Enthusiasm. Training. Loyalty. Knowledge of the terrain. Problem-solving. No one went hungry. Everyone found a niche, even if it took a few tries to find it. No one felt mistreated, because when an officer did something unfair, the soldiers would band together.

And they all believed in me.

I was in the middle of hanging up the sheets when one of the guys shyly told me how much belonging to the Army had meant to them. I wanted to drape the wet, cooling fabric over my head and hide.

“Truly, my Lord,” one of the others said. “We all have a place here. A purpose.” Energetic nods. Fighting a lump in my throat, I made the army’s salute, fist against my heart. They all snapped to attention and returned it. That wasn’t what I meant. I mean, my fist was covered with a sheet at the time, and there were suds in my hair. Formality was not in the cards.

“I will do my best,” I said, and cleared my throat, “to make all your dedication worthwhile. I...” Saying I didn’t deserve this wasn’t fair to them. “I appreciate all of you.”

They were all so amazing. I was going to make sure we made this place into a home worthy of them.

And I had an idea for my new hobby. Something that would make me less reliant on them, less of a burden. Something I could do on my own after some more practice. Something I'd always let others do — my parents, my partners, people I'd paid. It was time to learn for myself.

I asked the guys if anyone in the camp could teach me.