

Chapter 1

Going after the Secrets of Mana

Where: Inari's personal dimension

When: Time is a human construct not noticed by higher beings

Kid looked around the forest she now stood in along with Lysanias, dropping his hand. The familiar sounds of birds through wind in the trees did nothing to sooth him, his anger at having to leave that world so abruptly beginning to smolder within him. *If he was lying, that world could be overrun with those dream creatures in months or years. But what can I do? I can't fight a spirit hunter, a dreamer, and someone who can leach off my powers at the same time.*

"This place seems too green to be the same world," Kid remarked. "You okay there, Lysanias? You look like you ate a lemon."

"It's not," he told her sharply. "This is where you can get help finding Surge."

"You really did run. Ain't like ya, from what I can figure."

"Tell me about it. Come on." With his various senses he had no trouble picking the direction he would find the cabin, and set off through the trees to get there. She shrugged and followed after.

The cabin looked the same, a small wooden cottage surrounded by flowers in a clearing, though Lysanias did wonder if that stream had always been there. He raised a hand to knock on the door but it opened and the small form of Inari peeked out.

"Come on in, Lysanias," she said formally, holding the door open for him.

He stuck his head in, alert for some kind of practical joke like a bucket of water being dumped on his head, but nothing happened. Stepping into the room he noticed it now looked like a workshop, with candles floating near a large table at the far end of the room. Shelves of potions, metal samples, neatly tied leaves and other plants, and more spilled from the walls.

"Greetings, Kid," Inari said to Kid as she followed him in. "Welcome to my home."

She whistled. "Workshop is more like it. Guess I don't need no introduction? Ya know me?"

"I do. I look in on my wanderers from time to time, see that they're not in too much trouble. I saw him with you and backtraced your path through the multiverse. I've got a few places you might find a Surge that's to your liking so you can head out any time."

"Only one Surge is required, donCHA know?"

"But why have only one when you could have two or three at once?" she asked with a wink.

Lysanias rolled his eyes. "Anyway, why this particular configuration?" he asked. "Didn't think you needed these sort of trappings to do what you do."

"I don't. Lysanias I can feel you're feeling down but I do have a few solutions to perk up your spirits."

"Oh?"

"I could just use magic and change your outlook-"

"No."

"Very well," she conceded with a nod of her head. Her expression said this was only to be expected. "The other solution is to remind you that time doesn't run between realities in any standard way, and in fact you may have guessed I have some control over when I send you to a place and not just where. You think you're retreating from that world and you have somehow failed it, but put this from your mind. You went there and did what you had to do, namely, learn to step from dreams to reality. Now you must perfect these new skills. When you do, I will be happy to send you back there to nearly the time you left. You may then pick the fight back up and wipe out the shadows that followed Jason there."

"Oh." He was stunned for a moment. "Right, I suppose you can do that, can't you? And if I think of some other means of dealing with them, maybe make a light based weapon or two they can't adapt to... Wait, is this why the new lab?"

She shook her head. "Did you forget? Your entry into the rolls of the true heroes is dependent upon the completion of your next task." She pulled his old sword from nowhere.

“You must enchant this sword as I instruct you, use it to halt a great evil, and leave it upon a world where it shall be taken up by another far in the future.”

“I hadn’t forgotten, it just hasn’t been on my mind lately. So you got this ready for me? Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. You’ll find the instructions in the book on the table,” she gestured over to it, “if you would like to get started.”

“I might as well. No sense wasting time.”

“Splendid. Kid, come along and I’ll get you a marble so you can make your way back here easily. Then you can carry on with your search.”

“I guess this is goodbye then, mate.” Kid swept him up in a hug. “Thanks for bringing me here.”

He hugged her back but shook his head as she stepped back. “Don’t thank me, thank her.” He pointed a thumb over his shoulder at Inari. “Clearly she sent me to the time and place you arrived so that I could find you just as I did. You think it was completely random two reality travelers literally tripped over each other upon arriving there?”

“I guess not. Still, hope you find what you’re looking for out there. Seems like I can come back here, maybe I’ll take this test you’re taking, if they’ll let me. Even if I find my Surge, probably won’t be able to settle down, knowing what I know now about people like Jason hanging about trying to mess things up. Seems like the side ‘o good can use all the help it can. So I think we’ll meet again.”

“I hope we do.”

“So it’s just ‘until next time’ then! See ya!”

“Bye Kid.”

She turned to follow Inari into the other room and he went over to see about this imbuing or fabrication she wanted him to do. It turned out to be imbuing, as the sword was apparently meant to absorb and seal magical energies of some kind. He looked down at his side, pulled out the wand, and closed his eyes. A moment later he opened them, looking out across the somewhat barren plains of his soul, stretching out at the base of the mountain. He headed inside the house, then out the back into the garden where Rosalina was working surrounded by her little star friends.

“Hey, Rosalina, want to come out?” he called. “You and Inari could talk gardening, she has one in the back of her house too, or you could try your hand at imbuing. Or practice your magic, or just hang out in the real world. I’m doing some imbuing so it might be boring, but maybe you can get Inari to make you a super duper Kart racing track to add to your collection.”

“I always want to be out,” she told him, getting up and brushing off her pants. “Thanks for letting me say goodbye to Kid. She’s my friend too you know.” She put her hands on her hips and glared at him.

“Whoops. Sorry about that. She should still be there, I’ll get you out right away.”

“You better.”

Once out she ran off to say goodbye and he started looking over the list of things he would need to break down into magic and bind to the sword. An hour or so later he was arranging things on the table and looking over the directions when Inari came back in with Rosalina.

“Before I forget,” Inari told him, “I have some good news for you. Some bad news too. Unrelated to each other. I’ll give you the bad news first!”

“Go ahead.” *What now?*

“The world you’re going to is a *levels world*.”

He groaned. “Great, I’m going to be useless there, aren’t I? I mean my bending was at least somewhat useful back with Terra but the other ‘party members’ did most of the damage. And I’m going to have to run around dodging the local wildlife that all wants to kill me, and is invisible until I’m right up next to it?”

“Er, not exactly. You’ll see them coming, that much is like other worlds.”

“Really?” he asked, somewhat surprised. *Though I guess words can be any mix of the two they wanted to be. That’s why it’s another world, after all.*

“Really,” she insisted. She went over and looked at the book that was open to the instructions. “Maybe I can capitalize on what you’re doing here, I’ll think about it. Honestly you could probably finish off the lower level monsters there yourself, the world isn’t as crazy as some when it comes to absurd hit points.”

“That’s nice to know.”

“So would you like the good then?”

“Sure.”

“Remember the spell to open up your own paradise?”

“Of course, my shield is still connected to it. I made a magical item to try and cut the time down to open it, actually.” He fished the twisted serpent ring out from under his shirt and held it up.

“Great, great. Let me cut the time down some more for you.”

“How?”

“Turns out, we were doing it wrong the whole time. Susan has been experimenting with it, and it turns out the long form, the spell you have to first use to make it, doesn’t have to be used again. There’s a much shorter version you can use to open it up when you need to. Here.” She handed him a scroll which he unrolled and looked over. Or at least, he tried to. “You look confused.”

“I am. I create that portal using Skyebourne magic, and just throw energy into it. It doesn’t really have a formula, not like the magic Susan does. So I’m not sure how to translate this into what I do, manipulating magic like a Skyebourne.”

“I see.” She took it back and looked it over for a moment. “You can feel magic, right?”

“I’m not great at it, but sure.” *As with most things I didn’t just steal from someone.*

“Feel this out and see if you can duplicate it. I’ll cast it as slowly as I can.”

“Okay.” *As a Skyebourne? I guess she is a... something... of magic.*

He opened his senses up and felt out what she was doing, and he felt he missed it completely as the magical energy tore a hole in reality. “I’ve missed it completely,” he announced.

“You’re hopeless, aren’t you?” Rosalina asked, not unkindly.

“A little. Again, please?”

“Of course.” The door closed and again magical energy swirled around. The gateway (to his own dimension it seemed now that he was paying better attention) opened.

“Got it. I felt what you did, I’m pretty sure I can duplicate it. Thanks, that could be a big help. Even four minutes was a long time to sit there and gather magical energies.”

“I hear you. Finding everything?” She let go of the scroll and it vanished.

“I think so.”

“Then I’ll let you get to work.”

The work proceeded smoothly (as far as Lysanias could tell) and of course he utilized both his magical ability to become better at something, circles to help him concentrate, the spirit of the dragonfly, as well as consulting Inari about technique. It was a little different from what he was used to, but following directions is following directions, and soon the now blackened sword was a magical blade Inari said would serve to save the world several times where it was going. Of course Lysanias hadn’t worked non-stop, taking some time to race karts with Rosalina, spar, practice calling her out, and at night walk around the dream version of where Inari lived and practice making changes there. With the sword done she said he might as well leave now, it would be about the right time in the new world, about three in the afternoon.

“And will I be appearing in someone’s bedroom?” he deadpanned.

“You know I don’t reuse a joke. You’ll be where you need to be, as usual.”

“Fine.”

“Put on your armor though. You would look out of place without it, even if it’s a different style.”

"Fair enough." He did, belting his newly remade sword at his right, while Ragnarok rode at his left. *After all I want to pull that one first, it's the better blade. The other is just a tool to do whatever I'm supposed to be doing with the magic there.* He looked himself over in the mirror that had appeared, and made sure all his equipment was in place. *Wall ring, circlet, talisman ring, normal shoes because I'm wearing the hyper wrist, armor, sash, watch, Rosalina is out, the stele is there, my shield is put away, as is the hubpad. Wonder if I'll be able to get anything like the circlet and sash on this world? Note to self, if you can, make sure to buy up all of them you can. Dummy.* "Ready."

"I'll send you directly, you don't need the marble," Inari told him. "You know what you have to do?"

"No, you wouldn't tell me! Just some vague hints about the sword being the key."

"Exactly. Good luck."

The world shifted around him and he staggered a little, catching his balance. He seemed to be in front of a building, in what appeared to be a large city. Far off in the distance he could see skyscrapers, while the structures around him seemed to be of "modern" construction. Rosalina was at his side, also looking around.

"No cars," she told him. "But the roads are fairly well made. Magic vehicles maybe? You only need roads for wheels."

"True." He looked up and noticed several large car looking devices zipping overhead, as well as strange metal spheres with what looked like an "eye" darting this way and that. *Those could be the equivalent of a car, but what are those eye things?* "Do you smell smoke?"

"Smoke?"

The two looked around and as he was able to pick out more details, the people walking down the street were all dressed in normal clothes, though many were watching the sky warily. He opened himself up to the One Power, just to make sure he could, and with his improved eyesight he noticed a house down the street that had seemingly burned down not long ago. He let it go. *Typical, don't send us here an hour earlier so we could have helped. I guess it's not why we're here.* "It's down that way. Burned out house." He pointed.

"I can't see it at all. I'll take your word for it. Lots of frightened looking people, whatever it was must have happened fairly recently."

"If I can still smell it from here, probably. It's only one house, it could have just been an accident. There were lots of magical wars back home from what I understand. Non-magical ones as well, to be fair. You would think there would be a lot more destruction if this place was a war zone. But who knows?"

"Probably someone around here," she decided. "That's why we're here. Looks like some kind of bar, we going in?"

He swung his gaze forward again, looking up at the sign above the door. Peering in the windows he saw people sitting at tables and drinking, so he decided she was probably right. "I guess, but how do we find the person who doesn't know we're coming to help save their entire reality?"

"Keep our eyes open I guess?" She shrugged. Then held up a hand, one of her tiny star people appearing. "Watch for anything strange, but try to keep out of sight okay?" she told it. The being nodded and rose into the air, vanishing over the roof of the place.

"Watch out for those flying eyeballs!" he called up to it.

"Eyeball- oh." She saw one. "Odd."

"In fact..." *Mountain spirit, hear my call. Guard this door so we don't get surprised by anything nasty.*

Of course. The spirit of the mountain appeared, too late Lysanias realized that anyone that could do magic could see it, and this was a place where there were bound to be magic users. But no one seemed to notice as they passed so he gave a quick nod and opened the door. Walking into the place it seemed a fairly typical layout, with a long bar directly ahead and scattered tables to each side. The bar was empty apart from the man behind it rubbing a glass, though the tables were fairly full. He stepped a few feet into the place, looking to see if anyone jumped out at him when Rosalina poked him.

“What?”

“There.” She pointed, and he looked over there. Slouched down in a booth was a woman surrounded by what could only be spirits, a whole troop of them. Some were floating, some sitting on the table, some standing nearby. They looked to be about half the size of a person and elementally themed, he could pick out fire, earth, water, just by looking at them. One of the spirits, air probably as it had been flying a figure 8 pattern in the air a moment ago looked over at them. *Guess that’s why no one looked twice at my mountain spirit.* “Let’s go talk to her!”

Lysanias’ feet carried him... towards the bar, where he sat down, blushing furiously. Rosalina on the other hand had taken a few steps in that direction, realized he wasn’t there, and spun around. She stalked over to him as the bartender asked what he would have. The man was dressed in fairly nice clothes, a white shirt and black pants, well made. He looked to be in his fifties, balding, but now that he was closer Lysanias could see him swaying as if to music only he could hear.

“Er, what’s good today?” he asked, having no idea what sort of things were served in this world.

“Got some new mead in,” the man offered.

“Sure, a mug of that.”

“Coming up. 1 gold.”

“Sure.” *No smaller currency than that? Strange. Or is it just that good?* He got a gold coin out of his pouch and tossed it on the bar, the man glanced at it and went to pour the drink.

“Make it two,” said Rosalina, sitting down.

“Of course, my lady,” said the man, getting a second glass.

Right, probably thinks she’s fairly wealthy, wearing that dress of hers. Looking around I can see it’s way better looking than anything they wear around here. “Can you drink?” Lysanias asked her.

“I’ve got a mouth, don’t I?”

“But you’re a wand. What happens to what you drank when you turn back?”

“How should I know?! It’s magic!”

“Uh huh...”

Two mugs were set in front of the pair and he took the coin without really glancing at it.

Why would he? He wouldn’t expect a gold coin from another world.

“Why are we here?” Rosalina asked as he picked his mug up.

“To save the world?” he asked, confused.

“No, I mean we were *supposed* to be talking to the lady over there with the spirits. We’re not. I wondered why.”

“I can’t just go up to her and... and... I mean what would I even say? Hi, want to save the world with me? That’s not going to work!”

She frowned at him, took a sip of her drink, and brightened. “Oh, that’s not bad. Sweet. Burns a little though. Anyway, of course you can’t say *that*. Say something like ‘the spirits moved me to come and see you’ or ‘I’ve heard of serving spirits in a bar, but you’re taking it to an extreme!’ Something funny.”

“Something funny,” he parroted, beginning to get a little annoyed. “You know, I’m guessing women who are just sitting and minding their own business in taverns get extremely tired of guys wandering over uninvited and trying to be witty. I’m sure they know *exactly* what the men want, and it’s not a discussion on local politics or simply to complement them and then be on their way.”

“Why would they be in taverns if they wanted to be left alone? They could stay home and do that.”

“I...” His mouth snapped shut as he had to admit this was a fair point. “I still can’t just walk over there and talk to her.”

“Looks like you might not have to.”

“Wha?”

He spun, heart speeding up a little, and saw the air spirit heading their way. It stopped before him, hanging in the air. It looked male, tassel on his hat floating in the breeze even

though there wasn't one in here, and wearing billowy yellow pants. This contrasted with his blue skin, and he had a round face and big, pointed ears that reminded him of Yoda. He gave a hesitant wave.

Lysanias waved back.

His reaction was instantaneous, his face lit up with a huge smile and he shot back to the group, excitedly talking and pointing back at the pair. *Now what in the world?* The woman pushed herself up and looking around, blinking, and squinted over at them.

"You don't have a chance," the bartender said to him, leaning over the bar. "Besides, didn't you come with a beautiful lady? Why do you have your eye on another? It's none of my business of course..."

"No chance at what?"

"Oh, you know. She's a hero in this town, but she turns down every advance. Seems to be depressed- what?" He looked over and Lysanias did too. The woman had gotten up from the booth and was heading towards them.

Here we go...

Chapter 2

From thy spirit shall they pass no more—like dew-drop from the grass.

Where: At the bar

When: A second later

The woman that was approaching Lysanias had short black hair, green eyes, and was dressed in a breastplate and sturdy leather pants. She had a sword hung at her hip, and she moved steadily enough that Lysanias revised his estimate of her. *She isn't drunk, she was just slouched over before because she was tired?* Behind her clustered the spirits, talking excitedly among themselves in quiet voices.

"Miss Lanistien, can I get you something?" the bartender asked.

She held up a hand and shook her head. "Little privacy maybe, I know how much of a gossip you are."

He gasped dramatically (some might say overly so) and held a hand to his chest. "I never did!"

She scowled at him and he laughed, backing off. "Peace, I'll just be over here. Not listening in any way."

"Let's make sure of that, shall we? Shade?" She looked back at the spirits and one of them, the dark one, nodded. Lysanias didn't miss she "casually" placed a hand on her sword, and looked ready to draw. He felt a wariness from her, rising above the helplessness he had felt earlier as she came over.

"Let the darkness become silence around us," it intoned, gesturing. Lysanias felt magical power around them, clearly it had cast a spell.

"So who are you?" she asked bluntly. "My friends here say you can see them, is that true? Is it because of those weird eyes you have? I've never seen red eyes like that before."

"I'm Lysanias, this is Rosalina, nice to meet you. And yes, I can. And no, and I could have seen them before I got these eyes."

"I told you," said the airy one haughtily.

"Before you got them?" asked the dark one. "What, did you steal them or something?"

Not exactly.

"Be careful," said another, seeming to sniff the air, before he could answer. She almost looked made of bark, with green leaves for hair. "He reeks of Mana, and powerful spells surround him. Those swords... I don't like the look of him if he is against us."

The one with red skin, who looked like a lizard, bared his teeth and put his hands together, generating fire between them.

"I sense a powerful light in him," said the one that was almost glowing, floating up to be between them. She sounded female but didn't really have a body. She had four wings, and seemed to be just a head floating in an upside down teardrop shape of light. "Whatever else he may be, we can trust that he will brighten us as the sun brightens me."

"He has known fire," said the red one. "I can sense it within him."

"But not Earth," counted the short one, who reminded Lysanias of his gnomad friend from back home. "This one has not walked the earth here until moments ago. I do not know what it means and I do not trust it."

"If you could all stifle it for thirty seconds so I could talk to the man?" the woman snapped. They fell silent. "Sorry about them, so Lysanias, is it? So what's your deal?"

"I'm not sure what you mean by deal, I don't have a deal."

"At least tell him your name," said the glowing one. "And introduce us, I mean you don't have to be rude *all* the time, do you?"

"I don't have to be, no," she conceded. "I'm Anabeth, and this is Undine, Gnome, Luna, Dryad, Salamando, Shade, and Lumina. You met Sylphid earlier. Happy, Lunima?"

"You don't have to be a jerk about it," she pouted.

"I don't *have* to," she agreed, but turned back to him. "Now what's your deal? You didn't just waltz in here for no reason. And if you can see them, you've been exposed to a lot of Mana. And that means the enemy. So talk, or I'll have to politely ask you to go outside so we don't wreck my friend's bar here."

You couldn't take me. He held up his hands. "I mean you no harm. I'm actually here to help. Your world has problems, more than you might know, and I'm here to set things right."

"Are you?"

"Yes."

"Prove it."

"How?"

"Finish your drink and come with me." She crossed her arms and waited, one foot tapping. He took a sip and noticed Rosalina thumping her now empty mug to the bar.

"That was good," she announced with a smile. "Are you going to finish yours?" He looked down at the drink, shrugged, and handed it over. She drank it down and a second empty mug joined the first. She let out a burp and giggled, her hand over her mouth.

Oh boy. Anabeth looked slightly confused, but trailing the group of spirits, left the bar. She stopped dead in front of Lysanias' mountain spirit, who stared back at her. "What, you think you're the only one who travels with spirits? I left him guarding the door because I don't like surprises." *The kind he would warn me about, anyway.* "Lead the way."

"Curious," said Gnome, looking the projection up and down. "Earth, but not. Just who are you?"

"I'll explain after my little test, Anabeth seems to have something in mind, after all."

"You better."

Meanwhile Rosalina had collected and "put away" her friend, who she reported hadn't seen anything interesting.

The group went out and down the street, past the burned out house and into the back yard, where a group of uniformed men with weapons stood around staring at a shaking stone box. The box was about 2 meters to a side and every so often gave a lurch as though something inside had slammed into it.

Guns? That must be what those are. Why does she have a sword then?

"Ah, Miss Lanastien, you return!" said one. "Have you decided what you're going to do about this?" He hammered the box lightly with the butt of his pistol.

"I have, captain," she replied. "I'm letting him deal with it." She pointed a thumb at Lysanias.

"Oh? Another expert in spirits? I'm captain Moddress, nice to meet you." He holstered the gun and held out a hand, which Lysanias took. He was also dressed in armor, though it was more like a bullet proof jacket than a metal breastplate. He wore an official looking hat that obscured his hair, but he was taller and broader than Lysanias, with a firm grip.

"Lysanias, and my companion Rosalina. Can I have you and your men back away a bit while I work?"

"We'll give you all the space you want," the captain hastened to assure him. He felt relieved to be moved aside if what Lysanias was feeling was correct. "Everyone, take up positions near the choke points. Even if we can't see the thing, we might at least slow it down if it gets loose."

Wait, can they not see spirits? He glanced around the others didn't seem to notice his mountain spirit standing there. Their eyes just slid off it, as well as the other spirits with Anabeth. *Yup.* With them out of the way Lysanias turned his attention to the box, feeling what was inside. He didn't sense life energy, but magic and spirit energy were in there.

It's a spirit all right. "Is what's in there what caused the fire?" he asked, gesturing to the house.

"That's right."

"I put it in the box," bragged Gnome, but his face immediately fell again. "It won't hold it for long though."

The box shook some more.

"I can't actually hurt it," admitted Anabeth, "and the others won't seriously attack a fellow spirit. Even one as crazed as this one. This was the best they could do, which didn't really solve the problem simply postpone it."

He nodded. "You would need a magical weapon to hurt a spirit. I take it that's just a normal sword?"

"Yes," she replied gloomily. "Of course if *someone* would buff it with an elemental spell... which I know they can do..." All the spirits looked away, clearly not comfortable with this line of thinking.

"We won't let you hurt this spirit either," cautioned Lumina after a moment. "Maybe between the two of you the box could be carried outside of town so we can just release it?"

"No, I don't think that will be necessary," Lysanias assured her. "I think we can all walk out of here as friends."

"Friends?" snorted Anabeth. "You're joking?"

"Nope." He shook his head. "Calming angry spirits just *happens* to be a specialty of mine." *Stolen from another, who later betrayed us, but at least some good can come from the technique here. And not to show off, but let's show them exactly what I can do and use the full ritual. This spirit isn't going anywhere.* To begin he touched the box, thinning the walls a little and giving the top an edge so the water wouldn't just slosh out. Then he used magic to create water. Taking a stance he used water bending to encircle the box, then spirit bending to cleanse the negative energy from the spirit. As with the original technique the water began to glow with the energy transfer, and soon Lysanias felt he had cleansed the spirit.

"I told you there was light in him! No one ever believes me!" pouted Lumina.

When he felt the spirit was quiet he dropped water bending, took a firmer stance and blew the box apart with earth bending, ready to slam it together again should the spirit seem like it was going to attack. The spirit, looking vaguely like a bear with fire for claws and teeth stood there calmly.

"What kind of magic was all that?" Anabeth asked, sword out.

"Making the water used Mana," answered Undine. "The rest?" She looked to the others, who all shook their heads.

"Not Mana at all," Dryad confirmed. "He's clearly holding that stone up but I can't tell how."

"Nor can I," admitted Gnome. "But look at the spirit. It's calm."

"I beg your pardon," said the spirit. "But what's going on?"

"What's the last thing you remember?" Anabeth asked warily.

"I was drawn to a fire, humans were starting one," it looked around "must have been last night? Then suddenly I was here."

"The imbalance is getting worse. With Mana being sucked up by that Goddess forsaken fortress, you lost yourself. Are you all right now?"

"How would I know that?" the bear asked, clearly at a loss. "By the way, did I do that?" It pointed a claw at the house.

"Yes."

"Ah. Pity I wasn't myself, it must have been a fantastic blaze to see."

"It was!" agreed Salamando, who withered as Anabeth glared at him. "I mean if you're into that sort of thing."

"I put it out," Undine told him.

"Water," mused the bear, shaking his massive head. "Always spoiling my fun. You undid my rage?" he asked Lysanias, who was stacking the stone slabs to the side now that it didn't seem inclined to attack.

"I did."

"You have my thanks. And you say it was an imbalance of Mana? Is there anything I can do in future to avoid this happening? If I'm going to burn something down I at least want the presence of mind to enjoy it."

"Sure. If you see something like a big chunk of rock floating around in the air, run the other way."

"I'll keep that in mind. Farewell, all." He flashed into fire and was gone.

"Well," announced Anabeth, sliding her sword back. "That went differently than I expected. I figured you would, like me, argue it would have to be killed and try to convince my friends here to let you do the job. But instead you healed it. How did you do that?"

Lysanias was about to answer but the captain came over. "Is the danger past, then?"

"Yes captain, the fire spirit has been taken care of. You and your men can go back to your regular posts."

“Excellent. You’ve defended the town once again, and you have our thanks. You and the stranger, I’ll be sure to tell the mayor of your deeds today. Lysanias, right? You have the gratitude of the town.”

“But not any of its money,” Anabeth muttered to herself.

“Company, move out!” called the captain, and the soldiers formed up and moved out.

“You did set it right, just as you promised,” Anabeth admitted, taking a seat on the now stacked up stone walls.

“So do you believe I’m not your enemy?”

“Not being an enemy and being a friend are two very different things. Maybe all that was staged to get me to trust you. Maybe to get my fiends here to follow you instead of me.”

“But he clearly doesn’t need us to use Mana,” Dryad reminded her. “So that can’t be it.”

“Yes, how did you move that stone?” Gnome demanded to know.

“Earth bending. Look, telling you who I am is going to take some time. Are you sure you want to do it here?” He gestured, and people passing were looking at the ruined house and them. He also noticed several of those flying eye things looking the place over. *I wonder where the family is that lived here? Did they die in the fire? I hope not.*

“Fine, let’s head back. Don’t need to be stared at by drones all afternoon. Plus I feel I’m going to need another drink before this is over.”

“More mead?” Rosalina asked hopefully, perking up.

Once again seated at the bar Lysanias gave his now becoming the standard ‘I’m not from around here’ speech and demonstrated some more of the less flashy stuff he could do. Anabeth had no choice but to believe it, all the spirits agreed most of what he did wasn’t magical and defied their explanation. After a moment of silence as she digested all of this, Anabeth spoke again.

“I guess that explains the eyes. And you’re here to help us with our problems?”

“I’m here for the standard reason of beating back the avatar of darkness, and while doing that I am told I will lose this sword I have specially prepared before coming here. I am to not go after it, but let it land where it will, so that it can become a tool for saving the world at some time in the future.”

“You don’t think one of the people behind the Mana fortress is this avatar, do you?”

“If it threatens the world, more than likely.” *Is she talking about the thing she warned the fire bear about? Something floating around?*

“What other purpose can that thing have?” spat Luna. “I can see it now, a dark spot against the earth, Mana being sucked into it without ceasing.”

“You think you could take it out somehow? I’ve been doing what I can but that’s not a solution. We’ve been discussing it but never had any means of really *doing* anything about it. I mean how would I get up there in the first place?”

“How would you deal with it?”

“In theory?”

“Sure.”

“It’s powered by Mana,” Dryad told them. “If we can’t fly up to smash the controls because of its defenses we should bring it to us. To do that we need to somehow cut Mana off from it, so it crashes.”

That must be what they call magic. Mana. And it has defenses, so it’s like a Skybourne city back home?

“Preferably into the ocean,” Undine clarified. “So it sinks and can’t be retrieved. That would solve our problem without having to do anything else.”

“Or a volcano,” Salamando countered.

“And how would you do that? Mana is everywhere, isn’t it?”

“Short of cutting down the Mana tree, ending the use of Mana everywhere and probably killing every spirit in the world? I’ve no idea.”

“That’s not on the table, by the way,” Dryad informed them.

"Of course not!" Lysanias agreed, horrified. "Deprive a world of mag- of Mana? I'm here to save you all, not destroy you. But in theory, with unimagined tools at your disposal, how would you do it?"

The others sat and thought for a moment. *It must have something to do with sealing magic away, but let's see what they come up with.*

"Somehow pin magic to the ground?" Gnome suggested. "Keep it from radiating into the air?"

"Hey, I live in the air!" protested Sylphid. "Plus all the cars and planes and drones and anything else would come crashing down. Let's not cut off our noses to spite our faces!"

"Force it along certain paths?" added Undine. "Keep it low enough that stuff would still be able to draw Mana?"

"Hide it in the darkness?" put in Shade.

"You can't hide Mana!" protested Lumina.

"Well you can't exactly pin it to the ground either, can you?" he shot back.

"Wait, what if we could?" Dryad insisted. "What would that look like?"

"Mana simply flows from the tree, right?" Anabeth asked. "It grows to cover the world."

"Exactly, but so does rain. It covers the world but it runs in rivers. On the *ground*."

"You want to create a river of Mana?"

"I wonder if certain channels could be created. That way it wouldn't rise into the air all that far, and the fortress couldn't gather it up."

"This fortress," asked Lysanias. "What was the reason given for it being built? I'm curious."

"The reason shifted with the seasons," Anabeth explained. "I think it was built because they could build it, and for no other reason."

So the avatar pushed for it? "And what's it doing apart from floating around?"

"It's storing Mana," answered Dryad. "Only a portion of what it takes in keeps it in the air. The rest... I fear what someone could do with that much raw power."

I think I know. Wage war on the entire world. Or just gather enough and destroy it in one stroke.

"That's what made that spirit go crazy," said Anabeth. "As Mana is imbalanced, strange things happen to spirits. Some of these, uh, country folk..." She nodded her head towards the others sitting in the bar, "would have you believe the gods grew angry at us for creating something that is not tied to the ground. But that's nonsense. It's the Mana imbalance it's creating, pure and simple. They can't see spirits so it must be 'the gods.'" She snorted. "Typical hysteria."

"Mana is normally perfectly balanced, as all things should be," Dryad agreed.

"Some spirits just attack out of spite though," Salamando noted. "They blame all humans, despite the fact that most of them had nothing to do with the construction effort at all. With the fortress taking Mana they have less to use, meaning they go 'hungry' if you'll forgive the term. Many humans even opposed it for this very reason. They knew what would happen, or could at least guess. But spirits don't seem to get that. And as most humans can't really fight back, there's a lot of damage being done."

"But getting back to this idea of sealing it off," Anabeth continued, "how can we do that? It's not like water that can be seen and touched. It's Mana. It's just... In the air." She waved a hand in the air.

"Like follows like," Luna told her.

"What?"

"What she means is, Mana comes from what?" Dryad asked.

"We just said, the Mana tree."

"Right, exactly. A *tree*. And what do trees have?"

"Leaves?"

"And?"

"Roots."

"And??"

"Trunk-"

"They have seeds! Seeds!"

“Oh. Okay?”

I'm not sure where they're going with this either.

She sighed. “Sooo... Take the seeds of the Mana tree, put them in locations where Mana flows heavily, and pretty soon Mana will flow along those routes we've established between seeds.”

“Lot of work,” cautioned Gnome. “Covering the whole earth with seeds.”

“Would take time,” agreed Undine. “Time we may not have.”

“I can speed it up,” Lysanias told them. “My sword, before I came here I worked on it according to Inari's design. I see now what she had in mind. Once the seed is in place I can seal it, so the Mana should flow only along those channels between seeds immediately.”

The spirits looked brighter, they nodded and glanced between themselves. None raised any objection until Anabeth slammed a fist down on the table. “Wait, so is that it?” she demanded. “Do we really have an actual plan to save the freaking world? I can really- we can really do this?”

“You're stronger than you know,” Luna said kindly. “Haven't we all said that to you?”

Chapter 3

Because the fighting spirit is that of the enemy, flooding over the plaza.

When: It's now close to sundown

Where: The bar

Having taken several hours to explain who he was, how he could do what he could do, and all what he could do, it was now nearing sundown. The group ordered a meal while Anabeth told her story, which Lysanias felt was fairly interesting itself.

"I've always been able to see spirits, even when I was a little kid," she began. "My parents met in collage, my mother was studying Mana and my father was in the botany program. After they got married it seemed natural to combine the two fields and study the Mana tree, so they did. My mother was pregnant with me at the time, in fact there have been hints I was actually conceived *directly under* the branches of the tree but they always get really embarrassed when I ask about it so I've never gotten the full story."

The tree looking spirit seemed suddenly interested in anything but the conversation which Lysanias thought was telling, but Anabeth didn't notice and went on.

"In any case, I've been able to see spirits since I can remember. As far as my parents could tell I had MP as well, but of course I still couldn't do magic directly. I didn't have anyone to teach me, and it wasn't like we could just walk down to the library for some spellbooks. We've known Mana existed for ages, all one has to do is look around to know that, but humans being able to use it, that was something new. So my MP sat unused and I kept it a secret from anyone, seeming just a nice, ordinary girl."

And of course being so young you probably couldn't raise your "levels" and learn any spells on your own, if it works the same way here as with Terra. She learned most of her spells through Magicite, he stroked the hilt of his sword, but she learned a few on her own while raising levels, too. "But you're implying your MP isn't just sitting unused now? The spirits taught you spells?" *How did she or her parents know she had MP if she couldn't do anything with it? Or even that it was called MP? Some kind of 'meta-knowledge' like Terra had, so she could tell exactly how much MP or HP she had left?*

She shook her head. "Not exactly. The spirits say they can't teach me. What they can do though is take my MP to cast spells on my behalf."

"It's only fair," grumped Gnome. The others nodded.

"Other humans we give our power to use MP to summon us," Luna told him. "We then cast whatever spell they need, and we go back to where we were. Just because we happen to be nearby with Anabeth doesn't mean she can have us cast magic endlessly."

So do spirits not have MP? They just can do as much magic as they want?

She went on before he could ask. "I've always had one or more of the spirits around since I was old enough to talk, but with the recent upheavals they've all decided to stick with me for now."

Almost as if this lady is a... What's the word? A bridge between the human world and the spirit world. An "avatar" of the spirits, if you will. He fought down the urge to giggle. *I do see all the elements here, after all. But has she mastered them?*

"She seemed to want to help," Undine agreed. "And we're better together, given most humans can't see us. She can tell others what we want and we can do magic for her."

"And not doing magic directly means she can't get too power hungry," Shade added. "Magic does tend to corrupt humans. It's the darkness in them."

He sounds wistful, like he regrets that darkness in them, but yet it's his favorite thing about them.

"And so I have been," Anabeth went on. "Figured I could make a living using my ability to do magic, even indirectly. Mainly here in Cyntax, trying to keep spirits from doing too much damage. The regular police and hunters are keeping the city limits clear of the usual wildlife, which has also been riled up so travelers are at risk. They're either sensitive to the changes in Mana or like spirits have some direct connection to it, we don't know. If a spirit slips right by them and is a danger to people here, that's where I come in. And now you've come, saying there is a chance to put Mana back into balance again. Destroy the Mana fortress, like that

isn't just the hardest thing we could possibly do. That my traveling with the spirits wasn't an accident, but simply my fate to help save the world?"

"That's right," Lysanias assured her. "Everyone I've immediately met in the past after coming to a new world was central to my task in some way. We helped each other do what needed to be done."

"Wow. To think we actually stand a chance. That's... really a big responsibility." She leaned back in her seat. "Unless this is still some kind of trick, that even the spirits can't detect."

"It's not Mana," Dryad insisted. "I have no idea how he made the water float around. Or freeze. Or unfreeze. Or boil—"

"I get the picture," she told her.

"Me either," agreed Undine. "It's like he just commanded it to move, and the water obeyed."

But she wasn't listening. "Leave the city? Strike a blow directly at the fortress? Me? I don't know..."

"Think of it," Salamando urged, his flames growing a bit brighter in his excitement. "A once in a lifetime adventure. Traveling with a man from *another world*, ancient beings trying to destroy us, things to set *on fire!*" He looked over at the napkin laying there and it started to smolder, and Undine slapped a hand on it and put it out.

"Of course it's things you can set on fire," Undine muttered, rolling her eyes, "that get you the most excited."

"I know! Just think of it! All the things! On fire! So many things to set on fire. I can see it... er..."

The others were looking at him and he trailed off.

"Fire... Bad?" he asked.

"Anyway," Anabeth drew out. "I'll have to think about it."

"Of course. I'm not going to demand your help, or guilt you into it," Lysanias assured her. *What happens if she does say no? I try to find someone else? But who else than the person who knows all the local spirits personally?* "But I can offer incentives. I can make your sword able to harm spirits, or make you other magical items along the way. Plus if you like gold," he lowered his voice and leaned over the table, "I can turn any amount of, say, ordinary stones into as much gold as you want."

"That's a powerful argument," she admitted, looking at his grin. "Let me think about it, all right?"

"Of course. Shall we stay the night somewhere?"

"It is getting late, isn't it?" She looked around the bar, which had filled up while they had been talking, and was now in the process of emptying again. "I can take you to the hotel I'm staying at. I'll give you my answer in the morning."

"Fair enough."

After a bit of a shock and Lysanias gasping "how much?" when told the per-night rate for the hotel Lysanias was sitting in his room. Anabeth had agreed to cover him "for now" given he didn't have nearly enough coin on him to cover even a single night.

I guess one gold coin is like one dollar bill on other worlds. Maybe I'll just make a heap of coins tonight after I go to sleep. But she passed him something that looked plastic, not a sack of coin... Very odd. I guess I could always go out and see about killing the local wildlife. Set some of it on fire, that sort of thing. Bound to get gold that way, this is one of 'those' sorts of words.

"Think she'll say yes?" Rosalina asked him.

"It will be dangerous. Not everyone is cut out for that," he mused. *But she would have done something anyway, that's why we came to her, right? Can she even say no? If she was just to naturally go about this and I've given her time to think because I told her what's coming, she could very well refuse me and take a different path.*

"She fights rampaging spirits!"

"Hm? That's a different thing. This is going against the local government that built the fortress. It's bigger, it's a lot of things to think about. Not just the physical danger, but going

against your country." *Plus here she gets to walk around a local hero. No more of that if the government here considers her a threat.*

"Getting thrown in jail if you got caught, I guess?"

"That's one possibility. I hope she does say yes. We need a local guide and she has the kind of power we'll need to move around. Especially if there are wild animals out there that will attack us every few feet." *Because why wouldn't they do that? How else would we raise our "levels" and get money?* He shook his head.

"And not just because you want to travel with a cute girl?"

He looked her straight in the eyes. "I already am traveling with one. I would hardly look at another."

"Oh," she blushed. "You do know how to talk to the ladies. Good night Lysanias." She was a wand again.

Sometimes.

That night Lysanias stepped from his Dream into the local segment of the World of Dreams and looked around. He caught glimpses of those weird floating spheres as they seemed to be everywhere but things seemed normal here. *Nice not to have to look over my shoulder for shadow creatures. Let's just hope there are none nearby, I don't want to attract any. If what Jason said was true and there is only one World of Dreams shared across every reality. But for now...* He willed himself back to his room, then stepped over into the real world so he could dump a pile of gold coins onto the floor. Along with small pouches he could put them all into and then pull them from his sub-space pocket in groups. *Pulling coins one by one out of nowhere to pay for something would be just a tiny bit suspicious after all. People here can pull them out of "inventory" no doubt, as few or as many as they need. I don't have that luxury.*

With that done he headed back into the World of Dreams to have a look around the world he found himself in without having to worry about being seen. He first walked the streets a bit, towards the direction of the larger buildings in the distance, but quickly realized they were further away on foot than he cared for. So he simply rose a few inches into the air and zipped along the streets that way. Rows and rows of houses flashed past him, then he was on a major road and heading over a bridge that spanned what looked like a bay.

These people seem to have done all right for themselves. This all looks fairly technological, but then, this is probably what my world looked like before- He looked up. *Two moons! But that one is far too small to be our "chaos" moon. Interesting.* He stopped, looking up at them as his feet hit the road. *Without the sudden reappearance of magic we wouldn't have lost our civilization and needed to rebuild it. "Mana" was always here, just used by the spirits not by man. So of course man went ahead and- what?*

Out of the corner of his eye Lysanias detected movement and jerked his head, looking up at something that was in the sky. With him fixed on it the structure stayed in place, and Lysanias stared at it. *I look away and something impermanent like that will be someplace else. Is that the dream reflection of the fortress?* He concentrated on being able to fly again, and quickly rose into the air, speeding towards it. *Let's check you out, shall we? In fact, this is a dream and I want to be... there!*

He willed himself to be closer, feeling his body jump forward.

And then smash into something.

And then plummet towards the water below.

That didn't work out so well, he managed to think as he shook his head to clear it. *What in the world?* He flipped over and reasserted his dominance over himself and this domain, the water pushing itself out of the way as he got near it. He slowed, stopped, and then pushed off the water into the sky again, creating a huge geyser which immediately went back into stillness as he flew into the air. Naturally the fortress was gone. *Great.* He folded his arms across his chest and spun around, looking for the thing. *Would anyone really see me here?* He decided no and, after having flown higher just in case those vehicles went over

water he stepped back into the real world. Once again scanning the sky he caught sight of the fortress and willed himself closer.

There seems to be some kind of battle going on.

Summoning a pair of “magical” binoculars that let him see in detail so he didn’t have to get any closer he watched as a trio of spirits of some kind attacked the fortress. They seemed to wield lightning while on every flat surface people in uniforms shot back at them. With everything. Lysanias saw more of the customary guns he was used to along with some strange looking firearms that shot beams of energy, or fire, or even chunks of ice up at the figures that were circling. More of those spherical objects flew nearby as well, both seeming at a distance and closer up to shoot their own beams of energy at the spirits. All this while turrets containing larger guns swiveled and fired as fast as they could.

Those spirits are fast, to avoid all that! Do I help them? I’m not really that confident in my abilities like this, but without anything actively working against me it should be fine. There’s just no way those three small spirits are going to take out that huge place. At least let’s see what they have to say for themselves.

He tossed the binoculars and they vanished, as he wasn’t thinking about them being there anymore. With his mind only slightly occupied with keeping him in the air he concentrated on recalling this was just part of his dream, and willed all three of them to his side. They happened to be generating a ball of lightning between them and looked around stupidly as the fortress wasn’t under them anymore.

“Guys, take a break,” Lysanias told them. “You won’t take that place out with just the three of you. But I’m here to help. Come back with me and we can make a plan together.”

The three didn’t even acknowledge he was there, just let the power they were gathering between them go and flying back towards the fortress, where he was pretty sure they took up their attack again.

That was rude.

So he focused on just one of them, having seen them and knowing where they were he willed one back to his side and grabbed it. It felt fairly tingly, and again looked around as if confused. “Can we talk?” he asked it. “I’m trying to help you.” Again the spirit didn’t seem to notice he was there, simply heading back in the direction of the fortress. Lysanias had to choose to be dragged along, try to believe the creature *couldn’t* drag him along, or let go. He choose to let go, and the spirit rejoined the others. He looked down at himself. *Can they not see me? But I’m in the real world, there’s nothing special about this dream form that I was ever told. And they’re spirits, even if I was somehow ignored by those that couldn’t perceive the supernatural I would have to be physically invisible for them not to notice me. A spirit by definition is supernatural. I don’t know what to- crud.* He had taken the binoculars out and was watching the battle, one of the spirits being shot out of the sky by a man on the fortress. The other two didn’t seem to notice, simply went on with their attack.

They can see the spirits just fine. Wonder how they managed that? Special glasses? I can’t tell from here. Maybe they’ve spent a lot of time in a Mana rich area, like Anabeth. Those spirits... I feel for them, but if they’re not even going to acknowledge I exist, I don’t see how I can communicate with them enough to form a plan. Maybe teleport them further away? But in rapid succession the other two spirits were brought down, tumbling and burning up in the air as they died. The people on deck celebrated and most went back inside, the others taking their posts again with a military precision.

They are packing a lot of firepower, he mused. Some kind of magical weapons, if all the fire and ice and whatnot are any indication. It’s going to be a tough fight if we take them head on. The fortress started moving away, and Lysanias let it go, stepping back into the World of Dreams. At least I have a better idea now. Let’s see what else this world has to show me without people, and I can plan our next move when Anabeth wakes up. He smiled to himself. *This Dreaming thing is really going to work out I think.*

Chapter 4

Keep the old tryst, sweetheart, and thou shalt know if spirits walk.

When: The next day

Where: The inn

Lysanias woke the next morning after having spent the night roaming the city and getting in some practice high above the world. He didn't want to put too much "dreamer energy" into the world of dreams, but then having stepped back through wondered if "dreamer power" could leak through back into the world of dreams enough for the shadow creatures to sense it.

After all, dreamer energy may be mostly ignored in the world of dreams because the whole place is made of it. But if not, and there really is only one of them for all realities, would it be more suspicious to a passing shadow to feel dreamer energy coming through from the real world? Or less? The odds against a shadow feeling me while up in the sky must be remote though, right? And practicing in my own dreams is no good, Jason was correct that things are easier there and so I can't really tell if I'm improving or not.

But he had to practice, and so felt simply staying high in the sky was the safest bet. He was now walking down to breakfast with Anabeth, Rosalina, and the other spirits.

"Are we parting ways after this?" he asked, sitting down with some sort of bread like, breakfast food.

"I was up most of the night thinking about it," she admitted, sitting down across from him. "Quite apart from the chance to make history, maybe there is a reason I could always see the spirits. Maybe I really am meant to help balance Mana in the world by," she lowered her voice, "destroying the fortress."

"So you'll help me?"

She nodded. "It's crazy, but it sounds like you've been through worse. With the spirits to help me hopefully I won't be in too much danger."

"As long as you have MP we'll be glad to help you!" agreed Dryad.

"You're all heart," she only somewhat sarcastically replied.

It is odd they won't use magic on her behalf with her giving them her MP but hey, I don't make the rules in these places. I just get stuck wondering who came up with them.

"That's great news, thank you! Is there anyone else you might want to bring along? Anything we should pick up before we go?"

"If we're going with the seed plan, we'll have to stock up on food and water. The Mana tree is surrounded by a dense forest, it will take us several days on foot to get there."

"There aren't any roads near it?"

She shook her head. "Spirits won't allow it."

The spirits were nodding. "The humans gave up cutting trees near there right quick," Gnome told them. "When the ground buckled under them, or their machines caught fire, or darkness simply engulfed them."

"Will we be safe traveling through there?"

"Oh, of course," Luna assured them. "We don't mind some humans near there, if they're respectful of nature. It's just machinery and lots of activity that makes us jumpy."

"Speaking of spirits," Lysanias asked, sensing this was a good time to get some questions answered. "How single minded are most spirits? Say some were going to attack the... you know what. And someone tried to talk them out of it. Would they listen or just ignore the person and keep attacking?"

"Depends on the spirit," Shade decided. "If it's a low level spirit they aren't very bright. They probably wouldn't listen."

"Level? How does a spirit gain levels?"

Undine laughed. "Shade means a spirit's purpose, not level like 'are you level five yet?' Lumina, why don't you shed light on this?"

"But of course. Spirits like us represent a certain aspect of nature, as you can probably see."

"We're the boss spirits!" Gnome put in.

“Am I telling this or are you? But Gnome is not wrong. We are closer to humans in intellect, and are longer lived. Some spirits simply come into existence for a specific task, then dissipate again.”

“I see!” *So if those spirits came into existence to attack the fortress, no wonder they didn't seem to take notice of me. I wasn't their task.* “But wait, they live and then die just like that?”

“They're not alive in the same way we are,” Anabeth explained. “They're just manifestations of Mana, which is not alive or dead. It's like water, it simply is.”

“Excuse me,” Luna harrumphed. “Undine is like water, I am the glorious moon spirit! I am like-”

“A big ball of rock in the sky,” Gnome interrupted.

“I am not simply *rock!*” she insisted.

“You know what I mean!” Anabeth forestalled, waving a hand in front of them both.

“Don't start that argument again.”

I suppose I do. When I call up an angel I'm getting a specific one. But calling up, say the wind spirit, am I simply shaping energy and giving it a semblance of life or am I pulling a specific wind spirit from somewhere? There might be only one moon spirit per world but spirits of air and darkness wouldn't necessarily exist on the same level. The potential is there, it takes something to give that potential form. Actually I saw two moons here, does this world have two moon spirits?

Both spirits looked away from the other, crossing their arms.

“So if they attack the fortress and die, they don't really die?” he pressed.

“They would not, simply return to being Mana,” Dryad agreed.

That's a relief.

“It's one reason why we must come up with something quickly,” Sylphid told him. “I can tell the fortress is in the sky... That way.” They pointed. “And like you say, Mana is attacking the place more regularly as more is used. In desperation, Mana will gather more and more, creating larger and more dangerous creatures to attack the fortress until there is no more left, or the place is destroyed.”

“And what happens then?” Shade asked darkly. “Will Mana be satisfied, or will it rampage across the land until no fortress can ever rise again?”

“Consider, we feel it as a prison,” Lumina explained sadly. “Mana cooped up, forced into tanks or however they're storing it. Crystals maybe?”

“Mana has feelings?” he asked.

“It is not really spoken of,” Dryad told him. “A taboo among us, if you will. There are secrets of Mana humans are not to know, even you. Do not worry, it won't impact your mission here. But Lumina is right, we must do something before it comes to that. We do not control Mana, and we will not fight against spirits that seek to destroy the fortress.”

“Even to save humans,” Shade agreed, “should it be destroyed. We cannot fight ourselves, any more than your leg can fight your left ear.”

Could it be more 'alive' here? That would explain how spirits can manifest without someone like me calling them up. “Very well, I won't pry, or ask you attack fellow spirits. You answered my question, thank you.” *I can calm their anger, like the bear, so we shouldn't have to fight any. I hope.*

“Of course. Thank you for understanding,” Dryad said.

“One thing I don't understand,” he said after a moment of eating. “Anabeth-”

“We don't understand her either,” Gnome agreed.

She smacked him. “Go on.”

“Why do you carry a sword and not a gun? I know you have them.” *Having seen stores with them and those officers yesterday.*

“Can't charge up a gun,” she explained, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Sure, gun can do a lot of damage, but I bet a high powered attack from my- wait, can you charge your attack?”

“I have no idea what you mean by 'charge' my attack.”

"You know, you... you just, uh, you charge it." Her eyebrows scrunched together. "Wow, never had to try explaining it to someone before. Everyone here just knows."

Pity. Can't learn it then, if it's something innate to them and not a skill they learn. "You can probably show me once we leave town. What with the wandering monsters out there."

"Sure, sure. Wow, can't charge your attack. How do you even know you're at a hundred percent power after your last swing?"

"Still talking nonsense."

"Really?" She was looking at him like he was growing a third arm. "So are you always at a hundred percent power? So bizarre, but I wouldn't mind it."

So a plan was made to board a plane and fly to the continent where they could find the Mana tree. As he had no identity here she would simply buy two plane tickets, and he would wear wards that allowed him to board the plane unseen. With breakfast done they headed out, naturally after Anabeth packed her bags and put them into her inventory. They were waiting for a car to take them to the airport when Lysanias saw another of those weird orbs flying around and pointed it out to her.

"What are those things? They seem to be everywhere."

"They are," she replied with a frown. "Drones. They're the hot new thing. Everyone uses them. The police, the news agencies, regular people who are just nosy."

"Drones?"

"Sure. They stay aloft with Mana and transmit what they "see" back to the person that owns them. They're cheap to make so of course now you see them everywhere. They're awfully short range so at least you know if you see one floating over your pool that the person at the other end is close by."

"So at any one time you could be on a dozen cameras?" he asked horrified.

"Welcome to our world," she agreed with a chuckle. "Where privacy is dead and yet still people disappear and crimes go unsolved. Doesn't really make sense but there you are."

If these drones are powered by Mana, can those watching through them see spirits? Might want to pick up a few of them, if they're really something anyone can buy. Not only so I can take them apart to see how they work and then make my own while Dreaming, but they could be useful for scouting.

Soon enough the car they were waiting for pulled up, so Anabeth loaded her gear in the back and they were off.

"Not from around here?" asked the driver, a middle aged woman wearing what Lysanias hoped wasn't some kind of uniform. It didn't look official enough, and he wondered if this person drove people around for living or not. *If so, she's not very professional looking.* He had been looking around at the city as they wove their way through towards the airport.

"Ah, no, I'm here on business," he explained. "This was just a stop along the way."

"Too bad, it's a nice place to live."

"No it isn't," Anabeth countered. "The roads are terrible, we have two seasons, winter and summer, despite being so prosperous both homelessness and crime are on the rise, spirits have started rampaging about, I could go on."

"Don't let her fool you," said the woman with a laugh. "There's good everywhere you look."

"I wonder if that's true..."

Pulling up at the airport Anabeth handed over some gold, the woman thanked her, and drove off. "Now we'll see about getting to Alasker. We could simply travel to-"

"You'll ask who? Sorry to interrupt."

"What?" She looked at him with a blank look.

"You said getting to 'I'll ask her' who are you asking?"

"No Alasker, 'ah' no 'I'll' it's the name of the place we're going!"

"Oh. Carry on."

"Thank you. As I was saying we could travel to, say, port Sequeenca at the northern most border of this continent, it's about the same distance. But as Alasker is a place of ice

and snow nobody actually wants to go to, flights from there are cheaper and finding a boat to take us the rest of the way will be cheaper as well.”

Once I know roughly where it is, I can just take us there, one way or the other.

“Hadn’t you better get whatever it is going that will make you invisible?”

“Right!” He pulled a ward and his pen out, finishing it up so it could be keyed to her.

She still couldn’t just talk to him without looking like she was talking to herself, but at least she would know where he was. That done he slapped it on and they walked through the doors to get their tickets.

They ended up waiting a few hours for the next flight, and of course going through security took time.

“It’s been this way ever since the fortress was constructed,” she whispered to him.

“Someone’s afraid they’ll hijack a plane and fly to the fortress to bring it down.”

“Is it unpopular?”

“Everything is unpopular with at least some group or other,” she explained. “You could have a magic serum that cured cancer and at least one group would come out against it saying something like ‘cancer is only natural, should we really be curing it? What about all the doctors who would have made money treating it, are we really putting them out of a job?’ People are nuts sometimes.”

“Not like spirits!” Luna agreed.

“Somehow I can relate,” Lysanias added. *Even gods can be that way. Oh, here’s some free will, enjoy. Oh, I don’t like what you’re doing with your free will. I’m going to destroy you now.*

The flight was rather boring for the both of them, Anabeth couldn’t talk to him the plane was fairly crowded despite what she said about the place they were going being far to the north and thus snow covered most of the time. He couldn’t get out Rosalina because she would be seen by everyone, so he made some wards and poked at the hubPad. Anabeth looked on while trying to look like she wasn’t, and he could at least explain what he was doing. Finally they landed, and the pair checked in to another hotel for the night. They stood at the door of Lysanias’ room, having gotten separate ones.

“In the morning we’ll see about finding a boat, the only way to reach the island of the Mana Tree. It’s going to be weeks of travel I’m afraid, hopefully we can rent one for that length of time. I doubt we’ll find anyone going there at this point.”

“We can’t fly there? I know you said near the tree spirits stopped you building roads but...”

She shook her head. “Place is too small. It’s an island with the tree at the center. What isn’t steep rock walls is forest. There are paths, I mean you can’t miss the tree once you get close, and people do go there. There’s a small town, and regular deliveries are made. Anyone going as a tourist goes with a sightseeing tour, they last about three hours. But most if not all have been canceled.”

“The spirits aren’t exactly happy with people right now,” explained Dryad. “So traveling on the island isn’t recommended.”

“We won’t be attacked, will we?”

She snorted. “Of course we’ll be attacked, we’ll be wondering out in the wilderness. But not by spirits. It’s just the usual wildlife there will be *super* aggressive. My weapon skill is sure to level up at least *twice* while we’re there!” She seemed and felt super excited about this, but Lysanias wasn’t too sure. “Plus my affinity for the spirits if I have them use a lot of magic. Remind me to pick up some fairy walnuts before we leave.”

“Sure. But where, exactly, are we going from here? I mean if you could point to the tree, where would you point?”

She looked out the window. “I don’t know, do I look like an atlas? It’s straight west from here, the Mana tree island isn’t much smaller than this one. I have no idea which way that is but it’s west. Why?”

“Let’s just say we’ll be there in the morning, forget weeks of travel.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Oh really? I’ll be very interested in how you pull *that* off. See you in the morning, Lysanias.”

“Sleep well.”

He went into his room and looked around. “Now to see if there’s a map of the world in here, or maybe I can pull one up on the hubPad,” he mused to himself. “I need some way to tell which way is due west.” His right wrist buzzed, and he nearly fell over trying to jump away from his own hand. He brought his wrist up, and the display on his watch lit up. On the display was a compass, currently pointing to SE.

Oh, right, I used this to track my flight once before. “I almost completely forgot about you,” he said to it.

“I know,” it replied. “And as I must be addressed to provide information you should try to think of me more often.”

Is it just me or does it sound... sulky? Wait a second, maybe I can work this a different way.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he told it. “But how did you respond this time? I didn’t call on you?”

“You said ‘hubPad, I need some way to tell which way is due west’ and I have not been given any other moniker by you, I took that to mean you were addressing me. By your speech you were not, and so this was a bit of a stretch, but I am nothing if not flexible.”

“I did say that, didn’t I? Let me run this by you. I was going to try and find the place tonight in dreams. That way I could get a look at it, and know where to put a gateway using the One Power. But what I just flew there myself and sent the gateway *back* for Anabeth and the spirits?”

“Either one accomplishes the goal,” the watch replied without hesitation. “The question is, would being in your dream form be more comfortable for you flying over the frigid waters of the ocean for hours?”

“Er, probably. And honestly, dreaming myself there would take Dream Time, meaning even if I flew for hours I would wake up in the night, and still be able to do other Dreaming...” He trailed off. *If it took me 4 hours to fly there, but I set an alarm for an hour could I go there while my dream form was still flying there? Could I actually meet myself there... before I arrived?*

“Are you asking for my opinion?”

“What?” He shook himself out of it. *Dreaming is weird.* “How quickly can I get there?”

“Presumably you are only as fast in Dreams as you believe yourself to be. As I do not know the coordinates of where you wish to reach or your top speed while in the Dream state, that question is impossible for me to answer.”

“True. I could put some kind of bubble around myself maybe, that could keep the cold out.” *Otherwise I would have ice cold air blowing in my face for the entire length of the trip. Not pleasant.*

“May I suggest something?”

“Of course!”

“Please refer to the larger display.”

“The what? Oh, the hubPad!” He got it out and turned it on. The screen lit up with a teardrop shape barrier around Lysanias, and an animation was playing indicating he was flying. He saw arrows flowing around it, which he took to be the air it was pushing through.

“By using a shape such as this one, which is narrower in front, it will be easier to move through the air because you will be pushing more of it aside instead of running into it, like a wall.” The image changed to show a perfect sphere, and the air hitting it and being deflected. “This is called science, an area I am well suited to advise on.”

It’s true, that is a weakness of mine. “I see that.” *I don’t know if it works that way, while dreaming, but sure. In this world or the World of Dreams there’s still air. Some physical law still applies, heck I have to concentrate to fly so there’s still gravity. I could make a bubble in that shape that had the property of slipping through the air without resistance. It could carry me, rather than me trying to maintain it and fly at the same time.* He nodded. “Very well. I’ll take you off, Dream myself into my room, take you with me, and when I get there I can just will myself back here and leave you for when I wake up. That way you can keep me moving west and on track.”

"I will stand ready," it said.

I think we have a plan. Let's go to bed so I can put it into action. Man, Dreaming may turn out to be my Most Useful Skill Ever!

Chapter 5

You were not born a statue nor rooted like a tree. You were born a wild one; a spirit pure and free

When: That night

Where: The world of Dreams

Having realized he was Dreaming and successfully stepping into the World of Dreams he willed himself to the only place he knew, the hotel. He appeared outside it, looking around in the “daylight” as it was never really night there.

I know where the hubPad is, in the real world that is. Can I bring something here if I know it is there? He concentrated, picturing the watch part of the hubPad dropping into his hand. He peeked an eye open, closed it again, and gave it another shot. The watch dropped into his hand. “Can you still function here?” he asked it.

“I can,” it answered. “But my functionality will be limited for the purpose you now intend for me. There is no magnetic field here thus my accuracy over time for determining ‘west’ will diminish. I can still access the hub database, though as before full access to all my functions are restricted until you are given membership access.”

“I recall, thank you. I’ll step us back across for the journey to the tree. I just didn’t want to head into my room and possibly wake myself up if I didn’t have to. That would be embarrassing.”

“No doubt.”

He willed himself to the roof of the place and looked around, wondering if any drones might be nearby to catch him coming out of nowhere. With no way to really tell he simply shrugged and thought about leaving the dream. Luck was with him, he managed it on the first try, and stood in the cold thinking about his next move. *I can make anything, it’s just if I don’t know how I would make it otherwise, I have to concentrate on it or the thing I made simply vanishes. That would also be awkward, if I was in flight when it happened.* To that end he simply created a silvery looking, teardrop shaped ship around himself, and sat in the plain looking seat at the center of the chamber inside. Before him was a screen that showed the outside, and he nodded. The ship didn’t have any propulsion it was basically a thick metal shell so he didn’t have to concentrate on its existence, freeing him up to move the ship around by his own efforts. Mentally commanding the ship to rise and turn, he looked at the watch which was back to the compass mode. When it showed W straight ahead he cocked his head to one side.

“What would be the most efficient means of propulsion for this ship, hubPad?” he asked.

“If any means may be used, no matter how fantastical?”

“That’s right. I can simply will it to move just as I’m doing now, but if there’s some way I can make it move very fast naturally, I’d like to do that instead.” *Over the ocean it will be very hard to tell how fast I’m going so I’d rather have some guaranteed method of propulsion in place right from the start.*

“Then simply imagine that the ship is ‘falling’ sideways due to gravity. Or specify a point of gravity in front of the ship relative to our position so the ship is pulled along. This way it will continue to accelerate without limit. Just be careful to absorb any momentum this system has accumulated before you stop maintaining such an effect.”

This ‘system?’ What could it mean- “Ah, if I stop the ship but not myself with it, I’ll continue moving and smash through the front there.” He pointed. *Or simply drop out of the sky and slam into the water below, smashing myself and the ship to pieces.*

“Correct.”

Could my dream form withstand that? Wait, who was it that got squished by a rock? This guy, that’s who. Okay, let’s give that a try. He concentrated, imagining that gravity no longer pulled him down but straight ahead.

And the ship leapt forward. After just two minutes of acceleration due to this new force of gravity the ship was traveling over 4,000km/hour, meaning it could cross the USA (to

choose a random example) in an hour. This was shoving him back in his seat and making his eyeballs pop out (or more accurately compress) so he hastily thought about not going any faster than this. The ship stopped accelerating and simply cruised through the night sky. Of course he didn't realize he was moving at almost 4 times the speed of sound but we'll give him a break, he's new at this physics stuff.

And yes, some people along the coast heard some strange noises that night.

"Astonishing," remarked the watch. "While I believed what I suggested was possible for you, I did not believe you would be able to bend natural law with so little effort. I will revise my estimations of you and your capabilities."

You know, I could probably take out the fortress all by myself with something like this. Figure out where it is, teleport some distance away, create a huge block of metal, give it a gravity direction not down but towards the fortress, and let natural law do the rest. Can you imagine knocking it out of the sky with a brick traveling even faster than I am now? I imagined being pulled along by the same amount of gravity I feel pulling me down. If I imagined an even stronger gravity whatever was being pulled along would go that much faster. Still, better pay attention I could miss the island at this speed and have to double back before I knew it.

"Out of curiosity," he asked, suddenly realizing something. "What is the best way to stop, once we get there?"

"This may have been a better question to ask before setting off? Perhaps I must revise my estimate of your intelligence downward even as I raise the estimate of your capabilities."

He glared at the face of the watch. "I don't need you telling me things I already tell myself, just answer the question!"

"Very well. Conventionally, if that can be said to exist for you at this point, I would suggest placing a counter gravity field opposite but unequal to the original one, allowing velocity to slowly become zero as this force was allowed to strengthen over time. Both could then be dismissed. With your command of natural forces and unreality, I would simply translate the kinetic energy of this system into some other form, such as light, directing it upwards. That would stop us without harm."

"Er, aren't we moving fairly quickly?"

"That is a correct assumption."

"How much light would that translate into? I don't want to blind anyone that happens to be looking in that direction."

"So make the light coherent and direct it upwards."

There was a pause. "Do what now?"

"Normal light is random, it fills a space much like water. By making the photons of light you are translating from our velocity all travel in the same direction, none would strike the retinas of those below us. It could then be as bright as it needed to be with no danger to those below."

"I see." *So turn movement into light, then catch the ship with my will as we'll immediately start falling again now that gravity will be back pulling us in a downwards direction.* "I'll give it a try."

And so with the island coming up fast Lysanias concentrated on Dreaming his energy of motion into a thin column of light pointed upwards and away from the ship. It instantly stopped, throwing what was essentially a laser beam into the night that carried a paltry (if those calculations are correct) 1.5% of the energy one might find in a nuclear explosion. (61,728,404 joules) Gravity reasserted itself, but Lysanias simply stepped back into the World of Dreams, getting it on the second try. He then stopped himself from falling, knowing the ship would simply fall into the water below and vanish beneath the waves. *Even if someone found it, it's a hunk of metal, there's nothing they could get from it.* The watch at his wrist silently recorded all this, sensors measuring the energy, time, and effort he seemed to be putting in.

"That seemed to work fairly well," he announced. "We'll head over to the tree from here, I don't want to have to explain myself to anyone who may be there already how I got there. The landscape should be the same, so good enough for me to create a gateway there in the morning."

"As you say," the watch replied.

He flew the rest of the way under his own power and landed beside the trunk of the tree. *It's absolutely enormous*, he thought to himself, looking up at the branches high above. *It's the tallest and thickest tree I've ever seen in my whole life. Even Avendesora would look like a shrub compared to this tree. No wonder Anabeth sounds so awed when she talks about waaaaaaa-*

Lysanias had been walking around the base of the tree, paying no attention to the ground before him. So of course he tripped over something, which gave a cry of surprise and started smacking him.

"Ow! What the- quit it- ouch- what's going- please stop- ow you got me right in the- what is going on!?" he managed between slaps. Finally he untangled himself and scrambled away, while the figure he had tripped over pressed her back to the trunk of the tree in fright. Lysanias stared at her, trying to figure out how someone could be *here* and coming up blank. She had very long golden hair and was wearing a simple white dress with no shoes. Lysanias couldn't figure out how old she looked, thinking she was somewhat like a person that worked with the One Power in that regard.

"Don't. Scare. Me. Like. That!" she managed, breathing heavily. "Where did you come from?"

"Me?" Lysanias managed. "What about you? How can you even be here?"

"I live here!" she snapped. "And I don't appreciate being... sprawled upon!"

"Sprawled up- now look here! I'm sorry about tripping over you but I didn't expect anyone to actually live here. How can you even be here? It's impossible! Did you get trapped in a dream or something? Can that happen here?"

"Dream?" She looked confused, some of her anger draining away. "What are you talking about, dream?"

"You don't know where you are?" he asked after a moment. "This is the World of Dreams, how can you not know that?"

"Dreams? You mean I'm dreaming?" she demanded.

Now we're getting somewhere. "Exactly, you're dreaming. How long have you been here? If it's been too long..." *your body is probably dead or considered in a coma.*

"... I don't know," she admitted. "A long time, I guess. Nothing ever seems to change here. I guess now I know why." She snapped her fingers. "That's why it's never night time! Or why no one ever seemed to visit me. I wondered about that!"

She wasn't lucid. She was just stuck here in the World of Dreams as her unaware dream self. But what could cause that? If she came here by accident, as my teachers said could happen, in the moment after she realized she was dreaming but before she could wake her body died? Would her dream body stay behind? Usually it went the other way, and the person's body died. They didn't do a lot of studies on the other way around, for obvious reasons.

"What are you staring at? Haven't you ever seen a girl before?" This was delivered strongly at the beginning, but at the end she was almost mumbling and blushing furiously.

"What?" He shook his head. "Sorry, I was just thinking how you might have come here. Look, where do or did you live? Maybe it only seems a long time because it's a dream. If you're stuck asleep because of an accident or disease I can probably wake you up. Then you can go back to your life."

"Oh no," she shook her head. "I can't leave, it's impossible. But I do thank you for the offer."

"How do you know? You didn't even know you were dreaming until I told you!"

She laughed and pushed herself away from the tree. It seemed all was forgiven, and now that she wasn't in flight or fight mode was a little shy. She was looking down and scuffing one foot on the ground. "Oh, I know. So what should I call you, and do you meet all the girls by falling all over them?"

Now it was his turn to color. "Not *all* of them, no. I'm Lysanias, what's your name?"

She blinked at him as if he had just asked her 'what is the airspeed velocity of the unladen swallow?' and stopped dead. "My... name?"

"Yes." *How long...*

"I don't remember," she finally admitted. "I haven't spoken to anyone in so long, I'm surprised I even remember how. My name, I know I had one."

"How long *have* you been here?"

She glanced back at the tree. "A very long time," she replied wistfully.

"Wait, are you connected to the tree somehow?"

She grinned a little and walked towards, then past him. "You'll have to figure that out for yourself. I can't tell you. Come on."

Lysanias followed, scowling. He recalled the words of the spirits not long ago. *There are secrets of Mana humans are not to know, even you.* "A taboo?" he asked.

"You could call it that. Come on over here, I won't hurt you." She put one hand up, looking up at the branches above them. Lysanias shrugged and walked over to her. "Put your hand right here," she tapped the back of it with her finger, "and use all that manly strength of yours to push me past this spot."

"Uh, if you say so..." *I don't have my equipment but I suppose I'm as strong as I believe I am, here. Still.* He started to push, and while she seemingly just stood there faintly smiling at him he couldn't budge her arm past that point. He finally gave up.

"Satisfied?" she asked.

"For the moment, but there must be something I can do."

"But you've already done something!" she insisted. "This is a dream, right?"

"That's right."

"So I should be able to do..." She held a hand out and a ball of light appeared. She laughed, spinning it and holding it in both hands above her head. "Or this!" She stopped and concentrated, holding a hand out before her. A wooden sign appeared and she whipped her hand down, which drove it into the ground. Lysanias peeked around it.

"You're dreaming?" he read.

"In case I forget," she told him with a smile. "Now that I know this, maybe I can at least amuse myself rather than just sitting around. Maybe I'll learn to paint."

"You can just wish paintings into existence..."

"I probably could. But wouldn't it be more satisfying to just wish *paints* and brushes into existence and try to figure it out on my own? Or I could create instruments and work out how to play them, or write books."

That no one will ever read. Pretty sad, if you ask me. Was my making her lucid a kindness, really? She'll be more bored than ever, now. "I guess you're right."

"I usually was, even back when I was- anyway. So that takes care of me, what are you doing here? Come to think of it, you said there's a whole world of dreams? Is that where you come from?"

There's only one creature that 'comes' from the world of dreams. Pray you never meet it. "That's a long story."

"I've got the time if you do."

I suppose there's no harm in it. "I needed to see this place so I can come here in the waking world, and do it quickly. It's a weeks long boat ride otherwise and I don't have that kind of time."

"Why not?"

"Because the Mana Fortress is draining Mana from the world, and if I know who is running the place, they'll use it to destroy the world."

She gasped and put her hands over her mouth. "You're kidding?!"

He shook his head. "Afraid not. I've been sent into this world from another, to help stop that from happening. Like I said, a long story."

"I want to hear it all! And what's going on the world, if you don't mind. Please? I felt something was happening to Mana and while I don't think I can really help, at least give me some idea of what to expect."

I suppose this is dream time, I should have hours and hours at my disposal. Wanted to get in some practice but I can do that the next set of hours I have during my next dream.

"Very well. To begin with you have to understand that multiple realities exist..." He went through the whole thing, conjuring up dream images of places he had seen and things he had

done. He ended with coming here, and their plan to use the seeds of the tree to “pin” Mana to the ground, denying it to the fortress.

“Now that I do have some expertise in,” the woman told him. She had listened quite attentively, sitting on a tree root as he talked. Now she leaned forward. “You say the sword is the key?”

“Inari said I had done the work properly, that the sword would absorb, redirect, and seal, magic. I didn’t understand why it had to do that until we came up with this plan. But it seems this is the plan she had in mind as well, so I have confidence in it.”

She hummed softly and got up, pacing before him. “That doesn’t solve the biggest problem,” she admitted after a moment. “And I don’t see how a sword is going to solve that problem either.”

“What do you mean? What problem?”

“The problem is that the Tree of Mana,” she patted the trunk of the tree next to her, “is female. There are no male trees of her type anywhere in the world. Without male trees to produce pollen, you’re not going to get any seeds to take with you.”

There was a pause as Lysanias digested this new information. “You mean trees can be male or female?”

Chapter 6

You are always there for me when my spirits need a little lift.

When: A moment later

Where: The reflection of the Mana Tree island in the World of Dreams

“Not all of them,” said the girl. “Some trees can be both, it’s true. But it’s best to have, you know, contact from another, rather than just... *you know!*” She was blushing furiously now and not looking at him.

“Great, so what are we going to do? We need something to pin Mana to, and Anabeth seemed really sure about the seeds idea.”

“I don’t know, I’m stuck here.” She looked high up into the sky. “Branches maybe?”

Pretty high up to get any. “It’s not the same thing, and I’d feel odd breaking branches off the Mana Tree. That doesn’t seem right.”

“I wish I could help.”

“So do I. Let me think a minute.”

“Of course. I’m enjoying the company.”

Lysanias wandered around the base of the tree, thinking about what he could do.

Could I turn myself into this type of tree? Would I produce pollen in the same way? I don’t know much about trees, we’ve proven that. There just so much I don’t know, trees being male or female. Ha! Who would have guessed? I suppose people that study... plant life? Why didn’t Anabeth know there were no seeds to be found? I thought her parents studied the Mana Tree itself. Could I turn another tree into her type of tree with alchemy? Turning a person into something wears off, but again would the pollen be different?

“There was something you said,” the girl spoke up. “Didn’t you say the World of Dreams connected to all worlds?”

“So I’ve been told.”

“Can’t you then just step into a world where there’s a male version of the Mana Tree? I mean you said all possibilities play out across these other worlds, right?”

Lysanias stared at her. “That’s...” *Wait, that opens up a whole different way of thinking. If I can really use the World of Dreams as a “hub” of sorts and I needed something, I could just search through it until I found it. And then who could stop me from taking it? What a-*

“Stupid idea, sorry, I guess I’m not helpful at all,” she finished glumly.

“What? No, that’s a terrific idea! I don’t exactly know how to go between worlds through the World of Dreams but it must be possible. Yeah, I can see that working out!”

“Really?” She broke into a wide grin. “You really think so?”

“I really do! I’m going to go try it right away.”

She spread her arms. “I’ll be here when you get back, believe me.”

“I’ll think about what I can do about that, but for now, thanks. I’ll see you soon.”

“And if I don’t? Thanks. For waking me up.”

He nodded and looked upwards, past the branches of the tree, and let himself go.

All around him now were dreams. Looking like tiny stars in the night sky, the dreams of all the people in all the worlds spread out before him in all directions. He couldn’t see himself, simply floated as Dream energy, but he knew he would probably have to start here.

One of the lessons we were taught was need, he thought to himself, “looking” around. If we really needed something we could close our eyes, take a step, and hopefully get closer to the thing we needed. But we could end up anywhere, so it wasn’t something to be done lightly. I need a male version of the Tree of Mana. Someone must be dreaming of one, and if I step from their dream into their reality, I can get some flowers from it and we can pollinate, that’s the word right? Pollinate our Tree. What could go wrong?

He closed his “eyes” meaning the miniature suns of dreams went away, and focused on what he needed. *A male version of the Mana Tree. Same species. Flowers. And step.* He opened his eyes, not that he could tell the scene had changed. But something was different. To his right was a dream that looked different than the others. It had a misty darkness around it, something he had never heard mentioned. *Of course they train for years and I had only got the most basic course. And they didn’t come here often, there was no need for them to. But*

it's all I have. This is a step on the road to the answer, or a really terrible idea. He put forth a "hand" and touched the dream, knowing he would be sucked inside and totally at the mercy of whoever was dreaming this dream.

When he opened his eyes he saw a very flat field, almost an endless landscape with a single road cutting it in two. Before him were two young women, both with dark skin. The one facing him had a ponytail, dark jacket and jeans. She had a necklace on, something flowery, in a crescent. The one who had her back to him had short hair, and wore all blue. She was just saying "You're weak, you run. Nobody's coming, Yaz."

"I think you're wrong about that," Lysanias said, putting a hand on her shoulder. "Because someone did."

The woman's eyes narrowed. "Who are you?"

This close, he could feel a few things fairly easily. One, this person who had last spoken was a part of the dream. The person facing him was the Dreamer. "Telling you would be pointless," he told her, concentrating. She popped like a bubble as he concentrated on her unreality, seeing past her because she wasn't there, and like that she wasn't. "Yaz, she said? Hi there, I'm Lysanias. Can you direct me to your version of the Mana Tree, by any chance?" *And hopefully it's male?*

But the girl just turned away, looking down the road and moaning "I'm all alone, she's right."

"Uh, I'm standing right here. Look, I'm going to step into your reality, we can talk there. Don't freak out okay?" *I just hope this works!* He concentrated and willed himself into wherever her sleeping body was. He found himself inside what looked like an apartment, more nicely furnished than the one belonging to Bo. Still, glancing around he saw what was probably a flat screen TV, there was a phone on the table next to her, so clearly this was a technological civilization. *Will she even know what a Mana Tree is, could this world also have both magic and technology? What was-* He whipped his head back around to look at the robed figure standing there. He looked like an old guy, totally bald with some weird tattoos on his head. *Creepy.*

"Who are you?" both demanded of the other. They glared at each other.

"What are either of you doing in my sister's apartment?" another voice demanded, and both looked to see the young woman awake.

"You're going to be a problem, aren't you?" asked the man.

Lysanias willed a copy of Ragnarok into his hand and raised it. "If you mean her harm, you had better believe it." *Oh man, that was so cool!*

"Parlor tricks," the man grumped, and vanished in a swirl of darkness.

Wait, he put the extra effort into making a smoke cloud before teleporting? Who is this guy? He looked creepy but I have to admit, he knows how to make an exit. He lowered the sword. "Are you all right?"

"Answer my question, who are you?" the girl demanded.

"I'm Lysanias, didn't you hear? I was just in your dream. Want a sword? It's not magical or anything so it'll stick around with me. Seems a shame to just wish it out of existence again."

"Sure, just put it over there," she hastily agreed, gesturing into the other room.

"Great." He turned to walk over there but then she stood up. "Hang on, you *were* in my dream, weren't you? On the road!"

"That's right. I'm not here to hurt you, believe me. I'm looking for something, a particular plant I hope you might have. But I saw your dreams being, well, messed with for lack of a better term, and thought you might need my help."

"I might. Look, can I see that sword?"

"Of course!" He handed it to her, and she jumped back, holding it before her. "That's not really necessary."

"You just stay right there until I sort all this out!" she snapped, grabbing her phone up. She awkwardly dialed it one handed and seemed to be asking someone to come get her, Lysanias was looking around the room, a ball of light in his hand.

No evidence of magic, from what I can tell. That's a light switch, and that must be the light. That's clearly a TV, strange how so many realities have them, and I can see other buildings and cars outside.

Suddenly a strange sound filled the air and into the corner of the room materialized a blue box with "police" written on it.

Wait, maybe there is magic here, and she just called the cops on me! I guess I can leave at a moment's notice by stepping back into the World of Dreams for this corner of reality so let's see where this goes.

The door flew open and a woman emerged, and Lysanias did a double take. "If you're with the police then I've really stepped into the most bizarre reality so far." She wasn't dressed in a uniform of any kind, not any that he recognized anyway. She was wearing a blue shirt with some bands of color at the top, a long coat, and dark blue pants.

"Came quick as I could," she said. "Did I get the time right?"

"For once," replied the other girl, only half sarcastically.

"Hey, the TARDIS brings us where and when we need to be, not where it's most- hang on. Who did you get that sword, and why are you holding him? No, strike that. Reverse it. Who is that, and how did you get a *sword*? You know I don't approve of weapons!"

"Doctor, when creepy looking old men can teleport into me friend's flat in the middle of the night, I think I'm entitled to a little protection!"

She has a point there. But how does she know I'm technically an old man? The beard doesn't make me look that much older does it?

"Teleport?" The Doctor, if that was what she was called, pulled something from under her coat and started waving it at Lysanias.

"Is that a wand? Is there magic here?" he asked. *And me without my ring of reflection!*

"Of course not!" she scoffed. "It's me sonic. Hang about, getting some weird readings from you." She was looking at it as though it was going to tell her something.

His watch buzzed and he looked down it. "You were scanned," scrolled across the display. "Harmless, so I didn't block it."

"Thanks," he told it.

"Will someone tell me what's going on?" wailed Yaz.

"Once I know what's going on, I'll be sure to fill you in," promised the Doctor. "Come on, we've got to get Gram and Rayan, something's happening around here and I mean to get to the bottom of it. You want to come too? I'm making all sorts of new friends today. Come on then!" And she dashed back into the police box. Yaz edged around it and backed into it, and Lysanias shrugged. *They may need my help. May as well stick around to at least be sure she's safe.*

Stepping into the box he felt a weird sensation roll over him, and he looked around. There was a whole spaceship control room in there, along with a scared looking girl in very different garb trying hard not to be noticed across the way.

"Wait a second," he began. "Is this a pocket dimension?"

"A what?" asked Yaz.

"An offset dimension, with that blue box being the entrance. Was it just an illusion?"

"It's actually a little bit of offset dimensionality and a pinch of spacial compression," yelled the Doctor. "Close the door so we can get going!"

He pulled the door shut and she started fiddling with the controls, making that odd noise start up again.

Spacial compression? You mean like what I do with alchemy? Taking something and just crushing it down so the mass stays the same but the volume decreases? Something like that?

"Haven't you put that sword down yet?" the Doctor asked Yaz. "I do have to admit, the craftsmanship on it is top notch."

"You should see the real one." Lysanias walked around the parameter, admiring the giant yellow "crystalline" pillars that came up out of the floor and lit the place up. In the center one was going up and down, while blue light filtered in from all angles. "And you're sure this is technological, not magical?"

"Magic is science we don't understand yet!" quipped the Doctor.

Maybe in your universe.

Yaz reluctantly set the sword down and pointed to the girl. "Who's that?" This of course made everyone look over at her, something she was obviously not comfortable with.

"That's Tajira. I'll make introductions when we're all back together. Ah, we've landed!"

So the Doctor picked up two more people. Ryan, a dark skinned young man who was nearly bald, and an older gentleman named Graham who said he was Ryan's grandfather. With that they were off, and she bent over the console looking at something.

"And I'm Lysanias," he finally was able to say. "I'm looking for a tree."

"A tree?" asked Ryan.

"Huge tree. I have a female one, I need a male one. Hoping someone in this reality knows where one might be. You can't miss it, it would grow bigger than any tree-"

"Hang on, did you say reality?" asked the Doctor. "And don't give me that, I can clearly see them right here!"

"See? What?" he asked.

"You'll get used to her having two or three conversations at once eventually," Graham told him. "Did you say reality?"

"That's right, I'm from outside yours. I'm actually Dreaming myself here, this isn't my real body. See what?"

"These hairs I found from a creature seven hundred years ago. A creature the TARDIS insists it's never seen before, which is clearly impossible."

"I can tell you why that is," Lysanias told them.

"Oh yeah? Go on then!" challenged the Doctor.

"In this form I don't have access to most of my senses, but I can tell one thing. Dream energy. The only things in this room giving off dream energy are me, something very faintly over there which I assume is these hairs she's talking about, and you." He turned to face Tajira. "Faintly, but it's there."

"You're dreaming yourself here?" asked Yaz. "Is that why I saw you in my dream?"

"Exactly. I stepped from the World of Dreams to your dream, and from there into your reality"

"To look for this tree," Graham clarified.

"That's right."

"Eh, not the weirdest story I've heard, traveling with her," he said to Ryan.

"You got that right. Wait a second, how many senses do you have?"

"Uh, let's see, the usual five. Then ESP, so that's my sixth. I can sense life energy, that's seven. I can sense spiritual energy, that's eight. I can sense magic, that's nine, though I'm not really good at that one, I just have so many things to practice that's never been a priority. I can sense the One Power, but that's a type of magic and I sort of "see" it out of the corner of my eye rather than sense it so I don't really count that one. And I have a danger sense though the force so that's ten. Eleven would be sensing things that don't belong in the world I'm currently in. Need to practice that one a lot more, actually. I suppose my sensing vibration though Earth Bending could count separat-"

"Now you're just making stuff up, that's a cartoon!" Yaz scoffed. "Earth Bending, you had me going there for a second. Who are you really, how did you get into the apartment?"

"You did see me pull the sword out of nowhere, right?" He willed it to him and it vanished, appearing in his hand. "Why is my having Earth Bending so hard to believe? I learned it from Korra herself." He put the sword down again as everyone had taken a step back. The Doctor was scanning him again. "Really?"

"I don't know what you are, or how you tie into all this," she finally decided. "But I'm keeping my eye on you!"

And if I do something you don't like, what exactly are you going to do to me? Scan me into submission? You're the one who admitted she didn't like weapons. "I just need some flowers from a male version of the Mana Tree, so I can make some seeds and seal Mana away from the fortress before it absorbs enough to destroy the world."

"That all sounds vaguely familiar somehow..." Graham mused. "Can't put my finger on it though."

"Anyway, you all called me at the same time, that's not a coincidence. What happened?" asked the Doctor. "Ryan, you start!"

So Ryan told the tale of how he was staying at a friend's house who was having nightmares, and how that friend had been stolen away under his nose. Yaz said she had seen the same man, and wondered if her sister had been taken, she hadn't bothered to check before calling the Doctor and rushing off. Graham said he had been seeing visions of someone pleading to be let out, with no sighting of the man at all. Tajira said the place she was staying had been attacked by hideous looking creatures and the Doctor said everyone except her was missing.

"And this was seven hundred years in the past?" Lysanias asked, a bit concerned.

"That's right," confirmed the Doctor.

"And you just plucked her out of her own time? In what appears to be a time machine? That seems wildly irresponsible!"

"Not if you know what you're doing."

"Know what you're- Do you?" He looked to the others, who looked a little concerned and not exactly rushing to her defense. "Does she?"

"Course she does," Graham finally decided. "I mean sure, we met Tesla, almost got him killed a couple of times. Helped out Rosa Parks, made sure the past as we knew it played out correctly, that sort of thing. She does good, our Doctor."

"I'll take your word for it."

"Eh now, I'll not have you waltzing in here and telling me how dangerous mucking about with time is," the Doctor protested. "You think I don't know? Things work out."

"Yeah, who are you to come in here and question us?" Ryan asked.

"Nobody, apparently," he agreed. "Can we get back to finding my tree now?"

"No time for that," the Doctor told them. "We can look for plant life after we get Ryan's friend back, and Tajira's people too. But how to get there, that's the question."

"Get where?" asked Yaz.

"They must have been taken somewhere, right?"

"We bait the mousetraps with cheese," Tajira spoke up. "Why does this feel similar?"

True. Clearly whoever this guy is he could have just as easily taken any one of them, and the Doctor would have gone running to their rescue. But he didn't. He just showed himself and then teleported away. So they know he's connected to it, but are still all together to plan. Makes more sense to steal one of them away, wouldn't that have made her more sloppy? Get in, rescue who was taken? This way they're on edge, yes, but still thinking clearly enough not to make mistakes. Maybe I interrupted him doing just that, saving Yaz from being taken. And I chided the Doctor for messing with time...

"We still have to stop this guy," Ryan said. "Trap or no trap."

"Well said, Ryan!" the Doctor beamed. "I have an idea how to get there. At least to where this psychic transmission Graham is seeing is coming from. The TARDIS psychic circuits. Just follow them back, easy. Come on over here and I'll get you hooked up."

Graham looked suspicious but complied, and the Doctor pulled various wires and sensors from the center console, sticking them to his head.

Wait, so Yaz saw the figure, Ryan saw the figure and had his friend taken, Graham received a psychic SOS- but why him? Why not contact the Doctor directly, who might recognize the place she was being shown and then could go there directly? I find it hard to believe this one old man was the only one psychic enough. What if he had just dismissed the images, or this had driven him mad? "Why would the place the people were kidnapped from and taken to, and the place Ryan's friend was taken to, and the place this woman is calling from be the same place?" he finally asked. "You say the people living with Jajira were taken by monsters, but Ryan's friend was teleported away by a man. They're not the same thing."

"It's a place to start!" she protested.

"I guess."

"Do you have a better idea?"

He held up his hands in surrender. "No, no, please continue."

“Thank you! Graham, you’re all hooked up, so keep the image of the woman you were seeing in your mind and we’re off!”

She threw a lever, and the TARDIS began to shake itself apart.

Chapter 7

From even the furthest galaxies, to the light within your eyes, Spirit is here.

When: Moments later

Where: ???

“And that was normal?” Lysanias asked, aghast, when the furor finally died down. Sparks had been flying everywhere, the whole place had shuddered, but everyone had just kinda stood around as if this happened every day.

“Pretty much,” replied Graham, untangling himself from the wires. “The TARDIS isn’t the best way to traverse unfathomable distances in time and space- it’s the only way.” He paused. “At least that I know of.”

“Uh huh.”

“We’ve arrived,” announced the Doctor, showing something on the screen in the center console. It looked like a huge space station, pyramid shaped, with the point of the pyramid pointed right at them. The whole thing was lit with blue light and surrounded by rocks of various size. “Let’s head inside and see what all the fuss is about!” She hit some more buttons and the noise started up again, but only lasted a second.

Meanwhile Yaz was staring at the sword, eyes narrowed, and Lysanias handed her a belt and scabbard. “I don’t have anything against weapons,” he told her as she took it. “Just be careful with it. It’s as close a replica to my weapon as I could make, meaning it’s the sharpest thing in the universe. It will cut basically anything.” *I think. Without swinging it around to see if the blue sparks appear, I can only guess how sharp it is. But I know how I made the original, and while it was made supernaturally sharp by my powers, this one is as sharp as I believed it to be when I made it. And I believed it to be as sharp as the original.*

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she promised, belting it on and slipping the sword in. The Doctor made a face but didn’t say anything, heading for the door.

The inside was dimly lit, making Lysanias hold a hand up and create a light so they could look around. It was clearly some kind of control room, with monitors showing the outside and strange transparent panels sprinkled through the whole place. Yaz and Tajira were talking, Tajira plucked from history too far back to even conceive of a space station. She wasn’t buying it, and suddenly the lights went on as the Doctor stepped into the center of the room, onto a slightly raised platform. Lysanias killed his own and everyone went over there. On the screen were two planets, seemingly about to smash into each other. After a moment the Doctor waved her hand over the plastic strands that were hanging there and zoomed the picture in, showing that between them was some kind of energy field, holding them in place. She was gushing about how advanced the whole setup was, but Lysanias was looking at the strands.

How did she know it would do that, and why build an interface this way? Is it just obvious and I’m being stupid again? How is one supposed to know just waving your hands around does things, and by how much do they happen? Seems a very, very imprecise way of controlling a system.

A bit more zooming in showed a metallic sphere inside the energy field, and Graham announced that is what he had seen in his visions. “I’m sure the woman I’ve been seeing is trapped in there! We have to help her!”

Do we though? Someone put a lot of effort into keeping her from being out here.

“Have you seen this?” Yaz yelled. “This area is covered in fingers!”

“Fingers?” asked the Doctor, and everyone rushed over there. Luckily, even with no one on the platform the lights stayed on, so they could clearly see she was right. Yucky looking fingers were attached to clamps and wired to something, the wires hooked to them vanishing into the darkness.

Lysanias got nearer and then stepped back. “There’s dream energy inside them,” he told the others. “I don’t like it.”

The doctor was waving her scanner around and looked at it again. “There is some kind of signal, it’s being broadcast somewhere? The orb, of course! Why would someone do that?”

“Er, where’s Tajira?” asked Yaz, looking around.

"More dream energy this way," Lysanias told them, pointing. "I can't tell if she's that way, but whatever that hair from before came from, I can feel it from there."

"If she's connected it to, maybe she's being drawn that way, like a magnet?" Ryan asked.

"Better get after her," the Doctor advised. "I'll stay here and try to work more of this out." The group rushed through some doors, and there she was, along with a bunch of people chained up, and the guy in the black robes.

Yaz drew the sword and was shouting that he should let all these people go, and never come to her flat again, but he didn't seem to be concerned. He simply raised a hand and his fingers separated from his hand, floating into the air. They flew at the group so Lysanias simply created an energy barrier between them. The fingers crashed into it, the barrier seemingly barely able to hold them back.

Yeah, I didn't envision that quite strongly enough. Still, by the look on his face he's not exactly used to attacking things that are awake. "Is that it?" he asked, stepping up to the barrier. "Your attack is separating your fingers?"

"Impossible! What did you do?" the man demanded. He concentrated, trying to push the fingers though and Lysanias hastily thought about strengthening the barrier.

Like I'm going to tell you. "How about you just tell us who you are? And why you lured us here? You must want something from us, it's a lot of trouble to go through otherwise."

"My name is Zellin," Zellin told them, telling them his name was Zellin. "And I want nothing from you." He made his fingers zoom back onto his hand, but Lysanias didn't drop the barrier. "You just happen to travel with the one I *do* want."

"He's after the Doctor," Yaz exclaimed. "You can handle him here, right?" She looked like she was about to rush back.

"But he's here," Ryan reminded her. "So he can't be there. She can't be in danger yet."

"True," Zellin admitted. "I must deal with you first so I can deal with her on her own. Even so limited a being can be dangerous. But you've piqued my interest. I ask again, how did you do that?"

"Why would I tell you anything?"

"A fair question, you probably shouldn't. Still, I could probably learn a lot from just observing you." He stepped over to a panel and flipped a switch, and the group heard a door open behind them. Tajira screamed, as out from the darkness shambled a creature with huge teeth and claws. "Let's see what you do about that."

The creature suddenly blurred into motion, heading straight for the group. Lysanias created and ignited a light saber but Yaz stepped right into its path. With a cry of fury she swung the sword, more like a baseball bat than a blade, but her heart was in the right place. Blue sparks trailed the blade as it impacted and tore the chest of the creature in half. Howling it vanished, and Tajira winced, Lysanias feeling the connection between herself and the creature being broken. Yaz whirled, her eyes alight. "Yeah, is that it?"

What do you know, it is the sharpest thing in existence.

"Maybe we shouldn't have let her keep the sword," Ryan muttered.

"Uh..." he stalled, now looking a bit worried. "Maybe I'll just go check on how the Doctor is doing?" He started to vanish, but Lysanias was having none of it. *You are here. Solidly. Here. You're not going anywhere.*

Zellin flickered, almost seemed to be unable to teleport, but then was gone in a puff of smoke.

"Crap, couldn't hold him. Come on," Lysanias commanded. He turned to head back out the door.

"Is that a light saber?" Graham asked.

"Woah, can I get a light saber?" Ryan asked.

"Sure." One appeared on his belt, and he snatched it off and ignited it.

"Wicked!" He flicked it around.

"Don't cut your arm off. Come on!"

The group headed through the door and down the hallway, back towards where the Doctor was. Apparently, she had been meddling, and it seemed alarms were going off. Zellin looked quite pleased as the others arrived.

“What are you carrying?” the Doctor demanded to know as they burst into the room.

“Light saber,” Ryan told her. “How come you never give us cool toys?”

“Those don’t look like toys to me!”

“What’s all the noise?” Graham asked.

“It seems I shouldn’t have worried,” Zellin admitted. “While I was busy with you, the Doctor went ahead and poked her nose in. As I anticipated.”

“Why do you sound so happy about that?” the Doctor asked.

“What did you do?” Lysanias demanded.

“I figured out it must be a prison, so I unlocked it. Was that wrong?”

“Not from my perspective,” Zellin gloated, as more of that dark smoke appeared in the room. It formed into a woman, who groggily got up and looked around. She had dark skin, long, pale colored hair, and was wearing a white dress, an iron ring below a thick collar and a corset under that.

“I’m free, after all this time!” the lady gushed. “Your plan worked perfectly.”

“So, wait, you saw all the trouble someone went through to keep this person locked up,” Lysanias chided, “and rather than think, huh, maybe there’s a good reason for that. No, you just went ahead and let her out?”

“It seems I have done that, but who are you two? How have you survived so long in that tiny sphere?”

“I’m immortal, of course,” she drawled, as if it was obvious. “And while it would be hilarious to put you in some sort of awkward situation you would no doubt easily escape from, how about we just leave, Zellin? They’ve done their job, let’s just never see them again.”

“Oh.” That gave him pause. “Really? I mean we could chain her up and leave her here to die when the planets collapse and explode.”

“But what does that achieve? We can be anywhere in time and space in an instant. Even if she did somehow catch up to us, what would she do about it? It was only dumb luck the people here managed to catch me in the first place. I mean they constructed this place for how many generations?”

“Quite a few,” he agreed. “How were you caught again? Remind me.”

“Never mind. Besides which, we *are* immortal. These beings,” she brushed a hand up against Ryan’s cheek, “will be gone in an eyeblink. They’ll hardly be a problem for long. Oh dear!”

While she had been talking Lysanias was inching behind her, and plunged the light saber through her back. “Puny god,” he intoned, and whipped it up, cutting her in half. At least, that was the plan, as the blade passed through her the wound closed up, and she turned.

“I was talking, that was rude.”

“How are you not dead?” he asked.

“Didn’t you hear me? I’m immortal. This isn’t really my form, you know, it’s just a convenience. You can’t hurt me physically. Why do you think they imprisoned me, after all?”

Oh. We may be in trouble. Pause.

The world around Lysanias stopped, and unlike with his talisman he was stuck in place as well, but at least could still think.

Great, so the Doctor let out an immortal being who, if her companion there is any indication, has no qualms about messing with people. At least he doesn’t seem to have that many active powers. So she probably doesn’t either. Can I just go back in time, leave a note for myself here, telling her not to do it? No, Zellin would still be a problem. Same thing would probably happen with him, he wouldn’t take damage. Man, I’m immortal but not that immortal. Where can I get some of that? Could I turn her to stone? No, if this isn’t her form maybe she could just make a new one, or animate the stone. How do I know that’s even flesh? She might not even notice. Whatever I do has to be instantaneous and decisive, otherwise she just teleports away and I’ll never have this chance again. Wait, why not trick them? They’ll leave together, one assumes. And they’re not going to get into a ship and fly away, they’ve already

admitted to being able to teleport. Let's redirect them! When they start to "smoke out" just see them as teleporting back into the prison, not their intended destination. Risky, but really what other choice do I have? Remember, it's just a dream, keep that firmly in mind. They might not even be able to resist, given they'll be focusing on their destination. They'll do the teleport for me, I just need to mess with their heads a tiny bit and make them think of the cell, rather than their destination. I mean it must work similarly, they must have to decide where to go. That's my opening.

Time resumed, and he lowered the saber, switching it off. "Sorry about that. You realize I had to try."

"Poor little boy," said the woman, now touching his cheek. "Anyone else and it might have worked, too. Don't worry, we won't hurt your people, they'll just have more bad dreams than usual. Shall we go?"

"If that is your wish." Both stepped together.

"You can't!" cried the Doctor.

"But we can," Zellin countered. "And I do thank you for your efforts, Doctor. We will not meet again."

This is only a dream, I know that for a fact!

The black smoke began to appear around them, and Lysanias willed them to think about the prison, not anything but the prison. He threw energy into his will and pushed the thought of the prison into their minds. Both got a look of horror on their faces as they vanished.

"Slam it closed!" he called when their forms were gone. "The sphere, whatever you did to open it, close it again!"

The Doctor, doing something right, didn't hesitate. She raised her scanning device and swept it over the glowing sphere in the center of the room. *When did that get here? Huh.* The red panel on the wall turned blue again, and there was silence in the station.

"What just happened?" Ryan asked finally, turning the saber off.

"Zellin used the Doctor against us, I used his companion against him," Lysanias explained. "When they teleported I pushed a single thought into their heads. Her old prison. So wherever they were going, that's where they went instead. As for you," he turned on the Doctor. "Maybe take a second to think before you blunder into letting out immortal beings that feed on human nightmares? Just a thought."

"Sorry for trying to help someone," she said sarcastically, putting the scanner away. "We could have dealt with it. Somehow."

"Sure we could," Yaz agreed, sliding her sword back.

"And you," Lysanias rounded on her with a grin. "What was that back there? Jumping in the way? Slicing that creature in half? That was amazing!"

"Oh, thank you." She had the grace to look slightly embarrassed. "I am an officer, after all. It's what I do."

"If I can recommend people for the hub program once I'm a member, I'll be sure to recommend you," Lysanias promised her. "And keep the sword, it looks good on you."

"Hub program? Thanks, I guess?"

"You get to travel between realities and help save them from a multi-dimensional being that wants to consume their life force so it can evolve itself. It's a living."

"Oh," she mouthed.

"Can I keep this?" asked Ryan, holding the saber hilt up and pointing at it.

"No!" said the Doctor as Lysanias said "Sure."

They glared at each other.

"It has a non-lethal setting, I can show you."

She sniffed. "I suppose that's better than nothing."

"I'll have to build you a recharge station for it though. Should be no problem."

"I can handle that, thank you very much."

"Suit yourself. Maybe we should make sure this place is going to last a long time, who knows how Zellin sabotaged it while he was here."

"I'll look around."

"I'll free the people in that other room," Tajira announced, running off.

"Hey now, what do I get out of all this?" Graham complained. "They get fancy new toys, what do I get?"

"I can make you a saber, that's the only real technological device I know well enough not to have to maintain. Unless you want a new car or something, and I can just duplicate something you- hang on." He snapped his fingers and wished a sack into his hand. "Here you go."

Handing it over Graham almost dropped it. "It's heavy. What have you got in..." He trailed off as he opened it and pulled out a gold bar. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Pure, of course."

"This must be twenty kilos, you know how much this sack is worth?"

"Trade ya?" Ryan asked hopefully.

He shook his head. "Not on your life, kid. Thanks, Lysanias. You're a handy guy to have around, you know that?"

"I have my moments. Now, about this tree I'm looking for..."

With the people rescued and the station looked over and repaired where necessary, the group was back in the TARDIS sleepily watching him talk about the tree. (It had been the middle of the night when they had been attacked, after all) "...And the leaves look like this," he finished, showing the leaves.

"Wait, I think I've seen leaves like that!" the Doctor explained. "Yeah, Raxacoricofallapatorius, in the tall tree forest. They've got the biggest trees there, it sounds like what you're describing."

"Rexa- what?"

"Raxacoricofallapatorius. Part of the Raxas Alliance. We can pop down there and find you some flowers, no problem." She started pressing buttons and turning dials, and the TARDIS hummed to life.

"Great, thanks."

Moments later the door opened and the two came out, the others were too tired to be useful, and the Doctor was scanning everything in sight. "That one's male," she told him, pointing. "I brought us during their flowering season, there should be plenty."

"I'll go check it out." He rose into the air, heading for the branches above. From the air he saw some large, upright, blobby creatures who stared at him and pointed, but it was dark so he was sure he passed out of their range fairly quickly. The tree did indeed have blossoms, so after making a basket to hold them he gathered up a bunch and headed back down again. Safely inside again he decided now would be a good time to work out how to actually get home from here.

"Thanks for your help back there," the Doctor told him. "Guess I did sort of screw up, huh?"

"Maybe you wouldn't have, if I hadn't been there. I change realities, sometimes unintentionally, when I arrive. Who knows what would have happened if I hadn't been here. I'm just glad this reality has a protector who does care, and I know you would have come up with something to imprison them again."

"Darn right," she agreed.

"Goodbye all," he said to the others. "Stay safe."

They all wished him luck and he concentrated on stepping back into the World of Dreams, the first step on his own journey home. They vanished, so he knew he had done it, and he willed himself back to the Mana Tree. *That's a place I know. So if I envision the tree and the girl under it, I should find...*

He was back.

Chapter 8

And when an hour with calmer wings Its down upon my spirit flings

When: After coming back

Where: Under the Mana Tree

The mysterious girl hopped up out of her chair which Lysanias was pretty sure wasn't there before and beckoned him over. The book she was reading vanished, having been tossed aside.

"You've been gone for six months," she exclaimed. "What happened?"

Lysanias narrowed his eyes and glared at her. She was still wearing the same white dress, but something was different about her. "The beard is a nice touch, but it's a little much, don't you think?"

She laughed and pulled the fake beard off. "Can't pull one over on you, I guess. You got them?"

"I got what I hope was right. Take a look." He handed her the basket and she pulled a flower out. Sniffing it she nodded. "Smells about right. Wow, the Mana Tree can be pollinated at last. I wonder what this means..." She lifted it up and twirled it between her fingers, gazing at it thoughtfully.

"How long are the seeds going to take to develop, and do you want me to plant any extra ones? We're going to need the bulk of them to seal Mana away from the fortress after all."

"Given the amount of Mana and life energy the Tree gives off, hopefully not long," she decided. "I really can't say though as this has never been done before." She put the flower back.

"Ah, true," he admitted.

"As for planting them, sure. Like I say I don't know what will happen, will the world get a lot more Mana if it has more Mana Trees? I suppose that wouldn't be a bad thing."

Even if it doesn't, and there can be only one, at least there will be male and female versions so they can spread. "Or at least a backup if this one dies. Even a magical tree like this one isn't immortal, right? And it could burn down."

"Who would set fire to the Tree of Mana?"

He shrugged. "Things burn. Intentionally or otherwise having only one source of Mana, and out here in the open no less, isn't the best idea. It's hard to get to, sure, but still possible. Someone that wanted Mana gone could do it."

"I guess."

"Anyway, I better get back. I'll step these flowers," *and my wrist unit*, "back into the 'real' world. I don't know how much Dream time I have left this cycle so better to not take any chances." *I could come get them again but why risk it?*

"I hope you can come visit me again. It was nice, having someone to talk to."

"I'm sure I'll be able to. Bye for now."

"Goodbye."

One more thing to do here before I leave. Lysanias rose into the air once again and headed to the coast, careful to cover the basket so the flowers didn't get blown away or damaged. He made a quick circuit around the whole island, looking for a good place to put a gateway that wouldn't endanger anyone. He found a good spot and spent a moment looking it over, making sure he could picture it when he got up tomorrow.

Willing himself back to the World of Dreams representation of his hotel room he carefully stepped back over, leaving the basket and watch on the table. Satisfied his current mission was accomplished he spent the rest of that Dream practicing and then again for several "hours" during his next Dream. When the sun finally rose and he got up, Anabeth was already up.

"You got me flowers?" she asked, pointing to the basket. "I mean you're a nice enough guy I suppose but won't you be leaving after this job is done?"

"What?"

"If you're trying to win her affections," Salamando told him, waddling over, "offer to sharpen her sword or polish her armor or something."

"Agreed," Luna sighed. "She isn't into many girly things like flowers. Such a disappointment."

"Wait, I'm a what?" she demanded.

"Don't take it the wrong way, of course!"

"How else can I take that statement? Girly things? How are swords and armor and *saving the world* not girly things? You think only a *man* can swing a sword around? Or be a hero?"

"What I mean is, traditionally..."

"You better quit while you're only slightly behind," Shade cautioned.

"Er, perhaps you're right. Forget I said anything, dear."

"But I meant the polishing thing, she hates that."

Anabeth glared down at the fire spirit.

"What? What did I do?"

"In any case," Lysanias cut in. "They're for the Tree of Mana."

"You're bringing flowers to a tree?"

"Male flowers. The Tree is female. If we want seeds, well, you can fill in the rest."

"How did you learn that?" all the spirits asked at once, in appropriate variation.

"Can you take it down a notch?" Anabeth asked, a finger in her ear. "Some people may still be... Oh right no one else can hear you. Carry on."

They were all glaring at Lysanias. "Last night when I headed there in the World of Dreams I met a girl there. She explained it to me. Why?"

The spirits traded a glance and went over to the corner, whispering to themselves.

"What's gotten into them?" Anabeth asked him.

"I have no idea. The woman wasn't exactly forthcoming either. More of that 'taboo' subject." *But I have my guesses. There's so much magic in the tree it's actually sentient, and dreaming it's a girl, who is stuck there because she is the Tree* "What I'm more concerned with is why you didn't know about this? Didn't your parents study the tree? You should have known there would be no seeds."

"I was a *baby*. They left there soon after I was born. They couldn't stay and study the Tree forever. I just assumed that tree equaled seeds. I mean not much is really known about the Tree, even with all the research we've done on it. Like where does Mana really come from? How does a tree radiate it? Is it the island and not the Tree, and it just got that big because of where it was? We don't know. I guess it makes sense, there is only the one. But then what seed did it grow from?" The spirits are glared harder and went back to whispering among themselves. "I'm sure someone would have tried to plant the seeds and get more Mana Trees if seeds had been available. It would have given us a clue to the nature of Mana itself!"

"I see. Well, it would have only cost us a day, I would have learned it when I got there. Then I would have gone looking for flowers." *I hope. It was the girl that suggested walking the worlds as I did to look for some. Would I have come up with that? It was a real great suggestion and may come in handy in the future.*

"So they really aren't for me, huh?"

"Wait, was that a trace of sadness in your voice?" Luna pipped up.

Anabeth glared again and she shrunk back and went back to whispering with the other spirits.

After breakfast the group discussed their next move. Anabeth suggested heading back to the city if that was possible, she was going to need to pick up something.

"What?" he asked.

"Bees. Unless you can somehow pollinate the flowers there?"

"Oh, no. Not in any reasonable time, anyway." *I might be able to think of something but I honestly have no idea what it entails. Just rub some pollen from one flower on another? I think it's probably more complex than that.*

"So we'll head back to a warmer climate, you can just step us back there, right?"

“Yes.”

“Head to a farmer’s supply shop, get some bees, and you can just step us through to the Mana Tree, right?”

“I picked out a good spot, yes.”

“Great. So we should be all set. Luckily the weather is always nice there for some reason, so the bees should be fine.”

You can just buy bees?

He had taken them back to the yard of the burned out house, figuring no one would be there. He didn’t cut anyone in half so they proceeded outside of town into the country in a taxi. The driver was a little mystified at being told she didn’t have to wait, having dropped them off in front of a large store.

“We’ve got it covered,” Anabeth told her, handing over some coins.

“Whatever you say,” said the woman, and drove off again.

The place was pretty big, with all kinds of farm equipment, farm animals, feed, cages, cleaning supplies, and more. Lysanias was pleased to see they also carried drones, and he picked up three of them.

“You’re paying for those,” she cautioned him.

“I’ve got money now, it’s fine,” he told her.

She picked up some walnuts, which she said was usually just sold as a snack but had the curious property of restoring her MP, and he grabbed a few as well for study and perhaps to give to others in ‘levels’ based realities. *After all, I kicked myself for not buying a ton of those circlets, don’t want that to happen again.* He also grabbed a few medical herbs, and some HP restoring items. It turned out what Anabeth was after was a bee *hive*, but the people behind the counter didn’t want to just hand it over. The cashier had called over the manager, who was trying to keep his cool and explain how this was usually done. Anabeth was having none of it, and Lysanias, having already paid for his stuff, was standing off to the side.

“Look, we’ll just take it with us,” she insisted. “What’s the problem?”

“We can’t just box up a beehive,” the manager insisted. “I mean, yes, it’s in a box now, but we airlift it by drones to where it needs to be. It’s not good to transport it in a passenger vehicle. I’ve seen too many accidents happen, believe me. It’s for your own protection.”

“We don’t need it, that’s what I’m telling you!”

“What, you’ve got a plane out there with a separate cargo compartment? Just give us an address and we’ll see it’s delivered. You can trust us, we’re not going to not deliver the hive. We’re a business, this is what we do.”

Anabeth moaned in frustration and turned to Lysanias. “Can you do something?” she asked.

“I guess,” he agreed. He looked at the manager. Gripping his warded sword he imposed his will on the young man. “You will simply have the hive delivered to the outside of this store.” The man’s eyes went a bit glassy and he relaxed.

“I think I’ll just have them bring it around the front of the store,” he “decided.” “I guess it’s up to you to take it from there.”

“Thank you,” Lysanias told him.

“Sure, sure,” the man waved it off. “Have the hive taken to the front of the store. Yup, going to have the hive taken to the front of the store.”

Er, what just happened? Is he especially weak willed or did I just get lucky that time? My gear does enhance my will quite a bit. Eh, he’ll be back to normal in a few minutes.

“What did you do?” Anabeth asked him, eyes wide. Then they narrowed again. “Or is it just because you’re a guy he listened to you?”

He looked at the cashier, also looking at him like he had just done something astonishing. “I’ll tell you later.”

“Fine. My receipt?”

“Sure.” He handed it over. “Have a nice day?”

“You too!” she replied sweetly, and headed for the door.

Once outside they headed to the side, out of the way, and Lysanias grabbed his stele out from the scabbard. *Let's see if I remember how to use this.* He put energy into it, then started drawing wards on the pavement connected by a circle. It wasn't really needed, but it looked better, not that it would stick around all that long.

"What are doing now?" Anabeth wanted to know. The spirits were also all looking on with interest.

"These are *ignore me* wards. When we get the hive here I'll fill in the last one and activate it. That way anyone here will just look past us and I can open the gateway to the Tree without anyone freaking out."

"Sensible," she agreed.

With that done he couldn't wait any longer and tore the boxes apart to get the drones out. Throwing the packaging away he looked them over. They were just smooth metal spheres with the "eye" at one end, and he was turning one over and over in his hands. "Er, how do you activate them?"

"I wondered if you knew what you were doing!" Anabeth exclaimed with a smile. "You don't, do you?!"

"That's why I asked. No, I don't." *Why is she grinning like that?*

"You have to pair them up with like a smartphone or a home PC. I didn't figure you had either of those things so I wondered what you were going to do with them."

"You could have told me that beforehand!"

She held her hands up. "Hey, I'm not telling you what to do!"

He sighed and flipped the watch up to face him. "Can you control them?" he asked.

"Of course," replied the synthetic voice. All three came to life, orienting outward and hovering in the air. "Again, if you would like to refer to my companion unit?"

He got out the hubPad and activated it, being directed to a new "app" that had appeared that looked like one of the spheres. Touching it brought up a view of what all three were seeing, and he could touch one to make it take up the whole display. "Nice work. And you can direct them, so I don't exactly need to micro-manage them right?"

"Correct. Their internal algorithms are quite sophisticated, in a way, but they are by no means intelligent. Unless you mean to put them away I will simply have them follow you for now. As a note their range is not significant. This could be improved later, at the Hub, if you wished."

I'll have to test what that means later. Does that mean a kilometer? Halfway across the planet? Other planets? What's 'significant' range for something powered by Hub technology could be completely different for everything else in the multiverse. "That's fine. They can't run down, right?"

"They are powered by ambient magic, so no."

"Great. Thanks." He turned the pad off and shoved it back into his *pocket*. "I can view them on your screen though, right? Just a smaller image?"

"Of course." The view changed to what one was seeing, and it cycled through.

"I'll have to number them or something. Ah, here's the hive maybe?"

From the sky a group of four drones supporting a large box dropped down, and Lysanias directed it to land in the circle. They did, then disengaged and headed back up into the air again. He nodded, finished the warding, then opened himself up through the *angreal* to the One Power. He shot all five of the One Power's strands into the air before him, widening a gateway to the Mana Tree. The three drones of his took the place of the four, and while it was a bit unbalanced they managed to lift it and drag it through. Anabeth and the spirits came after, and making sure there was nothing in the way he snapped it closed again.

"Now we get to have some fun," Anabeth told him, her sword appearing from her inventory.

"Okay?" He looked around. From near the water several... "Are those *flowers* running towards us?" *Flowers with teeth?*

"Oh, they're all over the place," she agreed. "Fairly low level, we'll make quick work of them."

She was holding her sword before her, maybe "changing" it and Lysanias got out his own. They were tiny things, so probably wouldn't take much damage. *As long as they don't*

have some ridiculous level of 'HP' that is. He cleared his mind, knowing any fight could be dangerous but he was one with his sword, the ground, the flowers. He was ready.

Anabeth swung at one, doing a forward leap and slash, but Lysanias didn't do anything crazy. He just waited for the nearest one to get close and then swung at it, beginning to move like an air bender would. He sliced through it, and a large red "100" appeared above it before it bust and vanished. Inside the void this was interesting but he didn't allow it to distract him, he simply completed the motion, spun, and chopped another to bits with an "84." In total he killed another four, getting "112," "56," "92," and another "84."

"Show off," Anabeth grumbled, and called upon Salamando. His fire magic roasted several more, and the shoreline was clear of them.

"Now who's the show off?" he chided her, and she laughed. "You're not half bad," she admitted. "What's with all the fireworks when you swing that sword around?"

"It's cutting the air apart, I guess. It's the sharpest sword that can ever be."

"Oh really? Mind if I take a look?"

He reluctantly parted with it, point down, and she gave a cry of surprise as she took it. "This sword is *amazing!* How much do you want for this? Oh right you can pull gold out of nowhere now. Goddess, is there anything I can give you for this?"

"What about yourself- ow!" Salamando had started to say something but Undine had kicked him. "What?"

"Don't even think about it," she snarled.

"In any case, the answer is no," he told her. "It's a part of me now. Why?"

"Do you realize the attack stat on this blade? It's two hundred and fifty five!"

"What?" all the spirits said at once. "No way!" "Let me see!" "I was closest!"

"I take it that's good?"

"Good? Are you nuts? It's the theoretical maximum attack value of any weapon, ever. And you were doing only a hundred damage with this thing? I don't get it, you should have been doing thousands against low level enemies like this. You could chop *bosses* up in a few swings with this thing! This is nuts!"

"I see..." *It's more compatible with her because it comes from a 'levels' world. I just swing it around like a regular, really sharp sword. So she probably would do more damage with it.* "I suppose..."

"Yes?"

"That if Ragnarok agrees..."

"Yes?!"

"You could use it while I'm here."

"Oh, thank you!" She threw her arms around him, having zipped the sword into her inventory. "You're the best!"

He took it back, sinking into his inner soulscape and talked to Ragnarok about being loaned to Anabeth.

I don't see the problem with it, but she will not be able to call upon my power and wake me up as you can.

"I understand. Hopefully we won't run into anything we'll need your power for until we attack the fortress anyway." *Besides, if everything is going to be like that weird stamp that turns people into zombies, I'm not sure I want to use you like that.*

"If you bothered to get me out, you wouldn't need the sword," Rosalina told him. Then she turned thoughtful. "Though I suppose making items out of your foes could be interesting. You do have to kill them in any case for them to change so you might as well get something out of it."

"Yes, yes, now that we're here I'll get you out." *And I guess she's right. I do have to kill them anyway. If it is another "stamp" like thing I can always just get rid of it, or not use it.*

"I would have liked to see the baby chickens, but I suppose it's fine," she told him.

"If you knew there were baby chickens, you must have seen them already."

"That's... Not the point at all!" she sputtered.

"Of course. Anyway, get ready and I'll get you out. You're sure you don't mind?"

I am yours, but she is right. My potential as a sword is greatest in her hands, being from a similar reality. Why not allow her a taste of the ultimate sword while she has the chance?

Okay, he's not gloating about it at all. "Very well. See you soon, Rosalina."

"Bye!"

"He doesn't mind," he told her, handing the sword back. He got out the wand to call out Rosalina.

"Thank you so much!" she gushed, bouncing on the balls of her feet and holding it up to catch the light. "This is going to be epic! I hope some boss creature is guarding the tree for... reasons. Let's go slaughter our way up there!" She rushed off.

I've made a terrible mistake, haven't I?

Chapter 9

In such moods, I see my spirit mirror'd first, and then

When: Moments later

Where: A gate cutting off the path to the tree

The group had followed the winding path through the thick forest around the Tree of Mana and were now stopped by a thick iron gate that was connected to a thick iron fence that wound between the trees and vanished both left and right. They were standing there staring at it. The drones had flown over it and reported back the way was clear, there were no monsters between them and the Tree.

"I thought it was strange we didn't see anyone on the way up here," Anabeth remarked. "I guess now we know why. Usually there's nature lover types and those tending the tree around all the time to welcome new visitors. I hope they weren't all killed."

"I don't see any way to unlock it," Lysanias finally decided. "There's no keyhole or chain across it with a lock. I'll just metal bend it out of the way I guess." He took a stance and made a grabbing motion, expecting the thing to fly apart. It sat there and did not fly apart. "Huh?"

"Did you expect something to happen?" Anabeth asked him.

"I expected it to dramatically burst apart and let us through," he admitted. "Is it not metal? I suppose I can use my alchemy abilities to see what it is exactly."

"Of course it's metal, but you can't just do anything to it," she told him excitedly, her sword out again. "This is clearly a plot door, it'll only open when the time is right. Must have been put here by whoever is in control of the fortress, obviously they figured we would come here and they can't destroy the tree or the thing won't fly. There's probably a boss to beat around here, why else would this area be so clear?"

Plot door? What in the world is she talking about? How can I not just tear this to pieces? It's metal, isn't it? "Boss?" He looked around, and the path here had widened to get to this point. There were several meters between the trees now, where before he could have reached his hands out and brushed trees on either side while on the "path."

"You won't take us by surprise!" she called to the air. "You may as well show yourself!"

"Who are you talking you?" Rosalina asked, just as there was a rumbling in the air and what looked like a bulbous plant monster with vine like tentacles burst out of the ground.

"Boss creature, I knew it!" Anabeth shouted excitedly. "Let's see this sword in action!"

Anabeth struck at the creature, then backed off, a pattern Lysanias knew well from watching her in action against the monsters on the path up here. *Probably waiting to get to "100% strength" again for her next attack.* Rosalina pelted it with spells from her dual wands, which actually didn't seem to be doing much. "Their "attack value" must be low in terms of what this world expects," Lysanias told her. "Do you know any fire magic?"

"Just that magical bolt spell," she pouted.

"Oh well."

The plant actually cast a spell, which surprised him, wounding the party with vines that sprang out of the ground. Rosalina batted them aside with "Deflection" and the Wall Ring saved Lysanias, turning the thorns against the plant. Anabeth just took it, losing some "HP" but slashing again after a second.

This made the plant explode, which caused Lysanias to put up a lifestreaming barrier against it, further augmented by a barrier spell cast by Rosalina.

"Only two hits, not bad, not bad at all," Anabeth chuckled. Then she looked over at the two behind two layers of barriers. "What the heck are you doing? Boss death explosion won't hurt you."

"Maybe it won't hurt *you*," Lysanias countered, "I prefer not to take the chance."

"Whatever. Hey, see, the barrier is down we can get to the Tree of Mana now!" She pointed, and it was true. The gate was now somehow open, allowing them to pass though. "Can you feel that? That's the Tree of Mana! Come on!" She broke into a run, and Lysanias and Rosalina looked at each other.

"Not really an outfit for running," she remarked, spreading her skirts. "I guess I should have worn something else."

"See though hot pants?" he joked.

"Oh is that what you like?"

"No, don't you remember, back in- wait you weren't with me then. Never mind."

"Never mind? Come on, tell me!"

He sighed. "I'll tell you as we walk."

As Lysanias got closer he too started to feel various energies coming off the tree. Most of his senses lit up as life, energy, magic and the feeling of contentment grew stronger. When they caught up Anabeth was gazing up at the tree in admiration, a smile on her face. "So do you feel it?"

"I feel a lot of things. Can you be more specific?"

"The reason my parents had to leave," she explained. "You feel so good here, it's hard to actually want to *do* anything. Like study the tree. They got to the point they could hardly get out of bed in the morning, so they knew it was time to give up their studies. It's strange, this place being so empty."

He looked around, and there was evidence of people having been there once. No bodies, *thank goodness*, but the usual garbage that humans love to leave around. *No young woman, but of course she would only be here in the Dream.*

After a few moments (or longer) Rosalina finally spoke up. "So are you going to get the bees out or what?" She pointed to the box with the hive in it, still hovering nearby.

He shook his head. "What? Bees, right. Wow, this place really does something to you, doesn't it? I could have just stood there looking up at the... Bees. Right. Set it down okay?" The drones complied, setting the box down near the treeline so when people started coming again they wouldn't be bothered by the bees, and he looked the box over.

"Going to blow it apart like you tried with the gate? It's not a plot device, it should be fine."

"It's made of wood," he told her, rapping on it with a hollow thumping sound. "Looks like just a rough crate nailed together out of some boards. I'm not a wood bender." *Though I suppose if I grabbed two ends of it with the force and yanked...* "I think I can just metal bend the nails out though. Stand back." They all did, expecting bees to come poring out of it once the outer "shell" was removed. Lysanias, who had figured out where the nails were in looking the box over took his stance, let his power flow, and yanked the nails out of the wood.

The sides fell with a crash.

Nothing happened.

"You don't think the bees are all in a stupor, do you?" Rosalina asked.

"I wasn't in a stupor," Lysanias countered. "I was just admiring the Tree for a moment. That's all."

"I believe you," she replied in a voice that suggested she did not, in fact, believe a word of it.

Anabeth approached the hive, which was just another wooden box inside the wooden box with slots for the bees to come in and out of. "They aren't dead, are they?" she asked. "That would just figure, if we had to take it back because they were dead."

"Too much interference from the tree," Lysanias told them. "I can't feel if they're alive or dead in there."

"The slats are blocked off," Rosalina discovered. She tapped the side of the box. "The bees can't get out."

Anabeth snapped her fingers. "Of course. They probably just have a room full of hives and bees. When someone wants one they close one up. Most of the bees are probably in there anyway rather than flying around. Then they can safely take it out of the room, box it up, ship it, allowing us to unbox it and open it up. Now how do you suppose..." The group looked it over and figured out how to unblock the slats, which they did. But not before Lysanias collected the wood and put the flowers on top. Bees streamed out, flying all over, but before long he saw some crawling on the flowers.

Now to hope those same ones head up to the flowers I see on the Tree of Mana, and we get some seeds.

“Are we staying here?” Dryad asked.

“We better,” Lysanias figured. “If there’s some kind of alarm that went off when we beat that boss, or the gate opened, or whatever, we could be attacked. We can’t leave without the seeds. If we left and someone destroyed the hive, we’d have to do this all over again. May as well just stay here until we have what we want.”

“You don’t mind if we take a look around, do you?” she asked Anabeth.

“I don’t. You guys are always following me, go do your own thing if you want. I’ll be fine, I’ve got the sword.”

The spirits agreed she was fairly well protected, especially when Lysanias went ahead and slapped an *ignore me* ward on the gate after he closed it. “Now no one will be able to find the gate, meaning they’ll be blocked from proceeding and unable to figure out why!”

“I can also alert you,” chimed the watch, who had the drones flying around in a search pattern.

“I guess we set up camp,” Anabeth decided. “Just try to keep doing something. Stand around too long and you’ll have a harder time shaking it off.”

So they cleaned up the garbage, and Lysanias busied himself with turning the slats of wood into fabric and setting up a tent like structure. (Just one was dense enough, and the fabric light enough, that it yielded a lot) He didn’t have to worry about energy, there were plenty of ley lines in the area he could use to recharge, so he busied himself tweaking it. Rosalina and Anabeth found some long branches that had fallen on their side of the perimeter fence and he turned them into tent poles, propping the tent up with them.

Suddenly a thin looking cat came out of the treeline, walking over to them. Anabeth spotted it first and bent down to pet it. The cat bumped and nuzzled her. “Oh, aren’t you just the cutest thing!” she exclaimed, scooping it up. “Did someone just leave you here? Oh you’re all bones! Lysanias, can you send me back to the farm store? They had cat food, I want to get this little one something to eat.”

He searched his memory for a quiet corner in the store and decided the outside of the place, around the side, would be best. He could put the gateway against the wall, there was hardly any chance someone would be leaning on it. “I think I can manage something,” he decided, and drew the One Power into himself. He had to back off quickly, it rushed into him like a torrent, probably because of the amount of magic in the area. Weaving the gateway she gave the cat to Rosalina, who the cat didn’t seem to mind either. She jumped through, returning a few moments later with a water dish, food dish, litter box, a small bag of litter, cans of food, a can opener, what looked like a box to carry a small animal in, and some cat toys.

“Not going a little overboard, are we?” Lysanias asked as she set the carrier down first, then started unpacking the box she was using to carry everything in.

“Not at all. You can make water, right?”

“Sure.” He released the One Power as she set the bowls out for the cat. *Come to think of it, I could have sliced the box apart with the one power. Or pulled it apart with a strand of air. I really only use the One Power to make gateways, but it can do a lot more. I suppose someone who grew up with the Power would reach for it to do whatever, but I started this journey learning bending from Korra so naturally I tend to think with that first. Even though the One Power is more versatile. More dangerous too, I guess there’s that to think about. I could hardly feel the One Power inside of me, it feels the same as being near the tree. I suppose that’s to be expected. Odd that my senses were sharpened while just being near the tree doesn’t do that. I guess it’s a question of if the magic is inside you or not. Why does that happen, anyway? Why does taking in a type of magic...*

“In your own time,” Anabeth told her, looking at him expectantly. The cat was happily eating from the dish, and he realized it had been longer than he thought.

“Sorry, this place really does get to you.” He used magic to create enough water to fill the bowl, which the cat went after with gusto.

"I wonder if there's a spring or something else around here," Anabeth mused. "Cat is pretty thin, must have been where awhile. Wouldn't last long without water though."

"Suppose there must be," he agreed. *So could the cat squeeze through the gate without beating the boss? Could we have done it, by me turning us into cats or some other small animal? Not that the boss proved to be much of an issue but still.*

Anabeth amused herself playing with the cat once it was done eating and cleaning itself. Rosalina requested the mountain spirit help her train, so he called it out, and she tried to hit it with spells while it dodged. The cat seemed a bit interested, but Lysanias didn't know how cats behaved here so he didn't think much of it. He didn't wonder if the cat could see the mountain spirit, not that he could have devised a test to prove it one way or the other, but still. When the cat got bored it went into the tent and lay down. "I guess we have a cat now," Lysanias announced.

"I was always going to take her with us." She indicated the box with the handle. "Even if I just let it go somewhere else, that's better than it dying here where there's nothing to catch and eat. Anywhere else will have birds and mice or rats or whatever."

"I could probably ask the universe who she belongs to, with a little effort maybe even find out where they went and track them down."

"Could you? That would be great!"

"Let's see if I can get a name at least. Give me a few minutes." He sat down and got comfortable, then tried sending his question out into the universe. Just sitting and doing nothing didn't work out so well where he was, he found himself just unable to concentrate on trying to hear the answer. Instead he just sort of zoned out, enjoying the feeling of being under the Mana Tree. He finally gave it up and opened his eyes. The sun was a bit lower, and he heaved himself up and went over to Anabeth. She was brushing the cat, who was purring away like mad.

"Any luck?" she asked. "You were 'gone' quite awhile there. Thought maybe you went into a coma."

He shook his head. "I just can't concentrate. I'll have to do it somewhere else."

"Whatever."

"Where did you get the brush from? I didn't- oh is it yours? You pulled it from your inventory?" *Wonder what she has in this inventory of hers?*

"Actually, I made it," Rosalina told them. "I can make things out of thin air too you know." She pointed to the tent and he peeked inside. There were now mattresses, pillows, blankets, and a low table where several of her starlike companions were playing some sort of game. They all inclined their "heads" towards him and went back to it.

"Cozy." *With her star spirits and the other spirits and my mountain spirit and the drones we could field a very diverse and very bizarre... What did Bo call it? Football? Handball? Something like that, team.*

"The bees are enjoying themselves," Anabeth told him as he turned away from the tent again. He looked over to see them flying up and down the tree, and took in some of the One Power (carefully) so he could see them better. They did seem to be crawling around the flowers up there so it looked like it was mission accomplished, soon they would have seeds.

He looked around, there wasn't much else he needed to do to make the campsite better so he decided to get some practice in. He went around the other side of the tree, thinking about what he might want to work on. *Anything where I'm just sitting around, like trying to practice my battle meditation or asking the universe things is clearly not going to work. It had better be active stuff.* "Spirit clones!" he called, willing some duplicates into existence. While two of "himself" worked on sword and shield skills the third worked on dodging attacks by his mountain spirit and Rosalina. (One of the clones, obviously, so if it got "killed" nothing of value would be lost)

Finally it was getting dark so the pair had something to eat and crawled into the tent to spend the night. The cat snuggled up to Anabeth and Lysanias fell asleep secure in the knowledge his new drones would alert him if anything tried to sneak up on them. *How did I get along without them?*

That night he Dreamed, stepping into the World of Dreams to go see the girl by the tree, and tell her the latest news. She was delighted to hear that male versions of the flowers had been found and that the seeds plan was moving forward. With that done he put more effort into training his Dreamer skills, the world he left to the Dreaming Shadows still fresh in his mind. *I have to be the very best, like no one ever was. To find them will be my test, to destroy them all my cause.*

The next day the group was overjoyed to see that newly formed seeds had matured, looking like huge acorns, and after gathering up a bunch of them knew that their plan to save the world could truly begin.

Chapter 10

The spirits of the dead who stood in life before thee are again in death around thee—and their will shall overshadow thee: be still.

When: The next day

Where: Back at the land of ice and snow

“And why are we back here?” Lynanias asked. He was wearing his Red Jacket, given to him in Terra’s world, to try and keep warm. They were walking through the streets, Anabeth insisting they return there rather than the warmer area they had met in to the south. He had told her it wasn’t any more effort to go back to anywhere he had seen, they didn’t need to be in the land of ice and snow.

“But we flew here in the conventional way,” she explained. “So we have to leave here in the conventional way. This world doesn’t know anything about teleportation magic, we still have to travel place to place. If we suddenly showed up back in that town we left, not having bought tickets to travel from this place to there, it would show up in some database and the authorities would be very curious what was going on. We don’t need any more trouble-correction, I don’t need that kind of trouble. You can just make people ignore you and you’ll leave here eventually anyway. I can’t exactly explain to the cops how I stepped from one place to another with my friend from another reality.”

“Those drones?”

“Exactly. We’re in seven different databases just from walking down the street, believe you me.” She chuckled. “They must be having a field day trying to figure out who you are. You would have just shown up out of nowhere!”

“Is that bad?” he asked nervously, looking up at another drone heading by. Of course his followed along behind him, watching every angle.

“Eh, not illegal to have been in a coma the last ten years and be awake and walking around now. By the time anyone realizes you really aren’t in *any* database I hope we’ll have this whole situation resolved. You just have to see a place to go there, right?”

“Right.”

“So we’ll just pick out some good spots using the global mapping service, head there, put the seeds in, seal them, and stop the fortress for good. We do want to do this quickly, don’t we? Before it gathers enough Mana to really be a problem or larger spirits start gathering and causing problems?”

“Wow, easy as that, huh? I mean it sounds good, like it won’t take more than a few days. But then why are we wandering around out here in the snow?”

“There should be an animal shelter around here. That’s what I was asking about when I went into that store after we got back. I want to see if they’ll take this little one.” She patted the carrier she was holding.

“I see!”

“Don’t worry, it’s not much further anyway. Look.” She pointed, and they were approaching a building that had a man with a carrier much like hers standing in front of it.

“Huh, are they not open yet?”

Lysanias hung back as she walked up to the door. “Hello there,” he said to her. He was wearing cold weather gear as well, a thick jacket, scarf, gloves, hat, and sturdy pants. “Looks like more than one person is going to be disappointed today.”

“What’s going on?”

“Closed.” He pointed his thumb at a sign on the door. “Permanently, it says here.”

“What?” she cried, taking a look at the notice. “Why?”

“Doesn’t say. Could have sworn they were open yesterday, I drive by here every day. Maybe I was wrong.” He sighed. “I guess I’ll have to figure something else out. I suppose I could keep this one away from my cats until I get it tested. My wife didn’t want another cat to look after but I don’t mind.”

Anabeth crouched down to look into the carrier and Lysanias heard a hissing from inside.

“Yeah, not too friendly. Well, anyway, have a good day.”

“You too.”

The man nodded, turned away from the door and got into his car, driving away.

"Do those vehicles run on Mana?" Lysanias asked.

"Everything that moves runs on Mana," she remarked, not paying attention. "What the heck? Why did this place suddenly close?" She had set the carrier down and was looking in through the door through cupped eyes. "Can you get in there, take a look around?"

"Oh, so not only do I have no identity here which would cause me a problem, you want me to add breaking and entering to my list of crimes?"

"It's not a crime, it's just something that will raise some red flags. And you don't have to break in, so no one would ever know!"

"I have a better idea." *Want to walk around a little?*

I can check the place out.

His mountain spirit stood on the other side of the door, and he concentrated on seeing what it was seeing as it walked around. The place was dark and cold, with a central desk just inside the door, and then a door behind it leading to a cage area. This too was empty.

"It's totally empty," he reported, "but they sure left in a hurry." As the spirit looked around the place was strewn with papers, toys, spilled food, dirty litter boxes, the works. The file cabinets still had all their paper records, though there was nothing connected to the screens he saw inside so he figured all their "computers" had been taken. "No real clues why they left though. Place seems intact, there wasn't a fire. No damage to the walls or cages, it wasn't an unseen spirit. I don't get it."

"Bizarre. Well, I guess you're sticking with us little kitty," she told the cat.

"Meow," the cat replied, though Lysanias wasn't sure if this was the cat equivalent of a "yay" or "oh great" and an eye roll.

"So now what?" he asked as they walked away from the place.

"Actually, why don't we split the difference?" she asked. "I have to fly back, that's a given, but you didn't technically fly with me because you were wearing one of those ward things. For all anyone knew there was an empty seat next to me, right?"

"That's right."

"So here." She handed him the carrier and the bag of cat stuff. "Take the cat and head back. You'll have to find a place to stay until I get there, but I'm sure you can manage that. It'll be more comfortable than flying back with him. For both of you. Once I know what time the flight will land we can meet back up. How does that sound?"

"Sounds fine to me. I do wonder why we flew here in the first place though. If you can just show me a picture of where we're going next, I mean."

"I didn't realize the implications, and besides did you even mention that? You can do a lot, so you said, this bending stuff, various types of magic, manipulating life energy, those clone things you were doing yesterday, your list went on and on. Either you didn't mention it or it just got lost in everything else you told me."

"It is a lot to take in. Learning other worlds exist," he agreed. "Very well. At least the airport shouldn't be far."

"Why don't you all go with him?" she asked the spirits that were again following them around. "You don't want to take a boring plane ride, do you? All crammed in around me so you don't get stepped on?"

They agreed that was fine, so after buying her ticket and Lysanias setting an alarm for when to meet up, she got in line for her security check and he headed back outside. The airport was fairly crowded but not crowded enough he couldn't put up a few temporary wards with the stele so he would be undisturbed. He then began chanting and throwing energy into his Skybourne magic to open up his personal dimension. "Come along," he told them all when it was open.

"What is this?" asked Dryad. "I've never felt magic like that before!" She paused and then grumbled "Just like the other magic you used I had never felt before."

"A place we can wait, and I can let the cat out. Come on, it won't hurt you." He stepped through, followed by the others. They took the short trek to his workshop, which he closed off and opened the carrier door, so the cat started sniffing around.

"Can you open that gateway of yours from here?" asked Lumina, "or must you go back where we came from?"

"You know, I don't know," he admitted. "It works by making a thin slice of the place you are be exactly the same as the thin slice of the place you want to go. As they're exactly the same it acts as a doorway you can step through. This place exists, er, somewhere, so I don't see why not. I'll give it a try when the time comes." *At worst the weaves just won't form correctly so no big deal.* "Meanwhile, make yourselves at home. I can let you out if you want so you can look around."

The spirits agreed that would be better than being cooped up in there so he let them out, watching the cat to make sure it didn't bolt out the door. That done he spread the cat stuff out again in case she was still hungry and figured he would work on some wards or something in the meantime.

Finally the alarm went off and Lysanias went to go meet Anabeth at the airport. To his medium surprise opening a gateway between his personal dimension and the "outer" world worked just fine. So they stepped through and his drones spread out, catching sight of her moments later.

"How was the flight?" he asked.

She groaned. "Awful, as usual. I'm very depressed I didn't get more details about what you could do beforehand. From now on we just travel by map. Let's find a place to stay, it's getting late."

"Suits me."

So they headed back to the hotel to spend the night, bringing the cat into the room once they were sure they wouldn't be disturbed. Lysanias spent time practicing in the dream, and the next day they decided where they should start putting the seeds.

"We don't want them disturbed," Dryad began. "Can you imagine doing all this work and someone coming along and either smashing the seeds to pieces to taking them along? They would have all of Mana in the palm of their hand!"

"What do you suggest?" Anabeth asked her.

"Some kind of temple that can be guarded by us spirits. Out of the way, but alongside our element."

"I'd love my own temple," Shadow remarked.

"But if you're off guarding a temple or whatever you won't be able to travel with me!" Anabeth complained with a frown.

"True," agreed Shade. "But our magic will still be yours to command. You will simply have to summon us in the normal manner."

"I suppose. I'll miss you all, you know that?"

Luna smiled. "You need only look up, or start a fire, or hold a rock in your hand to be close to us."

"Not really the same thing."

"We must do what is best for Mana, not what is best for you," Dryad explained. "While we have enjoyed traveling with you, this situation must now be our main focus."

She threw her hands up. "I know, it's just I feel like I'm losing my friends. Like we're a band that's breaking up."

"Not even the sun will last forever," Lumina agreed sadly. "So to it is with our being together."

"Wait, what's this now about the sun?"

"Never mind. Let us find a detailed map of the world so we can plan our journey."

"Fine, we can buy one someplace around here."

"Wait a second," Lysanias cautioned. "If you want to put the seeds in an out of the way place, I won't be able to take us directly there. The whole point is to keep them from places people go, meaning your picture network will only get us to places people go."

"Unsuitable places," Sylphid agreed. "He has a point."

Anabeth's eyes lit up. "Ah, but that's good for us. We start someplace known and then strike out into the wilderness, so we can beat things up and I can raise my weapon level."

"There's more to life than weapon level," Undine chided her.

"Lies!"

So with a map of the world spread before them, the group looked for good places to hide the Mana seeds. They were sitting in a park, a playground was nearby that was currently empty. The map was held down by four rocks, and the spirits all floated or stood on the table looking it over.

"I'm seeing some good spots here," Lysanias told them, making some marks on the map with a pen he pulled from his *pocket*. "This great expanse of desert would be fine for you, Salamando. You wouldn't mind the heat, would you?"

"I would not," they agreed.

"So we just pick a random spot somewhere in the middle and you're pretty much lost forever."

"Oh," he grunted, looking sour. "I guess that is the plan, isn't it? Huh, didn't think about it like that, we'll just be stuck there forever, won't we?"

"It's the only way," Undine told him. "A small price to pay to keep the world safe."

"Is it?"

The two stared at each other.

"I suppose we could always bring trustworthy humans there, to talk to..."

"I must go here," Luna told them, cutting off that discussion and pointing to the center of a mountain range that rose from the desert. "High above the desert sand."

"Above it?" Lysanias asked.

"I've heard stories about that place," Anabeth told them, a slight frown on her face.

"People don't like to go there."

"And thus it will be perfect for a spirit such as myself," agreed Luna. "If you can tear a chunk of rock from the ground and place it high in the air it will stay there. It is one of the strange characteristics of the area. I will make my temple there."

"As long as it'll stay there on its own, I can probably manage something," he allowed. *Never really figured out how high I can make something go with bending. Though if I made some clones, I bet we could launch a chunk of rock into the air and get it pretty high.*

"I think here would be suitable for me," Shade told them, pointing to a place deep in the mountains to the south of the desert.

"That is one massive mountain range," Anabeth agreed. "You could get lost there forever. Hey, there's a waterfall by the looks right here." She pointed. "Undine, would that be a good spot for you?"

"I agree on the water aspect," she agreed, "but we should spread out a little more. It's fine for those two," she indicated Luna and Salamando, "as Luna will be in the air. What about here?" She pointed far to the east of the mountain range, to a series of lakes and ponds in the center of the continent.

"We can check it out, see if there's a good spot," Lysanias figured. "Who's next?"

"I will go there," Lumina told them, pointing to a very small island out in the middle of the ocean. "There should be no people there."

"Fair enough."

"Then I will go on the opposite side of the continent," Dryad told them. She pointed to a fairly sizable island off the east coast of the land mass separating the oceans. "That place seems to host a sizable city, but I'm sure some place can be found away from people."

"Are you sure?" Lysanias asked her. "There's some huge tracts of land here and there that seem to be nothing but forest. You hide out someplace there and you're set."

"My decision is made."

"Okay."

"Meanwhile, not a bad idea," Sylphid agreed. "In fact, I believe there to be a sprite village somewhere here." They pointed. "Perhaps that will be a good place for me to go."

"Oh sure," Salamando complained. "You get to see sprites anytime you want, while I'm stuck in the desert. I didn't want to mention this but I hate sand. It's coarse, and it gets everywhere."

"They'll help protect the seed."

“Who will? Sprites?”

“Why not?”

“Because they’re *sprites*?”

“What do you have against them?”

“Anyway,” Gnome put himself between the two. “I should go underground somewhere. I think there’s a dwarf village here, no complaints about *dwarves* helping to protect the seed, are there?” He glared at Salamando.

“No, dwarves are fine. They make most of the weapons and armor the world uses. Awfully close to where Undine wants to go though.”

“He’s got a point,” agreed Anabeth, nodding. “There are other islands, and no one has picked this continent here.” She pointed to the land mass in the upper right of the map.

“Dryad, are you sure you don’t want to go here? Look at this expanse of trees!”

“I feel that is not my place.”

“Okay...”

“I think having the dwarves nearby is worth the risk of having two seeds in close proximity,” Gnome continued.

“Better than those happy go lucky *fairies*.”

Several of the spirits gasped. “I can’t believe you just said that!” Sylphid managed.

“I should punch you in the face!” Gnome agreed.

“I’ll hold him down!” added Shade.

“Aw, what’s the big deal, anyway? You were all thinking it. What are you looking at?” Salamando demanded of Anabeth. She pointed at the playground area where a small child was staring at them, bottom lip quivering. All the spirits turned to look at her, and she suddenly started bawling her eyes out and ran away.

“Now look what you’ve done!” Lumina yelled at him, her wispy form that usually threw off a gentle yellow light now turning more red. “Honestly, how could you say such a thing?”

“I didn’t know any were around here!”

“And that makes it okay?”

“She’ll have forgotten it in an hour. Honestly, what’s a sprite child doing here anyway?”

Apparently whatever these ‘sprites’ are they can see the elemental spirits?

“That is *so* not the point,” Luna huffed. “Anyway I’m not speaking to you at the moment so let’s just pretend Salamando doesn’t exist for the moment and go about our day.”

“Great, maybe I’ll get some peace and quiet at last.”

“You just had to go and make it worse, didn’t you?”

He smirked. “I thought you were pretending I didn’t exist.”

“You! You! Aarg!”

Chapter 11

As 'twere a band a homeless spirits who fare Through the strange heavens, wailing stubbornly.

When: Not long after

Where: The dwarf village

As the dwarf village was on the online map of the world the group decided to go there first. As they wished to place two seeds nearby it seemed as good a place to start as any, and the group had made their way into the tunnels that served as the dwarves' home. As the dwarves were, as Salamando had said, premiere forgers, designers, and inventors, the upper level saw both dwarves and humans milling about. They were buying, selling, trading, and the ring of the hammer on iron being forged could be heard from all corners of the area. The group had asked to be directed to the village leader, who had been pointed out, and the group was now another level down where it was a bit quieter.

The dwarf, who introduced himself as Plonk, had a fairly nice beard mostly turned to white, wore a helmet with a spike sticking out of it and a chainmail shirt. He was a bit wider than the dwarf he called friend back home, but clearly a dwarf wasn't a dwarf without a beard. Lysanias felt a pang of homesickness, looking the dwarf over, and wondered when he might see his friends back home again. He had to stifle a laugh when he heard the name though, which he turned into a cough.

"You okay there?" Plonk asked.

"Sorry, dusty in these tunnels," Lysanias managed.

"Aye. So what can I do for ye?"

"It's like this," Anabeth began. She explained and showed one of the Mana seeds, which Plonk looked over.

"So ye want to use some of our tunnels to house this seed of yers, which yer gonna use to seal Mana away from the bloody fortress that's been flying round lately."

"That's right. The spirit of the earth, which is here but who you can't see, will remain to help protect it."

"Seems like a mighty big responsibility."

"It could be," she agreed, possibly realizing this could go both ways.

If they see it as an honor, they'll probably agree wholeheartedly. If they see it as a hassle, they'll refuse.

"We do have some tunnels below, that we use for mining. Having some seed down there though, won't it get in the way?"

"I'll be constructing a shrine of sorts down there for it to sit on," Lysanias told him. "If you want I can make sure the tunnel doesn't have any useful resources before I begin. That way there would be no need to ever use that tunnel again."

"Ye can do that?"

"I can."

"Now this I've gotta see. Very well. You let me see this method of yours and I'll keep the seed safe."

Anabeth looked at him questioningly and he gave a slight nod. "Very well," she agreed. "It's a deal."

"Right this way then!"

The group was led down into the dwarven tunnels below the main living area, rough hewn passageways that he almost had to stoop to pass through in some parts. The dwarf obviously could see in the dark as he offered no source of light as they went further into the caves, so Lysanias held up a hand and created a flame to see with. Plonk glanced back, saw it, raised an eyebrow, and continued. They came to a branching passageway and Plonk stopped.

"Which way?" Anabeth asked. She didn't exactly look comfortable in these close tunnels, and Lysanias could understand that. *To me they just remind me of waking up in a world that had passed me by. The first steps on my journey here. And what a strange journey it's been, too.*

"Why, was hopen Lysanias could tell us," Plonk told her. "Each one 'o these tunnels might be suitable for this seed, can ye tell me which one is most suitable?"

"Probably." Lysanias looked around, then at the flame. *Can't do earth bending and fire bending at the same time. But I can do this...* He opened himself up to the One Power, taking in enough to create a light. Weaving the strands he created a globe of light and tied it off, sticking it to the wall. Releasing the source it stayed there, and he nodded, making the flame go out.

"Should have just through to bring a flashlight," Anabeth muttered.

"Hehe, sorry 'bout that, little joke on my part," Plonk admitted. "Wanted to see what ye would do when we got down here. Otherwise I would ha sold you one-"

"Sold?"

"Er, lent, lent you one, before we started down here."

"That's better. What are you doing?"

This was directed at Lysanias, who was slamming the walls with his palms (he didn't want to take his shoes off) and "listening" with earth bending. "Getting the answer to his question. Okay, this tunnel," he indicated the one to the left, "has the least resources buried in the walls. I'll force them out and get started on the shrine."

"That's the tunnel I would have picked too, good on ya, lad."

Using a combination of bending, (earth and metal), alchemy, and his mountain spirit showing him where things were he enlarged the end of the tunnel, pulled out the remaining metals, and smoothed out the floor. He had felt a spring under the floor as well so he figured he would incorporate that into the pedestal he was going to make.

"It doesn't have to be fancy," Gnome told him. "Dryad suggested a 'temple' but I don't care."

"I'm not just going to leave it sitting around in the dirt," he countered, thinking about how he wanted to do this. *Maybe a channel for the water out the top, it can then naturally flow over the edges towards the bottom, and I'll create a pipe of sorts leading back to the source. I can use the same method I just stuck that light there, tie off some strands of water. No one will ever figure out how the water is flowing up into the structure.* "I mean these are important things that are basically going to save your world. They should be shown some respect." He slammed his foot down on the ground, creating a pyramid structure that history has shown to have lasted and set to work drawing the water up. Again using a combination of magic, bending, and alchemy he had a nice looking platform for the seed to set on, which he did and stepped back. Pulling his sword out he offered it to Anabeth. "Would you like to do the honors? It is your world, after all."

"What do I do?" she asked, taking it.

"I have no idea," he admitted. "In theory, the sword has been set up to seal magical energies. Just touch it to the seed, there aren't any magic words you have to say. It should just work."

"I'll give it a try." She stepped up and lightly tapped the seed with the blade, and as she did several things happened. The seed started to glow and rose into the air, and the drones that were following Lysanias around now fell out of it. The spirits all cried out, as though the light from the seed was hurting them, and Lysanias looked around in alarm. The light show ended, the seed coming back down to rest, and the drones took to the air again.

"What happened?" he said, bringing the watch up to his eye. "Did you get any of that?" Anabeth rushed to the side of the spirits, who said they were fine.

"Connection with local power source was temporarily disrupted," the watch informed him. "No further information is available at this time as no scan of the local environment was requested before event."

"You mean they lost access to *magic*?" Lysanias gasped.

"Statement agrees with local observation," it confirmed.

"Do you know what happened?" Anabeth asked Dryad.

"Magic... changed," she finally said after a moment's thought. "I mean that's to be expected, isn't it? That's what we're doing here."

"Yes, but... Oh my goddess!" Her hands flew over her mouth.

“What?” Plonk asked.

“If that happened everywhere, there are terrified people all over the planet now. Planes, cars, anything that uses magic would have fallen out of the sky or stopped working for a second. Just stopped working- magical stuff. You don’t think that could happen again, do you?”

“That’s what we’re doing,” Dryad told her. “What did you think would happen? We’re trying to keep magic away from the fortress, so naturally everything else flying around would fall, too.”

“We have to warn people, make sure they’re not flying when it happens. It’ll get worse, won’t it? The more we seal away, the harder it will be for magical things to work.” She looked at the sword like a snake in her hand, and handed it back. “Some might not work at all, after we seal a few of these seeds. There won’t be enough magic to go around.”

“Congratulations,” Salamando said with a smirk. “You’re about to become the number one terrorist in the world.”

“You’re not helping,” Sylphid told him.

“No, he’s right,” Anabeth admitted. “We’re turning magic off in the world. I never considered turning it back *on*. Once the fortress is taken care of and our world is safe, how do we undo all this?”

“I don’t know,” Lysanias admitted. “The sword just seals magic. Maybe it can’t be undone.”

“Even if it’s for the right reason, no one else in the world will understand what we’re doing. And if we can’t get Mana back... Though I suppose some might say we don’t deserve it, after how we abused it.” She paused. “Maybe it should be taken away from us. Either way, if the world at large somehow figures out what we’re doing, we will become the number one most wanted criminals in the world.”

“So we better move fast,” Lumina figured. “Let’s head to the next site.”

“And terrify people even more? We have to somehow let everyone know this is going to happen, who knows if anyone was already killed just now! A plane landing, or taking off? Traffic suddenly coming to a halt? People must be freaking out about now.”

“Can you somehow get the message out?” Lysanias asked.

“I have no idea how,” she admitted.

“Record a message taking credit for the ‘outage’ and send it to major news outlets?” Salamando suggested.

“Oh, that wouldn’t reinforce the terrorist image at all. My parents would be so proud of me.” She closed her eyes, leaning against the wall.

“You have to do something.”

“And we’re sure there’s no other way?”

“We must finish what we have begun,” Dryad told her. “In fact, delay is not advisable at this point.” She was looking at the seed and frowning.

“Why not?” Anabeth opened her eyes.

“The purpose is to channel Mana in certain ways, using the seeds as conduits. Right now there is only one conduit. So a tremendous amount of Mana is being drawn here. Too much, and-” She glanced over at Plonk. “-I shudder to think.”

“Ye’ve gone pale, lass. What have ye thought of?”

“You can’t see the spirits, can you? One of them, the spirit of nature, said something bad will happen if we don’t carry on with the plan, and soon. Because of how much Mana this seed is now going to attract without all the others to defuse it.”

“Yer not talking about an explosion or anything, are ye?”

Anabeth looked to Dryad. “I’m talking about the uncontrolled release of Mana in this area. What form that would take I do not know. This has never been done before.”

She relayed that.

We should have set them all up, then used gateways to quickly travel between them and seal them one after another. But now we have to seal them one at a time, don’t we? Really should have thought that through better.

“How long do we have? Should we evacuate the tunnels?”

"There's no immediate danger," she replied with a shake of her head. "We should have more sealed before it becomes an issue."

"I hope so, lass, this seems more dangerous than you first said."

"We perhaps should have put more thought into it, I see that now. Let's set up the second one, take some of the strain off. I just hope it doesn't cause too many problems until we can get some kind of warning out. You're staying, Gnome?"

"I must. Naturally, please continue to call upon me if you need my magic."

"I will."

Plonk looked around. "We'll be hosting a spirit, then? Here in our caves?"

She nodded. "A spirit of earth."

"I see. Have to fix this area up, bring in some walls, make the place a bit more livable. After," he clarified, "we're sure it won't explode or whatever."

"I'd appreciate it," Gnome said.

"He says thanks," Anabeth told him.

The group left the caves, leaving the cat in the hands of Plonk who said he would find a good home for it, and headed north, getting directions to make their way to the sprite village. The two smashed their way through the wildlife in the area, Anabeth looking more grim than usual. She was clearly trying to think of a way to get a warning out that didn't make her look like a terrorist, instead someone who was saving the world.

But of course their way of life is going to have to change, isn't it? These people rely on Mana, he looked back at his drones, still just following along behind them, for a lot of things. What happens when they can no longer use magic as a power source? Can they develop an alternative? I know there must be one, other realities use... what did Korra call it? Gas engines I think? But I don't know the specifics of how that works, not enough to tell them how to make one. They're used to flying around and driving in magical cars and having drones floating around everywhere. That all changes if we do this. Do we doom this world even as we save it? I don't know if any of my skills are useful in this case either. I can't send a message to every person on the planet despite my many abilities. I'm just not geared for that kind of thing. Even making a face appear in the moon or something, with so many people looking at it and resisting my efforts to make that a reality, it would never work.

"By the way, you aren't going to say a single word when we arrive at the sprite village," Undine said suddenly.

"Huh?" Everyone turned to look at her, and she was staring pointedly at Salamando.

"Are you talking to me?" he asked innocently.

"Who else would I be telling to keep their mouth shut?"

"Why just me?"

"Oh, you know."

He held his hands up looking confused.

"You know. All of it?" She looked him up and down. "Just stay quiet and we'll have no problems."

"So if someone says, 'hey, how you doing?' I can't answer them? Nice, make me look like a jerk, why don't you?"

"If someone asks we'll simply explain you've taken a vow of silence until the world is safe from the Mana Fortress."

"But that's a lie, I haven't done that."

"Yes, you have."

"No I have- oh." He got the message as she continued staring at him. He mimed zipping up his lips and pouted.

"Very good, you're getting it now. So what are you not going to do in the village?"

"Ta-"

"Ah haha haha!" she chided.

He tilted his head and glared at her.

"You're not going to..."

He said nothing.

“Excellent. Now we’re ready to meet them.”
They’re such good friends.

“Aren’t we setting up your place first though?” Sylphid asked her. “The sprite village is where I want to be.”

“Right, I just wanted to make sure I mentioned it before then. I’m staying behind, so someone else will have to be sure he behaves.”

The others hastily assured her they would.

Salamando just looked annoyed.

The group came to a waterfall, having followed the river to the north, and past it was another cave. In the area were giant bees, those animals that looked like flowers, and some weird looking furry creatures that all fell to their blades. With the area clear the group examined the cave, and Lysanias slapped his hand on the outer wall. He felt it went back quite a ways, so that seemed promising, and the group went inside. It wasn’t too big, but Undine said it seemed fine for her, and Lysanias got busy making some changes to it.

Good thing there were ley lines on the way I could recharge from. I’ll divert some of the water here, make it flow this way, and the pedestal can go here. Shove some walls back and make a little more space there... Bet I can do the same trick with the water, too. He made the place at least look a little better, then looked around. “Honestly, I’ll come back tonight when I’m dreaming and make it really livable. I can’t create something from nothing unless I’m Dreaming. Not on the scale I would need for this cave. Get some idea of how you want it to look until then.” *While Dreaming I can basically snap my fingers and make it look any way I want. It’ll be normal matter, and no one will be around to resist my making it, so it should be fairly easy. Good practice, too.*

“Very well,” she agreed.

“I guess it’s time, then?” Anabeth looked over at the seed, snug at the top of the pedestal.

“I can seal it, if you want,” Lysanias offered. He got the sword out, but she reached for it.

“I started this, and it’s my world, my responsibility. I’ll do it. I just pray it’s still a short duration and no one dies.”

“As do I. Oh.” He brought the watch up. “Better lower the drones, no sense having them crashing around.”

“Affirmative,” the watch answered, and the drones drifted to the floor.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, and touched the blade to the seed. Again, there was a flash of light and the seed rose into the air. The spirits winced and the lights went out on the drones, but soon enough it was over and they rose into the air again. “Two down,” she remarked, handing the sword back. “Let’s go see what the sprites have to say about all this. They’re magical themselves so I’m going to guess they’re not going to be real pleased about what we’re doing.”

Chapter 12

When the water spirits returned after four years of drought, every thought in me, every action became gratitude.

When: A few hours later

Where: Outskirts of the sprite village

The group had continued following the river north, then cut west through a dense forest a few miles past the waterfall. Sylphid was leading, of course there were wolf like creatures and other dangers in the forest that had to be cut down.

Strange, most animals just run from people, but these things continuously throw themselves at us. I mean I know they need to raise 'levels' or whatever but it's like they have no sense of self preservation at all. Even me hitting one and not doing enough 'HP' damage to kill it, they don't run. They just keep attacking. It's so weird.

"Sun's getting real low," Anabeth remarked, noting the long shadows on the ground.

"Will we make it before dark?"

"It's not far," Sylphid told her. "Do you have a plan to convince the sprites?"

"Convince them of what?"

"To let us leave a seed here. It's going to be a risk for them, if someone comes looking for it. They aren't fighters like the dwarves you know."

"Oh crap," she muttered, stopping and leaning against a tree. She rubbed her forehead, Ragnarok drooping in her hand to rest point down in the grass. "You're right."

"So you didn't think about it. I see." The spirits traded a look.

"Not like that. I figure they'll be fine, there should be enough Mana gathered by the seed that they won't die off once we finish our work." Lysanias looked confused and she opened her eyes. "They sort of feed on Mana, they don't eat in the way we do. Mana sustains them like sunlight a plant." He nodded. "They hardly ever leave their village anyway, from what I understand. I was going to talk in terms of us saving them by leaving the seed there, I thought that's why you picked it to be honest, but if someone thinks in terms of the danger like you just did..."

"Could they refuse?" Lysanias asked. "I mean we could just look elsewhere right?"

"We could," she agreed. "There is that one continent to the east we didn't consider. But then they may starve." She groaned. "And we've already 'hit' them twice today. I'm sure they felt the change in Mana when we placed the seeds. Maybe we should have done them first, then headed south."

"Too late for that now," Shade remarked. "We must go forward."

"Give me a minute to think of a new strategy."

Salamando raised his hand and Anabeth sighed. "Go ahead, we're not there yet."

"Thank you. It may seem counter intuitive but what about telling them the truth?"

"What do you mean, truth?"

"That this is actually a great honor for them. We are trusting them to keep this seed safe, and they have leeway to decide how that's going to be done. Yes, they may not be the greatest fighters but they do have magic. They're tricksters and worse, but directed against those that would harm the seed that could be a good thing."

"That is... surprisingly one version of the truth," Luna admitted. "I don't know how great an 'honor' it is but coaching it in those terms, that we're trusting them with something, even if they're now stuck here near the seed to get enough magic to survive? They may jump at the chance."

"Even better, say we're simply looking for good sites, and they may not be chosen!"

Salamando chuckled. "They're sure to want it in that case."

"I'm not going to manipulate them into taking it!"

He scoffed. "Of course you are. Did you think you would just walk into their village, announce the seed was going to be placed there, and leave them to it? They would just dump it someplace out of spite. You're going to have to make them *want* to protect it."

She sighed and closed her eyes again. "This is so screwed up. Whose idea was this, anyway?"

"We all agreed there was no other way," Lumina said gently. "This sacrifice must be made if our world is to survive and this avatar of darkness defeated."

"I am so going to kick that guy's butt when I see them." The grip on Ragnarok tightened. "Let's go, hopefully it's not far, like you say."

The village wasn't far, and as they got into the clearing Salamando made a "tisk" sound but didn't say anything. Lysanias could see what he meant. The houses there were scattered about, made of branches, leaves, twigs, mud, and whatever else the sprites could scrounge up. No real roads existed, it was as if the sprite who wanted a house just picked a spot, made a passable shelter with a minimum of effort, and called it done. They were currently having some sort of dance further on, with music reaching his ears as they got closer. This wound down as the group was noticed, the sprites that were dancing coming to a stop and staring at the newcomers. Along with them were strange, furry, white creatures that were even smaller. They had a sort of antenna with a red ball growing out of their heads, but didn't seem to act like just animals.

What in the world are those?

"Ah, she who walks with the spirits!" one of the sprites said at last, stepping up to them. She was small, half the size of Lysanias and clearly not human. Her long hair flowed nearly to the ground, and cat like ears stuck up from the side of her head. She was dressed only in jewelry if it could be called that. A crown of flowers on her head, twisted leaves made a bracelet. What looked like grasses made an anklet, though she was painted in patterns from head to foot. Looking out over the crowd Lysanias saw most of the others clad similarly, and wondered if this was some kind of ceremony they had interrupted or just another day in sprite town. "How nice of you to join us! Will you dance with us, and make merry as the sun goes down on this wonderful day? Will you eat with us, and tell us your stories about the big, wide world?"

"Yes, tell us, tell us!" chorused the others, all smiling and looking expectant.

"And please forgive our appearance. I know you big ones love covering yourselves, as if the touch of nature upon your skin was to be avoided at all costs. Had I known we would be having guests I would have planned accordingly. We do have some scant clothing here, for when one of us wishes to visit a human town."

"Never mind that- You know me?" she asked, clearly not expecting this.

"Yes, we know of the human that the spirits have chosen to walk beside." She turned serious for a moment. "Your appearing here, when we have felt Mana ebb and flow in waves cannot be a coincidence."

"It's not. I'll need to talk to you, as there is something important you must be told."

"Very well. I am the village elder, Greenleaves, please, make yourself comfortable here and tell us your tale."

She's an elder? She hardly looks older than a child. Of course, I'm thousands of years old and will probably look the same in more thousands of years too, if I survive that long. So I'm not one to talk. I guess these are the equivalent of fairies from back home, but actually calling them that is a no-no, given how the spirits reacted. They don't really age, they're sort of nature spirits, not like these elemental spirits but not exactly like mortals, either.

"I am Anabeth, Mana Knight, and this is Lysanias, one who has traveled here across many roads. The spirits I'm sure you know." The spirits all mingled with the sprites, who all turned towards Anabeth.

Glad I'm not the one who has to tell them the story. I'll just sit quietly over here where I don't have to talk to anyone thank you very much.

"We have come on a matter of great importance," Anabeth began. "I don't know if you have seen it, in the sky, but the Mana Fortress has been built. It carries with it a great destructive power, one that if unchecked will lay waste to our world."

"We have felt the moving of a great power," Greenleaf told her. "It is a dark stain upon Mana, and seems to gobble it up without ceasing. It is a fortress you say? Built by men? Go on with your tale."

"Our aim is to take this fortress down, to make sure Mana is safe and the weapons it carries with it are never used. But it cannot be attacked. Many spirits have tried. It must be

brought down in another way. A way you may not like..." She steeled herself and got the seed out of her inventory. There was a collective gasp and all the sprites surged forward, trying to touch it.

"Back! Back all of you!" Greenleaf cried, as Anabeth looked terrified.

I can feel her unease. That many beings, even as small as they are, rushing me? No thanks. But they didn't seem to be trying to grab it...

"Behave yourselves!" Greenleaf yelled at them. "You are not animals fighting for a scrap of meat. You can see it later, I'm sure. She's telling her story now, sit down all of you."

"You know what this is?" she asked, as the crowd shrank back a little. They still only had eyes for the seed.

"It can only be one thing," she admitted. "May I?" Anabeth nodded and handed it to her. The crowd grumbled a little, probably along the lines of "why do you get to touch it?" if what Lysanias could make out was true. But she went on. "A seed from a tree that should never have a seed. How? How did you come by this?"

"It wasn't easy, I admit. In dreams and other worlds this seed came to us, a precious gift we're going to use to bring down the fortress."

"I begin to see. Go on with your story." She handed it back and the seed was put back in inventory.

"Using the seed we wish to seal Mana, and have done so twice today already. We made a shrine for each, and two of my friends, the spirit of earth and the spirit of water have stayed behind to guard it."

Now the crowd started to look a little more dangerous, as glances and whispers took the place of awe and openness.

"More than one? How many? How many seeds?" Greenleaf demanded.

"Eight."

There was a cry of shock from the crowd. "You mean to destroy us?" one sprite called, springing up.

"No!" she cried. "Please, hear me out!"

"We will hear you, as a guest," Greenleaf told her and the crowd. "But your words do seem to signal our doom."

"Not so!" she countered. "We wish to leave a seed here, for you to watch over and protect. Our hope is that enough Mana will gather around the seed that this close you will be able to survive. The seeds will create a network of Mana along the ground, radiating out from each to every other. This will keep it from being drawn into things like the fortress. In this way we may survive."

"Easier not to have built the thing in the first place!" a sprite called.

"I had no control over that!"

"A likely story!" cried another.

"She speaks the truth," said Luna. "We have been with her most of her life. Always has she done right by us, and nature. She wishes only to do the best she can now, to protect as many as she can."

The sprites scowled but couldn't claim a spirit was lying.

"You ask much," Greenleaf told her. "With Mana gone we may be forced to recede back into our original world. We would not have the power to protect the seed, being less 'here' than we are now. But perhaps some could remain, it's hard to say."

Original world? What's this now? Anabeth also seems confused, she's not heard of this before either.

She went on. "But we could make this place more difficult to find. Create false trails in the forest, and conceal the entrance to this place behind a path only we know. It could be done."

"So you will allow us to leave a seed here?"

"It seems as though if we say no, you will simply leave it elsewhere. Is that not correct?"

"You're correct," she admitted softly.

"Then better to have it here, where at least we have some control of our destiny. There would have to be... a cost, for us keeping it safe. But the evening is yet young, let us put this

aside for now. Bring food for our guests, and let us sing merry songs! Let us dance, for tomorrow is not yet here!”

Salamando caught Lysanias' eye with a look of “Told you.”

So the group ate, and watched the sprites dancing, and Lysanias answered questions of the sprites who came over to talk to him. They seemed to live a carefree life here, and he somewhat envied that. *But on the other hand, being able to see this and knowing more wonderful things await me on my journeys to other worlds? I wouldn't trade that even for becoming one of them, and watching beautiful girls dance under the stars night after night.*

It didn't look like the party would end any time soon and he had work to do, so he moved a bit away from the crowd and leaned up against a tree trunk. *I doubt they have a house big enough for me but it's fine, it's warm enough here I can get to sleep.* He concentrated on his breathing, using the techniques he learned when learning Dreaming, and drifted off to sleep.

He opened his eyes in the reflection of the world, and looked around. *No sprites here, so this isn't the world they were talking about. Wonder if I would have understood the answer if I had worked up the courage to ask them. Anyway...* He willed himself to the waterfall, and stepped over into the real world again to fulfill his promise to “Water spirit Undine?”

“Ya!” the spirit, who had been staring into the base of the waterfall spun around. She raised her hands, icicles forming in the air around her as she cast a spell. “Oh, it's you!” The ice vanished as she saw who it was.

“Sorry if I scared you.” *She seemed a bit lonely, just sitting there. Like Amy was tied to that body of water she's now stuck here. Do spirits feel loneliness? I wonder if there's a way for her to both have a friend and protect the seed.*

“You came out of nowhere, and you feel different. There's no water in you, is this your ‘dream self’ that you were talking about?”

“It is. My real body is back asleep at the sprite village.”

“No problems with them, I hope?”

“They seem to have accepted the task of protecting it. Hopefully in the morning we'll have three seeds to bear the burden of Mana, not just two. The seed here is holding up alright?”

“No problems so far. I was just, you know...” She trailed off. “Anyway, you can make this place look a bit better now?”

“If you've got a vision, I've got the power to make it happen. Just let me know what you need.”

The pair spent what seemed like hours adding details to the place. He sunk parts of the floor and made bridges, redirected water to fill more of the space inside the cave, and generally made it look more like a palace than a dark and damp cave.

“Now this isn't bad,” Undine admitted at last. “You really can just wish up just about anything can't you?”

“There seems to be no limit on my ability to create when I'm like this.” *At least in terms of walls and decorations. I do have to wonder where it all comes from, it's so unlike what I can do with alchemy. As long as she doesn't want anything made that's more complex than I can understand, my time dreaming seems to be the only limitation.* He looked around, nodding at what he had accomplished here. *Above all else, this must be my greatest power. And what does Jason do with it? Destroy, not create. What a waste.* “Was there something else you wanted made? Something special?”

She sighed. “No, I suppose not.”

“That sounds like a ‘yes, please’ to me. Come on, out with it. What else can I make for you? I may not be back so you better ask now.”

“It's silly!”

“What is? I don't have all night here!” *I could wake up at any moment, it's been a few hours but I don't know exactly how many. Soon though.*

“Could you, I don't know, make me someone to talk to?”

"Someone to-" He stopped, considering. *Jason made that 'clone' of his that turned into the rare candy. It was 'alive' and able to fight me off in the suit of armor he made for it. Could I do something similar? Just wish up a being? "Maybe?"*

"Seriously?"

"Let me think..." He closed his eyes and tried to envision what a "friend" of a water spirit would look like. *Elves back home were basically immortal, if I wished up an "elf" they could stay together for a long time. Maybe a female elf, hummm yes she wants a companion not a lover, long hair, blue of course, gold there and there, sort of a flowing dress, pale blue there, dark blue there, kind eyes.*

"Hi there," said a new voice, and Lysanias' eyes flew open. Undine was looking totally shocked, hands over her mouth as a beautiful woman, a little shorter than him, waved shyly at them. She was basically how he imagined, her legs mostly bare but with sandals and a gold ring just below her left knee. Her dress flared out, multiple layers falling behind her. Pale blue hair, moving to purple and then violet as it went down cascaded down her back, and she wore gold bracelets high on her arms. Her ears were pointed, and she had a sort of crown on her head, that almost gave her a second pair of ears. Her eyes were as red as his and large, and she had a small nose and kind mouth. "Nice to meet you both, I'm Luka."

"By Mana," Undine breathed, not taking her eyes off Luka. "Are you a god?"

"She's not exactly real," he explained. "She's somewhat of an extension of me. But I think she'll stick around. I hope?"

"I hope so too," Luka told them. "It would be a shame to vanish into the nothingness I came from so soon after meeting you. We can be friends, right Undine?"

She knows she was just created?

"You know my name?"

"Of course. I know all that Lysanias does. Including..." She suddenly shifted her weight, lashing out a high kick with one leg. Then she dashed forward, rapidly punching but not quite touching *exactly* where he knew he would be chi-blocked had she made contact. She jumped back, her dress fluttering around her and stuck her hip out, resting her hand on it. "I will help you protect this place, if that's all right."

"Wait, do you have any of my powers?" he asked.

She sadly shook her head. "As much as I would like being a water bender, I only have your knowledge." She shifted her weight again, turning back to the fountain and doing a water bender move. The water did nothing. "See? Of course, like I said I still know what you know about powers and such. Who knows what I might be able to do later? I'm my own person now, thanks to you, so I may find I have other abilities in the future."

He breathed a small sigh of relief. *Okay, so I didn't make a female duplicate of myself, that's good to know. Still, that was scarily easy, as easy as making the walls in here. She was right to ask if I was a god.* "I'm not a god," he told Undine. "But honestly I don't know where dream energy comes from, but it seems it can do just about anything. I'm just a conduit for it, and honestly as surprised as you are that worked."

Undine took a few hesitant steps forward, and held out a hand. Luka took it, smiling, and she nodded. "She's real, not just an illusion. You made a person."

I made a something, I would have to examine her closely before I called her a person. "So it seems."

She walked around Luka, who seemed amused at this. Undine ran a hand through her hair, then came back in front of her again. "You did exactly what I wanted. A person to talk to. I guess I can't fault you for that, but you do realize what this means, right?"

That given enough time I could create an army? That I'm just really starting to learn what being a Dreamer means, and those I trained with have absolutely no idea? That I should be very, very careful how I use these powers? "I'm starting to."

"I hope so. Thank you, for everything."

"It was my pleasure. I'm sure I'll be back sooner or later to see how you're doing before this is all over. For now I'll leave you two to get acquainted, I have more work to do tonight."

"Bye for now," Undine called.

"Bye dad!" Luna said, blowing him a kiss.

Dad? He willed himself to wake up, wanting to take some time to process all this. Sitting up he looked around. Clearly not more than a few minutes had passed since he went to sleep, as usual for Dreaming. So in a few hours my dream self is going to create a person. That's either terrifying or- wait. If I teleported to her right now and told her under no circumstances is she to ask me for 'someone to talk to' would my dream self come back here without having created her? Would I then remember both creating and not creating her? My brain hurts, I'm going back to sleep.

Chapter 13

Our deeper soul connection Helps set our spirits free

When: The next cycle of dreams

Where: The World of Dreams

Lysanias stuck closer to the sprite territory the next time he realized he was Dreaming, and looked around. To the north, past the village, were more trees and he figured really any direction would be fine. Looking around he decided to really push himself and envisioned the trees simply sliding closer together to create a clearing. The trees immediately responded, zooming to the sides and leaving a simple field of grass where they had been. He nodded, then stepped back, planting his back foot as though going to earth bend. Which he essentially did, stomping and causing the ground before him to sink lower. This created a space surrounded by rock walls, with a gradual incline leading to the center of the place. He nodded.

This makes it more defensible. Anyone who wants to enter will have to go "down" meaning rocks and things can be thrown at them from "up here." Now for the place the wind spirit will live.

He imagined a fairly simple house that filled the space, several columns in front to somewhat match what Undine had been going for at the water palace. There was a shimmer in the air and what would come to be known as the wind palace by those that came later appeared out of nothing. The front and major walls he had wanted made of stone, as he knew it would have to be here for a very long time, and looking up at the roof he was pleased to find it made of metal as he had wished.

I just hope it's the right kind of metal. I know all about that heavenly metal that should never rust and be much tougher than anything else from my skill at alchemy. It looks right, hopefully the roof is the same stuff, so even if it hails or there are windstorms here the place should be completely fine.

He was fairly pleased how the whole thing had come out and went up the stairs, opening the door to the inside. This of course was made of the same metal, not wood, so it too would never have to be replaced. Looking around the interior showed him it was simply one big room, as he had figured.

I suppose I could have tried filling it with something at the same time, but better to get the outside in my head solidified and then work my way in.

Which he did by making a vertical drop near the back into a huge hole in the ground, which he then imagined was full of water.

That should keep them in water for some time. It won't be exposed for more than a few seconds, so it will evaporate very slowly. They can just pour a bit in every week to account for any loss.

Putting a pedestal over it he figured he could use channeling once awake to circulate the water that would cascade over the edges just like the previous one. On the inside he created some more pillars and let some light in with colorful windows at the back.

Sylphid can put whatever they want in here as time goes by, I expect they'll hang with the sprites most of the time anyway. All this practice I've been doing lately has paid off. Of course, before I was mainly trying to kill shadows and learn to protect myself from Jason while Dreaming. That's a much more different thing than just making matter appear out of nowhere.

Walking around the inside and outside he put some finishing touches everywhere, little bits of detail as he thought of them. For instance smoothing out the floor and turning it into rock, then giving it a pattern. Or details on the outside like metal decorations at the top of the pillars at the sides of the house.

I don't get much chance to be creative, after all, not like this anyway. Most everything I make is practical, and while I helped with the shield and Ragnarok, others really take the credit for how they look. This is something I alone created and can take some pride in. I think it looks pretty good.

Having finished the palace to his liking he stepped back over into the World of Dreams and spent the rest of his Dreamtime practicing, waking in the morning as the sun was coming

up. He cleaned himself up with magic and made food, figuring he might as well keep his hand in magic rather than expecting the sprites to feed him, and eventually everyone was up and admiring his handiwork with the shrine. Greenleaves met him there, now wearing a flimsy robe type garment that honestly you could see right through, so he wasn't sure why she bothered. She was holding the seed, sitting on the floor before the shrine and not looking all that pleased about it. Rising, Lysanias noted she had washed the paint off herself, and she put the seed in the crook of her arm.

"Good morning," she greeted him. "This place seems to have sprung up overnight, but no one can seem to tell me how. Can you?"

"Good morning. Er, it was just a little something I worked on as a place for the seed and for the wind spirit. No big deal." *Maybe change the subject?* "Are you ready to have the seed sealed?" *I should warn the spirits first, and I know Anabeth is going to want to try warning the world, I wonder if she's worked out a way to do that? Hopefully as it's only the third one it shouldn't be too bad?*

"Something you- Actually no," she answered. "I want all of my people to be here, but Mountain Dew hasn't returned yet. Now that I think about it, she's been gone a long time, and I'm starting to get worried."

"I can probably find her." *I doubt there's much magic in the world that can block me, given most people can't directly use magic at all they would never have developed any.*

"That would be wonderful," she admitted. "I don't want her away from her people, you'll probably finish sealing Mana off in a day or two, right?"

He nodded. "The sooner the better. That Mana Fortress isn't getting any less powerful the longer we wait."

"Do you need anything from me? I assume you'll use some kind of magical tracking spell? Is there such a thing?"

"Something like that. You'll just have to trust I'm telling the truth when I say I can do it. I don't suppose you have a picture of her? I have her name but being able to tell what she looked like would probably make this easier." *Given my track record of failing to hear the answer a majority of the time let's not make it any harder on myself.*

"Not as such, but come with me." She set the seed down and was going to head out, but Lysanias stopped her.

"May as well finish this off now." He took hold of the One Power through the bird in his pouch and sunk strands of water and air into the pedestal, making water flow up them. After he had the water flowing nicely he tied them off. *As long as there's magic in the world, that should be sustained.* "There's a small lake of water under this now," he explained to her. "But some will be lost over time. You'll need to add a little to account for that."

"I'm sure we can handle that," she agreed. "What exactly did you do? I feel magic, but of a sort I've never felt before, and you didn't seem to cast any sort of spell. Just who are you, that can create all this in a single night, and do even more besides? This house isn't magic, I can tell that much, why didn't you do that before, when you made it?"

Whoops. I never exactly explained who I was, last night. They were too busy partying. "When Anabeth said I had traveled many roads to get here, that was an understatement. For right now let's just say I can do many things, some magical, some not, and leave it at that for the moment." *Like create people...* he thought, remembering back to Undine last night. *Still not sure how I feel about that.*

"Very well. Come to the viewing pool." She led him through the village to a basin of water, shooing a bird away from it. Concentrating she touched the water, and as it rippled an image formed, growing clearer as the ripples stopped. "This is Mountain Dew." In the water was an image of a sprite, laughing and dancing with others who were "out of focus" in the picture to call attention to her.

"There isn't another sprite village, is there? Is this live?"

She shook her head. "This is a memory of her."

"I see. Very well, let me ponder this and I'll see what I can come up with."

"I will leave you to it." She took her hand away and the image faded. "I will not be hard to find when you are ready." She walked away.

Getting out his circle with the numbers on it he sat down near the basin and opened himself up to the impressions of the universe, asking the question of *Where would I find the sprite Mountain dew that I have just seen- I'm stupid.* Getting up again he moved off away from the village, preferring to call the spirit in private and not have to explain himself to the sprites who would no doubt come running when he started the chant. Now in the trees he chanted for several minutes, feeling the spirit's influence settle upon him. Then he went back and sat down by the water.

Where was I? Right. Where would I find the sprite Mountain dew that I have just seen in this pool, as indicated by the numbers on this paper?

There was no answer.

Lysanias couldn't stop a sigh from escaping him, resisting the urge to smash his head into the water repeatedly, and tried again.

What direction, along the heading shown by this circle, would I have to travel in to find the sprite Mountain dew that I have just seen in this water?

312

Thank you. How many kilometers would I have to travel to meet the sprite Mountain dew that I have just seen in this water?

5413

Five thousand! Sheesh! How in the world did this poor sprite get so far away? That's crazy talk.

So Lysanias got up and wandered the village, finding Anabeth with only a few spirits, talking to some sprites in a circle around herself. She got up told them she would continue later, if she could. They moved off, going back to whatever it was sprites did in this world, leaving the two of them to talk.

"So what's five thousand kilometers in that direction?" he asked, pointing in the direction he had gotten before.

"What's a kilometer?" she asked.

"Uh... A unit of distance. Even I know that much!"

She shook her head. "We must call them something different. Still it sounds like a lot, I would have to say the continent to the..." She got the map out of her inventory, spreading it on the ground. She pointed to a land mass across the ocean. "North east?"

"Another continent? How did the missing sprite get there?"

"There's a missing sprite? Good question, usually they stick pretty close to home."

"Mountain dew, apparently she left the village some time ago and hasn't been back."

She rubbed her chin. "That's a problem. If she's caught outside as we seal the Mana seeds she could starve before she can get back here."

"Greenleaves wanted her found before she would allow the seed to be sealed. Can you use your mapping software to figure out a more exact location? And maybe some pictures so I can make a gateway there?"

"We'd have to head back to the city, find a wireless connection we can hook into. There's too much detail to be stored inside the device, it's brought up as needed."

"I guess we better get going then. I'll just teleport us back there, it's not as dangerous as opening a gateway and I'm pretty sure I can lift all of you if Anabeth will hand me my sword back."

"I'll, uh, get it back again though right?" she asked, pulling it from inventory. She inverted it and handed him the hilt.

"Until I have to leave this place, yes. We're taking the other spirits, right?"

Anabeth gathered up the spirits and said goodbye to Greenleaves while Lysanias made a stone circle and took a picture of it, telling her to keep everyone out of it if they didn't want to get cut in half when he returned. She said she would warn everyone and wished them luck finding the wayward sprite. Everyone grabbed onto him, and he envisioned himself back in the dwarf caves, in an out of the way spot.

Internet access restored the group sat at a cafe looking at maps of the continent Lysanias figured Mountain Dew would be found at. He had asked what city she would be found in, and he was lucky enough to have gotten an answer right away. There was a problem though.

"All the dates on these images are two years old," Anabeth told him. "Even teleporting into, say, this alley here could be dangerous. There could be anything there now."

"I agree. The alternative is finding a place to stay for the night, then making another 'gravity ship' to fly there like I did when I first found the Mana tree."

"I hate to waste the whole day though."

"I have a question," Luna asked. "This gateway of yours, Lysanias. Does it have to be on the ground?"

"I suppose not, why?"

"As long as we can step through this end, why not simply put the other end in the air, here." She flew over and pointed to the picture, picking a spot in the air several meters above the ground. "What are the chances something will be in the air in that exact spot? They won't have torn down the buildings and put another building right there, right?"

"That would be fairly unlikely," Anabeth agreed.

"So we can just peek through, and if safe I can simply put it lower down. That's not a bad idea."

"Good job," Anabeth praised Luna.

"My domain is fairly high up," she explained, but still looked pleased.

So the group headed outside, back into the forest behind the caves the dwarves lived in, to make sure no one was around when they tried this. They didn't go far so Lysanias gathered the One Power inside himself and reached out with his senses, learning the area. *As Nynaeve said that would help make a stable gateway. Luckily I have a few more senses than the average channeler, so it doesn't take me as long.* This still brought up the bad memories he had of leaving that world in a hurry, and hoped he was practicing enough so he could go back there and make sure the shadows were gone. When he felt he had it Anabeth showed him the picture of the location and he opened a gateway which was at ground level on their end, but in the air at the other end. *Good thing she thought of that, I wouldn't have. And Nynaeve never mentioned doing this. Maybe they never thought of it either, as usually you don't want a hole you will fall through.*

The location looked good so he created another gateway lower down and the group passed through it.

"Now what?" asked Lumina, looking around.

"Do any of you have contact with a very out of place sprite, through your elements?" Anabeth asked her sprites. They all shook their heads. "I guess it's up to you," she told Lysanias.

"Er, here's a thought," Salamando spoke up. "What if she doesn't *want* to return to the village? I mean, she's gone pretty far here..."

"Not want to go back?" Shade asked him, sounding shocked. "Impossible. She's a sprite!"

"Is it? I mean why go to such great lengths to make sure it's almost impossible to be found?"

The others looked a bit concerned, looking to Anabeth for her take on things.

"I don't know," she admitted. "We'll tell her what's going to happen, and she'll have to make up her own mind about what her future holds. Worst case we make a gateway back to the village and the queen orders her back. Or at least sees her so she knows we tried."

Ultimately it's up to her, but she could die, so even if she had problems with those in the village, better to work at working them out than being dead."

"You do have to think of the worst thing that can happen, don't you?" Sylphid told him.

"I'm just being realistic. Something drove this sprite here. Let's be prepared for a chilly welcome."

So Lysanias sat on a trash can and sent his thoughts into the universe, asking for a street name where they would find the sprite. The spirits of course were somewhat bored as they waited for a reply and were floating around the mouth of the alley. It wasn't even a minute after Lysnaias started listening for the answer when he felt himself being poked.

"What the?" He opened an eye.

"Don't bother," said Salamando, who had been poking him. "We found her."

"You did! That's great news!" He jumped down from the can and looked around. "Was she just randomly walking by and you spotted her?"

"Not... exactly. Come on, you better look for yourself."

"Okay?"

The spirits led the two humans down the street a bit where a colorful poster hung on the front of a building. They stared at it. It was apparently advertising some kind of traveling show that was in town, and there was no mistaking what one of the attractions was. The poster was in full color, and a sprite doesn't look like anything else in the world but a sprite, even shrunk down on a colorful poster with other "marvels."

"See, it was even worse than I thought," Salamando told them, sounding smug. "You all think I'm so negative but honestly, it can always be worse."

"Oh dear," said Anabeth, her shoulders slumping. "That's a problem."

Chapter 14

Though there be fury on the waves, Beneath them there is none. The awful spirits of the deep
Hold their communion there; And there are those for whom we weep, the young, the bright,
the fair.

When: Same time

Where: Same place

The group stared at the poster for a time, and finally Lysanias spoke up. “What they’re doing. Is it... legal?”

“Someone made it legal,” replied Luna, sounding disgusted.

“I wouldn’t say that,” Anabeth disagreed. “Let’s just say- well, look around.”

The group did. Lysanias saw more drones, actually more than he had seen in the previous cities if he was counting correctly. He looked behind him, and his were still hovering there, being “eyes” for the AI he carried on his wrist. (Even if he didn’t exactly know the term “AI” yet) There were people driving past, and a few on foot hurriedly walking past them, minding their own business. “What am I looking at?” he asked.

“What do you see?” she countered.

“People?”

“Exactly. No dwarves. I mean yes, they tend to stick with their own kind and there are far fewer of them than humans in general but even where we were you might see one occasionally. This place doesn’t seem as welcoming to non-human life.”

“What makes you say that?”

She shrugged. “Just a feeling. It’s a lot of little things. More drones, meaning people aren’t as trusting here.”

“I noticed that.”

“Look, the people walking are mostly looking down, not ahead. This alley is filthy, no one cares to clean it. It all adds up.”

“I see what you mean. So they can just lock up a sprite as a ‘curiosity’ and it’s not illegal here?”

“It’s probably not in any law book, it’s just a sprite would have very little standing here. Maybe it’s the reason she was brought here. As a non-human the people here might just not see her as deserving the same rights they have.”

Lysanias begin to feel a great anger welling up inside him. “Well,” he announced. “Good thing I’m here. There’s nothing these people can do to stop me rescuing her.” *Even as I am now, my abilities should be enough to rescue one little sprite from a bunch of lowlife thugs such as this.* He glared back up at the poster.

“Maybe not at the time, but there’s plenty they can do after the fact.”

“What are you talking about?”

She sighed. “Say we bust in there, right? Smash the place up, rescue any animals or other ‘curiosities’ they have. *We’re* the ones in the wrong at that point. We’re stealing this Stromboli character’s property.”

“Property?” he spat. “Mountandew can’t be property! She’s a person.”

Anabeth tried to shush him. “Keep your voice down!”

“You’re not taking his side are you?”

“What? No, of course not! I just don’t want to be flagged as having a shouting match in an alley on a continent I can’t possibly be on because I was last seen thousands of kilometers away on a *different continent.*”

He came up short. “Oh, well, I mean...” *Wait, now she knows what a kilometers is? Or did my translation ability just make it seem to me that she said that?*

“It’s fine for you, you’re not a person around here. It’s different for me.”

“Okay, okay, I get it.” He got out his stele and traced an *ignore me* rune on the buildings that made up the alley. “There, for the next few minutes no one will even know we’re here.”

“Not really the point but fine. If you’re seen by even one camera in this rescue attempt, it may take awhile because you can just pop in and out of places but eventually the law will

catch up to you. Are you going to fight police forces even when you know they're just doing their job and you're legally, if not ethically, in the wrong?"

"I would rather not," he agreed hesitantly. "But who says I would look like myself during the attempt?" He grinned.

"I guess if you have some power to disguise yourself, but we come to my question; What do you intend here?"

"If worst comes to worst I can just rescue her tonight in a Dream. I'll just slip in and get her. I can look like anyone I want, just walk by, touch her, and teleport away. They won't know what happened and they'll never know!"

"And if she's here by choice?" Salamando asked.

"How could she be?" he retorted.

"Maybe she wanted to see the world, and this was the only real way she could do that. You assume she's held captive but you don't know, she could be the star of the show and treated like a princess. What if she doesn't *want* to be 'rescued' and now you've kidnapped her against her will?"

Better than her dying out here when Mana goes away. "So are you volunteering to find her and ask? After all, she would be able to see you but most other people wouldn't be."

"That's what I heard him saying," Shade told the other sprites. "Isn't that what you heard?"

The others agreed that was exactly what they had heard. Salamando rolled his eyes.

"Fine, I'll go. But we have to find where the show is, first."

"It lists the address, I'm sure we can get directions," Anabeth told him. "Come on then."

He grumbled as the other sprites teased him, but the group left the alley and headed up the street.

Not too long afterwards they came to the building where the show would be held, a theater of some kind. Salamando, grumbling about it, said there were no fires burning inside so after making sure to anchor some *ignore me* wards near a window Lysanias opened it from the inside with the force. The group stood out there, totally ignored by anyone that passed by, and soon enough the spirit returned.

"Did you see her?" Anabeth whispered.

"You don't have to whisper," Lysanias reminded her. "As long as we're near these we won't be seen or heard."

"Whatever. So?"

"I didn't, actually," he admitted. "But I saw some strange stuff, that's for sure. She's not walking around, but there is a lot of activity going on in there. Something's happening."

"So what did you see that was so odd?"

"I'm not even sure. Best way I can describe them is 'boxes of darkness.' They kind of creeped me out, to be honest."

"Boxes? Of darkness?" Shade asked, floating over. "Show me."

"Come on."

The two vanished inside, but were back before Lysanias had to trace more wards with the stele. *They don't last very long, after all.*

"It's just as he said," Shade told them. "It's darkness, but at the same time it's not."

"Huh?" everyone inquired.

"There were several 'blank spaces' in there. A lot of caged creatures, so I assume they're some kind of cage, but I couldn't see into them. Or touch them. But despite them being 'dark' I couldn't tell anything about them."

"And your domain is darkness, I get it," Anabeth reasoned. "That's troubling."

"Some kind of magic?" Lysanias asked.

"I could go see," Dryad told them.

Anabeth shook her head. "Don't bother. I think I know what it could be, it's just super odd that a low life like this would get access to it."

"To what?"

"Remember those rumors about a metal with anti-Mana properties being developed?"

"Sure, they wanted to protect the fortress with something like that, but, wait you don't think?"

She nodded. "I do. I think it actually was developed. Think about it. What kind of cage would you put a magical creature in?"

"One that was resistant to magic, or cut it off," Dryad said sadly.

"Exactly. Some monsters can use magic, we've seen that in fighting them. Want to bet creatures that can do magic get an anti-Mana cage so they can't just break out?"

"But don't sprites subsist on magic?" Lysanias asked. "That would mean they were—"

"Starving her, yes." Her face was grim. "We need to get in there and get her out. *Now.*"

"We were seen walking around the building though, we need to be seen walking away again."

"What part of now didn't you understand?"

"She won't die in the next three minutes. Let me get set up here and come with me."

He burned a quick circle on the ground and took a picture of it, then slapped real *ignore me* wards on either side. *That should keep anyone from being right here when we come back.* That done he headed away from the building, making sure to look right at any drones he saw flying around. Anabeth started to protest but followed him. When they were far enough away and down another alley he embraced the One Power and after a moment opened a gateway back to the fairy village.

"What are we doing back here? Going to lead an army of sprites through to rescue their own?" Anabeth asked.

"We're getting changed. You have other clothes in your inventory, right?"

"Sure, but—"

"Get me out a dress."

"A dress?" She seemed scandalized. "What are you talking about?"

"Just come on."

Some time later two very different looking women stepped through a gateway back to the side of the building. One of the figures was wearing all of Lysanias' gear, but looked like Korra. The other looked like Mavis. They were followed by several spirits, a lady in a turquoise colored jumpsuit holding two wands, another jammed into her belt like a sword, and a living mountain.

"Why are some of my teeth sharp?" "Mavis" had asked, after being transformed into her disguise.

"You're a vampire. Believe me, the girl you are now, Mavis, would *not* stand idly by and let this happen. She would fight."

"A vampire?"

"Uh huh."

She paused a second. "Okay, cool. And why are *you* a girl?"

He laughed. "Korra was a real hothead. I figure if I'm going to bust into a place for a rescue effort, I may as well look the part."

"So we are doing this the noisy way?"

"I think sending a clear message here is the way to go. Obviously don't kill anyone, but a bunch of people as powerful as we are tearing through this place will make whoever runs it very cautious about locking up a sentient creature ever again." *And with these people having "HP" I can actually be fairly "loud" about things. There's not much danger of them dying from any one attack I can pull off. And even if they do drop to "zero HP" that's what the cup of wishes is for. They'll be fine, it's not like I can cut off their limbs or anything, they just take "HP" damage. Sure, I refilled my energy before we left, and I still really can't handle a protracted fight, but maybe we can scare off any guards the place may have before it becomes an issue.*

"I'm behind you, either way. How are we getting in? I don't think they own the building, so we should try and keep property damage to a minimum as well. So no blowing up the wall here. Through the window?"

"We'll find a door, come on, some drones should see us approaching we don't just want to break in."

“Okay. You all ready?” she asked her spirits.

“We are, but remember you have to tell us what to do, and offer your MP,” Dryad reminded her. “We can’t act directly against humans, even to protect you.”

“I remember. I just wish I could use the fancy sword.” She glanced over at Korra, where the sword hung at its usual place.

“Sorry, I need the boosts.”

“It’s fine. I can give up the ultimate sword any time I want. Who says I can’t? They’re obviously wrong, I gave it up didn’t I?”

“After a bit of internal struggle, yes.”

“See, it’s fine, it’s not a problem. I’m already over it. Are we going or not?”

“Lead on.”

The group headed around the building, towards the back, where they figured loading doors would be. These easier to cut a hole in rather than open and potentially set off any alarms. *We don’t need the whole building on alert or officers being automatically notified, let’s keep it quiet for at least a the breaking part of the breaking and entering.* They were correct, there were loading doors, and in front of them was a truck, which looked like it was being, as one might expect, loaded. The doors looked big enough for two trucks side by side, but only one was there so the two could see past it into the building. Boxes and equipment of all kinds lay in a pile inside, and burly men were hauling them into the back of the rectangular shaped vehicle that was idling there.

“Can I help you ladies?” the driver of the truck shouted down to them.

Lysanias had to mentally switch gears for a second, he had come here expecting resistance and a fight, not an offer to help. The two looked at each other and Anabeth shrugged. *Maybe it’s different because we’re all woman right now? Would he have offered the same help to another guy? Rosalina, Mavis, and Korra are fairly attractive, after all.*

“Is Mr. Stromboli around?” she called, walking up to the cab. “We’re here to see him about one of his... exhibits.”

Heck, if we can just walk in there and see the man, maybe I can simply tell him to hand the sprite over, and he will. Not exactly how I wanted it to play out but safer for everyone I guess.

“He left after the final show last night,” the man said. “He headed for the new location, wanted to make sure everything was in order there when everything from here started arriving. Look if you’re some kind of activist give it up, he doesn’t care, and he’ll just have you arrested for harassment. It’s happened before.”

She looked like she didn’t know how to respond to this and decided to take a different approach. “You really are packing the show up?”

“Been here two months, time to move on.”

“I don’t suppose the ‘animals’ are still here?”

He shook his head. “Nah, they left on the first truck, about five minutes ago.”

Of course they did.

“Well that’s just great. Can you tell me where the show is going next?”

“I’m driving this rig out to Amistein, east of here. So I suppose that’s where it’ll be next.”

“Okay, thanks.” She waved to him and he waved back, so she turned and collected Lysanias, moving out of sight again.

“So now what?” Salamando asked. “I suppose you could wait at the new location-”

“You could have told us they were being moved!” Anabeth fumed. “That guy said we missed them by a few *minutes*. If we hadn’t headed back to do our little fashion show we could have jumped them and saved her before the truck left!”

It’s true, she had a few outfits and I did spend maybe more time trying them on than I should have. I did want to look good, heck I do look good in this. He glanced down at what he was wearing. *As I’m borrowing Korra’s body I wanted to represent her well. Is it my fault I want to look cute every once in a while? Trying on outfits was kind of fun and-*

“I told you something was going on, didn’t I say that? Humans do things, they’re always doing things! How am I supposed to know one doing thing from another? I wasn’t paying attention to them, I was looking at the weird cages and trying to find our wayward sprite.”

Besides, it's just as much your fault, and his, or hers, or whatever I should say now." He was pointing at Lysanias.

"Mine?" he asked in surprise.

"Oh, she won't die in the next three minutes I think you said? You didn't check, did you? And you," he turned back to Anabeth. "weren't there dates on the poster? Couldn't you have said 'the show is already over, I bet they're packing it up if they haven't already.' But did you? Noooooo."

Her mouth opened and closed like she wanted to make a counter argument.

"So don't just go blaming the spirit of fire for decisions you made." He crossed his arms and turned away from her.

"So what are you going to do?" Rosalina asked him.

"Good question," he admitted, thinking it over. "I could put a design on the top of the truck with the stele while wearing an *ignore me* ward. Take a picture of it, then target that space some time tonight. I know it'll be east of here, I could teleport on top of it then bring the rest of you through a gateway."

"You won't let her be carted around in a pitch black truck for hours, will you?" Dryad asked, sounding desperate. "Imagine how scared she must be right now!"

"Eh, she's probably numb to it by now," Salamando told them.

"That's horrible!"

"She's right. I suppose I could fly after it, can we figure out the shortest ground route between here and there? That's the most likely path so I could follow it in the air and see if I see a similar looking truck."

"Are you that fast?" Sylphid asked.

"I'm pretty fast, with certain pieces of gear on." *And my identity gift, thank you so much Allfather for giving me something that I only learned of after being stuck in a cave for thousands of years,* he managed with only a medium of sarcasm.

"It might not be the shortest, it may be the fastest, or the one with the least turns," Anabeth countered. "Big vehicle like that, there's probably a lot of considerations. There's going to be a lot of road between here and there."

"There must be some way to track it," Sylphid insisted.

"Let me think a minute, I can do a lot of things but selecting the right set of- wait a minute."

"You thought of something?" Anabeth asked.

"I once tracked down Kid by looking at the past of the place I knew she was and then followed her through time until I caught up with her. I can do something similar here, with some modification." *Yeah, a bit of clone power, getting lost would be terrible... It's three separate skills but I should be able to just manage them.* "Spirit clone technique!" he called, putting his fingers together and creating a single clone. The clone settled down and left his body, then called upon a vision of the past to see the truck leaving. He felt he just managed it, luckily it hadn't been more than 10 minutes since it left, and his senses took off after the truck.

"What's she doing?" Anabeth asked. "What are *you* doing I guess is a better question... You can be fairly confusing sometimes, you know that? Are you still male?"

He grinned, choosing not to answer that question. "There's no way I could run or fly and keep my mind on the past at the speed we'll be talking about here," he explained. "But my astral form, if you will, that my clone has just released, isn't concerned about the physical world. It can ignore and pass through anything in the here and now as it flies after the vision of where the truck was in the past. It's also faster. When it finds it the clone's astral form doesn't have to make its way back here, potentially getting lost, the clone just ends the technique. I get the knowledge of where the truck is, what it looks like, and I can teleport to it." *If it's stopped, anyway. If not my clone will have to think of some way of stopping it, or racing ahead to a landmark I can teleport to, and we'll stop it ourselves.*

"As simple as all that? I should have thought of it."

They shared a laugh and settled down to wait.

It didn't take long before the clone vanished. "Okay, grab hold of me everyone, we're off!" They did, and Lysanias *shifted*.

Chapter 15

It's the spirit of sweet friendship That brightens all the year

When: After the teleport

Where: A bridge over a freeway

"This isn't a truck," Anabeth rightly observed, looking around. The group was standing atop a bridge, traffic going by to their left and under them. Vehicles were zipping by on the lower road, this probably being some kind of long distance toll road a truck would take between two major cities.

"Correct," Lysanias admitted. "The truck is just a little ways that way. My clone spirit followed it for a bit, but it shows no signs of slowing down. As it just got underway I doubt the driver will stop any time soon."

"So what, you're going to force it to stop from here?"

"What? No! That would be very dangerous!"

"So what then?"

"Well... how adventurous are you feeling?"

"So I'm not going to like the answer. Wonderful."

"You might! Look, as it passes by we're just going to jump unto it, that's all."

"May I remind you that you don't have HP? Won't you be hurt if you mistime this jump of yours?"

"I would, but it should be fine. I have the force to guide me, and I'll use metal bending to attach my cables to it before I jump. I'll really just be pulled down towards it rather than relying on gravity."

"And I'm supposed to, what, just hold onto you or something?"

"Actually, I was hoping Rosalina could help there. Can you use your telekinetic powers to help you both jump and land on the truck?"

"Shouldn't be a problem," she admitted. Then she grinned and giggled. "I guess all my kart racing jumps have rubbed off on you."

"They played a part in me coming up with this plan, yes."

"Kart racing?" Anabeth asked.

"Never mind, it's a soulscape thing. Look, watch out for the truck we don't want to miss it."

The drones lifted off, scanning the road in all directions. *Oh, right, I have drones now.*

The watch at his wrist buzzed, and he looked at it. *I'll alert you to the timing for the jump* it flashed.

"Thanks," he told it.

They didn't have long to wait, and as the truck passed under the bridge the watch buzzed again. He turned and saw it just coming out beneath him, and shot his cables out from each arm. The spools at his back whined as they unrolled, and he shot the ends into the metal walls of the truck, then jumped off and pulled himself towards the top. Beside him Anabeth leapt off the bridge with Rosalina at her side, both shouting it excitement. (Or terror? He wasn't concentrating on their emotional state at the moment.) The drones and spirits, which could all fly anyway, simply headed over there.

He landed with a thump, driving the cables in further to anchor himself, and the other two grabbed onto him as they landed.

"That was fun!" Rosalina yelled. "It's like we're in an action movie! This is fantastic! Oh hey."

He looked over, and beside him was a car with a fairly young child in it, gaping up at them. She waved, and the kid hesitantly waved back, then started pointing and talking to the people in the front seat.

Concentrate. He looked over at the two. "You okay?" he yelled.

"We're okay," Anabeth assured him. "Now what? Are we sure this is the right truck?"

He looked down, trying to feel out what was below him. They didn't have spirit energy, just like Anabeth didn't, but through the force he could at least feel it wasn't hauling food or goods, but living creatures. "I feel a lot of creatures below us, it should be."

"I agree," Shade told them. "The inside of the truck is dark, so I can tell it's full of cages. But I have no idea where the one holding the sprite might be. Lots of them I can't 'see' into."

"I suppose you could head to the back, use metal bending to get the door open? Nothing should fall out unless the truck accelerated," Anabeth called to him.

I would hate to tear the top off the thing, despite that being rather easy given it's metal. It's what Korra would do, no doubt, but the person that owns the truck isn't at fault it's being used to transport what it is. "But what if she's in the front?" He pointed.

"The cages are packed tightly together," Shade agreed. "And the 'dark' ones are sort of randomly placed."

Ugh, super. I don't want to cause any kind of disruption here. If people see cages floating around there could be accidents on this road. Just me standing up here is probably a bad idea, I should have used ignore me wards first. Actually, that gives me an idea... He carefully released some of the tension on the one cable, and pulled out his stele. "Drones, tell me when the lane to the right to clear, we're stealing the whole back of the truck!" They rose into the air, swiveling into position. *My goodness I use this one ward a lot. Way more than any of the others.* He traced an *ignore me* ward on the top of the trailer, then put it back and slammed his hand down on the truck. Using Earth Bending he figured out how the pieces went together, and used metal bending to release them. Grabbing hold of the trailer he kept it rolling forward with bending, and waited for the watch to buzz. When it did he trusted it and slowed the truck, making sure it was decoupled from the cab. Various cables and tubing ripped away, making him wince, but he yanked the front of the thing to the side and rolled it through the thin metal barrier by the side of the road and onto the grass. They all rattled around as he yanked it to a stop, finally coming to rest by the side of the road. With his concentration now freed up he looked back towards the road, and was relieved to see no one swerving or crashing as far as he could see.

"I guess that works," Anabeth told him sounding a bit impressed. "But now what are we going to do with it?"

"One problem at a time," he told her. "But I have an idea." He yanked his cables back and jumped down from the top, then figured out how to open the door. "Everyone okay in there?" he called. The sounds of terrified animals met his ears, and he squinted into the darkness. "Mountandew, you in here?" He listened, but didn't really hear anything over the cries of the caged creatures. "Well, they don't look too smashed up," he decided, and closed the door again. *Now for the tricky part. My energy pathways have been widened so I can spend a lot of my spirit energy at once. I don't, normally, because it leaves me weakened and vulnerable. But in this case, we're heading back to the forest so I can recharge right away. Now usually I can open a gateway just big enough to walk through, and that's using the little bird I got for returning the two scepters. But I took Nyneave's skill, and as she explained it I can trade my inner energies for a temporary boost in my ability to hold onto the One Power. Just like Susan using her magic or me using Skyebourne magic. If I use all the energy I can I bet I can gather enough to make a gateway big enough to roll this truck through. It's a simple matter to use metal bending to move it, so let's see how this works.*

Lysanias concentrated, willing energy through his body and into his channeling. Opening himself up to the One Power allowed a flood of it into him, making his eyes pop open as every sensation was suddenly heightened. The cars passing by sounded like they were right on top of him, the glare of the sun threatened to blind him, and he could make out minute details of the grass below and the clouds above as he looked around.

"You okay?" Anabeth asked.

"Okay? I feel fantastic! I can do anything. You hear me? Anything!"

"What?" She hopped down. "Are you high? Did you take something? Is that how you jumped off the bridge? Drugs?"

"Drugs? What are you-" He caught sight of her eyes. "Oh wow, you have such beautiful eyes."

She colored. "You are high."

"How come you never tell me I have beautiful eyes?" Rosalina asked, leaning over the edge.

"Everything about you is beautiful, oh wand of mine."

She seemed mollified. "Well. A girl does like to be told, every now and again, you know."

"Look at that bird!" he suddenly cried, pointing up. "The feathers have such a nice pattern!"

"What bird?" both ladies said, looking up. "What, that tiny spec up there?" Anabeth went on. "Is that a bird?"

"Right, sorry. Focus!" *Get ahold of yourself. Honestly.* "Watch this." He got out the picture of the open spot in the sprite's forest and channeled, a gateway several times larger than what he normally created springing open. *Hope no one was near the circle, but we did tell people to stay away from it.* With that done he dragged the truck with metal bending, needing to do some tricky maneuvering to keep it from being chopped in half by the edges of the gateway. The spirit helped, having stepped through and grown to a larger size. The sprites were all around watching this go on, and finally when it was through he (reluctantly) let the One Power go. The world became so drab and lifeless he almost sobbed, but realized it was just returning to normal. *Yeah, that can be addicting. Good thing I don't have to make them that big all the time. I'm bushed.*

With some help the group got all the cages unloaded, finding Mountain Dew alive but in poor shape. She perked up a little when released and she could feel Mana again, thanking them for getting her out of there. The other animals were carried into the forest to be released.

"Don't mention it," Lysanias told her. "We couldn't just let you stay there once we heard you were missing. You'll be okay, right?"

"I should be."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"So what are you doing with this?" Greenleaves asked, smacking the truck. "It can't exactly stay here."

"You don't want it as a storage unit?" he asked. "I could tear the metal into sheets and you could use it as building material." *Later, once I've recovered a bit that is.*

She seemed to consider. "On second thought, leave it for now."

"She's got a point," Anabeth mused. "You just stole that guy's truck out from under him. Sooner or later he's going to realize it, and not know what the heck happened. He could be in big trouble."

"Can you send a message to this Stromboli character? Anonymously? Warn him against using live creatures in his show again and say the sprites have reclaimed their own?"

"Eh, maybe. I'll see what I can come up with."

"I guess you'll want to seal the seed now?" Greenleaves asked.

"Unless there was something else? We did bring back Mountain Dew."

She shook her head. "No. Go ahead." She gestured for them to proceed. Walking through the town Mountain Dew was greeted warmly and Greenleaves shouted for everyone to spread the word and brace themselves. "Mana is going to go away for a few seconds. Everyone get ready."

And the deed was done, and Sylphid said goodbye to the group. The drones stayed off a bit longer than with the previous sealing, making Lysanias concerned that yes, they really were going to have to find some way to warn the world the next time they did it. *Maybe 24 hours notice? So they don't have planes flying around? We have five more to go.*

But they didn't leave right away, Lysanias was fairly tired from throwing all that energy around and holding a gateway that big open so long. So they decided to stay for the night, and discuss their next move.

"The place I chose is almost directly west of here," Shade said as they unrolled the map. "That should be our next destination."

"I agree, in principal," Lysanias told him. "But we should discuss going about this a little differently."

"How so?"

"The world has no doubt noticed Mana vanishing three times, and each time it took a little longer to recover."

"That's true."

"With three seeds taking the load we should have a little time. My idea is this- we continue finding sites but we don't seal the seeds just yet. We maybe find three sites, I take pictures of them, and get them ready in Dream time. Then we release some kind of message to the world. That's your job, Anabeth, I have no idea how to go about that."

"A warning?"

"Exactly. Coach it in whatever way you think is most effective, and when the time comes, maybe we give them 24 hours, we seal one right after another. Mana goes away and stays away, if we do it quick enough. At that point we have two left to seal. We give the world one more warning. The next time Mana vanishes it doesn't come back."

"And then we seal the last two seeds," she whispered, looking haunted.

He nodded. "With no more Mana to absorb we knock the fortress out of the sky and your world is saved."

"Our world may be saved but our way of life is doomed. We'll have to figure out other ways to do just about everything."

"I can't deny that, you're exactly right. And you at least have one advantage. You know that, through me, other ways of doing things are possible. I couldn't describe a combustion engine well enough that you could invent one, but once you need it, I'm sure someone could. But at least this way there should be minimal deaths."

"If they listen, which they won't," Salamando observed.

"That's up to our message," Lysanias countered. "What do you think is most effective, Anabeth?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, there's plenty of ways we could approach this problem. We could pretend to be terrorists, who-"

"Pretend?" Salamando asked incredulously.

"Quiet you. Terrorists, who will destroy the world's Mana unless our demands are met. Namely destroying the Mana Fortress. Maybe political pressure will bring it down before we have to?"

"Maybe. What else?"

"Let me think... We could pose as scientists studying Mana and saying this is a natural cycle, like we've found evidence it's happened before and one day will return again. Or maybe as nature spirits who are tired of having Mana be abused by humans. It was never meant for what they've done with it, the spirits are angry, and we're cutting them off until they can learn responsibility."

"We are angry," Salamando told them.

"There's a difference between angry and ornery," Dryad told him. "Also speak for yourself. Mana is there to be used, no one use is better or worse than another."

"They don't have to know that."

"I like that idea, that it isn't being done by humans. I mean, here you are, helping. You agreed to the plan, so in a way that's the truth. But not the whole truth. I think we should tell people the whole truth about what's going on here."

All the spirits started protesting this was a crazy idea that would never work. She held up a hand for quiet.

"He left the choice to me, and that's what I'm doing. I'll think of a suitable speech tonight and you can record me saying it in the morning. I'll put it on a video sharing site and when we've seen the next three places I'll make a generic email account and publish the video, sending the link to major news organizations. Twenty four hours later we seal the seeds. I'll make another video and do the same thing for the final two. I'm the one doing this, history will either make me the hero or the villain as it will. But my world will be safe."

"No disguise?" Lysanias asked. *Wow, she's a courageous person all told.*

"No. My life may be over when this is done, but honestly, I think they'll have more important things to be worrying about. Like figuring out a replacement engine for airplanes..."

“As you wish. Actually, doing things this way we can record it in the morning, release it immediately, stay here another day, and hop to the sites the next day. I can travel faster in my Dream ship than my airship, and I just need to see the sites and take a picture to get us all there in the blink of an eye. I can do that far more easily asleep.”

“Better get started then.” She got out her communication device and started tapping away into it.

“We can still come, to see if the site is suitable though, right?” Lumina asked.

“Of course. You don’t really sleep, do you? I’ll leave the Dream here, make a ship, and we can tour the whole world in a night.”

“What do you think?” he asked the hubPad, playing the camera over the map of the world. Anabeth was off practicing her speech and the spirits were off playing with the sprites. “We can do the same thing as when we found the Mana tree, right? Use the gravity drive ship, you can keep me on course, and we can find these sites easily enough right?”

“Given what I have seen you do, this course has an 89% chance of success.”

“Better than most. I’ll take it.”

“If I may suggest a course of action in the meantime?”

He did a little double take. “Oh, of course. What did you have in mind?”

“I am authorized to provide a blueprint based on the design of the previous ‘Dreamship’ you created. Study it and implement it when you Dream tonight. Then, rather than allow it to fall into the ocean or destroy it yourself, put it into your magical dimension for later use.”

“But I can always just wish up another, why save it?”

“When access to the Hub is granted, if these specifications are followed, a real engine can be added allowing for use both in and out of the Dreaming state.”

“Oh? Show me.” Images appeared on the screen, showing a ship much like the one he had made before, a silver teardrop shape, but this design was bigger, more comfortable in order to transport more than himself, and had space for various components that could be added later. “I see! Landing gear that works like that, okay that’s just mechanical that’s easy enough. Panels that can open and close presumably to add fuel to the engine which would be there. Conduit for wires so we can put an actual display there. Weapon systems would go here, some kind of shield generator there. Once I understood how such things actually worked I could just Dream them into place, we wouldn’t need to take the ship apart to install them. It can still be all one piece of metal, and I know all about various metals so we can talk about the best one to use. Will all those components really fit?”

“Hub technology is very compact. You hold an example of that in your hands now.”

“I can’t argue with that. Sure, I’ll keep looking these over so I understand them.

Thanks, you’re right, may as well just make it once and reuse it.” *Even if I can just wish it into existence when I need it. Having a ship like this I could use now instead of that pokey balloon, no offense my old friends, would be nice. And it won’t be long before I have Hub access, so I may as well start thinking that way. Man, imagine showing up back home with a ship like this!*

“Very good. Allow me to show further detail and close up views of the various spaces and compartments.”

“Go ahead.” *This will be so cool!*

Chapter 16

You're like the spirits the children invent to inhabit the stuffed horse and the doll.

When: That night

Where: The Dreaming representation of the Sprite Village

Once Lysanias realized he was Dreaming and stepped over to the real world he began work on the new craft. He decided it would have no doors or windows, he would simply teleport into and out of it- like a boss. He would make a note reminding himself to create fresh air every time he went in, and he could set a reminder on the watch to refresh the air at intervals, it would be fine. He could do that awake or asleep, that didn't matter, so using it in either state was possible. The outside of the craft he made out of adamant, making it a dark blue that he stood and looked at tilting his head this way and that. The metal did make the ship basically invulnerable, being the toughest stuff he had ever come across. But his previous Dream ship was more like a mirror, (not that anyone had seen it, given he only flew it once and in the dark at that) and he was wondering how he could make it look at least 20% cooler. Then it came to him- coat the whole thing in Rainbow Shell material. This went on like a skin, it didn't need to be thick to be dazzling, and he nodded, thinking that was much more like it. If the ship was somehow attacked and the outer coating got scratched up, who cared? He could always fix it, the "armor" in this case was on the *inside*. It was larger than his previous ship, and sat on landing legs, only slightly ruining the teardrop shape. He figured it could comfortably hold 4 people, but there were no "quarters" as such like there had been on the Falcon. This was a craft for zipping from one place to another in. *If I need something like Han's ship, stupid Han, I'll make it. The principal is the same after all, I just need to scale it up.*

Moving to the interior the seats were comfortable and could fold down if he didn't need all of them at once. Along the "front" he left space for the screen and the captain's chair in the middle had a control panel to the right and left, in case for some bizarre reason he needed to control it manually. (It was empty at the moment, that would all be hooked up when he understood enough about electronics to do so) He asked his AI (*still need to give them an official name instead of just 'hubPad'*) about "the enterprise" he remembered Jason mentioning, and it showed him pictures of the interior. He wasn't sure if that was right so it showed him pictures of other craft in that same universe, including a shuttlecraft. This he thought fit the bill a bit better, and added some places to hang further displays that curved above him to about mid level, and then put some shelves and cubbies below. He carpeted the floor, added a place for some lights (he was lighting it himself at the moment) and generally made it look more like a real craft and not an empty, floating, warehouse building. He didn't spend long on it, just enough to get a feel for what the final product might look like, and brought the others onboard.

"And this thing will fly?" Salamando asked him.

"For the moment, I'll will it to fly, but one day it'll fly under its own power." He focused on "magical" displays, showing a view of the outside, and imagined gravity pulling them upwards, not down. The ship lifted off, retracting the landing gear which was basically just spring loaded at this point, and he turned the front to the west. "Everyone ready?" he asked. Those that needed to strapped themselves down to the chairs, (Lumina was more light than substance he figured, but felt it rude to ask) and the ship picked up speed towards their destination.

As before he stopped their acceleration and kept their speed constant after less than a minute, they weren't going very far at the speed they were going. They went fairly high up so as to not disturb anyone on the ground with noise from air friction and cruised over the mountains. Being so high gave them the advantage of seeing a lot of the ground at once, though the place Shade wanted was fairly small in comparison. Luckily they had a fairly good idea of where it was based on the map and the heading provided by the AI, plus it could calculate their speed fairly easily and told him to ease up and drop down near the right place. Having found the small clearing in the middle of the mountains the group left the ship and headed inside. It was a fairly dark cave, but Shade thought it was perfect as after a small

“vestibule” area it opened up to some twists and turns. Lysanias got more practice in creating matter as he smoothed out the walls with some similar looking architecture to what Undine had wanted, and in the very back created a hole and a huge amount of water he could later hook up to the pedestal. Shade had insisted some of the cave be left as is, while some of the walls were okay to “make pretty.”

“I’ll put traps and things in later,” he told them. “Maybe some invisible bridges, you know, that sort of thing. This is a good start, thanks.”

“Sure thing. Sorry you have to live all the way out here now...”

“It’s for the good of the world. Besides, all of darkness is my domain, I’ll know what’s going on in the world.”

“If you say so.”

With all that done he took a picture of the pedestal, not bothering with a circle on the floor to target. *What’s the point? There won’t be anyone in here.* With that they headed back to the ship and traveled northwest, towards the desert. This was about twice the distance they had just come so Lysanias let the ship accelerate for twice as long, the teardrop shape of the craft cutting through the air with little resistance. Oddly, Salamando didn’t want his new home to be in the exact middle of the desert but more towards the coast, so with a shrug he kept the ship going until they could see water. “Yes, this is the spot,” he told them. “Bring us down here.”

“Okay...” He did as he was asked, stopping the ship and landing it, then brought everyone out.

“Why here?” Luna asked him.

“You’ll see. Can you put a sort of hill here, maybe, then put a door with some stairs going down into this general area?”

“Whatever you want,” he replied.

It turned out Salamando did know what he was talking about as there turned out to be a huge network of caves under that very spot, and he had Lysanias walk through for about two hours setting this up there. It went down fairly deep, making this palace the largest and most impressive of all of them thus far. At first he wondered how the spirit of *fire* knew about this place, but at one point it went so deep he saw *lava* so that question was answered. “No one is going to make it down here easily,” he chortled when the last details were put on the resting place of the seed. “Yes sir, would be thieves may as well just give up now. I’ll not be leaving this place thanks to some weirdos breaking in, no sir.”

“Is that a danger?” he asked, not believing for a second it could be.

“You never know.”

He took a photo of the pedestal and simply teleported them back to the surface rather than walking through all that again, appearing in the ship and unrolling the map.

His wrist computer warned him that he had been Dreaming for about 5 hours at that point. “You may wish to ‘wake up’ and start your next Dream cycle back here.”

“Where is the next closest palace location?”

“The moon palace location in the “sea of stars” is one half hour away if you accelerate for one minute.”

“Only a half hour? We accelerated more than that to get here, right?”

“Correct. You accelerated for two minutes to reach this area.”

“So we know what it feels like, and we would only be at that speed for fifteen minutes at that point. I say we go for it. I’d rather wake up while putting her palace up than still have hours of Dream time left in this dream.”

“As you wish. I agree the risk is low if you do not stay in the air very long.”

“Then let’s pile in!”

Luna did want her palace in the center of the mountain range that surrounded the strange environment they passed over, so when the computer judged that distance they stopped and looked around.

“What are these weird things?” he asked, looking at the star shapes embedded in the black sand that made up the area.

"No one knows. So how do you want to do this?"

"You said if I hoist something into the sky it'll stay?"

"That's right."

"I guess we'll see just how much matter I can create, and then set it into place. That will determine how big a palace you get."

"That seems fine."

So he concentrated, and an enormous chunk of rock appeared, tilted at an angle. He had made the top flat, and figured he had some experience with floating "islands" from back home, he may as well make something similar. Luna lit up, looking it over and said that would be fine, but he was more worried about lifting something that huge. Just like with the ship though he envisioned gravity simply carrying it aloft, placing a point of "double" gravity above the center of the mass. He tried to position it high enough that it didn't just tear the thing apart by flinging it into the sky, and was rewarded by it gently lifting off the ground.

"That's high enough," Luna told him, and he ended the effect, hoping she was right and it wouldn't come crashing down and kill them all. He was ready to teleport them away at the first sign of it coming back down but no, it just hung there. *Whew*. A bit more work righted it so the flat part was really flat, and he teleported the group up there. Luna said she didn't need anything too fancy, the fact it was so high in the air would be deterrent enough so he started building her a nice place to live as he had done several times before this. He warned them if he woke up and vanished he would be back within the hour, and after setting up the three conventional rooms he put some imagination into the mostly pitch black "puzzle" room she wanted. He left that Dream before he finished it, but it was (as far as he could tell) his very next dream that allowed him to step back and finish it.

With that done he took another picture of this pedestal and the group headed back to the sprite village. It was a good thing, this Dream time seemed only to be two hours, but they reached it and had landed before it became a problem. He spent the rest of the night practicing, and finally the sun rose on the day they were going to announce to the world that Mana's days were nearing their end.

"So when you signal me you're ready I hit this button here," Lysanias confirmed. "When it's recording this will flash. Keep you bracketed and in frame, with the sprite village in the background. When you're done, press this button again here."

"That's all there is to it," she agreed. "Ready?"

"I think so. Are you?"

She barked a laugh. "To become the most wanted person in the world? No. But it has to be done." She paused. "It does have to be done, right?"

"Unless you would like to go up there and fight the fortress while it has an unlimited amount of Mana to draw upon. I saw some spirits attacking it once, it wasn't pretty. The number of guns mounted on the thing, plus all the strange Mana powered weapons the troops were using meant they could throw a lot of stuff at anyone attacking it." *Which was I guess the point of making it, a fortress, and not simply a research platform or something similar.*

"I mean you're not lying to me, are you? Not somehow working for the other side."

"What?" He looked at her with a shocked expression. *Bit late to be thinking that way, isn't it?* "What about me indicates any malicious intent here? Back with the truck I could have just stood on that bridge, slammed it into the wall when it went past, and caused all sorts of havoc. I went out of my way to keep others from harm! But *now* you're questioning my motives?"

"I just... I have to be sure. There's no going back after this."

"Technically, there's no going back until you post the video," Salamando told her. "Just recording something isn't against the law."

"Yes, thank you for that. All right, I've trusted you up to this point, and if you're not who you say you are," she glanced over at the rainbow shell coated ship, splintering light in the morning sun, "it's a heck of an act. Let's get this over with."

"I'm ready when you are." He brought the camera up as she backed away. "Right there, that's good."

She took a deep breath and nodded, so he hit the button and nodded back. They were on.

“Hello everyone,” she began. “I’m sure you’ve realized by now something is going on with the Mana in the world. Three times it’s ‘paused’ if you will, and three times it has come back. I’m here to tell you why. Our government insisted that building the floating fortress would keep us safe, that having that, and let’s be fair, weapons platform flying around the world was somehow in our best interests. I’m here to tell you that was a lie. It was not in your best interest or my best interest. You haven’t been told this, but monsters, created of pure Mana, have been attacking it regularly since it was created. Mana *itself* knows the fortress is wrong for the world, and I’m here in the sprite village verifying my worst fears. According to them,” and of course this was the lie, but the information had to seem to come from somewhere in the world, “these ‘Mana beasts’ will only get more powerful and enraged. Mana itself is limitless, as we know from powering our homes and our cars with it. But soon, a Mana Beast of similar proportion will appear, and it *will* take the fortress down. Ask those that have been defending it, have attacks increased? Have the beasts become more powerful? The answer is yes. And it won’t stop until Mana creates a creature big enough, tough enough, strong enough, to stop it. But that won’t be the end. It will then turn on us, for our part in creating such a thing. By that time nothing will be able to stop it. And so I, Anabeth, along with the help of others such as the spirits of nature, have decided to do what needs to be done before that happens. But I am small. I am weak.” *Ha, sure you are, compared to what? Me?* “I can’t attack the fortress, I must use other means. And so, using a method I’ve devised I am going to *turn. Mana. Off.*” She paused for dramatic effect. “You have already seen the proof of this three times. Three tiny blips where Mana simply ceased to exist. This video is a warning. Twenty four hours from now I will turn off Mana again, for a longer period this time. If you are in a car, or a plane, you will likely die. I implore you, please, be safe and stay away from anything moving in that time. You will then have some time to destroy the fortress on your own. Call upon your local government to act. Bring the fortress down. If you don’t, and soon, I will be forced to turn Mana off again. This time *permanently*. It all stops. No more planes, vans, buses, cars, or trucks. No more drones, no more heating our homes with energy from the air. But do not mistake my intent here; I don’t want to do it. I don’t want our way of life to change. I do not do this maliciously or to cause panic in the world, or to somehow take the power of Mana for myself. I do it in order to save us, to safeguard our future as a people. *It must be done.* We may have less conveniences in our lives, need different ways of doing things, but we will be alive to live them. Please, don’t let your death be on my conscience. Twenty four hours from now, do not be in a vehicle. You will see I am serious, that I have the power to do what I’m saying. The fortress comes down, one way or another. Another video and twenty four hour warning will be given if the fortress does not come down in a time frame I feel is fast enough. And may the goddess have mercy on us all if even now I’m too late.”

She nodded a final time, and he clicked off the recording.

“How was that?”

“I think it was pretty good, you want to watch it.”

“Ugh, no, but I better. Play it back, Sam.”

He looked around. “Sam?”

“Never mind.”

The group stepped back through to a city so Anabeth, who now looked like Mavis again, could get online. They sat in a coffee shop and she created two fake email accounts, one to send an explanation to Stromboli about his missing truck and animals, and the other to email news organizations around the world and post the video. They noted the time and she slumped back in her chair. “That’s it,” she breathed. “It’s done. The die is cast, and all that.” She looked up at the TV playing on the wall. “Good, it’s a news channel. Once we see a story about it we can head back to the sprite village I guess.”

“Why back there?”

“Hide out, of course. I may look different but if someone figures out the video was posted from here the place will be swarming with cops.”

“Can that happen?”

“Better to assume it can. I don’t know what technology can do.” She snorted.
“Especially to track down the person that posted it. Every government on the planet will expend any resources needed to find me, make no mistake.”

“But you know a little bit about it, right?”

“I guess, why?”

“It’s always bugged me a little, why do we have to come to a place like this when you want to do stuff? Back with Clary or Bo their devices would let them access their information network from basically anywhere. Okay, maybe not the middle of the woods, but still.”

“Really?” She seemed surprised. “That’s pretty amazing. No, we never came up with a radio technology that was long enough range. Room sized like this was the best we could do.”

“I see.” *Some sort of interference with Mana, or did their technology just go down a different path than in other realities? I mean, Korra had cars and not guns, so it’s safe to say not every reality that focuses on science (no matter what powers it) proceeds along the same routes.* “Very interesting.”

“A long distance global information network, that would be something all right.”

“It was pretty convenient for them, I guess. But wait, that TV is getting a signal from someplace!” He pointed.

“Sure, a wire in the wall. Not over the air. Different thing, we can send signals over wires any distance we want.”

“Oh!” He nodded his understanding. “Something in the air?”

The pair didn’t have long to wait until the news station showed her video, and she stood up after it was done with a grimace. “That’s it, the story is out. They have less than twenty four hours until the next event.”

“No going back now.”

“We’re going back to the sprite village though, right?”

“I’m talking about Mana.”

“Got it, right. Yes, let’s head back.”

So out of sight he teleported them back to wait, as the world got the word out that Mana really could go away forever. And as usual for things people didn’t understand, the appropriate response was *absolute terror and hysteria*.

What a time to be alive.

The hours ticked on.

Chapter 17

A slumber did my spirit seal

When: Twenty four hours later

Where: Sprite Village

After Lysanias got a “no” answer to “Have the governments of the world brought down the fortress of Mana” Anabeth reluctantly agreed that the plan must go forward. She had been rather depressed since coming back to the village, not wanting to talk to the sprites or the spirits.

“Look, don’t feel too bad about it,” Lysanias told her, sitting on a fallen log next to her. He could feel her sorrow and conflict, but wasn’t sure how to make her feel better. *Is taking her hand appropriate? Putting an arm around her? I have no idea. But I have to say something.* “Think of it this way. I was sent here to leave this sword, right?” He pulled his black sword out, the one he needed to leave. “Inari said it would one day help to save the world. Don’t you see- there’s going to be a world to save after this. It’s not the end. Have some faith in people! You’ll figure it out, back on my world the continents got ripped apart when the chaos moon showed up and brought magic to a world that had very little. Now you get the opposite here, lose Mana instead of gain it. But there, life went on, we recovered. Sure, it’s a different world than it was, but people still laugh, and fall in love, and try to give their kids a better life than they had. It’s not all bad.”

“I suppose I lost the right to complain when I sent that video. I have my task, moping about it won’t help. I just hope everyone took my warning to heart and not many will die because of this.”

“I could give you an answer, but I don’t think it would make you feel any better.”

“No, probably not. Besides, I’ll know soon enough what happened.” She stood. “Come on, let’s get this over with, bring the fortress down, and see how much of our world is left standing.”

That’s the spirit? “The spirits are ready when you are.” He indicated the spirits, standing or floating off to the side waiting for her.

“Yeah, we’re waiting on you!” Salamando told her. “There’s no getting off this train we’re on now!”

“At least trains won’t fall out of the- no, not going to go there. I’m ready.” She offered her hand, and Lysanias took it. The sprites gathered round and he looked at the hubPad at the first place picture.

“Away we go.” He *shifted*.

And found himself in the forest.

“Er...” Shade said. “This isn’t my cave.”

“Sorry. My random succeeding or failing strikes again,” he told them, going red in the face. “I’m usually pretty good at this. Trying again.” He *shifted*.

This time he was exactly where he wanted to go, and nodded. “Go to it.” He handed over the black sword and she sealed it, again covering her eyes against the flash of light that was produced.

“Next location,” she said, running back over to him. He already had the next picture up on the pad with a flick of his finger.

“Right.” *Shift*.

The fates smiled, he was where we wanted to be and Salamando stepped away.

“Good luck, okay?”

“Thanks.”

Again the flash, and more Mana was sealed away from the world.

“One more to go, let’s do it.”

Shift.

A third time he was exactly where he wanted to be and a third seed was sealed, Luna was now stepping away. “Thank you for coming to help us,” she told him. “An unconventional solution to be sure, but your journey here is almost ended. Don’t loose heart.”

“I’ll see it through,” he promised her.

“Back to the sprite village, I want to know they’re all okay.”

“Right.” *Shift.*

The sprites were nowhere to be found, Anabeth ran though the village to try and find them, calling for some she knew. Lysanias went over to his ship, where he had left the drones. They were still just laying on the forest floor, dead. He stared at them as the minutes passed. Lumina popped up next to him. “They’re fine, they went into the temple to be near the seed, figuring that would be where the most magic was during the sealing.”

“Smart. Do you think maybe we won’t need the other-” As he said this one of the drones’ eye socket flickered and it unsteadily rose in the air.

“What about the other two?” he asked his watch.

“Insufficient ambient magic in this location to power all three simultaneously,” it reported. “Warning: Control of this drone is likely to be tenuous at best from this time forward.”

At least we know this plan should be a long term solution. “I see. Let’s go see how the sprites are fairing.”

He put the other two drones in his *pocket* and headed to the temple. The sprites were looking tired, and reported that away from the seed Mana was too thin to sustain them.

“But you don’t need to continuously be in a Mana field, do you?” Lysanias asked.

“Can’t you come back here every few hours?”

“We can,” Greenleaves told him. “It is just something we will have to get used to.”

“You and everyone else. Lysanias, can we check out other places in the world? I want to see how people are reacting.”

“Is that wise?” he asked.

“Probably not,” she admitted. “But I have to do it. I have to know what harm I’ve caused.”

“Very well. But if I may suggest, why don’t we combine our efforts here? Record the next video now, then when we get somewhere that has a signal you can release it.”

She nodded. “That’s reasonable. It should be shorter this time, I’ll go see what I can come up with.” She ran off.

“So are you really okay?” he asked Greenleaves. “Or were you just saying that so she didn’t worry?”

“We’ll survive, one way or another. Please don’t weigh us against the whole of the world. We have... contingencies if there is not enough Mana in this world to sustain us. One way or another, we’ll be fine.”

“But I’m basically the cause for all this, so how can I not?” he asked.

For that, she had no answer.

With the message recorded and the ship placed into a containment ward and put into his *pocket* the group, now only two people and two spirits, went back into the world. Lysanias hadn’t seen too much of the world so they went back to the first city he had seen, and the sound of chaos met his ears as they *shifted* in. Looking around they saw that most hadn’t taken the warning seriously, or twenty four hours wasn’t enough time to get the message out. Cars were smashed into things, plowed into the ground, or otherwise banged up from impacts. People were running around as though they had lost all sense, smashing in windows of stores and grabbing everything they could.

“Uh, will that even work once Mana goes away?” he asked Anabeth as a man struggled to haul what looked like a TV down the street as fast as he could.

“No, it won’t,” she agreed sadly. “It’s powered by Mana.”

“Great!” he said sarcastically. “Hey, look at this guy.” Further on a man was pushing a cart full of toilet paper and waving a sword at anyone he thought might get near. “I don’t think that’s going to stop working when Mana goes away.”

“Probably not,” she admitted. “But just the same, having seen him with it, I feel an overwhelming urge to do the same.”

“I’ll make you some before I leave.”

“Will you?”

“You sound more excited about that than is really natural.” He heard the sound of gunfire down the street. “This is more panic than I would have expected.”

"I hear you. Maybe we *shouldn't* have warned them."

"It's not like a disease," Lysanias countered. "You know, like, 'there's a disease and here's how to protect yourself' and people would be like, 'oh, we should do that and get on with our lives.' We had to warn them. This was going to happen in the span of a few hours, their lives are going to change because of it. And they know better now, I don't think any planes will be in the air tomorrow." *If any can even get in the air at this point*, he thought, glancing back at his one remaining drone hovering as best it could behind him.

"I hope not. Should we, I don't know, help, somehow?"

"How? If this one random section of city we randomly went to is like this, you can bet most other places are too. We can't help everyone, they're going to have to get used to the idea that Mana powered devices will no longer work after tomorrow or so."

"So we should help no one?"

"I don't know about that, but I can't heal HP injuries and who exactly would we be helping? Shop owners? You said it yourself, anything Mana powered is at this point essentially worthless. It doesn't matter if things are stolen, most stores are just full of junk at this point anyway."

He felt a new burst of sadness from her. "I didn't even consider that. Refrigeration will fail, trucks will no longer bring food. People will starve!"

"That's up to them," Lysanias countered. "They could pull together, share what they have, start growing things locally until they have transportation networks up again."

"Do you think that's going to happen?" She waved a hand at the scene before them.

"I hope so?" *This must be what my world went through, as the chaos moon approached. Or even before that, when my people were killed as the rains came down and didn't stop. They could see their doom inching closer as the waters rose. Have I become the Allfather of my world? Have I destroyed this world so that it can be saved? Have I judged Him unfairly, and now I know- no. He's a god, He could have chosen to fix His creation in any number of ways. I'm just a man.*

"I hope so too," she said softly.

"So what do you want to do? Do you really think we can make a difference anywhere?"

"No. I better just see if I can find a working signal and try uploading this video. I'll make a new account, that other one will be watched I'm sure. Or not, given what I'm seeing here. Are you sure you can have the locations found by tomorrow?"

"I'll do the same thing. In the Dream ship it shouldn't be that hard."

"All right. Be pretty crass of me to say Mana goes away in twenty four hours and then miss my own deadline."

"Yes, that would never do."

She laughed, but only for a second. "Come on."

Having uploaded the video and sent another letter to the news organizations of the world Anabeth wanted to visit her parents, and showed him a picture of their house. He took her there, waiting outside for a few hours while they talked. Finally she appeared in the door and motioned him inside.

"They've invited you to stay," she told him. "I haven't told them about you, you're just a friend of mine. They don't know you're the cause of all this. Of course I couldn't hide my part in it, they saw the first video I made. But they're glad I'm safe."

"Oh!" He hesitated. "I don't want to be any bother."

"Come on," she grabbed him and pulled him inside. "Come and meet my parents."

The rest of the day was basically spent watching news reports of trouble around the world. Rioting was everywhere, but slowed because most heavy machinery didn't work anymore. Minor devices like the TV and lights still worked, but anything bigger than that just couldn't get up to speed. As no one could load up a truck with stolen goods you were limited by what you could carry, that didn't stop people from smashing things and yelling about how the world was ending.

Yeah, it's ending because you're going around smashing stuff. If you had just headed our warning and prepared, you would have been fine. Again, you can see it coming, you know exactly what the effect will be, there's no need for all this.

Both videos were played continuously, with speculation rampant about who the woman was in them and how she was doing this. With most drones out of the picture and larger computer systems down due to lack of power she didn't think anyone would find her before tomorrow.

"They would have been swarming the door before this," she reasoned. "Bugging my parents as to where I was. So I think this place will be safe."

If not, I'm here, we can deal with any trouble I think. I could just put ignore me wards over the whole place if I had to. That reminds me, I've used some up I should replace them.

That night Lysanias went to bed in the guest bedroom, having put the Dreamship outside and putting a few *Ignore me* wards keyed to Anabeth's parents in the basement. Once he was Dreaming he stepped into their house and packed the place floor to ceiling with bottles of water, cans of food, and, more as a joke than anything else, toilet paper. *As long as the house is still standing no one but them will be able to see any of this. It's the least I can do for them.*

That done he boarded the Dreamship with the two remaining spirits and made it rise into the air.

"Where to?" he asked the hubPad.

"We are here," it showed him. "Our destinations are two islands here and here." Those were marked. "Given our current location the larger island to the south east should be our first destination."

"That's fine with me. Are you both ready?"

"To spend an eternity locked away somewhere guarding a seed? Absolutely," Lumina told him sarcastically.

"Didn't figure you for a pessimist," Dryad said to her.

"With Salamando gone, someone has to be."

"I'm not sure that's true..."

So again the Dreamship turned and shot into the night, gravity pulling it along until the hubPad said they had arrived. Looking down it was a fairly busy place, a sprawling metropolis spread out below them.

"That looks like a lot of people," he remarked. "Are you sure this is the place?"

He received no answer, and looked over at her.

"You must never tell Anabeth what I am about to tell you," she said softly. "If you do, I fear she will lose her resolve completely and that will doom our world."

"What's going on? Why all the secrecy all of a sudden?"

"This land mass was set in place long ago. Balanced not upon the ocean floor as with the other continents, but on Mana itself. When we seal Mana, this place will sink below the waves."

"Wait, you mean all the people here are going to die?" *Who was stupid enough to do that? Why? Or did it just happen and they built on it not knowing?*

She nodded. "There is no way around it."

"I refuse to accept that! There must be some way to save this place."

"Really? Can you pull up enough of the ocean floor to secure it? As you are now or in your waking state, are you that strong? We have little time, after all."

"We'll see about this." He zipped the ship to the coast and let the gravity field that was holding the ship up go. It plunged downward, and he reoriented the pull the ship down faster.

"Warning," said the hubPad. "This is an extreme risk situation. While the ship superstructure is unbreakable water pressure will still exert force on the occupants. You will need to use your Dreaming abilities to keep the cabin survivable. Also, if you should wake now this craft would continue sinking and the two spirits aboard would be lost forever."

"Oh." He stopped the craft, reorienting the gravity field to hold them in place. Scowling he created some bright lights outside, lighting up the blue darkness that was all around them. Above he could see the island, they hadn't gone far, and Dryad was right. It just sort of floated

there, not connected to anything. He couldn't see the bottom. "Can you estimate the amount of rock needed to secure the island?"

"Without doing a variety of scans showing the depth here and total circumference of the island, any such estimate would be completely suspect."

"In other words no. I don't believe this!" He slammed a fist into the arm of his chair.

"You must seal my temple last," Dryad said sadly. "Build it at the highest point of the island, and build it to last. Most of it will be submerged for the foreseeable future."

"Fine. But I'm not leaving these people without some means of escape." He looked up and reoriented gravity again, shooting out of the water. "Can you show me a diagram of a large sailing ship?" he asked the hubPad. "A cross section I mean? Maybe in wood, something easy to steer and move around?"

"Of course. Displaying now." Images flicked across the screen, and he nodded. *They don't need to have engines they wouldn't have fuel for them. But I bet in a sailing ship used by societies before getting access to machine power at least get someplace after the disaster that's about to happen.* Coming to a stop again he concentrated. Soon a dozen boats bobbed near the coast of the entire island. He had no idea how many people lived here, but as simple mass was the easiest thing to create in the Dream he made some massive ships, with many ladders hanging off the sides of them. They had unfurled sails, and the insides were little more than many rooms as shown by the hubPad. *They can float out to the ships and climb aboard. At least they'll have a chance, the sails shouldn't be too hard to figure out. That's more than my God gave my people when their end was at hand.* "Let's get to creating your temple."

Because it was to be so tall he simply flew to the center of the place, which he figured would be the highest point, and found a park. Dryad described and drew out what she wanted and Lysanias started implementing it. He could hear gunfire in the distance and wondered what people would think when the sun came up and they found themselves having a new tower in what was once a golf course or whatever this was. But at the same time Mana would be leaving shortly after sunrise (at least where they had been) so they wouldn't have too much time to worry about it. But as it was a big empty field no one bothered him as he started willing the walls of the place into existence. Sadly, because it was so tall he didn't finish it when he snapped out of the dream.

Of course. Why would some dreams allow me hours and hours and others barely any time at all? I mean it isn't like I have a different skill entering the Dream one time than another. But here I am, awake. I really hope the spirits don't get in trouble while I'm gone. Lysanias relaxed, closed his eyes, and slowed his breathing. *Won't do me any good to tense up about it. Just go back to sleep, dummy. And hope...*

He next realized he was in a dream and willed himself to the representation of the tower he was building in the World of Dreams. *It should at least partly be there, right? By now anyway.* It wasn't, making him scowl, and while he had to try three times, he finally managed to step into reality again. *And let's hope it lasts a bit longer this time!*

He looked around. The city in the distance seemed the same, looters and such making a mess, and he realized with a start why it might be worse here. *This place probably started to sink when we sealed Mana off that last time. Maybe even noticeably. So of course the people here are going to be more on edge. Where the heck is that nice tower I was building?* He looked around, pretty sure this was the right place. But no ship, no tower, no spirits. He stroked his beard, pondering, and it finally hit him. *I'm here an hour or two early. I went to bed, had a dream for a few hours, woke up ten minutes later, went back to sleep, teleported here, but it's still in the "past" for me now.* He sighed. *So now what? I have no idea how long it'll take "me" to get here and then to vanish again. I guess I'll just hang out and practice.* So he did, practicing Dream skills like trying to manipulate time by throwing a group of pebbles into the air and catching them all before they hit the ground. *Gotta catch them all!* Or making his body tougher or manipulating gravity. Finally he heard a noise and the silver teardrop dropped out of the sky, so he quickly willed himself invisible and headed for the edge of the park. He knew if he was too close to his "other" self he might be absorbed into "him" and have

to do all that work all over again, so he was content to watch as his younger self started creating the tower.

When more stopped being added and the two spirits came out looking around he walked back.

“Oh, there you are,” Dryad exclaimed. “We were worried.”

“Sorry, the dream ended and I woke back up. You didn’t have to wait long, did you?”

“Just a few minutes,” Lumina told him.

“Then I’ll get back to work.”

Chapter 18

One hope will raise our spirits

When: An hour later

Where: Flying again

Having finished the tall tower, and putting an entrance at the top and the bottom, (for reasons, Dryad said), he was now heading to the final island.

“Can you make me like a huge house?” Lumina asked him.

“How huge?”

“Really huge!”

“That’s not an answer.”

“I guess we’ll see how big you can make it when we get there.”

“That’s for the best.”

So the group landed on a small island, essentially smack in the middle between the main continent and the continent they found Mountain Dew on. The place was pretty tiny, maybe two kilometers across, with a small set of mountains, a pond, and trees.

“Yeah, this is great,” Lumina told them, floating around. “Though it probably looks nicer in the daytime. I want a real mansion, three- no four stories high, right here!”

“Your wish is my command, oh spirit,” Lysanias said with a bow.

He set up the place how she wanted it, and the three set course back for Anabeth’s place.

“Remember, no telling Anabeth about the island,” reminded Dryad.

“I know. I just hope people make it to the boats.”

“They’ll see them. I doubt they’ll understand what they’re for until the place starts to sink, but you made enough of them. I’m sure everyone will help others and all get off safely.”

“I hope so.”

With the ship landed in the back yard Lysanias bid a goodnight to the two remaining spirits. “I’m just going back to normal sleep,” he told them. “Usually I don’t really notice it, but tomorrow is probably going to be a pretty day. I’m not taking any chances if my Dreaming self impairs my waking self in any way.”

“Good night,” they both said.

And so the morning came, and Lysanias awoke to find breakfast being prepared by Anabeth’s parents.

“Notice we’ve got a lot more supplies in the basement than we did,” said her father.

He stifled a giggle. “Maybe some looters broke in and as it was opposite day, left you a bunch of stuff.”

“And yet,” her mother said from the other side of the table, “I have to wonder if we have enough.”

“Mom, there must be five thousand rolls of toilet paper down there! How can you possibly say you don’t have enough?” She glared at Lysanias, who looked puzzled. She felt... amused but exasperated?

What, it doesn’t weigh anything and my ability to create matter in the Dream is based on weight.

“I’m not sure,” she admitted. “It’s just a feeling I have.”

Anabeth threw her hands up with a groan. “Unbelievable.”

“Anyway,” Lysanias changed the subject. “Any news on the fortress? Has it been forced to the ground?”

“We would be so lucky,” Anabeth grumped. “No, though after yesterday everyone is saying it should be destroyed, there’s really nothing anyone can do about it. It was made to be the ultimate weapons platform, so even attacking it with fighter jets would do little good. Not that any can take off, now.”

“So we finish the job and take it out ourselves then.”

"Will you be all right dear?" her mother asked her.

"I've got pretty high HP mom, and I can still do magic."

"Plus whatever armor she has I'll turn into rainbow shell, it's from a reality where they have HP so... I should not have said that."

"A what?" her father said while her mother said "Rainbow what?"

"We've got to go, thanks for breakfast," Anabeth said, springing up from the table.

"Busy day. Stay safe, don't go out, and I'll see you back here after the... change."

"You're really going to turn off Mana?" her father asked.

"We have to, dad."

"And we just bought that new stove too," her mother lamented. "I guess we can always go back to gas."

"Everyone will be in the same boat-"

Lysanias jerked his head, glaring at her, and she looked at him like "What?"

She went on. "So we'll figure it out together. Love you." She kissed both of them.

"Love you too," they both said. "And you. You'll protect her? She's our only daughter, you know," her father said.

He nodded. "I can't promise she will take no hurt, but I will do my best."

"I can't decide if I should be proud she's saving the world, or angry because of the way she's doing it."

"Believe me, if there was any other way..."

"I know, she told me. Just bring her back to us, okay?"

"I'll do my best."

So the four *shifted* to the island tower, as there were several hours to go before the twenty four hours were up. Anabeth got showed around, and as the time neared, Lysanias asked the universe: "Shall the final seeds be sealed to save this world?"

There was no answer

Good thing I expected that and started early. In that case, is sealing the last two seeds required to save this world?

Yes

"That's it then," he announced, "we have to seal the last two seeds we have."

"I was afraid of that," Anabeth told him. "Let's get this over with."

"Wait. Let me do what I said. Any equipment you have, like armor, let me turn it into Rainbow Shell. It was from a world that had HP, so it must do you some good to wear armor made of a material so rare there as to be nearly non-existent."

"Right. Better prepare, it's just two jumps and we go to attack the fortress, right? You still have to destroy this avatar person or they'll just try again."

"That's right. No doubt they're some high ranking official that gets to live there."

"How are we getting there, though?"

"Huh. Good question, I didn't consider that. Umm, we'll just do the same thing as with the truck. I'll make a clone, and it'll scour the sky and get a good place for me to teleport to."

"Oh, that sounds reasonable. Okay, let me check my inventory and such."

So the two prepared, putting on armor, wards, and Lysanias chose the wall ring and Hyper Wrist over the Sprint Shoes. He was fast enough but if he needed to hit something with the sword, he wanted the most strength possible. He got out Rosalina, who was wearing her teal colored kart racing uniform, and put wards on her. She took both Skyebourn wands and said she was ready. He also handed the black sword over to Anabeth and took his blade back.

"Bye ultimate sword," she said sadly, patting it. "It was nice using you while it lasted. But why am I taking this one? It hardly has better attack power than mine. A bit less, if you want to be critical about it."

"I need to leave it here, I've done that. If it falls off the fortress during the battle, or you just put it into inventory, that's its destiny. Don't go after it. Inari said to just leave it where it fell. As long as I don't leave with it, I pass my little test here, and somehow in the future it'll help save this world again." *The last link I have with my parents. I mean, I'll get the picture and this was stolen by them it wasn't really theirs, but still. I guess we all have to sacrifice to make this world safe, and this one is mine.*

"Okay, you're the boss. Anything else?"

"I can't think of anything. Let's do it."

So she sealed the seed, and Lysanias *shifted* them to the final place.

"May the goddess have mercy on me if we're wrong about this," she whispered as she held the sword up to the final seed. There was the same flash, and Mana was now trapped, radiating out from the Mana Tree and into the seeds that were scattered about the world. No more would people use Mana as a power source, and all over the world the machinery of the planet ground to a halt for the final time.

The group stepped outside, looking around. Of course, they were on an island in the middle of the ocean so they really didn't see anything different.

"Wait, I think we won't have to chase it down," Anabeth cried, pointing.

The fortress had found them. It was hovering near the horizon, and as they watched a beam of light, unbelievably huge and bright to be seen at this distance, shot out the bottom of it. It was dragged across the land, and Lysanias could only stare in horror as he tried to calculate the amount of destruction that had just been caused.

"We have to get up there before it can fire again," Anabeth told him. "Come on, start with the clone and- what?"

The two looked in front of them as the air began to warp, shimmer, and *twist*. Before their eyes a huge white animal appeared, then roared in anger while looking at the fortress. The beast had four wings, stood eight meters tall, and was close enough in shape that Lysanias immediately thought *dragon*. His next thought was *are we going to have to fight this thing?*

But he needn't have worried. The beast looked down at them and then crouched, lowering a wing to serve as a ramp.

"Uh, is it offering to fly us to the fortress?" Anabeth squeaked.

"They'll never see us coming," he told her.

She burst out laughing. "Thanks, I needed that. I guess we have our ride." She scrambled up the side of the beast, followed by Rosalina, and he followed. The beast took to the air, wings flapping, and shot forward towards the fortress. The roar of the wind made it impossible to talk but it seemed like at least Rosalina was having a good time. *Probably thinking this is way better than a kart race any day.*

As the beast approached the fortress various doors and shutters were opened, allowing what looked like guns to slide out. And they were guns, as they started opening fire on the creature who took evasive action and started flying parallel to the fortress in order to be harder to hit. It roared, and a beam of energy shot from its mouth, impacting one of the towers. There was an explosion and it went down, but there were many more still firing. As with the smaller guns he had seen before these seemed to be elemental in nature, of all colors. They weren't slugs, it was energy that was zipping past them, but the beast they were riding threaded through the onslaught like it weren't no thing.

Lysanias was going too fast to really see any detail on the fortress but had to assume people were gathering down there to help fight this latest manifestation off. He turned to the two. *As I see it, here's the plan*, he sent into their brains. He included the beast, hoping it could understand it. It was "made" of Mana, after all. *We'll do a close fly by and jump off. I'll take the front of the place with Rosalina. The beast, Rosalina, and I will be the distraction. As this thing is still flying around with Mana cut off, it must be expending the Mana it absorbed earlier to fly and fire the guns. Anabeth, you jump off on the other side of the place and find a way inside. If it's expending Mana there must be some kind of storage unit, a tank or a crystal*

or something, that the fortress is drawing from. Unhook it or destroy it, if you think you can without blowing yourself up. The fortress should fall like a rock and we've won the day.

The two ladies nodded, and the beast, seemingly with perfect understanding, spiraled around the fortress getting closer with every pass. When they were close enough Lysanias took hold of himself and Rosalina with the force, and jumped off the creature's back. He slowed their fall as much as he could, and both landed on the metal ground with a thud. The beast continued, and went out of sight briefly around the other side of the fortress. The beast kept up his energy blasts, blowing towers and guns away as it could. Lysanias wasted no time. "Spirit clone technique!" he called, making two clones of himself. The group looked around, all getting their shields and swords out. *Should I call out the sword's power? Like I need another "stamp." That was was stupid, no offense Ragnarok, though I doubt you have control over what something turns into. Not having done it again it's hard to say what I might get doing it a second time.*

"Strange, there's no one out here," Rosalina remarked, lowering her wands slightly. "You think there would be."

"It is odd." The fortress was pretty large, not as large as a whole Skyebourne city, but he was sure he had seen people on it before when he had viewed it. He looked around now, seeing metal towers surrounding a central building in the middle of the place. The whole place glowed with Mana, conduits of it on the ground in patterns he was sure must serve some purpose. It ran though metal plating, so metal and earth bending were probably good bets here in a fight.

"Wait, someone's coming," a clone said, pointing with the sword. The others looked and coming from the main door of the building was a man. He had armor on, was wearing a cape, both in black. He didn't seem impressively tall, or muscular, not that appearance meant anything here. *His stats could be anything.*

"I figured someone would show up soon," said the man, stopping a few meters before them. "Ah, and it's my newest Wanderer friend Lysanias. Seriously? They sent you here? I have to tell you, I have five thousand HP as a boss so just what do you think you're going to do to me?"

"So you are the avatar. Good to know. I'll think of something." He shifted his stance, bringing his shield up. The others did the same. Inside his mind he imagined the flame, feeding all his emotions into it and slowing his breathing. He was one with his opponent, the ground, the sky, the coming battle. However it went, he was centered and confident.

"It's just you?" asked the clone on the left. "I guess you're pretty confident."

"Fairly," he drawled. "Naturally I did have others working up here but they were actually arguing in favor of scrapping the whole project when those Mana outages started. They thought maybe the fortress was the cause. I knew better. Couldn't have them causing me problems though so they had to... go."

He killed them, in other words. I guess the systems here are automated?

"Odd that you didn't really try to stop me," said the other clone. "I've been running around out there for days."

"Stop you?" The man laughed. "Why would I stop you? For one thing you were bouncing around the world too fast so it just wasn't practical but even if it was, you were doing a great job of ending the world for me. I was applauding your efforts, honestly."

So he did know I was here? Or is that just a bluff?

"He's lying," Rosalina told them. "He just couldn't keep up with you. And now he's cornered here."

"Am I? Have you seen the news lately? You've thrown the world into a panic, and effectively made electricity go away on this world. I couldn't have done better myself. It's chaos down there, making the-" He was interrupted by another beam slicing down into the surface below. "Ah!" He smiled. "It's too bad I couldn't have made it recharge faster but there's progress right there. Have to work with what the world give me, you know? What was I saying?"

"It doesn't matter, we're taking you down," Lysanias told him.

“Not until that gun fires several more times. How much of the world will be left, Lysanias? Admit defeat, there’s no shame in it. Soon the potential of this world will be mine. I am inevitable.”

“I don’t think so.” He rushed forward, and the man smiled. A black blade appeared in his hand but he didn’t raise it to act defensively.

Right, they don’t block here, Lysanias thought as he smashed into the guy. They let their HP take it and just counter attack. I can’t get hit by this guy, in fact, crud, he’s probably doing that “charging” thing Anabeth was always doing to hit harder. That’s why he’s just standing there.

Rosalina sent two bolts into him, which again he didn’t seem to dodge, and as Lysanias saw his clones readying attacks he risked another swipe of his sword. Clone one sent some spears of fire into him, while clone two started glowing, figuring a bit of the One Power wouldn’t go amiss at the moment.

All the attacks landed, and he held up a hand turning to the other clone. “Go on then,” he said, spreading his arms. Alert for some trick the others backed away a step, and the clone gathered more of the One Power, finally arcing streams of fire into him.

“Ow,” he said in a monotone. “Stop. Mercy.”

“Give it up, we’ll wear you down eventually!”

He laughed again. “Wow, you’re a funny guy, Lysanias. You did a little more than a hundred HP damage to me. That means you’ll have to attack like that fifty more times, at least. But I’m pretty sure I only have to hit you, the real you, once. Can you dodge me fifty times?”

“Er, I don’t suppose you could tell me which attack did the *most* damage?”

“Do you really think I would?”

“One can hope.” *But he’s right, I have to hope Anabeth can disable this place and the resulting crash will take him out. I doubt I can seriously hurt the body he’s in. Really going to have to do something about that if I know I’m going to a world like this again. I just can’t do enough damage, fast enough, to people with thousands of HP. For now, I guess I’ll just keep my distance, let my clones attack close range, and see if anything sticks. But what else do I have? Sword, bending, channeling, that’s about the only damage dealing abilities I have. Wait a second, guys!* he sent to his other clones. *Forget trying to damage him, just trap him, they still have breathe and this place is going down.*

The other two nodded and he shifted his stance.

“Wait, you’ve just thought of something, haven’t you?”

“Tell you? Did you really think I would?” With that he tore up some of the metal around the avatar and tried to wrap him up in it. The man tried to dodge but he had learned from the best, and it collided and stuck.

“Oh, I get it,” Rosalina said, creating a large block of stone nearby. She put one of the Skybourne wands in her other hand and drew her own wand. Meanwhile the man was struggling to get free, but a clone added his metal bending to keep the plates crushed around him. The second clone pulled up more rock from where the metal had been tore out, melting it and slamming it into him.

“I’ll get free of this!” cried the man.

No, I don’t think you will. It’s material from this world, so it’ll resist you as if your strength was no greater than mine. We’ve got him!

“Conductive Displacement,” Rosalina cast, and the stone went around him. “Now for some chains!”

Working together the group crushed the stone around him, giving him less leverage to get out, and bound it up with thick chains created by Rosalina. They piled the metal on, and pulled up more rock which they melted and hardened, creating a coffin he hoped would hold the man. Suddenly Lysanias realized something. *No gunfire. What happened to-*

There was a mighty crash as the Mana beast landed, and everyone looked over at it.

“Come on!” Anabeth screamed. “Stop messing around with whatever that is and get on. We’ve gotta go!”

“Go on,” said one of the clones.

“Save yourself, leave us,” said the other. “We’ll keep piling the rock on to the very end.” Both swished their arms (in a spiral motion) and caught both Lysanias and Rosalina up in a gust of air that sent them onto the beast’s back. There was a distant explosion from the center building and the whole place rocked.

“Go, go!” shouted Anabeth, and the creature took off again, speeding away from the place. There was a shock wave as something on the fortress exploded, and it dropped like a stone into the water below. If Lysanias had held the One Power he might have seen a black sword rocketing away from the explosion, hurled back to land where it would come to rest and one day fulfill a destiny as the Sword of Mana. But he didn’t, and he was covering his eyes from the light of the explosion anyway. The beast flew directly to the nearest coastline and dropped them, seeming to lose coherency the further it went. But it made it, and nodded its head to them as it finished vanishing.

His watch buzzed.

“Exit event has been recorded,” it told him. “The shadow avatar has left this reality and dimensional encryption has begun.”

“Thank you,” he told it, then lowered his wrist again. “What did you do, anyway?”

She smirked. “Oh, just saved the day and all. Another day in the life of the Mana Knight. Yes, just one more day at the office-”

“No really, what did you do?”

She laughed. “One of the attacks by our now vanished Mana Beast tore a hole in the side of the building. I got in that way and found a giant crystal I figured was running the place. So, I shoved the sword into it.” She mimed thrusting a blade into something.

“You shoved the sword into it?”

“That’s what I said, isn’t it? I figured if the sword could seal magic, this would either overload it, or simply add that Mana back to the ‘network’ we had created, draining it of most of the stored Mana. I guess it took the overload option, it started to glow and as you saw exploded. Sorry, I couldn’t get the sword out I was too busy scampering out of there before it exploded in my face. The Mana Beast picked me up and I came to get you. There was no one inside to stop me, can you believe that?”

He shrugged. “I can.” *The avatar probably didn’t think a sneak attack would happen, only that we would attack his body head on. Most probably do think like that, but I’m a bender, and I learned misdirection. It thought it didn’t need any more guards for the fortress? It learned differently.* “It’s fine, it was meant to stay here so I have to believe Inari foresaw this end, and everything will be all right.”

She looked around. “Is everything all right? You saw that beam, I have no idea how much of my world is even still around at this point. Plus everything we’re going to have to face now that Mana is gone.”

A bit less than you imagine, I bet that island is gone by now. I’ll have to swing by before I leave, see how many people made it to the boats and if they need any help getting to shore.

From out of nowhere there was a **pop** and a book landed at Anabeth’s feet. The pair looked at each other a moment and Anabeth bent over it. There was a note stuck to the cover which she read as she picked it up. “Good job, hope this helps. Inari.”

“What is it?”

“How to invent everything, by Ryan North.”

“Sounds like it could come in handy,” he told her with a grin. “Want me to take you back to your parent’s house?”

“Yes please,” she answered, absently paging through the book. “Oh, now that’s interesting...”