

Emberhaven

A recounting of the Gloomhaven conflict
as it took place in the lands of Pyre

Part 1

The Jekserah Saga

Chapter 1

Our prospects start looking up

“Why did we come to this crap hole of a town again?” Malachite growled, slamming his empty tankard to the table. I looked up from my own drink, untouched, to regard him and raised an eyebrow. He was a draig and so anyone that didn’t know him would find the amount of teeth he was displaying rather unnerving but I wasn’t worried. We had been traveling together for some time so I knew that while he could be short tempered at times he didn’t mean anyone any harm. As long as they didn’t look at him funny or anything like that. “Remind me,” he went on, switching mugs with me. “It was your idea, wasn’t it?”

I sighed, watching him down my ale. Normally I didn’t need to eat or drink, magic itself sustained me, but sitting at a table with nothing in front of you was sure to draw suspicion we didn’t need. So we always ordered two of everything, and he simply had my portion as well as his own. He didn’t seem to mind, but it did add to our expenses. Money was a problem, the funds I had made selling my latest creations, small figurines sculpted with magic, was running out. In fact we barely had enough for the drinks, so it looked like he was going to go hungry tonight. *I guess he could go hunt something up, there are enough wooded areas around town. Tomorrow we’ll look around for more raw material, any sort of shiny rock will do, or find other work.* “Yes, I’ve already explained I thought this town was called Groomshaven, not Gloomhaven, when we decided to come here. That satyr that suggested the place seemed to be mispronouncing it deliberately to mislead me. But really, one place is as good as another isn’t it?”

“You really thought you would find a husband around here? How’s that working out for you?”

“Yes, well, when you’re as old as I am you begin to have thoughts of settling down,” I sniffed. “This seemed as good a place as any to start looking.” *As if anyone would get past my rather unsettling appearance and get to know the real me. Of course I can’t remain in one place for too long, because of the curse, but a traveler like myself would be perfect. Can’t be that hard to find a guy that enjoys seeing the world, can it?*

“Seems to me you should just look a little closer to home.”

I blinked at him. “What’s that supposed to mean?” *Am I supposed to date my sisters or something?*

“Nothing!” he hurriedly assured me, turning away. “How old are you, anyway?” he asked, changing the subject. “You never would tell me.”

“Never ask a lady her age.” I followed his gaze, there was a scrawny looking possum person at the bar chatting with the bartender, a “remnant” or “robot” as they used to be called standing in the corner, and a few others scattered about the place. Mostly humans, like myself, though I doubt they would think so. All in all not a lot of prospects. The place itself was clean enough, a scattering of tables and chairs and a server checking on everyone to see how they were doing. There was no fire in the fireplace, and the windows were open, letting in a not exactly warm breeze from outside. Not the best place I had stayed, and not the worst either. *But maybe it is time to be moving on? Am I going to find what I’m looking for-* He slammed his mug down again and jerked his hand back as it shattered in his hand. “Oh for crying out loud!” he muttered, shaking a piece of pottery out of his scales. “They just don’t make things sturdy enough!”

“You’re not supposed to be slamming them down though,” I gently chided, “my colossal, winged friend.” My eyes flicked to the bartender who was now eyeing us and sighed. “Move over,” I told Malachite, standing and shoving him. He didn’t really go anywhere, but got up on his own.

“Orchid, are you sure?” he asked. “Even in a town like this...”

I shook my head. *Even he's paranoid about the Mages' Guild coming after me. Maybe I made them seem more powerful than they really are, but it doesn't hurt to be careful. I've always charged for magic when I had to, there's no reason I'm in their sights.* "The guild won't mind, it was my cup after all. I don't have to charge the place for the spell. You broke it, you bought it, as the saying goes." *After all, if I did have to charge someone for the spell it would no doubt be far more than a stupid mug like this was worth! But I haven't done too much repair magic lately and I need to keep my hand in it so...* Magical energies sprang up around the cup as I focused my efforts on it. Seconds later it flowed together and was good as new. Even with the magical "drag" of maintaining my disguise spell- I currently looked like a rabbit type beastkin- by empowering the spell with ambient mana I was more than good enough to repair a shattered cup.

"I've never heard that saying."

"Of course you have!" I held it up to look for any imperfections. By the Allfather I was good! Not a scratch. "Tomorrow I'll use my divination spell, even with just yes or no answers I'm sure I can find someone that would hire us. Or be told it's time to-"

"Excuse me," said a voice from behind me. Malachite's hand fell to the sword at his side, (mostly worn for show as he tended to use his claws they were just as good) and I set the cup down and turned. A dark elf was standing there, and my eyes widened. She was wearing more gold than I had ever seen in any one place. Especially in *this* town. How did she- I looked past her, and up, to see two minotaurs standing there looking threatening. *Oh, that's how.* "May I see that?" she asked, gesturing to the cup. I shrugged and handed it over.

"This was well done," she announced, looking at it for a moment. "Did I hear you say you were looking for work?"

"As it happens, we are looking for work," I told her. "Do you require the services of a mage?" *At least I don't have to ask if she can afford me.*

"I am interested in anyone that can find and retrieve my stolen property," she told me, handing the mug back. "If you know spells that could aid an adventuring party in such a task you are welcome to hear my offer at least."

"I know a variety of spells," I told her, with some modesty. *Not quite fifty yet, buying magic out in the world is expensive. But it's my tendency to get obsessed with studying that got me into my predicament in the first place. I do miss my library at home, and my sisters, but until this curse is broken...* "Both utility and for combat. Of course I leave most combat up to my bodyguard here," I gestured to Malachite, "but I can hold my own if it comes to that."

"Splendid!" she cried, clapping her hands together. "A genuine magic user! I'm starting to have hope again! I see the two others that responded to my work notice are here, I will go collect them and we can see if a deal can be struck."

Other two? In here? "Very well," I told her. With a nod she turned and to my surprise, gestured to the metal figure in the corner of the room. It "came to" and headed her way, but she was already headed towards the bar. She greeted the beastfolk boy that was sitting there who hopped down off the stool and followed her. *Those two? You have got to be kidding me.* I threw some copper on the table as Malachite got up. He and the minotaurs sized each other up, and I noticed the two were hunched over a bit in order to fit in here. Nevertheless they were still a bit taller than my scaly friend. *We could probably take them, but I doubt there would be a need to. He won't start anything.* "Okay, Malachite?" I asked.

"Sure, sure," he replied, taking his hand off his sword. "No problem on my end."

We headed to the back room and again the two had to squish themselves to get past the doorframe, and took up positions on either side of the dark elf. "Introductions are in order," she decided. "I am Jekserah, are any of you known to the others, by any chance?"

We looked around, shaking our heads.

"Very well, perhaps you would all like to introduce yourselves?"

I shrugged. "I'm Orchid Spellweaver, scholar of magic." *Though I'm sure the distinction is lost on this lot. Maybe Jekserah knows what that means though.* I did a quick Sun spell, no more than a cantrip to make a point of light appear above my upraised fingers. Hardly bigger than a candle flame but it at least proved my credentials.

"I'm Malachite, her bodyguard. So don't go getting any funny ideas." His clawed hands flexed back and forth.

"Beep boop beep," said the remnant, waving their arms stiffly in the air. "Funny ideas does not compute."

We stared at them a moment.

"Oh, come on!" they protested, now talking normally. "A quip like that would have them rolling in the aisles back in the day. You guys need to lighten up."

"Sure," Jekserah agreed dubiously. "The sturdiness of remnants is well known to me, but can you handle yourself in a fight?"

"Judge me by my exterior, do you?" They raised an arm and it *changed* before my very eyes. Something about it screamed "weapon" and the end of it started to glow. "Nothing can stand up to this little baby right here," they claimed, patting it. "The problem is having a body to loot after somebody gets hit with it, to be honest. Despite what the old video games might want you to believe, you can't loot someone's entire inventory if you've turned them into a pile of ashes."

"I like 'ooting bodies!" spoke up the beastfolk boy.

Yeah, don't we all kid?

"Very well. Your name?"

"Hanz." They put their hand back to normal.

"Nice to meet you. And you sir?"

"I'm Snarly, nice to meetcha! You two are awful quiet there, wha'ca names?" He stuck a hand out to the nearest minotaur who looked down at him like he was crazy. But after a moment he sort of stuck out some fingers and allowed them to be pumped up and down.

"I'm Freighttrain," he said.

"I'm Tannenbaum," said the other.

"Those are good, 'olid names, all 'ite. Maybe I'll be big as 'ou when I've grown up a bit!"

"Sure kid," said the one, not believing it for a second. "Eat your vegetables."

"With that out of the way," Jekserah told us, "your task is simple in execution if not exactly straightforward. As you may know, banditry in the area around the town is becoming more and more of a problem recently. The guard says it's not their problem unless it happens in the city limits, and this has emboldened thieves as of late. This has resulted in the theft of a delivery of mine bound for the city, and I want you four to track down those responsible and retrieve it."

From any number of bandits that might be in the area? I suppose once we get on the track of some I can just ask my magic if they're the right ones.

"What's the property?" Hanz asked.

"Any one of you could easily carry it," she replied. "Simply a collection of scrolls, three of them to be precise."

"More importantly, what's the compensation?" Malachite asked, getting to the heart of the matter.

“Ten moons apiece for the job. One now in case you need provisions and the like while you look, the other nine when the scrolls are returned to me.”

“These must be some scrolls!”

We all looked a bit impressed, that was a fair amount of money to throw around for some information, but the guild couldn't say I was working for too little no matter how much magic I had to do in pursuit of the thieves. 40 silver coins? That worked out to be two suns, the gold coins only the ultra rich ever even saw in their lifetimes. Who was this lady, and how many people had already died for these scrolls? Clearly she would have hired a large force to protect them, if they were that valuable to her, right? *But then, why hire a bunch of random strangers off the street to retrieve them? What's she hiding?*

“They are of some importance to me, yes.” She counted a few coins out of a pouch and handed them to us. I hadn't seen silver in some time, only copper. And nine more of these to come? That would set us up a little while!

“Too bad you don't have an internet anymore,” Hanz lamented. “I mean scrolls. Ha! Wait, how elder are these scrolls?”

“The what?” she asked politely.

“Never mind.”

“Do you mind if we read 'em?” Snarly asked.

“I doubt you would be able to,” she replied. *Don't be so sure, lady.* “But I suppose the bandits would have broken the seals on them soon after they got away. I would not expect you to try and avert your eyes should they be sitting on a table or something like that. But I would request you not copy them.”

“Of 'ource, of 'ource.”

“You can give us a rough location as to where the robbery occurred?” I asked.

“The courier did get away with his life, so yes,” she told me, sounding resigned. *But because he didn't die defending the delivery or because she considers the scrolls more valuable than his life?* I was handed a rough map after I stuck my hand out. “This will give you those details.”

“Very well.” I looked it over. “And this happened recently, I assume? We're not talking about two weeks ago or anything?” *In that case they could be ashes by now.*

“No, just two days ago.”

“Fine.” *Looks like the east road into town. Not far from here.*

“You want those responsible brought back here for justice or what?” Malachite asked.

“I don't care what happens to them, honestly, as long as my property is returned.”

“Excellent.”

I rolled my eyes. *Malachite, we've talked about killing people haven't we? Think of your soul!*

“Will there be anything else?” she asked.

We looked around the table. Seemed there were no more questions.

“Very well. Messengers will know where to find me if I'm not here when you get back. Good luck.” She breezed out, followed by her two guards.

“So what's 'ur first 'ove?” asked Snarly. “Can you find 'em with magic or 'atever?”

“I will consult my magic to make sure it's even worthwhile to look,” I told him. “Can it simply point to them? No.”

“But we have a starting place?” Hanz asked.

I handed them the map. “Yes, the map is crude but specific. If we follow the east road out of town we should see the site of the attack.”

“We can maybe track them from there,” they decided. “Are we leaving right away? Not much time until sundown.”

“I think it can keep another night,” I decided. “She didn’t say we had to rush off, and if they’re still in one piece now they will be tomorrow morning as well. Let’s meet at the front gate in the morning. That way you can get any supplies you think you might need. Food and water, that sort of thing.”

“Suits me,” Hanz told us. “You organics certainly need a lot of that stuff. As for me? Time to go back to standing motionless in the corner. It’s a crazy old world, isn’t it?” He got up and headed out the door, singing something like “if I only had a heart.”

“I’m gonna get ‘nother smallbeer!” Snarly announced, following.

Are you sure you haven’t already had enough? I wisely didn’t say as he also slipped out.

“Are those two for real?” Malachite asked. “The machine is probably all right, but what’s with the kid? I don’t want to have to look after him too.”

“What’s this too business?” I asked, crossing my arms over my chest. “I can take care of myself. That’s not to say I don’t appreciate you being around of course. But I do admit I have my doubts about him. I hope he can handle himself but he does seem awfully young.” *But of course I can’t compare myself to him, even if he’s reached maturity for his species he’s a fraction of my age. He won’t even live to be my age. That makes him, and basically everyone else around here, seem a lot younger.*

“I know you can, you just seem so fragile to me. I didn’t mean anything by it, Orchid.”

“Apology accepted.” *I am, after all, fairly fragile. Stupid curse!*

“I guess time will tell. You heading back to the room?”

“Yeah. Work to do, now that we’re officially hired. May as well get to it.”

“Fine. I’ll go get any supplies I might need. You want anything?”

I shook my head. He knew I didn’t eat or drink but I did flip him my coin. “Just in case someone was listening and knows we have it. Don’t spend it all in one place.”

He grinned. “Thought you could take care of yourself?”

“Just get out of here!” I told him playfully. He grinned even wider and left.

I went back to the room we had rented and sat at the small table, lighting the candle there with a quick Mars spell. My disguise had vanished once I got back, the task the magic had been asked for satisfied. So once again my “disfigurement” was on full display, not that there was anyone but me there to see it. I purposefully didn’t look in the mirror near the nightstand, I knew what I looked like. A human woman with oddly colored skin and crystalline “protrusions” all over my body. At least I could sit comfortably, they didn’t cover my back or legs, but made up for it by crowning my scalp and arms. *Oh, to grow even a single strand of hair. But no.* Still, I now had my full concentration back and put all of it into some Jupiter magic, asking about the future. I would need to cast the spell every time for each answer, but there was no rush. I could take extra time and make sure I didn’t miss part of the incantation. Magical energies sprang up around me as I started the first casting. “Are the three scrolls desired by Jekserah still intact?”

Yes

Ah, an excellent beginning. “Are the three scrolls desired by Jekserah more than a day away for our newly formed group?”

No

Very well. I don't know how fast Snarly can move, after all. But I do know I'm pretty slow, of course I've compensated for that. "Are the three scrolls desired by Jekserah to the east of here?"

No.

Great. But they still exist so they must be somewhere. "Are the three scrolls desired by Jekserah to the north of here?"

Yes.

I guess we'll still head to the road, but we'll have to head north at some point. "Are the three scrolls desired by Jekserah guarded by more than one person?"

No.

"That's odd. That can't be right." I sat in thought for a moment. "Are the three scrolls desired by Jekserah currently guarded?"

No.

So they probably opened them up, saw they couldn't read them, and tossed them someplace. Great. So they're not specifically 'guarded' they're just in the hideout of the thieves. Considering 'near' to mean about fifty meters... "Are there more than five people near the three scrolls desired by Jekserah?"

Yes.

Ah hah. So we will have some complications getting them back. Malachite will be pleased. Okay. Well, we can head out tomorrow as they haven't been thrown in a fire or anything. It's worth going out after them. Better get some sleep, tomorrow could be a big day!

Chapter 2

We start our first job together

After getting Malachite up, a feat in and of itself some days, getting my new disguise in place, and getting something (for him) to eat we met up with the others at the east gate. Malachite was carrying the supplies he would need for the day, while I had a small pack with my book of magic and a few odds and ends. I didn't need the book to cast spells of course, but I hated to leave it lying around as it had taken a considerable time to put it together and I didn't really want to redo all that work. I was fairly sure the lock on the door would keep anyone out, but should we unexpectedly need to spend several days on the road tracking the thieves the innkeeper might need the rooms and simply toss our stuff out. *So best to keep my valuables close to me.*

"Good morningth," Snarly greeted us, waving as we came into view. "Letths get 'tarted shall we?"

"Bandits don't have to get up early," Malachite complained with a yawn. "Don't see why I have to."

"Wait, didn't you 'ook different yestday?"

It was true, I didn't look like a bunny girl today, but like an elf. "Wear the same face twice?" I scoffed. "Never."

"Huh?"

"I'll explain in a second. We have a long way to go so I suppose we should get started."

"The estimated time to our destination being represented in hours does mean they will be up and about when we arrive," Hanz agreed. "Another hour would not have made that much difference."

"See you in an hour," Malachite decided, turning back and starting to walk back to the inn. I grabbed his arm and he allowed himself to be spun around.

"Come on, Malachite, it's a great day for a walk. Just look at that sun, and those big puffy clouds up there."

"As if you'll walk."

"Walk, ride, whatever. I'll be right there besides you."

"Come on, 'lowpokes, letths get 'oing!" Snarly seemed eager to be off on his first "adventure" meaning he would probably be complaining and regretting it before the first hour had even passed. The others turned to walk past the gate but I stopped just at the edge of town. *Will they notice and turn back, I wonder?* They did, Hanz cocking his head to the side in confusion.

"Is there something else?" they inquired politely.

"Yes," I told them. "The fact of the matter is I've picked up a bit of a curse along the way. Or at least it acts like that. I spent too long in one place, studying magic, and it changed me physically. So I don't exactly look like everyone else around here despite the fact I'm mostly human. I hide that fact with magic around town to avoid getting stared at, or questioned as to what exactly I am. But outside of town I don't usually bother. The spell I've cast at the moment wouldn't let me anyway, it will be done disguising me once I step out of town, as I only asked for it to be around that long. I could cast the spell again, but like I say I don't typically bother. So, once I step past this gate my spell will break and you'll see me for who I truly am. Got that? I just wanted to warn you, it's still me."

"So leths see it!" Snarly agreed.

I sighed, braced myself, and stepped past the gate. My spell faded, leaving me in all my spiky glory.

"Interesting," Hanz mused, looking me over. "Those protrusions almost seem crystalline."

"They're something," I told them. "They break easily though, shattering almost like glass. Sort of terrified of high places because of it, actually."

“May I run a scan?” They raised a hand as Snarly walked around me.

How would running help? And what’s a ‘scan?’ “Uh, sure?” I agreed. They nodded and set a hand on my arm. *Not exactly what I pictured.*

“Very interesting readings. I’m not sure what to make of them. Do they bother you at all?”

“They slow me down, I’m heavier than I would be. They seem to weaken me too, and like I said they’re fairly fragile. If they do get damaged it takes awhile for them to ‘grow’ back, they seem to heal up the same way I would but quite slowly. But as long as I don’t stay in one place for too long they seem to be under control, not getting any worse. I still have no idea how to get rid of them though.”

“I think they’re ‘ery pretty!” Snarly decided. “You’re shiny!”

“That I am,” I agreed. “So, this is me. This is what I look like. Now you understand why I hide it though?”

“Indeed. Were we not friends I would be eager to dissect you, see if you had extra organs that produced this mineral like secretion from your skin. We are friends, are we not?”

“Of course we’re friends!” I hastened to assure them. *And it’s magical, not physical. Right? None of my sisters have this affliction. Still, that might explain why I’ve never found a magical solution to the problem.*

“Pity. Well, perhaps in the course of this investigation you will die, or lose a limb, allowing me to do a more detailed analysis of the phenomenon.”

“Uh, sure, in that case you’re welcome to it.”

“Splendid, I look forward to it. Shall we go? If you are slowed by the condition I must revise my initial estimate of our travel time and perhaps more supplies are in order? Should we procure some kind of tent? I understand organics prefer shelter at night...”

“As to that...” I smiled and raised my hands. Feeling out magical energies in the area there were plenty to gather up, so I grabbed hold of them (to avoid failing at this spell and looking the fool, I didn’t really need any extra mana for this normally) and began casting. At the end I touched the necklace I wore and channeled the magical energies into it. Then I made a throwing motion and a horse (with horn of course) seemingly made of crystal suddenly sprang into existence, pawing at the ground as if to say “I’m ready to go.” The necklace was a maintaining focus, so I didn’t have to think about keeping her around, and I could cast other magic without being dragged down while this spell was going. It had cost me a fair amount, but it was worth it given how often Malachite and I were on the road.

“Ooooooo!” Snarly exclaimed, clapping his hands together. “Magic sparkly pocket horse! I knew I ‘iked you. What’s ‘is name?”

“Athame,” I told him, jumping onto her back. “Shall we go?”

“Magic is truly a wonder,” Hanz decided. “It seems my initial estimate remains unchanged. Let us be off.”

We headed down the east road, away from the town, and every so often I asked my magic if we were in sight of the place where the attack had happened. I always got a no back and we walked for more than an hour. Malachite did some scouting from the air, dropping down to tell us something was in the road ahead of us. We hadn’t met anyone on the road otherwise, just seeing the usual amount of trees, small animals and birds, and of course the (hopefully dormant) volcano in the distance. We didn’t have long to go before we saw what he had seen, a horse and wagon stopped in the middle of the path. They brightened at our approach and I cast a quick spell to determine if anyone meant me harm in the nearby area. It seemed no one did, so I relaxed a little. After all this could easily be the prelude to an ambush from the treeline, but no, it seemed they were legit or out of range of my spell.

“Hi there!” Snarly called to them as we got closer. “Do you need any ‘elp?”

Now that we were closer I could see it was a wagon loaded with trade goods, and two dark elves jumped down from the seat. Both males, in simple traveling clothes with cloaks, nothing fancy about them. They had their hands on their weapons and were looking around nervously. *Sure, they have the opposite problem as us. There's four of us, two of them, and if we wished to rob them... I mean we've got a draig, me on this clearly magical mount, and a remnant. They're right to be cautious.*

"We don't mean you any 'arm, travelers," Snarly went on. "We just want to 'elp if we can!"

"We do?" Malachite asked.

"Shush, you," I teased.

"There is always the possibility of a reward," Hanz stated.

"We should help," he decided. "It's just the decent thing to do. What seems to be the problem? Broken wheel?"

The two relaxed, taking their hands off their swords. "Someone," said the elf on the right, "didn't pack our water barrel. Now our horse is exhausted and refuses to move."

"Yes, quite," said the other elf. "*Someone*, who usually has checklists coming out the..." He glanced at Snarly who was looking up at him. "...wazoo, neglected in this case to check everything off the list. Hence we are mere leagues from our destination at last and unable to proceed further or return home. But I too will name no names as to whose fault all this is."

"Even though the guilty party is quite obvious," said the other. The two glared at each other.

Married couple?

"What's a wazoo?" Snarly asked.

"It's like a kazoo," Hanz told him. "Only tighter."

"Oh okay!" He shot me a curious look but I just shrugged. "Do you 'ave any water making magic?"

"Sorry, I don't," I admitted. "Even before I left home I didn't eat or drink so I never bothered to learn spells like that. Then after I didn't have the money, so Malachite has had to fend for himself a lot."

"So there's nothing we can do to 'elp?"

"Hummm," I considered. I was fairly certain I was a powerful enough magic user to simply float both the horse and the cart the rest of the way into town but that would take awhile. Not to mention that would no doubt spook the horse, floating around like a bird was not something horses were used to doing. He or she could hurt themselves in their panic. That wasn't ideal. *And I would have to charge for the spell, just because I'm out in the wilderness doesn't mean the guild wouldn't learn of it. Can these two afford it?* I could offer my magical horse companion in their place, perhaps without the burden of the cart the real horse would follow along? But if they didn't, we were back to the same problem. These two wouldn't want to lose their horse, they were expensive! "Nothing immediately comes to mind I'm afraid."

"If it's just water the poor beast needs I could fly and get some," Malachite offered. "The river isn't *that* far away from the air. And I'm pretty fast," he bragged.

"You wouldn't mind?" asked the first elf.

"If you have some wineskins or something I can carry some water in, I'm happy to do it."

"Let's see what we have!" The two started tearing the contents of their cart apart.

"Meanwhile, you all go on ahead. I'll catch up, just don't leave the road. No sense you all waiting for me when I can move a lot faster than you."

"That is the logical course of action," decided Hanz. "We will not leave the road until you catch up to us." They made a funny V with their hand. "Elves, I wish you peace and long life." He stepped around the wagon and started off.

"Byeeeeee," Snarly said with a wave. "Good luck with your 'orse!" He scampered after Hanz.

“Hey, you trust these two?” Malachite asked me quietly. “I hate to leave you with basically strangers.”

“They don’t mean me harm, the spell I did earlier would have shown that. Go on, and thanks for doing this.”

“Well, it’s what you would do isn’t it?” He looked away shyly and took to the sky.

I suppose it is at that. I mentally willed my magical construct forward while the two elves shouted after Malachite about forgetting to take the skins. I shook my head as he either heard them or realized it himself and circled back.

“So ‘ow did you two meet?” Snarly asked me as I trotted up to the others.

“Yes, it seems an unlikely paring,” Hanz agreed.

“It wasn’t long after I... left home,” I started. *Was thrown out for just wanting to study magic and not ‘performing my duties properly.’* “I realized that while my magic could keep me safe in most situations, having a large, brutish looking bodyguard such as Malachite there could be useful. He caught my eye at the inn I was staying at after a game of Gressh’dronnar because I heard his name was Malachite. In my... family,” *clan*, “girls are given ‘soft’ names like flowers, while men are given ‘hard’ names like rocks or minerals. Well, he was celebrating a little *too* hard and got into a fight with a rival player. Everybody was thrown in the local jail to sleep it off, but apparently this wasn’t Malachite’s first run in with the city guard. They were talking about bringing him up on charges. So, knowing that having a bodyguard around that knew how to fight might mean I didn’t have to use magic to defend myself I went to go see him that night. The town wasn’t big enough to warrant any protections against my spells so it was embarrassingly easy to get into his cell. I offered him a way out- come travel with me and see if the two of us could stay *out* of trouble rather than him getting *into* it all the time. As I figured he often did, judging by his behavior that night. Or rot in jail and I would find someone else to be my bodyguard. Despite being a young and inexperienced lad he realized what a great offer that was, and he’s been with me ever since. That was maybe two or three years ago at this point?” I sighed dramatically. “I despair of ever curing him of some of his bad habits but I’ve at least made some strides. He’s proven a loyal companion many times in our travels after that. I trust him with my life.”

“It never ‘erts to ‘elp!” Snarly told me, the phrase sounding like something they said all the time.

“I believe I could find numerous counter examples of that phrase,” Hanz decided. “Would you like me to begin listing them? Example one; jumping into a body of water to try and save a drowning person only to wind up drowning yourself.”

“La la la la la la la la la,” Snarly sang loudly, covering his ears. “I can’t hear you.”

“Example two; You run into a burning building-”

“La la la la la,” he sang louder.

“Curious.”

We didn’t have long to wait at what my magic told me was the site of the attack as Malachite joined us again from the air not long after we arrived. He and I both stayed out of the way as the other two looked and sniffed around, with the pair finally announcing they believed those responsible had come from, and left to the north. I pretended to be shocked, simply *shocked* at this revelation and they led the way away from the road. We eventually found ourselves heading north of where the town would be, doubling back the way we came and even crossing the river at a narrow point. So we wound up almost directly north of the town when the pair announced they had found an overgrown entrance into some kind of cave or crypt that went deep into the earth.

“This is where they went, all ‘ight,” Snarly told us.

My magic gave me a yes answer when I asked it, just to be sure, so I nodded. This was indeed the place, these were indeed bandits that had been terrorizing the countryside, and it hadn't even taken half a day to find it. *Not bad. Does make me wonder, if a rag tag bunch of people like us can track them down why exactly the city guard can't. I mean that is their job, right? Are they being paid to look the other way? We really have no authority here, and those below could rightly claim we attacked them and they were simply defending themselves. But they have to be stopped. I guess they made their choice, now it's up to the Allfather to judge their souls.*

"Curious there is no guard posted," Hanz remarked, looking around. "Perhaps they did not wish to call attention to this spot and the guard waits below?"

"It would have to be underground," Malachite complained, pulling his wings closer.

"Shall I scout the area?" Hanz offered. "I can effectively become invisible if you wish to know the layout of the place before we descend."

"Thanks for the offer," I told them. "But we're not peasants that have to physically go down the hole to see what's down there." I climbed off Athame and touched the pendant, willing the magic to disperse again, and the horse vanished in a swirl of magic. *I want to see the bottom of these stairs,* I thought to myself, casting a divination spell to do just that. It took about a minute of concentration but as the spell went off I closed my eyes, and "opened" them again to be looking at the area as though I had gone down there. *Sight beyond sight, I do love doing magic.* Six individuals lounged there, basically just leaning against the walls or sitting there looking bored. Oil lamps were scattered about, so there was plenty of light, but no tables or chairs were in evidence. *Right, how would they get them way out here?* Two of them were playing a dice game of some kind in the corner, one was watching, the others were just there. A door at the back of the room was closed. I relayed all this and ended the spell. While I had been doing that Malachite had gathered up my pack and his own, and set them high in a tree so we could get them back when we came out of here. Didn't need it distracting us while we were down there.

"The odds are against us," Hanz remarked. "Of course, perhaps your magic can compensate for our lack of numbers?"

In a few ways. Could probably go astral, this stairway down probably exists there if it's been here long enough. So we could attack from there, the doorway is pretty close to where they are though, could we all fit and not get in each other's way during the attack? I do have something just as good we'll just do it this way. "If you can go invisible without help, I can put a spell on the three of us to do the same," I told them. *Though getting three beings or four isn't that much of a difference. But I'm curious how effective theirs is.* "We can sneak down there, get into position, and attack from surprise. That should cut their numbers in half at one stroke."

"Are you going to be okay with that, kid?" Malachite asked Snarly.

"We 'ave to get Lady Jekserah's property back don't we?" he asked. "They're bad men, they deserve what they get." He drew a pair of knives. "Let me at 'em."

"Are they?" I asked. "We should give them the chance to surrender, at the very least."

"Just ask your magic if they'll surrender if we offer it," Malachite suggested.

"Good idea!" I spent a moment casting the spell, but got a "no" answer to "Will the bandits down those stairs surrender to us if we offer it to them?"

"See, that's settled. Don't chicken out on us after we get down there, Snarls."

"I won't! You'll thee."

"If we are all invisible what is our sign to act?" Hanz asked. "Perhaps a silent count?"

"I would say once we cross into the room you've got a slow count of ten to get into position, it's not that big, and then just attack. Anyone that does will become visible so every eye will go there--"

“How about I just attack first?” Malachite suggested. “A draig appearing out of nowhere and ripping someone’s throat out will put the fear of the Allfather into them. When they’re distracted by that everyone else can strike.”

“An excellent suggestion,” Hanz decided. “Sadly I will have to refrain from using my primary weapon in such a confined space. It is quite bright, and blinding one of our party would be a severe handicap. Nonetheless know I will do my part. For further clarification, I will take whoever is in the rightmost position in the room. Snarly, you take the leftmost bandit. This leaves Malachite and Orchid the center of the room for the big entrance.”

Magic is flashy, it will draw the eye and cause more confusion. Once everyone is visible I can go last, the spell will break on me naturally and I won’t be dragged down by it casting another. “Very well,” I said with a nod. “Single file, Hanz you’re in the lead. Put your hand on the person in front of you so we don’t get separated and we’ll head down there.” We got into position and I cast my invisibility spell. After we vanished I felt Malachite’s hand on my back, and he grumbled “don’t pull my tail” making me stifle a grin. Hanz vanished as well, and we started down the stairs into the darkness. *May the Allfather have mercy on their souls.*

Chapter 3

We tear through the first floor

We reached the bottom of the stairs without anyone tripping and falling and entered the room. I took a step to the side, counted to six, and stepped back into the doorway again. I was a delicate flower, after all, and while there wasn't really "cover" like there would be from a door frame it would keep them from attacking me from the side. If they even survived our initial assault, anyway. I took a slow breath and steadied myself. My clan had a reputation for terrifying combat not strictly because of our prowess, but because of our seeming indifference to the whole proceedings. This wasn't because we didn't care, but because we practiced a battle technique akin to meditation. I wasn't as practiced at it as some in my clan, I hadn't seen that much real combat after all, but I was fair at it. I relaxed, picturing in my mind the box that held my emotions. No matter what happened, even if someone jumped me and stabbed me from behind I would be at peace, for I locked that box with my emotions up tight. Whatever happened now I would simply accept it, rationally decide what to do, and then act. I was ready, I was at one with my opponents, and either they would walk away from this or I would. It was all the same thing.

A second later and I heard a battle cry, and the shocked bandit tried to jump back from Malachite going for his throat. He didn't manage it, and Malachite's claws raked across his flesh, drawing blood but not dropping him. His hands of course went to his throat as blood started pouring out and he gave a startled gasp.

"Huh?" was the general sentiment as the others in the room took a second to process what had just happened. "We're under attack!" one cried.

No, you think?

Hanz appeared, yanking the sword away from the surprised man in front of them. They drew it back to stab the man. Meanwhile Snarly appeared and went to stab the man in the back with his knives but it had been just a second too long, the man was moving and noticed him, jumping out of the way.

Great. So much for the element of surprise.

I raised my hands, deciding I would hit the man Malachite had attacked and the man that just got away from Snarly with my elemental wind spell. Snarly was in the most danger, and getting rid of the attacker that was already wounded was just good strategy. *I'll have to apologize to Malachite afterwards though, he'll understand.* I skipped most of the incantation, whipping my fingers through the motion and envisioning the symbols needed to cast the spell. Two bolts of air came out of nowhere, striking both men in the head. The one Malachite had attacked went down, the other man again tried to dodge out of the way of my bolt and got struck, but remained standing.

"I had him," complained Malachite.

"Get them!" shouted one of the men. He started to get up, drawing his sword as he did so, as did the man who had been playing the dice game with him.

Hanz tried to stab the guy they had stolen the sword from in the chest, but the man threw himself to the side.

"Spellcaster, there you are," said one man, drawing his sword and looking right at me. I couldn't have him rushing me so I drew an imaginary line between us. *He won't hit one of my friends.* I thrust my palm out, casting another Mercury spell as I did so with a single word of the incantation. He went flying straight backwards, the air whooshing out of him as he hit the wall behind him. He crumpled.

Malachite looked both ways, decided the man with the sword was the bigger threat as he was about to attack Snarly and could anything really hurt Hanz? His decision made he lunged for the man,

grabbing him around the waist. Snarly stabbed him with both daggers. One went into the guy's right arm, the other into his left leg. "Gotcha that time!"

The man recently disarmed by Hanz went to grab the sword back, but they simply lifted it a little and the man's hand grabbed only air. "Organics are so clumsy, don't you find?" they asked. One of the men that had been dicing was now up and attacked them. The blade clanged off their metal body. "Please wait your turn, sir, I'll be with you in a moment," they promised the man.

The man grabbed by Malachite tried to break loose, but Malachite was pretty strong. He got slammed to the ground instead, crying out in pain.

The other man who was playing dice was now also up, and I couldn't take the chance his sword was sharper and able to damage Hanz. I concentrated on both men, this time swaying my whole body to cast a Moon spell. I spoke the three words of the incantation and let the spell go, but both men shrugged it off. The second man took a swing at Hanz, but again they were unharmed. "Sirs, I'll have plenty of time for each of you, please wait your turn!" They went to stab the guy again, and again the man dodged. "Oh bother. If you would just stand still a moment sir..."

"No!"

The other man drew back, raising his blade high possibly to stab directly at Hanz's head. I couldn't have that, so I thrust my palm out again, speaking part of the incantation. He too went flying into the wall, his leg bent at a weird angle as he slammed into it.

Snarly plunged both daggers into the chest of the man thrown by Malachite, and he went still.

The first man I pushed with my magic got up, grabbing his sword as he did so. "I'll get you for that!"

"My pretty?" Hanz asked, dodging the man again who tried to grab his sword hilt back. "And her little dog too? Keep trying sir you nearly had it that time."

"Stupid remnant," said the other man, "I'll deal with you later." He looked over at me and grabbed a knife that was strapped to his leg. It looked like he was going to try throwing it at me.

Well we can't have that, can we? I figured it would take a moment to flip the blade over as you can't really throw a knife by the hilt, and pointed downwards like that, so I took the full time with my air attack this time. I slammed him from two directions right in the head, and he crumpled to the ground.

Malachite, probably figuring this guy was down for the count after being stabbed by Snarly headed over to help Hanz, aiming for the man getting up from my Mercury spell. He went for the throat again, and with his leg unable to support his weight he went down for a second time.

"Ah ha! First blood is mine!" Hanz reported, finally scoring with their stolen sword. They got the guy in the arm though, but it was a fairly deep cut. "Have at you, swine!"

First what? Are they not paying attention to the rest of us or what?

The other guy I tossed with my magic got up, and looked around wildly. It looked like he wanted to race to the door but one of them was blocked by me, the other was closed and there were two people nearby that would be sure to catch him before he got there.

"I surrender?" he asked tentatively, bringing his hands up.

"No, you're a bad man!" Snarly screamed at him, lunging for the guy with his daggers at the ready. One of them scored on the man's chest, the other in his left leg.

"Fine, kill me, but my master will see to you!" said the man before Hanz.

"We will see about that," Hanz replied, thrusting the sword home. They gave it a twist and pulled it out, causing the man to gasp and fall to the ground.

"No!" cried the last man standing. "I surrendered, you have to spare me!"

"No we don't," Malachite told him. "Should have chosen another profession." He sank his claws into the guy's chest, and he too gave a gasp and fell over.

“What is going on in here?” shouted a voice, as the door opened. The man on the other side froze, taking in the scene. “Never mind!” He slammed it closed again.

“We have to get after him!” Malachite screamed.

“I’ve got this,” I told him, lining myself up with the door. I spoke the full incantation, targeting the door, and when I thrust my palm forward it tore off the hinges and went flying into the next room. The man wasn’t able to get out of the way and the door slammed into him, knocking him over, and then went careening past him to smash into the far wall. Two surprised looking men with bows looked back at it, then back at me. The four skeletons in the room didn’t seem to care one way or the other.

“Get them!” cried one archer, reaching for an arrow. The other one followed suit, shouting “And by get them he means attack and kill them, not just bring them over to us!” The skeletons seemed to perk up a little, while both Malachite and Snarly tore into the next room. It was much longer than it was wide, but the skeletons were about halfway between the door and the other end where the archers were.

“After you,” I told Hanz, who slipped through the door frame after them.

The quicker archer let loose with his arrow, and we couldn’t have that so I cast a quick defensive spell, and it slammed into magical energy and bounced away. I had to do it again as the other fired as well.

Snarly and Malachite got up to a skeleton, but really only Malachite had a chance to do any damage to one. Both attacked at the same time, the skeleton’s sword smashing into Snarly’s temple and sending him flying.

“Snarly!” Malachite cried, and grabbed his skeleton’s arm.

“Oh dear, this is bad news!” Hanz announced, stepping over Snarly to engage the skeleton themselves. They swung the stolen sword, but the creature simply swayed a little and they missed.

Meanwhile Malachite whipped the skeleton around that he had grabbed, flinging it backwards and into the other two behind it. All three crashed together and fell into a pile of bones.

I watched all this rather dispassionately, keeping my breathing even and looking the situation over as it was, not as I wished it to be. If Snarly was still alive, he could be healed. If not, there was nothing I could do for him. The archers were the clear problem, while we tried to get through the skeletons they could continue firing arrows at us. However, an archer without a bow isn’t worth very much, so I raised my hands to see what I could do about that. I began casting, using the full incantation as they hadn’t drawn new arrows yet. I was confident I could do what needed to be done before they were ready.

The man we had seen shakily got to his feet, it looked like he was in a lot of pain, and he started staggering towards another door. *Ah, a “two for one deal” as the old saying goes. Opportunity knocks once, that sort of thing.*

The skeleton that hit Snarly went for him again, but Hanz managed to block it. “You’re fighting me, old chap,” they told the thing. Meanwhile two skeletons had untangled themselves from the pile and were reaching for their weapons, so Malachite kicked one, driving it back again. It drew back so he missed.

“There’s nothing to hit!” he complained. “Stupid bone men!”

They could be bone woman.

“I’m okay!” Snarly croaked. “If anyone cares?”

“Just stay down for a moment,” Hanz told him. “We’ll protect you.”

My spell was ready, so I gestured with both hands, and both bows flew out of the archer’s hands and into the back of the man who was now almost to the door. He tumbled forward and didn’t move.

“Hey!” both archers shouted.

The final skeleton had gotten up, but Hanz was busy with another. They swung their blade, but the thing skipped back again, teeth clacking. "They do seem rather hard to deal with," they agreed to Malachite.

"Orchid?" he called.

"On it!" I figured they weren't very strong, being all bones, so I thrust my palm out again and spoke the first word of the incantation against three. I would have liked to take a second to gather extra mana but with them swarming and Snarly down, I couldn't risk it. They were blown off their feet and smashed into the wall behind them. I wasn't straight on with any of them so none was blown back enough to hit the archers, but you can't have everything can you?

"You left one?" Malachite chided me.

"What, you can't take one wittle skellington?"

"Oh I see how it is." He lashed out, grabbing the thing by the shoulders.

The archers started for their bows, and we couldn't have that now could we? I flexed my muscles (such as they were) and targeted the bows with a Mars spell. Both burst into flames and the archers skidded to a halt. They looked down the corridor with murder in their eyes, and I gave a little wave to them. "Hiiiiii."

With Malachite now gripping the bones of the skeleton Hanz swung their sword in from the side, aiming for the neck. The head came clean off, flying off to the side and bouncing to the ground. The bones went limp, the animating magic leaving them. *One down, three to go.* Malachite dropped them and they scattered apart, no longer connected by magic.

But another was ready to take its place, though the sword it had been carrying had gone flying. It started running towards them.

"No, no, kill the magic user!" one of the ex-archers shouted to it. *What? Kill little old me? For shame. I do declare, I think I've rustled their jimmies a bit.* The skeleton stopped, confused and looking around.

"It doesn't know what a magic user is you dolt! The woman down the hall! Kill her!"

The bony eye sockets locked with my big, beautiful blues. *Come and get some, boneman.*

Malachite was on the case, saying "Oh no you don't," and rushing it instead. The thing had its orders, kill me, so it didn't bother dodging as he grabbed it. Just for good measure I threw a Saturn spell at it, so whatever he was going to do he would have an easier time of it.

With no other weapons in sight the ex-archers became swordsman, grabbing up the fallen swords from the skeletons. They were still way down at the other end of the room though, I wasn't that worried. The skeleton now tried to break free of Malachite and get to me, but he was having none of that. He slammed the thing into the wall, head first, cracking bone and leaving the head at a weird angle. It must have been hanging by a thread, the bones didn't go limp.

"I'll handle the next one," Hanz announced. It too had gotten up, so they planted themselves in front of it. It too had heard the orders to kill me, so it tried to get around them as they swung. The blade passed through the ribs area without stopping, so they hit nothing. "Oh dear this is difficult isn't it!"

I wasn't too worried about the skeletons reaching me, but with the swordsmen now armed and heading towards me I figured I should do something about it. *I took their bows away, now it's time to take their newest toys away.* I started casting. A second later I let the magic go, which worked on one of them at least. His sword squirted out of his grasp and he had to shuffle to the side and stop to avoid it chopping his legs off. The other man turned but he waved him on. "Take her out!"

"To the ball game!" Hanz started singing. "Take her out with the crowd."

The last skeleton finally got up and started towards me as well. *What a popular girl I am today.*

Malachite didn't waste time, simply grabbing the head of the skeleton he had hold of and yanking up. The bones fell in a heap and he hurled the head at the other one. It smashed against the wall, missing by inches.

Hanz tackled theirs to the ground, pinning it for the moment.

I didn't like how close the other skeleton was to me, as my friend's efforts had failed to stop it. That one swordsman was close on his heels as well. I couldn't waste time, so I gestured, calling up a sliver of wind at leg level. Both stumbled as the elemental energy slammed into them. I had gotten myself a second of breathing room at least.

Hanz slammed the skeleton to the ground as it tried to wriggle away from them, but it was still moving.

Both the skeleton and the man were about a meter away from me now. The man had victory in his eyes, raising his sword to cut me down, and finally get rid of that pesky magic user. How I hated to make him start all over again, but that's really how we learn and grow, isn't it? I shoved my palm out, speaking the first word of the incantation. Both went flying back away from me.

Hanz held the skeleton while Malachite grabbed the head of it, trying to twist it off. There was a cracking but it didn't come off.

"Come on, come on!" he shouted.

"You're dead! You hear me? Dead!" shouted the swordsman that was getting up a few meters away from me. I cocked my head to the side and looked confused.

"I don't seem to be at the moment."

"Our master will destroy you!" He grabbed up his sword again.

I hadn't lost track of the other one who was about to reach me, but decided throwing them around wasn't really cutting it. I switched tactics, twisting my hand and bringing my palm parallel to him. A beam of elemental energy slammed into him as I spoke the first word of the incantation, skipping the rest. He stumbled backwards and tipped over, the sword clattering away from him. *Whew.*

"No!" cried the other one.

"Yes!" I cried back, and started the full incantation for the bolt. *He won't reach me before I can finish it.*

Malachite tore the head off the skeleton and simply tossed it, then offered a hand to Hanz to help them up. "Just laying around?" he quipped. "There's still one left you know."

"I know," they sighed. "Let's go get it."

The swordsman had his blade up and was waiting for me to finish my spell, which I did. He tried to dodge but I had noticed he was favoring his one leg and accounted for that in which way I figured he would go. The bolt slammed into his face but he didn't go down. "I'll kill you if it's the last thing I do!" he promised. "Or maybe your friend!"

"What?"

I didn't expect the man to chuck his sword at Snarly, an awkward proposition at the best of times. I figured it was going to go wide but I couldn't take the chance. With a gesture and the one word of this particular incantation it bounced off a magical circle in the air and clattered to the floor.

"anks!" Snarly managed.

"Really?" I asked the man, now coming into the room totally. "You would try to kill someone who was already hurt and no danger to you?" The box my emotions was in was trembling, I couldn't let it break open yet though.

"I didn't expect you to be able to deflect it, or I would have done something else," he admitted.

"I see." I started casting again. He looked for a way out but the door was covered by Malachite and he would have to get past me to leave that way. He took a step back and put his hands up. "I surrender."

I finished casting but held it. Three magical circles were pointed at him, my wind spell ready to be unleashed.

“Fine,” I decided. “Get out of here.”

“What?” Hanz and Malachite gasped. They got distracted by the last skeleton again though.

“Go on, get out of here.” I stepped to the side and pointed to the door with my thumb. “Tell your friends if they keep up this kind of lifestyle, we’re coming for them too.”

“You won’t leave this place alive, but sure, I’ll tell them.” He gave the other two a wide berth, and suspiciously went past me. My magic paced him, but he raced up the stairs and out of sight so my magic splintered and vanished. Now the box broke open, and I rushed over to Snarly.

“How bad is it?” I asked, concerned.

“I’ll be fine,” he tried to insist.

“You’re bleeding all over the place. Quit squirming around and let me heal you. I won’t even charge you for it.” *Being a member of my group and everything.* I started casting. It took two castings of the spell but the wound closed and Snarly sat up. By that time the fourth skeleton had been dealt with, and the others helped Snarly up.

“Good as ‘ew,” he insisted. “Sorry to have worried ya.”

“Your spells are quite versatile,” Hanz remarked. “I also notice you can cast them rather quickly.”

“Oh, it’s nothing. I may be slow of foot, but I’m not slow of mind,” I humbly bragged. *And not having to worry about dodging helps, I can concentrate on what’s going on all around me by staying back like I do.*

“To be sure.”

“Why did you let that guy go?” Malachite demanded.

“I heard a plea for surrender three times down here,” I told him. “Snarly decided against it. As did you. This one was *my* choice. Killing him gained me nothing, and goes against the Allfather’s will. You must each decide for yourselves the condition of your soul after this. Perhaps prayers of forgiveness, if meant genuinely, will afford you some mercy when you are judged.”

“As I have no soul,” Hanz announced, “I will make sure all of the bandits *are* in fact dead. Allow me to retrieve a weapon and I will set about the task.”

“I just knocked the one out,” I told them. “We don’t have to end his life.”

“Do you believe leaving him alive will benefit the area?” they asked. “Will this brush with death change his ways in any way?”

I sighed. “No, probably not.”

“Then best to end it. Doing this may save other lives down the line. You need not watch if it bothers you.”

“Just... just do what you have to,” I told them. “We have another level to clear out it seems.” I gestured to the door.

“Yes, hopefully no one comes from that level until we are ready. Malachite, perhaps you would like to stand guard?”

“Yeah, okay,” he allowed. “And Orchid, I see where you’re coming from. You were probably right, killing him wouldn’t have changed anything, and he had surrendered. I can’t fault you for your choice.”

“Thank you for understanding,” I told him.

“Looting time!” Snarly announced.

Chapter 4

We tear through the second floor

As Hanz finished off those still alive from the two rooms and Snarly searched their bodies for valuables, I scowled at the doorway. Malachite had checked it, cracking it open, and it led down into darkness so there must be another door at the bottom.

“Thinking of blowing this one up too?” Malachite asked. “That was pretty neat, what you did with that door.”

“Thanks. I figured being down here it would be pretty rickety. But no. Now that we’re down here and I have a second I can feel some weird magic coming from further below us.”

“How weird?”

“The closest I can say is that it feels like Pluto magic, but it isn’t the type I normally feel. Like something old is reaching out from this place.”

“Demonic?”

I shook my head. “Could be. It gives me an idea though.” I gestured to the body that was left in this room and floated it upwards. “Be back in a second.” I hauled it through the air into the other room, where the two were finishing up. “Are they dead?” I asked Hanz.

“All dead,” he confirmed. “Why are you bringing this one?”

“I don’t often get to do this,” I explained. “And the magical energies in this place seem right for it. I’m going to get us some reinforcements. It will take a few minutes so watch my back.”

“Very well.”

I tossed the body with the others and started pulling mana into the spell. While not exactly “easier” the mana seemed “eager” for what I was about to do, and two minutes later the bodies of the former bandits started to get up. They seemed to have an aura about them, a darkness I had never seen a zombie possess, but they stood there waiting my orders. “Perfect.”

“You have reanimated them?” Hanz asked.

“That’s right. They’re under my complete control.”

“That’s really ‘reepy,” Snarly told me, staying away from them. “Did ya have to do that?”

“Well, no I didn’t *have* to, but I’d rather send these fellows in first and let them cause some confusion and maybe take some hits meant for us. I’ll be dragged down a bit, controlling them, but I figure it’ll be worth it.”

“As long as we don’t bring ‘em home ‘ith us.”

“I wasn’t planning to.”

“Good.”

We headed back and I told Malachite not to attack them, and called the zombies into the room. They shuffled in. “Right,” I announced. “I’ll take a look down there and see what we’re up against. We can make our plans then.” Casting the same divination spell I had before I expected the same result. But something was wrong, I couldn’t quite see down there. I wasn’t blocked, exactly, but it was like trying to see through a mud stained piece of glass. “That’s never happened before,” I told everyone. “I can’t get a good look at what’s down there.”

“So we just have to hope for the best?” Malachite asked.

“There is another way. I just hope they don’t have magic to counter it. Come on. Troops, follow behind us,” I told the zombies. “We’ll head down the stairs and I’ll take a peek through the door. They won’t be able to do anything about it, and we can quickly come up with a plan.”

“Is this dangerous?” Malachite asked.

“As I say, unless they have the one exact spell to counter this, not at all. Come on.”

We headed down, setting some of the lamps at the top of the stairs so we could have some light, and at the bottom I took extra care and time in casting a spell on myself. I became less solid and nodded to the others. "Wait here a moment." I stepped through the door. On the other side were several men in the same type of robes the guys upstairs were wearing, not typical bandit fare as far as I knew. They were in a circle, being led in the chant by a guy in the middle, and there were several dead bodies laying there. They looked like farmers by their clothes. One of the men gasped, stop chanting and pointed.

"Master, a ghost just came through the door!"

"Continue the chant!" he ordered, turning.

"Yes master."

I put a hand on my hip and regarded him. *Are they the source of the weird magic or was the magic here and they're just trying to use it?* The man had a kind of black flame licking at one arm, but didn't seem concerned about it.

"Are you a ghost?" he demanded.

"What if I am?"

"Then I shall be about my business and ignore you."

"That's no fun. Actually, my people and I have come for some stolen goods. I couldn't see into this room so I came to check it out for myself. Just what exactly are you doing in here?"

"My men are dead?"

"I'm afraid so. But you don't have to be. Surrender and come back to Gloomhaven with us. Face your punishment like a man."

"Gloomhaven? Ha! You know nothing. Even if you have killed my men in the chambers above, this chamber will be your end! The Gloom cannot be stopped." He held up his hand, the black flame climbing higher. "The Gloom will destroy all who oppose it!"

"The Gloom will destroy all!" echoed the men around the circle.

Okay, crazy then. Good to know. "Sure thing friend. I'll just take my leave then, shall I?"

"Come back here!" he shouted as I stepped backwards through the door.

"We may not have much time, they're doing some kind of ritual magic in there," I explained. "There's enough room here, I'm taking us into the astral. The zombies on the stairs will fall a little but they'll be fine. We'll head through, get into position just like last time, and I'll step us back across. Any questions?"

They shook their heads and so I had everyone grab hands and I started casting. We slipped across dimensions, becoming closer to Heaven and as the stairs didn't exist here, just as I said the zombies fell a bit but righted themselves. "Try to remain undamaged," Hanz said to Snarly.

"Tha's the plan!"

"Come on, he's doing something!" We rushed into the chamber as the guy in the middle was pouring black flame across the corpses, and they were beginning to stir. I found a side chamber with an open door and went in there, out of the way, and the others got into position. I told the zombies to simply attack anyone that hadn't come down the stairs with them and hoped they were smart enough to understand that order. They didn't start trying to attack us so it seemed fine.

"This chamber seems big enough to negate the photonic concern I had with the last one," Hanz remarked. "I will take out the leader." Their hand switched over into weapon mode and they got behind the guy.

"Ready!" Malachite called.

"Weady!" Snarly called, behind a guy and with daggers poised to strike.

I nodded, calmed myself and put the box back around my emotions, then let the spell keeping us in the astral plane go. Hanz wasted no time, a beam of energy hitting the main bandit (cultist?) in the chest and basically burning a hole right through him. His clothes caught on fire but he didn't even have time to scream before falling over. The black fire kept pouring into the zombies though, who were now rising. Strangely, even my zombies were attracting this strange fire, their bodies beginning to dim as it flowed towards them. It seemed they weren't exactly following my command either, they were heading towards it like a moth to a flame.

As Snarly stabbed into the back of the guy he was behind Malachite thrust with the sword he carried, but neither dropped. They whirled, realizing something had happened.

"The master is dead, kill the intruders!" one needlessly shouted. All raised daggers, they must have gotten them out while we were getting into position. Several started towards Hanz, who to be fair was the biggest threat in the room. The one stabbed by Malachite spun and slashed with his dagger. He dodged back but got hit, not that it did anything against his scales.

I started casting, wanting to get the knives away from these guys. It seemed as if Malachite and Hanz were in no danger but Snarly certainly was. I wasn't quick enough, the one he had stabbed slashed back, but Snarly deflected it with his daggers. My spell went off, a magical circle filling the room under the feet of the bandits. But I felt the pull of the magic I was already sustaining to keep the zombies active, and that was enough to distract me. None of the knives dropped from the bandit's hands as I had intended. Had I not locked my emotions up I would have been quite cross at that, but as it was I simply accepted it.

"Who did that spell?" demanded a bandit. He looked around and spotted me. "Ah hah!" He sprinted towards me.

Crap. He was going to reach me in about a second, limiting my options. I needed to cast a spell in that time and have it stick, or I was going to have a bad time in a second. I started casting, cutting the last part of the incantation out so he would still be a little distance from me when I got it off. I got it off before he reached me, and he dodged to the side (or tried to) as my bolt struck his head. He cried out but didn't go down. Still, he was right there, and shaking his head as if to clear it. I had to risk it, and lashed out with magic again, this time only saying the first word of the incantation. Luckily I struck him again, and he went down in a heap.

I looked to see how everyone was doing, and two of the men were surrounding Hanz, trying to grab them. They swung their sword in an arc in front of them, catching one of the men in the leg but only a grazing blow.

Malachite got his opponent through the chest with his sword, yanking it back as the man fell. While Snarly slashed twice with his daggers, forcing the other man to dodge back. I figured I would help him out, and started casting a spell on his opponent. I felt this one go off, it was a tough one to resist and silently cheered our smallest member on. It didn't stop him attacking though, and he barely missed Snarly who ducked out of the way. I was pretty sure Snarly would attack next and helped him out further, flexing my muscles to cast a Mars spell on him. He hit, but the man seemed hardly to notice. *Well, it never hurts to help, right?* I started casting my wind attack, aiming for the man's head. *That should slow him down.* It struck, and while the man was staggered he remained standing. But not for long, as Snarly dodged a clumsy attack and plunged both his daggers into the guy. He went down.

With the bandits down I switched my attention to the zombies, who now seemed to be fighting each other over the remains of the black flame. It had subsided as the last bandit died, and they were now slugging it out. They seemed more energetic than normal zombies, the black flame seemed to be some kind of power source for them, but it seemed zombies were evenly matched. I aided mine with some magic and set some of the others on fire, and finally only two of mine remained standing. I set them on fire as well, marched them into the pile of zombies while Snarly checked over the bandits for

valuables, then we set the lot on the fire and made sure everything was burning nicely before we left. The air stank of cooking flesh and we would need to get out of there pretty soon because of the smoke, but there wasn't much down there. Malachite grabbed a chest and we headed upstairs and into the light again. Hanz and Snarly grabbed up the weapons, there were several more bows and quivers of arrows stacked against the wall, so we had a small pile of stuff when we made it out. Their swords, the bows, arrows, and Malachite had taken one of the red sashes they were wearing and was looking it over.

"So what was all that about, oh master of the arcane arts?" he asked me.

"I'm actually not sure," I admitted. "My zombies were still under my control, the spell wasn't broken, but that black fire seemed to entrance them in some way. Powered them up a bit too from what I could tell. I talked to the man when I was looking the room over he mentioned something about "the Gloom" and that it would not be stopped."

"I did notice they all wore a black robe with a red sash," Hanz announced. "Some kind of cult?"

"I jus' hope that puts an end ta it," Snarly decided. "That zombie stuff freaks me 'ut."

"I hope so too. It's got me a little worried. But zombies are just magically animated bodies, they can be useful in the right application. There's no need to be prejudiced against them, they're better than just burying bodies and getting no more use out of them."

"I'll take yer word fer it. Let's just 'ope the stuff we're 'ooking for iz in heres." He tapped the chest. "A minute with the 'ld lockpicks and we'll have 'er sprung." He got out a set of lockpicks and started working on the lock. Meanwhile Malachite went up and got our packs, handing mine back to me.

"Thanks."

"Well 'ookie here!" Snarly started passing the stuff in the chest out, and I took a look. Several vials of liquid that seemed magical to me. Four of them had a symbol of a sword on them and five had the symbol of healing. One pocket watch that also radiated magic, and seemed to be a compass on one side and a clock face on the other when I opened it. A scroll which had a magical formula on it. A map to a location further north of town, with "crypt of the dammed" written on it, and thankfully Jekserah's missing scrolls were in there too. It had been opened and Snarly looked it over. "Gibberish," he decided. "Anyone read gibberish?"

"I can," I told him, taking the scrolls. "But should we?"

"We risked our lives for this," Hanz told me. "I think we should see what all the fuss was about. I know well the dangers of information, these scrolls could be very dangerous."

"Okay." *Strange though, for supposed thieves this is an awfully small haul. Did we miss their main stash? They went out of their way to steal some scrolls they couldn't read, a few other odds and ends, what was the point?* I cast a spell to let me understand a written language and was surprised to see it remained gibberish. "Now that's unexpected. I should be able to read this perfectly now. What in the world?"

"It seems to be a cipher of some kind. I am not surprised."

"A what now?" Malachite asked.

"A code. The information has been modified in a way that only the sender and receiver know. That way if it falls into the wrong hands without the means to decode the message the information is safe. Odd to see it used in this time, however. Though it was used even in the time of the ancient Romans as I understand it."

"Could you make sense of it?" I handed it over.

"Given time, perhaps. But with so little text to go on, only these few pages, and not having any idea what the contents might be, it would be slow going. For example if I knew it was addressed to her, I could conclude this first word is her name and work from there. But I do not."

“Well, it’s safe so we’ll hand it back to her,” I decided. “Are we taking the other stuff?”

“Might be we can ‘ell it?” Snarly put in, looking hopeful.

“We can try,” I agreed. “Was there anything on the bodies?”

“A little coin.” He dug out some coins and handed them around. Just copper. It was better than nothing. “No rings or anything like that.”

“The sash is interesting,” Malachite announced. “Look. There’s a symbol sewed into it.” He turned it so we could see and there it was. It was a skull (of course) with some wavy lines around it. *Flames, maybe?* “Ever seen it before?”

Everyone shook their heads.

“We can ask around town. If these people were part of a cult dedicated to making souped up zombies, someone should be warned about it.”

We agreed.

“I’ll get my horse out. Put that stuff into a bundle and I’ll just float it alongside us. Can you carry the chest, Hanz?”

“Of course. I do not tire like an organic so I was going to offer anyway.”

“Then let’s get away from here. That weird magic seems to be going away but I still don’t like this place.”

With the weapons and such tied up with the sash and my horse carrying me, we made good time back to the town. I put my disguise back on once we made it to the gate, and put my horse away. Back at the inn we sent a messenger to Jekserah to let her know we had returned safely, and celebrated our first successful mission together. I looked over the spell, it turned out to be a spell to ignore weather conditions like cold or rain, which I felt could come in handy in our travels. If we stayed together, that is. But none of us seemed in a hurry to split up, which of course could be simple pragmatism so everyone got their share of the money. The messenger returned and said Jekserah would see us in the morning, so we headed to bed. Plenty of time to deal with our “loot” and such tomorrow. I wasn’t completely thrilled with how many people we had murdered, but the land was a little safer because of it. So I took what comfort I could from that and went off to sleep.

Chapter 5

We stick together and do some stuff in town

It occurred to me the next morning that I probably should have asked my magic if we would be attacked in the night in retaliation for the bandits we killed, but it was fine. The inn was still standing when we woke and got back together.

Jekserah joined us at breakfast, sitting down with us flanked by her usual two bodyguards. “So I’ve been told the job is done?” she asked.

“That’s correct,” I told her, handing her the scrolls. “They were opened by the bandits, we didn’t open them.”

“Fine, fine. Wait, who are you?” She looked me over. I currently looked like a sylvestris, the child of an air elemental and a human. Long flowing hair, a bit shorter than I usually was, wearing a simple white dress and a flower in my hair.

“I’m Orchid, don’t you remember me?” I acted a little hurt and pointed to the flower.

“But I thought you were- never mind.” She took the scrolls and looked them over. “Yes, this seems to be in order. Freighttrain, you may distribute the funds.”

“Yes madam,” said the minotaur, getting out a coin purse. He counted out nine silver for each of us and handed it over. *Yes, that’s a bit more security isn’t it? Still, it doesn’t hurt to ask.* “Are you aware of any bounties on cult members in the area wearing black robes with a red sash? We took out a fair number of them to get those back. If the city will pay us for that part of the job...”

“Bounties? Cult members? No, I’m sorry I don’t know anything about any cults in the area. Sorry. And don’t get your hopes up about getting any coin from the city guard!” She barked a laugh. “They can barely keep themselves running!”

“That’s okay.” *Could be too new? I’ll have to check the board in the town square.*

“Were they all killed?”

“One escaped, but the others are very dead.” *Dead, undead, and then dead again.*

“That should be all right then. And you’re sure they’re dead?”

Why the interest? You got your stuff back. “Very dead. We burned the bodies.” *Didn’t want them turning into zombies on their own, given the weird magic I was feeling in that place.*

“Splendid! And in only a day too, you are very efficient. Burned them you say? Well, never mind.”

Why does she sound disappointed at that?

“That’s us,” Malachite told her with pride. “Anything else we can do for you?”

“If you’re looking for work, there is another matter you might want to look into.”

“Go on.”

“Somewhere in the Dagger Forest is a group of khi’teen, you know, the bug people? They’ve been causing trouble near the town as well, killing and making off with caravan goods coming into the city from that area. You would be doing the Merchant’s Guild a great service if you were to take care of the problem. I can’t say exactly how generous an offer I can make you but rest assured it would be worth your time.”

She paid us two suns for three pieces of paper, so I can well imagine. More killing though, not exactly what I had in mind but what exactly did I expect? Planting crops?

“We might be interested in something like that,” Malachite agreed. “We should contact you in the usual way if we have something to report?”

“That would be fine. Tannenbaum, I think you have some maps of the area?”

“Yes madam.” He got out some sheets of paper from a pack and looked them over. “Here you are.” He handed it over, she glanced at it, and handed it to him.

“This will show you the rough area we believe the camp is located. I’m sure you can take it from there. Try to make an example of them, if you can. Yes, that would work out nicely I think.”

“Thank you.”

“I don’t believe we have any other business so I’ll be on my way. Come along you two.” She stood, as did we, and she nodded and breezed out.

“We did ‘ur first job!” Snarly announced, jingling his pouch. “Hurray for us!”

But at what cost? What cost?!

“And perhaps got another,” Hanz agreed. “But what is our immediate next move?”

“Take a day off?”

“I would advise against that.”

“What did you have in mind, Hanz?” I asked him.

“I believe before we go asking around about this ‘Gloom’ business we should see how widespread the cult is. We have information related to a second location, let us go there and ascertain the situation. It must be important to them in some way, given the map we discovered with everything else.”

“No money in it,” Malachite grumbled.

“Unless they have more ‘tuff than the last group did,” Snarly advised him.

“Perhaps so,” Hanz agreed, “but stemming the tide of a group we have witnessed using strange magic, dedicated to reanimating corpses and empowering them *now* rather than *later* is tactically sound. If we wait until they can gather even more members, we may have a much larger problem to deal with. Plus we need proof of how widespread the movement is, to know what kind of a response we should recommend the guard take to secure the town.”

“Agreed,” I told them. *And it’ll put off going after those bug people. From what I recall they’re just so hideous looking, even more than me, that humans don’t want them around. So they aren’t really welcome in settlements like this and have to do whatever they can to survive out there. Obviously killing people and stealing goods isn’t the best way to go, and they should be found and stopped. But it’ll mean killing them, I doubt I would find anyone here in town willing to negotiate with them. Maybe in the meantime that situation will resolve itself?*

“Very well. We have a very detailed picture of their location from the map we recovered, as long as we leave before noon I estimate we can be there and back not long after sundown based on our velocity yesterday. Let us try to sell what we recovered from the bandits, have an early lunch, and depart. This will also give us time to shop for any supplies we may need, now that we have been paid for our current job.”

“Sounds good to me. Snarly, unless you want to try lugging stuff around Malachite and I will take the weapons and stuff to sell.”

“I wanta tell Senna about my ‘dventures. She’s tha lady I’ve been staying with, she basically ‘aised me. She suggested I ‘trike out on my own for a while, I want to tell ‘er I lived through it.”

“Go ahead,” I told him. “Just be back before lunch.”

“I will.” He scampered off.

“All right. You coming, Hanz?”

“If it’s all right with you, I would like to browse the merchant shops, see if anything catches my electronic eye.”

“It’s your money. Let’s go.” *What does a remnant spend money on? Odd.*

Malachite and I gathered up the goods, but I pocketed the watch case. “When we get a chance, maybe tomorrow, I’ll go talk to anyone that runs a shop dedicated to magic. Town this size must have

more than one. Items like this are very hard to make and rather expensive. Those bandits must have stolen it from someone, and the best place to ask would be the place they likely bought it from.” *Though the most likely owner is whoever brought the scrolls, or at least someone with them. They’re probably either dead or chased off or halfway back to where they came from by now. It didn’t seem like they were robbing from the townspeople, after all. We only found the one chest of stuff. The item was probably made half the continent away for all I know. Still, the wizards may have a network for that sort of thing. Better to say I made the attempt than for a mage to track me down and demand it, knowing it was stolen goods.*

“Sure, whatever. The compass part would be worthwhile if we’re going to be traveling around anyway.”

I laughed. “I know a spell to tell me which direction is north. So it’s not *that* useful.”

“Oh. What about the potions?”

“As you don’t tend to use swords, preferring your claws, and Hanz’s special beam cannon or whatever they call it seemed effective enough, I would say sell the ones with the sword on it.”

“What about Snarly though?”

I sighed. “Yes, Snarly. He’s a problem. Brave enough, to be sure, but didn’t seem all that effective when compared to you or Hanz.”

“Or you,” he protested. “You took out your share, don’t forget.”

“Oh, did I?” I feigned ignorance. “I didn’t really keep track. Yeah, we’re going to have to do something about that. Maybe I can find a spell that will help him be more effective. That would be more reliable than potions.” *I can ask when I see about the watch. Two birds and such.*

“Yeah, probably. And the healing ones?”

“Those we’re keeping. I can do healing magic it’s true, but what happens if *I* get hurt? If I can’t get the spell off to heal myself, these would be a nice backup.”

“I wouldn’t let you get hurt!”

“It could happen. Especially if our job is fighting cultists and bug people now. I’d rather be prepared.”

“Yeah I guess. Okay.”

After demonstrating I was a magic user myself I had no problem selling the potions after I explained what they did. (I worked it out before we had left, it wasn’t that hard especially with a little help from my divination magic) The weapons, on the other hand, were a different story. Everyone told us they were of pretty bad quality. While the swords could be sharpened and made somewhat more serviceable, the bows were pretty beat up. Arrows could be had in bundles for a copper coin, selling them was hardly worth it. No one wanted any of it.

“So just dump them?” Malachite asked.

I wagged my finger at him. “Ah ah ah, one man’s junk is another man’s treasure. What have I been telling you about non-material transactions?”

“But they’re no good!”

“To sell, yes. But let’s think about this for a minute. Who could benefit from these weapons, even in their current state, and would be grateful to have them for free? And then might remember that ‘donation’ later when we needed something.”

“Uhm...” He thought for a moment. “Weapons. Weapons. Merchants leaving the city? No, if they got here they have their own stuff. The only other place would be the guard!”

“Exactly. Good thinking!”

“But I don’t get it.”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. “Think about it. Guards have to be trained. But you don’t want them training with good weapons they might break or bang up. You train them on shoddy equipment, leaving the better stuff for when they actually get into a scrape. Plus they can practice maintaining swords on swords it doesn’t matter if they ruin. Now we...” I trailed off.

“Have a bunch of shoddy equipment they can have, for free, to put in their arsenal,” he finished. “It’s good enough for that purpose, nobody would care if it broke or got beat up. They know we donated it, and maybe see us more favorably in the future!”

“Bingo,” I said with a grin, beeping his nose. “There’s opportunity everywhere my scaly friend. Learn to look for it, even if it doesn’t lead to coin right away.”

“I’m trying!”

“I know. You’ll get there, I’m just a bit older than you. It takes time.”

“So you say.”

When we got back to the Sleeping Lion Snarly was there but Hanz wasn’t, so we settled in to wait. They came tearing into the place, had they breathed I would have said they were out of breath. But they did seem excited.

“I have found something I wish to purchase!” they announced.

“So do it and let’s go,” Malachite told them. “You’re the one that wanted to check out this other crypt.”

“There is a complication. The price of the item exceeds my current funds by 50%. If you would be good enough to loan me a few more moons I’m sure the item will pay for itself in the end.”

My eyes narrowed. “What exactly is this ‘item’ you’re so excited about?”

“It’s a map. The purveyor claims it leads to great treasure.”

Snarly perked up but Malachite and I just shared a look. “Hanz, we have a word for that kind of thing around here. It’s called a scam.”

“Yeah, even I know to stay away from so called treasure maps,” Malachite scoffed. “Forget it, buddy.”

“But the man seemed so sincere!”

“Yes, he would,” I agreed. “He was trying to scam you. He wouldn’t be disagreeable. Sure sign of a legitimate businessman, either indifference or an outright bad attitude. If someone doesn’t seem to care if you buy or not, you know you’re dealing with an honest man selling an honest product.”

“Is that true? We could at least ‘ake a ‘ook at it,” Snarly told us.

“Oh my goodness,” I griped, throwing my hands up. “Look, I’ll ask about it, okay?”

“That would be acceptable,” Hanz agreed.

I shook my head and started the spell. “Is the map Hanz wishes to purchase a legitimate treasure map?”

Yes

I did a double take. “Now that’s a surprise. It seems it’s at least somewhat real.”

“So we can buy it?” Snarly asked, eyes wide.

“Hold your magically created pocket horses there, kid,” I told him. “I’m not done. Does purchasing the map seen by Hanz lead to a greater treasure than the cost of buying the map?”

Yes

“Ah, so there you are. It seems a good investment after all.” *I have to admit being a bit shocked but the world is full of surprises.*

“Wasn’t someone just telling me about non-material transactions?” Malachite asked thoughtfully, a claw on his chin.

“What, you think the real treasure will be the friends we make along the way?” I asked him.

He smirked at me. “Possibly.”

“Leth go ‘ake a look!”

We headed out to the merchant stalls and the map was still hanging there. It was folded over so the whole thing couldn’t be seen, so the merchant wasn’t a complete dummy, and Snarly looked it over. “Lookth like a real treasure map ta me!”

Yes, we’ve already established this. And run into a lot of treasure maps in your travels, have you? Now now, Orchid, be nice. Yes, I know. But by the angels he’s so young! Was I ever that young?

“Ah, my metallic friend returns. Lucky the map was still here, I’ve had many interested parties today.”

Sure you have.

“So what do you think?” he asked us.

“I’ll put in one if you two will agree to put in two,” I agreed.

“I’ll put in ‘wo,” Snarly announced. “But I get ‘wice the treasure we find that ‘ou do!”

“You do recall I’m paying the bulk of the cost, correct?” Hanz reminded him.

“Details, smetails.”

“That which the devil himself dwells within. Very well, we shall take the map.”

Some distance away we unfolded the map to see exactly what we had bought. It seemed to mark a sunken vessel off the coast, though I would be sure to ask if it was still there before we left as that looked like several days travel.

“I can go down there easily enough, but it may be a solo mission,” Hanz told us.

I shook my head. “Not so fast. I don’t have to breathe and depending on the size of the boat and how much ambient mana is in the area for me to draw on, I may be able to just raise the whole darn thing and we can all poke around it.” *My magic should support all points equally, so as long as it’s still in one general piece and I take it slow, I bet I could raise it. Yeah, that could be fun. Could it be fixed up? Could we own a boat?* I had no idea what being underwater would do to a boat, but I supposed it depended on how long it had been down there for. *And who made a map to it and then didn’t bother to go down and see what it contained? Very odd.*

“A task for another day.”

“Exactly. Let’s put this away and head out.”

“Lunch first!” Snarly reminded us.

So we ate lunch and headed out, cutting straight north rather than following any road. We knew approximately exactly where we were going, after all. However, fate was against us, as while we walked, khi’teen dropped out of the sky and surrounded us. We formed a circle as our two groups looked each other over. They stayed clear of my horse though. *These guys aren’t supposed to be here. Unless this is another group, their encampment is supposed to be in the forest west of town. We’re north of town! But I suppose if they attack us, we can defend ourselves.*

But Snarly of all people made the first move. “‘ello friends!” he called, stepping forward. “Great day for flying, isn’tit? Uh huh!”

They clicked at us and I wondered if I was going to have to put my spell on that would let me talk to them, but one was called over and stood before Snarly.

“Why you trespass these lands?” he demanded.

“We’re on our way to beat up ‘ome badiths,” Snarly told him honestly. “We think they’re usthing bad magiths so we ‘ave to spopth them.”

“So come from that reached human town you have?”

Does he mean wretched?

“Yeth but none of us is human! As ‘ou can thee?”

The bugman looked us all over. Hanz and Malachite were clearly not. Would he recognize me as a funny looking human? I discovered I wasn’t breathing and forced myself.

“That’s why talk, not attack!”

“We thank you for that. What can we do fer ‘ou?”

“These lands ours, you pay toll to walk here!”

Are they though? I don’t think that’s how it works... Or maybe that’s exactly how it works I forget.

“You mean like money?” Malachite asked, who was of course loathe to part with any. Treasure maps leading to, well, treasure, excluded of course.

“Maybe.”

“How would you use it? You would have to go into the town you clearly hate to spend it.”

“No use fancy words muddle issue! You trespass, you give us something.”

“Ah, more of that non-material transactions I’ve been reminded of recently.”

It looked like he was struggling to understand this.

“Look, we don’t have anything,” he clarified. “See?” He spread his arms. “Just food for the road. You want to rob us, fine, but how many of you will die in the process?” He flexed his claws.

“Must have something. You open packs!”

“What if we just did ‘omething for you insteath?” Snarly asked.

“Like what you do for us?”

Ugh, please don’t offer my magic. The guild would be less than thrilled me doing healing or repair spells for these ‘people’ even if it was to save my own life.

“We’ll tell the town these lands are ‘ers. Tell all the town. I promish!”

“You tell humans leave us be? Not come here?”

“I’ll tell ‘em. Can’t make ‘em listen though...”

He considered it, looking us over. “Fine. You give word, tell town.”

“I give you my word,” he promised, holding a hand up.

“Fine, you go now!” He clicked something to the others and they took off again.

I looked at Snarly with a new admiration. He seemed to handle that well, even with Malachite butting in. I approved. *I just hope we don’t meet them later over at the encampment and have to kill them. That would be... awkward.*

“Did I do ‘ood?” Snarly asked.

“You did fine kid,” Malachite told him with a smack to the back. “Really stepped up there. Good job.”

“Thanths. Let’s head to tha ‘omb.”

Yeah, before we have any more unwelcome visitors. I kept one eye on the sky but we made it to the entrance just fine. Our possible second tussle with these weird Gloom cultists was about to begin.

Chapter 6

We have a second tussle with Gloom cultists

The entrance to the second crypt was in the middle of some ruins, old run down buildings that were falling apart. But we found it easily enough, there were signs of recent activity all over the place. And I could follow the feeling of that dark magic, which seemed even greater here than the last site. Because it was closer to ground level or just because it was a stronger source I couldn't yet say.

"Same plan as before?" Hanz asked.

"I'll check it out," I told them, beginning to cast. A minute later I had a picture. "Four guards on the main entrance. Ugh, two men in those same robes and two skeletons."

"It would be skeletons," Hanz mused.

"Yanking their heads off seemed to work for me," Malachite told them.

"I shall attempt it. Anything else of note?"

"There's a door, I'll have to do the spell again to see beyond that."

"Very well."

I did so, but ran into that same muddy glass effect I had been thwarted by before. "I can't see into the next room. They're doing something in there."

"So we take out the guards, and see for ourselves," Malachite decided, slamming a fist into his palm. "Let's make with the invisibility magic."

"I suppose we have no choice," I agreed. I started casting. *I hate to just rush down there and kill them. For all I know this Gloom stuff is forcing them to do this, they became 'cultists' against their will. But I don't know any exorcism magic, there wouldn't be anything I could really do for them. And their souls may already be tainted, beyond saving even if I wanted to.*

"We should talk about the plan?" Hanz suggested even as we faded out.

"Take them out!" Malachite told them.

"Yes, but specifically?"

"Same as before. Get into position, I'll attack first. Let's you and me take a skeleton, Snarly can backstab one of the guys and Orchid can hang back and use spells on the other one or to help us as we need it."

"That is acceptable."

"Sounds good ta me!"

We headed down, again trying to make as little noise as possible, and I closed up my box again as we headed down there. *No hesitation. You know what you have to do, agonize over the moral implications later.*

Malachite became visible as he grabbed the head of the left skeleton, causing the cultists to go "huh?"

Hanz did the same, while Snarly plunged his daggers into the back of the man on the right. With everyone visible I said the first word of the wind attack incantation and gestured at the remaining man. Two bolts slammed into his head, and he staggered forward.

"Attack!" managed the one stabbed by Snarly. The skeletons raised their weapons. Malachite wrenched the head but didn't pull it off, while the other one slipped Hanz's grasp.

"Blasted thing," they cursed, dodging back as the thing swung a sword at them. "Oh right I'm made of metal," they remembered. They went to grab the thing again, easily getting a hold of it. Malachite kept pulling, this time ripping the head off and tossing the skull aside as the bones fell apart.

By this time the cultists had drawn their own weapons, and the one had turned to attack Snarly. I flexed my muscles, casting a Mars spell to hopefully make him miss. He did, Snarly dodging to the

side to avoid the blow. With a shrug I figured I would keep helping him, and cast the opposite spell on him, to make him hit better. It wasn't much, but it was all I could offer at the moment. It did seem to help, the man dropped as Snarly pulled his dagger away.

I risked a look at the battlefield, Malachite had turned to face the other cultist, while Hanz seemed to be having some trouble holding onto their skeleton. I cast a Saturn spell at it, hoping that would help. I was pretty sure it did, they got hold of it once again, and with a crack of bone they too had taken the skeleton's head off.

With only the one cultist left he stood no chance, and I simply watched as the others ganged up on him and finished him off.

"A good start," Hanz decided. "Now for what will no doubt be the larger chamber."

"Oh, oh, do the door thing!" Malachite pleaded.

"Liked that, did you?" I asked, shaking my head a little. "Fine. Get into position." I spoke the full incantation and this door flew into the next room, followed by the others. This was a much larger chamber, several doors in evidence on the far wall, and several cultists within. Three were standing before an altar of sorts at the side of the room, chanting something, and a column of black flame rose from the center of the chamber. This concerned me greatly, as part of it shot out and struck the two men that had been killed, giving them that dark aura and making them stir! *It's turning them into zombies just like that? This is bad.* I watched in horror as they started to move, their arms reaching in the direction of the flame. I had to do something, I couldn't let them fully become zombies especially with me right next to them. Luckily I had all the tools I needed right there. They hadn't seemed to notice me yet, more entranced by the flame in the next room, so I gently took a step back and started casting. Controlling four objects at once wasn't easy, but swords were pretty light all things considered that's how you could swing them around in combat so much. I gathered ambient mana and threw it into my Mercury spell to grab up the scattered blades. With them controlled by my spell I raised them high in the air, then brought my hands down. Two each plunged into the backs of the zombies and then deep into the floor, pinning them to the ground. They didn't seem to notice. That suited me fine, maybe they wouldn't notice what I was about to do next- set them on fire. Again drawing in ambient mana I set their hair and clothes on fire methodically, knowing it wouldn't really burn them to ashes or anything but would at least slow them down should they get loose.

As I cast my final fire spell I realized Malachite was screaming my name and raced to the doorway, looking for him. He was off to the right, pointing towards a door that had been opened by a cultist. He was busy fighting another, and I looked through the door. It was some distance away and lit from within by oil lamps but I saw some kind of creature stirring in there. It wasn't a mouse. The man was shouting something to it, then ran to the side as it got up. The thing was big, and looked like it was made from rock or something. I had never seen anything like it, and quietly started to panic about how we were going to deal with such a thing. I had *one* chance. If I could hit it just as it started to leave the room the blast might be contained. But I couldn't wait too long, because I needed to see my target; the burning lamps behind it.

When I copied the spell of combustion into my spellbook I dutifully copied the warning that was printed after the spell. "Warning: Do not cast this on an already burning flame. It will cause an eruption of fire far out of proportion to anything you expect. The fire will be hotter, brighter, and more deadly than any other flame you have ever experienced. You cannot escape the blast, it will reach as far as your magic can reach at that moment. It will kill you."

But in this case the fire would be contained in the tiny room, right? The entire force of the blast would hit this rock creature, and we would be fine, right? Right? I had to chance it, if that thing got

loose my little wind magic spell just wasn't going to cut it. *I just hope there's no valuables in the room as they're about to be turned into slag. But they wouldn't leave anything in with that creature, would they?* I drew in mana and waited for my chance. When I thought the moment was right I cast, reaching as far as I could with my magic and hoping I didn't need to get closer. It worked! There was a detonation from that room, but I was horrified to watch as flame belched out of the doorway and filled half the room up. Malachite for sure was caught in the blast, as were the two men nearby. Snarly was on the other side of the room thankfully, and Hanz simply flinched back, but my box broke open as the horrifying realization took hold of me.

I had just killed Malachite with my carelessness.

I blinked my eyes against the fading light and was horrified again. The creature was still alive! That massive blast hadn't done anything more than enrage it, and it smashed its way through the door frame. This, it turned out, was a mistake. The flame or just age and the force of the blow caused that part of the crypt to simply cave in on the creature, trapping it. I held my breath to see if it would impossibly climb out but the pile of dirt and rock didn't stir.

"Nice job!" Malachite shouted at me. "Only a few guys left!"

I did a double take and stared at him, tears forming in my eyes. "You're alive!" I whispered, afraid to speak a reality into existence that may be some kind of wishful thinking on my part. I found myself running out to him, grabbing him up in a hug. "You're alive!" I said again, tears running down my face.

"Yeah, not sure how, but I'll take it. Are you crying? For me?"

"Of course I am, I thought I killed you. Are you hurt? Oh, I'm so sorry about that! I never thought it would be that huge! I thought I had killed you. Oh Malachite I'm so sorry!"

"You're repeating yourself. You're repeating yourself. Hey, don't worry about me, I'm tough." But he still looked a bit confused about the whole thing.

By all rights he shouldn't be fine, draig aren't immune to fire and- "I thought you were dead. Where are you hurt, I'll heal you right away!" I pulled away and started checking him over.

"I'm telling you, I'm not hurt."

"What?" It seemed it was true, his scales didn't even seem singed, and he was still dressed so his clothes hadn't caught on fire. The man he was fighting was burnt to a crisp right there before him, his robes and hair still burning. Same as the other one not that much further away. But Malachite? Not a scratch.

"Not to intrude," Hanz called, beam cannon at the ready and pointed away from us. "But what are we doing about them? I can't get near them."

We both looked over where they were pointing, there were three men surrounded by some kind of elemental energy, swirling around and shielding them. They seemed to be chanting, and there was a creature seemingly made of air forming near them.

"Shoot the middle one!" I told them.

They shrugged and their beam lanced out, exploding the man's head. With no intelligence to guide the magic it went wild, and the two at the sides cried out as the elemental, vanishing again into whatever non-existence it enjoyed before this struck out and slashed them to ribbons.

Silence fell over the cave.

The black fire started to sputter out too as the wind died down, and we all looked around for more threats. There were none, the cultists were all dead.

“What wath that fire?” Snarly asked, putting his daggers away. “Wath that you?”

“Some kind of creature in that room over there,” I told him. “Panicked a bit. Had to hit it with my best spell, and that didn’t even seem to finish it off. Luckily the ceiling fell on it.” I said a quick prayer of thanks to the Allfather, or whatever angel had been watching over us at that moment. “If it could take that blast and keep going, I’m pretty sure it could have taken all of us.”

“Warn a guy before ya do ‘hat next time, ‘k? Seesh, my fur got a bit singthed.”

“Forget your fur, Malachite was just standing there in front of the open door. Are you sure you’re all right?” I asked Malachite.

“Completely fine,” he assured me. “I mean if you want to do a more thorough examination later back at the inn... Oh I mean, uh, that is to say, what I meant was-”

“Never mind, jerk.” I hugged him again. “Don’t scare me like that again.”

“Don’t blow me up next time then!”

I chuckled. “I won’t.”

“Yer ‘upposed to leave people to loot,” Snarly complained, looking over the dead cultist. “Well, time to check the place out. Glad yer not dead, ‘Kite.”

“Yes, I too am relieved to see you alive and well,” Hanz told him. “Especially given your proximity to the blast and how hot it registered to my sensors. Most peculiar you escaped unharmed.”

“You’re telling me. Are you going to let me go or what? Not that I’m complaining...”

“Sorry!” I let go and wiped my eyes. “I just, right, looting all the bodies. Let’s get out of here before the whole place collapses.”

We checked the site, and these people were “proper” bandits. They had a nice haul of what Snarly declared were antiques, and should fetch a good price.

“Suns, not Moons,” he quipped. “We need to haul all this ‘tuff back ‘n sell it!”

“Gold?” Malachite breathed. “Now you’re talking my language. But are you sure? For this junk?”

“Ith not junk, to the right peopleth.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

Additionally we found more silver coins lying around, nine in total, bags of supplies like travel rations, but I was most interested in the books. They had gotten blown around when the elemental went crazy but they were intact. We also found some old tablets and scrolls, as well as a few maps of the area. From my quick look over of the stuff it seemed the crypt was a place of power involved in the mage war centuries ago. Ancient mages tapped into elemental power here, when magic was “new” and the chaos moon had “only” hung a few hundred years in our skies. Records from that time were scant, we didn’t know how long the age had lasted from the time of the Moon’s arrival to the mage war that ultimately knocked us back to the stone age again and precipitated the creation of the mage’s guild to make sure such a war never happened again.

“The maps here mark other locations ancient mages used,” I told the others. “It’s written in their script, I’m not great at it as I rely on magic to read other languages but I can tell that much. This one it seems has been overrun with the undead, as you can see that’s in Trade. So the cultists must have looked at the site and marked that here.”

“Doesn’t look far,” Hanz informed us. “I estimate we could detour there, see how bad it is and if something should be done about it on our way back to town. I assume we are returning to see our ‘loot’ sold as soon as possible?”

“Gold!” Malachite reminded them.

“Yes, quite.”

“Are you damaged?” I asked them, finally taking a good look at their casing or body or whatever you wanted to call it.

“I did sustain a bit of damage from the combat yes, and I am not as fireproof as our scaly friend here it seems.”

“So it’s my fault. Let me try my repair spell, maybe it’ll work on you like a healing spell works on living people.”

“You may proceed, I too am interested if such is the case. But know if you should fail, my systems will self repair in time, so do not concern yourself overmuch.”

So I healed them up, it seemed repair was healing for them, and took care of a scratch for Snarly as well. We again gathered up the cultists, even the now returned to death ones from the outer chamber and set everybody on fire. We used the wood from the doors and the alter this time, so they would burn a little longer.

“I really don’t want them coming back as zombies, or liches or anything else,” I explained. “Given how these two started to become animated just from that black flame being around, I can’t trust them to stay dead. What are you doing?” I asked Malachite.

They gave a jerk and pulled their hand away from the fire. “Just making sure. The fire doesn’t burn me, isn’t that wild?”

“Experiment later. Maybe this place is interacting with you in some way. I don’t like it. The weird magic feeling I had is going away but it’s not gone yet.”

“Fine, *mom*.”

“Oh, is someone going to get a spanking when we get back home?”

Both of us froze a little and looked away. I certainly wasn’t thinking about the shape of his butt, or his tail, or how exactly all that fit together back there and was curious to see it close up for myself. No, I certainly was not. *Could I even spank him? Is he scaly back there too? That could actually be fairly inconvenient. Not the time, Orchid. Bad thoughts, out with the bad thoughts.*

“Anyway let’s load up these chests, they’re not going to get themselves back to town!” he announced. “Nothing else for us here, let’s go.”

We followed the river south a bit, agreeing with Hanz that we should at least check out the nearby crypt to make sure it hadn’t been disturbed enough to send undead spilling into the countryside. Though if it had we were already too late to do anything about it. We managed to find the entrance rather easily, it was well marked on the map, but I couldn’t use my magic to see down the stairs this time. Unfortunately my magic treated me as if I had moved to the point my divination magic went, so if it was dark, all I saw was... dark.

We decided Hanz had the best chance of sneaking around undetected as they were not alive in the way a zombie or other undead would care about. Also they could see in near darkness. With their own invisibility and my phasing magic they slipped inside to scout the place out. The door was open but I had gotten a “no” answer to “have any undead come past this door since it was opened?” A few moments later they came back, reporting there were undead shuffling around in the dark down there.

“Nothing much of value either,” they reported. “At least in those areas with enough light for me to see by. I say we close the place up again and hope time forgets it forever.”

So it’s only risk and no reward? I’ve already almost killed someone I know today, let’s keep the total at one shall we? “I mean we should do something about them sooner or later,” I protested. “I’m all for using zombies as tools when the situation requires it but you get rid of them afterwards. You don’t leave them lying around. We can probably deal with them better than anyone who stumbles upon this place later.”

“Very well. I shall make a note in my memory banks. Beep. Beep. Beep. I have set a reminder to come back and deal with this place.”

“However you do it.”

With the three of us (I used magic) we pushed the doors back into place, and I considered using my spell to sculpt stone to create a sort of “lock” by twisting parts of them together. But Hanz spoke up first.

“I have observed most people are somewhat wary of magic. Could we place a fake magical seal upon the door to discourage the curious?”

“It wouldn’t be magical to anyone that knew what to look for,” I told him, “but sure, whatever you want.”

So with their beam weapon at low power and my sculpting spell we “carved” some “magical runes” into the door and stepped back to admire our work.

“I’d ‘tay way from it,” Snarly decided.

“Okay, let’s head back. We’ve got a lot of stuff to do in town tomorrow.”

“Thath right, I have a promish to keep,” Snarly reminded himself.

And miles to go before I sleep.

Chapter 7

We behave like responsible citizens

We dropped into bed when we got back to the Sleeping Lion that night, leaving our valuables in the care of Hanz who insisted they didn't sleep anyway. We left them sitting on them out in the stables as we didn't want to be seen carrying chests of "loot" through the place, giving me an idea I would look into more later. The next morning it seemed Snarly was out doing whatever he thought was needed to fulfill his promise to that khi'teen, leaving us to pick through and sell the goods. I didn't have any cleaning magic but we did get some soap, water, and rags to at least knock the worst of the dust off the stuff and make it presentable. I also had some fun with a spell I didn't get to use much, that allowed me to measure things, so I could tell what materials everything was made of and how much it weighed. We hauled the stuff around the various markets all morning, I had disguised myself as a dwarf with a big bushy beard "down to here!" When we were unpacking the stuff a strange looking figure started rummaging in the chest and pulled out one of the items. I looked him over as he did this. His robe was in a style I had never seen before, and while he was scaly like Malachite, his face was closer to that of a human than a dragon's snout. His eyes almost looked like a cat's, but he had feathers sticking out the back of his head instead of hair. I sensed magic on his person, but didn't want to stand there staring at him to tell what type or what the purpose of it was. After looking our treasures over for a moment he dug out a strange looking coin and presented it to me, showing me his intended purchase.

"What's this?" Malachite demanded.

"I think he wants to buy it," I told him, after the man didn't speak.

"We only take real money!" he insisted.

They proffered the coin again. I looked it over, it was a strange metal, half black and half white with some writing on it. "It is certainly interesting."

"Oh, is this one of those non-material transactions you're always talking about?"

"It could be."

"Or it could be a scam. You were the one concerned about that map, but now you're ready to take a coin from some weirdo off the street. Look at this guy, you think you're cursed!? Ha!"

"Malachite please, he could understand every word you say."

"Doesn't look like it."

"Look I'll ask about it, okay?" I held up a finger, took the item from the guy, set it down, and pointed to the ground. He looked curious but set the coin down. I nodded. He looked quite interested as I cast my spell, seeming to approve. A minute later I had an answer to the question "Is the coin a worthwhile trade for the object this being desires?"

Yes

"Done," I told him, picking the coin up. He broke into a grin and took the item back. He bowed several times and vanished into the crowd.

"Well, you meet all kinds in the city," Malachite remarked.

I looked the coin over, it didn't seem magical in any way, and again my magic failed me in trying to decode the writing on it. I stuck it in my pouch to look at later and got on with my negotiation for the rest of the items.

We made out well, everyone treating the dwarf they saw instead of the cursed woman I was under the magic with respect, and we managed to make a tidy sum from the sale of the items. We met

back up for lunch and I passed out the small mountain of silver we had made. Snarly seemed pleased, but with Hanz it was hard to tell. They repaid us for the map they had bought though.

“I spent some time in the library,” they told us. “As this Gloom cult does seem to be more than a single group of crazed bandits. The librarian did mention rumors of some odd cult operating in the area, but nothing concrete. As far as the Gloom itself, the only mentions I could find dated back to the mage war, when researchers were trying to do dimensional research. It does not mention if the Gloom is a being, a disease, a power source, or some inter-dimensional horror beyond our understanding. Naturally most research done during those times was related to weapons and holding onto power, so you can draw your own conclusions about that. This afternoon I intend to speak to the city guard about all this, if you agree?”

I shared a look with Snarly and Malachite who both nodded. “It has my vote,” I told them. “I would rather tell them now, not be believed, and when some eldritch horror shows up be able to say ‘we tried to warn you’ than say nothing and they’re completely unprepared for it. Someone may listen.”

“I shall do my best to be persuasive.”

“It is curious,” I mused. “The name of the town. A haven for Gloom? Maybe you should look into how the town was founded? Maybe that will give us other clues?”

“I will keep that in mind. If there is nothing else at the moment I will depart and meet back here at dinner time?”

“Sounds good.”

With lunch finished Snarly went off to continue trying to sway public opinion or whatever and I was sitting there waiting for Malachite to be done in the bathroom. I had taken the coin out and was lazily spinning it in front of me with magic, looking it over. I was trying to figure out exactly how to ask the questions that would reveal how it was a good trade for the item when someone stopped in their tracks and leaned back to look at it.

I never thought I would see one of those again.

“What?” I snapped out of it and looked over at my new admirer. *It’s a wanderer!* Huge black eyes, almost no nose, mouth or hair, dressed in a simple robe with a walking staff in their hands. And for a wonder they really did glow, I could barely see it as it was a rather overcast day outside. *Now there’s another type of person you don’t see every day. This town is suddenly bustling with strange and wonderful folk, isn’t it? These guys are even more well traveled than I am, they spend their entire lives just moving from place to place and being inscrutable.* I cleared my throat, remembering I was in dwarf mode at the moment. “I mean, aye, what’s that, stranger?”

Apologies, I didn’t mean to startle you, good dwarf. Did you excavate that meeting marker in one of your tunnels?

“Actually no, I was traded it recently for an antique by a strange person that would not speak.”

Now that is a strange tale. May I see it?

“Of course! We dwarves are very trusting!” *That’s something a dwarf would say, right?* I waved my hand and stopped it spinning, then floated it over to them.

My, my, this is truly rare! These markings indicate a meeting in the future, rather than the past. Most of these you find are discarded, no longer useful except as a rarity. But this one... This describes a meeting yet to come.

“A meeting of whom?”

They shrugged. *Whoever shows up, I suppose. Perhaps fate itself has guided this token into your hand, and me to you. I can decipher these markings if you wish to attend the meeting. I have heard they are not to be missed.*

“And what would you want for such a service?” *It is a huge coincidence that I happened to have the coin out, and this wanderer who just so happens to be able to read it happened by. What a strange way to get people together. But they can't be lying? Right? I mean that feathery person just happened to decide to send me on a wild goose chase? I don't buy it. Huh, wonder if they were disguised just like I am. Didn't think about that, whatever race they seemed may not even exist.*

They waved that off. *Not in coin. I will pass this way again after the date has passed. Please, tell me of the meeting, who was there and what transpired. I fear without this token I would be unwelcome, but I am curious what they are about.*

“Very well. I expect to be here for some time yet. We have a bargain.”

I am pleased. Allow me a moment.

They gave me a date and approximate location for the meeting, and I thanked them and they went on their way. Malachite came back, saying he had been watching for signs of trouble, and I explained what the wanderer had told me.

“Will you go?” he asked.

“But of course. How could I pass up such a mysterious invitation?”

“Of course. Say, do you mind if we split up this afternoon?”

Is it just me or does he look a bit nervous suddenly? “No, I don't mind. I was just going to pay a visit to the town's magic shops, inquire about the pocket watch item we found. It would probably bore you anyway.”

“Okay, meet you back here at dinner time!” He nearly raced out of the place. *Now what was that all about?*

I stretched, patted my pocket to make sure I still had the item, and headed out the door on my own. It was a little strange, Malachite was always hanging around now, and being on my own was something I was no longer used to. I was a little lonely. *I'm more than two hundred years old, I can manage being on my own for a few hours. Get it together, Orchid.*

It turned out there were two major wizards in the town, and right across from each other too. I stood in the street for a moment, considering which to visit first. To my right was the shop of Solara the Magus, the left was the Humble Shop of Brellen Yellow Cheeks. I cocked my head to the side, pulled out the token, flipped it, and as the white side pointed to the right I headed there first. The bell above the door chimed and a young girl hopped up off a chair to meet me.

“Can I help you, good dwarf?” she asked politely.

“That ye can, lass,” I answered, getting into character (or what I thought was a dwarf's character anyway). “I've got business to transact with yer master, if she's about. Run and fetch her for me, that's a good lass.” I dug out a copper and flipped it to her.

“Yes sir, right away!” She scampered off towards the back, and a woman in red replaced her. I stifled a laugh. *For all I know they're the same person, using the same spell I do to currently look like this. Never mind.*

“I am Solara, what can I do for you?”

“I'm here to discuss three things with ya,” I told her. “One of which might earn ya some coin, it will. Is this a good time? I'm not disturbing ya?”

“I am at your service, good dwarf.”

“Right then. First order 'o business is a wee magical item I took off some bandits yesterday. Naturally I won't just show it to ya, meaning no offense of course, but I can tell ya one side looks like a clock face, while the other looks like a compass. If ya've heard of such an item being stolen from one such in town I'd like to return it to the owner. They describe it, and it's theirs, no reward necessary.” *Though I would of course not turn one down...*

“That’s quite generous of you,” she told me, sounding impressed. “But sadly I’ve not heard of such an item, stolen or otherwise.”

“Pity.”

“Yes, it is. Such an item would have been very expensive to craft. I myself have lost some goods lately coming into the city, so I know there’s a plague of bandits roaming the countryside. And the city guard does nothing! Can you believe it?”

“Aye. It’s a real problem and make no mistake! I’ll keep a lookout for you, if I run into any more bandit camps in me travels.”

“I’ll certainly pay for the return of my supplies. And I’ll ask around about the lost magical item as well.”

“Thank ya kindly. Now we’ve already touched on the second piece ‘o business. These bandits you speak of, they be no ordinary thieves I be saying to you.”

“No?”

“Nay. They’re part of a cult, dedicated to something they call the Gloom. One of my party is even now informing the city guard of their dastardly deeds, which include raising the dead!”

“That’s quite illegal, especially in town,” she agreed. “But why tell me this?”

Well it’s a good thing I’ve not raised any zombies myself then... In town... “Just this. Ya might want to brush up on yer combat magic, or get a combat spell or two of yer own if you don’t know any. I have a bad feeling that this cult is going to make trouble for the town before it’s through. Eliminate those that have a chance to stop them, and all that, no? So that’s just a courtesy, me warning you there’s some bad magic users out there in addition to the usual thieves and whatnot.”

“I take your meaning. Yes, the guard would expect me to help out, and probably for free as it was for the good of the town or something like that. I’ll look over my spells, your warning has not fallen on deaf ears.”

“Good, good. Now for the business transaction!” She leaned forward a little. “One of me party has the heart of a warrior but not exactly the stature of one, if you take my meaning? He’s no dwarf! I’d like a spell to help him out a little. Preferably Mercury, Jupiter, Saturn, or Uranus. Not maintained, but can help him do more damage when he hits something. Poor little sprout just doesn’t have the strength yet to be a proper warrior. This can supplement him until he does. I can already make him hit better, or have his opponent not dodge as well, depending. But if it’s pinpricks what’s the point?”

“I see your dilemma,” she agreed. “Let me look through my book.”

“Of course.”

She found me a Neptune spell that was suitable, it would cause whoever I cast it on to do elemental damage on their next attack. I didn’t have to maintain it, the spell was cast and forget, and low enough grade it didn’t have a long incantation. It was perfect. After some haggling I traded her my spell of detecting if someone meant you harm, and some coin, and we copied the respective spells out of our books and handed them over.

“Pleasure doing business with you,” she told me after she counted the coins.

“Same here. I’ll send someone round or come meself if your missing goods turn up.”

“Let us pray they do. Have a good afternoon.”

“You do the same.”

I repeated the “performance” across the street, he too did not know of any lost magical items, and he too had a shipment of goods stolen. *Probably came in on the same caravan, it got hit, and both orders were lost. It would be nice these two owing me a favor or two...*

I headed back to the inn, hardly an hour had passed so I had some time before the others would be back. I studied the spell, copying it into my own spell book, and was confident in our next encounter I could help Snarly out a bit more. *I mean it's me attacking a guy or him attacking a guy, but like Hanz said I'm a lot faster than them so if I can help him out and still act defensively I may as well. The faster he dispatches his opponent the safer he'll be, and I'm usually acting at a distance anyway.*

I also asked about the goods the two wizards had lost, casting my divination spell a few times. "Are the goods stolen from the wizards I spoke to earlier easily recoverable?"

Yes

Okay, so they still exist. That's good.

"Are the goods stolen from the wizards I spoke to earlier in the possession of cultists of the Gloom like the ones we have been killing lately?"

No

That's surprising. If these are magical goods why would anyone but the cultists steal them? I figured they would be used for the rituals but apparently not. Who else do I know could be stealing stuff around here? Oh no...

"Are the goods stolen from the wizards I spoke to earlier in the possession of khi'teen?"

Yes

It can't be. Please don't make it be them.

"Are the goods stolen from the wizards I spoke to earlier within the Dagger Forest?"

Yes

"Are the goods in the encampment we already know about?"

Yes

I slammed my head into the table. *It's the group the merchant lady told us about. They have the goods. They must have just robbed a merchant train and grabbed what they could. We have to go out there and murder a bunch of bug people if we're going to get them back. And earn more favor with the merchant's guild. And get more money. Great, this is just great. Wait...*

"Do the khi'teen we met along the Still River live at the settlement in the dagger forest?"

No

So different group then. That would be awkward. Yeah, like killing them won't be, Orchid. Stupid. But it all ties together, doesn't it?

I looked up to see Malachite coming in, and he spotted me. He seemed to have something behind his back, and sort of stood awkwardly over me. “Sit down ya bloody fool, getting a crick in me neck looking up atcha!” *Man am I in character today or what? Forget all this magic business I should have been a star on the stage.*

“That is you, right, Orchid?”

“You know any other dwarves as cute as me? Look at this beard I’ve got going on here! Thing of beauty it is!”

“Just checking. Here I got this for you hope you like it bye.” He shoved something at me and sort of ran off again. I was sitting there with my mouth open holding... what? I looked it over with my critical dwarven eye. It was an opal, in a nice setting hung on a chain. *He got me a gift? After I nearly killed him? And then ran off. Something wrong with that... No, you don’t think... No, I do think? And am I okay with that?* To forestall any further thought in that direction I got out my other necklace and compared the two. It was a nice gesture and everything but I didn’t want my original one scratching up the stone. I was pretty sure wearing the new one wouldn’t interfere with the magic, but I also didn’t want to chance losing either one. For the moment I shrugged, put the magical one in my pocket, and clipped the opal around my neck. When no one was looking I recast my spell to be a more feminine form, and in keeping with the theme of the day I just sort of made up my look. I had bright feathers in place of hair, completely black eyes, a small nose and mouth, and as I could change my outfit too made sure the dress I was wearing was low cut enough to show the opal. *There. Now to get everyone back together and plan our next move.*

Chapter 8

We kill it with fire

The next day we left after breakfast to go check out the khi'teen encampment, now that we had two reasons for doing so. Malachite was still acting a little strange, but had reappeared for dinner. He did a double take before sitting down with me, asking how my day went and if I had found the owner of the magical item. I told him I hadn't, but they were going to look into it. Hanz reported back they at least got the captain of the guard to listen, and the man seemed reasonable and believed the story about cultists. "In this town you never know what's going to happen next" he had said. I believed them. Snarly said he had fulfilled his promise to the khi'teen we met on the road, and was somewhat relieved we wouldn't be meeting him in the forest. At least, not to kill him.

Malachite was flying ahead, keeping a look out for the village and totally not avoiding me, but I had swapped the necklace out for my magical one. I *probably* didn't have to wear it while it was holding the magic for me, but I always had, so for the moment I just continued to do so. He had come back and was walking with us, having just reported back, when he froze and jumped in front of me.

"What's up?" I asked, trying to see over or around his wing.

"There's someone up ahead," he told us.

"A khi'teen?" Snarly asked.

"No, looks human."

"So let's thee if he needsh help! Hi there!" He rushed off.

"Howdy strangers," said the man as we got close. He was sitting on a rock and rubbing his knee. "Odd place to meet you but these are odd times. Don't mind me none, got no quarrel with you."

"Better check if anyone means us harm," Malachite whispered to me. "He could be with some kind of bandit group."

I didn't think so, he wasn't really dressed that way, not that I knew what bandit groups dressed like. He did have a sword, stubble, unkempt hair, and a fairly bad smell. *Though that could still just be Snarly.* "Good idea." I cast the spell, and I didn't sense anyone that would be considered an enemy anywhere around us. "Clear." I got down off of Athame and looked him over.

"What are you doing 'ere?" Snarly was asking him. "This forest belongs to khi'teen you know? You could get kilt!"

"That's why I'm passing through as quickly as I can, you know? But I stepped wrong, hurt my knee. I'm just hoping it ain't serious and I can be on my way soon. Don't want to spend the night out here."

Not exactly answering the question, but okay.

"Oh, oh, we've got a magic user," Snarly offered. "She can heal you right up!"

"Is that so?"

"Go on, Orchid, you can do 'hat, right?"

"Technically," I hedged, drawing the word out. "No. Not without him paying me. But I suppose in the middle of the woods here," I looked around, "we're pretty far from anywhere the guild would care about. As long as you don't go spreading it around I suppose one minor healing spell wouldn't go amiss."

"You have my solemn vow, I will never speak of this so help me God."

That seemed good enough for me, so I pulled mana from the area and cast my healing spell on his leg.

"Now that's a right sight better, miss," he told me, testing his weight on it. "I thank you kindly."

"I was happy to do it," I mostly didn't lie. "Just be sure you're back to the city by sundown, this isn't a place to be wandering around alone."

“I’ll take that advice and be on my way. Good day to you.”

“Byeeeeee,” Snarly called to him, waving.

When next Malachite landed he said he spotted something, but it would probably take us an hour to get there on foot. We discussed it, and I brought everyone into the astral plane right then and there so there would be no slip-ups. They could have patrols out for all I knew, and running into one out here would not be the best thing to happen.

“We’ll see how the camp is laid out,” I told them. “What their routine is. How many there are. That sort of thing. Then we’ll make a plan.”

“Exactly as I would have said,” Hanz agreed. “Let us proceed.”

We didn’t see any patrols but the clearing the village was in couldn’t be missed, even in the astral plane. I climbed down from my horse, which vanished, and we checked the place out. There were several “buildings” if you could call them that, one of which had a bunch of stuff in it including crates and various odds and ends. They were all labeled, it looked like stolen goods the merchant’s guild would be glad to have back. Another had useful stuff like hoes, shovels, and the like. A third seemed to be their food storage locker and was ignored after I realized some of the meat was, well, human arms and legs and torsos and such.

“So they’re not only stealing from people entering the area they’re killing them and eating them too?” Malachite asked.

“Looks that way.”

“Let’s kill them.”

“Not without a plan.”

We counted, and there seemed to be twenty adults there, a handful of kids young enough to run around, and a handful of young too young to even do that. The adults were all armed, the kids running around and playing.

“Maybe bring two of them at a time into the astral?” I asked. “Wait until they go to sleep, be invisible and go back there. Then just touch two of them at a time and bring them here. Then, you know, murder them.”

“Grisly work,” Hanz told me. “But it would, if done properly, prevent an alarm being raised.”

“But what about the kids?” Snarly asked.

“They’ll just grow up to be as bad as their parents,” Malachite told him. “They’ll have to be taken out too. Or they’ll just grow up and the cycle will repeat.”

“Thath not very nice.”

“But it is necessary.”

“Are you ‘ure about that?”

“Yes.”

“I thee.”

“Maybe we can come back here tomorrow, the goods seems safe enough. Bring a wagon into the astral, and load it up that way?” I suggested. “These huts aren’t guarded. Two or three trips back and forth and we’d have it all. No reason to kill them at all.”

“Apart from Jekserah paying us to make an example of the place. Just stealing their stuff isn’t going to do it. They’ll just keep doing what they’re doing.”

“But there’s babies!”

“Baby khi’teen.”

We went back and forth on the issue, tossing out suggestions but it came back to simply killing them all, kids or not. It was getting to be sunset, the forest was getting dark, so we would have to make a decision soon. I wasn't sure I could go through with it, but suddenly Hanz motioned us to be quiet. "Something is happening," they told us. "They're gathering."

We watched as the fire at the center of the village was stoked, meat was brought out from the "larder" and everyone gathered around the central fire for the evening meal.

"We won't get a better chance," Malachite excitedly told us. "Let's sneak behind that building, and you can detonate that fire and kill them all in one shot!"

"What?" Snarly and I both said.

"Think about it. Do you want to use a plan that has us murdering groups of them, again and again basically while they sleep? Or use one spell and have it be over? They're dead either way. This way is far less risk to us, almost guaranteed to take them out in one shot, and we can just haul the stuff away afterwards. Jekserah wanted an example? What's a better example than their fire exploding?"

I rubbed my head. Philosophical quandaries such as this one made me wish I had taken up drinking. On the one hand they were murderers and thieves. There was no denying that, they were cooking up human parts to eat them, for goodness sake. If they were not stopped they would continue their campaign of murder and theft. We were here, and I had the power. Oh yes, I had the power to kill them all with a single spell. But is that what that power was *for*? Besides weren't the kids innocent? The babies? Why did they have to die? But then on the other hand if they were truly innocent they would enter Heaven, far sooner than I ever would. If ever, after this. *Can I weigh saving the lives of those killed by them in the future if I do something right now against the lives in front of me if I don't? Which is really the better path?*

"Well?"

I stared at Malachite. *And what of his soul? Snarly's? If I can save them from having to dispatch kids and babies tonight, and I don't, what does that make me? A monster of even greater proportions? I don't think there's any easy answer here. But are their souls just as imperiled for not stopping me doing this?* "Very well. Let's get into position."

We dropped out of the astral out of sight of everyone, and I gathered mana. There was no way they could get away, even speaking the full incantation, which I did. The fire lit up with a magical circle as always, and they seemed confused for a second about what was happening. The next second the spell completed; fire created a dome eight meters across, Malachite jumping in front of us all and extending his wings to make sure we didn't get caught in it. As the blaze subsided we looked to be sure there weren't any survivors.

There were not.

"Let's get everything back to town," I told everyone sadly. "We can collect our bounty for this 'work' tomorrow."

"It had to be done," Malachite told me. "And did you see that fireball? Spectacular!"

"There's always a choice."

"Moving to more practical matters for the moment," Hanz broke in, "exactly how are we going to move the goods to the town? We have no cart at the moment."

I sighed. "There's a spell you haven't seen me use yet. Athame has it as well, the ability to get bigger. She would be the size of a real unicorn if she didn't have it, this grade of spell produces a medium sized companion. As it happens she can still get much, much bigger. I'll have her use it, and use it on Malachite and perhaps you as well. If we can find some rope we can lash the stuff onto her

back and you two can carry the rest. It's not like she's going to be weighed down, she's made of magic. She can carry the stuff just fine."

"I can tie 'nots pretty good," Snarly told us. "I'll look for thome ropeth."

It took us some time to get everything loaded onto Athame and wouldn't you know it, as soon as the work was done, the men showed up. Dropping out of the sky were several draig, dressed in the town's colors so they were apparently guards. *Oh, now they show up. Seems like you could have gotten here at any time, gentleman. Maybe done your jobs, protected the town from these murders and thieves?* Naturally they started demanding to know what had happened here, apparently they had seen the fireball all the way in town? *That's a long way, do they have watchers in the air at night or something? I'll have to keep an eye out when we get back. Not that it matters one way or the other...*

Hanz went over and explained the situation to them, as I really wasn't in any mood to do so. They accepted this, the evidence was right there after all, and suggested they talk to the captain of the guard in the morning to report what we had done.

Oh, no, that's fine. We don't need any credit or anything, thank you very much. Or are we being invited to turn ourselves in for murder?

They flew off again, not offering to help carry anything because why would they do that?

We made it back to town and again Hanz offered to guard our load of goods, making me resolve to tell the others about my idea in the morning. But it was too late tonight. Malachite and Snarly both went to bed, but I had something I had to do first. I got directions from a passing guard and headed to the Church of the Eternal Repose, dedicated to the angel of death, Azrael. The place seemed fairly large from the outside, but looked run down and almost on hard times inside. Only a few candles were burning, and I was the only one there that late. *Which is odd, isn't this really the time of the angel of death? I suppose no one is told their time and it can come day or night. But it seems appropriate. Perhaps I'll make an offering of most of the money I get from that "job" as it doesn't seem right to profit from such an action.* I took a seat near the front and looked up at the depiction of the angel. *Azrael, I prayed, I wish to pray for the souls of the innocent I took tonight, and for my own...*

That night I dropped into bed, returning from the church feeling no better about what I had done. But strangely, the next day, I did. I vaguely recalled that the angel Azrael themselves had come to my dreams, and explained that as long as I did not revel in such destruction and death, that I remained humble and understood the weight of the lives I took, my own soul would be judged fairly. That while I should not simply seek out those that I felt had done wrong, if I saw injustice with my own eyes I was obligated to act. They also said I had indeed saved lives; his subordinates, the Psychopomp, would reap the souls of the living not as early as they expected because of me. Meanwhile the innocent of the village would indeed see paradise. It didn't excuse what I did, but having the angel of death themselves give you the "thumbs up" did make it a little easier to bear. I knew it hadn't been just a dream, I had spoken to the angel quite rationally, now that I thought about it. *How extraordinary. Little old me actually got the attention of an actual angel!* I went down to breakfast not with a spring in my step, but at least a lighter heart.

"Good morning," I said to everyone as they joined me around the table. "I hope that those of us that sleep had a good night? Hanz, any problems?"

"No one came near the goods. I also took the liberty of sending a messenger at first light to Jekserah so hopefully she will be along soon to take possession of them."

“Good. There’s actually something I wanted to discuss with you all, a plan to make our lives a little easier. This storing things in the stable and whatnot made me think of it. Staying at this inn is all well and good, but it is costing us. We’ve got some money now, and it seems we’re a team. We have a mission, to find the source of this Gloom we’ve been hearing about and take out bandits and cultists in the surrounding area. That seems to be our source of income as well, so as long as jobs keep coming our way we’ll continue to make money. So I think we’ll be together for at least a few months. Why not rent a house in town, doesn’t have to be fancy but a place to put things we recover so Hanz doesn’t have to just stand around all night. Our own place, so we have a real address for mail or messages. What do you think?”

“You would really want me to ‘taye with youth?”

“Of course, Snarly.” *As long as you get a room somewhat far from mine, or start bathing regularly. I mean let’s be reasonable here!*

“Wow, that’s great. I’m in!”

“Live with me if you want to come,” Hanz said in a deep voice. We looked over at them questioningly. “On adventures,” they clarified. We all agreed this was logical. “It is logical, and if our finances do support such a purchase I would not be against it,” they decided.

“Live in a place with a bedroom we can use to- I mean sure, whatever,” Malachite added.

“Very well. We can look into available properties when we get a chance. We still have plenty to do in the local area in the meantime but if you see something walking around town let me know.” *Not that I have any idea how to buy property, but someone must be able to help with that around here. There would be a sign of who to contact, right? How would it be sold otherwise?* “Now, let’s get the mage’s stuff delivered to them so Jekserah doesn’t take it by accident.”

“I’ll go with you,” Malachite told me.

“Sure.” *I can ditch you later... Hehehe.*

I floated the crate behind us, in my guise as a nymph today, and entered the store. The apprentice once again ran to get Solara, who exclaimed over the return of her goods.

“I must admit I had given them up for lost and placed another order,” she told us. “But no matter, please extend my thanks to that dwarf when you see them next. If they stop in I’ll see they’re rewarded.”

I held up a hand. “We didn’t do this for any reward-” I started to say, but Malachite talked over me.

“Oh, you can give us the reward, I’ll make sure to distribute it to our company,” he told her. “We all risked our lives equally to see those thieves paid for what they did!”

Did we? Were you in any particular danger when I was magically blowing up their fire?

“Very well,” agreed, looking between the two of us. I was fuming a bit but stayed quiet. She got out a pouch and counted out some silver. Then paused, her fingers clutching a few more coins. “Incidentally, I see more items here than I ordered. I must assume you’ll be making a stop at the... charming little shop across the street to return his goods as well?”

“It’s the right thing to do,” I insisted.

“The thing is, I’m sure he’s already placed another order as well. And it would save you a bit of work not having to go over there and deal with that man. Oh, no, I doubt he would be grateful at all, the old phony. No, no, tell you what. I’ll double what I’ve given you if you just leave his goods with me.”

“Really, we can’t-”

“Just double?” Malachite asked shrewdly. “You are trying to bribe us into doing something my partner here clearly doesn’t approve of. Typically buying someone’s silence is worth a little bit *extra* don’t you think?”

“I suppose that’s true,” she said icily. “I will add two more silver on top of that. For your *silence.*”

“We really can’t accept-”

“Done!” said Malachite, holding his hand out.

“And next time, bring the dwarf,” she said as she counted the coins out. “I’m sure he would understand much better than a nymph about how the world works.”

“What? But!” I clenched my teeth together. *We’re the same person, you dope. I would have hoped a wizard would see past the mundane but it appears not.*

“You’re probably right. Come along.” He nodded to Solara and headed out of the shop.

“Enjoy your extra goods,” I managed, and ran after him.

Oh, he’s going to get it!

Chapter 9

Doing things around town

“You’re mad at me,” Malachite decided after a few minutes of walking the streets. “It’s just some stupid crystals and stuff. He didn’t need that crap, I know what real magic looks like. And look at the money we got for it!”

“Malachite,” I finally sighed. “Remind me of our recent conversation about non-material transactions.”

“Oh, wait, when you said you didn’t want a reward...”

“Exactly. I was going to get a reward. Just not one in coin. What’s more valuable in the long run? Two wizards who seem to be competing with each other owing me a favor, or a couple of silver?”

“The favor.”

“Exactly. Honestly, you have to start thinking ahead!” *Says the lady that nearly burned you to a crisp, but that was different. I had a second before that thing would have been through the door and on us. And I didn’t expect the fire to make it past the thing. I know better now. This was a choice, and something we had talked about recently.*

“I know, I just... I hear the jingle of coins and something just takes me over. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

“Yeah, right. But I was thinking about the house, honest. And we still have that bandit cache to clean out, that had a fair amount of coin if that note was right. We’re going to need it to get a house, right?”

“That is the plan, yes. But there’s a time and a place, you know?”

“I’ll try to follow your lead more. Are we heading back to the inn?”

“You go ahead. I have some shopping to do first. And honestly, it’s probably better if the person that wiped out an entire village isn’t there to awkwardly take credit for getting all that stuff back.” *Epecially because I still feel bad about it, and the person that did the deed doesn’t even “exist.” No one would recognize the person I walk around as every day as being me, no one in town has seen my true hideous face, so it’s not like I would get any recognition anyway. So best to just leave it to mystery.*

“Okay. See you later.” He walked off.

Sorry Malachite. Even with this, almost losing you made me realize how much I really do value your friendship. I think you showed me you express your feelings through gifts, so that’s just what I’ll do back. In my own unique way, of course. Now, I’m sure if I look around I can find what I need...

I first found a blacksmith’s shop and went inside. The apprentice met me and I explained what I wanted.

“I’d like this opal changed from a necklace to something else. Maybe a broach? Something I can wear on my head? A bracelet? I want to wear it all the time but I don’t want it to get scratched up by my other necklace.” I showed him.

“We can easily turn it into a broach, that just means removing the loop for the chain and adding a clasp on the back. We could have that done for you by tomorrow morning. I can get you an estimate from my master if you want to wait a second.”

“That would be fine,” I told him. “But let me ask you something. How long would it take if you were the greatest smith to ever live?”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’m a mage,” I explained. “And as you’re doing this work for me, the guild would have no problem with me throwing some magic around. I know a spell to make someone better at doing

something. I cast that spell on you, and for the duration of the magic you're a smith two or three times better than you ever dreamed of. What do you say?"

"Magic?" He looked around nervously. "Oh, no, uh, I have a cousin that got a spell cast on them once. At least according to my aunt, who heard it from her best friend during her son's wedding. Was never the same after that, according to her. Magic? No thanks."

"What? Look, it's temporary. That's how magic works. I cast it on myself and others all the time. It's perfectly safe." *Who doesn't want to experience magic? Or better yet turns down becoming a master of their craft for an hour or two?*

"I'd rather not chance it."

"Very well. Just thought I would offer. Go get the estimate then." I waved him off.

"Thank you. I'll be right back."

He left and returned, quoting me a price less than a moon, and I handed over some coin and the opal. I insisted upon a receipt 'because someone else may come pick it up' and left to see what else I could find that day. I was fuming a bit though.

There goes my plan to set up a partnership with the local blacksmith. I figured once he experienced what magic could do for him, allowing him to make pieces far better than he normally would, he would be hooked. Then, when wealthy clients that wanted the absolute best 'at any cost' came along he could have me cast the spell for them, charging them, and then do the work. He would be the very best, like no one was before, and so the piece would be well worth the extra cost. Easy money, on my part. Looks like it's not meant to be though. Really wanted another revenue stream in case we get around to killing all the bandits around here. Oh well, there's always sculpting. And speaking of...

Looking around at the various stalls and shops I found what I wanted at a very reasonable price. A large chunk of obsidian, bigger than my hand. *One of the perks of having a volcano nearby I expect. When we're out and about I should stop over there, see if I can just pick up a few chunks myself for free. Anyway...* I found a bench outside a shop and sat down, pulling it out. Looking it over I had an idea what I wanted it to look like, but one 'scary oooh magic' spell later and I could almost see the dragon bursting forth from it. I was dragged down now by two spells, but gathering mana and taking my time the third one went off without a hitch and I started reshaping the stone to look like what I wanted. Not long after I had a serpentine looking dragon that might just fit over a certain draig's horn. Turning it this way and that I was very pleased with how it had come out. *A craftsman at the top of their game could do it, given a few weeks of work, so little old me who hasn't been keeping up with chiseling nude figures out of marble blocks doing this well in five minutes is pretty great. Thanks, magic! You're the best! I do have to wonder if the guild has gone a little too far, forcing magic users to charge so much for doing magic. This means the common person just doesn't see it performed enough and thus, views it with suspicion. Not much I can do about it though...*

Walking back to the inn (keeping my eyes open for properties for sale) I realized something. Everyone was talking about us. Not us-us specifically, they didn't know who the "powerful wizard" was that had destroyed the khi'teen camp last night, but they were both awed and concerned that it had happened. No one knew there was "such a powerful wizard" walking among them but they were glad that person (me) had chosen to use their powers for "good." Everyone said they felt a little safer with the camp gone but I wasn't so sure that was the right attitude to take. *Imagine the situation were reversed, I imagined saying to them. Imagine this was a huge khi'teen town (don't think about how) and a small human village had been destroyed by them. What would the humans do? Right, grab up every available human and attack the place. So are we really safer? Personally I'd make sure the town*

guards were a bit more alert the next few days in case they decided to stage a little revenge but hey, it's not up to me.

I made my way back to the inn and found the group waiting for me.

"How did it go?" I asked them.

"Jekserah was quite astonished we didn't simply try to sell the recovered goods ourselves," Hanz told me. "Also she gave us a total of 60 moons for the destruction of the camp. Here is your share."

"Thank you," I said as I took the coins. *Note to self, donate ten moons to the church when you get a chance.* "And Snarly didn't butt in and demand to be compensated for getting the stuff back?" I asked.

"That wouldn't be 'ight," he said. "Plush now she seeth us as reliable workerth and maybe we'll get more jobth in 'eh future."

"In effect, prioritizing a greater, future gain over a smaller immediate one. Well done, both of you."

"Okay, I get it," Malachite told me crossly. "I get the picture. I'm a terrible person, okay?"

I shook my head and laughed. "No, you're not. Don't look so down, chum, I won't have this little one perched on the horn of someone that looks grumpy." I pulled out the ornament I made and casually held it out. "Though I guess if you would rather be grumpy than accept my little gift..."

"Is that? Did you?"

"A Spellweaver exclusive," I told him. "Just for you. There won't be another like it, I promise you that."

"For me?"

"Of course for you? Do you see any other horned fellows around here I might want to shower with affection? I mean, uh, are you going to take it or what?"

"So we're okay?"

"Yes, Malachite, we're okay. I accept we have different value systems, and you're trying. You've stuck by me even when you didn't have to, and I enjoy your company. You giving me that gift and me almost losing you made me realize it. So this is my way of telling you."

"Thank you," he said softly, taking it. He looked it over. "Er, I'm not sure it'll fit."

"No, that's what she said," Hanz quipped.

"What?"

"Never mind."

"Yeah, I figured I would have to do some adjustments," I told him. "Easy enough to do."

"Before you do, may I see it?" Hanz asked.

"Yeah yeah, I want ta thee it too!" Snarly echoed.

"Sure." He handed it over, and Hanz held it so he and Snarly could look it over.

"The craftsmanship of this item is above average. Have you been working on it long?"

"About fifteen minutes?" I guessed.

"Yes, that make sense. Wait how long?"

I laughed. "I used magic. This is how we made money before we met you. I would sculpt figures out of rock and sell them. No two alike. The spell basically makes rock flow like water, and I can simply shape it mentally into the form I desire. Once I end the spell it goes back to being unyielding stone."

"Interesting. I take it with the proper spell you could reshape any material in a similar fashion?"

"That's right. I'm hoping to find a spell to reshape other things if it's not too much. Maybe glass? That would make some nice figures. Wood is common enough, that would actually be useful as well. I suppose metal wouldn't go amiss either."

"It lookth really good!" Snarly told me. "I'd pay a good price for 'omething like that."

"Well thank you."

"Here you are." They handed it back and I made the final adjustments to fit it over his horn.

"Just remember, it's made of fairly brittle rock. I picked obsidian because it's shiny and I found a big enough chunk to do what I wanted. Don't smash it against anything."

"If I do you can just repair it, right?"

"True, if you get all the pieces of it."

"We must speak of our next task," Hanz told us when we were done admiring my handiwork. "There is a complication."

"Of course there is," I agreed. "What's the job?"

"Jekserah requires us to fetch a diamond of a certain size from an abandoned mine not far from town. Normally of course I would think nothing of the request and place it into the queue along with all the other places we intend to visit in the near future. I'm sure your magic could help us locate any diamonds that are left within the stone walls of the mine."

"No doubt." *And any that were not big enough we keep, not a bad little deal.*

"The complication there is, the mine has been taken over by goblins."

"But you could use your magiths to make us looks like goblins and we could walk 'ight in!" Snarly said proudly.

"Yes, I was going to mention that," Hanz told him. "That was a minor complication, considering. No, the real complication is that, after she left, a member of the guard named Argise, a beast-kin, contacted us. It seems our 'employer' has been in their bad graces for some time, though she could not give me any specific evidence or accusations. She, and others of the guard, believe she is up to something untoward, perhaps even plotting to overthrow the guard itself."

"From what I've heard that could be a good thing," I told them. "Everyone is saying how terrible the guard is, not doing their job to patrol the countryside like they should. We're the talk of the town, by the way. Everyone thinks the town is safer because of what we did, and sentiment is the guard should have done it long ago."

"Are we? Should I procure a pen for signing autographs? Pity I don't have any 8x10 glossies to hand out..."

"You say some weird things 'ometimes," Starly told them.

"Apologies."

"In any case, no," I told them. "I didn't shout from the rooftops I was the one that," I looked around, "exploded the encampment."

"Very wise. And it is your magic I again wish to consult. I was hoping you could use your divination spell to either show there is more to investigate relating to Jekserah, or show Argise is in the wrong about her, before we become too involved and regret it later."

"Be happy to."

"Very good. I begin to wonder how I ever functioned without being able to consult divination magic."

"I should start charging you! Joking, just a joke."

"Your strange organic humor shocks and appalls me."

"That's... what she said?"

"Now you're getting the hang of it!"

Am I though?

“We are meeting with her this evening to get more information, if we can give her an answer one way or another by then, it would be best. I must go and discuss last night with the captain of the guard as requested. So I will leave you to it.”

“I’ll go talk to my friends in town about ‘ouses!” Snarly decided.

“I’ll come with you, Orchid will probably want to be alone to do her magic.”

“I don’t have to be-”

“Come on!”

“I’m comingh.”

“Huh.”

So I went back to the room to come up with a few questions I could ask my divination magic, and hopefully shed some light on the situation. “Are the concerns of the guard Argise about Jekserah legitimate?”

Yes

So there is some merit to us looking into things. Great, if it turns out she’s evil there goes our main source of revenue. Well, maybe she’s overreacting though! “Would I consider Jekserah’s plans evil?”

No

Ah hah! You see? Not evil then, maybe just misguided? And with what I said before, maybe she would run the town better than... Who runs the town now? The guard? Like, who is the mayor or whatever? I didn’t vote for him. Hey, once I have an address do I get to vote? How do we get our leaders around here? Or are they appointed by the king or whatever. Do we have a king? Huh, looking to own a home has suddenly increased my awareness of politics. “Is it better for this town for Jekserah to take over?”

No

Okay, so that’s out. If that’s her goal we should try to stop it. But why a diamond though? “Will the diamond we bring Jekserah be used for evil?”

No

Well that’s confusing.

I mulled over the answers I got until the others returned, bringing news of current houses prices that could be affordable for us. We didn’t want something like a row house that might only be 5 moons a month, but a small place with enough space for us could be had for twice that. I told them what I had learned with my magic, and everyone agreed we would take Argise seriously at least. So we waited around for dinner, then sunset, and went out to meet her.

“Thanks for coming,” she told us, undoing some kind of cloak that made her invisible.

Oh, I want one of- oh wait I could just do the spell directly. She was a beast-kin, with cat ears and tail like I used once. Dressed in the color of the guard, she looked around nervously.

“Our magic user has determined we should at least look into it,” Hanz told her. “We accept your concerns as legitimate. Thus, what can we do to gather the evidence you need to move against her?”

And why can't you do it, as really it's your job and it's going to cost us ours?

“There's a warehouse down by the docks she seems to favor,” she began.

“Ah, I should have guessed,” Hanz agreed. “It's always a warehouse down by the docks.”

“What is?”

“Never mind, please continue.”

“There's a spell over the place. We think. If anyone from the guard goes inside she'll be alerted.”

Not really how magic works, but okay, I guess it could cover a whole building with enough work? How is it being maintained though? And how did you learn of it? Is there a magic user employed by the guard?

“Can you sneak in there and see what's inside? Even if you can't physically bring us any proof because you don't want her to know it was you, enough to show probable cause if the guard busts the doors down and grabs it.”

Yes, if you flub it and she looks into who made her life miserable and discovers us, she can have us brought up on charges like breaking and entering at the very least.

“We're good at 'neaking!” Snarly told her.

“So you want us to find evidence of wrongdoing?” Hanz clarified.

“Yes. We're certain she wants to overthrow the military rule of this town. But not how or when. Anything you can get us would be appreciated.”

“We won't even ask for any money,” Malachite told her proudly. “The gratitude of the guard will be enough for us.”

I nodded seriously, and he beamed.

“That's a relief, because I can't pay you, that's for sure,” Argise told us.

“That brings up a good point,” Hanz put in. “Why is the guard so starved for resources? I saw Sir Golden when I went to speak to your commanding officer today. He seemed, what is the word, resplendent?”

Who?

“Oh, the leaders do okay for themselves, don't you worry about them,” she admitted with some bitterness. “The problem is most money generated by the kingdom went to the war effort against Anduril. Now that the war is over that structure isn't needed anymore. We're within the kingdom of Daelin but about as far from the front as you could get, so we never got that much funding in the first place. We need to come up with a better system but for now, those in power are hanging onto it. They pay themselves first, and leave the scraps to us peons that actually do the real work around here.”

And without a yes answer to my question about Jekserah taking over, we think anything she plans would actually be worse than what we've got now. Super.

“I see. Thank you for clarifying, it was as I expected having seen what I did today.”

“Sure. So, when can I expect word you're done?”

“May as well go tonight,” I decided. “One night is as good as another.”

“I'll check back here in a few hours then. Here's the address.” She handed us a scrap of paper with the address on it and brought her cloak around her again, vanishing.

“I guess it's up to me again,” I told them as we headed to the place.

“It is the safest course of action,” Hanz agreed.

“And if we find out this is some kind of misunderstanding,” Malachite decided, “we don't want to burn our bridges with Jekserah.”

“Not a problem. But I think I’ll do a quick divination anyway. Will Jekserah or another working for her be alerted should we enter her warehouse from the astral plane?”

No

“So we have our answer. When we get closer I’ll step us up to astral and we’ll see what we can see.”

Chapter 10

We learn of her plans

Finding the place proved to be no problem, and we made our way past the walls and into the structure without effort. It was a pretty typical warehouse, with shelves, crates, tables, oil lamps burning, barrels, garbage cans, the usual security zombies wandering the place, rats, cats watching the rats, a few cute li'l mice-

“Uh, that’s not good,” Malachite decided.

“Are we ‘ure they’re zombiths?” Snarly asked, clearly desperately hoping for a no.

“They’re undead all right,” I told him. “I recognize them anywhere. You can tell by the classic ‘shamble’ they employ rather than walking, and note the distinctive-”

“I’m not looken at ‘em!”

“They are useful tools you’ve said though, right?” Malachite asked.

“Sure. Don’t need to pay ‘em! But having the undead around, it’s a risk. And illegal inside the city walls according to the mages I talked to earlier. Doesn’t prove anything but careless intent, it’s not enough to storm the place.” *And get guard members killed.*

“Agreed,” Hanz told us. “Let’s keep looking.”

We discovered about a dozen zombies wandering the place, and came to her office which fortunately or unfortunately for us was occupied. Jekserah was sitting there, flanked by her bodyguards, sitting at a desk working on something.

“All those zombiths and she still needs her two bodyguarths?” Snarly asked. “Give them the night off or ‘omething.”

“Is that not the scroll we recovered for her?” Hanz asked.

“Yeah, that’s it,” I agreed. Watching her she seemed to be consulting a book of some kind, going back and forth between it and another which she was writing stuff in.

“Ah, she is decoding the message. That book must contain the key for the cipher.”

“So we wait around until she leaves and check up what’s she’s doing in a warehouse full of the undead?” Malachite asked.

“That’s the plan,” I agreed.

We waited several hours until she finally closed the place up, but Hanz wisely decided to wait even longer in case she came back. We got another little tidbit of knowledge as she was cleaning up, as she used a spell to turn the lamps off. I hadn’t realized she was a magic user, there had been no reason for me to check and it would have taken touching her anyway. She didn’t have any magical items on her person I would have sensed as a matter of course. *Because if you’re a secret magic user, you don’t go announcing it with magic items that might make someone curious. Oh Jekserah, what exactly are you up to?* Hanz’s decision to wait paid off, as she did return some minutes later after leaving, the bodyguards clearly unhappy with the situation. But they stood there while she took care of something and once again the place was empty of life. We waited a bit, and finally stepped back into the world. I put the lamp on low and looked around now that I could see clearly. It was a fairly simple office space, a few shelves, a desk, but our main interest was the chest she had locked what she had been working on into. Snarly and I looked it over, Snarly announcing it didn’t look physically trapped. I on the other hand had a problem.

“It’s magically trapped all right,” I told everyone. “I think I can suppress the magic but it feels, I don’t know, different from what modern magic feels like. Give me a second.” I gathered what ambient mana I could and carefully cast my suppression spell on the chest. The casting was well and truly done, one of my better casting I believed. But I had to be sure. Feeling around I was astonished to discover I

hadn't suppressed the spell on the chest at all! "What in the world? I know I'm not the greatest magic user ever, after I got comfortable with each planetary school I focused on learning new spells, not simply improving my ability to cast better. So there's certainly room for me to improve but I thought I had done fairly well. Whoever put the spell on this chest was much more skilled than I am."

"So is it hopeless?" Hanz asked.

"Maybe. I'll try again." I did so, and this time was rewarded with the magic feeling muted and suppressed enough I nodded to Snarly to begin working the lock. *Good thing he knows his way around a lock-pick. I wouldn't want to try maintaining this spell and then trying unlock magic on the chest.*

"It's a 'trange lock too," Snarly remarked. "Kind of old?"

"Where did she dig up this old fossil?" Hanz asked.

The lock clicked open. "There ya go!" he announced, stepping back. "Leth see what we've got."

What we had was exactly what we had seen her put away. A half finished spell formula, the book she was working to break the code from, and a journal of personal notes. Pocket spellbook volume 14 was the title. *Sheesh, this is a 'pocket' spellbook? I hate to see the size of the normal ones.* I started there, and I didn't like what I discovered. "We know what the diamond is for," I announced. *And why she needs such a big one.* "She's going to use it in this spell somehow. Don't ask me how, it's not a traditional enhancer in the way I understand them. But somehow it's going to allow the spell to be cast on a massive scale."

"But a spell to do what?" Malachite asked.

"If I'm reading this right, she's going to reanimate all the dead for leagues all at once, giving her a massive army, far bigger than the one I made in our first encounter with the cultists." *Ah, and that's why she was upset about the bodies being burned. Less undead she can make!*

Everyone gasped, even Hanz, doing so electronically probably to not feel left out.

"That's how she's going to overpower the guard and take over," they surmised.

"Exactly." *And why I got a 'no' answer to the diamond being used for evil. Simply raising a lot of zombies isn't evil. Heck I did it myself on a small scale. But on the other hand, doesn't the scope of the spell change the parameters a little? Maybe I'm further gone than I thought, not believing such an action would be evil. But at least we did get a 'yes' answer to her taking over being a bad idea. Imagine trying to get rid of all those zombies! Maybe I should have asked if Malachite or Snarly would think it evil? Or maybe a priest? I guess I can't ask every question I would never do anything because there's always another question that could be asked.*

"I guess we can tell Argise the evidence she's looking for of wrongdoing does exist," Hanz announced. "She just has to get into this chest without being blown up, or whatever that spell does."

She would take the key from Jekserah I would imagine. "Eh," I hedged. "Just doing magical research isn't illegal. If it was, Fladdermus would have been razed long ago. Without a list of steps detailing a plan to use this spell for a specific aim, the government would have a hard time proving any wrongdoing here. You can't prosecute someone for what you think they're about to do, only what they've actually started doing or have done. I mean can you even imagine the society that made thoughts a crime instead of deeds? I mean really!"

"Especially against 'omeone as rich and powerful as her," Snarly agreed.

"Exactly," I agreed. "Look around for more evidence while I get started looking over this other book."

"Right."

The smaller volume (but thicker) was a researcher's notes. Research to uncover the secrets of the various magical factions during the mage war. *Seems fairly recent, and wordy, typical scholar writings.* I flipped through it, finding it discussed the ciphers used by military researchers and some history of the war. *Would be a fascinating read, but we're in a hurry.* "Just a regular book," I told everyone. "She bought it just to translate the spell from this coded form to something she can actually cast. Not evidence I can point to of wrongdoing."

"Same here," Hanz told me. "She's not stupid enough to leave something like that laying around. The only real physical evidence here is the zombies, which may simply be frowned upon for someone of her station and not enough to charge her on. Also I see no indication she has anything to do with the cult of the Gloom, despite their similar penchant for raising the undead. She's acting independently."

"At least we won't have to worry about any black flames then. Let's get out of here and meet Argise. We can tell her what we found here, she'll have to decide if it's worth the guard trying to bring her in. The law is on her side so it's going to be tricky."

"Proving her intention would be difficult," Hanz agreed. "Though I suppose it could be done magically?"

"Possibly." *If she doesn't have some kind of magical counter measure going. But even if she's studying ancient magic, it still feels like magic. She wouldn't be able to hide it from today's mages. Right? Still, have you looked up lately? Those floating cities are still up there, and we have no idea how they were made. So magic from that time might not even register because I don't know what I'm looking for, so to speak.*

We put everything back in the chest and Snarly fiddled with the lock to lock it up again. I stood as far away from the thing as I could and ended my suppression spell. Nothing happened, so we stepped back into the astral and headed for the inn.

"Why don't you biologicals get some sleep?" Hanz suggested as we went inside. "As I do not do such, and we do not know exactly when Argise will return, and I can relay what we discovered as well as anyone, there is no need to incur further sleep debt on your part."

"Sounds good to me," I agreed, stretching. "I'm bushed. Ancient magics, sneaking around, those hours in the astral. It takes a toll."

"I'll see you all in the morning."

"Thanks Hanz. See you."

The next morning a messenger appeared with a letter addressed to Hanz as Malachite and Snarly were having breakfast, so they took it and broke the seal.

"So what's it say?" Malachite as they were staring at it.

"Oh my," Hanz replied, putting a hand up to their "mouth" part, "it's quite personal, but if you insist." They made a throat clearing noise. "My dearest Hanz, I simply had to write you first thing this morning to thank you for the wild time you showed me last night. Every time you *beep*ed my *beep* I achieved new levels of orga-"

"Give me that!" he growled, snatching the parchment away from Hanz.

"Organization, I was about to say," they huffed.

"Wait, what was that beeping 'ou were 'oing?" Snarly asked.

"We'll tell you when you're older, kid," Malachite told him. He scanned the letter. "Hanz, the city guard wishes to extend our thanks to you and your company-" He looked up. "Your company? Who decided that?"

“If the city guard has erroneously taken me to be the leader of our group I’m sure it won’t take long to clear up that misconception. If it becomes necessary.”

“Uh huh.” He looked back down. “Your company for the part you played in performing reconnaissance for the city. Know that the guilty party will be apprehended and punished, but we cannot move against this individual without certain bureaucratic assurances in place. Additional troops are also being requested from nearby settlements to help in the effort to apprehend the individual. To that end we request you fulfill any obligations you have to this individual for the time being so they do not suspect anything is amiss. We will only need several days so the deception will not need to be performed long term. We hope this will not cause your company any inconvenience. Signed, illegible signature.” He paused. “I see it doesn’t say we’ll be rewarded for our part or what to do if it does cause us any inconvenience!”

“I suppose once the ‘guilty party’ is taken into custody we can see what’s in the warehouse,” I told him. “She won’t be needing it anymore, in jail.” *Like certain spellbooks, perhaps? Magical items? Stashes of gold? I mean something must be in all those boxes, it’s not product for sale. In a secret hideout dedicated to illegal magical research? I think not. Hopefully the ‘additional troops’ are people familiar with taking in magic users who may not want to be taken in. I mean I have several ways up to and including vanishing from this plane of existence altogether if someone tried to put me in jail. So they would need someone who could lock her down and had the authority to do so. Unlike myself that could perhaps lock her down for a time but is just a normal citizen.*

“Why did ‘hey say it like ‘at?’” Snarly asked.

“In case the letter fell into the ‘wrong hands’” Hanz explained, “It’s called plausible deniability. Naming no names means this letter could be referring to anyone, so the person in question wouldn’t be tipped off should they see it. We know who it’s talking about, we don’t need to be told it again, so it’s almost a coded message with no cipher, to use the recent events as a metaphor.”

“What’s a metaphor?”

“Well ‘meta’ refers to showing an explicit awareness of oneself so one could look in a mirror and think, wow that’s me, so meta. So if we take the opposite meaning of cluelessphor, we can thereby deduce-”

“Oh don’t confuse the poor kid,” Malachite broke in. “Just ignore them, metaphor isn’t even a word. So what are we doing about the diamond mine?”

“I beg to differ,” Hanz grumbled softly.

“We can go, but we’ll have to be careful,” I cautioned. “Before we set foot out of town, we’ll all need to agree that we’re going there to get our client the diamond, and we have every intention of handing it to her once we return.”

“But we’re not?” Snarly asked.

“But we must.”

“But we’re not.”

“But we must.”

“But we’re not.”

“But we must.”

“But we’re not.”

“But-”

“Just explain it properly!” Malachite insisted. “Honestly what is up with the both of you today? What are you talking about Orchid?”

I sighed. “We know the client is a magic user. She probably has better divination magic than me, how else would she know this diamond exists there? But consider if she doesn’t and only has a spell like mine. If she asks ‘is the company I sent going to retrieve the diamond to give to me?’ and gets

a 'no' answer she's going to look into it more. If we head there with the intent to just keep it, she'll know something's up and magic may tell her so. Who knows what she sends after us, maybe she just uses magic to kill us in our sleep. Anyone that doesn't believe we are going to hand this diamond over once we get back to town is a risk. You must all swear, and believe, that's what we're going to do."

"Of course, should it happen that by the time we get back, 'coincidentally' she's locked up, well, we would have no choice but to keep it, right?"

"Exactly."

"Then the client comes first," he decreed. "Anything we pick up along the way is of course fair game but the big diamond is hers. No problem."

"Are we agreed?" I asked, looking around the table.

"Diamond dot owner equals the client, data processed," Hanz agreed.

"We 'ave to do the work the client 'ired us fer!" Snarly finished.

"Very well. Then we can go get it. I assume you'll be needing supplies?" I looked between the other two. "We have tents and such from coming here but you'll need a few days worth of food."

"I do estimate at least nine hours to reach the site," Hanz told them. "That will mean at least two days on the road if we rush. Three if we are careful and perhaps look around the mine to see what we can find. The client didn't say she needed it right away, after all."

"I'll pack for three days," Malachite decided. "Just in case. Come on Snarls, let's go shopping."

"Yay!"

The two left and I, disguised as an avian, or bird person, went to get my broach. I handed over the receipt and collected the opal, pinning it to my tunic as I left the place. The work was serviceable, but it could have been done better and faster if only he had let me put the spell on him. *Oh well.*

Back on the road, we headed vaguely towards the volcano first taking the road, then following the river south towards the foothills. Entering the narrow path carved through the rock about sunset we started looking for a good place to set up camp for the night. What we found was a rock-slide.

"This is not the ideal situation," Hanz began.

"Doesn't seem like a big deal to me," Malachite told us. "But I could see where you might have a problem with it."

"You don't 'hink itth the site of an ambush, do youth?" Snarly asked, nervously looking around.

"We'll know soon enough," I told him, and started casting my spell to look for enemies in the area. It came back negative, so Malachite offered to fly around see see what he could see.

"Sure, but you don't need-" I started to say.

"Great, see you shortly!" He spread his wings and jumped into the air, starting to climb.

"To do that," I finished. "He does like to exercise his wings... Come on, let's just go through it." I held both my hands out to the others.

"I am curious though," Hanz told me, holding up a hand. "*Could* your magic clear the blockage?"

I considered the pile. Brightening I actually got closer to it, just to see if any unusually colored rocks had been revealed I could save and sculpt later. But no, it was just the usual boring rocks one might find anywhere. I saw a few larger ones though. "Maybe," I told him. "I could shift these larger ones fairly easily I'm sure. But I'm no expert in... Whatever you would call clearing disaster sites without causing more issues. What if this pile of rocks is holding up the sides of this area now." I pointed to the walls. "I move them I might make it worse. I certainly don't want to bring the walls crashing down on us!"

“Still, I wonder if we should make the attempt, if we can do so safely? If this path is used frequently those that use it would thank you, even if they didn’t exactly know you had done them the favor.”

“But if a horde of angry goblins is chasing us this would block them,” I countered. “We can count on it if it’s still here when we’re heading back. We could always take care of it then if we’re in the clear.”

“I suppose you are not wrong. Very well, proceed.”

With both holding onto me I phased us, and walked through the rocks as if they weren’t there. It wasn’t that deep and we came out the other side. Nothing interesting on that side either, just the continuation of the path, so I dropped the spell again.

“So we just wait for Malachite,” I told them.

“This would be a good place to set up camp,” they decided. “Defensible, with that wall of stone at our back. We can continue to the mine from here in the morning if you wish.”

“Sounds good,” I decided, setting my pack down. “I’ll start setting up the tent.”

I had basically finished setting up our tent when Malachite landed again.

“I’ve got some good news and some bad news,” he told us, folding his wings behind him.

“Oh really?” Hanz asked. “I am intrigued and excited to hear this news. Please, continue.”

“There’s another path we can take that isn’t blocked. And I’ve spotted what I believe is the mine entrance. That’s the good news, the bad news is there’s a pack of wolves or something roaming around near there that- hang on.”

He looked left and right, then up to find the setting sun.

“Is something wrong?” I asked politely, trying not to laugh.

“Aren’t we heading in that direction?” he asked, pointing up the path.

“Yes we are,” I agreed.

“But then how is the- You just moved everyone past the rock-slide, didn’t you?” he asked, defeated.

“Yes I did. Thanks for scouting though. I’ve got the tent set up, you’re of course in charge of your own dinner.”

“Of course,” he sighed.

While the others ate I asked questions like “are we safe from further rock-slides at this location?” and “will we be disturbed in the night” to which I got a yes and no answer, respectively. So I figured we would be safe though Hanz did announce they would watch over the camp in the night. They would be “awake” anyway so there was no harm in it. We did hear some howling as it started to get dark, so there were wolf like creatures or something else that howled around here, for sure.

But that sounded more like war wolves, not regular wolves. Goblins don’t associate with them usually, it’s orcs that train them. Very odd. We won’t be disturbed so I’m not worried, do they use this path? I suppose they might be able to just climb it, they’re the size of horses if I recall correctly. Still, the howling has stopped so they don’t seem to be getting closer or rushing to find us. But just to be safe... I got up and looked around, deciding at the narrowest point nearby to cast my spell that created thick spider webs and block off the pathway. I cast a few times, filling the passage almost to the top, and nodded to myself, satisfied. If they come running down the path they’re going to have to stop and try getting through this stuff, or smash into it and hopefully get trapped. Never hurts to be as cautious as possible.

That night passed uneventfully, as my magic had predicted. We were up and ready to go the next day, with some grumbling by Malachite of course, who I had to shake awake several times, both

before and after I had taken the tent down. The mine awaited, it was time to claim our- I mean- the client's- diamond.

Chapter 11

The mine gets a little messy

The entrance to the mine showed recent signs of use, a camp of some kind had been set up and not cleared up very well. The remains of a fire pit, a cast aside pot, a few bones were all in evidence. The boards across the mine entrance were long ago torn down and thrown aside, and the entrance to the place descended into darkness.

“I’ll go check it ‘ot,” Snarly announced. “See what awaiths us further in.”

“Would I not be the logical choice?” Hanz asked him.

“How good are you at ditharming trapth?”

“I admit it’s not my area of expertise. But I can become invisible.”

“So can I!”

“Really? You have some hitherto unannounced means at your disposal?”

“Are you making up words again?” Malachite asked them.

“I assure you my lexicon is quite genuine.”

“No, the,” Snarly stepped over to me. “I have an Orchid. Can you put yer invisicabitily ‘pell on me?”

“Sure,” I answered simply, feeling around for ambient mana. I didn’t feel anything like the cultists would leave behind or gather to work with whatever they were doing, but there was a normal amount of magic here so I grabbed as much extra as I could and cast it on him.

“I’ll be back,” his disembodied voice told us, trailing off into the mouth of the cave.

“Everyone knows I can just look in there with my magic, right?” I asked no one in particular. “I’ve done it before?”

“Would it work in this case?” Hanz asked. “It is a mine, after all.”

“I... guess not? What are you getting at?”

“In the past we’ve had a fairly short distance to travel before reaching the rooms, which were lit. So it was easy for your magic to reach down and see what was there. You could see down the stairs and knew where the door was. This is an abandoned mine. The tunnels could stretch for miles before whoever owned it gave up and left it as a lost cause. How would your magic know where to look? And I assume most of the tunnels if not all of them are dark. It is my understanding goblins can see perfectly well in the darkness.”

“Both of those things would work against me, it’s true,” I admitted. “So I guess Snarly going ahead was a good move.”

“If he can even get very far, I doubt his vision is that good to move much past the mouth of the cave. Unless Malachite, you can see in total darkness?” Malachite shook his head. “Pity. Then unless you have magic to do so, we are going to be in a bit of a bind.”

“Any amount of light will give us away, even disguised as goblins,” Malachite decided. “That is what we were planning to do, yes?”

“Yes. I had hoped there would be more activity here, and we could waylay a few goblins and take their place with magic. Then just follow them down to the work area and steal the diamond that is our target as well as any others they’ve mined. No such luck though.”

“I do have a light spell,” I admitted. “But it’s fairly unconventional.”

“How so?”

I reached into my bag to pull out my spellbook. “Let me just look it over, it’s been quite awhile since I cast it. Basically whoever is going to be in the lead can have a shield made of light. That will light our way.”

“I don’t fight with a shield,” Hanz told us. “And it could interfere with my bow. Malachite?”

“I usually just use my claws.”

“The spell gives you the ability to use it with at least some level of skill. Hang on.” I read the spell over. “Wait, why did I even learn this spell? I didn’t think this was right but it is. This is no good!”

“What’s the problem?” Malachite asked.

“The problem is I can’t cast it on anyone else. I have to cast it on myself. I have to carry the stupid thing around! That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard. What magic user wants a huge shield attached to their arm? I’m the dumbest magic user for learning this stupid spell. *What could I have been thinking?*” *Why wasn’t the spell developed to be cast on other people? I don’t believe this!*

“It doesn’t seem your style,” Hanz admitted. “But we are stuck with it for the moment. I suppose one of us could carry a torch but as I’ve said these tunnels could go for miles.”

“I’m back!” announced Snarly, appearing out of nowhere.

“How far did you get?” Hanz asked him.

“Not far,” he admitted. “But I smell dogs, and fungus, and mud. Someone goes back and forth through here a bunch.”

“I guess I’ll carry the stupid shield then,” I announced, putting my book away. “Because I’m too stupid to learn a simple light spell, or a spell to let me see in the dark, both of which would have been *far* more useful to learn!”

I was still fuming as we walked through and checked the endless tunnels in the mine. Malachite had wrapped his hands in oil soaked rags he requested I light on fire should we get into trouble, and I had to admit it was an interesting way to use his newfound immunity to fire. He was bringing up the rear, Hanz and Snarly were in the lead. There were old, rusting out tracks for a mine cart of some kind still bolted to the floor, but not much else. The place was quiet apart from us, but Snarly did say the smell of dogs was getting stronger.

And then it seemed we were upon them. There was a flash from ahead, and Malachite and I looked at one other because we knew what that meant. Hanz was firing their laser at something.

“Flame on!” Malachite told me, thrusting his hands out.

Put everything in the box in a second, I decided, get him into the fight now. I did, making him grin and round the corner at full speed. As I took a breath and calmed myself, putting my emotions in the box as I had been trained, the fire wobbled and went wild, as if he had tripped over something. *A rock maybe? Not a great beginning.*

I peeked my head around the corner, looking through the shield figuring I was being dragged down by the stupid thing I may as well use it for cover and saw Malachite struggling to hold onto a shaggy, horse sized wolf while another was chewing on Hanz.

“Oh bother,” they were saying, trying to keep their balance on one leg. “He seems to have torn my leg almost clean off! Perhaps a little help here?”

I looked past them, one of the massive creatures was down, his head smoldering where Hanz must have lasered him. Snarly was poised to strike so I figured it was a good opportunity to try out the new spell I had purchased. I gestured and spoke the first word of the incantation. Magic swirled around one of his blades and it radiated magic, so I turned my attention to Malachite. A quick spell to balk the wolf’s next defensive action and I figured we were in pretty good shape. Hanz went to shoot the dog that was snapping at them, hit, but the beast shrugged it off. But what was even worse was, Snarly struck out with the magical knife and somehow completely missed! Yes, the beast lunged to the side at the last second so the strike went wide, and the magic vanished. This would have irked me to no end, had my emotions not been held in check by the box, so I tried my spell of dazzling an opponent. It didn’t even work, I flubbed the incantation trying to maintain concentration on the shield.

By that time the wolf had gotten tired of chewing on Hanz's armor and must have realized I was there, he tried to lunge past the remnant but even with one leg, Hanz held him back. "Perhaps a bit more offensive magic is called for?" he suggested.

None of my magic is that offensive- oh they mean the other way. "One second!" I covered Malachite again, casting my spell to make the beast more likely to miss his next attack and then I slammed the one closest to me with air as Snarly stabbed it from behind and Hanz lasered it again. This confused and enraged the beast, and Snarly gave a yell, jumping up on top of the thing to stab it again. *He can hardly miss this time, no?* I quickly cast the spell to empower his strike and he drove his knives home, this time the magic worked wonders and the wolf slumped to the side. *One remains.*

With their leg busted and sticking at a weird angle Hanz returned their weapon to the hand configuration and took the bow off their shoulders. *I was wondering why they were carrying that thing around. I guess they plan to use it?*

"I'm low on power," they called to us. "Get me a clear shot!"

Ah, the weapon built into them must have some sort of limitation, unlike magic which is just everywhere and I can draw upon without limit. If they fired it too much perhaps they would even cease to function. This gave me a glimmer of an idea but there was no time to explore it now. I tried to dazzle the beast but again, the fates were not with me and it fizzled. *Stupid shield. But to drop it now would be a disaster, it's our only source of light. I guess apart from Malachite's blazing hands.*

Malachite had hold of the beast, the fire from his hands licking the fur and he was trying to rip chunks out of it or something. Hanz readied an arrow and I took the full time to cast my air spell, and both helped to finish the beast off, which slumped to the floor.

"Anyone hurt?" I asked, now coming into the chamber where the wolves were. It was just a hollowed out part of the mine they must have done more digging in, making it bigger than the surrounding tunnels.

"I'm fine," Malachite said, and Snarly agreed, looking around and keeping his daggers at the ready.

"Then let me have a look at that leg. Malachite, bring that fire over here will you?"

"Sure thing."

With the light of the flames nearby I dropped the shield and focused on my repairing magic. Pulling mana and carefully making the required gestures repair magic shimmered around the leg. Nothing happened. "This is bad. It could be too far gone for my magic to fix. I'll try again." I did so, and again failed. "I'm sorry, I don't know what to do!"

"Not a problem," they told me. "My own systems can self repair, given time. If we can be sure this room is safe for a few minutes, perhaps you can try again and your magic can then succeed."

"There's a big 'ole in the wall," Snarly told us. "Well, big fer me, anyway."

"Show me," Malachite told him, and the two of them moved off to the far wall. I stayed by Hanz's side, casting a grade 0 light spell to at least give us a candle flame's worth of light. "Yeah, it's a small hole into the next chamber," he called back. "I can hear voices beyond too, there's people in there."

"We should seal off the entrance in some way," Hanz suggested. "But our available materials are few."

"Oh, I can think of something," Malachite said with a grin. He started dragging one of the wolf bodies towards the hole, and we heard him shoving the thing in there. "It'll take them a while to dig that out of there!" he announced.

"I'll be right back," I told Hanz, and made myself useful webbing up the corpse, so it would be harder to push out from that side. With that done we waited a few tense minutes, expecting goblins or

worse to emerge from holes in the walls they were digging at this very moment. But nothing happened. After five minutes I tried my repair spell again, and was rewarded with their leg snapping back into place. It wasn't fully repaired but one more spell did the job and they stood up again.

"Good as new," they announced, jumping on it. "Well done, thank you."

"Thank you for stopping that thing from getting to me," I told them. I touched their armor and cast my spell to measure things, getting back a depressing result. The dents were pretty bad, and the armor was really thin and even broken in places. "Sorry, your armor is even further gone, I don't think I can work on repairing it at all." *The leg is something I can concentrate the magic on. The armor is all one piece, it will disperse the magic too much. A simple dent I could take care of easily but this?*

"No bother, if needed I will simply do the human thing, toss it aside and buy a new one. Shall we proceed?"

"Can you get rid of the webbing?" Malachite asked. "I don't want to get all sticky, not that way anyway. I mean..."

"I have no idea what you mean," I told him. "But that thing isn't going *this* way, it's going *that* way."

"You don't mean..."

"Like uncorking a bottle of wine," I told him, beginning to cast. I set the webs on fire and used my thrusting spell to shove the corpse of the wolf through the hole. It wasn't pretty, as the hole was a bit smaller than it was. So bones snapped and fur went flying out the hole on the other side. Screams drifted back to us, and I must admit I felt a certain sense of satisfaction before I closed the box on my emotions again.

"Can you cast on the fire?" Malachite asked excitedly. "Blow the whole room up?"

"Perhaps offer surrender first?" I suggested. "Let's not reach for the top shelf stuff right off the bat." *I really don't want to use that spell again, thank you very much. It nearly got us all killed, and didn't kill the thing I was trying to kill. Then with the bug people... It's still painful to think about. If I can avoid it, let's solve this another way that doesn't involve cooking everyone in there and maybe blowing fire out this passageway towards us and roasting us as well.*

"What do bats have to do with it? Spoilspout."

"I shall make the offer," Hanz decided. "I can fit easily enough through here. One side please."

They crawled through the hole and though it was muffled I could have sworn they were saying something like "Orc? Orc orc!" There was a flash as they scrambled back, and there was a cry of rage and despair from the other side. Also some kind of a beeping sound as Hanz backed up out of the hole and stood up again.

"Well, *he's* on fire now," Hanz announced. "Didn't seem to want to parley. But I only hit his arm. An arm for a leg, as the saying goes. I'm sure someone says that."

We looked through, with Malachite shouting "now, now, now, flame him now!" and I could see him staggering back, on fire from the laser. I sighed and started to cast. But this time I clenched only the muscles in my right side as hard as possible. I knew it would imbalance the flow of Mars magic and make the spell less effective. Which is what I wanted, because I didn't want to cook myself. The spell went off, a minor detonation compared to the others I had caused with the spell, meaning while he was now more on fire, he wasn't dead.

"You're off your game today," Malachite complained. "I guess we'll go finish him off." He climbed into the hole.

"You're off your game today," I sarcastically repeated. "You try not killing yourself with magic. Oh that's right you can't because you can't do magic! Like this!" I put my invisibility spell on him so he could strike from surprise and waited. A few seconds later there was a tearing sound, as (I would come to see in a moment) he simply ripped the orc apart.

With all of us now in the larger room the work was being done in we found the large diamond we were there for in a bucket near the back corner, and saw shadowy figures watching us from various small side tunnels all around the room. There didn't seem to be any valuables, no other diamonds mined making me wonder if there even were any to find here. Malachite said he would cover me if I wanted to ask, so I did.

"Are there diamonds of value to be had in the walls of this room."

Yes

"Okay, let's go see if they want to talk," I told him, casting another spell to be understood. I didn't want them to be able to claim they didn't speak my language, after all. *I can probably do "mining" a lot faster than these guys can with my sculpting spell. Just move the walls of the cave around until the diamonds fall out. Easy. But not with them all looking at me.* "Hey you in the walls!" I shouted. "You're looking for diamonds? Let's make a deal!"

"Don't want any stupid diamonds!" a voice called back.

"Right, we'll leave you half of- wait what?"

"Orc wanted diamonds. Orc is dead. We're not working here anymore! We go home!"

"You don't want any diamonds?"

"You stupid or something? What did I just say?"

"Don't insult her, you saw what they did!"

"I'm just telling the truth."

"Be quiet!"

"So can we look? You don't care if we take any diamonds?"

"We do care! You killed orc master, that's fine. But you leave now. No come back!"

"How does that make sense? If you don't want them..."

A rock sailed past me. "You leave!"

"What's going on?" Malachite asked.

"They don't want any diamonds, but I guess they don't want us getting any either."

"Typical," he snorted. "Let's just go. This place stinks of mud now."

"Well, okay, if you want." *Malachite passing up a chance to get something valuable because there's a bit of danger? Maybe he is learning something after all?* "Fine. We're leaving. Got that? You attack us from behind, and you'll regret it!"

"Yes, yes, you go now. We don't make trouble!"

"You better not." I dropped the spell. "Come on." *Ugh, time to cast the stupid shield spell again.*

We headed out and wound our way back up to the surface, the fresh air feeling good on our faces. "Wait, someone remembered to grab the diamond, right?" Malachite asked.

"I thought you had it!" Hanz insisted, holding his hands up. "I don't have it."

"Itth not with me, 'onest!" Snarly put in.

"Oh wait it's right here," Malachite told us, holding it up. "Gotcha!"

"I'm rubbing off on you," Hanz announced, sounding proud. "Well done."

"Good job everyone," I praised. "I think we did okay in there. We only killed an orc and some wolves, wouldn't want them running around the countryside. Let's get away from this place just in case

they decide they do want the diamond after all, and tomorrow maybe we can head to the volcano and check out that bandit cache.”

“Sounds good,” Malachite agreed. “But I still wanted an earth shattering kaboom.”
I just rolled my eyes. *No, you really didn't.*

Little did I know that very soon, Malachite would get his wish...

Chapter 12

An earth shattering kaboom

As we walked away from the site of the diamond mine, Malachite and Snarly looking over the uncut diamond and saying how it didn't look like much yet, I turned my attentions to Hanz.

"Did I hear you correctly in saying your weapon was out of power?" I asked them.

"Yes, it's convenient enough against single targets, but sadly my internal batteries have degraded over my long years of service to the point I can only activate it at full strength a handful of times. That's why I am forced to carry this primitive projectile launcher around with me."

"The... what?"

"This bow and arrow."

"Ah! I wondered about that." They had once again put the bow on their back, so they didn't have to carry it. "I suppose getting replacement parts is quite tricky these days."

"You have no idea. Sadly even my self repair systems can only do so much. Especially for internal components of such complexity as batteries."

"I imagine." *And my magic wouldn't be able to help because I have no understanding of 'batteries' or how exactly they're damaged. Plus it's probably some kind of sealed box I can't see into.*

"Why do you ask?"

"Humm? Oh, right. With your permission, I'd like to try something."

"You have generated a hypothesis you wish to prove or disprove?"

"No, I want to try something and see if it works!"

They seemed to sigh electronically. "Proceed."

"Thank you." I focused on magic, willing my spell to provide power for devices of that long lost age to provide it for their beam weapon. Given their size I took no chances and used the second longest casting of the spell, which seemed to take. (This spell was fairly unique in that it had multiple formulas, each taking more time to cast but in exchange powering a significantly larger device) *I'm glad I picked up this magic now. I've used it only sparingly in my travels, I had hoped to encounter more devices and using this spell, alongside my spell to understand how to use them, unlock some of the secrets of the past. No such luck yet though.* "Okay, go ahead and fire it."

"Very well." They raised their hand and the weapon emerged. They started shooting at rocks on the path, and expressed surprise after a few shots.

"I kept the power low, but that last shot was at full strength. My internal indicators show no loss of power for any of those firings!"

"So I can help power you," I decided. "Good to know."

"But this interferes with your own effectiveness, does it not? Like with the shield? I noticed you were 40% less effective in your spell-casting with it going."

"Yes, it drags me down to an extent, maintaining a spell. That's why the necklace to maintain Athame." I tapped it. "But if you needed to scout ahead or we were facing a lot of enemies that couldn't hurt you but could hurt me, I could cast on you and retreat."

"Indeed, the spell could have its uses. I'm glad you thought to try it, and that it worked to our benefit in this way."

"Me too."

"So where to next?" Malachite asked, seeing our conversation was over.

"We are near the caldera, and our plan was to travel there and see if the bandit cache still existed, yes?" Hanz asked.

"I 'hought we were near a volcano?" Snarly asked them. "What's a caldera?"

“The most accurate description of the local geographical feature,” they answered. “To put it simply, a hole in the ground where magma came from. What we are heading towards is not, strictly speaking, a volcano which is a mountain that has hot rock inside it.”

“So it’s an inny not an outy?”

“Your analogy does not compute. Can you rephrase?”

Malachite laughed. “Yes, that’s what they mean.”

“Okay! Caldera time!”

Sadly it was not that simple. Despite being only two leagues, more or less from whatever you wanted to call the hole that had been blasted in the ground during the time of the mage war and never closed up, it wasn’t a flat grassy plain. It was somewhat mountainous, with a lot of loose stone that even my magically conjured horse had trouble with. Finally I gave up on it, hopped off, and dismissed her. But I didn’t want to hold everyone back, and honestly the others were having enough trouble as it was so I turned my Mercury magic inward, grabbing myself with my telekinetic spell and simply floating myself around. It wasn’t exactly a flight spell, and it took some concentration, but so had staying on my house so I wasn’t losing anything that way. I had nothing better to do but concentrate on it, so it worked out. We made our way to a body of water we saw in the distance, finally stopping for the night after the sun had gone down on the second day. We were at the shore, starlight and the light of the double moons ahead reflecting off the water.

“Leth start setting up the capth!” Snarly announced, throwing off his pack.

“A good a place as any,” Malachite agreed. “Nice to be back on the road again, isn’t it Orchid?”

“I guess?” I hedged. “It took way too long to go such a short distance though. Give me a nice road any day.”

“I was a bit bored, flying around waiting for you to actually get somewhere. I still think you could have used your magic to make me grow to a huge size and I could have just carried everyone.”

“Pass!” Hanz announced, making double slashing motions with their hands. “You know what falling from any height would do to me? I’m heavy!”

“I wouldn’t have dropped you.”

I too would shatter if dropped. But then I trust Malachite more than Hanz does I believe.

“Not on purpose I’m sure, but the fact remains gravity would accelerate me at nearly ten meters per second towards an untimely demise-”

“What’s a meter?”

“Quiet, all of you!” Snarly hissed. “Don’t you hear that?” He was looking around wildly.

“Obviously not,” Malachite replied. “What is it?”

“here!” he pointed with a dagger, and from the nearby bushes sprang a hideous beast the likes of which we had never seen before!

“AW, look at the cute puppy!” Hanz announced, clapping their hands together. “He’s totes adorbl!”

“I think someone has a gear loose,” Malachite told us, lowering his claws but tapping the side of his head. “Are you speaking Ancient again? It is a dog though. How did it get way out here?”

And it was a dog, a young dog, looking dirty and hungry, but with a tail that wouldn’t quit wagging. *Unless this is some shape-shifting creature putting us off our guard, I think he’s harmless enough.* He was yipping and trying to decide who to sniff first by the looks of it, not dangerous at all.

“It drove?”

“What’s drove?” Snarly asked. “Come ‘ere boy! That’s it! Who wants some... Uh, what ‘ave we got? Jerky? Do we ‘ave jerky? Who wanths some jerky? Oh who doeth? Ith is you? Ish is? Yeth it

is!” He dug some dried meat out of his pack and the dog started wrestling with it. He took the opportunity to give the dog a good sniffing and announced “I don’t smell any others dogs on him. Probably not part of a pack.”

“I guess we have a dog now?” I asked.

“We ‘ure do!”

“He will need more than a little dried meat,” Hanz announced. “I’ll go see if I can’t catch a rabbit or something in the area.” They put their pack down and grabbed their bow. “I’ll return soon.”

“I’ll scout the area, see if there’s another group nearby that may have lost him.” Malachite took to the air.

Guess that leaves me to set up camp, I noted, as Snarly was now engrossed in playing with the dog, teasing him with more strips of meat. What a shock. Leave the woman to do the hard work. Probably want me to cook the rabbits too, even though I don’t eat. I suppose the dog would have it raw...

Some time later the dog was snuggled in against Snarly (*how can he stand the smell?*) and the others were in their tents. Well, Malachite was, Hanz was again standing guard as they didn’t sleep. I was looking out over the water, sitting near the edge and thinking.

How long has it been since I went swimming? But the question is... Will I be safe swimming here? My magic soon answered me.

“Yes.”

Great. No strange creatures in the water ready to pull me down and have their way with me. The other consideration of course... I looked back over my shoulder towards the camp. Hanz is mechanical, he doesn’t care. And Snarly doesn’t tend to leave his tent. Malachite... Eh, he’s impossible to wake up. And even if he wasn’t asleep yet, would it be so terrible for him to catch a glimpse? I decided no, it wouldn’t be that terrible, and stood. Carefully removing my clothes so they didn’t catch on any of my sharp bits, I folded them and set them aside. The breeze felt wonderful against my skin, and I wasted no time wading into the water and diving under when it was deep enough. Ah, now that’s the perfect end to a hard day’s travel. I wasn’t that strong a swimmer but I knew my way around, so I splashed around and floated on my back, looking up at the twin moons. The Chaos Moon swirling with light and magic as usual, as the immense magic of the place caused who knows what to be happening there. I needed this.

The next day my swimming had gone unremarked so after we cleaned up the camp I summoned my horse and we were on our way. The dog was being dragged along by Snarly, who had tied a rope around him so he didn’t run off. The little guy didn’t seem all that happy about it, but was walking along side him. It was late afternoon by the time we made it to the site we believed would hold the cache, and I was feeling a bit disappointed. I had been keeping my eyes open for any obsidian or other interesting looking rocks but nothing had caught my eye. I was thinking maybe it was time to branch out, (if you’ll forgive the pun) and look into a spell for shaping wood as that really could be found anywhere. *The principal should be the same. Take a chunk of wood or stone and take bits away until it looks like what you want. It should carry over to wood, my experience shaping stone that is. Ah, Malachite is back.*

He landed near us and held up a hand, making us stop. “We’re in the right place,” he announced.

“You found the ‘reasure?” Snarly asked him.

“Not exactly. I found some things guarding the area.”

“Things?” Hanz prompted.

“Hard to tell from the air, but probably more orcs and goblins. Some strange looking things too, like creatures made of fire.”

“Made of-” I started to say.

“Can you explode them?”

“The... What?”

“If something is made of fire, can you explode it? You know, with that really great spell of yours?”

“You know that was a one time thing, right? A desperation move to kill that rock creature. I don’t like doing that, it’s too dangerous! I didn’t like using it on the bug people, and I sure as heck don’t want to do it in an old eruption site!”

“So is fighting a dozen armed guards. Dangerous, I mean.”

“A dozen!”

“I counted that many at least. We go any further up this path and we’ll see them. They’re milling around the hole-”

“Caldera,” Hanz corrected.

“The inny,” Malachite growled. “So you better think of something unless you want a real fight on your hands.”

“Perhaps just asking them why they’re here?” I suggested. “Remember the diamond mine? It happened like two days ago? The goblins were just following the orders of the orcs. If we promise to help free them, they may fight on our side.”

“That is one probable outcome,” Hanz agreed. “They must be here for some reason. It can’t be to look for a cultists’ coin cache.”

“Right. Let’s go up and there and ask them.”

“But fire!”

“I’ll ‘ecure the puppy,” Snarly told us, finding a big enough rock to tie the rope to. We waited and then crept forward. Looking over the ridge into the hole I noticed a few things. Malachite was right, there were both orc and goblin forces below us. Plus strange creatures that seemed to be made of fire. They were all just milling around down there seemingly without purpose. Heat was rising out of the place, I wondered how they could stand it, and saw pools of melted rock down there that must be the cause. I cast the spell on myself to be understood by any creature with language and stood up.

“Hello there!” I called to them. “Goblins, your day of liberation has come! Help us defeat your orcish masters and you can go free!” *Yes, that sounded about right. Wait what are they doing?* The nearest goblins had drawn swords and were scrambling up the slopes of the caldera. “Did you not hear me? You can be free, this very day! Turn on your masters and with our help-” *Oh no.* They were getting close enough that I could see details about them, and I didn’t like what I saw. That strange, purple energy swirled around them, the same as I had seen the cultists using. Their eyes seemed dead, and they moved unnaturally enough I felt around for magic. This told me what I already knew, magic swirled around this area. *But how? We killed the cultists, heck I turned some of them into zombies myself. No magic could survive their death. Right? What?*

“There!” Malachite was screaming at me. “The fire spell, put it there!”

I looked where he was pointing, and it was right at the melted rock furthest from us.

“Oh no, bad idea! Very, very bad idea!”

“You have a better one? I’m good but I can’t take three orcs and a dozen goblins plus whatever those fire creatures are.”

My eyes darted over the scene. Hanz had their laser out, Snarly his daggers. Several goblins were scrambling up the slope, the orcs were barking orders to the others and pointing at us. There were a lot of them, I had to admit. And it was possible they were already dead, or somehow taken over by this “Gloom” which was a bad sign. *But without any to study, how can I tell if this is something the cultists did, or that happened to them somewhere out in the wilds, or what? But how will I study them if I’m dead?*

“Do it!”

“Against my better judgment, fine,” I told him, readying my spell with magic pulled from the area. *I think I can cast it boosted and still be okay, as I’m up here and it’s down there. My magic should reach.* I tensed, throwing my fire spell into the area. As I expected my efforts had a dramatic effect, blowing the place up and even causing the ground to start shaking. Rock and melted rock flew in the sky, and the things down there (the living things anyway) started to scream as the heat and magma swept over them. The fire things didn’t seem to care, and started floating towards us. I only saw this at the last second as I fell over from the ground shaking.

“Oh yeah!” Malachite exclaimed. “That’s what I’m talking about!”

You’ve got a problem.

The goblins recovered as one came over the edge, I hadn’t gotten all of them it seemed. *Probably too high up.* Hanz lasered him, and he fell backwards into the hole again. “There’s a few that survived,” they called to us.

“Get up,” Malachite told me, hauling me up. “Here they come.” He struck out at a goblin that was pulling themselves up, and it screamed and tumbled back.

So are they undead or not? Zombies don’t feel pain. Two orcs were charging us, and there were still a handful of goblins too. I figured the orc was the bigger threat, so I focused on it. I thrust my palm out, focusing my Mercury magic and they lost their grip, tumbling back down.

Hanz took out another goblin, as Malachite pushed off with his wings. I noticed he had drawn his sword, which surprised me a little. He had always worn one, but preferred his claws in most cases so hardly ever drew it. *He must be unsure of those fire creatures. He may be immune to fire but they could be magic, not fire at all.* With that in mind I put my newest spell on him as he went feet first towards the nearest orc. *Or not. I thought he was going to use his sword?* He smashed into the orc, trying to drive him back as well. No luck, the orc didn’t go anywhere and Malachite bounced off him. That gave Hanz a chance to act, lasering him but only grazing his leg.

“There’s another!” Snarly shouted, drawing my attention back there. Another goblin was emerging, so I put the same spell on his dagger. He darted forward, driving it into the goblin’s chest and causing him to stagger back and fall. “Gotcha! ‘hanks, Orchid.”

“Sure thing.” I looked back at Malachite to find him slashing the Orc across the chest. Magic burst from the blade, that and the force of the strike nearly cut the thing in two and it fell, dead. I quickly put the elemental spell back on the blade as the fire creatures were getting closer. He dodged a strike by one, and I saw the orc I had cast on first make their way back up the ridge and pop their head up. So Hanz lasered it, making it explode.

“Just the fire creatures left,” they announced. “One moment please.” They went to rummage in their bag, couldn’t imagine what they were thinking at the moment but I turned back to Malachite. *Need to support him.* I cast two spells on each before they could react, I was really that good. One to dazzle their senses and the other to balk their next defensive action. Malachite had been gearing up for a strike, I guess letting them get close so he could do one mighty swing and slash both of them at once, which he did. They went out like candle flames, leaving only one.

“Take care of that one!” he shouted up at me, and headed across the caldera.

What in the world? Where do you think you're going? I cast my elemental spell of air at it, hoping it was vulnerable to more than just magical damage, and it seemed to be hurt so I did it again. That took it out and Malachite was back carrying an iron chest of all things.

"Noticed this in the rubble, think it's what we're here for?"

"I believe this area is becoming unstable," Hanz announced, as the rumbling and spewing of magma hadn't stopped. "I suggest retreat and accepting that as our only spoils for the moment."

"Won't get an argument from me," Snarly agreed, heading down to untie the dog and hustle them out of there.

We booked it out of there ourselves, though there wasn't any sort of real eruption we had to worry about, thank the Allfather. When the chest was cool enough Snarly looked it over and went to work getting it open. When he did some kind of gas spewed out of it, making us call out his name, but he just stood there.

"Smells like almonds?" he remarked, and looked the chest over.

Er, what just happened?

Snarly pulled out a pair of boots of all things, sniffed them, and pulled out a coin pouch as he tossed the boots aside. "Now this is promising." He let the coins spill out into his hand and it looked like there might be the equivalent of 60 moons all right.

"We can divide them up later," Hanz told us. "Let us return to the camp. Someone came to investigate the last time we used that spell, and it was fine because it was to take out the encampment. If you happened to trigger a new eruption around here, I'm sure you don't wish to be blamed for it."

Magic could tell someone who did it though... "I suppose you're right. Let's get out of here."

But why the boots though? Seems an odd guardian for the coin pouch.

Chapter 13

His past catches up with him

I found a partial answer to that question after we set up camp again. The boots had a magical spell woven into them, something relating to Mars magic as far as I could tell.

“So put them on!” Malachite encouraged. “See what they do!”

“That’s not how that works,” I told him. “And I’m not putting them on. For all I know they set the next person who wears them on fire.”

“So I’ll put them on. Tight fit though.”

“Oh no.” I yanked them away from him as he reached for them.

“I see how it is. They’re magic so they’re yours?”

“That’s not it at all! You’re welcome to them, *after* I’m sure they’re safe. The fire thing is just *one* possible spell it could be. Remember, they were in a chest trapped with some kind of poison gas and surrounded by... Whatever we’re calling Gloom infected orcs. Gloorcians? They could easily enough sap your strength, make you more vulnerable to damage, blunt your claws, or worse. But say they make you immune to fire or give you great strength instead. We have no idea how to activate them, or if they’re limited to a single use only. We need to have someone study them to tell exactly what spell has been put on them.”

“I get it. Okay, fair enough. I’ll leave them alone for now.”

“Thank you.”

“Let us discuss those guards,” Hanz said, joining us. “Strange to find them out there, was it not?”

“It’s extremely troubling,” I agreed. “If the cultists somehow ‘infected’ those guys with the Gloom, and it stuck around after they died? That’s a very bad sign. It’s also possible someone else is controlling them, someone we didn’t kill that day. But they would have to come back to cast the controlling magic at least once a day, which I suppose they could- oh my goodness we’re so stupid.”

“What? Who with?” Snarly demanded to know. “With it me? It better not be me!”

“No Snarly, it’s not you. We could have just pretended to be the cultists with my illusion magic. Told them we were here for the cache. We saw them, I’m sure I could convince a bunch of orcs under some magical compulsion that we were them.”

“Wouldn’t have been as fun,” Malachite told me.

“Yes, blowing the whole place up was pretty fun,” I wasn’t sarcastic in the least in telling him.

“Darn right. Still, nothing we can do about it now. They’re gone, we may never know how they got there or what the cult did to them.”

I pray that’s the case. It would mean they were the only ones like that, and this isn’t some quickly spreading problem that’s going to catch us unaware in a month and kill us all. But on the other hand I worry that’s not the case and this is only the beginning. We really should have tried to keep one alive to figure out how they got here and if guarding this small amount of money was really their purpose. It was a lot of manpower for something so simple. I’m worried. If they can throw this many resources at a few coins and some musty boots, imagine what they could set to guard something they actually care about!!

We made our way back to town, luckily making it before sundown. As we neared the Sleeping Lion a young man perked up at our arrival and looked us over. “Most of you match the descriptions I was given, you know a guard named Argise correct?” he asked.

“We do,” Hanz assured him. “Did she survive the attack? I see the city hasn’t burned down so...”

“Burned down? Who would burn it down?”

“Oh, things burn my young friend. Things burn.”

“Is that some jab at me?” I asked. “I told Malachite it was a bad idea. Didn’t I say it was a bad idea? Didn’t I say I shouldn’t keep using that spell?”

The boy was looking between us. “Uh, no, message for you.” He handed Hanz a parchment.

“Thank you, young master,” they replied, handing back some coins. “Sorry if you had to wait overlong.”

“That’s okay. Thanks. Bye.” He took off and Hanz opened the letter.

“Oh I see.”

“What is it?” asked Snarly.

“A summons. Come find me at the guard station as soon as you get this.”

“That’s it?” Malachite asked.

“That is the entire content of the message. Shall we?”

“I suppose we better,” I decided. “At least that means she’s still alive.”

We headed there, following Hanz, and were ushered into her office after showing the note.

So we’re doing this out in the open, then? Must have gone well.

“It didn’t go well,” Argise told us after the greetings were done. “She escaped.”

“Of course she did,” I mused. “She’s a very careful magic user. I’m surprised any of you are alive at all.”

“Thank you for that vote of confidence,” she replied icily.

“Sorry, I’ve been on the road for days and I could use a good night’s sleep. Go on.”

“I get it. Actually I was starting to get worried she had gotten to you too, or you had skipped town or something. It’s been days.”

“Yes, well, we had something else to do in the area,” Hanz told her. “And you did say to lay low while you took care of the situation.”

“I suppose I can’t say I didn’t.”

“So what happened?” I asked.

“Long story short? We stormed the warehouse, and tried to apprehend her. We didn’t manage it, as I said, as her guards were sacrificed to aid in her escape.”

“Oh, the minotaurs?” Snarly asked. “I liked ‘hose guys. Too bad.”

“Yes, they’re dead now. All we recovered is some information, mostly what you already told us. So at least I wasn’t fired, or worse, killed by the merchant’s guild. We got the evidence of her spell and her plans. My employers consider the matter closed.”

“Closed? She’s a dangerous magic user now on the loose!” I snapped. “Unless those notes on the spell were destroyed,” *and I hope they weren’t it’s a terrible spell but it’s still a window into how the original magic users, created after the Chaos Moon first appeared, cast magic*, “she could get them back and continue her plans.”

“She’s no longer in the city limits, and so the governor will not spend any more time or resources tracking her down.”

“That sounds fairly short sighted.”

“I’m glad you agree.” She looked pointedly at me, one of her cat ears twitching.

I sighed. “I see. It’s like that, is it?”

“Exactly like that.”

“What’s ‘his?’” Snarly asked, looking between us.

“She wants us to track her down, before she has a chance to get her revenge,” I explained. “And probably for no reward whatsoever.” *I mean, after all, if she found out Argise here led the charge*

against her, who do you think she's coming after first? So she's trying to save her own hide just as much as keep the town safe, no?

"If she's retreated to a hidden base, there's probably spellbooks or something there," she mused with a shrug. "You can have them, once she's dead."

I considered. "You're not wrong."

"Excellent, so we're in agreement. I've been preparing for your arrival, I've come up with two sources that might help track her down. There's a wanderer magician somewhere in town that has a good reputation for finding people, you can ask them."

On our own coin, I expect. Do you know the rates the guild makes people charge? I do, because I have to charge them too!

"Or, you can check out the Watcher Mountains. There's a rumor about an old temple up there someplace that houses a spirit that can answer questions. You could ask there."

Uh, forgive me, but if I'm being given the chance to ask a spirit questions, it's not going to be about some crazy lady that was chased out of town. It's going to be how to help the most people, or where to find my soul mate or something. What if you only get one question in your life? And you waste it on this?

"The only other lead I have for you is a sulfur mine that her notes mentioned. I don't know how that relates. You can ask around about that, I made a copy of her notes about it." She rummaged around in her desk and handed me a folded over piece of paper.

"We'll see what we can do," I told her. "Tomorrow."

"Of course. Look, I know it's a crappy thing I'm asking and I, at least, appreciate you even considering it. I really can't offer you anything but my respect and the knowledge you really did make the town safer. If it were up to me I would do more, a lot more. But I can't. You know how it is."

"I suppose."

"Bound ta be loot there," Snarly told me with a slap on the back. "Ow! Something jabbed me." He rubbed his hand.

"You do remember my curse?" I asked with a snort. *He must have hit one of my crystalline bits.* Argise looked at me questioningly, but I waved her off. "Come on, let's go. Unless there's something else? Oh, all those zombies were destroyed, right? Nothing else interesting found in the warehouse?"

"Zombies destroyed," she agreed with a nod. "Nothing I can give you from the warehouse. Sorry."

"That's fine. Come on."

"There is one 'hing," Snarly reminded us, pulling the dog forward. "We found this dog out 'here. Can you see if it ran 'way from someone 'round town?"

"I can do that," Argise promised him. "It might take some time though."

"We'll watch over 'im till then. 'Course if someone wants 'im, we can't really watch 'im if we're always on the road. They could keep 'im."

"I understand. I'll take care of it." She took the dog in her arms. "I don't mind looking after a dog and it'll be easier if I can show him around rather than describing him."

"Thanths!"

So the next day rolled around and we sat at breakfast and discussed what our next move was. I had asked my magic about the sulfur mine that morning and if going there would lead us closer to finding Jekserah, but had gotten a no answer. The note had turned out to be a map and some notes about an artifact, some kind of magical drill, that could be found there.

"I wonder if the artifact is simply a product of my time," Hanz mused, "and not something magical."

“Doesn’t get us closer to finding Jekserah or the Gloom cult,” Malachite said with a shrug. “So her interest was probably the same as ours would be. Finding more treasure. We need to go after her, magical drills can wait.”

“Agreed,” I told him. “I think we should track down this wanderer. They must have a shop in town, let’s head to the wizard shops and just look at the signs.” *Or ask around, someone must have heard of them.* “If they can’t help, we still have the spirit temple, so check the closer option first I would think.”

“I do calculate that has the best odds of producing a favorable result,” Hanz agreed. “In the interest of raising our odds further, I suggest we split up, however. Snarly and I can cover less traveled paths, in case this wanderer has a presence elsewhere, outside the usual guild approved areas.”

“Why couldn’t Argise jes’ tell us where ‘his wanderer wath?’” he asked. “Isn’t ‘e the one that suggested the guy in ‘ta first plath?”

We all stared at him for a second.

“Indeed, that is why I have suggested this course of action,” Hanz told him. “Perhaps she simply heard the name from others rather than having first hand knowledge about the person. She is a town official, after all. She may be sending us to someone she has only heard of, a disreputable sort that she cannot associate with, but could get us the answers we need. The ‘lesser of two evils’ if you will, ‘the ends justify the means’ etc..”

“Yer probably right.”

“It’s fine with me,” I told them both. “We’ll meet back here when we have something to report. You coming, Malachite?”

“Sure thing!” he announced, pushing his chair back. “Let’s go find this person.”

So we headed our separate ways. Malachite and I headed to the familiar streets where the wizards had their shops, but we didn’t actually make it there. He suddenly tensed up and flattened himself against a building.

“What? What’s up?” I asked him, scanning the crowd for danger. He looked like he wanted to hide but there wasn’t much around that was taller than he was.

“Those guys over there!” he hissed. “I recognize them from my home village. I don’t want them to see me here!”

See you here, as in here or see you here with me? I glanced over, and yes, there were three driag over there with their backs to us. It looked like they were asking about something, holding up a drawing of some kind. “That’s not a problem.”

“It is, they’ll turn any second and see me, there’s no place I can hide!”

I cocked my head, raising an eyebrow, but wasted no more words. I gathered mana, hoping to counteract the magical drag I was already under disguising myself and cast on him with a touch. He now looked like a regular old human.

“Oh, right,” he realized, looking down at himself. “You use that spell all the time, I should have-”

“Morvis?” shouted someone, and I looked over that way. One of the three was looking over at us. *Aw, crapbaskets. Wait what?*

Malachite of course looked the other way, as if looking for the person the driag was shouting at. The other two heads turned.

“Let’s maybe go?” he suggested, giving a shrug and heading back the way we came.

“Are you sure they want you?” I asked, falling in beside him. “I could swear they said Morvis.”

“Just keep walking!”

“Okay, okay...”

“Morvis!”

“Great, they’re not going to give up.” He looked behind and the three were now shoving past everyone, hurrying to reach us. “Better try to head them off, or they’ll trample everyone.” He tried to put on a questioning look.

The three made it to us, but two looked confused. “It’s just a human,” the one said. “You do remember who we’re looking for, right? Morvis? Green scaly fellow like ourselves?”

“No, I’m telling you I saw him,” said the other. “This woman put a spell on him.”

“Can I help you gentleman?” I asked, putting my hands on my hips. “We’re right here.”

“Excuse me, miss,” said the third. “I’m sorry to bother you, but did you happen to see a green draig around here? His name is Morvis.”

“I don’t know anyone by that name,” I told him honestly.

“So what is your name?” demanded one, looking at Malachite.

He looked panicked. “You’ll have to forgive my brother,” I told them. “He’s been unable to talk for years. Trauma, I expect. Ever since that farm incident he hasn’t, you know...” I tapped my head and leaned forward to whisper. “Been quite right in the head.”

The three looked at him suspiciously, but he was gazing off into the distance now.

“Why I remember the night well,” I begin. “There we all were, watching the sun go down on our porch. My father was there, smoking his evening pipe. A number fourteen blend if I recall correctly. My mother was there, oh she loved to natter on my mother, God rest her soul. She was yacking on and on about how we weren’t going to bring in enough crop that year and how did he expect to feed his family when he was a lazy, good for nothing nobody and how she could have married Mr. Jones all those years ago. She had been pretty heavily into the family wine, that was part of our business you see, so really it was more her fault than my father’s if we had less product to sell in a given year given how she used to drink. Oh goodness could my mother drink! I remember one time several years before the incident-”

“While this is all very fascinating,” said one, “we don’t have time for this. Come on, these people are not going to be of any help to us.”

“I’m telling you, it’s him. I saw him plain as day,” the one continue to insist.

“You saw what you wanted to see. Happens all the time,” I told him. “Why one time, back on the farm, I clearly saw my mother slip from the loft, catch a rope around her neck by sheer coincidence, and off it popped! Oh what a joyous day I thought it was going to be, let me tell you. I ran to get a shovel, to bury the old biddy before it turned out she could put her head back on. Turned out to just be a bit of hay blowing down, our barn wasn’t that sturdy you know. In the dark the mind plays tricks, don’t it? That reminds me of the time where are you going?”

The three made a hasty retreat and it was all I could do not to burst out laughing, but somehow I managed it. But when they were out of sight I bent over laughing.

“That was... I don’t even know,” Malachite told me. “Are you going to be okay? What was all that?”

“That was me keeping you safe, boy!” I roared, earning me some dirty looks as I started laughing again. “Come on, let’s get off the street,” I managed, pulling him along. “Poor old Pa! How did he put up with us all those years?”

“Not that I don’t appreciate it but are you okay?”

“Sorry, I just needed that,” I told him. “Oh man, I’m glad they left I couldn’t think of what horrible thing scarred you so badly. Maybe a rabbit attacking you? Chicken? The family cow kicking our old, broken down Pa at the end right in front of you and our mother swearing off drink?”

“If you’re quite finished, can you change our disguises?”

“I guess. Why?”

“We have to follow them. They’ve come a long way, maybe it is something important. Maybe my parents died or something. I’d like to see if they’ll let slip why they’re asking around for me.”

“But are they asking for you? You’re not Morvis.”

He sighed. “Actually, I am.”

Dun dun dunnnnnn.

Chapter 14
On the road again

I was now disguised as a tortugan, or turtle person, while Malachite or “Morvis” was simply another human I had spotted in the crowd and put over top of him. Most of my repertoire of illusions were of course female, not that I didn’t take the occasional male form when it suited me. But it was simpler to just pick someone moving past and away from us, duplicate them, and move on. We were keeping the three draig in sight as they went about asking around town for this Morvis person.

“So your real name is Morvis?” I asked him.

“My *real* name is Malachite,” he growled back. “I changed it before I left my village, they should know enough to call me that and not my old name. Probably think they’re being cute or whatever. As my parents would never tell me much about our family I’ve had to discover who I am for myself. I’m fairly happy with the person I’ve become, and could have gone my whole life never hearing the name Morvis again. Now these three jokers have to show up. Never much liked them, wonder what someone offered them to come find me.”

“Well, you’re definitely much more of a Malachite than a Morvis, if you ask me. Things... must have been pretty tough back at home huh?” *I guess we had more in common than I originally thought. I was thrown out, it seems like he felt he had no choice but to leave given what he went through. Family can be complicated.*

“I never felt like I fit in there,” he explained, “and everyone treated me differently. No one would say why, of course, but eventually I had enough. When changing my name didn’t do it I left. I didn’t look back.”

“And now here these three are, asking for you.”

“Yeah.” He wouldn’t say more.

We followed them for maybe another hour, but it was always the same story. They were looking for him and while several people said that yes, they had seen a green draig walking around they had no idea where to find him. The three did let slip it was a matter of life and death, making Malachite scowl, but nothing more specific than that.

“Look, why not just go talk to them,” I finally told him. “We can run them out of town if we have to, we do know several guards after all. And I can disguise you as easily as myself until they give up. We’re heading after Jekserah anyway so we’ll probably leave town again by tomorrow if the wanderer thing pans out or not. If we don’t get an answer from them it’s off to the spirit temple. They won’t chase us across the plains or anything.” *I don’t think.*

“Fine,” he agreed, however reluctantly. “We’ll do it your way. Drop the disguise.”

“Very well.” I did, and we hurried over to them.

“I hear you’ve been looking for me,” he told them. The three perked up at our approach.

“Morvis!” cried one. “Wait, so was that you I saw before?”

“Never mind that. My name is Malachite as you all well know. What do you want?”

“Hey, it wasn’t our idea,” said the one on the right. “It’s the name we were told to ask around for. How were we supposed to know you didn’t change it back?”

“Very few people that change their name later change it back. What do you want?”

Wait, how would you know that? Met many people that changed their name, have you?

“Look, it’s a sensitive matter,” said the one on the left. “We should go somewhere to talk.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you three. Not until I get some kind of explanation. You do realize we’re not exactly friends.”

“And whose fault is that?”

“Are you implying it’s mine?”

“Hold on,” said the center one. “Look, Malachite or whatever you call yourself these days, it’s about your parents.”

“Sort of,” said the one on the right. “More like great grandfather or whatever.”

“Was there some kind of accident?” he asked. “And I don’t have a great grandfather, or whatever, that I know of.”

“No accident, your parents are fine.”

“Get to the point.”

“The point is Alveindros,” said the center one.

“That dragon that protects the town? What about him? You’re not making any sense, what does that have to do with my parents?”

“It affects all of us. Alveindros has fallen ill.”

“A dragon?” he scoffed. “Fell ill? I hardly think so. Though I have heard of the dragon pox being particularly bad this century. I’ll send him a get well card.”

“Not that kind of illness. Look, if it gets out the town isn’t as defended as it once was, if a rival dragon decides now is the time to start something and take his hoard, that battle could flatten the town and get Alveindros killed. Even... weakened, he would be able to put up a decent fight. Let’s go somewhere to talk. Our inn isn’t far.”

“Very well. But my friend here *will* kill you if you try anything. If I don’t get to you first, that is.”

“This turtle?” they scoffed.

“I was trained by a rat,” I told them, “in the ancient secret combat arts of the night.”

“Of course you were. Come on.”

We were now seated in the common area of the inn, furthest from the door. The three had rearranged the room slightly, bringing a table and chairs big enough for the four of them to the corner of the room.

“So start at the beginning,” Malachite demanded.

“Some time ago something happened to Alveindros,” said one. “It’s been weakening him ever since. As we can’t find a way to heal him he’s sent for you. Apparently someone of his bloodline can help in some way.”

“Hold on, someone ‘of his bloodline?’ What’s that supposed to mean? He’s a dragon, I’m not. End of story.”

Right, but something’s been happening to you lately, right? That whole immune to fire business, that’s not normal.

“That is all we’ve been told.”

“So get my father to do whatever this is. He’s still living in town isn’t he?”

“Your father, according to Alveindros, is dead or this matter would have been resolved-”

“You said my parents were fine not twenty minutes ago!”

“Your step-father *is* fine, or was when we left. Your real father...”

“Hold on, I’m adopted?”

“I told you it was worth coming all this way, look at his face,” said the one on the right.

“Oh knock it off,” said the one on the left. “Though I do, of course, agree with you. This part has made the whole trip worth it.”

“I see how it is now. Ugh, I don’t believe this! Is my mother even my mother? Who am I?”

“All we know is that Alveindros sent us to fetch Morvis, that is you, saying someone of his line can open one of his hoards and thus, break this curse. You want the whole story, go talk to him.”

“Ha! Don’t see why I should. Clearly he had no interest in telling me the truth until now, when it benefits him. Let the old lizard die, it has nothing to do with me.”

“You take that back!” The one on the left started to get up, hand on his sword, but the others, not looking any more pleased, pushed him down again.

“Look,” said the one on the left. “If he does die, that means the region will be up for grabs. We’re surrounded by dragons, in case you forgot. Do you want to see your home town smashed up by a dragon fight as three or more dragons squabble over the hoard he left behind? Even you must have some feelings for the place!”

“Not especially.”

“Then consider this,” the driag said with a sigh. “Saving the life of a dragon would surely result in your being well rewarded.”

“Dragons aren’t known for parting with any part of their treasures...”

“But the townspeople might be grateful enough to.”

“Humm, you’re not wrong. And I could learn the truth about myself. Maybe punch my so called dad. How far are we from there anyway?”

“Directly? A day by boat to the other side of the lake, then several days on foot.”

Why do they have a boat? Didn’t they just fly here? They couldn’t have known he would bring other, non-flying people along. Odd.

“Man, it’s a bad time. Jekserah is out there plotting her revenge. The Gloom is doing who knows what. You’re asking a lot you know.”

“Your responsibility lies with your family, and your own kind, not with this town full of humans.”

“Yes, my own kind who were basically packing my bags when I announced I was leaving. What do you think, Orchid?”

“From a purely pragmatic perspective the possibility of a reward could come in handy in fighting the Gloom, should we need to hire mercenaries. You saw what was guarding a small sack of coins and some boots. And we do want to buy a house, and honestly not being poor for two minutes would be a nice change. Neither will move in the next week I’m sure, we can probably get there and back before anything major happens.”

“We?”

“Of course. Did you think I was going to let you go alone?”

“You don’t have to come. I haven’t even decided, much less asked you.”

I set a hand on his arm. “You don’t have to ask, Malachite. You’ve stuck with me where I wanted to go all this time. Now I get to return the favor.”

“Aw, is little Morvis making googly eyes at the little turtle?” said the one on the left.

“Disgusting,” said the one on the right. “Is it because no driag would have you?”

“What-” he started to say, claws gouging the table, but I gripped his arm. He looked over at me.

“Gentleman,” I sweetly told them, standing up. “As we’ll be traveling together, I think it’s best if you know my real face.” I snapped my fingers and released the illusion spell covering up my true appearance.

“What... What are you?” said the center one.

“A fairly skilled and experienced magic user,” I told them, gathering mana. With that I caught all three of them with telekinetic magic and threw them towards the ceiling. They cried out as they left their chairs and were pinned helplessly above.

“Hey now!” said the man behind the counter. “None of that!”

I ignored him, looking at the three. "I suggest you remember it, and treat me accordingly. My appearance, though unconventional, is the unfortunate result of my long study of magic and I *will* be treated with the respect my power deserves. Is that clear?"

"Okay, okay!"

I glared at them for a moment, arms crossed, then gestured letting them down. I wanted to drop them, but then they might break the table or chairs they landed on and I didn't want to have to do any repairs. "I'll put the matter behind me, then. If you stay respectful."

"Did you really think I would travel with someone who wasn't amazing!?" Malachite asked them. "I mean, uh, you know..."

"No please, go on."

We were walking back now to the Sleeping Lion, having never made it to the wizard's section at all. We were to meet the three at the docks when we were ready to go, and I figured we should grab all our stuff. It wasn't much, but better to keep it with us so it wasn't stolen while we were away. When we entered the others were already back, Snarly was for some reason in the process of shoving far too much food in his mouth and trying to get Hanz to look at him. Hanz was having no part of it, and rather thankfully gestured to us to sit down.

"No luck?" he asked.

"Something else came up," I told them. "You?"

"One hundred percent successful trip. But you're not going to like it."

"You're not going to like what we have to say either, so there's plenty of that going around. You first."

"Very well. We made contact with Hale, a very strange being currently squatting, as far as I can tell, at an abandoned inn called the Crooked Bone. We had to travel to the western most part of the city to find it, and them."

"They were weird," Snarly said, finally able to talk again. "Even by our 'tandards."

"Yes, I have never observed a wanderer dressed quite in that way. If they had not come recommended to us I would simply suggest leaving for the spirit temple at once, or trying to use what divination magic you have at your command Orchid, despite its limitations. Or seek out a better spell to purchase for yourself. As it is, Snarly badgered them into helping, but it will cost us. They want 'an orb' whatever that means, from the 'frozen hollow in the Copperneck Mountains.' They were not forthcoming with any more details than those, though I do have a rough map."

"An orb?" Malachite asked. "So, what? We pick up any round looking rock and they're honor bound to help us?"

"They claimed to be doing research of some kind, that we were disturbing. I must assume it relates to that research-

"Like 'ow many cockroaches they could fit in'a jar," Snarly wondered. "That place wath filthy."

"Charming," I told them both.

"As I was saying, relates to that research and we will know it when we see it."

"Well, that will have to wait," I told them. "Unless you want to split up. Malachite and I are heading back to his home town. Apparently there's a task only he can do there, and may reward us quite handsomely."

"When do we 'eave?" Snarly immediately asked.

"So we are hitting the pause button, so to speak, on the Jekserah matter and the spreading Gloom?"

"This place will just have to look after itself a few days," I agreed. "And if the place is a smoldering ruin when we return, well, what could we have done anyway?" *Besides she wanted to rule,*

not destroy, though that sentiment could have changed for all I know once the guard chased her out of here.

“Would you like me along, Malachite?” Hanz asked. “I am willing to brave the wilderness alone to retrieve the orb, should we think that the need is urgent. It wasn’t that long ago I was alone, it would not cause me undo concern.”

“No, you better come,” he replied. “I know you can take care of yourself but there’s three draig from my home town here. I would feel better outnumbering them on this journey, if you know what I mean.”

“I ‘hink I only count as ‘alf,” Snarly reminded him.

“Still.”

“Very well. I assume we are leaving immediately?”

“As soon as we get our stuff.”

“I will meet you back here.”

We all packed up our stuff, I sadly packed the boots away as well. If only they had come a day later. I would have liked to have had a chance to talk to someone about how to figure out these boots. On a multi-day journey I could have had lots of time to practice the skill and maybe figure them out. Oh well. I’ll find something else to work on I guess.

We headed to the docks, finding the good ship “Alveindros’ Grace” right where they said. Looking at the vessel I saw the name must have changed just recently, as the old one was simply scratched out. I shook my head, what did it matter what the boat was called? Still, we went aboard and got underway.

The trip to Malachite’s home village was a bit strained. The three showed no interest in him, his adventures since leaving home, or us. They were impressed by my ally spell and we were able to move a bit quicker because of it. I could tell they wanted to simply fly and leave us, but with Hanz and Snarly riding one casting of the spell (I couldn’t stand the smell Snarly gave off but Hanz didn’t care) and me another, we made good time. At night Snarly seemed to take it as his personal mission to get them to lighten up, cracking jokes and doing tumbling routines to try and entertain them. It even worked, two of the three seemed to open up a little and strangely, get along with him. Meanwhile I tried to take Malachite’s mind off it by insisting he help me with more combat training. I had come up with a new technique using Hanz’s arrows, and for the most part it worked out. I could grab a bundle of them, animate them with Mercury magic and have them hover near me, then fire them off one at a time with little effort. This also allowed me to work on my deflection magic if he did get too near me, and we worked on the timing of my newest Neptune spell with Hanz, the two of them going at it while I alternately cast on both of them to make their weapons do magic damage. Of course neither was going all out, but it was a good exercise and had the dual purpose of letting the three draig know what we were capable of should they decide to double cross us in some way.

It was the afternoon of the second day when Malachite looked up at me.

“Hey Orchid?”

“What’s up?”

“Mind using that wonderful divination magic to get me some answers? I’m concerned about this whole dragon thing...”

“I suppose I don’t have to charge you. What would you like to know?”

“My first question is “will my life be in danger if I choose to help Alveindros?”

I cast the spell and got a yes.

“Will I die from saving Alveindros?”

I got a no to that one. *So the dragon doesn't want his heart or anything, that's good to know.*

“That's a relief. Are they telling the truth that the man I know as my father isn't my biological father?”

I got a yes on that one.

“Finally, am I a descendant of a dragon?”

Yes again.

“Wow. Okay, thanks.”

“I actually have one since we're doing this. I'm going to ask if the dragon is worth saving. After all, if he's a despot and the world would be better off without him, may as well just turn back now.”

“Good thinking.”

I got a yes to that one as well.

“I guess it seems we're going to have to go through with this.”

“So it seems.”

I had thought the trip to the town was strained, but that proved to be only a preview of the chilly reception Malachite got when we marched into the place. Our three escorts left us, their job done, flying away to return to their previous lives. His parents were waiting there, but this was no tearful reunion. Driag dressed in what looked like ceremonial robes hastened to bring him to the lair of the dragon, and he made no attempt to stay a second longer than he had to. His parents did seem genuinely concerned for him as we went past, but I figured staying out of it was for the best. This being driag country I didn't bother with a disguise, did these guys know what a human looked like in the first place? Malachite was getting all the attention anyway so we just trailed along behind him. Until we got to the dragon's place, anyway. It was a rocky area to start with, and this just seemed to be another cave, albeit a large enough one for a dragon, going further into the mountainside. There was a lot of verticality in a driag village, as all the inhabitants could fly. So they built up and down mountains, which made sense to leave what little flat land they had for growing crops. Mostly to feed animals, not a lot of driag vegetarians out there.

“Only the chosen one may enter the lair of our great leader, the dragon Alveindros,” said the guard at the center of the line of guards. The others interlocked their spears, creating a barrier of driag in gleaming armor, shields, and weapons.

“Take 'eir dragons seriously here, don't 'hey?” Snarly asked.

“Like he needed protecting, most of the time,” Malachite sighed with a shake of his head. “But now I suppose his pride won't allow him to show weakness to anyone but me. Wait here, I'll go see him.”

“Good luck,” I told him.

“You can wait over there,” said the guard as Malachite went into the cave. He was pointing with his spear off to the side, the path headed down to some stone benches carved into the rock.

“Then I guess that's what we'll do,” I told him. “Come on, they seem jumpy enough we'll leave them to it.”

Moments passed. I had to wonder what sort of impression my young friend was making on his dragon overlord, given his reluctance to come here. He wasn't going to insult a dragon, was he? Even one weakened by sickness could be a problem. And imagine if he said no, the town wouldn't take kindly to the fact their last hope walked away. Even if we had nothing to do with it, that kind of hostility could very easily spill over to us. As the minutes ticked by I got more and more worried, but finally the guard moved aside again and Malachite came walking towards us, a small box in his hands.

“Let’s get this over with,” he told us.

Chapter 15

The sudden but inevitable betrayal

“Whath in ‘he box?” Snarly asked.

“A few things we’ll need,” Malachite told him, opening it. “This is for you, Orchid. He seemed to know you were with me, one of the challenges of getting the hoard open will need a specific spell. He wanted to make sure you had it on hand.” He handed me a scroll, and I unrolled it.

Looks like a Venus spell of some kind. “Okay. I can handle this.”

“As for us getting there, we have this.” He pulled out a small shell, which looked like it had once been the home to a snail. “I just say the command word and we’ll be taken to the place. As obviously he doesn’t want us knowing the exact location.”

“Obviously.” *It’s probably protected against teleportation in some way, as once I’ve seen the inside... Well, once someone with teleport magic has seen the inside, they could just go there. But it at least obscures the path, doesn’t it? And I could always get teleport magic, were I a thief, given the cost of the spell would be a fraction of what I could pull out of the hoard. But we’re not going straight there, I guess we still have to get in the hard way, meaning we can’t go there directly. Just how many protections are there going to be on this place?*

“Are we leaving at once?” Hanz asked.

“Might as well not delay,” he agreed. “Alveindros isn’t looking so good. We better get this done. Everyone join hands.”

We did, leaving Malachite one hand free to hold the shell. “Lair,” he intoned, because you have to be dramatic at moments like this. The world around us twisted and we found ourselves elsewhere in the mountains. We were looking around as Malachite tossed the shell but we all turned as a huge booming sound came to us from higher up the path we were on.

“Uh, whath ‘hat noith?” Snarly asked. “Are we about to be cruthed by a landthide?”

“The sound is more reminiscent of a battering ram,” Hanz told us.

“Wait, you don’t think...” Malachite trailed off. He set the box down, carefully so there must still be something inside. “Oh that’s just what we need.” He took a few running steps and launched himself into the air.

“Think what?” Snarly yelled after him.

“That the entrance to the hoard is under attack, a rival dragon knew where it was the whole time and is trying to get to whatever this cure is before we do,” I explained. “Thus insuring the death of the local dragon, thus opening up the other vaults so that dragon can have all the treasure and the town for themselves. Come on.”

“Right.”

We raced, at least the others did, I kept up as best I could, up the path towards the noise. It kept ringing out at intervals, and Malachite was circling and pointing. It was a faint hope he hadn’t been seen, but I cast my invisibility spell on us as we got closer, at least hoping to take them by surprise. As we reached the door I could see five figures in blue robes directing a huge, flaming, dragon looking battering ram which, when slammed against the stone door in front of them made the sound we had been hearing all along. One of them was looking around and seemed to be urging the others to hurry.

“Isn’t that Gerval, one of our guides?” Snarly’s voice came from my right.

“Wait, he’s had a name this whole time?” I asked.

“Who doesn’t ‘ave a name?”

“I guess he got spooked and didn’t see a chance to take Malachite out on our trip down here. There’s a lot of magic on those guys, they’re prepared for a fight,” I told the others, who I hoped were still nearby. *I see now why he hurried away so fast, but the others did too. Are they hanging around*

somewhere, or where they just in a hurry to get back to their lives now that the job of bringing us here was done?

"I hesitate to mention it," Hanz asked, "I predict you will react negatively, but it must be asked. Can you target the battering ram with your fire spell?"

"No, it's a spell, not actually something burning."

"So we must do this the hard way."

"Do what this? You don't know if those people up there are doing this of their own free will. They could be under a spell. You can't just kill them!"

"However, we also cannot let them gain entrance to the vault. They must be stopped and I have few non-lethal means at my disposal."

"I suppose that's true enough. Fine. I'll make the first move against Gerbil or whatever his name is. Hopefully he's the spellcaster and that will make the others more vulnerable. But try not to kill them, okay? I'm looking at you, Snarly. Think of your soul."

"I'll try."

"Okay, here we go." I got close enough to see my target and gathered mana. Pushing it into the spell I gestured and he went flying, bouncing off the stone wall they were trying to break through. The others whirled, the battering ram going slack but not hitting the ground as Hanz lasered one. He ignored it and started casting, so I quickly cast my knockout spell which took him in the chest. He flew backwards and went still.

Malachite took all this as the signal to attack and screamed out of the sky with his sword out, cleaving into the traitor driag and slicing him in two.

No, no, no! Malachite what are you doing?

Snarly appeared behind another one, stabbing him in the back and causing him to cry out before he dropped. Another started casting a spell at him, I hastily suppressed it with my own magic. By that time Hanz had gotten his bow and arrow out and another one went down. Malachite whirled on the final man standing, slicing into him with a fury.

"NO!" I cried, again casting my knockout spell as I ran towards them. The magical beam hit him in the chest and he went down. I noticed that the battering ram spell was gone as I started healing the guy, closing up his wound.

"What are you doing?" Malachite asked me.

"They could be controlled by magic. Or blackmailed into doing this, you don't know. You can't just go around killing people. Even if they are trying to break into a vault owned by a rival dragon."

"You're right," he put his sword point down, "I just saw that traitorous driag and something snapped. Hey did you see me slice him in two? That was pretty cool huh?"

"Pretty messy," Hanz countered, appearing next to us. "We should secure these men before proceeding."

We cleaned up the remains of the driag as best we could, I sculpted a grave site for him in the stone and shoved him in with magic, then closed it up.

"Don't know why we would bury a traitor," Malachite grumbled.

"It's not our place to judge his soul," I reminded him. "I do this for *our* souls. Showing respect to the dead helps keep us from falling into darkness."

"You do seem to consider the state of your soul more than others," Hanz observed. "At least more than these others..." He indicated Malachite and Snarly.

"I'll be alive long after either Snarly or Malachite are gone," I told them. "You might outlive me, if you can keep getting parts or whatever, but most won't. That means I have that much more time

to do good or ill in this world. The path through darkness may be long for some, but it would be much, much longer for me. I have to be careful.”

“I see.”

Meanwhile Snarly was tying the humans up, I had directed him to bind their hands tightly as well as their mouths.

“It will keep them from doing physical magic, at least. Now if they know Pluto spells they might be able to just phase through the ropes and escape, but we don’t have time for anything else. We have to secure this place and bring back the... How are we getting back?”

“Oh right!” Malachite went and grabbed the box from where he dropped it, getting out the spell scroll and another shell. “This one is for the return trip.”

“Fair enough. Let’s get this over with.”

We were now faced with a large stone door, unremarkable save for an engraved shape about halfway up.

“Looks like the paw of a dragon,” Hanz announced, looking up at it from a few paces back.

“Do dragons ‘ave paws?” Snarly asked.

“They don’t have hands. Or flippers. Or tentacles. Or hooves. Or-”

“I get the point!”

“Wait, I have hands!” Malachite insisted, holding up his hands. “So why doesn’t a dragon?”

“Perhaps this discussion can wait? Let us focus on this lock for now.”

“Fine. I see blood up there, dried blood on the *paw* print.” He looked at Hanz sideways as he said “paw.” “You think only someone of his bloodline can enter because it requires some kind of blood test?”

“Then why not just bleed a little into a jar, send a trusted, local, agent here, have them smear the blood on their hand, and open it that way?” I asked.

“Perhaps the door itself somehow extracts the blood? It must be fresh?” Hanz put forward.

“I’ll try that!” Malachite flapped up there and slapped his hand on the door. Nothing happened. “Nope, didn’t work.” He landed with a thump. “Maybe the spell?”

“Let me take a look.” I unrolled the spell and looked it over. “No, says here it’s for shrinking. Unless there’s some mouse hole we actually have to go through and the paw print is a misdirection?” We looked the door over and the area to both sides but found nothing.

“So it has to be blood on the door?” Malachite asked. “But like you said that’s sort of easy to defeat. I mean work around, if he wanted to send someone else here.”

I could only shrug. He took one of Snarly’s daggers and cut himself, again flying up and smacking the indentation. This seemed to do the trick, the doors could now be pushed open. They did that after I healed his hand up. But we didn’t make it far into the hallway when we were stopped by another wall, this one that did seem to have a small hole at the base.

“Ah, shrink spell!” Malachite announced. “Go to it.”

How good a spell caster is this dragon that they can shrink from dragon size to mouse size? I would have said the smallest a dragon could get was the size of a... raccoon? Hard to say how small this hole is in this light though. I guess they could be big enough to- What? “What are you...” Snarly, with no sort of warning whatsoever had thrown himself at the hole and was trying to wiggle through it. The other two shared a look and a shrug, they had no idea what he was doing either. It almost seemed like he would be stuck, but with one final wiggle his tail vanished and he was gone. We all bent over trying to look through.

“Are you dead?” Malachite called.

“I’m fine!” Snarly called back. “There doesn’t seem to be any trap or anything.”

“That’s good?”

“Wait, I wath wrong. There’s all kinds of trapth! Yay!”

“Well don’t move until we get through, honestly, what were you thinking?”

“Jes trying to help!”

“What is *wrong* with you?”

“Agreed, more help if he stayed out of trouble,” Hanz grumbled. “Well?” they asked, looking at me.

“Yeah, going to skip the tedious process of trying to work this spell out,” I announced. “Especially as we’re on the clock as Snarly could be killed at any moment by traps.” *Not that it wouldn’t be his own fault at this point but still.* “I think I’ll just try sculpting-”

“I disarmed the first trap!” Snarly called back to us.

“What did I just say?” Malachite yelled through. “Stop messing around, Snarly. You want to get killed?”

“I’ll be fine! Ith no trouble.”

“You don’t know that!”

“Sure I do. Ith easy to disarm trapth. See, this one ith thimple too. I juth-”

There was a yip, a flash, an inrush of air, and silence.

“Snarly?” Malachite called. “Uh, you still okay there buddy?”

“...”

“Hello?”

“...”

“Well, he’s dead. What were you saying Orchid?”

“Do you think he was disintegrated?” Hanz asked. “I would hate to think the little guy suffered overmuch.”

“I’ve no idea. We’ll have to get in there and see. But these are probably imbued items, magical traps don’t really exist otherwise. It’ll be gone by now that it’s been triggered, unless someone really spent a lot of time and money making it permanent, so I have no idea what-”

“Shh. Do you hear something?” Malachite asked, cocking his head.

We all listened.

“Someone screaming?” Hanz decided. “It sounds like it’s getting closer.”

“You don’t suppose...” Malachite mused, then his eyes got wide and he dashed outside.

“Suppose what?” I asked, a little annoyed. But he took off into the sky. A moment later he landed again, Snarly in his arms.

“Huh?” Hanz and I asked.

“I got put up intha sky!” Snarly announced. “Glad you heard me shouting.”

“Yeah, have you learned your lesson?”

“Absolutely!” he promised. “Thankth for saving me.”

“No problem. If we could get on with this?”

“I’ll get back to work!” he announced, and sprinted back into the cave.

“What? No. Come back here you little freak!” Malachite raced after him but Snarly was already wiggling through the hole again.

“Something wrong with that boy,” Hanz announced. “One too many blows to the head, no doubt.” He tapped his head. “Perhaps I should perform a medical scan- if I can get him to sit still long enough.”

“Come on, before he hurts himself.” I headed into the cave again followed by the others and cast my stone sculpting spell on the wall itself. Then I simply enlarged the hole, shoving the rock to either side. When it was big enough I bowed them through.

Hanz went first, followed by Malachite, and I was about to head in when an ear splitting noise erupted inside the chamber.

Is he trying to get himself, or us, killed? Is he doing this on purpose for some reason? That can be the only explanation for this. He was near a tile on the floor, backing away with his ears covered, so I figured that was the source of the noise. I had to cast my suppression spell wordlessly, I couldn't hear myself over the noise, but got it off and there was silence again. Snarly jumped on the tile until it broke.

"Maybe leave someone else to take the lead?" Hanz suggested.

"What?" Snarly shouted. "Can't hear you yet!" He turned and took another step forward. Then jumped back as flames erupted into a wall of fire. I could see he was badly burned and he scrambled backwards away from the fire. He finally bumped into me and looked up at me with pleading eyes. "Ow!"

"You brought this on yourself," I told him. "I don't know what's up with you today but you need to snap out of it. This is the second time you've almost been killed in the last two minutes. Instead of us all looking the place over from a distance and coming up with a plan you just rushed in. That forced Malachite and now me to go out of our way to save you. Has it sunk in yet?"

"Yes!" he squeaked. "Please, it hurts!"

"Yes, I can imagine. You took a bunch of flames to the face." I raised my hands to start casting.

It took several castings to heal his body, face, and tail of all things, but finally he was back on his feet and I suppressed the fire as well, making it wink out. Hanz broke the tile this time, and we were now to the other side of the hallway. This appeared to be a door with another paw print on it, this time with a heart in the middle of it. Malachite got a horrified look on his face, stared at me with wide eyes, and was about to say something.

"This may mean the soul," Hanz decided, looking up at it.

"I don't know if I'm inside your heart but would you what did you say?" His head swiveled to look at Hanz.

"Yes, looking at it more closely this symbol often refers to the soul, or the essence of a person. That's why there's no blood on this one, the condition for opening it is more ethereal. Fascinating."

"So I just have to touch it?"

"Indeed. That may be why the dragon did not simply send a lackey out with some blood to retrieve the item when he knew he was ill. Why it can only be you. He knew that even if the agent with the blood got through all those traps, they would be stopped by this door in the end anyway."

"Okay, setting aside what you were saying," I told Malachite, "that's still wrong. You don't have a piece of that dragon's soul, you have your own. How is it, the magical lock I'm talking about now, going to go up the line and determine you're related?"

"You think hard about that, I'm just going to touch it."

"And hope it isn't another trap that just stops your heart," I muttered.

"What was that?" But he didn't wait, slapping the print on the door. There was the familiar click and the door could now be pushed open. We stood gaping at the treasure inside. I could only shake my head at the waste. Lots of gold coins in a mound on the floor, fine jewelry, candlesticks, artwork, all sort of just sitting around. In a vault. Not doing anything, not benefiting society or being used to fund research into magic or lost technology. Just collecting dust. *Imagine having so much wealth you can just throw a bunch of it in a vault and ignore it. Lock it away so not only can you not look at it when you want, no one else can make use of it either. No wonder we have to keep mining gold and mines are running out all over the place it's just being hoarded like this.* "Well, here we are," I said at last. "You

know what you're looking for, presumably. Let's get it and get out of here. Snarly? Don't. Touch. Anything. Not a single coin, you hear me?"

"Why jes me?"

Chapter 16

Oh boy were we suckered

The object we were after was quite obvious, in looking the room over. There was a pedestal in the center of the room that held what looked like a clay disk, about 15cm across with a skull embossed on it.

“And this object is a curative object, despite the skull I clearly see on it?” Hanz asked skeptically.

“That’s what I’ve been told,” Malachite agreed, grabbing it. “I see you reaching for something Snarly.”

“I jes wanted a clother look at ‘omthing, I wasn’t gonna take it.”

“Uh huh. Just back away, that’s it. We’ve gotten what we came for. Let’s go.”

I hung back as Malachite went for the box. “Go on ahead,” I told the others. “I’ll stay here and secure this place again, as best as I can until Alveindros can get here and decide what he wants to do.”

“I’m not sure I’m comfortable with that,” he admitted. “I hope this cures the old lizard instantly but what if it doesn’t? You could be here for days.”

“True. But as I neither need to eat or drink I am suited to the task.”

“Why bother at all?” Snarly asked. “Itsh not our problem we were jes supposed to get the thing.”

“That was before we knew the location of the place was compromised,” I told him, gesturing to the men that were tied up. “I won’t leave this place unguarded. I can’t. If we leave and another group shows up and cleans the vault out, after we so helpfully made that possible, how angry do you think the dragon is going to be? Do *you* want an angry dragon after you? I don’t. There would be no way to prove we didn’t make off with his treasure even magically. You know my magic can make me look like anyone, he would just believe we were framing others to get away with it. He would come here, see an empty vault, become enraged, and go after the people he knew were just there. That’s us. Honestly, I don’t mind staying until you can get an answer. Take these fellows and go. Hopefully they can be checked over for magical compulsion or whatever and not just killed. Let the town decide what to do with them.”

“I believe you are forgetting an important point,” Hanz spoke up. “I also do not need human sustenance. As I too am concerned with you remaining here on your own I will also offer to stay. The two of us can work together to secure the location and defend it, should more rival townspeople arrive to try looting it.”

“Oh. Thanks Hanz. If you’re sure, I was willing to stay alone.”

“But there is no need for you to do so.”

“That makes me feel a little better,” Malachite admitted. “He can always make us another shell if we need one. You’re sure you’re going to be okay even if it’s days you have to stay here? You’re not immune to the cold and it’s pretty cold here.”

“I won’t exactly be ‘here’ once everything is set up. And I can warm up in the cave. I’m sure there’s something I can burn around here if I needed to. Just get back, get Alveindros healthy again, and when he’s up to it get him here to figure out if he wants to move this vault or secure it differently or what. It’s the best solution.”

He stood there a moment, considering. “I guess you’re right. And maybe it’ll mean you’ll get a separate reward from him, for putting his vault first over your own comfort. Okay, up you get fellows, we’re heading back. Snarly, you’re not staying here are you?”

“No way! Itsh too cold here and I’m hungry.”

“Of course you are. Come on.” Everyone got in a circle and he took out the next shell. “See you two in a bit. Don’t die or anything.”

“It’ll be fine.”

“I hope you’re right. Return.” They vanished.

“Okay then,” I chortled, rubbing my hands together. “Let’s get this place secured a bit, shall we?”

“Is there anything I can do specifically?” Hanz asked.

Do you have a dazzling array of magic at your command? “Uh, probably not?”

“Then I shall simply find a good vantage point and watch for any intruders.” They moved off but I called them back.

“Hold on a second. I can maintain a spell or two, I’m not doing any sort of battle magic at the moment. Stay here and I’ll put the spell on you to allow your use of the light weapon without end.”

“Ah, that would increase my effectiveness many times. Very well.”

I nodded and got to work. First I sculpted the hole closed completely, leaving the previous entrance as a solid, blank wall. Then I got out Athame, having her grow to dragon sized. Changing maintenance of the spell to the pendent I then cast my disguise spell on her, making her look like a dragon. Thankfully this hallway was quite large, but then, how would the dragon have gotten in here to set all the traps and store their treasure otherwise? So of course he would fit. I then backed off and gathered ambient mana, taking all the time I could to cast my webbing spell over the entrance. I could get quite a lot with extra mana shoved into the spell, and was pleased to see the entire entrance covered with sticky webs. *This will slow them down, and give me something to cast my fire spell on, should it become needed. I would hate to do so, but if there’s ten or twenty people that show up it’ll be my only option.* I then put my technology powering spell on Hanz, and they went to go hide somewhere while I stepped into the astral. The cold went away and I sat down to meditate and wait, hoping my ruse with the Alveindros “clone” or the webs would keep anyone else away. If they scryed the area they would see a dragon wandering around and even if not, if they somehow got past the web before I could get there it would attack them. Not with claws and fire like a real dragon but the size of her would make up for any deficiency there. I just wished I had seen the real thing so I could make the illusion more convincing. I was counting on someone peeking in, seeing a dragon, and stopping the spell right away in case “the dragon” had countermeasures going. Thus not taking any time to study the dragon and say “hey that’s a different dragon than I expected!”

We waited.

It seemed to be several hours later, it has hard to say where I was, but I perked up as another group appeared out of nowhere. They were looking around not like people there to loot the place, but as though looking for someone. Me, perhaps? They seemed to be dressed in the colors of Alveindros but that didn’t mean anything. I noticed Malachite in the crowd and let go of my dimensional spell, coming back into phase with reality. He noticed me and waved me over. It was getting dark at that point, it really had been some time.

“Alveindros is healed,” he announced. “But still weak. He agreed he needed to probably move this vault now that the location is known, and thanked us for thinking of it. These soldiers from the village have volunteered to guard it until he can get around to doing it himself. He’s not exactly thrilled about more people knowing the location but as he has to move it anyway, it’s fine. We can head back.” He held up another shell.

“Sounds okay to me,” I agreed. “Ah, here’s Hanz.”

We found ourselves back in the village square, and Malachite took us to the town hall. “We actually hid the prisoners,” he told us. “We didn’t want the draigs here tearing them apart. So they’re still alive Orchid, I knew you would want to know.”

“They took their fate into their own hands,” I explained. “The soul of whoever decides their fate is the one in peril, not myself.”

“I suppose.”

“We’re back, Valris,” Malachite called to a robed draig. “He’s a high priest or some such. He’s in charge anyway.”

“Nice to meet you,” I told him. *Where’s Snarls?*

“We’re having a feast in your honor tonight,” Valris told us excitedly. “It won’t be long until it’s ready. Please, this way! You can refresh yourselves and be seated, the food will be ready shortly.”

“An interesting irony,” Hanz whispered to me. “A feast for a party of four and only two of the four eat.”

“I *could* eat,” I reminded them. “But eating means the other thing and that’s always a pain. Especially for those of us on the road most of the time. Maybe I’ll just have a bit of cake or something and retire. It’s been a long day.”

“Stay to honor our hosts, yes, that much would be expected,” they agreed.

We, or at least I, freshened up with some water and went to find the others. They were seated already, and Valris seemed to be waiting for me. As I sat he leaned towards us. “I wanted to talk to you about those people you brought back,” he said in a low voice. “They can’t really stay here and executing them would only make Isincala even more hostile to us. Now that her plan has failed to curse our master we don’t want to make her any angrier. Would you be willing to escort them back to her village? It’s not that far away, and could be seen as a diplomatic mission.”

“You want to send me on a diplomatic mission?” Malachite scoffed. “Have you seen me?”

“Yes, believe me, it’s not my first choice,” he admitted. “But you have the best chance of not simply being killed on sight. Dragon rivalries, never pretty. They spill over onto the followers of the dragons as well, as though it wasn’t simply a quirk of being born in one place or another that determines what dragon a person follows.”

“Much like religion on Earth, before the Chaos Moon reduced us to a single continent,” Hanz remarked. “And opened the Heaven gates and such.”

“I suppose if that’s all you wanted,” I told him. “Just to drop them off, make sure they ‘get home’ safely. We do have other things to be doing this was only supposed to take a few days.” *Hopefully the Gloom cultists haven’t made any moves on the town.*

“It won’t take long, believe me. And we may want to use this as a sort of peace offering, maybe improve relations? I just figured I would run it by you all. If it’s not a hard no I’ll talk to some others, see what we can come up with. I don’t need an answer now.”

“We’ll be paid extra for the service?” Malachite asked shrewdly.

“Of course!”

“We can discuss it tomorrow then,” I agreed. “I think the food is ready.”

And it was! I had a small amount to eat and drink and asked where I might take a room for the night. Valris directed me to a nearby inn he said was expecting our party and would be complementary for our stay here. I wished everyone a good night, and headed up to bed.

I woke up refreshed the next morning, and headed out alone to see the city. I didn't mean to, but none of my party were in evidence in the common room so I took my pack and went exploring. I asked around, and it turned out there was an expert in town that assisted Alveindros in cataloging any magical artifacts he wanted to place in his hoard, a priestess Agela. I found her easily enough and with my status as one of the saviors of her lord she was more than happy to give me some tutoring in the basics of feeling out magical artifacts to tell what they did. She informed me the boots I had picked up did allow one to walk through fire, which was good to know. To be technical about it they had the spell of Elemental Protection: Fire woven into them, which I did manage to discover on my own under her guidance. So I knew she wasn't lying, and that I had the basics of the skill down and could practice it on my own. I thanked her, tried to pay but she wouldn't accept anything, and I headed back to the inn to see if everyone was up so we could talk about what Valris had asked about the night before.

"There you are," Snarly told me, perking up as I walked inside. "Malachite is askin' about you. I think he drank th' much last night."

I barked a laugh. "Don't know what he wants from me apart from a kick in the shins, but okay. What room is he staying in?"

He told me and I slipped into my friend's room. He was still laying in bed, holding his head.

"Who's there?" he weakly asked.

"I would say your delicate flower, but you seem to be the delicate one this morning. It's almost noon and you're still in bed? That's late even for you."

"May have had a little too much last night," he admitted. "Everyone is just so friendly and wanted to drink with me."

Naturally. You cured their dragon. "Glad to see your hometown doesn't hold any grudges. And now that it's out in the open you can just be yourself."

"Not so loud. Do you have a spell that can help?"

"A hangover? Sure, there's a spell."

"Use it please?"

"It's called, I'll go and get you a glass of water." *Or maybe a bucket? But you get to empty it after you drink the water and do the other thing.*

"Uggghhhhhh. Don't joke."

I laughed. "Ah, my fiend. Every moment of pain is a lesson. Let me get you that water." *Honestly, you drink a weak poison for hours and expect nothing to happen the next day? Never could come to grips with why someone would do that.*

He stumbled down into the common room not too long after that, looking miserable. Snarly ordered himself some lunch but Malachite just wanted more water. Hanz and myself of course wanted nothing. Snarly was going on about all the great things he had gotten to eat last night, making Malachite groan, when Valris walked in and spotted us.

"Ah, good afternoon!" he greeted us. "I've come with your payment for the job!" He tossed a small coin pouch on the table and Malachite winced away from it. I rolled my eyes and grabbed it up, looking inside. There was a pathetically small number of coins in the pouch. I narrowed my eyes, about to complain that saving a dragon's life was only worth *this*? But he went on. "And to say thank you for accepting the diplomatic mission. Will you be leaving after lunch? I'll have the three 'guests' brought to the edge of town in that case."

"The what now?" I said instead.

"Did he not tell you?" Valris asked, seemingly with genuine concern. "Malachite accepted the mission last night. You are to return the three guests to their home village, and hopefully bring back an

ambassador to open relations with our town. All this hostility must be put to a close. This is the perfect opportunity, we can't let it go."

"You agreed to this?" I asked Malachite.

"Did I?" he wondered. "I don't recall."

"You seemed so thrilled to be asked last night though."

"I'm sure," I told him harshly. "You didn't notice him drinking rather a lot last night?"

"Not that I noticed, no."

"Of course. He doesn't speak for the group, but on the other hand if it can improve relations between these two towns I suppose we are honor bound to try."

"Let us not forget the 'guests'," Hanz reminded me. "They would no doubt be killed if discovered here."

"Indeed!" he quickly agreed. "And I wouldn't ask you to do it for free. I'll almost double what you've been given already. I can't be quite as generous because this comes out of the town's money, not my lord's coffers."

Generous? This tiny amount of coin? Sure, sure. Act like I didn't see the hoard, see how far that gets you. I mean I know dragons are loathe to part with any of their treasure but is this the amount their life is worth? Seems they don't value themselves very highly- or this guy skimmed a bit off the top?
"If I am going to walk around the countryside with a bunch of draig who were trying to kill me a day ago I'll need to do some divination. I haven't said yes. Come back in an hour and you'll have our answer."

"Of course, whatever you need. I will return then." He got up and left.

Jerk. He knew what he was doing. There's no doubt in my mind. But I suppose it has to be done?

"Sorry about this," Malachite offered. "I really don't remember much about last night."

"It's fine," I sighed. "Let me think a moment."

I come up with some questions to ask the universe, and threw them out there.

"Will the followers of Isincala be hostile to us when we come near their village?"

No

"After returning the three captives, will the followers of Isincala be willing to speak to us about furthering relations with the village of Alviendros?"

No

"Huh," I mused, coming out of the magic. "That's a minor surprise."

"So we are going then?" Hanz asked.

I took a deep breath. "So it seems. They won't be hostile towards us, but at the same time it seems they won't want to talk about improving relations. Best we'll get is just seeing them safely home."

"Tomorrow," croaked Malachite. "I can't go anywhere today. Sorry."

"Just try not to let it happen again?" *I mean really, how many times does this have to happen before you learn?*

"I'll try."

We gave our answer to Valris who seemed quite pleased and said leaving the next morning was not only no problem, he would have recommended it anyway. As it took about a whole day to walk to the next village we didn't want to arrive in the dead of night. He gave us a map, told us the 'guests' would be waiting just outside town after sunrise the next day, and thanked us for this chance.

I guess he's just trying his best. He didn't want us to say no and took advantage. But as the magic says they won't attack us on sight, maybe it'll be fine. Could be a cultural thing I'm not aware of or maybe he really just didn't know how drunk Malachite was.

Malachite drank more water and went back up to bed, leaving me shaking my head. *Why create a drink that does this to you in the first place? Doesn't make sense to me.* I gave Hanz and Snarly one of the gold pieces from the bag, as we discussed putting the rest into buying a home when we got back to Gloomhaven. At least they could buy supplies and anything else they found around here. I then had the rest of the day to wait around, and basically just walked around seeing how the draig lived their lives here. I spent some more time practicing my new artifact reading skill, and went to bed. It was probably going to be a long day tomorrow.

Chapter 17
Making a Home

I took extra food with me just in case the ‘guests’ hadn’t been well taken care of, and wonder of wonders I was correct. They revealed to us, the next day when we took over guarding them, that they hadn’t been. They seemed quite relieved and a little surprised when I handed out the drumsticks, still warm from the kitchens. They gobbled them down as we told them what was happening, and they agreed that as we were heading back to their village, and there were no hard feelings on our end, (which was only partly a lie) they didn’t have to be tied up for the way back. Naturally if they tried anything we would respond in kind, and they said they wouldn’t there was no point. We weren’t a dragon’s hoard now were we? No, we were not. So with a casting to get Athame back for the trip we were off.

“Why *are* you escorting us back?” one of them asked after we had walked only a few minutes.

“Yes, we could easily fly,” said another. “Save you the trip. Your reception there will be a bit... chilly.”

“Oh, good one!” said the third.

“Don’t start with the ice puns just because you think they haven’t heard them,” said the first. “Sorry about him.”

They follow an ice dragon. Of course.

“Wow, talk about the cold shoulder.”

“Stop!”

“I see you telling me to stop-”

“Icy, good one,” said the second one.

“Don’t encourage him!”

“Anyway, to answer your question. It’s a long shot, my magic could always be wrong,” I told them, “but there is a small chance this will serve to at least reduce tensions between your two people. We have to make the attempt. To do that, we have to be seen escorting you and you can tell your people that while we could have killed you in your assault of the vault, we didn’t. Malachite was a bit overzealous, yes, and that resulted in death, but that’s not the *town’s* fault. Your leaders told you to assault the place, it didn’t work out. The town responds with not killing you. Okay, most of them didn’t know you were there. But it has to start somewhere.”

“Huh. Well, don’t say I didn’t warn you. You’re on thin ice.”

“Stop!”

“Dude, chill.”

“Can I punch him? Just a little?”

“Snow joke, just trying to lighten the- hey stop!”

It took much of the day to get there, and we saw four, yes four, guards at the gate that led into the ice dragon’s domain. All in white robes, and carrying weapons that looked more like ice than steel. They called us to a halt and demanded to know what our business was.

“These three assaulted the vault of the dragon Alveindros,” Malachite told them. “They were captured and in his wisdom and compassion the great dragon has allowed them to return to their lives. In exchange we wish for a diplomat to come with us and begin negotiations to end this cold war.”

“Don’t you start,” grumbled the one driag.

“He’s fine again, by the way,” Hanz told them. “You can tell your leaders their plot failed, his curse has been broken. He’s at full strength and ready to defend the town.”

“This true?” the guard asked, looking past the three.

“Well, I don’t know about the curse,” said the one. “But there was a vault and we got caught. They let us go and now here we are.”

“Fine. They can go in. No outsiders allowed in the town.”

“What? We came all this way!” Malachite protested.

“And now you can go all the way back,” the guard retorted. “Have a safe journey.” They totally didn’t meant that last part.

He looked to me, and the three driag. “Go on I guess,” he told them, when I just shrugged. “But please at least try to tell someone in charge this weird feud is pointless?”

“Can’t promise anything,” said the third one. He turned to me. “Thanks for the food, and for holding back your friends here. I noticed you didn’t want us dead, I’m sure we would have been if you had.”

“Quite possibly,” I agreed. “We did get the drop on you.”

“Yeah. See ya.” The guards called for the gate to be opened, but tensed up as the three were met on the other side by even more guards, who led them away.

Wow, they take their security seriously here I guess?

They relaxed a little, as the gate closed again and the shooed us away.

We went back down the path a bit and Malachite turned to me. “Are we just leaving?”

“What are we going to do, press the issue?” I asked him. “How do you see that turning out?”

“I hate to go back empty handed.”

“As do I, but we can’t antagonize them. They’re just doing their job, and if policy is no outsiders, well... I mean look at the difference between the two villages. This one has an entrance on a winding mountain path with a real gate and a number of guards. I mean how many people are coming up here, anyway? Doesn’t make sense. But there they are, so they must take their isolation seriously. You want to attack them or something? What would that get us?”

“We’re not that ‘tupid, are we?” Snarly asked.

“We are not! Such an action would be foolish in the extreme,” Hanz agreed. “Can you even imagine if we picked a fight with them? Or were overly rude to them for no reason? I mean they’re just doing their jobs.”

“I wouldn’t have helped, we would be to blame,” I mused. “We are the trespassers here.”

“Exactly. The guards on the other side of the gate would rush to get reinforcements, and pretty soon the whole town would be after us,” Malachite decided. “It isn’t like the vault, they were just standing there. In fact they were perfectly reasonable, it’s their whole job to keep people like us out, did we expect to be welcomed with open arms?”

“Not likely,” Hanz said.

“At least nothing happened, we’re all safe, and we can get back,” I told them. “Catch a boat back to the city and start looking into houses!”

Which is what we did. Valris was disappointed but not surprised to hear we had been turned away like that, saying that perhaps the guard had been increased because they expected a reprisal by Alveindros. We decided that made a lot of sense, more sense than stationing so many guards at the gate normally. Of course tensions may be even higher now, as they may think the return of their people was some kind of trick.

“So you can’t win,” I remarked. “Anything you do will be seen as some plot to lull them into a false sense of security before you strike.”

He sighed. "It's what we've been brought to. I can only hope your actions today will reduce tensions when they realize we are not retaliating. Thank you again, and I wish you a good journey home."

The journey home was uneventful, and we headed back to the inn to get some proper rest. *I really do need to buy a teleportation spell. Something that can help us move around quicker, anyway.*

The next day I stood in front of a house with a for sale sign on it, one we had gone past many times on our way to and from the western gate of the city. It wasn't in the best of shape, but it was made of stone so I figured I could fix it up fairly easily. It was two stories, had a small yard, but more importantly looked to have a workshop attached to it. The sign listed a contact and where to go, it seemed to be the Mayor's office across town.

Well, on the one hand one wouldn't buy the first horse one saw nor the first cow. So I should probably look for other places in the area to compare them. Yes. That's what a responsible prospective home owner would do. And so I did. A bit of divination magic to guide me led me to another, much nicer looking place a fair walk away from the first. Still in the "craftsman" district so it was of a similar design, it just looked better taken care of. The sign here said I should ask at the bank for more details, and decided maybe the previous owners had gotten into some kind of trouble with the bank and had the place taken away from them.

Better make sure no one will be pounding on the door some evening demanding back taxes or something from people that aren't even there any more...

We had discussed buying versus renting on the way back, and Malachite was of the mind to simply spend the gold we had gotten from our last job rather than trickle it out a little bit at a time as renters. Basically, while he would be sad to see so much money gone to one thing, he hadn't even had the coins a week ago so he would not have time to get used to the idea of having them. In essence, trading the dragon's life for a house, and really wasn't finding the lair the first step of building a treasure hoard? This also made us safer, buying the house outright meant we didn't have to worry about paying the rent on time if we were away on a mission. It would be *ours*. We could reshape it with my spells if needed, and if we did get something to fix up we could probably sell it for a profit when we ultimately went our separate ways. (Or just pass it on to Snarly so he always had a place to live)

I spent the rest of the morning at the two places, getting information about the two properties, and then part of the early afternoon getting a tour. Naturally I inquired about other properties, but they were either too small, single family homes with not enough bedrooms, or too lavish. These two seemed to be the best fit, and be in our price range. The one place was better kept but both were unfurnished. Rather plain. The first house I had seen still had a lot of garbage kicking around in the workshop area and it all smelled pretty bad, but hopefully cleaning it up would take care of that. It was on the market for about 15 suns, 5 less than we had. We could fix it up and furnish it with the leftover amount easily, especially if what I was thinking could be done. The nicer place had been cleaned out, but it wasn't so much nicer to be worth an extra sun. At least, I didn't think so. I thanked both people for their time and told them I would be in touch.

That night I spread the paperwork on the table in the inn and tried to get the others interested in a discussion about our new potential home. Reaction was... muted.

"I used to live on ta 'treets," Snarly said first. "Anything with a 'oof is a 'tep up."

"I require very little in the way of 'shelter,' Hanz said next. "I do not need a room with a bed like an organic being, simply a place to put anything I do not wish to carry around with me."

"I'm clueless," Malachite said finally. "Whatever you think is best, Orchid. This was your idea and I trust you."

"I just don't want any complaining later," I told them. "We saved up the money for this collectively-" *sort of* "-so I want you all to be happy about it. If you're sure you don't care that's fine."

"Which one are you thinking?" he asked. "The more expensive one?"

I shook my head. "Just the opposite. I can easily fix it up and possibly furnish it at least partly, on my own. Thus, when the time comes for the townspeople to carry us, on their shoulders no less, to our new palace in thanks for saving the town from the Gloom or whatever, we can sell our old place for a profit. It being fixed up, and everything."

"I do like the way you think," he agreed. "Their shoulders, huh?"

"Singing our praises the entire way."

"Whatever you think is best."

"In other news, we checked in with the city guard," Hanz told us, "and Jekserah hasn't been spotted since we ran her out. No rumors of her location at all, and anyone associated with her either isn't talking or has also vanished. So at least she's not here assaulting the place with an undead army, but she's probably planning something. We'll have to get back to looking for the hitherto requested orb if we want that wanderer's help."

I slept on it, visited each house to look around the grounds again, and made my decision. I headed to the Mayor's office with Malachite in tow, but after handing me the sack with the gold in it he backed off.

"I'll just screw something up," he worried. "I know it. And seeing all that money just *handed* to someone?" He shuddered. "I couldn't take it. You get in there and do what you have to do, I'll wait here."

"Okay..."

The process of buying the place was fairly straightforward. There was a lot of paperwork to sign of course, but not as much as if we were renting the place or trying to get a loan. I would have had to talk to the bank for that beforehand, but there was no need in this case. The man working with me made sure there would be no problems with the city coming after us for money or anything like that. He did want to know things like my source of income and that I knew when taxes were due, their original problem with the previous owners. I told him stonework and bounty hunting, making him look at me pretty funny. I was "disguised" as just myself, without my pointy crystal bits, figuring that was easiest in case I had to come here again as the owner I wouldn't need to try and remember what I looked like. So I just looked like a somewhat frail human woman, not the usual type for either of those professions. (Not enough muscles for stone work, or bounty hunting) But he noted it down on the form. All of this was done in the presence of a lit candle, which he kept an eye on, making sure it didn't flicker. *Clearly some kind of truth telling spell. But as I actually do plan to go back into business making stone carvings, and we do make money taking bounties such as the Jekserah case, it's the complete truth.*

On my side I pointed out a few things I had noticed on the tour that would need to be taken care of, and ultimately got the cost down to 14 suns, 5 moons. With that set on the final form I signed it, handed over the sack of gold, and took possession of the deed and keys to the place. I was a homeowner!

As I walked back to the inn (for the last time) to get the others a thought struck me.

My name is on the paperwork. The city doesn't know anything about the others. They just happen to live with me. Does the city expect taxes from them, or just me, the land owner? Probably just me. I'll have to go buy a ledger, make sure I keep track of expenses for the business and the money I take in. Set some aside for tax day. Should I take in some kind of "rent" from them? I wouldn't actually take anything, as they all contributed to the house, but it would save them some money in the long run. City just knows about me. Of course if a city official physically shows up and asks how many people live there I can't exactly lie. Better tell the others to save a bit of their income and maybe help them with keeping track of it. Snarly is just a kid still, right, he wouldn't owe taxes he's basically our... ward?

We collected the others, making me wonder what they did the rest of the time we weren't together. Neither one had said anything about space for working their own trade, was their income only going to be what they made killing bandits and such? I knew Malachite had no trade skills, that much was somewhat painfully obvious, but at least he didn't complain about needing to go out and work doing the jobs we had taken thus far in town. *Oh well. Maybe now with space they'll show off their true potential and contribute to the household in- oh no what have I gotten myself into?*

They walked around the place and claimed their spots, the two of them promising to get to work while I went to get some raw material. Hanz started making a list of spots I would need to repair and what improvements could be made to the place, while Snarly was looking a bit forlorn to have to get rid of the garbage left by the old owners. I insisted and left with Malachite to put my next plan into action. I had adopted a new disguise before I left the house of course. Buying a house here wouldn't make people stare at me less on the street.

"Good morning!" said Solara, looking up from the counter. "How can I help you?"

No apprentice today? Maybe she's on an errand. Of course this persona wouldn't know she had one, "I've" never been here. "I hope so. I'm looking for a couple of spells, an elemental spell in the sphere of Uranus, and a cleaning spell."

"The guild doesn't allow the selling of anything too destructive," she cautioned me.

"Oh Heavens, nothing like that!" I assured her. "No, no, something from the conjuration family. I need raw material and rock is just the thing." *Well, I say just the thing but wood is probably better. But there's no spell to wish wood into your hand. I would have to buy wood. And wood comes from trees. I won't have trees killed just to make myself something I can just as easily make out of stone.*

"That I can do, it's a spell of the first grade. I will caution you however that you should use it outside the city limits. While under the domain of Mars or Neptune to get fire or ice, this spell can and does seem to create something from nothing. Reports are inconclusive for this one, as you tend to get earth or stone that would naturally occur in the area. Meaning it could be pulled from underground, I'm not clear on it but best to take no chances. We don't want the stone under the city to be disturbed, for reasons I'm sure are obvious."

"That's perfectly all right!" I assured her. "I'll go far outside before I use the spell."

"Very well. One moment while I retrieve the scroll. I can also get you the hygiene spell, it's also of the first grade and common enough I'm surprised you don't already have it."

"Thank you."

Having paid for the scrolls with the spells detailed I went to the market and bought a cart sturdy enough to haul stone.

After paying the man looked around, somewhat confused.

“Is the driag going to drag it or what?” he asked. “I can put a sold sign on it if you want to go get your horse.”

“You need a horse *too*?” I asked, as if scandalized. “Why didn’t anyone tell me? I thought it moved itself!”

“I figured you knew?”

I laughed. “I’m just kidding around. Hey Malachite you think you could drag it?”

“I’m not dragging it like a horse.”

“Sure you are, get hooked up to the harness, I want to see what it looks like! Does it come with a whip or is that separate?”

“Orchid!”

The man was looking at him now, wondering if I was, in fact, serious about this. I used the distraction to cast my ally spell, bringing out Athame. “Here’s my horse,” I announced. “I just had to find which pocket I left her in. Hook her up.”

The man whirled and stared, but clearly my crystalline unicorn summon was not a natural creature and he shook his head. “Magic.”

“Yup!” *I could just as easily make it move itself with Mercury magic but this at least is a little more ‘normal.’*

Athame dragged the cart outside of town and in the field twenty minutes away I started studying the spell. It was the easiest type possible to learn and engrave onto my mana core so an hour later I tucked it away and started casting. I drew ambient mana every time, making sure I got the maximum amount of stone, and dozens of castings later I had a cart full of heavy rocks. I put my disguise back on, resummoned Athame who hadn’t stuck around and dragged it back to the house. Leaving it for the moment I studied the cleaning spell, and an hour later had that set as well. Then I got to work. Because I could get between 7 and 10kg of stone per casting depending on how well I did gathering ambient mana our furniture would need to be made in pieces, but that was fine. For example the seat of a chair was just a rounded slab with holes in the bottom. The legs of the chairs were just rounded rods, set over the hole and magically sculpted to fit into the slots I had made inside. Doing that four times, then two times on the other side to make the back, and you had a chair. The table could be just a frame I set slabs into, smoothing them and locking them together in the same way. Anything I touched could be cleaned in an instant with the hygiene spell, so both of those got a workout that day and in the end, the place was cleaned and somewhat furnished.

We made several trips, getting enough stone to make everybody a bed frame, a chair, a small table, whatever they wanted. The smaller, leftover bits went into the workshop area to be turned into jewelry and figurines later. Furnishing the place took the rest of the day, we would still of course need to buy mattresses, pillows, cushions for the chairs, and the like. (Malachite maybe didn’t mind sitting on a stone chair but I couldn’t. Actually Hanz probably didn’t care either way as well)

With that we had the beginnings of a real place to live! I would take care of the outside the next day, fix up what I could and maybe replace the fence with something made of stone too. I was pretty exhausted, just from running around and doing way more magic than usual, but at least I could stand there and look at the tangible results of the magic I had done. So little of magic was permanent normally, and many of my spells were support spells for combat. It felt really, really good to use magic constructively again, making things and bringing light to the world instead of just hurt.

If only we didn’t have people like Jekserah, researching magic to cause great harm. Just do this sort of thing. Create. Build. That’s what magic is there for. Can you really say raising an undead army

would bring you more satisfaction than I'm feeling right now, looking at the tables and chairs I made with my magic today? I doubt it.

"Let's go get something to eat and get to bed, I'm exhausted!"

"Nice work," Malachite told me. "Stone furnishings. I bet we could find a friendlier driag village and you would have work for life."

I laughed. "I'll keep it in mind!"

The next few days passed in a blur. No one seemed in a hurry to climb all the way up to the mountain lair the wanderer's stone could be found in, so busied themselves with house stuff and city living. I fixed up the outside of the place, making the walls smoothed out and shiny, then got to work sculpting. I made various pieces, ranging from jewelry like bracelets and Malachite's horn ornament to larger statues of dragons and other local wildlife for people's gardens and the like. Snarly had requested the cart for some reason, so I cast Athame, told her to follow his orders and stick around until he was back here, and sent them on their way. His presence was announced by a lot of rattling and clanking, so I stepped out to see what was going on.

"You bought a cart load of old weapons?" I asked him, looking over his "haul." It included banged up armor, shields, and a lot of really sketchy looking weapons useful for melting down to be reforged but not much else. "Do you want me to clean them off?" I wasn't sure if my spell would work on rust, but I was willing to give it a try.

"Oh no," he assured me. "Itth all part of the elastich."

I grew confused. "You mean aesthetic?"

"Thath the one!"

"Uh huh. You need some help with that?" On the top was a huge tower shield, easily twice as big as he was, that he was struggling to pull off the cart.

"I can handle yipths!" The shield fell on top of him.

"Yeah I'm just going to carry this for you," I told him, lifting it off him with some difficulty.

"Thanth."

As the cart emptied I noticed a bunch of raw meat in the corner of it, wrapped in a cloth. "Your meat is dripping." *Looks like I got a cleaning things spell just in time.*

"Yeah, got 'ome really fresh 'tuff. Gonna look so good."

"Look? It's not for dinner? No, I don't want to know..."

I cleaned up the floor and the cart with the spell, and tried to ignore the sudden thwacking and squelching sounds coming from his room as I walked by. *Don't want to know. Where did the others get to anyway?*

It turned out they had been hunting, and Malachite had actually taken the initiative to look into work he could do around town while we weren't out adventuring. He said he had some leads on "intimidation work" whatever that meant, but given his size I could guess. I took the cart out the next day filled with my work to put the next part of my plan into action. Disguised now as a shroomling, or mushroom person, though a bit curvier and more human looking than most, I looked for a place that suited my needs. It wasn't a disguise I used often, as they weren't exactly common around here, but that was fine. They had a reputation for being craftsman and were generally trusted as honest folk. I saw my target and went inside.

"Greetings," the man at the counter said to me. "How can I help you?"

I looked around. Paintings of all sorts hung on the walls, and the smell of paint was strong in the air. I could see an artist at work behind the desk, canvas before them. "Good day," I said to him, bowing a bit. "I represent a local artisan that works in stone. I have samples of their work with me, and wondered if the painter here would be interested in buying unfinished works to paint and sell for a profit."

“Profit?” asked the artist, perking up and setting down their brush. “Someone said something good.” He stood up and came over to us.

“Good day sir, I am Gnarly, representing the artist Orchid.” I suppressed a snort at somewhat stealing Snarly’s name. “She wishes to form a partnership with someone who can finish her goods and is willing to sell them at wholesale prices so both parties can profit.” *And because I get the material for free, and magically shape it so it takes minutes not weeks to make a single piece, I can afford to sell very, very low and still make a huge profit!*

“I might be interested,” the artist decided. “Let’s see what you’ve brought me.”

He looked the cart over and spoke with his partner or apprentice or whatever the other guy was to him, and offered me a deal. We sat down and hammered out the details, and while the offer was a bit low, he had a good reason for it.

“I can certainly finish these pieces,” he said, “it will be an interesting change from only working on canvas. I’m glad your master had the idea. The pieces are all quite good, but I think painting them will really make them come alive.”

That’s right, just let me dump them and take coins away. Otherwise I would need a storefront of my own, or a booth or something in the market and that’s just not for me. This is the quickest and easiest way for me and by extension, him, to make money. That blacksmith doesn’t know what he lost out on.

He went on. “But I’ll have to ship the bulk of the pieces elsewhere. I already do it with my paintings, this town simply isn’t, shall we say, it doesn’t have the number of sophisticated patrons artists of our caliber would need to make a living.”

In other words, people here are pretty poor and don’t buy shiny things, so we need to sell them in bigger towns and larger markets. “I completely understand,” I told him. “Whatever you think is best, as long as the price my master receives is fair.”

“So I have to pay for shipping, insurance, and these works are stone. Not exactly the lightest of materials to ship when you pay by the kilogram.”

“Of course.” *Perhaps I can hollow them out, still leave them thick enough they won’t collapse, but still weigh less. That could only be done magically though and I don’t know if I want to tip my hand quite that much.* “I believe the terms are acceptable.”

“Splendid. I’ll write up a contract so there’s no misunderstanding, and you can bring it to your master to sign it.”

“Very well.”

In the end he would accept regular cartloads of items similar to the ones I had already brought, with the understanding there may be periods of silence while ‘my master’ worked. (i.e. I was on the road adventuring and late with a shipment.)

“Of course, frankly I’m surprised you’ve agreed to such an aggressive schedule as you have. Your master works stone quickly!”

“That she does,” I agreed. *I’m going to have to hold myself back, honestly. But I can whip up a room full of stuff and just bring one cart at a time every couple of weeks to keep him happy.*

With the contract written up we shook hands, and the two unloaded the cart so I could take it back. I headed home, signed the paper, put the disguise back on, ran it back, and did a bit of a happy dance in the workshop. I had a regular source of income, got to use magic to do it, and could create pretty things that would bring joy to people their entire lives and be given to their kids and their kid’s kids besides. Stone would be around long after even I was gone, so I was truly making a mark on the world. This was great! I had a home, steady work with the occasional stint saving the town, a

bodyguard/good friend, a companion I trusted- and Snarly. *The orphan boy we adopted? Somehow?* What more did a person need?

Finally we could wait no longer, and gathered up our things for a trip into the mountains. I locked up my house- *my house!!!* -and we left out the west gate to head north. *At least I know if someone breaks in, they aren't stealing the furniture. It's all made of stone!* It was the 29th of Summersend so still warm enough, but we had packed some heavier clothes for when we got higher in the mountains. Naturally I had summoned Athame, and we were chatting and making good time through the nearby wood. Suddenly, Malachite motioned for us to stop, and pointed ahead. Looking through the trees I was about to reach for defensive magic when I saw it was just a couple of deer standing there.

"Don't scare me like that," I told him, and the deer looked over in our direction.

"It figures, I've been trying to learn how to hunt in the traditional way instead of just swooping down on something and pouncing it, and now that we're on our way somewhere a bunch of deer show up."

I was about to say that yes, it did seem like the world worked that way all right when an arrow came out of the side of the trees and took one of the deer in the neck! It staggered and fell, making the others rush off.

"Nice shot," I praised Hanz. "I didn't even you see raise the bow."

They glared at me and looked back up. "Come on out then," they called, clearly catching sight of the real shooter.

"Of course," said a voice. A green scaled driag stepped out from the trees. "Thank you for providing a distraction. I hope you weren't hunting them as well?"

"No, it's fine," Malachite told him. "Just passing through. We'll leave you to it."

"Now 'old on," Snarly protested. "It would be rude to jest leave without inthrowducing ourthelves. Hi there, I'm Snarly, whath your name?"

"I am Darvok," he replied, pulling his arrow out and then replacing it. He got out a knife and started cutting into the carcass. "My hunting partner Jalad is around here somewhere."

You know, I'm rather glad I don't actually eat most of the time. That is disgusting. I mean it must be done, yes, but still...

"That was quite a 'hot," Snarly went on. "Your 'haft must be so 'traight and hard."

He seemed a little confused. "I buy my arrows by the dozen in town, they're nothing special."

"And your tool, it curves to the left? I would love a clother look."

"My bow? I don't think it's become warped?" He held it out and looked down it. "No, no, still perfectly straight. Just a standard bow, nothing fancy needed for me."

"Oh I bet, in and out thath my 'trategy as well. Do you often take your prey from behind?"

"Is he doing what I think he's doing?" I whispered to Malachite. I turned to him and his eyes were wide.

"I hope to all dragons he's not," was the reply. "Does he even... You know... With males? Oh pitchforks can he not tell the difference with us?"

So he is then. Awkward. "How old is he? He's still a kid right?"

"Don't ask me. We need to get him out of here before-"

"Do you prefer a thick or a thin 'haft?" Snarly went on.

"I believe the thickness of arrows was standardized thousands of years ago? I don't think there's that much variation?"

"I prefer 'hick myself."

"I say," he called to Malachite, "is your pet rat always this weird?"

“Sometimes it’s worse,” he called back. “Come on Snarly, don’t bother the nice man in his work. We have to get moving.”

“You live in town, right?” Snarly asked. “Perhaps you could ‘top by our house and we could discuss more about hunthung ‘ometime?”

“I’m sorry, I think I hear Jalad calling me! Probably caught in his own trap again it happens all the time.” He hefted the deer he was only halfway through with. “I better go check on him. Goodbye!” He ran off.

“Oh ‘hoot. I thought we were really getting on famouthly.”

“What a fascinating display,” Hanz announced. “I will be most interested to see how his sexuality develops from here on out, I’ve never studied his kind in detail before. Oh but observing the subject can cause changes to their behavior I must be sure to do so while cloaked so he doesn’t realize it. Yes, that would be for the best. Shall we carry on then?”

Malachite looked between them and then at me. “Orchid, please don’t go nuts okay? I don’t think I could take it.”

“I’ll try my best,” I promised with a small grin, then I started wiggling my eyebrows. “To be your rock...”

“Oh no that ice puns guy rubbed off on her!”

“He did have some serious stones.”

“No!”

Now out of the trees and far enough away from the town to not cause a stir I put my growth magic on Malachite- as we had discussed earlier that morning- who scooped us all up and flew us the rest of the way. We didn’t want to take forever to get there, it had already been more than two weeks since that crazy wanderer made the request for the orb. They probably thought we had died or something. It was quite the experience, but Malachite handled us well, being four times as big makes a lot of things possible, after all. Normally I was terrified of heights, and you can be sure I put my telekinesis magic on myself after making Malachite grow, just in case, but I did trust him not to drop us. And really, heights was looking down the side of a cliff and worrying about falling. Flying was soaring into the sky and I didn’t have a fear of flying, right? No. Keeping my eyes closed most of the entire way had nothing to do with it. I was just meditating, that was all. After landing everyone spread out to see if we could find the entrance, and Snarly waved us over to say he had.

“Loth of tracks here,” he reported, pointing to a crack in the side of the mountain. “Wolfs maybe?”

More wolves, great. Why is it always wolves? Don’t they have better things to be doing than bothering us?

“I can scout ahead,” Hanz told us. “I have no scent and can be invisible. They would not bother me if there are wolves in our path.”

Sure, let them feel useful. As I could much more easily just bring us into the astral, and avoid any conflict all together. “Go for it,” I told them. They rippled and vanished, footsteps appearing in the snow and into the cave. We didn’t have to wait long until they returned.

“Six wolves, just laying around.”

“I hate to kill animals just seeking shelter from the cold,” I told the others. “Tell you what. I have a spell to make us like ghosts. I’m pretty sure you’ve seen me use it before? You would have to hold onto me or each other though. We can go in that way and hopefully they’ll just leave us alone when they realize they can’t touch us.”

“Sounds good to me.”

We headed in, I was in the middle. Snarly to my right and holding onto Hanz, while Malachite held my left hand. He held his sword in his left hand, somewhat awkwardly, but said the extra reach would make up for it. I took his word for it, reminding him that no physical force could now affect him. Magic, maybe, but it would have to be pretty specific magic. We were basically untouchable.

Which was proven as the wolves snapped and lunged for us. After a moment of passing through they got confused and just wandered off to another part of the cave, which was quite large, and we nodded and moved on. The place got darker and darker, making me sigh.

"I can guide us," Malachite announced. "Just keep hold of me. I know you don't like your current light spell..."

"Yes, that stupid shield, that I learned before realizing I couldn't hand it to somebody," I answered. "I can cast it if I have to though." *Better to do it now than when we get deeper in and it's really dark.*

"You may want to. This spell we're under now, uh, does it protect against things like, just to pick something relevant to our situation, ghosts?"

"Probably not, they're just as insubstantial- are there ghosts?"

"Yes three of them! Prepare yourselves!"

"What?" I couldn't see a thing, but if Malachite said there were ghosts, then there were ghosts. I had to know where my target was to cast, which usually meant seeing them, but in this case I knew right where Malachite was he was right there. The other problem was needing to use my hands, at least for some magic. But not Mars spells, which basically just required a lot of flexing your muscles and squeezing mana from your core through them. I flexed as much as I could and cast on him, "Successful strike!"

"Thanks!" He swished the sword and I felt him impact something. "Got it!"

"I have this one," Hanz announced, lifting his free hand. A beam shot out, impacting the next one in the chest and causing it to start burning away. "It's neutralized."

"And the third one takes the hint, it's floating away," Malachite told us. "Good teamwork. Except for you, Snarly."

"What do you want me to do?" he complained. "I can't get my knives like thith!"

"Never mind. Passage goes this way."

"Wait a minute, let me get the light out," I told him. "It's going to be stuck to my arm, so don't let go of me but maybe just put your hand on my back?"

"Sure thing." He did, and I cast. I was now pretty dragged down by magic, and probably useless in any upcoming fight but at least we could see what we were facing. The shield of light flared into existence, and I could see again.

We headed forward, following Malachite who again stopped. "What in the world?" Before us were 4 creatures, seemingly made of ice. They flowed out of the walls and approached us menacingly. A fifth figure, dark, seemingly made of shadow, hung some distance away and looked at us. The ice figures made strange noises, if it was a language I certainly didn't recognize it, and rushed us.

We were all feeling confident. Too confident. That's why when the first one called upon ice and caused icicles to shoot out of the floor no one tried to get away from it. This turned out to be a mistake. They impacted Hanz and Snarly, who cried out in surprise and pain.

"That shouldn't be possible!" I yelled. "We're still phased!"

"Tell that to them!" Hanz insisted. "What's the plan?"

"Break off, I'll stay phased and deal with the shadow if you're still up to dealing with them?"

"Wait, let me take the shadow, it might be weak to light." He fired, the beam again burning away the target, which happened to be the ghostly figure. Whatever it was.

“No more phase then,” I reported, and dropped it. We knew to dodge now, but the area filled with ice made that tricky as we were just emerging from the tunnel behind us. I dodged backwards, avoiding their next attack but Hanz was once again hit, driven back by the force of the ice now that he was solid again. One took a swipe at Snarly but he scrambled away from it.

“Thrust!” I cast, as two were lined up pretty well from where I was standing. I’m wasn’t sure throwing them around would hurt them, as they weren’t flesh like most things I’d used the spell on, but it did work at least partly. They went sliding back and crashed into the far wall of the cave. *I’ve bought them some time.*

Malachite slashed at one, crunching into its icy body as it scraped along his armor with a hand. Neither went down.

What next? Snarly! He’ll need my help his knives aren’t going to do anything. I cast again, “Elemental strike!” *That should help.*

Hanz meanwhile had pushed off the wall and beamed one of the creatures, burning it through. It started to vanish. *Shoot, wanted to study them, are they magical or something? Why are they disappearing?*

“Oh no you don’t. Thrust!” I cast on the one furthest away, they were getting up and it went down again. *Stay down a second, would you? Stupid things.*

Meanwhile Hanz was dodging another ice attack, while Malachite smashed the left arm of one.

With a cry, Snarly plunged his dagger, recently empowered by me, into... nothing. He missed, as the ice creature skated out of the way.

Snarly! I need to make him more accurate, giving him magical damage means nothing if he can’t actually hit anything with his daggers. He needs to practice more.

Hanz brought their beam weapon to bear on the one Malachite had just hit, but only succeeded in blowing the leg off it, rather than hitting the body. “I can’t do that many more times!” they announced as it staggered off balance.

“Not yet you can’t. One second!” I started out there, kicking aside the still present ice shards from the attacks. *I’ll have to take the full time, maybe? But they’re the most effective combatant here, better to get them what they need as I don’t seem to be doing much good.*

Malachite smashed it in the head as it fell, trying to finish it off. But he didn’t manage it. Snarly darted in, getting his first hit in, scraping the body with his knife.

Oh sure, now you hit, when my spell isn’t helping. Oh well. “Power technology!” I cast, touching Hanz. Their hand cannon lit up.

“Ah, most agreeable, thank you.”

“Look out!” I jumped back again as the ones I had thrust got in range again and both shot ice at us. I managed to avoid the blast but Hanz wasn’t so lucky, taking the full effect and getting pinned to the wall.

Oh crap! I have to get them out of there. I’ll drop the power spell that wasn’t even useful and take them to the astral. I can use my repair spell on them there, stabilize them, and get back in the fight if needed. I have to be quick, but they’ve just attacked I’m much faster than them, right? I once again smashed my way through, and here was where I made a grave error. My spell needed only another syllable or two when the ice attack crashed into me. I guess they were faster than I thought, or I was moving slower than I thought. As the darkness and cold took me, I realized Snarly would be blind again, and had just enough time to realize he would have been anyway, because I would have taken the light with me. *Stupid... now we’re all dead... We should have done the astral from the beginning, we got overconfident-*

I knew nothing else.

A wizard is one who prepares

In the vision I was a boy, a young boy going to school who knew nothing of his past. The boy, his name was Acura, lived in a small island nation called Japin. And the boy had magic, of a sort. It wasn't like the magic we had on Pyre, it was slow and clumsy. Was the vision about the past? I saw fantastic sights like flying machines, tall metal buildings, and metal machines that ran on tracks. Was it the future? It reminded me of stories about the world before the Chaos Moon came to our solar system and changed everything. Or was it another world? I couldn't tell. The boy knew only his world, a world of ghosts, and demons, and struggling to protect a world that neither knew or cared to know of such things. His only companions were a girl his own age named Mickey, and a younger boy with no powers at all, named Bull. The boy's magic was too slow to use in combat, but as the boy's situation grew darker and more dangerous, he realized he needed more help. He could already call upon a spell much like my own, the one that created Athame, but his was a great bird of fire. This magic pulled upon him just as it did me, forcing him to split his attention and making him less effective. Did the boy not know how to create a focus like I had? Could no one make one for him? He bore his burdens alone, it seemed. But the boy wasn't stupid. He modified the spell to make a smaller bird, and gave to it spells of defense so he could keep it near and allow it to protect him during his struggles with a demon that was trying to rile up the spirits. This bird hardly affected him, and proved itself in combat time and again, protecting him as he cast longer spells or simply to deflect blows so he didn't have to himself. It was a glorious solution, but even that was not enough for the boy. He tired too quickly, but realized his magical constructs had spirit energy of their own. So he made a third companion, one with magic to transfer its energy into him, so he didn't have to hold back in a combat and could recover easily afterwards. Then did the boy become a true protector to Mickey.

I began to lose the vision. No. No. I had to see what other techniques the boy discovered! I couldn't go yet, there was still so much I could learn from the boy. So much! "Mickey!"

I thrashed around, calling out in my delirium as strong arms held me down.

"It's okay Orchid," a voice told me. "It's fine, you're going to be fine."

My eyes popped open, but I had to look away. A bright light was above me, and I hurt everywhere. "What?" I managed.

"We're safe, for the moment," Malachite told me. "Are you okay? I thought I lost you, don't scare me like that!"

The attack came back to me. "Hanz! Snarly! Are they—"

"They're fine, I think. Snarly is fine. Hanz is still stuck to the wall. I don't know. Can you kill one of his kind with just cold? Can you move?"

"I'm so cold, but I'll try. What did you..." I managed to look at the light that he was holding.

"You like it?" He moved it, and I saw he had made a crude torch by wrapping his sword up in rags and lighting it on fire. "Those wolves are scared of the fire but who knows for how long. We need to prepare better."

"No kidding. Let me heal myself and we can go see about Hanz."

"Here's something funny I think you'll like," he went on as he helped me up.

"What's that?"

"When your light went out, I could still see just fine. Another 'gift' of my dragon heritage I guess."

So I just need a spell to transfer someone's abilities to others and we'll be all set. "Glad you're getting something out of all this..."

Once up again I cast my healing spell a few times, on myself, him, and Snarly. We headed back into the central cave, it seemed Malachite had pulled me into the first section again away from the ice and cold in the other room. It was freezing, ice was everywhere, but he held his sword nearby as I cast the repair spell on Hanz and they too finished coming around. We broke them out of the ice and I apologized for my lapse.

“Both of them, I guess,” I went on. “Even had I been able to save you by pulling you into the astral as I intended, the light would have come with me leaving Snarly in the dark. Some adventurers we are.” Naturally I didn’t worry about Malachite now as he could apparently see in the dark. It only would have disadvantaged Snarly.

“No worries,” Hanz replied. “But now we must decide our fate for the next few minutes. Do we press on, hoping that our encounter with the ice creatures has adequately prepared us for their next attack, or fall back for now and come up with a new strategy?”

“We could be centimeters from the ice orb,” I mused. “It could simply be tucked away back there. I hate to think our prize is just sitting there and we were simply too timid to pick it up.”

“Perhaths we could have thish conversation ethwhere?” Snarly asked. “Ith freezing here.”

“Grab on, we’ll head to the astral,” I decided. “If there are more guardians at least we can tell that and plan our next move with all the facts.”

“Sounds good to me,” the others agreed, and we vanished.

Malachite went ahead, peering through the plains as best he could. He jogged back to us looking grim. “Bad news,” he reported. “More ice creatures and ghosts in the chamber ahead. The orb is there too. And more bad news, I think the ghosts saw me somehow.”

“Impossible!” I scoffed.

“Maybe, but explain how they looked right at me as I moved around.”

“Uh...”

“Curious,” Hanz remarked. “So now we have the facts. What is our next move?”

Everyone was silent for a moment, thinking. “By the way, what was that you shouted?” Malachite asked me.

“The what?” I answered, confused.

“When I woke you up, you shouted something.”

“How did you wake me up, by the way?”

“Healing potion. I just poured it on you, I’m glad that worked.”

“What healing potion?”

“We found ‘ome earlier, remember?” Snarly announced. “I’m thmart, tho I remembered and kepth them nearby.”

“Good thinking,” I praised. “I’ll get some replacements for sure. How about that, it did turn out that I was hit hard enough to need them. Maybe I have a little seer in me as well? I wonder if that’s how I saw that vision.”

“Vision?” Malachite pressed.

“When I was unconscious...” I explained about the boy and his magical companions, and how I was thinking of following that example. *Was it a divine vision? I’m not particularly devout, but I do try to keep these three from too much sin. Perhaps this has afforded me a little nudge from the heavens. I have spoken to the angel of death, after all, and I was almost dead just then. Perhaps they are watching over me because I kill so much.* “Now, if we do want to press on, give me a minute to mana cycle my core. If I cultivate for a moment I should have enough potential to socket a few spell engrams into the ally spell template and create a new defender for myself. It will still be the ally spell so my necklace can hold it, and we can continue the assault. I’d still like to be... What?” My companions were all

looking at me like I had gone nuts. “Oh, sorry, just talking about magic! Did I lose you? I vote going back and better preparing. Those ice creatures- an attack with no casting time, area effect, and can hit us through phasing? Never experienced so cheap an attack in all my life. Doesn’t even seem to be part of this world, everything here has a counter or downside to balance it out. But that took us apart. We need some kind of defense.”

“Agreed,” Hanz said with a nod. “We are chilled, outnumbered, and perhaps outclassed. A retreat is a tactically sound decision.”

“If we don’t have to fight them again,” Malachite countered. “For all we know this cave creates the creatures.”

“Then why stop at just the number we have already seen? Why not absolutely fill the cave with them? They are clearly guarding the orb, and more guards are always better than less.”

“...That’s a good point. Okay, let’s head back.”

Naturally we couldn’t talk much with the enlarged Malachite flying us back, but I was too busy berating myself anyway. Even to be too concerned about the height. I was supposed to be the responsible one! The one that thought ahead! Why had I kept that stupid shield spell when I realized it was personal only? Why had I rushed to aid Hanz but put myself in so much danger? I knew how fragile I was, just hitting a doorframe could crack one of my curse crystals and make me wince. I had put everyone in danger with my actions, and I had to do better. A lot better. *Always the astral, never phase, that’s my new catchphrase.*

Hanz announced they were heading to the library to research the creatures, see what they could come up with in terms of weaknesses and such. (Apart from the obvious, fire?) I put on my disguise spell, a rabbit beast-kin I had used in the past but suddenly named Broccoli for some reason that had me giggling as I walked, and headed to Solara’s shop. *Man, I could totally go for a cinnamon bun right now.* Her apprentice was competent enough to sell me a light spell and directed me to the spell directory so I could see what else I wanted to buy. Making us immune to cold would be fine, but fairly specific. I needed a single spell that could help *everybody*, me included, because holding onto spells really did distract me so the solution wasn’t to hold on to *more* spells, but as a magic user what else could I do?

“Perhaps I can help?” Solara offered, after I had been paging through the book for about fifteen minutes. It was pretty huge, listing the standard spells the Guild had on offer in alphabetical order. Theorized grade, price, brief description of effect, planetary sphere cast under, the whole works. No formulas of course, that would have made the book several meters tall and be the most valuable item on this continent!

“I’m not even sure what I’m looking for,” I admitted. *Why do I have the overwhelming urge to hug this woman? Hug everybody, really. Odd.* “Maybe having another maintaining focus made for a second magical ally focused on attack? But I know that’s really expensive, this one I had made a hundred and fifty years or so ago cost me a bundle and I don’t have my family’s resources anymore. Plus it doesn’t really help the party that much-”

“Perhaps starting at the beginning?” she asked, confused. “What do you hope to accomplish?”

“Oh, right! Sorry!” I explained the situation, and how we had nearly died. How I didn’t want to maintain a bunch of magic and how most of my spells were fire and forget anyway to help my team either directly or by messing with our opponents. But we needed light, torches just wasn’t going to cut it, (who wanted to carry it? Everyone used two handed weapons but me, but I needed my hands free to cast!) and we needed Hanz to be able to use his weapon more, and if Malachite and Snarly could hit better all the time-

"I know exactly what you need, if you have the skill for it," she cautioned.

"I count myself a fair wizard," I didn't mind bragging. "And I'm fast. I can usually get off two spells, both empowered, while my hunk- I mean lunk of a draig swings his sword once." *My hunky boy! Wanna hug him when I get back! What is wrong with me today?*

"I see. May I?" She held her hands out for the book and I passed it over. She paged through and got to the S section, handing it back. I took a look, and my eyes got wide.

"This spell is amazing!" I gushed.

"It is. But hard to learn, and expensive."

"Yeah..." I put a hand on my coin pouch. "I wonder if I can afford it?" *Of course, spells should be free, or have a token cost. There's really no reason they can't be apart from policy. I'm trying to keep my party alive and doing good in the world, the Guild is trying to squeeze as much coin from me as possible. Which of us is really on the moral high ground, and thus, the argument is over?*

"Then let me look around the back. Given the cost and difficulty, you can probably imagine there's not much call for it. But I do believe I have a copy somewhere."

"Please, take your time and look properly!" I insisted. *Not have it right at hand? But it seems to be the most useful spell ever? Even at a high difficulty, this is the sort of thing you practice every day because it'll make your life so much easier. It's going to make my life so much easier..*

"Be right back."

She went into the back and I read the spell over again. Basically, you cast a spell that had "holes" in it, just like the ally spell did. But instead of needing to have the spell fully engraved into your mana core such that it was the same every time, this spell hung in the air attached to an object. You then slotted another spell into it, and both were sucked into the object. The object could then be used by anyone, and would maintain the spell for you. Basically, a single use imbued object that took only a minute or so to create! Why hadn't I seen this one in my family's records? Or had I just forgotten about it? Hard to say. I put the book back on the counter and looked around the shop as the apprentice kept an eye on me. *Strange, nothing for sale that would indicate she's using the spell. But it seems like I could? Shatter rock into some thin disks, and put the spell onto the disk. I could make a whole bunch of them- light, healing, compass, detect enemies, pest repellent, hygiene, communication... The list goes on. They're easy to make taking my time and empowering everything. Sell them for the standard price of casting the final spell, as really that's the only spell the user is directly benefiting from. This satisfies guild rules, and my magic is now out there helping people all over. I get money for basically hardly any work, and if I brought barrels of them here she could manage the collection and take a cut for using the space in her shop. She could make money doing literally nothing. Then I wouldn't need to set up a booth or shop of my own. Think she would go for it? I can only make a few to prove the concept and try to convince her. Is there some rule against it? Why hasn't she done it herself? Very odd.*

"Here we go!" she announced, finally coming back with a scroll in her hands. "Found it."

"Let's count my coins," I said, dreading the outcome.

In the end I had just enough, but was now basically broke. *Good thing I at least have the steady income of my statuary business, I thought. And I don't eat much and the house is already paid for. So I should be good. I'll get the orb, take care of Jekserah, and then hopefully make it back selling spell tokens in a couple of weeks. Of course I have no idea how popular they would be but maybe some posters printed up to announce the new product- One thing at a time, let's get to work.*

I announced to the others, when they arrived back at the house, I would be spending today and probably the next day studying the spell. It was that complex and I didn't want to mess it up. They were

free to do whatever and that when I was done, we would easily take out any forces arrayed against us. *I hope I'm not overselling it, but just freeing me up to let Hanz fire his beam weapon as much as they want whenever they want is going to be huge.* That got their curiosity up but I said I wanted it to be a surprise, and that a lot of our problems were about to be solved. They left me to it, but I stopped Hanz as they were about to leave the room.

"Wait, did you find anything?" I asked.

"Not much," they admitted. "Elemental creatures such as gnomes and undines have, of course, been known almost as long as the chaos moon has hung in our sky. These creatures are different. They vanish when killed, like a demon, but are made of their element. I found one reference, in an old book, about a theoretical elemental plane or planes each relating to the elements. The work theorized this is where elemental energy comes from when channeled by wizards or demons, rather than simply being created out of nothing. Spells that attack with the elements simply open a hole of varying size to this plane, which lets elemental energy through. As spells here can become sentient, in the form of cohesions, it is thus theorized raw elemental energy could come through to our world and take shape in a similar way. What such a creature would *want*, once it was here? That can only be speculated upon."

They did seem perfectly content to stand around that cave, but how did they get the ghosts to work for them? "You've got that right," I agreed. "Well done, that's more than we knew before. Elemental demons, for lack of a better term. As if the Gloom wasn't bad enough. Not that we've seen much of that lately. Okay, thanks for doing that." *Unless that's how, it's all connected to the Gloom?*

"Of course."

I studied for what felt like hours, then took a break to take care of the other parts of my plan. Sitting in the middle of my workshop I closed my eyes and started breathing deeply, feeling mana flowing around me and directing it to my core. I had some work to do here as well.

"Did you fall asleep?" a voice asked me some time later. I cracked one eye open and saw Malachite standing there, looking a little sheepish. "Oh, I guess not!"

"I'm cultivating," I told him. "But I can take a break. What's up?"

"Oh, nothing," he waved his hands around. "Just wondered how it was going, if you wanted some company? Something to drink? Oh right, you don't do that much. I'm probably bothering you, I'll just leave." He turned to go.

"It's fine," I told him. "I should get to bed soon, but I'm almost done here. Then I can get back to studying tomorrow."

"That's great. Er, done with what? You were just sitting there?"

"What do you know about the mana core?" I asked.

"Well it's the core, isn't it? Of... Mana."

"So nothing," I sighed. "Not that I would expect you to. Look, sit down."

"Okay!" He did, across from me.

"Right. So for the most part, magic is imprinted on the soul," I began. "You have to be born with a mana core to cast magic. Those that easily inscribe magic to their core, and can use their souls to strengthen their spells we call natural magicians. Those like me that use ambient mana to fuel our magic and can learn to pull in a little bit more for a single spell, are called scholars. I won't talk about those using orreries that's a whole different thing. Anyway. Think of the mana core as a ball, a glass ball, and spells as being engraved onto the ball. The mana, which naturally collects in the ball, passes from the center through the engraving, and takes a certain shape. That shape is the spell that's being cast, and we call the final product magic. Here." I got up and got the spell I was studying. "What do you see?"

"It's just a bunch of gibberish."

“Right. What you can’t see, and what I can only feel, is the engraving I’m trying to do onto my soul using this spell formula as a template. This isn’t just ink on paper, there’s magic bound into it. Part of the process of learning the spell is taking that magic, engraving it onto my soul, and then returning it so it can be learned by someone else in the future. It’s why we have so little understanding of how early magic was done. Like the Skybourne islands or the magic used in the war after the moon came. We have the writings, sure. You’ve even seen some, like with that whole diamond episode and the warehouse. But they’re so old they have no more magical template. They’re dead writings. We can’t learn anything from them. They’re trash. Jekserah must have been trying to recreate whatever spell that was from scratch, maybe using ancient techniques that scholar’s book talked of? So, what am I doing? Cultivation is the process of changing your mana core. I take in mana from the environment, it’s pretty much everywhere, and I use it in various ways. Remember how I said it was like a ball? It has only a certain amount of ‘space’ to write spells onto. I don’t want to cast the stupid light shield spell anymore so I’m smoothing that space out. I’m going to put my new defender spell in its place, they’re about the same size so it works out. I also have to make room for this spell, it’s quite large, so I’m smoothing out some other spells I don’t use. Like detect traps, we have Snarly for that.”

“When he’s not almost dying from setting them off.”

“Well, they get noticed that way, right?” We both chuckled. *Something wrong with that boy.*

“Once it’s smooth I can write to that space again. Of course I can make more space by making the sphere bigger. That takes longer though, pushing magic into the core so the outside expands, like a glass blower. Of course this is all metaphorical, I don’t have a glass ball in my soul.”

“I’m not that dumb!”

“Just making sure. So that’s what I’m doing. I’ll work on inscribing this new spell, the light spell, and my new idea for a defender spell. After we get the orb I’ll come back here and expand my core so I can write a slightly different variant of the ally spell that’ll focus on attack. I’ll use the new spell so I don’t have to concentrate on that one, and the old necklace for the defender.”

“How does this new spell help you with that?”

I waggled my finger at him. “Ah ah ah, that would be telling. Don’t worry, you’re going to love it. You should look forward to it.”

“I guess I will. Thanks for the explanation... It was interesting.” But he made no move to get up, and looked a bit troubled.

“What is it?” I pressed.

“This whole dragon thing, it’s got me thinking. Lots of them are magicians, they have the time and the resources to study magic. Do you think one day I can use it too?”

“Here, let’s see your hands.” I held my hands out and he shyly took them. I concentrated, trying to feel any magical potential in his soul. “Now that’s interesting,” I finally announced.

“What? What is it?”

“It’s almost like an echo. You don’t have a mana core, not yet, but it’s almost like one could form, with a bit of pushing. I could teach you more about cultivation and feeling out magic, I think you’re one of the rare ones because of your heritage that might be able to create a core when you weren’t born with one. Or maybe you were, and it’s just developing, like your sudden immunity to fire? Maybe it’ll just suddenly be there one day? You should probably document the process, I’m sure scholars of all kinds would be interested in your progress and if the process is exclusively trigger based or can happen spontaneously.”

He grinned at me. “Leave it to you to want me to write a whole research paper on my... evolution? Is that what this is?”

“Perhaps there was just so little dragon left in your background it’s just taking its time to be expressed? It’s a pity you had such a hard time growing up, your bad memories of the town and your

true ancestor not being forthcoming make getting answers more difficult. Well, I wouldn't worry about it, you are who you are and will become what are you meant to be. I'm sure it's all part of the plan."

"I guess you're right."

I looked down to my hands. "Better not give the others any wrong impressions if they saw us like this."

"Right!" He snatched them back and hastily got up. "I'll leave you to your mana... Whatever it was. See you tomorrow!" He rushed off.

I shook my head. *Dragons live a long time, how does that song go? A dragon lives forever, not so little boys. You'll have to grow up soon, my friend. And I'll be right there with you, our adventures will last a long time, given how long we should both live. If we don't get killed in ice caves...* I went back to cultivating, I had work to do.

Ice Cave Round 2- Fight!

“So who would like to go first?” I asked, late the next day. I was excited, rubbing my hands together, and grinning like a fool.

“Oh, oh!” Snarly put his hand in the air and danced around.

“Would you-”

“Not it!”

I sighed.

“I will be the guinea pig,” Hanz announced, stepping up.

“Whath a guinea pig?” Snarly asked.

“Do they not exist anymore? It’s so hard to keep track.”

“Anyway,” I broke in. “Give me your arm. As the only one here that is, no offense, not flesh yours is in some ways the most convenient.”

“My what, exactly?”

“Watch and learn.” I cast for a minute, then forced the power technology spell into the empty spaces in the spell symbol spell. Completed, it sank into Hanz’s arm leaving a detailed replica of the spell circles as though I had painted it on. “Done. This,” I showed the others, “is our new weapon against anything that tries to stand against us. It’s magic, and I don’t even need to be around for Hanz to use it. Simply touch it, say the keyword ‘power’ and you’ll have full use of your beam weapon without worrying about depleting it. Or yourself? I’m not clear on that point. Anyway, it’s single use, so after you use it the symbol will be gone and I’ll have to put it back. Easy. Happy to do it. Next?”

Malachite went next, and I put the spell to augment someone’s skill at something on his sword. “You should be twice the swordsman you are now at least,” I told him, “and all you have to do is pull your sword out. It’s automatic.”

“Nice!”

Snarly got the spell of invisibility on one dagger, and the same augmenting of skill on his other. He wanted the symbol on the sheath for some reason, I didn’t think it wise to advertise it being magically active but someone close enough to see it would probably be put off by the smell, so it wasn’t that big a deal. I then handed out 12 stone disks with a symbol on it. “Three are healing,” I explained. “One is light. Use is pretty simple, just hold the one up and say ‘light’ and it’ll make a ball of light that follows you around. The other just touch to the person you want healed and say heal. Keep the blanks or chuck them, I can always make more. Oh, Hanz, yours are the repair spell not healing. They’ll only work on your kind. I figure if we only had two healing potions before, nine of them spread across the three of us should be sufficient.” *And no breakable glass either, a plus.*

“And none of this affects you in any way?” Hanz asked, still looking their new symbol over.

“The spells have been cast and are completely separate from me. I have no idea why it works this way, but I’m happy it does. You can have all these spells going at once, while I have my new companion out and I’ll still be in top fighting form. I can assist you as I always do without penalty.”

“So you did manage to create it?” Malachite asked.

“Let me show you!” I cast, and in a burst of magic nothing seemed to happen. “Isn’t she great? Exactly as I envisioned her to be!” I gestured in front of me like “look at my cute little baby.”

“Uh?” Malachite wondered.

“Humm,” Hanz agreed.

“I don’t get it,” Snarly decided.

“Oh!” I feigned surprise. “Let me help you a little.” I knelt down and held a hand out. “Boline?” A paw hit my hand, and as that was affecting another creature she became visible. She was a crystalline

looking panther, more sleek than Athame who was closer to a diamond in form, being more angular. She just seemed to be made of glass. “Everyone, this is Boline. Say hello, Boline.” I made it bow a little and then vanish again. “Sorry, she’s shy.” I petted nothing, scratching her ears.

“Does she have other abilities apart from invisibility?” Hanz asked.

“Yes. She knows my balk spell, to keep an opponent off balance, and my thrust spell. I debated deflection, but I figured thrust was probably better, it will throw people away from me. If someone is hitting me with a sword or something I don’t just want to stop them, I want them nowhere near me. And she’s fairly strong and fast, in a pinch. Stronger than me, anyway.”

“So the plan, upon our return to the cave, is to use our new capabilities to overwhelm our opponents and at last take the orb?”

“I figure you should be able to take out an ice creature fairly quickly. We keep the ghosts busy, watch out for the ice attack, and as Malachite and Snarly shouldn’t ever miss what they swing at, with me further buffing you it should go quite differently than last time.” *And they can self heal if they do get hit.*

“I do share that hope, I am not quite ready to go to silicon heaven if you take my meaning.”

“If you died, I would hollow out ‘ur ‘kull and make a beautiful planter!” Snarly assured them.

“That’s very... kind... of you?”

“And one of your arths could be a back ‘cratcher.”

“Shall we go?”

We flew back to the cave, transitioning to the astral plane when we got near just in case. Malachite landed us down the path as he saw something odd through the haze and as he shrunk down again said he would go check it out and to wait here. He moved closer, not really being stealthy about it as there wasn’t anything to hide behind here anyway. He went right up to the mouth of the cave and jerked back, making us all perk up. But nothing happened and he jogged back to us.

“There’s two wolves guarding the entrance,” he reported. “They could see me, too. One howled, at least I’m pretty sure that’s what he was doing. Do wolves yawn? He howled, gotta be. I noticed something odd about their eyes, like there was smoke or something coming out of them.”

“Guarding? Are you sure?” Hanz asked.

“Totally. They were sitting up and looking around. One started to pace back and forth when he saw me. They’re acting different than before.”

What in the world is going on here? What kind of power can be given to normal wolves that not only increases their intelligence but allows them to see into the astral? Is someone in the cave maintaining a spell on them? For the last two days? No way. Is the orb itself doing something to them? Protecting itself somehow? None of this makes any sense.

“Getting past them is now the question,” Hanz decided. “I do not wish to have them attacking our flank while we try to defeat the ice demons and ghosts in the far chamber.”

“Or spreading whatever happened to them to other creatures in the wilds,” I agreed. “But by the same token fighting them here will draw the ice creatures from the other chamber.”

“Not if we do it quickly enough!” Malachite announced with a grin. “It’s fire time!” He got out some wrappings and a small vial of what I assumed was lamp oil.

I closed my eyes. “You want to blow them up, don’t you?”

“I sure do! Come on, it’ll be fun!”

Fire dragon. By the Allfather... I opened my eyes again with a sigh. “I suppose it’s an enclosed space and a narrow opening. If I’m to the side when I cast it should go by me.”

“Can you draw them into the cave, so that if any remain there they can be affected?” Hanz asked.

“No problem!”

They looked to me.

“We can do it. You two hang back for now. I’ll step us down and Malachite can rush the two. Bully past them into the cave, and I’ll follow a bit behind. I’m slower anyway. Once in position I’ll combust the fire... which will be your hands, I guess?”

“Can you see it? Boom!”

Good thing you’re immune to fire to I guess...

He set his hands on fire with a jet of flame from his mouth, and got into position. “Ready.”

Hold on! Since when can he do that? He just... did it. Like a dragon would. He really is turning into a dragon, not that there was really any doubt at this point but still. He never mentioned it to me like ‘hey look what I discovered I can do now’ he used it like he could do it all along. I do have to say this evolution of his is a bit scary to watch from the outside. Are we going to wake up one morning to find he’s doubled in size? What else can dragons do I should watch for, that he’ll just pull out one day like it’s completely natural?

I looked to the other two, who were hunkered down around the bend in the path. “Okay.” *Worry about that some other time, keep your head in the game.* Taking a deep breath I put my emotions back in the box, something I hadn’t been doing much lately. But I felt it was best to do it now, otherwise worry might creep up on me and I needed focus for what we were going to do. I dropped the spell and the real world returned, and Malachite charged the two wolves. Yelling his head off, he raced toward the cave entrance, hands outstretched to hopefully drive the two wolves back into the cave. They did not retreat however, instead worked together to tackle him and all three went spinning down the side of the mountain.

Uh, that wasn’t supposed to happen. I reached the area and looked down, he was struggling with the two wolves and trying to get his wings in position. Before they were out of range I gathered magic and cast thrust on the pair of wolves, figuring they would be blasted off him. They somehow held on, and so all three of them were thrust even further away in a blast of magical energy. I looked to the cave entrance. *It was such a simple plan, too. How has it gone so wrong already?* There was a thump as the group landed, skidding to a halt several meters down the mountain now. I stared as Malachite seemed unable to dislodge the wolves, and I wondered if they hadn’t been enhanced somehow, as he was a pretty big driag. Not that all driag weren’t big, but his arms were about the size of my legs so that was saying something. I figured they were still in range, and gathered magic for a long rang attack. The only spell that could reach them now was the knockout blast, which was fine, it was pinpoint accurate and would help him throw them off. I cast, gathering as much mana as I could and fired it off. Direct hit on one wolf, who yelped, but stayed hanging on. *What?* But that did seemingly help, as Malachite twisted and threw that one off him. I had to tag the second one *twice* with my magic before it was driven off, and Malachite was able to get up and fly back up to me.

“Can’t get past the scales,” he called. “We’re sticking with the plan!” He raced into the cave, only to be stopped by the four other wolves that had come to investigate. Malachite folded his wings and tried tumbling past them, but only served to get into the middle of them.

I can’t do it right here, I’ll fry myself. Get going further into the cave!

But he couldn’t, as four wolves latched onto him and started to overwhelm him. It hadn’t worked very well the last time but I figured it was all I had, and gathered mana again. Taking a fairly large risk I cast on all of them, hoping to blow them into the other side of the cave. Predictably, at this point, somehow all four wolves were totally unaffected leaving only Malachite to go flying and land several meters away. Two wolves took off after him, two started to push through the hole that wasn’t big enough for the two to use side by side and so got in each other’s way.

“Orchid!” I heard from within, as I had been taking a step back as I didn’t want to deal with these two jacked up wolves. I could see over them though, and in the darkness of the cave was the fire. *I guess the plan is still on*, I thought. I quickly cast, throwing myself to the side as I did. Fire roared out, roasting the two wolves who were in front of me and popping them out of the cave like a cork. Hanz ran up with an ax in their hands, and chopped the one nearest them in half.

Oh, that’s right, they do carry an ax I forgot. I figured they would give it up for the beam weapon, was I not clear enough that it would last long enough to get through a whole combat? They should use that, or I should enchant the ax too.

One hadn’t gone that far and was in front of me, and getting up. It looked pretty badly burned of course but I did notice the eye thing Malachite had talked out. *Creepy*. I called up elemental energy and needled it in the head with wind, dropping it.

Hanz thundered past me, another singed wolf was on the way out, so I quickly cast my successful strike spell on them. They dodged a strike by the wolf but took that one out too. Malachite by this time had gotten up and was facing the last wolf. He scored a good hit on the body of it but it was still up. I cast dazzle on the wolf, making him stagger back, and Hanz rushed over and bashed him in the head. Snarly appeared, finishing the wolf off with the dagger in his hand, not having drawn the other one yet. There was silence in the cave as we waited for something to come from the passageway.

Nothing did.

“They’re waiting for us?” Malachite asked finally.

“Very considerate of them,” I agreed. “That didn’t go exactly to plan, did it?”

“Plans are of little importance, but planning is essential,” Hanz intoned.

“Sure,” I agreed. “Come here Snarly, let me put your invisibility back on.” He came over and handed me his knife, I activated my light token and started casting.

“I’ll scout the next bend,” Hanz announced.

“I’ll back them up,” Malachite agreed, and they both headed off that way. They came back with plenty of time to spare, and I finished up.

“Nothing,” they reported. “Our enemies await us in the final chamber it seems. Malachite, you saw it, did you not? What can you tell us about the chamber?”

“The orb was in the far back corner. There’s plenty of cover in the form of natural stone pillars. One small hallway in and out.”

“Then our strategy is clear,” they announced. “We rush straight to the back corner in the astral plane. We drop out of it and the two of us are in the front. Snarly grabs the orb while Orchid recasts the spell to take us back to the astral. We defend them. With the orb in hand he grabs Orchid, she grabs us, and we all go together.”

They all looked to me. “That’s doable,” I agreed. “I bet I could seal the cave entrance off, too, trap them in there before we leave.”

“They probably would not give chase, seeing us vanish in that way,” they agreed. “Let us go quickly.”

And we tried. We really did. But it seemed the universe wanted us to slaughter our way through this cave as well, as we screeched to a halt once we could at least see most of the other room. Two wolves had been added, but that wasn’t the worst part. That was the fact the orb, floating above the ground still, was now encased in a lattice of ice, like a spider. It was at least two meters across, meaning we as a group would have to spread out as the wolves were basically snug up against the ice, meaning it would be impossible to do a smash and grab as we intended. The ghosts turned towards us,

something I still couldn't accept, and we backed off again. As we did the ghosts seemed to be saying something, they were pointing and the ice demons were taking an interest as well.

"So now what?" Malachite asked. We were now "above" the wall so at least if the ghosts could somehow reach us here, it would only be them and not the ice demons as well.

"Is the universe punishing us in some way?" Hanz asked seriously. "That ice cage was not there before, was it?"

"It wasn't," he agreed. "But now, the moment we have a plan to get in and out, suddenly we can't? Had we simply carried on a few days ago we probably could have done the grab and go plan. But now it's like we're being forced to kill everything around here."

Could the world itself be rejecting these creatures? Are we the instrument it is using to purge itself of this incursion? "We'll have to split up," I decided.

"Never a great plan, but I'm listening," Hanz told me.

"You're over there, by the entrance. Only one ice demon can come through there at a time and you have a clear shot to a lot of the room. Hopefully you'll draw their attention as they try and stop you beaming them. Meanwhile Malachite and I will stay phased, so we can deal with the ghosts. Once they're gone, if there are ice demons left, we take them together. We know they can hurt us, and it's area effect, be careful. Snarly... I have no idea. Those wolves seemed a lot stronger than I would have said before today, given the trouble Malachite had with them. Run around invisible and strike when you can, I guess?"

"I'll think of 'omething."

"Do try to keep something between yourself and an ice demon," Hanz suggested. "They may not attack if they are going to hit one of their allies, such as a wolf or ghost."

"That's true," I agreed.

"I shall get into position. Power." They activated their symbol and jogged over to where the entrance was. Snarly pulled his one dagger and vanished. I cast phase on both of us, wishing I could use my new companion spell but it couldn't exactly hold onto me, could it? Plus using thrust on a ghost was an exercise in futility, it would not be damaged by hitting a wall or anything. We wanted them near so Malachite could stick them with his sword as quickly as possible.

Hanz was in position. I hoped Snarly wasn't anywhere dangerous but had no way to tell. Malachite and I were together, I needed to touch him in some way to keep him phased, so I just had a hand on his back. Better that I only have one hand to cast than he only having one hand to use a sword with. I dropped the spell, bringing us into the real world again. Malachite took a deep breath and tried to roast a ghost, but it dodged. An ice demon behind it sent ice our way, through that ghost, which seemed unaffected. We dodged back into the wall and it smashed against it.

Such a cheap attack. It can hurt us and not them? Come on.

Inside the wall it was like the outside world didn't exist. Like the wall was the outside world now, we could see perfectly well inside the stone, but not into the air beyond. A hand came through the wall, searching for us, but Malachite deflected it. He brought his sword up and with a shrug I figured, *you know what? A little bit more help is always appreciated.* I did a quick casting of my successful strike spell, and he followed up with an attack at random, where he believed the head would probably be. I could tell he hit something, the blade didn't fly smoothly, and he nodded. Even phased we could tell it was getting cold, but was that a danger? It wasn't the direct attack, and nothing should be able to affect us. Still, best not to take any chances.

"I'll make us invisible, we can step out from a new location." I started casting.

"Good plan." He dragged me along, we were in the corner of the cave so I figured he wanted to step out from the other corner. I finished casting and suddenly a bunch of the wall next to us vanished, making me wonder what had happened to it. *Did the ice demon crack it with ice or something?*

"I think we could use a little more heat," Malachite decided. He put his head through the wall and must have been breathing fire again. *So much for stepping out invisibly.*

"I hit the ghost, it's still there," he reported, jerking back.

I nodded, and cast successful strike on him again. Another hand raked through the stone, missing my face by a few centimeters, but that just let Malachite know where it was. He slashed and finished it off.

"Yeah, no more ghosts, come on let's help Hanz," he told me, taking a quick peak back out through the wall.

I am the woman in the wall... We headed out and I dropped the phase, looking around. The ice was damaged but Snarly was nowhere to be seen. The passageway into the chamber was blocked with ice, but two of the creatures were down and dying. The wolves were sniffing around looking for something. Malachite roared and rushed to one of the ice demons, smashing it across the chest and driving him to the floor. It clearly said something in a language I didn't recognize as he did this, but then went still. He swung his sword around as a wolf leapt at him, driving it back. A beam took the other one in the head, and moving a little I saw a hole had been melted into the ice allowing Hanz to shoot through. *They tried to block it off.*

"I think Snarly is hurt!" Malachite yelled, pointing vaguely in a direction. I headed that way, but didn't see anything. *Did he take a lucky shot and as he didn't get a chance to attack back, he's still invisible? But if he's unconscious his connection to the magic would be broken, right? He would go visible again. Or am I wrong about that? The spell didn't say, exactly. Or is there just so much magic in here it's doing something to him?* I felt a lot of magic, I couldn't even tell where my own spell was, so I just swished my hand through the space until I felt his body. I moved up his leg, trying to figure out where he was hurt so I could heal him, and basically decided to just focus on his body. Once we weren't in danger my spells should drop anyway, and I could do more. But if he had been hit in the head it may already be too late. I cast, and he seemed to be coming around.

"I think he's fine," I said, turning. It seemed the others were mopping up, the last wolf was down and Malachite was about to chop the last ice demon apart. "No, wait!" I shouted, reaching out but it was too late. The sword came down, and it was gone.

"What? What happened?" he asked, looking around.

"I wanted to bring one back," I told him. "We need to study these things. And it clearly said something, it could be intelligent. In fact I'm pretty sure the ones we killed before were talking, a few days ago. I could have talked to it, tried to figure out where it had come from, what it wanted here. I can't do that if I don't have a prisoner to question. I can't take a ghost prisoner this was the next best thing."

"Oh. Sorry," he apologized sheepishly. "I didn't think of that."

"Clearly," I muttered. *But it was my fault for not thinking of it earlier too.* "Well, let me finish up with Snarly here, and we can get the orb." I turned back and put my hand out again. *That's odd, we're not in danger the magic should be gone.* "Once I find him again."

"Is that a problem?" Hanz asked. I turned to them and looked, they were pointing at the only way out of the cave. I whipped around to see Snarly, a suspiciously round bulge in his pack, wiggling through the hole Hanz's weapon had made in the ice. I couldn't believe my eyes, and looked back at the orb. Yup, it was gone. I looked back at him, now vanishing into the darkness.

Was he not hurt as badly as I thought? I wasn't done, how much more healing does he need? Why is he just leaving? "How did he know it wouldn't freeze him solid when he touched it? Or pull him into an ice realm?" I asked no one in particular. "You don't just go grabbing strange, floating objects at random like that! We had the time to study it, now."

"Did it take him over?" Malachite asked. "Should we go after him?"

“He’s not getting anywhere, unless he plans to *walk* back to town,” Hanz reminded him. “We flew here, how would he even know which way to go?”

“Good point. Hey, is that loot?” He went over and pulled up a small coin pouch of all things, pulling it out of the ice and opening it. “Hey, silver! Great. At least we won’t leave empty handed. I mean the orb we have to give away, you know what I mean.”

“Let’s just get after Snarly, before he does escape with the orb in yet another twist,” I decided. *I guess at least we’re alive, and my new magic proved itself. Really wish we could have talked to one of these things though. And if Snarly has been possessed by the orb somehow, well, I’m sure we can separate them only cutting off one arm...*

Snarly, who was waiting for us outside, seemed to be fine, insisting he realized the orb would have to be given up once we got back to town. We checked his eyes, there was no sign of the dark haze around them that the wolves were showing and he seemed to be his normal self. So we headed back to town. *None of this situation makes sense. What infected the wolves? Did the ice demons have more magic than just ice magic? Were the ghosts actually in charge? Usually they aren't together enough to execute complex plans, they're just drifting souls gone mad after refusing to move on. What do they get out of ordering a bunch of ice demons around? Where did the orb come from in the first place and what was it doing in that cave? How did this wanderer know about it?*

"Go get the orb to this person, I'm going back home to cultivate," I told the others. "We'll have to leave right away once we get the location we've honestly waited too long," I neglected to mention why, part of it was my fault and Malachite wasn't exactly to *blame* for that dragon getting cursed or whatever it was and doing that side quest in the middle of all this. But it hadn't helped the situation any, that was for sure. "So we need to get going before she moves again. I'll want my new offensive ally spell ready to go for our confrontation."

They agreed that would be for the best, all four of us didn't need to go simply to hand over an orb and watch someone do divination magic. So I let myself back in at home, still sort of marveling I had a house to go back to, and headed to the workshop. I fed mana into my core and was rewarded with the sense of it expanding, so I easily made another copy of the ally spell and slotted different spells into it. Somewhat different spells, anyway. The invisibility stayed, attacking from hiding was just too useful, but then came the conundrum. Did I go with elemental *needle*, or elemental *bolt* for the offensive spell? Bolt was only knockout, so it did "more" damage but the wolf proved even a single decent hit wasn't enough to drop a foe. It couldn't become lethal, after all. Which in many cases could be a benefit, I had lethal magic if it came to it but choosing lethal for the ally limited it to only lethal strikes. On the other hand it was long range, rather than medium, and I wanted a bird that could stay out of range of bows and the like while still being able to attack. In the end the flexibility of bolt won out, and I slotted that in. Two grade three spells was all I could "afix" into the spell, and it successfully was engraved on my mana core. I wasted no time creating a bracelet made of stone that could hold several spell tokens, and loaded the spell into them. I made them double sided, all I needed to do was touch it and say ally, then later use stone shaping to get it out and flip it over. Then put it on the bottom and raise the next one. Hopefully not needing 6 at any one time they could then be reloaded and reused forever. An elegant solution, I thought.

I was out watching my (invisible) bird flying around when the group returned. I had simply put it into my necklace at the time, no need to "spend" a token just to get a sense of how it moved and such. "Come meet Besom," I told them. "Isn't she beautiful?" I directed her to land nearby.

"I assume this companion is also invisible?" Hanz asked.

"Indeed so! Observe!" I held a hand out and she put a wing in it, becoming visible. She was a giant hummingbird, I figured the ability to hover would help her aim better. She was a brilliant blue, angular like Athame, and clear like glass.

"What's wrong? Wait, don't tell me." She vanished, as I didn't need her around anymore. The others looked a bit angry, rather than excited to leave to go finally get Jekserah. "Someone already got her so we won't get any credit for her capture?" *Though knowing these people it would be her corpse we delivered, not her.*

“They said to come back tomorrow,” Malachite told me. “They were pretty excited about the orb, wanted to start studying it right away. I don’t even remember leaving the shop but there we were outside.”

“Did they say what it was?”

“Apparently the theory I read about may be the correct one,” Hanz told me. “It could be some kind of gateway to an elemental plane. They wish to somehow reproduce the work and create another, proving the theory. A risky venture, given it may trigger the existence of more ice demons. But I suppose it is their risk to take.”

“I just hope they don’t screw it up and freeze the whole town,” Malachite mused. “They don’t seem very put together, not like you, Orchid.”

“Well, we can’t all be perfect,” I agreed, wishing I had hair to flip back that would have been the power move right then. *I think?*

“Exactly.”

“Beep beep! Oh sorry, that was my sarcasm detector going off,” Hanz apologized. “I thought I had it in silence mode. Don’t mind me.”

“Anyway, at least this gives me time to work on stuff,” I told them. “You can head there in the morning and we can leave right after that. If they keep their word, anyway...” *And doesn’t skip town now that we’ve gotten them what they want. Aren’t they living in an abandoned inn? Not like they have a lot of possessions to lug around in that case.*

So the next day rolled around, and I had a good selection of product for my supplier, and a sack of every sort of spell token I could possibly make. No sense making a barrel full when I didn’t even know if the shopkeeper would even agree to sell them! I would head there, make my pitch, and see what she said. In a pinch I could play the two against one another, mention if she didn’t take them to sell perhaps her competition across the road would? But it wouldn’t come to that, I was sure. She would see the logic and be greedy enough to want the income for no effort. The others had been gone for maybe an hour already but once again returned looking even more angry than they had the day before.

“Where’s Snarly?” I asked, looking around. “Getting supplies, for the journey? That we definitely have a destination for now?”

“She’s screwing us,” Malachite announced, slamming a sheet of paper on the table. I looked it over, it seemed to be a map and a crude drawing of a plant of all things.

“How so?” I asked, eyes narrowed.

“She says she needs this herb, biteroot, to do the scrying. She’s sent us out for some.”

I blinked at him for a moment, this was difficult to process. “I’m sorry, she needs what?”

“A plant,” Hanz said, simplifying it.

“Yes, but-” I looked back and forth at the map and them. “That’s not how magic works. Yes, you *can* carry around the so called ‘enhancer’ for a spell, and use it up to make a single spell *slightly* more powerful. But you don’t *need* it. I’ve never met a magic user that bothers, it’s too much of a hassle and easier to just empower the spell with more ambient mana than trying to get a rusted nail or whatever out of your backpack. Needing a plant to do divination? It’s nonsense. Divination magic works better if you have something that belongs to the target, or a picture of them or something, but a random weed has nothing to do with it.”

“Perhaps you would like to go back and tell them this?” Malachite asked. “Snarly will probably still be there.”

“Be there? Why? He’s not being held hostage or anything, is he?” *Please say he just offered to help clean the place up a bit or- wait it’s Snarly... Cleaning? No, he’s more likely to roll around on the floor collecting an interesting scent.*

“He’s sitting in the street waiting for a bell to reappear.”

“He’s- what?” Again I was having trouble processing this.

“Believe me, they’re made for each other. Both kooky as clams. At least he seems to have object permanence, they seemingly forgot about the deal we made!”

Yeah, I was afraid of that. Without the orb we can’t prove we made a deal with them for information. “But you reminded them?”

“That’s right. So what do we do about this? Endless fetch quests for this nut? I mean what if it never ends?”

“We could check out the spirit temple, that was the other suggestion for how to find her,” I reminded them. “It’s still an option. We could at least ask what the cost there is. Maybe bring a contract back to this person, with these plants, that specifies exactly what else we are going to be asked to do before they give us what they promised.” *Or maybe beforehand? Just to be sure this will be everything.*

“That would stop them sending us out endlessly. If they can’t do it just say so. But we’re taking the orb back in that case.”

“Agreed. It seems pretty dangerous to just have hanging around especially if they’re as bad as you say.”

“Once Snarly comes back we’ll decide on which way we wish to go,” Hanz decided.

“Agreed,” we both agreed.

Why is nothing ever simple? Well, back to work I guess?

Snarly came back soon enough and said he didn’t really care which way we went, but did remark they knew of a plant that resembled this biteroot we could provide much easier than the real thing. I cautioned against this deception.

“I have no idea what this person thinks they are going to do with the root, but if they do wind up using it as an enhancer for a spell and it’s the wrong thing, the magic could easily backfire and kill them. If you want to risk having that on your conscience, in addition to then not getting the information we paid for with the orb, be my guest. If we continue this route we should do it properly.”

“The spirit cave is an unknown,” Hanz remarked. “And would probably want some kind of sacrifice for the service.”

“No good deed,” I muttered. “Let’s just go for the root. If they go all the time it can’t be that difficult to find.”

We headed out of town and I enlarged Malachite once again, steeling myself for once again having to fly high in the air. But I trusted him, I was sure he would drop Snarly before dropping me, and allowed myself to be picked up so we could get there and back in a reasonable time. The area wasn’t actually that far away, apparently this wanderer went there regularly so that helped. He almost went straight there, her directions must have been pretty good, and started circling around looking for a good place to land. I had my eyes closed as he swooped over the place, but he shouted to us.

“Plenty of movement around there!”

Movement?

“I’m looking at a bear much bigger than normal,” Hanz told us. “The area seems to also be home to some carnivorous plants.”

“Whath those?” Snarly asked, pointing.

“Some kind of creature I’ve never seen before,” they admitted. “But that’s fairly far away they shouldn’t bother us.”

"I'm landing near one of those bushes!" Malachite announced. "Hopefully it's the kind we need."

I felt us swooping down and suddenly we were on the ground again. As my spell had been cast to get us to the place it of course went away, and when I opened my eyes to see a normal size Malachite he was fumbling his sword out. Some distance away were plants with teeth, snapping away, and two cave entrances were some meters away. A narrow strip of land separated us from another section the bear had been hanging out in, and several bushes dotted the area that had the leaves I had seen in the drawing. We just had to get some and get out of there. "That bear is coming over here, why am I small again?"

"One second!" I told him. I started gathering mana.

"I think I 'ee the right bush," Snarly announced, bounding away while getting rope out of his pack. "I'll yank it out."

"I shall cover him," Hanz decided. "Power." Their gun arm powered up as they activated my magic. "Oh, don't worry little one, I won't hurt you."

I looked to see what he was talking to and a small, yellow, rabbit had crept out from under another bush nearby. It had a black horn like a unicorn, and I wondered if it was some kind of very, very strange cross breed when it jumped onto Hanz's arm and bit into it.

"Get it off, get it off," they shouted, waving their arm about. The rabbit hung on tenaciously.

Why can't anything be easy?

I finished casting my spell on Malachite, causing him to grow to three times his normal size again and roar at the bear. It didn't back down, despite now facing something twice its size.

Is everything in this place somehow being enraged? I don't get it. Most sane creatures would look at something the size of Malachite and run the other way. But it's not. I looked around briefly, there didn't seem to be anything out of the ordinary apart from the weird looking plants. Some kind of pollen effect?

Malachite took a swing at the bear which stunned it, but didn't actually seem to do much damage. Meanwhile Snarly had his rope around the bush, trying to tug the whole thing free with a supreme effort. *You know I can just use telekinesis magic and yank the bush out of the ground with ease, right? Ah, let him have his fun I guess.* Hanz was lasering the rabbit, who seemed to take it in stride and wasn't giving up on their arm.

Okay, what is going on here?

I turned my attention back to Malachite, who was rearing back for another blow. I did an instant casting of the magic I had bought for Snarly, adding magical damage to his weapon, so his next strike was more effective.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Hanz actually miss the rabbit, which had hopped away from them, so I did a quick successful strike spell, because that was simply nonsense I wasn't going to stand for.

I then went back to trying to empower Malachite. I actually tried twice, but the magic fizzled. *It's that stupid grow spell. Any time I'm trying to maintain magic and cast something else, even a spell as simple as this, it goes wrong. That's why the whole spell symbol expenditure. Figures you give someone the ability to basically never miss what they swing at, then suddenly they want to be huge as well. I can't win. I'll just try and empower it next time.*

My third time it worked, and I had time to cast a sure miss spell on the bear just in case, didn't want it laying a hand on Malachite after all. It finally went down, having taken another blow as I had tried to empower Malachite, so I looked around again. *Three hits from a sword that big, two of them enhanced with magic? That thing could have torn me apart with a casual swipe! The animals here are all crazy, why?* The bunny was gone, scorch marks on the ground showing Hanz has scared it off at

last, rather than killing it. Snarly hadn't managed to more than budge the bush out of the ground, it was fairly large after all, so I figured it would be up to me after all.

A roaring sound came from the nearby caves I had only glanced at, sounding much like the bear had. And there were two of them, getting closer. *It makes sense. In the mountains and the cities even halfway to the beach, you're never out of reach from a bear.*

"Oh for crying out loud, let me," Malachite muttered, pushing Snarly out of the way.

"Hey!"

He gave a mighty tug and the bush came free, which he scooped up in one arm and motioned us to get into the other.

"I loothend it for you," Snarly insisted. "I think we can all agree on that."

"Sure thing, little man. Come on, Orchid."

"You know how slowly I move!" I glanced back, and those strange looking creatures were coming from one cave entrance, while two huge bears were coming from another. *Were they trying to get us killed? Do they not need this stupid plant after all and this was a total setup? That's the only explanation! This place is awful, but how did it get this way? We're not that far from town.*

We were once again hauled into the air by Malachite, safely getting away with our prize, that was making a weird, shrill, noise and there were tiny mouths on bulbs that were trying to reach out and bite us. *Of course. Bite Root. What were they thinking? Maybe grow some if you need it that badly all the time? But I guess they're squatting in some abandoned building?*

Malachite didn't go for subtlety when we got near the town again, simply flying straight over the wall and to our destination. Lots of people gave horrified cries as his dark shadow fell over them, pointing into the sky and yelling about a dragon attack. "They'll get over it," he said when I started to say something. "You want to drag this thing through town?"

It wouldn't be that difficult, all things considered. I'm just thankful there's no one around at the moment to see my undisguised true form. The dragon nonsense was bad enough, can you imagine what they would say about me?

It still had the rope around it, so after landing and the magic vanishing again the group rang the bell and waited. I hastily put on my "Broccoli" disguise as I looked the place over, and yes, the busted sign did say the Crooked Bone, and many of the windows were cracked or broken. *Any port in a storm I guess. But aren't they doing magical research of some kind? That's expensive as heck, if they're trying to make new spells on their own. If they can afford that, they could afford a proper lab and proper precautions. I guess if they blow the place up nothing of value would be lost?*

The others wrangled the bush through the door, making me snort and try to hide my grin. Snarly called out as the place seemed deserted, but there was no answer.

"I swear, if this person skipped town after getting the orb..." Malachite began.

But how would that even work? They must have stuff upstairs, clearly their lab is not this old bar area with all these broken chairs, half a table, and dust everywhere. Or is it just opportunity, they got something incredibly valuable from a bunch of weirdos, i.e. us, and left before we could figure out what we had given away? They couldn't have known we would give them the orb and so made this their base because they knew we would come- oh here they are.

"Here." Malachite tossed the bush at them as they emerged from the back, and they put up a hand. The bush came to a stop and floated there.

What? That wasn't a spell. Is this person an ESPer? I wish I knew more about wanderers...

"Why, is this biteroot?" they exclaimed. "However did you know I needed some? I was going to go tomorrow to replenish my stocks!"

The others shared an incredulous look. *And this person does magical research? No way.*

“You just sent us after it!” Malachite announced in no uncertain terms. “We got you the ice orb thing, remember?”

“Oh, that’s right. You wanted someone’s location in exchange, didn’t you? Ah, that’s why you brought me biteroot, it all makes sense now.”

“Yes. Jekserah,” Hanz told them. “Dark elf, wealthy, wanted to take over the town with an army of undead. Say, what did we ever do with that diamond we got her?”

“Diamond? Oh, that old thing?” Malachite asked innocently. “It’s kicking around somewhere. It’s not the start of my hoard, we could still sell it something- somewhere. Party goods. No problem. I don’t sleep with it or anything.”

“Uh huh. Anyway, ring any bells?”

“I’m familiar enough with her,” the wanderer announced. “One moment while I prepare the paste.” The bush followed her up the stairs.

We waited, hearing a banging from upstairs. “Must be ‘ubduing the plant?” Snarly asked with a shrug.

Not long after she came back with a parchment in her hand. “Here you are, everything you’ll need to know.” She set it on the bar and we came to take a look. Malachite, who would be flying there no doubt and so needed the best directions possible traced the hastily drawn map with a claw. “Yes, this seems easy enough to-”

We looked up, and the wanderer was gone.

“Let’s just get out of here,” he decided, snatching up the paper. “This place gives me the creeps.”

What an odd person, I thought as we headed for the door. I looked over my shoulder but the place was empty. She really needed this root stuff? How did she do that?

Getting ahead of Jekserah

We stopped by the house, just to have a place to do some magic in peace and so Malachite could study the map. We wanted to leave as soon as possible just in case the divination had somehow alerted Jekserah and she was currently packing to leave her current hideout for another.

“Seems to be the other side of the Corpsewood,” Malachite remarked. “She hardly went anywhere.”

“As she knew the incompetence of the guard, it was her main complaint after all, perhaps she felt she didn’t need to travel further out of her way,” Hanz suggested. “She knew they would not pursue her outside of the city gates.”

“Arm,” I told them, handing Malachite his sword back, having put the spell symbol back on it. They lifted their arm and I got to work.

“That makes sense,” he agreed. “Why is it named Corpsewood anyway? I mean what kind of people were the founders of this town?”

“I can only guess at their motivation,” they admitted. “Is there any preparation we should do before leaving?”

“We’re doing it?” He gestured to me.

“Any *other* preparation, I should clarify.”

“I’ve got my sword, I’m ready to go.”

“Let us wait a moment to allow Orchid to finish and see if she has any suggestions.”

When I was done I shook my head. “It’s not enough information for me to scry on the area,” I mused, looking at the map. “Knowing a lair of some kind is there is a bit different from knowing exactly where to look.”

“Ah, for the days of the GPS to return,” Hanz lamented. “And satellite imagery. And electricity. And planes.”

“Uh huh, sure,” Malachite humored them, knowing they were just making words up at this point. “Any divination you want to do?”

“Unless you want to attack when she’s asleep? I could ask when that was. Gives her time to get away though, if we delay because my magic says she’s still sleeping after sundown like a normal person.”

“No, let’s leave now,” he decided. “We’ve waited to corner her long enough, now that we have a lead let’s not let her get away. For all we know she has a dozen safe houses in the area and rotates between them every night.”

“Agreed.”

We wound up flying for part of the journey, then landing and making our way into the forest on foot. I had of course gotten out my two new allies, which I knew were invisibly following us, one by land and one by air. We decided to forego going into the astral for now, the trees were pretty thick and there was a specific set of directions included with the map we needed to follow. Missing a step would have us doubling back again and again so we just kept an eye out. I had my detect enemies spell going every few minutes, just to “ping” the area as Hanz described it, in case we were being watched. I needn’t have bothered, as the map led us right to an old mausoleum that had a tree trunk fallen across the entrance and the area was still silent as the grave.

“This must be it,” Malachite announced, looking up from the map. “They actually came through, or at least led us to someplace in the area that’s plausible.”

“Is there another entrance?” Hanz wondered. “She’s not moving that tree trunk every time.”

“I don’t know, I could probably manage it,” I bragged (just a little). “She could just be teleporting inside I guess.”

“Can you do it quietly?”

I looked it over. “Not sure. She never knew we were spying on her from the astral plane, so I doubt she’s got any protections in place against that. I say we just head in there, in the astral, and see what we come up with.”

“Alternatively, I can go alone,” Malachite suggested. “We’ll need to see if the place is dark or not, and if she’s even there. If they can see us there, one person sneaking around is easier to manage than all of us.”

“I won’t be able to watch you,” I cautioned. “You’ll be on your own.”

“I can handle it.”

“All right.” I stepped us all over to the astral, and Malachite disappeared down the stairs, becoming lost in the haze that permeated the whole place. We waited a tense few minutes before he returned.

“Didn’t spot me,” he announced, popping back up out of the door. “There’s a lot of them down there.”

“What’s the layout like?” Hanz asked.

“The first room is complete darkness, there’s three skeletons in there. The next room has some weird shadow like creatures in it, knowing what we know now about elemental demons I would call them elemental shadow demons. There’s a torch there, as three cult members are standing around there at the entrance to that room.”

“Oh great,” I moaned, “she’s involved with the- of course she is. Why am I not surprised?” *I should have asked when I realized she was interested in raising the dead. Not that it would have changed anything if I asked after she left town. Right, my magic said I wouldn't think she was evil, so I didn't even think to associate her with the Gloom. Was she a high ranking member? Must have been. I guess we did more good than I thought with this. Huh, she totally lied to our face when we asked her about cults too, jerk.*

“In the middle of the hall is a door, and down the hall is another door again guarded by three cult members. That room has two zombies in it. It’s also dark. I saw some piles of stuff in that room, but didn’t want to get too close to the zombies just in case. There’s only one more room, a large one, Jekserah is there. That’s lit by several torches. She’s guarded by two skeletons and two zombies.”

“A difficult approach,” Hanz decided. “I assume the chambers are fairly small?”

“Only a few meters across,” he agreed. “Lots of burial spots, but the corpses there are really, really old. This place really was forgotten.”

“So any noise will bring the others running,” they mused. “Even with the choke point of the door the light will announce our presence, and I hesitate to speculate on what abilities an elemental shadow creature would have. We would soon be facing multiple opponents and if they can travel as shadows, from multiple directions.”

“I’ve got a good sense of the layout. We could simply drop in behind her, chop her head off, and hold off her forces long enough to grab the head and be stepped back up to the astral again.”

“A sensible plan. The only downside I can see is...” They turned to look at me.

“There are still a lot of things that can go wrong with that plan,” I told them. “For one thing she could have the room trapped. We step on the floor and suddenly we’re teleported kilometers away. Snarly knows what I’m talking about.”

“I ‘ure do!” he announced happily.

“And there’s magic to make a spell go off when something happens. Maybe we get the drop on her and chop her head off. Oops, she’s got a spell trigger that immolates the entire room. With ice!” I hastily added, as Malachite raised a claw. He put it down again.

“What I actually meant was would you be willing to participate in such a plan?” Hanz clarified. “I calculate an 87% chance you would rather capture her.”

I sighed. “That would be ideal. But without knowing what she’s capable of, it’s tricky. Heck, we all know about how difficult it would be to keep *me* imprisoned. Or a friend of mine?” I winked at Malachite who grinned back. “Could this town hold me for more than a few minutes? Probably not, if I wanted to escape and wasn’t unconscious. There’s no dead magic cell around here I know of. And that’s what it would take. They could never take me out of it, lest I simply snap my fingers and escape. Plus trying to actually fight her? I don’t want to fight myself, given my two new invisible guardians. Who knows what’s really in that room? We could learn a lot from questioning her, I’m sure. But the risk...” I trailed off. *She’s a wanted person. She brought undead into the city, I make sure to clean mine up when I’m done with them. Wonder if a zombie could keep the house clean for me? Shoot, zombie wolves! I’m so stupid! That would have been perfect. Or a huge zombie bear? Oh, now we’re talking but how would I- Anyway, not the time. She hangs out with undead, and cult members. But did she contact them or did they force her into something? No, if she’s as powerful as we fear there’s no way she did any of this under duress. She could have any number of dangerous spells I can’t counter, or traps as I said. I can’t see any trial going her way and they would have the same problem trying to lock her up. It’s simply impossible to keep a decent mage anywhere they don’t want to be. They would have to kill her. But I fear for Malachite’s soul if he does this. That angel did say it would be all right if it was justice.* “She’s backed us into a corner. We can’t take any risk she’ll get away again, she’s clearly still planning on attacking the town somehow otherwise she would have just gone to another town they didn’t know her at. Or stopped hanging out in places like this at the very least. But she didn’t. We really don’t have many options.”

“The instant kill plan it is!” Malachite agreed.

“Let’s go over it in a little more detail though,” Hanz suggested. “For example, could we bar the door in some way so we are not rushed after doing the deed?”

Several minutes and a few hastily sculpted rocks later, we followed Malachite down into the dark, and around the edges of the room into the main chamber. As he said, it was some kind of lab with several torches burning, and Jekserah was there at a table doing something to a corpse. Nothing reacted to us getting into position, and Malachite took careful aim. Snarly was ready with the wedge shaped rocks at the door, Hanz was covering them. My guardians and I were off to the side, ready to lend what aid we could.

“Ready?” I whispered.

“Ready!” everyone said back.

“On three. One. Two. Three.” I dropped the spell, and Malachite’s sword whistled through the air. She didn’t stand a chance, her head being cleaved off her shoulders in one strike and blood going everywhere. Her head flew off into the corner of the room. I braced myself but no explosion of magic came. *Huh, how surprising.*

“Yeah, take that!” he shouted. “Sword beats mage!”

“Did you hear something?” came from the other side of the door.

“Oops!” he whispered, as the skeletons and zombies shuffled into action. Snarly slammed the two wedges into the cracks around the door, wedging it closed while Hanz shot one of the zombies, hitting it in the arm.

Do they not know how to aim? To show them up (and how it was done) I hit the other one in the head with an elemental needle. *Wait, does that even matter for zombies? Maybe I should have done the leg.*

Malachite smashed the skeleton that lunged for him, bones scattering every which way.

“Just get the head!” I reminded him.

“Oh, right, we don’t need to re-unalive these guys.” He looked around for where it went.

The other skeleton went for me, and here I slightly regretted my choice of non-lethal damage for Besom. It would do nothing against a skeleton magically with only knockout. So it simply took a swipe at the thing, it had sharp claws after all, which staggered it and made it visible. Boline followed up with thrust, just as intended, becoming visible as well and throwing the thing back. *Ah, they work! Not that there was any doubt as they worked in the vision I had but still. Nice to know, and I didn’t have to do anything.*

Something hit the door on the other side and it shook a bit, but it was a heavy stone so it would take more than that. Still, perhaps it was time to go? Snarly was bouncing around keeping ahead of the zombies and trying to knock them over, so I figured it was time for me to get us out of there. I had my defense and offense to look after me, after all. I started casting dimension step as Malachite scooped up the head of Jekserah, shaking out her pillowcase to stuff it into. The door took another hit, and started to crack. Hanz stepped away from it, covering it in case something came through but was working their way over to me. I held the spell, and Malachite grabbed up Snarly and raced over to me so I simply had to release it when I was sure everyone was touching me. A second later the door burst apart and the cultists and shadow figures poured into the room, looking around for what was going on. My two allies were left behind, with a silent thought of *give ‘em Hell, girls!* we turned and got out of there before those shadow creatures figured out where we were and decided to do something about it.

“This way,” Malachite insisted, pulling me away from the direction of the exit. “That storage room, let’s see if there’s treasure!”

“You and your treasure,” I muttered. *The real treasure is the friends we made along the- who am I kidding, the real treasure would have been any books on that table. I may have to check this place in a day or two to see if they leave. I doubt they would leave the books though. I so wanted her spellbooks! Aarg!*

But I let myself be dragged along and we saw the zombies pounding on the door or at least Malachite did. The room was still in darkness.

“Sacks,” he announced, looking around. “Sacks of gold I shouldn’t wonder.”

“One second.” I didn’t want to be vulnerable for even the length of time it took to cast the spell, so this time I cast a second dimension step spell, held onto it, and dropped the first. Everyone but me grabbed up the sacks in record time, and Hanz picked up an ax, everyone being able to see as my magical, glowing circles were enough to light up the room enough to see by. “Okay time to go!” he announced, and with everyone holding onto me I let it go as the zombies turned to look at us. We were away. We headed back out the door, noticing with some amusement the undead were turning on their ‘masters’ and attacking them.

Sure, Jekserah animated them, I thought. With her death they’re not under control anymore. So they’ll just lash out. Serves them right, I suppose. They’ll probably be fine though.

We looked through the sacks on the way back, basically just a change of clothes and some loose change in the bottom of each one. Nothing too great. The ax looked pretty neat though, I had to admit that, and Hanz was swinging it around to get a feel for it. Once out of the forest we flew back to town, and headed for the guard building while the head was still “fresh.”

We didn't have too long to wait, a bloody, dripping pillowcase will get you bumped up in the queue pretty quickly in any town, and the captain of the guard and another man came to meet us.

"That's her," he agreed, taking a quick peek in the makeshift sack. "Hope it wasn't too much trouble for you."

"Honestly it could have been worse," Malachite admitted, closing it up. "We bypassed most of the place and took her out directly. She was a member of the Gloom cult, and there were several other cult members there as well as some strange looking creatures we didn't tangle with. Sorry. We felt it best to take her out as she was the main instigator."

"Yes, that cult is becoming a real nuisance," he agreed. "But what can we do? It's outside our jurisdiction."

"So you don't want the map of her location to make sure the place stays cult free?"

"Nothing we can do about it!"

"Uh huh... I guess we'll be on our way..."

"Don't you want the bounty?"

"Bounty? I didn't think there was one!"

"Ah some cat girl has been bugging me to put one out so I did."

Huh, she came through for us after all. I'll have to thank her.

"Of course!" He gestured to the man next to him to counted out twenty moons apiece for us. *Hey, that's not bad. Still not back to where I was before buying the spell but it's a start.* When that was taken care of he held up two more rolled up pieces of parchment.

"As you've proven capable, if you're looking for work I'll give you first crack at these. I was going to put them on the bounty board out front."

"I'll take a look," Hanz told him, taking them. They started looking them over.

"I can give you a summary. There's been a large creature flying around town lately we'd like investigated. People are claiming it's a dragon, and there shouldn't be any dragons around here. We'd like you to investigate that."

"Er, around town?" Malachite asked, as innocently as a babe.

"No, thank goodness. The Northern Pass, specifically."

"Ah, interesting!"

So it's not him, we have been careful apart from that one time.

"The other job is closer to home. Under it, to be precise. The Sinking Market district's wells have been much dirtier as of late, and those that go into the sewers have reported some kind of infestation of slime creatures of some kind. I don't really have a good description as people that go into sewers generally run away from anything they see down there pretty quickly. But as it seems," and here he sniffed a bit, "you may be at home there, you could check it out for us?"

Two of us, the ones that could smell things, glanced at Snarly, who was oblivious of course. *I keep casting the cleaning spell but the smell just doesn't go away. What do I have to do to make it stop?*

"We'll see what we can do," Malachite promised.

"Excellent. Good luck, and good day."

"Good day."

We headed out back home, our purses heavier and our steps lighter. (In a certain sense.) The town was safer and my new spells had proven themselves. We had more work, and the rest of the day to take it easy. I would look over the ax, see if it was magical in any way, and maybe head over to sell my spell tokens in the afternoon. The cult was still active, but we really hadn't been seen by anyone so we were probably not in danger of any reprisal. Things were looking up!

I went over my spell tokens that night, making sure all were up to my standard, and the next morning we discussed our next steps. The Gloom was still out there, but we really didn't have any leads at the moment. The new tasks from the guard captain needed to be done in a day or two but everyone agreed we should probably finish off our backlog of tasks before they really started getting away from us. And there really were only two; Hanz still wanted to explore the sunken vessel the map they had purchased showed, and that my divination magic said was still undisturbed, and the date for the meeting as shown by the token was finally coming up. *My patience will be rewarded!* We discussed the sulphur mine but my divination magic gave me a no answer to the question "will we find a drill of any kind within the mine" so we figured it had been looted in the meantime. I wanted to go talk to Solara and make her an offer she couldn't refuse, so we agreed to meet back up after lunch and I headed out there.

Walking into the shop in my bun form disguise she looked up and smiled at me. "Back for more spells?" she asked. "How did that symbol spell work out for you?"

"Very well," I began, "and it's the reason I'm here. To make you an offer."

"Oh?"

"Take a look at these. I call them spell tokens." I upended the sack I was carrying onto the counter (carefully) and dozens of spell tokens spilled out. They were simply small stone disks I had put spell symbol onto, and quickly sorted them into piles based on the spell I had used. I knew a variety of useful spells after all, any one of which would be invaluable to those in the adventurer's trade. And I wanted to know which would sell the best, so I made a few of each as examples.

"You've been busy," she remarked, looking them over.

"They don't take long to make," I countered. "So here's the pitch. I'm not quite ready to settle down and open my own store yet, but at the same time I think my magic could be useful to more people. On the other hand I can't personally accompany every adventuring group out there, or deal with every person that needs a spell cast. This is the way around that. My theory is, you have a shop. You seem like a person that wouldn't rip me off. I trust you. So you put up a display of these spell tokens in the shop, and in exchange you take a portion of the proceeds. I'm thinking 70/30 split? After all it's basically free money for you I don't see anything like this on your shelves so I'm not competing with you for business."

"If any of these are spells I would cast for a client—"

I put up a hand. "They're taken out without question. Only spells I know and you don't are sold in this way. Well, actually, if you trust me to do my job right we could just reverse it. Any spell you know that goes out of here as a token I only get 30% of. That's only fair, right?"

"I guess..."

"After all unless you were trailing around after a group the only spells you would cast are ones that last outside the shop. How many is that? Don't answer now, just think about it. Once a week I come back, see what sold, collect my earnings, and bring you replacements. Heck I could even do that here. We both make money, the shop reputation grows because you're selling a useful product, and my magic helps more people out in the world. What do you say?"

She thought a moment. "But what would we charge for them?"

I almost, but not quite, suppressed my scowl. "The usual guild fee would, of course, have to apply to each, separately. No bulk discounts, for example."

“That goes without saying. What I mean is, technically there’s two spells here per token. We would have to change for both and the spell symbol is very high grade. That would price it out of reach of most.”

“Look, I’m as concerned about guild interference as you... well, maybe less as I’m not the shop owner. But I have two arguments for you.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Go on.”

“The first is, clearly the eyes of the guild are nowhere near this town. This is evidenced by the fact an extremely wealthy and connected member of the merchant guild was also secretly researching dangerous magic and making undead *inside the city walls* and the guild did nothing. As I understand it, a group of so called ‘heroes’ stepped in and took care of her.”

“I just heard that from the town criers this morning, you’re well informed.”

“Ah, yes!” I coughed a bit. “I keep up with the news- anyway! The point is they didn’t care about that, why would they care about this? My second argument goes like this; if you buy a jar of honey at the market are you changed twice? Once for the jar and once for the honey?”

“No, of course not!”

“Of course not,” I echoed. “You pay only for the final product. You can see this everywhere. The post guild will give you a box to ship something in. The spice shops will sell you a salt shaker with salt in it for one price. Your shoes come in a nice bag. And so on, and so on. The point is the spell at the end. The final effect. The spell symbol just saves us time, not having to follow whoever wants the spell around- I thought of a third argument!”

“That’s handy.”

“Yes it is. Shoot I forgot it again. One second. Right, I remember! This,” I grabbed a token and held it up, “perfectly illustrates what the guild stands for anyway!” I announced triumphantly. “They can’t possibly argue against it.” *Logically. They can’t logically argue against it. They can make up all the stupid, non-logical reasons they want.*

“How so?”

“It’s single use. They *have* to come back and buy another if they want the spell again. It’s not like an imbued item that casts the spell over and over. It can easily be taken away, and if abused you simply don’t sell to that person anymore. It’s self limiting, as resources are not infinite. Only the buyer knows the activation word, so it’s not dangerous if lost or stolen. And while it’s not an official tenant, it should be. Use magic for the greatest good. If my spells can keep someone alive, or help them explore a dark cave, or provide some edge against an unexpected monster isn’t that something any mage should strive for? The blacksmith that makes a sword and shield keeps the person that buys it safe. Why should we be any different? This is just another tool of our trade. Why should we ignore it?” *Greed. Greed is why the guild would say to ignore it. But it’s actually more money for us so that argument works against them at that point.*

“So you would argue the spell symbol is just the box the spell comes in. We should only charge for the spell the customer actually gets use of.”

“Exactly!”

“And I get a cut of the profits?”

“Of course.”

She considered, looking around the shop. “They are small, perhaps just a set of baskets with them over there. Easy to steal though, the shop becomes more of a target.”

“Who would be stupid enough? Even my divination magic could name the person that broke in here. If they were good enough to scramble that to do the crime, they wouldn’t *need* to do the crime.”

“There is that. I’ll have to try a few of them, make sure they do what you say. After all I don’t trust *you* just yet. Though if you were trying to ruin my reputation or something this is the most roundabout way of doing so I’ve ever seen.”

“I won’t charge you for them, these can be samples. I can easily make more they only take a minute to make.”

She hummed again. “Let me see how actualized your core is. I want to know what sort of strength they’ll have in the end. If you’re just starting out...”

“Oh? Okay, I guess? And believe me, I’m not.” *I’m over two hundred and fifty years old!*

She came around the corner and held up a hand. I nodded and she put it on my chest, closing her eyes and relaxing. I tried to as well. A moment passed, and she opened her eyes again. “You have a fairly strong core,” she announced, sounding surprised. “But I think you still have a way to go before complete mastery of the art. But then, so do I. In fact I would almost say your core was larger than mine.” She realized she was standing really close to me, she had taken another step forward and was looking into my eyes, our noses only centimeters apart. She cutely blushed, backing away again. “Oh sorry! Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I told her with a grin. “It comes from all the life and death situations I’ve been in, I suppose. It’s just so hard to advance past a certain point.”

“I hear you. Okay, we’ll give it a try. But I’m doing divinations of my own and holding you responsible if any of these are not what you say they are.”

“Of course, I stand fully behind my product! Ummmm...”

“What is it?”

“We should do a contract. And if we’re going to do that...” I took a deep breath. “You should see who you’re really dealing with. This isn’t my usual appearance.”

“A sort of figured, but didn’t want to pry. I felt it on you when I was checking your core. Are you a mutation? I don’t care, only the product matters to me.”

“Not exactly. Here.” I dropped my disguise spell. “This is me.”

“Interesting!” She looked me over. “May I?” I nodded and she poked one of my crystalline protrusions. “Ouch. They actually are pointed!”

“Tell me about it.”

“What happened to you?”

“A lot of sitting around studying magic in a cave that held onto the mana a little more than I would like. It changed me. At least that’s what I figure happened, I don’t think any of my sisters did this to me. They all seemed surprised when they saw me next.”

“I see. Well, if you wanted to do something about it let me know, I’d love to help return you to normal. You’re fairly exotic looking, but it would probably be nice to have hair again. And maybe hug someone without poking them a hundred times.”

I shrugged. “I’ve gotten used to it. But thanks, I’ll think it over. My name is Orchid Spellweaver, by the way. I’ve been in your shop several times in different guises...” I blushed a little.

“I see. There have been some customers I didn’t recognize but seemed familiar. I guess that clears up that mystery. Let me go get some paper and I can write up a short contract for this.”

“I’ll start separating them out again!” *Yes, she’s going for it! Money money money here I come!*

We were now flying out to the shipwreck, Hanz shouting directions up to the enlarged Malachite as we flew. We followed the coast for a bit and then a chain of islands out towards the ocean. We knew the map was good but I breathed a sigh of relief as Hanz really couldn’t, being mechanical, when the final island did in fact seem to have a shipwreck stuck to it. We circled, looking for a place to land, as the term “island” was being generous. These bits of land were little more than large, jagged

rocks thrust up out of the water, but this one did have enough space to land on near the ship, and that's where he did. We scrambled out of his arms before he shrunk down again and as the others looked around I got out my two magical companions. *Can never be too careful.* They went invisible and I noticed Snarly and Malachite gesturing over to me. Looking down near the base of the ship I saw a group of fish people down there, looking up at us. They grabbed weapons and started heading around.

"Looks like company," Malachite told me. "Think they're friendly?"

"They had ample time to look over this wreck," I told him. "There can't be anything left of value there. If that's the case we'll just go, no need to fight over a rotting ship." And it was rotting. From here I could see the corpse of what used to be a wooden sailing ship. Masts broken, holes everywhere, but I caught sight of some movement as well. *Odd.*

"Didn't yer magiths say tha thip was undithurbed?" Snarly asked me.

"That they did! Very curious."

"I assume we can get the story from our new friends," Hanz announced. "Here they come."

"It's your map," I told them. "You get to talk to them. If none speak Trade I'll enhance you magically, I have a spell for that, as you know."

"Thanks."

They stepped forward, setting down the bow they still insisted on carrying and the ax, to show they were unarmed. Not that they were, their most deadly weapon was attached to them. But it was a good gesture. The fish people, which were pretty ugly close up, didn't do the same. In looking them over they looked like giant fish, but with arms and legs. Fishy heads, little clothing, scaly bodies. Mermaids these were not! I knew various groups of them lived in the waters around Pyre but as they didn't come up on land that often I had no idea how numerous they were or really what they wanted from life. One in particular continued a step past their brethren.

"These waters are ours landwalkers, what are you doing here?" he asked, in passable Trade.

No showing off for me at the moment. Darn.

"We came here following a map, to a great treasure," they explained, showing the map. "If you have already claimed it we have no quarrel with your people and will go."

"We cannot," he bubbled. "In fact we have lost many in trying. You would be wise to leave this place before it claims your lives as well."

"We are no strangers to danger," they protested. "Perhaps we can be of some use to you? Splitting the treasure is better than leaving empty handed, do you not agree?"

He seemed to be laughing. "What can a mere four more do for us? At one time we numbered in a dozens, but so many fell most left this place in fear. Now only the six of us remain. It is not enough."

"Hey, Orchid is a powerful mage," Malachite told him, throwing an arm around me. "We all benefit from her magic allowing us to fight as a group twice our size or more!"

I considered. *Yeah, that's probably true. I'm worth two people because of my speed, and as these guys really can't miss and can use their strongest attacks every time we do punch above our weight class now. And we have Snarly!*

"Tell us what you're facing," Hanz went on with a nod. "And we can determine for ourselves if the spoils are worth the risk."

"Very well, very well. There are two major risks," he began. He gestured to the others and said something to them in their language, and they lowered their weapons. "The first are the restless spirits that guard the ship. They act unlike any spirits I have heard of. We cannot hurt them but they rush to defend the wreck and they can hurt us. You can see the passageway that leads to the ship from where we are." He pointed, and we looked over the rise. It seemed there was a passageway through the rock there, it must loop around and be where the ship crashed into. Dropping from the air didn't seem

possible, the deck looked all sorts of beat up from where we were standing and I hoped the inside was in better shape. “When we simply ignored them hoping to gain entrance to the ship and retrieve what we have come for before they can react, a demon unlike any I have ever seen barred our way. A great hulk of ice, seemingly come to life and causing havoc among us. Their icy powers we were unable to get past. Come up with a plan to solve those two issues and you may have the treasure onboard. We are here for one item only. The cursed compass.”

“Curthed?” Snarly exclaimed, jerking back. “I don’t like the thond of that!”

“Indeed. We believe it to be the reason this ship was lost. It must be kept from human hands lest it cause even more tragedy.”

“I’m more interested in the demon,” Malachite mused. “Sounds familiar.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “But what is one doing around here? That ice cave, sure I can see that. They were protecting that ice orb. Are they attracted to magical objects maybe?”

“Maybe this one simply got lost and took shelter here,” Hanz suggested. “We cannot even guess at their motivation.”

“I’m worried therth more than one,” Snarly added.

“Still, working together we may be able to come up with something,” I decided. “We know what they can do, and we have some good weapons against their kind.” I indicated Hanz's beam weapon. “Let me think a moment.”

“Very well,” said the fish man.

I paced a bit on the narrow strip we had, thinking. Running through things in my mind, I saw plenty of rocks around here so I had raw material to work with. I could claim these guys as part of my party, to give them magic to get us past the ghosts. The guild also probably wouldn’t care this far out to sea so I wouldn’t have to charge them for it. “Okay,” I announced. “Let me run this by you.”

“We usually say swim this by you, but I take your meaning,” the fish man said.

“Right, swim. I’m going to share a piece of my magic with you. It’ll let you deal with the ghosts on their terms. You’ll be able to hurt them. I wish you wouldn’t, and I’ll explain why in a moment. You’ll head in first and keep the ghosts busy. Meanwhile my party will... swim ahead, meeting the ice demon head on. Snarly, you have the most important task. Go invisible, sneak past all that happening, and get on the ship. No ghosts there should bother you, and you’re the lightest of us. If the floors are weak you should be fine. Find the compass and bring it out.”

“This plan seems sound,” the fish man decided. “Why not use our full might against the ghosts?”

“I feel they’re not the bad guys in this case,” I explained. “Ghosts have a reason for refusing the afterlife. I feel those that died in this shipwreck did so in order to simply scare off those that would further use the compass, risking their own lives. They’re not evil. But try explaining you simply want to take it and keep it from being used to them. I don’t think it’ll work. So disarm them, show them you can hurt them, and take them prisoner. Once we have the compass and it’s shown to be in your hands, and you leave, their purpose should be over and they’ll just vanish. We can then loot the rest of the ship at our leisure.”

“Orchid doesn’t like killing any more than necessary,” Malachite explained. “Even those that are already dead.”

“Her words reach me,” he decided. “It is true, I have not sensed malice in their attacks simply duty. It may be as you say. I will relay this to my men, prepare your magics. We shall work together as you have said.”

“Great, this won’t take long,” I told them. I bent to pick up a stone and get to work.

I handed out 6 spell tokens to the fish men, and the one that spoke my language asked if the command word I had chosen, 'activate' had to be in Trade as none of them spoke it. That took me a second to think through, but I decided probably not. It was intent and your own will that activated the magic, not the specific vibration in the air you used to communicate. It was magic. It could tell me the answer to basically any yes/no question I could pose. It could let me speak and understand any language, or tell me about the basics of any technological device I had never encountered. So just because I thought the command word should be a certain sound I was sure the magic could deal with it being another as long as the sound meant the same thing to each person.

They indicated they were ready.

"Charge!" Malachite shouted, drawing his sword. He seemed pretty exited.

As planned the fish men made their way into the cave, while Snarly pulled his dagger and vanished. Hanz powered up their weapon, and I slowly made my way after everyone. They pulled ahead quickly, I mean even Snarly could beat me in a footrace and as I came up to the entrance to the cave I saw the fish men fighting off sailor ghosts. My friends ignored all of them, simply rushing past them as per the plan, and turned the corner out of sight. I was now alone (apart from my two invisible companions of course) and looking into the cave as the two groups went at it. *Now how can I best aid my new friends here?* I mentally reviewed my spells and had a thought. The spell that made enemies drop their weapons just specified that a group of targets would be affected, not that those targets had to be corporal or not. I wasn't trying to hurt these ghosts, and magic itself could target ghosts no problem. I took a chance, gathered mana from the environment into my core, and cast the spell. It worked! All the ghosts fumbled their weapons, which to my surprise stayed visible rather than vanishing having left their hands. This also surprised one of the fish people wielding a halberd of some type who was in mid swing, slashing the ghost he was fighting across the chest. It staggered back and vanished.

Come on, I specifically said to try and avoid that!

I then spent a fairly amusing moment messing with the ghosts. They would reach for their weapons but I was much faster than they were. I could cast the spell, hold it, and when all of them had rearmed themselves simply let it go. They would then drop their weapons again. They repeated this twice more before they caught on, and the fish men basically backed them into the cave, near the bend, and held them there. I noticed there seemed to be another one missing, making me sigh, but I stood behind the line and looked them over.

"Can you understand me?" I called to them.

"What do you want, pirate?" said one back.

"Ah, you can. Good. Look, I know you feel you have a duty here, to keep other ships from meeting your fate but I assure you the compass will be taken out of human hands. No ship will ever be wrecked by it again because those that take it," I gestured to the fish people, "don't use ships." *Not ships that sail above the water, anyway. I wonder if they have below the water ships? Like, pulled by whales or something? That would be cool to see.*

"What are you talking about? What fate? We're just here to resupply and we'll be gone in the morning."

"You're ghosts! You haven't gone anywhere in years. Your ship is a wreck."

"It are not!"

"It is! Look at yourself."

He looked down. "I look fine, stop trying to trick us, such an obvious lie would never be believed. Pirate! If it wasn't for all that magic you kept using on us..."

I was trying to figure out how to get through to this guy, and if it was even worth doing so as they were effectively pinned now by the fish people but I heard a commotion in the direction of the ship and moved to investigate. I'd like to say I ran to investigate but we all know that would be a lie. Passing the ice elemental I realized it hadn't vanished yet, meaning they had somehow disabled it and left it for me. *That's so sweet of them, they remembered! How about that?* Passing it I came upon a strange scene. A rope halfway through the room was swinging back and forth, and Malachite was soaking wet. He was also missing his sword. Snarly, at least I assumed the invisible figure on the rope was Snarly as Hanz was also standing there looking around, must have let go and hit the rickety wooden door to the left of us and dramatically smashed through it.

"You have to give the little guy credit sometimes," Malachite announced. "Hey Orchid. Any problems?"

"Not on my end, ghosts are taken care of. How about here?" I asked, looking at the huge hole that was clearly the source of Malachite's current state. It seemed the water had made it in here and filled up the lower decks of the ship, so this floor would be all that breathing folks could get to. Alone, it would have just been me and Hanz, but we could send the fish people down there if we had to.

"Floor is rotten," he explained. "Snarly is investigating past here. Sorry, we had to kill two ghosts to get here. Two more ran off."

"That's odd, you guys aren't phased. I sort of saw--"

"I hear the sounds of combat," Hanz announced. "There may be more ghosts within that didn't get the message."

"I can get you over there, if you--" I started to say to Malachite, who swore, looked around, and shot upwards flapping his wings. He soared out of sight.

"Guess he has a plan. Well, I can get *you* over there if you--" I started to say to Hanz, who simply stepped into the hole and fell into the water.

I looked left and right, now standing there by myself. "Was it something I said?" I sniffed my armpit. *I mean I can't be as bad as Snarly... I use cleansing magic all the time. Weird...*

I heard a crashing from beyond and shrugged. If they didn't want my telekinesis magic to help them get over there, it was fine with me. Super fine. I didn't need their validation. I could leave right now if I wanted to. Would serve them right, really. Instead I just leaned back against the wall, arms folded. *Is it cold in here or is it just me? Colder than it should be, I mean.*

The day was quickly won, the group shouting to me that the captain had been dispatched, making me think I hadn't heard them right.

"What do you mean dispatched? He must have been a ghost, and you aren't phased?"

"I could hurt him!" Malachite shouted. "He seemed more solid than any ghost I've ever seen. Same as the ones in the passageway. There's some chests here, Snarly is picking the locks!"

"Great!" I shouted back. *I specifically said not to kill any ghosts. Disarm them, I said. Let them realize their mission is over and they can depart, I said. Does no one listen to me?* "Let me know if you need help moving them!"

"Will do." He went back into the room again.

You know, with magic? Which is what I do? The only thing... magic?

We got the chests out, thankfully the compass was in the larger one along with a bunch of moldy clothes Snarly was enraptured with. There was every possibility the thing was down in the hold somewhere, and that would have been a problem, sort of. We did have fish men on our side... which begged the question why they hadn't just swam under the boat, come up from there, and looked around

bypassing the cave and the ice elemental completely. But now wasn't the time. We handed the compass over (after I took a quick look to make sure it wasn't a 'press this button to flood the entire surface world' magical item) and they departed. As they did the ghosts seemed to be gone, so at least some spirits found their rest that day. Malachite was clutching a chest like it was his baby or something, so I pointed to it. "Find something good?"

"Mine!" he insisted, pulling it away from me. Then he seemed to shake himself and carefully set it down. "Sorry! Wow, that's a powerful instinct. Yeah, take a look." It was a classical pirate booty, with coins and gems aplenty, meaning if we could liquidate it, we were all about to be quite wealthy.

"Nice," I told him. "I guess the map paid off after all."

"You can say that again," he agreed, snapping the lid shut. "Can't wait to see what we've got here, but maybe back at home?"

"What's in the barrel?" I asked.

"Some kinda booze," Snarly told me. "Don't know if it's good anymore or not."

"Well, you can always use it as a rust remover or something."

"That is not factually accurate," Hanz told me. "In fact, the breakdown of alcohol molecules results in-

"Anyway, I see you left me a gift," I told them all, thumb pointing back into the cave. "Let's get him healed. Cover him so he doesn't make trouble and I'll question him. Thanks, by the way."

"We can learn from our mistakes," Malachite told me.

Slowly, I refrained from saying, because I wasn't mean like that.

With the ice creature pinned and covered by a laser, a sword (a fish man had gotten it back for Malachite, he had lost it while almost plunging through the deck before) two daggers and my own allies, I cast a healing spell. The hole in the ice was pretty small, but it was in the thing's head, so I wasn't sure how much damage it had taken. Plus, I didn't want it *too* healed so it was a danger again, if it somehow decided to make trouble for us despite all the danger it was in. If it could blow itself up or something... ouch. But we had to risk it. I had to know what exactly we were facing. I had the spell already going to understand any language, and as the hole closed up it seemed to come around.

"You awake?" I asked it.

"I am," it replied. "You have left me alive for a reason, I assume?"

So it is intelligent. That's a good piece of information right there. "That's right. I'll trade you your life for information." *Killing one of these or letting it go isn't going to matter much in the larger scheme of things. It's the only thing I can offer that has any meaning to it. Let's see if it values its own existence or not.*

"It seems I have little choice."

"Correct. What are you doing here?"

"I am carrying out the will of the Gloom."

Guarding this old wreck is the will of the Gloom? It has strange tastes. "What is the Gloom, exactly?"

"The Gloom simply is."

What? "How did you come to this world?"

"The ways of the Gloom are not for me to understand."

So you have no idea? "What does it want?"

"To cover the land and make all who live here despair!"

But why? What does it get out of it? Still, maybe someone sent it here and we can find them and get better answers. "Do you have a master that you answer to?"

"I serve only the Gloom. You too could serve, I sense a great power within you. You would be a valuable asset to the Gloom."

"And if I did serve? What would the Gloom offer me?"

"Service to the Gloom is its own reward!"

Oh really? Not a very good sales pitch buddy. Maybe you aren't all that bright? I expected it to offer me knowledge, or more power. Not just... nothing. "Do you know how the Gloom came here? Did someone here invite it?"

"I tire of these questions! Either kill me now or release me as you promised."

I stared down at it. It didn't seem like it was going to budge. In fact those answers were more like a drone, or someone under the influence of magic robbing them of their ability to think about anything but what the caster wanted. Magic could be nasty like that. "Fine," I told it. "Go then, and tell your Gloom it will fail, because there are people in this world that will fight it, and win."

It just laughed and suddenly burst apart into water, splashing to the ground. Everyone jumped back, not expecting this. I sure hadn't. *Did the elemental energy keeping that ice together just go away? Did it return home through some means? I'm more confused than ever now.*

"Learn anything?" Malachite asked.

"Not nearly as much as I would have liked," I replied, shaking my head. "Certainly nothing we can act on, it was like the Gloom itself was controlling it. It was all just Gloom this and Gloom that. I can write it all down later, maybe send it to the guild? They should be told what's happening here. It didn't seem very smart, honestly. But it could talk... it's very strange."

"The ship is looted, I suggest we depart," Hanz told us.

"Yeeeeeesss," I agreed slowly.

"Is there something else?"

"Maybe." We left the cave and I stared down at the ship. "They were just guarding the compass, even if they didn't know it. I doubt most of the crew even knew the captain had such a treasure. Why would he tell them." *Could it have been the captain's will keeping them here? He knew what had happened to the ship, and he wanted to prevent anyone else finding it. His crew was so loyal they stayed even after death. Huh, a romantic idea, I guess.*

"What are you thinking?" Malachite asked.

"Not about romance! What?" I cleared my throat. "I think the ship and what remains of the crew that's aboard should be finally put to rest. They did us a service we didn't even know about, and it's not fair they just are left here to rot. Bones of the crew or the ship. It just doesn't seem right. You're sure we've gotten everything out of the ship there is to get?"

"Completely," Hanz agreed. "But I am still not following. Our only option is fire, and the ship will not burn. It has been here too long."

"That's not what I have in mind *at all*. See, I think you guys have been, in a word, underestimating me as of late. Let's see what we can do to remind you what I'm all about." I took a deep breath and regarded the ship. *Telekinesis magic on a target affects the entire target. That's why I can't cast just on somebody's ear and rip it off. It's the whole target or nothing. So the ship should hold together long enough to be moved. If I can put my money where my mouth is. If I can't, I am about to look very, very foolish. Or die to backfire, I guess? Nah, that won't happen, I know what I'm doing. Right? Right!* I opened my mana core further than I had ever dared, mixing ambient mana with what was stored there. I raised my hands, carefully taking as much time as I could to cast the spell, and a bright circle, brighter than any before, appeared above it. Rotating and glittering, the ship shuddered as magic took hold of it. I gritted my teeth and released the magic. "Move," I commanded, and swung my hand around, making a lifting motion with two fingers. The ship *responded*. I raised it slowly, as that

was the most dramatic, the water pouring from it as it lifted clear out of the water, my three companions stunned into silence beside me. I made a shoving motion, and it headed out over the water. When I felt it was clear of the rocks (I had no idea how far that would be but I pushed it out pretty far) I pointed my fingers down. "Sink," I commanded, not that I needed to. I just felt it was more badass. The ship complied, splashing back down into the water and rapidly sinking out of sight. "Now *that* is a burial at sea," I announced, making a slashing motion and dropping the spell. I put my hands together and bowed my head. "May their souls finally rest in peace." I looked between my awestruck companions. "Yeah," I said to them as I turned and walked away from the edge. "And don't you forget it."

Okay, may have laid it on a little thick there, but wow that was amazing. I did it! Still have far to go, what's she even talking about? Huh, maybe it was because of that comment I wanted to try it in the first place? I really shouldn't show off like that. But did you see their faces? I mean not Hanz they don't really have a face but the others? Yeah that was worth it. I think? Yeah, sure...

"Er, sorry about all that," I told the others when they came over to me. "Not sure what came over me just then. Not like me at all. Let's just forget the whole thing happened!"

"We are not ignorant of the fact it is your magic augmenting us greatly," Hanz told me. "We do appreciate it."

"What are you even talking about? Did something happen? I don't recall anything. Let's go! You ready Malachite?"

"Perhaps it is best if we depart."

"Don't forget tha chesth," Snarly reminded us. As if we would.

We made it back to town without incident, and Snarly sat at the table looking over the gems and chortling to himself. Not chuckling. Not laughing. This was a chortle if I ever heard one. He set some aside and rattled off some numbers to Hanz, as he still couldn't read apparently, and when done Hanz announced the total. It was quite large.

"But can we find a merchant with enough capital to buy all of these at once?" they wondered. "Though I suppose traveling to a few merchants would be less suspicious."

"We did acquire them legitimately," Malachite reminded them. "That ship was there a long time, no one is going to come looking for them at this point. Plus it, uh, sank." He glanced over to me. "So it's not even as obvious it was there in the first place. We should be in the clear. My concern is the taxes we'll have to pay on the lot! It'll be considered income by the town!"

"No doubt," I agreed. "We can ask around, it's too late tonight." This was true, it was getting dark and even I didn't want to carry a sack full of gemstones around town at night. Even with my favorite bodyguard. Too easy for a pickpocket to slip something away from you without you even noticing.

"Agreed," Hanz agreed. "We should place them into the 'safe' for the night and leave that task for tomorrow. We have another few days before the date of the meeting, correct?"

The safe being me sculpting the stone of the floor in the basement, shoving them into the hole, and covering it again. It works. "By my calculations, yes," I agreed. "Then we can go after this dragon that's flying around and visit our lovely sewer system. Really looking forward to that one!"

"Ith not so bad, onth you get used to it," Snarly told us, gathering all the gems back into the bag. "I'm going through the chest, thanth for taking it to my room, Malachihe."

"Sure thing little guy," he said, rubbing his head. "You have fun."

"Sthop that!"

“Night all!”

I took the bag and headed downstairs, tomorrow should be interesting.

Little did I know how interesting.

I spent extra time on my appearance that morning, as we were going to look for a buyer I needed to look my absolute best. For a grade 2 spell, the disguise spell could do a lot and I wanted to take full advantage. I settled on a male form, indeterminate race but with pale red skin, and red horns sticking straight up out of my forehead. One was broken off in a jagged way. My eyes were a pale yellow, my hair nearly white. My clothes were in the latest style, seemingly made of the finest material, and freshly pressed. Of course they were in the style of a wizard and so more long and flowing than a three piece suit because while I also changed my bulk to look like I bench pressed boulders before breakfast, I was still a spell caster and not to be trifled with. I made myself a long staff out of stone with a dragon curled around the top to complete the look. Malachite of course scrambled for his sword when I came into the room until I told him the agreed upon “safe word” we had always used to identify me.

He always snickered when we talked about the “safe word” but I could never figure out why.

“That’s new,” he finally managed.

“The better I look, the less questions will be asked about how we came into so much wealth. Men will be questioned less than women, so I threw that in there. Sad but true, and I want every advantage. Don’t worry, it’s still just me under here as always. You want to feel to make sure?” I put a hand on my chest and squeezed playfully while wiggling my eyebrows.

“No!” he answered quickly, looking away.

“And yet I’m hearing a yes. Come on, bodyguard.”

We headed outside and I cast my ally spell twice, getting two copies of Athame. Naturally my persona wouldn’t simply *walk* about the city like some kind of *plebeian*. Perish the thought. Malachite wasn’t exactly thrilled about riding but I told him Athame was very kind spirited and would never, ever, ever, no matter how funny it would be would she ever try to buck him off. Say into a nearby fountain or pigpen.

“I can walk just fine.”

“But seeing these two obviously magical creatures being ridden will further discourage trouble.”

“Or attract it,” he countered. “Because you’re obviously making a show of how powerful you are.”

“Would you steal from a mage?”

“I’m not stupid! Many people in this city are!”

“Well it’s up to you but just think Lord... Lord... Anglebright wouldn’t want even his bodyguard to walk around like a commoner.”

“Ankle blight?”

“Anglebright.”

“Whatever you say.” He swung into her back and we were off.

Our first two inquires were a bust. The first wasn’t buying anything at the moment, and the second claimed the haul was too much for his humble shop and he couldn’t give us anywhere near the true worth of the pieces. This was frustrating, but at the same time a good sign that Snarly’s estimation of the gems’ worth was correct. *I’ll have to remember to tell him, so he knows he did a good job.* We were standing there wondering where next to try when an older woman, human, came up to us.

“The flower and the rock!” she exclaimed, looking us over. “I found you after all!”

Malachite went into protector mode, stepping between us, but I leaned around him.

“Can we help you?” I asked.

“Why, I believe so. You are the right pair, aren’t you? Those horses, there can be no mistake!”

“If you’re talking about a flower and a rock, that could apply to us, yes. How do you know us?”

“Last night I prayed for guidance for my troubles,” she explained. “And I received a vision. A lonely field, and in that field two horses grazed, next to a flower and a strange, green, stone. I knew that I had to travel to find you, but that I would know you when I saw you. And here you are. Please, can you help me? I don’t know where else to turn.”

Malachite relaxed a bit. “Is it far? We’ve got things to do today.”

One thing. Turn gems into coins. Two things, count the coins. Again and again and again and...

“My house isn’t far, no! So you’ll help, then?”

He looked at me. “It’s fine with me. Let’s hear her out.”

“Oh thank the angels! My prayers have indeed been answered. This way, this way!” She beckoned us on. I had the horses follow us, it wasn’t good for my ‘image’ but whatever.

She led us to a poor district, and there were far too many of them for my liking in town but what could you do? Lord Anglebright wouldn’t normally be caught dead here but maybe he was picking up his laundry or something. Lord Anglebright was a believer in giving the poor opportunity to better themselves, after all. And she could be the best washerwoman in the city. You don’t know. Her house didn’t suggest it, it seemed sort of tilted and she indicated it was hers. “I’d invite you in to show you the problem, but that’s part of the problem itself. Please, take a peek.”

We traded a look and cracked the door open. Many, many tiny eyes met ours, as the place seemed to be infested with all manner of rats, and the smell was tremendous. They went back to doing ratty things, convinced we were no threat to them after their surprise wore off. “I see what you mean,” Malachite said, staggering back from it. “You’ve got a real problem here!”

“Yes, they’ve eaten a lot of my stock,” she explained. “If this goes on I’ll be ruined. Simply ruined. Oh I hope you really can help.”

“Can you?” he asked me. “They can’t really hurt me but I don’t fancy doing battle with a bunch of rats.”

“It seems like tutorial stuff anyway,” I muttered. “I had thought we were far past this sort of thing.” He looked at me like I had lost my mind.

“Wha?”

“Never mind. Do? Yes, I can probably clear this out, but...”

“But?”

“But?” the lady echoed.

I sighed. “It’s the guild. Despite it costing me nothing I would have to use a spell to do it. Thus, I have to charge you, even if I wouldn’t mind helping out as an act of charity. Or just doing my good deed for the day, say it however you wish.” I looked her over. “No offense, but even the lowest level of spell can be quite costly for those of, shall we say, lesser means.”

“Oh I can pay!” she quickly assured me. She dug around in her pockets and pulled out four moons. “Is this enough?”

“Come on Orchid, really?” Malachite chided me. “You’re going to take this poor woman’s life savings away from her? I mean there’s greedy and then there’s just plain mean. Do the magic already!”

“My hands are tied, you know I would in a heartbeat! Remember the guy in the woods? I healed him right up despite the risk. I also swore him to silence. I figured the guild wasn’t patrolling the forest or whatever. This is the city.” *And I made the argument against them being here just recently, to try and sell my spell token idea. I can’t have it both ways. But at the same time-* “I do too much and it’ll add up.

They'll find out and want to know what's going on. I don't need that kinda hassle in my life, believe me."

"I would rather give up the coins and have my product, honestly," the woman said. "And my house back, to be honest."

"Still..." he hedged.

"Look, I can see why they insist on it. They don't want some Lord abusing mages and not paying them fairly. Throwing them into prisons and whatnot if they don't do as he says. Unpaid magic thus is asked about by diviners and investigated. I mean what else does the guild have to do? They're not out helping people like this, are they? Look around!" I spun, arms wide. "You think a couple of mages couldn't radically transform this street in an afternoon? All new stone buildings? Smooth roads? Nice yards? Of course they could. They *choose* not to. Because of greed! And now they're making me be greedy too!"

"How much are we talking here?" he asked.

I sighed. "For a mage of my experience, the standard cost for a grade one spell is 17 embers. Almost two moons. Getting rid of the rats is just the first step. We have to figure out where they came from."

"We'll take that as it comes," the woman said. "The angels led me to you and I trust you. The fact you didn't just snatch the coins from my hand and not tell me the exact amount says volumes about your character. Do what you need to, please."

I let out a breath. "Okay. Let me think about this." I turned to the house and looked it over. Could use a lot of work, and it was definitely leaning a little. I walked to the sides, trying to estimate the size of it, but it wasn't as big as our place. *On my way to sell gems worth more than this lady will ever see in her entire life, and I have to take the only money she's got to rid her house of rats the city shouldn't have let get this bad in the first place! This sucks!*

"What's the problem?" Malachite asked. "You're the one that floated that whole ship around just yesterday. This one spell you're thinking of can't be harder."

"Here, let me give you a little lesson. You too, miss?"

"Mrs. Teak-Ettle. Of course my husband, Mat has been gone these five years, God rest his soul. But you can call me Edna."

"Edna then. You may also find this interesting if you have any interest in magic." I picked up a rock and drew in the dirt. First a line with two ends on it, then numbered one end 1 and one end 10. "The guild has a system of cataloging spells, it's fairly arbitrary because it's magic and magic comes from chaos but we work with it. At one end of the scale are grade 10 spells. These are the kind of spells that can seriously reconfigure the landscape, like creating new volcanoes or conjuring a flood out of nowhere. Naturally I don't know any spells of that magnitude. On the other side are grade 1 spells, like making a light, healing a scrape, or undenting someone's armor a little. I know a lot of that type. Most spells are in this range," I indicated the middle area. "Flexible enough in range and power to be useful day to day. Now, Malachite saw me use a spell yesterday in this range," I stuck a point a little past the halfway mark on the line. "It was meant to move things. I was showing off a bit—"

"A lot!" he tried to disguise as a cough.

"A tiny bit!" I insisted, "And I moved something fairly big. Because that's what a spell of this grade," I tapped the line, "is supposed to do. Move things. It was created to exert pressure equally across an area such that all points receive the same amount of force and the object holds together during the duration of the spell."

"I love it when you talk dirty," he whispered to me. "I mean shop, when you talk shop."

"Ahem. The spell I want to use here," I pointed to the house, "is grade 1. It's on this side of the spectrum." I tapped the 1 side of the line. "It's meant to be cast on a single person, and all it does is

create a magical 'ick field' if you will, that drives away vermin. You're supposed to use it before you go into the forest or whatever, so bugs don't bite you. I want to use it on a house, which as you can guess is a slightly different proposition. Basically I have to take the magic normally sized for a person and manually smear it, if you will, across this entire structure. It's not meant for that. But I think I can do it anyway."

"Why, that's wonderful!" Edna gushed. "I have faith in you!"

As well you should, I'm great, I didn't say. "Let's just hope it works," I did instead. "Look, I'm going to drop my disguise spell," I told her. "I don't normally look like this. I look... worse. Don't be alarmed. I need all my concentration for this. Sadly Athame will have to go too." I snapped and one of the horses went away.

"Why just mine!" Malachite complained. "Uh, not that I wanted to ride in the first place."

"My necklace holds one copy of the spell, remember?" I gestured across myself, again totally unneeded but one must keep up appearances, mustn't one, and dropped my spell. Edna didn't react too much, just looking me over. "My name is Orchid. That's the flower part you were probably confused about this whole time."

"I do get it now!"

"And this is Malachite, your 'green stone.' Okay then, let's get this party started. Malachite, we'll open the door wide, you need to get in there and open all the windows. Let's give them plenty of avenues to escape, shall we?"

"Why me?"

"Who was just bragging about not taking harm from the poor little dears? And be careful not to step on any either, you'll hurt the poor things."

"Fine, fine," he muttered. "The things I do for you..."

"Appreciate it!" I called to him as he went inside. A moment later he was back, and the windows were open.

"Stand back," I commanded dramatically. I took mana out of my core and cast. The effect was immediate. The rats shrieked in confusion and distress, and there was a mass exodus and a slow trickle after that. Some had run in circles, unable to understand what was happening but finally got it together and made a break for it. Others simply jumped immediately out the doors or climbed the curtains to leap out the windows. After a moment I decided they had all scampered and we went inside to look around.

We found the problem, or rather I did, in the basement. It seemed the house *was* sinking, and it was going to be a real problem. Part of the foundation had collapsed and the house was now low enough to actually connect directly to the sewer system. As Edna made preserves the smell must have attracted the rats which simply climbed up through the hole.

"Oh dear," she cried, "what are we going to do about that?"

"Move?" suggested Malachite. "This place needs to be torn down. The whole foundation redone. Hey can you lift the whole house?"

"And do what with it?" I scoffed. "I wanted that ship to sink, I didn't care what happened to it after I let the spell go. I can't float this house around the neighborhood, redig the foundation, line it with stone or whatever... I'm a mage, not an architect. I don't know what's involved. A group of mages and some city planners could do it. All I can offer is short term solutions."

"This place will last longer than me," Edna insisted. "Whatever you can do for now is good enough."

Is it though? I shook my head. *Thousands of years, and we still haven't figured out how to keep people from living in squalor. We have magic, for God's sake. It's stupid! I mean we don't all need to be on floating islands but there must be some happy medium we could strive for?*

"Your stone spell?" Malachite asked, as I was scowling at nothing.

I came out of it. "Huh? Oh, yeah. Thankfully it's also grade 1, so it really is your lucky day. Knock more of those bricks lose and make a roughly square hole. I'll do my stone creation spell and simply plug it up. I can make it any shape, including thickness, and seal it up by attaching 'wings' on either side. I'll see how far to the sides I can go, they shouldn't be able to get through. I can make it pretty tight."

"Oh, you can make it pretty tight, that's good to know," Malachite announced, clearly not looking at me for some reason and scratching his chin with a claw. I had no idea what he was talking about now so ignored him. He got to clearing the hole and I sealed it up.

"Thank you so much!" Edna gushed. "Take the four, please!"

"I can't take all your money!" I protested. "How about two moons and a few jars of preserves?" Looking around there were a lot of jars, mostly clean.

"If that's acceptable to the guild, I don't want to get you in trouble because you wanted to be nice to me."

"As long as I can say I was fairly compensated for the spells and a truth spell will back me up, it's fine," I told her. "But seriously, have an expert look at your house. I don't want it falling over with you in it."

"Oh pish posh, it'll be fine. It'll take me days to clean up all this mess though. Rat poop everywhere!"

"I didn't notice," Malachite deadpanned, shaking his foot.

So we walked away with some jars of jam and two moons, and I told her we would return the jars as they must be expensive to produce. She said that would be a big help, and to spread the word about her product. She had a booth in the market and we said we would. Walking back down the street towards the shops I was seething. *Stupid guild. Stupid having to charge for doing a good deed. Angels, an actual prayer, led her to us.*

"Uh, Orchid?"

And I had to charge her. Was that her life savings? Will she be able to buy jars now? Some of her stock was destroyed, they got into everything. I suppose they didn't break the jars.

"Orchid?"

Couldn't offer cleaning magic, oh no, that would up the cost. A couple more grade 1- grade freaking one!!! spells and she would have been beholden to me for-

"Orchid!"

"What?" I yelled.

"Your disguise?"

"Huh?" I stared at him, and then around me. People were looking at me and edging away across the street. Athame stopped at my side, having followed me without any specific command on my part. "Oh! Right. Forgot. Sorry, yes, thank you."

"I could hear your teeth grinding from here," he told me, as I cast again. "We did good, don't worry about it."

"It's just," I looked around, now solidly a cambion looking dude again, "the wealth we're carrying around? I didn't need her two moons anymore. I'm set for months- years maybe! But that's not good enough for the guild. I had to take more. It makes me *so mad!*"

"I noticed. I guess start your own guild?"

“With card games and scantily dressed people that appeal to a broad range of tastes?”
“I mean you might as well make it nice...”

We resumed our mission to liquidate the assets, and another jeweler said that we hadn't heard it from him, but a famous, wandering, kobold that doesn't ask too many questions and pays top dollar for the sort of thing we were looking to sell was in town. His current “office” was down by the docks, which sounded a little shady, but finding a quiet place and doing some divination magic showed he was real and would treat us fairly. We headed there and showed the goods to the guards, who let us in. There were tough looking people all over the place, a number of races, so honestly the two of us fit right in, and the kobold, who gave no name but sat at a desk with ledgers of all types motioned us forward and gestured to the empty spot. We dumped out the goods, minus two Malachite was interested in keeping, and he nodded in appreciation. He pulled out various lenses and started looking them over carefully, writing things down on a fresh sheet. He took his time too, which wasn't suspicious or anything, and even cast a few spells of his own on them. *The measure spell, by the looks of things. I know that one! Hope he's not going to charge us for it, we'd walk out of here owing him money. Stupid guild!*

Finally he slid a number over to us, on a folded over piece of paper, and I lifted it up. The number was pretty close to what Snarly had estimated, I had actually figured we would lose more to fees but this guy was pretty near to my own heart and didn't seem to be jerking us around. I nodded once. He nodded back. Malachite held up a hand, and two more gems were there.

“We think these are the best,” he announced. “I'm keeping the better one, please add the other to the total on that paper.”

He peered closer to them, taking them, and giving them the same treatment. He handed back a very black, well cut stone and kept the other. He gestured and I slid the parchment back. He wrote another number, which was 63 moons higher, and again I nodded. He gestured to a nearby tough, who went and unlocked a large chest, pulling a smaller chest out of it. A different person came over and unlocked it after he set it on the table. The kobold started pulling gold bars, laying 5 down, then silver bars, 10 of them, then 3 suns, another 35 moons, and a pile of embers. He pushed them all forward and started placing the gems inside. The goons around us tensed a little.

Ah, time for math. How much is a trade bar worth? Screw it. I swept the lot into the chest that originally had the gems in it. If he's really going to use math to try and cheat us, he deserves it after all that effort. I'll trust him. That looks like a nice enough pile of silver and gold, silver and gold, to me. “Nice doing business with you.”

Everyone relaxed, he smiled and nodded.

“This way please,” said a guard, and we followed them out.

“That was a bit surreal,” Malachite reported once we were some ways away.

“Yeah, not how I saw that going,” I agreed. “Of course now we have all these bars to deal with. What huge thing do we want to buy we can use them for? I guess we could take them to a bank and get coin a little at a time but there's probably a fee for that.”

“A boat? Another house?”

“We could rent the house out,” I agreed. “Make this money work for us? Splitting it up is going to be tricky, we could just keep track on paper for now.”

“Maybe you can!”

“Maybe I can.”

“What's up with our financial system anyway? All this one coin is worth so much of another, but a different amount going up again. Makes it hard to figure out how much you actually have.”

“You know, I have no idea,” I told him with a shake of my head.

When we got home the others were waiting for us, and said they had picked up another job for us. Apparently a Lord Graymane had heard of our exploits (somehow) and had come to the house looking for us. Snarly (of all people) had impressed him, and had hired us for 10 moons to protect a shipment traveling from a warehouse (yes where we had just been) to the outskirts of town. Easy money. And speaking of money we showed the fruits of our labor to the others who were impressed, and I thanked Snarly for his good work in estimating the value of everything.

“Of corth!” he replied.

I bundled the money up into our “safe” and got busy on another disguise for myself. I went with a gargoyle, at least a small one, but not something you would mess with, and we headed back to the docks. I wanted to turn Snarly into a dwarf but he said the man wanted our group specifically which of course meant if he didn’t look like himself what was the point? I had to agree, if he really was gaining reputation around town people would need to see him with us to cement it. On the way I refreshed everyone’s spell symbols, as I hadn’t gotten a chance to do it yet. This mission actually went quite well. I had all my allies out, riding on Athame and both Besom and Boline were visible and scanning for trouble. A bunch of tough looking thugs were waiting along our route, but they took one look at us and decided it wasn’t worth dying over, and we got left alone. At the gates we collected our fee and went back home. We were pretty rich! It was a good night to celebrate our newfound wealth and soon head to the meeting of the minds as specified on the token I felt I had gotten ages ago. I couldn’t wait.

With the date on the token being just two days away we had a little time to kill, and that night while sitting with the others and watching two of them eat I hatched a plan. A wicked plan. A naughty, delicious plan that needed a few things to go right, but was I not a master of all I surveyed? Of course I was! If I couldn't pull this off, it was time to hang up the old spellbook for good. Part one of my plan could be put into action immediately! It looked like everyone was about done and would be getting up shortly, and I didn't want to forget what I was about to learn. *Now, act casual, Orchid. That's it, nice and causal.*

"Say, have you two noticed that Malachite's tail seems to be getting longer?"

"You really think tho?" Snarly asked, looking over.

"I didn't notice anything," Hanz reported.

"My tail? What are you talking about?" Malachite twisted and turned, trying to see his own tail around his wings.

"I mean I wasn't checking it out or anything," I hastily assured him, needing to sell it and sell it big. "But it just seems longer to me now than before. You should be careful not to knock into things if you think it's one size but it's another."

"Why my tail though?"

"Don't look at me. Oh, here! Easy way to tell. I'll just cast the measure spell on you and then again in a few weeks. We can compare the size and know for sure."

"A logical plan of action," Hanz praised.

"Okay," Malachite allowed. I got up and went over to him, touching him and casting my measuring things spell. This was easy enough to pull off, and I announced his tail was 1.05 meters in length currently. But secretly, I was repeating his other measurements to myself so I didn't forget them. Dinner soon broke up and I hastily wrote down what I had learned. Part one of my plan was complete!

The next day I left early, Malachite still snoozing away, and headed into town. I took on the appearance of a dark elf, and named myself Midnight for no particular reason. My first stop was a clothing shop that catered to driag, thankfully there were some in this city. Most places didn't exactly like having them around for one reason or another, but with their lands so close by and most of the guard being driag I had plenty of places to choose from. I picked one that seemed to have some nice examples in the windows and a bit of looking around and talking to the salesman later I handed over his measurements and was assured he could tailor the outfit I had picked out to fit Malachite perfectly. For a small fee he said it would be delivered when I asked, and I handed him the note I had written to be included. With that done I headed out and found a nice looking open carriage I could rent, then made reservations at a nice restaurant for tomorrow evening. Thankfully I could ride around doing all that and not walk, so I made it back with plenty of time to spare for the day. I still had work to do before leaving for the meeting.

My divination magic assures me we can get there and back before dinner tomorrow. The best time to arrive is exactly noon, so that's when we'll be there. We'll meet whoever shows up, head back here, and I can put my plan into action.

We had discussed what to do with the money and we didn't have many good ideas for now except to put it into the "safe" and worry about it later. Always better to have the problem of "no money" as Hanz put it than "no money" which I decided was them making some kind of joke? I didn't get it. But Malachite did have one request, and that was a spell to protect him against ice attacks. He said fire elementals would be no problem for him, not that he could hurt them easily, but that ice

elementals- such as the ones that seemed to be popping up everywhere- were a real concern. So I headed off to the usual magic shop, and 50 moons later (*This better be worth it!*) I had a spell to make someone completely immune to cold attacks. At least I didn't have to maintain it, thank you spell symbol magic! I spent the rest of the day studying the new spell and that evening I asked what form he wanted the spell symbol to take. I offered him some spell tokens, but he decided to just have me burn it onto his armor. Yes, it could only be used once until I refreshed it, but then he didn't have to fumble around with a sack of stone disks either. It didn't matter to me either way so that's what he got. I set the tokens aside to put in the shop once I went back there, figuring I might as well make some of my money back.

Finally the day had arrived. The fated meeting, if the wanderer that told me about the coin was on the level, that is. We left soon after Malachite got up, flying to the treeline of the Dagger Forest and heading inside. We knew the place was somewhere within, but not exactly where, so we had a bit of searching to do. Still, I could use my compass spell and Snarly took the compass/watch we had gotten so long ago and we spread out in a line to try and find the place. We had searched for maybe a half hour when suddenly it started to get dark, and I looked up in alarm.

It was a solar eclipse!

Of course, that's why we had to come here on this date, I thought to myself. But is this place only visible while the eclipse is happening? I hope not! I still don't know where it is, and how long does an eclipse last for? I dug the coin out, just in case as I hadn't felt any magic on it before but as I held it up, a beam of light shot through the trees.

"Hey, come on!" I shouted to the others. "Can you hear me? Come on, it's this way hurry!"

Naturally I was the slowest of us but the trees slowed everyone down. We broke into a clearing and there it was- a large structure with four beams of light coming out of the open doorway. One of them was connected to my coin, and winked out as we got close. Everyone looked around as I studied the entrance. There was some writing around the door, which was just an open portal into darkness.

"Hey, comeone's soming," Snarly announced. "I mean thomeone's comith."

It was true. Several figures pushed past the trees, blinking in surprise at what they saw. One was an older man trailed by a younger, both in robes so they were probably spellcasters. One was a very well dressed dwarf, no weapons but he was trailed by an armored figure, probably a bodyguard. The last group were three female beast-kin, two cats and one raccoon. They had simple weapons and clothes on, so were probably just normal folks. Their coins winked out as well.

"Is this all of us then?" the dwarf called. "I demand to know who's in charge here!"

The others looked to the other groups, but no one spoke up.

"I guess we need to go inside. Right! I'm going in first, any objections? No? Fantastic. Come along Mitsu."

"Hang on, we should talk about this!" pleaded the human. "We can't just go in there without making some kind of plan! I should prepare a few spells-"

"Forget all that," the dwarf roared. "You know how much I paid for this token? It's finally time to recoup my losses, and not a one of you is going to stand in my way."

He marched up to the door and went inside, followed by his bodyguard.

Expect he wasn't.

"I can't get past the doorway," he exclaimed. He shoved against nothing, trying to get in. "Mister Steelshod, I can't get in!"

“Maybe you need to actually hold the token to enter?” asked the wizard. “What sort of spell could do that though? Hummmm.”

“There’s writing here, I was going to try and work out what it said,” I told him.

“Ah, now there’s an idea. Archmage Duceldorf, at your service!” He came over, holding out a hand to shake. He didn’t seem put off by my appearance, but then, he was probably prepared for strangeness given the whole situation. I hadn’t bothered to put up my disguise while wandering around the forest, and I hated people seeing the ‘real’ me, but there was nothing for it now.

“Orchid Spellweav-” I started to say, but was interrupted by a blood curdling scream. Everyone looked at the door, where the noise had come from, and the dwarf booked it out of there slamming past his bodyguard and sending them both tumbling.

“What in the world?” the wizard asked.

“Monsters!” the dwarf announced. “Creatures. Horrible! Almost didn’t get away!” Looking at him now I saw his clothes were smoldering, like he had been attacked by fire. “Just what are you all trying to pull here? Where were you?” he demanded, as his bodyguard got up.

“I couldn’t come in after you,” he protested. “I tried. Didn’t you hear me calling after you?”

“Typical. You! Girl! Give Mitsu your token so he can come in after me. I’ll toss you a trinket or something on the way out, should I find one. Come on then, don’t keep me waiting.”

I looked around for this ‘girl’ he was referring to. Was there one behind me?

“No, you, the bald girl with the spiky bits. Hand your token over this instant!”

“Oh really?” Malachite growled, stepping between us. “How about you give me *your* token and I’ll go in with her?” He put his hand on his sword. “Or better yet, I’ll fight you and your so called bodyguard for it. That’s fair, right?”

“I’m not fighting anyone over this!” exclaimed the beast-kin girl. “And I’m not going in there if there’s monsters. You can have my token!” She threw it at him and spun on her heel. “Come on, let’s go home. What a waste of time.”

“I told you we shouldn’t have come here,” said the raccoon one.

“Shut up, Augustine. We heard you the fifth time you said it.” They vanished into the trees.

“Good!” said the dwarf, now up and rubbing his hands together after handing the token to the armored man. “We’ve secured a second token and reduced our competition in one swoop. Now we can go. See you all inside.”

“Sir, shouldn’t we go in together with the others? Safety in numbers, and such?”

“You’re supposedly the best,” he pointed out. “Earn your pay. I won’t be second in this, we’re going in first.”

“But it may not matter,” he protested, rushing to keep up with the dwarf. “At least tell me about these creatures...” They vanished inside.

“With that out of the way,” the wizard decided, dismissing the dwarf from his mind no doubt. “What you were saying, my dear?”

“I was going to see about reading this writing or whatever it is,” I said, pointing to the runes.

“Please proceed!” he agreed, stepping out of the way. “Always nice to see a fellow practitioner of the magical arts at work!”

I cast my spell, touching the writing, and it became clear to me. “Welcome to the temple of the eclipse,” I read. “Those with the proper means may seek their destiny within. There is nothing to fear, your master of ceremonies awaits you in the lowest chamber.”

Ah, proper means. Holding a token, in other words. Right.

“Ah, so we are to be met,” the wizard decided. “But if there is nothing to fear, why the monsters? Perhaps the fine gentleman dwarf simply rubbed them the wrong way? They are known to

be a bit abrasive perhaps he got their dander up he wasn't offered a cool drink right from the start and they took umbrage?"

"A trick, perhaps?" Hanz decided. "To try and delay us entering? He may meet this master of ceremonies and claim no one else was around."

"He themed pretty schared," Snarly decided. "And a jerk."

"Would he really burn himself like that?" Malachite asked.

"A good point," the wizard agreed. "Well, we have two tokens remaining. Will you join me, my dear? I know a combat spell or two, so I'm not completely helpless. Hopefully with that brute in armor already down there we can have a good chance to come to their aid."

"Why not let me go in there?" Malachite offered. "And see what the situation is? I know you can take care of yourself Orchid but for all I know this guy will stab you in the back the moment my eyes are off you."

"Now see here!" he protested. "I would do no such thing. I simply wish to see what this is all about. I have no designs on anyone. Whatever happens within, I am content to take third place, if this even is some kind of contest. The writings do not imply such, though why all this cloak and dagger business does confound me fiercely."

"Perhaps it should be me," Hanz spoke up. "As I can be invisible. Let the 'good' dwarf and his highly paid companion distract these creatures while I do reconnaissance. I will, of course, record his face when he learns he is second after all, should I reach the master of ceremonies before him. How to display it though..."

"Orchid could make me invisible!"

"Until you had to attack someone," they protested. "Mine doesn't wear out."

"Pluth they have a ranged weapon," Snarly added. "For the record I don't want to go inthead of you. Even though I thoo can be invithible thanks to Orchid. It'th all yourth."

I hummed, looking between the two of them. They made some good points, and I doubted either would betray me no matter what treasures were to be found inside, should I give up my token to allow them to go alone. We had been together long enough to let me know that, perish the thought. So why then did the thought of giving it up seem so repugnant to me suddenly? Hanz could handle themselves, and report on what they found. Both were sturdy, good fighters in their own right, and with my spell powering their weapon the ranged aspect would maybe help. And Malachite really couldn't miss with his sword now. But the dwarf had been *burned*, if this 'monster' was some kind of fire elemental they would be helpless. I was going back and forth between them in my mind when Snarly cried out, "Look!"

We looked, and the two tokens were expelled from the doorway, flying in an arc and landing in the grass. He went over and started running his hands through it, coming up with the two a moment later.

"Well, they're dead!" Malachite announced. "I guess we can all go in. Snarly, whatever your name is, give me your token and wait here!" He held out a hand for the tokens.

"You really think they're dead?" the wizard asked, looking pale. He clutched his token to his chest, as though Malachite was going to yank it away from him. I noticed I was doing the same and forced myself to relax my grip and put my hand down.

"Want to go down and find out?" he said with a grin. (Don't forget he shows a lot of sharp teeth when he does this)

"Nope!" he decided, handing over his token. "It's not worth my life. You have fun in there! Come on." He turned and walked back the way he came, his apprentice looking relieved and even giving us a grateful wave before they vanished back into the trees.

“The question now becomes,” Hanz announced, “do the four of us believe we have a chance to survive in there? We are becoming fairly old hat as they say about these sort of situations. Do they still say that? I forget.”

“Even if it’s the whole building and not just the door that keeps us out,” Malachite told them, handing the coins out. “We can each have a token so there should be no problems. Let’s head into the astral, we can bypass any ‘monsters’ and just go right to the last chamber. Our host has a lot of explaining to do after this!”

I chuckled. “Seems to be the go-to strategy isn’t it?” I agreed. “Grab on.”

We headed down the stairs, expecting as usual for the astral to get dimmer and dimmer as we did so. But strangely, it got a bit dimmer but no more. From what we could tell the ceiling here looked like the night sky, and there was the eclipse, a ring of fire lighting the way. But there was another light source down here too- a creature made of light. Flanked by two more figures made of darkness, they were heading back down the corridor away from the bodies of the dwarf and the bodyguard. I shook my head and said a short prayer for their souls. *Perhaps the patron of lost causes will see something in them?* We passed them and continued on. Halfway down the hallway was an altar of sorts, sitting atop it was a crystal that shone brightly, just like the creatures that thankfully didn’t seem to notice us. They were strange looking, the dark ones having multiple limbs that were hard to count or keep track of, while the light ones were too bright to look at directly so they could really look like anything. We had seen creatures of darkness like this before, had they looked like this? *I really don’t want to think we’ve been killing them, and so they’ve started evolving or something to become harder to kill, when they come here. Are they all connected? This place hasn’t been used in ages, what are they even doing here? How does being here further their goals? They aren’t making an army, it doesn’t make sense.*

“It’s the God forsaken ice cave all over again,” Malachite announced. “And just when I got immunity to ice too. Figures it’s a different element now. These *are* elemental light demon things aren’t they?” He looked to me.

“That’s how it seems,” I agreed. “It *was* just sitting there the first time, that ice orb I mean. It was only protected the next time because we tipped our hand. Thankfully these guys don’t seem to communicate and haven’t taken steps to secure this one. Or maybe they can’t, how do you protect something with light?”

“So this place is compromised? It shouldn’t look like this?”

“Yessss,” I slowly answered. “That also seems to be the case. Maybe they aren’t thrown out because they’re made of light or something? Let’s move on, but I don’t expect anything good.” *In fact I suspect our “host” to be long dead, if these things have taken the place over.*

He nodded, and we headed further in. There was a door which didn’t bother us any, and down the next hallway was a similar altar, with another crystal. It was hard to tell with this one but it seemed to be sucking light in, rather than giving it off. Another two elemental creatures, dark ones, were by the door, and shockingly two mechanical figures guarded the door at the far end. They were on treads, and looked powered down.

“Those- it can’t be,” Hanz decided, walking around them. “Do they even function?”

“What are they?” Snarly asked.

“War machines,” they answered simply. “I didn’t think any were made since the fall. Very peculiar. Oh, if we could only capture them somehow and reprogram them to follow our orders. We could protect the house and bring one with us!”

“I’m not carrying that thing around,” Malachite announced with some distaste.

They do make a good point though, a tireless sentry at the house would be nice.

We stepped around them just in case, then came face to face with three figures in the final chamber. Two were simply larger variants of the light and dark demons we had seen in the passageway, but the other was another remnant like Hanz. Superficially, anyway. Same basic structure, but Hanz didn't have dark and light energy pulsing through them like that. We could see it along their joints, which seemed to be pushed apart by it slightly. We all jumped when it suddenly looked around.

"Intruders detected in adjacent dimensional space!" it announced. "Preparing countermeasures!" It let out a scream and energy started pouring off it in waves. Meanwhile the two demon things were alerted, and looked around for us. Thankfully they didn't seem to notice us. Still...

"Let's go let's go!" Malachite announced, spinning me around and shoving my back. "Don't want to be in here anymore, let's go!"

I agreed, and we hustled out of there. The two war bots were now active in this hall as well, but thankfully also didn't seem to notice us.

"Was that supposed to be our hoth?" Snarly asked. "There wath a chest in there I thaw."

It would make sense, something that could stay here, alone, without food, to meet us during the eclipse. But it seems compromised now. What was that energy? How was it doing that? Is Hanz holding out on us? But no, I've never heard stories of remnants able to do that!

"If they were," Hanz told him, "they're a bit too far gone now. Prudence suggests we retreat, however I estimate a 96% chance you will request we think of a plan to at least not leave empty handed." They were looking at me when they said that. "You want those crystals for study, do you not?"

"You know me so well," I told them with a grin. "Let's let the big guy calm down a bit and see what we can come up with..."

The creatures seemed content to stay in the temple, as none had emerged while I was pacing around outside thinking of the plan. There were three things to retrieve, and I was pretty sure my plans for each would be foolproof. The question was, could I convince Malachite of that? I called up my two magical companions, they were a big part of the plan after all so I needed them ready.

“Right, I have a plan!” I called to everyone, and they came back over to me. They had been walking around the place, but no one reported seeing anything interesting or out of the ordinary. “Here’s what we’re going to do. We’ll move fast, and hopefully not break anything. Hanz, as you say your invisibility doesn’t end when you interact with the world so you’re with me. I’ll take us to the astral again and go invisible myself. We’ll get into position near the first crystal and drop out. You grab it up while I cast the spell to take us back again. It should happen quickly enough they won’t have much time to react. Now I know what you’re thinking.” I held up a finger. “They’ll alert the ones in the second chamber to expect us to do the same thing. That’s where these cuties come in.” I stroked Boline’s head. “They’ll come with us on the second run. We’ll still be invisible but they won’t be. I’ll have them attack and be a distraction. This will, sadly, probably kill them.” Boline cocked her head as if to say “and what’s your point?” “The third chamber, with the crazy remnant, will get a visit from Athame, whose only power is to grow. But that’s all we need her to do. She can drop in, grow to enormous size, knocking them over and distracting them, while we grab the chest. Thoughts?”

“Where do I come into this plan?” Malachite asked gruffly.

“Ah. You get to, uh, wait out here and cover our retreat?”

“Why can’t I come?”

“Because in this case, you coming actually makes me *less* safe. Trying to cover both of us with the invisibility magic makes it less effective. Thus, increasing the danger I’m in. Trust me, we’re going to be in and out. You know how fast I am casting magic. They won’t know where I am, and there is some cover I can take after all I’m not just going to stand there and let them attack me. Hanz will be there and for the second and third chambers they’ll be too busy fighting my friends here.” Both nodded, they were ready and willing to serve.

“I don’t like it, seems like too big a risk.”

“We gave away the ice orb without me even able to look it over,” I reminded him. “We need to understand how these things got here, what powers they actually have. Are they connected to the Gloom? We don’t know. But we better find out, as they seem to be everywhere we turn. One ice orb is coincidence, three is enemy action. It may be working up to something, putting pieces in place it’ll use when the time is right. We need to understand them, and this is our best chance at doing that.”

“Just... stay safe, okay?”

“Of course!”

I put the invisibility on myself first, then touched Hanz’s back and reminded him not to move too fast because of, you know, my condition. They assured me they knew, and went invisible too. Both Besome, sitting atop Boline, went invisible, and I cast, holding the spell when it was done and grabbing one of her paws after flailing around a moment. Releasing the magic we shifted over to the astral plane and we headed out. *Should I try to keep three spells going at once? Cast the spell again, hold it, release the first one, watch for the crystal to move, then let that one go? No, too much risk. I am fast enough I know I am.*

We got into position. There was a column here, so we tried to use it to our advantage. I crouched down, making myself a smaller target, and waited a moment for the other two to get into position. “Ready?” I asked Hanz.

“In position,” they answered.

“And go!” I said, dropping the spell. Hanz must have reached out, grabbing the crystal just enough so it would go with us. I had hoped the slight motion wouldn’t attract attention, but it seemed these creatures were more alert than I gave them credit for. *Probably because of that stupid dwarf. Thanks, moron.* They snapped to attention and started firing beams at us, making me duck even more. *Time to go.* I cast, seeing a small flaw in my plan because the magical circles appeared around me, but that couldn’t be helped. They had fired way too high anyway, and we were gone in an instant.

“Next one is this way,” they told me, moving as I straightened up again. “That distraction won’t hold them for long.”

I agreed, and made my way as quickly as I could over to the next crystal. We repeated the heist, this time without incident as my creatures had done their job pulling attention away from the area we were in. I grinned, this was going to work out perfectly. Now back in the astral we made our way to the third room as my allies were torn apart, though they did get some good hits in. I took my time casting Athame, and held the completion of the spell until we popped back again. When my two allies were gone I shifted us down again, releasing the spell. The remnant sort of knew we were there, but as soon as Athame appeared their attention shifted to her. And she blew up, impaling the light demon on her horn as she expanded to fill the room. They tried attacking her as she kicked and struck out with her hooves, but I was too busy casting again after Hanz picked up the chest. One more spell and we were away, rushing out the door again carrying our prizes.

“Thank God you’re okay!” Malachite told me as I reappeared outside.

“Nothing to it,” I assured him. “Actually, did you get hit at all?” I asked Hanz.

“I did take a few glancing blows,” they reported. “My armor is very slightly scorched.”

“I’ll take care of it in a moment,” I told them. “Let’s head to the tree line. If those things pour out of there to try chasing us I want to know about it.”

I got my two companions back out, looking none the worse for wear and perhaps a little smug at being such an integral part of the plan. But that was probably just me projecting. Nothing came out of the temple, making me wonder if they even *could* at this point, maybe you needed a token to pass through the doorway and they had been summoned on the inside? Who knew? When it seemed the countryside wasn’t going to be dealing with demons made of light and shadow we headed back, Malachite taking off right from there to save time.

“Sorry you didn’t have much to do that time, Snarly,” I apologized to him.

“Ith fine, that guy wath scary!”

“Yes they were...” *What was up with that remnant anyway? Magical corruption of some kind? What were we supposed to have accomplished there, us four token holders? I guess we’ll never know, and the token system is now out of commission. As I assume we would have set up the next round of it and started the new tokens circulating in the world. Huh, was that fellow that didn’t speak that gave it to me in the first place the ‘last generation’ or did they come upon the token and saw no value in it? Just more questions.*

Back at the house I tackled the chest first, which had a ratty old cushion inside that was falling apart that a fancy ring was set on. Finally able to practice my synchronizing again I looked it over and after a bit of effort, determined it was an imbued item, 28 charges left, of the basic healing spell. *If this is some kind of “prize” it’s a booby prize. Not worth that dwarf dying over. I mean is this a joke? This*

token thing, waiting until the eclipse, only allowing token holders into the place. What was the point? What were we supposed to do there? Only one ring, how would we have decided who would take it? And a simple healing spell, and with charges? The worst kind of imbuing you can do? Who made this and why? It's the most useless, most expensive item that could possibly exist. Looking at my friends around the table I handed it to Snarly.

"For me?" he squeaked.

"Hanz can't even use it," I explained. "And Malachite is much tougher than you. It's sort of useless, honestly, as we have healing spell tokens now. But in a pinch it could come in handy. Don't say it now, but the command word is just 'healing' and thinking about where you want to be healed. You can use it 28 times and then it's basically junk again." *I think it can be recharged, but I never got into that sort of thing so I'm not sure. Not worth it, really.*

"Thanth!"

"Sure. I won't be mad if you sell it or whatever. It's yours."

"Okay."

"As for these," I held up the two crystals we had acquired. "I'm going to go to the workshop to look them over. There's no telling what they can do and this helps remove the danger from you guys." Malachite started to say something but I held up a hand. "I'll do divination magic before any test to make sure it's not dangerous, this is simply a further precaution," I told him. *And it gets me away from here so the delivery can happen and be a surprise.*

"Fine. I'll stick around in case I hear you screaming for help though. Try not to summon any magical elemental demon things that want to kill us."

"I'll do my best!" I replied with a grin.

"How do we protect them?" Hanz asked. "If someone was using divination magic to find magical treasures, or Gloom cultists learned the place was raided and they are now available in the world, I don't want them led to our house."

"You've answered your own question," I told them. "Lead. It'll block magical scrying. It's fairly rare of course, rich people buy it up to protect their own stuff. And as I understand it not much was around after the fall. But if you can scrounge up some and make a box out of it, we can keep them safe that way."

"I shall begin a search immediately." They headed out, but turned back at the doorframe. "Ah, one other thing. I did take a quick look about the final room, and there was an altar there as well. It was empty, but I did notice two depressions in the stone, sized for those crystals. Do not discard your tokens, we may need to return there at some point to finally put this situation to rights."

"I see. Thanks for letting me know. I'll let you know what I find out."

Which, sadly, wasn't much. I started with the glowing crystal, feeling that would be safer than the darkness one, and started feeling it out. It radiated a lot of magic, and I picked up Sun, Neptune, and Pluto energies swirling around it. But unlike the ring, there was no specific 'spell' I could command it to perform. *Perhaps it acts more as a 'battery' as Hanz might say? Powering something, such as whatever that altar was in the final chamber?* It made sense that a stone containing magic relating to light, magic, and souls would be used to summon things. Could it banish them as well? Without some sort of instructions on the altar though, I would be riding blind. I wouldn't want to set them there and have it automatically summon some. Or blow the place up by putting both on there at once when I was never supposed to. *Should I involve the guild in this? I warned the local mages, did she pass it up the chain? No one ever came to talk to us about it, and I did tell her it was always me coming to shop there. Maybe she'll be more interested now that we have something concrete to show.*

But if I do hand them over, forget ever seeing them again. They'll be put in a vault somewhere and only handed out to high ranking members. If at all. But trying to do this on my own... seems unwise. Our collective knowledge would be better than just me guessing. Well, that's something for another day.

I started to get a little nervous as I snuck back to hide the crystals in the 'safe' for the time being. Heading outside I saw the carriage had been delivered as I instructed, and started hooking Athame to it. Degrading, for such a magical companion (not that she minded) but I didn't trust a real horse. I had learned to ride just riding her around, I didn't deal with the genuine article. It was fine, it would keep people away from us. Then I worked on myself. My disguise spell went up, turning me into what I had looked like before my curse had taken hold. My hair was done up nice, and I had on a nice dress too, thank goodness for magic. I didn't need more than a flicker of mana to change my whole appearance, though concentrating on it all night would be tiresome. If my instructions were followed, the clothes should have been delivered with the note just after the carriage, and that meant-

The back door opened and Malachite was standing there, looking out of sorts. I smiled as he caught sight of me, the carriage, and Athame. He was wearing the clothes I had bought, and they looked pretty good, if I did say so myself. Completely suitable for a night out with a lady of my quality and breeding.

"What's all this?" he asked, coming over to me. I saw he still had his sword, which was fine. I was carrying a fair bit of coin after all. Someone would think twice with this guy standing next to me, not that I couldn't take a thief down on my own thank you very much.

"Well, *I'm* going out for a nice dinner," I informed him. "Thus I demand my bodyguard accompany me, as is proper for a lady of my standing. You don't have a problem with that, I trust?"

"Oh! In that case..." He offered me his arm, which I took, and he helped me up into the carriage. A thought and we were off.

We made it to the restaurant without issue, and I parked the carriage myself. Usually one rode past such a place, stepped out, and allowed the staff to do it. But that would just highlight the opposite problem, that of Athame not responding like a normal horse would. It was fine, we went inside and sat down at our table.

"So, uh, what's all this then?" Malachite asked nervously.

I took a deep breath. "It's a lot of things," I began. "Do you remember how this all started? You and me, against the world?"

"How could I forget?"

"We roamed around, looking for odd jobs but without any real purpose. Always poor. Me not able to use my magic as I would want though even back then I could solve so many problems with it." *Of course that hasn't changed!* "But then we came here. And boy did our lives change. We adopted a kid? And I have no idea what Hanz's deal is- maybe I don't need to- and then we found out about the Gloom. And we fought cultists, and ghosts, and weird elemental creatures-"

"And don't get me started about my whole great, great, great, grandfather!"

"Exactly. It's been non-stop since then. I was afraid you might start thinking I was taking you for granted. This," I indicated the place around us, "is my way of showing I'm not. Now that we have a bit of being less poor I thought a night out with just the two of us would be just the thing. No worrying about the fate of the world. Just you and me, out for a nice meal."

"Oh, okay!"

We talked, and after a bit Malachite seemed to come to a decision. "Hey Orchid?"

"Yes?"

"I've been keeping something from you, and I figure now is a good a time as any to come clean about it."

"If this is about watching me swim that one night after we found the dog, it's fine."

"What? No! You mean I could have-" He cleared his throat. "No. Look, you remember back before we moved here, we were out on the road and had to spend the night? Then those weird plants started grabbing us?"

"Sure. Too bad you didn't have your fire attack back then, it really would have helped."

"And I tried to slice through those vines that had grabbed you, and broke off some pieces of your, you know, curse?"

"Vaguely, I guess? I would have healed it right up..."

He shook his head. "The point is I kept them." He looked away.

I laughed. "Is that worrying you? It's fine." *Maybe a little weird.* "I don't exactly have hair to cut off and offer you. That would have to do for me."

"You're not mad?"

"I mean it's not... normal," I hedged. "It's like keeping someone's fingernail clippings I guess. The stupid things flake off all the time if I'm not careful enough." I ran my hands over my arms. I could still feel them there, even if they were covered by illusion at the moment. "But I'm not mad. I don't really feel they're a part of me, just a nuisance. Though they have been part of me, for longer than I would care to admit. I suppose from a practical standpoint, if you ever needed to find me for some reason a mage could use those as a focus? This is a weird topic, don't worry about it."

"Thanks. Have you ever thought about trying to break this curse, get your original appearance back?"

I sighed. "I call it a curse but I don't know if it's one, traditionally speaking. I was sort of hoping getting away from my little learning cave where this all started would gradually return me to normal. But I guess not. Maybe me doing magic reinforces it? Giving up magic for years is no good, it's who I am. I suppose I could use my divination spell and ask... I don't know. This is who I am, you know? I'm unique, and maybe this is all part of the plan. I'm not getting worse that I can tell, so there's that."

"You couldn't get any slower!" I glared and he laughed. "Sorry, sorry!"

"Oh, you will be. I wouldn't turn it down, if some angel appeared and offered to fix me. A demon? Eh, probably not I like my soul where it is thank you very much. It depends on the circumstance."

"I suppose many things do."

Thankfully the restaurant wasn't overrun with cultist or ghosts or anything like that, so we paid and I drove the carriage back to where I had rented it from.

"Hey, we're not walking home are we?" Malachite asked when he realized what was happening.

"I should say not," I told him. "The way I see it, you can either ride with me on Athame, or if you're really in a hurry you can fly me home."

He didn't have to consider long, sweeping me up and taking to the sky.

There was another surprise waiting for us at home, and not one of my making. Two rings were sitting on the table atop a crude note, but I just shrugged when Malachite looked at me in a panic. "I only do one surprise at a time," I told him. The rings were interesting, they had a strange pattern etched into them, and I had never seen them before.

"Look at this," Malachite said, handing me the note. I cast my light spell and looked it over. There was only one person this could be from.

“Snarly?”

“Must be.”

“He really doesn’t know how to read or write, does he? I can’t even...” It took a moment to decode what had been written, and I felt my cheeks getting red when I worked it out. “Oh no.”

“Does it say what I thought it said?”

“I think it does. Malachite and Orchid, you’re married, then he tried to write congratulations a bunch of times, and settled on you’re welcome.”

“Snarly!” he called.

“Yeth?” he asked, coming into view looking hopeful.

“I think you have the wrong idea here,” he explained. “We were just going out to eat. We’re not engaged yet.”

Oh? Yet?

“And certainly not married. I mean you didn’t attend any weddings, did you?”

“I gueth not?”

“There you are. You can’t just declare people married, you know?”

“I thought you would be happy,” he moaned, looking miserable.

“Look, if and when the time comes, we’ll be sure to let you know, okay? You didn’t steal these, did you?”

“No!”

They stared at each other a moment. “Okay, that’s fine. Look I know you probably want a mom and dad, but... Look we’re not going anywhere, okay? You don’t have to worry. We’ll look after you until you’re older.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

I mean, we may as well. What’s a few years to me, and if Malachite really does become a full dragon, he’ll live even longer than that. Taking care of a kid a few years is no big deal. Where did that lady that sort of shoved him into our lives even go, anyway? She just sort of vanished. Not cool, lady.

“Here, you hold onto these.” He handed the rings back. “I’m sure there will be a time when they’re needed.”

“Okay,” he managed sadly, and ran off.

“Snarly? Are you *crying*? Look I said, look just a second...” He ran off after him, leaving me standing there wondering if maybe it was too late to just go back on the road? *But it’s a pretty nice house, and there’s the Gloom stuff to worry about around here...* I shook my head, looking the note over again. *He does try, you have to give him that. And maybe we’ve ignored him a bit. He is just a kid, it’s not his fault. But I never signed up to be a mom...*

“I think I’ve set him straight,” Malachite sighed when he came back.

“You’ll be a good dad!” I announced brightly. “You should start practicing your dad jokes now!”

“Don’t even joke about that! But, uh, speaking of, now that mood is ruined and all that, I was going to ask if you wanted to come up to my room tonight but I guess-”

I jumped into his arms. “Come on, you big lug,” I told him. “Before your tail gets any bigger.”

“Oh that’s why you measured me!” he realized. “For the clothes. I mean, are you sure?”

“Do I have to use telekinesis? How much more forward do you need me to be?!”

“Yes ma’am!”

In the end it took a bit of creative thinking, what with the wings, and the tail, and the curse, and all that. But we ended the night satisfied, and as I watched him sleeping I reflected on my crazy life now. About the dangers we might face in the future, and the uncertainty of being with someone that might one day be four times my size. But that was for another day. Tonight, I was happy. Tonight, I was safe, in my own house, with my strange little family I had found. I snuggled closer and closed my eyes. Let tomorrow sort itself out, right now... Right now...

Right now I was hearing the city's alarm bells going off.

“What the heck?”