

Ain't no Sunshine When She's Gone

When: About a half an hour after being dumped

Where: A farm out the outskirts of the village

Lysanias sighed again and looked out over the pen holding the horses he had so recently been compared to. He had been led here so they could be used as an example, and had been leaning against the fence feeling miserable since then. The cause of his feeling was the annunaki girl Ytrius he had been traveling with. She had unabashedly told him, to his face, that her people considered people like him in the way he might consider a horse. Handy to have around, loveable, but not something to have a long term relationship with. She then turned and without so much as a "I'll miss you terribly" went with her father to begin their journey back to their home deep under the earth.

*And you would think, saving the entire town or possibly the entire world from that insane member of her own species would rate something. A kiss on the cheek at the very least. Not that I would really get much out of one with this stupid beard in the way. Anyone else would have been, 'oh, Lysanias, you were so brave running off like that to stop the giant metal monstrosity's mayhem and murdering. Oh no this flimsy cloth covering my body has somehow torn away! What shall we do about that?'* He looked around guiltily as if someone could be eavesdropping on his thoughts. *Get control of yourself. One no one would talk like that and two, you're thousands of years old. Not fourteen anymore. Even if you went to sleep fourteen that was-* He suddenly stood up straight. *When is my birthday, anyway? Do they even use the same calendar?*

He shook his head. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered. In defending the town from the war machine from a forgotten time his only keepsake from *his* own time had been destroyed. The sword his parents had, admittedly, stolen to at least provide him with something when he awoke was a twisted ruin. Sacrificed to contain and return the energy of darkness that annunaki had thrown at him, it had saved his life but now held no trace of supernatural ability he could detect. On top of that he had promised to help said war machine find a smaller body to inhabit so it didn't have to be a war machine anymore. His body had not weathered the years well, leaving him gaunt and easily winded, not to mention clumsy because he wasn't used to his huge hands or long legs yet. The girl he really liked had left him, the wizard in town had no love for him, and now that the crisis was over the two he had been traveling with, Don Fortress the dwarf and Everest the gnome would probably leave and go back to their own lives.

*I think I could get by, selling wards or making things the blacksmith would find hard to make. Or even just turning things they do make into whatever metal the sword... what used to be the sword... is made of. But they were the ones to pull me out of that cave where my parents stuck me before the flood wiped everyone out. I think they're my friends, but I don't want to impose on them. Wait a second...*

He looked around again, and it seemed the mayor and several people with weapons were approaching.

*Oh, some kind of ceremony to thank me for saving their town? That would be nice.*

"Ah, there you are," said the mayor crisply. "You're under arrest."

Lysanias stared blankly at the man. He was a bit shorter, much pudgier, and better dressed than Lysanias was. His hair was styled, not just somewhat shortened by someone who had never done something like that before. He obviously knew how to shave, something Lysanias didn't because when he had asked Don it had deeply offended the dwarf. With a somewhat round face and in his mid-forties Lysanias wondered how one became 'mayor' anyway. You certainly didn't have to be in shape for it.

"I'm what?" he asked, looking up to see what he was under. He could, of course, understand all languages due to his heritage of being born before there was such a thing as language, and spoke, if anything, the angelic tongue called Enochian. This did not mean he understood the nuance of what someone was trying to convey, for example talking to Yttrius had been trying at the best of times. She kept using words he had no concept of, like "teleportation nexus" and *what was that thing she mentioned when arguing against the invasion of the surface? Binary Load Lifters? I never did ask what those were.*

"Under arrest," the mayor repeated. "Specifically, for inciting panic in the villagers."

"Inciting panic?"

"That's correct. If you'll just come with me?"

"Where are we going?"

"You're under arrest, where do you think you're going?" He asked this as though someone had just asked him "why is there air?"

"I don't know, you're not making much sense."

"I'm not sure how much more clear I can be. You're under arrest, that's the end of it."

"You keep saying that but you aren't explaining anything! Do you know what a binary load lifter is?"

"No."

"Well no matter how many times I say those words, will you understand it any better?"

"Come now, you can't be that stupid."

"I just got here! You have no idea what I've been through! I have no idea what being 'under' arrest means. I'm not under anything!" He pointed up.

One of the men snickered but the mayor's look cut him off. "You don't know what it means?"

"No, I don't."

"I see." The mayor regarded him. Lysanias wasn't trying to run away, he was just standing there. The mayor saw no magical circles, these being indicators of spellwork, or any other indication of power that could be used to get away from the city guard. He didn't seem to be stalling, in fact seemed genuinely upset about something. His eyes were red and puffy like he had been crying, and by all reports he had just been standing here, looking at horses of all things, for the past half hour. "Say I believe you," the mayor hedged. "Perhaps you could come with me and I can explain it to you. Standing around here isn't exactly the best place."

"Very well, I don't suppose I have anything better to do." *I can't train in the sword anymore, that's for sure.*

"Fine, fine. Just come this way then." The men with weapons surrounded him but didn't say anything, and he followed the mayor back into town. They did not go to his office, as he expected, but to a sturdy looking building made of brick. It was rather stark inside, and gloomy as there were no windows as such. There were small slits, but they were covered by bars. "Right, have a seat in there," he said, pointing to a section of the place. Lysanias looked around. There were some people already here, in what looked like cages, and the mayor was pointing at an empty one. It was empty apart from a wooden bench, some cots, and a cabinet that had a pitcher and a bowl on top of it.

"Okay." Lysanias did as instructed, expecting the man to join him. He did not, simply slammed the gate to the room shut and the man next to him inserted a key and turned the lock. The man then nodded and both turned to go.

He got a few steps before Lysanias shouted "Hey, I thought you were going to explain!"

He stopped and said over his shoulder. "I think if you sit there a few minutes the explanation will come to you." He turned away again. "Come on, let's go get the dwarf and the other one."

"Wait, what?" Lysanias sprang up from the bench and rattled the gate, but it was locked. "Hey, am I being locked in here?"

"Quiet down!" shouted a man at a desk some distance away.

"But I don't understand what's going on!" he pleaded.

"I don't think getting hit by my 'clue bat' here is going to help you any," he guffawed, holding up a stout cudgel. "But it's what'll happen if you don't shut up."

Lysanias was bewildered, and staggered back to the bench where he heavily sat down. He looked over at the other cages, each holding one or two people in various states of sobriety and dress. Less women, if that meant anything, but all were leering at him.

"You just walked right in there!" exclaimed one in the cage right next to him. "How stupid are you?"

"I don't understand what I'm doing here," he explained.

"Yeah, neither do I! Hey warden, why don't you let me out?"

"Shut up, all of you!" He brought the cudgel up again.

"Don't hit me with that, I don't know where it's been!" The others in the place laughed and one made a rude looking gesture.

"Is that so?" said the man, getting up. "Want to know where it's going to be?"

"Hey, now, I didn't mean anything by it!" The man backed off a little.

"Should have thought of that before you mouthed off!" He brought up a thick ring of keys and tried several before the door to the cage sprang open.

"Honestly, warden, I was just joking around, you know, with the new guy! There's no need for this!"

"Oh, but I think there is. He looks like a troublemaker, and you know it's best to make an example straight off so they don't get any ideas. You just got picked."

"But if he's the troublemaker why I am—"

The man didn't get to finish his sentence as the guard roughly knocked him in the head with the stick, knocking him over. He then kicked the man a few times for good measure and stalked out of the cell again, smiling. He looked over at Lysanias, who was staring, horrified, at this treatment.

"You want the same?" he growled.

His options flashed before his eyes. The man was big, and it seemed far stronger than he was. Lysanias didn't know how to fight, not really, and only then with a sword. He had his wards still, the mayor didn't seem to know what the dispenser at his belt contained, could he bring one to use before the man could knock him unconscious too? He didn't think so. "No," he said, lowering his eyes.

"That's better," said the man, going back to sit down. "You just stay like that and we'll have no problems at all." He went back to some kind of metal puzzle he was trying to get apart made of two interlocking rings.

The place was quiet now, and Lysanias looked over at the man sprawled out on the floor of his cage. The brutality of it had shaken him, and he felt sick and light headed.

*What is going on? Why have I been left here? Can that man just club another and none will go to his defense? Why are these other people even here? None of this makes any sense.*

He looked over at the other cage, the man hadn't stirred. He was clearly bleeding from the wound left by the attack, but these cages weren't all that large. Lysanias went to the edge of his and tried to reach the man.

"Hey, what are you doing now?"

"I just want to make sure he's still alive," Lysanias softly called back, not wanting to provoke the warden further.

"Ah, he'll be fine," he scoffed, but gave the matter no more attention.

This let Lysanias touch the man and will his flesh back together. The bleeding slowly stopped as the wound vanished, and Lysanias breathed a sigh of relief. The man wouldn't die while he was around at least. A moment later the man got up, touching his head.

"What happened?" he asked, confused.

"He hit you and you passed out."

"Who did?"

"That guy." He pointed to the warden.

"He did? Why? And for that matter who are you?"

"I'm Lysanias. He hit you because... I don't even know, but he seemed to enjoy it."

"Don't recall that at all. I don't doubt it though." He went and sat down without introducing himself.

"You're welcome," Lysanias said crossly, somewhat miffed at all these instances where people should be thanking him but not doing so.

"For what?"

"Oh, never mind."

"Quiet down!" the warden roared again.

Lysanias sat in silence and looked over his new surroundings. He still didn't know what was going on, but it seemed the mayor was going to keep him there. He hadn't really done anything to deserve such treatment, had he? And where were Don and Everest? Would they come looking for him? Could they explain things to the mayor so he could be released? He didn't know how long he had sat there but suddenly there was another commotion by the door, and the prisoners all looked up again. Don and Everest were being led in, and looking none too happy about the situation.

Lysanias ran to the door of the cage, thinking he was finally to be let out, but the warden stuck his stick through and snarled "back, dog!" to him. He backed away and both were roughly shoved into the cage with him, which was locked again.

*Oh no! Don't tell me-*

"So, got you too, eh lad?" Don asked, standing up again. He helped Everest up.

"What do you mean, got me? Don, what's going on? I thought you were here to come get me! The mayor said I was 'under arrest' but wouldn't explain and then they put me into this cage and that guy was almost murdered and I was afraid you would never come and-"

"Slow down," scolded Everest. "We'll figure this out, don't worry."

"Figure what out?" he wailed. "What's going on!?"

"Near as I can figure," Don answered, dropping into the bench, "the mayor doesn't like us very much at the moment."

"What?"

"Were you arrested for 'inciting the townspeople' or something similar?" Everest asked.

"I don't know. Maybe? He said something odd, it could have been that."

"That's what he got us for. Near as I can figure we embarrassed the man a bit and this is his retaliation."

Lysanias spread his hands helplessly.

He sat next to Don and looked up at Lysanias. "Take it from his perspective. We show up and start raving about some kind of threat to the town. He didn't take us seriously, says the thing the annunaki are digging up is a rock. We make trouble at the doctor's office and rile up the town wizard. Finally our warning is proven correct when the rock turns into your friend out there. So he starts evacuating the town. Then we go out there and convince the thing to not flatten the village and now he has to get everybody back and tell them it was a false alarm. So his credibility takes another hit."

“So he takes his frustrations out on us,” Don finished. “Locking us up in here is a good start.”

“He can do that?”

“Here we are, lad.”

He looked over at Everest. “His title is mayor, but he’s more like a lord,” he explained. “He commands any military forces in town, so he has the power. In theory he would have to justify locking anyone up to his superiors, but how often do they ask? They’ve got their own concerns to worry about.”

“So we’re stuck here?”

“For the moment. What about your girlfriend? Did she get away?”

“Oh, the girl that sees me as a horse? Yeah, she’s been gone for a while, I doubt the mayor will send his forces after a hundred annunaki just to get her back.”

“Wait lad, did you say a horse?”

Lysanias explained what she had said to him.

“That’s harsh,” Everest commiserated.

“Sorry Lysanias,” Don agreed. “That was going a bit too far. But cheer up, there’s other fish in the sea!”

“But we’re nowhere near the sea!” he protested. “And what do fish have to do with my feeling worthless because the girl I thought liked me actually saw me as a pack animal the whole time I knew her?”

“It’s just a saying.”

“Oh.”

“Let me put it another way; There’s other horses on the farm!”

Everest glared at him. “Too soon, Don. Too soon.”

But Don wasn’t listening because he was chortling away to himself. “Other horses. Heheheheh.”

He sighed and turned back to Lysanias. “She was a fool to let you get away. I mean look at that beard, right Don?”

“That’s right!” He stroked his own. “A beard like that doesn’t come often on a man with as much greatness in him as our Lysanias. You rushed out there against something that could have crushed you flat. And you held off that darkness wielding annunaki long enough for the real hero,” he put his thumbs against his chest, “to arrive and save the day. Not many would have done that. If she can’t see who you are just from that, well, she’s chasing a dream!”

Lysanias couldn’t help but feel a little better, the two were smiling at him and did seem genuinely concerned about him. “Thanks guys.”

“Now,” he lowered his voice and the others leaned in to hear him. “I say we blow this wall here to pieces with magic and leave this dump of a town behind!”

“Or,” cautioned Everest, “we could not get the town guard after us, avoid having wanted posters put up in every nearby settlement, and just see how this plays out.”

“I hate it when you talk sense. Oh sit down lad, we’re gonna be in here a while.”

“You really think so?” he asked, sitting next to the dwarf.

He shrugged. “We all have means of escaping at any time, right? Even if we got put in separate cells, it’s no big deal. Everest is right, let’s see what the mayor has planned for us and go from there. Maybe he’s planning some kind of celebration in our honor and wants us out of the way while they prepare the parade.”

“Could that really be it?” he asked excitedly. *Wait, what’s a parade?*

There was a pause. “Er, no, not really.”

“We need the rest after the day we’ve had anyway,” reasoned Everest. “We needed a place to spend the night and this is cheaper, if not nicer, than an inn. We’ll see what the morning brings and make some plans then.”

After a moment of sitting there Lysanias spoke up again. “The warden there knocked that guy unconscious before you came in.” He pointed to the man he had

healed. "He was close enough that I could heal him but he claimed not to remember it happening."

"You did say something about someone almost being murdered. That's the one, eh?" asked Don. The all turned to look at the man, who stared back at them.

"It's no surprise about his attitude though," Everest said with a nod. "Humans tend towards short term memory loss after a sudden blow to the cranium."

The others looked over at him. Don rolled his eyes. "I think he's trying to say if you get knocked in the head, you tend not to remember why," he translated.

"Whatever, shouldn't we report it or something?"

"To who? Besides, you healed him so we have no evidence. Believe me, I'm sure that sort of thing is common in here."

"What? But that's... How does the Allfather... How does anyone..."

Everest held up a hand. "I know. You keep seeing them at their worst today, I guess. Not that I make apologies for humans, of course, but your race doesn't have the cleanest history to begin with. At least my ancestors had the excuse of being *actual* demons."

"I guess." *The Allfather wiped us out for reasons I can't imagine, but this sort of thing goes on and He just allows it? How bad were we to deserve what happened to us?*

And silence descended once again.

With nothing else to do, Lysanias took the time to sit and think about a long range weapon he could learn to use. *A bow would be nice, but maintaining arrows is probably a pain. But you know what would work just as well? Stone darts. I already know how to move stone around and you can find it anywhere. Heck, I could make stone darts tipped with the sword metal. I only need a bit of stone to move them with the ability I learned from Everest. And I already know they can go pretty far and be very accurate; I watched Everest hit Yttrius in the head from down a hallway. I wouldn't have to learn anything new. I would need practice to be that accurate, but it's a useful skill by itself, so why not? I could "unroll" them and put ink in the middle, turning them into wards, and I can easily make other things into rock if I didn't have any handy. That sounds perfect.*

The night passed uneventfully, and just as the sun was rising a tremendous crashing was heard outside the town and sirens blaring startled everyone in the town out of their beds.

Don't Know when I'll be Back Again

When: Sunrise the next morning

Where: Jail Cell

"Attention people of this town!" The magnified voice of the war machine sitting just on the outskirts rattled widows and scared small children into crying. Some grown men as well. "The human Lysanias has promised to aid me but did not return. Send a representative to explain this treachery. Or else I will consider this town hostile to me and respond accordingly. You have one hour. This message will repeat at ten minute intervals until that time." The siren resumed for a few seconds and then went silent again.

"Do you hear something, lad?" Don sleepily asked, one eye open.

"I think the mayor is going to be a bit angrier with us today than he was yesterday," Lysanias reasoned.

Soon enough, only half dressed, the mayor dashed into the prison and demanded that the three be released.

"It's about time," Lysanias told him, getting up from the cot.

"Not so fast, lad," Don cautioned him. "I think this would be a good time for a lesson in economics."

"In what?"

"Are you mad?" the mayor screamed. "That thing out there is shouting gibberish at us! Go and see what it wants!"

"We would, of course," Don agreed. "But we're in here, and not out there."

"That's why I'm letting you out. Where are those keys?"

"Before we go anywhere, we would like certain, what's the word? Assurances. Yes, certain assurances."

"What?"

"Everest?"

"First," Everest began, counting off on his fingers. "We want a signed apology and pardon written in your own hand for any crimes, real or perceived, that we have supposedly committed in your town."

"We do?" Lysanias asked.

"Oh, at a minimum," Everest assured him. "We don't want a repeat of this situation, do we? Nor do we want to have our pictures up on wanted posters in nearby towns."

"I'm still not sure what that is."

"Believe me lad, it would make our lives a lot more difficult."

"Secondly," Everest went on. "We want our possessions back. All of them. All money, all weapons, not a copper coin should be missing."

"I'm sure your stuff is around here somewhere."

The man with the key opened the door and Lysanias was about to step out, but Don grabbed his hand and shook his head.

"Third-

"There's more?!"

"Third, we want to be compensated for the night of wrongful imprisonment. I'm somewhat certain a small sack of shining silver shall soothe our souls."

"You want money!?" He was clearly becoming outraged.

"Fourth-

"I don't believe this! It's extortion!"

"You were the one that put us in here," reminded Don. "You didn't ask how we had stopped the war machine. You just assumed it wouldn't show up. Well, it did."

"If I may continue? Are you writing this down? Well, I'm sure you'll remember it. Forth, we will go and soothe our friend out there and make sure he doesn't flatten this

town, but we'll be back to buy a few supplies before leaving for good. We will not be harassed by any city guard."

"Tell him I want a small horse," Lysanias whispered.

"And a... cream colored pony."

"That's totally out of the question."

"I tried."

Lysanias tried to look crestfallen but it was all he could do just to not giggle uncontrollably.

"You better get busy writing up that apology," Don cautioned. "I don't think our friend out there will wait very long."

The message was repeated twice, but finally Lysanias and the others walked out to the war machine with their gear and some extra coins in their pouches.

"Query: Why did you not return as you had promised?"

"I said I would help you find a place to get your brain installed in a smaller body, I didn't promise to do it that day!" Lysanias called up to him. "We need to prepare for a journey like that!"

"Yes, don't tell it about our night in jail," cautioned Don. "Might not sit too well with it."

"The error was mine? I must apologize to the townspeople. Attention people-"

"It's okay," Lysanias shouted, waving his hands. The machine broke off. "They realize it wasn't your fault."

"They are very forgiving. I also apologize to you, I should have asked for clarification after our initial consultation."

"That's quite all right. In any case, we'll be leaving..." He looked to the others.

"Before noon, I would think. We don't need to get that much stuff together, do we?" Don asked.

Everest shook his head.

"Around noon today. Please wait patiently for us here until then."

"I will wait. Thank you for being more specific this time."

*Can a machine use sarcasm? That must be my imagination.* "We all learn from our mistakes."

"Indeed. Please do not hurry on my account, I know you biological beings have many needs that must be met."

"Biological beings?" he asked Everest.

"Things that are alive."

"Oh. Yes, that's correct. We'll be back later."

"I will await your return."

The group breathed a sigh of relief and went back into the village.

"That crisis was averted," Everest said with a shake of his head. "An impatient machine. Who would have thought?"

"The fact is we've traded one slip of a lizard girl for an enormous rolling bunker," complained Don. "We can't understand it any better, and it won't fit into a ward should we decide we've had enough of it!"

"You couldn't- oh my goodness," groused Lysanias. "I'll make you up some translation wards before we leave. You may have to talk to it, after all. What are we getting, anyway? We can use magic for food and water."

"Thought you might like more than one set of clothes, now that we have a human town to buy from," Don suggested. "Plus a new weapon for you, maybe? Better sleeping bag? Tent? We have coin and lots of it. Let's stimulate their economy a bit."

"Now who's using big words?" Everest joked.

"I was thinking about that last night, actually. Not... whatever you said Don. About weapons. I didn't want to bring it out in the middle of that cage, but I bet I could at least

straighten the sword out. It wouldn't absorb attacks the way it used to, not until I figure out how to put that sort of power into it, but it saves me buying a new sword."

"They are sort of expensive. Can you do it, lad?"

"It might take a few days, but I don't see why not. The metal is twisted and blackened, but I bet I could make it serviceable again. My parents went to a lot of trouble to give it to me, I should at least try to put it to rights again."

"That's a bit of good news! Well, anything else you want to get, let's do it and be gone from here."

"So much for settling here."

"You'd want a larger city anyway," Everest told him. "More potential customers."

Their first stop was to get *even more* money. Lysanias had a few things in mind and wanted to be sure he had coin for the next town they went to as well. So the group stopped into the blacksmith's.

"Greetings!" said the Sumash brothers cheerfully.

"Quite a ruckus outside earlier," Peter said, stating the obvious.

"We were hoping you would come back," Paul added. "We've been talking about how best to use this amazing metal of yours."

"Swords and such are fine, but they're such a small part of our normal business," explained Peter.

"You are still willing to help, right?" asked Paul.

"I don't have much time, but yes, what did you have in mind?"

"Know what we hate making above all else?"

"What?"

"Nails," the brothers answered together.

"It's so tedious," complained Paul.

"But we thought, what about a sort of mold, made of your metal, that we could pour molten metal into?"

"Like a candle maker," explained Peter, getting the lump of metal he had previously turned out. "We wouldn't have to worry about it deforming over time, because your metal doesn't seem to deform. Ever."

"We've heated it, whacked it with every heavy object in here, and there's not a scratch on it."

"But if you can make us various sizes of nail molds, we'd pay you a lot."

"Like so much! If I didn't have to pound another nail in my life..."

"So what do you say?"

"Sounds like I came to the right place. Paying me 'so much' is music to my ears."

So the group went over the plans for the molds, and both Don and Everest had some ideas as to how to construct such a thing as well. The mold could be fairly thin, and made in two parts simply clamped together. So Lysanias concentrated on the lump first, making it long and thin, then putting "dimples" in it where the nails would ultimately be. Then he made the second piece and they tried it out. They poured molten metal into the holes on the top (where the head of the nail would be) and gently lowered it into a quenching bucket. When it was cool they unclamped it and out tumbled even, regular, standard, nails.

"This is great!" exclaimed Peter, looking one over.

"Let's try them," agreed Paul. Both grabbed a hammer and some scrap wood and slammed them through. Then pried them back out again. "They hold up!"

"You have *no idea* how much time and effort this will save us," Peter thanked him, shaking Lysanias' hand.

"It's easy enough to be done by apprentices, while we work on more expensive projects. But we can churn out a hundred a day! We'll be the nail capital of the realm!"

"Now, about making some in different sizes?"

“What about needles?”

An hour or so later Lysanias walked out with a much fuller pouch and some very happy blacksmiths were gleefully filling their quota of nails for the month. “Not exactly what I had in mind when I went in there,” he admitted, making sure his money pouch was secure. He felt better than he had in a long time, at least about himself. He was somewhat exhausted from making the molds, but he felt it had been worth it. “But they seemed happy. Imagine being that happy over a way to make nails.”

“Hopefully you can make me a set of those,” Don suggested. “When I get home I can put them to good use. You know how much regular, consistent nails would go for? Twice what standard nails would, and they’re much easier to produce!”

“Wonder if you could make candles the same way?” mused Everest. “Give them different shapes and whatnot. It would take a blacksmith a lot of effort to make a completely round candle for instance, but you could make a mold for one very easily.”

“Probably. Come on, we’re heading back to the library.”

There, Lysanias bought all the paper and ink the place would sell him, plus another empty book he wanted to start using as a journal. He wasn’t the last of his kind, but he felt he should write down the things he had done and seen for those that might be interested. *Plus I should write down how I do things like alchemy and sensing spiritual energy. Maybe if someone had done that, I could just pick up some books about it instead of struggling along with just what I learned before. Or can pick up from others in this time.* He looked over at Everest. *Wonder if he knows any other people like him, maybe an air gnome? Wonder what they’re called? I would love to be able to manipulate all four elements like I can with earth. Ah well, master one element at a time, I guess.*

Leaving with a sack of paper and many bottles of ink, Lysanias did go and get some clothes (and a stout pair of boots at last), his own camping stuff so he didn’t have to keep using his friend’s stuff, a trunk to put it all in, and packed things away. He put it all into a contain ward, and asked if there was anything else he should get for the road. He had an empty quiver at his side, his (ruined) sword and sheath in wards stuffed into his book, which was in a pack on his back. In the pack was his metal pan and bedroll, fire starting stuff, the usual rope all adventurers seem to carry, utensils, etc.

“Considering what you started with lad? I’d say you’ve made a good start.”

The group then ate a fairly early lunch, Lysanias slapped two translate wards on his friends, and they marched back to the war machine that was patiently waiting for them.

“It pleases me to see your safe return,” it greeted them.

“I’m glad to see you too. Shoot, we didn’t get a map!”

“That will not be necessary,” the machine told them. “I have attained access to a satellite with sufficient capabilities to contact other machine intelligences. They have provided me a path towards facilities that can perform the transfer.”

“How far away is it?” Everest asked cautiously.

*What’s a satellite?*

“The path is not linear. The other machine intelligences I contacted cautioned that I should avoid human settlements and cause as little damage to the ecosystem as possible. Therefore I must not take the most direct path but instead follow a route that is the most clear of obstacles as it can be. I regret to say some destruction of flora is inevitable as there are no clear paths for certain portions of our journey.”

“Er...”

“He means he might have to smash some trees down on the way to the place because there’s no clear route. But he’s going to take the clearest route he can.”

“Ah!”

Suddenly the mayor ran up to them, followed by more people with weapons.  
*Oh great, this better not be another 'arrest.'*

"You're back? Good. Now leave! Go on! Off with you, and don't come back!" Don stepped over to the man, who nervously looked down at him. "What?"

"You're welcome," Don told him, then spun on his heel. "Come on, let's head back to the staging area, it's the most clear, then you can tell us about this 'non-linear' route you're taking us on."

"Affirmative."

The mayor watched as the war machine carefully backed over any trees it had smashed down and the others followed after it.

"Don't come back," he muttered, and went back into the village again.

"Are all humans like that? I mean the blacksmith brothers seemed to be fine, but I was helping them out rather directly." The group was following some distance behind the war machine, as it made a pretty loud racket as it moved. Crushing fallen trees, climbing over rocks, and just the general rattle of the armor and loose parts the annunaki didn't see fit to repair made it difficult to be near and talk at the same time.

"I pretty much stay to my own kind," Don admitted. "So I can't be sure."

"I think they're all different," Everest told him. "From what I've read there are good ones and bad ones, always have been."

"Why else would the demon world exist?"

"Good point."

"I hope he enjoys his stay there!"

The others laughed and agreed.

"Will you be heading back? Going this way takes you with me, towards wherever P05 is going and away from the cave."

"Do you not want us around?" Don asked, somewhat crossly.

"What? No. I just didn't want to imply you had to come with me. You have your own lives, your own desires. You don't want to shepherd me around the world."

"We're with you, all the way," Everest assured him. "Thought we had made that clear."

"What he said. You've been awake a couple of weeks and already we've had more adventure than most have in a lifetime. You've made things, defended a whole town, I think you're just getting started."

"I was just reacting to stuff," he protested, cheeks reddening.

"Sure lad, sure. But what else are you going to 'react' to on this journey? It's a long way to our next stop, and I have a feeling sticking with you is the place to be."

"And not only because he wants to wait for you to get better at making gold so he can return home with a whole chest full of it," Everest assured him.

"You'd have earned it," he replied with a laugh. "Thanks you two. I'm glad it was you that found me. Both of you."

"Yeah, imagine if you'd been found by those *e/ves*. Ugh!" He shuddered and then all of them were laughing.

As he walked, Lysanias picked up promising stones and dropped them into his empty quiver.

"What do you plan to do with those?" Everest finally asked.

"Shoot, now that I think about it, I should have gotten you one of these!" Lysanias regretted, shaking the quiver. "I think you'll like this, and be able to use it yourself. Eh, I can make you one with this as a guide probably."

"Use what myself?"

"Watch and learn." He took a stone and reshaped it, making it have a sharp point at one end. It had gone from being a simple stone that would fit in his hand to a narrow

cylinder as long as his forearm. The now pointed tip he turned into metal and then levitated the entire thing above his hand. Making a pitching motion he slammed it into a nearby fallen tree, making it quiver and stick. He hadn't "let it go," his power was still controlling it so he wiggled it until it popped loose again. He brought it back and let Everest look it over.

"I do sort of like that, actually," he admitted. "What an amazing use of my ability to command the earth to move."

"It works for me," he admitted. "There's various styles I came up with last night. It could be a thin disk with a razor sharp metal edge, or a more knifelike design with a stone handle. Or this, which is more like an arrow. I'll have to see what fits best into the thing I carry so they're easy to get to, and what flies best. Who knows, maybe some odd shape I haven't even thought off flies best. Hopefully as we go you can give me some pointers on accuracy. I was, uh, actually aiming for that stump over there."

"I never thought of it because I can't make the shapes you can," he went on. "But a small bag of rocks would be something to keep handy, just in case."

"You can just empty your coin pouch into mine, that'll give you plenty of space to put rocks."

Don laughed. "Oh no, Lysanias is starting to make jokes now! We better watch out!"

The other two joined him.

"Seriously though, this is really neat," Everest said after a moment, hefting it. "Mind if I give it a try?"

"You can't blunt the end, go right ahead!"

So he swirled it around and smacked it into trees while Lysanias picked up more rocks. He noticed Everest got the point in far deeper than he had, and realized he had a ways to go both in accuracy and throwing strength. He finally handed it back and took out the daggers that hung at his sides.

"Think you could turn the hilts of these guys into stone?" he asked, passing them over.

"I don't see why not. I haven't totally exhausted myself quite yet." He did, also turning the blades into the special metal because why not, then passed them back. Everest now sent them spinning through the trees, controlling both as if one with each hand. Finally they came back to him.

"Now we're talking," he allowed, putting them back. "I'm more familiar with the dagger, so I think it would work best for me just keeping hold of them and swinging them about that way."

"Whatever you want, I live to serve!" He gave an over the top bow.

"You two are having all the fun it seems," Don grumped.

"Figure out how to make rock move and I'll be happy to make the wooden handle of your polearm into stone."

"I suppose you helped me out first, making that halberd for me. I did cut that guy's head clean off with it..."

"After I shot fire and darkness at him with my sword! You just did the final blow."

"And I got us up there!" Everest reminded him.

Don laughed. "We make a great team, I admit it! And with the war machine blazing the trail for us, what could possibly go wrong from here!"

He really shouldn't have said that.

## Splish Splash

When: Evening of the fourth day

Where: On the "road"

While some may have been content to simply amble along behind their giant weapon of war from a bygone age, Lysanias kept himself busy. He made as many metal tipped stone "arrows" as his quiver would allow, and practiced hitting trees and rocks with them as he walked. He insisted on making the food and water for the group at night to keep his hand in magic, and he made daily translation wards for Don and Everest. The ruined sword he straightened and sharpened while riding on P05 on the second day, noting that the metal had changed somehow, becoming darker and somewhat colder to the touch. Surprisingly when he tried to turn rock into this variant of the metal he could only get the original type. He could feel that something was different about the sword, but he couldn't reproduce it no matter how hard he tried. The weapon still served, and was just as light and sharp as it had originally been, it just did not have the original sheen. Of course, it wasn't on fire either so Lysanias thought that could have something to do with the looks of the blade as well.

"And I thought dwarves were industrious," Everest remarked as Lysanias whipped two arrows out and sent them hurling forward for the 20<sup>th</sup> time that day.

"I have to practice," he remarked. "I've only been awake a couple of weeks. And it's perfect, all this walking along is the best opportunity. I mean the trees are pretty and everything, those not getting knocked over- no offence."

"None taken," replied P05. "My immense girth was not suited for stealth missions or environmental preservation."

"But after you've seen one, you've seen them all. It's either just waste the time and walk along passively, or practice defending myself. I choose to practice."

"You weren't like this in the tunnels, lad," remarked Don.

"I know better now what life is like in this world. I have to be ready so I don't get killed by the spirits of my people possessing someone or a mage's guild assassin. Plus, this is fun!" He let the arrows fly again. "And I'm getting a little better, right?"

"Sure you are," Everest lied. "Better all the time."

"It only took me three tries to get both of them. In a real fight I'll only stick with one at a time, of course. But I feel if I can handle two in practice with little difficulty, one in an actual combat should be doable."

"The real thing is very different," Don agreed. "Fighting for your life tends to change your perspective on everything. Of course, if you know Dwar-fu like I do, you don't really have any worries."

"Dwar-fu? What's that?"

"Secret, ancient, dwarven fighting technique."

"You know something like that? If it's a secret I won't ask you to teach me, but could you show me a few moves?"

"Oh, there's no moves, lad. You just whack your opponent with whatever weapon is at hand until they stop moving. While at the same time trying to avoid being whacked with whatever weapon your opponent has on hand."

"It's so elegant, I hope I can see it again someday," Everest pined, wiping an imaginary tear from his eye.

"If I may interrupt this jocularly," P05 boomed. "We will stop for the night in exactly fourteen minutes at this pace. I thought you might like to know."

"Thanks for the update," Everest replied dryly. "Seems sort of early, isn't it?" he started looking around. The sun was low in the sky, but not quite as low as it usually was when they stopped. "There's still plenty of daylight left."

"I have anticipated a request to stop, given the local terrain which will come into view momentarily. This route was also created with your convenience in mind."

"Not sure what you mean," Don said up to it.

"In thirteen minutes and thirty seconds you will understand. If you wish to climb up my frame you will see the reason for yourselves." P05 slowed to let the others catch up.

"I'll take a look," Everest volunteered, grabbing onto the metal ladder that was welded onto the side of P05's armored body. He climbed the full height to the top of the bulbous, tank like war machine and shaded his eyes against the setting sun. With a smile he nodded and climbed back down.

"So?" Don asked.

"You'll see," he replied mysteriously. "You knew that was there?" he asked to P05.

"Negative. While incomplete, my memory banks show various needs which must be met for efficient travel. My scanners have been seeking various locations that do not deviate significantly from our preprogrammed course."

The others didn't exactly know what they were talking about until fourteen minutes later when a beautiful pond came into view.

"Oh wow!" exclaimed Lysanias. The reflected sun sparkled off the clear water, and sparse trees grew nearby. Weeds sprang up around the irregularly shaped banks, which were roughly 20m by 30m except in one place where it looked like they were regularly pulled. This created an inviting downslope to the water.

"I hope that this location is satisfactory," P05 told them. "My records indicate regular bathing or swimming raises morale and increases travel efficiency by 6%."

"I don't know about that, but the location is very satisfactory," he replied. "And it'll give me a chance to try something out."

"This was quite thoughtful of you," Everest thanked it, looking somewhat confused as if he hadn't expected this giant thing to take their needs into account.

Lysanias ran down to the water's edge and looked down, pleased at how clear the water appeared. "It is safe, isn't it?"

Don joined him and looked out over the gently rippling water, blown by the slight breeze. "I suppose there's nothing that will eat your face off in a place like this," he figured. "There are aquatic demons and such, but aren't you the one that can sense life force and such?"

"Oh yeah!" He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, reaching out with his senses to see what sort of energy was in the area. "Wow!" They snapped open again. "This place has a lot of energy flowing through it. I would almost say there was a ley line convergence near the center of the pond." He pointed.

"A what?"

"The energy conduits of the planet," Everest explained, joining them. "Places with a lot of plant life typically are rich in ley lines. This place certainly qualifies."

"I can actually draw off them," Lysanias remembered. "I was underground so long and then on the move so much I forgot about it. This would be a great place to do any work that needed a lot of energy. I'll have to keep this place in mind if I ever come this way again."

"But what about nasties under the water?" Don reminded him.

"Can't tell. This much energy messes with my senses. I can't even tell where you guys are by your energy, we're right inside a line that runs straight across." *Right where this cleared area is. Odd. Could it mean something? Maybe animals come to this spot more often and eat the weeds, that's why they seem cleared here?*

"I guess nothing bad would live in a place like this, right?"

"I should think not!"

"You'll want to swim then?"

"Don't you? Or at least bathe?"

"Eh, I'm fine. We'll set up the camp, you have fun."

"Everest?"

He put his hands up. "Earth elemental, remember? I don't do so well in the water."

"I guess it's just me then. Be a shame to pass this beautiful pond and not swim. After all, P05 was kind enough to find us this place."

"You go ahead. It can't be that deep. You do know how to swim, right?"

"Of course I do! I'm not going to win any races or anything, but I won't drown myself."

Everest trailed a hand thought the water. "Warm enough. Well, have fun."

Lysanias stripped off his clothes and grabbed one of his arrows, thinking that if Everest could pull a grown dwarf and himself up by two pieces of stone, he could pull himself along in the water the same way. With a splash he struck out for the center, finding to his delight the arrow pulled him along with ease. He submerged, wanting to see if he was right and if there was a convergence of ley lines under the water. Even here the water was clear and he reached out with his senses, trying to find the point of maximum energy. He was slowly spinning in a circle when he noticed something out of place at the bottom of the pond. He hung there a moment trying to figure out what it was, then shrugged and went up for air again. Taking a moment and then a deep breath the arrow pulled him under quickly, dragging him to the bottom of the pond. Details were hard to make out here, but there was something there, he was sure of it. Something darker than the surrounding plant life, and crushing it down if he didn't miss his guess. He swam close to it and reached out, expecting perhaps a rock formation that simply seemed to be the impossible shape his brain was telling him this was. He expected something cold and hard, but instead his hand touched something warm, and soft, and a pair of eyes opened to regard him.

Lysanias now knew his hand, frozen in shock at finding something so soft and supple under the water, was touching a living being. A being that smiled at him, teeth straight and white in the darkness of the water. Her hair flowed as she sat up, billowing in a cloud around her head, and she put her hand on his, still smiling.

This was enough to break him out of his stupor and realize that if he was some kind of underwater predator, what better way to catch unsuspecting prey than by looking like the most beautiful thing that prey had ever seen? He gripped the stone arrow tightly and let it rocket him away from the creature, who stretched out a hand and mouthed something.

*Probably 'get in my belly.'*

He whooshed out of the water and scrambled up onto the cleared area, turning and hovering the arrow above his right hand in case something roared out of the water to attack him.

"What's wrong lad?" Don asked, grabbing up his halberd from where he had set it down. "Was there something down there after all?"

Lysanias could only mutely nod as a head broke the surface of the water and started towards him.

"Oh, don't tell me," moaned Everest. "I've read about this. High energy location, clear water... I should have known. Put that down, she doesn't mean any harm. Quite the opposite, if you know what I mean?"

"What? What is she?"

The figure was now half out of the water, her light blue skin contrasted by the dark blue hair that cascaded over her body like a waterfall over rocks. This served as only a partial covering, but she seemed unconcerned as she made no move to further cover herself. She did however freeze when she saw the arrow hovering over Lysanias' hand.

"I won't hurt you," she called. "I've been waiting for you to come. I saw this meeting in a dream. I can help you, Lysanias!"

"Wow, she works fast," Don remarked, lowering his weapon. "But what is she, if you'll enlighten us?"

"Probably a nymph. And by her coloring and location, specifically a naiad."

"Dangerous?"

"She won't drag him to his death or anything. His purity might take a beating tonight though." He snickered at the very idea.

"Preserve us."

"I mean you no harm!" she called again. "Please, may I approach?"

"Guys?" Lysanias wasn't taking his eyes off her.

"Oh, it's fine. She's some kind of nature spirit, right?" Don asked, throwing his weapon down in disgust.

"Exactly. She won't hurt you. If you want to go back into the water with her, we won't think less of you. Or try to rescue you, no matter what sounds we hear!" He started laughing again.

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh, put it down. Come on, he won't hurt you. Let's have a look at you," Don called, walking over to the edge of the pond.

The naiad kept an eye on Lysanias in case he made any sudden moves, and came towards them, revealing more of herself as she walked. Water ran in rivulets over her perfect skin, and Lysanias now stared for a different reason. He had seen angels in his lifetime, but this creature? She radiated perfection in a way they didn't. She was perfect of proportion, and her toned legs and arms beckoned him in a way no angel ever had. He had thought Yttrius exotically beautiful, but this creature surpassed that in a way he didn't understand. Her face was narrow and symmetrical, with large eyes and a cute nose. Poking up from behind her hair that reached almost to her ankles were pointed ears, and she flung her hair back, totally exposing herself.

"I hate how heavy this hair is out of the water," she complained, gathering it up and draping it behind her. "I don't suppose any of you fine gentleman has a pair of scissors on you?"

"Don't cut it!" Lysanias blurted, then flushed scarlet.

"It's going to be rather tricky to take care of on the road," she told them. "But I suppose if you really like it, I could braid it or something."

"Who exactly are you?" Everest asked, coming over to stand by Don. "And do you want to put your clothes back on, Lysanias?"

"Oh, don't rush on my account," offered the naiad. "People's clothes are always falling off around me, so it's nothing I haven't seen before."

Lysanias let the arrow go, catching it and lowering it to the ground. "What are you?"

"I'm a water spirit. Sorry for startling you before. I knew you were coming, just not exactly when. It figures I would be taking a nap at the time. Say!" she brightened. "You all speak my language! This is great! How did you ever learn it so well?"

"That's a long story, lass. Hey lad, why don't you introduce us?"

"What? Me?" Lysanias began thinking furiously. *What did these two do when they were introducing themselves? Right.* He got up and walked towards the others, arrow held lightly in his hand just in case. "This bearded fellow is a giant in heart if not in stature, I present to you Goldfinder Fancybeard."

"Is he..." asked Everest.

"And the rocky looking fellow is a big softy don't you worry. I present Smartypants Cloudhead Daggerflyer the third."

"He's stealing our stuff!" Don agreed.

"First he starts making his own jokes."

"Then he steals our routine!"

"The nerve of that guy!"

"I don't know why we're friends with him."

"Wait, did I do something wrong?" Lysanias asked, horrified. "I'm sorry! It's just you did that and I figured it was to break the tension and-" Both started laughing, and the naiad started grinning a bit too, looking between them all. "Oh."

"He's the perfect straight man, Don!"

"Couldn't have chosen a better if we tried, Everest."

"Our friend, Lysanias," both finished.

"But I guess you knew that, somehow? Who might you be, lass?"

"I'm Amy. Amy Pond. Nice to meet you all!"

"I am P05, it is pleasant to make your acquaintance."

The naiad froze, eyes darting to see what had made that tremendous noise. They lit on the war machine, sitting there passively and then went past it. It was huge, almost too big to see, and her eyes just couldn't accept it was there. They came back to it and she looked up and up at the thing.

"Yes, it was I who spoke."

She let out a blood curdling scream and leapt back into the water, rapidly disappearing from view.

"I believe my presence startled that aquatic female," P05 stated, trying to sound remorseful. "Please convey my apologies at your earliest convenience."

"That solves that problem," Don remarked, dusting off his hands.

Lysanias was looking at where she had disappeared, and had involuntarily taken a step after her.

"Are we letting her go?"

"Oh, go after her," Everest said with a shake of his head. "You know you want to."

"I have to, she knew my name. I hadn't told her my name!"

"All the more reason to stay away," Don cautioned.

"Sounds like something I would say. Still, it would be interesting to hear how she knew that," Everest admitted. "I'd like to know her story."

"She's no bloody book!"

"I'm going after her!" Lysanias decided, though really he had decided that the instant she disappeared. He jumped back into the water and let the arrow propel him forward, trying to see where she had gone. *If I had just been startled like that, I would go to the furthest and deepest point I could. That means the bottom and all the way across.* Taking a deep breath he plunged down, back into the warm water, seeking the figure. He found her, huddled at the bottom and curled into a tight ball. He touched her on the shoulder, making her jump and scramble back, but she saw it was him. She grabbed him in a hug and squeezed some bubbles out of him, and somehow he felt she was crying. *Crying... Underwater? How does that even work?* Another odd thing he somewhat registered is that without actually seeing her, it would have been hard to tell she was even there. Her body temperature seemed to match that of the water. So while she was solid, and he could feel the difference between her body and the water, she was no warmer or colder.

Unlike her, he couldn't breathe where he was and soon (all too soon in his estimation) air was trickling past his lips as he fought to not inhale. She hadn't calmed down but he gently made the arrow rise, dragging them both to the surface again where he took in deep gulps of air.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to keep you down there so long," she softly apologized. "Are you okay? I was just really surprised, and then you came after me, and..."

"I'll be fine. Are you okay?"

"I'm calming down. What is that thing?"

"Who? P05? He's the reason we're here. We're off to find him a smaller body so he doesn't go smashing up every place he visits. It's a long story."

"I saw you arrive at the base of a tower, but I thought it was just more dream imagery. I didn't think to take it literally."

"You said that before, that you saw me in a dream. What did you mean by that?"

"Hoping you're the man of my dreams?" she asked coyly. "If you can let me go we can include your friends in my story. They'll need to hear it too."

"I'm sorry!" He let her go and splashed away from her.

"It's okay. I know what effect I have on people. Not that I see too many out this way. Come on." She took his hand and dragged him along, gracefully moving through the water like she was born there.

*She probably was.*

"Welcome back!" Don greeted him. "I guess they were biting after all."

"Biting?"

"Those fish we were talking about- Never mind."

"Did you convey my apology?" asked P05.

"Oh, right. It said it was sorry for scaring you earlier."

"Does it?"

"Yes, yes it does."

"Tell it I accept, I guess."

"She says it's fine!" he called to it.

"That is a relief to hear. Query: Is there some way we can communicate directly?"

"If she dries off I could put a ward on her..." he offered. *Or would it work on P05 directly? That would be an interesting thing to know.*

"Then I will wait until the moisture on her skin has evaporated."

*You could just wait until she dries off.*

"Now then, Amy was it?" Don asked. "You said something about coming with us? Why would we want to drag a naiad along on this trip?"

She turned serious. "You must allow me to come. The fate of the world depends on it!"

Born to be Wild

When: No time has passed

Where: By Amy's pond

"The entire world?" repeated Everest, not believing it for a second.

"Yes, we are all in grave danger," Amy replied seriously.

"The whole thing? Every kilometer? Even this rock? What about this tree?" He pointed. "That cloud? What about that cloud?"

"I'm being serious," she huffed, putting her hands on her hips.

"I'm sure. Or, and correct me if I'm wrong, you're just bored and hope we can help pass some time for you."

"Can I at least make my case before you dismiss me?" she asked petulantly. "I did call Lysanias by name earlier, if you'll recall. I think that affords me a certain amount of credibility."

"She has a point," Don agreed. "She did call his name."

"I think we should hear her out!" Lysanias agreed.

"Lad, you don't get a vote. Not in this, I think."

"Hey!"

"No, he's right," cautioned Everest. "I know what part of you wants her to come, and it's not this part right here." He tapped his head knowingly. "But okay, convince us."

"Thank you so much," she replied sarcastically, gathering her hair up again and flinging it back. This sent a spray of water behind her and she stepped out of the pool. Looking around the camp her eyes stopped on the halberd Don had recently thrown down and she went over to it, touching it with a finger. "This weapon has only killed one person. Cowardly, from behind, I might add. It was recently made, both by you and Lysanias." She took her finger off and went over to the war machine, touching it. "This came out of the ground recently. Odd green men swarmed around it, and you fought one of them atop it." She giggled, a sound like falling rainwater across the strings of a harp and Lysanias hoped to hear it again. "It rolled up to the town just days ago and demanded to see Lysanias. Humm..." She walked over to him and held up a hand. "May I?"

"Of course!" Lysanias answered, not exactly clear on what she wanted. But whatever it was, he was all for it. He hoped she didn't notice his eyes taking in her body and he was trying to focus on her eyes which were sparkling and as beautiful as she was. She noticed, but she was used to it. She simply touched his arm and concentrated on him.

"He was... In some kind of cage I think, at the time? He didn't like it there." She turned to the other two men. "Right before he was put in there one of those green people spoke to him and then went away. He stared at some penned in animals for a time after that. Shall I continue?"

"Actually, that's fairly impressive," allowed Everest.

"Cowardly!?" Don fumed, unable to move past that little remark on her part.

"I see what I see."

"You could have put it a different way."

"That aside? Lysanias, any help here?"

He nodded. "What else can you do? You can dream the future, and tell the past of an object. Can you see an object's future? Project your senses?"

"Yes." It was her turn to be a bit surprised. "How did you know that?"

"It's a long story. Guys, she's legitimate. Those that focused on abilities like hers were the ones to predict the flood. They all dreamed of the flood, that's how dangerous it was. She has a real gift, something non-magical just like my wards."

"All right, so far I'm not going to dismiss you out of hand. What exactly did you dream?" Everest asked.

"I saw Lysanias, standing beside a great tower, with two stout companions at his side."

"I'm not that fat," complained Don, rubbing his belly. He jiggled it. "Humm..."

"I think she means courageous."

"I knew that."

"He stumbled as if blind, and he held a blade, a dark blade, out in front of him. But he did not attack with it, he simply tapped it upon the ground as he moved forward. The sword pulled him towards a great maw, and shadow spilled from it as though to cover the land. Those that would be his allies turned upon him as he sought to close the maw and save us all."

There was a moment of silence as they digested this.

"So where do you fit into all this?" Don asked finally.

"My future is uncertain. In the dream a chain was around me, binding me. I dragged the chain along with me until one of you noticed it, and found the source. But it took another to finally free me."

"So we're to help you?" Everest asked.

"It's true, I don't have much to offer you," she admitted sadly. "You are much more traveled than I. I am not strong, I cannot fight. But I can read intentions, and tell truth from lies, and glimpse both the past and the future. Are these abilities not enough?"

"And you'll use these abilities for our benefit?"

"Of course!"

"We'll think about it," Don promised her.

"Shouldn't you already know our decision?" Everest asked.

"I try to avoid looking at the specifics of my own future. It is somewhat... bleak... most of the time. I know in general if a day will be good or bad for me at the start, but beyond that, no."

"I can understand that. Everest, a word?"

"Sure." The two moved off and Lysanias and Amy stood, somewhat embarrassed now that they were alone.

"Let me dance for you!" she suddenly offered. "I practice and practice but hardly anyone ever comes here to watch me."

"Uh, sure!"

"Really? Wonderful!" She smiled, making Lysanias a bit weak at the knees, and plunged into the water again. She began a very complex routine, basically a synchronized swimming show with only one performer. Lysanias sat entranced as she spun, turned, and even shot out of the water to do backflips. She was breathing heavily when she finally emerged to Lysanias clapping and smiling.

"That was... I've never seen anyone swim like that. How did you even manage to do some of those things? Is that your power too?"

She shook her head. "No, just a lot of practice. Come into the water and I'll show you."

He didn't hesitate.

The pair laughed and swam in the fading sunlight, Lysanias trying and utterly failing to perform even the most basic of tricks in the water. But Amy was encouraging and didn't laugh at him for it, only saying things like "it took me a year to perfect that move," and "you almost had it!"

Finally it was too dark and Lysanias staggered back to shore.

"Thanks," he said to her. "That was honestly the best time I've had in thousands of years."

"You aren't lying!" she replied, amazed. "And I thought I needed to get out more."

She went back to her watery bed for the night, before sleeping when she was tired and being awake when she wasn't. She didn't need to eat, and she could see perfectly in the dark, so the hour of the day hardly mattered to her. But she wanted to leave with them in the morning and so decided to get as much sleep as she could in her home one last time.

"You've made a friend," Don observed as Lysanias finally dressed again.

"That's our boy," Everest agreed. "Can't even go swimming without finding *the ladies*."

"I think she's just really lonely," he answered. "And think of it- If I could get her to touch, I mean teach me her skills, I could see the future and such too."

"You think you could learn from her?"

"My people could do it. I'm sure of it."

The two looked at each other. "Guess we have another addition to this little party," Don allowed. "Honestly, a war machine and a naiad. What's next, a talking raccoon?"

"A wise cracking raccoon no doubt," Everest agreed.

"Here, we saved you some food."

"I'm starving, thanks guys." He tore into it.

"Yeah, increased blood circulation will do that," Everest told him, but wouldn't explain further. Just laughed.

That night Lysanias tried to sleep but Amy's form kept intruding on his thoughts. Those curves, the way she moved in the water. Her laugh, that hair. He couldn't wait to get to know her better. *Yttrius? Who's that?*

And so the morning dawned to a heavy ground fog and cloudy skies. Amy was splashing around in the pond as the others got ready, she seemed to be looking for something. She had already brought up a handful of colorful stones she had them pack away, saying they helped her use her abilities. She had no other belongings to worry about, but seemed upset over something. "Help me find Kappa!" she pleaded, swimming over.

"What's a Kappa?" Don asked. "What are we looking for?"

"Some kind of water demon, right?" Everest answered.

"He's no demon!" laughed Amy. "But he sort of looks like one I guess? Kappa! I didn't think he was this shy, but he does love to play. Of course he would pick this morning to play hide and seek. Kappa! Come on, we're leaving! You must have seen these people last night, where are you?" The nearby weeds shook and a head popped out of them. It was small, green, and had a white "crown" of hair sticking out in a circle around his head. He had a yellow beaklike snout and beady black eyes. "There you are!" she cried. "Come on, we're going on an adventure!"

The rest of the body followed, and it was a tiny green fellow with webbed hands, tiny claws, and a tail. It walked upright and ran over to Amy, hugging her leg. It was the size of a cat, so it came up to just past her knee.

"Everyone, this is Kappa!" she said brightly.

The little creature gave a shy wave.

"What is, uh, he?" Everest asked, bending down to look at him.

"No idea. Woke up one morning and there he was, waiting for me on the shore. He's been hanging around ever since. Not even that wizard I know can tell me what he is. Weird huh?" As she said "wizard" she made a funny gesture with her hands, making her two index fingers and thumb into a ring and putting them inside each other.

"Wizard?" Everest asked. "Nearest wizard around here is that Americut guy. You mean him?"

She ignored the question and picked Kappa up, spinning him around and then plopping him on her head. "Guess that's it, we can go any time!"

The others traded a look, wondering why she ignored the question.

"Does he talk?" Don asked.

"Nope, not to me, anyway. You want to talk to them, Kappa?"

The green figure shook his head.

"Guess not. Huh. What a strange little guy."

"He's cute," Lysanias told her, figuring the way to the mother's heart was through the child, right?

*Wait, or was it 'the way to the man's heart is through the stomach?' That would be an awkward one to get wrong.*

"He sure is. Aren't you, Kappa? Yes you are." She ticked one of his feet playfully. "Okay, let's go. It's going to take hours for my hair to dry though. Of course it would be cloudy and foggy today. Ah well. You sure you don't want me to cut it?"

"It's your hair, it just seems a shame to lop it all off. Wait, maybe I can do something about it," Lysanias offered, stepping up to her. "If I may?" He stepped behind her.

"Sure?"

He gathered it up in his hands, thinking. *Water is pretty malleable. I can turn a rock into an arrow and it'll stay that way. But what about water? I could reshape water but why would I bother unless it was ice? It would just flow back together. But in this case I just want to "reshape" the water in the hair to be lower down. That should cause it to run into the water even lower down, again and again until it's all out of the hair. Plus I could heat it up a little.* He put the hair between his palms and let his ability to reshape matter take it from there. By running his hands along the length of it the water got squeezed out, and any that was left was warmer so it would evaporate quicker.

"That actually worked." She ran her fingers through it and fluffed it, pleased. "It's not totally dry, but it's much dryer than before. How did you do that?"

"Oh, it's just something I can do," he answered modestly.

"I'll do it up as we walk. Shall we get started?"

Everyone looked around the camp and it seemed nothing had been left behind.

"Let's resume our journey," Lysanias told P05.

"Affirmative." It wheeled away from the pond, which Amy took one last look at, and the group moved off.

As she walked, Amy put her hair into two strands, one on each side of her head. This showed her cute pointed ears better as well as her neck, both of which were perfect in Lysanias' eyes. She made a ball, almost giving her the look of having a pair of small, rounded ears atop her head and making her look even cuter. Lysanias offered some twine to tie up the bottom so it stayed parted like that. Kappa grabbed on to one of her "meatballs" to help him stay up there, but glared at Lysanias as he tied the twine around each of her "tails."

"Thank you!"

"You just made that, didn't you?" Everest asked.

"Yeah, what of it? Do you need some? I just used a stick, I could get another."

He waved off the request. "Just something I was wondering about. You bought all that paper, back in town. Why? Can't you just make paper out of leaves or whatever?"

"Oh sure! But I can't use it for wards."

"Why not?"

He hung his head. "I'm not good enough. Others could, back before the flood. It took a few steps. First you had to make the paper, obviously."

"Yes."

"Then you had to draw the energies out of it. Because it wasn't natural paper it had a residue of energy left from the transformation. If you drew that out, *then* you could use it for other things that put different energy into it. Like wards."

"I see. So there could be a slight difference in say, gold, that *you* make versus what you find in the ground?"

"If you knew how to look for it, sure. If I could find someone to teach me how to manipulate spiritual energy and draw it out of things, then I could do it that way. But until then?" He spread his hands in defeat.

"Interesting."

"On that note, would you like me to make you a wrap or something?" Lysanias asked Amy, who was still totally naked. He was enjoying the way she moved, as even her movements seemed perfect and calculated to draw the eye. But he felt he should offer, even if he was desperately hoping she would refuse. "Aren't you cold?"

"I'm only cold when I'm cold," she answered.

"Er?"

She giggled. "Don't you see? I'm *literally* that pond of water back there. Near as I can tell, I came into existence because of all the ley energy in the area. It's an extension of my body. Or this body that walks around and talks is an extension of it? I'm not clear on that point. During highsun, like now, I'm fairly warm. During firstsnow I'll start to freeze, and my body, or this body that walks around," she indicated herself, "will grow colder too. Both figuratively and physically. I'll be more aloof, have more of a temper, and snap at people more easily. Like ice. If you touched me I would be colder to the touch, as well. But now I'm warm and caring." She giggled and put her hand up against Lysanias' cheek. "See? Warm. So enjoy it while you can!" She let her hand drop. "And don't take it personally if we stay together until then and I do get a bit colder. It's just something that happens to me, I'm afraid."

"One question."

"Yes?"

"What's 'highsun?'"

"The season," she replied, as if that was the most obvious thing in the world. I mean if even *she* knew that...

"We have twelve," Everest told him.

"Twelve?! We only had four!"

"Four?"

"Spring, summer, fall, and winter."

"Seems fairly inaccurate."

"We got by just fine." He shook his head in disbelief. "Twelve seasons. I suppose there's eight days a week as well?"

"Ah, no, we still have just the seven."

"Thank goodness for that."

"If I may say," Everest now said to Amy, "you seem to speak really well. What I mean by that is, you sound more educated than I would have expected."

"Did you expect me to be an empty headed bimbo only out for one thing?" she asked slyly.

"You can tell truth from lies, right?" he asked thoughtfully, thinking about his answer.

"That's right."

"Then yes, yes I did."

She laughed. "I don't blame you. I've sought out others of my kind, and that stereotype is somewhat accurate. Oh, we had some fun together don't get me wrong. But they felt no need to really improve themselves. I, on the other hand, attended university, so it's no surprise I sound refined and cultured." She mimed drinking from a teacup, one pinky in the air.

"You did what, lass?"

"Attended university. School."

"How in blazes did you do that?"

She sighed. "Do you know how boring it is, just floating around your pond day in and day out?"

"I suppose I can imagine it. Never really had the opportunity."

"You don't want to, believe me. Imagine you're me- You can't leave the immediate area, not for too long, anyway. You have no one to talk to because you're in the middle of nowhere. You have a friend but he just splashes about and doesn't say a word." She indicated Kappa. "But then imagine you discover that your dreams come true. You dream about a fairy passing by, and one does. You dream about a family of deer, and the next year that family of deer shows up. So you start to wonder, and you start to see what other sorts of things you can do."

"That's how you realized you could see the future?" Lysanias asked. "Dreams you had?"

"That's right. From there I just started trying other things. Some things worked out, some things did not. One thing that did work out was finding out I could become a sort of ghost and travel to other places. After a few months of doing that I realized I didn't have to leave my body anymore, I could just want to see a place, and then I saw it. So I started peeking in on students learning things and eventually worked my way up to university. I didn't really *study* or anything, you understand, but hearing about history or magic or learning about numbers was better than just another day alone in my pond."

"Can you see anywhere in the world?" Don asked.

She shook her head. "It works better if I have something in mind to try and see. Sometimes I can get further than at other times, I don't know why. Sometimes I can't get anywhere at all. It's very frustrating."

"You're still learning," suggested Everest.

"Maybe. Anyway, that's my story, and I'm sticking to it."

"So what else can you do?" Lysanias asked excitedly, rubbing his hands together. "And if you could, please be as specific as possible in describing *how* these things are accomplished, as well. I'll be taking some notes when we stop, so the more specific you can be, the better."

He looked at her expectantly, grinning.

"The better for what?" she asked.

5

I'm a Lumberjack and I'm Okay

When: That evening

Where: Camp

As usual that day, Lysanias had been busy as they walked. Once he had convinced Amy that telling him exactly how she accomplished what she could do was not a waste of time, she was more than happy to explain. He had to demonstrate he could move the earth like Everest, and do magic like Don, and he made a new ward to replace the one he took off so she could see without it, they couldn't understand each other. She had to admit that if he could do all that, he could probably learn what she had to teach as well.

"So if you put one of those pieces of paper on me, I could talk to P05?" she asked.

"That's right. But if you can hold on a bit, I have an idea about that. See, we usually put the ward under clothes, and as you don't have any on-

"You do like bringing that up."

"It's just a simple-

She smiled at him and took a deep breath, standing straight. He sort of lost his train of thought, not that trains had been reinvented yet. "Simple... I offered, don't forget!"

"I'm just teasing, go on."

"What was I saying?"

"Wards?"

"Oh right, wearing them. It could get knocked off easily. But it just has to be attached to you. I think I can come up with something."

"Whatever you say."

So that evening he handed her a necklace. It had a simple gold chain with a clasp he consulted with Don on how to construct. The main part was a flat golden disk with an embossed image of Kappa in silver on the front. On the back were some guides, thin enough for a piece of paper to sit in.

"Here you go," he said shyly, handing it to her.

"It's beautiful, I really like it. Look Kappa, it's you!" The Kappa just crossed his arms and looked away. "Don't be like that! This took a lot of effort." She let the chain droop into one hand, holding the front of it. "Why not a bracelet? Or a choker?"

"Your chain imagery from the dream. I thought maybe it related?"

"Oh no," she sighed. "That chain is very different." She made that funny hand symbol again, looking directly into Lysanias' eyes.

"What do you mean?"

Again she ignored further talk on the subject and tried to work out how to work the clasp to put the necklace on. *You could ask me to help.* She finally managed it and Lysanias told her how to activate the ward on the back.

"Can you understand me now?" she asked P05.

"Affirmative. I am pleased we may now directly converse. Allow me first to again offer my apologies for startling you during our initial meeting."

"That's all right. So what's your story, if you don't mind me asking? I only took a peek when I touched you before, and you were buried a long time. I couldn't go back any further into your past."

"I do not know what you are talking about, but I can relate my history quite simply. My memory banks are incomplete, but I can tell you what is there. As my designation suggests, I am the fifth prototype of my kind. When my construction was completed

and I was activated, my creators were dismayed to discover I was unsuited for the purpose they had created me for.”

“How so?”

“I did not wish to be a weapon of war.”

She digested this. “Did they force you?”

“How could they compel me? They built me to be an unstoppable juggernaut of destruction. This worked against them when I demanded to be given a different purpose.”

“Bet they took that really well,” Everest remarked.

“I detect sarcasm. It did not work out well for either party. I was deactivated and I surmise that many of my parts and systems were removed for installation into subsequent prototype units.”

“You don’t know for sure?” asked Don.

“I am aware that many of my key systems including most armaments and nearly all my power cells are not present. As I was deactivated I can not know if this was because my creators stripped me for parts or over the years I have been the victim of theft.”

“So you don’t know how you got buried then?” Amy asked.

“I do not. When I returned to consciousness the annunaki force was repairing me. They were surprisingly adept. When I balked a second time the annunaki leader somehow forced me to comply, and I began my approach to the nearby village. That control became inoperative when Lysanias and the others arrived and began their assault.”

“And now you want a smaller body so no one will ever order you to military action again?”

“That is correct.”

Amy shook her head. “They made a weapon of war, gave it the ability to think for itself, and were shocked to learn it didn’t want to be a weapon of war. Amazing.”

“It is a curious trait. I do not know if humans still seek to enslave others in this time, but I must assume they do.”

“Oh, they do, believe me.” She made the funny interlocking rings symbol again, looking somewhat sad. Don took note of it, looking concerned. “Still, I’m glad you have a goal. Something to work towards. Do you know what you’ll do once you have your smaller body?”

“It is my hope that I can be assigned some worthwhile task by those that transfer my intelligence and memory circuits. If they do not have a task I will self assign with priority to knowledge acquisition and worthwhile achievement within my skill set. This of course will be contingent upon what manner of body I am placed into.”

“What’s it going to do?” asked Lysanias.

“Learn about stuff and figure out what it can do in the world that’s worthwhile to it,” Everest explained. “If it gets a body like the doctor, it can do human tasks. If it gets one that isn’t human its function will be determined by what shape it does have. It could be a rock hauler or a flying type.”

“I see. Thanks.”

“It’s been nice talking to you, P05. I hope you get your smaller body soon. Now, if one of you fine gentleman earth movers can make me something, I have to return home.” She made the funny hand symbol again.

“What do you need?” Lysanias asked, jumping again at the chance to do something for her.

“A hole full of water, deep enough to cover me,” she explained. “I can use it to go home again. I’ve been away too long and I don’t want the compulsion to go back to build up too strongly. Don’t worry, I can use the same place to come back in the morning. As long as there’s enough water in it, anyway. But that’s up to you three.”

“It’s only been a day, lass,” Don protested.

"Has it?" she asked. "Odd that it feels like five."

"Lass, is something wrong?"

"No, what could be wrong? I just have to go home, that's all."

"Back to the pond we found you at?"

"I have to go *home*," she repeated pointedly.

The others shared a look but Everest stepped up. "We can make you a hole easily enough, and fill it with water. Lysanias, you may have to turn the dirt into rock so the water stays there until the morning."

"Not a problem." *I hope.*

"I'll make the hole then." The two got to work, first pulling the dirt out nearby and then turning the walls into a thin metal.

"After all, a thin metal will hold water better than a thin rock, that the water would just seep through. It's actually easier to do it this way, because turning it into rock or metal is about the same difficulty for me."

"Whatever works," agreed Amy. "I'll be back in the morning, okay? Thanks!" She plunged into the water and as soon as it covered her, she was gone.

"Interesting person," Don began, a moment after she vanished. "Lad, get out that book because I want you to make some notes."

"Okay?"

"When did she first make that funny hand symbol?"

"The what?"

He sighed. "If you stopped staring at her- anyway, Everest?"

"When she mentioned the wizard."

"Right. Note that down, then she did it again when she talked about slavery..."

The group noted down all the times she had made the funny symbol and what questions she avoided answering.

"What's this all about?" Lysanias asked.

"Not sure," Don admitted. "But there's something going on with her."

"I'll try to be more attentive."

"Lad, you couldn't *be* more attentive. Just be attentive to other parts of her."

"It's not like that!"

"We have eyes too, you know," Everest told him. "She doesn't seem to mind, but she probably does. Just because she's used to it doesn't mean you should leer at her."

"Then she should have taken me up on my offer for clothes."

"Should she, lad? Should she do something just for *your* convenience? Because you can't keep your eyes to yourself?" He looked down. "I don't mean to lecture lad, you're still fourteen inside, I know. It can't be easy for you, suddenly being a grown man and having to deal with a creature like her. The point is, something's off about her, and I think she's trying to tell us something. Just keep an eye out, all right?"

"All right." *She's not human, I guess. So she wouldn't have the same social conventions we do. Wearing clothes might feel very restrictive for something made of water. Would water care if you stare at it? Even water that can walk around? But she is still a person, she understood P05 better than I did, probably thanks to 'attending university.' And she will go back to her pond in the end, just like Yttrius went back with her people. And I see the difference between her and Yttrius, what she meant by 'flirty.' Amy doesn't do that. Was making her that chain a mistake? Was I trying to claim some ownership of her? I wanted to make her something nice, but was it for me or for her I made it in that exact shape? Putting a chain around her neck, what was I thinking? Does she hate me now, but is too nice to show it? Is that why she just ran off like that? Maybe I won't even see her again. And I couldn't even be mad at her because it would be totally my fault for driving her away. I guess we'll just have to see.*

To take his mind off her, Lysanias had Don help him write down the formulas for the magic he could cast, and then started making notes about ward making and “alchemy.” *I can't berate others for not writing stuff down so I could learn from them and not write down what I know so anyone coming after me can learn what I know.*

That done he got in some more practice with the arrows and dropped off to sleep.

Amy returned in the morning, seeming her happy self, and the group continued in this way for another two weeks. Amy was happy to help Lysanias practice what she knew, and he made notes about his successes and failures in his journal. They even discovered, now that she had someone to practice with, that she could send thoughts, even see his soul by gazing into his eyes. So they learned some things together, and Lysanias felt he had a handle on the basics of what she could do. Try as he might he couldn't read thoughts as she discovered she could do, but he noted down it was possible and what she said about how she did it. Along with some other things like leaving her body and actually seeing ley lines. He was *very* interested in learning that skill. Feeling them out was all well and good, but to just be able to see where one was would be a lot better.

Every few days Amy would request to go back “home” at night, and the group would put water into the metal container so she could disappear from it. They had saved the original one, attaching it to P05 so he didn't have to remake it every few days, and this worked well enough. It was a little after noon on the 19<sup>th</sup> day after leaving the village that the first major line of trees came into view.

“You may want to wait here a moment,” P05 told them. “Follow after it is safe. This is the first of the major tree barriers that must be penetrated.”

The group looked past him at the dense forest that blocked the way. “Are you sure you'll be able to get through that?” Everest asked. “It doesn't look all that passible, even for you.”

“I appreciate your concern. But I calculate a 98% chance I will have no problems. If you could all step back an appropriate distance I will begin.”

With no other choice the group stopped as P05 began his controlled rampage through the forest. When he was far enough in that they wouldn't be smacked with falling trees they pressed on, stepping over trunks as they went.

“If anyone were to need to find us, they would have no trouble,” Amy remarked, looking around. “Hope none of these were dryads.”

“Is that likely?” Lysanias asked.

She shook her head. “No way to tell. There's a lot of ley lines around here because of all the trees, but I don't see any major convergences that give rise to one.”

*But if a tree was already knocked over where one had been, would we really know?*

There was nothing to do but press on though.

An hour or so later the hulking form of P05 stopped as did the noise of trees being smashed over. *Are we though?*

“What's the problem?” Don yelled up to it, coming up from behind.

“I am obstructed by small, flying, humanoids,” it reported.

“By what?”

They walked around it sure enough, two dozen small, winged people were there, shouting and flying and trying to hold it back.

“Fairies!” exclaimed Lysanias, watching them dart about.

“You know about fairies?” Everest asked.

“Oh sure, we had them. I'm glad they weren't wiped out with us. Hello little ones!” he called, waving.

Several noticed and pointed him out to others, and a small swarm flew down to them.

“What’s the little idea!” demanded one, a male, pointing to P05. He, like all the others, was smaller than Lysanias’ hand and had gossamer wings. Most didn’t wear anything, but he saw a bit of cloth or a leaf here and there as they darted about. This one seemed to have a tail, which was lashing back and forth, something he hadn’t noticed on fairies in his time.

“I think you mean the big idea,” corrected the male fairy beside him.

“How can ideas be big? We have them, and look how small we are compared to them!”

“It’s just a saying.”

“So I’m changing it. What’s the little idea!”

“Compromise already!” bellowed another male, this one with a tiny beard.

“Very well,” disgustedly said the first one. “What’s the medium sized idea?”

“Nah, what you said before was better,” allowed the second one. “Better a small idea than-”

“Let them talk already!”

They all gave the group the stink eye.

“What are they saying?” asked P05, and the fairies all shrieked and covered their ears.

“Better stay quiet for the time being,” Everest said up to it. “We’ll fill you in later.”

“But how can I apologize for-”

“Make it stop! Make it stop!” the fairies shouted. Some scattered to try and get away from the booming sound of gibberish.

“We’ll apologize for you!” Don hastily interrupted.

“Very well.”

In the sudden silence the fairies slowly uncovered their ears. “What was that?” asked the bearded one.

“First things first- what’s the big, small, or medium sized idea! Well, speak up!”

Don looked to Lysanias who didn’t look like he was going to speak up, and stepped forward. “Fairies, we apologize for startling you. Our large friend here needs to pass through your woods so it can find a smaller body.”

“Our homes!” screeched one.

“My babies!”

“My carefully cultivated fungus collection!”

“No one cares about that!”

“I do.”

“Like I said.”

“Mom, Telli’s being mean to me!”

“You moved out six months ago, you can’t come crying to me!”

“Quiet!” roared the bearded one. “All of you, go back home. I’ll deal with this.”

They grumbled about it, but reluctantly left.

“Now then,” he said, flying and hovering in front of them. “Let’s see, we have a dwarf, a gnomad, a human, and... my dear are you what I think you are?”

“I am,” she gave a little bow.

“And so far from yourself, too. Your need must be very great to have left your pond.”

“The choice was not my own,” she admitted, making the hand sign again.

“So few things in life are,” he agreed. “Now, the fact remains you absolutely must not continue knocking trees down around here. There are many oaken in this area, and in fact a group of elders serves as our home straight in your path.”

“We must get through, though,” Don told him. “Perhaps you could simply point them out and we can be sure to go around them?”

"My good dwarf, none of us recall where exactly *all* of the oaken are. Many went to sleep hundred of years ago. It would be unforgivable to simply smash them over because they happen to look like regular trees."

"What's an oaken?" Lysanias whispered to Everest.

"Walking tree. They can talk too, even do magic."

He stared in disbelief. "There really are talking trees?"

"Sure. You met a pond, Amy Pond, is a talking tree really that unbelievable?"

"I suppose not." He turned to the forest, giving a shout. "If there are any wise cracking raccoons out there, come out now!"

Everyone waited a moment.

"I don't do jokes, but I can sing," answered the bear, sticking his head out from behind a tree. "Does that help at all?"

*A singing bear. Of course.* "Not really."

"If you change your mind, just give a shout." He pulled his head back and from the brush drifted a song. "There was... blood on the saddle and... blood all... around."

"Ugh, that bear," remarked the fairy. "Doesn't he know any other songs? I swear it's like he got stuck singing that one song for all time. Anyway, the oaken?"

"What do you suggest?" Don asked. "We could go around, I suppose."

"Wait here a second." He rose in the air and kept going above the tree line, looking off into the distance before coming back down. "I don't know, it's pretty swampy to the north of here, but I suppose south would be passible. Heard some strange rumors from people passing that way though. Ghosts and worse. It would take you pretty far out of your way if you're headed in a straight line through these woods. This is really the narrowest path you could take."

"Our friend here is nothing if not efficient, I guess."

"Look, would it mind staying put for the moment? Maybe some of the oaken would have an idea? Come meet them and maybe between all of us we can come up with something to get you through here without too much trouble."

"That would be great. P05, can you stay here? We'll negotiate something with the fairies here and come back."

"Very well," it boomed. "I will await your return."

The fairy winced. "You can actually understand that gibberish?"

"Not without a bit of work on our part. Lead on. I'm Don, by the way. This is Everest, Lysanias, and Amy."

"I'm Donkey Hootay. It's not the most originally named place in the realm, but welcome to the fairies' forest."

On a Wing and a Prayer

When: A few moments later

Where: Fairy Village

It didn't take long for the group to reach a clearing and cause a stir among the creatures who were there. Several animated trees turned to watch the newcomers arrive, while fairies darted this way and that. Something dark of coat hopped up on four legs and ambled over to them, and Everest stared at it.

"A black unicorn!" he breathed. "At least, I think?"

"Oh, I am," she replied somewhat sadly. "For what it's worth." The creature was small, about as tall as a goat, and had a silver horn protruding from her forehead. But the similarity to a normal unicorn ended there. A thick golden ring sat at the base, and at the top the horn split into two, almost looking like devil horns at the tips. Her coat was more leathery than velvety, and she sported vestigial bat's wings on her back. Her eyes were red, not black, and she had a slightly "demonic" air about her, making those around her feel vaguely uncomfortable. She looked each over, seeming to concentrate on each one, and bowed her horn to Amy. "They seem okay," she reported to Donkey. "What was that horrible noise before?"

"What we're here to discuss," Donkey told her. "Can you get everyone back here?"

"Sure."

She stepped away from the group and magical energies started swirling around her. Her horn dipped as she traced a pattern in the air with it and atop it a ball of light appeared. She flung it upward where it suddenly grew brighter, obviously some sort of prearranged signal for the village. This lasted a moment and then dimmed to nothing again.

"Everyone will be along shortly," Donkey told them. "Naturally they're out doing fairy work, but that can wait."

The unicorn didn't come back over, hanging her head as though ashamed of her appearance.

"What happened to her?" asked Everest. "I've only heard of black unicorns in stories, and never ones that could use magic!"

"Her story to tell, really," he replied. "But I know she would tell you this much. Her current form is a "gift" of Anansi. Seems she did some spider elves a favor at some point in the past and this was the reward for her trouble."

"She got turned into that?" Amy asked, somewhat disgusted. "As a present?"

"This is just her normal form. She was always a black unicorn, forced out of her herd for it of course, the gift just carried a price. The ability she got was actually being able to take *any* form. Of course she prefers her own, but it has come in handy for her since then so it's not too horrible a tradeoff. She sometimes visits her herd as the most radiant unicorn they've ever seen, but she won't tell them where she comes from. All the males want her to have their babies, so justice comes in many forms." He grinned.

*Great, is that what we have to look forward to when Anansi gets around to 'rewarding' us for saving that elven farming area? If you're listening, don't do us any favors.*

"Of course, refusing her gift would have been seen as an insult, meaning she probably would have been killed, so she was stuck either way."

*Unless of course, you really want to, he amended quickly. Then it's totally fine. I hear horns are in this year, they would go great with my beard.*

"Tell us of the outside!" one of the oaken insisted. This was a huge one that looked rooted to the spot.

"Yes, tell us!" the others chorused. Two were still unrooted, but were nearly as tall. One was far shorter and looked more alert. They were all different sorts of trees, one a pine, one an oak. There was a maple tree and the tallest one seemed to be a tree with strange green fruit hanging from the branches. Despite that they were somewhat humanoid, with arms and a face, and all looked eagerly at the group.

"These are the still awake oaken we're taking care of. Starting to be quite a community around here."

"A retirement community," the pine joked.

"Retirement?" Lysanias asked.

"Oaken that get too old grow too big to move around anymore," Donkey explained. "So they take root again. If they're lucky they make it to a place like this beforehand, and can be among their own kind."

"And if unlucky?"

"They either fall into a slumber that they never wake from, or go mad with loneliness."

"Wow."

"This one here," he flew over and touched a large tree Lysanias couldn't identify, "was one of the first. Despite our care he decided to go to sleep anyway. We respected his choice. Others, like I said, didn't quite make it and so dot the landscape around here. We fairies tend to them as best we can, but some have gone to sleep like this one. Thankfully none of yet have gone mad, so we don't have that to worry about!"

"But having them around is why we can't just blunder though," Don reasoned.

"That's why we would prefer you didn't," he agreed.

"Enough explanations, what's going on in the world today!" the big one insisted.

"We can tell you of our adventures," Everest told him. "We've been underground for some time, so we don't know a lot of surface gossip."

"Stories! Stories! Stories!" chanted the fairies that were there.

"I guess we're telling our stories then. You want to start, Lysanias? You are where this all began."

"Oh, uh, no, why don't you tell it?" he requested shyly. There might be only tiny people and a unicorn here, but there were so *many* fairies. He wasn't comfortable at all being the center of attention here. "I'm sure you'll do a better job."

"Okay, if you want."

So Don and Everest told their story, starting with the "funny little beastkin girl" that hired them to map out the tunnels where they found Lysanias. Then about how they had to drive off a giant worm, and how Lysanias drove it off with his earth spirit. Then they stumbled onto the deep elf village and saved it from being occupied by annunaki terrorists. Once that was done they came to the surface to track down the rest of the annunaki, foiled their plans to smash everything, and "liberated" the war machine they were now escorting to be put into a smaller body. Most of the fairies, and the unicorn changed into a fairy, flew up to see if they could spot it over the trees, and it was tall enough they could. Lysanias tried to downplay his involvement, that he hadn't really done all that much to help. Don and Lysanias were happy to take their credit for the whole thing, and by now the area was full of fairies. There were as many shapes and sizes as in the human village, both young and old, male and female. When the story was done Donkey address the crowd.

"So that's why they're here," he shouted. "We have to figure out how to get that enormous thing through our territory without smashing down any more trees. Anyone have any ideas?"

Several hands went up, and the mayor pointed to one woman.

"There's a lot of us here, couldn't we all just get really big and carry it over?"

The mayor looked to the group. "I tried simply tipping it over with my mountain spirit," Lysanias told them. "It was taller than the machine at the time. I couldn't budge it. It's really, really, heavy." *Nice to know they can still get bigger when they need to. I guess some things haven't changed since my time. Nice to know. The tails are new,* he thought, as one particularly pretty fairy drifted by who had a tuft like a rabbit. *But I'm not complaining.*

"I guess using magic to lift it is out of the question too," one male fairy said, putting his hand down.

He came back to the conversation. "If you can lift a mountain with your magic, maybe?"

The general sentiment was that they couldn't. Even working together that would be a bit much.

"Could Nyassa turn the scary thing into wind?" asked one young fairy.

"That wouldn't knock the trees over, but it would still damage them as they passed though," she told them. "It's mainly an attack spell for when you can't damage something any other way. It keeps you safe because you can't be hurt, but it's more for running away. I wouldn't be a good fit here."

"Good idea though," Donkey praised. "Next?"

"Could the oaken just ask the trees to move out of the way?" asked an even younger fairy.

There was a good natured laugh at this suggestion.

"I'm afraid it doesn't work like that," Donkey said kindly. He looked around for other hands up. "Oh, go ahead."

Everyone turned to Amy, who had put her hand up. "What if we asked them?"

"How would we do that?"

"Magic. Nyassa, she can cast spells, right? I just saw her do it. And presumably many of you here can as well?"

"I've been teaching them, fairy and oaken alike, what magic I know," Nyassa admitted. "As it's kind of silly for creatures with the spark of magic not to do any magic, right? But I don't know any spell like that. Talking to plants, sure. But getting them to move, well, that's another story."

"I bet someone does though!" she went on, getting excited. "And I bet I could find it!"

"But we're weeks from even the nearest town, lass," Don protested. "I suppose our friend out there could wait..."

She shook her head. "That won't be necessary. I've... done this before. Oh, I could say it!" She made the funny hand symbol again, and Everest scowled. "I'm not able to get into the main guild rooms, they're protected. But books laying out in the open that are owned by just regular wizards? I can see them just fine." She grinned.

"But they would have to be open to the page with this exact spell on them," Everest protested. "There's no way we're that lucky."

"That's the best part. I can use my powers to see inside books! I can get the formula and copy it out for you. It would take a little while, but like I said, I've done it before."

"We'll see about coming up with any better ideas, but if you think you can do it..." Donkey trailed off.

"I'll get started right away. I'll need someone to watch over my body. Hummm... Who likes looking at my body? Don? No, how about you, Lysanias? Can I trust you to watch over me?"

"Of course!" he agreed quickly.

"I guess you'll make an attentive guard, if nothing else. Come on, I'll talk you through what I'm about to do, you can make some notes in case you ever want to do it sometime."

"Great!"

The two went off and Amy settled into the grass at the base of a tree.

"First I'm going to ask the universe if a spell to allow trees to move around exists. If it doesn't there's no point to this. Then I'll ask how far I need to go in each direction to find the nearest copy. Then I'll leave my body and travel there, hoping to track down the book it's in. Once there I can come back here and simply view the place without going there in my 'ghost' form. Then I can make a copy onto some paper for the magic users here to look over."

"That's pretty complex! You sure you can do all that?"

"Oh, I'm sure," she replied a little sadly. "This is going to take a while, couple of hours total, maybe? When I'm away from my body I'll be totally helpless. So if there's a fire or something I'm counting on you to protect me."

"I'll put you inside a ward if it comes to that. But I'm sure it'll be fine."

"I hope so. One more thing. I can die if I'm away too long, and the only way to find my body again is by looking for it. So I have to come back here and if it's gone, I'm stuck. So make sure you're feeling me out, hopefully you can sense me at least a little if I'm hovering around nearby because you had to move me. We've practiced your sensing things, so you should be able to feel my mental presence if I'm nearby."

"Just how risky is this?" he asked, eyes narrowing.

"Do you think these fairies would let a forest fire go on for very long?"

"No."

"Then probably not very. But you never know."

"I'll protect you with my life."

She shook her head. "My life isn't worth yours, Lysanias. If trouble comes, just get away, okay?"

*But if you die there goes our chance to find this spell and get P05 through this forest.* "Hey, you said this morning it would be an okay day, right? Nothing will happen."

She shook her head, looking up at the sky. "I just have an odd feeling. Better get started."

She lay back and closed her eyes, beginning her first ten minute meditation on the question "Does a spell to allow trees to move exist in a book I can get to?"

It turned out there was, and thirty minutes after that she had a rough idea of what direction to go in. Lysanias of course kept careful watch over her body, purely to safeguard it and with no improper thoughts about it at all.

"I'm leaving now," she announced. "Once I get to the general area I can come back and ask which house has the book. I won't feel anything when I'm gone, but I expect you to keep your hands to yourself."

"Who do you think I am!?" he protested. *Besides, there's fairies flying through here all the time. I couldn't do anything where they might see me and tattle. Personally I think they keep zipping by to try and catch me doing something like that. They keep giggling at me in either case.*

"Just making sure we were clear on that. I am giving you plenty of time to admire me though, so for now let's just leave it at that." Naturally this statement caused a surge of hope which lit up Lysanias' face. "I should not have said that," lamented Amy, closing her eyes again.

*Wait, why shouldn't she have said that? Is she being 'flirty' like Yttrius, and has no intention... Or does she really like me but knows... arrg this is all so confusing!*

She hadn't been gone more than a few minutes when cries of panic and alarm came from the nearby fairies, and two long shadows passed overhead. Lysanias looked up to see two huge creatures, like winged snakes, soaring over as if seeking prey.

*You have got to be kidding me. Mountain spirit, I may need your help.*

But there was no answer, despite him trying several times it seemed he was on his own for this one.

*Really have to practice talking to my spirit. I guess I've just been lucky so far? The problem with being able to do so many things is having enough time in a day to practice them all.* So instead he drew his sword, sticking it nearby and took control of an arrow as he stepped over Amy's body. *I could put her into a ward, she can't resist at the moment. But what if something then happens to me? No one would know and we would both die. Sorry Amy, I just hope your good day today extends to me instead of being because of me. Seeing my ripped apart corpse would make this a bad day, right?*

One of the giant beasts dived down into the area with the fairies, and Lysanias saw flashes of magic to try and drive it off. The other saw the helpless prey just lying there and dived for it.

In the span of time he had, Lysanias noted that the thing was huge. Easily twice as tall as he was, and looked like someone had cast a spell to make a snake grow and then somehow gave it wings. These were bat-like, and rather large to support the weight of such a creature. He noted the head seemed to have a beak instead of a snake's mouth with fangs, and as the creature dived he drew upon his spiritual energy and threw it into his will, letting the arrow go. He doubted he could kill such a beast, but maybe the arrow would at least discourage it from eating either of them.

The beast twisted out of the way, making the stone arrow whistle past it as it dove. But this was at least enough to force it to land nearby instead of simply scooping up the two of them. It landed heavily and Lysanias grabbed the sword up, correctly assuming that if this thing was even remotely snakelike it would strike like a snake too. Fast, with a darting motion to try and bite him. He idly noted the tail seemed to end in a sharp, bony point, and wondered which end he would be defending himself from.

"Leave us alone!" he shouted, hoping to maybe startle it or at the least alert someone nearby they were in trouble.

The beast, rearing back, now cocked its head and looked at him like "are you being serious right now?"

"Wait, can you understand me?"

But this was too complex a question for the beast and it darted forward, going for the more helpless prey on the ground. Lysanias drove it back, catching it on the right wing and putting a respectable gash in it.

"No!" he shouted, hoping this was more understandable.

The beast drew back and seemed to consider, but it was pretty hungry (among other reasons) so it tried again. Again Lysanias took a swipe at it, this time he completely missed and it sank its bony tongue into Amy's abdomen. She didn't cry out or stir at all, but Lysanias raised his blade to try and chop it before it could close its mouth over her.

That's when Don's halberd struck it from the side, obviously thrown like a spear as the dwarf was still some distance away. It got swept off Amy, bowled to the side by the force of the blow.

"Pick on someone yer own size!" shouted Don, fully realizing the irony of this statement.

The winged snake shrugged off the polearm and took to the sky again, hoping for easier prey elsewhere.

"You all right, lad?" Don asked, running over and grabbing up his weapon again.

"Just keep that thing off us if it dives again," he replied, glancing at his ward dispenser and whipping out a healing ward. It only took two and the wound disappeared like it never was. He took another arrow out, scanning the sky.

"Think it left?" Don asked, as Everest charged over to them. His daggers were out and floating, and he too was scanning the sky.

"The other one was wounded, but got away!" he shouted to them. "Everything okay here?"

*“Just great,” growled Lysanias. As once again, I fail to do anything useful. Don saves the day, and without any special powers or magical items of any kind. Just brute strength. Why am I so weak? Why are all the creatures here so huge? Huge worms, huge flying snakes... what the heck is a giant flying snake anyway? How does that happen? Who says, “oh, yes, a giant flying snake. That’s the thing that was missing from the world. Let’s make a whole ton of them!” The Allfather made all creatures, right? Regular giant snakes were probably bad enough, if we even had any in my time. But making them fly, too? That’s just cheating.*

Moments later the excitement died down and Amy opened her eyes again. “Is something wrong?” she asked, seeing that Lysanias was hovering over her, arrow out just in case.

“No, everything’s just fine,” he told her.

There was a pause. “You do know I can tell that you’re lying, right?”

## Heed My Every Order

When: Moments after the attack

Where: Fairy territory

"You saved me?" Amy asked, after she got the full story about the winged snake attack that had just taken place.

"No, Don saved you," Lysanias clarified. "I totally failed to get out my mountain spirit, then completely missed the beast with my arrow. My sword blow failed to discourage it, but Don's maneuver drove it off."

"Don's maneuver, I like that," agreed Don. "That's what we're calling it from now on." He mimed throwing something.

"Throwing a halberd is now Don's maneuver?" Everest asked skeptically. "I'm pretty sure someone before you has had the idea."

"Can you prove it?"

"Of course I can't."

"Then Don's maneuver it is." He stuck his chin out and dared Everest to deny him his due.

"Fine, it's your maneuver. But you have to shout that attack name every time you use it. Any news on your end?" he asked Amy.

"I've found the book. I just need some paper and some magic users to help guide me in transferring it from there to here."

"I'll go get everyone," Everest volunteered, heading back towards the clearing.

"Thought I told you to get out of danger if something happened," Amy chided Lysanias as he handed over his book and ink.

"Yeah? Well, I don't remember... stupid things... that good..." He felt his face getting hot and looked away. *Can I just stab an arrow through my own head? Would that be okay? What am I even saying?*

Amy's expression was somewhat unreadable. "Is that so? I'll write you a note and stick it to myself next time. You know, so you can remember it."

"Fine." *Joke's on you, it would cover part of you up so you wouldn't be as interesting to look at!*

"Ah, here's everyone."

For nearly two hours Amy went back and forth, mentally observing and copying from the book of spells she had found. She would remotely view the book then fill in the page with what she had seen, over and over. The magic users corrected her symbology and asked her to focus on specific parts of the spell, which she did, providing further detail. When it was done those that could cast magic declared it serviceable and Amy relaxed.

During this time Lysanias ran through the meditation exercise the elf had shown him, relaxing and allowing his energy reserves to recharge. He had thrown a lot of power into defending Amy, not that it had helped in the least. But for the moment he wasn't feeling as wiped out, just in case they came back. "When can you cast it?" he asked them.

"I could probably cast it right now," said one of the fairies, and a few others nodded. Others shook their heads, as did Nyasa.

"For all that it does, just let plants walk around, it's pretty high level," she began. "Those of us that can't put energy into our magic will need to study this carefully. Probably all of tomorrow before we even attempt it, to be safe."

"And who's going to be first?" Don asked. "No disrespect to you, Amy, but you got some part of this wrong and it might blow up in the face of whoever tries it first."

"I understand."

"Wait, couldn't you just use your abilities to either tell you if it's complete, or who has the best chance of casting it?" Lysanias asked.

"That's a good idea! Once everyone's studied it I'll ask who has the best chance of casting it safely and that will be that."

"Tomorrow?" Donkey asked.

"At the earliest," Nyasa agreed.

"That gives them plenty of time then." He turned to the travelers and smiled.

"Plenty of time for what?" Everest asked, clearly dreading the answer.

"We're doing you a huge favor here, right?" He put his hands together in front of him as though praying.

"No, we're doing you one by not just smashing-" He stopped, looking at the smile fading from Donkey's face. "That is to say, yes, we wouldn't want any lost oaken lives on our conscience."

The grin returned. "Exactly! So now you're going to do us a favor."

"What is it?" Don asked, also dreading the answer.

"Remember those winged snake things that just attacked?"

"No?" Lysanias tried.

"Yes we do," Don corrected him. "You want them gone, right?"

"Darn right we do. Moved in a few weeks back. From what we've learned about them, usually they stick to cows and, well, people to be honest. Large things, lots of meat on them. But suddenly they've developed a taste for fairies. Are we like candies to them? Between meal snack? We've lost three of our people already and I won't lose another. So you're going to take care of them for us."

"You know where they're nesting?" Everest asked.

"Sure do. We've been watching them. Normally the scout would have alerted us they had left the nest but we had the emergency meeting so she was here instead. That's how they got the drop on us."

*Nest? How can something that huge have a "nest?" I have the sinking feeling before this day is over I'll know the answer to that question.*

"Is it far?"

"Ah, yes, you can't exactly fly over there, can you?"

"I can put a flight spell on them until they return," Nyasa offered.

"Not far at all!" Donkey told them. "I'll go find the scout and you can have it done and be back before dinner. We might even throw a bit of a party to celebrate your mighty victory."

*Or a nice send off to Heaven for those that don't return.*

Donkey flew off and the group got ready, making sure their weapons were at hand and sharp. Amy called for Kappa, who rushed over from playing with the younger fairies. She picked him up and set him on her shoulder. "We're ready."

"You're not going," Don told her with a scowl.

"I think I am," she retorted. "I can help keep you safe. My ability to see the future works just as well in the short term. Telling you how to dodge or strike could be the difference between life and death. Besides, you'll protect me, right?"

"Give Everest a turn, he hasn't had the pleasure yet."

"Just stay back when the fighting starts," he cautioned her.

Lysanias went to call upon the spirit of the dragonfly in hopes the mountain spirit would have an easier time hearing him this time. He was way too self-conscious to do this in front of all the fairies but of course a whole bunch followed him and hid behind trees to see what he was doing. He did his best to ignore them and called for several minutes, just in case these snake things were several minutes away.

"Everyone, this is Lady Bug," said Donkey, introducing the scout. She had short red hair and tons of freckles all over her body. Amy introduced her group, offering the fairy a hand to stand on so she didn't have to hover there.

"You can call me Bug for short. Nice to meet you all!"

"So the four of you?" Nyasa asked, looking the group over. "I suppose that's possible. Hang on." Magical circles spun around the four and vanished, leaving Lysanias feeling exactly the same as he had a moment ago.

"Did it work?" he asked.

"It worked! I'm flying! Magic is real! I believe! I believe in fairies!" squealed the fairy, now hovering again with one knee bent and her hands thrown over her head. She was shaking her hands like she just didn't care, then started spinning in a circle just to show how excited she was to be flying. Everyone looked over her and she stopped.

"What? Oh right, I can already fly. Silly of me." She looked up at them sweetly.

"Just think about moving how you want and you'll move. Try to watch out for the trees," Nyasa suggested. "I'm not responsible for any injuries you take on account of crashing into things."

So the group practiced a bit and then set off, finding that flying with magic was as natural to them as walking had been.

"I've requested the magic until you get back, so even if you touch the ground it should be okay," Nyasa told. "Good luck."

"You aren't coming?" Lysanias asked, the bewilderment in his voice clear that a seemingly experienced spell caster wasn't going to aid them.

"I'm staying to study this spell. These snake things are your job. Believe me, I've done my share of combat duty, thanks."

"More glory for us, eh lad?" Don slapped Lysanias on the back.

"Right," he replied unconvincingly.

Bug led them over the trees and Lysanias had to admit, flying under your own power was pretty fun. He just wished the reason he was flying wasn't to do battle with some weird snake things.

"Hush now, quiet now, they should be right around here," Bug warned them. "The nest is on the ground, maybe they'll be gone and we can set some kind of trap for them?"

They cautiously looked through the tree branches and there was the nest. Lysanias groaned, thinking he should have known. *Why would creatures like this build a nest? Why else? To raise their young.*

Watched over by the two parents, several cute little flying snake creatures tumbled and played in the large nest that had been constructed as if by giant birds. It was fairly large, given the size of the snake creature, and sat on the ground due to weight. It looked like huge branches had been woven together, and he had to admit the structure was fairly impressive. But they were going to have to kill the young ones too? They couldn't even fly, much less defend themselves.

"Wait, what are you feeling?" Amy asked in a whisper. "Sympathy?"

"Why shouldn't I?" he hissed back. "They never told us there were young ones too. I don't want to kill babies, even baby, flying... snake monsters. Okay that sounded better in my head."

"Seems we know why they're suddenly going after fairies though," Don remarked. "Baby food."

"Too soon!" chastised Bug, stamping a foot on air. She crossed her arms and looked away from Don, pouting.

"Sorry."

"So are you out?" Everest asked. "I was counting on the mountain spirit too."

"I don't know. It's different to just drop out of the sky and attack a *mother* and her *children* instead of defending yourself against a creature trying to eat you."

"Weren't they trying to eat me last time?" Amy clarified.

"You know what I mean."

"We can't do catch and release here," Don told him. "They can fly, for one thing. They know where the finger food is- sorry." Bug was about to stamp her foot again, her mouth open in shock. "They'll just fly back no matter where we put them." She gave a "humph."

"I just got the sense that one understood me on some level."

"You want to go down and try to talk them out of eating the fairies, be my guest."

He shook his head. "I'm pretty sure that any of us get near that nest, they won't stop to have a chat."

"You're probably right."

"Let's just get this over with." He readied an arrow, but felt a hand on his arm. He looked over to see Amy looking at him with concern.

"You really feel for them, don't you?"

"They're alive. They have the right to exist. Same as any of us. My entire race was destroyed by a wrathful God I couldn't understand or reason with. Aren't I playing God now, about to destroy them? What gives me the right?"

"Interesting." She pulled away. "I'll support you all from here. If you hear me shouting at you, do what I say!"

*Wait, interesting like, 'oh it's so great you're into nature and don't want to harm these creatures even though they would not hesitate to rip your face off. You're so sensitive and caring and I'm going to visit you tonight and show you just how great nature can be' or interesting like 'this guy needs to grow up and figure the world out before it grinds him up into tiny bits? What an idiot!' And is she spying on my emotions? Aren't there laws against that or something?* He shook his head, this was not the time. *Mountain spirit, we're ready, if you can hear me.*

*This time I hear you clearly, I am coming to your aid.*

The spirit appeared on the ground and began to grow, as the plan was it would try to at least pin one down so they only had to worry about one at a time. Lysanias was counting on the fact that if Everest couldn't see it, hopefully these snake things wouldn't be able to either and could be taken by surprise.

They weren't. The instant the mountain spirit emerged from the trees they turned and hissed, rearing up and ready to defend their nest and their young. To the death, if need be.

"Oh marvelous, they can see it," moaned Lysanias, bringing the arrow up to throw it.

"Even beasts? Why am I the only one who can't?" complained Everest.

The one snake monster lunged forward, intending to "gently persuade" this creature from coming any closer to the nest, which suited the spirit just fine. Lysanias winced and hoped that seeing his spirit was the limit of these creatures, that they could not actually hurt it. It struck out with its tail, landing a solid blow, and Lysanias was relieved he did not feel impaled. Either the rocky skin of the spirit or simply its invulnerability, he was safe.

The spirit went to grab the tail, figuring it didn't care which end it got hold of, just that it did. He couldn't manage it, the tail bounced off too quickly and the snake monster drew back for another blow.

Everest sent his knives down to slash at the other, who dodged out of the way.

Lysanias was up but Amy called "wait" so he froze, waiting for her direction. "Don, you go to the right and make it dodge left. You throw slightly to the left of where it is now!"

"Right lass!" cried Don, diving towards the snake.

"Right!" agreed Lysanias, adjusting his aim. He loosed as Don took a swipe at the creature with his halberd. Both attacks hit their mark, Don hitting the wing which the

creature couldn't get fully out of the way while Lysanias' arrow struck just below the neck.

The first snake once again tried to stab the spirit, who again tried to grab it. It managed this time, taking the snake by the tail and trying to slam it into the ground. The serpent was having none of this though, and simply yanked its tail away. *That's one solid snake, to get away from my spirit like that. Must be pretty strong. Note to self, don't get hit by the snake.*

"Dodge, Don!" shouted Amy, and Don threw himself to the side as the snake lunged for him. He barely managed it, the beak of the beast just grazing him. Don was fairly certain without that arrow in his neck, the snake would have reached him, but that held it back just enough for him to dodge.

"Come up from below, Everest!" Amy shouted to him, and he changed the direction of his knives, swooping them low and letting them rise up. They scraped the beast but scored, slashing upwards and at least causing it a bit more distraction.

Lysanias pulled another arrow, but waited to see what Amy would say.

"Don, from below, Lysanias from straight above!" she cried.

Don swept his halberd in a great arc, trying to come up directly under the beast's jaw, while Lysanias launched his arrow to hit square in the head. Both struck, dazing the creature and it now had an arrow sticking out of its neck and the top of the head.

"Nice shot, keep it up lad!" Don shouted up to him.

The other serpent dodged the spirit's next attack, now on the defensive as the spirit could attack faster than it could.

"Keep going for the head," Amy called. "Everest, to the left!"

Again the knives struck down, and blood was drawn.

*This thing is still up, after all that? What's it made out of?*

The snake was being enraged now, nearly blind with pain it again struck out at Don, who again barely dodged.

"Try again, ya big flying bird snake!"

"Wait until he's in position," Amy cautioned, as Lysanias drew forth a third arrow. "One more blow to the head should do it!"

"Right."

Everest held back as well, waiting until they could all strike at once.

"Now!" shouted Amy, and all three weapons slammed into the snake. Lysanias' arrow from above, the knives from the left and the halberd from the right.

The snake went down.

The other snake gave a loud squawkish roar which might have been quite humorous under different circumstances, but in this context was not. The babies in the nest also went wild, cheeping and squawking and trying to crawl up and over the walls to avenge the brutal murder of their parent. And perhaps try to prevent the brutal murder of their other parent, who even now was launching itself at Don to finish what the other tried in vain to accomplish.

"Dodge down!" Amy told him, and Don tried, trying to keep the halberd between himself and the giant maw, but was still impaled in the leg by the beast.

"Get this bloody thing off me!"

Everest brought a single dagger up and sent it hurling into the eye of the beast, which had to lose its grip on Don or possibly lose an eye. At the same instant, Lysanias had the same idea, sending an arrow hurtling down at it. It chose to let go, but both still struck, Lysanias' arrow striking true while the knife buried itself deep in the jaw of the creature.

Half blind now, enraged and near death, the beast threw itself at them, while Amy screamed a warning. They had been grouped up, having drifted towards Amy because her advice had proven to be good. This now worked against them as they were an easy

target for such a long creature. Everest managed to dodge out of the way but the length of the beast slammed into Amy and Lysanias, driving them into the underbrush below.

*Self, thought I sent you memo not to get hit by the-* Lysanias passed out and knew no more.

When he awoke, he was staring at Nyasa's dark face, looking down at him in concern.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

He took an experimental breath. "Strangely good. What happened?"

"You took a nasty hit, the flying snake crashed into you and I guess you hit the ground pretty hard. Any harder and you might have died. For real. A huge snake monster falling on you will tend to do that. Your friends saved you."

"Are they okay?"

"Amy is recovering nicely, Don's leg I took care of personally, Everest didn't take a scratch."

"Amy?" He sat up, and she was there beside him. "If you need my wards-

"I am a unicorn, you know," she said shortly. "I did just say I took care of Don personally?"

"So?"

"So I can heal with my- never mind."

"I'll be fine, Lysanias," Amy said, looking over at him. "She knows regeneration magic, it's very efficient. That's what she put on us."

"Lysanias, you're okay!" shouted Don, running over to him and throwing his arms around him.

"What, no 'lad?' You must have been worried."

"We were, don't scare us like that! We used all the healing wards you made on you and Amy, but you still didn't wake up. Oh and I used two, you know, bleeding to death from the leg. As one does. We brought you back here and Nyasa healed you the rest of the way."

*Great, once again Don the hero saves the day.* He lay back down. *Unbelievable.*

"You are all right, aren't you?"

He sighed. "I'll be fine. Thanks for healing me. Wait, you aren't part of the guild, are you?"

She flapped her tiny wings and looked back at herself a moment. "Do I look like I would be accepted into a mage's guild? Why do you ask?"

"If you were I would owe you a lot of money for the spell."

She laughed. "You got that right. I'll take it in sugar cubes or carrots. Anyway, I'll keep the spell up a moment longer but you should be fine."

"I am. We won then?"

"Thanks to, well actually we all played a part. Well done us!" Don praised.

"What happened after I got hit?"

"The great beast was thrashing around, you got him in the eye pretty good lad in case you forgot. But there I was, right above the monster and trying to time it just right. I readied my weapon, pointed straight down to finish the beast off. I flew down and speared the thing on my halberd. Heya!" He mimed spearing something. "You should have seen me, lad. Straight through the head of the beast. I stood, triumphant upon its back, blood spraying everywhere, ah it was a tale I'll tell for many years to come. Now there's a picture I wouldn't have minded being taken. Your spirit vanished, and Amy was pretty badly shaken up and trying to crawl towards you."

"You were fading pretty fast," she admitted, sitting up next to him. "I'm glad you're all right."

"We did the only thing we could do. Used your healing wards and got you stabilized. That dispenser of ours really came in handy, we could just grab them right out."

Between the three of us I used them all, so you'll have to make more soon. Then we both carried you back here. Everest stayed to finish off the small ones and get your arrows back. They've really proven themselves lad!"

"I just wish I had."

"You did!" he protested. "You fought the beast to the bitter end. Both of them."

*From a distance. Like a coward.*

"Something else happened after that," Amy told him. "Kappa went and smeared the blood of both beasts on himself. Weirdest thing, I've never seen him act that way before. Like he was drawn to them. Then he was normal again, and has been ever since."

"Hopefully you've never gone around killing stuff, so that's probably the first thing he's ever seen die."

"But to do that? I wonder what it means?"

"I sure don't know. Thanks for saving me." *Again.*

"Every time, lad. Every time. You rest up. Tomorrow afternoon we can maybe get some trees moved and get that war machine moving again."

"We better go see him tonight, make sure he stays put. Wouldn't want to wake up to that blaring noise again."

"Good point, I'll get on that. See you later."

"Yeah, see you."

Lysanias lay back down next to Amy, and looked up at the sky through the windswept branches above him. *Was my almost dying a sign that we made the wrong choice? That I should have thought harder about how to solve this issue without killing those creatures? What, exactly, do you want from me?*

But the trees, and the sky, and anything beyond gave him no answer.

Rooms to Let, Fifty Cents

When: Two weeks later

Where: 4 days out from the remnant factory

Over the course of the next several days a path was created for P05 to move through the fairy/oaken territory without smashing into anything. When they did not respond to the spell, the fairies discovered several sleeping oaken they hadn't known about. It seemed only unintelligent plants were able to be moved, sleeping or not. It was easy enough to create a new path around them, and P05 promised to be careful on the way though. They were tagged by a bright ribbon made by Lysanias so they wouldn't get lost in the shuffle again, and at last the way was completely opened.

During this time Lysanias rebuilt his supply of healing wards, having the bright idea to ask for the help of the dragonfly spirit beforehand. He could chant for a minute then make a ward, back and forth to make about two dozen a night before he fell asleep. This gave him practice both in calling the spirit and making wards, and also slightly boosted their effectiveness, which was no bad thing. He felt he could have done more, but every night before that he spared with Don and Everest, who gave him some floating targets made of stone to try and hit with his arrows. So he was pretty wiped out before dropping off to sleep but felt the preparation was worth it.

Don looked over Nyasa's ragged collection of spellbooks she had found over the years or taken from people she had defeated. He wrote out the spells he knew into them where there was space, and she was happy to let him copy some spells out into Lysanias' book so he could look them over later. There were a lot of useful combat spells, but for celestial schools Don didn't know how to cast, like Mercury. He felt it too risky to try taking them in case he got something wrong, doubly because Nyasa was out moving trees all day and couldn't give him any training in even the basics. Lysanias was a bit disappointed, he wanted to learn all he could from her while he had the chance.

"Don't pester her," Don chided him. "You've got enough on your plate just learning the basics of the sword and your earth arrows. To try and mix combat magic into that as well? Stick to the deflection spell and hitting more accurately. Then you'll know the skill is yours and won't have to rely on magic."

Lysanias had to admit he had a point. Basics first, then enhance. But privately he felt the *ideas* behind the spells were the most valuable part, as he could probably make wards to do many of the things she said she knew how to cast. That had the advantage of not needing to be concentrated on while in use, and he could easily distribute them to others. He felt when he had a proper desk and working area again he might look into trying his hand at making some more varied designs. So he asked Don to at least copy down the names and descriptions of all the spells onto some paper he made and kept separate, just as an "idea chest."

With the path clear, the group said their goodbyes to the fairies who thanked them for being so understanding.

"And for the new magic," Donkey said to Amy. "We'll be able to more easily up-root and clear dying trees to make room for new ones. Plus we might actually be able to space them out a little better, give young saplings a chance."

"Glad I could help, and that was so useful."

The group had smashed through the second barrier of trees without incident, this time with P05 in the rear and keeping them on course with the communication ward. Lysanias stuck one on him near a "speaker grill" and simply held the other, and could hear him talking from many paces away. This meant that if there were more fairies or other creatures in their way the humans could tell the war machine to stop rather than

terrified creatures throwing themselves in its path. And P05 could give course corrections if they started to veer too far left or right.

They were now into a clearing and could see the third barrier of trees, a narrow strip that P05 said would lead directly to the remnant factory. It was getting dark and Lysanias had just finished his daily translation wards for the others, setting them aside for the next day.

He stood and stretched, muscles aching a bit after the workout he had with Don and Everest as usual. Amy came over to him, now that she saw he was done working.

“All done?”

“For tonight. You need to go back?”

She shook her head. “Nope, just wanted to talk. It’s a great sunset tonight, don’t you think?”

They both turned to look at the setting sun, spreading the last rays light among the puffy clouds that floated overhead. They also glinted off a strange structure floating high above, making Lysanias think it was probably one of those “skybourne” cities Xerxes had talked about. It was too big to be an airship, which he had seen occasionally too, hurrying from one end of the sky to another. *Is there really anyone still living in those things? By now wouldn’t they all be cousins or something? That would be weird. What would have happened if we had made floating cities before the flood? Would the storms have been that much worse?*

“It sure is.”

There was a moment of silence. “You work awfully hard, are you okay?”

He barked a laugh. “I’m fine. I think of it as making up for being asleep for so long.”

“Were you always like this?”

He shook his head. “If my parents weren’t dead, they would tell you. I was always looking to get out of doing chores, or studying. Oh, I knew the flood was coming a few years early, but there still didn’t seem to be any great urgency. I thought maybe a year and my father would come get me, and we would start rebuilding. Well, that didn’t happen. I mean the people of the village scurried around getting stuff for Atlantis but seemed resigned to their fates. Wasn’t much they could do. It’s odd, now that I think about it, that the Allfather didn’t block those initial dreams somehow, so we were caught totally by surprise instead. Why let some of us survive? Sorry, I’m rambling.”

“It’s okay. I never had parents, you know? I just woke up like this one day, and there I was. What was it like, having them?”

“Annoying, or so I thought at the time. Now I see they just wanted what was best for me, even if I didn’t know what that was at the time. I miss them, having them to fall back on now that I’m here. I guess that’s another reason I’m working so hard. To maybe show I can, when I put my mind to it. To honor their memory of always trying to get me to study. And the effort they put into saving me. They sacrificed themselves, so I have to make that count for something. But all I can do is survive for now, and that means practice and studying.”

“You’re studying a lot of things.”

“There’s just so much to learn! What I said about surviving? It’s because of how many times one or more of us have almost died since I woke up. I mean the worm attack, and fighting the annunaki, and cave-ins, all of it. That sort of thing didn’t happen when I was a kid.” He considered. “I guess it must have happened, to somebody. I don’t know, life here just seems way harder, more brutal than before.”

“You think your parents were shielding you from some of that?”

He sighed. “Maybe. It’s hard to say. Maybe one day I’ll figure out a method to tell if their spirits are still around, and ask them.”

"I hope you do. I just wanted to say I really admire your dedication, no matter what the reason is. You remind me of myself, learning how to use my abilities. I did it because I was bored, but you do it to keep your friends safe. That's definitely the more noble cause."

"Thanks. But you're to be commended too! You found out you had these abilities and you worked to develop them. Others may have seen them as a curse, or just ignored them because they didn't have any relevance to them as a person. But you sought out new experiences, even if you had to do it in your 'ghost' form."

"I don't know, you really have no idea how boring it was just floating around my pool before I got found. See you in the morning." She walked away, giving a wave without a backwards glance.

*Before you got found? What does she mean by that? She was just out in the open, wasn't she?*

As the group got closer and closer to the remnant factory Lysanias saw more and more evidence of the previous civilization. Rusted out shapes laying long abandoned and metal beams sticking out of the ground that may have formed support structures long ago in history. But again the might of P05 smashed through everything and the group came to a clearing where the factory still stood. It was a vaguely rectangular shape and looked held together more by prayer than sound structural elements. There were large holes through the walls, some which had been repaired with wood, others that were still just open and crumbling. Most of the windows had at least one crack in them, if they were not outright shattered, and Lysanias could see lights flickering to life within. On the roof were shiny panels pointed towards the sun, and these seemed to be the only thing in good repair. Two remnants were striding out to meet them. Amy stepped behind Lysanias a bit, wary of these strange beings coming towards them.

"They are simply coming to greet us," P05 told them. "There is no cause for alarm."

Both were quite human in shape, and the one was painted rather sloppily with a black and white design someone from two thousand years ago would recognize as a tuxedo. The lower section of his right leg had been repaired with wood, and unlike the doctor he had a discernible face. Both their bodies were metal or dirty white ceramic, human in proportion but obviously robots. The other seemed to be painted with cowboy boots, but this was mostly worn off. He gave a whistle as they approached.

"Well I'll be!" he exclaimed. "Would ya look at that? They actually made it. Howdy folks!"

"Greetings sirs, madam," said the other formally. "If I might take your things, I'll bring them up to your rooms?"

"We should introduce ourselves first, partner! Don't you be getting all ahead of yourself, now."

"My apologies sir, madam. I haven't had anyone to serve in so long, I was most eager to begin my duties. This caused me to skip several greeting subroutines. I am B04, it is my pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"And I'm C02, but don't worry I won't silently kill ya or nothing!" He roared with simulated laughter and slapped his knee. When the others didn't react he immediately stopped. "C02, ya get it?"

The group gave him a bunch of blank looks.

"Clearly they do not. That, or your timing chip is faulty."

"I haven't lost a microsecond in one thousand, four hundred, and ninety two years."

"That you know of."

“Or has it been ninety three years?” he asked, looking off into space. “Ah well, what’s a year or two among friends, am I right? We know who you are, of course. P05 radioed ahead and told us all about you nice folks helping him out. Right neighborly of ya! Now let’s see if I’ve got this straight in the old noggin- Don, Everest, Lysanias, and Amy, right? Charmed to meet you all, of course.” He doffed an imaginary hat.

The group of course had no idea how to deal with these two, and were looking to each other for some clue how to begin. Finally Everest stepped up. “That’s right. We’re here to see about getting a smaller body for our friend here?” He pointed up at P05.

“Shucks, we know that. Everybody’s waking up to take care of it even as we stand here. Woowee, and they’re just as pleased as punch to have this much raw material to work with again.”

“I must concur. When P05 contacted us it caused quite a stir. We’ve set everything up, but the process will take some time. We’ll have to break part of him down in order to construct a new body. As you can see, we’re quite low on raw materials at the moment.” He indicated his leg.

“Ah, they don’t care about the technical nitty-gritty. Say, how would you folks like a tour of the place? We’ve fixed up a couple of rooms for y’all. You can freshen up and we can get started!”

“We were unsure of your sleeping arrangement preferences, would you each like your own room? Or we have rooms with double beds if you prefer.”

“We say beds, but that sort of thing didn’t hold up that well.” The robot seemed to be embarrassed. “We’ve done what we could though.”

“I think we should stick together, at least in pairs,” Don suggested. “Unless you would prefer a room to yourself, Amy?”

“No, I’ll stick with Lysanias.”

“Two rooms then.”

“Of course sir.”

“Follow us!”

“If I might take your bags now?” He held his hands out.

“See you later, P05,” Lysanias called up to him.

“Hopefully in my new body. I will see you soon.”

The group handed over their stuff to the butler bot and followed both into the complex. The inside was as run down and dirty as the outside, though they could all hear a great deal of noise from further inside.

“Usually most of us are in power saver mode,” explained the cowboy bot. “Just waiting for someone to come along so we can fulfill our programming. Our solar panels aren’t what they used to be, but hopefully we can make some repairs to ‘em using parts of P05. We’re warming up our equipment now, as you can hear. We’ll have a rooting tooting good time I’ll tell you that much. Turn right here and up the stairs. Ah, maybe not these stairs, there’s another set further on we can take.” These had collapsed some time ago, and there was no climbing them. “Not to worry, the building’s sound enough, we keep it up as we’re able.”

“Our facilities are dreadfully limited at the moment. We are all quite embarrassed about it. I hope you can forgive our lack of complete hospitality.”

“We understand,” Everest assured him, finally getting a word in.

“Most kind of you to say, sir.”

“This will be sir and madam’s room,” said the butler bot, indicating a room they came to. He handed some of the packs over to the other bot.

“And across the way will be your room, partners. Come on, I’ll let you have a quick look-see and get out of your hair.”

“This way, sir, madam.”

Lysanias and Amy went into the room past the hastily constructed door and the butler bot set their bags down. Looking around they saw what was probably a very nice office at one time, but was now converted into a sleeping area. There was a wooden platform strewn with furs serving as a bed, and in the corner of the room sat a large metal structure that Lysanias saw was full of water. An old wooden dresser was against a third wall, and the fourth had a door that was currently closed. The floor was swept but cracking badly, and the ceiling sagged in the middle in a way that would have worried even the most inept of contractors.

“It’s very nice,” Amy said, walking over to the tub. “Did you do this for me?”

“We hoped to accommodate you best we could. We heard from P05 you were an aquatic creature so we connected this to the plumbing system. I hope it will serve your needs during your stay here.”

“It’ll be fine. Thank you.”

“Not at all. Now, I’ll send in G01 and she can see to your further needs. We’ll replace the water after that, if you wish to use it to return to your home. I will await you out in the hall.”

*Send in who and what further needs do we have?*

The bot turned and left, closing the door behind him. The two stood and looked at each other.

“That was-” Amy started to say, but almost immediately was a knock on the door. It opened and a female version of a robot came in. It was clothed in basically rags that may once have been a fine oriental robe, and the face was painted completely white. She was covering herself with one arm, and held a basket woven of thin wood in the other. She went down on her knees and bowed ritually to them. Her forehead touched the floor, and there she remained.

“Greetings, honored guests,” she said formally. “I am G01. Please forgive my appearance. I was unsure if you would want me in modesty mode, given my current garment hardly covers me at all in any case. I know how some humans can be touchy about that subject, and I am rather well endowed. I must perform my function but I do not wish to give offense.”

Lysanias of course had no idea what she was talking about. “I’m sorry,” he said after a moment when she hadn’t moved. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Your pardon, honored guests, what I mean to say is in modesty mode I will attempt to reveal as little of my body as possible to you. If you wish modesty mode disabled, I will wash you without concern for this.”

“I walk around with a naked naiad I think it’ll be- did you say wash me?”

“That is correct, honored guest. If your companion does not mind, of course. I do not wish to disrupt any relationship or social mores that exist between you two.”

Amy grinned. “Oh, no, please, go right ahead. This will be quite educational I’m sure.”

“Wait, what? No, this really isn’t necessary,” Lysanias protested.

“But it is, I must serve,” said the bot. “I am turning off modesty mode, at your request.” She smoothly got up and removed her ragged garment, dropping it to the floor beside her. Her body was metallic and ceramic, just as with the others, but styled to be more female in appearance. She too showed signs of wear and while she wasn’t as supernaturally beautiful as Amy was, clothed and in low light she would have resembled a very attractive woman. At least as far as her body was concerned. Any hair she may

have had was long rotted away, leaving her skull smooth and bald. Her face wasn't quite something out of nightmare but it was close. She advanced on Lysanias.

"If the honored guest would like to disrobe, I can begin the washing procedure."

"That really isn't- I can wash myself."

"Then I would have no function," she protested. "Please allow me to serve as I was constructed."

"Yes, let her fulfill her function," Amy told him, trying to stifle a laugh. "Because this I have to see."

When You Lose Control and You've Got No Soul

When: After the scrubbing

Where: About to begin the tour

After the most through scrubbing in his life, Lysanias watched as Kappa and then Amy had their turns. She unbound her hair then giggled and squeaked as she was washed by the robot. Apparently she was either extremely ticklish or was just putting on a show for Lysanias who she insisted stay.

*I suppose she didn't want to be alone with the robot? She said it was because "fair was fair" whatever that meant.*

The robot then tackled her hair, soaping it up and rinsing it until it shone more than usual. After she helped Amy out of the tub she then pulled one of her hands off and started blowing hot air up and down the length of her to dry her off. She combed the hair out using a plastic comb (not that Lysanias knew it was plastic) and finally put it into an intricate braid.

"How do I look?" Amy asked, posing for him.

Lysanias knew what she meant but rather than just say it, he went over to the window. Touching it he easily changed the other side to a polished silver and stepped back to let her see herself. "Beautiful, as you can see," he replied, meaning it.

She stepped up, looking herself over. "I've never actually seen myself this clearly," she breathed. "Just reflections in the water. That's really what I look like?"

"It really is."

"Wow." She posed, turning this way and that to look herself over. She glanced over at the robot and then pulled her hair down. "Wonder how I would look bald?"

"I'm sure you could make it work. Why though, your hair is amazing. I suppose it would be easier to swim?"

"True."

"Is there any other need my honored guests?" asked G01. "I can provide a variety of other services."

"Oh, like what?" Amy asked, intrigued. "I ask for Lysanias, I'm not interested of course."

"Maybe we should go on that tour?" Lysanias hastily suggested. "We don't want to keep Don and Everest waiting."

"Poo, you're no fun. I guess that's all for now."

"Very good. I will of course be available at any time should you require me." She bowed and backed out of the room again.

Stepping out into the hall they were met by both robots again, who oriented on Lysanias.

"If you don't mind sir, could we enquire as to how you changed that glass into a mirror? G01 did not observe the usual effects of magic use."

*Great, maybe I shouldn't have done that? These robots seem perfectly friendly but maybe letting them know I can do things like that right off the bat was a mistake. No help for it now, though.* "I can turn things into other things, at least small stuff. Reshape things too."

"You mean, like, rearranging the molecular structure of a substance to be another substance?" asked the other.

"I'm sorry, I have no idea what you just said. I could turn that leg into metal, if that's what you're asking. But it would become quite thin."

"So mass is retained? Interesting. Sir, with your permission, after the tour perhaps you could help us with a few things? Despite the resources to be gained by dismantling P05's current body there are still some things we lack an abundance of."

"It wears me out, but I'm happy to do what I can."

“Why that’s right neighborly of you, partner.”

The door across the way opened, and Don stuck his head out. “Thought we heard you. Ready for the tour?”

“We sure are.”

“Thought we heard some... odd noises earlier,” Everest put in with a smirk. “Everything go okay in there?”

“She’s just ticklish that’s all.”

“Is she lad?” Don asked with a wink.

*Okay, maybe I don’t know what that means yet.*

The robots led them on a tour of the place, showing them various labs where components could be fabricated, and the assembly line where the various body parts were made.

“We’ll soon have this place humming again,” said C02.

“How have you kept all this going?” Everest asked.

“Hasn’t been easy. We have repair units of course but even they can’t work with no raw material. Once we strip enough of P05 to make him a new body we’ll prioritize what needs fixing around here and get to it! No more wooden replacement parts, at least for a while. Woo doggy!”

“Can we see him?” Don asked.

“Sure thing. He’s out back, obviously won’t fit in here. Come on.”

They were led through the halls and out the back, to where P05 was being hooked up to various machines and several robots were busy cutting parts off his body.

“They’re not hurting you, are they?” Lysanias asked him.

“I do appreciate your concern, but I do not have pain receptors like you do. My core functions are untouched.”

“What’s this?” Everest asked, pointing to the cables that led inside him.

“That is what his consciousness will flow through, into his new body,” B04 explained. “Several units are hooking these cables up to key points within his mainframe.”

“I am told I have a good looking mainframe,” P05 remarked.

“I’m sure you do,” Don remarked.

“They have had many queries for my mainframe,” he went on. “But given my long deactivation I have been unable to answer them.”

“We have had many input/output requests. You need not trouble yourself.”

Another robot wandered over to the group, this one looking exactly like B04. “Is there any service I might provide you?” it asked.

“I am providing these people service at the moment,” B04 told it. “You should concentrate on your assigned task.”

“That does not override my primary function of service.”

“Yes, yes, I know, go on now. Out of here. I’m serving them now. You’ll get your turn later.”

“Very well.” It walked off.

“So very sorry about that, sirs, madam,” B04 told them. “You must forgive us, we just haven’t had anyone to serve in so long. Some of us might be a little too eager at this point.”

“That’s fine,” allowed Everest. “Will you start construction of the new body soon? I’d love to watch the procedure.”

“Yes, very soon, sir. We can provide you a safe vantage point from which to observe the work. And the rest of you? What service can we provide to you?”

“Don’t be shy now, ya’hear?”

“Actually, watching the process might be interesting,” Don agreed. “I’m something of an expert in metalworking myself. I wouldn’t mind what methods you use.”

The other two nodded their heads and the group was taken back inside to see where the construction would take place.

Back in the labs Lysanias was given small amounts of certain materials they were low on and was asked to make more, which he did after analyzing them. He didn't have names for things like ceramics or fiber optic cable, but his ability could create them once he felt them out. All told, it took several days for the new body to take shape, and as it did Lysanias couldn't help but notice something.

"Isn't it quite short?" he asked. "Compared to the rest of you, I mean?"

"P05 wanted it that way, sir," answered B06, the remnant currently watching over the group. "It wanted the smallest and least imposing body we could manufacture. That means the "young maid" model, making his designation YM01, as we have no other "young maid" models in service at the moment."

"I see," he half lied. Lysanias had learned that this facility had specialized in making "servitor robots" before the moon, basically units that did household tasks or helped around farms. The "B" line stood for "butler" while the "C" was for cowboy. Lysanias didn't understand what "geisha" meant and none of his friends, even Everest, could explain it to him. This explained their need to serve, and why units were always pestering him to make sure his needs were being met. Their guides kept changing, apparently so everyone could have a turn serving them, which was fine as they seemed to share information between themselves. So what one of them told one remnant soon all of them would know.

All this "are you being served" stuff didn't bother Lysanias, but it seemed to increasingly bother Amy, who started shouting at them by the third day to leave her alone. The first night had been rather awkward, as Lysanias wasn't quite sure how to bring up the sleeping arrangements. That, and a "B" unit stood just by the door (in the room) in case they "needed anything in the night." Amy finally shooed him out, making him stand on the other side of the door, saying she was uncomfortable with it staring at her like that.

"Regular people staring is fine," she admitted to Lysanias when they were alone again. "I know what they're thinking. And it's part of nature, and completely natural. But these remnants, they don't have a life force. They don't have a presence I can sense. They don't want from me what, say, you want from me. They're creepy."

"I'm sorry you feel that way. They seem a little strange to me, but nearly everything in this world does. They really bother you?"

"It was fine with just the two of them, but how many have come up to us today and asked what they can do for us? It doesn't seem right."

"It's just their culture or something, I guess? We are the first people they've seen in some time."

"So they say. Maybe because they scared everyone else off with their incessant need to serve."

"I think they're just lonely."

"Maybe. Something to figure out in the morning. I'm going to bed."

"Oh. About that..." He glanced at the furs.

"I'm sleeping in the water," she clarified.

"Of course! That's probably for the best. See you in the morning."

"See you." She slipped into the water and lay down, bubbles trickling from her nose until her air was gone.

*I'll just sleep over here. Alone. As I should. I suppose I'm not really good enough for someone like her anyway. And we did just meet, but the others keep making these jokes like there should be more between us. Or am I just not understanding their cultural cues and it doesn't mean anything? I'm so confused.*

All through the third day remnant after remnant approached Amy, trying to find some need of hers to fulfill. Time after time she rebuked them, saying she would not enslave another creature because she knew what that was like, thank you very much.

*She must be thinking about her inability to be gone from her home pond for more than a few days.*

"It's not really enslavement," Everest tried to explain. "They were programmed to serve."

"The fact that they were made to be enslaved makes it that much worse."

"There's nothing we can really do about that. Just put up with it until we're ready to leave."

"How about I just go home? I'll see you all tomorrow. Come on Kappa." She stalked off, a remnant calling after her that if she needed something, it would be more than happy to get it. Finally she turned the corner and was gone, presumably up to her room to use the tub to get home.

"Wonder if you might do something for me?" Don asked him, a moment after she left.

"What's that?"

"You're sleeping with her, right?"

"What?" His face got red. "Not, you know, together."

"Really? How str- I mean she's still in the same room with you, asleep? She doesn't go to another room?"

"No, why?"

"She's not in your bed but she's in the same- never mind. The point is you've been practicing viewing the past of someone or something by touching them, right?"

"Sure, but I can't get very far back."

"That's all right. The next time she's asleep, I want you to look into her past. See where she really goes when she goes 'home.' Something doesn't add up about her and I want to know what it is."

"What do you mean?"

"All this nonsense about slavery, and 'knowing what it's like.' Her hand gesture, which I think is a chain, by the way. Remember how she talked about one? Not discussing certain subjects? That wizard she mentioned and then never brought up again? It all adds up. Just to be safe, take a peek will you?"

"I can try."

"Good lad!"

It was now the evening of the fourth day and the body was ready. Amy had come back, despite being pestered again, and said she could stand it as this should be the last day they needed to be here. Wires trailed from P05 to YM01, and everything was double checked to make sure nothing would go wrong. Lysanias had made several key parts of the body and some of the fiber optic cable connecting the two, so he was especially nervous because if it didn't work it might be his fault. Switches were thrown, information flowed, and the figure before them opened her eyes.

"Run a full diagnostic," commanded the "C" unit that was overseeing the procedure. Lysanias had noticed they spoke differently among themselves, basically falling out of "character" when not interacting with a human.

"Processing." She continued to rattle off various checks and saying there were all at "100%" but it was all meaningless to Lysanias. Her limbs moved, her eyes blinked, even her fingers wiggled. It seemed everything was in order as she finally decided "Final result, all checks passed."

"Excellent. Your designation is now YM01. Welcome."

"Thank you."

The wires and cables were removed, and finally YM01 sat up.

"So it worked?" asked Everest. "I'm shocked."

"There was an 86% chance you would say something of that nature," YM01 told him. "So I am not surprised at your skepticism. My friends, I must give you my thanks

and wish you well on your further journey.” She hopped down, then looked up at Lysanias. “Strange, to see you from so low. It will take some getting used to.”

*What an odd twist. I went to sleep and woke up looking down at everyone. I didn't get a choice, it just happened. This person woke up and decided it would rather look up at everyone.*

“Is it just me, or are you speaking differently?” Don asked.

“It turned out several of my personality subroutines were made inaccessible in my old body, possibly as a last ditch attempt to make me conform to the purpose I was constructed for. They have been enabled, so I am once again able to speak to you normally. Also, it seems this body's processors are more efficient, possibly due to advances made while I was dormant. This also improves my cognitive function, allowing me to choose the best sentence structure I can.”

“Oh.” He looked to see if anyone else had gotten any of that, and naturally none had. “So you're feeling all right, then?”

“I am. Thank you for putting up with my tremendous bulk before.” She went into a series of stretches. “This smaller form will take some adjustment, but I believe in the long run it will truly be the best fit for me.”

“Glad we could help.”

“You'll stay the night, of course?” the “C” unit asked them. “Would be a shame to leave so late, ain't that right?”

“I suppose,” allowed Don. “In the morning we can decide what our next step is going to be. We do have this ‘gaping maw’ to look out for, after all.”

“Any news on that front?” asked Everest, looking at Amy. “Any more dreams, odd feelings, notes from the universe about where to go next?”

“I'll concentrate on it tonight,” she promised. “Lysanias, you try too. Maybe we can get some more direction, or at least a little clarity about what our next step is.”

“Sure.”

Don caught his eye and he gave a small nod.

That night Lysanias pretended to get comfortable as Amy slipped underwater again to go to sleep. He had no idea how long it took her to get to sleep, or how deeply she slept, so he waited what he thought was a decent time and quietly got up. He went through the door into the bathroom, then waited a moment and came out again, heart pounding. He peeked over the edge of the metal tub and she hadn't stirred. She was laying on her back, fully stretched out and submerged in the tub. He watched her, pale moonlight falling across her perfect form, to see if she would sense him there and open her eyes. A tense moment later and he breathed a sigh of relief, she was probably asleep. Her breathing, as far as he could tell, was deep and even.

*She's so beautiful. And so still like this, like a statue someone tumbled into water and it just sank down to the bottom. But I guess I better get started.* He hesitantly lifted a hand because something was nagging him. That feeling he had just before Yttrius had popped out had returned, like he was forgetting something important. Then he remembered that something- Kappa. He looked up and there the little guy was, head cocked and looking at him. He was sitting on the edge of the tub, and Lysanias idly wondered if it slept at all.

“Ah,” he said softly. “Look, Don thinks she's in some kind of trouble, okay? I just want to touch her and take a look into her past. When she's not with us, where does she go? Just back were we found her? Or is there someplace else she goes? We need to know. Is that okay with you?”

The tiny creature considered, then pointedly turned around, obviously choosing to ignore Lysanias for the moment.

“Thank you.”

Slowly, as to not disturb the water, he slid his hand in and touched her on the shoulder with a fingertip. The amount he touched wasn't important, only that he be

touching the thing he was trying to “read.” Naturally it was somewhat of a struggle not to touch more of her, or in a different place, but Kappa had not raised an alarm so he was going to behave.

*Really wish I could have called upon the dragonfly spirit, but the remnant at the door would want to know where I was going, and I can't exactly do it in here without waking her up. I just hope this works.*

He closed his eyes, concentrating. It took him three tries, but he did manage to “follow” her back in time to when she last went back home. He expected to see the pond, and sunshine, and tell Don he was just being silly.

What he saw was a dark place, obviously not a glade of sunshine and happiness. In his mind's eye he watched as she sadly swam over to the edge of the water and hauled herself out. There she seemed to activate something and wait, sitting on the edge with her legs in the water. A few moments later a figure appeared, holding up a ball of light. She looked up at him and said something. Lysanias reeled in shock, breaking the connection and pulling his hand hastily out of the water.

He had just seen the wizard, master Airlinis.

“Slow down, lad,” an exasperated Don pleaded. Lysanias had burst into the room rather suddenly, knocking past the remnant standing by the door and started babbling about seeing some wizard. “Who did you see?”

“That wizard, Airlines or whatever his name is. What are we going to do?”

“Let me get the whole story from the top. You say Kappa allowed you to touch your latest girlfriend after explaining you wanted to help.”

Lysanias let that slide. “Yes. It was looking at me and I thought, maybe if I just tell it what I want it’ll be okay. If not, well, it couldn’t exactly tell on me, now could it? But it seemed to come to a decision and let me. I touched her and concentrated and saw the last time she went back home.”

“Which was not the pond we saw earlier?” Everest asked.

“That’s right. I got the feeling it was somewhere underground. It was dark, anyway.”

“Of course it would be dark, she only goes home at night.”

“This was too dark for that.”

“And she got out of the water and simply seemed to sadly summon someone?”

“That’s right. She was just sitting there on the edge and suddenly there was the wizard.”

“What happened next?”

“I, uh, jerked my hand so the connection was broken and immediately came over here.”

The pair looked at him like fish had just started growing out of his ears. “That doesn’t really tell us anything, does it lad?”

“I know, I’m sorry, I panicked. I’ve never done any of this sort of thing before, you know? Going behind people’s backs, checking out their secret pasts. It’s not right! I shouldn’t even have done it.”

“It’s right when you’re trying to help someone,” Everest protested.

“How does that make sense? How can you do a bad thing now and justify saying it might cause a good thing later?”

“Now is really not the time to go into it. You’re going to have to go back there and try again. And this time, when you see the wizard, stay there and see what he does!”

“I can’t. Not tonight. I’m too shaken up. I’m sorry. I don’t think I could concentrate on it.”

Don sighed, the man did look shaken and out of sorts. His eyes were darting around and his hands had a faint tremor. He was pretty sure the guy’s breathing was somewhat erratic too, so it was obvious he was no use to them at the moment. “You can’t do what you can’t do. Just calm down and go back to bed, try to get some sleep. Give it a few days and she’ll no doubt go home again. Then the next night you can try it right away. It should be easier that way anyway, right?”

“I guess. Yeah, that’s what I’ll do. Just give it a few days. What’s the harm? Don, what do you think it means? We have to help her!”

“Calm down I said! You don’t know she’s in any danger, and she doesn’t know you saw him. For now just try and forget you saw him and when we have more information we’ll make a plan then. If she’s really reporting to him she has been all along so nothing has changed there. For all we know they’re just lovers and it has nothing to do with us.”

“It is your own fault,” Everest added. “If you had stayed and seen the whole scene play out we wouldn’t have to wait.”

“It’s not his fault, it’s like he said he’s never done this sort of thing before.”

“And we have? I don’t think any of us are really functioning in our comfort zones here!”

“Excuse me sirs, I heard raised voices, is everything all right?” asked the “B” unit that had barged into the room like it owned the place, which it sort of did.

“Everything’s fine. Our companion here just had a bad dream. We were just talking him down.”

“Did he?” the unit asked, looking at Lysanias. “I didn’t think he was asleep at all, much less asleep long enough to experience an unpleasant stage five episode. Could I get sir anything? Perhaps sir would like a massage from one of our “G” units to help him relax after his episode?”

“I’m fine. I’m just going back to bed. I’ll see you all in the morning.”

He pushed past the remnant and came face to face with Kappa.

“How long have you been there?” he angrily asked.

Kappa of course had no answer for him, so he stalked across the hall and carefully slipped back inside his room. As luck would have it, Amy was still asleep so he carefully lowered himself to the bed and stared at the ceiling. *What’s a massage anyway? Stupid Everest, like he could have done any better. Okay, maybe it surprised me but he didn’t have to go saying-*

He felt a small energy source near his head and his eyes flashed open. Kappa was standing not inches from his head, looking down at him.

“What?”

He pointed at the sleeping form of Amy.

“Yes, I’ll help her. I will. I can’t do any more tonight, okay?” he hissed. “You’re just going to have to wait.”

The creature sat cross legged and stared at him, and Lysanias rolled over, away from those accusing eyes. *But wait, it seems pretty insistent. Maybe she is in some kind of danger?*

The next morning Amy was happily splashing about the tub with Kappa as Lysanias sat up and rubbed his eyes.

“Good morning!” she called excitedly. She came over to the edge and rested her arms on the side so only her head was visible. “Did you dream of anything? I think I did.”

“I had a dream all right, but I don’t think it’s relevant.” *Another failure to toss onto the pile it seems. I can’t even dream properly, something I should be doing every night regardless.*

“Tell me about it, they’re often confused and nonsensical at first.”

“Fine,” he sighed. “A man, or it could have been a woman it was hard to tell, entered a general store in a city somewhere. This person was crouched down, almost seemed to be sneaking about, as though the shopkeeper’s door opening didn’t alert them to someone coming into the shop. This person crept through and grabbed an iron kettle as though it weighed nothing, then went behind the woman who was sitting at a table near the fireplace. They put this kettle over the woman’s head, and she seemed fine with it, continuing to sit there as if nothing was wrong. Then they picked up a basket, and I remember the shopkeeper well. He was dressed in a faded red shirt with a darker vest and there was an enormous wheel of cheese on the counter. He was leaning against the counter sort of staring off into space, and not at the woman with the iron kettle over her head. The basket went over the shopkeeper’s head, and the shopkeeper was robbed blind. Then the man or woman calmly transacted business with the shopkeeper and walked out.”

“Was the stuff still on their heads?”

“It was. Neither made any move to take it off the entire time.”

“Weird. I... don’t know what that means, actually.”

“I told you.” *Can’t do anything right.*

"Mine was a little more clear. A man was on trial for murder, but there was a great shadow that hung over the proceedings. Suddenly a glowing man appeared, and banished the shadow, allowing the man to get away."

"You're right, that's far more understandable. A glowing man? That would be interesting to see."

"Remember, it may not be literal. It could just mean the man brought some candles because the trial ran into the night." She stood, letting the water roll off her. "Come dry my hair and help me put it up, then we can go talk to the others about it over breakfast."

*At least that much I can do.*

After a bit of breakfast the other two admitted either dream could mean just about anything, from a sickness that was blinding people in some town out there to a master thief in the area. The other could be just new evidence being brought to a trial or someone with a light spell blinding the people there and letting the accused escape.

"Don't feel too bad," Don told him. "This dreaming stuff is just a hint anyway. No matter what abilities you might have, you still have to solve your own problems."

"I suppose."

"Meanwhile, let's talk about our next move, find our 'maid,' and say goodbye."

"Both dreams pointed to a town, maybe we should- yes?" Everest looked up and saw the butler remnant looming over the group.

"Did I hear you gentleman saying you would be leaving?" he asked politely.

"We've done as promised," Don told him. "P05 now has a smaller body and a new life. You've got lots of raw material to work with. What further need is there for us to stay?"

"If you leave we will again have no one to serve! Sirs, madam, please rethink your decision and perhaps consider that this factory can become your new home? We could construct permanent rooms for you, whatever you would need."

"No, we need to be on our way," Don insisted.

"We would serve you tirelessly. Has our service not been sufficient? Have we given offence in some way?"

"We just have to get on with our lives, that's all. Lysanias, why don't you go collect your stuff? We should be on our way as quickly as possible, now that I think about it. Nearest town is probably days away through the forest, we'll need to get started right away."

*He's tensing up. He deliberately looked towards his weapons. Is he expecting trouble over this?* "Sure thing Don," he tried to say casually, getting up. "I'll just head over to my room then, shall I?" He headed for the door, expecting to be stopped, but the remnant just stood there.

"Is there anything we can do to change your mind?" it was asking.

"I don't think so."

Lysanias opened the door and took a step into the hallway, then froze. He was looking down the corridor and spotted at least six remnants standing there, blocking the way. He slowly turned his head, looking in the other direction, and yes, it was blocked off too. *Maybe I'm just seeing things. I'll just look back the other way and-* He did. *They're still there.* "Uh, Don? Maybe you should come see this?"

"What's the trouble?" he asked, coming over. "Oh. Hey, what's the meaning of this?" he called to the remnant in the room.

"We really must insist you stay," he simply stated. "We exist to serve, and to do that we must have someone to serve. Right now that is you four."

"We're being kept here against our will?" Amy expressed angrily. She threw her hands up. "Even here I can't get away from someone making my decisions for me. Just great."

*What does she mean by that?*

"We would prefer if you simply changed your minds and decided to stay on your own. Until that time the passageway will be guarded. And we know of your capabilities so we have taken further precautions. If you would like to join me at the window, a small demonstration has been scheduled."

Curious, Everest was the first to join the remnant at the window, but the others slowly congregated. Outside, the giant form of P05 started spinning in a circle and whipping the retractable stunner arms about.

"You put P05 back?" Lysanias asked. *How did they get it to cooperate?*

"No, that unit is loyal to you, and does not share our directive to serve. Another consciousness was placed into the empty vessel."

"So we get out of here and that chases us down, is that the idea?"

"That is correct. Naturally we would not recommend this, you could be crushed by accident or otherwise hurt. If you died, that means less people we have to serve."

"Why don't you just leave here, go find people willing to be served?" Don demanded. "You can all come with us, we'll take you to the nearest town where there will be plenty of people. I'm sure you could find work there."

"Normally, this would be the logical option," the remnant agreed. "Many units have done just that. We remain behind to maintain the factory and construct further units. We have taken some raw material that does not impair the function of the dreadnaught to construct units. These units will seek out others to serve. Meanwhile we must fulfill our primary function, that is to serve."

*By the Allfather, these things are alive. They want to propagate themselves, and they want to have a purpose for their existence. It just so happens their purpose was given to them, they didn't seek it out like we do. We gave them the means to do both just by showing up. I was the one who wanted to help P05 out, so it turns out this whole thing is my fault. I can't even do good without screwing it up? Wait, what's it doing out there?*

The war machine, seeming satisfied with the tests it had performed, suddenly turned and raced away from the factory at top speed. As Lysanias watched it smashed through the nearest trees and started crunching through the forest like it had someplace to be.

"Er, is it leaving?" Lysanias asked.

"Leaving? You have not left it should have nothing to pursue. If you are trying to trick me in some way- it's gone." The remnant stared out the window, obviously trying to process this betrayal.

"Yes, it's gone," Don growled. "Hence the question of why it's leaving."

"I- I don't know."

"You better figure it out, and fast!"

"Whole thing didn't work out too well for you, did it?" Amy asked with a smirk.

"This is most irregular. I am querying other units now. Wait, YM01 says it has information. It is coming up the stairs now."

"Come on," Don snarled, heading towards the doorway. "We need to see what this is all about."

Out in the hall the small form of YM01 pushed past the massed remnants, all somewhat confused about what was going on.

"What has happened?" demanded the butler remnant. "Did you do something to the dreadnaught?"

"Are your logic circuits faulty?" she retorted. "You put one of your servitor unit intelligence matrices into my old form?"

"We needed a sufficient sentinel to keep our guests here. Answer my question- did you do something?"

"I didn't need to. Can't you see it? Your programming is breaking down after so long. You put a faulty matrices into my already faulty mainframe? Is it any wonder it

went berserk?”

“The potential for error was acceptable, I don’t understand-”

“What’s it done, what’s happened?” demanded Don.

“What do these units keep going about?” YM01 answered, pointing back down the hall. “Serving someone. My guess is it went off to find someone to serve, now that it had the perfect body to do that in.”

“You mean it’s just going to roll up to a town, demand to be given orders, and start following any random fool that shouts at it?” Everest asked, distraught.

“What else could it be looking for? A fuzzy bunny to pet? I don’t think so.”

“You’re guessing, you don’t know,” the butler sputtered.

“It ran off, who cares why? We have to stop it before it reaches someplace with people. If some warlord or something gets hold of it, imagine the damage it could do!”

*Imagine the damage it could do by accident. There could be more fairies or oaken or dryads in the way. It’s not going to care and stop like we did. It will just roll through until it finds a human to “serve.” What if it just comes across Joe Random Farmer who decides he might like his own kingdom?*

“Are they really that faulty?” Everest asked.

“Look around. They denied me access to their wireless network so I couldn’t get information about their plans. They turned me away every time I wanted to come see you. Then they suddenly all come up here and block the hallway. I can guess why that is, too. Is that logical behavior from your point of view? My circuits are new, and my matrix was deactivated for all these years. That kept me sane and I think they recognized that. That’s why they kept me apart from them, I wasn’t following their programming.”

“Our programming is simply that we must serve! It’s all we wish to do.”

“You see! That’s the only thing it has left. Give it up.”

“I- I cannot.”

“You’re going to have to. We need to get after that thing and shut it down.”

“Can we do that?” Lysanias asked.

“One way or another, yes. But it’s fast, I should know. We’ll never catch it.”

“Yes we will,” Lysanias countered. “I can make my mountain spirit really tall. It can just carry us and take one step for every thirty of ours. Maybe more!”

“I don’t know anything about that. But if that’s true we should leave right away.”

“How about it?” Don asked the butler. “Are you going to force us to remain here while that war machine wreaks havoc out there, or let us go to stop it before it goes that far?”

The remnant seemed to be caught in a loop, slightly turning then turning back. “I cannot allow others to come to harm because of my actions. But I must serve. Others cannot come to harm. I must serve.”

“Go get your stuff, we’re leaving,” Don said to Lysanias.

“Right.” He hastily dashed across the hall, grabbing up his armor and belting it on, as well as his sword and other sundries he had unpacked while they had been there. Amy helped, buckling the armor on and picking up anything scattered about the room. Shoving everything into his pack he took one last look around. *I am going to miss the hot water from the tub. But I suppose I could heat the water up that Amy uses to travel home once she’s done with it. And now I’ve reminded myself about last night. Can’t think about it though.*

“Got everything?”

“I think so. Ready Kappa?” The green creature gave a salute and ran to be picked up by Amy. “Then let’s go.”

They went back across the hall where Don and Everest were finishing their own packing. The butler remnant was still looping, and Lysanias grabbed up the halberd as Don finished slipping his shield into the holding straps on his pack. “Are we going through them?” he asked, pointing it in the direction of the massed remnants.

"They might still try to stop us, unlike this one here they may be less busted."

"So how-"

"Watch and learn, my boy!" He grabbed the weapon and strode over to the window, which he smashed apart. "Send your spirit out there, make him grow, and we can step into his palm."

*He's got the itty bitty babies, in his hands. He's got the- Oh no, please don't get that sung stuck in my head. "Great idea!" Spirit, please hear me.*

He had to call twice but the spirit answered, appearing on the ground and starting to grow. Meanwhile the remnant came out of it, turning towards them all looking out the window.

"I still can't see the darn thing, are you sure it's there?" Everest nervously asked.

"It's there, I'll go first," Don assured him.

"I don't perceive anything there either, if it makes you feel any better," YM01 told him.

"Sure does," he answered sarcastically. "I can't see it, maybe I'm just a robot in disguise?"

"You can't leave!" protested the butler.

"Made up your mind, have you?" Don sneered. "News for you buddy, you can't keep us here. Thanks for the hospitality and everything, but we're stepping out."

He jumped out of the window.

Swing Low Sweet Chariot

When: Moments later

Where: Chasing the remnant war machine

The others jumped out of the window into the waiting hands of the earth spirit, though Everest needed some prodding. Once out the window he could no longer see Don and just frantically stood there calling his name until Don yanked him out the window.

"I'm floating," he remarked, stamping a foot down on the spirit's hand.

"You're in the hand of the earth spirit. Can you see me again?" Don asked.

"I can see you now."

Lysanias, Amy, and YM01 followed, then the spirit took off towards the knocked over trees that showed the path of the war machine. It held the group close to the chest and covered them with its other hand, taking off at a run. The war machine didn't have much of a head start but every moment could count.

"I'm- that is to say my old body- isn't functioning at peak efficiency," YM01 informed them. "So the speed it can move at is restricted."

"And we'll have a clearer path," Don mused, rubbing his beard. "That should help."

"What am I even standing on? This is so weird!" Everest complained.

"You can my spirit, right?" Lysanias asked Amy.

"I can see it just fine."

"How do we stop it though?" asked Don. "Even as big as this, Lysanias' spirit could only barely hold it back the last time."

"My- it's sensors will not be able to detect our approach. If that holds true we can use one of the emergency entrances to, somewhat logically, gain entrance. If we are quick enough we can disable my old body before any local settlements are reached."

"Are there any of those?" Amy asked.

"Sadly, yes. I believe we are heading in a direction that will intersect the nearest. Naturally the factory kept records to make sure they knew where to send any newly constructed units."

"Trust a machine to take the shortest past," Everest grumbled.

"Indeed. That programming has not become faulty. It is only the service level algorithms that seem to have been damaged. Or perhaps they were faulty at the start."

"How do you mean?" Everest asked.

"Given what I have observed, it may be the case the original programmers gave the servitude remnants a 'counter' of sorts. Every day they served, that counter stayed at zero. Every day they did not serve the counter incremented. As the number climbed higher the remnant became more and more uncomfortable and wanted more and more desperately to serve."

"I have that! Every day I'm away from home I feel worse and worse," Amy exclaimed.

"An interesting parallel."

"But these remnants haven't served anyone in years. Decades! Hundreds of years!" exclaimed Lysanias.

"Their level of inquired servitude, plus the immediate action of the new P05 confirms my theory. Some units even tried serving me when I was first activated, but as I was a remnant myself this didn't work, and soon the offers stopped."

"For us people that have no idea what you're talking about," Don said, "basically they weren't meant to last this long and have gone crazy because of it?"

"This is a fair summary. The original programmers would not have taken the end of the world into account, and may not have set a maximum value for this theoretical 'uncomfort number.' If they could find someone that would stay and be served perhaps

they would go back to normal. It was probably a safety feature at first, to prevent service robots from getting the idea they should not serve.”

“Disgusting!” Amy spat.

“Something to worry about later,” chided Don. “How close are we?”

Lysanias closed his eyes and concentrated. “I can still see it, but it doesn’t look like we’re gaining very fast.”

“Super.”

A tense few hours passed, with the spirit of the mountain grown to enormous size and the war machine getting a little closer, a little closer. Finally it seemed within reach, and the spirit, knowing it couldn’t stop the machine just by jumping on it, jumped onto it. There it held on and waited for further instructions.

“We need to get inside!” shouted YM01, pointing to the side of the machine. The mountain spirit was holding onto the top of the machine with one hand, so now the full force of wind struck the group and made talking difficult.

*Yes, we know that. How?*

The spirit lowered them, coming to rest next to the door. YM01 pressed some buttons on a keypad that was there, but then banged its fist when the door didn’t open. “Locked, the code was changed. We need to get through!”

*Great, this stuff weighs a lot I bet. And there’s no “lock” I can simply move aside, it looks like the entire door will have to move.*

Amy was staring at the door, looking it up and down then suddenly tapped it. “Here!” she shouted. “Can you get through here?” She brought her fingers together and held them up. “This thick!”

“I’ll try!” *Does she see some mechanism we can use to open the door?* He set a hand against the door and concentrated, having analyzed the material while on the road with P05 before. Energy poured out of him as he “cut away” a ribbon thin slice of the material in a round shape. At least it was supposed to be round, he didn’t manage the whole circle. *I can’t do that many more times, this stuff is even harder to work with than rock!* “Can we pry the rest out?” he called. Everest shoved his knife in and started levering it out, finally managing to bend the metal back enough for Lysanias to shove an arrow in and bend it out more. He didn’t want to have to fix Everest’s knife later, after all. “Now what?”

Amy grabbed the arrow and shoved it into the hole, feeling around inside and then bracing it. She heaved, and the others helped her by pulling or pushing as they were able and something inside the door moved. “That should do it!”

YM01 gave the door a shove and it opened to a narrow hallway. “Come on, this way.”

The group followed it inside, but as soon as they stepped off the enormous hand of the mountain spirit, they became visible to new P05.

“Query: How have you breached my outer defenses?” rang through the inside of the war machine. “What we know of teleportation magic means it should have been rendered nullified by my current velocity.”

“It’s even talking like you used to,” remarked Everest. “Interesting.”

“Just ignore it. All my inner defenses were removed long ago.” The group followed it deeper into the tight corridors and saw that most of the inner doors had been removed, probably by the remnants who were stripping it for parts. “Never seen things from this angle before. Interesting.”

“What exactly are we heading towards?” asked Don.

“There are two failsafes within my body. I’m hoping Amy can use the first. If it comes to the second- aarg!” YM01 clutched its head, seeming in pain.

“Are you okay?” Everest asked, he was closest having followed YM01 in first.

“It’s trying to hack my systems. Turn me into a drone to stop you. We have to hurry.”

*What's hack? Could one remnant control the actions of another?*

"Will you be okay?"

"I'm fighting at the moment. Come on, we're almost there." The passageway led to a control panel, and YM01 flipped a handle and tossed aside the front part. "There, you see that?" It pointed and there was a keypad mounted on the inside. "Amy, can you come up... here? I'm hopeful you can simply... use... your power to figure out what the code is. Punch it... in here and all the mainframe will be cut... off from the rest of the system. We can pilot it back to the... factory manually and this time I'm going to...to...to... watch them slice it apart."

"I can probably do it, but you're still under attack, aren't you? It would take me at least ten minutes to do."

"Ten...Ten...Ten minutes? I won't hold out that long. Then we have to use the second option. Come with.... me." Again the group followed him deeper into the machine's body, this time climbing up into the frame. There was an unassuming box welded to the wall and secured with bolts. "Lysanias, can you manage these bolts? Turn them into... something smooth so they.... pop... pop out."

"I think so, they're pretty small." He climbed up next to YM01 and touched each one in turn. They were not armored and so easily came out when Lysanias was done and grabbed them. The cover fell off the box, revealing an unassuming lever. "Now go, get out of... of... here. I'll give you thirty seconds then... just go."

"Wait, what is this lever?"

"Final solution for... rouge... units. Throw the lever, containment for... power source drops. Explosion. Power source low, but explosion still big. Have spirit cover you."

"Wait, it has to be triggered manually? There must be another way!"

"Last ditch effort. Had to be... manual so it couldn't be... blocked. Only us here. Unless one of you wants to volunteer? Has... has... to be me. Go. Losing battle, more time you waste the... more I might... can't fight back... forever... go."

"Come on lad, there's no time." Don dragged Lysanias down. "It... she... knows the cost."

"There must be something!"

"I don't like it any better than you do. YM01, I'll hope to see you in Heaven one day."

"Do I... have... a soul?"

"You do as far as I'm concerned. Come on lad!" He dragged Lysanias and the others followed.

"Thank you," YM01 called out after them. "For everything."

"No!!!!"

The spirit gathered the group up and jumped off the back of the war machine. It put both hands over the group, protecting them as much as it could as ten seconds later there was an earth shattering explosion that knocked trees over and sent flaming metal raining down on the area. Finally the smoke cleared and the spirit lifted a hand to let the others see what had happened. Trees were flattened and burning, and there was a huge hole in the ground where the war machine had been.

*This is my fault.*

"Come on lad, don't freeze up on me now," Don chided. "Look, there's a huge ring of fire we can't let spread. The spirit can smother flames while you and I use the water spell to douse them."

"I'll move earth to smother them too. Let me off here, I'll go this way. You go that way. We'll meet at the other end of the blast area."

*My fault. Animals. Fairies. Trees. Anything in the area was just destroyed. And for what? Such a waste, was supposed to be used for making new life. Now YM01 is dead.*

*Didn't even get to have a real name. Brought her here to die. Didn't get to do anything she wanted to do. My fault.*

"Snap out of it lad. We've got work to do."

"Okay."

For several hours the group put out fires in a huge circle around the crater caused by the exploding war machine. The pressure wave had smashed trees down, and sent debris flying far out past the area of the explosion. Lysanias moved methodically, mechanically, casting his elemental creation spell again and again. His mind was going over and over the seconds that had passed, and with each iteration he felt worse because the answer was obvious. Obvious now, anyway. He knew now what he should have done. It was so easy, so simple.

He hated himself and wanted to die.

But the feeling got worse when they spotted the remains of some kind of encampment. Rough tents now ripped to shreds and the remains of people of some kind sent Lysanias to his knees, weeping.

"Not your fault lad," Don tried to tell him, putting a hand on his shoulder. Lysanias knocked it away.

"Not my fault? Not my fault? Of course it is you idiot! Do you know how we could have solved this? Do you? It's right here!" He ripped a ward out of the dispenser and waved it in front of Don's face. "This. Just this!"

"I thought you couldn't put something the size of the war machine—"

"Not that, stupid! YM01. I could have just popped her into the ward, let Amy work, and then brought her out again when the code had been entered." He tried to throw it but the paper was fairly thin and simply fluttered to the ground. "But no. I let her pull the lever, didn't I? Blow herself up. Blow these poor fools up. Who knows how many I killed? Because stupid Lysanias had to go and do the noble thing. 'Oh, help the machine follow its dream, Lysanias. Yeah, nothing will go wrong with that, Lysanias.' I'm such a fool. I should have been destroyed, along with the other progenitors. Go ahead!" He got up and spun, raising his arms and face to the sky. "I'm right here, *Father*. Strike me down. You destroyed the entire planet just to get rid of us. One little man should be a snap of the fingers for You. Finish the job. Well? I'm waiting!"

He went reeling from a mighty blow from Don and sprawled to the ground. "Don't you *dare!*" he snarled, enraged. "Is that how you're going to honor her sacrifice?"

"What else do I have to give but my own life? Answer me that, if you're so smart, Don. How do I atone for these people? They were simply living their lives, and now, without warning, because of *me*- they're gone. Just like that. Because I wasn't fast enough. Because I wasn't smart enough. Because I wasn't *good enough*."

"I didn't suggest it either, and I knew you had them."

"Only difference is, I'm one of the Allfather's *original creations*. Yeah, right after angels we came along, did you know that? It was Allfather, my parents, me."

"So that makes you better than me? Because I'm just a stupid dwarf?"

"I should be! I should be better than this. Better than all of you. But no, I screw up everything. I think about why Amy doesn't sleep in my bed. I think about how you always seem to save me. How I can never understand what people are saying despite being able to understand them talking. Stupid, petty stuff, stuff that doesn't even matter. Not really."

"Of course it matters. To you. You think we all don't have our hang-ups? I'm worried about having enough money to grow old on. That maybe one day Everest will decide he's tired of me and I'll never see him again. That one day, a thousand years from now you'll be alive and rich and powerful in ways I can't even imagine now. You can just touch something and reshape it. Or turn it into gold. You met someone that could see

the future and all that, and picked up the basics. You've been out less than three months, and look at what you can already do. What else will you learn? And I'll be dead, and forgotten."

Lysanias snorted. "Dead and in Heaven, more likely. I doubt I'll be welcome there now any more than I would have been dying with my parents in the flood. If I'm not alive I shudder to think what will happen to me at this point."

"So don't be so quick to call upon the Allfather's wrath to strike you down."

"Besides, I'm terrible at everything I can do. I'm weak, I'm small-

"Lad, we're all weak and small. Let this be a lesson to you." He pointed to the torn up area. "Any of us can be walking along one minute and the next we're standing somewhere to be judged. These people were all 'wonder what to have for lunch' one second and 'hey, what's all this light and angel singing all of a sudden.' You think that couldn't happen to you? To me? Because it could. You have to do all that you can in the time you have. Because that's all you can do. Now get up, help me put out more fires, and recriminate yourself later. Maybe you screwed up this time, maybe you didn't. Learn from it. Make wards to make people immune to explosions so this doesn't happen again. You're the one with all the abilities, so you have to keep track of them. You let YM01 solve your problem this time- let her be the last one that needs to."

Don turned and cast, dumping more water on the nearby trees and walked away. Lysanias rubbed his jaw and got up on his knees. *What do You want from me? Why did those innocents have to die? Am I being punished, for not dying before? Have You cursed me? So that everything I touch turns out wrong?*

But Lysanias had no real faith, having lost it as he lost his parents when they sealed the cave with him in it. No angel came to offer him words of comfort. No beam of light shone down upon him to give him comfort that there was a higher purpose. A greater purpose to all of the experiences he had thus far had. Wiping his eyes he got up and followed Don to help keep the fire from spreading too much.

Somewhat exhausted the group met up after having gone around the circle to do what they could. The giant form of the mountain spirit had stomped, smothered, and thrown burning wood aside to keep it contained. Everest had moved a pile of dirt from fire to fire, smothering it. Amy assisted him, telling him the best place to put it and pointing out hot spots that might have become fires if the right breeze touched them. The group was once again dirty, hungry, and without a plan.

"We found some remains over there," Don told the others. "We should bury them before we move on."

"There were people out here?" Amy gasped, hands flying over her mouth. "Oh no."

"Looked more like satyrs to me than humans, but it's hard to say."

Lysanias started to ask what they were, but decided against it. He couldn't spare the effort, but Don saw it anyway.

"Part humans, part goat. Came from demonic stock, like we did."

"Oh."

"Is something wrong?" Amy asked him. "You seem really depressed."

"You tell them," he told Don. "I'm not up to it." He walked away from the group. *I don't think we'll need you for the moment, spirit. Thank you for your help today.*

The spirit bowed and was gone. *Remember that you are the mountain. Tall. Proud. Unbending. I wonder.*

So Don told them about the ward, and how it probably could have been used to secure YM01 long enough to crack the code.

“Why didn’t she know the code?” Amy asked. “I mean she was that thing, right? Did she just forget? I wish it didn’t take so long to get an answer out of the universe. I could have saved those people...”

“From what I’ve read of old texts, the code probably wasn’t known to her as a security measure,” Everest explained.

“A what?”

“Those were last resort things she said, right? Probably set up when they were made so that if they went rouge, they could be stopped somehow. But you wouldn’t want the codes to disable your war machine to fall into enemy hands. If one could be disabled, that very thing could happen. From what I understand, the code would have been transformed using some kind of math, and the result of that was stored in the remnant. Then when someone punched a code in the same math was done and if the numbers matched, boom! Uh, okay maybe not boom. Too soon?” The others glared at him. “Anyway, so she didn’t know the code any better than we did. She just had the number the code would produce. Useless, in this case.”

“Know it all,” Don chided him.

“Not everything. For instance, what are we going to do now?”

Everyone waited for someone else to speak up first.

Blowing Like a Breeze

When: The next morning

Where: Camp just inside the blast zone

The group had taken the rest of the afternoon to bury the remains of the encampment that had been destroyed, and said a few prayers over them or apologies in the case of Lysanias. As the day wore on he felt increasingly and somewhat irrationally angry at these satyrs for being here. *What were they doing way out here? And why does there seem to be so much awful smelling drink still intact? There must be barrels of the stuff.*

With the bodies buried and the group exhausted they camped in the explosion area, figuring they may as well not let the flat ground go to waste. Before sundown Amy came over to Lysanias.

"I know it's a huge pain, but do you think you can get the portal to my home set up?"

"Sure," he wearily replied. "No trouble at all." He got up and started rummaging around in his pack. "I'll understand, you know, if you don't come back."

"Of course I'm coming back. Hey, are you going to be okay?" she asked, putting a hand on his back.

"I don't know." He shook his head. "Thousands of years ago my creator destroyed His entire people. Did He feel even a tenth the remorse I feel for these strangers? Then after that, billions died when the chaos moon arrived. Allfather let that happen, for all I know set it up to happen that way. I know the moon feels nothing, hard to hold it accountable. In another thousand years this place may be a sprawling city and none will even know what happened here today. Those that died would be dead anyway, so honestly what's the point?"

"Of existing? I'm just a water spirit that floats around her pool all day. You're asking the wrong person."

That got a quiet laugh out of him. "I guess you're right." Finding his book he pulled out the contain ward that had the metal box in it and held it before him. "Release." The box dropped out and the ward burned up. "Just a second while I fill it with water."

"You saved it?" She clapped her hands together. "That was so thoughtful!"

*More like lazy. I just didn't want to have to make it again, or have them use it as raw material. She must not have seen me store it away.*

He filled it with water and she lay down, joined by Kappa, and both vanished.

*I should apologize to Don for shouting at him. I was angry at myself, that's no reason to take it out on him. He was right in more than one way. This can't be allowed to happen again. I need to track down and destroy any more of those war machines that exist in the world today. P05, you have my word- someday I'll have torn all of the rest apart so they can't do any more harm.*

The next morning dawned cloudy but with no further plans made. Lysanias hadn't felt like talking the night before, simply staring into the fire they got started. He didn't know how to bring up the fact he shouldn't have been so hard on Don, after all none of this was his fault. The longer he sat in silence the harder it was, which just made him feel worse. Neither pressed him and after making the translation wards for the next day, and one to put the box in when morning came, he lay faced away from them and tried to get some sleep.

Not long after sunrise Amy and Kappa stepped out of the box, squeezing her hair. "Can you dry my hair out again?" she asked, turning her back to him.

The rising sun hadn't improved Lysanias' mood all that much but he couldn't exactly refuse her. He stepped up and took her hair in his hands, about to use his abilities

to force the water out of it as he had done so many times before. But this time he froze, staring at it.

*I have to start thinking ahead, or at least get better at recognizing opportunities. Why do I need wait to take a peek into her past when she's just given me permission to touch her? I don't need to wait until tonight, I can do it right now!*

Excited, he concentrated on seeing what she had done the night before, and only had to make three attempts before he got back far enough and was seeing a vision of her summoning the wizard. This time he didn't pull away, and tried to pay careful attention to any details that might be relevant. She was obviously in a deep cave, the ceiling was low and there were stalactites all over. The wizard appeared and she seemed to be making some kind of report to him, making Lysanias wish this vision also included sound. He seemed deep in thought and she stood, then seemed to be pleading with him for something. He struck her, sending her reeling back into the pond with a splash, then pointed at her and angrily said something. A flash of light and he was gone.

"Hey, Lysanias, you fall asleep back there?"

"What? Oh, no, uh..." *Come on brain, don't fail me now.* "I was just thinking about how soft your hair was. Do you think that's just because of being a naiad or because you're in the water so much? Or were you just lucky?"

She laughed. "You're in a weird mood today, aren't you?"

*How can she laugh like that? The wizard struck her, yelled at her for something. Is he threatening her? It didn't seem like she was doing this to please him, because he didn't look pleased. But she isn't asking for our help, either. Is he the chain she spoke of her dream? Is there some spell on her that she can't ask for our help? I think a few questions to the universe are in order.* "I guess. I'll dry your hair now, sorry." *I guess everyone has their share of troubles, not just me. Of course she isn't responsible for killing a bunch of people, is she? Nope, just me. I'm so lucky.*

With her hair dry and up and breakfast eaten, Don finally brought up the issue of what to do next.

"I had some ideas about that," Lysanias told him. "But if you can give me a few minutes I thought I might ask the universe a few things, make sure I'm heading in the right direction."

"Better than stumbling about in the dark. Take all the time you need lad."

"Thanks. There's plenty of wood around, let's light the fire again so I can call the dragonfly spirit for help first." *This is one time I don't want to screw up.*

"I can help," Amy offered. "We could both ask the same question and compare answers."

*Uh, no, I'm asking about you.* "Actually I should get used to just doing it on my own. You won't be around forever, right?"

"I guess. May as well do my own questions for today, huh?"

After calling the spirit he got comfortable and cleared his mind, sending his awareness out into the world. *Is Amy under some kind of compulsion cast by the wizard I saw in my vision? It took him two tries, having to rephrase the question into Does the wizard Americut have some kind of hold over Amy that forces her to do his bidding?*

He got back: Yes.

His eyes popped open and he nodded and stretched. "I know where we have to go next."

"That's great lad! Where?"

His eyes darted to Amy. *Careful now. She can tell if you're lying and if she suspects I know this wizard has a hold on her she may have to tell him, complicating her rescue. What I say next has to be the absolute truth. Maybe not the whole truth, but not a lie either.* "Our dreams have pointed to towns, right? Glowing men and shopkeepers

with baskets over their heads. We've come pretty far east, I say we keep going that way. The wizards guild did offer to introduce me to some alchemists, I was thinking of at least going to talk to them. See if they can give me any pointers in what I can already do, or any training in stuff I can't. I do seem to use what they called 'alchemy' a lot."

"Changing things into other things or reshaping them altogether does seem like one of the most useful things you could learn," agreed Everest.

"Isn't it? And maybe they have some exotic materials they've collected I could study, or different applications of the ability that have come about over the years."

"They may know of others like you, or know about people with different abilities you could learn from," mused Don, rubbing his beard. "Plus I could do with a drink and a soft bed again. So what's the plan? Head to the guild headquarters, talk to the alchemists? Meanwhile the three of us check the city out, look for anything matching the descriptions you gave us of murderers on trial, glowing people, or blind shopkeepers?"

"Exactly!" *While you're out looking around I can maybe bring my concerns to a wizard, see how to break Americut's hold over Amy and get her actual story.*

"Sounds good to me, lad. Amy, Everest? Any objections?" Both shook their heads. "Sounds like we have our plan then. Let's pick up the camp and be on our way."

"Actually," said Amy, "how exactly do we know where the place is we're heading towards? We were just following the remnant before, but now we're sort of in the middle of nowhere, right?"

"From what the wizard's guild representative told us, the only real danger is going too far east, and having to backtrack. There are towns all along the coast so once we reach one, we should be able to just follow the road to any others. Apparently the land east of here juts out like this." He traced a design in the dirt, showing a coast that crept northwest, then suddenly reversed direction and went east again before proceeding to swing around to the northwest again. "We see mountains in the distance we know we need to head further south to get to the coastal towns here." He stabbed a finger in the lower part of the map.

"Oh, so that's where we're headed. Always good to know, if we get separated or something."

*And now her innocent question doesn't seem so innocent, knowing what I now know. Will she report to Americut that we're heading to a coastal town?*

The group got moving, Lysanias turning down Everest's idea of "riding" his mountain spirit again.

"I don't want to step on any wildlife or trees," he explained. "It was fine before because the war machine cleared the way. But now we have to be careful again. I won't crush some poor rabbit with an invisible foot they can't see to get away from."

*Plus I want some more time to practice stuff, and that means nights out here.*

They got started towards the sun, and as soon as Lysanias was sure no one would say anything for a moment he focused his thoughts into Don's brain.

*Don, if you can hear me don't react. I'm sending you my thoughts. Just look over to the right if you're getting this. He looked off to the right. Okay. I looked into her past and she was arguing with the wizard when she went back last night. I don't think she's doing this voluntarily. When we get to the guild building I'll ask what we should do about her. Meanwhile, on the way I'll try to ask more questions about the nature of his hold over her.*

He nodded and continued walking.

If the group had stayed that first night near the graveyard they might have seen the ghostly form rising from one of the graves and looking around angrily. The gravesite was undisturbed, the specter having simply passed through the dirt as if it wasn't there. The form was vague, having what could be goat's legs and horns, but hovered over the ground without touching it. It almost seemed to blur and change as it hung there, almost

as if it couldn't decide on what form to take. If it noticed this malleability it showed no sign. Finally the risen creature stopped turning, oriented as though seeing something distant. A single word disturbed the quiet stillness of the gravesite, uttered low and as if from a chorus of voices and not just one. "*Revenge.*" Then it began to drift after the group as though borne on the winds.

That night they fell back into the same pattern, with Lysanias and Don sparing with the sword for a bit, then target practice with Everest floating rocks around for him to aim at. He made a few wards, and as it was getting dark sat and asked the universe about Amy. Without the spirit's help he didn't get many answers, and tried to keep his questions yes or no to keep things as simple as possible. As the days went by he got a vague idea Americut had threatened her with something to insure her cooperation, and had used magic to keep her from telling them about it. He didn't know *why* she was along, but when he did her hair every few days it was the same pattern. She reported to him and he left. She then sadly swam about her cave and then went to sleep.

Finally the group came to a road, and Lysanias made a new looking glass and sat in the palm of the spirit's hand to try and see where each led. He concluded the road leading more south was the larger of the two towns, and so the group headed that way. They met several people on the way who assured them that yes, the way they were going would lead them to Fareborough and from there they could ask where the guild hall was.

And finally they stood at the gates of the town, surrounded by a high stone wall and flanked by soldiers in decent looking armor.

"Now this is a town," Don told them, peering through the portal to the streets and cities beyond. "You going to be okay, lad?"

"What?" He hadn't really processed what Don was saying, he was too busy looking at the goings on beyond the gate. He could only see a short way past the thickness of the wall but could already tell this place was quite different than any he had been before. At least since he had woken up, as this place seemed more like home to him than anyplace he had yet seen.

"Can you handle it?" Don repeated. "I know the first village we went to brought back some unpleasant memories so I want you to take your time in this one."

He shook his head. "I'll be-"

"Hey baby," said the nearest guard, walking over to Amy and looking her up and down appreciably. "Why don't you ditch these losers and tonight I'll show you what a real man is." He ran his fingers through one of her tails and she smiled up at him.

*Should I say something? Draw my sword? What's the right thing to do in this situation?*

But he shouldn't have worried. "I would," Amy told him. "But then I might let slip to your wife that you lost the money you keep behind the loose brick in the fireplace playing cards with your buddies last night. I wonder how cross she would be after that?"

The man jerked his hand and took a step back, putting it instead on the hilt of his sword. "How do you know about that?"

"Oh, I know all kinds of things," she said sweetly. "Want me to tell your future? It involves a lot of metal pointed in your direction if you touch me again."

"Leave her alone," called the guard on the other side of the gate. "Go on, head inside. But you might want to cover up while you're here if you don't want every man, boy, and possibly woman in the city after you. We don't see many of your kind around here."

"I'll think about it."

He shrugged, sighed wistfully, and went back to staring straight ahead.

"Will there be anything else?" Don asked him, stepping up beside the guard.

"No, move along," he said bitterly, moving back into place.

“Come on.”

“Man, fair time brings all sorts, doesn’t it?” the guard asked the other.

The group entered the city and Lysanias looked around him, trying to adjust to the noise and smell. Houses here seemed constructed to a much higher standard than the last town he was in, and many more people were moving about the streets on errands only they could know. There also seemed to be more diversity here, with the occasional dark skinned elf, half man half horse creature Lysanias couldn’t believe he was seeing, or even giant turtles walking about the streets as they all stood and stared. There were four of them, each with a different colored headband and weapon.

“Probably a mercenary group of some kind,” Don decided as they went on their way. “Perhaps we should cover you up a little, if you don’t mind?” Nearly every eye was being drawn to Amy and people not watching where they were going started colliding.

“It’s fine either way. Having everyone staring at me will probably get a little old.” However, she didn’t sound displeased with the notion.

“Tell you what. Everest, why not go with her and find someplace to get some clothing? We’ll head to the wizard’s place and see about meeting these alchemists.”

“Meet up back here?”

“That sounds good.”

“Wait,” Lysanias cautioned. He got out two talking wards and handed one to Everest. “So we can communicate if we need to.” He stuck his to the outside of his sword sheath, and Everest stuck his to the side of his pack.

“Good thinking. Actually, we’ll probably take less time so we’ll find an inn as well. We’ll give you the name and you can just come find us there.”

“Prices here will probably be crazy,” grumped Don. “But see what you can do.”

“Of course. See you later.”

The four waved goodbye to each other and Don headed for the center of town where they could see some taller buildings off in the distance. “That’ll be them no doubt,” he told Lysanias. They ducked and weaved through the traffic, asking for directions when the tower wasn’t in sight and finally made it to the place. Lysanias saw people in all sorts of odd clothes, masks, painted faces, and glittery outfits. He of course had no idea if this was the norm around here and tried to keep with Don as best he could.

*At the very least I can follow his halberd.*

Standing before the tower Don turned a critical eye to the architecture here and seemed upset about the decent job they had done. Lysanias got the feeling he seemed to think that only a dwarven craftsman would reliably work stone in the needed way.

“Looks like they refurbished an old world building for this,” he remarked, looking up at the tower that rose above them. “Stonework on the corners is a little shoddy, of course, but they’ve done a fairly good job making use of the old structure. Come on, doors should be around here someplace.”

The doors opened automatically as they got near and cooler air washed over them as they entered. The place seemed quite opulent, with plush carpets and fine tapestries everywhere. Off to the right was a waiting area not unlike the doctor’s office from before, but this one had several people sitting in it. One person with a head swelled to what Lysanias hoped was double the normal size, while another clutched a small cage with a speck of light darting about inside it. Don pointed and the two headed to the left where a man in a fine robe was looking up and beckoning them forward.

“Welcome to the mage’s guild chapter house of Fareborough,” he said cheerfully. “How can we help you today?”

Don shoved Lysanias forward as he was a bit short to see over the counter.

“Oh, uh, I’m here to see the alchimints. Alchamants. The alchemists. I’m here to see them,” he blurted.

"Didn't quite get that," the man admitted. "Have you backfired a spell that has slurred your speech? I have a pad and pen here if that would be easier." He held a pad of paper up.

"He's fine, just a bit nervous. We were invited by a wizard named Tanner," Don reminded him.

"Right. Sorry. We were invited by a guildmaster to come and speak to the alchemists you have employed here. Three of them. I'm one. I mean I'm not one of the three, I'm a fourth one. I don't know their names. My name is Lysanias." He clamped his mouth shut before he spouted any more nonsense.

The man looked at him like *are you sure you didn't backfire something, or maybe have too much to drink last night?* "I don't know anything about alchemists, can you wait here a second?"

"Of course."

The man got up and disappeared through a door that was behind him, and the two stood and waited somewhat uncomfortably.

"Lad, you really have to learn how to talk to people."

"I know, I know. I'm just not used to it. I never really met anyone new before the flood. It's harder than you think!"

"Is it? Never had any trouble. Just imagine you're hiding behind your beard and peeking over it to talk to someone."

He started snorting and trying not to laugh, imagining a tiny man peaking over a beard the size of a bush.

They didn't have to wait long as the man returned, looking fairly perplexed. "Apparently, we have a basement," he announced with a shrug. "Who knew? I've never sent anyone down there so I never knew it existed. Anyway, I can get you access right away. I just need a few things from you," and reached for something behind the desk.

"Oh no," moaned Don.

"What, what is it?" Lysanias asked.

"It's probably *filled out forms*. In triplicate, no doubt."

The man smiled. "Oh no, it's much worse than that."

Without No Seams Nor Needle Work

When: No time has passed

Where: Mage's Guild reception area

The man's smile when he had said "It's much worse than that" set Lysanias' mind aw whirl with possibilities. What exactly was "paperwork?" Why did Don dread it so? Why was it needed "in triplicate?" What was the man reaching for behind the desk? A needle, to extract blood? Would he have to be blinded so he didn't accidentally see any guild secrets? What could be worse than that?

"Oh, I forgot to ask," the man went on, straightening up again. "You are magic users, right?"

"We can both cast spells, if that's what you're asking," Don answered gruffly, answering the question without exactly giving the standard answer.

"Excellent, that makes this much easier." He reached into the other side of the desk and pulled out two thin, rectangular pieces of metal with a hole in the corner and a chain put through them. "These will be your access passes. I'm going to put spell symbol into them, and you can cast a spell into that. Can be any old spell, even a cantrip if you want. The systems here just need a sample of your magic to allow you access to certain floors. Easy enough, right?"

"Do what?" Lysanias asked, looking to Don.

"I'll go first, lad. Nothing to it, you'll see."

The man put the first card down in front of him on the desk and cast, circles of magic compressing until they seemed to have been burned into the card. This took about a minute, but the man seemed pleased and nodded to himself. "If you would be so kind?" he asked Don, dangling it down so Don could see it. He cast, the magical energies from the simple water making spell being sucked into the card. "Excellent, and now you sir." He repeated the casting and gestured for Lysanias to go ahead.

*I get it. This is a spell that basically allows magic users to make wards! What a neat thing!*

He cast the same spell, being sure to target the symbol, not the area above the symbol and drench it with water. Once again the magic was sucked in, and sensing the area as he picked it up he felt there was indeed magic now being stored in the card.

"See, nothing to it!" said the man. "Now, please keep these cards with you and turn them in when you leave. You can use the elevator which is there," he pointed, "or the stairs right next to it. There will be a panel next to any door, simply hold the card close to it and the door will unlock. This gives you access to the upper two floors... and I suppose the basement, but like I said I didn't even know we had one so give it a try." His voice took on a bored tone, like he was reciting something from memory. "Second floor is a trading area and our public access spell library. Spells grade one through three can be found there, at standard guild prices. Or if you would like-"

"Wait, what grade?" Don demanded to know suspiciously.

"Grade one through three."

"That rat bastard! He was lying through his teeth!" Don exploded, banging the front of the desk with a fist.

"What?" asked Lysanias.

"You remember 'master' Airlinis? The whole translation spell thing?"

"Yeah? We wanted translation magic for Yttrius before I made the ward to do the same thing. What about it?"

"You remember how he said she wouldn't be able to buy that spell because she wasn't a member?"

"He did say that."

"But translation is grade three, he said so himself. Right?" He looked to Everest.

"That's right."

"It is grade three, isn't it?" he asked the agent.

"As far as I recall, yes."

"So she could have, according to this man. He was lying right to our faces!"

"He was lying," Lysanias realized. "I wonder why?"

"More profit for him, I suppose? But no, he would have just paid the fee and then we would have paid him. It would have worked out to be no profit at all. Very strange."

"If I may continue?" the man politely asked.

"Go ahead."

"Thank you. Where was I? Ah yes," he went back to reciting his standard memorized speech. "To request a specific spell of a higher grade, up to five, you can enter the formula into the exchange system along with a spell of the same grade you wish to trade for it. You'll have to check back every so often to see if the trade happened, but it could be worth it. People are always checking in there so there's a fairly quick turn around for most common spells. There's a small fee for the service, of course."

"Small. Of course," Don agreed.

"The third floor is a general lab area. Beginners and non-guild members are free to get advice about spells they're developing, would like to know if they can develop, or test a spell they've created in a safe environment. We don't want promising wizards blowing themselves up, now do we?" He laughed. "Above that you would have to be a guild member to access. Would either of you like to join the guild?"

"How much?"

"The fee is twenty suns to get your gold card, and a small fee of eight suns a year after that."

Don looked like he was choking on a fish, his mouth open but no sounds coming out.

The man behind the counter sighed. "That is a not uncommon reaction to our policy. I take it membership is not in your immediate future?"

*Let's see, I think they once told me a full printed book was worth one sun, right? And I remember seeing that "printing press" at the mayor's office. So that's twenty books which I would have to assume took a fairly long time to produce one at a time. Still not sure if that's really reasonable or not.*

"What are the benefits?" asked Lysanias. "Apart from going to the upper floors, I mean."

"Oh, there's plenty!" he assured them. "You can get access to the full library, where all our spells are kept. Of course you would still have to pay standard guild prices if you wanted to buy any spells."

"Naturally," Don agreed dryly.

"And you get to vote in guild policy elections."

Lysanias waited. "That's it?"

"There was something else... What was it? Oh, you have to be a member to set up a shop! That was it!"

*You mean that empty building Americut was ignoring while he was sunning himself? Got it. Wait, if you have to be a guild member to set up a shop, how do you make the money to pay for the membership if you don't have a shop to make money with? I'm missing something.*

"So basically we get the privilege of giving the guild more money," Don summarized.

"I suppose if you want to put it crudely," the man admonished.

"Then never mind. Come on, let's do what we came here to do. Where did you say those stairs were?"

"Right over there. Let me know if you have any other questions!"

*What is the nature of existence, and how do I fit into this world I've found myself in?*

The two took their cards over to the door the man pointed to, and beside it was indeed a box. Both could sense magic inside, probably a spell that registered the presence of the card and made sure it was magical. Don shrugged and put his card against it, wondering what was going to happen. The door clicked and Lysanias gave it a push, then pushed harder. "Did it work?"

"I think it swings towards us, lad," Don said, rolling his eyes. Lysanias grabbed the handle and gave an experimental tug. It swung out easily.

"Oh!" He cleared his throat. "Just testing."

The stairs beyond were metal and led both up and down, so they took the stairs down and found another door. This one had no magical lock so Don dropped the card over his head and pulled the door open.

The pair stepped into a workshop of wonders.

Supported by solid rectangular beams at regular intervals the space was mostly open and lit from above by globes of light. Lysanias could see tables set up in one corner with cheerful liquids bubbling away above bright flames. Shelves and shelves of materials extended the length of the place. Reaching nearly to the ceiling these were stuffed with raw materials, disassembled machines, and parts of devices Lysanias couldn't even begin to identify. Past that the frames of rotted vehicles from before the moon's arrival sat to be studied, and directly ahead more tables had been set up with various projects. A man in a bright robe looked up from what he was working on and turned. The pair walked towards him, eyes darting to take in everything they saw.

"You two lost?" asked the man, eyeing their badges. He had a long white beard and graying hair, rough textured face and was stooped just a little. At his belt was a pouch that Lysanias could feel spiritual energy coming from, and assumed it held this man's "something stone" the guildmaster had told him about. "I think you wanted up, not down."

"No," Lysanias countered, a big smile on his face. "I think I'm right where I need to be."

"Is that so?" the man asked, eyes narrowing.

Figuring the easiest way to convince him was to show, not tell, Lysanias scanned the nearby shelves and saw what he believed was a smooth, polished rock. He reached out a hand towards it and willed it across the space, and it helpfully obliged him. He fumbled trying to catch it, the rock flying out of his fingers and towards the ground, but he caught it again with his power and brought it back up.

"He's a little excited I think," Don remarked.

"I would be too, if I could do that," replied the man. "But I'm still not sure..."

Lysanias closed his hand around the stone and willed it to take the shape of a sleeping Amy, something he figured he had seen (stared at) often enough to have a good idea what that would look like. He felt it flowing but when he peaked at it the figure wasn't quite right so he tried again. The figure become more defined and he nodded, opening his hand to show the man.

As he looked at it the man's attitude immediately changed. His eyes lit up and he took the figure, looking it over critically. "Not bad, not bad," he allowed. "Maybe you are in the right place after all! Welcome. I'm master alchemist Sanches. Rick Sanches. Who might you be?"

"I'm Lysanias, and this is my friend Don. We need your help."

"Nice to meet you both." He transferred the figure to his other hand and stuck it out.

*Some kind of greeting ritual? Like Yttrius did when we made our bets? I guess I'll just follow his lead?* He stuck his hand out too, and the alchemist grabbed and shook it. *Ah, I see!* He shook it back and after a slightly odd look from Rick shook hands with

Don. *Oh, that's how it's done. Well, I'll know for next time I guess.*

"You've come at a fairly busy time, so my help will be limited for the moment. I'm in charge of the fireworks for the fair, and I have one more batch to make. We got a surprise order a few days ago so we had to scramble and make more. The other two alchemists are out delivering the batch we just finished up, and I was getting started on the next one."

"Fair?" asked Don.

*Fireworks?*

"Sure, the famous Fareborough Fair. You must have seen people in costumes wandering around on your way here. The townspeople always get a little excited and go overboard the day it begins. Showing off, mostly. But they want to parade around half naked who am I to stop them?"

Don snapped his fingers. "Is that why all the masks and such? I did wonder. I thought it was just some new fashion that had been adopted."

"Nope, just the fair. Starts tonight with the fireworks display. There's whole streets full of food venders, games, contests, all sorts of things. Jugglers, singers, plays- Goes on for several days, the whole town gets involved."

"Oh no, I bet inn prices are going to be through the roof!" Don moaned.

Rick nodded his head in sympathy. "If you can find rooms at all at this point. Arriving this late? Most places will be full."

"Great."

"Anyway, I need to get back to work but it's fairly dull. I can listen and work at the same time, been doing this festival preparation so long I could probably do it in my sleep." He turned back to his work, picking up a tapered piece of marble and grinding something in a small marble bowl. In front of him was a hollow tube shaped into a point, and various metal shavings were contained in a wooden tray off to the side. *Where did the figure I made go? I didn't see him set it down.*

Don indicated Lysanias should continue after they stood there a moment watching him.

"Oh, yes, uh... How to begin..."

"There's two things you want, right?" Don prompted.

"Right, there's two things we want. We have a friend we're traveling with, she's been threatened or put under some kind of spell by a wizard we met. We need to speak to someone who can maybe help us get her away from him. We hoped as you worked here you might be able to introduce us to someone."

"Don't know many wizards. They don't associate with us," he replied with a frown.

"The guy at the desk didn't even know you were down here," Don told him.

"Typical."

"It is!"

"But I do work here, something should be possible but I'll need more details. I can take you up to the offices later, someone should be able to help."

"That's great! The other thing is I want to learn. I know how to reshape things, like you saw, and I can change them from one material to another. But what else can I do? That's what I want to know. Like what can *you* do?"

"A few things," he admitted. "What you mentioned and alchemy itself," he indicated the table with the stuff that was brewing, "are the main abilities we utilize. But how did you learn to do what you can do now? Did it just happen one day and you finally got a chance to ask a wizard about it and they sent you here? Or were you trained by someone?"

"That's a long story. I guess the short answer is before the flood I picked up a few things but now don't have anyone to teach me more."

"Flood?"

Lysanias sighed and went into his tale, about how he was apparently a "progenitor," had been saved from the flood that wiped out his people and how Don had

found him. As he went on the man's grinding slowed and finally stopped he was so absorbed in the story.

"So, wait- you can do magic. You can do alchemy. You can float earth about and make wards. You can even see the future or tell an object's past. Basically anything anyone can teach, you can learn no matter what."

"That's right. At least there hasn't been anything I can't learn. Apart from the really advanced stuff Amy knows how to do, but she said she only mastered that stuff after practicing the easy stuff for months or years."

"No wonder progenitors got wiped out," he muttered. Then louder, "And now you want me to fill in a few gaps for you?"

"If you didn't mind."

He considered. "I guess if you just need to know the basics of doing something and the rest is practice. But you'll have to wait until the fair is over."

"Of course! Whenever you get a chance. Amy is the more important concern right now anyway."

"And Amy is the naiad that taught you seer skills? The one this wizard has a hold on."

"That's right, but what's a seer?"

He went back to grinding. "The name we give to people who can use their spiritual energies in certain ways to do what she can do. Just like I'm called an alchemist, or people who could make wards were called... Uh..." He looked at the ceiling, and his eyebrows scrunched together. "Artificers! That's right. Just a classification system, really."

*Of course. If people that came after the flood couldn't do everything, like I can, naturally they would want a 'shorthand' so to speak to tell someone what they can do. So related groups of powers got named certain things because people could only do one group of them. Makes total sense. Interesting that it worked out that way, rather than people getting a random selection of abilities they got abilities that complemented each other. I guess You do have some idea what You're doing,* he thought, looking up a little bit.

The alchemist went on. "Wait, I shouldn't have assumed. Do you want to stay here? Move to the city and take a job with us? We could use you, we have all sorts of projects going as you can see. But even for someone that's lived as long as I have, there's always more to discover."

"I'm not really sure where I'll end up," Lysanias admitted. "Believe me, this place is at the top of my list, but hiding away from the world down here? I don't know."

"I suppose I am doing that, aren't I? And I'll probably never get half that stuff working..." He glanced over at the pile of machinery in the corner.

"What is some of that stuff, if you don't mind me asking?" Don asked.

"Various devices from before the fall. I can possibly restore them, get them able to function. But actually powering them- that's the trick."

"We should reach the same level people did before the fall though, right?" Lysanias asked. "One day we may have the means to use these old devices. Getting them working so they can be copied, that's the important part?"

The man sighed, shaking his head. "Those days will never come again, I'm afraid."

"What? Why?"

"Let's ask our dwarf friend here. Apart from magical wars, because there were always wars, why has life basically remained the same for- what year is it?"

"2102."

"What? My goodness time flies! When was my last vacation? Anyway, we'll say two thousand years. Why has life stayed the same for so long? We figured out cars and airplanes and computers and all manner of wonders once. Why couldn't we do so again?"

"I don't see why we couldn't."

"Don't you? Consider this, both of you. There was a time when many buildings were constructed like the one you're in now. Steel and glass and concrete. Now what are they made of?"

"Wood," answered Don. "Or stone."

"Exactly. Why?"

"It's easier?" asked Lysanias.

"True. But there's another reason. Think about it, where did all the metal to build everything come from?"

"From the- oh," Don started, then nodded.

"What?"

"From the ground. It was mined. But ask Everest and he'll tell you. Mines are hard to find lately. Your worm tunnels prove that, lad."

*Of course. They walked for a month or more through those tunnels and found only me. No metals of any kind. And I saw that map and blurted "where's the rest of it?" The world is smaller now, or at least we can't reach any other lands that exist out there. So that would cut our available resources too, there's just less ground to mine out of.*

"That's not the only thing we ran out of. Easy sources of metal, oil, minerals- they were all dug up before the fall. I can tell you about gasoline, or plastic, but without the millions of barrels of oil we used to dig up every day before the fall what good is knowing? We threw away the easy sources of energy and raw material and now are stuck at our current level. We can't blame the wars, those were happening in the old days too. But there was progress, slow, steady progress thanks to how easy it was to get resources. Not so much anymore. And that's why we're stuck."

"We got magic in exchange," Don followed. "But because spells are so jealously guarded by the guild, and so few people learn to use magic to any real degree, it's no help."

"Indeed. Anyone could pick up and use devices with a bit of training before the fall. But magic? Well, you've got the perfect example of that right on you. Look at your cards, how long did they take to make?"

Both glanced down at their badges. "About a minute?" Don estimated.

*Which is totally not fair, given it takes me ten minutes to make one ward.*

"But will you see things like that for sale at embers apiece? Of course not. Can't have the masses expecting easy access to magic."

*That's why the annunaki were so advanced. They got the earliest access to the metal and resources they needed, plus they're all magic users. They built all their stuff so they don't need to mine any more metal to make buildings, and probably developed magical energy sources that don't run out. I mean something powered her padform, it was glowing and playing music and whatnot. They progressed past the point of needing to take stuff out of the ground and then never got wiped out back to the point we are today.*

"Simple economics would dictate them selling stuff like that as a steady income stream," Don went on.

"I'm sure they debated long and hard the merits of doing and not doing so." He poured the contents of the bowl into the tube and tapped it so it was even. Then he capped it off and lay it down. "But you didn't come here to listen to a very old man rambling. Let's go to the offices and see who we can talk to about your friend's wizard problem."

You're Working For No One But Me

When: A moment later

Where: Outside the first floor elevator

The alchemist Sanches led the pair up the stairs again and stopped in front of the other door the man at the front desk had indicated.

"Can you put your access card right there?" he asked, pointing to the box next to the door. Lysanias, being closest, did, and a moment later the door slid open. Rick stepped inside and the others peeked around the doorframe.

"It's a box?" Don asked somewhat nervously.

"Elevator. I'm not walking up thirteen flights of stairs at my age. Come along, it's perfectly safe. I reconditioned it myself."

The two stepped inside and the doors closed. Rick pulled a key out of his pocket and looked at the teeth carefully. "Now if I can remember the sequence for this- Oh, I'll explain, you may find this interesting, both of you. Normally, you would put your access key up against the box there and choose the floor." He pointed to a series of buttons on the inside wall next to the door. "But of course you can only get to the next two floors, while technically not being magical I wouldn't be able to get anywhere. The benefit of having basically rebuilt this elevator from scratch is I know the tricks. See this here?" He pointed to a small hole below all the buttons. "This is an alchemist lock. I insert this key here and give it a twist," he did, "but it only goes halfway. While the key is in the lock I have to reshape it to give it the full twist." He concentrated and finished twisting the lock, then hit the button for the top floor. The box started to move upwards and he withdrew the key.

"That's amazing," Don admitted. "To even construct a lock like that the usual way would be very difficult."

"I suppose that's true enough. Now hopefully the fair hasn't driven everyone away from the offices. The guildmaster should be in, we can go talk to her at the very least."

The three stepped into the hallway and Rick led them down several corridors full of closed doors, then stopped in front of a door with the bronze plaque "Mary Louwho" nailed to it.

"Here we are," he announced, giving a knock.

"Come in," drifted through the door and the alchemist twisted the handle and let them all inside. It was an office with more fine carpet, elaborate wall hangings and a solid desk with some chairs in front of it. Behind the woman sitting at the desk was a large window overlooking the town, and on the desk were several stacks of papers. It looked like she was going over them, a pen in her hand, and she did a double take in surprise.

"Master alchemist," she said, recovering. "This is quite a surprise. How did you even get up here?"

"Madam, you do recall I rebuilt the elevator system myself? Naturally I would not fail to give myself access, should I need it."

She made a humming noise in her throat and looked to see who else was coming in. "You seem familiar to me..."

"We met when Americut dragged you to that town near the mountains some time ago," Don reminded her when Lysanias didn't speak up.

"Oh, of course! The alchemist! So you made it after all. Welcome! Will you be taking a position here, then?"

"I'm not sure, at the moment," Lysanias admitted shyly. "We wanted to come and see you about Americut, actually."

"To be more specific, we wish to register a complaint!" Don announced.

"What's he done this time?" she warily asked.

"Enslaved a naiad."

"Okay. And?"

He shook his head. "And? She reports to him, and he physically struck her when she questioned him."

"She told you this?"

"I saw it. She's a seer, and she taught me some of what she can do."

"A what?" She looked to the alchemist.

"Yes, someone like me," he agreed. "But with leanings more towards scrying and truth-telling than physical alterations to the world."

"Okay. What do you want me to do about it?"

Lysanias couldn't quite believe what he has hearing. "Tell him to stop, of course!"

She set the pen down and gestured for them to sit. There were only two chairs, so Rick excused himself. "But come see me later, we can talk about getting you some training."

"Thank you very much, I'd like that."

The three introduced themselves and Mary poured them both some ice water from a nearby pitcher. "So start at the beginning," Mary asked them, sitting again. "I assume you met this naiad after you left the town?"

"That's right. We were escorting the enormous death machine that had been dug up somewhere it could find a smaller body and came upon a pool. In the pool was Amy, and she said she had seen me coming in a dream. She wanted to help me close a maw that was spewing shadow into our world, threatening to cover it."

"And you bought this story?"

"We had recently defeated an annunaki that seemed covered in darkness," Don explained. "It threw dark energy at us and totally wrecked Lysanias' sword in the process. I got lucky and snuck up on it, chopping his head off. So it wasn't far off the mark."

"I see. I'll want to hear more about that later, but go on."

"You noticed. You and Everest, you tell her."

"She kept dropping hints that something wasn't right with her. Told us about a chain she was laboring under, and sometimes would do this with her hands, like making a link of a chain. But only when certain topics came up." He demonstrated. "Wouldn't talk about certain things, or seemed surprised she could talk about other things. I finally asked Lysanias to look into what she did, exactly, when she went home. That's when he saw the wizard."

She considered a moment. "Nothing you've told me here breaks wizard law, so there really isn't anything I can do."

"Nothing you can do? He's got some kind of hold over Amy!"

She put up a hand. "And you say this 'person' is a naiad?"

"What does that matter?"

"A naiad is essentially a physical manifestation of nature. It's not a person. So it doesn't really have legal rights."

"*She* is a living, thinking being!"

"That's your opinion."

"So you're saying that he could anything to her, and that would be just fine?"

"Not *fine*, exactly. Obviously it would be frowned upon, keeping such a creature enslaved, but unless you can discover some actual law he's broken relating to her, there's nothing I can do. Besides, if she is working for or enslaved by him, what's she doing wandering around with you?"

"I don't think she can tell us," Don put in. "She seems to be under some kind of magical restriction. There's a spell active on her, I can tell that much."

*Shoot, I never even thought to check that. Good thing someone on this team is paying attention to other parts of her than her-*

"That I could help with," she announced. "I can loan you the use of our courtroom. It was built to negate magical energies so if you get her in there, any active spells should be suppressed. She should be able to talk freely then."

"Can you tell truth from lies, lad?"

He shook his head. "She's tried to explain how she tells, but she could say the sky is green and I'd believe her. It seems to be something innate to her, not something she can teach me to do."

"Pity. We'll take it though, this might be our only chance."

"I agree."

"We use special candles in the court," Mary explained. "The anti-magic spell doesn't extend to the judge's bench, so a candle is placed there that will flicker in the presence of lies."

"How much?" Don asked, not missing a beat.

"Eleven moons. I'll throw in the candle."

"How generous," he allowed sarcastically. "We'll take our chances, thanks."

"Up to you." She got up and put her hand on a rope that was sticking out of a hole in the wall. "Will you do it now?"

"We can get her here. Let's do it," Don agreed. "I don't like having someone that's walking around with me reporting to someone else. Let's get to the bottom of it and know for sure she can be trusted, or not."

Lysanias nodded so she pulled the rope and sat back down. "Someone will be along in a moment," she explained.

*How mundane. A bell rope?*

Moments later a young man knocked and opened the door. He had short light hair, a more ragged version of the wizard robe the guildmaster was wearing, and a silver access key around his neck. He looked to be in his mid-teens and somewhat badly needed braces. Not that anyone here would know what that was. "You rang, guildmaster?"

"These people are going to bring someone to the courtroom. Please show them the way when she arrives, and see what she has to say. If the wizard they talk about has broken any guild law, come get me."

"Yes, guildmaster."

The two stood. "Thank you," Lysanias said. *For nothing.*

"Yes, thank you for seeing us," Don agreed. "I hope it's nothing. Enjoy the fair if we don't meet again."

"Ah yes, that's why I have so much paperwork now," she grunted, looking the desk over. "No doubt I'll glance out the window from time to time, that will have to suffice."

There was really no response to that so the two left, following the young boy. He called for the elevator and took them down to the waiting area.

"I'm Sherlock Gnomes, nice to meet you both," he said as they sat down.

The two introduced themselves and Lysanias went to activate the ward. *Actually, wait a second.* "Hey Sherlock, how would you like to meet the most beautiful creature you'll ever see in your life?"

"You know someone like that?" He wasn't buying it.

"I sure do. Her name is Amy, she's a naiad, have you ever met one?" He shook his head. "You're in for a treat. She's buying clothes at the moment but usually she walks around-" He looked around and lowered his voice, "totally naked. She's a fantastic swimmer, maybe she'll show you if you ask her."

"That would be great!"

"It would, wouldn't it?"

"What are you up to, lad?"

"You'll see." Lysanias touched the ward, activating it. "Hey Everest, can you hear me?"

There was a brief pause and his voice was clearly heard. "I can hear you, what's up? Is Don there? He's not going to be happy, most of the inns are full! And the others want a lot of coin for just a night!"

"We heard, there's a fair going on," he called into it.

"We can worry about that later. I'm here at the mage's guild and there's someone here who really, really wants to meet Amy. Can you both make it here?"

"Sure, we can head there now. See you in a bit."

"See you!" Lysanias tore the ward in half and it burned up.

"Oh, I see. You wanted a reason to get her here that was truthful," Don figured.

"That's right. Be aware, she can tell when people are lying, so don't lie to her," Lysanias cautioned Sherlock.

"I won't."

"Good."

While they were waiting Don had a thought. "How did you afford guild membership? Aren't you a bit young to have chests of gold lying around?"

"I'm just an apprentice," he admitted with a laugh. "See, my card is silver." He lifted his access card and indeed it was silver. "My master is a member, of course he's out helping with the fair. I got stuck here... I mean..."

"No offence taken," Don assured him.

"Anyway, I hope to be a member someday."

*Sure, so you can lay around in the sun, maintain an empty shop, and still make tons of money. Who wouldn't want that?*

"I'm sure you will, lad. I'm sure you will."

Twenty minutes later Don and Amy came through the door, looking around. They spotted the others and come over. Amy was dressed in a costume that left little to the imagination, being little more than strategically placed pieces of cloth. To her credit she was wearing a feathered mask that covered the top half of her face. Her long hair had been styled into long loops and looked like it had silver ribbons wound through it. Kappa had on a funny looking, colorful hat and was riding on her shoulder.

"You weren't kidding!" Sherlock exclaimed, eyes glued to her.

"Lass, I thought the point was to avoid attracting attention."

"That's what I said!" Everest assured them.

She laughed and spun around. "What did you want to see me in, a cloak with the hood pulled up? Have you seen what people are wearing out there? Believe me, this will blend in better than if I was skulking about in a hood and cape. Every eye would be on me wondering what I was hiding. In this outfit they'll just look right past me, because there's so many people wearing similar things all over the place."

"She has a point," Everest agreed. "This fair must be really something."

"It's a huge festival," agreed Sherlock. "A lot of planning goes into it."

"So, where's this person that is just dying to meet me?" She pretended to look around, shading her eyes from a "sun."

"Let's go upstairs, you'll see him in the room they've let us use." *You'll see him here, too, he's right there. But it's still not a lie. You know, telling the truth from lies might not be all that useful. There's so many ways to tell the truth to someone but still mask your intentions. Huh. I suppose because we know, we can be on guard against it. Anyone else wouldn't and so speak more freely. I guess it comes down to trusting people in the end either way.*

"Okay, let's go!"

The group used Sherlock's card to go up to the sixth floor, squeezing into the elevator. He wasn't complaining, and led them into the courtroom. "The anti-magic area ex-

tends just past the walls and up to the judge's bench," he explained as they walked towards the door. "Leave your access passes in this box or they'll get wiped out and you'll have to remake them." He cast a spell to unlock the box and put them inside, then locked it again. "Okay, the room is right over here." It was a standard looking courtroom, with seats for people to watch, a jury box, several tables, and the very tall judge's bench. This was more like a wall, probably three meters high so anyone on trial didn't jump the wall and get their magic back. *And it forces people to strain their necks looking up at the looming judge. It has as much to do with intimidation as it does blocking off the area that magic still works I bet.*

"There's an anti-magic area in this room?" Amy asked nervously, looking around. "And where's this person?"

"That's right," Don answered, slamming the door behind him and putting a hand on his sword. "Now, please do tell us everything you can about the wizard Americut."

"He threatened to dry up my pond and kill me!" she shouted. "Oh hey, that actually worked!" She seemed surprised.

"He did what?" Lysanias asked, looking angry.

"I can really talk freely here?" she asked. Sherlock nodded. "Okay, here's the full story. Wait, will my geas come back when I leave?"

"I'm afraid so," he told her.

"Oh well. So yeah, my name is Amy, but my home isn't that pond you found me in. After you left Farpoint the wizard that owns me, I guess, told me to stick by you. He had several ideas how to make that happen but when he realized you were heading in a straight line he jumped ahead of you and carved out that pond. The area was rich in spirit energy, so it seemed like a place I could have naturally come from. So that much worked perfectly."

"Did you really dream about me?"

"Yes I did. That much is true too, the world is in danger. He doesn't believe me, I'm glad you did, we really do need to be together!"

"Go on lass."

"I'm really from some yucky underground spring. I don't know how long I was down there perfecting my abilities but one day that wizard guy showed up. He said he could give me a purpose and put me to work. I didn't mind, it gave me something to do. But he got more and more demanding, and then he met you, Lysanias. The reason he wanted me to follow you is because you could be more powerful than me. So you could get him things I couldn't, and he was basically drooling just thinking about it."

*Ew.*

"What we can do isn't magical, so the guild wouldn't be looking for us. They deal in magic stuff and protect against that. He figured getting you to work for him was the perfect crime. He put a geas on me to never betray his interests and told me to follow you. He wanted to know what you could do, where you were going, and some means of getting a hold over you like he has with me. You don't have an easily dried up pool of water to threaten, but he said he would find something. So that's why I've been tagging along, from his perspective anyway."

"So you're not to betray us at a crucial moment, just report our movements to him?" Don asked.

"That's right. In fact I'm to help you as much as I can. He can't get you to work for him if you're dead."

"That's a good point," Everest admitted.

"So you're not really his slave?" Don asked.

"More like an information gatherer. I mean he's made me do some things, you know, that sort of stuff. I couldn't exactly refuse but he didn't mistreat me either."

"But he hit you!" Lysanias protested.

"Yes, he had never done that before. Like I said, the opposite, actually," she looked down, embarrassed. "But I was telling him how you shouldn't be controlled because you were doing so much good in the world. I told him about how you got the war machine blown up, he got mad about that. Said it was a real waste."

*It was, but in a different way than he's no doubt thinking.*

"I am sorry, but my existence was on the line. I think he really would dry me up. He seems really nervous about what he's doing. I mean, why would he have found someone like me to do it? Someone nobody even knows exists?" She looked away from the group.

"At least now we know the full story. Can we help you, somehow?" Don asked.

"Do you want to be free of him?"

"He's really the only person to come and visit me. There's no way I could have left my pool without his help. But if he gets worse, tries to blackmail Lysanias into helping him too? Where will it end? How far will he go?"

"But *what* is he making you do?" asked Sherlock. "You never said."

Amy seemed to gather herself, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. She opened her eyes and looked around the group. "He's making me steal spells."

## All Day Long They Work So Hard

When: Stunned seconds of silence later

Where: Suppressed magical courtroom

Lysanias realized that blurting certain things out loud at this point might be detrimental to their cause. Case in point, when they did the very thing they were now accusing Americut of doing to clear the path for the war machine. They had basically “stolen” the spell they needed out of a wizard’s book for their own ends. So were they really any different? Instead of opening his mouth he used his brain, sending his thoughts to Amy directly.

*That’s how you were able to get us that spell, why you were so sure it would work. You had done it before.*

*Many times, she replied. At least I did it with a higher purpose in mind this time instead of just for someone’s profit.*

*Still. Best not to mention we broke the ‘law’ in exactly the same way he did, or we might find ourselves in the same situation he is. If they do anything about it.*

*I’ll keep it back for future blackmail material.* She grinned and winked at him.

*See if I help you again. Then to himself what’s a black male have to do with it? I’ve seen all sorts of dark skinned people wandering around from elves to humans but I don’t see what-*

“Uh, hello?” Sherlock said, waving a hand between them.

“Funny time to go all googly eyed at each other,” Don grumped. “Is that breaking the law enough for you?”

“In fact, that is as serious a crime as can be committed by someone in the guild,” Sherlock told them. “The guildmaster should be told right away, I’ll go get her.”

He hastened out of the room and back to the elevators, returning a moment later with the guildmaster in tow.

“Ah, so this is Amy,” she exclaimed, coming into the room. “I can see why you’re so, uh, passionate about her defense. And a gnomad if I’m not mistaken?”

“Everest, at your service guildmaster!” They shook hands.

“Guildmaster Louwho, nice to meet you. Now, what’s all this about stealing spells?”

“It’s true, guildmaster,” Amy agreed. “Americut had me use my abilities to read spells out of unprotected spellbooks. I would copy them down and he would come to collect them every few days.”

“Wait a minute, that thieving bastard,” Don exploded. “Did you ever get him a translation spell?”

“I’m fairly sure I did, why?”

The group nodded knowingly. “He was going to sell us one for a hefty price. Went on about having to teleport back here, pick up the spell, then go back. I bet he was just going to go into a back room, wait around a few minutes, and then come back out with it. It would have been pure profit for him!”

“I really need to take some notes,” Everest muttered. “The man’s obviously a shrewd businessman.”

“He’s a fool,” spat Mary. “Especially if she can prove all this.”

“I can prove that I can do what I say,” she hedged. “And I think you can prove I have a geas spell on me easily enough, right? You would have to find his books if you wanted the proof he actually had spells he hadn’t paid for.”

She rubbed her temples. “That could be tricky. They could be in a pocket dimension for all we know. Without the evidence it’s just your word against his.”

*A what? Oh, wait, I think she means a space like my contain wards. Figures they could do that too.*

"I could ask!" Amy said, brightening. "It would take ten minutes, would you like me to?"

"If you can, that would be a big help. Even knowing they were out of reach would help us come up with a better plan."

"I'll get started. I'll ask a yes or no question... maybe 'are the books containing the spells I copied for the wizard Americut usually in a pocket dimension?'"

"You know your abilities best, so whatever you think will work."

She nodded and settled into a chair, closing her eyes.

"What about truth magic?" asked Don. "Just ask him straight out, did you use Amy to copy spells for you?"

"We would have to work out a very precise phrasing. For example he could say no to that question truthfully because he used a *pen*, not a person, to copy the spells."

*Oh my goodness it's worse than I thought.*

Don's face fell. "I guess even magic doesn't make it easy."

"No, it just gives us different problems to worry about. The only other thing we would accept is a confession, but good luck getting that out of him."

The group thought for a moment. "Wait, that actually might be possible," Lysanias offered. He started pacing the floor in thought. "Forget asking about the books for the moment, Amy. Could you get him into the water and bring him back here?"

She opened her eyes. "Oh sure, we've had plenty of- Er, you know what I mean. He's always up for it so that would be easy."

Lysanias reddened. "I can imagine. Anyway, he won't be on guard around you. If you went and put one of my communication wards there, I bet you could trick him into confessing. Something like 'they mentioned to me they wanted to buy a translation spell from you. Were you really going to charge them the teleportation fee as well?' When he says yes we've got it. He won't be able to show he bought the translation spell, and will have admitted to cheating us!"

"I can't though," she admitted, face falling. "Once away from this room my geas will be back. I won't be able to act against his interests."

"Oh."

"We can work around that too," Mary told them. "A spell symbol with the same spell that negates magic here. You go there, activate it, then set the... what did you call it?"

"Ward?"

"Right, ward. Tear up the symbol and call him."

"It would get wet though. They both would. Would they still work?"

"They would if we put them on a bit of metal, like say as big as an access pass?"

Lysanias held up his fingers in a square. "Just hide it well."

"But no, that's out," Mary said. "Bringing him back here works against his interests. So you couldn't do that."

"How big is your pool?" Everest asked.

"A couple of lengths at most. Why?"

"Just set the area of negated magic to touch only the water, like the spell here just touches the judge's bench. Set the ward at the edge of the pool. Get the confession, then lure him into the water and you'll be able to bring him here."

"We could minimize the area of the spell," Mary agreed. "That would seem to take care of all the concerns."

"Except one. I would have to leave from this room. Otherwise I wouldn't be able to go, because I planned to betray his interests. Which I can't do."

"Blast!"

"Why is that a problem?" asked Everest.

"The spell symbol would get erased when it came in here. That's why we have people leave their access cards outside this room."

"Wait, what if it was inside a ward? I bet it wouldn't vanish then!"

"We'll have to try it. We could use one of your access cards if you don't mind re-making it if this doesn't work."

"We can use mine, it's fine," Lysanias agreed. "I'll need to put the ward on anyway."

They passed the ward through the suppressed magic area and got the card back out in the hallway. It still had the symbol, so that part of the plan was viable.

"We'll just have to wait until tonight. He won't be expecting me so early and I can practice what I'm going to say to him."

"Then I'm going back to work," announced Amy. "Sherlock, stick with them, and I'll authorize anything else you think of that you might need. You don't need to come ask me, just get it done. I'll get the spell to create the dead magic area prepared myself. Come get me when it's time."

"Yes, guildmaster."

"Thank you," said Amy.

"Thank you for bringing this to my attention. We can't have people running around stealing magic now can we?"

She walked off, leaving Lysanias thinking. *Right, she's not doing this to help Amy. If Americut wasn't using her in this way they wouldn't have cared at all. But oh, he's making a copy of something he didn't pay for and suddenly it's rush rush rush to bring him to justice. It just doesn't seem right somehow.*

"We'll need some buckets," Don told Sherlock. "May as well start filling that tub up."

"Buckets?"

"To put the water in. We can't fill it up with magic here, and do you know how heavy the tub would be trying to carry it in full? We'll have to fill up the buckets out in the hallway."

"Why are we filling a tub in here?"

"For Amy to disappear from!"

"Oh. I wondered what you were talking about. I thought she could just vanish. She has to leave from water, huh?"

"That's right."

"Buckets. I'll see what I can do." He went to leave.

"And we absolutely need a pony!" Lysanias shouted after him.

"And a keg!" Don shouted.

"And an eight meter tall statue of myself!" Everest added, striking a pose. "Made of cheese!"

"Yeah, yeah!" he shouted back.

"Shall we go back and look for an inn?" Amy asked Everest.

"Oh, no lass, you're not leaving this room," Don told her.

"Why not?"

"Who knows what that geas might cause you to do? Run to your master and tell him our plan? I don't think so. You're stuck here until tonight."

"Oh. I got all dressed up, too." She tossed the mask on the desk, pouting.

"Plenty of time for parading yourself later on. For now, sit here and wait until sunset."

"Fine," she grumped, dropping into a chair. "But you guys owe me an opening night at the fair."

"You'll just have to settle for your freedom."

"Eh, I suppose I can live with that." She sat, hunched over for a moment but then looked up. "Let's play a game, Kappa! I spy with my little eye..."

As Lysanias and Don worked to fill up the tub, he was thinking about Amy's past. *How many other creatures like her are stuck someplace? Immortal, thinking, but locked away from anyone. If it happened once it could happen again. Need to make a note, when I'm better at getting answers out of the universe and have some time, look into it. At least oaken have the option of just going to sleep if they root in a place no one else is. She didn't get that luxury.*

It took many trips, and Lysanias splashed water all over himself and the courtroom, but finally the tub was full and the wards they would use were made. He had put them on the smallest pieces of metal Sherlock could find so they would be easy to hide. Amy practiced her lines while walking around the courtroom, having taken her costume off. Sherlock stared openly for a few minutes and then asked if anyone was going to need him for the moment. Everyone shook their heads.

"Well, if anyone does I'll be in my room. The bathroom. I'll be right back from there. I have to go now." He stiffly walked out.

"Wonder what that was all about?" Don snickered.

Finally it was near sundown and a horde of people trooped into the courtroom. They were all wearing robes and looked disgusted, but most brightened when they saw Amy prancing around the room as she was.

"What's all this?" Lysanias asked nervously.

"Witnesses, you didn't think it would just be me hearing Americut admit to all this law breaking, did you? Are you ready? I left the spell paper you'll need out in the hall."

"I'll go get it."

"I'm ready," Amy told them. "I won't let you down."

"See that you don't," sniffed one woman. "I'm missing the start of the fair because of this."

"Blame your fellow wizard Americut," suggested Don. "He's the one causing all this."

"Humph."

"Come on, Kappa. Let's do this!" The tiny figure jumped into her arms and she submerged herself in the tub after taking the wards.

"Good luck," Lysanias wished her.

"Thanks. For everything." She lay down and vanished.

A moment later her voice came from the companion ward set on the desk that everyone was crowded around. "Can you hear me now?"

"We can hear you," Lysanias said back. He looked around the table. "No one say anything or this whole plan is for nothing. As you heard they work both ways."

"We have been appraised of the situation," said one portly wizard. "Just get on with it."

"Getting on with it, aye!"

Amy did whatever she did to summon Americut and a moment later his voice was heard through the ward.

"All right, report."

"The group has made it to the city, but we're having trouble finding a place to stay tonight. There's a festival of some kind going on, so the inns are mostly full."

"I don't care about that! Has he made contact with anyone to learn new abilities?"

"Yes master, a group of alchemists in the city."

"Excellent, most excellent. What's an alchemist? Never mind, that's not important. You haven't observed anything we can use?"

"He didn't immediately go to gamble or anything like that. Don seems to be the one always wanting a drink, so there's no help there. He's focused on finding this shop-keeper from his dream. We do have that shadow maw to worry about, you know?"

"So you keep saying. Don... he's been traveling with that pair a while. What if we threatened those two instead? They would be easier to control after all."

“Do you really want a man like Lysanias angry at you? With all he can do?”

“You just worry about your job, and I’ll worry about mine. You’re right though, better take it slow and find the right leverage. There’s still plenty of time, and he has a lot yet to learn before he’s really that useful to me.”

“Speaking of that, I haven’t gotten you any spells lately because I’ve been following him around. You don’t need that done anymore?”

“No, no, you’ll be back to tracking spells down for me soon enough. I do miss our times together doing that but for the moment, this comes first. Now that you bring it up though, I’ve been thinking about expanding your duties a little.”

“Will I get a raise?”

“I’m not paying you- oh, good one. Raise, that’s rich. How would you feel about spying on people? Guild meetings would have the same protections in place as the library, but maybe the mayor? I bet we could get a nice little revenue stream going by blackmailing people in the village. Everyone has their secrets and I bet most would pay well to keep them secret.”

“I have to do what you say, why even ask me?”

“You do, don’t you?”

“Don’t you make enough? I heard about your trying to get money out of Lysanias when he got into town. Said he wanted translation magic, and I know I got you that spell at one point or another.”

“Except he didn’t buy it! Even selling a spell I haven’t actually paid for I still have to charge the official price for it. It got around I sold spells at below cost and someone might start looking into why. I shouldn’t have gotten greedy and told him I needed to teleport back to the hall to pick it up. He might have paid the fee otherwise. So no, I don’t. With the guild fees and how expensive they make casting spells for people, I barely get by!”

“Oh. I mean if you really need the money it’s a different story. I’d be happy to do other things for you in that case. It would keep me busy, just tell me what you need.”

“You would? That’s great! I’ll think about it, it was just an idea I had recently. You wouldn’t be able to do it while traveling anyway, and I’d want Lysanias at that point. He can threaten people without leaving magical traces, and that’s important if you’re blackmailing people. It can’t be traced back to me, after all.”

“That would be terrible! If you get locked up I’d go back to having nothing to do!”

*Laying it on a bit thick, aren’t you, Amy?*

“That’s right. So, anything else?”

“Do you have to rush off? It’s been quite a while, why don’t you join me in the water? I’ll make it worth your while.” There was a splashing sound.

“You’re asking for it? Usually I have to order you!”

“I just like to play hard to get. But tonight I’m going to be the one on top!”

*Won’t that mean he’s underwater? Oh...*

“Come on, please? I need it!”

“Well, if you put it like that!”

There was a sound of clothes being thrown off and someone wading into the water.

“Hang on to me!”

“I intend-“

\*WOOSH\*

“-to. The Hell?”

The assembled wizards all looked down at Americut, who was clinging to Amy.

“Americut Airlinis, you are under arrest,” the guildmaster formally stated, averting her eyes. “You are charged with acquiring magic without paying the correct fee, and for charging prices for spells you did not cast.”

*And for enslaving a sentient creature. And conspiring to ‘black male’ both myself and others using said creature. But no, just ignore all of that. Make it all about spells.*

"This is outrageous!" Americut tried to protest. "I- I don't know what you're talking about!"

"We all heard you," one of the wizards said. "There's no sense denying it."

"You!" He looked over at Lysanias who was standing there. "How did you set this up?"

"Maybe your hold on Amy isn't as great as you thought," he told him, leaning a little to loom over him. "Let's take that off, by the way. Now. Because Amy was right- you don't want me angry at you."

"I will do no such thing!"

"Don't dig yourself deeper, Americut," the guildmaster warned him. "And can you put some clothes on?"

"I can go get them," Amy volunteered, vanishing again.

"But they'll be sopping- and she's gone."

A moment later she was back, lugging the now water soaked clothing.

"Your raiment, *master*," she teased, throwing it over the side of the tub.

"Oh, you think this is funny, do you?"

"Fairly. Now release me or I'll take care of you *my* way. We go back into the pond where magic doesn't work and I drag you underwater for a bit. Don't worry, I'll be sure you die satisfied."

"You heard her, she's threatening to kill me!"

"Ah, but if she's not a person," Lysanias reasoned. "She can't be held accountable for murdering you, now can she? You can't have it both ways. She's a person you enslaved, adding to your crimes, or she's not and killing you is just an act of nature."

He glared at Lysanias but the others were nodding and saying that was a good point.

"Fine. But you'll regret this." He clapped his hands twice. "Release."

"That was it, that's what he said would release me!" Amy was hugely smiling. "I'm free!"

"Better do it again out in the hall," Everest advised. "Magic doesn't work in here."

"Thank you so much for informing me," Americut growled through clenched teeth. "Just let me get dressed."

"Have a special pair of bracelets for you to put on," Mary told him, holding up a pair of handcuffs. "I'm sure you'll look just fabulous in them."

Having repeated the procedure to release Amy out in the hall and then being slapped by her in order to test it, Americut was led off to the prison floor. The guildmaster told them not to leave town as they would be needed for the trial which would take place the next day. She gave Lysanias a temporary gold access card so the group didn't need an escort and said they could stay in the rooms on the fifth floor usually used by visiting dignitaries. Don and Everest thanked her and said they might turn in early, (and really someone had to stay behind to talk to the lawyer who would start building the case against Americut) but Amy begged Lysanias to go with her to the fair. He had no problem with that and had one of his gold suns turned into a pouch full of embers and they went to go see as much of the fair as they could. Lysanias got to be a kid again for a while, playing games and eating fairground food with Amy at his side who was just as excited as he was to be experiencing her first festival.

Eventually the stalls started to close down and they made their way back to the guild building, where they found their rooms and went to sleep for the night. Amy thanked him for coming and went to her own room, as there was no need for them to share a room here of all places. He was somewhat disappointed but wasn't awake for long enough once he flopped into bed for it to bring him down.

He was now sitting next to her in the courtroom along with their "lawyer." He was a human sized bird man with wings neatly folded at his back. He was covered in brown feathers and had a hooked beak and claws that reminded Lysanias of Yttrius. Sharp and dangerous. He was dressed in a robe with no back and was going over his notes before being called to speak.

Americut, now dressed in dry robes and wearing some kind of amulet around his neck was seated with his, a dark elf. The jury box full of wizards was filled, and both Don and Everest were seated in the audience area along with several other people he didn't know. *Probably just here to see a wizard's trial?* There were several people that did look familiar, one of which was the mayor of Farpoint, but Lysanias couldn't imagine what *he* was doing there. The guildmaster was also there, making Lysanias think *She's not the judge?* The jury members were all trying not to stare at Amy who was of course back to wearing nothing at all. *At least she'll have their undivided attention when she's being asked for her story.*

At the door were burly men in armor with swords, and of course Lysanias had put the metal box away inside another contain ward the night before. Their weapons were not allowed in the courtroom, but they let Lysanias' ward dispenser pass as he had hoped, because they didn't realize what it was. The first ward in the contain ward slot had a box full of weapons, something Don had suggested early that morning.

"Never be too far away from a weapon, lad!" he had suggested, and Lysanias saw his point and made sure he could get their stuff back in a hurry. Everyone rose when the judge appeared in the box, and sat as he lit a candle and sat himself. "This trial of the wizard's guild vs. Americut Airlinis is brought to order. Council for the prosecution?"

"Thank you, your honor." He got up and addressed the jury. "Members of the jury, it is my intent to show that the wizard, master Airlinis, did break guild law by unconventionally stealing spells from other wizards and then charged people fees inappropriately. For example, changing for teleportation spells when he claimed he did not have a spell to sell, when in fact he performed no teleportation because he already had the spell. To do this I will call two witnesses who will provide their testimony."

"Very well," the judge said as the avian sat down again. "Council for the defense?"

"Thank you, your honor." Americut's lawyer, a short, dark skinned elf woman, stood and addressed the jury. She was dressed in sensible clothing, had short dark hair, and had no jewelry on he could see. "It is true what my colleague has said, some trials are simply for accessing guilt and determining the appropriate punishment. But others, such as this one, are far more important. I say this because in this trial I will seek to impress upon you that it is time for guild law to change and that my client should be the catalyst for that change. Rather than simply being punished for an outdated practice that is no longer relevant to today's world. This practice of buying sheets of paper that could easily be mass produced needs to be rethought, as does the expense associated with spells cast by wizards. I will call two witnesses to provide testimony."

"Very well. Your first witness Mr. Dewuhrm?"

"I call to the stand Amy Pond." Amy got up and sat in the chair that was in front of the judge's bench. "Allow me to remind you that there is truth telling magic present in this room."

"I know."

*For all the good it does, according to the guildmaster.*

"Fine. Now, in your own words, Ms. Pond, please tell the jury what Master Airlinis had you doing."

"After he trained me in recognizing and copying magical symbology I was to search for unprotected spellbooks. Having found one I was to look inside it and copy down the spell formula if he didn't already have it. He would then come every few days and collect the spells I had written."

"I see. With your honor's permission, I have prepared a demonstration to show how this is possible." He got out a blank book and had several jury members write a sentence or two into the middle of it, and then sat it out of sight. She concentrated and read them their sentences back. The jury seemed satisfied she could do what she claimed and as she was doing it in an area of suppressed magic, that it wasn't magical in nature.

"Thank you. To continue, how many spells would you say that you copied for him?"

"Dozens, at least. I didn't really count, I just did what he wanted. It went on for some time."

"Can you say how long?"

"I don't know how long, I can't see the sun from where I live so I can't give you an exact number of days."

"That's not necessary. But this happened more than once?"

"Yes, he came many times."

"Oh, I bet he did!" someone in the audience remarked, resulting in some snickering in both the jury box and the audience but Lysanias didn't get what the joke was.

"Order! Order!" the judge ordered, banging his small wooden hammer on the desk. "No remarks like that please." Everyone quieted down but they were still grinning.

"One of these spells was a translation spell, wasn't it?"

"From what I understood from the name of the spell, yes, yes it was."

"Thank you. No further questions."

"Very well. Your witness, Ms. Shell."

The dark elf woman stood up. "Amy, what happened after you got these magical formulas and Master Airlinis came to get them?"

"Uh, he would command that I satisfy him physically?"

That get everyone going again, and once again the judge banged his hammer on the desk.

"I mean with the spells, specifically," Shell went on when the room quieted.

“Oh. Well, nothing. He would look them over, ask me to go look at any areas he felt weren’t detailed enough, and leave again.”

“You didn’t see him cast any of them?”

“No.”

“Did you know what he was doing with the spells?”

“He never said.”

“What do you feel was his intent with having you do all this?”

“Objection!” yelled Dewhurm. “Her feelings are not relevant, only the facts of the case are relevant.”

“Sustained.”

“No further questions.”

“You may step down,” said the judge.

Amy went to go sit down again and Dewhurm got up again. “I call my second witness, Lysanias.”

Lysanias went to sit in the chair and was also reminded about the truth magic. But in addition the lawyer also grabbed a book and had him raise his right hand while placing his other hand on it.

“What’s this?” he asked, flipping through it.

“Uh, a bible,” the lawyer replied. “It’s no use swearing in a creature with no soul, but you must have seen one of these.”

“Never.” *Must have come after my time.*

“Well, it’s the word of God,” he explained, as to a two year old. And honestly, those that didn’t know what a bible were would be few and far between in the Realm. It had been somewhat revised over the years as angels had corrected various things and those like elves that had come from heaven expanded on what certain passages meant. But much of what it had originally contained was intact, and generally every home had one. “You need to swear that you are acting in the best interests of all involved, not just those on your side of the issue, or for your own ends. You do it while touching the bible so you know your words have weight here.”

“The word of the Allfather? This tiny book?” He laughed, tossing it back. “Look around you, *all of creation* is the word of God. That is just words on paper, and anybody can make that.”

The avian seemed extremely flustered, ruffling his feathers and glancing around. “I suppose you have a point. Still, do you swear to the Allfather upon your very soul that you seek only justice and not personal profit by your actions here today?”

“I do.” *If it’ll make you feel better for me to say those words.*

“Your honor?”

“He has an interesting way of looking at things. I’ll accept it. It’s his soul in the end, touching the bible or not.”

*Like there’s any chance I’m getting into Heaven anyway. Or that I would believe an oath sworn to the being that wiped my entire people out would mean anything to me. Unbelievable.* Then he remembered where he was and nervously looked out at everyone staring at him. They looked a bit angry, like he had insulted them all personally by throwing the bible back. He began to get a bit uncomfortable. *Maybe I shouldn’t have insulted their rituals like that? Still, word of God, who came up with that anyway?* He shook his head, then froze. *Who else but the Allfather Himself? Stupid, Lysanias, very stupid. Why am I such a moron!?*

“Now, please explain your dealings with Master Airlinis when you went to purchase the translation spell.”

“We spoke to Master Airlinis about getting some translation magic so one of our group, an annunaki that was traveling with us, wouldn’t need me to translate anymore. He quoted us a price that included teleporting to a guild location to pick up the spell for us, then teleporting back.”

“And what was the cost?”

“Oh. Uh, I’m still not all that familiar with your money system. It was a lot of silver in total, I remember that much. Maybe in the eighties for the teleport? That was bronze, I mean. He said it was all guild standard prices. But Don seemed to think it was unreasonable.”

“And who is Don?”

“The dwarf I travel with.”

“And before he was arrested, you heard him state clearly that he knew he had the spell, and wished he didn’t have to cover up that fact by charging for the teleportation.”

“That’s right.”

“No further questions.”

Ms. Shell now got up.

“Did you purchase the translation spell?”

“No, Don said it was too much.”

“I believe two castings of teleportation magic at eighty five embers apiece would make the teleportation one hundred and seventy embers?”

“It sounds about right.”

“So the cost of the grade three translation spell was increased by more than half. Did it seem strange to you that you should have to pay for his teleportation just because he happened to not know the spell?”

“I just assumed policy was policy. He could have chosen not to offer to teleport to the guild and buy the spell at all. I thought it was nice of him to offer, even as expensive as it was.”

“But if he hadn’t, you would have gone away empty handed in either case?”

“Yes.”

“So he had the spell, the method he had to sell it to you was too expensive, meaning the guild and he made no money as you went away empty handed?”

“That’s right.”

“No further questions.”

Lysanias went to sit but Ms. Shell remained standing. “I will now call my first witness. I call the mayor of Farpoint, John Tireiron.”

*Oh, is that his name. I don’t think he ever told us.*

The mayor, not without a dirty look in Lysanias’ direction, took the chair and was reminded about the truth magic, then sworn in with the bible.

“Mr. Tireiron, how long as Master Airlinis been working in your village?”

“I would say at least five years now, perhaps a bit more.”

“And how much magic have you seen him do for the townspeople?”

“Not much, always claimed he didn’t know the spells people wanted him to cast.”

“Interesting. So despite you now knowing he did indeed have the spells he acted as though he did not. Why was that?”

“I don’t know his mind. I know people complained the teleportation fee was fairly high, far in excess of what a single casting of the spell they actually wanted would have been. They wanted the city to set up a fund to pay that fee, but even the city doesn’t take in that much in taxes to afford that!”

“So keeping all that in mind, what would you say was the worth of a wizard?”

“I’m not sure I understand the question.”

“I’ll rephrase it. Say Master Airlinis could cast moon spells with unnatural precision.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“I will be more generic. Say he could cast spells of healing and protection better than any other in the world.”

*In other words, sun spells. I get it. Naturally someone who didn't know anything about magic wouldn't know how they were classified or anything. The jury looks to be all wizards, so they would.*

"All right."

"But the only healing spell he knows is the most basic one, that can heal little more than a scratch."

"Fine."

"Would you call him a great wizard?"

"He only knows the one spell? Of course not!"

"Of course not. In other words, his worth as a wizard is not how skillful he is at the spells he can cast, but rather being able to cast a great number of them."

"Oh, I see. Yes, I would agree with that."

"Very well. Now, I believe he's contracted with the village to cast at least one spell on a regular basis?"

"He keeps the village water supply clean."

"And what else has he done for the village?"

"He made the fire for the spotter balloon burn endlessly."

"An endless fire spell? Does he cast that every day?"

"No, he only needed to cast it once."

"I see. So one spell only once, and another all the time. Tell me, if you needed to dig up a sapling but you didn't have a shovel, would you go to buy a shovel knowing you probably wouldn't need it again, or look to borrow one from a neighbor?"

"I would probably borrow one, it would be cheaper."

"So wouldn't the same principal apply here? That Master Airlinis shouldn't be forced to buy a spell formula he's only going to use once?"

"Objection!" cried Mr. Dewhurm. "This line of questioning is not relevant to the case."

"I believe it to be relevant to the case the accused is trying to make. However, this question does go too far, Ms. Shell. You are asking his opinion, and guild law is clear. You do not have to answer, Mr. Tireiron."

But the question had been asked, and Lysanias saw the gears turning in the minds of the jury. They were looking more thoughtful than they had a moment ago.

"Very well. Mr. Tireiron, I believe your village has several "printing presses" as they are called?"

"That's correct."

"I would like to submit exhibit A, a sample of output from this 'printing press.'" Ms. Shell took a stack of papers and started handing them out to the jury. "As you can see, each of these pages is exactly like every other. This specifically is an incomplete spell formula, being only the first page. However, I believe you can easily see how the second page could be produced similarly. Hundreds of copies could be made in a very short time, with no errors or flaws. As you all know, transcribing spell formula was initially quite risky because of the possibility for errors in the process. This method does away with that risk. Also the process was quite time consuming, these were all produced in less than ten minutes." She paused to let the jury look the pages over. "Part of the initial cost for spell formula was the careful work that went into writing them down by hand. That no longer needs to be the case, as you can see. We can use a device from before the moon's arrival to simplify and speed up the process. Mr. Tireiron, to return to our shovel example, would you pay more to a store if you were guaranteed the shovel you were buying would not burst into flames the first time you used it?"

"Probably."

"But shovels don't do that, do they? So their cost is simply the cost of the material and whatever profit the blacksmith believes is justified for the item."

"Correct."

She held up one of the pages, allowing the jury to ask, and answer the logical next question in their own minds, and not have the avian shouting "objection" at her again.

"No further questions."

The avian got up and thought a moment. "Mr. Tireiron, do you know if the spell to create the endless flame was purchased legally by Master Airlinis?"

"I have no idea. I don't really know anything about guild policies and such."

"Would you have had him cast it if you had known it was?"

"Probably. That would be his problem, not mine."

Dewhurm gave a grunt and waved a hand. "No further questions."

Ms. Shell gave a small smile, if he couldn't think of any questions to strengthen his case she was doing well. "I call my next witness, Picard Anycard."

*Wait a second, I know who that is now. That's the farmer whose son I healed! Oh dear, I think I know where this is going.*

"Mr. Anycard, can you please describe, in your own words, your most recent interaction with my client?"

"I sure can."

There was a pause.

"Please do so."

"All right. My son got injured after he fell out of the loft while horsing around with his brother. I brought him to the village doctor who said he was probably too far gone for him to help with. Master Airlinis arrived and I gave him all the money I had to have him cast a healing spell. But he said it might take more than one casting, and he was right. His spell didn't do much and he demanded more money because he said guild law wouldn't allow more."

"And did your son die?"

"Why no! That fella there came along and healed him instead. Said he didn't use magic but I don't know the difference. He's been fine ever since."

"That's great to hear. Was that the end of it?"

"Not exactly. I got this letter from him the next day." He pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and Ms. Shell took it.

"I would like to submit this as exhibit B. Master Airlinis, this is your handwriting?" She held it up to him.

"Yes it is. That is the letter I sent."

"I will read it, then pass it around to the jury. It reads, Dear Picard, I am writing you today to apologize for my inability to heal your son yesterday and hope he has fully recovered. I wish to impress upon you that my decision to not heal your son was not any malice directed at you on my part, simply guild law which is very strict. Had I healed your son as you requested without taking money and the guild caught wind of it, more than my business would have been at risk. I may have been subject to having my access to magic permanently cut off or worse, I may have been killed. I invite you to write of your disgust of such archaic practices and the next time I visit the guild building I will see that your letter reaches the right people. My pleas have fallen upon deaf ears, but perhaps if enough non-wizards begin to make their voices heard change could be brought about. I hope your son has a long and happy life ahead. Yours, Americut."

She passed the letter out and the jury, then the judge, looked it over.

*It was all some kind of protest? He was willing to let that boy die in order to beat the guild over the head with how out of date its laws are? I thought he was just being greedy, and maybe he was just covering his tracks with all that bluster and ranting he did after I healed the boy. But if that letter is sincere, he really believes that their laws should change. And it explains the theft of the magic as well, he just sees it as his due, as a wizard. That dark elf made a good case, he's probably been preparing for this day for some time. He must have known he would get caught eventually. His point of why*

*magic is still so expensive when most spells won't be used that often anyway, and they can be mass produced very cheaply is valid. Is the guild going to lose this case?*

"And did that letter make you feel better?"

"I felt I understood what he was going through a bit more. It probably wasn't easy for him to stand there and watch my son die, knowing he could probably save him if some stuffy old wizard half a world away wasn't enforcing laws he felt were unjust."

"And your feelings towards the guild?"

He turned to the jury. "You should all be ashamed of yourselves."

"Objection!"

"Overruled, but do have a care, Mr. Anycard. You are in a courtroom."

"Forgive my outburst your honor."

"No further questions."

"No questions," the avain said. The dark elf flashed him a grin when her back was turned to the judge, but was neutral again by the time she sat down.

"Closing statements?" the judge asked. Mr. Dewhurm stood.

"Members of the jury, I ask that you remember why we are here. Did Master Airlinis break the law? Yes he did. Should that law be changed? That is not our task. If it is at some future time, perhaps a new trial can be held. This wizard forced Amy here into a kind of slavery and made her steal magic for him. That is fact. Anything else is beyond this trial."

Ms. Shell now stood. "Members of the jury, we have proof that Master Airlinis collected spells, yes, but not that he ever cast any spell obtained in this way. And we have explored guild policy that we believe should be taken into consideration. Guild law needs to change, and that change begins with you. Set the precedent here and now- release this man who has done no wrong."

*No wrong, right. Threatening Amy just gets ignored totally, is that it?*

"The jury will now deliberate. There will be a short recess." The judge tapped his hammer and everyone got up to stretch.

Lysanias looked over at Americut and made up his mind. He got up and went over there.

"Ah, the man who does non-magical magic. What can I do for you?"

"I wanted to apologize to you."

"You- what?"

"I think you did something reprehensible when you enslaved Amy, but I also wronged you in my own mind. I think you were just trying to make a point, and it just so happened to be a life threatening situation that came up. I can't forgive you for either, but at least now I have a better understanding of why you did it."

He seemed surprised. "At least someone does."

"What do you mean? I was watching the jury, they seemed fairly receptive."

He laughed. "They have a vested interest in leaving things exactly the way they are. Believe me, nothing will change today. If it had been a jury of regular people, maybe. But these are my 'peers' in other words other wizards. Why would they want the system that makes them so much money to change?"

"Maybe all you can do is convince one person at a time? You convinced me," he said to the dark elf, and she smiled and nodded to him. "So there must be some hope."

"Wish I shared your optimism."

Almost before he knew it, the jury was filling their seats back in and everyone sat down again.

"Have you reached a verdict?" the judge asked.

"We have, your honor," said the closest one. "In the case of the wizard's guild vs. Americut Airlinis, we find the wizard Americut guilty of theft and improperly charging his customers."

Lysanias couldn't believe what he was hearing, and looked over to Americut. He gave a small shrug back, hands raised like "I tried to tell you."

"Very well. Is there anything the accused would like to say before sentencing?"

"I would like to say two things," Americut announced as he stood. "If you meant what you said, Lysanias, come find me sometime. There are more of us that believe the guild's laws are a bit behind the times. We could use someone like you to help shake the guild up a little. The second is a general question- what is the definition of a wizard? Anyone?" He yanked the talisman from his neck. "Someone who prepares." With a mighty heave he chucked the talisman straight into the judge's bench, causing it to shatter. The guards raised their weapons but the talisman had shattered like glass, leaving a jagged, colorful rock stuck into the wood. It was flashing and glowing as was the perimeter of the room. Americut slammed his palm over the stone of the ring he was wearing and barked "escape!" With an inrush of air he was gone.

But no one noticed because the stone erupted a form and suddenly the courtroom was thrown into a panic because a fully grown troll, complete with wooden club, was standing there and bellowing as if in rage.

The troll that had just appeared out of nowhere bellowed and raised its club high like it just didn't care. It was easily twice as tall as the tallest person there, and the club it held in its right hand was as big around as Lysanias' leg. It was naked with a waxy brown skin and only sparse hair, and its eyes seemed to have no intelligence behind them. Strangely, no one panicked because it was a room full of wizards. As the troll bellowed the wizards in the jury box simply cast a variety of spells from a mere dazzling for the more junior members to outright striking this foe dead with magical might for the more experienced ones.

Nothing at all happened.

That's when the amassed wizards remembered that, oh yes, they were in an area where magic didn't work. The courtroom. Then the screaming and panic to try and get out of the room began.

"Come on lad, get our weapons out!" Don called, running up behind him.

"Right!" He glanced down at the dispenser and yanked the first ward out.

"Release!" he said, spilling the box out.

"Wish my halberd had fit in here," Don grumbled, grabbing up his sword.

"I wish Lysanias' sword still had flames on it," expressed Everest.

"Why's that?"

Everest didn't get a chance to answer as the troll spotted the nearest person, Ms. Shell, and went to smash her with his club. The dark elf nimbly rolled to the side and the club came down on the desk, smashing it to pieces.

Amy backed off, orienting on the future so she could perhaps help her friends survive this encounter. "Don, it's going to go for her again, but be careful!"

"Right lass!"

Everest and Lysanias grabbed up their weapons while Don sprang for the creature. Everest, of course, took them up mentally, commanding their stone hilts to rise so he didn't have to go over there and get in the way. It, as predicted, simply swept the club in an arc, sending part of the table flying as well as trying to hit Ms. Shell again. Once again the dark elf nimbly dodged, enraging the creature further. Don, anticipating this move with Amy's help used part of the troll's strength against it, driving his sword deep into the arm of the creature.

"Hit that arm again, both of you!" Amy shouted. "It won't recover in time to attack!"

Both man and daggers now charged forward, joining the melee. Lysanias had his blade held high and gripping the hilt in both hands, drove it downward while Everest slashed upwards with a dagger. Don moved out of the way, wrenching his sword free as the others slashed it, and both attacks hit their mark. The club slipped from the troll's hand as it went limp against the body.

"It'll regenerate!" cautioned Everest, slashing with his other dagger. This didn't cut very deep but further caused the troll to lose it. It did something no sane being would do, grabbed its right arm with its left and yanked it off, whirling it through the air like a club trying to hit both Don and Lysanias who were standing right there.

"Duck!" screamed Amy, who certainly hadn't seen that coming.

Both got out of the way, scrambling backwards as the troll swiped at them with the arm.

"Not that I don't appreciate the extra blade," Don called to Lysanias, "but shouldn't you be getting your mountain spirit out about now? We'll hold it back!"

*Oh right, I have abilities. Why did I attack this thing with my sword first? Showing*

*off in front of Amy? Mountain spirit, can you hear me?*

"Attack it from the right side," Amy told Don as he lunged forward again. He struck but only superficially, Don figured he didn't even feel it. Everest tried the same thing, sending his knives spinning in from the side with less arm in the way. These cut more deeply as the troll didn't even bother to dodge them.

Lysanias was waiting for the mountain spirit to reply but was beginning to worry it hadn't heard him. The troll seemed to have lost interest in Don and turned towards the screaming mages that were trying to get out of the jury box and through the door that led to the room they had gone to deliberate in. It took a step towards them and a chair came sailing along the floor, thrown by Ms. Shell trying to trip it up. This worked, so instead of smashing an arm through the panicked crowd it simply fell, smashing through the railing and the chairs that were there. Luckily everyone was clustered around the door by this point, so no one was injured.

"Nice one," Don praised, looking to see who had thrown it. His eyes fell on the dark elf woman. "Oh. Well, you did what you could lass."

She gave him a dirty look. "I don't see you stopping it."

"We need fire!" Everest shouted. "That or sunlight."

"I know how to beat a troll!" she yelled back, hands turned upward. "You see either of those in my hands? The chair was all I had."

"Run it through the head!" suggested Amy.

"Good idea," Don agreed, approaching the dazed troll. He struck, trying to drive his sword into the creature's skull. The troll was thrashing around a bit so he only struck a glancing blow.

Both of Everest's knives now plunged down, also going for the head, but the troll rolled over, crushing more chairs and more of the railing around the jury box so they missed.

*Mountain spirit, hear my call!* But again he received no answer. *Oh come on!*

The troll now pushed itself up to a standing position again and looked around stupidly. The arm it was holding shriveled up and started to burst forth from the stump ripping it off had left.

"What?" Lysanias yelled.

"I told you. Fire is the only thing that can stop a troll!"

"Distract it, I'll try and get it into a ward!"

"Good plan, lad. Over here ugly!" Don yelled at it, moving around the side and slashing at its legs. This drew the creature's attention towards him, but also towards the door the terrified jurors were trampling over each other to try and get through. It kept turning towards them.

"Get it in the foot so it can't go forward!" Amy suggested, so Everest sent a dagger plunging down into the monster's foot. It struck but didn't go all the way though.

Lysanias got out a ward, shifting his sword over to his left hand and moving towards the creature. *Don't turn around now, please.*

Don and Everest both tried to get the monster's attention, Don by attacking the leg again while Everest spun his daggers around the troll's head. It stared stupidly at the daggers and Lysanias slapped the contain ward on.

It did nothing but burn up. But the troll now turned to look at him.

*You have got to be kidding me.* "I don't suppose we could talk this over?"

The troll bellowed, charging forward and taking Lysanias with him. He slammed into the wall behind him, getting the air knocked out of him.

*I take it that's a no.*

Ms. Shell grabbed a piece of the broken table and tried slamming it into the body of the troll, which hardly did more than distract it. "He's going to try grabbing her!" Amy called. The troll did seem to lose interest in Lysanias, turning to grab at her as Amy had said.

Everest gestured and his one knife sailed towards the troll's arm, cutting into it and deflecting it away from the dark elf who dodged back anyway.

Don started forward as the troll grabbed the knife out of the air, staring at it as it tried to wiggle out of the beast's grasp.

*Please work this time!* Lysanias dispensed another ward and as the troll was still right there, stuck it on. Once again the ward simply burned up without doing a thing. *I just can't catch a break today. Spirit of the mountain, I could really use you!*

*Why didn't you say so?* it replied, appearing next to the troll. It looked up at the thing that was also twice as tall as it was. It didn't really have a head to turn but Lysanias got the impression it was looking over at him like "really?"

"Finally!" Don shouted.

"Are we winning? I don't think we're winning!" Everest called to him. His second dagger slashed down to try and free the first, but again the hit was too shallow to really make the troll notice.

"He's going to go for Lysanias again!" Amy called.

The troll indeed looked back at the closest person, Lysanias, and went to punch him with the dagger still in his hand. Everest tried to hold it back but the troll was too strong to even notice the pull on the hilt. Don had arrived, having woven around the debris and the still upright table that had been smashed aside and brought his sword up, targeting the left arm. And the mountain spirit threw a punch at the hand to try and deflect it. This at least kept Lysanias from being hit, but he was still pinned between the spirit, troll, wall, and railing where the audience sat. However, his spirit was now between the troll and himself and grew to match the troll's size, making Lysanias breathe at least a small sigh of relief. The bad part about this was he could no longer reach the troll to try and trap it in a ward.

"Back off, let the spirit take him!" Amy called. "It'll try to hit Lysanias again!"

Don stepped back a few paces, sword at the ready in case it went for him, but it seemed to want to try and do just what Amy had said. It struck out at Lysanias but smashed into the spirit and bounced off, unable to figure out what it had just hit.

"Oh no it's going for the club again!" she called, and indeed it turned and reached out with its right hand, which seemed to be functional once more.

But the spirit pounced, hammering both fists into its back to try and knock it over. The troll managed to stay upright but was actually propelled closer to the club, which it grabbed up and whirled back. It didn't bother to dodge, the club held less fear because it was obviously wood and not supernatural, so it couldn't hurt the spirit even if it could bash through solid rock. Again the spirit hammered the troll, spending almost all of its remaining energy in the attempt. This paid off as the body of the troll spasmed and crashed backwards into the floor.

"You did it lad!" called Don, raising his sword in the air in a salute.

"It's not dead, it'll just regenerate!" Everest warned.

"Sit on it and make your spirit grow, quick!" Amy suggested, so it did. The group watched as the troll knitted itself back together again in less than thirty seconds and started struggling to get up.

"Get a torch or something, set it on fire!" pleaded Lysanias, sending the spirit his own energy to try and pin the troll's arms down. "I can't keep it down very long, it's really strong!"

But he didn't have to, as into the room strode the guildmaster and the alchemist, holding a glowing ball aloft in his hand. The troll bellowed, struggling to get away from the light. The group watched, fascinated, as the troll swiftly became stone and turned into a statue of itself.

"Is it-" Lysanias started to say, but the statue cracked and seemed to explode. He put his arms up to cover his face but that wasn't necessary, the pieces of stone vanished almost instantly. In their place was a jagged, colorful stone that seemed to shine with an inner light. Oddly even the club was gone, and a sudden silence

descended upon the courtroom. "I've got to have one of those!" he finished, looking at the alchemist. The man seemed confused, looking over the railing at the stone.

"I'm sure this concrete luminescence didn't do that!" he protested.

"No," agreed the guildmaster, "the fiendbeast simply reverted to being a fiendstone because it had been killed. Nicely done, holding it off like that. Is everyone alright?"

Everyone looked around to make sure no one had been hurt, and Ms. Shell stepped up beside Lysanias to look down at the crystal. "Thanks for-" That's when Kappa charged through the wooden slats and touched the crystal.

"Hey, what's that creature-" the guildmaster started to say, but Kappa had already reached the remains and started to ripple and grow. There was a flash of light and a sense of power that washed over those left in the courtroom and when everyone looked again, the cute "baby" Kappa was no more. In its place was a creature that looked far more bestial and stood about half as tall as Lysanias himself. His head was sleeker and more snakelike, but with a beak that now looked more like it belonged on those serpent things they had fought in the forest. His body was lumpier, almost looking like a miniature troll, not that Lysanias could see this all very well because Kappa seemed to be dancing.

"Oh yeah!" it said, spinning in place and wiggling its arms. "That's what I'm talking about. Yeah, work it Kappa, work it!"

"You can talk?" both Amy and Lysanias gasped.

"At long last!" he agreed, not dancing anymore. "No thanks to you. Honestly, a snake monster and a troll? I must look hideous right now, can someone get me a mirror? Hey lady," he turned to the guildmaster, who was staring down at him. "Can you get me a mirror? What does a guy have to do to get a mirror around here?"

"What's he saying?" Mary asked.

"Oh for the love of Pete. Hey Lysanias, you got any spare translation wards? I know how you hate translating." He turned, showing his back. "Just slap it right on back of me there. That's a good kid. What are you waiting for, an engraved invitation? I'm not getting any younger, come on, get in here kid. I'm waiting on you."

Lysanias got one out and cautiously approached, then pressed the ward onto Kappa's back. "That's the way, well done, good job, sit. Stay. Now can somebody bring me a mirror?"

"You want a mirror?" asked Mary.

"Yeah, so I can see what these guys did to me. Honestly, why did they have to beat up such ugly stuff? That's what I want to know."

"What's going on?" asked Amy. "How come you can talk now? And why are you so big?"

"Big?" Kappa snorted. "I'm not even dwarf sized, no offence Don."

"None- what?"

"Anywho, I can talk because you finally got in enough fights to let me evolve. Honestly, I need to absorb the essence of your fallen foes if you want me to do my job and protect you. Thought everyone knew that. But did you ever think to ask, hey universe, is this all there is to my good buddy Kappa? Or could he be more, something greater, perhaps even something... special?" He put his foot on the crystal and posed. "Hey ladies," he said to those still in the jury box, fingers in an "L" shape.

"No, I-"

"That's right, no you did not. Never thought Kappa was more than just your little swimming buddy. I tell ya, it's rough being me it really is. It's not easy, being green," he singsonged.

"Can someone tell me what's going on?" Lysanias asked.

"You're a hopeless case kid, don't even try. Just smile and nod, that's my advice to you. Smile, and nod. Go ahead, try it now."

"No!"

"Well, suit yourself. But while I have your attention, and hey, Don, Everest, you need to hear this too. Get over here." He climbed up onto the railing so he could look the three in the eyes better. When they were in front of him he bowed his head. His tone changed, becoming serious and quieter. "Thanks a lot for looking after Amy. I still have some growing to do so I'm going to need you to look after her a bit longer. I'll help where I can, but I can't do it all. Having you around means a lot to me."

"Of course," they all agreed.

"And you!" he yelled, turning to Amy. "Would you sleep with this guy already? What are you waiting for, a golden light to shine down from the heavens? Ain't gonna happen. How many more fights does he have to be in, saving your sorry hide, before you give him a little of that sweet reward? Am I right kid? Am I? Of course I am. But seriously, you could be a little more manly. Knock her door down or something. I see you looking at her, don't tell me you don't want it. Drag her by the hair, caveman style. She's got enough of it, am I right?"

"I- that is- it's not- I would never-"

"Eh, whatever. I've said my piece. Anyway, I'm Kappa, nice to meet you all. I'm your friend, let's travel together!" He stuck his hand out and the three, in turn, shook it. He hopped down and went back over to Amy. "As you were, just go back to pretending like I'm not even here."

"Why do I never understand what's going on?" Lysanias asked.

"This time even I don't," Don admitted.

"That's no surprise," Everest said, bumping him with an elbow.

"I suppose you've read about this?"

"Er..."

"It's a companimal," Mary said, turning to him. "They haven't been widely studied, but the guild has a few people looking into them. To see one evolve though, that's rare. Wish it hadn't been here, and we could have had some spells going to study it. Ah well." She seemed to be speaking to herself. "Could we suppress the magic suppression, get time window in here? Or maybe..."

"But what is it?" Everest asked. "I thought it was just a weird animal-"

Kappa broke in. "So's your mom. Ohhh, zinger! I'm still right here you know. Weird animal, why I aughta-"

"No one knows. What they are or where they come from."

"So what about the troll?" Don asked. "Explain that!"

"That's a lot easier. Hand me that crystal?" Don nudged it with a foot and Mary laughed. "It's perfectly safe. It'll take a lot of magic to reactivate it."

"If you say so." Don picked it up and handed it to her, and Mary looked it over. Rick also came over, clearly fascinated.

"Amazing, never seen one this large. This is a fiendstone, basically a magical crystal that can become a creature, like you saw. But to use one like that... It's been a day of surprises."

"Americut!" Lysanias remembered, looking around the courtroom.

Mary shook her head. "He's long gone. This stone was hidden in his amulet, which I see now was made of glass so it could shatter easily. This stone was probably on the cusp of becoming that troll though how he figured it so precisely is beyond me. The amulet didn't do anything for him as a regular imbued object would, simply kept magic away from the stone. He jammed it up against the edge of the spell that keeps magic from working in this area, and broke the glass. This let it absorb and disrupt the spell, which allowed him to teleport away. Then we were busy fighting it instead of going after him. I had no idea he was so crafty! Or that they could be used in that way, honestly. What else could they do, I wonder?"

"He implied he was working with a group," Don reminded her. "They may have come up with the plan."

"Indeed. We'll have to look into that. Oh, and before I forget, thank you for taking

care of the creature. Sorry you didn't have any help!" She said the last to the guards at the door.

"Not our job," said the one on the left. "We're here to keep prisoners from getting loose, not take on trolls that spring out of nothing."

"I see," she replied icily.

"It's fine," Lysanias told her, even though everyone knew it wasn't.

"That's very gracious of you. Well, you beat the creature, here's your reward!"

She handed him the stone, which he of course dropped. "I don't want something that's going to turn into a troll!" Rick looked pained, hands almost reaching out to try and catch it.

Many laughed again. "Then you're smarter than most. Those stones, especially one that size, go for a lot of money on the open market."

"Really?"

She held up her hands. "Hey, don't ask me. People are crazy. But take it to the auction house in town, oh it's closed for the fair but when it's open I mean, and you can probably get a sack of gold for it. A small sack, but still."

He looked down at the stone and then back to the glowing sphere in Rick's hand. Picking it back up he offered it to the man. "How about we talk trade?"

"Pun intended!" yelled Kappa, pumping a fist in the air. "Nice one!"

*Having him around is going to be very interesting, isn't it?*

## The Thing I Want To Do The Most

When: Just after offering the trade

Where: Courtroom

The eyes of the alchemist lit up as he was offered the fiendstone, thinking he might finally get to study one after all this time. But Don put a hand over it.

“Now don’t be hasty there, Lysanias,” he cautioned. “That’s a lot of gold you’re just letting go.”

“This is just my offer,” Lysanias explained. “Rick has to make me a counter offer that’s acceptable.”

“Ah, good lad! Carry on.”

“Carry on my wayward son, there is peace when you are done!” sung Kappa.

Everyone looked over at him.

“What? Wrong key?”

“Anyway, what did you want for it?” Rick asked.

“One of those to start, obviously,” he pointed at the glowing ball in Rick’s hand. “Access to any mundane materials you have and training to better understand them. The training in *any* skills you can teach me for that matter. Samples of alchemical creations you’ve whipped up and notes on how to make them myself.” He paused, thinking what else he could ask for.

“What? No pony?” asked Everest.

“And a pony!”

“All that you ask, and more!” he agreed. “Come down to my lab and we can work out the specifics.”

“I will have to insist on one thing, though, before I hand this stone over to anyone.”

“What’s that?” Mary asked.

“When it’s not being actively studied I want it behind a barrier of some kind that keeps it from absorbing magic. I don’t want any deaths by troll on my conscience when I could have just stuck it in a contain ward and hidden it away for the rest of time.”

“We’ll take every precaution,” Rick assured him.

“Fine.”

With the trial now over and Americut becoming a wanted man, the jury members came out of hiding and went back to their tasks. Mary made some notes to have a wanted poster made up, a bounty placed on Americut’s head, and his guild membership terminated. Also getting some workmen up to start putting the place back in order as they couldn’t do it magically. She didn’t exactly apologize for them being put in danger but did thank them again for taking care of the problem. Lysanias actually felt pretty good about it, despite his energy reserves now being depleted. He thanked the mountain spirit who vanished back into his soul, and thought *for once I didn’t get knocked out or anything. I’m making progress?*

He also thanked Ms. Shell for distracting the beast with the table, and she brushed it off. “Never thought I would need combat training as a lawyer. Maybe something I should look into, though.” She looked him up and down, seeming to consider something. “If that naiad doesn’t take care of you, look me up sometime. See you!” She left the room, perhaps putting a little more sway into her hips than was strictly required. Lysanias stared after her, unsure what he was feeling. *She is really cute.*

“Oh my,” Don teased, elbowing him. “You are becoming a real ladies man, aren’t you?”

“No I’m not, stop it!” He turned red.

“It’s the beard, make no mistake.”

“Don!”

"Feel free to stay here, at least until the fair is over," Mary told the group while trying to suppress a grin. "You've earned it. And Amy, if you can track down where Amecirut went, we'd be quite grateful."

She shook her head. "Anything that blocks magical means of gathering information seems to block me as well. That's why I couldn't just go to your library," she pointed up, "when he was having me fetch spells for him. I couldn't get past whatever protection spells you have going on the place."

"That's somewhat of a relief. Still, he can't be protected all the time so if you do happen to get any clues, let us know. If you need anything else you know where to find me." She too left the room, leaving the last jury members and the visitors trickling out.

"I guess we're back to tracking down this maw of shadows?" Everest asked.

Amy nodded. "I didn't dream anything new last night, so we just have what we know now to go on."

"Blind shopkeepers and glowing men," Don agreed.

But Amy shook her head. "Remember my initial dream. Lysanias was using his sword to point the way, and it dragged him towards the maw."

"But he's going to study with the alchemists for now by the sound of it."

"Do you really think we're going to find anything while the fair is going on?"

The group considered. "We should probably wait for the crowds to thin out," admitted Don. "Let things get back to normal. But we should also be out there, a fair might be the best time to cause havoc. Remember, that shadowy form took over an annunaki and made him gather people and head to the surface to free P05. We should be watching for people acting strange."

"Who are not drunk, or high on mushrooms or just letting loose a little," cautioned Everest. "It is a festival."

"Ah, good point. Well, it's worth a try, and we can see the fair at the same time."

"Yeah, why did you guys skip opening night? It was great!" Lysanias chided them.

"Oh, they had their own little fireworks display going on I wager!" Kappa snorted.

"I don't get it."

"My goodness you're naïve. Smile and nod, remember what I said."

"Could you, I don't know, take that ward off him?" Don asked.

"No, he's a part of the team," Lysanias countered. "And he'll be treated as such."

"Hey, you're okay kid!" Kappa told him, surprised to be defended. "I don't care what Everest says about you, you're tops in my book."

"What I- don't listen to that little twerp."

"Oh, a twerp am I?"

"Boys, behave," said Amy sternly. "I think you and I need to have a little talk. Why don't you two head out and see the town? I'll have a chat with Kappa and head out later. I can ask around if anyone has seen anything strange."

"Will you be okay, lass?"

"I'll see trouble coming a mile away," she assured them. "But maybe one of your knives wouldn't go amiss, if you can spare one Everest."

"Sure, we can go get the sheath for it. Attaching it to that costume you bought, that's going to be the tricky part."

"We'll make it work. See you all later?"

"Weren't you listening? I can make sure she stays safe now," Kappa insisted. "You underestimate me at your peril."

"Sure little one," Everest assured him, handing a knife over. "Just keep telling yourself that."

Lysanias went down to the ground floor and then walked to the basement where the alchemist was working. He set the stone down on the table and Rick came over carrying an armload of stuff.

“What’s all this?”

“The stuff you asked for. We have tons of it around here, we’ve been here a loooong time. Hey you two, come meet our guest!” Two other people stepped over from the tables with all the weird things bubbling away and stuck out their hands. One was huge, as big as the troll had been and obviously female. She had the head and legs of a bull, which stuck out from beneath her robe. Great horns swept upward from her head and while it was hard to tell, Lysanias believed she was smiling. “I’m Abigale Splithoof, nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“Elves Presley, and yes I know my name is stupid,” said the other. He was a young kid, probably about the age Lysanias would have been had he not been stuck in that cave for thousands of years. A young teen in other words.

“It is rather odd,” Lysanias admitted. “But my name is Lysanias, so I think I win.”

He laughed. “I guess so. My parents are obsessed with elves, don’t ask. Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.”

“Lysanias may be staying with us a few days to learn some alchemy,” Rick told them. “But he’s brought us a present in exchange. Let them see it.”

He held up the fiendstone, and both peered at it, Abigale leaning way over to get a better look.

“That isn’t what I think it is, isn’t it Rick?” she asked.

“It is. We finally can have one for study.”

“Are you trading it for stuff?” She indicated the pile of jars, bottles, and envelopes now spilled out onto the nearby table. “We’re going to need more than that, unless you’re thinking in guild prices. We can afford to be generous, stuff is piling up around here. Actually we really need to clean this place out now that I think about it.”

“I’ll find some more stuff, just give me a minute. Hey, can you get down a small chest?”

“Sure thing. Hey, what about that book we could never translate? Think he would be interested?”

“Eh, we can toss it in.” He looked around. “If we can find it...” They went off to look to stuff, Abigale checking the higher shelves.

*Oh, that’s why they’re so tall.*

“So you’re an alchemist?” asked Elves.

“If doing alchemy makes me an alchemist, I guess so!” *As well as a maker of wards, a seer, a gnome, and who knows what else.*

“That’s great. There’s so few of us, I was lucky to find these guys. Oh, and don’t let Abigale fool you, she looks fierce but she’s a really nice person. Weirdly enough, she’s the closest I have to a mother.”

“What is she, if that isn’t a rude question?”

“She’s a minotaur. Part cow, part human. Pretty crazy, but I’ve seen squirrel people, half-dragons, talking turtles, you name it. Magic, am I right?”

“Yeah! Part cow. How did that happen?”

“I know, right? She only has two, if you’re wondering.”

“Two?”

“You know...” He cupped his hands in front of his chest.

*I think I do. Cow, come on.* Now it was his turn to roll his eyes.

“Well, better get back to work. The apprentice gets to make sure nothing explodes while it’s cooking. You’ll be around? Talk to you later.”

“Yup!”

“Found it!” Abigale announced, holding a book up and coming over to Lysanias. “Here, take a look. It’s full of formula and pictures of armor and things but the wizards we showed it to couldn’t make heads or tails of it. See what you make of it.”

“Let’s have a look.” Lysanias opened it up and scanned through it, becoming more excited with every page. The first part did indeed have pictures of both weapons and armor, and focused on how to strengthen the metal with spiritual energy. The next part focused on making weapons sharper, and allowing either to repair themselves. The last part, as far as he could see, was examples of binding powers into objects. *This is how my sword was made, I’m sure of it. It’s basically a book on artificing. This is an incredible find!* “I can use this,” he said, unable to keep the excitement out of his voice.

“Really? I’m glad. Take it, we couldn’t even read it. If you can so much the better. I’ll see what else we might have kicking around down here.”

“Thanks!”

She nodded and wandered off again.

*How can I even read this? It doesn’t look like my kind of writing, I guess Enochian others would call it. Weird. Who cares though, if I can get enough out of this to figure the process out I might be able to fix my sword!*

A while later Rick made sure all the corks and such were tight, then started carefully placing everything in the box Abigale had gotten down. “So here’s the deal,” he said as he worked everything in. “It’s the box of alchemy stuff, don’t worry each is labeled.” He turned one of the vials so Lysanias could see it, and on the label was “Incendiary Ether.” “I’ll include a list of what’s there, what it does, and a book of formulas and ingredients in case you find a lab someplace you can use. I’ll include two of each concrete luminescence, one set full sunlight and one full moonlight. Be careful around that one, they can trigger lycanthrope transformations.” He put four balls of light into the chest, two bright yellow and two cool white.

*I have no idea what that means.*

“Oh, you can have this one for free.” He tossed the ball of light from his pocket and Lysanias almost didn’t nearly fumble it. He expanded the pommel of his sword enough to slip the gem out and put the ball of light in its place. He stuck the gem in the trunk. “Good plan, never know what it might come in handy. Won’t have to worry about vampires I guess!”

*I have no idea what that is either.*

“Huh, tough crowd. Anyway, also included is access to the materials collection, the book, and enough training to get you started in anything we can do that you can’t. Sound fair?”

*Honestly, just the book on artificing is probably worth it to me. To nearly everyone else on the planet it would be gibberish so value is an interesting thing.* “I think we have a deal!” He handed the fiendstone over and Rick took it, holding one of the yellow orbs up to it.

“Extraordinary. Much as I want to dive into this, there’s only a few days of the fair left so let’s demonstrate what we can do and start our lesson.” He set it aside. “Abigale, you’re up.” He picked it up again. “Go over there or something.” He vaguely waved them off, and Abigale tilted her head.

“Come on, let the kid play with his new toy.” She grabbed up the chest and moved to another table, then sat on the ground next to it.

“So I guess I’ll show you what we can do, and then you can tell me what you’d like training in first?”

“That sounds great!” *Because if I tell you all I can do, you’re going to be very confused.*

So the rest of the day Lysanias got an introduction to the world of the alchemist. It turned out there were three new things for him to learn; animating objects, altering intrinsic attributes, and brewing up substances. Abigale also told him that as he got better at what he could already do, changing the nature and shape of material that he could practice doing so without touching the substance he was working with. She demonstrated and he made some notes in his book about everything.

Brewing of course had clear instructions already noted down in the book he was getting as part of the deal, but Abigale went over the list so he knew what each substance did and how to use it. Animating things he could see at least one immediate use for, attacking with his arrows. He envisioned making a ridge that ran along the length of one, then making it spin at high speed on its own. By jabbing it into something the ridge would then pull the rest along, doing more damage as it worked its way deeper into whatever it had hit. *This would be pretty agonizing, and brutal, so I would probably only do it as a last resort. But having the option would be nice.*

As far as the intrinsic modification, Abigale explained it could change the fundamental nature of an object to a certain degree. She demonstrated with his sword, turning the weapon completely harmless for a short time.

"Something that was mindless could be turned into a great intellect," she further went on to explain. "Or something made to fly or swim could be made unable to do so. It doesn't come in handy all that often, but when it does it can be pretty powerful."

"I can imagine!"

He went to his room that night feeling quite energized, and after stopping to make sure everyone had gotten back all right (and hadn't seen anything) he went to his own room to start devouring the book on artificing. He had only gotten to the first page, glad to have a sword that shed usable light again and was wondering if he should make some sort of cover for the orb. He was thinking that he wanted to keep the sword nearby but still get to sleep so putting the light out would need to be done at night when there was a knock on his door.

"Yes?"

Amy stepped into the room with Kappa, and Lysanias' heart immediately started racing. *Oh right, there was that whole thing, that I totally forgot about, because alchemy.*

"Uh, hi."

"Hi."

Both were looking down, and Amy closed the door behind her.

"Oh, look at these two love birds! Don't strain yourselves now, kids!"

"Do you have to be here?" Amy asked him, exasperated.

"I go were you go. What, you don't like it when someone watches? Don't worry, you won't even know I'm here!" He snickered.

"Look, do you-"

"You don't have to-"

The two looked down again, unsure how to begin. "Go ahead," Lysanias pleaded.

"Would you like me to sleep here tonight? I mean, with you?"

Lysanias' palms felt sweaty, and his heart was still racing. He couldn't even look at her, she was too beautiful. *There's a right answer and a wrong answer,* he cautioned himself. *What is the right answer?*

But he knew what it was, of course he did. "Only if that is your choice. I don't want to pressure you into anything."

"Oh, come on!" Kappa complained. "Can you believe this guy?"

*Crap, was that the wrong answer?*

"Quiet. We're talking now."

"Fine."

"You mean that?"

"Of course I mean it. I know what caused the nephilim to exist. I know right from wrong, even if I don't know exactly how things work in this time. If you don't want to, I don't want you to feel obligated." *If you think I'm not good enough... You're probably right.*

"Most people," she said after a moment, "take one look at me and somehow think just because I'm a naiad I'll jump right into bed with them. And it's true, I suppose we do have a certain reputation for it. I've read enough minds and felt enough emotions walk-

ing through town to know there's really only one thing on most minds when they see me. Even yours."

"I'm sorry."

"It's nothing to be sorry about. Look at me! Go on, look." He did, and she put her hands above her head and stretched every muscle. She even got on her toes, then relaxed again. "You've never seen anything like me, have you? I mean what's the point of me? Just to be supernaturally attractive?"

He looked down again. "I don't know." *I don't know what the point of me is, how can I tell you what the point of you is?*

"I know you don't. I'm just trying to explain this to you. The fact you don't expect that, that you can even sit there and make it my choice is really amazing. You actually treat me like a person, not just a thing to have in bed."

"Of course you're a person. You taught me stuff, you have a drive to learn and figure your abilities out."

"Most would not agree, I think. I really like that about you. But do I like you enough to jump into bed with you, or is that just my nature and me fooling myself? I don't know."

"And do you think I like you because you're supernaturally attractive, or because I like you as a person? Could I even tell the difference?"

"Exactly."

"Does it matter?" asked Kappa. She glared at him. "Okay, okay."

"I'm going back to my room," she announced. "Because you have given me the choice, and I choose to be a person."

"I understand." *If I insisted against her wishes would I be any better than Ameri-cut? Probably not. She has to make her own choices, and would some person, a human I met not a month ago, jump into bed with me? Probably not. Ergo, she is doing the thing a person would do.*

"I hope you do. You really are a great person, Lysanias, and maybe someday... I don't know. For now I think this is best."

"Whatever you want."

"I'll see you in the morning."

"Sure."

She slipped out of the room, Kappa following and shaking his head. "They're both crazy!"

Lysanias shoved the book and sword under the bed, no longer in the mood, and tried to get some sleep. But all he could think while he lay there was *I'm just not good enough. That's the real reason she walked out of here. And I can't really blame her.*

There Must Be Fifty Ways

When: The next evening

Where: Hallway outside their rooms

The next day, Lysanias awoke alone as he expected. After quickly washing his face and making some breakfast for himself he guiltily reached out with his senses. Amy was in the room to the right of his and he still felt her spiritual energy there. He slipped through the door as quietly as he could and moved down the hallway. It was empty at the moment, and he hoped it would stay that way until he reached the elevator. Leaving two wards outside her door he turned and rode the elevator down to the ground floor and then walked the stairs to the alchemist's lab. He felt bad just running off like this, but he couldn't face her.

*She made her choice. You're not good enough to bother with, I guess. It's better this way, she doesn't have to see me and be reminded of yesterday.*

The other alchemists hadn't arrived yet so he started analyzing the bits of metal and other materials they had listed on the shelves. Once they arrived he stayed there until late, working with them to make sure he had picked up the basics of what they promised to teach him. The two older alchemists were impressed with his enthusiasm (Elves just thought he was a suck up) but didn't realize the source: trying not to think of Amy all day. Finally he had to go back to his room for the night and stood at the foot of the stairs leading to the ground floor. The others had left an hour ago, but he could no longer put it off. He almost sat down and asked the universe if he would run into her on the way back to his room, but decided against it.

*It would take too long, and besides, there's only a slim chance of it anyway, right? She's not going to be there waiting for me with a knife. She's probably moved on, found some other guy to be friends with today while walking around the city. After all, her "chain" is broken, right? She doesn't even need to stay, not really.*

But there was someone waiting outside his room, someone he didn't expect to see there.

Kappa.

"Not even going to speak to her now, is that it?" he asked, getting up from where he was sitting. "Funny, you provided the means for us to talk to the others, so I know you didn't rush off and forget us. But now here you are sneaking back to your room? You can't even talk to her?"

"It's just easier this way."

"Easier? Punishing Amy for something you allowed her to choose is easier? Funny how your mind works, kid. You say to someone, 'I acknowledge you as a person, please do what you feel is right' and then when they choose what they feel is right, you leave them? Pretty shady if you ask me."

"I didn't intend it this way, it's just I have to get all the time with the alchemists that I can."

"Don't even give me that, kid. I can't tell when people are lying like she can, and even I can tell you're lying. But hey, prove me wrong- she's still up. There in her room, feeling miserable because it turns out you don't see her as a person after all. Go talk to her. You could ask her how her day was. She'll say 'oh, fine' which will be a lie but that's the kind of thing you're supposed to say, right? And she'll ask you about your day and you'll say 'fine' even though she'll know you're lying. And that can be the end of it. Talk about inconsequential stuff and you can both be miserable. What do I care? I won't sneak into your room and slash your throat out because I'm her protector and she's in pain because of you. Promise! Alternately you could go in there and apologize for being such a jerk and beg her forgiveness. You both get to feel a little better and maybe, just

maybe, move on to a point she would consider becoming more than just a friend. Man up, in other others. Up to you. I'm going to annoy Don and Everest for a few minutes so you just take your time, okay?"

He started towards their door. "What are you, anyway?" he blurted.

"Just call me your conscience, kid." He sang "When you wish upon a star!" and pushed his way into the other's room.

*What is that guy? Strange.* Lysanias took a deep breath and went over to Amy's room, lighting knocking on the door. *Oh, she must have gone to sleep, well I just-* "Come in, Lysanias," she called from within.

*Or not.* He pushed it open and found her sitting up on the bed. The candlelight in the room reflected off her shimmering hair and cloaked part of her in shadow, but she was still the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. The two stared at each other a moment after he came into the room and closed the door.

"So, uh, how was your day?" Amy asked at last, not even looking at him.

"Fi- no. Amy, look, I've just been told by Kappa, a being that couldn't even talk a week ago, that I'm being a jerk. And I suppose I have to agree. You made a choice, and I have to respect it. Trying to avoid you is stupid, and I'm sorry. He also said you felt pretty bad all day and you might not have if I had come to see you this morning before I went to train with the alchemists. So that's on me too. It isn't right to make you feel bad because I'm a... spoiled brat or whatever." He tried to imitate Kappa's voice. "So snap out of it, sister!"

She smirked a little, finally looking over at him. "That was terrible. You're terrible. And you're right, you were being a jerk, you jerk."

"I know. I hate to play the 'I'm actually still only fourteen because I was asleep in a cave for thousands of years' but-

"You were asleep in a cave for thousands of years. That excuse won't work forever."

"That's why I'm getting all the use out of it now I can!"

The two grinned at each other. She got up and put her fists on her hips. The candlelight was now behind her, making her a little easier to look at as her form was mostly shadow now.

"If you're going to play that, I'm going to play the 'I'm just a nature spirit who was trapped in a dark cave for who knows how many years.' See, two can play that game." She softened, dropping her hands. "Maybe I could have handled it better. Explained better last night, or-

Lysanias shook his head. "No. I made a choice too. I could have joined you in the morning for breakfast, and talked to everyone, and made sure you knew it was no big deal. But I didn't. I actually *used my powers* to make sure you were in your room and snuck off without seeing anybody. That's on me."

"You didn't!" She spun, turning her back on him and crossing her arms. She turned her face to side, looking at him out of the corner of her eye. "I don't believe you! Using what I taught you for evil?"

"I know. You think I'm proud of it?"

"I don't know, you sounded a little proud of it." She was stroking her chin as she said this.

"No I-" He caught her 'innocent' expression as she turned back to face him. "Very funny. Look, the point is, I do want to be your friend and I wasn't being a very good one today. Sleeping in my bed isn't a condition of that. Maybe we can pretend today didn't happen, chalk it up to experience, and start over tomorrow?"

"What's chalk?"

"What?" It took him a second to switch gears in his head. "Chalk? Oh, a white stone we used to use as kids to draw on rocks because it left a powder behind if you rubbed... You're right, it's a weird saying isn't it? You know what I mean."

"I guess." She considered, wondering if she should forgive him. "If you pay the penalty I'll let you back into my good graces again. If you do a good enough job."

"What's the penalty?"

She lifted one of her feet up. "Rub my feet. You know how sore they got, walking around on cobblestones all day for two days? Tomorrow I'm buying some shoes. Oh, and I want money for shoes. And a, what did you call it? A pony?"

He laughed, walking closer to her. "You don't even know what one is!"

"Doesn't stop me wanting one!" She stretched out on the bed on her stomach, kicking her feet in the air. "Here they are. Get to work!"

It took some time for Lysanias' apology to be completely enacted, but she finally let him go. "And I'll see you for breakfast tomorrow?"

"Of course."

The next morning Amy came to get him and showed him the cafeteria area the mages enjoyed. He ordered some food and sat down next to Don and Everest.

"Good morning stranger," Don said to him. "Amy, why don't you introduce us to your friend? Who we have never met before this moment though he does have a very fine beard if I do say so myself."

"Why sure, Don. Don, this is Lysanias. Lysanias, this is Don. He's a dwarf and next to him is Everest which-

"Was the name of a mountain," Kappa interrupted.

"What?" everyone turned to look at him.

"Long time ago. Yeah, Everest, pretty sure of it. Don't ask me how I know that, but I do. There's actually a lot of random information bouncing around my head. I was thinking about it last night. Weird huh?"

*I was thinking the same thing. He gained the ability to talk just like that? What other information was stuffed into his head and how did it get there?*

"My parents said they found the name in an old book, so it certainly could have been," he admitted. "Anyway, nice to meet you! Lysinias did you say?" He stuck his hand out.

"Knock it off. I was only sulking for a day, you couldn't have missed me that much."

"At least you called it what it was," Kappa admitted.

"We good, lad?"

He nodded. "I still have some things to work out for myself, but yeah, we're good. It wasn't anything you guys did, it was just me acting entitled. I'm sorry I disappeared yesterday."

"Eh, forget it. Do you know, one time Everest was so mad at me he didn't speak to me for nearly two weeks? I don't even remember what that fight was about. Funny, huh?"

"Really? Two whole weeks? And you still got back together."

"We did. Best two weeks of my life, come to think of it." He sighed wistfully.

"Oh? Maybe I should make it three this time," Everest threatened.

"Could you? Honest?"

"Do you hear something, Lysanias?"

"Oh no, don't drag me into this. We're setting that... aside." He made a sliding motion with his hands, as though sliding a box on the table. "On to another topic, I've been learning a lot from the alchemists, how goes your task- the shadow hunt?"

"Nothing odd to report," Don told him. "Festival goes on for two more days, then is cleaned up Haniday. We'll start searching in earnest then, with you and that sword you're supposed to be using somehow. Until then do what you need to do with the alchemists."

"I had them look the sword over, actually. They can't recreate the exact material it's made of now either. Nor could they explain how it had changed. I think because it

started off a talisman and interacted with that weird shadow energy it absorbed. They gave me a book on talismans, hopefully once I get some time with it I can better understand it myself. Maybe even make my own or repair the sword so it can absorb things again. How would you like your halberd to set things on fire, or armor that can repair itself? It's possible and the book shows how to do it."

"I could do that with magic, lad. If I had the time and a lab, anyway."

"Oh. Well, fine. We have a lab for the next two days at least. If you want to do anything like that now would be the time. I'm sure they wouldn't mind, they're pretty nice people."

"That sort of thing takes a while, probably wouldn't be able to finish anything before we had to leave."

"Too bad. Wonder if I could create some kind of portable lab? Hummm..."

"If you got really good at making those contain wards I don't see why not. Build a small room out of metal and just store it. The water we put in the tub was there when we got it out in order to dump it. So it obviously doesn't tip anything over while inside."

"That's an idea." He shook his head. "I just need about twenty years to master all this stuff."

"You've got two days."

"A day and a half. You're spending at least some time with me on the last day of the festival, right?" Amy asked.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world."

"The world is not enough!" Kappa sang, and everyone laughed.

So the two days passed and everyone had a great time on the last night of the fair. There were more fireworks, concerts, food, and magic shows both with real and charlatan magic. The group wandered together, enjoying each other's company, but as with all things it came time to shut it all down.

"We'll have to come back here next year," Lysanias told them on the way back to the guild building.

"Here, here!" Don managed, having had a bit too much to drink that evening. (And as a dwarf that was saying something.) "You guys are the best!"

"Yes we are!" Everest agreed. "Let's get you to bed though."

"Yer all welcome to join us!"

Amy smiled, but covered her mouth with her hand.

"Ah, no, no, you're not," Everest clarified, holding up a hand.

"That's quite all right," agreed Lysanias.

"Oh, think yer better'n me? Is that it? Too good to share a bed with a dwarf, is hat, hat, that what I'm hearing?"

"I don't think that."

"I think you do. But yer not, you hear me? I'm a... I'm a... What am I? Dwarf that's what I am. I'm a dwarf!" he shouted at the top of his lungs.

"Oh yeah!" another dwarf passing by answered him, raising a mug. "Dwarves forever!"

"Why don't we just go ahead," Everest suggested, pulling him along. "You guys can come up later."

"Yer still welcome!" he called back to them.

"Okay, that was odd," Amy remarked. "And he did that to himself on purpose why?"

"Odd. Yup." Lysanias just smiled and nodded.

"You got it right that time, kid. I'm proud of you!" Kappa beamed.

The next day Lysanias said his goodbyes to the other alchemists, and explained why he probably wouldn't see them much anymore. They said he was always welcome, and if he wanted to stay there permanently they could use the help.

"In fact, we could hire you on paper so you get a salary, and you're just a field agent," Abigale suggested. "As long as you bring back interesting material or broken devices for us to study, it would be legit. And when you're in town or the festival is coming up you pop back here to help us prepare. You wouldn't have to be stuck here to say you worked as an alchemist. You aren't a wizard, we can define your employment with us any way we want, right?" She grinned at him. "They're just leasing us the space, we don't actually work for them. What do you say?"

"I'll think about it. That sounds great though, I'd be willing to do all those things!"

Rick told him he would write up what Lysanias was looking for and pass it on to the guildmaster, who hadn't come to see them while they were there. At the trial she had expressed interest in the "shadow beings" they were looking for, but Lysanias figured she was just really busy and forgot.

"After all, if we quickly need the guild's help dealing with them, I'd rather not have to take the time to explain again."

"I'll do it today, have no fear of that," Rick promised.

"Thanks. For everything. You all really made me feel welcome here, and honestly this is the first place that's really done that." *Even if it still feels like we're being hidden away from the world down here, instead of you having an actual lab of your own someplace in the city. Where, I don't know, people could come and have things done instead of the guild pretending what you make is magical in nature. You say you don't work for the wizards, but really, you do. Do I want them over my head all the time, despite how good the offer sounds otherwise?*

"Good luck saving the world or whatever," Abigale told him. "Let us know you're safe, no matter where you decide to settle down, okay?"

"I will."

"How do I get in touch with that naiad you're always hanging out-" Elves asked. Rick smacked the back of his head. "I mean, bring her back any-" Another smack. "It was nice meeting you!"

With the fair mostly packed away by early afternoon, the group had been visiting various shops in pairs. Lysanias with Amy and Kappa, while Don and Everest got the idea to visit the various other guild halls, such as the adventurer's guild, for any news of other places being attacked. Trouble was there were shops for everything from bread to ancient bits of pre-moon civilization and Lysanias felt he needed to visit them all. About three hours into it they entered a general store sort of location and Lysanias stopped dead in his tracks.

"That cheese wheel," he exclaimed. "That's the one all right!" He looked around and there were two people in the place, a man and woman, both human. The woman was sitting at a table while the man was leaning on the counter. He looked at the cheese.

"I'll give you a good price on it," he announced, "if you want it that badly."

*He's wearing the red outfit. Red shirt, darker red vest.* "This may sound like a strange question, but neither of you is blind, are they?"

They looked at each other and shook their heads. "No one blind here."

"That is so odd. Has this shop been burgled recently? Has someone shifty looking come in?"

"Nothing like that." *Except for you,* he didn't say. "What's this all about? Something I should know?"

"I should be going," said the woman, getting up. "You don't need me in the way of your customers. I'll see you later, Lucan."

"Right. So, about this cheese."

But something strange happened as the woman tried to walk by Lysanias. His sword rose of its own accord and seemed to stick to her. It pulled him a little off balance and he nearly fell on top of her.

“Do you mind?” she asked coldly.

“Lysanias, what are you-” Amy started to ask, pulling him away. Then they both noticed the sword, still stuck to the woman like a magnet.

Everyone froze, Lysanias lifting his hands to show they were not on the sword, which was horizontal and flat across the woman’s side.

“Now what in the world?” asked Lucan.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know what’s going on with my-”

“He’s the one that disrupted the annunaki operation!” Lucan suddenly realized, looking Lysanias over. “Run! I’ll hold him off!” Inky black shadow surrounded the man, again flowing up from the floor, while the woman tore the sword off herself and lunged for the door. “You’ll pay for that now!” promised Lucan, raising a hand.

“Oh no watch out!” Amy called as blackness shot out of it.

Am I The Only One Who Hears The Screams

When: Just as he dodges

Where: The shop

Lysanias tried to dodge the dark beam of energy that streaked towards him, taking Amy's shouted advice to get out of the way. It impacted his jaw with a glancing blow, then continued past and hit the wall behind them.

"I've got this," Kappa announced, running around the side of the counter. The man dodged, looking down at this creature that was trying to slash at his legs. "Or not!"

Lysanias drew his sword, taking advantage of the man's distraction. *Can't use my arrows in here, this place is barely ten paces across. And I have to keep myself between it and Amy.*

"He's going to kick you!"

"Little runt!" The shopkeeper kicked out at Kappa, who became surrounded by water just as the man was surrounded by shadow. The two auras clashed, and the shopkeeper's foot bounced back.

"Ha, you aren't the only one who can do that you know?"

"He's distracted, swing from left to right."

Lysanias now swung his sword, trying to slice into the man from behind, attacking the blind spot, why not? The man dodged to the left, not having much room behind the desk, and his upper arm was caught by the edge of the blade. He cried out, and looking down that there was a "gash" in his shadowy armor where the sword had passed. Lysanias could see the flesh underneath, and the blank face of the shopkeeper looked at it in shock.

"Impossible!" he breathed. "How did you do that?"

"Worry about me, sucker!" Kappa taunted, slashing at the man again with his claws.

"I'm not really worried," he replied, dodging again.

"Ah, come on!"

*The stone bowl behind him, he won't be expecting it.*

He kicked out at Kappa again but as he did, Lysanias exerted his will on the bowl Amy was talking about, making it fly towards him. It hit the barrier of shadow and exploded but the man grunted and turned to look at what had hit him. His kick had connected but Kappa had tried to strike back instead of just dodging. Once again the auras clashed and nothing happened.

"Get rid of that aura, kid!" he shouted.

*Okay but how? Wait, I can change the fundamental nature of something now.*

*Grab him when he next dodges Kappa! Kappa attack when I say..*

Amy's thought came through clearly, and Kappa tensed, ready to strike.

*Now!*

Kappa slashed again while Lysanias went to grab the man, putting as much energy as he could into the attempt. Kappa missed but did his job of distraction well, as Lysanias now had his hand around the man's arm. It felt odd, cold and dry, but also like it was somehow there and not there at the same time. As quickly as he could Lysanias sent spiritual energy into the darkness, willing it to change into the opposite- light.

The aura around the man blazed, becoming as light as it had been darkness. It seemed the man screamed with two voices, and Lysanias backed away as the man went rigid, arms outstretched.

"*Now!*" commanded Amy, and Lysanias didn't hesitate. He thrust his blade forward into the man's chest. The aura and the light in the man's eyes were snuffed out like a candle flame, and a sudden silence descended on the shop.

*Oh no, I just killed again.*

Into the shop burst a guardsman in armor, taking in the scene of Lysanias' sword thrust through the chest of the shopkeeper. "Drop your weapon!" he commanded, drawing his own sword. "You're under arrest for the murder of this shopkeeper!"

Lysanias pulled his sword out and the man slumped to the floor. "You don't understand-

"Drop the sword, now!" he commanded again, and the blade clattered to the floor. Lysanias wasn't really following the guard's orders, he just couldn't hold onto the hilt any longer, his hands were shaking too much.

*Why do I have to keep killing people?*

"Wait, it's true," insisted Amy.

"Miss, you stay out of this. Stay right there, I'm going to need your statement after I take this man into custody. You, hands behind your head and turn around. Do it now!"

"This man was possessed by some kind of shadow, he attacked me!"

"If that's so your trial will be an open and shut case. Now turn around!" He roughly spun Lysanias around and pushed him to the ground.

"You have to believe me!"

"I don't have to believe anything. Now be quiet."

The door opened again and another man in armor arrived. "Get the restraints on this man," commanded the first. "I apprehended him killing that shopkeeper behind the desk."

"Right!"

Lysanias felt heavy iron cuffs going around his hands and didn't resist. He felt light headed and shaky, revulsion at what just happened and disgust at himself for having no better option than running the man through warring inside him.

*I've killed again. That's two people I've killed. Three in total that have died around me. My ability changed his darkness into light, it hurt him, and then I ran my sword through him. Why do I have to be the one that does this?*

"Right, he's secure."

"On your feet. We'll be taking a little trip to the nearest jailhouse."

"Wait, I can prove it," Lysanias pleaded. "The woman that was here, the sword stuck to her. She's one of these shadow possessed people too. Just touch it to her and you'll see!"

"You mean the one that went and got us? All right, we'll see if you're telling the truth." He grabbed Lysanias' sword and put his own back. "She's outside, move. Take her statement and don't let anyone in until- you know how to do your job, I don't have to tell you."

"Right." He got out a notebook and went over to leer at Amy while he "took her statement."

Lysanias was guided outside and pointed out the woman, who was now looking rather confused. Both went over to her and the guard, holding Lysanias' arm, spoke to her. "You saw the attack?"

"I... yes? There was an attack, I ran to get help."

"Man here says this sword will stick to you if I touch you with it. That okay with you?"

"I guess?"

He did, letting the sword go. It clattered to the ground.

"That's that," the guard said with finality.

"It stuck before, you have to believe me!"

"Sure it did." He picked it up. "Move."

Lysanias was roughly shoved in the direction of the nearest jailhouse, and neither man saw the shadowy figure moving from person to person away from them.

Lysanias was long gone when the tall, thin, smooth faced man walked past and inquired what had happened. When he heard that some fool was babbling about shadows and had killed a shopkeeper he thanked the man and rushed off, clearly distraught. "Weirdoes all over the place," muttered the man that had told him.

Once again Lysanias found himself in prison. It was surprisingly like the first one he had been in, ascetically pleasing interior design not being a requirement for such places. He had been frisked, his dispenser taken, along with his stone arrows, pack, and books. The chest of samples was of course in a ward inside the book, so at least it was safe for the moment. He sat in contemplation, wondering how it had come to this and what he should have done differently.

*Should I have just put the guy into a ward, then dealt with him later? Tried to find a priest or something, to see if this is a "demon" that is possessing people like this? How am I going to get out of this? That guard just saw me stabbing the guy, why couldn't he have come in during the fight? Not enough time I expect. Should I have resisted that guy? Ran away? That would have made it look worse though, right? Like I was guilty.*

*Why didn't the sword stick the second time? That woman was one of them. She must be, given what the man said to her. I was the one that disrupted the annunaki operation. That means these things are moving with purpose, not just randomly doing stuff. But what good is having a sword that can detect the presence of these things if there's more than one? Unless they both attack one gets away. Plus I have to be right up next to the thing so a sword fight is the only option.*

*Lysanias, are you all right? Amy's voice came to him.*

*I'm fine, can you hear me? he sent back.*

*I can hear you. Where are you?*

*A prison. Again. Is Kappa all right? Are you?*

*He's fine. Said he 'absorbed the essence of shadow' whatever that means. He wasn't hurt in any case. As for me, he didn't even look at me. That guard wanted my 'statement' so I told him what happened. I think he was more interested in my body than... anyway. I'm not to leave town because I'll need to give my testimony at the trial. But they said I could go so I found a quiet spot to talk to you.*

*Trial? Oh great, shadow creatures or whatever are taking people over in this town too and I'm going to be sitting in a courtroom!*

*Hopefully not for long. They said it would be soon. Even a town this size doesn't have too many court cases a day.*

*I guess that's a relief. Look, I'm glad you're okay. Better find Don and tell him what happened. He's going to be thrilled I'm in jail again, but at least this time he won't be joining me. Do I need one of those lawyers now? I want Ms. Shell, she did a great job defending Americut.*

*There was a pause. You do recall she lost, right?*

*Only because the jury was made up of mages. He even said they would never rule in his favor, because it didn't benefit them. Just get her, okay?*

*Okay. We'll figure this out, one way or the other.*

*That's right. They don't know who they're dealing with!*

*That's the spirit. I'll be in contact soon.*

*See you later.*

*Bye.*

*Yeah, don't know who they're dealing with. Lysanias, the guy sitting in a cage, needing to be rescued by his friends. Again. Who am I kidding?*

An hour later, looking worried, Don and the others showed up to talk to him. Kappa, of course, got the first word in.

"Hey there buddy, don't you be a square. If you can't find a partner use a wooden chair!"

"Kappa? Wooden chair? That's disgusting, how would you even-"

"I think it's about dancing, but I can't be sure. Strange where your mind went though. Point is, if you're going to murder someone in broad daylight, the first rule is 'don't get caught!' Then you can stay out of the big house here."

"Oh is that the first rule? I thought it was 'make sure to know where you're going to bury the body.'"

"That's rule two."

"All joking aside," Don cut in, "are you okay, lad?"

"I'm fine for the moment. Did Amy tell you? Two in one place! What's going on around here?"

"I don't know."

"I managed to track down that lawyer," Amy told him. "She said she would be happy to represent you. Er, how much gold do you own?"

"None, they took everything away from me."

"They'll give that back," Everest insisted. "You still have most of the coins you got from selling the glass, right?"

"Yeah, I've only changed the one so I would have money for the fair."

"He should have enough."

"What's going to happen to me?"

"She'll come and explain it to you a bit later," Don assured him. "On the bright side, you know your dream was fairly literal now!"

"But it wasn't. They weren't blind, nobody stole from them. Apart from the shop just being there no other part of it was right!" *I mean the cheese wheel was there but does that really count?*

"That's not exactly true," Amy protested. "The baskets over their heads could have meant they were under the shadow. Being robbed, then talking to the thief may have meant they weren't themselves. It's hard to know with dreams. But we do know the sword works now. It did point them out, and it can hurt them somehow."

"I was thinking about that. If people are being possessed or controlled by these shadow creatures maybe I can kill them without harming the people they're controlling."

"That aura isn't too thick," protested Kappa. "It's like a second skin. Can you really be that accurate with a blade?"

His face fell. "No, not really. I just don't want to kill anybody else!"

"One step at a time, lad. Look, the warden only gave us a few minutes. The trial will be held in a few days, once everything is in place. Do what the lawyer tells you and it'll be fine. You were defending yourself and the threat is real. We'll all testify to that."

"Thanks everyone. Sorry to put you through all this."

They all assured him it was fine and promised to keep looking. Of course without the sword it would be tricky but perhaps the "glowing man" would show up soon. Lysanias hoped so and they said their goodbyes.

Some time later Ms. Shell showed up, once again wearing fine clothes and little jewelry. Lysanias was brought to a small room they could talk, where he was chained to the desk. She was allowed into the room when he was secured, and the guard left. Lysanias looked her over as she regarded him, one hand on her hip and one on the table. She had dark eyes and short hair, and probably stood up to his chin at best. She was thin, with pointed elf ears and had an air of grace about her that came through just standing there motionless.

"Would those even hold you?" she finally asked, pointing to his bonds.

"Not if I wanted to leave, no," he admitted. He thought a moment. "I could get out of them at least four ways, off the top of my head."

"Is that all?" She sat down. "Your friends told me a little about you, that's why I ask." She shook her head. "You've gone through an awful lot of trouble to see me again. I would have joined you for dinner, had you asked."

"I thought maybe you might go for the 'bad boy' type so I wanted to make sure I was 'bad' enough."

"Oh, you're bad enough," she admitted. She took some papers out of a bag she had carried in with her. "Let's go over your case."

"Fine."

He told her from the start what they were doing in town, and how they had tracked down the shadow creature that had taken over the shopkeeper.

"So why didn't the sword stick afterwards, when it clearly had before?"

"I wish I knew."

"I see. Well, we can have a wizard corroborate your story by looking at the past. We are fortunate to have a guild hall here, so some wizard would know how to do it. That's fairly expensive though."

"What isn't, with the guild?"

"Indeed. Other than that though, there's no evidence this shadow exists apart from your word. To the average person you just walked into that shop and murdered the man."

*Which, in fairness, I did. I turned his shadow skin into light and ran him through when he was distracted. Could I have saved him somehow? I just don't know enough.* "There will be truth magic going though, right? If Amy tells the jury what she saw, and it isn't a lie, wouldn't that be good enough?"

"That's a risk you're going to have to take."

"How much for the spell? Do you know?"

"Given how often it's used, I do. Seventy five embers, typically. We don't need a master to cast it, the incident just happened so it wasn't twenty years ago or anything."

"True. So a couple of moons? That doesn't seem so bad, but all my money was seized when they threw me in here."

"I can get your money released, don't worry about that. So, I'll get that done and have a court appointed wizard document and sign that what he saw was what you also claimed happened."

"And that will be the end of it?"

She laughed, then became serious again. "Hardly. That could have been an illusion of some kind created by magic to cover your crime. The trial will still go on. Naturally you'll have to be tested for demonic possession, mind control magic, curses, having remnant systems inside yourself that went crazy-

"All that?"

She nodded seriously. "Believe me, in the world we live in there can be any number of reasons why two people kill each other. We like to be thorough. An autopsy of the corpse will also be done to check for evidence of your claims."

"I guess you aren't kidding. Whatever we have to do. But there are more of them out there. Am I going to have to go through this every time?"

She considered, a finger against her chin. "I suppose you could just not get caught."

"What? This danger is real. One of these shadow things took over a lizard man and dug up a huge war machine from before the fall. They need to be stopped! I'm talking about forming some kind of group to keep the city safe! I don't want to be the one running around killing people to get rid of them!"

"No one is going to give you a 'license to kill' as it were in any case. If there is some threat to the city, and that's assuming your case is won, there are measures in place to do something about it. The threat of demonic invasion is always present, after

all. If these aren't demons it will be trickier, because they wouldn't respond to normal prayers and such, but one thing at a time. First we win your case, then we can take it to the proper channels. You realize that's what you should have done in the first place, right?"

"Would anyone have believed me?"

She shook her head. "No, probably not. But at least it would have been documented."

"All right, I'll keep that in mind for next time." *Ugh, why do I always learn about things after it's too late?* "I suppose if a shopkeeper was taken over, their plans can't be that advanced. I just hope there isn't some other war machine buried around here."

She looked a little worried. "Is that likely?"

"I'll work on getting an answer to that when we're done here. I can still do some investigation while locked in here." *I can use the practice, and it's not like it wears me out or anything. I just wish I could leave my body like Amy does, but she says I'm not ready for that sort of thing yet.* "Why a shopkeeper though, it doesn't make sense." *Of course, I don't know what the 'great leader' was before he became the 'great leader.'*

"I can see if he was planning on getting any shipments of dangerous items in."

"That's a good idea!"

"Is there anything else you can think of that might provide proof of what you're saying?"

He thought for a moment. "Unless there is some physical evidence left by the attack, no. It's a shadow, it possesses people. I don't think it's going to leave any evidence. It did shoot an energy blast at me, check the wall across from the desk." He showed her his bruise from earlier, it was too minor to heal and he had been worrying about other things.

"I'm sure the city guard noted down any physical evidence, but I can go down there and take a look for myself. Anything else?"

"There is one thing maybe..."

"Yes?"

"That woman the sword initially stuck to, then didn't? She seemed out of it. Make sure she's watched or questioned carefully. If the shadow fled her, maybe she doesn't remember what it made her do. Or if her personality suddenly changes it may have returned."

"She'll be called in for the trial anyway, as she saw you come in. We can see how she acts then. And try the 'sword test' again, see how she reacts."

He nodded. "It sounds like a good start."

"That it does." She got up. "I'd shake your hand, but..." She pointed to the cuffs. "Maybe next time. See you in a day or two. We'll go over the case before the trial begins, make sure your friends know what questions they'll be asked. That sort of thing."

"See you then. Thanks."

"Of course!"

She knocked at the door and was let out, and Lysanias was brought back to his cell.

*What a wonderful way to spend the night.*

Once again Lysanias found himself in a courtroom, his friends seated in the audience chamber. Only this time he was where Americut had been, and he had no daring plan of escape. *Of course, if I called to the mountain spirit there would be little these people could do about it. But would the spirits even help me in this case?* The jury was made up of a random selection of beings from the town, though certainly one could be a magic user of some kind. Ms. Shell had prepared him in the days before by going over what questions she would ask and how everyone would need to respond. Also as Ms. Shell had said he was tested for various things from demonic possession to simply madness, and found to have been in his right mind during the attack. For his part he had asked the universe a series of questions while sitting around his cell so he was more informed about things than anyone else would have been. There were no huge or even small war machines anywhere around here, for one thing. For another the shopkeeper and the woman he had seen seemed to be simply random people chosen by the shadow possessors. Apparently they didn't stay with a person for very long, but moved among populated areas almost at random. It seemed that as enormous war machines were difficult to come by they "rested" between plans by simply going wherever. As the memory loss gave them away it seemed they didn't stay with one person very long lest they be discovered that way.

This all was quite frustrating because he knew testing the woman with the sword wasn't going to produce a result, nor was there any real way to track that one shadow possessor down. But as the trial began it had been brought out along with the witnesses to the attack and the document asserting a wizard had looked into the past and recorded what he had seen. The courtroom was much the same as the previous one with one exception. As this was not taking place at the mage's guild hall the judge's bench was situated level with everyone else, and there was no magical suppression going on. They still used a truth candle, which was lit by the judge as he took his position at the desk. And of course everyone was sworn in with a bible, which Lysanias simply accepted with a shake of his head. *I don't need to antagonize anyone at my own trial, after all.* The judge was a human, middle aged, with thinning hair and wearing dark robes.

"The trial of Fareborough vs. Lysanias is called to order," he proclaimed, banging his miniature hammer. "Council for the prosecution?"

"Thank you, your honor." The opposing lawyer stood, and Lysanias looked him over. This was a "beastfolk" or human sized person who also happened to be animalistic. In this case a wolf, dressed in shirt and pants that let his tail and claws poke through. Ms. Shell had said his name was Bloodmuzzle which didn't worry Lysanias at all in those moments he desperately lied to himself. She called him a real "hard nose lawyer" but looking at him his nose didn't seem any harder than any other dog's nose, so he thought he might be missing something. "In this trial I will seek to show that this man," he pointed a clawed hand at Lysanias, "did brutally murder one of our beloved town residents, Lucan Dooit. He did this without provocation, with this very sword!" Again he pointed, this time at the blade that was sitting on the desk. "He is survived by his infant son, Justin Dooit, and his wife, Samantha Dooit." He paused to let the impact of these words sink in because he was excellent at his job. Naturally Lysanias hadn't know that, but it made sense. Why wouldn't he have been married? Why wouldn't he have been a father? He sunk a little lower in his chair, feeling miserable all over again. Bloodmuzzle continued. "I will call three people to the stand to prove my case."

"Then I'm sure the case is already won!" the judge joked, eliciting a laugh from the jury and the people behind him. He stared incredulity at Ms. Shell, who looked as

though she couldn't believe her ears. "Council for the... the..." The judge started snapping his fingers. "You. Your turn. Go ahead." Ms. Shell had to take a second to compose herself and stood, trying to mask her outrage at this horrendous breach of protocol. She had told Lysanias the judge was actually one of the better ones, according to her he only took the occasional bribe and most cases he heard did see justice done. But he seemed to be acting somewhat out of character at the moment, now staring off into space like he didn't even care what she had to say.

"Thank you, *your honor*," she finally managed, standing. "As council for the *defense*, I will show that Lysanias acted not only in self-defense, having been attacked in the shop by the shopkeeper, but heroically. The shopkeeper had been possessed by a creature he has fought before, and vowed to stop before they do any more damage to our fair city. The town of Farpoint, near the west coast, was recently imperiled by one of the creatures, and it seems they are here as well."

"So he claims," the judge interrupted her.

"I have a signed document from the mayor of Farpoint under oath that Lysanias did in fact save that town just recently. He happened to be in town for another trial and I managed to track him down before he left for home."

*And how hard did you have to twist his arm to get him to sign it? He threw me in jail for the whole thing and then basically banished me from the town! I have to admire her dedication.* Lysanias sat up a little straighter, looking at Ms. Shell with gratitude.

"Easily faked, but go on, finish whatever it was you were going to say."

That really made her eyeballs pop out of her head but she sputtered and recovered. "There are more of the creatures out there, one more at least, so we should be aiding Lysanias in his bid to protect us, however tragic this death was. It has prevented many others. I will call three witnesses."

"Three? That's a bit excessive, isn't it? Whatever. Bloodmuzzle, you're up."

*What? It's the same number as him, how is that 'excessive?'*

"Thank you, your honor. I will call my first witness, the lady Esmerelda." The woman took the stand, and indeed it was the woman the sword had originally stuck to. "Please tell us what you saw."

"That man came in—"

"I'm sorry, which man?"

"That one." She pointed to Lysanias.

"Please let the record show that she is pointing to the accused. Go on, Esmerelda."

"He came in, and I guess, I mean he drew his sword and started attacking the shopkeeper. I ran to get help."

"And when you returned with the guard, Mr. Dooit was already dead, isn't that right? Dead at the accused's hand!"

"That's right."

"Objection, she wasn't there and didn't see what happened. How could she know how the man died? He could have had a heart attack for all she knows!"

"Overruled. The sword that killed the man is right there. Just be quiet and let her talk."

"Wa—" Ms. Shell barely stopped herself from shouting at the judge then and there, or leaping the desk and throttling the man.

"No further questions."

"Something's wrong," Lysanias whispered to her. "The other trial wasn't like this at all."

"No trial is like this," Ms. Shell assured him. "But at this point what can we do?"

"Do you have any questions?" the judge asked.

"Yes, I do." She stood in front of the woman. "So your testimony is that this man come into the shop and attacked Mr. Dooit?"

"That's right."

"Was anyone else in the shop at the time?"

"I don't think so."

"Really? Not even that naiad there, who came in with him?" She pointed at Amy, who raised her hand. "Or her companion, Kappa, the companion that she had with her?"

"Oh, well, I mean, no one notices a naiad, right?" She gave a nervous titter, and there were some lewd comments from the audience that the judge did nothing to silence. Finally they settled down on their own.

"So was she there or not?"

"I guess?"

"I see. Had you been drinking before that?"

"Of course not!"

"What were you in the shop to do?"

"I don't know, maybe buy something?"

Again the audience laughed. "Buy what, specifically?"

"Is that relevant?" She looked to the judge.

"You don't have to answer," he assured her. "I think we've heard enough, you can step down."

"Thanks!" She left, and Ms. Shell's hands started clenching, probably imagining smacking the judge.

"I call my second witness, the guard that first entered the shop. Mr. Forester?"

He took the stand and sat up straight, looking nervously around at the people arrayed before him.

"Can you tell us what you saw when you entered the shop?"

"That man was stabbing poor Mr. Dooit through the chest with his sword."

"I assume you mean that man there, and that sword there?" He pointed to Lysanias and the sword in turn.

"Yes."

"I submit exhibit A, the murder weapon." He held it up. "Recovered from the scene still wet with the murdered man's own blood. Was there any sign of a scuffle? Any indication as to why this attack happened? Perhaps he was going for the shopkeeper's purse?"

"I suppose he must have been? He was in front of the counter, it was hard to tell."

"No further questions."

Amy stepped up. "Mr. Forester, was there anything unusual about the shop that you noticed when you entered?"

"Not in particular, no."

"What about when you approached the building? Was there anything about the windows you noticed was strange?"

"Oh yeah! I guess there was a sort of light shining out of them?"

"A sort of light? Can you describe it?"

"It was a bright light, coming out of the window."

Lysanias face palmed. *These are the people building a case against me? I don't believe this.*

"But you saw no light when you entered the store?"

"No, just him being stabbed."

"And before this you didn't hear any inhuman shrieking from the store?"

"Not that I recall."

"In your official capacity, what weapon is most used in robberies?"

"I guess I would say knives?"

"Certainly, they are easier to conceal and to get rid of. Cheaper to purchase as well, and in a close encounter just as effective. More a tool for intimidation than actually

hurting someone. So would this situation, in which the accused brought only a sword, be a robbery?"

"Objection, you're asking him what he thinks!" Bloodmuzzle called out.

"Sustained."

"No further questions."

"Then I shall call my third witness," announced Bloodmuzzle. "This is detective Wattson, who went over the crime scene after the incident." A man in a guard's uniform and breastplate took the stand. He was in his mid-thirties, still in his prime and had bigger arms than Lysanias could ever aspire to. "Mr. Wattson, please describe the aftermath of the attack."

"Of course. I entered the establishment and saw the shopkeeper Mr. Dooit on the floor. I checked his pulse, he was dead, and noted the position of the sword and the corpse. The sword had blood on it, and matched the wound exactly. There was no question in my mind that the sword had done it, and it had been held by that man when the deed was done."

"Thank you. No further questions."

"Mr. Wattson, did you happen to notice anything unusual about the shop?"

"Nothing springs to mind. There was a smashed plate or something on the floor, probably broken in the scuffle."

"Thank you."

"Your witnesses," the judge sighed, now looking impatient.

"Before I call my first witness, Amy Pond, I would like to submit several documents for your review. Exhibit A is a copy of the prison record entered when Lysanias was brought into custody. I have circled the important part, he was admitted with a strange bruise on his neck. This will become important later. Secondly, Exhibit B is a signed statement by a member of the mage's guild saying they magically conducted a viewing of the past and the observed actions therein."

"Exhibit B is too easily faked, I'm not allowing it to be entered as evidence," the judge decided. "Please remove it."

"You think I would fake a document from the *mage's guild*? Your honor?" she lamely added.

"Perhaps only unknowingly. I'll be checking the prison record most carefully to make sure it hasn't been forged as well."

"Of course," she allowed icily. "Then I will call my first witness, Amy Pond." She took the stand, and was again subject to everyone staring at her. She looked rather funny wearing just shoes, but didn't seem too bothered by the attention. She looked angry, even she knew something odd was going on here.

"Please describe the events leading up to the attack," Ms. Shell prompted her.

"Of course." Amy described how they had been seeking out other "shadow beings" and how the shopkeeper had reacted when seeing Lysanias. She also described the beam of dark energy he shot, wounding Lysanias, and how the aura of darkness became light just before he died.

"Thank you. No further questions."

"So you admit the accused stabbed the man, Mr. Dooit?"

"He stabbed a shadow creature attached to the man. It's just rather tragic one had to die at the same time as the other."

"I see. No further questions."

"I will call to the stand the wife of the deceased, Mrs. Dooit." A normal looking human woman took the stand, looking somewhat out of her depth with all of this.

"Had your husband evidenced powers such as creating auras of darkness or shooting beams of energy out of his hands before? Was he a wizard or possessed of some other supernatural or demonic power?"

"Not that I know of. He was just a shopkeeper. He inherited it from his father. If he could do any of that, you think he would have stayed a shopkeeper?"

"Had he been acting strangely before this?"

"He seemed a bit distant that morning, but that doesn't mean anything. It doesn't mean he was possessed!"

"I know this is hard for you. I am sorry for your loss, and I have no further questions."

"No questions!" called Bloodmuzzle.

"You may go," the judge waved her off.

"My third witness is another detective I hired to look the crime scene over. Mr. Tomes, will you please take the stand?" A clean shaven man with a pipe took the stand, looking dapper in his hat and coattails. "Can you describe what you found at the scene of the attack on my client?"

"Of course, Ms. Shell. Of course. I entered the shop and immediately saw the broken bowl as my colleague mentioned. I thought it strange that the pieces of broken pottery were not in one area, as one might see when one drops a dish from a fair height. This suggests the bowl hit something and bounced off it with a fair amount of force. I sketched this, if you would like to pass this out?" He took out a sketchbook from under his arm and passed it to her, and she showed both the jury and judge. "The second oddity I noted was on the wall directly across from the desk. This was a blasted out hole, about four centimeters across, and fairly fresh given the plaster residue I also discovered beneath it. If you could turn the page please? Thank you." She showed where this was sketched out as well. "This seems to bear out the claim that the man did have some sort of unholy aura about him, as no pottery fragments were recovered from the victim's hair. Something that would have been seen had the bowl impacted the hardest part of the man, his head. Simply hitting his body or arm would not have shattered such a sturdy bowl, in my opinion. Secondly, one must ask where the neck wound came from? I believe it was indeed a beam, generated by the late Mr. Dooit, which scraped the neck of the accused and impacted the wall behind him."

*Okay, we obviously have the stronger case. Our witnesses don't seem totally befuddled, or drunk, and the evidence fits my story. The true story. If this jury claims I'm guilty of murdering a man, not a monster shaped like a man, I'm going to be very disappointed. Of course I have been nothing but disappointed ever since Don found me...*

"No further questions," she announced. "The defense rests."

"Well, it's pretty clear what happened," said the judge. "Do you really need to deliberate or shall I just sentence the man?"

"Your honor!" shouted Ms. Shell, now unable to be silent. "Are you seriously suggesting the jury not be given time to deliberate? What about closing statements?"

"One more outburst like that and I'll have you... I'll do the thing... that I can do. What is that thing?" He was snapping his fingers again.

"Contempt of court?" Bloodmuzzle asked, puzzled. Even he was starting to doubt the judge knew what he was doing at this point.

"That's the one! Contempt of court. I didn't hear any objection from the jury so I'll just get to sentencing you, shall I? I, judge of this court, sentence you to-

*"Just a moment!"* A voice "rang" through the courtroom, and the judge stopped, looking at something past where Lysanias was sitting. Lysanias hadn't "heard" the voice in his ears, but rather in his head as though he had been thinking the words *just a moment*. But they weren't his thoughts, they were the thoughts of the strange being now making their way towards the bench. The figure was tall and bald, probably standing a head taller than Lysanias, and had no facial features to speak of. Black eyes were the

most prominent, with the nose and mouth seeming mere afterthoughts. This, coupled with the fact the being had “spoken” with his own voice led Lysanias to wonder if they were male or female. The figure was clearly not human and so he couldn’t really use the shape of the being as any guide. They were also thin, thinner than Lysanias which he didn’t even think was possible. *“I wanted to be absolutely sure, and there seems no doubt now. Away from here, shadow kin!”*

The judge now looked worried, eyes darting to where the exits from the room were. “Uh, guards, arrest this man! Contempt of course! Of court I mean.”

*“You will do no such thing. You, Lysanias, be ready!”*

“Ready for-”

But the being didn’t give him a chance to be ready for anything, simply taking something out of their pocket and holding it high. Light exploded through the courtroom, and everyone turned away from it, squeezing their eyes shut. That inhuman wailing was back, and Lysanias “heard” the voice of the man again beneath it. *“Now, you must strike while it is separated. Only then can I send it back to where it came from.”*

He cracked his eyes open, and the glare had diminished but not faded completely. Before him was the judge, arms thrown over his face, but it was the thing *behind* him that Lysanias focused on. It was a shadow, seemingly pinned to the wall by the light, which was fading even more as he waited for his vision to clear. *Do I need my eyes? What have I been training for if not this? I can feel that thing from here, both in terms of energy and with what Amy taught me.* He risked a glance at Bloodmuzzle, but he too was acting blinded so Lysanias sprang into action. He crossed the room, his eyes closed but senses alert. He knew where Bloodmuzzle was, and thus by extension his sword. He cracked an eyelid, not wanting to slice his hand open, and grabbed the hilt. *Wonder if I could give it the power to simply come when I reach my hand out? Easier to find someone that can teach me to move objects at a distance like I already can with rock. One thing at a time.* Had he been a true action hero he would have easily leapt the barrier and with a warcry to strike terror into the stoutest of hearts driven the blade deep into the shadowy creature that had been revealed by the blast of light.

*But if I tried something like that I would catch my foot on something and fall on my face. Probably run myself through with the sword too.*

So instead he carefully climbed the barrier, then sword outstretched, made his way to the creature. Without hesitation he plunged the sword in, making the creature cry out again as it actually cut into his essence.

*“You do not belong here. By the voice of the emperor I command you, begone and never return!”*

“The gate opens soon!” it screamed. “Our kind is-”

And it was gone.

Maybe Someday When We've Learned

When: As long as it takes to recover your sight from a bright flash

Where: Courtroom

The light in the palm of the hand of the strange being faded rapidly and was shown to have come from a device of some kind. The being tossed it aside and helped Lysanias back over the railing that separated the judge's area from the main courtroom.

*"Are you all right? Has the flash begun to fade, restoring your eyesight?"*

"I think I'm fine. Is that thing really gone?"

*"Indeed, thanks to your help. Usually it takes several of us to force them back into our realm but as that sword can actually wound them I thought I might have a chance alone. I'm glad I was right."*

"Me too. Who are you?"

*"Perhaps introductions can wait?"* The being gestured and the guards at the doors had recovered and were stomping over to Lysanias.

"Drop it!"

"Drop that weapon!"

*"Perhaps fleeing is the better course of action? You are too important to be locked up again."*

"I can't fight them, that'll be much worse for me!"

*"I didn't say you should."* The being set a hand on Lysanias' shoulder and there was a wrenching that set his teeth on edge. He blinked.

"What just happened? Where I am?"

*"My home in the city. I thought we should talk."*

"So you abducted me?" Lysanias' sword came up, and he warily took a step back from the being. "Look, I appreciate your help but you can't just whisk people away from courtrooms! I need to prove my innocence!"

*"I'm sure the judge will realize he was possessed and pardon you."*

Lysanias' eyes narrowed suspiciously. "You can see the future?"

*"Ah. Well, no..."*

"Then you have no idea! You stay over there." He took a few more steps away from the man, looking around. It seemed he was in a starkly furnished house, with a simple table and chair in this room. It was probably the kitchen, there was a sink and some cabinets as well, and Lysanias put the table between himself and his "rescuer."

"What direction is the courtroom in?"

*"You aren't thinking of going back, are you?"*

"Just tell me which way it is!"

*"Very well. The courthouse should be that way from where we are now."* The being pointed.

"Fine. Be quiet a minute." *Amy, can you hear me?*

*I can hear you, are you okay? Where did you go, exactly?*

*I'm not sure. My abductor hasn't attacked me or anything, but I don't know their intention. Ask my lawyer what happens now.*

*It's pretty chaotic here. The judge doesn't remember even coming into work today so he's freaking out. The guards rushed off trying to find you. Everyone in the jury is talking at once. It's a mess.*

*I can imagine. They must see now that what I was saying was true. Hopefully they can throw the case out without me actually being there.*

*Or you can be chased out of yet another town. He got the sense she was giggling. Anyway, keep your brain open and I'll see what I can find out. For all I know that shopkeeper being possessed doesn't even make a difference, and they'll still want to try you for the murder.*

*That would be typical of how my life is going.*

*Now, now, don't be a gloomy face. Oh, I think the judge is finally trying to restore order.*

*I'll see what this... person wants. Even this close I can't even tell if they're male or female, their face is like a mask.*

*There's always balance in the universe. Keep in touch.*

*Balance in the universe? What did she mean by that? "You caused quite a stir back there with your disappearing act."*

*"You can see that, or are you in contact with someone there?"*

*"I think I'm the one that gets to ask questions at the moment. To begin with, who are you?"*

*"I am Estamelosian Tamrikroll Barthalmuecarastian Fulthamias."*

*"What's most impressive is you said that with such a straight face." Not that I could really tell you were smiling with that tiny mouth.*

*"I do not understand what you mean."*

*"That's your name? Your actual name?" I thought he was doing a bit, like that stuff Don and Everest did when I met them.*

*"I understand your kind keeps them a bit shorter. You may call me Esta, if you wish."*

*"Fine, Esta. How did you do that?"*

*"Drive the shadow kin from that man? It was a device constructed by my people to create a specific type of blinding light. We only managed to bring a few of them with us, and that was my last one. Sadly they cannot be reused, and we have not found something in this world that produces the exact frequencies needed. So any others we discover are going to be difficult to deal with."*

*Exact frequencies? Great, I'm back to not knowing what people are talking about. "Wait, what do you mean 'this world?' How many are there?"*

*"Countless realities exist. Come, will you sit with me? I will have to start at the beginning and it is not a story my people tell lightly." The being gestured towards the door.*

*"Fine. But let me check back in with the courtroom."*

*"Of course."*

*Amy, any news?*

*I've explained why you aren't here anymore. I may have accidentally lied to them that you were chasing down another one of those shadow beings. You know, keeping the city safe and all.*

*You naughty girl!*

*Aren't I though? Kappa seems so proud of me. They're still discussing what to do with you, but given the judge was taken over the two lawyers are retelling everything they said. Says he only remembers bits and pieces, but from what I feel from the jury it should be fine. They're impatient to be gone and nervous about further take overs. I think they'd rather just forget the whole thing and... Oh wait. The judge is saying something. As this is a matter of city security they may want you to go see the local duke about this. I think the judge just wants to make you somebody else's problem.*

*I'm not sure that's good or bad.*

*Neither am I.  
Okay, whatever we have to do in order to clear this up.  
I'll let you know what he decides, I think he's going to think about it for a minute.  
He's called a recess.  
Thanks.*

*"Okay, lead on."  
"This way, please."*

The being stepped through the door further into the house and Lysanias followed, sword ready. The next room was darker, and as the being moved to open the curtains Lysanias noticed a faint glow coming from their body.

*The glowing man? Things are moving forward, aren't they? Not that I trust this being any more than I did, but at least they were expected.*

*"Please, sit."* The curtain was opened and Lysanias saw a few chairs dotted about the room next to the fireplace. He chose the nearest one and set the sword within reach. *"To begin, how much do you know of my people?"*

*"I've never seen your kind before. So nothing."*

*"I see. We are fairly rare but usually most have seen one or two of my kind. No matter. As you probably have guessed, we are not native to your world. We are actually from another, a world that has become dark and terrible to behold. We came here to escape that place and the forces besieging it. We should have known that the method we used would not escape notice forever."*

*"What method did you use?"*

*"There is a place on your world where, in the correct conditions, a hole opens between your world and ours. We discovered it and have been bringing through those we can while it remains open. But the forces against us found it and so control of the portal changes hands regularly."*

*"The forces against you being these shadow creatures?"*

*"Yes. We call them 'the people that walk akin to shadow and leave no mark upon the world.' Of course this is lengthy even for us, so it is typically shortened simply to 'shadow kin.' Your world has certain analogous creatures, such as the darques. Those from our world can possess people and thus are harder to detect. Darques here it seems cannot do this, meaning they are always seen for what they are. This makes them less dangerous in some ways."*

*"I agree. The judge it seems doesn't remember being taken over. If they can make you do anything they want and later leave you wondering what happened that's incredibly dangerous!"*

*"You have seen what else they can do. Attack with physical bolts of darkness, and even cover the host with their own bodies to act as a kind of armor. Most attacks do not harm them, so typically this is quite effective. Your sword, I heard it directly harmed one?"*

*"That's right. I got the shopkeeper's arm and the shadow around the arm actually looked cut. He seemed surprised at the time."*

*"Did you purposefully create the weapon to do that?"*

He shook his head. *"It was made a long time ago to absorb elemental attacks. I fought one of these shadow kin and absorbed a large quantity of fire along with this shadow element. It nearly destroyed the sword but I managed to straighten it out again. Since then it's been dark and seems attracted to these shadow kin."*

*"Perhaps some of the essence of shadow remains in the blade. It seeks to return to its own, turning the blade into a compass of sorts. You may have the only means to determine if someone is taken over or not."*

*"Lucky me."*

*"Indeed so! I do not know if it is the darkness in the blade or some leftover fire that allowed you to hurt the creature directly, but this shows it is possible."*

*"I'm not going to your world and fighting an army of shadow kin!"*

*"Apologies, I did not mean to imply you should. I was simply hopeful it could be studied and other weapons like it made."*

*"We would need to fight shadow kin with a weapon similarly created to absorb elements, have them attack with that specific combination of things, then hope the weapon survives. Doesn't seem likely. In the first place I can't make talismans yet, much less anything that complex!"*

*"Then we are stuck with only one weapon for the time being."*

*Hey Lysanias! Amy here. The judge is sending you to the leader of the town all right. Wants to know where you are so an 'escort' can be sent.*

*Just a second. "Where are we, my friends need to come to get me."*

*"This is Graywhale lane. Corner of Graywhale and Foxhole road."*

*Corner of Graywhale and Foxhole. We'll be waiting for you.*

*Got it. See you soon.*

*"Meanwhile, you can tell me about how you brought me here so quickly, and how you banished that shadow kin. Be specific, part of your apology for making my friends worry is teaching me everything you know how to do."*

*"But those are things only I can do."*

*"Heard it before. Get explaining! And make some notes if you can."*

So Lysanias got a brief explanation of teleporting and banishing, then opened the doors when Amy said they were close by. He dragged Esta along, saying he wanted the wanderer there as further proof these shadow kin were real and a threat. He handed the sword over to the guard, who said he could have it back when the duke made a decision.

*"You are all right, aren't you lad?" Don asked, concerned.*

*"I'm fine. Didn't Amy tell you?"*

*"She did, but this sending of thoughts you two can do isn't good enough for me. I want to hear it from your own mouth."*

*"I'm fine. The teleport didn't hurt me in the slightest and Esta seems nice enough. I might even learn a few new skills very soon."*

*"That's good. I bet you're glad to be out of that prison aren't you?"*

*He laughed. "I sure am. Though I know better how Amy feels now."*

*"It was a few days," she protested with a shake of her head. "No, you don't."*

They approached the building where the duke could be found, a place of more modern construction meaning it wasn't as tall as the guild building had been. It was made of stone, had few windows, but there was a crowd of people milling about the front.

*"They aren't here about me, are they?" Lysanias asked nervously, fearing a mob had gathered for some reason.*

"It's always like this," replied a guard. "Most of the things they try to bring to his attention are petty so the lower offices handle it. We may have to wait but hopefully we'll get in today."

"And if not?"

"I'm not sure."

*Great, this fills me with confidence.*

"I'll go deliver this and see what they want to do with us," another announced, holding up a folded rectangle of paper. "Make room," she shouted, making her way through the crowd. "Official city business, move along there!"

She came back maybe a half hour later and announced they could wait inside, so the group made their way through. There was a lot of grumbling and dark looks by the people already there but the presence of the guards in uniform and armor made sure everyone played nice. Finally they were escorted to a waiting room where those soldiers left and a different set took positions outside the door.

The entire place was well furnished, and this room was no exception. Soft chairs, a tray of refreshments at one end near the window, even a bit of greenery in the form of plants hung from hooks screwed into the walls.

"Having money must be nice," Lysanias remarked, looking around.

"Ah, but think of the headaches this duke must have," countered Everest. "After all, he gets to decide what to do with you!"

"I wouldn't want his job," agreed Don. "Though the money would be nice..."

"So tell us more about this portal these shadow kin come through," Lysanias said to Esta. "Like how many are we talking about here? I've taken care of three, is that a lot?"

*"The portal opens once a month, when the chaos moon is in a certain place in the sky. It stays open for a time, then closes again. I haven't been back in many years but according to others I've met since I came through it seems to vary. Sometimes our people come and finally escape the terror of our world. Other times shadow kin come through. Unfortunately I think more and more shadow kin are coming through than my people, lately. We are possibly losing even our desperate attempt at survival there while we wait for the portal to open."*

"So three could be basically zero?" Amy asked, thinking about dreams of shadows pouring through a hole in the air.

"In the worst case, yes."

"So, wait, you're saying there's a portal someplace and your people came through it?" asked Don. "But sometimes instead of your people coming through these shadow things come through. And you didn't warn anyone?"

*"You must understand, we couldn't. Shadow kin can come through on their own, yes. But in the beginning they came through by possessing my kind. We don't have the resources to build vast walls or cities around the point in our world where the portal opens. We had to protect it as best we could. Often times refugees would pour into the area just before it opened, leaving us no time to make sure they were not possessed. Naturally we wanted to get as many through as possible, and when a mass of shadow kin are chasing a group of refugees you don't ask questions."*

"That turned out to be a ploy on their part, didn't it?" Don asked quietly.

*"Yes. More than we realized were possessed. We thought we were doing good, but instead we just did harm here. Those that found themselves here often times did not know how they even came to be here, as the shadow kin went in search of new hosts to possess, to learn more about this world. By now they have reported back and shadow kin know there is a bright, new world to take on this side of the portal."*

"But as soon as you knew, you could have told someone!"

*"Who, exactly? How could we be sure we were not talking to someone already possessed? We do not have anything like the sword, to point out those that we should not trust. Besides, there were already many dangers here, demons and the like. Another hardly makes a difference."*

"It does to us!" Don insisted angrily.

*"I know. Why do you think I have used my last flash device to save Lysanias? I am hopeful something can be done, now that we have the means to seek and destroy shadow kin. When I heard someone was actually tracking them down and able to fight them? I couldn't believe it!"*

*But I'm just one person. To 'seek and destroy' anything that once came through that portal would take forever. I don't want to comb every city in the world, check every fairy, and interrogate every singing bear.*

"The duke will see you now," said a voice by the door, and everyone looked over to see who had spoken. A woman with long hair stood there, dressed in somewhat fine clothes and looking expectantly at them. "This way please."

The guard accompanied them, the woman leading them to a large room with a conference table in the middle. The guards took up positions around the edges of the room and the woman announced they were in the presence of Duke Hazard, and may be seated.

The Duke was probably in his mid-sixties with a fairly developed beard and fine clothes. He had several gold rings on, and a golden chain around his neck with a medallion of some kind that had a funny symbol on it. It seemed to be a hammer, like the one the judge was using, above a square. He introduced himself as Duke Johnathon Hazard and greeted everyone warmly as they all introduced themselves. Naturally he kissed Amy's hand and Kappa, out of sight, swished his claws through the air like a cat.

"Please, be seated. Let us take a moment to pay homage and pray to the angel Zadkiel, so that his justice can be seen here today." He bowed his head and clasped his hands together.

*Do what for the who now?* Lysanias looked around the table and if ever there was a group who knew nothing (or didn't care about) angels it was this one. Don rolled his eyes and tried not to sigh. Everest looked as though he didn't care one way or the other. Amy looked as confused as Lysanias felt and Kappa was pretending to nap. Esta simply waited politely, their four fingered hands folded on the table before them.

*Huh, didn't notice that before. This being really is from another world.*

The man's head came up again. "Very well. Now, I've been appraised of the situation by reading the court transcripts," he indicated the papers before him, sitting on the table. "But I'd like to briefly hear your story. Apparently this is a fairly serious matter, if people in my city are at risk of being possessed."

Everyone looked over at Lysanias, who wondered how he could get out of telling his story.

*"Before we begin,"* Esta interrupted, *"could we by chance have his sword returned and test everyone in this room?"*

"I'm not letting you have a sword in my presence," the duke told them.

*"At least allow the guard that's carrying it hold it to each person here to see if it will be attracted to them. I don't believe he actually has to hold it."*

"I'll allow that."

The guard did as instructed, and with some relief Esta nodded as no one, it seemed, was possessed at the moment by a shadow kin.

*"Thank you."*

"Of course. Now, the story please?"

Lysanias now briefly explained how he had come to be there, leading up to the murder of the shopkeeper and what Esta had told them. He told them about Amy and their dreams, which had come true. About what the first shadow kin had wanted, and almost accomplished. And now they were here, lurking about the city invisibly.

"This portal you speak of, when it does it next open?"

*"I'm not really sure. I don't keep track of that sort of thing. Not for at least two weeks, if I remember the position of the moons correctly."*

"Then we have some time. Tell me, how accessible is the place? And is it far?"

*"We would not reach there this time unless teleportation was used. As for how accessible it is, I'm not sure I understand the question."*

"In other words, could we secure it? Test people coming through or fight off these shadow kin? Maybe set up magical barriers they couldn't cross?"

*"There are only a few passageways leading from the portal itself to the one tunnel that leads to the outside. It is not right out in the open. So yes, it could be secured with a large enough force. It would be a large undertaking, but possible. Those that we leave stationed there would help."*

"Excellent. You can show us where it is? Teleportation is out, as that would be moving military forces which is against treaty. But perhaps you could go to a nearer location and send word to any troops stationed nearer that location?"

*"I could teleport myself there, if they would believe me."*

"I would give you official documents, and we would only need a few troops to start. If this portal continues to open and close it's going to need to be watched carefully. We don't want anything worse coming through, after all. This is going to be a long term effort, as I'm sure Lysanias doesn't want to go back there every month to test the refugees that spill out."

*"For the rest of my extremely long existence? No thank you. "That's true."*

"Perhaps if we capture some people that are possessed, we can see about finding others ways to tell. There must be magical ways, the guild would know."

*"That would have to be done carefully, we didn't find much that could hold a shadow kin, though we did not have magic like yours to work with."*

"There you are! Lysanias, I have a favor to ask of you. Will you go with this, uh, being, and help in the short term? Right now that sword seems to be our best tool for combating this threat. We'll need it to make sure none of the people near the portal are possessed. That's the first step, before it opens again."

"That's a scary thought. That the portal is actually controlled by shadow kin. I have nothing else pressing at the moment, I'll go to help."

"And the rest of you?"

"Lysanias is our leader, we'll follow him," Don said.

"Splendid. Just a moment." He took up his pen and drafted a quick letter. He sealed it with wax and pressed his ring into it. "You, guard!" He pointed to a guard. "Take Esta and have this delivered to the mage's guild. I want their full cooperation in this. Esta, take this to the guild and you should be admitted right away. Tell them everything you can about the threat facing us. How these shadow kin creatures move, what if any weaknesses they have. You're the expert here. Tomorrow I'll have the proper paperwork done to present at whatever town is nearby the portal to call up troops. We can talk more about our next steps then. Come back in the morning, I'll have you admitted immediately."

*"I guess I'll have to tell my employer I need some time off."*

“I’ll pay any lost wages, for the moment you’re employed by me, essentially. We need to take care of this quickly.”

*“I agree. I’ll go to the mage’s guild right away.”*

“Thank you. I’ll see you in the morning.”

He was escorted out, and the guard came back to tell them so.

“Now that they’re gone, I’ll tell you the real plan,” Duke Hazard told them seriously. “You’re going to find where that portal is and we’re going to figure out how to magically or physically destroy it.”

"You want us to basically betray the being that brought all this to our attention?" Lysanias demanded of the duke.

"No, I'm ordering you to save our world from some sort of invasion. You all said it yourself. These shadow things are dangerous because they can take people over. They have, in fact, taken people over. If you hadn't run into that one elven farm and learned of it, they probably would have succeeded. Amy has dreamed about them coming in greater numbers. We only have one decent weapon against them. All this demands a response- close the portal between our two worlds before things here get worse."

"But my dream isn't necessarily what *will* happen," protested Amy, "only what *could* happen. A warning we can act upon."

"According to Esta, their people coming through has become less frequent, while shadow kin coming through is becoming more frequent. Even if there's a chance some untainted people are now on the other side of that portal waiting for it to open, we can't risk it."

"He's talking sense, lad."

"You're agreeing with this?"

"It may not even be possible to keep this portal closed," agreed Everest. "Can we stop the chaos moon rising in the sky?"

"That's not the point," protested Lysanias. "We could keep anything from coming through by having wizards put a spell around the whole place that just incinerated anything entering the area. It's the order I have a problem with, not the means."

"How horrible," Amy added with a shudder.

"It may come to that," agreed the duke. "Until you are able to see this portal yourself and work out how it opens, speculation is probably not meaningful. But your orders stand. Find a way to make sure nothing ever comes through again. I'll provide for the casting of any spells you might need once we know more about it."

Lysanias looked around the room at the others. Don was nodding slightly, clearly he agreed with the plan. Everest was drumming his fingers on the table, lost in thought. Amy still just looked shocked.

*So that's it? We're going to go with Esta to see this portal and they think we're doing it to help the people that come through or fight off any shadows that make it here. But in reality we're working to stop it opening at all. Wonderful. Wait a second-*

"What about troops going over there? Helping to secure the location in their world-"

The duke was shaking his head. "You think I'm going to order a bunch of my soldiers through a portal into a world we know nothing about where more than likely they'll just get taken over and walk back a minute later? They can't fight these shadow kin, only you can. It has to be you."

"There must be something we can do! We can't leave people that need our help on their side of the portal knowing it will never open again. Just to make us feel a little safer, how does that make us look? We're just lumping everybody on that side together? Because a few might be bad, nobody comes through to safety?"

The duke's face darkened. "I've given you my orders. I expect you to carry them out. I have other things to be doing than argue with you." His chair scraped the floor as he pushed it back. "I'll have the orders drawn up by tomorrow morning to send whatever

soldiers are nearest the portal location to accompany you. Come back then to pick them up. Good day." He swept out of the room, and the soldiers stepped to, ready to escort the group out of the building.

Once outside and past the throng still waiting to get in the group discussed their next move.

"Are you going to tell them?" Don asked.

"I can't," Lysanias replied bitterly. "If I do, they may not take us to the portal location. Then the duke may decide we've decided to disobey his orders and send soldiers out after us. That's no better."

"Especially if the duke then goes after Esta, captures them, and forces them to reveal the location of the portal. The job gets done anyway, and without your sword to tell who is possessed, he might just have everyone in the area killed just in case."

"So we need a plan to do this job that can neutralize any possessed forces in the area, which also distracts anyone else, thus giving us time to figure out how to close the portal."

"Throw them a party?" Kappa suggested. Everyone ignored him.

"Closing it for good may not even be possible," Everest reminded him. "Leaving us with no choice but to lay traps around it somehow."

"Which we don't know would even work. Remember, Esta said few things can hurt these shadow kin, that's why they were so excited about my sword. We might put a bunch of traps around the thing and it just succeeds in wiping out people and letting shadow kin glide past."

"Let's take one thing at a time. For now, our task is to assist Esta and get them to take us to the portal location. Once we've seen it we can make further plans."

"Fine. Let's go to the guild building," Lysanias allowed. "Maybe there will be a way to at least let the portal open once more. If shadow kin come, fine, we close it. If refugees that are not possessed come, fine, we let them through and toss a message through that it won't open again and anyone left there is on their own."

"At least they wouldn't defend an area that's not going to do them any good," agreed Don. "Guild building should be this way, come on."

Half an hour later the group was escorted to another meeting room, this time with several wizards in it arguing over who should go. Esta introduced them and explained.

*"Apparently the duke has 'requested' at least two wizards go with us to the portal, for magical support."*

"Sounds reasonable," Lysanias agreed.

*"As you can imagine, all are jumping at the chance. How did the rest of the meeting go?"*

Lysanias looked to the others, trying not to look too guilty.

"Just fine," Don spoke up. "It didn't go much longer, there's not much we can do here anyway."

*"True."*

"So you're the one with the sword that can detect these things?" the wizard on the left asked. All three were dressed similarly, in fine robes with various bits of jewelry. Two were bearded, and human, while the third was a female that had the lower body of a horse. She was the one to have spoken. Her human part was covered by a robe, while her horse part was a pale gray with darker spots. Her tail swished, it was the same color as her hair, which was in a long braid down her back.

*Is that woman under some kind of curse? Strange. Wait, I saw someone like that when I got into town. I guess they're at thing now? I thought maybe it was just a funny costume for the fair, but a wizard wouldn't be wearing a costume on duty. That's really what she looks like. She's half horse. How does that even work, which part is her heart in? Does she have two?* He realized he was staring and cast his mind back to what she had asked. "That's correct. It seems to be drawn to the people that are possessed." *If that wasn't just a fluke. After all it's only happened the once. That doesn't prove it will happen a second time.*

"But unless you drive the possessing spirit out, actually hurting one hurts the host?" asked the man to the right. "Can standard anti-possession techniques, such as magic or holy ritual drive them out? People do get possessed by demons, after all, so there are various ways to deal with that sort of thing."

"I've really only fought the one since the sword became capable of hurting them. I really don't know what else it could do. Could I simply stab the shadow of the person? I doubt it. But what I observed was that cutting the man cut the shadow first as it didn't seem to repair itself. And I wounded another that had been separated. As far as ending the possession as though it was demonic possession? I don't know any way to do that so I couldn't try." *I wonder if someone at a church could show me the holy technique? But then I have to ask myself, "Lysanias, do you want to draw attention to yourself by calling upon holy power of all things?" I mean He must know I'm up and about again, and I haven't been smited or whatever, but I still think that might be more than He would want to allow.*

"And we have no means of separating them anymore that we do know works? I understand that correctly?" asked the one at the head of the table.

*"Sadly no. At least I do not. I could ask around, others of my kind that live in the area may have spare flash units."*

"If we could get another, even one, we could make a lot more, and more durable ones too," Lysanias told them. "That would be my first priority."

*"How so?"*

"Look at this." Lysanias popped the cover off the pommel of his recently returned sword, revealing the ball of solid light. "This is made by alchemy. It's essentially frozen light. If you could get another and set it off at the right time, the alchemists could freeze it, thus creating some that never went out."

*"The intensity would have to be the same. Unless it's blinding and fills a space, it doesn't do much more than make them uncomfortable."*

"What's this alchemy you're talking about?" asked the man in the center.

"The people who work in the basement are alchemists. They can manipulate matter at the atomic level with spiritual energy." Lysanias was pretty proud of himself for remembering that explanation he had been given. *Let someone else wonder what the heck I'm saying for once.* But their reaction was a bit different than he expected.

"We have a basement?" all three asked at the same time.

"Yes, you have a basement," Lysanias replied with a sigh. *Fine, focus on the wrong thing, typical.* "Trust me, it would work."

"Wait a second, didn't a wizard look back into the past to verify your story?" Amy asked.

"Not that it was accepted as evidence, but yes, they did." *Hey, the duke didn't say anything about my trial. I guess I got pardoned? But in exchange I have to go close the portal. I almost think that cage would be better.*

"How was that done?" She looked to the three wizards.

"Magic?" said the man to the right.

“Yes, *obviously*, magic. But how? I can just stand in a room and see the past. Is it something like that?”

“Really? How extraordinary,” exclaimed the centaur. “Our spell opens a window in the air that shows the past.”

“That’s perfect!” Amy clapped her hands together, excited. “Can you cast that spell, let the light that shone before through, and have the alchemists use it to create this solid light?”

“Without knowing how they accomplish this, we can’t say,” said the wizard in the middle after looking at his two fellow wizards. “The light would come past the window, otherwise we wouldn’t see anything. But in any useful quantity?” He shrugged.

“There may be ways around that, too,” Lysanias told them, excitedly thinking about something they had done with Yttrius. “Look, you figure out who you want to send and get them ready to go for tomorrow. We’ll go talk to the alchemists right now. We just need someone that can cast this time looking spell. Hopefully large enough that this ‘window’ covers the entire room.”

“To let the maximum amount of light in, I see where you’re going with this. I’ll come,” said the woman. “You two bicker about who to send.”

*“Make sure whoever you send can teleport,”* advised Esta. *“I can only carry one, maybe two people at a time. And even then not very often. If I can just teleport the wizard and they can teleport the rest of us, that would be very helpful.”*

“It’ll cost you,” the one on the right cautioned, not even a pause between when Esta stopped.

*It’s like it’s engrained into them.* “The duke is covering it,” Lysanias assured the room.

“Oh, that’s all right then.” The three all smiled. Lysanias just shook his head.

The group went down to the basement, the centaur going down the elevator by herself. She also grumbled at having to go down actual stairs, which Lysanias could see might be a problem for her.

“Why don’t you stay, and we’ll bring the alchemists up here?” Don suggested. “They’ll need their equipment brought up anyway, right lad?”

“There’s a lot of equipment, especially if we want to make up a lot of this stuff. We’ll be back in a moment.”

“Very well,” she said. “By the way, I’m Fala. Fala Bell. Figure you should know my name if we’re going to be working together.”

“Nice to meet you Fala,” Don said, reaching a hand as high as he was able to shake hers. Everyone else introduced themselves and then went to go see the alchemists.

“Back so soon?” Abigale greeted them. Don looked up and up at her, eyes wide. “And I see you’ve brought some friends!”

Lysanias introduced everyone and they sat down at a table to discuss what they wanted.

“You want as much concrete luminescence as we can make, basically,” Rick summarized. “To try and drive shadow creatures who are possessing people out of their bodies.”

“That’s right.”

He hummmmed and looked thoughtful. “Won’t be very bright, not as bright as you’re talking about, Esta,” he told them.

“I was thinking about that,” Lysanias added excitedly. “What about a lens? I made one, a large one, and Yttrius said the purpose of the lens was to gather light and focus it

down the tube. Well, what about a really big lens? Focus the light from the spell into a smaller area and that should increase the intensity, right?"

"Even so... You've seen the sunlight ones. How much brighter can you get than the sun? But you can look at what we make, can't look at the sun."

"Er, excuse me?" Sherlock hesitantly asked with a raised hand.

"Yes?"

"As I understand this, you're going to a place where this portal is, that shadow kin tend to come out of?"

*"That's right."*

"So, forgive me if this is a dumb question, but what prevents any that are there now from just taking you over and marching you all off a cliff? I mean, you're not special, no offence."

"Er?" Don replied.

"Oh..." Everest added.

"Yipes, this kid's sharpity sharp!" Kappa praised.

"Ep!" Amy added.

"Well?" Lysanias looked to Esta.

*"Ah. Nothing, I guess. Slight oversight on my part. What to do..."*

The group sat and thought for a moment.

"What about hiding a chip of the luminescence under your clothes? Those of you that wear clothes, anyway?" asked Abigale.

"They could still possess us, I assume. It would just make them uncomfortable about doing it. The idea is sound though, if we take it another step- What about the shoes?" asked Lysanias. "I did notice the shadow kin taking the shopkeeper over bottom to top. Would a thin layer of the luminescence on the bottom of the shoes prevent it?"

*"Essentially separating you from your shadow, because you would, at that point, literally be walking on light. That could work! It might even drive them back if they tried to possess you, because they wouldn't notice until it was too late."*

"That keeps you guys safe, what about the people already there?" asked Sherlock. "Someone already possessed? Even as many as we could make concentrated into one place probably isn't enough to force them away. Not if it has to be as bright as you say."

"And there could be a dozen or more," agreed Amy. "We need a light that lasts long enough to drive the shadow kin off, pin them in place, and lets Lysanias finish them off."

*Great, I can go around murdering more things. Sure, they're shadow beings from another world, but that doesn't mean I have the right to murder them.*

"We need to do more with less," Rick announced. "For now, you say a wizard is waiting for us? Let's get to work. We can think of other options while the solution hardens. Everyone, grab up whatever you need to make up several batches of the luminescence."

So the group carried a bunch of the lab equipment inside a box that was inside a freshly made contain ward, and walked over to the courthouse. Lysanias was a bit wary of going over there again but no one seemed to recognize him. Fala basically demanded the room for guild purposes, and the people there fell all over themselves trying to be helpful.

*No, the guild isn't feared or hated at all. What gives you that idea? At least I'll be able to get my stuff back, Ms. Shell said it would be here so they could return it if they found me innocent. I'll have to ask around in a bit.*

The mixture, according to the alchemists, took four hours to harden. It took about a half an hour to mix up the ingredients, then another half hour of concentration at the end carefully applying spiritual energy into the mix. Lysanias had two masters (and an apprentice) to watch which helped tremendously, and so he carefully did what they did at the beginning and the end of the process. Their coaching and stopping him from making several mistakes was invaluable, so four batches were merrily soaking up light instead of just three. They had also whipped up some lenses and Fala maintained the time window spell at the instant the light from the flash unit was brightest. (Luckily the image could be "paused" like a recording, so it was just frozen there) The light hit the solution and with the torches dark and the windows blocked, the mixture only absorbed the light coming from the flash.

Four hours later, Lysanias held his glowing ball of light aloft like he had lifted it out of a treasure chest in a dungeon somewhere and music should be playing in the background.

"I did it, Amy! I did alchemy! Look!" He thrust the ball out at her, which of course in his excitement made him lose his grip on it. As it sailed through the air he was able to briefly call himself all six kinds of fool and wonder why he couldn't move anything other than rock by willing it. *I really have to find someone to teach me to move any substance.*

Then it smashed into the floor and broke into a thousand pieces. Lysanias stared at it, wondering if it was acceptable for grown men to cry in these troubled times. *I hate myself. Haven't I gotten the hang of these enormous hands yet? This is ridiculous, no wonder Amy avoids me. I would avoid me too, if I saw what I just did.*

"Bad luck," Rick told him. "Of course, we can stick it together again fairly easily. As a note, as you get better at it, the luminescence will become harder to break. I once had an order for some armor made of the stuff, some vampire hunter or another I think. We demonstrated by bashing it with hammers, I doubt it could be broken." He said this last with no small pride in his voice.

"I remember that," Abigale recalled. "Wonder whatever happened to that guy?"

"Someone get me a broom," Lysanias sighed. "Let's sweep this up and try putting it back together."

"*Wait a moment, this is all you made?*" Esta looked the orbs on the table over. With the spell now ended they were cheerfully glowing on the table, but were hardly "blinding." The three "true" alchemists had mixed larger batches than Lysanias, so their ball was more head sized than fist sized. But they still didn't seem bright enough. *"This doesn't seem bright enough."*

Sherlock picked up a shard of the broken one, then concentrated and turned it into a small ball. "You know, if the larger ones still aren't good enough maybe we should think smaller. What do you think, Rick? Could we load a bunch of these pellets and some powder into a shotgun shell?"

He came over and took the ball, looking it over. "Lysanias' would probably not hold up, but ours would. I see where you're going with this. Actually shoot them with the stuff, that would probably drive them out. What do you think?" He turned to Esta. "Would putting, oh, six or eight beads of this size into someone at high speed drive a shadow kin out?"

*“Without trying it, I can’t really say. The light would be inside someone? That could make it more effective in some ways, I suppose.”*

“But that means hurting a bunch of people!” protested Lysanias. “And what’s a shotgun?”

“Projectile weapon,” Everest explained. “You don’t see too many guns used today but they are out there. Take too long to reload. Which would you rather have, six arrows in the air or one shot and a lengthy reload time?”

“Plus the expense. Arrows are cheap, and easy to make, and can be bought anywhere goods are sold,” Don put in. “Powder is none of those things. You know, if you’re not an alchemist anyway who could presumably make their own. I’ve seen some dwarves that use them, though. Basically it’s a bit of gunpowder, like those fireworks we saw. Put that into a metal chamber and ignite it. That forces a bit of metal out a long tube that, if you’re lucky, hits the person you’re shooting at. If you can hit you can do some damage, don’t get me wrong. More than an arrow. It’s missing that’s the problem. With an arrow you just immediately try again.”

“In the case of a shotgun,” explained Rick, “the tube is quite big. So it lets a lot of projectiles out. That helps because usually at least *some* hit the target, no matter how bad a shot you are. And the shells can be created beforehand, shortening the reload time. We’ve got a few around here that we’ve found and repaired over the years.” He looked around, wondering where they were. “The part that ignites the powder at the end of the shell is the hardest part to make, but we’ve got some made. You must have analyzed the gunpowder we have, if you didn’t remind me and I’ll get you some. It could work.”

“So the plan would be to head to the place, test anyone we see there, if they are possessed they get shot, then I stab them with the sword?”

“Ah, yes, that does seem quite cumbersome, doesn’t it?” Don admitted. “While we were shooting the one, a dozen more might come from behind.”

The group thought for a moment. “Wait a minute,” exclaimed Fala. “Alchemists! You three are where chocolate comes from, aren’t you?” This she demanded, hands on her hips, as though they had poisoned her village well or something.

They all smiled. “That’s us,” agreed Rick. “I take it you’ve had some?”

“A small square of the stuff. I always wondered why it was so expensive. I thought magic made it somehow, given it’s shipped from here occasionally. But it’s you! You make it!”

“What’s this?” asked Amy.

“It’s from before the fall,” explained Abigale. “The cocoa plant went extinct a long time ago. But what you get from it, chocolate, keeps basically forever and we managed to find some and analyze it. So every so often we make a bunch and ship it to be sold to rich people. It’s good stuff, I can get you a sample later.” She winked and smiled. “As I’m not technically in the guild I won’t even charge you.”

“For the weight, it’s worth way more than gold, just because of scarcity,” Rick went on. “When we need some expensive ingredients we know we can always afford them after a chocolate sale.”

“But what does this have to do with our problem now?” asked Everest.

“That’s the best part!” She clopped over to where the shards were and reached for them. But she couldn’t actually reach them and gave up with a sigh. “Anyway, we just need to get this glowing stuff inside the people guarding the portal, right? Well, chocolate melts! It could be melted and tiny bits of this stuff covered up by it. Get them to eat it, wait a few minutes while the chocolate melts again, and suddenly they’re burst-

ing with light from the inside. Any shadow kin that are possessing people are stunned, giving us enough time to take care of them without being attacked!”

“That could work,” Abigale agreed. “And I know just the thing to offer them too. You haven’t lived until you’ve had my chocolate chip cookies.”

The delicious smell of baking cookies wafted through the basement lab, making Lysanias realize there had been some progress made in the world, after all. He could hardly wait to taste the cookies, given Abigale hadn't allowed him any of the chocolate or dough as she had been preparing them. But some had been made without the shards of solid light, and those must be for them, right? The other alchemists had done the work of shattering their blobs of solid light into manageable pieces and coating them with the melted goodness before the dough was made. It was tricky work, making sure that each was fully coated so no glint of light shone through, but more time consuming than difficult. They could easily reshape the "shell" around the bit of light with their powers if they couldn't get the melted chocolate to stick in the way they wanted.

"Almost done!" she announced, checking the oven.

"But will they eat them?" Everest asked, a bit late now that all that work had been done.

"And will they poison anybody?" Amy asked.

"I really have no idea," admitted Rick. "We've never really eaten the stuff, why would we? It's just solid light now though, it should just pass through them without harm. It's pretty small pieces, it's the fact it's inside them that should disrupt the shadow kin's hold on people."

"He's got a point though," grumped Sherlock. "Why would a bunch of shadow kin possessed people eat cookies?"

"To be polite?" asked Kappa. "You don't turn down cookies someone made you! Even if you are a being a pure shadow from another world that invaded this one to kill us all. Oh wait..."

"Exactly, they have no reason to eat them," insisted Sherlock.

"Counter point- They have no reason not to."

"Er, I think Sherlock has the stronger case," Everest insisted. "We're going to have to think of something. I suppose they would be suspicious if someone showed up at their door with cookies and started insisting they be eaten."

"Could we trick them somehow?" asked Don.

"Oh, this is pointless," Amy huffed. "I'm just going to ask. I should have done it earlier, sorry, don't know where my mind was." She settled on the floor and a thoughtful expression crossed her face. "Okay, yes or no, are there more possessed people in the area around where the wanderers emerge into our world than not possessed people? Be back soon." She closed her eyes and looked inward.

"What's she doing?" asked Rick.

"Asking the universe," explained Lysanias. "It's something she can do as a seer. Either of us should have thought of it."

"Yeah, you stupid or something?" asked Kappa.

"You knew she could do it, why didn't you bring it up earlier?"

Kappa had the decency to look embarrassed. "Er, uh, what am I stupid or something?"

"I'm *trying* to concentrate?" Amy sassied them.

"Sorry! We'll just be over here."

Ten minutes later, with the cookies cooling on wire racks, her eyes opened again. "Got a yes back, so at least we know we're on the right track trying to find a method to kill the shadow kin without hurting the people they've possessed."

"But we're still back to square one!" Everest protested. "I suppose it's nice having a clear answer but does that help us?"

"I don't know what squares have to do with it," Lysanias offered, "but I think it does. We need to come up with a plan to get a group of possessed people to eat these cookies. How do we accomplish it?"

*"On the bright side, food is probably scarce in the area. They would have to send someone to a nearby town to get supplies, and they really have no means of getting money."*

"Apart from just possessing someone, having them take all the coin they own out behind a tree someplace, then jumping back to the first person and retrieving it," figured Everest.

*"Yes, apart from that. But do things like that too often and even a town with absolute dullards would realize something was going on."*

"What's your point?" asked Don.

*"The point is, maybe we can trick them. You say these cookies would sell for a lot, right?"*

"That's right," Abigale agreed.

*"Then that's our answer. Load me down with fine foods all packaged up nicely. I can teleport into the place and claim it was a stray thought before I did the teleportation. I doubt they would let me go, I would probably be immediately possessed."*

"Hey, I don't want to put you in danger!" Lysanias protested.

"I would be more worried about them learning the plan," Everest more practically announced.

*"I'll be fine. In both cases. They can't read minds, the worst they can do is prevent you from knowing what you're doing while they're in control. So they won't learn the plan that way. And if I go hungry I'll tear into the food with the rest. Have to keep the one you're possessing healthy, after all."*

"So what, the story is you're making a delivery and got the wrong place?" asked Sherlock.

*"Correct. Many of my people work as curriers, given our ability to go rapidly from place to place. Places we've been, anyway. Still, even taking a package the long way initially might mean a package to go back that gets there immediately."*

"Sounds like a decent enough cover."

*And a decent cover for us. While they're scarfing down on cookies and such we can be figuring out how to close the portal permanently.* "All right, it seems we have our plan. The rest of the evening and tomorrow Esta is going to be drilling me on teleporting and that banishment thing." *Because there's no way I'm letting you walk away without learning how you teleport. I got a few hours coaching while the mixture hardened today but that's not enough. I have to do it for myself to make sure I know how it's done.* "Then we can teleport to the area where the portal is and secure it."

*"I'm still not convinced you can learn to do it."*

"You let me worry about that."

"While you practice we can scour the city for fancy food to pack up for the operation," Don suggested.

"And make up a fancy work order or something," suggested Everest. "With prices for everything so it looks like you're really delivering for someone."

*I just hope his acting ability is up to the task.*

"I know some good shops," Abigale told them. "I can point them out, even if I can't actually go in." She indicated her tiny hooved feet. "No shoes."

The others chuckled, obviously it was her size that constrained her, but for some reason Kappa found her remark hilarious.

The rest of the evening Esta continued his tutoring of teleporting and banishing, explaining how to use spiritual energy for both, and the next day the group went to get

the forms signed by the duke. That done they went their separate ways and by early evening Lysanias had at least teleported from one end of the room to the other.

*"Astonishing. I guess you can do it. Without something to banish it's difficult to know if you have learned that technique appropriately but I do feel spiritual energy coming from you as you chant the words. What you were banishing would have to be very wounded at this point, but it does seem that you have grasped the basics."*

"Just assisting is going to be helpful at this point. The more people we free, the less work I have to do with the blade."

*"Because more will be free to banish. Yes, I see what you mean. I wish I had more things to teach you, now that I know you can learn what I can teach. Pity."*

"This is plenty, believe me!" *Wishing myself from place to place? I can't go very far yet, but come on, how amazing is this? We didn't have this when I was growing up, apart from magic. It seems new abilities are discovered all the time.*

*"Wait, perhaps there is. Do you know how to read auras?"*

"To do what?"

*"Ah, apparently not!"* Esta rubbed his hands together. *"It's a way of seeing a faint energy field around a person and interpreting it. It can tell you how they're feeling, general health, even if they mean you some kind of harm. That's pretty tricky to tell though. Still, I can give you a quick lesson if you're up for it."*

"Am I? Just let me get my notebook out to jot some things down."

*Need to make some more wards, I've been neglecting that. Just so much to learn!*

And so the next day Esta teleported one of the wizards to the town they remembered that was near the portal location, and the wizard teleported himself back. He then used a variant of the spell to get everybody, and noted down the two spells in his book to charge the duke later.

*Honestly, we're saving the world here. And this guy is more concerned with making sure he gets his coins.*

*"At least the outskirts of town is much how I remember it. Luckily it's a fair size, so it should have a good number of troops to draw upon."*

"Which way to the portal?" asked Don, as the soldiers were secondary to their real mission in the area. He wanted to know if it was close by, close enough they could slip away and see it without Esta knowing.

*"That way."* Esta pointed into the distance, having teleported them outside the edge of the town to make sure there was less chance of them appearing inside something. They all looked, and there was a mountain range in the distance. *"Inside that large one, there. I'll be happy to tell you the story of how it happened while we're on the move. After all, we can't teleport the soldiers over there so we're walking the whole way. I just hope it's at least a week before the chaos moon is in position."*

*Maybe it'll just be in a tunnel we can collapse!* He shivered, looking around. *It's a lot colder here.* "How far did we come? Where are we?"

*"Almost halfway through the Northwolds to the frozen north. Which is that way, if you were interested."* They pointed, and the group looked over there. To the north was mainly forest, though if Lysanias could have extended his vision it wouldn't be long before that became the ice plains that made up the upper latitudes of the realm. Past the village to the south was the bay, while the imposing mountains were situated due west. East it seemed was more forest, and Lysanias couldn't help but wonder just how much of this world had actually been tamed since the arrival of the chaos moon.

Naturally the guards stationed in the town scrutinized the orders, but with members of the mage's guild there as well they couldn't exactly turn the orders down.

*"So how many can you send, and how quickly can we get there?"*

"I won't cut my fighting force here by more than half," the head guard told him, handing the orders back. "So you can take six of us. As far as getting there goes, a little under two days."

"Two days?" scoffed Everest. "To get all the way over to that mountain range?"

"Yeah, just take the rail system," the guard assured him as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

*"Rail system? I'm not familiar with this."*

"Put in, oh probably a hundred years or so ago now. I don't know, been here forever. Come on, I'll show you."

*How long? And Esta didn't know about it? How long since they came through here, anyway?* The guard took them through to the other side of town, earning them some strange looks from the townspeople. They were dressed more heavily than the places he had been before, especially during the fair where a lot of people were hardly dressed at all. Many seemed to be working at separating large piles of rock into smaller piles.

"What are they doing?" Everest asked.

"Mining, actually," was the reply. "Don't know for how much longer though. Shipments into town from the mountain keep getting smaller." Everest and Don shared a dark look, nodding. Seemed it was a familiar story. "They've taken to just dumping what they dig out into the carts, hauling it back here, then taking the stone back and dumping it. They used to do more sorting there at the site but with the amount of ore they find now, every scrap has to be recovered. So they hired most of the townspeople away from their fishing boats to sort through rock."

Lysanias watched as what was essentially a mine cart was tipped onto a sort of belt that was then descended upon and anything that was not plain old rock was tossed into other barrels. Metal with rock stuck to it was freed, then the belt moved dumping the stone into a cart that was lower down. It then was dragged away, iron rails in the ground keeping it easily moved. "Used to be a fishing town, that's why the place was situated by the water. But with the rising price of metals the rail system was made and people started going into the tunnels instead. As I say, that was some time ago."

"That's why the relatively large number of soldiers here?" asked Amy. "To protect the stuff that's mined?"

"Originally we were stationed just to keep the town safe from monster attacks. We are sort of in the wilds not too far out of town. Once the place got established pirates would come, and they aren't limited to just staying on boats. So we fight off raids too. Then we got more help when the mines went in, so that's what that's all about. Here we are."

They had stopped in front of a section of railroad track that made a loop, with various other bits of track running out from this place to get the carts in and out. Several were ready to go, joined up at the base so they could be pulled. *But by what?*

"This track runs all the way to the mountain?" Don asked, impressed.

"Yup. Story is they got the idea from some old mines they found scouting the mountains out all those years ago. So the first thing they "mined" was these. Had to make some sections from scratch, and replace some of the track over the years." He shook his head. "How ironic that when the mines dry up, this track could probably be pulled up again and sold for a fortune. The carts too."

"I'm sold on the idea!" Lysanias announced. "It will cut our travel time by a few days and get us there more rested than we would have been. That doesn't seem like it has any downsides. This isn't covered by treaty, right?"

*"Agreed. It must have been longer than I thought, my coming here after emerging from the portal. This place has grown considerably."*

*Not to mention this track system. One town has a spotter balloon. This town has some kind of rail system. But these places are so isolated nothing gets shared between*

them. *What other wonders do towns have that I haven't visited? And how might they use what others have found out here?*

"When can we leave?" Don asked.

"As you can see, it's a loop. There's a set of cars that come and go every day. Next one should be in a few hours. I'll have the passenger car brought in, we can go over and see this portal area of yours. Though I'm surprised we haven't found it during our mining."

*"The passageways in and out were hidden, given the fragile nature of the portal's existence. We did not want anyone finding it and destroying it before as many of my people were through as possible. Some might not have seen our 'invasion' in a positive light, after all. Though my people seem to be accepted in most places, as they keep to themselves for the most part."*

Lysanias' blood ran cold again, and he had to look away from Esta lest be betray some emotion. *Do they suspect? But no, we're still here and moving forward. Is their plan to ditch us before we get close? But no, they know most of the people there are taken over. If they believe Amy. This whole thing is so messed up. But it does seem there is a way...*

"Makes sense."

*"You must have people that are not miners come to the town for supplies every so often."*

"Oh yeah, them. They're people like you, but I never thought much of it. Thought they just liked living out in the forest or whatever. They never made any trouble, so I didn't worry about them."

*"Those are probably some of the people guarding the portal. It will be good to see many of my own kind again."*

*When they're not possessed, I hope they mean.*

"So why are we going now, exactly?"

"There have been signs a lot of evil creatures are about to come though. We need to secure the passageways before the portal opens again, and see what the real situation is," Don explained. "We have no problem with Esta's kind coming through, it's what they brought with them. It's coming to a head now, so that's why the sudden rush to get this taken care of."

*While in reality, that's a deception too. We're there to destroy it, not secure it, and you're here probably to protect us from a very angry mob of wanderers once the deed is done.*

Hours later noise was heard down the tracks, and a truly odd noise it was, too. The group squinted away from the setting sun to see a bizarre sight coming towards them. At the front of the procession of cars was a gigantic looking person, kneeling on a flat bit of metal with wheels. The noise was coming from the cars being pushed along by the being, one leg whooshing them down the track while he knelt with the other. The cars were slowly losing speed as they got nearer the town, the giant pushing them less frequently. Finally the cars stopped and the giant, easily four times the height of Lysanias, stretched and yawned.

"They're moved by a giant?" Don asked, as if this wasn't clearly obvious just from looking at the guy.

"I guess," Lysanias replied. "And really, why not? It's probably easy for him, and he would have to eat anyway. May as well earn his food this way."

"Hello down there!" the giant called to them, waving. "Were you waiting to see me?"

"When do you make your next trip back?" Esta asked, and the giant cocked his head.

"Hey, that's a neat trick. I can hear you perfectly. I'll start back first thing tomorrow. You guys want a ride out to the mine?"

*"Yes, if that isn't too much trouble."*

"No trouble at all. If you'll excuse me, I've got to get these cars unloaded. There should be an inn someplace in town, I won't leave without you."

*"We appreciate that. We will see you tomorrow then, friend giant."*

"Yup!"

The giant bent to his work, switching the cars around, so the group went in search of the inn. Naturally Lysanias put some time into making more wards, now that he had a desk to work at. It wasn't that he couldn't sleep, no it wasn't that at all he told himself.

*After all, tomorrow we go to follow the duke's orders. Esta teleports in, gets them to eat the cookies. That should stun them and allow me to free them. Meanwhile Don and the others sneak around using the wizard's invisibility spell and figure out how to keep the portal from ever opening again. That gets done and we head back. Heroes to some, perhaps, but the wanderers will be furious. Am I doing right or wrong?*

Glory Calls, It's Waiting For You

When: The next day

Where: All aboard the train

It turned out the "passenger car" was just a flat piece of wood that had wheels on it, and a railing so anyone on it had something to hold onto. The constant speeding up and slowing down made the journey unpleasant, but Lysanias had a job to do.

"You said you could tell us about how the portal came to open?"

"And how do you know about this, which you weren't there for?" Everest demanded.

*"We have speculated, based on certain characteristics of the chamber."*

*That's odd, just as with the giant hearing him, I can "hear" Esta perfectly. They really are speaking into my mind, so the wind doesn't play a part. Though I suppose I could do the same thing with my ability to send thoughts.*

Esta went on. *"As you know, the chaos moon brought many changes. Not just bringing magic to the world, but also showering it with pieces of itself."*

The wizard to the right of Lysanias nodded. "People have done experiments with moon shards over the years. Implanting them into people seems to give them strange powers. They also can be ground up for spell lenses."

*I think Don mentioned them at some point, they let people without the spark do magic, right? This really isn't the time to ask.*

*"It did something else. We believe there was a large eruption which tore through this area hundreds of years ago. This is what created that largest mountain you see in the distance. Something curious happened when it hardened and cooled. It formed a sort of 'chimney' that runs from the base to the bottom. That passageway is lined with the remains of the crystalline eruption. The portal is at the base of the chimney. It always hangs there, a bright spot of light in an otherwise featureless chamber. However, when the chaos moon is directly overhead the portal tears open, and things can freely move between this world and the one I came from."*

"It was a total accident?" Amy asked.

*"A fortunate one, for us. But yes, as near as we can tell."*

Lysanias and Don looked at each other, a moment of understanding passing between them. He glanced back at the barrels that the giant, loading the cargo that morning, said were gunpowder. Lysanias had gotten a sample of that from the alchemists, and knew what it did. Applying fire to some made it explode, just a small bang in the lab as it had been a small amount. But these were barrels full of the stuff, so he couldn't imagine what they might do. Don looked back at Lysanias, the message clear.

*He wants you to put a bunch of them into contain wards, Amy thought at him. If you guys can get to the top and blow it up, that should be the end of the portal.*

*Better ask the universe if that's the best way, he sent back.*

*Good idea. When we get further on so it can seem I'm just taking a nap. Oh, he's got another message for you. Switch with Everest.*

*What?*

*One second. Okay, when we go invisible to get inside the tunnels, give your sword to Everest and he'll go with Esta. You can go with Don. Esta won't know the difference, and it will free you up to help destroy the portal.*

*I suppose I have no choice. Either kill a bunch of shadow kin or potentially strand more refugees on the other side of the portal. Aren't I just the lucky one?*

*Oh, but he's asking how you guys are going to find the portal. I might be able to find it just looking into the future, to see if the path I take is a good one.*

*Don't worry about it. It's inside a mountain. My manifested spirit will be able to tell me how to get to it.*

*That's great. I'll tell him.*

The cars sped through the day until the giant was too tired to continue, so the group made camp near the tracks. By that time Amy said the universe gave a "yes" answer to "are explosives the best way to close the portal between our world and the world of the wanderers?" With not much else to contribute she took the opportunity to go home for the night, and in the morning the group got underway again. It was about mid-afternoon of the next day that they reached the base of the mountain where the mine was. The miners were somewhat surprised to see a group of six soldiers, two wizards, and the assortment of races making up the normal group stepping off the platform. The giant busied himself getting the return cars loaded and after being thanked by the group, zoomed off down the tracks again.

*"Now, we have the rest of the day to head over there, where the secret entrance to the tunnels leading to the portal can be found. We've made good time, I've been watching the moon and it shouldn't be in position for a week yet at most. We have plenty of time."*

"Still, better get started," Lysanias told him, not liking the plan any better now than he had before.

That night the group camped by the base of the taller mountain and in the morning, Esta greeted Lysanias. He was putting his stuff back into a contain ward, the others nearby picking up their own gear.

*"Ready to go? I have the pack with the fancy food. I'll take you part way in, then teleport the rest of the way myself. You can stay nearby while invisible so when the shadow kin eat the cookies you can be ready to destroy them. Or if the plan goes wrong, get me out of there."*

"Right. Are the soldiers ready? And I think one of the wizards is still asleep. Shouldn't we wait for them?"

*"Them? That would only complicate things. I thought it would just be you and me."*

"Uh, we brought all these soldiers and mages to secure the passage."

*"I'll open the passage in a moment. Then, they can secure it. This is the only way into and out of the mountain, believe me. You didn't think I would be leading this whole force into the portal area, did you?"*

"Oh, uh..."

*"I see that you did. I'm sorry, but I can't take any chances. Unless something goes drastically wrong, you won't even see it yourself. I'm sorry, but that's just our policy. Everyone else will remain here, and can set up whatever structures they would like to prevent any shadow kin getting past this point. Not that I think their efforts will come to anything, but at least something is being done. That is why we came here, right? To make sure the portal was under our control and keep shadow kin from making it out. They can do that just as easily here as they can inside the actual chamber, believe me."*

"Yes, of course," he said hastily. "But I would feel better having them with me."

*"I don't see why. You're the only one with a weapon that can harm shadow kin directly. If this plan doesn't work and the possessed attack us, mundane weapons would*

*only harm those that were possessed. If they were killed the shadow kin would just take another body and fight on. Having them is actually a liability.”*

*“I hadn’t thought of that.”*

*“As long as that’s clear now.”*

*“What if it goes completely wrong and we’re both captured? There won’t be anyone to come to our aid.”*

*“True, it is a risk. But both of us would have to be rendered unconscious at the same time, which would be difficult. Otherwise one could simply grab the other and teleport away. I admit you aren’t very practiced at it, but neither are we going all that far. The tunnels may wind a bit in a straight line it can’t be more than a kilometer or two to the center.”*

*“And you’re okay with this?”*

*“I’m not ‘okay’ with it, but I must do my part to keep my adoptive world safe. If this world is overrun, I doubt a second miracle will occur to save my people as they were saved this time. Just what is the problem here?”* Esta’s eyes narrowed, and Lysanias could feel the suspicion rising in them.

*The problem is I need to be free to make it to the portal chamber so we can figure out how to destroy it. But I can’t raise Esta’s suspicions so I have to go with them now. I can’t be in two places at once! Hey, that would be a great technique, wonder if someone in the world knows how to do that?* “No problem, I just, now that it came down to it, I mean, I’ve never not had Don and Everest at my side, that’s all. It’s a little scary having to save the day on your own like this.”

Esta seemed to relax. *“Is that all? You’ll do fine, you must have plenty of skills you’ve picked up, and it’s not that far, you can always teleport back out here if we really get into trouble.”*

*“I suppose. Okay, let me find the other wizard and get the invisibility spell put on me. Then we can go.”* *Huh, should make a ward to do the same thing, would probably be pretty handy.*

*“Very well.”*

Lysanias walked off, wondering how he was going to get out of this. *Think Lysanias, think! How can you be in two places at- wait a second. Amy!*

*Here. You need me to do something? And sneaky, given how you’re contacting me.*

*Yes, I’m going to leave the ward with my trunk. I hate to not have the alchemy stuff but getting it out would be a hassle. I have to come up with a system to have that stuff on- anyway. Tear it and get some paper out. I’m going to tell you the route we take, note it down, then take it a moment later. Once Esta is captured we can do the switch and I can take everybody from there.*

*Got it.*

*Whew.* The wizard noted down the spell for cost purposes and cast it on Lysanias, who then went back to Esta.

“I’m ready,” he said, his voice coming out of thin air. In truth this was the lesser of the two types of invisibility magic, the greater would have masked his voice as well. But as he figured he might want to talk to Esta on the way in, the lesser would have to do. In a dark cave the slight distortion he left behind in the air probably wouldn’t be visible at all.

*“Very well. Wish us luck, everyone.”* Esta faced the wall, then suddenly became a wispy version of themselves. They nodded and walked through the wall.

*What in the world? That’s a new trick!*

A moment later the rock face lifted, revealing a space inside.

*"This door was put in just in case we needed to bring inside more people than we could lift. I guess that was a good decision. If it was just us I would have simply made you insubstantial with me and walked through but I think that would have broken the invisibility."*

*"Yes, it would have." And thank goodness for that. They would have had to blow the rock face off otherwise. Though maybe Everest could have torn it up with his ability to move earth.*

*"Are you through? I'll close- wait, no I guess I'll have to leave it open so they can set up inside. So much for our secret entrance. Come along."*

*Double whew. "Coming."*

Esta pulled out a shard of the solid light so they could see and took off down the passageway. The glow the wanderer's body produced not great enough to really illuminate the passageway, but at least Lysanias wouldn't lose sight of them. *Let's get this over with.*

Lysanias kept careful track of what passages Esta led him down, and Amy said she was noting them down. After a few turns she said they were moving into the tunnels themselves, so would be nearby if something went wrong.

*"Still with me?"*

*"Yup. Still here."*

Lysanias wasn't sure exactly how long they went for, but every few minutes he "consumed" a spirit battery ward to keep up with the energy drain from the sending. The two wound their way through a maze of tunnels, and Lysanias had to wonder how Esta knew what path to take. If there was some sign, like a scratch mark or different colored rock, he didn't see it. But before his energy gave out, Esta stopped him.

*"From here I'll teleport the rest of the way, into the common area where there are sure to be some people who can take me captive. You just need to go straight and take the next two right turns. The passageway does goes straight, so just keep your right hand on the wall and take the next two rights. Got that?"*

*"Got it. Good luck."*

*"To you too. Try not to kill me if I get taken over, okay?"*

And Esta was gone.

*Hurry up, I'm alone here finally, so Everest can take over.*

..

..

*Hello? I guess she didn't have the energy to maintain the connection. Sorry, Amy. I guess I'll at least get out my mountain spirit.*

Both it and Lysanias were waiting for the group when they caught up with him, and Everest took the sword and went invisible. Naturally the wizard almost gleefully added this to his notebook and Lysanias could almost see the coins in his eyes.

"Can you lead us to the location of the portal?" Lysanias asked the spirit. It nodded. *Probably should have asked that before, but I was fairly sure...* "Great. You should also be able to tell where the people are, if any. Please try to avoid them." It gave him a look like "how stupid do you think I am?" and gestured for the others to follow. They did.

Following the spirit as quietly as possible, Lysanias and the group got closer to the portal chamber. The spirit, having a complete awareness of everything inside its domain, that of the mountain, knew where every everything was, down to the last speck of dust, and could keep them from being discovered while taking the fastest route. *I was always a bit jealous of that one girl with the moon spirit as a guide. She could find anything under the moon. I'm finally getting some use out of that aspect of my spirit guide.*

*Not that you aren't useful I mean... can you hear my thoughts?* But the spirit gave no indication it could at this point. *Probably because it's outside me now, or it's just seething with anger or whatever. Keep it together, another few minutes and this will be over.*

The group stepped into a chamber where a spark of light was hovering a meter or so off the ground. The spirit pointed and Lysanias knew this was it.

"This is it?" Don asked, looking around. "This chamber is huge, we'll never blow it up. Can we get some more light in here?" He looked to the wizards.

They insistently shook their heads. "Feel around for magic, if you can. This place is saturated in magical energies. Any spell we do is likely to bring the whole place down on us."

Don and Lysanias lifted their heads, opening their perceptions up to any magical emanations.

"I feel it," Don admitted. "And it feels really weird, too."

"Yeah," Lysanias echoed. "What is that?" He bent to pick up a bit of crystal, sparkling in the light of his own shard of the solidified light.

"Chaos shard," the one wizard told him. "Main ingredient in spell lenses. I guess Esta's story was true, that is what's keeping the gateway here."

The mountain spirit was pointing at the light and then straight up, so Lysanias handed over the light and the mountain spirit grew. He stuck the shard into a pocket. As it did the group watched the ceiling come into view, which was absolutely covered in sparking crystals. Then the spirit shoved a hand into a hole in the ceiling, showing even more crystal. The wizards whistled.

"You know I'm against spell lenses as much as the next wizard," remarked the one. "But can you imagine how much you could make selling crystals in this number?"

"I'm right there with you," agreed the other.

"Remind me again, what's a spell lens?" Lysanias asked, figuring now as a good a time as any to bring it up.

"Basically a device that allows someone without the spark of magic to use spells," the one wizard told him.

*So I was right!*

"It's seen as cheating in magical circles," the other put in.

"Magical circles, good one." Both giggled.

*Ah, wizard humor.* "So they don't have to learn spells? The lens does all the work?"

"Well, no, they still have to study the spells," admitted the first.

"What about the planets? They still have to study how to manipulate the magic with gestures and words, right?"

"Technically, I suppose that's true," admitted the second.

"Seems to me I recall someone telling me it takes a lot of energy, too. Like they couldn't cast more than a few spells a day," recalled the first.

"And this is seen as cheating?" Lysanias uttered, knowing he shouldn't be surprised at yet another way the mage's guild had found to make trouble for people. "It takes them more effort, and money for the lens, than just being born with the spark. You should be happy people want to take the *extra effort* to be able to use magic!"

"I guess when you put it like that..."

"That's not here or there," Don interrupted. "We need to blow this place up."

The mountain spirit shrank back down in size and bent to the floor, where it traced a pattern of some kind on the floor.

"Looks like a mountain with a shaft running through it," Amy remarked. "Oh, you think what it showed us is a shaft? Maybe it goes all the way up!"

"Has to be," Don agreed, getting excited. "Esta was right about that, too. The moonlight from the chaos moon must travel to the center here, and that is what opens the portal. Not the light itself, but the magical energies that travel along with it, activating the crystals. I bet if we wedged the gunpowder at the bottom of the hole there and threw some fire down, we could start a chain reaction and bring the whole place down."

"The whole place?" Lysanias was horrified. "Everest is still here, and Esta, and anyone else!"

"I just meant this chamber."

"Oh. Still..."

"It's what we came to do, lad. Don't back out on me now. We don't have enough gunpowder for more than a small explosion, don't worry."

*Small? With the number of barrels we have? Though I suppose compared to when P05's old body blew up anything we could do would be considered small. Hope you made it to Heaven, P05.* "Lift me up there, let's see what we have to work with," Lysanias told his spirit, who obliged him and grew again. The hole was several meters across, and Lysanias despaired of covering it up to sit the explosive on it. He looked it over, trying to think of various things he could try. *This is not going to be easy.* "Okay, lower me down."

"How about it, lad?"

"You're not going to like it."

"Just tell me."

"I hoped I could seal the hole up, giving the barrels someplace to rest on. Then we head to the top of the mountain and just throw fire down the hole. But that won't work, it's too far across."

"We don't have to do it now, do we?" asked one of the soldiers. "You've seen it, you could come back here any time with more supplies."

"We need to shut it now, before it opens again," he explained. "Amy's dream suggests disaster if we allow it to open again. Do you know when exactly the moon will be above this spot so it opens?"

"No. I guess the sooner the better, huh?"

"Exactly." He looked up, wondering if he could really pull this off without getting himself blown to bits.

"Sounds like you do have a plan, you just don't like it," Don said to him.

"I do. Just how bad would doing magic around here be?"

"I don't want to be anywhere near here when magic was done!" the one wizard said.

"Anything could happen. You could turn into a fish, or your toenails could turn blue!"

"Of the two, I would prefer the blue toenails," Don admitted. "Any way to weight the odds in our favor?"

"Not really, literally anything might happen. What magic are you thinking of doing?"

He took a deep breath and let it out. "Here's the plan. The mountain spirit climbs up a ways with us two. We get out the barrels and Don, you set them on fire with your magic. The spirit throws them, we teleport out, and they explode, causing the shaft to collapse. No more portal."

"Are you kidding?"

"I know, it's dangerous but—"

"No, no, I mean they'll be singing songs about my bravery for generations! Don Fortress, up into the mountain he climbed with his companion. Facing certain death, or blue toenails, still he laughed at the notion of turning back now."

"All right, don't go making any epic ballads just yet," chided Amy. "Do you think you can do it?"

"Fire, throw, teleport? Sure. I'll have the dragonfly spirit on so that should help. And the outside isn't that far away, so I should make it."

"Wait, let's go back to this song. I was just thinking about a drinking song, something my fellow dwarves sing while raising a glass to one of their own. You really think it would be a ballad?"

"You're impossible. Well, do any of you have any ideas?"

"We don't have any special powers," protested the soldiers. "I'm lucky I have a halfway decent piece of armor, tell you the truth." The others muttered their agreement.

"Fine. But you better come through this in one piece," Amy told him.

*How about a kiss, for luck?* he wanted to say, but didn't. "I will."

"The rest of you, clear out. Get free of this magical crystal and teleport back to the campsite. We'll follow in a moment."

"Actually we're coming too, I need a fire so I get all the benefit from this I can. And give the others your weapons and stuff. I have to *carry* you through space so any weight you can shed will make it easier."

"I'm not shaving my beard."

He rolled his eyes. "You don't have to." *But I might leave it behind by 'accident.'*

Away from the chaos shards the group teleported, and Lysanias smirked and went back into the area. He gathered up all the shards he could carry and stuck them into a sack, then a contain ward.

"Might as well turn some profit after all this, right?" he said to Don.

"That's capital thinking right there. I'm getting a share of those, right?"

"Of course."

"Excellent." He was rubbing his hands together, and Lysanias wondered if he knew roughly what these crystals would go for, down to the ember.

Once again back down the tunnel Lysanias turned some rock into wood and Don lit it on fire. Lysanias did his chant after asking the mountain spirit if they were alone, and they were.

"It is rather funny this place is unguarded," Don remarked on the way back.

"Given what it took to get here, I'm not surprised. This place is a total secret, there would be no need to guard it."

"I guess."

Now came the moment of truth. The spirit grew again with the pair hanging around its "neck" and then started to scale the wall.

"Wait lad, how are you going to teleport this massive spirit?"

"I'm not. It'll simply vanish when I teleport, as I can only get so far away from it before it disappears."

"Instantly? I don't want it getting caught in the explosion."

"It wouldn't get hurt anyway, it's a supernatural construct, essentially. A regular explosion wouldn't even touch it."

"I hope you're right."

Once a fair way up the side, the spirit stopped and grew again, wedging itself in the hole.

"It'll take a least a second or two for the fire to reach the powder, right?"

"I'm setting them on fire magically. I have no idea."

"Great. You ready?"

The spirit put a hand over them, as though that might help. "I have to see the barrels," Don reminded it, craning his neck. "There, that's fine."

"It was an honor traveling with you," Lysanias said honestly.

"Ah, don't start any of that. Next thing you know we'll be all weepy. You just do your job and let me do mine."

"Fair enough."

"On three. One. Two. Conjure Fire!"

The spirit threw and Lysanias willed them outside, picturing the train tracks, giant, and Amy waiting for him. They shifted.

You Can Do Whatever You Please

When: Seconds have passed

Where: All is darkness

Lysanias felt and heard a distant rumbling, but most definitely not the sensation of being buried alive or exploded. It seemed he had successfully teleported, but where?

“You could open your eyes, lad. We’re safe.”

This seemed reasonable, and yet... “I don’t have to do what you tell me to do. You’re not the boss of me.”

“Er, what?”

“Yeah, you’re not the boss of me. Stop bossing me around. Bosser.”

“Fine, keep them shut then.”

“Maybe I will, and maybe I won’t. Maybe I’ll just open one of them, how would you like that, huh?”

“What is wrong with you?”

“Me? You’re the one trying to run my life, you stupid dwarf. Always telling me what to do. Move here, move there. I’m tired of it!”

“I’ve never told you what to do!”

“You admit it!”

“That was the opposite of admitting it!”

“Uh, Don, I don’t think arguing with him is going to get you anywhere,” said a voice. “I think something happened to him when you cast that magic. By the way, how do you feel?”

“Fine. Normal, I guess?”

“Hummm... the surge can take some time to manifest. For all we know, a dragon somewhere in the world has become your mortal enemy for no reason and will roast you on sight.”

“That should keep life interesting.”

“What do we do about him?” asked Amy.

“You could show a little appreciation,” Lysanias suggested. He opened his eyes, looking around. “You know, saving the world. Again and again. But what do I get out of it? Just more needing to save the world. Professor X was right, it’ll always need saving. Why do I have to be the one to do it?”

“We need to go get Everest. Can you help him somehow?”

“Let me see,” said the wizard, moving closer.

“Don’t touch me.”

“I won’t.” He looked Lysanias over. “I don’t feel anything presently magical around him.”

“Wait,” said the other, “I just need to mark this down in the book.” He got out his notebook again and made a note. “There we go. Didn’t say anything about me not touching you- One casting of *Reveal Constraints!*” Magical energy swirled about Lysanias. “Oh.”

“What? What’s wrong with him?”

“Apparently, for the next three days, he’ll have no personality. He’ll be impossible to live with, I’m afraid.”

“What?” everyone shrieked.

“We did warn you. Be thankful it’s only three days.”

“We can’t wait,” Don told him. “Is there anything you can do?”

"Me personally? No. I don't know any spells to restore a person's personality. You?" The other wizard shook his head. "Sorry."

"You know, I hate all of you, and all for different reasons. You would think there couldn't be that many reasons to hate someone, but I do. I hate you all."

"Yes, yes. Perhaps just knocking him in the head and letting him sleep it off?" the wizard suggested.

"We need him, he's the only one who can find where Everest is in the tunnels. And we can't leave Esta, they could be possessed right now if the cookies didn't work."

"Not my money," the wizard said with a shrug. "I can head back to the guild, see what I can find. That's two teleport spells and the cost of the spell I find and the casting of it—"

"I know—"

"Just pretend I'm not here, I'll be fine."

"You don't get a vote. Go, hurry up!"

"Very well. Hope the duke appreciates all this." He got out the notebook again and noted the teleport spell down, then vanished.

"We should just go in there and kill them all! I should kill you all! I probably could, you know."

"Just be quiet."

"You be quiet. You're bossing me around again!"

"Are you sure you don't want me to just bash him in the head?" asked the guard.

"Try it, I'll take you apart!"

"Let's all just calm down," Amy suggested.

"Fine." Lysanias got out his sack of crystals and started pawing through it. "Don't need any of you anyway."

"You picked up some!?" demanded the other wizard.

"Of course I did. I'm not stupid like you." He gripped one, a jagged yellow crystal close to his chest, and pulled the others towards him. "They're mine. You can't have any."

"I am stupid. I should have grabbed some, they were all over the place there." He looked back towards the mountain. "And now they're gone."

"Are they?" Don asked. "Can you tell?" he asked Amy.

"I can look inside the mountain, at that room we were in. Just give me a second." Her eyes unfocused, and she seemed to look through the mountain. "Yeah, the room is just rubble now. There's no way the portal can open in there."

"That's a relief, at least we don't have that to- ARGH!"

Laughing uproariously, Lysanias took his hand off the chaos shard he had just jammed into Don's back. The soldiers tackled him to the ground as Don tried to reach behind himself. "Get it out, get it out!"

The soldiers ran over, but then stopped, looking around.

"Where did he go?" the one asked the other.

"He was right here, I didn't see him go anywhere."

"What did you do to him?" the third asked, looking around and then making this demand of Lysanias.

"Not telling! Ha Ha!"

"Don!" shouted the one. "Where are you?"

"I'm right here, you bloody idiot. Now get this crystal out of me."

"They can't see you," the wizard breathed. "What an astonishing thing."

"What?" He stopped flailing and looked at the wizard.

"Somehow, that crystal has removed you from their perception. Extraordinary."

"Yeah, it's great. You mind healing me here?"

"You mean cast a spell near a chaos shard? You saw what it did to your friend-"

"You're no friends of mine!"

"And we have yet to know what it's done to you. I can bandage the area, maybe, but do magic? No, I don't think so."

"So I can't do magic ever again?"

"Oh, no, you should be fine. It's just casting something on the crystal that will be the problem."

"So take it out!"

"I could, but if I leave even a little piece..."

"So bandage it before I bleed to death. This is the worst."

The wizard started trying to get Don's shirt off so they could see how bad the wound was and maybe bandage it somehow.

"It's just the universe telling you we did wrong, Don," Lysanias told him from the ground. "We did wrong. Shouldn't have closed the portal. Should have just left it alone. Let everybody die, at least that would have been the natural order of things."

"You don't mean that!" Amy told him.

He looked up at her. "Hey, how about you forget about being a person tonight?"

The soldiers didn't know what he was talking about, but she did. She looked enraged. "Bash him in the head!" she screamed. "Do it. I don't even care if you hurt him. Kappa, you do it!"

"I'm not touching him, what if he's contagious?"

"He can't be, we're touching him aren't we?" But he seemed to be trying to convince himself, not Kappa. "As for bashing him, are you sure?" The soldier drew his sword and held it up, ready to bash his head in.

"What?" Lysanias asked her. "Being a person is overrated. Be true to your nature! It's what I'm going to do."

"Yeah, for three days, and then you'll be miserable because of all the trouble you caused us."

"I don't think so."

There was an explosion of air and the other wizard was standing there, scroll in hand. He looked at the scene, Don bloody, Lysanias being held and struggling with two guards. "Guess I missed all the excitement."

"Can you help him?"

"Perhaps. Just let me read this spell over for a moment."

"Oh, not a very good wizard, huh?" Lysanias asked. "Can't cast a simple spell without hours of study, is that it?"

"I'm no *natural magician*, if that's what you mean. I study magic properly-"

"Just get on with it," Don ordered, teeth clenched.

"I'm trying to do this as gently as- oh, not me."

"Very well."

Lysanias started making random "La La La" sounds.

"Can't you gag him? I'm trying to concentrate!"

"I think that can be arranged," said the one soldier holding him down. He grabbed his handkerchief from a pocket and shoved it into Lysanias' mouth.

So he turned it into chocolate and crunched through it. "Delicious. What else have you got in there?"

"What in the world?" the other guard questioned, horrified at what he had just seen.

"My girlfriend gave me that handkerchief!"

"Will she be furious you lost it? Please tell me she will be!"

"I'll just get another one that looks just like it before I see her again."

"What couldn't go wrong with that hilarious scenario?! Do you even remember what it looked like?"

"It was sort of, uh, purple?"

"You don't. You're going to get the wrong one and she'll hate you. *FOREVER*. In fact I bet she'll think another girl gave you another one and you prefer her because you have hers and not the one she gave you."

"*Quiet!*"

"I suppose I could bring it up again for you. I mean, since it means so much and everything." He started making fake retching noises.

"I'll bash him in the head, I swear I will!"

"Keep it down!"

A few moments later the wizard finally was able to cast "Augment Personality!" and everyone went still. Especially Lysanias, who looked around with a horrified look on his face.

"I am so, so sorry," he began. "I said, and did apparently, some horrible things just now-"

"Forget it, can you close this wound up?" Don asked.

"Oh, of course! As soon as these fine gentleman let me up."

"Is he cured?" asked the one.

"No, I must maintain this for the moment. But at least we can get back to town and he can be locked up someplace for the next three days."

"Of course, whatever it takes," promised Lysanias. "I am so sorry about that."

"Bleeding!"

"I'm coming. I'm really sorry about that, it was just in my hand, and there was your back, and I just-"

"Less talking, more healing!"

So Don got patched up and put his shirt back on, then demanded they go in after Everest immediately. "The place is probably in full panic mode by now. We need to get a move on."

"Right. I'll get the mountain spirit out right away."

*Can you hear me, spirit of the mountain?*

*I can hear you quite clearly for some reason. I come.*

"We need to find Everest, he should still be inside the mountain."

The spirit nodded, and headed off towards the entrance.

"Thanks for curing me! I'll be out soon. Please keep maintaining this!"

"I planned to. Better note down the casting before I forget." He got out his book again and Lysanias turned away, heading back into the mountain.

"The rest of you, stay out here. If any shadows come out of there, run. You don't have the glowing shoe bottoms we do, so you're vulnerable."

"I'm sure it'll be fine," Lysanias said.

The tunnels seemed quiet, but this far away from the blast site they would be. Two figures came into view, and both raised metal tubes.

"*Outsiders! They're responsible for this!*" said the one.

*I can't tell if they're possessed or not. Not without getting closer. Wait, why would they automatically assume we caused it? We're coming from the opposite direction and they don't know we can teleport. We could be rushing to help because we heard the noise. Something isn't right here.*

"Guns," Don cautioned. "Be careful, they could fill this whole tunnel with shot."

"Look, it was the duke's orders!" protested Lysanias. "I didn't want to do it. I had to."

*"Oh, the duke is here? Behind you, whipping you into submission?"*

"No, of course not."

*"So the, ugh, so you're just a mindless remnant, is that it? Doing what you're told?"* The other had a pained look, and seemed to be struggling against something.

"Are you hurt? We can help."

*"Stay back! I'm fine."*

*"Do you realize what you've done?"*

"Saved our world?" Don asked.

*"Stranded the rest of our people on the other side of the portal!"*

"Indications were your world had fallen," Amy tried to tell them.

*"Indications?"* both intoned. The unwounded one went on. *"What are you talking about? Are you a time traveler?"*

"No."

*"Then you have no idea what would have happened, who would have come through!"*

"But I had a fair guess. Believe me, it's better this way."

*"You know what I think would be better? If the world didn't have people like you in it."*

"They're going to shoot!" Amy warned.

The mountain spirit shot forward, bringing his fists down and then up, trying to knock the guns upward before they could be fired. It managed it, knocking both up so the shots impacted the ceiling instead of the party. The sound reverberated through the tunnel, making everyone wince.

*"Get them!"* cried the wounded one, and Lysanias got an arrow out as the guns came down. He saw they each had a knife on the front, and he realized they weren't exactly helpless despite not being able to shoot again right away.

*But at least I can stay out of the way, the spirit can cover me while I fire these from a distance.*

Don had his halberd out already so didn't need to ready anything. He simply gripped it in both hands and lunged for the one that had seemed wounded already. He tried to get the guy in the arm, make him drop the weapon, but the halberd just passed though.

*Oh great, they can go insubstantial! It isn't just something Esta can do, but something they all can do.*

The being kept going, walking right through Don so now there was one on either side.

*"Good thinking, we've got them on both sides now. Hey, where are you going?"*

Rather than turn to help the wanderer just kept going, breaking into a run.

*"Coward! Help me!"*

There was no response.

"Look, we don't want to fight you," Lysanias told the one that was left. "What's done is done. You were invading our world, and you brought your trouble with you. We simply did what we had to."

“Did that magic wear off already?” Don muttered. “So what’s your choice?”  
“*You haven’t heard the last of us.*” There was a sudden inrush of air, and the wanderer was gone.  
“Come on, Everest must be here someplace.”

They found him under guard, two wanderers covering him with guns. They were in a dining area, and the fancy food was all over the place. It looked like quite a scuffle had occurred here, with tables overturned and chairs flung everywhere. Everest was tied up, the sword nearby on a table.

Lysanias struck from behind a corner, two arrows to the head, one for each of them. He used the blunt side, not the sharpened edge, and both went down.

“You okay?” Don asked, grabbing a dagger and starting to saw the ropes off him. “Hello? What’s wrong with him?”

“You okay Everest?” Lysanias asked him.

“Oh, Lysanias! Where did you come from? Where’s Don?”

“Don’t give me that nonsense, this is no time for your jokes.” The upper rope fell away and he started on the bottom one.

“You can’t see him, can you?” Lysanias asked, concerned.

“See who?”

“Don.”

“Don’s here? Where?”

“I swear, we get out of here and I’m going to kill you myself. I was worried sick you know!”

“I don’t think he can see you anymore,” Lysanias explained. “Like those soldiers a little while ago. Remember how he could never see my mountain spirit? I think you’re like that now. Unseen by people without special abilities.” *Though he can levitate rock, doesn’t that count?*

“I’m what?”

The other rope holding his legs dropped, and Don stood back. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

But Everest just sat there, seemingly unaware his bonds had been cut.

“You’re free,” Amy told him.

“What?” He looked down. “Oh, so I am! How did that happen?”

“You’re not just joking around?”

“No, what’s going on?”

“Something happened to Don. He’s fine, you just can’t see him at the moment. We’ll work on it.” Lysanias grabbed and put his sword away. “Meantime, what happened here?”

“The plan went pretty good,” he explained. “They ate the cookies. But some of them just seemed uncomfortable. Others were expelled, we took care of those. After driving one through I became visible again. Esta figured something was up but it was too late. The explosion came soon after. It was panic around here after that.”

“I can imagine.”

“Did we get it? Is the portal closed?”

“It’s closed. For better or worse,” Lysanias told him.

“Is one of them Esta?” asked Amy, looking over the two unconscious wanderers. “I’m ashamed to say I can’t tell them apart.”

“No, Esta ran off. I don’t know if they’re possessed or not at this point. We were this close, I tell you.”

“At least there won’t be any new ones, right? We only have the existing ones to worry about.”

“Who knows how many that is though?”

“Should we bring them?”

“I can’t see how that would do any good. They can just vanish from wherever we put them, so why bother?”

*Hey, come to think of it, so can I. No more prison cells for me.*

“I hate to just leave them.”

“The mountain isn’t coming down or anything, they’ll be fine,” Don assured her. “With no means of getting rid of any shadow kin that possess them the only thing we could do is kill them.”

“Let’s not do that,” Lysanias suggested. “I think they’re already mad at us. We don’t need to throw more fuel on that particular fire.”

“I guess.”

“If we’re going, let’s go,” Everest told them. “I’m willing to pay that wizard personally to get us back to civilization. We won!”

*Did we? Did we really?* Lysanias sadly followed the group out of the cave, the spirit in the lead.

“We can’t go back yet,” the wizard told him once everyone was back together. “Once we change settings the magic will be broken and you go back to being a total jerk.”

“Wait, what?” asked Everest. “What’s this?”

“Something happened to him when we blew the place up,” Amy explained without explaining. “I’ll explain later. It has to do with why you can’t see Don at the moment.”

“Put me inside a ward,” he offered, getting a contain ward out. “I won’t resist. You can put me in a cell so I don’t hurt anyone for the next three days. Better take my stuff.” He started to unbuckle his arrows. *Oh, wait.* “I don’t know how you’re going to keep me from just teleporting away though. That’s not magical, it would work just fine even in a magically dead area.”

“We can put you into stasis or something when you come out,” the wizard informed him.

“And charge me for it?”

“Naturally.”

He sighed. “Fine.”

With Lysanias tucked away the wizard cast the group teleportation spell and got back to the mage’s guild. When he came out Lysanias was raving about how terrible they all were when he got hit with a bunch of ice and knew nothing more for three days.

Shivering and exhausted, Lysanias tumbled from the ice and blinked at the people looking down at him.

“Are you okay?” Amy asked.

“I’m fine, little cold though. Everything work out?”

“There’s been no official protest by the wanderers. The mountain site is abandoned, I’ve been checking to see if they tried to clear it but the crystals are pretty much shattered. That portal won’t open again.”

“Great. How much do I owe for the spell that got me out of the ice?”

“You’ve learned our ways quickly,” said the wizard that melted it. “You’ll fit right in here!”

*Yeah, no. Thanks, but no thanks.*

"Let's get you warmed up," Amy offered, holding out a hand.

"Don't get any ideas, she doesn't mean it that way," Kappa made sure he understood.

He did.

That night Amy knocked on his door. He was lying in bed, reviewing the last few days (of his time) and if they had done the right thing. He still didn't know. He wasn't sure what they were going to do about Don. On the one hand there could be benefit to him being somewhat invisible to normal people. But that included Everest, who still couldn't see him at all. Or hear him, or notice when he moved something. *Maybe I can make him a talisman to let him see unseen things? I have that book, I could look through it.* The knock broke him out of his reverie.

"Come in."

"How are you?"

"Feeling almost human again. What can I do for you?" He sat up on the bed.

"Actually, I've come to say goodbye." Amy's eyes dropped, her shoulders drooping. "There's some things I need to tell you."

"I see." *Can't say I haven't been expecting this.*

"The first is, my role in all this is over. Traveling with you is great, but it's taking a toll on me. We just aren't meant to be away from our home, crappy as it might be, for so long. I have to go back, for a long time now. Every time I left it got a little harder, despite my going back all the time. I... need some time there. It's just what I am."

"I understand."

"I'll check in with you, from time to time. Seer, and all, you know?" She gave a forced laugh. "But there's another reason."

"What is it?"

"You still have promises to keep, and further adventures ahead. You will meet another, a girl in trouble. In fact I get the feeling many of the years ahead of you will be marked by women coming and going in your life."

*Oh, wonderful.*

"You're a friend zone magnet my friend," Kappa informed him.

"I have no idea what that means."

"Oh, I think you do."

"Anyway, I see the clouds and beyond in your future. Places I could never dream of, never reach myself. I saw the earth trembling at your feet, and you calling up fire from your very hands. A man in a black mask is exactly what he seems while his daughter is not, and a sword that is alive comes to you, lending you strength. But this girl... she is troubled. You will help her unravel the mysteries of her people. People of the clouds."

"You've dreamed all this?"

"In bits and pieces. None of it seemed relevant to the shadow kin, so I kept quiet about it. You could dream your own future, you know. You know how, now."

"Sure, and get baskets on the heads of shopkeepers. But yes, I should practice it. I will practice it. Everything you taught me. But there's something else."

"What?"

"I was never able to see energy. I think I've almost got it, but I'm not quite there. At least come back to the city to complete my training, then tell me goodbye. I was really hoping to learn that skill in particular, I think it could be really handy for me."

“You are close. Tell you what; work on sensing spirit energy for a few more days. I’m sure the alchemists can help with that. That’s the foundation for the technique. Then I’ll come see you one last time and give you a quick lesson. But that will be it, okay? You have promises to keep. Keep them, or worse is coming.”

*She really looks troubled. I promised myself that I would destroy all other war machines that might be reactivated. Is that what she means? Must be, I don’t recall any others.*

“I will.”

“Okay. It was really great traveling with you, Lysanias. Thank you for freeing me from that wizard. Letting me see the world with my own eyes. It means a lot to me.”

“Of course. Thanks for your help. We’ll miss you, especially in combats, your advice kept us safe.”

“You’ll have to take that role now. Look, I’ll see you in a few days, I have to go home.”

“See you kid,” Kappa gave a wave as the two went out the door.

Lysanias flopped down on the bed again. *So I get to experience this, woman coming into my life and then leaving again, over and over? Never staying, never finding me good enough to stay with? How did I get so lucky? I should make some notes about what she said, it could be important.* He dragged himself up and wrote down what she said, then sat staring at it. *Guess that’s it. I still have no idea where I’m going to settle down, and she implied it wouldn’t be here because I still had work to do in the world. I just hope the duke is happy we did as he ordered.* He closed the book and covered the light of the sword, getting into bed again. *Man, last time a woman left it, I had broken my sword. This time I broke a mountain. What am I going to break next time?*

Afterword

When You Meet a Brand New Friend

When: moments after the explosion

Where: Throne room

The group of wanderers suddenly found themselves in an ostentatious room, a man in fine robes sitting atop a throne some distance in front of them. Naturally they were a bit panicked, but the man held up a hand for silence.

"Please, good wanderers, I have brought you here to aid you. There is no cause for concern, you are all quite safe."

"*Where are we?*" demanded one.

"*Have we displeased you?*" asked another, bowing low. Half of them looked over at the other half, bowing at this figure.

He laughed. "Only in a minor way. Raise your heads, you still have a part to play in this world. Go, I will give you your orders later." He clapped his hands and the doors at the end of the room opened, admitting several servants. "They will show you to your rooms. I will call upon you soon."

They bowed their way out, leaving the other eight puzzled.

"They already serve me," the man explained. "But it is you who must now be offered the choice to serve."

"*Why should we serve you?*" one asked.

"Why wouldn't you?" asked the man. "You have just been dealt a crushing blow by that Lysanias character, haven't you? He is my enemy, though he knows it not. I believe he is your enemy as well."

"*It's true,*" Esta told them. "*I thought he was coming to help, but he was coming to betray our people. To seal the portal between our worlds. No more of us will ever come here. Those that were left are at the mercy of the shadow kin, to be toyed with and killed as they see fit. This cannot be allowed to go unpunished.*"

"True, and what a pity," sympathized the man. "But you are here, and there are more that can join your cause. Pledge your loyalty to me, and I will outfit you with far better weapons and armor than you have ever seen!" He gestured, and a cloth lifted off a table that was nearby, folding itself neatly at the end. Weapons and armor of every kind were displayed there, some glowing with power. "These can be the instruments of your revenge!"

"Revenge!" cried a figure, drifting from behind the throne. It looked like a satyr, with the upper half a man and the lower half a goat. But no satyr hung in the air like that, or looked over at the weapons causing them to rise.

The man raised a hand, forestalling this rise. "Yes, my friend. Patience for just a little longer. You will get your chance, but it must be done carefully if we want to succeed. Lysanias has many abilities, you would be wise to learn how to counter them all." The weapons settled again. The man looked over at the wanderers. "My apologies. I found this lonely spirit wandering the forests, and learned he, and his entire tribe, had been wiped out by Lysanias. Yes, wiped clean out! Naturally I offered him the same I have offered you. Training, weapons, and a chance for revenge. You have served an emperor before, have you not? You do cast shadow kin out in his name. Perhaps you could serve another?"

"*You know much about us,*" one remarked suspiciously.

"*You are an emperor?*" asked another, looking around the throne room.

"I am. I have ruled for almost thirty years here, having taken the position from the previous empress. She wanted to take over the world, but she was destroyed by her

own greed and quite honestly stupidity. I see the point she was trying to make now, however, and have been cautiously building up my power so that when I attack, I will not make the same mistakes. I think it's time I started putting those plans into action. So what do you say? I ask no payment, the destruction of the so called 'progenitor' Lysanias will be payment enough. Will you join me for this task?"

An understanding passed between the wanderers that were there, and they all nodded. With a single motion they knelt, bowing their heads. "*We pledge ourselves to this task and you, emperor,*" they intoned as one.

"Excellent!" he purred. "I see we're going to get along just fine."