

I was super excited to learn I could reincarnate in a new world
but I never expected I would become a mother as fast as I did!

By Robert Ziefel

Chapter 1

Awoke

When: Before the beginning

Where: Currently unsure

Awoke is the wrong word. To wake up, one must be asleep. But I wasn't asleep. At least, I didn't think I was. But at the same time there was a discontinuity, a sense that at some point I had not been here, yet now, here I was. I looked ahead at what seemed to be a dark room, lit from my left by a soft, white light, and wondered how I came to be here. I had the sense that I should remember things, a life well lived perhaps, or at least a name. But I didn't. Normally I thought not remembering anything would scare me. But it didn't. I just felt numb.

I wasn't hot, or cold. I didn't feel tall, or short. Vaguely I remembered hands? Feet? But the lack of them now didn't seem to bother me. Who was I? Where was I? Naturally I turned to the light. I'm not sure what I turned, my head, I supposed, but I didn't feel I had a head to turn. Despite that, the glow from the door to my left came into view, and I saw what I can only describe as Heaven. A perfect land was beyond, one that beckoned me forward to lie on soft grasses, swim in warm waters, fly across starlit nights. Whispers that could only be the ones I loved, already there and waiting for me to join them, reached what I would have called my ears. The desire to go into that light was strong, but not absolute. There was another door, I knew there was. I faced away from the door to Heaven with some difficulty, and beheld another door. A blank aperture into a dark space, though I could see a table in the center of that space, as though lit by a single overhead bulb. I looked through the doorway a moment, then back to the door with the glorious light spilling out of it. Was that laughter I heard? Merriment and companionship? Forever and ever? I was sure that it was.

"So one door leads to safety, one door leads to a horrible death?" I asked myself. I wasn't sure how I spoke, I didn't feel a mouth or lungs, yet the words came to me.

"Not exactly," someone answered behind me.

I froze. Someone was here with me. Perhaps they would have the answers I needed? Perhaps they would even have *the questions*. I slowly turned. Standing before me was a figure, clothed in a white robe. Great white wings protruded from their back, their feet were bare. In one arm sat... a clipboard?

"Be not afraid," said the figure with a slight smile.

I considered myself once again. "You know, I don't think I am."

"Naturally enough not," they agreed. "Fear is mostly a response of the body. Various glands and such, as I understand it. Nasty business but it's what They wanted. Sorry. It's just sort of traditional to say it. They love tradition, you know?"

"I don't. Why don't I remember anything?"

"Memory resides in the brain, of course. Part of the body you left behind. Consider yourself to now be the purest expression of yourself you can be. Welcome to the choosy room."

"Uh, thank you? I take it," I looked between the two doors again, "that I am to choose."

"Exactly correct. This door, as you have no doubt surmised, leads to a paradise. An eternity of doing whatever you choose. Study in the great library. Compose the perfect hymn. They love hymns. Debate the great masters, or reenact great battles in history to see if you can do better. You will never

tire, never be bored. And nothing you do from that point on to the end of even eternity itself will matter in any way.”

I would have blinked, if I had eyes. *That almost sounded... wistful? A touch of annoyance perhaps?* “And the other door?”

“Ah, now very few take that door,” they admitted, stepping over to it and running a hand along the door frame. “You can feel it, can’t you? The pull? The call? Even now you want to step through that door of light?” They pointed behind me, to the door of light.

“A bit, yes.”

“Naturally. And yet, there’s a certain charm to the unknown, isn’t there? A dark room, a single table, what can it mean?”

“Can you tell me?”

“To a point. If you step through this door you still have a chance to matter. To make a difference to someone.”

“I can go back...” I realized.

“You can go sideways,” they clarified. “Your old world is gone. While your essence may retain a few bits of knowledge from that place that were especially important to you, returning there is not an option. Their rules are clear. But going on? Yes, that is very much an option.”

“That’s what you want me to do.” It was clear to me from their every movement, the way they were drawing my attention away from the door of light.

“I?” they protested, placing a hand on their chest. “I want for nothing. I am simply here to explain the choice. Nothing more.”

“So I’ll just choose the other one then?” I moved slightly, not even knowing how, towards the door of light.

“It is your choice,” they agreed, looking down as though they were a doctor thinking to themselves “lost another one...”

“I have one question.”

Startled, they looked up again. “Yes?”

“Will I see this room again, or is this choice forever? Am I denying myself that door if I don’t choose it now?”

“Changing the nature of your essence is quite difficult,” they began. “To be offered this choice now and not again in the future? Unheard of. Your choices are your own, and they have been made well. Even if circumstances were different, you would still choose a similar path, I think.”

“Then I think I choose to matter again,” I decided. *If I can come back here again and again, why not explore ‘sideways’ as this angel says? What’s the word? Isekai, I think? I can’t remember if this was one of my dreams but if I have eternity anyway, those on the other side of that door can wait a bit longer.*

“It’s not nice to tease me,” the being pouted.

“Is this teasing?” I boldly strode through the door and past the shocked face of the angel, who dropped their clipboard.

“What?”

“I choose to matter, is that really such a big shock?” I felt that I should have felt amused, but that may have been more of those glands I was missing. Still.

“Okay then!” the angel recovered, grabbing the clipboard and coming after me. They shut the door behind them, looking at their clipboard. “I have to re-familiarize myself with the procedure, it’s been so long! One minute. Have a seat!”

I looked, and at the table was a chair, so I figured out how to sit down. At least, I thought I did. My view didn’t change all that much, but I kind of felt like I was sitting so that was something. The angel seemed to be turning many more pages on their clipboard than would fit on a clipboard of that

size, but they finally seemed satisfied. “Wow! Wow! I can give you some nice bonuses, as it’s been so long.”

“I guess most take the other door, huh?”

“Usually I don’t even get to introduce myself, people just bolt through it.”

“You haven’t actually introduced yourself.”

“Oh yeah! Sorry about that. I’m Mumiah, nice to meet you!”

“Nice to meet you. Sorry, I don’t remember my name.”

She waved that off. “To be expected. Now, let’s get started! What’s the system you know best?”

That gave me a bit of pause. “I’m sorry?”

“Right, no memories, my orientation was so long ago now. Maybe just pick one at random? No, that’s no good. Look, you were involved in this one in life, perhaps you want to stick with it?” They handed me, and I’m not sure where it came from, a book. It had “Paragon Universal Role-Playing game” on it.

“Hang on,” I said, taking it. “I do feel a connection to this. Yes, yes, somehow... what is it?”

“I can’t tell you, sorry, policy. Still, looks like a good character creation to start, lots of flexibility, and a few supplements. She plunked a further stack of books next to me and I turned what would have been my head to read the titles. The Embers of Pyre, Demongate High, Darkbolt, LUCID: Dreamscape Reality, Perfect Horizon.

“Character creation?”

“That’s right. You’ve got a few options. You can simply be born and have your traits basically assigned at random, or you can go into the world skipping past those early years and jump straight to the good stuff. The adult stuff!” She wiggled her eyebrows.

“Like car payments, and the realization of your own mortality?” I asked, confused about why that was such a good thing. *Though I guess we got off lightly on that one!*

“I guess,” she sniffed. “Boy, give someone a setup... anyway. What do you think?”

“I wouldn’t mind having some control over my destiny,” I admitted. “Skip pooping my pants again and maybe be an adult somewhere right off the bat. But I have no idea if this is a good option or not.”

“I don’t think there’s any *bad* option, simply different options. There’s a lot there to choose from.”

“But it’s all over the place,” I protested, somehow moving the books to see the covers. “This one is clearly some kind of futuristic setting, and this one has dragons on it. And a catgirl, and an elf. What kind of world are you sending me to, that’s what I need to know. This elf seems to be doing magic? What if I want to be an elf and there are no elves where I’m going? That would be a disaster!”

“Oh, come now, it may be rare but that’s not to say it never happens,” she chided. “You pick who you want to be, and we’ll find you a world you’ll fit into. Promise.”

“Even if I want to be this robot looking guy right here?”

“Do you *want* to be that robot looking guy there?”

“I don’t know!” She seemed fairly sincere, and I had to admit if I couldn’t come up with something special from all these books, I could still probably request a different “system” until I left this room. I was simply potential, I was beginning to understand. “Guess I better get started.”

“Okay!” she exclaimed with a bounce. “Now we’re talking.” She gestured, and a form hung in the air, blown up so I could touch parts of it as clearly I was going to start defining myself. I saw fields for name, gender, hair color, all that sort of thing. “I can help you through, let’s get started with the main volume and see what we need to do to start.”

“Right.”

I read through the books, more and more coming back to me as I did, as though I was simply remembering this process and going through it one more time rather than learning it for the first time.

That helped. From the main book I could be someone with mental powers called an ESPer, a magic user of various types, or a cyborg. I was probably going to stay away from that, they said I would go into a world relating to my choices and to be perfectly fair that elf on the cover looked pretty good to me. One after the other I devoured the books, getting a concept in mind as everything was connected. Was I going to be a fighter or a scholar? An inventor or a craftsman? The skills I took would be connected to my stats, as would the powers I took. Did I want to be super tough or super smart? Without knowing what world I was going to; stone age? High tech? Middle of the road? It was hard to pick. Would I die of disease a month in or live a thousand years as an elf? If there was a lot of disease in the world a high CONstitution would come in handy, but would that leave me a low LUCk in a world where games of chance were commonplace? It all came down to trusting the angel, I supposed in the end. Just do what felt right, be the best person you can be, and let everything fall from there.

I jumped up and touched the first field that mattered, even more than name. I would need a great name, but I would need to see what I came up with to inform it. Right? So gender was first, and I mentally willed in female. "I mean, of course."

I jumped as an image of a naked woman, totally average in every way, appeared beside me.

"You'll want to see how you look, I figured," said Mumiah. "Sorry, I should have warned you."

"That's fine." I touched hair color and filled in red, again, because *of course*. *Of course* I was going to pick red. Are you kidding me right now? Then I touched height, and now I was a bit stumped.

Do I go for tall, imposing, a powerful woman you don't mess with? Or a short, super cute girl everyone that meets wants to hug until I pop? Tall? Short? Tall? Short? I messed with a slider, dragging it back and forth and watching the image of who I would soon be grow and shrink. *Are smaller girls looked down upon?* There was a pause in the slider action. *You know what I mean. I do want hugs. And maybe to be underestimated? Yes, go for cute, that's the way to go.* I left the slider on the shorter side and moved on. Weight. Being right handed. Green eyes. Finally I got to my stat block. There were some numbers in there already, but something was off about them. I counted them up, and opened the book to the front.

"There's too much," I protested. "The number is too high."

"Ah, let me explain," Mumiah told me. "While we don't want you to be superhuman, lifting 40 ton boulders or what have you, we are allowing you to be slightly more exceptional than even the average, exceptional, character generated with this system. Unexceptional people have 5s in their stats, exceptional people have either a 5 or a 6 or have reduced a stat below 5 to place that point elsewhere. We want you to have all 6s, with 2 7s. Not enough to tip someone off you're operating at a level above them but enough to give you a slight edge. Consider it our first gift for choosing this path."

"That explains it! Thank you."

"Of course."

Now, as I've gone the cute path, let's focus on mental stats not physical. I won't neglect them of course, I'm going into an unknown world but I have some plans.

I stepped back with my stats looking like this:

STR 5	REA 8
END 5	KNO 7
CON 5	RES 8
REF 5	INS 5
COO 6	PER 7
MAN 6	LUC 6
LOO 7	

And certain things had changed about the character model as I had worked. In short, as I put points into my LOOKs I got more attractive. I asked if further customizations could be made and Mumiah said yes, opening up a more nuanced set of controls so I could dial in exactly how I wanted to look. I couldn't move things too far, like making my eyeballs huge or my nose disappear, so I would always be in the 7 range for looks. It was vain of me, I knew. It wouldn't keep me alive if I got poisoned, or smashed in the head with a rock. That's what CONstitution was for. But in the unknown world I was going to be dumped into I was going to need to make a lot of good first impressions, and fairly quickly too. My high LOOKs and PERsonality would help with that. Besides, I was going to be plenty smart and I wasn't below a 5 in anything, so I was no worse off than the average person in that world would be. It would be fine!

"And now backgrounds, and the meat of the whole build," I announced.

"Indeed," Mumiah agreed. "Now this is going to work a little differently as well. Your weaknesses are your own. They cannot be changed. However, we are giving you twenty background points to work with. Choose wisely!"

"Twenty?!" I exclaimed. "That's crazy, they start you with 5 in the book, but you can take weaknesses- hang on. Just how many weaknesses did I have in my old life that you can give me... you can't tell me."

"That's correct. You may pick up additional weaknesses in your travels, and boons as well that is up to you. Eventually it will all balance out. But that is what we're offering."

Great, the first person to see me will be some king and decide they hate me on first sight and order my death, giving me a 5 point enemy weakness. "I'm not going to refuse it at this point!" Elf. Elf. Elf. Elf. Elf.

But it wasn't looking good. I picked Elf for 3, spark of magic for 1, natural magician for 4, and Mumiah explained I could take "power points" to choose from the Darkbolt "setting" which had me practically floating in air. Each point spent gave five "power points" making those sorts of powers much, much cheaper than anything else. So I splurged 4 points, buying me a ton of various powers I couldn't wait to try out. 12 points gone just like that. I wanted extra spells, or maybe resources for some kind of spellbook in case learning magic in my new world was restricted, extra skill points, because how was I going to get training in anything? A focus for a spell I wanted to have going all the time but not be dragged down by it. I could manage it, even still have a point to buy good sense of direction or something but it felt... wrong. Elf was 3 points. But so was beastkin, that would give me animal ears and a tail. As an elf I would be functionally immortal, got a +1 to everything I did, radiated perfection, could see in the dark, and had my stats adjusted further. Beastkin got an animal sense, animals liked them better, seeing in the dark again, and the aforementioned tail. How were they worth the same number of points? And either way I was basically still just a human. There was all kinds of neat stuff in the Demongate book like manipulating matter with a touch or making alchemical creations as an alchemist, or talking to the spirits as a shaman. As an elf I would live a long time, and magic could certainly do a lot, but did I want to be stuck as only one thing? Dropping elf and the spellcasting backgrounds gave me 8 back, and for only 2 more...

"And I can take any background in these books?" I asked, taking the Demongate High book in hand again.

"Of course. Though, if you're thinking of taking some sort of conduit for divine power it may change based on the local manifestation They have chosen. They are in all places, but reveal Themselves differently across the infinite world."

"No, nothing like that." *Let's go for it, see what happens.* I pulled the first three backgrounds off the sheet and my cute elven ears vanished, making me sigh. In place of them I picked a background that cost 10 points all by itself. I had my what I thought of as eyes on Mumiah who didn't seem disturbed in the slightest, and Progenitor appeared on the sheet floating in the air.

Huh. Seems to have worked?

Chapter 2

Progenitor

When: Still before the beginning

Where: Let's call it between life and death

Progenitor. What was it, why did it cost so many points? In the universe that made up the Paragon system (*and perhaps some reality somewhere?*) it was taken to mean one of the first people. The original creation of the Lord, you know, the ones They horribly drowned in the flood instead of just snapping Their fingers (or Godlike analog) and causing to not exist anymore? Those poor souls? Innocent and guilty alike, child and mother, father and son? Animals and plants? Seems odd They wanted Their people to suffer so, when They had the power to simply make them Not Be. But some survived, and as the first people were more akin to angels than the mortals they later became, they can still be found in the world if you know where to look. In modern times I mean, thousands of years later. They didn't die of old age, is what I'm saying. But what made them truly special is the fact they were supposed to be able to do everything, to build Their world in the way that was the plan. (Was the flood part of the plan too? Must have been. But why make a people you are just going to- never mind) All that fear, and cursing the God that had, in their eyes, betrayed them? But that is neither here nor there. The point is progenitors could learn to do everything. They did not need to be alchemists to learn how to perform alchemy, nor shamans to learn to speak with the spirits. Not like the humans of Demongate High. In fact, with just a bit of effort those first humans could easily surpass many angels in capacity and this too could have been a part of their downfall.

The angel seemed no more happy or concerned than they had been a second ago but perhaps as I glanced at them there was a bit of an upturn to the mouth? A bit more sparkle in the eyes? Perhaps just my imagination, which if you think about it is all I had at the moment. It was a background, I had taken it. I was Following The Rules. All was well.

Or was it.

"Technical question?" I posed, knowing this could all still go wrong.

"Go ahead."

"It was probably never considered when these books were written, but I should be able to learn the way Skyebourne people do magic as it says here progenitors can learn any skill."

"It does say that!" they agreed.

"But that raises a concern. Skyebourne magicians pull spells out of nowhere. Unlike all other types they don't need to study magic, it's just available to them. Is it their specific *background* that allows them to do this, or is it acting through their *skill*? I'll have to start all over again with a focus on that, though I suspect I could take some kind of magical tome with me to learn magic from with a resources background. If I wanted to be a scholar of magic, for example. I would rather not though, as that's something I can *lose* and maybe don't want to introduce into the world I'm going to? I would rather just have the magic there when I needed it. The fact I can't ever forget it again is somewhat of a concern, but I suppose if I need a spell once I'll need it at least twice, so..."

"It is a conundrum," they agreed. "Let me see what my sources say about the whole situation." They started paging through their clipboard again. "Actually, I don't think you have to worry." They went over to the book and opened it to page 184. "It says right here, '*with this skill* Skyebourne call forth all their magic.' In the previous paragraph it says 'they decide what their spell effect should be, and then they bring it forth.' It's almost the exact same wording. Call forth vs bring it forth. I would argue they're synonyms, and you just make a check the first

time casting a spell and if you meet the normal difficulty, you've manipulated the mana correctly and you cast the spell. Then you know it forever."

"That seems a good way to describe it. Thank you." *And so I can probably make checks one after another until I get it, if I did fail. Hard to do in combat but I don't really consider myself a combatant, that's what the magic is for.*

"Of course."

Good, so I don't have to worry about that, I'll never be stuck for magic. And language is taken care of too. Progenitors can innately speak and understand any language. I would have to assume I would be 'gifted' the local language for 'free' because they wouldn't make me learn the language the hard way, would they? No, of course not. But this way I can talk to anybody, even serve as a translator without any other point cost. It would actually be hilarious if I wound up working as a translator, which was just a consequence of me taking a background and not something I specifically went for.

With that settled I had again spent 14 points, leaving me with 6 to spend. They went quickly. I had to make a few assumptions but with my main focus being a progenitor I would need as many skill points as I could get, as well as some extra points for magic. I was going to try taking a 1 in as many skills, both mundane and supernatural, as I could. Rely on magic in the beginning, and dump XP into-

"Hang on, second question!"

"Ask as many as you like, of course. You only get one shot at this. Until you die again, I mean. Sorry, I don't mean to be crude."

I waved that off. I had figured out I was dead some time ago. "How will I raise my skills? Just practice? Am I going to get XP as though some narrator was handing out rewards for staying on task and not derailing their adventure too much?"

"Good question! You'll have a sort of hybrid system, actually. While I cannot answer questions about the world you're going to, mainly because you haven't finished and until we know who you are going to be we don't know where we'll send you! But that aside, once you're in the place that will be your home you'll be able to query me and I can give you limited advice and answers. You will be missing a lot of cultural context as you'll not have grown up there, so anything we can do to help you fit in, I'm been authorized to do."

When was this?

"Meanwhile, you will get XP because you are, at heart, now going to be a paragon character and you chose to enter the world as an adult rather than grow up the usual way. We'll try to fit you into whatever system the world uses but you'll always be a little bit 'off' from others. It can't be helped in your case."

"Hold on, you don't mind? Me bothering you, I mean?"

"Not at all! It's simply a part of my duties and I hardly ever got to do it. I'm actually quite excited to see how you'll do!"

"As long as you don't mind. Okay..." *So my idea is sound. I won't have a trainer when I'm there and many skills, supernatural ones especially, are "trained only." But taking a 1 before I leave simply means I took training, from "somewhere." I can then raise them as I need to, while I'm there. A progenitor has no natural limit on their lifespan, just like an elf. So I'll have the time.*

With that settled I wound up with my backgrounds looking like this:

Progenitor 10
Darkbolt Points 4
Extra Spells 2
Resources: focus 1 (ring)
Talent: Skyebourne magic 1
Jack of all trades 2

From the top, extra spells from the Pyre setting gave me an extra 15 points per point spent on the background, for a total of 30 points. My focus resource was a spellcasting focus

from the main rules, allowing me to transfer maintenance of a certain spell away from myself and to the specially prepared object. As magic would give me penalties and with my low skills that was a terrible idea, I needed something to defend me that also didn't drag me down. The idea I had in mind was going to be *glorious*.

Talent: Skyebourne bumped my Skyebourne skill up two points. As the skill was so expensive, six times the normal cost of a skill, the difference between a 5 in the skill and a 7 was 12 skill points. That's 20 skills at a 1 rating if I could put them into skill groups. Naturally I had gobs of energy and would recover it much more quickly than the average person but still, I wanted to be good at magic. Who didn't? (Skyebourne magic could be boosted with energy, in case I wasn't clear about that. That's why I focused my Darkbolt points on energy so much.)

And finally Jack of all trades gave me 30 more skill points, or again 50 total skills if I could group them. None could start at above a 5, but that was fine. Most prerequisites were a 5 anyway, so it would take some juggling but I was confident I could ask the angel's advice on that too. I wanted a huge number of starting skills even if I had to sacrifice being good at just about anything in the beginning. One of the spells I was going to take first was magic to artificially raise my rating in a skill, so I figured that would cover most if not all the gaps I would run into in the first weeks to months of my being there. I would just have to do a lot of "questing" and get lots of XP. Easy, right? I didn't plan on sitting around anyway and I had a vague sense that when people went to different worlds it was to defeat the dragon lord or whatever so I was sure to see plenty of action. They (the angel) wouldn't be giving me all these options and extra stat points and everything so I could be lazy, right? No, it was because some great evil was coming and I would be the heroine of the story. Totally obvious.

And so I looked at the skill list. This was fairly daunting but the angel helpfully supplied me a spreadsheet (I seemed to remember them!) of all the supernatural skills and their prerequisites. (This also seemed vaguely familiar to me?)

"As far as skills go, clearly I'm headed to a magical world because I'm focusing on magic."

"Are you?"

I pressed on. "So what about skills like computer use, or typing? Am I going to be wasting points on that sort of thing that could be better spent elsewhere?"

"Oh dear..." The angel seemed conflicted now.

"You do know where I'm going, don't you?" I wondered.

"No!" they insisted a little too quickly. "Just don't worry about that. You won't be able to pick any skill you can't use on the world you're go- that we select for you when you're done."

"Ah huh..." I nodded, tapping my nose. "Good save." *Wait, when did I get a nose?*

In the end I picked 95 skills, most at a 1 because I still needed to spend skill points on wards, circles, and spirits. I picked one of each, just so I had something to use those skills on, and could "research" others later. They weren't like magic, I could do that on my own. I had 10 skills at a 5, 10 skills at a 3, and a few skills at a 2. The skills I had a rating 3 most excited me, as they came from the LUCID setting. Basically allowing me to step from my dreams and into reality. I didn't *need* to sleep because of a power I took from Darkbolt but I could, and if I did, I could still affect the world in certain ways. That took what seemed like hours, but I was finally done. I was terrible at a *lot* of stuff, but at least I could get better at whatever I wound up relying on. With a deep breath (of sorts) I moved on to spells, another huge list I would have to sort through. I knew a few spells I wanted right off the bat, so a bunch of points vanished easily, then I had to consider carefully what I would need to survive in this strange new world.

I settled on 15 spells, two direct combat, one magical ally, the rest utility like healing, making light, some minor divination, talking to animals, and enhancing my own ability to spend energy. I didn't take any repair type spells or shaping spells, figuring I could simply augment my alchemical abilities if I needed to do that. I looked it over again and again but there was nothing for it. I was... ready?

"Can I get a sort of preview?" I asked the angel. "I want to see how this body moves and how my skills feel when I try to use them."

"Of course," she replied. "Simply step into the image of yourself."

I did so, stepping into the back so I didn't get too disoriented. I took a breath. I had a body again! There was a mirror in front of me which I went over to, and did some stretches. I looked pretty good, all things considered. My perspective had changed a bit, as I was shorter now, and had to look up at the angel as they stepped up beside me. They gave me an encouraging pat on the head and grin. Having taken gymnastics I attempted a simple back bend, and felt myself calculate a 7 on the check. So I didn't fall over, but it wasn't the smoothest kickover either. But it was passable, my new body worked, and I felt like what my stats were doing when I made a check to do something. Coming to my feet again I sighed a little, straightening my hair up. I turned this way and that. *Yes, that's a nice silhouette isn't it? Look at those hips, I'm going to get all the boys to my yard. Or the girls? Sure, why not? Let them all come I have a big yard. We can have a cookout and get the cops there for a noise complaint.*

"What's wrong?" the angel asked. "You have a 7 LOOKs you can't be disappointed in that! You want it higher?"

I realized I was scowling a bit at my image. "It's not that, believe me I know I look great. I miss those elf ears, not gonna lie," I told her. "Oh, is that my voice now? La La La laaaaa!" I hadn't actually taken singing figuring I had no desire to sing in taverns or whatnot, but I felt I calculated a 12 on my untrained check. That high PERSONALITY coming to help me out, I figured. "Anyway, it's too bad beastkin is 3 whole points. With this red hair I wouldn't mind a pair of fox ears and a tail. You couldn't swing something like that, could you? I don't care about the animal sense you can keep that out of it. I suppose a tail is a tail in terms of COORDINATION checks but I just want them for looks."

"Your cuteness factor would go up, though of course not in any real stat way. I wonder..." She pinched the air and drew her hand down, opening a seeming shop or something hanging in the air. "This is the accessories shop, we have to figure out what sort of ring you want. Let's see if there's any ear options." We scrolled through, and as luck would have it, there were!

"I can take them, and they're not like a headband or anything?"

Mumiah touched them and some text appeared. "Ah, because you can basically change your appearance on your own minor cosmetic changes are allowed."

"How can I- transmogrification!" *Sure, it won't last until I get my skill rating up, but when I do I could look like anybody or anything for a whole 8 hours or more. This would be just the beginning. This just means I don't have to think about it. I'm gonna be so cute I wanna die! Again! Which would be pointless because I would just come back here again.*

"Exactly. Want to try them?"

"Uh, yeah?"

"Okay." She hit a button and I turned back to the mirror. There they were! And swishing behind me was a fluffy fox tail! I swung my hips and danced in place, getting a 9 on an untrained dancing check. (I took *ritual* dance not regular dance, sue me) "This is great!" I nearly squealed. "And my ears are so fuzzy!" I was petting them, I could *feel* them, on top of my head, but wondered something and moved my hair aside. My human ears were gone. That looked weird, but with my hair down they would have been covered anyway. *Wait, did my hairstyle change? Whatever.*

"Are you happy?"

"What, you can't tell?" I asked, unable to stop shaking my hips to see my tail swishing. I turned around and tried to look behind me. It was a tail, a real tail!

She giggled a little and hid her mouth. "Yeah, maybe."

"Go ahead and laugh, I want to see you grin, grin, grin! How could you look at this face and be sad?" I pointed to my cheeks and made a face.

She did, and I joined her. I was going to be the best foxgirl ever. Just you wait and see.

"Come on, let's get you the focus you paid for."

"Sure, but... Is this okay? Does it restrict the number of worlds I could get sent to? I don't want to be run out of the first town I come to as some kind of demon."

"You let us worry about that. You may face some prejudice but people aren't going to run away from you screaming in terror."

"That's fine I guess." We scrolled through rings, exclaiming over a few and saving them as favorites. That narrowed it down a bit. That took a few minutes, it seemed the styles for rings was fairly endless, but I filtered on gold as I figured it better be able to stick around a long time. What I finally settled on was fairly chunky, a large stone sat in the middle, with a dragon wrapped around it, wings outstretched. It was going to hold one, after all, so it may as well be thematic. (Yes, I saw many cute fox designs but thought that was going a bit too far.)

"Only one thing remains," Mumiah told me.

"Walking through that door!"

"No, silly. Your name! What are we to call you now?"

"Oh." That stopped me. Right, I needed a name. A great name. Not something stupid that sounded like I was typing a name into a character creator. No, a name my mother would have given me. Who was my mother? What did I tell people if they asked who my family was? I went to sit down again, yelped, moved my tail out of the way *have to be careful of that now!* and sat again. "Let me think." *Something with character, something big like a coming storm. Watch out, it's blank, people will say when I come to town. She's got a heart of gold but if you cross her, that dragon she hangs around with will bite your head off and she'll just tell her what a good girl she is. Coming storm. Tempest. But not as a first name.*

"What about Sylvia?" Mumiah asked.

I looked up at her, surprised. "Sylvia?"

"It relates to forests, or woods," they explained. "It's what I thought of when I saw you with those ears."

"Huh." *It has a nice ring to it. Sylvia. Sylvia Tempest. And foxes live in the forest, that's why we don't know what they say.* "You know what? Sure." I stood up and went over to the character sheet still hanging in the air. I touched the final blank space where the name was, and entered Sylvia Tempest. "Thanks," I said sincerely, and she nodded back once.

"And now we're done," Mumiah announced, taking a step back and taking me in. "Take one last look, once you leave this room that's it. You'll go to your new world and new adventures."

"Right." I let out a breath. It was almost go time. I checked everything over. I had tons of skills, powers, and spells. I didn't need to earn money to eat and I didn't have to have a bed at night because I didn't sleep. I could roam around, see what kind of world I had stumbled into and find my place in it. Do some quests, polish up alchemy and make things, or simply become a healer with magic. Or a guard, either for a castle gate or a caravan. That would be ideal, I could travel and get paid for it at the same time. I had many options, depending on where I landed, and I could grow and learn for as long as I could stay alive. Seemed like a pretty good deal to me. "I think I'm ready."

"Very well." She gestured to a circular platform that wasn't there before, a light shining from under it as though through water. "Step on the platform, close your eyes, and you'll go to your new home. Oh, and just say my name if you want to ask me something. Mumiah, remember?"

"I have a 7 KNOledge now, I'll remember," I promised her. *Mumiah. Like mumm-ra.* "Thanks for everything." *Wait, like who now? Why do I know that name?*

"Thank you! I can't wait to see what you get up to. Go give them Heaven!"

"Will do!" I stepped up to the platform and closed my eyes. A light shone around me, but suddenly something rather important caught my attention. "Wait, what about clothes?"

But it was too late.

Chapter 3

Splash

When: Right at the beginning

Where: A Whole New World

Splash!

That cheeky angel had dumped me underwater! Or was it random? I hoped it was random and they weren't bent over laughing at me right now. My hair went everywhere, my tail got heavy, and I looked up hoping I didn't have to change my Darkbolt powers out so soon to allow me to breathe underwater. But no! The surface of the water seemed to be only a few meters up, and the sun was shining down and beckoning me onward. I made my pathetic swimming check to reach it, hoping I wasn't going to regret only having a 1 in swimming. I couldn't return to that room 20 seconds after I left, after all. My face would catch fire from blushing so hard! How would I explain myself? I would die all over again trying and where would I end up after *that*?

I calculated a 10 on my check, so it seemed I wouldn't drown after all, and broke the surface. Taking my first breath of air on my new home I looked around. The sky was a brilliant blue, and dotting it here and there were white puffy clouds. The water around me was warm, the sun shown down upon me, and gentle hills and fields met my eyes in the distance. What a world! So I wasn't in the middle of a bustling city, or in an underground tomb so it seemed I would be able to get my barrings after all. There were *some* people here though? Right? But I supposed if there were not huge buildings it just reinforced my entry into a world of magic which was just about the best thing *ever*. I took a deep breath and put my legs together, with my arms over my head and sank down again. The water here was so clear! It was fairly deep so I couldn't see much of the bottom so I had no idea if anything lived here or not, but looking up the sky through the water was great. I floated there, feeling the warmth around me, and silently thanked the angel for their help. But I couldn't take anything for granted here until I knew the score. Coming up again I looked around. The shore looked quite far away, but I wasn't worried. While it seemed nothing was going to sneak up on me around here there was still every possibility something in the depths had seen my cute tail dangling in the water and thought "oh my! I bet the thing attached to that would be quite delicious. Let's go say hello, goodbye!" So I floated on my back and raised my hands. Time to do some magic!

I first made a spirit manipulation check, so I could spend more energy on this. I calculated a 14 as that was one of the skills I had at a 5. So I could spend 22 on the spell, with of course the first energy going towards the activation and not the bonus. Still, a horrific 31 (my minimum was a 30 I realized, and rolling a 30 generally means doing the impossible for most other checks) on the check and my new guardian creature slammed into the water next to me, making me laugh and bob in the water as the wave splashed me. It was a simple matter of willpower to transfer the spell into the ring, and it came up beside me as I pushed the water and strands of wet hair off my face. My own personal dragon, scales glistening and teeth sharp, fully under my control. It was a glorious sight, even if I could only right now see the head part. I knew the rest was all there, and all glorious killing machine. Should I ever need it. I wouldn't be terrorizing towns or anything, this was a weapon of defense only.

"All right- huh, you need a name don't you? Well, for now, let's head to shore and see if there's any sign of intelligent life anywhere."

She couldn't speak, but dove under and swam under me. Coming up so I could straddle her neck she started swimming to shore, but not before shape-shifting to become more streamlined and lose the wings. Yes, one of her powers was to change shape, and as I also picked size change for her, basically she could become any object or creature of any

size! So versatile! What a good little (big?) engine of death, destruction, and versatility she was! I patted her neck, not that she was alive to care but I felt it was the thought that counted. The water rushed around us, feeling great, and everything was great in the world. *Wait, aren't there, like, flesh eating bacteria in water sometimes? I swear, if that angel gets me sick two seconds after I arrive...*

As we neared the shore I realized there were people milling about, and wondered if I should turn around and head the other way or go say hello. In my current state of undress I wasn't sure how I would be received, but on the other hand I needed to start somewhere. Someone had already seen me though, and was pointing and shouting to the others. Turning now would be pretty suspicious so I pressed on. The dragon returned to normal as it got near the shore, and it occurred to me as we emerged from the water a little thing like having no clothes paled in comparison to a *huge dragon coming out of the water to eat you!* They weren't looking at me, they were looking at the monster! She was shaking the water off her wings, snapping them out to full size making her look even bigger. Still, they were overreacting a *little*. It was a +1 size creature, true, but that only meant it was 3m tall. A true dragon would be 12m tall or so. They were carrying on and trying to get the kids out of there and whatnot so I figured I better do something and hopped off her neck, splashing into the water again because she could stand up in 2m of water and be mostly visible and scary but I was only 1.3m tall so it would totally cover me up. I pushed forward as best I could and quickly scanned the crowd. No weapons in evidence, not even a belt knife if what I was seeing was true, so I didn't feel in any danger from these people dressed in... peasant garb? Their clothes looked a bit rough, not machine made as far as I could see, and I wondered just how primitive this world was? If only I could remember my old world maybe I could have given them new technologies. But alas, I did not. With a thought my guardian and companion shrank down in size almost to nothing, becoming a fairy the size of my hand. She had long golden hair, dragonfly wings, but still had sharp teeth and claws which she showed me when she grinned at me. She flitted over and sat on my shoulder as I dragged my soaking tail out of the water.

Okay, that's going to take forever to dry. I resisted the urge to wring it out like a towel, that I felt would be quite undignified. *My goodness wet hair is heavy. Did I know that before? Did I never have long hair? And then the tail as well...* I gathered my hair up and flung it back as best I could. *Going to have to practice that, it just clings to everything and now it's all stuck to my back and gross.* "It's okay!" I shouted at them. "Sorry for scaring you like that! Hello?"

Finally everyone decided they were *not* going to be eaten today and someone came over to me. It was one of the larger men, with dark hair and blue eyes. I noticed everyone here seemed human and wondered if I should be disappointed or not.

"What is the meaning of- this?" he started to demand but then sort of lost steam. It wasn't my fault my tail was wet! I just *happened* to shake my butt in an effort to dry it out a little at that exact moment when he came over. It was total. Coincidence. I swear!

"Sorry about that," I said again. "This little one here," I poked the side of the "fairy" now holding on to my hair and she wiggled like it tickled, which for all I know it did. "Panicked when she saw someone and did some illusion magic to make it look like a huge monster was coming out of the water. She was very, very naughty and says she'll be more careful next time."

"A fairy? Out in the open? I've never heard the like. Are you a naiad?"

"That ain't no naiad," said another man, coming over. "Ain't pretty enough to be a naiad. Plus, look at the ears. What you doing round here girly? You lost yer mum?"

"And you would know this how?" said a woman, stalking up after him. "Been looking at many nymphs, have you?"

"There's one what lives in the fountain in Treetrunks."

"Just leave this to me, will you Terrance?" asked the man stiffly. "We'll need lots of firewood for tonight, you might want to look into that."

"And how we gonna get that, eh? With no axes or nothing. Tell me that, Martin."

"Just go pick some up, somewhere not here."

“Bah!” He took one last look at me (or leer as the case may be) and stalked off, the woman behind him still demanding to know when he last saw the nymph and how he knew where she lived.

“Sorry about him,” said Martin. “We’ve had a trying day. But what *are* you doing out here in the middle of nowhere? If you don’t mind me asking. Are you lost?”

“You might say I just dropped in,” I tried to joke. It didn’t land, clearly he had no idea what I was talking about. That’s when I noticed. “Hey! You’re hurt!” His arm was in a makeshift sling and as I peeked around him I saw people limping, sitting and being tended to, and kids looking depressed rather than running around as I would have expected. They too looked beat up. “You’re all in bad shape!”

He glanced back with a sigh. “Yeah. Last night our village was attacked by trolls, of all things. A whole group of them. Never thought I would see the day *trolls* worked together or came so close to a human settlement but there you are. We are the few that escaped. We figured they would leave, so stuck close to the town as they didn’t seem interested in following us. They would need to be back in their caves or whatever before the sun came up, that’s what we figured, and we could take our homes back. But as the sun came up suddenly it clouded over, and they were just walking around bold as you please. So we left. Figured we would come here, get some water, and head to the fort not far from here. Though what even the legion is going to do against that many trolls is beyond me. But they have to be warned.”

“Agreed,” I said, nodding my head. “Meanwhile, let me help where I can.”

He looked me up and down, which was fine. I felt no need to cover up, let him look. “Really?” he finally said. “Though I suppose if that fairy friend of yours knows some healing magic I won’t turn it down. Owing the fae is never an easy burden, but there are a few of us who probably can’t go on much further. We can repay the debt... If we ever get our town back.”

“Oh, don’t worry, this magic is going to be all me.”

He finally started to look a bit more hopeful, brightening. “You can do magic too? Well, maybe this day is looking up a bit.”

I chuckled. “Sir, you have no idea. Now let me think a minute.” *How best to handle this? I could individually heal all these people there’s no doubt. But let’s try to be smart about it. I took the healing circle, after all, as the others didn’t seem as immediately useful. Seems like a good decision.* “Stick,” I said to the fairy, who dutifully turned into a wooden stick after flying to my hand.

The man did a double take. “What just happened?”

“Give me some space here,” I told him, shooing him back. Thankfully the area here was fairly sandy, and large enough to do what I wanted. He took a few steps back and regarded me with suspicion. I stabbed the stick into the sand and raised my hands. “Let my skill be augmented!” I cast, magical swirling around me. I took the extra time, why not, and calculated a 22 on my check. With the extra energy I put in, and I didn’t go crazy this time, I now had an effective 11 on my skill at crafting circles. Minus the penalty for the spell maintenance, of course. Taking the stick in hand I started with a plain circle, then over the next ten minutes added to the design. Several people came over to watch me work and asked Martin what the heck I was doing. He replied something about magic but wasn’t sure. When I was done the stick turned back into a fairy and I knelt by the circle I had made. Putting my hand over it I focused energy into it, and was rewarded with a 15 result, and it softly started to glow. Pleased, I stood up and faced the group. I made a speaking check for 10 and didn’t stumble over my words even standing there without anything on. I did notice several mothers trying to cover the eyes of several young boys (and one husband?) and tried my best not to grin as they were trying to wiggle out of it.

“Everyone!” I shouted. “If you are hurt, step into this circle please!” I demonstrated, stepping over the lines in the sand to the middle. “Don’t mess up the lines just step into the center. When you are healed, step out again and let the next person in. Line up!” This last part triggered a persuasion check which I only calculated a 6 on, so there was some grumbling and no one stepped forward. “We don’t have all day, do we?” I asked, stepping out. This was negotiation, at a 10, and everyone agreed that, well, no, they really didn’t have all day so someone was going to have to chance it. Martin was close and stepped up. “I’ll go

first," he announced. "If she isn't telling the truth, well..." He looked around at his bruised and battered townsfolk. "I guess there's nothing we can do anyway." He stepped into the circle. His eyes widened as his scrapes vanished almost at once, and he took his arm out of the sling a few seconds later. "I feel completely fine," he decided. "It works."

"Of course it works," I scoffed. "You doubted me? You think I would put so much effort into some kind of trick?"

"To be fair, you travel with some kind of fae that can turn into a stick? And you're a fox type, so what did you expect me to think. Also, I've never heard of magic of this type. Line up, most wounded person first!"

Wait, am I really going to be seen as a trickster? Huh. I'm not sure how I feel about that.

That got people moving and they one by one came to the circle, which gave them regeneration while they were inside it. Everyone was careful of the lines and finally most everyone was through. Everyone but one young girl who was looking down and not approaching.

"Come on," I encouraged, wondering if I should make an animal handling check or what? *Wait, I didn't take that because I took the make animals your friends and talk to animals spells.*

"It's all right kid," Martian told her. "You've all seen us use it. Go ahead."

She shyly stepped forward, got healed, muttered "thank you" which honestly was more than most had done, and scampered away again.

Martin was shaking his head sadly. "Tragic story, that one," he finally said. "Lost both her parents in the attack. I don't know what we're going to do with her. Someone has to take her in, but... We've got our own problems."

"That's terrible," I agreed. *But there's nothing I can do for her at the moment either. Poor girl. Looks like a hard world to be orphaned in. But at least there is something I can do for the group.* "So tell me about these trolls. Big, ugly things? Uh... regenerate really fast?" I was struggling to recall any lore of trolls I could, and made a KNOledge check of 12 with no skill, like Topic: Monsters, to back it up. I hadn't taken anything like that because it was a new world. I figured that knowledge wouldn't transfer and would start taking it when I got here. Well, now was the time! I had a faint sense of watching a show where a plucky witch used magic to reverse the troll's regeneration and then had someone else wound them, so they got worse instead of better. But that wasn't to say they worked the same way here.

"That's about the size of it," Martin agreed. "Sunlight and fire are their only real weaknesses. But why do you ask? We're not going back there!"

"Well," I began, digging a toe into the dirt, "I can't offer you much in the way of food, or shelter. I don't have any magic like that." *Because like a selfish idiot I figured, oh, I won't need those things so why bother wasting points on them. And I have no XP nor can I remove spells from my mana core to replace one with another. So I can't get some that way. Nor can I even make bread because while I know what bread is, why do I know what bread is? Is bread... in my soul? I don't know what bread is. I haven't used my power on it to see what the molecular structure is. So I can't turn rocks into bread either. So they're stuck.* "But what I could do, I guess, is fly on my big, scary dragon and take your town back for you. What do you say? Just point me in the direction and I'll be back in two shakes of a lamb's tail." *Do they have lambs here?*

"I thought you said the dragon wasn't real!" he protested.

"Ah, about that," I admitted. "My little fairy here is no more or less real than the dragon. I just said that to stop you all running away. Sorry do deceive, but yes. I have a magical construct in the shape of a dragon, that's *currently* taking the shape of a fairy. And I'm fairly confident we can get in there and drive these awful trolls out, so you can go home and sleep in your own beds tonight. How does that sound?"

"You?" he clarified. "Even with a dragon, I don't know." He was looking me up and down again. "Or are you something more than you appear to be, too? I did mention it was like twenty trolls, right? Big, scary, trolls? That eat people? I mentioned that."

"Don't worry about it," I assured him. "It's going to be fine."

Suddenly I saw something odd covering up the face of the man.

You have caught the attention of Machidiel,
patron of courage. They offer you this quest:

Slay 20 trolls while naked
You may use any tools or magic you desire
but cannot wear a single stitch of clothing
because they think it's hilarious

You may choose from the following rewards:
20XP (1 per troll killed)
1 medium sized chest containing random loot
1 favor to be owed at a future time

Refuse Quest

Accept Quest

“Hah?”

Chapter 4

Help

When: After the box popped up

Where: Standing by the water

Help, that's what I needed. "Mumiah," I called. "Are you there?" *If you were pulling my leg when you said you could help...* The man was starting to say something but everything seemed to be slowing down. Everything but me, that is, and a familiar face looked over my shoulder.

"Hiya!" Mumiah greeted me. "Settling in okay?"

"Settling in? It's been fifteen minutes. You jerk! Why send me here with no clothes? Why dump me in the water? Look, forget that, I can deal with that. What's this all about?" I pointed.

"Wow, a quest already!" she cooed, sounding impressed. She clapped her hands and beamed at me. "You don't waste any time do you?"

I turned to face her and noticed she looked transparent. *Ah, so it's some kind of projection of her, not her coming here after me. Probably afraid I might strangle her or something.* "You mean this is normal?"

"The box? Or getting noticed by an angel?"

"Yes!"

"Okay. Yes, and sorta. Like I said you're a sort of hybrid, have you looked at your status page yet?"

"I just got out of the water, helped heal these people, and decided to go help them. I haven't had time." I gestured to the circle, and she nodded as though with approval.

"Well, when you do it'll appear like this. It's no big deal. Thus so will announcements. Or if you just have a quick question for me, I can send you one and not come in angel. So to speak. Each person here would get them in a different way, depending on their faith and belief. Yours just happens to be a bit more direct, that's all."

"I... suppose it has to appear somehow. But what about the angel thing?"

"Oh that!" She laughed. "You made ripples, and I'm not just talking about the water. You came here from another world, of course the major powers of the world would take notice. Here, oftentimes great deeds will attract the attention of a patron of whatever that deed falls under. Have you made any bold proclamations lately?"

"Just that I would go free a town from the grip of the trolls that seem to have overrun it."

"That'll do it. As you're new and interesting the angelic powers are watching you and so you'll probably get more attention from them. At least for a while, until they lose interest. Especially saying things like that. You'll find the Heavenly powers a little more 'down to earth' here than in most places. Doesn't stop bad things from happening, mind you, but righting wrongs is the pastime of many a paladin. Whether they call themselves that or not."

"So this is okay?"

"Perfectly okay. Go, the world is yours for the taking. Not literally. That would imperil your soul. But doing good deeds is fine. Just don't get yourself killed. That would look really bad for both of us."

"It's fine. With my best girl at my side," I indicated the fairy, "I'm sure it'll be fine. They're just trolls."

"Yes, Firebrand is fairly powerful. And her breath weapon or elemental touch attack will be all that stops the trolls regenerating. As you took lightning as your main attack spell. Don't get me wrong go ahead and use it, that'll slow them down enough that- Oh, but you can use the fire spell too, right? So you can both fight pretty well even against trolls. What I am thinking about?"

I was blinking at her then looked around to see who she was talking about. "Who?"

"Firebra- uh." She froze, looking concerned with a finger about ready to point at my fairy. She pulled it back again. "You did name her that, right?"

"Nooooooo," I replied with a shake of my head. "I told you the sum total of what I've done here."

"Eh heh," she sort of laughed. She was rubbing the back of her head. "Sorry, time's up. Deposit twenty five cents for the next three minutes." She vanished and time went back to normal.

"Who?" Martin finished saying.

"Never mind," I fumed. "Just a lying angel that probably was laughing her wings off after dumping me in the water!" I stabbed a finger at the accept quest button, figuring it worked like that, and the notice vanished. I felt that perhaps somewhere I had a "quest log" I could open and if I did, I would see it listed there and be able to get more information.

"You know an angel personally?"

"I know of one." *A lying one. Probably knew the whole time where they were sending me. Suggesting my name like that, probably just saving me an hour of agonizing over it. And now she slipped up and told me the name of my ally. Thus proving she knew the whole time. So I was selected for this world? Can they see the future or something? Well, of course they can, why couldn't they? Plain old magic can do that. You think they would give me all this capability and not expect something for it? Naive. Totally naive. It's the whole dragon lord thing, isn't it? Well, to be fair I sort of came here expecting that.*

"That's more than most. You seem confident, so I'll tell you our village is that way." He turned and pointed. "Once you're in the air I'm sure you'll see the thick clouds that rolled over the place. That's where our town is. We can stay here a bit, we've gained time as now we don't have injured folks to tend to. So we'll make better time to the fort. But we can't stay forever."

"Look, for all my bravado, if it looks like I can't manage it I'll fly back here. I can go ahead to the fort and then get you there by magic." *By Darkbolt power, specifically, but close enough to magic for their purposes.* "Either you'll be back in your homes by dark, at the fort, or I'll be dead." *And embarrassed. Even more bare-assed than I am now, if that's possible.*

"I wish I had more to offer than good luck. But we have no weapons or magic users among us. If you really don't just fly off and leave us hanging, thank you."

"All that is required for evil to win is for those that can do something about it, not to. I'll get you your village back. For that little girl, if nothing else."

"May the Lord and all Their angels go with you."

I nodded, and headed past everyone. I heard him telling others not to panic, she would probably manifest the dragon again which is just what I did. Hopping up on it I allowed it to grow to full dragon size, and waved to them. A scant few waved back. I was on the neck, right behind the bony plates and horns that swept forward and made it look nastier. Those, I figured, would protect me from the wind and the seat was comfortable because as she grew she shape-shifted to become a dragon with a nice place to sit.

Okay, Firebrand, if I keep your name that just to spite that angel. We've never flown before, but I do have a 1 rating in riding and in aerial combat. You're not going to try throwing me off, and you have wings naturally so even though I don't know how, you should know how to fly. If you faceplant here in front of all these (somewhat) nice people, I'm turning you into toilet paper. Got it!?

There was no response, as again it was just a construct made of magic and not a real creature so really it was just an extension of me. But I willed us into the air, and with a mighty beat of her wings, we were off.

Getting to the village didn't take long at all, Martin was right about the cloud cover. It made the village stand out because the rest of the sky was empty, probably because all the clouds had been pulled out of the sky to come here? Plus the village wasn't that far away, they had only walked since this morning and that was with a bunch of wounded people. They hadn't got far. So I spiraled around the place a few times, looking down, and yes there were odd looking creatures down there. Ugly things, by the looks, and standing upright. I selected a

good landing spot, an open area probably some kind of town square, and landed the dragon on a troll that was gaping up at the monster heading right for him. Taking a -1 penalty for a called shot to the body my glorious, fantastic friend got a 73 to hit, driving him to the ground as 18,000 kg of dragon landed on top of him. This did 41 damage to him, squashing him flat. Thankfully, as long as fire damage was applied to the wound it couldn't regenerate, it wasn't that you had to do enough fire damage to bring a creature into gone. As Firebrand had both a ranged fire attack and a touch fire attack, we were down to 19 trolls and the battle had just started. As she breathed fire at the next nearest troll I looked around. The place was pretty trashed. Carts were smashed up, as were the wooden booths that probably served as stands for the townspeople. The homes I could see were broken into, and red smeared many surfaces. These trolls had certainly been busy.

The troll was speared with fire, doing a pathetic 5 damage to the body. I rolled my eyes. While the elemental touch ability she had was a "creature ability" granted by the ascension spell, her elemental blast was a magical ability, and depended on me. She could spend her own energy (and had) to get the maximum amount of damage for the flames on her claws, but my rating in Skyebourne was only a 7. There's a huge difference between an attack with 34 strength + 9 fire damage and 7 fire damage alone. Was it even worth it? Probably not, unless they were running away and Firebrand couldn't get to them for some reason. But given her speed? That was highly doubtful.

I notice I now have some kind of counter, I thought to myself. A 1 had just appeared in a small blue box at the lower corner of my vision. *Thanks for that.*

I had assumed the trolls, being at least somewhat intelligent would run *away* from the dragon that just landed in the square but I was wrong. They started running *towards her*. *Odd.*

My dragon was fast, and didn't want to wait for them to get near enough so she turned and pounced on the next nearest troll, that was somewhat behind us. She calculated a 76 to hit, taking a -1 penalty for a called shot to the body, and did 42 + 12 fire damage to it, ripping it in half. She continued spinning, lashing out with her tail and catching another nearby troll with an 85. Doing 41 + 14 fire damage that time that troll too was shredded and icky blood went everywhere. This cost her 8 delay, despite the fact her REFlexes was a 34 because that's just how off hand actions worked. You could be Goku and taking that off hand action would cost you 4 delay.

Wait, I know that name. Goku... huh.

In any case, I was up at the same time Firebrand was going so I drew upon my inner energies and called upon my magic. "Let lighting strike my enemies!" I cried, pointing down at a nearby troll. Elemental Cascade had a 6 segment casting time, but nobody had time for that. With 13 energy thrown in to compensate I got a 24 to cast the spell, with an effective rating of 20. That meant I could hit 20 targets, but I didn't have that many targets! Boo! It was fine, I had a few because I was so high up I could see all around me, and lighting shot out of the sky and instantly flashed between 8 of them. One of them actually managed a dodge, but the rest didn't. Four of them went down, either because their legs were blown off or their body was ripped apart by the magic. "Yeah, take that!"

I began to grow a bit concerned.

This concern was both for myself, that I had just used a fairly deadly and destructive spell to blast some trolls apart, and for the trolls, who kept coming. *This can't be right. They saw me do that and decided, sure, maybe she can only do it once? Also, shouldn't I feel a bit bad for these things? They are alive, and yes they smashed this town up and there's probably no reasoning with them but I just jumped right into it. That can't be good.*

Trolls were rushing out of every house, store, from behind barrels, and going to surround us. I was pretty sure we were fine, and that was borne out by the first troll to reach Firebrand whacking her with a sword and bouncing off. Then another, and another, probably 5 of them all at once? "Don't worry fellows, plenty for everybody!" I called down. Gathering my energy again I made the same check, this time getting a 26 to call down lighting and targeting everyone around Firebrand's legs. Once again lighting flashed, this time targeting 12 of them.

More of them went down, but it was going to take fire to keep them that way. You could already see them regenerating, which was one of those things just too horrible to look away from. Like a train wreck but you can't look away.

Hold on a second. I make Firebrand attack at a 2 delay, plus 1 for the called shot, right? That's 3 total delay I can do simple math go me! But if I make her do an off hand action that's another total 5 delay. Adding these two simple numbers up gets me an 8. However, if I simply have her do a single attack, and then another single attack on her next action, that's only 6 delay, a saving of, wait for it, carry the 7, two. How in any universe does that make sense? Hello, yes, I'd like to speak to a manager please? Something about this seems wrong.

Firebrand lashed out, spearing a troll that was staggering around with a lighting bolt sized hole in their chest with a 95. *Okay these numbers are getting ridiculous.* It died. It died so hard. As did the one next one that ran up screaming about avenging his friends which again kinda made me feel bad?

But I had no time for that, because it is at this point in our story that it takes a bit of a turn. Remember that mysterious cloud cover that rolled in over this town in the morning? That was actually magic, a spell cast by a certain troll that had been blessed in his life to have gotten the opportunity to study such things. How? That's not really important to the story but what is important is that unnoticed, because Sylvia was looking down at the trolls around her ally's feet and not off to the side, a troll mage was finally done casting.

"By these spells combined, weaken and throw!" he shouted, a strange shape hovering before him becoming a point of light, and a beam shot out, targeting Sylvia. Even if she had seen it, which she didn't despite getting a 17 (her max) on a perception because of the penalty for being flanked, she couldn't really dodge as she was currently straddling the neck of a huge dragon. So the beam hit her, and did two things simultaneously. It sapped her STRength of 5 down to a 0, and threw her off Firebrand's neck and into a nearby house. It wasn't enough to smash her completely through it, this wasn't an anime, but she did take 8 non-lethal damage to the body and 7 non-lethal damage to the head. This brought her to just 2 points of penalty to future actions, but it didn't matter. She couldn't move a muscle as her STRength was a 0.

Those trolls that still could turned to me with glee, not that I could see it faceplanted on the ground and wondering what the heck it was that just happened. Clearly my Paragon nature wasn't going to extend to the magic of this realm, as I didn't recall any chance to make a resistance roll against whatever hit me. *I should have been able to resist the STRength draining effect with a RESolve check. And then being thrown with STRength. Oh. Clever girl.*

Thankfully, Firebrand was up and could still act, reaching me as a free action and shapeshifting. She became an iron dome covering me completely, but not a smooth iron dome. No, this dome had a series of saw blades that started to spin around the base, and two more circular saw blades on a couple of arms. It was pretty neat, pity I could only imagine it.

What can I do here? Not magic, that requires physical movement. Maybe this at least? I used telekinesis on myself, getting a 15 (total) on the check. This was enough to raise myself up and plop myself down in a somewhat sitting position not that I could tell because there was no light in here. But I felt I was looking ahead. Then I tried to jerk back as a series of 6 screams in quick succession followed by the sound of sawblades cutting flesh and the screams being cut off met my ears.

*They wouldn't. They **couldn't** be...* But the counter, still in my line of sight, ticked up. It was now at a 10. *They are.*

Suddenly, out of nowhere, my body was engulfed in flames, and I screamed. I had taken 2 damage to the head, 2 to the body, 3 to the left arm, 4 to the right, 1 to the left leg, and 7 to the right. (My tail was still wet, so it didn't take damage) This triggered 6 LUCK checks, thankfully all of them above the damage I had taken so while my hair now had that "just rolled out of the oven" look, the fire didn't take and I didn't have to worry about trying to roll around on the ground to put it out with telekinesis.

Firebrand turned back into a huge dragon, letting me see again, though I blinked my eyes against the sudden light. I could *just* see one troll left standing, and the smug look on his face turn to horror as he realized the dragon was back and had seen him. He didn't stand a chance. Firebrand charged at him, catching him with a claw and tearing him to pieces. (39 total damage) My STRength returned as he died, and I sprang up again.

All around the perimeter of where the wall had been were now burning chunks of troll. It seemed they really had just thrown themselves at it in some desperate attempt to get to me. I could only stare and back away, unable to even conceive of what would drive a creature to do that. Firebrand shook the burning chunks of the troll mage off her claws and looked back as if to say "now what?"

My mouth set in a line I made my decision. *These creatures are too dangerous to allow to live.* But at the same time... I held up a hand and walked over to one that was regenerating his legs. "Why?" I asked it.

"Think you're so great?" it screamed. "I'll heal from this. You and your pet can't stop me! I'll destroy everything. You hear me? Everything! Until it's all gone. That will show you, yes, it will. I'll be one that does it, tears you up, eats your flesh. Don't even have to unwrap it. I'll start with the brea-"

Firebrand's claws came down, pulping the troll and burning it. The numbers ticked up as the rest of the trolls were taken care of in a similar fashion. When the last one was dead I got a new window.

Quest Completed

You have slain 20 trolls as asked. Boy, what a scene am I right? Why do you think they did that? May want to look into that sometime? Up to you I guess. As promised, for your courage you may choose from the following rewards.

20 XP	Treasure	Favor
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Look into it, it says. Just like that, huh? I'm taking the XP thank you and getting the heck away from here. "Let's go, Firebrand. Those townspeople have a lot of cleanup ahead of them."

Chapter 5

Gratitude

When: After the box popped up

Where: Standing by carnage

Gratitude is all well and good, but rewards are better. I hit the button for my XP reward and the box vanished. But to my surprise another one popped up right after it.

You have caught the attention of Mtniel, patron of beasts. You have reveled in your beastlike nature and struck down many foes. And like a beast, you wore nothing. Bravo. You have been rewarded.

Accept Reward

I looked around, was this place packed with invisible angels or what? There seemed to be no way to refuse whatever this reward was, so I touched Accept Reward. The box went away and I felt something. Something wiggling. It was my butt. Suddenly something sprouted from it, and I stared in shock as a second tail had joined the first. I was a two tailed fox girl!!

“Uh, Mumiah, little help here?”

There was a pause.

“Are you still mad at me?” asked a timid voice. I turned, to see part of a wing sticking out from behind what was left of an overturned cart. And an eyeball, part of a face, and some fingers.

You suck at hiding, I didn't even have to make a perception check to notice you. “No,” I sighed. “I never was. It's fine if you knew where I would end up. I suppose there's some rule against telling me. Come out from there I don't want you hiding from me we're supposed to be working together!”

“Okay.” She looked bashful but came out. Then she brightened. “Congrats on the second tail! Just as an FYI the max is 9. Any more than that would get pretty crowded back there.”

Nine is crowded? Just two seems a bit much! I was happy with just the one. “That's what I wanted to talk to you about. What the heck?”

“Oh, it's still just cosmetic,” she assured me. “But it will signal to those in the know, such as those that revere Mtniel, that you have caught their eye and done some great deed they approve of.”

“This is something they approve of?” I indicated the trolls and destruction around me.

“What could be more animalistic than this? I mean I assume you didn't use your teeth or anything, but you tested yourself against a great foe, and came out on top. That's the way of nature.”

“I guess. I don't suppose you can tell me why they were acting this way? Or do trolls just throw themselves into battle like this?”

She shook her head. “Sorry, no can do.”

“I figured.” A took a moment to swish my new tails back and forth. The original one had been dried off, so they both swished easily through the air. “They are nice, aren't they?”

"Sure are. Anything else?"

"No. Thanks for being there as I get the hang of things here."

"Really? Thought for sure you would ask about getting set on fire..."

I waved her off. "Clearly magic here works differently than paragon magic does. That's fine. I'm sure it'll give me a certain edge as they won't know what I'm doing, and be a pain in my butt, until I get a handle on how to deal with it. But I'll do that on my own. I can't learn everything in a day."

"Well, if you do want some hints let me know. See ya!" She waved and vanished.

"Bye, best angel buddy. Now, let's get going!"

Firebrand looked at me, then at the corpses, and then back to me.

"What, you want to eat one or something? Huh, how would that even work? If a dragon ate a troll that was still alive, would the stomach acid and the troll's regeneration compete and the dragon would never have to eat again? The troll would just keep- what?" Firebrand was waving to get my attention.

This spell is controlled by me. But partly by my subconscious. What am I trying to tell myself?

Firebrand raised a claw a little off the ground as if indicating height. I thought for a moment and finally figured out what I was trying to get across.

"The kids! There's kids coming back to this place. I can't let them see all these troll bodies, they'll be scarred for life. I have to do something about them. Thanks, my friend."

She nodded, then sat back to wait for me to decide what exactly I was going to do. At least in the meantime I had healed and gotten some energy back, so I felt better. Not that I had spent all that much, of course.

"Alchemy," I decided with a nod. "Yes, that's what we'll do. I need to start analyzing things so I can work with them. I'll augment that skill and analyze the dirt and rocks around here. Then switch over to transmogrification. I can probably make a big enough hole that way, and then use telekinesis to move the remaining body parts into the hole. You really do tear things apart, don't you? And I wasn't even half trying to get your stats up I just wanted something to protect me in the water. You'll be a real terror if I actually put effort into you!"

Firebrand nodded vigorously, seemingly pleased to be recognized and looking forward to being even stronger.

"Right," I agreed with a laugh. "This shouldn't take too long, though it takes a minute for each substance. I won't need to make the check twice though if I augment it with magic. So just hang out a couple of minutes and we can get started."

I dug around in the dirt for any rocks I could analyze, cast my augmentation spell on myself, and sat down. I would search the ground first, then each rock. That way if there was a lot of rock in the soil here I could move it as well. Good plan, me! I closed my eyes and started concentrating, while I set a hand on the ground.

Meanwhile Firebrand watched with some amusement as Sylvia did all this. She shook her head, the human did some funny things sometimes it seemed. It was going to be *so fun* traveling with her, wasn't it? They had gotten into a fight just minutes after arriving, and she had proven herself. Where would Sylvia be without her? Dead, most likely. Those trolls were hardly a challenge, but they would have overwhelmed her small companion. It was a good thing she had thought to bring her along! She looked up. Time to get to work.

Firebrand took her fully grown dragon size and launched into the air. Zipping through the clouds, creating huge gusts of wind with her massive wings, and a few well placed fire bolts started it dissipating. With the magic gone that had been holding it there this process had already begun of course, but she helped it along as best she could. Even the most minor amount of sunlight would turn a troll to stone, though it would be interesting to see if that worked even when they were dead. Probably, she thought, as it was probably more a physical reaction to sunlight that had nothing to do with the presence of the soul. Time would show it quickly enough. That done she landed some ways away from the village and turned into a dog. A big dog. A big, red, dog. She still had her massive claws and strength, and started to dig. Throwing the earth behind her was super easy with her massive STrength, and even larger stones went flying with ease. Soon she had a pretty big hole, big enough for the pieces of troll they would need to get rid of. Looking up she saw the clouds were almost gone and

bounding over to the houses she was rewarded with the troll bits becoming stone instead of flesh. This was good. Her master wouldn't have to carry yucky, stinking flesh bits but instead just some smooth stone. She was a good girl! Maybe headpats? Belly rubs? Oh, she hoped so!

Sylvia came out of it, having understood the various types of rock in the area, and the dirt. She could now command it with alchemy skills, and blinked, looking around. She caught sight of her ally, now a huge dog for some reason, tongue hanging out and looking eager. "What have you been up to?" she asked. "Your paws are all dirty!" She looked up, it looked a lot brighter here for some reason. "Ah, the clouds are moving off, good. I wonder..." She got up and walked over to Firebrand, who nosed a piece of statue towards her. "Ah, that's a stroke of luck," she muttered. "They're stone now. Good. So we just need a hole-"

Firebrand barked, making Sylvia jump because she didn't know it could make any sounds, and ran off. She followed slowly, somewhat amused at this behavior but stood awestruck at the huge hole that had clearly recently been dug. There was the huge pile of dirt. There was the hole. There were the dirty paws.

"You did this?" she asked. Firebrand barked again and nodded.

"Good girl," Sylvia praised. Firebrand pranced around, almost knocking her over just from the ground shaking. "Get smaller you silly girl!" she commanded, and Firebrand did.

She got headpats and was told she was the best girl. Yes she was. Oh yes, *she was*. It was the best day. Ever!

She took her fairy form again but human sized this time, and helped carry the larger pieces of stone to the hole and chuck them in. Sylvia seemed a bit amused as the now human sized fairy, wings and all, lifted stone troll bodies over her head with no effort and carried them easily. *She dug the hole without me even asking her too. And she protected me when I was out of it with 0 STRength and wondering what the heck hit me. And I didn't have to tell her what form to take here, she just did it. Is she supposed to be this smart? The description doesn't exactly have a lot of detail but I guess it's fine?*

With the stone pieces taken care of and the hole filled, Sylvia looked around the town. She left the human remains alone, even though they would be just as traumatic for everyone because these people may have some kind of ritual they would want to do for the bodies. She didn't want to step on any toes, or lengthen their grieving by not getting closure.

"Just stay like that," she told Firebrand, who came up beside her. "Time to see what Darkbolt can do for me." She reached inside herself, feeling her Darkbolt nature and triggering something.

The power of "variance" was created in the Darkbolt system for a specific individual. Chaos, one of the main demons of the series and a being they spent at least one complete arc fighting. It allowed the being that took it to allocate powers on the fly, allowing the boy that ultimately bonded with the Chaos orb to swap powers as needed. Sylvia had taken it and left 6 power points as "floating" points, currently assigning them to defense boost, environmental adaptation, and passive regeneration. And in recalling this she smacked her forehead, she would never have drowned in the lake she didn't need to breathe at all! Getting a handle on these powers was going to take some getting used to, clearly. She now scrapped all of these points taking the 5 point teleportal power and leaving the extra point as potential. She was going to swap them in a moment anyway. There was a burst of energy as her powers changed, and she felt the new ability inside her. Gesturing, she opened a hole in space to just beyond the water's edge, figuring no one would be there at the moment. An 11 LUCK check proved this to be true, and both figures hopped through it, to the stares of the townspeople. They landed with a bit of a splash and then reallocated her points again. Now she took the 4 point telesphere power, and put her passive regeneration back on. *Can't be too careful.* Another burst of power and it was done, the people sort of jerked back but didn't run when she made her way out of the water.

"It's done," she announced. "Your town is safe again."

Martin came over. "We figured you would fly back. What's that?" He pointed to Firebrand.

"The same fairy you saw me with before, just bigger."

"Great, two naked people running around."

I could always use my clone technique and make it three or four. "Yes, titillating I know. Let's focus. You can go home now, I killed all the trolls. They did a real job on your town, it's gonna take some effort to clean it all up."

"Great, it'll be dark by the time we get there. Well, it's better than nothing." He turned away and started shouting orders to everyone. Sylvia and Firebrand looked at each other in shock.

Would a 'thank you' have really been too much effort? Wait, now, maybe in their culture it isn't done. I can't judge them by what I think they should do.

Everyone gathered together to hear Martin, and he (somewhat grudgingly) said the fox girl was back and claimed the village was cleaned out again. Many stared at her skeptically.

"Is this everyone?" she asked, walking towards the center of the group. They let her pass, Firebrand at her side.

"No one left, I made sure everyone stayed close," Martin told her. She looked around, finding the little girl she had seen earlier at least, and decided that was the only person that really needed looking after anyway.

"Great, here we go." She triggered her telesphere power, and energy rushed out of her, making a design on the ground that started to rotate. Before anyone could blink, or dodge out of the way because they were ignorant and thought maybe they were under attack (which honestly would not have been all that outrageous she should have explained more clearly) they were back. They looked around, startled, but of course everyone recognized where they were, right outside the town.

"Fine," Martin said finally. "I guess we don't have to walk back. Let's see what we've been left with." Again, no one really thanked her, just walking off towards the town grumbling about this and that. She watched them go with some confusion, and wondered if maybe she should have just left well enough alone when first coming here and let them deal with the problem themselves. But there was one grateful person.

"Thank you," said the little girl. "I'm sorry about them. My parents were the same way. I suppose I would have been too."

"It's okay."

She just sighed and stood there.

"Are you-"

"I don't know what to do now," she continued at the same time.

"Yeah, that's a problem," Sylvia admitted, glancing over at the others. "Stick with me for now, kid. We'll figure it out."

"Okay." She took Sylvia's hand and they headed back into the town.

"Hoy, there she is." As she got close that annoying guy that had been talking to her back at the pond came up. Followed by his... wife? "You said you beat the trolls and that?"

"Yes, what about it? Did I miss one? My counter went up to twenty so I figured that was all of them."

"What's a counter? Never mind that squeak. Where's the proof then? Like the bodies and that?"

Did you just call me squeak? "You want proof? That I murdered twenty trolls and saved your town?"

"That's right. I ain't seen no bodies or what."

She turned around and waved her two tails at him. "This proof enough for you? I got a second tail because of my bravery from the angel of beasts. You think I just grew this myself? No, I got it for saving your sorry excuse for a town." She continued wiggling them.

"Maybe you had two tails when you got here, eh?" said the woman.

"Yeah, I weren't looking at your backside none."

She stopped shaking and turned back to him. "Oh really? Didn't check me out even a little, is that right?"

"That's right. Happily married I am! Wouldn't dream of looking at no strumpet even if she parades herself around not wearing a- hurk!"

He didn't get to finish as Firebrand's arm shot out and clamped around the man's neck. He was lifted off the ground and started struggling and going red and doing a whole lot less breathing and pumping blood to his brain than he had a second ago.

Sylvia drew herself to her full height, which of course wasn't that much more. "Leave," she spat. "Now."

Firebrand tossed the man, much to his wife's protesting, but neither one dared to make a move towards her as Firebrand stepped in front of her and crossed her arms. Her dragonfly wings turned into bat's wings, and she got more vampirelike, with fangs growing out of her mouth, her hair turning white, and her features sharpening. She grinned at the pair, who turned tail and ran. Firebrand was back to her normal form, and smiled at Sylvia.

"We're leaving this place as soon as we get them back on their feet," she decided. "I am not feeling very welcome here."

The girl beside her just fell a little bit more into her depression.

Chapter 6

Fallen

When: Some hours later

Where: Standing at the graveyard

“Fallen souls,” intoned the minister as he led the ceremony, “be at rest. We wish you safe journey to the other side.”

And may you make the right choice, and choose the dark room to your right rather than the obvious one to the left. Make a difference in someone’s life, just like I’m trying to do. Then I won’t be such an anomaly.

The town had done an inventory of sorts, checking for the fallen, seeing what damage had been done, and digging graves for those that had been lost. Sometimes only an arm or a leg remained, it seemed that trolls were rather ravenous, and humans were meat. I helped where I could, despite getting a bit of a cold shoulder from the townspeople and feeling more and more like an outsider.

Mumiah never said it would be this bad. Maybe the fox ears were a bit too much?

I dug graves, carried bodies, and was now standing somewhat apart as the others said their final farewells. The entire time Firebrand and the young girl silently followed me. She was weeping for what she had lost, and possibly for her uncertain future to come. I held her hand and wished I could take her pain away. The ceremony continued.

After that they had a meal. The trolls had only been interested in meat, so while they smashed carts full of produce and stands full of fruits, they didn’t take or spoil any. So anything still good was picked up, cleaned off, and a simple meal was made that everyone started to sit down to. Everyone helped themselves, but the girl hung back.

“Go and eat,” I told her, giving her a little push. “I know you don’t feel like it, but you have to eat a little something at least. Go on, they won’t stop you. You’re a part of this town too, and they’re going to have to get used to the idea. I’m not going anywhere yet, come find me when you’re done.”

She nodded sadly and went on her own, and it wasn’t lost on me the looks they gave her, and me. As though hanging around with me had tainted her somehow. But no one said anything as she took some food, and sat by herself to eat. Personally, I didn’t want to stay here a moment longer than I had to and got to work. I started focusing on windows and doors, figuring they would be happier to know their houses were at least somewhat secure again that night. Figuring out glass and wood, I switched over to alchemy again and started flowing pieces of glass back together. Doors that had been simply smashed open I fixed as best I could, those that had been smashed *in* I repaired and hung back on their hinges. Firebrand was off doing something, I noticed her lifting the town statue back into place all by herself, then carting off what used to be carts and stands into a big wood pile. That was too much effort to do with alchemy, I had a plan for making them some replacements I would put in place later.

Every home had been broken into. Every home had been rampaged through. Shelves broken, furniture smashed, kitchens torn apart. Were they looking for something? Mindlessly destroying everything they saw? It was impossible to say. Soon enough my small charge was back at my side, possibly feeling a little better as she offered to help sweep and tidy up homes as I moved through the town. It wasn’t lost on me that where I was, other people tended not to be. It was like there was a big bubble around me, pushing people away two houses away from where I was, and then filling in behind me as I moved on. Quite frankly it was starting to piss me off! But I felt lashing out at them would only make them more wary,

and simply went about doing what I could. Let them see their homes in better shape when I left. That would speak more to my intentions than anything I could say to them. The day dragged on.

Finally, as it was starting to get dark, I finished up the last house. Of course not everything was perfect. I had left jars, vases, table settings, most furniture, and general knickknacks alone so to really have everything back to "normal" would take a week or more. But everyone had their doors on tight, their windows were unbroken, even their walls were put back up in some cases. Yes, it seemed some trolls hadn't bothered with doors and just smashed through the sides of houses in some cases. Things were still a mess. At least I had gotten a look at how these people lived. Simply, by the looks of it. Their houses were fairly bare, everything was utilitarian, not much artwork or decoration anywhere. But was this a choice or a necessity, I wondered. That answer would have to wait. I felt like I had done two days worth of work, the day had simply crawled by, though with my regeneration, energy regeneration, and no need to sleep myself it was hard to say. There were no clocks in evidence anywhere, so I had no idea if these people even kept time or understood the concept. Firebrand rejoined me, and the three of us stood in the empty square.

"Everyone just went home?" I asked, looking around. It seemed that way. Those houses I could see now had their windows covered, I assumed they had candles lit I had seen enough of them in each house but only the barest light escaped. *I had hoped someone would come and thank me for all my hard work today. Something. Invite me to dinner or whatnot? No? Just going to ignore me, huh? This place gets curiously and curiously. What about the girl? What about finding her a place to stay? Did me being near her deny her a good chance? But no, Martin was all grumpy about having to find her a new family even moments after I showed up. It's like they just can't be bothered.*

"You can stay at my house," said the girl. "I guess it's my house, now. With my parents... gone."

"That is very nice of you," I told her. "Thank you."

"You were nice to me," she said as if that explained everything. "Come on." She took my hand and led me to a home I had of course worked on. We went inside, Firebrand shrinking again and flitting from place to place looking things over.

"Ah, so this is your house. I see." It was like the others, mostly bare. "Show me your room, we'll see if anything needs repair."

"Okay." She led me down a hallway, the houses were all one story and had few rooms, though they were seemingly well made. Not just logs or anything, but proper wood and stone and brick houses. Just simple. Her room was the same. No pictures on the walls. No clutter. She had a small end table with a candle on it, a single book, a closet with a few clothes in it, a bed-

"This is my bunny," she said proudly, holding up a stuffed animal from the bed.

"It's a very nice bunny," I told her. "He looks well loved, and well taken care of."

"I guess it's okay, they didn't break my bed." She put the bunny back down.

"Tomorrow we'll figure things out," I promised her, kneeling down on one knee. "Everyone is just in shock I'm sure."

She shook her head. "We don't like outsiders here. People say it all the time. With no parents... I'm an outsider now."

"Come on, it can't be that bad," I protested, tapping her chin. "You'll see. Things will be better tomorrow."

"Okay." She didn't seem convinced. I had only calculated a 9 on my persuasion check, after all.

"You want something to eat?"

She shook her head.

"Come on, you have to eat," I told her. "I'll see what's left in the kitchen and fix you up something, okay?"

"If you want."

"I do. Ignite!" I snapped my fingers, casting the combust spell on her candle and lighting it. "There, that's a bit better, isn't it? You can come watch if you want, or you can stay here, it's okay."

"I'll come."

Probably better she not be alone, though I'm no child psychologist. "Okay then. Bring the candle."

We headed to the kitchen and I found where everything was. No meat, as expected, but I could fry up a few things. I made a cooking check of 8, and was surprised when Firebrand enlarged and started cutting things up next to me. She helped, making her own check to assist me and getting an 11. Stupid ally, showing me up. So I got a 10 total, enough to throw something together and she thanked both of us as she sat at the table and started to eat. Suddenly she seemed to realize what was actually going on.

"What about you?" She held her plate up to me, as if to share.

"Oh, don't worry about me," I told her, pushing it back down. "I don't have to eat. It's one of my pow- it's part of my magic. I'll save what food you have for you." *As I have no idea how you're going to afford more,* I didn't say out loud. *But I do have XP now...*

"You don't have to eat? Wow, magic is pretty great."

"Yes it is," I agreed.

With dinner done she washed up and got changed into a night shirt. With no electric lights these were a people that rose and fell as the sun did. She put up no protest and yawned the whole time anyway. I tucked her into bed and she clutched her bunny.

"Sleep well, and wake," I told her, sitting on the bed and stroking her hair. "I'll be here when you wake up, I promise. We'll start figuring things out then, okay?"

"Okay..." She was clearly sleepy, it had been a trying day for such a young girl, and I blew out her candle and went back to the main room. There was another bedroom, one I would be using in a moment, but for now I had some questions.

"Mumiah," I said softly. "If this is a good time?"

"Always a good time for you," she answered, stepping out of nowhere. "Good first day?"

"I'm still not sure, ask me a week from now." *If things get worse, it was. If they get better, it's wasn't.*

"That's fair."

"So I have some questions," I told her.

"Of course. Ask away."

"First." I pointed to Firebrand, currently sitting in a chair at the kitchen table. "What's up with her?"

She put a hand to her chest and took an innocent look, as if to say "what about me?"

"Is she not what you hoped for?" Mumiah asked confused.

"Just the opposite," I assured her. "She seems a little too smart. She acts on her own, I hardly have to tell her to do anything. She takes initiative, reminds me of things, she protected me. She's amazing! I want a dozen of her for my harem!"

Firebrand lifted her chin to hear all this, looking smug.

"But is she supposed to be?" I went on. "The description on the spell listed the ally as 'mindless' tell me that's a mindless creature!"

She got up, put her arms out, lolled her head to the side, let her tongue hang out, and her eyes rolled to the side.

Mumiah laughed. "Nice zombie impression," she praised. Firebrand held the pose a moment and then bowed.

"You see? What was that?"

"I can neither confirm nor deny we secretly replaced your magical ally spell with Folgers crystals."

"With... what?"

"Sorry, old joke. Probably before your time. I still can't confirm or deny exactly how the spell is 'supposed' to act. I can say we did notice you seemed to spend a lot of points on her, picking her as a spell first and then her subsequent spells and abilities before anything else.

Then got the ring. Clearly you wanted someone you could trust by your side in all this, and so such a thing was delivered to you. She is your ally, never think she will betray you. But, and this is important, don't take her for granted either. Or abuse her. She won't turn on you, but she could become less if you did that. Magic is a fickle thing, and she is pure magic. You can direct her with your will, yes, but she can also think on her own. Let her help you, and consider her simply a silent partner in all this."

"I will," I promised, throwing an arm around her. "She's my best girl!"

"Good."

"But how did she stay around so long? Don't I operate on the scene system?"

"Mostly, yes," she admitted. "But some concession to local physical law must be taken into account. Plus it's the ring doing most of the heavy lifting there."

"The ring?" I lifted my hand to look at it, the only thing I had worn since I got there. "But it just holds the spell."

"It's a resources background, yes, but not exactly a paragon one. You see, a paragon would make an item that conformed to their local reality, wouldn't they?"

"Sure."

"But this was made by us, in Heaven. It's a holy relic. Because honestly we thought the whole scene thing was a bit much. Let me give you an example: Consider your wanting to fly from point A to point B."

"That's usually how it goes, yes."

"So you fly for a time on your companion and you want to stop and stretch your legs, right?"

"Sure!"

"So you land. Boom, scene over. So you have to cast the spell again. You fly, and now you land for lunch. Cast it again. Lunch is over, that's another scene. Cast it again. Fly into the afternoon and land. Cast again. Land for dinner, that's another two castings. You see? It's ridiculous. Just do one casting rather than over and over again! So that's how this spell will work, when it's carried by the ring we made for you. As long as you're conscious she'll stay around, be that a day or a week."

"Wow. Thanks. She's been super helpful today, I'm glad I didn't have to keep casting her every ten minutes because I turned around or whatever." I turned to her. "Thanks for your help."

She made an "aw shucks it ain't no thing" gesture.

"What else?"

"How long is the day here? It felt like it went on forever!"

"That one's easy. Days here are exactly 33 hours, and to answer your next question, a year is 333 days."

"That sounds... precise."

"It's what the Lord wanted."

"So longer days but shorter years? How does that work out?"

"I'll give you another example. Your young charge in the other room is considered to be 8 years old. On your old world, as counting by number of hours lived, she would have been considered 10 years old."

"Good to know, that I'm not going crazy as the sun slowly crawls across the sky. Just one more then, for the moment."

"Yes?"

"You said something about a status page?"

"Yes, just say that, and will it to open. Imagine a blue box before you, that contains your stats."

"I'll try it. That." I waited. "Nothing happened."

"Oh, very funny."

"Thank you! Status page."

The box opened. I saw a few of my weaknesses listed there finally, including

Small 1

Two Spirit 1

Destitute 2
Overconfident 1
Bloodthirsty 1
XXXXXXXX X
XXXXXXXX X
XXXXXXXX X

“These are all accurate,” I had to agree. *My rushing off to fight those trolls without a second thought. My complete indifference to slaughtering them. My cute and tight body, my lack of any resources in this world.* “But what’s two spirit?”

“Not official,” she admitted. “But as close as we could come. You’re from another world. Your spirit is inside a body that will only gradually become your own. You’ll probably have... urges, if you will, in both directions, your entire life. Don’t worry about it.”

“Okay,” I agreed slowly. “But what are these others?” I touched one and a smaller box popped up.

Weakness occluded.
See administrator.

“Occluded?”

“There are some spoilers there,” she explained. “They have been hidden from you until the proper time. When you display those weaknesses or discover the circumstances behind them, they will be revealed to you. We don’t want you to think we’re pushing you in one direction or another. Clumsy as it is, this is what we came up with. I thought we should just leave them blank but all things must be in balance, as they say.”

“Who says that?”

“You know, people.”

Angels, or the rules or whatever. “Whatever you say. I suppose I can say similar things like quest log? Skill window? Spell window?” Three more boxes popped up, and I nodded, closing them again. “Fine. That checks out. Okay, that’s all for now!”

“There’s one thing on our end,” she said, holding up a hand. “Something you might need to know.”

“What’s that?”

“I slipped those books we were reading into your pocket dimension. Just reach around in there and you’ll find them. Thought you might want them for reference. Looking up spell descriptions and whatnot. You can’t actually learn skills from them or anything but they could remind you of things.”

“Oh really? Thanks, that could come in handy. Thank you.”

“Of course. And now I’ll take my leave. And just so you know, you did pretty good today. We’re all rooting for you, so keep up the good work and you’ll do great.”

“Thanks. That means a lot to me.”

“Have a good night.” She faded and was gone.

Oh, I intend to. Shoot, I didn’t ask how long the nights were. Well, whatever, I can discover that tonight. I assume people here need maybe 10 hours of sleep vs 8? Because of the longer day? Who knows.

I headed to the girl’s parent’s room, doing a quick hygiene spell on the bed, the pillow, and the area around the bed, just in case. Then I turned to Firebrand.

“Thanks again for your help today,” I told her. “I’m going to sleep, I want to check out my dreaming powers and help the town more. I figure I can replace the carts and things, and I want to put up some kind of defensive wall around the place in case there’s more attacks. That’s easiest to do in the dream state, I think. We’ll see.”

She nodded, and I lifted the ring. "See you tomorrow. Have a good sleep?" *Does she sleep or is her existence continuous from one casting of the spell to another? Will she dream?* She put her hand on the ring, surprising me. "Oh, did you want something else?"

She nodded. Then darted forward and kissed me lightly. Pulling back she put her hands over her cheeks, doing the official anime "I can't believe I just did that dance" and popped like a soap bubble.

I touched my lips. Okay, that was a thing that happened. A goodnight kiss? Sure, why not? I wouldn't mind more, if she really was her own person as I suspected given what Mumiah hadn't said. It was her choice, I hadn't made her do that. Had I? No, I didn't want to kiss myself, hot as I was now. (I totally could, with my powers, do that as I stood here right now!) So that hadn't been me. Right? But at the same time we had only known each other that day! On the other hand it was just a peck. I got into bed and let myself drift away, I would consider kisses another time.

I still had work to do!

Chapter 7

Dreamer

When: Some time later

Where: Inside the dream??

Dreamer power was going to be amazing, I just knew it. While it would be a balancing act getting in enough practice with it to put XP in, versus all my other skills, it would be worth it. In the dream I could easily (for some yet to be determined threshold of easy) create and destroy matter, change the laws of physics, even explore the world of dreams, a strange reflection of the world. But first I had to realize I was dreaming. This was governed by the dream sense skill, controlled by REASON. When I first began to dream I made the check, calculating an 11. My difficulty was my own INSight, which was a 5 so that worked out fine. Now, I needed to take control. This needed the lucid dreaming skill, also REASON based calculating me a 13. I had taken control! The dream I had been having lost most of its detail, if it had any to begin with. I had been standing in the town square, but one bustling with activity and life. But most of that went away as my unconscious mind couldn't keep up generating that sort of imagery non-stop now that it was running my consciousness again. Or something. I knew some things about dreams from my skills, but wasn't sure how dreaming itself actually physically worked in the brain. My next step was a crossover check, difficulty 10, based on INSight. This is the one that worried me. My REASON was an 8, but my INSight was only a 5. I crossed my fingers, reminded myself this was my dream, and I could do whatever I wanted here, and took a step. My 11 was enough, but thank goodness I made that extra lucid dreaming check for the bonus beforehand. I would have only had a 9 otherwise.

I was standing in the town square in the real world! Yes, it had worked! It was nighttime, the stars were out, and by the light of the moon I could see the piles of wood and rubble that had been carts and stands. Nodding to myself I snapped, making a surreal existence check. I calculated a 12, meaning I could affect, at any one time, 10,000 kg of mass.

Told you it was powerful.

The matter shimmered, and the entire square was restored. The carts were back in place, the booths were upright and whole, and all the smashed up wood was gone. I strolled around, looking at my handiwork and found it to be acceptable. A single check, and I did all that? *I should have just taken a nap earlier in the day! What else can I fix around here? Oh yeah there was the barn that they smashed so much it fell over...* I got an 11 to fix that up, and then decided to head to the perimeter of the town and start making that barrier. I stepped 100m with a 13 check, and pondered how best to do this. There were many farms out here, should I put a barrier around the entire thing or just the town? I had to believe that if the place came under attack again, the farmhouses-

Oh shoot. I didn't go around and fix up the farms! I just focused on the town itself. They probably got really smashed up, and all their animals were probably killed. Well, even I can't do everything in only a day, 33 hours long or not. I'll head out to them tomorrow. Actually no one complained... probably they were taken out first, unless I miss my guess. Er, not that anyone talked to me at all while I was here, jerks. In town an alarm can be raised, not so much when your nearest neighbor is two fields away. They're probably gone, and new people will have to take the farms over. Ugh, what a mess. Okay, focus on the town then. Leave plenty of exits of course, they can run to the town if they get attacked, right? Maybe put up a big bell tower, something they can ring and bring everyone in if someone spots a group attacking? I can see if someone will talk to me in the morning about it, I don't want to totally renovate their town out from under them, even though I totally could now.

I headed back to where the town border seemed to be and started growing a thick, thorny hedge in a straight line. When a section was done I moved on. I wanted a hedge because it could maintain itself, “fight back” with thorns, and given how these people lived I figured a living barrier would be more pleasing to them than the wall of iron I could make around the place. Balance, and all that. I tried to figure out where the “roads” were by looking for wagon tracks and kept a nice hole open as I walked. Into the hole I put a nice guard station outside, with some movable barriers to at least slow down any attacker. My next 5 checks fluctuated a bunch, from 7 to 12, which was just part of the charm and the curse of the paragon I supposed. One could go from being unable to perform the most mundane action one minute, and do the impossible the next minute. Still, I did what I could with each check, growing the hedge and putting up some nice guardhouses. I made them fairly simple because that seemed to the style of the time, but with tables, chairs, shelves, everything made of stone. The walls were stone, the floors were stone, the roof? Stone. I mean it was a guardhouse, it shouldn't be easy to burn or smash down, now should it? I made one for each exit out of the town, one per cardinal direction. It was coming back around on the forth side that I happened to notice (with a 16 perception check) lights moving in the distance.

Late night party? I did a quick step over there and noticed the lights were torches, and they were carried by the townspeople. Along with pitchforks. I couldn't believe my eyes, an actual pitchfork mob! *Huh, stereotype much?* Who was the lucky- oh. Looking past them I of course saw the house I was staying at, and with a shake of my head and an 11 on a surreal physics check to become little more than a shadow, went around the group to see what was going on.

“She seems to be asleep,” one man was saying. “The girl is too. I don't see that fairy, or dragon, or whatever it was anywhere. Maybe it's out hunting? Or maybe it was just an illusion.”

They were looking in my windows? Rude! I should have drawn the curtains, that's on me though.

“An illusion didn't right the town founder statue,” one woman said. “I don't want that thing coming back and rampaging our town even worse than it was.”

“Well we can't just have her wiggling her tails all over the place like she is,” another said. “Tempting our boys to sin. Why I'm surprised there isn't a line of boys six deep out there now trying to sneak into that place.”

“Now, now, even our boys know the temptations of sin, they ain't gonna be so easily swayed,” said a man.

“I saw you watching her!” she protested.

“Just to make sure she didn't get up to nothing.”

“What about the child?” another woman asked. “Can't she be saved?”

“You saw her following the witch around like a lost puppy. She's been ensnared. Best to just do away with both of them.”

What? My blood ran cold. *She stuck with me because you all ignored her. Parents dead, so sad, but what can you do? That's you! I didn't 'bewitch' anyone. I showed her a tiny bit of compassion. Come on!* I looked at the torches in a new light. What was their purpose here? Burn us alive? After I tried to help them? *You have to be kidding me.*

“Better this way anyway,” another agreed. “Lost her parents. Would just be a burden on us from here on out. Shame about the house though.”

I had heard enough. They were talking about casually murdering two people, one of them an 8 year old and the other who had been working her tails off helping them all day (and then *some more* in her actual freaking *dreams*) and this guy was moaning about the loss of the house? I was becoming enraged. I went visible again and threw my arms out. Naturally, I calculated a 5. What had I just been saying about the highs and lows of being a paragon? But I covered it.

“Enough!” I screamed, throwing my hands down now. This time it was a 10, which allowed me 10m which was enough, they were huddled pretty close together in order to hear each other.

All their torches went out.

They screamed and backed away, though some of the men stood their ground.

"We won't fall for your tricks," one claimed.

"Tricks? Like repairing all your windows? Your doors? That was tricks?"

He just glared.

"How did she get out?" one person wondered. "The door didn't open. I swear I saw her through the window asleep. You have to believe me, I saw her!"

Dude, worry about me, not your fellow man who will mock you for falling for some kind of trick tomorrow. "You vastly underestimate me," I told them angrily. *Maybe I should have been taller, can they really take me seriously like this? Crap.* "Did you really think I would be defenseless?" *I was, had I not made that check to see them I shudder to think what would have happened.* "But enough about me. What in the Hell do you think you're doing? I've been nothing but kind to you all day. Killing the trolls. Getting you back here. Repairing your stuff. What, exactly, have I done that justifies killing not only myself but one of your own citizens? A child!"

"That's just it, isn't it?" Martian said, stepping forward.

Ah, now we'll see. The voice of reason. He won't want to put that little girl to the flame.

"It's what you'll do in the future that worries us."

"Exactly. I- what?"

"Don't play dumb. We see what you are. A fox spirit. Trickster!"

"Trickster!" was echoed by many in the crowd. "Kill her!"

"I just happen to look like this, I'm really not a fox spirit." *That would be pretty cool though. I wouldn't give up progenitor for it of course.* "You're condemning me for something I might do?"

"We know your type. You're all the same."

Okay, so not the voice of reason I was hoping for.

"How's that?"

"Oh, doing good deeds one minute, then someone vanishes one night. Oh, doesn't have anything to do with me," you say. Then two days later his body is found somewhere in some compromising position."

My cheeks heated up. "Compromising- what exactly are you implying here?"

"You know full well. Strutting around like that!" He indicated my, to be fair, still naked body.

I didn't dream myself up some clothes. Huh. One would think that would be the first thing I would do when I can just wish matter into existence. But I didn't get the exhibitionist weakness... "I just don't happen to have any clothes right now, it's a long story!" *I was brought here by an angel. "I'll get some eventually!" You didn't actually offer me any when we got back, so... It's really your fault more than mine, isn't it?*

"Ha! More lies. But no, it's going to be worse with you isn't it? You're too powerful. Once you're done 'fixing' up our town, then the demands will start. One after another, and we'll all be bowing to you before long. Or your pet will devour us all or something. No, our best option was to try and get rid of you before that happened."

"Didn't work out so well for you, did it?"

He barked a laugh. "There's fifty of us! Only one of you. You may have magic but you can't defend against so many. We'll win in the end. Take her!" Everyone leveled their weapons, and I rolled my eyes. One more check later (a 13) and thick iron bars fell out of the clear sky and slammed into the ground in a circle around the house. The mob bounced off it.

"I could have encircled you," I told them, stepping up to just out of reach of them. "Think about that for a second." I wasn't sure if they heard me over the screams of killing me and such. I shook my head. "I'm leaving. Pray I never return."

I turned on my heel and went inside. Slamming the door, I woke myself up.

Crap.

I headed to the girl's room, shaking her awake. I had no idea how much sleep she had gotten but we couldn't stay here.

"What's going on?" she managed, rubbing her eyes.

“Sorry, honey. Plans changed. Your fellow townsfolk decided they were going to burn this house down, with us in it. I saw it and stopped them, but they’re still outside trying to get in here. We have to go.”

“Go? Go where?” She was awake now, and I pulled her off the bed.

“Anywhere but here, we’ll figure that out when we’re in the air. Unless you want to take your chances here?”

“I don’t know!” she wailed.

Right, you’re an 8 slash 10 year old. This is all going to be beyond you. “Look, I’m sure there are plenty of towns. We can find you a nice place to live, somewhere the people don’t try burning you to death in the middle of the night.” *And a 7 on persuasion, thank you very much.* But the girl was exhausted, probably at penalties for fatigue and honestly had never really eaten very well. She seemed to find this argument acceptable.

“Okay.”

“Great. What would you like to bring from the house, we won’t be back here.”

She scanned the room and grabbed her bunny in one hand and the blanket in the other. “My mom made this blanket...” She started to cry again, and I cursed myself for a fool. This was nothing to put on the shoulders of a little girl. Especially one that had been through the day she had. Yesterday she had gone to bed thinking tomorrow would be just another day, but she lost her parents, and now her village. My heart broke, and I swept the girl up into a hug. “Oh honey, I’m so sorry this all happened to you. You have to be brave, just a little longer okay? I’ll make this right, I promise you.”

“I’ll try,” she managed.

“Good girl. Grab all your clothes, I’ll take the blanket.” I pulled back from the hug and took the blanket as the girl struggled to move to the small chest that must have held her clothes in the corner. *Must be exhausted.*

I ran first to the window by the door. The mob outside was trying to wiggle the poles out of the ground so they could get through. Some seemed to be lighting torches again. Others were... praying? They were on their knees.

Someone should tell them I’ve got the favor of the angels. Any show up here they’re likely to ask ‘what the smeg you all think you’re doing to our new entertainment?’ That I’d love to see. I gathered energy, making a spirit manipulation check of 17, allowing me 24 energy to be put into Firebrand, which I did, targeting the space outside. *She should be even stronger and faster with that result, thank you very much.* She roared, and everyone in the mob staggered back in fear. *That should keep them busy.*

That done I raced to the kitchen, spreading the blanket on the ground and loading up the cookware into it. I didn’t bother with food, that could come easily later now that I had XP. There wasn’t much else in the house, no portraits of her parents to remember them by, so she would be traveling light. The girl came in and I had her dump the few outfits she had and the bunny on the top, then gathered the whole thing into a ball. With a check of 12 I opened a portal to my personal pocket dimension and shoved it in. With a 12 KNOledge check I didn’t remember seeing anything else of value in the house and nodded to her. “Come on. And don’t listen to them.”

She nodded, and took my hand. I led her out the door to the dragon, who had seemingly been harassing them and teasing them through the bars. The shouts started up again. I won’t repeat any here but it wasn’t pretty. The girl looked shocked her neighbors could turn on her so fast. I helped her up on the dragon and got beside her. “You should all be ashamed of yourselves,” I said, though I doubted any heard me. Firebrand grew to full dragon size, making them step back even more, and causally stepped over the fence I had made. A few more steps and we were flying.

I should have resisted. I really should. But these people had taken my generosity and tried to murder me in my sleep. We didn’t take off right away, but I had Firebrand circle the village. It was a simple matter for her to reach down, touch the vines that couldn’t hurt her in the least, and set the entire ring on fire with her elemental touch power. When we finally left the village was surrounded by flames, which I was pretty sure were safe. I hadn’t come that

close to any houses in making it, so none of them would burn. Pity. I almost went back to set a few on fire just as a further example but something caught my eye.

A weakness that was occluded
has been revealed.

I closed the message and opened my status screen, staring at the new weakness I had discovered in myself.

Vindictive 1

Yeah, that's about right.

The girl was trying hard to be excited about flying, but also seemed to be drifting in and out of sleep. I had to land somewhere, though I supposed we could fly all night I wouldn't let her fall. But she deserved a better bed. The only place I really knew in this world was the pond area, so we headed back there. It didn't take long.

"Let's get you down," I told her as I slid off the now smaller dragon.

"We're staying here?" she managed. "But where will we sleep?"

"You'll sleep on the finest bed you've ever had," I promised. Firebrand obliged by becoming a huge, 9-tailed fox, who curled up on the ground, tails pulled in close. I set the poor girl on the tails.

"So... fluffy!" she managed. And then was asleep again.

Just what have I gotten myself into? I asked myself, watching the now sleeping girl. I pulled the pack out of my dimension and snuggled her bunny up with her. She didn't wake up but pulled it tight. *Gonna be a long night, but as long as I don't sleep, she'll be fine. My dream powers worked fine, so test successful I guess. Oh little one, I hope I can do right by you, I really do. I came here with few expectations beyond maybe fighting some dark lord or another eventually but now I've temporarily adopted a little girl. It's a funny old life, even one only a day old...*

Time to get to work.

Chapter 8

Rise

When: Morning of day 2

Where: By the stream

“Rise and shine, sleepy head!” I told the girl as she was stirring. She rubbed her eyes and looked around, clearly surprised to be sleeping on tails and squinting as she looked around.

“Where are we?”

Ah. Can't say I didn't expect something like that. “You don't remember last night at all, do you?”

She shook her head. “Something about fire?”

“That's right. We had hardly gotten to sleep when the others decided burning your house down, with us in it, was the neighborly thing to do. Thankfully, I noticed and got us out of there. So you're on the road with me now, until we find you a new place to live.”

“Oh. Okay.”

Clearly in a bit of shock. I'll need to... Do... Something. Why didn't I take psychology? Every skill, I told myself. Yeah, every skill but that one. “You hungry? I've got lots of stuff to make for breakfast.”

“I guess. What's all this?” She looked around, sitting up.

“All this” was what I had been working on all night. This area had been changed into a proper campsite with a stone picnic table, iron grill, fire pit lined with stones, a stone platform you could put stuff on so it wasn't just sitting in the dirt, a line for drying clothes, and had been basically smoothed over and spruced up. With all night to play, I had made some decisions. I took the food creation spell and a spell to summon stone from nowhere as my first XP expenditures here. Figuring if I could get a block of stone anywhere I was, and could reshape stone or turn it into other things with my alchemy powers, I would never lack for material again. I had also taken the opportunity to “feel out” the cast iron pan, water, the cloth of the girl's clothes, the blanket, and the paper of the book she had grabbed. That's how I made the grill, shaping stone and then turning it into iron. It was basically just a metal box on a pole so you didn't have to squat down to cook, with a space for wood and an iron grating above it but it would serve.

“I had to keep busy last night while you rested up. How are you feeling this morning anyway?”

“Fine,” she said, clearly not fine. With ESP (and a check result of 9) I could feel her emotions, and she was more numb than anything else at the moment.

Wonder what her RESolve calculates out to be right now? She'll need time to heal. Best we just make things as 'normal' as possible? Shoot I know nothing about raising a kid!

“Okay, then. How about I get some breakfast started, you jump in the pond there, can you swim?”

She nodded. “We do come here sometimes.”

“Great. Jump in the pond there and wash off, and you can have some breakfast. Here, hand me your nightshirt and I'll hang it up.”

With a shrug she stripped out of it and I went to hang it up while she climbed down from the tails. I caught sight of Firebrand turning into her small fairy form to the delight of the girl.

“Did you watch over me all night?” she asked.

She nodded.

“Your tails were so fluffy. Thank you for letting me sleep there.”

She darted forward, planting a kiss on her cheek, and flew around back to push her (gently, she didn't dare use her full STrength or even this tiny she would break the girl in half) towards the water.

"Okay, okay, I'm going!"

Meanwhile, my eyelid was twitching.

Wait. No. Just no. Is that really the road you're going to go down, Sylvia? Being jealous of a little girl who may I remind you, lost everything she ever knew including her parents not 33 hours ago, simply because she got a fairy kiss in the morning and I didn't? No. You are not going down that-

Firebrand flew over to me, sticking her butt out as she leaned forward, making a smoochy face.

I got red, I was sure of it. "It's fine, it's fine," I told her, waving her off. And it was. I was being *very* silly and I took a calming breath. This was fine. She deserved all the fairy kisses she could handle and I was not going to be jealous of that. I had *everything* compared to that poor girl, and Firebrand could kiss who she wanted. She wasn't slave to my will, I simply called her here with magic and she was her own person. That's just how it was. Mumiah had implied as much. "I have to cook breakfast now." She straightened up. "But maybe later," I mumbled, unable to help myself. She wrapped her arms around herself and was shaking, clearly with laughter. "Just help me with this!" I told her, face heating even more.

We made cooking checks again, a 13 for me this morning and a 10 for her, giving me a respectable 15. Thankfully I got a chunk of butter from the spell so I sliced up some bread, set it toasting on one end of the grill, smeared butter in the pan, took some slices of meat that Firebrand had been cutting and got them sizzling, and popped an egg in there when I felt it was hot enough. It didn't take too long to cook up, and I called the girl in from the water where she was splashing around. She came over and her eyes got wide when I set buttered toast, meat strips, and an egg before her.

"What's this?" she asked.

I was confused. "Breakfast?"

"That's usually some yucky porridge, or one slice of bread. I've never had a breakfast like this before!"

No wonder you look so thin and malnourished. I just hope it hasn't stunted your growth and we can reverse it. A ten year old? I don't know... "Just one of the perks of traveling with me, kid. Sorry, you'll have to drip dry I don't have a towel. Sit and eat."

"It's okay. After watching you all day I kinda wanted to try it myself. It feels... nice." She sat down and picked up the silverware we had taken from her house. She tried the egg, and thoughtfully chewed it.

"How is it?" I asked.

She just made a humming sound, swallowed, and tried the meat.

"It's..." she started to say.

"Yes?"

"It's..."

"Yes?"

She bit into the toast and tried that.

"It's really bland," she admitted. "I thought porridge was bland. It's not bad I mean-"

I burst out laughing.

"You're not mad?"

"Not at all. Sorry, the spell clearly states that the food will keep you healthy, but be the blandest thing you've ever had. I don't have any spices, not even salt." *Because I have yet to see any here. Once I do I can turn rocks into salt, or basil, or pepper, but until that time, I've got nothing.* "Maybe we can pick some up in town."

"Okay." She kept eating, so it couldn't have been *that* bland, and I joined her with a piece of toast. Just because I could go without eating, didn't mean I couldn't eat.

When she was done I combed her hair out with a comb I made out of a rock that I had turned into a metal comb, and she got dressed. I cleaned up the plates, put everything back in

the dimension, and found the marker I had made the night before. This was nothing fancy, just a stick pointing in a certain direction. "So according to my magic there's a fairly big town in that direction that we can reach flying on Firebrand in less than 3 hours. I didn't narrow it down more than that. Ready to do some flying?"

And now, after I got this little girl to safety and watched over her, and fed her, she balked. She crossed her arms over her chest and said "If I'm going to be traveling with you maybe you should tell me who you are?"

I blinked a moment, processing this *extremely reasonable request*. "Sure," I told her. "But you're not gonna believe it. Have a seat." She sat on the bench and I sat across from her. "Right. My name is Sylvia, and two days ago I didn't exist in this world..." I told her the whole story, and I was right. She didn't believe me.

"Hey Mumiah, any chance you can show yourself and back me up here?"

Normally no, but I think in this case
it'll be fine. Warn the girl and I'll
be along in a moment.

"Who are you talking to?"

"My angel case worker," I joked. "Look, an angel is going to come and verify my story. Don't freak out or anything okay?"

"Where are they then?" She jumped as Mumiah tapped her shoulder. She spun, and looked the angel up and down. *She's taking in the wings. The bare feet. Yup, Firebrand is right there it's not her playing a trick.* "It's true," she breathed.

"It's true," Mumiah agreed. "You're very lucky Sylvia found you, you know. There are good things in your future now. Things that weren't there before, and better than you could have ever dreamed. You can trust her, *absolutely*. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

She nodded quickly.

"Then that's settled." She straightened up and looked at me. "Don't make me a liar now." She vanished.

The girl sat for a moment, and I didn't press her because I had *nowhere* to be and was immortal anyway she could take all the time she wanted. "Okay," she finally decided. "If this is some trick it's a really good one. And a lot of effort to go into for one little girl. I'll trust you."

"Thank you."

"So you can really do all that stuff you said?"

"I can do a lot. But very poorly," I stressed. "I can use magic to make myself better at one thing or maybe two at a time before I get hit with diminishing returns but yeah, probably almost anything you can think of."

"Neat. So what happens to me?"

"Ah." Here was a conversation I wasn't exactly looking forward to. "I don't know if you want to experience that traveling lifestyle I've been forced into. For now my plan is to head to a bigger town, and see what's up. Get a feel for clothing styles and make myself some nice clothes, and see if there's like, a nice orphanage or place you can use to find a family. If there is, we'll see what the turnaround rate is, that is to say, do we think you'll be there a week or fifteen years? I can ask my magic about that I think. Or a power? Something should give us an idea. I meet your prospective parents, size them up, and if they pass the test we hug and say goodbye. You go to your new life, and I figure out why the angel sent me here. You haven't heard of any rising dark lords or anything, have you? Dragons causing trouble? Fairy uprisings?" Firebrand stomped her little foot and turned her nose in the air away from me, fists on her hips.

"No."

"Okay, well, just weird troll attacks, huh? Anyway, how does that sound? If that town doesn't have a good place you can stay with me and we'll try someplace else. I promised to find you a good family and I'll stick with you until you do. If that takes twenty years and you

grow up and find some cute boy to marry, well, fine. At that point I'll practically be family and we can stay in touch and I'll come bounce your kids on my knee or whatever." *And stand at your deathbed and say goodbye...* "I'll do my best to educate you and prepare you for the world but first I have to find out about this world, and what people do here. How they live. Right now I'm getting by with magic and a plucky attitude but I need to find my place just like you do. I'm not sure even I want to wander around forever. How can I have a harem if I don't have a place to put them all?"

She grinned a little but her face quickly fell again. "That sounds okay I guess."

"It's all I can offer at the moment. Believe me kid, we're all just hoping something better comes along."

"I get it."

"So, are you ready to get started? I think you'll like flying. You were pretty out of it last night but now the sun is up and you can see for miles. What do you say? How many girls your age can claim they've flown on a dragon? Not many, I could guess."

"Probably none."

"See? Looking up already. Though I did have a thought." I turned to Firebrand. "If I had given you the flight power instead of boring old wings, you could have turned into something like a carpet, and we could have flown on a flying carpet! Too bad, I'll just have to *settle* for the dragon form."

She shook her finger at me and was scolding me for like 30 seconds, and I could swear I heard the faint jingling of bells. But then we both laughed and she flew a ways away and went back to her normal form. She lowered her neck. "Ready?" I asked, holding out my hand after getting up.

"Ready."

I helped her climb up on Firebrand and took my place behind her, holding her tight. "Here we go!"

We took off in the direction of the town, and the girl really did like flying she discovered. She was looking all around and pointing things out below, like a group of horses and a bunch of people herding some kind of animal. "To be seen at this distance they might be giants!" I shouted at her.

"Uh huh!" she agreed.

The town came into view fairly quickly, it made sense towns weren't too far apart because merchant caravans would need places to stay and a horse could only drag a wagon so far even if the day was 33 hours long. As soon as it did we landed, and Firebrand changed into a galloping horse so we could get closer. I had no desire to get shot out of the sky by some sort of dragon defense system or twitchy mage after all. But what I could tell was the place was far larger than the town the girl had come from, was set on a river, and had a wall around the whole thing. *Sensible. A sensible town at last!*

We got down off Firebrand, who maintained the fiction of the horse for the guards, who stopped us at the gate of the place. It didn't seem like anyone was interested in going in or out at the moment but us. There were two guards, and they looked us over.

"Regulations state anyone wishing to enter has to be questioned," the guard on the right told us. He was a human, pale skin, probably mid twenties so closer to thirty I guessed. The other was a centaur of all things, which I felt was pretty interesting. *So they're a thing here? Huh.* "That's fine, we have literally nothing to hide." I spread my arms out, as if daring them to suggest I had something to hide.

"Yesss," he drawled. "That's what I'm afraid of. But we'll get to the bottom of it. You may want to find some clothes if you're going to stay here long term."

"That's the plan! But it's fine for now?" I was fairly surprised.

"We have a water nymph that lives in the town square fountain so people are used to it around here. You'll still get a lot of funny looks though."

"This is Treetrunks!" I realized.

"Treetops," he corrected me.

Oh, I guess that guy got the name wrong. Well, he tried to burn me alive so I fart in his general direction.

"Welcome. If you'll just come this way?" They opened the first gate and a groom came to handle the "horse."

"Be good," I hold her. She snorted and stamped her front hoof twice.

One knock for yes, two knocks for no?

We were led into the building and two more guards met us. "You can come with me," said the first guard. "The girl can go with him."

She froze, looking up at me.

"We can't be questioned together?" I asked suspiciously.

"No offense, but a young girl traveling with one of your kind? We have to be sure she's not being trafficked and if she is, you'll never see her again. Not that you'll ever see the light of day again in the first place."

"Oh." That took me aback. "What a sensible policy." I knelt down. "Go with him, these are guards it'll be fine. It's their literal job to protect you."

"Okay." She nodded and went with him. I was ushered into what could generously be called an interrogation room with a stool and small table. The guard sat down with a sheet of parchment, a quill, an inkwell, and many questions. He also set a curious glass sphere down on the table and touched it. "Let no untruth be spoken here." He turned to me.

"Name?"

"Sylvia Tempest."

The sphere flashed green.

Oh neat, some kind of truth telling orb. Huh. They are on the ball here, aren't they?

"Reason for visiting?"

"Ah, looking for work around town and maybe finding a good orphanage for the girl."

Green.

"She's not your daughter?"

"No."

Yellow.

"That's odd. You'll have to elaborate on that. Please use short sentences and pause between each one."

"The girl's parents were killed yesterday when her village was attacked by trolls."

Green.

"Because I showed her kindness she stuck with me as I helped fix her town up."

Green.

"Because of that association, the townspeople decided they would burn the house down we were staying in last night, with both her and myself in it."

Green. The man's eyes narrowed.

"We fled, and made it here."

Green.

"This was yesterday? You move fast!"

"Yes we do."

Green.

"Humm, that doesn't explain the yellow..."

"I'm acting as her guardian until I find her a good family. So I'm not her mother, mother, but at the moment I may as well be, as I'm all she's got."

Green.

"Ah, I see! Yes, nuance can sometimes be lost here, that's why we ask for clarification. Huh, not what I expected at all, actually."

Green.

"Works both ways, huh?" I asked with a grin.

"Yes."

Green.

"This town, was it human only? To the west of here? Standoffish people, don't like outsiders?"

"That sounds about right!"

Green.

"And they were attacked by trolls you say? While I wish no harm to anyone—"

Yellow.

"Ahem, the point is they could be taken down a peg. Fanatic bastards. We warned them and warned them. But to be attacked..." He put his elbows on the table, thinking.

"Has this town been attacked?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yes. But as we sensibly allow magic users, other races, city walls, and guards at night we got advance notice and easily defended ourselves. We thought it odd, a whole group attacking like that but now I learn it's not an isolated incident."

Dark lords! Don't squee. Don't squee. Hold it in, conceal don't feel. Don't let it show.

"Sounds like someone is stirring up trouble."

"I hope not."

Green.

"Anyway, back to the form. Magic user?"

"Yes."

Green.

"Hostile or offensive magic?"

"Yes."

Green.

"I meant list them, please?" He was poised to write.

"Oh, sorry, my mistake."

Green.

How do I put this in terms he'll understand? Oh, okay, sure. "I can summon lightning and produce a stream of fire."

Yellow.

I stared at the orb. "Is there something else?" he asked.

"A directly offensive spell? I don't... Spell list!" I looked it over. *Can he see this?* He didn't seem to react to it. *Does it count my ally? But that's not damaging. Oh, wait.* "I can set things on fire!" I realized. "Flammable stuff. So I guess in theory I could set someone's clothes on fire or their, like, hair? At a distance of some meters."

Green.

"And that's it?"

"Yes."

Green.

"Healing magic?"

"Yes!"

Green.

"Good! We can always use more healers, if you're looking for work there are always openings at the temple or the guards. If you can fight, a mage that can both attack and heal would be paid very well."

"I've done okay for myself so far." *With a little help but it's still true enough. How many trolls did I take out before getting whacked with magic?*

Green.

"Fine. I think that's all we need to know. Now for what you need to know. First, our laws. Pretty common sense stuff. Don't steal, don't kill anybody. Don't make trouble for us and we won't make trouble for you. Sounds good?"

"Yes."

Green.

"Good. As a mage do you acknowledge that if someone is found to have been burned alive or struck by lightning you will be summoned to account for your whereabouts during the time of the attack, in front of a magistrate, that can and will order your execution should you be found guilty of the attack?"

"I do." *Wow, they're serious. I guess they have to be, it's the only way to keep the peace in a world where magic can be done.*

Green.

“Fine. What am I missing? Ah, legal brothels display this symbol upon their front doors in wood, bronze, silver, or gold depending on the rating of the establishment.” He pointed to a plaque hung on the wall with a fairly distinctive relief carved into it. A fairly explicit, distinctive relief. “Please stay away from any illegal ones. And report them, that would be great. If you’re looking for work from a place like that, uh, honestly stick to gold you’ll be as wealthy as a lord in under a month and can retire for a couple of years. If you stay with bronze though, uh,” he gave a little cough. “Let me know which one. I don’t make a lot as a guard but I’m sure we could work something out. My name’s Jeb just ask around at the guard house and someone will point me out.”

I was pretty sure my face was fire. It’s not every day a girl is told “I’d love to see you professionally later if that’s your thing.”

“Sign here that you acknowledge everything we spoke of,” he hurriedly went on. “The official town stuff I mean not the last thing. Please don’t tell my captain I said that!”

“Your secret is safe with me,” I assured him, taking the quill. I had a “writing” skill but that was more for writing a book or an essay, not the physical act of writing. It was simply assumed I knew how to write the language I spoke. I put the quill to the page and almost automatically my arm moved, and I signed.

Oh, how about that?

“Great. Let’s get you reunited with your horse and your charge, and you can be on your way. Welcome to Treetops.” He stood and the door opened.

“Thank you!”

Chapter 9

City

When: Morning of day 2

Where: Just inside the gates

“City living, here we come,” I announced. “You okay? They give you any problems?” I asked the girl. I smacked a fist into my hand. “I’ll beat up the whole lot of them if they did.” *Even the one that propositioned me.*

She shook her head. “They just asked about you, mostly, and why I was with you.”

“Did they have an orb that flashed different colors?”

“Just green. Wait, you didn’t try lying to them, did you?”

“They just asked for clarification! It was yellow, not red!”

“Uh huh. You’re a bad influence on me!”

“How can you even say... that...” I trailed off. We had passed through the inner gate and into the city proper. And what a place! Cobblestone roads, stone buildings, lots of people moving around as the market square was just up ahead. And people? I should say so. Some humans, yes, but I saw what was clearly a dwarf with a fine beard down to here, feathery eared elves like I first wanted to be, a couple more centaurs, a bunny girl covered with fur and not wearing much more than I was, and more. In fact two more, coming for me leading two horses and clearly on their way out for the day. They were dark skinned, had pointed ears, stylized armor that gleamed, swords at their hips, and pale hair. I couldn’t really tell if they were boys or girls, their features were in between just like the angels they could have once come from. *Dark. Elves. So cool!*

“Kitsune,” the closer one greeted me as they passed.

Oh my God, he’s so hot. “Hotman,” I greeted him back.

Error. Error! My brain screamed at me. *Designation not found.*

Fix it, I mentally screamed back. *What did you just call this guy?*

“I mean, Darkman,” I corrected myself.

How is that better? You idiot!

The elf slowed and looked back at me with a huge grin on his face. “Oh, not at all,” he said. “Hotman is,” and he brushed his hair back, “perfectly acceptable.”

“She would eat you for firstlunch. Come on,” said the other. “Though *you* would walk right into the jaws of danger.”

“Danger? From this sweet little thing? Nonsense. Besides, I could use a little afternoon delight. So could you, come to think of it. Hey what do you think about three-”

“You’ll have to forgive my partner,” said the one, grabbing the bridle on the horse of the other one and yanking it forward. “He is extremely uncouth. Good day.”

“But my lunch!” protested the other one, walking backwards and reaching out a hand as though to grasp me. “Wait for my return! I love you!” he managed as they walked through the gate.

“What was that all about?” asked the girl.

I shrugged. “Happens when you’re beautiful.” *Though that one was partly my fault. What was I thinking, calling him Hotman. Where did I- it sounds so familiar. Clothes, maybe I need clothes.*

“I’ll take your word for it.”

We moved further into the city, Firebrand now again a fairy and both were trying to look at everything at once. Me, being the worldly being I was simply kept my eyes open for what

we were here for. Slowly scanning the crowds and the booths. Cool as a cucumber, me. Did they have those here? I'd have to find out.

"My father was wrong," the girl finally decided.

"Wrong about what?" I asked, curious.

"This." She indicated everything all around her. "Look over there. That bird looking man is haggling at that stand with that turtle looking dude. Ah, they've decided on a price. Both look happy, and he's leaving with his product. All my life my father said this could never work. That a place where many races lived together would be a dump and get you killed. But I see guards, they seem at ease. Everyone is being respectful. There's no waste on the streets. No garbage. Nothing is on fire. He was wrong. These houses look way better than we had, they have this," she scuffed her foot on the pavement. "Walls to keep out the monsters. He was wrong, and it got him and my mom killed."

"Come here," I told her, heading out of the main street and to a bench by the side. I patted the seat and she sat down, and I knelt down beside her. "From now on I want you do something for me, okay? Don't worry, it's simple. A simple rule to live by. That rule is; trust, but verify. Trust that your father believed in what he said. Maybe he had a bad experience in a city once. Maybe more than once. Maybe his information is outdated, or second hand. Or he fell in with a bad crowd and that poisoned his thinking. Trust he believes it, and believed he was trying to give you good information to keep you safe. *But verify*. Look for yourself. Research the issue. Come to your own conclusion. Got it? Trust, but verify. See the world as it actually is, not how someone else told you they feel what it is. If that makes sense?"

"I'll try."

I nodded. "That's all you can do sometimes." *Do, or do not. There is no try*. "As for your folks, I have to believe they loved you and were doing the best they could for you." *I have no proof of this, of course. Trust but verify*. "But you have to understand, not everyone gets an angel on their shoulder when they start out. Don't hate them, or anything like that. They got you this far, didn't they?"

"Yeah."

"Okay then. Now, do you see anywhere we should go first?"

She pointed over my shoulder, so I turned to look. There was a shop window there with a gorgeous set of armor on a dummy. The armor part was pure white, covering a shimmering black set of underclothes the various pieces were strapped to. I turned back to her. "Nice job, that's exactly what I had in mind! Let's go steal it."

"Really?" Her eyes got wide. "Do you need me to be a distraction or anything? I could 'accidentally' knock something over?"

Oh, do we have a little thief in our midst? I should clarify. "In a manner of speaking only. No breaking stuff required. Let my skill be augmented." I cast on myself, and we headed to the window. I tried to fix the image in my mind, it was of course way too big for me but that was fine. I just wanted the style. A little more feminine perhaps, but that material! What was it? I had to know. We entered the shop.

"Welcome, welcome," said a high voice from somewhere in the store. "Be with you in just a second." We looked around. Armor of various types ranging from leather to steel adorned dummies in here, along with gambesons, boots, trousers, everything the prospective adventurer would need for their journeys into heroics. Defense wise, anyway, there were no weapons here because this was clearly an armor shop, not a weapon shop. Anyone could see that.

A guy even shorter than me came around a shelf of pants and looked me over. "Oh my," he said. "If there was anyone in more desperate need of my services I can't imagine what they would look like. Or are you here for a fitting? You could have taken your clothes off here, no need to walk the streets like that."

Not a dwarf, no beard. Hobbit? Do they exist here?

"Not a fitting, not yet. Actually, I'm here to get an idea of prices and styles. I'll need to save up, as you can see I'm a bit without means at the moment. I'll be looking for work in town so I'm sure to have the needed funds soon but I wanted an idea of what to expect when I come back."

“Humm, I see. Well, I’m not helping anyone else at the moment, I can show you around.”

“I would greatly appreciate that.”

He showed me various pieces and what they cost, almost skipping the design in the window. “Hold on, what about this one? Or is it a situation where if I have to ask how much it is, I can’t afford it?”

He chuckled at that. “It would take you some time to save for that it’s almost a one of a kind piece. And far too big for you, I can’t source the materials to make another, I’m afraid.”

But what if you could? “Ah, so it is a special material! I thought so. May I have a closer look?”

“I suppose.” He moved it back and I touched it, feeling the tiny ridges that made it up under my fingertips. Silently my power started to analyze it.

“What is it made of, if I may ask?”

“No secret. It’s woven of spider silk, with a special resin applied in layers to build up the bulk. It takes weeks of work to complete a single piece this large.”

“It must take hundreds of spiders to get enough webbing for one of these! No wonder you said you can’t recreate it!”

“No, no, giant spiders. It’s actually quite interesting...” I had hoped to stall for time, this particular power needed a whole minute to work, but I was able to “examine” the other parts of the armor as he talked as they were all the same material. I looked it over to see how it all fit together so I could replicate it making sure to always have one hand on a piece of it. He seemed quite pleased to go on about how rare it was and how he had come to offer it in his shop. I figured out the molecular structure of it with plenty of time to spare. The black garment under it was something else, the silk was white and would take no dye, so it was a more mundane material but I kept a finger on it and analyzed it too.

“How much?” I asked, when he seemed to run out of things to say about it. “Just for my own curiosity, of course. As you say it’s far too big for me.”

“Twenty silver, of course if someone came in here actually serious about buying it I would ask for thirty up front and hope we settled on twenty five. Come, come, more to see!” He put it back. I got a full tour of the shop and we wound up at the front door again.

“Thank you very much for the information,” I told him. “I have a very good idea of what I want and I know where to come now once I have the needed coin.”

“Plenty of work in a city like this if you’re willing to get your hands a little dirty. Or I suppose other parts of you. Come back again soon!”

“I will!” I lied. We left the store.

“Let’s find a quiet place and finally make me some clothes,” I told the girl. “The clothes of an adventurer! Which is what I am, in case you were wondering.”

“You didn’t steal anything, I watched you!” she protested. “Or are you just that good?”

“Oh but I did,” I assured her. “Watch and you will see.”

We headed to an alley and got behind the stores and the wall, and I looked both ways. It was clear, we could use this space. I canceled the augment spell I had going for analysis and cast my spell to create rock out of nothing. With a huge stone before me I first cut it into a few pieces, mass was conserved and rock was a lot heavier than the armor I was going for. Then I switched over to transmutation, turning it into a big chunk of the material, and smaller chunks for the arm and leg pieces. Then I turned some rock into a very, very long sheet of cloth that was black and shimmery. Putting the augment spell on again for transmutation (and boy would I be glad when I had higher ratings in these skills by default and didn’t have to keep using magic not that I minded using magic in any way) shaped them into the forms I wanted. The girl watched all this with a great interest.

“So only part of what you’re doing is magic? The rest is skills from other worlds?” she asked. “And those skills were given to you by an angel as a reward for choosing not to enter Heaven?”

Sort of. I could take the skills because I took the background that lets me learn any skill. But I suppose if the multiverse exists, and I am proof that it does, then I trust all worlds probably exist and so probably the world of “Demongate High” exists- or at least some analog

to it- and “true” “progenitors” exist. So yes, these skills are “from another world” in that sense. I didn’t go into that detail for her but close enough. “That’s right. Good on you for trusting what I told you and trying to verify it. These skills fall under the category of alchemy.”

“We have alchemists!” she protested.

“I trust you do, but I’m going to verify it,” I replied smugly. “Maybe you have magical alchemists, or people that just call themselves alchemists who can’t do crap! You ever see one of *your* alchemists turn rock into cloth?”

“Oh...” she realized. “No. I get it. But then, given where I lived...” She broke off, clearly it was a sore point for her.

“Sorry to bring up any unpleasant memories.” I considered the piece I was working on. “No, I want this to look a little different.”

“So you didn’t steal anything, did you?” She actually sounded a little disappointed.

When that piece looked how I wanted it I set it aside. “Depends. Is me not paying that guy theft? I stole a few minutes of his time, to be sure. But really he didn’t make that armor any more than I did. He bought it from someone in the hope of selling it later for a profit. And he still can, I didn’t steal the armor itself, just information about the material it was made of. All artisans start with a raw material of some kind be it sand, or ingots, or cloth. They turn it into glass, or swords, or clothes. It just so happens I have skills to turn rock, that I summon out of nowhere with magic, into other stuff. Then shape it as I desire. Really I could make another set of this armor, change my looks, and sell it to that guy for pure profit. But that’s a bit suspicious as I was just there nosing around it. Is buying bread from one baker ‘stealing’ from all other bakers? No, of course not. Yes, I said I would be back which was a lie I told him to feel better about helping me. A small one he’ll forget when his next customer arrives. But he still has all his stock, and I get clothes and some neat looking armor with a bit of effort. Now the clothes part.” I picked up the cloth and started shaping it, I wanted it as form fitting as possible. May as well show off those LOOKs! Meanwhile the kid was thinking hard about what I said. Or she just had some gas, what did I know about kids? But she finally spoke up again, and held something out to me.

“I found this when we were walking around. Why don’t you just make a bunch of these?”

I looked at what she was holding, and it was a small copper coin. *Good job keeping it hidden from me. Trust, but verify. Having some of your own coin may have saved your life, if I still had some nefarious design on you I got past the guards at the gate.* “I could,” I explained. “And I’ll analyze it later because it’s a type of metal I haven’t seen yet but there’s a difference between making something myself and making counterfeit coins. Even if they are identical at the molecular level.”

“Is there?”

“Sure.” I set the cloth aside. “Think about it this way. Presumably the kingdom knows how many coins it made. Sure, there will be some fake ones floating around but say they make ten thousand of those copper coins one year when the kingdom is founded. So they set the price of a nice, hot, fresh loaf of bread to be one coin. Everything else comes from that. The people can trust a coin is always going to be worth a loaf of bread and get on with their lives. Now here comes the new girl. I take a big rock and with my powers shatter it into a thousand identical copper coins. Now, there’s eleven thousand coins floating around. Sure it won’t be easy to notice at first, I’ll just trickle them out as I buy stuff, but the value of each coin just went down. It doesn’t have as much buying power, and not only because the kingdom just lost track of how many coins are circulating. It’s all very complicated and I only know that much from all the skills I’ve taken. But there’s a more important reason I don’t do that.”

“What’s that?”

“I want to *help* people with my magic. That gives them the excuse to help me out with some coins. As I can’t take finding their lost cat or fixing their leaky roof to the store to get my bread. The coin isn’t important, it’s the amount of value the coin carries with it, that the person I help gives up to get my help. If I just made a thousand copper coins, traded them in for silver coins, made more silver coins, traded them up for gold coins, made a ton of gold coins I could buy a mansion. But I would be bored after a day. You see? No one gets helped, my purposes are not served, and all that coin devalues everybody’s coins.”

"If you did make coins, but still helped people out, any coins they gave you would be worth less."

"There's that too."

"Okay." She thought for a moment and I waited to see if she had other questions. "Are.. Are you going to take it away from me, now that I showed you?" She held it up and I could see it was costing her a great deal to do so. *Wow, her parents really were the worst weren't they? But then, if they were as poor as I expect maybe this one coin would be the difference between eating today and not. She hid it, but when I showed I could make more she gambled that I wouldn't. Now she thinks she's lost that gamble. Kid, you've got a lot to learn about how I want to do things in this world, and who I want to be. But then, so do I.* I remembered that not all my weaknesses were being shown to me. But I was pretty sure greedy wasn't one of them, and was going to make sure of that right now.

I closed her fingers over it. "Like I said, I want to borrow it when I'm done with all this but this is yours. You want a money pouch? I can make you one. Might not want it made of this shiny stuff, that'll make it a target. I'll turn some of this into a rougher cloth for you in a minute. I can make that from your own clothes- that I analyzed last night while you were sleeping- so it matches."

"It's... It's mine?" she echoed, clasping it tight to her chest.

Ah, kid. You never really had anything of your own, did you? Just a blanket and a rabbit. "You found it. Spend it or save it as you wish." *Feed the birds, tuppence a bag.* "And I'll tell you another thing. You help me with the jobs I take and you'll get some of the money from that too. You deserve to get a few things I can't-"

I couldn't say more, she was hugging me too tight. Then she turned away, maybe so I didn't see her tears. I saw them anyway and smiled. "You'll get used to it kid. Now quiet, I'm trying to work here."

Firebrand patted her cheek and I got back to it.

Chapter 10

Jobs

When: Morning of day 2

Where: Between the stores and the walls

“Job’s done!” I announced, spreading my arms wide. “What do you think?” I had finished the armor, buckled it on, and boy oh boy was it weird to be wearing clothes again. I just wished for a mirror. I had leather boots, made as I could analyze the leather strips helping to hold the girl’s clothes together. Black pants and shirt, then various armor pieces strapped over it. I had debated boob armor vs actually effective armor and settled on a slight mix of both. If someone was hitting me with a sword they had gotten past Firebrand and my own powers and by that time they deserved it. A straight up and down chest plate would deflect blows the best, but I was just vain enough to want to show some things off. I could walk around in full plate if I was that worried about it- this was mostly fashion not function. This white material looked great and was *expensive*, meaning people that looked at me would hopefully take me more seriously, as I could “afford” it. The rest of the outfit was as tight as I could make it, as after all I had basically sculpted it out of cloth for myself. I had to assume my legs looked great with these pants hugging all my curves like this.

The girl clapped for me, finally smiling again. “That looks great. Like a hero from a story.”

“Perfect, everyone knows nothing bad ever happens to heroes in stories. And maybe we can walk around without attracting every eye? Though I would like to go see this nymph people talk about. See to just how much prettier she is than me.”

“I bet you’re prettier!”

“Maybe, I appreciate the confidence, kid. Let’s go see what jobs we can do, shall we?” I held out a hand.

“Hold on, I still don’t understand,” she protested. “You said you want to help people, that’s fine. But really what do *you* need money for? You can just make anything you can touch, right? Rock with magic, rock to whatever else!”

You paid attention, good! “Come with me and I’ll show you!”

She shrugged, took my hand, and we walked back into the main city. It didn’t take me long to find a store selling what I wanted, and we pushed the door open and went inside. Wonderful smells met our noses, and I breathed in deep.

“A spice shop?” she asked.

“That’s right. *Someone* complained about how bland their breakfast was. I figured I would do something about it. Let’s see how much some spices are and we can get a variety. These I’ll actually buy because just getting salt would be boring. Plus sticking my hand in a spice barrel is a good way to get thrown out of a spice shop! Best to do that with my own when no one is looking. Now let’s see if we can find some help.” I looked around, the shop wasn’t big but it was stacked with barrels, boxes, bags, vials, bottles, basically anything you could put spices in. I heard something nearer the back and led the girl onward. Someone was singing back there.

“If you want to cook for me
I can tell you there's a price.
Open up a brand new jar,
you gotta use the right spice.”

I cleared my throat and a girl jumped up from behind some barrels. “Oh hi, sorry I didn’t hear you come in!” She was another dark elf, fairly young by the looks, at least I thought it

was a her. She had much longer hair than the two elves I had seen by the gate, but then a person that regularly got into sword fights would want shorter hair. It was nicely styled, and she was very well dressed including an apron that held many glass bottles full of leaves and such. "Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for some spices," I told her, just to get the obvious stuff out of the way. "But I'm a traveler. Do you have some kind of traveling kit you can recommend?" I held up a hand. "I'm short money right now, I'm just asking so I know what to bring later."

"We do actually have a traveling kit!" she gushed, "It's so cute too let me show you." She bounced over to a bunch of leather bags hung on pegs. "Right here, see?" She got one down and opened it, letting us see inside. It held 10 small glass jars full of spices. "Everything you'll need, salt of course, take a look." She handed me one at random and I looked it over. It even had a tiny label on it detailing what the spice was, and on the back were ways to use it. My eyes popped a little. "I didn't expect that level of detail!" I admitted.

She giggled a little. "That's a not uncommon reaction in our shop. We aim to be the only place you think of when you think 'spices.' The whole kit is 3 silver and if you bring the bottles back so we can refill them, you can save 2 copper per jar on the price of the spices we use to refill it."

Sure, the glass is probably expensive to make. They would want to make as little of it as possible. "May I?" I handed that one back and pointed to another. *If I'm right...*

"Sure!" She held it out and I took another out.

Oh yeah, these are hand made. Someone, a glass blower, made each of these I bet. There's variance to them. And someone made the labels, by hand as it's not printed. Glued them on. I have no idea if three silver minus two copper for a refill of each jar is a good value or not but she's selling it! She genuinely seems excited about spices and is super friendly. If I licked her, what spice would she taste- get ahold of yourself Sylvia! "I have to admit, this is actually a lot cuter than I expected a bunch of spices to be. Including the little carry case for them is a great idea, and they fit so snug in here they won't break easily. You've sold me on it! I'll be back with three silver." I handed her the jar back. *And then never return, because I can turn rocks into anything I want. Even salt. Rock salt, if you will.*

"I'll look forward to it!"

We left and it was finally time to look for work in this town. My first information gathering check of 7 led me down the wrong path, but with my next check of 10 after wandering around a bit more found me the correct people to ask and I got directions to a community job board outside the mayor's office. The three of us found ourselves in front of it, but things were not looking good. All the jobs here were terrible, or more accurately ridiculous! Of course I should have expected this, all the easy or very high paying jobs would go quickly leaving trash like this; 'Remove all small rocks from my field.' 'Count the number of bees I own.' 'Count the hairs on that giant's' – *WHAT?* I took that one, flipped it over, tacked it back to the board, and covered it with two others. *There, that should be fine.* "What about this one?" the girl asked, handing me one.

"Demolish a house," I read. "Warning, house is haunted."

"You know who could demolish a house easy," she reasoned, pointing to a certain fairy that was sitting on my shoulder at the moment.

"You're not wrong. Probably not even haunted. Let's go see the man about this, good find kid. Already earning your keep!"

"Thanks!"

The card had directions to where we needed to go to start the job, so we headed there. It was the building of a construction company, and we spoke to the receptionist, a small sentient tree behind a desk.

"Ah, the old ghost job," they said, voice sounding like wind rustling leaves on a fall afternoon. "Don't look much like a priest."

"Magic user," I told them.

“Ah, that’ll do it,” they agreed. “At least I hope so. Ah, what have we got to lose? Last three people, ah, that said they would do it never did it. Ah, that’s bad manners, you know that?”

“Wait, is it actually haunted?”

“Ah, that’s what the local say. You still taking the job?”

“We’ll check the place out at least. What do you want done with the remains if we do get it smashed down?”

“Ah, just leave them there. We’ll have a crew, ah, clean it up.”

“You got it.”

Quest Accepted

Investigate the abandoned house in town and see what you can do about it.

Reward: Variable XP based on performance

So we got the address and headed out there. Houses here were pretty small, with small yards, we were inside a walled city after all space would be at a premium. We could have found the house just walking around, all the other yards were nicely kept, mostly as gardens because you can’t eat grass. Why put a lot of time and effort into watering it and caring for it? Tomatoes or corn you can eat, and the plants can look just as nice if you take care of them. You could tell which houses were owned by people with money, those houses didn’t have produce they had flowers. So clearly they were rich enough not to need the extra food others were growing for themselves. Or it could be just a personal preference for people to want to eat something they grew themselves. Who was I to know? Let them do what they want! Having a mix of flowers, ripening vegetables, bushes, and even some kind of rock display spruced the area up unlike just boring old grass.

This house, the house we were tasked with investigating and perhaps knocking over had an overgrown yard like the place had been empty for years. The plants were twisted and strange looking, and tall weeds and grass choked the yard making just walking into the property area impossible. It was fenced in, the low stone fence also looked like it badly needed to be replaced so we couldn’t go around but I was pretty sure the back would be the same. A dead tree leaned at a fairly precarious angle and unraked leaves and other trash had accumulated making the place look really bad. It was going to be a chore just getting near the place, to say nothing of checking for this “ghost” in a house so far gone it wasn’t worth it to the company needing the job done to repair it. I stood shaking my head wondering how it had gotten this bad in the first place and deciding what I wanted to do. I *could* just have Firebrand get really big and land on the roof, crushing it. Job done. But if the ghost was real, and I had no idea if it was, that could complicate things for the crew that came to clean up the mess. After all, hadn’t I been a spirit not that long ago? Could I have refused to leave my world? Would that have made me a ghost?

The girl stood quietly by my side, clearly a product of the “children should be seen and not heard” parenting style. *Still, plenty of raw material here we should get started.* “Firebrand, can you bring me some branches of that tree?” I asked her. The fairy stood up straight in the air, legs together, chest out, and saluted, then zipped off to break up the branches I had in mind. “You want to help me clear these weeds so we can get into the house?” I asked the girl.

She nodded.

“Great. I’ll make something to help and we can get started. Making the yard a little nicer isn’t specified in the job but one should always give the customer more than they ask for. Helps build good relationships. Plus I don’t want to be slogging back and forth through

these weeds if we want to get anything out of the house that's too big to put in my magical dimension." *May as well sell any furniture that's still good. A desk or table would still be fine, even if a couch or lamp wasn't.*

Bringing back the smaller one I got to work. First enhancing my alchemy ability to reshape material to make what I thought was a passable but miniaturized sickle, complete with an over-sized wooden blade. I got a 9 on weaponry: wood, so it was passable. It would shrink when I made it metal as metal was more dense than wood. By that time Firebrand was back with the larger one, but she could hold it up all day so she just hovered there with it. I figured I would have to go back and forth so added a bit more energy this time, enhancing my ability to turn material into other material and not bothering to let go of the first spell. I was now at a -4 penalty to the checks, but that was fine, it's not like I wanted to reshape a whole house. It was a kilogram or less of material. The wooden blade at the end turned into iron and then I made sure it was wicked sharp. This was only an 8 on weaponry: edged because of the penalty so I wasn't sure it was curved just right but it wasn't going into a museum, it would probably be functional for as long as we needed it to be. As in, the next hour or so and we could toss it and not care. The "rules" specified that an instant attack made was OTR 3, same as any blade, but let's be reasonable here. I had near absolute control over the molecular structure of the material, especially with my enhanced skill magically above a 10. There was no reason I couldn't concentrate on it for a moment and made the edge OTR 10. Would it stay that way forever? No, assuredly not, the edge would be too delicate even against grass and tough weeds. Would it "lose" TR slowly enough to cut these weeds down though? Absolutely.

I looked down at the girl and tapped the tool I had made, getting down on one knee to look her in the eye. "This," I told her, "will chop your own leg off if you're not careful." *At least, as this place doesn't run by Paragon rules that's the theory. In a Paragon world it would only be her STRength that matters, not the sharpness of the blade. Which is weird, because the strongest man in the universe is not going to cut a thick, juicy steak with a spoon no matter how much he tries. But a baby could slice apart stone with a light saber by strapping it to their leg and having them wave it around. TR matters.* "I can probably reattach it, but it'll be difficult when I'll be laughing so hard. Do you understand *why* I'll be laughing?"

"Because you warned me it was sharp and I cut my leg off anyway?"

I beeped her nose. "Smart girl! That's exactly right. Carefully swish it around and cut some of the weeds down. We'll do the whole yard rather than just making a path, make the whole thing look better. Anyone hauling away the remains of the house will thank us. Do you think you can do that?"

She nodded again.

I held it up with two hands, presenting it to her. "Fine. Here you go. Be careful." *I mean the blade is way over there on the end of a stick. You would have to be pretty clumsy to allow it to fly out of your hand, have it bounce off something, and then impale you. But it doesn't hurt to tell her the seriousness of the situation beforehand.* "I'll take the left side, you take the right."

"Okay." She swished it, cutting some weeds down, and move forward. I approved, and got to work on a larger version for myself. A moment later I dropped the spells so I didn't accidentally chop my own leg off, which would have been double embarrassing, and got to work. Meanwhile Firebrand grew to full person size with claws, and started tearing limbs off the tree so we could take it down.

"Morning!" said a voice, and we all stopped work to see who was talking. A man was approaching from the house to the left. "I see someone's finally gonna tackle that poor 'ol house again. Or were you just hired to do the yard? Doesn't make any difference to me of course."

"No, we're going to see about the ghost and tearing it down."

"All by your lonesomes? Now that I will have to see. Reason I came over here, I see that pretty little thing with wings is stacking these branches up here, and they would make good firewood. You mind if I take some?"

"Not at all," I told him. "We'll be taking the trunk down in a bit if you want that wood too."

"Why that would be right kind of you!" he gushed. "I'll get my ax and I can help a bit if you want."

I chuckled, and Firebrand just shook her head. "I'm sure that won't be necessary but you may want smaller pieces so it could come in handy that way."

"Hey," said another voice. We looked, and the man from the house on the other side was standing there.

"Hello," I greeted him.

"Hey," he said again, pointing to the weeds.

"Yes?" I asked, not sure what he was getting at.

"I think he wants some of that there tall grass you're cutting down," suggested the first guy. "That would make good feed for his horses. How are your horses Mac? Doing well I trust?"

"E'yup."

"Well that's good, mighty good. Say you should come for supper some time next week. Doesn't matter what day, always plenty of food on the table and we can always set a place for you. Be mighty nice to catch up with you. Come any time around sunset, any day, don't make me come and get you now."

"Nope."

"It's settled then! Wife always sets a fine table, you know that to be true. Any night next week, don't forget now, around sunset."

He just nodded.

"You can have the hay," I told him, when it was clear he wasn't going to say more.

"Thanks," he told me, scooping a load up in his arms and heading back to his house.

"Mighty fine man, that Mac," the first guy told us. "Great listener. Don't talk much but a mighty fine listener, yes indeed. Why one time I must have spoken to him about frogs for almost an hour. Seemed interested, didn't even fall asleep. Do you like frogs?"

"Frogs? Sure!"

"Great little creatures, frogs. Lots of varieties. Big ones, small ones, colorful ones. Hop pretty far, frogs. Yes sir, I told him everything I know about frogs one day and he didn't drop off once. So many people do when I talk about frogs, you understand. But not old Mac, no sir. Been second neighbors many years now. Haven't heard the man speak more than five words at any one time but he'll do anything for you. Fix up your wagon wheel, patch your roof, loves pie. Do you like pie? Always have a fresh slice for him if we ask him to do something. Always ready to lend a hand. Mac. Swell guy. Listen to me talking your 'ol ear off when you just want to get back to work I wager. I'll go get my ax and my cart. This will be good firewood you know, kindling, logs, just hope the bugs haven't gotten into it too much. That would make it look like good firewood but it wouldn't burn for too long. You want a nice, dense wood for a fire, but of course you know that don't you. Oak, hickory, and cedar, those are the types you want for a nice long fire. Yes indeed, nothing beats a warm fire on a cold night, snuggled up with someone and a hot coffee on the table beside you. Do you like winter? Only good part of winter is the fire and snuggling up with someone. Don't much like snow myself, gets everywhere, have to wear a lot more clothes and it's harder to walk outside in the snow. Anyway, I'll go get my ax you just get back to work and pretend I'm not even here." There was a crash from across the yard. "*Holy Toledo* that little naked girl just smashed that tree down with her bare hands?! It must be more rotted than I thought well free firewood is free firewood even if the bugs have gotten to it make it easier to chop too I'll just go get my ax and my cart nice talking to you good luck with the ghost and all that!"

Oh my goodness I'm going to regret this. "What can you tell me about the ghost?"

"Not much," he said with a shrug. "Others came here just like you did. They didn't work on the yard none though of course it wasn't as bad then you understand? They went into the house, and then came hustling right out again soon after. Didn't stay long. I've never seen it, but what else could it be? Poor thing. Hope you can set it to rights. Good luck."

Not exactly what I wanted to hear. The man moved off and I took another look at the house. *Am I going to regret taking this job?*

Chapter 11

Ghost

When: After clearing the yard

Where: The front door of the house

"Ghost, we're coming inside!" I yelled softly, cracking the door open. The girl, Firebrand, and I had worked to clear the yard, and the two men to either side had grabbed up what we cut. Firebrand easily tore apart the trunk making sections for the man to split apart and put in his cart, while the other man also got a cart and loaded up the tall grass into it. The yard looked at least somewhat managed now, and we stepped up to the house. Interestingly, the windows and door were all intact, when the yard was less wild kids hadn't even thrown rocks through the windows or anything. Either the ghost was protecting it or kids just didn't do that sort of thing around here? Hard to say, I didn't know enough about kids here to even speculate. But the door was unlocked, and it seemed even looters had left the place alone because despite it being somewhat of a mess everything looked intact. No sign of any ghost just beyond the door so I headed inside, leaving it open to get some fresh air in here.

We moved into the front room and looked around. It was a small living room, with a now faded couch, small table with vase that must have held flowers as there was a dried up pile of petals near it, and a portrait on the wall. This was rather curious because it was of a man and woman in formal clothes, possibly some sort of wedding clothes, and the man's side had been clearly slashed with a knife. He hung in two pieces, split up and down the middle.

"That was no accident," I remarked, pointing to it. The girl just nodded and huddled a bit closer to me. "Don't be scared, I'm sure we can deal with a ghost if we have to. Come out, ghosty ghosty ghosty. Pspspspspspsp." She looked at me like I had gone nuts and I grinned a big grin. She wasn't sure how to take that but Firebrand, who had been flitting about the room flew up with a crumbled piece of paper. It was torn and incomplete but smoothing it out and looking it over it seemed to be a love letter of some kind. Looking around at the floor it seemed there were more of them, and an open metal box that looked like it had been bashed open and flung was laying there. Firebrand flew over to the fireplace while I gathered the papers up and hefted a brick, showing me. "Well, well, the old loose brick in the fireplace gag," I said, taking it and slotting it into the space it was supposed to go. I pulled it out again and looked into the hole. Nothing. "So clearly someone was hiding something in this house. Love letters? Curious." There were the remains of several letters, torn, ripped, and scattered so it would take some time to piece them back together. Plus they looked like they had been just laying there for quite some time the ink was very faded. I gathered them up and set them on the table. "We'll keep looking around for now. But at least we can loot the house it seems."

We moved into the kitchen, the girl staying quite close to me, and I was surprised to see what looked like a calendar on the floor, so I picked it up and flipped through it. There was a nail on the wall it must have hung on, and yes it seemed there were 15 months in the year. Three months had an extra day, every other month had 22 days. On the 7th month was circled "10th Anniversary." At least, I figured that's what it said as it too looked like it had been stabbed. "What do you make of-" I started to ask the girl but she was backing away and clearly trying to hide behind me. "It's behind me, isn't it?" I asked. She nodded mutely. I slowly turned. There was a woman there, pale and transparent, but she was ignoring us completely. She seemed to come from the living room and went to a knife block sitting on the counter. She mimed taking a knife out and stalked back to the living room. "That was odd," I remarked. "What do you suppose-" She did it again. "Oh dear." I called out to her when it happened a third time, but she paid no attention to me. "I think she's pretty far gone," I told the girl. "She's not even aware of us."

"You're brave..." she muttered.

“Not really. I was a ghost not that long ago, near as I can figure. Wait she’s back.” The figure was back without even moving there, it looked like she was cooking something. “Hello? Can we help you in some way?” I asked. She raised her head, and I wondered if I had gotten through to her. But her eyes were blank and she went back to her ghostly task. “I guess not. Shoot. Was she murdered? In this house? Was she having an affair and her husband murdered her? Got away with it maybe, and now she wants justice before she can move on?” I looked around the room. Nothing seemed to be out of place here, like it had been thrown. But Firebrand did go over to the knife block and gestured to it. I went around, making sure the ghost didn’t make any sudden moves and looked it over.

“There’s a knife missing all right,” I mused. “She grabbed it to defend herself? But no, the painting was cut. It doesn’t make sense.”

I continued scanning the room and noticed the window here was broken, but nothing like a rock was inside to have broken it. I opened the back door and looked out, the overgrown nature of this part of the yard (we had only done the front) forcing me to make a perception check. I calculated a 15, enough to catch sight of a something in the tall grass and weeds and yanked it over to myself with telekinesis. A 13 was more than enough for that, and a broken dish flew into my hand. “She threw the dishes out the window? Now I don’t like doing dishes any more than the next person but that seems a little too much.” I brought it back in and set it down. The ghost was gone, but I was sure she would make more appearances. “Let’s check the rest of the house.” There were two floors and a basement, that full of some dried up and long rotted food, while there was a bedroom, a sewing room, a bathroom if you could call it that as the toilet was just a covered hole connected to the sewer below, and a dining room. Nothing else seemed disturbed; the bed was made, there was an old piece of cloth carefully set aside with a design being sewn into it, the dining room was dusty but ready to receive guests. The ghostly lady had made several appearances, seeming to go about her life. Always just a few seconds at a time, but we caught her moving about the house somewhat at random. “Let’s head back to the living room,” I suggested, and the girl nodded and followed me. “Okay,” I asked her. “What do you think happened?”

“Me?” She seemed quite surprised to be asked. “Oh, uh, well, there’s a ghost. Ghosts are made when someone has unfinished business. And we found the letters, and they were hidden. So they weren’t letters someone wanted the other person to see. But I guess they got found? Then something happened, and maybe the lady got killed? And she’s still here to try and get closure because her husband was never caught?”

“But then how do you explain this?” I asked, pointing to the painting. “If the man of the house found out his wife was cheating on him, why cut his own figure in the portrait in half?”

“Ummmmm...”

“Exactly. And why would a man throw dishes away? No, something doesn’t add up here.”

“So the lady found the letters? Ripped them up. Got the knife, cut the painting, stabbed the calendar, and then her husband? But then why become a ghost? She got her revenge. And why is the house empty?”

“Now you’re asking the right questions. Let’s go ask our talkative neighbor.”

“Okay.”

“So the ghost is real and it’s the lady who lived here, is it?” the man said after we told him what we had seen. “Now that’s mighty curious, yes it is. I didn’t see nothing that day myself, but I heard there was some kinda tussle in the streets before the house went vacant. But you know who you can ask? Mac. That’s right. He moved in right after that, for some reason his house went up for sale right after that. Strange thing to happen, don’t you think? Come on I’ll take you over there.”

We went around back where Mac was bundling up his grass and taking out the weeds he didn’t want his horses to eat. “Oh Mac,” the man called. “You mind helping this pretty little lady out a moment? She has some questions for you!”

“E’nope.”

“Thanks Mac,” I said. “But you moved in after this happened? Let me start at the beginning.” So I did. I told the whole story and he listened patiently. He nodded at the end.

"Come on," he said simply, and started to walk off. I looked at the girl who also seemed a bit perplexed but we followed. For quite a few minutes, actually, as Mac moved through the town clearly looking for someone. Everyone greeted him, it seemed he was a popular guy though he didn't do more than nod and wave in greeting. Finally he peered in a window and made an "of course he's here" gesture and went to open the door. Firebrand settled around my shoulders as a half cape, she had gotten some funny looks as we walked around and this would keep her close but incognito. He went over to an old panda bear who greeted him warmly. "Mac!" he cried, getting up and shaking his hand. The place was clearly a restaurant, and all the servers, sometimes in harmony of two and three cried out "Hi Mac!" with a giggle. Who was this guy?

Oh right the panda bear. It was an actual panda bear! Sitting calmly at a table reading a menu. Some graying fur, but fuzzy and clearly known here. Mac gestured for me to take it from there.

"Uh, hi," I started. "I'm Sylvia. This is a little orphan girl I'm watching over for the moment. We're working on the ghost case in town? Next to Mac's house? You know the place?"

"Is that what this is about?" the bear asked, sitting down again. "Thanks Mac, I'll take it from here."

"E'yup." He walked off.

"Almost firstlunch, why don't you have seat? Let me buy the cub something at least are you really taking care of her? Looks pretty thin to me."

"I only took charge of her yesterday," I countered. "And I cooked her a huge breakfast! All on my own! With bacon and eggs and plenty of hot, buttered toast. We were going to stop for... firstlunch... soon!" *I've heard that a few times now. Of course! With a 33 hour day I bet they eat four times a day. Like a breakfast, two small meals during the course of the day to keep their strength up, and a larger meal at night. First and probably 'secondlunch.'* Makes total sense.

"That true cub?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Hummm, well, that's okay then. You want something?"

She nodded again.

"All right. Let an old bear pick you out something you'll like. Waitress!"

"What do you say?" I prompted.

She seemed to pluck up her courage. "I don't need your charity, ratty old bear!" she shouted, pounding the table.

Talk in the place halted as every eye fixed on the little girl.

"What did you say to me?" the bear growled dangerously, rising up to his full height. His claws gripped the table and there was a fire to his eyes.

"You should apologize right away!" I told the girl. "What were you thinking?" Firebrand seemed to ripple a bit, letting me know she was watching and ready to act should the bear make trouble. I was running through my spells, I guess I would shoot fire at him and hope it slowed him down to get away? I didn't want to really hurt the old guy, and the girl was clearly in the wrong but I couldn't let her get mauled by a bear because of her poor upbringing.

"Apologize?" the bear exclaimed, jerking back. "This little girl is the only one in a year that's spoken to me properly! Would you say yes to a *double* helping then?"

"Uh-" I tried to process this.

"Sure. Thanks!" she said with a smile.

"You're all right cub!" said the bear, patting her head. "Ah, there you are." The waitress had arrived and he sat back down. "I want this, this, this, this, and a double helping of this for the cub."

"Yes sir!" she agreed. "I'll be right back."

I looked around, people were nodding and going back to their conversations. "What just happened?" I asked no one in particular.

"Never take a bear's first offer," the girl explained. "My dad always said that. I guess he was right about certain things."

"Good man, your- say didn't you say she was an orphan?"

"They were just killed. Trolls," she explained sadly.

"Aw, great, I made her sad," the bear mused. "Sorry cub. I didn't know."

"It's okay," she sniffed.

"Nice of you to say, cub. Ah, here's some water." The waitress returned with some glasses for us and poured water into them. The bear's was more like a small soup pot but made of glass just the same.

"So what can I tell you?" the bear asked. "Oh, I'm Theodore, by the way, nice to meet you." He held out a paw.

"Sylvia Tempest. Nice to meet you. Like I said we're investigating the apparent murder of the woman that used to live in the house next to Mac? What can you tell us?"

"The who?" he asked, confused.

"The woman... she became a ghost? We assumed she was murdered?"

"You've got it backwards," he said. "Good thing Mac brought you to me to set you straight. See, my wife and I used to live in the house Mac lives in now. She saw the whole thing. Was out tending the yard when the man got home. There was some kind of commotion after that, and he came bounding out of the house that woman hot on his heels with a knife. Tackled him to the ground and sta-" He made stabbing motions but then glanced at the girl. He looked at his hand like it had betrayed him and slowly lowered it. "Er, well, let's just say he didn't make it. Healers couldn't get there in time. My wife was so aghast at seeing the whole thing she insisted we move immediately. So we put the house up for sale and moved to another part of town. Mac bought the place."

I blinked at him. "So wait, *he* was running away? From his wife? He didn't kill her? Then why is she a ghost? What happened to her? She got her revenge, why is she still hanging around here?"

"Don't know," he admitted. "Probably caught and put on trial for murder. Nothing to do with us, we didn't look into it anymore."

"Well you lived next to them, maybe you can shed some light on what we found inside?"

"If I can."

So I told him what we found, and the food came, and they ate, and he pondered what it meant. But he didn't have many answers.

"I always thought they were fine," he told us. "Didn't argue much, that we could hear. Sure, he often came home late some nights but so does everybody. Didn't mean anything. To think he was getting some on the side. Well, my wife would probably do the same to me. There may be public records of what happened to her, but this was 20 years ago or more now. May be hard to dig up."

So more like twenty five? Great. "I'll look into it. Thanks for setting me straight about what happened."

"Sure thing!"

The girl couldn't finish her meal, she wasn't used to so much food and it was only firstlunch, not dinner. It wasn't supposed to be a huge affair. They brought out a glass container with a metal top and put the food into it. "We'll need this back," the waitress told me.

"Of course," I replied. *These sneaky bastards. Oh sure, some of these probably go missing but most people would return it. But then think, 'well, we're already here why not get a bite to eat?' And their business improves. What a racket!*

I put it in the dimension so we didn't have to carry it back and went back to the house. Naturally I had thanked the bear and he said it was no problem, but to take good care of the cub. I promised him I would. "So now what?" the girl asked.

"Look for more clues I guess?" I suggested. "We have to find out where he was going. Maybe something in the house will tip us off. If we don't find anything we head back to the mayor's office and ask about the woman's fate. If we explain about the ghost they'll probably help? At least I would hope so. There must be a record of what happened to her after the incident. I mean, unless she just abandoned the house and moved, like that bear did."

"He was nice."

"You're only saying that because he bought you food!"

“Yeah?” like this was the most obvious thing in the world.
“*Oh boy.*”

Chapter 12

Secrets

When: After firstlunch

Where: Back to the house

“Secrets, we’re on the lookout for secrets,” I told the girl. “We’re going to empty the house here into the yard. Any of the furniture, like the tables, that’s still good I bet someone would be interested in. As it’s all getting flattened in the end clearly the construction company doesn’t know or care about it. So it’s ours, as far as I’m concerned. As we do we’ll check each piece out. Look under the tables, feel around in the cushions, check the desk for hidden compartments, you know, the usual places. When the house is empty it’ll be easier for me to sense anything hidden inside it. Sound good?”

She nodded, and we got to work. The neighbor came by with his cart again and once we checked something over he hauled it to his storage shed, saying he would be happy to keep an eye on the stuff until we could find a buyer. He suggested the person buying the house that would go up after this one was knocked down, which would certainly get rid of all of it at once, if we wanted to wait that long. But he said he would keep an ear out for anyone looking for specific pieces. We thanked him. Firebrand did most- okay all- of the heavy lifting, and a few hours later the house was fairly empty. We hadn’t found anything either. That meant the letters were the only thing, which would make sense, or we were still looking in the wrong places. There hadn’t been much in the way of either jewelry or money, making me wonder where it had gone, but at least we had an almost complete set of knives, pans, and bedding in the dimension now. The girl ate her leftovers, I heated them up, and we walked through the house looking for anything we had missed. The ghost hadn’t reacted to any of this, simply going about her non-existent life. And of course I returned the container through a portal, making the waitresses jump but they served a talking bear, they knew what magic was.

“I’m going to try a few things with my powers,” I announced to the girl. “First I’m going to leave my body and become a psychic presence. I’ll zip around looking for holes in the walls and maybe secret places under the roof? Then I’ll walk around with my ESP boosted to see if I get any sense of secrets in any of the rooms. Watch my body for me, okay? Anyone moves it and I won’t be able to find my way back.”

“Okay.”

I settled down on the floor and made the check. I didn’t bother to enhance it, this skill only determined how many minutes I could safely be away, that is if I could manage to calculate the proper amount to begin. I first calculated a 2, which was not enough. And then, because the universe works this way, I calculated my maximum result. An 11. Minus 1 for the retry because I didn’t have patient, are you kidding? I had powers to take not mundane backgrounds like-

“Yipes!” Now out of my body the ghost was right there looking at me.

“Can you see me?” I asked, stepping back with concern. *Sure, okay, ghosts could work differently here, respond better to this form than a material one. I have no idea how they work here, I shouldn’t have thought I did.*

“Help me!” she cried.

“I’m trying to,” I assured her. “I’m looking for more proof of how you were wronged. I found the letters you found. Is there evidence of who your husband was seeing? Something he was given and kept? The letters aren’t clear, they don’t mention anything like that.” *Probably on purpose. They were flowery and mushy, but very carefully devoid of clues that could identify either person.*

“I don’t know!” she insisted. “But there has to be something. Please, I’m stuck. Only finding the end of my story will help me. It wasn’t fair, what happened to me. Help me.”

"What wasn't fair? What did happen to you?"

"I don't remember. It wasn't fair. Help me. He cheated. I was wrong to kill him. But what happened to me wasn't fair. Help me!"

"I will, I'll get to the bottom of it I promise."

"Did you find the letters?"

"I said I did. I spoke to your neighbor, his wife saw the whole thing. The bear?"

"Bear? You have to help me!"

Crap, even communicating she's not very helpful. "I'm trying. Let me look around the house now."

"I'm stuck here!"

"I know. Wait, where are you most stuck? Is there a place you go to more than other places?"

"I'm... I'm... Stuck." She looked at the bedroom, and I zipped in there. She was there when I stopped.

"You're really attached to me now aren't you?"

"Been so long. Can you help me?"

"Let me look around!"

I looked, poking into the closet to see if there was a false wall, and the ceiling to see if there was a crawl space. This was tricky because despite my being only mental energy at the moment darkness still presented a problem. I couldn't see into it! I guessed I would have to become a MODOD or a Mental Organism Designed Only for Darkness to get around that limitation. But after 20 some years of neglect the roof wasn't exactly in the greatest of shape so I could see a little bit. Nothing jumped out at me up there, though there were plenty of nuts and things probably left by hungry squirrels. I zipped through the rest of the house, and the basement but really if there was a secret passage down there I wasn't going to see it. I had lit the place up with magic when we went down there the first time but had no such capacity now. I headed back to my body and the ghost lost interest again.

"Anything?" the girl asked.

"Maybe," I told her, getting up. "Let's check the bedroom." I stood in the center of the room and made an ESP check. Another 11, that was fine. I felt a weight here, a spiritual pulling that must be what the ghost was talking about and looked around. The room was empty, we had moved everything out of it. What could possibly be left? A REASON check of 17 tilted my head down. *Of course, the floor!* "Look for a loose board!" I cried, getting down on my hands and knees. "I bet something is hidden under the floor!"

Firebrand became a mouse, and started squeaking their way around the room while the girl and I looked. My pathetic LUCK check of 8 was not enough but it must have been less than the girl who triumphantly pried up a section of the floor and reached down into it. She pulled up a small bag and opened it up, spilling out a letter and a small box. The box held a man's ring, heavy and gold, and the note was simply "in greatest need, show this and be granted favor." I looked the ring over, it was a signet ring with a C under a crown. "You found it," I praised. "Great work!"

"Thanks," she said shyly. "But what does it mean?"

"I'm not sure," I admitted. "I wasn't expecting a man's ring. Do you recognize the design?"

She shook her head.

I sensed it out. A 2 on spirit sense wasn't getting me anything, I couldn't even tell if the girl was alive with that roll, much less myself. Magic sense went much better, my maximum of a 12. *I keep doing that, first a minimum check, then a maximum check.* There was a very interesting interplay of magic on the ring I couldn't exactly identify, but it felt extremely complex but not dangerous in any way. This meant it was a genuine article though, but I didn't dare put it on in case it had some kind of single use enchantment. I could synchronize with it, but figured it wasn't worth knowing more than the fact it had magic on it at the current time.

I made a KNOWLEDGE check and got a 16, so it was ringing a faint bell for me but I couldn't imagine where I had seen it. I hadn't even been in this world two days! "Let's go ask." We left the house and I was surprised to see the ghost now trailing us. She still wasn't any

more with it, but was seemingly being pulled along by my moving the ring around. She vanished as the neighbor walked up though.

"Did you find anything?" he asked.

"Just this," I told him, showing the ring.

His eyes got wide. "That's the crest of the royal family. You must have seen it on the flags at the entrance of the city?"

I snapped my fingers. "That's where I saw it, yes! Why would someone living here have such a ring?" *And why hide it away? Thieves?*

He shook his head. "You got me. What are you going to do now?"

"I need to solve this mystery. Are there any members of the royal family living here? Or were there, twenty years ago?"

"Why sure. Our mayor takes orders from the baron, he has a palace in town. I can give you directions but what are you going to tell them?"

"Nothing," I said with a grin. "The note I found with the ring says simply to show it and be granted favor. If I show up with it and flash it around I'm sure I'll get someone in charge to at least ask me what I'm doing with it."

"Well, good luck with that. Let me know if you come out okay."

"I'll be back to demolish the house, the actual reason I'm doing all this," I reminded him.

"Though I'll go back and ask if they really want it smashed up if the ghost is gone..."

"All right. Let me draw you a map to get to the palace."

We headed through the streets towards the palace, the girl riding on Firebrand who had taken the form of a pony. I figured it was better for them to be together if something went bad, I could (presumably) take care of myself but if they needed a quick getaway, what better creature to be with than a shape-shifting magical construct that could grow to dragon size? No other creature, I told myself, so she got to ride. She seemed to be having fun and we made our way to the palace. There was a guard standing outside the front gate so I marched up to them, and when they glared at me and asked what my business was I simply opened my hand and showed the ring.

"Where did you get that?" he demanded, but to his credit didn't try to snatch it away from me. I held up the note.

"That's none of your concern," I told him. "I suggest you get someone in charge down here, I'll need to speak to them right away."

He looked the note over, the ring again, and nodded. "Very well. One moment." He pulled a small doll looking figure made of cloth out of a pouch and tossed it through the fence, where it hung in the air in a burst of magic. "Go get the captain and bring him back here," he instructed it. The thing floated away towards the house. "It will only be a moment."

"Fine." *An application of that invisible servant spell perhaps? This way he can send a message to someone inside but still remain here to guard the gate. Very clever. It wouldn't have to speak, the very fact it's up and moving around is the signal to come investigate.*

Within moments another armor clad man clanked over and asked what was going on. He also handed the man a different looking doll. *One time use?* The first guy explained and I showed the ring again, making the second guy scowl but nod. "I'll open the gate."

"Stay here," I told the girl. Then I leaned closer. "You'll have to lead the rescue operation if I get in trouble. If Firebrand suddenly changes into a dragon, hang on!"

She nodded, an excited look in her eyes. Hey, what kid wouldn't want to ride a dragon into battle against the nobility they probably blamed for most of the problems in their life?

He marched behind me, guiding me inside the palace which was all marble and artworks and maids running about doing maid things. He directed me to a meeting room and told me to stay put, closing the door behind me. I didn't have to wait too long, but sat in the very comfy chair on one side of the table. The captain, two guards carrying a heavily locked chest, and a man in robes came into the room. The chest was plunked down and the two stepped back. The wizard set down a sphere like the one I had seen at the border.

"Do you wish harm to anyone within these walls?" he asked me.

"I do not!" I answered. The sphere went green.

“Will you leave as peacefully as you entered once your business here is complete?”

“I will.” Green.

“Go ahead,” he told the captain.

“Now,” said the captain. “You have two choices. We can continue this, and if the ring proves not to be genuine you will be imprisoned and possibly tortured or magically ‘persuaded’ to tell us what your aim is and why you tried to fake it. Or, you can simply declare the whole thing a misunderstanding and leave now, with no ill will on our part. Naturally you would have to leave the ring and the note.”

“Let’s go forward,” I told them.

“Very well. Place the ring on the table. Wizard?”

The man in the robe nodded and looked me over. “A strange magic on the ring she’s wearing, almost as if it’s helping maintain something. But it doesn’t feel directly damaging. The ring she brought does have the correct magics on it. As for her... May I, miss?” He held out a hand and I gave him mine. He concentrated. “Yes, she’s a caster,” he declared. “Her mana core is *extremely* large, and feels a bit different from what I’m used to. Were you taught some kind of unorthodox cultivation method young woman? I’d love to speak to you more about it at length.”

Must be my spirit energy he’s feeling, I decided. As it’s tied in with my magic and I have far more energy than probably all but the most powerful demons or their equivalent around here, it’s no wonder he’s excited. They’re all mixed up, so he doesn’t need spirit sense to feel it. Just magic sense would be enough for him to, well, get a sense of it. And as I cast differently that explains his confusion about my core. I was thinking about how to answer but the captain went on.

“Great,” he muttered. “Go and get some backup.”

“I hardly think-”

“You heard me.”

“Very well, very well,” he agreed, dropping my hand and rushing off.

“It’s almost impossible to forge,” the man told me, who I noticed had put his hand on his blade so he could draw it at any moment. “You can still just say whoops it was all a bit of a prank some friends put me up to! If you want. Right up until we open that chest.”

“You’ll be apologizing to me soon,” I told him, leaning back in my chair as without a care in the world.

He just snorted.

“I’ll put in a good word to the baron though, that you followed all safety procedures to the letter. I feel very intimidated.”

“Good!” He muttered something about something mages. Ducking? Clucking? Mucking? Something like that, it didn’t sound congratulatory.

A moment later two other people in robes followed the man back into the room. One was short enough, and bearded enough, to be a dwarf, while the other was a mermaid, floating along because she couldn’t exactly walk around. She was wearing a robe that left her tail free, but was open in the front. “Does this suffice?” he asked the captain.

*This. World. Has. **Mermaids!!!!!!** I want to be part of their world! Oh wait I already am, we’re in the same room aren’t we? Mermaid wizards! I love it here! Is it socially acceptable to hop up and give her a huge hug? No, no, play it cool for now. You’ve seen hundreds of mermaids. Thousands, even. No big deal. Am I grinning like a fool? I am, stop it, stop it, stop it! How many of them are there? Lots? Do they have a whole undersea kingdom? Can I visit it? Eeeeeeee!*

“It’ll do. Take positions at either side of the room and watch her, she’s a caster.” He nodded to the two soldiers that had carried the chest in here and they took keys out from around their necks and fit them into two locks. Those opened, and then they switched positions, and unlocked another set of locks on the side of the chest. *What’s in there, the nuclear codes?*

They stepped back and the captain opened the lid. He pulled out something I didn’t expect, a thick metal disk with a symbol on it. He thumped it onto the table and watched me,

but of course I made no move towards it. Then repeated the procedure several more times until he had a line of them sitting there. "Do it," he commanded.

I wasn't sure what he was talking about but it turned out I didn't need to. The wizard put his hands together and started to gather mana. "Let all that has been hidden be revealed to us!" he cast, and magic washed over the room. To my surprise above the disks and the ring I had brought now hovered a transparent window, each with a set of numbers and letters in them. He slid the ring along the table, matching the windows up and looking at them. He stopped at one disk and nodded up to the captain. "It's a match," he announced. "The ring is genuine."

The captain looked positively shocked, and took his hand off his sword at last. "My apologies, my lady," he told me, tone now completely different and bowing in my direction. "I hope you understand my caution, it's not every day that-

I waved it off. "Yes, yes, captain, no offense taken. I meant what I said before, about putting in a good word for you. It's an extraordinary situation I don't hold against you. You did your job, there's no doubting that."

"Thank you my lady. Would my lady like to accompany me to a more suitable location while the baron is summoned? The east sitting room is quite lovely this time of day and overlooks the flower gardens."

"I think he'll want to keep this... intimate," I decided. "The less that is seen of me here, the better. I'll wait here."

"Very well my lady. I'll have refreshments sent, and someone will see to the girl you came with and your horse. I will bring the baron at once."

"Good."

"By your leave." He bowed again and gathered up the coins, putting them in the case, locking it up, and everyone filed out. The wizard a bit longingly, looking back at me like he wanted to stay and talk. I didn't blame him, but probably best not to reveal my origins.

While I sat waiting I wondered how they had done it. Imbuing? But there was a lot of magic there... An invisible illusion of some kind? He made invisible things visible and checked some kind of serial number or whatever put into the objects. Probably either some kind of obfuscation if someone stole the chest they wouldn't know which of the metal disks to copy or they referred to different people? It was an interesting system to verify someone's claims of owning a legitimate item normally reserved for royalty. I was feeling out the ring some more and trying to match up the mishmash of magic that was on it with what I had seen them do.

Refreshments were brought in, but not 30 seconds later the captain was back with another man, very well dressed who looked both confused and somewhat annoyed. Both grew as he looked me over. I had no idea how I should respond so I just let him stew and make the first move.

"Well that's clearly a ring of mine," he finally decided, "but I don't recognize you. What's this all about?"

"It's about events that happened about twenty years ago," I told him. "And perhaps a little bit of justice."

"Twenty years? What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about her. Can you show yourself?" I gestured to the spot in the corner of the room. The ghost of course had been hovering nearby, I had felt her the whole time. She was dragged by the ring in truth, it seemed, and now made herself visible to everyone. The guard nearly drew his sword again but the baron recoiled and went up against the wall.

"No..." he managed.

"Yes," I told him, standing. "Now, why don't you tell me why this poor woman has been trapped here, anchored to this existence by your ring and maybe we can put all this behind us!"

Chapter 13

Reveal

When: A tense second later

Where: The meeting room

“Reveal the truth?” the baron finally said. “I suppose I have no choice now. Out.”

“But milord-”

“It’s fine, you can wait outside. This is a private matter between us.”

“Very well.” He saluted and stepped out, closing the door behind him.

The baron stared at the woman, who stared back.

“Can you make her go away again?”

“No.” I answered flatly.

“What do you want? Money?”

Don’t tempt me. “I want justice. Your money only comes from the hard work of your ‘subjects’ anyway. I don’t feel like stealing from them, even if you don’t mind it.”

“Taxation isn’t-”

I waved that off. “So you clearly recognize her. And you don’t want the guards to hear our conversation. Very interesting. So talk, why is she stuck here? What did you do to her?”

“Do to her?” he asked, now looking at me. “She’s a criminal. She killed her husband in cold blood, we had a witness to it.”

“The bear, yes, I spoke to her husband. But someone was having an affair- Ah, it was you. You and her husband?”

“Yes! Can you even imagine the scandal?”

“That you were seeing a man on the side?”

“What?” He looked at me like I was crazy. “No, who cares about that? I’m talking about him being a peasant!”

“Uhhhh kay? The horror. So... What?”

He sank into a nearby chair, still leaned away from the ghost who seemed content to watch for now. “We met by chance, and of course I was much younger in those days.”

Sure, by about 25 years as I would calculate it.

“We continued to meet in secret. His wife didn’t know. Until the day she did.”

“She found the letters,” I told him. “He had hidden them, and she did a job on them after she found them. They were torn and thrown everywhere. She messed the house up a bit after that too. Probably seeing his betrayal everywhere.”

“I see. I didn’t know how she found out. So he kept the letters- anyway! She was seen murdering the man and given a short trial, and executed. That should have been the end of it.”

“Trial?” the woman managed.

“Yes, trial!” the baron insisted. “Did you *not* get your day in court? Of course you did. You were guilty!”

“And of course you wanted it to proceed quickly, before it got out *why* she did what she did,” I decided. “And you went for the maximum punishment too, didn’t you? What would that be around here, I wonder?”

“Hanging,” he offered. “She was hung soon after.”

“Ah hah. But she didn’t know who her husband had cheated on her with. And the ring she never found dragged her spirit back here. Wonderful. For a land of magic, where ghosts can be so easily made, you were certainly careless about the whole thing. And here we are, all these years later.”

“If it were that easy they would be all over the place. But yes, you had to go stirring up trouble didn’t you?”

“Oh ho ho ho!” I laughed. “Like any of this is *my* fault! I just wanted to knock a house down for some money. I didn’t think I would solving a ghost murder mystery or whatever you call this. Well, there she is.” I pointed. “Make it right so she can move on. You made the mess, you can clean it up.”

“I will do no such thing,” he told me, folding his arms. “It’s been twenty years, she needs to move on. Besides, she killed the one I loved, why shouldn’t I take revenge on her?”

“Now that she’s seen you I’m sure she’ll be happy to haunt you, and this place, instead of that lonely house she used to call home. As far as I’m concerned that’s justice enough for me.”

“I’ll just have a priest take care of her.”

Of course, using his power to avoid responsibility. At least the church will get a sizable donation, I expect, to keep quiet about it? “Wow. Really? Not even a little remorse, huh? No admitting your part in all this? Not even to set a restless soul to rest? Perhaps something as simple as an ‘I’m sorry’ could set her free.”

“Set free the soul of a murderer?! Okay I fooled around with her husband, she should be happy I noticed him at all.”

“I really shouldn’t be surprised,” I decided. I turned to the ghost. “What am I going to do with you now, though? I got you this far, you found the guy, is that enough? It may have to be.”

She seemed to gather herself and “breathed” in. The room got colder, and she fixed her gaze on the man.

“I admit my part in this,” she said. “But I think he needs a change in perspective.” She blurred forward and sank into him.

“No!” he cried, eyes losing focus. His face took on a look of horror, and then deep sadness, sliding from the chair to his knees. “No,” he said more softly. The ghost reappeared.

“The irony is, had you presented yourself to the house I would have been flattered. I would have shared him with you. We could have kept it quiet, and been happy together.” She turned to me. “Thank you.”

And she was gone.

Quest Completed

You managed to follow a fairly straightforward set of clues to their logical conclusion. Thus allowing a ghost to move on and humbling a person in power. And no one died. Well done.

Reward: 4 XP was gained

“Well!” I announced, standing and stretching my arms way above my head. He was still kneeling, and now weeping. “I guess she showed you what it was like from her perspective? Ghosts can be nasty around here I guess? I’ll leave you to it. Let’s hope no more of your ‘youthful indiscretions’ forces me back here. I won’t be so polite the next time, now that I know exactly who you are.” *Shoot, there’s my vindictive weakness again, and a bit of bloodthirsty if I’m not mistaken.* I opened the door and the guard looked in. “He’ll need a minute. Escort me to the gate, my purpose is done here. I left the ring.” I gestured to it, still on the table.

“Sir?”

He nodded, and the guard accepted it. “I’ll send for the royal therapist. This way, please.”

I was led back to the gate, and the girl perked up as I approached. As did Firebrand. “Let’s go,” I told them. “We’ll head back to the company, see if they really want the house smashed up after all now that the ghost is gone.”

“So she’s at rest?” the girl asked.

“She is, she got what she wanted, and our good baron got a lesson in humility. And I didn’t even charge him! What a gal I am!”

It turned out the company did *not* need the house knocked over, now that they knew it was still in fairly good condition after all these years and the ghost was gone. They said they would send someone right away to do a survey and I got paid. True to my word I handed over some coins to the girl.

“And these are really mine?” she asked, eyes wide and clearly not believing what had just happened.

“I’m not going to steal them in your sleep or anything,” I assured her. “You worked hard, you earned them, I’m giving them to you. It’s as simple as that.” *Let’s not forget the furniture and such, she’ll get a part of the sale of that money too, she helped move it and check it over.*

“I never had money before,” she explained.

“Yes, I gathered that. Want to walk through the market? Maybe see what a new dress would cost, or a friend for your bunny?”

“But the spices!”

“I’m buying the spices, yes. Unless you want to help, which is fine. That’s your choice, you don’t *need* to. We need to go back to the job board anyway, so it’s on the way. I thought you might like to buy something for yourself, with your own money, that you earned, doing good work. But if you don’t want to...”

“We can!”

“Then let’s go.”

“I want a sausage!” she announced, pointing.

“Wah?” I managed back. “You want a sausage, on a stick?” She looked at the booth, and they were selling sausages on a stick. It was a thin metal stick, so you had to stand there and eat the sausage, then give the metal stick back. The booth was the “sausage on a stick” company. I had to admit they smelled good.

“Yup!”

“Haven’t you eaten more today than you ever did in like a week? That bear bought you a double portion!”

“And I’m still hungry!” she announced. “And I always wanted to try one but I never could. You said I could buy what I wanted with my money!”

“I’m not saying you can’t. It’s just, I can make you all kinds of food with magic somewhere...” *Yeah, she’s finally getting the food her body needs and so it’s going to send signals to keep packing in the calories while she can.*

“Bland!”

“Again, agreed. Okay. But a sausage on a stick is dumb. I won’t be seen in public with a girl munching on such a thing. But a sausage in a bun...” I looked over and there was a bread seller just next to the sausage guy. This was run by a cute looking girl with tiny horns, the bottom half of a goat, and a tail. Oh, and goat ears too, which were not as cute as mine. Not even close. But she was calling out about fresh baked bread, and we walked over there.

“There is no such thing as sausage in a bun,” the girl protested.

“Not until now, maybe.” I selected a nice looking loaf that seemed the right size and had her cut it lengthwise, much to her confusion. I thanked her, said she didn’t need to wrap it up, and we headed over to the sausage place. “Go ahead,” I nudged the girl forward.

“One sausage please?” she shyly said, looking down.

“Sorry, didn’t quite hear that?” The man put a hand to his ear and cocked his head.

“One sausage!” she said louder.

“Very well, young miss. Be careful, they’re hot!”

She handed the money over but I intercepted the sausage. Laying it on the bun I pulled the stick out and handed it to her. “See, *now* it’s a sausage in a bun. Enjoy.”

“Oooooh!” she cooed, nodding. “I get it.” She took a big bite. “It’s so good!” she managed. Juices ran down her chin and she looked like she was really enjoying it.

"Don't talk with your mouth full!" I handed the stick back to the man and he stared at it like it was a live viper I was trying to foist off on him. *We need a napkin. Can I invent those too?*

"What did you just do?" he asked.

"I put the meat in the bread, but I didn't shake it all up," I told him. *Now that sounds familiar...*

"Are you kidding? This shakes up everything. Darla! Darla! You have to come see this!" he yelled in the direction of the other stand. The girl (satyr?) bounded over and put her hands over her mouth in shock.

"It's just meat in a bun," I protested. "It's not... rocket science? Do you even know what that is? I don't think I do it just came to me."

"You don't understand," said the man. "Darla, this is it!"

"I know, my love!" she answered, looking longingly at the man. "This is the answer! It's perfect. We have to tell them right away!"

"And you'll-"

"Yes! Oh yes! Yes! Yes!"

I need an adult. Especially as they flew into each others arms and passionately kissed.

"I mean it's *good*," said the girl around a mouthful of food. "But this display seems a bit over the top." But they only had eyes for each other. The pair broke off the kiss, took each other's hands, and raced away from the market. Both our mouths dropped open. "Did," she swallowed. "Did they just *leave*?"

"I think so," I told her, as baffled as she was. "I guess we better watch their stands while they do whatever. Otherwise they'll come back to find all their product has walked off. You want bread or sausage?"

"Eh, I'll take bread I guess?"

"Humm, let me see something." I walked over and with the fire and such in the meat booth the bread booth seemed easier to move, so I enhanced my skill at Telekinesis and with a check of 18 easily moved the booths closer together. "Now we can sell our patent pending sausage in a bun easier."

"Okay!" She paused. "What's a patent?"

As she finished her own I worked out where the wood was, and how he kept the sausages warm on the grill and such. The girl took to the job of saleswoman with gusto, calling to passerby about fresh bread, all kinds a bread, we've got a long bread, round bread, dark bread, bread with seeds, and boy howdy try our new sausage in a bun! She seemed to be having a blast and I felt was finally coming out of her shell a little. I approved. What I did not approve of was the stern looking city guardsman coming over.

"Why is this stall so close to the other one?" he demanded.

"It's so that the city's residents can partake of the newest invention," I offered. "The sausage in a bun!"

"Bun?" He looked to the other stand. "Say, this is Darla's stand!"

"Yes, she and the man running-"

"Don't care. It's too close together. Safety hazard. It's a fine." He got out a notebook and pencil and started writing something down.

"A fine? You mean, like money?" I asked.

"That's right."

"But that stall over there is at least three times as big as this one!" I pointed to a stand across the way. "I mean if our stand happened to be twice as big and just sold two things-"

"Sure, they have the proper permit. Say, if you're manning the stand now I'll need to see your merchant license."

"My what?"

"Oh dear, that's another fine." He flipped to a new page and continued writing. "If they had asked you to watch their stands they would have told you about the merchant license. So somehow you stole them. Theft is a big no-no in this town, it's another fine and I'll have to confiscate the goods. They'll be returned to the original owner though, don't you worry." He chuckled as if to say "but not all of them."

"But I just wanted to make sure someone didn't take their product. I'm a passerby!" I protested. "They just ran off!"

"Not my problem. Say how old are you girl?" he asked the young orphan.

"I'm eight," she announced proudly.

"Eight? Hey we have laws in this town against underage labor!" the guard told me. "That's another fine." He flipped the page and kept writing. "Not to mention thirty days in the stocks. Not for her, of course, for you. She'll be kept as a ward of the state until your sentence is complete."

"Stocks?"

"Or sixty in prison. Your choice. We pride ourselves on choice in this city. You're her mother I take it?"

"No, she's an orphan girl I'm just looking after."

"An orphan? You kidnapped an orphan girl and are forcing her to work for you? That's another fine and even more time in the stocks. Don't think about running away, resisting arrest is another fine."

"I'm not forcing her- what are you doing now?"

He was taking something out of a pouch and spoke into it. "This is officer 217b. We have a code 12 in progress in the market square, bread stand. That's a code 12 at the bread stand. Over."

"Roger that," said a voice.

Magical two way communications?

"If you would just listen-"

"Now see here young lady. I don't care about your sob story. All these fines are adding up plus your time in the stocks- or prison at your option- you're looking at real criminal territory here. If you have anything to say in your defense it'll have to be to a judge. My hands are tied."

"Oh for crying out- you know what? Fine. I didn't want to do this, you understand. Let my skill be augmented." I focused on a particular skill I hoped never to use, but this situation seemed to call for it.

"You're a magic user?" he asked, taking a nervous step back.

"Yes, but I only cast on myself there can't be a fine for that!"

"No, but I'll need to see your mage's license, can't have unregistered mages wandering around making trouble."

"No one at the gate said anything about this!"

"Don't have one? Can't say I'm surprised. That's another fine, plus I'll have to collect the fee for the registration, the fee for the exam, there's taxes-"

"Taxes?"

"Of course. What do you think pays my salary? Now, anything else here not up to code? How hot is that fire?"

I closed my eyes, this had gone on long enough. I focused my power. "You are going to rip those pages out of your notebook, give them to me, and then take a long walk around the city thinking about your choices in life." Yes, I waved my hand around as I did it. I don't know why I did it. I didn't *need* to do it, but it felt right.

My skill check of 21 in compulsion slammed into him. His eyes glazed over and he swiftly tore pages out of the book, handed them to me, nodded, tipped his hat, and whistled his way away from us deep in thought.

The girl's eyes were wide as she watched all this.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm not proud of it," I told her, dropping the spell. "Probably wanted some kind of bribe. Ugh, this sucks!" I augmented my skill again and put the stand back, meanwhile the pages were burning nicely in the fire that was warming the sausages. Firebrand shape-shifted into the baker girl and took her place at the bread stand, while the orphan girl sat next to the stand I was at looking bored. Clearly not working at the bread stand. This was because what I feared to happen could still happen, and indeed did happen. Several serious looking men in armor stomped over to us.

"Where's officer 217b?" one demanded to know. "We got word of a code 12 around here?"

"No code 12 here, gentleman," I assured them. "As you can see Darla is there as usual, and the owner of this stand went to relieve himself and asked me to watch the place for him. He figured a few minutes wouldn't necessitate needing the license."

"We'll be the judge of that! All this true, Darla?"

She nodded.

"Yes or no!"

She tapped her throat.

"Oh, she's lost her voice today," I explained. "Too much shouting about fresh bread, I expect. You know her, she's so bubbly and cheerful." *Please be bubbly and cheerful.*

"So if that's Darla, then who in the blazes is that?" asked another guard, pointing in the direction the two had run off in. It was Darla and the man.

"Ah. I'm sure we can work all this out!" I told them.

"We better. You there, what's the meaning of this?" he demanded of the two.

"Oh no, did you stay to watch the stands?" Darla asked. "Sorry if the guards gave you any trouble. It's just so wonderful, we couldn't wait to tell our families!"

"Tell them what?" I wanted to know.

"That we can finally get married! We've been in love for just years and years," she explained. "But, well..."

"My family only made sausages," explained the man sheepishly.

"And my family only made bread. We had no way to combine the two."

I looked at them as if they were crazy, *this* was the reason they had not wed?

"*I know,*" she agreed with an eye roll. "Our families were set against our union. We had devised a bread and sausage poison plan, faking our own deaths to teach our families a lesson but-" She looked embarrassed. "It wouldn't have worked out, he's so prone to jumping to conclusions he might really take me for dead and then run himself through, and then I would wake up and have to run myself through because I saw his dead body there- it would have been a real mess. We just waited for the right moment, and here it is. Now they have no excuse not to bless our union, because our two products can work together in harmony. Like a sausage in a bun, that's how our wedding night will be."

"Please, there are young children present!" I scolded them.

"Like I don't know about that," the girl huffed.

"You're too young to know about that!" I protested. "Strike any reference of sausages in buns from your mind *this instant!*"

"Who was that manning the stand though, she looked just like- oh she's gone," the man said.

Of course she is. She turned back into a fairy and is waiting our clever escape.

"What I want to know is, what happened to 217b, he's supposed to be here," said a guard. "He's the one that called us, right?"

"Who?" asked Darla innocently.

We slipped away as they continued arguing. I was pretty sure things would work out for the couple. Like a sausage in a bun!

Chapter 14

Kids

When: Twenty minutes later

Where: Back at the job board

“Kids?” I wondered. “Nine kids?”

“Thinking you could get rid of me by slipping me in among so many?” the girl asked.

“Perish the thought,” I told her. “Here, I’ll give you a quiz.”

“What’s a quiz?”

“Like a test only shorter. Here.” I handed her the card from the board, and she read it over. *At least she seems to know how to read. Her parents did that much for the girl.*

“This seems a bit long term for you.”

“Agreed. But we must learn to see beyond the obvious. What service could we provide a woman with that many kids?”

She stared at the paper as if to force it to reveal its secrets. The posting was for a governess position, something I wasn’t prepared for but neither was anyone else considering it was still posted.

“That power you used on the guard to make him go away? Could you do that and make them all shut up? She might pay you just for that service.”

I stared at her, and then burst out laughing. “That’s a good idea,” I managed. “I hadn’t thought of that one!”

“So what is it really?”

“Similar, just a bit more legal. We can give her a day off. Offer to watch the children for a day so she can have a little time to herself.”

“Would she give up her kids to some stranger?”

I hadn’t considered that angle before. “If you had nine kids wouldn’t you leap at the chance to get rid of them for a little while? But you’re right, I should bring a reference.”

“A what?”

“You’ll see. Come on.”

“So, Mac, would you mind coming and vouching for me so this lady knows I’ll give her kids back at the end of the day?” I had headed back to see Mac and ask him to come with me, offering to slice up the rest of the weeds in the back for his horses if he agreed.

“E’yup,” he agreed.

“You will!? Thanks a lot! I’ll get to work on the weeds.”

Man, 33 hours in a day is a long time, I complained to myself. It hadn’t taken long to clear the back yard of the now safe from being demolished house, but it was getting late. Another step in my brilliant plan. She would probably say yes to anything at this point, especially an offer from a stranger to take her kids away (safely!!!) for a day and give them some fun. Mac and I now headed to the address on the card, and I knocked. An elephant, or perhaps just a bunch of kids because that’s who opened the door, fought to be the first.

“Can I speak to your mother?” I asked them.

“Mom!” they all shouted. My ears were ringing.

“Yes?” a tired looking woman called back, coming into view. “Can I help- oh, Mac?” She seemed pleased and looked down at herself. “And I’m such a fright too, whatever could you want?” She tried in vein to fix up her hair and was blushing a little.

Who is this guy?

He pointed to me. “Hello, Mrs. Tangleberry. My name is Syliva, and earlier today I happened to catch your notice on the job board for the governess position.”

"You're hired!" she nearly shouted.

"Ah!" I put up a hand. "Yes, I thought that might be the case. Please let me finish. I thought you might like a day to yourself, and I thought, well now *that's* a service I would be happy to provide. I brought Mac along to vouch for me and put your mind at ease that I wasn't going to cart them off into slavery or anything. My offer to you is, allow me to mind them tomorrow, giving you a bit of a breather. Take them around town, see the sights, that sort of thing. I'll promise to return them in exactly the same condition I get them in." *Actually, I have something else special in mind, but she would never believe it.*

"You want to take my kids for a day? Are you a sadist?"

"I don't think so?" *There are still obscured weaknesses on my status page so you never know.*

"Out of the blue you want to give me a day off?"

"Helping out in ways people don't even realize they need is my specialty."

"And Mac, you vouch for her?"

"E'yup."

"I see." She seemed to regard me. "You've come dressed for it. Not that the children are violent or anything, but wearing armor would let them know you're serious. So you'll pick them up tomorrow, get them out of my hair, feed them and such, and bring them back in the evening?"

"That's right! They'll have the time of their lives, guaranteed!"

"I'll keep the two youngest at home, they're too young to be out of my sight but if Mac says it's okay, then I'll agree. You'll take them tomorrow?"

"That's right!"

"Very well. I'll see you tomorrow morning, after breakfast. I'll at least do that much."

"Of course. I'll see you then!"

"Nice seeing you Mac!"

"You too," he replied.

"Thanks Mac," I told him, offering him a portal to step through to save him walking. "You're the best!"

"Take care of them," he told me.

"I will!" I promised.

He stepped through and was gone.

"What is your plan?" the girl asked, curious. "Are you really going to walk them through the city all day? Sounds like a good way to lose some."

"HA!" I laughed. "No way. Corralling eight kids *would* be like herding cats. No, I'm putting them in a cage so they can't get away." She gave me a skeptical look. "Not like whatever you're thinking about. You'll see!"

"Okay..." she agreed.

"Now, about tonight. You want to stay at an inn or head back to the lake and your fluffy tail bed? Shoot, no, you can't have the tail bed I need to sleep tonight to get the pen- I mean cage- I mean *entertainment* ready for the kiddos."

"Hey, you said eight kids but she's keeping the two youngest. Can't you do math?" she asked.

"You're a kid," I told her. "Can you?"

She stuck her tongue out at me.

"Such a kid. But seriously, I'm going to need your help tomorrow. You have to make sure these kids stay in line, okay? You're my woman on the inside. They'll trust you more than me. We will use that against them because you'll be working for me the whole time."

"I can do that!"

"Good girl. You'll get paid for it so don't slack off. Now, I can make you a fluffy bed after I go to sleep, or we can visit an inn."

"I kind of liked waking up and swimming and you making breakfast," she admitted.

"Okay, the pond it is," I told her. "It'll get us our spices earlier too, saving money."

So we headed out, and I was assured we would be remembered and let in tomorrow without *quite* as much hassle. We had “behaved” ourselves today and they hadn’t heard anything about any sausage cart shenanigans so we were in the clear. We flew back to the pond and I set about cooking up some dinner while the girl played in the water. Firebrand watched over her, I wasn’t going to let her swim alone! She was fine, ate dinner, and I made myself a sort of bed out of rocks I turned into an equal amount of shiny material, held in place by a frame of stone. It was quite comfortable, a large rock will make a lot of shiny cloth thank you conservation of mass.

“I’ll go to sleep and then my dream form will come here,” I explained. “I’ll make you a nice tent and a bed and then go work on my plan for the kids tomorrow. You can always wake me if you need anything.”

“Okay.”

I got a quick goodnight kiss from Firebrand and got a 19 on my Lucid skill of affect sleep: self. I was out like a light. Now came the tricky part. A 13 on dream sense was a good start. I was dreaming. A 14 allowed me to control my dream, and I was now aware of it. Then to take a step, reminding myself it was a dream gave me a +2 bonus, and I got a 10 just what I needed. I stepped into existence at the pond. The girl, having been warned of this didn’t scream and wake me up, but did look back and forth at my sleeping and Dreaming form. I wasted no time, making us a nice tent (simply willing it around my sleeping form which was a bit weird to look at) and her a soft bed to sleep on. I also set up a fence in the shape of a cube, so nothing would disturb us in the night. Then with a check of 12 in surreal existence I was standing near the city walls as I intended. It was getting dark, but that was fine. There was enough moonlight to see by. I headed out around the walls to a nice open area, and started my work.

I first made a chunk of the wall vanish. Looking through I decided it was a bad spot, that’s what a LUCk check of 8 will get you. I put the rock back and headed around. My next check of 11 was fine though, and I checked the thickness of the wall so I could replicate it. In fact I would want to double it, just in case. I did so, making sections of wall jut out from here to create a large enclosure. I put in a top, but simply as stone bars not solid pieces of stone so it let light in. Scowling at this I didn’t like it, and made it vanish again. Then I simply put the walls of the place up to the walls of the city, which I figured was fine. They would have to scale this wall, get in through all the fence, then pass through the tunnel I had made- an invading force wouldn’t bother. It was fine, this was secure enough. Then I went to work making a great playground for the kids. I sectioned the parts off, a chain link fence going around the blacktop area, the pool area, the games area, the tables area with the grills, and the main play area with the slides and swings and other things. I had no idea how long this took me, but pretty soon everything was perfect. The fences had a door I could open so I could keep the kids all together in one area, so I didn’t have to watch the whole place, and I made them balls and hoops, and flying disks and chalk and anything else I figured a group of kids could have fun with. My memories seemed easier to access in this form, and I remembered bouncing balls and kicking balls, and bowling balls, and wiffle balls, and all of these things came at my command. They would never be able to be replaced, some of them, but that was fine. I was going to leave the area so that any kids could play here but they would have to bring their own balls.

Surprised I was still ‘around’ in this state and figuring I must have calculated a really good INSight check for my “number of dream hours” check I headed back to the camp and somewhat out of sight practiced my powers some more. I made a few changes of clothes for myself, a bunch of cute outfits I had seen for the girl in wandering around town, stuff like toothbrushes, combs, ribbons, shoes, but one thing I *didn’t* make was spices. I figured I could. If I could make tons of rock and metal and water to make an entire swimming pool a bit of basil couldn’t be beyond me. But I wanted the kid and I to earn those spices. They would taste better if she knew she had worked hard with me to get them. Right? I thought so. I couldn’t think of anything else to make at the moment, so I made a crossover check again at an 11 and went into the between world, the world of dreams. This was a reflection of the real

world where things could change between one blink and the next. But it would let me walk among the buildings and things to sight-see. I walked the palace, the mayor's house, and in and out of various buildings just looking around to see what I could see. I looked at maps, papers that changed their content even as I looked at them, even at people that sometimes briefly touched this world before vanishing again. It gave me a better idea how the various peoples lived here. Finally my dream was over, and while I knew I was dreaming several more times that night, I let it happen. It was going to be a big day tomorrow.

The girl was delighted with all the stuff I had made the night before and picked a new dress to play in. She was excited about playing with kids around her own age, and hastily ate breakfast. I did her hair up with ribbons, and we stepped back via portal to the town. No sense making her hair all nice and then messing it up again, I thought. Past the gate I opened another portal to the pond and brought the cart I had made the night before through, and hooked Firebrand up to it as a huge unicorn. Talk about traveling in style! The excited woman met me at the door, nearly fainted at the sight of the pure white unicorn pulling a cart and shoved her kids out the door. I introduced myself and the girl who I said would be playing with today and loaded them up. We headed for the tunnel I had made last night, not telling them where we were going, but leaving it as a surprise. They were surprised all right. Heading through the wall and to the play paradise I had made, even the girl was impressed.

"You made all this in one night?" she asked, not believing her eyes.

"Dream power is the best at this sort of thing," I told her. "Now let me address the troops." I had everybody pinned by the first gate, though they were clearly excited to go try everything.

"Listen up," I told them. "I'll be watching you. Everybody stays in one location. You get bored and want to move on, everybody moves on. I'll be counting. Play nice, and this location can stay here. You'll have to get your mom's permission to come back of course. You will also," I pulled a small pouch out of my pocket and took a shiny gemstone out of it, "get to choose one of 8 shiny stones out of this bag at random. But I see any fighting, shoving, pushing, name calling, any of that stuff and no stones!" I dropped it back in and shook it, so they knew there were lots of stones in there. *Bribing is the best strategy, yes?* "Let me know when you're ready for firstlunch, I've got plenty of stuff for you." *Personally I can't wait to taste that lemonade I made, with my own mouth not my dream mouth. I made it extra strong but with ice in, so it'll be watered down but cold by the time firstlunch comes around. I'm so smart. Have they ever had a cold drink? Probably, it probably snows and they put snow in something to make it cold.* "Everybody got that?"

They indicated that they indeed got that.

"Fine. Line up!" I counted, making sure I got to 8 so nobody had fallen off the back of the cart, and the first ever playground (or so I had to believe) opened for business.

The kids had a blast. They played on the swings and stuff first. I had a monkey bars, that spinning thing, curvy slide and straight slide, see saw, swings, a sandbox full of shapes and buckets of water they could use to pack the sand and sculpt it, and more. They ran around like, well, kids! It was a sight to behold. They finally wanted to swim before firstlunch, and I questioned each child before I let them in. "Can you swim? How well?" Those that could swim and were older I sent to the left, those that could not swim or were younger went to the right. There was a shallow pool that way, and the deeper pool to the left. They wasted no time throwing off most of their clothes (because that's just how you swam, it was no big deal believe me a house with 9 kids and no modern plumbing bathed as many kids as possible at once they were used to bathing together) and jumping in. They had never even considered trapping water for this purpose, and it made me sad this one part would have to go when we were done. They had no way to keep the water clear and it would quickly go bad if I left it. But they had their fun, and didn't have to travel miles to go to a stream or whatever. I used my ability of shadow clones for the first time there, playing lifeguard to two sections of pool (even a toddler can drown in shallow water, I watched everybody like a hawk) and cooking at the same time. But that even had a surprise for me.

“Spirit clone!” I called out, crossing my fingers in a way that seemed appropriate. A copy of me appeared to the left and right, as well as two more fairies. They all looked at each other in confusion, holding hands to make sure they were all real.

“Uh, Mumiah, what just happened?” I asked.

The angel stepped out of nowhere. “How many kids do you have now? I said you work fast I didn’t think you worked *this* fast? Or did I fall asleep again and it’s been thirty years? I hate when that happens.”

“Cut it out, they aren’t mine,” I told her. “Well, one sort of is? Anyway, two more fairies. Why?”

“You made spirit clones of yourself,” she answered like it was obvious. “That copied your equipment. Part of your equipment includes the ring, that’s holding a copy of your magical ally. So you get two more magical allies too.”

“Oh!” That actually made a lot of sense to me. “Thanks!”

“Sure. Nice to see you doing some good in the world. Keep it up.”

“I will.”

After pool time they got dry, ate lunch, (even if it was bland) and went on to the next section. I had a large blacktop area they could draw on with chalk, or bounce balls around and put them through hoops. Then it was into the open area to throw the disks around, and they were really crazy about them. I kept thinking about the word Tron but that didn’t sound right? They had another name but I couldn’t recall it. I was glad to recall the exact dimensions that let the things fly correctly, so they had fun flinging them everywhere. I also had kicking balls, and hitting balls with bats so everyone had a turn at that. I also showed them some magic, and Firebrand (all three of her) changed shape and gave out rides, and changed into things the kids shouted. Then back in the pool and secondlunch. Kids love swimming, go figure! They played in the slides area again though I let one girl back into the chalk area to finish her drawing, I had to admit she had made a pretty good drawing check it was a nice scene, and we loaded up the cart to go home. Naturally the kids hated to leave, and while I could have lit the place up so they could play more I had promised their mother to have them back on time. So into the cart they went, one more counting of course, and back to their mother. As promised when they headed back inside I let them pick from the bag, and tossed the last stone to my inside agent. The mother paid me a generous sum and said I could look after them anytime. I said they had been a delight and that the play area would remain should they ever want to use it again. She asked “what play area” and I said “don’t worry your kids won’t stop talking about it for a week.” She thanked me for the day of respite, and I headed away from her house.

“Thanks for keeping the kids in line today,” I told the girl.

“Sure,” she said with a yawn. “I’ve never been tired like this before.”

Sure, tired from play is probably a different kind of tired than tired from working in the field or whatever. “I hope you had fun.” *You were running around with the others and getting along so unless you were faking it...*

“So much fun!” she gushed. “But I can’t imagine having that many brothers and sisters. That poor woman...”

I laughed. “Yeah. What was she thinking? Here, your part of the profits.” I handed it over.

She looked at it seriously. “We have enough for the spices, don’t we?”

“If you wanted to use some of your share, yes,” I told her. “But you don’t have to. I can take another job tomorrow and we’ll have plenty I’m sure. You keep yours for what you want to buy.”

She shook her head. “I want to. They are for me, after all. And you can make more. And I think I’ll be getting more money if I keep helping you on jobs. It won’t be the last.”

“That’s true,” I agreed. “We can go tomorrow.”

“Okay.” She yawned again. “Dinner?”

“Sure, my ravenous sleepy head. Then back to the pond. I need to sleep to dream and take the pool away. It’s too dangerous to leave there. It’s just too bad I can’t find some way to keep it clean.”

“Maybe a wizard could do it, as it’s for the benefit of the town.”

We walked a few paces.

“What did you say?”

Chapter 15

Mother

When: A second later

Where: Still in town

“Mother...” I looked down at the girl. “Fudger!” I finished lamely. “Magic! Of course this town would have mages, maybe I could convince one to look after the pool? Good idea kid.”

“Fudger?”

“Fudge is a sweet, soft, dessert. I’ll make it for you sometime if you haven’t had it. Another usage is to ‘fudge the numbers’ as in to fake them. Today I was a fake mother to those kids...” *Yeah, yeah, that’s it. Totally explained, well done me.*

“I guess you were.” She looked a bit sad but I brushed that off as being tired.

“Let’s head to the mage’s quarter. There must be one open at this hour it’s not that late. We can go ask. But how to approach them...”

“Tell them they can make money from it,” she suggested.

“Make- explain!” I demanded with mock serious squinty eyes.

“Tell her the pool is now hers. She can lock the gate you made and control access. People have to pay a small fee to get in. This covers the cost the of the spells needed to keep the pool full and clean, and for the person to watch it so nobody dies there.”

“Oh!” I was actually surprised, this little girl had a devious mind apparently! “That’s actually a rather lucrative idea! Someone might just go for that.”

“Aren’t you glad you’re keeping me around?” she asked with another yawn.

“You’ve proven useful a time or two,” I admitted. “Keep it up and who knows what might happen.”

“Okay,” she replied slyly.

But seriously, you can’t really stay with me. Can I give you the life you deserve? I have no home, no real prospects but doing odd jobs all my life. I mean I could settle down somewhere... Bah humbug, leave that for another day! “Here, you better ride again, rest your feet.” Firebrand became a pony again and I plopped her on top. We headed for the mage’s quarter, to see who I could find.

There was a light on in a certain shop in the Mage’s Quarter, “The Pointed Mage” so I shrugged and went in. The girl and Firebrand, now a fairy again, followed. A bell dinged and I looked around. It was pretty much what I had envisioned a mage’s shop to be like, with rows of potions, magic crystals on shelves, bundles of leaves and oddities probably for working spells and even brooms. Mages still needed to sweep floors, I suspected. A woman in robes looked up from behind the counter and my breath caught. She was dark skinned, with flowing hair but she had a unicorn horn out the center of her forehead and a shimmering circlet set holding it in place and wrapping around her head. *The pointed mage, I presume?* A black cat sat on the counter washing a paw and looked over at me.

“Your grace,” I told it as I approached the counter, and I could have sworn it nodded in recognition. “Hi there!” I greeted the lady.

“What can I help you with?” the lady asked with a smile.

“I have a bit of long term work for you, if you’re interested,” I began. “Do you know purification and water creation magic?”

“Odd combination, but yes I’m sure I can manage that,” she replied. “What sort of service do you need?”

“It would be much easier to show you than to explain. Would you mind coming with me a moment?” I turned and opened a teleportal back to the pool area. Her eyes bugged out as I

stepped through and the portal started to shrink. Firebrand and the girl followed me through, so the woman shrugged and started around the counter. "Watch the store for me?"

"Of course," it replied.

Wait what? Ah, so it's not only bears. Got it. Do you take a cat's first offer? The world needs to know!

She stepped through and looked around in surprise. "What's this place?"

"This is the playground," I told her as the portal winked out. "It's on the other side of the wall, as I figured no one had claimed that space and would bother it. See, there's the wall." I pointed and she squinted looking over there.

"Oh yeah I see the opening. But where did it come from?"

"I made it."

"You did *what?*"

"I know, I know, sorry I can't tell you exactly how but it's the pool I'm concerned about. Come on over here." I brought her over there through the gates and she stared down at the water.

"I haven't swam in ages. How have I not heard of this place existing?"

I cleared my throat. "Uh, don't know! Anyway, I'm looking to transfer ownership of it. I need someone to keep it clean and topped up with water, and you'll have to hire someone to watch it during the day. In exchange, and this was her idea," I pointed to the girl who waved, "you get a charge a small fee to use the pool. How does that sound?"

"Like a pretty big responsibility," she admitted. "I don't know..."

"Oh, you're back!" cried a voice from above. We whirled, and coming down out of the sky was a figure. It looked like a kid, but had full grown wings out the back and was dropping towards us. They were clothed in the usual white robe, and a holy light shone around them.

"Angel!" the mage squeaked, and dropped to her knees.

"Yo," I greeted the figure. "How's it going?"

The woman's mouth dropped open and she stared at me for what was probably considered blasphemy or whatever. I knew better.

"Great!" they replied. "I was hoping to catch you mostly alone. Oh, get up Sweetpea, I'm not one of those stodgy angels I mean have you seen me?" They spun around with a "wheeeee" and came back around to look at her.

"You know my name?" she further squeaked.

"You've done your share of play," they told her. "I don't forget. A certain amount of, shall we say, frolicking, in meadows perhaps?"

"Don't you dare!" she now yelled, and I think she was blushing and looking flustered.

"...As a *unicorn*," the angel finished.

"I can't believe you would... How can you just..."

"You're a unicorn?" I asked, seeing the horn in a new light. I had thought she was just a regular beast type like, well, not myself exactly but like others I had seen in town. Just a unicorn variant.

"Don't worry, she's one of the good ones," the angel told her. "But you're cute when you're indignant. Greetings, Sylvia, I am Cajetan, patron of play. I wanted to thank you for what you gave those kids today. Never before have I seen such utter joy. And one girl may have started unlocking her talent for art over there, thanks to this place? Thank you for letting her continue her work. And from what I hear you want to keep this here? You have my approval."

"Uh, thanks. Look, I won't tell your secret or anything..." I told Sweetpea.

"You better not!" she threatened. I held out a hand and she glanced at it, the angel, and decided "eh what the heck" and let me help her up.

"So I guess you've met angels before?" she wound up saying. That seemed a safe topic.

"This one will be my third in the past week."

"What?" Clearly didn't believe me.

"Sure. The one that, uh, sent me here. Patron of beasts who gave me my second tail," which I of course turned and show her, "and now the patron of play."

"Most people go their whole lives not seeing one. And you've seen three? Who are you?"

"Just a traveler. Anyway, is there anything I can do to make the area please you more?" I asked the angel. "I can work on it tonight if you want."

"Goodness, are you kidding? This place has it all," they protested. "You did great. Though actually I was thinking some kind of reward..."

"XP?" I asked, breaking into a huge grin.

"Not exactly, but good try," he offered with a chuckle. "More like a blessing. I know you want to keep kids playing here so how about I bless this place?"

"That's good too," I agreed, only slightly disappointed. *I just didn't get any XP for all this, which is fine of course, it wasn't slaying dragons or anything.*

"Good. Then upon this place I bestow my first ever blessing. How about that? Seems like a long time coming. Let this place be blessed thrice; Ever shall these waters run clean. Always shall this pool be full. Forevermore shall this be a place of play in safety and joy for all who enter. So mote it be!" I felt a power come from the angel and settle on the place with an 8 spirit sense, so it must have been powerful. The angel considered us again. "I will set a watch by a lesser angel over this pool, that none shall come to harm within."

"Thank you," I told them, bowing my head. "That eases my mind greatly. I'm glad it can be enjoyed again by the children of this town."

"I too," they agreed. "Go now, and spread more joy to other places. Your journey is just beginning, Sylvia Tempest. May you live up to your name!" He laughed with joy and shot back into the sky, vanishing in a burst of light.

"So, that happened," Sweetpea finally said.

"It sure did. Sorry you aren't needed anymore to keep the pool safe."

"No, that's okay. I got to see an angel, and they didn't... They didn't..."

"Didn't what?"

She was silent for a time, just looking at me. "Didn't curse or condemn me."

"What? Why would they do that?"

She sighed. "Black unicorns... They aren't really well regarded in unicorn society, if you will. We're supposed to be white, or a pale pink or whatever. Like black isn't just another color, which it is, by the way. That frolicking he spoke of? Usually it was done all alone. No one would let me play unicorn games."

"That's awful!"

"Yeah, it really is. I guess I expected the angel to make an issue of it too, but they didn't seem to care. I'm rather relieved. Being what I am forced me out into the world, where I learned magic and opened my shop and made a life here. I'm not too mad about it now. Let them eat grass and prance around, I actually help people with my magic and make a difference in the world."

I girl after my own heart! "So you're shape-shifted." Firebrand flew up and become a small back unicorn. "This is Firebrand, she's a magical companion of mine."

"I thought so, she feels made of magic. As for me, yeah, it's the circlet." She tapped it. "Keeps me human while I wear it. I... couldn't give up the horn. Even I have my pride as a unicorn. And it makes the shop more mysterious, ooooooh that mysterrrrrious shopkeeeeeeeperrrr. What's *herrrrrr* deaaaaal?"

I chuckled. "It looks good," I told her. "I'm glad you kept it."

"Thanks. Uh, do you think I could swim for a bit?"

"You're welcome to as far as I'm concerned. I don't know if the angel is here yet, want me to stay and you're taking your clothes off."

She had thrown her robe off and with a giggle jumped into the pool, splashing water everywhere. *That answers that question.*

I took my boots off and rolled up my pant legs so I could at least sit at the edge with her. "Looks like we're here a bit longer," I told the girl. "Sorry, dinner will have to wait."

"It's fine. I got to see an angel and now meet a real unicorn! You're really neat to hang out with."

I get it kid, I get it!

"Anyway, take a nap if you want." Firebrand trotted over and became a beanbag chair, which she sank into. "We can head out soon I'm sure she won't want to swim too long."

"Whatever," she said, probably wanting to be seen as a 'go with the flow' sort of girl.

"This feels wonderful," Sweetpea told me. She had swam around a bit, but was now hugging the side of the pool next to me.

"A sunset swim in what could be the world's only dedicated pool? Sure, I can see that."

"And this place," she went on. "It feels different, somehow."

"What do you mean?"

"After that angel blessed it. I was sort of thinking about swimming when I first saw the pool of course, but after the blessing I couldn't resist. You have to understand I don't normally just throw my robes off in front of strangers, swimming or no swimming."

"I'm not judging you if you do! As a unicorn originally I'm not sure how you can stand clothes in the first place. I think he made it more likely people would play here?" I guessed. "I'm not sure, I'd have to feel around."

"That's definitely it," she agreed.

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because without some sort of force acting on me I never would do this."

"Do what?" I was going to ask, but with a very mischievous smile she grabbed my arm, pushed off the wall of the pool, and sent me sprawling into the water beside her. I yelped, remembered I still had the teleportal power loaded and not the survival power, but managed to not breathe water in as I ditched my pants. I broke the surface to hear her laughing and scooting backwards away from me.

"Oh, that's how it is?" I playfully asked. I threw my shirt off, it splatted against the side. "I hope you're prepared!" I splashed her.

She laughed with abandon and splashed me back, which went back and forth a few times. "You can't defeat me, I'm a powerful wizard!" she announced with a huge splash.

"So am I!" I replied with a splash of my own.

"Is that so!" She dived under and I felt a hand on my calf. She gave me enough time to take a breath before she pulled me under, which I felt was a nice touch. Dunking people is generally frowned upon, but as we tussled and dunked each other we always made sure to watch to see the other person was ready.

"Keep it down," the girl sleepily admonished us. We just looked at each other and sent a huge splash her way.

Finally we were worn out and both hanging by the side of the pool.

"It's Sylvia, right?" she asked.

"Yeah. Nice to meet you."

"You too. You going to be in town much longer or..."

"Don't know," I told her. "I've been going where the wind takes me lately." *Yeah, all of two days now? Which for me is more like three and a half or however the math works out. I'm to tired to make a math check to figure it out.*

"Well," she seemed a bit hesitant to say this next part, "you know where my shop is if you want to see me again. Or I might come here at night sometimes. Though this place will probably get pretty popular fast. Maybe I should still charge people..."

"It's your pool now as far as I'm concerned."

"Thanks. For the pool and the swim. I guess I forget about, you know, play."

"I'm sure that angel would say it was the most important thing a person can do."

"Yeah." She lifted herself out of the water and squeezed her hair out. She didn't seem to mind me watching so yes, naturally I did.

"Well?" she asked, offering me a hand.

"Ah, my chance for revenge!" I cackled.

She snatched her hand back as I reached for it. "You can't announce it!"

"Cruses, me and my big mouth. I... promise... I won't dump you."

"I think I need a truth orb!" But she helped me out anyway, and I didn't dump her. *(Cursed 18 RESolve check!)*

I walked her back to the shop and said goodnight, and the kid and I headed back to our campsite for the night. *Now that was a good day*, I thought to myself. *Let's have more of those.*

The next day we headed bright and early to find the spice shop. But then I had a thought. A horrible, no good, icky, downer thought. The girl had taken a few steps and turned back to me, turning to see what had happened.

"We didn't even check this town for an orphanage," I realized. "I know you were looking forward to the spices, but if this town has a good place for you to stay, we won't need them. I'm sorry, I should have thought of this right at the start. I... Don't know what I... Sorry."

She smiled a sad smile at me. "I did. But I kept quiet about it. So I guess it's my fault."

"No it's not," I told her. "You thought maybe you could stay with me, and that's fine. You were really great, and..."

She turned away. "It's fine. You don't have to pretend. If I'm not staying with you I don't need the spices, you're right. Let's find the orphanage."

"Hey," I told her. "It's not set in stone. If that place isn't a bastion of hope and smiles with a revolving door where little boys and girls like yourself come and go in minutes to great families than it's out. It's out! I'm not just dumping you. I promised you a family and I meant it."

"Oh." She thought this over. "Okay."

"We're just looking for now, and we'll talk it over once we've seen it. Agreed?" I held out my hand.

"Agreed," she said, like she had any choice in the matter.

Information gathering of 13 led us fairly swiftly to the right building, which didn't impress me right at the start. It was a large place but badly in need of maintenance. I could see kids running around through the windows, so I was sure this was the place.

"Strike one," I muttered.

"What?"

"Nothing. Let's go." Firebrand was on my shoulder as a fairy again, looking around in disgust mirroring my feelings. We walked up to the door and I pulled the rope that rang the bell. A moment later a human woman answered.

"Looking to adopt?" she first asked with no preamble. She looked down and caught sight of the girl. "Oh great, another brat to feed." She threw the door open. "Go talk to my assistant in that case." She stormed off, leaving the door wide open. "She's around here somewhere. Tail? Where are you? Go see the woman at the door. Tail?!" She was out of sight.

"Strike two," I muttered, as the girl looked pleadingly up at me like "really, you're going to leave me *here*?"

We stepped in and looked around. The inside wasn't in any better shape than the outside but we heard heavy footsteps and a reptilian with folded wings came into view down the corridor. Looking exactly like one would imagine a cross between a human and a dragon would look, her expression fell when she saw the girl. She tried to rally though. "Welcome, hello, I'm Tali! Come in, come in, office is just over here we can sit and talk. Jerome if you do *not* stop jumping around so help me! Sorry! It's always a bit of a mess around here. I can't talk long Timothy do not pull her pigtails like that!" We walked forward to see a bunch of unruly kids acting out in the long room we had seen in the window. She stepped forward, offering a clawed hand. She was dressed in pretty shabby clothes with an apron, and her long tail trailed along behind her. *I like my tails better.* She was scaled, clawed, and had huge teeth but was clearly a softy given how the kids were behaving in there.

She got us into the office and took down a clipboard. "Now, just a few questions and you can be on your way. Name of the girl?"

"Hold on a minute!" I protested. "This isn't a done deal or anything. I came here to check this place out, not just drop off an unwanted kitten. This is a person we're talking about here. I need to know she's going to get the care she needs. And I have many questions, like how long until she may be adopted? What sort of people look to adopt? What's your success

rate? Do kids come back here worse off than before? Will her needs be met until then? Are you the only help? What's with that woman's attitude? Is she the owner? Did she smell of booze this early in the day? What's even going *on* in there with those kids? Do you have any control of them at all?"

"Not really," she admitted. "You think I would, looking like this but they know I'm a softy." She showed a claw as she said this. "Sorry, most people just want to drop the kid off and put the whole thing behind them. Uh, what was the first question again?"

"Look, how typical is this place, as an orphanage?" *And I'm not going to like the answer am I?*

"I've never worked at another," she admitted. "But I guess I would say pretty typical? We don't get much support from the kingdom we have to do what we can."

"And you're alone in charge of all these kids?"

"Yeah, the owner doesn't really like kids? I do my best and I wish we could hire more help but she says there's no money for it. Complains every time she has to pay me, come to think of it. Don't know why she started this business honestly, it's not for the money."

Unless she's pocketing it, how did that one story with the red haired orphan go? What was her name? I can't remember. "I see. And what are her chances?"

"Of finding a good family?" She looked the girl over, who to her credit was clean, well dressed, and in fairly good health. "She's at a good age, not too old and not too young. She can work. Some 'adopt' just to get more live in help, but legally she would be an heir so that can work out. Some kids have been here a few years..."

"I don't want to be here," the girl pleaded. "I don't like this place."

I looked at her, tears forming in her eyes. "Okay," I told her. "She didn't convince me. Strike three, we're out." I turned back to the woman. "Thank you for your time," I said standing. The girl jumped up too. "I'll see about making other arrangements."

"Good luck, I hope she makes it," the woman said sadly, putting her clipboard away. We left the place, hand in hand again.

"So what now?" she asked, sniffing.

"I don't know," I told her honestly. I pulled her back and squatted down. "A bigger town may have more prospects, but also more competition. This is, arrg, I don't know! But I do know one thing. I can give you a better life than in *that* place! I think? I really... Oh man if only I could get some kind of a sign." *Maybe a power? Premonition? I could get really good at-*

You have caught the attention of Lailah,
Patron of childbirth. She cannot be away
from her duties but wishes to send an attendant
angel to speak to you. Please accept this
invitation when you are secure from prying eyes.

Accept Attendant

That is exactly what I had in mind!

Chapter 16

Accept

When: A few moments later

Where: Back at the campsite

“Accept!” I shouted, as I jabbed the button on the window in front of me. We had portaled back to the campsite after I excitedly told the girl something good was about to happen as we were getting another visit from an angel.

“Another one?” she exclaimed. “Are you on some kind of quest to meet every angel?”

“I’m the new hotness around here, didn’t I tell you that?” I asked her. “Come on, this should be good.”

Time seemed to slow around me, the girl’s blinks taking seconds instead of an instant until finally everything was frozen in place. I looked around.

“Greetings,” said the angel, making herself known to me. They were of the typical type, though looking more feminine than the usual angel. *They certainly pulled their clothes tight enough around the hips to show them off. Meow! Of course, they’re related to motherhood if she’s an attendant of the patron of childbirth itself. Strange I would have been expecting the patron of adoption, but maybe there’s isn’t one?*

“Be not afraid,” we both said. She laughed like the pealing of bells.

“I guess you’ve heard that one before. You’re the talk of the town, you know? We haven’t been this excited in a long time.”

“I’m just doing what needs doing,” I explained. “Nothing special.”

“Perhaps, perhaps. But let us speak of the child, the reason I’m here.”

“Of course! What am I to do?”

“I believe you have already made the choice,” she countered. “Now you must simply understand it.”

“Wait that sounds familiar...”

She coughed a little. “Let us not dwell upon the words, only their sentiment. Back at the orphanage you could have simply left the girl.”

I made a cutting motion with my hand. “No! I gave her my word!”

“Strange, I do not see the words compulsive honesty upon what you call your status screen. Yes, we were told of your peculiarities when you arrived. Perhaps I should add it?” She poked a finger forward.

Can she even do that? “I have enough weaknesses for now,” I hastily told her. “Thank you anyway!”

“Pity. Be that as it may you have grown fond of the girl, have you not?”

I had to be honest. “Yes. She’s starting to lose her grief a little, and watching her play with the other kids was nice. She was probably an actual kid for the first time. It was nice. She’s well mannered, pretty smart, tough, I mean if I wanted a daughter...”

“And do you not?”

“I don’t know. My coming here, and now suddenly being thrust into parenthood? I’ve barely gotten my footing you know? Plus I’m immortal I don’t need to replace myself. Kids... That was pretty far from my mind.”

“Such modesty! Need I remind you of your deeds thus far?”

“No, that’s fine. My biggest worry is giving her the life she deserves. On the move with me all the time, is that the best I can do for her? I can’t teach her this world’s magic, and I doubt what I know would translate. I know they do magic differently,” *and I’m aching to see if I can learn how to do it do too if it’s better than mine but one thing at a time*, “but she still needs to learn history, and math, and cooking, and-”

“Those skills can come, in time,” the angel told me.

"I mean, sure, I guess."

"And you could settle somewhere. That town seems like a nice place."

If you don't count the guards.

"You seem unconvinced. But only one thing matters. Look upon her."

I did so, she was frozen in mid blink.

"You wish the best for her?"

"Yes."

"And would protect her, even at the cost of your own life?"

"Like anything could- yes." *Who knows what dangers this world holds. Maybe real dragons? There's unicorns after all.*

"Is this not the role of the parent? But I have a third and final question. One you must think upon before answering because my lady tells me the answer has grave and final consequences for you both. But also joyous, perhaps even beyond your ken. My question for you is thus; Would you be her mother in truth?"

I looked at the child. She had traveled with me without complaint. Despite her sorrow she offered me her home. She tried to be in good spirits. She took things seriously and had good ideas. She wasn't afraid of hard work, though she had turned chopping weeds down into a game but then who didn't like swinging a blade around and cutting stuff up? She worked towards a goal, was polite and grateful for being recognized as contributing when I gave her money. I remembered her face at the bread stand, calling out to people to buy 'her' bread. How she was trying to be brave at the funeral. Her eyes as she silently pleaded to me not to leave her in that awful place.

"Yes," I whispered.

"So mote it be," the angel spoke softly.

The what now?

Darkness overtook me. Something was happening, something momentous. But illogically, impossibly, I was starting to *remember*.

I remembered meeting a hunky foxboy, and having a fling with him for weeks.

I remembered learning I was pregnant, long after he had moved on. He wanted to *play the field*? Was I not good enough? Me??? I who could be *queen* of this entire *world*? Oh one day he would *burn* for leaving me as he did. *I had sworn it!*

I remembered the pregnancy, feeling the life growing inside me.

I remembered the birth. Made easier with magic, but not easy, I finally held my precious, precious girl in my arms, and her cries, and my tears.

I remembered her name, spoken to the mages around me, smiling down at the two of us safe and healthy.

"Seraphina Upwards Tempest"

I remembered watching her grow. Her inquisitive nature. Her bright spirit and her hot temper, just like her mom's.

I. Remembered. *My*. Daughter.

poke

poke poke

Something was poking me in the cheek.

It continued.

“Come on mom, get uuuuup,” cried a voice. “I’m hungry!!!!”

My eyes popped open, and darted around. We were in the tent, that much was sure, and I seemed to be snuggled up to someone, in the girl’s- in *Seraphina’s* bed.

“What day is it?” *Have I skipped a whole day? What’s going on?*

“Spice day!” she announced with a huge smile. “We gonna get spices at last! Took us long enough!”

“Seraphina?” I asked hesitantly.

“Uh, yeah, who else would it be?” she asked. “Were you hoping for a cute little black *unicorn*? You could have gone with her she was *totally* flirting with you the whole time. I mean come *on* mom you can be so blind sometimes. Do an ESP check or something once in a while will you?”

“Mom?” I bolted upright, and looked over my daughter. She had fox ears, and a tail peeking out. She was red haired, freckled, and beautiful. *My little girl!*

“You okay mom?” she asked, now looking a bit worried. “What were you doing crawling into my bed anyway? You don’t usually sleep, were you doing Dream practice stuff?”

“Seraphina!” I cried.

“Yeah?”

“Seraphina Upwards Tempest!”

“What?” she now looked scared. “Am I in trouble for something?”

“In trouble? Of course not!”

“You only use my full name when I’m in trouble. But I’ve been super good, haven’t I Firebrand?”

A fairy swooped out of nowhere and nodded her head. Then pecked her cheek and mine good morning.

Wait, how can she be out if I was asleep? What’s going on here? “Sorry, I’m just, I feel a little out of it,” I admitted.

She scowled and put a hand on my forehead. “You don’t feel like you have a fever. Did you sneak off to see your new girlfriend? I know you don’t like booze so you couldn’t have been drinking or did she convince you?”

“No, nothing like that.” I looked around. The tent was at once familiar but different somehow. “The pool was yesterday. We’re getting spices today?”

“Yes. Did meeting the angel of play last night tire you out? You were playing with that *unicorn* for quite a while in the pool!” Again as she said the word “unicorn” she did a sway with her shoulders that I supposed was suggesting something?

“Stop saying unicorn like that! We only just met!” *Did I get sent back in time? How powerful are angels here? Or did I spend a whole day in that darkness and come out the other side? But what’s with... my daughter?*

“That doesn’t matter. You can go see her again. I want to ride on a unicorn too. Even if I’m doing it in a different way than you are.”

“Seraphina!” I cried, scandalized.

“What?” she said, the very picture of innocence and not blushing at all. “Are we getting up or what?” She stretched.

“We do have a plan for today,” I admitted. “Though I’m not sure what to do after.”

“Oh, something will drop into your lap,” she told me, crawling across me and out of the bed. “What should I wear today?” She had several outfits hung up on a line strung between two poles. “What’s the spiciest outfit I have...”

I looked her over, her cute little tail wagging behind her. *Wait.* “Did you get bigger?”

“I don’t think so...” She backed up to the pole and put her hand on her head. Stepping away she checked a mark on it. “Nope, still just as tall as yesterday.”

But she did. Of course, if she's really my daughter now she always ate well. Much better than she did in her 'first' life. So this is how tall she was supposed to be! She's not malnourished anymore, and she does look plumper. She doesn't remember being any shorter only I do? "We've been here awhile, haven't we?" I don't recall putting those poles up. I recognize some of those outfits though but not all.

"Sure, couple of weeks I guess," she replied. "Why?"

"What about that place with the... trolls?"

She wrinkled her nose. "Oh, that awful place? Where they chased us away because they're jerks?" She stopped, looking confused. "That was... That was some time ago, right? Why did I suddenly think it was just recently? Oh well." She picked an outfit and held it in front of her. "Is this spicy enough?"

"I'm not even sure what that means," I told her.

"You have to wear something spicy to get spices, it's the rule. Everybody knows that." She started putting it on. "You just going to sit and stare all day? You are okay, aren't you mom? Have you ever been sick in your life? I can't really recall... Do you have a cure disease power?"

Just alchemy. "I'm fine," I told her. "I'm just..." Suddenly I was up and holding her in my arms. "I'm just so glad you're here."

"Ugh, mom, what are you doing?"

"Hugging you, silly. And listen to me a second, okay?" I pulled back, putting my hand on her arms. "I love you. No matter what. No matter what you decide to do in life, or how it goes. You may reject me, or think I'm dumb, or go all goth or whatever and that's all fine. You will *always* be my little girl and I will always love you. I just wanted it said, okay?"

"You are acting weird," she admitted, but softened and hugged me again. "But it's okay. I love you too mom."

"Thanks." We stayed like that a moment and I got up. "I'm going to swim and I'll get breakfast going."

"Just use magic," she called out as I sprinted from the tent. "Gonna have to use it on me anyway I'm already dressed!"

Diving underwater hid my tears, and when I got control of myself again I called out. "Mumiah!"

She swam up behind me. "Thanks for inviting me for a swim," she told me. "We never hang out anymore like this."

"Hang out? Not you too? What's going on around here?"

She laughed and patted my cheek in sympathy. "Poor old Sylvia, always the last to catch on. You accepted the angel's offer, silly. Seraphina is your daughter now. Don't you remember that strapping lad you fooled around with? A kitsune, naturally, so she inherited those looks from him, not exactly from you. Ah, those nights of passion between you, too bad he had to go, and under those mysterious circumstances too... So weird!"

"That's the thing, I do recall all that!" I told them. "He was a total hunk! I'd have him back in a second my goodness he knew how to please a woman!" I cleared my throat, blushing. "But at the same time that's impossible. Isn't... Isn't it impossible?"

"What's possible?" they asked cryptically. "I don't know. Do you?"

"But she-"

"The girl, yes. Look, don't push this." Suddenly Mumiah was serious. "She's in a state of paradox at the moment. Even we can only do so much with the power of our domain. Push her away from you, and she starts to remember her old life again. Pull her towards you, and you strengthen your bond and she becomes more and more your daughter in truth. Keep her on the edge and, well, remember losing a tooth? How you kept feeling that space in your mouth? Imagine that but inside your brain." She pointed to her head.

"She would go mad..." I reasoned.

"Exactly. Pull, don't push. Get the spices, act normal, her entire life has been traveling with you. It's what she 'remembers' happening. But *don't* press her on any specifics. Got it?"

"Got it!" I told them.

“Good. And invite me to swim more often. Unless you only swim with *unicorns* these days.”

“Not you too!” She laughed as I tried to splash her, and she was gone.

Is everyone watching me around here? Maybe I will go ‘ride’ that unicorn and you can all watch that! Yeah, would you like that, angels- what’s this now?

A weakness that was occluded
has been revealed.

I opened my status page curiously, and somewhat cautiously, what could have been added now, all I did was gain a daughter. *Crap was it easily infatuated? It was wasn’t it? I can’t help it if everybody is cute around here! Or lecherous? I don’t want to be lecherous!* But it was obvious in retrospect.

Dependent NPC 1

Humph, she is not a weakness, System! Oh, but I get it. Spoilers. That’s why you hid them from me this whole time. I would have wondered who it was... Didn’t want to push me in one direction or another, that’s what they said. But they knew. So is free will- never mind! I slapped my cheeks. *Let’s just roll with it for now.*

Now dry and clothed I set breakfast in front of Seraphina. I had leftover lemonade I poured for her, and she sat scowling at it.

“Don’t you like it?” I asked.

“Shhh,” she chided me. She raised a hand dramatically. “Today’s gonna be the day! Come on, come on!”

What in the heck is she doing?

The glass slid across the table and into her waiting hand. “I did it!” she cried, jumping up and then jumping in place. “You saw it mom, didn’t you see it? I did it! I finally did it! You saw? You must have seen! Tell me you saw it!”

“I saw it, I saw it!” I told her. “That’s great honey!” *What’s going ooooooohnnnn?*

Oh, just think about it for a second.
You’ll get it I believe in you.

Love,
Mumiah

She immediately tried again, scrunching her face up in concentration.

Wait, she’s really my daughter now. I’m considered a progenitor. The kids of progenitors are given a five point background that gives them some powers. Any untrained skill? Is that it? And they can take the usual backgrounds to unlock a full set of powers? My daughter- she really is my daughter now. This... proves it. Telekinesis is untrained, she’s been trying to use a power forever, and today she finally managed it. Her powers are starting to come in! I stared at her, blinking back tears. *My little girl.*

“Ugh, I can’t do it! What am I doing wrong? I did it once, that means I can do it again! Are you *crying*? You are drunk somehow aren’t you? From last night! Still! You can tell me I’m eight I want details what did you do together? Come on, you can tell me!”

“I’m not drunk, just really happy,” I told her, hugging her again.

“Don’t try to cover it up. What am I doing wrong anyway? You make it look so easy. You just look at something and it flies all over the place.”

I backed off again. "Powers are about feeling," only getting a 6 on a teaching check. *Still her rating must be zero so even a 1 would do at this point.* "Think back to when you moved the cup. What were you thinking? What were you feeling? Put yourself back in that frame of mine, just scrunching your face up isn't going to get you anywhere."

"I wasn't scrunching!"

"You totally were! See this?" I scrunched up my face. "This was you," I said in a deep voice. "Miss Scrunch, at your service."

She laughed and shoved me. "Quit it, no way I looked like that."

"I see your tail swishing," I told her. "I don't need ESP to tell your feelings right now."

"God, mom! You can't just go looking at someone's tail!"

"So stop swishing it."

"I can't! Yours are swishing too you know!"

We both fell against each other laughing.

We got through breakfast and cleaned up, then portaled back to town. The guards gave Seraphina an odd look, like "did she have ears before?" but didn't press the issue. We made our way to the spice shop and went inside. I had given her the rest of the money and reminded her she didn't have to contribute it. She said she wanted to, and marched boldly up to the dark elf working there.

"One traveling spice kit, please!" she ordered, plunking her bag of coins on the counter.

"Sure thing, come pick one out," said the lady. "We have several styles."

She settled on the cutest looking one, that had an outer pocket too, and after the money was counted she proudly left the store. "Come again!" the elf called.

"We won't!" she very, very softly said with a giggle but waved goodbye.

"Want me to carry it?" I offered after the door closed.

"Nope!" she told me, putting the strap over her head. "I'll carry it for now."

Good, less chance of someone grabbing it. Did I teach her to do that? "So you're a spice girl now?" I asked.

"Wasn't that some band back in your old world?" she asked.

"I- maybe? I told you about that?"

"Sure, spice girls and backstreet boys you said."

"Sounds about right. So what would you like to do today?"

"Same thing we do every day, mom," she answered simply. "Pick a random direction, fly like the wind with Firebrand, and see what trouble we can get into."

"Yup, you're my girl," I said. "That sounds pretty good to me."

We left the city by the gate, Seraphina showing the guards her new spice pouch which the guards all appropriately said was very nice and wished us a good day.

Wow, not so shy anymore, are we? Old you wouldn't have just run up to them like that. But I guess new you has no problem doing so. Weird, that she changed so much in- I mean she grew ears and a tail 'overnight' so I guess I can't say a little personality change is out of the question. I just need to stop feeling that warm glow every time she calls me mom! I always want to burst out crying, but from her perspective it's just a normal day. Got to get control of myself.

"Mom!"

"I'm coming!"

Once on Firebrand, and here she did give me the pouch to put away because it would be a shame for the bottles to simply fly away before I could analyze their contents, we picked a direction. She said the mountains in the distance looked interesting so we headed there.

"Maybe some stranded hiker or wise old guru you would talk to!" Seraphina shouted to me.

"In this world, both are equally likely," I agreed. "Firebrand, let's go see what the day has in store for us!"

"Forward!"

She roared and with a mighty flap of her wings, we were off.

Chapter 17

Soldiers

When: Morning of day 3

Where: Over the mountains

“Soldiers?” my daughter asked, pointing. I looked over Firebrand’s neck, and she was right. There was a line of people down there, clearly trying to make their way over the mountains.

“Looks like,” I shouted back. “Hang on I’m going to buzz them for a closer look!”

“Woohoo!” she cried, as we banked and dived.

Concerned faces and soldiers scrambling out of the way in case the huge dragon decided to land or worse yet spray them with fire just to see what happened met my eyes, yeah these were soldiers all right. They had wagons for their supplies, wore armor, carried weapons, and most importantly at the back pulled by many horses were large wooden contraptions.

“Siege engines,” I muttered. *Catapults by the looks. Now why would such a thing be brought over the mountains, one wonders?* We rose into the air again, turned again, and rushed back the other way. While there wasn’t exactly a path down the side of the mountain there were wide enough areas those engines could traverse, so we headed down that way and took a peak. Not far, maybe a few hours to move that many people, was a town with a wooden fence around it. “We’re landing,” I shouted, pointing to the town.

“Okay!” she shouted back, nodding. “We have to warn them!”

Good girl, exactly what I was thinking.

The dragon caused quite a stir when Firebrand slammed into the middle of the place, wings sending dirt and rocks flying and people scattering. I watched in some amusement as they carried on, and waved to some as they fell over screaming about a dragon attack. But the dragon didn’t attack, and people started pointing up at me. I didn’t have the lip reading skill but it was pretty clear what they were saying. “It has a rider!”

That’s me, dragon rider and troll slayer. Though the dragon did most of that...

“I think they won’t attack us,” I told Seraphina. “Let’s go make some new friends.”

“New friends, new friends!” she singsonged as Firebrand’s neck came down. We jumped off and I patted her, keeping her in that form for now. Several people in armor rushed out of a building towards us, or at least they had some armor, it looked hastily put on.

“Greetings,” I told them, showing my hands. “Sorry to drop in like this.”

“A dragon, allowing a person to ride them? It hasn’t been heard of in thousands of years!” one man with a feathered hat said as he stepped up to me. He was human, fairly big, and his troops took positions behind him.

“Good discipline,” I praised as they took a half circle around us. “I’m almost intimidated. Well done.”

“Who are you? What do you want?” he demanded.

“I am Sylvia Tempest, and this is my daughter Sarah.”

“Hello!” she cried, waving. “You’re screwed!”

“And this is Firebrand.” I patted her neck again. *Wait, what did I just call my daughter? It seemed so natural. Do I shorten her name around other people? I guess I do. Weird.*

“Wait go back to us being screwed?” demanded the man.

“What my daughter is *trying* to say is are you expecting a force of soldiers from beyond the mountains? Some kind of delegation perhaps? Because we spotted one from the air.”

The soldiers all traded looked behind him, and he scowled. “No, we are not. What livery?”

"Oh, uh," I cast my mind back, first having to figure out what the heck he was talking about. A KNOledge check of 19 sufficed. I had only glanced at any individual, Firebrand could only fly so slowly after all but they had made sure everything they wore and carried had those colors. "Green and yellow." I glanced up to the flags this place was flying about its walls. Red and blue. "Different flags as well."

"Crap. Wizard!" he shouted. A pudgy man in a robe waddled over.

"Yes, captain?" he asked.

"Check the mountain pass again, if there's an army coming we need to know about it."

"Right away sir!" He held his hands out as if holding a ball between them but with a magic sense of 4 I wouldn't have believed Firebrand was magical, much less this guy. Still, I was surprised to see an inverted pyramid appear there and begin to rotate between his hands. The surfaces lit with designs as he concentrated, and he chanted "Give me sight beyond sight!" The pyramid shrank to a point and he clapped his hands over it, then placed two fingers up to his temples. His eyes went white and flicked back and forth. "I see nothing," he claimed. "Wait!" His eyes darted to the side. "I could have sworn..."

"Wizard!" the man warned.

"A moment, a moment," he pleaded, eyes going normal again. "I'll focus on power, not effect as it's closer than I thought."

You'll what?

He cast again, and I calculated an 8 that time so caught at least a little of what he was doing. Sarah was watching with interest as well, did the magic he gathered look different this time? I was sure one part of the design glowed more intently than it had before, but it was hard to say as it was rotating as well. *If only I had been able to sense what he did first!* Clearly this was how magic users channeled mana on this world, but I had no idea what I was sensing. Rather than magical circles his spell seemed to be in five parts, yet existing as a whole just the same. An 8 just wasn't enough to get any detail, and it was cast and gone.

"There's a spell in the way," the wizard reported, his eyes white again. "I was fortunate to get the edge of it before, hard to hide that many even for a master wizard. I can just pierce it now, the woman is right. There is some kind of force heading down the pass. They look armed for war."

I heard many gasps, people were starting to crowd around.

"Trust, but verify," Sarah mused, nodding her head. "It's what I would have done."

"How long do we have?" the man asked.

"Tomorrow at the latest?" he offered.

"Great." He rubbed his head. "Just what we needed." He turned and raised his voice. "All right everyone, we may come under attack some time tomorrow. Make ready, we've done the drills you know what to do." Everyone scattered, and the man turned to Firebrand. He bowed deeply. "Great dragon!" he shouted up to her. "I know dragons have sworn to stay away from human affairs but perhaps you could see your way to helping defend us?"

She looked away as if uninterested. *Can dragons talk here? This one sure can't.*

"We're willing to help, right mom?" Sarah asked excitedly. She smacked a fist into her other hand. "We'll send those guys packing!" She punched and kicked the air as if to prove her point. *Have I been teaching her martial arts? Duh, of course I have it's a dangerous world and her powers haven't come in yet.*

"You two have done more than enough," the man said. "Simply by providing us an early warning. Now we can prepare and send messages, perhaps get some reinforcements. If the kingdom of Anderon is going to break the treaty after so long we'll be ready for them. The dragon you travel with has made their intentions clear. I would not dream of trying to force the issue. If you'll excuse me, I must see to the defense of my fort." He gave us a swift nod, turned, and walked away shouting orders.

"We're still going to help, though, right?" Sarah asked.

"Let me ask you something," I told her, crouching down. "We've been wandering around this kingdom for a while, right?"

"Sure?"

"Helping people out, having our little adventures-"

"And late night swims, with *uni-*"

I rolled my eyes and covered her mouth with my hand. She shook with laughter. “Yes, and swims. But what do we actually know about the *politics* of this kingdom? Yes, we’ve met some people here and they seem nice enough, but their king? I’ve never met him, have you?”

“Noooooo.”

“Maybe his policies are bad. Maybe he had a treaty to provide food to those people over the mountain, and he stopped sending the food. Or he threatened them recently. Or maybe their princess has gone missing and they’re just here to look for her.”

“Their princess is in another castle?”

“Exactly. We don’t know. For us to get involved? What does that look like, exactly? Lighting bolts from the sky? Firebrand smashing people to a pulp? Sarah, killing trolls is one thing, but these are people. They have lives, loved ones to go back to. They could be in the right. We can’t get involved.”

“Then there’s only one thing to do!”

“What’s that?”

“Trust, but verify! We trust the people here are worthy of our protection, and then verify it. We have until tomorrow. Let’s go talk to them, see if they can tell us what the situation is. Then if it’s not their fault this is happening to them, we protect them. We find a way to neutralize that army without hurting anyone. That’s the Tempest way, isn’t it? Doing the big magics to keep everyone safe.”

What’s that feeling when you look at someone and you just feel like your heart is going to burst? “Have I mentioned recently how lucky I am to have you as a daughter?”

“It’s always nice to be told,” she replied with a grin.

I looked around. “Let’s see if we can find someone not rushing around like a chicken with their head cut off. We don’t want to bother someone legitimately getting ready for this.”

“Like an old man with a pipe, they always have the best stories.”

“Do you see an old man with a pipe?”

“That was just an example.”

“Ah!” I looked around. This did sort of look more like a fort than a town. The buildings were right up against the wall. Majority of people were male. Hardly any kids, though I saw two or three little ones in woman’s arms. Good mix of races, not just humans. No carts or market like back at Treetops. *Never did get to see that nymph. Have to go back sometime.*

“Let’s try there,” she decided, pointing.

“Why pick that one?” I asked.

“Infirmary. Sure, they’ll be plenty busy there getting ready for casualties, but if someone is sitting around with a broken leg or whatever from earlier, we can sit in the corner and hear what they have to say. Then you can heal them as a thank you and boom, win-win.”

“Fair enough.” I looked up at Firebrand. “You better stay here for now. Let them think you’re just a dragon. I doubt I’ll get attacked around here, not after the ‘good’ news I brought them.”

She nodded.

I stuck my hand out to Sarah. “Let’s go.”

With only a 9 LUCK check no one had recently broken their leg, *curse my luck!* but a bird person rushed over to me. She even had a beak and everything, and her outfit left her arms bare, as they were covered in feathers.

“Please state the nature of your medical emergency,” she intoned. She turned her head slightly, fixing me with an unblinking eye.

I held up my hands. “Actually, I was here to see if anyone needed healing magic. Which I know. To get them moving again. I don’t need medical care myself.”

“There is the one unfortunate fellow who stepped on a porcupine this morning. We were taking the needles out but that’s going to have to wait. We’re getting ready to host casualties when that other army arrives.”

“Why don’t I take a look?” I asked. “I’m sure I can work something out and get him back on his feet.”

“What about the poor porcupine?” Sarah asked. “Are they okay?”

"Yes. They're over in that box." She gestured. "We wanted to observe them before releasing them."

"Let's go mom!" She pulled me over in that direction.

Did you forget we were here for information? We can't get that from an animal...

We crouched down and looked over the top of the box. There was the ferocious beast, sniffing around. A variety of greens, nuts, berries, and twigs had been provided, as well as a crockery of water.

"This seems cozy," Sarah decided. "I approve. Go ahead mom, see if he's okay."

How am I supposed to do that? I thought, going through my list of powers in my head.

Ah, ask him, of course. I cast. "Give this beast the power of speech!" I cried, pushing my magic through my aura so I didn't actually have to touch the little guy. I calculated a 15 on spell ranging, more than enough the little one wasn't even a meter away, so my Skybourne check of 15 also succeeded. As the magic sank into both my daughter, myself, and the quilled rodent he suddenly came to, and stood up.

"I say, this is an unexpected twist," he said up to us. "Ah, hello there."

"Hi!" Sarah announced. "How are you?"

"Oh one cannot complain," he mused. "Even when one is simply minding one's own business and then is suddenly squashed most empathically by some oaf. I mean, really! How would you feel if you were simply minding your own business, and suddenly out of the clear blue some giant thing came down and tried to squash you?"

"I would be very perturbed," she admitted, clearly trying not to giggle and her tail was racing back and forth.

"Quite right you would! Look at my poor spines, they shall be weeks regrowing I wouldn't wonder. Serves the man right though of course I do hasten to add that I certainly mean no harm to any living thing I'm not one for violence. I do want that made clear. I wish him well with the same fervency as I wish he hadn't stepped on me, right enough."

"He sounds fine," I told her. "Perhaps the real patient?"

"Are you okay? No aches or pains anywhere?"

"It is good of you to inquire. As it happens I did take a bit of hurt during the whole incident. But don't worry about little 'ol me, I'm sure the pain will subside enough to let me sleep in a few weeks. If I'm not dead from a badger or something before that. It's just my lot in life, I fear."

"Heal him up, mom!"

"Yes, yes, I was just going to," I told her. I cast, getting a 17 this time as I could touch his underbelly where there were no spines. No penalty this time, and I calculated his healing at a total 9 greatly multiplied by his size, no doubt. That would do anybody a world of good.

"Oh my!" he said, wiggling a bit. "That has done it all right! What a marvel the modern world has produced. I'm in your debt, both of you. Really, I mean that! Would you like a bit of leaf? When I was dumped in here I feared the worst but it's actually been a rather pleasant experience all round. Most excellent service, do you know how hard it is to find fresh water? And here I have some, all I can drink. Marvelous!"

"No, you keep your leaf," Sarah told with with a smile. "I'm glad you're all right, you can be on your way again soon. Be careful though, there may be a battle here later."

"Oh dear. Humans and their strange sensibilities again no doubt. Still, nothing to do with me. Thank you for the warning little fox. And for the company!"

"We'll come say goodbye before we leave. Bye!"

"Bye for now, and thanks again!"

I nodded, and dropped the spell. The little guy looked around in confusion, dropped to all fours, and started sniffing around again.

"He's pretty cute!"

"We already have a pet," I told her. "And don't tell Firebrand I called her that."

Now she did giggle. "She's connected to you, I think she already knows."

"Dang, you're right! Anyway, the patient."

"He won't be as interesting," she despaired. "But I suppose for completeness we should see to him. Oh right we wanted information."

"Glad you remembered."

We made our way over to the man who was sitting with his leg outstretched on a stool, the job half done. Quills adorned a nearby table along with a variety of gripping tools so they had made a good start but now had more pressing concerns.

"Serves you right," Sarah told him, crossing her arms. "Stepping on that poor little guy like that."

"Who the heck are you?" he asked back rudely.

"Hello sir," I told him, stepping up. "I'm Sylvia, and this is my daughter Sarah. We're here to look after you and get the rest of those quills out while the other professionals are busy. That way you can get back to work too."

"That's fine then. I'd do it myself but it's a bit tricky with them in my foot, you see."

"Any excuse I suppose," she went on. "Well, let's see what we're dealing with here." She looked his foot over. "Gross! Don't you ever wash these?"

"Now, now, be nice," I told her. "Let's first examine the removed quills." I picked one up. "See here, at the end? There's a small barb that makes it extra painful to try and remove, and keeps it from simply falling out when it's all bloody."

"Extra painful you say?" she asked a bit more interested now. "Ah, yes, I see it. Well, wouldn't want to be stupid enough to get one of them stuck in me! To say nothing of a dozen or more."

"It was dark, and I didn't realize the—"

I glared at him.

"The cute, helpless little guy would be under my bunk, now did I?" he finished.

"Did you apologize?"

"What? In between jumping back, knocking my head, and falling over? No, I didn't."

"There's no helping him," she decided. "He'll just have to suffer until after the attack is over. I'm sure those enemy troops will show him mercy given his, ah, unique situation."

"Come on now!"

"We'll help you out," I promised. "But I want information from you as we work. Got it?"

"Sure, whatever."

"And apologize to the porcupine when we're done," Sarah added.

"Yes, yes, I would have anyway," he most assuredly lied.

"Then we're agreed." I turned to her. "Now, what's your assessment of my best method of removal?"

"Hummmmm..." She looked him over, circling the man and regarding him.

"Just pull them out already!" he insisted.

"Oh no, that will never do," she told him. "While my mother can and will heal you, that spell doesn't replace blood loss if I'm remembering correctly?"

"You are," I told her.

"That could weaken you, slowing you down and getting you run through with a sword or whatever in the attack. No, no, we can't have that on our conscience. Healing after every quill? Again, possible, but tiring. No, I think pair of dachshund cleats our quickest path to victory is the somewhat lengthy process of creating a circle of healing and then telekinesis. That will heal any exit wound right away and prevent the quills breaking off. You are also skilled enough—" She looked at me, I had a quizzical look on my face. She paused.

"I think you mean paradoxically?"

"Perin Dox Ally?"

"Paradoxically."

"Pair of dock silly?"

"Para-doxic-ally."

"Pair of ducks really?"

"We'll work on it," I promised her. "I am also concerned at yet another problem solved with telekinesis. You can't solve all problems with telekinesis."

"Counter point, you have solved many problems with telekinesis. It is, if I am again recalling correctly, one of your more potent skills. Second only behind magic itself."

"Point granted. And you could be right. I think you were going to say I'm skilled enough to get more than one at a time, reducing patient discomfort by shortening the procedure?"
Also helps prevent infection I would think.

“Yes, the patient’s comfort must be foremost on our mind,” she agreed. “Even one such as this.”

I considered it. I didn’t think they would bleed all that much, and one healing of the foot would probably be enough? But if I wanted to raise my skill at circles any time soon I did need at least some excuse to practice them so her idea wasn’t without merit. “Right then. Find me some chalk or charcoal and we can get to work.”

“Finally!” said the man.

“Hush, if you’re not answering my questions,” I told him. “Now, while my daughter goes to look, tell me your feelings about this lovely kingdom we live in...”

Chapter 18

Sleepy

When: Mid-morning of day 3

Where: Infirmary building

“Sleepy?” I repeated.

“Yes,” the man agreed. “If I had to sum up the kingdom in one word it would be sleepy.”

I had started drawing the needed circle around the man, after putting on my augmentation spell of course, and had asked him his general thoughts about the kingdom. I had explained we were simply travelers and not subject to the king but that perhaps Firebrand, my companion dragon, could be persuaded to help in some minor way. The man seemed interested in getting my help so naturally I would have to take what he said with a grain of salt, whatever that meant, as he would gravitate towards making his home look good while making any other kingdom look bad.

“Go on.”

“Some kingdoms have plenty of mines, or great universities of learning and study of both magical and mechanical wonders. Our kingdom does not. Don’t get me wrong if some new marvel were to be introduced I don’t think we would shy away from it but our kingdom wasn’t founded on the pursuit of knowledge. Nor of martial prowess, as many kingdoms are known for the quality of their armies. No, we aren’t a huge kingdom and our exports are mainly grains and meat and homespun cloth. We take things as they come and try to keep to ourselves. Of course we’re not stupid, that’s why outposts like this one still exist.” He gestured to the building around him. “There are always threats both from within and without that may need to be dealt with.”

“Such as?”

“Oh, the usual. Bandits. Relatives that want to get a bit closer in line to the throne. Monster attacks-”

“So they’re a typical problem then?”

“What? Monsters? Now that you mention it there have been more this year than in a typical one why do you ask?”

“There was a town nearby that got chased off by twenty trolls. I came along and drove the trolls off. It was no big deal of course but I wondered if it was an isolated incident or just something that happened in these parts.”

“No way any size town would be all that threatened by trolls. Just wait until the sun comes out.”

“This group had a troll magic user that clouded up the place.”

“Still,” he scoffed. “We fought off three times that number of orcs just last week. Were they not repairing their walls or something?”

“They didn’t have any walls.” A vision of the walls I had made, of thorn bushes, burning as I sped away into the night gave me a pang of regret.

“No walls? Oh, you’re talking about *those* people. Those crazies. Honestly the trolls would have done all of us a favor wiping them out.”

“What? You can’t be serious!”

“Hey, we’ve told them time and again they’re just putting themselves in danger but nooo, they believe that by staying ‘pure’ or some nonsense the angels will take pity on them or something. Never really cared to stick around all that long those people are crazy.”

“Were they dangerous?”

“Well, no, only to themselves,” he declared. “We are talking about the purists, right? Only humans allowed in the village? No magic use allowed? Hate outsiders?”

“Sounds like them,” I agreed.

He shrugged. "See what it got them? We rightfully welcome all those who hold the angels in their hearts, from the smallest dwarf to the mightiest giant. Be they furry or scaled, if they don't cause trouble all are welcome. Look around, even this fort has a mix of races." He gestured to the bird person nurse, who nodded to us. Clearly she was listening in. "And magic, if you've got the gift for it, can change the whole course of a town's future. Just one mage can make a town prosperous where it wouldn't have been otherwise. Saying 'mortals' weren't meant to wield it? Bah, seems like a lot of mortals disagree and it makes everyone's life easier! Why make things harder for yourselves? But there they are, slaving away without magic, or even the natural abilities of a beast type such as yourselves. They were welcome to settle out in the middle of nowhere and tough it out but they were warned it was simply inviting disaster."

"I suppose you're right. Some of them died, and I hardly got started putting their town to rights before they chased me off. Still, something like that must shake the faith a little, you would think. Maybe they'll finally see the light and broaden their horizons a little."

"Don't count on it."

"He's right," Sarah agreed. "In fact it'll probably be even worse now."

"What? How do you figure?" I asked.

"Their prayers were answered, in a roundabout way," she explained. "Perhaps a bit after the fact, but those types of people will simply see that as a test of their faith. Those that died? They just didn't have the faith those that lived did. They'll be thanking the angels and spending their nights in prayer rather than their days building a stout wall like they should. All thanks to us. They're like kids that don't know any better, and refuse to learn the lessons life... Am I crying?" she wiped her tears, she had started crying. "Why should I care? I don't! I don't care about them!"

I set the chalk down and went over to hug her. "It's okay," I told her. "Even though they brought it on themselves, those lives that were lost are tragic. It's okay to be sad for them, Sarah. We can only hope that one day they'll come to their senses." *Some part of you still mourns the loss of your 'parents.' Pull, don't push. I'm here for you, little one.*

"I'm okay, I'm okay," she insisted. "I guess I was just thinking about any kids that didn't make it. They're just so *stupid*."

"No one in a house of healing blames you for having a big heart," I told her, pulling away. The bird lady was nodding at her. "And stupid or not, they should be allowed to live their lives the way they want, as long as it doesn't hurt anyone. The world failed them, they didn't fail the world." *Though being racist is a step too far. They don't want to use magic, that's their prerogative. But someone with a tail or pointed ears is chased away because of what they look like? Yeah, burn the place to the ground and force those nutjobs to integrate into society so they can see diversity is strength, not weakness. Of course having them all in one place and not making trouble for the rest of us could have its advantages as well, now that I think about it.*

"I guess," she sniffed. "I guess that's why people like us exist, huh? We can't stop helping just because some idiots believe it's a sign from the angels they're right. Even if we are actually sent by the angels, meaning they are sort of right? It's just a big mess!" she declared.

"I'll say," I agreed. She seemed fine so I picked the chalk back up and went back to finishing my circle. "So back to the kingdom..."

"Right," said the man. "We haven't done anything that I've heard of that would cause a neighboring kingdom to dislike us. Especially not enough to send soldiers! Pretty sure our last treaty with them was about sixty years ago? There are a couple of passes through the mountains but we don't have much to do with them, honestly. That they would attack now, I don't know what they could be thinking."

"Could people in this kingdom have invited them in some way? How's your tax rate? Is there a new king here that's going against the old ways? Anything like that?"

He shook his head. "No, nothing I've heard about King Peterson dying. As for taxes, well, any amount is a terrible injustice to hear most people tell it but you won't get away from it. Things would have to get pretty bad for us to ask another kingdom for help with that. They would want territory, and who is to say their taxes are any lower? No, I doubt it's that."

Having finished the circle I empowered it, then started yanking out quills. As Sarah had suggested I took at least a few at a time, making him yelp but as he did heal instantly it was fine. Finally he was able to put his sock and shoe on, and thanked me.

"Quite all right," I told him. "Thank you for your opinions on the kingdom as well."

"Of course. Hope you can convince that dragon friend of yours to help. See you around."

He went to leave.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Sarah yelled, rushing after him and pushing him towards the crate with the porcupine.

"Thanks for doing that. I'm Tika, by the way," the bird lady introduced herself. "Short for Tikabird. Yes, I hate my name, thanks for asking. My parents didn't speak common so it's simply a huge coincidence my name has the word bird in it. At least that's what they claim and I'm rambling so I'll shut up now!"

I chuckled. "It's fine. Is what he said true? I'd like a non-human perspective as well. Sometimes they aren't the most reliable at seeing their own faults."

"He's not wrong about the kingdom, life just sort of goes on here. Though I will say it's more the expense of trying to get over the mountains more than any treaty that has kept us from hostility with the kingdom on the other side. Either side would love the territory that comes with taking over the opposite kingdom, but trying to rule such a divided land would be challenging. All kingdoms seek to expand, even if they claim they don't."

I nodded. "Sure, that makes sense. But nothing happened in this kingdom that drove them to attack, that you've heard of? It's unprovoked?"

"As far as I know."

"Thank you. I'll get out of your... feathers."

"Will you talk to the dragon? Is there really a dragon? I didn't go out to see."

"There is one," I promised. "We'll see what she has to say. You can go see her if you want, she's friendly. Just don't expect her to talk back, she doesn't have much to say."

My daughter and I headed to the building the leader went into, to at least see what his plans were. I wasn't going to help either side slaughter the other but smashing the catapults could be a bit of fun for us and make them think twice about continuing their assault. As I got near it seemed to be a discussion of magic though. I entered the room to see the leader, several others in armor, and 4 people in more normal clothes, which included the wizard the leader had called upon before. The wizard was talking to a dark elf woman.

"What if I combined targeting and equip army and you added your spell of armor disintegration? Would that enhance it to include their weapons as well?"

"It could work," she admitted. "But I'd rather have a third person in the spell as well. They're going to be counterspelling us and we need to overwhelm them."

"I could provide targeting," said a very alligator looking guy. "Then you can just focus on equip army and she can contribute disintegration."

"Ah, you stayed," said the leader, as everyone turned to look at us. "I thought hearing the mages discuss possible strategies would be helpful but I can't follow it. Does this mean the dragon has decided to help after all?"

"In ways that limit bloodshed," I told him. "She won't just land in the middle of that force and tear them to pieces for you."

"No, no, would never ask that," he insisted. "Well, even if it's just intimidation it would be a huge help. We've never had to fight off other people before, you understand. Just the occasional monster wandering down the mountain or lately group of them. I've gotten everyone together that claims at least some proficiency at magic to see if we can come up with something. I don't hold out any hope we can win against such a force but you never know."

"The problem," said the wizard, "is that they're sure to have mages as well, several in fact to cover so many with an anti-scrying spell. We need to focus either on offense or defense, depending on what they do. If they start knocking our walls down with fire it's

different if they hang back and wait for us to attack so they can counter it. So we're going through what spells we know and how we might combine them. We'll need to practice as well, make sure the spell works as intended. If our plans can include the dragon as well, perhaps we really do have a chance!"

"I also know magic," I told them. "I don't know if I can combine my magic with yours, from what I saw outside we cast very differently, but I can tell you what spells I know and we can go from there."

"Cast differently?" the wizard asked.

"Before you get into all that, at least let me introduce everyone," the leader said. "I am Captain William Se'Fan, please, call me Bill."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Sylvia, and this is my daughter, Sarah."

"This is the second in command, the wizard Don. Don Erblizen."

"My lady!" He swept his hat off and bowed.

"This is the dark elf Midnight."

"Midnight Toker," she said with a nod. "Your ears are cute, I've never seen one of your kind close up before, they go well with your hair. And you have two tails? Before you leave I'd love to hear of your exploits, you seem young to have done deeds worthy of getting you noticed by the angels."

Oh, now this woman was very interesting suddenly! I gave her a closer look. She was dressed as a sensible mercenary would in a dangerous land. Dark brown clothing and leather armor layered over top of it. No sword but a dagger at her hip. Sensible boots, and her hair was tied back. It was a pale blue, in contrast to her dark skin and eyes, though it did have a completely white section on the right, pulled back to reveal a very beautiful face. Very elven, with delicate features, high cheekbones, and dark lips. *Oh yes, please let this world be part dating sim. I want to get into her... dialog trees... right away.*

He indicated the cross between a man and a river gator. "Ripjaw, our resident reptilian."

"Howdy!"

"And finally Mary."

"Hello," she nearly whispered. Mary was quite thin, had airy features, and her fine hair almost seemed to be suspended away from her.

"Actually Mary hasn't spoken up yet. You *are* a magic user, aren't you?" Bill asked.

"Yes," she admitted, not really looking pleased with having to do so.

"You don't sound so sure. If you're not confident in your skills or you only know a spell or two it's fine. Whatever you're comfortable doing, even if you think it can't be used in battle I'm sure I can find a use for you."

"It's not that, exactly," she muttered.

"So what is it? We don't have a lot of time here before the attack begins, so out with it!"

She started breathing a little more heavily, shooting nervous glances at the door and the soldiers in the room now taking a bit more interest.

"It's okay," I tried to calm her, walking over to her. "Are you a demon worshiper or something? We won't hold it against you if you use your powers to help." *Those exist in the world, right? There are angels so there must be the opposite.*

"It's nothing like that!" she insisted. Then sighed. "I guess I'll just have to tell you. I really thought I could- but never mind. I'm a... ritualist."

I had no idea what she was talking about, but looked at the others. The two other mages also looked confused, but Don leaned forward.

"Are you really?" he asked, sounding excited.

"Yes, but I'm not very good," she admitted. "I don't know how I can help, I don't know many rituals."

"What's she talking about?" asked Bill.

"It's a rare talent," he answered, leaning back again. "I can see why she would be hesitant, I've only ever heard of them. They're snapped up and employed by major cities, and not usually allowed out and about. From your looks you seem to be half air elemental?"

She nodded her head.

“Not the sort to want to be tied down,” he explained. “I see why you would be reluctant to speak up. Probably worried we’ll cart you off after this is done. Ah, that’s why you’re living out here at the moment, less people to stumble upon your secret!”

She nodded.

“Well, no one will hear about it from me. You took a risk telling us, answering the call for magic users in defense of the fort, and I won’t see you ‘punished’ for it. I hope I can count on the rest of you to follow my lead. There isn’t a bounty on them or anything but if she wishes to be left alone... But perhaps I should explain what a ritualist is? Quite apart from her being a race that traditionally doesn’t like getting tied down, ritualists are basically allowed to name their own salary which *seems* like anyone who is born with that power would seek the highest bidder for their services. Downside is, it’s more of an arrangement that they promise not to run off, they don’t learn more than a handful of rituals, and they have to register what rituals they *do* know. They’re highly regulated. For good reason.”

“What reason?” Midnight asked. “She doesn’t look all that dangerous, no offense, and I doubt you wish anyone any harm.”

“I don’t,” she squeaked.

“Ritual is the most powerful and wide reaching magic known,” Don explained. “Basically allowing a spell to be cast upon an *area* rather than simply a nearby target. A ritualist could protect a city, or bring it to ruin in a few hours.”

“That does sound powerful,” Bill admitted. “And you’re sure you can’t help us?”

“Do you want it to lightly rain over a large area for hours? Or for all the crops in your fields to be free of bugs? Because I could do that for you. I never wanted to be a ritualist, so I never studied many spells. That would just get me stuck in a tower someplace casting those same spells over and over! But I learned that much so I could do good in a way that still seemed natural and I could move on after.”

“Hold on,” Ripjaw spoke up. “I know a sleep spell, sometimes I use it on myself because I have trouble sleeping. Can I simply combine my magic with yours? Make a sleeping rain that falls over the incoming army?”

Don and Mary both shook their heads. “Ritual magic takes hours,” Mary told him. “I have no idea how a spell cast in the blink of an eye could be combined with a ritual. If I had days or weeks I could maybe convert your sleep spell into a ritual, and put everyone I could see to sleep. But we don’t have the time!”

“Too bad,” Bill mused. “Putting them all to sleep, we could probably disarm them, break their catapults, and demand to know why they came here from a position of far greater strength. Then simply send them back up the mountain again with this conflict resolved for the moment with no deaths on either side. Then start beefing up our presence here in case they try again.”

“Hold on,” I told them, an idea sparking in my brain. “I think *I* could do that!”

Chapter 19

Victory

When: A second later

Where: War room

“Victory,” I told the assembled troops. “I think I can guarantee you a victory in this.”

“You sound confident,” Bill agreed, “but I’ll need a few more specifics.”

“Hey, if my mom says she can do it, she can do it,” Sarah told him. “Er, how are you going to do it, mom?”

“Magic!” I replied simply. “But I better explain, because I can’t do it alone. You’re going to have to trust me. And by you I mean the entire population of this fort.”

Ripjaw looked suspicious, Mary seemed glad to have the spotlight off herself, while Midnight looked skeptical.

“Go ahead, but make it quick we’ve got limited time here,” Bill told me.

“Sure thing. Mary took a risk telling you about the way she uses mana, I can do no less. But let me ask one thing first. Don, does your spell-casting drain you in any way?”

“I don’t understand the question.”

“Could you perform the same spell, 10, 100, 1,000 times in a day and be no worse for wear?”

“Of course, how could you think otherwise?”

So they count as scholars, however it is they cast spells. Interesting, and limiting.

“Because of how I manipulate mana. My core is entangled, if you will, with my body’s energy reserves. So for me, casting a spell is akin to you carrying a heavy weight some distance. I can’t do it forever.”

“I’ve never heard of anything like that. Can you demonstrate?”

“In a moment,” I promised. “The point is, I can overload this ability to make my magic stronger. Now you may be thinking, ah, but I can’t lift a boulder over my head and you would be right. I am still limited in certain ways in how much mana I can pull from my core. *But*, and this is where the ‘true magic’ happens if you will, I can use my own magic to do away with that pesky limitation. Ah ha, I hear you thinking again.” *Not literally, I’m not using mind reading powers right now.* “I’ve caught you once more! Your body must be limited such that even if you could do all this rock lifting in one go, you are *still* limited in your capacity and thus, unable to do as you have promised and give us a one shot victory. But to you I say ha! And ha again! I can work a spell to drain every person and even animal here of some of their resources, adding them to my own. This will allow me to create a sleep spell *so big*, and *so powerful*, it can encompass the entire invading force as though it was a ritual Mary was doing. This is, however, where I need your support. You would have to agree to allow me to do this, and we would have to do it fast. Like, maybe when they got halfway here from the mountains, so they were almost here when I attacked. They would need to be close anyway so we could take their weapons and such so that’s not a big deal.”

“Why should we trust you?” Ripjaw demanded. “How do we know she’s not part of Anderson? Here to weaken us before the main force arrives?”

“You can trust us, but verify?” Sarah asked. “Er, how can he do that?”

“Consider your position,” I told him. “Say I was part of that army. Why would I waste time talking to you, warning you? If I wanted this fort to be attacked all I had to do was nothing. Plod along with the rest of the army, and when they were in position, fly over your walls and start setting your fort on fire with my dragon. Thus creating a pincer movement with the troops on one side of the wall, and me and my dragon on the other. Did I do that?”

“...No.”

“That’s right. I warned you. I healed a man. I asked around about how you felt about your kingdom and the one over the mountains. I’m offering to work magic to help you avoid bloodshed. Clearly if I can do what I claim, I could have just as easily done it to the troops and put *you* all to sleep instead. Disarmed you, tied you up, and taken this fort in a matter of minutes.”

“She’s got a point,” Midnight allowed. “Plus there’s the mini version of her to consider.”

“I’m not mini!” Sarah protested, both hands on her head. “I’m fun sized!”

She snorted. “Either way, she would have to be the most irresponsible parent on earth to bring her child into what was going to be a battle zone. No, I think she is what she says. Another person with strange magic at her disposal that moves around to avoid being poked and prodded by his type,” she gestured to Don, “and happened to see a situation she could help with. I mean the man’s practically drooling. I can only imagine what someone in university would do to study this magic she claims to have.”

“I am not,” he protested, quickly wiping his mouth just to be sure. “But the prospect of seeing ritual magic *and now* yet another type of magic being worked before me? I admit to some excitement yes.”

“It all sounds good but none of that is *proof* of her intentions,” Ripjaw said with finality.

“Oh bother, we can clear this up in a moment. I’ll be right back!” Don stalked out of the room.

“Say I agree to this plan,” Bill decided. “What exactly do you need from us?”

“Just to line everybody up and accept me taking a portion of their reserves. I would want to do it one after the other because I start to lose any excess pretty quickly so I would need to drain and leave within the hour. I won’t take it all, they’ll hardly feel it. I don’t need you all falling asleep on me. I should ask, how many people are here anyway? And horses, I guess?”

“There are 243 people here. Probably around 50 horses.”

“Okay, those are some good numbers! Let me do some math...” *At twenty energy apiece, minus one for casting the spell, minus the 10% I would lose per hour...*

Don’t strain yourself.

$(243 * 20) + (50 * 10) - 243 - 50 = 5,067$

Doing it in under an hour loses you 507.

Your total would be 4,560 energy.

The tempter Sammael himself has 5,200.

No other demon or angel comes close.

Don’t blow yourself up.

The smog spell you’re thinking of directly converts this to meters, or 4,560m or 4.5km.

Get to the center of the group and you’ll be fine.

Love,
Mumiah

I glanced upwards. “Thanks. Let’s just say it will be *glorious*.”

“And you can do it?”

“Naturally. And here’s the best part. Say I somehow fail? You can still make other plans and I’ll even leave the room while you discuss them, *Ripjaw*, because I’ll have to do it far enough away from the town I don’t put you all to sleep by accident.”

“True,” he agreed. “We’ll see what Don comes back with, I’ll think about it in the meantime.”

"Of course."

He came back a moment later carrying a transparent sphere. "Now!" he said, setting it down. "Tell me a truth!"

"My name is Sylvia Tempest."

Green.

Yeah, thought so. Once that was invented I'm sure it spread like wildfire.

"And a lie?"

"I would never under *any* circumstances lie!"

Red.

"Satisfied?" he asked Ripjaw.

"Thus far," he agreed. "Now I have to trust you, and this orb."

"He's my second in command! I've known him for years, he's a loyal subject-" Bill protested, but Don held up a hand.

"What he says is fair enough. Do you personally wish any person here, on either side, to come to harm in the coming battle?"

"No."

Green.

"Is it your plan to help us defeat the force of soldiers on their way here?"

"Yes."

Green.

"Do you plan to betray us at any time either before or after their arrival?"

"No."

Green.

"You want to ask something?" He looked at Ripjaw.

He considered. "You believe you can defeat that entire force with a single sleep spell?"

"Yes."

Yellow.

He scowled.

"I suppose if you're being technical about it, I need three spells. The energy draining spell, the spell to allow me to use that energy in my magic without limit, and the sleep spell itself. The sleep spell is the end result and what I would consider the 'single sleep spell'."

Green.

"Fine. But I'll be watching you."

Green.

From a distance? "I have no problem with that!"

Red.

"Hummmm..."

"I'll go first," Sarah told him.

Green.

"What?" Don asked. "You can turn that off now!"

Red

He put a cloth over it. "It can't be turned on and off, you know that."

What? The other one I saw was activated. Maybe this one was done differently?

"Yes, yes, I remember now. Go on with what you were saying?"

"For the spell to drain people. I'll go first. Then they can see it's safe. I want to be part of this too, you can have my power mom, as I'm sure you're going to insist I stay behind."

"You'll just fall asleep otherwise, not that I couldn't wake you of course but I wouldn't want you falling off Firebrand and cracking your head open."

"You wouldn't let that happen!"

"I may be out of it. I've never used four *thousand* energy in a single action before. My normal max is 200. The magic should protect me but..."

"You can't verify it until you actually do it, and by then it's too late. I get it. Okay, *fine*."

"Good girl."

So we left the room to allow them to discuss it, and started helping around the fort. Sarah carried bundles of arrows, and water skins to thirsty people, and even watched the little ones so their moms could take a break. Meanwhile I looked over the defenses of the place. I fused together the boards they used to put the wall together, making it that much harder to get through. I also sharpened all their weapons and made sure their shields were in good shape. I checked on horseshoes, put spikes on the horse's armor, and created food and water for them. The water I actually just got by putting a portal back to the pond and filling barrels up, then casting the hygiene spell on it. This probably didn't kill any viruses or anything but at least it was cleaner. I also went back and asked Tika what the infirmary could use, and turned rocks into bandages, water into alcohol, and sharpened their scalpels and such. Thank goodness my Darkbolt powers allowed me to recover energy super fast! We worked all through the day, having first and then second lunch, then dinner as the sun went down. Don reported the troop movements as about what he expected, and said they were on track to attack some hours after sunrise the next day. If they charged us, and didn't just ignore us.

I noticed Ripjaw talking to various people and glancing at me, but all he got was glowing reports of me being helpful so even he had to admit I was probably on the level. I didn't blame him. When a dragon drops out of the sky with a girl claiming to be able to solve all your problems you have to have a bit of healthy skepticism.

That night I had Firebrand fly away "to hunt" so they wouldn't realize when I went to sleep that she went poof. I wanted to do a few dream things and it would have been suspicious if I didn't get some sleep that night before a big battle, so I accepted their offer of a cot in the barracks. When in my dream form I turned their walls into stone, reinforced them by making them twice as thick, doubling the number of arrows they had, making them some large stones and some catapults of their own after walking around the enemy camp in the dream world to study them. But something odd caught my attention.

"Why so many wagons?" I asked myself. They were not permanent so they faded in and out of the dream world but I was pretty sure now that the soldiers had stopped, they were not simply one wagon appearing in different places. Each wagon seemed different, and mostly empty. *Now soldiers on the march will certainly eat a lot of food, but this seems like a very large number of wagons to take over the mountains. Is there something in them I'm just not seeing here? I'm not stepping over to take a closer look, invisibility or no. They could have detection magic going. But it doesn't make a lot of sense.*

Naturally everyone noticed their "upgrades" and the new catapults sitting there but I just told them maybe an angel took pity on them and did it? As clearly I had been asleep all night, which various guards attested to. I hadn't left the barracks that *they* saw. Sarah kept snickering but no one paid any attention. I got Firebrand back, strong as ever, and Bill announced that everyone should line up and give their power to me so I could use it because Don announced the invaders had left the mountains and were now heading straight for us. Sarah, good as her word, stepped up first. Tika was behind her. "I trust you," she said to me.

Naturally I first had to come up with the energy drain spell, as I didn't know it. That was easy enough as the initial (and then normal) difficulty of the spell was a 10. I had a minimum 9 calculation, and nobody around here could tell the difference between me casting for 5 segments or 6. So I just took the 6 and couldn't fail it. I drained everyone in the camp, then moved to the horses, the mages following me around uttering things like "extraordinary" and "fascinating" in equal measure. I promised once this was over to give them a better explanation of what I was doing but I wanted to know how their magic worked too. They all agreed, and seemed entranced by the magical circles my spells produced. For their part the soldiers said they didn't really feel that much different, but everyone could see the circles and knew I was working magic. So after the first few no one had any qualms about me draining them and it went fairly quickly. I just drained the horses, I didn't have time to ask their consent. A bit rude of me, perhaps, but necessary.

Finally I was ready. I was burdened with glorious energy, holding myself together with effort as over four thousand energy filled me to bursting. I was practically glowing and

vibrating. I was on Firebrand, and had the energy accumulation spell cast so I could start gathering energy while he flew. Everyone wished me luck, and I was about to take off.

Quest Accepted

Save the fort from the oncoming army.
Try to do so such that nobody dies! That's
the hero's path to victory. You do want to
be a hero, don't you?

Reward: Variable XP based on performance
A single death will not be counted against you.
More than this and XP will be docked.

That's an odd thing to put at the bottom, I thought. What are you trying to tell me, Mumiah? Is there someone in that army that has to die?

And then I was flying and gathering energy. I resisted the urge to simply land and take them all in single combat. With this energy I could do it. I could do *anything*. But no, stick to the plan I told myself. This was the hero's path, to cowardly put them all to sleep and take their stuff.

Wait...

But then it was too late. Firebrand landed in what I determined was the center, and roared. The horses panicked, the men panicked, the rocks panicked, the grasses panicked, everybody but me panicked. Me? I just smiled and snapped my fingers. With this much energy I didn't need to bother with trivialities like gestures and incantations. A gigantic magical circle hung in the air over everyone and they all dropped like rocks, breathing in the mist the spell made that put them to sleep. I wasn't breathing, and of course Firebrand didn't either so we were fine. The horses, the people, they all went down as our victory was assured. I dropped to 6 XP, having spent another 6 to get that spell into my list. I figured it was worth it, I would make at least part of that back right... now!

XP please? Blue boxes? Hello? I'll take that reward now!

I waited, lamenting the lack of energy I had now. I hadn't gone into the negatives so I didn't feel tired at all, but I already missed it. *Yeah that sort of thing could get addicting, better keep an eye on it.* But I seemed fine, dropping the accumulation spell as I didn't need it now.

No? Not done yet? Odd... I canceled the spell, lifting the mist that had put the army to sleep and waved into the air. I knew Don would be checking in with me using his scrying spell, and he would see everyone was down. They would then as quietly as possible rush out of the fort, grab up all the weapons and armor they could from the sleeping foes, and simply retreat again to wait for them to wake up. Some had argued they should be killed, but I made sure everyone understood, they were *just* asleep. They probably needed it, a trip over the mountains dragging all this stuff behind them couldn't have been easy so they would probably sleep awhile, but if someone started carrying on they were being murdered everyone would start to wake up. They could break the catapults if they could do it quietly, and if everyone grabbed a couple of swords we could disarm the whole group in one pass. That was the plan, anyway. Now I just had to wait for them to arrive.

I looked around as I waited, and yes, they had a lot of wagons for some reason. The horses were also sleeping, just standing there, and while I didn't know a lot about horses I could mentally compare these horses to the horses I had just drained of energy. Were they thinner than would be expected after such a journey? Hard to say, but they didn't look as

healthy. Odd. I was lowered to the ground and everybody here seemed a bit thinner than I would expect. Very odd! I carefully made my way across some sleeping people to the back of the nearest wagon and peaked inside. Empty. They really brought an empty wagon? Instead of just ditching it? I could see them bringing lots of fodder for the horses there wouldn't be much to eat in the mountains but if this one random cart was empty, more would be. *Something strange is going on here. Well, disarm them as per the plan, and we can talk like civilized beings and not animals fighting over a scrap of meat.*

It took maybe twenty minutes for the fort's inhabitants to arrive, and start carefully disarming everyone. I had insisted on slow and steady for this effort, waking anyone would be a disaster. Sarah was with them, and I wagged a finger at her but she just shot me a grin. *Of course she wouldn't want to be left behind.* She seemed to be just as cautious as anyone else, she understood what was at stake here. She slipped through the camp looking for something she could carry away and so I turned, taking my eyes off her. I had been scanning the place in case I needed to cast the spell again on a more localized target because they tripped over someone or something happened to wake somebody. I saw people cutting horse harnesses, which was good thinking if they did wake up sooner rather than later the horses would bolt and the carts would serve to block them in. I also saw some people quietly discussing how to disable the catapults without causing a fuss.

There was a muffled scream and my head jerked back around. A man was awake! He was awake and holding a knife to my daughter's throat! A man in robes, not armor, had grabbed my daughter and was threatening her life!

A man was going to die.

Chapter 20

Release

When: A second later, morning of day 4

Where: Out in the field

“Release my daughter,” I growled.

“I think we should talk instead,” he insisted, pressing the knife close. For her part Sarah didn’t flinch or cry out, she knew she couldn’t be the one to wake those nearby making her situation worse. She looked at me with complete trust in her eyes and even gave me a little nod, like “I know you can get me out of this, mom!” He went on. “Don’t know how you and that dragon did this, but we’re going to get everyone up and moving towards that fort again. Or this little one gets it.”

“So that’s who you are,” I told him. “A coward. I’m sorry I pressed for this plan, instead of just incinerating the whole lot of you. I offer you mercy and the chance to return to your kingdom healthy and whole, and you repay me with this? I won’t tell you again. Let my daughter go.”

“Now, now, aren’t you curious about how I’m awake?”

“Not particularly.”

“It’s an enchanted item I carry on my person. Of my own design, in fact. I don’t have to sleep while I wear it. Seems to have made me immune to your little gas. But I feigned sleep, and waited for-”

“I told you I wouldn’t ask again.” I raised a hand, about to cast. *I’ll hit him in the head with my fire attack. That will do it. I’ve got enough energy to throw into it to roast him alive. Even if he cuts her throat, I can heal her.*

“By all means!” he agreed, smiling. “Cast a spell!”

What?

“I’m not a monster, so I’ll give you a chance to save this little one on your own terms instead of mine. Go ahead. Give me your best spell. You get one shot. If you can take me out, well, she’s all yours again!” He moved the knife a little, but away from the throat now.

What’s he playing at? “I get one spell?” I asked.

“That’s right! I’ll wait, you have my word. I’m interested to see what you’ll pick.”

“Fine.” I lowered my hand and stared at him. “I forgive you your ignorance. But I do not forgive you threatening my daughter.” I untied the cords holding my armor together and pulled it over my head.

“What are you doing?”

“I’ll show you exactly who you are threatening. You think this is my form? You’ll soon learn differently. Your last moments will be true despair.” I pulled off my shirt and his eyes bulged out.

“Lady, are you trying to seduce me or kill me? I can’t decide! And honestly I’m leaning towards the seduction! I hadn’t considered it but it could work. Even if this isn’t a spell exactly. Keep taking it off and your girl can live a little longer!”

“Prepare yourself.” I made a spell ranging check of 16, giving me 3 meters of range to cast the spell. That was enough, thanks to my LUCk check of 18 (my maximum). I couldn’t do a spirit manipulation *check* because I needed to cast on my next action, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t use the skill as normal. 13 energy poured into my skybourne skill, giving me a minimum twenty result after taking the -2 penalty for the ranging. With a fifteen difficulty I took no chances, and cast for 5 segments. He had given me “one spell” after all. “Awaken,” I cast. Magical energy sprang up around the two of us, and the man looked horrified I had chosen my daughter to cast upon instead of him.

“What are you doing? What is this? This isn’t magic, this isn’t what I agreed to!”

The magic changed us, granting us the same benefits as Firebrand enjoyed, meaning invulnerability, DTR increase, combat bonus, bonus to physical stats, and her creature traits including wings and claws. We both became more foxlike, our faces and bodies getting furrier and red, and as the wings tore through my daughter's clothes they knocked the man back. She spun to face him, wings outstretched and claws dribbling fire. "She warned you..."

"What? Angels? Impossible!"

"You have no idea what's possible," I growled, using my shape-shift power to turn into myself, but with 9 huge tails that now fanned around me.

"I have to get away!" the man realized, and raised his hands to cast. That inverted pyramid appeared.

"Oh no you don't," my daughter told him. With her boosted stats and combat bonuses it was easy enough for her jump onto the man's chest, then do a back-flip kick, nailing him in the head. As she flipped over it seemed she had used her elemental touch ability, as his head was engulfed in flames. He naturally lost the spell and started to shriek even as he clawed at his head and fell over. I didn't want his noise to wake everyone so I shot forward, grabbing him up by the neck and taking to the sky. Thankfully, I seemed to know how to fly perfectly, probably knowledge granted to me via the spell, and I took off, dragging him into the air with me. Sarah flew after. When we were some distance away I swooped up, let him go by throwing him up into the air, then doing my own spin kick to drive him downwards. He landed with a crunch and I dropped out of the sky next to him. I didn't have to worry about mundane damage after all. I stared down at him.

"Mercy," he managed, his head wasn't on fire but he wasn't getting up any time soon. His skin and hair were burned off, and I wasn't even sure he had eyes at this point. "Angels should show mercy."

"Would you have shown my daughter mercy?" I asked. "I swear, if you get offered the Heaven door... You better take it. You get reborn somewhere and I'll find you and kill you again. Believe it." And I stomped his head into paste, putting energy into STrength instead of more fire. I didn't really want him to suffer... too much.

"Wow, mom!" Sarah exclaimed, landing nearby. "This spell is amazing! Did you get him? You did! Serves that guy right, grabbing me like that. His head is totally crushed!"

Well, she doesn't seem disturbed. Should that worry me? I already accepted my weaknesses but... "Are you okay?" I asked, rushing to her and looking her over.

"I'm totally fine," she assured me. "We need to use this spell more often! Did you see me? I flew! And you have more tails! You look like a fox, do I look like a fox?" She touched her face. "I do, don't I?"

"Yes, yes, all part of the service. Come on, let's get back before someone else does something stupid."

"Okay."

Everyone stayed nicely asleep though, we transformed back only when Bill said they were ready to move out. I put my shirt and armor back on, and got out a new dress for Sarah to replace her ruined one.

"You should modify all my dresses to have no back," she suggested. "In case you need to use that spell again!"

"Are you planning on getting grabbed again?" I asked.

"Noooo, but it's like you always say, a wizard is one who prepares!"

"I suppose it can't hurt."

"Yay!"

Back in the town we locked up all the stuff we had stolen, though I put a few swords and shields in my dimension. With the gates locked up again it seemed my quest was over.

Quest Completed

You managed to outfox your enemy and disarm them without much problem. Seems like Bill can take it from here. And almost no one died. Don't worry, we'll take care of what is left of his soul.

Reward: 5 XP was gained

Then we met up again.

"How long until they wake up?" Bill asked.

"Only one has to wake up, and they'll start getting the others up," I told him. "Could be a minute from now or three hours."

"You have our thanks," he told me gratefully. "You really did pull it off. I'll be sure to mention this could not have been done without you in my report."

"What are you going to do with them?"

"With their weapons gone, we have little to fear from them, and reinforcements are on the way. Hopefully we'll be able to talk and figure out why this happened in the first place."

"I can stick around a while longer too," Mary shyly spoke up. "I'll start translating Ripjaw's sleep spell into a ritual. If they try something like this again I can do what you did and keep this place protected."

"Good, I approve!"

"But I won't stay forever," she insisted.

"I understand," Bill told her. "Thank you for doing this much, I know it's still a risk you being found out."

She nodded.

"Now can we please talk about magic?" Don asked, rubbing his hands together.

"See? Salivating," Midnight scoffed.

"I'll leave you all to it," Bill told us. "Drop by any time, Sylvia. Sarah. Stay safe."

"Okay!"

With Bill gone Don turned to me. "Would you mind if I examined your core for a moment? Then I can answer your questions better. Most of mine were answered watching you perform your spell two hundred times. I was able to feel it out quite well, so I have a good handle on how your mana control works. But this is the final piece of the puzzle, so to speak."

"I suppose it's fine."

"Do you mind taking off your armor? It's best if I touch your, ah..." he indicated my chest area.

Now, of course I had the magic sense skill myself. What mage wouldn't? I knew about sensing if someone had "the spark of magic" i.e. a mana core. I knew they had to be touched, and yes, the chest area or heart was the easiest place to sense it from. But he was sort of cute when he was out of sorts like this and asking to feel me up. I jerked my head over to Midnight. She rolled her eyes and nodded.

"I guess it's fine," I told him. "But you better buy me a drink after!"

"Captain doesn't allow alcoholic beverages on base- ah I see you're joking." I was ginning at him as I took my armor off. He put his hand on my chest and concentrated.

"It's as I thought," he finally decided. "You don't have a traditional five sided mana core. It's round. How you can even cast magic from such a thing... What a surprise. Ah, yes, that may explain the circles I saw! A projection from a round core, yes, yes, all very logical if you think about it for a moment."

"Do me next!" Sarah insisted. She stepped up and stuck her chest out.

"Er, I suppose if it's all right with your mother?" he asked with a 'don't kill me' look on his face.

"I'll be watching you," I threatened, squinting at him.

"Think of it as a medical exam, nothing to worry about!" He put his hand on her and again concentrated. "Oh, now that is strange," he finally decided.

"What is? Is there something wrong?" I asked.

"Not wrong, no. But it is curious. Her core, such as it is, feels unformed. Midnight, would you mind verifying this?"

"If the little miss doesn't mind?" she asked.

"I don't mind."

"Very well." She came over and repeated the procedure. "He's right. I've never felt the like."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"I can only speculate," Don mused, "but given your strange method of using mana and the fact she's your daughter there's probably two ways her core could develop. If you pushed her to learn magic the way you do it, it would develop into a spherical core, like you have. But if you apprenticed her to a master or enrolled her in a university she could develop the five sided core we use. Once she cast her first spell in either 'school' if you will, that would be it. She would be unable to learn the other method. So consider her future carefully, please."

"So I wouldn't be able to learn your method, then?"

"Oh, Heavens no! Your core is quite solid. It's the foundation of using magic, I would have said. How you managed to get as far as you did without a teacher... Unless I'm assuming wrong and you did have one?"

"Of a sort," I hedged. "Tell me about using a five sided core."

"Certainly. The basics of all magic are first manifesting the core." He held up a hand and the inverted pyramid appeared hovering over it. "Each side represents an aspect of the spell we wish to cast. Mana, aim, power, range, and effect," he showed, pointing to each face. "We gather mana into the core, and release it across all the faces at the same time, resulting in a spell. For example, watch the faces." He concentrated, and they lit up with various symbols. *Sort of like a miniature circle for me.* The pyramid collapsed into a bright light. "That was a simple light spell. I released mana across all five faces though normally I wouldn't. No sense empowering aim or range when you just need a bit of light close at hand. Did you see the mana interacting with the core?"

We both nodded.

"Good, good. In this way we create spells. For example, using this spell of light and combining it with a spell to detect anyone that wishes me harm, I could cause all those that wish me harm in the area to glow. Or I could empower a healing spell with a spell that detects my allies, healing them all at once. I simply attach each component onto a face of the core, and the magic does the rest."

"You can't do that!" Sarah announced.

"No, I can't," I admitted. "My spells are more limited. I can't combine them." *So that's how the troll did it. He combined a spell to find his enemies, me, with a spell to light things on fire. He didn't have to see me, his magic found me. Figures. Thus he got a spell to set his enemies on fire. Simple. And yet with a bit of imagination, combining spell effects could lead even a mage that knows only six or seven spells to generate twice that number of effects.*

"Ah, I wondered about that," he went on. "So they're more focused on a single result, but yet more powerful under certain conditions. I wonder which is the superior method."

"I think we would both say ours was."

"More than likely, given what I've just seen you do. Moving on. Naturally each spell requires study, so it can be envisioned properly so when released from the core it takes the right shape. And it takes many years to become proficient in manifesting and then manipulating mana. Which is why most don't bother. You must have a true love of magic to stick with it, day after day, and become proficient at spells. Difficult when most are working the land or banging out horseshoes to put food on the table. We are the lucky few that have stuck with it." He indicated the others.

Without my 'system' I would have said the same, I realized. Especially for skybourne magic, that's a single skill that costs the same as 6. You would have to study for weeks to go from a 1 skill to a 2. Or if you wanted to learn all the planets, how many weeks to master

them all? They have five facets, plus learning spells which I don't have to do. And I can't learn this and then pass it on because it's not a skill. It's the shape of my core and how I manipulate mana. As my daughter, the daughter of a progenitor, she could learn my way, but also as a child of this world (via her original parents and my hunky but absent foxboy who may not actually exist?) she could learn their way. But not both. "Right, you would need years of study to get any return on your investment, and maybe you're terrible at it or give up after two years. You probably have loans to repay and now you have no skills to repay them."

"You have the right of it. Beginning to study magic is a huge risk, which only pays off years later."

"That was very eye opening, thank you. We've got a lot to think about, in terms of Sarah's future anyway."

"I would be happy to write a letter of recommendation to a university, if she decided that was her path. We mages are a tight knit group, just ask around for Don Erblitzen, someone in the community can get a message to me."

"Thank you." *We would have to settle down for that. Or at least I would, she's not old enough to live in a dorm somewhere. Is she?* "Say, question for you all, unrelated topic- I mean it's still the topic of magic."

"Sure, go ahead," Don told me.

"That mage that grabbed my daughter. He was practically begging me to cast a spell to save her. I think he expected me to cast a spell on *him*, rather than on my daughter and myself. Can you think of why?"

He thought a moment. "I could think of one reason. He had a powerful enchantment on himself that would bounce back any spell cast on him. He wanted you to cause your own demise by bouncing your spell back."

That jerk! Crushing his head was too good for him. He wanted me to hurt myself with my own magic in front of my daughter, what a piece of work. "I see. He did brag about some object that negated his need for sleep. Maybe he made more than one thing?"

"You can wear many magical talismans- er, just as a point of interest, did you take it off him? Can I see it?"

I shook my head. "I didn't want to touch him." *Plus I had no idea what I was looking for, was outraged about him taking her hostage, and wanted to get Sarah away from the corpse. She was looking a little too joyful at the whole thing.*

"So some potentially powerful and expensive magical items are just lying out there on a corpse? Now past that whole army? Oh dear, oh dear," he fussed.

"Sorry, after the unfortunate incident with his head I didn't want to stick around."

"What incident?" Midnight asked.

"He threatened my daughter. You figure it out," I told her. She glanced at my shoes and nodded. *Have to clean those off later.*

"He got what he deserved then?"

"I would say so."

"Still, I wonder if I could find him out there, be a shame to have someone on that side pick those items up when we could use them just as easily. I'll be back!" he rushed out the door.

The rest of us went to get some firstlunch, and as we ate Sarah asked me the usual question.

"So where are we going next?"

"Probably not to that kingdom over the mountains," I replied. "I have to wonder if it all fits together somehow. More monster attacks, now an attack from over the mountain? Twice is coincidence, three times is enemy action. We need to see if there's a third thing happening in this kingdom that's going to get worse before it gets better. I figured we would fly around, see what other towns are saying about the whole thing. Maybe find the capital? See how people close to the king are taking it? If they know at all."

"It'll be weeks before anyone in this kingdom knows about this attack," Mary protested. "News doesn't travel all that fast."

“In a way that’s good,” I decided. “If they do know something it won’t be tainted by association with this. I’m sure people will start having pretty strong feelings about another kingdom invading. Maybe more than one kingdom is, to carve this place down the middle. I’ll need to find out.”

“Good luck,” she told me. “I hope this is the end of it though...”

Somehow, I have to think it's only the beginning.

Chapter 21

Intimidation

When: After firstlunch

Where: By the gates of the fort

“Intimidation?” I asked Bill, after we finished with firstlunch. We were outside, standing next to Firebrand, as he wanted to see us before we left.

“Yes, if you didn’t mind staying awhile longer,” he explained. “When those soldiers from the kingdom of Anderon show up I want them to see your dragon looming over the walls. Hopefully it’ll make them a bit more receptive to the idea they shouldn’t invade around here. When we send them back to their king and they report seeing a dragon hanging around, maybe he’ll think twice before trying this again. She doesn’t have to say anything, just loom.”

“I suppose we could wait, I’m really in no rush to get anywhere,” I decided. “Seems a bit dishonest though.”

“Not at all,” he countered. “Wartime is all about misdirection. Make the enemy think your troops are over here, but they’re really over there. Hide their numbers. Give them crappy armor to wear on the march so they look weaker than they are, as they wear better stuff into battle. I’m trying to avoid further conflict here, so our two kingdoms don’t go to all out war with each other. I’m not going to answer any questions about why the dragon is here, they’re going to simply see her. It’s not my fault if they truthfully report seeing a dragon but then simply assume it’s here to protect the pass.”

“Unless they report a dragon being seen here, and then convince a dragon that lives in that kingdom to attack you to counter it.”

“It’s not like they haven’t already seen her, mom,” Sarah reminded me. “We flew over them several times, and they saw you land before they went to sleep. They already know one is involved here. I’m sure he’s a good enough negotiator to imply she’s here just to observe for now, but could be called on to defend the kingdom if threatened. All without lying or giving a straight answer.”

“Am I good enough to do all that?” he wondered. “I must have made a better first impression than I thought! Hey you’re really bright kid!”

“And it might raise more questions as to where she went if she’s not seen here, okay, okay, fine. She can loom over the walls all you want.”

“Yay!” Sarah cheered, “training day!”

“Training day?” I asked.

“Sure. If we’re staying we can work on my martial arts. And maybe pick another thing off the list for me to work on. You know,” she wiggled her fingers at me. “All of it? I’m so close now I can feel it!”

“List? List?” I patted my sides before I realized, duh, how stupid! Woman’s clothes don’t have pockets. And I hadn’t put any in the pants I was wearing under my armor.

She giggled. “It’s in your *other* pocket.”

“My prison pocket? No, I don’t think so.”

“I’m not even going to ask what *that* is,” Bill decided. “I’m going to help set up a table outside, I’m not letting them in this fort but perhaps I can have a sit down with their leadership and figure out why they’re here. You two ladies have fun.”

“Just get it out already!” she huffed.

I really had *no* clue what she was talking about, this must be something the new timeline had put in place, but I figured there was only one place it could be. I cast, thinking about taking a list out of my pocket dimension. Sticking my hand in I felt around and to my surprise there was paper in there! I yanked it out and looked it over. The title at the top was

Skills Seraphina can practice

and it had 107 skills Sarah could potentially learn. Some were iffy, like summoning demons or angels. We were in pretty good with angels, at least I was, so maybe she could learn to call some minor angel or learn to use holy power? Risky though, if they did decide to take some kind of offense to it. 19 of them were just martial artist techniques, at a 1 rating were they worth learning? She liked doing martial arts but did I want her to become a bare fist fighter? Some skills I didn't have, like the demon artist stuff, and so couldn't teach anyway. All this worked to cut the list down but it was comprehensive. *Good job, past me that I guess did this at some point?* "Now the real question is," I mused, "what should we focus on? We know you can use telekinesis, we both saw you use it recently. So your powers are coming in, there's no doubt." *Ah hah, which explains her current excitement I assume, she wants to do that again.* "Do we continue to strengthen that connection or move on to something totally different so your soul gets used to using a variety of powers? Honestly you should probably learn spirit sense and manipulation first but that would really require lay lines for the best learning experience. There's also your future to consider. You may want to pick a background like seer or artificer and focus on those skills, so you can unlock higher ratings in the future. On the other hand, we just got a small presentation on the type of magic used here, and the five sided mana core. I saw how excited you were watching that. We may want to get more information about what types of magic is considered easy and hard here. If any mage worth their name can turn lead into gold there's no point in learning alchemy. But if they can't, that's an easy path to victory for you. Unless you just wanted to focus on magic for now?"

"It would make sense to learn their way of doing magic instead of yours," she agreed. "You can have as high a rating as you want doing skybourne magic, but I can't. I don't have your energy reserves so doing magic that way really isn't worth it to learn. Sorry, but it's true."

"No, no, I see where you're coming from. Exhausting yourself after one spell is no good." *You don't have my energy regeneration either, after all.* "Maybe you could have learned the 'planets' if such even existed here to a high rating, but I didn't take them as skills so I can't teach you. Once your powers do truly come in, we know once you have the basics down for a skill you can move on. You can't ever get any better than that unless you focus on it. So even getting through most of this list wouldn't necessarily take long, I should always be around to teach you. Tackle the hard stuff now while you're still young, there's some wisdom in that."

Her face fell. "The bad part is having to go to some kind of school. You would have to leave me behind."

"Hey, nothing says I couldn't move into a big city for a few years. School isn't forever. Then we go back to normal."

"You would do that for me?"

"Of course!" *I would do pretty much anything for you, little one. Even kill a man.* "Oh, but there's another option!" I waved to Midnight who was crossing the courtyard. "Midnight! Over here!"

"What's up you two? Greetings, mighty dragon." She bowed and Firebrand nodded back, then went back to watching over the wall. She cocked her head, seemed like she chuckled a bit, and spun around like a dog and lay down.

"I wondered if you had ever considered taking on an apprentice?"

"A what?" she snorted. "Some whiny rich bastard's spawn? That follows me around for years, puts in minimal effort, thinks they know better than me because their daddy is rich? Gets into trouble, probably drunk more often than not, then at the end of three years I have to explain to daddy dearest that their little darling isn't fit to clean stables and *somehow* that's my fault when really the kid hasn't done a day of work in their entire life and... ugly... useless..." Near the end she started glancing at Sarah, who was looking up at her with big eyes and a trembling lower lip. She looked to me. She looked back at Sarah. Then back at me. "Er, just so we're on the same page here, you were actually inquiring on behalf of your daughter, weren't you. Not just as a general topic of discussion?"

"I was, yes. But if it's not for you-

"Ah no!" she hastened to add as Sarah's lip started trembling even more violently. "That, what I was saying just then, it was just to contrast what I would actually say. That's what the usual dark elf mage would say, if you asked *them*. What I was saying. Earlier. But you're asking me, so I'll just give you *my* answer *now*. Not- not their answer. Huh, apprentice, you say? Never thought much about it really."

"I guess what I'm really asking is have you ever considered traveling? You could come with us, and in exchange for me taking care of your needs maybe show my daughter a thing or two about magic."

She snorted. "Considered traveling? Me? You really don't know me at- Wait! My *needs*, you say?" She wiggled her eyebrows. "I do have needs. Are you sure you can meet them?"

I blushed a bit. "I mean like food, and stuff."

"Oh that, boring. But you do travel by *dragon*..."

"That's right." I patted Firebrands' leg. "It's the only way to fly."

"Unless you can grow wings, which we did just recently," Sarah clarified. "I miss them so much!"

"Yes, unless that," I allowed. "And you had them for like two minutes, you can't miss them that much."

"Yes I can! If you had been born without a leg for instance, and then someone magically provided you one for two minutes, and you walked around, and then they said 'whoops sorry wrong person' and took it away again, I'd bet you would miss it."

"She has a point," Midnight agreed. "Humm... Traveling with two fox ladies on the back of a dragon-"

"Excuse me, we're foxy ladies!" Sarah corrected.

"As in we are foxlike," I added, flicking one ear and swishing two tails to drive the point home.

She laughed. "That you are. It's true there's not much keeping me here. And I have been getting a bit antsy, if I'm being completely honest. I don't suppose you two like to roam around? Never in one place? You roam from town to town?"

"That's us exactly," I agreed wholeheartedly. "But I just wanted to know if you would be open to the idea, as Don mentioned learning that way instead of university. We're really just thinking about what Sarah should focus her efforts on. She... has more options than most because of her heritage."

"So it isn't just weird magic? You can do other things as well?"

"I can."

"I'm starting to get the picture. That's why *you* don't want to settle, if people found out... Is it possible you're like-" She cleared her throat. "But what sort of pay are we talking about? Apprenticing is expensive normally, and I don't see any bulging sacks hanging down." She twisted to the side and leaned over to really drive the point home she was looking.

"Ew, gross!" Sarah exclaimed making a face. "You said it that way on purpose!"

"We're not rich," I admitted, quickly moving on.

"We just spent most of our money on spices!" Sarah announced. "That we haven't actually gotten to use because we've been eating here since then."

"Spices?" she asked.

"I can make magical food, but it's bland," I explained. "We'll get to use them soon, I promise. But she's not wrong. We take odd jobs in cities to make money when we need something. Usually I can just make anything we need. And we have a camp by a pretty nice pond, that's basically our home base at the moment. We've got a tent and everything."

"Do you like to swim? I swim all the time there!" Sarah told her. "I'm trying to reach the bottom but it's pretty deep."

"A tent *and* your own pond? You two really do live on your own terms huh? Been awhile since I roughed it that much. Could be a nice change, my fellow elves would say I was getting soft by living in cities all the time. We are supposed to be the 'nature elves' after all. But I don't really swim all that much, sorry to say."

"Aw!"

"We would do jobs to pay you," I explained. "You wouldn't have to do that kind of thing if you didn't want to, just tutoring and whatever it is you want the rest of the time." *I have no*

idea how elves spend their time here. Praying? Roaming the forests hunting? Perfecting rock carving or something? I suppose she practices spells.

"I don't know," she hedged. "All I can eat magical food, nice campsite, riding around on a dragon to see the world, pleasant company, teaching someone magic, sounds like plenty of days to hang out with no responsibilities otherwise? I should be paying you, it sounds like a spa experience or some kind of curated woodland vacation package!"

"Done!" I grabbed hand and pumped it up and down with gusto. "We can work out the rate later!" I said with nary a pause. She glared but I gave her a big grin.

"Tricksters, always tricksters, foxes. I should have known," she mused with mock sincerity.

"I'm just teasing, nothing has been decided," I assured her, letting her hand go.

"I sort of figured. Look, it sounds interesting but I would need a lot more from you two before I said yes. There are... things about me," she glanced around, making sure no one was close enough to hear, "I don't generally want known. I've always insisted on my own quarters and I'm a good enough mage my employers usually go for it. But you would find out pretty quickly, and I need to know you won't... well, I don't want to say too much right now."

Seems like we both have secrets. Maybe we can trade them, this lady may be more interesting than I first thought.

"And then there's the obvious stuff on your part. Like how you came to travel with a dragon. Who you really are, and what you want. I don't buy all this just wandering around business helping out of the goodness of your hearts. With your magic? I'm pretty sure you could be ruling this kingdom if you wanted. Dragons are highly sought after as advisers, and as you're in good with this one if she became adviser to the king you could basically tell her what to tell the king. If you seriously want my services, fine, but I'm going to want to ask you some questions with Don's truthstone nearby. If that's out of the question—"

I held up a hand. "No, that's fine. There are certain things I myself will only reveal if you promise to keep quiet about them, but I won't lie to you. Nor will I just dump you somewhere, or whatever you're thinking. It sounds like we both have secrets, and we can trade them and trust each other. This is foremost a legitimate offer to train my daughter in magic while traveling with us. To that end we promise; Adventure! Danger! Problem solving! Tails!" I swished my tails, and Sarah followed my lead.

"Meeting unicorns," she put in.

I rolled my eyes. "Yes, even meeting the occasional unicorn. But I would need to ask you some stuff too. If you're some bloodthirsty monster—" *welcome to the club?* "I would at least want to know beforehand." *I would hate the competition.*

She waved her hands around in distress. "Nothing like *that!* Goodness, no, I'm not a monster! But why would you want to meet a unicorn? I mean they're probably nice enough but they just prance around the forest all day. Talking about an interesting flower they ate yesterday as the highlight of their conversation."

"This one ran her own magic shop. The Pointed Mage. She learned magic and goes around as a human. I don't think most even know she is a unicorn."

"Really? Well, I guess there's room for that in the world. Why not? A shopkeeper unicorn. I never would have guessed. Huh."

"Well, let me know what you decide and we can go from there."

"I'll go ask to borrow Don's truthstone then, and we can get started."

"Sure..."

So we sat under Firebrand and discussed Sarah's future. I had no idea how *good* Midnight was at magic, or how good a teacher she would be. But I could enhance her skill at teaching and Sarah really just needed to 'firm up' her mana core. Once she could cast like anyone else in this world she could probably get more tutoring and buy spells in towns. *And I'm sure Sweetpea would teach her, right?* "Would you be okay with her as a teacher?"

"I *trust* she would be a good teacher but I would have to *verify* it," she began. "But let's think about our current options. Don isn't going to do it he's employed by the kingdom. Ripjaw might, but honestly I don't think I want to travel with a man. I mean I'm sure he's totally fine but he was pretty suspicious of you at the start. Not very trusting, could lead to problems in

the future. Mary is a ritualist, and only knows two spells, and wants to stay here to defend the pass once she learns a sleep ritual. Finding someone in another town either means that person is willing to travel with us, or us settling down and at that point I may as well go to a real school. She's the best choice. She's at least willing to consider it, and seems nice enough."

"A fair assessment," I agreed.

"And nothing says I can't work on magic a few hours a day, and still practice martial arts and other supernatural stuff the rest of the time. I don't get XP after all, I have to do things the old way. Practice, practice, practice. Which is fine because I want to learn!"

"Even math?" I teased.

"Enough to count money at least," she agreed, making a face. "And you said it before-if she does agree to teach us she can tell us what her type of magic can do. We can train other skills that complement that on the side. We can't hide what we are from her, but better ask the orb if she can keep our secret."

"I think I would have to ask her if she can keep our secret, and just see if she's lying."

"However it works!"

"Okay, I see what you're saying. It sounded like she had her own secrets, trading them will let her trust us more and be comfortable with us. Which would be a real plus! Is this what you want though? It will change things, adding another person to our group like this."

"Oh, I'm sort of counting on it," she replied slyly.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

She stared at me, as if to think about her next words carefully. "I realized something when you were splashing around with that unicorn-"

"You don't have to keep bringing that up!"

She held up her hands. "Mom, listen, this is important. You're... lonely, I get it!"

"I'm not!" I insisted. *I only got here a couple of days ago, I haven't had time to be. Though maybe in this timeline...* "I have you, and Firebrand-"

She shook her head. "You are. It cost you something to walk away from her. I get it. She was interesting and unique, and you liked her. She liked you. She wouldn't have flirted with you half as hard as she did if she hadn't. If I wasn't around you might of taken her up on her offer, I could tell you wanted to. But because of who we are, we have to be safe, we can't let too many people in. I mean if everyone knew where you came from..." She glanced around nervously. "But I'll say no more. You need someone you can talk to that's not me. Someone you can trust. Maybe it's her. Maybe it's not. But if the stone says she's not lying to you and she agrees to travel with us, and I can learn some magic on the side? I think it will do you some good. Sweetpea had her shop, there was no way she was leaving that town. But Midnight? She isn't tied down like that so she can travel with us just fine. We stay safe, and you get someone to splash around with." She giggled, then sobered. "Oh right she doesn't swim. Well, maybe we can convince her after splashing her a bunch."

I looked at her out of the corners of my eyes. "Are you playing matchmaker or something?"

"You don't *have* to like her in that way," she insisted. "But it's also not good to just travel with me. Is it? You need an adult."

I considered her, then scooped forward and hugged her. "How did I get such a thoughtful daughter?"

"We take care of each other, mom," she replied, hugging me back. "We always have, and we always will. Us against the world, right?"

Always, for like two days now. Pull, don't push. "You better believe it, kid." I let her go. "But it still has to be something you want."

"Uh, are you kidding me right now?" she asked with a grin. "Finally learn magic? I've seen the amazing things you can do, I want my own Firebrand you know? Something like, I don't know, a flying unicorn or something."

I glared at her.

"Just thinking at random, it doesn't mean anything." She looked around again and leaned forward, whispering. "Every time I see her, I have a super good feeling about her. I can't explain it."

A power coming in? Premonition, or ESP? I've stayed away from it because reading her emotions or her future could be considered a bit rude, but she wouldn't have that discipline. Not yet. She wouldn't even recognize it was happening, not really. But she is my daughter and if she says so, I can trust her. That's what those mental abilities are, just listening to that inner voice about things you can't otherwise be expected to know.

She went on. "And look, people expect magic users, right? I learn magic and what you can teach me, I can cover those powers and wave them away as just another spell if I had to. I get safer if people see the five sided mana core or whatever they call it. I can do a fake spell and then whatever I really want to do. It's camouflage, right? And maybe I can do things you can't, making our team even better. Until I learn magic Midnight will be there with hers, making us safer too."

"Okay," I agreed. "We'll see what she says, and if she wants to come with us-"

Suddenly there was shouting and carrying on from the main gate. It seemed the other kingdom's army had woken up and were on their way towards us. Showtime!

Chapter 22

Diplomacy

When: Twenty minutes later

Where: By the gates of the fort

“Diplomacy is the order of the day,” Bill shouted to everyone. All the soldiers in the fort were gathered around, and the invading army, sans horses, carts, and catapults were moments away from the walls. “Any man who fires upon them,” he looked at the archers, “will answer to me. They are probably furious over losing all their stuff and being made to look the fools, and will bluster and demand we return stuff. Instead, I will invite their leader to sit down and talk this through. Then we will send them back. Unharmed. They will learn that while we are only a small fort, we could have killed them while they were helpless. Yes, it was basically a trick we can’t at the moment repeat. They don’t have to know that. This is about securing peace, and if we shoot them up or provoke them they’ll just go home and then come back with a larger force. Am I making myself clear!”

“Yes sir!” everyone shouted.

“Form up!” They all went to stand on the platforms so they could look out over the walls.

“Sylvia, I’m going to have to ask you to stay out of this,” Bill told me, coming over. “As you’re not technically a part of the kingdom, as much as I’d like you out there in case things go wrong, dealing with this situation must be done delicately. There would be questions asked I don’t want to have to answer if you were at my side.”

I think they’re still going to want to know where that sleep magic came from. How are you going to get out of telling them without lying? “Plus you can’t actually order me around. If I was some kind of enemy agent, and I hope I’ve proven I’m not to your satisfaction, I could screw it up or even assassinate you right in front of your troops! I should not have said that...”

“Yes, there is that consideration as well. But as you are a fine, upstanding young woman with only your daughter’s best interest at heart you won’t make an issue of this, right?”

I waved him off. “Didn’t want to attend your boring meeting anyway! Just a lot of grunting and male posturing, that’s what I’m picturing is going to happen.”

“Good, glad that’s settled.”

“Before you go though, if you want your skill at say diplomacy or negotiation magically enhanced, I’m happy to do it.”

“Er, they might sense the spell on me and take exception to it. Round or five sided, it’s still magic so they could tell it was there. Probably best to just go as I am. Thanks for offering though.”

“Of course!” *So Don went and squealed on me, huh? Otherwise how would he know about the part he wasn’t there for?*

“Here.” Midnight walked over and handed me a glass sphere. “I’ll see you when this whole crisis is over,” she pointed a thumb out the door. “Don’t mess with it.”

“I won’t,” I promised, but fully intended to. I cackled and ran my hands over it like it was a priceless treasure. *What secrets do you hold, my pretty? My precious? Yes, the precious...*

Red.

She glared at me. “Really?”

My cackle turned into a genuine laugh. “I won’t,” I promised, now intending nothing.

Green.

“Gonna regret it,” she muttered, shaking her head and walking away. The group, Bill, other soldiers, and the mages headed out the door and it was bolted up tight. I handed Sarah the orb.

“Hold this a second will you?”

“I will hold it a second,” she agreed.

Green.

“One!”

She started tilting her hand to drop it. I scowled and she grinned, showing she was gripping it tight despite now holding it like it would fall out of her hand.

Maybe we are tricksters by nature now?

I gathered myself and made a Telekinesis check, calculating a 9. As this was at a -2 penalty for using the power on myself it turned into a 7, meaning I couldn't lift a medium sized rock with that check. But no one knew but me, and I tried again. This time it was a 17 because that's how checks go, turning into a 14 with the -2 and additional -1 for retrying. That was enough to raise 100kg, and thank you very much I am not *that* heavy so seemed to simply jump up to the platform above. I wanted to at least make sure things went well at the beginning. Bill was standing there looking solid as the enemy captain ranted and raved at him. I figured this was a good time and Firebrand got up from her little nap. Everyone on that side started completely freaking out, some falling over, while Bill simply glanced over, shrugged, and gestured again for them to sit. He even poured something from a pitcher into a glass, drank it, then poured out more where the seats were.

Ah, showing it's not poisoned.

They kept glancing up at Firebrand, especially when she pretended to yawn and sent a stream of fire into the air, but they sat down right quick after that. I nodded once, figuring things would go smoothly after her display, and made another check. A 16, -2 again, so I managed to float down to the ground and took the sphere from Sarah. “Let's find enough open space and go through some forms,” I told her.

“Yeah, punching time! And did you see my flip earlier? Did the magic help with that? It felt like it did.”

“I meant to talk to you about that,” I realized. “Well done back there. You didn't panic, or scream waking up others. I was proud of you. You even took care of that guy, I don't think he would have lasted much longer after you kicked him.”

“Yeah, fire just came out,” she remembered. “Whoosh!”

“It's part of the powers you get from the spell. Here should be fine.” I set the sphere down, unbuckled my armor and set it on top, and walked a few paces away from it. “Let's stretch and you can show me Seisan kata.”

“Yes, sensei!”

We practiced for some time, more and more of the soldiers at the walls watching us instead of the army on the other side as that was boring. Finally I decided they should get back to their actual jobs. We sat and did breathing exercises, working on our meditation skills, and then I had her try moving a rock without touching it. She actually managed it about 4 times out of 10, and I had to wonder if she had 'raised the skill to a 1' yet. Hard to know, really. All the teaching checks in the world just helped her spend “xp” which she already admitted she didn't have. Wow did I have it a lot easier than other people! *Still, proud as heck she's come as far as she has! She's really serious about learning to use her powers, I guess. And can I blame her? Actually I wonder if I could ask question magic if she has the equivalent of a 1 rating in the skill?* We got some food, there was a lot left over, it seemed the cooks had been working hard all morning to prepare enough for everyone on both sides of the walls. *Another show of good faith I suppose, feeding those that would be your enemy.* After all this place could easily be resupplied, so it wasn't kind to be stingy especially if the whole thing was a misunderstanding. It was taking awhile, I hoped it was going well, and that the two kingdoms were not going to come to blows any time soon.

After that I found a very small stone that would easily fit in the hand, and we sat playing a “guessing game” to work on Sarah's ESP skill. I figured we had done physical stuff all morning it was time for a mental workout. She didn't do much better than chance but even a 1 rating in ESP could be useful. *She's trying to do it now, which is actually harder if she really was using it before while looking at Midnight. Some more paradox for her, but really for*

anyone training ESP. She's straining to hear what she should be simply trusting herself to know.

Finally the doors opened again and Bill started shouting orders. He was giving them back a portion of their weapons it seemed, as they were going back across the mountains and he wouldn't leave them defenseless on the journey. They handed over probably 1 in 5 swords, and the group made ready to leave. Midnight came over to me.

"So what was it?" I asked, unable to hold my curiosity back any longer. Not that I had that weakness 'proper' as in on my status page but anyone would have been dying to know at that point. "Why all the wagons? Why attack now, after so long?"

"They wouldn't say," she answered. "Just some crap about poor harvests. I can believe it, they all looked thin and scarfed down everything that was brought out. Didn't even wait for our side to take some in case we poisoned them, they were that hungry. Weird, if you ask me. Bill has said he would petition the king for merchant caravans focusing on food to be sent through the tunnels we have. They're leaving their carts and horses and such, if you can believe it. The soldiers are supposed to go collect them. Said they didn't want to drag them back over the mountains again. He's going to see what they're worth and have that much food shipped for free at first. Seemed grateful, and desperate. None wanted to come here and attack us, according to them, but it speaks volumes that they went and did it anyway."

"Better check them for hidden compartments or magic," I cautioned, thinking strange thoughts about wooden horses. "Could be a trap."

"They insisted it wasn't, and they had a truthstone Don checked over. It was legit. But yeah, Bill isn't stupid he'll probably keep them outside the walls."

"Fair enough. And the truthstone said their words about the harvest were true?"

"It went green. But they must have rain magic, and crop magic over there same as we do. Insect repellent magic? Sure. Though maybe something got in the soil? I'm no farmer, I don't know what can go wrong. We've never missed a harvest, that I can recall. They're hiding something, but wouldn't budge on telling us what it was."

"I suppose it's nothing to do with me," I mused. "Maybe we'll check the kingdom out one of these days, see if I can help at all. Now, I'm ready for the grilling if you are. But we can't do it here, there are some things you'll need to see to believe. So how about a quick flight?"

"You're kidnapping me?" she asked.

"It's not kidnapping if you come willingly."

"I'm not sure you know all the ways kidnapping happens..."

"Come on you," I insisted and pulled her over to the truthstone. holding it up for her to see. "I swear that I will return Midnight Toker to this location after a brief flight, tour of our camp, question and answer session, and flight back. Maybe some dinner depending on how long all that takes."

Green.

"Furthermore I wish her no harm..."

Green.

"...and must show, not tell, her certain things if she is going to consent- to travel with us."

Green.

"I'll go tell Bill we're going to scout the area. We even could. Check to make sure nothing else is sneaking up on us, and show the area is patrolled by a dragon. They see her flying around it adds to our credibility. Can you believe they thought it was some kind of illusion at first? Boy oh boy were they shocked when the truthstone went green!"

"Trust but verify, I guess?"

Bill seemed to think scouting an excellent idea, he made shooing motions after Midnight spoke to him. I meanwhile put my armor back on, put the truthstone in the pocket dimension, and told Sarah we were leaving for a bit.

"She's not taking my seat, I'm still up front right?"

"Yes, she can be behind me," I told her.

“Fine.”

She wound up gripping me pretty tightly as we flew around the fort, checking the mountain and then heading away from it. We landed at the camp, I had of course been using compass magic the whole time to keep track of which direction we were going and question magic helped keep us on track as well. It was fine, don't think about it too much.

“That was amazing!” Midnight gushed, sliding off Firebrand. She started rubbing her legs. “Ow! I'm going to have to get used to my legs being spread open like that. If I decide to stay with you, I mean. Uh, maybe I could have phrased that better let me try again?”

“No need, I understand,” I told her. “She's pretty thicc, with two c's. Even at the neck, dragons aren't really built for riding. Welcome to our camp.”

She looked around, clearly confused where the chain link fence had come from.

“I didn't want animals getting into the tent,” I explained, without explaining a thing. “Now, let's get this going so we can get you back.” I dug the truthstone out of my pocket dimension and set it on the table. “I'll go first. I need to know you can be trusted with my secrets, then I'll answer any questions you may have.”

Green.

“I can be trusted,” she told me a little petulantly.

Green.

“I know you believe that now, but it's a little more complex than that. Do you, Midnight Toker, swear that no matter what you see and hear today at this camp, no matter how strange, fantastical, or unbelievable, you will hold it in confidence and not tell anyone?”

“Yes,” she replied carefully.

Green.

“And after revealing my secrets to you, thereby cementing your trust in me, will you reveal your secrets to me?”

“Yes,” she agreed, with a tiny nod of her head. I didn't need ESP to see how nervous that one word made her.

“...Fine,” I said, pausing for dramatic effect. “Then let's get you asking the right questions. First, come meet Firebrand.” I held up a finger like I was calling a bird.

“I've been flying on the dragon for- by the angels!” Firebrand transformed into her fairy form and flew over to my finger, where she lightly stood. She gave a little curtsy, holding a dress that didn't exist, and then waved. “How? What?” She was stuck in a loop, looking back at where the dragon had been and now at the tiny fairy that was silently laughing at her. She was sitting and kicking her little feet, rocking back and forth.

“Firebrand is not a dragon,” I told her. “Nor is she a fairy, a stick, a larger fairy, or even a living creature. She is a magical construct technically controlled by my will but thanks to some angelic intervention is more like a person. She can act on her own without my direct intervention and should be treated as a friend and party member. She cannot speak in any form but does understand everything. Her powers- her main abilities- chief among her abilities is shape-shift and changing her size, as you've just seen. She's also an unstoppable killing machine. Yes she is, aren't you, yes you are!” I tickled her with a finger and she wiggled in place.

“Ni- Nice to meet you,” Midnight managed.

She jumped off my finger, growing to person size and stuck out a hand. They shook, and she took her default appearance, winding around me. I patted her head.

“This is what she looks like when she first is summoned. Actually, you two could go swimming if you wanted. Seraphina, you already know all of what we're going to talk about on my end. I won't accept her secrets without you present unless she strongly objects.”

“It's... fine?” she decided.

“Yeah, okay. Come on Firebrand, race you!” She took off towards the pond and Midnight sat.

“I heard rumors of spells like that but to think that dragon was one the whole time...”

“Now you see why I had you swear. I'll start at the beginning, and you can ask me about anything I skip over. My story here began after I died, and was offered the choice, by an angel, to enter the afterlife or go between worlds so I could continue to make a difference in

people's lives. Most choose the afterlife. I did not. That was only days ago. But you may be thinking 'so how can she have an eight year old daughter?' I'll get to that..."

I told her the whole story. How I picked being an adult not a child. What I could do, how I could do it, and how I adopted a daughter and then the angel patron of childbirth made it true overnight. How much of this needed to be kept secret from Seraphina, lest she go mad with paradox. Midnight asked questions about my designs on the world, like did I plan to take over the kingdom or whatever. Thankfully, I did not, and the truthstone backed me up. Meanwhile I asked her how good a mage she was, and she said better than average. She also practiced with a blade which she demonstrated after calling one out of thin air with magic. She insisted she would pull her weight in the group, and even without the truthstone I believed her. She told me a little of her story too, how she was fairly independent a long time, selling her services as a mercenary mage. I got the feeling she was working up to her big secret, and let her move at her own pace. *Anyway I promised Serephina she could be here for the big reveal.*

"But what's your long term goal?" she asked finally.

"I have no idea," I told her. "It hasn't been long enough. And I don't remember enough of my old world to really improve this one in any capacity. Pretend to invent technology and whatnot. Short of on an individual basis doing jobs with my magic no one else wants to. Do I need more than that? Watching my daughter grow up? Visiting her kids? Whatever. I'm immortal, long terms plans for me mean in like a thousand years or more. Not ten years from now, like you might ask literally anyone else. It's possible the angel sent me here to this world and this time for a reason, some big thing only I can do, so I'll be looking out for that but otherwise, learning, studying, living my best life in places like this. What could be better?"

"And I could be part of that?"

"If you wanted it."

"I sort of think I do..."

"And Bill won't be mad at you? I don't want you making a previous employer angry you left suddenly. Especially as things being what they are."

She shook her head. "Being a mercenary has advantages, this is just such a time. I can come and go as I please, to a certain extent. We got through this crisis, I'm sure the kingdom will be sending some court magicians to secure the place. I won't be needed, as I'm more expensive. Because I'm willing to stay on the edge of nowhere and deal with soldiers all day long. He'll be relieved he won't have to have any awkward conversations with me, honestly. Not my first rodeo, if you can believe it, I'm older than I look."

I leaned forward excitedly, starting to smile and putting a hand to my ear. "So am I hearing a yes?"

"You're not using some kind of mental power on me? I can leave at any time?"

I recoiled as if struck. "Midnight, I swear to you that yes, while I do have mental powers and yes I could have used them on you," *not that it would stick, compulsion only lasts a few minutes*, "I have not and *would not* use a mental power on you at any time." *I mean, can you even imagine?*

Green.

I went on. "Look, I admit I'm a bit of a monster myself. I'll stomp a man's head in if he threatens by daughter and walk away feeling no guilt at all but you're a friend. At least I hope we can become friends. Unless I was pulling you out of the way of a falling rock or something I would never, *ever*, use a power on you of any kind. Not without your consent. Like if you wanted wings or something, but you would be in total control of that. Influence you mentally? No. Never. You have my absolute word."

Yellow.

"I mean unless I was pranking you and it was harmless. I.. I guess I should leave that possibility open? But never mental stuff. A harmless spell or ability, yes. Like giving you bunny ears and tail and Serephina laughs at you and then you realize and we all have a good laugh? Sure."

Green.

“And you can leave whenever you want, just like with Bill. *Buuuuut* you have to look my daughter in the eyes and explain yourself while she cries her heart out and begs you to stay.”

Green.

“Wow, laying it on a little thick there, aren’t we?”

“Not at all!”

Yellow.

“Hey, work with me here you stupid orb!”

Red.

We both laughed.

“Okay, okay, let’s go tell my former boss to take a hike!”

“Welcome to the team!” I gestured and a portal opened. “We can be there and back before Seraphina even realizes we’re gone. She can swim for hours believe me. And Firebrand has like two dozen aquatic forms she likes to cycle through, you should see her mermaid...”

Midnight collected her belongings, reported not seeing anything in the air that further threatened the fort, and got her final pay. I did one more question magic and got a no answer to “will anything threaten this fort in the next week” so I was confident us leaving wouldn’t make more trouble for them. Bill thanked me for what we had done and I wished him luck dealing with the fallout. He said he would need it. I said goodbye to Mary and Ripjaw too, who promised to work hard together to make a ritual right away. With that we were back at camp and a bit awkwardly standing there. *Yeah, gonna be an adjustment period, until we’re comfortable to ‘let our hair down’ around each other.*

“So what now? It’s pretty late to start any training today,” Midnight told me.

Don’t you have secrets to tell me? Or are you stalling? “We’ve been doing other training, let her play for now. I thought I might upgrade your equipment, actually.” *I suppose she could just be waiting like she promised. So let’s do this, wanted to anyway.* I tapped my own armor. “You’re part of the team, how about a fresh design and material? So people know we’re... together.” I was pretty sure I blushed a little at that.

“Yeah, I guess I can ask you now without seeming nosy. What is that stuff?”

“Spider silk armor,” I said with a smirk. Her eyes widened and she raised her hand questioningly. I nodded and she ran her hands over my chest plate.

“No way! It really is, isn’t it? That texture is unmistakable. I thought it must be given the color but that stuff is super rare on the surface. You really got hold of some?”

“In a manner of speaking. Let me do some magic and see what we can come up with for you. I’ve told you what I can do, now it’s time to show you.”

Not long after Seraphina came back to check on us, drying herself off with a towel. She stopped dead looking at Midnight in her new armor, pure white like mine but styled the way she wanted it.

“You’re staying!” she shrieked. “Oh thank you, thank you! This is gonna be great!”

Chapter 23

Cooking

When: Five minutes later

Where: At the campsite

“Cooking?” Midnight asked, looking over at the two of us. Seraphina, hair still dripping wet from swimming had pestered Midnight to make sure she hadn’t told any secrets without her there, and what had changed her mind. She answered as best she could as Firebrand turned back into a person sized fairy and started helping me get dinner ready. “She helps you with that too? I guess you said she was almost a person in her own right, does she eat as well?”

I laughed, turning to look back at her. “No, she doesn’t eat. But her description in the books says she has all the same skills as me, and I know cooking so she does too. I’m happy for her help, actually. I should say that more often.” I turned to her. “Thanks for your help with everything, Firebrand.”

She gave it “don’t even mention it gesture” with her free hand and went back to chopping vegetables.

“It’s not fair,” Seraphina huffed, finally drying her hair off. “You raise your rating in martial arts or something or she just gets it for free. I have to work and work to get any better. She just gets summoned out of mana itself knowing more than she did the day before.”

Firebrand put the knife down, spun, put a finger up to pull one eye open more and stuck out her tongue. She responded in kind.

“Hang on,” Midnight put in. “You just were telling me about alchemy, and ESP skills, and telekinesis, and all that. Are you saying that *in addition* to being a shape-shifting dragon that’s ridiculously strong, with scales harder than steel plate, breathes fire, sets things on fire with a touch, on *top* of all that- she can do all of your stuff too?”

Serephina and I both went still, staring at each other.

“Uh, hello? Did I break your brains or something? Are you communicating telepathically or something? You said you could do that right?”

“No, we’re...” I trailed off, looking at Firebrand. “I never actually thought about it that way.”

Firebrand smiled like she was about to share a big secret, and put her arms out to the sides in a T pose. She had two fingers on each hand out, the rest curled up.

“No, it can’t...” I muttered.

She smiled wider. One arm went up, the other went down. They met in the middle touching to make a cross shape.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!”

She mouthed something, no sound coming out. With an outrush of air, two identical copies of Firebrand appeared, one to her left, and one to her right. They all started shaking each other’s hands and kissing each other’s cheeks.

“Hug pile!” Seraphina shrieked, throwing the towel aside and piling into the group. They hugged her from every side.

“You didn’t know they could do that, did you?” Midnight asked.

“They were never supposed to,” I breathed. “By God, do you know what this means?”

“Maybe? Uh, there’s only the three of us here, right? And now three copies of Firebrand?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Then who’s grilling?”

“Grilling?” I swung my gaze over to the grill, and a familiar person was happily watching the meat and veg warming up.

"Hiya!" Mumiah said to everyone. "Looking good here, I can use some of these spices right?"

Things were moving a bit too fast for me, but I tried my best to get my brain caught up. "Uh, Midnight, allow me to present my, uh..."

"I could be referred to as a guardian angel," Mumiah suggested.

"Okay then, my guardian angel. This is Mumiah, who sent me here."

"Really?" Seraphina asked, extracting herself from the hug pile. She ran to hug the angel, who knelt to take her into her arms. "It's so great to finally meet you. Thank you, thank you, thank you for sending my mom here. I can't believe it's been so long and I finally get to thank you in person. Did you get my prayers? Please say you did!"

"I did, little one," she assured the girl. She patted her head. "There was no way any angel wouldn't hear a prayer that sincere. Oh, get up. The girl has the right idea."

I looked over to see Midnight kneeling, head down. "Holy angel, this one is not fit to stand in your-"

"Knock it off, sister. I wouldn't expect that from any *mortal* around here so certainly not from *you*. Honestly, what must you all think of us? We never asked for that kind of behavior from the start, you know?"

"Sister?" both Seraphina and I gasped.

"It's part of the reason I'm here. Hey, we can do all the hugs you want later but I really do need to keep an eye on this grill if you don't want blackened chicken for dinner. Or whatever this magical meat is. We'll call it chicken. That's easiest don't you think?"

"You better," she threatened. "You need at least one hundred hugs as a thank you for bringing my mom here."

"I'll start a tally." She was let go and went back to the grill. "You've got 99 to go."

Meanwhile Midnight looked completely lost but slowly got up. "An angel, grilling? But..."

"Well someone has to," she muttered. "You're going to be a bit busy with revelations for a moment but I wanted to get this done before dark."

"The last book of the bible?" Midnight asked, shocked. "Is she here because this is the end times and she's gathering people to be the four riders or-"

"What? Oh, goodness, no I mean the whole- her!" She gestured with the tongs. Had I made tongs? I must have made tongs. We looked over at Firebrand, who had shrunk down to fairy size again and was currently dancing in a circle with her other selves. "To start. And then my sister has a few things to tell you, but one thing at a time. That's what I mean by revelations. Secrets being told, get it? Finish up with Firebrand first."

"What else is there?" I asked. "She has my skills. Clearly she was never meant to but this is huge. Now that I know this I'll have to have her use them."

Mumiah was shaking her head. "Take it a step further."

"Further?" I almost shouted. "How much further? There's three of her, that means three huge dragons I can field in an instant. One dragon terrifies people around here."

"Tell me why she was never 'meant' to have this power?" Midnight asked.

"I put the books on the table," Mumiah told her. "Go through it with her."

I looked, and the paragon books were indeed on the table. *She can reach into my pocket dimension? Or are these another copy?* "Okay, look." I picked up the main book. "When I got sent here I was offered my choice of systems to operate under. I glossed over this before but this is the physical manifestation of the rules I would follow. I got to reinvent my physical body and capabilities as a reward for my good service through life I guess. Apparently I knew this system well in life and Mumiah said it was flexible enough and close enough to where I might go, so we went with it. This is the foundation," I tapped the book, "explaining the core rules." I set it down and picked up the Demongate High book. "This one is a setting. The rules for a story, if you will. It explains how the supernatural powers work, and is where my progenitor nature and all my supernatural skills came from." I set it down and picked up the far larger Pyre book. No really, you could kill someone hitting them with it, or crush a mouse on accident just setting it down on top of them. It was ridiculously huge. "This is a continuation of that story, after the world is destroyed. Supernatural power exists, but has been supplanted by magic. In this book," I pointed to Demongate High, "magic is considered evil. Given only by demons, and even those that have it naturally, of which there are only a

few, are suspect. So at no point would a person that has access to both magic and true martial artist techniques exist. Until I came along, and was told I could pick and choose what I wanted. I didn't understand the full implications until just now." *And given so many background points. You would have to take so many weaknesses and get a ton of XP to manage both being a mage and a martial artist. It wouldn't work. I'm the outlier.*

"Do you understand though," Mumiah asked. "Go further. One step. Further."

"I don't know what you mean though."

"Oh, oh!" Seraphina's hand shot into the air. "Teacher, teacher, pick me!"

"You thought of something?"

"Remember back at the playground?"

"If you mention unicorns one more time so help me..."

"Not in front of the angel, mom. No, remember what happened? You used spirit clones to watch all the pools and start lunch all at the same time. You were surprised to see three copies of Firebrand, just like now. You said it was because you were maintaining the spell, and the ring it was inside duplicated too. So if you did it again, you would have, uh... maybe I do need to learn more math." She silently counted. "Nine!"

Almost against my will, my arms moved into position. My hands formed the seal. I spoke the words. "Shadow clones!" To my left and right two clones appeared, and I glanced over at the fairy circle, which now had 9 fairies in it. They started shaking hands and cheek kissing again. Naturally they all wanted to meet each new copy of themselves which was going to take awhile and how would they even keep themselves straight? They looked like they were having a ball so maybe they didn't even care to. I looked between my left and right clone.

"Well, that happened," said the one on the right.

"Can you even imagine if all nine of them got serious?" the one on the left asked. "I really could rule the kingdom. If it wasn't smashed to rubble before the king could surrender. Heck, every kingdom could fall to me! That's a real danger I think. Nine shape-shifting dragons, more powerful than any fleet, or army on earth. We. Would. Prevail."

"There's no way I should need this much firepower!" I protested.

Mumiah regarded me seriously. "Agreed. We in Heaven hope you never have to call upon this amount of force in your time here. But now you know you can. And you may work to combine other skills? I can only hope we've chosen correctly." She turned back, wings drooping a little. "There are those who believe the risk was too great. But here we all are."

The other two clones nodded, and I dismissed them. We were back to only 3 Firebrand, who kicked at the air a little like "shucks I was just getting to know them mom!" and then there was only one of her as well. She vanished, and reappeared at my shoulder, sitting down.

Spirit step. Have they really sent me here with this power to counter something only this level of power can fight? And what will the land look like after I'm done?

"Is it too late to back out?" Midnight asked timidly. "Or should I go the other way and invite you to bed right now? I feel I either need to run away and warn the world you're coming or be the first in your inevitable harem so I rise as you do. Those clone things were *real*, right? They were you? I could have multiple... you... in bed... Wait does Sarah know about..."

"She's cool with it," I told her. *Somehow? I must have had some kind of talk with her in the past? Or people are just more progressive here? All this paradox stuff that that happened when she became my daughter is sort of annoying. I don't really know where I stand with her some of the time, what we've 'discussed' in the past. But she runs around naked enough maybe it's not as big a deal here? I guess even those purists back there didn't make too much of an issue of it, and they would be the ones to do so if anyone was going to.*

"She really should have spent the night with that unicorn," Seraphina mused, sounding wistful. "Given her the best night of her life. But I'm glad you're thinking of the possibilities. Personally I can't wait to learn that technique! I mean not just for that!" She had the good graces to blush heavily.

"Oh boy," Midnight managed, looking shocked.

Mumiah chuckled. "Ah, sister. Your time of hiding is over, accept it and be happy. Let me tell you a little secret to make it easier; good souls go to Heaven. Bad souls go to Hell."

"That's no secret!" she protested as Mumiah turned the meat.

"Let me finish. Pure souls get the choice. She's already told you about the choice her soul made to come here. She is a pure soul, you have the word of an angel on that. Tell her, let her take some of your burden. You're not alone anymore. She will do as she has said, and keep your secret. She's one of the good ones, I promise."

She seemed to struggle with herself. Seraphina went over to her and took her hands, looking up at her. "It's okay, Midnight. We're all here to support you. Whatever it is, it won't drive us away. It's just us, and you're safe. This is our little corner of the world, and a safe place for us to be ourselves. I mean I still haven't even put on clothes after swimming! Be at ease. Okay?"

I'm proud of you, daughter.

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath and let it out. She opened her eyes again. "Okay, kid. You're quite the pair, you know that? I'll need my hands back." She started taking her armor off, dropping it into a pile next to her. Seraphina had stepped back.

"I think I like where this is going so far!" she decided. "How about you mom?"

"Sarah!" I chided. "This seems serious."

"Perfect time to lighten the mood then. Yeah, take it all off!" she shouted, as Midnight proceeded to do just that, her top joining the pile.

What in the world?

She stood there half naked, hands awkwardly at her sides.

"I don't get it," Seraphina announced. "Are you taking the rest off or what? I expected you had a clockwork heart or something but you look totally normal. What's this big secret then?"

"I took it off to show you this," she finally said, and turned around. Again she looked normal. But when she moved her hair aside, there it was. On her back was something I hadn't expected to see. It was thin, white, and taller than it was wide.

On her back- was a ward.

"Hang on, you have artificers on this world?" I asked, stepping up to take a look. I may have 'accidentally' put my hand too low and traced her spine, making her shout "your hands are cold!" as she wiggled around but she didn't move away from me. I touched it, and yes it was a ward. It was made of paper with symbols on it. It was mystically stuck there. I hadn't made any, I didn't have access to ink at the moment just paper, but I knew how. I had spent 5xp on it in the room to make sure I had a ward memorized and knew how to make more. This was clearly a supernatural power, as it didn't radiate to magic sense. (I calculated a 6 but I was touching it so I was pretty sure)

"I don't know what that is," she admitted. "These are made by a priest I found. To help me manage my... condition. Look, before I show you, I need to explain. What do you know about elves?" She dropped her hair again and turned to face me.

"I can tell you what my books say about them," I hedged. "But maybe you should walk us through it."

"Okay." She breathed again. "So, angels watch the world, right? When great deeds are done, or when those who can act as paladins are found holy power can be used to reward, or help those that wish to battle evil."

"Or just if someone needs a new tail!" Seraphina announced, running around me, grabbing my tails, and swishing them to either side of me.

"Hey watch it don't pull them!" I told her.

"Sorry."

Midnight chuckled. "Yes, or getting a new tail. They've been watching humanity a long time. And sometimes an angel will wish to join us here. Perhaps they fall in love with someone, or they see a cause they believe they wish to fight for directly. There is a ceremony that can be performed, that strips an angel of most of their power, and sends them here. Now, the first angels that did this, I'm told, were sort of clueless as to what to do next but those that came since then have had a support network in place. We call these angels that have come to live among us elves, or 'light elves' which I'll get to in a second. Their ears become

feathered, they retain their celestial grace and are essentially immortal if not killed. I don't know what happens if they are, they don't have souls. But I'm an elf too." She touched her ears. "So where did I come from? There is an even deeper ceremony that can be performed for those that truly wish to experience mortal life. A fire is lit, a great blaze to test us, to make sure we are ready for what is to come. Those angels that walk through that fire are further stripped of their celestial power, beyond what light elves experience. The fire turns us black, cracks our skin and is agony to our very cores. We come out changed. Our skin is healed but forever darkened."

"Oh!" Seraphina gasped. "Did you... did you?"

She shook her head. "I was never an angel. I did not feel the heat of those flames. I will explain. Those that pass through the fire are granted something- a soul. We come to earth knowing our time is short, but that one day we will return to Heaven with a new appreciation for mortal life. But it is impossible to totally divest oneself of holy power. We live much longer than humans. The oldest 'dark elf' as we're called I believe was recorded as being five hundred and sixty. I myself am only sixty eight, considered by many a child. Society won't even take you seriously until you're at least a hundred and fifty. But recall how I said many angels come into this world for love? Elves breed true. Light elves, given their immortal nature hardly feel the need to reproduce. But they can, and a new elf is born. We dark elves, on the other hand, know our time is limited. We, to put it mildly, go at it like rabbits. That's why there's so many of us in human society. We were kids once. Just like you." She scratched Seraphina's ears.

"Oh, I bet you were so cute as a baby!"

Wait 500 years is 'short?' I guess when you compare it to the other type of elf...

"I assure you I was, according to my parents," she agreed. "Oh, word of warning, I guess? If you're invited to a dark elf party, based on what I've just told you, I think you know what to expect. We are very... open. About things."

"I get the picture."

"So what does this have to do with me?" she went on with a nod. "I've already said I didn't walk through the flames. Neither did my parents. Our line has been here two generations. But sometimes..." She trailed off.

"Sometimes an elf will find their way back to us," Mumiah picked up. "And it's not just elves that experience this. Those with a bit of draconic blood in their past sometimes become dragons later in life. Those with demonic blood can become oni, or raiju. Some consider it a curse, some a blessing. Only They know why it happens." She pointed up.

Hold on, putting all this together... "You're becoming an angel?" I asked.

"Yes," she answered simply. "And with that..." She turned again, moving her hair out of the way. "If you would do the... I won't say honors. But please, prepare yourself, this will be a bit of a shock."

I stepped up to her back again. "This isn't going to hurt you, is it?"

She shook her head. "It's who I am. If you know anything about angels, you know their true natures are very inhuman. This," she gestured to Mumiah, "is most likely not her true form."

"It's not," she agreed. "May want to squint a bit as you take it off. Go ahead."

"Okay," I told her. I took the edge of the paper and- "Hold on, you have more of these, right? This one is going to burn up when I take it off?"

"They are single use, yes."

They are wards. Amazing!

"I go back for a month's supply at a time. I do try to wear each one as long as possible, of course. The priest is very nice about it but does insist upon a donation for their work. I have more in the bag. Why?"

"Because I'm pretty sure I can make this," I told her. "With some inactive ones to study I can be sure later but yeah, no more worrying about running out or whatever. I can make you as many as you want, I've got the XP so that's no problem. I just need to buy ink to duplicate-"

"What?" she demanded, whirling. I had the piece of paper in my fingers which easily tore off. The entire place lit up and I threw my hand over my eyes and staggered back.

Chapter 24

Sorry

When: A second later

Where: At the campsite

“Sorry!” Midnight shrieked. “Oh I knew this was a bad idea why did I let that angel talk me into this. Sorry! I’ll get a new suppressor out of the bag.”

“Wait,” I cried, blinking my eyes against the sudden light. “It’s fine, I was just really close to... you?” I looked what used to be Midnight over, and to my surprise she was completely gone. Her pants and armor were just laying there in a heap, and floating above them was just a sphere of light. About as wide as her shoulders had been, not that I had been studying them in any detail or anything. She radiated a bright light, and everything around her seemed more vibrant. I could even see the leaves of nearby trees turning towards her, and in the silence I was sure I could hear some kind of heavenly chorus or trumpets?

“Wow,” Seraphina decided on. “This is what you really look like? It’s amazing!”

“It’s completely impractical,” she sniffed. I noticed she glowed a bit on time with her words, and started to walk around her.

“Yes, I’m a sphere,” she spat. “A big old ball of light. With no hands. Super useful to everybody. Now you see why I wear the suppressor?”

“This is certainly not what I was expecting,” I admitted. “Mumiah, explanation please?”

“She is becoming a virtue,” she began. “Maker of miracles. Somewhat near the middle of the angelic choir, and believe it could have been worse.”

I vaguely recall seeing their entry in the book. Didn’t pay much attention because it wasn’t relevant to my build, but it’s nice to know the author got this much right. How... How did the author get this much right?

“How can it be worse than this?” Midnight demanded.

“You could be a floating scepter, or have four faces. Have you ever seen a ophan? They’re just wheels of fire that have a ton of eyes. Really, you got off easily.”

“You have got to be kidding me. I’m a *ball*.”

“I think you’re beautiful either way,” Seraphina told her. “So deal with it. But how did you put the ward on with no hands?”

“Magic,” she admitted. “Telekinesis is a spell I always take.”

“Oh that explains it. Can I still hug you?”

“You want to hug a giant ball of light?”

“Uh, yeah? You feel down and I want to make you feel better. I’ll have to squeeze you extra hard because you can’t hug me back but I’ll accept one from you later to make up for it. When you’re back in elf form.”

“Sure, it’s fine?”

“Yay!” She hugged her. “It’s like hugging sunshine!” she giggled.

“And you’re really okay with this?” she asked.

Hard to know who she’s talking to, there’s no face... I put a hand on her and it was sort of like touching sunshine. Words came to me. “Let me put it to you this way, Midnight; If your heart’s been longing, but you’ve been afraid to try. If sorrow kept you company and the dance has passed you by? I’ll lift you up, I’ll blaze with you, across the moonlight sky. I accept you in any form Midnight.”

“...Thanks...”

And now for a bit more levity? “And really, this is great! I love reading in bed but I could never get the light quite right. I’m guessing you’re going to be *fantastic* at being a night light! You don’t mind standing motionless for long stretches do you? Hovering, I guess I should say?”

"I would really like to scowl at you right now, not having a face is really inconvenient. But pretend I'm scowling."

"Don't let her fool you though," Mumiah told us. "She's more like you than she knows, Sylvia. Midnight, explain your power to her. You haven't really begun to take on all aspects of the virtue but you have the most important one."

"Oh, oh, what did you get?" Seraphina asked, stepping back from the hug. "I bet it's something great!"

"It's pretty great," she admitted, as though saying this pained her greatly. "Don't know if it makes up for all... this. Imagine I'm gesturing to myself. My mana core seems to contain all spells. When I need one I can call it forth, inscribe it on my core, and cast it. I'm then stuck with it for seven days before it vanishes again and that space is freed up. The larger and more complex the formula the fewer I can inscribe of course but I've got room for a decent selection most of the time. That's why I'm so useful as a mercenary, whatever spell someone needs I can probably come up with it. I usually have most of the space free."

"That is shockingly similar to what I do," I admitted. "But I can't ever clear the space. Very interesting. And here I was thinking I was just getting a tutor for Seraphina. This is a real bonus. Apart from the night light thing which honestly is the real win for me personally."

"Sure, go ahead, joke about my being a floating ball of light. It's fine."

You would prefer rejection? I suppose it's hard to process what is unexpected.

"How did you wind up like this anyway?" Seraphina asked.

"Just woke up one day and there I was," she replied. "Floating in air and lighting the place up. Shocked quite a few people, let me tell you. Thankfully I'm clearly angelic, you probably haven't missed the musical accompaniment?"

"No, I hear it," I told her.

Seraphina looked around. "Oh yeah."

"Yeah. Well, the people I was with bundled me up," she sighed, "in a box, specifically. And carried me to a church to figure out what to do with me at that point. I didn't resist, how could I? Even if I ran, everyone would just see a ball of light floating around and I would have a whole gang after me. Oh, the church people were very excited about the whole thing, they recognized what I was. But they realized I wasn't quite ready to leave my mortal existence behind, so they asked around and finally the priest I told you about earlier came forward and helped me regain my old form and suppress all the effects. So I'm at least able to live a mostly normal life. If you don't count the absolute terror at my suppressor coming off at an inopportune time and revealing my secret."

"She couldn't survive Heaven as she is," Mumiah explained. "Not until her transformation is complete. So that really was the only thing she could have done." She paused. "Well, I mean she *could* have stayed as a ball of light but it would be pretty awkward with everyone staring at her as she walked around town."

"How long will her transformation take?" Seraphina asked.

"As long as it takes," she replied cryptically.

"At the church, the two theories were that I would change fairly slowly over the course of my whole life. When I 'died' in four hundred and fifty years or whatever I would simply rise to my full angelic potential, finding myself in Heaven as a true angel. The other theory was it would be complete before then, and I would simply wake up one day and not be an elf anymore. Right now spells dealing with divination and such name me an elf still, despite my looking like this. One day that won't be true."

"I wonder if divination magic could give you a more definite number of days?" I asked.

"Frankly I've been afraid to ask. Whatever, it'll happen when it happens I guess. I've lived with it this long, I'll continue to do so. Anyway, I was brought to where the priest worked, so I could get back there when I needed more tags, and I've been going there ever since with teleportation magic. It's been about thirty years? I would have to think back."

"That's fine, don't worry about it," I assured her. "Well!" I stretched. "This has been informative. Midnight, I'll pick your stuff up and fold it so it says nice instead of just lying there in a heap. If you're comfortable like this feel free to be your true self for now. We are fairly isolated here so I doubt anyone would come investigate a bright light moving around. That's

why I don't insist Sarah get dressed. Or I can get you a ward and change you back. However you're most comfortable."

"I appreciate it, I really do," she assured me. "But eating is much easier with, you know, hands?"

"This is almost ready," Mumiah announced. "I can dish it up soon if you want to get changed."

"I guess that settles it," I told her. "I can go through your bag?"

"One second. You really think no one will see my glow?"

"Even if someone does, I'll chase them off with my dragon and tell them it's none of their business!" I assured her. Firebrand flew over and saluted, clearly happy to be of assistance.

She barked a laugh. "I'll take that offer. In exchange, Seraphina, how about I take you up on your offer to swim after dinner?"

"Can you really?"

"Sure." Before her, a five sized core appeared, flashing with magic. A moment later the familiar dark elf form of Midnight stood here, but with much longer hair that was glowing. "There we go. I'll have that one for seven days but it's fine. I still have plenty of potential space left on my core."

"So neat!"

"Shape-shift?" I asked. She nodded.

"She'll get that as an inherent ability one of these days," Mumiah assured us. "Take a look at the book if you want to know more. That entry is pretty accurate."

"Sounds good." She gathered her hair up, sighed, and let it fall again. "As long as some part of me is glowing, it seems this works fine. I guess my hair is good enough for now."

"Oh, oh, next time just do glowing nails, that would be so cool!" Seraphina suggested. "Or like your eyeballs?"

She considered. "Either could work."

She went over to the pile of clothes and armor and sighed. She looked over at Seraphina, and then back at me. "I don't know if it's because I'm a big ball of light now or what but I actually hate wearing clothes. It's even weirder when I'm shape-shifted like this. I still feel I'm a ball of light, you know? Do you mind if..." She kicked her pants.

I immediately threw off all of my clothes. "There, now we're all the same. Well, not some of us!" I looked over at Mumiah. "Come on, off with the robe you can't be the only one! It's not clothing *optional* around here anymore."

"I'm leaving after this," she told me. "You all run around naked for all I care. I did what I had to do here. And I don't mean the cooking."

"Thanks for doing that, by the way. Huh, I'll need to make a new plate and some utensils. Let me get on that."

So while Midnight picked up her stuff and set it aside I did that, and Mumiah dished up our meal.

She said grace, and we ate, the spices or perhaps the fact it was cooked by an angel made all the difference. *Have to remember to analyze them tonight so they can be replenished.*

"This is great stuff!" I gushed to Mumiah. "Thank you for doing this."

"Sure thing. Don't get too used to it. I just figured my little sister needed a push and I didn't want my cooking skills to get rusty."

Yes, why would one cook in Heaven? How did she learn in the first place? But an angel wouldn't lie, now would they? Humm...

"They really did make the difference, didn't they?" Seraphina agreed. "Is it always going to taste this good?"

"I have a 1 in cooking, kid," I reminded her. "Maybe when I have a 5 I can get close. I think she combined the spices to their maximum effect. I'll just read the label, use one at a time, and hope for the best until I have a higher rating."

Mumiah chuckled. "Looks like my work here is done for the evening. I'll see you girls later. Maybe with a cookbook."

Now that is something we could use.

"Thanks for visiting!" Seraphina cried, springing up and hugging her again. "Auntie Angel! I still owe you 98 hugs!"

"I'll be sure to come back often so I can get them," she promised, as Seraphina stepped back. She spread her wings, holy light and the heavenly chorus filled the area in a cone of light from above, and she rose up a few meters before giving a little wave to Sarah and vanishing.

"Show off," I muttered. "She never did that stuff before. Here one moment and gone the next."

"You know," Seraphina decided as she sat down again, "she may be fairly lonely too."

"She's an angel!" protested Midnight. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh yeah? Let's look at the facts. Fact: angels probably don't go around lying."

"Perish the thought!"

"Good. Fact: only pure souls, like mom here, are offered the choice. She said so herself."

"So?"

"So she also said very few souls *get* the choice. And fewer still take mom's path. Angels have an assigned task, right?"

"...That's the commonly held belief."

"So her task is doing this. She doesn't get to do it very often, according to her. So this may be the most interaction she's had with others in some time. I doubt there's water cooler talk in *Heaven*. Can you see angels standing around the halls of some office building, chatting? I don't think they have families, or kids to look after after. Just their task. So maybe she really only has us to talk to right now. She didn't seem a bit lonely to you? I mean she cooked our dinner, she didn't have to do that. She could have just showed up, smacked you upside the head, and left you a note to read that had only three words. 'Get on with it.' Wait, that's four words. Stupid math stuff. Right?"

Hey now, does my daughter have the emphatic background? That would explain a lot of her little hunches paying off while still not needing a power. Or is she just super good at ESP or something? Really high INSight? "Well, in either case," I said a bit louder than I had to, "she's always welcome to pop in. At this point I do almost consider her family. She is like my mom, in a way, as she helped me define myself and sent me here. As long as she won't get in trouble I don't mind her visiting at any time."

"Oh absolutely," Midnight agreed hastily. "I could use some lessons on Heavenly etiquette. If I'm going to be an angel one day like she said, I could use some pointers about how angels should act. So I can practice, and stuff. I would love to talk to another angel it would greatly ease my mind about this transformation I'm going through."

"Or if she wants to cook for us," Seraphina agreed. "Or just to chat, I mean to advise mom on something. She doesn't have to be asked, just pop right on down! Shoot, I should have invited her to swim with us after supper. Can I do that now?"

We all looked around, not sure what we were expecting. We shrugged and went back to eating when nothing happened.

After everything was cleaned up we all splashed around in the pond until after dark, watching the stars and the moon come out, and finally Seraphina decided she was ready for bed. I brushed her hair out until it was dry and sent her into the tent. Midnight had simply turned back into a ball, then spun around shaking all the water off herself and then changed back again. "You can have my bed for now," I told her. "I don't feel like doing dream stuff tonight. I told you about my dream powers, right?"

"You did."

"Great. So yeah, I'll just stay up tonight. Have things to do anyway, so there."

"Well, I'm still an elf so I only sleep, if you can call it that, about half as much as a human. It'll still be dark when I get up, so you won't be lonely long. Oh, let's do this by the way, as the spell will end if I go to sleep." She went over to her bag and got out a ward, handing it to me and turning around. "Would you mind?"

“Not at all.” I stuck it to her back, near her neck, and activated it. The glow of her hair winked out, and the Heavenly chorus went silent again as well. She dropped her shape-shift magic so her hair was the normal length and turned back around. “Ah right,” she realized, snapping her fingers. “I was a bit hasty. You wanted to snuggle in bed with me as your night light didn’t you?”

“I was picturing you just sort of hovering over my shoulder, I didn’t know snuggling was on the table!” I protested.

She laughed. “Guess I showed my hand a bit early. You’ll just have to play your cards right then, won’t you? If you don’t want to read tonight we’ll just keep it like this, so I don’t keep Seraphina up all night glowing.”

“I don’t actually have any books- I mean apart from the rulebooks.”

“Better find some then! See you in a few hours!” She slipped into the tent.

I tried to calm my heart-rate down.

The first order of business was analyzing the spices before we used too much of them up. Then I needed to study that ward, spend the 5xp to learn how to create it, and make some of my own to see if I could. Or was it the other way around? *Eh, I’ll work it out eventually.* I figured I would analyze the paper in the books, *or have I done that one already?* it was just ink and a brush I would need to come up with to get started. I had no idea how I would do that and considered taking a little nap to dream one up when I realized a specific energy signature was behind me. I was at the table with the latest group of spices in my hand, analyzing them with my power, but as she didn’t say anything I kept going. I waited, putting that spice back and taking the next. Finally I spoke up.

“I can feel you there, you know. You don’t have to lurk if you want to talk.”

Mumiah sat down, her back leaning against the table, wings pulled in close like a cloak. “Sorry, I didn’t want to mess up your concentration.”

“It’s fine. What’s up?”

She dug a toe in the ground and seemed to be working up her courage to answer. “You really don’t mind, if I stop in from time to time just to talk?”

“No. Why would I? Come every night for all I care.”

“I don’t know. There could be a lot of reasons. I should warn you though...”

“Yes?”

“I’m not allowed to interfere in any material way here. For example, if there was someone sneaking up on you intending to bash you in the head with a rock, I couldn’t warn you.”

“Is someone sneaking up on me intending to bash my head in with a rock?” I asked Firebrand, who had been sitting in fairy form watching me work from my shoulder. She looked around and shook her head.

“That wasn’t a warning, just an example. Like I said-”

“I get it,” I told her, putting a hand on her arm. I felt cloth and looked her over. “You’re still wearing the robe? Wow!”

“You’re going to make an issue of it?”

“Nah, do whatever you want. I would rather you be here and comfortable. Yes, come talk any time. Especially in times like this. Maybe I could just go to sleep but I have a few things to do tonight and someone’s in my bed. Seems a little premature to join her at this point. So it’s probably going to be a long night even with practicing, and swimming, and huh. Whatever else I get up to. Maybe a nap to make some ink and brushes to make wards. I’ll appreciate the company, believe me. As long as you won’t get in trouble for it- and if you do I’ll bash in your superior’s head with a rock after sneaking up on them.”

“You would, wouldn’t you?”

“If they got mad at you for just coming to talk with me? You bet I would.”

“Even if my superior was the Lord Themselves?”

“Can the Lord make a rock heavy enough I can’t lift it to bash Them in the head- don’t answer that.”

She giggled. “Yeah, glad you realized. No, I’m sure it’s fine. We’re given our task and basically assumed we’ll simply do it. Forever. No one really checks on us there’s no need. It’s

Heaven. Who would be avoiding their responsibilities there? Even if most of the time they just sat in a room waiting for a pure soul to be delivered. With nothing to do otherwise.”

I hummed. She was probably right, did she sound a bit bitter about it? Sort of wished Seraphina was around. I could do ESP but again, that seemed like cheating and a violation of some kind. If she really was unhappy with her assignment there wasn't much that could be-
“Elves.”

“Excuse me?”

“Angles become elves, when they want a more mortal existence. There is precedent, isn't there? You said there was a ceremony, right? Look if you were tired of being an angel and wanted out, get us a copy of the ceremony and we'll do it here. Would that work? Does it have to be done up there or can us mere mortals do it?”

She bolted upright. “I- I-”

And she was gone.

Great, way to go, Sylvia. Way to put your foot in it. Moron!

Chapter 25

Caravan

When: Morning of day 5

Where: In the air

“Caravan under attack!” I called, calculating a 12 on my perception check. Sarah strained to look over Firebrand’s neck and I felt Midnight shift to look as well where I was pointing. Underneath us was a group of wagons, one on fire, and I could just make out figures below fighting.

“Our next adventure awaits!” Sarah cried. “Dive! Dive! Awooga!”

You have caught the attention of Nicholas,
patron of merchants. They offer you this quest:

Save the caravan

You may choose from the following rewards:

XP

Merchant offers ½ price sales

Merchant offers 1 item free

I won’t give you reject buttons anymore, we
both know you would never use it. Good luck.
(Like you aren’t just going to one-shot these guys)

My first thought was *Wait, not the bearded guy with the belly that shakes when he laughs like a bowl full of jelly?* And the second was *Well, at least the angels still are watching me even if I scared off Mumiah. Weird I thought she was writing these, but really she never said where they come from.*

That morning we had decided to fly around looking for more towns, just to get some idea how widespread this problem of monster attacks was. Naturally I had told everyone what had happened with Mumiah the night before and to not mention the ceremony if she ever showed up again. Both hoped she would and wondered why she had reacted in that way. I figured it could be any number of things really, me guessing that’s what she wanted before she was ready to tell me? The fact she wasn’t supposed to tell us how it happened and realized she screwed up? General shock that I would even offer? Hard to know.

I had spent most of the night studying the ward, as it took 8 hours to learn to create a new one. Technically part of that time was “experimentation” which I couldn’t do, short of making a bunch of blood wards. But I wasn’t a fan of the idea of cutting myself repeatedly thank you very much so that part would have to wait. I had made my KNOWledge check of 10 so I was pretty sure I had it, once I could make a few of my own I could spend the XP (ugh, I only had 11 left) to learn the ward. At this rate I was never going to be able to raise the ratings on my skills, not that it had been a real problem yet.

We landed with a crash across from the wagons. It seemed the drivers had seen their enemies coming and lined the wagons up, 3 to a row, 4 rows. Then put their guards in front,

which the creatures simply ran into. So we pincerd them, though thinking about it just as we landed it could have been a mistake. An enemy will fight all the harder if it thinks it can't run away. *We should have landed to the side so they could flee back the way they came.* But it didn't seem to matter. The small creatures below us did not freak out at the sight of Firebrand showing up, they simply considered her another target. They turned, raised their weapons, and charged us.

"That's not normal," Midnight told me. "Hobgoblins are supposed to be cowards."

Is that what those are? I didn't respond, with them charging Firebrand I didn't want them ignoring her and climbing up to get to us. I looked them over, and there must have been two dozen of them; ugly, short, barely dressed and not in the good way. Firebrand was fast, and could probably pulverize one per swing of her mighty claws but there were a lot of them. Even she wasn't that fast. I made a spirit manipulation check, a 10, so I could throw 17 extra energy into my spell. That would get me a total of a 24 "planet rating" which, huh, nice how that worked out isn't it? I could thus target 24 of the little guys. "Let lightning strike my enemies!" A bunch of them died as lightning flashed out of the sky and smashed into them, still others had a leg torn off and went sprawling. Six were still up with only arms torn off.

"Oh I see," Midnight said calmly. "I suppose I can't let *that* go unanswered." She raised a hand and her mana core appeared. "I call upon fire, let it rain down upon those I consider my foes by these spells combined!" Her core became a pinprick of light, which she grabbed, and made a downward throwing motion. Fire speared out of nowhere, striking down at the remaining hobgoblins, and engulfing them. Only three were shrieking in agony when the glare from the fire receded, but Firebrand put them out of their misery quickly enough.

It took a substantial amount of my concentration not to start grinning like an idiot and cheering. *Oh yeah, we're going to make a great team.*

"I can start learning magic today right? Later today? Tonight? Maybe after firstlunch?" Sarah pleaded.

"We'll see," I told her. The stunned faces of the people in the caravan looked up at us, as if wondering what we would do next. We had just taken out a small army in seconds, they were probably right to be at least somewhat concerned.

"Let's go see if anyone's hurt," Midnight suggested.

"Right."

Firebrand lowered us, and we hopped off.

"Stay here," I told Sarah. "I want to make sure none are just playing dead. Don't need you getting jumped again."

"Boy," she spat, crossing her arms and looking away. "You get grabbed one time and nobody lets you forget it."

"Our prayers have been answered!" one woman shouted. "Dragon knights have returned to the land!"

"Holy warriors in white!" a child shouted. "Praise be!"

"Paladins have struck down our enemies with the might of Heaven," another cried. "We're saved!"

Many dropped to their knees and started thanking the Heavens for sending two holy warriors to save them. Which wasn't *inaccurate* per say, but at the same time we were just flying around. On the other hand who is to say we were not led here, as Heaven works in mysterious ways?

"Thank you, holy knights!" said a man, coming forward. He seemed to be dressed better than the others perhaps making him the guy in charge? "What can I do to repay?"

I held up a hand. "Wounded first. Who's hurt? Let us heal you, step forward please."

Several people in banged up armor were hurt, and were helped over to us. Midnight and I busied ourselves healing them, each one thanking us in turn.

"Thank you, holy paladin," I heard over and over.

But I'm not one... I wanted to protest.

Aren't you though?

Mumiah

Oh crap, she doesn't sign it "love" anymore? "Mumiah, I'm sorry if I offended you or something," I cried, turning away from the man I had just healed and knowing I looked crazy. I could feel the eyes of the man on the back of my head. He thought I was crazy, I just knew it. I didn't care. "Please, can we talk about this? Or at least come and tell me to forget it, I'll never mention it again. Whatever you want. I'm sorry!" *Now for the guilt trip.* "Don't punish Sarah for my mistake, she only just met her aunt! She wants you to come visit her again, you know?" *Wait, she only sent this message after I thought I wasn't one, responding to my thoughts. Can she read my-*

Like an open book.

We can talk later. I didn't mean to upset you by vanishing like that. But there are some things I have to come to grips with. Focus on your task for now, I still have some thinking to do.

:~)

Wait it's getting worse it's just emoji now? "Wait if you can read my thoughts I didn't have to talk to you at all and everyone wouldn't be looking at me like I'm crazy?"

Most people call it praying.
Give it a try some time.

:~)'

"Uh, holy paladin?" asked the next guy in line. "My arm? You can see the bone? Please help me, oh by the angels you can see the bone!"

"Stop your whining," I told him, turning. "Honestly, you get a little scratch and *holy crap you really can see the bone hold still!*"

Finally everyone was healed and the fires were put out. Midnight checked all the corpses by running her flaming sword through them, and the caravan moved on a little to get away from the smell. Finally the guy I figured was the leader called a stop and again appealed to us for how we wanted to be rewarded. Meanwhile I hadn't needed to think about it for long and selected the XP reward. Unless this guy was carrying some kind of super magical object he would give me free (why hadn't he used it during the attack?) saving money was all well and good but XP was priceless. I selected it.

Quest, such as it was, complete

Reward: 3XP

Come on, it wasn't much of a challenge

Is she really that pissed at me?

"No need for a reward, good sir," I told him. "Serving the kingdom is reward enough."

"Oh, thank goodness," the man told me. "I had the queerest notion that I should let you buy from my caravan for half off, or even worse, offer you something for free! It was most unnatural! That feeling has passed though, thank the angels."

"I'm sure you're relieved. Look, would you mind giving us some information though?"

"Not at all. But please first allow me to introduce myself! I am Jeremy Bobcat. Traveling merchant, at your service."

"I'm Sylvia, this is Midnight."

"Greetings," Midnight said to him.

A horse with a horn and wings trotted up, with Sarah on her back. I glared at her and she gazed back innocently. "And this is my daughter, Seraphina."

"Uh, forgive me, paladin Sylvia but did you not arrive on a dragon? Where did it go?"

"Never mind that for now. What was that attack all about? Do you think they were after something you carried?"

"It's unprecedented, it really is," he insisted. "Even with so many, facing a number of guards such as I employ for protection from bandits should have given even that many hobgoblins pause. But they headed straight for us once they saw us. Why, you must have seen it yourself! How they threw themselves at- yes, I'm sure there was a dragon. I really must thank it as well, did it fly off without me noticing?"

"I'll convey your thanks," I assured him. "So their behavior was unnatural?"

"Quite so," he agreed. "Perhaps for my next trip I *will* invest in a mage or two, despite the cost. If these lands are becoming unsafe and caravans are being attacked, why, I can double my prices and still make a profit even paying two mages to guard us."

"Typical merchant," Midnight spat. "It's during a crisis you *lower* your prices, to build good will and actually help out the common folk. Then you make a customer for life, instead of just short term profits."

"Holy paladin Midnight, please, to hear such things is blasphemy against the rules of acquisition. I cannot hear them!"

The rules of... hang on.

"I suppose it's nothing to do with me," she agreed. "Keep chasing that short term profit."

"I assure you I will. Now, onto a bit of a delicate matter."

"Yes?" I asked.

"Does your holy mission take you from our side right away? Or can you stay with us until we reach Wellspring?"

"I would feel better escorting you to Wellspring. We have business there ourselves anyway."

"Splendid! I will get everyone moving again. Thank you very much!"

"Of course." He rushed off. *Sure, you get two competent guards you don't have to pay.*

"These attacks are really starting to worry me," I told Midnight, as the wagons started rolling again. We fell in beside them, Sarah still on the horse.

"Yes, the attack from the other kingdom, and apparently this has been going on for some time. We need to get to the bottom of it or I fear it's just going to get worse."

"Holy paladin! Holy Paladin!" I heard, and looked around. It wasn't until I looked down that I saw a small girl looking up at me. Probably a couple of years younger than Sarah, with black hair, a round face, and clutching a doll.

Now how does a paladin of the Lord respond? "How may I help you, child?" Nailed it!

"I want to be a paladin when I grow up, and protect my village!" she announced.

"A fine goal," I told her.

"But how?" she persisted.

"Uh, well, each person's path is different..." I hedged.

"Come here little one!" Midnight rescued me, lifting the girl who was struggling to keep up with us with her tiny legs. She had her held in one arm, resting against her hip. *I should have noticed that myself. Some paladin I am. Don't you dare, Mumiah, no boxes from you right now.* She went on. "What my partner is trying to say is there are two things you absolutely must have to become a paladin. Do you want to hear what they are?"

"Uh huh!"

"The first," she held up a finger, "is the desire to help others, even if there is a cost to yourself. No matter how big or small, to never let an injustice pass if you see one. Do you understand?"

She nodded vigorously.

"The second is not to be afraid of hard work, so you can become strong. Only the strong can protect others and act on what they see. It doesn't matter if it's a sword and shield, or magic, when the opportunity comes if you are strong enough to see it through, an angel will notice you and offer you the chance to become a paladin."

"Wow!"

"Tamrin!" a voice called out. "Tamrin, where are- oh, holy ones!" A woman clearly looking for her lost daughter came around a cart. "Tamrin, don't bother the holy ones!"

"I assure you it's no bother," I told her, calculating a 13 on persuasion. Her features softened.

"It's so kind of you to look after her. I simply turned my back and she was gone. I should have realized she would come to bother you. Come here little rascal!" She took her from Midnight.

"I remember how inquisitive this one was at that age," I totally lied, getting a 12 on an untrained deception check. It was believable. I reached up and tussled Sarah's hair. "It reminds me of days gone by."

"Mom, quit it!" she squealed.

"It's such a blessing to see you," the woman said with a smile. "Most paladins are men, it's good for the little ones to see that woman can serve the Lord in that capacity too."

"Magic is the great equalizer," Midnight agreed.

"I imagine so," she agreed, with a look on her face like "you think we can afford magical training?" "I won't bother you further, holy ones. Say goodbye Tamrin."

"Bye!" She waved, and we waved back.

"As you were saying about the attacks," Midnight started.

"Right?"

"I think we should- hold on." She looked past me again and I turned, one of the guards, in dented up armor and helmet was coming over to us. He was holding a small coin bag, and whisked off his helmet and bowed as he got near. His hair was atrocious, and I struggled not to laugh in his face as he straightened up. *Helmet hair. Wow!*

"Holy ones, a moment of your time?" he asked.

"Please, be at ease," told him. "How are you feeling?"

"Oh, much better, thank you! The wound I took is completely gone. I shall pray nightly for seven nights in thanks for your holy work. I'm sorry to bother you, but the others have collected this from our pay. I hope I'm not overstepping or causing offense, but we all figured that even paladins have to eat. Please, say you will accept it?" He offered the pouch to me.

"That is quite generous of you," I said, not yet taking it.

"Please, take it," he pleaded. "We can be generous because we are alive. Thanks to you. I know it's not much, but I would rather give to the warriors of the Lord so that they may also stay strong to answer other's prayers."

"We humbly accept, in the spirit it is given," Midnight told him. She nodded to me, and I took the pouch.

"It's just, we knew Jeremy wouldn't pay you, probably spout some nonsense about the Lord providing for you if you hinted about it. But you defended this caravan better than we did, it's only right-"

“Please,” I told him, “there’s no need to explain. It is as you say, your generosity will help us to help others. It is appreciated. Blessings be upon you and all who helped defend these good people. You held out until we could arrive, no doubt as the Lord intended. It was enough.”

“Yes, thank you,” he bowed, “thank you so much holy ones. I’ll tell the others of your blessing, thank you!” He bowed again and moved off.

I felt sort of bad. *Will that even do anything?*

Oh, you might be surprised.

Love,
M

Okay, now I’m just getting mixed signals...

“Paladins certainly are well thought of here, aren’t they?” I asked Midnight.

“Of course, it’s almost guaranteed that to become a paladin, one has actually met an angel to receive your holy mission. If only they knew, right?” She snorted. “Pull this... What did you call it?” She reached around to tap the back of her neck.

“The ward?”

“Right, pull this ward off and you would really have them in a tizzy.”

“I suppose so. Still, are we sort of lying to them?”

“Eh...” she did a wavy gesture with her hands. “Given your history, calling yourself a paladin is not inaccurate. You just don’t know what your true mission is yet. And we did save them, and we do have an angel’s blessing. Even if she hasn’t said the words “I name you my paladin” it’s close enough. Just don’t go pranking them or anything, it would be a bad look.”

“I’m not that much a fox!”

Firebrand made a laughing sound and smacked her horse lips.

“That’s enough out of you! And don’t worry about the attacks, I’ve got a few ideas. We’ll ask around town, but find a quiet spot. I’ll do some divinations and see what I can come up with. If there’s a central location they’re coming from... I’ll find it.”

After all, that is the paladin thing to do.

Chapter 26

Attacks

When: Afternoon of day 5

Where: Near the town gates

“Attacks here too?” Midnight asked, looking ahead. We were nearing the town after several hours of travel, and stopping for both first and second lunch. Still probably two hours before twilight, giving us a good view of the rather large town we were approaching. There was a sturdy wall around the place, as was proper, but I could just see people swarming over it, maybe doing repairs? It also looked like their gate was wide open, and a lot of people were clustered around it rather than seeming to be passing through it. Guards also seemed to be congregating but looking around at the faces of my fellow travelers I saw only relief in their eyes. So that was probably fine. We were all riding Firebrand, in a sort of long horse form, giving us a little more room to sit. Not a bizarre amount, of course, enough that you might think your eyes were playing tricks because you had never seen a horse that long. But as we got near the gate and the caravan boss took care of securing our entrance into the city we slid off, trying to work feeling back into our legs.

The entire caravan was let in, and without all that pesky question and answer stuff I had to do at Treetops either. It seemed being recognized as a caravan guard allowed us to skip the formalities, probably because it was assumed we would be leaving again shortly anyway and our “employer” would tell us to be on our best behavior while in town. Once past the gate he did come over to thank us again, give us a verbal advertisement to come and visit the shops to purchase some of the product we had helped protect, and wished us a good day.

“I do want to pick up a few things,” I told the others. Firebrand went into fairy form and was perched on Sarah’s shoulder. “Manly samples of paper, ink, and a brush. Then I can spend tonight finishing up that ward.”

“It’ll be awhile before these wagons are unloaded,” Midnight told me. “Be dark by that time too and the shops might close. But that’s simple enough stuff any shop would probably have it. They’re not going to turn away customers because they need to bring boxes inside.”

“We can give them a few minutes to get settled and moving,” I decided. “I’m sure the cute young thing running the register isn’t going to be the one hauling the goods. They have strapping lads for that.”

“I ran a bread stand for like twenty minutes,” Sarah bragged. “After mom invented the sausage in a bun. It was pretty fun! I guess it’s only natural to have someone pretty at the front of the store, huh? Get you to buy more with a wink and a bump of the hips.”

“Go back to her inventing what?”

“Anyway!” I moved on. “Let’s go find someone to talk to about the gate. I want to see how bad the attacks here around here.”

“Hate to bother the people working,” Midnight countered.

“Oh, no, we’re not talking to them. Come on, I see a stable right over there. Probably don’t want the horses dragged all over town so someone smartly set up a drop off point right by the gate. Though I want a bird? There must be birds there...”

“Bird?”

“Sure. I took the speak to animal spell for a reason and I want to get my money’s worth out of it. That porcupine was cute and everything but now we can get some real information.”

“He was cute, wasn’t he?” Sarah sighed. “Pity about the spines, I soooo wanted to cuddle him!”

We headed over there and I looked around for a bird when I heard a familiar voice.

"My love! You're here!" We all turned to look, and coming out of the nearby building were two dark elves. My "admirer" from Treetops and his companion, they must have dropped their horses off having arrived earlier.

"Hotman!" I gushed. "What a surprise!"

"Oh no," his companion groaned. "Why me?"

His friend ignored him, bowing deeply to me. "Indeed. That fate has brought us together a second time in as many days? It must have meaning. Or perhaps it is the case you pined for me so that you followed after me? Poor girl, I had no idea I had affected you so strongly."

"It is sheer coincidence, I assure you," I told him. "What are you doing here?"

"Do not be so quick to dismiss fate," he cautioned, waving a finger. "Our world isn't so small that our meeting like this should not be considered a sign. Are you certain you didn't chase me? So many have, I would not hold it against you. Especially when there are so many other things you could hold against me. But perhaps I overstep? At least you have taken on a sensible traveling companion," he went on, indicating Midnight. "Please, introduce me to your no doubt lovely."

His friend tugged his sleeve and pointed, cutting Hotman off. Both seemed to be leaning over, as Midnight had turned away from them as best she could. "The hair."

"Yes, I see it now," he replied, demeanor changing in an instant. He turned back to me. "You travel with a traitor, kitsune. I figured you for a trickster rightly enough but to willingly subject yourself to one like that? I regret speaking to you now, if that's your preferred company."

"What in the world are you talking about?" I demanded, looking between them.

"You leave my friend alone!" Sarah shouted. "She's worth ten of you!"

"Hummm, it is possible they were not told," the second one mused. "She wouldn't brandy it about, perhaps she wishes to hide from her shame among those too young to have heard?"

"I hope that turns out to be the case. You ask her," said Hotman. "And I suggest finding a new person to travel with once you know the truth. That one will just get you killed. If it was an honest mistake, I certainly do not blame you for it. We'll be around, if you want to ditch her for, oh I don't know, us, I'm sure we could squeeze you into the bed somehow."

"You would have to go and say it like that," the other sighed. "But for real, watch your back around her. Good day."

They left without another word.

"Wow, that was, I don't even know," I finally breathed. "I sorta thought that one was hot too. What a jerk. And they scared the birds away, we'll have to settle on a horse. Which one do you think has been here the longest? I suppose I could just ask one, it's not like I don't have the- What?"

Midnight had turned back to me, clearly upset. "You're not going to ask?"

"Midnight," I said quietly, taking her hands. "You *showed* me who you are. An angel of light and miracles. Whatever they think about you, they clearly don't know anything. No one bad could light up my life like you do." I smirked and raised an eyebrow.

"Awww!" Sarah exclaimed, hands clasped together.

Midnight snorted, and a tear fell, which she tried to hide by turning her face. "Puns now? That was awful."

I dropped one hand and wiped it, turning her face to look at me again. "And it shall continue to be, until those two awful people are but a dim memory!"

Sarah hugged her from the side, "They don't hold a candle to you."

"Thanks, you two," she said, taking her hand back and stepping away. "I'm okay."

"What was their problem anyway?" Sarah asked. "They saw your hair and suddenly no more flirting."

"Sarah, it's not polite to ask about people's past," I scolded. "If she wants to tell us, she will, someday. When she's ready. Don't pry."

"Yeah but if we're going to beat them up for making her sad we need to know now! They're getting away! Though hunting them down could be an interesting diversion..."

Midnight shook her head. "It's not their fault. I don't even know them. And they only know me by reputation. And they don't have the whole story- look let's sit down somewhere and I can tell you, okay?"

"You really don't have to," I protested. "I don't want to make you feel worse."

"I know," she agreed. "But maybe you should. Before you go spending time making me stuff, or whatever. And I'll give the armor back of course, I don't deserve it if you throw me-"

"Midnight!" I cautioned. "You are your actions today, not some vague rumors of elves you don't even know. Even hot ones."

A sharp giggle escaped her. "He is sort of, isn't he? Come on, maybe talking about it will make me feel better. I'll treat you to dinner."

"I don't need your charity, ratty old bear!" I shouted.

Sarah burst out laughing. "Good one mom," she managed.

"Okay you lost me," Midnight admitted.

We were sitting in a tavern some moments later, the speaking to animals plan temporarily put on hold. *I just hope we can still get the supplies later, I want to finish that tonight nothing else to do but sleep. Still a few days before a week has passed and I can put XP into things and then start the next round of "practice."*

"So to start with, this happened some years ago," Midnight began. "Maybe two or three years after my..." she glanced around, "condition become known."

"Wait wasn't that like a super long time ago?" Sarah asked.

"Maybe thirty years or so at this point?" she finally decided after thinking a moment.

"Thirty years?" we both exclaimed. Our eyes locked. "Jinx!" we also both said at the same time. We put our fists up. "Jan-ken-pon!" we shouted, and I threw scissors and she threw paper. "Dang!" she said, snapping her fingers. "You get to choose."

"I choose feet," I told her. "Specifically- soles."

She rolled her eyes. "Fine."

"Er?" Midnight inquired.

"I get one minute of tickle privileges before bed tonight because I won," I told her. *And how did I know to do all- never mind.*

He eyes darted between us. "You two are really being... yourselves right now, aren't you?"

"Whatever do you mean?" I asked, putting on as innocent an air as I possibly could.

"How can I be anyone but myself?" Sarah mused. "If she's you, and you're that guy, am I still me? Who's eating this chicken?" She shoved some chicken in her mouth.

"Thanks," she said quietly.

"I don't know for what. Anyway, this story has been boring so far. All I know is it happened like, a million years before Sarah was born. Who cares about that far back?"

"We do," she griped. "That's the problem with living so long. It's longer to hold a grudge too."

"I shall strive never to do so!" I promised, slapping the table. "So, a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, Midnight did a thing. Please, go on."

"Yes. What do you know about the more, shall we say, evil types of elves?"

"Wait, evil elves? Like ones that make raisin cookies but label them chocolate chip?"

"What? No! Elves from demons instead of angels. Cookies? I don't even..."

"Hold on. Wait, that actually makes sense. Are you saying demons can do rituals and become elves too? But they're evil? How do you tell them apart?"

"Oh it's easy," she claimed. "Just check and see if they're stabbing you in the back or not. Or like skin color?"

"Hold on, I'm a little uncomfortable with where this is going..."

"I'll start at the beginning. There's high elves, those have the feathered ears, right?"

"With you so far."

"Then there us, who go through the fire and get souls. Earthy elves, or ground elves, we have lots of names other races call us."

"Just not late for dinner," Sarah put in.

“Uh, sure. Then there’s demonic elves. I have no idea what rituals they go through but a demon can return to an earthly existence as an elf, just as an angel can. They have pointed ears like we do,” she brushed her hair aside and I so wanted to nibble nibble nibble on that ear, “but their skin is totally white. They’re sometimes called ghost elves, or snow elves, or ‘get away from me you underground freak’ elves. They mostly live underground, you see.”

“That’s odd. Why doesn’t every demon do this? Their home, as I understand it, is Hell?”

She shrugged. “Demons are like angels. They have their tasks and they for the most part enjoy them. It’s the rare one that desires a return they just don’t think like that. Honestly most are like me. They weren’t demons, but are the children of elves that have demonic lineage. They’re just brought up a certain way and know no other type of life. They’re more victims than evil souls, sadly.”

“So what does this all have to do with you?”

“I’m getting to that. Now you have the background you need. So thirty years ago I was part of a task force hunting down some demonic elves that had come to the surface to stir up trouble. They think nothing of using magic to raise the dead as zombies, or steal stuff, or just rile up trouble. That’s the first time I saw this type of armor, you know?” She tapped her breastplate. “They have some really big spiders down there, that’s how they get enough silk. Anyway, we tracked them for days and finally had a showdown. The leader, seeing he was outnumbered and outclasses, threw down his weapons and said he surrendered.”

“And across the battlefield, a forbidden love had stolen into your two hearts,” Sarah guessed, wide eyed and not eating as she listened to the story. “You ran to each other, hugged him fiercely, and declared that any who would harm him would need to run you through as well?”

“No,” she told her, shaking her head. “But I may as well have.”

“Sure, free hug.”

She rolled her eyes. “No, I called for the others to stand down. I took him prisoner. The others wanted to just kill him on the spot but I demanded he stand trial. It wouldn’t have been honorable to cut him down after he disarmed himself, and asked for mercy. The others didn’t feel the same way.”

“And across the bars of his cell, a love blossomed-”

“No! Can I tell this story!?”

“Fine,” she huffed. “Get to the good part.”

I don’t know if it’s that kind of story, kid.

“There is no good part. A day later there was an attack on the place we were holding him in. Apparently there were two groups of them not just one. So they rescued him. Several people died. I myself was wounded by some kind of magic. It hit me here, burned my hair away.” She touched the white spot on her head. “I passed out. When I came to he and his gang had gotten away. I was healed, but ever since then my hair was white here. And so now they know it’s me because of it. I let him get away. I got others killed. If I just let them kill the guy when we had the chance, none of it would have happened.”

“I don’t know,” I hedged. “They may have attacked to retaliate, you don’t know.”

“You’re right, that’s a terrible story,” Sarah told her. “No romance at all. Can’t you just dye your hair? Or wear a hat?”

She shook her head. “I keep it to remind myself. That sometimes doing the right thing has consequences. But we have to do them anyway. Killing him after he surrendered would have been wrong.”

“I agree,” I decided after a moment. “Sounds like they accepted the risk, and maybe got lax because they thought the job was done. Those two elves just focused on the end of the story, not the reasoning behind it. You *did* do the right thing. While I would mourn the loss of life it’s the fault of those elves, which I will happily volunteer to track down and complete the job, not you. Stop carrying that guilt around, that’s an order.” *That’s why those two said she would get me killed. They think she’ll do the same thing, offer mercy to someone that will- oh crap.*

“Wait, how many are we talking here?” Sarah asked. “Three? A hundred? I mean if you got a thousand people killed...”

"There's no way it's a thousand," she protested. "A couple. Five, at most. What does that matter? It was still my fault."

"You were the highest ranking person there?" I asked.

"Well... no. I'm so young, and like I say I was thirty years younger back then."

"So really, whoever was actually in charge made the call, and took them in. You just suggested it first."

"Yeah I guess but if I hadn't suggested it..."

"You would be party to the killing of an unarmed man, and your soul would be imperiled. I have no idea what that would mean for someone in your situation."

"Yeah, could you really have stayed silent?" Sarah asked. "Your light shines on all equally. No puns this time. What angel would have simply cut that man down rather than giving him a chance to repent and seek forgiveness from those he wronged?"

"I don't know," she answered honestly. "I guess that's one way to look at it."

"Look, however you think of it, let's be real here," I began.

"Am I not real?" Sarah asked. She started pinching the fingers of her one hand.

"Not now, Sarah. When I was in your situation I squished the guy. It wasn't even that long ago. Sarah got grabbed, she nearly took his head off, I flew him away from the sleeping people so he didn't wake anyone up, and he begged for mercy. He was completely in my power, and I caved his skull in with my boot. If anything it's me that *you* should be rejecting for not meeting your standard. I didn't even feel bad about it, because I was protecting Sarah. I still don't, and I would do it again a thousand times to keep her safe."

"You should have seen her," Sarah said with a huge smile. "She put a spell on both of us, and it gave us wings, and I busted out of the guy's grip, blam! And she grew more tails, and we were all foxy, and we flew!"

"I did wonder about that..." She looked thoughtful.

"So yeah, I'm no saint. But my System messages seemed to know it was going to happen, and Mumiah said they would take care of the soul. But you see where I'm going with this? Similar situation, you did the right thing and have seemingly carried the guilt of it for most of your life. I did the wrong thing and didn't look back. You can't control how you feel, I get that, but I'm telling you, you're way more in the right than I am. If you want to get up from this table in disgust over my behavior, I wouldn't blame you."

She spent a moment, head bowed. Praying, maybe? "It was to protect Sarah?" she asked quietly.

"She got grabbed, and I went nuts," I agreed. "I went too far, but... she's my daughter, you know?"

"Yeah." She looked up. "I guess we can just be a messed up pair together, huh? Sarah, learn from our mistakes, okay?"

"Hey, if someone threatens my mom, there's no middle road," she replied fiercely. "They're going down hard, and I'm not stopping until they're dead. No matter what. They don't get to pull that sort of thing and walk away."

"You know what, kid? I believe you. It must be great, having each other's backs like that." She sighed. "So, birds, you said, right?"

Sarah and I shared a grin. She was staying! And maybe, after sharing this, we were all a little bit closer.

Chapter 27

Split

When: Evening of day 5

Where: Near the restaurant

“Split the party?” I repeated. “That never ends well.”

“We’re in town,” Midnight went on. “And we have things to do before it gets dark and the shops close. You’re buying paper and ink for my benefit anyway, so let me go pick it up. I can do that much, you do recall me being a wizard mercenary for hire? I’m three times your age? Accomplished mage? Exactly how much trouble do you think I can get in?”

You know? All of it? “I guess it’s fine,” I told her.

Firebrand took off from Sarah’s shoulder, gestured, and another one of her appeared at her side. She vanished, the little showoff, and appeared near Midnight. She plopped herself down on both Sarah and her shoulders. Both waved to the other and blew kisses.

“Right, sure, I could have done that,” I realized. “Fine. We’ll go find an animal to talk to, you go get supplies.”

“Supplies!” Sarah shouted, throwing her arms up.

“Yes?” Midnight agreed, not getting it.

“Ugh, never mind!” she grumped, crossing her arms. “I’m not explaining it to you.”

“Anyway, we’ll be over by the stables, unless we aren’t,” I told her. “Though I can’t imagine why we wouldn’t be.” *Can’t take that long to find an office supply store.*

“Can’t she...” She pointed to Firebrand and then to the other one.

I shook my head. “There’s no connection between them. They can’t just point to one another.” *Wait, they can’t talk but can they use my sending and mind reading skills? I’ll have to look at the spell description later if it says ‘communicate’ or ‘talk’ in there.* “Best she could do is vanish, transferring her memories to the original... Which is the original?” I looked between them, the one on Sarah raised her hand. “Right, I figured. Anyway, yours could vanish, letting us know where you were at the time. We can meet back up here in a pinch.” I gestured with a thumb over my shoulder at the building behind us.

“But we already meated up here,” Sarah protested. “That chicken was delicious!”

“By the angels put a muzzle on that girl!” Midnight insisted with a grin. “They’re getting worse!”

“Woof! Woof!” Her tail was wagging back and forth furiously.

“See you in a few.” She chuckled and walked away.

“Did I do good?” she asked, after Midnight had vanished into the distance.

“You tell me,” I asked instead of answering. “Did she seem less down after dinner than before?”

“I think so?”

“Then you did. Keep it up.”

“Yeah, that’s what she said!”

“You’re way too young for that joke. How did you even learn that- no, I don’t want to know.” *Her paradox might not even account for it and she might start thinking hey where did I learn to say that and then- pull, not push.* “Keep up the good work, how’s that?”

“You’re no fun.”

“I’m literally the most fun! My playground got blessed by an actual angel of play. I made the first in-ground pool this world has ever seen. How can I be any more fun?”

“That was, like, two days ago at this point. What have you done that’s fun lately?”

“I’ll be tickling a certain someone before bed, that’s going to be pretty fun for me. I’m looking forward to it.”

"Don't remind me!"

"Hey, you're the one that's going to, of your own free will, take off your socks and shoes and present those little feeties of yours... Feeters? Footsies? I'm not going to force you. When you're too old for the game, we move on, and I don't love you an ounce less. You know that." *I guess? Do you know that? I suddenly know that. So I guess you do too?*

"I know. We can... keep playing. For now!"

"Great. Ah, here's the stables."

"How about that one?" she asked, pointing.

I looked and there was a large, black, bird, preening itself atop the supports. "Perfect." I held out a hand and she took it, as this was a touch based spell. Because that's what you do, make a spell to talk to an animal touch based, because animals will just stay still and let themselves be touched. So to make sure Sarah could understand I touched her while I cast the spell at the bird. Thankfully I had the advanced skill of ranged magic, and extended my aura towards it. I spent max energy on my check, throwing 8 into my RESolve for the action and calculated a 21, more than enough to get 10 meters away. I cast, getting a 15-2 or 13. DIFficulty was a 9 and it seemed inclined to talk to me, so it didn't resist.

"Holy cow!" it squawked. "I'm a talking bird!"

I put my hand to my forehead as Sarah giggled. "I think there's just something in the air tonight," she decided. "Don't try to fight it."

I wrinkled my nose. "I thought I smelled something. That was you, was it?"

"Hey now!" she protested. "We're near a stable. A *sta-ble*. That's what you're smelling."

"Is that so?"

"Hey!" said the bird. "Hey. Hey. Hey. You want something? What are we doing here? Hey. Hey. You make a bird talk and then ignore me? That's rude. Rude. Rude. Hey! Don't be rude."

"Hello, hey! Hi there!" I called up to it. "Can we talk for a minute?"

"Be weird to say no now, wouldn't it? I could fly away, serve you right! Hey! Hold out your arm."

"Like this?" I held it out.

"Sure." They jumped off and landed on my arm. "That's better. Hey!"

"Right. Wanted to ask you about any attacks around here recently. Have there been many?"

"What's many?"

"More than one?"

"What's one?"

"Oh boy."

"I'm beginning to see a flaw in your plan," Sarah informed me.

"Look, you are one bird. Got it? One?" I touched their beak.

"Okay, okay, I can see that. One bird. Huh. What a concept. Yeah, there's been one attack."

"Was there one after that?"

"Nope!"

"That's good."

"Was there one before it?" Sarah asked.

"Uh, yeah. Good eating."

I gave a nod to Sarah, that was good thinking. I would need to remember to praise her later.

"And was there one before that one?"

"Let me think now. Hey! Yeah, I guess so."

"Three?" Sarah whispered. "That's not good."

"No more?" I asked.

"Nope, just one, and the one, and the one. That's when the gate broke. Hey!"

"Were they different creatures each time?"

"Well, there was no eating after the first one. The one after that was good eating. Then the one after that even I didn't want to go near."

So extrapolating from that, I know from the book at least one type of creature dissolves back into the mud it came from when killed. If it works the same here, and many things have, that could be the first type of creature. 'Good eating' means the second attack featured something else. Something meat, that a bird like this would eat after a battle. The third time it seems was similar, a physical creature but a really gross one? "Was it a smell?"

"Was what a smell?"

"Why you didn't go near after the most recent attack."

"That's it! Hey! Smell."

"But the one before smelled okay? You ate well?"

"I sure did! Hey! Speaking of eating... Am I getting anything for all this? Not that I don't love being a talking bird, it's pretty great. Hey!"

"I'm not really sure what to offer you..."

"Typical. What else would you like to know?"

"How long ago was the last attack?"

The bird looked me dead in the eyes. "Hey! I'm a bird!"

"Right, sorry. Dumb question." *Didn't even know what one was, how is it going to know how many days ago- does it even know what a day is?*

"You got that right. Wow! Hey!"

"I'll let you go. Thanks for the help."

"Sure thing! Here's something for you, as you have nothing for me!" Something hit the ground near my foot and splattered around.

I glared, dropped the spell, the bird lost their ability to speak, looked up at me, panicked, cawed loudly, and flew away.

"Three attacks then," Sarah said. "Does it mean something?"

"We may be getting closer to the source?" I decided. *Does this world have dungeons they could be spilling out of? Monster generators of some kind? I'd have to ask around. Shoot, could that other kingdom be experiencing the same and had less luck dealing with it? Maybe they did just need food because their fields were trashed. I shouldn't assume it's just happening here because I'm only here experiencing it. I would need to travel to other kingdoms and see if they're having a similar problem.*

"Your magic could tell you when the next attack was, right? We should either stay and help or try to prevent it before they get here. I don't think they're getting that gate fixed by tonight."

"Which is actually a bit odd, there must be magic users here, right? They should be able to fix it."

"Gate is resistant to magic," said a voice to my left. I looked over and there was a man unhitching his horse. "We made it that way. But it got smashed down in the last attack, and now we're having to try fixing it the hard way. Maybe we shouldn't have made it out of iron like that? It's really heavy, and trying to fix the hinges is taking longer than we would have liked. Those monsters in the last attack really messed it up bad."

"I see. Thanks for clearing that up." *Makes sense to make your gate resistant to magic, so some wizard doesn't just use a spell and tear it apart. Wonder how they-* "Hey you're not going out now, are you? It's almost dark!"

"I'm a scout, it's my job to go out," the man remarked with a chuckle. "With our gate down, it's more important than ever to know if something's coming as soon as we can."

"Yeah, I guess. Come back safely, okay?"

"Why, thank you kindly. I'll do my best. Have a good night."

"You too."

He climbed on the horse and rode away.

"Come on, let's do some divination magic."

"Yeah!"

We found a quiet spot near enough the stable Midnight could come and find us and I asked my magic a few questions. The news wasn't good, and it kept getting worse the more questions I asked.

"Maybe the news wouldn't be so bad if you just stopped asking questions about it?" Sarah suggested.

"I don't think that's how it works," I replied.

I spent maybe ten minutes asking questions, each one taking more than a minute, and Midnight joined us again as I was sitting and thinking about things.

"Got the stuff," she told me, showing a roll that seemed to be several different kinds of paper curled around itself, an ink jar, and a selection of brushes. "I didn't actually know how big a brush you wanted. I should have asked, didn't think about it until I was standing there looking at them. An oversight, yes, but I'm a mercenary not an artist. I can't be expected to remember that brushes come in different sizes even though it, you know, makes total sense that they do."

"It's fine," I told her. "I can use them all, make big wards and small wards. Thanks." I took the stuff and put it into the pocket.

"You look worried, did the horse or whatever had bad news?"

"Bird, actually, we worked out there have been three attacks here lately. I then did some magic and was told there's going to be another tonight. And not just here. It seems the ungrateful village will get attacked again tonight as well."

"The village with no walls," Sarah added helpfully when Midnight looked confused. "Where they hate outsiders and magic, and fun, and anyone not of pure human ancestry?"

"That's the place. I can protect both, don't get me wrong. And I have an ethical responsibility to do so, right enough."

"But you don't want to I'm guessing?" Midnight guessed.

"They tried to *burn down* the house I was staying in while I was asleep inside. Seemingly, while watching me work my butt off helping rebuild their stupid town they were planning out how to wait until I went to bed, form a mob, and murder me. Yeah, great way to repay somebody for their efforts, thanks but no thanks. Call me crazy but I'm still a bit miffed at them!"

"I could go-"

I shook my head. "They wouldn't like you any more than they liked me."

"Less," Sarah confirmed. "They would see you as blasphemy. An angel had to give up Heaven to create you, one way or another. They wouldn't like being reminded that a 'higher being' could even consider leaving paradise for our world. Mom at least looks like a kitsune, something they understand is simply a part of the natural world now."

"Oh, that type!"

She nodded.

"So what are you thinking?" Midnight asked me.

"I'll create a spirit clone. As we already have two Firebrands, we'll then have four of them. Two can go with one of my clones to the ungrateful village, and I'll stay here. My two dragons can take the place of the gate, and make sure no monsters get inside. Meanwhile the two of us can work from the walls, raining magical death and destruction upon our attackers. Tomorrow I'll try to get a reading on what direction they came from, and I'll have done the same with the other village. Hopefully there's a map around here I can use and that should help point the way towards our destination for tomorrow."

"That's a plan," she agreed, rubbing her chin. "But I do have to wonder if there isn't a better way. This isn't natural. Groups of one type of creature don't just meet up and spontaneously decide to start attacking villages. Finding out where they're coming from is a good step, but is there more we can do to get to the bottom of it?"

"Sounds like you have an idea." *I didn't take that battlefields and tactics skill after all, I didn't plan on leading any armies. But then, I didn't consider becoming a mother or getting a partner that's a cute dark elf girl part of the time and a warm glowing orb the rest of the time either.*

"That sleep spell. These creatures that are attacking are considered monsters, but they do have language. They're not animals. Perhaps you should do the same thing here. Put them to sleep, the townspeople here can secure them, and we can question them as to why they're doing this."

My eyes lit up. "That's a great idea!" *Alternatively, we just kill them and ask their corpses with the speak to corpses spell. But maybe not mention that to someone turning into an angel? May be considered necromancy and thus, not something a civilized hero of society would do.*

"I have them, from time to time," she admitted with pride.

"I'll hold you to that. Now, we do know they'll attack basically anything that moves, they haven't in the past run away from Firebrand when they saw her. They ran to attack, even though she was full dragon size, and even as I rained lightning down on them. I can have her patrolling outside the city, and hopefully they'll be drawn to her instead of the walls. If I can get them all around me, and there probably won't be as many as the army from across the mountains, I won't need to push the crazy amount of energy into the spell I had to before. Then we just get the guards to come out, carefully tie them up, and question them when they awaken." *I can probably ask my question magic which direction they'll come from too, and be there waiting for them. As for the other town, I'll just have to kill anything that comes there. They won't be prepared to tie up any monster, and probably won't listen to me anyway. But that's fine.*

Quest Accepted

Protect the town with minimal loss of life on either side. Gather information from your opponents about why this whole thing is happening and decide what to do about it. Then put that solution into action.

Reward: Variable XP based on performance

Reward: Recognition (1pt background)

Reward: Occluded

With the plan in action I sent Sarah back to the campsite through a portal so she wasn't wandering around town on her own. She whined that she wanted to watch, but I didn't want her on the walls during a monster attack because who knows what could happen? She pouted a bit but relented, gave me an IOU for the tickle attack, and promised no swimming while she was alone. She sort of perked up when I mentioned it, and I realized that she really didn't get a lot of alone time, at least not since I had come here. *I should have her practice shopping alone, or asking people in town how to get somewhere else in town. It will be good for her development. And while she does swim "alone" with Firebrand, I should let her take walks or something on her own too. She needs the time to think and just be herself. Maybe even let her get lost, see if she can find her way back here in a reasonable time. As I can always find her with my divination magic.* "I'll see you after the attack," I told her.

"Stay safe," she replied, hugging me. "Love you."

"Of course. Love you too."

And so my clone and two dragons flew away from the town, headed for the second group of monsters in the area, and Midnight and I separated each taking a copy of Firebrand. While her magic wasn't quite as far reaching, she could just as easily put a group to sleep with her magic, and replace it seven days later. So whichever of us found the attackers we were set. Naturally we had spoken to the guards about it, so they knew the plan as well, and had agreed to help. They wanted to know where all these monsters were coming from just as much as we did, and when two "dragon riders" showed up with offers to help, they jumped at the chance to not have any more casualties of their own. So we started circling the place, on

the ground, looking out for trouble as the sun went down. *Just one more thing to do, and then some question magic again to see where they might come from.*

"So we have some time," I said to no one. "If you wanted to talk a bit."

I waited.

I began to despair. "Don't make me get down on my knees and use flowery language. You know I will if I have to. Can you even imagine how atrocious my praying would?"

I felt a pair of arms around me, and smiled.

"Hey you," I greeted Mumiah. "Thanks for coming, even if you're just going to chew me out over it." *Wait why is the phrase chew me out perfectly acceptable but the phrase eat me out despite having almost exactly the same literal meaning (chew and eat being synonyms right?) has a totally different and in this case completely unacceptable meaning? What was I saying again?* "You can, I can take it."

Silence.

"Hey, don't make me bust out ESP. Or mind read. Because I'll do it."

"I'm fine," she told me. "Just trying to figure out how to- Look, I'm sorry for rushing off like that and worrying you."

"You didn't get in trouble or anything, did you?"

"What? No, it's Heaven, we don't 'get in trouble.' I have hardly any oversight as it is. No, I just wasn't expecting the reaction I had when you said you would do the ritual for me. I never considered leaving Heaven, but then suddenly there it was. I could actually help you, here, travel around and live like you do. Instead of just watching and wishing I could make a difference. Or sitting around doing nothing, which is mostly what I did before you showed up. Angels don't get bored I guess you would call it, but we still feel things. When you said that I felt... all mixed up, and I just had to get out of there." She sighed. "Honestly, I'm not any less mixed up now. You really did a job on me, offering me the ritual like that you know!" She smacked my arm.

Sure, I've had plenty of time to learn to deal with my emotions but this angel probably not so much. Probably not a lot of extreme mood swings in Heaven, and certainly not shock or surprise. "Sorry to put you on the spot like that. I thought you were hinting something but I guess I was wrong."

"Because I was asking if you minded me being around?"

"Pretty much, yeah."

"I can see how you would think that. I mean I would have to give up meeting pure souls and helping them through the choice. I do like my work. On the other wing that doesn't happen very often so really the job could be done part time, as it were, by another angel. Should I decide to give it up."

"But then the next one that comes along wouldn't get the guidance I do!" I protested. "You watch over me and come talk when I want to. If some other angel just rushed a soul through the process and tossed them into the void so they could get back to their 'real job,' that's no good."

"You're right, you're right," she sighed. "See? All mixed up."

"Still, you deserve the choice."

"The Lord would say I had my task, and to not try rising above my station."

"I don't think contemplating giving up being an angel is rising above. More like the opposite. Plus it's not your fault They made such a wondrous place full of interesting and cute people (such as myself) that tempts you."

She laughed. "It's true. It's those tails, I just can't resist their allure!"

"Not your fault at all, I agree."

"Completely blameless."

We both laughed.

"I better go, you'll be getting company soon. Sorry again, I didn't mean to make you think I abandoned you or anything. I'm your angel. Unless you start demon worshipping or something."

"What sort of tails do they have on offer?"

She smacked me again. "Kitsune are considered by some to be demonic, you know. So watch it."

"I shall pray to avoid temptation then."

"See that you do. Bye for now." She gave me a squeeze and was gone. "Thanks... for worrying."

Offer is still open though, I thought. If you did want to give it a try.

I heard a howling in the distance.

Showtime.

Chapter 28

Creatures

When: After sunset day 5

Where: Outside the walls of the city

Creatures spilled out of the night towards me, atop Firebrand, a strange sound preceding their advance. It sounded like the buzzing of insects, which made a certain amount of sense as my opponents turned out to be giant, humanoid bugs both on the ground and in the air. I found this out the hard way, as one of them tried to knock me off her neck. I, of course, didn't feel it coming because my premonition check calculated out to be a 7 minus 1 for the clone I had going, minus another 2 for the accumulation spell. Thankfully Firebrand was warned in time because she calculated a 13, and got a 73 to dodge out of the way. She had a REFlexes of 37 and so her maximum was 108, making the 73 not bad, not bad at all. Flying types were going to be a problem to deal with though, unless I centered the origin point of the spell quite carefully. It did extend in a sphere around me, but falling from a great height would probably wake them up. On the other hand, once they did wake up they would breathe the mist again and go right back to sleep. On the gripping hand (*the what?*) the fliers were much faster than the ground forces and had gotten here first. I needed to fend off the flying types to allow the ground types time to get here. Casting the spell now they might see the mist, not run into it, and just go around or spread out enough for it to not be an effective strategy anymore. I needed them all here at once. Or did I?

As long as we get a few to talk to, it should be fine, right? I can bug zap the flying ones, and when the ground ones get here, just take them prisoner. It's not like I have to feel bad swatting some bugs that happen to have been made person size, right? Right! Here we go. I picked two that seemed to be in range. There must have been two dozen of the things darting this way and that in the air but they were still too far away. These two were the closest, having arrived before their main group. I didn't feel showing my hand early would hurt, the sight of Firebrand standing there wasn't deterring them, I doubted a little magic would either. My circle lit up the night as I raised my hand. "Let lightning strike-

"Wait!"

Midnight was changing up on Firebrand's clone, and I let the spell go.

"Don't hurt them!" she continued, skidding to a halt next to me. "They're not monsters!"

"They're giant bugs," I countered.

"They're bug *people*," she counter-counter. "They shouldn't be acting like this."

"There are *what* on this planet?"

She didn't get to answer as a bug "person" dive-bombed her. I saw it coming and shouted "No!" lashing out with telekinesis. Throwing energy into my will I calculated a 21, minus the same 3 as before. Just enough by the looks of it, the bug's two hands on one side almost getting a hold on her but it went smashing into the ground instead.

"Don't hurt them!"

Don't hurt them, she says. You've got to be kidding me. "Get on the ground, I have a plan." Firebrand lowered us, Midnight looking at me like I had gone crazy but I grabbed her off Firebrand's neck as soon as we were low enough and pulled her close.

"Do it!" I shouted unnecessarily, as Firebrand already knew the plan. Both of them shape changed into being a mesh dome maybe two meters across, weaving together to add strength. The bugs, predictably, started trying to bite or claw through it.

"This is better?" she asked, looking around but not letting go of me.

"You're the one that said not to hurt them," I reminded her. "I need them close enough but the ground types are too far away yet. This should get them to bunch up."

"Are you sure they can't get through?"

"Firebrand is tougher than dragon scale, don't worry," I assured her. "No doubt part of the cage has burrowed into the ground, they can't move her. The problem is you."

"Me? I couldn't let you hurt them, I couldn't follow the plan!"

The plan to keep distance between us so she didn't get caught up in the sleep mist. "I suppose. I would have felt pretty bad when I learned they were people. I've never seen bug people before though?"

She shook her head. "They're not allowed near human settlements. Prejudice. They're perfectly nice most of the time, though of course treated poorly and justifiably angry about that. But this... Oh." She stepped away from me and gestured to the bugs, now crawling around the dome trying to get in. "Sorry."

"What? I wasn't complaining."

"Not the time, maybe?"

"I guess you're right. Still, you're going to get caught up in this. Thankfully it's just normal sleep, so you should be fine."

"If it forces me into my usual state I'll be hard to wake up. But what about you?"

I winked at her. "I don't actually have to breathe, so I'll be fine."

"Ugh, of course. Well, it looks like they're here so get on with it." She gestured again and the main force of bugs was indeed upon us. They had encircled us, which was handy for me, shaking the "bars" of the cage and trying to reach us. They were also biting it, the winged ones were trying to lift it. They really, really, hated our guts yet wanted desperately to see them, it seemed.

"Right. Better sit down."

She did so as I gathered energy. I spent 19 actions gathering 8 energy each, for a total of about 150, and cast without speaking. I held my breath and specified the center of the dome as the center point for the spell. It whooshed out to the maximum range, and the buzzing of the insect wings abruptly cut off. Many simply rolled down the dome, stirred, and went back to sleep again. I held the spell, the shimmering mist creeping about the bodies just in case there were some stragglers, and finally cut it off, taking a breath again.

"Okay, let's head back to town," I told Firebrand, who changed back again. One dragon, one fairy. "Good job on the dome." Both nodded to me. I pointed to the fairy one. "I don't get it." She put a hand over her mouth like she was covering a laugh, skipped over, and effortlessly picked up the now sleeping Midnight. I should also note that she also did this with the utmost care and grace, her MANipulation and COOrdination of 37 turning every movement of hers fluid and unearthly. Midnight barely stirred. I had never really noticed this before, but as she easily cradled the sleeping elf and buzzed her wings, lifting off a little from the ground, I couldn't help but see it now. Her stats allowed her perfect control, like she was the most practiced dancer to ever live even when she was just hovering there. I climbed back onto the dragon's neck and we quietly left the sleeping bugs to lie.

"What are we dealing with here?" the captain of the guard asked me, clearly not believing me. I had put Midnight down in a bunk and Firebrand in tiny fairy form was keeping an eye on her. Mostly by sitting on her chest in case anyone got any funny ideas. My Firebrand was also in fairy form, sitting on my shoulder.

"Giant bug people," I repeated. "Some fliers, some not. They're as tall as I am."

"Dozens?"

"There were tons of bugs crawling all over the dome I made, and more on the ground. I didn't get a full count. There were a lot of them though."

"Great. Great!" he repeated. "We're not equipped to deal with this. Tie them up, sure, I agreed to that plan. But I thought it would be orcs or those nasty bat things from last time. Not bugs. We can't tie up bugs. You know how strong those things are? They're *bugs*. It's a good thing you did stop them though, the fliers would have gone right over the walls."

"Plus we'd have to somehow bind their mouths," another guard said. "They can bite through most anything."

"I heard the ones with stingers are way worse than bees!" agreed another. "You ever been stung by a bee? My grandfather was and he almost died. From one tiny bee! Imagine getting stung by something as big as you!"

"Would we have enough rope? They have six limbs," said another. "Plus the wings, we don't want them flying-"

The captain held up a hand and they fell silent. "As you can see, there's a lot of problems with this plan now."

"Midnight said they were acting strangely, that they shouldn't be doing this."

"None of the monsters we've been fighting off *should* be doing this," he agreed. "But they're doing it just the same. Now, how can we deal with them? They're just asleep, right? So any loud noise will wake them?" I nodded. "There should be enough of us, even if there's more of them. If we sneak out there and at least deal with the fliers on maybe a count of three, we can take the ground walkers as they wake up."

"Hold on, when you say 'deal with' you mean-"

"Chop off their heads with axes while they sleep, yes."

"Unacceptable," I told him, making a slashing motion with my hand. "If they really are intelligent, and I have no reason to not believe Midnight, something is making them do this. We really do need to figure out what."

"So we'll drag *one* of them away and question it after the others are dead. I'm sure we can keep one bug man under control."

"No! That's not what I'm saying."

"So what's your plan? I have to keep my city safe and I don't want giant bugs flying over the wall and carrying off kids or whatever."

"Fine. Look, they're fairly clumped up now because they were trying to get into the dome I made. I can make another dome. But this time with them inside." I looked to Firebrand who nodded. "We can question them in the morning. If they can't be reasoned with, well, they'll be all grouped up and easier to deal with."

"You guarantee the safety of the town? I'm putting a lot of trust in a mage I've never heard of. Dragon rider, paladin, or whatever you are or not."

"I do. It'll hold, believe me."

He sighed. "There were reports of a bug village some distance from here, out in the woods or whatever. They never bothered us. Even if these people aren't those people, if it got out we murdered a bunch of helpless bugs it would just cause more trouble. I'd rather avoid that."

"Look, I'll watch over them all night myself. If they get out, I'll be right there to deal with them just like I did the first time."

"Fine. But I'm coming with you for now, I want to make sure there really are bugs."

"Why would I lie about it? Whatever, I'm sure my dragon can handle carrying us both," I told him. "Come along."

We rode out there, the captain a bit nervous about the dragon appearing out of nowhere but climbing up all the same. I showed him the sleeping bodies of the bug people, and how I would create a huge dome to keep them all in. Firebrand could become any size, after all, and any shape. "You'll have to walk back," I told him. *Though I could portal you back I guess?*

"That's fine," he agreed. "Good job. Well done." He scampered out of there.

I think I intimidated that guy... Or maybe all the bugs did. Even in the dark they're pretty ugly.

Nothing stirred for hours. I got the paper and ink out, analyzing it, and then working on the ward for Midnight as the time passed.

"I can walk you know," I heard from behind me. I looked up from my work to see fairy Firebrand once again carrying Midnight and coming towards us. *Has it been so long? She only "sleeps" half the night, is it that far gone already?*

"There's sleeping beauty," I greeted her, getting up. "Have a nice nap?"

"Yes, thank you. Can you tell Firebrand to put me down? She insisted on carrying me out here."

"Well, it's what I would have done so..." I nodded and she got set down.

"Thank you. What's going on here?"

"Wait, I have to tease you about how cute you were when you were asleep and being carried around by Firebrand! She scooped you right up-"

"Not another word!"

I laughed. "Fine. I'm penning them up until morning and we can question them. Apparently trying to tie up bug people isn't going to work, according to the captain."

"It would be tricky," she agreed. "You see their mouths?"

I had been looking them over. "Yes, they really are just big insects, aren't they? You would need chains, not rope I think. What made them? Magic that went wrong at some point?"

"No idea. They've been around as long as us, I guess. I take it this is Firebrand, as I don't see her?" She shook the bars a little.

"It is. I could nap and maybe make something like this. Or make it out of stone with a bunch of energy but she doesn't mind. Do you?"

Firebrand shook her head.

"What was it like, by the way? What you did before, I mean. You both made the dome, did you go half and half or what?"

By way of explanation she came over and hugged me.

"Ah! I see!"

She stepped back smiling.

"Well, keep an eye out, now that you're here. Unless you want to join your other half and make the bars even stronger?"

She made an "I'll think about it" gesture.

"Okay. Now as for you!" I pointed to Midnight. "Get that shirt off and let's try this out!" I held out a ward. "XP spent, it should work. I even made some 'alert' wards too, now that I had paper. I'll stick them around the campsite. Let's give it a try."

"What? Right out here?" She looked around.

"We're far enough from the town. You should only light up a second."

"I guess it's fine." She removed her armor and shirt, turning around so I could take her ward off. "I'll still be naked when I came back to this shape."

"Yeah why do think I'm in such a rush?"

"You have Firebrand to look at. She's much prettier than me."

I looked at her, and she fluffed her hair out and stuck a hip out in away that conveyed "Yes that goes without saying."

"All her physical stats are linked to how much energy I put into the spell," I explained. "From STrength to LOOKs. So yes, she has a 37 LOOKs as well right now. She is," I looked her up and down, "from every individual strand of hair on her head to her tiny, polished little toenails, as perfect a creature as we will ever- Hey Mumiah, you there? What's the LOOKs of the most perfect angel? I'm not talking about Them, just an angel in general."

That would be Lucifer, with a LOOKs of 20.
They are tied with the prince of the seraphim, Michael.

Love,
Mumiah

"Wow, the best an angel can do is a 20. So yeah, she's beyond perfect. Thanks, Mumiah." *But at the same time, there must be diminishing returns. Sure, someone can be hot as an 8, but what does being 'a 10' really get you? Can you really be more perfect going from a 10 to a 15 for example? It doesn't hurt she moves so well, because of her other stats.*

"She really is," Midnight had to agree. "She's always flitting around or turning into a dragon or whatever so I guess I never really noticed until she carried me and I was forced to hang onto her and look into those perfect eyes of hers. And touch that perfect hair. And feel those perfect arms around me. Everything about her is... perfect."

Firebrand was acting pleased and embarrassed over all this scrutiny. Perfectly, of course. She finally turned small again and went to hide in my hair.

That snapped both of us out of it.

“Well, uh!” Midnight tried, as if coming out of a trance.

“Yes!” I said, a bit too loudly. “Magically perfect companion aside, get that shirt off!”

She complied, and I burned up her previous ward by taking it off her. Then I stuck the new ward I made on the glowing orb that was floating there. With a smile, Midnight was back.

“It worked,” she breathed.

“Of course. I know what I’m doing.”

“I don’t have to go back to that priest anymore,” she continued, looking herself over.

I laughed and took her hand, holding it up. “Yes, you’re all there. Every inch of you. Though I could take a closer look if you wanted me to be completely sure. Actually I better check a few things, is your skin smooth? Your hair silky and soft? Muscles right in the legs? Tummy flat enough? Shouldn’t take more than a few minutes touching that body of yours. You don’t mind right? I mean I helped make it so now it sort of belongs to me right? That’s how law works here?”

Firebrand zipped out and nodded, getting in on it.

“Oh you want to help?”

“I think everything’s accounted for better get my clothes on in case the bugs wake up and we need to fight I can’t do it naked thanks for doing all this!” she said in a rush, diving for her clothes.

“Aw!” I pouted, as she grabbed up her stuff and started to dress again. *Wait did she bend over like that on purpose or...*

With her fully dressed (*spoilsport*) she thanked me again for working on the wards.

“It’s fine. I want to use all my powers and now I can finally use this one, as we have paper. Wandering around, helping folks? It’s sort of what I do?”

“It still means a lot to me. I’ll have to go back, once more, and tell that priest I don’t need his services for now. But that can wait. I’ll find a way to repay you, someday.”

Walk around naked more... I didn’t say. I just smiled and nodded. “With that out of the way, you okay? Get enough sleep? This lot isn’t going anywhere.” I poked a thumb at the bugs. “If you wanted to nap a bit more.”

“I’m fine. Ready for the rest of the day!”

“Great. Watch them for a moment, I’m going to check in with Sarah to let her know I’m okay. Actually, I’ll leave a note! I have ink and paper now, how cool will that be? For her to find a note from her mom when she wakes up? Let me see here...”

I sat and wrote a short note to Sarah, then stuck it through a portal. She was asleep like a good girl, I noticed, and nodded. Midnight and I spent the rest of the night just hanging out, talking about what it could mean if the normally peaceful bug people were now starting to attack settlements with the other “monsters” but we could only speculate. The night passed uneventfully, and as the golden rays of the morning sun revealed their dark carapace I figured they would stir and start to try escaping. But they kept sleeping. I had figured given their energetic nature the night before they would be up with the sun and ready to resume wandering around looking for things to attack, but an hour after sunrise they were still just lying there. The captain had even come and gone, checking in with us, but we had nothing to report as they were still snoozing away.

“I don’t get it,” Midnight finally decided. “Were they that tired?”

“We have no idea how long they marched around for,” I told her. “Maybe they really were exhausted.”

In my note to Sarah I had simply said breakfast might be late as I wasn’t going to portal her back until the danger was over. So simply to stay close to the campsite, no going into water deeper than her hips, and stay out of trouble. As I was contemplating making some food here and just bringing it to her one of the bugs woke with a start, and I figured that finally we could get this show on the road.

“Hello!” I called to them as they looked around. “Can we talk for a moment?”

They wasted no time rushing me, and smashing into the bars and groping for me as though they wanted to tear me limb from limb. This woke the rest, who were suddenly on their feet (or in the air) trying to escape.

"I know you can understand me," I shouted to them. "Please, can we talk?" I turned to Midnight. "Are you sure they have language?"

"They're crazed," Midnight breathed, having taken a few steps back. "They shouldn't be acting this way. They're people, they just look like bugs. They have their own language. Now what's happening?"

Anything with language should understand me, but they seem like they don't.

There were a series of pops, and something that looked like bread was appearing out of nowhere all around the floor of the cage. The bug people went nuts over it, diving on it and devouring every last bit of it. I felt it was being magically delivered, (10 on magic sense) and Midnight agreed. But it happened too fast for us to get a sample they were fighting over it and within a minute every trace was gone. Then they went back to throwing themselves against the bars. Biting them. Shaking them.

"Something's been done to them," Midnight gasped, horrified. "They're starving. Exhausted. Crazed. This isn't natural. Sylvia we have to do something. We have to help them!"

Chapter 29

Break

When: Morning of day 6

Where: Outside the walls of the city

“Break this down for me again?” the captain asked, having been brought back to the site via portal. We didn’t have time to mess around with *walking* of all things and he and several of his men were now scowling at the mess I had created.

“Okay,” I stalled, collecting my thoughts. “Last night my divinations informed me that this town, and another one nearby, would come under attack. I stayed here, and sent some trusted allies,” *my own spirit clone and two Firebrand clones*, “to protect it. They have reported,” *uncloned themselves, giving me their memories in the process*, “complete success. They fought off wolves that had stony bodies.” *And what thanks did I get from the townsfolk? More threats and shouts of not needing my help. Oh, shut them up fast when I asked Mumiah to make an appearance and set them straight. She said it was sort of a violation but she was getting pretty angry with what they were calling me. She appeared, said if they didn’t like the God given help they had been given in answer to their prayers to not bother next time, and see how far that got them. The looks on their faces as they realized I was a paladin were priceless, I wish I could have stayed but my clone took that opportunity to vanish. “I have less bigoted flocks to tend to,” my clone said to them. “And it seems my angel has retracted my charge to keep this village safe. I will not be back to save you a third time. Perhaps if you truly beg forgiveness in your hearts she will see fit to restore my holy mission of keeping you safe. But that is up to you and your attitudes. Good day.” Pop! One cute fox girl and two giant dragons simply gone, like that. Priceless.* “This location was attacked by the supposedly intelligent bug people and while I trust Midnight I have so far been unable to verify that claim.”

“They occasionally show up to trade,” the captain admitted. “They speak our language pretty well, for being bugs. We allow them for short periods, and I guess I’ve never really had a problem with them causing trouble in town. That they started, anyway. Sometimes the townsfolk can get a little touchy with them around.”

So who is the real monster here? “Fine. So usually they talk a bit better than this, I can accept that.” I gestured behind me, where the seemingly rabid bug people were still trying to escape their Firebrand style enclosure. “This morning they slept longer than I thought they would, had something like bread magically delivered, which they all devoured. They fought over it. I made them a bunch of food to try and help calm them down,” I again gestured to the piles of magically created food in the cell, “but they completely ignored it! So weird. I tried my speak to animals spell just in case, no luck. They’re not under any kind of magical compulsion, and their thoughts are all jumbled up. Their emotions too. Rage, desperation, exhaustion, I can’t make heads or tails of it.” *Even two tails. I don’t have the meld skill, that had too many prerequisites, and I don’t think I want to go even deeper into any of their heads than I already have.* “I looked at their auras, they’re not evil. I have a few more tricks up my sleeves but they’ll have to be asleep again I’m not risking touching them as they are.” *I can see where they came from with postcognition and even check out a soul or two with soul extracting. See if they’ve been corrupted by demons or something.* “But before I went too far I figured I should see what you had to say.”

“Well we can’t just leave them here,” he began. “And it doesn’t look like they’re going to cooperate enough to imprison them. Maybe splash them with lamp oil and then set them on-what?”

Midnight and I had both gasped and put our hands over our mouths. “That’s horrible!”

“How do you propose we get rid of them?”

“Get rid of? We have to undo what’s been done to them! Send them back to their homes. They’re people! What if a bunch of townsfolk had something done to them, and they attacked a bug village but were captured, and the bug people set *them* on fire. What would happen then?”

He sighed. “More humans would be sent to teach the bug people a lesson. It would only escalate from there.”

“Exactly. Maybe send a scout to find that bug village you spoke of before? See if they have any idea what’s happened?” *Or to determine these poor souls are all that’s left of it.*

“If they were orcs or wolves or whatever we wouldn’t be having this conversation you know.”

“I agree they may have no better idea about this behavior than we do but at least we can say we *tried*. Instead of just thinking of ways to kill them. And maybe the other bug people know methods to calm them down and will take them off our hands rather than let them become charcoal.”

“I’ll send a scout. Meanwhile, will this structure hold? They really don’t seem to like being in there.”

We watched them a second. They were absolutely crazed trying to get at us. Even hurting themselves trying to bite through the bars, and push past each other to get to the front where we were.

“The structure is... stable,” I allowed. *I don’t like being without Firebrand’s main body but her clone is just as good. Hold on.* “Wait. I know what to do, it’ll keep them down and they won’t have to even be watched. They’ll be totally out of it for days. Long enough to track them back to their origin, and figure out some kind of antidote or whatever we need to do.”

“Get to it then,” he ordered. “If I’m satisfied I’ll trust you and not pursue killing them for the moment.”

“Thank you, captain.”

“Don’t thank me until I’m satisfied.”

That’s what she said? Oh crap, now I’m doing it. “Then step way back. I need them all asleep again and the bigger an area I get with the sleep mist, the better it works. You would think it would be the other way around, but no.” *After all, if I could get 100m with the spell but choose to only get 10m, it should be 10x as potent and they would need a CONstitution check of whatever x 10 to avoid falling asleep. But no. They both scale linearly. Magic is weird.*

“Very well, everyone move out!” he shouted.

“What are you going to do?” Midnight asked as I was chortling and rubbing my hands together.

“Same thing I did with the townsfolk back at the fort,” I told her. “Put them to sleep so they can’t resist, and then use my energy draining spell on them. If I keep pulling energy out they’ll start taking non-lethal damage and tons of fatigue. They’ll be out for days sleeping all that off!”

“But they won’t be permanently harmed?”

“I won’t take that much, I promise!” I assured her. *Though it would become lethal quick enough, but like I said I don’t wish them harm any more than she does. If they’re victims, and I believe they are, we need to help them. I’ll stop after a reasonable amount.*

“Okay.”

“You need to step back too. Don’t make me have Firebrand princess carry you again.”

“I’m going, I’m going!” she insisted, rushing to join the soldiers.

I estimated their distance (magic combat, 8) and had them step back a few dozen more paces. An 11 later and I decided it was enough, and got to casting. I figured the resistance to this spell was a CONstitution check, something they couldn’t put energy into. They seemed fairly hardy though, being bugs, so if they had an 8 CON their maximum check would be a 24. So I just had to have a planet rating higher than that, so they couldn’t succeed. *As I am about to refill my energy and then some, no sense leaving anything to chance. And done.* They dropped (like flies, he he he) again and Firebrand became her smaller dragon self after I was sure they were all down. The others approached as I worked my magic, stepping up to each

one and quietly casting the spell to energy drain them. They couldn't resist now, and I pulled as much energy from them as I dared with a few spirit sense checks to guide me. I was terrible at this skill, it's one I only had a 1 in, but even a low result would tell me if something right in front of me was dead or not. I determined they had about the same energy as a typical person, and by watching my status page I could see how much I took and stopped at about 45 for each one. This left me with over a thousand energy, filling me to bursting once again. And this time I wasn't going to immediately use it either. It felt *great*.

"You're almost glowing," Midnight told me. "Is carrying around that much energy good for you?"

"I could get used to it," I told her, bouncing on the balls of my feet. "Spell description doesn't list any downsides, and it fades pretty quickly. But for now this feels so great!"

"You can keep Firebrand around a long time, right?" she asked, glancing over at her. She put a finger to her chin like "what are you thinking?"

"Sure, thanks to Heaven making my focus and not a true paragon type. It circumvented the scene system, why?"

"So pump some of this extra energy into *her*, and have a companion that's twice as strong or more than she is now."

My eyes widened. "And twice as pretty!"

She flashed red and looked away. "That's just a side effect!"

"Uh huh. But sure, I have it to burn now." I dismissed her for a second, put my energy gathering spell back on, and threw an even 100 energy into my magic. This would leave her with a frankly *ridiculous* LOOKs stat of 109, below her other physical stats of 126 as they were all boosted by a percentage of my bonus from the spell. She appeared as her usual dragon self, but quickly morphed into her larger fairy form. Everyone stared, even me. Her translucent wings caught the morning sunlight in exactly the right way making them shimmer and glow, and the way she was standing was somehow exactly like seeing the most amazing sunset of my life. In human form. Her body was made up of a series of glorious curves my eyes hungrily devoured, and some part of me wondered if this had actually been a good idea? Everyone else was drooling over her as well, I was dimly aware. But it seemed she was satisfied with this, and nodded, shrinking and flying to sit on my shoulder as usual.

"Wow!" Midnight managed, shaking herself a little. "What just happened? Were we just stun-locked by beauty?"

"That's the power of a plus hundred looks I guess. Firebrand status page." I looked it over and whistled.

"What is it?"

"Woo boy. With these stats her health is at 274, her energy is over a thousand, and I can't even begin to guess what her unarmed skill calculation would be. Somewhere in the range of 200?" I looked to see Midnight very confused at all this. "She's a hurricane in the shape of a tiny fairy."

"That still doesn't tell me anything."

"She could literally zip across a battlefield and take out an army by herself. For context, my normal energy is 200, and my health is a 12. Not that you could damage her," I realized with a laugh. "DTR 10, higher really because of her CON but it can't *go* higher. She's not a hurricane, she's an entire mountain range packed into a fairy shape. Good thing her COOrdination and MANipulation are as good as her STRength or just sitting on me could break every bone in my body. I mean she's not heavy just that strong."

Firebrand put a hand on her chest as if to say "aw, little 'ol me? Nah!" and waved a little.

"Glad to have suggested it?"

"Super glad!" *I can easily throw in 100 energy normally upon waking, I get back what, 1 energy every 2 seconds? She can always be this strong. And fast. Her 'normal' walking speed is over a hundred! That's 600km/hour flying. Sheesh.* "Now, I still have work to do." I turned to the nearest bug person and got to work. First I pulled out their soul, calculating a 15 on the check with maximum energy put in. Ironically ties would have gone to the defender, but the bug person was at penalties for the fatigue and it popped right out. I then calculated an 8 on soul appraising, and thankfully I didn't detect any taint there.

"What is that?" the captain asked, having walked over again once I indicated it was safe to do so.

"The soul of this person," I explained, looking it over. It was a swirling ball of energy, a light blue color, hovering over my hand.

"They have *souls*?" he asked, sounding disgusted.

"Sorry if this impacts your worldview- wait not sorry," I told him. "Soul is fine. I could check others but this is a random sample. They were all acting weird, I can't imagine this one in particular having no corruption while others do. I'll do something else next." I let it go, and the soul zipped back into the body again.

"Are you doing magic? I've never seen half the things you're doing. Who are you?"

"Right now, the paladin assigned to figure out what's going on around here and put a stop to it. You have a problem with that?" I turned to face him.

His eyes flicked to all the bugs lying around. He knew who had done that. Me. "Carry on!"

"Thank you." I walked to another and bent down to touch it. *Now this skill I have a five in, and honestly I don't need to go that far back. Let's just see what you've been doing these past few days shall we?* I touched it and activated postcognition, calculating a 15 again. Seemed to be the day for it. This was enough to see 100 years into this guy's past, but I settled for a week ago through today.

I was horrified by what I saw, and scrambled back away from the victim.

"Sylvia?" Midnight asked, concerned. "What is it? What happened?"

"I saw his past," I told her, trying to control my breathing. "It's horrible. We have to stop it right away. Not his past, that's impossible. Well, it's not impossible with magic. What I mean is what's happening to others like him." *I'm babbling. I need to get a hold of myself.*

"You did what?" the captain asked, clearly not convinced.

Midnight waved him off. "Relax, try to relax. I'm not clear on what happened myself but it's upset you. What can I do to help?"

"Oh Midnight!" I grabbed her up into a hug.

"Shhh, there, there. It's going to be okay," she told me, patting my head. "Take all the time you need."

I stayed there a moment as the vision passed, then let her go. "Thanks. Sorry about that."

"It's okay. You don't look as spooked, are you okay?"

I nodded and turned to the captain. "Here's the deal. Like I said I can experience the past or future of a creature I touch. Any object, really. I looked into that one's past. A week. Just a week. He's been held somewhere, some kind of cell, and there were more creatures there. A lot more. Things were done to them. Beatings. Starving them. Magic. Experiments? He wasn't sure at the end, it feels like that. What was done to him turned him into this, and two days ago they were released into the wild in a group. He's basically been awake and manic the entire time since. I don't know how we're going to get them back. It was horrible what he- all of them- endured. We have to put a stop to it, or more crazed monsters are going to keep plaguing this area."

"We can't exactly leave the town vulnerable if more like this are roaming around," the captain told me.

I shook my head. "I'll take care of it. I know roughly where this guy's hideout is. I can get there on Firebrand far faster than you could march or ride horses there. We need to stop him before he releases any more of these creatures on the world."

"Him who?"

"The bug guy never heard a name. He was very careful. A week ago he was in a cage with others, I would have to go back further to see when he was captured, how it happened. He might have been there for months for all I know."

"Someone made them like this on purpose, just to release them in the end?" Midnight gasped.

"That's what I'm afraid of," I agreed. "There's no spell that can just fix this. Even the best healing spell won't undo months of torture, if that's what he's been through." *Maybe some combination of alleviation and a memory wipe spell? Take them back to the point before they were captured? But what would that do to them? Even torture wouldn't turn an intelligent being this crazed, right? Did that bread or whatever they ate play a part in this? Is that why they ate only that? He was given so little to eat otherwise...*

"But I don't understand why?" the captain persisted. "Why go through the trouble? Are they just evil? And then why release them? Just to see what happened?"

"He asked the same question many times, I think. Though he was pretty far gone by the time last week rolled around." *I've only been here 5 days, this guy and in fact all of these people have been through so much, before I even arrived.* "I'll ask the guy, once Firebrand is done- carefully- punching him in the face." *He needs to be able to answer, after all. And one strike from her could shatter a castle wall at this point.*

Firebrand quickly stood and saluted. "Ready for duty," she seemed to say.

"Not to impugn your skills and confidence, but where is this place, roughly?" the captain asked. "In case something happens I'd like to at least send some scouts to watch the area, and report on any more monsters coming from there. And we'll need to send more to scour the land, find those already running around before they hit more towns. If you do fail, the kingdom will need to send a whole battalion to clean it up."

Not to what? "It's closer than you might like. That's why so many attacks here, I think. Their path wasn't straight here, they seemed to just wander around and follow different leaders, like a swarm of bats or something, but they got here in the end. It's a ruin maybe a day from here in..." I looked around. "That direction." I pointed. "If you just went straight there."

He noted it. "Got it. Ruin you say? I know of ruins near here. Yeah, a day away? They probably ran non-stop? On horseback that would be about right, if you wanted to kill the horse. Fine. You'll report back before dark?"

"Of course. I have a few things to do but we can get there very fast on my dragon, check it out, and be back by secondlunch. If we're not back by dinner... Send all the reinforcements you can, and do what needs be done. Meanwhile prayers wouldn't hurt. Thoughts and prayers." *They could actually help, in this world.*

"I will. Good luck." He had his men form up, they had been poking the sleeping bugs to make sure nothing would wake them, and they started marching back to the town.

"What do you have to do that's so important we shouldn't leave now?" Midnight asked.

"Heading back to camp," I told her. "Breakfast, for us and Sarah, and then about a dozen hugs to finally banish what I saw. It was horrible, you have no idea. The cages. The sounds. What was done to them. The man is a monster, a true monster, for doing this. He has to be stopped."

She put a hand on my other shoulder. "We will, Sylvia, we'll get him."

I nodded. "But first, hugs."

Chapter 30
Irresponsible
When: Just after breakfast
Where: At camp

“Irresponsible,” I told Sara, shaking my head. “It would be completely irresponsible for me, as a parent, to bring you into this situation.”

“But mom!”

“Don’t you but mom me! Even if I do have a nice butt, haven’t we learned our lesson? What happened the last time? You getting grabbed?”

“That was totally different!”

“Yes, this situation is even *more* dangerous! We know they’ll be awake and there is some mastermind behind it all. A magic user, or at least a master and an apprentice. Undead roaming around. Cultists? There could be magical traps guarding the place. Magical guards like Firebrand or animated suits of armor. Golems. Magical guards guarding physical traps that trigger magical traps when you defeat the magical guards and disarm the physical traps. Plus whoever is there could just unleash all the monsters at us, they’ll be right there!”

We were back at camp, and I had made breakfast for us all and heard what she had been up to since I left. She had survived the night and morning alone, wandering around the camp as usual without anything on. It was actually a bit rainy that morning, but she said she would rather just let the water run off her than get clothes soaked. She said it was weird, being on her own, and couldn’t wait to master enough magic to get her own magical companion like Firebrand to play with. “It was nice, I didn’t freak out or anything going to bed alone, and I even did my morning exercises like a good girl without your prompting.” I promised her we would take some time once this whole wandering monsters thing was taken care of, so Midnight could start her proper lessons. Hang out at the camp, “spend some XP” as it were. I shouldn’t have brought up XP honestly, as a moment later she was throwing the phrase back at me.

That led into the fact we were going to explore the ruin and free the caged creatures from the madman turning them into crazed attackers and that we would be back later. She, of course, insisted on coming to help.

“Look, I don’t *seem* to get XP like you do,” she protested, “but I’m still your daughter. It may be going on in the background. If I don’t go on adventures with you, I don’t get experience and I won’t be able to grow. I mean I’ll grow, I can’t stop *growing* but you know what I mean. My skills. Powers.”

“We could run into anything,” I counter protested. “Crazed trolls, undead, metal monstrosities brought to life through human sacrifice. You don’t know. Stuff that won’t bother just grabbing you, they’ll just squish you. This guy opens a cage of creatures he’s about to let out into the wild and suddenly we’ve got a dozen fighters in a small space to worry about.”

“So I’m just supposed to sit here and worry? What if something hits *you* from behind? What if you never come back? What am I supposed to do then? I’m in the middle of nowhere here!” She gestured around her. “The nearest town is that one that hates you, good luck getting any help there.”

“I’ll be fine. I have plenty of powers to help me. You don’t.”

“Put the wing spell on me again. I can certainly take care of myself then!”

“Do you know how much a grade 10 spell drags me down? I paid one twentieth of my background point total just for this!” I showed her the ring, “Just to avoid paying the penalty for a grade 8 spell. It’s one more than that!”

“Are you dragged down in the same way?” she asked Midnight. “Could you put a similar spell on me instead?”

She waved her hands in front of her. "Don't drag me into this. Your mom wants to keep you safe. I wish she could keep *me* safe. You think I want to go to some madman's lair in some old ruin? No. I'd rather just stay here, where it's safe, and start training you. Let the cities and the kingdom solve their own wandering monster problem. It's nothing to do with us. Why should we take the risk to fix it for them?"

Well, for the XP of course.

"You're just saying that!"

"Am not!"

"Are too!"

"Am not!"

"Are too!"

Dee two?

Suddenly Firebrand zipped out and went between them, holding up a palm to each of them.

"What is it, Firebrand?" Sarah asked. "Also, did you do your hair different? You seem prettier... I like it."

She shook her head, pointed to me.

"I can explain later, don't change the subject."

"She changed the subject!" Sarah protested.

"Yes, why did you-" I started to say, but she put her fingers together and there were suddenly two fairies in the air. "Still don't see what-" She wasted no time, one of her zipping towards Sarah and growing to match her size.

"Is she saying she'll guard me?" Sarah asked, not sure what she wanted as she opened her arms for a hug. "Or is she upset we're arguing and just wants a hug?" She hugged the girl, and squeaked as she was lifted clean off the ground.

"Firebrand, what-" I again didn't get to finish my thought as suddenly she was gone and Sarah was stumbling forward, catching herself and going upright again. She stared at her hands as we stared at her. She was changed. She was now wearing a glistening, stylized armor that covered her entire body. Her helmet had a clear glass faceplate, leaving her good visibility but still completely protecting her head. It even had room for her ears, sticking up so they weren't folded over. The whole thing was vaguely scaled, sort of dragon looking, and Sarah's face started lighting up as she realized what had just happened.

"Oh wow!" she finally managed. "This is amazing! Mom, isn't this amazing? Look at what she did!"

"I'm looking," I told her, still a bit stunned. "She became... armor."

"She sure did," Midnight agreed, walking all the way around her. "But no offense, Firebrand, isn't she going to suffocate in there?"

Firebrand shook her head and darted around. She pointed to some slits at the back of the helmet.

"Oh, I see. Air vents in the back, clever."

She accepted the complement with a bow.

"I feel different," Sarah told us, still clenching and unclenching her hands. "Like I'm moving differently, for some reason." She looked over at the stone table and walked over to it. I couldn't help but notice it seemed Firebrand's stats were helping her out, she moved with more grace now than she did before. She put a hand on the table and easily lifted it. "Oh yeah! I can do it! I feel great. We can win!" She was pumping it up and down like it was nothing. "Quick, make me a rock I want to punch it!"

A bit dazed I used elemental conjuration to make her a rock, and she put the table down and stood before it. She smiled as she balled up her fist and jumped, shouting a battle cry as she smashed into it. The rock didn't stand a chance, it was shattered into tiny pieces and she danced around, pumping her fists. Then her eyes got wide and she looked behind her. "She even accounted for my tail!" She turned and showed me, there was an armored tail sticking out too, and it seemed to be segmented enough to let her wag it. "Oh, that's why she picked me up! Shoes." She lifted a foot and I saw the armor extended to her feet, giving her a slight heel so she was standing a little taller. "She thought of everything. Firebrand is so great!"

“Okay, I get armor but how?” Midnight protested. “She’s completely enclosed and seems to have Firebrand’s strength? How are they not fighting for control?”

“Her stats,” I breathed. “They make this possible. Think about it. Average person has a 5 for REFlexes, right? Firebrand has a 126. That’s,” I paused to do the math, “25 times the average person. Same with MANipulation or COOrdination. Firebrand doesn’t need to fight her, or read her mind. She’s reading her body. Reacting so much faster to what Sarah wants to do they’re like a seamless unit.” *A DTR 10, 126 STR absolute unit. By the angels! And she’s a clone of the original, who can still be a dragon and fly us around. I did so good picking her as my first spell! Wait she has my skills, for all I know she is reading Sarah’s mind right now, to see what she’ll do next and that’s helping her. Or premonition, maybe?*

“I bet she could even make me fly,” Sarah announced. “If I needed wings, she could just shape-shift into the armor, but with wings. She would be in control but that would be okay. I trust her not to fly me into a tree or anything, and if I wanted to fly away I could just ask her.”

“Or blades, or claws...” Midnight suggested. “That armor could be pretty versatile, as it’s essentially alive and can think for itself what’s best for any situation.”

“Oh yeah!” Sarah lifted her hands and there were claws. She laughed, then stuck out a foot which had become more dragon-like too, with claws. “Just like that, yeah, nice one Firebrand!” She clawed the air back and forth, then kicked, jumped, flipped, spun... “It’s so easy!” she announced. “She’s helping me, I can feel it! Guiding me to be perfect, where to put my feet and such. I can jump so high, she’s helping me all right.”

She has my ratings in martial arts, even if Sarah doesn’t. “You’re going to get all irritated though, that armor looks pretty skin tight,” I cautioned, because I needed to think of something here. “Doesn’t it pinch, it’s metal sort of?” *I mean she’s harder than metal, even if she looks like flesh as a fairy. She’s magic, so it’s still the same stuff but that armor looks like metal plates. Though I could make her a skinsuit and Firebrand could just go atop that. Would be harder to respond to her muscles moving but with her stats I doubt it would be that much of a problem.*

“Oh no, it’s soft and fuzzy on the inside,” she reported, stopping and putting her arms around herself. “I’m being hugged from head to toe! It’s like a blanket that covers all of me and makes me invincible.” She spun to face me, putting her hands on her hips. “You can’t say I won’t be safe now!”

Right, she became a ‘fuzzy on the inside’ armor. She can become anything, so why not that? “I suppose I can’t,” I muttered, looking at Firebrand the fairy. “Thanks.” She put on an innocent expression like “I didn’t want you to keep fighting” or something like that.

“Yeah, it’s great but let’s not get ahead of ourselves here,” Midnight told her. “There are two things you still have to account for.”

“What’s that?” she asked, sounding curious and not too bratty.

“The first, magic is real. If magic is used against you, well, I could still catch you on fire right now. Burn your face right off through that armor. It’s not absolute protection. You could be teleported out of it. Or an acid teleported into the helmet. Heck even just water would mess you up.”

“I guess...” she admitted.

“But the more important consideration is, you’re a young girl. We’re going into a torture dungeon. Full of crazed beasts.”

“Sounds exciting!”

She scowled. “I’m serious. You may see things you wish you hadn’t.”

“I’ll be fine, it’s fine!”

She dropped to one knee. “Sarah, listen to me. You’re a mature little girl, and inquisitive and kind, and with a heart as big as your mom’s. But for all I know there could be creatures hung on hooks, or cut open and howling in pain. It’s not going to be pretty.”

“Oh.” Her face fell. “Yeah I guess I see what you mean.” She looked at me. “Well, can I at least keep a Firebrand clone around? She won’t be held back too much right? And at least then I can know you’re still okay. And then I can swim and we can play- I’ll still practice my telekinesis and ESP while you’re gone.”

Oh wow, no she won’t. With a thousand energy even breaking into 10 clones leaves her 100 energy each. With her stats the meager -10 penalty would hardly register. I thought I

had an unbeatable army before, I had no idea. “You’re willing to sit this one out? No more arguments?”

She nodded sadly. “If you think that’s best, then... it probably is. Sorry I argued before, I wasn’t thinking about monster guts all over the place. I just want to be there to help. But you have Midnight, and she’s great!” She smiled up at her, though still a little sadly. “You’ll keep each other safe, right? And I know Firebrand will do her part. I don’t have to worry, right?”

Firebrand looked over at me and gestured at Sarah with an exasperated expression.

I crossed my arms and regarded her. She looked defeated, staring at the ground and waiting for me to announce her doom. “Okay,” I said slowly. “You can come.”

“What?” both Midnight and her said.

“Jinx!” we both said.

“Hey, you can’t say jinx if it’s someone else that said- but you said. I’m confused.”

“There are going to be some rules,” I told her. “But you listened to what Midnight had to say. You considered the risks, and you accepted that I knew better than you did. You weren’t happy about it, but you agreed with it. That right there, my daughter, is maturity. You showed it, you may be rewarded for it. But if you abuse it...”

“I won’t!” she promised.

“So we come to the rules. You follow what I say, when I say it. We will go in first. If I determine it’s not something you should see, you will not see it. If you push me on this, I’ll simply have Firebrand walk you through a portal and dump you back here. Then there will be further consequences.” *I have no idea what those consequences would be, so please don’t push me on this and find out.* “Are we agreed?”

“Yes! Oh thank you, thank you mom!” She grabbed me up in a hug and I was grateful Firebrand had the presence of mind to retract the claws and soften the armor so I didn’t get shredded. Sarah *really* didn’t understand what a 126 STR actually meant.

“You sure about this?” Midnight asked.

“She will, one day, need to be able to handle herself in situations far more disturbing than the one we’re going to encounter today,” I told her. “If you’re old enough to ask the question, you’re old enough to be given the answer. She really isn’t in any physical danger, even from magic. If Firebrand has to pull her along a bit and slice someone’s throat out because they’re casting at her, well, that’s a failure on *our* part. So let’s all keep each other safe, okay? Meanwhile, we’ll see if she can follow orders and be part of the group, so I feel better about her development.” *I mean she’s been my daughter only a few days. Even if she thinks differently. I need to learn more about the person she has become and this is a good way to do it. Trial by fire, so to speak.* “She may one day be part of an adventuring group with friends and not have us around. I won’t insist when she’s an adult she stay with me. This is the very first, very small, step on that road. It’s a harsh world out there,” *I think? I mean there’s demons and angels and bug people and who knows what else? I’ve been here less than a week I don’t know!* “She has to learn to deal with it.”

“Hey I’m not telling you how to parent.”

“But it will be when you’re twenty before I let you do something like this again, if you screw up today young lady,” I told Sarah, tapping her faceplate.

“Got it.”

“I don’t mean making mistakes, we all make mistakes,” I clarified. “I mean me telling you one thing and you doing the opposite.”

“I won’t.”

“I hope so. You want any more time to practice? Need to do anything else? Visit the outhouse before we leave?”

“I guess I better. Hey, couldn’t Firebrand just shape-shift a hole-”

“Just get going!”

We took care of everything we needed to and portaled back to the sleeping bug people. Sarah said she hoped we could help them, and I agreed. They did look sort of pathetic, all sprawled out on the ground like that. They were just big bugs, they should be allowed to live with everyone else if they had language and could contribute to society. There was no reason they couldn’t. But that wasn’t something I could change on my own. With

Firebrand back to full size we all climbed onto her and she took off in the direction of the ruin. As expected, she was super fast, and staying high up we spotted what could be a ruin and headed that way. We landed and approached cautiously, expecting trouble. Firebrand shrank down to her normal size but stayed in dragon form, and as we got close I started to take in the details. It really was a ruin, it looked like maybe hundreds of years ago there had been a village of some kind there, but which was now long abandoned. All that was left was crumbling stone buildings, overgrown by vines and shrubs. I was fully expecting it to be some kind of illusion or something, but no. We walked through the whole place, relaxing by degrees as nothing jumped us. In the center of the place was a surprisingly intact well, but no water at the bottom that we could see. We walked completely through the place, headed back to the center of town, then turned 90 degrees and walked that part, then turned around and went past the well the other way. Nothing but small animals and birds could be seen. Some deer ran from us, that was the largest creature we saw.

"And you're sure this is the place?" Midnight asked. We were back in the center of town, sitting on the well.

"Positive," I agreed. "Look." I got up and went over to one of the buildings. "See these stones? They were knocked out of this wall by a rampaging monster just recently." They came over and squatted down, looking the large chunks of stone over.

"Ah, nothing growing on them," Sarah decided. "And this wall here..." she picked up a chunk of rock and fit it back into the wall. "Right, see? The vine here matches the rest of the wall. It was torn out recently the leaves are just starting to get yellow."

"That's right," I praised. "If you look carefully you can see all sorts of signs that recently, creatures came through here. Creatures that wanted to smash stuff. But how did they get here? That's the problem."

"If they came from some kind of pocket dimension, or were simply teleported here, or stepped over from the astral or something we may never find it," Midnight complained. "Divination magic won't help, it won't reach across dimensions. We would have to check everywhere physically ourselves. I can get a spell to help but if it's teleportation or a personal dimension there's not much I can do."

"I can poke around with postcognition," I offered. "If I saw them stepping through a portal or appearing in a flash of light that could give us some idea how they were brought here. Let me do that first, save you from getting a spell that's wrong for the situation."

"Fair enough."

So I opened myself up to the impressions of the past in the area, and it was the worst case. The creatures I saw, the stone wolves, the bug people, and others that went off in different directions, simply appeared. They seemed to be in a big heap, and then jumped up and headed out, smashing anything in their way.

"Curious they stick together at all," Midnight remarked as I explained what I had experienced. "They seemed crazed enough one would think they would either tear each other apart or just scatter to the winds."

"Just another piece of the puzzle as to why this is being done deliberately," I suggested. "But why pick this as your spot to take them to? Why not just drop them into cities or towns directly? There has to be something special about this spot in particular."

"Why was it abandoned, do you think?" Sarah asked. "Some kind of bad energy that's conducive to this effort?"

"Conducive? Nice word choice!" I gave her a thumbs up.

"Well probably went dry hundreds of years ago," Midnight decided. "People then slowly moved away, or maybe it was abandoned all at once when getting water became too difficult. It's happened."

"Okay."

"There's a base, I know there is. I saw it all around that bug person. I'm going to try the destination spell, see if it can give me any ideas." *After all, I do 'know of its existence' enough for the magic to lock into. I've 'seen' it. Maybe as a last resort I could get there as my dream self later tonight. I don't want to use the last of my XP on a teleport spell that might not work because it's not in this dimension. As a dream creature I think I could reach anywhere?* I pulled some energy into my magic and cast, taking a full minute. *Thank goodness I'm getting*

some use out of this spell. Grade 7 is nothing to sneeze at, points wise. But I figured if I ever wanted to get back somewhere, I would need it, not really being familiar with the world. Now I get to use it in this way, to get somewhere I've never been but know exists. And here we go.

I turned, scowling, and pointed. "The well is the key?"

Chapter 31

Down

When: A few moments later

Where: Down the well

Down into the well we went. Sarah simply jumped, Firebrand assuring us she could cushion the fall just fine. I went down a bit more cautiously, using telekinesis to slow my decent and come out okay. Midnight used her shape-shift spell from a few days ago to turn into a fairy herself, which Firebrand went a little crazy over. She flew over, hugged her, spun her around, and was dancing round and around her like she just got a new sister. Finally Midnight had to put her foot down, such as it was hovering in the air like that, and pulled her along down the hole. Once down she ended the spell, becoming herself again, making Firebrand flit about like she was searching for where her new fairy friend had gone.

I put up a light spell, just a globe that would follow us, and we headed down the tunnel. It was completely dry, and didn't look worked in any way. Just a crumbling dirt passageway that went past the hole, and long ago carried water.

"And the place we want is underground?" Midnight asked me.

"That's what the spell told me," I replied. "We head down the well and in this direction. That's the only step we need to find the place I saw in my visions, the place the monsters were released from."

"I guess it makes sense. If you need a secret base to do horrific experiments in, put it where no one can see it. Maybe whoever this is found the ruin, checked the well, and decided no one would bother them down here."

"I bet I could use divination magic to point the way to a good spot for a base," I decided as we walked. "Not the destination spell because I wouldn't know exactly what I was looking for, but question magic could tell me the direction a good hiding spot would be."

"Thinking of moving on from the campsite?"

"Nah, not really. Not until it gets colder. But if we beat this guy up and can clean his base out, I wouldn't say no to an underground base for the winter."

"Secret base! Secret base! Let's all get a secret base!" Sarah singsonged.

"I would have pegged you for the almost inactive volcano secret base," Midnight decided. "Just enough lava to warm the place up, not enough to explode ever again."

"Uh, isn't that villain type bases though?"

"Is it?" she asked, genuinely curious.

"I think so?"

We walked along, Firebrand as her smaller dragon form in front in case anything jumped out at us but nothing did. It was almost boring, but finally after sloping down and down we saw a light in the distance, and everyone went quiet. I put out my own light, leaving us in darkness, and crept forward. What we saw at the end of the tunnel was, to put it mildly, a castle.

It sat in the middle of a cleared area, a huge ball of light overhead providing the illumination for the place. There was a sheer drop and here the area looked cleared, so I had a pretty good idea how the place had been made. Someone followed the path of the old well for a distance, then simply created their own cave underground. They sculpted the earth to make a big chamber, then used the stone to make the castle. It was a square looking thing, with a skull face that rang a slight bell for me. Something about a shirtless guy running around and a floating magic user in a red tunic and floppy hat? High windows, because of course why wouldn't you have windows that looked out at the smooth walls of your chamber, but the only door was the mouth of the skull. It looked like it would go up and down, and was currently up,

meaning we couldn't get into the castle. Otherwise it was fairly boxy, like someone just wanted walls so they could put shelves up or something, I mean it wasn't going to rain down here so why not just smooth out the walls and turn the whole space into your "castle?" Like, how many times did the owner of this place walk outside to admire their handiwork? Probably not many. It was weird.

"Did someone put this here?" Sarah asked. "I want my own castle. Maybe not with the weird skull face though. I want a cute looking castle. Can you even do that?"

"I suppose you could shrink a whole castle, and carry it somewhere? That could be one way it got here." Midnight offered. "Though the color of the stone is the same as the walls here. It was probably made right here." She touched the stone wall.

"No guards of any kind," I mused, looking the place over. "I don't know if that's good or bad."

"Overconfidence," Midnight pondered while nodding her head. "That's what'll get you every time. Take note of this Sarah."

"Right! Plenty of guards for the secret base. Wait, wouldn't that let someone know there *was* a secret base?"

"If it was out in the open where anyone could stumble on it, sure. Underground, you would want plenty of disposable guards like skeletons or something."

"Weird to hear you advocate for skeletal guards," I told her.

"*Zombies* are an offense to the Lord, make no mistake," she clarified. "Forcing the bodies of the dead to walk around again? Attack people? Make more zombies? No. Never do this." She shook a finger. "*Bones* that have been animated, on the other hand? Not so bad. Cleaner, not self replicating. Follow orders to the letter, tireless, quick. There's no way to tell who they were in life, and by the time you get to that point your soul has been gone a long time. May as well make use of them rather than let them continue to break down. Somehow they're smarter as well, from what I've heard. Get a skeleton force of workers to paint a house and they'll do it. Try to get a similar force of zombies to do that? Ha! Forget it. They just shamle about. Weird that it works out that way but there you have it. Oh, and you could use animal bones, if you just want guards or an early warning system."

"An interesting way to look at it."

"So you could bury them underground, and they could burst up if they felt someone passing. Whoosh!" Sarah jumped and made grabby hands.

"Hummmmm..." I looked the place over again, that was a possibility wasn't it? There could be hidden guards, or invisible guards I supposed. I would need to get closer to do a spirit sense or magic sense to tell for sure. What was the floor down there made of? Sand? Rock? If sand they *could* easily climb out, that would make sense. It would slow us down as well, trying to walk through sand.

"I guess we won't know until we go down there," Midnight told me. "Same as before?"

I looked over the edge. "Doesn't seem any further down than the well was."

"Weeee!" Sarah cried as she jumped over the edge without a care.

"We agreed I would always go first!" I shouted after her. *Wait maybe I shouldn't be shouting to let them know we're here?*

"Muzzle," Midnight suggested. "And a leash maybe?" She made a tugging motion near her neck.

"Leash implies a collar though," I mused, looking up at nothing and rubbing my neck.

"Are you, by any chance, visualizing *collaring* my daughter?"

She put her hands up at once, eyes widening and stepping back. "What? No!! I only meant-"

I laughed and smacked her arm, her reaction was priceless. "I'm just teasing. If you want to collar her *when she's of age* and she agrees, it's nothing to do with me. Equal chance she'll want to collar you though! Just saying. Come on."

"Oh Lord, give me strength to deal with these two," she prayed as I jumped.

Now standing at the base of the castle and looking up at the place it was pretty tall. Three times as tall as I was easily. No guards burst from the ground or attacked us invisibly or stepped out of another dimension, which again got me a little worried. Sure, the monster

torturer within may not have realized anyone would come here and so posted no guards. But it seemed fishy.

"Do we just knock? There's no bell to ring or anything," Sarah asked. "I mean we trust this is the place but we should verify it, see what the owner has to say for himself before we bust in and find out he's been framed for the whole thing."

"I guess?" I answered with a shrug.

"Okay." She pounded on the door, the sound echoing through the chamber.

We waited a moment.

"Are they not home?" Midnight whispered to me.

"Just a second!" yelled a voice from above. We all looked up and saw a figure in one of the eye sockets above us. "Honestly, it's the same thing every time. You slip into the bath and there's a knock at the door. I'll be right down!" The head retreated.

"Bath?" Midnight asked. "Little early for one?"

"Don't look at me." *But being down here, probably his sense of time is thrown way off. It could be his nighttime for all I know.*

"Even those that torture monsters probably want to stay clean. Wash off the gore and whatnot," Sarah decided.

"Yeah..." we both drawled.

A moment later a small slot opened in the stone, about head height, and a wrinkled and ugly figure poked his head out. Like, really ugly. Like, the opposite of me ugly. What was left of his hair was dripping wet, so it seemed his story about the bath wasn't a lie, and I really, really hoped he was wearing a towel or something if he did decide to let us in. You never know about some types, walking around without a stitch of clothing on for days at a time. Disgusting, really. Oh it was fine when I did it. I was cute. This guy looked like a really old potato had come to life and glued a few patches of hair on his head and called it a day. I didn't want my daughter seeing what was lower down if just his face looked like that.

"What'da want? Did the fact I'm underground and in this scary looking castle not clue you in to the fact I value my privacy?"

"How long were you in the bath for?" Sarah asked. "Did you fall asleep? I did that once."

"Don't be rude, Sarah," I told her. *But on the other hand, yeah, it looks like this guy did spend about a week in the bath. What happened to his face?* "Sorry to disturb you sir, we're looking for the source of a bunch of monsters rampaging around on the surface? Wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

"Uh, no?" He looked about with shifty eyes. "Can't say that I do. Hang on." He studied us in turn. "White armor, poking around where you don't belong- You all must be paladins?"

"You could say that, sir."

"Should have guessed. Well if you're asking for alms I gave at the office. Good day!" He slammed the slot shut again and we could hear his wet feet slapping away back down the corridor or whatever was beyond the door.

We were stunned for a beat.

"So that happened," Midnight finally spoke up.

"We're not just going to leave again, are we?" Sarah asked.

"This must be the place," I decided. "My spell led me here. Wait, what's up Firebrand?"

She came flitting back down, at some point she had become a fairy again and had flown up to check the windows. She nodded savagely and pointed.

"This is the place?" Midnight asked.

She nodded harder.

"Very well, she must have seen the cages or something. Don't let his appearance fool you," I told the others. "Sarah, take the-"

"Wait, before you do anything let me add to that," Midnight cautioned. "That looked like a lich. So yeah, really don't let his appearance fool you. He's going to be a master mage, and probably have a bunch of really weird, never before seen spells. Magical equipment too, they

love making stuff. That's what they do, mostly, research bizarre magic to satisfy their craving for power."

"But what good is it to just live down here and not help people with that power?" Sarah asked.

"Sure, that's how people like you and I think," she agreed. "Not people that turn themselves into liches. He chose to become undead at the risk of his own soul, to acquire more power in this world. You see?"

"Got it. Rush him and smash his face in. I can do that."

"They can't be killed, not easily. Expect him back again if we do manage to kill him. Put him to sleep or something if you can. His life force will be tied to an object, it could be a candlestick for all we know. Unless it's destroyed he'll keep coming back. Be careful. Who knows how old he is, what things he's brought to life in there."

"Smash the door, rush him, tear his legs off and shove him to the ground face first so he can't see us. Got it."

Midnight looked at me.

"Hey, she's making a plan based on what she can do. We'll back her up. He'll hardly have his torture pits here in the entryway of his castle."

"I guess. But remember our magic works differently than your mom's. He doesn't need to see us to cast on us."

"Right, like I got set on fire by that stupid troll mage," I agreed. "Watch for the mana core?"

"That's the sign he's about to cast," she agreed. "If he can survive having his legs ripped off, probably an arm or two won't kill him either. Do that if you see him manifest his core. That should disrupt his casting."

She nodded. "Okay, get ready," I told her.

We turned and Sarah stepped up to the door. "Firebrand! Punch!" she cried, rearing back and delivering a mighty blow to the door, making the castle ring. The door stayed intact. She looked at her fist in disbelief and back to me like she had just been betrayed.

"That's a sturdy door," Midnight announced, taking a step forward and putting her hand on it. "How is that even possible?"

"I'll try again," she decided, and Midnight stepped back again. She pulled both arms back this time. "Double. Fisting!" She slammed it again, and again it didn't smash into a billion pieces but mocked us all by staying intact.

I'm not sure about that attack name. "You don't need to call out your attacks," I told her.

"Aw, but it's fun! What's with this stupid door?"

A cackle from above had us looking up again. "Pound it all you like, you're not getting in here. Suckers! Now leave me to my bath!" The head vanished.

"Firebrand, go up through the hole and dump that guy out here!" I commanded. She saluted and flew up there. A moment later she was back, looking very confused.

"What happened?" I asked. "Did he shut the window or something?"

She made a circle in front of her with both hands.

"Okay, the eyeball?"

She nodded. She mimed pressing a hand up to it and straining to get in. She gave up, gave a cute little kick, and flew over to me again.

"You couldn't get in despite nothing being in the way?" I guessed. "And so you came back to us."

She pointed and nodded.

"Sounds like the fortification spell," I decided. "Let me look it up." I grabbed the book from my pocket dimension and turned to the spell section, then to the F's. "Oh, I see. I wondered about that."

"About what?" Midnight asked, looking at the book over my shoulder. "Also how can you read that?"

"I can read any language. Here, it says the destination spell can't penetrate the fortification spell, nor can you teleport in or out. He must bring the monsters out to send them to the surface. That's why I got an odd result from the spell. I had to concentrate on finding

the spot the monsters left from, and then it said to come down here. When I focused on the lab I got nothing.”

“So how do we get in?”

“If it’s the same spell, it’s going to be very tricky,” I admitted. “And it explains why there is no guard. It’s proof against fire, earthquakes, an enemy entering the structure... We could probably lob spells through the hole up there. But even if that worked he would just move, or snipe us back. And he can regenerate or whatever, so we really can’t kill him anyway from here. He is totally secure in that structure, he doesn’t *need* guards. The castle guards him just fine.”

“Give me a second.” Midnight closed her eyes. “Yes, I have a similar spell in my core. Sarah might be able to pound the door down, or Firebrand could do it as a larger creature. Take a while though, the structure is basically meant to be unbreakable now.”

“Phooey!” Sarah complained. “Stupid lich or whatever he is.”

“Can we negate it somehow?” I asked. “Spells I use can be countered by their opposite spell. Though, huh.” I looked the entry over. “This spell’s opposite is fortification. And it takes twelve hours to cast. Not sure I want to hang around out here for twelve hours casting something.” *Though throwing energy in and taking a huge penalty has worked out for me in the past. Maybe the magic negation magic? That would cause it to fail but I hate to leave a hole where magic doesn’t work, even here. What about the spell suppression spell? That could work if I could get it big enough to cover the whole thing.*

“Could we tunnel up from below?” Sarah asked.

“Probably no more than we could drill in from above,” Midnight decided.

“Wait until nightfall, have mom go to sleep and fill the whole place with lava? Or collapse the ground above? If he’s trapped he can’t teleport in and out you said right?”

“But he’s able to use magic, he can dig himself out sooner or later. Liches don’t have to breathe. Though,” she looked thoughtful, “if she can fill the entire place with lava that would probably destroy his soul object too. Of course, you’re burning the possibly innocent creatures we originally came here to save as well as him. Do you want that on your conscience?”

“Not really. Just wait around until he wants to send more monsters out? He has to come out to do that, right? At least the towns will be safer, and maybe he’ll get bored and offer some kind of truce?”

“For all we know there’s a secret tunnel under the place as an escape route he could use. And his soul object could be a random stone somewhere, now that I think about it. He could just come back mad.”

“Would question magic be able to tell us?”

“I don’t know. Look, can you show me exactly what your version of the spell says?” she asked me. “I have a vague sense of what the spell does and I want to see if the rest matches up. If it does then there’s a way we can take it down.”

“Uh, sure. Mumiah, can you show Midnight a translation of the spell, or the version of it from this world?”

A blue box hung in the air suddenly.

Fortification

Planet: Sun

Grade: 10 Resist: N/A

DIF: 15 Duration: (Sun) years

Range: M Casting time: 12 hours

Reverse: Fortification

Enhancer: The cornerstone from a temple or church.

You fortify a single structure, protecting it and its occupants from all harm. The structure itself becomes effectively DTR 10, and can only be damaged by the most powerful of attacks. The structure is proofed against fire and earthquakes, and all the portals become totally sealed against intrusion. Open doors and windows can still be fired into or out of.

The spell blocks any means of scrying into the structure; even spells such as Question and Destination are incapable of penetrating the structure unless their casting checks exceed

your casting check. Within the structure, such spells function normally. No forms of dimensional travel are possible into or out of the structure, including various forms of teleportation, phasing, or plane-shifting, unless their checks exceed your casting check. Additionally, no enemy of yours can enter the area, nor can any creature with intent to harm an occupant. The spell protects against creatures who may even be planning to unintentionally harm an occupant, such as one under a spell or planning on carrying out some task with harmful side effects. Only a single structure can be affected per casting of the spell, and the structure must fit within one 10-meter cube per Sun rating. If a structure cannot be fully contained, then the spell will not function.

“Thanks!”

“Is that what you see when you talk to her? Never mind, tell me later. Yeah, that’s what I thought. Okay, I know how we’re going to get in. It’s a fairly big spell, but I still have capacity left. This is going to take half of it so I hope we don’t need too much more from me.”

“Is it going to be an earth shattering kaboom!?” Sarah asked, grinning.

“I’ll leave that to you, kid. Here we go.” She raised her hands and her core appeared, and began to flash.

Chapter 32

The Trick

When: A few moments later

Where: By the castle wall

“The trick,” Midnight explained to us, “is affecting this whole structure at once. But I know it can be done because this lich fellow did it. Normally, as your instructor, I would slowly go through the steps here but we’re in a hurry so I hope you’ll forgive me that I don’t take my time. We don’t want him to get too far away, after all.” The manifestation of her core appeared, and started to flash as she drew mana from it. Or threw mana into it? I wasn’t clear on the mechanics of how their magic worked. The sides got brighter and brighter, and finally she seemed satisfied. “Become unto dust!” she intoned, slapping her hands together over the core and touching the castle wall. Magic rushed out...

And she jerked back as if slapped. “Crap!” she exclaimed. “It’s too big. I don’t think it’s going to work alone. At least it wasn’t so bad I exploded myself. Sorry, we’re going to have to maybe try a few things, he’ll probably get back to the bath by the time I have a good combination. Maybe that’s good, we can find a good defensive position once we’re past the door?”

“What did you try to do?” Sarah asked.

“The spell protects a place for a certain number of years,” she explained. “So I tried to use magic to simply advance the age of the castle. That should, in theory, use it up early.”

“Oh!” Her eyes got wide. “What a dirty trick!”

“Too bad it didn’t work,” she grumped. “I should have known, the fortification spell acts on a 10-meter cube, it says so right in the description. It’s *made* to cover a wider area than a spell meant to target a person. Even as good as I am, I’m not good enough.”

I could do it, but it means taking the spell myself. Goodbye XP. There must be another way.

She went on. “I don’t even think I could do it practicing magic more. The spells just work too differently.”

“We’ll figure out another way!”

“I already have one in mind so it’s not hopeless yet, actually but thanks for the encouragement.”

“You do? Talk me through it. How do we solve this problem, now that we know we’re not going to catch him you have plenty of time to explain it right?”

She made a humming noise. “You’re going to be a great student, aren’t you?”

“Maybe,” she answered slyly. “If I ever get a teacher that actually teaches me something!”

“Ow!” She put a hand to her chest. “That’s a low blow, kid. There’s been monsters and stuff, you know!”

“I know, I’m just kidding.”

“You better be. Now as to this dilemma, the solution is to combine spells, essentially throwing mana at the problem.”

“Like mom does!”

“Yeah I guess. If I choose two complementary spells and combine them into one I can throw twice as much mana into the spell, and overcome the size issue. But what pairs well with advance age that I already know? I’d have to think about it, given I’ve never used this particular spell before.”

“What spells do you currently have- what is the proper term here?”

“I would say ‘etched into your mana core.’”

“So, that, then.”

“Let’s see.” She closed her eyes. “I have twelve currently. The element of fire, elemental weapon and blast, telekinesis, a cleaning spell, healing, acceleration, pest repellent, create webs, shape-shift, detect friends, and for the next week advance age.”

Sarah was counting on her fingers. “Yup, that’s twelve all right. So you can’t just pick one other one at random?”

“Not if you want it to work,” she cautioned. “Just throwing spells together you’ve never tested can produce some very odd results. Also, the more spells you combine, the more difficult it is. You have to strike a balance between casting time, difficulty of combination, and what you’re trying to do. Now in this case casting time isn’t an issue because we’re all just standing here but in the interest of *teaching*,” she glared at Sarah who just looked back innocently, “I thought I would mention it. I had hoped just the advance age spell would work, but not so much.”

“Not to distract from the lesson but what’s create web? I think I get the others just from the name.”

She seemed a little embarrassed. “It’s just for fun.” She cast, her core appearing again. When she was done she put her arm up and what looked like a rope shot out, heading to the ceiling and sticking there. She grabbed it, and went flying upwards, much to Sarah’s delight. She came bouncing down, finally coming to rest and making it vanish again. “I can pull things to me, or swing on it,” she explained. “A lot of times I use that and my sword, yanking people past me while I slice them. Haven’t done much hand to hand lately though.”

“So neat! I want to learn that one too!”

“Yes, well, not exactly helpful in this situation. We already know we can’t get in through the windows.”

“So I’m thinking the cleaning spell or the pest repellent spell,” I told them, trying to get back on track here. “Would your magic accept a spell that makes something older and cleans it at the same time?”

“Oh, uh, better then trying to age it and lift it, or age it and heal it,” she agreed. “I’ll try it, my cleaning spell is one of the easiest I know, so it shouldn’t interfere too much.” She cast again, this time taking at least 5 seconds while the core flashed and glittered. “Come on, come on,” she muttered. “By these two spells combined, age and be cleansed!” She clapped and was about to throw her hands forward to touch the castle wall, but time suddenly slowed to a crawl around me.

Hey Sylvia! Listen! Hey! Midnight is about to fail by one. She would have to get two tens for this to work but got a 10 and a 9. Want to boost her with 1xp? Getting two 10s in a row, even spending max time, not very likely. Sorry. Honestly it’s a great plan it’s just the castle is so huge. Getting past the spell on it is going to be a pain otherwise just to let you know.

Heck Yeah!

How much a pain we talking here?

I rolled my eyes and touched “Heck Yeah!” spending the 1XP so she could succeed. This left me with 8. Time resumed, and her hands touched the wall. Magic rushed out, covering the castle and producing no visible result but she grinned. “It’s working, the magic is aging the castle walls!”

It would take hundreds of years to notice any weakening of the stone. But we know it’s working, she’ll probably just age it up a few dozen years and hope that breaks the magic off.

As Mumiah seems to think it'll work I'm confident in it, she wouldn't ask me to spend XP if this wasn't going to work in the first place.

"Clean it up, age it up, wayyyyyy up!" Sarah cheered, pumping her hands in the air. "You can do it, Midnight!"

"Tell me when to stop!" she told me, concentrating on the spell.

Or I guess I get to do it, given she's busy working the spell, planning this man's demise. "I'm terrible at magic sense, just so you- never mind." I cast my skill enhancement spell on myself, mentally berating myself for not keeping up with things. My 15 (minus penalties) calculation on magic sense allowed me to easily sense the spell on the castle wall, it seemed the caster was quite skilled indeed. It didn't take long for it to break though, and I tapped Midnight. "That's it," I told her. She broke off contact with the wall and Sarah screamed in triumph and delight, slamming into the door again. This time it shattered and she basically kool-aid man through it. Whatever that was. Midnight and I shared a look of horror, there was no telling what was in there and made our way over the rubble to the inside. Midnight was coughing because of the dust, I simply chose not to breathe for the moment, and we looked around. It was unadorned, basically as open as it could be with pillars holding up the upper floors, but sectioned off into different functions. I saw plants growing in one section, bookshelves in another, a staircase, a forge area-

My head snapped back to the stairs as the figure was rushing down them again. Thankfully, he *was* wearing a towel. "What in the world is going on down here!" he demanded. He got to the bottom of the stairs, took a few more steps, and screeched to a halt staring at what was left of his door. His eyes darted across the three of us, looking a little more nervous with each person. "How in the world-"

"Megaton punch!" Sarah screamed, rushing the guy with her fist back. She jumped into the air to cover the rest of the distance.

"Bedroom!" the lich managed, and vanished as she came crashing down where he had been.

"Aw, geese!" she complained, looking around. "He got away!"

"Be more careful!" I told her. *I thought it was Firebrand Punch anyway? Is it different because it's a jumping attack? That wouldn't make sense.*

"It's fine mom," she protested. "He's not going to trap his own entrance way."

"He could have fired off a spell, if he was confident in his abilities," Midnight told her. "But yes, rushing a spellcaster is sometimes the best policy. Don't let your guard down he clearly has some kind of system in place to teleport around easily. He could pop up again at any time."

"Got it!"

We briefly looked around, next to the books was a desk that I would have said was an imbuing station. It had some smaller shelves on top of it, spilling out with odd things like feathers, claws, gemstones, hair, rope, and small bottles of liquid. Clearly nothing on this floor related to monsters, but we did find the stairs down.

"He went up, probably that's where the living quarters are, if such applies to a lich," Midnight decided. "Let's go down."

"Right," I agreed. "Down is where you do evil, right? Goodness rises, badness sinks, that's the phrase right?"

"I've never heard-"

"Hello?" said the lich. "Is this thing on? Can you hear me?"

We whipped around, looking for where the lich was, I heard his voice clearly beside me. *Invisibility?*

"It's a spell," Midnight whispered to me. "Just communication, he's not here."

"Come back down here and fight, coward!" Sarah yelled, yelling up to the ceiling.

"You don't have to yell, I can hear you just fine," he said. "What's the big deal, breaking in here like that? How did you even do that?"

"Not telling!"

"Maybe the grownups should handle this?" I told her.

"Fine, boring conversation anyway," she pouted. "I'm going to go look at the flowers."

"Boring?!" he exclaimed. "And leave my flowers alone! Don't you step on them with your big, clunky feet."

"My feet are not-" She lifted a foot, turning it side to side as she considered it. "I guess in the armor they are kind of clunky. I'll give you that one, old man." She wandered over to the plants area, saying "stomp, stomp, stomp, stomp" the whole way. Firebrand went with her, sniffing around the area now looking like a dog.

Does he eat? Looks more like potion ingredients than a vegetable patch. "Anyway, I assume I'm speaking to the master of the castle?"

"Yeah that's right. What do you want? I didn't figure paladins to be thieves. If you even are paladins."

"Little hazy on that one," I admitted. "Point is, monsters were seen coming from this area, so we're investigating. We said this, we're putting a stop to it."

"You can tear this place down I'll just build another one somewhere else. You won't stop me!"

"Ah, so you admit it!" Midnight crowed. "You are responsible."

"No!" he hastily went on. "Monsters? What monsters? Don't know what you're talking about."

"So if we, for example, went into your basement we wouldn't find cages full of pathetic creatures you're performing experiments on?" I asked.

"Don't you dare! I'll come down there and stop you, mark my words!"

"So do it then," I invited. "See how far that gets you." I waited. "I'm waiting!"

"I'm not insane," he countered. "I'm not fighting three paladins myself. Not that I couldn't, of course," he went on smugly. "I figure I can just wait you out and when you realize there's nothing you can do to me you'll leave. Why make the effort?"

"We could burn this place down!" Midnight threatened.

"Burn down? A castle made of stone?"

"Well," she looked around. "Things burn. Books, for example."

"Oh, a book burner are you? Figures you're one of those types. Right leggers. Censorship. Closed borders, government poking into everything, all that sort of stuff. Go murder some kids with your spells of mass destruction, then offer their families thoughts and prayers while you laugh at them for being victims. I've seen it all before, you can't shock me."

"Hey now just a minute!"

He laughed.

"Leave the poor man's books alone," I told her. "He's just trying to distract us. Come on. Sarah, we're heading down."

"Okay mom!" She headed over to us again.

"Oh, *mom* is it?" the lich asked. "Maybe a hostage situation is in your future?"

"Try it old man," Sarah told him. "You think you're harder to break than your door? That was me you know."

"Poppycock!"

She gasped. "Language! I'm a child."

"You're a loonie."

"How do I hang this up? Oh here it is." She made a buzzing sound.

"What the? You can't 'hang up' this spell, how did she even do that?"

The buzzing sound continued. I put my finger to my lips as Midnight was clutching her stomach trying to keep in her laughter, and we headed down the stairs. As we entered the lower floor her laughter stopped, and I pushed Sarah back. She had a sour look on her face but remembered our deal. There were cages everywhere. Tables full of equipment like glass beakers, tubing, tiny heating devices, books everywhere. The creatures ranged in size and temperament, some still trying to escape, others just laying there. Wolves, bat creatures, spiders, tiny humanoids, big humanoids, cages and cages of them lining the walls here. Surprisingly clean, for the most part, but then like Midnight said, a cleaning spell was pretty easy.

"You monster," I breathed.

"What was that?" the lich asked. "Are you still there?"

"I'm here. Looking at your handiwork in the basement. How did you even catch all these poor creatures?"

"Oh, boo hoo, does the paladin feel sorry for the little dears? Humbug! They would rip you to pieces if they could."

"They're still alive, something you haven't been for a while, clearly."

"Why even do all this?" Midnight asked. "What do you gain from it?"

"It passes the time," he answered smugly. "Everyone needs a hobby."

"You- I should come up there and- oh!" She was mad but with no outlet for it.

"I'm thinking of a new hobby," I told him. "Tracking down your life object."

"Good luck! It could be a stone in a forest."

Was he listening to us earlier? "Is it a stone in a forest?"

"What? No, that was just an example. It could be a grain of sand on the beach! A locket inside a secret cave covered by a weird potion you have to drink and guarded by zombies. Yeah, that's a good one."

"That's rather specific," Midnight muttered.

"I bet I could find it," I told him. "Divination magic exists."

"You think I didn't protect against that?"

"Never know until I try. Now be quiet while I think about what to do with all these creatures."

"Let us out!" one little guy cried. He had spied us coming down and had worked himself into a sitting position. "Please, no more raids I swear! We be good. Honest!"

"Some can talk? Come on!" I mean the bug people could but I don't see any of them, but clearly they too came from here. Animals would be too far but to capture and do this to intelligent beings...

"They're vermin, I'm doing the world a favor."

"Shut up!"

"Sorry, sorry!" the little one cried, scrambling back.

"No, not you," I told him, walking over. "It's okay, it's okay, come here." I gestured and he hesitantly came forward. "You don't deserve this."

"Please, so hungry!"

"You don't feed them?"

"What? You speak Orcish? A paladin that speaks Orcish? That's a new one."

"Can we disrupt his spell somehow?" I asked Midnight.

"Not with what I've got," she admitted. "And he can just cast it again."

"Fine," I muttered. "Let's get you some food first, then figure out what to do with you."

I looked around, but there was no food to be found. So I went from cage to cage, those that were up and around enough got a casting or two of conjure food, and they tore into it.

"These poor things will eat, why didn't the bug people?" Midnight asked.

"Ah, don't know everything do you!?" the lich crowed.

"Would you shut up," she growled, teeth clenched.

"Nope! I could even sing! Uh, what songs do I know... Oh crap. I'll think of one! This is the song that doesn't end, yes it goes on and on my friend! Some people, started singing it-"

"Sarah, go upstairs and stomp all this guy's flowers!" I commanded. "And smash the side of the castle out and toss all the beds into the cave. Then we'll start piling the books outside while I look for some lamp oil."

"On it!" she called back.

"Wait, I'll stop!" he promised. "I'll stop!"

I waited, there was silence on the line. "Fine, no stomping for now."

"Just say the word, mom."

"As long as he behaves up there. What have you got, Midnight?"

"Come look at this," she replied, holding up a book. "This book was open so he must have used it recently," she held one up. "This one is about poisons, but he's made some notes about modifying it to make various creatures actually *want* to take it. Even fight others of their own kind for it."

Maybe enough to ignore food? Rampage around trying to get more? That's why-
"That's why the bread in the morning. Look for that."

“Right.”

We piled up any books that look like it might relate and found a large stone box in the corner of the room. Spilling it to the side bread rolls tumbled out, and all the creatures in the place went nuts, snarling and snapping in our direction, ignoring the food I had made them earlier completely.

“Well, crap,” I muttered. “They know what this stuff is. He’s got them trained to crave this, and only this food. That’s how he’s controlling them. How are we going to deal with all this?”

But Midnight had no answers.

Chapter 33

Poison

When: A few moments later

Where: Castle Basement

"Poison addled monsters, that's going to be tough to deal with," I muttered. I started sweeping the bread back into the container, hoping once out of sight they would forget it after a bit and go back to eating the food I had made for them. *Out of sight out of mind as they say.*

"Tough? It's going to be impossible," Midnight assured me. "Look at the scope of it!"

"A large project just means you have to start earlier. Break it into more sub-tasks so you can feel a sense of accomplishment from smaller achievements and keep up your momentum."

"What are you some kinda corporate shill?" the voice of the lich asked.

"No, that- that actually makes sense," Midnight agreed. "But that's not what I mean."

"What is it? This task isn't even *really* that big, because it can be done in parallel. We don't have to try curing just this cage full of creatures, then move on to the next. A group can be assigned to each cage and work at the same time."

"What group?" she asked.

"Well, you know. Like people in the-" I looked around at the caged creatures.

"Figured it out, did you?" the lich crowed. "Good luck with that one."

"He is, unfortunately, correct," Midnight agreed. "No one is going to be convinced to take on the task of trying to rehabilitate a bunch of drug addled wolves, for example." She pointed to the wolves cage. "Why would they? And then there's these little guys..." She walked over to the cage with the small humanoids. They all looked up at her.

"You could just let us go," one said hopefully. "We're not that far gone, see?" They all nodded and agreed. "I hardly even crave that bread stuff, I could stop eating it at any time. Right fellows?" Again, they all hastily agreed they could take it or leave it.

"Oh really?" she asked, bending down. "I'm supposed to believe that?"

"It's true!" he insisted. "I'm a very honest person."

"He is," agreed another. "He's the most honest in our tribe. He makes me sick, I hate him, he's so honest."

The first one got a horrified look on their face. "You mean that?"

"Uh..." The other's eyes darted from Midnight to his friend, clearly weighing what was the better choice for getting out of there. "Yes!" he decided. "I've always hated you! A truthful hobgoblin? You should be ashamed of yourself."

"But... But..." they stammered, tears beginning to form in their eyes. "We've known each other our whole lives! We were raised as brothers!"

He turned away and crossed his arms. "I don't care." His voice cracked a little bit. "I still hate you."

"My brother hates me!" he wailed, tears now falling from his face. "Oh how this awful truth has cut me to the very bone!" He gripped the bars of the cage and shook them. "All of life is suffering and now I only wish for my suffering to be over! Do it! Run me though, I don't even care anymore." He spread his arms wide, daring us to do as he had said. "Just let my brother go free, for I still love him even if he does hate me. I'll be the bigger man, that'll show him."

"See what you did?" the other accused Midnight.

"Me? How are you blaming this on me?"

"You don't think this is *my* fault do you?"

"You're the one saying you hate your own brother!"

"Wait," I stepped in, "if you're the most honest of the tribe, how do you know your brother is being honest? He just said an honest hobgoblin should be ashamed of themselves. So isn't he lying right now?"

"That's right, she's right!" he decided. "You're just trying to trick them, right? Right? Aren't you?"

"We can be honest when it's hurtful," he explained.

"You little guys are a piece of work aren't you?" I decided.

"Even getting only half this conversation this is really delightful," put in the lich. "Wonder if I have any popcorn up here somewhere."

"Quiet you!" Midnight hissed.

"Make me."

"I've half a mind to," she muttered.

"He's right, we're encouraged to be honest when it's hurtful. So he probably is being honest now. My life is *ruined!!!!*" the little one started back up, breaking down further. "It's all been a lie. I should have courted that cute girl but no, I stepped aside for my *brother* when he said he was interested too. A brother who *hates me!* Who has *always* hated me. I'm so stupid."

"Oh yeah, she was great, you really missed out," he agreed. "So curvy. And *soft!* Wowzers, that takes me back. Wonder whatever happened to her?"

"You tossed her aside? You monster! Give her back to me! Right this instant!"

Like, you're in a cage buddy?

"Can we focus here?" Midnight snapped. "I need certain assurances if we're just going to let you go free."

"Haven't you done enough? Leave me to my pain."

I thought you wanted to be run through?

"He doesn't speak for me! I want to get out of here." The others indicated that they too simply wished to be set free.

"You do, do you? Then you don't mind if I give your brother here this bit of bread to help him feel better?" She reached into the box again and pulled out a roll. She wiggled it before the cage.

"Give it! Give it!" he screeched, reaching through the bars. The others joined him, pressing against the bars and little hands grasping for it.

She pulled it back with a smirk. "That's what I thought."

"I mean, uh, please? Or not? It makes no difference to me, really."

"And yet you're still reaching for it." She tossed it back in and closed the lid. "They're pretty far gone."

"Ruined," muttered the one.

"I see that," I told her. "What a mess. If they've been physically addicted to it, magic can't even help. It could take months of careful work to learn how to manage their cravings, if such creatures can even manage to do so. The animals can't, I'm guessing. Oh, this is bad."

"Told you, didn't I?" asked the lich. "So march yourselves right out of my castle, never to return. And fix my door, or pay me for damages you metal freak."

"Please can I go punch him?" Sarah pleaded. "*Pleaaaaase?*" Firebrand was nodding seriously next to her.

I looked at the two of them, then switched to the sending skill, calculating a 16 to push thoughts into her and Midnight.

No punching him, Sarah. Go and check out the first floor again. Grab all the books and anything else you can carry from up there. Midnight, we're doing the same thing here.

She looked concerned, started to say something, stopped, and tapped her head. I glanced over at Sarah, who gave me a thumbs up and stomped up the stairs again. I cut off the sending to them both, and stood next to Midnight, offering my hand. I hadn't actually taken the meld skill, it had too many prerequisites, a five in two skills and I only had a five in one of them. Mind read I had a 1 in, as with most things just so I could train it up later. So I didn't need to touch her, but if she was offering, and made a physical gesture accepting my 'intrusion' into her mind I figured that would help lower her RESolve check against me. This

was a good move, I calculated only a 5 on the attempt. She didn't resist, her eyes got a bit wider as she realized we were connected now.

Can you hear me? Oh my God if she can hear me I have to be careful not to think about how distracting her tails- hummm humm hummmmmm not talking about your twintails, it's all about your sex appeal- has it started yet. Oh God it started didn't it? She's hearing everything you're hearing everything aren't you why did I agree to this?

I smirked and started another sending, now at a -2 for holding onto the mind read, and gave a silent prayer I hadn't tried it the other way because that never would have worked. She looked at my smirk and knew I knew what she had been thinking. Naturally I calculated a 17-2 on that one. Because reasons. *I sure can. What's up?* I sent, filing the whole tails thought away for future blackmail material. *This is why you don't mind read friends, but she is very cute when she's flustered!*

Focus Midnight, I mean- Are we destroying them? That would make him attack for sure.

Not here. As much as they're probably full of dark rituals and such and so should be destroyed, I would at least like to look through them. Maybe there's some kind of antidote we can make? For now just gather everything up that's not nailed down. We can cripple him in more than one way. I have no idea what to do with these poor souls he's captured but think it over. Meanwhile, I'm going to check the place out with my other senses. We need clues, I don't buy the whole 'it's just a hobby' excuse he gave. It's a very elaborate setup for that, and bent to this specific purpose. I don't think he lives here, he came here and made this place to do this. We need to know why, I want to see if there's evidence somewhere of that around here. He didn't expect anyone to get in, after all. Grabbing his books should reveal any letters and whatnot too. If someone is paying him to do this, we'll find it.

Got it. You'll put them into your holding space?

Yes.

So he won't see us carrying them out. Good. I'll get to work.

I nodded and she pulled her hand away. I was *this* tempted to keep the mind read up for just a second but no, *Bad Sylvia* I chided myself, mentally slapping the back of my hand. *No cookie.* I dropped it and she started piling the books up.

Meanwhile I sat with my back to the wall and made a bilocation check, again getting a 5. *Maybe having a +3 higher RESolve than INSight does make a difference? That would have only been a 9 even with a 5 in the skill. Huh.* I slipped out of my body and zipped upstairs. Sarah was gleefully rummaging through the desk, stacking books and odd looking things near her, then jerked and looked guilty. "Mom?" she asked, looking around confused. Her eyes lingered on where I was for a second but then moved on. She shrugged and went back to her work.

Huh.

I filed that for later too, and with a quick look at the first floor headed up the stairs to the second. Here again there was really only one chamber, with only one person living here there were no need for walls and the like, and there was our "host" the lich, pacing back and forth and looking worried. He was carrying a strange looking dagger, and had gotten dressed in the meantime. He had on a collection of bracelets, rings, and a necklace that I had to guess were all magical. He seemed to be hyping himself up for an attack. He would go a few paces, slash or stab with the dagger, then shake his head again.

"You've all gone awfully quiet, you still here?" he asked.

I didn't hear her reply, probably my body did but I wasn't there anymore.

"Just leave them alone!"

I snorted. I could guess what she had said. But then I wasn't laughing anymore, freezing as I saw something that screamed "clue." Tacked up on the wall was something familiar; a banner in colors I had seen before.

The colors of the kingdom across the mountains.

I looked around, but it seemed he didn't spend much time here. There was a bed, even an undead creature such as a lich might want to recline and take their mind off things even if

they didn't need sleep- I could relate- but not much else. Some furniture like a dresser and wardrobe. His bathtub, a mirror, some odds and ends. All made of the same dark colored stone as the castle itself, and so had probably been made on site. *Sure, if he came here to do this drug thing specifically he probably wouldn't want to lug that much around with him. Even having a spell like mine to put things into a pocket dimension, a whole chest of drawers would be a little much. He plans to go back sometime, and just brought that as a reminder of home.* I headed back to my body.

"You come from the kingdom of Anderon, don't you?" I asked as I got up.

"What? What could possibly make you think that?" he replied.

Midnight looked at me questioningly.

"Oh, this and that." I pointed upwards, and she nodded. *Sarah, and Firebrand I sent, making a connection to both again with a 12. Keep an eye out. He's got a knife and magical items on his person. I don't want him sneaking behind you, not that I think he could really get through the armored form.* Naturally I couldn't get a reply, but she stomped twice on the floor.

"How are things going here?" I looked around, it seemed Midnight had been busy. She had gathered up the books and stacked them, then started breaking all the glass jars and vials and beakers that didn't have anything in them. *Not a bad idea, make it as hard as possible for him to continue.*

"Finishing up," she smashed another jar on the floor, "but no ideas what to do with the zoo."

"Yeah..." I made checks in skybourne to put the books away, not speaking the words so I was at a slight penalty. Still managed a 15, a 16, an 11, and a 14 just so I didn't have to pull everything out again all at once and put a modest stack of books in at a time. The lab was now much emptier, and messier, though not any quieter as the caged creatures were still finishing up the food I had made them. Seems they had gone back to it once they forgot about or decided they were not going to get any "bread" at the moment. *So maybe it would be safe to return them but it's the same problem. Just teleporting them to the surface either means they fight each other, or just go around and bother towns. Not as crazed as the 'graduated' creatures but still very dangerous. What the heck am I going to do with them? I don't want to just kill them!*

"Finishing up?" the lich asked. "What are you doing down there? Leave my stuff alone, you thieves! I thought you were supposed to be paladins. Are you going to rush up here to kill me or not? I mean sure, breaking into my house somehow, that's all fine and good but making me *wait*? That's just rude."

Is that what he was expecting? Why the knife?

"That would have been the traditional thing to do," Midnight allowed. "Most who call themselves paladins are- shall we say- single minded?"

"They certainly wouldn't have hesitated over killing a few monsters and pests," the lich agreed. "I'm beginning to think you're not paladins at all. Oh, you're going to be in *such* trouble when you die! Impersonating a paladin? That's not going to go over well upstairs." He snickered.

"You just worry about your own soul, what's left of it," Midnight called.

"Bah!"

Still, Midnight had a point and gestured to the cages. I shrugged and pointed to my head. *Let me think about it until Sarah gets back,* I sent to her. She nodded and scrunched up her own face, thinking.

I had the beginnings of an idea by the time Sarah came down the stairs, balancing the books and enchanting supplies. "Here you go mom!" she said, handing me the stuff.

"Thanks," I told her. I put it away with another check of 20 in skyborne and switched to sending again.

Okay you two, head outside. I'm going to put everything in here to sleep. We have to get them away from this guy, but at the same time we need more time to decide what to do. He could decide to attack us at any moment. I'll meet you out there. We'll head back to the town and I'll get them there, cages and all, so we can talk about what to do about this whole thing.

The two nodded and headed off, though Firebrand came back to my shoulder in her fairy form. I put my energy accumulation spell on myself and then cast the smog spell to put everyone to sleep, throwing so much energy into it I didn't have to worry about them resisting. One by one they dropped where they stood and were out of it. I had a sudden thought and got out some paper, ink, and quill, making some marks to remind myself of all the creatures I needed to get out of here. That done I nodded to myself and headed upstairs.

Once back there I opened a teleportal back to the fort, and we all stepped through. We were outside the wall, not that far from the gate though.

"The spell is gone off us," Midnight reported. "It only works if you know where the target is. And he doesn't now, so we can talk normally again."

"How are you going to get them here?" Sarah asked, looking around. "And shouldn't we be in the town?"

"I didn't want to startle anyone," I explained. "Also, as this particular thing I'm going to do isn't magic, I felt it best to have at least a little privacy."

"I know you explained about being able to do supernatural stuff. What can you do that's not magic but powerful enough to get all those creatures here?" Midnight asked.

"A few things. Just a second while I shift things around." I took a few steps back and concentrated. There was a burst of power around me and I let go of teleportal, switching it out for telesummon. I didn't want to use active Darkbolt powers too much, preferring my passive energy stuff and renewal, so as to not raise too many questions. Magic, even as "strange" as mine was to the people here, was magic and thus explainable. But now I was going to do something I wasn't going to cast a spell to do, simply willing it to happen. That cost me 3 of my 6 variance points. I stuck the others into my energy regeneration, taking it from a 5 to an 8. I was now getting 1 energy back *per segment* or 20 every 4 seconds. I was going to need it. I brought my list up and started to work.

Telesummon could get objects or living things, so I just got the first cage, then teleported all the sleeping animals inside it one by one. I then repeated this process for all the cages and creatures. Thankfully there were some empty cages, those bug men had come from somewhere after all, and I sadly added them back into it so everybody could be in one place. Then just for a laugh I thought about other things that were movable; dresser and wardrobe, the plants I remembered seeing, his desk upstairs, the tables, and as it was clearly precious to him, the banner for the other kingdom. In sudden inspiration I grabbed some of the "bread" out too, so it could be studied and maybe counteracted in all of them. That seemed to do it, as far as I could tell his castle would be pretty empty by now, so he would really have to start from scratch again or better yet, just go home and leave this place be. "That should do it," I told them. "Let him figure that one out!"

"You're kinda mean when you want to be," Midnight remarked. "Who steals somebody else's bathtub?"

Girl, you have no idea. I flashed my powers again, retaking defense boost, adaptation, and passive regeneration just to use them up. "Right. Let's go talk to the captain and work out what he wants done with all these poor critters. Probably not releasing them, certainly not as they are, but we should be able to come up with something better than 'run them through with a sword while they're helpless.'" *And maybe this will help the bug people too, knowing what was done to them.*

Chapter 34

Worse

When: Almost time for Firstlunch, day 6

Where: Outside the Wellspring wall

“Worse, it just gets worse,” the captain lamented, looking over the cages and cages of creatures. Midnight had gone to get him while I watched, and nobody was waking up again, so at least we had that going for us. “I thought we only had bug people to deal with. But now we’ve got all this!”

“Sorry about that,” I told him. “On the plus side, there won’t be any more attacks until that lich restocks his castle.”

“Er, that may not be entirely true,” Midnight cautioned.

“You don’t think he had another base do you?” I asked, horrified.

“I sure hope not. No, I’m worried he let creatures out that haven’t attacked towns *yet*, so there still could be some out there wandering around the fields.”

“Well, okay, so it could be a *little* worse,” I told the captain. “I don’t mean to dump this all on you, honest. But we had to get away before that lich got his courage up and decided to throw himself at us. I doubt he could have taken us, but better safe than sorry.”

“Are all paladins as big hearted as you?” he asked, resigned.

“I can only speak to myself and Midnight.”

“Hey, I’m a paladin too!” Sarah insisted. “Right?”

“In training, maybe.”

“Is that how it-” he shook his head. “Never mind. You were saying something about a poison?”

I gave a quick nod. “That’s right. I can get you a sample, and the books he was using to do his research. I’ll want them back, I think we had better remove any temptation as quickly as possible. But if you can get some healers here, magical ones, with a background in research maybe we can ‘cure’ these poor souls and release them. At least the smarter ones.”

He chuckled. “Helping hobgoblins, what a world. But I suppose to counteract a lich’s plans... Ugh, to think such a being was almost on our doorstep! And stirring up trouble like this, too. Usually they just slink off to do whatever and leave the rest of us alone. But no, we get the one who wants to still be active in the world.”

“About that...” I brought out the banner he had hanging in his room. “He had this, basically the only thing that wasn’t made on site. Does it mean anything to you that he came from Anderon?” *I mean he didn’t outright deny it, but this is circumstantial at best.*

The captain scowled at it, the wheels turning in his mind. “Maybe it does. I heard about an attack on a fort near the mountains recently by Anderon, that was sent back empty handed.”

“Surprised to hear news of that has spread so quickly,” I decided. *We flew pretty far to get here, though I suppose a fast horse could have gone the distance by now?*

“The kingdom has a fairly robust communication network,” he bragged. “At least for events like that one of importance to those guarding towns. We were ordered to post extra watch positions and to draw from the general population. Anyone with good eyesight that could be trusted with a few hours on the wall to raise an alarm if they saw anything would be accepted into the guard. Temporarily.”

“And you verified their loyalty with magic to make sure they weren’t enemy agents that wouldn’t raise an alarm but instead simply open the gates when something happened?”

“Errrr...”

“Oh. Moving on, what’s your point?”

"I was wracking my brain trying to figure out why they would attack with such a small force. The report, if correct, estimated their numbers as far too low to be a serious threat to the kingdom, especially as it was only one group and not a continuous line of soldiers through the mountain passes."

"They said they were here for food," I told him. "Had the mostly empty wagons to back their story up too."

"Did they now? I can't speak to that but it was bothering me. This, I think," he indicated the banner, "puts the pieces together."

"You think the lich was part of their king's plan?" Midnight asked. "I suppose he must have been here awhile, and they could communicate as easily as any other mage. They thought that far ahead?"

"That's right. Why get your own people killed when you can have crazed monsters destabilize the area before you arrive?"

"It would have been way worse if mom hadn't shown up to deal with things," Sarah spoke up proudly. "This whole kingdom owes her big time!"

"Oh, does it now?" the captain answered with a chuckle.

"Uh huh. Think about it, what would have happened if she hadn't shown up? Trolls had just driven people away from their village, and without her to stop them they would have continued."

"She's right about that," I agreed. "Those refugees would have gone somewhere, maybe the nearest fort town, further stretching their resources. The trolls had a mage, so they could travel during the day." *Was the mage crazed as well? Strange to think some poison addled monster could concentrate enough to cast spells. Maybe they made a deal, magic user to magic user, and that one troll was spared the process? They were 'trusted' to cause havoc because that's what they would want to do anyway?* "They would have gone on to attack other places. It may have spiraled out of control from there." *I was sent here, to this time and place, for a reason.*

"If you can convince our king of all this, I'm sure you'll get a medal or something out of it. Meanwhile, what are we going to do about it?"

"What if they weren't lying?" Midnight asked. "What if their crops are failing? What if they knew it was coming, and so planned to invade our kingdom and start bringing stuff back?"

"Then king Anderon is an idiot," the captain decided. "He could have just asked. We did have trade with them, we would have helped. Or sent mages to help with the fields. Strange though, he must have his own..."

Would you though? "So you're saying we should go see for ourselves?" I asked.

"Every sign points to that kingdom," she agreed. "Just flying around here putting out fires isn't going to solve anything. We need to see what's going on over there. Maybe their king was replaced with a shape-shifting demon or something. Their harvests are fine but they're being told they're not, because the king is stealing everything. We don't know. But I'm guessing we could help. Or put a stop to it, if that's the case. Free the real king, whatever it happens to be."

"We do have a number of resources at our disposal," I agreed. "And as paladins no one kingdom is our, uh, domain. We must travel to where the evil lies, and smite it!"

"Hear, hear!" Sarah cried. "To the smiting!"

"We'll see what we can do for these guys," the captain told me.

"And by, see what we can do, you don't mean just set them all on fire or anything? You'll actually try to help them?" I pressed.

He sighed. "Yes."

I stared at him but he just stared back. "Okay then. Obviously, if it is determined there's nothing you can do, kill them as painlessly as possible rather than just letting them out. I won't fault you if you seriously tried."

"Thank you. And for informing me about the lich. I'll mention it to the priests in town, see what they want to do about him."

"Fine."

I got out the books and handed them over, noting down the titles so I could be sure and get them back one day. I also handed over the bread samples, with a warning not to let the victims see it because they would go crazy trying to get it. With that done we flew back to camp to have firstlunch and basically pack it up.

"We can always come back here with portals, but if we're moving to the next kingdom," I told everyone, "we should set up a camp there."

"Fair enough," Midnight told me.

"I'm starving," Sarah told me, stretching. I noticed Firebrand was back in her fairy form, sitting on her shoulder, so no more armor.

"You should probably find something to wear," I told her. "I mean it's fine around here but for when we leave you'll want to be wearing something."

"I was thinking about that," she admitted. "But I'm not sure. Come on, let me see." I followed her into the tent and she looked over her collection of clothes. "Mostly skirts, that's no good."

"Why not?" I asked. "They always have been for you." *I mean, at least to look at this collection.*

"I figure you would want Firebrand to be able to protect me at a moment's notice, in case something happened," she explained. "If I'm wearing a skirt that's a little bit harder, at least to create the whole suit of armor she did before. So I need pants. Or ideally like a one piece outfit that's fairly tight. That way it won't get caught or pinched when she creates the armor."

"I could make you something," I decided, but Firebrand had other ideas it seemed. She zipped off Sarah's shoulder and shook her head.

"What's up?" I asked her.

She zipped back to Sarah and grabbed onto her. Just like that she was wearing a one piece, all black, footie pajama like outfit.

"Oh, we're dumb," she announced, looking herself over. "If she can become armor, then certainly she can become other clothes."

As long as it's all one piece. "But I can't ask you to just be her clothes all the time," I protested to Firebrand, still on my shoulder. "I mean I know that one's a spirit clone and all but-

She made an X with her arms and pointed to me.

"Me? What about me?"

She made a heart with her hands, then pointed to Sarah.

"You, heart, me!" Sarah cried. "Mom loves me?"

She nodded.

Firebrand indicated herself. Then suddenly she zipped to my arm and became a shield. Then she was back and pointing to Sarah again.

"Mom loves me, so you want to become my shield?" she asked.

She nodded again.

"She is made of magic," Sarah reasoned. "She may be *more* a person thanks to Mumiah but first and foremost she's your magical companion. She follows your will, right? And you want to protect me over all else."

"I'm not saying that's not true, of course. And being able to change into the armor at a second's notice is nice. I mean it's not like having a clone out drags *you* down, not with your current stats..."

She nodded vigorously and started posing, flexing her arms, making us both laugh. But she waved a hand and flew over to Sarah's side. She pulled at the material a little, mimed punching it, and shrugged.

"Okay I don't get that one," Sarah admitted.

"Oh, I do!" I told her. "She's saying it doesn't matter what she looks like. Her stats are the same if she looks like armor or cloth. Her DTR, her STREngth and REFlexes, you're just as protected- in the body anyway- as you were before. You're just missing the helmet." She nodded and clapped, we got it. *And something would have to be traveling faster than sound, to surprise Firebrand enough she couldn't throw Sarah to the side or shape-shift to include the helmet again.* "Still, I'll make you up some outfits like this once we're settled in the new

kingdom,” I told her. “Just in case. I can’t see a situation where I don’t throw massive energy into calling on Firebrand after waking up, and she can always make more clones, but just in case you wanted her in fairy form or to ride in horse form or something and still be presentable.” *As presentable as you can be in a skintight, black outfit. But it is clothes, she is completely ‘decent’ so it counts. Society is weird.*

“Okay.”

“With that out of the way, let’s eat!”

“And then pack all this up,” Midnight said, resigned and looking around.

Heh, we did collect a lot of junk around here, didn’t we? Even if I wasn’t ‘here’ for most of it.

I made enough food (with the other’s help of course) to pack a second lunch and packed up the campsite. I made some boxes out of stone to pack everything in, and slipped everything into the old pocket dimension. That done we got on Firebrand and headed for the mountains. Almost as soon as we crossed I realized something was wrong. While on what was now the “other” side of the mountain was green and growing, fields here looked dead and dying. I had Firebrand stick close to the mountain range at first looking for a town, to see if I could get the story of what was going on from people here, and it didn’t take long. We landed right in the middle of town as usual, figuring this was the fastest way to get their attention. And that we did.

People looked up from their stupor, seemed to decide that the dragon was either friendly or not, would kill them or not, but they couldn’t be bothered to care. They went back to being slumped over and disinterested.

“Wow, people immune to mom’s razzle dazzle, did not see that coming,” Sarah remarked as we were lowered to the ground.

“Yeah, something’s wrong here,” Midnight agreed. “I’d say keep Firebrand close but you can’t actually be any closer. Don’t go wandering off.”

“You’re not my mom!”

“Sarah!” I muttered.

“She’s not. Do you really think these people are dangerous?”

“Desperate people can do unthinkable things,” I told her. “Let’s see what the situation here is. Stick close for now.”

“K.”

I looked around, making some checks. 10 on magic sense, nothing there. 14 on ESP. A lot of despair, hopelessness, and general lethargy. Not good. Spirit sense of 4, I had to guess these people were alive, but did manage to sense a general “ick” in the area which concerned me. With that low a result I shouldn’t have felt anything, for me to have done so meant whatever I was feeling, it was *big*. While I was standing there Midnight crossed to the nearest person, hand casually on her sword. “Can you direct me to someone in charge around here?” she asked.

The figure, a gaunt woman I could now see, slowly raised her face. “Do you have any food?” she managed.

Midnight looked back at me in shock, and I nodded.

“The caravan,” breathed Sarah. “Maybe they weren’t lying about the poor harvests?”

“Starting to look that way,” I agreed. *Everything is brown and dying even here. Weeds, flowers, everything.*

I couldn’t just ignore these people who were suffering right in front of me, so I went to work. I created as big a table as I could, joining some pieces of stone together so I could at least have a surface to work on. Then I put on my energy accumulation spell and decided how much I was going to spend. I could get three full meals worth of food per planet rating right now, and decided this town couldn’t hold more than 300 people, right? If it did, by the time I distributed *that* much food my energy would be back so it would probably not be all that big a deal. So a ‘mere’ 100 energy would probably suffice for the moment. A minute after that a *mountain* of bread, cheese, meat, fruits, and vegetables appeared from my spell, and that

caught people's attention! The problem was, many didn't even seem to have the strength to rise and come to get any! Those that did were somewhat terrified of the dragon that was still standing there, but that worked in my favor to avoid the table getting swarmed by those that could still move. I quickly made some spirit clones, with an 11 result getting two, which tripled the number of dragons I had, but only for a second. They became people sized and made their own clones, so I had a variable army around the table and handed out some stone knives. They were super sharp for the moment because the spell allowed me to get the stone in any configuration I wanted, and we went to town cutting the bread and ingredients and making sandwiches.

"Bring up all the water you can from the town well," I told Midnight. "And see about getting cups. This is going to take some doing."

"Right!" She went to do that, while Sarah started running around delivering food to those too weak to rise.

"Try to eat it slowly," she would say as she handed it out.

Word spread, and those with the strength to do so showed up and started helping. Mostly those were younger kids, I got the feeling parents had been going without to make sure their kids were taken care of, which I thought was a good sign. They were soon running everywhere, making sure anyone that finished something off had something else to take the place of it if they wanted, or carrying cups, water skins, and the thanks of a grateful town. Finally things calmed down enough that a well dressed man that had been watching the whole proceeding came over and introduced himself.

"Mayor Chi, at your service holy paladin." He bowed.

"Tai Chi?" I asked with a grin.

"You know my brother?" he asked, straightening in surprise.

"Er, no, lucky guess."

"Ah! Strange. No, I am Foau Chi. You have my thanks, you have saved our town at least for the moment. I thought perhaps the Heavens had abandoned us. I should not have questioned my faith as I did. Please, if there is to be any punishment let it fall upon me for my lapse."

"Not really my department," I told him. "Look, can you tell me what's been happening here? Signs pointed to my needing to be here but not exactly why. From the air it seems the land is dying for kilometers. What happened?"

He shook his head. "That's just the thing," he admitted sadly. "No one can say. But if something isn't done, soon our entire kingdom will starve."

Chapter 35

Investigation

When: Two hours to secondlunch, day 6

Where: Town of Nearmountain

“Investigation?” Mayor Chi repeated to me.

“Yes,” I agreed with a nod. “What has your investigation about the phenomenon revealed?”

“I think you may be giving us too much credit,” he decided. “We are a mining town. You must have seen our closeness to the mountain? And why the town was named Nearmountain?” He gestured, and we looked over there. The mountain was very close, I couldn’t deny it. I mean, yes, I could deny it, but the evidence was really right there before me so it would have made me look quite foolish. “As such most of us are miners. Not wizards, or priests, that can manipulate the world around them with mana. We do have some farmers of course, but we are a small settlement. Barely fifty families all told. We would not have any means to investigate as you say. Our village is not along any major trade route or road. Word of major events in the kingdom take weeks to reach us, mostly when miners return from other towns after selling what we’ve mined. And given the current situation no one is strong enough to work, putting our entire livelihood at risk.”

“Right, the longer something like this goes on, the harder it will be to return to normalcy,” Midnight agreed.

“Okay sure, but your crops didn’t start dying overnight... unless they did?” I asked.

He shook his head. “No. I would say we began to notice this about three weeks ago at this point. Everything has been slowly decaying since that time.”

“So there you are. Is it drought?” I looked towards the clouds. “When was the last time it rained?” *But Midnight didn’t say the well was running dry. Everyone got what they wanted to drink as far as I could tell.*

“It’s not that,” he protested. “Our weather hasn’t changed, and it is not just the plants you see or the crops in the fields. We have stores of grain, vegetables from our last harvest, of meat from hunting in the area and animals raised for slaughter. They go bad far too quickly for this to simply be a natural occurrence. As you no doubt saw even our flowers are dying, and we draw water for them as usual.” He indicated a nearby flowerbox, with withered plants. “Our wells have not run dry, and our farmers cannot explain this failing to us as the dirt seems as robust as ever. No one field remains untouched, so there is no accusation of wrongdoing among our farmers.”

Thank goodness for that! “Right. So it isn’t just growing things, it’s everything you need for survival. Can I see one of your silos? I doubt I’ll get anything but I feel I should be comprehensive.”

“Of course, things seem to have calmed down a bit here. Though it seems your... twins? Have things in hand.” He looked to my spirit clones. “You all wear the same clothes as well? Doesn’t that get confusing?”

“Oh the pranking potential is off the charts,” I agreed. “But sure, they can watch things here.”

“Hang on though, you must have heard *something*,” Midnight protested. “You said this has been going on, things didn’t get as desperate as they are overnight. Has your king really not sent any word he’s working on some sort of solution? Or aid? Nothing?”

“A group of soldiers came through here a few days ago,” he admitted. “Headed to the kingdom on the other side of the mountain. They haven’t returned yet. Supposedly they were tasked with bringing food back. We would have been able to take a small portion but the food

would need to be shared all over the kingdom. That's all they would say, no explanation was given as to why this was happening."

Whoops. We must have beaten them back here, which makes sense. They're crossing the mountains on foot, we flew over them. I feel sort of bad now but they were carrying an awful lot of weapons for people on a 'humanitarian crisis' mission. And we couldn't have known things were so dire on this side, just the other side of the mountain there are no reports of anything like this happening. We couldn't have known their need was so great. But come on, even bringing a few wagons of food back it would be enough for a day or two? That's no solution. What was the king really thinking? Is he just bad at his job?

"So either your king doesn't know and is just doing what he can, or he does, and he's keeping it from you while trying to seem like he has your best interests at heart."

He sighed. "Exactly. And even if it was solved tomorrow, it will take months to get our crops back in shape, they're barely hanging on as it is. Another week and I'm afraid we would have to start from scratch, next year! It's too late in the season to replant everything now."

"So your harvest is going to be poor this year either way?" I remarked.

"Looks that way. And with our stores gone..."

"Hard times ahead. Well, that's a problem any way you look at it." I looked over at Midnight and did a sending to her. *Can your type of magic make food like I can?*

She gave me a quick nod.

"Mages that can create food may be in high demand in this kingdom soon," I told him. "Perhaps, we can visit a larger city and bring one back." *We may need to quickly bring one to every town like this that doesn't have one.*

"We could pay one, at least in the short term. Perhaps someone with an aptitude for magic that lives here could be trained up in the meantime. Yes, our situation may not be as bleak as we first believed. We would be very grateful to you, if you could do that."

"I'll see who I can find," I promised him. "Now, let's look at your granaries."

I calculated a 10 on spirit sense, near my maximum, looking over their storage unit. I clearly felt something wrong with the ley lines in this area, which would explain why plants were starting to die. It did not explain why already gathered foodstuff would rot, but that's exactly what it was doing.

"It doesn't matter where we put it," Mayor Chi told us. "We tried ice, making sure everything was dry, it didn't seem to matter. It decayed just the same."

"Something *is* wrong with the energy of the land here," I announced. "But why only this kingdom? Mountains wouldn't block this strange energy, nearby lands should be affected as well. But I should be as complete as possible." I stepped up to the building and put my hand on it, opening myself up to the recent past. Another 10 on postcognition got me nothing, making me sigh and change tactics, fearing the -1 penalty for trying again right away. I picked up some grain and used analysis on it, calculating a 6, which got me nothing. I scowled at it, resolved to put my augmentation spell on if I had to, and went back to the building. This time I calculated a 12, enough to get the impression of the entire month. It didn't seem like anyone had deliberately messed with the grain here, to ruin it. I ran through my other skills, but nothing came to mind. The one spirit I could call upon with ritual chant was the robin, who could tell me anything about home and hearth, and let me sing a songstrel song. Not helpful. No ward or circle would help, though I could use divination magic and at least get a few yes or no answers.

"You don't seem pleased," Midnight remarked.

"I'm not. I don't think there's any way to tell what this is."

"We are on the fringes of it anyway. If I had to guess this devastation effect, whatever it is, must come from somewhere. Let's head further into the kingdom and see if that's the case. Perhaps we can find the center and start there."

Yes, as we go further in the effect may be stronger. We just follow that 'gradient' if you will towards the center. For all I know something fell from space and is simply poisoning the land. I could get rid of something like that pretty easily, I think? "That's not a bad idea," I mused. "We can find some bigger towns too, see how they're doing. Maybe find a mage for this place and send them back here."

"Do you think the food you made magically will spoil in the same way?" Mayor Chi asked.

I shook my head. "It only lasts a day normally. I hope this corruption won't affect it that quickly but even if it did, that's not a long term solution."

His face fell. "I see. I was going to suggest creating several days worth and storing it, but if as you say it won't keep past a day anyway we shall simply have to make do. At least a few good meals will insure we can hold out a bit longer."

"Sorry about that. But don't worry, my dragon is fast and I can get back here until you have a more permanent solution. I'll do what I can to solve this quickly. And perhaps mages can be brought to revitalize the land once whatever is causing this is gone." *That lady that can do ritual magic, maybe? She said her rituals could cover a wide area, exactly what we need right now, and she could research new rituals. She might agree to it?*

"Anything you can do would be appreciated," he told me.

"Your king will certainly help you out!" Sarah announced. "If only because he can't collect taxes from a bunch of dead people."

He chuckled darkly. "You have a point little one."

Heading back to the center of town I again made as much food as I could in one casting with lots of energy thrown in, and the mayor assured me he would tell everyone it wouldn't last past a day so not to hoard it. I pulled myself together, made sure there wasn't anything more I could do immediately to help them out, and we got back on Firebrand. The mayor said this was the priority at the moment, and I agreed. The very land turning against you was bad, and they needed it fixed like yesterday. With a wave we were off again.

We headed away from the mountains, deeper into the kingdom, trying to keep our eyes open for greater blight. Interestingly, it didn't seem to get any worse as we flew, stopping now and again to land and check things out. We were currently standing at the edge of a forest looking at yellowing and dying trees.

"So if it's no worse here what does that mean?" Sarah asked.

"Whatever is happening, it's powerful," Midnight replied. "To do this to an entire kingdom? That seems impossible, but yet here we are."

"It doesn't feel any worse here," I told them, calculating a 9 on spirit sense. "So it seems whatever is doing this is slow, methodical, and covered the entire kingdom at once?"

"But it's not magic?" Sarah asked.

We both shook our heads. "There seems to be no magic here, apart from what we brought with us." Midnight indicated Firebrand, who was looking around nervously, probably mirroring my own feeling about how creepy this whole thing was.

"I only calculated a 3 on magic sense just now, so I'll take your word for it," I told her. "But I did better at the village. There wasn't anything there either."

"So it's something natural?"

"There are other powers in the world than magic," Midnight explained. "But a being that could do something like this? I don't know, they should be powerful enough not to bother. Is it personal? Sending a message? Some kind of ransom? If it was natural you think someone in this kingdom would have figured out what by now. It's not fast enough to kill the entire kingdom overnight, they all see their deaths by starvation coming. But at the same time they seem powerless to stop it."

"Good point," she allowed. "Let's hope mom has better luck."

"We're back to square one though," I protested. "Maybe a larger town will have mages that have done their own divinations and have some answers but I was really hoping to see more evidence of a central point this started from. Without that we're blind."

"Then I guess we better get going!"

I grinned at her. "I guess so."

The next town we discovered was larger than the first, and a little better off. Not in terms of plant life, which was still withered and dying, but in terms of size. It was large enough to support a mage who seemed to be working their hardest providing food for the town. There

was a line a hundred people long snaking into a single building, and at regular intervals it moved a bit and someone came out with a basket of food.

"Is it like this all day?" I asked, picking someone at random.

"Pretty much," they agreed. "By order of the king, making food cannot be charged for until the current crisis is over, and all are required to share anything they can't use with their neighbors to lighten the mage's load."

"I'm sure that won him some support," Midnight remarked.

"Not from our resident mage!" he replied with a laugh. "She basically is stuck doing this day in and day out now."

"She's getting something out of it," the man behind him said. "I always bring a bit of copper to throw in the collection basket. She needs to make a living too."

There was a general sentiment up and down the line that others did the same.

I had to admit I was impressed. Both with the king's actions and the giving nature of these people. "This is a fairly nice kingdom isn't it?"

"It was," he agreed, "until our plants started dying. Are you paladins? You should check in with the church, it's over that way. You can't miss it." He pointed.

"I will, thank you."

"Because you're not cutting in line, even if you are."

I put up my hands in surrender. "I wouldn't dream of it."

"Ah yes, we've been praying and praying for a solution," the priest we met told us. The church had been fairly obvious, it was one of the larger buildings in town, though deserted at the moment. We let ourselves inside and had found a lonely priest sitting there, who perked up when we approached. I asked if he had any news, perhaps from larger cities, about what was happening but he had no more idea than we did. "All divine visions we have received have been uncharacteristically pessimistic. As if the Heavens were telling us we were somehow all to blame for this and to fix it ourselves. But they either can't or won't tell us how to atone! It's all been very vexing. The community looks to the church for guidance, but if I can't provide answers, well, they may start trying to get them from others." He pointed down, making a face. "Less savory types, if you get my drift."

"Come now, people's faith can't be that tenuous," Midnight assured him.

He spread his hands, showing the empty church. "If only I had studied magic, I could have helped to feed people here, and the church would be packed as well. But alas. You see what a bit of starvation will do to people."

Uh, yes, they're doing what they need to in order to survive. Not every mage can feed 300 people at one time, but I'm sure she's doing her best.

"Keep the faith, Father," she told him. "Your flock will need you, once we figure out what this all is and fix it."

"Then... there is hope?" he asked, looking more excited now.

"You have my word," I told him. "I will not rest, I will not sleep for an instant until I have determined the cause of this strange circumstance and put a stop to it."

Midnight raised her hand. "Uh, I'll sleep my usual six hours a night, if it's okay? I get really cranky if I don't get to sleep on time."

"I have to pee," Sarah announced. She had a finger up her nose.

"There you have it," I said confidently. "Put your entire hopes in us."

"I will?" he said, clearly not convinced. He did point out a place for Sarah to go.

"I guess if you can't help us we'll be on our way," I told him.

"Sorry I couldn't be more help. Keep going further into the kingdom. Larger towns will of course have more resources. More holy men and women, more mages. Someone will have an answer somewhere."

"I hope so. About that, this town seems to be set for the moment, which way should we go to find the largest town? There's a mining town near the mountains that has no mage support, so they're on the brink of starvation over there. We need to get them a person that can support them and we clearly can't take this town's mage with us."

"I should say not! We would have a riot on our hands. Not that it would help, mind you..." He thought a moment. "I would follow the south road out of here. That will lead you to Billytown. It has a strong mage presence, and is quite large otherwise. If there is a spare mage to be had, it's where I would look."

"Very well. We'll head that way, thank you."

"Good luck. May God go with you."

I already have an angel or two, but sure, the Big Guy isn't unwelcome.

We flew to the next town which stretched for quite a ways within the city walls, it could possibly be the largest town I had encountered since I got here, and we landed over the wall rather than have to go through some tedious process at the gate. We had work to do! The mage's quarter wasn't hard to find, we followed people with empty baskets and such while people will full baskets headed in the opposite direction. Here on the street several lines formed, younger people (probably apprentices) organizing everyone into parallel lines as we got close. These lines moved fairly quickly, not that we joined them as we weren't getting food at the moment we needed to see if someone could be spared to go to the mining town. Clearly there were several mages here working in tandem because there wasn't one long line like back in the town we had just left. That boded well, perhaps the loss of one for a few hours (if they could teleport there and back once a day?) wouldn't be so great. Once we got close I saw my estimation was correct, tables had been set up in the street and each line led to one. A person would step up, present their basket, get it full of magical food, step to the side, thank the mage or leave an offering or both, and walk to the left where they weren't in the way and could leave the area quickly. It was all very efficient, and I had to hand it to them there were no fights, no pushing in line. Probably because the mages had no tolerance for that sort of thing and if they decided you weren't going to be served you would probably starve in short order. So that would have put the fear of God into everyone and they were on their best behavior in this crisis. *And really, this could be the result of weeks of refinement, it was chaos the first few days but now everyone is used to it.* We were getting some looks by people in the crowd but as we weren't pushing ahead to get food, and were clearly people of importance from our white armor and regal bearing, no one stopped us. I also noticed at least two tables where younger mages were being coached by older ones, clearly training them in the spell to further help reduce the burden on the others. The younger mage would do the spell first, then if not successful they would watch the master do it, and then repeat.

"The question is how to approach the subject," I muttered.

"It looks like every mage on this street has been conscripted to make food," Midnight agreed. "What an effort, but a necessary one."

"Agreed. Bigger town, more people to feed. And if their stocks are degrading at the same speed as the mining town... Man, these lines won't be going away any time soon will they? I hate to make them wait, though they'll be set until tomorrow for sure. Maybe check in with the local church-

"Excuse me miss, are you Sylvia?" asked a young boy, running up to us.

I did what amounted to a triple take, staring down at him. "Yes? How in the world?" Midnight and Sarah were staring at me as well, clearly as surprised as I was.

"My master wishes to see you." He pointed at a scowling mage a little ways down the street. "He says it's important. Follow me."

We did, stopping in front of the table, which earned us some ire by the people in line but he said he would resume his duties in just a second. He told the apprentice to start casting the spell, and they carefully got to it. Meanwhile he looked us over, reading something from a note he had in his hand. "Well I'll be," he finally said. "Two tails. Dark elf. Young fox-Looks like it is you. Here." He crumpled the note and handed us a sealed letter he pulled out of his robe. "I can finally get rid of this stupid thing. Hope it's good news or whatever. Take it and get outa here." He flapped it at me.

"Huh?" I managed, looking at him and not taking it.

Chapter 36

Seer

When: Not long after

Where: Mage's quarter

"Seer?" I asked, not yet having taken the proffered letter.

"That's right," the mage agreed. "Some years ago I was given this letter and told to watch out for you three. A time of great crisis she said. Our only hope, she said. Well, as promised I've kept it close all this time but I've really only expected you lately, once this whole situation started. I mean if it isn't this one, the next one would have to be even worse. I'm glad to finally wash my hands of the whole thing, and no longer have to worry I missed you. Small chance of that I realize now, but it's a weight off my shoulders for sure. Well?" He flapped it again. "I don't have all day."

"Thank you," Midnight said, reaching past me to take it. "We'll take it from here."

"Whatever, nothing more to do with me."

"But how could someone have known?" I sputtered. *I didn't even exist here years ago. How could the future have taken that into account? Wait was it always my destiny to die, be sent here, and do this? Can realities be that tightly woven together? Was Mumiah lying about my coming from another world? Maybe I was always a part of this one.*

"Even magic can help tell the future," he told me. "Seers aren't that different. Just more specialized. Though most are fake of course. This one seems to be real though, huh, wish I could remember her name I'd visit her myself now that I know she's on the level. Dang, all this time a real seer in town and I never knew it."

"No, what I mean is- Aarg!" *I can't even explain it.* "Never mind!"

"Way ahead of you. Now if you would like to move along?" He indicated the line behind us.

"Wait! We need someone to do this in another town!" I told him, putting the whole future thing aside for now. "Near the mountains. They have no mage support so they're dying. I've taken care of them for today but they need help."

"As if I didn't have enough problems," he muttered. "Fine, what's the name of the town?"

"Nearmountain."

"Rather original."

"Isn't this town called Billytown?" Sarah asked innocently.

"Yeah, what's your point? Named after our fonder, what's so odd about that?"

She looked at him like he was stupid.

"Anyway, can you help or not?" I asked.

He sighed. "I'll bring it up at the meeting tonight, I'm not a decision maker. We have some apprentices who could possibly be trusted on their own-"

His apprentice perked up and grinned.

"-Not you."

His face fell again.

"That we could send. That wouldn't reduce our capacity here."

"Whatever you can do, they'll thank you. Thank you."

"Sure, sure." He waved us off and I figured that was about all I was going to get. We headed away from the area so I could look at the letter. It did look several years old, somewhat rough around the edges but it was in an envelope sealed with wax which was intact. Barely. *I'll head back there tomorrow, see if they really did send someone. If not, I'll make a bigger stink. And I don't mean gassing the mages at the meeting, if you get my drift.*

Hey now there's a spell, to make a bunch of people pass gas at the same time... But what grade would it be? And what's the resistance check? STRength to hold it in?

"What are you giggling at?" Sarah asked, looking around. "Is there something funny? I wanna see!"

"Nothing!" I assured her. "Let's see what this letter is all about." I cracked it open.

Dear Sylvia,

Come and see me about your destiny.

Madam Gözbebekleri

I stared at the paper a moment, then turned it over. The other side was blank. I turned it over again, and being a (barely) three dimensional object the original side was once again revealed to me. Even worse, the content had not changed. I held it up to the light. I scratched my head.

"What does it say?" Midnight asked, and I simply passed it to her. "Oh."

"I know, right? I guess we'll look around."

"Can I see?" Sarah asked.

"It's just one line," I told her. "Come see me, and a name."

"That's no fun."

"Yes, after the mysterious circumstances of it being delivered... Come on."

We checked the mage's quarter, and with a 10 (a fairly lucky result given my 1 in the skill of information gathering) I was directed to a shop with a crystal ball sign above it. We went in, ringing the bell by the door as we passed inside. It was a small shop, with room for a few people around a table and a curtained off area across from us from which a voice could be heard.

"I'll be right there, dears! Have a seat!"

We traded a look and sat down.

A moment later an older woman pushed the curtain aside and walked over to the table. She was fairly well dressed, nothing like the mages we had just seen, but sort of in between a mage and a laborer. Something a farmer might wear to dress up for mass, I thought. She looked us over and sat down.

"Ah, I've been expecting you!" she announced, with a sweep of her hand.

"I should think so," I told her. "So about my destiny-"

"All in good time, my child!" she told me. "Would you like some tea? Can't do a reading of the tea leaves without tea, after all."

"I'm surprised you have tea left, what with the withering that's going on all over," Midnight told her suspiciously.

"I didn't say it would be *good* tea."

"Look, you are madam Gözbe-something, right?" I asked.

"Gözbebekleri, yes. The greatest seer in all the land!" She made a sweeping gesture.

"You don't need to sell me on it. I'm here, what is it you have to tell me? Is it about the kingdom? Can I solve the issue? We need to get going on it!"

She seemed to not be hearing me. "Perhaps a palm reading? Or are you here to see if your lovely companion is the one for you? I can tell you if your future together as a couple will be bright!"

I colored a bit. "She's not a romantic partner..." *Yet? Plus of course it will be, she's a glowing orb by default. How could our future not be bright... at least in that way.*

"So you wish to know how to attract one? I can give you advice there as well!"

"Oh that?" I brushed that off. "I already know." I counted some points off on my fingers.

"Have a positive outlook and laugh at their jokes. Proper diet and exercise, for a nice figure. Be interested in their hobbies no matter how silly they seem to you, because they are decidedly not silly to the other person. Take care of your teeth so you have a nice smile-"

"Wait I can't write that fast!" Sarah protested. I looked over to see her furiously writing, it seemed she had found a small desk to the side and there was paper and a quill in there. "Take... Care... Of... Your... Teeth... Okay!" She looked up. "What's next?"

"There's really only one rule," I told her, chuckling and shaking my head. I looked to Midnight who grinned.

"Be yourself!" we both nearly shouted.

Her face fell. "But what if I'm terrible?"

"You're not terrible!" I insisted. "Who told you that? I'll punch them in the face! No, I'll get *Firebrand* to punch them in the face. No, I'll let you *and* Firebrand punch them!"

"No one, just I mean what if I'm myself and the person I like doesn't like me back?"

"Then they aren't the one for you," I told her plainly. "Part from them with only a fair thee well and no rancor in your heart, mourn the loss with a good friend, and look for another to love with shining eyes."

"Huh, I should be writing this stuff down," the seer mused. "You gunning for my job, girl?"

"Indeed," Midnight agreed, ignoring her. "Better to find the one that loves you for who you are than the mask you wear. Sooner or later that mask will slip, and that would only be harder on the both of you."

"Huh," she decided. "I guess I can see that." She wrote that down and capped the bottle again. "Anyway, sorry to interrupt."

"Yes, where were were?" I can't find you any great treasure, if that's what you were hoping for," Madam Gözbebekleri went on. "Not sure why people ask me that all the time. I'm finding myself lost treasure before I tell someone else where to find some, you can be sure of that."

"Right, this was a waste of time," I announced, standing up. "Lucky guess before, maybe? Let's go."

"Wait!" she cried. "Half off a reading of the bones? Two for one special on an aura reading?"

Midnight put a hand on my arm. "Come on, Sylvia, give her a chance. It may have been so long ago she's forgotten."

"But she's a seer? If she didn't see us coming?"

"Sylvia?" said the woman. "Why does that name sound familiar?"

"It should," I told her, sitting again and passing the letter over to her. "Maybe this will jog you memory? Care to tell me why I'm here?"

"This *is* my handwriting," she admitted, looking it over. "And I do remember writing it, oh yes I gave it to that mage to deliver! He actually came through, wonderful! I mean," she went on quickly, "I knew he would of course! That's why I gave it to him in the first place. I mean, obviously."

"So you do remember, great."

"I remember writing it," she admitted, sitting. Her attitude changed a bit, no more gesturing.

"But not why?"

"To get you here, clearly. You have to understand this was years ago. Separating the past, present, and future is difficult enough for me. I'm sure a standard reading will be enough to get to the bottom of it. No charge, of course." She didn't look pleased when she said this. "As you are paladins and want to know how to help the kingdom. If it relates to that it's the least I can do. The mages are making all our food, after all, asking nothing in return. I mean that was the king's order but still."

"You're an actual seer, aren't you?" Midnight asked. "So what was all that before, about the tea and whatnot?"

"That's right. Sorry about my earlier persona, I like money as much as the next person but if people knew what I could really do I would never get any time off. So I'm 'right' just enough they let me stay here but not enough to really realize they should trust me any more than a divination spell done by a mage."

"But you don't know why I'm here any more than I do?" I asked.

"I recall having a vision of you arriving in town, many years ago," she explained. "And I knew I had to speak to you. Guide you. That was *my* future. Now that you're here I can tell you yours."

I could probably tell me mine too. I have premonition at a 5 after all. That's probably what she's going to use. Though, had you? No. I didn't think I was that desperate yet. "That does make a certain amount of sense."

"So we are agreed?" She held out her hands. "I don't really need the tea or any of that, just your hands."

Yes, I know that. "It can't hurt." I took them.

She concentrated a moment. "You will face a difficult choice in the near future," she began. "A choice without a right answer. But you must beware. The choice is false, you must see past it to other possibilities. The castle is the key. You must travel there next, for that is the beginning of the choice."

"But the choice is false," I protested. "Why should I chase something I know is wrong?"

"You must be offered the choice, even knowing it is false. Only then can you know the stakes, and offer a choice of your own." She sat back, releasing my hands. "That is all I can tell you. I hope it's helpful."

"It's a destination, that's more than we had before," I admitted. "Thank you." *Though we would have headed to the castle soon enough for answers anyway, so it's not all that helpful.*

"I hope you can find a solution you can live with."

"Me too." I got up.

"Mom, we can't just leave her empty handed!" Sarah protested.

"It's all right dear."

"No, she's right," I decided. I cast a few spells, making a stone appear from nowhere and then sculpting it with transmutation into the shape of a fox with two tails. Then I turned it into silver. "There, enjoy."

"What a lovely piece!" she gushed.

What am I going to do with this piece of junk? she thought, after the group had left. Maybe my granddaughter Anne will like it, her birthday is coming up. She likes animals, all little girls like animals, right? Frogs mainly, is her latest kick for some reason? I forget. It's fine.

We got directions to the capital from the guards at the gate, Firebrand returning to dragon form as we left and they realized they hadn't actually seen us come in. The guards scampered away after that and we took to the air.

"What's our plan when we reach the capital?" Midnight asked me.

"I say we go right to the top," I told her over my shoulder. "Land at the castle and demand to speak to the king. If he doesn't know what's going on in his own kingdom, no one does."

"That sounds like something you would do!"

"You got that right."

We slammed into the ground in the middle of the castle, it was fairly traditional with the boxy shape and green lawn in the center, and Firebrand roared, making several guards along the walls fall over and scramble away.

"That's got their attention," I said to the others, and got lowered to the ground. "No run-around for us, no sir. Let's get to the action!" We didn't have to wait long, a line of guards streamed out every available door and while not exactly acting threatening, were gripping their weapons and looking nervous. One in particular, probably some kind of captain, marched over to us.

"State your business here!" he demanded.

"It is urgent I speak with the king about the state of his kingdom," I replied. "Sorry for not making an appointment, but the whole situation seems rather urgent. I won't take up too much of his time I promise."

"I'm not letting-" he indicated the dragon in a general way but turned his attention back to me, "you anywhere *near* the king!"

"Really?" I asked, cocking my head to the side. "Do you believe he's any safer where he is? If I were here to threaten this place, do you think you could stop this dragon before she turned your castle into rubble? And she's letting *us* ride her, how powerful do you think we are if she lets us do that? You ever ridden a dragon? I don't think so."

"Ah..."

Firebrand yanked a brick off the top of the wall with two claws, brought it down to his level, and squeezed, smashing it to bits.

"I'll repair that later. We are holy paladins sent to resolve this situation, it can't escape his notice that his subjects are suffering. If he is a ruler in more than name he will show himself!"

"I'll tell him, but I do not command the king. Please, allow me some time to convince him before your dragon makes things worse."

"Worse for me, or for you? I just want to talk to the man, you have my word."

"Wait here." He turned and rushed back into the castle.

We waited.

"Can I pet your dragon?"

I looked over, and there was a boy in very nice clothes looking up at Firebrand. Probably a few years older than Sarah, and certainly fearless to have come right over like this.

"Hi!" said Sarah greeting him with a wave. "Sure, you can pet her. Her scales are pretty hard though what's your name?"

"I'm Hazaa, but you can call me Haz!"

"I'm Seraphina, but call me Sarah!"

"Nice to meet you." The boy bowed.

She giggled and bowed back. "You too. Come on, come see her claws they're so huge!"

"Yeah they are!"

I kept one eye on them as Sarah showed off Firebrand until a shrill voice shrieked "Prince Anderon, get away from that dragon this *instant!*"

Prince? I looked over and there was a woman in robes standing there, backed up against the wall and looking terrified.

"Henie, I want to see the dragon!" he protested, shouting back.

"This. Instant!"

"Don't worry," I told her, putting my arm around the boy. "I, Sylvia Tempest, personally guarantee his safety. The great dragon Firebrand shall not harm him."

"Take your hands from the royal personage!"

"Make me!"

He laughed. "I like you! I want to ride a dragon when I grow up. Do you have to raise them from an egg? Did you tame this one or is it just a friend? Do you know other dragons?"

One question at a time kid!

She was just sputtering something.

"What is the meaning of this?" another voice said. A figure appeared and started towards us, and this could only be the king. Crown, fine clothes, gold chains, straight back. He marched over to us, the nervous guard at his side. I noticed a few archers spreading out on the walls as well, like that would help them.

"I'm sorry sire-"

"Come over here, I won't have you shouting from across the courtyard. Clearly they mean us no harm or they would have shown their true colors by now."

She looked up and up, then nervously shuffled forward.

"Now," he said again. "What is the meaning of this?" He indicated his son.

"I'm sorry sire, he got away from me and said he wanted to see the dragon. I just can't keep up with him, he runs so quickly."

"I see. Will you release my son?" he asked me.

"He's free to come and go as he pleases," I told him, patting his back. "Go on, stand next to your dad, little prince."

"Okay. Bye Sarah!"

"Bye!"

Everyone relaxed- fractionally- as he went over by the king.

"Thank you for that. I wasn't sure if-" the king cut off, and changed what we was about to say. "So you've come at last," he said, looking us over. "Paladins. I can't say I'm surprised. I actually expected you much sooner. But tell me one thing, if you would? However did you learn of it?"

"Your kingdom being threatened by some kind of corruption?" I asked, unsure what he was getting at. "It was a little hard *not* to notice once we passed over the mountain range. Your kingdom is very rapidly dying, your majesty, and we need to get to the bottom of it as quickly as we can. But it was your somewhat poor decision to attack the neighboring kingdom that first tipped us off."

"Attack?" the captain protested. "Don't be ridiculous. We sent that convoy to beg aid!"

"With a lot of soldiers in full plate armor, armed for war?"

"Of course! There are many bandits in the mountains that would have made off with what they were bringing back. It had to be protected. You didn't kill them, did you?"

"What? No!" I protested. "They're on their way back, suitably chastised for coming to attack the fort I happened to be staying in at the time. Bad luck on their part, honestly, but there you have it. It led me here so I guess all is well that ends well." *I can overlook your hasty action and give you the benefit of the doubt, given your situation here.*

"I tell you, they had no orders-"

"Then what about the lich?" Midnight asked.

"Lich?" asked the king, looking innocent.

"Who was sending crazed animals out into the world to destabilize the area so your men had an easier time of it?"

"Slander!"

"Now, now," said the king, raising his hands. "I'm sure all of this can be cleared up. But back to what you were saying, you're here to 'get to the bottom of' in your words the troubles of my kingdom?"

"That's right, your majesty," I agreed.

"So that implies you don't actually know the reason."

It wasn't a question. "That's right, we were hoping *you* would know."

"I do!" he announced, now looking quite relieved for some reason. "A horrible demon has decided to blackmail me, in exchange for my very kingdom. But now that you're here, you can travel to the demon realm and eradicate this foul beast, saving all my people in one swoop. Praise the Heavens, everyone, our prayers have been answered!"

"Praise the Heavens!" everyone echoed.

Hold on, he seems to have changed his tune a bit? He was defensive before but now he's trying to be very helpful. A little too helpful.

"I'll send for the royal mage at once, he can open a portal to the world of demons. I'll give you the name of the foul creature that threatens our lands and you can hunt him down like the no good scoundrel he is." He clapped his hands. "Guard, bring the royal mage!"

"Yes your majesty!" several answered, running back into the castle.

"It really is great you showed up," he went on, laying it on as thick and rich as he possibly could. "We'll have a huge feast waiting for you when you get back. Good luck!"

"Hold on a second!" Midnight cried. "Are you just trying to get rid of us?"

Chapter 37

Brunch

When: No time has passed

Where: Castle Courtyard

“Brunch!” the king announced, snapping his fingers. “How could I have forgotten?”

“It’s almost secondlunch, way too late for brunch,” Midnight protested. “And that’s not answering my question. Are you trying to get rid of us for some reason?”

“Maybe he’s saying the feast he’s going to prepare is just a brunch?” Sarah asked innocently. “Pretty cheap for saving his whole kingdom and whatnot. But I guess they are low on food now...”

“No, no,” the king waved that off. “That’s the name of the demon you need to defeat to save my kingdom. Brunch. Lanyard Brunch. I mean, his name is something unpronounceable in their tongue but that’s what, uh, our divination magic has revealed to us. Other demons will know the name I’m sure you can ask around.”

“Ask around?” Midnight shrieked. “The demon realm?”

“You are prepared to do *anything* to save my kingdom, are you not?” he asked shrewdly. “Think of the people that will die if this curse isn’t broken. Mages can provide food for a time yes but what happens when trees are gone? When flowers and grass are gone? All the animals will die. Think of the bunnies, and the kitties, and the cute puppies.”

Midnight sputtered, trying to think of a response. I had calculated a 9 earlier on an ESP check and so got nothing, but my check of 15 (-1 for the penalty) now showed the king felt relief, and very smug.

“You’re hiding something,” I decided. “Want to tell me what it is? I can simply ask my divination magic if going to the demon world and asking around for this Brunch person is the only way to solve this crisis.”

“Ah!” He held up a finger. “But can your divination magic pierce into the demon realm? You can really only ask about the place you’re currently in, no? We had to go to the demon realm to get our answers about Brunch, after all. My court mage will verify that.”

“He’s got a point,” Midnight agreed reluctantly. “But we could ask about this place. Like ‘is the current trouble in this land related to a demon’s curse?’ Something like that.”

“It’s a good start.” I cast, getting a 14 on the check, and by the time I finished the court mage was there looking on with interest as I clearly wasn’t using the same 5 sided mana core they did. But the result couldn’t be denied.

“Yes.”

“So there is a demon,” Midnight half asked. “You aren’t just trying to get rid of us.”

“Oh yes,” said the mage. “Rather nasty bit of business there. We would send troops and such if it wouldn’t make the situation worse, of course. But independent agents, such as paladins, could go and set things right. Thanks for agreeing to do this!”

“We haven’t yet,” Midnight protested.

But you will send troops, and monsters, into other kingdoms. I see. I get the picture. “You want us to go beat up some demon, on his home turf, and get him to take off the curse he put on your kingdom?” I clarified.

“That is what paladins do, right?” the king asked. “Fight demons, protect the weak? All that non- uh, heroics? What would it be in your case? Heroinics?”

“I don’t think- you’re not getting us off track again!”

“Me?” The king was a picture of innocence.

"What *exactly* did you do to make a demon angry enough to curse your whole kingdom?" Midnight asked. "We're not just going in there without some idea what to expect. Especially against one powerful enough to do what they did!"

"He wants my son," the king said quickly, hugging his son from the side. "We don't know why, some diabolical plot or another I expect. Naturally I can't just hand him over, now can I? No, I would rather my entire kingdom fall down around me than capitulate to the mad desires of some demon. Would you give up your daughter to save this kingdom?!"

"Of course not!" I agreed.

"Eh, you could," Sarah decided. "Then when he's asleep I cut his throat out!" She made a slicing motion across her neck.

"You're assuming he'll let you sleep in the same room as him," the king remarked.

"I can sneak places!"

"Can you? You think he doesn't have guards right inside his bedroom? Outside it?"

"Anyway," I put in. "Brunch, huh?"

"That's right. Mage, open the portal for these ladies so they can get started."

"Uh, the dragon will have to stay behind," he told us. "I can't make it that big."

"Don't you worry, she has a convenient travel size," I told him, Firebrand becoming her fairy form. "See?"

"Oh! No problem then, I guess. I'll get started." His core appeared, and started flashing.

"So we're really going?" Midnight asked.

"There is a demon, and we do have to get to the bottom of it," I mused.

"You mean, protect my kingdom and my son?" the king asked.

"Sure, sure," I waved that off. "What you said."

"You know, most people refer to me as 'your majesty.'"

"Most people aren't risking their lives to save your kingdom."

"Strangest paladins I've ever encountered. Don't take after them, Haz."

"Okay dad!" He winked at us.

"Let the veil between worlds be lifted!" the mage intoned, and a tear appeared, resolving into a gateway to the lower world. "The demon realm is a strange and terrible place," he told us. "I hope you can handle it. I got out of there as quickly as I could. But you're made of sterner stuff, right? Good luck."

"Thanks."

Taking a deep breath I plunged through, stepping into another world. I looked around in confusion, this place seemed familiar to me on some level, which was odd. Midnight, Firebrand, and Sarah were quickly through and the portal winked out behind us.

"Not for nothing, but how are we getting back?" Midnight asked, looking at the place the portal was.

"Don't even worry about-"

"Mommy, mommy, look! *Humans!*" I heard from a little ways away. We all looked, and there was a strange sight. Two demons, one pushing a sort of stroller were coming towards us. But the demon in the stroller, and "in" here wasn't an exact description because it was way too small for them and so was he just sort of perched on top of it, was excitedly pointing at us. "I want to corrupt them!"

"Now, now junior, you know you're far too young to corrupt anyone," said the demon pushing it. Both had red skin, horns, and were short and stocky.

"But I waaaant to!"

"We're crossing here," she told him, turning away from us. "Leave the poor humans alone. Who knows what they're carrying. Look how close together they're standing! Power of friendship for a start. You don't want something like that anywhere near you, believe you me!"

Midnight jerked back away from me, she had been standing awfully close, not that I was complaining. "Sorry!" she whispered.

"But moooooom! Their souls! They're so shiny! I want to corrupt them!"

"I'll tell you what." She was looking both ways, and I noticed strange vehicles whizzing by to either side of us. "When we get home you can practice, and try corrupting the next humans you see."

“Practice? But mooom, these ones are right there! There won’t be any more for aaaaaages!”

“Just like your father,” she cooed. “I’m so proud of you. You’ll be such a great corrupter one day.” She made her way across the street and pointedly looked the other way when she was across from us. The child looked like it was still protesting. “But I want to now!”

“Right, so, where are we?” Midnight finally said when she was out of sight. “What is this place?”

We took a look around, and again stepped closer to each other as our surroundings came into greater focus. Buildings towered over us, making me dizzy as I looked up and up trying to find the tops of them. Then further up, a red “sky” and what looked like more of the same, hanging above us as though we were inside a ball. The roads near us were straight and seemingly made of rock or something, and beside us strange enclosed carts full of demons passed by. Then suddenly they would stop, and a horrendous noise would come from them, then they would start moving again after about thirty seconds. They were silent otherwise. Demons flew in the sky, bright signs flashed around us. It was an alien scene and Midnight was starting to panic. I was pretty sure I was too. Sarah just looked interested.

Are you two okay? Your dimensional coordinates just changed. Are you in the demon realm right now?

“Yes,” I croaked. “What... What am I looking at?”

Oh bother. Your vitals are all over the place. One second, this is going need higher level permissions I need to get an admin hang on.

“Hang on to what?”

“Me? Hang on to me?” Midnight asked. “I’m so dizzy myself.” She stumbled a bit. “How does it work? It’s curving up. UP!”

“What’s wrong mom, isn’t this place neat?”

“Uh?” I managed.

Is this culture shock? A panic attack?

Okay, it came back. I’m reintegrating some of your old memories. Stand by. I’ll have to remove them when you leave just so you know.

Suddenly information flooded me. I straightened, looking around in wonder. Why, this looked like the city! Near where I was born, the downtown area! There was nothing to fear here. They were just tall buildings, roads, cars. Why had I been so nervous before? *Wait, why are such things here?*

That must have worked, you’re

leveling off. Good luck.

Love,
Mumiah

“Midnight?”

“So tall. What are they?” she managed.

“What? Midnight? Look at me. Hey, come on, look at me!” I grabbed her face and made her look at me. Her eyes were wide and she was breathing heavily.

“It’s just houses,” I told her. “I’m right here, you’re safe,” I told her. “Tall houses, that’s all. Different ways of doing things. It’s okay, we’re safe. Just look at me. Deep breaths, relax, you’re not under attack. I know, it feels weird but I’m here.”

“You okay?” Sarah asked, taking her hand.

“What? Houses?”

“Very tall houses,” I agreed. “Nice roads, strange carriages. That’s all. Nothing to worry about.”

She looked at me for a moment and closed her eyes, trying to relax. I took this is the perfect opportunity to get some hugs in.

“Now kiss!” someone yelled from a vehicle nearby.

I opened one eye, Sarah was armored up again and smacking her hands together. “Want me to scare them off?” she asked. But they just laughed and pulled away again. “Aw!”

“Leave the demons alone,” I told her, and her one piece outfit came back.

“Fine!”

“I’m okay,” Midnight told me, pulling away. “I think. Sorry about that. I’m just not going to look up. Problem solved.”

“I guess that’s a solution?”

“It’s pretty weird all right,” Sarah said, looking up. “Is someone on the other side looking up at us right now? How does that work?”

“I don’t want to think about it,” I told her. “In any case, we have to find this Brunch fellow and see what the deal is.”

“How are we supposed to do that?” Midnight protested. “This place is totally foreign and there’s demons everywhere. Why did we just jump through that portal?”

“Come on, where’s that fearless woman I know?” I told her, bumping her. “We’ll make some checks, maybe bust a few heads- no they might like that. We’ll bring them the power of friendship, that other demon pushing the stroller seemed concerned about that. We’ll have Brunch before dinner.”

“Isn’t it just a snack if it’s before dinner? It’s only bunch in the morning,” Sarah said, confused.

“You know what I mean! Let’s take a look around, see what this place has to offer.”

What the place had to offer was basically everything. Shops selling who knows what, gambling, shows, just along this street it seemed services of every kind were available. The problem was we needed information, and even with some of memories of “cities” returned to me, I knew just walking up to someone and asking if they knew where to find a specific person wasn’t going to work. Just looking around this place must be *packed* with demons. Why build such tall structures, otherwise? The other problem was we weren’t demons. That marked us out, and while we weren’t attacked right in the street everyone seemed to notice us and stared.

“It’s theorized they can see our souls somehow,” Midnight told me. “I believe it, based on what that ‘baby’ was saying.”

“Yeah. Still, we’ve gotten the lay of the land, so to speak. I can ask my magic which direction we should go to find Brunch.”

“There’s so many types,” Sarah announced. “Why are there so many types?”

“Same as why there’s so many types of angels, I suppose,” she figured. “Different tasks assigned to each?”

"Now what?" I muttered, as a vehicle with flashing lights jumped the curb, stopped totally in the way of everyone else, and a demon in a uniform got out.

"It was true," he muttered. "Humans walking around. Ah shut yer yaps I'm parking here!" he shouted behind him to the angry people now shouting out their windows at him. He got out some kind of weapon, fired it into the air a few times, answered by others doing the same. Some kind of social contract fulfilled they started going around the vehicle and the demon came over to us, still holding his weapon. "Hey whatta ya doing here?" he shouted at us.

"Who are you supposed to be?" I snapped back.

"I'm an officer of the law, what does it look like I'm a tooth fairy?"

Firebrand huffed at that.

"Law? In the demon realm?" Midnight gasped. "You're joking."

"Oh we got rules, sister. Why you're breaking about a dozen of them just standing there. Being a dark elf in public, that's for starters. I need my ticket book, where's my angel blasted ticket book?" He started patting himself looking for something. "Gonna write me so many tickets."

"Oh you did *not* just go there," she threatened.

"You got a problem with it, tell it to the judge!"

"Okay, okay, before anyone does something they'll regret," I hastily stepped between them. "We're looking for someone. Brunch. You know that name?"

"Oh sure, one of our most respected citizens, Brunch. Owns a lot of buildings, the Brunch family does. Does a lot of deals, whata guy! They say he even rigged our last election, well *he* says that, but nobody can find any proof! He's just that good, so subtle, he does everything larger than life!"

Isn't that a contradiction? "Yes, we're here to see him about a deal he made with a king in the human world. Do you know where we can find him?"

"Do I look like a person who rubs elbows with celebrity? Do I? You gotta be kitten me!"

"If you want us off the streets so we don't break your rules or whatever, you'll help us get in contact with him."

"Are you threatening me?" He pointed the weapon at us.

"Yes?"

"Ah! That's great! You're okay." He put his weapon back. "Now, how would I go about getting an audience with Brunch? That's a tricky one."

"He makes deals with the human world, doesn't he? He must have contact information or something," Midnight reasoned.

"Bah, mortals would use rituals or something, I don't even know," the officer told her. "You can't just call him on the phone."

"What's a phone?"

"You know, a phone!"

"No I don't."

"Wow you mortals are ignorant. Can't be helped I guess. Let me think now." He started pacing around. "How do you feel about being shoved into a big box together? We could probably ship you there..."

"No!" both of us shouted, getting a little red.

"Okay, bite my head off why doncha? Just a suggestion, calm your digits."

"Do you have maps? We could fly there maybe?" I asked.

"Do we have maps," he echoed, mocking me. "We had maps while you were still banging rocks together. Like I said, he owns tons of property, how would we know where he was right at this very moment? Huh? Answer me that why doncha?"

"I can just use divination magic," I answered simply.

"Oh la dee da, divination magic. Fine, I'll take you down to the station, you can look at some *maps* and consult your *magic*." He did jazz hands.

"Don't demons do magic?" Midnight asked. "Why are you so negative about it?"

"Course we do! Who doesn't do magic? You stupid or something?" He leaned over.

"Look, I have to be seen giving you a hard time," he whispered. "Nothing personal, ya know?"

"I really don't."

"Yeah ya do. And don't you forget it!" he yelled.

"You tell 'em!" someone shouted from a vehicle. "We don't want their kind around here!"

"Get in, before I make ya!" He stomped over to the vehicle and opened the back door. Midnight looked at me, but I shrugged.

"You think we can't break out of something that flimsy if we needed to?"

"I guess."

"Hey, no breaking my car," he told us.

We filed in and he closed the door, walked around, and got back in himself. "Alright, here we go."

We headed to the station and he looked for maybe twenty minutes for some paper maps. "Cause we don't use them no more, see?" he told us. "But as I don't feel like cleaning up after your eyeballs explode out of your heads when I show you what a computer is, we'll stick to something you're familiar with."

When he said the word "computer" it rang a faint bell, but without looking at one it wasn't any more than that. *I should know what that is. My former life had them, I'm sure of it.*

"Here we are. Take a look." He pointed out various properties owned by Brunch and I asked my magic one at a time if he was at one of them. Finally I got a yes, and the officer got us directions from the portal station and drove us out there.

"You have a whole portal *network*?" Midnight asked. "That's amazing. This whole place- it's not what I expected at all."

"We have a certain rep-u-tation to uphold, ya know?" the officer told us. "Don't go spreading it around or everybody will want to come here. Okay, just show the nice demon behind the counter your ticket and follow their directions. Have a terrible day!" he finished, shouting and drawing his weapon again. He shot a nearby wastebasket, then an overhead light just for good measure. There were cheers.

The building wasn't too far from the station, and it was clear which building it was. As it had Brunch's name on the side in big letters. And near the bottom. And the top. And above it, which was probably magical as it was lit up and rotating and shooting fireworks up every so often. I shook my head, asked my magic which floor Brunch was on, and we headed inside. I looked around the lobby, recognizing it, and my target. An elevator. I figured they existed, you don't build buildings this tall without inventing a way to easily go up and down. We marched over there, past the receptionist, a demon with long hair, and punched the button to open the doors. She rushed after us, slipping in as the doors closed.

"What do you humans think you're doing?" she screeched. "You can't just come in here and act like you own the place!"

"We were technically acting like we had an appointment, if we were acting like we owned the place I would have flirted with you a lot more," Midnight pointed out. She was fairly pretty. Mostly human looking, with a robe of some sort on tied at the middle.

"I stand corrected, he does do that," she admitted. "Are you here to *kill* him?" There was no mistaking who the "him" was.

"What would you do if I said yes?" I asked, tensing up a little.

"Ask to watch."

Not what I expected. "Huh. Well, right now we're just here to talk about a deal he made. We need to know if we can work something out."

"Ugh, fine. But you better play along."

"Sure?"

She led us down the hall and showed us a door. The hallways were richly carpeted and well lit from many windows. Artwork hung on the walls and all the doors and moldings were polished wood. "Just barge on in, go ahead."

Some kind of trap? But I put my hand on the door and got no warning from my premonition skill, so I gestured to Sarah who grinned, and delivered a mighty kick to it, smashing it off the hinges.

“What the?” said the demon inside, some kind of sandwich halfway raised to his mouth.
“I’m sorry sir they just barged right past me,” the woman complained. “I told them you were busy but-”

Busy eating secondlunch?

“You’re fired!”

Chapter 38

Liberation

When: No time has passed

Where: The office of Lanyard Brunch

“Liberation at last!” the demon crowed. “That was way easier than I thought it would be. See you suckers later!” She headed to the door, seemingly totally unconcerned she had just been let go. She paused at the door frame and looked back. “By the way, I’ve been embezzling money from this place for years now. Good luck finding the evidence of it in your records. Byeeeeeeee!” With a swish of her hair she was gone.

“Wait!” croaked Brunch, struggling to rise. I noticed he had a mountain of those sandwiches, wrapped up next to him, and wrappers littered the floor. He finally pushed himself up and got past us to the door. He stuck his head out but looked disappointed.

“She moves fast for someone with that much hair. She got away,” he mused, turning. “If only I had known. Well, I’ll give her an offer later, someone around here must know who she is. I’ll get her back. I only hire the best people you know.”

“But she just said she was stealing from you,” I protested.

“I know! What a woman! Even if she wasn’t, now I have to have my accountants go through all my books and check. And trying to pin embezzlement on her specifically and not some other demon that works around here? Think of the time and expense that’ll take! If I take her to court and it turns out she was innocent the whole time? What a fiasco that would be! It was the perfect parting shot. If I had known she was that shrewd I would have promoted her. You can do anything to someone you just promoted you know? Even walk right up to them, grab them by the-”

“Kitty!” Sarah announced.

My eyelid twitched a little.

“Huh? Oh yeah that’s mister snuffles,” Brunch told her, wheezing a little as he made his way back to his deck. “You can pet him but he bites! Scratches too. His whole jaw will open up and he’ll suck you right into his tummy, see that he doesn’t.”

“Oh I don’t believe that, do you mister snuffles?” She started petting the perfectly ordinary looking cat that she had found sleeping in the corner. “See, he’s purring!”

“You have cats here?” Midnight asked.

“Course we do, where did you think they ended up? Only dogs go to Heaven you know, thought that was obvious.” He sank into his chair and picked up his burger, I saw it was a burger now. I hadn’t had a burger since I got here. *Wait they have burgers here?* “So, humans here, huh? You must really want to make a deal. You came to the right place, I’m the master of the deal. I make the best deals. Huge deals, all of them. So huge.”

“Hang on just a second,” Midnight cut him off, slamming her palm down on his desk. “Explain all this! Hell is supposed to be eternal torture for all of you. How are you sitting down in here- why is it so cold in here anyway?” She looked around, there was a cold breeze coming from the ceiling.

“What, you never heard of air conditioning?” he asked her, speaking around his bite of burger which was as gross as you might imagine. “Okay, okay,” he swallowed, “I’ll tell you the story, but only because it will amuse me to see your expressions as you learn the truth. You paladin types are all the same, I swear. Oh here, sign this release so I can use the footage.” He stuck a hand into a drawer and came up with a contract, sliding it over to her with a pen.

“I’m not signing anything *here!*”

“It’s just a standard release, you can read it I’ll wait. You want the story or not?”

“Release? What release? What are you even talking about?”

“Don’t worry about it. Just sign.”

She looked between him, the document, me, back to him, and angrily yanked it up to start reading. *I guess she really wants to know.*

"This seems fine even if I don't understand what some of these words mean. Footage? Recordings? Waive my rights to any proceeds? Memes? What is all this?"

"You want the story or not?"

"It doesn't say anything about my soul... Sylvia can you..."

"Does signing this contract harm Midnight in any way?" I asked out loud, casting. A moment later I had my answer.

"Reputation."

"Uh, huh. It's never done that before. Take it as you will, I guess?"

"It's a pretty great story," he cooed, finishing up his burger and deciding to take another or not. He was going to be talking a bit. "You can take it back with you. What's that worth to you? A few memes? Forget about it!"

"Fine!" She snatched up the pen and signed.

"Brilliant!" He stuffed it in the desk again. "Now, here you go, first a little background. What do you know about our illustrious creator?"

"I know the scriptures!"

"Good, good, so you know the beginning of the story. It's not that far off, I'll give them that. But you see, our creator? Not much for follow up if you get my drift. Fire and forget, that's our guy slash girl slash infinite cosmic being."

"What are you talking about?"

"Here's an example. The flood, right? Gave humans free will, they used it in the way The Big One didn't approve of, pow! Flood. Fire and forget, am I right? You think it took forty days to flood the earth? Nah, They just forgot about it. They could flood the earth in a second if They wanted to. They have the power, right? Sure They do. Same all over. Pillar of fire? Attention span of a gnat, that One. This place is the perfect example. They made a place for wicked souls, right? And for those of us angels that rebelled this was supposed to be our punishment. For eternity, right? But They never followed up!"

"What does that mean?"

He sighed. "Okay, further back then for the slower ones in the class. You getting any of this toots?" He looked at me.

"Leave me out of this," I told him.

"Eh, whatever. Certain of angels rebelled against Them this much is known to you, right?"

"Yes, of course."

"So they were cast out of Heaven and came here. And what did they find? What does your precious 'scripture' tell you?"

"A wasteland. Lakes of fire. Sulfur. A punishment forever."

"Exactly!" He snapped his fingers. "We took one look around and said, man, what a dump this place is!"

"They were punishing you!"

"Sure, sure, but that's only the beginning of the story. We were angels, remember? Word 'demon' hadn't even been invented yet. We were simply 'fallen angels.' And what do angels know? We knew magic. We had powers. You think we just stood there and bemoaned our sorry lot? Nah, we got to work!" He beamed. "Think about it."

"Hundreds of angels rebelled," she breathed. "Maybe thousands. Maybe more, scripture isn't exact."

"Course it isn't. You think the One wanted it branded about how many followers They lost in one swoop? Course not. That many angels saying "hey, you might be wrong?" right to Their face? Must have been pretty humiliating. But there we were. With nothing but time on our hands and all our magical power intact, we started to build. In stone, first, yes. Those that knew more magic taught it to others that knew less. Soon we all knew all the magic we needed. We opened portals back to your realm. Took raw material from there. Experimented.

Learned the secrets of the universe. Basically terraformed the whole place. Those lakes of fire and such still exist, we couldn't get rid of them completely. So we used them instead. Covered them over, controlled them, heat is a great resource if managed properly. Thousands of years later, here we are." He spread his hands wide, encompassing the whole office or the whole world I couldn't tell. Not that they were different, really.

"But we had the same amount of time," she protested. "We can't build anything like this!"

He laughed. "That's the best part. You all are so busy fighting each other when you should be working together. Demons don't have that problem. We *know* we're all demons, despite how we look. We don't waste energy destroying other cities or whatnot because it's a different 'kingdom' or whatever you're calling it now. Plus we cheated."

"Cheated?"

"Sure. Magic can make you stronger, faster, it can also make you smarter." He tapped his temple. "So we did. We experimented. And more souls are always coming here. We have a workforce you can't believe. You think we just sit around and torture them all day? No way, Jose. Waste of resources- we put them to work. Come to think of it, that must be why that lady was so excited. Probably under a geas to work here until I fired her. Shoot, I gotta stop saying that. Oh well."

"So instead of this place being an endless agony for the souls of the wicked-"

"We made our own Heaven," he chortled. "Why would we torture souls that come here? We rebelled in the first place, you think we owe Them any loyalty? They threw us out. We threw it back in Their face. No follow up, you get me now? They just let us do what we want, which includes me sitting here eating burgers in air conditioned comfort."

"You house them. Give them work to do. Teach them magic..."

"All that and more, babe. Oh sure we're *demons*, on a personal level we'll backstab each other for a nickle but on the whole this entire place is a giant middle finger to You Know Who. We flipped the script, how could we not? Now we all live better than your kings, all thanks to Them. Paradise? Ha! We made our own with our own two hands- we own it."

"What's a nickle?" Sarah asked, the cat now in her lap.

"Nickle is a type of metal," he answered. "You better be careful, that cat will take your face right off."

"Liar," she said with a giggle.

"Eh, it's your face, don't say I didn't warn you."

"It has to be a lie, but..." Midnight went over to the window and looked out. "How can I deny this?"

"Priceless! While she processes her little crisis of faith or whatever, what did you actually come here for doll?" he asked me.

"The kingdom of Anderon," I told him. "We want the curse lifted. You're going to oblige us, or else."

"Ah, there it is!" he exclaimed with glee. "There's the paladin I was expecting. Nice to see one of you knows the script. Anyway, Anderson, you say? I can look that up."

"Anderson," I corrected.

"Doesn't ring any bells. But I do a lot of deals so..."

"You want his son, apparently."

"Hey even we have lines we don't cross!" he protested. He turned to a strange- *no-that's a computer!* And started typing away. "Ah, here we are. Let's see, uh huh, uh huh, standard stuff. Oh, I see where you're coming from. Don't have the whole story, as usual. One second." He picked up his phone- *Oh that's a phone-* and dialed it. "Hey bring me the contract for two double oh seven four three hundredths. Or you're fire- Or I'll give you extra work to do!" He put his hand over the mouthpiece. "Ha! I remembered." He listened. "Just do it!" He slammed the phone down. "It'll just be a moment. How you doing over there darling?"

"Gotta be a lie!"

"About what I expected. Hey you're made of sterner stuff. You want a job?"

"I have a job, thank you." *I'm not made of sterner stuff, I'm just too new around here. Didn't have their scriptures guiding me my whole life. So of course Midnight is going to take it*

hard. Plus I was from a world that had similar stuff, it's a natural progression as far as I'm concerned.

"The whole paladin thing, sure. Personally fulfilling work, is it?"

"It can be."

"Long as you're happy."

We waited a moment and a demon delivered a rolled up scroll, then departed. He spread it out. "Okay, the deal with king Anderson was specified thusly. In exchange for his kingdom's prosperity for 10 years, he would perform a certain ritual when his firstborn was ten years old. Failure to perform this ritual would rebound on the kingdom and take away as much prosperity as was gained. Standard stuff. It's all there, he signed of his own free will, just like your friend there did. I assume you're friends? Whatever. Not my business. My hands are tied, that's just how the contract works."

The contract spell, no doubt. "I'll just take a look?" I reached for the thing, and he indicated I should go ahead. I took a look over it, and he was right. It said all that.

"What's the ritual?" I asked.

"Demonic implantation," he explained. "Little tyke gets a demon whispering in his ear. Demonic magic too. Serves as a teacher, and gives little nudges to do what we want. Pretty soon the old king dies, the little one is on the throne, and he's basically a demon himself. Not a bad little deal right?"

"You give the kingdom prosperity and then twist it around," I reasoned.

"Maybe we just want to make your realm more like ours. Did you think of that? You hear the word demon and think the worst of us, but isn't that jumping to conclusions? Maybe we're building from the bottom up. Giving you what They never would. Hard to say, right? But it's possible, you've seen what we can do with your own eyes." He gestured to the window again. "But I guess you have a choice to make huh?"

"That's usually how it goes," I told him.

"Sure, sure. You can attack me, here in my place of power, as killing me *might* lift the contract but you recognized this magic. I saw you when you looked at it. You *knew*. So it's a risk. Plus getting out of here, getting back to your realm. Or you can kill the king. You see there are several 'escape clauses' at the end? See, I try to be as fair as possible, there's plenty of ways out of this for old Anderson."

I didn't bother to correct him. "Yes, something of equal value could be handed over. Or the king murdered while the firstborn watches."

"All automatic. You go kill the king for me, make his son watch, and boom! Kingdom saved. You mind if I send a film crew along, just to document it?"

"Wait, you can't be considering that!" Midnight announced, coming out of it. "Killing the king?"

"What is the worth of a demonic agent on the throne?" I asked. "Can you provide it to this demon so the contract breaks? I don't have the first clue." Meanwhile I made a sending check, calculating a 10. *Don't worry, I'm not considering killing the king. He lied to us, this is what he was hiding. But I remember what the seer said. This is the false choice. I need to come up with a different solution. But I can't let him know I'm thinking that way. He has to think he holds all the cards.*

She gave a curt nod.

"Now you two are just staring at each other. Are you going to fight? The release covers anything you do in this office you know? We'll just blur out the other face it's fine."

"No, we aren't," I told him. "Look, I'm sure we could take you if we wanted, but I don't think that would help. The king did sign this, possibly of his own free will, and then decided he didn't want his son corrupted in this way. He was wrong to do this, his kingdom suffers for it, but if this is right his kingdom has had prosperity for the last ten years. He did all this to himself."

"Of course. We keep our word! No one would do contracts with us if it got out we didn't follow through. That's why this magic was made in the first place. It can't be broken."

“So as much as I want to, I can’t blame you, specifically, for the systems your society has put in place. We’ll think of another way.” *They offer deals, the king took one. That’s on him.*

“Glad to meet a sensible paladin at last. You can use the room down the hall if you want to think about it.”

“Fine. Whatever. Let’s go Sarah.”

“Say, I couldn’t interest you in a demon friend, could I?” Brunch asked Sarah. “Invisible playmate? Gives you magic? Can help pull you out of a jam and shares the secrets of the universe with you?”

She sniffed. “I’ll learn magic the right way, from Midnight.”

That’s my girl!

“Suit yourself. Still.” He reached into his desk again and pulled out a scroll. “If you ever change your mind the ritual is pretty easy. Think it over. We can offer you a lot and I think you’ll find magic practice is long, boring, tedious, and dangerous. You can do better, and then we all lift together.”

She looked at me and I shrugged. She leaned over the desk and took it, earning a nod and a grin, and we headed down the hall.

“So what are we going to do?” Midnight asked. “And thanking about it now, killing the king *would* be justified. The contract would be over, he has shown himself to be evil. We would not be judged for it if the kingdom itself went back to prosperity.”

“That’s the thing,” I mused. “I have the power to do just that. But something Mumiah said to me, that she hoped I would never have to use that power. Plus what the seer said. There must be another way. Maybe dig up a ton of gold somewhere? That must be worth a kingdom, right? Or maybe offer my services? If they really do or did enhance themselves with magic I could take the mental acuity spell and make one person- sorry demon- the smartest being to ever live for a day. Think of what they could come up with.”

“We should make a list,” she decided. “There’s paper here, maybe see what he would accept as an equal trade.”

“It’s worth a shot, but even that doesn’t feel right. That’s playing into the contract. Letting him control what we do. There must be a loophole of some kind. I ‘know the stakes’ so now I must ‘offer a choice of my own.’ But what choice? Tell the kingdom what their king did and let them choose? That could take months, to reach every single citizen. The demon can’t just cancel the contract, I mean I suppose if we grabbed him and dragged him there and threatened to kill him if he didn’t negate it. Both could sign another contract releasing them from it but how much of this building would be left if we attacked that guy? He *seemed* fat and lazy but he’s still a demon. His office could be full of technological traps my senses wouldn’t register until they activated. May not be magical. Trying that could be a hard fight, may result in casualties to innocent... demons. Or humans if he let himself be taken and then made trouble on the other side.”

Meanwhile, Sarah was sitting in a chair reading the ritual. She spoke up. “Why don’t we just ask Haz what *he* wants to do? It’s his kingdom too, shouldn’t he have a say in all this? Just because he’s a kid, like me, that doesn’t mean we should ignore his feelings. Maybe he would accept the demon, knowing what it represented, in order to save his people.”

We both stared at her.

Chapter 39

Choice

When: No time has passed

Where: Meeting room

“Choice? You want to tell the king’s son,” I asked her, “probably without the king knowing because that’s a fight right there, that he’s the reason the kingdom is dying? And then make him choose to accept a demon or not?”

“If he’s in line for the throne, he should be prepared to make hard choices,” she said simply. “I’m sure his education is preparing him for such things. At least include him, we shouldn’t talk about any solution involving him without him. I mean are we just going to show up, murder his dad in front of him, and say ‘oh sorry about that, had to be done.’ That would be terrible.”

“She does have a point,” Midnight agreed. “Even if still a child, he’s ten years old. That’s old enough to start making decisions for himself.”

“I guess it doesn’t matter if his father or he does the ritual, only that the ritual is done,” I mused. “Then the contract is fulfilled, and this backlash against the kingdom would be over. Okay, we’ll talk to the kid.”

“Thanks mom!” Sarah came over and hugged me.

“How are we getting back?” Midnight asked.

“I’m certain I can manage a *simple* portal between realms,” I replied with a laugh. “Why do you think I was so unconcerned with coming here? The problem is going to be getting there unseen. Still, if we hang around here for a few hours it should be getting dark by the time we head there. We can think of a plan then. Actually, scratch that, I have a plan. I’ll just roam around the castle in my bilocation form, and open another portal into his room. Castle isn’t that big, it shouldn’t take too long to find him. We can wake him up and explain things at that time.”

“Oh.” That gave her pause. “That does seem simple enough.”

“Let’s go walk around the city some more,” I suggested. “No one really bothered us.”

“Apart from that one demon that did,” Midnight reminded me.

“Right, apart from them. But no one attacked us or anything. We’ll find a place to eat, hang out a bit, see the sights, have dinner, and portal back once I think it’s dark.”

“Explorers, ho!” Sarah shouted.

So we spent some time wandering around the demon city. Which seemed to go on forever, though we didn’t fly up and actually see how big it was. We got a lot of funny looks, but most demons simply stayed away from us, treating us as if we were some kind of plague carriers best avoided. We looked in the shops, I wasn’t completely clueless as to what I was looking at thanks to my returned memories, but even I couldn’t say what every little thing was for. We had secondlunch, tucked away in a corner no one would bother us, and a few hours later (after dinner) I changed my Darkbolt powers to include teleportal again, sacrificing my regeneration, defense boots, and adaptation. I could put the portal in front of me but step through just outside the castle, so I did, naturally sticking my head through to make sure we were clear before just rushing into guards. Neither of us had invisibility magic, though after doing a spell on the edge of the portal Midnight announced there were no friends nearby. She didn’t have a spell to detect enemies, and was almost out of space on her mana core for the moment. I said it was fine, and calculating a LUCK check of 10 it turned out I was right. We were at the base of the castle, opposite the main gate, and there were no guards in sight. I sat with my back to the wall and breathed out, allowing my consciousness to slip out of my body with a check result of 7. Then I simply rushed through the place, checking every door

until I found the room of the prince. I took a good look, made my way back to my body, and stood again.

"Okay, I'll open the gateway, he's alone," I told them. "Sarah, he should trust you. Quietly wake him up and get him ready to go. I'll open a portal in a count of 45? That should be enough. We'll explain things and see what he wants to do."

"Got it."

She darted through the portal and it closed behind her, shrinking as it always did. I counted to 45 and she must have calculated a good persuasion check because they were both there when I opened it again. They jumped through.

"Didn't your father tell you not to jump through strange portals with cute girls?" I joked with him.

"But you're paladins," he protested. "You don't mean me any harm, and Sarah said it was important we speak because it concerns my father and the prosperity of the kingdom."

"We could have just been pretending- never mind. Look, we need to talk to you."

"So your daughter said. It must be awful if all of this secrecy is necessary?"

Midnight and I traded a look.

"The fact is, your father wasn't entirely honest with us," I begin. "He sold you to the demon before you were even born, or maybe just after? I didn't press that issue. But now that you're ten that payment has come due. The kingdom dying? That's the backlash from him not holding up his end of the deal. We wanted to see what you thought we should do, as it's you that is at the center of all this."

"The demon does want me after all? As some kind of servant? But no you said my father lied, but he never kept from me the fact I was targeted by a demon."

I shook my head. "Nothing so crass. He wants you here, with some kind of demonic influence in your head, so you're basically doing his bidding by the time you take the throne."

"Diabolical," Haz breathed. "My own father, selling me out for power."

"Not exactly," Midnight clarified. "He got ten years of prosperity for his kingdom. That's why everything is dying around here. It's the opposite thing, he didn't want power for himself."

"So ten years of hardship," he decided. "That sounds about right. But if I accept this demonic presence you're talking about the kingdom goes back to normal?"

"Yes. Our other choices are attacking the demon in his... stronghold. Very low chance of his death undoing this though. The specific magic he used doesn't work like that. Or murdering your dad in front of you, which has 100% chance of working." *Because he's sick and it would make for good... Good... Shoot, now that I'm not in the demon realm I seem to have lost the knowledge Mumiah gave me. Boo! Bad Mumiah!*

"Or somehow coming up with something he would accept as equal to having you on the throne," Sarah reminded me.

"Right, or that," I agreed.

"These are not good choices," he decided.

"I know," I told him. "Before I came here a seer said I needed to explore a choice of my own. Maybe that choice was just coming to talk to you about all this, rather than leaving you out like your father did."

"It was my idea!" Sarah bragged.

"Thank you," he said to her honestly. "For not keeping me in the dark like dad did. It was always odd to me that he seemed to know the demon personally that was causing this trouble. And how widespread it was and how quickly it spread. He would only tell me that the demon wanted me, and he was keeping me safe."

"To be fair he was keeping you safe," I told him. "Just at the expense of everyone in your kingdom."

He shook his head. "No. This will never do. Tell me more about what the demon plans for me."

"I'm not exactly familiar but I've heard stories," Midnight began. "The demonic force will teach you magic, but extract a price. You will slowly become a demon yourself, as you give into it and crave more power. You might look the same, but inside you would no longer be yourself."

"Ah!" He brightened. "So if I could resist the temptation to do what this demonic presence suggests, I would be safe?"

"I guess?" Midnight and I looked at each other but she didn't have any better ideas. "I can ask my divination magic, or look into your future to see how effective that would be."

"Please do so. I have a plan and I would like to know if it will work."

"Very well." I asked the question and got back a yes, that if he could successfully resist the temptation to use magic, his soul would be safe. I also touched him, looking into his future as a king, calculating a 12 on premonition. I did a double take. "You will be regarded as a fair and wise king, without equal in all the land!"

"Excellent," he told me with a grin. "Then my plan will work. Thankfully I've seen this done. Can you return us to my bedroom with the ease with which you took me?"

"Of course."

"Then come with me. We have work to do, in order to save what will one day be my kingdom."

We burst through the door, the guards at either side coming to attention as the prince, dressed in his finest, looked them over. "Guards, you are with me. We are calling upon the royal mage."

"Prince Hazaa, who are these people?" They looked to us, hands going to their weapons. "How did they get in here?"

"Guards, you have not listened to my commands. Take me to the royal mage and never speak of it to anyone. Do you understand?"

They shared a look.

"Am I known for frivolous demands?" he asked shrewdly. "Am I, even in the small hours of the night, your prince and first in line for the throne?"

"No... Majesty," the one on the left said.

"Yes, majesty," the one on the right said.

"Good. Move. The fate of our kingdom hangs in the balance."

What is this kid up to?

We made our way through the castle to another room, and another set of guards. One went in to announce the prince, the other took their position at the door. A moment later the guard came out and said we could go in. Of course we got some funny looks but the prince didn't hesitate. He marched in, ordered the guard out, and closed the door.

"What is the meaning of this?" the mage asked. "You? You're back? Did you defeat the demon?"

"It's impossible," I told him. "We need to do something else."

"We *are* saving the kingdom," Hazaa told him. "Tonight. My father has lied, to protect me, perhaps. Perhaps he just thought he could get away with it, and now regrets his decision to deal with demons at all. Have you lied? Are you a part of- None of that matters. I trust what these paladins have brought to my attention. But I need your help with this and you will perform the magic I request."

He looked a little nervous but went to one knee. "You need only command me, young prince."

Maybe he was in on it, and realizing he's outnumbered, is now trying to find a paddle for the creek he's found himself rushing down.

"Good," he replied smugly. "Bind me with your magic. I've seen you do it to criminals in our kingdom. I do so here of my own free will. Bind me such that I can never do magic... unless given leave by this girl here." He indicated Sarah, who squeaked and blushed. "There is always a component that ends the magic, is there not?"

"Me?"

"Who better? We're close in age, I doubt you are in on any plot worked by your... parents?" He looked between Midnight and I.

She giggled. "Only my mom. Though maybe I'll have a second mom soon?" She bumped me with her elbow.

"Not now, Sarah."

"Right, not now, but soon?"

I glared at her.

“Anyway, that’s a lot of faith you’re putting in me. And we travel all over, if you really did need to do magic one day, how would you-”

“Perhaps you might gift me a lock of your hair, that I might have mages find you? Naturally I will protect it with my life,” he told me, as I was inhaling to tell him in no uncertain terms was he keeping a piece of my daughter around here that enemies could use to strike at us. “And it is only the court mage that will know we have done this, and what the condition is for my release,” he went on. “As long as I keep the hair hidden, none will even suspect I have it.”

I growled, but couldn’t think of a counter argument. I had seen him being a wise king after all. “Fine.”

“But prince, how does this help save the kingdom?” Sarah asked.

“Yes, what’s this magic you’re asking to have put on you?” Midnight asked him.

“It’s used when criminal behavior shows itself in our kingdom,” he explained. “We do not, like some places, have prisons and the like. If a person is found guilty of a crime, a geas is placed upon them to more closely follow the laws of the kingdom, and they are released. We do not believe cutting someone off from society is humane, especially if the crime was one of necessity, such as stealing food for your children. In those cases we work with the convicted, to put their lives on a better path. But those that simply cause anarchy for the sake of it cannot be tolerated. Yet they may still be contributors to society and locking them up would rob them of that. Thus, we simply make sure their behavior is magically enforced, and everyone wins. Other kingdoms build cells, as if people were animals, and lock them away. In this kingdom, we strive to be better.” He said that with no small measure of pride, and I had to admit that was a better way of going about things. *If you could make it stick, that is.*

“So the geas you want put on yourself is that you can never do magic? That’s harsh... I couldn’t even imagine not doing magic.”

“Agreed, but it is necessary. Once I can never do magic, we may *safely* fulfill my father’s contract with the demon Brunch. We will have the last laugh, as they say. As it is magic that corrupts me, the demonic presence inside me will ultimately be powerless.”

“Ooooooh,” I managed, impressed. “That’s some mighty fine trickery there, prince.” *Is that what they’re teaching kids these days, or only princes?*

“Thank you. I shall inform my tutors you approve.” He looked to the mage. “Well?”

“Let’s work out the wording...”

No protesting? No wondering how we know all this, just accepting it? I think someone did know the truth after all, and is maybe relieved we’ve come up with a solution?

In the end the wording was this: “I, Prince Hazaa Anderon, swear to never perform any form of magic, from any source, unless given leave by the true and uncorrupted Seraphina Upwards Tempest in a time of great need. All my decisions, should I become king, will be for the well being of my subjects first, and my personal needs second until the day I die.”

My daughter answered: “I accept this duty, and will treat it with the gravity it deserves, coming to the aid of Hazaa Anderon, should he call upon me, at my best possible speed.”

Both nodded, and the magic in the air faded.

“It is done,” the prince announced. “What is our next step?”

“There’s a ritual,” Sarah told him, handing the scroll she still had over. “Can you handle it?”

He looked it over. “We should be able to find these things in the castle somewhere. Candles, certainly. Come.”

We left the room, the prince insisting the mage cast the spell again, to bind the guards to silence until given leave by him to discuss what had happened that night, and we went in search of the ritual ingredients. There weren’t many, demons *wanted* this ritual done and done right, so it was as simple as possible. Basically lighting some candles, cutting his hand, dripping blood in a bowl, yadda yadda, and he accepted the demon as his personal savior. It seemed to go off without a hitch, and the prince nodded after a moment of seeming to listen to a voice only he could hear.

"There is a new voice in my head. It seems to know what we did, however. It's not happy about it. But it does admit it can't exactly 'phone home' whatever that means- Ah, it says it means to tell Brunch about our betrayal, so we should be safe from reprisal. It will be years before demons realize I have not become one of them once I take the throne. Time to prepare for any assault."

"Good!" we all agreed.

"I just hope it doesn't drive you mad by complaining all the time," I told him.

"I think we can come to some understanding," he assured me. "But how do we tell if the kingdom is safe?"

"I guess in the morning we see if plant life is starting to revive or not?" Midnight suggested. "Divination might do it, if you ask it the right way. Is the kingdom safe or something like that. A question that doesn't deal with the demon, like is the contract broken? It couldn't reach into the demon world to answer that one."

"Please, remain as my guests at least," he offered. "I will have breakfast sent up to your rooms in the morning. Do you wish two rooms or three?"

"Two!" Sarah gleefully insisted while Midnight squeaked an embarrassed "two" and I said a confident "three."

The prince looked between us.

"I just, I didn't want to put the maids or anything..." Midnight protested. "Taking a whole extra room..."

The prince laughed. "We pay them all well, fear not. Come, I'll show you the way."

I figured I would enhance my skill at spirit sense in the morning and see if that odd feeling energy was gone, but it turned out I didn't have to. Flowers in the room already looked better, and when the first rays of the sun touched the room (I hadn't slept just in case something happened that night) I got the expected blue box:

Quest Completed

You have solved your first major mystery in this world and saved a kingdom. Sorta. I mean you put the pieces together anyway. It was the noble sacrifice of the prince that really solved it. Maybe I should give him the XP? Just kidding, you need it more.

Reward: 15 XP

Reward: Recognition (1pt background)

Reward: Friendly with prince Anderson

"Mumiah reports the quest is over," I told everyone at the breakfast table. "This kingdom has been saved."

"And the king gets off scot-free," Midnight complained. "Seems wrong somehow."

"Yeeess," I agreed slowly. "But unless you want to press the issue, take the win. He'll just assume we succeeded as the kingdom comes back to life-"

"Meaning he will learn nothing and pursue similar mechanisms in the future!" Sarah burst out. "Nice!"

"What do you want me to do about it? Have Firebrand attack the castle? Kill the king? That would really make the prince like us. Besides, he wasn't taking personal power he just wanted prosperity for the kingdom. If he was evil it would be easier to argue for his removal. But he really did put the kingdom first, making this way harder."

"We could announce the truth at the dinner?" Midnight suggested. "See what his subjects have to say about it. We don't live here, they have to live under a king that gave away his son so they didn't have to work as hard or whatever. They should be fully informed."

“Are we going to have a triumphant return?” I asked. “I think it’s just better to leave well enough alone and keep him guessing what really happened. Us not showing up may send a clearer message ‘we know what you did’ sort of thing.”

“Don’t show him any legitimacy, I see where you’re going with this,” she agreed. “And he will always be wondering- if the prince plays dumb- if we didn’t solve it by simply doing the ritual ourselves and turning his son into a demon. For the good of the kingdom! Well, have Mumiah set a reminder or something to ask about this place every few months. Make sure it’s still prospering.”

“Sure.” *Did you get that, Mumiah? Remind me every few months to check in on this place, make sure it’s not going to pot.*

Why not make a more permanent home here? You did express interest in a base of some kind, make one in the nearby mountains. Then you’ll always be close and can deal with anything that comes up.

Love,
Mumiah

“Hey, she had a great idea,” I told them. “I think I know what our next move is!”

“Start my training?” Sarah asked hopefully.

I laughed. “Yeah, we can do that. I’ve got some XP to spend, some magic to do, and no pressing mission. I think we can take a bit of a break it’s been a *long* week.”

“Yes!” She pumped her fist and her tail was swishing madly. “Training, here I come!”