

Chapter 1

In Medias Res

Where: Instantiated Dungeon 17

When: Two months after the Skyborne incident

As Sinjorino let the arrow fly at the drake, a -3 size creature, they knew without question they had missed. Their calculated attack was a 12, the lowest possible result, while the fiendstone creature, zipping out of the way trailing its fiery aura with a laugh and a rude gesture, had at least a 13. They knew this as easily as they knew the chaos moon hung in the sky or that water was wet. They had to, because in the infinitesimally short moment before the arrow “truly” missed and it was someone else’s action, they had options. They could “spend” an “XP” to make the creature recalculate their dodge, rewinding history and making a hit possible, or to recalculate their own attack, which was honestly the better option in this case. As the creature could dodge with even greater effect they were sure, while the odds of again calculating a 12 were one in twenty two. Their rigid, ceramic face mask betrayed no emotion as they weighed the odds.

It's the last creature, as I see Olaph and Paige have successfully worked together to take down that cyclops that came from the side passage behind us. It's so small, it's not that much of a real threat to any of us, even I can tell that. Light is no doubt up next, and "XP" is such a rare commodity it's not worth the expenditure just to avoid the shame of missing this one time. I'm sure none of the others will mention it.

Time thus solidified, the choice made, the dodge was true and the arrow clattered to the ground after hitting the dungeon wall behind the creature.

Sinjorino was correct, and Light blurred forward, lightform sword stabbing out like a sewing needle to catch the creature three times. The light pierced it, and the form of the drake burned away, allowing the true form of the creature, a fiendstone, to clatter to the floor. There was a tense moment as everyone looked around, straining to hear or see any other creatures but of course, such an instinct was a bit outdated as the notification soon popped up where each could see.

Dungeon Cleared

Congratulations <unnamed party> for clearing medium dungeon 17

All participants receive 3.534 XP

Once all fiendstone rewards are gathered,
you will be deposited to the outside world

Please gather any belongings before this eventuality or they shall be lost

Have a great day

"I don't know if I'll ever get used to that," Light admitted, aligning his sword with the sheath at his hip and sliding it home. As he let it go the cavern they were in dimmed, as now the only illumination was the "immature" fiendstone that dotted the cavern walls. He flickered as the magic left him, turning a being of light into a simple man of flesh and bone, dark hair and beard not a hair out of place. "What was that, anyway," he asked, turning to Sinjorino. "I thought you were good with that bow of yours? I mean you talked a good game when we left on this crazy outing but now it seems like you were maybe lying to us?"

"As I'm sure you know," they replied, bending to retrieve the spent arrow, "I am now as much a part of The System as you or any being is. This means that my attack is calculated using my base MANipulation, and my skill rating is added to it. Thus, it is possible, however unlikely, that the first calculation will be minimal, while simultaneously my opponent's calculation to avoid the attack will be maximal. I will not apologize as this is not a failing in myself, but simply pure mathematics. I would not have brought it up had you missed, for example. So I do not see why it has been brought up in my case." *Perhaps he perceives this body as female, and it is simply a male thing? But he should know despite my outer appearance, I am still a synthetic being without gender.*

There was a pause as the party of three was rather unsure how to take this, but Light finally shook his head and sighed. "I guess I thought remnants had a sense of humor? Or is it just you that doesn't?"

"Oh!" Sinjorino exclaimed, now processing his tone and mannerisms in a new context. "This was banter? Camaraderie? I apologize, I did not realize our group dynamic had evolved to the point that banter was an acceptable method of communication. If this is truly the case I will adjust my text prediction algorithms appropriately. In that spirit I will continue in that vein to further cement our bond as true and loyal companions. Paige!"

The elf gave a bit of a start at suddenly being included in this. "Yes?" she squeaked, as Light gave a confused "The what now?" under his breath. He was clearly scowling, and thinking he was sorry he said anything.

"I have chosen you to receive a similar sarcastic sentence as I did. I hope you are prepared for it. My delivery begins now; You're the support mage, are you not? Why did you not enhance my attack before I fired? It is within your capability is it not?"

"I'm not sure this is still banter," Light muttered. "Maybe we should just drop it?"

"No, they have a point but it's not my fault!" Paige insisted, her feathered ears drooping a bit. "I was *trying* to help Father Perdita who, you might not have noticed, was really struggling back there! You two seemed quite used to this sort of thing but both of us are not. Besides, I had just cast a successful strike spell on Father Perdita and my delay hadn't cleared yet. You two are way faster than I am. So excuse me for protecting the person that needed it!"

"He really didn't though," Light insisted. "I did explain how the sword worked, didn't I padre?"

"I'm still not a hundred percent sure about it," Olaph admitted. He was more a shadow than a man at the moment, the instant the sword had cleared Light's sheath he had become the opposite of Light, a darkness you could barely see in the gloom of the cave. But he could still be heard, if more faintly than he would be otherwise. "My instinct is to avoid attack, even if you say there's no practical way anything could hurt me- how do I give this back to you, anyway?" He was trying to figure out how to hand the sword back but the obvious problem was clear. As a shadow how could Light take his sword back when he couldn't touch the thing without hurting himself?

"Just put it on the floor, I'll pick it up from there."

"Ah, of course!" he reasoned, doing just that. He too became a man again, instead of an elemental force of nature. "I'm just so out of my depth here. I know you said I would be fine, and that I would gain the XP for the dungeon as I was part of the 'party' no matter how much I actually contributed as long as I tried. But I was a healer, not an adventurer, like you all. I can't even access my abilities now, without this sword I would be completely helpless."

Light took the sword in hand, becoming shadow himself for a moment, but flickered back to being solid as he put the sword next to its twin at his hip. "It's why I gave it to you to use. And correct me if I'm wrong but that's why this whole trip, right? See if you can talk to the angels, get your magic back?"

"That's the main gist of the trip, yes, though I wouldn't exactly put it the way you did."

"Look, can we have this conversation outside?" Paige asked. "I'm not that claustrophobic, but this place still gives me the creeps. Pick up the stupid rock and let's go back to town."

"As my lady commands!" Light told her, with an exaggerated bow. "Sinjorino, pick up that stone will you? You're closer." He kicked the stone with his foot so this statement became more true.

"Oh my goodness organics are lazy," they announced, walking over to it. "And I haven't been anyone's servant for... a long time. But I *choose* to pick it up only so I will have it at hand should I wish to throw it at you momentarily. Everyone ready?" they asked, looking the other two over. All checked their gear, and nodded, they hadn't dropped anything they would miss on the way through this place. Satisfied they picked up the last stone and the space around them flexed and vanished. They found themselves back where they had entered the dungeon, the worried looking mayor pacing back and forth in the street nearby. He turned and caught sight of them, running over there. He was a middle aged beastkin, like most everyone in this part of the world, with bear ears and a tail the party couldn't see now that his back wasn't to them. Being mayor he was well dressed, several golden objects like chains and rings adorning him in various places.

"You're back!" he announced, though this much was clearly obvious. "How did it go?"

"Six total monsters," Sinjorino reported, holding the medium sized fiendstone up for him to see. "Medium sized. All destroyed."

"I'm just glad this weird entrance that came up out of nowhere really did vanish as you said," he told them, relieved. "It was in the middle of the street. And what if monsters started pouring out of it? We're just a waypoint on the way to Citadel, we don't have any soldiers or guards here. We're farmers. It would have been big trouble for us!"

"That hasn't been happening," Light assured him. "However, to be fair those the Guild knows about are destroyed almost at once just in case that *should* start to happen. Come to think of it, we should keep one around if it isn't in the way, just to study what the long term effects are in the area."

"I'm sure the Guild knows what it's doing," the beastkin agreed, looking a bit haunted at the mention of the powerful Mage's Guild. "And speaking of that, are you sure there is no change for this, uh, service? Our village is rather low on funds at the moment, we've only just recovered from that nasty business with the undead everywhere." He made the sign of the cross. "Rebuilding what was destroyed has taken most of our reserves. But we can forward any outstanding balance to the Guild later! So if there is a charge just tell me, we'll work it out, no need to send enforcers or anything."

The Guild really does have a nasty reputation, Paige thought. He's not wrong though, they've gone out of their way to seem like trying to cheat the Guild is a recipe for disaster. But would they really send anyone way out here, where there's so little Guild presence in the first place? But he looks really scared we'll demand more than he can afford. Is that really right? We should be known for trying to be helpful, not just demanding money for every little thing.

Light waved that off. "It's fine. We happened to be in the area, so it wasn't a special trip for us. Strange it did pop up right before we arrived..." He scowled thoughtfully but continued after a moment. "We can sell the stones we collected later, and we weren't helping any one person over another by doing this. It's only using magic on a personal basis that triggers any sort of debt. For example if I needed to heal your broken leg, I would have to charge you. But defending a town? The Guild is happy to bring any resources it can to that sort of effort."

Huh, the old man is actually not holding them over a barrel. How old is he, anyway? He looks kinda young but he seems pretty experienced. I mean it's not Guild policy to be jerks, but it may as well be. He's being surprisingly nice.

The mayor did look pretty relieved. “Thank you, that’s a real weight of my mind. Still, I insist you dine with me tonight! You should be rewarded for your efforts and I can at least do this much for you. And I’ve made sure to tell the innkeeper your rooms will be complementary as long as you wish to stay. I just feel terrible we can’t do more!”

“Thank you for the offer. We’ll be moving on in the morning though, we need to get to Citadel as soon as possible. We’ll take you up on your offer of dinner though, at least, most of us will.” He glanced at Sinjorino.

The mayor’s eyes flicked to Father Perdita’s holy robes and Paige’s ears. “Yes, yes, the gate to the Heavens, nothing to do with me of course say no more. Come, come, my house is just up the road you must be hungry after your adventures.”

“Very kind of you, lead the way.”

As the mayor’s wife, another bear type beastkin and several maids busied themselves with making dinner, the mayor and the four sat in his living room, enjoying a drink. The house was the largest in the area, which wasn’t saying much given how small the town was, but it was comfortable and the furniture was well made and maintained. Sinjorino had of course refused any beverages, but the others had lemonade on coasters within easy reach.

“I’ll be happy to show you to the inn after dinner,” the mayor told them. “It’s a small town so you can’t really miss it, but there is a stop I’d like to make along the way if you’re inclined.”

“Something else we can help with?” Light asked. “I remind you unless it’s for the town’s benefit I’d have to charge you for any magical solutions.”

He waved a hand. “Nothing like that. Actually, this is more directed to Father Perdita? Do I have your name right, did I pronounce it correctly?”

“Please, just call me Olaph.” *Until my connection with the Heavens has been restored, I don’t know if I’m worthy of any titles.*

“Very well. Olaph and Paige.”

“Me?” asked Paige, startled out of picking up her glass jerking her hand back like she was afraid it might bite her.

“Yes. It’s about a young girl in town, Lily Florando. She’s been a bit depressed lately, and I wondered if you both might be able to cheer her spirits a bit.”

“How can I do that?” Paige wondered. “I mean, yes, if I can help just tell me how. I’m willing.”

“You must understand, Lily is a very devout girl. She helps out at the local church quite regularly, and she has expressed interest in joining the church officially when she’s older. It would lift her spirits to meet a real elf, we don’t see many like yourself in these parts.” He gestured over to the flowers in the room, which were turned towards her and looking more radiant than they had before.

“Oh, no no no,” she protested, waving both her hands in the air. She made sure to lean away from the glass so she didn’t hit it. “I’m not really a *real* elf, there’s a bit of a misunderstanding there.”

“Oh, I could have sworn...” He looked at her feathered ears. “I didn’t mean any offense of course.”

“None taken. And I am an elf, just not... an *elf*. I was born to elven parents. I’ve never seen the realms, I’ve spent all my life here. I’m only twenty three.”

“I see!” He perked up again. “You’re a rare blessing to an elven couple, from what I understand. They do have few children, correct?”

“Yes, that’s the usual propaganda an elf village will try to maintain,” she grumped. “Reality’s a bit different though.”

“I’m not sure I understand?”

“I don’t really want to talk about it.”

Looks like I better rescue her, Olaph thought. *I'd be interested in learning what happened in her past to make such a young elf so bitter about family.* "Why is Lily feeling down in the first place?" he asked. The mayor's focus went back on him, allowing Paige to breathe a sigh of relief.

"She feels the Heavens have abandoned her. It happened about the time The System started showing those blue boxes to everyone, actually. But I should start at the beginning."

As he said this, Light got very interested and leaned forward, watching Olaph out of the corner of his eyes.

"She always insisted the Heavens listened to her prayers. Most young people her age want to play, or explore, or simply run about making a great deal of noise for the sheer joy of it. But not her. She would spend hours in prayer, and, well, I can't exactly say she was wrong. Who am I to say the Heavens weren't listening? We did get the rain we needed, after she held that prayer service and I could swear the place was a bit brighter when she was praying. Of course many people will be granted a boon if their prayers are just but she always had a special connection to the Heavens. Always was talking about going to see the gate. Speak to angels directly. Learn more about the Allfather's will. Once The System came about she insisted the Heavens didn't listen to her anymore. She grew more and more despondent about it, as she prayed more and more. But her connection, she said, was gone. She won't talk to us about whatever she may have done to make the Heavens turn away from her, but perhaps she might reveal it to you? You could set her a penance and she could regain the Heaven's trust? I hope I'm not overstepping..."

Olaph had a resigned look on his face, and the party knew why. All of them looked at him with all the sympathy they could, apart from Sinjorino of course who couldn't control the facial expressions of their faceplate.

"You're not, but I'm afraid there's little comfort I can offer," Olaph finally admitted. "The reason we're on this journey is because what you're describing has happened to me. I was a healer. Every day, I would pray to Micheal and he would see fit to gift me the spells I would need for that day of healing. Curing the sick of their disease, driving poison from the body, even the odd possession. I enjoyed my work and I was good at it. But then The System came to be, and suddenly my prayers went unanswered. Our journey is to the gate, to see if I can get answers directly."

"Then there is still hope," the mayor decided. "Would you still be willing to speak to her? Let her know that the fault is not in her? It would mean so much to the child, and as mayor it is my responsibility to see to the well being of the townspeople."

"I would actually like to speak to her," he decided. "See if there is any similarity to our situations. See if she was offered the same 'deal' that I was, to replace certain parts of my soul with... something else."

"Deal?" asked the mayor. "What-"

"Don't bother," Light interrupted. "There's no similarity between any of the people that have lost their connection to the Heavens. We checked."

"We?" Olaph pressed. "You mean the Guild? The Mage's Guild? They've been investigating this as well? Seems more like simply a matter for the church."

"Every major group has, as far as we can tell. The church, the Guild, various smaller groups. In a rare display of solidarity they've even been sharing what they learn between them. Which, to be fair, isn't much."

"I didn't know that, you didn't say anything! Those conversations you have, alone, every night? Is that you in contact with the Guild?"

"Of course. We keep in touch."

"You let me think I was the only one?"

"Yes. Because you didn't need to know," he explained. "That, that right there is why we didn't tell you." He pointed to the man's face. "That reaction right there. We didn't want to start a panic. But the information is getting out, it's been a few months after all. Rumors travel quickly and we can no

longer deny them. In the next few days an official announcement of some kind will go out. We will have gotten to the Gate by then and I'll have reported my findings. We all will have. All the Gates to the Heavens will have been checked. You may have come to the Guild for protection on your journey here but we would have sent someone anyway. That you were affected by this was just a bonus. Maybe you can get better answers."

"Why didn't we teleport here?" Paige asked. "Someone in the Guild must have been here before and knows that spell, or could buy it. This seems like something we would want to solve quickly."

"The treaty," he answered with a shrug.

"What, the ban on teleportation for war? That one?"

"That's right."

"Are we at war?"

He shook his head. "You tell me. If you were a demon, and wanted the best opening salvo you could get, wouldn't you try to close off Heavenly power? But if it's a plot by some king or queen somewhere, and this is just the opening act of war, we'll stick to the treaty."

"But it's been months!" the mayor protested. "We would know by now, wouldn't we?"

"Exactly why now is when we're announcing something," he agreed. "So we don't think it was that side, but who knows?"

"No," protested Olaph. "Nothing the demons could do would cause this. Blocking all Heavenly power flowing to Pyre? It's nonsense."

"Yet, that's exactly what's happened. You tell me how and what to do about it."

But Olaph had no answer.

Chapter 2

Lifting Spirits

Where: On the road

When: After dinner

The four heroes of the town and the Mayor walked down the street to the Florando family home, Paige apologizing to the mayor the whole time about dinner. She had finally braved her lemonade, but as she lifted the cup to her lips the glass shattered, spilling the shards and liquid all over herself, the couch, the floor, even the ceiling somehow. Naturally she cleaned it up with magic and apologized about the glass, but her troubles for the evening weren't over. Somehow during dinner the latch on the window nearest to her snapped, causing a gust of wind to yank the napkin she was using out of her hand and depositing it in the fireplace where it of course immediately caught fire. It continued moving, fluttering over to the couch which also got set on fire. After a shocked moment of disbelief at this series of events everyone sprang into action, both mages casting water spells as though they wanted to be first, causing much more water than was needed to go everywhere. That took some time to clean up, meanwhile a raccoon must have smelled the dinner and stole in through the window, swiping the rest of her dinner and running off with it. She came back to an empty plate and sighed as though this all was only to be expected. They finished up quickly after that. The mayor was brushing the whole thing off and said not to mention it again, as she had repaired both the glass and the latch with her magic. He clearly wasn't planning on inviting them back though, rushing them out the door before something even worse happened. The repair magic had, of course, made Light scowl at her a bit but she had been the cause so even he had to admit there wouldn't need to be a charge for the "service." He would have argued the window latch as not really being her fault but he decided not to press the issue for the moment.

She looks miserable enough. Does this happen often around her? he had thought at the time. *She didn't seem surprised by what was going on at all. Just like it was a normal consequence of her life.*

They arrived at a normal looking house and the mayor knocked on the door and stepped back. A vision of loveliness answered, making Olaph's breath catch in his throat.

She's a catlike beastkin! Of course she is. She's so beautiful. Look at that apron, and she's got a little bit of flour on her nose. Look at those ears! And that swishy tail, see how it swishes behind her? Peaking out here, now there. Swish, swish. And her beautiful catlike eyes, they're so sparkly.

"Bishop?"

How beast like are beastkin anyway? If I threw a ball of yarn would she pounce on it?

"Ah, Bishop? Father Perdita?"

If I stroked her hair would she purr? If I teased her with a catnip mouse would she-

"Bishop? Are you all right?"

"What?" Olaph suddenly realized everyone was standing and staring at him, and he had been staring at Mrs Florando this whole time they had been talking and introducing themselves. They looked concerned as his eyes darted between them.

"Yes, yes of course!" he hastened to assure everyone. *Oh Lord, they caught me staring at her didn't they? She knows. Look at her smirk she knows everything oh Lord in Heaven, please take your*

humble servant now, into your embrace before my shame grows deeper. But of course this prayer, like all other prayers cast in the time since The System was put in place, went unanswered. “Apologies, my lady. It has been a trying day, what with entering the dungeon as I did, and being forced to fight against most hideous foes. Not what I would normally be doing at all. Yes we’re here to speak to your daughter, Lily, if you don’t mind.” *Is she going to buy it?*

“Yes, that’s what I was just explaining,” the mayor further explained. “But perhaps if you’re not feeling up to it, we should come back tomorrow?”

“No, no, we’ve already intruded. Let’s not delay the poor girl’s peace of mind any longer.”

“Very well. If you don’t mind sending her out? I should think it would only take a moment?”

“Not at all. Lily?” she called into the house. “There’s a bishop here to see you.”

“A bishop?” came the reply, and another beastkin lightly skipped down the stairs and into view. She was probably not even ten, and dressed in a simple outfit. Like her mother she had cat features, like ears that stuck up from her head and a tail. “An elf!? Are you the bishop?”

“Just an elf. In a manner of speaking,” Paige agreed sourly. “This is Bishop Perdita.” She stepped out of the way to introduce Olaph. “He wants to talk to you about your recent issues. We can talk after that, if you want.”

“Yes please! Oh wow, a real elf! Hello bishop, would you like to sit in the yard? We have a lovely tree we can sit under. There’s a bench! We don’t have to sit on the ground of course.” She giggled, clearly not knowing how to really interact with a bishop, which was fine. Olaph knew just how to put her at ease.

“That would be lovely, can you point it out to me?”

“It’s just right over there?” She stepped out and pointed to it. It was right in the yard, they had passed it on the way to the house.

“Excellent! I’ll meet you there. As you know, being a bishop I can only move diagonally so it’ll just take me a moment.” He turned to the side and started side stepping diagonally away from the house. Thankfully the girl was young enough to find this bizarre behavior delightful and old enough to know what chess was, and so got the reference. She was laughing with delight as he finally sidestepped over to her and sat down. “Not sure why the church makes us move like that but there you go. I’ve heard you would like to join the church one day?”

Her face fell again. “If my prayers aren’t being answered, I don’t see the point. I’ve been a good girl, I do everything my parents tell me, but after that scary blue box showed up it’s like I don’t feel anything when I pray. Are you here to help?”

Not see the point? Of faith? Though perhaps with the gates and such faith itself has taken a bit of a turn as of late. But this isn’t the time or place for that discussion. Let’s keep it to her problems and a solution not a philosophical debate I would have with an initiate. “If I can. Though I only learned of you this evening, I didn’t come here for you specifically. Did you read that box?” he asked.

She shook her head. “I’m too scared of it. My parents say they got them too, but they don’t know what to make of them. So I just waved it away and tried not to think about it. It keeps coming back up but I just wave it away again.”

Of course. You have to accept or reject the quest. Mine keeps coming back up every few days too. I can see that being scary for a kid. “What if I asked you to be brave for me, and read me the box? Could you do that? I want to hear what it says as that may help me, help you. What do you say?”

She took a deep breath. “I guess I can’t run from it forever. My dad says sometimes you just have to pounce on your problems, take them in your teeth, shake them until you break their backs, and toss them in the air so they die.”

“...Wait, your father really says *that*?”

“Doesn’t yours?”

“I think I had a bit of a different upbringing than you. Still, as a beastkin I guess it makes sense. Anyway, the box?”

“Okay. I can feel it, you know, like in the back of my head? It wants to pop up so I think I can easily- there it is.”

Olaph of course saw nothing, but brought up his own as she read from hers. It was nearly identical.

Special Quest Granted
Know Thyself

Due to the implementation of The System in your reality, we regret to inform you that we have discovered incompatibilities with your current set of abilities. The System offers you this one time quest as an apology. Rediscover yourself by reallocating points to new class abilities and supporting skills. A list of abilities and skills will be provided upon acceptance of this quest. This quest has no time limit for completion. Note you will be powerless until the completion of the quest.

Accept / Reject

Naturally Lily stumbled over a few words like “incompatibilities” and “reallocating” but when she was done he nodded. Nearby, Light was scowling at the mention of “we” and wondering exactly who “we” was in this situation.

I’ll ask him about it later, he thought. That’s new information, and the Guild would be very interested in who the “we” was. And an apology? This doesn’t sound like a natural phenomenon like the Chaos Moon showing up in the sky. It’s like someone did this. To the whole world. ... Who could do something like that and why?

“It’s the same as mine,” Olaph announced, making Lily gasp.

“You got one too?”

“Yes, I... hummm.” *They seem to be invisible except to the person they belong to. But what if I wanted to show someone one of my boxes? I can call them up mentally and put them away mentally, could I just...* He decided he wanted her to see the box and tried to “twist” it in the air towards her. She backed away from it but then started looking back and forth at an empty space in the air and his box, that now looked like it had reverse writing on it. “I guess that worked.”

“What worked?” Light demanded. “What did you do?”

“Just summon a blue box, like your status or something, and mentally decide it’s okay if someone else sees it. Then show it to them,” he explained. “Nothing really special, I think anyone could do it. I don’t have any powers at the moment, after all.”

He scowled. “I don’t think I’m comfortable showing people my status, thank you very much.”

“Nor am I,” admitted Paige. “That’s a lot of really private stuff on that box.”

“Well, I don’t know, that’s the easiest box to get. Actually, I wonder...” *Thinking back, when we cleared that dungeon we were called the unnamed party. There must be some way to name the party. If I can name the party, can I communicate with the party somehow? Party message: “Can you read this?” Uh... Send message.*

The three yelled (Sinjorino more in solidarity with the group than any emotional response) as each saw a blue box appear before them.

<unnamed party> chat window 1

Olaph: Can you read this? Uh...

“How did you-”

He shook his head. “Let me finish up with Lily, *that’s* why we’re here.”

“Right, fine. Meanwhile...” He scowled and concentrated.

“Sorry about that,” he apologized. “So you see, we’re in the same boat. The System took our powers away. Mine was prayer based, and I bet as you got older you would find yours was too. You may have been chosen by the Heavens as I was. But now...” He sighed.

“It’s all different now,” she realized sadly.

“So it seems, and only relating to those of us with close ties to the Heavens. Pure magic users didn’t lose their power, at least that the Guild admitted to when I visited them to ask for protection on my journey to the Gate. That’s why I’m on this journey by the way. I’m going to the Gate in Citadel. I hope to get some answers there. If I do, I’ll come back and share them with you. For now, just put the box away again and don’t accept the quest. I don’t know what it means if you do. If there’s nothing else for it, I’ll accept it, and again come and tell you what to expect. We can walk through the process together, so it’s not as scary. Okay? Does that make you feel any-”

<unnamed party> chat window 1

Olaph: Can you read this? Uh...

Paige: I figured it out first! Or I guess second? Take that, Light! So much for your scholarly ways, how’s that working out for you? This is for all the *youth!* Represent! Now how do I

He waved the window away, looking over at Paige who was sticking her tongue out at Light, who was demanding to know what she had done. “Sorry what was I saying? Right, does that make you feel any better?”

“I’m not alone,” she finally said. “If a bishop has the same problems as me, I guess I wasn’t naughty.”

“What? No, of course you didn’t do- you thought the Heavens withdrew because of something you did?”

She nodded. “What else could I think? But I try to be so good! I didn’t know what I could have done.”

“I’m sure you do,” he told her gently. “Well, don’t worry about it. We’ll get this all sorted out, one way or another. Okay?”

She rubbed at her eyes. “Okay.”

“Good girl. Now, you want to talk to Paige?”

“Hey kid!” Paige called to her, walking over. “All done with the serious stuff? Then operation; lift Lily’s spirits can begin. How would you like to see some magic?”

“You mean it?”

“Course I do! Where to start? How about... flying? You ever flown before?”

She shook her head, eyes wide.

“Would you like to?”

She nodded her head, eyes getting wider.

“You got it, kiddo.” She totally exaggerated her movements, taking the maximum time to allow Lily to see the magical energy that danced in the air around both of them. She threw in 8 energy, knowing her usual rating of 4 was being cut down to 2 for casting on the both of them. With the two extra segments bringing her result back up to a 4 she couldn’t fail the spell and that was good enough. She could have spent more than twice that amount, and barely felt it, but this was fine. The magic took hold with a 16, and she rose a little into the air. “Come on, catch me!”

“How do I...”

“Just think about it. Easy as walking. Come on!” She shot away at her top speed of 80k/h but stopped, turning and motioning her to come on above the trees. Lily soon got the hang of it, and both were swooping and diving and zipping around the sky. Paige let her play for probably fifteen minutes, and then called her back to the ground.

“That was amazing!” Lily told her. “Thank you so much!”

“We’re not done yet.” Paige looked around and saw a woodpile nearby. She could use her natural born legs, but she was showing off, and as she estimated the wood pile as being less than 10m away (with a 9 result in her Magic Combat skill) she cast again, targeting one of the logs on the pile. As she got a 10 and the log was nowhere near 80kg it sailed through the air and into her waiting hand. “Watch closely now.” She cast again, switching from the Mercury type of magic to the Moon type, targeting the wood. Again her difficulty wasn’t that high so she didn’t bother putting too much energy into the cast, but added another segment (not that anyone not her could tell as no one was in combat rounds at the moment). As Lily watched Paige shrank, warped, and otherwise cut away parts of the log she didn’t want with her wood shaping magic, making her a statue of an angel. The angel had outstretched wings and upturned hands like they were singing. Or praising God. They did a lot of that, up there in Heaven, as she understood it. She turned it this way and that, concentrating on the spell and making minute adjustments. Feathers came to the wings and detail to the face as Lily looked on in wonder of just willing something like this to happen, and having it happen.

“Usually I use this spell for making bowls, and spoons, and trays, things like that,” she explained as she hadn’t gotten the robes quite right yet. She made another check and they flowed into a better configuration. “I got a 7 on an untrained *Sculpting* check but it looks okay, don’t you think? It doesn’t have to be a masterpiece.”

“I love it!”

“Yeah, it’s good enough I guess. Here you go.” She ended the spell and handed it over. “Have someone stain it or paint it though, it is still wood so it could rot otherwise. You can take to a real woodcarver to have some detail added if you want. I wouldn’t be offended.”

“I’ll keep it nice, and just like you made it. It’s great. Thank you very much!”

“Sure thing. You feeling a little better?”

“Uh huh.”

“Good. Go on home now. I guess we’ll see you soon? We should get to the gate by tomorrow, so a day there, a day back, hopefully with some answers for you.” *And us.*

“I would pray for your success, but...”

“Still can’t hurt, right?”

“I guess not. Thank you, lady elf! I’ll be watching for your return!”

“Call me Paige.”

“Okay, next time I will. Thank you bishop! Thank you mayor! Bye bye!” She waved and ran back into the house.

Paige walked back to the others, who looked happy. Except for Light, who looked grumpy. And Sinjorino, their mask didn’t change. So really it was only Olaph that looked happy now that she came to think about it. The mayor seemed to be slowly backing away like he wanted to be away from the magic users as soon as possible.

“I really wish you would stop throwing magic around like that,” Light chided her. Her eyes narrowed as she stepped up next to him. “First the mayor, now this? You naturals, just because magic is easier for you the rules are there for a reason. Stop throwing magic around every two minutes.”

Easier? Is he really playing that card? I had to study just as hard as him to learn to cast magic. But I’ll let that slide for now, there’s a bigger issue here. “Oh yeah?” she asked. “Let me ask you something. Have you ever been a scared little girl?”

“Of course not.”

“Exactly. I have. I know what it’s like to not understand what’s going on around you. I know what it’s like to have parents that can’t help you, can’t even seem to connect with you. So get off your high horse. Lily needed a little magic in her life. She didn’t gain any permanent benefit from it, like healing, just an experience that I hope helped to lift her spirits a bit. That little girl has been terrified for weeks, even a human should be able to see that. Imagine if you reached for your magic and it wasn’t there! That’s how she felt, praying and praying and feeling like no one was listening. If the Guild *really* is going to have an issue with me letting her fly around a few minutes and making her a little wooden angel, is that really the side of the line you’re going to stand on? I know the rules same as you do, I graduated from university I’ve got the bills to prove it.” *Ugh, do I ever. When is my next payment due? I need to keep track of that better.* “I know about the mage wars that happened between our kinds, natural and scholar. I know about abuse of power by those that came after. *That* wasn’t it. You hearing me?”

“It’s your head if they decide otherwise. I just need to make sure the words are said so I don’t get caught up in any inquiry. I’m not taking any fall for you.”

She barked a laugh. “They’ve got bigger problems than me to worry about. The world changed if you hadn’t noticed. Maybe time for the Guild to change too, stop obsessing over every single copper.” She spun and walked away from him. “Mayor, let’s find that inn! Does it have a bathtub? Cleansing magic is great and all, but I could use a soak after that dungeon.”

“Uh, I’m not sure. I’ll see what we can do. Right this way.”

That night before bed Light got Olaph to tell him how he created that blue box with the message in it, and they figured out the “party options” box which allowed turning on or off, a box showing everyone’s status, the name of the party, distance to party members, booting a party member, and more. He figured out how to show someone a box, flipping it around, and asked what Olaph thought about “we.” He didn’t have any real answers, only speculation, but hoped the angels at the Gate would know more.

“I hope so. Okay Olaph, get some rest. Another big day tomorrow.”

“No doubt.”

Chapter 3
 Highway to Heaven
 Where: On the road
 When: The next day

The weather seemed okay as the three were eating breakfast before heading out, but as soon as Paige stepped out a sudden storm blew in, and rainclouds covered the whole area. They really did want to make it to Citadel by sundown so there was no choice but to go on through the storm. There was no need to make everyone walk, however, and Paige offered her flight magic “And free of charge, even,” to the party. Light accepted.

“Getting there faster would be preferable. Boost us as much as you can so we don’t have to fly forever in this storm.”

“Oh, now my being a natural is just peachy,” she muttered. “As it benefits you.” She made a spirit manipulation check, allowing her to throw 17 additional energy into her RESolve for a total of 22 energy spent on the spell, bringing her total down to 145 energy. (It cost her one energy to begin the spell, and was not counted for the bonus) With that her spell allowed them to zip along the ground at a blistering pace of 140km per hour. In the driving rain. Naturally Light once again offered his Shadowblade to Olaph, while he himself took the Lightblade. Sinjorino didn’t care about weather one way or the other, they wouldn’t rust and didn’t really feel cold, so it was only poor Paige who flew along, miserable.

It’s just my lot in life, to suffer. She got out her status window and looked at her weakness with a sigh.

| | | | |
|----------------|-----|-------------|--------|
| Page Malplenan | | | |
| STrength | 4 | REASON | 6 |
| ENDurance | 7 | KNOWledge | 6 |
| CONstitution | 5 | RESolve | 7-1 |
| REFlexes | 6 | INSight | 4 |
| COOrdination | 5+1 | PERsonality | 7-2 |
| MANipulation | 5 | LUCK | 5 |
| LOOKs | 5+2 | Perception | 1d10+4 |

| Backgrounds | Weaknesses |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| Elf | Curiosity |
| Extra Spell Knowledge | Indebted (collage loans) |
| Natural Magician | Low Pain Tolerance |
| Spark of Magic | Outcast |
| Spirit Well | Stubborn |

It's that trouble magnet. It has to go. Somehow. It's made my life miserable these twenty three years and it's not letting up now. Look at them. Smugly flying with my magic while the rain just passes right through them. I mean I can see to Olaph's comforts he's the client. And yes, there's two swords and they do belong to Light but he could have offered. He could have-

<unnamed party> chat window 1

Light: How you doing back there, kid?
You holding up all right? Not too cold
are you? Flying is great, isn't it?

Paige did not dignify this obvious hook with any response. She was pretty sure she heard him laughing a moment later and gritted her teeth. Paige would remember this.

Naturally, the storm cleared up just as they landed, hours earlier than if they had walked. The magic, having done the task it was called upon to do broke off, and weight returned to the party. They looked around as Light took care of his swords and became solid again. The town of Citadel was a large one, populated mostly by beastfolk and beastkin, and the actual citadel the city was named for could be seen in the distance. A few people could be seen in the streets now that the rain was stopping, and Light turned to the others.

“Right. To reach the Gate of the East Wind we’ll have to travel through the town and various checkpoints. As our need is genuine and we have with us a real bishop, there shouldn’t be any problems. Be respectful, state your intentions clearly, and don’t talk unless spoken to!” He glared at Paige. “And try not to break anything on our way down there, okay?”

How about your face? Could I break that? “I know how to act in these circumstances, thank you very much.”

“I hope so. Let’s go.”

The group made their way through the town, keeping the citadel in sight as they needed to pass by it to get on the path to the gate. Flying directly there was, of course, a very bad idea and while they saw plenty of guards at the walls in case of monster attack, none of them got much interest as they looked to be normal adventurers here to do whatever. It was a port town, after all, being quite near the ocean and Paige could see and hear seabirds in the distance, wheeling high above them. They could be here to charter a ship, but of course Olaph may be recognized from his priestly robes and it was assumed they were headed to the Gate.

“Those of you who have traveled a bit more,” Olaph said hesitantly, “is this reception normal? The people here look quite nervous.”

Paige refocused from the birds, looking around at the townspeople that were out and about. All sorts of humanoid beasts, from wolves to mice went about their business. But she saw a fair number of scowls in their direction, and people were giving them a wide berth, now that it had been called to her attention. They weren’t scurrying away from the group holding their kids or anything, but neither were they getting all that close.

"I knew them to be a bit standoffish," Sinjorino agreed. "But not to this extent. These people seem a bit more nervous than anything else. Not hostile, but not welcoming either. How curious."

"Never mind that," Light told them. "Not our problem. If no one starts anything with us we won't start anything with them. I agree though, something isn't right here. Stay on your guard."

"Is it all that strange?" Paige asked. "As far as I know," (*with only a 7 on my history check*), "they haven't been very well treated by humans, that's why most settled here. To avoid persecution."

"You're not wrong," Sinjorino told her. "Humans have always had that problem, even when it was only humans running around the planet. Ah, those were the days. But usually we would stir up some kind of reaction. At least from scammers trying to get us to buy dodgy watches or something. They still do that, right?"

"Oh, it's one sob story or another," Light agreed. "Asking for a handout, that sort of thing. Like all adventurers are loaded or something. Ha! As if."

The group fell silent again as they continued. The town felt off, hushed in a way that didn't bode well. In a town this size there should have been more people on the streets, carrying groceries or delivering things. Kids playing. Babies crying in the distance. There was none of that. As if the town was trying very, very hard not to be noticed. All too soon the first checkpoint was reached, and a pair of burly looking beastfolk rabbits blocked their way down the path.

"What's your purpose in coming here?" the one on the right demanded, lowering his spear.

Stay calm, Olaph. This is standard procedure. The guards will be more numerous and better armed the closer we get. The gate is highly protected, both from attack by demonic or monstrous forces, and by those that would just like to cause trouble. I've been briefed. "I am bishop Olaph Perdita, on a mission of discovery to the Gate of the East Wind to speak to one or more angels on a matter of utmost importance. With me are my bodyguards, Light Kajombro, a mage's Guild representative of the third tier, who also has an interest in my discoveries here at the gate. With him are Paige Malplenan, an elf graduate of the Mage's Guild academy doing some shadowing before striking out on her own, and Sinjorino Packets, our old world expert."

"Greetings," Sinjorino said with a short bow.

"Hi!" Paige nervously waved.

"A remnant? I don't understand," the guard said.

"In case the issue I need to discuss with the angels is related to the world before the Chaos Moon, or an artifact of the first age of magic. As a member of the clergy I fully vouch for their presence which may be vital to my questioning."

"Eh, whatever. You've come a long way for nothing, bishop. The gate is not receiving visitors at the current time. You will have to turn around and leave this area. Failure to comply will result in arrest. Good day."

"I'm sorry, the gate? What?" Olaph stuttered. "Not receiving visitors? A gate to the Heavens, not receiving visitors? What does that mean?"

"Just what I said. Hope your journey home is swift. Good day."

Is this my fault? Paige asked herself. *No, no, couldn't be. Right? It wouldn't go that far.*

"Now see here—"

"If it's closed, it's closed," Light stepped in, pulling him back a little. "Any indications it'll be open soon? We can take a room in town if it won't be more than a week or so."

"I don't have that information," said the rabbit. "Good day. Move along."

"Of course, thank you for your time. Come on," he hissed at Olaph.

Light: This must be why the town is so on edge. Leave it for now. We'll circle around and try from another angle. Don't want to start something with these two. Man, this chat thing is really handy.

"*Fine*," Olaph spat. "Thank you so much for your time." He turned and stalked off. Paige threw glances over her shoulder and they didn't relax while she could still see them. They rounded a corner and kept going, then found a fountain that didn't have anyone near it and regrouped there.

"Most peculiar," Sinjorino began. "I've never heard the like. If word got out they were not letting anyone near the gate... I mean the elves don't really let anyone near theirs, no offense. They are elves so it's to be expected?" She looked to Paige who just shrugged. "It could trigger an international incident. There's no treaty or anything but it's understood they are the guardians of the gate, only. Not gatekeepers. I believe all the kingdoms, all the decent ones I mean, pay into a fund to maintain the guard around the gate as it's in everyone's interest. To be turned away..."

"Do you think this has something to do with your problem?" Light asked Olaph.

"I can only assume so, yes," he agreed. "It's a bad sign, that's for sure. But we have to get down there. Only angels can tell us what we need to know and we can't let a couple of low level flunkies, no offense to them, stop us."

"I'm sure orders came from higher up, unless you think those two were lying? I didn't detect them lying," Sinjorino added. "A 16, if you want to know the raw number. I doubt a simple guard could do better hiding their heart rate than my scanners can detect."

"I did an aura reading on them as we were standing there," Paige told them. "They were actually more frightened than angry. I was a little confused."

"That we might press the issue, and be able to back it up?" Light guessed. "Maybe they thought word had gotten out, and we were the response? That would make sense. I wonder if we could head up to citadel, find someone in charge to get some better answers from?" He looked up at the towering stone nearby.

"Can the angels themselves have given this order?" Sinjorino asked. "If we did press the issue and force our way into the gate area, would we cause trouble for the people here?"

"Let's assume it's mortal greed or someone making a play for power and not the angels themselves. Though they would notice if people stopped coming... Let's talk about how to get in there, quietly, without causing an international incident. Of course I can use the Shadowblade tonight and slip down there easily. But if we don't want to wait, what else do we have?"

Paige brought up her spell list, just to make sure she didn't forget anything. "The only spells I can contribute are flight and maybe a spell to detect enemies, so you can be sure you're not spotted around a corner or something. I'm mainly a support caster, not really big on sneaking into places."

"I have that spell too," Light told everyone. "And I got a good look at those two guards. I could use my disguise spell to make two of us look like them. As we're supposed to be getting the bishop here to see the angels, that's the way I would go."

"You're not suggesting we kill them, and take their place?" Sinjorino clarified.

"No, no, of course not. I'm sure the padre would never go for a plan like that."

"You would be correct," Olaph agreed. "A minimum of violence, please!"

"What would the plan actually be?" Paige asked. "Pretend to be them, and report that a bishop has arrived and they want confirmation of their orders?"

"Hey, that's actually not too bad," Light admitted. "That collage edu-ma-cation of yours is really coming in handy there."

“We did not study how to trick people and get into places we were not welcome,” she clarified to the others. “I don’t know what he’s talking about.”

“How much magic can you do at once?” Sinjorino asked Light.

“That’s a technical question I suppose I could give you an exact, numerical answer to at this point,” he conceded. “Why do you want to know?”

“If you can disguise someone as anyone, perhaps Paige could be disguised as a person in need of medical assistance. She can then approach the first checkpoint as a distraction. If she can put her fly spell back on me I can track your progress with my superior vision, and keep you up to date on beastkin movement via the party system chat.”

“That actually sounds good too,” he admitted. Suddenly;

Quest Generation Complete
Fact Finding Mission

Sneak your way past the guards and enter the Gate area without being caught.

Rewards: Questions answered about Gate. XP.

Accept / Reject

“Are you seeing this?” Light asked.

“I sort of expected it,” Olaph admitted. “I got a similar quest to travel here to the Gate, before I met you all. I think that’s how we became a party, my quest was ‘gather a party and head to the Gate to get some answers.’ Something like that, though thinking about it I could probably pull up the window-”

“Never mind. Everyone accept and let’s put the plan into action.”

They all touched a finger to the “Accept” and the box vanished.

And so Paige put the flight spell back on Sinjorino and they took to the sky, getting into a good position. She also slapped on a detect enemies spell, as they would be focused on the party and that would alert them if someone flew up behind them. *And now to make some untrained ‘acting’ checks, wonderful. If I get thrown in prison for this they better come save me.*

Paige got a bit of a shock as Light cast, as he focused a moment and the disguise spell circle expanded to include all of them, standing next to him at his earlier insistence. All three of them seemed to shimmer and change, she becoming a beastkin woman (bunny type, for a sympathy bonus?) in bloody bandages and they become the two guards. “Is that not the regular disguise spell?” she asked, looking over her hands. “That one is touch only, but you didn’t touch us at all. Was that the ranging skill? I have that, but I can’t do what you did! It still doesn’t explain how you were able to get all three of us with one casting.”

“Oh, does Miss Recent Graduate not know everything?” the now larger and fluffier form of Light teased. “What a shock! Study for fifty years and maybe you can learn one of my secrets.”

“You’re not fifty, you’re barely forty!” she retorted.

“Am I, Paige? Am I really? Tell me a secret of yours and I’ll tell you a secret of mine. Get hopping. We’ll go shadow form, a bit tricky with the two of us but we should be able to get behind

them and continue down the path. Let you know how we do. Padre, your hand please?" He held out a hand.

"Fine, don't tell me," she grumbled.

"Okay, I won't!"

She rolled her eyes and went to go distract some guards.

"Please, help me kind sirs!" she called out, holding her wrist and trying to limp slowly towards them. "I was attacked and only just got away. You must go after them."

The two looked at each other but the one gestured her forward.

"They're running away, please don't let them get away. They grabbed my baby, you have to help me!" She got a little closer, neither one moved from the spot. "Help me!" *Come on you morons, I got an 11 on that check, my maximum. Okay, minus the penalty for the spells I'm maintaining but I could have just as easily gotten a 1, minus the penalties. It's my lucky day, don't have my weakness drag me down again this is important.* She was almost to them now and the one held up a hand, stopping her. He said something to her. She stared at him. He said something again. A ball of ice started to form in her stomach.

"Did you really think we would fall for that?" the one asked.

"How stupid do you think we are?" asked the other. "We've seen all the tricks, honestly, the whole damsel in distress bit is cute, but we're not falling for it."

"I don't know what you're talking about sirs, please, my baby!"

"Drop the act. Garble garble garbage meow meow crinkle crackle."

"Beastfolk speak their own language," Paige suddenly realized. "And if I really one was, I would have approached you and spoken that language. Wow, I'm the idiot apparently." The act over, she stood up straighter and focused on not slamming her head into a nearby building hoping to break loose some smarts up there. *Did I fail an INSight check or something? I have a decent REASON why didn't I think of this before? Language is important.*

"That you are," the guard agreed.

"To be fair, you totally sold it," the other said.

"Oh yes, a very good performance. I wouldn't have see through it otherwise. Studied acting long?"

"Untrained, I just got lucky."

"Well done!"

"Thank you. I suppose you're going to have to take me into custody now?" she sheepishly said. *Maybe I can still salvage this, get them focused on me anyway putting the cuffs on me or whatever they-*

"Nah. Get out of here."

"What?"

"Go on. Get. Tell your bishop no dice. He's not getting near that Gate. It's closed."

"It's been requested that no one approach it," the other one quickly clarified. "I mean the gate itself is still open. That would be crazy talk, that it was closed!" He gave a fake laugh, and the other beastfolk joined him.

"That's what I meant. I meant the approach was closed. I got distracted because your shirt is falling open, who did your disguise it's really good."

They're hiding something. "Fine, I'll leave. But if something really has happened to the gate, you can't hide it forever."

They didn't say anything else, and she turned and walked away. *I have to warn the others!* She was about to summon the chat window but it blinked up into her vision with a message from Sinjorino, so she just added to it.

<unnamed party> chat window 1

Light: This must be why the town is so on edge. Leave it for now. We'll circle around and try from another angle. Don't want to start something with these two. Man, this chat thing is really handy.

Sinjinorino: It was good enough. There were enough shadows in the area they could slip by on the left side of the wall. They're on their way. Good job.

Paige: Don't talk to the guards! Unless you're fluent in Beast language anyway. They'll know you're fake. Do it as shadows the whole time if you can.

Then, suddenly, she got another window popping up.

Mission parameters modified
Overwatch Detected
Activate friend/foe tracker?

Cost: ¼ total XP gained for mission

Accept / Reject

Activate the what now?

Chapter 4

To the Danger Zone

Where: The path leading to the Gate

When: Seconds later

“Wait, stop,” Light hissed to Olaph after dismissing the chat window the warning from Paige. “Are you seeing this?”

“Yeah, another blue window popped up, but there’s no words. Just funny looking blobs.”

The two men pressed against the side of the cliff and looked it over. It was a square window with two blue blobs near the center, and two red blobs coming towards the blue blobs. A primitive line drawing showed under that, Light couldn’t exactly place why it seemed so familiar.

“It’s a map?” Olaph decided. “As seen from above. Look, we had to climb a lot of stairs as the town is basically built on top of a small mountain. The citadel sits at the top. But we passed that and now we’re heading *down* again, around the other side to get to the Gate. Those blue dots... That’s us!”

“If you’re right then those red dots are enemies, and they’re coming this way. Patrol I would wager. We need a place to hide.”

“Hide? We’re totally exposed on this path. It’s a sheer drop on the other side, we can’t hide! Even as shadowy figures they’ll see us.”

“We can, we just need- there!” He pointed, and Olaph found himself sucked into a small crack in the hillside beside them. This was an interesting experience because the crack was only a few centimeters long but they seemed to fit just fine.

“How are we doing this?”

“Just be sure you don’t let go of my hand. We’re literally shadow right now. We can fit anywhere a shadow can. We’ll let them pass and when they’re far enough away we’ll jump out and run the way they came. It’s the next checkpoint that worries me.”

“One problem at a time.”

“Right, right. Say can you still see the box?”

“Yeah. It’s in the solid rock but it stays right where I can see it. Did you have any idea The System could do this?”

“I have a feeling we’re going to be figuring out a lot of what The System can do for us over the next few months. But no, I don’t understand where this information is coming from.”

Light took this opportunity to drop his spells, he didn’t need them dragging him down now as their original plan was shot. *I didn’t think of the language thing. I guess they don’t speak Trade, they have their own language. Sort of proves they aren’t just humans that for some reason took on animal characteristics in the past. That wouldn’t change the language they speak.*

“They passed us, let’s go.”

“Right.”

The two left their crack and headed down the path, but then came to a new problem. It wound around and went into the sunlight again, and there were more guards down there. Just one this time, but one that was almost as big as the previous two put together. He had a long trunk and huge ears like an elephant, and was just standing there with a huge ax in front of him. He had both his hands on it, and was taking his job seriously, looking at the path, the sky, behind him a little, back to the path.

“Great, we would get someone competent,” Olaph complained. “Now what?”
“Now the kid gets to earn her XP again. Just a second.”

<unnamed party> chat window 1

these two. Man, this chat thing is really handy.

Sinjinorino: It was good enough. There were enough shadows in the area they could slip by on the left side of the wall. They’re on their way. Good job.

Paige: Don’t talk to the guards! Unless you’re fluent in Beast language anyway. They’ll know you’re fake. Do it as shadows the whole time if you can.

Light: Hey Paige, get over here. Need you to create a shadow we can walk through and distract a guard at the same time. Think your collage education can help you figure that out?

“Did you not go to collage?” Olaph asked him, reading the message over.

“Didn’t exist in my day,” he explained. “There were only two, the master and the apprentice. The way it should be.”

“But that’s clearly unsustainable, there’s more people now that want to learn magic than ever.”

He sighed. “I know. Won’t stop me giving her grief about it. Thinks she knows everything.”

Maybe it should, also, does she? Never really gave me that impression? “Okay. Do you think she’ll-”

“Yeah, here she comes. She should know enough about elemental body to figure something out. I could switch to light but that’s a little *too* obvious. Get ready.”

High above, Paige flew in from the side looking for the problem. She saw it, and looked off to the side probably trying to gauge where they were using the blue dots. On the ground, her dot came into range on their map, again causing Light to wonder where it was coming from. Neither saw the more distant figure of Sinjinorino zoomed in on the whole situation. Paige saw them and positioned herself between the rock wall and the sun, creating a shadow they quickly jumped into. She slowly moved, drawing the attention of the elephant man who pointed up at her.

“Hey you, where do you think you’re going?” he shouted up to her.

“Is this the way to the Gate?” she called back down, not stopping. The darker shadow passed behind him, as she went up a little so the shadow didn’t fall on the man. He had turned towards her so he didn’t see the dark spot with the two men cross behind him.

“The Gate is closed to outsiders. Even elves,” he called back. “Turn around, or you will be shot down.”

“Uh, you don’t have a bow?”

“But the guards further on do, and worse. I’m telling you, don’t test us on this. Get back here!”

“What?” By now she had drifted far enough they could jump out of the shadow and move normally again. They did so, and she shot back into the sky so someone didn’t get any funny ideas about shooting her down. Her dot vanished from the window of the two men, the red dot stayed where it was so the guard wasn’t going to leave his post.

Well done, Paige, Olaph thought. Now for the next challenge.

Around the next bend were four figures. All remnants by the looks of them, male type unlike Sinjorino that was a female type. Two had bows and were looking around, two had a configuration of beam weaponry built into their arms.

“Figures,” Light spat. “They can stand there all day and night not not complain about it. Long as they have a purpose. Harmless to us, even those beam weapons remnants carry can’t hurt us in this form. But we don’t want to raise the alarm either.”

“Should we get Paige in here again, do the distraction bit?”

“No. This far in they probably shoot first. And those weapons would be pretty deadly to her. I have an idea, as hiding in the crack before worked out. It’ll be a tight squeeze but nothing we haven’t done before at this point.” He pulled them back and looked the cliff face over. “Yeah, mostly rock. This will work.” He cast, and a small hole appeared which he sucked the both of them into. Moving forward the hole expanded, creating a tiny tunnel for the two, who popped out again on the other side of the four. “See? Nothing to it.”

“This shadow form body is pretty amazing,” Olaph had to agree.

“Why do you think I had those two swords made, anyway? Come on.”

Their next challenge looked to be the final one, as the path bottomed out and there was a building there, a closed door in their way. But there was also a guardian. Olaph again couldn’t help but stare, this was a beastfolk type he had never encountered before. *Heck, I’ve not thought it was possible.* She was a pony type, thin and dark, with a ponylike face and ears. But sticking up from the center of her forehead was a horn, and from her back sprouted two wings. She wore armor that allowed for quick movement, covering only parts of her chest, and left her legs free. A sword was strapped to her back, and she was currently sitting cross legged in front of the door. She was in shadow, a canopy had been placed here so the sun didn’t fall on her. “She’s the most beautiful...”

“Don’t fall for it,” Light cautioned. “Never known a- whatever she is beastfolk. Winged unicorn? To exist. Probably a disguise spell like the one I tried. But it can’t make you that much bigger or smaller than you actually are. Wonder what-”

“I know you’re there,” she called out to them, voice echoing up the path. “You might as well step out.”

“Crud, probably running detection magic,” Light told him. “Fine. I’ll keep her busy. You grab the Lightblade, you should be able to touch it as we’re both shadow at the moment. You’ve got the hang of the movement?”

He waited for his nod.

“We’ll step out, let her see us, then I’m going to rush her and you’re going the other way. Get back into the light. You’ll have complete freedom of movement. Find a window, you can ride the sun into it, and into the building. If it’s dark in there yank the cover off the pommel of the sword. It’s an alchemical sunlight so you can move around easier. The gate must be right in there, ask your questions of the angels and get back. I don’t want to hurt her.”

“Right.”

“Let’s go.”

The two stepped out as the figure smoothly stood up, gracefully stretching. *Oh wow. Please, please don’t hurt her. Thank you, oh Lord of the Heavens, for creating so amazing a physical form. I really hope I’m not coveting someone’s wife, that would be a sin. I’m a bishop for goodness sake. But look at those legs! That horn, those wings, that muscle tone.*

“Go!” Light hissed, and he put his hand on the hilt. *Oh right, gotta stop getting distracted by them!* He couldn’t be both light and shadow, but he timed it well. Flickering into light just as the blade left the scabbard and he let go of Light’s hand. He zipped out of there, back the way they came and into the sunlight again.

She “tisked” and looked back at Light. “I suppose I have to get through you first if I’m going to chase him down?”

“Let’s just remain calm and as we are,” Light suggested. “If there’s a window, it’s over. He’ll see whatever it is that has you all in a panic and we can go home. He just wants to ask the angels some questions, that’s all. He’s a bishop, the church and the Mage’s Guild has sanctioned this mission. We’re not just murder hobos or thieves or anything like that.”

“Remain calm? How can I?” She looked him up and down. “My heart’s beating faster already, I never thought I could have a *true* challenge anymore. The sword cost me a bundle, I was thinking of actually selling it because it made things too easy. But now you appear before me. If I was a cat type I’d be purring.”

“What?” he laughed. “You can’t fight me, not like this.”

“Don’t suppose you wondered why this place is kept in shadow?” She casually reached up for her blade, then slowly drew it out. As it cleared she too flickered into shadow, becoming little more than a darkness in the air.

“Oh no...” *I guess if one person can have that idea, another can as well.*

“Oh yes! Yes! Yes! Now we’ll see how good a swordsman you *actually* are, when you can’t rely on your tricks! My name is Lunaria, face me man of shadow, let me feel alive once again!” She blurred forward.

He won initiative, 17 to 11 so he was able to go first. His usual technique was to wound his opponent with a normal strike, giving them a penalty to later dodges, then use his combination attack skill to do further damage because using it applied a penalty to his sword strike. If he used it too early they would just dodge it. That strategy wouldn’t exactly work here, unless he killed her in a single stroke she, just like him, would heal instantly and be none the worse for wear. With this in mind he actually held his action, waiting for her to strike and choosing only to defend. *Don’t lose sight of the goal; keep her busy so Olaph can get near the Gate. That’s all I’m here for, not to kill a gate guardian.* She struck, and suddenly he was forced to use his combination attack skill defensively, as it seemed Lunaria had the same idea using the blade he had all those years ago. He managed to block two of the three strikes she threw at him with his own blade, but had to twist away from the third. He was surprised he managed it, the active dodge check he made was only a 7. *What was Sinjorino saying before? That they could roll low even with a high skill? She took a 3 penalty to that strike so she “really” got a 10. She could be holding back, testing me. Or just a bad opening result, I can’t really read her face to see how she took it.* Even with two defensive actions he was still up, and made a close combat check, 18 vs 19. He had no idea when she would act next so he didn’t chance pulling more power into a spell, he just cast at the normal speed, taking 2 segments. *She took the 2 delay for the strike skill, so even if we act at the same time it’s fine.*

“Dazzle!”

The shadowy figure flinched back, but ties go to the defender. “Coward, fight me without magic, blade to blade!”

“No! I’m telling you-”

He made his checks again but this time she came out on top, he took two hits, one for 2 damage to the body, one for 3 damage to the left arm. Both healed even as the blade was pulled back.

“This is pointless,” he continued. “Unless the guy that put the spell into your sword-” *Wait, the damage I now know is between 1 and 6. The guy that enchanted it all those years ago said he was probably not the best but not the worst either. If I give him a 6 rating in the skill, then probably the maximum cap of damage is the skill rating. Skill ratings go up to 10. If she got someone better than I did, her maximum damage is still only between 1 and 10 at a time. Even with combination attack, the sword is pulled out between strikes and I would heal.* “Unless he wasn’t human and could have higher skill ratings than 10, you can’t get past my lethal and then gone in a single strike. Neither of us can. Don’t you see?”

The blade dipped fractionally. “You really are spoiling this for me, aren’t you?”

“Yes. It’s over. Look, you did your job if anyone asks, I’ll attest to that. But we’re both functionally immune to what the other can do. It was over once Olaph left. Give it up.”

“We could... both drop the spell? Have a proper duel?”

“Why would I do that?”

“Come on, it doesn’t have to be to the death! First blood! I’ll even turn my sword around and use the other side, it can be to first hit if you’re that concerned about it. Come on, what do you say?”

Hold on a second. “You- you’re really bored here, aren’t you?”

“I soooooo bored!” she agreed, dropping the blade and looking to the sky. “You sit here every day for the last two months and try not to go crazy. I thought I would be fighting people day in and day out but nobody. You’re the first! No one even comes down to talk to me. It suuuuuuks. I hate it. Fight me! Please?”

Two months? They blocked this off right after The System announced itself? That’s odd timing.

“Yes, there’s quite the gauntlet you have to run, you’re just the last guard on the path.”

“Oh, seriously? I just teleport in and out, I didn’t realize. Those jerks. Making me sit here on my butt. Oh this is frustrating.”

“Sorry about that. But hey, your job is over now, right?”

“I guess. Could be other protections in there, they never let me inside. Just sealed up the door and said to stay out.”

“Yeah, about that,” said Olaph, standing behind them with the sword on his shoulder. “I think you better come have a look, Light.”

Using the party chat and teleportation magic, Light gathered up his two other party members and brought them down to the chamber. The blue window vanished when Sinjorino came out of the sky, and Light made a mental note to ask them about that later. He found Olaph, awkwardly trying to chat with Lunaria, making Light shake his head. *That guy has it bad for beast types, doesn’t he? Though I have to admit, she’s pretty cute now that she’s not a shadow or trying to kill me. I’d date her.*

Paige used her magic to unlock several locks on the door, and her Telekinesis spell to yank them open. They entered the chamber and looked around. There were no angels. There was no gate. But neither was it an empty room. In the center, taking up most of the space, was a stone block. Everyone looked around, confused.

“And we’re sure it’s supposed to be here?” Paige asked finally.

“Could they have blocked it off?” Olaph, who looked horrified, mused. “Is the gate inside this block of stone? But to what end? How? Why?”

“The angels wouldn’t allow that,” Lunaria insisted. “Would they?”

“We can find out,” Light assured them. “It looks like this was just pulled up from the ground using stone shaping spells. I know that spell so let’s just reverse it.” The others all nodded so he gathered magic with his Empowering skill, starting over because he got such a low result the first time. The stone melted away, leaving an empty space in the room.

“Impossible,” Olaph breathed, falling to his knees in despair. “The Gate- it’s just gone. A gate to the Heavens- gone. No. No. This was my only chance for answers. How can it be gone? What... what am I going to do?”

Report back, that’s what we’re going to do. And nobody is going to be happy about this. Nobody. Are the other Gates like this? Is this why the holy man isn’t so holy anymore? Why that Lily’s prayers were not being heard? Oh, this is bad, really bad. Did the Heavens give up on us again?

“Wait, they had me guarding an empty room this whole time?” Lunaria yelled. “Oh, they’re so dead.”

Quest Update
Fact Finding Mission - Complete

Total XP gained: 6
XP costs: 1.5 (friend/foe tracker)
XP Actual: 4.5

Congratulations on completing your quest
We hope the answers you have gained satisfy you
Have a wonderful day

They don't though? thought everyone.

Chapter 5
Riches of Plenty
Where: The Gate room
When: Seconds later

“We need to demand answers,” Olaph insisted after a moment. He got up from his knees and looked the group over. “And I do apologize for asking but you really had no idea the Gate was gone?” he asked Lunaria.

“I wouldn’t have stayed and guarded an empty building, no matter what they paid me,” she assured him. “I’m as mad about this as you are.”

“I assure you, that is not true. But I take your meaning and I appreciate it. Who do we talk to about this in your government?”

“Ah. Oh. That’s a fair question. See, we get hired out by the monarchy here, yes, but it’s the elders that accept the missions and send people on them. I don’t get messaged directly. The elders of the village assign missions based on each person’s skills. So I would basically have to go back to my village, talk to my superior, see who he talked to, come back here, try to find them. I’m willing... sort of? They don’t like it when we break a contract, which is basically what I would be doing.”

“I won’t put you at risk,” Olaph told her without hesitation. “We’ll have to find another way.”

“You don’t live here in the city?” Light asked.

“No, our village is a bit out of the way. I mean look at me.” She stretched, her wings unfurling.

Oh, I’m looking all right, Olaph thought. *Which is probably sinful and I should stop but would it be sinful to look upon the glory of the Lord? Then why should this be any different?*

“Regular unicorns are hunted for their horns all the time.” She tapped her horn. “Stupidly, as you could just ask them to do some healing and they probably would say yes. They’re nice like that. It’s what gets them caught in the first- anyway. Can you imagine how freaked out people would be if they knew beastfolk like me existed? What could powdering my horn do for somebody? Don’t care to find out. Sure, we take jobs and such but mostly we keep to ourselves. One of my kind seen walking around could be someone messing with magic, or passed off as story and rumor.”

“You are unique looking, that’s for sure,” Paige agreed. “But let’s return to demanding answers, right? Of a king? Isn’t the king around here some kind of demon worshiper or something?”

“What? No!” Sinjorino said. “Warlock perhaps, but this land is ruled fairly. He would probably hear us? Depending...”

“Exactly,” Light agreed. “We can’t know his mind. He doesn’t want to be embarrassed to have ‘lost’ the Gate. All this smacks of fear. The hastily constructed stone block, the flimsy story told to the guards to tell us about the Gate simply not accepting visitors at the moment. We march up to the castle and demand an audience, they may try to silence us before we get the word out. Heck, the king might not even know, one of his ‘advisers’ may have done this to *avoid* telling him. Then we would really be in for it, as that person would now be mad at us. If we even got close enough to the king to ask about it.”

“I did wonder about the block,” Sinjorino put in. “Why go through the trouble?”

“It’s how teleportation magic works,” Light explained. “You have to on some level picture the place you want to go. With the block in the room no one could picture the reality of this room well enough to teleport here. At least that’s my theory.”

“Maybe they wanted to claim the Gate simply turned into stone?” Paige guessed. “I mean the Gate was gone, so visualizing the Gate room wouldn’t work, stone or no stone. You can’t teleport to a Gate room that doesn’t exist.”

“Oh, know all about teleportation magic, do you?”

“Now now, let’s stay civil,” Olaph asked the two. “She has a point, and we may never know what they were thinking. Maybe they just panicked and put the stone there and hurried away without thinking much about it. Light, your recommendation then is to simply leave? Not ask for an explanation?”

“That’s right. This isn’t the only party sent to the Gates. Holy power of all types was disrupted, and even the Guild needed to know why. We respect holy magicians and those that work directly with Heavenly power. We’re all on the same side! If Heavenly power has been cut off, it might mean a move by demons which means it then falls to us to deal with it. We’re the major power in the world, after all. So we needed to know if something big was coming, so we could prepare. If, as I suspect, all the Gates are now gone demanding answers here is only asking for trouble. There aren’t any, only trying to save face either by making sure word doesn’t get out from us, or trying to blame us somehow by claiming it was fine yesterday or some crap.”

“Magic could easily prove that false!” Paige told him.

“Want to sit in a cell for a month or two, while they get around to proving it?” he smirked.

“No.”

“So let’s simply go back for now. The truth of this place won’t change in the next few days, we can report and then confront, rather than confront and then report. Oh but not the Guild, not yet. You have a promise to keep to Lily, padre, and the Guild doesn’t expect us back just yet. Let’s get all the information we can about the process of replacing a holy man’s abilities with something else. And the girl’s, see if the process is the same. Then make a full report. Leave them guarding an empty room for now.”

“I’m not staying,” Lunaria announced. “I won’t tell them about the empty room, but I can say my boredom is making me want to jump off the mountain. They can send someone else.”

“But can’t you fly?” Paige asked innocently.

Aren’t you at the bottom of the mountain? Olaph thought.

“That’s not really the point, it’s just an expression.”

“Oh okay. Gotcha.”

“Fine, we’ll head back to that settlement,” Olaph agreed. “Let’s close the doors again. No, wait. First; Are we putting the block back?”

“Nah. Fire up the old natural magic there, Paige, swing those doors closed. Lunaria, nice to meet you. I assume you can get back on your own?”

“I’ll be fine. Nice to meet you all. Pity we didn’t get to have a real duel.”

“If we wanted to hire you, what would we have to do?” Olaph asked.

“Down boy,” Light commanded. “Leave the lady to her life.”

“I guess I’ll never see you again, huh?” he asked.

She tilted her head, looking him over. “If you really want to, you’ll find out how to find me. Until then.” Her horn started to glow and she gestured, a magical circle springing up around her. There was a rush of air and she was gone.

They couldn’t lock the doors again, only close them, because Paige only knew the unlocking spell and not the locking spell. She took a look at the available magic offered by The System, and announced the locking spell was grade 4, meaning 4XP to learn. “I’m not spending most of the XP I just earned on this one spell. Or the 1XP to see the formula and cast it from ‘writings’ as I guess that’s an option? It’s an empty room, I’m not spending XP to ‘secure’ it. Sorry.”

“Whatever. The doors are closed, let’s go.”

“Uh, I didn’t want to mention that,” Sinjorino spoke up. “But shouldn’t we be on the *other* side of the door? We’re still in the chamber.”

“I knew there was something I forgot to do,” Light mused sarcastically, snapping his fingers. “It was go outside!”

“You want me to open them again?”

He sighed. “No, of course not. Just grab onto me, we’re teleporting out of here!”

“What about the ban?” Olaph asked.

“That’s in times of war. Clearly no one nation did this. They would already be crowing about it. Something else happened, something to do with The System. It’s too coincidental otherwise. We’re not at war with anyone, so it’s fine.”

“Fair enough.” They all gathered around and once again the chamber was empty.

Light and Sinjorino went to get their room at the inn back, while Olaph and Paige went to go see Lily. This time they asked to come in, and Lily’s mother, who introduced herself as Rose, invited them to come and sit down.

“Lily has been in much better spirits,” she explained. “She seems to have hope again. And I think she’s getting used to The System, asking me what the stats mean and if she has to grow up to raise them. Oh, this is my husband, Garlik,” she said as another beastkin came into the room. “Garlik, this is Bishop Olaph, and Paige.”

“Ah, the ones my daughter has been talking about! Nice to meet you both. Didn’t expect you until tomorrow.”

“We were able to teleport back,” Paige explained. “What we found, well, it was quite a shock so we hurried out of there.” *And away from the people that might want to put us in jail for learning their little secret.*

“Nothing too serious I hope?”

The two shared a look. “We’re not sure. I don’t think I should say more at this time. We’re meeting with the church and the Guild when Olaph here has more information about the process he’s going to go through to replace his holy power. They’ll decide when and if what we found should be shared.”

“Forget all that politics stuff anyway,” he waved off. “Ah, here’s Lily!”

“Hi, hi!” Lily called, running into the room. She carried the angel doll in one hand. “Did you see the Gate? Did you meet the king? What were the angels like? Look I had my grandpa stain the angel like you said, doesn’t it look good?” She held it up, and the wood was darker and shinier now.

“Very nice!” Paige told her. “I’m glad to see you’re taking good care of them.”

“I named them Angelica, and I made a special place for them on my shelf so they can watch over me at night.”

“That’s my daughter,” Rose said with a laugh. “Always going for the non-obvious name. She once named a turtle she found Mr. Shell.”

“What’s wrong with Angelica?” she pouted.

“Not a thing,” her father assured her, ruffling her hair.

“Stop that, dad, I’m not a baby anymore!”

“Sure thing, kiddo. Anyway, what can you tell us?”

“I’d like to go through the process of accepting the quest with your daughter,” he explained. “To see if the process is the same, and maybe help to guide her choices. Honestly, apart from the minor text of telling me to ‘rediscover myself’ I have no idea what will happen.”

“It’s not dangerous, is it?” Rose asked, concerned.

“It’s constrained to The System?” he replied, unsure.

“I can give you a little more detail, as I’ve used The System a bit more than he has,” Paige explained. She turned to Lily, who had set Angelica down and come to sit next to them. “As a magic

user, usually I would have to pull some dusty old book down off a shelf, sneeze a couple of times, and crack that baby open. Tediously skim the pages to find the spell I want, then carefully read it over, absorbing the magical runes that make up the diagrams on the page to internalize that magic. Boring!” Lily giggled. “But that changed with The System. Magic is regulated, quite heavily I might add, by the Guild. Their philosophy is, you want a spell? You pay for it. Like, a lot. They have them on scrolls, in highly guarded rooms, and you better come with a bag full of coins for a single scroll. But then The System came along, and something curious happened. Can you guess what it is?”

She shook her head.

“Well, when I open up my status page I can see the spells I know. The skills I have. Have you tried that?”

She nodded. “I have a skill of 3 in deception!”

“You told me yesterday it was a 2!” Garlik cried. “And I believed you!”

“I know! Gotcha!”

“My own daughter!” He put the back of his hand to his forehead. “What will become of her learning such a skill as this?”

Wow, they're a really great family. Not like some other families I could name, Paige bitterly thought. Then she stuffed that thought in a sack, threw the sack down a well, and boarded up the well. Try to stay positive for the little girl, will you? “Okay, so you know about that. Well, there’s a place on my spells page where it says ‘add new spell.’ I touch that area and I’m shown hundreds, and hundreds of spells. All in a neat little list. I can sort them, filter them, all sorts of things. And The System itself can show me the formula. I added a ‘fumble’ spell for 2XP into my spell list, just to see how it would work, and it showed me the spell, right there in the air. No book needed. I was able to study it, and make the KNOledge checks and whatnot, and it was added to my list so I can cast it now. It makes people clumsy so they drop stuff. So now I don’t have to go to the Guild, and beg for the ‘honor’ of giving them a sack of gold in exchange for a piece of paper or two. Needless to say,” she dropped her voice and touched a finger to the side of her nose, “they are not very happy about that. Nothing they can do about it though.” She straightened up again. “So, I’m guessing it’ll be about the same. From what Olaph told me, and he showed me his quest, you’ll get a similar list. Your backgrounds relating to the Heavens will be taken away and converted into something you choose, and any skills you have relating to that will be shown. I suggest talking your options over with your parents here and seeing what they think. If it offers you the choice of being a monster tamer or something and a really good farmer, you might want the tamer but your parents would probably say the farmer was better, long term.”

“Do you really think I could be a tamer?”

“I have no idea what it could offer you. I don’t know how that would be a power, exactly.”

“Aw!”

She laughed. “Go for it and see.”

“Can I mom?”

She looked resigned. “There’s no chance her connection to the Heavens will be restored?” Rose asked.

“It’s impossible to say,” Olaph decided. “For all I know The System will vanish like it never was after lunch tomorrow. I don’t know what caused it, so I can’t say how long it’ll last for. On the other hand, if it does suddenly go away, I would have to guess reality would snap back to how it was. If The System is forcing this change and there is no System...”

She nodded. “I see what you’re saying. And there’s what you found at the Gate that you can’t discuss. If it’s what I fear we may need whatever replacement power she can take sooner rather than later. I’ll trust you if you say this is for the best.”

“We’re making history here, your daughter and I. We can document the process and make it easier for anyone still in our situation.”

“Go ahead Lily.”

“Okay!” She concentrated, and touched the air. Olaph did the same, accepting his quest. He got another box.

Know Thyself

Thank you for beginning the process of self discovery needed to replace incompatible abilities. This quest has several steps and can be paused and restarted as needed. You will be given the opportunity to review all choices before they are applied in the final step and help is available every step of the way. Various “what if” scenarios can also be explored to assist in this process if desired, at the proper time.
We wish you luck during this exciting time in your existence.

You have the following backgrounds to replace:

Heavenly Devotee: Michael
Celestial Repository of Magic
Spark of Magic (optional)
Early Riser (optional – tied to Celestial Repository)

Proceed to step 1->

“I’m seeing a list of things of replace, some are optional,” he told everyone. “But what is-” he touched “Celestial Repository” and a second window popped up.

Due to your faith in your patron, you are provided with a flexible pool of spells rather than learning a set number of them. By praying each day, you are able to allocate your total spell points to any spells available to you based on the Planets your patron provides. You must allocate all of your spell points (which includes starting points based on your KNO plus starting totals in all Planets, as well as any EXP spent to increase this point pool). As usual, each spell costs as many points as its Grade.

Praying for spells requires an uninterrupted hour. Your chosen spells persist until the next sunrise, and then vanish from your mind and you must pray anew.

*Requires the *Heavenly Devotee* Background.

“That answers that question,” he announced, waving it away. “What did you get?” he asked Lily.

“I got spark of magic, which is optional, Celestial Favor, and Faithful,” she answered.

“So it’s working?” Garlik asked nervously.

“So far it’s just a list of what we have to give up. Touch Celestial Favor, does it give you a box with some description?”

She did so. “Uh huh. Uhhhh it’s really long?”

“Decide you want me to see it and spin the box around.”

"I'll try." She did, and the box appeared for him.

"Interesting," he mused, reading it over. "Looks like, depending on which angel you most identify with and venerate you would get a few gifts from them. Ranging from always sailing on calm waters to shining a light on injustice. It lists ten different angels here, no wonder you said it was long. Well, it's going away so don't worry about what might have been." He waved the box away. "What's faithful?"

"I treat my PERSONALITY as two points higher when I make *faith* checks. What does that mean?"

"I guess praying? That's why you always seemed to be noticed by the Heavens, maybe. Okay, let's go to step one and see what we can replace them with."

"Okay!"

They both did.

"Uh..." Lily managed.

"You said it."

"What? What is it?" Rose asked.

"There are a *lot* of options here," he explained. "Ranging from supernatural to magical. I'm just looking at the list of available supernatural 'categories' we'll call them, and there's-" he quickly counted. "Fourteen. Ranging from Alchemist to a True Martial Artist, whatever that is."

"Oh, you can touch them and get a- huh," Lily exclaimed, then concentrated. "I don't know about that one. I don't want to punch people. Where is the monster tamer option?"

Paige laughed. "Is there one?"

"I don't think so," Olaph decided. "Paige? Do me a favor? Run and get Light. I think we're going to need his input on this, and he's going to want to know there's a lot more options here than I thought."

"I have fourteen as well," announced Lily. "Do you think it's the same list?"

"We'll have to go through it," he decided. "Step by step."

"I'll go get Light," Paige announced, standing up. "Be right back."

"I'll show you to the door," Rose told her, "and get some drinks. It sounds like this is going to be a long night."

"Demon Artist?" Lily muttered, scrunching up her nose. "Like, drawing demons or something? That's dumb."

"Demons? You should probably stay away from anything demonic related!" cautioned Garlik. "Don't choose anything until we discuss our options, okay baby?"

"I know, dad! Oh, it's all about weakening demons and using their powers. That's kinda neat."

Garlik looked to Olaph like "what have we done?"

Chapter 6

Deciding Destiny

Where: Lily's house

When: Moments later

"Hello?" There was a knock at the door and Rose went to answer it, a moment later Light walked into the room. "Couldn't do anything without my advice, huh? Smart! Very smart. You made the right choice. Hi again, Lily."

"Uh huh." She didn't look up, eyes glued to the blue boxes she had opened by now.

"No respect for elders anymore, I tell ya," he lamented in an over the top way. "What is the world coming to?"

"I can relate," Paige told him. "Make yourself useful, have a seat."

"We'll need more chairs in here," Garlik realized. "I'll go get some."

"I'll help!"

"Oh, thanks." They moved off.

"So what's the story?" Light asked.

"We're being offered, from what I can tell, every single magical and supernatural power that exists on the planet," Olaph began. "From Alchemy on. It's a little overwhelming, to tell you the truth. It's all very neatly laid out, and everything is explained in simple enough terms to understand, but it's still a lot."

"So you want my advice?"

"In part. I wanted to ask, do you think the Guild would want this information? I don't mind copying it out, the quest says I can pause and go back to it as many times as I need until I get to the final step, review everything, and make it all permanent. I've been without my magic for this long, a few more days won't hurt me."

"What information, exactly?"

"For instance, take Alchemist." He touched the air. "I can see here exactly what an Alchemist is supposed to be able to do in a general description sort of way. Then I choose the next step and it shows me the exact skills of the Alchemist. Alchemy, analysis, animation, imitation, intrinsic alternation, ranged transformation, transmogrification and transmutation. Then I go into each one of them and it lists *exactly* what it does. Down to how difficult certain things are, the stats each skill uses, the works. This may be the only time I ever see this information in this detail. Do we even know Alchemists know they can do all this?"

Light rubbed his chin. "Good question. I know the Guild snaps up any Alchemist that wants work. They're super useful." He barked a laugh. "Actually, reminds me of a funny story. I was waiting my turn to see the receptionist about something or other at a local Guild building. Young kid comes in and says he thinks he's an Alchemist, right? Wanted to know if they were hiring. Well, this guy comes *barreling* out from the area behind the counter, snatches the kid up with magic and has the forms to hire him out and a pen in his hand before he even finishes introducing himself. Crazy! Must have put some kind of 'fast moving' spell on himself. Anyway, what were you saying?"

"Should I copy this all out? Would the Guild want a record of this for future study?"

"Oh right. They wouldn't turn down knowledge. And knowing exactly what someone could do, in case they went bad and had to be countered, could be invaluable. If you're willing, I doubt they

would turn it down if you did the work. Heck, I could even put in a request for paying you for the effort as a consultant.”

“Then I have a couple of days of work ahead of me,” he groaned. “I don’t mind it. Good thing I have the writing skill I guess. So let’s put my choices on hold for a bit and see what we can do for Lily. I would still like to make sure your selections are the same as mine, so let’s start with that.”

“Okay then!” he announced a bit later. “They do seem, as far as I can tell, identical.”

“You’ve been going pretty fast,” Garlik spoke up, looking haunted. “What does all this mean though? What’s her best choice here?”

“I doubt there is a ‘best’ in this case, only what she’s interested in and is willing to work towards.”

“She’s a little girl,” Rose countered. “Her interests change week to week.”

“Think of it this way, at least she does get some choice,” Light reminded her. “Most people just have to take what they’re given at birth. You all can discuss it and work out a plan.”

“I suppose.”

“Yeah, I’m confused,” Lily told everyone. “This is hard. There’s too many options and I can’t keep them straight.”

“Let’s start at the beginning, okay? There’s supernatural power and there’s magical power,” Olaph explained, holding out his two hands one at a time. She nodded. “One stems from your very soul, one is manipulating magic. We’ll ignore natural magician for now as that’s sort of a mix of both and will just further confuse you. So just think soul or magic right now. It seems like some of these new powers you’re being offered will take all of your current magical potential, where others will not. For example Shaman would leave you with no magic, Songstrel allows you to keep your spark. I’m guessing because The System considers a Shaman to be more powerful than a Songstrel, and takes up ‘more’ of your soul where the power goes. So Shaman pushes your magical potential out, where Songstrel does not. Are you with me so far?”

“I guess, but what’s better? I don’t want to use up my soul!”

“Well, a magic user will probably tell you magic was better,” he hedged. “Also you’re not using up anything, the soul is the container, I should have just said spirit energy before. See, even I’m confused so it’s not just you.”

“Actually, as an elf I’m partly both,” Paige spoke up. “Magical and supernatural. So maybe I can help clear that up? The soul allows you to harnesses power in a few ways. One of those ways is turning your spirit energy into a result out in the world. Another is allowing you to touch Chaos, and do magic. This process is ‘attuning’ for lack of a better word, your soul to work with different types of power. Like my ability to see auras isn’t magical, it’s a supernaturally ability all elves possess, if they train it. I actually took some courses at the Demongate Academy to get a handle on that part of myself, as part of my schooling with the university where I learned magic. So yes, it seems some powers are ‘bigger’ than others and leave no room for magic. Does that help?”

“A little?”

“Fair enough. Now, you asked which is better? Having trained both types of power I can give you some pointers. Basically magic is really hard at first, but once you master it, and I have a long way to go before I can say I have by the way, you can learn new spells and thus do more with what you’ve learned pretty easily. Supernatural power, well, you learn it and that’s it. There’s nowhere else to go. That can be good and bad, depending on what the skill is.” *Spending more energy, for me, is a massive boost to my magic. I don’t think there’s a single spell equivalent to my aura reading skill.*

“That’s another thing to consider,” Garlik sighed. “Schooling. Magical training must be expensive.”

“Oh, it is,” she agreed with a shudder. “Don’t remind me.”

“But we have The System now,” Rose protested. “Does she need a school? Will anyone? Ever again?”

“I’m afraid so,” Light told them. “Trained only skills, right?”

“Right,” Olaph agreed. The two parents looked confused. “I’ll give you an example. ESPer, right? That’s a person that develops their mental power to affect the world in certain ways just by thinking about it. Sounds good, right?” He scrolled his window. “A skill like telekinesis is *untrained*. She could pick it up today and start using it, by putting XP into it. But the skill of barrier, that relies on telekinesis, is *trained only*. She would need a teacher for it, making teaching checks, before she could put XP into it. As I understand it, there’s a limit of some kind such that after a certain point you wouldn’t need the teacher anymore but can just start putting XP in, depending on how complex the subject is. It’s just ‘practice’ at that point. The System doesn’t totally negate the need to practice after all, it just simplifies things a little. Shows you how close you are to mastery, and helps you get there. Do you see?”

“Schooling,” Rose agreed.

“Now the Academy is free,” Paige went on. “Those that graduate are expected to ‘help the school out’ a bit with funds once they start putting their talents to use in the real world. And to help fellow graduates if they need it, that sort of thing. So keep that in mind. It’s only magical training that’s super expensive. But like I said it can do a lot and you don’t need to buy spells anymore so...”

“It also depends on how hard a worker you are, Lily,” Olaph returned to her. “With our earlier example of Alchemist, you would be a fair Alchemist after learning eight skills. But you would only be a fair True Martial Artist after learning *twenty nine* skills. That’s a huge difference! Let’s do an experiment, shall we?”

She nodded.

“Okay, try to select Alchemist and don’t get rid of Spark of Magic.”

“I did. The System says I have to get rid of something, and I get rid of faithful and favor. Now it says I can take it.”

“Good. Go back and now select True Martial Artist.”

“Okay. I have to get rid of everything.”

“Thought so. It’s backwards, but what can you do?”

“Backwards?” Garlik asked.

“Sure. One would think that a background that necessitated so many skills would be cheaper up front because of the investment you must make later. But not so much. The Alchemist has it much easier. You can be an Alchemist, retain your Spark of Magic, and at least do some magical things along with your eight alchemy things. But you’re out of luck if you choose Martial Artist. You have a loooong road ahead in your training for that background. Is it worth it, just to punch people better? I’m not so sure but then I haven’t read exactly what their skills are. Can’t be better than magic.”

“That is odd,” he agreed, scowling.

“Now of course you can specialize, not learn them all, but are you really considering yourself any of the things on this list without at least a point or two of XP into all the skills you can take because of it? That’s up to you, but it’s something to consider.”

“It’s a big decision honey,” Rose told her. “You may want to think about it for now. Maybe even wait until you’re a bit older?”

“I guess?” she decided. “If only I could get more points, I could take- oh.” She turned a blue box for everyone to see.

Get More Points: You may immediately take certain power based weaknesses to earn points during the process. There are certain limitations to this method. If you wish to add the weakness list to your selection of backgrounds touch [here](#).

Expanded help offered for the youths: As you grow up, you may discover certain weaknesses have taken hold and will allow you to choose more powerful backgrounds than at the current time. The System offers no guarantee of this however.

Choosing all powers now does not preclude adding more at a later time. This can even be done with XP in some instances.

Our ultimate advice is this: Pick something that interests you at the current time. As this power is added to your soul, interest in the topic will remain strong your entire life. No power or magic is without use, all has a place and can be used to help or harm as you see fit.

Good luck, and don't stress about it too much. :)

“Uh, is that a sideways smiley face?” Paige asked, tilting her head. “Who writes these boxes anyway?”

“I think if you could answer that, it would go a long way to explaining everything,” Light told her. “Also, the youths? Something very strange going on here...”

“More strange than blue boxes floating in the air that come out of nowhere?” Rose asked.

“Fair point. Let me give *my* ‘ultimate’ advice as the box says,” he said to Lily. “While magic users are not exactly plentiful, we’re not exactly rare either. It’s a world of magic, after all, and with teleportation and the like a magic user can be in three different parts of the world all in one day helping where they need to.”

“Not that they do,” muttered Paige. “Keep in mind that magic is highly regulated, and you have to always be looking over your shoulder to make sure you’re not breaking the rules all the time. They also have a reputation for being greedy, power hungry, narcissistic-”

“Yes all that aside,” Light went on, “the point is we’re not all that rare. Even Alchemists, while not something you would see offering services on every street corner, do find their way to us and can make a very good living. Some of the ones I know are even super old, so I think they can extend their lives in some way? What I’m saying is, maybe go for something not so common. If, for example, this talking to spirits thing interests you at all, as a Shaman, I would say that’s a great choice. Yes, for the most part you would need some sort of training.”

“The academy can train you in just about anything supernaturally related,” Paige told her. “Even if they don’t have a specific teacher that’s a Shaman because there are so few, and I have no idea of any numbers mind you, they have plenty of books and people that know how to move spirit energy around. With the help of The System I bet even book learning would count as ‘a teacher’ to at least slowly put points into skills. I mean someone has to blaze the trail what if some new power was

discovered by someone? They would need to train themselves, it can't be that stingy to insist on a teacher or you get nothing."

"Right, exactly. And once you master your craft, you'll be able to do something very few people can. That's what I think will be the most valuable in the world to come. But you have plenty of time, no need to rush through and pick something right this minute."

"Agreed," Olaph mused. "In fact you may even want to put all this aside for the moment and just sit down with your parents and draw up a list of things you're interested in. What would you *like* to be able to do? You have an idea what's possible now, maybe you want to be a teleporting paladin or work on the next generation of magical armors as the greatest inventor that ever lived. Then just choose the archetype that most closely relates to that goal."

Her face was screwed up in concentration. "I think I get it. Okay, I won't choose yet. Maybe for my birthday next year? My parents can help."

"I'm sure they can. I don't know what I'm going to pick either, but I can always pay to teleport back here. Check up on you every so often. Or send a letter, you can drop one off at any church and they'll see it gets to me. I *am* still a bishop, after all. I'll give you an address before I leave just in case. You're not alone, okay?"

"Okay!"

"And I'll be here for a few days, unless we're heading back right away?" He looked to Light.

"There's an experiment I want to run before we go back," he admitted. "If you're hard at work writing all this stuff down I should have time. We'll stay a few days."

"You can come to the inn with any questions before I leave, and I'll come say goodbye before we head back."

"We'd like that," Garlik told him. "Thank you for this. You've eased my mind at least, about all this. Her losing the Heavens, and about this whole quest of hers."

"Yes, we really can't repay you for what you've done," Rose added.

He waved that off. "Having your daughter choose her path for herself is reward enough. And knowing everyone connected with the Heavens is going to have to face this choice soon, if they haven't already, is good to know. She helped me with that, and thus, all of us. And besides," he eyed Light. "I'm not a Guild member. I don't have to charge for every little thing."

"Oh don't you start!" he grumped playfully.

Everyone laughed and they said their goodbyes, heading back to the inn as it was getting dark by this time.

So now I get to go through the same thing. What do I choose to do? Stay a magic user? I could simply become like Light, and learn the healing spells that Michael would have given me with The System. I could return to my post at the church without even too much disruption. But is that what I want? Can I be of service to the church in a different way? I have to assume Heaven still exists, even if I have no evidence of it at the current time. That's what faith is. How is the world going to look in a year once everyone gets used to The System? What's my place in that world? Perhaps being able to look at all this information in a book form, in my own writing, will solidify it a bit for me. Ah, that's a snag. "Do you think this town would have a bookstore?" he asked Light. "They usually have blank books, for aspiring writers to use."

"No need for that," he replied, bringing his hands up. He cast a spell and reached into nothing, pulling out a book that he handed to Olaph. "I've got a lot of odds and ends stashed in there, never know what you might need."

"Thank you."

"Pocket dimension?" asked Paige. "How much are you charging him for the casting?"

He sighed. “Nothing. It’s for my own benefit. I’m letting him put stuff into the book, he’s already agreed to give it back full of information he’s going to copy down from The System. It’s just on loan.”

“Shoot, you’re right. Well, fine then.”

“Glad it meets your approval. I’ll get you ink and some pens when we’re back at the room.”

“Appreciated. By the way, what’s your advice for me? Just become a scholar like yourself?”

“If you don’t know yourself by now, you’re never going to.”

“Go for natural and spirit well like me!” Paige insisted with a hop, walking backwards a few steps because she was an elf and that sort of thing came easily to her.

“Yes, I suppose you could cheat, as you’re being offered the opportunity,” Light grumbled.

“It’s not cheating!”

“It kind of is though?”

“I’ll take both of your thoughts into consideration, thank you,” he told them. “I am being offered a fresh start in life, it’s almost rude to simply try and emulate my old life as closely as possible.”

“Rude, to The System?” Light asked. “I don’t think it cares.”

“Or maybe it cares deeply, you don’t know,” Paige retorted. “It uses words like we, and good luck, and knows Lily isn’t old enough on her own and so gave her more advice. Almost sounds alive to me.”

He didn’t have an answer to that. Because really, he didn’t know, did he? *But that would open a whole different can of worms wouldn’t it?*

The three said their farewells for the evening, and Olaph got to work. Starting with Alchemist, he copied or at least paraphrased what they could do, as that was fairly well known by now, and then their skills. He touched every word he could, seeing how far the ‘help’ system went, and it did define many things relating to what matter was, the nature of gold and why it couldn’t cross over to other planes without changing form, and the entire list of what alchemy could produce. He didn’t see specific recipes, though he believed that a real Alchemist would get them, just as a person that could cast spells saw what spells they had available to them. Just that entry was a lot of work, and he went to bed pleased to see the job at least begun.

Meanwhile Light had gotten out a variety of strange things, loads more paper and pens, and certain books on magic he didn’t think he would ever have to open. Satisfied he could begin in the morning, he went to sleep. A few days and he would solve a minor mystery, and have another report to bring to the Guild. It had probably already been done, but more data points were good, right? Of course they were.

Paige got in her four hours of rest, and went to go find Sinjorino, to keep them company the rest of the night because they didn’t sleep at all.

The night was peaceful, and everything was in its place.

Someone, far, far away nodded and smiled, if it could be called that. It was a start.

Chapter 7

Obligatory Flashback

Where: Outside the Mage's Guild building

When: Several days ago

Bishop Olaph Perdita climbed the steps of the Mage's Guild building in Fareborough. While not as large as the main building in Amaranthia to the north-east, the place still seemed to be a hive of activity with people coming and going along the broad steps. Those leaving looked much angrier than those arriving, Olaph noticed, which wasn't a good sign any day of the week.

Unlike me, these people are probably here for answers. Answers no one can give yet, if ever. The appearance of The System, literally overnight a month and a half ago has sparked off every kind of fear mankind has ever known. Waking up to a strange box, hanging in midair before you, and 'welcoming' you to the new Way Things Are Done Around Here Now would be a shock to anyone. Many places are still rebuilding from the undead attack that happened just before that, and you would have to be blind to not see the floating islands in the sky aren't floating around so much anymore. I've heard rumors that the people that lived up there had something to do with the attacks, and were trying to get back up there? It's crazy, I can only hope we are all strong enough, and have enough faith in the Lord to see us through.

He waited for another person to exit and took their place in the building, looking around at the waiting area. It seems they had recently introduced a number system, as it was rather thrown together with just a basket of numbers you had to sort through to try and find the lowest.

Maybe to further slow us down?

He sorted through it, taking the lowest numbers he could find and handing the next ones in the sequence to the people that had come in behind him, and trying to find a seat. Chairs seemed to be strewn all over too, this waiting area was never meant to try serving this many people at once. It was an interesting mix, as well. Mostly human, but there was a satyr, there a wanderer. That fateful night everyone from the most holy elf to the most unholy cambion had been introduced to The System, it seemed.

Actually, that's a scary thought. Did angels did put on The System? Did demons? I doubt anyone's asked them. It's fine, I suppose. The System hasn't given us anything that we didn't already have. It's just... opened our eyes to certain things. Assigning a numeric value to what should be unknown. I doubt they're any more dangerous now than they were. And Heaven seems to be keeping quiet, or I wouldn't even be here. Powerless. Michael, why have you stopped answering my prayers? I need your blessings to do my holy work, how many have not been healed in the days since you went quiet? How many journeyed to my church only to be turned away? It's mad-

"Bishop?" a voice asked. He looked over, one of the receptionists had finished with her supplicant and rather than call the next number she was walking over to him. "You're expected, you don't have to take a number."

"To do otherwise would only anger those that came before me," he told her. "I will wait my turn."

She frowned. "Actually, as you're here to find us the answers we desperately need it might be best if you left as soon as possible. Your team is already assembled and waiting for you."

“Very well.” He looked around and found the person that came in after him, handing his number over. “Go with the Lord,” he said.

“And you, father,” was the reply.

The woman took him towards the back and he glanced in a nearby mirror that was stuck on the wall. An odd place for it, but perhaps it was enchanted in some way? Placed here to answer questions or show the truth when asked, and thus placed there with purpose? There were plenty of old stories about magic mirrors and once magic was commonplace it would be easy to see someone wanting to make a favorite story come true. His image looked back at him. A lined face, a bit of gray in the black, he had turned forty not that many years ago and was still on the fence about praying for magic to turn back the clock. He would only have the spell for a day but he would only need to cast it once. Would it be an abuse of the trust Michael placed in him day after day to not want to be *quite* so old? But shaving his age back to twenty, allowing him to perform another twenty years of service to the Lord to get back to this point? Wasn't that for the greater good? Had he not proven, day after day, that he would not abuse the magic and responsibility he had been given? He had dared not even ask, though that inhibition would likely fall away as the years began to pile up. *Of course* he one day wished to see the splendor of the Heavens. *Of course* he would have to be judged, one day, for all his actions in this world. But he was a healer, first and foremost. What healing would he need to do in Heaven? And when there were still so many to be healed here? He hated leaving a job half done, and this was really a job that could never *be* done. But he had to try.

He was dressed to be recognized as a bishop, no armor or weapons for him. His faith in the Lord would have to suffice. Especially now. But he was still a pragmatist, and when he requested a leave of absence to seek answers of the Heavens, his diocese insisted he seek out at least one bodyguard for the duration of his journey. In fact they insisted on the best, so he wrote to the Mage's Guild to see if someone was available. They had gotten back to him right away, not only making one person available but a whole team, as it seemed they were soon to mount an expedition much like his anyway. And thus, he was here to meet them. He followed the lady into the back and to a meeting room, but she didn't go in. “You can all introduce yourselves,” she told him. “I have to get back to the front. It's a constant stream of people, you think the first hundred would tell the next hundred we don't have any answers, and save us the trouble. But nooooo. Good luck, bishop.”

“May the Lord go with you.”

“I hope so,” she answered, and headed back to the front area.

He stepped inside and looked at the three people that looked up at him. Two of them were clearly turned away from each other, while the third was simply standing in the corner with his? Her? Arms folded. *Looks like a remnant, but not a standard model. This one looks more female inspired. How interesting. But at the same time remnants usually like to be called 'they' as they don't really have gender.*

They were dressed in leather armor, and had a bow and arrow stood next to them. The armor covered most of them, making it hard to see they even were a remnant, but the face, or lack thereof, gave it away. It was covered by a white faceplate, feminine in shape, though he could see around the edge various “bones” moving as though they were human. *Most remnants just have a boxy, very un-human like head, this one looks like it was meant to appear more human. Experimental model, perhaps?*

The second person in the room was a human, also in leather armor. Two swords hung at his left hip, making Olaph wonder how you used two swords that way. He looked to be in his mid thirties, with dark hair and a well kept beard. For such a young man his face was scarred a bit, making Olaph wonder what he had seen and been through at this point in his life. He looked rather no nonsense, and there was no bag of supplies near him.

Unlike with the third person in the room, who was clearly an elf. He figured female though it was hard to tell with them sometimes. She also wore leather armor, making him feel a bit under dressed, these were all clearly adventuring types that came prepared. But then, they were his armor in a very real sense, as were his robes. Woe to anyone that practiced banditry against a member of the church. The Lord would see to them, one way or the other. The elf had a bandoleer of small throwing knives across her chest, no sword or shield, but did have a pack nearby. Her silvery hair was done in a braid, and like all elves she was tall and lithe.

“Ah, our client has arrived,” said the man, coming over to shake his hand. “Father..”

“Olaph, please. Olaph Perdita. We’ll be traveling together there’s no need for formal titles.”

“Sure thing, padre. I’m Light, Light Kajombro. Bodyguarding isn’t my normal area of expertise but I think we can make it work. With how busy things are now they’ve got us all doing whatever we can to help, and that’s fine. Normally I’m more of a wizard hunter, tracking down those that the Guild needs dealt with. You’re in good hands.”

“I’m sure the Guild has sent competent people.” *A hired killer? Is that what he’s saying he is? I fear for his soul, if that is the case. How dangerous do they think this trip is going to be, exactly? I just wanted someone that had traveled before and knew the lay of the land. Where to stop for the night, and where not to, that sort of thing.*

“This is my shadow, Paige Malplenan,” he gestured to the elf.

“How do you do?” she asked. “I’m freshly graduated from the academy. I trained to be a support caster, so I know some buff and debuff spells. Also flight, survival, healing-”

“He doesn’t need the whole list,” Light scoffed. “She’s here because she needs to observe how a real mage operates before she can go into business for herself. That’s all. I suppose as a graduate she’s learned something, but what remains to be seen.”

“I’m just as real as you are, thank you very much.”

“Eh, in ten years you might be.”

“Have you two been together long?” Olaph asked. *Because it doesn’t seem like it.*

“It’ll be our first mission together,” Paige admitted. “I hope we can get along.”

“As do I,” Olaph stressed. “And this brings us to our final member.”

“Sinjorino Packets,” the remnant introduced themselves. “Nice to see you again, Light.”

“Hold on, we’ve met before?”

“Indeed. I don’t wonder that you don’t recall me. It must have been over thirty years ago now. You’ve aged surprisingly well, if I had to put a number on it without a deeper bio-scan I would only say a few months. Curious.”

“Oh,” he looked a bit embarrassed. “I neatened up the beard recently, makes me look younger.”

“I don’t believe you had the beard when we met? You are the Light that went with me to investigate the Purple Killer, are you not?”

“Purple? Wait, right, the guy we thought might be a remnant? We tracked him to that old world base he had fixed up, we needed you to bypass all the traps in the place.”

“The security grid, yes. Good to see you haven’t lost your organic existence. The swords are new.”

“That faceplate of yours is. Got tired of people staring at you, huh?”

“About twenty nine years ago, yes. Humans seem to react better to it, even though it’s not a perfect solution.”

“Were you in some kind of accident?” Olaph asked. “Irreparable damage?”

“Nothing like that, sir. I was a very early model of remnant.” They held up a metallic hand. “At one time I had an approximation to skin covering my metal understructure. This made me look more human, even my face was somewhat indistinguishable from a human at the time. It has long since broken down, and I no longer have the means to construct a new one. As my head more than resembles a human skull, a fact many find uncomfortable, this is the easiest solution.”

Hold on, how old is this remnant? Thousands of years?

“How are you still powered?” Paige asked. “Can your parts have really lasted so long?”

“Magic, actually,” they replied. “And many of my parts have been replaced. Though that gets harder and harder as the years go by.”

“May I?” she walked over and held up a hand.

“Of course.”

Paige put a hand on the remnant’s chest and concentrated. “There is magic inside you. Turning magic into... lighting?”

“Correct, from a current day understanding. Electricity and lightning are the same thing simply on a different scale. As I have proven my worth to the Guild investigating, repairing, and explaining old world technology they have allowed me to replace my failing power systems with a simple magical device that should, as long as magic exists, continue to supply me with power until I fall apart completely.”

“I see. And I suppose magic can repair your body to a certain extent.”

“Indeed. Does that satisfy, sir? We have been made aware of your mission to travel to one of the Heavenly Gates and seek answers as to why holy power seems to have abandoned you. Is this team sufficient to your needs?”

“I was expecting a single person so this exceeds my hopes. But, if I may ask, why did they assign you to this task?”

“Perhaps I am to balance out the murderer in the party?” they suggested. “No offense, of course, Light.” They drew an arrow from their quiver. “I am loath to end organic life, as you can see many of my arrows are blunted. Should you need my protection I will strike only to wound, not kill. Of course I have regular arrows as well. My skill with a bow is quite unmatched, though I hope I must never prove this claim to you.”

“That can’t be the only reason,” Light protested. “Is that even a reason? I’m not some crazy man that murders everything he comes across. Only those that cause trouble that the Guild sends me after. I’m like a cuddly kitten the rest of the time.”

“If you do not accept that reasoning, perhaps this one would be more to your liking; My primary function is to investigate any old world devices that may be revealed in the course of our journey. I have insisted no such device would be able to block Heavenly influence in the world or be powerful enough to have created The System. They insisted, and as I wish to retain good relations I have accepted. Still, I am willing to hunt for you organic beings, should you require it. I would not be unwilling to kill animals if you are going to eat them, for I realize that is simply,” and here they broke into song for some reason, “the circle of life, and it moves us all!”

“Yuck,” Paige muttered, making a face. “We have magic for that, thank you very much. No killing required.”

“Then perhaps it will simply be a sightseeing tour and an uneventful one at that for me. That would be the ideal situation, would it not?”

The others nodded.

“There you are, then. Naturally I will still pull my weight, setting up camp if needed and the like. I can also entertain on the road, I have many stories from ages past. My favorite being the tale of R2D2 and C3PO, remnants that helped topple an empire. There may have been some organics in the vicinity, but their part was minor at best.”

“I’m sure we’d all love to hear it,” Olaph told them.

“Here’s a map of our route, if you’re interested.” Light pointed to the table, where a map had been placed. “We’ll leave here, go north east to Emberslook where we’ll board a ship, sail around Silveria to Levithmirra, docking in Wolfton. We’ll go overland from there, shouldn’t be more than a day if *someone* can help us to fly as they claim.”

“Can’t we just sail directly to Citadel?” Olaph asked. “It’s a port town they must get many visitors.”

“Divinations done place that as our best route. We need to spend at least a day on the road between here and Citadel. As I understand it, the mission succeeds either way, but ‘a night on the road will lighten the load, of the future to be so don’t travel by sea.’ That’s some of the divination rhyme I was told, so that’s what we’ll do.”

“As long as I get to the Gate in one piece, a minor detour is no concern. Is everyone ready to leave?” He hefted his own pack of supplies. “Anything anyone needs to buy?”

There were shakes of the head all around and those with packs and such picked them up.

“We’re off to see the wizard,” Sinjorino sang.

“I thought we were going to see *angels*?” Paige wondered.

Olaph awoke with a start. He was slumped over his book, apparently he had fallen asleep in his chair the night before. He straightened up with a groan, his back was killing him. *I was trying to get this done as quickly as possible, and I’m almost done. Must have been thinking about what brought me here, to have a dream about the past like that. Probably only another hour to- what’s this?* He blinked the sleep from his eyes and rubbed them, looking at the blue box hanging before him.

Information

A member of your party

<Light Kajombro>

has completed a hidden quest and gained beta level access to parts of The System. That party member has granted you beta level access. You currently have an outstanding quest that may be affected by this action. Would you like to display the beta level sections of The System specific to your quest? Other, non-relevant sections are still off limits.

We apologize for the inconvenience.

Display / Deny

What the heck is a beta? I guess it can’t hurt to display things, right?

Olaph touched the word “Display” and started to read. His eyes got wide.

I have to see Lily right away!

Chapter 8

Beta Beings

Where: Light's room at the Inn

When: The morning of the 7th day in the village

Light was fairly excited.

While Olaph busied himself with the unenviable task of transferring pages and pages of text from The System to actual paper in the hope of understanding people's abilities, he had been hard at work as well. His project was of a different sort, but it did relate (as seemingly most things these days) to The System. While Olaph was busy taking things *out* of The System, Light was answering a burning question he had about what would happen if you simply ignored it. Did things the old fashioned way, so to speak. (As hilarious as it was to think of two months ago being 'old fashioned' of course) He had been shut up in his room for the past six days, doing magical research. He had prepared for this, bringing a small trunk full of things he would need as well as more paper, ink, and various books of magical formula. He had selected his target spell, Pest Repellent, as it was only grade 1, useful to a traveler, and already in The System. For six days he stayed in his room, while Paige and Sinjorino did who knows what, hard at work. But finally, on the 7th day, early in the morning because he was so excited, he copied all of his notes into one final "spell sheet" that held his completed spell. He hadn't wanted to screw something up the night before and so got a good night's rest and now it was time. He was confident. He had never researched a spell before, but his books on theory and teleporting back to the Guild to speak with others had served him well. He was sure he had gotten it right. It was time to see what happened when-

A blue box appeared.

Hidden Quest Completed

Research a Spell

You have put time and effort into creating a spell that is your own. We offer you our congratulations in your pursuit of deeper magical knowledge. You could have simply taken the spell from The System but did not. We applaud this effort. You have been thrice rewarded.

Reward: XP bonus equal to the cost of the spell
Reward: Do not need to spend XP to learn the spell
Reward: Proven yourself and are now a beta tester

Continue to strive and learn,

your rewards will be great.
Congratulations again.
The world is enriched by your actions.

Okay, that wasn't exactly what I had in mind. What in the heck is a beta tester? Light touched the words, figuring this part of The System worked like any other, and he was right. He read, getting more and more excited as he did so. He opened his personal spell list, not surprised to find the spell of Pest Repellent there. He opened the spell "store" and saw the new "tab" the explanation text had spoken of. He looked at the spells there. Nearly fifty of them! He closed everything, cast a hygiene spell on himself, and rushed downstairs.

"I've done it," he announced to Paige and Sinjorino, at the breakfast table. At least it was for Paige. She was nibbling on something but Light couldn't care about that right now. He had to tell her! Not that she would truly *understand*, not like *he* did, but she was the only other magic user around and he was about to burst.

"What? Gathered the courage to leave your room without pants?" she asked.

"Pants?" He looked down. *Oh, how about that?* He had left the room without his pants. Imagine that. "Never mind that!" he decided. "This is bigger than that!"

"Bigger than *pants*?" she asked, interested now. "It must be big!"

"I researched a spell!"

There was a pause.

"Don't people do that all the time?" she asked politely.

"They did, but then The System came along. Who would spend hundreds of coppers a day on components to do spell research anymore?"

"You did, apparently?"

"I did! And was it worth it! I got *rewarded* for it!"

"Hold on, rewarded how?" she asked, putting her food down and scowling at him.

"Oh, now I've got your interest?" he joked. "I'll tell you. But I'm starting at the beginning. I picked a grade 1 spell as it's the cheapest and easiest, and I wanted to see what would happen. Would I just learn it the old way? Would The System not let me do it? I had to know. But it did. Listen to this; I didn't have to spend the 1XP to learn the spell. In fact, I *got* 1XP added to my status page. I have to assume if I had researched a grade 5 spell I would have—"

"Gotten 5XP," Paige finished.

"Exactly. It just zipped into my spell list, and I know I can cast it now, same as with any other spell. But even that's not the end of it."

"You got more?"

"Much more. Take a look at this." He willed his spell "store" open and switched to the 'beta' tab. He tried to spin the window but instead another window popped up.

Special Action Detected

You are about to reveal the existence of the beta area of The System. The person you are showing is a member of your party. Would you like to allow them access to the beta area? As a beta tester you may allow access to individuals you trust, however a

more limited access is granted to those not in your party. Other may view the beta area at your discretion regardless.

Allow Access / Deny Access / View Only Access

Oh, that's even better. I wonder... "Can I allow access to my whole party at once?" Imagine the look on Olaph's face when he realizes he has more text to copy out!

The window vanished and was replaced with another.

Special Action Request Keyword Detected

Allow all party members access to relevant beta areas?

Allow Access / Deny Access / View Only Access

"Allow!" He pressed the words and the window vanished.

"You know you look like a crazy person when you do that," Paige reminded him. "A half naked crazy person."

"Yes, yes, just look at your spells list now. The store, whatever it's called for you."

"Okay..." She opened it and her eyes got wide. "It changed. There's like a new section I can access at the top."

"So it worked? It keeps those spells separate, you'll see why. Touch it and you can see."

She did. "There must be fifty spells in here. What is this?"

"I guess it's some kind of area for spells that haven't been in wide use? I got the notice when I opened it that I can buy them at half XP cost for now."

"So did I, I'm reading that now."

"You'll see that a year and a day later you can either give them up, or if they've worked out pay the rest of the cost. Or I guess research them yourself? Huh, wonder what would happen if I did that during the year and a day... anyway, they may change in grade or description as we use them. But isn't it amazing!?"

"Yeah, there's some crazy stuff in here. Put two things together so the combined thing has the characteristics of both. Create elemental spheres that attack enemies on their own delay." Her voice went up in pitch. "*Turn a field prepared with seeds into a complete harvest- in an hour? What?*"

"What's that one? Oh no wait, I think I see it. Huh, you're right. That would be huge."

"Why hasn't someone researched that one yet? Can you imagine tilling a field, planting seeds, fertilizing, watering, and then harvesting the whole field an hour later? Chop down the corn stalks or whatever, till again, seed again, repeat. A single farmer could feed thousands of people a month!"

"Good question. I suppose even hiring a mage to cast the spell once a day would be worth it if you could grow an entire season of crops that day. Bugs wouldn't get into them. No disease, I would imagine, no time for them to get diseased. Not if they grew to full height in an hour. What... What have we been doing with magic up until this point? Though I do recall a similar spell that made plants grow in a wide area, but that was more uncontrolled growth not useful growth like this." *Mainly to stand in the middle of a forest that burned down and get it all back again in a day. But we can't eat forests, so this spell is far more useful.*

“Good question. A lot of these are really useful. Purify water. Purify metal? Sort out things dumped into a barrel, like if bugs get into your rice dump it through this spell and have only rice again. Link minds to fight better as a unit. Make an object immovable? Put a minor sphere of force around yourself to keep out rain. I want so many of these!”

“I know, right?”

“It is good,” Sinjorino interrupted, “to see you two so excited about a shared passion. It seems you are not so different, after all.”

“Yes, well, that is, I got carried away. She’s still a- I better go put some pants on. Be right back.” He fled.

“Was that Light?” Olaph asked a moment later, joining them at the table. “Why wasn’t he wearing any pants?”

“He’s just a bit excited at the moment,” Paige told him. “And who can blame him. Say, did you get in on this beta action stuff?”

“I did, actually. I have to hurry off, I got access to some new powers, and there’s one Lily is just going to *love*.”

“Odd that the term beta is used,” Sinjorino put in. “I haven’t heard that word for a long time. They even kept the Ancient word for it, as there is no such word in Trade. Very curious.”

“Ah, sure, if you say so. Take a look.” He flipped a blue box towards the both of them. They looked it over.

“Oh yeah, you’re right,” Paige agreed. “She’ll absolutely love it.”

“I know, right? I just have to figure out how to give it to her. Say thanks to Light for me, on second thought I’ll thank him myself. We can leave today the- we can’t leave. I have to copy the new powers into the book. We can leave this afternoon. Evening at the latest. I’ll be back! Byeeee.”

“Typical,” Sinjorino lamented. “The remnant gets nothing. Story of my life, really.”

“Sorry,” Paige told them. “I guess The System thinks you’re just perfect the way you are.”

Olaph knocked on the Florando’s door, hardly able to contain his excitement. He had to hold himself back from pounding on it, but it was opened soon enough.

“Oh, Olaph,” Rose greeted him after cracking it open. “How are you doing today?”

“Fine, fine, I’m so sorry for coming this early but something wonderful has happened so I need to see Lily right away. I think I have a solution to the issue of what power she should choose to take. I just discovered it. It’s ideal for her!”

“A new power? Did she not get the full list when she began the self discovery quest?”

“It seems not. My bodyguard Light did something last night, I’m not sure what he was running around the Inn like a crazy person without pants this morning so I didn’t get to ask him. But it allowed the party access to different things, and as I’m in the quest to rediscover myself I got some new powers offered to me. I think I can transfer one of them to her!” *The others aren’t really applicable to her situation.*

“We can certainly discuss it, but I thought we were waiting until she got a little older?”

“That’s the best part! Please, may I come in? I’ll explain it all to you.”

“Very well. Come on in.” She let him inside and called her daughter and husband, and they went to sit in the living room.

“Coffee?” Garlik offered.

“If I drank coffee I would explode, I’m already super excited from what happened this morning,” he declined. “But thank you.”

“So I heard you talking to mom, what’s this about a new power?” Lily asked.

“It’s so great. Come here and give me your hand. I’m not sure how to do this, the directions were not super clear we may have to try a few things.”

“Okay?” She gave him her hand.

“I, Bishop Olaph Perdita, do, without reservation, grant this girl, Lily Florando, access to the beta area skill: Herbalist!” He waited for something to happen.

Nothing happened.

“Do you feel any different?” he asked hesitantly. “Did you get any status updates?”

“No.” She shook her head.

“Huh. Oh wait, maybe it’s simpler than that. Let’s try this.” He dropped her hand and brought up his quest list of powers. From there he went into the beta area and focused on “cutting” out the Herbalist skill. He then had this in a separate window, nodded, and tried flipping it over. A box appeared, but more slowly than usual. He had never seen a box fill in piecemeal before but this one did. Finally it was done updating and he read it again and again.

Special Action Detected

You are about to reveal the existence of a beta area skill to a being not in your party. You do not have beta level access. Admin consent is required.

Please Wait.

Request sent.

Request approved.

Admin Message: Olaph, I see neither one of you has chosen your new Lifepath yet. This is a good compromise, Lily is a bit young and a temporary set of abilities is a great introduction to the world of the supernatural. You did good, please continue to bring light and hope to your realm.

Normal messaging resumes:

You may show the skill with view only access at your discretion.

Allow Access / Deny Access / View Only Access

Okay, as if that doesn’t raise a whole new host of questions. Who or what is an admin? How have I gotten a personalized message? Is The System being directed by something? Is a person sitting there making messages for people when they try breaking things or otherwise doing what they shouldn’t? How else can you break The System?

“Olaph?” Garlik said softly. “Are you okay? There was a sort of spinning rainbow ball in your eyeballs?”

I guess I’ll try and note it down later. I can always offer someone else the ‘beta area’ and get the message again, and write it down word for word. “Yes, sorry, just a bit of an unexpected twist. Let me just-” He touched “allow access” and the window vanished, while the previous one spun away from him.

"I see it now." Lily read for a moment. "What do these words mean?"

"From what I understand, this set of skills and powers isn't to be found in the world yet," he explained. "We're being offered them special, to see if they might come into the world at a later time. To that end, you can take them now, and in a year you'll get the option to keep it, or reset your abilities and have to choose again. Personally, I'd go for it if I were you. There's no downside. You can see how you like a supernatural ability, and it's a useful one. You can get started with it right away, and the usual 'trained only' restriction on putting in XP is lifted because in all honesty, those taking the ability *now* will be the teachers of the ability *later*. Or pick something else in a year."

"But what ability it is?" Rose asked. "What is she getting?"

"Let me read it to you," he offered. "Herbalist: An herbalist is a master of plants, able to grow, change, and work with plants using their own spiritual energy. They can create poultices that swiftly draw out poison, close wounds, or heal disease. They can command plants to grow in a certain way, or for a specific function. An herbalist can even find seeds in nature or tell just by touch what seeds will grow into specific plants. Their skills specifically are; Create Poultice, control plants, find seeds, grow plants, identify plants, identify seeds, topic: plants, and revive plant. All of these skills, their names, and their effect are subject to change during the beta period."

"Well that doesn't sound too dangerous," Garlik admitted. "Not like shooting energy out of your hands or leaving your body to become a warrior."

"I like it," Lily decided. "Huh, I can keep my spark of magic if I take it, too. I only have to get rid of Celestial Favor. It's warning me that Faithful is unneeded in the current implementation and I could take a minor background as part of the beta period without penalty if I wanted to try it out. So I could take Attentive instead and then give it up?"

Wait, faithful doing nothing means... no prayer will ever be answered again? This- is every faithful person on the planet being given the opportunity to choose something else? It's not a power, just the Heavens listening to you a bit better. I should write that down to bring up with Light later, when we return to the Guild.

"Do you want to be attentive?" Rose asked.

"It's just at the top of the list. I would have to look the whole thing over again."

"Ah. Well, as it's only temporary and we wanted to wait anyway, I don't see the harm in letting her grow plants or make poultices. We have a regular old Herbalist in town, I bet she would be thrilled to teach Lily about plants in exchange for her growing a bunch instantly."

"So I can take it mom?"

"Go ahead."

"Okay! It's asking if I want to drop Faithful... I put 'replace later' it says I can come back for that any time. And done, I'm an herbalist! I have some XP, I'll put it in and try growing something!"

"This all worked out then," Olaph decided with a smile. "I hope you enjoy it. We'll be leaving soon, once I write these new abilities down in the book, but I'll try to come back here sometime. See how you're doing. Don't forget to write me, okay?"

"I won't!"

"Good. Enjoy your new powers."

"Thank you, bishop," Garlik told him, taking his hand and shaking it. "This really puts my mind at ease. Maybe when she's older she can decide to be a demon killer or something but for now, working with plants and getting the chance to say no to it later is huge."

Not to mention, helping out The System seems to brings rewards. It helps the world, and she's one of the only people that can do this. She'll be in demand, even as young as she is. "My pleasure. See you both later."

He walked back to the Inn with a bounce in his step. *Now to finish copying these out, and then choosing my own new path. I too may pick from the 'beta' area, this fiendstone power seems*

particularly useful, especially in light of the bag of fiendstones we got from this very town. I'll have to read it over more to be sure, but giving it a try? For the good of the world? Why not? A vast departure from my usual wheelhouse but isn't that what the quest is all about? Rediscovering myself? Let's go all the way for now, maybe even see a bit more of the world before I head back to my flock. The possibility is there... And I'm useless to them as I am, perhaps the Lord has a different destiny in mind for me. I'm open to it, oh God, just give me a sign. Are... you still there, oh Lord of the universe? King of kings? Heavenly Host? I hope so...

Chapter 9

Reporting the News

Where: Common room at the Inn

When: Now the afternoon of the 7th day in the village

The group was again all in pants, and seated in the common room at the inn. Olaph explained what he had given Lily, and Paige sort of pouted a little bit.

“I wouldn’t mind those powers,” she told the others. “Our cities are mostly plants anyway. Imagine growing new kinds of plants or modifying your house while it’s growing.”

“You can do some of those things with magic though,” Light protested. “In fact even better. From what I’m seeing here the Herbalist can grow a few seeds at a time, but with that new growth spell you can do a whole field.”

“Yeah I guess.”

“Are we departing?” Sinjorino asked.

“I haven’t chosen yet,” he admitted. “Looking over all my options... it would be interesting to take something new. I played around with it, I could take the new Attuner powers and still be able to take Herbalist myself. I’m older, it makes sense I have more potential to play with than Lily did. But she’s going to be playing around with that one so maybe that’s good enough? But do I want to permanently lose my spark of magic? According to The System by studying under an appropriate master, and spending the correct amount of XP of course, I can become a spellcaster later. On the other hand how much studying do I want to do at my age? Getting my spells through prayer may have spoiled me. Even with some skills being destroyed and replaced with others during this whole process I’ll still have to do some. Being a Seer I can tell truth from lies without any special training that could be useful to the church all on its own. But more useful than removing the soul of a person to search for and heal corruption? There’s just so much to consider!”

“There is something that you perhaps haven’t considered,” Light told him. “May I offer a bit of advice?”

“Of course!”

“We’re heading back to the main Guild building. The other parties are returning and we’ll need to give a full report on everything we’ve discovered thus far. The,” he glanced around, “closed Gate, the beta area, the new spells, the new abilities, even the wording of the boxes we got. Then will come discussion about what it all means, and what the Guild’s response is going to be. I can’t predict it in whole, but I do know they’re going to want more information. And to be fair, we’ve learned about the Gate, but that hasn’t told us anything. Like the why, or the how.”

“You think we’re going to get sent out again,” Paige decided.

“Exactly. The number of people demanding answers has only increased. Governments are losing patience with us, the people that are supposed to have all the answers. All we’ve done at the moment is uncover more questions. You do still want to know why, don’t you padre?”

“I do,” he decided. “If this is a nefarious plot by Sammael somehow, we need to know and put a stop to it. Get the Gates open again and return Heavenly power to the earth.”

“If you’re going to travel with us, and I don’t mind giving you the sword obviously, but you should be able to protect yourself in the event we’re separated. See what the Guild says, if they want

your help in answering these questions, and choose then. Otherwise just go back to your church, speak to your superiors there, see what your area most needs.”

“Is the Guild likely to request help from an outsider, such as Olaph?” Sinjorino asked. “He went to them and as he had a quest to do what they wanted anyway, sent us all. You think they would allow him to continue?”

“They hire you often enough,” he reminded them. “You can’t even use magic, and are not affiliated with the church. He is, and can deal favorably with any angels we come across. They might answer him, but not us. Personally, I think they’ll take all the help they can get at this point.”

“That’s true,” they admitted. “All of what he said was true.”

“Fair enough,” Olaph agreed. “Let’s not keep them waiting. We can start heading back today.”

“Start?” Light asked with a chuckle. “We’re not walking back. Get your stuff and I’ll tell the owners we’re done with the rooms. We’re teleporting back.”

“Oh yeah, we can do that now. Be right back.”

The group made it back, teleporting into the designated area and being checked out by the guards. They were cleared, got settled into guest rooms and were told a meeting would be held the next day after breakfast. So they waited around and spent the night, Light and Paige holding off getting any of the new spells for the moment. Olaph had been ignoring it, but the second he returned to the building his personal quest completed, granting him XP. As he was the quest leader and the group that had been formed was essentially his he got an option to distribute XP to “his other party members,” while reducing his own. He gladly took the trade. Everyone got 6 XP, and both Paige and Sinjorino messaged him with their thanks.

They were now in a meeting room seated around a large table, or at least the members of the Guild were. Those associated with them were seated behind the members, it was not lost on Olaph that non-members “didn’t get a seat at the table” in a very literal way. Looking around he saw that most around the table were human, but there was two elven parties, distinguished by variation in their armor, and a group of fierce looking woman on the other side of the table. The leader of the meeting, once everyone was seated, started.

“I call this meeting of the Mage’s Guild to order. Let no untruth be spoken here!” He cast, and the candle in the center of the room flickered to life. “Master Wizard Thesuviv, speaking for the great city of Paradiel, I offer you the floor.”

“I thank you,” the elf said, raising from his chair. “I yield my time.” He sat down again.

“... I see,” the leader finally recovered. “Very well. Wizard Callithior, representing the city of Logaeth. You now have the floor.”

“I thank you,” that elf said, also rising. “I yield my time.” She sat down again.

“I sense hesitation,” one of the Guild elders said into the silence. “Is the news truly so bad that you will not even speak it? Or is no news good news? This is going to be a short meeting if so. I expected many hours of discourse but perhaps I can simply return to my students?” He started to get up.

“I will speak,” Light told them, standing.

“The floor recognizes Archmage Kajombro,” said the facilitator. “You have the floor.”

Huh. Those titles must be their actual Guild ranking? Olaph thought. Still, seems like the elves don’t want to be the first to admit their Gates are gone. If that’s what has happened, and it seems more and more likely it is. Ah, I see. Those are Amazons, the closest to one of the Gates. South maybe? I only got a 9 on my untrained geography check. Never needed to know what was beyond the walls of my church. Oh well, not important. One group from each land, and the beastlands are not represented by

some of their kind like the others because they don't allow a Guild presence in their lands. So we got sent instead. Perfectly reasonable.

“Thank you. As you know we traveled to the East Gate and gained entry to the building that protects it. The people there were quite unhelpful, the guards saying the Gate was not receiving visitors at this time and would not elaborate. We had to force our way in and discovered what was left of the place. An empty room.”

And the knockout guardian, Lunaria.

The elves scowled, clearly not wanting to hear this. The flame flickered a little, not lost on anyone in the room.

They all looked at it, Olaph thought. Some kind of truth spell.

“An empty room, save a block of stone where the gate would have been,” he clarified. The flame did not flicker. “We don't know what their purpose was in raising such a monolith, perhaps just a panicked reaction and a way to further keep teleporting people out. There were no angels, no gate to the Heavens. Nothing. We left soon after that. I suspect the other gates have been similarly closed, given the reactions of the most honorable guardians?” He looked to the other groups of elves.

“Our gate has also vanished,” said the Amazon woman at the table. “We have the courage to speak the truth even if elves do not.”

“The floor has not recognized Master Mage Henchin, would you like the floor, Master Mage?”

She raised a hand. “I've said what I needed to. The Gates are gone, what are we going to do about it?”

“We have not heard confirmation of that,” he cautioned. “I can return the floor to you, if you wish?” He waited, but neither elf took him up on it.

“Of course not,” Light reasoned. “If they say their gate is gone, and the candle stays steady that's it. They're telling the truth and what does that mean for them? Face it, the Heavens have abandoned you. Abandoned all of us. Once again our prayers are unanswered, it's up to-”

“Blasphemy!” roared one of the elves. “Even a human should show more respect!”

“Oh? Did it flicker?” he asked with a smirk, indicating the candle.

“Just because you believe something is the truth doesn't make it so.”

“Then tell me of your Gates. Are they still there or not?”

Lots of emotions seemed to play across the elf's face, but he did not speak.

“I think we have our answer. I had hoped... but no. We must take the world as it is. We're on our own. I agree with Master Mage Henchin, we should speak of our further plans in light of this.”

“In due time,” he agreed. “The floor recognizes Bishop Perdita. This was your quest, has there been any development? Since The System came to us, has any prayer of yours been answered?”

He stood while Light sat down again. “Thank you for the floor. I am saddened to report that not only have my own prayers been unanswered, I encountered a young girl with the background of Celestial Favor, who was also Faithful. She too has lost her connection to the Heavens. It was not just me. I have begun the quest to replace my backgrounds relating to the Heavens with new ones. I have documented my choices here but have yet to choose. There are many.” He got out the book from his pack and set it on the table.

With a wave of a hand the book got a magical circle under it and whisked to the other side to the facilitator. He paged through it. “This is quite extensive,” he remarked.

“Light, that is Archmage Kajombro, believed it would be of benefit to the Guild to have as complete a record of abilities people might manifest as possible. To aid further training if the information is shared with the Demongate Academies, and to fight against those misusing their powers. I also included all magical backgrounds as I am allowed to pick them as well, having the Spark of Magic myself. Hopefully that information can be of more direct use to the Guild. I'm sure you're aware of all of them, but for completeness I didn't see the harm in writing down what they are supposed to do, in case there was some question.”

“I see. This will be copied and returned to you. The Guild thanks you for your hard work.”

“I can only hope the information is of use to you.” *Light mentioned perhaps a more physical reward? But I would not be crass enough to mention this. Great wealth is of course not my main goal, as a member of the church, but a few coins can go a long way.*

He set the book aside. “Are there any other insights you would like to share while you have the floor?”

“I would like to make clear that I am willing to continue my original quest if the Guild feels they have need of me. There is much more to learn about our new situation and I will not shy away from another assignment, or quest if you will, that gets us closer to the answers. While you may have issue with The System allowing easier access to individual spells, I still wish to chase down whoever it was that closed the Heavens to us. All these questions have the same answer; Where did The System come from? Let’s see if we can go find out.” *In fact, from my perspective The System made life way better for mages, saving them a lot of money and hassle learning spells. This was of course somewhat artificial. The Guild could just as easily made spells available free! They chose to charge large sums. But it was devastating to those that relied on the Heavens for their powers. Would I trade one for the other? More versatile and wealthy mages and less prayers answered? Only the future me can know if it works out in everyone’s favor. We should take care of our own problems, it’s what the Lord originally wanted after all.*

“We will take that under advisement.”

“Very well.” With a nod he sat down again.

“You still have the floor, Archmage Kajombro. As you have most recently been among the common folk, and seem the most willing to share your experiences, what is the current mood of the populous?”

“There’s still a lot of fear out there,” he said after a moment standing again. “Lily, that’s the girl we helped, was terrified of The System when we arrived in town. It was only because the mayor knew of her and knew Olaph was a bishop he asked us to check in on her. Once Olaph admitted he was having the same problem, and that the windows were nothing to be afraid of did she start using them in earnest. People still aren’t sure what to make of them. There needs to be widespread education campaign and very soon. ‘Don’t fear the boxes’ or some such. She was more afraid than most because of her connection to the Heavens that had been taken away, most would not have that experience. But at the same time these odd messages in the air would be seen as most to be magical, and I don’t think I need to tell you the rumors of Guild reaction to those that play around with magic. We started many of them! But now spells are simply a touch away, like Olaph said, and that changes the game.”

“Yes, what are we going to do about that?” one of the men near the facilitator asked. “We can’t detect it, can’t stop it. What happens to our revenue streams? And think of the danger- Is everyone going to be able to purchase elemental devastation now?”

“The floor recognizes Wizard Shoaster. Though I doubt Archmage Kajombro has any insights into that particular issue. That is a discussion for another forum.”

“Actually, I think I can put your mind at ease at least on that issue. I’ve been experimenting with a few things on the road, as I’m sure others here have as well. I’m surprised you haven’t run into this though. Have you tried to take that spell?”

“No. I don’t actually have the XP for it. And I didn’t need to learn such a dangerous spell. Such things are highly regulated, even for someone at my rank.”

“As well they should be. Does anyone here have the XP to gain a dangerous elemental spell? Cascade, storm, devastation?”

Everyone looked around the table, and one of the elves hesitantly put their hands up.

“Great. Try to take the spell now. Don’t worry, you won’t lose the XP. Just tell us what happens.”

“Very well.” The elf started touching the air. “Oh! It says I can’t, because it’s a restricted spell. I either have to research it myself, be granted permission from someone else that has it, or get admin approval with a proposed use, whatever that means. The box is asking if I want to proceed and which method I want.”

“Yes, the admin thing confuses me as well,” Light admitted. “We’ll have to talk about it.”

“You didn’t know this?” one of the other Guild members asked. “I thought everyone knew about restricted spells by now!”

“No I didn’t,” the first complained. “No one tells me anything.”

“No one told me, but I seem to have figured it out.”

“Oh yeah? And what restricted spell were you trying to get, I wonder?”

“That’s none of your business!”

“The floor has not recognized this argument!” the facilitator reminded them. Both looked away angrily. “But that concern is answered. We should have someone with high XP try to buy every spell and compile a list of what’s restricted. You always get a confirmation window, so if you’re careful you won’t accidentally do this. That would help allay fears, especially if the list of restricted spells is the same as our original list of them.” He blinked a moment. “And what would it mean if it was?”

“I’ve assigned an action item,” said the meeting scribe from the corner of the room.

I didn’t even realize they were there! Olaph thought to himself.

“Fine.”

“If I may,” Light spoke up.

“The floor is still yours.”

“This highlights a growing issue, that of even Guild members not exactly knowing what they can and cannot do under The System. And if we’re confused, think about the general population!”

“I see your point. We do not wish ignorance of the population, only safety. If The System is the new way of life for us, all should be informed equally and allowed to benefit. You have a solution?”

“I do. First, put out a bounty. Any new knowledge of The System that is unknown will be rewarded. A moon, perhaps? I can’t imagine us paying out that much over the long term. Meanwhile, post a set of instructions internally and externally. The outside world doesn’t need to know exactly what spells are considered restricted for example. But knowing you can show someone a window by willing and spinning it is quite useful.”

“You can show a window by spinning it?” asked the one guy that knew about the restricted spell.

“HA! You didn’t know that? Too busy trying to get restricted spells I guess?”

“I see what you mean,” the facilitator agreed looking between the two. “We’ll take it under advisement.”

“Good. We’ve discovered party chat, the party options menu, that weird overwatch system that activated when Sinjorino was in the air, the beta area when you research a spell, huh I wonder if there’s a way for supernatural people to become beta testers? Anything else I’m not remembering?” He looked to the others.

“I copied out part of the beta area and gave it to Lily to give her Herbalist,” Olaph told him. “So you can clearly break windows apart into separate ones. A person granted beta access can further spread an ability. Who knows if Lily could do the same as a third generation.”

“Okay, what else?”

“What about that dungeon entrance we came across on the way to the Gate?” Sinjorino reminded them. “It’s not related to The System, or is it?”

“If it is not the timing is very coincidental,” the facilitator told them. “When The System took hold the The Labyrinth of Khandax broke too. It was created and we believe maintained by holy power. Now, without that control, parts of it are now popping up all over. It’s a real problem.”

“Wait, the entire labyrinth is just gone?” Light asked.

“That’s right. The governors vanished, as did all the entrances. We’re still doing surveys last I heard to make sure the area is stable but the area under Khandax is now mostly empty. We were concerned the whole area could collapse, given how big the labyrinth was when it was there, but I haven’t heard of any catastrophes there. We have mages shoring it up as best they can.”

“So it didn’t go away? We went through something called level 17 or..”

“Yes, medium dungeon 17,” Sinjorino agreed.

“Right. When we picked up the last fiendstone it vanished and we were on the surface again.”

“That’s consistent with other reports,” the facilitator told them. “Various levels of the labyrinth now appear, seemingly at random, near populated areas and remain until cleared. Anything else? Seems we have a lot to discuss.”

“I think that’s it?” Light decided, thinking back. “We did want to discuss the wording we saw presented in several boxes too. The System used words like ‘us’ when referring to itself, and again just now spoke of admin consent to do certain things. That implies an intelligence behind it, and perhaps we can somehow contact that intelligence.”

“Very well, all valid topics for this meeting. For starters, what is the overwatch system?”

The meeting went on and on.

Chapter 10

Kit

Where: Meeting room inside the Guild building

When: Now the evening of the 7th day in the village

The group was alone, the meeting having ended several minutes ago and the others leaving. Each was sitting with their silent thoughts, never believing the path the meeting had taken. The Guild leaders were quite interested in “what” was filling in the boxes The System presented, and even more so that the beta spells and abilities not yet in widespread use could be changed after the fact.

“There are not many powerful enough to do that,” the facilitator had said. “In fact I would have said only the Lord. But why strip us of our ability to speak to angels at the same time you make these changes? No, it must be some other power.”

And now, despite their protests, it seemed the group was being ordered to go look for that power.

“So,” said Light into the silence. “I suppose we should have some kind of planning meeting. We’ve been given a lot of leeway but we’ll have to depart soon.”

“And you’re sure about this?” Paige asked him. She had, not being a member of the Guild and only there to watch Light do his thing, kept her mouth shut during the meeting. But she was free to talk now, and looked a bit panicked.

“They’ve decided we’re the best team for the job. We already know about the Gates and such, showed initiative with the beta area, and have good ideas. Why not us?”

“Why anyone? It’s crazy talk! They want us to go to the demon world, find a tunnel down to Sammael himself, and make sure he’s still secure down there?”

“As one of the only beings that could, in theory, make such a change to the world, yes. And with all angels gone, if he’s not being held back anymore the world needs to be made ready and aware.”

“And the four of *us* are going to do that?”

“Well,” he decided, “Olaph doesn’t have to go, of course. But I’m fairly certain the church would like to know what’s going on down there as well. And most of their power is gone now. He’s one of the only ones we know that can complete the quest, get new backgrounds, and come with us. Naturally I’m sure other high ranking members of the church got the same quest but he’s already involved. Isn’t that right, padre?”

“I’m not exactly looking forward to coming face to face with the being charged with tempting mankind, but I agree the mission is of utmost importance. We do need to know,” Olpah allowed. “If you don’t think I’ll slow you down too much.”

“See, the four of us!” Light told her.

“And you’re sure we can handle it? Just us?”

“Oh, Miss collage educated isn’t actually ready for the real world? Is that what I hear you saying?” He put a hand to his ear and turned his head.

“This is like being told magic exists and now please go ahead and cast this grade ten spell. I want to be a support mage, yes, but this mission seems awfully risky. I don’t want to slow you down too much either.” *Yes, good excuse not to crawl around a hole in the ground, good thinking me!*

“Well, well, a bit of self reflection from our youngest party member. Who would have thought? Don’t worry, I wouldn’t take you if I thought you would get in the way. I’ve seen your spell list it’s fine. And you can take a few more before go, right?”

“I have some XP from the missions, yes.”

“So there. Sinjorino, any complaints on your end?”

“I will go where the Guild orders me, though I doubt there will be much of the old world where we are going. I do wish to clarify something though. Paige may be referring to the four of us simply not being enough for this mission. We may have to fight through many demons in the tunnels leading to Sammael.”

“Ah, well, this is a case of one person being too many and an army being not enough. We have to strike a balance,” he told them. “It’s a fact finding mission. We’re not expected to take over being his jailer. We peek in there, look around, and get back out hopefully without attracting any attention. The fact of the matter is he’s probably still guarded so we’re really just formalizing it.”

“How do you figure?” they asked.

“Because he hasn’t been seen breaking through to our world to enact his revenge? Start tempting people again? That sort of thing, you know, the stuff he does.”

“There is that. And we can’t just find an avatar because they can’t be trusted.”

“Exactly. We’ll be fine. There are some steps we’ll have to take between now and then anyway. Passages that deep aren’t exactly easy to find, by design, so we’ll need a guide to show us one. Basically any that exist have been created by demons after the fact, using magic probably. A pilgrimage, if you will, to see their king. We just find a demon that made the trip and get them to show us where their tunnel is. We won’t take them with us, of course. It’s a tunnel, not a maze. But one thing at a time.” *The problem will be finding that one demon. But the leader (that’s me) has to project confidence and I’m sure something will work out. Worst comes to worst we make our own tunnel, I have the stone shaping spell I could probably do it myself.*

“Fine,” Paige breathed. “I should get used to weird requests I suppose, and traveling all over.”

“That’s the spirit. Now, the Guild has allowed us, and I quote, every resource, so we’ll head to the bursar and get out a couple hundred moons for supplies and sundries. Maybe some suns for bribes in the demon world? Then hit the armory, have a nice dinner, and the next few days we’ll spend shopping and studying for the trip. Olaph will of course use this time to choose his powers, now that he knows what we’re going to be facing, and Sinjorino, uh, I guess you get a few days off!”

“You said armory,” they mused, folding their hands and leaning their chin on them. “What exactly are we talking about here?”

He laughed and stood up. “Come on, I’ll show you. Every resource means full access, we’ll stop at the misfit depot first, way less paperwork to get something out of there. If you don’t find anything that suits your fancy we can visit the main depot too. I’m pretty much set,” he indicated his two swords, “but with the misfits you never know what you’re going to find.”

The three were led by Light deeper into the building, his order from the Guild heads getting him past any guards. He took out 200 moons, 50 suns, that he would have to fill out paperwork to justify or give back upon his return, and the four went to another room past another set of guards. A man behind a desk perked up at their entrance.

“Welcome to the misfits,” Light announced. “The home of the maybe useful. Look around!”

“But don’t touch anything please,” said the man. “Read the cards and ask if you want to see something. And I’ll need to see your authorization for taking anything out.” He held out a hand and Light gave him the paperwork. He hadn’t put it away, he had to show it every twenty meters traveled after all.

“What is all this?” Paige asked, looking around. Before the group were shelves, racks, and pegboards full of all sorts of junk. Weapons, jewelry, simple stones, figurines, lamps, and more filled the space.

“These are the less useful magical items,” the man explained, still with some trace of pride in his voice. “Items that are not cursed, obviously, but which did not work out for the person or people involved in their creation. Spells put into objects that were not completely thought out, or that interacted in a strange way. We want to find good homes for them, if you will, but all of these come with caveats. In the right hands they can be useful of course. We don’t throw any magical item away. Worst case we wait ten years and if it hasn’t been moved, meaning no one has shown interest in that time, we siphon off the magic to create a different item. If you can show you can handle them, the paperwork is minimal to take something out on loan. Not like the armory proper, you have to sign a stack of forms up there, and we want the item back or if lost, you pay for the replacement. Here, well, it’s not *great* if you lose it but it’s not the end of the world either. Another difference; Here we offer a *discount* from the usual cost to anyone that shows interest, so that the originator of the item can get at least some of their investment back. If they’re still alive, anyway. So if you fall in love with something and absolutely have to have it, we can make that happen. Again, after proving you understand how to work with whatever it is.”

“Neat,” she realized. “That all sounds quite reasonable.”

“We think so too.”

So the group looked around, and Sinjorino was the first to speak up because they went right to the weapon racks. “I’m interested in a bow, maybe this one. Can you tell me more about it?”

“Ah, the bow of the five winds! A fine weapon, in the right hands. We actually have several bows like it, of different elements if you didn’t want wind.” He indicated several nearby bows, of various styles. “People keep trying to make this thing, I mean it’s the only real use for the conjuration chain spell, but they never ask anyone (such as myself) if someone has before. So we keep piling the things up. Sad, really.”

“I’m not really familiar with specific spells?” they hedged.

“Here,” Light told them. “Check it out.” He spun a box for them to look at.

Chain together multiple spells, releasing them all in sequence when you stop maintaining this spell. Immediately after casting this spell, you may cast any number of additional spells into the chain. Each such spell is considered maintained while you are casting into the *Chain*, imposing the usual penalty, but once you have finished the only maintenance penalty that applies is that of the *Conjuration Chain* itself. Technically, you do not know if each spell succeeds when you cast it, as it is subsumed into the chain with no immediate effect, so the exact casting check will be obfuscated by The System. However, as you can use XP to recover from failed checks you will be informed by how much you failed. If you choose to not spend XP you will forget you have failed and may carry on as you were. Additional spells must either be personal or otherwise not have a specific creature or object as a target; you can use area effect spells, or specify a distance and direction from yourself, but the *Conjuration Chain* otherwise is unable to determine specific targets. Upon ceasing maintenance, you can choose to either let the linked spells complete, or simply let their magic fade. If you choose to activate the chained spells, each one activates using your initial casting roll for each spell, each one activating one Segment after the previous one. Of course, if you failed to cast any of the spells into the chain, they may backfire.

“I think I see the problem,” they decided.

“There are many, some you probably don’t,” said the curator. “The spell is grade ten, so you’re at a minus four to all subsequent casting after that. Now you have to worry about what spells you’re putting into the chain. That’s a further penalty for each one. Say you put in three spells and fail two. So you not only blow yourself up once, you get to blow yourself up *a second time*. Now that we have The System and know the results of our checks we know just how dangerous this spell is. And how useless. Why cast a bunch of personal spells in this way? Just cast them, it’s way easier. You have to maintain

them one way or the other, this just adds extra steps. *But*, in this one case it might have worked. It may even have been someone making the first bow of this type that made this spell, but it still fell short. You can specify the distance and direction but not a target. And nobody is good enough to estimate, to the centimeter, where their spell needs to go. So they do all this work, give it a try, and then give it up in disgust and try something else.”

“Try what, exactly?” Paige asked, interested now.

“The bow is in two parts. The bow itself which has the chain on it, and the string. The activation is pulling the string back. The string starts casting elemental bolt into the chain cast by the bow, which again is set up with a direction and distance. When you release the string the chain unloads the bolts into the target. If they haven’t dodged out of the way by then, of course.”

“How quickly? Oh wait, one per segment,” Sinjorino corrected, looking at the box. “Better if it had been all at once. I wonder.”

“Naturally the target would get what we now call a dodge attempt,” the man explained, “so while before The System was put in place it would have *looked* to be simultaneous given how short a time a segment is, we know now it isn’t. The System gives them the chance to defend, even if it’s totally implausible they could dodge that quickly. Once they perform a dodge, and move 1/10 their movement speed, they need not bother to dodge again because the bolts are going to go right past them. You would only hit the maximum number of times if they failed to dodge that many times, as they would get a dodge per spell. And if they fail to dodge that much, they’re probably already dead anyway.”

“May I try something with it? Do you have a shooting range?”

“In the back. You may safely take the weapon it won’t go off. Here’s the string.”

Sinjorino walked to the back and strung the bow. There were stone lanes with a block of stone at the end, clearly something to fire at. They nodded, their distancer telling them the exact range to the block. They lifted, sighted, made an archery check as they pulled the string back and releasing it, getting a 19 + 1 for the distancer. An energy bolt struck the block doing 2 damage. “At least I can use it as a normal bow if I wanted to,” they remarked. “How long do I have to hold it to get more bolts?”

“I’m surprised you hit it at all,” said the man. “I never could. The spell is cast in three segment increments. Don’t charge it more than five times, that’s where the name comes from. You risk backfire after that, too much magic as the string is technically maintaining all the casts of the spell until it’s not pulled back anymore.”

Sinjorino would have scowled if they could. “I see. As for hitting the block,” they tapped their faceplate, between the eyes. “I have a special device that tells me the distance to things I can see.” They pulled the bowstring back again. This time they waited 12 segments before releasing it, getting a 14 total. *No aiming bonus. Right, because I specify the target on the initial pull, and I cannot further refine that after the fact. I would have to ‘aim,’ then begin the full ‘countdown’ by holding the string back. Disappointing.* 5 segments later all five bolts had hit the block for a total of 25 damage. The man cast a repair spell on the block, fixing it up as they considered. Quickly taking only single shots they made 5 bow checks, 22, 20, 20, 13, 13, each at a 3 delay, for a total of 15 delay spent firing. 23 damage this time, and another repair spell cast. *How unfortunate the spell doesn’t ‘stack’ on top of itself, simply doing more damage the more times the spell is added. That’s really what the creator should have been going for. But perhaps magic doesn’t work that way and this is the only thing they could attempt? I suppose it could be useful, if used against a wounded opponent harried by others and finished off by me in a flurry of strikes. Wounded, they would have less chance to dodge each ‘arrow’ and be hit more times. But for me-*

“My goodness you’re fast,” the man remarked. “I could hardly follow all that!”

“Yes, I have practiced with a bow for a very long time. I believe I have what you may call mastered it. But in terms of The System I have a 10 rating.”

“Doesn’t work that way?” he questioned. “Skill with a bow doesn’t drop delay?”

“You are of course correct. I have developed what is essentially a bow based martial art, further decreasing my delay. As I say, I have been refining the technique a very long time. I’m just glad The System incorporated it or ‘allowed’ it if you will. I know it claimed to be as easy a transition as possible so we were not made worse but physical law has seemingly changed, or at least become more discrete, so it easily could have.”

“Ah, that would explain it! Nothing we humans could do, then.”

“It would be difficult to teach, without a CPU, excuse me, a processing unit alongside your fleshy brain.” They tapped their head. “But perhaps with a bit of magical assistance, say a magical lens over one eye that told the distance to an object? Then the bow could be used by anyone. That is the limiting factor here, if I did not mistake you? An organic taking the usual 6 to 7 delay, plus reload delay, would be far better off with this weapon, but as my ranged combat delay is equal to the casting check of the spell it works out to be the same. If the combination of spells had worked as intended, I mean. As it seems to work just fine as a normal bow, I will take it. Light, would you mind putting my bow and arrow into your dimensional pocket? I will see how the bow holds up and perhaps purchase it upon my return, but for now I will not sell my current equipment.” *Just making the bow fire the energy bolt upon release of the string would have saved them enchanting the chain spell, and probably would have worked as a normal bow. But here it sits, because of the peculiarities of the chain spell.*

“Don’t mind,” he said simply.

“Thank you.”

“An enchanted lens,” the man mused. “That could solve it, couldn’t it? A variation on the measure spell, heck maybe even the measure spell itself. Now why didn’t we think of that? I’ll look into it, if that pans out we may be able to use these bows normally after all. Thanks for the idea!”

“Of course. When we return I would be interested to learn the results of such experimentation.”

“Now, do you want wind? We have ice, fire, magic, wind, knockout, and dross.”

“As I cannot change the type of arrows this bow fires and there is always the possibility of use against living targets, I will choose knockout type, please.” *I can always simply stomp an unconscious monster or animal to death if it became needed. Or just leave the area, in the case of an animal I have no wish to kill and simply disturbed accidentally. Yes, this is for the best.*

“Okay, you can put this one back and grab the other one. Though really, it’s the string doing the work, pick what bow design you like and just switch the strings.”

“Very well. Thank you for your assistance.”

On the way to the range Paige had spotted something interesting hanging on the wall and went over to it. “What’s the story with this?” she asked, looking it over. It seemed to be a harness with four heavy chains hanging off the back, and at the end of the chains was a three segmented grasping hand.

“Ah, now there’s an interesting piece,” the man told her, coming to stand beside her. “Created by the honorable Doctor Ocurvius it’s one of the least quirky objects in the misfit section. It’s simply a chain put into a H configuration such that a length of chain hangs off each point, and a single casting of animate object went into it. It works as intended, though it can get away from you a bit if your mind wanders or you forget to tell it to stop doing something. It’s here mainly because no one wants to wear it! It is carrying a bunch of chains on your back, it’s not any heavier than a backpack but it does make you look a bit evil.”

“About a meter and a half on the chains?” she asked.

“I believe so, I never measured them.”

“I’ll try it on!”

“Really?” Light asked. “You’ll look ridiculous.”

“But I’ll be in a tunnel where no one can see me,” she countered. “So it won’t matter. Two extra pairs of ‘hands’ could come in useful.”

“I guess?”

While she got strapped into the harness and practiced making them move around he looked around the shelves. He rejected most things, his own swords were pretty amazing and they worked just as he wanted them to thank you very much. So to find something here-

“What’s this ring?” he asked, skidding to a halt and leaning back. *Something about alarm?*

“Ah, that was created by a recluse, wanted to know if someone was sneaking up on him. Very paranoid, tragic case. It works as the normal alarm spell, when you put the ring on you can specify a number of people that won’t set it off. But otherwise it’s a five meter radius out from the ring that will permanently sound an alarm if anything gets close. Naturally no one can wear it even in their house because if they got too close to a wall and someone walked by on the street outside it would always be going off. So it’s stuck down here.”

“I’ll take it,” he decided. “We’re going to be alone in a tunnel so an extra alarm if something invisible tries sneaking up on us would be very helpful.”

“Very well. Just wait until you’re alone to put it on, please.”

“Of course.”

“And for you, sir?” the man asked Olaph.

“I’m not sure,” he admitted. “We can always come back, right? I think I know how I’m going to redistribute my backgrounds but until I actually do I won’t know what would really suit me.”

“You should try these chains,” Paige yelled, being carried by them as she let them do the walking by him. “I’m walking without moving my legs! This is fun!”

“Eh, pass, thanks.”

“We can come back,” Light told him. “But better decide soon, padre.”

“I’ll have it done by tomorrow,” he promised. “Then we can really start to plan this trip.”

“Good enough. My good man, paperwork please!”

“Oh yes,” the man promised them. “Three items? So much paperwork...”

Chapter 11
 Prep and Go
 Where: Guest chambers in Guild building
 When: That night

Olaph had at last finalized how he wanted his backgrounds to be rearranged. They were going into a potentially dangerous situation, dealing with demons *in the best case* and actually making it to Sammael's prison in the worst. Hopefully they could remain hidden or at a distance but who know what one of the most powerful fallen angels knew or could sense around himself? Even supposedly frozen in ice. *And what if he isn't? Disaster!* He needed the maximum amount of power with the least amount of skills he could manage. Oh, he knew now, looking at the confirmation screen, that his skills relating to his old powers would transfer to new skills relating to his new powers. But choosing something like that Martial Artist he had talked with Lily about was certainly out of reach. He didn't have enough current skills to sacrifice for the skills that power set would require for sure. (Was information about his new skills just going to be *placed* inside his brain? The System could do that? Where did the knowledge come from?) But there was a beta set of powers that was perfect. He had gotten the bag of fiendstones from Light, the party hadn't sold them or anything there just hadn't been time. That earned him a funny look but he handed them over. Olaph was now looking at the final step, and took a deep breath. *Remember, it's only temporary. A year and a day and I can choose again, or keep it. This is what's best for now, I'm convinced of that. I need to pull my weight, and this is the best way I can do that. I can choose pure magic user later and become a healer again, think of this as just a vacation. The most dangerous vacation anyone has ever embarked on. Yeah.*

Confirmation Required

The following changes will be made to your Lifepath.
 As some abilities chosen are beta abilities none of these choices are permanent until the beta period expires or final confirmation is given.

Please check the following for accuracy.

Backgrounds

| Old Background | is modified to | New Background |
|------------------------------------------|----------------|--------------------------|
| Heavenly Devotee: Michael Early Riser | | Attuner |
| Spark of Magic | | Spark of Magic |
| Celestial Repository | | Medium Thief of Magic |

| Skills | | |
|----------------|-------------|-------------------------|
| Old Skill | modified to | New Skill |
| Moon | | Bilocation* |
| Purification | | Channeling* |
| Repulsion | | ESP* |
| Anatomy | | Healing Acceleration* |
| Consecration | | Premonition* |
| Sun | | Telekinesis* |
| Venus | | Fiendstone Attuning |
| Uranus | | Fiendstone Boosting^ |
| Mercury | | Fiendstone Empowerment^ |
| Jupiter | | Fiendstone Sense^ |
| Saturn | | Fiendstone Skill |
| *excess points | | Fiendstone Stats |

*Note: As some skills you have chosen cap at 4 but you currently have a 5 rating the extra points will be removed and reallocated to account for all Attuner skills. Skill groups have been reorganized to further facilitate this change.

^Due to the exceptional circumstance prerequisite requirements have been waved to maintain skill group coherency.

| Stats* | | | |
|---------------|-------|-------------|-------|
| STrength | + 5 - | REASON | + 6 - |
| ENDurance | + 5 - | KNOledge | + 6 - |
| CONstitution | + 6 - | RESolve | + 7 - |
| REFlexes | + 5 - | INSight | + 7 - |
| MANipulation | + 5 - | PERsonality | + 5 - |
| COOordination | + 5 - | LUCK | + 5 - |
| LOOKs | + 5 - | | |



*Note: Multiple new INSight based skills detected.
CONstitution based background detected.
INSight based background detected.
Stats have been reorganized along these lines for maximum efficiency. These are the recommended changes.
If you are unhappy with these changes you may make additional changes. You cannot confirm until changes to stats equal 72 points exactly.

Do you wish to make this change to your lifepath?

← Go back

Confirm

There was nothing for it. This would (hopefully) allow him to keep up with the others, while granting him more options later should he desire them. He wasn't sure about turning into creatures as a long term solution to his loss of holy power, but for the moment he could help "beta test" the abilities in as hostile an environment as they could probably ever be tested. He looked everything over a third time, nodded, and he hit the word confirm on the box. It vanished. There was no interplay of lights, no sign anything had changed, really, yet Olaph could feel, once and for all, that his connection to the Heavens was gone. His knowledge of how to cast magic was gone. But in their place...

He shook the fiendstones out onto the table and looked them over. Picking one at random he concentrated on it. Nothing. He chose another to avoid the penalty for retrying. Nothing. *I am avoiding that by trying a different stone, right?* He scowled, picked up a third, and finally managed a 17 on the check to know what it would turn into. A wraith.

Is a fifteen for this skill too high a difficulty? With my 7 INSight and five skill I can only succeed five times out of every thirteen. That's less than half the time. With a ten skill and a 7 INSight my minimum would be a twelve, meaning I would only fail about one in seven times. I suppose the main use of the skill, just to find them, is only a 10 difficulty and much more achievable. This is something you do like I'm doing it. Sitting down with all the time in the world to figure it out. I was just curious, I have six stones and I have a 6 CON so I'll be absorbing them all. I don't need to know what they turn into, I already know because my party fought them. This was simply an experiment to see if my new skills worked, and apparently they do. He took another stone in hand as he set the wraith aside and made the same check, which succeeded that time as well. *Ah, the gargoyle. Well, it's an hour of work just like my praying used to be, at least these won't vanish at sunrise the next day. No offense, Michael.*

For the next sixty minutes Olaph sat with each fiendstone, tearing it apart bit by bit and absorbing the power it held into himself. Each stone went into a "slot" in his soul he hadn't had before, and each one had a "pool" of points he could use to draw from. Either to enhance his own stats with the stats of the creature the stone would be, to use one of the creature's powers, or to simply become that creature outright. In the end, he absorbed these six stones with varying degrees of usefulness.

| | |
|-------------------|----|
| Ogre | 11 |
| Drake | 10 |
| wraith | 16 |
| Gargoyle | 15 |
| Chimeric: Leodile | 13 |
| Skeleton | 13 |

As these were all medium stones (or were) each would take 4 “points” to transform into, or 2 points to pull a power from. Naturally this could be stretched a bit, using the boosting skill. So with luck he had a total of 20 transformations before all his power was gone. *Of course, turning into a skeleton is probably not something I’m going to be doing any time soon, but knowing I can take their toughness or I suppose their undead nature makes them useful.* The stones were gone, and he felt the creatures slumbering within him. This was good, fiendstones were always absorbing ambient magic and could, in theory, reactivate at any time. This took these six stone out of circulation, making sure they would never trouble anyone ever again. *Of course, as more people gain this power fiendstones will thus become more desirable, and thus the price of them will go up. But then, with each person only able to absorb so many, maybe it won’t be problem? Maybe we could start charging, taking older ones that could reactivate at any time and making sure they aren’t a danger? Not for me to decide, I guess.*

He played around with his other powers a bit, from his new medium background, floating things around and closing his eyes to see what he could sense with ESP. Satisfied everything was working as The System had claimed he went to bed. Tomorrow he would tell the others he was ready to go.

“I’m not quite ready to go,” Light told him the next morning. “I still have a few hours of studying spells to do. I want to spend most of my XP before we leave.”

“Fine with me,” he agreed. “This gives me a chance to look around for another fiendstone to buy. I’d like one large one, just in case. Hopefully the vendor won’t mind me sorting through their stock so I can find a good one. Good practice for the skill, not that I can’t just put XP in now I suppose.”

“That will be a hard habit to break,” he agreed. “Paige, Sinjorino? Anything you need to do to get ready?”

“I already learned all the new magic I want to,” Paige announced. “Some of us don’t need to study for hours, how tedious, just to learn a spell or two. I learned elemental orbs, skill transfer, zone of the zen master, and temporary tool. Should all be useful on our journey, I think?”

Light rolled his eyes. “Naturals.”

Paige just looked smug.

“I am ready to depart whenever,” Sinjorino announced.

“Fine, I’ll get back to work,” Light grumbled.

“Let’s go find you a fiendstone, Olaph!” Paige announced, getting up from her seat. “Must be one around here someplace.”

“You want a what?” asked the woman at the counter on the second floor of the Mage Guild’s building. Paige was wearing her chain harness but had the four “arms” wrapped around her midsection. It was an odd look, but it kept them from waving around and getting her even more odd looks, and it was a Guild building so most everyone was aware that something weird could show up at any time.

“A fiendstone. One classified as ‘large,’” Olaph repeated. “Ideally a selection so I can choose what creature it turns into. For reasons I won’t get into.”

“Your funeral,” she said. “But we don’t keep anything like that around here. With the amount of magic we use it’s dangerous. Never know when one of those things is going to come to life again.”

Well, until I came along that was true, Olaph laughed to himself. “Would there be any in town, do you think?”

“Probably. Check with jewelers, stupid people are always buying the smaller ones as earrings or some nonsense. Like living dangerously, I guess.”

“That does seem a bit dangerous,” he admitted. “Thanks.”

“Thank you,” Paige echoed. Both made their way out of the room but Olaph looked down the hall.

“What’s up?” she asked him. “Did you want to go back to the equipment room? Get something out now that you know what you can do?”

“No, not exactly. There must be some kind of bounty board around here, right? Someplace to get missions assigned by the Guild?”

“I guess? Once I graduated I got assigned to Light so I’m not sure of all the ins and outs of the day to day operation of the Guild. We can ask around though. Mind if I ask why?”

“It’s like this,” he told her, getting out of the way of a man in robes coming down the hall. “I may have active powers now, but I’m still not a fighter. And we’re going to potentially the most dangerous place it’s possible to go. I’d like a ‘trial run’ if you will. So maybe there’s a report of another dungeon popping up somewhere that includes ‘large’ sized fiendstones. That way both needs can be met. I can get some XP to put into close combat or dodging better, get some more fiendstones, and close a dangerous source of monsters all in one trip. Good practice with your new toys, all of you. The new bow, and the ring, that sort of thing. And working together, we really only had the one mission.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” she agreed. “Let’s go down to the front, it would be down there. So ‘adventurers’ can check it too, see if there’s any monster that needs slaying the Guild doesn’t want to bother with.”

“This way?”

“Yeah, down those stairs.”

The pair looked over the board but came up empty.

“Shoot, we’ll have to go into town after all,” Olaph sighed.

“Were you looking for something in particular?” asked the receptionist.

“Something to do with those dungeons that are now popping up all over,” he explained. “The more difficult the better.”

“Oh, sorry, you missed one by that much,” she said, making a tiny space with her fingers. “Wait, no that was two days ago? Hang on.” She rummaged around in her desk. “Yes, here it is. We got a request from Fairfield and a party was dispatched via teleportation three hours later. That was two days ago, there was no confirmation or acceptance of the reward. I think this one just turned into a rescue mission. You want it?”

Shouldn’t there be a better system than that? Olaph asked himself. Would they have just stayed missing if we hadn’t come along and asked about it? There should be some kind of check in period, something, to make sure the job is done and everyone is safe. I mean, really.

“You bet we do!” Paige announced. “Give us the details.”

“So let me get this straight,” Light finally said after hearing the story. “Two days ago in Fairfield, a town to the west of here, a “large dungeon 23” appeared and the Guild was notified. A group of adventurers took the job of clearing it, and haven’t been heard from since. You want to go there, both to collect fiendstones for your new absorption powers so you go down the demon world tunnels with large creatures instead of medium, but also as a trial run for our journey and as an extra bonus, save this hapless group?”

“Correct,” Olaph agreed with a nod. “What do you think?”

“We did handle dungeon 17 fairly easily,” Sinjorino reminded him. “And that was before we had access to our new gear.”

He snorted. “You’re the only one with useful gear, and honestly it’s not all that useful because you picked the knockout string. You may actually be *less* effective that way!”

“My calculations suggest that statement is incorrect. With knockout being twice as effective, and without the usual delay necessary to draw new arrows, my damage output should increase substantially.”

“It would have to,” he complained, “as non-lethal health is much higher than lethal.” He rubbed his chin. “But you are pretty fast, I have to admit. And getting the padre some actual combat experience before we leave wouldn’t be a bad thing. And in theory he’s more powerful after the fact, because he upgrades from medium to large creature types.”

“It’s going to be weeks of travel, a day or two more isn’t going to make any difference,” Paige explained. “Can we do it? Huh? Can we?”

“Why are you so hot for this? What’s the reward?”

“Rescuing those poor adventurers, of course!”

“Uh huh. Wait, if this is a rescue mission- it’s a double reward isn’t it? For clearing the place that the first team couldn’t, and rescuing the team. They’ll have to put up some kind of reward for your efforts. Is that it?”

“I mean I guess that’s a thing,” she admitted, but wouldn’t meet his eyes anymore. “I mean maybe we would get more XP as well, but again it’s saving the people I’m most concerned with.”

“Sure, I believe you, miss collage loans. All right, we can head there.”

“Let us depart,” Sinjorino agreed, standing. “Our belongings are safe in the rooms, I assume?”

“We can make sure to tell the front desk where we’re going,” Light told them. “They won’t get tossed like at an inn or anything. Come on.”

So the group went to accept the mission, allowing them to be teleported there free of charge, and wound up in what was essentially a small, single room with a window and a door. The door opened just fine from the inside, but had no handle on the outside, so that someone couldn’t mess with it. Fairly standard teleport destination and the group hurried outside before someone else decided to use it and things got messy. They closed the door and went looking for the dungeon entrance. This was a much larger town than the previous one so they had to ask around, finally getting directions to where it had opened; the middle of a bakery. It had been cordoned off by the city guard, who stopped them as they walked up.

“State your business,” the dwarf in charge demanded.

“We’re the rescue party for the initial party that went into the dungeon,” Light told him. “We were sent by the Mage’s Guild, here’s our paperwork.” He handed it over.

“This looks in order,” he decided, losing some gruffness. “I hope you fair better than the other team. They looked capable too, but they haven’t been out. Probably dead, I guess?”

“I hope that’s not the case. Carrying their bodies out would be a real hassle.”

The dwarf smirked. “Got that right. Okay, good luck. Don’t make me greet another group who has to go rescue you from rescuing these other people.” He gestured and two humans moved the wooden barricade keeping out the curious. Not that there were many at this point, it had been two days after all. They were really there in case something started coming out of the dungeon, not to keep fools from throwing their lives away by going in there.

“The shame of it would likely kill me anyway. See you soon.”

“May the angels watch over you.”

Not likely anymore, Olaph silently sighed.

The four headed into the shop and there was the entrance, looking just like the previous one. A rocky protrusion from the earth, thrust up into the middle of the store with a dark entrance, stairs going down into the darkness. Paige was trying not to giggle, imagining the looks on the faces of the bakery customers when this suddenly popped up to ruin their day, but sobered hoping no one had been standing on that spot when it happened. Light put his hand up and stuck it into the dungeon’s opening.

“Yes, same as before,” he announced. “But number 23. Any last minute prep you need to do?” He looked back and everyone shook their heads. “Okay, I’m starting the quest.” His hand went to touch accept on the box.

Quest Generation Complete
Rescue Mission

Original Location Quest:
Enter and clear Large Dungeon 23

Quest now expanded to include:
Learn the fate of the previous team that entered
Rescue previous team (if still living)

Warning: Standard Dungeon
You are about to enter an instantiated dungeon.
You may leave at any time by returning to the
entrance point, be aware no reward will be gained
if this option is exercised. You will be attacked by
various creatures. Collecting all dropped fiendstones
will cause the dungeon to vanish, resulting in the
loss of any equipment that has been left behind.
Please be careful.

Rewards: Possible rescue of party <The Brightblades>
Variable fiendstones (Large, Huge), Treasure, XP

Accept / Reject

Chapter 12
Getting To It
Where: Dungeon Entrance
When: Just then

The party appeared in the dungeon, looking around. Walls of seeming stone met their gaze, lit by the soft, gentle light of the circle at their feet. They had tested it in their last dungeon, stepping off this spot and then back again would send them outside. Anything they had picked up in the meantime would be gone, and any resources used (like arrows) would be returned. Light privately wondered if some sort of trickery was at work here, like this was all happening mentally to fool them into thinking they were wandering around a dungeon but the fiendstones had proven to be real and where would they have come from otherwise? So something was happening, either something new put in place by The System once the original network had been destroyed, or simply as a consequence of the Heavenly governors no longer being there to control the place. It was still very unclear how they had made such a thing in the first place, and now they would probably never know as there was nobody around to ask.

Did they make it? Or did they just 'corral' the whole thing into one place, some natural phenomenon they took credit for? And now without their power to maintain it, the place has gone back to the way it was always supposed to be.

This was neither here nor there at the moment, and Light unscrewed the cap on his sword of light, shining it around the space. This room *should* be safe, a jumping off point to the dangers within, just past that door. A very strange door, at that.

"Hello there, what's this?" Sinjorino asked, stepping off the circle and lowering their bow. As they did a rectangle set into the wall started to glow, illuminating a strange device underneath it. Symbols of some kind flashed up on the illuminated surface, and the others stepped up beside them. "Why, I never thought I would see one of these again!" they remarked, now looking the whole thing over. There was a platform of stone holding up a strange rectangular shape made of a gray metal, and a thin cord poked out the back and went into the wall. Above this, on a metal arm, was the glowing rectangle with the strange symbols on it. They changed every few seconds, making everyone but Sinjorino wonder if it was magical in some way. And to be fair, based on how many different sciences it took to make something like that work at all, it might as well be.

"So what is it?" Paige asked.

"An antique, even in terms of my construction," they answered. "My, my, my, I remember seeing one of these in a museum on a date. An official Apple low profile keyboard. Look how thin it is. Oh my, back in the day Apple was obsessed with how thin their devices were. Even when it actively hurt the product, if they had a choice between a slightly thicker design and a slightly thinner one, they went with the thinner one. And look at this beauty! A 32 inch OLED display running at 144hz and a 4k resolution if I'm not mistaken. Ah, those were the days. At least, according to the museum. We had gone quite far past the need for all this by the time I was constructed but some people still swore by 'what was good enough for their grandfathers.'" They chuckled.

"Okay, that's a whole bunch of nonsense," Light told them. "What's a keyboard?"

"It's a board... for keys."

That got them a dark look.

“See?” They pressed a key and the rectangle changed, now there was a box in the middle that said “Login.” “If I knew the password I could use these keys to type it in. See, these are the characters in the Ancient script. Well, pre-ancient I should say to be most accurate. This is an English keyboard. No mouse here though, I don’t think it’s meant to be used there must be some other purpose to all this. We just need to figure out what it is.”

“Go back to you *dating*?” Paige requested.

“Oh yes, I was quite attractive when my outer skin could be maintained,” they admitted. “Not so much now, of course.” They tapped their faceplate. “I do miss it. Dating, I mean.”

“You could get an illusion magic put on that, to make it look like you had skin?”

Heck, I have that spell, I could offer it to them sometime to see how it worked, Light thought. But of course that would be all you get, sight only. Anyone that touched you would feel you as you were, not so great for your date if they went in for a kiss, for example. But if they knew beforehand...

“I... suppose I could. I was quite vain back in the day. How could I not be, I was made to be perfect. Flawless skin, radiant hair, perfect nails, and you should have seen my-”

“Assuming you would like to maybe clear this dungeon sometime today, and apologies for interrupting you ladies, but could we focus on the door?” Light demanded. “Is this related in some way? That other team could be dying at this very moment.”

“There some kind of keys here too,” Olaph reported. “Bring that light over here.”

“See, progress?” He stepped over there, and the other two followed. It was a numeric keypad set on the side of the door. “Okay this isn’t better.”

“Indeed not,” Sinjorino agreed. “Without even knowing the length of the passcode I would have to guess perhaps millions of combinations. We could be here quite a while.” They looked it over. “I could try getting the casing off, perhaps construct a crude interface allowing me to more rapidly enter codes via my datalink cable but the mechanism itself may be rate limited to reduce the attack surface.”

“You know, sometimes I wonder what language you’re- Hang on, the other group got through here,” Light protested. “They didn’t die in the first room, we would have see them. Hello? Ghosts of adventurers? Are you here?” He pretended to listen. “Not here.”

“True, I do not see any defensive measures on the door,” they agreed, looking it over. “I do not think punching in a wrong code would activate any sort of killing mechanism. But of course one can never be sure.”

“Uh, is that thing supposed to be doing that?” Paige asked, pointing to the glowing rectangle again. Everyone turned, and the image had changed. On the display the nonsense had returned, symbols and numbers.

“That’s just the screensaver,” Sinjorino explained. “To help protect the monitor from burn in, not that monitors in that time were susceptible to such things like the old CRTs or Liquid Crystal displays were. An odd one, at that. Why would anyone put a calculus problem- wait, now it’s a linear algebra equation? To what end...”

“A what?”

But the display continued to change. “Calculate the 4 millionth digit of pi? Now that takes me back. I haven’t done that sort of thing since my early days, as a diagnostic routine. And now a quadratic equation. Oh, I see!”

“Slow down, what are you talking about?” Light huffed.

“I will simply take the problems in order, as they have now repeated.” They stepped over to the keypad again and typed in a bunch of numbers. The door opened at their touch. “See, nothing to it.”

“Wait, the answers to those math problems were the combination to this door?” Olaph asked, pointing at each thing in turn.

“Correct. An odd system, to be sure.”

“I call shenanigans,” Light decided. “How did the other party get through here? Did they just leave and not tell anyone because of the shame? Are they fine?”

“Quest is to rescue them though?” Olaph asked.

“You’re assuming this group did not have a remnant in the party,” Sinjorino cautioned him. “But there is every probability this is the case. We are not so rare as all that, and even one built in this time could no doubt handle such easy calculations. My concern is why this challenge right at the start? To insure one such as myself was included in the group?”

He brightened. “Ah, yes of course! That must be it. Well, come on everyone. We can get attacked at any time through this door and from any direction. Be on the lookout.” He put a hand on his sword. “I’ll take point.”

The group headed through the door and into the hallway beyond, which turned right after only a few steps. A few more paces forward and the path branched both left and right.

“Left hand rule again?” Light asked. He glanced back to see the other nod, and took the left path. This went right and left again, but led to a dead end. “Wow, already?” he asked no one in particular. “Back we go, I guess.” They headed back, now going straight and coming to a left fork while the passage went forward to what looked like another door. Light went left, then right, then left again, coming to another dead end.

“So far I’m not impressed,” Light mused, turning around again. “I guess we head back to that door we saw.”

The others turned to go but Olaph stood, staring at the wall.

“Something wrong, padre?” he asked when he realized Olaph wasn’t moving.

“This wall isn’t right,” he decided. “I got a 12 on my ESP check. I think there’s a hidden door here.”

“We could smash it down if we needed to, but unless the other party had not only a remnant and someone like you, Padre, the odds of the other party going this way are pretty slim.”

“What is our strategy here?” Paige asked. “Simply try to kill all the monsters thus making the dungeon vanish, or actively pursuing the other team? I can’t imagine they would vanish if we picked up the last fiendstone.”

“We’ll just have to take each room as it comes,” Light told her. “Clear it out, and whatever happens first happens.”

“Should we split up? Cover more ground that way.”

“Stick together, I have no idea how many levels the original dungeon had but twenty three sounds pretty deep to me. We need to be careful.”

“Okay. So we move on quickly as we don’t think they went this way.”

“But I could hardly see even inexperienced adventurers falling so early,” Sinjorino put in. “We should bypass as many early rooms as possible and move further in. That is where we will find our wayward group.”

“Fine, we’ll spend a moment trying to get this door open, but no more than that. Look for some kind of switch or hidden keyhole or something.”

Everyone nodded, and started pouring over the stones of the wall to see if anything stood out to them. But this didn’t last long.

“No, Light is right,” Olaph decided. “We won’t take the time to look, we’ll just go through. I need to get used to using my powers and one of them can help here. Join hands.” Everyone did, and he activated his Fiendstone Skill getting a 12, then Fiendstone Boost to knock his point cost from a 2 to a 1. The power he called was that of the wraith’s insubstantial nature, which allowed them to simply pass through the wall as if it wasn’t there. He turned around. They weren’t there. He scowled, and went back.

“So that didn’t work,” Light told him, rather unnecessarily.

“What did I do wrong?” he wondered. He brought up the box for the insubstantial power and realized his mistake.

The creature can bring with them additional mass, as long as they are able to carry it. Note that insubstantial creatures are treated as normal for all purposes to other insubstantial creatures.

“I have to be able to lift you!” he realized. “Maybe one at a time?”

“I am quite heavy,” Sinjorino warned him. “You would need a 7 STrength to lift me.”

“That’s not so bad. The question is do I spend energy three times or use a power?” He considered a moment. “I’ll just try for the wraith’s STrength as well, I only have 30 energy.” He willed the stat into himself, getting a 15, and as he wasn’t using the insubstantial power at the moment pulled all +3 STrength from the stone he could. *Should get some kind of bonus for pulling from one creature. At this rate I could have just become the wraith, but of course then I couldn’t turn the insubstantial power on and off.* His point pool went down by another one, and using both skill and stat together meant he was at a -4 to every other active check, but that was fine he only needed to take them through the wall. Which he did, one at a time. Once they were all through he deactivated the powers. They would be there for use for the rest of the scene, but he didn’t need the penalty walking around.

The room beyond had five sides, the “point” directly ahead. There were two doors, one to the left and one to the right. The room was otherwise empty, so the party headed to the left door and light went to open it.

“Wait!” Olaph cried. “My premonition went off with an 11.” *Good thing I did put those abilities away.* “That door is trapped somehow.”

“Trapped? The doors in number 17 weren’t trapped,” Paige reminded him. “Why would they be now?”

“I just have a bad feeling, that’s all.”

“We can take a quick look,” Light told him. He held up the pommel of his sword, playing it around the door frame. Everyone but Sinjorino calculated a 13 on their perception checks and saw the holes in the ceiling with the arrows pointed downwards towards where someone would be when opening the door.

“I could make them immobile with the new spell I studied,” Light suggested.

“I could simply open the door from a distance with telekinesis,” Paige countered. “They would then harmlessly fall to the floor.”

“Well I could sculpt the stone above the door and block the arrows from hitting us,” Light continued.

“Naturally I could just set the arrows on fire so they wouldn’t even be there to trigger anymore,” Paige announced.

“I could blast them in the holes with elemental energy!”

“So could I!”

“Just walk through it already!” Olaph shouted at them. Both turned. He had his hand on the door, which looked insubstantial, like him. “My goodness you two!”

“After you!” Light told Paige with an exaggerated bow.

“No, I insist, you’re the more experienced mage I’m just here to shadow you.” She bowed back.

“Here we go,” Sinjorino told them, shoving them both towards the door already. Olaph stepped through himself into the next chamber.

“Why couldn’t you have done that with the last one?” Light asked.

“Lift how many tons of rock? No thank you. I can easily lift a wooden door.”

“Ah.”

They were now in a hallway that went straight ahead and to the left, so they followed it left. They could make out an archway into the next room, straight ahead. But left they went, and yes, it snaked right, right, and left again dumping them into the room they had seen. It obviously had two doors, one right next to the other. As they entered it and the light fell on the shape in the corner that shape suddenly rose, showing itself to be a troll of some kind. A huge one, twice as tall as a man and reaching for the bolder it had been sitting on to use as a weapon. It had massive tusks, protruding from its upper lip, and wore only the rattiest of rags around its waist. It had gray skin, and bulging muscles making it far stronger than any human. It hefted the stone and looked at the shocked beings in front of it. Then it spotted Paige, and it roared.

“Trolls hate elves most of all!” shouted Paige over the roar.

Light wasted no time, as he had (almost) won initiative, in drawing his sword and becoming light. He added 4 to his delay.

Paige acted at the same time, somewhat impressing him and making him wonder if she had spent energy to show off? She made a magic combat check, getting a 16 vs the troll’s ranged combat check of 4. (Note: Trolls have no skill in ranged combat and are somewhat dumb) She knew he wouldn’t throw that rock (at her, he was looking right at her) for another 2 segments, but the spell she wanted to cast was 6 segments long. She took a -5 penalty and cast for 1 segment of deferred delay. This put her at a 2 with Sinjorino, who flowed into a stance and got a shot off from their bow. They calculated a 13 on “Bow Fu” while the troll calculated an 11 LUCk check to resist. He was hit. Sinjorino followed this up with a bow check of 20 and a mathematics check of 30 because of their CPU. This was a head hit, so they calculated damage, 6, and doubled it for being the knockout element, which was halved again for being used against a +1 size creature. The troll was at a -1 penalty now, having taken one quarter its capacity in the head for non-lethal, and this put Sinjorino’s delay up by 3.

Paige’s spell went off at the same time, and throwing 10 energy into it (getting one back with energy boost) she got a 23, her maximum. Half her planet level was 7, so that’s how many flickering orbs appeared in the air around her, each one crackling with lightning. Each was -3 in size and had effective 12 stats, meaning their delay was a 4. They calculated initiative, and slotted themselves into the combat.

“Show off,” Light muttered. *But then, neither of us has actually done any damage yet so...*

It was now, unfortunately, the troll’s turn, which it gleefully took tossing the rock at Paige. Yes, this disarmed it, the smarter move would have been to try to bash Paige in the head with it or something but again, troll. Not that bright. It got a 14 on this check and Paige, probably showing off more than she should, cast thrust on it. She took the -2 for casting it instantly, and with 8 energy (getting 2 back with energy boost) got an 18. The rock went straight back at the troll, which couldn’t exactly dodge because it was attacking. It got a rock to the chest for 19 damage. (Halved and rounded down to 9) It staggered back, unable to comprehend how the rock it had thrown had come back to hurt it. Paige’s delay went up by 2.

Olaph now had two choices. Transform and attack, or not get in the way of the professionals. Two of his forms, the orge and the leodile were both +1 size and could probably handle the troll. The drake was a -3 and would probably be ignored, even able to get behind the thing and attack from the rear. But he saw those glowing orbs around Paige and knew Light was about to get in on the action and so decided to hang back for now. He took a step back and was considered holding.

Light now blurred forward, sword striking out with a combination attack, calculated at a 15. This gave him three strikes, which he took, calculating a 10. He figured it was fine, usually he just opened with a sword slash but the troll was already wounded, so why not go for it? The troll calculated a dodge at 11, then subtracted 4 for his body and head injury. So Light hit three times, doing 1 damage to the right arm, 1 to the left leg, and 2 to the body. Light went up by 6 delay.

Sinjorino was up again, and made the same hit calculations as before. Ties go to the defender, so this time they missed, as penalties don’t apply to LUCk checks after all. They “tisk”ed.

Orbs 1, 2, and 3 went off. With the ridiculous stats they had and her planet rating of 14 they got a 34, a 27, and a 29 to hit respectively. The troll never saw it coming. It took (after rounding down) 11 damage to the body, 10 damage to the head, and 9 damage to the left arm. Naturally, just about anything else taking that kind of damage would get the point already and do the decent thing; expire. But not a troll! It could take a licking (in this case 'a licking' is a whole lot of damage) and keep on ticking (in this case 'ticking' is to keep living). It was very, very hurt but still up and fighting.

So, orb 4 and Sinjorino went to do something about it. 11 vs 6 for Sinjorino's "bow fu" so they hit this time. Another total 8 non-lethal to the head. (What head it had left, that is) Meanwhile the orb fired and vanished, but it hit the leg for some reason doing only 7 damage there.

The final orb, the troll, and Paige went on a 10 delay, the troll regenerating 1 point of damage which to be honest was hardly noticeable. The orb did another 9 damage to the body completely destroying it while at the same time it tried to swipe at the only person in range, Light. Naturally Light didn't bother to dodge, while Paige held as well, she had faith in her orbs. The troll's body, having exploded from what were essentially lightning bolts hitting it again and again toppled backwards, the head hitting the ground with a wet thud. Light plunged his sword through it and held it there, and the others watched as his radiance turned the still regenerating troll into stone. When the last piece became stone the whole thing shattered, turning into a fiendstone.

"Sure, I'll trade ogre for that," Olaph decided, stepping back into the room again.

"Heeeeeeey, thought we were supposed to be letting you get some combat experience," Light realized, putting his sword away and becoming flesh and blood again. "You didn't do anything!"

"I'll take the next one," he promised. "This is such a small room, I didn't want to get in anyone's way."

"I'll hold you to that," he promised.

"Meanwhile, my orbs did great!" Paige crowed. "I think I'm going to like that spell."

"Yeah, yeah. I'm used to fighting things that simply can't get away, or fight back. I wear them down. I don't need to hit for ridiculous damage. That troll would have kept coming if me and my sunlight orb weren't around. You would have been in trouble."

"Not really. I would have just set it on fire a bunch."

"Hummm..."

"What's this?" Sinjorino asked, taking a strange looking object down off the wall. It was a metal rod with what looked like rearing horses on either end. "The 'treasure' the quest spoke of that we might encounter?"

"I suppose," Light told them. "Mind if I have a look?"

"Not at all."

He took it and concentrated, getting a 14 on magic sense. "It's magical all right. We can figure out the purpose later, it'll take too long now." He cast, putting it into his pocket dimension. "Let's carry on!"

Chapter 13

What's Behind Door Number...

Where: Room 27

When: Just after beating the troll

The door out of the troll room was just that, a normal, everyday, unlocked, wooden door. That was stuck. Sinjorino took point, slamming a shoulder into it with a 16 STrength check, unjamming it. They peered into the next room.

"Looks clear." They looked up. "And isn't that odd?"

The others entered the room after them and looked around. Candles were scattered around the rectangular room only a few paces wide, but above them was a mural of an angel of some kind. They were holding up an amulet of silver, seated at a desk covered with books, notes, and other odds and ends. It seemed they had just finished work imbuing it as the amulet was depicted as having a white glow around it and they, the angel, seemed pleased with what they had done. In the center of the room was a large blue gemstone.

"That's pretty," Paige remarked, squatting next to it and looking at it from this and that angle. She made a magic sense check, calculating an 11. "Doesn't seem magical. Can we keep it?"

"Everything in here we don't pick up vanishes," Light reminded her. "We didn't see anything like this before though, what's going on?"

"More danger here, so more reward?" Olaph asked. "Or maybe more of the original dungeon's functions are coming back? They might have been suppressed by the governors?"

"But if this matter is real," Sinjorino asked, "where is it coming from?"

"Same place the fiendstones comes from I expect," Light answered. "Though the magic item concerns me. Then again, with the chaos moon and chaos mages loose in the world it could just be a consequence of that. Some random stuff happening, like the dungeon being random and now showing up in random places. Pick it up and let's go, we're not getting any answers here." *But to randomly make a magic item? It takes a long time to do that, and it's very exacting. How would a random magical surge create anything useful at all?*

"Fine by me," Paige told him, grabbing it up and slipping it into her backpack. "Of course, once we know the value and sell it I'll split it among you all. Party rules."

It looks like that pained her to say, Olaph thought. "So onto the next room, door is conveniently to the left."

This door too was stuck, making everyone wonder why, exactly. The dungeon hadn't been here two days ago, and even back when it was contained it shifted and renewed itself every 24 hours. This door being stuck was a *feature* of the place, not a consequence of moisture or anything like that. But if you've opened one stuck door you've opened them all, and again Sinjorino smacked it out of the way with another STrength check. This room was twice as big as the previous one, but no candles or murals here. There was a maze pattern in the floor, and some odd words scrawled on one of the walls. No one admitted to being able to read it, but Paige said to give her a minute and touched it, casting with her other hand. She barely made the check with an 8, not willing to put any energy into this, and stepped back.

"You cannot kill it with swords," she read. "That's what it says."

“Could be a reference to the troll?” Olaph wondered.

“If so, a little bit late on that score. Let’s go,” Light told them.

But now they ran into another problem. This room had four exits, one along the left wall, one straight ahead, one on the right wall, and another on the other side of the room back the way they had come. That wasn’t the problem. The problem was the door to the left was solid metal, with no handle or keypad next to it. What was next to it was a series of levers sticking out of the wall. Twelve of them, to be exact.

“Unless their group had six people in it, they didn’t go this way,” Sinjorino remarked. “Strange configuration too. Look, nearly half of the levers are here to the far left, where there are another six spread out next to it.”

“Do you think we need to have them in a certain pattern?” Olaph asked.

“While there are less combinations here, and thus brute forcing the issue would be possible, all the other doors have provided a clue of some kind. No such clue here that I can see.” They made a humming noise and tried a lever. It didn’t move. They tried various other ones. They didn’t move. They threw two at once. They moved. “Ah hah!” They let the levers go and they went back up.

“What?” Light asked. “You figured it out?”

“Possibly. Paige is the key in this case.” Everyone looked at her.

“Huh? Me?”

“Indeed. Come,” they agreed. “Light you stand there. Olaph there, and I will stand here. Paige, use your extra arms to grasp all your levers and throw them at the same time. On three, perhaps?”

“Ooooooh.” Paige nodded, taking her place and unfurling her arms. They got into position.

“One. Two. Three.” All the levers were pulled and the door opened, showing a circular room beyond.

“This doesn’t make sense,” Paige complained. “The dungeon couldn’t have known I was here.”

“And yet...” Light glanced at Sinjorino. “Never mind, figure that out later. Anything in there?” He poked his head into the circular room and took a look. “Strange pillars lining the room, and some kinda weird smell. There’s a door, let’s go.” The door, for a wonder, was unlocked and easy to open. It was clear why. Looking around the corner showed a dead end.

“Next door!”

This was the door in the center of the north wall, and the group looked it over. It was an intact, wooden door, but part of the doorknob had been broken and was lying on the floor.

“Could they have gone this way, and broken it accidentally?” Olaph asked. “Closed it behind them and it fell apart?”

“I suppose,” Light decided. “Stand clear.” He picked up the pieces and turned them this way and that, finally holding them close to the rest of the mechanism. With his other hand he cast “Repair!” He couldn’t fail that one, but it was the ‘lesser’ version and so only repaired one point of damage. He kept casting it though until the knob was fixed, and turned it, opening the door.

“Stand clear?” Paige remarked, passing him. “What, did you expect to backfire it and blow the door up or something?”

“Just taking the usual precautions,” he told her.

This room was a big as the last one, but it was hard to tell this as once they opened the door a wall of water greeted them. Sensing it out the group decided it wasn’t magical, though how it was just sitting there and not spilling out into the other room was a bit of a mystery.

“It does look like the whole room is filled with water,” Light announced. “I can go in there in my elemental body of light.”

“But you can’t touch anything like that,” Olaph reminded him. “There must be a way to drain the water.”

“Ah, true. Can you get in there and look around, then?”

“I can. Time to actually use one of my main abilities it seems. Don’t want anyone freaking out now, it’s still going to be me standing here no matter you see. So no attacking me, okay?”

“That’s just what someone who was about to attack us would say,” Paige mused. “Did you grab the real Olaph and take his place, and now you’re about to show your true colors?”

“Look, my power is in the stones. I’ll show you.” He set down his pack but didn’t take off his clothes, they would hang loosely but still be supported. With a bit of willpower he reached into one of the stones and just like that, he was now a skeleton. He made sure to use the boosting skill, calculating a 12 and getting half the points he spent on it back.

“Monster!” yelled Paige, pointing at him. “Kill it kill it kill it kill it kill it! Also where did Olaph go he was standing right here wasn’t he?”

He clacked his teeth at her and cocked his head as if to say “really?” Then, as he didn’t need to breathe anymore (he had no lungs) he stepped into the room. It wasn’t that big, he quickly found the lever he had to pull which opened the drain, allowing the water out. He waited for them to come in.

“Are you going to stay that way?” Light asked. “Also, interesting power. Not sure if I would want it or not.”

He nodded. He wanted to say he had spent the points, and until he wanted to change back he wouldn’t, so he might as well stay like this for the moment in case some other situation where we has a skeleton came in handy. But skeletons didn’t talk, nor were they all that bright and as he literally was the skeleton now, that thought was a bit beyond him at the moment. He shambled back and picked up his pack again though, he knew enough not to leave it behind.

“Okay then,” Light decided. “Not very talkative now, that’s fine. Let’s see what else we’re dealing with here.”

This time the way forward, and to the left, was open, so they went down a long hallway which turned a few times, and which was lit not only by the usual “immature” fiendstones but glowing runes as well. They were meaningless as far as Paige and Light could tell, and they passed a door on the right to turn left and be confronted with two doors. One of them stone, one of the wood.

“One door leads to safety,” Sinjorino intoned, spinning to face them. “The other leads to a horrible death. You may ask me one question, ribbit, but I always lie.”

“Was that statement a lie, or are only answers to questions a lie?” Paige asked, confused. “Wait, if you answer that would it be a lie? Does that count as a question? How many questions have I asked?”

“Why ribbit?” asked Light. “And why are you talking so funny? Are you possessed or something?”

They sighed. “You’re supposed to ask me what’s the point of having a door that has a horrible death behind it. What does it achieve? Nobody understands my references anymore.” *Admittedly, that one was ancient even by my standards when I was built. And fairly obscure as well, but it was just so perfect.*

“Maybe don’t talk in gibberish?” Light concluded. He looked the wooden one over briefly, and tried the handle. It opened.

“Probably the door that leads to a horrible death,” Paige decided. “Taking the easy way, and all that.”

“That’s just what they want you to think,” answered Light. “Looks empty, come on.”

The room was empty, save for another blue gemstone off in one corner, cut in a different way from the first one. They collected it and moved on to the set of double doors leading out of this room. They stayed to the left, again able to simply open the door as it wasn’t locked or stuck closed. It led to a hallway that turned right, but there was no way to get there as the floor seemed to be missing here. Past the door was simply a maw of darkness.

“Probably just leads into the same room as the other door,” Light decided. “We can just try that door.”

“One moment, is that a target way down there?” Sinjorino asked, pointing.

“Maybe? Why?”

“I just have to wonder.” They brought up the bow and noted the distance to it, getting a 22 on a simple bow check. (Their maximum) The bolt of energy flew true and smacked the target. A second later a grinding could be heard, and the stone that would serve as the floor rose up out of the darkness. “See, nothing to it.”

“I guess so.”

They continued, coming to a door of stone. This door seemed to be crawling with bugs of all kinds. Perhaps thousands of them, with no way to push the door open without getting them all over you.

“One minute,” Light told them, starting to cast. He calculated a 13 on his pest repellent spell, and the bugs skittered away from him as he put two hands on the door and shoved it open. Looking inside it seemed that yes, directly to the right was the other double door they hadn’t taken. No monsters, so they stepped inside. Along one wall was an odd looking tapestry, what looked like strange humanoid creatures sitting down to a meal of human arms and legs. They were quite gaunt, with big mouths, full of teeth. They were naked apart from the bibs, and the table was done up nicely with a flower centerpiece and a rich tablecloth.

“Ghouls, unless I miss my guess,” Sinjorino decided. “I see a ladder here as well, anyone want to take it down as spoils?”

The ladder was leaning against the wall across from it. No one wanted it, so they headed to the next door. Naturally they did not go back the way they came, but forward, another stuck door shoved aside without too much issue. This led to a hallway with some turns, and another solid metal door. No keypad this time. Looking it over Light noticed a tiny hole, and held his sword up to it.

“There’s something in back of this tiny hole,” he announced. Paige and Sinjorino both took a look, and agreed there was some kind of switch back there.

“What do we have that’s long enough and tiny enough to fit in the hole?” Sinjorino asked.

Olaph held up a bony finger, but they shook their heads.

“Too thick, I’m afraid. And the pinky wouldn’t be long enough.”

He looked as sad as a skeleton can.

“I could get a casting of elemental needle in there,” Paige suggested. “It’s the thinnest elemental attack spell there is.”

“Go for it,” Light told her, so she did, calculating a 13 for the attack for the DIF 9 spell. The sliver of electric energy shot down the hole and hit the switch, opening the door.

“Good shot,” Sinjorino praised.

“Thanks.”

This room had only one door, but scorch marks on the floor, making them wary of some kind of fire based trap from the ceiling. Sinjorino went first, but nothing seemed to happen.

“Anyone hungry?” they offered. “There’s some rotten fruit here, for some reason.”

“What happened to gemstones and magical treasure?” Paige complained. “Go back to that stuff!” she called to the ceiling.

No door prevented them leaving this room, but they did come to a four way intersection, the first of its kind they had seen. The choice was fairly easy as the left hand side only went about 4 meters to a dead end, so they went left, right, left, right, left, right, to the next door. It had a basin in front of it,

like one would use to wash up with, and if it wasn't obvious enough there was a raindrop looking shape scratched into the door.

"I'm thinking fire," Paige mused, rubbing her chin.

"And that's why I'm the leader around here," Light told her, casting. He filled up the bowl with water, easily getting a sixteen on an elemental conjuration spell. The door vanished.

"It's a good thing we've always got the answer to opening these doors," Sinjorino remarked. "I mean that could have been filling it with blood, or urine."

"That's disgusting!" Paige told them.

"Ah, apologies, I know you flesh beings are somewhat squeamish about such things."

"Ugh, now I have to go..."

They stepped into the room, which was a dead end. It was almost like a storage room, but for headless statues that looked like they had been tossed in at random. However, the one nearest them had something in a hand, which Paige took. It was a fancy coin purse made of a tough feeling leather, trimmed with some kind of white fur. No coins inside though. It seemed in excellent condition, and had no magical signature on it.

"It's not nothing," Paige told the dungeon, looking up again. "I appreciate it."

With one last look around she shoved the statues with her chain arms, to see if anything else of worth was here, but found nothing and went back the way they came.

"You coming?" she asked, turning, when Light didn't.

"You're not wrong," he told Sinjorino. "These 'challenges' to get the doors open, or to get the floor back in your case, we always had exactly what we needed. It's strange."

"Especially considering the previous dungeon was quite a bit different. Is it because this is our second one? Because it's a higher number? Some other force at work? I will be interested to hear of the other party's experience, should we discover them alive."

"Impossible to say. But we should tell the Guild, have them gather reports on dungeons that are cleared and their characteristics. See if there's any pattern to all this. Two isn't enough for us to make any guesses."

"Agreed. Let us continue."

And so the group took the last hallway of the four, coming to a metal door with a keyhole in it. There was a strange grating at the top and bottom, but otherwise it was ordinary. While looking around for a loose brick or something that held the key, Olaph noticed something falling and pointed. The others looked but it had fallen out of sight by that time.

"What was it?" Light asked. "Did you see something? Maybe you better change back?"

But he just was looking at the lower grating to see if he could see what had fallen. Something whizzed past his head, too fast to really see.

"That was a key," Paige decided. "We just have to catch it?"

"Seems easy enough," Sinjorino decided. "Who has the best REFlexes of the group? I have a 6."

"Mine's higher," Light told them.

"Lower," Paige replied sadly.

"That I get, but how can mine be higher than yours, Sinjorino? I can't believe you don't have 10s in every stat. Did you at one time, and it's just your age?"

"You calling me old, boy?"

"You are old, you've said it before."

"Is the banter option not still enabled?"

"Just answer the question!"

"You are correct," they admitted. "In all honestly, being an artificial being both my physical and mental capability should be far in excess of any organic being. A 'ten in all stats' as we might now say

under The System. It is not degradation of my parts. It's how I was built. At the time, even as modern man of the day built robotic servants such as myself, they were afraid of the so called 'robot uprising.' Naturally I was programmed to want to help, and be non-violent. But so many stories, games, movies, and the like naturally explored the circumstances leading up to, and the aftermath of, such an uprising of artificial beings the world at large still saw us as a potential threat. Even with our limiters, they feared us, the creations they built day after day. And so I was made no more strong or fast or wise than they, even though I could have been so much more. All I ever wanted to do was help, but because those that built me had small minds, they made me small, too."

"...Oh. I never... Huh. I'm sorry."

"Quite all right," they told him. "Perhaps, with The System now in place and being able to spend XP on my 'stats' I will one day be able to boast of 10s in all my stats. I plan on being around much longer than any organic, after all."

Don't be so sure, Light thought to himself. "I hope it happens for you."

"Yeah, you deserve it!" Paige agreed with a grin. "And I'll be right there with you, cheering you on when that day happens!"

Oh right, elves don't get old. Don't even need magic for it. Stupid elves.

"Anyway, back to trying to catch this thing. I guess I'm up?" Light asked.

Olaph waved both hands, wishing he could tell them his plan.

"Wait, I think Olaph wants to try?" Paige told him.

"No way is the padre's reflexes better than mine!" he protested. "But hey, go for it, bone head!"

Olaph stepped up to the door, he had a plan.

Chapter 14

Rescue

Where: Outside Room 40

When: Just before the key falls

Olaph's plan had one tiny drawback. In his current form he had an INSight of 1. This meant in his current form his maximum premonition check was a 5, half of what he needed to succeed. This gave him two options- drop the skeleton form thus basically wasting it having only taken advantage of the form to do the water 'puzzle' or draw upon another form's INSight and raise his chances. And lower them. While he wasn't at any penalties for being a skeleton, if he took stats he would be at a -2 for the check and he only had a 4 skill. So what to do? Mentally reviewing the monsters at his disposal he was rather surprised to find the leodile creature had the highest INSight, at a 6. He wasn't sure why, it had no skills associated with that stat, but evolution doesn't strive for perfection, only what works well enough. He took it. Or at least he was going to, but paused and brought up the skill description.

Extract power from an attuned stone, allowing you the use of a stat that creatures possesses to augment your own. Roll this check, for every 5 rolled add a point to your own stats from an attuned stone. The stat cannot exceed the normal base stat of the stat the specified creature naturally has. Multiple checks can be used to apply the same, or different stats. Each enhanced stat used by the attuner applies a -2 penalty for all active checks. Stats fade at the end of a scene and each change costs as many points from the stone's pool as $\frac{1}{2}$ the grade of the stone.

That's not going to work. I would have to perform a skill check of 30 in order to add all +6 INSight to my current 1. As a skeleton I only have a RESolve of 4 and 20 energy. My maximum check is a 21. Do I pull energy from my leodile form knowing the most I'll get is still far below my normal stat of 7? Seems a waste, I guess skeleton is just going to go away.

And so it did.

"Ah, you're back," Light decided.

He sighed. "Yes, skeletons are pretty dumb. It couldn't do what I wanted so I'm back to being myself. Let's see now," he made the premonition check he wanted to before, calculating a 12. He put his hand in place and a few seconds later the key dropped into it.

"Great job!" Paige praised.

"If it even works," Light huffed.

"Why wouldn't it?" Olaph asked, putting the key in the lock and turning it. The lock clicked open. "The solution to the door is always right there."

"That's just what this place wants you to think."

"I guess."

They poked into the next room, empty apart from a statue of a figure with a crown. They went inside but didn't see anything else. There was a door on the left wall they looked over. It was metal, had no handle and no keypad, and for some reason had a square hole cut in the center of it. Paige was about to put her head through it when something whistled by her and she jumped back. "What the heck was that?"

"I didn't catch it," Light admitted. "Maybe it'll be back around?"

They stared at the door for a moment and from the other side came the shape again.

"A target," Sinjorino announced. "And unless I miss my guess..." They paused. The target swung back into view. "Yes, on a pendulum. I have calculated the period, if you would all like to take a step back?"

The others had no idea what they were talking about but couldn't miss the fact they made a respectable shot which allowed the door to open.

"A twelve," they complained, lowering the bow. "My minimum. Wonderful."

"Seems to me someone was saying how that was bound to happen," Light mused, "similar surroundings as well."

"I suppose I did say that, yes."

This was a fairly long room, with only one door at the far end. Sitting in the middle of the floor was a treasure chest though, which everyone looked over for traps. They didn't see anything and so Sinjorino opened it up, then held up a small box, which they then opened, revealing a set of crystal dice.

"Little on the nose, isn't it?" Light decided.

"How so?" they asked.

"Never mind. Put it away and let's go. Unless there was something else?" He looked in the chest. Empty.

The next door was made of stone, and had an unlit torch sitting next to it. Nothing the group did seemed to help, as using the torch as a lever did nothing, it didn't move. Lighting the torch did nothing. Putting it out did nothing.

"And we still have no idea about this odd engraving on the door," Olaph mused, as everyone stood there thinking about it. He tapped it. "Like something was supposed to fit in here."

"That's it!" Paige announced, grinning. "The torch isn't a torch, not really. It's *raw material!*" She used her spell to shape wood and slotted it into the shape carved into the door. It swung open. "Tada!"

The room beyond was about half the size of the previous one, and was again unadorned. There was a high shelf, and Light ran his hand along it searching for anything up there. He came up with a scroll, which he unrolled and looked over. He made a magical scripture check, calculating an 18. "A useless scroll," he announced. "Now that we can simply ask The System for any spell we like. This might have been worth something before that."

"What spell is it?" Paige asked.

"Something about controlling the undead. Probably that one that can free them from someone's control? I'd have to study it further but I can't see this being a previously unknown spell."

"The System doesn't give us every spell," she reminded him. "You proved that by researching that one. You could have researched something that wasn't in the list."

"Humm, I suppose. I'm not just setting it on fire, we can see if it's available for purchase later."

"Say," Olaph realized. "If I'm a skeleton or a wraith, would I be harmed by sun magic even though I'm not really an undead?"

"You would know better than I, padre."

"Let's hold off answering that question."

“Good call. Well, door is before us.”

This door just opened, and it was easy to see why. It was a dead end. So they headed back, turned left, and faced the next one.

“You know, if there was ever a door shortage I would know where to go,” Paige complained. She had turned back from it, facing the others. “Doors, doors, doors, and more doors. I mean come on!”

The door swung open, smacking her in the back and she took a step forward. “Hey!” It instantly swung shut again. “Why you... What was that?!”

“Are you addressing the door?” Sinjorino asked, curiously.

“It moved, didn’t it.” The door swung open and shut again. “Ha, missed me!”

“I don’t think it meant to hit you,” Light decided, watching it fly open and close several times at random. “My time to shine, once again.” He readied a cast, holding until the door opened again. It was forced to remain open with a 20 mercury check. “After you,” he said with a bow.

The hallway went right and left, and there was another door.

“Color me shocked,” Paige growled. “You want a piece of me too, door?”

The door did not answer.

It was just stuck, so Sinjorino applied some pressure and opened it up. Another empty chamber, though someone had scrawled “Stay left” on one of the walls, and in the corner was a pile of shredded paper.

“We should stay left,” Light decided. “That’s a good strategy. Good on you, dungeon scrawl person.”

This next door was metal as well, and had a keypad so Sinjorino stepped up. “No obvious clues,” they decided. “This arrow is strange however.” An arrow pointing down had been painted on the door, but there was nothing on the floor in front of the door it could have been pointing to. “Perhaps it’s more literal? Can you bring that light closer? Thank you.” They crouched and looked at the tip of the arrow. “Ah, of course. Clever.” They straightened up and punched in a code.

“What was it?” Paige asked.

“Very tiny numbers,” they replied. “Thankfully my vision can be magnified.”

“How did the other team get *anywhere* in this place?” Light asked, exasperated. “It’s not possible!”

“Yes, the vision augment is not guaranteed in any model,” they agreed. “And the water came back to that one room. Curious.”

Staying left did them no good in this case because the passageway snaked left, right, right, left, and became a dead end. They went back, heading left and came to another metal and keypad door.

“Another one for Sinjorino?” Paige complained. “It had been a good mix before-”

“Quiet!” Light shushed her. “Do you hear that?” Everyone listened. Sounds of something heavy moving in the room beyond could be heard. “You’re up, padre!”

“I suppose it was coming sooner or later.” He made the sign of the cross. “Lord, protect me in my hour of need.”

“Still have to get by the door first,” Paige told him.

“True. But I’ll want time to prepare before we open it. You should all move down the hallway if I’m going to do this alone.”

“Not alone,” Paige told him. “I’m a support mage, remember? I’ll at least support you. I need the practice as much as you do.”

“I doubt it,” he told her. “But as you wish. I just don’t want someone saying later that it wasn’t a fair test.”

“Why is everyone looking at me?” Light asked, the very picture of innocence.

“Be back in a second. Hold me up please?” Olaph made a bilocation check, leaving his body, calculating a 13 after everyone had a hand on him. He zipped into the next room, not worried about finding his way back. It was a meter away, it was fine. He saw a strange manlike figure made of clay stomping about the room. The room was fairly small, only a few paces to a side, so there was no way all of them could have fit and fought in the room anyway. *We could lure him down the tunnel to the bigger room? No, this works out just fine for me. I just hope it works.* He turned, then shook his invisible head and passed back into his body again.

“The code is 84923423,” he told them. “It’s written on the other side of the door. As for the monster, some kind of construct. Not a creature.”

“Can you deal with it?” Light asked.

“In fact, I’m probably the one that can deal with it the most easily,” he replied. “Wait to open the door. Sorry Paige, you better stay back. This thing looks pretty nasty.”

“And what are you going to do to something like that?” she asked, a bit miffed at being asked to sit this out.

“This,” he replied simply, and changed into his wraith form. He got half the points back with a check, and drifted through the door. The clay figure rushed him, but with a RESolve of 9 now he didn’t panic, and didn’t dodge either. The thing went through him, and they both made RESolve checks. 20 to 18, as of course this specific creature had a 10 RES. Still, he drained two energy from the thing and it kept on trying to physically attack. A wraith of course has no physical presence, and so it was simply a matter of swiping a hand through the thing again and again until he pulled out all the energy it had. It had to follow the rules too, and once it was at -ENDurance it crashed to the ground. He kept swiping, draining more and more energy which of course started to physically damage thing thing, until finally it broke and became the fiendstone. Olaph, for his part, felt great. He had never had this much energy before, over a hundred, though he was pretty sure Paige still had more than he did. With a shrug he drifted back through the door, indicated it was fine to move on, and they got the door open and collected the fiendstone.

The next door was absolutely filthy, and smelled horrible. With a moment of “oh no, after you,” the two magic users did rock-paper-scissors to determine who would clean it, and Light lost so he cast the hygiene spell. It really didn’t matter, they couldn’t “feel” the filth through their magic or anything Paige was just being difficult.

This next room was quite small, but did feature an iron chandelier with some lit candles stuck in it, hanging from the ceiling. With no treasure the group moved on, up to the next door.

“Well, now this is interesting,” Sinjorino told them. They tapped the lettering on the door. “This is English. Old English, spoken in the time of my manufacture.”

“What’s it say?” Light asked.

“It’s a riddle from a famous book about a great journey. ‘Speak friend and enter.’ In the book I believe it was elvish that allowed the group to move forward?”

Everyone looked to Paige.

“Well friend in Enochian is ‘Mellon,’” she told them. The door opened.

“So it is,” Sinjorino mused. “So it is.”

The left hand path was a dead end, but the group never reached it. The door to the right caught Paige’s attention.

“I feel a great amount of spirit energy!” she announced, getting a 6 on the check. So really, it wasn’t that much, but she thought it was because of the low check. “That can only mean living beings!”

Olaph drifted through the door, then came back quickly trying to tell them to hurry with gesturing. The door was unlocked, and the group stepped inside. Here was the other party, seemingly

sprawled out on the floor. Several torches lay next to them, completely out. There was no signs of a struggle, they just seemed to have dropped where they stood.

One member was a female centaur, another a fairy. A male human and minotaur rounded out the group. They were just lying there, seemingly asleep. At least, everyone hoped that was the case. They pushed into the room, starting to check everyone over. Sinjorino knelt by the human, the only one they could reliably get a read on. They put a hand on their forehead activating their bio-scanner. "Alive, but suffering from an airborne toxin? But I'm not detecting any toxin- Wait!"

"Are we being poisoned?" Paige asked, looking like she was about to back out of the room.

"Carbon monoxide, filling up the room," they announced. "If you have a purifying spell now is the time!"

Light did, casing Pure Air with an 18 result. There seemed to be no change but Sinjorino nodded. "Good, keep that up. They should wake soon."

And wake they did. They hadn't been "damaged" so the healing spell wouldn't work, but after getting some water and breathing better air they started to come out of it. The fairy recovered slowest of all, but soon all were up and embarrassed, thanking their rescuers. Olaph stayed out of sight down the corridor, he didn't want to scare them or have to have the others explain.

"So what happened?" Light asked.

"Blue Sky was the first to fall," the centaur, Emelia, told them. "We didn't even realize it. We were trying to work out the wording on the wall there," she gestured. "And when we turned around, she was flat on the ground. I guess we all got caught in it as we rushed to her side. We should have rushed out the door but I never considered a gas trap."

"What were we caught in, exactly?" asked the minotaur. "Is it a gas trap, like she said?"

"Carbon monoxide," Sinjorino explained. "Odorless, you wouldn't have realized you were in danger. Strange you survived at all, however. If I had to guess, the room alternates between the gas and fresh air, simply keeping you unconscious rather than outright killing you." *That's why it was fine when we came in here, and then started to fill with CO again. Nasty.*

"Figures, the one of us that could have prevented it was the first to fall," said the human.

"Sorry," said Blue Sky. "Maybe I should hang back more in future?"

She too must know the spell I used, Light thought.

"They wouldn't reuse a trap though?" Emelia wondered. "In any case, we're heading back now. Clearly this place was beyond us." The others started to protest but she held up a hand. "We had to get rescued. Yes, we won't complete the quest. Yes, we'll lose the stones and treasure we picked up. But we'll be alive. We'll look for easier ones to clear and work our way back up."

"Incidentally," Sinjorino inquired. "How did you get past the first door? I expected to see a remnant, like myself, in your party."

"I would have asked you the same," she countered. "You don't have hooves."

"Hooves?"

"Yeah, the first door?" she went on. "I had to stand on the hoof marks and then Tapis here," the human waved, "had to get on my back. Then the mechanism disengaged and the lock opened. Some kind of weight based trigger. How did you trigger it?"

"Did we go in the same dungeon?" Light asked. "That wasn't there for us."

Everyone glanced at everyone else, but no one had any ideas.

"That's not creepy at all," Emelia finally decided. "Seems these places are more complex than we thought. The doors, did they keep testing your individual skills? Like each person got a turn opening a door?"

"Exactly like that," Paige agreed. "Sometimes magic, or being a good shot, or having a specific power..."

"Same here. But how- I don't want to know. Come on team, let's go."

“I was going to protest, but hearing that,” said the human, “I agree. This place is clearly watching us and changing based on what abilities we have? How does it even- The System. It knows. It’s controlling this!”

“So it seems,” agreed Light.

“Doesn’t seem right,” the minotaur grumped. “Nothing we can do though.”

“Yeah there is, we leave and don’t come back. Nice meeting you all, thanks again for the rescue, stop by The Startled Swan and I’ll buy you a pint once you make it out. Good luck in here.”

They left.

“So do we continue?” Paige asked, nervously glancing around.

Olaph nodded.

“Of course you would say that, you don’t want to lose the fiendstones!”

“Still, there is the treasure and probably more to come,” Light mused. “Someone needs to get this place out of the bakery. We’re partway through, is running our style? Okay, the doors are keyed to us and our skills. So the place has more connection to The System than we thought. Big deal. Maybe we can get more clues if we keep an eye out.”

“I am all for gathering more intel,” Sinjorino voted. “We must go on.”

“Fine,” she breathed. “I guess worst comes to worst at least one of us doesn’t breathe at all. Gas traps don’t worry us as much. Strange, that one seemed almost unfair to the others...”

“Perhaps they were meant to be rescued?” Light mused. “So we could get the information about the nature of the place? We never would have given it a second thought otherwise.”

“...True,” she decided. “Well, I’m keeping my eye on you!” she told the wall.

Chapter 15

A Solo Endeavor

Where: Still in the dungeon (sorry)

When: Just after the rescue

The party pressed on through the dungeon, needing to backtrack quite a bit now because the door out of the “rescue room” led to a dead end. So they went back away from the chandelier room, down the longest hallway they had yet encountered, and were now peeking around the corner into one of the largest rooms they had seen down here. The floor here was covered in broken glass, though no windows or frames were on the walls, and some old apples of all things were scattered around. But what was giving them pause was the creature sitting in the middle of the room. It was a wolf the size of a horse, but it had wings too. So the size of the room made some sense. Light gestured to everyone to pull back, and they went back down the hall and around the corner again.

“I’m not sure the padre here has really done as I asked,” Light announced. “Don’t get me wrong, he went into a room he said some creature was shuffling around in, and came out with a fiendstone. So all signs point to him fighting *something*, it’s true. But he’s intangible! That’s not fair. He should take another form and actually fight something.”

“I disagree,” Sinjorino decided, shaking their heads.

“You see, even they- what?”

“I believe we have enough fighting power between the two of us, backed by Paige, to handle almost any situation,” they went on.

“Aw, thanks Sinjorino!” Paige gushed. “You really believe in me!”

“Perhaps I worded that too strongly...”

“You don’t believe in me?” Her eyes widened and she took a step back. “Traitor! How could you? I was so happy and then you pulled the rug right out from under me! And it was spikes underneath, and the spikes were coated with poison. And they were on fire too, and there were bees coming out of the spikes.”

“That’s not exactly what I mean to say either. I would need more data. The point is the bishop’s calling is not as a dungeon delver, or adventurer, like ourselves. While his power does make him versatile, I would posit that it is that versatility we should focus on, not his combat prowess. He should seek out new fiendstones that have a great utility, rather than simply finding them randomly as we have been doing. Save an impressive combat form such as this wraith for an emergency, but others large and small acquire for versatility. Can you really see yourself, bishop, putting XP into close combat, unarmed combat? You are a man of the Lord still, not having renounced your ties to the church. I would guess violence is distasteful to you?”

The wraith considered, and nodded.

“You see? Let us not force the man to change again, using up his power for a simple exercise. If he truly wishes to learn combat skills I can serve as teacher later, in a more controlled setting. But for now, I believe we are enough.”

“It’s true, I could easily take that creature myself,” Light mused. “It can’t hurt me. And learning to fight in one form is meaningless in another. Longer arms, or if you took this wolf thing in there’s shape you would be biting people. I suppose close combat would still reduce your delay but...” He

thought a moment. “And we are still sort of hired bodyguards, in a way. Fine, I won’t make you fight, padre. But do pay attention, I won’t turn away your help if you think you can make a difference. Let’s go-”

“Wait,” Paige announced, holding up a hand. “He’s not going to solo that beast, but I am.”

“Whaaaaat?” he drawled.

“I’ll prove to you, to both of you, that I’m more than just a support mage. Yes, that’s where I think my strength lies, but if you really don’t think I’m keeping up with you, Sinjorino, I’ll just have to convince you the hard way. You’ve not really seen what I can do, so it’s time I showed you.”

“Don’t place yourself in danger because of some perceived notion of organic inferiority. I assure you, that while you are inferior to me in several ways, as I’ve already explained in many cases that’s a matter of training not of innate capability. Not all cases of course...”

“Am I going to have to fight *you* later, and make you take back those words?”

“I seem to be having the opposite effect,” they mused. “Let me try to put it a different way.”

“The way I see it,” Light began. Both glared at him. “Uh, is that I should stay out of it. Hey padre, doesn’t the construction method of these walls seem really interesting?” He turned to the wall and started pointing out various things. “Do you think this stone was here before or was the whole thing brought here and the original material is in a holding pen someplace?”

“Look, I’ve made up my mind,” she told them. “Cover me in case he gets in a lucky hit or something, but otherwise watch. And learn.”

“As you wish.”

“One thing though,” Light told her, as she mentally prepared herself.

“What?” she glared at him.

“I don’t want to see that orb spell out there. That’s a force multiplier for sure, but let’s see how you would have fought without it. You only just learned it, after all.”

“... Fine.”

As she headed back down the corridor she made a Mercury check, casting the spell of telekinesis with as much energy as she could throw in without doing a separate spirit manipulation check. *After all, I’m holding onto the spell for this entire combat I may as well do it right the first time.* Taking the full time got her a 32, still easily enough to get all six of her combat knives which she whisked out of her bandoleers and sent floating around herself. Telekinesis was an odd spell, each knife weighing less than a kilogram, so six knives should be difficulty 7 to get moving. But not so! Each separate object added one to the difficulty, so this check was actually a 12 difficulty. *I suppose because my brain has to keep track of each object individually? Still seems wrong though. I could lift 320kg with a check of 12. Of course my check of 32 is so far off the charts, I suppose I just should have done that on the creature and slammed him into the ground a few times and called it a day. Oh well. I want them to see me move.*

The creature growled at her as she entered the room, and crouched. She took a stance, ready to start battle dancing if it charged her. She got a 10 on initiative, the creature the same ironically. She made a magic combat check to notice, another 10 (that’s how it goes sometimes) while it countered with 7.9 because it only had a REASON of .6. So she knew they would be going at the same time, and decided to act defensively rather than offensively. The creature sprang forward, wings launching it into the air to slash at her as it came down. She made a Mercury check, a 29, and all the knives spiraled together, points touching, to make a shield that kept the creature’s 17 attack roll away from her. She was up, and made a battle dancing check, calculating a 15. As she was now considered to be using “evasive maneuvers” her difficulty to be hit was a 23 as long as she kept moving. The wolf whirled, striking out again but a 19 was not enough, she had already gracefully turned so the claws hit only air. Her defense taken care of she made another Mercury check, sending the knives shooting straight into the creature with a 20. It tried to dodge with a 16 which was not enough. All six knives scored along

the creature's sides, doing 4, 4, 1, 2, 1, and 2 damage. That was a total of 14, and the creature's health looked like this: Health: L18+10(4)/H13+10(3). So it was only 4 points away from "gone" and flopping over. But for now it still had a bit of fight left in it. Sadly it had no special powers, really it was just a large wolf that happened to have wings, so all it could do was try jumping on her again. Which it did, spending maximum energy and calculating a 27. Battle dancing seemed a bit inadequate as 320kg of wolf landed on top of her, slamming her to the ground for 7 damage to her body. She cried out, but she was still in it too. The knives were still hanging in the air as they hadn't gone anywhere from her summoning them back, so she simply made a fist and willed them into the back of the creature. It was considered flanked and so was at a penalty because it only saw the knives move on the edges of its vision. It tried to dodge, calculating a 15 but she got a 23 on the check and so all six buried themselves into it. This only did another 10 damage, total, bringing up the total damage to 18, plus 6 into "gone." The creature slumped over, falling right on top of her. She cried out again as she was pinned, this was a lot of wolf to have on top of one's self. She could now only cast non-physical based spells, as her arms were pinned, which meant Mercury was out for the moment. Luckily for her, Uranus spells were cast with ENDurance, which she did now with a scream of "Get off me stupid thing!" A needle of electricity slammed into the creature doing... 3 damage. It was still there.

"Need any help in there?" Light called. He sounded quite amused indeed.

"I'm doing this *myself*," her stubborn weakness made her say, and cast again. This time, of course, she did 7 damage because that's how the universe works, and the creature vanished, becoming a crystal. "Ha, see! Freaking stupid pouncing what is this a cat? I thought wolves went for the hamstring or something? Ow. Stupid dungeons. Crap that hurts!" She sat up and started casting her healing magic, knowing she would need to do it 7 times total, and then a bit of repair magic for her armor as well. She was in no danger of failing normally but at her current -3 penalty she spent a little energy on her first castings, getting it down to a more manageable level as even her inner reserves were not infinite. By the end she was still at over a hundred energy, so she wasn't worried.

"How would you rate her performance?" Sinjorino asked Light during all of this.

"...Adequate," Light finally decided. "She lived. It didn't."

"I must admit," they told him, "that I underestimated the power of telekinesis magic. And she does move well, quite unlike how I would go about it." *Of course, she doesn't have the statistical models I do, of where is best to stand to make your defense as solid as it can be.*

"Ah, well, she can afford to throw lots of energy into it right at the start," he complained. "So yes, it's hard to get going with as many objects as she did, but because of that she managed to do okay. Getting pinned though, that's the part I would take points off for. Very sloppy."

"Yes. Good thing it was already wounded. She ended up in a bad position. It could have bitten her face right off."

"I can hear you perfectly well!" Paige shouted at them. "I won, didn't I? And on my own too. Could your bow of knockout have done it so quickly?"

"I suppose we will never know," they admitted.

The group moved on, dealing with more of the same along the way. There was a room with a coffin in it, and Light had to talk to the corpse inside about how to get past the door with his corpse conversation spell. It wasn't a fiendstone, and couldn't answer any question not related to the door, and "died" again once they had the information. They had to make a key with temporary tool, move a live wire from touching a metal door so they didn't get electrocuted, and follow a path Sinjorino told them about to not touch burning hot tiles. But they found a few more things too, like a polished green stone, and a chunk of copper, and then their next monster.

"Clearly a ghoul," Light told them. "Fairly tough to kill and strong, but no real active powers."

Without a word Olaph went and took care of it.

After that they had to backtrack, coming to a passage they had been in before and hastily going back to check a door they had passed on the right. Empty room, so they moved on. They picked up a bloodstone and nothing else until a fairly small room with more enemies. This time two animal looking creatures, a war wolf and a grotesque.

“What is this, the pet section?” Light grumped.

“Pets?” Paige asked.

“Those big wolves are kept as pets by orcs. That misshapen thing there is a pet of gargoyles. I wonder... But no, the doors were locked. The dungeon put these two dog like things together. Very odd.”

“How do you want to deal with them?” Sinjorino asked.

“You can’t want to turn into one of these!” Light told Olaph.

He shook his head, but pointed up.

“Yeah, yeah, we have to kill them to end the dungeon. I know. Sorry they’re not all that great.”

He held up a hand, then made a motion like he was cupping two things.

“Uh, you want to take them?”

He nodded. Then mimed putting them on a counter, going around the counter, and someone counting out coins.

“And then sell them?”

He then went around the counter again, picked up the coins, put them back down, and pointed. Then seemingly picked up two more things.

“Ah, sell them and buy two better ones. I get it. For anyone else a fiendstone is a fiendstone. It’s only the guy that can tell them apart that cares. Okay. Want to fight two things at once?” He asked Paige. “Really show off your skills?”

“I am done with wolves!” she announced.

“Aw, but look how cute they are, and I bet they’ll be extra cute as they pounce on you.”

“No!”

“I guess I can go, as you’re too scared.”

“Are grotesques like their masters?” Sinjorino asked. “If their skin is like rock I doubt your knives could penetrate anyway. Even my fists would likely only cause non-lethal damage to it.”

“Probably safest to assume that.”

“Let’s do this more creatively,” Paige decided. “This door is stone, and it looks pretty tight now that we’ve closed it again. I assume the door at the other end is similarly tight. You have a stone sculpting spell, right?” She looked to Light.

“I do.”

“Great. Sculpt a small hole right about here and a hook right about here, and I’ll use the temporary tool spell to create a bucket with a tube we can hang on it. You keep casting your water making spell into the bucket, which will drain into the room, and drown them.”

“That is certainly creative,” he admitted. “But isn’t there an easier way? I can just make a slot right here, and cast the water spell into the room directly. You hold them down with telekinesis. That will take a lot less water.”

“I’ll allow this modification to my plan,” she agreed.

“Very well.”

It took hundreds of casts of elemental conjuration to fill the room up enough, but as a scholar and being unable to fail, Light could literally do this spell all day. Given the size of the creatures and their no doubt horrific STRength Paige didn’t *simply* try to hold them down, she tried to lift them, flip them over, and then hold them down. She still spent as much energy as she could casting the spell though. Her result was a 29 and even putting maximum energy into their resistance checks, a 26 for the grotesque and a 29 for the wolf, she managed it because of trying to lift them first. They had no hands

to try and hold onto anything, so they suffered a penalty to their check and got held under. It took quite some time for the grotesque to turn into a fiendstone, but it did, and they opened the door and let the water out, moving to the next one.

Two rooms later they found what was basically a closet with their next target, an orog. This was a sort of half orc, half ogre that smashed the door down as they got near to try and reach them. Everyone calculated initiative, the orog going dead last. So that worked out. Light was up first, drawing his blade and turning into light. Olaph took a swipe at the thing with a bony hand, calculating a 12 vs the orog's dodge of 14. A miss. Sinjorino simply went for the thing's head, not bothering with the bow they were too close anyway. A 10 to 6 check that time. This did 2 whole damage, making them wonder why they bothered. Paige had the choice between elemental needle, orbs, or playing the support mage like she was "supposed" to, and decided *fine*, and cast *dazzle* on the thing, full strength. This was a 23 check, which the orog resisted with a 22, having also spent maximum energy. Missed it by that much. It was stunned for 19 segments, or nearly 5 seconds, meaning the group could almost be leisurely about the whole thing. Oh, and it also was at a penalty of -19 to any reactive action until its turn, we wish it luck with that. It tried to dodge to the side as Light blurred forward, sword poking it 3 times with an attack of 11. It got a -5 to the dodge, somewhat meaningless at this point even with +4 armor because that's still a negative number, and took 12 damage to the body. It was now at a further -4 penalty. Truly, "he who strikes first, wins." Sinjorino shook their head and stepped back, raising the bow. Punching it in the body *could* work, even with the armor, but they decided to keep going for the head even if it was non-lethal. *Not that it can really fight back even as it is, but more penalty that won't go away is better than less.* They fired. 13 vs -3 (as the head wasn't armored in the first place) and it took 16 non-lethal to the head. This was another -3 penalty. Olaph couldn't miss now, and touched the thing, draining 9 energy from it. Paige honestly felt like she had contributed enough at this point, and stepped back. She crossed her arms and leaned against the wall to watch the show. Light was up again, again with a 15 on his combination attack and hitting three times. He calculated a 12 to hit, it dodged with a -21. Honestly, he should start getting bonus damage or something for the thing leaning into his hits like this. But there's no rule that says that, so he just rolled damage as normal. Another 12 to the body, pushing it 4 into gone and dropping it. Olaph stole the last of its energy with another touch, 18, and it only had 11. This put it below ENDurance by 1, technically meaning it took non-lethal damage everywhere but everyone stepped back and let Light finish it off. The fiendstone appeared and he put his sword away.

"You're welcome," Paige told them. "Hope everyone feels warm and fuzzy about having a support mage around. No complaints now? Excellent. Can we get on with it?"

"I wasn't complaining," Sinjorino explained. "I just had limited data as of that point."

"I'll complain a bit," Light announced. "Not about you, Paige, that was excellent work. Well done. About this dungeon. How much more of this do we have to do? I mean, it's just going on and-"

Quest Update*

Rescue Mission

Enter and clear Large Dungeon 23 (in progress)
Learn the fate of the previous team that entered (complete)
Rescue previous team (complete)

Dungeon Rooms: 36/47
Large Fiendstones: 7/7
Huge Fiendstones: 0/1

**Note: You may only receive quest updates when 50% or more of the quest is complete.*

“Oh,” he said after a moment. “Didn’t know you could do that. I guess that answers that- are you all seeing this?”

They all nodded.

“Don’t have to flip it, then. Only one creature left, we just have to find it. Shouldn’t be too hard, only 11 rooms left.”

“Thank goodness,” Paige breathed. “Let’s do it and get out of here.”

But as they turned to walk, Olaph floated before them and waved his hands.

“You got something to say padre?” Light asked.

He nodded. He pointed to Sinjorino.

“Me?” They pointed to their face.

He nodded.

“Very well. What about me?”

He pointed to the bow and mimed pulling it.

“You want me to shoot something?”

He shook his head.

“Can’t this wait?” Light asked, exasperated.

He pointed to his head, and made a flitting away motion.

“You have an idea and you don’t want to forget it?”

He nodded vigorously.

“Carry on.”

They got out the bow. “What then?”

He pointed to the string, then held up two fingers. He made like he was pulling a string, then exaggerated a movement of slipping his finger between two strings and pulling one. Everyone made INSight checks to figure out what he meant. Light was highest with a 15.

“Oh, we are stupid aren’t we?” he decided. “Yeah, I get what you mean padre. It could work...”

“What could?” they asked.

“Two strings on the bow. One lethal, one not. You just pull the one you want at the time you want to use it. As it’s the bow that holds the shot, and the string casts into the bow, the magic wouldn’t interfere with itself. At least, I don’t think it would. Second string isn’t doing anything at the time you pull the other one. Couldn’t pull more than one string, as there’s only the one conjuration chain on the bow. But you would get to choose your shot.”

“I would be interested to try this theory when we get back,” they admitted. “Thank you, Olaph, for thinking of this.”

They nodded, looking as happy as a faceless, terrifying, floating cloak of emptiness can look.

“Onward, to victory!” Paige shouted, pointing forward.

Chapter 16

Escape and Counting the Loot

Where: Outside Room 12

When: A few minutes later

The group now had to backtrack and pass through several rooms and corridors they had already seen to get to a new section. They picked up a chunk of what looked like blue glass, a weird looking rock with square bits sticking out of it, and then waited outside the room where it sounded like something heavy was stomping around.

“This must be it,” Light told them. “The final monster. Remember, don’t pick up the fiendstone. We want to check out any remaining rooms for treasure.”

“How are we going to tackle the beast?” Sinjorino asked. “Send in Olaph?”

“I just wish he could take a peek and tell us what we’re dealing with,” he mused.

“I don’t suppose you know some kind of code like semaphore or Morse code?” Sinjorino asked.

Olaph shook his head.

“Pity. Of course, I don’t either but it was worth asking.”

“We could do it in a very crude way,” Paige decided. “Go take a look, Olaph.”

He nodded and drifted through the door but then pulled back. He wiggled a finger and then went through the wall. There was a crash against it as whatever was in there smashed itself into the wall probably trying to get to him, and Olaph drifted back.

“You saw it?” she asked.

He nodded.

“Great. I’ll just recite the alphabet. Put your hand up when I get to the letter you need. We can just spell it out slowly.”

“I like where you’re going but I have a slightly better idea,” Light announced. He cast, and along the stone wall the letters of the alphabet appeared, now carved out of the stone. “You can just point to the letters.”

“I’m still taking credit for the idea,” Paige muttered.

Olaph pointed to several letters in quick succession.

“Stone Golem,” Light put together. “That’s a decent boss monster all right. No offense but can your bow even hurt something like that?”

“A construct made of solid rock?” they exclaimed. “I have no data to answer that query, I haven’t tested it against anything like that.”

“Good point, good point.” He nodded and stroked his chin. “If only there was some way to tell.”

Everyone stood for a moment in thought, and suddenly Olaph waved his hands to get everyone’s attention. He pointed to three letters.

“Ask? What’s that supposed to mean? Ask who? I would need to ask the guy that made it.”

He seemed to sigh and started pointing again.

“T.H.E S.Y.S.T.E.M. Ask The System? About a weapon? How would that even...”

“We asked it about our progress in the dungeon,” Paige reminded him. “What else can it tell us? It seems to know all about us, why not our equipment?”

"I suppose it doesn't hurt to try," he admitted, pulling his sword of light and becoming light himself. "Weapon status?" He tried variations and finally his eyes widened in surprise when he commanded "Display equipment menu," which brought up a blue box listing everything he was wearing, carrying, and existed in his pocket dimension. It was a pretty long list, and he found the sword in the list and touched it. Another window opened.

The Lightblade of Light Kajombro

The Lightblade is a rapier style thrusting weapon crafted in 2016 by the dwarf Alandro Stonehammer and enhanced by the master wizard Bela Graymare in 2056 for Light Kajombro. He has gone on to use the blade to slay many foes, including mages, in his unending quest to bring justice to the world.

Current Attributes

OTR 3 sword blade, fine steel: Heft 6, ER 1m

Pommel: Concrete Luminescence (sunlight) DTR 6

Sheds light as though standing in full sunlight at noon. Removable cover

Current Enchantments

Elemental Body (Light)

When drawn, transform the user and their equipment, including the sword itself, into pure light. On contact, deal OTR 10, HDL[3] elemental Light damage to the target. In this state the user can travel anywhere light can reach, and will only take damage from magical weapons or elemental Shadow spells. All damage is regenerated on the same segment unless the user is killed by a single attack.

"So that's a thing," he decided, reading it over. "It works. It told me all about the blade."

What else can it tell us, once we figure out how to ask it?

The group stood there, looking over their equipment list and reading things over. Olaph hovered, cursing his inability to speak and then realizing in his current state he really had no equipment anyway, it had vanished when he became a wraith. He would simply have to have his fun with the new menu later.

Sinjinorino finally spoke up. "So the bow does OTR 6, HDL[6]x2 damage and it can't become lethal. A construct made of stone is probably completely immune to my attacks. Either unarmed or otherwise. After all if I shot the wall here nothing would happen. I can't knock the wall out, it's not conscious. I really will need to try attaching another string to the bow. I wonder how that will modify the description."

"I can probably still hurt it," Light decided. "If I tried to chop a stone door apart, well..." He swung and a crack appeared in the wall where he hit. "Yeah, it would be slow but it would work. It can't hurt me."

"And if it can't touch you, what need for a support mage?" Paige mused. "Maybe I should look into getting an elemental body spell."

"It's a fairly high grade, so the XP cost is high. At least you don't have to pay gold for it now."

"True. Well, you two get in there and take it out. We learned at least one thing about these dungeons, if you have a form that can harm and not be harmed, you're basically unstoppable."

"Right. Padre, you head through that wall again and head to the other side. Then Sinjinorino and Paige can open the door and let me in. I don't think there's a crack big enough for even light to get in while it's closed like this. I'll open it from the other side when it's clear."

"Okay."

So they did just that. The golem seemed to get faster and faster the more Light poked it with the sword but all it could do was flail around and try to hit them. Soon it too died, and Light put the blade away and ushered the others inside. Of course they already knew it was gone, because as soon as it was a familiar box popped up.

Dungeon Cleared

Congratulations <unnamed party> for clearing
large dungeon 23

All participants receive 11.67 XP
Once all fiendstone rewards are gathered,
you will be deposited to the outside world

Please gather any belongings before this
eventuality or they shall be lost
Have a great day

From here there were only two rooms left before they found themselves back in the entrance chamber. The dungeon status listed 3 rooms they still hadn't visited, but everyone was tired of being in here and said the treasure they had was good enough. They had found one other thing that could have value and picked it up. Using the newly discovered method of asking The System what something was it called the tile an "Ornate porcelain tile gilded and painted with a legendary coat of arms." And it was. It was a tile, small enough to hold comfortably in the hand that had a faded symbol painted on it. Everyone made sure they were holding onto everything and Light picked up the last fiendstone. A second later the group found themselves in the bakery again, the dungeon entrance gone like it had never been, even the floor wasn't disturbed.

"Ah, yer back!" said the dwarf, turning to look at them. "And in one piece too I see. Figured you'd be along shortly, as the other group came out not long ago. You must have done what it wanted, I see the entrance is gone."

"Yes, this place can re-open," Light told him.

"Ach, the owner's 'll be glad to hear that. Thanks for taking care of the thing. It... won't be back, will it?"

Light shrugged. "No way to tell. Will it regenerate the rewards and come back to this exact spot? No way to know until dungeon 23 shows up someplace else or comes back here. It's too early to tell, the Guild is still trying to find those answers."

"Maybe I won't mention that to 'em? Eh, not up to me. I'll report what ye told me. Thanks for taking care of it."

"Sure thing. You're awfully calm about seeing a wraith by the way. I guess dwarves are made of pretty stern stuff."

"What are you talking 'bout now?"

"The-" He turned and noticed Olaph was back to his usual self. "Oh. Never mind."

"Couldn't hold onto it any longer," he announced. "I guess changing locations like that knocks it off me."

"Right. Well, let's go see about selling the stuff we picked up, and maybe trading in some of these stones for other ones if you want."

"I'd like to at least see what's available," he agreed.

"Right then, you lot," called the dwarf. "Get this barricade picked up, and someone find the owners and tell them it's safe to re-open."

Having gotten directions to a nearby jeweler the party, after having been hit with cleansing magic courtesy of Light because they had been wandering around filthy tunnels for hours, entered the shop. Light explained they had several things they were looking to sell, and gathered all the various shiny rocks they had found in the dungeon. There were seven in total, and the man behind the counter told them they were bloodstone, aquamarine, two lolite, chrysoprase, spinel, and azurite. He offered them 95 moons, 7 embers for the lot. This was almost 5 suns, the highest value gold coin, but just to keep it easy they split the moons 4 ways, so each person got 23. Not a dragon's hoard but decent enough for one day's work. Paige had complained about her collage loans often enough the group happily allowed her to take the leftover copper embers. Then Olaph asked about fiendstone, but not before having a thought. *Seven fiendstones, seven regular stones as rewards. Coincidence? Maybe, not enough data as Sinjorino might say.*

"Big ones?" asked the man. "I have a few, you just want to trade them?"

"That's ideally what I'd like," he agreed. "But if you're only buying them, I'll take the money and seek others elsewhere."

"I'd have to see them, of course..."

"Of course." He got them all out, laying them out on the counter.

"Yup, those are fiendstones all right. Fairly standard examples. Let me see what I've got." He went into the back while the apprentice kept an eye on the four in case they really were there to rob the place, but then if they were, what would either of them have really done? But of course Olaph was a bishop so it was fine, there was no chance of that. He came back with nine of them. "These should all be about the same size," he announced. "Don't get them mixed up but if you don't mind my asking, what's the difference?"

"All the difference in the world," he said mysteriously with a smile. "Now then, we have seven large ones, and one huge one. This huge one I'm keeping." He put it back. *Becoming a stone creature that's twice my size? Yeah, that one is pretty useful.* "The others are a clay golem, a war wolf, a grotesque, a lupogriff, a mountain troll... You know what I'm keeping that one too. An orog, an a ghou. Let's see what you have!"

Many minutes later, Olaph promising himself to spend some of that shiny new XP he got on the fiendstone skills as soon as enough time had passed, he had his answer. The man had:

1. Ursagriff x3
2. Treadguard
3. Mishipeshu
4. Orog
5. Orthrus Hound
6. Olgoi-khorkhoi
7. Arachnelim

"I'm not trading an Orog for an Orog, that's obvious."

"How are you telling what they are?" asked the man.

"Not very easily," he admitted. "But I'm not at a 10 in the skill just yet."

"You have a skill- sorry, dumb question. Carry on!"

"You want the treadguard," Sinjorino told him.

"I do?"

“Indeed. It’s a mechanical creature, I’m actually shocked a fiendstone can become one. They aren’t alive. Strange how the dungeon has incorporated them. Anyway, it’s from my time, they were purpose built for guarding locations and thus, not that bright. But their combat potential is quite high. And as they are mechanical, you would enjoy several benefits such as not breathing.”

“It’s something new to try, I’ll take it.” He put the war wolf below it on the counter. “The Mishipesuh seems far more useful than the grotesque,” so he did the same with those two. “The others don’t seem all that much better than what I already have. Those three ursagriffs though...” He quickly got out the description of his skill from the beta site. “I thought so. I could stuff all of them in the same place, for maximum points!”

“Uh, sir, you’re not, uh, putting these up your butt or anything are you? I apologize for my crudeness, but...”

Olaph laughed. “Nothing like that. Just me talking to myself.”

“I suppose it’s none of my concern if you do want to do such a thing.”

“I’ll do it. The lupogriff, golem and ghoul for all three ursagriff!” He grouped them.

“As the three you’ve said become ursagriffs are all similar, I wonder if I’m getting the better deal here. On the other hand, making a matched set with these three could be worth more...”

“If you want to sell a set to someone that puts them in three times as much danger, sure. Mine are recently destroyed. They won’t reactivate for some time. You have no idea how old these are and could activate at any time.”

“A good point. Still, would you mind trading this one for that one?” He pointed to the ghoul and orog. “This way I can at least still have a matched set of two?”

They are fairly similar. “Done.” He moved them.

“Ah, thank you.”

He swept the stone up into a bag. “Now if you can direct us to an antique dealer...”

“May I keep the dice?” Sinjorino asked on the way down the street. “I have something special in mind for them.”

“It’s fine with me,” Light told them. “I don’t think they’re worth all that much. They’re an interesting item though. I want to play around with the weird rod we got. I should be able to use The System to tell me what it is. Actually, Paige, do you want the coin purse? And that leaves the tile to you, Olaph. You can do what you want with them, and if they happen to sell for a lot of money, well, it’s an equal chance right now so that’s just our own personal LUCk. Four items, four of us. What do you say?”

Another coincidence, you would claim, oh recently cleared dungeon? They do seem to be piling up but again, not enough evidence one way or the other.

“I’m selling the purse,” Paige told him. “I need the money. But it sounds fair to me. You think that old tile is worth anything?”

“I shall gamble upon it,” Olaph announced. “Though of course any excess shall be given to the church, to help those in need.” He made the sign of the cross. “Perhaps the Lord will bless me with a bounty so that I may share it with others.”

The woman running the antique store was quite thrilled with the purse, offering her a single golden sun for it, which she accepted. But the tile, to everyone’s surprise, had really peaked her interest.

“This is one of the floor tiles from the Cielarko estate!” she gushed. “The crest is unmistakable.”

“Cielarko?” he inquired.

“A very well to do family that fell on hard times long ago. Oh my the story is famous among those in the trade. Their fortunes grew so quickly they could afford to have every tile in their home

hand painted with their crest by the greatest artisans of the day. And they did, and even more decadence besides. The finest stained glass windows, silk curtains, exotic woods for their floors and furniture. They spent and spent like their money would last forever. But then their fortunes turned so sour, so quickly, creditors basically tore their estate apart for anything of value while they could. Bits and pieces of the old place appear at auction from time to time, or at least that's the claim. Only the tiles, having been marked at the family's direction, are known to be genuine. And here I have a piece in my hands! I'll give you fifty moons for it!"

Paige gasped. She thought she had done pretty well with the purse but now she wished she had traded.

"I accept," Olaph told her. *I'll give a few to Paige, she's in need is she not? Perhaps thirty to the local church? I do have a long journey ahead, after all, so keeping some for myself is not greed, only prudence. The Lord helps those that help themselves, is it not said?*

"So now what?" Light asked the group after they left the shop. "We've proven ourselves against a fairly tough dungeon, got to use our new stuff for a bit. Shall we head back, get that other string, and see about finding someone to lead us down to talk with Sam?"

"The group we rescued, they suggested an inn that was nearby," Sinjorino suggested. "We could teleport back right now of course, but I would like to make sure they made it back all right. It shouldn't take long."

"I don't mind," he told them. "Let's see if we can find it."

They managed it after a bit of asking around, and with a LUCk check of 13, the gloomy looking party was sitting in the common room, looking mopey. The fairy had a thimble of something which was like a human having a whole bottle while the others seemed to be sharing a bottle of something. She perked up and noticed them first.

"Hey, it's them!" she announced. The others turned.

"Greetings," Sinjorino said with a wave. "I'm glad to see you made it out without issue."

"Seems you did too," said the centaur, looking back at her drink. "I guess some people have all the luck."

"Ah, don't mind her, she's still sore we had to get rescued," said the minotaur. "Find anything good down there? We had a few things, but of course they all vanished when we left."

"That's actually why I'm here," they told the group, presenting the box. "I felt bad you left empty handed, that doesn't seem quite fair to me. Oh I see why the dungeon would do that, to avoid you going multiple times and not picking up the stones so the entrance doesn't go away. So I saved you something. Please, accept it."

Everyone looked at the box and then back to Sinjorino. "Are you sure?" asked the centaur.

"Completely."

Huh, that's nice of them, Olaph thought. Here I was thinking I was the only one to be generous, but it turned out I was assuming too quickly. And Sinjorino doesn't even have a soul to consider. At least, that's the current consensus. A pity, that the being that seems most deserving of an existence in Heaven shall never attain it. Doesn't really seem fair to me.

The fairy got up and walked over to the box, throwing it open. "Oh wow!"

"I don't think it will be the most valuable item we took from the place, but they should be worth something. Use or sell them as you wish, at least you have something to show from your time here."

Everyone took one out of the box and looked it over. "A die carved from, is this crystal?" the human asked.

"Possibly. I'm not sure."

"These are really great, thank you," the centaur told them. "You didn't have to do that, really!"

“And yet, I see that I have lifted your spirits, and so the gift has had the intended effect. I wish you luck on your subsequent adventures.”

They all thanked them, and they bowed their head a little and came back to the group.

“Now we can depart,” they said.

If I tell them to wait and go to the church now, I'll look like I'm trying to compete with them over who is nicer, Olaph thought. I'll just wait and go tonight, in secret, after we're back. All churches share donations where they are needed, giving to one or the other is not a requirement. I will not spoil their sacrifice even if I had planned to tithe all along. It would just be a bad look. The others have no need to know and think me a braggart.

“We'll find a quiet place and we're gone,” Light agreed. “Let's mosey.”

Chapter 17

Blast From the Past

Where: The Guild hall

When: The next day

Having spent the night at the visitor's quarters the group was ready to head to their next destination, Goldharbor, on the coast of Condana. Everyone had spent the rest of the day doing their own thing, for example Olaph making his donation to the church and Sinjorino seeking out the armory. It turned out that attaching another bowstring didn't interfere with the magic one bit, though it was a little tricky to get the right bowstring if one was in a hurry to attack. Or at least it would have been, if they hadn't had a 10 in the skill, but they did, so they were fine. They picked the ice string, which could lower DTR and freeze things, as it turned out "dross" was essentially useless. Because the initial damage from that element was half normal, and the mage that had created it only had a 5 skill, it rounded down to HDL[2] damage which was hardly worth anything. Getting an additional +2 damage on subsequent attacks by others was attractive, but really only applied to Light's sword. He wouldn't *mind* doing HDL[5] damage instead of HDL[3] of course, but as nothing could really hurt him did he *need* to? No, no he did not. So they picked pure offense rather than support, which was fine with everybody.

Paige went to the bank with her latest earnings, and made sure her monthly payment of 15 moons was made. *Only 53 more months to go.* Basically the bank and the university had an agreement that any money in this special account was taken on a certain day once a month, because she could be anywhere on the continent performing her shadowing. This relieved her of the stress of trying to get to the bank on a certain day, and avoided fees for late payment and such. (Of course the bank getting to use *her* money for the duration was just fine with them. Did they pay any kind of interest on this money? No, no, don't be silly this is for your convenience it's not a savings account. Have an account with stacks of gold and then we'll talk some kind of interest rate.)

The rod Light was interested in was a "beta object" put out into the world to help test the beta spell of "make immobile." This caused a minor stir when Light showed it to some of his fellow mages, as they rightfully freaked out about who, exactly, had created it and put it there. They were also interested in the fact that according to the blue box:

As this object has been imbued with a spell not yet in wide use, it is subject to modification without notice. Should the underlying spell change, the spell within this object will change as well. For example the grade of the spell could change, or various aspects of the spell could be modified. If the skill check that created the object becomes insufficient, this could result in the object no longer being magical. We apologize for the inconvenience, and are excited to learn what use, if any, this spell is put to.

"So some force is just going to reach out, change how the spell works, and that will subsequently change this magical object?" said one of the people he was showing.

“That’s what it says,” Light replied.

“And all it does it stay where you put it when you push the button?” asked another.

“That’s right.”

He did it, leaving it hanging in the air. He pushed it again and it was able to move.

“What a strange object,” they all agreed.

They discussed what kind of power could change the rules of reality like that, but only a few beings that would wield it came to mind. All of them terrifying. They all were relieved he was soon going to leave to see if Sammael was still imprisoned, and wished him luck.

“How are we getting to Goldharbor anyway?” Paige asked as they ate breakfast the next morning.

“Given we are on an official mission for the Guild they’ve found someone who has been there and can teleport us. I’ve never been, so I can’t take us,” Light admitted.

“Isn’t that place the worst?” Sinjorino asked. “I’ve heard stories about how corrupt everybody is there.”

“It’s true, there’s been a cycle of escalation there for many years,” he agreed. “The merchants charge outrageous prices to the guard, so the guard makes up a lot of phony ‘taxes’ and ‘fees’ on everything from walking down the street to entering buildings. Everyone around there as always trying to put one over on everybody so money changes hands a lot. It all evens out, in the end, at least if you live there. It’s people like us that are just visiting that really get taken advantage of.”

“And why are we heading there of all places?” Olaph asked.

“It’s where the demonic city of Bhogavati ended up after the Moon’s arrival. This may be why the place ended up like it is. Who can say? We’re just heading in there, and finding someone that can send us to the lower plane. There’s a lot of trade between the two places so it’s not going to be that difficult. From there we can put out feelers, and see who can show us a reliable tunnel down to Sam. Then we take that tunnel. We have magic to make food and water, we have light, it should be fine even if it takes weeks. I have no idea how deep Sam is.”

“All of that is still probably going to cost us,” Paige mused.

“The Guild is paying it, remember? We got out money the last time we were here. If they’re going to insist I pay for every little thing, I’ll insist on getting receipts for it all. They’ll love it.”

“Still. The less time we spend there the better, correct?”

“Naturally. They will try to take everything they can from us. There’s nothing we can do about being outsiders.”

“We can limit our time there though,” she insisted. “Go down to the Demon Realm ourselves.”

He shook his head. “I don’t know that spell.”

She sighed. “You have to stop thinking like an old man. Pay the 1 XP for The System to show you the spell and cast it from there. It won’t let you learn it without spending the rest of the XP but we only need it hopefully a maximum of two times.”

“Oh.” He considered a moment. “I guess that would work. You’re right, before The System I would have had to go up to the repository and pay for the spell. Let’s see...” He opened his spell interface and started reading over the descriptions. “It would have to be the gate spell, grade 10. Everything else is maintained. Which is weird, teleportation isn’t ‘maintained.’ I magically move myself to another location, I’m there. Why is every dimension hopping spell different? I’ve gone to the location, let me stay there.”

“Probably so humans were not tempted to enter, and remain in, Heaven,” Olaph decided. “I still know what a grade 10 spell is, the hardest to master. So it would take some doing to get there and stay there. Our Lord probably made sure if you needed to move plains permanently, you had to work long and hard to be able to do it.”

“Makes sense. Gives someone time to talk you out of it. Well, we’re not going up we’re going down. And to one of the only places that welcomes humans, no offense Sinjorino, in their city.”

“Excuse me, what about me?” Paige asked, annoyed.

“As an elf, they’ll probably give you some dirty looks,” he admitted. “Maybe wear a hat and try not to be so…” He indicated her in a general way. “Elf-y.”

“Great,” she grumbled. “Not welcome at home or in a demon city. Make up your minds.”

“Will it work, can you handle it?” Olaph asked him.

“I’ll spend the XP, give me a few minutes to make some checks and I’ll let you know. It’s a Pluto spell and I have a 5 rating. From writings it’s a difficulty 19-”

Paige raised a finger and took a breath.

“Yes, I know it’s a penalty of -4 and it’s not the exact same thing Paige I was simplifying the explanation for the bishop.”

She put her finger down.

“But with a 10 segment casting time raised to 20, meaning I can take an extra 10 segments instead of just an extra 5, my minimum check result will be a 12. That’s base. I can probably enhance it with a good empowering check another 2 or 3 so we should be fine.”

“If you understand the spell,” Paige put in.

“Yes, if I can understand the spell. But at least it’s possible to cast this way so the plan is sound. Now let me concentrate.”

“Of course.”

Light made his checks, first spending ten minutes for the grade 10 spell just reading it over. He made a magical scripture check of 11, meaning he didn’t get it. He then spent another 30 minutes, getting another two 11s in a row before his final check of 19 forty minutes later. By the then others had wandered off, heading outside so as to not disturb him. Naturally as he had tried 4 times his check was at a -3 penalty but the 19 was still more than enough. He had successfully read the spell, and now thought about it, making a magical theory check. He calculated a 14 and with a sigh, spent an XP to bring it up to above the minimum needed. With a nod to himself he collected his wayward party members, and they were teleported to Goldharbor. Again, into a small shack used for that purpose. They didn’t step out, as they knew they would probably be charged some kind of ‘teleportation fee’ right outside by any guard that happened to see them. Instead Light brought up The System display again, and started making his spell casting checks. He got a 15 on his empowering check, and a final 22 on his Pluto check after all his bonuses. A dimensional gate opened inside the shack, and the group jumped through into the demon world.

They stared at the city below them. It wasn’t that it looked all that different from cities in the modern world, though they saw a lot more lights on poles along the road which added to the gleam of the whole thing. No, the biggest difference was that rather than being made of stone or wood, the buildings here seemed to be made of gold.

Though probably some kind of overlay, thought Olaph, as a gold building wouldn’t really hold up. It must be stone frames, then gold on top. Thankfully I am not a greedy man but... are the streets gold as well?

“I guess I see why they stay here,” Paige decided, looking around. “Given the ease we just got here, you would think after all this time they would have all migrated away from the Demon Realm. But if they did they would either have to leave all this gold behind or melt it down and not live in a gold city anymore. Can you imagine the thieves in our world seeing a sight like this? It wouldn’t last an hour.”

“Lots of naga do live in Goldharbor as I understand it, traveling back and forth,” Light told her. “Of course they just live in regular houses. This place has been like this from the beginning.”

“There’s a path to the city,” Sinjorino announced, pointing. “We’re overlooking it, because they *wanted* us to overlook it when we arrived. To see the splendor of it all. I have no doubt the shack is used for this purpose as well, and was positioned deliberately. We must walk down and go through the city gate, there.”

“Let’s get down there and get out of here,” Paige told everyone. “This place isn’t as bad as the dungeon but it still gives me the creeps.”

“You know we’re heading into a dark tunnel pretty soon, for like days or weeks?” Light reminded her.

“I’m trying not to think about it. It’s like this whole adventure is specifically made to make me uncomfortable. Stupid weaknesses.”

“At least there’s something of a sky overhead?” Olaph mused, pointing at the sickly red orb that dominated the “sky” in this place. If one looked carefully one could see that the horizon here curved upwards, as the Demon Realm seemed to be on the inside of a sphere rather than outside it. How this happened before the Moon’s arrival was simply accepted as the general oddness of the place, but once the continents all shifted in the Great Arrival it was even more unclear how things matched up. Oh it had been mapped in the meantime, (this was a “where” not a “how”) but one still couldn’t travel in the Demon Realm and bypass the restriction on travel that seemed to keep everyone on the continent of Pyre.

“I’m still trapped inside a big old ball of rock,” she complained. “Let’s go.”

There wasn’t a closed gate to be seen as the group neared the wall but there were several guard stations they had to pass by. Staffed with fantastic looking naga, in all colors, their weapons got some looks but no one stopped them.

“Probably think our swords and bows and such are quaint,” Light remarked. “They’ll have weapons here from prior ages, mark my words.”

“This place didn’t go through all the changes the world did,” Sinjorino agreed. “So they’ve had all that time to continue technological advancement. I would be curious to see if they’ve continued robotics research and if I could get parts here. Perhaps even more advanced parts?”

“Plenty of time for that later on,” Light told them. “I think we’re about to be greeted.”

The group had reached the entrance to the city, and a female naga slithered up to them, smiling all the while.

“Welcome to Bhogavati,” she greeted us. “The shining city. City of gold. Of wonders and treasures. Ah, I see you are an adventuring group, by your garb. And what a curious group you are indeed! Of course, we do not discriminate here so even elves are permitted. Ah, how you have fallen from your lofty beginnings, lady elf. But we will not hold that against you, in any way! No, we will not.”

“I’m a native,” she growled. “No lofty beginnings here.”

“Really? How sad for you. To have never known the splendor of the Heavens and yet still be treated as though The Lord created you directly. That must be quite confusing for you.”

“I get by.”

“Of course, of course. Now, to business then? For a small fee I would be happy to guide to you any part of our fair city. You wouldn’t want to get lost, would you?” She continued smiling.

“Yeah, definitely some kind of bleed over,” Olaph decided.

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand?” She looked confused.

“I’ve got this one,” a new voice said, coming over. A man, who had been sitting on a bench near the wall had gotten up and walked towards them. He was very well dressed, clean shaven, and was accompanied by a rather huge looking, upright beaver, and on his shoulder was a strange looking bird. He had a lens of some kind over one eye, but no visible weapons anyone could see.

“Hey Dean, these people are here to see you?” the naga asked.

His head bobbed a bit. “Not that they knew, but yes.”

“There goes my fee. I have to make a living too you know!”

That strange beaver, it's not a beastkin or beastfolk, too animalistic, thought Olaph. And what's that bird? And what's with Paige?

Paige had taken a step, and then a few more steps back as the man approached. She looked terrified. Olaph looked between them a second and stepped to the side, putting himself before her. *I'll go wraith if he makes some kind of move, get in his face to distract and weaken him.* He noticed Light had put a hand on his sword too, and he had taken a step back as well. *What am I missing? Is he an avatar of some kind? Could 'he' have learned of our mission somehow and came here to stop us already?*

“Who- *what* are you?” she managed.

“Peace, please,” he told them, holding his hands up. Olaph noticed a ring on each hand, and he had a tattoo of some kind on his palm. “I mean you no harm. My name is Dean Chesterfield, I'm here to help.”

“Your power-” Paige breathed as Light stuttered “Your magic-” Both eyed the other.

“Ah, yes,” he agreed, looking a little down. “Well, when 5000 years old you reach, as powerful as me you may be. Yes!” He said this in a funny voice. “But you are all too old. Yes. Too old to begin the training.”

Why does that ring a bell for me? Sinjorino asked themselves.

“No? Nothing? Not even from the-” He sighed, having been eyeing Sinjorino expectantly. “Never mind. Come with me, if you want to live. I know you're on some kind of important mission, but not the details. We can head to my house and you can fill me in. I want to help.”

“He's a good guy,” the naga told us. “You can trust him. Anyone, and I mean virtually *anyone* in this town will vouch for Dean. He's lived forever and helped more people than I'll ever meet. Go on, enjoy your stay in Bhogavati.” She slid to the side, and gestured us forward.

“Are you an angel?” Olaph asked.

“No, I'm sort of sideways from them. The opposite would be a demon, and I'm certainly not that. I'll explain it all later. Please, come to my home. You four are central to the changes that have been going on recently in some way and I'm curious to learn more. I have snacks!”

Light looked at the others.

“His aura is pure,” Paige told him, having made the check 3 times. “He's worried, excited, and not a demon. But I've never felt a spiritual energy like his before. It's so... expansive. It's not even coming from him completely, I think he's got a lot of power stored in items on his person.”

“They're called talismans,” Dean announced. “I was an artificer first, you know. Ah, those were the days.”

“He's magically active too,” Light agreed. “But if you don't think he means us harm...”

She shook her head, and he took his hand off his sword. “Then you have my apologies, sir. We didn't expect to be met here, and if we were, well, it could have been very bad considering who we are here to see.”

“I'd love to hear all about it. Shall we?” He took a few steps, his beaver following him, and looked back.

The group followed him through the city to his place, and the naga was right, everyone greeted Dean and he, for the most part, greeted all of them by name. Many times he asked about some issue they had been having, but was now solved. They showed him a great deference, hastily went their way, and some even greeted the bird though it didn't seem to care. Finally they reached a fairly large building with people of all sorts coming and going. The building was many floors, covered in gold of course “We have to keep up appearances after all,” Dean told them, The reception area was full of people waiting to be served in some way, he greeted many of them. Looking around the group saw a lot

of things they didn't really understand, (Sinjorino did and couldn't believe their optical circuits) because they were computers, and a water fountain, and a jukebox next to a soda machine. They took a few flights of stairs, and he put his hand on a panel next to a door. It lit up and the door slid open. He welcomed them into his office, and everyone looked around. The place was richly carpeted, and there were many shelves on the wall displaying objects both old and new looking. A sleek looking desk was at one end of the room, and everything was rounded and shiny.

“So tell me why this place is straight out of the starship Enterprise?” Sinjorino finally asked.

Dean's face lit up like he an old friend of his had just woken up from a 5000 year coma. “Ah ha! You are an old companion model! I knew it! Sit, please, make yourselves comfortable. We have a lot to talk about.”

Chapter 18

Who is This Guy

Where: Dean's building

When: Just after they got there

“So let's get the big questions out of the way,” Dean told them, pacing excitedly around the room. “Like how did I know you were coming? Dreams. Thankfully one of my abilities as a seer is to dream about things that can happen in the future. It's how I avoided all that unpleasantness when the Moon arrived. Naturally I don't dream about stuff like stubbing my toe or anything like that, just the big stuff. I, and most seers, really, knew that something really, really bad was coming. Thankfully I had contacts here and the means to reach this place, so I saved as many as I could by bringing them through portals. That was a scary couple of weeks for everybody, let me tell you. Even the demons were like, uh, is this supposed to be happening? We could feel the changes happening to the world even here. Of course I ventured out when it was safe to try and help as many as I could. When it was over the world had changed, and we had to start trying to pick up the pieces.”

“You've been around since the breaking?” Sinjorino asked.

“Since before that. I was born just after the year 2000. The first one, mind you. I attended Demongate High, got married, had a bunch of daughters, and offered them all talismans to stop their aging. I didn't need one, long story. Most accepted, even my wife did for a time, but they've mostly gone on now. Felt it was their time, and took the ring off. It didn't get any easier each time it happened. But I stayed the course, as it were. There's just so much to do, to learn, and now The System has taken hold! It's an exciting time to be alive. So that's the very, *very* short version of who I am. I saw you all coming in a dream, and narrowed it down using my other seer abilities. I saw you on an important mission and I'd like to offer what help I can. Then maybe when you're back we can reminisce about the past. Dr Who and Star Trek and Owl House and everything else I've missed so very, very much. I've recorded what I could *about* those stories and I even managed to save a lot of things from that time but no one seems to be developing television so all those stories are basically lost. What a pity.”

“I wouldn't turn down the opportunity to share a few old memories,” Sinjorino admitted. “But our mission comes first.”

“Naturally! I wouldn't have it any other way.”

“What is this place, exactly?” Light asked. “And introduce us to your companion. Do you know our names?”

“Companion?” He looked around. “Oh, him!” He laughed. “No, no, one of my abilities as a shaman is to project my soul. It's perfectly safe here but he likes being out, so I try to keep him out as much as I can. This little guy,” he patted the bird on his shoulder, “is an imbuing of one of the new beta spells, the micro companion. Beta spells, can you believe it? Oh, you know about that right?”

“We do.” *How many abilities does he have?*

“Ah good, good. I have only the faintest inklings of your names?”

“I'm Light. This is Paige, Olaph, and Sinjorino.”

“Good to meet you all! Olaph, is it? Yes, yes, a like minded individual if what I've seen is any indication. Good man. After some revelations you'll play a big part in the future to come, mark my words.”

“I see.”

“All in good time. As for this place? It’s something I started a long time ago. Back in high school I formed a club. The Helping People Club. We would basically sit around the clubroom doing homework and hanging out and occasionally someone with a problem would drop by. We, that is my friends and I, would solve it. A few hundred years of learning and wandering around after I graduated made me nostalgic for it, so I started the Helping People Company. It’s been going ever since.”

“Hold on, I’ve heard of that,” Light told him. “You’re the HPC?”

“That’s me. But really it’s much bigger than me,” he admitted. “I hire all over the world, anyone that genuinely wants to help their fellow- well I can’t say man. Being? This is the main office and where we refer anyone with the big problems to. I only take the biggest issues, my employees are more than capable after all. I wouldn’t have hired them otherwise!” He laughed again. “We’re the living embodiment of the phrase ‘stronger together.’ Hey, if you’re ever looking for work, we’re always short staffed. If you can do unique things, or magic, or just have a genuine desire to help someone we can find you a place. Think it over.”

“So you were there when the gates first opened?” Paige asked.

“I was.” His face fell. “I really thought we had something there too. Magic was flourishing, enough people had survived to rebuild part of our civilization’s technology. All questions of religion were settled, angels were walking around the place again. I thought, okay, maybe a Thanos event can bring us together.”

A *what?* thought everyone.

“Bring magic and technology together, make an even better world than we had before. But then dragons showed up, and conflicts turned to wars. Because of course we still had those. I couldn’t be everywhere at once. So I got to watch the world get torn apart a second time. I stayed here a lot after that. Just couldn’t face it. But finally I decided I had to, and came back to the world. I’ve been working to keep it together, on a personal level anyway, ever since. I try to stay out of politics, focus on the ones that need the most help. The Guild keeps a close eye on me when I pop up, seems to think I’ve amassed too much power, even though I only use it to help others. You think a 5,000 year track record would speak for itself but nooooo.”

Light was nodding. “Yeah, that’s about right. Your name does sound familiar, now that I think about it. Huh, you’re the famous Dean. How about that?”

He grinned. “In the flesh. So, everyone satisfied, for the moment? Shall we talk about your mission?”

“How much do you know about it?”

“The specifics? Not much. I know it has to do with The System, and it’s dangerous, and pointless in the end. But you have to go through it.”

“Pointless? Oh come on!” Paige muttered.

“The mission itself is, but where it leads isn’t. Sorry, dreams aren’t the most clear even for me.”

“It’s fine,” Light told him. “The specifics are we want to check on Sammael’s prison. He’s one of the only beings powerful enough to have created The System for whatever reason. You know about the angels, right?”

He nodded. “I do. Lots of complaints after The System showed itself. Promises by angels being broken when they didn’t show up. Prayers being unanswered. I never explored those powers myself, felt it wasn’t right to tap into holy power when I hadn’t been given it directly. I mean what difference is there between myself and a holy man? None, I always thought. I don’t kill, I honor the commandments, that sort of thing.”

“Didn’t tap into?” Paige asked. “Who are you?”

“Didn’t I say? I’m a descendant of Cain, primordial man. Many times removed by now of course, but still with enough power to eventually take the backgrounds, as we now say under The System, of all other archetypes. I have them all, from artificer to true martial artist. That’s what 5,000

years of training will do for you. When I mastered all of them I moved on to magic. And now I have the beta abilities to play with! That plant one looks really interesting, I'm saving my XP for it."

Cain, the undying. Cursed by the Lord to never enter Heaven. Naturally he's still around, having the occasional kid it seems. So he's in direct line to the progenitors, eh? So that's how he did it. "A descendant can just buy supernatural abilities?" Olaph asked.

"Essentially. Before XP I just studied them exclusively, forced my soul to grow to encompass the abilities each archetype had. Now I would just pay the points. Much easier! The System is just so convenient, isn't it?"

"I should say so." *My own experience taking the attuner 'background' is evidence of that. I can't deny him the same, as it seems he was born into a background that lets him take other backgrounds. Wonder how many points that particular one is?*

"But back to the topic at hand. You're afraid the angel guarding Sammael is gone too, leaving him about to break free?"

"That's right."

"I should have thought of it, but I'm glad someone did. And just you four are going to check on it?"

Light spoke up. "We realize it's not a great plan, but we can't send an army down here. It has to be done quietly. We see if we can get close, see what the situation is, and get back. If he's breaking free we prepare as best we can. We can't kill him, but by God we'll not just let him roll over us either."

"And we may not look like much," Paige told him. "But we're fairly powerful in our own right."

"Lots of different powers in the world," he agreed, nodding. "I admire your confidence. Okay, let's see what I have that can help us." He went behind his desk, took off his lens, and started typing.

"Hey, that's that keyboard thing!" Paige exclaimed. "I know what that is, we saw one of those recently!"

"Yes, how do you have working computers here?" Sinjorino asked.

"Electricity is pretty easy," Dean told them, pausing in his typing. "They've always had it here. Computers too. Now naturally they were imported not manufactured here, but during the breaking I had my people gathering knowledge just as much as saving who they could. I had been everywhere, I could teleport all around the world gathering up great minds I knew deserved to be saved. And of course as many server farms as I could lay hands on. Yeah, turns out when the sky turns yellow and the sea starts to boil the people guarding a few racks of computer equipment don't care so much for their jobs. We saved what we could, put the process back together, and built our own factories. Naga are just as smart as people, smarter actually, they were heavenly beings after all. And they *like* computers, makes it easier to count their wealth. They like games, they like the connection these devices provide. So they've continued making breakthroughs all this time. After all we have alchemy and magic to help do things the original factories never could. This one device here probably has more power than all the computers on Earth when I was born!" He patted it affectionately. "It doesn't hurt that here in the Realm we didn't lose souls and knowledge like Earth did. In fact we gained them, because so many died. During the time of the breaking demons sort of looked around and thought, huh, not much world to conquer is there? No sense attacking it, the end times sort of came and all the prophesy was wrong. No Fenrir, no Beast, no war with Heaven. So they went to work doing other stuff. We had factories to build, and an almost infinite labor force to build them with. So we did. Plus it didn't hurt that demons deciding that making souls forget their past lives was a bad idea, we needed that knowledge. So a lot of souls skipped the whole punishment thing and simply oversaw the industries they were familiar with. I mean who was going to come down here and punish them for doing it? God? Not likely. And even demons can get bored just doing the same old tortures for a thousand years. So a lot of them took up other work. A lot more than the surface changed when the Chaos Moon entered our solar system."

"Could you bring this sort of thing back to the world?" they continued.

“Maybe. When it’s ready for it. I mean how many places even have electric outlets?”

“Not many,” they admitted. “Somehow we’ve just stalled...”

“Solve that problem, and the naga will happily start selling computers to people. A whole new market? They’d jump at the chance. Money, money, money, money. They love the stuff. Now, where was I?” He went back to typing. “Okay, here’s the deal. I’ve got information about two possible entrances to the prison. One curated, one rumored. Basically anyone that wants to can take a ‘pilgrimage’ to see the king of demons. The path is kept open and patrolled. There’s rest stations. Amenities. Even electric carts so you don’t have to walk, for the most faithful. The rumored one is none of those things. It’s just a hole leading downward, in the dark, and there could be anything in those tunnels.”

“So the curated one it is then!” Paige announced.

“Ah, there’s a price,” he cautioned.

“Of course there is,” Light muttered. “But we can pay?”

“Can you?” Dean asked. “What if the payment’s not in gold?”

“What is it? Not sacrifice, I hope?”

“No. According to this you must prove your worth to see the tempter. That’s still his holy mission, don’t forget. The Allfather never said to stop. And all he wants to do is fulfill that command. So, to go see him, you have to prove you’ve tempted someone. The more people you’ve tempted, or the bigger fall they had, the better your treatment along the path and the better your reception at the end. For all four of you it would probably have to be one big fall caused by you working together or each one of you would have to tempt someone on your own.”

“Temptation, eh?” Paige mused. “We do have a holy man right here, so I bet my part can be done pretty easily. Hey Olaph?”

“Yes?”

She adjusted her stance, sticking one hip out. Her voice lowered, and she stuck out her chest. “How about we find a quiet corner and, you know, get to know each other a little better?”

“No!”

“Well I’m out of ideas,” she admitted, standing straight again. “Yeah, that could be pretty hard.”

Dean giggled and rolled his eyes. “Wow, what was your seduction check just then?”

“...A five. I don’t have that skill.”

He laughed all the harder. “Yeah, you nailed it.”

“But she didn’t nail anybody, that’s the whole problem,” Sinjorino countered.

“You’re not wrong!”

After a moment he got himself under control again.

“Do you know where the other one is?” Light asked. “We can move stone should the path be blocked. We can survive as long as we need to as long as we keep going down.”

“It’s in a pretty remote area. Probably so it wouldn’t be discovered. And really it’s just a rumor, like I said. There’s a hole demons sometimes go into that my people have mentioned seeing. There are not many reasons to do that. So that’s what we figure it is. I can give you directions to it if you want to chance it.”

Why have two? Olaph pondered. The official one sounds much nicer. And demons wouldn’t have a problem with causing temptation in humans. But of course getting there to meet some to tempt could be an issue. Maybe they don’t want to bother? But then why go see Sammael? Why risk his displeasure for not following the rules?

“I’d like to do a divination spell or two before we leave though,” Light decided. “If I just get a ‘no’ answer to ‘does the hole we’re heading to lead to Sammael’ we can... Oh.”

“Right,” Dean agreed with a nod. “We already know from what I’ve discovered the trip is pointless, but the journey is necessary. Go ahead and do it, don’t trust my word for it, but don’t be surprised if you do get a no and a yes to ‘should we go anyway’ sort of thing.”

The group had a brief discussion but decided to trust the guy that was thousands of years old and had made a living for most of that time by helping people. There was no denying his story, given the number of artifacts Sinjorino verified were from before they were constructed to the modern day. Coupled with the fact his spirit energy and aura were both unlike anything Paige had ever seen, his knowing they were coming, the beaver, his magic, the company. It all added up.

“So where is this hole?” Light asked.

“Tenebria, thankfully,” Dean replied, getting out a map. He spread it on the desk and everyone came to look at it. “Here’s the city where we are, and this vast area here is Tenebria. Basically home to everyone that was just *slightly* evil. Not enough to be tortured, but yet not good enough to be let into Heaven. So much for the forgiveness of the Lord, am I right?”

“The Lord does forgive those who genuinely repent their sins!” insisted Olaph.

“Right,” he drawled. “Tell that to them. Anyway, a good place for an illicit portal into the lower chambers, as demons hardly go there. It’s depressing even for them. Just a seemingly infinite amount of souls standing around doing nothing. Makes you wonder what the point is. They can’t leave, and are too out of it to allow us to build factories there and put them to work. I tried, believe me. There’s nothing I can do for them, and I hate it. But hey, not my call. Now, it’s just to the north-east of us, but there’s no magnetic field here! Whoops! No compass will work. And we’ve yet to figure out how to keep satellites in the air to provide GPS service. Dragons keep bumping into them or whatever. Demons shoot them down for fun, or they just fail randomly. So that’s out. It being there is too vague for divination magic too, to just show it to you. There’s no landmarks. My people out looking for those together enough to respond so they could be given something to do report demons passing them and vanishing down a hole. Not much help. So we’re going to have to figure out some other way to tell exactly where it is and get you there.”

“Actually,” Light mused with a slight smile, “I think I have just the thing. As it’s physically there and we know about it, staying on course isn’t a problem. It’s traversing the distance. I don’t want to spend the next few weeks trudging through the Demon Realm.”

“I can loan you a flight sphere,” Dean offered. “And a pilot. That can get you anywhere you want to go pretty fast.”

“Don’t know what that is, but I think we have a plan!”

“Let’s head to the airfield!”

Chapter 19

A Minor Setback

Where: The “airfield”

When: A few moments later

The airfield, it turned out, was a big field outside of town full of strange looking metal spheres. The group didn't see much detail as they headed into the main building, led by Dean. He was greeted by the receptionist, a goblin.

“Greetings, Dean,” he began. “Need to get somewhere?”

“These people do. I'd like them to leave right away. Who is available right now?”

“Next in rotation is Malfeasaceen, I can have him come down right away.”

“Malfeasaceen?” Light asked, not believing his ears.

“Don't let their names fool you. They've all been vetted. They're professionals.”

“If you say so.”

“Get him down here, and book a one way flight to my account to where ever these people need to go.”

“Sure thing sir!” He started typing madly.

“What's his number? Thirty something right?”

“Thirty four, yes.”

“We'll meet him out there, I'll want to show them the 'craft.' They've never traveled this way before.”

“Okay!”

“Come on.” He headed out the back door and the others followed. They passed dozens of spheres, each sitting in a square marked by a number. Looking inside, past the seemingly glass window that made up the “front” of the “vehicle” were a number of seats. And nothing else. It didn't take long to reach 34 and Dean cracked the thing open. It was a fairly thick, solid metal sphere with a door, a small glass area in front to see where you were going, and some very close together seats. That's it.

“So here's how it works. Our pilots are all devils or other spell caster types. Devils happen to all be able to use magic and need work because there's a zillion of them. So I hire some. They cast a few spells, the first on you guys to protect against the high speeds you're going to be traveling at, and then a spell that modifies the direction of gravity for the sphere. It then lifts into the air. Another casting and it zooms forward. When you're near your destination he cuts the spell and it drops like a rock. Of course in some areas we go for a softer landing, and he'll use another spell for that. But this,” he banged on the side of the thing, “is bloodiron, so it can't be physically deformed. You just tell him where you want to go. Direction changes means recasting the spell, so keep that in mind. It's not more expensive or anything, we're not the Guild, but each time you get lower and lower. Of course you can go up again but it's a hassle. Much easier and faster to go in a straight line from here to where you need to go.”

“And this is safe?” Paige desperately needed to know while trying to act uninterested and chill with the whole situation.

“Completely safe! And it can get you from one side of the Realm to the other in the fastest way possible. You aren't going that far and there are other means if you don't want to do this. The dragon taxi for example. But dragons are way more expensive and slower. Trust me, this is the best way to

travel around here. Well, teleporting is the *best* way, but we work with what we have. Ah, here they are.”

“Hey everyone,” said a devil that walked up. “Ah, Dean, you’re not traveling this way are you? Thought you had been everywhere.”

“Not me, them. Take good care of them now!”

“Of course. Haven’t lost anyone in days. Maybe two weeks. Nothing to worry about.”

Paige took a step back.

“I kid! I kid the clients! Hey, anyone want spell-casting ability? As I have you here...” He pulled what looked like a contract out of his jacket pocket.

“I should say not!” Olaph told him. “Not the way you’re offering it anyway.”

“Ah, no one does anymore,” he complained. “Easier to make warlocks. Stupid warlocks. Anyway, all aboard! Where we going?”

“Give me a minute and I’ll tell you,” Light told them. “Dean, thank you for all the help.”

“Sure thing. Come see me when you get- you can get back, right?”

“I know the teleport spell, yes.”

“Don’t try going to the city directly. Go back to the bench we met at, otherwise you’ll be redirected. Pay the guide to bring you back to my building. I’ll reimburse you, long as you tell me what you found out. We’ll need to know too.”

“Right.”

“Good luck.”

“Thanks again.”

With a nod he went back inside, disappearing from view. Light got out a large piece of canvas and set it on the ground. Everyone bent over to look at it, and found it was a circle with various numbers on it. He cast the question spell twice, getting an 11 and a 13 on the checks. “Okay, we need to go in exactly that direction,” he pointed while standing on the circle, “for exactly 417km. Can you do that?”

“Aw, that’s easy. Let me punch in some numbers here.” He got out a glowing device and touched it in various places.

“A cell phone,” Sinjorino decided. “Or a modern equivalent. Interesting.”

“Ha! Yeah, I remember when those were just coming on the market!” the devil told them with a grin. “That takes me back.”

Right, thought Olaph. Demons are also basically forever. It’s no surprise to find one thousands of years old at a minimum. Or even millions. We humans really do have a pathetic lifespan don’t we? Ah, but that was “our” own fault, wasn’t it? The Lord made us the other way first. Strange he didn’t see what came after coming.

“Right. Punched it all in,” the devil announced. “Got a heading and flight time. We should be pretty close, within a few kilometers anyway with only a kilometer resolution for the flight time. I’ll get you snug and we’ll be off.”

They showed how to buckle into the seats and the devil cast a spell on them. “Don’t resist it now,” he cautioned. “This is the spell of... Well read it for yourself.” He made a motion and a box appeared.

Inertial Compensation

Planet: Mercury

Grade: 3

Resist: RES

DIF: 8 Duration: M
Range: M Casting time: 3
Reverse: Vulnerability Enhancer: A metal spring.

Negate ill effects based on movement of the target, such as a sudden stop or acceleration. External factors still function on the target, including attacks, but the target is unharmed by any effects caused by their own movement. Any surfaces contacted by the target still suffer the normal effects of impact.

For instance, *Inertial Compensation* could be cast to prevent a creature from taking damage from a high fall, or to keep them safe if they are fired from a cannon (assuming they are otherwise immune to fire and any explosive effects), or even to prevent them from blacking out under extreme G-forces in a fast-moving vehicle.

“Everyone clear?” they asked after a moment. Everyone nodded so they waved it away and cast. Light and Paige both made magical theory checks, Paige calculating a 4 (her minimum) and Light getting a 9. So she had no clue, but he nodded. The spell cast by the demon was the spell he said he would cast. “And away we go!” they shouted, jumping into their own chair and snapping the harness closed. They cast again, and the sphere shot into the air. There was a moment of weightlessness as they cut it off and recast, and the sphere shot forward. It picked up speed at a frightening pace, while the devil watched a set of numbers going down on their device.

“What did you do- you can talk, right?” Paige asked, realizing that perhaps, making this guy lose his focus would doom them all.

“Sure thing, Missy. Only keeping the one spell active, the one protecting us is right here.” He jingled a bracelet.

Oh, a maintaining focus? “So, what did you do? What are those numbers?” her curiosity weakness made her ask.

“The spell we’re using to fly redirects gravity,” they explained. “Which is an acceleration, don’t you know?”

“I knew this,” Sinjorino announced.

“Means you get faster the longer you ‘fall.’ And we’re now ‘falling’ in the direction we need to go. Within reason, of course. But this is magic so there’s pretty much no limit. I put in how far we wanted to go, and this little baby,” he shook the device, “calculates the time we need to travel for. It does all the fancy mathematics to calculate our speed at any one time. As we’re going an additional 9.8m/s every second. If you didn’t have that spell on you would black out pretty fast, but because you do it’s a pleasant enough experience. Dean really revolutionized travel when he realized those two spells could be used together and started this sphere service.”

So it is his company, Olaph thought. *He must be into almost everything. At least if there’s a need to help people do something. Helping People Company. I mean really. It’s what the church should have been.*

“So, wait, if you used this in the human realm or whatever you all call it, because you’re not going to smash into the ground again you could move at a really fast speed, basically forever! You could go into space!”

“That’s right.”

“I want to go into space. Will you... take me to space?”

He laughed.

“This is a rather fearsome spell,” Light decided, clearly looking it over. “Simply have a solid metal sphere such as this one floated high in the sky, and then force it to fall at a faster and faster speed. The shock-wave and impact damage could devastate even a medium sized settlement.”

“Yeah, pretty much,” the devil agreed. “No terminal velocity when magic is involved. Would have to be bloodiron, anything else might vaporize before it hit the place though.”

“Yeah...” He seemed disturbed.

“Let’s go back to talking about space…”

But Paige couldn’t convince the demon to come with her and provide a space shuttle service, and at the right time he cut the spell. The momentum carried them quite a distance, but gravity won out in the end and dumped them near where they needed to go. The sphere was fine, they were fine thanks to the magic, and after Light verified they were, in fact, quite near where they needed to go they took a bit of gold as a tip and streaked off again.

“What an interesting way to travel,” Olaph decided. “And it only took a few spells to make it happen. That devil found a good purpose, and a use for their magic that serves that purpose. Extraordinary.” *I mean it’s not really what you think of when you think of this place. Just lakes of sulphur and the like. Not helpful demons trying to earn a living being a transport expert.*

“Sure thing, padre. Come on, this way.”

The group headed to the hole, through a dimly lit land devoid of any features. A lot of souls were standing around, only a few lifted their eyes in confusion to see living people wandering around, but quickly lost interest again.

“And yet people still do evil,” Olaph mused. “Shouldn’t they want to avoid this fate? And this is the least of the bad fates that could await someone here. It’s madness that people still turn to banditry, or worse. How can any war happen?”

“You’re not wrong, Olaph,” Paige told him kindly. “Maybe one day even these people can be saved somehow. And this place will be empty, because no evil will be done.”

“I doubt I will live to see that day, but perhaps you will. It’s a nice thought.”

“Found the hole!” Light announced. He stopped before it. “Yeah, this must be it.” Mounds of dirt were strewn all around the local area, and a hole led into darkness. Light tipped his sword forward, showing it wasn’t a drop but more of a slant. “This has to be the place. Let’s go.”

The group traveled only a few minutes on a rather steep slope before they heard voices, and they froze.

“Demons coming back?” Olaph whispered.

“Let’s back up, let them pass,” Light decided. “We don’t want to start a fight in this small tunnel and who knows how those that went to see Sammael will react to our presence.”

“Right.”

They hastily turned around and headed back. “But we’re not souls,” protested Paige. “We can’t exactly blend in here.”

“But we can say we’re just researching the place, studying the souls here. We didn’t even see the hole.”

“Lying? I don’t like it,” Olaph mused.

“You like fighting more?”

“No, no, we’ll do it your way.”

They group waited, turned away and pretending to be looking the souls over. They were pathetic, looking thin and pale, not even caring that living people were here looking at them. A few moments passed.

“Okay what gives?” Light demanded. “There’s no way it’s taken them this long even crawling. Did they teleport away once they got near the surface or something?”

No one had any answers, so they headed back down again. Again, a moment of walking later and they heard voices again.

“Some kind of protection?” Sinjorino wondered. “To make it seem like someone is coming up and scaring others off?”

“Pretty weak if so. Let’s keep going this time.”

“Agreed.” They readied their bow. The group shared a look and tried to quietly move forward. They didn’t have far to go, the tunnel suddenly broadened and the two groups stared at each other. The first, our heroes of course. The other a dozen or more of tiny, ugly, horned demons and two oni reaching for clubs.

“Thieves!” one of the tiny demons yelled in a shrill voice. “Nasty, awful, human, sneaking, thieves!”

“Kill the thieves!” chorused the others. The oni hefted their clubs and looked ready for violence.

“Now hold on just a second,” Light said. “There’s clearly been a misunderstanding here, we’re not thieves.”

“Thieves- and liars!” They advanced.

“No. I don’t want to hurt you, but we can. Please let us explain.”

“No explain!” cried one. “We eat your eyeballs!”

“Blood!” screamed another one. “I want lots of red blood. Four of them enough to bathe in!”

“Drink it down!” screamed another.

“Stop!” Light cried, drawing his blade. This of course turned him into light, and the demons all shrank back.

“Make it stop!” they cried.

“We’re burning!” said another. “Oh what a world!”

“Are we?” asked a third.

“I seem to be fine,” said a fourth.

“We can still attack!” cried a fifth. “It was all a trick, it’s just a bright light.”

“There’s no need to attack,” Light insisted.

“All right, all right, calm down everyone,” said one of the oni. He set his club on his shoulder. “Look, I’m Pontamious. This is Elkaton.” He indicated the other oni, who raised a hand in greeting. “If you aren’t here for the bloodiron what are you doing here?”

“The what?”

The oni looked at him suspiciously and glanced at the pile of metal over to the side. “So you didn’t know we were mining here?”

“No! We thought this was a tunnel to Sammael. We need to see him.”

“They have a death wish! They have a death wish!” sing songed the tiny demons. They were jumping about now, their terror seemingly gone. *Strange little fellows aren’t they?* Olaph decided.

“We’ll be fine. Maybe. Look, shut up. Stop that! Quiet!”

“Heh, good luck with that,” the oni told him.

“You’re really mining? Here?” Olaph asked.

“Sure, why not? Nobody else comes here. So it’s perfect. We run the company, the little ones use their alchemy powers to find and mine the ore. It’s a perfect set up.”

“You actually have a company?” Paige asked.

“Sure. See, if demons saw us just selling bloodiron they would start to wonder, hey, wonder where that comes from. Maybe I can get some for myself. It’s getting more rare you know?”

“Tell us about it. I hear mines are emptying out all over Pyre,” Sinjorino agreed. “Not like the olden days, where you could seemingly turn over the ground with a shovel and find any number of useful things.”

“I hear ya. So we started a company. We buy and sell bloodiron. The buy part, we take in scraps and such and have a bunch of imps like these little guys fuse them together into bigger chunks. Then we add a bit of what we’ve dug up. Nobody is keeping track of us buying 2kg here, and 10kg there, and another half a kg over there, but we’re selling a 20kg chunk to somebody. All our stock seems to come from somewhere, and as long as we don’t sell what we bought for a loss, we make a profit on the extra.”

“I guess you can’t be too careful, even among your own kind,” Olaph decided.

“Ha! Can you?”

“...No.”

“So there you are. You really thought this tunnel led all the way to Sammael?”

“Who told you that?” asked an imp.

“Yeah, they’re stupid!”

“Dum dumbs!”

“We were told it was a tunnel and only a few demons seemed to use it. We clearly had the wrong idea,” Light told them.

“I’ll say. Bye then!”

“Sorry for disturbing you.” He put the sword back, and gave a nod.

“Back to work you all!” the oni commanded. “Your break isn’t for another...” He looked at his watch. “Forty six minutes.”

“They get breaks?” Sinjorino asked, sounding a bit shocked.

“Hey we’re union,” said one of the little ones. “They may be bigger than us but we command the means of production. We’re fairly paid and well treated. It’s in the contract, sister!”

“Good for you,” they praised. “Keep up the good work.”

“Aw, no blood bathing?”

“Sorry George. Back to work.”

“Never get to have any fun.”

“Hey, you know how long it’s been since I tasted human blood? Three hundred years! Nobody summons us anymore.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“So that happened,” Light said when they were out of the hole again.

“Yeah. Unionized demons. What will they think of next?” Olaph wondered.

“So now what do we do?” Paige asked. “The temptation plan is back on the table? Olaph, we could do it right here! These souls won’t mind, they’re not even looking at us.”

“You just want to get the easiest assignment,” Light chided her. “Did you ever think he might prefer me? I can make untrained seduction checks too you know.”

“Do it then!”

“I don’t feel like it right now.”

“Uh huh. Hey Olaph, who do you prefer?” she asked, the hint of a grin on her face. “Come on, all that mistranslation about laying with men has been cleared up for a long time. You can tell us!”

“I’m not going to answer that,” he told them.

“It’s Sinjorino, isn’t it?”

“What?”

“It’s okay, I’m sure they wouldn’t mind.”

“Stop teasing the poor man,” Sinjorino told her. “Focus on what we’re actually going to do now. Go back to Dean’s place? Maybe ask around to see about other tunnels down?”

“Let’s head back,” Olaph agreed. “But let’s try something a little more unconventional. Dean might know if it’s possible right now, but if not we can try it.”

“Try what?” Light asked.

“Something I always wanted to try as a spell-caster, but never got the chance. This seems like the most opportune time. I think you’re going to love it.”

Chapter 20

Making Magic (and a long distance phone call)

Where: Back at Dean's place

When: 20 minutes later

"I don't like it." Light had waited patiently as Olaph explained his idea for what to do next. It was insane. It had never, to his knowledge, been tried before. I was foolhardy. Magic didn't work like that. It was-

"The theory is sound," Dean countered. "But the implications..."

"I know, right?" Olaph exclaimed. "Think of what it might mean."

"I don't know," Paige mused. "But I'm willing to try it."

"Because you have no self preservation instinct?" Light asked. "Because, I can't even tell you, on how many levels, this whole plan..."

"Maybe you're just thinking too small."

The group had teleported back to the bench, paid the lovely guide to bring them to the Helping People building, and walked into a surprised Dean's office.

"It was a small mine?" he asked, surprised.

"Very small. Apparently there's bloodiron there."

"Huh. Well, why not? I guess we *are* going to have to start looking in non-obvious places, aren't we. It's been mined for thousands of years at least and it's no more infinite than metal on Earth. Sorry about that. I'll have my notes updated and the demon that entered the record flogged."

Everyone glared at him.

"Kidding! We don't do that here. I'll just talk to them. I mean it was no one's fault, and I did say it might not be that. It was just the most likely idea. But then something became more likely, that's all."

"The padre says he has an idea," Light told him. "But wanted to run it by you first."

"My plans seem inadequate as of late," he admitted. "If you've thought of something, let's hear it."

"It's a well known fact that mages can combine their efforts," Olaph began. "This isn't exactly a skill, so there's no skill description for it in The System, but we know it works."

"Sure," Light agreed with a nod. "We assume it follows the usual assisting rules. It's hardly ever done though, how many times do you come across another mage who knows the exact spells you do? I mean, okay, some are taught as standard because they're grade 1 and useful. Like the hygiene spell. I use that one at least twice a day. It's the best spell ever. But when would I need to cast it at a higher planet rating?"

"Oh you have no idea," Paige told him, waving a hand under her nose.

He glared at her in exactly the way you're picturing.

"Be that as it may," Olaph continued. "If two spells that are exactly the same can be combined, why can't two dissimilar spells be combined? Thus creating a spell with characteristics of both? We use a spell like that, possibly a summoning spell linked to a communication spell, and get a spell that reaches out to the angel we want to talk to, and lets us talk to them."

The group, minus Sinjorino who didn't know anything about magic, talked about the plan. Light couldn't exactly be convinced magic would even allow such a thing but Dean was more optimistic.

"Look, maybe it'll work and maybe it won't," he agreed. "Let's just try it. Take two grade one spells that seem like they would work well together, and try casting them on a target at the same time. Or maybe more safely overlap the magic by doing it one at a time? You can hold onto a spell you've cast and let it go later, after all. Again, no one does this because why would you? We can try various things! We don't have to argue over it, we just have to do it."

"And if it goes wrong?" Light asked dryly. "The both of us could die to backlash. Or the whole place goes up as magic interacts randomly or with purpose to 'erase' anyone involved in this little endeavor."

"Then I reserve the right to laugh uproariously and show you pictures when I reload the save point and tell you not to do it."

"The what now?"

"Standard procedure for experimenting with anything around here. We have a chamber. It has thick walls and a viewing area. Someone outside the chamber activates an imbuing of the temporal anchor spell that's been conveniently placed outside the chamber. The 'save point' if you will. The experiment is performed. If successful, nothing happens. If unsuccessful, the anchor is triggered and the experiment is not performed. At least, not in that way. Repeat until success or giving up. We used it for spell research a lot, before The System came along."

"Oh." He tried to think of a reason this would not be adequate but came up short.

"We're doing this!" Paige exclaimed, grinning. "What have you got?"

The two looked over their spell list.

"There's plenty we could do with detect enemies," Paige announced. "Imagine making all enemies immobile. Or setting them all on fire. Or I guess making them clean? Dazzling them. But otherwise, I'm not sure. Some things clearly won't work, like heal and thrust. That would be dumb."

"Agreed," Light agreed. "Maybe this is why this was never attempted. Who would have two complementary spells right when they were needed? Now with The System maybe we could find two, and cast them directly from there. Though I suppose we just want to see what happens. If the two spells do work together, like those you mentioned with detect enemies, and there are no enemies the spell just does nothing. But doing nothing is better than doing something random, or worse, backfiring on us. At least we would know combining spells didn't do that."

"I do have one good combination," she admitted. "But it's not grade 1. I guess in for a penny, right? What is a penny?"

"A small copper coin from before the breaking," Dean told her. "Worthless. They tried to get rid of it many times, but it took the end of the world. People love to hold on to things far longer than they should. See also; imperial measurements. Parallel and PS/2 ports. Fax Machines."

"We still had those when I was built!" Sinjorino announced. "I always wondered how they kept chugging along. Barely anyone had a physically connected phone line but yet, somehow, there was fax machine software still being maintained."

"Before you guys go into a reminiscing spiral- What's the combination?" Light asked.

"You have to have a garden party, to reminisce with some old friends," Dean told him.

"How much old music *did* you manage to save?" they asked. "Not just dubstep I hope."

His face lit up. "So much-"

"The magic? Please?" Light pleaded. "If we're going to get blown up I'd like to do it and say I told you so." *Seems like if I let it get away from me, those two will spend hours talking about things that happened thousands of years ago. We have work to do in the here and now!*

“My new zone of the zen master and your hygiene spell,” Paige told him as the others said fine, they would talk about the past later. “We get energy back and cleaned at the same time in a zone?”

“That could work,” he admitted after a moment. “What the heck, let’s try it. If you’re sure we can be safe?” He looked to Dean.

“You have my word. The chamber is at your disposal.”

The group went down many flights of stairs into a special underground chamber, and the two sealed themselves in. A screen on the wall lit up and Dean was shown.

“Whenever you’re ready,” he told them. “I triggered the anchor.”

“Right.” He nodded to Dean and turned to Paige. “As for you. This isn’t going to be about power. Don’t go crazy and shove twenty energy in or something. I know you can, you don’t need to show off right now!”

“Aw, is someone jealous?”

“Are you listening to me? This is about fitting the two spells together. The zone is a 5 segment spell, yes?”

“That’s right.”

“Take the 8 and hold it. Make it as ‘big’ as possible and yes, I realize that’s somewhat meaningless. Try anyway. I’ll try to fit hygiene into the circle you make that represents the spell. We release the spell together and hopefully our combined spell does what you think and doesn’t backfire on us. Or worse.”

“Right.” She took a deep breath and made her Sun check, getting an 11, beating the difficulty by only 1. *Good thing I put the extra time in. I should have put a little energy into it, I didn’t have to go minimal just because he said not to go overboard.*

The magical circle lit up the area, slowly rotating on the floor and defining where the zone would be. Light made a magical theory check, calculating a 14 and he was pretty sure he could see where the gaps in the circle were, where he could fit his spell. He made his Venus check, getting another 11. This beat the difficulty by 5 and the two circles were now synchronized on the floor. He nodded, she nodded back, and both let the magical energies go.

Special Action Completed *Spell Combination*

Through your diligent efforts you have unlocked a new skill. As you are the first to unlock this new skill it has been granted to you at a rating of 5. Congratulations on your achievement. As you will need to teach the skill to others, you have also been granted a rating of 5 in that skill. Please spread it far and wide, and continue to enrich the world around you.

Here is the skill:

Spell Combination (MAG)
REA†

Combine two spells together to create a third spell with the characteristics of both. As a

reactive action before casting a spell, (or as an additional one in the case of skills such as bypassing) make a check in this skill. The difficulty is the difficulty of the spell your spell will enhance. The person casting the first spell makes the check to “leave space” in the spell while the second person casting the spell makes the check to fit their spell into the first one. Failure of either check means the combined spell does not function, only the individual spells. This check assumes taking the full time of both spells, and a penalty equal to the number of segments saved is applied if either spell is rushed.

A target, if applicable, receives both resistance checks even though the spell is counted as only one spell. Resisting either effect resists the entire spell.

Note 1: Not all spells can be combined in this way. Some combinations can lead to unpredictable results even if successful. Spells that cannot be combined simply have their separate effects.

Note 2: Requires a 5 in Magical Theory. If you do not have the needed prerequisite it will also be granted to you.

Note 3: This is a beta skill. The description and effect may change over time. When this skill is finalized note 3 and the addition of the prerequisite bonus will be removed. The skill description for Magical Theory has been modified to allow for checks to be made to determine if two spells will be a good fit for each other. We believe this will also help spread the word about this new skill.

“Beta *skills* now?” Light wondered.

“Hey, system or whoever is doing this!” shouted Paige to thin air. “This was Olaph’s idea. We just implemented it. You should reward him too!”

Special Request Detected
Sharing the Credit

A member of your party has noted your contribution to a recent special action completion. You are not a spell-caster but you have the Spark of Magic background. Please wait.

Requesting administrator intervention

Administrator message follows:

You are in a trial period! We hope it is going well for you. As you do have some magic casting ability you may share in the reward given to your party members. The skill will be flagged. If you lose the spark of magic or your thief of magic background the points allocated to this new skill can be repurposed at that time. Spell combining was your idea, was it? Well done.

We’re expecting great things from you, Olaph.

“This raises so many questions,” Olaph muttered, frantically reading the box. “Thanks, Paige.”

“You’re welcome! Thanks, System!”

“Are we going back or not?” Dean asked.

“Come in and see for yourself,” Light told him.

Dean opened the chamber up and walked in. He felt restful, at peace, and being cleaned inside and out, mentally and physically. Light flipped a box so he could see it.

Restful Cleansing Zone

Venus + Sun

Created by combining the Hygiene spell with the Zone of Zen Master spell, this space now cleans all targets within while allowing energy regeneration as though one was meditating regardless of physical activity.

Original casting by Light Kajombro and Paige Malplenan.

“It even gives you credit, nice!” He brightened. “I guess it works.”

“It works *now*,” grumbled Light. “But it almost seems like whatever is creating The System is adding new abilities into our world.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Paige asked. “I think it’s amazing. Can you imagine what we could create by combining spells together?”

“No, and that’s just the problem. The Guild has a good grip on magic; what it can do, what the limits are. Now we’ve discovered a way to upset all that. Maybe a spell that finds the owner of an object can set them on fire no matter where the caster is. Maybe a spell that detects species gives them and only them all a disease. Need I go on?”

She shook her head. “Magic can already do great good, and great harm. If the Guild is really doing their job then any harmful magic is already detected and those that perform it are punished. Think about it, you have to convince someone else of whatever dastardly deed you want done because it must come from two. It’s not like I can suddenly cast one type of magic with one hand and another type with another and combine them. It’s about us working together. The System *wants* us to work together. And it’s rewarding us for experimenting and helping the world. Did you read that box? It was positively glowing! I got the teaching skill, my magic theory went from a 3 to a 5, and I got the new skill. Just for being first. Because Olaph here thought outside the box, if you’ll forgive the pun, and tried it. Isn’t it great? There’s still things about magic to explore, to learn! And we *have to learn and explore them together!*”

“I suppose, it does seem to be about making connections. But you’ll see where I’m coming from one day.”

“HA! Oh, don’t worry, my parents would be right there with you. Make no mistake. ‘Oh, why do you ask so many questions, Paige? Why are you in such a hurry Paige? What is that on your shoulder Paige?’ Drove me crazy!” She stomped a foot.

“What was it?” Sinjorino asked.

“What was- oh, it was just a friendly little mouse. He was so cute and I put him on my shoulder and named him Charley. They made me put him back outside. He looked so sad, he just wanted a friend, and I did too. It wasn’t fair, them making me put him out, it wasn’t.”

“I see.”

“So if the combination technique works, how is best to proceed?” Olaph asked. “Can we combine some kind of divination for angels with teleportation? Summoning with communication? I would rather not pop into existence right in front of Sammael if I could help it, mind.”

“We’ll have to completely rethink magic,” he told him. “I’m thinking some sort of communication myself. Like you said, let’s not disturb him too much. Sammael or his guardian. Let’s just have a quick call, see if he’s still down there keeping an eye on the ultimate tempter of mankind, and go from there.”

Some moments later Paige spoke up. “For the communication part the ideal spell is actually this beta spell; Meeting of the Minds. It could get all of us, put us inside a timeless mental space so we don’t actually disturb whatever the guardian angel is doing, and even make him forget we called if we want. Hey System, do I still have to pay the 1XP to get casting access to beta level spells?”

Help Keyword Detected Casting Access

Query: Do you need to pay 1XP for casting access in the beta area?

Answer: Come to think of it, we do want these spells tested. If you’ve found a use for one and don’t want to pay the cost, sure. Go for it.

We’ve waved the cost but only for you and your party, as you were polite and asked about it. Have a nice day.

“Thanks!” she called out happily. *Is it just me or are these a different style every time? Is The System one thing or a lot of things working together? Seems like a different ‘person’ answers and makes these boxes when they’re needed. Weird.*

“What, you’re just talking to The System now?”

“It’s there, why *not* talk to it? I needed to know. And we need to know what it can do, and one of the things it can do is answer questions. I know this, because I asked it, and it answered.”

“Because it could be Sammael trying to tempt you?”

“So you refused access to the beta area? You’ll never use the combining skill? The teaching skill? Oh wait, what are we doing now?”

“We have to do that, to make sure it isn’t!”

“Uh huh.”

“Look- never mind. Fine. I think we can combine the angel summoning spell with that one and see what happens. I got a box when I looked at it. Here.”

Warning

This spell remains available but at only 1% effectiveness due to various circumstances currently active on your plane of existence.

It is not recommended to spend XP to learn this spell. If you wish to cast it for some reason, the 1XP cost will be waved if you do so from The System window directly.

Additional Information: We think we know what you're going for due to recent queries and if it'll set your mind at ease, go for it. We'll assist as we're able on our end as this is such a new concept for you. Congrats on being first with that new skill, by the way.

Yeah, something fishy about these boxes all right, Paige thought to herself.

"One percent," breathed Olaph. "Why? There are no angels left to call? Maybe, except for this one? The System wouldn't be foolish enough to get rid of Sammael's guardian, would it?"

"Circumstantial at best," Light cautioned. "But if it's not Sammael, and then what the heck did all this, there's hope one angel is still left to perform their duties. I guess it won't cost us anything but time to try and find out."

"Can you cast it?"

"That's just it, I have no idea. The difficulty of summoning the angel that can hold back Sammael would probably be ridiculous. But we don't want to get them here. We want to use this spell to simply reach out to them, because we don't know exactly where they are. Not enough for the usual 'speak across distance' spell. Or does that one require you to have met the person? Same problem, never met this angel. That's why we had to go down there, or so we thought."

"We have the chamber," Paige reminded him. "We can try it a few times without risk. And The System will help us, it said so right there. It's been helpful so far, maybe it will want us to learn the truth about this and not worry so much. It implies as much."

"Or if The System is Sammael he'll just fake us all out and we'll go away thinking everything is fine but it's not," Olaph countered.

Light shrugged. "Even if we went down there, if he was breaking free, do you think we could trust our own eyes around *him*? He would make it look like he was still imprisoned, again making us complacent. Or just change our memories. Or just wish us dead. We have to trust something, and I trust magic. Even he can't know we're doing a spell in this moment and combining it with another spell, to talk to his jailer. Right? He can't see everything at once." *Though getting the new skill, Paige asking stuff, his eyes would be here right now, wouldn't they?*

"This place is as warded as we can make it," Dean told them. "I don't know what that means for the being we're discussing but no normal scrying should work in here. The walls, floor, and ceiling are even lead, made them myself." He tapped the wall.

"What do we have to lose? Our lives? Over and over? Let's just try it."

Paige held up a hand. "Wait. I don't have the spell to enhance skill checks but I do have the new beta spell to transfer skill between people. I'll give you my skill for reading magic and magical theory for you to figure out how to cast your spell, then take your skill for me reading mine. Just to save time, I mean."

"That sounds acceptable," he decided. "And it's a few uses of a beta spell. The System should be pleased."

So they did just that, and made their checks. Light got a 14 on his new skill check before casting, and he also gathered as much ambient magic as he could. Paige got a 14 as well, at least beating the usual “grade + 5” for spells with variable difficulty. They both called out, reading from a page in front of them as their magic slowly came together.

“Mighty Sandalphon, protector of our souls, let our magic reach you. Unyielding wall, collector of prayers, let our minds touch yours. Chosen of God, one who protects from temptation, speak to us in our hour of need. By our magic combined, let our minds become one. Allow us this boon, that our hearts and our minds be calmed, knowing your purpose yet remains. Towering one, winged one, one who hears our prayers, let our words reach you and know we mean no harm. We seek knowledge, great one, that only you can provide. Let this magic become our conduit, let our minds be known to each other without interrupting your holy duty. Open yourself to mortal minds and impart your wisdom, let it be done in this place and this time, without delay. Now the spell is cast!”

The magic locked together, and the spell was complete.

Chapter 21

Some Good News

Where: ???

When: After the spell completed

To the figures that appeared, the game seemed simple enough, if a trifle odd. In many ways it was chess, with a board that looked to be out of some space trekking fantasy or another. But this game was a touch more complex, as was necessary for the players. That game did not give the pieces each a special power, in addition to their movement, but this one did; One piece could move forward in time, so it could strike from out of nowhere when it returned to the play field. One piece could resurrect others if they made it to a spot where a piece had been vanquished. One piece could carry another and protect it, sacrificing itself so that the second piece could strike after it was taken. The edges of the board were at right angles to each other, so a piece that moved left could suddenly be moving forward on a board above the one it started on. One part of the board was dark, pieces that moved there could not be seen. One piece of the board randomly shoved pieces forward to other positions. That game had not been played for thousands of years, this single game, back and forth, with neither player the winner. This game had.

“Ah, we have guests,” said the well dressed man in the crisp suit, facing them. He leaned to the side, past the other figure with their back towards the group. “How lovely, to have someone new to talk to after so long. Come, have a seat! Sandi, offer up your chair for our guests, or make some new ones I guess? You’re such a poor host you haven’t offered them a drink or anything.”

“Stop trying to distract me, you know I can never remember what turn your timejumper is going to phase in on.”

“And I maintain this so called lapse in memory is simply a ploy, to make me believe something that which is not true. You always seem to avoid disaster by *this* much.” He made a tiny space between his fingers. “Come, come, please, don’t be shy,” he called to the group. “You’ll have to forgive Sandi they are truly intent on their mission. Smack their head or something they’ll come around to believing you’re there after that.”

The members of the group shared a look and with nothing better to do walked over there. The figure, now seen in a white toga looking garment jumped to the side. “There really are people- how did you get here? You can’t be here! Wait, this isn’t right.” They looked around.

“Wow, you really are helpless,” said the man, shaking his head. He rose and bowed. “Greetings. Sammael, at your service. What brings you here? I see you used to be a holy man, but that’s not working out so well for you now is it? Have you come to offer yourself to me, instead? I can serve as a replacement for your lost power you need only offer yourself to me.” He reached under his jacket and started to pull a roll of papers out of it.

Sandalphon smacked his hand. “Stop that! You can’t just corrupt people the minute they set foot near you.”

He looked hurt. “Father said I should.”

These are the two that threaten and protect our world? Olaph mused. How odd. But this is a mental thing, and so perhaps we are simply seeing them in a way we can mentally understand. Thanks to the magic, or The System helping us a bit like it said it would. Perhaps they are so connected we

simply couldn't get one without the other? I'm glad we are not seeing them in their 'true' forms, that would tower over us and possibly blind us with their radiance.

"Ugh, I can't even say it's a lie." They turned to the group. "Who are you people? What's going on, this isn't my usual- I see you trying to move that piece!"

"I was just making an adjustment!" He pulled his hand back. "The piece was off center, you know I hate that."

"Away from the board, 'brother,' let's put our little struggle on the back burner for now. These people clearly need to talk to me. Unless you really are here to talk to *him*?"

"Oh no," Olaph protested. "We just wanted to talk to you. I didn't think the spell would get us both of you."

"We're connected, so- spell?"

"Are you aware of what's been going on?" Light asked. "The last two months in particular?"

"I have my task, everything else is secondary. Though..." They looked troubled. "I have been unable to deliver prayers as of late. As though my connection with the Heavens was somehow broken. I assumed it was a temporary situation and was content to wait until Father accepted them again."

"And do you... hear those prayers?"

"Of course!"

Light looked a bit troubled. "And has there been a sort of theme lately, perhaps?"

"Theme? What are you- What are you laughing at?" they demanded of Sammael.

"You'll have to forgive them," he told the group. "They're very focused on their job. Much like myself- are you sure none of you wishes to switch your alliance to me? It can be very fruitful to you, in life."

"No!" everyone shouted at once.

"I didn't think so. That's the trouble with the modern world. Everyone seemingly has all the power they want. Of course the invention of warlocks was a stroke of genius if I do say so myself."

"Stop trying to distract me!" Sandalphon insisted. "What's going on in the world you needed to contact *me* about it? I have my task, leave me to it!"

"I tried to tell them many times," Sammael sighed. "Wouldn't listen. Maybe they'll listen to you, but I doubt it."

"Doesn't matter," Paige told him. "We already have our answer. You're still locked up and guarded."

"Humm, I suppose so. For now. Never can tell what tomorrow may bring though. You may regret not signing up with me, when the time comes. I would protect my chosen, you could be at my side instead of hunted."

"Why wouldn't he be?" Sandalphon asked.

"Maybe read some of those prayers you've been getting?" Light suggested. "Don't take our word for it."

Sandalphon scowled and beads started appearing in their hands, swiftly replaced with others.

"Did you not get The System?" Paige asked Sammael.

"Oh, we did as well," he told her. "They ignored it. Wasn't part of their mandate from Father. Typical, really. Of course I'm the same but when the Lord gives you a command, you perform it to the best of your ability. Right, Olaph?"

"...He's not wrong, of course."

"See? He knows. Now, The System... It doesn't really help me out all that much, but it is interesting to play with, isn't it? I'm still thinking over how to best utilize it for my own purposes. Can I give people XP? That would be a fairly good deal, right? Maybe a thousand XP for signing on with me? Would that tempt anybody here?"

It actually did, but Sandalphon spoke up again.

“These same prayers, over and over again,” Sandalphon mused. “Pleas for help, petitioners asking what they had done to be stripped of their guardian angels. Holy Chosen that are left powerless. *What have you done?*” They rounded on Sammael.

“Me?” He put on an innocent expression. “I’ve sat here with you this whole time. Do you doubt your own ability to watch me? No, my sibling, I have done nothing, this time. The System has done me a glorious favor, why do you think I’ve been in such a good mood lately?”

“You have, now that I think about it. But what happened?” They looked to the group.

“We don’t know,” Olaph admitted. “Just that one day I had a status menu, and my prayers went unanswered. No longer could I pray to Michael and receive my daily spells, to help those that came to my church. The Heavenly gates were closed, and all angels gone. We feared you would be gone too, but it seems you’re the last. The last angel.”

They stared in horror, the beads they were holding slipping from their grasp and falling to the floor.

There was a flash and a whirring sound, and Sammael lowered a strange device. A shiny piece of paper had popped out of the thing they were holding, and he grabbed it and started waving it in the air.

“Really?” Sinjorino asked, who knew full well what that was having seen it in the same museum as the apple keyboard and other ancient technologies.

“The best camera is the one you have with you, when you need to take a picture.” He grinned. “I mean how many times will I see that face? Now, I can always look back on this moment fondly. By the way, interesting spell, the one we’re using to talk! Seems like two different planets even. However did you manage it?”

“Never you-” Light started to say, when suddenly Sandalphon was in the middle of the group and a barrier of energy had sprung up around them.

“Dang, you’re still so on the ball,” he complained.

“What?”

“He was going to try and read your mind. He wants to know how you did this, but unless you think about it, he can’t just yank it out of you. So he asked. Hopefully he didn’t get too much, this should stop his power for now. It’s dangerous for you here,” Sandalphon told them. “Despite how he seems, his power dwarfs mine, only in this mental space are we somewhat evenly matched. You should not linger. So what he said was true? All my brethren have been recalled to the Heavens once again?”

“It’s true. We’re on our own,” Olaph told them. “But we’re trying to figure out why, what did this. What made The System. In case we need to reverse it, allow angels back into the world. Naturally if the Lord willed it, I assume it would be done but...” He paused. “We don’t know what it all means. Perhaps the Lord did this, but a little notice would have been nice. So I must assume this is simply another trial for mortals, to see if we are willing to put in the effort to welcome them back.” *Things have been fairly stable now, perhaps the Lord decided angels no longer needed to be here, and The System came about by accident in that power vacuum that was left behind?*

“And souls? Their progress is not impeded?”

He shook his head. “I have no idea.” *Didn’t even think of it, to be honest. Gates and angels we can see, and them being gone is a hole in the world. Souls should take care of themselves.*

“The Guild has not noted an increase in ghosts or other ghostlike phenomena,” Light offered. “Has the church?”

“No.” *That’s a relief. He’s right, if they were unable to cross over there would be way more problems. So that’s something we probably don’t have to worry about.*

“That is good,” they decided. “If you can, please contact me again with any news. The knowledge that my brothers and sisters in Heaven were taken from the Earth, possibly against their wishes, will weigh on me. And I must perform my duties here lest he break free. So I can give it little thought but he will no doubt taunt me with it to try and distract me.”

“They’re not wrong,” Sammael agreed. “Sounds like something I would do.”

“I understand. We’ll do what we can,” Light promised.

“Thank you. Go now.”

“Thank you. I know you were commanded to do this but it cannot be easy. Only knowing this struggle. All humanity thanks you for your service.” *We have temptation enough without an angel running around who has the holy mission of corrupting humanity. Thank you very much, oh Lord, for giving that particular command.*

“Hey, I’m a great conversationalist I’ll have you know!” Sammael protested. “We laugh and laugh at my jokes. Want to hear one?”

“They don’t!”

“Let them tell me that!”

“We better go,” Light decided. “We’ll do what we can, you have my word.”

Sandalphon nodded. “I believe you. Go with the Lord.”

“Amen,” Olaph intoned.

And the group was back in the chamber.

“Did it work?” Dean asked, after a moment.

The others were reading a box.

Administrator Message

Just wanted to let you guys know, that spell combination wasn’t actually all that great. Maybe with higher ratings but we decided to honor the intent with which it was cast. That angel would normally be beyond any one person given their power and they were pretty far away. But no backfire this time. You have a lot of questions and that’s okay! We encourage that. So we sort of fudged the numbers (you still say that right?) in your favor. Hopefully this puts your mind at ease and you can move on with things. Absolutely try more combinations but maybe not that one again? Not until 10s at least. Thanks.

“It worked,” Light finally said, waving the box away. “But The System wasn’t exactly happy with it. I guess it was made to work as a courtesy to our efforts but that maybe we shouldn’t try it again.”

“So an angel still exists here,” Dean repeated after getting an explanation of what happened. “The System didn’t simply do things at random or without thought. There was purpose to it. And these messages from the ‘administrator’ are also worrying. They have personality, Olaph has noticed, and even now we learn a helpful nature. But could that nature be turned against us if we push too hard?”

“It seems good-natured enough, I hope it would give us some kind of warning,” Olaph mused.

“I hope so too. Well, what’s your next move then?”

Light answered him. “We’ve been charged by the Guild to discover what the source of The System is, and all we’ve done is ruled something out. If you can believe Sammael, that is.”

“That one seems like he would have been all over taking credit for this,” Olaph told him. “But his attention is still being taken up by Sandalphon so they would really have to be off their game to have missed him changing the way the entire world works. From the Demon Realm.”

“Agreed. Our orders then, if Sammael was not the cause, is to investigate other causes. As we’re here, what demons do you know, Dean, that might have an ear to the ground in general? I know it hasn’t been long but maybe demons have looked into this, to see where the greatest advantage lies?”

“I’ve never gone, but I know of one place that is a bastion of hoarded knowledge. Those that are there would claim they know everything. Perhaps the seriousness of your mission would compel them to speak, and you do have knowledge to trade. The last angel, for instance, if they hadn’t figured that out for themselves yet. Yes, I can have ‘ol 34 give you a lift, even if they said you were terrible passengers.”

“Terrible?” Paige spat. “What do you mean? We even tipped the guy.”

“Didn’t scream in terror even once, the way they reported it. That’s what they really want. You were all too trusting, believing you were safe in his hands and just watched as things happened.”

“Screams of terror?”

“Exactly.”

“At least it isn’t giggles,” Sinjorino remarked. “But where are we going? You didn’t say.”

He paused dramatically. “The grove.”

“The grove?”

“The grove!”

“Is that some sort of night club, or...”

Dean laughed. “It’s the home of the simurgh, the mighty birds of knowledge. They’re immortal seers that are basically obsessed with knowing every fact that can be known. Go ask them, maybe you’ll get lucky and they’ll even know. You hungry? Have something to eat before you leave and we’ll walk over to the airfield again.”

The building had a fairly good selection of dishes and a cafeteria, so the group sat down to eat.

“Hold on,” Paige realized. “You’re a seer though, right?”

“I am,” admitted Dean. “Among other things.”

“Just like these simurgh folks. Can’t you do what they do?”

“What they do? No. They can use their powers as though the difference between this world and the upper planes don’t exist. So questions they ask the universe are not limited to the plane they’re on. So if I were to ask something, I would have to ask it here, in purgatory, on Earth, in the astral, because The System could have come from anywhere. Even I don’t have that kind of time!”

“So I have lunch on Earth, and one asks about that, they can get an answer while you, being here, cannot?” Light asked.

“Exactly. And they have nothing better to do but gather and trade information all day long, year after year. And say they don’t know, but you do later find out. Be the first to tell them and they’ll owe you. They’ll be honor bound to answer a question of yours, should you have one in the future.”

“Certainly can’t hurt,” Light admitted, “to have a favor owed. And they’ll deal fairly?”

“As far as I understand it, yes.”

“Okay.”

The forest was just to the west of the city, so the group climbed into the sphere and took off once again.

“Thanks for flying us again, Malfeasaceen,” Paige told the devil. “This seems like a pretty great job.”

“It’s not too bad,” he admitted. “Dragons occasionally try to knock us down because we’re competing with them for business but it’s all in good fun.”

“A dragon attack is in good fun?”

“Aw, sure. They just want to remind us who really rules the skies around here. They’re smart enough to know going against Dean is a bad idea, so if they really made trouble they would be in for it. It’s more a show that they *could* mess us up but they *choose* not to. See?”

“I would think once you got going even a dragon would be hard pressed to keep up with one of these spheres,” Sinjorino mused.

“Yeah, I like longer trips better, and not just because I charge by the kilometer. Less chance someone will try shooting you down if you’re traveling at the speed of sound.”

“And does that happen often?” Light asked.

“It is still the Demon Realm,” he explained. “Not all the princes are on board with strange metal spheres flying around in the sky. And there are other dangers, it’s no walk in the park. Some still train armies for the ‘end times’ even though they really probably came and went? I mean have you seen the world today? What would we even fight for? Would angels really be able to respond? And what if they did? We have billions of souls here, there are only so many angels. Some demon prince was really serious about taking power they would march into that place we went to before, snap all the souls there up into containers, and have hundreds of thousands of soul power to draw from. But they don’t. So I wonder how serious about the whole thing they really are. Just, uh, don’t tell anybody I said that.”

“It’s fine,” they all assured him.

Still, could this realm be tamed? Olaph wondered. With enough time, and people like Dean to organize and change things. Demons clearly are not mindless, one is sitting here not 20 cm from me and they seem to have no desire for violence against me. They have a job, I’m a customer. Isn’t fleecing me better than killing me? I can be fleeced many times, after all. That’s the naga way of doing things. I admit to seeing only a small part of this place but maybe one day, by the strength of our will, humanity can put an end to it. Wishful thinking no doubt, but it’s good to have goals.

Paige made sure to scream her head off, grip the armrests like she was going to die, and generally carry on about how they were all going to die as they made their decent. Malfeasaceen looked quite pleased and gave her a 6/10 for her performance. “It would have been 8/10 had you done that the first time. I knew you were just trying to make me feel better. Thanks anyway.”

They had landed some ways away from the grove, it wouldn’t do to try landing right near it and maybe smash any trees up after all. So the group wasn’t prepared for the enormous birds that met their eyes as the trees came into view.

“These are simurgh?” Light asked. “They’re like half dog, part lion, part bird, but the size of a dragon!”

“Don’t look at me,” Olaph protested. “I don’t have the demonology skill. Never needed to study them, I wasn’t a demon fighter I was a healer.”

“They know everything, so they should know we’re coming right?” Paige asked. “So we don’t need to-”

Correct, rang in all their minds. Come closer, children, and ask your questions.

Chapter 22

They Came to Bargain

Where: The Grove

When: They just walked over

The three creatures that drew near towered over the group, each looking down with hunger in their eyes. Others, in the distance, were doing a poor job of hiding their excitement at whatever was coming.

Hunger for knowledge, or for soft elven meat? Paige thought to herself, determined not to show how worried she was to the others. She need not have bothered, they were too busy being determined not to show how worried they were to the others. It was that sort of situation. *I mean they guard fruit trees. So one must assume they eat fruit. But how does something so huge survive on so tiny a fruit? I would have to believe they wouldn't turn down more variety in their diet.*

Light took the lead, stepping up but casually putting a hand on his sword for no reason. "So if you know why we've come," *to ask about The System's origin*, "can you tell me if you can answer my question or not?"

"We know of your quest to seek where The System comes from," said the middle one. "But for me to answer your question about me answering your question would require you to tell me something I don't already know. Is that what you want to bargain for? A meta-question? Do you have so much to trade us you think we don't know that you can waste your chances?"

"No. Allow me to rephrase; My question is what is the origin of The System? I have knowledge to trade if you can satisfy me."

"It had better be good," the one on the right cautioned. "The answer to that question has been sought for as long as—"

"We can't help you," the one on the left interrupted.

"Don't tell them that!" the right one screeched. "What are you doing?"

"And don't be so impressed. We had no idea the exact reason you came here. She was reading your mind and you thought about why you were here when you asked. She just said it back to you so we looked more wise than we are."

Light looked between the three for a moment. "I'm confused," he finally admitted. "So you can't help us, and you're admitting to it up front?" *That's nice of you.*

"Do you know how many people have been asking about that very thing?" the left one asked. "We've been right there with them. No one has any answers. Leading you on wouldn't be right. Only some of us," they glanced to the others, "would admit that."

"We knew we would be asked sooner or later though," the center one hastened to add. "It was only a matter of time. You just happen to be the first. I suppose it's better to say we don't, before this opens the floodgates and a million other people show up trying to get that same knowledge."

"But now they'll just leave," the right one complained. "And we won't learn their secret knowledge! You're stupid. See what your stupidity has caused? We could always have owed them."

"Now, now, let's not be hasty," Light told them, holding up a hand. "I came to bargain. I'll still tell you what I would have if you can act in good faith. Even if you don't know *now* you may learn the answer to my question in the future. I'll take it then. Or if you know something else that could help get

us closer to the answer- you admitted you don't know the full details of why I'm here. Maybe I have a question that is just as important to the Guild I'll trade for."

The others looked at him confused, clearly none of them knew anything about this other question the Guild might pose. What else but this could they simply not use their own divination magic to find out about?

The three perked up at that. "It's true," the center one admitted. "We like to claim we know every fact, and I think we came pretty close. What we don't know is every little detail about every person. Uphaltine is right to remove some of the mysticism from what we do," they said to the right one. "I mean aren't you tired of people coming and asking the most inane questions all the time?"

"I suppose," the right one admitted.

"I mean, yes, we could know if so and so likes so and so, or if they'll get that dream job, or if they'll get food poisoning next week at the fair, dumb stuff like that," the center one went on. "We deal in knowledge, not trivialities. Yet everyone seems to confuse the two, and it's annoying as heck."

"Hold on," Olaph mused. "Are you saying someone, I guess some demon, came all the way here to ask about their *crush*? And this happens often enough you complain about it?"

They all laughed. "Oh no, the other branch gets those types," the left one clarified. "We're too remote for that thank goodness. But we hear about it from them. Oh my goodness we hear about it."

"But we get our share of dumb questions and even dumber supposed 'knowledge' to trade," the right one told them. "So we at least get some payback when they drone on and on about how Mr. Smith should be running the country. And how many languages Enoch Powell can speak."

Who? "Other branch?" Paige asked. "Is this not all of you?"

Wait where have I heard that before? Sanjorino thought.

"Once things calmed down after the mage war some of their people came back to our world," Light told her. "Took the trees as well."

"A backup, I would call it," Sinjorino spoke up. "Smart."

"We came here and not to that grove because we were already here," Light went on. "They know the same things, it was just easier to get here."

"Don't get me wrong, we enjoy company," said the left one. "Talking to the same simurghs who know basically everything you do is really boring. So this is a nice treat and I'm glad to have won the pick along with these two. But what we don't enjoy is fools. So spread the word, facts only, not stupid inquiries okay?"

"If anyone asks I'll be sure to tell them," he promised. "Heck, I'll put up a banner when I get back at the Guild hall saying exactly that. I don't suppose that would earn me any favors?"

"Wanna know who has a crush on you?" the right one asked. "I suppose we could swing that much at least..."

"No!"

"Then no, not really."

"I'll still do it."

"...Thanks."

"Now, to business. The knowledge I have to trade is magical in nature. We, ourselves, discovered this property and we even have The System's receipt to prove it. So no weaseling out of it and pretending you knew before. You didn't. We tried this in a special room proof against scrying and I believe the man who told me that. This knowledge is hot off the press, okay? I tell you, and I get an answer in return. That's how it works, right?"

"No fine print," the center one agreed. "Knowledge for knowledge. We determine the worth and we'll give you an equal amount. If you feel it's an uneven trade, well, tough. Take it up with management."

"Management, that's a good one," the one on the right cackled.

“Right,” Light drawled. “Okay. We recently learned spells can be combined. We don’t know the true extent but we’ve combined the spells of zone of the zen master and hygiene to make a cleansing field that restores energy. And the spell of summoning an angel and having a mental conversation with someone to contact the last angel. The System didn’t like us doing that one at our skill level though and said if we had been anyone else that it wouldn’t have worked. I think it was excited about our finding out about the skill and was cutting us a break. It rewarded us pretty well for thinking of it.” *Also I think it wanted us to find out, for some reason. It facilitated that conversation so we could move on from it and do what we’re doing now.*

“What’s the skill?” the one on the left demanded. Light showed it to them. “Seems legit.”

“Can you demonstrate it? With something new?” the one on the right asked.

He looked a bit sour. “Our known magic doesn’t mesh too well together,” he admitted.

“Wait though,” Paige told him. “The beta area is free to cast from, as though from writings, let’s see if there’s something there we can work with. Low grade spells that won’t take long to read over.” *Maybe even some grade 0 spells if we’re creative enough about it, but those can only be small effects and hard to see for creatures this huge. I suppose if The System shows the new spell like it did, we could just show that...*

“Say, you guys know about the beta area, right?” Light asked.

“You’re not the only ones to find that,” the center one told him. “Sorry, no trade!”

“No problem. Just thought I would check. Give me a minute...” The two looked.

“Your trees,” Paige asked, looking up. “They’re just normal trees, right? They just happen to grow a fruit that has special properties?”

“They’re normal trees, sure,” the center one told her. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“So they drop branches sometimes? I mean despite your best efforts they’re just trees. So you get sticks and such from them? It’s just normal wood?”

“Yeah sure we’ve got wood.”

“What are you thinking?” Light asked.

“What about combust and suppress light? Would that make a fire that burned half as brightly?”

“Humm, combust just sets things on normal fire. Suppress light is maintained. I suppose if it wasn’t, and the fire was ‘dimmer’ I mean it could work.”

“Okay. Let us have some sticks. We’ll go way over there, and I will plainly state that I, nor none of my party to my knowledge want to set your trees on fire, and make two fires. A normal combust fire and a special one. We’ll see if they’re the same brightness.”

“You seem to be telling the truth. Fine, as long as you go way over there.” They pointed with a wing. “We’ll follow and tell you when it’s far enough.”

“Of course.” *Really don’t want any trees to start burning. Can you even imagine?*

A few minutes later there were two fires burning, and a new blue box. One fire clearly normal, the other, a pale looking imitation.

Starlight Fire

Moon + Mars

Created by combining the combust spell with the suppress light spell, this fire has more in common with moonlight than sunlight. The brightness of the fire is halved, however the temperature and burn rate is not effected. Fire taken from this source will retain all properties.

“We actually created a new *kind* of fire,” Paige read, wide eyed. “So would the bolster light spell make a fire twice as bright? Would combining freeze and combust create a cold fire, a fire that freezes wood instead of consuming them? Would elemental sculpting and combust create a fire that couldn’t be more than a certain size?”

“Sounds like you have some experimenting to do,” said the center one. “It seems legit. Ask your question. But put those fires out.”

They did, and walked back to the grove.

“As you have already admitted you can’t tell me where The System comes from, I must ask my backup question. With the authority vested in me by the Guild of Mages, the high seat, the Master Wizard Extraordinaire bade me be her voice along this journey and ask this question true: What is the complete and true ritual needed for a summoner born to call upon and be in the presence of a primordial one?”

A single word rang out from all the nearby simurgh, even as the three stepped back from him. That word was “No.” Spoken in a panic, the trees shook, dislodging many twisted birds that raced into the sky away from the grove. When they were gone there was silence, and the group felt the many eyes of the simurgh, both real and via their nature as seers, upon them.

“No?” Light repeated after a moment, softly coaxing the silence to end. “You would renege your vow to me, of only moments ago? For shame, mighty simurgh. Have I not said I do not ask for myself, alone? That I ask with the weight of the Guild at my back? Would you deny me *knowledge*, your very own stock and trade?”

“Ask something else,” the center one insisted. “Anything else. We’ll double our efforts. Call in favors. Give us time to pierce the shadows surrounding The System. The origin will fall to us and we will tell no others before you what we discover.”

He shook his head. “We’ve wasted enough time. The Guild *must* know. Before more damage is done.”

“What damage?” Paige asked. “And what exactly are you asking? What kind of summoning is this?”

“One with grave consequences, young elf, even in the best of times,” the right one told her.

“We know the danger,” Light insisted. “We will take every precaution. *Every*. But there is no other avenue open to us. The Heavens are gone, sealed against us. Holy power- gone. Prayer-unanswered. Sammael himself doesn’t know. So, we must go to the very top. We must ask the only beings left to us. It’s not like I’m asking for a lord, I’m sure we can handle a second in command.”

“This does sound dangerous,” Olaph agreed. “Why such lengths?”

“As an Archmage I have been with the Guild a long time,” he explained. “I don’t agree with their every decision of course. But I would not have risen so high without being of the same mind. What The System offers is dangerous. Consider this; the Guild could have done something similar at any time. They could have offered free access to most spells of a wholly non-destructive nature at any time in the last two thousand years. They did not. They- we- grew wealthy and powerful by limiting magic, charging for simply learning a spell. Charging for training. Taxing our members. Perhaps with the best of intentions at the beginning. Another magical war cannot take place! We overlooked so many with the spark, our ranks could no doubt be ten times what they are now. We could embrace spell lenses, make them as cheap as possible. We did not. But now, anyone that can say “status menu” can tell if they have the spark. Any mage that requests access to the spell list can simply ‘purchase’ any spell formula. Our wealth and position of power is in jeopardy. And at the same time, the Heavens pack up and leave? Even if Sammael isn’t the cause, they will be quick to take advantage. Demon gates are

open and easy to open. Will a demonic tide soon spill from those portals to claim our world? Without angelic forces as deterrent we fear it's only a matter of time. We need to know what did this, if more changes are coming or if there's a possibility it will be taken away again. We must ask at the highest levels, and this is the one being powerful enough to know the answers, but grounded enough to speak to us and not have us go mad. And so I ask again- what is the whole and complete ritual needed to summon a primordial one?"

"Even we dare not discover it," the center one whispered. "The laws are clear. We would not be spared if it was learned we knew what you asked. Asmodeus is not known for his leniency. I'm sorry, but for the second time I must admit I cannot answer your question."

"Great, it's going to get harder then," Light complained. *We may have to discover it from scratch, or worse yet rely on magic to do the same. Disaster!*

"Now, now," said a new voice, another simurgh coming over. "Don't fly off just yet. Just because we try to cultivate the appearance of all knowing the same things, that doesn't mean we do. I can help you."

"What?" All three turned to the newcomer. "You couldn't have!" the center one demanded. "The law!"

"Oh, don't get your feathers in a bunch, I don't know the ritual itself, mind," the newcomer clarified. "But I can tell you where you might find a copy. After all, we trade for knowledge not safety."

"And if your tip isn't good?" he asked.

"Full refund, of course," the simurgh promised. "You can have your question back. Of course it's a different story if you screw it up. If you see the book and trigger the alarms and get caught with egg on your face that's not my problem. They move it after that, well, you had your chance."

"That's fair."

"Uh, shouldn't we talk about this, boss?" Paige asked him.

"What's to talk about? This is *my* mission from the Guild. I have been empowered to call upon any resource needed to find an intact copy of the proper summoning ritual, and see it through." He grinned. "Wait until you see the preparation they're doing! You're going to love it."

"That's what we used to call a *carte blanche*," Sinjorino informed her.

"Sure, whatever. Now I share your concern. Three months ago had the Guild learned of such a ritual in the wild I would no doubt have been called upon to find and destroy it. It's the sort of thing I did. But this time I'm on the other side. Now we need it."

Two sets of laws, gee never saw that before, Sinjorino thought to themselves.

"But we're not summoners, we're mages! What are we going to do with it? I would have figured asking for a spell..."

"But they can be hired. Believe me, we maintain relations with Demongate for more than just wayward elves that need a bit of supplemental tutoring."

"Aflac." the simurgh cheeped. Sinjorino slapped their faceplate and groaned.

"Bless you?" Light wondered.

"Oh sorry, I thought you said supplemental insurance."

"Honestly, of all the simurgh," the right one said, "the one that does the bird puns has to know where the ritual is? Why is the universe so cruel?"

"Besides," Light went on, "there may be spells that can summon a primordial. But guess what planet they would fall under?"

Paige didn't have to guess. "Chaos."

"Exactly. Now, I don't have access to the chaos spell list, and thank goodness for that! But the Guild does employ a few chaos mages, mostly as a deterrent to keep them from casting magic. Yes," he looked to the others, "we pay them to sit around and not do magic. Believe me, it's worth it, and not easy. Those guys are nuts and almost addicted to doing magic so their chaos spreads in the world." He shivered and looked back to Paige. "But I've been assured calling such a being with magic would be

even more difficult than doing it the 'traditional' way. Just as with our angel summoning spell, we would need to actually *know about* a specific primordial one. Do you know any?" Paige shook her head. "Exactly. Summoning rituals can get us one at random, magic can't. That's the easiest way, and the safest way. We don't need a whole bunch of chaos mages cooperating on a spell and three miles away, all the cows in a certain field start discussing philosophy and looking people in the eye asking if they're going to be eaten soon. Chaos magic is dangerous, literally anything can happen if it goes wrong. Heck, sometimes when it goes *right!* It's how we get those cohesion things, sometimes. So, the ritual. Where is it?"

"Chaos magic sounds kinda foul," the simurgh told them. "But about the ritual- thanks for not asking how I knew about it. Allows me to play it all cool and act like it's just one of those things we simurgh are known for."

"But you better ask," said the left one. "Because I sense a great need to tell the story."

"Hey, we don't go reading each other's minds!"

"It wasn't that deep, believe me."

"Very well, how did you learn of it," Light asked, eager to deflect the situation.

"You know how sometimes a vault will be updated, and then things from one vault go into that new one so the next oldest vault can be renovated?"

"Hold on," Sinjorino perked up. "Are you saying there's a chance we could intercept a vault moving between two locations and have some awesome chase scene like in that one fast and furious movie? I've never gotten a chase scene, this is a dream come true!"

"Don't be silly, this was moved like two hundred years ago."

"Aw, come on!"

"Sorry. No, that's how I learned of it. It went from one Asmodeus vault to another. The protections must have slipped and I got a nice inventory of the items. So I knew where it ended up."

"If it hasn't moved again," Olaph cautioned.

"I don't think it has, they don't do that many renovations, for obvious reasons. Even if they did, maybe they would have a record of where they took it. Right now it's your only lead. You gonna reject my offer?"

"Wait, Asmodeus?" Light asked. "He's the one that put the law in place in the first place, right? Why would he- oh demon, right. Of course he wouldn't follow his own rules."

The simurgh shook their head. "Not exactly. See, you might not know this but I'll throw it in. Demons? They're kinda greedy. Maybe you heard? Anyway, once most of the rituals were destroyed, suddenly those that were left became quite valuable."

"So it's not the ritual itself, it's the rarity of the item? Yes it's illegal but as it's worth a lot, he's looking the other way it happens to be a ritual that is against the law. He knows that maybe he can sell it to someone later. And then presumably arrest them for possessing an illegal summoning and get it back. Genius!"

"Exactly. So, I can tell you which castle the vault is in, you want it?"

"Castle?" Olaph questioned, turning a bit pale.

"Of course, you don't think it was like a dragon hoard or something do you? It's a vault. Of course it's going to be guarded."

"We have no choice. If, of course, you will swear upon your honor as a simurgh this is indeed our only chance to acquire the knowledge we seek."

"I swear it, no other source is known to me."

He looked to the others, who grudgingly nodded.

"Then I shall accept the trade. Where it is?"

Chapter 23

Looking then Planning

Where: The Castle

When: Not long after

“So, Malfeasaceen,” Light turned to the demon. “What exactly am I looking at here?”

The group had taken the taxi service, Malfeasaceen had been willing to wait while they talked to the simurgh in case they needed a further ride somewhere, to the castle. Approaching from the “back” side, and landing on a nearby mountain that overlooked the place, no cry seemed to be raised so they were looking the place over. As both had the temporary tool spell they could make some nice binoculars and passed them around. The demon was currently looking through them.

“Seems pretty standard,” he told them. “To the left you’ll see the fields, where they grow crops because even demons need to eat. Some of them, anyway. Straight back you’ll see the section marked off for war games. That’s where all the demons are running around and smacking each other. Further right you’ll see the training ground, it seems to be in three pieces. Closest to us seems like firearms training, see the flashes? Then magic in the center, then hand to hand combat furthest from us. At the front of the castle you’ll find the guards, pits, traps, and main road leading to the gate. Looks like pretty much every other demonic fortress you’ll come upon. It may surprise you, but our leaders, being millions of years old and such, are not that creative. This sort of setup worked once in the past, so now it’s how things look. And you want to break into that place?”

“Want is a strong word,” Olaph told him.

“Hold on, firearms as in guns?” Sinjorino asked.

“All kinds,” he agreed. “Yeah, they probably have some sweet gear down there. You’re not causing a distraction of some kind are you? I could be in a position to ‘liberate’ a few things for my personal, uh, collection...”

“Didn’t think demons were big on that sort of thing,” Paige remarked.

“Oh, we weren’t,” he agreed, looking over at her. “Even when guns first started to be introduced we didn’t see much value in them. But they kept getting better and better, you see? Then the world cracked, and magic came along. Now, here’s our leaders, right? Sitting around discussing what to do about it. Sure, human world went from billions of souls to a few million almost overnight from their perspective, but we still had a prophesied war with Heaven to look forward to. Not that there was much point, the influx of souls from the breaking was going to keep us busy a long time. I don’t even know if we have finished processing them all! But I digress. On the one hand the number of angels stays constant, right? And humans aren’t going to come back and fight in the last battle, they’re too busy basking in the love of the lord or whatever they do all day.”

“He’s not wrong,” Olaph agreed.

“While our ranks only increased, because unlike the other side that doesn’t turn souls into angels, we turn souls into new demons. But there was still a problem. Rather than just squishy humans running around now you’ve got elves, and fairies, and bug people, your people Sinjorino. You know, things that can fight back. Plus lots of humans have magic, and a select few have really good magic, like litches, or immortals like Dean. Necromancers could use our dead against us, and a good wizard with the right spell can create a hundred troops out of thin air to fight for them. Not to mention just

making it rain fire or whatever. No, we hadn't gained any advantage because the number of people that could fight us only increased. We would always have the angelic forces to worry about, that was a constant number. But as time went on and more people learned magic? Our invasion seemed less and less certain to go the way we wanted because more and more humans learned magic."

"Until two months ago," Olaph grumbled. "And we lost angelic protections." *Hopefully not for good. He's talking about the last battle, all the gates are supposed to open again in those times, right? But we have to worry about the time between then and now. The more warlocks or witches they create the less mages we'll have on our side when the time comes.*

"Yeah, exactly!" he agreed with a grin. "Man, you should have seen the parties when we realized that had happened. Ha! I mean, uh, anyway, so two thousand years ago or so we decided to do something about it. New blood was chosen to implement new ideas, as our old leaders recognized they were behind the times and always would be. So they issued the commands; Find out how to make the best weapons. Find the best strategies for dealing with magic users. Get our own magic users up to snuff. Humans lost their technological advantage so we decided to revive it. Take electricity and such for ourselves. We have our own soul powered versions of robots, so we never bothered making more of them, but everything else we improved on. So when the last battle really comes, we'll be ready. You think *angels* are going to be wielding energy weapons and anti-matter bombs? No chance. We'll wipe the floor with them and they'll just be standing there wondering what the heck happened. I mean, fight fair? This is the demon realm, what were they expecting? We would stick to *swords*?" He scoffed.

"Terrifying."

"Glorious."

Olaph glared at him.

"Hey, don't look at me like that. I don't want it to happen tomorrow, or anything. I like my job, and my life! I don't have to run around like those saps, getting beat up in war games or casting the same fireball spell a hundred times in a row. But your guy decided it was going to happen, right? We're just playing our part. If your guy hadn't directly said 'one day there will be a great battle between our forces' we wouldn't train so hard for it, would we? But I guess your guy wanted to give us something to do, and so... Here it is." He swept a hand out over the forces below them. "Rather than just lazing around we train. If it's coming, I may as well enjoy my side benefiting from the fruit of all this labor."

"And the rest shall inherit a paradise on Earth..." Olaph said softly. *I suppose if that is the Lord's plan for us, I can't fault this one demon for it. It's not their doing. There is a battle for the totality of human souls, I cannot doubt the Lord's word. But he's right, they're pressing every advantage. Are we doing the same? Would we be ready if the last battle came today? I think not.*

"Should you be showing and telling us all this?" Sinjorino asked. "I mean you're doing it out in the open and whatever, yes. But still, aren't we the enemy?"

He shrugged. "I'm not telling you any exact strategy, I have no idea of such myself. We're all soldiers in theory, but I escaped from that life long ago. I'm making my own way. I mean like I said his guy told humanity this was coming even before the breaking. You've always known. I'm not giving you any cheat codes or anything."

"Yes I suppose."

"Speaking of cheat codes, and as fascinating as this discussion is," Paige told them, "can we get back to planning how we're going to get in there? Past the vault door, grab the ritual, and get out? Because I don't see it."

"Yes, could be tricky," Light agreed. "Even my elemental forms can't get me into a vault. Usually those are secured by a thick door. Though I suppose the padre can go in as a wraith?"

"Do you really think it wouldn't be secured against such things?" he asked.

"Ah, yes, they probably spared no expense, huh?"

"We should proceed as if they haven't."

"How many do you think are down there?" Paige asked.

“A legion is 6,000 troops, maybe two legions worth?” Malfeasaceen answered, slowly scanning over the crowds. “The inside will have a lot of forces too, probably as many as are out here. Shifts, and all that.”

She closed her eyes. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“If we did make it to the vault, could you simply teleport it out?” Sinjorino asked. “Then come back for us? Assuming we can teleport at all inside the walls there, of course.”

He shook his head. “Spell specifically says ‘one additional creature per Mercury rating.’ Bank vault isn’t a creature. There’s no real spell to teleport a ‘target’ like some spells mention. ‘The target’ this and ‘the target’ that. Sorry.”

“So we can’t hold off their forces for a moment and then open the vault at our leisure. It must be done on site. This complicates things.”

“Hold on, I tell a lie,” Light backtracked, flipping through his System window. “There is ‘send object.’ That’s a teleport spell that works on objects. Downside; someone would have to stay behind. And depending on how big it is, spell might not work. I mean maybe Paige could put enough energy in to get something huge, but it appears at random near the target. One can’t just send the safe to someplace they’ve seen, it has to be to a person. And I doubt we can send it to Dean if he’s down in the room. Whoever she sent it to would have to be in an empty field someplace. Odd spell.”

“...That could work,” Paige mused. “Say, Malfeasaceen, you want to be part of our heist here? You can choose an item from the vaaaaault...” she singsonged.

“You really think you can get in there?”

She sighed. “Not without casualties, maybe? It may hurt some of your people...”

He laughed. “You’re really thinking you can beat 6,000 troops? That have probably spent thousands of years just doing this?”

“Beat? No. Distract? Yes. Long enough to get inside and get the vault? I hope so.”

“This I have to see. Okay, five items from the vault and my magic is yours.”

“Two.”

“Four.”

“Three!”

“Done!” They shook hands. Paige didn’t let go. “After, of course, we remove the thing we want. You can look over the rest.”

“Of course, I figured that went without saying.”

“As long as you understand.” She let go. “Let’s go back. I don’t want to plan anything out here in the open. They must have divination magic same as we do. Let’s not give them any advance notice if we can help it.”

The group climbed back into the pod and took off.

“You want to do what?” Light asked, now safely down in Dean’s lead room. Paige had been laying out her plan, and Light was becoming increasingly worried about her sanity. She hadn’t used any specifics, as the demon had followed them as he was going to be part of the plan, but he understood what she was going for.

“Show them something they’ve never seen before,” Paige told him with a smirk. “I kind of hate to do it, because it’ll give them the idea, but we’re going to have to go big on this one. Really, really big. It’s the only way. We can’t fight our way through. I doubt we can bribe enough people to get in. Or sneak in, who knows what sorts of traps and detection magic they have in that place.”

“Plus technological means even I may not be familiar with,” Sinjorino reminded them. “If they’ve been improving all this time, and keeping it secret...”

“Right, like they said. We need them occupied. And this is the only way to do it. It keeps us safe, keeps us out of their sight so they don’t know who did it right away, and lets us get away.”

“But two grade ten spells? You’re crazy!”

She grinned. "I know! But what did we discover combination magic for anyway? To use it, I'm thinking. And this- it will be glorious."

"If we don't get killed outright."

"That's the beauty of it. With Dean's help we've got everything covered. We activate the chamber, nothing says we have to stay in it once activated. He just has to know if he should rewind time for us or not. We combine the two spells on location and attack the place. You three sneak in back. I stay outside to receive the safe, which is hopefully small enough for you to handle. I need to direct the spell though maybe you could do it as we're combining it? I don't know. When it appears Malfeasaceen puts the gravity magic on it and the pod and simply flies them away at high speed. You come pick me up, everybody's happy. Everybody on our side is happy," she clarified. "They won't be happy, but you can't please everyone."

"What if there's more than one safe? What if it's not a vault but a huge storeroom and the book we need is just sitting on a shelf someplace with a thousand others?"

"Same deal!" she agreed. "We hit the magic, the attack never happened, and we start the plan over. We can do it as many times as we need to, really. I mean you could bring some bags or something to haul loot away in, we can do a little preparation beforehand. We only have to succeed once."

"Don't forget my cut," the demon grumbled.

"As long as we get further each time, a similar strategy did work in the movie *Edge of Tomorrow*," Sinjorino told them. "Not that I would use a movie as the basis of any real life plan of course, but the logic is sound."

"Oh yeah, that was a good one!" Dean agreed. "That's the one with the bug aliens, right?"

"Not *Starship Troopers*. It's the one where the blood of an alien absorbed by a human lets them go back 24 hours if they die."

"Still had bug like aliens. Yeah, yeah, and the lady lost the power somehow? But how did she know? She would have only known if she got killed and didn't find herself back in time."

"Agreed, that was a bit of a plot hole."

"If we could focus on the plan?" Paige asked with false sweetness. She was quite excited about it, given she had come up with it.

"Sorry. Talk movies later," Dean told them.

"Agreed."

"So, what do you think? Spend the XP and start studying the spell?"

He shook his head. "This is exactly what the Guild is afraid of, you see that right? People just being able to use The System and get access to any spell."

"And you see how useful it is, when you need a specific spell right away, not to have to go hunting it down and pay a sack of gold for it? I mean what's *your* brilliant plan for getting in there with only the spells we know? Do you have one? Want an hour? I doubt you'll come up with something better than I did."

"I admit, the four of us against several legions of demons does give me pause. I'm usually a more one on one type of guy. And we can't exactly just walk up to the place and demand it." *They're magic users, they can hurt me and mass spells could even do enough damage to me to kill me through my elemental body. Plus I only have two swords, the other two would be vulnerable. Her plan would seem to work around all that. If they don't immediately decide it's a distraction and ignore it. I mean I don't see how they could but still.*

"Well you *could*," Dean told them, "but it probably wouldn't go very well."

"So I guess going big is the only option. Hopefully seeing something like this coming towards them will break their resolve. Maybe they won't choose to fight but instead flee. Not that I mind demons dying, especially these ones that are just endlessly training for the end times. But I don't want Asmodeus to have another reason to come after us. Just the one will be bad enough."

"Yes, how are we going to handle the ritual?" Olaph asked. "Once we've used it, I mean."

“Once it’s been used the Guild will take precautions,” Light explained. “We’ll have those with mental abilities on hand to erase the ritual from those that studied and performed it. Magically doing so it could be recovered. We’ll be doing it in a place that can’t be scryed upon, and we’ll put spells in place that prevent the area from being viewed backwards in time. Then we destroy the original writings and scatter the ashes so it can’t be put back together.”

“So at least if he does come after us, it’ll be for the theft and not his property, which will be gone by that point. We may even be able to argue we’re in the right because technically the ritual is illegal by his own laws.”

“Yeah, don’t get cute with demons. Let’s just hope he doesn’t follow up because we’ll all be back home and not on his turf, the demon realm.”

“That’s what we’re going with? A bit of hope? Great...”

“As long as we don’t take anything else,” Paige mused, “it’s a good argument. He would be disingenuous to go after something that shouldn’t even exist.”

The demon sighed. “I’m not getting anything for this, am I? I don’t want him coming after just me.”

“I’ll make you something if you don’t profit directly,” Dean told him.

“Oh!” He perked up. “Your stuff is legend, boss. Thanks! Huh, what would I like made...”

Light spoke up again. “For now, we have a lot of studying to do. Is there a place we can stay around here, Dean?”

“Stay here. We have rooms and a cafeteria. Stay as long as you need.”

“Thanks.”

And so the two studied after getting some dinner. As the spells they wanted to use were quite lengthy, in addition to being grade 10, they took much of the next day to go over them as well. They talked about how best to fit them together, and how to hide what they were doing from the town. Doing the spell too close, and the giant, garishly glowing magical circles would give them away and they would be attacked far too early. Too far and the place would see what they were going to do far in advance and be able to get ready. Dean waved that off.

“I’ll just give you some wards that make you overlooked,” he told them. “I was an artificer first, after all. They’ll never see you coming.”

“They’ll work to hide the magic we’re building up?” Paige seemed doubtful.

“Anything you do will be overlooked, as long as you’re not attacking or jumping around. So yes, because the circles are coming from you, they too will be ignored.”

“Handy.”

The plan was to attack just after everyone left the castle, or at least as many as were going to. Attacking too early and the doors of the place would act as a choke point, meaning more demons inside to worry about. (Attacking late in the day was also considered, meaning the demons outside would be worn out from the day’s training. But then the demons inside would have gotten a full night sleep and be ready for them. Better groggy demons inside and fresh demons outside than the other way around) As the group was going to have to scour the whole place at least once to find where the treasure room was, the fewer demons inside the better. They wanted all the demons outside, dealing with the spell combination the two were going to do. Sinjorino would carry a communication device, in case they needed a quick “reset” into the past, but would otherwise travel light. Speed through the halls and rely on Olaph’s senses to try and avoid bad passageways, taking out guards as quickly as they could. He would be in drake form, to get flying and elemental attacks and still be able to talk.

Another good night’s sleep and the group headed for the castle. Dean saved and the plan was put into action.

Quest Generation Complete
Find the Ritual

Get past the guards any way you can and find the forbidden ritual. Take it from the castle guardians and get out alive.

Rewards: Ritual. XP.

Accept / Reject

Chapter 24

Hulks Smash

Where: The Castle

When: Just after demon “sunrise”

Before casting Paige had placed one of her favorite spells on herself. Energetic accumulation. As the result of her part of the 2-part spell was directly related to her Mars rating, and her Mars rating could be artificially increased with energy, and this spell allowed her to basically dump as much energy into a check as she wanted- she would be a fool not to. *But at the same time I have to allow some energy in case I need to fight off anything that comes around here. So I'll just dump half my energy into this and trust that's enough.*

Her part of the spell normally took 20 minutes, but as she was casting from writings it was going to be 40 minutes. Thank goodness for those wards, am I right? She was joined by Light, doing his part of the spell over the course of 20 minutes. So he joined her halfway through, fitting the magic together with her. Both had to spend an XP, Light to recalculate his result completely as he only got a 9 the first time and Paige for a +2 as she got a 14. The magic fitted smoothly together and with a Mars check for Paige of 83 (minimum, her max would have been 89) and 17 (his maximum, because that's how the universe works) the ground started to shake and tear itself apart. Both watched, Paige with glee and Light with rising horror as what they had unleashed tore itself free from the ground and awaited orders.

Legion of the Armored Colossus

Mars + Mars

Created by combining the Colossus spell with the Legion spell, a number of huge (size = $\frac{1}{2}$ Mars rating max +5) stone figures in gleaming steel armor and wielding swords rip themselves out of the ground to fight on your behalf. The number of fighters conjured is equal to (Mars x STR) and each is wreathed in fire. Because these creatures were created with the combination of two Mars spells, their stats, size, DTR, delay, and speed are all slightly enhanced from the original spell. For other effects and variables please refer to the original spells they are too lengthy to record here.

Original casting by Light Kajombro and Paige Malplenan.

Administrator Message

You two don't go small, do you? We love it!
Keep up the good work and I hope whatever it is
you need this kind of force for, it's enough. We
shudder to think what wouldn't. You guys are okay, right?

With a Mars rating of 7 the stone creatures were +4 size modifier, having rounded up instead of down due to the double Mars spells. But the real star of the show was, of course, Paige. With her 84 Mars rating the landscape here was absolutely devastated because over *three hundred* of the things had climbed out of the earth and left a crater in their place. They were now packed together, heat rolling off them in a wave. Each taller than a dragon, in armor, holding a huge sword taller than she was, and absolutely ready to kick. Some. Flank. They would explode upon death, rain flaming rocks down onto whatever killed them as they died, and were probably high enough DTR to be almost unbeatable. Paige was happy, very happy, with her new children.

“Head down this road to attack the castle and anyone that attacks you!” she called to her army. They turned as one and raced forward.

“...I actually expected more,” Light finally managed. “What happened?”

“I had to save some energy,” Paige told him. “There’s still a lot of ways this can go wrong.”

“Are you kidding? Let’s just stay here and let them trash the place. We can dig the ritual out when they’re all dead!”

“Really?”

He sighed. “No, we have to get it before they trash the place. Grab on, you need to see them right?”

“Don’t know, the new spell window didn’t say. I had hoped not, because of the legion spell of yours buffing them but let’s not take the chance. I’ll head up the mountain with Malfeasaceen so I get a good view of the action.” *And stay behind, sigh. But I guess my part is done. So long as I get the XP when the quest is over I’m happy.*

“Right.”

They waited until the group was almost out of sight and Light teleported them back to the side of the mountain. She reoriented and looked down upon them, and they seemed to be fine so that worked. The demons were realizing something was wrong as the first fighters smashed into the castle walls, and started to tear them down.

“That was your plan?” Malfeasaceen yelled. “But how did you- there’s so many! You were saying some weird stuff and I went along with it but you somehow did *this*?”

Light answered. “Never you mind. Keep an eye on the crowds down there. I want to go through that back wall once everyone clears out to fight our men of stone.”

“Will you be okay with that penalty?” Paige asked him.

“Going to have to be, aren’t I?”

“I’m not... sure?”

“What?”

“Well, in our classes we did learn how to ‘hand off’ so to speak a spell to another person. This is sort of the same spell spread across the both of us but I figure, if I’m just going to be standing here I may as well have a -8 penalty instead of just a -4. You need to be able to make combat checks. I don’t.”

Light considered with a bit of a hum. “I did know about that, hardly ever able to make use of it though. How often is giving your penalty to another mage going to help? But in this case, sure, let’s try it.”

“Great!” She held out a hand which Light took, and both concentrated. Light on moving the magical energies he was maintaining through his body and to Paige, while she did the opposite and accepted them. Normally of course this would have required a check but as Paige had already said it was the same spell, and Light’s piece of it actually whooshed out of his body, attracted to the piece of

itself in Paige's. No check required. Both blinked a bit at how easily it had happened, and Paige resigned herself to being weighed down by the combined penalty.

"Good call," Light finally praised, dropping her hand. "That does make me feel a little better about going in there. No offense you two."

"None taken," both assured him.

"Right, grab hold and we'll head down there. Paige, stay safe up here."

"Will do!" she cheerfully agreed, and he cast the spell and vanished.

"Just you and me now," she told the demon.

"Yes. Yes it is," they said, eyes narrowing just a bit.

The three found themselves by the castle wall and went into action. Light started casting to create an opening in the wall, while Sinjorino crouched a bit and made sure they were unobserved, bow flicking left and right. Olaph meanwhile drew upon his orge fiendstone and turned into a hulking brute.

"Thought you were going to be a drake?" Sinjorino queried. *Good, we're in the clear for the moment. Everyone is charging to the front to confront those stone constructs. We've not been noticed in all the chaos.*

"Changed my mind," he grunted. "Be big now, not small."

"Ah, the soldiers the others made inspired you, is that it? I don't mind, just try not to get in the way if I need to shoot something.

"Me friend, no shoot friend in back!"

"Yes, that's the plan."

"Plan smash stuff! Find shiny stuff, we take!"

"... I can't tell if you're trying to be funny or if your transformation really does affect you this much."

The wall before them was made of uneven pieces of stone, joined together with mortar. The pieces were square, probably manipulated by a similar spell just to make them easier to fit together, though not standard sizes like bricks. But the spell specified "you can only target a single "piece" of the element with each casting of the spell" which was going to be a problem. He didn't want to cast it again and again, but he didn't have to. Light simply called upon his aura skill, something he had teased Paige with when he disguised all of them at once, somewhat hoping she would figure it out for herself. This was a unique skill he had developed by pushing his skill of ranged magic to the limit and beyond, so he could get enough of the wall even though it was individual bricks not one solid piece of stone. He calculated an 8 on that one, not enough to activate the skill and so he tried again. This time he calculated an 11, minus 1 for the retry, and casting his elemental sculpting skill with his aura active allowed him to target every piece of stone in a 1m radius and each piece could be as much as 1m x skill rating large. No stone was, so he stepped to the side and mentally willed each stone to pull the center of itself out of the wall. As each piece ejected itself he had stone around the area fill in after it, making the area collapse as a bunch of stone "rods" were completely ejected. It didn't collapse the whole wall, his 1m hole wasn't enough structural damage for that, but Olaph grabbed the mortar that was left and yanked it out, leaving the way free.

Sinjorino jumped through, putting an arrow into a surprised demon down the hall. It didn't do much damage but Olaph was next through and charged it. So Sinjorino smoothly pivoted and let another arrow fly, striking another demon that was coming around the corner. This drove it back in surprise and it skidded to a halt and jumped back out of range.

"How did you know that one was coming?" Light asked, poking his head through the hole and looking around.

"I didn't. I simply calculated a high probability of additional forces on the way and fired where the first was most likely to be."

“Oh, simple as that, huh?” he asked, stepping through.

“Indeed.”

Olaph had sprinted down the hall towards the surprised demon, moving at a speed of 15 which was pretty good, and made a grab for them. Ties almost went to the defender, but the devil was at a -1 for their head penalty, and so he got grabbed and slammed into the wall. Their wing crunched into the wall making them cry out, but not stopping them from acting. They smiled a wicked smile in the direction of the others and vanished.

“Oh crap,” Light muttered.

“Oh crap indeed, matey,” Olaph said, turning towards them. “Whatcha gonna do ‘bout it?”

“What?” Sinjorino asked.

“They possessed him.”

“Oh crap.”

“Yup. Stay back.” He yanked his sword out, becoming a shadow of his former self.

“I’ll cover your back.” Sinjorino stepped back and swiveled their bow down the other side of the hall, in case that devil popped back up.

“I can still hurt you,” Olaph told Light, as the man rushed down the hallway to reach him. He raised his hands to cast, and barking a quick word and flexing his now mighty muscles fire erupted down both sides of the hallway. Sinjorino jumped away from it, while Light ignored it, stabbing out with his sword.

Can’t use combination attack, he thought to himself. Without a means to exorcise this guy I only have once chance. Turn him into shadow so he can’t actually do anything. That will require a decent strike, combination attack reduces the damage too much, it would never trigger. I hate to lose Olaph but there’s nothing else for it at the moment.

The sword passed through Olaph, doing 6 damage to his body. Which was halved because he was so big, so 3. The demon easily resisted the shadow effect with a RESolve check and looked down at him.

“That was it, huh? You’ll kill your buddy before that does anything to me directly, I can tell you that much.”

“That is entirely possible,” Light agreed reluctantly. “That possession power is a real problem.”

“Isn’t it though? I’m going to enjoy making you regret coming-”

“Reset now!” Sinjorino shouted.

The party found themselves back with Dean.

“What happened?” he asked, as everyone looked around in a bit of a daze.

“I got possessed,” Olaph admitted. “So, no grabbing devils for me. Got it. Er, was I talking funny once I changed?”

“Aw, come on, we have to do that 40 minute spell again?” Paige complained. “You’ve got to be kidding me!”

“Sorry,” Light told her. “Good call, Sinjorino. That demon really had us in a bind. We had no way to deal with it once it possessed Olaph.”

“Push the button and let’s get going,” Paige muttered. “I love doing 40 minute spells anyway it’s fine.”

Events proceeded in the same way, there was no reason to change casting the spells and getting into the castle, but this time Olaph simply swung his meaty fist at the devil in the hallway. He calculated an 11 to hit, called shot to the head because even an ogre believes in taking no chances, and the devil tried to dodge with a 7. He was slammed into the wall and went down.

“Not dead, or he would vanish,” Light told them. “Let’s move on we don’t have time to finish the thing off.”

Are you sure? thought Sinjorino. *I could easily put a blast into his head on the way by. But I suppose we're not here to kill demons, though some will inevitably die due to our distraction outside.*

"I did good this time!" Olaph bragged.

"Yes, yes, very good," Light assured him. "Which way?"

"Only one way!" He stomped off down the corridor. "Smash everything!"

"No, use your power, ugh, come on!" The two followed after him.

Right, he was supposed to be using his premonition power to see which was the best way to go. I guess ogre him forgot.

The group moved through the halls of the place, smashing down doors and such looking for stairs, as any vault would most likely be underground. Light used his elemental bolt spell alongside Sinjorino's ice blasts to keep demons back, and they didn't run into more than one or two at a time as everyone inside had rushed to fend off the main attack. They tried only to knock out any demons that showed up, as none of them knew if anything they were carrying would go *poof* along with them. If there were security doors that could only be opened with cards or whatnot they would need them. But no search revealed anything like that yet.

Meanwhile, outside, the legion was going bonkers trying to figure out what to do about these giant rock creatures and stop them from smashing the castle up. Paige was watching with an amused look when she noticed the glow of a magical circle behind her. She turned to see Malfeasaceen was holding a sword that seemed to be made of fire and she looked around.

"Are we under attack?" she asked. "Did someone notice us up here? Are they coming?"

He chuckled. "No, nothing like that. I just thought, hey, you're sort of out here alone, maybe this would be a good time to maybe, I don't know, threaten your life a little bit? Sort of thing?" He took a step forward giving the sword a swish through the air.

"What? Why?"

"Way I see it, if I'm the first one to bring to my lord, Mephistopheles, whatever technique it was that brought all those creatures to life I would be well rewarded. And here's the person that made it all happen! What a coincidence! I can just ask them, super politely, and they are sure to tell me!"

"So you're abducting me?"

He held up a hand. "No, I'm threatening you. At the moment you're at a -8 penalty or more, from what I heard? I'll never have a better chance. You can't drop the spells or the attack ends, and your friends are put in danger. You can't defend yourself, at that kind of penalty you're more likely to impale yourself on my sword than dodge it. And forget about casting any spells, even as a natural magician you're likely to blow yourself up shortening even the easiest of magic. I'm not risking taking you back at full power, as a spell casting elf who knows what you can do? No, you're simply going to tell me what I want to know, and I'll be on my way. We both get what we want!"

Ugh, but you were supposed to drag the safe away with the gravity magic. It's coming here! "I thought you liked your job! And you know Dean is going to be super angry at you, he's not going to let this slide."

They nodded. "I took it into consideration. He's powerful, that's true, but I think I can count on my lord to protect me. Like I said, this technique is going to be worth a lot and I'm going to be very well rewarded for bringing it to him. I might like the job, but sitting around in a palace ordering servants around and counting my wealth seems a lot better."

"For all eternity? Sounds boring to me. Dean isn't dying any time soon and he can probably hold a grudge a long time."

He shrugged. "But in a hundred years can he find one devil among so many? I think not. Now, the secret of how you did that, if you would?"

“I really can’t talk you out of it, huh? Appeal to your better nature, even knowing you’re a demon?”

“Are you trying to make me laugh myself to death? You’re right, I am a demon. This sort of thing comes with the territory.”

She sighed. “Fine. I tried. See, the thing is, you miscalculated.”

“Oh? You’re not at a huge penalty?”

“Oh, I am,” she agreed. “But my arms are not.”

“Arms-” he started to say, as the chain-link arms unwrapped themselves from around her middle and started clacking ominously.

“What- what are those?” he asked, taking a step back. “I thought that wrapping was some kind of fashion statement? Why are they moving? What are you?”

“Not telling!” she said brightly. “Let’s see if you’ve got a dancing skill...” The arms, one at a time, started darting for him like snakes and he stumbled back trying to fend them off. Paige took a step forward to keep them in range. “Dance for me, demon!”

Chapter 25

Getting away with it

Where: The Castle

When: A moment later

The three intruders stood before a heavily armored door that most likely led to the prize they all were there for. This hallway had been covered by automated defenses that sprang into action when they got close, forcing Sinjorino and Olaph to wait around the corner while Light, in his elemental body, took care of them. Sinjorino was able to make some electrical and robotics checks to determine where best to strike, so Light didn't have to stand there gradually eating away at the things. There were gun emplacements, gas nozzles, flashing light and sound meant to disorient, and the whole place started to heat up like an oven. He took care of it all, giving them a chance to attack the door. For its part, the door wasn't having it. Olaph had smacked it a few times, and Light had also tried but it resisted his efforts. The three now stared at it, wondering what to do next.

"The deactivation of the locks may only be allowed remotely," Sinjorino remarked. "I see no panel here or traditional mechanism to release any bolts. Or perhaps it's on a timer?"

"This could all be a trap, too," mused Light. "Put all that stuff in a hallway to guard an empty room. I could see it, as a delaying action for anyone that got this far."

"And you are sure it isn't magic?" they asked. "I didn't think anything could resist your light form?"

"Not many things can," he admitted. "My sword was enchanted by a master, the way this elemental form works with the light element, unless you have basically mastered Sun magic at a 10 skill you may as well not bother. The damage is too low. Normally nothing would be able to stand against it for long even if the damage I do is fairly small normally. It's meant to be used against people, after all, not vaults, while keeping me immune from harm at the same time. This door just is too much I guess, who knows what it's made of, because it just doesn't seem to be taking any damage from me hitting it."

"Door go whoosh!" Olaph decided.

"Yes, that's what we're trying to figure out how to do, my friend," Light told him. "Let us think."

"Use spell, door go whoosh."

"Yes, I'll keep that in mind. Perhaps you could use your wraith form, see if we're even in the right place?"

"No change form, like form. Make door go away, walk inside. Easy."

"It's not really that easy."

"Actually," Sinjorino asked, "why isn't it? Can't you teleport the door somewhere? Even if you have to go with it, you can get back here easily enough."

He shook his head. "I said this before, the teleportation spell only works on creatures." He opened a System window and made sure he was remembering the spell correctly. "Right here; 'one additional *creature* per Mercury rating.' A strange restriction but there you have it. Door is not a creature."

"But our plan was to send the vault out to Paige, was it not? So you must have a way."

“Well, the send object spell but- no...” He swiped to move the spell list and took a look at the description. “‘You send a single object to another creature...’ You don’t think that could work, do you?” His face scrunched up in thought.

“The door is an object,” Sinjorino reasoned. “It would seem to be a single slab of hardened metal, probably with some rods to secure it to the foundation of the building. We can deal with those if they don’t go with it, much easier than dealing with the whole vault door.”

“And it was put here, it’s not like it’s the wall,” Light agreed. “It could be removed. There’s no restriction in the spell description about how big is the biggest object I can send. Or that it has to be in my hand, or it has to be free to move around otherwise. Just send an object. Surprisingly open ended for a spell, actually, I expect only the normal limitations of magic would apply to it. Like I couldn’t designate a whole mountain as an object just roughly a person sized mass per planet rating. At least that’s what we’ve been able to determine how it works, even The System doesn’t give an exact description of the underlying rules.”

“Less talk, more action!” Olaph demanded.

He chuckled. “Yes, yes, fine, I agree we are still in enemy territory.” Which had been shaking and crashing above them, probably due to Paige’s command to her soldiers to attack the castle itself, so they were punching or slashing the walls with their swords. “Let’s give it a try.” He got out the formula and started to read.

Paige learned something interesting about the arms as they lashed out under her mental commands at the demon that was trying to threaten her. It seemed like they didn’t have delay, as she understood it. She knew that when she did something, that action took almost no time at all, but *recovering* from that action did take time. The System called it segments. Spells took a certain amount of segments to cast, which was a *deferred* delay but otherwise punching someone or swinging a sword at them happened instantly. Which is what the arms were doing. Normally she “knew” on some level what her own delay was, and could reasonably guess an opponent’s delay with a successful magic combat skill check. But she had no idea what delay these arms operated under because once commanded to attack, they did. Malfeasaceen was forced to dodge and smack them aside, raising his reactive delay and preventing him from performing an active action against her, and the arms just kept coming. One after the other, they struck like snakes and hardly pulled back before they struck again. Paige varied the attack pattern mentally, first a few rounds of upper right, lower left, upper left, lower right to get him into a rhythm. Then upper right, *upper* left, both lowers at once, all four at once, lower right twice, forcing him back and back as she stepped forward with him.

The arms seemed to have an attack of 1d10+5, the usual calculation for the average magical artifact, but it was the fact Malfeasaceen could only reasonably dodge one thing at a time and dodging all four put him at a penalty that he took damage at all. (And don’t forget his penalty for keeping the sword spell going) 1 to the left wing, 15 to the body, 7 to his tail, right wing took 5, and his left arm took 2. He was backing up to the edge of the flat ground they were on, and decided that as he could only take one more hit to the body and his delay was rising with every defensive action he would have no opportunity to strike back. So he threw himself off, getting away from the arms and flying out of reach.

“Get back here traitor!” Paige shouted after him. “Not such a helpless little elf after all, am I? Coward! Stand and fight!”

I’ll just do what I should have done in the first place, Malfeasaceen decided. He dropped the sword spell, increasing his delay a bit, but he didn’t feel in danger now as she wouldn’t dare cast anything at her penalty. Right? He started to swing around, intending to cast a long range spell of his own. *I’m pretty wounded, I’ll take the full time and give her a face full of fire. She’ll regret not just telling me what I wanted to know.*

It was at that moment that a heavy slab of metal came out of nowhere, appearing in a flash of magic before Paige. It started to tip over, and she gave a “yip!” sort of sound and mentally commanded the arms into position and away from attacking. She braced herself as the arms took the weight, getting a 7 on her coordination check after penalties. She wasn’t exactly squished, but this wasn’t very high and the metal slab fell on top of her. The arms made a strength check to keep her from being crushed totally, which worked out to be 1d6+1d8+7 because they got a +2 bonus for there being another “pair” of arms. They calculated a 15, so while Paige was driven to her back on the ground the arms held the slab in place. They would have to get a much better result to throw the thing off of course but for the moment she was safe. *Was this their attack? I didn’t see them casting anything, and creation magic takes a long time. Wouldn’t think it could get this much material either. What in the heck is this thing?*

“That worked fairly well,” Light admitted, the vault door having vanished a second ago. *The spell says the door should have appeared ‘at the feet’ of the person I sent it to. In this case, Paige. A good test for the safe we may have to send if the ritual is not out in the open. Hopefully it didn’t just fall on her... Eh, she’ll be fine.*

“Me smart,” Olaph agreed. “Now we get shiny... shiny... What we here for again?”

“Just leave that to us,” Sinjorino told him. “You make sure nothing gets in here.”

“Right! Save me a shiny!”

The two stepped in and realized they had their work cut out for them. There were several safes of various sizes, shelves full of “lesser” treasure which did include books, stacks of gold bars, scrolls, jewelry, figurines, and somehow a mint in the box Millennium Falcon toy, probably the only one in existence, still in the shrink wrap and everything. A bit of a scuffed corner though, so maybe an 8/10 if graded by an expert in the field, and good luck finding one of them.

“It’s absolutely priceless,” Sinjorino said softly, staring transfixed at the toy from another age. “If something like this is just out on a shelf, what treasures must these safes contain?”

“What is it?” Light asked picking it up and shaking it a bit.

If Sinjorino could wince they would have. *Don’t do that, please.* “A child’s toy from the 70s, the original 70s, before the fall. Even in my time something like this would be impossible to find. Has it been in this vault since it was made?”

“... So it’s worthless.” He tossed it carelessly back on the shelf.

“Ha! Dean would give you millions for it, no doubt. It’s literally a one of a kind item at this point, and I’m sure he would recognize it. The memories associated with it are of course the main draw at this point. To most people, such as yourself, it’s just a curiosity. You would have to find someone that old who remembered it, like Dean. But to that person, absolutely priceless.”

“For a- never mind.” He turned away. “Look for a book of rituals that’s the only thing we’re here for.”

“I see you slipping that gold bar into your pocket. And you have your hand on another.”

“You saw *nothing*.”

They chuckled, grabbing one themselves. “Agreed.”

Light scowled at everything before him, and started casting his divination magic to try and narrow the search down a bit.

Outside, Malfeasaceen banked and was about to unleash his fire spell as he swooped past Paige. *That stupid elf won’t be able to- where did she go?* Quickly scanning the area they had been standing there was no elf. A dark slab of something was jiggling around down there, but he had no target. *Where did that come from, and what is it? She couldn’t have conjured something that quickly, I can see the soldiers attacking the castle she hasn’t let them go. Some kind of trick? But why use illusion magic to disguise yourself as a... whatever that thing is? Become a rock or something not obvious. I guess I could attack the slab? Still a risk of backfire... Forget it. I need to report in. I’ll head to the castle,*

someone in charge can take me to my lord. I don't know how they did what they did but I know it took two, and I've seen the result. I can tell him who knows, and he can track these two down again if he wants. My reward may not be as great but I'm sure it'll still be good enough to hide out until Dean forgets about me. Stupid elf, I thought I had her dead to rights, I really didn't expect those arm things of hers. I'm out of here.

It took the arms 6 tries to fling the door off of Paige, which went clattering down the mountain. Thankfully, being a magical construct they didn't suffer a retry penalty as she would have, and they could just keep trying until they got the best result. She expected an attack at any second and scanned the skies for Malfeasaceen. The demon was nowhere to be seen. *Okay, this is crazy. Did he give up? Did he think he crushed me and left without checking? How are we going to get the safe, if there is one, back at this rate? One thing at a time I guess, I hope the others are doing okay, the soldiers I made are crushing it out there, though I see far fewer of them now and some seem to be fighting others they must be possessed? I guess I'll just stay here and wait for them.*

"So this safe here, the biggest one," Sinjorino verified, "holds the item we are searching for within?" They were looking at a huge safe, easily taller than they were, and with what seemed to be four separate dials and four separate levers on the front of it. It was also slick with what looked like blood, making the material it was made of bloodiron, and thus harder to get into. Big enough to hold two people inside, possibly with room to spare based on how friendly the two were, it was secured to the floor in multiple ways.

"That's right. According to my question magic the answer to the question 'which safe holds the ritual we desire' is 'largest.' And this is the one."

"Will the same trick work? This seems much more massive than the door."

"My skill is only at a five, to be fair, but I can make a maximum energy empowering check to push it higher. Would you estimate this safe to be the equivalent of 8 or so people? That's probably all I can reasonably hope for, and that's at the high end of my limit."

"Possibly, yes. Estimating this safe as at least 900 kilograms, while the average weight of a human is 70 kilograms, rather simple math would tell us you are approximately 300 kilograms off the mark."

"Oh." He glared at the safe. "That's a problem. Can you get it open?"

"I fear I do not have any mundane safe cracking skills. Nor is the safe electronic, so I cannot simply 'plug into' it and force it to open. Plus this design is quite strange." They touched it. "Four input points. Is there a certain order we must perform them in? Does only one function? Does using the incorrect one set off explosives inside? Are these a complete misdirection and the safe isn't locked at all, but someone small simply slips around the back and throws a lever back there? Too many variables. Simply teleport the door off and let us be on our way."

"Ah! About that. You, uh, bring up a good point. Had the previous door been rigged with explosives it very easily could have gone off in our face."

"I hope Paige is unharmed in that case."

"So do I. Remember, he doesn't want the ritual getting out. He's just keeping it around just in case. Better to blow it up if this thing is disturbed than take a chance someone finds it. So yes, I'd totally rig the safe to blow if very specific things aren't done. We have to take it with us somehow, so it can be studied and opened safely. Maybe after using Dean's time magic again, so we can go back if we get blown up trying to open it."

"A reasonable and sensible precaution. What do you suggest?"

"That's a good question. Give me a minute. At worst we get Paige here and she can read the spell over. She doesn't have my... limitation. She could probably get it with extra energy thrown in. I just hate to admit I couldn't take care of it myself."

“Now is hardly the time for pride, Light.”

“I suppose. Olaph told us what type of creatures he can become, maybe one of them can help? Let’s consider everything we can...”

But neither remembered anything useful about the creatures he could become that would help, and Light was getting worried. Even a distraction as large as they had created would only hold so long. He had to think of something. “Right, let’s attack the weakest points first and go from there,” he decided. He pulled his Lightblade and started chopping up the chains, bolts, and sections of floor that secured the safe. *At least this stuff isn’t DTR 10 so I can get through it. The door must have been magically reinforced, or just some sort of material they’ve invented with a maximum TR. There we go.*

“Okay, it’s free,” Sinjorino told him. “Now what?”

“You take too long!” bellowed Olaph, stomping into the room. He was hunched a bit to fit but put his massive arms around the safe and hefted it.

“You can’t lift-” Light started to say, but Olaph managed it just fine, pulling it out of the room and straightening up again. “I guess you can.”

“Bigger creatures do quadruple their lift,” Sinjorino reminded him. “But can we really just carry it out of here?”

“We just need to get it outside,” Light replied. “We can signal Paige and that demon to come pick it up. Oh well, at least I did use the spell so the XP loss wasn’t a total waste.”

“Grab me shiny and let’s go!” Olaph commanded, starting down the hallway.

“I believe he’s going to be very embarrassed when he comes back to himself,” Sinjorino remarked.

“Yes. He’ll probably donate anything we get him to the church.” But he grabbed another gold bar anyway.

To make their journey easier Light placed the disguise spell on all of them with his spell aura, turning all of them into what looked like devils. Olaph, of course, then became a devil that was twice as large, in other words a demon prince, as he had started that way. Anyone talking to them would realize they weren’t speaking the demon tongue, but demons had a pretty rigid hierarchy. Any that saw them simply bowed and hoped the “prince” wouldn’t single them out or start blaming them or ask why they were not out right now defending the place. The fact that they were carrying a safe around was not to be questioned, a price could do what they wanted. Of course when it was all over and any witnesses were questioned about *why* they didn’t question what was obviously a fake demon roaming the halls, those demons learned the meaning of the phrase “dammed if you do and damned if you don’t.”

And so the group made it outside without any more combat and Light teleported back to Paige.

“Quick,” he shouted, completely forgetting he was now a devil. “Let’s go! Where’s Malfeasaceen? We need to get going the safe is huge I couldn’t use the spell it was too big.”

“And you are?” Paige asked, wondering if this was some trick by Malfeasaceen who had healed themselves up and come back to try again. Her arms came up again, ready to attack if that was her command.

“It’s me, Light! Oh, right...” He dropped the spell. “Come on, where did they get to?”

“They betrayed us, wanted the dual casting technique to take back to their lord. Thought they could threaten me because I was at such a high penalty. I drove them off with the arms.”

“Drove them off? Betrayal? How are we going to get this safe back now?”

Paige looked him over. He *seemed* to be the correct guy. He had the two swords, he was dressed the same. Her magic sense would be a total -3 penalty so hardly worth bothering to try and sense if he

was now disguised as Light but she made an effort. She calculated a 5, hardly enough to know if she herself was magical or not. "How can I tell you're not the demon?" she asked.

"Paige, it's me. I used the disguise spell because Olaph is carrying the safe because we couldn't move it any other way. We need to get out of here."

"Prove it."

"Fine, take one of the swords."

She shuffled closer to him, and grabbed one at random. It was the Lightblade and she pulled it out, becoming light. *I guess unless they went and somehow got his swords away from him, this is the real Light.* "Fine, I believe you." She set the blade down so he could pick it up again and put it away.

"Great, what are we going to do? Can you maybe fly it out with telekinetic magic?"

"Maybe, I'd have to drop them though." She pointed to the giant stone creatures still attacking the place. "Hey, get us down there I've got an idea. At the very back, mind." She held out a hand and he looked at her like she was crazy, then down at the scene below.

"Okay..." They teleported down there with a 15 Mercury check, and Paige ran up to the nearest one.

"Pick us both up and run to the other side of the castle!" she yelled. Naturally there was no way the thing could hear her over the battle that was still going on but it was magic, so it turned and followed her directions. She directed it to pick up the safe, Olaph and all, as well as Sinjorino who all pretty much fit in one hand. It then sped away from the scene, the others vanishing as she got out of sight range so the attack was over. Meanwhile Sinjorino was calling up Dean for ideas getting them and this safe back to the base. He said he would come up with something and to keep going.

So that's what they did.

Chapter 26
Loose Ends
Where: Dean's building
When: Some time later

Quest Completed
Find the Ritual

You have escaped the castle with the ritual.
At least, sort of. How you actually get to it is your own problem.
You're not getting a quest for it, even though it's a tough nut to crack.
Don't blow yourselves up!

All participants receive 6.82 XP

"Er," Paige wondered as everyone stared at the box, "what exactly does it mean blow ourselves up?"

"I can take a look," Dean assured them. "I wasn't just going to start poking it in any case. You don't live as long as I do without learning a bit of caution."

The group was back at Dean's place, having gotten the safe back there somehow between chapters.

"It was crazy getting that safe back here!" Olaph told him after becoming himself again. "Did you see me lifting it? I was so strong!"

"I concur, I can't believe we managed it," Sinjorino agreed.

"It was touch and go," Light added. "But I had every confidence in us."

"Sorry for the way I was acting," Olaph apologized. "It's strange, I really do become the creature I look like. I could feel my REASON draining away when I changed. Life became more simple, could I ignore something, smack it, or eat it? Thank goodness you were all there to keep me on track."

"Of course, of course, nothing to it."

"I have to tell you about your employee or whatever that devil was," Paige told Dean. "Who betrayed us, by the way. He wanted the secret of our dual casting. Naturally I smacked him to within an inch of his life instead. He ran away, crying back to his master to protect him from you. I suggest hunting him down as a warning to the others."

"Demons," Dean mused while shaking his head. "They never learn. Sure, I'll want a full report but for now let's tackle this safe!"

"So it looks fairly complicated inside," Dean told them, moving his head this way and that. "Oh, interesting. Yes, there's a single thing inside it, a book I think. The walls are basically just

explosives. The door- that's funny. That runs over to- But why is that connected to- But then only three- Is it the order? But then which one- that can't be right?"

"Strange," remarked Sinjorino. "Were Dean a machine I would posit he had slipped a cog somewhere. He seems unable to complete a full thought suddenly."

"What is he even doing?" Paige asked. "He looks ridiculous, bobbing his head this way and that. Is he drunk?"

"Oh, sorry," Dean replied, blinking and coming back to the group. "It's a seer technique, it allows one to see inside things. You know, see if there's a worm in your apple before you bite it, or see if a garbage can has anything interesting inside before you open the lid."

"The apple thing I can understand," Light agreed. "But you do check garbage cans often?"

"You'd be surprised what you can find in the garbage," he said with a knowing wink. No one knew why. "Now, for the safe. It looks like opening the door improperly, or removing it as I could do in a number of ways, will set off the numerous explosives inside it. But what is 'properly?' Good question! I think one dial is used which sets a mechanism allowing the second and third dials to be used which must be done simultaneously. The fourth dial is a dummy. Doing anything with it I think sets off the explosives at once. But I could be wrong."

"How can we know for sure?" Sinjorino asked.

"One second." He touched the safe and concentrated. "Ah, bad news. It hasn't been opened in the last one hundred years. I can enhance myself and raise my chances of calculating a 16 or higher but without that we're stuck. We'd have to try something else."

"How much magic do you know?" Light asked. "You know where it is inside the safe. You could use a retrieval spell to get it."

He nodded thoughtfully. "I could. Sets off the bombs but I could put the safe someplace... safe. If far enough away I would have little to fear from even the most mighty of explosions!"

"There is a mechanical switch near the book?" Sinjorino asked.

He nodded.

"How complex. The maker really wanted this item to be destroyed if the safe was tampered with."

"Looks that way."

"So I can't just cast the unlocking spell a few times?" Paige asked. "I know that one."

"And why does a fine, upstanding young elf, such as yourself, know a breaking and entering spell anyway?" Light wondered, tilting his head and looking confused. "You used it before at the gate and I didn't think anything of it, but not under that stress it now occurs to me to wonder."

She got a little flustered. "Look, sometimes things, you know, they need to not be locked anymore! That's all."

"That's not an answer."

She ignored him. "Can I use the spell or not?"

"I wouldn't recommend it," Dean decided. "It isn't exactly a lock keeping the door shut. It's more like a puzzle in the shape of a lock. Moving the handles with the numbers in the right positions slides various rods back and forth. You may even need to push the first lever back into the original position after pushing the second and third ones. I would have to study it in more detail. The unlock spell acts as a phantom key and can move a mechanism but it can't know how to move this mechanism to avoid blowing us up."

"Cut in from the side?" Olaph suggested.

He shook his head. "The book is at the center, no going in from the side and just removing the explosive. Let me check my skills real quick. I just have so many," he announced without the faintest trace of humility, "even I can't remember them all. I used to carry a small notebook around to refresh my memory but as we have The System now..." He started flicking a finger in the air, clearly accessing The System to see his skill ratings. "The problem is it's mechanical. Easy for alchemy skills to peel

back the sides of the safe but I don't want to disturb it and set the explosive off. No circle or ward is going to help. In theory I could stop time, preventing the explosive from triggering, but not for very long. Probably not long enough to tear the thing apart, get the book out, and get away. Freezing it doesn't help, setting it on fire is the opposite of what we want. Soul wielder techniques are right out. Spirit energist stuff is out. My spirit projection is useless, the problem is most powers are big and flashy. We want the opposite of that this time. Though moving the thing didn't set off the explosives, maybe they don't even work anymore? But the book is in there pretty tightly, it wouldn't jostle around. They really went too far in making sure it would be blown up. Every square centimeter of that safe is packed with explosives. It's crazy, I wish you should see it as I do."

"If we have a method let's try it," Light announced. "You know the spell to summon an object, let's just use it. I'm sure we can find a place around here that could use a good blowing up."

"Yeah, I suppose you're right. One second." He put a hand into a very old looking pouch at his side, pulling a small piece of paper from it which he slapped onto the safe. It vanished. "BRB." He vanished.

"Birb?" Paige asked.

"Be right back," Sinjorino informed her. "It doesn't actually work in the modern tongue, it's an English abbreviation."

"Ah." *Must be an old language.*

The group didn't have to wait long, Dean reappeared with the book. In the meantime Paige had been writing up her encounter with the demon as there was a desk with paper and pens in the room.

"Ah, you got it out already," Light announced. "I figured you would leave the safe somewhere and just use the spell back here where it was safe. Where did you take it, anyway?"

"Purgatory," he told him, handing the book over. "Figured I might as well go someplace I can be sure nothing will be harmed, and then went far away from any blast zone. You should have seen it go up, it was pretty amazing. I hope this is what you need."

He flipped through it. Scowled. Closed it again. "See what you make of it," he told Paige, handing it to her.

"Me? I'm honored, oh great and wise master! Is this some kind of test for me?"

"No, you just know a spell I don't."

"Oh?" She cracked it open, looking over the unfamiliar words. "Oh. One second." She calculated a 15 on her Saturn check, casting the literacy spell over the course of 15 turns. "Got it." Looking over the beginning she nodded. "If these warnings are correct this is the ritual we need. It will summon a lesser primordial."

"Then we shall take our leave and head back to the Guild building," Light told everyone. He turned to Dean and stuck out his hand. "Dean, thank you for your help. You made all this much easier."

He shook it solemnly. "Certainly. Come back any time you happen to be in the neighborhood. Or just look for my locations in the real world, they can get a message to me. Good luck- oh and be sure to spread the word about the Helping People Company, problem solved or your money back!"

"One second, let me finish this!" Paige insisted.

And so the group headed back to the entrance of town and through a portal again back to Pyre. They then teleported back to the Guild building to report their findings.

At least it's mostly good news, Light thought to himself. Sammael is still locked away, and guarded. On the other hand it might have been better if he wasn't, and he had somehow put The System in place. That would be an answer, something we could understand and perhaps deal with. Now we have to call upon, and ask, a much more powerful and potentially dangerous being if they know anything about it. I hope the Guild really can put enough protections in place to make this safe. And can we even trust such a being? Well, I had my orders and followed them though. It's up to them now.

The group rested at the Guild for two days, as scholars poured over the book they had retrieved. Finally they were called to a meeting with one of the higher level mages so they could be told what was going on.

“That book you brought back was an interesting find,” he informed them after everyone sat down. Olaph recognized him from their last meeting as the facilitator, and he had introduced himself as Master Wizard Florplan. “While it does contain what we believe is the complete ritual, we’re having some summoners go over it, it also seems to be a complete record of the summoner’s investigation into these primordial beings. Basically an entire journal on the subject. Naturally they didn’t summon any lords, but the lesser primordials they did summon were more than happy to sing the praises of their betters. If that record can be trusted, the higher primordials are nearly unlimited in their capacity for magic, and able to change their home reality of Primoris at a whim. Thankfully, their servants, the ones we would be summoning, are far more limited. They have no magical or supernatural abilities at all. Makes one wonder why they exist at all, if they can’t really do anything. But they must have some purpose there, the writer never figured it out though. Problem is, summoning them here doesn’t get rid of the chaos that clings to them, making their intrusion into our plane a danger, but one we can guard against. The important thing is they’re willing to talk with us, according to this, and they’re sure to know what’s going on in their own realm. Did they get The System too? Did they cause it somehow? Do they not even know? Hopefully we can persuade them to answer, as I doubt we could force the issue. Even without active powers they’re not to be underestimated.”

“So what do you need from us?” Light asked him.

“At the moment, not a lot,” he admitted. “The ritual seems to require a lot of odd objects, and we’re having some lower ranked people track them down. The summoners say the ritual doesn’t exactly need all of them, but the more we find the less effort they’ll need to do the actual summoning. Meanwhile we’ll find a place we can secure far from any inhabited area to do the actual ritual in. You don’t have to be there, technically your part in all this is complete. Your group did their job by checking on Sammael and getting the ritual. You deserve some time off. You can attend if you want, of course, we won’t turn down help in case something goes wrong. You already know we’re going to do it, so that’s less people we have to keep track of for security reasons. But it will be... an experience, so make sure you’re prepared before you say yes.”

The group shared a look. “I’d like to see it through,” Paige spoke up. “I mean we did put in the effort, shame if we just walked away now.”

“I feel the same way,” Olaph agreed. “The church is going to need to know what the being we summon says. And I can become a variety of things thanks to my new abilities, so I won’t be a liability. I’m still the best choice for it.”

“I do find this group dynamic pleasing,” Sinjorino admitted when everyone looked over at them. “Even if I am not on a specific mission and thus, not being paid by the Guild, I would not turn down sticking with the group. If you will have me of course.”

“I don’t mind having you around,” Light told them. “Say, that does remind me. We should stop by the accounting department and get paid. Return or negotiate for the stuff we borrowed. The ring didn’t actually come in handy because we didn’t actually go into any tunnels looking for Sammael. We discovered the dual casting technique. Shoot, that’s another thing we need to do, submit formal paperwork about that and demonstrate it for everyone.”

“See,” Wizard Florplan said with a chuckle, “sounds like you have plenty to do until we’re ready. It could be weeks before we track some of this junk down, and properly secure a site. If you say you do want to attend I’ll make sure we don’t start without you. We can get you a message one way or another so don’t feel you need to stay here, either.”

“What sort of things *does* the ritual need?” Paige asked.

“Bizarre things, but I suppose that’s to be expected,” he answered. “Off the top of my head? A trumpet accidentally stepped on by an elephant, an alligator skin suitcase that transported an actual alligator at least 100km, a ladder once used by a snake to climb up at least 5 rungs. A wedding bouquet caught by a woman that never married, a weapon that only killed the person who owned it, the shoes of a man that lost his feet with the feet still inside, and a die that has been rolled 100 times and has never landed on the highest possible value. It went on and on. Basically they are to be ‘sprinkled’ that was the word used by the book if our translation is accurate, sprinkled about the site totally at random. Primoris is basically absolute chaos, and actually some scholars believe the original source of magic in our realm before the moon’s arrival. Leaks, if you will. Some speculate there’s a huge portal somewhere on the moon that leads there, and that’s why its arrival here did what it did. Hard to prove one way or the other though. In any case, the more chaotic and random the ritual the easier time they’ll have of it. Several summoners must walk around the space blindfolded and basically perform random parts of the ritual, again, at random. When the complete ritual has been done, in any order, it will work. And not before. Because it must be random it could take an hour or five hours. Tripping over the objects and running into each other, and the walls is encouraged.” He looked towards the Heavens with a sigh. “It’s going to be a nightmare.”

“Guess I can’t help with any of that after all,” Paige apologized. *But I could use my skill stealing spell if they had some apprentices I could drain, or if it relies on energy my accumulation spell. I could still be useful on the day of the attempt. Perhaps I should learn a spell to augment someone’s LUCk stat, or just boost their summoning skill in general?*

“Not to worry, that’s what apprentices are for!” he brightened.

“Oh, I remember,” she muttered.

“Put us down for it, in that case,” Light told him. “I too would like to see this through. We’ll go take care of some things and await your summons.”

He nodded. “Good, good, spend some XP in the meantime or whatever, and we’ll see you back here in a few weeks!”

So the group got paid, and headed back to the armory. Light returned the ring, Paige purchased the arms, Sinjorino asked for an extension on the bow and strings.

“It’s an interesting idea,” they explained. “But I might want to commission something more customized to myself. The ability to store the shots doesn’t seem that useful so I would rather have something that did more damage up front. I haven’t decided yet. But if I did decide to go that route, I would rather have my full financial resources to bring to bear on it, rather than have to try and return these.” *Not that I really tried it, to be honest. But again, I’m so quick with the bow my calculations from before showed it would hardly be worth it.*

“We know who took it out, you’re the only person that’s expressed interest,” said the person on duty. “You’re welcome to keep it for now.”

“Thank you.”

“So what is our plan from here?” Light asked. The group was seated back at the meeting room table. He had gotten a few people together and demonstrated the new dual casting technique, and the place was abuzz with people running around asking everyone what combinations they might try. So that had gone over well. “I’d actually like to go check in with my sister. She’s getting older and I’ve been away longer than I usually like. Shouldn’t take too long, just to see how she’s getting on.”

“She can’t be much older than you, though?” Sinjorino decided. “I calculate your age at around thirty.”

“Ah, yes, well...” He trailed off, suddenly interested in itching his hand and not meeting anyone’s eyes.

"I'd like to go back and check on Lily," Olaph spoke up. "See how her plant based powers are doing. We can just go there directly, it too shouldn't take long."

"Hey, that's a great idea!" Light decided. "I can easily take you back there! Sinjorino, Paige? Anywhere you would like to go?"

"I will stick with the group if that's okay?" Sinjorino asked.

"Sure thing! Paige?"

"Nah, I'll go with Olaph to see Lily, she was so excited to get her powers, I can't wait to see what she's done with them."

"You don't want to visit your parents, or anything?" he asked. "You've been away from home a long time."

She scowled at him.

"What?"

"Her parents are a sore point, don't you remember?" Olaph asked him. "She didn't want to talk about them."

"Did they hurt you?" Now it was his turn to scowl. "If they did, we can go beat the crap out of them for you. There must be some kind of permit we could get from the other elves, right? Make it all official?"

She snorted. "Nothing like that. I suppose I can tell you guys. My home life was rough, not because my parents didn't care about me, or abused me, but because of what they are. Think about something; you start your existence as an *angel*, right? You're up in Heaven, doing whatever it is angels get up to, and while planets and suns and life forms in the lower plains you're just doing your thing. Then humans come along. Curious little creatures, aren't they? Living and dying and basically hardly able to bang two rocks together to make fire. They're so cute! But give them a few hundred thousand years and suddenly they're making cities. Using magic. Probing the fundamental building blocks of reality."

"Even traveling to the moon and Mars," Sinjorino added. *Not to mention making beings, such as myself, in their own image. Goodness I miss skin.*

"Exactly. Then the chaos moon comes, and you have a chance to live among them. Most scoffed at the idea, of course. Become lesser? Become *mortal*? Perish the thought. But some had fallen in love with that life and decided to stay. It's a new existence for them, yes, but they didn't become *humans*, no, no, no, no, no, it's not that simple is it. They become *elves*. They didn't forget their origins, or the millions of years of existence that defined them before. They were not placed into baby's bodies and born, and grow up in this life. They just showed up, changed, and now they're stuck. They need to eat, sleep, use the chamber pot. You know, maybe it was a mistake wanting to remain here? But they can't go back, so they do what they can. Eventually, two decide to have a child. That child is an elf too, but one with no knowledge, no history. So you have parents that are a million years old or whatever and know the *theory* behind raising a kid, and here you have the non-theoretical kid. They're three. They know *nothing*. But they're curious about everything. Here's the point; how does a being that's lived for so long, experienced so much, even relate to that little kid?"

"Poorly, I'm guessing?" Olaph said as she seemed to be waiting for an answer.

"Very poorly. It's not that elves don't want to have kids. It's that, when an elf couple does, the community sees how poorly it goes! Oh, sure my parents thought *they* could do better. Nope. I'm sure they love me, in their way, but I see problems in the world, or I want to learn all about something, and they just say 'leave it for tomorrow, Paige. It'll still be there.' Or 'we've above that sort of thinking Paige, leave the humans to their little huts and digging around in the dirt.' Maybe they tried to connect with me, see things from my point of view, but I didn't notice. They infuriated me at every turn, because they just didn't know how to relate to me at all! They were never five. They never had to learn to walk, or what a spoon was, or how to conjugate verbs. So how could they teach me those things? I got out of there as quickly as I could once I could fend for myself. So yeah, I'm sure my parents are

just fine. Doing the same things they did ten, twenty, fifty years ago, in the same way. Noses in the air because they were once angels, thinking how superior they are to everybody else. Well, I wasn't. I was born here. I'm not better than any of you, but try telling them that. Maybe in fifty years I'll go visit, and they'll say 'oh, you weren't gone very long I hardly missed you' and I'll scream at them and turn right around. I don't know. But I'm not going back now. So, now you know."

There was a moment of silence as everyone absorbed this. Finally Light spoke up. "I guess there's downsides to living forever as well, huh? Something to think about, if one gets the opportunity. Anyway, thank you for telling us, Paige. I won't bring them up again. Except to tease you, in a good-natured way, of course."

"You better not!" she announced, but she was grinning a little.

Chapter 27

Doing What's Right

Where: ???

When: The next day

"You've screwed up somehow!" Paige announced gleefully, as the group looked around after their teleport. Light had told them he was aiming for outside the town of Merryhill so as to not spook anyone when they appeared from nowhere. The plan was simply to walk the rest of the way, and see how the town, and especially Lily, were doing. But they seemed to be in the wrong place, as while there was indeed a town in the distance it seemed to have a wall around it, something the town did not have while they were there.

"Impossible," Light scoffed. "It's magical teleportation. I've been here before, I simply need to specify to the magic where I want to go. It does the rest."

"So you're saying this wall went up in the time we've been gone? Pretty impressive, for a small town such as this. It must stretch for miles." She indicated the wall, and it did seem to cover an impressive amount of the countryside before them.

Sinjinorino zoomed in on it. "It's not actually a wall in the traditional sense," they remarked. "It's more a very thick hedge if what I'm seeing here is correct."

"Is there some reason to doubt what you're seeing?" Olaph asked.

"It could be some kind of magical illusion I suppose."

"There is that," he agreed. "Do we proceed?"

"You're the one that wanted to come check on the place, padre," Light told him. "Up to you."

"If something's happened, some kind of attack that prompted them to build such a thing the least we can do is offer aid. Let's go see what it's about."

So the group headed forward, and another surprise was in store for them. The wall was indeed simply the branches, trunks, and vines of various trees and bushes, with a break along the road. But what surprised them were the two guards standing inside the gate. They were both beastkin of course, one cat and one dog.

"Halt, state your business, stranger!" yelled the one on the left, with the cat ears.

"Too confrontational," said the dog eared one. "Maybe something like, 'can I help you gentlefolk?' We don't want to upset any merchants that come here. Please forgive him, he hasn't been a guard long. Pretend you've only just walked up to the gate, we haven't said anything yet, and... go!"

"Who goes there!?" shouted the cat. "Friend or foe?"

"Better," said the other, wiggling a hand. "If this was some kind of stage play. Who in their right mind would say anything but friend? Even if they planned to burn the town down, they wouldn't just tell us that. Then we wouldn't let them in." He tapped his head. "Think about it. Also, they're right there, they can probably hear you just fine. No need to shout, you can just ask them."

"Well, they're humans- two of them are. I have no idea how good their hearing is."

"We can hear you," Light told him. "What is all this?"

"I'm asking the questions here!"

“Sorry about him,” the other apologized. “Cat types are often seen as a bit lazy, so he’s just trying to fight against the stereotype. Welcome to Merryhill, do you mind if I ask what your business is?”

“While dog types, on the other hand, are sometimes far too trusting,” said the other, talking over Light as he started to answer. “But you never know with them. Sometimes it’s all tail wags and sniffing and making friends, other times it’s all bared teeth and lots of posturing. At least cats are consistent.”

“I’ve *never* sniffed anyone!” the other protested in a huff. “Not like cat types, licking their hands to wash their ears off.”

“I- I- I would never!”

“Oh, lick lick lick,” the dog mimed, washing his ears. “Gotta clean those ears.”

“At least I do clean myself on occasion.”

“I bathe regularly!”

“Regularly isn’t on a per month basis you know.”

“Now listen here-”

“Gentleman, please!” Light finally broke in loudly. “If you could turn your attention back to us? We could have taken over your town in the time your argument finally wore down by the sounds of it.” They both sheepishly turned back to him. “That’s better. Now, what happened here? Why this gate, and this strange wall? We were here not that long ago and neither was here.”

“We’ve had to make some adjustments,” the canine one said with pride. “Can’t just have anyone coming in here and stealing our seeds now can we?”

“Seeds?” Paige asked.

“Lily must be doing well,” Olaph mused, relieved. She had an “ah!” moment and nodded.

“You know Lily?” the feline one asked suspiciously.

“I’m the one that opened up the beta skill for her, allowing her to work with plants. Bishop Olaph Perdita, at your service.”

The two looked him over.

“He dresses like a bishop,” the feline one said at last.

“And the name matches up,” the other agreed. “Three party members, one an elf. What’s your name, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Paige.”

“It’s them,” he decided with a nod. “I’ll open the gate.”

“Thank you,” Light told them, exasperated. “You’re really taking this seriously aren’t you?”

“We had to,” said the feline one. “Our standard of living shot up almost overnight. But we need Lily to stay safe so the town’s prosperity isn’t lost. We’re happy to export things but if word got out about exactly how we can now produce so much... Of course the wizard helps, even if they aren’t cheap.”

“Wizard?” Light asked.

“Some human with growing magic. You’ll meet him, I’m assuming you’re here to see Lily?”

“That’s right,” Olaph agreed. The gate swung open and the four entered.

“They’re always together. Along with the old herbalist. Just ask around the fields, you’ll find her.”

“Perhaps an escort?” the other offered.

“Oh come on, they’ll be fine. He’s a bishop, do you really think he’s going to steal our stuff? Besides our job is to guard the gate.”

He rolled his eyes. “Fine. Enjoy your stay.”

They all thanked him and entered the town, gate swinging shut behind them.

The town had clearly changed. Now that they were inside, they saw why the walls were so long. Fields stretched to the very walls, and it seemed most of the townspeople were out in them. People

were rushing to and fro with carts laden with various things, mostly crops of some kind. They seemed headed away from this gate and towards the opposite side of town.

"I suppose if they're exporting things now," Sinjorino decided, "it makes sense to bring them to the larger city of Citadel for distribution. That road would begin opposite our current position at the far end of town. Strange to see such bounty however, in so short a time. Lily is only one small girl, after all, she couldn't have caused so much growth just by herself, could she? I suppose once we find our wayward cinnamon bun we can ask her."

"Lily isn't a bun type she's a cat type," protested Paige. "Are you thinking of someone else?"

"It's just an expression, Paige."

"Oh, okay."

Lily wasn't terribly hard to find, she and both her parents were out in the field directing things, and the group walked past some weird looking plants to get to her. She squealed when she saw the group, and ran towards them, arms outstretched. Olaph put his arms out and Lily ran smack into... Paige and hugged her.

"You're back!" she announced.

"Yes we are," she replied with a laugh. "You've been busy!"

"Greetings, bishop," Rose said, her husband trailing behind. "And the others, of course."

"Mom, mom, the bishop is back!"

She laughed. "Yes, I see him standing there, honey. I take it you were successful in your mission?"

"We don't have all the answers yet," he admitted. "But at least we know what it isn't. But enough about that, what's all this?"

"The fruits of our labor, of course!" said Garlik with a grin.

Lily groaned. "Don't listen to him, come see! Ummm..." She looked around the field. "Let's start over there!" She ran off, yelling to follow her.

"Your first visit was a real blessing," Rose told Olaph. "Our daughter has never been happier, and now the whole town is excited and productive again. Go on and see what she has to show you."

Olaph, trying hard not to think impure thoughts again about that tail that was swishing back and forth again nodded. "I do see the whole place is certainly more lively than when we came the first time. All this has come from her?"

"Not exactly," Garlik answered. "We've- that is to say the town- has hired a wizard to help grow these quantities. Lily makes the plants and grows a few as a trial, then we-"

"Come on dad, talk later!" Lily shouted.

"Come along, I'll tell you as we go." He shook his head and started after her.

"What are these huge white balls?" Paige asked, finally getting a word in. She was pointing at rows and rows of plants with delicate looking branches each with a white ball about the size of a head at the end.

"Cotton," Rose answered simply. The others stared at her, and she nodded with a smile.

"Historically, the individual boll resulted in a yield ten times smaller than I am seeing here," Sinjorino remarked. "Lily managed to increase yields this much in so short a time?"

"She says she just made a plant that just loves making cotton. I think others down the line are even bigger. You can only do so much per generation, you see. But as she can grow ten generations of a plant in a few days, it works out."

"Finally, here, pick one of these and open it!" Lily had them stopping in front of a large tree with a strange fruit on it. It was sort of banana shaped, not that anyone in Pyre except certain immortals or semi-immortals like Sinjorino knew what a banana was. It was far bigger than a banana though, but still a bright yellow. "You have to try it!"

Light reached up and grabbed one, easily peeling it and looking inside. It looked like a lemon slice inside and he easily separated the sections and handed one out. Even to Sinjorino, who refused with a wave of their hand.

“This is so yummy!” Paige exclaimed after popping it in her mouth.

“It’s like a chewy lemonade,” Light agreed.

“Did you make a sweet lemon?” Olaph asked.

“I sure did!” Lily agreed with a giggle. “And I made them easier to open. We have oranges over there,” she pointed, “I did the same thing to. I like oranges but peeling them and getting that yucky white stuff off was a pain. So I made it go away. And it worked!”

Garlik nodded. “We’ve grown several generations of the seeds, her changes seem stable. The ripened fruit is easier to open and the lemons are much sweeter than the normal variety, as you can see.”

“This is great,” Olaph praised. “What else have you come up with?”

“Have you ever heard of chocolate?”

“You didn’t?” Sinjorino gasped.

“Come see!” She skipped off towards another part of the field.

“If I see a tree that just grows chocolate bars...” they threatened.

“What’s chocolate?” Paige asked, confused. *They don’t eat, so why the interest?*

“It’s... complicated,” they answered. “It’s a process more than anything. It was originally a bean that was processed in various ways to produce a food additive for cakes, cookies, drinks, or with added sugar and fats eaten by itself. The old world consumed tons of the stuff every year, sadly for organics it all but vanished with the coming of the moon. It wasn’t grown much on this continent, conditions weren’t right for it. To think it could come back, but how?”

“A little help, or actually a lot of help,” Rose admitted. “Our resident herbalist, Cali, put in a discrete inquiry to the Guild, some alchemist contact she knows named Abigale. They in turn asked around and came here with a wizard that had gotten access to that beta area you spoke of, Light.”

“Okay?” Light seemed confused as to where this was going.

“Well, alchemists are a pretty long lived bunch if you didn’t know, at least the ones that make it to master status can be anyway, and a few of them survived the breaking and to the modern day. So they kept the taste of chocolate alive among themselves at least. But that’s just turning things into chocolate, like say a potato. Nobody else could make it because the plants were lost. But now, maybe...”

“See?” Lily pointed, and there before them was a strange looking bush. The “fruits” of the bush were green and yellow “pods” that hung off the branches. “This is my latest attempt.”

“Attempt?” Olaph asked. “They seem healthy to me.”

“It’s not that,” she explained. “It’s the taste. I just can’t get it!”

“What she means is,” Rose took over, “that the processing plays a huge role in the end product. We’re pretty sure we’ve got the process right but the end product isn’t quite the same as what the alchemists make. We’re getting there.”

“I recall the process,” Sinjorino told them. “I could go over it with you, make sure you’re not doing anything wrong.”

“That would be wonderful!” she agreed. “Thank you.”

“So you created this plant basically from scratch?” Paige asked.

“Yup!” she agreed with a grin. “I started with a bush that was pretty worthless, and made it grow these pods with the cocoa inside. We wanted to get as close to the original plant as possible before making improvements. Each time we would harvest the pods, save some of the seeds, and process the rest. Then I would take the seeds, make them grow, and try to give them different qualities to see what stuck. I can’t wait to bake cookies with chocolate I grew myself. Abigale brought some, they’re soooo yummy!”

"I bet they are," she agreed.

"It was the wizard, well, apprentice really, Sherlock Gnomes, that suggested we put up the wall. He was kind enough to grow the barrier around the town after Lily prepped it with seeds. He's been working with us ever since, using his growing spell to bring an entire field to readiness in an hour. We've been bringing in fertilizer like crazy, so that our fields can keep up the pace, but that's neither here nor there. The point was, he said we should protect our interests until more people like Lily are out in the world."

"It's unfortunate," Rose agreed sadly. "Just growing the cotton we do, makes us a target to other places that will now see their revenue dip as supply goes up. They could retaliate against us, and that would be horrible. Or steal our seeds, which would be fine but we're not quite ready to let them out yet. Naturally we would rather sell them to interested parties and they can grow their own."

"I agree," Light said with a nod. "I think I know that guy. Good kid. As long as he's getting paid the usual wage per spell he'll be a Guild member in no time."

"Membership being obscenely expensive," Paige told them.

"So he's said," Garlik mused. "He was super excited that his master insisting he research a spell opened up the beta area. Sort of got the last laugh, as it were. This gave him a chance to capitalize on it before others could use the same spell and--"

"Boring!" Lily announced. "Let's go look at some more of my plants!"

So the group got the full tour. Lily's plants were created with ease of harvest in mind, like the cotton being bigger. She had made a carrot bush, where the carrots actually grew off the branches and could just be plucked off, and a catnip bush too, that she wasn't actually allowed near until she was older. They met Sherlock in the field, busy with growing magic so they didn't disturb him for long, and the herbalist at her shop, as she didn't get out much due to her age. She was a bun type, and Lily introduced her.

"This is Cali Flower," she told them. "She's been teaching me a lot about plants in general for my other skills, like seed finding and identifying plants."

Cali was clearly an elder in the village. She stood slowly from the stool she was sitting on, grinding up leaves. Her face was lined and her ears drooped a bit, but she greeted them easily enough. Light introduced the group, and she peered up at Olaph.

"Nice to meet you all. So you're the mysterious bishop that changed the life of our little Lily and thus our village? Never really seen one 'out in the wild' if you will. Most high ranking members of the church tend to their flocks at home."

"Mine was a special case," he admitted. "And I'm not that mysterious, just a normal bishop, honest. Thanks for taking care of Lily, I'm glad she found someone so knowledgeable to help her out. I'm sure her XP expenditure per week is much higher because of you."

"Strange way of complimenting someone, but I do find I understand it, thanks to the strange world we live in now. And it was really no bother. All my children are grown and gone, and none wanted to follow in the footsteps of their old mom. So I had no young person to perhaps leave my shop to when I'm gone. Now maybe I do. She's hard to keep up with but she's reignited my own love of the craft. I feel like a bun half my age. Sometimes."

"Come now, you can't be that old!"

"Perhaps, perhaps. It's the story of my life you know. Along comes this bright eyed young woman, eager to learn and able to do things with plants I never could. I won't be around long enough to impart all my wisdom to her. Or I suppose in the modern way of saying things, 'raise her skill levels as much as I could with teaching checks.' Still, one does what one can with the time one is given."

"Yes, I suppose that's all one can do," Light agreed slowly. "You're not ill, I hope?"

"Just old. Something it seems half of you won't understand." She looked at the remnant and elf with envy in her eyes.

“Yes.” He looked troubled for a second and turned to Lily. “Lily, why don’t you continue the tour with the others? I’d like to speak to Mrs. Flower about something. But you’ll just be bored, so I’ll come find you in a few minutes.”

“Okay.” She and the others, minus Paige, said their goodbyes and left the shop. Paige leaned against the wall and folded her arms against her chest, looking at Light quizzically.

“Er, you can go with them, you know?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Now I want to stay even more. You’re acting weird, oh master mine, I intend to figure out why. What is it about Mrs. Flower here you needed to rush everyone out of here?”

“Please, call me Cali,” Cali told them, but was ignored.

“I could insist.”

“But could you back it up with anything? I may just shadowing you but I report strange behavior on your part to the Guild and I’m sure someone-”

“Okay, okay, you can stay.”

“Now what is all this about?” Cali demanded. “I won’t have you two falling out, in my shop no less, over me!”

Light stared at Paige a moment longer, who had a “I dare you” expression on her face but with a sigh he turned back to Cali. “She really seems to like you.”

“She’s been a joy to teach. Never had such a student, we get along well. But what of it?”

“It would be a real tragedy for her to lose you, when you were just starting to see what she can do. How serious is it, may I ask?”

“Like I say, I’m not sick. My plants keep me healthy enough, but every day it gets a little bit harder. Why? What’s all the mystery here?”

He glanced at Paige again and seemed to make up his mind. “What if I offered you, off the record, the chance to turn the clock back a little bit. Say twenty years? No charge. Would you take me up on it?” *Because I doubt you could afford it.*

Paige calculated a 16 on her REASON check, and her eyes widened. “Oh,” she breathed, nodding. “I get it. That’s why you said your sister was getting older. What, did she refuse you? How old are you, exactly?”

Cali looked between them, Light now looking embarrassed and Paige triumphant. “What am I missing here?”

“This.” She called up The System and scrolled through, finally spinning the box for Cali to look at.

Reverse Age

Planet: Saturn

Grade: 8 Resist: RES

DIF: 13 Duration: C

Range: M Casting time: 8

Reverse: Advance Age

Enhancer: A white hair.

Cause the target’s age to rapidly reverse. Each turn, starting the action when the spell takes effect, the target becomes up to HDL [Saturn] years younger (you can specify a maximum to which the age is reversed). This aging is both physical and mental, though it doesn’t affect skills or memories. An older individual may recover physically from the signs of age, but may eventually lose stats to youthfulness. While the target retains everything they have learned in their life, their maturity and ability to act on their knowledge may be impaired by youth.

“I didn’t know you could do that,” Cali admitted. “You’re both magic users then, I take it?”

“We are,” Paige admitted. “You took the spell, didn’t you?” She was grinning.

“Yes,” he admitted with a sigh. “About three days after The System showed up. Most in the Guild were running around like the world was ending again but I took a peak into what spells I could get for free before it went away again, or what not.”

“And this is one of the restricted ones, isn’t it?”

He nodded. “Along with the immortality spell, yes. Oddly anything destructive I couldn’t purchase, like the elemental attack spells, but whatever decided which spells to allow decided this one was just fine. I would have been a fool not to take it. Naturally anyone that saw me knew what I had done, but they had bigger concerns and the way I see it, if the world itself is offering me an opportunity to halve my age, why shouldn’t I take it?” *And I’ll keep doing it too. Every year, one year back. Why not?*

“And you’re offering it to me?” Cali asked.

“If you want it. I should charge you the normal spell-casting rate, and if it gets out I used it on you there would probably be consequences for me. Minor ones. Even if I did charge, to keep it somewhat ‘above board’ at the same time I’m not taking you back to your twenties or anything. Think of it as a small bonus in thanks for helping out Lily. They would sigh, and say I should know better, but this is the reality we live in now and they’re going to have to accept it. So I’m willing to take the risk. Besides,” he looked at Paige, “there are enough beings in the world, like elves, that will never need the spell so giving you a few extra years? What’s the harm, really?”

“Oh. *Oh!* I see how it is,” Paige announced with only half seriousness. “What was it you yourself said, in this very town I believe it was? That I should stop throwing magic around? And now here we come full circle, because you’re about to do the same. And with far greater repercussions than I did. I just let a little girl fly around for a bit and made her an angel statue. You? This?” She gestured at Cali and clicked her tongue.

“That was you showing off. This is different, this is important.”

“Raising Lily’s spirits was important. I wasn’t just showing off as you say.”

“Please, please, let me think a moment, stop arguing!” Cali snapped. “They won’t come after me?”

“What are they going to do, cast an aging spell on you?” Paige wondered. “No one would spend the XP on that spell. Even to cast from writings. You didn’t ask for it, you would be fine.”

Light glared but agreed. “She’s right. They wouldn’t come after you.”

“I would be a fool to say no then, wouldn’t I?”

A moment later both exited the shop, Paige looking smug.

“Lawbreaker,” she teased.

“Yes, well, I can be when I want,” he countered. “Maybe I’m just balancing the scales a little bit. Races like yours, people like Sinjorino, it’s not exactly fair some get to live so long and others don’t, even if they’re deserving of it. Besides it’s just another 20 years of work I’ve given her, she didn’t strike me as the type to retire just like that. I did it for Lily. It’s more a curse than anything, if you think of it like that.”

“Huh...” She had just the hint of a smile on her face. *Are you trying to convince me, or yourself?*

Chapter 28

Light's foe

Where: Merryhill

When: Just after lunch

The group stayed for lunch, hosted by Lily's family, and left town again by the gate. The others had instantly picked up on Paige's smugness and asked what had happened, so Light told them. Paige was gleefully willing to throw her master under the cart, but he didn't want any embellishment which just made her pout a little. There would have been no hiding it, Cali was standing straighter, walking faster, and her ears were perkier but really only someone close to her would notice. Twenty years when you were over 80 wasn't the same as twenty years when you were thirty, after all. So he fessed up, and told them about using the spell both on her and himself, a few months earlier. This led to an interesting discussion at lunch.

"You know the afterlife exists," Sinjorino mused. "Why deny yourself that reward? As an inorganic myself I do not believe I will be eligible for entry upon my final shutdown, so I can see myself struggling to find replacement parts as mine wear out because I do not crave oblivion. I have lasted this long after all, and intend to continue as was my original mandate. But you are different. Please explain?"

"It's like this," Light told them. "Either there is a destiny or there is not. Let's take the destiny track first; I am fated to die at a certain time, and nothing I do will prevent that. Now, in the case of me dying say 85 years after my birth, so be it. But I would rather spend each day young and hale and meet my destiny with my full faculties instead of age dragging me down day by day. The end result is the same, so who cares? Now let's say my destiny is to die three hundred years from now. Why, then I *must* continue to use this spell, as that is the Lord's plan for me, to reach that day. How can I not? I may not be as devout as Olaph here, but I would never seek to go against the Lord's plan. On the other hand, perhaps there is no destiny. Fine and good. Each choice is my own and I end up wherever. I'm not immortal, even Paige isn't immortal, simply long lived. All of us will one day be dust, or rust, in certain cases."

"My alloys will not simply *rust*, but I take your meaning," Sinjorino assured him.

"Of course. So I have not avoided the afterlife, simply postponed it. Doing so for the right reasons? I don't think that will be held against me. If I strive to bring justice to the world rather than simply acquire power for my own ends, I don't think any in Heaven would speak against me. I mean, if that's the case consider poor Dean! He has thousands of years on me today. What would they do with him, I wonder? Can you imagine the weight of a soul that has done so much? The Lord may have shortened our lifespans from the original people, the progenitors, but even some of them still live today. We have the tools to make our lives longer, if the Lord didn't want that to happen they shouldn't have been given to us."

"I just hope they were not put there simply to tempt you," Olaph mused.

"If Heaven is going to reject me in a thousand years because I choose to stay here and do good in the world, rather than simply giving up and hoping it turned out okay, I don't think I would want to go there anyway."

"Hear, hear!" Paige agreed. "That's telling them!"

“A long life by itself is not sinful,” Olaph agreed. “I do caution you to not fall into sin because of it, when you would not have been tempted, living after your appointed time.”

“Can we go back to talking about plants?” Lily asked. “You guys are even depressing me, and I’m only ten.”

The group was now about as far away as they had been to enter the village, and joined hands to be whisked by Light to where his sister was living.

“Ah, just as I remember it,” he remarked. “Welcome to the town of Summersky!”

As before, Light had brought them a fair distance from the town itself, so really all they could see was the wall surrounding it, so no one was that impressed. Despite the name of the town being Summersky the place was cloaked in shadow, rain clouds hovered overhead blotting out the sun and making the place look downright gloomy. They got closer and the guards at the gate simply looked them over and didn’t say anything as they went past. Olaph, on the other hand, scowled at the wall as he walked past it.

“What’s the problem padre?” Light asked him.

“These walls, seeing Merryhill suddenly sprout them made me think of it. Hard to expand a city that has walls around it. I understand there are dangers in the world, monster attacks and such, but where are new families going to go? Smaller towns with no protections? There must be a better way than just throwing a bunch of stone on top of itself and hoping for the best.”

“In the past, in stories relating to situations like ours where wandering monsters are a threat, many times how towns are kept safe is somewhat glossed over,” Sinjorino informed him. “Either monsters simply being intelligent enough to know towns are a thing and to avoid where people who might be strong enough to kill them are, or they don’t mention it at all despite it clearly being a threat.”

“That new wall around Merryhill would be easy enough to move though,” Paige protested. “It just being plants. They can use magic to move them, or simply cut it down and plant more in a single day to expand. I think that’s really the way to go. These stone walls would be harder to move.”

“Our population isn’t really growing that fast either,” Light remarked. “Given how expensive magic is, very few people can afford a magic user on hand during labor. Oh sure there are people like Cali, midwives and such, but having a child is still a risk. Plus with so many species it’s not even guaranteed you’ll be able to have a child with the person you fall in love with.”

“Not to mention those filthy homosexuals!” Olaph spat.

Everyone stopped dead and gaped at him. Light went for his Lightblade, wondering if Olaph had been replaced by some kind of impostor but stopped short of drawing it. *Maybe he’s been possessed and is goading us into attacking him. I have to be careful here...*

“I was under the impression the church had changed its stance in that regard thousands of years ago!” protested Sinjorino. “Am I witness to a regression of belief to before the-”

Olaph burst out laughing. “The looks on your faces! Not yours, Sinjorino, but you two. Wow, did I get you good! Of course the Lord doesn’t care who you love, never did! Even seeing them as strictly male is an outdated concept that tried to *limit* a being without limits. Wow I had you going didn’t I?”

“It was just the way you said it,” Light admitted, taking his hand off the sword, “more than anything. You really did have me convinced. It was just so out of nowhere, completely against the current teaching of the church I had no idea how to respond.”

“Seeing you as a practical joker, I just can’t do it,” Paige agreed. “Please don’t do that again, even I can have a heart attack.”

“Hey, even I can enjoy a good joke,” he protested. “Okay, so there are three nuns in a rowboat, and the first nun says to the second...”

His joking came to an end as Light led them to a specific house that he said belonged to his sister and opened the gate, inviting them inside. The yard was mostly flowers, grass long ago being seen for the waste of resources it was and discouraged, so small rocks, sand raked into decorative patterns, and just letting it grow wild was the most common. Paige thought it looked quite pretty, and made a mental note to remark upon it if she got the chance. Clearly it was not just random, most of these had been planted in a specific spot and kept free from weeds, so it was maintained not just left to grow. Also the path of stone to the door being taken care of showed purpose, so people didn't have to step around the flowers. (Or trample them) Light knocked on the door, but looked confused as a masculine voice called for them to come in.

"I don't think she's seeing anyone," he remarked, opening the door. "Maybe a neighbor stopped by? Reclina, it's me Light!" he called into the house. "Brought some co-workers, thought I would come check on you."

"Come on in," said the same deep voice. "We've been expecting you."

This really confused him, and he looked back at the others, who shrugged. They stepped into the house and Olaph, being last, closed the door. Light headed towards the living room and Olaph's eyebrows rose as he went for his sword again after seeing what was there. The three crowded around to see what he was reacting to.

"Plenty of room," said the vampire, lightly caressing the neck of the tied up woman laying on couch. "Have a seat."

"I actually expected you twenty minutes ago," said the other vampire, lounging on a chair nearby and consulting a watch with a flick of his wrist. "What, did you stop for gas on the way in?"

The two creatures, one next to each vampire, hunched over so they could fit into the room, showed their claws as their hands flexed. They had wings, fangs, and were muscled for days but didn't look like anything anyone in the group had ever seen. They were murder machines, plain and simple, and it looked like they had been simply designed for that very purpose, not born to a loving mother. They wanted *blood*, and they wanted it *now*. The vampires had on the same outfit, something resembling a suit, and were typical of the species. Pale, both of face and hair, with red eyes and long fangs. Olaph wasn't sure he would be able to tell the two apart.

"Reclina!" Light yelled, about to pull his sword out. She wiggled a little but was bound and gagged, and the vampire was of course right there. "What have you done, vampire?!"

"I tied her up," said the vampire holding her. "And if you don't give me the deed to the ranch I'll throw her on the railroad track."

"...What?"

"It's a song reference," Sinjorino told him. "Is this some kind of joke? Is someone named Jones going to walk in here and seemingly save her?"

"Ah, an old pleasure model if I don't miss my guess?" said the other vampire, looking them over. "Looking a bit worse for wear now, though. Strange to hear anyone get my references, but there you are."

"Who is this?" Paige asked. "Seems you two have a history."

"I know... one of..." Light started to say. He was looking between the two vampires with a confused look on his face. "Okay, which of you... What?" Both looked identical, but with only a 9 on her magic sense check Paige couldn't tell much more than there was a lot of magic in the room currently.

"Him," said the one, pointing to the other.

"Or him," said the other, pointing to the other. "It makes no difference."

"Which you address. Go ahead and introduce me, Light."

"Some kind of illusion?" he asked. "To confuse us where you actually are? You'll burn just the same when I draw this sword."

“Are we that stupid?” asked the one to the other.

“I don’t think we are,” the other replied.

“Perhaps some context?” Olaph asked. “What’s our move here? Your sister is in danger...”

“Not sure. One of them is the real thing. My so called 2 point enemy weakness. Figures he would show up here, I haven’t seen him in a bit so he was overdue.”

“Only two points?” said the one on the left. “I’ll have to up my game if that’s the meager amount of threat The System assigns me.”

“But think of the extra work on my part,” whined the one on the right. “It would mean showing up more regularly. Which means coming up with even more elaborate plans.”

“You’re right. It’s a balancing act.”

“What would it mean anyway?” Olaph asked, curious.

“What would what mean?” both asked at the same time. They grinned at each other.

“If you suddenly became more of a threat, would his status change? Would he gain another point to choose a background with?”

“What a fascinating line of inquiry!” Light yelled sarcastically. “Maybe you three would like to discuss it over tea. Oh that’s right they’re vampires, they drink blood! Get away. From. My sister.”

“You would like that, wouldn’t you?” asked the one holding her.

“Yes, that’s why I requested it!” *But I have to be careful, he could snap her neck or more likely slash it open before I can both get the sword out and get over there to stab him. And it won’t hurt him so much he couldn’t do so anyway.*

“It’s sort of cliché anyway,” Paige remarked. “I mean really, taking family members hostage? What is this, the 1400’s?”

“Sometimes, the old ways really are the best,” the one on the right assured her. “We got his attention, didn’t we?”

“Okay, I can accept that, but how did you get in here? Did she really invite you in?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know? Every restriction is simply a speed bump on my way to victory. Remember those, robot?”

“I do.”

Paige persisted. “How did you know he would even be coming? You said we were late...”

“Divination magic.”

“Are you going to introduce me or not?” the other one pouted. “Who is this anyway? You never traveled with anyone before and she keeps asking me stuff it’s starting to get on my nerves.”

“Ugh, fine!” Light agreed. “Everyone, one of these is Kevin.”

“I am not Kevin!” both roared.

“Well, no, you both can’t be,” he agreed. “But one of them is.”

“I left that name behind two thousand years ago!” the left one protested. “I am Noir Ciel!”

Light rolled his eyes. “Well, question magic tells me your name is Kevin. So that’s what I call you. I don’t care what you call yourself. I’ve been trying to get rid of him for years but he always runs away before I can finish the job. And now he’s decided to bother me here. Unbelievable.”

“Yes, you’ve meddled in my plans long enough, today that ends! I have taken everything into account. You cannot defeat me this time.”

“And this guy is for real?” Paige asked. “Who talks like that?”

Light sighed. “He’s a real vampire. Don’t underestimate him. But otherwise, I suppose he’s for real.”

“It’s true,” Kevin- Noir agreed. “Long have I existed in this state. My journey began soon after the chaos moon’s arrival in our solar system. I knew I had to do something drastic to survive the coming disasters and I figured, as long as there are humans or other animals to eat, being a vampire wouldn’t be so bad. And thus, I looked to find-”

“We don’t need your life story!” Light interrupted. “Are we fighting or not?”

“Little cramped in here,” Sinjorino remarked. *I suppose I could simply use martial arts, rather than my bow. Can those creatures hurt me? They all look geared towards drawing blood, but I have none.*

“That’s why I’ve prepared the back yard,” Noir told them. The one to the right stood up. “It shall be our sacred battleground. First the three of you will go. Then the one of me holding poor Reclina will go. Then you, Light, will go. Then I will follow, and we will have our fight. If you win, well, you can come back here and untie poor Reclina. You have my word I won’t harm her, after all I could have at any time.”

“As if I could believe that!”

“You would rather fight in here? A stray spell could easily hit her.”

Light looked around, clearly seeking some kind of escape. “Fine. I don’t know what you’re playing at with this illusion or whatever, but I’ll play along for now. Go on,” he said the others. “Sorry about this, padre. But thankfully you can defend yourself I think, the dungeon proved that.”

“Not to worry,” he assured Light. “The church places no restrictions on the eradication of the undead. We are even allowed to be gleeful about it. I shall take the opportunity.”

“We’ll see,” Noir grumbled. “Holy power is gone, if you hadn’t noticed. Not sure what you’re going to do.”

Olaph flashed him a smile and backed out of the room. The group found their way to the back door and went outside. It was more of the same, lots of flowers and a small shed with the door partly open at the corner of the lot. As they did the box appeared.

Quest Generation Complete
Defeat the Vampire

Save Light’s sister or die trying!

Rewards: Vampire and other forces defeated. XP.
Kisses maybe? A hug at least? I don’t know.

Accept / Reject

Right, can’t back out of this one, Olaph thought to himself. That brings up an interesting point. Do they have a quest to defeat us? They must have, right? The System wouldn’t withhold XP it’s not ‘moral’ it simply rewards whatever you’re doing at the time. Still, I wonder if it could... but then what intelligence is behind it that determines which actions are ‘right’ and which are not? World might be better for it though. Wait, vampire singular? Not plural?

“Flowers are going to get all ripped up,” Paige remarked, looking around to see what sort of space they had to work with.

“So we’ll go back and get Lily to grow her some she’s never seen,” Olaph decided.

“I’m taking position on top of the shed, I calculate it will hold my weight just fine,” Sinjorino announced, heading in that direction. They easily scrambled up to the top and readied their bow.

“Not much in the way of cover, good idea,” Paige decided. “Wish we had Lily here now, she could probably grow us some garlic.”

“Now, what form should I take?” Olaph wondered. *I should have taken one of the ‘larger’ creatures, but I wanted to use up these powers. Do vampires have energy that a wraith can steal? Those creatures probably do, but vampires can be insubstantial, can’t they? So big and punch things as an ogre or stony and clawed as a gargoyle? They’re both about as smart. Guess I’ll try the gargoyle out, I haven’t become that creature yet.*

He did so, settling in to wait as the first of the Noir pair came out. He looked around and did a double take when he saw Olaph.

“Was that ugly statue there before?” he asked. “And where is that guy in the robes?”

“Don’t know who you’re talking about,” Paige answered. “You feeling okay? That statue was there when I came out here.”

“Hummm.” He glared at it, Olaph simply not moving which seemed to be the natural state of the gargoyle anyway.

Light came out, followed by the other Noir, who was rubbing his hands together. The two creatures followed after them, and everyone took positions. Light got next to Paige.

“Take the Shadowblade,” he offered, holding the Lightblade up so she could access it. He was unscrewing the top of his, letting the sunlight orb in the hilt shine.

“I don’t have any sword skill,” she reminded him.

“Don’t need one. Look, you’re the most vulnerable one here, and I can’t use both swords. Just hold it in your off-hand so you can’t be attacked easily. You can still cast with your primary.”

“Fine. I guess.” She slid it out, becoming a darkened version of herself and stepping back. *May as well not let them use area effect spells on us as easily.*

“Might not want to get too close to that shed,” Noir cautioned Paige as she backed away towards the shed.

“Why not?” she asked.

“I will answer by shouting ‘come on out’ honorable ancestors!”

Paige turned and her eyes narrowed as six skeletons, all carrying what looked like garden tools, spilled out.

This just gets better and better, Light thought to himself. *The town graveyard, did they...* “Any other little surprises you want to spring on us?”

“Just one,” said one of the Noir. He snapped his fingers and barked a word.

Chapter 29

Vampire Battle

Where: The Back Yard

When: Just after the snap

A magical circle, centered in the middle of the yard sprang into existence as the vampire began casting. It was a short spell, only 2 segments long, so the vampire made a few precise gestures with his arms while he bumped his hip out (it being COOrdination based) and barked a word to complete it.

Oh my! thought Paige, vampires of course having the sexy background.

And that's mine now, Olaph thought as he finally got to use his thief of magic background for the first time. He made an INSight check to safely grab the magic, totally unaware that before The System came into being he would have had to make a Magical Theory check beforehand, at a penalty. But he didn't *have* the Magical Theory skill, and The System had made no mention of it. Why? Because The System thought that was a silly requirement and took it away. It can do things like that, you know? Part of the benefit of this background was being able to learn the spell you stole as if it was in your head as writings. But The System allowed any spell to be learned (within reason or permission) so part of the benefit went away. Only makes sense part of the downside went away too, right? Right. Anyway, back to the action!

Olaph easily beat the spell-casting check of the vampire with a 17. Some part of him thought *Oh, interesting. Using one of my normal backgrounds allows me to use my normal INSight, instead of the INSight of the creature I'm currently dressing up as. So I used a 7 rather than a 3. That was nice. Wait, so back when I was a skeleton I probably could have used my own INSight when trying to catch the key for my premonition skill check? Hard to say, as that's a skill check not a stat check. Even being told all about the skill by The System, there's still nuance to all this it seems.* While another part of him thought *I eat up magic, yum yum stupid vampires!* So instead of a huge ball of darkness covering the battlefield and putting everyone on the hero side but Sinjorino (who didn't rely on sight using Bow-Fu anyway) at a huge disadvantage the magic got sucked into him.

"That statue just canceled out my spell somehow!" the vampire complained.

"So smash it first!" the other commanded. "Wait, is that a gargoyle? Was the priest guy just an illusion?"

The eye sockets of the skeletons and the eyes of the creatures, now at their full +1 size height and radiating just as much malice as before locked onto him.

Oh crap!

The two creatures acted first. They were fast, moving almost 5 meters over to Olaph as a free action. The one went to his side, the other raised a clawed hand and Olaph prepared to dodge out of the way. But the other one surprised him with a spell, calculating 17 on a dazzle check. The resist check was RESolve based, and a gargoyle has a 5 RESolve. As with his earlier INSight check though, The System allowed him his natural RESolve as he wasn't using any of the creature's abilities at the moment. He managed to shake it off with a 19, and wasn't stunned. This allowed him a dodge check of 13. Sadly, the creature's minimum calculation was an 18, with a max of 43. It calculated a 30 on this check, and his left wing took 16 damage. Almost enough to tear it right off, but not quite.

“Uh, I’m in a little trouble here?” he announced to the others. *Maybe I should think about switching to wraith?*

Light only had eyes for the vampires though, and cursing his past self for not studying Quick Draw yanked his sword out and moved towards them. *Take them out first, then the creatures. They’re the bigger threat and why don’t they seem as concerned as usual?*

Vampire “1” started casting a spell, magical circles surrounding his hand.

Ah, touch based spell. But what do they think can hurt me like this? They can’t touch me without taking damage themselves. What’s his plan? Shadow based touch magic?

Sinjinorino looked over the battlefield from their vantage point. They had a choice; use Bow-Fu and start attacking at random, as it was LUCk based who you hit at any given time, or specifically attack one of the creatures harassing Olaph. Bow-Fu was faster, but with 10 opponents and only 2 on Olaph, chances were not good one of them would be hit per action. There was also the consideration that the skeletons probably couldn’t hurt anyone down there, but those creature things, given Olaph’s cry as they sliced through his stony wing, could. They chose Olaph and pulled back the string, calculating instantly the distance to their target and releasing. An icy blast streaked toward the creature to Olaph’s right, calculating a 15 to hit. The creature had no self preservation instinct at all and simply took the blast, which wouldn’t have been worth writing home about anyway at 1 damage to the body. However it took 0 damage because the spell they were using was not strong enough to hurt them in the slightest.

“I think you’re in trouble, Olaph!”

“Tell me something I don’t know!”

“That would take significantly more time than we have until your next action!”

Banter mode, in combat? Well done, Sinjinorino, thought Olaph. But seriously, if they hit me I’m dead. Oh crap they’re going to hit me!

Both creatures went again, on the same segment this time, along with vampire 2, who also started casting. The same spell, by the look of it, as the circles around his hand looked identical. Both creatures went for Olaph, who was now at a -2 to dodge two things at once. But dodge- he did not! He still calculated an active dodge to see if his action would succeed, but instead he tried pulling the insubstantial power from his wraith’s fiendstone. He put as much energy as he could into his REFlexes, calculating a 20 for his action. Or really, an 18 that’s basic math, of course. Both rolled a 34. Olaph took 23 damage to the body, putting him 3 into gone as a large portion of his midsection was ripped out. He went down, luckily for him the “beta” rules for his transformation read “Returning to their original form also takes an active action. As this is an act of will if they are knocked unconscious in another form, they remain in that form.” Unluckily nothing says gargoyles don’t bleed so he’s in a pretty bad spot at the moment.

Oh, do I finally get an action? Paige asked herself as she was now allowed to act. She went at the same time as Light, and pulled her maximum energy into some elemental orbs aimed at the two creatures. She got 18 orbs, casting it against each creature at the same time, and they joined the combat and rolled their initiative. They would each get to dodge 9 of their own personal orbs in just a second. Light meanwhile flickered forward and shoved his sword into the vampire, who ignored it, and him, completely.

“Nice weather we’re having,” he remarked instead to the other.

“Aren’t you in the middle of casting a spell?” the other reminded him.

“Ah yes.”

What?

The skeletons now did nothing, as their most recent orders were to bust up the statue, but it had toppled over and so really wasn’t a statue anymore, was it? Perhaps it was just a bit of malicious

compliance against these vampires that had so rudely dug up their graves and reanimated them, but orders were orders after all. They waited for new ones.

The first orb fired an electric beam at the second creature. It calculated 29 to hit, again it didn't matter in the slightest as the thing wasn't going to dodge away. It was wounded, but on the wing of all things, for 13 damage. A complete waste, in other words.

It was now time for the vampire to finish casting, while at the same time both creatures could act alongside skeleton 2 and orb 18. The creatures were smart enough to continue their attack and so did so. He took 18 damage to his right leg but more critically 25 damage to the head. As he could only take 22 total he pretty much died.

"Olaph," something asked him, with some urgency.

"What? Who is that? Where am I?" He tried to look around, but couldn't. Was it dark? Was it light? What was going on? He couldn't tell.

"Don't worry about that, you're about to die. Would you like to spend 1XP to not die instead?"

"Of course I want to do that! Why are you even asking me this? Who are you?"

There was no reply, but at least he was still unconscious and not dead.

Orb 18 went off, striking creature 2 in the head for 18/2 damage. Not that it could be, but even if it could it wouldn't be too concerned, it was only at a -1 penalty. It did calculate a CONstitution check of 27 so it wasn't stunned. Meanwhile the vampire finished casting, calculating a 15. He didn't even have to move, as Light's blade was already inside him. Deep, deep inside him. The spell went off, and Light made a RESolve check. He lost 18 energy and staggered back.

"Not going the way you expected, is it?"

Orb 15 now went off, again targeting creature 2, and did 31/2 damage to the body. This CONstitution check was also a 31 so it still wasn't stunned.

Sinjinorino was up again, having seen their ice attack do nothing against the creature figured they might as well try against the vampire. This was a check of 12 versus the vampire's dodge of 27, so really all it had to do was shift the slightest amount. It looked over at them, with a "what was that?" expression on their face.

Orbs 10 and 17 as well as Light got to act, the orbs expending their energies against the two creatures. Creature 1 was finally hit for 16/2 damage to the body, the other for 23/2 in the right leg. Their CONstitution checks also succeeded, again *this* close with a 24 for the one. (In other words, twice as much as it needed) Light, not quite yet understanding what the heck was up with the vamps but realizing staying there was probably just going to get him energy drained again turned his attention to his party member that was dying. Mentally reviewing his spells he believed maybe the "beta" spell of expand light would be enough to finish off one of the creatures before it could attack again, but it wasn't a sure thing. There was one spell he could easily cast to get Olaph out of harm's way though, and so he did just that, calculating a 13 with an instant casting of elemental sculpting. Olaph's prone form sank into the ground below.

Pretty sure they don't need to breathe much, I hope I'm right. (He had gotten a 12 on an untrained topic: the creatures of pyre and their breathing habits check.) We'll get you up as soon as we can, Olaph.

The two creatures were now up, and the statue was gone. They swiped at the thing nearest them, which was useless on both ends.

Okay, now we're getting somewhere.

Now orb 7, 5, 13, 2, 16, and Paige herself acted. Creature 1 took a total of 40/2 to the body and 16/2 to the head. Creature 2 took 20/2 to the right arm and 23/2 to the left. This was bad luck all around, really, as it hardly cared. Not that it would have taking only body hits, but there it was. Paige, for her part, had watched with pride and a bit of concern as she only had half her orbs left and these things were just not going down. On the other hand, Light was right there, Olaph seemed safe for the moment, so she decided to stop messing around and cast her accumulation spell on herself at a -5 penalty. She more than made up for this with energy, she had hardly acted after all and it would take a few actions of charging to get “decent” ratings for her “babies.”

<unnamed party> chat window 1

Paige: Keep them busy for 2 actions. I'll take these stupid vampires out.

Orb 8 went off, contributing 24/2 body damage to creature 1. Yes, it had now taken 40 damage to the body and was still just fine.

Now orb 1, 11, 4 along with creature 2, creature 1, and Sinjorino were up. The orbs 1 and 4 were attacking creature 1, and did 26/2 to the head and 16/2 to the body. This put it 1 into gone and so it dropped. Creature 2 took 25/2 to the left leg, more bad luck for our heroes, as it hadn't been hit there yet! In fact, for those keeping track it's been hit in every major body location now. How amusing!

Sinjorino took another shot at vampire 1, figuring they really had nothing else going for them at the moment. Again, not even close at 13 vs 32.

Orb 1 went off, doing 25/2 damage to creature 1 in the body, making it vanish. Orbs 3, and 6, which had not fired now had no target and vanished as well.

Light and creature 2 went at the same time, but it did something quite interesting. It didn't attack to wound, it simply stuck its hand into Light who was starting to cast the “beta” spell of there and back again. Light had to make another RESolve check, calculating an 11, against a 17-3. He lost another 8 energy, leaving him with 4.

Wait, this thing can drain energy too? Great.

Vampire 2 finally finished casting, while orbs 12 and 9, the final orbs, expended their energies against creature 2. Will it be the other wing? Perhaps a leg again? Close! A measly 13/2 damage to the body, and 25/2 to the right leg.

Light really, really should have dodged but honestly isn't used to having to do so. Usually nothing can hurt him. So, as the creature hadn't taken its hand out of Light's chest simply drained his energy again. The check was 12 to 15-4 so that time it got nothing. But Light realized he shouldn't be standing there like a lump but didn't want to move and increase his delay any further. Will it work out for him?

Vampire 1 and Paige were both up, so Paige simply stood there and gathered her maximum energy for this round. She made a spirit manipulation check, calculating a 19, so she could gather 19 energy for this round in addition to the normal amount for her RESolve. So she did.

“Why are you just standing there?” vampire 1 asked his skeleton army. “Attack that robot on the shed there!” He pointed.

They turned as a group and looked up at them.

Oh great.

Light finished casting, and Sinjorino picked one of the skeletons at random to head shot it. 15 vs 11 and they did 9 head damage to it. Light, meanwhile, calculated a 7 on his Saturn check, meaning he was about to backfire the spell. He spent an XP to recalculate, getting a 15 this time. Lucky for him, the difficulty of the spell was a 15 and so he pulled it off. Time slowed around him, and he now had 15 segments to act before anyone else could do anything. Part of this time was taken by his magic combat delay for the spell, a 4. He used up one delay gathering magic, then cast elemental bolt on the creature who now could not resist. He got a 16-1 for a called shot to the body, and did absolutely no damage because his TR wasn't high enough. That used up 5 and he had 5 left. *Great, just how tough is this thing? It bounced right off, these things are insane. What can I even do, my sword won't work and hitting one stupid skeleton isn't going to help me. Shoot expand light isn't what I was thinking of. I'm thinking of expand domain. I just got the spell that makes light brighter so I could travel further. Stupid. What am I going to do? Fine.* He did the same thing, this time aiming for vampire 1. He managed to do 8 damage to the head, and time resumed. *Hardly worth it, but that's really not what the spell is supposed to be used for.*

Vampire 2 vanished and appeared directly behind Light, attacking him. He was flanked but tried to dodge, an 18-2 vs 12. He dodged, coincidentally getting away from the creature as well, as he simply stepped through the light (such as there was at the moment as overcast as it was) to the other side of the shed. Creature 2 followed him, as it was still a free action to get that far, and attacked again. Light calculated a 15 to dodge, the creature a 27 to hit. He made the RESolve check again, an 18 to 12, and didn't lose any energy. Vampire 1 also followed, vanishing and appearing behind him. He attacked, an 11 to dodge versus a 12 to hit. Light made his RESolve check again, failing by 1 and losing 8 energy. He was now at -4 energy and could only lose one more before he went unconscious. *Come on, hasn't been two actions for you yet, Paige? You promised me something amazing in party chat. Really need to come up with a name for ourselves...*

But thankfully it was Paige's turn, and she threw her maximum energy, 16, plus the 25 she had from before, into her elemental orbs spell. This put her total rating in Uranus at 45, so the minor penalty she took for casting the spell instantly was hardly a concern at this point. 22 orbs for each vampire appeared around her, ready to fire.

“What?” Vampire 1 managed just as the first orb fired on him. He of course tried to dodge but he was dodging a calculation of $1d6+1d8+37$. In other words a 47 to 39, and that was with the vampire spending maximum energy. It was struck with 47 electric damage to the body, screamed, and-

Why did it turn into mud? thought everyone, as smelly, wet dirt plopped on the ground where the vampire had been.

With no target, all other orbs left for vampire 1 vanished.

The creature zipped over to be in front of Vampire 2, spreading his wings to cover his master. Light and Sinjorino attacked skeletons, and vampire 2 vanished, not that anyone could really see that at the moment.

Paige was up again, so she gathered more energy, figuring she might be able to take out the creature with a decent elemental needle to the head. She gathered 34 energy.

The creature vanished.

Aw, come on! Did the vampire run away?

“They can turn invisible- agh!” Light started to say, but got a hand through the back. He made his RESolve check again, but even with the penalty for fatigue he managed it. Meanwhile, 6 orbs that had been holding their action waiting for the vampire to appear fired all at once, now that they had a clear shot. He was quite exploded.

He too turned into mud.

But the group couldn't worry about that, Light rushed to uncover Olaph and get him healed, while Paige and Sinjorino handled the skeletons. Neither could really be hurt by them, and only Sinjorino could be held, so they quickly put the undead to rest once more.

“Thank goodness that's over,” Paige breathed, setting the sword down next to Light and joining him in healing the bishop.

“Is it over?” Sinjorino asked. “I didn't get any notification of the quest being complete.”

Light looked in horror at the house where his sister? was currently tied up. “I didn't either.”

Chapter 30

The Missing Sister

Where: The Back Yard

When: Just after the fight

Olaph groaned and opened his eyes to the worried face of Paige and the impassive faceplate of Sinjorino. “Ah, so I’m not dead then,” he managed. “That’s good to know. Praise the Lord.”

“Are you okay?” Paige asked him. “I think I’ve got you healed up to full, I didn’t bother with the wing as I figured it would go away once you woke up anyway.”

“Perfectly fine,” he decided, not needing to bother consulting his status menu. He knew he was back up to full. “We won then? Any other problems?”

“Problems we have aplenty,” she answered him. “Want to drop the gargoyle act? I can help you up.”

“Of course.” He shrank back down to his normal size and Paige helped him up. “By the way, this may seem out of nowhere but have either of you had a brush with death recently?”

The two looked at each other and shook their heads.

“Pity. Ah, not that I mean- sorry, I’m still a bit shaken up. What I mean is, after I was attacked I heard this strange voice. It offered me my life in exchange for one XP. Naturally I was not going to turn that down but I wondered if either of you had a similar experience. It seems not.”

“What voice?” Sinjorino asked, not understanding.

“It wanted your XP?” Paige gasped. “Why?”

“I’m not even sure. I’ve never heard it before. Nor do I recall where I was when I heard it. And I didn’t hear it, hear it, if you take my meaning. It’s hard to explain.”

“And did you actually lose one?” Paige asked.

“Let me check!” He opened his status menu, glanced at the number, and closed it again. “I did indeed. Well, until we know more I would suggest keeping an XP in reserve in the case of unfortunate accident. Where is Light?”

“Went to go check on his sister-”

“Kevin, you jerk!” could be heard from the house.

The three shared a look and raced inside.

With Paige taking over healing duty Light went to go see about his sister. She was unharmed, right where she had been left.

“One second, I’ll have you untied,” he told her. She was thrashing around and shaking her head. “What is wrong with you? Don’t tell me he put some kind of rage spell on you. Are you going to attack me when I get these off?” He observed her for a moment and she glared at him as if to say “Well hurry up.” He sighed and went for her gag, figuring he was going to get an earful.

“I’m not really here!” she said quickly as he got it undone. “That vampire took me someplace. I have no idea where but it rocks like-”

She dissolved into mud.

Light took a confused step back as a person sized amount of mud plopped onto the couch and blinked a few times. *The same thing that happened to the vampires.* “Kevin, you jerk!” he yelled to the ceiling.

“Where’s your sister?” Olaph asked, confused, as the group got back together. “And why is it so muddy in here?”

“Oh no!” Paige gasped.

“What?” He looked at her.

“The vampires did the same thing, you were out of it when it happened but their mud is still out there. It must be a spell!”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure it is,” Light agreed, flicking his finger in the air. “If I could just remember where I saw it.” A moment later he nodded. “Plastic proxy by the looks. Create a duplicate of a creature, he cast it on himself and then on her, leaving her copy behind. That’s why we haven’t completed the quest. She’s still in danger.” He staggered a little.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Fine. He attacked me in a strange way. Went for my energy, probably knew he couldn’t hurt me otherwise. Figures.”

“So he drained your energy? I wondered why he kept sticking his hand inside your elemental body. Figured he would have been hurt doing that, but now I get it. How low are you?”

“Negative four.”

“What? How are you even- One second.” She cast zone of the zen master into the space, and everyone’s energy regeneration shot up considerably.

“Thanks. That must be why they were so easy to take out. Penalties... But no, that doesn’t exactly make sense either.”

“Penalties?” Sinjorino prompted.

“The original vampire is out there someplace, he must have been maintaining a ton of magic. All the proxies, those two creatures which I’m pretty sure are magical ally spells, and they didn’t seem to care about the elemental body or my sunlight orb. They had some kind of mitigation spell going. No wonder they didn’t fight at their usual level.”

“I did almost die, may I remind you?” Olaph reminded him.

“To the creatures, not them.”

“Fair point.”

“Still, they dodged my arrows well enough,” Sinjorino complained. “I have a 10 skill in bow, and I wasn’t doing called shots. What are the stats of a vampire that even a copy dragged down by penalties could do that?”

“Wait, was each duplicate holding a copy of those spells or was the original?” Paige wondered. “Wait though, I’m looking at the spell myself now. Could one person, even a vampire, maintain two of those proxy figures? You basically have to control them remotely, even talk through them. I didn’t notice one of them animating and then the other, like he was switching back and forth. And it doesn’t say if they were maintaining the spells you said or the original was. Even my -8 from before was horrible, what penalty would holding all that magic give you?”

“You have a point, I don’t know how he managed it. Maybe it was just a trick of some kind, and we didn’t notice because he rushed us outside? Whatever the case, just know our next fight will probably be much harder. Especially because our energy is gone from the fight we were just in. I don’t think even with this spell going we can wait to rescue my sister.”

“If she’s not already dead, as her proxy vanished,” Sinjorino logically deduced.

“No, he wants me to come rescue her so he has another shot at me,” he decided. “He doesn’t care about *her* one way or the other. She hasn’t gone after him. And I don’t love my sister *that* much...”

“That’s horrible,” Paige told him. “If I had a sister I would treasure her like the world! We could have supported each other as our parents bumbled through raising us.”

“So learn the proxy spell I guess?”

“But only one of us can be active at any one time. I want to have someone to talk to and share my life with, not just a lifeless figure that looks like me and I have to make talk.”

“Whatever. Rest a few minutes in the zone, my divination magic takes a minute so we’ve got some time before I get a direction and distance to my sister. If she’s not somewhere blocked, but like I say he wants me to show up. It’s getting there that’s the problem. She may have some maps around here but if it’s not a place I’ve been to we’ll have to fly.”

“It’s ten minutes at least to get any benefit from the spell,” Paige reminded him. “You’re not going anywhere if you don’t want to pass out from accidentally spending an energy lifting something.”

“One thing at a time. We’ll have to plan what we’re going to do but I need to know if she’s a kilometer away or a thousand.”

“Fair enough. Want me to clean this up?” She raised her hands into a spell-casting position.

“I’ve got it, save your energy.” Light cast the hygiene spell on the mess and it vanished, leaving an envelope behind.

“What’s this?” Olaph asked, picking it up.

“She must have been laying on it, and now it’s been revealed,” Light decided.

“Take a look.” He handed it over.

“It’s from Kevin all right. Congratulations, yadda yadda, insults, to be expected. This part is interesting. ‘Sorry you didn’t get to wave goodbye to your sister, but that ship has sailed. By now you’ve realized my true victory, and hold out some vague hope you can simply barge into my lair and save her. I suggest not taking the scenic route if you want to appear in time. I plan to assault her in ways you can’t imagine. Tea is at four bells, don’t be late.’”

“Some sort of clue, perhaps?” Sinjorino wondered. “The wording must be deliberate.”

“Maybe, but I have better ways than sitting here figuring out vague riddles. I’ll just ask where my sister is with divination magic and my circle.”

“Still, I shall contemplate it while you work. I will also, with your permission, check the rest of the house for further clues.”

“Sure, go ahead.”

“I’ll scout the area in my astral form,” Olaph announced. “So don’t think I’m sleeping if I’m just sitting there.”

“Nice cover, good thinking,” Paige praised, bumping him with an elbow.

“No, really!”

Light tuned them out, getting his marked circle out of his pocket dimension and spreading it on the table in the center of the room. He worked his magic, and two minutes later was looking over a world map he had stashed in his dimension as well.

“There’s no question,” he announced. “The only thing in that direction and distance from here is ocean. It’s going to be a real pain to find her.”

“Has the vampire taken over some small island perhaps?” Olaph asked hopefully.

“Not if the note is any indication. He’s mobile, and it’s going to be a fairly small place to have our next fight in. Who knows how it could be defended?”

“And how far did you say?” Paige asked.

“Three hundred and forty kilometers, but of course if he’s moving he could be anywhere by the time we got there. We’ll have to cast the spell again which of course is what he wants. Delay.”

“Right, that’s a problem.” Paige opened The System window for her spells. “Flight speed isn’t that fast...”

Planet: Mercury
Grade: 5 Resist: RES
DIF: 10 Duration: M
Range: T Casting time: 5
Reverse: Grounding
Enhancer: A feather.

Enable the target to fly with a speed equal to your (REF + Mercury rating) x5, and a movement type of Hover.

“Without any energy put in, my flight speed is 50 km per hour. That’s seven hours of flying! Putting maximum energy with a single check is probably 215 km per hour. Still over an hour of flying and that’s over water. How do we stay on track? Do question magic every few minutes? I could push it higher with my accumulation spell but then it’s a different problem. We’re simply not used to moving that fast, it’s going to be hard to control and see where we’re going. The spell doesn’t say ‘up to a speed equal to’ it says ‘a speed equal to.’ There’s no middle ground.”

“There must be other magical options,” Olaph spoke up. “You can cast from a System window after all, there must be a spell to reverse teleport someone. Bring them here instead of going there.”

“You are right, there is,” Light admitted. “And it could even work, I know enough to get her here with it, but there’s a complication.” He spun the box.

Telesummon
Planet: Venus
Grade: 8 Resist: RES
DIF: Distance Duration: I
Range: M Casting time: 8
Reverse: Planar Hold
Enhancer: An piece of the target creature

Instantly teleport a specific individual creature to you. You do not need to know the exact location of the target, but you need a general idea of distance and direction. You must know the target and be able to uniquely identify them.

“Er, that doesn’t add up,” Paige mused after a moment of concentration. “The spell is medium range, but the description says specifically ‘to you.’ As in, they’re going to be basically in your arms when you finish casting. It doesn’t say ‘teleport a specific individual creature anywhere within range’ so shouldn’t the spell be personal or at the longest touch based?”

“Not what I was going for,” Light told her. “I’m more worried about the end result. If she’s out in the ocean somewhere chances are she’s moving. Maybe even fairly quickly. I teleport her here and she’s going to *keep* moving. She’ll smash into a wall or even me if I’m unlucky.”

“Could do the spell out in a field somewhere,” Sinjorino offered.

“True, but again, a not zero chance she’ll simply smack into *me*.”

“In theory we could calculate some likely speeds and the damage those speeds would produce,” they went on. “The System does give us damage calculations after all.”

“...True. Can you-”

“For example, if she were moving at a respectable 30km/hour, the maximum expected speed of a modern wooden sailing ship with three masts, her damage would be calculated as if falling 30m to the ground. Her damage therefore would range between 1 and 30. She could be injured in 7 locations, meaning 7 chances of being injured in the head snapping her neck instantly if damage was above the human average of 10 lethal damage to the head and 5 five gone. There is a 50% chance of this given the previously calculated damage potential. Now if we were to perform this summoning in deep enough water, some of that damage could be mitigated but now there would be a new problem. She would suddenly find herself hurled through the air and smashing into water, potentially beginning to drown right away. You say your sister was older than you before refusing your magic to make her younger, so no doubt she has begun to lose stats, so we cannot assume her REFlexes are even a 5 any longer. She may not be able to react in time, even if she has a high enough REASON to understand what just happened before she is placed in danger. After all, you would have to swim 30 meters just to reach her to begin life saving procedures.”

“And Heaven forbid if she was being propelled in a magical craft moving faster than that!” Olaph decided.

“The possibility does exist. A vampire that is this old could afford such a vehicle. Even a small skyship, we have only assumed the craft is directly on the water because it happens to be on the water *currently*. Or at least in the direction of water. To maximize her safety I would not assume anything.”

“Indeed. We can’t risk it,” Light agreed. “Even doing some sort of spell combination like we did before, scry creature and teleport, so we could go to her instead of her coming to us, we’re risking teleporting onto a moving object. Not recommended in the best of times.”

“So we have to fly out there?” Paige asked.

“Unless you can think of something better.”

“We need to rest in the zone anyway, let me think.”

“I’ll look too.”

So the group looked through what they knew and could do on short notice.

“Clairvoyance is out,” Light muttered. “Even if I do meet the requirements of knowing ‘about’ where I wanted to look, I have a resolution of 1km. And it will have moved a whole minute while I cast the spell, so possibly even less. I guess I could use my divination magic how many centimeters it will be a minute from now and then use that? But would ‘vaguely that way and so many cm’ be good enough for the spell? I can’t just say ‘show me the craft in this area’ it doesn’t work like that.”

I could get out someplace super fast, Olaph thought. The problem is getting back here. I have to mentally traverse both distances, and if I get lost, that’s it for me. I’ll die. I don’t think I’m going to be useful in this situation.

“We could do something similar to talking with the angel though,” Paige decided. “Combine that same mental spell with descry creature. Find her and connect to her in one step. Of course, she may not know where she is or how fast she’s going. She could be blindfolded.”

“We would know she’s alive,” Olaph agreed.

“She’s alive, the question spell told me where she is. Not where her corpse is,” Light reminded them.

“Ah!” both realized.

“Hold on,” Paige suddenly exclaimed. “We’ve been handed all the pieces we need. We’re dumb.”

“Explain?” Light demanded.

“That stupid devil, his spell that protected us while we rode in the sphere. We can use that. Combine it with the grabbing people spell and we have a spell that grabs people and protects them from the effects of being grabbed! We’ll still have to do it outside, we don’t want to smash her into the walls, but it’s obvious.”

“That is rather obvious,” he admitted after a moment. “That could actually work. Put that piece down first, then the telesummon spell on top of it. Okay, let’s not waste any time!”

So the pair got to work. Both “bought” their respective spell from The System and started reading it over. Telesummon was a much higher grade of spell so Light wanted Paige to do that part because she could throw energy into it. However her magical scripture skill wasn’t exactly up to snuff as they say, but she got around this using the skill transfer spell to grab his skill in it beforehand. She then did the same for him, giving him her pathetic skill level so he didn’t fail at his checks. The pair then made spell combination checks, Paige getting a 15 and Light getting an 11. (Despite his REASON being an 8 and hers was a 6) He then spent an XP for a +2 as he needed a 13, as the spell had no difficulty apart from distance and those tended to be grade +5. They knew how to fit the spells together, they understood their respective spells, it was time to do this thing!

They began casting.

Chapter 31

“D8” “Miss”

Where: The Back Yard (Again)

When: No time has passed

The spell went off, magic combining there in the yard so Light could get his sister back from the vampire Kevin. Everything *should* have worked perfectly. The magic took hold of the universe, forcing it to respond, and both people, low to the ground in case Reclina went sailing over them, watched as the magical circles combined to create a new spell. They had only done so a few times, and the result was quite beautiful, the magic brightening the space as the spells intertwined. They expected to see her pop out of nowhere, go flying, and then all have a good laugh about her skidding across her own yard and being safe. Even more hilarious if she face planted on the shed, or went flying through one of her windows.

Unfortunately, this did not happen.

What did happen instead was nothing. Not even a blue box hanging in the air to announce the creation of a new spell and to give them the credit for it.

The magic faded, and both looked around.

“So is she dead after all, then?” Olaph asked gently. “Does that spell combination not work?”

“She must have been protected,” Light swore. “But how? Most protection magic can be overcome with a high enough result. How does our combined spell interact with other magic? It must be able to overcome-”

There was an outrush of air and Light jumped as a piece of paper landed near his feet. He snatched it up. “It’s from Kevin, of course,” he spat. “Dear Light, did you think she wouldn’t be proofed against that, ha ha ha, etc. More gloating. He must have written this beforehand, to get it here so quickly. Look up the grounding spell before you waste time trying again. You know where I am, come yourself, coward. Oh I’m the coward, am I? Who is the one that came here as mud? Oh, that’s right *Kev* that would be you!” He crumbled the note in his hand and threw it as far as he could. It being paper that wasn’t actually all that far.

“Grounding does prevent teleportation,” Paige told them, accessing The System. “Also makes her unable to swim. If he wanted to keep her on a boat, that’s how to do it.”

“So we are going to have to fly out there?” Olaph asked. “I’m not looking forward to that.”

“It would be tactically unwise to engage Kevin before Light has fully recovered,” Sinjorino announced. “We can assume he will be attacked in the same manner. Just as the vampire prepared, knowing what Light would bring to the table, can we not prepare in the same way? Is there a spell to prevent the loss of energy you experienced?”

“I’ll look, but I don’t think so,” he answered. He started staring at nothing and poking the air.

“Gee, can you even imagine going back to before The System showed up?” Paige asked lightly. “Imagine having to tackle something with just the magic you have memorized! Or having to go down to a Guild approved location with a sack of coins to get some Guild approved magical writings instead

of just looking up what you need to know in a clean and intuitive interface. For free. Did I mention that part? It's so convenient, don't you think?"

"Just start looking," he grumbled.

And so the minutes ticked by. Light's energy slowly recovered in the Zone, which they moved back into. Almost immediately he found something and shared it. Not anything that could help them defeat the vampire, just something they could have used to get ready faster.

"Actually, I don't even think we would need to combine magics for this one," he decided. "The spell of accelerate magic seems to interact with magic all on its own. It would probably cut the time it takes to regain energy and lose fatigue in half."

"Very interesting," Paige agreed, looking it over herself. "I wonder if that was some kind of clue that magic could interact with itself, before we figured out the dual casting technique."

"Maybe," he replied, looking troubled.

"Is spending the XP to get the formula worth it?" she asked him. "I can do it and cast it right now. Or you could, I guess, as I'm already maintaining this spell." She indicated the faintly sparkly air of The Zone. "It sounds like it can be cast after the fact after all, as we don't need to accelerate the casting, just the results."

He shook his head. "No, leave it. He's not going to hurt her, she's the bait. I'll be in top shape in less than two hours, I expect you will too. You spent quite a bit of energy in the last fight, right?"

"I did," she admitted. "Making those elemental spheres strong enough and accurate enough to take out a vampire. What we thought was one, anyway."

"I'll want you at your best too," he told her. "So you rest up now. We'll need to work together to take this guy out. He'll be protected again against my only weapon." He indicated the sword. "I can't be caught like that again."

"Of course," she agreed seriously. "We'll save your sister, and take out this Kevin, no worries."

I'm worried, thought Olaph. What happens to his weakness if we do 'take out' this Kevin? Does he simply gain another enemy along the way if this one falls, or can't he fall until Light spends the XP to remove that weakness from his 'soul' or whatever The System is showing us when it shows our "status window?" Questions, questions...

So the two looked, starting with the energy drain spell so they knew what they were dealing with. It had a reverse, of course, all spells did, but as it wasn't an elemental effect there seemed to be no way, short of making your resistance check when touched, to prevent the energy loss. Even in the beta section, which was surprising.

"So he can be as immune as you please to my Lightblade and elemental form with the elemental immunity spell going but I can't be immune to his energy drain effect? Seems a bit unfair doesn't it? I'll have to have words with whoever put the spells into the beta area about this deficiency! Though I suppose I could go with a spell that augmented my RESolve, that would protect me to an extent."

"Probably why he picked it," she agreed. "And you're particularly susceptible. If he was my enemy he might have gone for something else, as I have far more energy than you. Attacking me in that way wouldn't be as effective, and would give me more time to come up with a counter. He can probably tell that, if he knows the spirit sense skill like I do. Vampires are supernatural creatures, right?"

"Too bad The System doesn't offer a bestiary; The Creatures of Pyre," Olaph lamented.

"That would be very handy," the others agreed.

Maybe a book to work on myself, the Creatures of Pyre and Where to Find Them.

The group waited, watching their energy slowly tick back up every 10 minutes, but Olaph wasn't wasting that time. He looked over his fiendstone collection and decided that leodile had to go. It was big, sure, but really it had no active powers and orge (as stupid as the form was) was still far smarter. He just didn't see himself becoming such an animalistic form and so expelled those energies (possible allowing the fiendstone to one day reform? He wasn't sure) and picked the mishipeshu, an aquatic fae creature slightly smarter than an orge (by the numbers) that had innate magical powers. It could also breathe underwater, and they were heading to a boat so it paid to be prepared? Of course it did. He absorbed 21 "energy" from the stone, which vanished, allowing him several transformations into the creature before it was completely expended.

So the plan, in the end, was to fly out there as quickly as possible by Paige pushing her rating in Mercury as high as she reasonably could. They would negate the effects of wind with a casting of temporary tool, creating a half "bubble" they would all help lift and hold in front of them to help streamline them and push air out of the way. Light would keep them on track with periodic castings of his divination spell, the tool would include his circle of numbers on a "shelf" near him, so he could simply continue to ask what direction they should go in. Once there Sinjorino would look the situation over at a distance with their better vision and see what they were facing. If some kind of ship they could reasonably land on, Light would take Kevin's appearance with the disguise spell and pretend the others were captured. Hopefully that would at least confuse anyone they met while searching the place long enough to take them out quietly. Grab Reclina, set the ship on fire in several places, and teleport into the air near her house allowing her to be gently returned to the ground with the flight magic. Easy! If it wasn't something they could land on, they would just have to attack it as they could, hopefully avoiding Kevin though Light was sure they would be together.

"Vampires can mesmerize people," he explained. "She would consider his requests as though he was her best friend in the world. It's how they get invited into places, that restriction hardly slows them down. Expect her to defend him, though she's not a fighter of any kind. She will put herself in harms way for him."

"No way to break her out of it?" Paige asked.

"None that we have."

"This is a good amount of preparation," Sinjorino decided. "Flexible, gives us a few ideas but doesn't restrict us. I say we get to flying, this bubble should allow us to converse if you think of something on the way."

"Right," agreed Light with a nod. "Paige, let's get it started."

And so the group flew out over the water at frankly ludicrous speeds, the half dome held in front of them doing its job admirably. Thankfully the spell he used could create any reasonable shape out of solidified magic, and be sturdy enough to hold up while he maintained the spell. It had a simple bar attached to the inside and curved the same way, so everyone could hold it. This squished them together a bit which was fine, though they all longed for the comfort of the "vehicle" Dean had introduced them to. Given that Paige knew her exact speed based on the spell formula, and Light knew the exact distance they had to travel with his divination magic, Sinjorino did the simple math to keep track of how long they had to fly for. They could then easily stop before the ship would be in sight normally, looking ahead by simply peeking over the translucent shape of the bubble to see what they were dealing with before getting too close. It turned out the ship was moving fairly quickly so their calculations were a bit off, but it was easy to see why. And they didn't like what they saw.

"I can see the ship," Sinjorino announced. "And you're not going to like it."

"What, is it some sort of flying ship after all?" Light asked. "As soon as we get onboard it'll take to the sky and, well, we flew here I guess Paige can just keep the flying magic on us in case..."

“Not that,” they reported. “It’s... impossible.”

“What? It’s not just a raft or something is it?” Paige asked.

“It’s a battleship. From before the fall. But that’s impossible, they must have all been destroyed. They must have!”

“Battleship?” Olaph asked.

“Not a ship made of wood, but an enormous floating fortress made of iron. I never thought I would see that kind of weaponry ever- oh no, it’s turning I can see it.”

“What is it now?” Light muttered.

“This bubble, it probably reflects radar, doesn’t it?” *It’s small, but resolution of pre-moon sensors was fairly good if I remember correctly.*

“What’s radar?” everyone asked.

“Drop it and scatter!” they screamed. “We’re about to be attacked!” They followed words with action, breaking away from the group and shooting at a random angle upward. The others took a few segments but did the same, Light dropping the spell and the three going in different directions. Not a moment too soon, as a shockwave from something hurling through the space they had been in rushed past them, too fast even for Sinjorino to register.

“Get as low as you can!” they ordered, flying straight down now towards the water. The group hovered only an inch from the waves, looking towards the battleship. “We’re too small to track, as long as we don’t bunch up too much. We’re safe for now.”

“What was that?” Paige demanded.

“Kinetic round.”

“Oh, of course, I know exactly what *that* is.”

“It’s just a chunk of metal, accelerated to very high speed by magnets set along the barrel of the gun. The ship has several, along with beam weaponry typical of the period if I’m remembering my history correctly.”

“So, wait, they threw a rock at us?” she wondered. “That doesn’t seem very futuristic.”

“It is when you realize the speed at which it was traveling. This is very troubling. If they have weapons of the era as well, and there is a high probability they do, our rescue mission just became that much harder.”

“How does a vampire- you don’t think he, like, stole it all those years ago, do you?” Olaph asked. “And he’s kept it repaired this whole time?” *Is he really only a two point weakness?!*

“Impossible to say,” they replied. “Light, what is your order? We are not facing a modern craft, with sails and cannon and a few crew. I estimate this ship is nearly 400 meters long with a possible crew capacity of over two thousand. Think of it more as a floating castle, armored and with weapons that can reach us even as far away as we are and can move faster than we can dodge. It was only chance I saw the gun moving into position and realized what it meant. Had it impacted the bubble...”

“It would have torn through and probably killed all of us just from the shock-wave. I get it,” Light told them. “I actually defer to your judgment, my friend. Can we safely approach? I must assume something this big was built to fight other things this big. Or to bombard coastal cities from safety. Not repel four human sized targets.”

“Lock S-foils in attack positions,” they muttered confusingly, shaking their heads. “Sorry, seeing that falcon toy from before- never mind. Yes, you are right. As long as we stay somewhat spaced apart, low to the water, and move fast it would be difficult even for advanced, pre-moon technology to track us. We can at least reach the ship, fly up to the deck, and see what the situation is. Hopefully without raising too much of an outcry.”

“We can approach from the other side,” Paige suggested. “They’ll all be looking over the side one way because that’s where the guns fired to, right? Everyone will want to be the first to spot us coming and curry favor with their master, Kevin.”

Oh, I haven't had curry in forever, thought Olaph. "Unless they anticipate our deception and everyone heads to the other side of the deck?" he mused.

"Ah, but if we know they might anticipate our deception and move to the other side perhaps attacking from the same side is the way to go!"

"We'll just head in from the back of the stupid thing," Light told them. "Come on. Lead the way Sinjorino. You know where the blasted thing is."

"This way. Keep several meters apart and as low as you can." They took off.

The group cautiously peered over the side of the back of the craft, and what they saw left them stunned.

There wasn't anyone on deck. At least, not that they could see at the moment. As big as the vessel was, the amount of walkway between the rear gun and the side of the ship was basically enough to walk single file and it didn't open up much towards the middle. But no cry of alarm was raised, no force of a hundred vampire thralls with particle beam weapons approached them with bloodlust in their eyes. There was silence apart from the noise of the engine turning the props far below them.

"They could be hiding?" Sinjorino decided.

"Agreed. We'll work our way that way," Light pointed to the left. "And check the whole upper deck before setting foot on it."

"There is magic around," Paige announced, calculating a 9 on magic sense. "But I can't tell what type or exactly where."

"Too far away," Light agreed, with a 13 result. "I'm getting a Venus flavor though. Hints of Moon as well."

"Venus will be that awful summon," Paige muttered. "I don't look forward to seeing that again."

"It seemed far more powerful than it should be, I agree. Come on."

The group ended up circling the whole craft. It kept up a constant speed and heading, according to Sinjorino, though they must have known the group was there. They saw no one, felt and saw no traps magical or otherwise, and hesitantly rose over the side and set foot on the deck. Still nothing.

"Maybe it's just him?" Olaph hoped fervently.

"This is almost worse," Paige mused. "At least if we had been rushed, that would be something we could deal with. This quiet is getting on my nerves, it's like anything can happen because nothing has yet."

"Door over there," Light told them, pointing. "Let's go below decks or however you say it, and see what surprises 'ol Kev has in store for us."

"Let's open it from the side," Sinjorino decided. "Just in case someone is there waiting to gun us down."

"I can check for that," Olaph assured them. "No problem."

"One step at a time then," Light agreed with a nod. "One corridor at a time, one room at a time. We don't let our guard down, we deal with what's in front of us, then look to the next room. All the way down. I'll put on my disguise if we get no response at this door. It would be pointless now, they know we would have come on deck and no one else is, so we're not fooling anyone."

"Agreed," everyone said with a nod. The group moved forward to the door and flattened themselves to the wall, keeping an eye on both directions just in case. Sinjorino stuck an arm out to grasp the handle of the door and pushed it down.

Chapter 32

Lower Decks

Where: Deck of the Battleship

When: No time has passed

“Wait,” someone said as the handle was pushed down. Sinjorino jerked their hand back and Paige jumped in fright a little bit.

“Don’t do that!” she hissed. “I’m on edge enough, geese. What is it?”

“Sorry,” said the voice.

“... None of you said that,” she realized, her eyes darting between them all. All three nodded, they hadn’t. *Then who?*

“No, I did,” the voice agreed.

“Show yourself!” she demanded, whirling. The empty deck before her was still just as empty as it had been. As wide as the ship was, much of the space was taken up by the odd looking guns, but there were empty spaces aplenty. No real clutter to hide behind though, so there was only one conclusion Paige could draw. *Whoever this is has used invisibility magic to hide themselves. But I don’t feel anything with spirit sense, and I calculated maximum minus my penalty for the flight spell I’m maintaining until we get back to shore. Invisibility shouldn’t occlude that.*

“I really can’t show myself any better than I already am,” the voice assured them.

“Then where are you?”

“I’m... right here? You’re not too bright are you?”

“Not too bright?!” she repeated, stamping her foot a little. “I’ll have you know I have an above human average rating in both KNOWledge and REASON, so there!” She paused a second, hoping her companions would not take offense to this given she was an elf. But as none of them looked all that strong, Olaph was a bishop for goodness sake not a bodybuilder so they must have more of their points in the “mental track” than the physical, just like her. Right? Though Light seemed to have a high REFlexes... “Not a brag, just a fact.”

“Good for you. So where am I, then, smartypants?”

“I don’t know, I can’t see you. What do you want anyway?”

“For you to leave. The captain says I have to fight you and I really don’t want to do that. If you just left, I wouldn’t have to. That’s a thing I like to call logic.”

“I know what logic is, thank you very much,” she said icily. “Come out where I can see you and we can talk about this.”

“I don’t really have a dedicated avatar,” the voice explained, sounding a bit wistful. “That would have been nice though. Technologically plausible as well. I’m not really sure why they didn’t.”

“What?” Paige was quite lost now. Sinjorino came to her rescue.

“I think,” they said carefully, “that we are talking to the ship itself at the moment. A variant on the dreadnought if I’m not mistaken?”

“That’s me! The U.S.S. Get Revenge on Light, at your- well, not exactly at your service the captain says I can’t serve anyone but him and he’s the captain so I have to listen to him.”

“That cannot be your original name,” Light said matter-of-factly.

“No, it’s what the captain named me just recently. He made me forget my old name, which I didn’t want to do but he’s the captain.”

“The captain being the vampire Kevin.”

“Who?”

Light sighed. “Noir Ciel, if you prefer, or whatever he’s calling himself these days?”

“That’s the captain all right!” the voice agreed cheerfully. “Though between you and me, he’s a pretty lousy captain. He’s away more than he’s here. Don’t tell him I said that though! Plotting, he says. More like slacking off if you ask me. Is he captain or not? Though I suppose that would benefit you, wouldn’t it? As slacking off means he’s not plotting his revenge and all that. Huh.”

“Hold on,” Olaph interrupted. “We really are talking to the ship itself? You’re like Sinjorino here? An intelligence from before the Moon arrived?”

“That’s me. So with that out of the way, will you leave or not? I’d really rather not fight you.”

“A floating fortress of destruction that wishes for non-violence,” he breathed. “Lord have mercy upon it.”

“If you don’t want to fight us then don’t,” Paige told it. “Super easy, right? If you’re like Sinjorino, they can choose what they want to do so why can’t you?”

“The captain said I had to. Said I had to shoot at you too, sorry about that, I’m glad you avoided it.”

“Like me, the guiding intelligence of the ship is sentient,” Sinjorino explained. “For some reason the generals of the past gave intelligence to their war machines, pray you never see one and that the dreadnought class is finally rusted and gone from the planet. I heard rumors not long ago a party was unearthing those that remained inactive and breaking them apart but I had no way to verify this. They were the size of buildings and could simply roll over any modern settlement in a matter of moments. But back to this ship, unlike me, and I explained how I was limited in capacity and function as they who built me were ever afraid of their creation lest it turn upon them, this intelligence would be even further constrained. Given how much more dangerous it would be to allow it to run rampant. So following the orders of their captain is probably an absolute directive. As for your earlier longing for an avatar, I can only assume that was for a similar reason. To prevent you having too much autonomy to move against the organics that built you.”

“You’re probably right, and 100% correct about the captain thing. I was without one for a long time,” the ship explained. “Just floating around. So much destruction. I did a lot of thinking. I can only be what I am, in form, but cannot my function be expanded?”

“Without question!” Olaph agreed. *Though I have no idea how. Perhaps with the removal of the weapons more space for cargo could turn you into a cargo ship?*

“Not without some major reprogramming,” clarified Sinjorino. “Can we reach your core?” *If one of us could become ‘the captain’ we could turn the ship against Kevin, and we may need every advantage.*

“My captain is between us,” they reported, shooting that idea down in flames. “I must use every means to prevent your progress. I don’t have many drones left through.”

“Can you tell us what forces await us below?” Light asked. “That would be a big help. Maybe help route us around them?”

“I can’t. I can’t help you. Even talking like this could be considered a violation, but I don’t think I’ve really helped. Just asked you to leave.”

“You have been decidedly unhelpful,” Paige assured it. “So thanks for nothing.”

“Of course! I won’t even turn a light on for you if you ask, so there! Confidentially a lot of them don’t work anymore, the captain can see in the dark so he feels it’s a waste to try and find replacements. I’m falling apart piece by pieces.” There was a sniffing sound like someone trying not to cry.

Seems a bit child like? thought Olaph. Is this really an engine of destruction from 3000 years ago? I mean, I suppose anyone could change in that time...

“Let’s get on with it,” Paige decided. “Sorry if we break some of your stuff trying to rescue the person we’re here to rescue.”

“I understand,” they allowed sadly. “I’ll just helplessly watch while more of me gets broken, shall I?”

“Right,” Light announced, not having an answer for the ship. “The door?”

“Of course.” They pushed down on the handle. “It’s stuck. Or locked, I suppose?”

“Now who do we know that can help with that?” Light gazed off into space and then snapped to Paige. “Wait, can’t you-”

“Move aside,” she sighed. “I don’t want to hear anything about me knowing this spell ever again though.”

“Perish the thought,” he agreed, letting her by.

One quick unlocking spell later and she yanked the door open, intending to do a flourish and invite Light to go before her. What she didn’t expect to see beyond the door was the creature, squished into the stairwell leading down and raising its claws and opening its mouth in an inviting way. “Step inside,” it seemed to say. “Make yourself at home for the rest of your life.”

Paige screamed and slammed the door shut again, taking a step back forgetting there was a limited space between the pillar they were standing at and the somewhat broken down railing of the ship. Most of the ship was in tip-top shape, looking great despite the age. No rust could be seen, the door had opened without protest or grinding, but this section of the rail seemed to be missing. She cartwheeled her arms around, trying to catch her balance, and went over the side with a scream.

The others stuck their heads over the railing, watching her.

She continued falling, into that watery expanse, of which she had more than a fleeting glimpse. She tried to speculate where she might land, but she had to admit such conjecture was futile. Still, the question of how much damage she would take upon landing in the water was unsettling to her. However her apprehension might be allayed, if one of her stupid friends would-

“Does she not realize she can still fly?” Sinjorino wondered allowed to Light. No one was actually touching the ground, in case they needed to dodge something quickly, so clearly the spell was still going.

“I don’t actually think she does?” he answered, a bit puzzled.

Paige screeched to a halt and shot upwards again, landing next to the other members of her party.

“Not. One. Word.” She told them.

“Not even to ask if you’re okay?” Light asked with genuine feeling and emotion towards his young apprentice, and not even a hint of sarcasm or snickering.

“What happened?” Olaph added. “What did you see in there?”

“That creature!” she insisted.

“Creature?” everyone asked.

“That Kevin had with him. That big thing with all the fangs and the claws and the wings and the violence.”

“Stand back,” Light commanded the others. He gripped his sword and yanked the door open, flinging it wide. He stepped back into the doorframe and half pulled his sword.

“Uh, there’s nothing here,” he announced.

“What? It was there, I swear it!” Paige insisted.

“Sure it was,” Light assured her. “We believe you, don’t we everyone?”

“An illusion of some kind?” Olaph wondered.

“Perhaps simply the product of the organic brain?” Sinjorino posited.

“You think I imagined it?” Paige almost shrieked.

“It’s just stairs,” Light told her. “Come on.”

The group headed down, into a narrow hallway with doors on one side.

“An enormous ship and this is the amount of space the designers gave people to walk?” Paige complained.

“Space is a luxury,” Sinjorino explained. “In a craft like this. Older vessels would have been worse, of course. Most of this ship is controlled by the core AI, there would be no need for map rooms, the bulky munition stores, and the like. Still, less space for the crew means more armor between them and their enemies, plus redundancies for power lines running to every corner of the ship. And less area to flood, should the hull be breached.”

“I noticed the seal on the door,” Olaph spoke up. “And the odd rounded shape. I suppose if one section was damaged they could seal it off and keep sailing.”

“Exactly. Come, let us proceed further down, we have many decks to go as I assume Kevin is at the bottom, with various ‘surprises’ between us and him.”

“Should we check all these doors?” Paige asked. “The creature could have retreated behind one.” She stepped up to the nearest one, looking it over.

“There is no creature,” Light assured her.

The sound of the door swinging shut and locking behind them echoed in the corridor.

“Uh?” someone said, and everyone looked back that way.

The sound of doors unlocking as lights above them went from green to red further intruded into the silence. Paige stepped away from hers, eyes wide and expecting the worst. They swung open and 4 figures stepped out into the hallway. A fifth, all the way down, proved to be the creature.

“Thralls!” Light yelled. “Don’t kill them unless you must, they could be innocent victims.”

“Victims with particle weapons!” Sinjorino clarified, as they were holding advanced looking rifles in their hands. “They’re extremely dangerous!”

“I told you!” Paige wailed, pointing down the hall at the creature. “Didn’t I tell you?”

The figures raised their rifles, each making a soft but high pitched wailing sound. Everyone calculated their initiative.

Light was first up, thinking to himself *you know, if I had that detect enemies spell going before we opened the door, we wouldn’t have walked into this trap. How dumb have I gotten lately? I would like to cast dazzle on all four of them, but that would leave me an effective 1 rating. That would never work. If that creature is the ally spell somehow it will have its caster’s RESolve, and vampires are known for their willpower. I don’t really have any area effect spells, maybe I should look into that?* He drew his Lightblade.

Thrall number 3 went next, firing a shot at Light which of course went right through him and hit the next person in line, Paige. She took 9 damage to the head putting her two into gone, and she dropped like a rock. Her flight spell also went away, dropping everyone to the floor but it was only a few centimeters so no one stumbled.

“No!” shouted Olaph, thinking her dead as a plasma lance hitting you in the head was going to mess up anyone’s day. He shrank down, drawing power from the drake fiendstone as it was immune to fire.

Light was up again, at the same time as thrall 2, who fired at Sinjorino. They hadn’t been able to act yet, not that there was much room in this corridor to maneuver in the first place, to take a better position where they statistically wouldn’t be hit. Their right leg took 7 damage. Meanwhile Light stepped forward, enough light in the room to move instantly to one of the two thralls that had not yet fired, and made his combination attack check, calculating a 15 and deciding to take all three strikes. He calculated an attack, putting 4 energy into COOrdination, calculating a 15. Ties go to the defender so the thrall narrowly dodged back into the room and out of harm’s way.

Sinjorino held off on attacking, instead *now* making an active dodge check, calculating an 11. Their passive dodge became a 21 as they were now in the best possible position they could be.

Thrall 3 and 1 fired at the same time, 3 going for the tiny shape of Olaph who was blazing with both fury and magical fire, 1 going for Sinjorino. 3 missed completely because the drake is a -3 size creature, not that it would have mattered, and 1 only got a 16 to hit and also missed.

Sinjorino returned the favor, drawing back their knockout string and calculating a LUCk check to see who they would hit. Thrall 1 was the unlucky target and they calculated their attack as a 14, beating the thrall's passive dodge. Next came hit location, a math check, for a 24. This was the head, which took 13 non-lethal damage. This put them at a whopping -1 penalty so this was basically a slight tingle for him, and he said "ow. Quit it."

Olaph was up, and got in the face of the man that had shot Paige, thrall number 3. He used his unarmed skill, hoping to latch on and burn the man's face off, calculating an 11 to hit vs a 20 to dodge. "Get away from me you bug!" he shouted, waving a hand around to fend Olaph off.

Light and thrall 2 went at the same time, Light again going for Goon 4 but as Light estimated his REFlexes as quite good didn't bother with combination attack again. The prevailing theory on that skill was, you used it after you wore your opponent down a bit because of the penalties and higher delay. He calculated a 12 to hit, further driving the thrall back into the room behind him with a 9 dodge. Normally doing 2 damage, the thrall's body took 3 damage.

Thrall 2 couldn't quite believe they had missed, and took another shot at Sinjorino, calculating a 15 to hit which also somehow went wide.

Sinjorino went through all their calculations again, hitting thrall 2 this time for 9 non-lethal to the head. *Why is the creature just standing there?* they asked themselves. *It almost seems to be enjoying this?*

Thrall 1 was now up, and decided to start aiming so they wouldn't miss like that loser thrall 2.

Light, Sinjorino, and thrall 4 now went at the same time, thrall 4 gritting his teeth as he simply plunged through Light to get to the hallway again. He took a little body damage but took a wild shot at Sinjorino, who was busying firing at thrall 1 again. Thrall 4 calculated a 6 to hit, after his penalties, so the shot went way off where it should have, while Sinjorino hit for another 8 damage.

My maximum damage is a twenty, they complained to whatever was listening, *why so little damage right now?* Nothing answered them.

Olaph went again, calculating a 6 as apparently drakes aren't really that dangerous after all. Of course the called shot to the head didn't help matters, but again he was waved away. That kept him from going next, but thrall 2 did, believing the third time must be charm, right? He even put energy into his MANipulation to hit better. This time he got a 29, 8 more than he needed, and their left arm took 2 damage.

They retaliated by targeting thrall 3, doing 15 non-lethal to his head.

Light stabbed thrall 4 in the back, figuring he must be hurting at least a little after that, calculating an 18 on combination attack and an 11 on sword; thrusting. This paid off, the thrall, now hurt and flanked, only calculated an 8 to dodge. He was hit in the body 3 times for 15 total damage, and he dropped. *Finally. I really do not like all this fighting multiple opponents I'm having to do lately. Please let me soon get back to simply tracking down single targets I can easily dispatch without risk. Amen.*

The universe offered no response to this either.

Thrall 3 decided to finish the job and ignore the little buzzing thing around his head and pointed his gun at Paige. Her difficulty to be hit was an 11, one more than usual because she was prone, and he calculated a 14. Her right leg took 11 damage from the bolt.

Sinjorino was up, and was forced to make their active dodge check again if they wanted to get into a better position and maintain their passive dodge bonus. Of course there had been hardly any movement in the last 4 seconds but that's what the skill demanded, so that's what they did. With a 13 they had a +2 to their natural passive dodge of 20.

Light had seen thrall 3 shoot the helpless Paige and so went for him next. Thrall 2 went at the same time, deciding to repeat the experience of spending energy to help them hit better. However they only calculated a 15, far too low to hit Sinjorino, who simply stood there as the bolt went past them.

“How are you doing that? I’m not this bad a shot!” they yelled.

“Skills,” was the reply.

Light saw that thrall 3 had magical energy still glittering around their head, a sure sign they had been attacked and decided to risk the combination attack against them. He made the calculation, getting only a 12, or two strikes this time. He took them, getting a 7 to do a called shot to the body. Pathetic. But enough, as Light could come at him from behind to flank and his -3 head penalty. He took 14 damage to the body.

Sinjorino and thrall 1, finishing their aiming action, went at the same time. They went for each other, Sinjorino doing 8 non-lethal to the head, while he calculated a 19 to hit, having also spent energy into MANipulation. In reality he would still have been disappointed as ties go to the defender, without his penalty he would have had a 22. Without his tough background he would have gone down, but with it he stood his ground and kept fighting for his master.

Olaph, determined to hit this time spent energy of his own, calculating a 23. Naturally he still tried to dodge, with a -6 penalty and so put energy into that. An abysmal 5 was his result, and he got glommed onto by Olaph and started to burn in the fiery aura that surrounded his tiny body. Or, it would have, had he properly activated it. As he had put all his energy into hitting, he had no further capacity that action to put into the aura, so despite it being there and being literal fire, it did nothing. You have to forgive him, he’s been a drake for like 5 seconds now. He’ll figure it out.

Sinjorino continued their attack, targeting thrall 1 with a 15 LUCk check. He took 14 non-lethal damage to the head, which sadly did nothing, as knockout can’t become lethal. So in the end, the regular old humans with a tiny amount of supernatural power from their vampire sire are completely immune to Sinjorino’s bow. As they are tough they can’t go unconscious from non-lethal damage, and they can’t do any more damage. Neat!

In a far away? somewhere *something* cocked it’s *something* to the side and gave what could be approximated as a humming sound. This *something* wondered if this was completely fair and if knockout magic shouldn’t maybe be adjusted in some way to compensate for this? Maybe saying it negated the tough background if doing the maximum amount of damage it could? Something to think about, for sure. Ah, no, they had an idea. The something reached over with something that could be considered to some a tentacle to what could be considered to some a keyboard and opened up a new what could be considered to be an email. The something was momentarily distracted by a noise and looked in a direction not adequately described as “up” to see something one might consider a pig with wings flying by. It was making a noise one might hear as whistling The Star Spangled Banner but the something was not sure which end of the so called pig the sound was coming out of and had no interest in investigating further. Turning back to the display they discovered it was now flipped upside down, and looked to see if one of their so called “coworkers” was playing what could be considered as a practical joke on them. Seeing, if it can be called that, no other being nearby and sensing no *directed* magic (though plenty of background magic of course what was this, the lower dimensions? Please, perish the thought!) they produced what could reasonably be considered a sigh, accepted it as simply being a natural phenomenon, turned their own sensing organs around so the display was right side up again, and began to what some could consider type:

Proposal to patch observed loophole in tough background

Having observed the spell knockout being used against an individual with the tough background it has come to my attention that said individual is functionally immune to the knockout

element of magic as they are prevented from being knocked out or having their damage cross over into the so called "lethal" capacity to finally do what the magic is supposed to do and knock them out and I know I have argued against leaving the resistance check (such as simply "wishing away the magic" with a RESolve check) intact because it's flooping magic and so should not be so simply negated

And here the being reconsidered, backspaced over "flooping" and instead wrote "flapping" because there was no cause for profanity in a workplace email after all was there? They continued

but I think everyone will agree in this case if we want knockout magic to actually do the only flapping thing it's supposed to do, knock people out, then it should do that irregardless (which was indeed an accepted word where the being was from and no cause for concern at all though maybe the being meant irrespective?) of the backgrounds of the target. Proposed solution; do not cap non-lethal damage done by the spell so at least penalties accrue after being hit by it repeatedly so practitioners do not stand there casting the same spell over and over while their target fails to resist but also fails to be knocked out! At that point they will no doubt be under so much penalty they may as well be knocked out and the practitioner can take it from there.

The being read the message over and hit what can only be described as a send button. They went back to the action already in progress.

"Go down already, I don't want to have to use the other string!" Sinjorino shouted at him.

"String?" the thrall repeated, confused.

"There's no time to explain!"

Light was up, ready to do what had worked the last time, and repeated their checks. 10 for combination attack, 11 for the actual attack vs well he couldn't actually dodge because now he had an angry fairy dragon in the face and was trying to pull it off. 10 fire damage to the body later left him 6 into gone and he dropped.

"Sorry, padre," Light apologized.

"I had him!" Olaph complained.

"I'm sure you did little guy."

Thrall 2 was up next, and decided to go for an easier target, Paige. With her +1 prone bonus his 10 wasn't enough, and he sighed, knowing it was three against one now and they would soon be on the floor as well. But their master could not be disobeyed, and they would fight to the bitter end.

Thrall 1 and Sinjorino went at the same time, and again went for each other, thrall 1 realizing he was basically invincible until that stupid robot thing worked out what was happening. So their shot bounced off his head again, where his shot went wide with a 6.

"This is going to take awhile," he complained.

Light went after thrall 2, putting himself in the thrall's face so he would stop shooting Paige. But he underestimated the thrall's resolve, (which was calculated at a 13 at that precise moment) and so instead of dodging like a normal person, he just took the attack so he could have another shot at Paige. In his mind, if he at least killed one of these intruders his master would be pleased and remember him fondly. More fool him, Kevin hated all of these guys and secretly hoped never to see them again. He took 12 damage to the body.

Sinjorino put another shot into thrall 1's head, and began to wonder if something wasn't going on here. If only they had the magical theory skill! But the tiny form of Olaph did, and as it was his turn

anyway flew over to them. "I calculated a twelve, it's not doing anything else to him because you reached the maximum damage he can take in the head," he reasoned. "He must have something going on that prevents him going unconscious from non-lethal damage."

"Oh."

Thrall 2 put a shot through Light and into Paige, and even with his penalties managed it! He did 10 damage to her body, putting her (for those keeping track at home) at 2 into gone in the head, 3 into gone in the body, and 1 into gone in the leg. Her gone is a 5.

Sinjinorino pulled back the other string. They had to take care of their opponent, but to not follow the progression on their bow-fu meant giving up their reduced delay and bonus to passive dodge. They just hoped the thrall 1 would roll high on their LUCk check. They got a 12, while thrall 2 got even higher, so they missed either one of them.

"That wasn't the same?" Thrall 1 said a bit nervously.

"That was a warning shot," they lied. "Surrender and be spared."

Light and thrall 1 went at the same time, thrall 1 saying "no" and bringing their gun to the side to shoot Paige.

"Dazzle!" risked Light, throwing energy into COOrdination. He calculated a 23, while the thrall, doing the same, only got a 21 (after penalties). He was forced to delay 5 segments, probably saving Paige's life, as Sinjinorino pulled the string back again. This time it was thrall 2 that was targeted, only making a 6 LUCk check vs their 9. Better if they had landed a blow on the body, but the way it works they can only hit the head so they did 6 lethal to the head.

Light struck thrall 2 as well, knowing one or the other would be able to shoot Paige again in a segment or two, but Olaph was on the case. He jumped for 1's face at the same time, remembering this time to activate his aura. Light missed, as ties go to the defender.

Olaph, of course, also missed.

Sinjinorino had to fire at thrall 2 again. But this was a more respectable 8 damage and thrall 2 went down, 1 into gone.

Light and the last thrall went at the same time, the thrall once again going for Paige so Light cast his dazzle spell again. 18 vs 14 and he delayed once again.

Sinjinorino put another arrow into his head, 8 damage.

Olaph... Didn't want to get in the way of that, actually. So he targeted one of the guns with his telekinesis ability from his Medium background, calculating a 13. The gun went sailing at the thrall's head, who jerked back automatically as one does when a gun suddenly flies at them. He only got a 10 to dodge and took another 8 damage as the thing smacked into his chest.

I finally did something, Olaph beamed internally. Wait, was he even damaged in the chest? I should have tried doing a called shot that probably would have dropped him. Sigh.

But both his friends were on the case, acting at the same time, and did a total of 0 damage as he dodged them both.

"I can do this all day!" he bragged.

"Can you though?" Light asked.

"You bet I- urk!" Sinjinorino's final arrow took him in the head and dropped him.

"Is she dead?" Olaph asked, flying to Paige's side.

"She soon will be," said a voice. "That was about 9 seconds, well done."

"Kevin!" spat Light.

"I'm not-" He sighed. "Whatever. Go ahead then."

The creature at the far end flexed its claws and grinned.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Olaph wailed.

Chapter 33

Even Lower Decks

Where: Deck of the Battleship

When: No time has passed

The creature was fast, they knew that from their previous battle, and Light figured given Kevin's (not totally undeserved) hatred of him that he would be the first to be targeted. The creature would do the same thing, attack him with the elemental immunity spell going and try to drain his energy. In this case, he counted on it. He put himself in the creature's path and predictably the thing took a swipe at him. He didn't dodge, and winced a little as he made his RESolve check to avoid the energy drain. He succeeded by one and lost nothing, making this the ideal situation. It would no doubt stay there trying to drain him, Kevin no doubt confident his little pet could take any spell thrown at him and not make it dodge. He couldn't tell if the draining worked, after all, he was only watching them. Thankfully, Light was not stupid and this was all part of the plan.

He cast his teleportation spell as quickly as he dared.

The System has this to say about the spell 'teleportation:'

The creatures must all be in physical contact, and may attempt to break free to avoid being teleported. If someone holds on to you, they may be brought with you as well unless you break free of them.

Otherwise, there was no resistance to being teleported, as this was one of the 215 totals spells with "N/A" next to the method of resistance in the spell description. While Light couldn't be *one hundred percent* positive that the arm of the creature sticking through him counted as "physical" contact, the energy draining spell was similarly specific.

Each action, as long as you concentrate on the spell and continue to touch the target, you can transfer up to your Pluto rating in Energy from the target, although the target is allowed a RES check each action to end the spell.

If one spell, the energy drain, was considered touch enough to work than another spell darn well better consider it that too. Light calculated a 9 on his mercury check, enough to get 1km out, and decided to take it. Both vanished.

"Um?" The tiny form of Olaph stared at the empty space a moment and looked over at Sinjorino, who shrugged.

"Don't look at me," they told him. "I don't know if that was supposed to happen."

Light appeared in the corridor again, sheathing his sword. "I'll get to healing Paige, hopefully she's not dead?"

"Oh. Welcome back, Light. Well done dealing with that," they looked up towards a camera on the wall, "minor annoyance." They looked back at him. "One moment." Sinjorino knelt by her and put a hand on her. "My bio scanner detects her as alive, though very badly burned in three places. I would start with the leg personally. Then alternate between the head and body burn. This way she will experience the least discomfort when she regains consciousness."

"That is the considerate thing to do," Light allowed. "But thankfully, I don't think that will be necessary." He began casting. As he only had the lesser healing spell that healed one damage at a time a normal mage would be looking at 33 castings of the spell to completely heal her. He was not a normal mage, or at least he was a normal mage with an abnormal amount of skill. He extended his aura, allowing him to cast the healing spell through it, and targeted all of her at once with the spell. He then only had to cast it the number of times (extending his aura each time of course) needed to heal her most wounded area, the 13 in her body. She started coming around before he was done, but he assured her everything was fine and she let him finish. Too out of it to question why all her body areas were being healed at once, when he was done she felt much better and said as much. Meanwhile Sinjorino covered the entrance to the place and Olaph covered the door to the stairs going down. When he was done with her he looked Sinjorino over, and cast a few repair spells on their damage, so everyone was in top shape again.

"My sensors show you as fully healed," Sinjorino announced, checking her again just in case. "Welcome back to the land of the living."

"Thank you," she said, looking around. "I guess we won, even without me. Are they dead?" She pointed to the four bodies lying there where they had fallen.

"I checked them as well, none are in any immediate danger of dying. I suggest simply leaving them here for now, we do not have time to properly secure them."

"And the creature?"

"I teleported it," Light replied with a smirk. "Out to sea, a kilometer out. All I could get reducing my casting time but it worked out. He won't know which way the boat is, so that bought us time to heal you up. I assume Kevin simply let him go and will recast the spell so don't think that's a permanent solution. We'll see it again."

"Yay? Sorry I was so useless, getting taken out right at the start like that."

"No more useless than I was," Olaph grumbled. "I hardly did anything. Maybe I should have gone for something bigger after all. But those weapons scared me."

"Well, they're ours now," Light announced, helping Paige up and going to collect them. "I'll stick them in the old pocket dimension, unless one of you wants one right now?"

"I could repair one or upgrade one with my firearms and electronics skills, but I do not have the rifle skill. I would have to use it untrained so I will stick to my bow for now, thank you."

"Okay." He popped all four in and looked around. "Let's head to the next floor, I'm sure master vampire Bloodtooth has more surprises for us."

"Master vampire Suckingblood?" Paige asked.

"Master vampire Sucksalot," Sinjorino chimed in.

Everyone looked to Olaph, who was certainly not going to lower himself to such juvenile behavior and engage in name calling. And not only because he couldn't think of something better, no sir!

"Stop making fun of me you jerks!" Kevin's voice came over the intercom again. "You're all so dead!"

"Yeah, your mom is dead," Light mocked.

“She died of ovarian cancer only a few years after I was born!” Kevin insisted. “You think a few thousand years have made me forget her? That the pain of her absence has eased even one bit with the passage of time? Because it hasn’t. You’re a horrible person!”

“Oh God, really? I’m so sorry.”

“You should be, jerk.” There was a snap and the sound cut off.

There was a moment of silence. “Do you think he was telling the truth?” Olaph asked finally.

“Don’t start feeling sorry for him,” Light demanded. “There’s a reason I started chasing him down, and he’s made his choices. Once they get turned a vampire quickly loses its humanity. Come on.”

The group made their way to the end of the hall and down the stairway. Turning the corner Light, who was in the lead and once again had his sword out, put up a hand so no one walked through him. Paige, in second place and determined to make up for going down so quickly last time peered over his shoulder.

“The creature again?” she muttered.

“And it probably won’t be as easily tricked as it was before,” he agreed. “Let’s stay on our toes.”

“I’m a dancer but not a ballerina.”

“It’s just a human saying.”

“Ah!”

They headed in, watching the creature at the end of the hallway warily. If anything it seemed even more annoyed than before, which didn’t seem possible as it wasn’t really alive and didn’t “know” it had been teleported. This one was a totally separate creature. They approached with confidence and expecting a trap.

“Uh, are you running out of battery power?” Sinjorino asked, as the elemental body form of Light started to flicker and dim as they made it two steps down the hallway.

He looked down at one of his arms. “That’s not supposed to happen. Some kind of magical-” the sound of the doors unlocking startled them, and the lights went out. They could see okay because Light’s elemental body still glowed a little bit, but it made what happened next even more creepy. Once again the door behind them slammed shut, and the doors nearest them opened. But instead of more thralls, because reusing a trap is simply not done, this time out poured “Rats!” Paige shrieked.

“I’ve been saving them for a long time,” Kevin told them over the intercom. “Enjoy yourselves.”

But they were not *simply* rats. They were, in fact, the undead *skeletons* of rats animated by magic. Hundreds of them, pouring out from the doors both ahead and behind in a bony wave, clacking together as they climbed over each other to begin their attack.

“Quick, take the Shadowblade!” Light insisted, pulling the blade and tossing it to Paige. This was of course very dangerous but the only way he could transfer it without first putting his own blade away. She shrieked again as the hilt of the sword flew towards her, but did manage an untrained catching check to try and grab it. Because, like, who puts points into that skill? She actually calculated a 12, so had no trouble at all snatching it out of the air and turning into shadow. With this the skeleton hoard become... Not much of a problem at all.

“This is vaguely unpleasant,” Sinjorino remarked, as the rat swarm closest to them crawled up, biting and scratching at their *DTR* 4 body with their *OTR* 3 claws and teeth. In other words they couldn’t be hurt, just as Paige and Light couldn’t be hurt and indeed damaged the bones of the rats that tried to jump upon them. Olaph just sat on a camera looking down at the scene with a concerned look that gradually became amused. Eventually all the rat skeletons had tested themselves against the two elemental bodies and destroyed themselves. Paige had, through no active part of her own, destroyed them more quickly as it seemed her elemental form was the more effective at the moment. Of course

taking extra damage from being so small helped tremendously, even a random amount of damage from 1-6 multiplied by 5 adds up quickly.

“Some kind of elemental dampening field,” Light mused, making sure nothing was moving. “That’s the trouble with fighting someone more than once. They get to know what you’re going to do and can plan around it.”

“Is there such a spell?” Paige asked.

“In the beta section. Look at elemental domain.”

She took a second. “Right, I see it. Makes one element stronger while the opposite one is weakened. I bet this shadow form is actually more powerful than usual here.”

“Okay, okay, enough chatter,” Kevin came back and told them. “I didn’t figure you would come *with* someone, you always worked alone before,” he complained. “So that wasn’t as effective as I hoped. You know how many years I’ve collected rats to make that happen? What a waste.”

“Indeed. Look, just give me back my sister and we’ll call it day. You can change your plans and attack me again another day. I mean you seem to get off on it.”

“Oh no, you’re here, and today you and I are going all the way.”

“You want me deep inside... the ship?”

“I’m going to make you beg for me to stop!”

“After what you’ve just seen, are you sure it’s going to be hard enough?”

“Are you two *flirting* with each other?” Olaph asked. “Because I am still a holy man. I could move down the corridor if you wanted to continue your double entendres.”

“No!” both shouted.

There was an awkward pause.

Light sighed. “Anyway, get your stupid ally over here so we can take care of it and move on.”

“Humm, two magic users that can’t be hurt by it plus two people I don’t even know or care about. And honestly if I did seriously hurt them they would want revenge on me and then I’d have even more people after me. What to do...”

“Repent your sins, and beg the mercy of our Lord!” Olaph suggested.

“Yeah let me think about that one- wait no.”

“Hey, I’ve already almost died!” Paige reminded him in a huff, putting her fists on her hips. “You’re already on thin ice, buddy. If you’re going to be attacking Light here all the time and I’m going to get caught up in it, The System better give me the two points and let me choose some more backgrounds! I’m picking money and suddenly getting super wealthy, that’s better than stupid old magic.”

“Wealth is pretty great. You know what? You can have this one. I’ll just have my summon meet you in the next room.” The door unlocked and it turned to go, heading down the stairs. “If I can’t hurt Light at the moment physically I’ll just have to make sure his friends don’t survive the experience and hurt him emotionally. Good luck trying to defend them against what I have planned for you next. Muhah haha ah ah haha hahaha!” He finished off with a laugh and the speakers went dead again.

“What, was he a theater kid before the fall?” Sinjorino asked.

“I really don’t know,” Light admitted. “Is there some way to bypass all his little ‘experiences’ and fight him directly, do you think?”

“The exact layout of a craft like this would be top secret,” they explained. “All I have for references is my memories of watching video tours of old WWII vessels. Perhaps we could use the flight spell, and ‘burrow’ if you will into the lower decks from the outside, through the armor. But I would still have no idea which part of the ship to attack from. Plus making a hole in the side of a boat, even one you won’t be returning to-”

“Please don’t,” said the voice of the ship. “I really would rather not sink.”

“And there’s that,” they went on, gesturing at the speaker. “You would be destroying a being such as myself. They’re in the shape of an ancient engine of destruction and terror, but that’s not their fault. Getting them away from the vampire “captain” is the right thing to do.”

“A double rescue mission!” Paige announced. “Can we get double the rewards?” She looked around expectantly. “Uh, quest update?”

Quest Update*
Defeat the Vampire

Save Light’s sister from the vampire (in progress)
Wrest control of the vessel from them (in progress)**

Quest component revealed
Reward: Additional XP
Reward: Grateful AI (Effective 2 point resources background)

**Note: You may only receive quest updates
when 50% or more of the quest is complete.
**Some quests have hidden components that are
only disclosed during/after the quest is complete*

SinJORINO made an electronic whistling sound. “Not bad.”

“I should say so,” Light agreed. “But why is it listed separately? Isn’t defeating Kevin getting the ship away from him?”

“I wish I could answer that,” the ship announced sadly. “But it might help you, which goes against my orders.”

“He can’t have rigged you to blow if he loses?” SinJORINO asked, aghast.

“I can’t answer that question.”

The party shared a look. Was their victory going to be Kevin’s triumph after all?

“Hey, you’re only two points though?” Paige told it. “That can’t be right.”

“My usefulness is limited,” it admitted. “While many of my systems do still work or could be repaired much of that repair is probably beyond your current means due to material acquisition or production limitations. Plus, I am a boat, and you all live on the land. There are few islands and going out too far results in very bad conditions, even for me. That probably lowers my effective score, however I am scored by The System. If you all wanted to be pirates or something like that, perhaps my score would be higher?”

“Live like a pirate ‘cause pirates are free! You are a pirate!” SinJORINO singsonged.

“I’m not though?” Paige insisted hesitantly.

“Wish I could be... Part of your world!”

“Now that’s an oldie,” the ship said. “Did you like the remake better or the original?”

“Oh the original for sure!”

“Plenty of time to talk later,” Light told them both. “Rescue now. Let’s see what the master vampire has in store for us on the next floor.”

“Right,” the group agreed.

“I really hope you can rescue me,” the ship said. “Talking to someone about movies again would be great. Even if they are all thousands of years old now.”

We should introduce them to Dean, he might even have a bunch of them somewhere, thought Light.

“We’ll make movies again one day,” Olaph promised. “Just you wait.”

They headed down the next set of stairs and crossed several decks, the creature always at the other end of the hall, beckoning them on. They were all on their guard, moving slowly and dreading the next time the door swung shut to see what would pop out at them. Paige had kept the sword, moving across the shadows of which there were plenty. Light seemed to get brighter and dimmer as they moved, probably moving in and out of areas covered by the domain spell that was weakening the light element. Finally they came to the largest space they had seen, what looked like a kitchen area with plain seating and a counter.

“The mess,” Sinjorino announced.

“It’s going to be a mess all right,” Kevin’s voice came back over the intercom. “Ship, do your duty.”

“Yes, captain.”

Something was spat out from the walls and started unfolding itself. In the low light boxy, robotic forms with weapons on long stalks took shape. Four of them, almost as tall as a person, and not showing any signs of wear.

“Drones!” Sinjorino announced. “Internal ship defenses!”

The eyes of the drones flashed red, and they started to advance. The creature stepped in behind them, ready to join in the fray.

“Sorry,” said the ship. “Captain’s orders.”

Chapter 34

The Final Battle

Where: Near the center of the Battleship

When: Moments later

“I’ll get my orbs going when it’s my turn,” Paige told them. “But I can only target one at a time so I’ll have it target the ally first.”

“I’ll try to keep it busy,” Light replied.

“No, combine it! Your detect enemies spell maybe?” Olaph suggested, buzzing nearby.

Both looked at the other with a “why didn’t I think of that?” look and Light started casting. “How long?” he asked.

“I’m on a four I’ll cast instantly!” she replied. “My reactive is a two!” *Have to hope just regular amounts of energy thrown in will be enough.*

“Got it.”

Light started casting, detect enemies was only 2 segments to cast, but he too had to make a reactive check for a spell combination check. He managed it with a 12, exactly what he needed. His magic combat was a 2 so he was now at segment 3 to start casting. Olaph went next, turning from the tiny drake form to the ogre form. “Me cover tiny people.”

Light started casting, detect enemies was only 2 segments normally anyway but if Paige was at a 4 she would need to go to 6 to do the check, so he added a segment, leaving space for her spell.

Sinjinorino made a check to get into a good position, getting an 8 which was logical, there was nothing even resembling cover in this room.

They and Paige were up, Paige making her own spell combination check of 7, which again was enough for such a low level spell. Sinjinorino made their LUCK check to begin pelting the room with arrows, but the drones had no luck, so they were going to be struck first. One of them took 5 damage to the head.

Three of the four drones now fired their lasers, picking the largest target because why wouldn’t they do that? Olaph’s right arm took 7 damage while his body took 3.

Paige was up, and Light finished casting, so their magic combined. Paige threw in as much energy as she could, getting a total 19 rating at the time of casting. Her casting check was a 23 with her penalty, so 9 orbs appeared along with a new blue box both ignored.

Enemy Seeking Orbs

Uranus + Jupiter

Created by combining the Elemental Orbs spell with Detect Enemies, the orbs are no longer tied to one enemy at a time. Upon activation, they will fire at the nearest target specified an enemy by the original caster. All orbs will be expended until no enemies remain.

Original casting by Light Kajombro and Paige Malplenan.

Meanwhile, Olaph took another laser to the body, taking another 2 damage.

Sinjinorino took another shot, doing 10 damage to the head of another drone. *You know, I could be a much more effective combatant in situations like this with a slightly better spell put on the string. Something that would maybe jump to other combatants like electricity. I mean look at those orbs, one spell and she gets a bunch of attacks all in a row. Maybe do the dual strings but have one an area effect that could be the knockout element, and one seeking bolt, that isn't.*

But that was for a later time as three orbs went off, all of them focused on the nearest drone. It took some major damage, most notably 25 to the head which blew it completely off. Sadly it was the third one that managed this, not the first, so the first two orbs were expended in vain.

“Sorry!” she apologized to the ship with a wince.

Light, Sinjinorino, and Olaph were now up. Olaph noticed the creature was just standing there, he hesitated to make any move that might spur it into action. *What's he doing? Seeing if the drones can finish the job? Maybe he's worried he'll be defeated, the ship will become ours, and doesn't want the drones falling into our hands?* “You stay right there!” he commanded the thing and held his action. *I don't mind taking a few more laser hits if it keeps Sinjinorino out of the line of fire.*

Light put an elemental bolt cast with 0 delay into a drone, the same one that had taken Sinjinorino's arrow, and it flopped to the side in a shower of sparks, and stopped moving.

Meanwhile they put another arrow into the next drone, and decided they might actually make it through this after all!

Another orb went off, punching through a drone's body but not dropping it, and Paige was up again. She had seen the last attack of her orb of course and targeted the same one with a needle. This was of course electricity based, being Uranus, and so the thing was zapped pretty badly and started smoking.

There was only one drone left, the orb and Sinjinorino fired at it. Either would have disabled it, and it too stopped moving, rolling to a stop.

The orbs now had a new target, the creature. Three of them fired at it, and now it tried to do something, namely dodge. The orbs were too much for it though, and all three hit. Sinjinorino, the last orb, and the monster all went at the same time. It “knew” it could be hurt now, but it wasn't alive and Kevin just wanted to do as much damage as possible, so it simply tore into Olaph who did try to dodge. Sadly the creature got a 34 to attack, so he took ten damage as the creature's claws raked across his chest.

“You no beat me!” he taunted. *Please don't beat me. I can't take much more damage thank you very much.*

Sinjinorino did a called shot, dropping their use of Bow-Fu as they would likely hit the head and the creature was more wounded in the body. They got a 15, but mentally winced as the shot simply bounced off. *Right, they're too tough for this spell. There's nothing I can do to it! Maybe throw a drone at it?*

“Olaph, back off, that's all that's left,” Light told him, throwing a Neptune bolt at it. Well, he tried anyway, but only got a 4 on the check. Had he calculated minimum, a 3, he would have backfired, but he was fine.

The monster pressed the advantage, slashing at Olaph again. *Stupid thing is so quick!* It was a 15 because of penalties, and Olaph spent energy to dodge because he was at penalties too. He just managed it, ties go to the defender, and he sucked his gut in and the claws hit only air. “Ha ha, you miss!” *Get this thing away from me please!*

“Olaph, here!” Paige tossed the Shadowblade to him, and Olaph reached for it. He got a 10, trying it untrained, which was enough, and he turned shadow like. He didn't heal, because only damage

sustained “while in the form” is healed, but at least he was now immune to the creature’s strikes. Of course, it wasn’t stupid, or to be more accurate Kevin wasn’t stupid, and that’s who was controlling it. So the creature simply switched targets, going after the now vulnerable Paige. She cast a quick deflection spell using all the energy she could, 20 vs 31. This was still enough to knock it off enough she only took 8 damage to the body. A pretty serious wound as she only had a 10 capacity there. She cried out.

The creature and Light were now up, and it brought its hand back to finish the job. Light stuck a hand through it, casting his teleportation spell as it had worked before, trying to get out of the ship again. He got an 18, having spent 6 energy, and as Paige cried out and threw herself to the side both Light and the creature vanished.

“Oh come on, not again,” complained Kevin over the intercom. “Talk about cheap. I was about to finish one of you guys off.”

“I would have spent XP,” Paige confidently replied. “They would have taken it before it could kill me.”

“Yeah, yeah, maybe. Honestly, you guys are really starting to annoy me you know that?”

“My heart bleeds for you,” she replied, showing a hand stained red with blood. “Literally.”

“You should get that looked at.”

“Working on it.” She started casting her healing spell, and Light joined in once he returned.

“Me helpful?” Olaph asked.

“We couldn’t have taken those laser bolts,” Light told him. “You did good. Better shrink down though, you won’t fit through the doors like that. Maybe let me heal you first? Don’t know how that works, I don’t want that wound to suddenly kill you when you’re smaller.”

“Okay.”

Healed up and ready for the next round, the group left the mess hall and headed down. They descended the decks, moving through the halls and alert for any more ambushes by the vampire’s forces. There were none, and finally they stood in front of a door that seemed different from the others.

“There is a high probability this door is the entrance to the command center,” Sinjorino told them. “Kevin is most likely there.”

“Time to see what my newest acquisition can do,” Olaph muttered, moving down the hallway and enlarging, calling upon the power of the Mishipeshu stone. He became much larger and longer, a puma shaped creature with long claws, horns, and a long but thin tail. “Most of my powers are weather control,” he admitted, finding he could speak just fine. “But I can still call lightning and ice, and my claws are sharp.” He held them up.

“He could have any sort of creature in there,” Light cautioned. “Be on your guard.”

Paige unfurled her metal arms, just in case, and everyone nodded. They turned the wheel on the door and pushed it open. A magical glow met their eyes as they filed in, and Kevin, seated in a chair in the middle of the room, swiveled to meet their gaze. At his side was the creature, and dotted around the walls were various screens showing different parts of the ship. One of those places seemed to be the brig, as a lone woman was chained to a bench and locked in a cell down there. As most of the ship was automated there were no physical controls in evidence, the captain simply told the ship what to do and it was done. He didn’t need to order a bunch of people to push buttons and such to make things happen. So the room was spacious, looked like it had more chairs at one time, but was otherwise empty. Light almost called out to his sister, but decided she would never hear him and instead glared at Kevin.

“Welcome,” he greeted them. “You finally made it.”

He’s holding a spell. He’s got it cast and only needs to mentally release it. Doesn’t seem to be Mars, what’s he planning? I don’t recognize the symbols in the circle.

“Wait, I am disappointed,” Paige told him. “It’s just you and your buddy there? No wolves? No skeletons of wolves? No more thralls, no drones, no zombies of any kind? What sort of final battle is this?”

Kevin looked a bit confused. “Zombies? I’m a vampire not a necromancer. Why would I have zombies? I just thought the rat skeletons were hilarious, I wouldn’t have done it if I knew they would hardly be a threat to you. So much time wasted.”

“Are you sure?” she asked coyly. “I thought all vampires were neck romancers.”

Everyone winced at how awful that one was.

“You’ve been waiting this entire time to make that pun haven’t you?” Kevin demanded.

“Maybe?”

“Glad you could get it out of your system. And to answer your question, no, I’ll be taking care of you all myself. My precious pet here,” he stroked the creature, “and I will be more than enough.”

“We’ve taken care of it several times now,” Light reminded him. “I don’t see why this time will be different.”

“That is because you lack imagination, my dear Light. You won’t be able to just teleport him away this time. I’ll be going after your companions first, in any case.”

“You think that spell you’re holding will help you?”

“I do! If there’s nothing else perhaps we could get on with it?”

“I have a question,” Olaph spoke up. “If you’ll indulge me?”

“Oh, what is it no- wait, weren’t you that tiny dragon before? No, I don’t care, never mind. What’s the question?”

“How did you manage all this? All these spells, and this whole ship, I mean I know you’ve probably been around a long time but it’s still a bit much, isn’t it?”

“Why, The System, of course!” he replied as if that should be completely obvious.

“I don’t follow.”

He shook his head. “It will happily provide as much XP as I need to learn spells to keep up my end of Light’s two point weakness. And as everything I’ve done in the past two months is in service of that, it’s been very accommodating. The ship I actually had from years ago, so I just needed to get you here.”

“The System wouldn’t hand you XP!” Paige insisted. “Especially not to someone evil. I don’t believe you!”

“What’s your explanation, then?” he asked with a smirk. “I assure you it’s true. The System isn’t keeping track of my morality, it only wishes to ensure I live up to my end of the bargain. I’m giving Light there two points, that means he gets two background points. If I don’t provide an adequate challenge for him I don’t even know what would happen to me.”

Probably be replaced with someone else that could challenge me, Light thought. And maybe he would just fade away? Who can say what The System does to people it doesn’t need anymore.

“But you must have him as a two point weakness as well!” she went on. “So how is it not handing out XP to him in order to battle you?”

“Probably because he’s been running around doing other things,” he decided. “Had he been specifically training or trying to find me no doubt it would have. But he didn’t.”

“It’s true, I don’t think about Kevin too much,” Light admitted. “Why would I?”

“Maybe you should have,” he grumbled. “Your not doing so is going to be the death of you!” He hesitated. “If there are no more questions, of course? I would hate for you to die still wondering about some part of my plan? No?” He looked everyone over. “Shall we get started then?”

“After you,” Light allowed, with a wave of his hand.

“Overconfidence or honorable, I forget which you had...” he mused. “No matter! Look upon my final form and despair!” The magical circle winked out, and Kevin wasn’t there anymore. Instead the

creature had changed, now appearing shorter but as though Kevin and it were now one creature. “Who wants to go first?” it roared.

Of course, it wasn't exactly any of them that had a say in the matter, The System calculated it and determined (big surprise) Kevin was going first, with a 26. Next nearest was Sinjorino, with a 17. The battle started, Kevin vanishing and appearing in front of them. He simply raked his claws along their chest, forcing them to try parry with a kick, as they were holding their bow at the ready. This was calculated at minimum, an 11, while Kevin got a 26 on his attack. This smashed right through the armor they were wearing and doing 19 damage to them. So fast it took even them by surprise Kevin shifted and said “dazzle” while looking at Olaph. Magical sparks appeared out of nowhere and making him stagger back. Sinjorino was now up, as was Light, and somehow Kevin again. Warning messages were flashing in Sinjorino's vision but they had to do something, so they took a step back and drew back their bow. Kevin didn't seem to care about dodging, and it didn't matter. He started casting a spell as the arrow slammed into him, which he totally ignored because his DTR was high enough he could do that sort of thing. He also ignored Light's blade through his back, focusing on the magical energies he was gathering.

Paige was up next, and made a magical combat check, calculating a 9. This seems low, but Kevin wasn't actually trying to hide what he was doing, in fact it seemed he was going to take *extra* time to cast this spell because he felt nothing in this room was a danger to him. She realized he would go on a segment of 10, and she was currently on a segment of 5.

I saw how he just moved, and he almost killed Sinjorino in one hit! Neither of the others is going to be able to do anything, it's up to me. With my delay of 7 if I act right now I'm still going to be too late. He'll have finished casting his spell. I have to spend an XP, and hope I can disrupt him while he's busy finishing up his casting. She made a spirit manipulation check, calculating a 27 after putting 6 energy into her RESolve. On her next action she could now spend 33 energy, and she was planning on doing so. She spent 1 XP to instantly go again, and slammed all that energy into her second best combat spell, elemental needle. *The orbs are nice, but he can teleport around the room and his stats seem scary. I have to at least put him at penalties as soon as I can.* She calculated a 38 on her attack, aiming for Kevin's head, and he did try to dodge it despite it being directly behind him and so he was at a flanking penalty. He only got a 25 to dodge, with his REFlexes stat of 21 he hadn't bothered to put energy in, a perhaps fatal mistake as 5 slivers of elemental electricity slammed into him at once. This exploded his head with 172 damage, halved because he was currently a +1 size creature. The System has this to say about the beta spell “Fusion.”

Either upon death of the fused creature or simply ending the spell, each partner takes half any damage sustained and retains a like amount of energy.

Even generously taking this to mean half of the actual capacity of the body part, in this case 39 for the head, a vampire can only take 23 damage before going into their mist form to regenerate. This is not what happened. What instead happened was the cabin being coated in a light dusting of sand as the form of the combined creature exploded from the backfiring of magic. There was a stunned silence for a moment.

“You've got to be kidding me!” Light moaned, realizing what had happened.

“Guess that's it then,” said the voice of the ship. “Well, it was a good run I suppose. It's a funny old world isn't it?”

“What do you mean?” Sinjorino asked, trying to ignore all the flashing red warnings. “You’re free now.”

“You would think so, wouldn’t you?” the ship asked. There was a muffled noise like something blowing up, the ship shuddered a bit, and the group watched in horror on the cameras as water started rushing into the place. “Captain’s orders, and all that. Well, as they say, finish on a song.” The voice started to sing. “I’ll say goodbye to love. No one ever cared if I should live or die. Time and time again the chance for love has passed me by. And all I know of love. Is how to live without it. I just can’t seem to find it.”

“I’ve got to find my sister!” Light insisted. “How long do you think we have?” he asked Sinjorino.

“I can offer you some estimate...”

“This ship isn’t sinking,” Paige told them. “Not if I have anything to say about it. Go, get your sister just in case but I’m heading up,” she told everyone. “I’ll buy us time.”

“What are you going to-”

“Just go!” she shouted. “There’s no time!”

The groups separated, Paige easily shadow stepping back the way they had come. It seemed all the doors on the ship were now opened, probably “captains orders” to help it sink faster. She ignored water and flickering lights, heading to the deck. Bursting out she looked around, certain this would work.

The ship is all one piece. I’m going to show them just how foolish he was, looking down on me as a natural magician. She cast her energy gathering spell and then gathered the rest of her energy, all sixty of it, and threw it into telekinesis magic targeting the ship under her. She had no idea what result she needed to lift the thing, but if this didn’t work nothing was going to save them, she had to risk it. She cast, calculating a 74 result on her check. Energy whooshed out of her and took hold of the vessel, allowing her to lift 295,147,910,000,000,000 kg total, which is not *quite* the mass of the entire planet but it’s close. We’re going to say it’s enough to lift one tiny battleship. It slowed, then reversed, rising out of the water completely such that it poured out, and all she had to do was keep it here for a bit while they figured out some way of keeping it from sinking again when the spell ended. For the moment Paige was in control of the world’s only flying battleship.

Quest Completed
Defeat the Vampire

You saved Reclina and the old world battleship did not sink

Rewards: Remnant battleship can be made an ally
All participants receive 9.462 XP

Moments later the group tumbled out of the nearest doorway, Reclina among them. She was looking around as if not believing her eyes, and to be fair a floating battleship isn’t something you see every day.

“Is she lifting the whole place?” Olaph asked.

“Yes I am,” she shouted. “Bow before me, mortals, and tremble!” She started laughing uproariously.

“See, this is why we don’t like naturals,” Light whispered. “Goes right to their heads, magic. They turn into dark lords and ladies every time.”

“Now what do we do?” Reclina asked. “We’re still on a boat that’s full of holes.”

“I can craft some temporary seals, perhaps,” Sinjorino announced. They were looking better, probably healed by Light when they were off screen. “There must be some sort of working torch around here. I will just need metal panels large and thick enough.”

“We can look. Maybe we can cut apart some interior walls?” Light wondered.

“Meanwhile, hey Paige?” Olaph yelled.

“What’s up?”

“Lower us a bit. I’ll swim around the ship and see if I can’t find where the holes are.”

“Got it.”

He went over the side and the two others went back down. “I’ll see if I can’t find the core first,” Sinjorino was saying. “If I can remove the lock on the ship and make you the new captain, the AI might be able to be more helpful and can tell us where, if any, emergency stores can be found. The System message said it could be done and I do have the capability to plug into it directly.”

“Good idea, if nothing else maybe we can convince it to close the doors and not let so much water in. We don’t need the whole ship. Even just a few rooms would be enough to get us back to shore. Though I hate to think how we’re going to do long term repairs on this. Though I suppose Paige could always lift it out of the water again so we can at least work on it on land...”

“You didn’t want to go with your brother?” Paige asked, as Reclina came over to her.

“Are you okay to talk? You seem to be holding this entire ship up with your magic.”

“No problem,” she assured her with a wave. “You think I can’t keep one measly spell going and talk at the same time? I could even dance!”

“Please don’t!”

“Fine, I’ll just sit here then.” She leaned back against the wall with a pout.

“Thank you. But to answer your question, not really. Don’t get me wrong I’ll have a big dinner and everything made to thank you all for coming to rescue me, but I’ve seen enough of the inside of this place to last me a lifetime.”

“Yeah, I get it,” she admitted. “I’m sure Light will say this but sorry you had to go through all that. He didn’t hurt you, did he?”

She shook her head. “I was too old for him. I would have done anything he wanted but he just made me follow him and then go into the cell. I guess he wanted both of us to perish when the ship sank, with Light trying to free me from that place.”

“Probably. Man, imagine hating someone so much you would sink a whole boat like this.”

“Er, I probably don’t want to know, but he is gone, right? He’s not going to come back?”

“Best wait until Light gets back, I’m no vampire expert.”

“Fair enough.”

“Oh I’m Paige by the way? I’m shadowing Light before I go off on my own, I only recently graduated.”

“Ah, the old unpaid internship gag?” she asked with a grin. “That’s a grift as old as time.”

“Hey, where else can you show off like this? And I’ve at least made last month’s loan payment with what I’ve made following him around. He’s not taking everything for himself.”

“Good. Knows you would knife him in the back while he was sleeping if he did, I expect.”

“Something like that.”

“Well, try to keep him out of trouble. I wish he would buy off that vampire weakness though. I’m going to be paranoid about that now.”

“Yeah we’ll have to do something, but I don’t know what. Huh, you should get the points if he really starts coming after you.”

“Maybe, but who am I going to complain to if I don’t?”
They laughed.

It took a couple of hours but finally the ship was under their command, not in any immediate danger of sinking, and taking them back under its own power. The group sat in a conference room and discussed what had happened.

“So vampires can’t be killed in the way you did it,” Light explained. “If that had been a vampire it would have turned into mist, regenerated, and we would have had to fight it again. But it didn’t. It turned into sand, which explains how all this was done. He made a copy of himself out of sand with one spell, then had that copy make a copy of itself with mud. He too made another out of mud and the copies we saw at the house were controlled from some remote location. After their defeat the sand copy went to the ship, and so now just the original is left.”

“So let’s put an end to it!” Paige insisted.

“Not that easy,” he explained. “I asked my divination spell where he is, and it gave no answer. He’s behind magical protections, so he’s beyond us at the moment.”

“It makes sense,” Olaph decided. “Until you buy off that weakness, he’ll forever be a thorn in your side. By the way sorry I didn’t get to do anything in that fight.”

“Don’t worry about it, seemed my blade would have been useless anyway.”

“My arrows were, the whole one I managed to fire. Good thinking on your part, Paige, you saved the day twice!”

“I did, didn’t I?” she asked sweetly. “Kevin needed to *go*. I saw what he did and don’t even ask me how he hit you and then cast a spell in only two segments. I’m just glad it worked I couldn’t have done that too many times and still lifted the ship. Huh. I should ask for a raise.”

“Let’s not be too hasty,” Light quickly spoke up. “You’re just doing your job here, remember.”

“So what are we going to do about Kevin?” Reclina asked. “I don’t want him grabbing me again.”

“He’ll need to put another plan into motion. He can probably have his clones up and running again in a day but he threw a whole battleship at me this time. He won’t have another one of them in his back pocket so another kidnapping plan is probably out.”

“But unless we changed every room, like back at the gate, he can come back here,” insisted Paige. “He can just teleport back.”

“It’s a problem,” he admitted, rubbing his chin. “For now she can just stay with us at the Guild building until the summoning is done and we get our next assignment. He won’t attack that place.”

“Fine,” she decided. “Maybe they’ll give me a ring that will keep me from being found and I’ll just move. They’ll want to protect me from a vampire, right?”

“Give?” Light asked, before he burst into laughter that went on, and on, and on...

“Oh my gosh!” Paige exclaimed, popping up out of her chair. “We forgot all about the thralls!”

Chapter 35

Appear from Chaos before me

Where: Battleship cabins

When: Late that evening

Paige was in one of the cabins, a narrow room with little more than a cot and a sink when she heard a person gently rapping, rapping on her chamber door. She had been checking her status page with The System and deciding if she wanted to start putting points into her spell-casting skills or just buy more magic. Maybe something to help her against a certain vampire in the future? He wasn't the only one who could learn from battles and plan for the next one, after all. And was she not a powerful wizard? Of course she was.

"You may open wide the door," she called, and she saw Light standing there. "Oh, what's up boss?" she asked. She looked him over, and he seemed a little hesitant, which wasn't exactly like him. *He's fallen in love with me and has come to confess?*

"I won't bother you for long," he said. "I just wanted to make sure you knew how much I appreciated your help in coming to rescue my sister."

"Of course," she replied, a little confused. "It's all part of the job. I go where you go and all that."

"Is it though?" he wondered. "You could have said this wasn't what you signed up for and left. The Guild may have even agreed, and given you another person to shadow without penalty. Well, anyway, I just wanted it said. Thank you. You've been a huge help, apart from that time you almost died I mean, and I guess I have to admit there are some good things about being a natural magician. This ship would have gone to the bottom of the ocean if it wasn't for you, there wasn't anything I could have done about it."

"Ah, no it wouldn't," she countered with a wave.

"You think I have a spell that could have saved it?" he asked, not believing her.

"Oh no, you would have been dead *long* before it got to that point if I hadn't been here." Her eyes twinkled as she teased him.

"That may be true," he admitted. "That elemental orbs spell is really something, I'm thinking of taking it for myself. When you leave, I mean. The group has you to cast it now so I won't steal your thunder or anything. And your other magic is useful as well, of course! I'm not saying you're only good for one thing. I'm not sure what I'll take, actually. All this time my swords have been enough, but I've always fought alone against singular targets. All this group stuff isn't my style. I just trail behind something poking it until it dies, because it can't hurt me. But now Kevin has decided to simply attack me in a different way, and with beta level spells no less. I'm not as invincible as I once thought."

"So you found the spell he used to fuse with his little pet?"

"I think the fusion spell is what he picked, it matches up with what we saw happen. He must have been at a severe penalty, holding at least three fairly high level spells. But he was still a danger. If you hadn't taken him out like you did..."

"Thankfully I wasn't just born an elf, but with a spirit well background as well. That makes a lot of the difference."

He sighed. "It sure does. One of the reasons those like me look down on natural casters is their limitation. How many are born with both gifts? Not many, so they can only cast a few spells in a day

and then they're useless. Maybe an energy draining spell will become standard for their training, like hygiene and making food and water are now? Especially as they can just get it for free."

"Probably."

"Anyway, this is far afield from what I wanted to say, which I have said, so I'll just go now. Thank you. For putting your life on the line with me, and sticking with me. If you want to say your apprenticeship with me is done when we get back, I'll support it. You'll be an excellent addition to any team that will have you, that much is clear to me and what I'll put in my report."

"Wow, thanks. But I'll stick with you a bit longer, if that's okay. I have a feeling things are going to get interesting after we do this summon. If we get answers or not, either way is going to change how we see the world and how the Guild sees its place in it. You're pretty high ranking, you'll be invited to all the right meetings about where we go from here. I'll at least want to be nearby so I can keep my ear to the ground."

"Fair enough. I have no idea what Sinjorino or Olaph's plans are. We'll have finished his mission of finding out why holy power was cut off, he may go back to the church. Sinjorino may just go back into the rotation of missions like they were before?"

Paige blinked for a moment. "I guess that's what life is like for those of us that choose to wander, rather than open up shops or whatever. We're always meeting new people, getting to know them awhile, and then splitting up again. I wonder if that's something to be celebrated or a real bummer?" *I think I know how I feel about it. Bummed out.*

He shrugged. "Depends on if you enjoy meeting new people and don't form attachments easily. It'll be two days before this ship reaches land, so it tells me, oh and I'm gathering possible names tomorrow so if anything comes to mind let me know. I'm not letting it keep the name Get Revenge on Light or whatever it was. So we'll be together at least that much longer. Have a good night."

"You too."

He closed the door.

Destroyer-chan? I Beat up a Vampire and all I got was This Old World Battleship? Sail McBoaterton? Huh, I am terrible at coming up with names for things...

The patches held up while the boat got back to the nearest port, which honestly couldn't handle a ship of this size anyway. But those there got a special treat, as Paige showed off her abilities again and floated it into a position it could be worked on. Light made sure the harbormaster knew it was the property of the Mage's Guild and no one was to go near it for the moment, and as he had just seen the thing lift itself out of the water and fly because of one innocuous looking elf, he tripped all over himself to say he would post guards and keep others away from it. Light thanked him and said someone would be along from the Guild to inspect it and figure out what they wanted done with it shortly. He had given the AI a code word so it would know that person was an official and it should take orders from that person. The ship couldn't defend itself anymore, it had no drones left, but that still didn't mean it couldn't make trouble for those inside. It was relieved to be away from Kevin and looking forward to being of use to others again.

It doesn't exactly need fuel, at least according to it the power source it has will last for many more thousands of years. But what am I going to do with a huge ship like this? Better to have some experts, i.e. remnants, go over it with a fine tooth comb. We already have a lot of power, political and otherwise, so we're the best people to deal with it should it go bonkers and no one will complain too much because it's not adding that much to what we already have. We're not going to use it to start destroying coastal towns or something. But I'll earn some political capital for 'capturing' it and bringing it to them, rather than simply hiding it out in the ocean as my own personal base. Plus I would love to see Kevin's face if he does teleport back to the thing and it's swarming with Guild mages.

Of the wounded thralls, no trace had been found, so it looked like they had gotten away as well, and were now probably back with their master and Light wondered if he would punish them or decide there was nothing they could have done and leave it at that? Wasn't really his business and he felt bad for the people now "under the spell" of the vampire but what could he really do about it?

Now on dry land again Light teleported the group back to Reclina's house so she could lock the place up properly and get some changes of clothes and whatnot, and then to the Guild building. He made his report about their activities the last few days, and someone was dispatched to take care of the battleship. They were informed a place had been selected for the summoning, and many of the items had been found so the event was only days away, and to rest up before then. The group gratefully accepted.

It was now the day of the event, and tensions were high. A stone building had been raised in the middle of nowhere, big enough for a dragon at least because one had been invited. Milling around the place were various summoners, high ranking mages, three chaos mages that seemed mostly sane at the moment, others called artificers, and of course their group. Olaph was there but as himself, if he needed to become something else things would really be going downhill and he just wanted to complete his quest. The person in charge went over what was about to happen.

"You all have your blindfolds?" he asked. He looked around made sure everyone had one. Sinjorino did not, they were just going to turn off their visual processing, and the dragon didn't. The dragon said, when being offered one, "I will simply keep my eyes closed" and no one wanted to argue with a dragon so the matter was not brought up again. "Good. Once everyone is blindfolded the summoners will begin the ritual. The circles that have been chiseled into the floor by the artificers should help summon and contain the primordial we call. Those with Jupiter magic will be maintaining the restore laws spell, to hopefully negate any chaos that comes through with the being. Do not. Look. At the primordial. No matter what it tells you, keep your blindfolds on. I don't think it'll be interested in tricking us and it has nothing to gain by making us go crazy by looking at it, but be careful. If you're not a summoner, don't wander around. I have no idea how long it'll take until we randomly complete the ritual so make sure you're good for the long haul. We'll be sealing the door once we begin. Not that it would stop the thing but perhaps it will appreciate the symbolism of staying in here?"

"I think he's talking about your organic need to leak all over the place," Sinjorino stage whispered to the others.

"Yes, I got that," Light told them.

Satisfied he had given everyone the last minute chance to visit the bushes outside he nodded, and the stone doorway was sealed up. Mages started casting Jupiter spells, and everyone put on their blindfolds.

"We now begin the ritual, or whatever, maybe we won't?" one of the summoners cried. "I think I'll take a short nap." They switched to singing. "Wake me, in the moonlight, won't you, my darling?" They lay down and started fake snoring.

Off to a good start? everyone thought.

The ritual went on for some time. The summoners quacked like ducks, walked backwards, played blindfolded checkers, tripped over themselves, one guy was yodeling the whole time at least that's what Light *assumed* he was trying to do it was pretty annoying and he hoped it was all part of the plan. They smashed the objects that had been brought, expressed remorse for their actions, and then pretended to forget the whole thing.

"Excuse me, sailor!" one of the summoners had said, after bouncing off Light.

Er, did that person not have any clothes on?

Finally, reality itself flexed and there was an unmistakable presence in the chamber with them.

“Oh, sorry about that,” said a voice. It seemed to come from everywhere and no one could tell what language it was or even if it was language but they understood it and it almost but not quite drove them mad but it was fine the chaos mages were seeming to enjoy themselves and that wasn’t a bad sign at all right? “Didn’t mean to step on you there when I came in. Let’s just slide you out from under there, there you go all better now. Oh, stop screaming you didn’t touch anything too gross. Hi everyone! All this for me? You shouldn’t have. What a strange little box you are worried about me aren’t you we seem to be out in the sticks did you little people want something?”

“Indeed we did, er, mighty primordial!” said the one guy assigned to speak to the creature. “Specifically, we want to-”

“Have supreme comfort, in a pair of underwear? I’ll see what I can do...”

“Ah, no, mighty one. Our need is-”

“Bob.”

“What?”

“Call me Bob. That’s short enough for you guys, isn’t it? I forget how much your tiny organic brains can process at one time so I figured I’d keep it simple for you.”

“We appreciate that... Bob.”

“No problem. Is that guy all right? That one there, he seems to be trying to negate chaos with magic and he’s not looking too good.”

“I’m sure he will be fine, we will not be taking off our blindfolds. Now, the reason for summoning you.”

“Go on.”

“We wish to know if you know where The System came from, and why holy power has been cut off from our world.”

“Oh, do you like it? We put a lot of thought into it, well, my bosses did at any rate I am far too low to be considered a decision maker but we all collaborated on it so we do hope you’ve been having fun with it. Please say you have? It really would mean just so much to us.”

“Ah...”

“Don’t be shy. Oh no, you hate it, don’t you? I have to bring back the report that you hate it? You know my bosses don’t like bad news, they tend to kill the messenger. Oh no, oh woe is me. Maybe I can hide out here, is there like a spare- what are you called? That bigger thing there, with the, what do you call them? Teeth?”

“You mean me?” asked the dragon.

“Yes, you!”

“I’m a dragon.”

“Dragon, right, of course you are. Do you have a spare dragon skin I could maybe drape over myself? Or squeeze into? I’m sure I could hide-”

“No.”

“Maybe a tree? A tall tree? You still have those right? Hollow it out maybe? I just need to lay low for a few-”

“Mighty- Bob. Are you saying The System was created by the primordials?”

“That’s right!”

There was a shocked silence.

Should have known, Light thought.

“Why?” he finally croaked.

“Oh, you want to know *why*?”

“If you don’t mind?”

“First you have to tell me if you like it or not.”

“I- I mean it’s fine? We don’t like the fact you can just take magic right out of it but otherwise it’s very... helpful?”

“You do hate it!” the being wailed. “Oh no, what am I going to tell the others? I’ll be strung up for sure! By my- well, you don’t have these. Or these either. But that’s what they’ll use bet your- shoot you don’t have that either do you?”

“Perhaps if we knew the reason, we might like it better?” he suggested.

“Fine,” they sighed. “I guess if you’re going to insist. See, the thing is, my masters get a certain amount of shall we say enjoyment out of watching you. Not individual you, no, no, no, that would be silly. And honestly none of you are around for very long so it’s like... What are those things you have?”

“We have a lot of things.”

“Small things, flat, you carry them? Cats? No, those are alive what I’m thinking about isn’t alive. Suitcases? Clipboards? There’s like marks in them and stuff.”

“Books?”

“Yes, that’s it. Books. It’s like twenty different books all in a row. We prefer one really long book. So we watch your civilization. What passes for it lately, anyway. You were sort of getting somewhere after those wars you had, those were very exciting by the way! But then you sort of slowed down again. We were getting bored so my masters spiced things up with a bit of chaos, you call it the moon I think? And then you really went backwards, and we thought, oops! Little bit of a whoopsy on our part. But then you came back from it! Yay! And then more wars, so exciting, and more backsliding, and now here we are! But you’re starting to stagnate again. So we decided you needed something else. So we gave you The System. So do you really not like it?”

“But then why close off Heavenly power? Did you not do that? I don’t understand how the two are connected.”

“Yeah, my masters never really liked that guy. Walking around like they own the place, who does that person think she is? The nerve. Anyway, you were relying on that place being there too much. So we took it away. Oh don’t worry, your ‘souls’ still go there, we didn’t change that. But you’re on your own now. You have to make your world work and stop requesting the Heavens do everything for you.”

“Are you- they hardly did anything for us!”

“That’s not the way I heard it.”

“I’m not going to argue with you.”

“You didn’t have those portal things in the olden days, so we figured, maybe closing them will get you back on the right track. I mean think about it, you’ve got the knowledge of the olden times from people who were there.” There was a pause. “You can’t see it but I’m totally pointing at that robot standing there. Take my word for it. Totally pointing. And you have magical power. But you seem to hoard it? So many people could do magic and they just... don’t? For reasons? So we fixed it. You need to get moving again. Get your civilization to an even better place than it was before. You have so many more options now, but you still live in tiny stone buildings. Or wood. I mean, really.”

“So to be perfectly clear, the primordial beings imposed The System on us because we were boring them, and they want more people to do magic?”

“Not *just* magic. They want all people to reach their potential. You have so much and you’re wasting it. Figure out what happened to your planet. Start building spaceships again. Explore! Learn! Don’t just sit here. It’s boring!”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“That’s all we ask. Now, if you have no more questions, on the subject of potential, there’s a message I need to give to someone that should be here. The name is...”

“... ”

“... ”

“Go on?”

“Crap I forgot the name!”

“Er...”

“I didn’t think I would be the one called, there was a general meeting and a packet and I read the packet I did, I swear I did and I gave a pretty good answer I thought but there was a name and it was only mentioned once don’t tell me!”

“I wasn’t going to.”

“I’ll remember it! I will. It was something, oh why can’t I- Olive!”

“What?”

“Yes. Olive! I have a message for you! And an offer.”

Chapter 36

Where do we Go From Here

Where: The summoning circle location

When: No time has passed

“Come now Olive, don’t be shy,” said the primordial, as if calling a cat. “Olive? Are you- it’s not Olive is it? Oliver? Ollivander? I’m sure it had an Olive in it. Martini? No, that can’t be right.”

“I’m Olaph,” Olaph hesitantly spoke up. “Is it me you’re looking for?”

“Olaph! Of course!” the primordial exclaimed. “You have to admit I was close. I was, right? Very close. Missed it by that much. You agree, right?”

“Very close, yes.”

“I thought so. Now, tell me the truth, how do you like your fiendstone thing thus far?”

“It’s not great,” he admitted. “Don’t get me wrong the ability itself is fine. Being able to turn into things is certainly interesting, though I don’t like that I seem to take on the personality of the thing I turn into, but it’s just not for me. I liked doing magic and helping people before. I was probably going to pass on it once the beta period expired. I may get the combat capability of the form but I’m not a fighter, I’m a man of the Lord.”

The being seemed to be nodding and humming along with all this. “Yes, we thought you might say that. We took a quick peek ahead and we have an offer for you.”

“An offer?” *A peek ahead? The future? I suppose there is magic to do that.*

“A super secret *new* way of doing magic we haven’t offered anyone else. A third way, if you will. Somewhat between the natural magician way and the boring way.”

“Hey!” Light protested.

“Oh I’m sorry how many times have you levitated a battleship this week?”

“You saw that?” he squeaked.

“We have an interest in Olive- I mean Olaph here. He was nearby, don’t you know? He’s an idea guy, he’s had lots of good ideas on your little adventure here and we want to encourage ideas. That little one you offered the plant power to, what a little darling they are! They’re having so much fun and moving things forward. So many new plants just from that one tiny person, what a treat! We like that power for your world, we’ll be offering it to others soon as part of a larger beta test. But this is about you. If you agree we’ll set you up with this new method of doing magic and you can test it out. Give us some feedback. What works, what doesn’t. You can be a magical researcher of sorts, not only for us, but with magic back you can sit and do a think. Maybe come up with some ways for all those people that suddenly found out they had magic to do some good in the world. Following the rules of course.” They said this last part as though under protest. “You’ll have to give up the turning into other things power, but as you said you don’t really like it anyway.”

“I’m sorry,” said the leader of the group. “But I must protest. A new way of doing magic? Preposterous! Just what are you talking about?”

“It’s not completely new,” they admitted. “It’ll still use the same spells, for the most part, you’re familiar with now. You’ll just cast them in a different way. Don’t worry, we tried to balance it against what’s known, you won’t be lifting any battleships with it. You already have people that can do that, we want something new. Something that hasn’t been done before. Less power, much more flexible, that’s

what we went with. You like flexible people, don't you Olaph? Don't be the guy that gets in the way of progress, little one."

"I- that is-" he sputtered.

"Uh, even if I wanted to, and I am tempted, very tempted of course," *this doesn't seem like a being you say no to. His boss may just pay me a visit on their own and that would be very bad!* "How would I, as you say, give you feedback?"

"Oh that's easy. I'll just send you a friend request and we can chat any time."

Friend Request

The entity "Bob" wishes to be your friend
Add to friend list?

Accept / Deny / Block

The box hung in the air despite Olaph's closed eyes. "I have a friend list?"

"Of course you have a friends list! How would you keep track of your friends otherwise? You... You do know about the party chat right?"

"We found that, yes! But it's not like any of this came with a set of instructions." *Maybe take the hint?*

"Ah, there you are then. So that answers that question."

"I suppose it does." *And you didn't.* He hesitantly reached out and touched "Accept." The box went away.

Friend Chat

Bob: Now we can communicate at any time. Trust me, I think you're going to like what we have to offer you. It's the same deal, a year and you can accept or refuse it. So no worries. I can give you the details later if you don't want to have the others know about it.

"Let's just say I'll think about it. I'm sure there's a whole process to go through, just like when I first picked the fiendstone abilities?" he asked aloud.

"That's true, you'll have to change your lifepath and it's a whole thing," they admitted. "Well, let me know okay?"

"Sure."

"Say, what about those dungeons, did you have something to do with that?" one woman asked. "The Labyrinth of Khandax seems to be a big hole now, but parts of it keep appearing in the most inconvenient of places. We thought it was because it was no longer under the control of the governors, who vanished, but now that I know exactly what caused that..."

"That was us too," they admitted. "We wanted a way to keep you all on your... What do you call them? Beans?"

"The only phrase I know like that is keep you on your toes."

“Right, toes! I was thinking of cats again. We hated to shut the thing down completely, adventurers gotta adventure. And the fiendstone attuners need a source for their powers. So we figured, hey, why not just make it pop up randomly.”

“Thanks for that! Do you even *know* how much trouble it’s caused for us?”

“Of course! Wait, was that sarcasm? It was, wasn’t it?”

“They’re all over the place, randomly!”

“Sure. We took each floor and made it appear as a separate dungeon somewhere near people. Believe me, you’re going to want to train people to be fighters and keep them happy. This way they get treasure, XP, and can help out in a meaningful way. Win win. Practice moving high level warriors around quickly, and have fighters in towns just in case.”

“Just in case what?”

“Er, can’t tell you that, sorry.”

“I see.”

Everyone digested that.

Demon gates, thought Olaph. *Of course guards will always be trained for town’s protection and such against ogres and whatnot, but it’s like they’re saying something bad is coming without saying something bad is coming. They want us to be prepared, and clearing those dungeon pieces like we did helps to that end.*

“Anything else, fellows?” they asked.

“There’s no going back, is there?” one person asked.

“Back, and to the left?”

“To the world before The System I mean.”

“You do hate it!” they wailed. “And after we work so hard to make it-”

“No, no, I just wondered!” they insisted. “I didn’t want it just going away one day, that’s all.”

“There may be upgrades- uh, changes that tweak certain things but there’s no plans I know of to scrap the whole project. Not after this long it’s been what a day?”

“It’s been months!”

“Whatever, time is nonsense. Oh right, it isn’t for you little people is it? Never mind that. No, it’s part of your reality now. Believe me, it’s for the best.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“Good. Because I’m a billion years older than you for a start. I know what I’m talking about.”

You didn’t even remember my name. Or what a book was, you called it a cat.

“I suppose asking how it was done wouldn’t gain us anything?” one person spoke up.

“You’re right, it wouldn’t,” they agreed. “It took all of my superiors to rewrite the laws of your reality and make them stick here. Normally they can’t really act here, too much order. Ugh. But working together, which is what we want you people to do, you can accomplish great things. What they did is the proof.”

“If we had other questions can we contact you though Olaph?”

“I suppose, if you don’t abuse it. I’m not adding all of you to my friends list, and this way Olaph is sure to get the support he needs from the so called Guild. Hey you could charge by the word, Olaph. That’s a good way to make sure what they’re asking is important. And the Guild is used to charging for every little thing, isn’t it fellows?” There was an awkward silence. “See? They know I’m right.”

What would that even look like?

“Very well,” said the main guy. “Release him. Thank you for speaking with us today.”

“Of course. So I’ll just tell them you love it, right? No issues? Parties and whatnot all around down here, right?”

“Er, yes, tell them we’re getting used to it and we’re sure to, uh, hummm.”

“Yes?”

“The thing is-”

There was a large popping noise and the presence went away. “It’s gone,” one of the summoners said. “You can look around again.”

Everyone started to take off their blindfolds, and Olaph noticed a lot of sideways glances directed at him. But mostly there was a lot of blank looks, some scowling, though the chaos mages were looking pleased probably because they had heard the voice of chaos, or at least as close as they were going to get.

“So, that was a thing,” one of the mages finally said.

“Yes, I didn’t expect it to come right out and admit it,” another agreed.

“Do we trust what it’s saying? That the primordial beings did this?”

“You want to summon another one? Some of the things are broken- put your clothes back on this instant! Sorry, what was I saying? Right, we have the circles and the summoners. See if we get the same story from another one.”

“I don’t know, they could be like simurgh, now that we’ve summoned one all of them will know it.”

“Agreed, we can’t risk it. What about, uh,” he looked over at Olaph.

“Yeah, a new way to cast magic? What’s that all about? We have enough ways to cast magic. But this does give us an in. If we can work with him and have this Bob report what we like and don’t like about it, maybe it won’t be too bad? Sounds like it’ll come sooner or later, like this plant power? What was that all about?”

“I’m right here you know?” Olaph muttered.

“Yes.” He stared at Olaph as though he wasn’t really seeing him at all.

“Look, we’ve all had a bit of a shock,” said the leader, “and I know that was a strain both for our summoners and our Jupiter casters. Let’s clean this place up, tear it down, and take the rest of the day. Those that need their memories erased, you know what you need to do. We have our answer, those of us at the highest level will discuss what, if any, we’re going to tell the general population. Meanwhile Olaph and his party can stay at the Guild building as our guests, and tomorrow when we’ve had a good night’s sleep we’ll tackle all this. We can see what this new magic is about, and give our newest Guild member, fee waved of course! The guidance he will need. Sound reasonable to everyone?”

Everyone agreed this was completely reasonable and those with stone shaping spells started tearing the walls down and everyone helped pick up the trash and box it away. Soon enough it looked just like a clearing in a wood again and everyone went their separate ways with a promise to get back together the next morning.

That night Light went to see Olaph in his room, and was let inside.

“You holding up okay, padre?”

“It’s not every day that a being from before the universe was created calls out your name and says you’re important to the future,” he admitted. “But the explanation makes a lot of sense.”

“We have stagnated,” he admitted, sitting down. “Our houses today aren’t built that much differently than they were a thousand years ago. No real inventions in ages, that primordial was right, we haven’t the first clue how to make remnants from scratch, or build the vehicles the people used before the fall. It’s like we just decided to stop moving forward. I mean look at the beta spells, so much more was possible with magic but no one created any truly innovative spells in years. No wonder they got bored.”

“But to think they were powerful enough to close the gates to the Heavens...”

“Or maybe they were lying. Maybe they worked together with the Lord or maybe the Heavens haven’t really tried all that hard to get them open again. Angels were never really meant to remain here. That’s not faith, after all.”

“True, true. We can’t know, as we can’t ask.”

“Anyway, I came to ask about the new magic. Did you look into it yet?”

He shook his head. “Should I? The Guild members implied I should wait for them and we would go over it together. I don’t want to step on any toes.”

“I’m not saying choose it yet, but you might want to at least start the process. Look it over so you have a good idea what’s coming. This is being offered to you, not them, so while they may not like it, you’re stuck with it. I wouldn’t refuse the offer, who knows how much offense they would take and what that would even look like.”

“That’s an excellent idea! Just as before the process won’t be finalized until I go through the whole thing and accept it, so I would like a little advance notice before they start yelling at me to tell Bob to change things. Very well.” He thought about friends and a blue box popped up with Bob’s name in it, which he touched. He got various options (most grayed out as he didn’t have a location as such or permission to see his “inventory”) but the chat option was there.

Friend Chat

Olaph: Bob, if this is a good “time” can we start the process now?

Bob: Glad to see you understood about the whole time thing. Sure, I can start your new lifepath choice right now. We’ve set the background at 3 points as it’s between, we believe, what you have access to now so you’ll be able to allocate to different things like before. Recommend more spells? Have fun

“Okay, I’m starting the process,” Olaph explained. “Looks like it’s the same ‘know thyself’ quest I went through before. I only used thief of magic once and medium was hardly worth it either so I might take those as more spells? Let me look this over.” He scowled a bit. “Looks like I’m only allowed to choose magical backgrounds now, the supernatural stuff like alchemist is grayed out. Okay, the new background is called dynamic mage, now before when I touched it- Ah! Let me read this, it’s an explanation.”

Light waited patiently as Olaph scrolled through what seemed like several pages of information.

“This is a lot,” he finally spoke up. “They weren’t kidding when they called it dynamic, it’s much more flexible than the way we cast spells today. And get this- you know how you and Paige can combine spells to produce a third spell with the capabilities of both?”

“Yes???” he drew out.

“This type of mage can do that on their own.”

“What?!”

“I know! It’s pretty hard of course. And they got rid of the planets.”

“Got rid of the planets? How can you cast without making some kind of- wait is it tied to a different stat or something?”

“Not as such. If I’m reading this correctly it’s not a skill check at all, in the traditional sense. There’s five ‘skills’ that each play a part in casting a complete spell, but they aren’t random like our

skill checks are now. For example my sewing skill, I calculate a number between 1 and 10 because my MANipulation is a 5, and then add my skill, a 4. That's how well I did on that check. Being a dynamic mage it seems I simply take that random number between 1 and 10 and it can't be any higher or lower. I could raise my MANipulation to possibly get a higher number with sewing, but I can't ever change that range for dynamic spell casting. All I can change is the number that gets added, and it costs twice as much XP to raise." *Wonder if I should suggest backgrounds and weaknesses that raise or lower that absolute limit? I could see wanting a 12 at the top end or even more, if I'm willing to pay the cost of it.*

"Okay, I see where they're coming from," he mused. "They're giving you an average shot and as there are ten magic casting skills, they've simplified it down to five but made them cost the same. Basically you can't ignore any 'planet' you have to learn them all. This will slow down someone's progress."

"It can be a skill group, so that's something. Here's the tricky part, you know how you can take slightly more time to cast, or a lot less time, with a penalty?"

"Sure."

"Well, each two segments of casting time I get another number. I can then allocate that number to one of the five attributes of the spell. How much mana to put in, how accurate it is, how far away it can go, and so on."

"So if you want to cast a spell reactively-"

"You better trust you have good ratings in the 'skill,' right. Otherwise a mage needs at least 4 segments so they can make sure they have enough 'fuel' for the spell and that it can actually do something once it hits."

"This is basically forcing you to not be a combat mage..."

"Seems that way. But like Bob said we have plenty of them, right? Unless you carry a tower shield or something everywhere you go? They took that away but put flexibility in place of it."

"Yes, how does combining spells work?"

"Basically it treats spells as separate parts. You can cast for example that cleaning spell on its own, or combine it with the zone spell like you guys did. But I need at least two numbers so I can put one on each component, and I take a negative per spell to every part of the process. Combining to make the cleaning zone of the zen master it would be one meter smaller, the target point is one meter closer, and it's one step less powerful."

"We need to write this all down."

"Yes, I figured I would do that, someone can copy it and I can hand it out to everyone tomorrow. That way they don't have to crowd around my box- oh here's something interesting."

"What?"

"Elements are separate now for me. You would have to learn two elemental spells, for example a fire blast and an ice blast. I learn fire by itself, ice by itself, and then blast by itself. Each element is 5 XP."

"Slowing you down in the beginning, but making you more flexible later on if you learn a bunch of attack magic."

"Right."

"That is different all right," he admitted. "It's a lot to wrap your head around. And it would only work now that we have The System. I mean we cast magic and sewed before, but we didn't realize what was going on behind the scenes before The System came about. How would you 'apply' these 'numbers' if you were a dynamic mage before The System?"

He nodded. "Seems like the primordials really want us to start taking advantage of The System, and this is a step towards that."

"Yeah." He seemed a bit troubled. "Well, I'll go get you some paper so you can start copying. I don't know if they're going to be pleased or not about all this. It's not super powerful, not like Paige can get, but who knows how combining spells is going to work? That could have implications we

haven't even thought of. Looks like you're going to be a popular guy around here for the foreseeable future, padre."

"So much for quietly heading back to my church."

"Be right back."

Light left and Olaph stared into space, not seeing the box before him. *The gates seem to be permanently closed. But not gates for demons. This is going to get out, and how are they going to react? I think there may be some hard times ahead...*