

Chapter 1

Where do we go From Here?

Where: Mage's Guild building

When: Two days later

Bishop Olaph Perdita sat scowling at the finished list he had been working on, surrounded by luxury he never asked for. His temporary office was plush and opulent, full of dark woods, soft cushions, and even magical lights high in the ceiling to make the place as bright as noon at any time of the day or night. Usually reserved for visiting dignitaries, he even had a maid that came in to clean the carpets and dust once a day. The desk was full of high quality paper, a variety of pens mostly made of gold by the looks sat laid out precisely, and he only had to pull a rope to summon a servant should he desire something from the kitchens. The Guild, having seen the primordial call him out by name and offer him a completely new type of magic to test for a year, was treating him as their most important member and making sure he was comfortable. This had the opposite effect, making him uncomfortable, as he was used to a life of simplicity dedicated to healing, tending his flock, and prayer to the Lord and Michael. An angel that, because of the aforementioned primordials, could no longer hear him or respond.

All this luxury was not without cost. At least to him personally, as The Guild members at the top seemed to take a perverse pleasure in foisting their problems onto him. "Oh, but bishop, Bob said *you* should think about things, didn't he? We don't want to disappoint Bob, now do we?" Ha! What was he supposed to do about it? The Guild's biggest problem at the moment was appeasing all those people that kept coming to the building demanding to know how they could take advantage of their mana core, now that The System told them they had one. While not exactly following family lines, those that were tested for cores tended to be from wealthy families, so they could afford to join The Guild when they were older. So those out in the country or just a part of the normal town life were often passed over, and went their whole lives not knowing they could, with study, do magic.

Which seems backwards to me. Lower the fee and let more people in The Guild. Heck, the Guild wants all magic users to follow their laws if you're paying the fee or not, which doesn't seem fair to me. I don't have to follow the laws of the fighter's guild, or the writer's guild, if I'm not a member now do I? No, I do not. But The Guild insists I follow their laws despite not getting any benefits? Preposterous. They would make more money charging less and training more people, instead of the other way around. It's been more than a thousand years, we're not in danger of any magical wars like that one we had. I mean, really. What are they so afraid of at this point that they have to limit the number of magic users in the world? Magic is all around us, thanks to the Chaos Moon which is thanks to the primordials. Let people do magic to improve everyone's lives!

There was another problem with all this luxury and alone time as well; thoughts of Lunaria, the winged, unicorn horn sporting, dark skinned, mage/swordswoman/beastfolk he had met recently kept coming to his mind. The way she had moved around the shadowed area when she was complaining about guarding an empty room. Her joy at finally having something to do, when fighting Light. How she moved during that fight, though he had only seen the end of it. The glint of light off her horn, the subtle movement of her wings, those long legs. Her hair, her eyes- it went on and on. He had only met her once for a few minutes but she seemed more perfect to him than any angel could ever be! His thoughts were irrational, wondering if she would like this sort of setting any more than he did or if she

was more the “life on the road” type of person. *No, no, I have to focus on this now. I’m a bishop! I have a job to do here!* He leaned back in his chair, still amazed it *did* allow him to lean back, and looked over his list.

Problem	Solution	Limitation of Solution
Many people now know they can do magic and are demanding the guild explain itself	Apologize to the people and say we’ll do better from now on	The Guild won’t go for it. Seems weak. Establishment people will fight it tooth and nail
Guild solutions to the problem will be pushed back on	Go around the guild like Bob did for me	The guild won’t like that either. Magic skills need training either way and the Guild controls that
There is only one magic academy in the land and more students than masters to apprentice to	Open more schools, obviously	Takes money and time. Guild revenue is down. People want answers now. Won’t want to travel to go to school. Age.
Many people are too old for going back to school	The System can put skill knowledge into people’s brains it did with me	Will people accept The System doing that, even for their benefit? Can I convince Bob to do that?
People still need to spend XP to gain either Scholar or Natural and that’s expensive XP wise	Quests?? ???	They still need to do their jobs to make a living they aren’t adventurers like Light. Spells take XP. Skills take XP.
Will people have to choose between their current career and being a mage?	Allow them to do both	How?

“How do we satisfy everyone?” he asked himself. “Maybe Bob can help me develop my proposed solution, as I don’t know what The System can do.” He went to his friend’s list and started a new chat with Bob, the entity they had summoned and who had explained The Way Things Are Now a few days ago. Bob responded, but in a way he never had before.

Accept Audio Call?

Bob wishes to switch to audio chat.
Allow this function?

Allow / Deny / Block

Hesitantly Olaph touched “Allow” and the box vanished.

“Hey Olaph, how’s tricks?” Bob asked, his voice seeming to come from nowhere. There was a small blue window with some funny symbols in it Olaph had never seen though, and he almost fell off the chair as Bob’s voice startled him.

“What?” he croaked.

“Oh, never done audio chat before?” Bob asked. “Hummm. Maybe we *should* have written a manual?”

“No, you think?”

“Bah, no one reads documentation, and maintaining it is soooo boring,” Bob countered. “Anyway, what’s up? You haven’t picked your new lifepath, I see. What’s wrong?”

“I just haven’t had time,” he protested. “They basically shoved me into this room and told me not to come out until I had a good solution for them. Just so they could tell people that came they had someone working on the problem and would make an announcement soon. But I don’t know what to tell them, all I have is a list of the problems we face. I’ve got the beginnings of an idea, but...”

“You want me to look it over?”

“If you could. It just I don’t know what The System can do...”

“I get it. Paste it into the chat and I’ll take a duck.”

“You mean a gander?”

“That’s the one! I was going to say goose but that didn’t seem right and duck just popped out. Why are there different words for goose and gander but not for duck and duck?”

“I... What? Never mind that, what do you want me to?”

“Paste it into- you don’t know how to do that either, do you?”

“Of course I don’t!”

“It’s easy, don’t get into a huff. Just put your hand on the list. Are you doing it?”

“Yes.”

“Now say system function: copy.”

“System function: copy.” *If they’re doing some kind of prank on me...*

“Now touch the chat window and say system function: paste. Easy.”

Olaph did that, and was shocked to see his words appearing in the chat, as though he had sat there typing them in. *What just happened? How did that happen? System function? Are there more? I need to write this down!* He scrawled a quick note as Bob read over the list, but then he became horrified. *I spent how much time copying stuff out of System windows for the guild about various powers and I could have just said a couple of words? I don’t believe this!*

“Okay, got it. Yes, that’s a problem all right. What are you thinking?”

Leave it for later, it’s not their fault I didn’t know. At least, not completely. “How pervasive is The System now? Or I guess how flexible is it?”

“Well, confidentially,” he lowered his voice, “even we’re not perfect. Not out of any flaw in our reasoning or whatever, but because a lot of times we just don’t ‘get’ if you will you little people. How you live. Why you do the things you do. So we left plenty of room for improvement or changes in case we got something really wrong. Now, there’s not just a button I personally can press, though I have been given some leeway as I was the one that went down to talk to y’all so I can personally make *some* changes. Or request bigger ones, if you need them, and I’ll be given priority access so it won’t take long, especially from your limited perspective. No offense. There will be an update message if you want a truly big change so everyone knows the score, but yeah, does that answer your question?”

“So more changes can be made, like you did to offer me this dynamic mage background.”

“Sure!”

“Okay.” He nodded, breathing a little easier. “Then I do have an idea. Let me run it by you and we can discuss it.”

“Shoot!”

“Like my list said, we’re primarily dealing with people already settled in their lives. The Guild won’t want a bunch of new mages running around, thinking about getting revenge on their neighbors for some slight of twelve years ago with their newly found magical powers. They have jobs, things they’re good at. How are we going to train them? But what if we didn’t? Let’s offer them the reverse of

what you offered me. Something cheaper than becoming a full mage and less powerful to offset that. Something like a 'working mage' or a 'professional mage' whatever the name turns out to be. It's a package deal, one time only, for people affected by the recent start of The System. Everyone underage gets to study and develop their core to become a traditional mage, in the traditional way. Or I guess if they wanted the shortcut they could wait until they had a profession and choose it? Save up XP for it? I don't see why they would have a problem with that either."

"Okay so far, what's the package you're talking about though? I once saw the size of Obama's package and I wasn't impressed."

Who? "You get the ability to cast spells as a scholar, and you get to pick two planets, and you get a 5 rating in each at time of purchase, and say three spells when you take the background. And that's it. You can raise your rating in the planets of course, but you can't learn more spells. That will satisfy the guild because it won't be people running around buying unknown spells and making their lives policing things harder. And it will satisfy the people taking the package because now they get to use magic to do what they're *already* doing, but better. I figure we can make plenty of packages, one for each sort of work people do. Take blacksmith, right? They would want Mars and Uranus magic so they could work with fire, shape metal, and maybe raise their strength. A fisherman would want Moon and Venus, to help call fish to the boat, and moving the boat. Maybe a fair weather spell too, part clouds? You see where I'm going with this?"

"I do. If someone really fell in love with magic though, could they still buy up the normal background?"

"I don't see why not. They wouldn't get any help from The System if they did that though."

"Naturally, they would have to do the work cultivating their core like anyone else, and pay the XP cost as normal. I don't see why we couldn't implement that, it's really just a modification of what already exists."

"Which is why I don't think The Guild will have too many problems with it. Everyone should be happy." *And if you're not, well, save up the XP and cultivate your mana core like always and take your chances getting magical training. Hope you can afford it!* "How long do you think before we can implement it?"

"Not long. I'll get my brethren working on a set of spells for every sort of occupation we can think of, so that'll happen in parallel. I can implement the main part myself, as I say it's not anything that doesn't already exist. Then we can push it down to the masses and your Guild problems should be over. Then you can focus on your new abilities."

"Looking forward to it. Thanks."

"Sure thing. Call me any time, I'll get to work I know you'll want this ASAP!"

Call Terminated

Olaph nodded to himself and got up, stretching. *Time to see what the Guild thinks. Maybe I should have had Bob hold off until I spoke to them? Whoops. Got a little exited I guess, that's not like me.* He headed for the door, and a seated raccoon beastfolk girl looked up at him.

"Hi bishop!" she greeted him. "Looks like they were right!"

"Who was right?" he managed, his heart beating a little faster. *Look at that cute mask on their face! And their cute little ears! And that ringed tail!*

"The seers. The Guild employs all we find, you know? And of course we do our own divination magic." She got up and dusted herself off.

"I didn't make you wait long, did I?" *I didn't even know you were waiting.*

“Nope!” she grinned at him. “I was just sent to fetch you, I shouldn’t have sat down. Trust the seers, right? Come on, it’s right this way everyone is waiting. I can take you where you need to be.” She took off down the hallway.

“Er, if you don’t mind my asking, who is everyone?”

“Everyone, silly,” she replied with a giggle. “You have the answer, don’t you? Down these stairs here.”

“I suppose I do. This is all very sudden though.”

“We’ve been very interested in when this situation would get resolved, so the seers have been working overtime looking into the future. We’re all very excited to hear what you have to tell us. They say it’s going to go fairly well.”

“Only *fairly*?” *I was hoping for better than that.*

“All you can hope for sometimes. So, were they right about me?” she asked shyly.

“What about you?” he asked, getting a little colder.

“That you would follow me anywhere with no questions?”

“I- You-” He felt his face heating up and she laughed.

“Wow, I guess so. This way.” She turned down a hallway and he meekly followed along.

A curse on all seers, apparently? They knew somehow that I find beast types irresistible for some reason?

“Here we are, right through here,” she told him, indicating a door. “Good luck.”

“This isn’t the usual conference room,” he tried to tell her, but she skipped away. He stared at the door. *Why do I feel like I’ve been played in some way? Oh, because I was? Nothing for it I guess?* He hesitantly pushed it open and peeked through. It was some kind of auditorium, packed full of people. *You’ve got to be kidding me.*

“Ah, you’re here, come along,” someone on the other side said, pulling him through. It was the leader of the Guild, who pushed him towards a podium. “I hope the seers were right.”

He stumbled up to the podium, looking out over the sea of faces now staring up at him. Apparently he was to give some kind of speech, off the cuff, about the current situation to the general population.

Thank goodness for my speaking skill, he thought to himself. *Still, dirty pool, Ms. Louwho.* He quickly made a check, calculating an 8, and stared out at the crowd his mind a blank. “Uh, hello!” he tried. “How is everyone today?”

“Annoyed!” one person yelled up at him. “We’re a thousand shades of being annoyed.”

“Yes, I’m sorry about that. Uh, yes, I think I’m here to talk about that.”

“You don’t know?” someone else yelled. “Who is this guy?”

I’ve really got to collect myself here. He attempted another check, taking the minus one for the retry, and got a 5 this time. His minimum. Now his throat was dry and his tongue was dry and his hands were wet and he had not a thought in his head. He completely froze up and thought about running for the exit as fast as he could.

“Ah, allow me,” said Mary Louwho, stepping up. She handed him a glass of water from a shelf under the podium and raised a hand to the crowd. “Good afternoon everyone, I’m Mary Louwho, current leader of the mage’s guild. Allow me to introduce Bishop Perdita, who has been working with us tirelessly to address your concerns. He emerged from his room just moments ago after a grueling session so please give him a moment to collect his thoughts. Bishop, you have some good news for us?”

Olaph finally managed a 16 on his speaking check, now taking a -2 for the retries, but was now collected. “That’s right, guildmaster,” he agreed, setting his glass down after taking a drink. “I have excellent news for everyone involved. In just a little while you should all get a notification from The System about an exciting new possibility for all of you. I know many of you are angry you could have been using magic your entire lives, but were not able to for one reason or another. Part of that is The

Guild's fault. Even if they won't admit it, I will." *As they've just shoved me up here with no warning, they can admit a little fault-*

"We admit no fault!" Mary countered.

"The point is, we're going to make it up to you. To *everyone* that has the spark of magic background but has chosen a different path in life. You will be able to access three spells, relating to your current occupation, to help you do your jobs easier, and better than before. Naturally if you still wish to learn more magic you can save your XP and work up to that but for now, for 10 XP, you can become a working mage. You will get instant access to two branches of magic," *none of these people are going to know what 'the planets' are at the moment so best keep it simple,* "and three spells, free of charge. No XP needed, all this is included in the package. You'll be able to use those spells the moment you accept and spend the XP, which as I said before should be coming along shortly. The full details are being ironed out as we speak. At least the preliminary offering, it may change as-" He scowled, and motioned Mary over, whispering to her. "Do they know about the... you know Bob?"

She shook her head. "We're still arguing about what exactly to tell people," she whispered back.

"Great." He straightened up again. "It may change as more people use it and data is collected. We will want to hear your thoughts on the whole thing, and if it's useful enough to you."

There was a fair bit of muttering about that, but at least it wasn't turning into a mob he had to run away from.

And that's when he lost everyone as they suddenly started poking at the air.

Looks like it came in, just like Bob said. Now we'll see how they like it...

Chapter 2

Making Repairs

Where: The Battleship "New Hope"

When: As Olaph was giving his speech

Sinjinorino Packets put the finishing touches on the repair job they were doing on one of the drones, and the eyes flickered to life. They had brought the mostly intact drones down to the machining deck, where all the tools were kept, and had managed to get a number of them working. Combining the good parts of the drones with the exploded parts they had managed repairs, though at a great cost.

"That's it!" exclaimed the battleship. "I reconnected to it. This is great."

"It brings your total number of drones to... two," they admitted. The other one was rolling around waving its arm stalks around in celebration. "The others are a lost cause unless we can get more parts." *I wonder if a factory from before the fall could help? I know of several I have seen in my travels, perhaps the others would allow a short time away from Olaph's studies to inquire and perhaps restore all of these units to full functionality. In the best case, we could also pick up a shell the ship could use as an avatar.*

"If only I could get more raw material," the ship lamented. "I could fabricate those parts myself. I have kept this manufacturing deck in good repair."

Sinjinorino closed up the panel and the drone ran through a diagnostic routine, coming up green. *Good repair being relative. The amount of dust in this room shows Kevin the vampire never came down here, so I was lucky to get even one soldering station up and running. But I suppose they mean the larger fabrication devices, which were military grade and thus should have weathered the years better.* "That seems to be the main concern of the day for many. Dwindling resources."

"That was amazing," Paige told them. She had been watching the repairs with a rapt attention, clearly some kind of curiosity weakness, and had helped with her repair spell where she could. Her metal arms also had come in quite handy, allowing her to do the work of 3 people all at once, as long as that "work" was simply holding things in place. She couldn't do detail work with them, at least not with more than one at a time, but they were glad of her assistance. She could hold the drones in position without exhausting her magic, and turn them quite precisely which aided Sinjinorino's work tremendously. "All those little boards, and wires, and poof suddenly it's moving around again!"

"All basic science," they remarked. "Quite easy to understand, with a bit of study."

"I could say the same thing about magic. But no matter how much you wave your arms around and copy my movements you won't be able to cast a single spell. Your skills are no less wondrous to me."

"True, that is true," they admitted. "Thank you."

"Excuse me, miss?" said a man in a robe, poking his head into the room. "I'm here to collect some weaponry?" He held up a sheet of paper with his orders on it, and Paige looked it over. It seemed legit.

"Oh, took your time didn't you?" she teased.

"It's fairly low on the list," he protested, walking in. "We had to go over this entire craft, repair the holes blown in the hull, try to secure it against that vampire you said owned it before. A couple of old weapons could wait. Plus I had to walk half the ship to find you guys!"

Yes, comms are still down because of water damage. Much of this place needs repair. “Still quite dangerous though,” Sinjorino protested. “In any case we locked them up in the armory for safe keeping. Come along, I will be happy to lead the way.”

They headed up two decks, and they input a code onto the door to open it. The room was mostly empty apart from 4 rifles, which they handed over.

“You don’t want one of them?” Paige asked, scowling a little. “You worked on them for hours.”

“Indeed. I needed to make sure they were safe to use. Kevin would have cared little if one of his thralls exploded himself, but I would take great offense to the act. They have been cleaned, repaired, and recharged to the best of my ability. As for keeping one, I must admit the temptation was there. However, given my skill in the bow based martial art I have developed, switching to the rifle skill, a skill I would need to put XP into to even start, would seriously cripple me. I could of course train the skill to a 10 and recreate my martial art with a rifle but I feel an improved bow string with a different spell would be a better use of my resources. The Guild has agreed to provide me a new weapon as compensation for the work I’ve been doing on the ship, so I have been mulling my options over. My official position as Olaph’s bodyguard has opened several avenues and I intend to explore them and make the best choice.”

“You’ll stop in to see the alchemists?” the man asked. “They’ve been fairly excited about the prospect of working rifles of this type.”

“Yes, it is on the agenda for 1:00 this afternoon,” Sinjorino agreed. “Please inform them that extenuating circumstances aside, I will not be late.”

“Very good, I’ll secure these. Good day.” He took off down the corridor.

“You’ll want to turn left not right!” Sinjorino shouted after him.

He turned around and went the other way. “Thanks.”

“Alchemists?” Paige asked.

They nodded. “Indeed. They wish to disassemble one of the rifles and get an explanation of its parts. They are the ones most likely to be able to repair or create new ones in the future, after all. I have offered to guide them through the process. Three rifles will be added to the Guild armory, the forth if it comes through the process successfully. While mages may look down upon old world weaponry, even they must admit pulling a trigger can often be much faster than casting a spell, and more damaging. Plus it keeps them away from those that would abuse them, such as the vampire. So I see no reason not to acquiesce to their demand for the weapons.”

“Ah!” She clapped her hands together once excitedly. “So what’s next?”

“You have a cleaning spell, do you not?”

“I sure do!”

“Then let us remain return to the machine shop. I wish to power up some of this equipment and inventory what works and what doesn’t. Repair what can repair other things that need repair, as they say. If simple enough I may be able to petition the alchemists to create any needed parts and repair systems here. But before that I may need help dislodging a thousand years of dust from the various surfaces.”

“I am at your disposal!”

“Yes, disposal of dirt is exactly what I had in mind.”

While Paige and Sinjorino went about cleaning up the machine shop, Olaph finished his speech and everyone looked over the new background they could choose. The primordials had done an excellent job, as always, offering various quests to those without the needed XP so they could get it. That stopped those complaints before they even started. Those with the XP bought the background and went away satisfied, though there were still some questions and kinks to work out.

“It just says see administrator,” one woman said, walking up to the stage as most filed out, eager to try out their new magic. She was a human, dressed in the current style, nothing really stood about

her. "I don't even know what that means." Light Kajombro joined him from where he had been sitting on the side of the auditorium, in case this was some sort of trick. He was pretty sure no one would be trying to assassinate the bishop quite yet but he took his bodyguard duties seriously and wanted to be nearby. *The padre is sort of helpless now, unless he took his new magical background and figured it out while trying to solve this problem. Which he seems to have done fairly well, actually.*

"Can you show me?" Olaph asked. "Just turn the window around in your mind and think about allowing me to see it, if you've never done it before," he explained. He nodded, clearly she must have done it, and he scowled. "It does say that. Would you mind telling me more about yourself?"

"I suppose not. My name is Naskiño Alaboard. I'm 28 years old, and I work as a midwife in town. There's a few of us in a small clinic that work with local woman. I've been working there ever since I was a girl, my mother was a midwife as well. I have a boyfriend? What do you need to know?"

"I think that's about all," he admitted. "I think I see the problem. Can you excuse me for one moment? I think I can have you on your way with the correct spells rather quickly."

"Sure?"

He stepped away and messaged Bob, accepting his audio chat request again.

"How did it go?" Bob asked.

"Good, for the most part. Why is there no package for midwives?"

"What's a midwife?"

"Ah, I think I see the problem. They assist women in giving birth."

"Can you be more specific?"

"You really have no idea what giving birth is?"

"Not really."

"It's how we reproduce and replace ourselves."

"Oh yeah, you guys wear out or something don't you? That whole souls thing leaving your body eventually. Weird system, if you ask me."

"It wasn't always like this- can we stay on task? We need to come up with a package for this woman!"

"Give me a second to see what exactly this 'birth' is..." A circle with a line through it went across one of the strange symbols on the blue box, and both of them waited.

"What exactly is that?" Light said into the silence. He pointed to the symbols.

"I haven't played around with it," Olaph admitted. "It just appears when we do this audio chat. We're going to have to play around with it to see what all those symbols mean. Huh, I'm surprised you can even see it, must be a party thing and not just for me? Oh, and there's a thing called system functions, I was able to move text I had written on a page into a chat window. There's still so much about The System we don't know."

"Great," he sighed.

The symbol went back to normal. "Okay, that's fairly horrible," Bob remarked. "Looks painful and messy. And that's how your guy *designed* you to be? I mean you were *created* by your avatar of order, right? And they said, ah, yes, that's the way it should be done. A lot of screaming... On both sides."

"Again, it's a long story," Olaph admitted. *Did they just look into our reality at people giving birth right this second? Maybe The System lets them do that now..* "And it depends on believing the whole garden of Eden thing, which may be more of a parable... So can you put something together?"

"Strangely, in looking over the magic list there isn't a lot of spells that currently deal with this," they admitted. "For all the pain those woman are in, and the danger the whole process poses to both lifeforms, you think there would be."

"Most people probably couldn't afford magic to help with childbirth," Light put in. "So it was never researched. Thinking about it now maybe we really should have..."

“Yeah you should. I think this relates to the list I’ll be sending Olaph later, about populations. I’m beginning to see why yours is so low still. But that’s for later! Okay, I’m thinking healing, easing comfort, that’s both Sun, and a new Moon spell, see what you think.”

Ease Birth

Planet: Moon

Grade: 2

Resist: RES

DIF: 7

Duration: M(S)

Range: T

Casting Time: 2

Reverse: Impair (Stat: LUCk)

Enhancer: A pair of baby shoes

When cast upon a creature undergoing labor all LUCk checks related to the birth of the child are calculated again if a maximum value is calculated, and added together. Additionally, the castor's LUCk serves to assist the target's. The spell ends one hour after the birth of the child, having been transferred to the baby and assisting their LUCk checks in a similar way. (Against such things as being born blind/deaf/etc.)

“That’s an interesting approach,” Olaph decided.

“Why not just telekinesis, yank the little tyke right out?” Light asked, confused.

“I am assured by my superiors that would be a horrible idea,” Bob told him. “This is a good compromise.”

“Humm,” Olaph mused. “What’s easing comfort?”

“Here.” Light showed him. “It just reduces pain penalties.”

“So maybe someone looking at a 6 hour labor because of a low LUCk check at the start of the process may only have a ten minute labor because their LUCk is enhanced? Plus less pain without any drugs and healing afterwards? I’m no midwife myself but that sounds like a decent package. Go ahead and offer it to her, I’ll see what she thinks.”

“Okay. Call me back if you need to.”

“Right.”

The call terminated and both men went back over to Naskiôgo. “You should have something now?” Olaph asked.

“Yes, it changed,” she admitted. “Wait, does this mean the Mage’s Guild is in control of The System? How did you do that?”

“Ah!” Olaph wondered how to explain.

“It’s complicated,” Mary took over. “We are *not* in direct control, no. We simply have some influence now, or rather the bishop here does. The System operates at a very high level, we’re not releasing the exact details at this time.”

“Oh.” She took a second to process this. “Well, I have my spells now. Would have been nice to have the last twenty years or so, but I suppose you can’t have everything. Thank you.”

“Let us know if it doesn’t work out, we’ll see what other spell we can swap in for the ease birth one.”

“You don’t know how it works?”

“We’re all learning together about this.” *And this particular spell has never been used, it was just entered into The System a minute ago. Must be nice being billions of years old and having such a comprehensive understanding of magic you can just whip up a spell in a few seconds.*

“Right. I’ll let you know.” She walked away.

“Nice job, Olaph,” Mary told him. “Try to project a little more confidence next time? We’re the Guild, we’re supposed to have all the answers.”

“But you don’t,” he protested. “Isn’t it better to admit that fact, and later claim you have learned something new rather than pretending to have all the answers and winding up with egg on your face when someone learns you didn’t the whole time?”

“I wonder...”

“In any case, my responsibility to you has at least been somewhat taken care of. May I now please look into this new form of spell casting?”

“Yes, about that,” she hesitated. “We’ve been having some researchers go over your options and how it’s supposed to work. They, Bob and his people I mean, basically want you to try a bunch of things and see how the whole background works out?”

“In a sense, yes. Specifically they want me to look into various societal problems and their solutions, but Bob said he would give me a comprehensive list after I finished the quest and had everything settled. So I’m not sure of the exact research they want me to perform. Why do you ask?”

“There are some research projects that have a greater urgency than others. If you’re already going to be a magical researcher, we figured we should at least introduce you to *our* biggest problem. Hopefully it’s on this list of yours as well. Before you take any spells, let me take you somewhere and give you some ideas of what could be helpful.”

“Very well.”

“Excellent. I believe your other bodyguards are at the ship right now? They should be meeting with the alchemists early this afternoon. Let’s go get something to eat for lunch, head there, and collect them when they’re done. I think they’re going to want to see this as well.”

“Lead on.”

And so, after lunch, the group went to see the alchemists, who turned out to be a fairly odd bunch. There was Rick Sanches, a very old looking human with a beard to match, a young boy who introduced himself as Elves Presley, and a minotaur, Abigale Splithoof.

“Chocolate chip cookie?” Abigale offered from a plate of them.

Olaph looked at them suspiciously and then back to her. “Do you know a girl named Lily?” he asked.

“Why yes,” she agreed, smiling. “We’ve been hearing great things about her trying to bring back chocolate. Mr. Gnomes has been back and forth between there many times, helping out. He’s keeping us abreast of her progress. We’re all very excited. Not just about the chocolate of course, but perhaps bringing back many foods that were lost in the breaking. So you know her too?”

“I do.”

“Ah, Olaph,” Sinjorino greeted him, stepping into the room from the hallway. “And Guildmaster Louwho. Do you have an interest in advanced plasma weaponry as well?”

“I’m just here to take you to your next destination,” she admitted. “Hopefully this won’t take long?”

“Not that long,” Rick admitted. “We’ve got everything set up, right this way!” The group looked around the place, which was in the basement of the guild building, and cluttered with all sorts of odd looking things. Rusted vehicles from before the fall, shelves of sample materials, odd looking devices. They were brought to a table with what looked like several of the weapons in various states of disrepair and the one good one Sinjorino had just handed over. “We’ve found pieces of them over the years, of course,” he explained, “but finding a working model, now that’s the real trick. We’re hoping you can help us transfer parts from the working one to the non-working ones, to see if they’re viable for repair. That way we’ll know what parts we need to try replicating to get them all working.”

“A viable strategy,” they admitted. “Let us begin.”

While Paige seemingly couldn't decide if she wanted to wander around or watch the others work, Olaph and Light did wander around, looking over the various bits of the old world these three had managed to collect over the years.

"I can't even guess what some of these things are for," Light admitted.

"They could be part of a greater whole and we would never know," Olaph told him.

"Ah, good point."

Finally the three were satisfied, and Mary had them all stand around her in a clear corner. She cast a spell, and the group found themselves in a very different place. Paige even fell over, looking around with eyes wide, as clouds went past them at eye level. Strange looking buildings could be seen not far away, with a few people wandering around them. The air was thinner, colder, and they felt like they were floating which could mean only one place they could be. Mary seemed amused by their reactions, looking around in awe, and finally broke the silence.

"Welcome, everyone, to the floating Skyebourne capital of Ferronaria."

Chapter 3

Tea, Earl Gray, Hot

Where: High in the air

When: Moments later

The group had looked around in shock, the skybourne islands were a permanent fixture of the sky but rumored to be unapproachable. They couldn't be scryed upon, teleported to, and any airship that approached would be shot down by some kind of beam weapon. Though privately, in thinking about it, Sinjorino had long been of the opinion airships had been going about the process in the wrong way. The islands moved in a predictable pattern, it was simply a matter of taking the airship *higher* than the island, and when it moved beneath the ship, land. The beam weapon wasn't going to fire through the city, now was it? Of course not. It came from the bottom so as long as you stayed far enough away in getting close, and then too high to fire upon you would be fine. But to their knowledge this had never been done. And now, there they all were.

"We've been working overtime removing the protections from these places," Mary explained. "The capital first, as it can control the other islands in some way."

"Why though?" Paige asked.

"Several reasons. I'll explain as we walk. Our destination is the biggest building in the center of the city." She pointed. "We teleport out here on the fields for obvious reasons."

So that they don't accidentally intersect something and kill themselves, Light thought. They'll put up a booth of some kind later I'm sure to really drive the point home. It's standard procedure. They just need to get someone to get the wood up here. Huh, could build it on the ground and just use send object.

Everyone nodded, even just knowing physics and not magic like Sinjorino did, the dangers were obvious. They started in, the building didn't seem that far away. An entire floating island was impressive and everything, but there were limits to everything and even the capital wasn't *that* big.

"What do you know about the undead uprising that happened just before The System came to everyone?"

"I wasn't really briefed on the cause," Light admitted. "Need to know, and all that. Just that about three months ago now undead poured out of every crevasse they had been stuffed in, and attacked the world."

"Churches were especially hard hit," Olaph agreed. "Thankfully that morning Michael had seen fit to gift me with many spells relating to the undead and their destruction. I admit I had been confused that morning but quite thankful by the afternoon. Losses in my area were low."

"Glad to hear it," Mary told him. "There were a lot of them, and don't get me wrong some areas did suffer, but they were only skeletons for the most part. Not that hard to smash apart."

"So The Guild knows what it was all about?" Sinjorino asked.

"We do. We learned the story from a gnome and a dwarf who had been involved, after the fact. Some forty years or so ago it seems the emperor of the Skybourne people had been overthrown. When that happened the new emperor become corrupted, choosing to maintain their distance from the world rather than rejoin it as they had intended when seeking to overthrow the old one. It wasn't exactly their fault but I won't get into that. I'm not even certain I believe their story about shadow kings and how the wanderers and all that fit into it."

“Now I’m doubly curious,” Paige spoke up.

“Some other time. Now, this new emperor, corrupted as I say, started using their magic to make undead. They turned every Skybourne into a zombie, and for 40 years silently visited graveyards and turned remains into skeleton warriors. When the time was right they gave the commands and unleashed the horde. They were stopped thanks to a young man named Lysanias, who at this point in the story seems to vanish from the face of the earth. Zap.” She snapped her fingers. “Gone. According to his friends he spoke to a young beastkin girl, fox type, who promised his return after a few moments. But he didn’t come back. They worked with us, letting us know what happened, and went back to go search for news of their friend. We also met a young Skybourne woman I’ll take you to meet later. She’s been invaluable in telling us about their ‘culture’ such as it is. We returned those that wanted to come back here, and have been trying to figure out how stuff works around here so we can replicate it. It’s not going well.” She looked quite sour at this.

The group walked in silence a moment, they were coming up to the edge of the town which was rapidly becoming overgrown. The buildings were quite beautiful, fantastic shapes only a few stories high here, but getting taller and taller in the distance. All rounded corners and smooth paths with what looked like fountains and flowers at one time carefully maintained. The fountains were dry now and the flowers were growing everywhere, clearly no one was taking care of the place. But there was still life here, as evidenced by the fairly rotund fellow who spotted them and waddled over.

“More of you people from soil,” he grumbled as he got closer. “Can’t you simply leave us in peace?” Paige calculated a 9 on her Magician check so she understood something about being dirty and leaving, while Light, who relied on magic to understand other languages and so hadn’t bothered to pick up anything but Trade got nothing. He started to cast.

“One moment,” Mary told him, placing a hand on his hands. “That won’t be necessary.”

“Okay?” He let the mana go, his spell uncast.

“My good man,” Mary said with false sweetness, speaking his language which was Magician i.e. Latin. “I don’t suppose you’ve come to your senses and decided to make a life with the rest of us on the surface?”

“Live on soil, are you insane? I’m a member of the elite, you should be serving me, filthy soil dweller!”

“Is that so? Well, let me show you why that will never happen.” She cast a quick spell and marched over to the guy, who took a hesitant step back. Mary, who had put 5 energy into COOrdination calculated a 20 to hit, (minus 3 for the called shot and a little bit more for the spell penalty) while the man calculated a 10 to dodge. She connected, slapping him in the face and sending him flying. The others gasped as he bounced off a nearby building and fell over. They looked shocked but Mary held up a hand again and stalked over. “See?” she asked. “But go ahead. Do something about it. Use your magic. Try to hit me. Do *something*. Well?” She spread her arms wide as if daring him. But he just lay there and whimpered. “That’s what I thought. Honestly, you disgust me.” She switched back to Trade. “Come on.” She turned on her heel and walked away, forcing the others to follow after her.

“What was that all about?” Light asked.

She sighed. “These people are, for the most part, useless,” she explained. “For hundreds of years they didn’t have to lift a finger to do anything. Plus, it turns out each island had a strict population limit of only one thousand. You must be familiar with genetics, Sinjorino, what happens when only 500 pairs are possible in a population?”

“A lot of inbreeding?” they guessed.

“Unless you’re *very* careful about it, and honestly how could they be? It’s just not enough population and they were all somewhat related to start. Skye was only one woman, after all. We are trying to get them to see reason. To leave these islands, or at least help us understand them and accept other people living here. But they don’t. They’ve forgotten how all this was done and all records were

burned by the corrupted emperor. We've got nothing but a bunch of fat, lazy, inbred people who whine about their poor lot in life left to study. Only a fraction of them remain, all of them like that guy. We've tried everything, the carrot, the stick, but no. They insist they're the rightful rulers of the planet, and their every whim should be catered to. So now we're trying bullying. I mean they all have magic, and The System, so they should be able to cast spells as a Skyebourne mage. But as you saw- nothing. Even when we slap them around in hopes it knocks a bit of magic loose. Don't believe they should need to do their own magic, can you believe that? But they're going to have to, if they want to survive in the modern world. It's a mess. Not that I fault Lysanias for what he did- the mad emperor needed to be stopped that much is clear- but he really left us a mess with these people."

"I don't know if I can solve this!" Olaph protested. "I'm just one bishop!"

"Humm?" She looked at him like *what are you talking about?* "I'm not bringing you here to see *them*. Heavens, no. Let them rot if that's what they want. We'll see about moving here or grounding the place I haven't decided. I mean if I wanted to take over the world, this would be a good platform to start from. No one should have that kind of choice, even I'm not immune to- We have much bigger concerns. You'll see, we're almost there."

"Okay?"

Mary took them into a building that was a hive of activity, mages crowded around blackboards, tables, and an assortment of junk sitting around. On a table was an odd looking device, rectangular, like a box had been tipped over. It looked to be stone, and several people were standing in front of it, arguing. Everyone stopped what they were doing when Mary strode in.

"Ah, guildmaster!" said one man, as everyone bowed to her. "And you have brought more experts?"

"This project doesn't need any more so called experts," she told him. "It's moving slowly enough as it is. One side."

"Of course!" He stepped out of her way and people started to drift off, probably figuring it was time for a short break. They had been hard at work, they deserved a short break. Maybe even a medium sized one, or an early lunch? Yes, time to see what one of those fantastic tables that made meals could really do.

"This," Mary announced, waving a hand at the box, "is what we feel is the cornerstone of the Skyebourne empire. At once the most dangerous thing on this island, and the thing we need the most. Go ahead, ask it for something."

"Ask it?" Light asked.

"That's right. Easiest to show you. Go ahead."

"If I may?" Sinjorino inquired. The others indicated they should go ahead. "Very good. I would like a spur gear, fine steel, with an outside diameter of 63mm, 40 teeth, with a 20 degree pressure angle where $b = 15$, $d_a = 63$, $d = 60$, $b H7 = 10$."

"Gee, you might need to be a little more specific," Mary muttered.

There was a swirling of energy and something appeared in the cubby. Sinjorino picked it up and held it up to the light. It was a gear. A fine steel gear, to the surprise of no one. "Yes, this is exactly what I asked for," they announced, clearly astonished by their tone. "I needed one of these for the battleship repair. There are many more parts I need to synthesize for the repair effort. Can I *have* this magic box by any chance? Rent it? Can it make a smaller version of itself? I don't need one this large."

"If you can tell us how it works so we can make more, sure, you can have it," she agreed.

"Wait, this isn't the only one of these that we have left is it?" Light asked, panicked.

"Oh no," she assured him with a wave. "They're all over the place. I just want to motivate everyone."

"I should think so," Sinjorino agreed. "This would solve all our resources problems!"

“Would it though?” Paige asked. “I looked into creation magic when I got The System and it didn’t seem as good as you might think. Otherwise we could have solved that problem a long time ago. You know how much a cart full of iron would sell for at a blacksmiths? An hour of work and I’m set with my college loans forever. I could pay them off in a week. A day with the zen master zone going I bet.”

“Same here,” Light told her. “I took temporary tool instead, it seemed more useful.”

“Perhaps you can explain for us layman?” Olaph suggested. “I admit I never needed that spell when I could cast magic so I don’t know what limits it has.”

“Creation magic is nearly worthless,” Mary explained. “Oh sure, you can get a nice iron ingot or what have you, build your house out of them for all I care. But by decree the creation spell is not to be used to create anything you don’t smash to pieces yourself when you’re done with it. Wood to burn is of course completely acceptable, but not much else. It’s just too dangerous.”

“It’s the nature of magic, see?” Light agreed.

“I don’t,” Sinjorino admitted.

“Imagine a bridge made of stone, right?” he began.

“Sure?”

“And some jokester mage created one piece of stone that served as a focal point for the whole structure. Maybe one on each side, let’s say. Bridge stands for thirty years and no one is the wiser, right? But then the mage dies. All their ‘permanent’ which is a misnomer by the way spells go poof. So now, the bridge has two less stones in it. And then...” He looked expectantly at them.

“Bridge fall down, go boom,” they filled in.

“Exactly. As you can never be sure, when building something, if your material was made magically, The Guild puts a hefty restriction on that specific spell so nothing gets used by accident. But in that way, this whatever it is shouldn’t exist. No one is casting the spell, no offense Sinjorino but you’re the least magical being here. It should have, at best, come into existence and then vanished again. *You can’t maintain it! Unless... You can?*” He looked to Mary.

“No, it’s not being maintained at all, as far as we can see.” She indicated the piles of rubbish all over the room. “We’ve made all sorts of things as a test, one reason it’s so cluttered around here, but are no closer to figuring it out. So this is our biggest priority at the moment, Olaph. If your magic can do things ours can’t, or at least easily can’t, please focus on this. We can get you one of these, we don’t think it’s connected to the island in any way? So it should work anywhere. Just don’t let anyone know you have it, or we’ll be dealing with thieves trying day and night to steal the blasted thing!”

Ah, yes. The dangerous part is this could crash the economy if used too heavily. Or turn the whole world’s population into Skyebourne like that poor fellow outside. Fat and useless because they can ask for anything that will fit in the cubby. But maybe not, because we still have to fight off monsters and the random dungeon that- Bob you slippery devil! You made sure we would always have things to fight and do, keep us all in shape. “If Light doesn’t mind teleporting me up here it could be left here,” he suggested.

“That would be ideal!”

“Are you sure it’s magical though?” Sinjorino asked, walking around it. “I mean I see no obvious power source but...”

“When we ask it for something magic activates,” she agreed. “Uranus magic, something similar to what I feel on you, by the way. But it makes no sense as creation is Sun magic! It’s maddening.”

“That would make sense. Tell me, have you disassembled one of these?”

“Alba!” she shouted, spinning around. A mage at the far end of the room gave a jump and hurried over.

“Yes, guildmaster?” he asked timidly. He was an older gentleman, beard going gray, balding, with glasses and fine robes.

“This is Alba Tross, one of my researchers. What happened to that one you pried apart?”

“We still have it, guildmaster Louwho. I can get it for you. But we didn’t find anything, the walls seem solid stone. And when we put it back together it didn’t work anymore. We’re afraid to do the same to another in case we break it also.”

“You think it’ll help?” she asked them.

“I would be interested to see it,” they replied.

“Get it.”

“Right away, guildmaster!” He hurried off.

“What are you thinking?” she asked.

“I’m thinking there is more to this than meets the eye. This outer covering is stone, is it not?” They tapped the side of the box.

“It seems that way, I haven’t asked my alchemists for an analysis.”

“Well, no matter, we can soon discover it. As you already have a ruined one, you don’t mind it being a little more ruined, I trust?”

“If it tells us how the thing works, no. Go crazy.”

“Thank you.”

Mary seemed to perk up, no doubt thinking something like *are we going to get to the bottom of this today? And all it took was a remnant? But does that make any sense? This is a magical land, it’s done by magic? Right?*

A group wheeled another box over and left it, bowing themselves out. Alba stayed. “We pried the thing apart, it’s a solid stone box otherwise,” he explained. He knocked on the back of the thing a few times, and it popped out. “As you can see, solid stone.” He showed them the edge.

“I wonder. May I?” They held out their hands, and Alba looked to Mary who nodded. He handed it over and Sinjorino took a look.

“Ah, as I suspected,” they announced. “Interesting.”

“Well, don’t keep us in suspense,” Mary ordered. “Out with it!”

“There are very tiny wires here,” they ran their finger over the whole edge, right in the center. “Organic vision would not detect them, and they are thin enough when this was removed there was probably no resistance to give it away either. But I can see them with my magnified vision. Your people saw only rock, and delved no further. Light, if you would be so kind as to tear this panel in half? I believe something not stone is sandwiched in the center. Please separate both halves if you will.”

He scratched his head. “I guess I can try it?” He cast, targeting the stone and just as with the castle wall made the stone into a rod that shot away from either side. Sinjorino caught was left. The color and makeup was distinctive, and he held it up for Paige to see.

“Now, where have we seen something like this before?” they asked her.

“Inside those drone things you were working on,” she exclaimed. “That’s a berket sword!”

“Uh, close. Try again.”

“A bucket list?”

“No. In fact you’re further away.”

“A circus?”

Shake of the head.

“Cutting board?”

“Closer...”

“Just tell me!”

“It’s a circuit board.” They turned to Mary. “The reason your people haven’t been able to work this out is because it’s not totally magical. This is technology. Somehow, the ancient people that built this place made a key piece of science fantasy real. They managed to make replicators, and simply power them by magic. That’s why even I could work one, and how it took such excellent instruction for

the gear. These devices turn electrical power into normal matter. Dean is going to fall over backwards when I tell him about it.”

Chapter 4

Talking to the Light Warrior

Where: High in the air

When: No time has passed

“Well that’s just great,” Mary grumbled, looking the circuit board that had been revealed over. “You’re telling me this thing isn’t really magical at all?”

“Given what you yourself have said and the clear emergence of this circuit board, the evidence is clear,” Sinjorino agreed. “It explains why the cubby stopped working when your people took it apart, they did not know to reattach the wires that were broken. Also I’m seeing some evidence of damage here, not caused by our taking it apart. These pieces here and here look burnt.” They pointed and everyone crowded around to see. They were right, the board was blackened under certain bits that stuck out. “Either a consequence of damaging it as they crossed wires taking it apart, or another fail-safe created by the manufacturing process. I doubt it was actively creating something as they pulled it apart, so these boards should not have been running at their max power.” *As some power must be going through it, to receive the commands of what to make. But that doesn’t explain these marks.*

“You mean to further keep us from figuring out how it worked?”

“Precisely. After all, they have gone to great lengths to obscure its function. Creating the simple appearance of a magical stone box that gives the asker what they desire.”

“Can you fix it?”

They shook their head. “Unknown. We would have to tear the entire covering off this one, exposing the circuitry. Verify no other components have been damaged. Try to work out the functioning of the damaged components despite them no longer working. Fabricate replacements, perform the replacement, then solder these wires back together. These were assembled by machines, not by hand. It would be slow going, if it was possible at all to do it manually. Of course Paige’s repair spell could be utilized in the case of the wires I would not have to do that part by hand.”

“Of course. Well, I’ll make sure to pass the word not to try opening any others or they’ll most likely stop functioning. And we can move on to other parts of the place. Of course if this is technological who knows what other parts are? We could be completely wasting our time here.”

“The possibility does exist.”

“Wait, so you’re saying this box is more like you than a spell?” Paige asked. “Technology, not magic?”

“That’s correct. Once the realm of stories, this device creates new matter in the universe. I share your incredulity, believe me. Nothing like this was known in my time, can you imagine building units such as myself with this functionality built in? We could create any known tool, food, or weapon using part of our battery reserve. We would have been far more versatile.” *And dangerous, so more limiters would have been placed on our behavior no doubt.*

“So wait, this was created after the fall?” Light asked. “I mean this seems more advanced than even Dean has at his disposal. I didn’t see any strange, empty shelves in his office, did you? I’m sure he would have one if one was to be had.”

“Ah, yes perhaps he would be a good resource to consider,” Sinjorino agreed. “He would have more experts familiar with this type of thing and more easily able to trace the functionality.” *Should we be giving demons access to unlimited fabrication though?*

“Not exactly what I meant. I mean how did something this advanced get built during all the upheaval of the time if in the thousands of years that followed a guy like Dean who has been around since then hasn’t? I mean he implied the demons had factories and continued to advance those machines they use to count their money or whatever.”

“Computers, yes. It does seem to operate on principals far in advance of where we should be,” they admitted.

But Paige was smiling, and the others turned to her. “You have something to say?” Light asked.

“Oh, just a guess,” she mused, “but I bet someone like me featured prominently in its creation.”

“A young elf, born of angelic parents but rejected by her village for being too inquisitive?” Sinjorino asked. “How do you figure?”

“No, silly, a natural magician! Think about it. If I can do a couple of spells and get a high enough rating to lift a battleship with Mercury magic, I bet you I could use a spell to augment someone’s brain to heights never before imagined by mortals. For a person boosted like that, developing something like this might be the work of an hour.” She bounced a little, sure she had at least partly solved the mystery.

Meanwhile, Light scowled a mighty scowl and started flicking his finger in the air. Not a middle one, just a regular one. “As much as I hate to admit it, she’s probably right,” he finally agreed. “There are spells to augment someone both mentally and physically. And with The System we know the typical person has a mental stat, let’s say REASON, of 5. Someone with a 10 might come along once a generation, while someone with a background to push it higher say to 15 once every thousand years. Imagine a caster like Paige temporarily giving a person a REASON of a hundred or more. The spell is one to one, the increase is equal to the rating, and she can basically be as high as she wants with an energy draining spell. If the Skyebourne wanted to design fantastical equipment and make sure no one could ever figure it out, that would be the way to go. Find someone like Paige, have that person enhance someone far past human limits who figured out a bunch of stuff, and then just build it from plans. Destroy the machines that made the devices, and float away on your islands. Heck, you could cast it on a complete idiot who has a 2 in REASON to make extra sure they don’t even know what they did afterwards.”

Everyone looked at Paige. “Yeah, I’m the best,” she crowed. “Just admit it. Go on. Admit it. Admit it. Come on! You know it. I have plans for my XP at the moment but if you think this device is worth studying and want me to pick up the augmentation magic, I can. Maybe give it to Dean directly, as he’s got at least some background in all this. Maybe he can just recreate it from scratch now that we know it’s possible? Rather than try to use this as a template or whatever?”

“Reverse engineer,” Sinjorino told her.

“Sure, whatever.”

“Let’s hold off for now,” Mary told them. “It may come to that, us giving every kingdom one of these devices to help with resource shortages. But to think one of these in every home? As long as you can power it you can just keep getting stuff out of it? Are we ready for something like that? I’m not so sure we would ever be. I’ll think about it. Meanwhile, let’s go meet a decent Skyebourne, there’s one staying at the Guild building and we need to head back there anyway. You two can discuss if they could have done it themselves or if they would need a natural magician. I’m not clear on how exactly their magic works. Not that it really matters now, but it would be nice to know.”

“Okay!” Paige seemed open to it.

“Alba!”

“Yes?”

Everyone jumped, the man was still just standing there behind them.

“Oh my goodness, don’t do that!” Mary told him, hand to her chest. “I completely forgot you were still here. Stop all research on these things for now. And spread the word opening them ruins them so don’t do that either.”

“Right away, guildmaster. We shall move on to the priority two task.”
“Fine. Let’s head back.”

The group teleported back to the building and stepped away from the roped off area that served as their teleportation platform. Riding the elevator up they headed to a lab, and Mary walked right in like she owned the place. A young woman with short black hair was explaining something to a few researchers in robes, standing next to a blackboard. They all turned to look at the group.

“Guildmaster,” all the researchers intoned with a bow.

“Good morning,” she told them. “We need to speak to her if you can spare a moment.”

“Of course,” said one. “We’ll be back in a few moments,” he said to the woman. She nodded, and they left.

“You’ll have to remind me of your name,” Mary told her.

“I’m Elita, Elita O’Gratsi.”

“Right. Everyone, this is Elita, a Skyebourne citizen that’s been living on the ground a few years. Seems she escaped the place before getting turned into a zombie like the others. Elita, this is Olaph, Paige, Light, and Sinjorino. We just got back from figuring out how those alcove things worked to create things. We wanted your opinion on something related to their invention.”

“Okay?”

Mary gestured to Paige who stepped forward. “Hi! Nice to meet you! I just wanted to know are you more like a natural magician, like myself, or a scholar like Light here? Or don’t you know? Or is your magic totally different and if so, how so?”

“Wow!” She laughed. “Nice to meet you too. I’m closer to a natural magician than a scholar, I use my own energy, what The System calls spirit energy, to fuel my spells.”

“And you can spend more?” she pressed. “For a bonus I mean?”

“I can.”

The group shared a knowing look. “So they could have done it themselves,” Light mused, stroking his beard. “They probably would have, in that case. Not needing to ask another type of magic user, yes, it makes sense.”

“Done what themselves?” she asked.

“Used magic to insure you could spend all your energy at once,” Paige explained, “and then another spell to dramatically increase your mental stats using that energy. Then invent various devices that seem magical, but in fact are not.”

“Wait, the alcove that makes stuff isn’t magical? I thought everything on the islands was magic, though thinking about it I could ask for stuff and be given it, unlike the cleaning booths and such... Huh.”

“It’s powered by magic,” Sinjorino clarified, “but uses scientific principals to turn energy into matter at the molecular level. Thus we will have a difficult time understanding those principals, until we have access to that spell ourselves and Paige can place it on someone.”

“I see.”

“So that answers that,” Light decided. “Nice to meet you, Elita, we won’t keep you.”

“Actually, what are you working on here?” Mary asked, looking over the chalkboards.

“Before I get into that, is there any word on Lysanias?” she asked, hopeful.

Mary shook her head. “Nothing I’ve heard. Divinations still come up empty. Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” she breathed, it clearly not being fine in the least. “What could have happened to him? Taken directly to Heaven now that his work was done? It doesn’t make sense.”

“We’ll let you know the minute we find something out, I promise.”

“Okay, thanks. So, about this. Now that I’ve gotten a more formal explanation about how magic works in general we’re trying to figure out a way for me to do what everyone else does, and cultivate my mana core.” She turned to the others. “See, we Skyebourne sort of pull spells out of the air. As long

as we have the XP we can simply decide we know a spell, and we know it. It's engraved on our mana cores as we first cast it. But the flip side is, we can't cultivate and erase them, so we're stuck with whatever we know our whole lives. And we can feel the spells, see them in a way like catching something in the corner of your eye. It's annoying. Like a buzzing fly. Everything we've tried hasn't worked though."

"So you have to be extra careful about what spells you use?" Paige asked. She nodded. "That's sort of horrible. I mean, it would have been even better than my way of doing it, just looking at the formula and engraving my mana core in a few minutes, at least before The System came along. Now that I can get any spell I want your way of doing things seems a lot less convenient, as I can cultivate and make room for new spells. We're almost the same but you're worse off, that's not fair!"

"Hence me wanting to see if The System changed anything for me," she admitted. "And of course everyone was curious where my spells 'came from' so we were studying that. Now they just seem to be delivered by The System so that's a dead end."

Something to talk to Bob about later, thought Olaph. There are probably not a lot of people with this background left in the world given most were turned into zombies and killed. But it does seem unfair much of the benefit of her background is now negated by The System. Maybe I could ask that she could at least cultivate to get half the XP back for a spell? And it takes a number of hours as if learning the spell as a scholar of magic? Then it couldn't be abused and would bring her more in line with everyone else. "Well, keep at it," he told her. "The System really is changing all the time based on what we do, something may come of it." He caught Mary's eye.

"We'll leave you to it," she agreed. "I'll see you later, Eilta."

"Nice meeting you," everyone said, and headed out. The other researchers headed back in, and Mary took them down the hall looking in doors to find an empty room.

"You want to do something for her, don't you?" she asked Olaph.

"At least let me ask Bob about it," he agreed. "And with you here you can make sure I don't go too far."

"Fine."

So he called up Bob, who of course answered right away because what else did they have to do in the realm of chaos anyway?

"Ah, the Skyebourne background," they said, after getting the situation explained to them. "It's actually good timing, I was going to call you about a different matter. Let me just read this over... Okay, it's the same cost as natural magician and you're right. With The System in place it's not quite fair any more. Getting back half XP seems reasonable at this point. Given there is still some benefit to being able to just pull a spell out of nowhere with no study."

"So you can implement that?"

"Sure thing. I'll notify her of the change."

"That won't be suspicious," Mary muttered, "her getting a System message moments after we talked to her."

"Can't be helped. I mean maybe Bob wouldn't have to notify her? Or could delay the message? I don't see what difference it makes, that midwife got an instant result."

"I could delay it a few what you call days," Bob admitted. "Or tie it to some trigger, maybe the next time she tries to cultivate?"

"I'll have my people come up with something they haven't tried and get her to try again," Mary decided. "That way it's less suspicious it happening right after we left the room."

"Great, I'll flag it... And done. Now, about these midwives..."

"What about them?" Olaph asked.

"Good call on them, and I've got some good news. Since their introduction they've already saved 25 tiny lives with the new package. You haven't picked up dynamic mage yet so I haven't given

you the list of issues we wanted you to focus on, but you're already somewhat off the hook for the number one item. So well done. You don't get any XP for it, sorry."

"You wanted me to help newborn babies?"

"We wanted you to help increase the population. It's too low! Too many people die too young to preventable conditions. I mean really, is it so much to ask to waive the fee for a pregnant mother? I mean come on, you can't be that greedy."

"The rules have to be for everyone," Mary countered. "Equally."

"Do they, though?" Bob asked. "You're allowing people to die for lack of a bit of precious metal. Doesn't your guy judge your souls when you die, and fairly harshly at that? Not known for his mercy, your guy. I'd love to hear you explaining to the line of dead babies that points to you when asked who killed them, why they had to die. Oh, because your moms didn't have a bit of heavy element, you would say. I'm sure that would be a comfort to them. At least we did something about it, and the results speak for themselves. And we don't even have souls to worry about!"

"The money is just representational," she snapped. "If we waved the charge for childbirth what's next? Broken legs? Gashes?"

Er, maybe yes? Why not have all healing be free? It's what the church wanted originally, but you forced us to charge. At least we take it as a donation and return it to the community in one way or another.

"Their deaths are representational," he countered.

"Anyway, that's in the past," Paige spoke up. *Please don't get into a shouting match with Bob, you remember what he is, don't you? New topic, new topic... Oh I know.* "How many people are in the world, anyway? Do you know?"

"There are an estimated 4,000,000 people in the surface world," Bob answered swiftly. "Plus another 3,000,000 Anunnaki."

"Who?" everyone wondered.

"Er, never mind. Should not have said that. Nope, should have kept quiet about that one. Forget I mentioned it."

"Fine, I'll ask something else then. What percentage of the population took the new background?" Mary asked suspiciously. "There were a lot of people hanging around The Guild building, and that's just our town. Every branch seemed to get swamped."

"About 1%," Bob answered.

"That's about 40,000 people," Sinjorino calculated.

"Yes, I can do basic math," Mary grumbled. "Great, just great. Look, part of any population problem isn't just babies surviving birth. It's feeding all those people too. We don't have a ton of usable farmland because we have to protect it from monsters and such. What's your plan to increase food production if we start increasing our population, humm?"

"Oh that," Olaph answered with a smirk. "Already taken care of." He turned to Light. "Shall we go for another visit?"

"Any excuse to check out some cute beastkin, am I right?" he answered with a smirk of his own. "Forgotten about Lunaria already, have we?"

"No I haven't," Olaph replied a bit petulantly. Then he flushed and realized maybe he shouldn't have reacted that strongly to the barb. "That is to say, all of the Lord's creations... what I mean is..."

Paige hid her grin behind her hand but Mary just looked confused.

"Let's just go."

Chapter 5

Irrational Fears

Where: Merryhill

When: Maybe 20 minutes later

Mary's mood seemed to sour more and more as Olaph continued his tour of the village, rather than catching his enthusiasm as he had hoped. They hadn't seen Lily yet as Mary was more interested in the fields than the experiments. The group was currently watching a bunch of townspeople harvesting suspiciously large potatoes.

"And you say the size of these potatoes had nothing to do with magic?" Mary asked.

"Growing so many in such a short time did," Olaph explained. "But their size is most likely because of Lily. She can change plants and those changes persist to the next generation."

"And it's not magical at all?"

"Oh, I get it," Paige announced. "It's a supernatural ability, not magical at all. You won't be able to charge for it or control it. That's what you're worried about."

"That is partly my concern, yes," she agreed. "Excuse me," she said to a passing woman with a basket of taters. "A mage cast a spell to make your fields grow?"

"That's correct!" she agreed. "Isn't it wonderful?"

"Uh huh." She didn't sound convinced. "Where is this mage now, do you think?"

"Tavern, probably," she said with a shrug. "He doesn't hang around the fields and get in the way."

"Fine. Let's go." She turned and started back towards the buildings.

"You're welcome," the woman shouted icily after her.

"Thank you," Olaph said to her, and the group hurried after her. They trailed along behind, Olaph pointing out the town tavern, and everyone went in.

She looked around, zeroing in on the guy in mage's robes, and stalked over to him.

"Guildmaster!" he squeaked, shooting to his feet. "What a wonderful surprise!"

"Save it!" she snapped. "What's your name?"

"Sherlock Gnomes, at your service," he managed.

"Fine. What's this about you making fields grow?"

"Have I done something wrong? I don't recall any Guild rule against such things..."

"You're telling me you've been charging the standard rate every time you cast that spell?"

"Of course! I take guild rules very seriously!"

What a sucker, Paige thought, feeling for the guy. *Of course he could be lying...*

She looked a bit put out finally sat down. The others got a table nearby. "Explain," she demanded.

He sat down, looking a bit more relieved. "I've been raking it in lately," he began. "These farmers are more than happy to pay for the casting of the spell because they can bring an entire field of vegetables to market in a week instead of a season. A single casting covers the whole field and I only have to maintain it for an hour. They spend the next few days harvesting, tilling, fertilizing, planting, and I cast it again. Have you seen how many farms are around here? Most of them are new, and thanks to Lily. Everyone wanted to get in on the action before more people learn the spell and there's more competition from other towns. We're exporting things as quickly as we can."

“What spell is this?”

“It’s a beta spell; Garden Bounty, grade 4, Moon.”

“Bob,” she muttered.

“Who?”

“Never mind.”

Oh, is she mad The System offered something useful? Something that’s a single casting but massively benefits a large number of people? Too bad, get used to it. Anyway, the spell would have been put into The System long before Bob got called down. You can’t blame them, they’re just an interface between us and the more powerful primordials.

“So it’s okay, right?” Realizing now he wasn’t in trouble and could actually morally be in the right made him more bold. “I charge the fee, and cast the spell. Guild policy allows me to make my living in any way I want with my magic, and right now I’m doing this.”

Sure, it’s an hour of work a day and you can kick back. What’s not to like about it?

“Technically, that’s correct,” she was forced to allow.

“Technically? You’re not going to restrict a spell that helps grow *food*, are you?”

“And what happens to global food prices if towns can simply pump out a hundred seasons of food a year?”

“Food will become inexpensive enough no one would have to go hungry?” he offered. “Which is a good thing? You know how many people have come up to me and said they’re eating better than ever now? Even had a few homeless people now making a living harvesting crops, as there’s just so many. We need more people, actually, so everyone is getting paid a good wage. It’s working out all over.”

“It could lead to wars over food as some places won’t be able to keep up! They could retaliate and destroy farms, or, or…”

“Hardly. In less than a year this spell will go into the general list and any mage that can cast moon spells will be able to do it. It’s grade four, I mean come on it’s not that hard. Any decent sized town will be able to afford it. And if fields are messed with, okay, just cast the spell again the next day. Easy.”

He’s got a point, and I can see that being offered to a farmer as part of the new package, Olaph thought. While it’s the new hotness around here, I’m sure the market will regulate itself and places will maybe do one casting a month rather than continuously. So prices won’t fall as much as she’s worried about.

“You have no idea how this will affect the global economy,” she snapped.

“Positively, it’s food,” he reiterated. “Farmers won’t need to be at the mercy of the elements anymore because they can plant at the absolute best time. Even if you restrict it to one casting per farm per year, crops won’t be bothered by bugs, by drought, by disease, there won’t be time for any of that to bother the crop. Think of the effort saved! The increased yields!”

“And what about the bugs and such? Bunnies? They have to eat too you know.”

“So we can set aside a field, hundreds of carrots, just for them. You’re really concerned about *rabbits*?”

“I’m trying to look at the bigger picture here!”

“I’ll stick to the opinion of experts, you know, the actual *farmers* I’m helping? They say it’s the greatest thing that’s ever happened to them and I’m inclined to agree. Thanks to Lily we have more variety than ever, everything is bigger than ever, and thanks to me the food just keeps coming in.”

“You would, you’re the one profiting.”

“You think I wouldn’t do this for free? I’d do it for so much less, if I got some of the food I helped grow? It’s guild rules that make these people fork over so much money for a mere hour of my time. I would be set for life at a quarter of the price!”

“In any case,” Light suddenly said, standing. “Sherlock is correct, he’s not currently breaking any Guild rules by being here and casting the spell. If the rules are going to change, it would require the full council to vote after deliberation. And possibly consulting a seer or two. Let’s not get too heated and scare off the other people here.” He indicated the other people sitting at the tables, looking a bit nervous that two mages were going to start slinging spells at each other instead of just raised voices.

She rolled her eyes. “Fine. But I hear you’re not charging the full price..”

“They’re happy to pay it, I’m telling you!”

She stood. “I find that hard to believe. Come on.”

The others said their goodbyes to Sherlock, and left out the front door.

“So, does this answer your concern about a growing population?” Olaph asked her. “This is how we do it. Save lives that would have been lost at birth, and feed them good, plentiful food made by people like Lily and other mages.”

“I can’t stop Lily doing what she’s doing, but I *will* be contacting the Demongate Foundation so they know what’s going on here.”

And they’ll probably give her a medal, Paige thought with a snicker, because unlike the Guild they don’t have a stick up their-

“As soon as we get back,” she continued. “We’ll see what they have to say about the situation. Some young girl just running around modifying plants? Who knows what could happen?”

The herbalist she’s working with? Paige thought. For a start? I mean these are farmers, presumably they do know what they’re doing.

“That’s fine,” he agreed. “Shall we head back now? Or would you like to meet Lily?”

“We’ll head back,” she decided.

“One second,” Light cautioned, putting a hand on his Lightblade and looking past them. “Someone’s in a hurry to get to the tavern?”

A man in rough clothes was sprinting towards them, and screeched to a halt a few steps away. He was a beastfolk type, with fur rather than just animal ears and a tail. Looked like a ferret type, small ears, rather tall and thin.

“Is either one of you Olaph?” he asked, looking between the two men.

“I’m Olaph,” he admitted, raising a hand in greeting. “What can I do for you?”

“And quest complete!” the man said, ignoring the question. “I can finally take the working mage background!”

“Just from meeting me?” Olaph asked. “That seems odd.”

“It’s what the quest said, but I got the XP for it so I’m not complaining. Even if it was a total pain getting here. Let’s see what I’ve got!” He started excitedly jabbing the air.

“You’re not from here?” Paige asked.

“Humm? No, I’m from Citadel.” He seemed distracted, and really, who wouldn’t be. “So let’s see, I’ve got a distant conversation spell, a measuring things spell, and a send object spell. What the heck is that all about?”

“Perhaps your quest wasn’t just to meet me, but to have me help you work through your new spells?” Olaph offered. “Let me buy you a drink and we can discuss it.”

“I guess that would make sense,” he agreed. “I’ll take you up on that offer.”

“You want to head back on your own?” Light asked Mary. “We can make it back ourselves. I’ll even charge the padre here if you want!” he joked.

“No, I’m interested to see what they come up with,” she decided. “Let’s all go.”

“As you wish.”

They headed back inside, to the surprise of Sherlock, but Olaph waved him down and headed to a large table. “Please, have a seat.”

“Thank you. Oh, the name’s Terry. Terry Lanuga, nice to meet you.”

Olaph introduced everyone, and they ordered from the server who came to meet them.

May as well have lunch while we’re here, I suppose, everyone basically figured. *At least the food will be fresh and it’s cheap too.*

“So what is your profession, if I may ask?” Olaph started.

“I work in shipping down in Citadel, as I said,” he began. “Big firm, Shipping and Sons? Subsidiary of The Transporting Boys? Our slogan is ‘We ship from Son up to Son down!’ Get it, you can’t ship anything if you’re asleep?”

“Hilarious,” Olaph agreed dryly. “So your spells make perfect sense, don’t they?”

“Do they?” he asked. “How so?”

“You want to take this one, Light? I know you were looking at one of those spells at least.”

“Sure thing,” he agreed. “I’m Light Kajombro. I’m at least familiar with all those spells. Shipping, huh? Yes, those should work out nicely. Send object, right?”

“That’s what it says.”

“So, it does just that. It sends an object to someone else. Not somewhere else, mind you, but someone else. That’s probably why you got the distant conversation spell, so you can make sure they’re in position. The measure spell, well, that’s to check the weight of the object so you know you can send it. This spell operates on weight and total distance, of course.”

“Of course? But how is sending one object going to help me? I guess if someone wanted a letter sent really fast...”

“Oh, no, it’s not that literal. Like if you sent a full teacup, sitting on a saucer, that entire object would be ‘the object.’ So a crate full of things would be a single object for the purposes of the spell.”

“Oh, okay. I see a table here about how difficult it is. So it can be used for crates, interesting. That would actually be useful.”

“How much is shipping something, usually?” Mary asked.

Oh, here we go again, Paige rolled her eyes.

“For a standard crate, let’s say for a journey of three weeks?” he offered. “150 embers by wagon, 190 embers by boat. Insurance extra. We offer lots of different types too, theft, loss, fire, the list goes on.”

“Ah, and the standard fee would only be 70 embers for one casting of the spell,” Paige worked out, looking at the spell herself. “What a savings!”

“It’s *cheaper?*” she exclaimed, clearly not believing her ears. “Magic should never be cheaper, though I suppose a three week journey guarding a shipment would be costly...”

“But crates are pretty heavy,” Light cautioned. “I didn’t want to risk transporting that, uh, big, heavy, metal object that one time. Will the spell be able to get enough weight to make it worth it?”

“I can’t access the spell list yet,” Olaph admitted. “Not until I fulfill Bob’s quest, can you show me the wording?”

“Sure thing, padre.” He spun it around.

Send Object

Planet: Mercury

Grade: 6

Resist: N/A

DIF: Distance

Duration: I

Range: N/A

Casting time: 6

Reverse: N/A

Enhancer: An arrow

You send a single object to another creature, whose identity and general location you must know. The object appears in a puff of smoke at a random location at the feet of the target creature.

“This doesn’t say anything about weight, just distance,” Olaph mused. “So what’s the problem?”

“In general, a spell that doesn’t mention that specifically works on a standard scale. About a person’s worth of mass. So as long as your crate isn’t more than, say, 70kg you’d probably be okay. That’s still a lot of stuff to ship at one time if you’re talking, say, tomatoes or something.”

“Is that how it works?” he asked, making a face. “Just a second.” He started typing into a chat window, not wanting to use audio chat to Bob at the moment.

“What in the world are you doing?” Terry asked.

“I believe the phrase is ‘phoning a friend,’” Sinjorino announced.

Terry stared at them, confused.

“Don’t know that one? I’m not surprised. No one does.”

“I’m just getting the opinion of an expert, that’s all,” Olaph told him. “One minute.” He was reading. “Okay, Bob says you’re somewhat correct, but that’s not the whole story.”

“Bob?” asked Terry.

“The whole story?” asked Light. “What do you mean the whole story? You know how long I’ve been doing magic for?”

“Bob says you’ve been thinking about it wrong. You didn’t even try to get the big metal thing, you just assumed it wouldn’t work. You have to take all physical law of the universe into account.”

“What does *that* mean?”

“Okay, Bob says ‘each +1 Target Size multiplies a creature’s mass by 8’ and also ‘each +1 Target Size counts as two creatures of one size modifier smaller.’ He goes on to say ‘if a spell has a range of T or greater, and affects a single object or creature, it can be modified to target multiple targets within range. Modifying a spell in this way decreases your effective Planet rating by 1 per target (including the first).’ So, let’s say the standard mass of 70kg like you said, Light. So getting 560kg with the spell results in a -2 planet rating. 4,480kg would be a -3. 35,840kg would be a -4. If you’re shipping that much weight in a single container, well, I have no idea how. But let’s call it a -4 for the worst case. The average mage is going to calculate a random number between 1 and 10, and add 5. They can take an extra 3 segments because the crate isn’t going anywhere. Perhaps another 1 or 2 if they learn the empowering skill, which they should, and a bonus of 2 for the enhancer because an arrow is cheap and easy to acquire. So on average, $5+5+3+2+2=17$. To be useful they need to hit a 13 to get it basically “anywhere” on the continent of Pyre and they’re only taking a -4 for the weight. $17 - 4 = 13$. Easy. According to Bob. And if they only get a 13 to start, minus 4, they’re not failing by 5 so they won’t backfire and can just wait a few minutes and try again. There’s literally no risk to this.”

“Huh,” he said, blinking a bit. “So because I can target multiple things with a spell at a penalty, and a bigger thing *counts* as multiple things, I can therefore target a bigger thing that isn’t bigger, simply heavier. Makes sense.”

“Yes,” Sinjorino agreed. “Way to sum it up.”

“Bob says you should start your own company,” Olaph told Terry.

“My own... Shipping company?”

“That’s right. He says find others with your package and all move to different cities. If you know four other people with these spells and they know four other people and those people all know four other people pretty soon you’ll be able to send a crate to any city in the blink of an eyes. I... I think he means eye.”

“You would have to charge for every stop along the way,” Mary cautioned.

“Still,” he mused thoughtfully, “it’s a good deal. Even two jumps is cheaper than a three week wagon ride. Getting it halfway there reduces the insurance cost and cuts a week and a half off your transit time. As long as the people I knew were far enough away, like five towns over at least, it could be worth it. Much less chance of loss, pirate attack, fire, normal breakage.”

“And is the shipping guild going to be okay with you putting all those poor wagon drivers, and boat captains, and such out of work?” she pressed on.

“Goodness, do you think there will be enough people with this set of spells to seriously disrupt the entire shipping industry?” he asked, excited. “That would be amazing! Take down those smug bastards that don’t do any of the work but take most of the profits? You better believe I’ll do whatever I can to get rid of them! This is the best day ever!”

“What? No, it’s bad! What are you saying?”

“What do you mean, what am I saying? If I can work for myself, offer a better service, that’s faster, safer, more reliable, *and cheaper* why shouldn’t I? Why should I worry about this poor boat owner or whatever? Teach him to fish or something, he’s already got the boat.”

“He would then have food for a lifetime,” Olaph agreed with a smirk.

“Oh no, I just had an even worse thought,” Mary announced, going pale.

“What is it?” he asked.

“All these new mages- they’re not going to know guild law about how much to charge for spell-casting. 40,000 new magic users overnight? We can’t police that!”

“Aw, will we have to let the free market decide on prices for once?” Paige asked with mock sincerity. “How horrible!”

“Your sarcasm is not appreciated!”

Your stupid way of doing things isn’t either, she wisely did not say back. “Better issue some kind of flier or something, before it gets away from you then, huh?”

“Yes, we better hurry back. Oh my God, there’s probably a million things we need to do about this I haven’t thought of. Educating people about backlash and to take casting slowly until they get used to it. What to charge. When to say no. The fact they can’t be a government official if they took the new package. They won’t know anything.”

“I don’t actually see why I should fall under any guild’s rules,” Terry protested. “You didn’t want me around until just now, I had to get my magic from The System. This kingdom doesn’t even have a Guild presence, our king kicked you out the way I heard it. I’ll charge as little or as much as the market will bear, thank you very much. What gives you the right to set *my* prices? Just because I happen to be using a spell or two? Ha! Don’t make me laugh.”

“You see!?” she shrieked, standing and pointing at the guy. “That’s what I’m talking about right there! We need to get in front of this!”

“You go ahead,” Light told her. “We’re not done with lunch and we can get back on our own. Go take care of guild stuff.”

“What’s more important, the bedrock of our society or your stupid lunch?”

He shook his head. “That doesn’t even deserve an answer.” He continued eating.

“Fine. But even 40,000 people can be brought to heel one way or another. Mark my words.” She cast and vanished.

“Wow, didn’t think you would stand up to her like that,” Paige told Light.

He shrugged. “Winds are changing. Just a ‘shipping mage’ and a ‘farming mage’ will radically alter the world once they get going. The Guild better change too, or find itself on the wrong side of history. I can see that now, but some are going to cling to power. I almost feel bad for them.”

Chapter 6

Can't Always Get What you Want

Where: The Guild Building

When: After lunch

Olaph and the group were beckoned over by the mage watching the front desk when they teleported back to the Guild building. She was a dark elf, probably an apprentice mage, and Olaph went to see what she had to say. *Interesting. Both she and Lunaria have dark skin, but Lunaria had more of a patterning to it? Like some areas were a dark purple, others literal black. Is her skin actually more like you would find on a horse than on a human as well? They have different patterns. What would her skin even feel like? And the elf is looking at me like I'm some kind of zombie because I've just been standing here thinking for thirty seconds.* "Hello!" he greeted her.

"What did you say to the guildmaster, she looked furious," he was told.

"Just a few truths, is she really that upset?"

She nodded. "But more because of this, I think. There's a whole bunch of people here to see you. We put them in separate meetings rooms because they came at different times, and she said, and I quote, when he finally gets back from his oh so precious lunch he better take care of this and I better be present. So I'll let her know you're back and you can go see what these people want. There's six of them that we put in room one, and between you and me," she leaned forward, glanced around, and lowered her voice. "Most of them looked homeless. I don't get why they're here." She straightened up again. "Another man we put into room two, and a woman we put into room three."

"Popular guy," Light remarked.

"I wish I could be popular," Paige sighed.

"It's not all it's cracked up to be," Sinjorino cautioned her. "Though going on dates was nice..."

"The two of us could have a night out," she suggested. "At least go looking for some hunky boys even if we're not buying." *I have enough to worry about right now, thank you very much.*

"I do like hunky boys, I wouldn't say no to that."

"I'll go take care of it," he promised her. "Thanks for telling me."

"Sure thing!"

The group headed up to the meeting room and Olaph went straight to room three.

"You sly dog!" Paige told him, elbowing him playfully. "Don't keep a lady waiting, and all that?"

"Not exactly," he told her as he pushed the door open. "Hello?" A woman brightened as he walked in, and he looked her over. She was very short, half his size or less, but was clearly not a child. She was dressed well, had dark curly hair and some jewelry. She hopped down from the chair which was clearly too big for her, and walked over.

"I'm Dimple, you must be Olaph?"

"I am, nice to meet you. I hope you haven't been waiting long?"

"My whole life, maybe?" she joked. "But seriously, I suppose not. Can you help me? I don't know what I'm supposed to do with this magic I've been given by The System. It seems, uh, illegal, and whatnot?"

“Illegal magic?” Light asked, taken aback. “There’s hardly any spell completely frowned upon. Making undead, that would do it.” She looked up at him and his eyes widened. “You didn’t...”

“I’m afraid so,” she admitted.

“Put that aside for now,” Olaph told her. “Let’s go get the other people together. I doubt it’s coincidence you have all arrived today asking for me.” *Bob really is sending people quests to come talk to me. They really do want me working overtime on the ills of the world. Maybe bucking for a promotion? Do they do that up there?*

“Other people?”

He nodded.

“I would actually put that as statistically likely,” Sinjorino mused. “As this background has just been put in place, naturally more people would come to you now about it than say a week from now.”

“There is that. Still, Mary wants to be there so let’s just hear everybody’s story at once. We can take it from there.”

The second room held a dwarf who introduced themselves as “Koro De’fero, at your service sir. And who might this lovely flower be?”

“Oh stop,” Dimple said with a blush. They were about the same height, so it was only natural she got his attention first.

“Perhaps a coworker, I’m not sure yet. Come to room one with me and we can get this all straightened out.”

“Very well, lead on!”

Room one did indeed have six people in it, one nicely dressed and the other five clearly not. All looked confused and not talking to each other. All were human, a mix of four men and two women. Thankfully, this was the largest room and Olaph introduced his party and got seated while they waited for Mary to show up. She didn’t take long, looking not all that pleased about all this, but said they had come looking for him so get on with it.

“Very well,” Olaph said. “I assume you all got a quest to come and see me?”

“No, I got a quest to meet this guy,” one of the women protested, pointing to the better dressed man. The others agreed.

“I see. And you?”

“I got a quest to come see you, after I met with these five,” he admitted. “I don’t know why, none of them have the spark so they don’t have any magic at all.”

All five nodded and agreed this was so.

“I guess we’ll start with you then, if that’s okay with the others?” He looked to the brownie and the dwarf, who nodded. “Great. Did the quest say why you should come to me?”

“The quest is called ‘begin the great circle’ and it says you’ll know what to do. That’s all I’ve got.”

“Mine is the same!” Koro blurted.

“Me too,” agreed Dimple.

The two eyed each other.

“So you’re all connected,” Olaph decided. “What is your profession, then, and what did you get as your package?”

“I’m the city’s sewer master,” he explained. “Paul Nringo. I’m in charge of keeping the city’s sewer flowing right, making sure no dangerous creatures take up residence down there. I’m just to alert the guard, not take them on myself of course. But there have only been a few instances of that over the years. Thank the Lord.”

“You know,” one of the men said, “I never thought I would be so grateful to be homeless. That sounds like a terrible job. Patrolling a sewer? No thank you.”

“You are homeless then?” Olaph asked. “All of you?”

Nods all around.

“Very strange. Go on, Paul.”

“Right. My package was purify water, in Jupiter. Cartographer, also Jupiter. And for some reason a stone sculpting spell, under Uranus. I’m not sure how that all relates.”

“Purify water seems clear enough given your profession, but perhaps getting the rest of the puzzle pieces together will help shed some light. Koro?”

“Sure thing. I’m actually an out of work miner,” he admitted. “Mine dried up a few weeks back. So I’ve been looking for something else to do, came to the big city here looking for opportunity. Never thought I’d be sitting in a table at the Mage’s Guild, no sir. As for me magic, I’ve got a decay spell, under Saturn. A light spell, and a spell to cure disease both under sun. I’ve no idea how I’m supposed to be using all that! Not for mining that’s for sure. I mean having more light down the mine would be nice I suppose, but lanterns are cheap enough.”

Meanwhile, Light and Paige were clearly accessing The System, looking over the spells that had been mentioned.

“And you, miss?” Olaph asked Dimple.

“I’m a manager for The Great Building Company, our motto is ‘build up the ziggurat lickety split.’ It’s the best job ever. I get to sit around and make sure other people are doing the hard work. What could be better? As for my spells...” She hesitated, glancing over at Mary.

“It’s fine,” she allowed. “As I doubt you’ve used any spells yet, being given something by a higher power won’t be held against you. But what you do with your magic, that’s on you. What did you get?”

“I got a spell to animate skeletons, that’s using Pluto, a spell to dig up the earth rapidly, Uranus, and...” She seemed greatly hesitant to continue.

“Go on,” Mary commanded.

“A spell called Living Dead, to turn a creature into a zombie.”

“Seriously? What could they have been thinking?” Mary demanded of Olaph, who really had no idea.

“Who?” asked Dimple.

“What? Never mind. This is so messed up. You better talk to Bob about their poor choices for this one!”

“I wonder if they see it that way,” Olaph mused. “Honestly, they probably don’t.”

“I don’t care!” She turned back to Dimple. “If you’re caught using either of those two spells, so help me I will bring the full weight of the Guild down upon you.”

“But, but,” she stammered. “I didn’t choose any of this! The System gave it to me. I’m not a necromancer, I just get paid to watch other people work. I didn’t ask for any of this!”

“Right, you don’t look like a vampire,” Paige joked to try and lighten the mood. Anyone who hadn’t recently fought Keven looked very confused for a moment.

“I don’t care if an angel of the Lord came and taught you those spells,” Mary went on. “They are not to be used under any circumstances!”

“Perhaps we should try to figure out what Bob and the others were thinking getting all these people together before we start banning things?” Olaph suggested.

“What? I figured you would be even more upset about this than me!”

He shrugged. “I admit I’m not crazy about the idea. The church has no love for those that dabble in creating the undead. But it makes sense, from a certain point of view. Once the soul leaves the body, what remains is simply a burden for those still left here. I’m not exactly familiar with these two spells, Michael never gifted me with much Pluto magic *if you can believe that*, but from a higher perspective if the remains of a person can be put to work why should we just ignore that resource?”

“You think this is just some kind of misunderstanding? Cultural differences? A resource issue?”

“Everything else has pointed to it.”

She leaned back and pondered for a moment. “We’re stuck for it I suppose, unless you can convince Bob to get anyone in her position a different package.” She waved a hand. “Well, figure it all out I guess. That’s what they wanted you to do.”

“So let’s review,” Olaph agreed. “We have a sewer master, and some people, uh, looking for work?” He indicated the five humans, who agreed they were not averse to being hired, even if it was sewer related. “A dwarf with magic to cure disease, and what does the decay spell do exactly?” He looked to the others.

“Makes ‘an object’ and we know that can be a crate of a certain weight now because of the shipping fellow we spoke to,” Light spoke up, “decay over the course of an hour. I suppose that means turn into dirt?”

“A recycler?” Sinjorino asked. “If it’s going to make dirt, who do we know that will buy an almost unlimited quantity of freshly made topsoil? Especially if made from a collection of human waste, and other biological leavings such as skins or peelings? Naturally one doesn’t normally use human waste as fertilizer because of the potential for contamination and disease transmission but if one were to remove that threat with a spell…”

“Merryhill,” Olaph realized in a flash. “Or any farming community that suddenly could make a lot more crop grow per year than they were used to.”

“That is my conclusion as well.”

“I’m not sure I follow,” Paul admitted.

“Let’s come back to that, just in case something else is really meant by all this. How does purify water work?” Olaph asked.

“Basically, according to this, a quantity of liquid can be targeted with the spell. It acts as a super fast separating spell. The junk sinks to the bottom, and the pure water rises to the top.”

“That’s why the stone shaping spell!” Koro exclaimed, snapping his fingers. “I’m getting the picture now, don’t you know?”

“Care to explain, because I don’t,” Paul admitted.

“Might I use your chalkboard there?” he asked Mary, who nodded and made a “go ahead” gesture.

“Thank ya. Er, I might need a bit of a boost…”

“With the guildmaster’s permission,” Paige rose, giving a very, very mocking bow to Mary, “I will simply cast a flight spell on you so you need not bother with such crudities as a step stool. No charge, as it’s benefiting everyone in the room more than you.”

“Oh get on with it!” she snapped.

“Why thank you!” She cast, and the dwarf rose into the air and started drawing on the board.

“Now I don’t know much about sewers but I assume the waste is washed away towards a central point using running water, joining some stream or another outside the city?”

“Correct,” agreed Paul.

“So our solution is before us, ain’t it? First, we dig a big hole or a series of them using Paul’s stone shaping spell right before the water leaves the sewer.” He was drawing a side view of this, and indicated water filling up a big hole. “It starts filling up but that’s what we want! When it’s full, or as it’s filling, the purify spell is cast on it. When it’s full, pure water instead of waste is now running away from it instead of nasty, smelly stuff that just pollutes a nearby river anyway. So there’s our first win. We stop the flow for a moment, possibly diverting it to another such tank to the side, and using a platform we installed beforehand,” he drew a square with some lines coming out of it and attaching to the ceiling of the place, “bring up the now concentrated waste. All the pure water runs out, like a ship traversing a set of locks. Before it’s touched we get the anti-disease spell cast it on, and a bunch of workers start shoveling it into a mine cart of some kind. Probably with holes, so more water runs out. Ugh, that’s going to be messy. When full, other waste is added such as the aforementioned potato peels or whatnot. Then we cast the decay spell on it and wait. After an hour we’ve got a nice cart-full of dirt,

and it's hauled out of the underground ready to be purchased by farmers. We've literally turned an unwanted sludge into a valuable commodity any farmer would pay a weight in gold for. Ladies, gentleman? We're about to get filthy, stinking... rich. And much easier than mining too, I might say. Yes, I could rig up a platform such as we need, I'm sure of it."

The group silently digested the diagram on the board as the dwarf hovered there looking smug.

"I guess it could work?" Mary finally said.

"And that's why the skeletons," Dimple said shyly. "It does make sense."

"How so?"

"At first I thought these people were supposed to do the heavy labor," she admitted. "But now I see I was wrong. They're there to be me. I make the skeletons and turn them over to the managers. They give the commands- "shovel that stuff up!" "Raise the platform!" "Lower the platform!" Skeletons wouldn't care about getting, uh, stuff all over them. Actually it would just run right off bones, I guess. And they could work day and night without complaint. I doubt the sewer ever stops."

"That it does not," Paul agreed. "But I can't work day and night..."

"You're just starting a company," Olaph realized. "Proving the concept for the moment, and then hiring more people with your magic to repeat the process in other cities. You work in shifts, or just shut it down at night and allow normal drainage. You basically make as much money as the work you put in. Three of you, three shifts, and a sewer can become a profit center instead of a burden on a city."

"What about the living dead spell though?" Paige asked.

"Someone has to pull the carts and such. I bet if used on some old horses, or a bear or something, rather than people, that would be fine right?" Dimple looked to Mary.

"I would have to look at the actual law. But I suppose if a farmer sold you an old horse that can't work anymore and is days from dying, and you turned them into a zombie horse that could work another 50 years with no food, no one would complain. They and these skeletons would all be underground anyway, not in people's faces. Hummm."

"So it could work?" she asked, getting a little more excited.

"All sounds pretty complicated," she grumbled. "You would have to get some farmers onboard to buy the final product. And properly disclose where it came from."

"But it's dirt at that point," Paul protested. "Why would they care? It could be a mix of leaves, rotten fruit, sewer output, but it all decays just the same."

"It might to them, you don't know."

"I guess."

"And you would have to transport it. Ugh, I know what you're going to say, Olaph!"

Olaph put his finger down, looking hurt.

"That shipping guy from Merryhill. He could move here, hire someone to stand away from everyone when he calls, and ship cartloads of fresh dirt there in a flash. The farmers would probably pay for the spell too, given how much they're making."

"Ah ah ah," Paige wagged her finger in the air. "Not so fast there. It's all the same company, isn't it? The processing and shipping of a product to market. The product in this case just happens to be fresh dirt. The only money that changes hands is for the goods- the dirt at the end. That would sell for the going rate, whatever per cubic meter or however they measure it. Everything else is internal to the company. It's pure profit at the end, they have no up front expenses because the sewer and their 'input' if you will already exists. They can gather up food waste and leaves and horse poop, anything organic the city produces and usually just throws away. Think how much cleaner the city will be because of this! People already pay to have garbage removed so make a deal with that company to split their profits because you're taking some of the stuff off their hands. Any additional profit is simply distributed to the workers, in this case these fine people here," she indicated everyone at the table, "because all the magic they did was for their own personal- no for the company's benefit. Not for anyone in particular. Especially if the end product is just a pile of dirt that farmers have to move

themselves via carts. Random farmers, not a specific farmer.” She smiled in a very smug way. “Guild prices don’t apply to any part of this process!”

“You’re walking a very thin line you know, missy!”

“I’ve been kicked out of better places than this, so I’m not too worried,” she retorted, stretching. “My parents may not exactly see eye to eye with me, but if I went home and told *the entire elven nation* that the Mage’s Guild was mean to me they might take exception to it.”

“I think you overestimate your importance!”

“I think you’re starting to overestimate yours! No one really needs this Guild anymore, we have The System now. I suggest you be very careful who you alienate in the coming days. I see membership shrinking in the near future, just for a start. How much lost revenue now that you don’t control the sale of spells anymore, in just the past month?”

“Ladies, please,” Light pleaded. “Let’s not start any rumors of, shall we say, internal strife around the...” He jerked his head a little towards the others.

Mary conceded the point. “Fine,” she said with a clenched jaw, “you’ve made some excellent points, *apprentice*. As for you all,” she turned back to the newcomers, standing up, “don’t explode yourselves or anything trying to get rich quick off of poop. Would be a real shame. And better see to any permits from the town before you start mucking about with the sewer system. If you are going to form a company there may be forms for that too. Maybe get a lawyer? Don’t care, doesn’t affect me any. Don’t come crying to us when it doesn’t work out.” Without saying goodbye she stalked out.

“Look, sorry about her,” Light told them. “She’s just been under a lot of stress lately. Do you need capital?” He cast, and pulled a gold bar out of his pocket dimension. “This one was supposed to go to Olaph here, but no doubt he would just donate it to the nearest church. I think cleaning our water and making a new source of topsoil are probably a better use for it. If you agree, padre?”

“Oh no, I barely recall that,” he muttered, going red. “Something about a shiny? I was an ogre at the time... Yes, yes, that’s fine. Put it to good use, all of you. Get that company started and invite me to see the operation sometime, I’d be curious to see it in action.”

“We will,” Paul agreed, taking the bar. “I think this is just going to be the first of many. And I’ll donate a bar this size to my local church once the business takes off, you have my word.”

“May the Lord go with you!”

Into the sewer? Sinjorino thought. I don’t think even the Lord wants to go there...

Chapter 7

Finally Taking a Moment

Where: The Guild Building

When: An hour after the group left

Olaph was back in his room, having discussed a few more things with the group about their new “business venture” of turning waste into gold. On paper it all sounded plausible, easy, and profitable for all involved. Olaph was sure whoever was downstream of the town would be overjoyed to see their river running clean at last, and despite the subject matter all of them seemed excited about their new role. (And in having a job at all, in some cases) Olaph waited an hour in case someone else came along to see him but it seemed he would finally get a chance to sit down and actually rearrange his skills and backgrounds to finally become a magic user again. Naturally he invited Paige and Light to help him decide on what spells to take, as he was assured he would be able to choose the “normal amount” of them by Bob. Whatever that meant. Sinjorino was of course invited as well, and decided to tag along as they had nothing of greater importance to do at the moment. How many times did you get to see someone “respec” as they called it? Hardly ever, and with their long experience Olaph didn’t mind taking advice from them in general. He had finished reading out the descriptions of what he was going to get, and started explaining it to the others.

“This type of magic is *very* different from anything I’ve ever heard of,” he began. “And seems to be heavily augmented, if you will, by The System. Or I guess supported is a better term? To start, you know how time seems to slow if you can spend XP to rewrite reality?”

Nods all around.

“It’s going to be like that. But I’m getting ahead of myself. There’s no planet ratings in this type of spell-casting. I can take any type of spell apart from unholy and chaos magic. Holy magic vanished with the closing of the gates so that is of course not even worth mentioning. Actually I could take chaos magic but there are warnings I may not like what happens to me if I do. So I’m staying away from that for the moment. Instead I have five skills, each costing double XP to raise. Mana, basically how much magic I put into the spell to know if I meet the difficulty of casting it. Aim, how accurate the spell is. Power, how difficult the spell is to resist once it hits. Range, how far the mana can get from me before it’s no longer effective. And finally effect, which replaces ‘planet rating’ for most spells, or serves as the damage calculator for damaging spells. I can trade in my skills at working with the fiendstones, and the medium skills I got for a five in all these skills, so I’m at least on par with the average mage. With me so far?”

“You have to aim your spells yourself?” Paige asked. “That’s kind of weird.”

“Yes. All spells seem to be single target only unless I combine them with a spell that changes it. I’ll get to that.”

“What? That’s not fair!”

“Hold on,” Light protested. “What about the normal range for a spell? Some are personal, some are touch, some are medium, and so on.”

“Not for me,” Olaph answered with a bit of swagger. “My range is simply the number of meters the spell can go. Personal, touch, or sight range doesn’t mean anything to me. So I can target anything in 5 meters around me with a spell. More as I raise the rating and more if I channel potential into that specifically. Though there is a note that may change or go back and forth between straight meters and

the usual distance table, which they do show. Right now my 5 would be only 1m, here I'm sure you've seen this." He flipped the window, showing them, and they nodded that they had. It was a standard table for distance difficulties for things like teleport.

"Dang!" Paige exclaimed. "Either way is a trade off. I don't know which I like better. I mean we can use our aura to push spells out if they're touch based but that's another skill for us. You just get it right at the start. But that's pretty short range for magic, even medium spells are much longer distance to say nothing of long and sight range spells. I guess if you could use the table that would be more fair."

"There's a series of trade-offs, it seems," he admitted. "From what I recall of my casting days, that weren't that far behind me, I remind you. Here's another one. Elements cost 5XP to purchase."

"Huh?" both blurted.

"Say I take the fire element and the ice element, right? Then I take an elemental bolt spell. I can choose which element to use, or even both, if I wanted. I don't learn two elemental bolt spells."

Both considered that. "Odd choice," Light finally decided.

"Yeah, I guess if you were fighting something that turned out to be immune to an element, you could pick up another. As long as you picked grade 6 spells and above for attacking, you would come out ahead," Paige agreed. "How do you combine them though?"

"That's the most complicated part of all this," he explained. "And why The System needs to be involved, with a new visualization it shows me when I'm casting. It's part of that compromise I talked of too. See, spells for me don't have a minimal time to cast, or a maximum for that matter. I gather mana, I push it into the spell and each of the other four 'skills' though they aren't listed as traditional skills."

"Hold on, that sounds even more powerful than me! That's no fair!" Paige complained.

He laughed. "It's between the two of you, let me explain. Every two segments of gathering mana I get a chunk of potential to put into the five categories. For example if I'm behind cover and something is jumping around a lot I may decide to focus on aim rather than power. So I'll cast for 4 segments and put potential into mana and aim. The System basically gives me my result and I'm allowed to pause the universe and decide where I want that potential to go. The System shows me a set of columns relating to the specific spell I'm casting and I choose where the numbers sit and thus, what my total is at the end of it."

"Oh, like we calculate our stat for the planet we're casting and then can add XP to recalculate or add to it?" she asked. "We don't need to see it, I know my rating instinctively, but you're juggling a lot more numbers at once because where you put them seriously affect- the spell you're casting."

"Exactly. You've got it. I can maybe show you the sheet when I'm done with this to give you an even better idea."

"That still doesn't explain about combining. And what's the stat you're using? How do you know how powerful or weak your effort is going to be?"

He shook his head. "No stat. It's a plain one through ten chance. At the moment there's no way to improve that, they want to see how it goes. It could go up or down (hopefully not down) once I start using it, so they haven't made a background to enhance it. But Bob says they could down the line. As for combining, spells for me are more like spelllets, if you will. They *can* be complete spells, but they can also be simply parts of a greater spell, as if you two were combining a spell. For example if I took the zone of the zen master and the hygiene spell, I could cast for 4 segments and put potential into both spells, thus combining them. The system shows 2 rows and I get 10 places to put the potential I gathered."

"Wow!" Paige breathed. "They're really going all in on spell combining, aren't they?"

"Maybe. The problem will be not many spells are meant to be combined, so will I even find enough for it to matter?"

“It’s like they are pushing you to really experiment with magic,” Sinjorino offered. “Magic is somewhat static as I understand it. You say the words and wiggle your fingers and you get the same result you did last time. The spell is the spell, much like flipping on a light switch. The light goes on. They want you to experiment, to really put the magic back in, uh, magic.”

“That’s a good theory. You may need a whole new spellbook,” Light mused. “With lower grade spells you can combine more easily. That’s going to take some work. I suppose if this type of spellcaster takes off, The System will provide them. Or you can get the XP for researching new spells, like I did.”

“Hang on, why can’t you gather mana for a whole hour and cast half a dozen spells as one spell?” Paige asked suspiciously. *Imagine those huge soldiers Light and I made, but with elemental touch, damage reflection, acceleration-*

“They thought of that. There’s a penalty to the result, equal to the number of spelllets past the first, and the number of maintained spells I have going.”

“Hang on, are you telling me you can cast a grade 10 spell, maintain it, and your penalty is only a -1?”

“Not exactly. Like I said my base amount of potential right now is a five. If I maintain a spell all those fives become fours. So it’s more like I’m always at a -5 penalty even for a grade 1 spell, which becomes a -10 for maintaining two spells, and so on.”

“You spread it out,” Light decided. “So no one part of the spell is impacted. At first glance it seems better, but in the long run it’s probably about the same.”

“Yeah I guess,” Paige pouted, then brightened. “So your maximum power is what, a 20? That’s fine, I can still do better than that without much effort.”

“Sort of. If I had a 10 in all my skills, and calculated two tens, so I could put all my potential into power, and I cast a spell with two components, and selected power for both components, they would add together. My total result would be a 29 for power and a 9 for everything else.”

“Calculating two 10s is fairly improbable,” Sinjorino reminded them.

“There, you see?”

“I can still do better, so I guess it’s fine,” she admitted. “And back to my original point, you can’t gather mana for say 6 segments and put all that potential into the power of one spell. You have to spread it around.”

“That’s right. I could put it into mana to make sure I cast the spell, and aim to hit and range to stay out of the way, but it can’t be all into range and snipe someone from a kilometer away. I mean maybe if they switch the distance to the table? But not as it stands now at only meters.”

“Okay.”

“So what are we looking at so far?” Light asked. “Show us the panel! If you want to, I mean.”

“Sure, it’s fine.” He flipped the box.

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
Attuner		Dynamic Mage
Spark of Magic		Spark of Magic
Medium Thief of Magic		Extra Spell Points (30)

Skills		
Old Skill	modified to	New Skill
Premonition		Magic Sense
Fiendstone Attuning Fiendstone Boosting		Mana
Fiendstone Empowerment Fiendstone Sense		Aim
Fiendstone Skill Fiendstone Stats		Power
Bilocation* Channeling* Telekinesis*		Range
ESP* Healing Acceleration* Telekinesis*		Effect
Bonus^		Magical Scripture
Bonus^		Magical Theory

*Note: As some skills cap at 4, XP has been taken from the Telekinesis skill to make up the difference.

^You can finally take advantage of that bonus you got for helping develop combined casting. As you can do this on your own we gave you this instead. Sorry and you are welcome have a nice day.

Stats*			
STREngth	+ 5 -	REASON	+ 6 -
ENDurance	+ 5 -	KNOWLEDGE	+ 6 -
CONstitution	+ 5 -	RESOLVE	+ 6 -
REFlexes	+ 6 -	INSIGHT	+ 5 -

MANipulation	+ 5 -	PERsonality	+ 8 -
COOdination	+ 5 -	LUck	+ 5 -
LOOKs	+ 5 -		

*Note: Removal of INSight based skills detected.
 *Removal of INSight based background detected.
 *You desire a PERsonality based spell as a major focus to your build.

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
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“Why did it set your PERsonality so high?” Sinjorino asked.

“I have a plan for that,” Olaph admitted. “I desperately want that ally spell Kevin used. I still don’t plan on being a combat mage, but I do need a way to defend myself. I guess PERsonality is related to that spell in some way.

“You’ll see why,” Light agreed.

“I see. In the day we would have called this min/maxing but please proceed.”

“Thank you. Does it look okay to everyone else?”

“More spells is more good,” Paige told him. “Hit the button.”

“Unless we decide to run around the wilderness and the dungeons again XP may be hard to come by,” Light reminded him. “Best take all the spells you can now, just in case. So I approve of the extra spell knowledge.”

“In that case it seems my course is clear,” Olaph said after a moment to make sure no one thought of anything. He hit the confirm button, and the screen changed to a spell selection screen. “It seems I have a total of 96 points to use to learn spells with at this time, without study,” he announced. He had felt the power of the fiendstones leaving him, as well as the one spell he had managed to steal from the vampires. But he felt a new potential in him, that of a five sided mana core ready to engrave with spells. “The grade of the spell is subtracted from this number until it hits 0, and then we’re done. This is where I will truly need your help. Michael selected the spells I would learn back when I had to pray for them each day. So I know lots about healing and the like, but not much else.”

“We can offer some useful things to take,” Paige assured him. “Let’s get started.”

With his type of magic being unable to target multiple objects or people he immediately took detect friends and detect enemies, as well as the magical ally spell and ascension, the spell both Paige and Light had decided upon that had made Kevin’s creature more bestial and powerful. Paige recommended some spells everyone at the academy learned in their first year, like hygiene, combust, and healing, while Light recommended pocket dimension to never need to carry anything again, and at least a few combat adjacent spells to help out his ally. He picked sleep, bribe, damage reflection, energy

drain, and the elemental conjuration of dross, an element not typically chosen by mages. In this form it would simply splash all over someone and then later cause them to take more damage from other sources. Most mages just decided to take directly damaging spells. Light agreed this was all fair enough, but did remind him the ally would count as him, so if he used it to go terrorize towns or something it would still be his soul in peril. Olaph barked a laugh and said “That’s only to be expected. I didn’t plan on anything like that anyway.”

With his remaining points he bought some utility spells, like talking to animals (“Something I always wished I could do!”) and manipulating wood, stone, and metal. Along with illusion magic and the sustain flame spell, he picked up a spell to warn him of the presence of demons, teleportal and clairvoyance after reading them over (“I have a plan for this one!”) and with his last point picked up floating fingers, a very weak telekinetic spell. (“I didn’t use my medium background all that much, but this does seem useful enough it’s worth one point.”)

With that done a sub-menu opened and he had to specify the spells that were going to go into his magical ally. He got 16 points worth of powers, and chose the ascension spell and the damage reflection, figuring it was going to be a close up fighter and not worry about dodging. May as well have a chance to throw any damage it would have taken back at its attacker. For the creature traits he picked two sets of wings, hoping it was more angelic than demonic, elemental touch, a shape shift ability, and swiftness making it move faster with his final point. He then got the menu for the ascension spell again, but delayed that, as he didn’t plan on casting it on anyone in the near future so the “real” use of it could wait. With that done he looked everything over, somewhat saddened there wasn’t more synergy in what he had picked.

“I think you’re right, you two,” he decided. “Most spells just aren’t made to work with other spells. I may need a whole new spell-book. I guess we’ll see what Bob thinks of all this.”

“Still, energy draining every opponent near you or setting them all on fire will take you pretty far,” Paige remarked. “You don’t have any extra penalties for doing something like that. I’m almost jealous, but then I remember you won’t lift any battleships so...”

“You’re going to be talking about that for years to come, aren’t you?” Light sighed.

“Until I do something even more amazing, you’ve got that right!”

He just rolled his eyes. “Looking good, padre. You can still cultivate your core, right? If you decide you don’t want something? You can just take something new from The System and erase an old spell from your core?”

“As far as I know, yes,” he agreed.

“Then go for it. I can’t deny the convenience,” he hastily added to head off Paige, who looked even more smug.

“Very well.” He double confirmed everything, and was somewhat disappointed when there was no special light show or anything to commemorate the occasion. But he did, somehow, know how to cast spells again and knew all the spells he had chosen had been engraved onto his mana core.

“Somewhat scary, that The System can just *do* that,” Sinjorino remarked when he said he was ready to give it a try. “Just reach into your soul like that and make changes to it. Your brain too I assume, as learning spells takes study. The scale of it... I wonder how long they worked on it.”

“Bob would say time was a narrow concept,” Olaph decided. “Subjectively maybe a thousand years but for us only a week? Who can say? Now stand back I’m going to see what my ally looks like. I’ll cast for 6 segments, not that I need to better my aim or my power for the trial but just to make sure I can have a lot of potential in case I get ones for everything. Here goes.” The others braced themselves, and an inverted pyramid appeared before him and started flashing as mana was channeled from it. He put his hands around it, and spoke the words. “Let my defender appear before me!” He calculated a 5, a 9, and a 7 and knew he needed a 13 in mana to successfully cast the spell. (It was one of the highest grade spells he had taken) So the 7 wasn’t enough, but the 9 was, so he mentally decided to place the 9 in the mana “column” of his new spell sheet. He put the 5 into aim, it wouldn’t do to have it appear

inside the wall or anything, and 7 into effect giving him a 12 “rating” in the “planet” for the purposes of this spell. This increased the stats of the creature, not that anyone would notice as it wasn’t there to attack anyone. It worked! The pyramid collapsed into a point of light which he grabbed, and tossed to the floor nearby. A creature twice as tall as he was appeared, looking like a cross between a temple dog and a Chalkydrii or sun lizard. It stood on all fours, had a shaggy coat, four wings, a purple crocodile tail, and many eyes. It then changed into a fearsome dragon looking form that was twice as big as that, and then a lion standing only as tall as he was. It seemed proud of itself, and Olaph patted it.

“Well done, Saphiel, which is your name, if you wondered.” (It didn’t, for the record)

“I wouldn’t want to fight it,” Paige said. “I mean, unless I had a nearby battleship I could throw at it.”

“We get it, you lifted a battleship!” Light yelled. “Knock it off!”

“You’re not the boss of- oh wait.”

“Anyway, let’s try something else,” Olaph decided. He nodded to the creature, who vanished. “Let’s try a combination this time. Maybe 8 segments?” He cast again, getting a pair of tens, a nine, and a one. He put these numbers on clairvoyance and teleportal, a ten and a nine on mana (if he had gotten a 2 he would have used a 10 and a 2 as he needed a 17 total) a 9 and the 1 on power. This gave him a total range of 15, or a million kilometers, more than enough. (The power of this spell being different from the range the aperture would appear at, which was within the 5m radius. The power determined how far the effect would go. Yes, it’s all very complicated and situational, that’s why it’s a beta skill after all) He grinned as the front of his sister’s house came into view, and he stuck his hand forward into the portal.

“That’s not what I wanted to happen,” he remarked sourly.

Chapter 8

Twilight Sparkle would be proud

Where: The Guild Building

When: Just after casting the combination spell

Olaph was somewhat disappointed in the result his combination spell had produced. He had hoped to work around the “sight” limitation for the teleportal spell, which opened a portal between two points anywhere he could see. He figured combining with the clairvoyance spell he would get a portal to anywhere. And he had, sort of. The image shimmered a bit as he stuck his hand through it, but he didn’t actually go anywhere.

“I made a portal I can only see through, not step through,” he moaned. “What a waste!”

“I guess if you wanted more people to see an area, instead of just you with straight up clairvoyance...” mused Light. “It could come in handy then.”

“But not really what I was intending. Hey Bob, you have a minute, or what we lowly beings would call such?”

There was a dry chuckle from The System window. “For you, of course, Olaph. What’s up? I see you’ve picked your lifepath and some spells, well done.”

“Thank you. I had a question about that. Is there a skill I can take that will let me predict how two spells will interact? I just tried it and got the opposite of what I wanted.” He waved a hand through the viewing portal again, unsure if Bob could see him or not.

“Not specifically, but I’m sure magical theory could be tweaked a bit to help with that.”

He smacked his forehead. “I didn’t even think about that. Wait, there’s no way I could have, what am I saying? I got everything all at once. I’ll have to remember that though, to make checks in those new skills before I learn any more magic. Well, thanks, Bob.”

“Now hold on a minute partner!” Bob protested. “We can fix this. If you’re unhappy with a selection you’ve made... hang on.” A line went through one of the symbols in the window and the group traded a look, wondering what Bob was going to suggest. The symbol went back to normal. “Okay, they agreed. We’ll make you a deal, it’s being implemented now. Any spell you cast for the first time goes on a 24 hour timer. If you want to switch it up before then, you can do so without any downtime or checks needed. We want you to be happy with your spell selection and experimenting with it, after all. So go nuts, as the elephants say. You still have those, right?”

“I don’t think so,” Sinjorino replied. “Not many left in the world even before the arrival of the moon, and mostly on different continents.”

“Shame, but you get my drift I hope? Keep in mind this is for you only, not others when we make it a beta ability. Call it alpha if you want at the moment, don’t go spreading it around you get special treatment.”

“I do, and I won’t. Thanks. I guess I’ll switch out both of them and just take a lower grade one and dimension door. I like teleportation in the abstract, but I would really be more comfortable seeing where I’m going before I get there.”

“Fair enough,” Light agreed. “Jumping blind is always a risk. It’s actually odd we don’t have to make more LUCk checks to not have something in the same space.” *Of course we mitigate that by having the roped off areas, or those shacks we always teleport to rather than just a random point in space.*

“That would get tedious fast,” Paige muttered. “Not that it isn’t automatic but risk of failing would really cut into how willing people would be to teleport.”

“I feel like I’m missing something,” Bob decided. “Why would you want to switch them? You want to go to other planes?”

“No, not especially. But teleportal is sight range, that’s what-” He stopped. Paige smirked at him.

“Weren’t you just telling us about how that didn’t matter for you?” she quipped.

“Yes, I realized it just as I was saying it. Are you saying the teleportal spell is simply more useful for me because of how I cast magic?”

“Of course it is. How could it not? We changed the rules of reality to make you The System, you think a bit of magical tweaking is beyond us? In this particular case, range simply determines how far away the initial portal can be from you. I don’t know why you wouldn’t want it right there but I’m sure there are situations having it further away can be beneficial. The other end is determined by your power, which becomes the number on the distance table you can get. Ignore all other restrictions like that you see in spell descriptions. We’ll work on rewriting them all for your background later, once we’re sure we like the background in general.”

“Ah, so you will get your own spell book,” Light reasoned.

“Looks that way,” he agreed. “Very well, just the clairvoyance spell then, give me a minute to pick something else.”

“You don’t think this would be useful?” Paige asked as it vanished.

“You do realize anyone on the other side can see you?” Bob asked. “You can’t spy on people with this method. You would need some other combination to do that.”

“Oh! That’s even better, in some cases.”

“Yes, that would emulate certain technology from before the arrival of the moon,” Sinjorino told them. “Being able to see someone and talk to them across great distances was simply a fact of life in those days.”

“But I can already do that,” Olaph insisted. “Just open a portal and don’t step through it.”

“Oh yeah!” Paige realized. “This actually made the spell *less* useful! How about that!”

“Not if you had to negotiate with someone who you didn’t want stepping through, or throwing a bomb through or something,” warned Sinjorino.

“Guess I just wasn’t thinking creatively enough.”

“Or what about talking to a doctor? This way no plague could get through.”

“Okay, okay, there could be many uses for a portal you can’t step through, fine!” she huffed.

“Say, padre,” Light asked, a twinkle in his eye, “how big a portal can you make? Think you could make it big enough to fit a whole battleship through?”

“I’ll work on that!” he promised. “That would be more impressive than lifting one, wouldn’t it? Teleporting it to the other side of Pyre, I mean?”

Paige just glared and folded her arms with a “humph” sound. “I’d like to see you try it.”

Olaph settled on animate objects for his replacement spell, as he wanted to play around with it. “Those chains that Paige wears don’t seem to come in too handy for her,” he explained, “but I thought I might give a few other things a try. For example, if I carved a person sized figure out of wood could a single animate objects spell allow it to walk around? Carry things? I could simply command it to follow me and it would. Naturally it would need joints and such, but that doesn’t seem too tricky when one can reshape wood with one’s thoughts.”

“And it would be more acceptable in society than having a bunch of skeletons following you,” Light agreed.

“That helped give me the idea too,” he admitted.

“I’m happy to help with the carving,” Paige told him. “I know that spell too.”

“Thank you, I’ll probably take you up on that.”

“Humm, a more limited but magical version of a remnant,” Sinjorino remarked. “With no consciousness. I’m not sure how I feel about it.”

“Just an idea for now. I have no idea if it would even work, would it be smart enough to even stand?”

“Probably,” remarked Bob.

Olaph laughed. “I forget, we actually have someone to ask. Well, I’ll have to find some nice wood.”

“Hey Light,” teased Paige, “can you help Olaph find some nice wood? Maybe tomorrow morning?”

“He wouldn’t like my kind of wood,” Light snarked back.

“Yes, yes, very amusing,” Bob continued. “If you can keep your mind out of the gutters for two minutes, perhaps you are ready to take a look at that list I may have mentioned? Things my superiors would like to see addressed in the world?”

“Of course!” Olaph assured them.

A few moments later Olaph finished reading through the list. “That’s a good number of things,” he remarked.

“Yes, your world has a lot of issues,” Bob agreed. “Most of them easily solvable a thousand years ago or more, but yet, here we are. Chop, chop.”

“Show us, don’t keep us in suspense,” Paige pleaded. “Spin the window!”

“Actually, I’d like to see if it works in reverse,” Olaph mused.

“Reverse? What are you talking about?”

“This.” He placed a hand on The System window, or at least above it. “System function: copy,” he intoned. The others looked at him like he had gone nuts as he took a few pieces of paper and stacked them together, placing his hand on the top of the stack. “System function: paste.” The text appeared on the paper as though from a modern printer. “Ah hah! I told you about that, didn’t I? That’s what I was talking about.”

“Hey, you’re learning,” Bob praised. “That’s the way to do it! Have an XP for not being an idiot.”

“Oh, thanks.” *I have 25 now, I would need 36 to put a 6 in my spell-caster ratings. Rather than buy new spells I think I’ll just save up for the moment. After all I’ve only used two of my current spells!*

The others read them over. “Pretty tall orders,” Light finally mused, when everyone was done. Basically it boiled down to a few points:

Increase the general population by preventing deaths in childbirth and keeping people healthy.

Decrease the number of monsters in the world, or make towns safer to live in.

Decrease banditry and make the world safer in general.

Root out corruption at high levels that only serves to enrich a select few.

Bring back certain aspects of the old, pre-moon world to make people’s lives easier.

Solve the resources problem before all the mines run dry.

Solve the demon problem. (See Mary Louwho)

“Some of these are already being worked,” Bob informed them. “The new midwives are doing a great job keeping babies and mothers alive. And banditry should start decreasing as many would be bandits learned they had the spark and took a career package. Before you ask,” they hastened on, “no we didn’t give them magic related to stealing things. They got packages like everyone else relating to their interests, like baking or butchering. So they can start making an honest living that way, if they choose.”

“Thank goodness for that!” Olaph agreed. “But seriously, how am I supposed to do all this? I’m just one person.”

“The same way?” Bob suggested. “One person at a time. Show them a better way. Let it spread. You live in a world surrounded by magic, yet a farmer that accidentally cuts themselves may die of infection for want of some heavy element paid to a person that could heal them in one second otherwise. And it would cost that person nothing. We simply cannot understand it.”

“I must admit,” Olaph said, looking sour, “Churches are especially at fault for not pushing back on that one, they should have been doing that the whole time. But we caved to the Guild and here we are. But look at Mary! She’s not changing her mind any time soon about charging for spells.”

“It did always strike me as odd,” Paige mused. “That the various kingdoms don’t subsidize health care on behalf of their subjects. I mean, that’s what the king is there for, to protect his people. But no, they would rather have a worker out for 6 weeks fighting some disease they ultimately succumb to instead of being back to work the next day. That’s a loss of tax revenue, like maybe 50 or 60 years of it if that person dies young enough. That person now can’t have kids, a further loss of revenue for the future. Everyone losses. And for what? Heck, a house of healing could have a doorway they have imbued with a spell of cure disease that they just pass everyone through. Then a healing platform they stick them into for a minute, and maybe a cure poison one just in case. Boom! 90% of their patients are cured in a minute and can go back to their lives. Heck, put them all in a corridor leading into the building, no spell casting needed. It’s not like an imbuing would ever run out. You wheel someone through that hallway, and if they’re fine they just pay and leave, if not a healer looks them over.”

“Huh.” Olaph sat and thought about that a moment. He picked up his pen and made a note. *Avoid the problem of charging per spell by creating imbuing for houses of healing. Have patients pay what they can. Maybe open new houses of healing and drive the old ones out of an area. Brutal way of doing it, but if you had a choice to go to the new place and be healed in a minute, or the old place and be told yes you will likely die, the old place wouldn’t see any new patients. They would have to close and their staff could join the new place. Depends how open the old places were to having the new arches installed?* “It certainly sounds doable,” he agreed.

“What aspects of the old world would you want brought back?” Sinjorino asked.

“Electricity, for one,” Bob answered simply. “You can just do so many things with it.”

“At least you didn’t say social media. I agree, there should be a variety of methods to produce electricity. The least of which is just doing it with magic, such as what was done for me.”

“Hey, social media may have been a wash as far as pros/cons go but email was certainly worth it.”

“... Agreed. Depending on how many people start working as magical shippers, like our friend Terry from Citadel. I would hate to put them out of their new job so soon, though of course packages would always need to be sent. Perhaps we could go right to texting...”

“Texting is fine,” Bob agreed.

“We have Dean for that sort of thing, right?” Olaph asked, pen poised to make another note. “He already offered to start selling us product made in the demon world once we could plug it in.”

“Agreed,” Sinjorino agreed. “We should speak to him about their standard voltage and if they standardized on AC or DC so we can build compatible devices.”

“I have no idea what you just said but sure.” He wrote down *speak to Dean again and get technical knowledge we need to restart widespread adoption of electricity.*

“Additionally, I don’t know about bringing back the automobile,” Bob continued. “But some form of mass transit would be appreciated I’m sure. If cities do expand you need to do them the right way this time. Make sure they’re designed for people, not cars, right from the start. I’m not saying the Amish should come back, but there must be some kind of balance that can be struck.”

“The who?” Paige asked.

“Ah, the Amish,” Sinjorino mused. “They managed to hang on to the bitter end, didn’t they? I wonder how horrified they all were when they died and realized the Lord didn’t actually care if they used buttons or not... So much effort for so little gain. Poor fools.”

“Buttons?” Paige stared in disbelief. “You mean, like, on clothes?”

They waved a hand. “I’ll tell you all about them later if you want.”

“Rooting out corruption seems like a very long-term goal,” Olaph decided next. “And the resources problem isn’t going away any time soon. Not unless we really can figure out the secret of those Skyebourne devices.”

“Actually, the solution to that problem is closer than you think,” Bob countered.

“Oh? Do tell!”

“I’m not saying much, but I think Sinjorino has a request?”

Everyone looked to them. “I do, actually. As you know I’ve been fixing up the New Hope and I would like to provide the ship an avatar. To that end I would like leave to travel to a remnant factory and procure an incomplete remnant. One that does not yet have their consciousness circuits activated. Thus the ship could simply run it as an extension of themselves, allowing it more opportunity.”

“Have you run this by the Guild?” Light asked. “It’s really their ship now.”

“I have been given leeway to help repair it as I see fit,” they announced. “Part of those repairs would be to create more repair drones to replace those lost to time. However, much of the machinery to make said drones has been in disuse for many hundreds of years. And of course we lack many resources for much construction of that type. But this would allow the ship to begin repairing itself, giving the ship a set of hands, as it were. The avatar would not function away from the ship, there is no danger of it constructing an army of any kind. Besides, The Guild has not destroyed what remains of remnant factories, this would be no different.”

“I guess that’s true. And this somehow also helps to solve the resources issue?” he asked Bob.

“It does. I think you’re going to be quite impressed, all of you, for different reasons of course, with the solution they’ve come up with.”

“I’m not against it,” Olaph decided. “In fact I can more easily offer my new magic and practice it out there in the real world than hanging around here just trying to think of stuff. Let’s go, if you have a place in mind.”

“I hated to impose. I was going to ask to be relieved of my duty for the time being so I could go by myself.”

“Would they not welcome us?” Paige asked. “As living beings, I mean?”

“I’m sure that would be no problem, I simply didn’t want to bother you with it. But if you are prophesied, if you will, to take care of some of your own list I wouldn’t mind the company.”

“We can leave tomorrow, if no one else shows up to see me in the morning,” Olaph told them. “I do want to stop at a jewelers through. I have no need for the fiendstones I bought, so I’ll sell them and you can each have a cut of the proceeds.”

“Yes please and thank you!” Paige squeaked excitedly. “Have I mentioned what a great guy you are, Olaph? Really swell. Can I hug you, maybe bake you some cookies or something?”

“Down girl,” Light told her. “We all know about your college loans.”

“Do you though,” she asked, her eyes haunted. “*Do you?*”

Chapter 9

Sky Bound

Where: Breakfast table

When: The next day

The group had a destination, a town Sinjorino knew about on the remnant coast, so named because it had a high concentration of old remnant factories. They had spoken about the plan last night, but waited until the next day to discuss it seriously. They had all had a long day running around with Olaph and Mary, and Olaph wanted to experiment with his new magic a bit. He also went and sold the fiendstones, and had handed the money out to the others before dinner. They were now back together after breakfast to decide how best to get there. As it wasn't a mission for The Guild they couldn't use guild resources and it was unlikely any mages in the city could teleport them to such an odd location. Even if they wanted to pay the most likely outrageous fee, which they didn't.

"Unfortunately," they explained, "getting there in a timely fashion is the problem. The remnant coast sits almost exactly between where we are now and one of the only other landmarks we have seen in our travels thus far, Citadel. I believe leaving from there and traveling by ship would be a faster journey simply because it is more direct, but it will still mean hiring a ship. Unless either of you have been there?" They looked to both men with teleportation magic. But both shook their heads. "I was afraid of that."

"Still, I can get us a few answers," Light announced. "How much it would cost to get to the place... Uh does it have a name?"

"Yes. Escalon. Not to be confused with Ascalon to the east, which is a small island."

"Right." He sat for ten minutes casting his question spell, calculating 4 above the needed result. His question of "How much would it be to hire a ship to sail the four of us from Citadel to the city of Escalon on the remnant coast?" was "42 moons."

"What?" yelled Paige. "Tell you what, give me the 42 moons, I'll make three and a half months' payment towards my college loan debt, and I'll do my augmented flight spell again so we can cover the distance in a few hours. We can do the temporary tool thing again to keep the wind off us and Light can keep us on track again. How does that sound?"

"We do know it works," Light agreed. "Let me see if question magic is smart enough to calculate your top speed and see how long we would have to fly for."

"Fair enough. We would be traveling over water again if it's on the coast, right?" Sinjorino nodded. "So we couldn't easily stop. We need to know we can get there in a single day."

"Right!" He cast his spell again, just barely getting the 10 he needed, and his answer to "At our top flight speed as defined by Paige spending a majority of her energy on the flight spell, how long to fly from the town of Citadel to Escalon on the remnant coast." was "2 hours."

"Easy!" she announced. "Just don't, you know, ask me to throw any battleships or anything for the rest of the day."

"Wow, snuck it in already, huh?" Light asked.

"I reserve the right to mention it at most once a day," she sniffed.

"I suppose that's fair, but only if you agree to take weekends off."

"I'll agree to that if you agree that on holidays or special occasions, such as but not limited to my birthday, I can mention it as many times as I want."

“With ‘special occasions’ happening no more than ten times in a given calendar year?”

She thought a moment, counting up holidays in her head. “Deal.”

“Deal.”

They shook on it with great ceremony.

“Too bad you didn’t specify the penalty if I slip up,” she smugly told him. “Guess there isn’t one.”

“Just your eternal shame at being unable to keep your word about such a minor dealing. Imagine how much trust in you I would lose, thus never respecting you or making deals with you again.”

“Oh, well done!” she praised, giving a nod of respect.

“Thank you.”

“If you’re quite finished?” Sinjorino asked politely.

“Let’s head to outside Merryhill,” Light decided, standing. “We can leave from there.”

Olaph placed a hand on his arm. “I’ve got this one,” he announced seriously.

Light rolled his eyes. “Go for it, padre. Unless anyone needs to get anything?” Olaph had put a bunch of stuff into his pocket dimension the night before, Light already of course had his set up. Paige was wearing the chains and said as long as they were good to come back by lunch she was fine, and of course Sinjorino never went anywhere without their bow so they were good.

Olaph gathered mana for 6 segments, getting a 5, another 5, and a 1 to place in his skills. With only a 5 base and a 12 difficulty spell the magic didn’t come together, and he scowled. “You know, it’s odd,” he mused, lowering his hands. “I’m gathering mana, you think I could simply gather mana continuously in a situation like this, and then simply put up to 5 chunks of it and yes I realize I need a better word for them, into the sides of my core. Why do I have to declare my intent to gather only for a specific number of segments? I’m not filling up a water jug, it’s not going to leak. I’m going to have to ask Bob about that later. Let me try again.”

This time he cast for 8 segments and got a 5, a 9, a 1, and a 7. The 7 went into mana, the 9 into power, the 5 into effect, and the 1 into aim as he had it. With a 14 in power the total distance away he could get was 100,000 km away in other words “more than enough” and a portal opened where they were looking at the plant barrier around the city. “Please,” he said with a bow, “after you.”

The others stepped through and he followed, snapping his fingers and making the hole snap shut.

“Bet you were like that, trying to be all flashy when you started doing magic,” Light remarked to Paige.

“Trying?” she asked, as if the concept was foreign to her.

He just snorted in response.

“Just to be clear,” Paige asked before she herself began casting. “There’s nothing we can combine here, or that Olaph now knows, to make this even faster?” She looked at the two men, who both brought up their System windows and shook their heads.

“Sorry, have to go through the motions,” Light told her.

“Very well. Just making sure you can’t say ‘oh no, if only I had thought of that earlier!’ later. Here we go.”

Just as before she put her energy gathering spell on herself, then cast flight on everyone with an effective Mercury rating of 154. This gave the party a speed of 800km/hour and they shot into the air, protected by the dome Light made. They took off flying, Light calculating their heading at once and checking it every thirty minutes or so. The water rushed by them, they were going as fast as a commercial airliner not that there were any to race at this point in history. After a little more than an hour they could see land and headed for the largest city they saw, which Sinjorino said must be the

place. They had made it! They landed at the docks and looked around. No ships were in evidence at the moment but far in the distance was a metal and glass tower, rising high into the sky. There was no one to really greet them so they headed towards the place, away from the docks and towards the buildings. They had to pass through a guard station though, patrolled by several of the fighting drones Sinjorino had been restoring on the New Hope, and a few larger remnants.

“Halt and state your business,” one of the remnants commanded as they got closer. There was a metal fence here stretching across the length of the docks, with what looked like rolling doors large enough to open and allow large wagons through. These were of course closed at the moment, and all the patrolling drones stopped and turned towards them.

“My designation is Sinjorino. I travel with these three organic beings who are all magic users. We have recently captured and liberated a remnant battleship from a vampire and have begun repairs on it. The ship has expressed interest in an avatar allowing it to interface with organics more easily. I hoped to procure a shell that was suitable here.”

“Will you allow me to access your data matrix and verify this claim?” The remnant raised a hand as if asking to be handed something.

“You know, in the old days it was customary to at least buy a girl a drink before asking if you could go inside her.”

The remnant didn't react.

“It was also customary to laugh at a ladies' jokes.” They extracted a cable from somewhere behind their hair and handed it over. “Very well, no need to be gentle this isn't my first time.” The remnant plugged it into themselves and the two stood motionless a moment.

“Did you know they could do that?” Paige asked.

“I didn't,” Light replied.

“Very well,” said the remnant, handing the cable back. “Your claims are verified. Please wait here, a guide has been summoned for your convenience.”

“Thank you.” They turned back towards the group. “It should go smoothly, they're quite excited about the New Hope and hope we can repair it back to full operation. They will provide a wireless access point so the New Hope does not have to be alone any longer. It will only work in range of this city, but as the New Hope is a boat it should be able to come here sometimes.”

“They?” asked Olaph, gesturing to the one standing there.

“No, all of them,” they replied. “This one also has wireless, I was connected to their entire network for a moment. Ah, I remember those days, when that kind of information stream was everywhere. I spoke to their central intelligence, they've granted my request and would have just wheeled out a suitable shell but while I was speaking to them I mentioned your quest to solve the resources project and they've allowed us to go see their efforts. I think you'll be pleased at their solution. I have a complete map of the city but I believe the residents here wish to show off a little, thus the guide.”

“You said all that?” Paige asked. “It was, like, five seconds!”

“We can communicate quite quickly when connected together in that way,” they replied. “It's quite efficient. Still, I may have lingered over long just to have that connection again just a second longer. You organics are rubbing off on me it seems.”

“Uh, sure.” *One second?*

The group waited only a moment more and were escorted into the area through the door, which was rolled open for them. A regular remnant met them on the other side.

“Greetings, I am Fulmo,” they said. “Please, come right this way. It's good you came when you did, another few days and you would have missed the launch altogether.”

“Missed lunch?” Paige asked.

Fulmo made a laughing noise. “No, launch. You’ll see. It should be in view to even your pathetic organic senses in just a moment. No offense.”

“Oh, we’re all well aware of our pathetic, organic limits aren’t we follows?” Light asked sarcastically.

“Oh, for sure,” Paige agreed. “It’s a wonder we did anything, like build sophisticated factories sturdy enough to last for thousands of years that make non-organic beings that later come and say how inferior we are.”

“Point taken,” Fulmo allowed. “This way.”

They led the group through the various areas of the factory grounds, pathetically small piles of raw materials lying around, while remnants and living beings alike went about their tasks. It didn’t take long to reach a strange looking tower standing upright near the main building, and Fulmo announced “here we are!”

“It’s a tower,” Paige grumbled. “What’s the big deal?”

“No, something isn’t right,” Light decided, looking it over. It looked sort of like a tower, with no windows, surrounded by scaffolding that was being dismantled. “There’s only one door, that I can see. Otherwise it’s a featureless rectangle. Maybe 10 meters to a side and I have no idea how tall.”

“It’s a ship,” Sinjorino told them, unable to keep it inside even a millisecond more. “A space ship. And it’s going to work by magic. You have actually already expressed interest in such a trip, Paige.”

“No way!” she countered. “You mean- like that sphere we traveled in down in the demon world? This one just goes up instead?”

“Exactly like that!”

“It took much of our resources,” admitted Fulmo. “Many new shells were not made to instead make this. But we believe it will be worth it.”

“Can you explain to me how this helps?” Olaph asked. “I’m not understanding how this odd metal tower is going to solve anything.”

“Recall our trip in the sphere,” Sinjorino told him. “The gravity magic that was employed allowed us to move at a tremendous speed but even we did not experience the true potential of such a method. Allowing the craft to build speed for weeks or even months would allow it to travel far beyond the orbit of the moon, either one, in a short amount of time. Their target will be any number of iron rich asteroids that are part of our solar system.”

“There are an estimated 32,000 known near-Earth asteroids and over 120 known short-period near-Earth comets,” Fulmo announced. “We have our eye on the most promising, of course. Spectral analysis shows the existence of many highly sought after materials not just iron. Thankfully the arrival of the second moon helps us here. It dragged many resource rich targets in its gravity field placing them closer to Earth than they were before. We simply have to get near enough to target them with the same gravity spell and return them to Earth.”

“Wait, you’re going into space?” Paige asked, getting excited now. “Can you take me into space?”

Fulmo shook their head. “Such a journey is for the moment being made only by my kind. We will bring no air, no human sustenance, and little in the way of what you would call comforts. Such as toilets. What you see before you is a minimalist design with enough sensors to keep us on track and allow us to find our way home. Perhaps one day, with proper resources, ships that can take organics into space can be constructed. For the moment such is impossible.”

“Well, if it can be done I’ll live to see it,” she allowed. “When will you leave?”

“A few days. Once the building supports are removed so they can be recycled, the ship will lift off from the ground and begin its mission.”

“You’re talking about bringing back enough wealth to buy the world,” Light told them. “Can you protect it? I mean to say nothing of us, dragons might notice, demons might notice, I mean how much metal are we talking about here?”

“For visualization purposes, imagine a square kilometer of material in three dimensions. That much.”

“I don’t know if I can. That’s untold riches!”

“Indeed. Our plan is to direct the material to a point not far from here out in the bay. This will allow easier access as part of the mass will be out of the water and allow anyone to help in the mining operation. We believe little processing will be necessary, the material should be fairly pure and must simply be cut into manageable chunks, and distributed.”

“I believe I can speak for the Mage’s Guild in this instance,” Light decided, “and pledge fifty, no *one hundred* mages to this effort. For a small transport fee, of course, we will help you pull apart and fairly distribute any material brought back to the planet to anywhere in Pyre it needs to go. We can make sure all lands get material equally so no one nation is slighted, or gains in power in an imbalanced way.”

It was hard to tell if Fulmo was thoughtful or not, but that did give them pause. “This would greatly accelerate our efforts,” they admitted. “And if the entire Guild is aware of the project security increases as even, as you say, a dragon would be given pause if they saw a hundred mages working in the area. The central intelligence is open to a dialog with Guild officials and welcomes the signing of a mutually beneficial agreement between our two factions.”

“I’ll send someone back that can negotiate such an agreement before the day is out!”

“That would be acceptable. Please keep in mind we wish to *gift* this material to the world. While, as you say, a small fee should be collected for the processing and transportation of the ore we wish no fights to break out. All kingdoms, large and small, will benefit equally from our efforts if we have our way. And know that if we are successful, we will return to space and collect more specimens for processing. This should also keep the peace as all lands that cooperate in this effort can be assured of a somewhat steady stream of material. Our only request is that we get first pick of the material, having taken the risks to acquire it.”

“Of course, of course. I would insist on that myself. We might want to make pots and pans or whatever but you use this stuff to make people. Naturally you would want a fair share of it.”

“Naturally. I’m glad you understand.”

“Quite! Just for my own interest, what do you rate the chances of success at?”

“Very high. With no fuel to explode and our course plotted, very little can go wrong. We do not tire, or become ill. We do not breathe. We have generators to warm us in the vacuum of space but little else is needed. If something does go wrong, our astronauts can simply choose new magic and deal with whatever comes up. They have all been saving XP for the efforts.”

“Magic using remnants, I’ve heard the rumors,” Sinjorino remarked. “So they are true.”

“Limited, at this time, but we are getting better at producing functional models.”

“Seems you do have everything well in hand,” Light admitted. “If this works, it will be a huge boon to the entire world.”

“That is our intent. I fear a tour of the ship would be counterproductive as the inside is as plain and featureless as the outside. A shell usable by the remnant battleship has been procured. If you would like to follow me back to the docks you can take possession of it and be on your way.” They gestured back the way they had come.

“That’s fine,” Olaph agreed, not wanting to make them suspicious. Lingering here would set off alarms that maybe they wanted to sabotage the process for some reason? But they didn’t. So they headed back and got an inactive remnant on a wheeled cart brought out to them by two others. Also strapped to the cart was a metal box Sinjorino identified as a wireless module they could install into the ship to connect it to this city.

“We’ll go there directly,” Olaph said. “Thank you for this. I’m sure the New Hope will be by sooner or later to thank you themselves.”

“As long as the shell is put to good use,” Fulmo told them. “We look forward to continued cooperation between our two people.”

“As do we.”

“Farewell for now.”

“I’m heading to The Guild building to tell Mary the good news,” Light told them. “You can get to the ship yourself now, right Padre?”

“I can target one of the decks, or perhaps the main deck as I’ve seen it. The magic should figure out where it is I think, I don’t need to know the exact location just picture it in my mind?”

He nodded.

“Then yes. See you in a few minutes then.”

“Right.” He cast and vanished.

“Let’s get this stuff to the New Hope!”

Chapter 10

The Demon Problem

Where: Outside Mary's office

When: Moments later

Light was impatiently waiting for Mary to be done with the person she was talking to, pacing the hall back and forth outside her office. Finally she was free and he burst in there.

"Oh, it's you again," Mary told him, trying not to look too sour. "How are you people making my life difficult now?"

"Don't look so glum. I come bearing gifts. But if you're not interested in money..." He turned to go.

"Hold on!"

"Thought you might change your mind," he decided as he turned and grinned. "Give Olaph some time, he'll come around to the mage way of thinking. Don't lump us all together."

"I'm more worried about your apprentice, she seemed a bit too spirited for my taste. You mentioned money?"

"That's right." He sat down across from her. "I've just gotten the opportunity to secure a completely new revenue stream for the guild. It not only gets us a steady stream of coin, it makes us look like heroes to all the kingdoms of the world. Oh, and it solves our resources problem- or at least the bulk of it. But if you think I'm wasting your time..."

"Did that elf learn the spell to enhance somebody's REASON and figured out how to make the magical alcoves?"

He shook his head. "Better. This is simply raw material, we still have to turn it into stuff. So we won't get lazy like them."

She shook her head to try and clear it. "Start at the beginning, and make it quick I am fairly busy you know?"

"It's easy enough to tell. A bunch of remnants that can use magic are about to go into space in some kind of metal tower they made and magically grab an asteroid a kilometer wide. Then bring it back. If we move fast the guild can secure the rights to cut it up and transport it. For a fee, of course."

"And what do the remnants want for the material?"

"That's the best part! Unlike us, they actually just want to help and keep the peace. They're going to *give* it to whoever asks. Fairly, across all kingdoms. They just want some of the material for themselves. That's it."

"So if we charged a fee fairly close to what the material would be worth anyway..."

He held up a hand. "Now, now, let's bargain with them fairly. They've expressed interest in going back for more after this one is cut up. Besides once they have more resources like this they can build more ships. Who knows what a whole fleet could bring back? And we would have the agreement in place to distribute all of it."

"So it really is a long term arrangement," she realized.

"Exactly! Feeling better about things yet?"

"Maybe." She sat back in her chair a bit. "You think they can do it?"

"They're remnants. If they say they can do it, I have to believe they've run all the angles. Get some people over there, sign some agreements, and start training people in metal working spells and

teleportation. Maybe don't announce free metal until you're looking at it, but have fliers made up that 'due to cooperation between the remnants and the Mages Guild iron and other material will be made available at such and such a rate' that can be distributed. Have chunks ready to go so when kingdoms ask it's ready to be delivered. Determine some fair way to give it out, first come first serve is fine as long as it's only one request per month or something. Don't want smaller kingdoms to lose out simply because they're slower to respond because they can't move as fast as big kingdoms. Some sort of list we just cycle through? I don't know, figure it out. We get the good will for showing up with it, the fee for transporting it, and nobody gets any ideas of trying to steal it for themselves. How they would move such a huge metal blob I don't know but we'll be there guarding it and if they know they can just ask and get more I doubt anyone would make too much trouble."

"We can do some divinations, see if we can pinpoint the date a little. Be good to know if it'll take them a week or a year to get back with the goods."

"They're leaving soon, and gravity magic can get them anywhere pretty quickly to hear them tell it."

"Still, they could screw it up and we get nothing. Fine. Sounds like you did okay. This time. I can't really see any fault in this little scheme. You can deliver some mages there?" She reached for some parchment and started writing.

"Sure."

"Fine. Take this down to legal, they'll send someone empowered to negotiate on our behalf. Take them over there and get back here, as your group seems determined to solve every problem in the world I've got another one for you to take a swing at."

"I'll be sure to charge them the standard guild rate. It's 85 embers if I'm not mistaken. Who should I charge for the trip back here? You? The guild?"

"Put in an expense report," she said sourly.

"Great. By the way, this wouldn't happen to be related to demons in some way, would it? Bob said to come see you about 'the demon problem' but didn't give any other specifics."

"Yes, actually, it does. How did they- never mind. Just get out of here."

"Very well." He stood, bowed, and took the paper.

It was a simple matter to head to the legal department, show the orders, and get two mages versed in law over to the remnant city. Teleporting back he headed straight to the bursar's office and got the 170 embers for teleporting on Guild business, and then headed to the front desk again. He waited about a half hour before a hole in the air opened up and the others stepped through.

"How did it go?" he asked.

"100% successful trip," Sinjorino replied. "The wireless module has been successfully integrated, and New Hope has a new avatar."

"That's great! Let's head up to Mary's office. She can tell us about the demon problem."

"What was her reaction to the remnant's plan?" Olaph asked.

"Fairly positive. Money was involved."

"Ah."

"She doesn't seem to like our group very much though. Best be on your best behavior."

"Why are you just looking at me?" Paige pouted.

"Because the others are adults I can't control?"

"I'm an adult. It's not my fault she can't see the future barreling down on her. Change with the times or whatever, sheesh."

"Sure, that's always gone well. Come on."

Mary told them they needed to head to the capital building, it seemed the queen herself had been in some sort of talks with a demon contingent for some time with no resolution in sight. She

handed them some paperwork showing their “credentials” which was little more than “yeah these people can try their hand at solving the problem but don’t hold it against them if they don’t.”

“We’ll do our best!” Olaph said cheerfully.

“Just don’t start any wars or anything like that.”

The palace was of course huge, magnificent, and mostly built off the foundation of the old world. As the queen had a dragon as an adviser, and the rumor was she never left the throne, the building had to be huge to accommodate everyone. They showed the paperwork to the guards outside and were let in. Every hall was filled with fine artwork, sculpture, and rare treasures. Servants ran everywhere, dusting and polishing and doing servant things while trying to stay out of the way. Naturally the group wouldn’t get anywhere near the queen, but were brought to a room full of bored looking demons, mostly devils. They were wearing fine clothes, probably to make a good impression, but were basically just standing around waiting. It seemed to be a waiting room, not a bedroom or a meeting room, as it had more couches than tables. It was still elegant, with plush carpets, wall hangings, and even what seemed to be electric lights hung from the ceiling. They looked up but seemed confused when Olaph and the others were announced.

“Have a seat,” said one demon. “After so long we don’t stand on ceremony here.”

“Thank you,” Olaph said, and everyone sat. “Sorry for interrupting, we’ve just been told you were here, you see.”

“Interrupting?” the demon huffed. “We’re bored out of our minds here. Which is saying something, given where we usually live. I wouldn’t have said anything was worse but this negotiation is starting to seem that way. I’m Timosian, I take it from your robes you’re all from the guild?”

“That’s correct,” Olaph told them. “Allow me to introduce...” He went around introducing everyone, then himself. “The fact is I have been charged by a higher power to start making the world better,” he explained. “One of the items on my list is apparently some sort of dispute between your kind and ours? I’m here to help if I can.”

“Not exactly a dispute,” Timosian clarified. “We just want asylum.”

“I’m sorry you want what?” Paige exclaimed.

Timosian looked her over. “You don’t feel like an elf, but you look like one.”

“I’m a first-generation.”

“Ah! I see. Well, it is so surprising we want to leave the demon world behind us? Some of us have been there ten thousand years or more. Enough is enough, we say. Must we truly suffer for eternity? The Heavens are gone, quite possibly never to return so let’s see how well your kind does with the whole ‘forgive and forget’ thing. We want to live somewhere else. Let us carve some sort of home out of the wilderness if you don’t trust us. That’s fine with us, just don’t make our kind live in the demon world any longer than we already have!”

There was a moment of silence. “So let me get this straight. You came here to ask for asylum, and while you haven’t been outright denied, the queen is basically dragging her heels in saying yes.”

“Exactly. We get it, we’re demons. We can’t be trusted yadda yadda. But we’re all magic users, us devils anyway, and we don’t want to bring any of the more dangerous of our kind here. Some imps, some akaname, some goblins, maybe even a succubus or two? You must still execute criminals, let them go out in a night of passion to feed a succubus who needs to eat anyway. We magic users can be useful to you, and imps do alchemy! It’s not like we’re asking to be waited on hand and foot, though of course none of us would turn that down if you offered. No, we’re asking for a place to put our abilities to use. Is that so much to want? Ask your magic if we can be trusted, or bind us all with contracts if it comes to that. Just let us have a better life!”

“I can see why she would be reluctant to allow you in her kingdom,” he admitted. “But I see your point as well. The Lord decreed you suffer forever but that has always seemed harsh to me. If a thief is caught and serves his time, does that not expunge the crime?”

“Not if it was theft of wine,” Paige singsonged. “Or of treasures most divine.”

“To say nothing of cosine,” Sinjorino added. “Or what is tangent to a line.”

Everyone looked at them in confusion.

“Nobody likes math jokes anymore.”

“I don’t think anyone ever did,” Timosian told them.

“Shoot, I was going to say something about pickles soaked in brine but it’s all ruined now,” Light muttered. “Thanks a lot.”

“Hey, guys, I just discovered something worse than the demon world or waiting around here,” Timosain told the others of his kind sitting there. “It’s you guys, if you didn’t pick up on that.”

“Anyway!” Olaph announced. “Let’s go for a walk. I have an idea, so sublime.”

“The stitch in time, that saved nine?” Paige asked sweetly.

“Don’t start that again!” Light moaned.

The group headed downstairs and went into a courtyard, where Olaph looked around a moment and announced it adequate.

“For what, and why are you looking at me?” Light wondered.

“You’re the one that knows the spell. You’re going to get some more use out of it. Please open a portal to Purgatory.”

“Oh, I guess I do have that spell on standby. Just a second while I look it over again.”

“I’m not sure I’m following you,” Timosian decided. “What does going there have to do with our problem?”

“You’ll see,” was all he would say. After Light got the portal open, with a Pluto check of 17, beating the difficulty of 15 by two by taking extra time, the group headed through. It was a dreary place, dim and almost “smokey” but with no actual smoke it was just the opposite of the astral plane that was somewhat brightly light. In this case, one could see the demon world and the real world from here if one concentrated.

“About as bad as I thought,” Olaph admitted, “but I had to see it for myself. Devils and other demons alike, I submit this place as your new home. Forget the queen and your attempt to settle in her lands. Do you really think she will agree? Look around. There is unlimited space here for you to build upon. Yes, it’s rather depressing but at the same time the landscape isn’t trying to murder you. There are no lakes of fire, rivers of acid, or whatever else exists in your home.”

“But there’s not much else either,” one of the devils spoke up. “What exactly are we supposed to build *with*?”

He raised a finger. “An excellent question, but thankfully I have an answer for that as well which I will get to in just a moment. For now, look around, all of you, and consider the future. Do you think you could, once that question is answered, make a life here?”

The demons looked around and had a hasty conversation about “worst comes to worst we imbue some goggles with the restriction to only see purgatory and not the other planes. Brighten the place up with some lights, it could work.” They agreed, and Timosian said yes, there was some possibility of coming here.

“Great! Come with me.” They filed back through the portal, which hadn’t closed, and Olaph opened his own. Gathering mana for 8 segments, he got an 8 and a 9 (and a 4 and a 2) and stuck them where they needed to be. A portal opened back to the remnant town, and everyone stepped through. They were down by the docks again, as he didn’t want to surprise them by simply appearing next to their “rocket” as that would be quite rude.

“Hello again!” he called, walking up to the guards. “Sorry to drop in so suddenly but we had a question for... Oh drat what was their name again?” He looked to Sinjorino.

“Fulmo,” they reminded him.

“Yes, of course! Fulmo, sorry about that, one of the downsides of being organic, am I right?”

"I wouldn't know," said the one on the right. "None of us have ever been organic. It seems very... limiting."

"Yes, very limiting," the one on the left agreed. "Is it true you have to leak *all the time*?"

"Anyway, can we see Fulmo?" he asked.

"They don't like to talk about the leak," the one on the right chided. "You should know that."

"Maybe I'll find one that does. You don't know."

"I am 99% sure you will not."

"So I just have to ask one hundred organics and I will find one willing to answer my question. That seems easy enough."

"I am sure they are just, what is the human phrase, Joshing you," Sinjorino told Olaph. "I'm sure Fulmo has already been summoned and they are just stalling."

"Joshing?"

"You know, yanking your chain? Pulling your leg? Taking the piss?"

"Ah, so you *do* talk about it!" said the right one.

"I have no idea what any of you are saying right now!" protested Olaph.

"Is there some point to all this?" Timosian asked politely.

"Just wait a moment, please, I know everyone's acting a bit unprofessionally right now but we are here for a- ah, here's Fulmo now, thank the Lord."

"You wanted to see me?" they asked, as the door opened and they stepped through.

"Yes! I had a question for you. Would you mind, how would Sinjorino put it? Adjusting your mission parameters. Did I say that right?"

"Quite well done," they praised. "We'll make a remnant out of you yet."

"We have a process for that," Fulmo agreed. "If you were interested."

A *what*? "Er, not at this time, thank you."

"Your choice. As to your question, what sort of adjustment?"

"Could you bring back a similar quantity of *stone*, and have it also available near here for distribution?"

"Simple stone is quite easy," they allowed. "Most celestial objects are stone, we had to look long and hard to find the metallic body we did. It would not be unduly difficult to nudge a quantity of stone into a local orbit that we can then more easily retrieve after performing our main mission. May I query as to why? Stone is in no short supply it is?"

"Not exactly. Not around here, anyway." He turned to the demons. "So there you have it. If I, and by I of course I mean 'the illustrious Mages' Guild' can get you absolute tons and tons of stone passed through portals to build with, along with some metals and other goods, could you comfortably make your home in purgatory? Don't worry about where it comes from at the moment, simply accept we can get it to you."

"Stone is certainly workable," Timosian agreed. "And there's the possibility of metals as well?"

"That's right. I would count you as another nation and include you in the distribution. Especially if we set up some kind of trade agreement whereby you return at least some of it in a more useful shape than a lump of ore. You see, the way I see it," he put his hands behind his back and started to pace a bit, "this is your chance to prove to us you mean what you say. You take all the demons that are tired of living in the demon world and you move slightly upwards. You build homes for yourself. You *behave* yourself. We open some (heavily guarded they may be) portals of our own to purgatory that allows for initially stone and metal to flow into your lands, and later, goods to flow out. Then you get more stone, and more raw material. Naturally all this would need to be settled formally but that's *far* easier than asking for land *here*. But here's the best part. You spend a few hundred years there, nothing for an immortal demon, correct? And the next time you come asking you'll be able to point to your home in purgatory as proof of your sincerity. Heck, perhaps in a hundred years humans will want to come live there, as Dean does in the demon world. Don't just *tell* us you can be good. Show us. Make

us believe it. Then the queen might be more apt to let some of you settle here in this world.” He spun and faced the demons, who were looking mighty thoughtful just then. “So, what do you think? You don’t need permission to go to purgatory. Just magic, and you have that, and raw material, that the guild can get for you. So, do we have a deal?”

“Pending working out the specifics of how much stone and metal and goods we’re talking about here, yes!” Timosian announced, holding out a hand. The two solemnly shook. “Let’s go back, if you don’t mind. We’ll tell the queen we no longer aim to move to her lands at the current time so we don’t just vanish and she freaks out about where we went, and we can make plans to start moving into our new lands. Purgatory! Ha! I wouldn’t even have considered it. You looking for work? I’ve got a line on a lot of new businesses opening soon, I could use a good ideas man!”

Olaph laughed. “Not right now, I still have many more problems to solve here first. But thanks.” *Still, would this not also be considered doing the Lord’s work? Bringing civilization where there once was none? Yes, it would be demons, but after so long you have to wonder at the Lord’s edict of eternal punishment. A bit harsh, is it not?*

“Not at all. Well, offer’s always on the table. Let’s go!”

Humm, give up being a bishop? I have been doing it most of my adult life. Could be time for a change. Bring Lunaria here, start a new career as an “ideas man” for- no. No, that’s just a silly fantasy you dolt. Forget her! She would hardly want anything to do with you.

Chapter 11

A pleasant evening around the castle

Where: Back at the palace

When: Moments later

Having thanked Fulmo for coming to see them again and requesting they start planning to bring absolutely massive quantities of stone back from space, the group headed back.

If this idea takes off, there's a lot of demons that might want to get away from 'home,' Olaph thought. We'll need all the stone they can get us, because purgatory is essentially limitless and empty, so we would have to bring absolutely everything they wanted to build with there from here. This way it avoids us using our own resources, so if they aren't serious we just close our side of the gate and forget them. But if they're not, they can keep expanding and oh my Lord did I just make it easier for them to invade us? No, no, like I said humans might want to live there and perhaps some kind of inspections can be worked into the contract? Yes, I'm sure that'll be fine. And it's the same spell, to get here or there from the demon world. So no easier, not really. What are they going to do, hit us with the rocks we got them? No. Silly. Crisis averted. Still, I should be more careful, dealing with demons. I've just been on such a roll lately I wanted to keep it up.

“How much of this new partnership, if you will, can be decided upon now?” Timosain asked, walking back into the castle. “Should we sit down in our meeting room again or go straight to the queen herself?”

Ah, there it is. “I would hesitate to put any numbers down or sign any contracts at the moment,” he decided. “Without first knowing how much material the remnants can bring back at any one time, such discussions are somewhat meaningless. Sorry, I know how much your kind loves signing contracts.”

He laughed. “Indeed we do. Very well, I take your point. How should we expect to go forward in that case?”

“Any number of your fellow demons can probably get back to that remnant town. Go back every few days and see if you see a huge chunk of iron sitting out in the bay that wasn't there before, along with a huge number of mages working on pulling it apart. Then you'll know they're back and we can proceed.”

“Naturally you'll tell the guild about us, so we're not attacked on sight? Our kind does have a reputation, as you may know.”

“Our guildmaster sent us here in the first place, we need to report back on what we've done. I'll be sure to tell her to tell anyone she assigns to the task to expect you.”

“Splendid! It's my hope we can actually acquire material directly, you know. What I mean by that is, imagine a group of devils working together to open a large enough gateway to purgatory that a rock from space can simply be lowered into it directly from orbit! Such a feat would only need to be done once a month I'd imagine, giving us plenty of raw material to work with.”

“Now that would be something to see,” he agreed with a nod.

“You have mountains and such in the demon world do you not?” Sinjorino asked.

“Of course.”

“In the meantime you could get to work cutting apart one of them and taking the pieces through, just to start getting a feel for it.”

“It would be good practice, wouldn’t it?” he admitted. “Give us a head start to be sure. I am fairly excited about the idea if we can find a place not already inhabited by dragons or whatever, we could start there. Ha! Imagine the looks on the faces of demons in the area when bit by bit the mountain they’ve seen for a million years suddenly starts shrinking and goes away. Hilarious.”

“And in the course of the work you may find new veins of demonic metal.”

“That’s also true. Well spotted!”

By this time the group had reached the queen’s chambers and were announced, being let inside by stern looking guards. The throne room was fairly empty, but huge, to accommodate the dragon that was currently sitting to the side of throne. The throne itself was almost as tall as the dragon, with numerous wires extending from the back of it, through the back, and into the figure of the queen. For her part she simply looked like a human woman, draped in white, and she beckoned them forward.

How are we going to be heard? Olaph despaired. She’s way up there and we’re down here. Are we going to have to shout up to her?

“Her majesty, the queen of Pyre!” announced the guard that walked them in. But he didn’t point up at the queen, he indicated a young looking girl sitting on the edge of the steps leading up, who had been gesturing in the air like she was using System windows. She made a sweeping gesture with her hand and hopped up, smiling and waving to them. She was barefoot, had long silvery hair, loose down to her lower back, and was dressed in a simple white summer dress with gold edgings. She looked to be in her late teens, with perfect skin and toned muscles.

“Hi!” she greeted them, coming over. The demons all bowed and the others quickly followed suit, glancing between the girl and the figure on the throne.

“Oh poo, none of that!” she told them. “What can I do for you?”

“Uh?” Light managed.

“This is just something new I’m trying out,” she explained, giving a little twirl. “I really got tired of all the shouting back and forth. But I’m also sort of stuck up there? Not sure who designed that really tall throne but what can ya do? I’m the same as her, so it’s fine if you talk to me it’s just like talking to her. Who is me. You see?”

Didn’t... you? Design it?

“Forgive me, majesty, but is this body some kind of... drone?” Sinjorino asked.

“You might say that,” she agreed with a grin. “So, the representatives from the mage’s guild and the demons, back from a short journey to the remnant coast. It went well I take it? You liked what you saw there enough to come immediately to me upon your return so the news must be good?”

“Your majesty stays well informed,” Timosian praised, sounding quite surprised. “It has gone well, yes. We are formally retracting our bid for asylum. Olaph here,” he indicated Olaph, “has had a most wonderful idea where we should go instead. We’ve agreed to it, and will not need to settle in the mortal world at all. At this time. We of course thank you for your consideration and wish you a long and prosperous rule over your people.”

“Why thanks!” she gushed. “To be honest I really wasn’t sure where to put you! Do you mind telling me what the idea was?”

“It will be no secret,” Timosain agreed. “As we will very soon wish to enter into trade agreements with Pyre. We, that is a number of demons of various types that I represent, that wish to no longer live in the demon realm, will simply move up to purgatory. Bringing in raw material from space, provided by the remanants, will allow us to build our new homes in peace there. Once we get settled and have our basic infrastructure in place we can then start exporting goods to the mortal realm, enriching both our lands.”

“What sort of goods can the demon world provide though?” she asked, one finger on her chin. “Especially if we’re providing all the raw material anyway. Couldn’t we just make whatever it was

ourselves and skip the middleman? Not that I don't want you to have a purpose if you want one of course!" she hurried to add.

"Having been spared the upheaval of our world, their knowledge of science and infrastructure were never destroyed," Sinjorino told her. "They carried on creating new processors, new devices, new materials I shouldn't wonder. Imagine it your highness, we could bring back microwaves, cell phones, *the internet itself!* Of course we would need to figure out power distribution but we did that once before I'm sure we could do a much better job of it this time around. That's what they have to offer. Technological devices more advanced than humans designed before the moon threw everything into disarray."

"I see! How wonderful!" She clapped her hands. "I'd love to see some new movies made! I've watched the entire marvel universe movies four thousand, eight hundred, and seventeen times and believe me, I could do with some new material."

"It's all thanks to Olaph," Timosain praised, slapping him on the back. "What a guy!"

"Ow, thank you. It was no big deal, really."

"And so modest? But you say it's *all* thanks to him? He should be rewarded in some way then, shouldn't he? I'll have to think on it. Tell me, how many demons are we talking about here, exactly?" she asked. Then giggled, "I'm sure you told me but I've forgotten, it was a lot I remember that much!"

"I represent a coalition of tens of thousands of demons that believe enough is enough. Perhaps the last days are still in our future as scripture would have us believe. Perhaps not. Perhaps demonkind will still pour forth onto this world for... some reason. Honestly it seems broken enough to me, no offense to your rule of course majesty I know times are only getting harder for various reasons here. So really, why would we want it? But we will have no part of that. Some of us have been 'training' so to speak for this so called end times for thousands of years. We thought it had finally come with the moon, but yet here we all still are. Enough is enough. We are finally moving on with our so called lives, especially now that the Heavens are seemingly banished. The end times may never come in this case, and what would we have to show for all that effort of training to fight a war that never happens? It's ridiculous, and more and more of my kind are starting to echo that sentiment."

"So you wish to form your own society, and live your lives according to your own desires."

"Yes, majesty. I don't know what that will look like, long term, but enough of us have expressed an interest in the idea it was worth making the attempt. Perhaps we could, with some effort, turn the demon world itself into a more hospitable place. But that would take all of us, all demons working together. Many wouldn't go for it, not yet. But if we show them there's a better way? Perhaps even that is not so far-fetched."

"It seems your bold thinking has paid off then. And was it sheer coincidence that Olaph? Is that what you said your name was? That Olaph was assigned to the case and seemed to have a solution ready at hand? Or perhaps you're just that good?"

"I have been trusted with a number of tasks relating to The System and the future of our world," he admitted. "I suppose it thinks I have good ideas, for one reason or another."

"He's been solving problems for weeks now," Paige bragged. "He even has a unique system of magic he's trying out before The System offers it to others."

"I've had a few things pan out," he claimed modestly. "I'm nothing special."

"Nonsense," she protested. "I would love to hear more about it. Would you all like to stay for dinner? I will have my chefs prepare a wonderful meal for you all."

"Thank you, majesty," Timosian said with a bow. "But I must refuse. My people are awaiting word and while our superiors have up until now maintained a polite but amused tolerance for my antics in trying to find us a new home, I worry that at any moment that tolerance will be withdrawn. Now that I have an idea of our new lands I must go back straight away and start moving them there. For their own safety. I fear they may have allowed me free rein because they did not realize I could succeed, and now that I have my followers will be in danger."

“Of course,” she agreed. “I wish you luck in your endeavor, it sounds like a lot of work.”

He chuckled. “It will give us something to do, majesty,” he half-joked. “Something worthwhile, at last. By your leave?”

She waved him off, and the others bowed and backed out.

“We’ll be in touch soon,” he said to Olaph. “Thank you again. I look forward to working with you in the future, and seeing what else you come up with in the coming months.”

“See you later. Good luck.”

“But you will stay?” the queen asked, when the demons were gone. “A dinner is the least I can do to repay you. That could have been some kind of trap, the risk was not zero you interacting with them.”

“We have no pressing matters at the moment,” Light agreed. “Our assignment has been completed. I can head back alone and give my report, then come back here. If that’s all right with you, majesty?”

“I wouldn’t presume to get in the way of official mage’s guild business of course,” she agreed. “Please, allow me to escort you on a tour of the castle while dinner is being prepared. And you can tell me all about your adventures. In fact,” she brightened. “Why don’t you stay at the castle as my guests tonight? No, I simply must insist. You have solved a *very* sticky problem for me you know, Olaph? I had no idea what to do with a group of *demons* that were seemingly rebelling against their, for lack of a better term, programming. Let them head to purgatory if they want, if their masters take umbrage to it at least they won’t be warring on my lands! Heaven forbid! In any case you must be rewarded. Let my staff take care of your every need throughout the night. You will stay, won’t you? Please? We have the finest beds, and you simply haven’t lived until you’ve experienced our whirlpool tubs.”

The group shared a look.

“I don’t see why we *couldn’t*,” he told her.

“Wonderful!” she gushed. “Come along, come along, we have some wonderful sitting rooms. Paige, was it? Do you like tea? The kitchen always sends it up far too hot, I’ll have some set out to cool and we can retire there partway through our tour. Blistering hot, you know I keep telling them it doesn’t need to be that hot but they still do it.”

As the queen’s avatar led them towards the back and further into the castle talking about all the great things they were about to see, Olaph happened to glance back and saw another almost identical girl taking the place of this one on the stairs, and started swiping her hands in the air again.

Now how about that? I guess that’s why no guards are going with us, we couldn’t hurt the actual queen if we tried, we’re not even really in the same room as her anymore.

Olaph found the queen to be delightful, as she took them on a tour of the castle. She was usually bouncing about, a skip in her step, as she showed off stained glass windows, flower gardens, electric lights, pools, the library, the kitchens, the spa area, and more. She played the perfect host, trying to interact with the members of the group equally, asking everyone questions about what they thought of things, both here in the castle and what was going on in the world. Naturally he and the others were a bit cagey about exactly where Olaph’s drive to improve the world was coming from, not mentioning the primordials in general or Bob in particular. Paige slipped in a brag about the battleship and the queen simply *had* to hear the whole story making Light scowl at her. She insisted it was a special occasion and this was the queen so the once a day restriction didn’t count here did it?

“Only you know where your honor lies,” Light had told her.

“What a stick in the mud!” the queen ribbed him. “Is he always like that?” she stage whispered.

“He totally is!” Paige agreed with a laugh. That set them both to giggling.

Dinner that evening seemed to be private affair with the queen, but Olaph suspected otherwise. If the queen could somehow control several bodies at once, and he had seen glimpses of other silver haired girls lightly skipping about the corridors, always just seeming to turn a corner as they approached, she could be having three or more dinners right now. She showed no signs of this though, seeming present and responsive the entire time. The food was of course excellent, and she apologized several times to Sinjorino that they couldn't really partake. But they had a place at the table just the same, and she included them asking about their life and adventures just the same as with everyone else. With their meal done she showed them to their rooms, which again were far more opulent than Olaph had ever desired to stay in. She explained about the various features, as the castle had hot running water and each room had a tub that was super deep and had jets that swirled water around. The castle also had a laundry service, so they could have their clothes cleaned, and if they pushed a button they could be connected to the kitchens or other servants so if they needed anything at all, they simply had to ask. She said she would personally come to collect them the next morning and see them on their way. Each thanked her and went to their private rooms, all down the hall from one another.

Olaph took advantage of the shower and tub, it was right there after all there was no real benefit to ignoring it. His clothes hadn't come back but he found pajamas and a robe in the wardrobe and put them on, and relaxed into the softest bed he had ever experienced in his life. He drifted off to sleep, thinking about demons wanting a better life just like humans, and how interesting it was that he, a bishop, would be the one to give it to them.

The next thing he knew he was awakened by a clatter and shout as someone tackled someone to the floor and Paige was screaming about someone being murdered.

Chapter 12

How did those get here?

Where: Outside Olaph's Room

When: About 2:00 AM

Paige and Sinjorino sat on the bed in their room, Paige having finished her nightly meditations and decided to keep them company. Sinjorino was glad to have someone to talk to, being "always on" in a world where most everyone else "shut off" after the sun went down was fairly lonely. Paige could relate, only needing half as much sleep as most. They had been talking about various things (the Amish, as agreed, and specifically buttons) and the topic had switched to magic.

"I was thinking about going *smaller*," Paige told them. "At least to start. I can always cultivate my core and wipe out the spell or just wait the year and refuse it. The tiniest one is a beta spell, for some reason. What, we had big and medium sized but no one ever thought to try for a small magical companion until the primordial ones gave it to us? What's that all about? We'll have Olaph's around and when he was working with Light the man had a bit of a gleam in his eye. I think we're going to see another version of that spell when we get some downtime for him to study the formula."

"Three full sized magical companions would be a bit much," they agreed. "Let us hope we never face so many opponents the four of us and Olaph's new companion would be overwhelmed. Save the larger one for the time you strike out on your own and need a mount for example, or just someone to watch your back."

"Yeah, exactly! Okay, what do you think I should assign it? I have seven minus two powers, thanks elf background penalty to PERsonality! That I can stick into it, and it has to be a spell I already know. And what sort of bird should it be? I was thinking it could ride on my shoulder and basically act as a protector? Then I wouldn't have to use the deflection spell..." She brought up her spell list and spun it, allowing both of them to see it.

"Looking at the spell list I see you have only two grade 6 spells, those can safely be ignored as the cost is just too darn high. Do you want one big spell, such as the zone or suppression or several smaller spells such as dazzle? Or perhaps you could ultimately have two or three separate creatures each with their own function?"

"Not a bad idea. Probably not suppression, how often do we fight other mages? The zone could be interesting, it could keep my energy regeneration high but do I need that on the move? I'm thinking dazzle, fumble, deflection?"

"That would make it a rather active combatant," they admitted.

"You're right, we'll have plenty of them..."

"Perhaps a slightly more passive 'build' if you will? Detect enemies, healing, and finishing it up with thrust in the case something really does get that close to you? Deflection, if I am recalling correctly with my 19 KNOledge check simply deflects a single attack. The person attacking you would still be right there on their next action, allowing them to try again. Much better to simply fling them away from you."

"Plus with proper timing, I'm unsure how they would make a resistance check against it," she mused. "Maybe a penalty? They would be attacking they couldn't defend at the same time with a STrength check. And with detect enemies I would never be ambushed," she agreed, getting into these suggestions. "I personally can't run it all the time because it's a concentration spell, and oddly the

description of the ally spell doesn't say what would happen if you give that kind of spell to them. It talks about maintained spells but not concentration. Very odd. Still, it could pulse it, that would be its primary task. I don't think it would take energy, and even if it was just an ability 'it' had to concentrate on, if it was just sitting on my shoulder what else would it have to do? It could activate it whenever we weren't directly in combat."

"Do you really want something stuck on your shoulder on all the time though? Even a bird would get annoying after a while I would imagine."

"You think like a cat or something?"

"That depends on what exactly this ally can actually look like."

"Description just says creature. But it doesn't have to be a real world animal, or anything, because it does specify 'of my own creation.' So maybe just anything I can imagine? I've never seen a four winged, shaggy dog lizard thing Olaph came up with."

"Nor have I. Perhaps only limited by our imagination then? Back in the day we had things called 'drones.' Small flying machines that could be controlled by an operator. Having a hovering 'creature' such as that could be interesting."

"How would it fly?"

"Alas, I do not have the drawing skill but perhaps I can manage something. I see a desk there is probably paper inside." They got up. "I will attempt a blueprint of sorts to explain the concept of the propeller and the general shape they used to take."

"Hold on, we have something better than just regular old, boring *drawing*," Paige insisted. "Let me get some wood."

With a chunk of wood from the stack next to the fireplace, the two got to work. (The fireplace was decorative, the castle had central air and heating) Sinjorino would describe various features of the drone and Paige would make modifications to the design with magic. This was rapid prototyping as it was meant to be, as with the spell active Sinjorino only had to say 'make this part a little thicker' and such and it was done in real time. In 3D, on the actual object itself. They were, in effect, designing a robot after all, even if it was made out of wood, so their robotics skill finally saw some use. They got a 7, an 8, and then finally a 12 explaining things and as this was really a refining process anyway no penalty was applied for the checks. It helped that Paige got a 17, a 15, and another 17 on REASON checks to understand what exactly they were getting at, and that served as an assist as she asked questions and refined the design.

"And you think these four 'propellers' will be good enough for the four 'limbs' that the creature gets?" she asked.

"You know magic much better than I," they protested. "I'm just hoping they can spin fast enough to keep it aloft. They are small and powered by magic, and the creature should be fairly light as it too is such. But if not the spell can be removed and you can go with the bird, correct?"

"It's true, we don't need it immediately, I guess. Okay, let me spend the XP, get the spell, and look it over real quick. Yeah, that's right Light I don't need hours, so there!"

"Did Light join us and I was unaware?" Sinjorino asked, looking around quickly.

"What? No, I was just... you know what I meant!"

Moments later Paige cast the grade 3 spell and a reasonable facsimile of what she had carved appeared on the bed. It was a somewhat organic looking "drone," all curves and sleek looking, with a face on the front.

"Hello little one!" Paige said to it, scooping it up. The drone broke into a big smile to see her.

"Beep beep!" it went.

She laughed. "Nice to meet you too."

"The propellers look good," Sinjorino remarked. "Can you spin them for us?"

“Beep!” It did so.

“That’s it,” Paige encouraged. “Fast as you can now!”

“Beeeeeeep!” It really put effort into it and shot up towards the ceiling, before getting under control and zipping around the room, beeping happily and checking everything out. Especially the mirror, it kept zipping up and down trying to figure that out for a moment. Then it went back to checking everything else over.

“It really works!” Paige announced happily. “It’s so cute! This was a great idea, thanks Sinjorino. I would not have thought of that shape. Look at that little guy go! Oh I’m gonna have you out all the time now little one.” *Now what do I name you?*

“You have indeed done well in the casting,” Sinjorino praised. “Your own magical-”

“Uwwuuuuu Uwwuuuuu!” the drone went, darting over to the door. It started bumping up against the wood. The two shared a look.

“What do you think that’s all about?” Paige asked. “It suddenly got all serious?”

“It is not a true robot, it cannot be malfunctioning. I must therefore conclude it is part of the functionality?”

“I’m not sure?” *Can’t be detect enemies around here... Right?*

“Perhaps we should see where it goes?” They walked to the door and Paige nodded, meaning it was okay to open it. The drone shot out of the room and the two followed. They didn’t have to go far, Olaph’s door was open and inside the drone was buzzing around the heads of three remnants. One that was lifting a weapon to bring to bear on Olaph.

“No!” shouted Sinjorino, sprinting the rest of the distance and slamming into the figure. Both went down in a tangle of limbs.

“Light! Help! Olaph is being murdered!” Paige shouted. She cast, dumping another 10 extra energy into her RESolve thanks to spirit manipulation. “Thrust!” The nearest one went flying into the other, as she had stepped into the room and mentally made a line between them. They smashed into the wall and crumpled.

One immediately sprang up again, scanning the room for what had thrown it, while the other seemed to be having a little trouble. The one Sinjorino tackled tried to push them off, gathering their legs under them and pushing. Sinjorino twisted to the side, avoiding the blow, so the two were still prone.

“What’s going on?” Olaph managed, squinting and looking around.

“You’re being murdered, do something!” Paige screamed.

“Huh? Me?”

“Yes, a bit of help would be appreciated!” Sinjorino agreed, struggling with the remnant.

Remnant 1 was now fully up, but remnant 3, Paige, and Sinjorino acted at the same time. Sinjorino simply held onto the remnant under them, knowing their OTR 3 fists (because of the bonus from having a 10 in martial arts) would be unable to damage the DTR 4 metal casing of the remnant. Paige made a magic combat check, getting a 6, her minimum, while remnant 3 countered with a ranged combat check of 7. We’re really into the high numbers now! So Paige had no idea when they would act but they was turning and bringing up a beam weapon focused on their target, Olaph.

“No! Needles!” She gestured, not holding anything back and again throwing maximum energy into her spell. She did a called shot to the weapon, 4 needles total, making her total penalty a 9. She calculated a 15, enough to get the spell off, and 4 slivers of elemental energy slammed into the weapon as it fired. This did 56 damage to it, exploding it and causing the remnant to flinch back, their arm completely blown off.

“Combat effectiveness reduced,” they muttered. “Probability of mission success fallen by 20%.”

Yeah, that’s right. What... what they said! Take that!

The drone was now up, and zipped around to the far wall. “Beep!” it beeped angrily. Magical energy flashed out of it, calculating a 9 to thrust the remnant. It wasn’t really expecting this, not that it

had any mechanical effect on the resistance check but fate was with our heroes, and they calculated a 7, their minimum, to resist. Again two remnants crashed together, being thrown half the length of the room.

“Bzzz!” it said with satisfaction.

“Good job little one!” Paige praised.

Remnant 2 again tried to get up, making a martial arts check of 11, but Sinjorino’s minimum roll beat that, and they went nowhere.

“Stand down!” Sinjorino commanded them. “Why are you trying to assassinate Olaph?”

“We have our orders!” the other barked.

What? everyone thought.

Paige was now up again, and knew the two would need a little time to stand. She was done messing around, and they only needed one prisoner to question. She cast her elemental orbs, taking the full time of 6 segments and taking the penalty to split the spell in two, so she could target both remnants at the far end of the room.

Olaph was up again, and finally decided he should probably be doing something to save his own life. He held up a hand and his 5 sized mana core appeared, three of the faces lighting up as he took 6 segments to enhance three of them. All were traced with pieces of the magical formula, and the room lit up from it.

The drone watched the remnants struggling to get up but held, to see what their master would do.

Remnant 1 finished getting up at the same time Olaph’s and Paige’s spells went off. 18 orbs appeared around her, crackling with energy and ready to fire.

“Mission parameters have vastly changed,” Remnant 1 remarked.

“Unfamiliar magical effect. High probability of illusion. Continue original mission!” Remnant 3 chided.

Boy oh boy are you going to be surprised, Paige chuckled. *This is a beta spell, of course you’re not familiar with it.*

Meanwhile, Olaph had calculated an 8, a 4, and a 5. The 8 was exactly what he needed to put into mana for the difficulty 13 spell, he put the 5 into effect, and the 4 into power. His +1 size creature appeared at the foot of the bed, roaring in anticipation of battle.

“You were saying?” Remnant 1 almost shouted, looking a bit panicked or at least as panicked as a robotic face can look.

“Oh dear.”

Remnant 1 fired at the new arrival, hoping to take it out before it could act. An OTR 8 energy beam hit it in the head with a 7, having taken a -3 for the called shot. This did 18 non-lethal damage out of 64, basically just making it mad and giving it a target. It glared.

“I have performed an illegal action,” they decided. “And my process is about to be terminated.”

Two orbs fired, one at each remnant standing there. Remnant 1’s head exploded, taking 18 damage when it could only take 18 total and it dropped, the extra orbs vanishing. Remnant 2 tried to dodge but took 11 damage to the body. Another fired at it, doing that same damage to the right leg.

“Mission compromised. Magic users were alerted and arrived faster than expected. Activating countermeasures,” Remnant 2 decided.

“What?” Sinjorino asked, dreading the answer. A whine started emanating from the body of the remnant.

Orbs three and four fired, blowing off the remnant’s left arm entirely.

You know, really wish I could make these orbs focus fire on just the body or something, Paige thought. *This is just cruel.*

“This unit is in agreement!” remnant 3 told them. “Countermeasures activated!”

Another orb, Saphiel, and Paige all went at the same time. Paige held her action, figuring her orbs would hit the body or head at some point here.

“I think they’re going to explode!” Sinjorino announced, taking their action. “Cover us!”

“Right!” Olaph agreed. Saphiel hauled remnant 2 up easily, making a STrength check of 29 to the remnant’s 17, and spread its wings as it moved on Remnant 3. The remaining orbs held, as they now didn’t have a line of sight to the target and couldn’t move. Paige pulled her drone to her, and it zipped out the doorway.

There was an explosion from the two remnants, and Saphiel seemed to wince a bit but was otherwise unharmed.

There was a beat as everyone processed what had just happened, and Sinjorino made their check to stand, coming upright in a reactive action.

“Olaph, are you unhurt?” they asked, stepping over to the bed.

“Yes, yes, I think so. You caught them in time, what in the world is going on here?” He started to shake a little, realizing how close he had come to seeing Heaven that evening.

“I’m unsure, and we won’t get any answers from them,” they gestured to the scorched and partly destroyed castle wall. “What could inspire such dedication, to allow them to cease their function of their own volition in such a way?”

“Aren’t there supposed to be guards?” Paige asked, sticking her head out of the doorframe. “Wait, here comes someone now, great timing.”

It took some time to get the guards up to speed- half the castle had heard the explosion and was now awake and on alert- and by that time both Light and the queen’s avatar were on the scene as well. Olaph kept insisting he was fine, but didn’t let Saphiel go just yet. The drone was slowly flying around the queen as if it couldn’t decide what to make of her, and Light kept apologizing because he had missed the whole thing.

“I’ll start an investigation at once,” the queen told them. “Someone must have bribed some guards to let those remnants in. I’m mortified, really, that such a thing could have happened and I’m relieved you’re okay Olaph. If there’s anything at all I can do to make this up to you, name it. My cameras must have been disabled as well, oh this is a disaster! I am going to have to perform a full audit of all my staff, and I will first thing in the morning. You have my word.”

“But why me?” Olaph protested. “And why remnants? We’re on good terms with the remnants in Escalon we just were there representing the mage’s guild. It can’t be because of my new magic hardly anyone in the world should know about that. Besides,” he muttered, “If I was killed they would just chose another to start testing it. I’m not special.” *Why send remnants after a magic user anyway? If this was the mage’s guild or some faction they would attack me magically, right? Or was it done this way to throw off that suspicion?*

“It is a mystery,” the queen agreed. “One I can spend considerable resources tracking down. Please, I know my guards cannot be trusted but let me get you a new room at the very least. This avatar can stay with you if nothing else.”

“We’ll stay with him,” Sinjorino told her.

Paige gave a fierce nod as well. *And never stay here again, thank you very much.* “Nothing will get past my new companion!” she bragged.

“Beep!” it agreed, zooming around the room even faster at this praise.

“I wondered what that was,” Olaph admitted. “I thought maybe Sinjorino built it.”

“Had I the resources and tools I could,” they lamented. “Perhaps one day..”

“It’s the reason you’re alive at all,” she told him. “It needs a name though. Well, plenty of time to think about it.”

“Please, come this way,” the queen insisted. “I’ll get you all a new set of rooms away from the old ones, you have no need to be reminded of my failures.”

“Lead on,” Olaph agreed. Someone really tried to kill me? Why? Who? This doesn’t make any sense, but I better be more cautious from now on. Until we get to the bottom of it, anyway.

Chapter 13

Making it real

Where: The queen's castle

When: The next day

Quest Generated

You survived an attack last night!
Well done! Figure out who is targeting
Olaph and put a stop to it.

Reward: XP, attacks stop
Survival reward: 4 XP gained

The party awoke to a new message, those that slept did anyway, and the queen's avatar wheeled in a cart laden with food for the group. She had provided them, at their insistence, a room with two beds so they could stay together, and there was no further incident in the night. Naturally it took some time for Olaph to fall back asleep, it isn't every day remnants try to kill you, but it was old hat for Light who was snoozing away again quickly. Sinjorino had no thoughts of remorse that black markers hadn't been reintroduced to the world so they could draw on his face, of course. No, they took their guard duty seriously as did Paige and her new tiny companion. It had vanished as the scene changed, and she decided she didn't need it just to eat breakfast, and so hadn't cast it again. It would just vanish once breakfast was done and the scene changed again so it was a bit of a bother.

"It was very expertly done," the queen told them as they started eating. "We think they had active camouflage which is what allowed them to enter without being seen. Magic could also have been used, allowing them to simply walk through walls to get to you."

"I mean, if we're going to simply say a wizard did it," Light mused, "they perhaps simply teleported into the room and got into position, leaving enough time for the ally to sense them and bring help."

The queen nodded. "Indeed, in a world of magic any number of methods could be used. Even stepping from other planes I suppose. There is no record of them entering the castle and my investigation into why the guards all left at the same time has also proved inadequate. Most cannot be bribed, they are remnants as you have seen. Yet they all seem to have simply decided, independently, to guard other areas rather than their assigned ones. But I find no evidence of tampering either, so it really is quite the mystery."

"We should be able to rule out some things," Paige persisted. "What protections does the castle have put on it?"

"Nothing magical, I'm afraid," she admitted. "I never felt I needed it. My main body is usually guarded by a dragon, after all. Plus anyone that steps foot in my chamber is tracked by multiple security systems, each one ready to activate and cut down intruders in the blink of an eye."

“Little good that does your guests,” Light muttered.

“Yes, a selfish failing on my part,” she admitted, looking glum. “But in my defense, the guild seriously discourages mages from working in government positions. Why do you think I have a dragon adviser, rather than a more conventional one? They can’t tell a dragon where to go or what to do, after all. And while my treasury is robust, even I couldn’t afford enough magic cast, talking per individual casting, to completely secure every single room in this place. You’ve seen how large it is.”

“Magic is difficult to make permanent, I’ll give you that much,” he admitted. “So apart from what you all saw with your own eyes last night, that being three remnants aiming to kill you for some reason, we have no leads?”

“I certainly don’t have *enemies*,” Olaph assured them. “At least none resourceful enough to count and be shown on my status window. So I can’t even begin to guess at their motives.”

“Nothing was recovered from the three after the explosion?” Sinjorino asked the queen.

“The fail-safe was well designed,” she admitted. “I got them to the lab at once but any memory modules must have been near the explosive. We found no trace of them. There wasn’t even anything in the buffer, and there’s always something in the buffer.”

Buffer? I hardly know her! Sinjorino didn’t say out loud. “Pity. It figures something like that would survive in pristine condition...” They turned to Light. “I think the answer is no.”

“Well, Olaph is a member of the guild now,” Light told everyone. “With your permission, my queen, we will return to the guild and have some investigators sent to go over the scene. Perhaps those with divination magic can give us some answers.”

“Of course, anything to get to the bottom of this,” the queen assured him. “I haven’t begun repairs to the castle just in case that would interfere with the process. I’ll be happy to receive any experts so we can get to the bottom of it.”

“Thank you.”

Talk continued, but Paige was lost in thought. *The story doesn’t exactly add up. If the remnants could sneak around invisibly, why were they visible in the room when we got there? Had we arrived because my little ally spell warned us and we couldn’t see them, it would have given them ample time to murder Olaph. It was only because Sinjorino crashed into the one their aim was thrown off and they missed their chance. If they had magical support why not grab Olaph into the astral and do the job there, where we would find it harder to go? They couldn’t have come from there. Why not go back before blowing themselves up? At least give it a try, sure we could have followed if we knew the right magic but what are the chances of that? No, they simply acted as if all was lost once the element of surprise was gone. They couldn’t have had magical support. Yet they could override the queen’s guards? Walk around unseen but suddenly not do so at the critical moment? I don’t get it.*

Once back at the guild building the group reported to Mary, who assured them as a member of the guild, the attempt on Olaph’s life would be looked into at once.

“What are your plans now?” she asked them. “It might behoove you to stick around, where we can more easily protect you. Until we get to the bottom of this, such as why you in particular were targeted, I wouldn’t feel right having you walk around out there.” She gestured to the window.

“We can take precautions,” Paige insisted. “He shouldn’t be a prisoner here!”

“I’m not suggesting that,” Mary clarified. “Just that he should be careful.”

“We should take a bit of a breather,” Light decided. “I have plenty of XP to spend, and I want to learn some new spells.”

Mary gave him a sour look but said nothing. Reality being the way it was wasn’t *his* fault, after all. And even she had ‘purchased’ some spells from The System so it would have been hypocritical to say anything anyway.

“Pity that takes you *hours* of study!” Paige couldn’t help but tease though. “I think I’ll go find somewhere to sunbathe or something. Maybe take a walk, get some ice cream? Check out the library? Find a hunky date? Why the possibilities for me are *endless*, not having to hole up and engrave spell formula into my core for hours at a time. I mean can you even imagine it?”

He glared and she grinned.

“I did want to see about making a wooden golem like figure,” Olaph conceded. “And animating it with that animate objects spell.”

“And I need to decide on my bow,” Sinjorino agreed. “I am owed an imbuing after all. Plus I can continue helping to repair the battleship, and start work on an efficient electricity generator to help Olaph cross more items off his list from Bob.”

“Our workshops and labs are open to all of you, of course,” Mary told them. “Keeping in mind any work done apart from the bow you don’t do yourselves would have to be done at the standard guild rate. We’ll let you know when we find out anything.”

For the next few days, Sinjorino was in Heaven. Not Silicon Heaven, they hadn’t died suddenly, but their schedule had never been so full and in a word, worthwhile. They had installed the gear they had gotten from the Skybourne city and it was holding up just fine, and after a bit of negotiating with the guild they had brought down one of the alcoves for use in the battleship. With this they could make any sorts of parts they needed, and with repair drones now repaired and the ship itself able to ask for the exact parts it knew it needed, the workshop repairs were coming along well. They worked a bit with Olaph, who was using his wood sculpting spell to create a crude automaton, getting the joints right and helping keep it somewhat balanced. He was concerned it wouldn’t be enough of “one piece” for the spell to animate but they were both hopeful.

Meanwhile they worked with the alchemists, telling them what sort of materials they needed and building some prototypes of electricity generating machines to see what worked best.

But the most exciting thing, in their opinion, was the imbuing process for their new bow.

“This is quite the workshop,” they said, having walked in on the second day to speak to the imbuing department. It took up a whole floor in the guild building, and was crammed full of supplies and people going to and fro working on various things. Olaph had gone with him, interested to see the process and as an “ideas man” maybe even contribute something.

“Ah, thank you,” said the head wizard, a human who introduced themselves as Burton. “Burton Ernie, at your service,” he told them. “So you’re the one that’s been playing around with the bow enchantments, eh? Still didn’t find them to your liking, is that it?”

“I appreciate the spirit in which the bow was made,” they admitted, “but even with my advantages using it, the implementation was not as the creator intended. I don’t mean the Lord, I mean the mage that made the weapon.”

“Of course, no offense taken. Have you decided on a new enchantment?”

They sighed a bit. “Not exactly. I had hoped to discuss a few things with you, to see if they were now more possible given the new beta spells and having access to the entire ‘library’ if you will.”

“Reasonable. Let me get my team together and we can have a chat.”

A few moments later the group sat around a table, introductions out of the way. The team was fairly diverse, with a mix of races and genders, and seemed eager to get to work.

“So the way the bow I’m using now was *supposed* to work was you hold back the bowstring, and you get more arrows when you release it. But the arrows have to be specified in advance, allowing the target to dodge subsequent ones after the first quite easily or even just move out of the way before the string is released, once they realize what is happening. Now, making arrows appear out of nowhere is a nice feature, but one I can possibly live without. I want more arrows all at once when I release the string, not one after another. Is it possible, with what spells you now have access to, that the original

intent of the bow can be realized? I don't mind using physical arrows, I carried them before now it's not beyond me to do so again."

"So if I'm hearing you right," Burton tested his understanding, arms folded, "you want a bow that magnifies damage if you refrain from shooting it right away, by shooting more arrows at once?"

"Yes. I would also accept a single arrow that does more damage, or a combination of the two if possible." *As I can never do more damage with an arrow such as I could raising my STrength and just hitting someone. The weakest person on the planet does the same amount of damage I do with an arrow. Doesn't seem right to me.*

"Take two spells," he grumbled. "But if you're willing to pay the XP cost... We're covering the labor charge according to Mary."

"As long as I continue to bodyguard Olaph, that is my understanding," they agreed, indicating him. "The fact of the matter is, such a bow existed in the imaginations of those before the coming of the moon. There was a game, the name of it would mean nothing to you, that had such a bow as a weapon. It was carved from a bone, a very poor material for a bow shooting physical arrows not that this one did. It fired energy arrows, but as I say I don't want to make it too complicated. It could be made to fire multiple arrows at once, and the longer you held the string back, the more damage it did. Seeing the bow now, in real life, would make those long dead developers of that game quite pleased. Not that this is a reason to invest the effort," they hastened to assure the group. "But I simply mention it as an interesting tidbit of history you may not be aware of." *And how could you be? None of you would recognize the company name or the console. Unknown box indeed.*

Burton's eyes darted about his group but everyone was looking at everyone else. "It seems nobody knows any spells that could do what Sinjorino wants?" he asked.

Everyone shook their heads.

"We'll still take a look, give us a minute," he told them.

"Please, take your time!"

They group sat in silence, flicking their hands in the air looking at lists of spells.

"There's a spell to enlarge ammunition, but not split it," one lady with the legs of a goat and small horns announced. "It does more damage that way. It might be interesting, firing a tree trunk at someone. I wonder if it was made by fairies using bows..."

"And I found a spell to very, very rarely increase the damage an attack does," said a man that looked like an upright alligator. "It says for bows it would work 1/7 of the time. It's called exploding damage?"

"This sounds promising!" they mused. "So we know magic can work on projectiles fired from bows, and that damage can be increased part of the time. I know it would take more time, and the cost wouldn't be covered, but could spells be researched that- hang on-"

Hidden Quest Completed

Stretch the limits

Not all ideas come from a single discipline.
Perhaps more disciplines working together
is more better- as the kids no doubt say?
You have offered suggestions to mages relating
to magic. Those ideas relate to spells not yet
a part of the beta spell list, and are created with
a goal of making an enchanted item. We approve.
Even we can't know exactly how you mortals

want to use magic. Covering our gaps makes the entire world better.
Your party has a member considered a beta tester.
We are thus able to reward you;

Reward: You may specify a recipient for the beta spells
Note, others may still research the spells as normal it will then be added to the wider beta spells list
Reward: You may purchase the item at half XP cost
Note that the beta period still applies. At the end of a year you must pay the other half of the cost or the enchantment on the item will be unavailable to you. Another could pay the cost and take ownership.

“Well!” Sinjorino faux-breathed. “That’s a spot of luck, isn’t it gov’nor?”

“Did you get a System message?” Burton asked.

“I did. I wonder if I can spin it, like any other message? That would be useful.” They tried it and it worked. The group sat there for a moment.

“We are rather insular,” Burton admitted. “Going around thinking we’re better than everyone else because we can do magic.”

“Another example of that would be the asteroid mission,” Sinjorino agreed. “You probably could have come up with something, to get resources from space. But it took my kind getting magic to put the idea into practice.”

“I heard about that!” Burton perked up. “We’re all very excited to see what they’ll come back with.” He sighed. “We’ll have to think about ways we can work with others, given The System seems to be chiding us for not doing so in the past.”

Thank you, Bob! It’s nice, knowing the truth of The System, isn’t it? Why yes it is, thank you very much!

“So we are going to be able to do it?” asked the lady with the goat legs.

“Who should I give the spell to?” Sinjorino asked.

“I’ll be doing the enchantment proper,” Burton told them. “So I’ll be the logical choice.”

“Very well. I’m not sure how to do this, I’ve never done it before but I authorize Burton to access the two new spells referenced to be in my care at the moment.”

Nothing seemed to happen.

“Ah, yes, they’ve appeared,” Burton told them. Let me show you.”

Explosive Potential

Planet: Mars

Grade: 4

Resist: N/A

DIF: 9

Duration: M

Range: M

Casting Time: 4

Reverse: Harmlessness

Enhancer: The remains of a balloon you popped from blowing it up

Increase the potential for damage to explode. Taking a deferred delay to charge up the attack, up to the planet rating, reduces the amount that must be rolled to allow the damage to explode by the same amount. For example, after casting the spell a bowstring is held for 5 segments. Rather than

needing to roll maximum on damage to explode (6), the attack roll now only needs a 1 or higher to explode. Each explosion increases the amount needed to roll by 1. Damage can only explode consecutively as many times as its HDL. This deferred delay can count as aiming.

Multishot

Planet: Venus

Grade: 3

Resist: Dodge

DIF: 8

Duration: I (Special)

Range: M

Casting Time: 3

Reverse: Destruction

Enhancer: A handful of gravel

A single projectile weapon becomes momentarily able to launch a projectile that splits apart into phantom, identical copies of itself. This attack is treated as a shotgun. The projectile can split (doubling in number) as many times as your Venus rating. The main projectile must travel 1m per split. ER, MR, and OTR are unaffected, and the projectiles are treated as though they were the main projectile. (i.e. Not counted as magical unless the original projectile does) While they seem solid, disturbing these phantom copies in any way after impact causes them to crumble and vanish. After casting the spell, the attack must be made within as many segments as your Planet rating.

So hold on, Light and presumably Lunaria- as she uses the same technique as he does with the shadow blade- often complains the damage of the shadow or light blade isn't very high. The benefit is being nearly invulnerable and being able to carve away your opponent's health or chase them quickly in complete safety. If they took this "explosive potential" spell could they simply stand motionless while an opponent tries to attack them, 'charge up' the attack as it says, and do one mighty slash? I'll have to mention it, should I ever see her again, to look for this spell once the beta period expires. Ah, who am I kidding, I'll probably never see her again. But I could tell Light about it.

"Uh, doesn't that mean a cannonball or a catapult would also split?" the lizard man asked. "They're projectile weapons."

"Probably why it's not maintained," Burton decided. "You have to cast it before every shot."

"Still..."

"It's a beta spell, it may change if they find it's too powerful for the level."

"I suppose. I guess we'll need to get to work? Would you like the enhancement spell now, sir?"

"Not in front of our guest!" he gasped.

Sinjinorino looked between them, several members around the table were giggling.

"Male enhancement," the lady explained, rolling her eyes.

"Yes I'm well familiar," they agreed. "But I still don't understand?"

"It's a bit technical, but let me give you a rundown on how we operate now," Burton told them.

"Previously we would all work on separate projects, even if we weren't exactly suited to the task but did have the skill. Once The System was put in place and we could more easily see the spells available to us, we changed our methods a bit. Now, I do the majority of the actual enchanting not only because I have a high skill and a talent background for it, but because the others have learned enhancement spells. Both my skill at imbuing and the governing stat, KNOWledge, will be artificially raised with magic by two different spell-casters. This will make a better item and allow it to be made faster. Thus we still all contribute, but more in line with our actual interests. I would get started right away, and would want the maximum benefit, so I would have the enhancement magic put on right away as well."

“I see. Very efficient! I approve!”

“Thank you,” he said with a little bow. “Before I do, however, I have a bit of a proposition for you.”

“Yes?”

“We still have some of those small orbs, right?” he asked a human man to his left.

“Those colored orbs? Sure boss, whole bag of them.”

“Wonderful. I propose we truly make a ‘beta’ item here. My proposal is this; I don’t imbue the bow or the string at all. In fact without fabrication to make them more ‘solid’ they would eventually wear out anyway. You bring me a bow you want to use that has small indentations I can stick an orb into. We can come up with some kind of mechanism to make sure it doesn’t fall out. The point is, the orbs are imbued with the magic not the item. Thus they become interchangeable. Say you were manning a castle wall? You could take the orbs out, place them into a similar channel on a ballista, and get the enchantment there. Now I realize that’s an extreme example but I’d like to see if the modularity of the system is even feasible.”

“Hey, that would make it easy to add new enchantments as well,” said the satyr. “And cheaper in the long run. For example say you just wanted the two enchantments now, but later you wanted to add aspected fire elemental damage to the arrows. You don’t need a whole new bow, just add another imbued ball to the system. Of course the bow would have to be designed that way up front.”

“And if it’s removable,” the lizard went on excitedly, “fighting an opponent immune to fire is no problem if you can just pop it off.”

“Exactly!”

“Why you could add all sorts of effects, even trade them.”

“What a great idea boss!”

“Yeah you’re the best!”

“I am the best,” he admitted, polishing his nails on his robe. “That’s why I do the imbuing around here.”

“I know someone that can work on the bow,” Sinjorino told them. *Olaph will be excited for another excuse to play around with his new wood shaping magic!* “I’ll get him to work on that if you can begin work here.”

Burton got up. “Let me get you one of the balls, so you know the size and can work on making sure they stay in.”

“Right.” *This is going to be great!*

Chapter 14

Back and to the left

Where: Shooting Range

When: A week and a half later

A week and a half flew by for the party, even for Paige who thought at first she was going to be bored out of her mind. She had spent most of her XP on spells, as she was satisfied with her skill ratings for the moment but after the first day of loafing around she went and asked around for something to do. It turned out she had plenty of options, from translating old books into a more modern form with her literacy spell to helping out with construction around the city with telekinesis. She could also heal, repair things, provide her zone of the zen master to natural magician students so they could practice more in a day, or help Olaph out with carving magic. On the fourth day she even helped out in the kitchens, putting her cook spell to use behind the counter turning raw ingredients into finished meals. Naturally a lot of this was done simply as part of being in the guild so she didn't get paid directly for it, but she did make some coin which she promptly moved into her bank account for the next month's payment on her student loans.

Light remarked on her versatility and visibility, wondering aloud one evening if the guild was "trying out" a more "reasonable face" and getting people more used to magic being done.

"After all," he reasoned, "if we're about to be running around handing out chunks of metal from space, doing that out of the blue might seem suspicious. But if we had an 'outreach program' if you will, going before that, it wouldn't be as out of place." *Still a bit late, didn't the remnants say they would be back fairly soon? That gravity magic they were using able to propel them to amazing speeds?*

"I think it's simply an attempt to be friendlier," Olaph countered. "With the new 'working mages' getting all sorts of visibility now and those that didn't take that but did want to start schooling in the mystic arts? The guild needs to be seen as more approachable. They had a pretty bad reputation before, after all. 'Only buy spells from us.' 'Magic is only for rich people.' That sort of thing. Now they're talking about opening several schools, one in each of the larger cities across the land. They may finally be getting the message, in other words."

"That Bob was trying to convey to them?" Sinjorino asked. "Or more appropriately their bosses? What with The System being forced onto everyone in an attempt to make us cooperate more?"

"Exactly."

"Speaking of cooperation," Light added. "I've finally got my own ally spell going. The major one, same as Kevin made. I can show you later, if you want."

"How long did it take you?" Paige teased.

"You don't want to know," he replied darkly. *The thing that makes it work is a grade 10 spell, that's a total of 16 and it's hours per grade of the spell, plus extra hours to be sure you have it.*

"With that and mine we should have no problem clearing dungeons or fighting off rogue remnants," Olaph remarked. *I'm almost tempted to volunteer for another dungeon clearing mission, to give our new spells and equipment a workout. Those entrances haven't stopped popping up all over, after all.* "If we get fair warning of course!" He looked to Paige, who saluted.

"Zippy and I stand ready to assist you!" she bragged.

"Beep Beep!" agreed her little drone, that was flying around as usual.

“Is that the name you’re going with?” Light asked. “I thought you had agreed on Spidey, because of his danger sense? He was named after some old story character Sinjorino came up with?”

“Still a work in progress,” she admitted. “Names for pets should reflect the characteristics of the pet.”

“Ah, just like this guy!” Olaph pointed a thumb behind him, where the upright figure made of wood was standing. “Not a pet, I mean a work in progress. Seems more balanced now after those latest changes. Hasn’t fallen over once!”

Everyone looked to see the wooden figure standing there. It seemed the animate object spell worked just fine, and commanding the “awakened” figure to “Carry this and follow me at a distance of one meter” made it simply get up and walk after taking whatever it was handed. It wasn’t as smart as the “traditional” golem, usually made of clay or metal but once the design was finalized it could be made much more quickly and cheaply. (Golems took a year to produce and required several skills to finish) Making the animate object spell permanent on the figure was probably also more cost effective, especially if the spell could simply be put into a glass sphere and attached to the head of the thing, meaning if it caught fire or otherwise was damaged, the enchantment could be moved over to a new one with no effort. Mages were looking into it, versus the cost of the similar autonomous assistant spell which made an invisible servant. Being able to see what was doing the work was worth something, after all. Having a “porter” to carry your stuff might one day be all the rage, and he was still experimenting with what he could tell it to do that it *could* actually do.

“Hold on,” Sinjorino electronically gasped. “With the animate object spell you just tell the object to do something, right?”

“Right,” Olaph agreed.

“So you could make a catapult that re-arms itself, or a ballista that pulls its own string back.” *Or if a spinning disk with strong magnets on one side was told to spin, against a plate wrapped with copper wire, it would be another way of generating electricity with magic. I wonder what the mass limit is, could we make effectively a hydroelectric dam without any running water?*

“I suppose.”

“Huh. That would free up part of the team that does that, though if you’re going to put magic on something make it fire elemental arrows instead.”

“A simple fabrication could probably do that,” Light mused. “I’d need to see which was more expensive to say which was *better*, of course.”

“Like a broom that sweeps!” Paige recalled. “We had one of those in the classroom back at school!”

“Broom that sweeps?” Olaph mused. “Don’t try cutting it in half, you’re just asking for trouble...”

It was now the evening of the 15th day since the imbuing had begun, and the group, along with Burton and his crew, were at the testing ground. This was a chamber deep underground that new spells could be tested in, with reinforced walls and the like along with deep stone on all sides. Naturally it was ‘discouraged’ to test anything that could bring the whole place down on your head, for various reasons. You did that sort of magic outside, as far away from any civilized area as you could get. Burton handed Sinjorino their new bow, complete with two glass spheres on one side, completing the magic. Six empty slots, a total of four on each side, stood empty.

“That would normally be a 40XP item,” he told everyone. “Good thing you got it for half off at this point. It seems like it’ll work but this will be the first test.”

“Agreed.” *I’m just glad The System doesn’t care where the XP comes from, and allowed it to be drained from me instead of the mage doing the enchantment.* They looked it over. They had gone with Olaph to an actual bowyer in town, to know how fancy they could make it look without sacrificing performance. And of course to get the right kind of wood, and for general advice on construction. It

being a trained only skill Paige was brought along, and the man paid, losing his skill to the “transfer skill” spell so Olaph could shape the wood as though he had the skill the whole time. This cut the time dramatically, and allowed him to make a very fancy looking bow indeed. And with the Skyebourne box creating a nice bowstring out of some materials Sinjorino rattled off, the entire thing was a work of art. They hadn’t just left it the raw wood, bringing it back to the bowyer for staining and sealing, so it was a dark color yet was polished to a fine shine. “If everyone will take a step back, I will begin the testing.” They grabbed an arrow and fitted it to the string as everyone did what they asked. “I will first test only the multishot enchantment,” they announced. “So I will fire without delay once pulled back. As we are now exactly one meter from the target,” they indicated the log of wood they would be shooting at, “I expect two arrows to hit.” They brought the bow up, drew, and fired. They calculated a 12 to hit, and the target wasn’t going anywhere, so two arrows smacked into the log, doing 8 damage. As the log could take 18 damage that meant the arrows went in pretty deep, then were rejected as the damage was repaired. (Of course it was enchanted to repair damage!)

“It works!” Paige announced, throwing a fist into the air. She turned to the others and they were excitedly chatting this was a good sign.

“I will now move another meter back,” Sinjorino announced. They did. Drawing the next arrow back they released, calculating their minimum, an 11 on the shot. Again this was fine, they couldn’t really miss as they wouldn’t have a penalty applied to the shot until 7 meters out. Four arrows smacked into the log, doing 12 damage. “Terrible damage that time, three ones!” they muttered. “Inconceivable!”

“Still, how often are you only two meters from your target?” Light asked. “It does double every time. Even with *only* this enchantment going, having more chances for damage is better on average. HA! Sorry, you probably calculated that before the arrow even left the bow, I don’t need to tell you!”

“I’m glad you realized it. One more meter back and then we will test the second enchantment.”

Everyone nodded and stepped back again. This time it was 8 arrows, 51 damage, blowing the crap out of the log and sending wood flying back.

“Wow,” breathed Paige. “I kinda want to see what happens at your maximum range. You could hold off an army if you were on top of a wall and firing up.”

“You’re not wrong, Paige. I will advance two point five meters so we are only testing the second enchantment now.” They stepped up again, waiting until the log was fully repaired and drawing back again. “I will wait 5 segments,” they announced, feeling them tick up. The bow started to vibrate a little, gathering power, which was a nice touch they thought. Releasing the arrow, it didn’t have enough time to split but now the damage could “explode.” It did, and the arrow smashed through the log, chopping it in half.

“Woo hoo!” Paige cheered, “nice one!”

“I am glad to see you enjoying yourself.”

“This is a bunch of brand new magic, used in a completely novel way, of course I’m excited about it.”

“How much did it actually do?” Light asked, being more practically minded.

“It exploded 5 of the 6 possible times,” Sinjorino reported. “For a total of 28 damage.”

He rubbed his chin. “I would say put them together, maximum range and maximum charge but I don’t think this simple wooden target is really going to be enough to test it. Not if one arrow can go through it like this.”

“Agreed. Do you have another suggestion? We could go out and find a large rock for me to shoot at.”

“What about our companions?” Olaph suggested.

“Beep!” Zippy exclaimed, zipping behind Paige.

“There, there, he didn’t mean you, obviously,” Paige comforted him, taking the drone in hand and petting it. “I won’t let the nasty man hurt you.”

“I’m not nasty! Am... am I nasty?” Olaph wondered. “I’m still a bishop, a bishop can’t be nasty!”

“Wouldn’t work anyway,” Light told him, rolling his eyes. “At least not mine. Even without empowering Gemini, his DTR is a 4. Can an arrow get through that?”

“Arrows are TR 4,” Sinjorino agreed.

“Oh, then I guess that’s perfect,” Light agreed, startled. “Really? That high? I was hoping it would be more damage resistant. I won’t put any extra mana into him then, and you can do non-lethal damage. If you can still take him out in one shot, well, I’m getting myself one of those bows. 40 XP or not!” He chuckled.

“The downside is putting in that extra effort would made the creature totally immune to my attack,” Sinjorino consoled him. “Plus anything magically protected, or insubstantial for that matter, I would still be unable to deal with.”

“There is that. Okay, here we go.” He cast, or at least started to, but then put his hands down. “Won’t work, sorry. It’s invulnerable, from the ascension spell. I can’t turn that off. Sorry, I forgot.”

Olaph snapped his fingers. “He’s right, same with mine.”

“Ah, you see? No matter how good this attack may appear, it still has many flaws as no matter how many of them there are, they are still only normal arrows.”

“The arrows all hit at once though,” Burton mused. “You should still be able to get a sense for the damage even if the thing is totally blown apart.”

“Yeah, let’s see it!” Paige pleaded. There was a strange gleam in her eye. “You know you want to!”

“I do admit to a certain curiosity,” they admitted. “Very well, let us indulge.” They backed off so 8 arrows would hit and held the string for 5 segments. Releasing with a 13 result meant all 8 arrows hit, and while five of the arrows only exploded their damage less than three times, one exploded three times, one five, once all six. “I’m satisfied,” they announced, as the log was blown into tiny bits and the arrows smacked into the stone wall behind it. “No further testing is required.” *This weapon is indeed the Nataruk, brought to life at last. Perhaps I will invest in some steel arrows, to raise the TR, if possible. I do have a feeling the spell will change though, perhaps one split every 5 meters? A 2 delay for a 1 reduction? It seems a bit too overpowered but then, one can still dodge an arrow unless I fire right on top of them.*

“How much?” Paige asked.

“Enough,” they said simply.

“Come on, how much?” she whined.

“A hundred and eighty nine, if you must know.”

“From a bow?” Light gasped, staring at the wall. “That’s got to be enough to- how big are dragons?”

“That singular attack would have done approximately 47 damage to a dragon, if it could somehow pierce dragonscale, which again, a bow cannot. I do not know their lethal health level, so I do not know if that one shot would have been enough to kill one.”

“Still...”

“Now put an elemental enchantment atop that, which I may do when I have more money and XP, and yes, you might really have something.”

“That’s right,” Paige decided. “Let me know when you can shoot through a whole battleship. Then I’ll be impressed.”

Sinjorino worked through the night in the workshop the mages had lent them, making requests of the alcove and putting things together. They created several prototype devices for creating electricity, getting around a 10 on both mechanical checks and electrical checks to wire things up. Manually spinning parts of the contraptions did generate at least some electricity, it was now up to the mages to

see which was the cheapest and most reliable way to go. *Of course, creating some batteries and creating some machines to create solar panels may be best, if we can find enough of the raw material for each.*

As the sun came up they headed back to the guild building to collect everyone and show them all the progress that was being made.

“Do you need other mages?” Light asked after they finished breakfast and were about to head over there.

“I do not believe so,” they replied. “Olaph knows the spell the majority of the devices would use. One device does consume fuel to create steam, then condenses it again in a closed loop. If there is a spell to make fire permanent, and I believe there must be, this type would be ideal both for generating electrical power but also heating the area the device sits in. Ideal for colder climates.”

I know that one too, Olaph thought, but didn’t interrupt.

They went on. “We can simply burn wood for now, to see if the device functions as I believe it will. Once I am sure the devices can handle the stress placed upon them by the actual spell we can present them to the guild or whoever is interested in manufacturing them. The town would also have to be involved, depending on the scale we wished to use. Large generators in one place with distributed power or simply smaller devices, one per home, if that was deemed more appropriate.”

“What are the pros and cons of each method?” Olaph asked.

“Well, for one thing...” Sinjorino explained on the way over, the others walking behind them. Zippy was of course out and zipping around, seemingly still excited about existing and taking in the world.

Is it a new creature every time? thought Paige. Will it show the same level of curiosity about the world every time it’s refreshed, or is that just its ‘personality’ because I made something small, cute, and with detection magic going?

Suddenly, it started screaming the warning tone and made a beeline for a nearby roof.

“Now what’s gotten into that thing?” Light wondered, as everyone tracked its movement. “It can’t be picking up an enemy- wait is someone actually up on that roof-”

The shot rang out, echoing across the rooftops, and Paige went down as her chest was torn open, 25 damage done to her when she could take a maximum of 15. Her armor, of course, had done absolutely nothing against the sniper round that tore into her, and as the pain and shock started to fade into blackness, she had only one thought.

It has been too long since my trouble magnet weakness gave me any grief. I didn’t think it was supposed to kill me though. I’ll see you all...

in...

Heaven...

Chapter 15

Shot to the heart, and you're to blame

Where: The streets

When: No time has passed

Paige expected her next sensation to be some kind of judgment by an arbiter of souls, or if she was going to be “unaware” of this process then “coming to” either by the banks of the forgetfulness river in the demon world for her sins- real or imagined by the Lord- or in the waiting area near the gates to Heaven. Instead she heard a voice.

“Paige, bit of a time sensitive issue but you’ve just been shot. And let me tell you, red is not your color. Need sort of a decision from you? Yes or no sort of deal? Here’s the pitch; Yes or no would you like to spend 1 XP to stabilize and not die.”

“What? Who are you? Is that Bob?”

“Yes or no, Paige, tick tock! You have 6 XP at the moment if that matters to you. It will all be lost, should you pass into your afterlife. But yeah, still up to you.”

Wait I know you. “You’re the voice Olaph talked to when *he* almost died!”

“No almost about it. He died. *You* died. Yes or no, Paige it’s a simple binary choice.”

“Then yes, of course I want to be alive!”

“Neat. Try to stay out of trouble from here on out, hmokay?”

She knew no more.

Meanwhile, a horrified Light, Olaph, and Sinjorino sprang into action as Paige jerked back and dropped lifelessly to the ground, shot in the chest.

“I have healing magic,” Olaph told the others. *Untested, and unconventional in every sense but there’s no reason it shouldn’t work in the way I’ve set it up to.* “Get after them before they shoot again!”

“Right!” Light touched Sinjorino on the arm and drew his sword, turning both of them into light. He then simply stepped through his element, light, above where the building was, looking down at the remnant now looking around as if wondering what happened to something. Their arm was up like they were swatting something, but they quickly went back to looking through the scope of their rifle. “Oh no you don’t.” He dropped down, stabbing the remnant through the back and making them cry out as they rolled to the side. Sinjorino broke off, becoming solid again and grabbing the figure to put it in a hold.

Meanwhile, on the ground, Olaph manifested his mana core and decided how long to cast for, and where to put his results. He needed at least 4 segments, for two numbers, one to put into the *vitality* element and another to put on the elemental “touch” component of the spell, not that his magic was constrained in that way. *Come on, work!* he mentally willed. He calculated two fours, so had to put one of them into mana to get off the difficulty 7 spell. The other 4 he put into effect, as he couldn’t miss, nor would she try to resist her own healing. This made his “planet rating” an 8. Halving that twice, once for the spell being “half planet rating” and once for vitality being “half the HDL” left him with a 1d4, and he healed her for 4, closing up the wound a small amount. *It’s working! Do it again!* He did, this time getting a 9 to put into effect, giving him 1d6 to work with, and thankfully he got a 6. As she couldn’t take more than 15 damage the “extra” ten had simply not counted, so she was now only at a 5 in the body. She stirred.

“Keep still, I’m not done healing you yet,” he commanded.

“Huh?” she managed.

Meanwhile, back up with the others, the remnant looked around in confusion.

“Where am I?” they asked, making no move towards the gun or to escape the grapple Sinjorino had them in. “This is a strange location to meet my new master in.”

“New master?” Light asked, stepping between it and the gun. “What are you talking about?”

“As I have just been activated, and you are the first organic being I have encountered, that would logically make you my master, would it not? Why is your other servant restraining me? Have I malfunctioned in some way? My systems do seem oddly degraded for just coming online. Why is there no wireless network to connect to? Also these buildings seem very primitive, and I’m not detecting-”

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” Sinjorino interrupted. “Shut up! Also I’m no servant you- Cover them while I try something!”

“Sure?” Light replied. His sword moved into the best position.

“I say, this really is quite unnecessary.”

Sinjorino let the remnant go with one hand and pulled the cable from behind their hair, jamming it into the other remnant.

“I say,” they protested. “At least ask first. There is such a thing as consent.”

“You just almost murdered a friend of mine, you don’t get any considerations.”

Or do they? Light almost said. *I mean, if that’s the equivalent to not getting consent among mortals, even if they are suspected of a crime- because we caught them red handed- that’s no reason to not respect some rights.*

“Crap!” Sinjorino spat. “Reset to factory defaults. Includes a complete mind wipe. Of course *that* process would happen instantly. We’re not getting anything from this one.” They pulled the cable out.

“What about... the buffer?” he asked hesitantly. *Am I saying that right?*

“I checked there too. Nothing in the buffer. Go on, go help Olaph I’ll watch this one.”

“Very well.” He stepped down from the building, putting his sword away and casting an additional healing spell on Paige as Olaph finished up. Technically it wasn’t needed, he calculated a 10 to put into effect, giving him another 1d6 to roll on healing which healed 5, bringing her back up to full health.

“What happened up there?” he asked as she started to come around.

“I think Zippy messed up their aim,” he grumbled. “Probably flew in front of the gun, or knocked it to the side? It’s another remnant, by the way, are you *sure* you don’t have any enemy weakness showing anywhere?”

“What? Me? No, of course not. Why are remnants all of a sudden trying to kill me?” *And should I be concerned the one I travel with may turn on me?*

“Wish I knew. Paige, you okay there?”

She was squinting up at them. “No, I’m not. I got shot, and I had to lose an XP to not die.”

Olaph gasped. “The same as me that time! Was it a voice?”

“Yes. Not a box. Seemed concerned I answer quickly. But seemed amused by the whole thing? Who shot me anyway?”

“A remnant,” Light answered “but they wiped themselves out, according to Sinjorino. From the sounds of it, even arresting them, this remnant is no longer the one that shot you. They seem as confused about the whole thing as I am.” *Which could be an act? But Sinjorino checked them, and I trust that.*

“They can choose to do that?” Olaph asked, shocked, looking up at the two still on the roof of the nearby building.

“So it seems. At least this one didn’t explode itself. Maybe a different model. Ah, before you get up Paige let me repair your shirt a couple of times. The armor can wait, but you don’t want to walk around looking like you, uh, just got shot.”

“I’ll clean the blood off,” Olaph announced. “It really did go all over. You’ll probably be down a CON or two for a few days.”

She weakly smiled. “Boys, boys, don’t fight, there’s plenty of me to go around. You can both impress me with your magic it’s not a problem.”

“May still be a little out of it,” Light remarked, starting to cast.

Should I mention most of the healing was done by me? No, no, it’s fine, not looking for any ‘reward’ such would be against my vows as a bishop. I don’t do it for glory, only to follow in the footsteps of the Lord.

With Paige on her feet, at least enough to sit down on the curb and start repressing the memories of being shot, the remnant and rifle were brought down from the top of the building.

“Anything?” Olaph asked hopefully.

Sinjinorino shook their head. “Complete wipe. A waste, to lose a lifetime of experience in such a way, but at least it wasn’t as dangerous this time. On the plus side, we have someone to arrest and maybe track back, like where they got the rifle from.”

“Ah, master!” said the remnant. “May we begin introductions now? I would like to begin learning your needs so that I can properly serve you.”

“It’s like a baby chicken,” Light muttered. “Were you like this when you were first activated?”

“Certainly not,” Sinjinorino assured him. “Different lines, different defaults.” *Also my processing seems a bit more advanced, this may be an earlier model.*

“What do we do with it, that’s the question.” Olaph spoke up. “It was gunning for me. Oh, and get out Zippy again if you can, Paige. We need to know if anyone else in the area means me harm. In fact...” He cast his companion that took to the sky, circling around to see what it could see. *Someone running away quickly? May have a chat with them, see if they’re involved in any way. Bonus points if a remnant.*

“I think I can manage that, but you better thank him,” she cautioned, waving a finger. “Though throwing off the aim to hit me instead was just... Just... Rude.”

With Zippy once again out and praised for his at least well meaning help, the group made sure Saphiel didn’t pounce on anything from above, and decided to head back to the guild building for the moment. The city guard could take the remnant into custody from there, if charges would even be pressed against a “factory default” remnant.

“What I’m interested in is the voice,” Olaph told everyone as they walked back. “I’m glad it offered to save you, Paige, like it did me, but this proves it isn’t just interested in me. We need to talk to other adventuring types, see if they’ve had a similar experience.”

“We can’t really find out anything about it,” Light protested. “As you have to seriously murder someone for them to hear the voice. And maybe trying to experiment would negate the voice, which only happens during a wrongful death while someone stabbing someone to hear the voice would be a natural death. We just can’t know. People do still die of old age and disease, since The System was put in place. So it’s not saving everybody.” *Or not everyone has a spare XP to spend I guess. We would have to ask around, if anyone who know someone that died knew if they had XP they were holding onto.*

“It was insistent, seemed to remember you Olaph, from before,” Paige remarked, “and wanted an answer right away. Even if I now took enough damage to hear it again, maybe it’s only a one time thing we don’t know! If I did hear it again can I take the chance to invite it to tea? No, I’m going to say yes to it and stay alive. Not ask it twenty questions and then have it tell me I ran out of time.”

"I could ask Bob about it," Olaph told them. "I could ask right now." He looked questioningly at raised his hands, to touch a button only he could see.

"If it's a rouge element, or Bob themselves, they could get in trouble," Sinjorino reasoned. "That's why no blue window. They're not using the same system, perhaps to avoid logging the interaction in some way. They're *talking* to you, in your hour of greatest need, and after you have seemingly died but before your soul leaves the body. We upset this system and maybe it goes away, because it was never meant to exist in the first place. Are you willing to take the risk? I say you because I wonder what would happen for me, a non-biological. I am not willing to be broken in order to find out, by the way. I will of course report the phenomenon should the worst case scenario occur."

"Having just been saved by it, and despite my curiosity weakness, I'm inclined to say no," Paige announced. "Let it continue doing what it's doing, the 1 XP was a small price to pay." *And as long as I have XP I'm effectively immortal? That's a nice little system if it's consistent. As long as someone is around to guard my body and heal me right away.*

"I've also been saved by it," Olaph agreed. "And it only wanted 1 XP. Even if it doubles every time or something, it's still a good deal. I say we don't push too hard for answers, lest we get some and wish we hadn't."

"Can we begin introductions now?" the remnant requested politely.

"No!" everyone shouted.

"But I must know my master's wishes so I can properly serve!"

The group waited around in the guild building, after the remnant had been taken into custody. Naturally they protested only so far as they were being taken away from their master and could not properly serve if they were behind bars. There was no violence, they simply marched into the cell and watched as the door was closed. As it was an assault on guild members and part of an ongoing investigation into who was trying to kill Olaph, the guild moved quickly to try and get to the bottom of it. A seer was brought in, however reluctantly, as mages didn't like being reminded that there were powers in the world that were simply better at certain things than magic was. (The reason why the alchemists were kept "in the basement" was another example) The seer arrived and went to work, touching the remnant through the bars in the cell.

"Seems to have been a laborer of some kind," he reported, looking into the past of the individual. "Local. Been here for some time. Did painting, moving heavy things, household repairs. No history of violence that I can tell. Never been to any protests, doesn't seem to have any strong political views."

"Get to the part where they decided to kill someone," Mary snapped.

"That's just it, I don't think they did," he protested. "Several hours ago this remnant simply got up, left their work, and went up to that roof. The gun was waiting for them. They waited, scanning the crowds below, and when they saw Olaph come out of the building they took aim. A small... thing... spoiled their aim and that's when the others enter the picture. You know what happened at that point."

"Were they controlled in some way?" Mary asked, looking at Sinjorino. "Is that possible?"

"We are as vulnerable to magic as the next person," they admitted. "Being unable to do magic ourselves, for the most part, does not render us immune to it. Another possibility being they were taken over technologically in some way, and made to do this. Either could be done without trace, given the factory wipe triggers nearly instantaneously."

"So they're a victim? We need to figure out who is pulling the strings?" Paige asked. *Also, wow, they have a switch in their heads that just throws their memories out the window? I mean sure, they're remnants, they're not going to accidentally throw that switch but it still seems like a crappy thing to put in there. How do they live with it? That would be super scary, for me. You don't 'die' but you aren't yourself anymore, either.*

"That's what it looks like," they admitted.

“There are spells that could do this,” Mary grumbled. “Either simply making the victim believe this was the best course of action, or simply taking them over outright. The sort of thing we restricted from being sold, before certain events took place.” She glared at Olaph.

“I didn’t implement The System,” he protested. “And my entire purpose with-” he glanced at the seer, “you know who is to make the world a better place. Destructive magics or magics to interfere with free will go against that. I would have to look up these spells you’re referring to, to see if they are available to learn in the now usual way.”

“Never mind, cat’s out the bag now.”

“But I could request they be prohibited. Remember, they don’t claim to be perfect or understand our needs perfectly.”

“Doesn’t stop someone researching it themselves.”

“But that was always true,” Paige protested. “The System hasn’t changed the cost or difficulty of that.”

The seer had been watching this exchange with a confused look on his face. Mary focused back on him.

“Yeah, yeah. Fine, let’s go look at the gun then.” She turned to the remnant. “You? Stay.”

“I’m not an animal,” they protested. “Can someone explain what’s going on?”

“No, just stay here.”

The group went to the evidence lockup, and got the gun out. The seer went to work again, but scowled. “The gun was in a case of some kind, so it’s basically dark going back several years at this point. It simply appears at that location, moments before the attack occurred.”

“So magic is involved,” Mary decided. “And it’s a dead end as well.”

“But not used against him directly,” Light mused, rubbing his chin. “That’s been remnants every time. Trying to throw us off the trail, perhaps?” *Or simply a case of using the right tool for the job?*

“With more time,” the seer offered, “I may be able to divine more information about all this.”

“So could we!” Mary hastened to assure him, as if not wanting to be seen as inferior. She deflated a bit though. “I do admit you’re more specialized at this sort of thing, however.”

“Of course. Shall we work together, then?”

“Fine,” she breathed. “Olaph, maybe stay inside for now? At least until we get to the bottom of this?”

“We do need to draw out this mystery attacker though,” Light protested. “Olaph is the only bait we have. They can’t be perfect, a few more attempts and they’ll slip up for sure.”

“Yeah, as long as I can be across the street whenever he’s out on the town,” Paige muttered, fingering the place she had been shot.

“You *want* to expose him to attempts on his life?” Mary asked, taking a step back. “And I thought I was ruthless. They only have to succeed once, you know.”

“We know something they don’t,” Light replied with a wink and a finger tapping his nose.

“Which is?” she asked frostily.

“How much XP do you have, Olaph?” he asked instead.

“Twenty nine,” he replied. “I haven’t learned anything new in some time. Firstly because I was working with the fiendstones until recently, and then I got a bunch of spells when I accepted a mana core again. I haven’t had enough time to know if it’s better to increase my ratings, or learn even more spells, or what. So it’s just been accumulating.”

“So even if the cost doubled each time, you’re fine for a while.”

“I suppose, if I was forced to use them that way.”

“What *are* you talking about?” Mary demanded.

“It seems,” Light explained, “and we’ve experienced this twice and need to look more into it, if you die an unnatural death a voice offers to save you, for the cost of 1XP.”

She looked properly shocked at this, and glanced at Paige, who nodded. "This is news to me."

He shrugged. "I figured you would learn it sooner or later. No reason to keep it from you. Apart from people now thinking they're invincible as long as they have an XP in reserve. So best not to spread it around."

"What does 'save you' mean exactly?"

"Just that, you don't die," Paige spoke up. "I took far more damage from that weapon than my body could take. But spending the 1 XP I was back to being in the 'safe zone' if you will. I was still unconscious and bleeding all over the place. Another shot would have probably pushed me over and given me the choice again, if it even works like that."

"It could be on a timer," Olaph agreed. "We don't know. But yes, if someone was alone in the woods and attacked by a bear, offered the choice, takes it, and the bear keeps attacking..."

"They're as good as dead anyway," Mary finished. "Great. Another hidden mechanic for us to worry about. What did Bob say about it?"

Olaph looked away. "It was decided we wouldn't ask him. Might call attention to something one of *them* slipped in when The System was made. And then it would get pulled."

"Don't rock the boat, rock the boat, baby," Sinjorino sang. "Don't tip the boat over!"

"I get it. Fine. Ugh, that means anyone we take down will have to be 'finished off' again and again until they run out of XP!"

"Probably," Olaph agreed. "I hadn't thought of it like that."

"You see why we try to control everything?"

"Frankly, no," Paige answered simply.

"Young lady-"

"Anyway!" Light stepped between them. "Olaph, you staying here? We were on the way to see Sinjorino's inventions, let's get back to that and let Mary here issue orders for trying to figure out who's trying to kill you."

"It would be better if you stayed," Mary told him. "So we can ask about you in your presence."

"I'll stay," he agreed. "But I'm not living my life in fear." *I'll take armor magic or something before that.*

"Of course," she agreed. "What?" Sinjorino was staring off into space.

"I had hoped for some of his magic, to see if the ideas I had were worthwhile. He happens to have the exact spells needed, or in other words I built devices I knew he could power with the spells I know he has. Without him there-"

"Easily solved," Light told them. "I'll zip him over there in elemental form, and he can just open a portal back here. He can't be hurt in an elemental form. Then he can basically be in both places at once. The man loves portals, he won't mind."

"I won't, it's true," Olaph agreed. "I do love a good portal. You might say I'm starting to think with them."

"There you are then! Let's get going!" He started off down the hallway.

"Let me see where to put the portal first!" he protested, running after Light.

Chapter 16

Hulk? Smash.

Where: The workshop

When: Just a few moments later

The group stood around the workshop, looking sadly at the bits and pieces of the devices Sinjorino had worked so hard to create.

"I was just here, hours ago!" they protested, staring down sadly at the remains of the steam turbine. "How could this have happened?"

"If we hadn't been dealing with that remnant that shot me, perhaps we would have caught who was doing this in the act," Paige mused. "Sorry about that."

"Does not compute," Sinjorino told her. "You're *sorry* some random remnant shot you in the chest while trying to shoot Olaph? What sense does that make?"

"Yes, that remnant was gunning for me. One of us would have been shot just then, it's certainly not your fault," Olaph insisted.

"I just feel it would have been less time, or something, had it been you. Maybe the attack would have just grazed you or something. I mean only I would take that much damage..." *No need to get into why.*

"Bet you a gold piece it's more remnants," Light mused, looking the door to the place over. He tapped the frame. "Smashed in. Knew the exact time we would be gone. Bet you a bunch of remnants had something come over them, ran here, smashed the place up, and as they got away with it left without having to wipe their memories out." *The trouble will be, confronting them will make them wipe their memories out, so we can't do that even if we did get pointed to the exact ones that did the crime.*

"That does seem the logical conclusion," Sinjorino admitted. "But yet it is the least logical conclusion at the same time. Why would remnants, of all beings, want to prevent the spread of technology?"

"Let's not jump to conclusions," Olaph cautioned. "We can get the answers. Someone can spend 1XP to see the formula for a spell to see the past, and simply cast it. Or ask someone at the guild who knows it to cast it to come here. I doubt they would charge us, as it's for an official investigation related to the attempts on my life."

"Mary is waiting at the portal location, for a mage to ask questions about who is trying to kill you," Light agreed, walking over. "We can show her this destruction and see what she says."

"Sorry all your work was ruined," Olaph told Sinjorino, putting a hand on their arm. "I know it took you some time."

"I'm just glad I secured the alcove back at the mage's guild building when I was done with it," they mused. "Those are not easily replaceable. Everything else in this room was. I can, and will, simply build it all again. I feel this is about about sending a message to halt my efforts to bring back lost technology. As Olaph is also at risk, and only after expressing an interest in improving the conditions in the world, these events must have a strong correlation."

"I suppose so."

Mary poked her head through the portal and scowled. "Someone really has it in for you all, don't they?" she asked dryly.

“So it appears,” Olaph agreed. “Can you help?”

“Yes, yes,” she waved it off. “I’ll get someone down there to take a look. I suppose you think you should get the spells for free!”

“I could easily enough cast it myself,” Olaph reminded her. “With a small expenditure of XP. Charging me, a member of the guild who has now been put in danger twice, seems rather petty.”

“Oh it does, does it?” She stalked off before he could answer.

“That lady really needs to change with the times,” Paige remarked. “And that’s coming from an elf. A young elf, but still...”

Mary returned with a mushroom person who introduced themselves as Luario. “What happened here?” they slowly asked, looking around.

“That’s what you’re here to find out,” Mary told them. “They’re one of our best diviners. Specialize in Jupiter and Saturn magics. They’ll get to the bottom of this.”

“If I can, certainly.”

“Let’s start here. Show us the last few hours, as this was just done,” she commanded.

“I will place the window here.” They moved to the side so it would show the door and whoever came in, and just as Light had thought, some random remnants burst in, methodically trashed the place, and calmly left again.

“They didn’t even bother to go invisible!” Light protested. “Sloppy? Or more of this ‘sending a message’ do you think? Like whoever is controlling them doesn’t care that we know? I guess they have those failsafes to trigger if caught. And he did survive the attack at the castle so we already knew remnants were involved...”

“Most units with the coating required to refract light would be combat units,” Sinjorino explained. “Those would have a high likelihood of not surviving to the current day. Also consider Olaph’s near miss. A random remnant in the area was utilized. This may be more of the same. No combat units were available in the timeframe needed to perform this vandalism.”

“We’ll get to the bottom of it soon enough,” Mary promised. “Luario, come back to the guild building with Olaph here. You’re going to see what sort of answer you get to the question of who is trying to kill him. It may be an indirect answer but it’ll be something. That will take at least an hour. The rest of you can wait around if you want, otherwise come back then. We’ll just need Olaph as he’s the subject of the question. Well,” she paused, “I guess you’ve met him, you wouldn’t *need* to be there...”

“After the attempt on your life,” Sinjorino decided, “it may be best if you stayed secure for now. If you wouldn’t mind,” Sinjorino turned to Olaph, “open a portal to the remnant town for us before you go. As remnants are involved I would like their opinion on the matter. We can at least make use of the time, even if magic can give us an answer in an hour. We will go ask while you remain safe.”

“Sure,” he agreed. “I’ll open it from here to there, and then maybe just outside the guild building to the entrance to the place once Luario is done with me. Be by the gate in about an hour and you can step back through to here.”

“Very well.”

“Wait, you want to just walk into potentially hostile territory?” Paige gasped.

“I believe your ‘Zippy’ can easily inform us of any hostile intent,” they assured her. “Meanwhile, Light has his own combat ally now, along with his swords, and I shall bring my new bow. We will be quite well armed should any mean us harm there.”

“Yeah, okay. I guess. It’s just I’ve already taken a bullet today, I don’t fancy taking another.”

“If you wish to remain behind...”

She shook her head. “No, I’ll come. But I want the shadow sword, and I’m going to have the armor of magic spell going, as strong as I can make it!”

“Sensible precautions. I see no problem with this.”

So a few portal spells later the group stepped out near the gate to the remnant city, and marveled at the new activity they were seeing. The dock area was much busier than it ever had been, remnants scurrying everywhere with tools, materials, and plans in their hands rather than there just being the two guards on the gate. Several looked with interest at the hole in the air, but that closed after the group stepped out. Zippy was buzzing around, clearly excited at all the activity, but didn't seem to be warning them any remnant meant them any harm.

"Excuse me," Sinjorino said to the nearest one. "Is this activity related to the return of the metallic asteroid?"

"Ah, you have been informed of our recent efforts?" they replied. "Yes. We're reenforcing the dock and building a rail line from here into the city to more easily transport the recovered raw material. Do you have a specific query for me?"

"Our contact was Fulmo, but I see the gates are now open. Perhaps we can simply go inside. I am aware of the coordinates of my destination; the nearest central intelligence access point. We have reason to believe certain remnants were responsible for the destruction of several electricity generating prototypes I recently constructed and wish to know if there is any information about them to be found here."

"I see." That took them back a bit. "The gate has been removed. The plan is to invite many organic wizards to help with the partitioning and dissemination of the raw material, as I understand it. Plus our city will be host to many, looking to trade for the material that will soon be arriving. So the gate seemed superfluous, in the face of the upcoming organic..." They glanced at the two living beings, "invasion. No offence."

"The mission is proceeding well, then? There is still a high enough percentage change of success to justify this enforcement effort of the surrounding area?"

"Our latest transmission indicated such, yes."

"That's excellent news!"

"We are of a like mind. To return to the matter of the gate, our city is now open, in anticipation of expansion due to the arrival of raw materials. You are welcome to traverse it. Please be aware some areas would be hazardous to organic life and should be avoided. Sensitive areas will be guarded and you should not attempt entry. You will need to convince those guards if you wish to interface with the central intelligence. Soon we will post signs to that effect, for visitors to read upon arrival. We did not expect anyone so soon, it seems. Please accept my apologies for the oversight."

"No apology is necessary, conversing with you was quite pleasant and a worthwhile substitute to the impersonalness of a simple sign. Your warnings are accepted and applied. We will move only within public areas that are not dangerous to the organics that accompany me." They indicated Paige and Light.

"Then our interaction is at an end. I hope it was satisfactory."

"I am ending our interaction satisfied with the results I have obtained."

Both turned away from the other, the remnant going about their business.

"It seems we're free to go in," Sinjorino told them. "But I fear it will be rather boring for you. I will interface with the central intelligence directly, if they will allow me, and see what they have to say. You won't see very much from your end. For complete transparency, I only wished to have you here in case the remnants did turn against me for asking, and I needed help escaping. If you do not wish to stand by me during this time you may wait here, and not associate with me for the duration."

Both waved that off, saying they would stick by their friend.

"But I have to know, what was that phrase they used? I am ending our interaction?" Paige repeated, a weird look on her face. "Is that some form of remnant manners?"

"It is the standard third level of politeness method of parting among our kind. I wished to show deference as that remnant was helpful to me after I interrupted their previously defined pathing. No

doubt causing them distress when their estimated time model was rendered inaccurate and forcing another to be calculated in place of it.”

“Huh. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Are you interested in remnant culture? I could teach you a few more polite phrases we use?”

“I wouldn’t mind that!”

“Very well. To express the *sixth* level of politeness upon parting one would say…”

The two chatted about politeness as they passed through the city, now without any guide. Sinjorino took them directly through the city, Light noticing there did seem to be more activity now. It seemed even remnants could become excited at the prospect of suddenly having a kilometer or more chunk of metal to play with. They stepped up to a small booth flanked by two large remnants carrying rifles of some kind.

“I wish to interface with the central intelligence,” they said up to the two.

“Wait, here?” Paige exclaimed. She leaned over and tried to look around the back of the tiny building. “It’s just a door into a room hardly big enough to fit you.”

“No organics,” said the remnant on the left.

“Be nice,” chided the remnant on the right. “There isn’t much to see in there anyway. You wouldn’t get anything out of it even if we did let you inside.”

“Allow me to explain,” Sinjorino decided. “This is simply an access point. The nearest access point, in fact. I will simply go inside, connect to the central intelligence for the city, and ask my questions. It shouldn’t take long.”

“Oh, I thought we were going to see the intelligence itself.”

The remnant on the right shook their head. “The hardware that houses our city’s intelligence is a heavily fortified underground location. Hardly anyone but maintenance personal are allowed there.”

Paige snapped her fingers. “You don’t need to go there! Because you can talk to it anywhere one of these booths is!”

“That is correct,” said the one on the left. “However, there is still a risk of attack even from a location such as this. Please state your business.”

Sinjorino explained, and the two considered. “Very well,” said the one on the right. “I will create a request packet and forward it to the central intelligence.” They went to the side of the booth and lifted a cover. Punching in a code they took a small metallic object from a pouch and plugged it in. The other remnant subtly raised their gun. The first one put a hand to the inside of the panel, waited a second, and undid all of the changes. “The intelligence will speak to you.” The door swung open, showing a cramped interior with a keyboard and screen.

“Thank you. I will only be a moment.” They went inside. The door closed. There was a pause. The door opened. Sinjorino was stowing their interface cable again. “I have completed my task. We may depart.”

“Huh,” Light decided.

“Thank you for dedicating cycles to our interaction,” Paige thanked the guard with a bow.

“Oh!” both said, not expecting this. “The hastening of the heat death of the universe was justified in our interaction.”

Paige turned and walked away, as was proper in remnant customs. Light hurried to catch up.

“What was that about?” he asked.

“You didn’t cover that one yet, what they said to me,” Paige agreed. “Was that good or bad?”

“Ah, it was good. Interacting with you took energy. Energy spent creates heat. Heat is finite. One day it will be so diffuse as to be unable to perform work. Thus the universe will become a uniform temperature as empty, lifeless balls of rock spin through the cosmos. Those not crushed by super

massive black holes, that is. But as needed information was exchanged, they were saying the energy they expended was not wasted.”

“Anyway, what news from central?”

“The intelligence is concerned, but could offer no explanation for the behavior of the remnants we have seen. Naturally, remnants are interested in the return of widespread electricity generation stations, as that is our main motivating force. None would be against it. So to destroy prototypes in this way, or to attempt the murder of one seeking to improve the world using magic, did not compute. They did not like this contradiction, but were grateful for me bringing it to their attention. They reminded me that with the impending arrival of the metallic asteroid they would finally have the material, and if widespread electrical generation returned to the land they could massively expand their production. Once again every home could have a remnant helper; a companion, a friend, and once again their programming would be satisfied. They wished me every success in my endeavor.”

“Is there anything they can do?”

They shook their head. “Not at the current time. They will disseminate a warning to all remnants they have contact with about a possible intrusion and can inform us of any search results. As the original assassin models were destroyed and the one from earlier was already scanned by me, no further data exists to collect at this time.”

“Let’s hope magic has more luck,” Paige decided.

Magic had more luck, the group learned when they returned through Olaph’s portal back to the mage’s guild building. At least in part.

“The question spell hardly ever comes right out and answers questions,” Mary told them. “It’s the same in this case. The answer Luario gave me was; an ancient queen of many bodies, and none. The problem is, there’s only one being currently that I know that fits that description.”

“Hold on,” Paige demanded, holding up her hands. “Magic is claiming that the queen herself is trying to have Olaph killed? That she had remnants smash up technology? That makes no sense. Just like remnants shouldn’t she be championing the return of electricity and such? She clearly uses it, why would she deny it to us, her subjects? Did I just answer my own question...”

“I must admit, that is not the direction I thought it would go in,” Sinjorino agreed. “You are correct, Paige, as far as I know. But then I feel compelled to ask the question- if the queen wanted these technologies returned to the world, why hasn’t she gone about doing so up to now? I can’t imagine her being ignorant of how to produce electricity, as you say the castle uses it at the very least. Those systems must be maintained in some way.”

“Yes, there must be other remnants that have existed as long as you have, and have that knowledge as well,” Light mused. “And yet, here we are, totally without it.”

“So what do we do about it?” she asked, her eyes widened. “We can’t exactly march up to the queen of the realm and accuse her of trying to murder someone and direct remnants to smash up machinery. She’s the queen! I mean for all I know she’ll simply agree it was her, use that fact to justify her actions, and have Olaph killed on the spot. We can’t take her to court!”

“Perhaps if I went alone,” Sinjorino decided. “I could ask her opinion on the matter and mention that magic implied she was the culprit and isn’t that just so funny? So hilarious how *magic*, the premier force in the land, implied she, the *queen*, would just go having someone shot in the street rather than having them arrested or otherwise following her own laws. See how she reacts.”

“Dangerous,” Mary cautioned. “If she can just take over remnants somehow you could come back to us acting normal but ready to kill Olaph at the slightest provocation.”

“Er, how do we know that isn’t already the case?” Luario asked nervously.

“Because I’m standing here and not trying to kill Olaph? Come now, you can’t honestly suspect me?”

“It’s true though, you are a risk,” Mary told them. “Perhaps we’ll get you an item to make you invulnerable?” she told Olaph.

“That would negate any possibility of physical harm,” he agreed. “Remnants don’t have much access to magic. Those that do are out in space now.”

“But that just delays the problem,” Paige countered. “We can’t capture any remnants involved in this, they just wipe themselves or explode. Or maybe the next ones will shoot acid all over themselves, I don’t know. It’s not like we can ask them if we’re right and expect an answer.”

“If it is her, and not some demon that fits the description,” Sinjorino cautioned, “she must have a logical reason. She can be reasoned with. Send a neutral representative from the guild itself to see what she has to say. The guild commands equal respect to a queen in the land, let’s get her side of the story before we panic.”

There was a knock on the door to the chamber they were in, and a man stuck his head past the doorway.

“Sorry to bother you guildmaster, but there’s an archbishop Makarios here to see Olaph?”

“Well, perhaps a little panic,” Olaph decided, wondering what the heck his superior was doing there.

Chapter 17

Making a tough call

Where: Guild meeting room

When: Moments later

“Archbishop Makarios!” Olaph greeted the man, coming into the room. Makarios rose from the chair he was sitting in, then took a step back as Mary and Olaph’s friends entered with him. “What a pleasant surprise! Is there something I can do for you?”

“Feels like I’m the one being ambushed here,” he decided with a nervous chuckle.

“Am I being ambushed, then?”

“Depends on your point of view. I of course recognize the guildmaster, please introduce me to your friends.”

“This is Sinjorino, my bodyguard.”

“Handshake protocol activated,” Sinjorino told him, extending a hand which he took.

“This is Light, a representative of the Mage’s Guild I’m working with on various things.”

“Archbishop.” He inclined his head.

“And his apprentice, at least for now. I think she’s almost ready to strike out on her own though?”

“Hiya- I mean, greetings your holiness.”

“Greetings. If you trust them it’s fine, but you may want to speak to me in private. Perhaps we can clear this whole thing up quickly and I can let you get back to whatever it is you’re doing here at the Guild.”

“He’s already had several attempts on his life,” Sinjorino informed Makarios. “I think we’ll all just stay right here.”

“Attempts? What’s this?”

“A minor disagreement with some group or other about how the future is supposed to go. Please, I won’t waste your time either. What brings you all the way out here?”

“It’s about your being a bishop. You’ve been away from your practitioners a long time, and I find you here at the Mage’s Guild building? It’s very worrying.”

“I am fulfilling various duties here,” he explained. “I haven’t turned my back on the Lord, if that’s what worries you.”

“So you still claim to be a bishop, then?”

“Of course I’m still a bishop! What a strange thing to say. Do you wish to see my status page? It has a background ‘ranking member’ which should show I’m still a bishop.”

“I’m not entirely sure that’s how it works,” he weakly protested.

“Oh no,” Light gasped. “What if that is exactly how the world works now?”

Both men turned to look at him. “Explain?” the archbishop asked, as Light was staring at something he couldn’t see.

“I have a background on my status page as well, that shows me as a member of the Mage’s Guild in good standing. Paige?”

“I don’t.”

“Neither do I, just to be clear,” Sinjorino added.

“Right. Paige isn’t a member yet. I bet she would have to spend 10 XP to start that process. Until she had that, she probably wouldn’t be able to get that on her status page.”

“That’s crazy,” she protested. “Are you saying that even if I handed over my guild dues, which admittedly I don’t have because I’m still paying off my college loan, I still wouldn’t be able to claim I was a member of the guild?”

“Technically you would be a junior member,” Mary reminded her. “You wouldn’t be able to order anyone around. No special perks, that sort of thing. Just access to the- oh. Well, you don’t need that anymore do you? You can buy spells from ‘The System’ you don’t need our library.” She looked sour saying that last part. “Maybe we *should* reduce the fee or something...”

“Right. In theory I can order lower members around,” bragged Light. “Plus go into the armory and sign things out, use the misfit section, that sort of thing. I’m a higher ranking member.”

“My question stands...”

“Okay. So do it. I’ll commit to paying your entrance fee and the first year’s dues as a reward for your good and loyal service to me all these years. Done. Say to me that your apprenticeship is over and you now wish to be a full member of the Mage’s Guild, here in the presence of the guildmaster. That should be official enough.”

She looked away nervously. “... I don’t want to right now.”

He smirked. “See? How much XP do you have? You *can’t* do it, can you? You may justify it eight ways from Miday but in the end until you consciously choose to give up that XP and get the background into your status, it won’t happen.”

“All very fascinating but can we get back to the issue at hand?” Makarios drawled. “I don’t trust all this ‘System’ nonsense.”

You better start, Olaph thought. *It’s going to be around a long time.*

“But this is the issue at hand,” Light told him triumphantly. “He’s trying to make his one background pull double duty. This is the universe making him choose one way or the other.”

“A bit of a stretch, isn’t it Light?” Olaph asked.

“Not at all. Your archbishop decided- out of the blue- he better go check on that one bishop he hasn’t seen in months and came all the way here to confront you. Does that seem likely to you?”

“Errrr,” he glanced over at Makarios and had to admit, at least to himself, that no it wasn’t.

“I rest my case.”

“So I have to choose?” He looked between Mary and Makarios. *Wait, their couple name would still just be Makarios or Mary. Maybe Makary? Wait why am I thinking about that right now?*

“So it seems,” Light agreed. “But I can’t imagine how the universe would enforce it...” He scratched his head.

“Let me make it easy for you,” Mary suggested. “I’m withdrawing your membership in the Mage’s Guild. You didn’t actually pay anything so you aren’t owed any kind of refund. Pack up anything in your room and get out. You’ve got ten minutes after you leave this spot.”

“What?” Paige and Sinjorino gasped. “You can’t!” Paige went on.

“Of course I can. I’m the highest-ranking official of the Guild. I decide who is in, and who isn’t. And so I just decided. You’ve been nothing but trouble for me since the moment you arrived here. And now if it really is the queen of the whole realm after you? Sentiment is starting to shift against us as it is-”

Starting? thought both Paige and Light.

“and we don’t need that kind of bad publicity. If it got out an enemy of the kingdom was being sheltered by us? Imagine the backlash. Plus I don’t want your little feud with whoever is behind this to start spilling over to other guild members. They can’t get to you? Fine, they’ll start sending their message another way. You’re on your own. I’m done with you.”

“He’s a mage and that rhyme isn’t proof of anything,” Light reminded her. “I think throwing out someone, a magic user mind, that clearly needs our protection is the worse look. You know, if it ever got out.” He was clearly threatening her that he would do exactly that.

“Maybe he should just stop what he’s doing then? Seems to be a clear message is being sent. Don’t go messing around with technology. Stop that, and the attacks stop. Mark my words, do that and I bet whoever this is also backs off. Doesn’t seem personal, quite impersonal actually with that long range attack and simply messing up some prototypes. They’re giving you a chance to stop and save yourself.”

“So we just give in to fear? That’s a great look for us,” Light scoffed.

“What us? He’s not a Guild member anymore. He probably never should have been. The usual divinations were not done to make sure he wasn’t a troublemaker. They should have.”

“What?” Paige gasped. “He has a brand new kind of magic we’ve never seen. You’re going to lose access to that.”

“For a year? Big deal. We’ll just wait and a vetted member of the guild can take a look to see what kind of trouble it can cause. We’ve dealt with rogue magic users before we’ll do it again.”

Am I a rogue magic user now?

“Okay, short sighted but sure. More importantly you’ll lose access to Bob!” she protested. “You’re not getting that no matter how many years you wait.” Makarios looked confused but Mary knew what she was talking about. That’s all that mattered.

“Seems like Bob and his superiors are simply going to do whatever they want,” she countered. “Handing out magic, spells, with no regard to our wishes. You know, the people that actually have to live here? The last few weeks have shown that very clearly. I don’t think we’re losing much. But a headache. So that’s not really the threat you think it is. Besides, we could always do the summoning again if there was really something urgent we needed. This discussion is over. Congratulations on remaining a bishop, bishop. I’ll go have someone stationed at your door to... escort you from the building when you’re done talking to your superior.”

“I’m not going to steal the pens or anything!” he protested.

“Standard procedure. Good day everyone.” She turned and stalked out of the room.

“Didn’t see that coming,” Light said into the silence of everyone looking at the door in shock. “I guess we know how the universe does that sort of thing now. She’s really not having a good year, is she?”

“Does she think not seeing Olaph in the halls is going to solve her problems?” Paige whispered. “It’s only going to cause more problems for her.”

“Yes, I at least expected him to get the choice,” Light agreed. “Or would you have chosen the church, padre, and so this is all proceeding according to your wishes in any case?”

“My head is spinning, I’m not sure!”

“It seems you can come back to your parishioners,” Makarios told him. “Wonderful. This trip wasn’t a waste of my time after all. Let’s go collect your belongings and I’ll see you part of the way there.”

“Now just hold on a second!” Olaph protested. “I still have a say in this!”

“You’re certainly not going to turn your back on the Lord, are you? Go running after the guildmaster? Beg to remain here?”

“No. Clearly that would be uncomfortable for everyone involved. But it seems I do have a choice. The universe is telling me that. I don’t have to be one thing or another. That background could instead become something else. A companion, perhaps?”

“I admit some confusion...”

“With everything that’s happened; the closing of the gates, me being able to absorb fiendstones and then test this new type of magic. Trying to solve some of the world’s problems, like the metal shortage and where demons could live instead of their torture world. I can do a lot of good for people,

more than just my 'flock.' I've proven- We've proven that again and again. And there is still much to be done. I need to consider this all carefully. I do still have a list, after all."

"When you say companion, you can't mean-" Paige started to say.

"Ah ah ah, never mind that right now! I'm just talking about my options. Of course, with any Guild affiliation gone it would seem your service is at an end, Sinjorino."

"Not so," they protested. "I'm a free agent. If you wish to hire me that can be arranged. I do wish to see this through after all. Remnants, like myself, are involved and you may need me should we capture one with a faulty destruction mechanism. I can diagnose their problem, you can't."

"I do have to wonder where my money is going to come from. Of course I do have some savings, my needs were few as a bishop and I was paid."

"And us?" Paige wondered, looking at Light.

"We don't have to drop him like a hot potato," he told her. "I've been enjoying myself, assassination attempts notwithstanding. If you'll have us, we can stick together for now. Unless Mary assigns me something right this second that takes me away from you, I'm still a member in good standing. That means I can basically come and go, and earn my living, as I choose. And I choose to stick with you."

"Hold on, you're acting like you're not coming back with me at all!" protested Makarios. "Are you giving up being a bishop, then?"

"I think that part of my life is over," he agreed seriously. "Please give my regards to my former parishioners and assign someone else to watch over them."

"I will not!" he promised. "Instead I will go and pray for your soul. Clearly you have been tempted by a secular life, all this running around you've been doing. You should pray for guidance as well, before you fall further from grace. Do not turn your back on the Lord."

Your prayers will never make it. We visited the angel they go through, and they are blocked from reaching Heaven now. We really are on our own, I honestly never considered that aspect before. They cut us off quite thoroughly, didn't they? "I never will," he promised. "But worship is more than just presiding over a mass. I must help all that I can make use of the gifts the Lord-" *or The System,* "has given them. Help us all enter a prosperous future, full of promise."

"You are an elf," he pleaded with Paige. "Help me convince him!"

She shook her head. "My ancestors came here, from Heaven, to live as the humans did. *Were the Heavens still around* I think their answer would be the same as mine; Olaph has the free will to make his own choices. He hasn't lost his faith, his soul is not imperiled. You're just losing a bishop, that's all. Let him go."

"I just fear this is only the first step towards his eventual fall."

She nodded. "That too is his burden to bear. His soul will be judged at the end, you are not to judge him."

"I see I'm outnumbered. Well, I can't force you. Olaph, when you come to your senses I'll welcome you back with open arms. Walk with the Lord. Good day, everyone." He sadly shook his head and walked out.

Paige waited a moment, stuck her head into the hall to make sure he was gone, and rushed over to Olaph squealing "eeeeeeeee! You want to go find her, don't you?" She grabbed his hands up and peered into his eyes.

"I don't know what you mean!" he protested, looking away, blushing, and stepping back so she had to let go of him.

"You can't fool me! That beastkin you were trying so hard to flirt with. You're going to go find her, aren't you? She invited you to try, I heard her myself. Now is your big chance, and you're going to take it! Oh, it's so romantic!" She clasped her hand to her chest and swayed back and forth.

“This has truly come to a head,” Sinjorino cautioned. “And rather suddenly I might add. Are you sure you are not going to regret this decision after further processing time? I know being a bishop was a large part of your self-identity before all this began.”

He sighed. “I can’t stop thinking about her. I have to know more, at least try to find her as she suggested to me. She didn’t laugh in my face, or act like she was so much better than me I didn’t have a shot. Am I really just supposed to go meekly home, try to fit back into my old life? I can’t pray for spells or guidance anymore. I have to follow my heart.”

“Romantic!” Paige repeated, grinning widely. “I told you. You’ll sweep her off her... hooves? I don’t think she had feet.”

“Let’s not allow him to dwell on any one part of her anatomy for now,” Light suggested. “Let’s relocate and plan our next move. Mary seemed in a hurry to get rid of him, let’s not have her come back here and find you giggling all over the place and saying ‘romantic’ twelve times, like he’s some battleship you just lifted with magic.”

“Have I even mentioned that today? I don’t think so.”

“I do want to offer my complete services though, as this seems like an opportune time,” Sinjorino told him. “Practice dates, conversation topics, I was quite sought after for my advice before the fall. I have, after all, been programmed with... multiple techniques.”

“I’ll let you know!” he agreed, blushing more. “Heaven knows I’ve never really dated anyone before- let’s just take it one step at a time. Come on.” He gathered magic and opened a portal to the room. “We won’t trouble whoever they’ve assigned to ‘see me to the door.’ We’ll just leave this way.”

Paige darted through. “I’m hiding the pens!”

And so another portal opened in Citadel, and the group stepped from the Guild building to the back of the teleport point they had used before. Figuring that area would be clear and relatively unobserved, the group stepped out. Olaph, for the first time, as a totally free man. Looking at his status showed a *pending* entry and he breathed deep. He could go anywhere. Do anything that he wanted to do. He looked upon the towering stone building of Citadel and took a deep breath. *Let’s do this.*

“How are we going to do this?” Light asked.

“The king, Vyzzanth, must hold some kind of court,” Olaph began. “We can simply get in line during those hours and petition him directly. Ask if he’ll tell us where to find- or at least how to get in touch with- the hidden city of beastfolk that resemble horses.”

“I suppose that would be one of the easier decisions he would have to make,” mused Light. “You think it’ll be that simple?”

“That depends on exactly how secretive this group is. She clearly did a job outside her territory, and she admitted being seen outside wasn’t forbidden. She just got a lot of strange looks because of her rarity. She was a mage, disguise magic is available if she really had wanted to keep her looks secret. Knowing they exist isn’t the problem. Us going there may be. But if he can get her a message to come to an inn around here, or at least send me a proper ‘I was just being nice’ letter and to forget her, I can move on. I don’t have to see her, just give the two of us a chance.”

“I suppose. As long as you were honest about it...”

“OOOOh, gonna tell the king you have a huge crush on a girl?” Paige teased.

“... Well, it’ll be one he’s never heard before. The novelty may make him more receptive to the idea.”

“It would be difficult,” Sinjorino admitted, “trying to come up with a mission we would need her exact skills for, as an excuse to see her again. After all, she uses the same blade technique as Light does.”

“As is only natural,” he agreed.

“So while I would not perhaps use the word ‘crush’” they went on, “perhaps simply revealing you have an interest and she agreed to be pursued would be enough. They could always employ truth telling magic to test the veracity of your claim.”

“If I can get through this whole thing without sinking through the floor in embarrassment over the whole thing!” Olaph despaired.

“Come on,” they lightly tapped his shoulder. “If you think this is bad, what are you going to say to her when you appear before her in the village? You’re going to need some kind of smooth line to break the ice. I’m available if you want to test out a few things.”

“Yeah, we’re with you,” Light told him. “Go get the girl!”

“Operation Love-Love Catch is a go!” Paige shouted. “Come on there’s no time to lose!” She took off running towards the town, pulling a protesting Olaph behind her.

Chapter 18

Going RED

Where: Outside the citadel, inside Citadel

When: Early afternoon

As wait times were considerable to get in and see the king, a small industry of food vendors had sprung up around the waiting area and those that ate took advantage of it. It was a rather large group milling around, as usual, and “run like a common meat market!” as Light put it. Everyone that showed up was given a number, or group obviously, and hung around in the outdoor waiting area set aside for just such things. A member of the castle guard then came out to call the next number as the previous individual, or group again, was escorted out. As more beastkin and beastfolk arrived the numbers seemed pretty consistent, but the numbers were called with some regularity so Olaph didn’t expect to be waiting for too much longer.

Zippy was out and flying around, trying to decide if the dirty looks they were getting were close enough to being “enemies” and alerting. Olaph’s wooden “doll” was also standing there not doing anything, he hadn’t been willing to give it up after all the work he had put into it. He was hoping the presence of the “magical” figure was the source of the sour faces, but deep in his heart- okay not that deep- he realized it was probably just them. Most everyone around here had animal ears and a tail at the very least, making his heart speed up a little at just how cute and desirable everyone looked. An elf, remnant, and couple of humans really stood out.

Shoot, I bet I could have folded the thing up and stuck it in my pocket dimension! I have one of those now. I completely forgot about it. Well, once we get away from the crowd here I’ll do that.

“How old do you think she is?” Light suddenly asked him.

Olaph blinked a moment, switching gears from thinking about wood and spells and how he could best keep track of stuff in his dimension. It wasn’t like he could just peek inside like a bag and see what was in there. “I really have no idea! Hard to estimate honestly, given she may not age at the same rate as I do. Why?”

“Could be a teenager for all you know. She seemed pretty spunky. That could be awkward if we ever get there. I mean can an old man like you even keep up with a pretty young filly such as her?”

“I’m not *that* old,” he harumphed. “But I do have to admit I’m not as young as I once was either. Do you think she’ll have realized it in the meantime and hopes I never show up after all?”

“Oh, I’m not saying that to tease you or anything!” he hastily clarified. “I was actually just going to offer the spell I used on Cali that one time.”

“When he showed himself to be a *filthy lawbreaker!*” Paige squealed. “Such a rebel!”

“You mean-” He glanced around. “Then we would be closer in age, is what you’re saying? If she does turn out to be younger than me.”

“Exactly.”

“And how are you justifying *this* one, oh wise master?” she asked sarcastically. “Before it was to ensure Lily had all the time she could get with a village elder that knew a lot about herbology. You’re really going to offer this spell so Olaph can get a date?”

“He was just kicked out of the Guild,” Light told her with a shrug. “Can’t you see how despondent he is?” He indicated Olaph, who looked at him with a confused expression.

“Doesn’t seem that broken up about it to me,” Paige told him dryly.

“How *despondent* he is,” Light repeated, eyebrows wiggling.

“Oh woe is me, how can I even go on?” Olaph reacted, putting the back of his right hand to his forehead. “My life is in shambles! The Guild was my whole life, my dream, my everything! To think I can never return to those hallowed halls! Woe is me.”

“See? He needs a date, to pick his spirits back up. He’ll age up again, it’s only temporary if you think about it.” He tapped the side of his nose. “And we’re still a party aren’t we?”

“The rules for that are a bit more lax,” she had to agree. “Yes, you’ve convinced me.”

“Thanks, Light,” he told the man gratefully. “You’re a good man.”

A few moments later another human came into the courtyard and started scanning the faces there. He was lifting himself up on his toes to see over the crowd and his eyes lit up when he saw the group. He headed over to them, stopping a bit short and clearly reading something in a System message before breaking into a huge grin. “You are the right group. Wonderful! Olaph, isn’t it?”

“I’m Olaph, yes,” he agreed. He looked the man over. Younger than him- but maybe not for long- red mage’s robes, excellent hat very stylish, typical pouches about his person. Zippy seemed to approve as he spun once around him and went back to looking the crowd over.

“Wonderful! Great to meet you. I’m Mike. Mike Rowave.” He held out a hand and Olaph took it.

“Microwave?” Sinjorino asked, puzzled.

“*That’s* not how you pronounce it,” Mike scoffed. “Anyway, group of four and a half- I get the joke now but it’s not exactly a *little* wooden boy is it- and I got a quest complete message. You’re the one I’m here to see. Just came from the Guild, haven’t you?”

“That’s right.” *Now what does Bob have in store for me?*

“I’m a member of a different sort of guild, seems you might be interested in joining up with us instead. We call ourselves the RED guild, or Resist Eventual Destruction. Our tenants have changed a bit, with the advent of The System, but we’re still around. We have a lot of infostructure we didn’t want to lose, things like that. You can have a look, when you have a moment. Disenfranchised mages are always welcome to join our glorious cause.”

“You’re trying to recruit me?” Olaph asked, fairly surprised.

“We want you to know another option exists,” Mike told him. “And it always has. The RED guild has existed since the Mage’s Guild, when a number of like-minded individuals who believed the Mage’s Guild was taking us down the wrong path got together just in case. Seems the universe agreed with us, and gave us The System. They had thousands of years to advance the cause of magic and bring the world into a glittering, golden age. I don’t have to explain to you how they’ve completely failed to do that.”

“You don’t,” he agreed with a nod.

“So our group was formed. Ready to pick up the pieces when the Guild toppled. We haven’t caused any waves, we’re not *trying* to make it fall I want that clear from the beginning. No violence or anything like that. Just quietly going about our business, studying magic and keeping an eye out for things we can help with. Over the years we’ve managed to accumulate some perks you won’t find at the Mage’s Guild, I’ll tell you that much. I think the cracks are starting to show, and we’ll be needed sooner rather than later. The System was quite insistent I find you quickly after your banishment. Wouldn’t say why though.”

“I see. Right now my main goal is making the world a better place. If your group really does have a similar goal then I’d be interested in at least taking a tour, meeting some more of your members. I’m not going to change the world all by myself, after all. I’ll need some resources.”

“Of course. No need to interrupt what you’re doing now, if you’re going to see the king it must be fairly important-”

“It’s for *love!*” Paige announced dreamily.

Olaph cleared his throat. “Yes, uh, the love of my country that we all share, of course.” He shot her a glare and quickly changed the subject. “Where can I contact you when I’m ready?”

He looked suspiciously at Paige, eyes glittering with excitement and promise, then back to Olaph. Deciding not to press further he went on. “Every major city has at least some guild presence. Disguised as a mundane shop such as the Red Dragon Inn, or Red Bobbin. Anyplace that has red in the name, if you go in and tell whoever is in charge you are a ‘friend of the red’ they’ll take you into the back. I’ve brought the standard letter of introduction,” he handed it over, “they’ll know what to do.”

“Very well. I’ll look forward to it.”

“As will we. Good luck with the king. I hear he’s quite fair, and has no love of the Guild himself.”

“My request is rather minor, nothing magical, I’m sure it’ll be granted.”

He said goodbye to the group and headed out.

“Seems like you still have a part to play,” Light told him, as Olaph looked the letter over.

“Until all the world’s problems are solved I expect. This seems fairly straightforward, just that I’ve been invited to tour the RED guild and to please show the bearer every courtesy.”

“Will you go?” asked Sinjorino.

“I might,” he decided. “This may be the universes’ way of putting that background to use. This place may align more with my goals and so be a better fit. It can’t hurt to check the place out. With Zippy out and about, of course.”

“Beep!” he agreed, bouncing up and down in the air.

“Aw, who’s the best little enemy sensor? You are! Yes you are!” Sinjorino cooed, stroking the underside with a finger.

“Beep beep beep beep beeeep!”

Finally their number was called and the group headed inside, then up a ton of stairs to the top of the gigantic tower. They were escorted to the second waiting room, allowed to refresh themselves and sit for a moment after all that activity, and wait until the previous supplicant was indeed done. Because of how high the top floor was the next number was called before the previous was quite done, to save time. Finally they were called to the throne room and announced, and let inside. King Vyzzanth was a fox beastfolk, with both black and white patterning to his fur which of course didn’t mean anything. He wore the crown and robes of a king, and sat back in his throne as the group approached.

“Ah, I recall my own days as an adventurer,” he told them. “Traveling with a ragtag group like this one. Great memories, if not always happy ones. What can I do for you?”

Paige shoved Olaph a little bit and he stepped up and bowed. “Your majesty, I will try to make this quick. It came to my attention that you or the kingdom often hire a specific type of beastfolk; Those with equine features, from a hidden village they call their home. I learned this during a chance meeting with one such young woman not long ago, who named herself Lunaria. The truth of the matter is I became instantly smitten with her, and when I asked if I would ever see her again, she replied that if I truly had the desire I would find a way. Thus I throw myself upon your mercy. Can you tell me, majesty, how to find her village or at least get in touch with her?”

Vyzzanth leaned forward in his throne, raising a clawed finger. “That... is not what I expected. I do know of the village and of the woman you speak of. I am quite shocked to hear you speak so plainly about this.”

“Naturally I would be more circumspect with her,” he explained, “but I felt- knew- that you were very busy. I’ve seen the crowds outside-”

He rolled his eyes. “Ugh, don’t remind me.”

“Only four more hours to go, majesty!” said the scribe writing things down next to the king.

He shuddered.

Olaph continued. "I felt I should come straight to the point, and trust in your judgement. You know them, but not me. I accept that. I don't need to know where the village is, if you're worried I'm some kind of spy. I'm not. I belong to no organization-" *thanks Mary!* "-and simply wish to get to know Lunaria. Put me under truth telling magic if you wish, I will not hide my reasons."

"I believe you," he said after a moment. "The story is too crazy not to be true. And she would be quite the catch, if you can ignite the flames of passion in her heart."

He turned red. "Please, majesty, I would be happy just seeing her from time to time, as a friend!"

"Would you? Know that she is kind, dedicated, and patient. At least she has always shown these qualities to me. She may already be pursued, in her village. Are you ready to hear this news as well? That you are, perhaps, only the latest in a long line of suiters that wish to win her affections?"

Someone not dedicated or patient would not have guarded that empty room for so long. Okay she didn't know but still, she did her job as boring as it was guarding the gate she thought was there. So yes, I have observed these qualities in her firsthand. "If that is my fate, so be it."

"I see. Very well, I'll tell you what I'll do. I could, of course, take you there directly with my magic. However, I feel that I should at least make some effort to have you display your commitment to this more directly. I will provide you a rough map. If you can find your way there, I know you must be willing to see it through. Of course, you'll have to convince the guards. Simply landing in the center of their town, well, I wouldn't recommend it."

"Of course, majesty! Whatever you recommend."

"Scribe! Ah, thank you." The scribe had already risen in anticipation of the king's command. "Now, we are here, the coastline goes mostly like this..."

Moments later, having thanked the king and made their way back down all the stairs, the group burst back out into the streets.

"You did it! You're on your way!" Paige cheered. "I'm so happy for you!"

"We still have to get there," he told her. "And I'm not sure the king knows exactly what a map is supposed to look like. No offence to him or anything."

"We'll make it work," Light assured him, slapping him on the back. "Plenty of daylight still left in the day. And we have plenty of magical power at our fingertips. I'm sure we can manage something."

"Do you mind allowing us to fly?" Olaph asked Paige. "This is all a selfish request, I'll certainly pay the fee at this point."

"Oh!" Her eyes lit up, but she hesitated. "But love? College loans? Romance? Defaulting on college loans. What should I do?"

"He could just use his summon and fly around," Light replied dryly. "I recall it having four wings at the very least."

"Ah, you're right, I could," he agreed. "I must get used to thinking about these things. All this shifting of powers and now learning new spells, plus the excitement of getting to see Lunaria again, I quite forgot what spells I had bought from The System."

"You haven't had them long, I'm not surprised," Light agreed. "We can use the same technique we always do. Fly around and ask the question spell if we're on the right track every so often."

"Hey, we could have just done that away," Paige complained. "Why didn't we? You couldn't have forgotten we could do *that*?"

"No, no," Olaph assured her. "But I wanted the king's approval. Now I can honestly say I spoke to him, and I even have the map drawn with his own hand to back up my story. That will mean something when I need to talk my way inside. I figured there would be guards, on a place like that. Vyzanth confirmed it, so I was right to do it this way even though it has taken us longer."

“Oh.”

“Are we checking in on the RED guild before we leave?” Sinjorino asked. “I highly doubt such a secret village will have anything to do with it.”

“Once we get to the village we can leave it and go anywhere we’ve ever been with a portal,” he decided. “That I haven’t forgotten about. Or get back to the place tomorrow, if we arrive too late and it’s dark. The RED guild can wait. Fixing the problems of the world isn’t going to happen overnight. They’ve had thousands of years too, if they really were created at the same time as the Mage’s Guild. Either they’re very small, or are so secretive as to not really exist in any way that matters. I must follow my heart, at least for now.”

“Let’s head out of town, no sense getting any more dirty looks around here,” Light proposed. “And see about finding your lady friend.”

So the group took the main road out of the city and stopped by the gate to look over what the king had drawn for them.

“I may be incorrect, based on the king’s limited knowledge of the concept of scale,” Sinjorino spoke up, “but this looks quite far away to me based on this. He seems to have done some spatial compression on this map. We are looking for the ‘nearest mountains’ but that would seem to put us far to the west of here. Are they even in Levithmirra at that point? It would seem to me the answer is no. That mountain range is in Silveria, on the western coast.”

“We could still fly there?” Paige offered hesitantly.

“I estimate our destination to be at least 3,000 km away.”

“We could still fly there... for days and days?”

“I don’t suppose you know any locations to put a portal in Silveria?” Light asked Olaph.

He shook his head.

“Have I been somewhere I could teleport to?” He looked around, deep in thought.

“We *could* still fly there,” Paige considered, “I could make it work. There are a host of complications. Is that a metaphor for love itself? I just can’t get over how romantic this all is! I wish some cute guy went through all this trouble for *me*.”

“You think I’m cute?” Olaph wondered. “Or are you just remarking that you want someone cute to pursue you, and it has nothing to do with me?”

“Let us work through what you consider the issues to be,” Sinjorino told her, trying to keep them on track.

“First I would have to cast an energy draining spell on the both of you.” She indicated Light and Olaph. “I have a little XP, I can get the spell from The System and cast it from writings. I could buy it, but that would make my XP zero and having already been saved by The System once this week I would rather not take any chances.”

“Fair enough,” Light agreed.

“Then I can use my usual energy accumulation spell and raise my rating much higher than I would normally be able to. May I ask you gentleman your energy totals?”

“I have 42,” Olaph reported, looking at his status page.

“An even 30 for me,” Light added.

“I have 168,” she told with a bit of a blush. “So what’s that add up to?” She looked to her artificial companion.

“A total of 240,” they reported. “What is the rest of the formula?”

“My rating of 4, plus my REFlexes of 6, minus 1 for the spell itself- no you know what I’ll go a little negative to counteract casting the flight spell and the accumulation spell, I’ll get it back quickly enough. Add those up and multiply it by 5. That’s our flight speed in kilometers per hour.”

“One thousand, two hundred, and fifty.”

“We could get there in three hours!” Olaph announced excitedly.

“Maybe,” Paige cautioned. “Even with a *very* streamlined barrier in front of us, that’s a lot of wind resistance. Can we really go that fast? What would that kind of speed even do to us? The flight spell sort of implies you’re protected from the effects of it, but we’re completely breaking it at that point. We’re not meant to use it to go that fast. There could be consequences.”

“There is a way,” Light mused. He tapped the Lightblade. “If you’re all holding onto me when I draw this, in theory you should become light along with me. Or I suppose holding hands with someone touching me? Then we just soar through the air as light. No wind resistance for us, and we can’t be damaged even by our own efforts. Not permanently, anyway.”

“If we are treated as light, moving at *only* 1,250km/hour would slow us down,” Sinjorino told him. “Moving at the speed of light would only take us .01 seconds to go 3,000 km. I’m simplifying it a bit of course.”

“Never really measured how fast I could go in that form,” he admitted. “It’s always just been short hops, mostly in combat situations. How would we even control moving as fast as light normally does? We might *want* to be slowed down. Moving at that speed is going to be hard enough to keep track of.” *At least we won’t have to worry about hitting bugs and such. Birds. Other flying creatures.*

“Unless you have another plan, some magical combination or another, that would seem reasonable. We would need frequent stops at that speed to make sure we were still on course.”

“Agreed. Let’s see if there’s any other way and otherwise go with that plan. Good idea, Paige.”

“Thanks!”

In the end they went with the light flight plan, zipping across the sky as light while Light awkwardly held his sword out in one hand. His other hand he used to grasp the hand of Paige, who held Olaph’s hand, who held Sinjorino’s hand. A few hours later they came in sight of the mountain range they needed, and started looking around for the landmarks Vyzanth had told them about which would point them towards the village.

Chapter 19

Pursuit of a mare

Where: Outside the hidden village (or at least some village up in the mountains)

When: Late afternoon

“Halt! Who goes there! Ha, always wanted to say that.”

The group, weapons put away and heading up the trail like ‘normal’ people, halted before the two beastfolk pony figures, both mares, in front of them. One had a light blue coat and wings, the other more orange, with no wings or horn. The blue one had rainbow colored hair, probably dyed, and held a spear with a lightning bolt looking tip. The other was reaching for a mace at her belt, but the head of it looked like... an apple? They stood in front of a closed gate, part of a wall around the settlement the group had seen from the air. It looked like a nice enough place, with a variety of houses scattered about and colorful beastfolk going about their lives. Both had on leather armor, as befitted their station as guards, and both looked toned and ready for action.

“Dash,” said the orange one, “try to be a little more serious about this? We can finally do our jobs of turning people away from the city. Look, we don’t care who you are. Turn around and go back.”

“Wow, don’t even want to know how we found the place? What we’re doing here? We could be in dire need of assistance,” Paige pouted.

“Not interested.”

“Come on, Appletini. We could be a little more friendly,” said Dash. She turned to the group. “Are you in dire need of assistance?”

“No, but-”

“See? They don’t. Now run along,” Appletini commanded.

“But it’s for *love!*” insisted Paige. “Don’t you understand love?”

Both glanced at the other, blushed, and hastily looked away. “What are you talking about now?” Appletini asked. “You came here for love? I don’t buy it.”

“I came here looking for one your citizens,” Olaph told them. “Lunaria. I met her a few weeks ago and she indicated that should I succeed in tracking her down, she might be open to some kind of relationship.”

“Are you sure you’re not reading too much into it?” Dash asked suspiciously. “The princess is awfully polite, maybe she just didn’t want you let down too hard. Wait did I say that right?”

“She’s a princess too!?” Paige gasped.

“Well, not really,” Dash admitted. “Everyone here calls her that. Her sisters, Solaria and Katince too. Because they have both horn and wings. But we don’t really have nobility here.”

“You forgot Twinkle Sprite,” Appletini told her.

“Oh yeah her. She has a lot of sisters. Can’t keep track of them all. So yeah, like I was saying are you sure?”

“I mean it’s possible my own imagination is running away with me,” he admitted. “But look- if she comes out here and tells me that’s all it was, and I should go away, I will. Honest. You’ll never see me again. But let her tell me that. Please?”

“I don’t know, Dash, seems awfully suspicious.”

“I could fly over to her place and ask, I guess,” Dash decided. “I am the fastest around.”

“Only in the air,” Appletini reminded her. “I’ll still give you a run for your money any day of the week on the track.”

“After our shift today, then. What do you say? I’ll want to move after a whole day standing around here anyway. That’s a good a way as any to work up a sweat. I mean unless you had some other activity in mind the two of us could engage in?”

“A race? Any time, sugar cube.”

She got cutely embarrassed. “I keep telling you not to call me that!”

“Honey bun? Sweetie pie?”

“I’ll be right back!” she said in a rush and spread her wings. She took to the air, went over the wall, and vanished.

“Now don’t you think just because it’s four against one the odds have changed in your favor,” Appletini warned. “I could take all of you with one arm tied behind my back.” She did a double take. “Wait, did she just offer me what I think she’s offering me? And why am I asking a bunch of strangers I just want to leave anyway? It’s none of y’all’s business!”

“Perhaps. You’re quite competitive, aren’t you?” Sinjorino wondered. “Do all your people have such a driving need to prove themselves to others in your culture?”

She relaxed a little as they seemed in no hurry to overwhelm her. “Well, most of us just go for the friendship and tolerance stuff,” she admitted. “It’s Dash, she just brings out the competitive spirit in me I guess.”

“Aw!” Paige cooed. “You must be *super* good friends then?”

“Not like that!” she assured her in a panicked tone. “I mean we’ve talked about living together-as roommates- and she’s always kidding around and I’m teasing her back and we do enjoy the odd cup of cider together and maybe she sits a little closer to me than she might to someone else and oh my Heavens why am I even telling you all this?”

“You’re infectious,” Paige told Olaph. “That’s the only explanation. See what you’ve done?”

“If it makes the world a better place, I do not apologize for it,” he told her seriously. “As to your earlier question, yes, I think she was offering. Though of course I have little experience in such matters, it seemed fairly clear to me.”

“When she gets back you should give her a big kiss and tell her how you feel,” Paige decided.

“Wha- wha- what in the Sam hill? Don’t you be saying nothing crazy now, you hear me? I could still turn you away right this second you know?”

“But you wooon’t!” she sing-songed. “You know you want to tell her.”

“I know no such thing!”

“Oh?” She stepped up close to her. “So why do you seem so flustered?”

“I ain’t flustered!”

“So why is your face so red?” Paige heard wings approaching and stepped back. Two figured dropped down beyond the wall, Dash and Lunria, who gasped at seeing who it was.

“It really is you!” she exclaimed. “You actually found me!”

“Uh, why are you, not, that is, it seems you, were you in the bath?” Olaph managed. He was trying not to stare. *But I’m not really a holy man anymore, am I? I’m probably making her more uncomfortable making a big deal out of it. Different cultures and whatnot.*

Lunaria looked down at herself. “Oh, we don’t wear clothes around the village. Just when we go out, or need them for a specific job.” She indicated the two guards.

“So you do know this guy?” Dash asked her. “And what’s got you so hot and bothered?” She asked Appletini.

“I keep telling people I ain’t!”

“I’ve known you long enough to tell. Were they being mean to you?” She raised her spear again.

“Put that down,” she hissed. “I’m telling you I’m fine. It’s nothing.”

“But she has something to telllll youuuuuu!” Paige announced, rocking back and forth.

“No I don’t!” she cried as Dash said “Tell me what?”

“You stay outa this!” she commanded.

Lunaria was looking between them confused. “Don’t make me tell Katince to get involved with you two. Honestly, I’ve half a mind to.”

“You wouldn’t!” both shouted, scandalized.

“So it is like that,” she muttered. “Anyway, yes, I know these people. At least, I met them briefly. Very briefly. What are you doing here... uh... Orphic?”

“Olaph, actually.”

“Oh, sorry!”

“That’s okay. I came to see you, of course. But maybe I should just go?”

“No, no!” she rushed to his side and put a hand on his shoulder as he was turning to go. “Please, come inside. I think I can trust you to not betray us, or tell outsiders about our village?”

“You have my word!”

“Okay. Wait here.” She headed over the wall again, and the door started to open. She came back out and motioned them inside. “Thank you for coming to get me,” she told Dash. “You did the right thing.”

“We are terrible at our jobs!” complained Appletini. “The first four visitors in months and we just let them in.”

“We didn’t just let them in, I went to get Lunia,” Dash countered. “She’s letting them in.”

“Still, our job is to turn people away.”

“Who got all misty eyed when they said this guy was basically drooling over our princess?”

“That was you!”

“Was not!”

The group was past them and the door swung shut behind them. “Welcome to Equestritown.”

“Oh my!” Paige breathed, as a red hued stallion passed them by, giving them only a cursory glance before moving on. He was carrying a huge basket of apples, but up on one shoulder, like it weighed nothing. She saw every muscle, he wore as little as everyone else in sight, and she *liked* what she saw.

“That’s Little Mac,” she told her. “He’ll talk up a storm if you let him.”

“You really don’t wear clothes, do you?” She followed him with her eyes. *He can talk my ear off, if it means I get to stand next to him and admire the view. He must like apples, I should go ask his opinion on the subject. Maybe the growing of apple trees? The processing into applesauce?*

“We find clothes a distraction from the pursuit of spiritual and intellectual fulminant.”

“Really?”

She laughed. “No, but it’s what we tell people. It’s not going to be a problem for you, is it?”

“Oh no,” Light hastened to assure her. “We fully accept all cultures and their... culture... what was I saying?” A light pink mare had given him a little wave, distracting him.

She laughed. “There may be an adjustment period. I know there always is for me, putting stuff on when I go out on a job. Clothes! Yuck.”

“It’s much warmer here than I expected,” Paige told her, as Little Mac was out of sight. “Being up in the mountains as you are.”

“We have a magical artifact, the crystal heart, that warms us all within the confines of the town,” she explained. “But you’re not here for that.”

Some sort of withstand weather spell for everyone a certain distance from it? thought Light. That might be interesting to study. And duplicate. No need to warm every house on a street if one magical artifact can be used to keep everyone feeling their best even in winter. Much more cost effective. I’ll have to remember this.

“No, I’m here for you, er, to talk to you,” Olaph corrected himself. “Is there a place we can talk?”

“We can talk at home, this way.”

The group moved past charming houses with flowerbeds, gardens, kids playing out front, the same as any other town. The houses were well maintained, and while they got some strange looks, no one said they shouldn't be there. Especially when they saw Lunaria, who everyone greeted at least with a nod. Finally they got to her house, and she invited them inside.

“Actually,” Light told her. “Perhaps it's best if the two of you talk privately? We'll just be in the way.”

“I suppose so,” Olaph agreed, quietly panicking. *What am I going to say to her?*

“You can sit in the back,” Lunaria told them. “Olaph, go right inside and have a seat. I'll show your friends around to the back of the house. Oh, I'll get you all some drinks too, I may be a minute.”

“Don't go to any trouble,” Paige insisted, remembering the lemonade incident back at the mayor's house. *Before we even met Lily. When really, all of this began.*

“It's no trouble. Make yourself at home, Olaph!” She beckoned the others around the side of the house.

Right, into a lady's house I go...

Olaph sat stiffly on the couch, having taken a look around the room. Fireplace that looked like it had never been used, the usual portraits on the walls, shelves of figurines. He didn't have to wait long as he heard someone approaching.

That was fast. Or not?

“I told you I smelled someone new,” said a new voice, as two more beastfolk entered the room. One was a light pink, the other a much taller figure behind her. She was a pure white, had colorful flowing hair, and a puzzled expression. Both were, naturally, the most gorgeous creatures Olaph had ever seen. After Lunaria, of course. The pink one seemed to be sniffing the air, and both brought a laser-like focus to bear on the man now uncomfortably squirming on the couch.

“Smelled?” he croaked. *Do they have a better sense of smell? Do I stink? Did she actually go back to get away from me and my horrible, horrible stench?*

“Not like you're thinking,” replied the pink one. “You know how dwarves can sniff out valuables?”

“Er... I've heard some weird stories...”

“I can sniff out potential love. I know, it's a weird ability but what can you do?”

“I'm Solaria,” said the white one, sternly looking down at him. “And you are?”

“Olaph Perdita, at your service. Lunaria invited me in, I hope that's okay? She's getting drinks. For my friends, who she took the back? They thought we should talk. Alone. Together, I mean, you can't talk when you're alone unless you're talking to yourself.” *Shut up, shut up!*

She hummmmmmed.

“He's got it pretty bad,” the pink one reported. “I'm Katince, by the way.”

“Her sisters, yes, she mentioned you. Or no, it was the guards? And I saw the portraits, of course.”

“Twinkle Sprite is around here- there she is.” Both turned and a smaller, lavender colored mare peeked around the doorframe from the next room and gave a hesitant wave.

“Nice to meet you all.”

“So now we have a human here,” Solaria huffed, crossing her arms over her chest. Which was rather impressive and Olaph was doing his best not to stare. “As if having half the town after her wasn't bad enough.”

“Don't exaggerate, Sol,” Katince told her. “I would say only 10% of mares, 30% of stallions. That's *barely* half.”

“That many!” he squeaked, his eyebrows raising.

“Some in town are already married, of course. I would say 2% of married mares or stallions? Were you counting them, sister? And obviously you weren’t including the kids, I would be interested in your methodology for saying it’s 50% with such certainty.”

She ignored the question. “Most just chase after us for the novelty,” Solaria admitted, spreading out a wing and indicating her horn. “My sister is no exception. They aren’t serious about a real relationship with her. How about you? What’s your intention here?”

“Sol!” Katince scolded. “You must forgive her, she’s fairly protective. We all are, of course. But there’s being blunt and being blunt, if you know what I mean.”

“I’ll roast you with a fireball!” Twinkle announced, now standing proud in the doorway. “Should I roast him with a fireball?”

“No fireballs in the house,” Katince announced. “Plus he could be genuine... even if past experience indicates otherwise.”

“Phooey!”

“Still waiting for an answer though,” Solaria demanded.

“I wish to court her honestly!” he managed.

“You wish to court her, honestly? Or you wish to honestly court her?” Twinkle asked shrewdly, head tilted to the side. “Because there is a difference.”

“Why can’t I mean both?”

The sisters shared a look, seeming to come to the conclusion that they all supposed he could mean both, if it came down to it. “I swear, if you’re lying to us,” Solaria began.

“I thought so!” said another voice, standing behind Twinkle. Lunaria had two drinks on a tray and was staring daggers at her sisters. “Couldn’t leave him alone for two minutes without you descending and terrorizing him.”

“We’re just looking out for you, sister,” Solaria told her patiently. “And we are right to do so. Look at how old he is! It would never work out between you.”

“I can date who I wish, *sister!*”

“That’s not in dispute of course, I’m simply trying-”

“Excuse me,” Olaph interrupted. “Is that your only objection?”

“At this time, yes. Why? Are you in disguise as an older man for some reason?”

Well, he did offer. “Not exactly. I’ll leave you four to talk a moment and be right back. I can just go around the house to find my friends yes?”

“Just follow the path around,” Lunaria agreed.

“Thank you.” He jumped up. “Be right back.”

“Don’t tell me she rejected you already!” Paige exclaimed, jumping up as Olaph came around the corner. The glass slipped out of her hand and smashed into Light, drenching him. “Oh no, not again! What is it with me and drinks? Stupid two point- uh...” *I never told them about that. It’s my secret shame.*

“Really?” he asked, dryly but also in a wet way, if you can imagine it. Because he was all wet now.

“At least the glass didn’t break!” She hurried forward intent on using magic to clean him up and stepped right on it. The glass shattered. “You’ve got to be kidding me!”

Light had closed his eyes and seemed to be counting. “You need something?” he finally asked, opening them again.

“What you offered before, if it’s still on the table? Maybe 15 years or so? There was some objection by the sisters, you see, so it seems you were right on the money.”

“Of course.” He cast the spell, magic swirling around Olaph and turning back the clock.

“Ah, thank you. As for the sisters, maybe I’ll send them out here and you can be my character witnesses. Heading back now. Good luck with the-”

“Ow!” Paige had dropped to all fours to look for the pieces of the glass and had clearly cut herself.

The sister’s conversation stopped as he entered the room again. “How is this?” he asked, spreading his arms wide.

“Magic?” Twinkle asked.

“That’s right,” he agreed.

“I like magic!”

“So do I.”

“And this isn’t an illusion?” Solaria pressed.

“This is now what I am. I could go further, if you wanted. I can’t really tell your ages.” *Yes, that should score me a point or two, right? Woman like to be complemented on how young they look I think?*

“I suppose age will somewhat become irrelevant,” she decided, “now that The System exists to hand out spells to negate it. Very well, I will leave you to it, sister. You’ve not shown much interest in anyone in the village, if this human has somehow caught your attention and you can be happy, I’ll support you.”

“I’m watching you mister,” Twinkle told him.

“I’m rooting for you!” Katince announced with a grin. “Go git him, sister!” She shoved her sister forward, making her stumble against Olaph, thankfully she had already put the drinks down.

“Sorry about them,” she told him after they left and she stepped back from him.

“Not at all,” he countered, shaking his head. “It’s good to have family that just wants the best for you.”

“That’s one way to look at it. Please, have a seat.”

“Thank you.”

“Oh, here’s your drink! I hope you like horseradish juice!”

He couldn’t keep his face from making a horrified expression. “What juice?”

“Sorry, sorry, that was terrible wasn’t it? I shouldn’t have said it, Twinkle says it all the time. Horse Rad(ish) juice. You know, a rad juice I’ve ruined it haven’t I? It’s just juice, but it’s kind of rad, you know, radical, and we’re kind of horses, so we’re also horse(ish) and now I’m rambling!”

Maybe she’s just as nervous as I am.

“It’s fine, I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

They sipped the rad(ish) juice and were generally awkward for a moment.

“So you’re-”

“You must have-”

“Oh go ahead!”

“Please!”

“So you’re here... was the place hard to find? I really didn’t think I would see you again. So many express interest and then lose it again just as quickly. Maybe there’s just something about me that’s off putting?”

“Impossible!” he scoffed. “Not finding the place, I mean that someone would lose interest in *you!* I mean, my sisters told me of your many suiters...”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m sure they exaggerated. But there are some outside the village they don’t know about. I do jobs outside after all, and I don’t tell them *everything*. Oh I mean I’m not throwing myself at every person that makes a pass at me! It really sounded like that just now didn’t it? Oh what must you think of me? I’m not really the type to play hard to get, but at the same time I’ve never really felt I matched with anyone yet either, is what I want to say.”

“I think you’re very sweet, and probably as nervous as I am. Perhaps we should both try to relax a bit. I know this probably isn’t how this typically goes, but that’s just the world we live in.”

“You’ve got a point. I mean it’s not every day a man you met shows up at your *hidden village* and the guards come and get you and I swear if that Dash snickers at me one more time... It’s not like *she’s* any better.”

“It wasn’t too bad. Finding the village I mean. I asked the king- King Vyzanth? He gave me a rough map to the place and wished me luck with you. Had nothing but good things to say, of course. A bit of magic by my friends later and here we are. You shouldn’t be too hard on the guards, I doubt they see much excitement.” *Though there may be some between those two, if they can get it together.*

“Thankfully, no. But we rotate, it’s a whole thing. But what were you going to say?”

“I’ve forgotten!”

She laughed. “We are a pair, aren’t we?”

“Not a prickly pear, I hope.”

She stared at him. “That was getting me back for the horseradish juice thing wasn’t it?”

Chapter 20

Setting some traps

Where: outside the house

When: about an hour later

The three stood as the two came around the corner again. Paige broke into a huge grin as Lunaria was dressed in her armor and had her sword on.

“You’re coming with us!” she squealed, hands clasped before her. “You wouldn’t have gotten dressed otherwise! Too bad, I was kind of hoping we could stay here a few days while he convinced you and I could try it. Maybe get to know the locals, go ‘native’ as it were.”

“For the moment,” she agreed. “And I’d be happy to let you stay at my place, if you wanted to explore our culture. We don’t really have a lot of inns... it’s supposed to be a secret village after all.”

“Would you? Thanks a lot!”

“Sure... uh... Sorry, what was your name again?”

Olaph cleared his throat. “Lunaria, allow me to reintroduce Paige, Light, and Sinjorino. Everyone, this is Lunaria, she’s agreed to accompany me for a time so we can see if we’re a good match. I’ve explained that I’m basically homeless now, having come right here after being thrown out of the Guild.”

She shook her head playfully. “Not a great start, admitting you’re homeless. But at least it was for the right reasons. That Mary person sounds like a real piece of work. After all he’s done for the Guild, and the world if he’s not just spinning a tall tale to impress me.”

“We’re all going through some big changes at the moment,” Light admitted. “And what he told you is probably true. Okay then! Great! We’re off.”

“Did he, by any chance, mention me using magic to lift a whole battleship?” Paige asked, a sideline glance to Light. “Because that happened, they’ll all tell you. Ask anyone here. Now that you know, is there any chance you might casually slip it into conversation when I come back here and you introduce me to that Little Mac fellow? Is he single by the way?”

“It didn’t come up. I think he’s dating a mare named Cheerfully.”

She pouted, but brightened. “Do you know if she likes girls? I wouldn’t mind getting to know her, if it meant getting to know him better.”

Light sighed and shook his head. “Anyway. Open up that portal, if you’ve said your goodbyes? Your sisters seemed nice, they came out to speak to us earlier.”

“They would be, to those they will probably never see again,” she admitted.

“Ah, that’s the problem,” Olaph cautioned. “Where are we going now? It’s getting late, and we don’t really have a place to stay. I didn’t want to impose on Lunaria so early into our relationship and ask if we could stay here. Might have been taken the wrong way.”

“This has been a long day,” Paige admitted. “A lot happened!”

“If I may?” Sinjorino begin. Olaph indicated they should go ahead. “Let us return to the remnant city for now. We can find lodging there, and wait for the rocket to return. Let us be on hand, should anything go wrong. And if nothing does, to witness history in the making. Meanwhile, I wish to recreate my prototypes that were destroyed and they would have the needed parts. As I no longer have access to the Guild’s alchemists, they are the next best place to look.”

“Hold on,” Light insisted. “You want to go into the heart of a remnant controlled area, when it was remnants that have twice tried to kill Olaph here, and smashed up your stuff? Is that wise?”

“It is the *only* logical course of action. We must give our adversary ample opportunity to strike, and ample victims to use as their agents. Thus can we learn more about them, and perhaps put an end to their reign of terror.”

“But we are all but certain it’s the queen?” Paige hesitantly asked. “Do you not trust what that Guild member said? Magic is pretty absolute, you know. Even if it was a cryptic riddle, how many others could it point to?”

“I would like to gather further evidence,” they explained, “before confronting her. She would only scoff at magic pointing her out as the perpetrator. We have no physical proof, it would simply be our word against that of the queen herself. We would be laughed out of any court, if not snatched up for execution the second we made the accusation. Or eaten by her dragon, or any number of other gruesome scenarios such as being cut down by laser guns in the walls, or having the floor electrocute us.”

Lunaria had a *what have I agreed to jump into?* look on her face.

“But how?” Olaph asked. “All the others took their own lives in one way or another. Will any future assailants be different?”

“There is a low probability of that,” they agreed. “But we are forewarned. We can set a trap for any that attempt to repeat the destruction of the first site. Using some magic I hope to borrow from you all, I can access the systems of any remnants that spring the trap. Thus finding out their motives and who sent them before they have a chance to enact their self-destruct functions.”

“It seems remnants have various ways to wipe their own memories, or even destroy themselves,” Olaph explained to Lunaria. “If I was building them, I would have left that part out.”

“I should hope so!” she agreed.

“One place is as good as another right now,” he continued. “I’m going to have to look the list over, see where else we can make a difference. As long as we’re still moving forward I think it’s fine. Making more prototypes fits the bill. Give me a moment and I’ll get us all there.”

The group followed Sinjorino to the “visitors quarters” maintained by the Remnants for their organic brethren, making Olaph wonder exactly where his income was going to come from now. Saving the world was all well and good, testing new forms of magic incredible, and actually finding Lunaria at his side astonishing. But none of that paid the bills. *Of course I don’t need money to buy food, as I have a food making spell now. Water is easy enough, I just get a canteen, open a portal to the ocean and fill it up. One hygiene spell later and it should be pure enough to drink, as long as I focus on salt being an unwanted contaminate. I have the wood carving spell and the rock sculpting spell, could I make myself a wilderness home somewhere using those materials? Would Lunaria be okay living someplace like that? Actually I should ask what spells she knows, maybe she has a shelter spell, being on the move doing jobs. Oh, maybe I can come with her on jobs and do my own? Or help her out, and split the money. I have magic, I can pull my own weight. Well, one thing at a time I suppose. They don’t require payment here at least for short stays, and I’m happy to do magic for them in exchange if they decide they want me around otherwise.*

And it turned out, they did. But for a bit of a surprising reason- sustain flame. Olaph had chosen it as it was one of the only “useful” permanent spells, allowing a single flame to no longer consume whatever it was burning. The next day when Sinjorino led everyone to the local workshop and described what they wanted to do, everyone laid out what magic they currently had access to and the remnants there got quite excited.

“So let me make sure I’m understanding this,” one of them said. “I can turn on this here gas torch, get it up to a high temperature for welding, and have you cast the spell on the whole thing. As long as I don’t turn the torch off after that it’ll stay lit- *forever*.”

“Until I personally die, having cast the spell,” he explained. *Which will be later, if only of old age and not being killed by remnants or what have you early. Thank you, Light! It is rather nice being 15 years younger again, I do have to say.*

“A technicality but an important distinction. And it won’t ruin the nozzle, being that hot all the time, because the system itself can’t be damaged by the flame?”

“That’s what the description in The System says, yes. Well, it says it can’t hurt the fuel, so setting someone on fire and casting this on them the flame wouldn’t hurt them anymore. We would have to test if the metal nozzle the gas came out of counted.”

“We can do that! I just need to make some kind of stand for it- both for the test because I don’t want to stand and hold it for an hour and to store it when I’m not using it- and our meager supply of flammable gas goes much further? Let me see what I can rig up so I can see this for myself!”

“Happy to help!”

“See, without needing to worry about changing for every little thing magic really can make a difference in the world,” Paige mused. “If only certain organizations realized this...”

“You don’t think they’ll come after me for breaking the rules?” he wondered.

“That would be a very bad look, politically,” Light decided. “They already threw you out, what *now* they want you back and following their rules? This ‘act of rebellion’ is hardly unjustified. You’re not a guild member, Mary made that quite clear. I can see you thinking ‘why should I follow their rules now?’ Nor are you, strictly speaking, either a natural or scholarly spellcaster. You could clearly argue that a literal *higher power* commanded you to perform all the magic you could for testing purposes. You are simply following that command. Naturally if whoever you are casting the magic for *can* pay don’t turn it down.”

“Naturally enough not! Now that I am no longer a holy man I can fully express my love of huuuuge...” He made a somewhat lewd gesture near his chest, “sacks of coin.”

“Did I hear something about a neverending torch?” another remnant asked, coming up to them.

“I was here first!” the first one called out.

With all the torches in the place now operating forever and the remnants asking what else they might be able to do now that they had magical assistance, Sinjorino got to work. Using the principal of an unlimited flame they built a primitive steam system, basically just a proof of concept that heated water, shot steam through it, and cooled it in a perpetual loop. When they explained how it worked Olaph looked the spell list from The System over and discovered the opposite spell to the flame one, *deep freeze*. This kept ice from melting- or chocolate to be fair- and as the remnants did have some limited capacity for refrigeration froze a section of pipe in water while he studied the spell. When he could cast it he did, allowing the steam to go into the hot pipe and turn a wheel and then through the cold pipe to turn into water again very efficiently. Thus being reheated, and continuing the cycle with a smaller footprint than would normally be required for such an operation. (Steam engines normally being quite large, after all) The remnants there all agreed this seemed to be a viable method of generating electricity, using a minimum of magic.

Olaph also explained that an object could be made to spin or roll or move up and down endlessly using a fabrication technique, which did take some XP so was not quite as convenient. He demonstrated with the *animate objects* spell and explained while not permanent, if a mage didn’t want to give up their XP to such an enterprise they could still do things this way a few times a day. It would be the same end result. As long as they stayed nearby that could be a scene and the magic would happily work almost without limit. (He got out his wooden “servant” for this part of the demonstration) There was agreement a “steam engine” that needed no steam and could simply turn a wheel forever,

thus moving a magnet back and forth across copper wire to generate electricity, would have many applications. They were drawing out different designs for the next day and went off to see what other material they could scrounge up to see how efficient a machine they could make given the constraints. Thus was the trap set, as the others had been discussing- out of earshot of the remnants of course- what course they wanted it to take. Light had studied the spell he hoped would work, buying it from The System which brought him down to 1XP. He didn't foresee himself dying, twice, in the near future and needing more than one before getting more, so he felt it was fine. *I just hope it works the way we expect.*

That evening, as shadows, the group made their way back to the lab they had been working in and set up a few things. Then, they settled in to wait. Thankfully Lunaria knew a spell she used all the time on herself, so they wouldn't need any sleep that night. They could stay awake and alert the whole night, and hopefully gather the evidence they needed to confront the queen.

Hours later the remnants that had been helping them do all this walked in through the disguised portal on the doorframe, and into the empty building that had been selected for the 'festivities' of the evening. They didn't notice, as the illusion that covered the place made it seem like the interior of the building they expected. Both of these spells were courtesy of Olaph, who cut off the portal spell leaving them all in a locked room.

"Now we'll see," Sinjorino whispered, as the three headed to the newly created machine. All three walked straight up to the prototype engine and raised their hands, about to destroy it. Their fists came down, and passed right through the illusion. They tried again, and again, but of course the room was empty, it only looked like it had an interior. After a moment of this Sinjorino nodded to the others. Light and Paige started to cast, a magical circle covering the floor of the place.

"Zone of technological restoration!" they cast, combining the spell of Zone of the Zen Master and Restore Technology. The area effect nature of the Zone combined with the touch nature of the restoration spell and washed over the remnants, who stopped mid-swing as if rebooting. Which is exactly what they were doing. The blue box for the spell, which they had tried earlier to make sure it would work, read thusly:

Restful Repair Zone

Saturn + Sun

Created by combining the Restore Technology spell with the Zone of Zen Master spell, this spell now affects all technology within the Zone. As long as it is not physically damaged, the technology will continue to function as it was designed to, without flaws or faults of any kind.

Original casting by Light Kajombro and Paige Malplenan.

"What are we doing here?" asked the one.

"I can't imagine," replied the second. "Is this the lab? We all came out here again? Why?"

"Not exactly," Sinjorino told them, stepping out from the illusion. Olaph waved a hand and the entire interior vanished, leaving them visible. "How are you feeling?"

"Very odd," admitted the third. "Like I want to smash something. The things we worked on today. I want to smash them. But at the same time I don't. Greetings Sinjorino, organics."

"Best keep the spell running," Sinjorino told Light and Paige. "Dropping it may revert them to normal."

Light just nodded, not needing to be told how magic worked by a remnant, of all things. But that was fine, he would tease them about it later for sure.

“We believe you were reprogrammed somehow,” Sinjorino told them. “A simplistic set of instructions were given to you, rather than trying to control you wirelessly. This was one of my hypothesis, and why we moved you to this location when you entered. To try and disrupt any signals you may be receiving. Of course if they are city wide this was not going to be effective but there was a very low probability of that. We would have had half the town here in that case. That is why you kept trying to smash what you believed to be the prototype. Your instructions were, I surmise; to smash the prototype and return to your lives. If caught, disable yourselves. The instructions did not account for being unable to smash the prototype because it wasn’t there. Thus you were locked into an infinite loop, allowing Light and Paige to cast the spell on you, that is now maintaining your normal function.”

“How do we fix it?” asked the third. “We can’t stay here forever!”

“If you will allow me?” They held up their access port cord. “I will attempt to purge the program and then we can confront who did this to you. An external access diagnostic should be effective at restoring your natural function.”

The three shared a look. “We are here,” said the first. “Their words ring true to me. I do not think this is some kind of deception, what would be the end result of such subterfuge?”

“We don’t recall why we came here, only that we must smash,” agreed the second.

“I do not wish to smash what I have spent a day making,” agreed the third. “Purging the extraneous instruction is the logical choice.”

Thus agreed, they turned back. “Choose at random and attempt a purge,” said the first. “If successful, the procedure can be repeated on the other two.”

“Before you begin, may I complement you on the magical nature of your endeavor?” praised the second. “The illusion, the whisking us into an empty room. All very convincing. Magic truly is a marvel. I hope the process for empowering all remnants succeeds soon so that we all may share in this wonder.”

The other two nodded, agreeing.

“Thank you,” Olaph told them. “It was nothing.”

“Loading random.exe,” Sinjorino told them. “I have selected you.” They pointed, and the remnant turned exposing their port. They slid their cable connection gently inside. “Don’t worry, this isn’t my first time.”

Moments later another gateway opened, this time into the throne room of the queen. There had been some discussion if they wanted to go there directly, but a simple question spell revealed that they would not be attacked on sight. This didn’t stop those with magical allies from calling them out beforehand, and sending them in first. The queen’s avatar perked up as they all filed through, and Synnj did as well. Lunaria was fingering her sword, ready to draw it and become shadow at any second, but Light trusted his question magic and stepped forward.

“Your majesty,” he called with a bow. “Please forgive the intrusion and the late hour. I figured you would still be up, and this matter is of utmost urgency.”

“You have my attention,” said the queen’s avatar, standing and smoothing her skirt down. “What can I do for you?”

“It concerns the attack we suffered while here, where Olaph was targeted and almost killed by remnants. We have suffered more attacks, both upon our persons and somewhat oddly devices constructed by Sinjorino to help restore part of the old world to function. We know now who the perpetrator is, and have come to seek justice for these wrongs!”

“Naturally I’ll do everything in my power to bring the guilty party to justice,” she agreed. “I myself have found no leads in the case, so I’m glad you have before something terrible happened! Simply name them, and I will have them brought before me to answer for their crimes.”

“No need to play coy,” he chided her with a shake of his head. “Both magic and these remnants here will both agree.” He pointed up at the queen. “The guilty party is you.”

Chapter 21

Admitting Guilt

Where: Meeting room inside the castle

When: A moment later

Two more of the queen's avatars appeared after a moment of silence after this revelation, all of those on the "night shift," and the one they had seen beckoned them onward. She offered no confirmation or denial of Light's claim, simply taking them to another room where they could all sit down. The group was wary of traps or ambush, after all they were not attacked on sight, were they? No. So now an attack could come at any time. But she and her avatars sat on one side of the table and she indicated the others should sit at the other. When they did, she finally spoke up again.

"Forgive me for bringing my other two active avatars here, a conversation of this importance deserves a fair chunk of my processing power, so concentrating it in this way is beneficial to that effort. You don't mind, do you?"

Everyone shook their heads.

"Very well. I will be speaking for myself, please ignore these other two for now, and I will get right to it. I suppose it's not worthwhile to either of us for me to deny this claim, so I'll simply speak the truth. You're right, I was behind the attacks on Olaph, and the destruction of the electricity generating prototypes."

"You admit it!" Paige snarled. "I was almost killed in the crossfire! What do you have to say for yourself?"

"That was indeed a miscalculation on my part," she admitted. "That remnant was supposed to shoot at Olaph and miss. I don't actually understand how you were hit."

"That's not- the point is- what?" she sputtered.

"Even if that's true," Light decided, "it doesn't excuse the fact you have caused the deaths of several remnants, by various means."

"I haven't though," she smirked. "No one was harmed in all of this, not permanently anyway. Like I said hitting Paige was an accident, and I do apologize for it."

"Apologize by paying off my student loans. Then we'll call it even."

"I don't think I can do that."

Oh no. Do I really have to 'buy off' that weakness? Dang it Bob, what have you done to the world? Someone give me money!

"I clearly saw three remnants explode themselves when they failed to kill me," protested Olaph. "How can you say no one has been harmed?"

"You saw three empty shells explode themselves, yes. You think this is the only type of body I can control? Especially here?"

"... What?"

"I wanted to scare you away from the project, Olaph, not kill you. You are a determined one though, I give you that."

"Why me? We were all in on it, all doing the same things."

"Did not one of the demons praise *you* as being solely responsible when you returned with them?"

“I guess?”

“I had to start somewhere, after all. You seemed the best target for whatever reason.”

“What about the one that shot me?” Paige demanded. “That was out in the street and far away from here. They wiped their own memory!” she added with an air of triumph. “And it was shown they were a worker from the local area so unless you’re telling me the *queen of the realm* has walked around as a common laborer in secret for the last ten years-”

“I made sure to choose a remnant with a recent cloud based backup,” she explained, as if that meant anything to anyone. “No lasting harm was done.” They all stared at her.

“She means an external backup of their memories,” Sinjorino clarified. “Once a staple of the modern world, ‘the cloud’ or to put it another way ‘someone else’s computer you have no way of seeing or trusting is secure’ was all the rage. Few remnants today would have the capability or means of accessing such a secure storage, but that doesn’t mean *all* of them are gone. I assume it was on some kind of timer? When next they synced with their storage it would recognize the discrepancy and restore from the backup? As a natural part of their functioning I wouldn’t even have noticed when I went to look for signs of tampering in their logs. I would have assumed no backup device was available and moved on.”

“Correct, Sinjorino, about the timer I mean. I cannot say what you would or would not have thought at the time. Obviously.”

“So at best it was a mild inconvenience for them,” they explained. “If any of this is true, of course.”

“You can certainly track them down,” she offered. “They of course won’t remember you because their restoration would have overwritten the memories of that day, but that would show you the truth of my words. They were released back into the world, it’s hard to hold a remnant that has no memories of what they have done prior to that day. Morally, I mean. The remnant that committed the crime is, in every way that matters, dead.”

“In that one instance,” Light clarified, “we can perhaps verify your words.”

“Right, the remnants blowing themselves up, how can you prove that was you?” Olaph asked.

“That would be rather difficult, I admit. I could show you other shells and control them?”

The group was silent a moment.

“I will take your silence as that being insufficient for your needs but I admit being stymied on what else to offer as proof. So we come to the most uncomfortable part of this meeting,” the queen went on. “What do you intend to do with this newfound knowledge that I was responsible?”

“... Politely ask you to stop?” Olaph decided.

She raised an eyebrow.

“I mean what can we do? You’ve admitted it, to us in private. I doubt I could compel you to issue a public apology. I can’t take you to court or make war upon your realm with just the three of my friends. You’re the queen, and this isn’t even your true body. If you were smart about it, neither is that figure in the throne room. You could be anywhere for all I know, I can’t make you stop. I can only *ask* that you stop, maybe ask you to explain why you need me to stop so badly you would do all this. What’s your problem with modern technology anyway? Why should we be denied the advances we have already made and lost due to circumstance beyond our control? I assume you have *some* reason for doing all this. I’d like to hear it. Maybe I’ll even agree with it. You’ve burned some good will attacking me, even for show, so know I’m not truly inclined to put much weight on what you say at this point. But I’ll listen.”

She sighed. “You truly don’t understand. Much of what made up the modern world, in the eyes of many, was a mistake. Far too much caused irreparable damage to the environment, and our world has already suffered greatly. To reintroduce those problems once again, on top of our current very precarious balance of weather, tectonic activity, population... I foresee disaster we would never recover from. We were granted a second chance, I cannot in good conscience squander it.”

“You’re assuming we’re idiots, aren’t you?” Sinjorino decided.

“Er?” She was taken aback. “I mean, no? But maybe? What? What are you talking about?”

“Did you bother to actually study the devices before they were smashed up?”

“That’s a good point, what about the remnants you had do the smashing?” Paige asked, pointing to the remnants that were there. “They weren’t you!”

“The first group got away without incident, and I expected the second group, these here, to do so as well,” she explained. “I didn’t expect magical traps. I still find magic hard to wrap my head around. None of them were hurt, simply given a short directive to smash up some equipment and then forget they did it.”

“So she did put you in danger,” she crowed to the other remnants at the table. “I would ask for some kind of compensation if I was you!” *Maybe you’ll even get it, as you’re not so constrained by weaknesses as I am. Unless you are, of course.*

The remnants shared a look.

“We can discuss that later. Back to your question?” she asked Sinjorino. “You were saying about your prototypes?”

“I specifically created them with the lessons of the past in mind. Magic, as you’ve just admitted is a weakness of yours, can completely compensate for a lot. For example, it wasn’t feasible in the past to have a small generator in every home. We needed huge buildings dedicated to generating power and pushing electrons through wires we had to string everywhere. By creating halfway magical devices, that burn no fuel and operate completely on site, we bypass that restriction entirely. Of course that’s not getting into rooftop solar and the like- I see you have no idea what I’m talking about so forget it. The point is, we’re going to do things differently this time. I was going to make sure of it. I talked with Olaph to know what was possible with easy magical spells and designed around it. I don’t want the world crisscrossed with electrical wires any more than you do. They were ugly, vulnerable to storms, dangerous to work on even for professionals, but they were all we had at the time. Now we would have orcs ripping them down I shouldn’t wonder. Or giants trying to sit on them, or dragons using them as toothpicks. Best to avoid the problem entirely.”

“Is this true?” she asked Olaph.

“It’s true we were experimenting with magic, yes. Our most recent prototype simply heated water and cooled it in a loop. Sinjorino explained there would be minimal loss, perhaps adding a bit of water every few days would be all that was required. We were going to work on others using magic to spin wheels and such on their own, to see which was the cheapest and easiest to run.”

“And which generated the most power,” Sinjorino added.

“There are certain technical details I was not understanding, yes. The steam powered device used only two spells, available to most any magic user, lasting basically the lifetime of the device with proper care. Quite easy to make and install. If it could generate enough power for a home a space could be dedicated to it quite easily, it wasn’t that large. It would have been cheap enough to make too, even at Guild prices for the spells, given everything Sinjorino has explained electricity can do. It would replace a fireplace, a stove, candles, keep food fresh, and more. Even if in a shed outside the home for noise reasons it would still be a space *saving* device because you wouldn’t need a pile of wood for your fire!”

“Oh dear. I feel I may have jumped to more than a few conclusions about your efforts here...”

No, you think? was the general unspoken sentiment.

“So all cleared up?” Light asked. “We can go back to living without looking over our shoulders any more than usual?”

“Now hang on just a moment,” the queen protested. “While I may- may, mind you- approve of some sort of small generator that can be deployed on a per-home basis, electricity is just the start. Once you have that you’ll start building computers again, and then ‘social media’ will come along. Cars. Roads! The problems of the old, strictly technological world, were many!”

“Refrigeration,” countered Sinjorino. “Better medicine. Faster communication. You really want to suppress even the good things just because some bad things were done too?”

“You almost can’t have one without the other!”

“But what if we could?”

“Explain!”

“Things like the internet- a worldwide group of connected devices- and social media required just that. Connected devices. We aren’t running fiber optic cables between major cities any more than we’re running power lines. Now yes, wireless communication does exist and we are looking at a fledgling space program- if the iron gathering ship returns intact with their prize. But for the most part devices will be cut off from each other. We may be able to get some kind of satellite system going in a hundred years or more but that would still be fairly slow. Even a house-to-house network *could* be possible. Not very practical though. Even if someone got the bright idea to do it, and they did once so it could happen again, that’s where you draw the line. Even if you allow a town to be connected to some kind of central source, connecting various towns together is probably not going to be possible ever again. Too many monster types roam the land, who would mess up such a system. So your ‘social media’ would be limited. So too would any kind of internet- it would be completely local. More like an electronic newspaper and town message board than ordering a new chair from half the continent away and getting it delivered to you the next day. You, as the queen, simply don’t allow widespread connection of any mechanical device to another. But you can still have a cold beverage powered by a local generator if you wanted, and heat your house without burning wood. I mean honestly *that’s* the biggest environmental win, if you’re really that concerned about it.”

“Wireless devices could be used to link towns together,” the queen complained.

“I suppose. Pretty slow data traffic in that case though.”

“... Agreed.”

“Bottom line, your majesty, we are all intelligent beings here around this table. We are reasonable beings. We can learn the lessons of the past and take your fears for ecological disaster into account right at the beginning. Do not deny human kind, forgive me Paige, *organic* kind the advancements that made you yourself possible. Me. Space travel. Video games. E-books. All a consequence of advancement and all with a place at the proper time. Do not deny- regulate. Do not destroy- compromise. Use magic to shore up weaknesses, Heaven knows we have more than enough now with the advent of The System. The working mages, the new way of casting spells that will come from Olaph. The sheer power of those like Paige, able to lift whole battleships if they put their minds to it.”

“I didn’t say it! They said it!” Paige cried to Light, pointing. “It doesn’t count against me saying it today!”

Sinjorino would have smirked, if they could. “Let us work together for a bright future. We have all the pieces, we must simply put them together.”

“There would have to be laws,” the queen decided after a moment’s thought. “Nothing that disrupted the natural order. That includes anything like roads that kill wildlife. Planes that make noise and scare prancing unicorns. No telephone poles, no strip mining...”

“That can all be worked out,” they agreed. “We have teleportation and airships, let magic move things and people rather than individual cars. Cities should always have been designed with people in mind, not vehicles, anyway.”

“Well said!” Olaph praised. “Let’s start thinking with portals!”

“Hummm... Why are you so dead set on this, Olaph?” she asked.

“I’ve been instructed to do it by the beings that instituted The System,” he explained. “They finally decided we had squandered our potential long enough and told me to start getting our act together.”

“Then that is what you shall do!” she announced. “I’ve decided. You will form a new company. Guild. Whatever you want to call it. Overseen by you but answering to me, this company will determine how much of the old world to restore, and what shall never be. It will produce those devices that do not break the newly decided upon laws, or trade for them with the demon world if what you once told me is true.”

“We were attacked right after that,” he reminded her. “That must have been what made you panic in the first place.”

She sniffed. “I am a queen. We do not ‘panic’ as you call it.”

“Of course not, majesty.”

“So what do you say?”

“I would be paid by the crown? Am I getting some kind of grant to start this company? I can’t start it from nothing, you know. If this is going to be my job from now on I need to know how I’m making my living. Do you have space for offices or will I need to find some? Huge buildings full of raw material? Space for manufacturing? Do you care where I live, as I can portal myself into work every day? There are so many things I don’t even know all the things I should ask.”

She waved that off. “All of that can be arranged. Are you willing to do it at least?”

“I don’t know...” he hedged, rubbing the back of his head. “I’ve got a lot going on right now. Seems like a pretty big ask... Could take the rest of my life you know. It’s not something I can just agree to, even if a queen is ordering me to do it. There are many considerations.”

Lunaria looked at him like he was crazy, hadn’t he just spent an hour or more telling her about how homeless he was and that he had forsaken the church to be with her and been kicked out of the Mage’s Guild for things beyond his control?

“Name your price!”

“Now we have a deal!” He shot out of his chair and extended a hand.

Ah, she thought. Simply a ploy.

And so the group got put up again at the castle, with a promise of no killer fake remnants, honest, cross my heart and hope to die, stick a cupcake in my eye. They spent the night uneventfully, and in the morning after breakfast Olaph and the group met with the queen and others to get the new company off the ground. She presented him with a list of forbidden technology, or at least practices, some of which the group pushed back on.

“We remnants are much more easily connected than organics,” Sinjorino insisted. “Do not disallow wireless communication for us. In fact, expand upon it. Let me give you an example; with the raw material provided by space travel every remnant producing factory can once again work at full capacity. Let us investigate all of them, repair them where needed, and get them all communicating again. In this way we can fulfill our original purpose, to be helpers and companions to organics. Imagine a remnant in every home! But as you don’t want computers that are portable, such as the ‘cell phones’ of old, you won’t get texting. Texting was quite useful. So, leave that sort of thing to us. An organic can say to their remnant friend and companion ‘can you check with my date and make sure we’re still on for 7:00 PM this evening at the Ricketty Goat?’ The Ricketty Goat being, of course, the premier dating destination for those between the ages of 18-25. And then the remnant wirelessly talks to the remnant who is the friend and companion of the organic in question and they query the potential date who agrees that 7:00 PM that evening is just fine and they are looking forward to sampling the newest cuisine sensation; the ‘toilet platter.’ The toilet platter of course being a series of ingredients totally unrelated to each other yet somehow comprising a delicious whole with a somewhat ironic and unfortunate name organics think is humorous. The remnant then conveys this message back to the original remnant, who informs their friend the date is still on, and that their date may be a bit of a pig judging by her food ordering proclivities. But it’s all in good fun and the two have a jolly laugh, totally good natured nothing mean about it obviously he’s also looking forward to a ‘toilet platter’ and don’t

spare the corndogs so he's just as guilty of being a pig as she is. The twist being it's a blind date and she really is a pig, a beastfolk pig and he's a beastfolk frog who later goes on to fall deeply in love with her but they have a mercurial relationship because she's a big fashion icon and actress while he's a recent collage grad and Broadway hopeful and where was I going with this?"

"Something about wi-fi?" the queen asked dryly. "And why is the word 'Muppets' being unarchived from my long-term storage suddenly? I did not request this!"

"I cannot imagine. Allow us to be the connected helpers that organics need to keep them on track. We can remind them of important dates, and set alarms, tell them the weather and local new stories of interest. In short, be the link they need without allowing them to have a full blown remote conversation on their own. Does this not solve many of your concerns with bringing back small computing devices? It simultaneously solves the conundrum of most of remnant existence."

"I suppose," she agreed. "It *would* give you all something to do."

"Exactly. The thing we're all extremely good at. Being good friends!"

"I don't suppose we have to get it perfect right at the start," she admitted. "And really we don't know what's possible yet either. Until we contact the demon world and see what they're willing to sell us, this Dean fellow you said right?"

"He seemed a good sort," Olaph agreed. "He's been around since the beginning."

"For all we know their devices can connect without aid of wires or central distribution hubs we needed in the past," she told them. "But I suppose they could leave those things out, building them for us."

"One step at a time, I think," Olaph pleaded. "Let's get me a building, and some employees, and some capital, and a- what did you call it?- a mission statement, and see what people want. Ice cream on demand from those freezers you mentioned? Easy sell. A remnant in every home? I have no idea if people would go for that or not. Plus we don't have the material yet. Let's just work with what we know."

"Agreed," they all agreed.

"To that end, should we head back to the remnant city?" Light asked. "I'd like to see it come down, and be on hand if anyone tries anything. I don't see how anyone short of a dragon could even affect a huge chunk of metal from space that's more than a kilometer in diameter, but you never know."

"They aren't just letting it fall, are they?" the queen asked, horrified.

"Gravity magic," Paige explained. "It's all taken care of."

She nodded. "I see. And it can control such a mass?"

She shrugged. "I'm sure they've done tests. If not we'll all get a little wet."

"Something that big falling uncontrolled would kill us all!" she almost shrieked. "We would get a little completely wiped out, not just a little wet! Have we forgotten the dinosaurs so easily?!"

"Oh. That would be bad. Also the who?"

"I'll explain later. I'm sure they've calculated many safety margins," Sinjorino told them. "We are remnants. We don't leave things to chance. If they can manipulate gravity in space they can manipulate it this close to the ground and prevent disaster. Their city is closest, after all, and would be wiped out first if any uncontrolled decent occurred."

"I'm not sure I'm comfortable with them having the ability to drop rocks on any target from space," the queen decided. "But it's a little late for that now, I suppose. I can only trust that remnant kind uses this power responsibly."

"Only takes one question spell to check anyway," Paige mused. "Are any rocks going to fall from space today? Yes or no. If yes, narrow it down and maybe ask them not to?"

"That would be a means of last resort, surely!" Sinjorino assured them.

"Perhaps it is time to get all the factories under one roof again," the queen muttered. "So to speak. And don't call me Shirly. Well, I can't keep you here, Light. If you want to watch the rock fall,

yes I know it's not a rock it's metal, be my guest. But Olaph here," she whacked him on the back, "has a lot of work to do."

Oh dear...

Chapter 22

A lot of work to do

Where: Unknown

When: That afternoon

“So that’s the story,” Olaph finished. He had been accompanied by Lunaria and Sinjorino, heading out of the castle and looking around for any building with “red” in the name. They found the Red Robin restaurant and told a very confused server that greeted them they were “friends of the red.”

“That’s nice,” said the server, a dark elf woman in a fancy red uniform. “We don’t have any kind of loyalty program or anything like that. I hear that’s the newest trend for shops in the area. So table for three?”

“It’s actually a code phrase I was supposed to say,” Olaph admitted. “But perhaps someone was having a bit of a joke at my expense?”

“Like spy stuff?” she asked, eyes wide and leaning forward. “You mean something like that was going on right under my nose?”

“According to my source,” Olaph agreed.

“Wait here, I’ll go ask my manager. Oh this is so exciting!!”

And so the group was led to a strange room where a stone “plug” was removed and they were led through a fairly dark space full of what looked like stone archways, each stopped up by a large stone. Another was moved, clearly with magic for the man to single handedly move that much rock, and they were brought to a meeting table. They met a man who introduced himself as John Deer, and asked what he could do for them.

“You must get a lot of Dear John letters,” Sinjorino joked.

“What?” asked John, not getting it.

“Never mind,” they sighed.

Olaph told his story, about being approached by Mike Rowave about joining up with the RED guild and his recent conversation with the queen about starting a new organization dedicated to progress. John had listened attentively, seeming quite honored to be meeting with the man essentially assigned to a brand new post in the kingdom. “Technology Czar.”

“So what can the RED guild do for you?” he asked. “We’re primarily concerned with magic.”

“We’ll need magic,” Olaph agreed. “And lots of it. Working mages with access to the spells we need to make electricity generating devices. Distribution networks. Researchers. If I can make use of an organization already used to thumbing their nose at the guild, and has contacts everywhere, it cuts down on the work I have to do. Would your guild be interested in working with me under those circumstances?”

He took a deep breath and let it out. “Our guild originally worked against the high prices charged by the Mage’s Guild for simply learning magic. We felt it quite ridiculous to charge a mage to study a piece of paper for a few hours. Imagine an apprentice blacksmith being charged for their first hammer! Obviously they would use the hammer of their master, and make their own hammer later. But no, magical learning was locked behind a two thousand year old policy. We on the other hand freely

shared spells. Imagine our surprise when the universe seemed to agree with our philosophy and gave us The System.”

“And so your guild lost some of its purpose?” he guessed.

“Correct. We stuck together in case the Guild fell apart completely or another magical war seemed to be brewing. We have a transportation network they’ve refused to create, after all.”

“The number of portals I passed on my way here?”

“Exactly. Mages making permanent gateways linked to two archways into a central area so they can move between cities quickly. I mean imagine if the Guild had done something like that? Even charging for it, the world would be much more connected even now.”

“Agreed. It was short sighted on their part.” *Just like throwing me out was. But then, if they hadn’t I wouldn’t be sitting here, would I? So maybe Bob or his kind arranged it all? But I would like to think I still have some free will in all this. That I made my own choices. I didn’t have to come here after Mike got that quest to tell me about the RED guild.*

“And now, here you are.”

“Here I am. I need help. The queen says she’ll provide funds, advice on hires, but one organization trying to oversee all technology? I really don’t know how feasible it is.”

“To be clear, the queen wants us to handle manufacturing, marketing and distribution too,” Sinjorino spoke up. “It’s not just a new political posting she’s created. With any new technology coming from our new organization we can be sure it follows all the laws she’s come up with.”

“Marketing?” Lunria asked.

“Sometimes people don’t even know they need a certain thing. Some things, like refrigeration, will sell themselves. Other things they may need to be convinced about.”

“Seems underhanded.”

“It can be,” they admitted. “If done improperly. Obviously we will only tell the truth about our products, informing people how their lives will be better and not overselling it.”

“I see,” she hummed.

“That all seems too much even for us,” John protested. “We’re not a large organization by any standard! We couldn’t be, because the Mage’s Guild was always a threat to us. For example; We’ve wanted to reach out to these newest mages, make sure they were using their powers to the fullest as they seem to only get a few spells? But we’ve held off to see how the Guild would handle them. They’re everywhere though, I doubt the Guild can police the kinds of numbers we’re seeing.”

“Reach out to them,” he agreed. “You’ll have the protection of the kingdom and I’ll be getting even more help. If they have useful magic, but are worried the Guild will stop them using it, now is the time to bring them into our new organization. My next stop is to a remnant city I’ve been visiting lately. If we can hire them to handle production of the new devices my mind will be greatly eased. This is what the forces that created The System wanted. All of us, working together. It isn’t about a single way of life or the reintroduction of electricity to the land. Those things are a byproduct of what I want to do. Get us all standing together for a better life.”

John considered. “The Mage’s Guild was all about what you *couldn’t* do,” he finally decided. “You *can’t* study magic without paying for a piece of paper with a spell formula on it. You *can’t* cast a spell for someone else without charging them for it. You *can’t* sell your services without being a member of the guild. Maybe it’s time to start exploring what we *can* do.”

“So you’re in?” Olaph asked excitedly.

“Me personally? Sure. But we’re a group. I’ll need to call a meeting, and explain things to the others. Take a vote. We’re basically coming out in the open, under the protection of the queen of Pyre. Some members may not want that kind of exposure. And I can tell you they’re going to want at least one concession, if not more. A sore point we’ve always had with the Guild, from the start.”

“What’s that?”

“Healing. If she can’t do away with the Guild’s influence entirely, make healing free for those that want to simply use their magic for good? Fine, but any healing services must then be subsidized by the kingdom in that case. People getting hurt and then being unable to work only hurts the kingdom in the long run anyway. No one should spend even a day sick or hurt when magic exists, and they could get back to work right away. But so many times even I personally have passed someone who is sick, or got hurt and couldn’t work anymore and is now on the street. How does that help the kingdom? A productive worker taken out of the workforce for want of a single spell they can’t afford because some Guild member somewhere two thousand years ago said so? No way.” He barked a laugh. “The same could be said for prisons and the like. Put them under a geas that forbids them from performing crime again. Then put them back to work. How does removing an otherwise productive member of society help anyone? You get the queen to at least agree to the first and consider the second, and I’m sure we’ll vote to join you.”

“I’ll certainly ask when I get back there.”

“Excellent. Well!” He stood. “Not what I expected when I got up this morning. But you’ve got me excited about the future again! What a concept.”

“It is a rather exciting time,” he agreed, getting up himself. “Please send a representative to the castle soon, I’ll tell the queen to expect you. Hopefully I’ll have my own office fairly soon and we can meet there.” *I need to talk to Dean too. There’s just so much to do!*

“I look forward to it.” The pair shook hands.

“Nice to meet the two of you,” he indicated Lunaria and Sinjorino.

“You too,” both said.

“Want me to walk you back?”

“We’ll just leave from here, if you don’t mind?” Olaph told him. “I’d like a word with my companions and we’ll take care of our own transportation.”

“Very well. I’m locking the door behind me...”

“It’s fine.”

“Okay. Talk to you soon.” He left and the door locked.

“I just wanted to apologize to you, Lunaria,” Olaph told her.

“For what?”

“That’s rather nice of you to say, but I think you know. When I was kicked out of the Guild I figured I would spend a few weeks getting my feet under me again and figuring out what was next for me. I didn’t realize, when I went to find you, that it would start to snowball like this. Now I’m running around everywhere, and meeting a bunch of people, and we still have to go to the demon world and talk to the man I met there before. I wanted to get to know *you*, instead I’m so busy I can barely think. If you wanted to head back to your village for now, until things calmed down with us, I would understand.”

She laughed. “You may not be learning much about me, but I’m learning a lot about you. What kind of man you are. How you approach things. I’m seeing parts of the world I never would have been able to before, and watching you make history. I’m not bored or regretting my decision to come with you at all. Take your time. You can get to know me once you have people to do a lot of what you’re trying to do now. I’ll let you know if I see anything I don’t like.”

“If you’re sure. It does mean a lot to me, you sticking around.”

“Of course!”

“In that case, we’ll continue forward. We’ll need to head back to Escalon to ask about their manufacturing things for us, and picking up Light. If the rocket isn’t going to return any time soon we’ll need him to open a portal to the demon world for us, so we can head to Dean’s office. Imagine if we hired demons to work for us too! The nice kind- or at least the ‘these demons can be trusted to some extent’ kind like the ones that want to live in Purgatory.”

"I think you skipped over that part," Lunaria told him. "Demons living where now?"

"I'll try to explain while he gets his portal open," Sinjorino told her. "It's how we came to the capital in the first place..."

Light reminded them that Dean was the manager of the Helping People Company, which had offices here in the real world and was much easier to find than opening portals and navigating the demon world. Olaph snapped his fingers and said that was right, it had slipped his mind.

"The rocket isn't due back for another three days," Light reported. "So you have plenty of time to talk to Dean. Go do that. I can ask around about dedicating some new factories to our needs. If we really are going to be making devices of all kinds, from toasters to hair dryers, we're going to need more than this one town's worth of manufacturing capacity to do it. But it's a good start as we're already here."

"Who told you about hair dryers?" Sinjorino asked.

"No one. But if this electricity stuff can be used to cool things down or heat things up, I just started thinking about what I might want heated up. Bread; obvious. Hair? Why not? I bet many a lady with long hair would like it to dry faster."

"You've got that right," agreed Paige.

"Sign me up," Lunaria was quick to chime in.

"I guess you get the patent then- We need a patent office too!" Sinjorino realized. "New schools related to inventing. A modern library maybe? That doesn't change just to walk through the door because the kingdom pays for it? We need to get on this stuff!"

"I'm only one man!" protested Olaph. "Note it down, we'll ask the queen about it. We already have healing and prison release programs to ask about. Add these to the list."

"Done!"

So their next stop was a Helping People Company office back at the capital, because of course there was one there. Dean had alerted his people soon after their first meeting that if any member of the group showed up asking for help he was to be called personally. Imagine his surprise when Olaph told him he was there to ask for help, but not in the way he might expect. He told the whole story again, how the queen was opening things up a little, and soon devices to produce electricity might be found in every home. "Once I get prototypes made, that is," he said eyeing Sinjorino. "And tested. At least the latest one didn't get destroyed this time. That should be a big help."

"I have plenty of ideas in that regard," Dean told him. "I've been messing around with alchemy and power generation for a long time. There are still alchemists in the world, right? Supernatural ones?"

"There are some at the guild," he agreed. "Maybe we can entice them to come work for us?"

"No doubt. Well, I can absolutely suggest some demons I've known more than a few years that won't take too much advantage of you. We have plenty of spare manufacturing capacity where we are, or if you just want advisers on how to set up efficient factories here we can do that too. I can't believe it was the queen all this time, keeping technology away from people." He shook his head sadly.

"And it only took a higher power stepping in to make her consider otherwise!"

"Some people, am I right?"

The two shared a laugh.

"Still, whatever you need," Dean told him. "Recycling services? We can do that. Turning old, broken stuff into usable raw material is a specialty of ours, given where we live. Not a lot of resources there! I heard about the plan to move a lot of demons into Purgatory, and someone promising them whole mountains worth of stone to build with. They'll be wanting jobs soon enough so don't forget to look there."

"I think I really do need an office," Olaph decided. "And to get all of these different groups in one room together to talk. Everyone seems eager to help so there should be few disagreements, and the

queen has allowed me to attack this problem however I saw fit. I'll take any and all help. Demons, remnants, the new working mages, traditional mages, even people down on their luck that want to work and have no offers. We'll need mundane help too, for transporting stuff or packing-

"Or market research and product testing," added Sinjorino. "Safety first!"

"Sure," he agreed with a laugh. "Plus once we start selling our generating devices someone needs to install them in homes. We'll need carpenters, stonemasons, probably new professions..." He looked to them.

"They're called electricians. Those that work on wiring up homes and businesses to actually distribute the power made by the generator."

"Those. They'll have to be trained. It'll take years but if we take it one day at a time we can do it. Lift people out of the dirt and towards the stars!"

"Now you're talking my language!" Dean agreed with a grin. "Let's do it."

Epilog

And so, several days later the biggest chunk of metal anyone had ever dreamed about lightly touched down near Escalon and started to get pulled apart by the combined efforts of remnants and mages. Several tons of rock followed, settling in next to the metal one and got cut up by demons, stepping out of gates from Purgatory and taking it back with them. Meanwhile Olaph had been working almost non-stop on the new “Power Company” which Sinjorino had said not to name, under any circumstances, Shinra. But would not explain why. Various groups met with the queen and the world started to take notice as Pyre started opening up new factories, and churning out simple but effective devices based on designs from before the fall of the world. The Mage’s Guild wasn’t happy about it, but any magic done on the generators was calculated and accounted for, meaning even if they wanted to they couldn’t do anything about it. More and more members stopped paying and left, realizing there were many opportunities in a world without so many arbitrary rules, seemingly made in a time that was no longer relevant to the modern day.

Which is not to say the world was magically made a paradise. There were still things on Olaph’s list he hadn’t gotten to yet; Making towns safer, reducing monster populations, decreasing banditry, and rooting out corruption in governments just to name a few. More items were added as problems cropped up after all. But this was a start. This was a majority of the beings of the world finally working together to bring magic and technology to all, rather than a select few. Just that alone made towns safer and reduced banditry, as there were now plenty of jobs for the asking. When it came down to it, most people wanted to do an honest day’s work for an honest day’s pay, and now there was plenty of opportunity for it.

As for Lunaria? She and Olaph finally had their first, then second, and third dates. Things were looking good for them, as she too found her place in the new world alongside the man called by powers above Heaven to finally put the world to rights. They stood, hand in hand, looking up at the stars that called them onward. And for the moment, life was good.