

Emberhaven

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

Part 2

Darkness and Light

## Chapter 1

Dirty, filthy job but it's gotta be done

Malachite and I staggered back home after weeks, or perhaps hours, or perhaps simply moments of fighting off the hobgoblin hoard that roused us that night. It was hard to say, as exhausted as I was how long it had taken, but at least it was finally over. The townspeople were safe, and we were headed home. Hanz, our remnant companion, merrily marched at our side, not feeling the effects of organic fatigue as we “ugly bags of mostly water” did. (Their words, not mine) Snarly, our youngest and smallest member scampered behind them, not having seen much action at all. He was strictly a close combat fighter and with all the options we had for keeping enemies from even getting to the top of the wall, he had little to do. It was fine, he wasn't put in danger and could at least be seen as there and ready to help.

We had been snuggled in bed after our date night- that is Malachite and I- when the alarm bells around the city started going off, and we reluctantly got up again to go see what was the matter. I expected a khi'teen attack at long last, in retaliation for what I had done to one of their encampments some weeks ago. But no. I had been surprised to see hobgoblins instead of the bug people at the walls, and took my place as a city defender. I was pleased to see Solara there as well, who nodded to me and went back to calling lightning down on the hapless creatures.

*I'm glad she took my advice and brushed up on her combat magic. I expected Gloom cultists or elemental demons not just these little guys but it's good practice because believe you me, something like that still is in the realm of possibility.*

We then spent a hectic and terrifying however-long-it-was defending the city. Hanz somewhat gleefully picking off hobgoblins one by one with their now- thanks to my magic- limitless beam weapon, while I rained arrows and spells down upon them thanking the angels that hobgoblins were not considered “one of God's creatures.” I.e. they didn't have souls. They could be killed by the hundreds without even the merest twinge of guilt, long considered to be pests the civilized world could do without. Malachite meanwhile swooped and slashed, breathing fire and pouncing on foes like a dragon would. Our only interaction during the whole thing was when he swooped up to me and landed nearby.

“Do the thing!” he gleefully instructed.

“The thing?” I wondered, using my telekinesis spell to hurl several arrows away from me into the crowd of hobgoblins far below us. “I don't know of any *thing* you could want me to do.”

“The fire thing, you know! Boom!”

“What, down there?” I asked, aghast.

“Sure. What do you think I've been doing, setting all those fires for?”

“Malachite, please. In the first place if I do that now everyone is going to know it was me that blew up that khi'teen encampment. I have enough problems, I still hear talk in the city about it, how the mage responsible should be found and questioned to make sure I'm not some dangerous lunatic running around. In the second I don't know if my magic would reach. Third I'm not disguised, it's bad enough I'm out here as myself, it's dark enough no one will get a good look, and forth if it hits the walls it could set them on fire and then we would have much larger problems!”

“Boy, you sure know how to take the fun out of things.”

“Fun?” *Is that what this is?*

“With your ‘logical reasons’ that are probably well thought out and perfectly valid so I can't argue against them. Fine, no big fireballs for me tonight.”

“You want great balls of fire, cultivate a mana core of your own and learn the spell,” I told him. “I told you that you could if you wanted, and that I would help. Then it's your head on the line if it goes wild and something bad happens.” *Like you hit someone you love with it, and they aren't suddenly immune to fire like a certain someone turned out to be. I can still feel the terror I had in that moment, when I thought I had lost you to my own carelessness. Don't you see that?*

He snorted. "Great balls of fire, good one."

"Just get out there." I planted a kiss on the side of his face and shoved him over the wall again. Of course he was pure muscle and I had the arms of a sapling, but he laughed and let me shove him.

"It really was like the days of old," Hanz remarked.

I tried to perk up enough to follow what they were saying. "What's that?"

"Tonight. It was almost as if my batteries were not degraded, allowing me to use my weapon as I did before the change. I really am grateful for that spell combination of yours."

"Oh sure, not a problem," I told them. "I'll refresh it in the morning, don't let me forget."

"I've already set three thousand reminders. Perhaps I could scale it back to only two thousand, I hated those pop-ups back in the day it's no different now. Perhaps one every *few* minutes is sufficient?"

"Whatever. Ah, we're home." I unlocked *my own* front door with my key and everyone shuffled into the main room. That little thrill still hadn't worn off, even at this early hour.

"Ah, are you, uh, going to, that is..." Malachite pointed to his room.

"Just get some sleep, big guy," I told him with a playful shove. "You're hard enough to wake up in the morning as it is. We'll talk 'arrangements' when I'm not dead on my feet. I'm going to my own bed for now."

"That's probably for the best," he agreed.

"Good nith all," Snarly told us, heading to his own room. "Thee you in tha morninth."

"We're doing the sewer thing tomorrow," I reminded everyone. "We've put that off long enough."

Malachite just groaned.

"More work?" Hanz said in a deep voice. "Move here, move there." They laughed as if they told the funniest joke in the world, though none of us did. "Nobody understands my jokes anymore!" they complained.

After a very late breakfast we got ambitious enough to head to the sewer and investigate reports of an infestation of slime creatures and general contamination of wells in the area. We headed down, smelling a different foul odor than the usual one- Snarly. I was disguised as a frog person, at least while we walked around the streets heading to the entrance the guard captain had told us about, but dropped it once entering the sewers. Reports were the area was clear of people, thanks to the slime creatures, so probability was low anyone would see me. My spiky headed "glory" returned, and I flipped a stone disk into the air and caught it.

"Light," I intoned dramatically, because that's simply what one did in times like this. The symbol on the disk vanished, and a ball of light behind my shoulder winked into existence. "Let's get this over with." At my back, Boline and Besom, the summons that I had called upon back at the house nodded and went invisible behind me.

We headed down a narrow stone passageway, the light as we moved revealing two rather large snakes in our way. Malachite took the lead, jumping in front and lighting the place up with fire. *Is that the smartest thing to do, in a sewer?* I managed to think but we didn't get blown to pieces and the snakes slithered off, further down the corridor. We saw them again, joined by their fellow snake brothers around a corner, but all took off when they saw Malachite. They weren't stopped by the grating that was there, but we were, so we backtracked and headed further on.

"There," Hanz told us, pointing. On the ceiling was our target, a pair of bright green slime creatures, or gumdrops hanging there, waiting to drop unto unsuspecting prey. Malachite lit them up with fire, causing them to drop.

"I think you missed," Hanz reported, firing their weapon. It punched through the poor thing and it slumped to the side. With a bit of reluctance I cast my wind needle spell on the other, wishing we could simply capture them somehow and take them outside the city. *But who knows how many are*

down here? It jiggled as it was hit by two needles, but still went to attack Malachite. He jumped back a little and breathed fire again, clearly not wanting to engage the thing physically.

*Ah, that's smart. I think they're slightly acidic, even he could be hurt getting that slime stuff on him, and I don't know if my repair spell would help his blade if some got on it.*

It too went still.

We were now facing a choice, as there was a wall in front of us. A strange place for one, the sewer ran directly next to it so we could see around it easily.

"So phasing magic, or do you want to want to brave the sewer water?" I asked.

"Phasing!" everyone shouted. I stuck a finger in my ear and wiggled it.

"Okay, okay, you don't have to shout." I mentally willed the light around the passage as it couldn't exactly phase through the wall- or could it? I actually had no idea! But with it on the other side we would be prepared so I just left it, vowing to experiment with that a bit later. With everyone grabbing on we easily passed through the wall to the other side. Boline simply flying around and Besom not caring if they got a bit of sewer water on them. Right into a group of snakes, of course, which added to the gumdrop problem on this side of the wall. Malachite again breathed fire at them, trying to scare them off or actually kill them I wasn't sure, as he missed either way. I figured I would at least try to get them moving and thrust a palm forward. "Thrust!" I cast, making one skid down the tunnel and turn to leave. Hanz meanwhile had lasered one of the gumdrops that was making its way over to us, and Snarly hit one of the snakes that was nearby with the flat of his blade. "Go on, git!" he shouted, pointing. "We done wanna hurtcha!"

Suddenly, Besom appeared further ahead and shot magic down the corridor. It impacted something, as I heard a cry and shouting from down there.

"What's she shooting at?" Hanz asked.

"We better go check!"

They headed over there, taking the lead and pointing their weapon down there.

"Hobgoblins, three of them!"

*Left over from the attack? Did they try to get into the city this way and are now hiding out down here?*

"Better take care of them!" Malachite decided.

"Agreed."

"Wait!" shouted Snarly, but Malachite was already taking a deep breath. He expelled a gout of flame in that direction, filling the small space and the tortured cries of the hobgoblins echoed past us.

"What did you say?" he asked as the flames subsided.

"Somethinths not right!"

It looked right to me. Instead of counting three hobgoblins I counted two, it seemed in the narrow space of that corridor one had simply been incinerated. The other two were thrashing around, various parts of them on fire. It seemed one snake was wounded, the other was getting up again from where it had been flattened to the ground, missing the flames entirely. It seemed ready for more so while the one next to it slithered past us and headed to the trench with the water in it, Besom and I hit the other with a knockout blast. Besom of course because that's her only real attack, and me figuring the snake wasn't evil or anything. There was no reason it had to die down here.

"Whatever," Malachite told him, as he rushed off towards the hobgoblins. He slashed at the snake, scoring on it, but not cutting all that deeply.

*Come on, first bears, now giant snakes? What's causing all these animals to get so huge?*

We both fired our spells off again, and finally the snake collapsed to the side.

“Passageway is clear of gumdrops to the end,” Hanz announced, walking back to us. “We can’t go any further that way anyway. What’s he doing?” They pointed to Snarly, who was trying to drag one of the hobgoblins towards the water.

“Help me put tha fire out,” he insisted.

Malachite shrugged, took a few steps, grabbed both of the hobgoblins and tossed them into the sewage. “Happy?”

“Yeth. Now we juth have to wake them up.”

“May I inquire as to why?” Hanz asked.

“They didn’t ‘eem thurprithed to see us, they ‘eemed to be waiting for us,” he explained.

“Interesting.” Their head swiveled towards the door. “I hear voices beyond. Perhaps we should go around the corner? They may be more hesitant to attack if they find their guards missing, perhaps their assumption would be they simply stepped away for a moment. Finding us here standing over the bodies of their comrades would goad them into attacking to avenge their fallen.”

“Well I’m not touching them,” Malachite announced. “Look where they’ve been.”

“You put ‘em there!” Snarly protested.

“Yeah, because you said to!”

“Never mind,” I told them both, raising my hands. “It’s a simple matter, really.” I dragged them out with magic and we all went around the corner to look them over. Casting a quick hygiene spell on both it didn’t look good. One had both arms completely gone, it seemed he tried to block the flames that way and they took the brunt of the damage. What was left was charred flesh, ending at the elbow. The other had sensibly dropped flat, but perhaps not fast enough as his face was all messed up.

“What can you do?” Snarly asked. “I thried a healith potion on tha one.” He pointed to the arm guy.

“I would need some kind of regeneration spell,” I mused. “Healing now may at least save him, but even that may be beyond me.” *I’ll tackle the one with the head wound first. He’s probably worse off, the head being fairly important after all.* I pulled ambient mana through my core and started casting, taking as much time as I could.

“What do you think it means, hobgoblins here?” Hanz asked.

“That attack just happened,” Malachite reminded them. “They probably got past our defenses and came down here. They could have seen us on the wall, Orchid’s magic does light things up pretty well, especially at night. And your weapon draws attention too.”

“I suppose you gave them little time to react. Perhaps that is the whole story. They recognized us from our time on the wall, and would have simply retreated had we given them the chance.”

“I guess we’ll see.”

I finished my spell and the flesh, at least most of it, reformed smoothy. He started waking up, and panicked, gibbering at us in orc or whatever language they used.

Snarly tried saying something to him, but it didn’t sound like the same language, and he didn’t get any more calm.

“We don’t want to hurt *ham*?” Malachite asked, a confused look on his face. “I could go for some ham, is it lunch time yet...”

*We just ate before coming down here!*

“Hurt *him*!” Snarly snapped. “I thaid him, not ham!”

“No you didn’t.”

“Yeth I did! My draconic ith perfeth.”

“It’s barely recognizable. And I don’t think they speak that?”

*Ugh.* I went over to the other one while they squabbled.

“Perhaps communicating with this one is our current priority?” Hanz suggested. “Calm him down, and whatnot?”

I shook my head. “In a second. I put that spell on and my healing effectiveness will go down. I’m going to need all the help I can get on this one. Just keep him quiet so I can concentrate.”

“A difficult proposition, nevertheless I shall attempt it.” They went over to the other one as well, trying to block his view, as the guy went crazy when I bent over to start healing his buddy. Again gathering ambient mana I cast, hoping I didn’t backfire the spell and get myself hurt. The energies faded, and he didn’t seem any better off. “Yeah, that’s going to be a problem,” I muttered. “Oh boy. Okay, okay, shut up already!” I turned back to the hobgoblin, who was being held down by Hanz while squealing and carrying on like he was being tortured. “He’ll probably be the least threatened by you, Snarly,” I decided. “Why don’t you talk to him? The spell is touched based so come here.” I held out a hand, reminding myself to do a quick hygiene again after this on myself, and with my other hand gestured for the translation spell. He touched me and I finished casting it, (a whole minute later) so he turned back to the captured, struggling little creature.

“Can you understand me now?” he asked.

“Yes I can!” the hobgoblin cried, ceasing to struggle. “Is Uglurk dead?”

“I don’t know, who is Urgurk?”

“I am Grekgrek!”

“That’s great, who is Urgurk?”

“Not Urgurk, he died in attack. Uglurk!”

“You mean that one?” He pointed to the other one.

“Yes. Where Urskip? Did he go tell others about hobgoblin saver arrival?”

“Uhh, yes? He must have, right? Orchid, is that one dead?”

“I think he’s still breathing? He’s in bad shape though.”

“Yeah, his arms are off,” Hanz remarked. “From now on he’ll have to bite kneecaps.”

“What that metal one say?”

“Never mind. He’s not dead. What are you doing here?”

“Looking for hobgoblin saver. And now I find! Hurray! Now all can go home.”

“What do you mean, savior?” he demanded. “You mean in the diamond mine? We saved you from that orc?”

“Orc orc!” grunted Hanz. “Orc orc orc orc... Orc.”

Snarly rolled his eyes.

“No no,” protested Grekgrek. “Groglorg saw mighty hero. Tell all tribe not to attack big person city when home lost, but all tribe not listen. Only us few. Tribe attack big person city, all get killed. Now have no home and no tribe. But savior real! Can get home back!”

“You mean Malachite, or Hanz?” Snarly pointed to each of them in turn. “Or I guess Orchid here?”

The hobgoblin looked at him like he was crazy. “Talking about you, savior, of course! You mighty warrior! Save what is left of tribe! Go see Groglorg, he tell you!”

I stifled a laugh as best I could. *Wait, who?*

“What’s so funny?” Malachite demanded. “What’s going on?”

## Chapter 2

There's a fire down below and you don't want to catch his eye

The situation before us was tense, and I could feel Malachite's hand twitching toward his sword as we stood there in the next chamber. I could feel this because I had my hand on his other arm, in perhaps a vain attempt at calming him. Grekgrek had managed to stand and invite us forward, knocking on the door and saying the savior was here. There was an excited rush on the other side, and we headed through into a cistern, Hanz carrying the still unconscious Uglurk. I had no idea what they would do for him, but they didn't slash his throat out right away so that was something?

*Just last night I personally accounted for at least a dozen of these little pests, I thought to myself. If not more. They tried to swarm the wall. I blasted them with wind, tore them off the wall with telekinesis, threw arrows at them. Now we're all just standing here, nice as you please. This situation borders on the absurd, and how are they going to take the death of that other guard? I don't think they've realized he's gone yet.*

But it was the mural, painted with stolen paint, that caught all our attention. Directly across from the door was a huge, incomplete picture, being painted by a hobgoblin in a torn and dirty purple robe. Clearly a castoff from a mage of some kind, the figure turned and threw down a brush.

"You see!" he cried, "it is just as I told you!"

A cheer went up from the assembled crowd of hobgoblins, all directed at Snarly, who incidentally was also the main subject of the mural. It was little more than outlines but the direction was clear. He seemed to be standing atop a serpent of some kind, holding aloft a sword in victory over the beast. None of us were present, just him. My eyes slid off the area, it was a bit over the top, and darted around the rest of the room. It was circular, with a hole in the floor that had a funny smell coming from it. Part of the far wall had collapsed, creating a tunnel in that direction, and all over were the no doubt pilfered objects the hobgoblins had collected. It was a mess. My eyes were once again attracted to the mural. What exactly was I looking at? I could hardly believe it. My mind simply did not want to accept it. That this hobgoblin could have supernatural power, had learned to paint, or had chosen Snarly as the subject of the work warred within me for the most absurd idea of the day.

"Finally some recognition," Snarly announced. "Yes yes, calm down everyone. Perhaps you can explain exactly how I'm supposed to accomplish this miracle?"

"I can offer no guidance, savior," said the one in the purple robe as he came over to us. "Only that I have seen your victory. You lead us back to our home and we will sing your praises forever!"

"Home? Where exactly do you come from?"

"We made sure to mark it!" he exclaimed, rushing over to a pile of stuff and digging through it. "So we could go back when the savior slew the great beast. Here, here it is savior, here is our home." He brought out a scrap of a filthy map, marked with an x. We looked it over, it wasn't too far away.

"Start from the beginning, will you?" he commanded.

"Of course, savior. Of course. We were driven out of our home by the monster. I told the tribe this is a thing I knew would come. They said I was crazy, just wanted to seem smart. I told them to ask at the big people town for the savior. They said big people town would just kill us. Decided to attack big people town instead. Take their home. I tried to warn them there were many, many more big people than us, but they didn't listen. We stayed quiet, sneaky sneaky. Found all this on the way! Uh, just laying there, we didn't steal it!"

"Uh huh. Go on."

"I painted this, so all would know the savior. And now here you are! See? See? They said I no see future, I showed them."

There was a general agreement among the tribe this was all true.

"Pity about rest of tribe though."

There was an aura of sadness that swept over the crowd.

*What is happening right now? Is that... sympathy, that I'm feeling? It can't be.*

"And you think I'm going to fight some huge monster?"

"Yes, yes! Win us back our home! I saw it!"

"How am I going to kill something that huge with these tiny things?" He indicated his daggers.

"Oh, no worries savior! Look, look!" he pointed to the mural. "You have sword!"

"No I don't."

"That's just because I haven't given it to you yet!"

"What?"

But he was already scampering to another pile of junk and lifted out a cloth bundle, which he reverently handed to Snarly. He took it, not exactly enthusiastically, and unwrapped it. What he pulled out was, at least from my limited knowledge of weapons, a fairly fine sword.

"Do you have enough for the rest of the class?" Hanz asked.

Everyone looked at him a moment and went back to staring at Snarly, who was looking the blade over.

"I guess not."

"What is this?" he asked finally.

"It's yours! We didn't steal it!" Groglorg insisted, eyes darting around the room. Everyone seemed to be not looking at him for some reason.

*Well you clearly didn't make it so where did it come from then? Just fell out of the sky, did it?*

"Uh, Malachite? Orchid?" He held it up.

Malachite took it up and looked it over. While far too small for him, it did seem perfectly sized for Snarly and the blade gleamed as if it had never been used. One curious feature was the inclusion of what seemed to be a glass vial running most of the length of the blade, in the blood groove. Some sort of liquid sloshed inside as he tipped it back and forth. Running a thumb along the edge he nodded. "It's a real sword."

"And it's magical," I added, feeling magic radiating from it. "I'll need some time to study it of course but this is a genuine magical item. Fabricated or imbued I can't tell yet. It seems the name of the blade is Viperfang." I tapped the writing on it. "In case you were interested." *You know how much a thing like this would be worth? It must be stolen. This hobgoblin must have some supernatural power, probably stole it from someone using that power to know how and avoid getting caught. Great, they won't let such a thing remain lost for long, they'll have a mage track it down and then we're going to be holding the bag explaining how it came to our possession. Super looking forward to that.*

"Yes, yes, the sword can kill the monster!" Groglorg insisted.

"So why didn't you use it?" Snarly asked.

"Us?" The hobgoblin backpedaled. "We can't face the creature, only the savior can use the sword and lead us back to our home in victory!"

"Which is me!"

"That's right!"

"Then I won't let you down."

Another cheer went up.

"Do you even know how to use a sword?" Malachite asked, passing it back to him. "It's a lot different from those daggers you use."

"Orchid can help."

He looked at me. "It's true. My spell may more than double your competence in wielding a blade but it can just as easily make him a fair swordsman even if he's only used daggers all his life. I just worry about that glass, who makes a single use sword?" *Clearly the sword is supposed to be thrust into the beast you're fighting, which breaks the glass, dumping the poison into the wound. An interesting delivery method but tricky to use properly.*

"It does seem rather fragile," Hanz agreed. "Don't bump it against anything while carrying it."



“Someone that really wants something dead, and doesn’t mind replacing the major component of it after it’s been used,” Malachite figured.

“How do we know they didn’t make it?” Snarly asked, turning back to the hobgoblins. “Are you all messing around with poison? The people up there,” he pointed, “are starting to notice you know?”

“You mean the water?” he asked. He pointed to another bundle on the ground, it seemed to be a dead hobgoblin. “Water was bad when we got here. Some drank, got sick. That one died. Tribe almost gone. Need home back. We leave for home right now?”

“You’ll have to wait,” he told them.

“Awwwwww!”

“We need to take care of the town first. And we need some plan to sneak you out of here. Maybe disguise magic, a few at a time. You trust your vision, right?”

“Of course!” Groglog drew himself up to his full height.

“Then trust it will happen at the proper time. We take care of this first, then we leave and fight some gigantic snake monster or whatever it is.”

“Yay!”

*Yaaaay...*

One crisis at a time was my motto, so we took a look around the area to see what we could discover. Snarly was lowered via rope down into the cistern, but returned saying he couldn’t see anything but yucky water down there. Our new “friends” the hobgoblins said they often heard noises coming from the crack which Hanz said sounded mechanical in nature. They didn’t need the spell to understand sound effects, after all, which they referred to as a “reverse C3-PO situation” leaving us all wondering what they were talking about.

“So, about that water!” they pressed on. “This rope seems structurally sound enough, allow me to probe beneath the surface and see if I can spot something.”

“You’re on your own,” I warned. “I could go down there but if the water is contaminated, it’ll still get in my eyes and such.”

“Agreed, best to not risk your delicate, organic, organs. Not to worry, if the water is contaminated it’s not likely anything alive will bother me. And I can perhaps deal with anything mechanical that may be leaking. At least to drag it closer to the edge here so you can lift it out with your magic.”

“Fair enough.”

They left their bow and pack, but did activate one of my spell tokens for light. Malachite slowly lowered them down and we waited while they looked around. They got to the end of the rope, then were pulled back up by Malachite.

“You’re filthy!” I announced. Some sort of black gunk was sticking to their casing, not dripping off with the water.

“So it seems.”

“I hope this works. Hygiene!” I cast, touching them. It did seem to work, the gunk was blasted off them, vanishing into the air. “Take that, gunk!”

“I would almost say I feel refreshed. Ah, my lower joint is now 2% more responsive.” They wiggled their knee back and forth. “Must have been a bit of accumulation there.”

“Anyway, did you see anything down there?” Malachite asked.

“Vibrations, machinery sounds, the water got more and more filthy as I went along, and several pipes leading to or from the area. But nothing that indicates the source of the problem. I will either have to forgo the safety of the rope to penetrate further, or explore the area beyond the crack in our usual formation.”

“Humm, penetrate further...” Malachite muttered, looking at me. “Or *explore* the area beyond the crack? Humm... You have a preference Orchid?”

“Not now!” I playfully smacked him in the arm.

He just grinned at me. “What? They said it, not me!”

“My apologies for using such a crude phrasing, it was certainly not my intent to leave any openings for double entendres.”

“I still don’t know what she’s upset about,” Malachite protested. “It was all perfectly innocent. Maybe your translation magic is acting up?”

Boys. “Let’s stick together. Come on.”

The hobgoblins wished us luck and we headed past the crack in the wall, and towards the sound of the machinery beyond. Deeper in the walls changed from simply being a crack in the earth to smoothed walls, finally a corridor with doorways, rocks spilling out like rooms beyond filling in and spilling out past their doors. At the end of the hallway was a clear door we could open and we stepped through. Flickering lights met our eyes, this was clearly an entrance to some kind of facility because three mechanical forms stood by a door. One which I recognized, the same type of guard we had seen at the temple of the eclipse. The two at the edges were different, they had legs, and were struggling to get up. The one with the treads rolled forward, surprising us, how it had lasted so long without any support was beyond me. Then it spoke.

“Garble garble garble,” it said.

“They’re your people,” Malachite told them. “You’re up.”

Hanz stepped forward and said something to them in some ancient language. They seemed to understand it at least.

“Garble garble garble.”

“Whath it thaying?” Snarly asked, leaning towards me.

“Sorry, when we left that room my translation magic ended, as we didn’t need to talk to them anymore,” I apologized. “Magic, am I right?”

“They want to take us into custody,” Hanz reported.

“Oh, oh, we know someone really good at getting out of that!” Malachite raised my hand.

“Sure, let’s take a tour of the place,” I agreed. “We can always use violence later.”

“Rather than shooting our way in? Mix it up a little?” Hanz asked. They turned back to the security bot. “Yes, yes, stop counting we surrender all right?” They changed languages again and repeated their statement.

The bots took us down the hall and to the right, there were more forces in the halls and a hallway to the left. The door almost didn’t open, there was a very nasty gear gnashing sound from within that made Hanz seem to wince as we listened, but finally it was open enough to let us through. This area also had two security bots, the leg type, and the tread one went over to a panel and started to do something. Half the room was collapsed, it was a miracle the station the robot went to was intact and working as well as it was. There was a moment of silence. Hanz asked it something and listened to the reply.

“Okay, it’s waiting for additional security personal,” they told us. “Three guesses how long that’s going to take.”

“More tan a few minuths?” Snarly guessed.

“A lot more than that.”

“What’s that noise?” Malachite asked, looking around. “Oh, it stopped!”

Hanz looked back the way we came. “Door didn’t close. I guess the mechanism finally gave up. Poor things, this place has been forgotten a long time.”

*Well, the security forces hassling us isn’t helping.* “Can you read any of that?” I gestured to the panel the robot was still waiting next to.

“I can indeed. This is, as we suspected, a water treatment plant. Most of it is in the red, I’m honestly surprised anything works after so long. Incidentally, if we wished to exercise the violence

option once more I doubt these units would put up much of a fight. Their systems must have degraded almost to the point of uselessness. Firing their weapons even once may deplete them totally.”

“It would only take once, I’ve seen your weapon,” Malachite countered. “I would probably be fine but what about the others?” He indicated Snarly and myself. “One lucky shot and…”

“This statement is true. There is not zero risk.”

“It’s your risk to take,” he told me.

I looked around. Three ‘units’ in here, one right outside the door, one further down the corridor that could get here fairly quickly especially as the door was now stuck open. There was no cover in this room, and really what was to be gained by smashing this place up? A stray bolt could hit that panel severing our only link to somewhat understanding this place. “Gather around, let’s just head ‘up,’” I decided. “I doubt they’ll understand magic but I’ll step us up quickly.”

“Right.”

They put a hand on me and I gathered ambient mana. “Step!” I commanded, the magic rushing out of my core and into the others. The units didn’t get a chance to even say anything and we were looking “down” on them from the astral. The one unit we had been dealing with swiveled a bit, said something, and rolled back down the corridor.

“Totally degraded,” Hanz sighed. “It basically forget we were ever there. Object permanence maybe? Look into it?”

“I could make us invisible, and you could do yourself,” I offered. “If you wanted to drop back down and poke at that console a bit.”

They shook their head. “I would not know any command codes for the system, besides it seems to be running some kind of diagnostic, one that will probably never finish. We know the place is degraded, I don’t need this station to tell me that.”

“Very well. Let’s see what else this place has to offer.”

“Agreed.”

We headed south, past more collapsed rooms and flickering, barely visible display stations. We even found some shelves of smaller robots, possibly a recharging station for repair units, long since degraded and falling apart. Hanz stood and stared at them.

“Sorry,” I told them. “Perhaps when we get a minute we can come back here, put together at least one working one from the parts of the others?”

“I am not emotional about it,” they insisted. “Let us press on.”

*Kind of sound it though?*

We found a large holding area in the next room, basically just a huge metal tube sunk into the floor, which was filled with water. The railing around it was falling apart, but Hanz stepped up to the side and peered down into the depths.

“Strange,” they finally decided. “This water seems clear. The contaminant must be seeping in from elsewhere. If my calculations are correct this is where I would have emerged, had I continued on previously. The flow of the water must be away from this location.”

“If it’s a leak from some old machine,” Malachite reasoned, “we have to find that machine. We haven’t really found anything like a pump. The water must come here from somewhere, even if it’s just passively now because the machine broke.”

“Agreed. The water level would not be so high otherwise. Let us take that passageway there and carry on.” They pointed, around the side was another door, so we nodded and headed over there. This hallway was partly collapsed, and Malachite, in the lead, gasped. “What in the world?”

“What is it?” Snarly asked, peaking around them.

“Skeletons! And more of those slime things.”

“Undead?” I gasped. “That’s odd. I might have accepted the odd ghost, some worker here dedicated to their task that died when the moon came but skeletons like this have to be made. I don’t understand how they would have come here.”

“Regardless, they’re here now. Come on. No, wait!” Malachite held up a hand. “Let me scout ahead, just in case. I have a bad feeling.”

“You always have bad feeling,” Hanz intoned. “But reconnaissance is important.”

“Hold still then, I’ll make you invisible,” I told him. “Unless you just want to go, Hanz?”

“With a magical means at our disposal, let us take that option,” they agreed. “No need to stress my systems in such a way.”

“Fair enough.” I put the magic on Malachite and he vanished. We waited. A few minutes later he reappeared.

“It’s as I thought,” he reported. “The pumping area is just ahead. Lots of pipes and machinery. But you’ll never guess who else I saw.”

“The ghost of Hendrix?” Hanz asked.

“Who? No, our buddies the elemental demons. Not ice ones, of course. The darkness ones. Between here and the pumping station are five skeletons, five slimes, six elemental demons, and one ugly looking thing that was mostly legs and face, I swear it was actually *sniffing me out* in the astral. It perked up when I got near. Took a quick look around though, I think they’re causing this on purpose. The demon things, I mean. There was all this black gunk around the pipes. It didn’t look natural, like a big blob of poison was leaching into the pipe. It was like they put it there.”

“Did you just call me blob?” Hanz asked.

“No, I said the pipe had a blob on it!”

“Ah, that makes more sense. How far away?”

“Just a few meters. Everything will come running if we make some kind of stink in the area.”

*Let’s avoid throwing Snarly in there in that case. Not that any of us are any better at the moment.*

“We will need a plan,” Hanz decided. “Perhaps you can give us more details about the coming terrain and we can come up with something?”

“Okay. This passageway curves around and goes downwards, probably so it’s near the tank on the other side...”

We got into position in the pumping room. My role was, *naturally*, the most important but at the same time the most questionable. Naturally I didn’t want to blast apart the gunk on the pipes with wind or fire because that might burst the pipes. They were probably weakened enough if some kind of acid or poison was simply dripping through them. Meanwhile I needed time to work and then get everyone back into the astral. So my first attempt was simply going to be my hygiene spell, on the pipes. This would of course attract attention because of the projection of the spell from my mana core lighting the place up. Would it even work? Would the magic consider this “black gunk” as Malachite called it contamination enough to simply be vanished into whatever it was that the spell turned dirt and such into? I had no idea, and we didn’t want to go back and forth again to further alert the darkness elementals to get me a look at it. But if the elemental demons were *distracted*, say by the weird creature Malachite described running off because they smelled something down the corridor, I would have room to work. So they got into position some distance from me, Malachite no doubt grumbling about how he still didn’t like it.

“You didn’t forget about my summons, did you?” I asked before we had left, and both became visible again. He jumped and went for his sword, then sheepishly relaxed. They both shook their heads and went invisible again.

“I sort of did. They are pretty new.”

“Not a problem. I’ll be fine. My invisibility won’t break because I’m not casting on a creature, so I should have plenty of time to try things if the cleaning spell doesn’t work. If you hear me yowling like a wet cat though, the pipe burst and we’ll need to get out of there pretty quick. I’ll need to touch you all, remember, so you come to me. I’m too slow to come to you.”

“Right.”

So Hanz and Snarly were invisible on their own, meaning I only had to focus on myself and Malachite. I got into position as quickly as I could, skirting the room the long way to get to the pipes. Thankfully the creature had “taken the bait” as it were, and I was pretty sure the darkness elementals had followed it. *Showtime*. I dropped the dimensional step spell and drew upon ambient mana. The hygiene spell was touch based, so I just touched my little finger into the gunk to minimize contact. “Cleanse!” I cast, and for once the fates were with us. The pipe cleaned up nicely, though of course water did start spraying out of it. I cast repair on that one and moved to the next. Repeating this twice more I heard a voice.

“Orchid, it’s heading your way!”

I whirled, and the strange creature was slugging towards me. While it had legs, of a sort, it seemed to be made of that same gunky stuff on the pipes, and I had to wonder if this wasn’t some kind of elemental filth demon or something. Despite how gooey it was, and it did leave a trail of slime behind it, the thing moved pretty fast. I had a choice to make; try and take it on with my summons in the usual fashion, or take a pretty big risk. I took the risk, casting and holding the spell. It leapt upon me, and I released it just as the bulk of it hit me and started to wrap around me.

“Cleanse!” I cleaned myself off, and the creature gave a startled yip and vanished. “Take that! Weaponized cleaning magic!” *Who would have thought? Man I could go for a cinnamon bun right now. Yeah, nice, hot, cinnamon bun.*

“Are you okay?” Malachite shouted, the others hot on his heels.

“Fine!” I shouted back, and started casting again. *Let’s get out of here.*

“Grabbed a bomb,” Hanz told me, brandishing a square looking device. “Not sure why it was just sorta left in that passageway, I can’t see elemental demons building something like this.”

“Bomb?” I asked.

“Yeah, you know, goes boom? Kills ya? Anyway, what are they doing now?”

The darkness demons had skidded to a halt, looked around, and headed back out again. We followed at a distance and they seemed to talk with the others who had not been as fast. Another moment and they vanished again. The skeletons nearby crumbled, and we all shared a look.

“What was that all about?” they asked.

“I really couldn’t tell you,” I admitted. *So it was them. What a slow way of doing things. How did they even find this place? Did they think no one would come looking when their water went bad? How dumb do they think we are? So many questions.*

“I’m jes glad they’re gonth,” Snarly added.

In the end we looted the place, not finding much. Hanz found some writing on the walls they said was interesting and they would share with us later. Snarly stuffed a complete skeleton in their pack for some reason, and Malachite found a sword like ‘plasma cutter’ at least according to Hanz we could play around with later, if it still worked. The guard robots were still active in the upper section, so we didn’t yet bother with trying to take them out. We just headed back to the sewers and out. We had a sword to look over and some sort of monster worm to destroy. For some hobgoblins.

*It’s a crazy old life.*

## Chapter 3

If you can get them, before they get you

With the sewer situation taken care of I cleaned everyone off with magic and Malachite asked in no uncertain terms that the answer should be no- if we were leaving right away to head to the lair of the monster.

“My vote is no,” I told him. “We’re still not 100% because of last night, and we only have a vague idea where this worm is to be found. It’s at least lunch time, do we want to leave in the middle of the day? Even flying, I’d say no. They can wait a day. I’d like to look the sword over, report what we found to the town so they can decide what to do about the water supply, and I’m still concerned about those two crystals we found. They were pretty far apart in the temple, is it even safe to have them so close together? Let’s maybe find out. I want to look into the temple of the eclipse, now that we have an actual name for the place, and see if any historical record can be found of light and dark crystals. Let’s take the rest of the day off. You three report in to the captain that the water should start to clear up, and report what we found down there. The town may want to send experts, given it seems at least part of our water comes from there and if it breaks down completely... You know. Clear the place out, open up the old rooms, reinforce the place? Whatever. Offer my help with stone shaping spells and telekinesis.” *Charging the town for magic? Yes please!* “Meanwhile I’ll head to the library, we can then meet up for lunch? Dinner? Something, and we can see about the sword and where we’re supposed to go for the hobgoblins. I expect we’ll need a bit better map than that ratty old thing they gave us.”

“Actually, I would caution against contacting the city guard at this time,” Hanz told us. “After we reveal the existence of the waterworks below the city the natural response would be to send experts to secure the place and begin any needed repairs. As they would have to pass through the territory now occupied by the hobgoblins, inciting violence against them would occur as a matter of principle. Our vanquishing of the dragon should not take long, thus freeing them up to depart under cover of darkness tomorrow. My recommendation is thus to wait until the way is clear, then inform them. The water will start to clear regardless, and we are not ‘hard up’ as they say for currency the matter can wait.”

*As long as another group doesn’t get sent in the meantime I suppose.* “That’s actually a good idea,” I agreed. “Okay, I guess you all head home then for the moment?”

“I’ll probably just fall asleep back at the house,” Malachite announced. “Wake me for food though.”

“I need to pose my skeleman!” Snarly added. “Thatth what I’ll be doing.”

“I will attempt to make sure the bomb is safe to have around, and see what I can do with the plasma cutter we acquired,” Hanz decided. “So it seems we all have our tasks.”

“Look over the sword first,” I told them. “See if there’s any mechanical component we should worry about.” *Get it out of the way, then I can do my magical examination.*

“Very well.”

We went our separate ways, and I spent some time in the library. I of course first took my bun form and went to get a cinnamon bun to satisfy my cravings. Finally, once again I was in my element after so long. Of course, me sitting around doing nothing but practicing magic and reading our family’s books for a hundred years was what made me look as I did, covered with sharp bits of organic stone. But what can you do? I was currently disguised as an owl person, shifting on the way over, who better to want access to a library? My name would be Hootsifer, though I wondered if that was little too close to Lucifer for most tastes? That one was still wandering around somewhere to be sure, a little thing like the chaos moon showing up and then thousands of years of upheaval wouldn’t change that! Eh, no one was really going to ask, I just wanted to have something ready just in case. I had books piled around me, trying desperately to stay on task and stick to only books that may be relevant; to that end insight into the Dagger Forest, the temple of the eclipse, eclipse magic in general, any sort of “cult” of the

eclipse (as a long shot), magic infused remnants, light and darkness demons, magically infused crystals relating to darkness and light- Okay it was a lot I admit it! I found little of relevance. Namely three points:

1. The Dagger Forest was historically used to perform magical research and was home to various cults over the years. This made sense, as it was nearby to the town and heavily wooded, you could hide oh heck just to pull a random example a whole temple inside it with no one the wiser for years.

2. The place was far more active before and during the mage wars, magical experiments were done there. None specifically mentioned, of course, just a vague sense that it was used as a testing ground at one time.

3. Nothing on the temple itself, or eclipse magic or light and dark demons. This was perhaps telling, as maybe information on it was purposefully suppressed?

I was leaned back in my chair thinking about my next move. There was probably *some* sort of mage's guild presence here, as there were mages that did business in town. They would need to be properly regulated and taxed and whatnot, so contacting them about the crystals could be a smart move. They could in turn get more experts here, and with physical evidence of the Gloom cult (the ice elemental had all but shouted they were controlled by the Gloom) we could maybe get some more help here dealing with it. On the other hand, if I did that, they would no doubt vanish into some kind of vault and I would never see them again. *Would that be so bad?* We had already lost the ice orb, a similar crystal with cold properties, so I wasn't keen on losing these too before I had a chance to fully study them. But one person studying them was of course inferior to a whole group of people, and did my personal curiosity about them override the danger they posed if not properly secured? There were not dozens of elemental demons at the temple, so I didn't think they simply created more without some kind of impetus, but one never knew. I was scowling at nothing when I realized someone had sat down across from me, and perhaps some time ago. I blinked and looked them over, it was a wanderer.

*Musings complete for the moment then, they "said."*

*Always weird hearing one of their kind talk.* "Yes, was there something I could do for you?" I asked.

*Have you already forgotten our bargain?* they asked, tiny mouth forming a bit of a smile.

"Bargain- you told me about the temple!" I realized.

They gave a small bow. *One and the same. How did the meeting go?*

"Ugh, poorly. Wait how did you recognize me?" I asked. I felt around, my disguise magic was still going, and Boline sat invisibly at my side.

*How could I fail to?* they asked, seeming genuinely curious.

"What?" *There's a lot we don't know about these people. Just like that crazy lady we gave the ice orb too. Maybe they don't see the world like we do? Or they can see through illusions? That's a scary thought.* "Never mind. It went poorly. The place was corrupted and a couple of the people that went in there got killed. Whatever purpose there was in the tokens and getting people to meet there on the eclipse is over. Sorry."

*This is most distressing. Please, can you elaborate?*

"Sure." I told him of the token lighting up and leading us to the temple when the eclipse started. How the dwarf rushed into the place, trying to get first access to whatever it was inside. How he got killed, scaring off the others. Then we went in, hatching a plan to take the crystals we found, as well as the chest with the ring of healing in it, and avoid the crazy remnant that was going nuts down there from all that magical energy surging through them. They were quiet while I told the tale, and looked concerned.

*This is all most concerning. And I take it you do not have these 'crystals' with you at this time?* They looked me over a bit. *I would love to at least see them.*

“No, they’re locked up at home. I need time to study them more, not that I know what more I’m going to get out of them with my limited divination magic.” *And the temple may be the key, with that strange alter we saw. But it would mean disabling that remnant, and quite frankly they scared the crap out of me!*

*Perhaps, one such as myself could tell more about them?*

*He did translate the coordinates. Got me there on time. Is this being actually more tied up with this than I first thought?* “With all due respect, until I find out if they can be used for evil, they’re staying locked up. For all I know you touch them and simply vanish, leaving me with nothing.”

*I take your point. But be careful for cannot the most innocuous healing spell be used for evil with a proper application?*

“I suppose,” I admitted, thinking back to slaying that odd muck creature with just a cleaning spell. *What is a contaminant anyway? What’s dirty? Could even that spell be used to somehow harm with the right mindset?* “If they can be used for both good and evil it will be up to me to find a person who can safeguard them and be trusted to look them over. Is that person you?”

*It would hardly convince you for me to simply say yes.*

“Quite right. I’ll think about it. I can at least ask questions about you.”

*Of course. If it will help you come to a decision.*

“Say I do decide to let you borrow them, at least. Will you mysteriously pop up like you just did, if I hang around someplace and need you to?”

*Who can say what the future holds?* they replied with another slight grin and a shrug.

“Then you better give me some way to contact you.”

*No need, I’ll be around and I’m sure we’ll run into each other sooner or later.* They got up and pushed their chair back in. *Good luck with the research.*

“Thanks.” *So do they simply not want to seem too eager, or do they not really care, or do they have a way to find me? Maybe they just take a relaxed attitude towards things, like elves. I could hardly say.*

And they were gone.

I headed back to the house, I had things to think about.

“Ah, you have returned,” Hanz announced as I walked in. “I will now provide the latest updates.”

“Go ahead,” I told them.

“I have secured the bomb, and Snarly has stepped out for the moment. Malachite has also departed, separately, and said he would be back later. I have been looking over the crude map provided by the hobgoblin leader and have plotted a course that should result in our finding the location with little effort. The blade is here if you wish to investigate it, there is no mechanical component in evidence.” They indicated the table, where the sheathed blade rested. “I have also used the time to convert the charging port of the plasma cutter into a form that can accept power from my systems, giving it an unlimited runtime in conjunction with your spell.”

“You’ve been busy!” *Or was I just lost in books, which has been known to happen from time to time, for longer than I thought?*

“I hope your time has been just as fruitful?”

“Not really,” I complained, frowning. “Just more questions. I saw our friend the wanderer again, who gave us the time and place for the temple of the eclipse. They were fairly interested in what happened, and wanted a look at the stones we took out of there. Naturally I have turned them down for the moment.”

“A logical choice, as you do not know if you can trust them.”



“Agreed. Now, let’s get this sword worked out and see how much trouble we’re in.”

“If you don’t mind I’ll watch?”

“You’re welcome to.” I pulled the chair out and settled into it, drawing the blade and looking it over. “But it’s going to be mostly me just sitting here and touching the thing.” Now that I had a moment, and some better lighting, the blade glittered and looked brand new, as if freshly forged. *You don’t think...* I opened my awareness to any magic in the area and glared at it. “That can’t be right,” I mused.

“What it is?” Hanz asked, somewhat concerned.

“One second.” I raised my hands. “Let my skill be augmented!” I cast, drawing on ambient mana as usual. My awareness of magic increased, and I sat staring at the blade for a moment. “No, it’s the same-” I whirled around. “Hang on, what’s that?”

“What’s what? I’m afraid you’re not making much sense at the moment.”

“What’s in that direction?” I pointed. *The workshop is over there, it’s not my spell tokens I’m feeling. It’s not my magic anyway, it’s something different.*

“My room?”

“What? Do you mind if I take a look?” I got up, scowling into the distance. “There’s something magical over there, close by, that I haven’t sensed before.”

“I don’t have much in there, you are welcome to.”

We headed over there and I looked around the room. Mainly just the stone furniture met my eyes, but one other thing. “The ax,” I breathed. “I never did look it over, did I?”

“You did not,” they agreed. “I believe I acquired it before you learned the technique of ‘reading’ magical items?”

“So I never circled back and checked it out,” I agreed, going over to where it was placed on the table and looking it over. *Ugh, need some kind of auto updating quest log. Wonder if there’s magic for that?* “With my senses enhanced it seems magical all right. Give me a moment.” I dropped the spell and put a hand on it, relaxing and working out what the effect was. “Interesting,” I finally decided. “It’s more of a blessing than a spell, I’ve really never felt the like.”

“Blessing?” Hanz prompted. “As in from the Heavens?”

“Yes. This ax will be slightly more effective in harming the undead than an ax of similar construction.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Who would have thought? Well, back to the sword. I must be right but it’s crazy to think that much magic can be contained in one blade. It’s almost... unreasonable. But I’ll have to spend some time with it.”

“Whatever you have to do.”

I enhanced my ability to read magical items, *may as well get some more use out of the spell*, and sank into the blade. The easiest thing to do was ‘read’ how many magical effects an object had, and my eyebrows (such as they were) shot up when the answer came back.

“Impossible,” I breathed, jerking my hand back.

“What is it?”

“This sword has *five* separate enchantments. It’s unheard of. It’s bizarre. It’s... gross is what it is.” *Well, I suppose the sharpness and toughness could have been done at the same time making it only four but at this point, who’s counting??*

“I don’t understand.”

“Neither do I. This will take a while...” I put my hand back on the sword and took a deep breath.

It was a half an hour later that I finally came out of it, shaking my head. It was ludicrous, the amount of magic contained in this blade. I saw Snarly and Malachite had returned, and blinked my eyes against the light.

“Welcome back,” Malachite told me. “Hanz said not to disturb you I hope we were quiet enough.”

“I thought you were in a coma!” Snarly announced.

“I didn’t realize you were here at all, it’s this sword, I simply can’t believe what I’m feeling from it. I kept going back over it but the results didn’t change. I can hardly even fathom it.”

“So what is it?”

“Basically? The most poisonous thing in existence. You so much as scratch someone with this sword, and they’re dead.”

“Really?”

“No joke, stay away from it. I don’t even want to sit this close to it. Someone very carefully sheath it again and yes, Malachite it will slice you in half easily so please be careful.” I got up and let Hanz, who was *probably* immune to it having no organic bits to poison make it safe again. I breathed a sigh of relief. “Okay, with that done, let me lay it out for you and give you some context. Be right back.” I headed to my room and got out my book of magic, whirling to look at the fur lined cloak that was draped across my bed now. It was a rich purple, fur lined, and looked fairly new. *When did- what- One thing at a time, Orchid. I thought something was different about this room but... Sword. Right.*

“Okay, sword,” I said, opening the book. “I know the theory behind fabrication and imbuing from my magical studies but I never took it up. For two reasons. Fabrication requires great strength, while imbuing requires sacrifice. Let me explain. To imbue something you’re basically creating magical pathways inside an object that maintain a spell forever. But the only thing that can direct magic is a mana core, and obviously objects do not have mana cores.”

“Thus the difficulty my people had with becoming magic users,” Hanz spoke up.

“Exactly. So, one step in the imbuing process is sacrificing a portion of your mana core and attaching it to the object. You then have to essentially cast the spell many times along that feature, until it becomes self sustaining. You do this while further sacrificing physical objects that represent what you want the spell to do, ultimately weaving the whole thing together and finally you have your magical object.”

“Sounds like creating magical circuitry,” Hanz mused. “What a fascinating parallel.”

“Sure, if you say so. Now, all this is no big deal, right? Wrong! This sword has been imbued three times. It has three separate mana cores, and three ‘magical circuits’ to use Hanz’s metaphor. It’s dense with them, I’m surprised it’s not shaking itself apart with how much magic is in there. But that’s not the worst part. Each successive thing you do makes the next thing you want to do harder. You have to weave the magic into a smaller and smaller space, so you have to be more and more accurate. Touching the spell ‘threads’ you already have in the object with the ‘threads’ you’re trying to put into the object can cause either or both to interact and either outright explode, have a completely random effect, or even backlash into the creator and outright kill them. We’re talking about poison spells here, maybe it would poison a whole town, if you messed up the magic that badly. That’s why most things just have one function. This sword has three. *Three!* Someone seriously skilled or just plain insane made this thing! Or maybe they just spent half a year on the project?” *That would help, moving very, very slowly...*

“Did you not say five, or am I malfunctioning?” Hanz asked.

“It was fabricated first, then imbued,” I explained. “Let me write some numbers down.” I got out the tables from my book, I had copied them of course just in case I ever for some bizarre reason thought I should start learning this stuff. The tables would swiftly debase me of that notion again. I began to write. “Now first the blade was made magically sharper,” I explained. “Such that it could pierce dragonscale, of course.” I consulted the chart and made some notes. “So the base amount of time

for that part is 30 hours, and the rule of thumb is you spend at least half again as much time refining it because you only want to do it once and not mess it up. So we're up to 45 hours of work and 350 embers to do that. Because fabrication also consumes material as you're pushing the magic into it. Now we add the first spell, grade 3, to accelerate the effects of poison on the target. It's been fabricated at this point so you're already looking at a huge increase in difficulty. Rule of thumb here is twenty hours of work per grade of the spell, so maybe twenty four hours of work to overcome that? So we're up to 117 hours of work and 650 embers. Now you put the second spell in there, to make your target more susceptible to poison. That's grade 4, we'll use the same basic assumption of twenty four hours, so add another 100 hours so we're now looking at 217 hours of total work. That's another 400 embers by the way so we're up to-" I pointed to Hanz.

"One thousand, fifty embers," they calculated.

"Great. One more effect to go! Elemental strike, aspected to poison. It's also grade 3, it's the same spell I use only mine is aspected to magic. Never mind. This is where it becomes very, very tricky. Rule of thumb doesn't apply anymore, no really. The item is now *saturated* with magic and one wrong move blows the whole thing sky high. I'll give it 50 hours per grade because really, why rush it at this point? It's already obscenely difficult so I'll let the maker take their time here. So add another 150 hours, that's-

"Three hundred sixty seven hours of total work," Hanz announced as I snapped my fingers. "Working 8 hours a day that would come to 46 total days. And if another 300 embers our grand total is now 1,350 embers. I assume this does not take into account the material cost of the sword itself?"

"We're ignoring that," I agreed. "This amount of time is also what I consider the most risky, unless you had decades of experience doing this, or were very, very pressed for time because a dragon was prophesied to attack your town, you would take your time and maybe double that number."

"So a total of 6 suns, 15 moons. Or about a half of what we bought this house for."

Malachite and Snarly both whistled.

"Don't be too impressed, that's if I was doing it myself," I warned them. "That's *just* material cost. Not labor cost. Remember, you can totally blow yourself up *or worse* doing this. If I was making this sword *for* someone, well, the payment would easily be more than this house is worth. Especially to make up for the risk. And you *know* how greedy the guild is about this stuff, just casting a spell costs people an arm and a leg. When I started wandering around and was 'gently introduced' to the guild policy of 'no good deed goes uncharged' they told me the ratio but as I figured I never would do it I didn't write it down. I would have to ask again what the 'recommended' hourly rate is for this sort of thing. It's not suns, but it would probably be close."

"Well, this does all assume you did nothing else," Malachite agreed. "So you didn't earn any other income those forty six days. You would need to make up for that, so I can see charging at least a moon a day. It's a specialized skill after all."

"Exactly," I agreed. "So, there you have it Snarly. Or not, because I haven't even asked my magic if someone is going to be coming after you once they learn you have their heirloom quality blade. I have to assume it's stolen, those hobgoblins didn't make it."

"Oh no!" he exclaimed.

"Yeah. You want someone rich or crazy enough to carry this thing around to come after you because they think *you* stole it? I don't. Give me a minute."

I asked the universe "Has this blade by stolen from someone we should be worried will come after someone at this table?" and the answer was a surprising;

No

“I guess you’re in the clear?” I exclaimed, totally surprised. “Where in the heck did this come from then?”

“Lookth like ith mine then!” Snarly decided, snatching it up. “Now I jeth need to figure out how tho sthab a dragon with it without dying mythef!”

“We can talk strategy,” I assured him. “But for now, I seem to have a cloak in my room to investigate. If you’ll excuse me?”

## Chapter 4

If we fight this thing together there's a chance that we may win

I swirled the cloak around my shoulders and secured it with the golden cord, getting a feel for the fit and it looked and felt pretty good.

"Oh, what is this?" I exclaimed to myself in a very exaggerated way. "A note under the cloak? Whoever could it be from?" I picked it up and unfolded it. "Put this on and be ready to fly, meet me outside," it said. I looked myself over, decided to "disguise" myself with my original looks but left my regular clothes untouched. With no idea where we might go but there wasn't any line in the note saying "wear the pretty dress" or anything like that, I figured it would be fine. I headed outside, starting to tell the others in passing we were going out but both said Malachite had told them and to have fun. The draig himself was wearing a similar black cloak and again seemed out of sorts. *A cloak with huge holes in it for wings? He pulls it off. Or I will be later, that is...*

"It looks good on you," he finally decided.

I gave him a twirl. "Thank you for it, weather is starting to turn after all."

"Especially when flying, I would bet. You ready?" He opened his arms.

*Surprise destination eh? Okay, turn about is fair play after all.* "Sure thing." He swept me up and we took off, with me shoving my emotions in the box and repeating to myself he wasn't going to drop me. Still, I mentally reviewed the telekinesis spell engraved on my mana core for no reason at all, and after a moment we passed the city walls and he slowed a bit.

"Can I get a boost?" he asked.

I rolled my eyes and freed a hand, gesturing. "Enlarge!" I commanded, casting my grow spell. I stopped at only twice as large, more might have unbalanced me or him causing the aforementioned dropping.

"Good enough!" With a mighty flap of his wings we shot forward.

We followed the river a time, it was getting fairly dark but I could tell that much at least, and we finally landed by a waterfall. *Romantic!* Naturally Malachite shrank down again as I had cast the magic to last until we did so, and he gestured that I should sit, so I did. His hands seemed to be shaking a bit but my emotions were locked down in the box, I was breathing evenly, trying not to jump to any conclusions about what was happening. He wasn't on one knee or anything so... He pulled out a piece of paper and looked it over. I waited patiently, this seemed important to him so his pace was fine. He started to read.

"I'm bad at words so I tried to write them down instead. Although I've never said it, and tried my best to hide it, I've had feelings for you since before we came to this town and found our new 'family.' I also have seen how much your curse bothers you, and wished I could help, but also didn't want you to no longer need me and decide you didn't need me in your life anymore, so maybe I didn't try too hard to look. However, now that I know you feel the same way, and I started to think about our life together, I wanted to do something really special for you. So, I went out and got the best answers I could find. It's not the instant cure I hoped for, but I think it's something that will get you there. Please know I love you, no matter what you look like, or your physical limitations. Even though you can kick my ass, to me you'll always be my precious, delicate flower. No matter what choices you have to make, I will be there at your side to the end."

He looked away, and I realized at some point during all that I had stopped concentrating on my box. *He loves me. He really loves me.* I realized he was handing something to me, it was a piece of paper sealed with black wax, and I numbly took it. *Where do I even start after all that?*

"I wouldn't just throw you away, you know," I decided. I canceled the spell hiding my true appearance, there was no need for that either. "It isn't like this is what kept us together. As far as most of the world knows, I don't even look like this. Yes, it's a pain to remember to do the spell when I leave

the house but curse or not, I'll always need someone to watch my back." *Yes, yes, I have my 'pets' now let's not mention that.* "If my condition cleared up tomorrow by some miracle I wouldn't just say 'see ya' to all of you. I still wouldn't be what my family demanded I be. For better or worse you're stuck with me, big guy. To the end of the Gloom and beyond." *I mean selling our house would be a huge hassle, who needs that in their life? And where would Snarly go?*

"You mean it?" he mumbled.

"Yes you big lug!" I said with a trace of annoyance, jumping up again. "I love you too!" I embraced him, and he startled and hugged me back.

"You do?"

"Would I really lie about it?"

"It just doesn't seem right."

"Let me worry about that." *And what I'm going to do with you if you really do turn into a fully realized dragon one day. Even if it takes a hundred years, I'll still be around to see it.* I held him a moment and let go, stepping back and looking him up and down. "I probably could kick your ass, couldn't I?"

"Oh!" he said with a grin. "Is that a challenge?"

"Maybe if you agree to get rid of all the magic *I provide you.* I'm not fighting myself after all. Now, what's this all about?"

"Read it. I don't understand it but maybe you will?"

"Okay." *I wonder...* "Unlock!" I cast, magic briefly swirling around the seal. It popped open without harm. "Ah ha!" I cast my light spell and looked it over, scowling at as I did.

*In the cave where time's whispers weave,  
a nexus dormant, secrets to retrieve.  
Magewar's echo, a past unmade,  
unlock the key across the temporal cascade.*

*Three points in time, where choices unfold,  
Fragments reveal the story untold.  
Magician's folly, power they sought,  
Grasp the essence, change the course wrought.*

*Cure or merge, the nexus bids,  
A choice of fate where destiny skids.  
Gloom's shadow looms, a threat profound,  
In crystalline echoes, the answer is found.*

"Ah," I said simply after a moment.

"What? What is it? Do you know what it means?"

"Humm? No, no, this is clearly the result of the more advanced divination spell. I say 'advanced' on purpose instead of something like 'more useful' or 'more helpful.' Basically there are two other spells, prophesy and the true question spell. It's probably prophesy because I think true question is limited to maybe ten or fifteen words? I would have to go back and look at my families' books. It's the reason I didn't learn either one and stuck to my question spell. A simple yes or no answer, far more useful most of the time. Otherwise you get this," I shook the paper it him. "Basically more questions than answers."

"So does it help at all?"

I hummed. "Do we have time to check every single cave in the local area and listen for whispers?" *Though what does time whispering sound like, exactly?*

"Not tonight but probably eventually, sure."

I looked back up at him in surprise. “Huh, we do, don’t we? Nexus, huh? It repeats that twice, so it must be critical in some way. I could maybe ask where ‘the nexus referred to in this poem’ is, I have an idea how to use my spell to narrow it down. I’ll work on it. Thanks for doing this, the spell must have cost you an arm and a leg. And hopefully doesn’t actually cost us an arm and a leg trying to track it down. I can’t heal that. Let’s see Snarly through this whole worm dragon slaying quest he’s on at the moment, look into that flying creature for the town to clear out our schedule, and we’ll have some time to dig into this. I won’t waste the opportunity you’ve created here.”

“Okay. It’s yours to do with as you wish. I’ll support you whatever you decide, like I said. Oh, I will say one other thing though. The wizard said it doesn’t seem to be a curse because they usually have a specific condition that breaks it.”

“Well, saying ‘it’s a curse’ is just a shorthand I use if someone does catch a glimpse of me. It’s something even a child understands exists in the world, at least in the abstract. I sort of knew that, basically why I didn’t go looking for a cure right away when it happened. I figured it was just my life now. But maybe it’s something else entirely.” *Cure or merge? Could I be some kind of crystal elemental, like Malachite has been shown to actually be an evolving dragon? It seems I have a choice, could I become even more of what I seem to be or less? And what does each of those choices mean for me? To have a whole body made of this crystal stuff would have to come with some really, really fantastic perks, not that my disguise spell would be any less effective covering it up. But I want to get better, not worse! Though you do see the occasional earth elemental wandering around, or rock based cohesion, so they are at least a bit more accepted in society than-*

“Hey did you fall asleep on me?” Malachite joked.

“What? No, sorry, just thinking. Come sit down, we flew all the way out here after all. Shame to waste it.”

We did, holding hands and not talking much, just watching the waterfall and thinking. But we finally did head home, finding Snarly had gone to bed. I told Hanz about the ‘prophesy’ and he said he would devote some CPU cycles to decoding the meaning, whatever that meant, and we both went up to bed.

The next morning Snarly looked pretty rough, and admitted he hadn’t slept all that well last night.

“I mean, what if it’s not me on that wall?” he mused. “What if I have some twin brother I don’t know about? Maybe those hobgoblins got us confused?”

“Is that all you’re worried about?” I scoffed. “You should have come talk to me, I can answer that question easily!” I made with the magic, asking the universe “is Snarly the beastfolk spoken of in the hobgoblin prophesy?”

Yes

“You see? Your victory is assured. Don’t worry, I’ll apply the same magic to your new sword as to your daggers. You’ll be about the equivalent of a decade of practice with the blade just from drawing it when the time comes. Plus you’ll still have the invisible one you can draw, and it’s not like you’ll be alone. We’ll be right at your side.”

“I suppose there’s no help for it.”

“The alternative is to return to the hobgoblin encampment, if you will,” Hanz told him, “and tell them the vision was incorrect. They cannot stay here, we need the area clear so the townspeople can investigate the treatment plant. They will either have to leave or be driven out. Possibly killed.”

“It’s what we should have done in the first place,” Malachite muttered.

*That attack still fresh in the mind, is it? I agree, it’s a bit odd to have killed them by the dozens out by the walls, but these specific ones we’re trying to make friends with.*

“You either trust the visions of the seer or you do not,” Hanz went on. “They have given you the sword, so their power does seem legitimate. We can at least head to the site and see what the situation is.”

“Many dragon-like creatures can talk, don’t forget,” Malachite told him. “Maybe we can simply ask him to move. The picture is just you *showing* him the blade or maybe you could trade it to him in exchange for him finding some other place to live. It’s not like it was passed down in your family or anything. Yeah it would be nice but it is dangerous to have around. I doubt you would miss it that much.”

“You don’t know!” he retorted.

“I guess not. Shall we get going?”

“Let me go grab that nice cloak I got from someone!” I protested. *We might need it as a burial shroud.* I snorted and ran off before I cracked up, it wasn’t nice to think that way about poor Snarly and he was about to face a huge dragon-worm thing which took courage and he should be praised. So there. I mean we all were, but Malachite would be huge no doubt to counter it, and Hanz could keep firing, and I had all my magic. Snarly was the only one who *should* really be worried.

It had rained heavily the night before so while we soared to our destination Malachite announced he was going to land, he had spotted something on the road below us. We fell from the sky, to a scene of circus wagons heading into the city stuck in the mud of the road. *Because it’s simply too much to ask that a couple of mages create stone out of seemingly thin air, and shape it into a decent road into and out of the city. No, no, keep the road dirt and mud, that’s the best way to do it. Like magic doesn’t even exist, that’s what we’ve decided to go with. Heck I could do it myself in just a week or two, depending on how long you wanted it.*

We were looking around seeing if we might be needed, it seemed two wagons were still stuck and bogged down, when a brownie in a top hat came over to us. “Hail travelers, interesting mode of transportation you use! Shame we can’t all enjoy the ease of air travel. What can we do for you?”

“Air travel was at one time quite easy,” Hanz whispered to me. “Until they got complacent and doors and such started falling off planes. While in the air, no less. Nasty time, but it did wake some regulators up.”

Meanwhile, Malachite had stepped up. “Think we can help somehow?” I caught him finishing up saying.

“You seem fairly strong, we can always use more muscle. My strongmen are just getting some chains put around the next cart. Madam Delilah’s, I believe. Yes, yes, your help would be appreciated.”

“Actually, I was thinking more Orchid here,” he said, turning to me. “I mean after a whole pirate ship this should be pretty easy, right?”

*No doubt.*

“I say,” said the brownie, looking me over. Naturally I had dropped the disguise spell once out of town, I figured I wouldn’t need it. *Stupid, I always need it.* “With your physique you would be right at home in the circus, have you ever considered the traveling lifestyle?”

Malachite and I looked at each other and burst out laughing, leaving the brownie a bit out of sorts.

“Wow,” I finally managed. “Yes, come see the magical freak. Heck, I could even be an attraction, get a ring on the stone lady. No thanks,” I told him. “Anyway, no can do, Malachite, I was thinking of just making you bigger again. Using my magic to directly get the carts moving I would have to charge him. But making *you* bigger, and you simply choosing to help in that form, well... I cast that spell on you all the time it’s for my own benefit of flying around. I can’t stop you if you want to help before we get into the air again.”

“Oh right that whole guild thing,” he admitted. “Suits me. Let’s go give the madam the good news.”



We walked over to the wagon and a hideous looking woman peered out at us. “Just as I foresaw!’ she cackled. “I’ll go make sure there are no candles burning and such.” She pulled her head back in.

“That’s not creepy,” Malachite muttered.

“She wath quite beautiful, in her own way,” Snarly protested.

“Uh huh. Whenever you’re ready, Orchid.”

In the end it was a matter of moments for the once again enlarged Malachite to carefully yank the wagons out of the mud and place them on more solid ground. The brownie, who introduced himself as the leader of the troupe, gave us free tickets for the show “Coming soon to Gloomhaven, if we don’t get stuck again!” He laughed. We thanked him, and were about to take off again when the madam ran up to us.

“I have had a vision!” she cried, hands in the air.

“Oh here we go,” the brownie muttered.

“Your path is dark and cursed. There is a shadow around you- a *Gloom*. You must leave this place. Be rid of it before it consumes you. That is all!” she spun on her heel and squelched back to her wagon.

“I knew it, I’m tho dead,” Snarly wailed. “I need to get rid of tha thowd or it’ll conthume me.”

“I wouldn’t put much stock in her,” the brownie told him.

“She did mention the Gloom though,” Hanz mused. “How else would she have known unless it was a true vision? Strange, to encounter so many with that talent in such a short amount of time. Perhaps they are being drawn here by the threads of destiny.”

I shook my head. “We knew our path was dark,” I told them. “And we can’t stray from it. If it’s going to consume us it’s going to consume everything. We have to stay and fight.” *We may be the only ones, in the end, who can. Because we’ve been doing it, learning the Gloom’s tricks. Seeing how they fight. It’s the ‘be rid of it’ part that worries me. Was she talking about the light and dark crystals we picked up? Is that the shadow? It’s what light and dark do make after all. Maybe I should get rid of them...*

Malachite beamed with pride and stood a little straighter. Not that you could tell, he was the size of a fully grown dragon at the moment. “That’s right,” he boomed. “Let them come!”

Not long after we landed in the rough area marked on the map and started to look around. We found a crack in a nearby hill that seemed promising, but there were two major problems. One, the crack was only big enough for Snarly, and two- something seemed to be wrong with magic in the area.

## Chapter 5

The cheese was the bait- won't somebody help me before it's too late

"What do you mean, you can't use magic around here?" Malachite demanded.

"Just what I said," I calmly replied. "I don't dare cast any spells in the immediate area. We're walking out of here unfortunately." *Ugh, it's worse for me, I can't summon my pocket horse. You know how slowly I move, don't give me that look. Actually, he could carry me at least, the others could move at their own pace.*

"Perhaps a further explanation would go a long way, even if we don't completely understand it?" Hanz added.

"Okay, how to put this..." I stalled. "When we landed I started feeling around for ambient mana, just to get a feel for the local 'flavor' and see if any spells had been cast recently. To my surprise the flavor was 'chaos' and there's a lot of it. You know about the moon of course?" I pointed up, at the large chaos moon above us. Both nodded. Snarly was too busy hyperventilating and talking to himself over by the crack, gripping the sword in both hands and staring into the abyss. *He'll be fine!* "Well, as the source of all magic in the world or at least the thing that caused magic to grow in strength upon the Earth, it still influences us in many ways despite being so far away. For one thing, sometimes pieces of it are ejected from the surface and fall to our world. Those pieces are always saturated with chaos magic, and cause unpredictable results to be around. Studying them is how we got chaos mages, who can tap into the chaos of magic directly, casting spells that warp reality in ways normal magic can't. They tend to go crazy though, so I don't recommend delving too deeply into it. Somewhere around here," I looked around in vain, "there must be a huge chunk of rock or something from the chaos moon. It must be huge, I feel it saturating this whole area, so it probably landed hundreds or thousands of years ago. The crater got filled in, the trees and other plant-life came back, and no one has been the wiser. Until today." I crossed my arms, scowling. "When we need my magic to either shrink us or widen this crack. And then fight a dragon-worm thing, but one thing at a time."

"And this is bad?" Malachite prompted.

"Very bad," I agreed. "I cast magic now, inside an area of chaos magic this strong? Anything could happen. And trying to gather ambient mana into my core to strengthen spells? Forget it! I don't want chaos aspected mana anywhere near my core! What if it doesn't come out again? What if it turns *me* into a chaos mage? I have enough problems without my magic causing chaos breaches or starting to talk to fairies that aren't there or whatever. Chaos mages are nuts, I want to emphasize this."

"Perhaps we could walk to where the effect weakens, cast the shrinking spell the dragon gave us, and then- ah, the walk would then be three times as long..." Hanz realized. "Unless it was just on myself, and you carried me back? Could you carry me if we were both shrunk down, to avoid walking?" they asked Malachite.

"I don't know. My wings would be smaller, wouldn't they? Wouldn't generate as much lift. Yes I know birds have small wings but they have feathers, it's different for them. I think?"

"That would be a problem."

"What about thith stuff?" Snarly pointed to the spell symbol on the outside of the sword. "Is thith going to cauth problemth when I pull the thord out?"

"I'm not sure," I answered honestly. "Those spells are already cast, simply held in readiness. And I always take my time with them and invest as much mana as possible. Tell you what, you'll need a light anyway, use one of your light tokens and we'll see what happens."

"Okay." He got it out and activated it. The light, warping a little around the edges, appeared as normal and followed him.

"It should be fine," I assured him. "That's a low grade spell. Not much mana invested in it. The symbol on the sword is a higher grade. That should help stabilize it." *Or would it be the other way around? Hummmmmmm...*

“That doesn’t help the fact Snarly is going to have to go in there alone!” Malachite protested.

“Let’s at least walk a little ways away, see how strong the effect is,” I told him. “Snarly, stay here. If you leave the area of the cave the light will go out. Not that you couldn’t use another token I made you three each right?”

Everyone nodded, but we headed out without him anyway. We walked a few minutes away but I was shaking my head the whole time. “It’s no good, it’s not falling off very quickly. We’d have to walk for a half hour or more. Especially at my speeds.” *I suppose I could make some tokens outside this area, shrink us down while riding Athame so we’re clinging to her when we shrink. That way we could get back quickly. But I’m not going near any dragon without being able to use my magic. And the risk of using tokens isn’t zero, that light spell doesn’t look quite right, can we really risk it?*

“Strange, that such an impediment would arise at this exact moment,” Hanz mused. “Right when he needs us the most, Snarly is being forced to go it alone. Chugga chugga, choo chooooo!” A strange, deep sounding whistle sounded out from them.

“What?” we both asked.

“Oh nothing, nothing,” they assured us. “My sound effects module suddenly activated, perhaps because of the chaos magic in the air.”

*That’s not how that- never mind.*

“So what do we tell old Snarls?” Malachite wanted to know. “A hearty pat on the back and a good luck, chum? Hope you don’t get eaten? That’s not fair to him!”

“Perhaps we must simply trust to the vision of the hobgoblins,” Hanz agreed sadly. “They did provide him a weapon that, should he get close enough, will do the job. Unless you were lying for some reason, Orchid?”

“Of course not!” I snapped. “What a thing to say. Believe me, if that sword could think it would want to poison the world and would laugh the whole time it was doing it.”

They shrugged. “Odds were against it, but now would be the time to come clean, as they say, before he does risk his life in the endeavor.”

“Great, let’s go tell him the good news...”

Back at the crack Malachite made sure to tell him this was his quest, it was his decision to go or not. There was always the possibility of simply waiting around here, it would get hungry sooner or later and come out. They could always tangle with it then.

“But by then thomeone could go into tha sewerth and find tha hobgoblins,” he protested. “We have ta do it now.”

“I’m simply giving you your options.”

“Ith fine. That dragon won’t know what hit ith.”

“That’s the spirit!” Malachite whacked him on the back and staggered him. “Get in there and show them what a poisonous, petite possum person can do!”

“I will pray for your success,” I told him.

“Thankth. That meanth a lot to me,” he admitted. “Here I go!” He clutched the sword and squeezed into the crack, the light bobbing along behind him.

I dropped to my knees and looked up. “Oh, patron of lost causes,” I prayed, “watch over Snarly as he goes to his almost certain demise...”

“I can thill hear you!”

“Oh, protector of beasts!” I called even more loudly. “Watch over one of your own that he does not end up in the stomach of a toothy predator this day...”

We waited.

We also backed off, if Snarly did talk the thing into leaving we wanted to give it ample room to wiggle out and not think it was under attack. We were all pacing around, hoping Snarly was all right, when finally he emerged again, carrying an armload of stuff.

“Snarly!” we all shouted, running over there.

“Are you well?” I asked him, looking him over.

“Not a scratch,” he told us, dumping his load. He had grabbed an urn of some kind, a pair of boots, and a large egg. “You’ll need to put the magic back on,” he indicated the sword and his dagger.

“You succeeded?” Hanz asked.

“I talked to her but she wath pretty dumb,” he admitted. “I had to use tha thword in the end.”

“I’m sorry,” they said to him. “But I am glad to see you emerge victorious. I take it she came here to set up a nest?” They held up the egg.

“Yup. There’th loth more eggth. And a lot of junk in there. Take forever to haul it all out, probably not worth it. I can get more eggth though.”

“We should see if any are fertile,” Hanz agreed. “We don’t want anyone else having to go through this in another fifty years.”

“Thath right. I’ll be back.” He vanished into the crack again.

“So the little guy did it,” Malachite said to himself, sounding a bit astonished. “Maybe there is something to this seer business after all. Ugh, does that mean we have to take that weird circus lady seriously too?”

“I would not discount her. Ah, another pair of boots.” They picked up the boots Snarly had left. “Whatever happened to the first pair we found?”

“They’re still hanging around,” I told them. “None of us wears boots but I hated to sell them, as they are technically magical. I mean can you even imagine trying to get boots on this?” I held up a foot, I wore sandals because my legs were covered with crystalline protrusions just like the rest of me. Shoes I could *maybe* manage if they were low enough but not boots.

“Not selling those either,” Malachite told us. “Unless you want the city guard after us.”

“Ah, I thought that might be dragon scale,” Hanz agreed. “Yes, quite illegal, especially this close to dragon territory.”

“That figures,” I agreed. “It’s just our luck isn’t it?”

We walked for some time after leaving the area, me feeling out the magic and by the time we got out of the zone and could climb aboard the Malachite Express it was after noon. We put away the boots and a few odds and ends Snarly had pulled out of the “hoard,” put the eggs carefully in a sack, and went to tell the hobgoblins to get out of town. They were ecstatic both about the amount of dragon meat and scales and teeth and other materials the body would provide, as well as digging through the hoard. It seemed it wasn’t theirs meaning the dragon-worm had been collecting stuff.

*Just how long ago did that that monster move in, anyway?*

They assured us that, under the guidance of their seer, they could leave right away and slip out of town without being seen, and scampered away.

“Good riddance,” Malachite spat. “Let’s never come down here again. Stinking sewers.”

“Yes, I had an idea for turning sewage into topsoil with careful application of magic but I have no idea who to talk to about implementing it,” I sadly mused. “A simple spell to hasten the usual breakdown of material would do it. Simply collect the sewage in large barrels, throw in some leaves, vegetable peelings, anything organic really, cast the spell, squeeze out the water, and sell high quality topsoil to farmers an hour later. Maybe a cure disease spell in there somewhere, just to make sure it’s ‘clean.’ Of course the guild would *insist* the city pay for the castings, I don’t know if the end material would make up for the cost. Stupid guild. It would be so much better for the city, less disease vectors, a valuable product produced at the end, everybody wins really. What were we talking about again?”

“Our reward?” Hanz suggested. “We can tell the city guard the well issue should be cleared up, and to send someone down to investigate the pumping plant more carefully.”

“That’s the one!” I agreed with a snap. “Let’s do that. Money, and whatnot.”

“And Shawarma after?” Malachite asked.

“Didn’t you juth eat lunnth?” Snarly asked him.

“It’ll be an hour before we walk over to the guard building and see someone in charge to get the bounty for the job.”

“Yer probably right.”

We had a nice little “We’re glad you’re not dead” dinner for Snarly that night, those that ate having a big meal to celebrate. I had a small slice of cake because *cake*. We discussed what to do the next day, if we should take a day off as even if he wasn’t hurt Snarly had fought a huge creature and that had to take a toll on a person. But he had another idea.

“The circus!” he cried, pointing to a poster on the way home. “We have free tickets, leth go thee what we can thee there!”

“What the hero of the day wants, the hero of the day gets,” Malachite agreed. “We can check it out tomorrow.”

“Yay!”

And so, the next day after breakfast we headed to see the Marvelous and Magical Techno-circus, making Hanz curious what the ‘Tecno’ part of the circus would entail. We got in free with our tickets, and discovered it was more like a fair than a simple circus, with game booths, wandering jugglers and performers, various small tents with the freaks inside- I was of course disguised as a driag like my boyfriend- no freaks here thank you very much.

“They must have worked all night to set this all up,” Malachite remarked, looking around.

“I’m sure they’re very efficient at it,” Hanz countered. “We were not that far from the gate after all.”

“Leth go see tha dancing bear!” Snarly decided, pointing to a tent. The sign indeed did say “dancing bear.”

“I swear, if this is just a talking bear they’ve paid to do a dance number,” Malachite grumbled. “I’m asking for my money back.”

“But we got in free?” Snarly wondered, confused.

“Not the point little man.”

We entered the tent and there was indeed a bear being forced to dance by a bored looking man that kept whacking it with a stick. We all shared a look.

“Say, are you a talkith bear?” Snarly asked it, going right up to the ropes.

“Back up kid!” snarled the man, giving the bear another whack. The bear was chained up and moving back and forth as if ‘dancing’ but gave a snarl as it was hit.

“Thay Orchid, you don’t know any talk to animalth thpells, do you?”

I shook my head. “My communication spell requires language already, it’s a separate spell to talk to animals.”

“Thath too bad.”

The bear got another whack.

“I feel pretty bad for tha bear,” he admitted. “Maybe this wasnth the best-”

As the man went to whack the bear again it seemed they had finally taken all they could take. It roared, snapped the tether like it was a piece of string, reared up, and was about to smash into the handler. Of course the man scrambled back in fright, falling off his stool and probably wetting himself. I was, perhaps to my detriment, somewhat amused by all this. Malachite jumped into action, placing himself in harms way and knocking the bear off course. At least a little, because rather than go down

the bear simply shoved him, making him stagger back. Hanz shooed the other people that were watching away and approached the bear, making odd growly noises to perhaps try calming it down.

“Oh, now it’s on!” Malachite decided, catching his balance. “Get out of here!” he shouted to the man, who scrambled to all fours and raced past me.

“I knew I should have been a chef!” I heard him muttering to himself.

“This is more like it,” Snarly decided. “I wish I had thome popcorns.”

“Are you nuts there’s a bear on the loose!” Malachite yelled, again going to grab the bear. He was backhanded, went flying, and came to a rest looking up at me with a very shocked and confused expression on his face.

“How am I losing to a bear?” he managed.

*You lost to a couple of wolves if you recall?* “If you’ve had your fun?” I asked him in an exasperated tone, raising my hands. I pulled ambient mana through my core and pointed at the bear, still unsure what to do about Hanz who was speaking softly to it and trying to appear non-threatening. “Arise!” I commanded. The bear obliged, legs pinwheeling as it was lifted off the floor and become totally harmless.

“It’s not a whole ship, but I’d pay ta see it,” Snarly remarked.

“Now what do we do with it?” Malachite wondered, taking my hand so he could get up. Not that I helped all that much, mind you, he was more likely to yank me off my feet if he wasn’t careful, but a good girlfriend is always there to help her man, I decided. I needed to think of these things now, after all.

“Go look for the handler?” I suggested. “I can handle things here.”

“He can’t have gone far,” he agreed, and swept the door of the tent out of his way. A moment later he returned, the man’s arm held in one of his claws.

“Okay, okay, I’m here,” he agreed, pulling away from Malachite. “It’s under control isn’t it?”

“That it is,” I told him. “You owe me 70 embers.”

“I beg your pardon?!”

“You heard me. Guild regulations, my hands are tied I’m afraid. I figured you didn’t want a dead bear, or a knocked out bear, so this was the next best thing. Telekinesis magic, grade 6. At my level the standard cost for the spell is 70 embers. I did save the place from a rampaging bear, and no one here was hurt. I mean can you even imagine? What if that bear had killed someone? You got off cheaply my friend so pay up.” *For once I don’t even care the guild make me charge. Who does this guy think he is, making this bear go crazy like that?*

“Yes, what kind of trainer are you?” Hanz asked. “I’d like to see your badge I tell you what. Do you even have the Boulder badge? I doubt it.”

“The what?” the man seemed confused.

“Never mind, just pay the lady. She did technically defeat your pokemon, even if she didn’t use one of her own. Orchid would you say you were closer to psychic type or rock type?”

“I- what?” *Now I don’t know what they’re on about.*

“Never mind,” they sighed. “As usual. I don’t see you getting out a coin pouch, friend.”

“I’ll have to go get it, just wait right here!” He darted out of the tent again, making Malachite narrow his eyes.

“I better keep an eye on our new buddy,” he remarked, following him out.

“Wouldn’t thee be magic type?” Snarly asked.

“Magic type wasn’t a thing,” Hanz replied. “Maybe fairy type?”

“Oh I could thee that!”

“Hey fairies are cool don’t you diss fairies!” I warned them.

“I wathen’t!”

“Do you hear shouting?” Hanz asked.

I sighed. "Let's go. Come on bear." We all headed out to see what the commotion was, I pulled the bear out with me, making everyone turn to see it.

*Great, I'm a freak with a floating bear after all. Sigh. At least I'm still disguised, thank the angels for small favors.*

Finally the ringmaster or whatever he called himself showed up and we got the whole thing sorted out. I got my 7 moons, thank you very much, and the bear went back in his cage to cool down. The brownie promised to look into his acts and employees a bit more carefully from now on, and hoped our stay had not been ruined so early in the day.

"Are you kidding?" Snarly asked. "Thith is the most excitement I've had, that wathn't tryna kill me. I hope the rest of tha day liveth up to it!"

"Please do enjoy the rest of the circus," he bade us. "And thank you again for taking care of that, it really could have been a disaster."

*Yeah, no kidding. But hey, easy money, and I got to use magic for what I believe it should be used for. Actually helping people out. You can't ask for more than that!*

## Chapter 6

If you can get them, before they get you

We headed out the next day to investigate the Ice Craig, where the reports of the “flying creature” were coming from, and piled onto the enlarged Malachite as usual. It wasn’t long before the mountains in the distance became the mountains right next to us, and we all started looking around for any large, flying creatures or large cave entrances big enough to hide such a creature. Malachite gave a shout and pointed, it seemed he had spotted something interesting instead. Near an area that seemed to have suffered a recent landslide and smashed the path to pieces were what looked like elemental demons, specifically some brown and some white, so probably earth and ice. There were some other indistinct figures milling around down there but we were too far away to see what specifically they were. The demons though, they were clearly visible, being “made” of their element.

“Hang on!” Malachite called. “I’m going to flame them!” He swooped down, making me squeeze my eyes shut but that just let me more clearly visualize him getting shot out of the sky, smashing into the mountain and killing us all. Snarly was also carrying on at my side, it didn’t seem he was any happier about the situation. “Didja see that?” Malachite whooped as he soared up again, banking to come around for another pass. “Got them!”

*He’s not going to drop you, get hold of yourself and help,* I chided myself. I had to cast my spell to aid his precision in striking several times as it didn’t last very long, even at his speed, but as we completed the second pass he had indeed hit them all again. Several arrows and elemental attacks came our way, as Hanz fired down as best they could, but Malachite was looking around.

“Hit my wing,” he explained. “Have to set down!”

We found a place and tumbled off him, he was clinging to the side of the mountain as best he could in his larger form. I expected to feel the spell leave me, given it usually lasted until we landed, but this time it seemed content to remain. *Of course, because I now need him to be smaller to do a proper healing, the magic doesn’t cooperate and keeps him big. He’s used to it going away by now though, so he won’t know the difference.* “Get ready!” I called up to him. *I can’t effectively heal him like that. Much easier to heal him at his normal size than this huge size, given how it works. I guess I shouldn’t complain too much, this scratch on his wing might have torn it off in his original size.*

He nodded, and I cut the spell off. He scrambled down to us.

“Those were draig like me!” he announced, clearly put out. “Working with those elemental things? Like the cultists? I don’t believe this! Humans, sure, I can understand that but we’re supposed to be better than that. Present company- *are you even human, strictly speaking?*”

*Anyone can be seduced by power. Look at me! Or better yet, don’t, thank you very much.* I opened my mouth to answer that curse or not, I probably still was, despite my longevity.

“Worry about it later,” Hanz cautioned, cutting me off. “But perhaps not too much later?” They pointed, and there were figures in the distance, possibly three of them, winging their way over to us.

*I really hope this ‘big, flying thing’ we’re after isn’t part of the cult. I mean give us a break here!* “Keep an eye out, I’ll get Malachite healed up,” I told them.

“Of course!” They stuck out their arm, clearly aiming. “They will be in my range long before we are in theirs. Arrows being what they are. Ah, those were the days.”

“I’ll... do nothing,” Snarly announced, looking around but not really seeing anything to do at the moment.

Malachite stuck out his wing, which was a bit torn up, and I started my Sun spell to take care of it, drawing upon ambient mana as usual. *I hope it isn’t too bad, I really need to look into a healing spell that doesn’t care about how much damage a person has taken. We found a repair spell so there must be a similar healing spell. Before we go looking for the nexus I’ll have to look into it. Uncertainty in healing is not ideal, especially when facing the unknown as the poem suggested.*



I focused on healing the wing, which seemed to take just fine, while Hanz took care of our defense. Two shapes dropped out of the sky, and while they were sighting on the third it started getting smaller again, not bigger. “Retreating,” they announced. “Sorry Orchid.”

“What?” I managed, but they were already firing again.

“Clipped the wing,” they announced as the figure fell. “He could survive, I suppose.”

We watched as he fell out of sight. I sighed. *Another stain upon our souls. I should have protested more strongly, but then I needed to heal. And would that excuse be accepted by the arbiter of my soul? Probably not.*

“I’ll go see if I can find them, make sure they’re-” Malachite looked at me. “Brought back for medical treatment if still alive?”

“They’re cultists, clearly,” I told him. “But they’re your people first. I can’t affect what you do if you leave, it’s your own soul that is in peril if you find them alive and do nothing.” *Or finish the job when I’m not around to see it. Might be nice to question something not an elemental demon though.*

“I guess we’ll have to see.” He flapped and took off.

“There’s thomthing I can do,” Snarly decided. “Help Malachite look!” And he promptly jumped from the path and started waving his arms around as he slid down the mountain.

*What are you doing? It’s kilometers away, where they fell. It would be hours before you got there-*

“Thith may have been a mithake!” he screamed, losing their footing and careening down the slope. He caught on a fairly gnarled looking old tree and skidded to a halt, looking unsure of what to do next.

“You going to do anything about that?” Hanz asked, gesturing to him. “Oh lifter of ships and bears and whatnot?”

I shrugged. “I’ll think about it. Clearly we’ve forgotten the whole dragon cave traps situation and can do with a reminder. He’s not *hurt*,” *this time*, “let him ponder the implications of his actions for a bit, and where not ‘looking before you leap’ can lead to.”

“Ah, the old King Koopa training method, eh?” they decided. “Pain is the best teacher, and all that? Pity you don’t play the piano. Peaches peaches, peaches, peeeaches!”

“What are you going on about now?”

“Never mind.” They hopped down the path themselves, taking the four or five steps to Snarly who they picked up in one hand and climbed back up. Setting Snarly down he dusted himself off.

“At leath I can say I twied,” he told us.

“That is not inaccurate,” I had to admit.

A moment later Malachite landed beside us again, and shook his head. “Couldn’t find them. Sorry, Orchid.”

“Well, their sprites despawned once they were offscreen,” Hanz told him. “So I’m not surprised you didn’t see them.”

“Huh? Talk sense!”

“They’re in a mood,” I told him. “And for some reason craving fruit, even though they don’t eat? Come on. You’ll have to cling to the side if you want to be big again, this path is pretty narrow.”

“We can make it from here, the path winds around.”

“I guess if you don’t mind me holding everyone back.” I looked to the side. “Maybe no horse, but my other friends can now join the party.” I got out Besom and Boline, who went invisible, and we headed up the path. Malachite first, though in reality Besom was in the real lead, hovering and darting back and forth ready to attack anything that moved. *At least the non-lethal attack will work on any more cultists, if not on the elementals. If only I could fit both a lethal and non-lethal attack into one of my little ones! But I’ve had that thought before so concentrate. Maybe I should just make another that has the lethal spell and choose between them as the situation requires? Right, concentrating...*

I closed my emotions up into the box and watched my footing, and some time later Malachite put up a hand and stopped us.

“They left?” he announced.

“Elaborate?” Hanz asked.

“I can see the cave, no one is in front of it.”

“That makes me all the more suspicious,” they announced.

“Agreed. Let’s take steps.” He held out a hand to me.

*Ah, the old astral trick. Suits me.* I got everyone touching me and moved us into the astral, where we still were cautious about moving forward because of the shenanigans related to that lately. This was fortunate, because after a moment of peeking into the cave, Snarly peeking around his legs, he motioned us back and we headed down the path a few meters.

“A few things don’t add up,” he began. “There’s two ice elemental creatures in there, standing by the other entrance as far as I can see. Along with two draig, arrows out.”

“You didn’t see the earth type onths?” Snarly asked.

“What earth type ones?”

“Tho you didnth.” He looked pleased at that, drawing himself up to his full height. “Theth three of them, near tha wallth to jump out at uth.”

“Great.” He rolled his eyes. “More things to worry about.”

“What doesn’t add up though?” I asked.

“Looking at the elementals, it’s like they’re more solid. But not solid like we’re solid, being all the way here. Does that make sense?”

“No. I mean your explanation makes sense, but there’s nothing in my experience that would allow a creature to exist in more than one plane at once. Which would be what you would be describing. Which is nonsense. How would they even do such a thing?”

“We don’t know their exact capabilities,” Hanz cautioned.

“So what are you saying?” I asked curtly. “That these elementals- guarding something high up in the mountains as they are- are *somehow* in contact with the others who have noticed us popping in and out of places and *just happen* to have an ability no other creature on this planet has to occupy both the astral and the material plane at the same time?”

“...Yes? The evidence is before us, after all.”

“You’re sure they look different from before?” I asked Malachite, hoping it had been some trick of the light or something, and not some further complication from these stupid things we would have to deal with.

“Pretty sure.”

“Well, that’s convenient for them.” I muttered. “Fine. We’ll go a little bit further away and go ‘down’ instead of up. We can ambush them just as easily popping in from purgatory as astral.”

“Is ambush the plan, then?” Hanz asked.

“They must be here for some reason,” I decided. “I don’t like the thought of killing the draig, who have souls, but we can’t leave these elemental demon things running around like- say, wait a minute.” I brightened.

“You have a plan?”

“If they’re partly here, I bet they would be damaged. We can ambush them, striking from our ‘high ground’ if you will, and not have to worry about the draig. We can then take them from behind and possibly force a surrender!” *Can their abilities work here? I’ve already underestimated them once, let’s not do that again. Dodge anything you see coming your way.*

“The battle is over, once you have the high ground,” Hanz agreed. “Ah, Obi-Wan, you old rascal.”

“That’s why having wings is so great,” Malachite agreed. “So is that the plan?”

“Let me at least see what purgatory looks like,” I decided. “I want to see if they are just guessing we come from there because that’s the usual mortal- I don’t want to say compulsion- to seek Heaven and not Hell.”

“Tendency?” Hanz suggested.

“That. I want to see if we still can take them by surprise. That might still be better, even if we have to deal with the archers.”

“I’m with you,” Malachite told me.

“Let’s back off a bit more then.”

Sadly, this plan left me even more enraged than I had been before. Malachite had reported back they looked the same. There was a clear difference in the elemental demons and the way the draig looked.

“They’re here too?” I spat. “Just who do these things think they are?”

“It is curious,” Hanz admitted. “Even my visual systems would be overwhelmed with sensory input from so many places. They are, in essence, seeing five realms all at once. How can that be worthwhile for them?”

“Hopefully we can get close and take them out before they can react,” Malachite decided. “I didn’t see where the earth ones were, are they closer to us now or over there?” He looked to Snarly.

“They’re nearer us,” he reported.

“We can cross the landslide,” I decided. “Attack from the other side. There better be something good in here for all this...”

We got into position. Malachite picked Snarly up and flew him across, while I simply used telekinesis magic on Hans and myself to get us across. We were now nearly in position and discussing our final strategy.

“I’ll empower your weapons,” I told them. “It won’t last long, so rush them. Hopefully you cut them down in one swipe, and we only have the three earth elemental ones to deal with. Hanz... I don’t know about empowering your beam weapon...”

“I will attack with the ax,” they announced, getting it out. “I would rather strike them physically anyway, and if luck is with us, they will count as undead enough to trigger the blessing.”

“Fair enough. I’ll follow and keep supporting you as I can.”

“Shouldn’t we be invincible?” Snarly asked, a hand on his dagger.

“I want to see if they can see us,” I told him. “If this is just for show, and they just stand there and take it? We know it’s a trick in the future. Us striking from hiding invalidates that effort.” *We got lucky this area is so rocky and they’re in a cave and such that we can ambush them like this. The next place we see them will be some featureless hallway, if things keep going the way they’re going.*

“Okay.”

“And what if it doesn’t work?” Malachite asked. “What’s the plan then?”

“We’ll have to drop out,” I admitted. “I’m not doing any kind of combat maintaining the spell that keeps us here. I’ve tried maintaining a spell in combat before, it doesn’t work.”

“That’s fine, I just want to know what to expect. I’m ready, do your thing.”

“Okay.” I relaxed, made sure my emotions were safely in the box, and cast on both. They rushed forward, quietly, and Hanz did the sensible thing of going for the head. The ax passed through, while Malachite hit the leg.

“It didn’t work!” he called out. “They’re hurt but still up, like only this part of them got hurt not their main body.”

I sighed, *of course it has to be the hard way. At least we know they’re somewhat vulnerable in this state.*

I dropped us back into the real world as Hanz pulled back the ax for another strike.

“Elemental Strike!” I cast, figuring I wouldn’t have enough time to pull ambient mana before they struck again. *Hopefully they’re strong enough on their own, and it would only be a bit more magic in the end anyway.*

It seemed it was fine, the head of the thing shattered and it started to vanish. The other one, acting offensively, used its cheap ice attack on us, the usual ice spears from the floor flew at us. I dodged back, I was outside the cave anyway but this meant I was now separated from my friends. *Neat.* Besom and Boline sprang forward, trying to tear the ice apart so we could get back to the fight, but it was a lattice of individual icicles, and they weren’t making much headway. I stepped up, casting phase on us all and they went still, allowing themselves to be shifted slightly out of the physical. I headed forward, keeping one hand on each, and looked the situation over as I got past the ice. With the door blocked the cave was even dimmer now, but I could see the ice elemental was gone, Snarly was hiding behind some boxes at the far end of the cave, while Hanz was smashing apart an earth elemental. There was one of them to go, and the two draig left.

*Huh, they were busy. I didn’t think I was gone that long.*

The earth elemental looked like it was about to do something, and was too far away for Malachite to reach. It wasn’t out of my range through, so I gestured at it. Two wind needles hit it in the face, causing it to crumble.

“Welcome back!” Malachite said to me in passing, boosting himself forward with his wings. He chopped into the one draig while snarling “traitor!” which killed him. I saw the other hastily booking it out of there, he was past my line of sight before I could do anything though.

*Great, they get to report we took this area. At least all the elementals are gone. Was my letting that ice one go the reason they developed this ‘technique’ of being everywhere, all at once? As they weren’t using it before. But one gave a report on us and now this is the result? But I can never be sure.*

“Is that it?” Malachite asked, looking around warily. Nothing else jumped out at us, so he tossed the body out the cave and let it roll down the mountain.

*Too far gone to reanimate. Besides I have my pets now, I don’t need the zombies quite so much. Almost wish for a speak to the dead spell, maybe we could have gotten more answers from a cultist than from a being of elemental energy.*

“Leth get looting!” Snarly announced, as I dug out a light token and lit it up. “Must be thomthing fun here.” He started prying open boxes while the others looked the place over. It was clearly a camp, but why? *What’s here they were guarding?*

“There’s a passageway back here,” Hanz announced. “We may have more fighting to do.”

*Oh joy.*

## Chapter 7

### The spiders are his only friends

I was lying in a hole, a sharp rock piercing my side, looking up and wondering why bad things happened to good people. Or was I not good people anymore? All I really wanted to do was make the world better with my skills, which meant magic, but now I was caught up in evil cults, and beings from other planes trying to kill me all the time. Beings that were being very naughty indeed and doing impossible things seemingly in direct opposition to me, specifically. Was this the universe's way of telling me I was on the wrong path? Was this pain my karmic retribution for not jumping to Snarly's aid before? Was even the thought of this being something other than random chance, as though the universe even noticed my moving through it, hubris? All of these things filled my thoughts as I lay in the hole, and cried out, because it *hurt*, darn it!

"Orchid!" I looked up and saw the faces of everyone above me. "Are you okay?" Malachite called down.

"Be careful, there could be other traps," Hanz cautioned. "We should look around carefully."

"She could be down there dying!"

"I'm fine," I called up. "I guess."

"Why is there a trap here anyway?" Malachite demanded to know, but of who I wasn't sure. I really had no idea. "It's not near the boxes, or the entrance. And who put it there?"

"Perhaps getting her out first, then speculate?" Hanz suggested.

"Hereth thome rope!" Snarly offered, and the rope he threw down smacked heavily into my face. "Thorry!"

"Ow!" *What am I doing with my life?*

"You were thupothed to catch it!"

"Perhaps you missed the part where I'm *impaled!* Not to mention I can barely see, it's dark down here." *My ball of light moves with me, yes, but I have to give it at least some kind of thought. When the floor opens up under you it's not one of the things I have in mind.*

"Can you move at all?" Malachite called down, concerned.

"Yes," I managed, gripping the rope. At least Snarly had made some nice knotted handholds for me, which was quite nice of him. "It's fine. Get me out of here."

They heaved me up, yanking me off the pointy rock I had been stuck on, making me grit my teeth together so I didn't cry out again. Finally I was out of the hole, and started to heal myself.

"What a fascinating process," Hanz remarked, watching it. "The crystals are slowly regrowing, they are truly a part of you."

"As if there was some doubt," I muttered.

"Thereth traph all in a line here," Snarly told us. "Be careful."

"Can we just get back to finding this dragon or whatever?" I asked. "I don't like this cave anymore." *Whatever is further down, the cultists are welcome to it, as far as I'm concerned.*

"I don't think so," Hanz reported. "I found some notes made by the draig, apparently the further you go into that cave there, the clearer a 'voice' becomes. The voice begs for freedom, so it is something we should probably look into."

"Were they investigating it?"

They shook their head. "Unclear. It seems as though the voice became apparent after they arrived, not that they came looking for it. They were stopped, it seems, further in. There is no indication of some other purpose in them being here, however."

"Don't like mysteries," I mused, getting up.

"Maybe thith will cheer you up?" Snarly handed me a slender, polished, stick. "It was in the thuff! Not much of value though. Is thith what they call a wand?"

"It's magical," I announced, feeling it out. "Earth based. So I guess so, yeah."

“We may need to take a break,” Malachite told us. “But that means staying here. The weather is getting a bit worse, and that fight took a lot out of me. I don’t think I’m prepared for another.”

“Pity you don’t run on electricity, like some do,” Hanz replied smugly. “Oh by the way I need the magic put back again?”

“You can’t use that magic on me, can you?” Malachite wondered.

“Only if you secretly run on batteries,” I joked. “Still...” I looked him over. My family had thrown me out, right? I trusted Malachite and the others, right? They wouldn’t go spreading it around, right? “I can help you though. In all fairness I should have offered this to you before. There’s a combat technique taught in my family, a sort of combat meditation. It helps me keep my cool, gives me an edge over my opponents. I can teach it to you if you want. But the technique begins with regular old meditation. If you want, I can give you some pointers for that right now; you can meditate for a bit, and see if that helps gets you back to a place you’re confident in.”

“I’m willing to try it!”

“Okay, get comfortable somewhere...” We dug out some blankets and I told him how to sit, how to focus on his body and his breathing, and left him relaxing a moment. “Get used to this, I’m going to do some magic for Hanz, then come back for you. I’ll use my magic to artificially boost your skill in this, which should help. Focus on your breathing.”

“Got it.”

Several minutes later I had remade everyone’s spell symbols, worked out what the wand did, (30 charges of an earth moving spell, so hardly worth it. Simply making it with 50- so that it was permanent, forever- would have increased the sacrifice of the mana core only fractionally, and been no less expensive. It boggled the mind why a mage would choose to do it that way) and increased Malachite’s skill at meditation. *Wait, did the ‘wand’ have more charges? It must have been used since it was made. So that makes even less sense, if it was say 40 to start, why not just make it permanent? Some people are just really dumb, I guess. Is that how they dug those traps here? Where did they put the dirt then? Did they really shovel it all out the cave entrance?* He sat and relaxed, hopefully getting his strength back, while we watched for other cultists flying in. I had webbed up the other passage, we didn’t need anyone coming from that direction either. He must have meditated for more than an hour, but finally got up and stretched.

“I really do think that helped!” he announced. “This meditation stuff isn’t bad. You really were holding out on me!”

“It was a means to an end,” I explained. “My goal was the battle meditation.” I looked away, embarrassed. “I can teach you that too, if you want. But that’s a long term goal, like I said.”

“Sure thing! Well, let’s see what this ‘voice’ has to say.”

We headed back into the astral, *no sense taking chances*, and headed down the path after a quick spell to ignite the webs and get them out of the way.

What it had to “say” was a confusing barrage of images, that we all had to stop and process after the onslaught ended. We all glanced around, confirming that everyone had received these “visions” even Hanz, to my surprise.

“What did you get out of that?” I asked them. *And how did we see those images here, in the astral? Wait, wait, is that why those specific elemental demons were sent here? To try and figure out what’s here? Maybe this captive is like them, ‘smeared’ if you will across dimensions? So they can see us just like the elementals could?*

“A creature of some kind is trapped down here,” they agreed. “I got flashes of wanting to be free again, something about opening the doors, and the captors are ghostly figures and more of those gumdrop creatures but I think they’re incidental to the whole process. Probably wandered in here and

never left again, rather than being stationed here. Hardly an impressive fighting force, so I admit to being confused about the whole thing.”

Malachite and Snarly were nodding along. I had to admit that’s what I saw too.

*So something powerful enough to show us all that exists here, a capability I would be hard pressed to explain. Maybe an angel could do it? But then why wouldn’t it have been freed by other angels? What exactly is keeping it here?*

“So what do we do about it?” Malachite asked, looking at me.

I shrugged. “We ask, of course.”

I took a moment to frame some questions, and cast my magic into the universe.

“Will we regret freeing the creature whose voice we are hearing in our heads?”

“Unknown”

“Does the creature whose voice we hear mean us harm?”

“No”

“Does the creature whose voice we hear mean anyone outside this cave harm?”

“Yes”

“Oh, wonderful,” Malachite spat when I told him that one. “So we let this thing out of here and it goes on some kind of rampage, we’re responsible for it.”

“That’s exactly right,” I praised, glad he had seen it right away. “We need to be careful.”

“We can approach this with some measure of logic,” Hanz decided. “For example, the jailers seem to be spirits of some kind. Odd to see them tied down in such a way, and we can verify if they are indeed ghosts further on before doing something.”

“What are you thaying?” Snarly asked.

“The jailers are not angelic beings, as one might find guarding a demon of some sort. At the very least, we know at some point in the past a person or persons versed in binding souls captured our ‘friend’ here and guarded them with necromancy. Does this suggest an evil being is held here?”

“I suppose not,” I agreed. “And while I don’t ascribe beauty to goodness- I mean just look at me- we can probably speak to this creature directly before we free it. At the very least it must be chained up somehow below. Let’s see what it is, what it has to say and make our choice then.”

“Fair enough,” agreed Malachite. “Also keep in mind the Gloom cultists didn’t rush to free it either. So it doesn’t seem like it would be friendly to them.”

*Maybe they couldn’t. But I see where he’s coming from. They weren’t ‘down there’ trying stuff, getting more people here and throwing magic at the problem. I know they have mages in their cult, we knew that from the very beginning. And this camp has been here for some time, to have brought all those boxes and things. No, they were in our way, so that’s another point in this thing’s favor.*

We headed further down the path, Malachite again in the lead but this time my allies trailing along behind me. I didn’t need them stuck between Malachite and whatever was down here in case it was a narrow passage and he went running at it. (Or was charged himself!) He could also see in the dark, which it was- of course- so I wanted the light bob-bob-bobbing along at my side. My allies couldn’t see in the dark any more than I could. He finally stopped and peeked through the opening, motioning me to stay back so the light didn’t reveal us.

“Two ghosts all right,” he reported. “And something else.”

“Does the phrase ‘dark souls’ mean anything to anyone?” Hanz asked.

We all glanced around but no one spoke up.

They sighed. “Of course not. Still, strange to find such a thing here. There is some kind of odd ‘door’ here, one that usually leads to boss encounters in a... story... from long ago.”

“Thing?” I asked.

“It’s a white mist. The character in the story would part it, touching it like this,” they made a swiping gesture in front of them, “and the mist would clear, allowing the character to proceed. It was a warning to them, that something awful was beyond. Very strange to see such a clear representation here.”

“You think it’s been here since the fall?” Malachite asked.

“And they used the convention because it was known to the people of the time?” Hanz went on.

“Yes, that’s entirely possible. This is the ‘door’ the entity wanted opened. And yet I see it only as a warning.”

“The cult couldn’t get past it?” I wondered.

“Ah, but the guardth are thill here,” Snarly reasoned. “Tho they didn’t try, did they?”

I had to admit this was likely.

“Let’s poke the bear,” Malachite decided. “I’ll try opening the door, and see if they react. What?”

I shook my head. “Too soon.”

He chuckled and giggled. “Sorry, I guess I fell into a trap just then.”

I glared at him.

“At least give me a ghost of a chance to apologize.”

“Just get going!”

He grinned a final time and headed into the room. I watched as he cautiously approached the door, sword out. The ghostly figures didn’t seem to react, and he touched the door, which it seemed stopped him. He looked back, scowling, and made the sliding motion. Nothing happened. He glanced around and headed back.

“Four gumdrops, two ghosts,” he reported. “No reaction from either. The door felt solid to me, which was a very strange thing to feel.”

“Leth just go around the door?” Snarly asked.

“A worthwhile suggestion,” Hanz agreed. “We can scout the area fully before committing to anything.”

We headed further in and checked the place out. Strangely there were only a few chambers beyond, and nothing that looked like a prison at all. Just empty rooms, a few more ghosts, and two curious additions that had us all scratching our heads.

“What are they eating?” Malachite wanted to know, as we looked at the pair of giant spiders that were before us.

“I want to know how they got here,” Hanz added. “The boss door here is closed, can they pass through it because they are animals?”

“Ith is right to call theth bothh dorth when there’th no bothh around here?” Snarly asked.

“Perhaps it only spawns when the door is open?”

“The bothh ith a fith? I like fith.”

“I could go for a salmon steak or five,” Malachite agreed. “I’m starving.”

“Spawning refers to- never mind.”

“It is curious,” I agreed. “Where is the prisoner? Why so many chambers, with seemingly nothing in them?” *Yes yes, some old coins laying around for some reason and that scroll but no chairs, tables, shelves, embalming tools, nothing. What’s the point of this place?*



The other curious thing I recognized was a creature called a death worm, usually found in deserts.

“It seems dormant, probably because of the cold,” I finally decided, after we watched the thing for a few minutes. It was just laying there, not doing much. “Too much to hope for that it’s dead. If it does stir, run. It can spray a poison that will basically just kill you outright. I... don’t know what the sword would do to it. How it got here, what it’s eating, I have no clue. This is completely the wrong environment for it.”

“Yes, get behind me in that case,” Hanz agreed. “It can spray all the poison it wants at me. You would be able to cleanse it with your magic, yes?”

“Once it was on you and considered a contaminant? Yes.”

“Are we continuing?” Malachite asked, once all rooms were explored. “You did want to see whatever it was before we freed it. But there’s no other doors or passages we’ve seen in this place.”

*The worm thing isn’t the captive, is it? Now there’s a thought.* “I guess I would rather free it, allow it to show its true colors and we put an end to it, rather than letting it just suffer here alone. If it’s evil, I’m sure we can figure it out and put a stop to it.” *Even an evil creature should be allowed judgment and rest.*

“Despite the ancient people being unable to do so, thus settling on imprisonment?” Hanz asked skeptically.

“What’s the worst that could happen?”

“I’m not with her!” they shouted, pointing to me and backing off. “She said it, not me!”

And so the plan was hatched. We started in the center, there were no more than two ghosts on each door which worked out because we had exactly two physical fighters. Snarly, to his somewhat disappointment, was told to stay back because poisoning a ghost probably wasn’t going to work out very well. Instead I would phase Malachite and Hanz, empower them, and drop the dimensional spell. This would pop them up right next to the targets, giving us “the surprise round” as Hanz put it, and hopefully finishing them off both at once. As I was touching them anyway to maintain the phase, we would then step back up, get into position again, and repeat until all the ghosts were gone. We would then start in the middle again, opening the doors so the gumdrops and spiders could walk around, and presumably “free” the captive here as they wished. This avoided us having to kill anything just trying to live, and keep us safe at the same time. We would give the gross worm thing a wide berth, and hope it was too cold to be active.

The plan went off without a hitch. The ghosts all burned away, Malachite this time going for the head after being reminded by Hanz while I was casting. With the guards gone we had free access to the place, though it seemed only I could open the doors for some reason. Snarly and Hans simply slid off the surface of the doors, while Malachite said he could almost seem to get a grip on it? I slid them easily, and the mist parted, allowing full access. *Something to do with a mana core? Not a very effective means of security though, magic users can be evil or good.*

With the last door opened we braced ourselves, and a joyful wind swept through the place slashing everything we had left to ribbons. I sighed mightily. *Really? We went out of our way to avoid that, there was no reason to kill the spiders, at least. And gumdrops are just... they’re not worth the effort.*

We were barraged with another set of images, it seemed the job was only beginning, yay! It conveyed to us that it would need certain objects brought back here to fully break the lock surrounding its prison, but that it was happy to see us, meant no one harm (a lie, clearly, as my magic already said it meant at least one person outside this cave harm) and knew where the first “key” could be found. Some random spot in the woods, of course. The wind died down and we were standing there again trying to make sense of it.

“Clearly a foreign intelligence, to communicate in this way,” Hanz finally reasoned. “I am becoming intrigued to meet whatever this creature is.”

“And how many of these keys are there?” Malachite wanted to know. “I didn’t get a good sense of it.”

“Neither did I,” I complained. “It figures though.”

“Yeah it does.”

“At least we can see what the thuff is around here,” Snarly told us. “Come on, there’s coin over here right?”

We found some coins (gold and silver, but not a style we were familiar with) and the scroll we had seen turned out to be a map to the “Well of the Unfortunate” which seemed like a good place to stay away from, maybe? We didn’t need any more of that.

“So perhaps finally returning to our mission for the town?” I suggested.

“Depends on the weather,” Malachite countered. “You want to fly in the snowstorm, we can but...”

“Let’s go see.”

## Chapter 8

### Getting lost in the shuffle

The weather wasn't keen on cooperating with us, and it was approaching mid-afternoon so it would be dark in a few hours. We needed to decide on a course of action fairly soon.

"If we did want to go out there, I do have a spell to help. Remember waaaaay back when we first started out and took some valuables from the cultists? I got a spell, one of the only ones I've found on this whole quest, actually." *Which is somewhat depressing. Oh, boots I can't wear? Sure, have some. Illegal, dragon-scale boots I can't wear? Obviously. Magical items with charges that are basically worthless? Got a couple of them. Something useful like spells? Nope! Sorry, you lose out. I've had to buy all but two. The shrink spell I never used, and the weather one- I never used. Yeah, great track record there.* "I never memorized it, but I can cast it from my book directly. It'll protect us from the cold and such, and we can carry on looking."

"We've roughed it before," Malachite reminded me. "We could camp here the night."

"Yeah, and it sucked. Plus we're in a cult location, more could show up at any time. In fact *may* show up, at least one draig got away, remember. He could be back with a dozen people at any time."

"So we can get rid of a dozen cult members at once!"

I rolled my eyes. "Not the point. Especially if they take a page from our playbook..." *And you're hard to wake up. If they attack us when you're asleep...*

"Oh, yeah."

"My vote would be that we head out again. If we don't find anything in a few hours we'll head back home and try again tomorrow."

There were no objections, so I found myself picked up again and carried into the snows. He started flying again, trying to follow the path to wind up where the captain of the guard had said the sightings had taken place. We saw some nesting creatures below us, but nothing bothered us, and soon enough Malachite called to us. "I'll be, there is a dragon! Let's go say hello!" He pointed, and sitting on a rock ahead of us was a rocky, gray colored dragon. He landed near it, clearly stealth was not an option the thing was looking right at us as we approached. The dragon right away raised a hand.

"There's only room on this mountain for one dragon, I suggest you turn back. I am not in the mood to squabble over territory."

"I'm magically enlarged," Malachite assured them.

"And magically delicious!" Hanz singsonged.

"They're just kidding around, I'm sure we all taste terrible," Malachite told them with a pointed look at Hanz. "I mean this one is mostly made of rock!" He pointed to me.

"I see that. So why are you here, then?"

"We're here to see about your intentions for the area. You've been scaring a lot of people, you know?"

"It was not my intent. But after those dwarves, I have been a bit standoffish, I admit that. Hard not to be intimidating, when you're my size. I'm sure you understand."

"Oh, completely. So you're not going to start demanding tributes or anything like that?"

"Perish the thought. I just want to be left alone. Maybe you can post a sign or something?"

"Do not meddle in the affairs of dragons because you are crunchy and good with ketchup?" Hanz suggested.

"Not exactly what I was thinking. Don't bother the dragon and he won't bother you, sort of deal."

"I could probably do that."

"Go back to thoth dwarveth?" Snarly asked.

"Yes, annoying little cowards. Attacked me in my sleep, some time ago." He rubbed his neck. "Actually managed to steal one of my frost glands, right out from inside me. The cheek!"

Hanz looked to me but I just shrugged. I had no idea.

“Maybe we can get it back fer ya?”

*And then do what? Healing magic can't just put it back inside him you know, Snarly. What would you even do with such a thing? Can it be so valuable to risk crossing a dragon for it?*

“Snarly!” growled Malachite.

“I really haven't felt quite right without it, it's true,” he agreed. “And it would be a good show of faith on your part.”

“Show of faith?” Malachite repeated.

“Exactly. Yes. You get me the gland back, I'll make an appearance in the town and issue a formal proclamation that yes, I'm remaining nearby but mean no harm. You can add your testimony that the dwarves started it, making me irritable when I saw others lurking around, but that the situation has been dealt with. I'll promise to be more courteous to those passing by and no one needs to fear me.”

*If I had a few days I could probably get some shelter put up around here, I thought, looking around. The dragon could actually charge a fee, turn his 'home' into a resting point. They would be safe from animals, what predator would approach a dragon? Yeah, I could see it, a big stone building, right there, with a stable there, actually the dragon could have a “stable” to keep the wind and the snow off... With this spell on me, the cold wouldn't bother me anyway. I could get stone here all day and reshape it to be anything I wanted.*

“We've actually got a lot on our plate right now,” he hedged. “Some kind of captured wind spirit a few mountains over sent us to look for stuff. And there's all this cult activity we need to look out for. And we wanted to break a curse, my rocky companion got some news recently about that, it just goes on and on, really.”

“It would be a shame, if I got irritated enough to fly over to the dwarven village myself and take a look around, so to speak. Anything could happen in that case. Castle walls, you know, they get old and someone like me just sits on them and they end up falling right over.”

*Yeah, the whole area would arm up against you. Isn't that the opposite of what you want? Empty threat really. We were sent to figure out if you really were a dragon. You are. We report back you're making threats and they'll start planning to deal with you. I doubt they would kill you, retaliation from other dragons in the area- we're not that far from Malachite's grandpappy- is an issue. But they could make your life here miserable with magic, I bet. Is there a spell to just make someone itchy from a distance? That would be an annoying one. What about making them thirsty all the time, or hear a random whistle in their ears?*

“I'm not saying it would take us weeks,” Malachite clarified. “Just that we might not be able to rush out to do it tomorrow. We need to discuss our next moves among the group.”

“Of course. We dragons are fairly patient. As long as I have your word it'll be done fairly soon.”

“Do you even know where the place is?”

“Naturally!”

He sighed. “Fine, you have my word.”

“Excellent! Now, if you were to fly straight that way...” He gave directions to the place, and Hanz took them down, getting some ink and paper out of my backpack. “Very good,” he said at last. “If you kill any of those stinking dwarves, be sure to shout ‘Ax'rejj the dragon sent me’ as you deal the killing blow. Yeah, that'll be good stuff. Let them know they shouldn't mess with dragons. Ketchup, and all that.”

“We'll keep it in mind.” He looked at me.

I looked back, with a look that said “You know *full well* we're not killing any dwarves, right?”

His look replied “Yes I know that well, my love.”

With that we headed back to town, for a well deserved dinner (for some) and some planning of our next move. It sounded like the wind spirit or whatever it was needed several keys for their freedom, and who knew how long my curse breaking would take? So it was decided to do the gland thing right away, then my thing, then hunt down the keys. The tricky part was how to go about it.

“So we have three choices, but two realistically,” I began.

“Simply ‘storming the castle’ as it were,” Hanz put in, “is right out.”

“That’s correct,” I agreed. “Not only would it be killing a bunch of dwarves, who are people, but any investigation will lead back to us. A squad of dwarves in battle gear spoiling for a fight show up at the town gate and how fast do you think the guard will hand us over to them to make that problem go away?”

“Tho fast our headth will thpin!” Snarly announced.

“Exactly,” I said with a nod. “So while *technically* an option, let’s discuss our real options. The sneaking way, and the diplomacy way. I have a certain member of our team in mind for either of those jobs.” I looked over to Snarly.

“I’m the one you want for both thoth planth?” Snarly asked. “Nice of you to finally recognith my skillth.”

“That’s right. For the sneaking plan we simply write a letter to the head dwarf, whoever they are. Snarly goes in with my magic making him invisible and phased. We watch from the astral as best we can, maybe he can leave little dabs of paint on the floor or something so we, who know what to look for, can track where he goes? We can work that out. Anyway, he waits for an opportune time, drops phase, picks up the gland, puts down the letter, and activates a spell token with phase in it again. No one is the wiser and the letter says something like ‘we’ll overlook it this time but if you try a stunt like that again etc.’ They freak out because the thing just vanished and life goes on for everybody.”

“And the other way?” Malachite asked.

“The other way we two,” I indicated Hanz and myself, “disguise ourselves as draig. We march up to the place, demand to speak to the head dwarf, and say Snarly is our ambassador. We draig are followers of the dragon, we’re all furious, and we’ve hired Snarly to speak for us as a neutral third party. Naturally, I’ve got magic going that enhances his skill at negotiating-”

“Not that I would need it,” Snarly hastened to add. “Everyone lovth me!”

“Of course not. But everyone can always be better. You talk them into giving us the thing back in exchange for the dragon not getting everyone they know together and smashing the place into the ground. Which I’ll need you to emphasize, over and over again, the dragon is seconds from doing should we come back without the gland.”

“Dragons are pretty solitary though,” Malachite warned us. “Would they buy that?”

I waved that off. “We can come up with some excuse. Something like he’s weighing the ridicule he’ll get from other dragons against them agreeing to put some dwarves in their place. That’s why he sent us to begin with, to see if he had to escalate or not.”

“It could work,” he admitted.

“I suggest we learn more about our reception at the armory before making further plans,” Hanz decided. “We do have the means, after all.” They looked at me.

“You have a question or two in mind? I won’t charge you,” I kidded.

“I do. For my first question I would ask ‘Are the dwarves in the Savvaas armory reasonable with outsiders?’ This would effectively negate the second plan if the answer is no. If they are going to turn us away at the gate regardless we should know about it.”

“Just a minute and I’ll ask.”

I did, and got back a “yes” answer.

“So that’s a good sign, they won’t just rain arrows down on us or whatever,” Malachite mused. “I have a quethion!” Snarly piped up. “What ith the beth way to get on a dwarths’ good thide?” “Shower them with gold,” Malachite muttered. “You’re not getting any of mine!”

“That may be too complex, but I’ll ask,” I told him. “The answer can be a few words, it’s just typically used for yes/no questions.”

The answer came back “depends on the dwarf.”

“Thoot.”

“Sorry.”

“Actually, there may be a way to better answer that question,” Hanz spoke up after a moment of thought. “There must be dwarves in town somewhere. Perhaps we can buy them some drinks and get their take on the situation. Perhaps gifting them a stone statue of some famous dwarf would go a long way to opening doors. Perhaps offering stone shaping magic, or something else we can do that’s not just gold would get them to trust us better. We don’t know their customs, some kind of gift may be appropriate in their culture even in this situation, as we are coming unannounced to talk to them.”

*No sense antagonizing them before we’ve even gotten inside the place, if we’re there to talk. No harm in asking around.*

“I’d love to talk to thom dwarvth!” Snarly agreed.

“Perhaps further planning should be paused until we have that opportunity,” Hanz suggested. “I put the motion to a vote.”

“Sounds about right,” I agreed, when Malachite shrugged. “Motion seconded.”

“Whatever,” Malachite said.

“Whath going on?” Snarly asked.

“Motion passes, discussion is tabled,” Hanz announced.

We all got up, Malachite with a strange gleam in his eye. He shuffled over to me and grabbed me up.

“A ha!” he announced, “I have you now, helpless peasant girl!”

“Eeeeeee!” I squealed, playing along. “The dragon has me in his power!”

“That’s right. Come quietly and your village will be spared. For now.”

I put the back of my hand to my forehead. “If only I wasn’t the most beautiful, most virginal girl in my village I would never have been put in this situation. Oh woe is me!”

Hanz cocked their head to the side. “You mean purist? How can you be the most virg-”

“Silence!” Malachite mock roared. “Do not disturb the mighty dragon after he has claimed his prize and is heading back to his lair to enjoy her. Company. Enjoy her company.” He glanced at Snarly.

“Be gentle, oh mighty one!”

“I’ll consider it. Please me and perhaps it will cause me to ‘forget’ your village even exists.”

“I’ll do my absolute best!” I promised, clenching my fists. “I’ll show those others girls in my dragon pleasing class!”

“See that you do, maiden! Now, to my lair!”

*And maybe if trolls or whatever don’t attack the place I can actually stay the whole night.*

The night passed uneventfully, at least outside the house, and the group headed out after sunrise. I was disguised as a tortugan, a humanoid turtle race, and we asked around for any large gathering of dwarves. The best place, we were told, was down at the docks where dwarven miners delivered ore for shipment. There was a small office there staffed by dwarves so we headed that way to see what we could find out. We did find a few grumpy looking dwarves loading sacks into a box, and we caught a

conversation about how little ore there was to actually load. At least, I did, they were speaking their native language and I only had a basic grasp of it.

*It's a problem I'm hearing more and more about, mines going dry. Thankfully I work mostly in stone so it's not really a problem, but thousands of years of mining and then available land being narrowed after the moon's arrival really did a job on finding new sources of metals. Magical material doesn't last, and there's no elemental spell to summon iron from 'nowhere' like there is for summoning stone. Still, that's a problem for governments, not people on the street like me.* “Let's go inside,” I decided. “These don't look like they're in any mood to talk.” *Unless you want to hear them complaining about their trade being gone sometime soon as there's no more metal to find underground.*

We headed in and the dwarf at the desk looked up at us. “Can I help you?” he asked. *I think that's a he. Do both genders have beards? I'm actually not sure.*

Everyone sort of looked at everyone else, we hadn't discussed who exactly would ‘take point’ on this as Hanz would say, so I stepped up.

“Good morning,” I told them. “We're here for some advice, if you have a moment. I know it's probably not your usual line of work but at least we're not dwarves complaining about mines.”

“Don't even get me started,” he agreed. “Wouldn't mind a break from that, honestly. I'm listening.”

“Okay. So a few days ago the city guard hired us to look into reports of a dragon hanging around the nearby mountains. Bad for business, right?”

“Could be, could be. Go on.”

“We found the dragon, and he told us he had been attacked by dwarves, who somehow put him to sleep and cut him open. Some sort of gland was taken from him. He is hesitant to retaliate, though he of course feels within his rights to, because he does simply want to be left alone at the end of the day. But at the same time to do nothing invites further attack by others and makes dragons look weak. Can't have that. We've offered to look into some other solution for him and wonder, within dwarven culture, if there is a better or worse way to approach the situation. Is some kind of gift appropriate? A ceremony we could request that holds weight with you, related to grievances? Anything you can tell us would be appreciated.”

“Don't suppose the dragon knows who attacked him?”

“He's fingered the dwarves that live in the Savvass armory. I have no idea how he's come up with that but he did give us directions to the place.”

The dwarf nodded and leaned back in his chair. “That tracks, actually. Guy that took that place over is some self styled ‘alchemist.’ Kind of an odd profession for a dwarf but hey, I'm not going to tell him how to live his life. Pretty ballsy to mess with a dragon though, what was he *thinking?*”

“We wondered that ourselves,” I admitted. *How do you know him? I suppose there's a dwarven rumor mill the same way there's any other. They probably have an ear to the ground about others of their race. I never paid attention because I never felt I fit in anywhere, once I left home.* “It's hard to wrap our heads around.”

“And you want advice for approaching the place?”

“If you have any, yes, that would be wonderful.”

He shook his head. “Hard to tell with that sort. I mean maybe rolling a keg of ale into the place would grease the wheels but with a dwarf that chooses to exist so far outside of normal society? It's hard to say. I can tell you some things though.”

“Go on,” I prompted.

“He's seemingly brought this on himself. I doubt the dragon did something to start all this. If he did have some kind of ‘accident’ over it we dwarves wouldn't rush to his defense or anything. As far as I know he took the place over legitimately, he's not squatting there. Still- this sort of thing gives the rest of us a bad name. We make deals, we don't just go stealing... what did you say it was? A gland?”

“A gland, yes.”

“Unbelievable. Go over there and tell him to cut it out. We don’t need trouble with dragons, after all. If the dragon retaliated then we dwarves would all have to do something about *that*, and the town would get involved, and then the kingdom gets involved... It’s not good for anybody.”

“Would just knocking and asking nicely... work?”

“He’ll give you a hard time over it, but dwarves aren’t dumb. Tell him the dragon is pissed and he better watch his step. He’ll get it. We’re not one for flowery talk.”

“Okay. Thank you very much for your time.”

“Thank you for actually caring enough to ask about our culture. Not many would have, you know. Probably just storm the place, especially if they had a dragon at their back.”

*We sort of do anyway...* “I like to reduce friction wherever possible.”

“For your troubleth,” Snarly told him, sliding some coins across the desk.

“You understand us perfectly!” he announced with a grin, scooping them up. “You’ll do fine. Good day!”



## Chapter 9

There's a time for you to run and a time for you to walk

"I'm concerned if this dwarf is a true alchemist," Hanz began when we arrived home again to plan our next move. "Can you ask about it?"

"Of course!" I agreed. "Who knows what their lair might be trapped with in that case? There's two kinds though, I mean I could call myself an alchemist if I focused on potions, even though it was just magical. One moment." I first asked the universe "Does any dwarven alchemist at Savvass armory have any supernatural power?" and got back "No." Same for asking about magical power. So it seemed they were just a "chemist" or "charlatan" according to Hanz.

"I mean don't drop your guard, chemicals are nothing to take lightly in their own right," they cautioned. "But at least the place probably won't have any defense against us intruding."

"Let's start with the talking plan," Malachite decided. "We can always swipe the thing if that doesn't work out. But if we did get caught trying to swipe it, that means the talking plan is off the table."

"I have come up with a great persona for each of us," I agreed excitedly. "You're gonna love it!"  
"Tho let's go!" Snarly exclaimed.

We flew out there and landed some distance away, so we could prepare. To start I put my spell of augmented skill on Snarly, and made sure he understood his role. I then put the illusion magic on myself and Hanz, turning us into draig. I wanted us to be seen as no-nonsense types, who had seen a lot of action and could loom properly. I had one more spell to maintain after all, so I wasn't going to be doing much talking, but looking intimidating was free. Hanz became a tall blue draig, with a chipped horn, missing scales, eye-patch, and as I could effect their equipment the ax looked twice as big. Their armor and such I left alone, it was fine. All that, in my mind, seemed to indicate someone that didn't shy away from combat, could handle themselves, and kept fighting no matter what happened. For myself I went with a red variety, but less physically imposing. As a magic user I had an obligation to magic, so I went with a robe that left my arms free. Those I had covered with mystical symbols. My eyes were bound as though I was blind, and I was "missing" a leg and part of my tail. My final spell was going to be telekinesis, I was going to float everywhere like the powerful mage I was. I also got out my two companion creatures, who I mentally told not to go invisible, as they were going to help with the intimidation effort. We were ready.

The door to the place was a heavy iron, covered with a scene showing dwarves in battle. Probably overdone, and the knocker seemed to be an old mace which Hanz called "metal" in a deep voice but of course it was metal. It was a mace. What did they expect? Malachite smacked the door with the mace and stepped back to wait. It wasn't long before someone came to answer it.

"Yes?" a dwarf growled at us, a small slit in the door opening up to reveal a pair of eyes.

Malachite stepped up, as was the plan. "We are here on behalf of the dragon Ax'rejj. Tell your master, the so called alchemist, that he has one chance to avoid the dragon's wrath. Speak with our hired hand," he indicated Snarly who waved up at the dwarf, "about restitution for the attack. Refuse us, and we will return in force with the dragon at our back."

"What do you need with that little one?"

*Rather rich, coming from a dwarf.*

"He is a neutral third party, such that our great anger does not get the better of us during negotiations. It would be a pity, if someone's ax should for example slip," he looked over at Hanz, "and chop off a head or two before it was brought under control again."

He looked us all over. I was silently floating there, looking right at him despite being "blind." Hanz was twirling their ax around.

“Wait here, I’ll see if he’s free.”

“He better be,” Malachite warned as the slot closed up. “So far so good,” he whispered to us after a moment.

The door opened a moment later and we were allowed inside, so I floated in and looked around. The place was fairly utilitarian, with a living area, workbenches, and workers discussing things and trying to be uninterested in us passing by. Three dwarves in armor and weapons met us, clearly the guards of the place, as the others also seemed to be intellectuals of some kind. Not to say they couldn’t fight, but they weren’t in armor and had no visible weapons, so they were probably hired by the alchemist as helpers for his experiments.

“Back room, and don’t touch anything,” one of our escorts told us roughly.

“Very well,” Malachite agreed.

We headed straight back, past what must have been the armory door but was now repurposed as a lab. Not to say there wasn’t a collection of weapons and armor inside, there was. All around the wall of the room, on dummies or pegs were a variety of weapons, shields, and armor. Much of it looked old, sized for dwarves but sturdy looking enough. *Antiques? Pieces of relevance to dwarves by famous smiths? Fakes? Odd for an alchemist to care but maybe this stuff was here when he took the place over.*

On a bench was a glowing, icy looking thing I took to be the gland, which the dwarf studying it quickly draped a cloth over and come up to us.

“I’m Sarvaan, the alchemist,” he announced. “What’s this all about?”

“You’re up, Squeak,” Malachite told Snarly. Of course we all decided on fake names, or at least Malachite decided on that one for him.

“Hello, hi!” he greeted the dwarf. “Nice place you have here. Is that pieth there an example of the dwarven thmith Raam Stonetoes?” He pointed to, as far as I knew, a random piece of the collection.

“Yes,” the dwarf answered. “How did you know?”

“I know quality work when I thee it,” he replied modestly. “Now, to buithness. These fine gentleman-”

I cleared my throat.

“And lady are followerth of the dragon you attacked rethantly. You were lucky not to run into them when you did the deed, they were off doing the bidding of their mathster. But they came back to find him violated, and enraged. They agreed to come thpeek to you, to see if the dragonth great anger can be quenched without violence. To that end they offer the following deal; You return the tholen gland, and the dragon agreeth to leave you in peace.”

“That’s hardly a good deal for us.”

“Tho you don’t value you livth? Very well, we will peacefully depart and when next you thee these gentleman- and lady- it will be with Ax’rejj to tear this place apart. Pity about the dithplay pieceth, but perhapth they can be dug from the rubble when ith all over. Good day.” He turned to leave.

“Now just wait a moment, I’m sure we can work *something* out,” Sarvaan hastily assured him.

*Oh yes, with my magic helping him, this guy is going to be handing us this room to keep his life in a minute.*

But Snarly didn’t insist on anything but the gland, and after some back and forth, mostly Sarvaan trying to convince himself the dragon wouldn’t be bothered to come after a now useless gland, he handed it over. Snarly had dropped many hints, points we had coached him on about Ax’rejj’s family paying them all a visit, and could they fight a half dozen dragons at a time? No, they could not. Of how the life of even one of his researchers wasn’t worth all this, and how other dwarves wouldn’t even try to get revenge on his behalf, because he was seen as an eccentric that wasn’t worth it. He tried, in vain, to get us to give him something for it, but every time Snarly saw this as him not valuing his life and heading for the door, making Sarvaan call him back, and he finally got the message. The other

researchers in the room were also looking a bit haunted, looking us all over and shooting him pointed looks, like “get rid of them before they decide to just take the thing, what are we going to against these three?” I took that as the successful application of my disguise magic, and tried hard to keep a beaming smile from my face.

Snarly didn't rub it in as he took the offered gland, now wrapped up in the cloth as it was still quite cold. In fact he apologized for the whole thing and said if they ever needed services in town to get in touch with a “Snarly” who would help them out. He was, after all, a hired hand and had no stake in this himself. So “a good friend of mine” would be able to see to their needs. Sarvaan thanked him for agreeing to represent the dragon and hoped this really did put an end to it.

“We'll see,” Malachite told him on the way out.

With the door slammed behind us there was no need for the deception anymore so I quickly dropped my spells and enlarged Malachite so he could fly us back to the dragon right away. He did, dropping us once again into the lair of the beast. But the location was empty, and we stood for a moment looking around.

“One minute,” a voice called to us, from a nearby crack in the wall. Ax'rejj appeared, and looked us all over. “You're back quickly.”

“We decided this was the quickest thing to do, so we got it done,” Malachite told him. “Hanz?”

Hanz handed the gland over, and Ax'rejj opened the sack and looked inside. “Yes, this is mine,” he decided wistfully. “If only it could be returned.”

“Your healing magic?” Malachite whispered to me. I shook my head.

“And the dwarves?” the dragon continued.

“They won't be bothering you again,” he agreed. “They now realize the danger.”

“Very well. I will announce my presence to the town, as agreed. They will learn they have nothing to fear from me, as long as I am left alone.”

“They'll be glad to hear it.”

“As for you four...” He reached behind him, taking something from the cave and handing it to Malachite. “I decided you should have a reward of some kind, and I guess I can part with a few coins.”

“Thank you very much, I know that must have been hard for you.”

“You have no idea. I'll be down to the town in a few days, please warn them I'm coming.”

“I will.”

“Then I wish you a good day.” He turned and went back into the cave.

Back at home, having collected our reward from the guard captain and explained the dragon was coming and not to attack him, we divided up the coins the dragon had given us.

“I think it should be an unequal split,” I told the others. “Snarly should get more this time. He did a lot of the work.”

“Thath not nethathary,” he insisted. “In fact I wath going to pay you for tha thpell you put on me. I could tell it wath working I don't know if I could have done all that without it.”

“Party members is a gray area,” I insisted. “Heaven knows I heal and repair and whatnot for you all enough without charging you. Heck you're all sitting on furniture I made with magic.”

“I inthitht.”

“Very well. Thank you.” *It's me the guild would come after anyway, but whatever.*

“So our next step is looking more into the prophecy and curing Orchid's condition?” Hanz asked.

I nodded. “If you don't mind putting the wind spirit thing on hold. We don't really have any leads on cultist activity in the area so it's a good time to see if this poem really was worth the money. I have some ideas on how to track down the nexus I want to try.”

"I don't think they'll mind, and this is more important to you," Malachite told me. "What do you need from us?"

"Time," I answered simply. "We're taking a few days to prepare. I'll let you look through my book of magic so you can pick out any spells you want made up as tokens. Hanz, remember you can probably just have them burned onto various places on your body to activate with a word. Meanwhile, brush up on your skills, or just rest up I know it's been a hectic couple of weeks. I'll be learning some new magic. That shrink spell we got from the dragon to start, as we seem to keep running into giant bears and whatnot, and I'm going to look into a better healing spell. Something that doesn't care how wounded you are." *And something a little more personal you all don't need to know about.* "With the tokens made, spells learned, core cultivated, we'll be ready. I won't even think about asking my magic how to find the nexus until we're ready. For all I know something will snatch us up for even asking the question so I want to be as prepared for this as we've ever been. I have no idea where it will lead to, or what we'll be asked to do, so whatever you need to prepare please do it."

"I'm going to prepare to be less hungry," Malachite announced. "How about it Snarly? Let's go get lunch, leave these people that don't eat here to do their thing. We can talk sword skills or something on the way."

"Yay! Food time!"

I snorted. "See you guys in a bit."

I headed to see Solara disguised as a kumiho, or shape-shifting fox demon. They were one of the few that could walk around almost without comment, as long as they behaved themselves. (In fact, only a few demons were "mindless" or "animals" and while some were more associated with torture or deals, most were tolerated as just more victims of the Lord's strange desire to punish souls for eternity and were given a chance to live a peaceful life here instead) Turning into people was the least of their powers, so I gave myself some nice fox ears and three tails, figuring I had earned at least that many. Four would have been a bit ostentatious, in my mind, while two just wouldn't be enough. As expected not many even looked at me twice, demons were common enough even here- passing through usually- though I did get a stern look from a being I was pretty sure was an angel. They were of course more rare but they were around, if you knew where to look. I just gave them a flirty wave and went on my way.

Once inside the shop I dropped the act so Solara knew it was me, and we got down to business.

"I have your profits," she told me. "The spell tokens have been fairly popular. That old coot across the way is fuming about how much more business I'm doing now."

I waved that off. "Keep them, I'm here to get some more spells. We're on the track of curing my- hold on a minute."

"Yes?"

"You and the guy across the street are the only two mages around here, right?"

"The only official ones, yes. Why?"

"So it was one of the two of you that helped Malachite by coming up with the poem!" *Why didn't I think of this before? Where do you think he went?*

"Yes, I thought he was talking about you when he described the situation," she admitted. "I couldn't exactly say I knew you, I wasn't sure how much he knew about our arrangement or that you had shown me your 'true self.' It's a good thing it was you, I think that helped, me knowing you directly, when I got the answer."

"It would have been fine, I don't hide- much- from him."

"He seemed quite smitten with you."

"Ah, yes," I blushed mightily. "That's one of the spells I'm here for. We're sort of involved now, and I needed a spell to make sure we, uh, don't bring any little ones into the world. If you take my meaning." *As I think, even as far away as we are species wise, we are compatible in that way. I've been*

*taking a risk fooling around with him lately but that ends today. Not the fooling around part, that I hope continues long into the future. Of course it's up to the woman while the man remains clueless. That hasn't changed in thousands of years...*

She laughed. "Say no more, that's a popular one. Normally I would try to get you on my subscription plan, which would have to be renewed every five days."

"What grade is it?" I asked, eyes narrowed.

"Two, Pluto."

I laughed uproariously. "How many people actually take you up on that offer? That's what I make in a *week* making a dozen statues and jewelry pieces to be painted and sold by the artist Upbright Vacuum. And you're saying it only lasts *five* days? I would be losing money every week! Unless—" I regarded her. "Is it subsidized by the kingdom? Given we have a queen and she would of course understand how important it is for a woman to have complete control over her reproductive health. And thus- no?"

Solara was shaking her head. "Afraid not. And you're right, not many have that kind of money when there are cheaper, if less effective methods, on the market."

I laughed again. "There is so much wrong with that. I'm on the road so much, trying to keep track of the days would be impossible. It's way too expensive for the benefit you get, I mean come on, two moons every five days? That's..." I started trying to work it out in my head. If there were roughly 350 days in the year 350/5 was 70 times it would need to be cast. 70 times 2 moons each time was 140 moons. There were 20 moons to the sun. Drop the zeros, divide 14 in half. "That's 7 *suns* a year! How many people do you think, even in a town like this one, have *seen* a sun in the last year?" *Not everyone stumbles upon pirate treasure and whatnot, after all.*

"Not many," she admitted glumly. "But on the bright side, as tokens it's one of my most popular spells."

"Yeah, I can't see why." *If someone wanted to bring a guy home for a bit of fun every so often, they could have the spell on hand and not need to announce the fact to you by rushing over here beforehand. Of course men could buy them as well.*

"Neither can I," she agreed with a smirk and a raised eyebrow. We both giggled. "Anyway, let me copy it into your book, I'll take it out of your profits."

"Thank you."

While she got busy with that I sat and made some replacement tokens for spells she was low on, so that worked out fine, just fine.

Once that was done I got into the second reason I was there.

"So I know the so called 'standard' healing spell, which has a pretty big weakness. It's the same as the repair spell honestly, and why I picked up the lesser version of that spell. If someone is 'too hurt' for the magic to affect, right when you need it the most the spell is useless. Not a great design, if you ask me." I glanced upwards. *No offense intended, oh Lord, but really what were You thinking? Of course the theory is magic was actually here first but I digress.* "So here's what I know; various elements exist. I know of four. Ice, for my anti-ice spell for Malachite. Knockout, earth, and magic itself. I *also* know elemental magic comes in many forms. Beams. Elemental creation. Blasts. You get the idea. So, my question is can we weaponize healing somehow? Is there an element that heals, and can be shoved into an elemental touch or beam spell, so I can, in essence, 'attack' with healing? Something that doesn't care how wounded a person is, but just does at least some good to the person getting hit with it? More than a lesser healing spell would, but maybe less than the 'standard' healing spell does? Which of course can be hardly anything, because I guess again that's just how magic works." *Again, no offense Lord. But come ON!* "That way I can just fire off a healing spell, stabilize someone, when they need it. Actually is there some kind of continuous healing beam I could hit someone with from behind? That would be pretty amazing now that I think about it..."

“There is a healing element,” Solara admitted. “I believe it was discovered when researching the opposite of the necromantic elements, to more effectively hurt the undead. Quite a pleasant surprise to find it also healed us. It’s called vitality, I think.”

“Amazing! Gimme!”

She laughed, but shook her head. “Sorry. That’s after my time. I’ve heard about it, but only in the experimental sense. I wasn’t taught anything about it in my training.”

“Well, crap,” I muttered. “Do you at least have the lesser healing spell?” I sighed.

“I do.”

“Fine. Actually,” I glanced over my shoulder. “It’s a long shot, but I’m going to talk to your competition. See if he knows anything about vitality. Naturally I’ll come sell it to you if he does. At the standard guild rate,” I added slyly.

“I doubt it, but good luck.”

“Thanks.” I put my disguise back on and headed over there. I knew exactly what to ask for now, after all. But as she anticipated, I was disappointed. He didn’t know any spells utilizing that element either. He also said it was fairly new, and not available to the general public while healers experimented with it to make sure there were no side effects. I went back to Solara, tails between my legs, and picked up the lesser healing spell. This I purchased with party funds, part of the pirate treasure haul we still hadn’t exactly divided up. *They get hurt much more than I do, after all. And given how fast I am at casting, it should be fine. Really would have liked a beam or something though, this one is still touch based. But at least it doesn’t ‘care’ how hurt you are, healing a small amount each time. It’ll just have to do.*

With that I headed back home, I had cultivating to do, to engrave some new spells onto my core.

## Chapter 10

They're the hardest to get, if you know what I mean

"Come on, take a break!" Malachite insisted that night, sticking his head into my room. "You've got all tomorrow to finish up learning magic!"

"Unless we're turned into giant pigs, or trampled by goblins, or whatever's next in this madhouse!" I muttered.

"What was that?" he asked, cocking his head.

"I asked what did you have in mind? A little late for afternoon delight, a little early to turn in for the evening. Have you even eaten?"

"We're going out to eat," he insisted. "I know you don't, but Snarly and I heard about a place this afternoon. Food is nothing special but apparently they have the best musicians in town!"

"I suppose heading into this with a more relaxed attitude could help," I decided after a moment. "Studying magic was what got me into this predicament in the first place. And how often do we get to experience music?"

"Hanz was going on about something called radio and MP3s, and something called streaming? I couldn't follow their explanation honestly. So let's go!"

"You've convinced me. Just let me decide on someone- I mean something- to wear and we can head out."

I stuck with my foxgirl disguise, why change up at this point? We headed to a rather rough part of the town and were seated. I had to admit, the music here was excellent, and we did the usual "I order something small and Malachite eats it" thing we always did. *Though I could be tempted by some cake or something...*

We were finishing up when Malachite tapped me and pointed. I looked over to where he was looking and caught a glimpse of a red sash we both knew well. I glanced at him, and he gave a quick nod. "Cultist."

I looked around. We couldn't exactly start something in this crowd, what was he even doing here? He had on a cloak but he wasn't being too careful about it, clearly he was wearing the "uniform" of the Gloom cultist, and looking around for someone. Someone he spotted, who came over to him and handed him a small vial of red liquid. He nodded, and the other man went on his way.

"What do you think that was?" Malachite asked.

"No idea. But it can't be good. Keep an eye on him. Once we pay we'll get closer."

Malachite scarfed down the last of his food and called the waitress over to take care of the bill, meanwhile I was fuming and wishing for a spell that simply made us overlooked rather than invisible. Us vanishing from here might cause a stir, but we couldn't lose track of this guy. That vial could be a spell he was simply going to smash against the ground, causing a gas to fill the room that killed everyone here. We had to figure out what his plan was. He seemed to just be standing there for the moment, so there seemed to be no rush to use it, whatever it was. With our bill paid we made our way to the back, and I took a chance making us invisible when I thought no one was looking our way. I managed it, and we worked our way around the room as carefully as we could, to get a better look at the guy. We were holding hands so we didn't get separated, which made things a little more tricky, but I didn't want to risk a second spell to phase us. *Plus I would have needed to do that first. Casting a spell to effect Malachite now would break my invisibility.* He was still right there when we got near, seemingly enjoying the music like everyone else. My blood boiled. *Cultists! Here in town! Oh, and he's a music lover, is he? Not going to be much music in the world when the Gloom covers the land or whatever that elemental was going on about. Right? Ever think of that? No? Maybe make better life choices?* I was fuming for what seemed like forever, but was probably closer to half an hour before something finally happened. People had been coming and going that entire time of course, sometimes

obscuring him, but he hadn't made any move like he knew we were there. He ordered a drink and went to get the coin out of his pouch, and froze.

So did we.

The pouch he had put the vial in was gone!

He looked around on the floor, panicked, but clearly he had been robbed by one of the people milling around in the place. I fought the urge to smack my face. Now not only did we have a cultist on the loose, there was some unknown vial out there in the wind. What if some kid opened it and that activated it? The cultist would no doubt throw it, they wouldn't want to be caught in their own spell but still. I doubted anyone would be stupid enough to drink some unknown fluid but on a dare? People could do weird stuff. He was looking freaked out and finally decided it was time to go, so we followed.

"We have to know what that was," I hissed to Malachite.

"I agree," he probably said with a nod, I couldn't see him still. "Let's see if he goes near an alley and I'll grab him."

*Maybe we can get him to tell us where his hideout is? Get the guard involved at last? This is inside the city now, there's no excuse anything outside the walls isn't their problem.*

But the man was being very careful. While it was fairly late and there were not a lot of people on the streets, still he stayed to the middle of the roads, avoiding anyplace we could grab him into.

"This isn't working," Malachite muttered. "Orchid, get home, I'll see what he has to say for himself."

"Is that really the best-" I started to say, but it seemed he was done waiting. His hand left mine, and a moment later he flashed into visibility as he grabbed the guy up and flew into the sky with him. Of course this caused the man to shout in surprise, and I heard another voice from down the street.

"What's that then? Stop in the name of the law!" I sighed as a guard came into view, looking around. "Someone prowling round here," they decided. "What's that then?"

I made my exit, heading in another direction, and when I was a few streets away I crouched behind some bushes (not my finest hour) and asked the universe.

"Is the stolen red liquid once held by the cultist I saw tonight directly dangerous to anyone?"

"No."

Somewhat relieved I didn't have to go chasing *that* down I made my way back home. Naturally it took me awhile, and Malachite was waiting for me when I got there.

"There you are!" he exclaimed. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, what did you learn? Where is the guy?" I looked around. "Is Snarly tying him up inside or..."

"Uh, dead?"

"He killed himself rather than answer your questions?" My eyes got wide. "This is more serious than I-"

Malachite shook his head. "Not that. I kinda dropped him."

"Because he was struggling, right." I nodded. "Panicked, no doubt. I would be, if something swooped down and grabbed me while I was walking around." *Well, no, I would needle the assailant and TK myself before I hit the ground but whatever.* "Not your fault, I'm sure you did everything you could to... What?"

He gave a little cough. "No it was pretty much on... purpose?"

I glared at him. "You killed him on purpose."

"He was creepy, I had to!"

I crossed my arms over my chest. "Explain." *At least he admits it. But I thought we were past this!*



“He was all shouty and screamy at first. Didn’t know exactly what was in the vial. Then said it was just an ingredient.”

*Right, that’s why torture doesn’t work. The person just tells the torturer what they think will get them out of it. And his death was the only thing you could think of? How were we supposed to get answers at that point?*

“Then his personality totally changed! He got all cold and was like, ‘you better just drop me.’ It was nuts.”

“Changed?”

“Yeah, like I said he was screaming and pleading and saying his wife was at home with their child and whatever and then boom. Nothing. I even dropped him and caught him, and he was like ‘oh is that all you can do? I expected better.’”

“So you dropped him for real, just to show him?”

“Kinda? I guess. I felt bad about it.”

“Felt bad? Malachite, the man is dead. We needed to turn him in to the guard. They can’t ignore the cult if they’re working right in the city. They could have hired Solara, or a seer, or something to see what he had been up to lately. This could have been the break we needed!” *One dead cultist doesn’t mean anything. We have to strike at the heart of it. But we have to find it first!*

He squirmed a bit. “I thought you might say something like that. Sorry, it was just a spur of the moment thing. I’m no good at thinking about stuff like that.”

“Clearly! Well, it’s done now. Honestly, stop killing people!” *Especially people who are completely in your power.*

“I’m trying- and I realize now how that sounds too. I really am sorry.”

“I know,” I breathed. *Honestly, what were you thinking? But he does seem to be.*

“What do you think, you know, happened to him?”

“If I had to guess? He was taken over by the Gloom. If he changed that much, maybe anyone in the cult that has touched the Gloom or whatever they do as an initiation can be taken over. That ice demon I questioned was the same. It didn’t seem to care about its own life just went on about how the Gloom was going to win and there was nothing we could do about it. But if that’s the case, my God, it’s worse than even I thought. We have to be careful.”

“Yeah, handling anything from a cult site could ‘infect’ us the same way. So then, in a way, it’s good he’s dead right? What if he infected a guard or whatever? Or what was in him could move to another?”

*Then it would have moved into you, dope. In fact, how do I know it hasn’t? And there it is, paranoia. Great, another thing to worry about. Would question magic even detect if such a thing happened? It would explain, not that dropping the guy isn’t in character for Malachite. I’ll ask later, and hope for the best.* “Don’t try to justify it, Malachite. You screwed up. You should at the very least pray for forgiveness and hope that man really was about to do something awful. The cult needs to be destroyed, yes, but that means saving the people we can, not killing them.” *Being able to study someone touched by the Gloom, that I didn’t have to make a deal with or could just turn into water and melt away would have been invaluable. Could I have broken that connection? No, but someone might be able to. A priest?*

“What about the vial? Or the other man?”

“I asked about the vial. It’s not directly harmful to anyone. The other man, I don’t know.” I shook my head sadly. “It’s our word against his, even bringing magic into it. It would be a whole thing. He may not even be a cultist, why would one cultist give another cultist something? That wouldn’t make sense. No, it makes more sense that’s an innocent, or as innocent as one can be doing a shady deal in a crowded room like that. The cult can’t be that stupid, I’m sure he would have plenty of plausible deniability.”

“We could stake the place out, see if he comes back?”

“Do you really think, after it’s revealed a cult member was *dropped out of the freaking sky after coming out of that place* that they’ll use it again for those sorts of things? All they have to do is ask question magic your name and poof, they know it was you.” *Honestly that’s all the guard has to do too, but I’m hopeful given he was wearing cult attire they won’t look too carefully into it.* “I’m sure they know us by now, we’ve been messing them up enough. It’ll just be another instance of that. They won’t risk using that place again.” *And will probably go further underground, making our job that much harder again. Great, just great.*

“Oh. I guess you’re right.”

“Of course I am. Let’s just drop it. Oh my God let’s just *forget* it is what I mean. We had a chance and-” I threw up my hands and went inside. I just couldn’t.

I spent the last few hours the next day engraving my core with the new spells, and made a few tokens the others said they wanted. I also refreshed any that had been used, and repaired Malachite’s armor that had been pretty dented in our last fight. All three were off training, which suited me just fine, I now had to create the tool to help us find the nexus. I didn’t want to start it until we were ready, just in case something happened, but that was about all I could do at the moment. So I got to work. I traced a circle onto a sheet of paper, then carefully marked it with 0, 90, 180, 270. Then I did my best to cut those marks in half, going for 45, 135, and so on. I made the marks closer and closer together up to a point, I really only needed a rough direction at least to begin with. Satisfied with my work I made up more statues and delivered them, in case we were gone for several days, and cleaned up a little around the house.

When the sun was setting everyone was back, and I showed them the fruits of my labor.

“In the morning we’ll use this,” I indicated the circle, “to find out where the nexus is. I hope. If this doesn’t work we’ll have to think of something else, but I have a good feeling about it. Get a good night’s rest, not you Hanz obviously. I have no idea what we’ll face once we start all this. Check your stuff, pack anything you think you’ll need *tonight*, in case we have to grab it up quickly, otherwise we’ll start out early tomorrow. Any questions?”

“Are you still mad at me?” Malachite asked quietly, eyes on the floor.

“Any questions about the mission,” I clarified.

“That’s a yes,” Hanz explained, leaning over to him.

“I don’t need you to tell me that!”

*Oh yeah, we’re going into this with the right mindset. May God help us all.*

The next day I aligned 0 with north and took a deep breath. I had the prophesy next to me, and had it in mind as I cast. “Along what heading upon this circle must I travel to reach the location, specified in this prophesy, as ‘the nexus?’”

To my delight I got a number back, almost due north.

“It worked,” I told them with a huge grin. “I got an answer. Now for the second part. How far in kilometers must I travel to reach the location specified in this prophesy known as ‘the nexus?’”

“1900.”

“That’s... Wow. Okay, that’s a trek,” I admitted. “May take more than one day. Still, it worked, the nexus exists and we can fly a bit and keep using this method to get a better idea as we get closer. Everyone ready?”

There were nods all around, so we headed out and took to the sky.

I had underestimated Malachite's speed when he was huge, the kilometers got chewed up at a rapid pace, going down about 400 per hour if I was doing the math right. As we got closer and closer I got more and more tense, the spell seemed to be directing me somewhere I was quite familiar with. We had stopped for lunch about an hour ago, and circling now I was sure this was the place. We landed, and I glared.

"I should have known," I cried, throwing my hands up. "It all comes back to this, doesn't it?"

"I don't understand," Hanz admitted. "Do you know this place?"

"Know it? I spent more than a hundred years here, studying magic. This is the cave I moved into with all my books. This is the crystal cavern!"

And it was. Huge slabs of somewhat transparent crystal were poking out of the cave entrance, far more than I remembered seeing after my emergence from the place. There was enough of an opening we could still get inside, but clearly this place was active magically in a way I was ignorant of. "But it wasn't this bad," I told them, turning this way and that to look the crystal over. "I wouldn't have even considered it if it had been this bad. Before it was just a lot of pretty crystals dotting the walls of a regular cave. Now it seems it's more crystal than cave. It's not even that big, if this is some kind of nexus I didn't notice it before."

"You can get pretty wrapped up in your studies," Malachite told me.

"True," I agreed. "Well, let's see what the inside has to offer." Taking no chances I got out my two companion creatures, spent a light token so I didn't have to maintain that either, and we all cautiously made our way inside.

We poked around, the place wasn't that complex or deep, just enough space for a single minded young lady to get some peace and quiet from her family to devote to the study of magic. I had packed up most everything, but anything I had left was clearly disturbed by growing crystals. It hadn't grown *into* anything, just pushed whatever it was out of the way. As with the entrance, the walls were almost completely crystal now, spikes of it jutting from every surface rather than being sheets of the stuff. Magic was flowing around the whole place, seemingly following the path of the crystals in a way Hanz remarked was like electricity when I explained what I was feeling.

"It's coming from the back of the cave," I remarked, pointing. "We'll need to phase through the wall or go astral to see if there's another chamber I missed. The crystals were always pretty dense there, I never thought anything of it."

We all headed back there, and tried to peer through the crystals that had grown up in front of the cave wall. "I think I thee thomething!" Snarly announced, "I think I can get clother!" He started squeezing his way through the mess.

"Snarly, have you learned nothing from- and he's gone." I shook my head.

"We're a real Micky Mouse operation, aren't we?" Hanz asked.

"A what?" Malachite asked.

"Never mind," they replied with a shake of their head. "We're not even Betty Boop."

"I thee a door," Snarly reported. "Ith clearly a door. There's a weird hand on it though."

"Hand?" I asked.

"The door is made of crythal, but if someone wath pushing a hand from the other thide, thath what it would look like."

"So maybe it's keeping something trapped here?" I suggested. "Maybe you should back off Snarly, I can ask how dangerous whatever is beyond the door is."

"I can almoth touch it!"

"Have we learned nothing about-"

There was a brilliant flash of light, and the cave was empty.

## Chapter 11

### I think I'm going berserk

I blinked my eyes against the sudden light, and put a hand up to block out the sun. *The sun?* Squinting and looking around I saw we were outside overlooking a strange city in the distance. One I had never seen before, I was pretty sure. I felt odd, light in way I hadn't in a long time, and I looked around for my companions. I first looked to my right, but all I saw was a strange pair of legs, and looked up and up at whatever was standing next to me. I stumbled back a step, it seemed it was a minotaur, holding a sword as big as I was.

"Orchid, what happened?" said the figure, also looking around. "Orchid? Where are you?"

"I'm right here," I told him. "Who are you?"

"What are you talking about? And why is everyone so small?"

"I have flesh!" someone said to my left. We both looked, there was a person standing there. Red skin, small horns, dressed in leathers and with an ax at their side. He was staring at his hands with a disgusted look on his face. "Look at all this... This... Flesh stuff. It's all over me."

"I would like to inquire what exactly happened to my tail!" said an even smaller person next to the red guy. He had two daggers, a very round face with huge ears, and was spinning in a circle trying to look behind him. He eventually fell over. "My goodness!"

"Oh no," said the big one, also trying to look himself over. "My wings are tail are gone too. What's going on? Orchid? Where are you? Hanz?"

"What?" answered the guy to my left.

"...No."

"Yes," I agreed with a sigh. "Something happened to us. Something good or bad I'm not sure." I looked down at myself. I seemed to be wearing something fairly skimpy, which was never a good sign, but reaching up I felt something I hadn't felt for a hundred years. "I have hair!" I grabbed it and turned over my shoulder. "Beautiful, soft, normal, long, honest to goodness *hair!*" I fluffed it behind me. It was hair! Golden hair, all mine once again. *Oh I can't wait to have a ponytail again, or braids, or a bun, or- huh how often do you wash hair again?*

"Glad someone's having a good time."

I laughed out loud. "Of course I am, it's hair! I've missed having hair so much! And I'm not covered in rock, but soft, supple *skin!*" I ran my hands over my body, it was such a thrill to feel skin and not rock for once. I was used to wearing loose, baggy clothes that wouldn't catch on my protrusions, it was weird to be standing there mostly exposed but if you've got it flaunt it I must have felt when putting on such a thing. *Oh I can wear the boots now! Too bad they're nowhere near me!* "I feel so light- Wait, Malachite, that is you, isn't it?"

"Yeah, what have I been saying? Orchid, *what* is going on?"

I looked him up and down. He was minotaur sized now all right, towering over all of us. "Wow, it's a good thing I just learned the shrink spell it would never fit otherwise if you're that big."

"Orchid! You can't just say stuff like that."

I laughed again and fluffed my hair out once more. It felt so good! Everything was great!

"Everything is wrong," complained Hanz. "I can't do anything I normally can. Is this how you organic beings perceive the world? Not a fan, not a fan at all. I can't even access the zoom function!"

"Maybe I *shouldn't* go touching stuff," Snarly decided, getting up. "So now what?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "Are we in some kind of parallel world? Is this us in that world? I have no idea. See what we have on our person. We were all facing that city there, perhaps that's our destination? We would have been facing away from it if we had just left." *I might be fine staying here but the others probably want their original forms back. But if it means going back into my old body-*

"I have a note," Snarly announced, patting themselves down. "I still seem to be unable to read it though." The others were shrugging off their packs, and I realized I had one too. I felt I still had a mana

core, and I remembered how to cast spells, and there seemed to be magic near us so I wasn't too worried about being defenseless. My allies were gone, as was all the stuff I had made for us. No tokens at the moment for my allies, I would be under the full weight of that magic if I needed them. *Great, but one thing at a time.* "Let's take a look." He handed it to me, so I unfolded it and read;

Arrys, Barnabus, Gorde, and Helvena: The Celestial Guardians thank you for your ongoing service, and the excellence with which you have accomplished the previous tasks to which you have been assigned. There is now but one step remaining in order to stave off the conjuration of the Gloom by the Twilight Syndicate: the Spirit Key, forged by the Order of Keys and held in Elgar, must be recovered and returned to us in the Obelisk. Only then can we call forth The Enlightenment, and defeat the Syndicate.

Herald  
Prelate of the Celestial Guardians

"I call Arrys!" I shouted as they were digesting this.

"Huh?" Malachite managed.

"Well, I'm not Barnabus, and Gorde is right out. Snarly can be Gorde."

"Hey!"

"Helvena would be a close second, I guess."

"Never mind that," Hanz waved that away. "Do you think this city is Elgar? We have one of those, and there was an order of the keys in our world as well."

"What was it?" Snarly asked.

"A group tasked with finding and closing demon gates," he explained. "It was established long before the fall, when things like the demon world were not common knowledge. Perhaps some 8,000 years ago now. There are too many to close now, so I think the group no longer exists."

"Plus any old mage can learn magic to open a temporary gate on their own," Malachite reminded us, poking me in the arm.

"Agreed," I replied. "Also ow! I'm not made of stone anymore you know!"

"Oh I'm looking forward to it."

"Now who's saying things they shouldn't?" I asked with a snort. "And don't think I've forgiven you yet. Even if you did just what I thought you were gonna do. But back to the present. I'm familiar with the Guardians and the Syndicate. They were factions in the mage war. Is the war still going on here? I don't get it. I think our mage war lasted like 14 years? How could it be that it would still be going to the modern day?"

"Maybe it got started later here?" Snarly asked.

"Yeah, okay," I admitted.

"If this is a parallel world, their Elgar is in one piece still," Hanz went on, looking down at the city. "Our Elgar is in two pieces, blasted apart so the rumor goes. Others claim the city was just built to look like it was once connected, though they are unable to explain why anyone would go through the trouble."

"The sea of Asariel?" Malachite asked. "That's what you're talking about?"

"Exactly. A large body of water separates the two halves of the city. But as you can see, this city is in one--"

At that moment, as we looked, there was a huge flash and rumbling in the direction of the city. A few seconds later we were all knocked over as the earth buckled, wind howled, and the loudest boom we had ever heard washed over us. Snarly was curled into a ball and screaming his head off, which honestly wasn't helping anyone, though I had half a mind to follow his example. *My hair is going to get all dirty!*

After the earth stopped shaking and the noise died down we crawled to our feet and looked down at the place again. It was messed up. In fact half it seemed to be simply gone, a crater was all that was left.

“Nuclear weapons wouldn’t even do that,” Hanz breathed. “And this highlights a disturbing thought.”

“What’s that?” I asked, dreading the answer.

“We haven’t traveled to a parallel world, we’ve gone back in time. I’ve seen that movie, it hardly ever ends well. We just witnessed the rending of the city of Elgar. If this key we’re supposed to find was there, it’s gone now.”

“Forget that,” Malachite shouted. “Imagine if we had kept going instead of stopping to figure out stuff from being changed like we were! We would have been much closer to the city when whatever happened just happened. We might be dead!”

“Do you think anyone survived that?” Snarly asked.

“I can’t imagine how,” I replied. “All valid concerns. Look, it’s kilometers away and we can’t fly anymore. Let’s take a moment to take stock of what we’ve got. A few minutes isn’t going to matter, anyone not dead down there... There won’t be much even my magic can do. Plus getting close after an explosion like that, it’s going to be a mess. Figure out who we are, what we have to work with, and then we can ride down there.” *Some kind of identification? We were supposed to get some kind of key, but I have no idea who I would ask for I don’t even know the name of the body- you don’t think the soul of this person went into my body, in the future, do you? Oh boy they’re going to be confused...*

“Right,” everyone said, starting to tear through their packs.

The group as a whole didn’t have much, the usual traveling gear one might expect, but no bedrolls, food, drink, or camping supplies. It wasn’t much effort to discover why. We each had a ring on, and sinking into mine with my skill to synchronize showed me a spell I was familiar with- withstand weather- and one I had personal experience with but didn’t need a spell for. As long as we wore the ring we wouldn’t need to eat or drink. *Which makes me think I don’t have that ability in this body naturally. What have we really gained, after losing so much?*

I also had some wooden tokens with a symbol on them, which I worked out was some analog to my spell symbol, with a shelter spell on it. So it seemed we did have to sleep, and we used that to make a small place in which to do that at night. Nothing really with our names apart from the letter, not even my book had a “property of” in the front. I leafed through it, and somewhat to my shock found it contained different spells than the ones I personally knew. *So this is a different person entirely, good to know. I’m not sure what it would have meant, had they been the same. Maybe that my soul reincarnated into my time, in order to once again battle the Gloom? That would have explained a lot, from my insistence my companions keep their souls pure so I would see them again in Heaven, to why I felt the need to study so hard all those years. To relearn my spells and be able to fight. Even if I lost my memories of this life, my soul, on some level, knew. It strives to repeat my success here, even if I’m not consciously aware of it. But that theory doesn’t work out for the most part, given what I see here. Oh sure, our spells would be a little different because of circumstance, but if I was a soul returned, and my mana core exists in the soul, naturally I would seek out the same spells. But this is a completely different set of them. So whoever this is, probably they are not related to me at all. But then how have I come to be here? What connects this body and mine that drew me here when Snarly touched the door? We better get a move on.*

“Anything interesting?” Malachite asked, looking over my shoulder.

“If I had a few months, sure,” I replied, stuffing the book back. “But this woman’s handwriting is terrible, it’s in her own sort of shorthand, and I’m not completely literate in Magician. I have magic for that sort of thing. I doubt I’ll be able to learn any new spells from this, unless we’re here for weeks at a time.”

“And what would it mean if we were?” Hanz asked. “The longer we stay here, the more danger our future is in. Stepping on butterflies, and all that.”

I nodded. “Yes, if we go left and they went right, it could change the entire history of our world. Or, if time simply fits together like a puzzle, our future is the way it is because we had already gone back to this time, so we can’t do anything ‘wrong’ because the future we know is being shaped by the actions we take here, which we have already done. Thus it must be the way we remember it because it’s already happened. And what does that say about free will, I wonder?”

“My head hurts,” Snarly announced. “Can we just get a move on?”

“Right you are, whoever you are!” I agreed. “Horse?” I tapped my chest. “Oh crap!”

We got closer and closer to the city, or at least what was left of it. Water was indeed rushing in from the ocean to fill the void that had been created, soon it would be what people called the sea of Asariel, no doubt. I was riding, Snarly was being carried by Malachite, while Hanz had refused another casting of Athame. “I prefer to ‘stretch my legs’ so to speak,” they told me. “Get used to having actual muscles. I may need to know my limits before long.”

“It’s your feet,” I told them. “Let me know if you change your mind.”

But they hadn’t, and we approached the ruins of the city with some caution. We were coming from the south, and the city had been torn in half and flung to the north, so this part was the least damaged. There were still fires burning everywhere, collapsed buildings, sinkholes, people crying out for loved ones- it was a complete mess. But at least no one really spared us a glance, and there were no guards demanding to know why we were entering the city. *I have no idea how secret their mission is, after all. These people may have a suitable cover story but we don’t know what it is.*

“How are we going to find *anything* in all this?” Malachite muttered, setting Snarly down.

“I suggest finding someone in a position of authority,” Hanz decided. “Though of course I do not know how secretive the Order of the Keys was in this time. No one but a member may be aware of the key we are to retrieve and thus, be unable to help us.”

“Let’s just go see what the situation is, I can’t just walk past all these people who need help,” I announced.

“But would the person you replaced have done that?” Snarly asked.

“If I start second guessing every decision they would have made I’ll never do anything. I have to think I’m in this time for a reason. Maybe because they would just ignore all this, and that leads to an even worse future. I’m here, no matter what I look like. I’ll follow my own conscience.”

“I expected nothing less,” Malachite agreed with a grin. “At least I can probably help clear rubble like a champ now.”

We moved through the city, helping where we could, healing where I could. The most heart wrenching victim was a young girl that had been playing outside. I healed the gash in her leg from being thrown around, but her house was rubble- her family was gone. With a bit of questioning we learned any other family she had lived in the northern part of town, the part that was now across an enormous divide now filling with water. *Were the two halves shoved apart equally? It seemed like this part sort of stayed where it was, and the other part was shoved. That means that part of town got hit worse than this one. What a mess.* We all stood there, knowing we couldn’t exactly take care of a kid for reasons too numerous to list at the moment. She was just standing there crying, but what could I do? We weren’t even in the right time, this had all happened hundreds of years ago. She was dead and gone in my time, how was I supposed to know what her best path was now?

“There will be many refugees,” Hanz finally decided. “Many loved ones lost. Even in the past the church would be the logical first responder in a tragedy such as this one. Perhaps finding the nearest place of worship is all we can do for her. Let them do their job.”

“You’re probably right,” I told them. I held out my hand. “Come on, little one. There’s nothing for you here.”

We headed further into the city, and Malachite looked at me questionably. “You seemed hesitant to do your magic, are you okay?”

I grimaced. “Mana here is... I don’t even have the language to describe it. I’ve never felt it be anything but what it is, so it’s like trying to describe a different sort of air.” *Actually, that could be a suitable analogy. It’s less ‘humid’ now...* “Whatever that spell was, it damaged more than just the ground. I’ll be fine for now, my mana core in this body is as strong as mine is, in the future.” *Or is it actually my mana core, because it’s in my soul?* “And it seems this body can utilize external mana same as I can, so I can replace what I use. But it’ll be slower. It’s thin? Like trying to swim in water that won’t hold you up. At first I thought it might have been caused by a chaos spell of some kind, and I would have trouble casting. Remember Snarly’s cave? But it seems okay, magic is simply a little ‘further away’ than I’m used to at the moment.”

“You’re our best bet in finding anything in this mess. Let me know if you need to rest, or go back outside town. I can’t fly you, obviously,” he turned to show his back. “But I can carry you.”

“Thanks.” I paused and grinned. “Big guy.”

There was already a line when we made it to the largest church, dodging collapsed buildings and streets on the way. We made the girl get in line, the others explaining or at least trying to explain her new situation to her. I hurried to help those I could, feeling my healing magic was going to get a workout today. I was in the middle of healing a man when several guards rushed up to me.

“Hold it there!” the one in the lead cried out. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Helping cut this line down,” I replied, not really looking at them. “Anyone that just needs healing I can handle myself, and they won’t need to go into the church. We’re all going to need to pitch in to recover from this tragedy.” *There wasn’t a mage’s guild yet, was there? No, I think it was set up after the war, to try and avoid another. So no one will be coming after this body insisting ‘she’ should have changed for the healing. Stupid guild. Stupid war!*

“You a scholar?”

I rolled my eyes. “Of course I’m a scholar. You think if I was a natural and part of the attack I would be here *healing* these people?”

“Yeah, go bother someone else!” one of the crowd called. “She’s been helping, I don’t see you helping anyone!”

“Protect the scholars, down with the naturals!” another cried. Others took up the chant.

“She’s got a point,” one of the guards whispered to the other. “And we can easily check. If she exhausts herself trying to heal these people we know she’s lying.”

“Fine, we’re watching you.” He backed off and started trying to get an orderly line formed back up again.

“What was that all about?” Malachite asked, coming over to stand next to me.

“It’s this war- more accurately people being dumb- over the ‘type’ of magic user you are. Hold still.” I started casting my minor healing spell, cursing Solara for not having the vitality magic I had hoped to get. No means to get it here, either, unless it had been discovered in this time, lost, and then rediscovered in my time.

“Thank you,” said the man, when I was done healing him. “I’ll make it count, go and help where *I* can. Blessing upon you, magus. Together I’m sure we can get through this.”

“I know we can,” I replied. He bowed and moved off.

“Type?” Malachite pressed.

“I’ll give you a brief run down it’s something everyone in this time would know. It would be suspicious if you didn’t.” I turned to him. “As stupid as it sounds, this was the cause of the war...”



## Chapter 12

Now we think you know what Donkey Kong is all about

“There are two types of recognized spell casters in our time,” I explained, simplifying things a great deal. “Those that can essentially turn their own body’s energy into mana, and those like me that hold on haven’t I explained this to you once before?”

“Maybe?”

“It was right after I got the spell symbol spell. I know I did! You came in while I was cultivating and we talked.” *I said you could maybe get a mana core of your own, if I recall.*

“You were... saying some things, yes.”

I gave a small shake of my head. “Fine, whatever. The point is, there’s a limit on the amount of mana I can use for any one spell. I can perhaps add some ambient mana to a spell through concentration but otherwise it’s a set amount. I can never get the strength of a spell over a certain threshold. But a natural magician can. Using spells- that are now highly regulated in our time by the guild- a natural magician can drain people of their life energy, store it within themselves, and release it in one big burst. This can empower their magic far, *far* beyond what we can do. It’s how I suspect this was done.” I indicated the city. “And as I say, that was a focal point for the war. Natural magicians were simply considered too powerful. And thus, too dangerous. And thus- war.”

“I can see their point,” he conceded.

“But after we “won” we got the guild which is- never mind. Clearly this town was on the side of the scholars, against natural magicians. So that type of magic user would be unwelcome. As I’m a scholar we’re fine, and I can get back to work.” I headed to the next person in line.

“So one person did all this?” he asked.

I shook my head. “One person, taking the life energy of perhaps a hundred people. Oh, they wouldn’t die, not if that one person didn’t take too much. Depending on how you ask the question, sure. It was a spell cast by only one person, in the end. Far away, to avoid being caught in the blast-” *they wouldn’t be that fanatical, would they?* “-and are now long gone.”

“Leaving us to deal with this.”

“That’s war, I guess.” *And what role did the Gloom play in this? Maybe setting this whole thing up somehow? Weaken us, so we would be less able to fight back? It seems smart enough and conditions were right in this time... It is suspicious the minute we arrived to pick up the key, a spell of this magnitude was set off to try and destroy it. The city was the target? Yeah, nice cover. This is the work of the Gloom, make no mistake. Did the spell go wrong, somehow? Shifting the city apart instead of destroying everything? Were there protective magics in place the spell interacted with that caused it? Perhaps making the spell so powerful changed what it did and this wasn’t the intended result. It’s impossible to know.*

With dozens of people healed and the lines now much shorter we headed away from the church area to continue on with our mission.

“What is our next course of action?” Hanz asked. “It will be weeks of cleanup, we cannot stay and help every person here. We must strike at the source of all this trouble.”

“I agree. We’ve proven the method works,” I told them. “And there’s plenty of loose stone around here. I’m making a new circle, a crude one at least, to see if we can get some answers. Direction and distance, nothing more to it than that. If the key is lost we’ll have to report back that a new plan will have to be made.” *But at least we’ll be alive to make that report.*

“I’m sure we could find some paper and ink around here,” Snarly spoke up. “I mean it might be stealing but these people have far bigger problems.”

“Thanks for the offer, but I think a little more sturdy model is needed now. I have a feeling I’ll be using it a bunch.” *Given in this time we really don’t know where anything is.*

“Up to you.”

I found a good sized chunk of rock and spent a moment sculpting it, making the crudest of numbers around the face and relying more on my understanding of how it *would* work if done more correctly. I knew what the small protrusions around the circle meant, and the magic would too. It seemed more sluggish than usual, but finally was ready and I reminded them it would take a minute to get the first answer so please don't disturb me.

“That seemed harder than usual, I've watched you work stone,” Malachite offered. “Should we head further south? Is the mana okay here?”

“The mana density will never actually be the same here,” I recalled. “I always heard there was something funny about magic around here, but never thought much of it. Now we know why. It's not that difficult a spell, I'll just try it right here.”

“Okay.”

About two minutes later I shared the good news with the others. “The key survived, is slightly north west of our position, 75 kilometers out.”

“Great, across that huge chasm,” Hanz muttered. “Without flight our options for retrieval are limited.”

“Still, all is not lost,” I countered. “I usually hold back making Malachite big, stopping at about dragon sized. Right now he's bigger to start, so he can get larger still. If I stop holding back he can be a true giant and probably just run us over there in a few minutes.”

“You were holding out on me!” Malachite looked offended. “I see how it is.”

“Do you really need to be *that* big?”

“That doesn't even deserve an answer...”

“Fine. When we get back to our old bodies I'll make you as big as you can be.”

“Just for fun?” He wiggled his eyebrows.

“With *magic!*” I clarified. “To see what it's like being that big.”

“Oh it's been magical,” he didn't let up.

“Stop flirting and let's just go!” Snarly admonished us, heading north.

We stopped outside of town where there was an almost vertical drop, like someone simply took a knife, cut the ground, and shoved it away from this place. We could hardly see the bottom, it was hundreds of meters down and I revised my estimate. It wasn't just a hundred people's worth of energy that did this, it must have been closer to a thousand or more. I just stared, really unable to grasp the scale of it, how much magic had been used to move that much earth. Just floating a boat around for a bit was starting to look a little pale in comparison. At least I had done it honestly, on my own. Far in the distance was the other side of town, but between the two were dark clouds, and strange red lightning was striking everywhere. We couldn't get through that!

“Even big, that's quite a drop,” Hanz decided. “My stupid organic ears also detect water rushing into the bottom. How do we deal with that?”

“Same way we deal with everything,” Malachite told them. “Head to the astral. How long will it take for that to reflect the reality here?”

Everyone looked at me. “I have no idea. Hopefully long enough to get across.”

“Is that safe?” Snarly asked. “Is that storm there too? I don't want you getting hurt.”

“I'll check it first,” I decided. “I'll phase and check it. That should be enough protection. I can drop it almost instantly if need be. Be right back.” I cast my two spells, the mana gathering as slowly as I had ever experienced, but it worked out. I was soon looking at the astral plane, which seemed to be okay for the moment. Looking “up” I noticed a lot of activity in Heaven in this location, but shook my head. *No, no, don't step out from your paradise and actually help these people in need. No, just watch*

*and talk about it. I'm sure they'll be fine. What's that? More prayers here than normal? Ignore them, it's what you usually do isn't it? What's the point of you and your power if you're not going to use it?*

I stepped back over and reported it was safe, and a moment later the absolute unit that was Malachite was rushing us north as fast as his legs would take him. I estimated he was about 130m tall at the moment, quite satisfactory, and he was moving well with us in his hands. He suddenly had to make a turn, his voice booming so much I couldn't even understand him, but peered out through the cracks in his fingers.

"Looks like the ground is trying to change here," I told the others. "He's moving to avoid it. Hopefully he's fast enough."

He was, and only a short time later we were stepping back through to the now ruined city on the other side. This place had really been hit hard, as I expected, having been shoved a greater distance. Hardly any buildings were in one piece, the ground was all torn up, it was a real mess.

"You should ask about our destination again," Hanz suggested. "And hope we're not trying to dig it out of the rubble of some building somewhere."

"Agreed." *Though that would be the easiest way to find it, we don't have to try and convince anyone that letter is real. We don't even know our own names, how are we going to convince someone we're actual agents on a real mission?* A moment later I pointed, "It's that way."

"Again, flying would be nice," muttered Malachite. "Let's get going."

By the time we reached what must be the place it was getting dark. I had insisted on stopping to heal anyone I could, or help them clear the streets of rubble. It wasn't much, but I figured every little bit would help. As soon as we saw the building we knew this was where we needed to be. The building was basically intact, the windows weren't even broken, so it was magically protected for sure. Not to mention, there was a sign over the door that had the outline of a key and "the order of the keys" written in Magician.

"Think anyone's there?" Hanz asked.

"Only one way to find out," Snarly announced, pulling the rope that served as a doorbell. A moment later the door opened a crack and a human in robes peeked out.

"We cannot offer any more assistance at this time," he announced. "Good day!" He started to close it, but Malachite stuck a hoof through and kept it from closing. "I say," said the man. "You'll find nothing of value inside if you are a thief!"

"I think this will explain everything," I told him, handing him the note.

"I highly doubt it," he sneered, but took it. His eyebrows drew together as he read it, then a second time. "Or perhaps it does?"

"So you understand?" Malachite asked, removing his leg. "So there should be no more problems?"

"Quite," the man agreed.

And slammed the door in our face.

We heard his footsteps retreating at a fast pace away from us.

"Was it something we said?" Hanz asked, as we all stood there with shocked looks on our faces.

"He... What?" I sputtered. "What does he think he's doing?"

"I'll see if I can get the door open," Snarly told us, stepping up to it. "You are okay with us breaking in, right?"

"But we're here legitimately!" I protested. "We're the heroes here to stop the Gloom. Doesn't he want the Gloom stopped?" *Is he a cultist? It makes sense they're in this time as well, the Gloom operates the way it operates. If a wealthy merchant can be one, this so called key member can be one.*

“Apparently not,” Malachite decided. “Go ahead and see what you can do Snarly. Don’t worry, I won’t hurt the guy,” he hastened to add.

“You better not,” I muttered. “Unless he’s a cultist, and tries to hurt you first. Then go nuts.”

“Let’s see what kind of lock we’re dealing with first,” Snarly decided. “Then we’ll see if I can find some of the old lockpicks about my person. I just hope this body-” He set a hand on the doorknob and there was a click, so he turned it and it opened. “Never mind I guess? How did I do that?” He creaked it open and we looked inside. There were candles everywhere, but the man was nowhere to be seen. “I guess we can go in?” Snarly asked. “Maybe he was just so excited he ran off without explaining to get the key. Maybe he’ll just bring it out to us?”

“Something’s coming,” Hanz announced, cocking his head. “We’ll see in a moment.”

Out of the darkness came the sounds of heavy footsteps, followed by a large figure like a suit of armor that had been animated. We all took a step back.

“Uh, I don’t think that’s a key,” Malachite announced, getting his sword into position. “What’s wrong with this guy?”

“Apparently he doesn’t want to negotiate,” Hanz remarked. “And me with only an ax. Delightful.” They pulled it out but raised an arm, making a fist, no doubt missing their energy weapon now most of all.

*And I didn’t put anyone spell symbols on so they’re back to whatever baseline skill they usually have. Great, just great. But who knew the guy wouldn’t cooperate, especially after his city just got torn in half. We need to put a stop to this.*

The figure stomped up to the door-

And stopped.

We waited, still. “Hello?” Snarly said, leaning forward a little. “Huh.”

“I guess it doesn’t want to leave the house?” I asked. The others shrugged. “In that case...” I empowered the spell and took the extra time as there seemed to be no danger. “Shrink!” I commanded it, and it did. Malachite bent to pick it up and it struggled a bit, but as it was now the size of a rat there wasn’t anything it could do.

*Glad I learned that spell at last. Looks like it’s going to come in very handy in the future.*

“Spread out?” Hanz asked. We all nodded.

Entering the place we spread out, looking for anything that resembled a key. There was a brief scuffle with the man, who seemed to be alone in the house. Hanz took care of him, it seemed he could turn invisible still so he tackled the man out of nowhere as he was calling for help using some kind of crystal on his desk. We were trying to convince him we were the good guys, and just wanted to use the key to help the world, when Snarly walked into the room and handed me a large crystal key. It felt magical to my senses, and I slipped it into my pack.

“How did you get that?” he shrieked. “Put it back at once!”

“You left the safe downstairs open,” he replied. “Opened right up, no problem. I think we’re done here.”

“Left the safe open? Preposterous!”

“Then how do you explain the fact I got it open so quickly? The front door too, locks just seem to agree with me at the moment I guess.”

“Thieves!”

“Are you not allies with the Celestial Guardians?” Hanz asked. “Do you not trust their judgment?”

“I’ve never heard of this Gloom business you’re talking about. If they wanted the key why didn’t they ask for it?”

“They are asking for it,” I told him. “Why do you think we’re here?”

“And this is you asking for it?”

“You slammed the door in our face,” Snarly grumbled. “What did you expect us to do? Just leave? Have you seen your city? This has to be stopped.”

“Any luck?” Malachite asked, walking in.

“Yeah, we got it,” I agreed. “Let’s just go. He was making some kind of call we don’t want to be here when help arrives. We’re not thieves, but I don’t want to spend hours trying to convince them.” *Or put them in danger by fighting them.*

“What should I do with this?” He indicated the golem, who was still struggling to get out of his grip.

“We’ll just toss it back in before we leave,” I told him. “Let’s go.”

“You won’t get away with this!”

“We’re saving the world,” Malachite told him. “Try to be a little more grateful.”

“You’re all mad! There’s no such thing as Gloom!”

“That sounds like something someone in the cult of the Gloom would say,” Hanz decided. “Just stay down and we can avoid further violence.”

He just glowered.

We left the building, tossed the golem- which grew and again stood there by the door- and headed out of town. We wanted to put as much distance between ourselves and the city as possible so we picked a random direction and headed into the nearby forest, or at least what was left of it. The trees hadn’t fared much better than the buildings but that wasn’t a problem for my once again giant friend. He simply stepped over them, searching for a good clearing as far from the town as he could reasonably reach before it got too dark. (He couldn’t see in the dark anymore, another blow to our overall effectiveness)

We spent the night in relative comfort, Hanz sleeping for the first time rather than keeping a watch all night. The shelter token I picked at random created a cozy little cottage for us, and in the morning we awoke refreshed and ready to deliver the key.

“Still storming over there,” Malachite reported, shrinking down after I made him grow to see what the situation was. “The land around here is going to be unstable for a long time, I think.”

“I can imagine,” Hanz agreed. “It’ll take weeks to fill up the area with water, and who knows how that will affect things. There could be cave systems or instability in the nearby land that will only be revealed when the water pressure gets high enough.”

“Hopefully we’ll be nowhere near here. Orchid?”

“I asked about the obelisk that was referred to in the letter. It’s north east of here, and fairly close actually. Suspiciously close, I might add. It makes me wonder why *we* were tasked with getting the key when the place it’s going is so close, and clearly we traveled to get here. We came from the south. It would have been far easier for them to come here than for us to have done so.” *Especially as maybe he would have given it to an actual member of the Guardians instead of just someone with a letter. For all we know our counterparts forged that letter to steal the thing. We’re taking it someplace, that much is true but maybe they’re going to look at us and say ‘we have no idea what you’re talking about.’ Anything’s possible at this point. But the key does exist, so that’s a point in favor of this being a real mission.*

“Maybe they did foresee trouble,” Hanz decided. “And knew we were the group to get it done?”

“Hard to say.”

“Nah, it’s easy to say,” Snarly countered. “We go there, and see what they say!”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” Malachite agreed. “Not eating breakfast is weird. And you’re like this all the time, Orchid? No wonder you’re so cranky in the mornings.”

I blushed furiously. “I am not!”

“See? Cranky.”

“Just get out there so I can make you grow again!”

“Or the others could wait outside and you could make me grow in here?”

“We can’t fool around in bodies that aren’t ours!”

“I guess you have a point. Fine,” he sighed. “Let’s go.”

We headed out in the direction I had marked when I asked the question, and only a few minutes later our destination was in sight. It was a huge, black, floating tower of something that wasn’t quite stone that I happened to recognize. In our time, it was a source of speculation and mystery, as there was no way to get inside. But there must be some way in this time, as there was quite a bit of activity underneath it.

“That’s the mage war monolith!” I gasped. “Are we finally going to figure out what it was made for?”

“I think they’re looking at us,” Malachite boomed.

## Chapter 13

### The hawk is upon me and the cat's coming too

I allowed Malachite to shrink down so we didn't scare anyone too much, and headed the rest of the way to the monolith on foot. As we got closer we saw people flying to and from the door in the floating tower, from tents arrayed below it. A man in robes rushed out to meet us, and greeted Snarly warmly.

"Barnabus, you're safe!" he gushed, taking his hand and pumping it. "After the attack we were worried you had been in the city when it happened and perished. I'm glad you made it out all right. Tell me, was the key destroyed? Is it safe?"

"It's safe," he told the man. "I'm sorry, remind me of your name again?"

"Why Barnabus, it's me Joris. We've known each other for years. Though I do have to say it was odd to see you all approaching on foot. And were you taller a moment ago, Gorde?"

Malachite's eyes narrowed.

"Ha ha, Gorde!" I teased.

"I don't understand," Joris told us, looking confused and at me. *Whoops.*

"Ah, yes, we were close to the city when the attack happened. Magic in that area has been affected and even now my mana core feels-" *ugh, how to make an excuse for not knowing the same spells as my counterpart here? "-itchy. My spells aren't coming out right, which I hope is temporary. Is there any indication of what was done?"*

"Oh my that does sound serious," he agreed. "And no, we've been too busy with the ritual to investigate the town. Likely some filthy 'natural' magic user that hopefully blew themselves up along with the place. Someone can look you over I'm sure, but for now you're just in time. We're at the critical point in the ritual we've just been holding it steady until you arrived with the key. Let's get you up there so you can deliver it personally. The Prelate has been anxiously awaiting your return."

*Return? Why did we appear on the south side of the city. If we left from here-*

"Just as a point of interest," Barnabus spoke up, "these others are known to you?"

"Your traveling companions? Yes, of course, what is the matter with you Barnabus you're acting out of sorts."

"Seeing the aftermath of the attack has led me to be a bit more cautious," he explained. "What are their names?"

"Why this is Arrys,"

*Yes! Wait why is looking at- oh come on!*

"And this is Helvena."

*I guess it could be worse. At least I'm Helvena and not Gorde.*

"Fine," Barnabus agreed. "With that cleared up let's get this key delivered."

*And maybe get back to our own time? But I don't get it. What's the 'folly' or the 'essence' we had to 'grasp' to 'change the course?' We have no idea if changing anything here would be good or bad. If we prevent someone in this time from fighting the Gloom, we may return to a world of darkness. If we could even get back at all. We don't know enough history, especially related to these four random people, to know if anything we do is a change and if that change would be good or bad. We can only go forward with what seems the best course for the moment. Better to go back to our world and fight the Gloom again than mess something up here in the past and not even have that chance.*

We had flight magic cast on us so we could head to the floating tower, and went inside. The place was huge, how it was floating like it was I would love to find out. Of course we had floating ships in our time, perhaps the technique was similar. (And floating islands of course, not that anyone could reach those to ask the people living there- if anyone even still did- how they had done it) There were stairs running the height of the walls, and many separate chambers that had been made simply by

stringing up some fabric. The majority of the ground floor was the ritual space, now dominated by 13 people in robes that were chanting something. A glowing symbol on the floor around them completed the look, but we were hustled up some stairs to a viewing booth protected by a thick glass.

“Ah, Barnabus, good to see you again!” said the man we found there, getting up from a desk. He had various papers strewn around him that he had been intensely studying. “Glad you made it out of there. You have good news for me?” He was middle aged, wearing the same white robes as the others in the circle but with a gold sash thrown over it.

“We do... Prelate?”

“Great. I’ll take the key and we can finally finish the ritual! By God we’ll beat the Gloom yet.”

I started to take off my pack to get the key but Barnabus gave a short shake of his head. I looked at him.

“Ah, before that, tell me exactly why this so called key is needed?”

*Does he think we shouldn’t give it over? Would your contemporary counterpart have questioned any of this? Don’t change the future!*

“I suppose you’re entitled to a short overview, we have been rather secretive about the whole thing. Humm, yes, I can wait another minute or two. We’ve discovered that the dimension the Gloom originally came from holds another being. A being of light, to balance the being of darkness that has been unleashed upon our world. The key will help us unlock that being, so they may bring the fight here and help us with their old enemy. We’ve been able to speak to it, briefly, but now the door can be opened so it can come here. Don’t worry, we’ve done our research. The Enlightenment, as it calls itself, is a force for good. We can trust it.”

“Another being, you say? And you’re sure it can be trusted? It isn’t some trick of the Gloom to get behind our lines or something to that effect?”

“As far as we can tell, no. Now, the key, if you please?” He held out a hand.

I looked to him, and he shrugged. “You’re the smart one.”

“We don’t know enough about the script to deviate now,” I decided, and handed it to him. He looked a little confused but once the key was at hand his focus shifted to that.

“Excellent! Yes, most excellent. Look at the craftsmanship. Feel the power of it! I must away at once, you’re welcome to stay here and watch!” He rushed down the stairs to take his place at the ritual.

“Unless *this* is deviation from the script,” Arrys mused. “Maybe we four were turned away and didn’t steal the thing. So this Enlightenment fellow never showed up.”

“And maybe that’s why the Gloom remains to this day,” I countered. “Perhaps this being can tell us how to seal it back away again for good. Maybe we can take and hide the key once they’re done with it, so we can dig it up in our time. Use it to lock the door again, as this one is being unlocked.” *Or beg the help of whatever they’re summoning once more.*

“Agreed,” they allowed after humming a moment. “Any deviation could have dire consequences, however we know so little about all this just not having flight magic, and thus returning late, may have consequences we’ll never know.”

“Little late to be having second thoughts now, we already handed him the blasted thing,” Gorde remarked. “At least this being is a being of light, according to them.”

“But to be fair,” I countered, “so was Lucifer.”

“That’s a fair point. It’s a bit strange, isn’t it? The poem referred to three choices, have we made any of them yet? Was one giving this guy the key?”

“Consider what would have happened if we saw the attack on the city and noped right out of there,” Arrys countered.

“Noped?” Barnabus asked.

“You heard me. Another person or team would likely have been sent soon, and history would have been placed on the same track. Now if we had stolen it and then started running and never



stopped, that would be a choice. I don't see how that results in us going home though. We have to see all this through."

"But then choice is meaningless!" I protested. "How are we even to know what these three choices are?"

"Indeed," agreed Arrys, "if only there was some sort of dialog choice that appeared before you, so you could know which decisions were the big ones, and could take your time thinking them over while the rest of the world simply paused until you made up your mind."

"Sounds awfully specific—"

"Hey look," Barnabus said, pointing down at the ritual chamber. They were gesturing and chanting at a fever pitch and as suddenly as a blink there was a creature of light down there, too bright to really look at directly. Light shone now around the walls, and in a familiar way to my eyes. It looked like the energy the crystals in my cave shone with. *Very interesting. And perhaps a clue, or a portent of things to come.*

Mr. Prelate and the being spoke, of course we were up a set of stairs and behind thick glass so we couldn't really tell what they were talking about, but they soon reached some kind of agreement it seemed. The man bowed and the creature sort of drifted around probably looking the place over. With that the guy returned to the stairs, and came back into the room.

"A complete success, as you can see!" he beamed. "Let me get you your payment and you can be on your way!" He hefted a large sack out a safe, seemed to regard it a moment, and shrugged. "Eh, take the whole thing, you've earned it. Consider it a bonus for your fine service." He handed it over to Barnabus who staggered trying to lift it, and Gorde came and took it from him.

*We'll need to bury that somewhere no one will ever find it. No one but us, in the future.*

"We have so much work to do now. Seeing what The Enlightenment can really do, drawing up plans to push back the Gloom. I finally feel we have a chance now!"

"Do you mind if we meet them?" Barnabus asked. "After all we did play an instrumental part..."

"Of course! Come on down, perfectly safe. Very kind, offered us their full support in our campaign without asking for anything in return. Couldn't be happier. Come on, come on."

We followed him down the stairs, the light growing brighter and brighter around them.

*Wish I could get some kind of idea what sort of being this is, I can hardly see them at all with all the light they're giving off. Why are they glowing so much, anyway? What creates it? Magic?*

"Enlightenment, these are the four that brought back the key that unlocked the door that brought you here!" he began. He named us all without hesitation, clearly he knew these bodies well at least.

"I'm glad your concern for the well-being of your world overrode your suspicions, so that these fine beings could call upon me," the floating creature said to us.

*And how does it speak our language? Or is it like an angel, and just doesn't need to worry about it?*

"Of course, I hope you are able to help these people here. Is there anything we can do to help you further?" Barnabus asks.

"I will need more information about your exact situation before I can answer that. I'm sure there will be much to do to prepare for the coming encounters."

"We don't have anything else lined up for you," the Prelate told us. "Go spend some of your earnings, you deserve it."

"When the work is done and our world is safe, perhaps," I countered. "Do you recognize us, at all?" Realizing I was being a bit hasty but there might not be another opportunity to ask.

"There is something strange about you," the being admitted. "Quite unlike these others. A displacement, if you will. You must understand, my existence is not tied to linear time or physicality as you understand it. But at the same time I am now constrained by the place I find myself in. I must warn you, just my presence may impact the timestream of your plane in unknown ways. It is good I was summoned in the place I was, to minimize my impact."

“Where is all this coming from?” the Prelate asked. “You didn’t run into some kind of time loop in the city or something, did you?”

“Something happened, we aren’t exactly sure what,” Arrys told him. “I’m not sure this is the right place to discuss it.”

“I see?” He clearly didn’t.

“I can offer some advice,” said Enlightenment. “The best way to solve a temporal displacement is to understand where your place in time is.”

*So I just think really hard about home and I’ll go there? Maybe click my heels together? How does that make sense? We all traded a look.*

“Oh dear, I sense confusion. Perhaps I was not as clear as I had hoped. Unfortunately, I am unsure how to better explain it. I’ve never needed to before, you understand.”

“We’ll keep it in mind,” I assured them.

“Meanwhile, let’s not bother The Enlightenment any further,” the Prelate suggested. “We need to move quickly after that attack, it’s already been too long honestly, other cities could be at risk and we need to start making plans.”

“Of course,” we all agreed. Barnabus waved to the creature. “Bye!”

There was a flash of light.

We blinked our eyes and found ourselves in a familiar looking cave. Simply take away the crystal growths found in my cave, and you would have this cave. It even had the same door, or at least a door we were looking at. I hastily looked around to see who was there, and it was our group and Herald, who was slumped over, looking at the door. He looked back at me with a tired expression. “And now it is done,” he intoned with a nod, as if I, Helvena, should know exactly what he was talking about.

*But once again- I did not. Hold on, we’re bouncing through time now? What happened to these bodies in the meantime? Did they suddenly find themselves in the chamber having jumped from outside town? Did they feel they just suddenly decided to cast unknown magic and have different personalities for a day, and then shrugged it off? Crap, what happened to that money? And I need to find a safe place to bury this spellbook too, sorry random lady but hopefully like me you carry only a copy I may need your spells in the future. The cave wall may work fine, it’s stone and wouldn’t be disturbed- Oh shoot he’s looking at me still I need to say something! “I just hope history judges us properly for what we’ve done today.” Yes, nailed it! Maybe that will get some information out of him without letting him know I have no idea what just happened.*

“If I thought it likely anyone would ever know, I would be more concerned,” said Herald. “They’ve already admitted they aren’t a part of our linear time, locking them up like this probably won’t even inconvenience them.”

We traded a look. *So, wait, they locked the Enlightenment up in this cave? Why? Were we a party to that? I doubt they went quietly. But there’s just us and this guy...*

“And we’re sure this is the best thing to do,” Arrys asked, looking the door over.

“The Gloom would have been impossible to overcome without the Enlightenment. You know this. If it could have been destroyed, and our safety here assured, then yes, sending it back would be the thing to do. But such a powerful tool as this is too valuable to simply throw away when it will surely be needed again.”

“Instead of just asking it to come back, at that time, and expecting a more favorable response than simply locking it up in a cave for a thousand years.”

“I don’t understand,” Herald decided as he looked us all over. “You’ve all been instrumental in all this the last ten years. Why the sudden hesitation?”

*Ten years? You've got to be kidding me. And that was an organization fighting all that time, not just a couple of random people like this time. How are we supposed to do anything? I guess maybe if we've caught it before it can spread too far, we may have an easier time of it? Who knows how long the Gloom was around before someone picked up on it and realized something had to be done? It does seem connected to the war so maybe they were dealing with multiple fronts. We just have the one. And it does seem to operate by possession. Maybe if we simply take care of all the cult members around here- that is Gloomhaven back in our time- it won't have anyone to do anything for it and will go back home again. Will it really help us after we locked it up? I have to doubt it. "Take care of" listen to me. Murder them, I mean. But what other choice do we have?*

"Perhaps being faced with the reality of a situation is different from the hypothetical of the situation," Gorde told him.

I gave a start, that was quite deep coming from him, I was impressed.

"It's done now, it's too late to have second thoughts. Barnabus." He handed the key over. "Take this and hide it. It's the only thing that can release the Enlightenment again. Where you hide it is up to you. We, the celestial guardians, are not to know. Ah yes." He reached into a pocket and pulled out a sheet of paper. "But someone must guard that knowledge, here is the location of the person you must deliver the information to."

"I won't let you down!"

"You never have. I suppose this is goodbye, I doubt we'll ever need to meet again." He shook Barnabus' hand, nodded to the rest of us, and cast a spell, teleporting away.

Barnabus looked down at the key in his hand. "So we're just going to let them out again right now, right?"

## Chapter 14

Caught in a mousetrap, now what can I do?

“That would certainly be one way to handle this,” I agreed after a moment with a laugh. “But consider the implications. Clearly the crystal is being grown by the Enlightenment either to try and escape or at least signal to the outside world that they are here. If we let them out now there will be no crystal. I won’t get ‘cursed’ as I was. So Malachite won’t go looking for answers- no, even worse than that. Without being cursed maybe my family doesn’t kick me out as they do. Maybe we never meet at all. Maybe you two get together with Jekserah as that’s before we met, and get killed doing her first mission because you don’t have magical support. I mean who knows how the future plays out if we let the Enlightenment out right now?”

“It could change a great number of things,” Arrys agreed. “My only hope is they are at worst neutral towards us upon being let out, and not vengeful. I would not want this being to join the Gloom in our time, we have enough problems as it is.”

“So the question then becomes where do we hide it that can survive more than a thousand years?”

“There is still much upheaval in the world to come,” Arrys went on. “I was inactive during most of this but I did make a short study of history upon my emergence. The world will still have to face being ruled by the Skyebourne, now that to most of the world Skye Bourne was the reason for the war ending. No historical document mentions the Gloom or Enlightenment, those forces were too carefully hidden away. Then of course are the dragon emperors, and more wars to get rid of them. The land will change in many ways between this time and ours.”

“But on the other hand,” protested Gorde, “we’ve made a good tour of a lot of the surrounding area around Gloomhaven. We must be able to pick *something* that’s here today and looks about how we find it in the future. The tombs and things should be somewhat undisturbed, and we have someone that can move rock aside.” He looked at me.

“It’s true,” I agreed quickly. “I can totally move rock. We could just stick the key in the wall of the cave, we know it’s going to be here in our time.”

“Would that be wise?” he asked. “While it seemed like the crystal protrusions in the cave were only at the surface, perhaps they were not. If the key was in these walls and the Enlightenment could sense it, perhaps they could grow crystal enough to touch the key, then connect the key with the door, and free themselves.”

“I admit it’s a good point.”

“Still, we are only brainstorming, as the old saying went, so no idea is too outlandish. Let us make a list of places we have been that would make a good hiding spot. First on my list is; we know a dragon.”

“That’s true,” Gorde admitted. “The only problem there will be getting it back away from him when the time is right. Even to a relative, dragons aren’t known for giving stuff away.”

“But if we make sure to stress he’s just looking after it until someone comes to claim it,” Barnabus asked, “it wouldn’t be a problem, right?” He finished threading a rope through the key and tying it around his neck, dropping the whole thing under his shirt.

“Don’t underestimate the greed of dragons.”

“Certainly not.”

“That treatment plant will be there long into the future,” I recalled. “We could hide it behind a wall panel we saw intact.”

“What about any big rocks?” Gorde asked. “Monuments or something that we know exist? You could shove it in there.”

“Stone monuments?” I thought for a moment. “I don’t know of any.”

“Who are we supposed to be meeting, anyway?” Barnabus asked, handing me the paper. I took a look.

“One Kelder of the Vault Keepers, apparently. Where do I know that name from...”

“There’s Kelders all over the place in our time,” Arrys reminded me. “It’s still the most popular name in the land.”

I shook my head. “No I mean Vault Keepers. Must have read about them, yeah some group of secret keepers that didn’t last all that long. Pretty sure no one has heard that name for hundreds of years in our time, yeah, pretty sure of it.”

“So wait,” Gorde cut in. “Even if we complete our latest ‘mission’ it doesn’t even matter? The information is just going to be lost anyway?”

“Probably,” I agreed.

“May as well just tell him any old random spot then.”

“So we have a dragon and the water treatment plant,” Arrys brought us back to our actual conversation. “Where else?”

“How about where you woke up from?” Barnabus wondered. “We could even include a note. Please keep this key safe and don’t tell anyone about it until someone says ‘the owl hoots at midnight’ while, I don’t know, holding a glass of water over their heads or something.”

“I don’t recall seeing any such note...”

“Because we haven’t put it there yet!”

“But you would have, if that’s what we decide here in the past, so I find it in the future!”

“Time travel is hard.”

“That it is, my small friend.”

“If no monuments, what about a tree? Could you learn a wood shaping spell?” Gorde asked.

“I could,” I agreed, “or maybe this person has one in their book. But what tree do we know of that’s still around in a thousand years?”

“I don’t know! Let’s just do the dragon plan!” he decided, throwing his hands in the air. “We know he’s alive in the future, we can worry about getting the key back from him then. He owes us anyway.”

We shared a look but had no other brilliant ideas come to us, so we all shrugged and agreed. I got out the old magic focus doodad and asked the usual. It turned out Alveindros was more than 2,000 kilometers away from us at the moment.

“We aren’t getting *there* any time soon,” Arrys announced. “Are we sure there isn’t something in the local area we can use?”

“There is a town down there,” Barnabus told us, pointing. “Is that the place you’ll ultimately be born in, Orchid?”

“Uh, yeah probably,” I decided, looking down the mountain towards it. “Seems to be in the right place. I didn’t travel that far to get to the cave. Why?” *Huh, are my grandparents alive down there? Given how long we live, my parents is probably a stretch but their parents could be there. Huh. How about that?*

“Could we hire someone to teleport us closer to where we need to go?”

We patted down our pockets and pouches, finding we had a fair amount of coin on us. So that part was covered.

“May as well ask, before we head all the way over there,” I told them. A minute later I had asked the universe “does the town I’m looking at have a mage that can teleport us most of the way to the dragon Alveindros.”

Yes

“Let’s go. Ready to get big again, Gorde?”



“Greetings, mighty Alveindros!” I shouted. “Prophecy has led us to you, to become the keeper of-

“Not interested.”

“I... What?”

“I hate prophecy. Never works out the way you expect. Messy business all around. Find someone else.”

“But we heard you were the best!” Barnabus protested. “It must be you!”

“Best? At what?”

“At growing your hoard,” Arrys told him. “We have heard whispers one day no mountain shall be large enough to contain it!”

“You heard that, did you?”

“There can be no question.”

He sighed and rolled his eyes. “Go on...”

“Ah, yes, thank you. Where was I? Right! We have traveled far to bestow upon you the Spirit Key, to guard throughout the ages until it is once again needed. Get out the key, Barnabus, show it to him.”

“I’m getting it, I’m getting it.” He started fumbling the key out.

“Spirit key, huh?”

“Yes, that is correct. It must be guarded, so that in the future, when the hated Gloom returns to the land, the weapon secreted behind the door the key opens can be released to counter it.”

“And who exactly does ‘prophecy’ say will come looking for it?”

“Four heroes, mighty one. A young boy, a remnant, a woman of stone, and one who will have saved your very life in your recent past.”

“That’s rather specific. Who are you people, again?”

“Okay look,” Gorde took over. “Let’s cut all the crap. We were magically brought into the past to secure this key thing, okay? Sooner or later you’re gonna have a kid. And they’re gonna have a kid. And so on. Until I’m born, okay? It’s not prophecy, it’s my life. That’s how we know it’s going to happen. We’re the ones who are going to come looking for it. Because we can’t just vanish across time carrying it, for reasons, back to our time to use it. Otherwise I think we would have?”

He looked at me and I nodded, this was sound reasoning after all. We weren’t in control of these jumps, something else was. We had the key, why *not* just jump us back through time to the cave again? Must be a reason.

“Are you sure about telling him all this?” I hissed.

“Don’t worry so much.” He went on. “We thought of you because we know you survive that long into the future!”

“Hummm...” He looked us all over. “Time travel huh?”

“The Celestial Guardians brought some kind of weird, other dimensional being here. Rather than just letting it go back home they locked it up. We can’t do anything about that, it’s still locked up in my time. We think it’s done this, to try and free itself. So you want to help us out or not, grandpa?”

“All rather irregular.” He took the key and looked it over.

“That’s our life in a nutshell,” Gorde agreed. “Put it in your hoard. Forget it about. But not too much. My friend here can make it look like a rock. When I come for it, hand it back over. You’ll know me when it’s time.”

“And what if someone else comes looking?”

“If this is the *third* time the Gloom has emerged in our world we’re really in trouble,” Arrys mused. “Do you know of the Vault Keepers, by any chance?”

“I am familiar with the name, yes.”

“We’re supposed to deliver the location to someone in that organization. But it’s gone in our time, we think. We can give them wrong information, to make sure it really stays hidden.”

“So you think it won’t be needed until your time?” Alveindros asked.

“The being is still locked in the cave in our time,” I mused. “If it was released, would it have meekly gone back to being imprisoned again? I think, given how it was treated, it would have maybe agreed to help but looked for a way to escape. I doubt it would still be there, now that it know what fate awaits it.”

The dragon chuckled. “You humans, so short sighted.”

“I’m not disagreeing with you, it’s probably a policy that’s going to bite us in the end.”

“As long as you admit it. Very well! Work your magics to disguise this most interesting of objects into a common rock, and I will see it through its voyage through the age.”

“Thank you.”

I did a pretty good job on the rock, if I do say so myself, and we headed away from the dragon to discuss our next move.

“I honestly don’t think it matters what we tell the vault keeper,” Arrys decided. “They’re gone, or if not, we’re clearly going to beat anyone to the key because it’s now held by a dragon friendly only to us. Let’s just tell them it’s in the water treatment plant just to close the loop here, get these bodies paid again, and-”

We found ourselves back in the cave.

“-and that horrible flesh stuff is gone!” they finished, looking over their hands. “Oh, happy day!”

“I’m thure it wath nice while it lathed,” Snarly agreed, looking around. “But how hath the future changed becauthe of us?”

“Let’s go find out,” I sighed, feeling heavy again. *I still don’t understand what the poem was all about. Did we make the right choice? I expected something a little more weighty, I guess. It’s clear we made some change to the past, given who we left the key with. Now we just need to hope they’ve kept it all these years and we don’t have to search the world for some random rock. Thankfully I could just walk us to it no matter where it was. I mean as long as it wasn’t underwater, or something ridiculous.*

“I can fly again!” crowed Malachite, snapping his wings open. “Let’s do some flying!”



## Chapter 15

### Keep on hopping you can never stop

It was the moment of truth. We stood in the cave again, key in hand. Alveindros had given us the key with little incident, digging through his personal hoard as he kept some treasure about his person like a normal dragon. He was apparently feeling much better, and had moved back into his cave from the sick-house he had been stuck in while under the effects of the curse. He thanked us for before, saying that portion of his hoard had been moved and there had been no out of the ordinary behavior from his neighboring dragon. So all was well that ended well. Including this. He found the right rock, I got the key out of it, and we flew back to the cave for hopefully the final time. The crystal seemed to flex and retract as we walked in with it, so I had to figure we were on the right track here. It was clear by the time we got to the door, but it seemed whatever was on the other side was getting a bit impatient. It physically grabbed the key, surprising me that the seemingly solid door could be turned into a putty like that, and put the key in the now revealed keyhole all by itself. We took a step back and waited.

“So now what?” Hanz asked after a moment. “Did it work? Is it free?”

“Not really sure,” I admitted, taking a tentative step forward. I turned the key in the lock just as a point of interest and the door melted away.

“Finally!” said a voice from behind. The being we had seen all those years ago floated over to us, forcing us to shade our eyes from the glare. “I don’t want to hear it. Deal with it on your own. Goodbye!”

“Gah! Buh!” Malachite orated, making a pretty compelling argument in my eyes but you never know with beings like this.

“Yes, was there something?” the Enlightenment asked, dripping with sarcasm.

“Do you know what we went through to get that key and free you? We’re not at fault here, we did what we could to help you and preserve our future at the same time.”

“I know. I was watching you for much of it, in the limited way I could.”

“So fix her!” He pointed at me. “That’s what this is mostly about anyway.”

“Humm?” The being turned and looked me over. “Oh yes, I see what you mean now. My apologies, it seems some of my crystal did indeed fuse with you. I wondered what you were doing back here poking around. But I did see an opportunity. Yes, of course, I can remove that sliver of my power from her at once. If you agree, of course?” A ghostly appendage hovered near me.

*Oh. So much for choosing between more and less, or whatever I once thought. Becoming some kind of elemental would have given me pause. But the poem- “Yes, please take your power back, thank you.” I mean why would I refuse at this point? That would be... very silly.*

“No, thank you. I suppose it really is the least I can do.” They touched me, and I felt lighter again. I touched my head, finding wonderful long hair again, as though it had been growing this whole time.

“My hair is back! But it’s blue?” I gathered it up and looked at it.

“I couldn’t get every bit, there may be a few minor, cosmetic, side effects. Now may I finally get out of this awful place?”

“Would it change your mind at all if we said the Gloom was back and we wanted your help again?” Hanz asked hopefully.

“It would not,” they said with finality. “I’m sure you’ll be able to handle it.”

“The four of us. Handle it. You could only drive it back the last time, how are we supposed to deal with it now without you?”

“I’m sure you’ll find a way. Goodbye!” They shot out of the cave and vanished.

We all stood around a moment, in shock.

“So, that’s it then?” Malachite asked, looking me over.

“I guess?” I agreed. “It feels... wrong somehow. But I have just skin again, and hair, and I could finally wear those fire proof boots we got instead of just sandals all the time. So I guess curse- Oh my gosh!”

“What? What is it?”

“We need to go *shopping*, I’m going to need all new clothes now that I can actually wear something that’s not a tent.”

“She’s a woman all right.” Hanz was nodding their head. “First thing she thought of.”

“Well look at me, I can’t go out like this!” I indicated my torn up clothes. “And with a boyfriend to play porter who wouldn’t want to go shopping?”

“Porter?” Malachite asked with some trepidation.

“It’s gonna be so fun! I’m going to shop all day and get so many nice outfits! Maybe I’ll even let you preview some. Oh I haven’t gone shopping in ages, and I have money now too which helps. I can’t wait to get back to town!”

Hanz patted his arm. “I’ll pray for you.”

We stayed the night in the cave, getting my new skin all dirty and yucky but that’s what I had cleaning magic for! We headed back early the next day and I went straight to get my hair looked at and taken care of. I got it shortened a little bit, I wanted to have long hair for now after so long having none. I could put it up when we were fighting, I was sure. With that taken care of Malachite spent the rest of the day following me around to various clothing shops, where I picked out a bunch of new outfits, most of them pretty revealing. I had *smooth skin* again and I wanted to show it off a little. Pity it was coming up on the cold season, but I could make withstand weather spell tokens, and I had the cloak Malachite had bought for me, and the boots fit me! Not the dragonscale boots, those were still illegal. I was *not* walking around town in illegal boots. The other ones. I cut quite a figure, looking in the mirror in my room. I was preening and wanting to try on all my new outfits, still a bit weirded out by how things had worked out, but figured I could only accept them, and move on. That poem though, it really built up the whole thing about choice and nexus and all that, and in the end it was just “here you go, bye!” Still, I was very pleased with the result, even if hugging Malachite now seemed much more prickly to me than before. *I can swim in water deeper than I can stand in, and while I’ll probably still disguise myself when I go out because it’s just fun and I have the spell, I don’t have to anymore. I’m not slowed down by being so heavy, my arms feel so light now. It’s going to be great!*

The only interruption for the day was us being approached by a rather disheveled looking fellow from the mouth of an ally. It was a rat folk, with rat ears and tail, and on the short side.

“Interesting in secrets, sirs? Or madam if it is? Muchly great secrets to be had, very unexpensively, just for the two sirs! Or if they are madams?”

“You really can’t tell that I’m a human woman?” I asked, looking the guy over. To my great shame, I did recognize the man, and the rolled up scroll he had was no doubt a spell. He was a known “troublemaker” in town, though he wasn’t violent or anything like that. Not everyone had the good fortune to be born as I had, so I didn’t hold his current circumstances against him.

“One has no interest in such things, only business, just business,” said the man.

“Just business, is it?” I said, a bit too loudly. “You come to me, looking to swindle me no doubt. Bodyguard, let us find a quiet nook and teach this filthy little creature a lesson!” I pointedly winked at him and he chuckled once, then tamped it down.

“A fine idea, my lady, come along, vermin!” He grabbed up the man who yelped.

I risked a glance behind me, there were nods of encouragement that this man would soon be getting what he deserved. They disgusted me, the whole lot of them. *The man needs help, you think he does this because he likes living dangerously or something? And you approve of us going to beat him*

*up! Is this really the way the Lord would have you act? Each and every one of you should be racing to his defense, and helping to lift him out of poverty as much as you are personally able. Is this not the lesson of the savior, son of God? I pity all your souls when asked about this day at the gates of Heaven.*

“Please, no violence!” pleaded the man. “I wish no violence!”

Malachite knocked over a trash can, making it clatter over and then started smashing it. “And that’s just for starters! Stand still and take your beating like a man!”

The man picked up on it right away. “Not the face!”

“Oh you want some more, do you?”

“How much?” I whispered to him.

“Five moons!” he whispered back. “Thank you for not actually beating me up.”

*Even the cheapest spell, purchased officially, would run me twice that. So even if it’s grade 1, as long as I didn’t already know it this would be a substantial savings. This guy looks like he needs the money, too. Honestly, I consider this transaction charity work. The piece of parchment the spell is written on is worth far less than 5 moons, and if I had my way any non-combat spell would be free, to help improve the world. I do this now to stick it to you, mage’s guild. I’ve seen the world before you came along with my own eyes now. Apart from the whole war thing, which was probably begun by the Gloom anyway, it looked like things were working out for us. You brought me to this, so now how do you like it?*

I slipped him the coins and he handed me the scroll, while Malachite continued to beat on the cans. He slipped out the back, and we proceeded on our way.

“So what was it?” he asked, as I looked the scroll over.

“Bah!” I spat. “We lost out. Unless you want a huge sword made of ice, or something?”

“Do I?!”

I glared at him, but chuckled. “Yeah okay I don’t know what I expected otherwise. So yeah no good for me, I’m not swinging a sword around but maybe you could have a stone bracelet made that you could pull a magic sword made of ice out of. If you lost yours, or your non-magical weapon wasn’t cutting it.”

“Cutting it, good one!”

“You know, if you needed that extra edge.”

“Okay, okay, don’t take it too far now.”

“The shape is up to my imagination so I could make it pretty n-ice.”

“What did I just say?!”

*It’s any close combat weapon. Wonder how far I could take it? Is a chain made of ice a weapon? A pole would be. An ice bow? It would only shoot regular arrows but in a pinch for Hanz maybe. An ice net? I have to keep holding onto it though. I can do some tests later. I bet I could make a net with one really long rope on one side, and I hold onto that to keep it around. Yeah, bet that would work.*

“Did you have fun thoping?” Snarly asked us when we got back.

“I did, thank you!” I told him. “Anything interesting happen while you were out?”

“Yeth actually. I thaved a kobald from being beaten by thome townfolk.”

“Good for you, little man,” Malachite praised. “We’ll make a hero of you yet.”

“Yer implying that you’re thome kind of hero?” he asked, not believing it for a second. “But thereth even more importhant neth to thare!”

“Don’t keep us in suspense.”

“I thometimeths head back to the Theeping Lion to thee how the place ith getting on. The owner told me that thereth some kind of weird thievery thing going on outhide town.”

“Thievery thing?” I asked.

“Bandith are accothing merchant caravanth, but the only thing they theal is lamp oil.”

“Lamp oil?” I repeated.

“Thath what he thaid. They don’t hurt nobody, or theal money or thuff like that, just the oil. It’s very odd.”

“I’ll say,” I agreed.

“Ah, you’re back,” Hanz said, closing the door behind them. “I just had a most interesting interaction with Argase.”

“We can look into the lamp oil thing if you want to help out the Lion,” Malachite told him. “Let’s hear what Hanz has to say now.”

“Thure thing.”

“Lamp oil? Anyway, she’s been looking for us. Maybe you should put some kind of mailbox on the side of the house or something? Then she could leave us messages. They went through the books from that warehouse they took down, much of it in code by the way, and she discovered another site she wants us to check out. It’s called the Outer Ritual Chamber, so there’s no doubt it’s connected to the cult. At least, that’s what they called it.”

“Sounds appropriately cult like,” I agreed. “It’s been a month since Jekserah, that could keep a few days. Don’t forget we have the imprisoned wind spirit to help out too. I would say let’s head tomorrow to look into Snarly’s oil lamp thievery problem, as that seems rather important in the short term, swing by the chamber after that, then look into the spirit thing and if we really want to release it into the world when we got back. I don’t want to make them wait too long, after all.”

Everyone agreed that sounded reasonable, and the next day we were off!

The attacks, according to Snarly, only happened on the east road to town, somewhat near the Dagger Forest. So we figured they probably had some kind of hideout there and headed that way to try and get the drop on them. We were walking so far, discussing our plan.

“So what is our plan?” Malachite asked.

“The one thing in the favor of these thieves is the fact they haven’t actually hurt anyone,” I explained. “So my idea is this; We fly down this road and hopefully spot the caravan before it gets near the bandits. We circle back, go into the astral, and follow them. Then when the thieves attack the caravan-”

“We jump out and cut their heads off!”

“NO! Bad draig!” I cried, slapping his hand. “We do nothing.”

“The what?”

“We allow them to take the oil-”

“Then cut their heads off, and *sell* the oil back to the- don’t hit me again!”

I actually shouldn’t have, my hand stung now. What where those scales of his made of? Oh, right, duh. They were *scales*. Ow. I rubbed my hand. “We *follow* them back to their hideout. Then we recover all the oil, figure out what the heck they think they’re doing with so much oil, and can *return* all of it. A small reward is acceptable to take, if offered.”

“Oh. So no cutting at all, then?”

“Not if we can help it. And no breathing fire either, just want to get that out of the way.”

“I’m not stupid, if I see gallons of lamp oil of course I’m not breathing fire next to it!”

“Good. They may be forced to do this by... some... elemental oil... demon? I don’t know. I don’t know what they need all this oil for.”

“You think someone’s drinking it?” Hanz asked.

“No idea, but why just oil? They aren’t stealing money? They could use it to buy more oil in other places. It makes no sense. I don’t like things that make no sense.”

“Agreed,” they agreed. “I have no issues with this plan.”

“Ready to fly?” I asked.

“Ready!”

But the fates were with us, and Malachite actually spotted a group of shady looking characters huddled by the road, the bad news being they seem to have spotted us too. Not that they could do anything about it, of course. We looped back around and landed some ways from them in the forest.

“We caught a break,” he told us, as he shrunk down again. “We wanted to find them, and we found them. At least, we found somebody acting suspicious around here. Let’s go astral and see if these are our guys.”

I had no problem with that, and we headed back, making our way to where they were in short order. There were four of them, with very odd mounts. They were stone looking dogs, with saddles, not horses. The men had a variety of weapons from swords to crossbows, and dark cloaks. They were clearly sitting there waiting for something, but not saying much.

*What, are horses just too mainstream for them or what?*

“I’ll go scout to see how far the caravan is from here,” Malachite offered. “Stay here.” He took off, coming back just a few minutes later. “They’re hours away at the speed they’re going,” he announced. “They’re trying to be extra careful I guess?”

“Tho we have time, now what?” Snarly asked.

“Those dog things look to be pretty heavy,” Hanz told us. “I bet they would make a trail a blind man could follow through the woods. Let’s head away from them again and look for tracks. We may be able to catch them in their lair, taking them by surprise, when they return with their latest spoils!”

*Of course this will be the one time someone gets killed, knowing our luck. Please, Lord, protect these poor caravans and don’t make me regret trying to spare the lives of the thieves as well.*

No one had any objections, so we did just that. I augmented both Malachite and Hanz, making their skill at tracking much better, and they started following the trail. And we kept following the trail. And we kept following it. And we followed it some more. And then it went on for a longer time. And still we followed it. It felt like hours, probably because it was, but still we followed it.

“How far away do theth guyth live anyway?” Snarly asked at one point.

“They do seem dedicated, to drag oil barrels so far through the woods,” Hanz agreed. “Most curious.”

“Do you hear that?” Hanz’s head whipped back. “Quick, put us back in the astral I think we’re about to get company!” I dropped the augmentation spell as everyone gathered around, they knew what they had to do by now. We were solidly in the astral as the four stone dogs thundered past us.

*I guess we know why they ride those things, then?*

“They’re really moving,” Malachite breathed. “So much for taking them by surprise.”

“We’ve really been following thith trail for tho long they had time to rob the caravan and ride pathed us? How did that work?” Snarly asked.

“Unsure, but at least we know we are on the right track,” Hanz told him. “Let us resume.”

So we did. It wasn’t too much longer to get to the place, and we crouched outside the crypt entrance looking the place over.

“Hold on,” Hanz told us, digging some paper out of his backpack. “This can’t be right.”

“What can’t?” Malachite asked them.

They looked around, the paper seemed to be a crude map. “There’s no mistake! It’s no secret they’ve led us straight to the Chamber!”

## Chapter 16

Once around the block, and I'll slide back out the side door

There was a cooking area in evidence near the entrance to the crypt, and the place was overgrown and with some rocks we could use as cover, but not much else. The cover was the most important part, as the gargoyle dogs had been left outside and were wandering around. They weren't tied up, so I had to wonder what really kept them from wandering off but it didn't seem they were likely to do so in the next few minutes. This was fine, Malachite cautiously went over there but they didn't react, so they had not been "gifted" with the ability to see us where we were.

"There's a set of stairs going down," he reported, waving us towards him. "Let's go get the drop on them."

We all nodded and the others made sure their weapons were ready, and we passed "through" the door and headed down. We didn't get far when it started to get suddenly dim and moving forward became much more difficult.

"Whath happening?" Snarly asked, looking around. "Ith it getting darker here?"

"I would say that was impossible, but it clearly is," I agreed, looking around.

"I can barely move!" Malachite, who was in the lead and thus several steps down from me, complained. "We have to turn around."

*I don't like it. Not one bit.*

We did so, passing the dogs again and taking cover to plan our next move.

"Do you have record of such a phenomenon?" Hanz asked me.

"Shouldn't be possible," I told them. "I mean, I suppose if someone went into the astral and cast something it could do anything. Strange sort of protection spell in any case, if it's that. Of course magic isn't the only power in the world and we do know locations can have strange phenomenon nearby. Maybe they found such a place a long time ago and simply built their base here?"

"You can't counter it?"

"Even if I knew exactly where the center of the effect was, this and my phasing spell are the only dimensional magics I know. We could try going further down, to purgatory."

"What are the chances we will find a similar blockage there?"

"Pretty good," I had to admit. "You don't board up your windows in a storm but then leave the side door wide open."

"Not if you are intelligent at all. Options?"

"The dogs may be fooled by magic, I could disguise us as cultists. At least they would bark and not attack? We could try getting someone from below up here and get taken down to see what the situation is. Some kind of inspection of the lamp oil plan? Or I guess take them prisoner one at a time as they come see what's going on up here?"

"Risky," Malachite mused. "We won't know any code phrases or secret handshakes or anything."

"I want a thecret handthake!" Snarly announced.

"I could go either way," Hanz admitted. "We should do a secret *foot* shake, handshakes are too mainstream for a group as on the cutting edge as we are. But returning to the topic at foot- I mean hand- how about invisibility?"

We all looked to Snarly. "They might signal if they smell something weird though," I tactfully didn't indicate him in any general way. Everyone knew who I was talking about. Well, maybe not Hanz, could they smell things?

"Never mind all this trickery stuff this time! Let's just kill the stupid dog things," Malachite insisted. "They don't have souls." He looked to me.

"I suppose the stairs were pretty far down," I thought out loud. "They probably wouldn't hear us and come running?"

“Could your magic tell us?”

“Eh, tricky. I would be asking about a different dimension. I don’t think it would work. We could back way off and I could ask where they might not smell us.”

“Dang. Well, as long as we can cover the door they can’t come at us except from right there. Easy to defend against.”

“I suppose. Really couldn’t keep them anyway I guess. Get into position then...”

The others took up their positions by the dogs, and got ready to strike. Meanwhile I got behind a rock and closed my eyes for a moment, putting my emotions into the box. My breathing steadied and I relaxed. *They have brought this on themselves. And the cult has to be stopped.*

Peeking up from cover everyone nodded. I raised three fingers and put one down. A second. A third. I dropped the spell.

I drew extra mana into my core and cast, aiming for the head of the dog not covered by one of the others. Somehow the thing dodged me, and looked around stupidly. From its perspective three people just appeared out of nowhere and started attacking its buddies. Malachite smashed into one, cutting the side of it but not dropping it. Hanz attacked a second one, hitting the head but it also was still up and fighting, while Snarly hit his on the leg with the poison blade. The dogs didn’t waste any time fighting back, Hanz got chomped but didn’t seem to mind. I finally hit mine, though I had to cast twice to do so, again going for the head and missing, then switching my target to the body. Snarly got knocked around a bit, causing Hanz to start shooting at that one, but he somehow missed. One final cast at the one I was fighting made it pretty much explode next to Malachite who had rushed over to help, splattering him with unsavory bits.

*Shoot, so much for that one.*

He switched targets, going for the last one, and swung, cleaving its head off.

*And that one.*

Hanz rushed to the door, first listening at it and then covering it with their weapon.

“I hear something, but not footsteps yet,” they announced.

“Anyone hurt?” I asked. Snarly limped over.

“I could uth thome healing,” he admitted.

“You can take care of this too, right?” Malachite asked, also coming over and indicating their armor and general messiness.

“I guess they aren’t stone all the way through?”

Hanz backed off and we went into the astral again, deciding we would do the same thing if any cultists popped up out of the hole. Figuring they would rush out, stand looking around wondering what killed their dogs, giving us time to get behind and ambush them. But it didn’t come. We waited and waited, but nothing happened.

“So they’re trying to counter ambush us?” Malachite finally decided.

“There is a high probability of that,” Hanz agreed. “Or they are unaware of our presence.”

Meanwhile I had been looking the dogs over. The two nearest me were a loss, and it seemed the other two were not much better. *So much for making myself some cute little zombie doggos. I guess I’ll get my own summons out at this point. No sense maintaining it for only two. I mean, really.*

“I guess invisibility is the only option at this point?” he went on.

“We could try phasing, but it may be close enough to a dimensional effect we have the same problem,” I decided. “We might not make it all the way down the stairs.”

“Let’s not keep our hosts waiting then.”

We dropped back into the material plane and I got out my two ally creatures. They went invisible and I put my spell on Malachite, Snarly, and myself. I put a hand on their backs and as Hanz vanished on their own I said they should go first, we would follow. They agreed and opened the door,

and we all carefully made our way down the stairs. It wasn't that dark now that we were not in the astral and got most of the way down, my allies following me. Three bored looking guards were standing there before a door, all in cultist robes. Their symbol had been scratched into the door as well, just to hammer the point home I guess. *Wouldn't want some other doomsday cult accidentally wandering down here, now would we?*

"Ah, finally!" the center one said. "You're making enough noise I don't know why you bothered with invisibility."

*Well excuse me for not knowing how to sneak around. Mr. I'm Stealing Lamp Oil For Some Bizarre Reason.*

He went on. "Perhaps you would like to come out and we can talk?"

*Does he really think that will work?*

There was a confused pause, none of us were really expecting this.

"I don't have all day!"

*I think you do!*

"Fine," muttered Malachite who went forward. He appeared, having touched the guy's neck with his sword.

He looked down at it. "I can't say I'm surprised."

"That I would want to chop the head off yet another end-of-the-world type cultist? Yes, you would be completely stupid if you were. What do you want?"

"It is not what I want, but what my master wants. He wishes to speak to you. To be more specific, you did us all quite the favor when you killed Jekserah, and our master wishes to thank you personally."

He snorted. "Sure he does."

"She was a nuisance. Best forgotten. You on the other hand have proven capable, with all of our brethren that lay dead at your feet. It is time for our master to see if you would be willing to join us. You don't know our true aims, of course."

*Nuisance? She was researching a spell to create undead for kilometers and take over the town. Is that really the best you could come up with?*

"We have a pretty good idea of what the Gloom is, we want no part of it."

"Then use this time to probe our master's weaknesses. Not that you will find any, but he would relish the chance to overcome them and become stronger."

Malachite hesitated. *Of course it's a trap. But we need to get in there one way or the other. And talking directly to the thing may get us more answers than I got out of the ice demon thing I talked to. Now that was a waste of time.* "Fine. Open the door and let me see what's in that chamber. I'm not walking into a place dripping with lamp oil. I would survive any explosion, by the way."

*So would I, wearing the boots, but there's still the possibility of being crushed. Neither of us would survive that.*

"Oh no, that has another purpose," he claimed. "Once your friends have shown themselves, we can proceed."

"Once you open that door, and we are safely inside, they can show themselves."

"But some may stay out here without my knowing."

"Then allow me inside, to verify the safety of my people and then they will show themselves and enter."

"But the invitation is for all of you. You must go together."

"There is nothing you can do to show your good faith?"

"I am unarmed." He spread his arms.

*Yeah, so am I buddy. That doesn't mean the door doesn't trigger some kind of explosion when it's closed again.*

"I tire of this." The sword came up again.



“Very well, very well!” he hastily agreed. “Let us proceed then!” He knocked the special knock, the *doom knock* one might say, on the door, and there was the sound of a bar being moved. The door opened. “Please, come in!” The two on the side moved aside, and he entered the chamber.

*Well, he’s dying too if there’s some trick.*

Malachite warily proceeded, and (presumably) Hanz did as well. Snarly and I moved up, and he went one way so I went another.

*Let’s spread out, see what- oh.*

The room was basically circular, with 4 more cultists. I didn’t see any oil, barrels, or traps. With the two cultists still to enter the room, these four, and the talkative one that made seven. We were almost outnumbered two to one.

*So it will be a fair fight.*

But the most distinct feature of the room was the ribbon of darkness in the center. It pulsed and shimmered, making it hard to look at. So I didn’t, looking around the room instead. Two doors, one to my left and one to my right were perfect for having more forces come to attack us, so I headed to the right. *Let’s go see if there are any surprises there. If someone comes out I can maybe do something?*

I heard a noise and to my surprise the door was closed again, leaving the two cultists out there. The bar was put on the door again.

*Er, what? Why are they locking themselves in here with us? Are they so confident they don’t need those other two? What’s going on?*

“This is our master, the Gloom,” the cultist said when Malachite was before it. His attitude changed, now shouting sarcastically; “He has a gift for you, for killing so many of our brothers!” Three nasty looking figures started climbing out of the rift, and he went on. “He is so happy you are here, it’s time for you all to join our army as-”

He was cut off, literally, as Malachite sliced his head off. “Wow,” he cried sarcastically. “I so did not see this betrayal coming. Who would like to lose their head next?”

The three creatures swiveled their, *I’m going to call it their heads?*, towards Malachite. They were bloated and tall, humanoid with no clothes on but with nasty looking claws.

Snarly appeared, shoving one back through the rift, where it tripped and went down. He bounced off it, flipping back so he didn’t go through as well.

The room was rather large and I was still invisible, so I figured I would continue with my plan and cracked the door I was next to open. A bright light spilled out, there were two of the elemental demons in there, light type.

*Glad I checked. I wouldn’t want to have them come at me from behind.* I took a step back as they started towards me. *Okay, that could work.* I kept backing up, trying to line myself up with the cultist at the far end of the room. *That thing will charge out, and I’ll do a thrust on it, slamming it into that guy over there!* I started to draw upon magic and Boline hit one with a balk, making sure it would be even less likely to resist. This caused him to become visible though. I cast, holding the spell, as he balked the other one for good measure. However the demon went for Boline, who dodged to the side, so I let the spell go and it went flying backwards. He had to dodge again as the second one went to slash him as well. He rushed past, heading for me.

“Oh no you don’t,” Malachite told it, leaping as far up as he could with a flap of his wings.

“Elemental Strike!” I cast when he was at the apex of his jump. He crashed down on the demon, slicing through it and it started to dissolve. He turned to give me a thumbs up but suddenly I was blinded.

“Something got my eyes!” I yelled to him, holding out a hand. “I can’t see.”

“Elemental darkness demons,” Malachite told me. “Hold tight!”

*Onto what, exactly? Okay, they did some kind of darkness ability, will my light spell even work?* I started to back up, figuring I would put my back to the wall at least. I directed Besom to cover my front, while Boline I commanded to at least head through the door and see if he could find that other

light demon. *If the darkness doesn't extend all the way into that room at least he can keep it busy, right?*

I heard the sounds of combat as I slowly backed up, finally feeling the wall behind me. *Okay, let's go left. There was a guy standing there but would the demon blind his own cultist buddy? I think not. I'll go invisible, get into a good position, and see what the situation is. Meanwhile...* I sent Besom forward, figuring it may as well get free of this darkness and attack something. It did, but then I felt my connection to her break. *What in the world?*

"Got the other light demon!" Malachite shouted. "You're being ignored Orchid nothing near you."

*Okay, but I'm not now that you just called attention to me, lover!* I cast my invisibility spell and inched my way along the wall. Finally out of the darkness I took in the scene. The others had been busy, keeping the undead creatures from fully coming through and dealing with the cultists as well. One demon of elemental darkness has looking around for a target so I cast my elemental needle spell on him, causing him to burn away. At the same time Malachite went for one of the cultists and a second demon appeared near him, blasting him with darkness. He chopped off the cultist's arm, who screamed, and magical energy enveloped all three of them. They vanished.

*Uh, what?*

With the cultists near me already taken care of, Snarly killing the last one with his dagger (*where did his sword go?*) and Hanz attacking the last moving undead creature I made my way around the room, Boline joining me as the darkness was now gone as well. I didn't want to go near "the master" if I could help it. *Though it's probably a lie, that doesn't seem to be a creature like the Enlightenment was. Now where is Malachite? Please just be some backfired invisibility spell or something?* "Malachite?" I called.

"There's something on the other side of that rift," Hanz announced, pointing through it.

*Right, it's not the Gloom, it's just a portal or something. Those things came through it. From the other side. You don't think they somehow ended up through there? No help for it.* I sent Boline through, with orders to help Malachite if he saw him, and when my connection didn't break (meaning he had made it through to the other side) I followed. Thankfully, Malachite was still alive, though looked hurt. He was holding the demon at bay with his sword, while the cultist was bleeding out on the floor next to him.

"Okay, Malachite?" I asked.

"Now that you're here maybe. Want to do that awesome combo attack again?"

"Sounds good."

But it was not to be, as I got shoved by Hanz and Snarly rushing into the place.

"Don't *all* come in here!" I protested. "What if the rift-"

The rift closed.

"That!" I shouted, pointing. "What if that!?"

## Chapter 17

I'm sure he's crazy too because he's bouncing off the floor

"Truly amazing, that creatures as stupid as yourselves have caused me so much trouble," a voice that came from nowhere told us. "Still, this has worked out to my satisfaction, having to sacrifice a few of my followers to trap you here. Rather beyond my expectations but I figured once the big one was pulled here, the others would follow. This you did. If I knew baiting you would work I would have done so sooner. I am of course a master baiter. There shall be no heroic last stand for you, die here in this place and bother me no more."

"Yeah no," Malachite told the voice, slicing off the demon's head. "Wait did he just say... Nah!"

Taking a quick look around I saw we were in a similar room to the one we had left, though there was a dimness, or perhaps one might say a gloom, to the whole place. I rushed to the side of the cultist and started healing him. His arm wouldn't grow back or anything, but it did start healing over so he wouldn't bleed to death.

"Uh, what are you doing?" Malachite asked.

"He may be the only way out of here," I told him. "You know how to open a dimensional portal out of the Gloom dimension?"

"Uh, no?"

"Neither do I!"

"I see your point."

I finished healing him and turned to the others. "Everyone okay?"

They both indicated they were.

"Good. Watch this guy, I see you took some hits." Malachite's armor was beat up so I assumed he was hurt as well. He was favoring one leg, I noticed.

"All in a day's work."

"Come here."

I healed him up and fixed up his armor, than refreshed everyone's spell symbols, including my own. I made another Besom who seemed glad to be back, and by this time the cultist was coming around. He was pale, he had lost a lot of blood (that I had cleaned up with the hygiene spell) and blearily looked us over.

"What a shame, I'm still alive."

"Wow," I marveled. "You people really have it bad, don't you? You know, all you had to do to enjoy a paradise at the Lord's side when your mortal time was up was not be evil. It was just too hard for you, huh? You really think this Gloom buddy of yours is going to offer you a better deal? How is he getting your soul, anyway? *I truly* doubt it can interrupt the soul cycle."

"Never mind that," Malachite told him, as he looked up at me confused. "Could be too much brain power in that effort. Open up a portal and take us back. Or I'll finish killing you the rest of the way. Maybe take your other arm off? Would you be able to serve the Gloom in death with no arms? Kinda want to do it."

"The portal opens at the whims of my master. He has not given us a method of calling him, he calls us."

"Marvelous!" I exclaimed, throwing my hands into the air. "We're stuck here." *But wait, you and Malachite got here when you backfired a spell. What spell were you trying to do that caused that?*

"But at least we have company," Hanz tried to joke.

"Hopefully more talkative than the last *demon* we tried to get answers from," Malachite agreed. "So... What exactly do you people want?"

"I thought that much was obvious. To bring the Gloom to the world."

“But what does that *mean*? You must personally be getting something from all this. Like Orchid said, your very soul is on the line here. You must have been offered something to beat the promise of Heaven to have turned your back on the Lord.”

“There is no greater service than to serve the Gloom.”

“So you threw away your chance at eternal paradise for...”

“Service is the reward.”

*Hold on. Is the Gloom actually some kind of disease? A mental parasite? A memetic hazard? He's spewing the same answers as the demon thing. Can he no longer think clearly? But how is this all being transmitted? I think we may have to put up fliers in town that this cult is recruiting around here and to report them. Something. Once they get into the cult it seems they just lose all reason.*

“How tiresome,” the big voice made an appearance again. The cultist dropped dead.

“And there it is,” Malachite decided. “We try to understand you and your followers go brain dead and then you make them dead-dead. What pitch is suckering all these fools into your service, anyway? Hello?”

“We should be on our guard,” I decided. “Assume we're under constant surveillance.”

“Anyone feelth the urge to take a big dump?” Snarly asked.

“I am not,” Hanz announced.

“I don't eat,” I reminded him. *And if we don't get out of here soon, that's going to be a problem. I can't make food or water. You all, not you Hanz, are in trouble if we don't get out of here in the next day or so.*

“I get what you're going for,” Malachite agreed. “Let him watch *that* if he wants. Come on, let's see where we are. At least there are doors. Had we simply been brought to some underground chamber with no exits... okay we could still escape thanks to Orchid but it smacks of poor planning on the Gloom's part. Anything to say?” He waited, looking around. “Thought so.”

“I'll check him over,” Snarly announced, going through his pockets. He had a few coins and a non-magical amulet with the cult symbol on it. Nothing more. Meanwhile we checked the doors, no handles or knobs. They seemed to be wood, but of a type I had never encountered before. Same with the walls, they appeared to be stone, and responded to a quick stone shaping spell I tried just to be sure, but it was corrupted in some way. I didn't like it. The whole place felt wrong. But at least it was somehow lit, as though it was purgatory. It wasn't exactly sunlight levels, but I didn't have any trouble seeing through it. *Don't need to use a light spell.*

“Nothing for it,” Hanz announced. “We must press on if we are to escape from this place. Are we underground? In a building? Someone made this place and brought those undead things here. We must assume this is some kind of base for the Gloom. Others must exist here. Perhaps some kind of local resistance? Our mission should be to seek it out.”

*What about the Enlightenment? It went back home, right? Which is here. Come to think of it, where exactly are we? Parallel world? One that lost to the Gloom a long time ago? And now it wants our world because it's bored or something? You have this place, leave us be.*

“Which door?” Malachite asked.

“As all three are equally likely to contain horrors, let us choose at random. Loading random.exe. Running. This door has been chosen.” They pointed.

“Fair enough.”

“Loading combat.exe.”

“I have no idea what you're saying. Get into position.”

We did, and he shouldered the door open. Inside were several skeletons, some rubble, no doors. Two creatures that were mostly month perked up from behind the rubble, and *of course* the skeletons jerked to life. Battle was once again joined. The mouth things didn't seem too phased by my magic, which was a concern, so I focused more on buffing the others while my allies harassed them. The skeletons went down fairly easily and the others turned to the mouth creatures, making short work of them as well. With the room clear we looked around, it was indeed empty, apart from a strange looking dagger in the far corner, partly buried under the rubble. Hanz was the one to find it, and called our attention to it. They said not to touch it, and I understood why, shadow seemed to be pouring off it.

"It's magical," I announced, clearly stating the obvious. "I would need to synchronize with it to tell you more."

"So neat!" Malachite decided, reaching for it.

"Wait, I can still tell if it's safe to be- and you took it."

He held it up. "Yup, think I'm keeping it."

"You know who utheth dagerth? Thith guy!" Snarly reminded him, pointing his thumbs at himself.

"Get your own," he replied, staring into the depths of it. "You got the poison sword, didn't you? This one is mine."

"Ooooohay." We all traded a look. *Maybe I better just take that off his hands... Actually I'm really the only one without a physical wea- oh no.*

"We can divvy up any treasure later," Malachite promised, sticking the knife through his belt. "Let's carry on."

*Seems dangerous, but in a fun way. I approve. No, no, he should lose his pants only at my request, not by some random slip of a knife.*

We got into position in front of the second door, after finishing our preparations of course. Malachite was holding a bottle of lamp oil in his hand with his sword in the other, and I was behind my invisible companions. He kicked the door down, smashing through it easily and revealing a large chamber beyond. From my vantage point I could see another darkness demon and two undead looking humanoids, one in red and one in blue.

"Let your defenses be nullified," I cast on the blue one. Magical energies hit it and I knew whatever it tried to do defensively in the next few seconds would be penalized.

Malachite threw the bottle of oil down and shifted his grip on the sword.

"One of them juth went out of thight," Snarly called to us.

*Where is he? Oh right probably went invisible using one of his daggers... which means he's not using the sword?*

"Probably trying to flank us," Hanz announced. "I'll watch the wall over here." They turned and brought up their weapon.

I gathered ambient magic into my core, then cast. "Elemental Needle!" Two slivers of wind struck the undead creature in blue, but it only staggered.

Another one of the toothy, magic ignoring creature came into view in the doorway, and Malachite breathed fire on it, lighting the lamp oil on fire as well. Snarly stuck his knives into it, becoming visible in the process, and it yelped.

*Great, can't help there, it'll just eat my magic or whatever it's doing to ignore it.*

The undead creature in red came out of the wall and Hanz shot it. "It ignored it!" they shouted.

*One second, I can't be everywhere at once.*

The undead in blue was casting a spell, I wasn't sure of the target but I didn't have time to empower my magic again. "Elemental Needle!" One sliver of wind slammed into him, but it was a shallow hit. *Come on, go down!*

Boline barked the undead in blue, as Hanz dodged to the side while trying to get out their ax.

A second toothy creature jumped the fire and went for Malachite, but he didn't seem concerned about it.

"Elemental Strike!" I cast on Hanz, empowering their next hit. They didn't have their ax out yet but that didn't mean I couldn't cast on the weapon itself. *Can't help Malachite, those tooth creatures are too close. What can I do next- whoa!*

The darkness demon appeared, shooting a beam of darkness at Malachite, and hitting his leg. He cried out but then seemed to vanish, becoming little more than a shadow of his former self.

"Malachite!" I cried. *Oh no, what just happened to him?*

He didn't let it slow him down though, he charged the demon, swinging his blade. The demon seemed surprised he chose to do this, but his sword did seem to impact the thing.

*He's not out of it yet, okay. I better have Boline move up to fill the gap he just left or we're all in big trouble.*

He did, as Snarly shoved a skeleton- *where did that come from? Oh great and there are two more!* -into the fire. He missed.

Looking to my right I saw Hanz *still* hadn't gotten his ax out. *These people move so slowly, don't they?* I cast a "Dazzle!" on the undead creature to help them out some, but I wasn't sure it was effective.

Boline was dodging the toothy creature now, looking for an opening.

*I really need to rework Besom. While I do feel better about it being between me and all that going on, it can't attack with non-lethal force and expect anything to happen. I have to give it my wind needle spell instead when I get a chance.*

Hanz drew their ax and got a hit on the undead creature, causing a flash of holy light as its magical power finally came into use. The creature was still up though.

The skeleton that Snarly tried to shove made it past the fire and looked like it was heading for me, but Boline jumped on it, smashing it to the ground. Sadly this meant she turned her back on the toothy creatures, and one bit her, causing her to vanish.

*Oh come on. Spells already cast as well? That's completely unfair.*

With the gap now opened the toothy creature went for Hanz, who was now beset on two sides. The undead in red cast some kind of beam spell, which they dodged, and I did a quick "Deflection" because I was right behind them.

"Thanks for that," I said sarcastically. "Look I can't take those tooth monsters. You deal with them, I'll take the undead guy."

"Right!"

"Elemental Needle!"

Hanz now focused on the toothy creature, driving it back with their ax.

*Okay, there is one thing Besom can do.* She shot forward, plunging her beak into the heart of the undead creature, which finally started burning away.

*Wait, burning away? What are these things?* I looked to the skeleton Boline had smashed, the bones that made it up were also burning up into nothing. *What in the world?*

Besom now took Boline's spot near the door, knowing to dodge any strike by the toothy creatures. I empowered Hanz's next strike again, which worked, they hit the creature and killed it.

*Okay, looking good here. What's going on- huh?*

Malachite was back, somehow, but he had lost his sword and was grappling a toothy thing. Snarly was cowering before the undead guy in blue, which wasn't ideal.

"Elemental Needle!" I cast, again not empowering my attack and only doing a single needle. I had hit the thing several times by now, undead weren't *that* hard to- it was still up.

One of the skeletons was stooping to pick up Malachite's sword.

"Don't you dare," he growled, getting out of the way of the third one.

*He seems to have that under control.* I cast a final needle on the undead in blue, and he started burning away.

Looking around it was just the two skeletons left, which were swiftly dispatched by Malachite.

“What happened to you?” I asked him, running through the fire myself. I was wearing the boots, so it was nice to finally get some use out of them.

“Not sure,” he admitted. “I turned into some kind of shadow creature, and then that tooth monster bit me, and I was fine again. Also, ow, can you heal my leg?”

“Sure thing. Your pants are all ripped up too. Not quite enough, in my opinion.” I considered a moment. “Maybe you should take them off so I can really see what the damage is.”

“Just fix them!”

I pouted in answer.

With everyone healed and summoned and armor repaired we stood before the third and final door.

“This better lead to a way out of here,” Malachite grumbled. “This place gives me the creeps.”

“There is something off about it,” I admitted.

“Everyone ready?”

“Ready!” everyone shouted. He smashed through the third door.

Three of the toothy creatures met our gaze, the room seemed empty of anything else but “decorated” in a hideous style. Like someone had piled up corpses of all kinds at the back of the room, and left them to rot.

*Let’s take care of this quickly and... huh, I have no idea. No door in this room either.*

I had Boline rush forward to the furthest away creature, intending to have her attack from surprise and at least get one good hit in. This worked, she hit and the creature whirled to face her.

“Elemental Strike!” I cast on Malachite, who was about to rush into the room.

Hanz hit the middle one right in the head, and it started burning away.

*Oh yeah, that’s the way. We’ll have this taken care of in just a second and what’s that noise?*

There was a moaning sound in the room, like the corpses were not all that happy to see us, and I got a bad feeling.

“Elemental Strike!” I cast again, this time on Boline, as she was still around.

Then, the pile of bodies in the back of the room rose as a creature, three times as tall as Malachite and twice as wide. It looked like a combination of dirt, dead bodies, stone, and bile, and we watched helplessly as it pulled itself up and roared at us. Snarly, bless his little heart, seemed unafraid or maybe was just trying to make up for his showing fear in the last battle and screamed in answer, rushing the thing.

*What are you doing? Let me shrink that thing or something-*

It finished forming and just as Snarly reached it, a vile liquid shot out of the thing, trying to catch us all. Hanz of course ignored it. Malachite took to the air and avoided it. I, on the other hand, was right across from it and the liquid sped out of the doorframe towards me. It had come out of the thing near the “head” which was 8m tall so it had to angle the stuff to try and get it through the door. It smelled awful, but hadn’t I purchased magic for exactly this sort of situation? Of course I had.

“Hygiene!” I cast as I crouched down, directly on the floor. The liquid vanished all the way back to the creature, as it was all connected. *Weaponized cleaning magic. I love it.*

While I was congratulating myself it shot a meaty fist in the air and snagged Malachite, smashing him into the ground.

*Oh crap. Wait, instead of shrinking the thing I’ll make Malachite bigger. I’m sure he’ll appreciate it.*

I started casting, figuring I would let the spell go when the thing's hand came back up, revealing Malachite who I was sure was fine. He was tough. Being slammed around a little was fine for him. Right?

Hanz also moved forward, gripping their ax and looking up at the thing.

The creature lifted its hand and Malachite was gone again.

*Oh for crying out loud. Where has he gone this time?*

I let the spell go on Hanz, who grew to match the size of the creature.

*Fine, see how you like that! Their ax should work on this thing as well.*

I started casting again, Malachite must be around here somewhere, right? I would get him next. That creature looked like an amalgamation of bodies, like some kind of zombie that was made of other zombies. *Perhaps he got pulled inside? He'll bust out, and I'll cast on him. Can't shrink the thing now, he'll get crushed. And where's Snarly? Trying to backstab the thing or what?*

Hanz and presumably Snarly were hacking away at the thing, it seemed it couldn't hurt Hanz though it kept trying to punch them. *Come on, come on, where are you? There!*

Malachite popped out of the arm, proving he was sucked up inside the thing, and I let the spell go. He too grew to massive proportions, though not his usual flying size. Now the odds were in our favor! *I would give you the same treatment, I think I can manage one more spell, if I could see you Snarly.*

The three titans went at it while I watched, somewhat afraid to do any more spells given how much magic I was maintaining at the moment. I noticed Malachite had lost his sword again, and was simply tearing at the thing with his claws. *Gotta get that man a strap for his sword at this rate.* Hanz's ax shone with holy light with each strike, clearly taking offense to such a grotesque abomination. Finally they dealt the final blow, smashing the thing to the ground where it stopped moving.

"Ha, take that!" Malachite crowed. "Why is it still moving?"

"It was healing very quickly," Hanz told him. "Perhaps it cannot be killed in the traditional sense?"

"I'll burn it to a crisp!" He breathed a bunch of fire on it, which of course was scaled up to match his current size because anything less than that would be very silly indeed. He spewed fire on it again and again, and finally the bits stopped wiggling around and went still. My magic broke, returning everyone to their original size, and we took a quick look around the room as I hygiened everything in sight.

"No door out of here either," Malachite finally announced. "That could be a problem."

We regrouped, healed, and repaired in the center room.

"We must be missing something," Hanz decided. "We must shift the rubble and search the walls. There is no way those creatures simply *appeared* here. They walked into this room. Those bodies were brought in here and animated. We shall walk out of it."

"Agreed," I said with a nod.

"I'm beat," Malachite admitted. "You all do that. I'm going to meditate, like you taught me, Orchid, in case something else shows up."

"Very well. I can support that much magic and look around at the same time. Augment Skill!"

We poked around the place, shifting rubble, knocking on the walls, inspecting the ceiling. I also repaired the doors, figuring if something teleported into the three side rooms we should at least have some sort of barrier between us. I also webbed them up and made some stone to wedge them shut with. We found nothing to help us get out of there; no secret passages, no hidden trapdoors, no ladders hidden in the walls. I did find a strange scroll I read over, which seemed to be a spell to turn someone into light. It was extremely high grade, but being light could be useful in some situations, I figured.



*Is this some sort of joke? Would I be more vulnerable to those shadow demons under the influence of this spell or less? Now there's an idea, cast the spell on them directly! Can they be both demons of darkness and light at the same time? Could be interesting. Still, could be useful outside that...* When Malachite felt somewhat refreshed I tried a few other spells, such as phase and dimension step. Going through the walls just showed darkness beyond them, while dimension step did nothing. Detect enemies overloaded me for a second as it felt as though they were all around me, and in desperation I did a question spell too.

“What is the way back to our home plane?”

Unfortunately, I just heard the voice of the Gloom again, taunting me with a laugh and “There is no way back, your only escape is death.”

*Well that's cheerful. Maybe don't tell the others that...*

“So now what?” Snarly asked. “How do we get out of here?”

## Chapter 18

Push on the button and wave bye-bye

“It is going to be a problem,” I admitted, looking the group over.

“But you can do it, right?” Malachite asked.

“You got here with a spell,” I reminded him. “Only we came in through the portal. Oh, quick tip for the future. *Don’t everybody jump through mysterious portals!*”

“A lesson learned to be sure,” Hanz agreed. “I have upgraded my firewall rules to disallow passing through portals if I am the last one to do so.”

“Great!”

“But you don’t know the spell or you would have used it already?” Malachite went on.

“Let me worry about that.” *For the record, I’m extremely worried about that.*

“I trust you. Do what you need to do.”

“I will. It hasn’t come to anything too drastic yet. I’m going to pray for a bit, see if that helps us any, and keep thinking about things.”

“Prayer? Well, okay, if you say so. I’ll keep looking around.”

*If it comes to it, I can at least get you all out. It won’t be pretty, but there is always calling upon wild magic. I can do basically anything, once. But the mana doesn’t like being used that way. It’ll rebound on me. Best case I get a spell that takes us out of here, and it rebounds on me to take me back here. Worst case I get a spell that takes us out of here and it simply kills me. But you all will be free to continue the fight. So naturally that’s the desperation move. For now I’ll say a prayer and hope for the best.*

I did so, and felt a little better. Like all hope was not lost, and that our story would continue from here. But I had to report no golden portal was probably on the way to rescue us.

We checked and checked the place over, and I wracked my brains for some way to use a spell I knew in some new and novel way to help get us out of here. *Like that hygiene spell a minute ago. Now there was some quick thinking, ‘thanks Orchid, that really would have been a problem if it had stuck around.’ ‘Oh, you’re welcome everyone, just another miracle performed by little old Orchid. No, no, please no applause. Oh I’m blushing, stop!’ But no, not even a mention. Sigh.* There was really no way to twist my dimension jump spell, or if there was I didn’t know it. I had made no real study of other dimensions, after all, I just used the spell. We ran our hands along all the walls, making sure nothing was covered by illusion, but finally we had to stop. Malachite and Snarly had some of their rations, and we lay down to get some rest. Hanz assured us they would watch over us, and kept their ax at the ready. One by one we succumbed to sleep.

“You’re not going to believe this!” Hanz woke us up, rushing to each of us and giving us a shake. And another, in the case of Malachite. And another. And a kick.

“Huh?” I managed, blinking in the sunlight and looking around. *Wait, sunlight?*

We were back in the real world, right by the entrance to the cave. I was laying next to a dead stone dog, and jerked back, scrambling to my feet.

“What happened?”

“Beats me. I suddenly realized we were here,” Hanz admitted. “Strange. My internal cronometer is... returning a strange value.”

The voice we had heard in the wherever we had been echoed up from the nearby entrance. “Know that I have spared you, as your actions have intrigued me. I invite you to break yourself against me. It will be more entertaining than the last time I brought Gloom to this world.”

“Whazat?” Malachite muttered. “Let me sleep.”

*Oh boy.*

“Thath that I gueth?” Snarly decided. “Hooray? We’re alive!”

*Hold on, ‘brought Gloom?’ I thought that voice was the voice of the Gloom? Shouldn’t it say something like “more entertaining than the last time I came to your world?” Something like that? Is it bringing Gloom or is it Gloom? Have we not actually met “Gloom” yet? I’m so confused. And a whole group opposed it last time, with the Enlightenment and everything. Was that not entertaining enough for you? I mean, really now.*

“Hey, we’re out!” Malachite finally announced.

“Little late to the party,” Hanz told him. “Welcome to consciousness once more, biologic creature.”

“Thanks, I think? What’s going on?”

“We’ve been spared, apparently. A critical mistake on the part of the Gloom, or so we must work to prove.”

“Fantastic! Think we were gone long?” He was looking around and also spotted the corpses.

“We must gather further evidence before I can answer that question.”

“Fair enough.” He got up. “Let’s check the place over, and head back to town for some breakfast. I’m starving.”

We headed down the stairs again, expecting to see the two cultists surprised to see us on this side of the locked door, or gone, having given up and left. We saw them all right, but they were slumped over, dead, no marks on them.

“What in the world?” Snarly asked, poking the one’s cheek.

“I am not here anymore, I have left these vessels behind. My roots are now deep, you will soon encounter my endless power once more. I look forward to the day.”

*Yeah, us too, jerk.*

“Awful chatty lately, our Gloom,” Malachite remarked, looking around. “One might think he was bored. Maybe don’t destroy your world, you might have a few people running around doing entertaining things. Just a thought.”

So we phased back into the room and yes, it was untouched from when we had left it. The oil was still there, barrels and barrels of it, along with general supplies, an odd assortment of candles and such probably meant for rituals, and one glowing potion. Yes. Our only treasure from this room was a single glowing potion that for all I knew at the moment was poison. Almost made me not want to bother, these cultists certainly were poor.

*I’ll look that over later.*

What we didn’t find was any real indication of what they were storing all this oil for. Sure they had a few lamps down here but this was enough oil to drown a horse. It didn’t make sense. But we phased out of there, deciding to keep it locked up just in case some other random bandit faction happened by and stole it again. With that we headed back to town, and by that time it was getting dark.

“Aw man, my sleep schedule is going to be all messed up now,” Malachite complained.

“Oh, so you’ll be up for other activities then?” I asked with a wink.

“I’m sure we could think of something,” he agreed with a grin.

“I’ll go report to the Thleeping Lion,” Snarly announced. “They’ll be around. I’ll tell them the good neth about the oil.”

“Figure out where they want it,” Hanz agreed. “How are we getting such a large quantity back to town, by the way?”

“I’ll just enlarge the cart, and Athame can grow in size to match,” I decided. “All hooked up we can simply phase the whole thing (I hope) and not have to worry about trees. We’ll figure something out. Some barrels of oil should be a cake walk for us.”

“Oh, have to get thome cake at the lion,” Snarly perked up, licking his lips. “Thatth like dinner right?”

The next day we spent moving the barrels of oil and otherwise looting the place. I buried the bodies of the cultists, unsure if they really were doing this of their own free will at this point. I prayed for their souls, but of course the Lord would know if they had free will while they were cultists. It depressed me, how the Gloom had simply thrown them away. Did that mean it didn't need cultists anymore? The words it had spoken troubled me. “Roots had gone deep?” Was it established here now, as a physical presence like the Enlightenment? But it would still need ‘servants’ and such right? Why not just walk them someplace else? Did it have so many cultists or did it simply care so little that two were inconsequential at the moment? Either way was troubling.

The next day Malachite vanished fairly early so I got to work studying the elemental body spell. I was unclear what exactly “move through their element” meant, the spell itself was light on details (pardon the pun) but I figured it would allow me to at least fly when the sun was out. If I was literally light I could probably pass through windows, under cracks in doors, but could I move at super speed? Hanz told me light was the absolute fastest thing there was, apart from magic which could in theory take one from one end of the continent to another with teleportation. I was eager to try it out. But it took hours of study and I didn't want to mess up such a high grade spell, so I took it slow.

“You've been studying for hours!” Malachite whined. “Let's go out for dinner tonight!”

“I do have some nice clothes I haven't shown off,” I mused. “And honestly we deserve a night out. Let me get ready and- we're not going to that music place again are we?”

He laughed. “No way! After what happened last time? Nope, let's go to the place we had our first date!”

“Your prison cell? Seems an awful long way to go for dinner, but I guess if you want.”

He smacked me playfully. “You know where I mean.”

“Okay, okay, let me change.”

I took on the looks of an Undina, or half water elemental. My skin was more gray and textured than normal, and my features were a bit more exotic. It was mostly habit at this point, but I figured I knew the spell, had spent effort learning it, I was going to use it! I spruced up my outfit a little too, but mostly left it alone.

On the way there Malachite seemed a little more nervous than usual, and twice I caught him patting his pocket as if to check if something was there.

*Spell tokens, no doubt. I'm a little worried about the Gloom as well. Who knows when it's going to come popping up at this point. Or what form it might take. He's unarmed, and we're down two party members. This would be the perfect time to attack one or the other of us. Of course if I'm being honest, eliminate Snarly and Hanz first. Do an area magic denial spell on the house and bust the door down. Their spell symbols fail, leaving them with only their natural abilities. No augments. Hanz can't fire their weapon all that much without-*

“What are you thinking about?” Malachite asked, looking over at me.

“Not how I would take us out now that we're separated!” I squeaked. “I mean, uh...”

He laughed. “No Gloom tonight, dear. Just us two.”

“Okay, okay. No work stuff. But maybe in a lighter topic, let me tell you about that spell I found. How would you like to become light itself?”

We were met at the restaurant by a young dark elf woman, who said there was a room set aside for us and to please follow her. I glared at Malachite but he put on an innocent expression and shrugged.

“Our reputation maybe?” He looked me up and down. “Well, mine, anyway.”

“Huh...” We both followed her into the back to a private room, covered with plant life and even had fireflies flitting around. “Wow, this is romantic. And you didn’t have anything to do with it?”

“Don’t know what to tell you,” he insisted.

“That’s... actually a bit troubling.” I looked around, opening up my magical senses, but finding nothing. After we were seated and the woman took our drink order I did a quick “Detect Enemies” spell but got no response. Then did another when the musician came in and started softly strumming his lute.

“Wow, this place has great service, 5 out of 5 would eat here again,” Malachite announced.

My eyes simply narrowed.

We were just finishing up when Malachite went quiet and looked over at the musician. He started in on another song, and I soon realized it was about me!

Into my cell entered an orchid fair,  
A woman who then graced my life with care.  
Her beauty shone, a beacon in the night,  
Softening edges where darkness held tight.  
She fights beside me, hand in hand we stand,  
Through trials faced together, round the land.  
Her strength empowers, fuels my fiery soul,  
With her by my side, I'm stronger and whole.  
For she was made of crystal pure and bright,  
Reminded me of what was true and right.  
Magical essence fills each breath she takes,  
Enchanting all with the wonders she makes.  
My heart beseeches her sweet presence near,  
To share our lives as one, forever clear.  
O gentle flower of grace and tender hue,  
Will you honor me? Will you say "I do"?

I looked over at him in shock as the last notes faded, and he had a ring in a box that he was presenting me. “You set me up!” I managed, delighted. “You acted like this was all some mystery, but it was you all along. I’ve been expecting the Gloom to jump out of the walls at us or some other hideous creature to have been the table all along but—”

The musician cleared his throat and I looked over at him. He jerked his head in a “get on with it” sort of way. I turned back to Malachite who I was was drooping a little bit.

“Of course I’ll marry you, you big goof! Yes! Yes, I’ll be your wife!”

The musician strummed as I grabbed him up in a hug.

“Kinda wondered where you were going with that,” he admitted, sounding relieved.

“I had to get you back *somehow*. Do you know on edge I’ve been?”

“You? What about me?”

“You were in control of the whole thing! What did *you* have to be nervous about?”

“Oh, you know. All of it!”

I broke off the hug. “Well,” I said, holding my hand out. “Put a ring on it, then.”

“Gladly!” he agreed with a smile.

The ring was silver, with two vines twining around the whole thing towards the center. Leaves sprouted from the vines, and there were thorns (or perhaps the claws of a dragon?) holding a large stone that seemed to shimmer and throw colors every which way. “I love it!” I told him, holding it up. “It’s perfect.”

“Now comes the other big question,” Malachite announced. “The wedding.”

“That’s going to be a whole thing,” I agreed. “Do we even invite our families? I mean part of your family is an enormous dragon! I suppose I could shrink him...” *Though he was the one that gave me that spell in the first place. He can shrink himself.*

“Whatever makes you happy,” he agreed. “It’s your wedding.”

“Uh huh,” I wagged a finger at him. “It’s *our* wedding. We both get a say.”

“Yes dear.”

I giggled. “You’re a quick learner!”

“Should we have it soon? A couple of months from now? What kind of ceremony do you want?”

“I *want* a big production, and a fancy gown, and at least some of the important people in my life, and a big party.” I sobered. “But realistically there’s a war on. Even if we’re the only ones who know about it and are fighting it. I can’t be selfish.”

“You can be a *little* selfish. There must be some middle ground?”

“Then I guess we’ll just have to have two!” I explained brightly. “One just for us, with Snarly and Hanz, and one later after we’ve won the war and stand triumphant over the broken body of the Gloom’s avatar in this realm. It can double as our victory celebration.”

“And we just pretend the first one didn’t happen? That we only had the big one?”

“Exactly. No one gets their feelings hurt they didn’t get invited and we have the time to plan once we’re no longer in danger. I mean can you even imagine? Our guests are all there and the Gloom attacks us while I’m walking down the aisle?”

“That would totally happen,” he agreed seriously. “Hey you can be even more radiant now, you can walk down the aisle as light, right?”

“I can!” *Or I can once I feel I have the spell memorized.*

“I can’t wait to see it.”

“So get busy defeating the Gloom then.”

“I’ll get right on that!” He sobered a bit. “It’s why I asked now, actually. I’ve been planning it for some time. I finally decided we’re going to be in danger either way. You cleared your curse, you can finally be yourself, but the Gloom isn’t going anywhere fast. I figured I should ask now, rather than have any regrets later.”

“Yeah...” I grimaced. “If it hadn’t ‘let us out’ the Gloom could have won back there. None of us is guaranteed tomorrow.” *I just hope our souls are pure enough to meet in Heaven when that day comes.*

“You could have gotten us out! I had faith in you.”

“Yeah, sure.” *I would have gotten you out, for sure. Not so sure about me. But you’ll never need to know how close I came to that. Had it worked, yes, a mage could have been hired to work on the problem of getting me out. I could have lived there indefinitely after all. But enough about that depressing topic.*

“I also wasn’t sure you would say yes. I am seemingly becoming a dragon. You’ll be alive if the process continues at this rate.”

“So learn a shape-shift spell,” I scoffed. “Remember I said you have a proto-mana-core, if you become even a small dragon I can help you manifest a proper one. Then we get you that spell. Even if it’s the only one you learn, you can be whoever you want.”

“Oh yeah.” He rubbed the back of his head. “I did forget about that. Guess it was pretty dumb of me, huh?”

“It’s not dumb to worry, but not discussing your worries with your fiance? Yes, very dumb.”

“Heard and understood! I guess in that vein, what sort of priest would we have? I’m not a big believer in your God, I just wasn’t raised that way. We’re raised to pray to dragons, or I guess just one

in particular... not that he's any better. Plus They sort of screwed me over in childhood... What I'm saying is I'm not really as devout as you are."

"Perhaps we can find a draig priest? There must be *one* around here somewhere. They can throw in some phrases relating to treasure, and long naps, and being the biggest and strongest thing around-

"You're my treasure!"

"Oh stop!"

My head was filled with images of wedding dresses and Malachite in formal wear and Snarly as a flower girl (*he could pull off a dress, right? Sure he could*) and music and seating and a million other things. I was engaged! I couldn't wait to tell the others.

## Chapter 19

### You can't run away

“Come on, get uuuuup, we're getting *married!*” I tried to get Malachite up the next morning. Snarly had been weird last night as usual when we told the others but Hanz seemed happy for us. We assured Snarly we would be using his rings, and he would be part of the ceremony to present them to us. No, he didn't have to wear special clothes unless he wanted. Yes, I would be casting hygiene on him before we went into the church.

“I guess I'll have to,” he groaned. “Is it even sunrise yet?”

“Sunrise? It's almost sunset! You've slept the whole day away!”

“What?” He managed to pry his eyes open and look around.

“Oh, you are alive. Come on, breakfast is ready.”

“Trying to trick me? I see how it is!” He grabbed me and started tickling me.

“Stop, stop! You jerk! Don't make me phase myself!”

“Is that what we're calling it these days?”

With Malachite up and moving we went to go see how to get married, which required heading to the town hall and asking. There wasn't a tremendous amount of paperwork to do and it almost seemed like once we did the paperwork, we were married at least in the eyes of the kingdom. Having a ceremony or whatever was totally up to us. The fee included noting the date of the “wedding” in the city records, printing a notice in the town newspaper, fliers hung around town, and the town crier announcing it as part of the daily news. We thanked the receptionist and said we would be back once we had a date from a priest. It would have been quite odd to get married on paper, then have the ceremony saying we *had* been married. I wanted a date, then to have that date in the news, then a ceremony, then signing paperwork. Not the other way around. At least some part of this whole thing had to proceed in the correct way.

“And now we have to find a draig priest,” Malachite complained. “Do you go to church or whatever? I don't think you do...”

I sighed. “Technically I am breaking the commandment of ‘remember the sabbath day and keep it holy.’ We're fighting a war here. The Gloom doesn't take Miday off, so neither can I. I don't really belong to a church, no. It would have been impossible on the road, and coming here it's been pretty non-stop. Maybe once everything calms down? We're just going to have to look into it.” *And honestly ‘church’ is about community, and giving your money to them. I can worship just as easily out in a grassy field as I can in a wooden pew. The Lord is in all things, including my own heart. Isn't the church rich enough by now? I think it is. They don't need my money.*

“You naughty girl! And you complain about me killing everything in sight. You're just as bad as me!”

“You're really saying me fighting for the freedom of all people against the oppression of the Gloom *one day of the week* is the same as you whirling your sword around, chopping everything we meet in half with one blow?”

“Is it a whirling? I feel it's more of a whipping motion. Honestly this sword is too small, it feels too light for me now. I need to look into a bigger one, something with some real heft to it.”

“That's what you're going to take issue with?”

“Okay, okay, I agree they're not equivalent. But what are we going to do? I was raised to worship dragons, and I'm terrible at that. To say nothing of angels and the Lord and Heaven and everything else that entails you were raised with. Is any priest going to marry us when our beliefs are so different? I mean fundamentally you believe in something, I believe in nothing. That may be a problem.”



"That's what we're going to ask him, once we find him, silly." *If we can't find a priest that will do it, we'll just exchange rings in the grassy field and call ourselves married. Will the town really go asking at every church if we had a ceremony there? No. We'll pay the fee to sign the paperwork and be married.*

"I guess we'll know soon..."

"... So, I guess you don't even believe in me? Kind of sad when you put it that way."

"Okay, not nothing. There is one thing I believe in, at least."

"That's better."

"It's bacon."

"On second thought maybe we shouldn't rush into a wedding..."

"Kidding! I'm just kidding around!"

"I mean if you wanted to marry bacon instead, I would understand."

"How would I marry the concept of bacon? That doesn't even make sense."

"I mean if you think about it, you're marrying the concept of me, aren't you? Unless you magically become me, you can never truly know me, and so all you have is the idea of me in your head, which really is what you're marrying."

"It's too early in the morning for this."

We asked around at various churches and found a small church dedicated to Kafziel, patron angel of dragons. Heading inside we sat down, hoping to be noticed and helped in due time. Thankfully it wasn't long before a green draig stepped out and came over to us.

"Welcome to the church of Kafziel," he told us. "I am Father Isengorf. May I help you in some way?"

"Yes," I answered, as Malachite looked to me. "My name is Orchid, and this is Malachite. We would like to be married when it fits your schedule, hopefully soon. A small ceremony for now, as having a full wedding is simply not in the cards for us at this time. Can you accommodate us?"

"Perhaps. To be truly married in the eyes of the Lord the spell of matrimony must be performed. This will safeguard your souls, entrusting them to each other. Have you pledged your souls, either of you, to any demonic patron or otherwise?"

"I should say not!" I told him, offended.

"Not that I recall," Malachite told him dryly.

*Huh, I can probably verify that with question magic later, just in case. He did get drunk a lot more before he met me.*

"That's a good start. Now for the tricky question; This requires you to share a faith, and I must say I don't often see this sort of pairing even in my church. Is this going to be a problem?"

"On my end, yes, Father," Malachite replied. "She has far more faith in the Heavens than I do."

"I see. Why would you say that was?"

"I suppose it started early. I had a hard time growing up, and I really didn't feel the Lord had any special plan for me. Or that They even existed at all. Either They didn't really exist and the world has this mass delusion, or They are real and hate me, so why would I pray to Them? But then Orchid came into my life, and she's showing me a better way. I mean I've seen Heaven with my own two eyes, and she's always concerned with the state of my soul. But I don't think that's enough."

"No, it's not. Knowing is not having faith. How long have the two of you known each other?"

"About three years," I answered. "We've basically been together every day since we met."

"I figured I better make it official before some bigger, stronger, better looking draig scoops her up."

"I don't think such a person exists!"

“Be that as it may, let’s return to the question of faith,” Isengorf told us. “And perhaps I should not assume anything. Orchid, do you believe your faith in the Lord is strong enough to carry you forward into the future?”

I sighed. “I’ll be honest with you Father, I’m not the most devout of the Lord’s children. I spent much longer than I should have studying magic, not really worrying about my faith for a long time. Paid a high price for it, too, one I have only just recently managed to put behind me. I should probably pray more, and I know I’m too reliant on my own power or should I say I have more faith in magic than I do in a divine presence protecting me. I know my choices are my own, and if I fail no angel is going to step in and save me. But on the other hand it’s like Malachite said. I worry about the condition of my soul, and his. I try to do the right thing, to help those that need help with no expectation of a reward- hey did we return all those jam jars to that lady? We must have, right?”

“I think we did???”

“We better check. Sorry, what was I saying? Right, helping people. I fight to protect those that can’t protect themselves, using the magic I learned, in the best possible way I can. Could I use my magic to be a thief? To simply take the good things in life I want? Of course! But I choose not to go down that path. Temptation is everywhere and I do my best to avoid it. I hope one day to see Heaven, and the friends I have lost along the way. But I have a long way to go before that day, so I feel I must be extra careful not to fall too far. Because I would have a long way to fall if I did.”

“You seem a bit young to be worried about some of that?”

I chuckled. “Father, I’m two hundred and forty years old. My parents are in their five hundreds. Those in my clan live a *long* time. And given how long this guy is going to live, I plan to research magic to turn back the clock when I get too old so I can stay with him. As I know the guild probably won’t sell me such. But one day my time will be up. My soul will be judged. I only hope my long life of service to the world will be judged adequate for entry into Heaven. *That’s* my faith.”

“I see. There truly are strange powers in this world... but enough of that. It seems only you, Malachite, are questioning your faith at this time.”

“Yeah, I’m always making problems for her, Father.”

“But you don’t go out of your way to make problems, right?”

“Listen Father. I agree that I haven’t had faith for a long time, but I’m learning to have it, and she’s showing me the way. If it weren’t for her, I still wouldn’t have any. I’d be in bar fights, and playing Gressh’dronnar, and the Gloom would be taking over the world and I would be clueless. She pulled me out of a jail cell because she saw something in me. What I don’t know. But I’ve tried to become worthy of her.”

*No need to mention a jail perhaps?*

“Still, it is my duty to caution you that the spell will only work if you truly believe.”

“I believe in her, and if she tells me that there’s something to believe in, well then I’ll go through Hell and back to get there and believe it. And she has the most faith I’ve ever seen.”

*Oh dear. He needs to meet more people. Like I said I’m not that faithful, just worried about all this killing he does. Yes it’s cultists, or elemental demons and such but I can’t help but think about that cultist he caught in the bar. He had a choice there, and rather than turn that guy in to the guard, he killed him. I think he learned from that, and he is trying, but I am not some paragon of faith by a long shot.*

“Unfortunately, Orchid is not the one providing the spell or linking your souls.”

“But all of this is for her. I have to believe that there will be a place that I can spend the rest of my days with her, after we’ve both moved on from this realm. Because we risk those lives every day. And I couldn’t keep facing down these dangers if I didn’t think it was for a higher purpose than just ourselves. I was bitter for a long time, thinking the Heavens had abandoned me. But I believe they put her in my path to show me otherwise.”

"Ah, yes, this is what Kafziel likes to see." He smiled. "Excellent. I believe if you keep this in mind, the spell will function perfectly on your wedding day."

He breathed out a sigh. "Thank you."

"It's your faith, I simply point it out. Now, you said you wanted a small ceremony? I can accommodate you in two days' time."

"Yes, just two others," I explained. "A beastfolk and a remnant. We'll have a proper ceremony with our parents after the war is over, and we're all safe. It just doesn't feel right getting our families here under the current circumstances." *And trying to accommodate a full grown dragon around here... We'll probably have to have the ceremony at his hometown. And won't that be a slap in the face for all those draig that live there? Well, one thing at a time. I wonder what his parents would say? He has no love for them, but they seemed genuinely saddened by that. Perhaps he'll find forgiveness in his heart after all this. My parents, on the other hand...* I shuddered.

"... I see," he managed, shaking his head a little. He seemed confused, perhaps about to ask what 'war' we were talking about, but changed tactics. "All are welcome, of course."

"Is there anything special we should bring?" Malachite asked.

"If you would like to take care of the donation for the ceremony now, which includes the matrimony spell, it would reduce the number of things you'll need to think about on the day."

"Very well," we both said, reaching for our money pouches.

"No, no, save your money for buying magic," Malachite told me. "I'll get this."

"We'll get this," I reminded him. "Soon *your* money will be *my* money..." I wiggled my eyebrows at him.

"..."

I hastened on. "And my money will be your money."

"I wondered if that was coming. I suppose you're right. Just give me some kind of stipend, okay? A few embers? Enough for a crust of bread now and again, that's all I ask." He grinned evilly. "Or cook Snarly up some bacon, just to let me smell it as it cooks. That will be enough for me. I'll just lick the pan clean, and be satisfied with that."

"I'll take good care of your purse- I mean you, my love!" I patted his cheek. "Don't you worry. Plenty of bacon if you behave yourself."

"I wasn't worried until just now." He counted out the coins. "What am I really getting into here, anyway?"

"Very good. Let's go over the various parts of the ceremony so you know what to expect."

After leaving the church we went back to the town hall, as we now had a firm date, and got that taken care of. More coins changed hands, and we headed back out.

"Should I buy a nice suit?" he asked.

"I was going to go with illusion magic. Tokens, so I wasn't concentrating on it the whole time. I'll just make you one. After all I'm marrying you, not your clothes. Naturally for the big wedding I'll have six months or more to work on the design of my dress."

"You're joking, right?"

"Am I, Malachite? Am I though? Let's be practical for now, as you say there's always more useful magic to buy and it's expensive. We have a war to win, and we won't do it in fancy clothes. Buy better armor or something if you're going to spend money."

"Oh dear..."

"What?"

"Uh, you'll see when we get home..."

When we got home a man in a leather apron was waiting out front. He was standing by a cart pulled by a single horse, and Malachite went over to him. "Sorry to keep you waiting!"

“No problem. That rat or whatever he was said you would probably be back soon. Hard to understand him, actually. Did he roll in something? How do you stand living with him? Anyway, let’s get this set up.”

“Get what set up, my darling?” I asked icily.

“Our new bed. Surprise! I know, you could have reshaped our stone one but I figured we would be sharing a room now and you’re not completely practical. I thought you might like a real bed, a wooden one. Ours was a bit small...”

“You do have a rather large... tail, that gets in the way of things sometimes.”

He snickered. “Besides I had to order this two weeks ago. But only practicality from now on!”

“I’m not some miser, love. A good night’s sleep will keep us fresh for battle. It’s practical in that way.”

“Exactly what I was thinking!”

“Uh huh. Let me go break down the old bed. You get to carry the chunks of stone to the workshop. I’ll repurpose them somehow.”

The next two days passed swiftly. I memorized the new spell and tried it out. My hopes for it were somewhat dashed, while the description said that any elemental body could “move through its own element at will” that apparently didn’t apply to light. Standing in the full sunlight I was unable to raise even a centimeter off the ground and I moved no faster than I could otherwise. What was the point of turning your body into light if you couldn’t ‘lightstep’ to put a name to it, to anywhere the sun was shining? Or fly through the air as a beam of light? But I supposed it could be useful, as it was almost absolute protection but I worried about the elemental demons we faced. Were they “darkness” aligned or “shadow” aligned? It would make a big difference. I also entertained thoughts of casting the spell on them directly. Could an elemental demon of darkness survive being turned into light? It would be a sure but slow way to do it, Malachite could chop one up faster than I could get off a grade 9 spell after all.

I added some “fins” to my necklace, made of stone of course, and put some spell symbols on them for my new spell. Four of them, more than enough for any one time, but far easier to use than trying to cast such a difficult spell on the fly. I figured if and when I needed it, I would *really* need it. Best to have it at hand.

And speaking of having things on hand, I convinced Malachite to hand the knife over that he had found, the one that radiated darkness, and looked it over. I didn’t seem to feel any particular pull to keep it once I had it in hand, but I increased my skill at synchronizing with magical objects and dove into it. Thankfully it didn’t seem cursed at all, but I did learn anyone stuck with the knife would have their life force drained and added to the holder’s. This didn’t explain why it looked like that, there was no illusion magic on it and just having an energy draining spell woven into it didn’t explain the effect I was seeing. *Just one of those mysteries I guess. So could someone stab my summons and take their ‘life force?’ They get a new one every time I summon them, after all. Huh. Let them be “killed” and just make new ones. I doubt they would mind. We’ll try it sometime.* I turned it over to Snarly, not that he needed it with his Most Poison Blade. But he was the one most likely to use it, so he thanked me and that was that.

While I had the augment spell on I also looked over the glowing potion we found, but it was just a standard healing potion. My tokens were better- much less breakable.

When I handed Malachite his token of disguise for the wedding he asked if he could have some hygiene ones, and I said sure and went off to make them. *Is he worried about more of those puking monster things? That was awful, I have to admit. Thank goodness my cleaning spell worked as it did.*

Finally I cultivated my core and wiped out the version of Besom I had there. I quickly reengraved her, slotting in my elemental needle spell in place of the knockout beam. It had proven fairly worthless in our past battles given everything we faced really needed to be ended, not just knocked out. I decided if something needed to be knocked out, I would do it. Otherwise, Besom would

be a more effective fighter from now on. She was the one to head into danger in place of me, while Boline stayed by my side and protected me should something get near. This would make that happen.

And suddenly it was the day of the wedding. Thankfully it wasn't too early so I could get Malachite up on time, we went over everything with Snarly so he knew what his part was, and we headed to the church.

## Chapter 20

### I think I'm losing my mind

The four of us headed to the church to get there in plenty of time, and we waited around as another wedding was performed. This one was more traditional, with lots of people and a whole production. I found myself a tiny bit jealous, but really it had been my choice to have this sort of life. *I do what I do to keep others like this safe. Like I said to the priest, I don't do it for glory, or to have the world praise me. I'm marrying my guy because I love him, and want to build a life with him. Not for the pageantry. And I'll get this, and it'll be great because I'll know I earned it. Keeping the world safe. And my wedding will be attended by a dragon, so there. Where is your dragon? Huh? That's what I thought.*

"Looks like they're clearing out," Malachite told me, pulling out his token. "Should we get 'dressed?'"

"I think now would be fine," I decided, pulling out my own. I concentrated and clasped it. "Wedding!" I announced, and changed. I had grayish skin, with light yellow hair, huge green eyes, and a just the hint of a horsey face with ears that stuck up cutely. My wedding dress was strapless, falling in layers to one side, leaving my legs visible from the other. Cute white heels, short white gloves, and a bouquet of white flowers finished off the look. Malachite simply looked like himself in nicer clothes.

"What's that look?" he wondered, looking me up and down. "Is that even a race?"

"You know who you're marrying," I told him, flipping my hair back. "I'm the lady with a thousand faces, don't you remember? How does it look? I wish I could look in a mirror and see it."

"You look great. But that priest is going to be very confused."

"Good! I'm interested to see if he tries to call it off or not."

I had to chuckle as we walked down the aisle. Hanz and Snarly took their places in the front pew, and Isengorf did a double take when he saw me. He looked to Malachite, who was clearly the draig he had spoken to a few days ago, then back to me. I cocked my head to the side and smiled a little. He looked back to Malachite, who nodded. Back to me. His eyes said "screw it, she said she's two hundred and forty years old maybe she's under a curse or something to look different every day." Too bad that was backwards, I finally *wasn't* under that curse anymore. But very little magic was "fun" so I intended to get every last use out of this spell I could.

"Malachite and Orchid..." he began, once again looking questionably at Malachite, who made a "get on with it" gesture with one hand. "You have come here to be wed in the eyes of the Lord, and in Their house. I call upon Kafziel, to turn his gaze upon these two that are before me, who have come here seeking their blessing in matrimony." Holy energy sprung up around us, similar magical circles to the ones always seen when I did magic, but these were a soft white. They lit up the church and both of us, and I really, really wanted to walk down the aisle as radiant light for our next wedding. *Maybe keep your mind on the one you're currently having, Orchid!* "Let it be known that if either of these supplicants is false, or wavers in their faith, Kafziel's gaze shall turn from them and they will not be wed. Are there any here that protest this union?" He looked over to the others. Snarly was vibrating as if he wanted to maybe do something inappropriate, but Hanz put a hand on his shoulder. He looked to the door, waited a beat, and turned back to us. "Malachite, are you prepared to take Orchid as your bride, now and forever, in sickness and in health?"

"For now and always," he agreed, "Orchid shall be my rock, my guiding star."

"Orchid, are you prepared to take Malachite as your husband, now and forever, in sickness and in health?"

"For now and always," I agreed. "Malachite shall be my protector, my other half."

"And will you grow your treasure hoard together, and share equally the spoils obtained by life?"

"My hoard is her hoard."

“My hoard is his hoard.”

“And will you grow in power together, and soar, and let all lesser creatures know of your dominance, as a dragon should?”

“Orchid empowers me, with her magic and her presence. Together we will become a terror, whispered in the deepest pits of Hell that all who would harm others must fear.”

“Malachite carries me, to the very heights. We shall soar upon his wings, together, my belief in his strength will never falter.”

“And what is your pledge to each other?”

“I pledge to be her sword, and her shield. I take hurt before she does, my life before hers.”

“I pledge to be his defense against all that is unseen in this world. To heal his hurts and aid his strikes.” *And repair his armor when it gets all banged up.*

“And what do you vow?”

“I vow to be the fertile soil that allows her to grow, like the beautiful flower she is.”

“I vow to see the truth of him, accepting him as he is, and never seeking to change his truth.”

“And will you have no other?”

“I will be the first of his harem!” I snuck in there. “All shall be subservient to me, first wife!”

“Orchid!” he exclaimed, scandalized.

“What? I have to be truthful. Dragons have harems, right?” I looked to Isengorf. “I have that right, don’t I?”

Isengorf rolled his eyes. “If we may continue seriously?”

He looked at me, and I looked at him. “I will have no other,” he went on, as it was clear I wasn’t going to say anything else.

I pouted. “I want girls to order around though? We’ll figure it out.”

“Moving on,” he requested.

“Yes, perhaps that’s for the best,” Isengorf agreed. “The rings?”

Snarly got up and presented the rings to us, on a slab of stone I had made. They stuck up from slots in the rock and Malachite took the one for me.

“Please repeat after me,” Isengorf went on. “With this ring, I thee wed.”

“With this ring, I thee wed.” He put the ring on my finger.

“Let it be, forever more, a symbol of the pledge I have made to you today.”

“Let it be, forever more, a symbol of the pledge I have made to you today.”

He nodded, and I repeated the gesture, putting his ring on him. *You know, he wakes up twice as tall one day I have to wonder what happens to this ring? Does it chop his finger off, break, or get bigger with him? Could be a problem.*

“And so it is done, Kafziel, bestow your blessing upon these children of the Lord, that they may be pleasing in your sight.” The circles around us winked out, and there was a sensation inside me, a dimension I didn’t know I had, and then it was gone. *Did I just feel my very soul? I guess it worked. We’re married!*

“With the power vested in me by the Lord, our God, I now pronounce you husband and-”

The door to the church crashed open, and a dark elf in torn clothing, looking fairly beat up and exhausted, staggered into the room. “Snarly!” she called. “I’m so glad I found you. Saw the fliers. You have to come quickly!”

“Senna?” Snarly gasped. “Where hath you been?”

Malachite and I traded a look, then I looked to the ceiling. *Really? I sent into the universe. I couldn’t have one day- no an hour? I couldn’t have a single hour, to get married, without something like this happening? Really?*

“It’s your family,” Senna went on, slumping to the floor and clutching a pew to keep from collapsing fully. “They captured Salliven!”